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**THE  
PYRAMID OF LEAD**





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BY  
BERTRAM ATKEY



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TO  
GEORGE HORACE LORIMER



# THE PYRAMID OF LEAD

## CHAPTER I

THE bare-headed individual in grey flannels, grey woollen sweater and travel-stained gym shoes, who, in the company of a small, silver-grey donkey of extremely gentle and sedate appearance, and a very brisk three-legged semi-terrier, had encamped for the night in the old, sun-baked gravel pit which they were now preparing to leave, cast one swift, comprehensive glance around the site of the camp and addressed his companions.

"All is well, my littles," he airily observed, rolling a cigarette as he spoke. "We have left behind us neither orange peel nor broken beer bottles and there are no greasy paper bags, bits of old newspaper, crusts of bread, ham bones, pieces of fat or apple cores to render uninviting this very attractive and homey little gravel pit. That is as it should be."

He moved to the grey donkey, and put a few finishing touches to the arrangement and fastenings of the pack she carried, comprising a very small tent, some jointed bamboo poles and cords, a few light aluminium utensils, a roll of blankets with clothing inside, a fishing

rod and various light sundries likely to be required by a gentleman on a sleeping-out tour.

Then he led the way to the exit from the gravel pit, the small grey donkey trotting close behind him.

At the roadside he paused, considering his route.

"Southwards, I think, Patience, for I have an instinct that to the south lies adventure, and adventure is what we seek. Ten days now have we wandered the by-ways but nothing has occurred. We have encountered no ladies in distress, nor have we found villains engaged in villainy, conspirators occupied with conspiracy, plotters plotting, or planners planning. The world grows good and the countryside even more tranquil and peaceable, Patience mine. . . ."

Thus airily prattling, the gentleman in the grey jersey headed, at an extremely leisurely gait, along the lane leading south, one hand resting affectionately on his donkey's neck.

Those with whom he had come into sufficiently close contact during the past few days to render an exchange of names necessary had learned that this friendly-eyed, easy-mannered, youthful-looking person, whose speech seemed ever to be a curious blend of whimsical jest, mild paradox, and kindly intent, was named Prosper Fair and that he was spending a few of the sunny summer weeks wandering about on tour.

Save to the thick-witted, Prosper Fair was very obviously a young man of good breeding, serene and equable temperament, whimsical nature, compassionate, charitable, sympathetic and courageous withal; trusted



by his small donkey, who was not such an ass as she looked, and quite obviously adored by his triple-limbed terrier, terrifyingly named Plutus.

Many a time had these wandered far afield in company, and various were the adventures which had befallen them. But this present tour had been in the nature of a failure in so far as adventures were concerned. All had been peaceful in all places and at all times, and though the tour had been joyous, it had also been without thrills—save for the thrill which meal-times bring to the outdoor wanderer. . . .

"A quiet tour, Patience mine," mused Prosper aloud as they passed at an extremely leisurely pace down the lane, "but, deep down within me, quadruped, I feel stirring an instinct, a premonition of adventure. I have had many premonitions in my life, Patience—most of them wrong—but never one quite so intense or convincing as this of which I am now conscious."

He never spoke a truer word, for it was hardly half an hour later that, on the point of crossing a main road *en route* to a lane on the other side, Prosper observed the little crowd of carefully-dressed men—for the greater part in decent Sunday black—approaching the lane opening for which he himself was heading.

His gay blue eyes grew a little more intent as he studied the company which in groups of threes and fours followed a man of military appearance who, with two others, was in the van of the straggling procession. Two policemen accompanied the party.

"Left incline a trifle, Patience," murmured Prosper. "Yes, left incline."

The trio moved to the left a little, then halted, and Mr. Fair appeared to busy himself with the rolling of a cigarette—under cover of which operation he contrived to take an extremely comprehensive view of the passers.

When, in a moment, the leaders left the main road and headed down the lane, Prosper stepped forward to the policeman who was bringing up the rear.

"Pardon an intrusion inspired solely by a very human curiosity, officer," he said easily. "Is it permitted to enquire what is taking place?"

The policeman, a heavy-faced man of middle age, studied his questioner for a second or two. Apparently satisfied with his inspection he spoke briefly.

"The coroner's jury are about to inspect the scene of the recent tragedy," he said importantly and moved on.

Mr. Prosper Fair no longer smiled.

"Tragedy——" he repeated quietly, reflected a moment, then glanced about him. A little distance along the road he observed what he evidently sought—a gate leading into a field. He went quickly to this and took his companions into the field, passing round to the back of a haystack near the gate.

"Do you abide patiently in this place, my littles," he said, deftly relieving Patience of her pack. "Wait here in peace—behaving perfectly—while in company with the jury I, too, inspect the scene of the tragedy which has thrust itself upon this pleasant countryside."

As though she understood every word—as, indeed, she did sufficiently well—the little grey ass settled down in the shade of the haystack at once.

Plutus the dog gaped wistfully at his proprietor for a moment, then realised that orders were orders, and he too settled down to a systematic investigation of certain inviting holes at the base of the stack.

“Good—very good. In due course there shall be rewards—eatable ones,” said the whimsical Mr. Fair. “Trust Prosper. All in due course. It is irksome, Plutus, yes, but duty was ever irksome. Trust Prosper and all will be well—all will be very well.”

He smiled indulgently upon them and strolled away, following the policeman that followed the stragglers that followed the leaders.

In a moment or two he had merged himself into the little company and a few yards farther on found him strolling by the side of the two serious-looking men, both bearded, of small stature, one of whom was quite evidently the local Wesleyan minister and the other probably the village schoolmaster. He saluted these with his accustomed easy punctiliousness which, for all its ease, conveyed perfectly the fact that he recognised them at once as men of worth and intelligence.

“A sad occasion, gentlemen,” he observed.

“Very. Poor soul . . .” agreed the minister.

“Sudden tragedy, even in remote and lawless places is always shocking,” continued Prosper. “But to encounter it here on this benign and beautiful countryside is more than shocking.”

"You are right," agreed the schoolmaster, a remote irascibility in his deep voice. "And when it repeats itself—when it occurs a second time—it becomes a matter of extreme importance to take steps to prevent a third tragedy."

"Pardon me—did you say the second time?"

"Yes, indeed," corroborated the minister. "You have forgotten, or, being a stranger to the village, you may be unaware of the first case. I mean, of course, the discovery of the body of Mr. Larry Calhoun, the racehorse trainer, dead at the base of the pyramid of lead, in the sunk garden of Kern a year ago."

"Yes, yes, yes!"—the schoolmaster broke in with that vague, distant suggestion of irritability which marked every word he used. "Mr. Calhoun, stone dead on the south side of the pyramid last year. That was the first. And now there is this nameless lady with all those emerald rings—also, mark you, found at the south base of the pyramid. The *south* base. It is entirely clear to me that the danger—whatever it might be, comes from the south side of that monstrous structure!"

"Monstrous, Hardy?" demurred the minister. They were evidently old cronies.

"Well, unfitting. Yes, 'unfitting' is the better word. I agree. Whoever heard of a pyramid in an old English garden—and a pyramid of lead at that. No. It is an ill thing, my friends—ill-starred, conceived in fantasy, erected in mystery, haunted. I may claim that I am not a superstitious man, but I can almost find it in me to

believe that the garden of the pyramid of lead is haunted."

"It sounds ominous, indeed," said Prosper quietly. "May I ask where is this pyramid of lead?"

"In the sunk garden of Kern—Kern Castle, once the residence of the notorious Lord Kern. We are going to it now," said the schoolmaster, crisply.

"The sunk garden of Kern!"

Prosper Fair knitted his brows slightly as he repeated the phrase over to himself—like a man trying hard to fix some half-forgotten and elusive memory. He must have succeeded for his face cleared almost at once.

"But—fantastic! I cannot recall that Lord Kern was fantastic," he said, presently.

"He was undoubtedly eccentric," suggested the minister, mildly.

"Eccentric to the point of fantasy," developed the schoolmaster, eyeing Prosper severely. Mr. Fair promptly disclaimed any but newspaper knowledge of Lord Kern.

He was anxious to gather all that he could concerning this inexplicable pyramid of lead, and though he knew—or was in a position shortly to discover—perhaps a good deal more about the eccentric Lord Kern than either of the cronies could hope to know, it was, he conceived, politic to let them talk, even to encourage their conversation . . . .

"I spoke from hearsay only," he said.

The minister shook his head.

"Lord Kern was an unusual and to most people, I fear, a formidable character," he said. "I confess that I cannot dwell upon the memory of the few occasions on which I met him with any pleasure. I believe that I am not without some right to claim that I am a charitable-minded man. But I found—it seemed to me—that Lord Kern was hard and secretive. I may say he was——"

"Oh, everybody knows it," said the schoolmaster, rather harshly. "Secretive is a mild word to use in connection with Lord Kern. I am a blunt man. I have always been of the opinion that he was of unbalanced mind. Who but a man of unbalanced mind would erect a pyramid of lead in an old world rose garden of what was once the—the show place of this lovely little corner of the world. A pyramid of lead in Kern village!"

Clearly the schoolmaster had a grievance.

"Yes—one sees that," agreed Prosper, feeling his way. "And moreover, a pyramid that obviously is not safe."

"After dark," supplemented the schoolmaster. "Think! Two people—Mr. Calhoun and this nameless lady have died in the shadow of it with never a mark—or wound or sign of one—to show what caused their deaths! The place is evil, I insist—haunted, sinister— Ah! here we are!"

He broke off as they followed the others through a pair of huge, black iron gates, swung to vast stone pillars each surmounted by a fabulous stone-hewn beast,



half lion, half dragon. But big as the gates and pillars were they were dwarfed by the colossal and crowding elms, towering over them, their sprawling upper boughs so interlaced and locked that the moss-grown carriage drive under them was dank and chill and gloomy in spite of the brilliant sun high overhead.

The little procession passed down a long and winding drive, heavily shadowed for almost its whole length, their footfalls soundless on the thick, moist moss. Clearly this roadway had once been a wide and noble approach to Kern Castle—but now the huge, ragged banks of sombre laurel bordering it on either hand had been allowed to encroach and crowd in so greedily that the road was reduced to probably less than half its original width.

"Truly a sombre place," said Prosper, glancing about him.

The minister nodded without speaking. His lips were set. Perhaps he was thinking of those meetings with the owner of this estate at which he had hinted.

"Yes. But at least it is a fitting approach to the castle—as it has become," said the schoolmaster, his voice slightly, and probably unconsciously, subdued.

There was that in the progress of the sombre-clad jurymen upon their melancholy mission through this dark and overgrown alleyway, to chill the spirit of almost any man, and the schoolmaster's hint at the appearance of the castle itself did nothing to minimise or counteract the stealing depression with which the approach was liable to afflict one.

Prosper Fair nodded slightly and dropped a pace or so behind, glancing over his shoulder.

"We shall see the castle as we round the second turning after this," announced the schoolmaster.

"In the sunlight probably it will not look quite so—ruinous," suggested the minister. "I confess that this approach lays a cold hand upon my heart. Do you not feel it, sir?"

He turned, as he addressed Prosper, then stopped suddenly with an exclamation.

Mr. Fair had disappeared.

It was quite a simple disappearance. A moment after dropping behind the two cronies, he had paused, allowing them to round a curve. Then, glancing about him and noting that for the space of a second or so, placed as he was between two bends of the narrowed drive, he was unobserved, he stepped lightly aside, swiftly parted the crowded growth at the left side of the drive, and vanished among the tall, dense shrubs.

The minister was so surprised that he stopped short.

"That's curious, Hardy—our hatless friend has—disappeared, you know."

He pulled at his lip, perplexed. Both of them were staring back.

But a sharp voice a little way ahead recalled their attention and they went on quickly.

At the spot where the carriage drive debouched into the open space before the front of the enormous pile of the castle, which, densely cloaked with an almost incredibly thick mass of ivy, loomed gigantically over the

nettle and weed-grown area that once had been lawn, the jurymen had halted, and one of the leaders, the chief constable of the county, a high-coloured, hot-eyed, elderly man, clearly an old soldier, was peremptorily giving orders to the two policemen.

"Send all these people away at once. Nobody has any duty or business here other than the jury and the officials in charge of the proceedings. This is not a— a show. I will not have the proceedings treated as a spectacle and the coroner hampered by a crowd of morbid sight-seers running all over the place. See to it at once. Send them away and one of you—you, Streeter—post yourself at the entrance gates and keep everybody out!"

He tugged at his stiff, grey moustache.

"If they are so keen to feast their eyes on this— this pyramid—let them come here at night, by Jove, if they have the courage—not shelter themselves behind a body of men anxious to carry out a painful and distressing duty as expeditiously as possible!"

The schoolmaster glanced at the minister—who, though not on the jury, was clearly not included by the chief constable among those he denounced—and concealed a very slight smile.

"I fancy our young friend was quick witted enough to guess that this would probably happen," he whispered.

He was right. Mr. Prosper Fair was a gentleman who for all his suave and gentle manner possessed the art of foresight in rather an unusual degree.

## CHAPTER II

**A**LTHOUGH Kern Castle was not yet quite so decrepit as justly to be termed a ruin, nevertheless it was far on the way to becoming so. The great building, itself a huddled conglomeration of additions to the original plain L-shaped castle, was so densely smothered in rank ivy that little more than a rough idea of its general outline was obtainable. Weeds were growing vigorously everywhere about it, weeds and nettles and docks, a few stubborn survivors of long neglected perennial flowers, seedling trees, creepers and such indomitable vegetation.

Many of the windows visible through the tiny spaces not yet filled by the tenacious and unconquerable ivy lacked panes and resembled dark recesses, cowed in heavy greenish drapings, rather than windows. The great main doors were closed, the broad, shallow stone steps leading to them were carpeted with mossy grass, and the columns of the great portico were hidden entirely by a straggling mass of ivy-strangled roses without bloom. At the apex of the great place a flag-pole spired high into the air—but it was broken, snapped off midway, and served only to emphasise the general air of ruin and desolation.

The jurymen, shepherded by the peremptory chief constable, the coroner, a quiet man with an impassive

face and very steady eyes, and a third person, ruddy, breezy, well-dressed, whom the others addressed as "doctor," did not linger at the main entrance front of the castle.

They passed quickly around, making their way over a wide, overgrown terrace walk, to the south side.

Here, at the end of a winding path between two huge, unkempt yew edges, very old and enormously thick, they came presently to a small opening or exit from the yew walk, which brought them out at the sunken, stone-flagged garden which they sought. There was an involuntary pause on the part of most of these men—mainly respectable villagers, each with sufficient knowledge of gardening to realise what a place of sheer beauty this spot must once have been and, with a little skill and care, could be again.

"The sunk garden of Kern, Mr. Coroner and gentlemen of the jury," said the chief constable, his voice dropping a little, "some of you may have seen it in its happier days—years ago. It was unique, then—could be so again."

He was the possessor of a fine and fastidiously cared for property himself, and he shook his head rather sadly as he gazed about him, tugging at his close cut moustache.

Two tragedies had happened in that place during the past year and now, in its deserted, lonely and neglected condition, it looked indeed a fit setting for tragedy.

It was in the form of a great rectangle, fully two hundred yards long, by fifty wide. This space was

hemmed in on every side by massive hedges of ancient yew, nowhere less than twelve feet high, which once had been almost mathematically squared and trimmed, but which now were in the same neglected and riotously overgrown condition as the rest of the garden.

From a wide flower border at the base of the yew hedges, running parallel with the hedges, were broad stone-flagged walks extending in width to, and their inner edge forming the brink of, a sunken stone-paved rectangle, perhaps three feet below the level of the walks. At both ends and at several places along the sides, wide, irregular steps gave access to the "floor" of this garden. Everywhere, in every cranny and crevice, still clung the survivors of an amazing variety of rock plants, but the weeds were slowly conquering all these, as they had long ago conquered and killed the plants that once, in the flower borders, had made a radiant glory of colour against the sombre background of the dark hedges. There had been many roses there years ago, but these had long run to riot, and where peacocks had strutted on the stone walks there was now only a tangle of weeds and briars.

Down in the sunk garden itself, the fountains, the sundial, the urns, lead figures and stone benches that long ago had made it beautiful still remained but the shadow of desolation and decay was on these too. Some had fallen and lay where and how they had fallen, but one hardly noticed these, for, dominating the whole of the garden, squatting, ugly, bizarre and foreign, in the exact centre of the garden was the pyramid of



lead. Dull grey in the sunlight, wrecking the symmetry of the entire place, the mass of metal rose upon a quadrangular base that reached more than two-thirds of the way across the garden. In height it rose considerably above the topmost level of the yew edges, but because of the breadth of its base it gave only an impression of squatness, as it might have been a low, grey, ugly, polyhedral excrescence upon the stone floor of the garden—a fantastic tombstone designed for the grave of some not less fantastic giant. No entrances were visible and the faces of the pyramid were perfectly smooth, save only for four inscriptions, one upon each face.

The schoolmaster had been right in his description. It was a monstrous thing to put in such a place—hideous, remotely eerie, chilling and utterly destructive of all beauty there. It was like coming suddenly upon the grey side of a battleship at the end of a rose walk.

Such was the structure erected for no reason known either to his few friends or his enemies by the seventeenth Baron Kern some years before his strange disappearance from England in the early part of the year 1914.

The jury walked slowly round it, reading the inscriptions deeply incised upon the dull grey faces of the polyhedron. They were simple quotations from the Bible, full of meaning in themselves though their connection with, or relation to, the pyramid itself was as darkly obscure and inexplicable as the reasons which had inspired the eccentric peer to erect it in his garden.

That upon the north side ran:—

AND THOU EVEN THYSELF SHALT  
DISCONTINUE FROM  
THY HERITAGE  
THAT I  
GAVE  
THEE

On the south side was this:—

THEY THAT MAKE A GRAVEN  
IMAGE ARE ALL OF  
THEM VANITY; AND  
THEIR DELECTABLE  
THINGS SHALL  
NOT PROFIT

The eastern face bore these words:—

I WAS A DERISION

And, lastly, on the west side:—

A GOOD NAME IS RATHER TO BE  
CHOSEN THAN GREAT RICHES  
AND LOVING FAVOUR  
RATHER THAN  
SILVER AND  
GOLD

It was on the south side that presently the jurymen were marshalled to stare at a place on the stone flags which the chief constable pointed out, and to listen again to the coroner's brief *résumé* of the subject of their enquiry. With a certain skill, the result of grim practice, he made all clear.

The body of a well-dressed woman, something under middle age, had been discovered lying there by two boys who had ventured into the sunk garden bird's-nesting three days before. The medical evidence proved that she must have been dead for at least twenty-four hours but it could provide no reason as to the cause of death. Externally there were no signs nor had a post-mortem revealed anything beyond a slightly unsatisfactory condition of the lungs.

Beyond a few pound notes and a few odds and ends—none of which gave any indication of the identity of the dead lady—nothing of interest was found in her handbag. The coroner referred to the unusual number of rings which she was wearing—all being set with large and perfect emeralds of very considerable value. Her clothing was of extremely good quality, but bore no markings likely to aid any one seeking to discover her name. One curious point of which the coroner spoke at some length was the existence of a wound in the palm of her hand—a sharply cut incision about three quarters of an inch in length. It was inconceivable that this wound could have caused her death—but the fact that the weapon or instrument which caused it had passed first through her glove, rendered it con-

ceivable that she had received the wound either in the sunk garden or close to it. Otherwise, he suggested, the wound would almost certainly have been bound.

But no weapon had been found by the police. . . .

The jury listened in silence, their eyes for the most part on the inscription on the south face of the pyramid.

Presently, satisfied with their inspection, they left the garden to return to the village hall in which the inquest was being held.

Deserted, desolate, ruined, the sunk garden lay hushed within its gloomy walls of yew, the great pyramid looming over all.

Here and there a bird flickered across the wilderness of weeds, a few small lizards crept out to bask again in the sunshine, and, in one place, sinister, venomous and ugly, a large red adder wound slowly from a crevice to coil on the hot stones.

The tall foxgloves and nettles stood motionless in the still air and it was as though that place had been forever abandoned to the sun-drenched solitude that possessed it.

But presently the solitude was invaded. Within ten minutes of the departure of the jurymen a slender, wiry, grey figure appeared silently at one of the overgrown, masked and almost obliterated arches in the great yew hedge.

It was Mr. Prosper Fair.

He came quietly out, passed across the stone walk and went lightly down the steps, moving towards the pyramid of lead. He walked slowly round the dull

grey mass of metal, reading the inscriptions, noting them in a little book, and, having circled the pyramid, stepped a few paces back, and sat upon the low stone wall.

Without taking his eyes from it, he made himself a cigarette, lit it, and seemed to lapse into a curious trance-like study of the pyramid.

His face was very serious.

"Two people—first Mr. Larry Calhoun, a trainer of racehorses, next a Nameless Lady with emerald rings and a wounded palm," he said softly. "If it had been one only, one could attribute it to misadventure. I can believe that this place is not without a fascination for a would-be suicide—lonely, remote, shunned. But two is—one too many."

He drew a deep breath of smoke and expelled it, absently watching the grey plume fade in the warm, still air.

"They came here with a purpose—a motive. It should be possible to discover that motive . . . one would imagine that there would be indications of some kind——"

His eye caught a pin-point glitter from under the gay spire of a foxglove that had established itself at a spot a few feet back from the centre of the south base of the pyramid of lead.

He rose, went across, and stooped. The glitter of reflected sunlight resolved itself into a tiny fragment of curved glass—nothing more. He picked it up, noted where he had found it, put it carefully away in a match-

box, and began a slow, systematic walk round the sunk garden, his eyes on the ground.

Presently he stopped, studying one of the flights of broad, stone steps leading down into the garden from the flagged walk under the yew hedge.

"For example, why do the weeds grow less thickly over these steps than over the others," he asked himself.

He bent over the steps.

"Here we have a few tufts of dead weeds—no, rock plant. Some one seems to have pulled them from their crevices about the middle of the tread and thrown them aside. Why? If I were desirous of sitting down on these steps in the sunlight, is it conceivable that I should remove the greenery from the place where I intended to sit? . . . Only if I were arrayed in white flannels, I think—or if I were a lady, in a white summer frock."

He bent lower over the steps, examining them closely.

In a few moments he began to pick out from among these creeping rock plants several minute objects, which he presently held out in the palm of his left hand and studied attentively. They were tiny bits—shavings—of slightly curled wood.

"Some one has sharpened a pencil here within the last few days—a pencil coloured with dark blue varnish," he murmured.

"Indications, possibly," he said to an inquisitive robin surveying him from the edge of a low stone vase



close by. "But it would be simpler if you could speak, my friend. You have the air of one familiar with this garden—you look a frequenter—possibly even a resident of this place. Who has been sitting on these steps in fresh, clean white clothing, and sharpening pencils here?"

He stooped sharply, and picked carefully from a crevice a bronzed hairpin.

"One would assume that it was a lady," he continued. "This becomes interesting," he said, glanced at the watch on his wrist, thought for a moment, then nodded to the robin.

"I shall return, redbreast," he informed the bird and turned away towards the arch by which he had entered the garden.

He paused an instant as he passed the eastern side of the pyramid.

"'I was a derision,' " he read aloud. "That, at least, is an unexpected confession for the last of the Kerns to make—if all that one heard of him is true. . . ."

He moved on, thinking.

"It is quite conceivable that the key to the mystery of these two deaths is to be found in those inscriptions," he told himself as he passed out of the garden and disappeared into the jungle of shrubs and tall trees beyond the yew hedges.

Perhaps it was as well that he left the garden when he did, for within five minutes of his departure two men came through the larger entrance which the jury-men had used.

One of these, a tall individual of perhaps thirty-eight with a dark, keen, intellectual face, was wearing a well-cut suit of golf clothes. He appeared to be acting as a guide to the second man—a hard-looking person, years older than the man in the golfing suit, with the odd, reserved, watchful air of the professional plain-clothes detective the world over.

"It is many years now since I had any right to come to this place," said the man who looked like a barrister on a golfing holiday. "But if my knowledge of it is as it used to be in the days when Lord Kern lived here—or, for that matter, of Lord Kern himself, is likely to be of any use to you, I shall be very glad to answer any questions you like to ask."

The detective nodded, his hard eyes roaming about the garden.

"Thanks, Mr. Barisford," he said. "In a case like this anything we can ascertain about the people concerned is bound to be useful."

His glance had come to rest on the pyramid.

"Lord Kern was said to be extremely wealthy, wasn't he?"

Barisford smiled slightly. His eyes were never quite free from a deep, lurking humour.

"Oh, yes. It is no secret that his fortune amounted to something in the neighbourhood of a million and a half."

"And yet they say he was most miserly, the most miserly peer in the country," continued the detective.

The other agreed with an appearance of some reluctance.

"He was ludicrously parsimonious, yes."

"But, nevertheless, with lead worth—how much?—twenty pounds, perhaps?—a ton, he built that thing! There must be tons of it there—tons. It must have cost thousands. Did you ever get a glimmer of an idea why he built it?"

Barisford shook his head.

"Not the least. I was his secretary for four years—living mainly at his town house—but at the end of that four years I knew no more of him—of his private thoughts, or ideas, of his real personality, than I knew at the beginning. Lord Kern was the most intensely secretive man I have ever met. But that's notorious, of course—his parsimony and his secretiveness."

"Yes—almost everybody had heard of that even before he disappeared," agreed the detective, moving to go down into the garden. "It's a pity. If you could have told me why he squandered his precious money on that big block of metal it might have simplified things right away."

"Yes, I see that. I wish I knew. But I don't. I've conjectured—puzzled—for hours about that. Like thousands of others. But I've got no nearer the solution than anybody else—though I agree with you that when we know the reason why Lord Kern erected this pyramid and disappeared, I believe we shall not be far from discovering the cause of the deaths of those two

unfortunate people—if, indeed, they died from abnormal causes.”

The man from Scotland Yard nodded.

“I’ll take a look round now,” he said, and passed down the steps.

The man who had once been secretary to Lord Kern took a cigarette from a silver case, sat on the steps and watched him idly, his eyes full of that curious, attractive good humour which gave him an appearance of always being about to smile.

### CHAPTER III

**I**T was high noon before Prosper Fair rejoined his little comrades at the back of the haystack, for since he left the place of the pyramid of lead he had contrived to attend the closing stages of the inquest and even had obtained a view of the body of the Nameless Lady. His face was grave and his eyes were blank and preoccupied as he rounded the haystack. All his life long Prosper had been tender and gently disposed towards women because he believed that life was more difficult for them than for men. Much trouble, time and money had this tendency cost him but he regarded all that as well spent.

“It has been my good fortune to help make many women a little happier and I shall always be very glad of that,” he would say sometimes to Patience. “And I believe—though I would say this to nobody but you who can keep a secret so well—that women like me and trust me. That is not so bad, Patience—not so bad, though sometimes it can wring one’s heart. . . .”

He would stop there, his clean-cut mouth a little wry and uncertain, for it was not more than three years since the day he had knelt beside the bed of the dearest woman of all to him, his face buried in his hands—though neither she, his wife, nor the small son she had

seemed to hold so closely to her, had known that he was there. . . .

Something pitiful, some vague, haunting suggestion of wistful protest that he had fancied he could see on the face of the Nameless Lady had moved him very much. And this, together with the voiceless challenge of the great pile of grey metal to solve the mystery of its existence, the puzzle of its strange inscriptions, had impelled him to match his intelligence, his courage, and his tenacity against this hitherto unsolved problem.

It was not with any expectation of such grim adventure that he ever set out from his home upon his wanderings in the prosecution of what he was wont gaily to term his ceaseless "study of humanity." Far less serious adventures had contented him hitherto.

But never among these lesser matters had he encountered one which called so insistently or urgently for his wholehearted intervention as this mystery of the pyramid of lead. . . .

He stood for a moment surveying his comrades with absent eyes.

"There is no puzzle without a solution—for if there were no solution there could be no puzzle," he said. "Do you see that, Patience? . . . For myself, I see no reason why there should not be a perfectly simple, though possibly sinister, explanation of these tragedies—provided one erects one's fabric of reasoning upon a sufficiently accurate basis. I shall try to do that."

Thoughtfully he moved out of the field, across the

main road and into the by-road which ran past Kern Castle.

He turned off into the woods just beyond the entrance gates and worked his way round to the south front.

Here in a little clearing on the edge of the ancient woods bounding the belt of wild growth between the south yew hedge of the sunk garden and the woods, he pitched his camp, fed his comrades, and ate his own midday meal.

This done he drew from his haversack and carefully spread out before him on a handkerchief his little array of trifles found in the garden that morning.

"Let us begin at the beginning," he told himself. "Which, at present, seems to me to be some years before the departure of Lord Kern from England in the year nineteen hundred and fourteen." He shut his eyes, frowning as he concentrated on the effort clearly to remember all that he had ever read or heard of the eccentric nobleman. Prosper, as may in due course be seen, had encountered in his career many opportunities of knowledge—intimate knowledge—concerning the aristocracy denied to the average man. Gradually many details came back.

"If everything one read and heard is to be believed the passion of Lord Kern's life was money—a miser's passion, not a gambler's. I remember that it was said that he had sold practically all his property except Kern Castle, its big park and grounds, and his town

house, in order to possess his great fortune in liquid or at least easily secured cash. For years he lived that way—mean, lonely and unmarried, the last of his house.”

Prosper nodded.

“Then suddenly he seemed to change. He launched out into a brief career as a man about town—a decidedly middle-aged one. He was seen at theatres, races, dinners, dances, smart restaurants, and some of the clubs. His town house was redecorated and he began to entertain on a lavish scale—when abruptly he seemed to repent sharply of the new life, and instantly reverted to what he had been before—a grim, hard and bitter miser. . . .”

Sitting staring blankly before him Prosper distilled that ancient gossip from his brain bit by bit.

He nodded again, as though to encourage himself.

“What came next?” he muttered. “If I remember correctly it was published some time after that he had retired from his social interlude to Kern Castle, lived there for two years or so, quietly and obscurely, during which time he built the pyramid of lead. Then he suddenly left England and went to America—or was it Australia?”

He scowled in his intense effort to remember.

“America, I believe. And he never returned—obviously. From the day of his disappearance to this, nothing more has been heard of him—by the general public, that is. But one may presume that he is still alive. There must be solicitors, agents, or somebody



watching his interests. I shall have to find that out,"—here he made a note. "But judging by the condition of this place the powers of these solicitors must be strictly limited, for it is clear that nothing is ever done to check the slow decay, the inexorable ruin that presses day by day more heavily, more darkly upon this noble inheritance——"

Prosper stopped suddenly, like one who hears a distant sound, and slowly repeated his last sentence—

*"——to check the slow decay, the inexorable ruin that presses day by day more heavily, more darkly upon this noble heritage of Kern——"*

"It is very evident that, wherever he may be, Lord Kern is no longer interested in a place which must have been perfect when he first possessed it—'this noble heritage of Kern'"—he quoted himself.

The word vibrated a string in his consciousness.

"Heritage! Heritage," he murmured and glanced at his notebook, reading aloud.

*"And thou, even thyself, shalt discontinue from thy heritage which I gave thee!"* Word for word he repeated the inscription on the north face of the pyramid of lead.

"But that's curious," said Prosper. "It is *apt*—as far as discontinuing to enjoy the castle he inherited is concerned. It seems as if this slow decay, this abandonment of Kern to ruin, is deliberate."

He reflected.

"I believe that I have gained a little point—captured a very small pawn," he said. "I will assume for a

little that Lord Kern is deliberately letting this place fall to ruin. . . .”

He considered that for a moment, but, at present, it led him nowhere. He put it aside, and tried another tack.

“The sunk garden of Kern has an evil reputation and few, if any, of the villagers—including, after this last tragedy, even bird’s-nesting boys—will go near it alone in broad daylight, and certainly not at night. Yet some woman goes there, sits upon those steps and lingers there—at leisure, for no woman in a hurry chooses that moment as a time for sharpening a pencil. It will be necessary to discover who she is, why she goes there, and why the pyramid of lead does not awe or appal her as it does the villagers of Kern.”

He put away the shavings and the hairpin and studied the curved fragment of glass. The shape of this puzzled him. It was obviously not a fragment of sheet glass, nor of a broken bottle, nor was it part of a tube or lens. It was too thin for any of those things.

He came at last to the conclusion that it might be part of an electric light bulb, though how it came to be in the sunk garden he could neither judge nor guess. He decided to ascertain if the castle was provided with an electric plant.

“It may be from an electric torch bulb—but with so wide a curve it would have to be a very large torch indeed,” he said and restored it to its matchbox. He rose, then closed the flap of the little tent and notifying the electric Plutus that he must remain behind, he be-

gan to make his way through the jungle of undergrowth and bramble-choked shrubbery dividing the woods from the south yew hedge of the great sunk garden.

He purposed passing through this on a short cut to the village.

His progress was slow and tormented with snaky briars, tough as wire cables. It took him half an hour to make the rudiments of a path through. In the south yew hedge, the one to which he was making his laborious way under the hot sunlight, were two arched entrances cut one at each end. Mainly because the village beyond the castle lay somewhat to the left, Prosper headed for the left entrance, intending to cut diagonally across the western end of the garden.

As he neared the entrance he went more cautiously and silently—not that he considered it really necessary but simply because it was just conceivable that the lady of the steps might be there on this gloriously sunny afternoon. He believed it improbable—but the fascination of the problem was enmeshing him closely now, and his mind was not of a quality which rendered him liable to carelessness or incapable of estimating possibilities.

His precaution was surprisingly well repaid.

As he came to the hedge he paused, glancing through the unpruned, growth-narrowed entrance towards the steps which had caught his attention. These were quite close—no more than the width of the stone-flagged walk separated them from the hedge.

He drew back instantly.

A girl was sitting on those steps, gazing dreamily before her. By her side was a sketch book, but she was not using it. She was sitting at such an angle that she could see the pyramid of lead, squatting heavy and grey and monstrous away to the right.

Very carefully Prosper looked in again.

A big garden hat lay near her on the steps, though she sat full in the sunshine. He could see only her profile, but that was enough to acquaint him instantly with her beauty. She was fair, very fair, with pale gleaming hair and even had he not known her to be young by reason of the careless, silky plait into which her hair had been gathered, he could not have missed the sheer youth in the unconsciously graceful pose of her slim body; and there was youth as well as loveliness in the delicate outline of her perfectly balanced chin and lips, nose and forehead. She was dressed in a white garden frock with a touch of blue here and there, and she was looking up, her lips slightly parted—as though studying the top of the pyramid. Prosper glanced at that monument and saw that she was watching two thrushes that had alighted on the pyramid—a hen and a late fledgeling on its first flight. Then, even as he looked, a shadow slid across the garden. The girl saw it and glanced up. A big kestrel had drifted on still vans over the pyramid. She stood up quickly, fluttering her hands.

“Oh, fly away——” she called in an urgent but most musical voice. The thrushes, alarmed, fled into the

yew hedges even as the kestrel stooped for the fledgeling like a falling bolt of red steel, curving up with an angry scream of disappointment just as it seemed about to smash itself on the metal summit.

The girl laughed aloud with pleasure and sat down again. Prosper thought her exquisite.

And she must be courageous too—for it was very evident that she was wholly without fear or nervousness alone in this place. He scowled unconsciously as it came to him that she might be in real danger. Two victims already the pyramid had taken—what was there to save this lovely child from becoming the third?

“She may be day-dreaming in the shadow of death——” he said to himself.

He watched her like a charmed thing.

“She must know that this place is—is perilous——” he began, and was on the point of rising from his ambush when a footstep on the stone walk caught both the girl’s and Prosper’s attention simultaneously.

He saw her look quickly down the garden. She did not rise and she showed neither alarm nor surprise.

A moment later the newcomer paused by the steps, slightly raising his soft felt hat. Prosper, watching intently, saw that he was a short, powerful man in a dark grey tweed suit. He was clean shaven with a rather heavy jaw, tight lips and hard, piercing, light grey eyes. He was scrutinising the girl intently.

“You’ll excuse my venturing to interrupt you in your sketching, Miss,” he said, in a flat metallic voice,

"But as you're probably a stranger about here, I think it's my duty to warn you that this is—not the best of places for a young lady to come to alone for an afternoon's sketching." Behind the friendly tone was a hint of both warning and authority.

But the girl only smiled.

"Oh, thank you for warning me, but, you see, I know this place very well indeed. I live quite close. And I know about the—sad things that have happened here, too. But I have been used to coming here for years and I am not afraid or nervous. I have no enemies, you see, and I don't get into mischief——" she laughed softly—"and so no one is likely to want to hurt me."

A certain admiration made itself apparent on the hard face of the man from Scotland Yard—for this was he—but he shook his head.

"Well, although I don't want to spoil your pleasure, Miss—Miss——"

"My name is Merlehurst——" she said, smiling, "and I live quite close—midway between the castle and the village."

The detective nodded but persisted.

"There are still some people about who are enemies of all the world, Miss Merlehurst," he reminded her. "Do your friends—your parents—know that you come here alone? You need not mind my asking—I have a kind of right——"

"Oh, yes, they know. And I, too, know that you have a right to warn me—you are the detective from Scotland Yard who is enquiring into the mystery of

those poor people who—who—died here.” Her voice sank and was troubled as she spoke.

He stared.

“How did you know that?”

She laughed again.

“Oh, but don’t you understand what country villages are like? Every one knows already that you are Inspector Garrishe of Scotland Yard.”

“Oh, do they? . . . But that doesn’t make it any safer here for you alone, Miss Merlehurst. And—forgive me—have you any real right to be here? That has to be considered, too, you know.”

The lovely laughing face became more serious.

“I have more right to be here than perhaps you think, Inspector Garrishe,” she said.

“May I ask what that right is?”

“Oh, yes. Everybody in Kern knows it. You see—if Lord Kern does not return here within ten years from July nineteen hundred and fourteen, Kern Castle and everything Lord Kern possessed becomes my property.”

The detective gave no sign of surprise. He seemed to know something of that already. But it was with some interest that he answered.

“Oh, so you are the young lady referred to in that celebrated deed of gift.”

She nodded.

“I thought you would be more surprised,” she said naively. “You have heard of that before?”

“Yes—a good many people have heard rumours of it

who have never met the fortunate young lady who will benefit by it. So that is why you are not afraid to come here."

She considered.

"Perhaps it is. I don't know quite. But somehow I don't think this beautiful old garden is unfriendly to me. I love it and I always feel that there is nothing in it that wants to hurt me."

The detective said nothing for a moment. He seemed to be thinking.

Then, like a man who has come to an abrupt decision, he asked:

"Will you answer a question that perhaps you may feel I have no business to ask you, Miss Merlehurst? I assure you that I ask it in the interests of the law, and for the sake of those poor souls who died here—as well as, in a way, for your own sake."

She looked at him, her blue eyes wide and steady.

"Ought I to promise to answer?" she said. "I don't think I should promise—but I will try to answer it. What do you wish to ask me, please?"

"Why did Lord Kern name you as the one to inherit this place in the event of his never returning? You must have been quite a child when he disappeared."

She answered that at once, frankly and openly as a child.

"Truly, I don't know. I have often been asked that. I was only a little girl when Lord Kern disappeared and I have never seen him in my life."

The detective reflected.



"How old are you now?" he asked abruptly.

"I am eighteen."

"That would make you about nine when Lord Kern disappeared."

"Yes."

"May I ask your full name?"

"Oh, yes. Marjorie May Merlehurst. Do you like that?" she asked with a little laugh, half shy, half mischievous.

"Like it—why, of course he likes it. It's music," said Prosper under his breath. He was enchanted with the girl—but still not so enchanted that he failed to notice the entry into the garden of another man—a tall person, in golf clothes.

"Here is Mr. Barisford, a friend of mine, who used to be secretary to Lord Kern," said the girl. "Perhaps he could help you, inspector."

But it proved that Mr. Barisford could by no means help the detective with any information concerning the reason why Lord Kern had named Miss Merlehurst conditionally as his successor.

"The thing is as wholly a mystery to me as to Miss Merlehurst, or her relatives or anybody else, inspector. If you can find out his reasons for doing that, there are quite a number of people who will be grateful to you."

"And I shall be one of them," chimed Marjorie May in her clear, sweet musical voice.

"Well, there must be a reason," said the inspector thoughtfully. "But I shall have to hunt for that an-

other day," he added. "Just at present I am going to be busy in the castle if you are ready to show me over it, Mr. Barisford."

"Perfectly ready," declared Barisford. "But as I stated when I promised to act as guide I can accept no responsibility for—er—'forcing an entry,' don't you call it."

The detective chuckled.

"Ah, I'll be responsible for that," he said. "I understand the law about 'forcing entries.'"

"Oh, please——" began the girl, but broke off.

"Yes, Miss Merlehurst?" encouraged Inspector Garishe.

"I was wondering whether it was possible for you to permit me to come, too. I have never yet been inside the castle."

The detective agreed readily enough—so readily that he might almost have had some motive. But if he had he certainly gave no sign of it, and presently they all moved away down the garden towards an exit leading to the castle.

For a few minutes Mr. Prosper Fair stood, thinking deeply.

But his thinking brought him only to the conclusion that the sooner he gleaned the very fullest information available about Lord Kern the better.

He returned quickly to his camp, retracing his trail with the quick-eyed confidence of a man at home in the wilderness.

Here he settled himself, with writing pad and pencil

leaning against a big tree trunk and wrote diligently for some minutes.

He re-read what he had written, then turned to his companions, Patience and Plutus, and addressed them :

"If you were able to read these letters, my littles, it is just possible that you would agree that the uncomradely act which I am on the verge of committing is justified. . . . My dears, I am going to send you home, and to work singlehanded. There is that suggesting itself in this matter of the pyramid of lead which is ominous and dark and sinister. And it is no desire of mine that you should share such danger as seems to me to lurk like a deadly, silent, merciless and inexorable thing in ambush about this ill-starred garden of Kern—the stark spirit of murder, backed by infinite stealth and cunning, inspired by some strong and ruthless and pressing motive . . . which I have to discover. So by reason of the danger—and other reasons—we shall part for a little. We have had a generous share of light-hearted adventure at various times—but there is nothing light-hearted in this adventure. So a brief parting will be arranged just as soon as I can send a telegram. Trust Prosper—and all will be well."

He rose again and headed definitely for the village, making a wide detour of the castle and its grounds.

His face was grave—even a little grim—as he walked through the wood. All that he had said—ostensibly to Patience the donkey and Plutus Three-Legs, as was his custom but, actually, by way of self-communion—he believed.

He had first come to see the pyramid of lead with an open mind, in a spirit of enterprising curiosity, but already he was far from that point.

Here, in a space of a few hours, he had sensed that there was indeed a mystery—and a dangerous mystery—about the great, grey, forbidding pyramid dominating the sunk garden. Somewhere in the opaque fog of that mystery moved an intelligence, swift, tenacious, formidable—an intelligence that could discriminate.

"Yes, that is so," he told himself. "There is purpose driving the hidden intelligence that lurks within the veils of the mystery—and power to discriminate between persons—to select victims. Why is it that beautiful, graceful child is safe in the garden—and seems to be very well aware of it—whereas Calhoun and the Nameless Lady were—fair game?"

He was asking himself this question, without guessing, even dimly, at a feasible answer until he reached the post office.

It was here, in the centre of the village street, that he first saw the person of whom ever afterwards he thought as the Iron-Grey Man.

This one rounded the corner on which the post office stood and halted just as Prosper was about to enter the little building.

"Forgive me," he said, in the voice of one well-bred, "I am sorry to delay you but I should be grateful if you will tell me the way to Kern Castle."

"To Kern Castle? With pleasure. Let me see now—um!"

Prosper reflected, studying the man. He was not less than six feet two inches tall, desperately lean, very upright, and his height was accentuated by the long, faded, grey frock coat tightly buttoned round his frame. He was clad wholly in shabby grey. His boots, long, narrow, and badly cracked, which once had been of black patent leather, were greyish white with dust; he wore a stained top hat which had once been grey; and his hollow-cheeked and haggard face was grey, though with an ugly flush on each of the jutting cheek-bones. His hair was iron-grey, his moustache of the same hue, and his eyes were pale grey also.

He waited patiently for Prosper to speak and it seemed that he swayed a little as he stood there. Clearly a tramp—it needed no more than a glance at his ruined clothes to glean that—but the sort of tramp who has once been a gentleman. For a moment Prosper could not quite “place” him. Then, suddenly, he realised that this weird wanderer looked precisely as a man might look who, dressed in the height of fashion for a day’s racing at Ascot some years before, had left some smart coach on the race-course and taken to the road forthwith—even as he stood. Since then the sun, the wind and the rain had been corroding what once must have been an appearance of extreme “smartness” to its present condition.

“Kern Castle is empty—untenanted, you know. I believe that it has been unoccupied for years,” said Prosper, watching the Iron-Grey Man.

"Quite so—I understand that, thanks."

Suddenly he closed his eyes tightly and kept them closed.

"Forgive me if these closed eyes give you an impression of—queerness. It is a habit I have when I am fatigued."

"——and hungry and thirsty——" mentally added Prosper to that.

"I shall be able to open them in a few moments, you understand—feeling refreshed. Strange, that—isn't it?" continued the Iron-Grey Man in a voice of inexpressible weariness. "It was always so with me. I am sorry."

Prosper took one of the bony claw-like hands and forced into it a tightly folded wad of crinkly paper.

"It is probably something to do with the nerve centres," he said casually, and added quietly:

"The entrance to Kern Castle lies half way down a lane which is the second turning to the right. . . . But the entrance to the local inn is three doors along on the left. My friend, if you do not go to that inn first and eat and drink and rest, it is questionable whether you will ever reach Kern Castle. . . . Give a man well acquainted with the trials and vicissitudes of the road an opportunity of repaying many kindnesses he has experienced also on the road. If you are willing I will join you there within the space of a few minutes."

The Iron-Grey Man swayed.

"Sir, you are incredibly kind," he said. His lids opened suddenly.

"Let it be as you wish," he said and moved on towards the inn.

They were slow at the post office and it took Prosper a full ten minutes to get his telegram off.

Then he hurried to the inn to improve his acquaintance with the iron-grey apparition.

But he was not there—nor had he been there. Prosper was astonished to discover that this information seemed most unaccountably to disturb him.

"But he was quite staringly in the last stage of exhaustion!" he said to himself and went out, oddly worried.

There was no sign of the Iron-Grey Man anywhere along the empty deserted village street.

But an enquiry put to a placid woman standing in the doorway of a little general shop opposite made things plainer.

"Yes, I saw him. He was standing outside the Kern Arms when the baker's van stopped with the bread. I thought he was a funny-looking sort of a tramp. He bought a loaf off the baker's boy and I suppose he asked for a lift. Leastways, he drove off with the boy."

"He wanted to go past Kern Castle," said Prosper. The woman nodded.

"The baker's van goes round by that way this afternoon," she explained.

Prosper thanked her and headed for Kern himself.

## CHAPTER IV

PROSPER was busy at his camp for an hour or so, then, leaving all snug, he set out with Patience and Plutus for a spot some two miles west of Kern village. No doubt he had ample reason for wishing to separate from them quietly, unobtrusively and without witnesses, for that certainly was how the parting was achieved. The only witness was the very smart driver of the closed motor shooting-brake which drove up to the spot whereat Prosper and his humble friends waited, some two hours after he sent off his telegram.

Clearly, Mr. Fair was a gentleman with greater resources at his command than one might have expected from the circumstances in which he had entered the village of Kern.

It took some time to accomplish the parting with Plutus the three-legged, though Patience took it with the wistful and philosophic resignation which one would expect to find in a well-behaved donkey.

But at last it was achieved, and taking a suit case which the chauffeur had brought, Prosper bade him return whence he came, and prepared to do the same himself.

"You will miss them, my friend," he told himself a quarter of a mile on. "Particularly that three-legged electric spark of a terrier."



He need not have worried. A little further on he chanced to look round.

The "electric spark" was trotting three-leggedly along at a discreet distance in the rear—one eye on Prosper for caution—one eye on the hedgerow for sport. How he had got out of the car Prosper never knew. Like those of small boys, the movements of small terriers are mysterious and unexpected.

Prosper shook a friendly fist at him, but Plutus merely insisted on regarding that as an approval of his manœuvre.

He rejoined his master forthwith.

"Very well, old Indomitable. But you have doomed yourself to a silent few weeks, young fellow. There will be no barking—do you understand that? No barking whatever."

"Certainly not," wagged Plutus. . . .

Prosper might have done worse—for it was the low uneasy growl of the terrier which at midnight recalled him from the brink of sleep.

"What is it, Plutus?"

The dog was staring through the chink left at the tent opening for ventilation.

Prosper left his blankets and looked out listening. There was no wind, and the whole world was uncannily still.

A reddish moon hung low over Kern Castle.

Prosper watched Plutus who, with a furiously twitching nose, and stiffly erected shoulder bristles was sniff-

ing incessantly and glaring in the direction of the sunk garden of Kern.

"Ah, so thus it is, my son, is it?" said Prosper tensely, and took from under his pillow a thing which glittered bluely in a stray moon-beam—an automatic pistol.

He passed out into the chequered maze of moonlight and shadow that enmeshed the wilderness in which he had made his track to the garden that afternoon.

Plutus was left behind, duly warned to silence.

Very cautiously and slowly Prosper made his way to the sunk garden.

Plutus was everything but a liar, and Prosper knew that. And the small dog was extraordinarily experienced. It was no such light matter as a prowling fox, a stealing rabbit, or a gliding weasel which would so excite Plutus at midnight following a brisk day.

There was a more formidable thing abroad to-night than any common or customary prowler.

Prosper had reason to congratulate himself on the care with which he had broken his trail that afternoon. Had he not done so he could never have made his way direct to it in the dull moonlight. Even as it was he could not avoid the thorns and brambles which gripped him as though with invisible hooked ghostly hands, holding him back at every few yards. There, too, were owls, floating on down-muffled, utterly silent wings, who screamed discordantly overhead—long the nocturnal owners of this desolate spot; and once a lithe

thing, probably a grass-snake, squirmed under his foot as he walked thigh deep in dense shadow.

It was eerie there and the odour of the vegetation which he crushed underfoot was peculiarly pronounced—acrid, rank and poisonous.

But presently he moved clear of that belt of woodland and came, lightfooted as a cat, to the arched entrance to the sunk garden. For a few cautious moments he paused there, looking in, reconnoitring. He was prepared to take no chances, to run no unnecessary risks. Under its towering black walls of yew the sunk garden lay, soundless, serene, tranquil in the moonlight, and the bulk of the pyramid of lead, looming squat and heavy in the centre of the garden, seemed merely unattractive rather than dangerous in the sense that any one need hesitate to approach it.

But two people had been found dead in its shadow already without any signs of what had caused their deaths—and Prosper Fair was not desirous of becoming the third victim for lack of a little caution.

His eyes grew more used to the curious chequered light in the garden, as he stood in the archway watching and listening. He saw nothing, heard nothing. Had not the sharp-sensed little Plutus distinctly given it as his opinion that there was something queer—unusual—taking place in the direction of the garden, Prosper, after his inspection, would unhesitatingly have declared that the place was deserted.

He moved quietly out from his archway, and keeping

well in the black shadow of the yew hedge he went silently along the flagged walk towards the pyramid.

The theory of the schoolmaster that it was the south side of the pyramid which was the most dangerous recurred to his taut mind, and he approached it from the north side.

Once in its shadow he waited again to listen.

But the jarring, rattling cry of the owl from over the belt of wilderness was all he heard, and that was absorbed by the night instantly, as blotting paper absorbs a spot of ink.

Then Prosper walked along the west face of the pyramid and, checking at the corner, peered round to the fatal south side.

Even as he looked some keen uncanny intuition warned him what he would find. He had felt for the past half hour that, moving silent, malign, grim and terrible, the spirit of murder which haunted this deserted place was abroad to-night.

Now he knew.

Lying at the base of the pyramid of lead was the body of a man.

Prosper was by his side in an instant. Carefully shielding the light with both hands cupped round the bulb, he flashed a small pocket torch into the still face.

It was that of the Iron-Grey Man.

He was quite dead, though his body was still warm. A quarter of an hour before he must have been living.

Prosper switched off his torch and stood up, thinking swiftly. It was impossible that the killer could have

got far away—if indeed he had left the garden at all. Even now he might still be lurking in the myriad shadows, watching, listening, planning to add yet another to his already terrifying list of victims.

Prosper drew in a long deep breath and with a sheer effort of will-power caught up and re-strung his relaxing nerves.

Then even as he slipped his pistol free and, gripping it in his right hand, began to back round out of the perilous zone under the south face of the pyramid, a sharp, ringing report hammered the silence to shreds.

Between the garden and the castle some one had fired a revolver.

Prosper did not hesitate. He ran silently towards the exit nearest the sound, passed through and found himself in the darkness of a densely overgrown yew alley. On the mossy walk his rubber soles were noiseless.

A few yards further on he stopped short—like a pointer.

On the other side of the hedge a man was crouching. Prosper had caught the rustle of leaves and twigs as this one moved.

But Prosper was not the only one who had heard that movement, for as he paused, listening, swift feet thudded twice on the turf at the other side of the hedge, like those of a man rushing, striding swiftly, and a low tense voice in the darkness.

*"Now, you!"*

It was the voice of the man from Scotland Yard—

and it was instantly evident to Prosper that the detective and another man were engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle beyond the hedge. He could hear the short, strained pantings, the scuffle and thud of their feet.

Then came swiftly the peculiar, flat, wholly unmistakable sound of the impact of metal or hard wood against thinly covered bone, and a low groan.

"Now, will you take it quietly—eh? eh?—keep still——"

There was a tiny ominous clink of steel, and Prosper heard the detective say in a voice of complete triumph and satisfaction:

"That will do you, I think. Get up. You've paid your last visit to this place—killed your last victim here."

"Killed a victim! Why, you fool, I'm hunting for the man who killed Larry Calhoun here. You call yourself a detective! Why, you fool, I'm Fred Oxtan—I was partner with Calhoun. Everybody in the village knows me. You've spoiled everything. Why, he was about to-night—the murderer—he was *about*, I tell you—I thought it was him I shot at——"

"That'll do, now. You can tell me all that to-morrow," snapped the inspector. "I'll take care of you till then."

"Do what you like—what the devil d'you think I care? You've ruined the best chance we'll ever have of getting the right man. You'll see. He's about. He's on the job to-night. Mark my words—you'll

hear of him before morning. I tell you, I wouldn't swear that he's not close by now—in the dark—*listening*. . . . Come on, now, I'll make you an offer. Let's go to the pyramid and look—you can keep these handcuffs on me all the time——”

But the detective was satisfied.

“No, no—I'm not looking any farther for my man to-night.” He chuckled rather grimly. “One murderer a night will do for me. Come on.”

Prosper heard them move away, blundering through the shadows, the man in handcuffs cursing furiously.

For a moment he hesitated. He had caught in the voice of the man Oxtan what the inspector seemed to have missed—a certain ring of truth.

Then he turned and made his way with infinite care back to the pyramid of lead.

An icy thrill of surprise touched his veins as he rounded the pyramid.

The body of the Iron-Grey Man had disappeared.

Fred Oxtan was—must be—right. The killer was abroad that night—and close at hand.

For a moment Prosper was undecided, listening tensely. He was appallingly at a disadvantage—and was well aware of it. It was extremely likely that the killer crouched in dark ambush quite close—almost at arm's length—watching him, ready to deal with him with the same mysterious but deadly effective weapon or means he had already employed against three victims.

But Prosper, like many another airy, irresponsible-

seeming, modern young gentlemen, had nerves which difficult situations only strung to the tautness of steel wires.

He remained where he was and looked about him in a long deliberate scrutiny, straining his eyes at every nearby shadow or dark patch. But none of these moved, made any sound, or seemed in any way suspicious and his stare moved round the garden—to become instantly fixed, as it touched a flight of steps at the end of the garden.

A figure was standing there—pale, silent, almost spectral in the light of the moon.

A chill hand gripped his heart for an instant at sight of this ghost-like apparition. Then he shook himself free from his momentary agitation, and moved swiftly and silently on his rubber soles towards it.

His pistol hand was raised and ready, the wrist pressing lightly against his right side. He could have fired in a fraction of a second.

But the figure made no sign of offence.

Prosper drew near.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? Be careful—I am armed,” he said, quietly.

The figure made no answer.

Prosper stepped closer yet and his pistol hand fell.

It was Marjorie Merlehurst.

“Miss Merlehurst——”

He was within a foot of her now.

And then he caught his breath.

The girl was fast asleep. It was not from the ex-



pression on her face or her eyes, for these Prosper could see but dimly in that shadowy moonlight, that he realised this startling situation. It was because she appeared to be wearing only a light silk kimono or wrap over her nightdress. Her hair was loose—and her feet were bare. Prosper felt a little chill wave at that, for vipers lived in the crevices of the stonework of the garden—he had seen two that afternoon—sunning themselves.

Suddenly she spoke in a strange, dreamy, hesitant voice.

“He went into the dark shadows under the yews—carrying something. I saw—oh, I am sure it was he—I recognised him—it was——”

She broke off abruptly with a little moan, very pitiful to hear. She was silent then for a moment. Prosper, watching her, was conscious of a shadow that moved behind her—a dark blur moving against the dark background. Some one there! Or was it just a trick of the light?

His pistol hand swung up again, and his swift wits, strung to an uncanny keenness, pounced on the truth.

This girl, consciously or unconsciously, must have seen the man—without doubt the killer—who had taken away, for his own reasons, the body of his last victim. She knew him—had recognised him—was on the very brink of uttering his name. By some trick, some freak of the mind in her state of somnambulism, she had yet realised—or, more probably “sensed” in some profound, inexplicable way, his identity. She

might say aloud his name at any moment . . . and Prosper fully believed that close behind her, a shadow masked by shadow, he lurked, armed and ready, listening—listening.

If she spoke a syllable of his name she would die swiftly—Prosper was sure of that. But not until she spoke it, for the killer knew that Prosper, armed and ready would avenge her instantly. It was impossible for the man to kill two people simultaneously. Prosper's eyes strained over her shoulder into the shadows. Had he seen a movement, a ghost of a movement, or heard a sound, a thread of sound, he would have fired at once, and risked the shock to the startled little sleep-walker.

But the darkness that shielded the lurking death was blank and blind, as silent and still as it was perilous.

Keyed up, every muscle taut and strung to its extremity, every sense alert to the point of torment, Prosper waited, aiming into the shadows.

The girl's strange floating voice rose again, sweet and faint on the silence.

"I—recognise him—I——"

Another voice broke in—low, of a pleasant timbre, but full of anxiety—calling softly from somewhere behind the yew hedge.

"Marjorie! Marjorie!"

A pause.

Then, a little nearer.

"Marjorie! Are you there? Don't be afraid. I'm

coming to be with you. Are you awake? . . . Marjorie!"

It was like the voice of some kind and friendly ghost calling softly out of the gloom—coming nearer.

Prosper recognised the voice at once as that of the man he had seen in golf clothes—Mr. Barisford, who had been secretary to Lord Kern.

Evidently the girl had been missed—and Barisford was coming in search of her. Aware of the danger of waking a somnambulist too abruptly, he was calling softly somewhere out there in the gloom as he approached the girl's favourite haunt in the sunk garden.

But Prosper did not take his eyes from the shadows.

There was no danger from Barisford—what of danger came would come from the shadows. . . .

"Marjorie! Marjorie. . . . Can you hear me?"

At last the pleasant voice penetrated to her tranced mind.

Prosper heard her sigh deeply—the sound of one at the very point of waking—and a second later, her confused little cry:

"Oh-h! Where. . . ."

"It is all right, Marjorie—all right," said Prosper gently but very quickly. "Nothing to be afraid of—nothing at all."

He stepped aside and the ray of his electric torch darted on to and dispersed the shadows.

The black muzzle of the pistol in his right hand seemed like a dark, sinister, basilisk eye following intently the white rod of light from the torch.

## CHAPTER V

SO convinced was Prosper that the deep shadow behind Marjorie Merlehurst harboured or ambushed some imminent and formidable danger that it was with a sense of shock he realised that nothing—neither man nor beast—was there. Only the dark mass of yew like a low cliff of greenish-black rock.

A few seconds later, indeed, somebody appeared, but this was one whose voice Prosper had recognised, and whose arrival he was unfeignedly glad to see—Raymond Barisford. He came swiftly through the archway in the hedge, his keen, handsome face white and anxious and the girl went to him with a low cry of relief. Her first waking stare at Prosper had been that of one dazed, but now the soft shackles of sleep had fallen from her mind.

“Oh, I woke suddenly and I found myself in the dark . . . until that ray leaped out like a great eye . . . and some one was staring——”

She was looking at Prosper, one hand trembling on Barisford’s sleeve.

“Yes, yes—but it’s all right now, Marjorie—all right——” Barisford soothed her.

“I have been walking in my sleep again—I was thinking of the sunk garden when I went to bed. I seemed to dream . . . a dark dream with shadowy

men moving through it—like men moving through smoke—vapour——”

She was silent suddenly, staring blankly ahead, her pretty brows drawn together like those of one trying to recall a dim memory.

“Men—moving dim in the fogs——” she murmured.

“Never mind the men, the dream, now, Marjorie—it’s all right. I am going to take you home safe and sound again——”

He slipped an arm round the slender figure and stared intently at Prosper.

“Who are *you?*” he demanded. “What are you doing here?” His voice was sharp with suspicion. “You do not belong to this—district.”

Prosper smiled into the glare of the other’s electric torch.

“I? Oh, a nobody, a wandering artist—a vagabond painter—a sleeper-out—a walking tourist. My name is Prosper Fair and I have a camp in the woods close by. I wandered here to paint the famous sunk garden of Kern and its pyramid—and I came out to see it in the moonlight. Call on me to-morrow, and let me prove to you that I am—perfectly respectable.”

It was impossible to misinterpret the cool, cultivated voice. Barisford’s tone was moderated as he spoke again.

“A strange place to visit in the moonlight, Mr. Fair,” he said. “And—why did you frighten the lady?”

Prosper’s voice was tranquil as he answered.

"I should not easily forgive myself if in any circumstances I frightened a lady. I am sure she will let me detain her just long enough to explain that as I moved from the pyramid to investigate more closely the little apparition which proved to be herself, I believed, no, I am quite sure, I saw someone—something—move in the darkness behind her. Already I have learned enough to know that it is not good for one, awake or asleep, man or woman, to turn one's back upon moving shadows in this garden—at this hour of the night. So I conceived it wise to risk the danger of waking Miss Marjorie abruptly, in order to satisfy myself about what might have been a greater danger."

The girl glanced over her shoulder.

"Yes, yes—that is true—and thank you, Mr. Fair——" she said quickly.

Barisford nodded slowly, studying Prosper.

"There was nothing?"

"Nothing at all. I must have been mistaken," said Prosper gravely.

He flashed his ray on Barisford's heavy golf shoes, then stooped and swiftly took off his own light canvas gym shoes.

"These are lighter than golf shoes, Miss Marjorie. Won't you wear them home as a sign of forgiveness?"

The girl had wholly recovered herself now.

"Is it a sign of forgiveness to borrow a gentleman's gymnasium shoes at midnight?" she asked, with a little smile, only slightly tremulous.

"Oh, no—Marjorie, you had better have mine—Mr.

Fair has to walk back through the woods and we go by the pathway," said Barisford quickly.

But, rather to Barisford's chagrin, it was discovered that while Prosper's shoes were far too large, the golf shoes were very much larger, harder, too, and heavy for tiny white feet when light gym shoes were available.

"You are both so kind," said Marjorie, eyeing the footgear dubiously. "And it is impossible for Mr. Fair to go barefoot through the woods and the thorns. But I came barefoot by the pathway . . . and of course I can go back barefoot."

But neither Barisford nor Prosper would hear of that.

"Then, please, the only other way is for me to have Mr. Fair's shoes and, because it is safer from thorns and perhaps a snake on the pathway home, for Mr. Barisford to lend you his shoes to wear through the woods!"

Prosper laughed a little.

"If Mr. Barisford is foolhardy enough to lend a pair of excellent golf shoes to a—vagabond artist—a risky enterprise——" he said.

But Barisford agreed pleasantly enough and Prosper slipped on the shoes.

"They shall be awaiting you, brightly polished, at my tent to-morrow—or, if you prefer it I will bring them to you at your house."

"Oh, I'll call for them——" smiled the other.

Then they said, "Good-night," and passed through

the nearest exit in the yew hedge, Prosper's torch lending its aid to Barisford's.

At the dark entrance to the overgrown pathway the girl half turned to wave a tiny hand, white, almost moth-like in the cold electric beam. Then they disappeared.

Prosper looked after them for a few minutes. Then he turned back into the sunk garden. He glanced at his wrist watch and switched off his own light. For a little he stood, thinking, then moved slowly back to the pyramid.

And as he went the pale, exquisite face of the girl dimmed in his mind and disappeared—displaced by the flock of thoughts which, like birds once disturbed but now reassured, returning to a favourite spot—swift, keen, groping thoughts—all to do with more virile, grim and sinister things than a lovely child-woman wandering in her sleep. In a second or so Mr. Fair was again intent on the mystery of the Iron-Grey Man and the killer.

The rubber-barred golf shoes were almost soundless on the stone paving as Prosper halted in the shadow of the pyramid.

He believed that the murderer of the Iron-Grey Man must still be lurking near at hand, for it was improbable, if not impossible, that he could have taken the body far away.

Prosper Fair was a man who thought quickly, lucidly and coolly. He had learned from many adventures, great and small, encountered during much wandering,



far afield, that haste does not usually go hand in hand with success, and is a vastly different matter from swiftness.

"It should be clear to you, my friend, that if you value your hide you will do well to go very slowly—and silently," he advised himself. "For the smallest sound will travel far on a night as still as this. Moreover you are not in an ideal place for watching and waiting . . . the neighbourhood of the pyramid is an unhealthy spot, with a high death rate. Clearly, one does not go rustling and groping about this garden or through a maze of yew alleys. . . ."

He moved silently round to the west side of the pyramid, chuckling very softly as he continued his self-communion.

". . . . hunting for what one can hardly expect will wait to be found. What should one do? Go home, obviously. Very well, I will go home. . . . But I shall come back."

His decision made, he moved, a shadow among shadows, out of the garden and slowly through the jungly path to his camp on the edge of the woods.

The distant church clock belled once as he entered his tent, and quieted the cordial greeting of his small terrier.

He slipped between his blankets again and smoked a reflective cigarette, pondering many things. . . .

Presently he spoke drowsily to Plutus the dog.

"Not so badly, companion of my solitude. We have not done so badly. . . . Policemen we are not, Plutus

—detectives we never have been. Yet, such is the fortune of life that here, ready to our hands—and *heads*, Plutus mine—is a problem as likely, I will venture to say, to be solved by us as it is unlikely to be solved by a shoal of policemen or—a—cohort of detectives. . . .”

Staring at the pale triangle which was the unlaced tent flap, he considered earnestly the matter of the Iron-Grey Man. He was well aware that many—most, even—would hold it to be his duty to give at once an alarm and particulars of his discovery to the police; but this he had no intention of doing. He believed that the police needed no further incentive to do their utmost than had already been furnished by the deaths of Calhoun and the Nameless Lady; and the presence of the Scotland Yard man was ample evidence that the authorities were by no means ignoring the matter.

He was quite sure that the Iron-Grey Man was a stranger in Kern, and, whatever he once may have been, was, at the time Prosper met him, little more than a wandering tramp. In a little while perhaps it would be wise or necessary to notify the death of this man to the authorities but, at present, he proposed to keep the knowledge to himself—sharing it only with the killer.

He had no doubt that the Iron-Grey Man had come to the sunk garden for much the same reasons as the earlier victims, and since it was out of what he could learn of the pasts of the victims that he hoped to discover what these reasons were, it was, in a way, another

string to his bow—and one exclusively his—to know of the coming and passing of the Iron-Grey Man.

“I may be able to trace back along the life of so striking and noticeable a tramp more easily than that of the trainer or the woman with the emeralds. . . . We shall see.”

The tiny furnace-red jewel at the end of his last cigarette glowed as he lay considering his gleanings of the day.

“My problem is to find out who murdered those three people, and why. The mystery of Lord Kern, his crumbling castle and his pyramid will probably, almost certainly, be solved in the process of discovering the killer. . . . Well, Prosper, my friend, you have at least six starting points. The first is Marjorie Merlehurst—she saw the killer, possibly with the body of the Iron-Grey Man in his arms. But she only saw and recognised him sub-consciously, in that queer, half-waking state we call somnambulism. It is just possible that if ever her friends or I can catch her in that condition again, we may lead her mind back to what she saw and get her to name the man she recognised. That is possible—but improbable. . . . The second, third, and fourth starting points are the victims—Mr. Larry Calhoun, the Nameless Lady, and the Iron-Grey Man. My fifth starting point is Lord Kern—I may be able to find out why he built the pyramid and went away, and why he arranged that Marjorie Merlehurst should inherit if he did not return within ten years. And the pyramid itself may be another starting point. One

man could not have built it single-handed. I must look for the man or men who helped Lord Kern build it—the firm from whom he bought the lead—and anything else relating to it. Barisford might help me there. . . .”

He dropped his cigarette end, and settled down for the night.

“And that, Plutus, my old, is *that!* Let us now adventure into the region of sleep ourselves—and if perchance I, too, arise in my sleep and start out to explore the garden, kindly bite me before I can leave the tent. . . . Good-night, carnivore!”

In two minutes he was asleep.

## CHAPTER VI

**L**ONG before the grey mist-veils of dawn had begun to steal away from the hot eye of the rising sun, the airy and whimsical Mr. Fair had been down to a lake he had noticed away to the west of the woods, taken a quick and chillsome plunge, returned to his camp and, working with the neat deftness of a practised sleeper-out, had saturated the atmosphere surrounding the tent with a truly thrilling odour of frizzling bacon, frying bread and hot coffee.

He was in high spirits.

"The ability to rise, prepare and devour a plain but plentiful four a.m. feed is a gift direct from High Providence, O Plutus mine," he prattled. "Mark that well! *You* have that great, that glorious gift—so, too, have I. Let us take care to cherish it for it is more to be desired than gold or jewels. . . . Pardon me, friend, will you kindly remove your face from out of the biscuit box—thank you, thank you. . . . Consider the kings of the earth, Plutus—probably every man-jack of them is frowsting in his royal bed at this moment when, with a little enterprise, he could be frying bacon in the woods—six, no, call it eight streaky slices of it—as I do now. Take warning from that, Plutus. Do not be a king. Strive to remain ever a four a.m.

bacon-fryer—thus balancing on the summit of human bliss. . . .”

He carefully spilled a tin of beans into the frying pan.

“Take beans again. Deep down within me, Plutus, I am secretly aware of a respect, a veneration, for that benefactor of the human race who perfected the art of capturing and canning the bean which is greater than my respect for the sage who discovered the force of gravity—for mankind can still manage to survive without being intimately wise concerning the force of gravity—but where would he be without beans—and bacon—and hot coffee? . . . Philosophy by Fair. . . . Ready! Breakfast is ready! The grandest, most solemn and thrilling words in the human tongue!”

The gay effervescent prattling gave way to more serious sounds, and was not renewed.

When the bacon and beans had fulfilled their destiny and an inch or two of tobacco had been burnt, Prosper swiftly put his abode in order and, inviting the small dog to accompany him (with a warning to preserve reasonable silence) went quietly through the thinning mists to the sunk garden.

He was anxious to see in daylight the spot at which the Iron-Grey Man had died, and now he studied it, and a considerable area about it on both sides of the yew hedge, for some time with extreme minuteness. It was clear that the killer must have picked up the body of his victim and carried it away. . . .

The sun was still low when Prosper came silently

back along his private pathway to the tent. But clearly the art of early rising was nobody's monopoly, for sitting on a box at the closed entrance of the tent was Raymond Barisford, a briar pipe between his teeth, a towel round his neck, staring thoughtfully at the pair of golf shoes which, admirably polished, were standing on a small roughly-erected bench near the tent.

He looked up, smiling, as Prosper appeared.

"I've never had them so well polished since I bought them," he said. "You are a good man to lend things to, Mr. Fair—though I hadn't the shoes in mind when I decided to call so early—on my way to a dip in the lake."

Prosper laughed, eyeing the shoes.

"You are right. But I claim no credit—for from my youth up I have been a very fine shoe-polisher. I say it without vanity—the gods bestowed the gift upon me at birth," he stated gaily. "Have you breakfasted?"

"Thanks, yes."

"You managed all right without the shoes last night, I hope?"

"Oh, quite, thanks. Miss Merlehurst's home is quite close."

"It is rather a pity that so charming a girl should be subject to somnambulism."

Barisford nodded.

"It is just the last flicker of an old trait—an old complaint—to which, I believe, she was very prone during childhood. But nowadays it happens to her

more and more rarely. It is six months since she startled all her friends by just such another nocturnal ramble as she took last night—and it may be a year before it happens again. Perhaps never. At least that is what Benson—our local doctor, a good man—says.”

“I am so glad to hear it,” said Prosper. “Beautiful as it is, I imagine that the sunk garden is not a good place for a girl to visit at night.”

Barisford agreed very readily.

“That’s true, by Jove! And that’s really why I looked in on you so early. . . . Some very curious and unpleasant things have taken place in the garden during the past year and it occurred to me that when you decided to pitch your tent here you probably knew nothing about those things.”

He tapped out his pipe, watching Prosper with a very friendly smile.

“Let me explain that better. You see, Fair, you were extremely kind and tactful last night and you did a great service to Miss Merlehurst and myself. I add ‘myself’ because I hope some day to marry her. . . . It seemed to me that the least I could do was—not necessarily to *warn* you—but certainly to satisfy myself that, before settling down in this place, you are fully informed about the peculiar risk—the—yes, I think I can reasonably call it ‘danger’ that seems to lurk about the place. I’m afraid that sounds a bit like something out of a novelette but, even so, it is true. There have been some confoundedly queer do-



ings in the sunk garden of Kern and no one seems able to get at the cause of them or the reason for them!"

"Oh, yes—I know something of all that. I—collided with yesterday's inquest and a couple of worthy gossips who readily gave me a history of the happenings you speak of . . . the deaths of Mr. Calhoun and the Unknown Lady who was the subject of yesterday's enquiry. They had something to say about the eccentric owner, Lord Kern, too—gossip, probably."

"Possibly—but he was certainly eccentric—as witness that extraordinary pyramid!"

"If one were quick-witted enough to be a good amateur detective—or slow-witted enough to imagine oneself a Sherlock Holmes—it might be interesting to devote oneself to trying to solve the thing," suggested Prosper. "But, personally, I have no time for the art of amateur detection—my whole interest is occupied with the art of comparatively amateur painting. Besides, judging by the little I know, I should be inclined to say that the death of the strange lady was simply a direct consequence of the death of Calhoun."

Barisford nodded slowly.

"Yes? Why?"

Prosper waved an airy hand.

"Well, assume that Calhoun committed suicide——"

Barisford broke in to agree.

"I believe he did. The chap had been having appalling bad luck with his horses."

"That might help to account for the suicide," agreed Prosper, "and it is not straining things to picture the

Nameless Lady arriving here—at Kern village—expecting to see Calhoun alive and well and finding instead that he was dead. . . . There may have been a love affair. . . . In any case it is a permissible guess that she went to the place where Calhoun killed himself and there committed suicide. . . . That is just a theory—a wandering artist's theory—but it seems feasible,” concluded Prosper.

“More than feasible. It is probably the truth. There is a Scotland Yard man investigating here—you will run across him, I expect. He's not a bad sort but I think he will finally come to the conclusion that it was a double suicide—though nobody has yet discovered exactly what killed them! That's rather a—a stumbling-block to the suicide theory!”

He rose.

“I am glad you know the facts—since you intend camping here. Let me thank you for what you did for Miss Merlehurst—and remind you that if I can be of any service to you while you are here I shall be glad to do what I can. I live just outside the village—near the golf course. Yes, we've golf even in this remote place—only nine holes, but they're good. Any time you care for a match I shall be glad to play you——”

He moved off, in the direction of the lake, and Prosper, glancing at his watch, settled down (inside the tent) with his note book.

But before he had filled in more than a couple of lines he lapsed into his accustomed low-voiced self-communion.

"A man of the world, Barisford. . . . He hopes to marry Marjorie, does he? Probably a good many men about here would like to do that—Marjorie is very sweet and she may be rich. . . ."

His thoughts moved on from the lovely little somnambulist.

"It is evident that Barisford has not heard about last night's tragedy—nor of the arrest of Oxtan. I might have discussed those things with him. He's a pretty keen hand." He stared thoughtfully at the small dog. "But there is no real reason why we need hurry to share our private discoveries with any one yet, Plutus, no reason at all. A still tongue in a cool head—that is the combination which we need. We are at present merely a vagabond artist and his trusty hound. Let us remain so. . . . We will now proceed to action—beginning with a visit to the racing stable of which Mr. Fred Oxtan is—or was—a partner. Yes, you may come—and when we get on to the public highway there is no reason why you should not relieve your system of the vast volume of bottled-up barking with which you are clearly surcharged."

He laced the tent flap tightly and strolled away towards the village.

It was something after seven o'clock. As soon as he reached the village, Prosper, hatless, easy, grey-flannelled, quietly strolling, perceived at once that the news of Oxtan's arrest was already public. Small knots of people were standing about discussing it, and as Prosper passed the small cottage which was the

village police station, a motor, driven by a uniformed constable, with the county police superintendent and a sergeant at the back, stopped outside the cottage.

The Scotland Yard man, Inspector Garrishe, met the superintendent at the gate. They went into the house, and a few moments later re-appeared with a lean, brown, bow-legged little man, very neat, with that tight and dapper neatness of most men who have lived their life from childhood with horses, walking between them, talking furiously. Prosper, moving slowly past, heard him tensely conveying his crisp opinion of all police and all detectives to the unmoved men on each side of him.

"I tell you I was at York and Newmarket . . ." he was snapping at them, " . . . almost anybody but a countrified cop and a fat-headed detective, a stranger to the place, would know enough to look it up for themselves. . . ."

Then Prosper passed out of earshot and a second later, the car slid away, returning to the county town some nine miles away.

"The argument of Mr. Oxton appears to me to be weighty and reasonable, O Plutus," murmured Mr. Fair, as he turned into the narrow road leading to Druid's Hollow, the racing establishment of the late Mr. Calhoun—a lonely place, some two miles across the downs.

Once, in the old days of prosperous farming, Druid's Hollow had been a famous racing stable and stud farm, and had belonged to the Kern estate. The grandfather

of the present Lord Kern had run it on the grand scale, and had bred and trained there some great winners.

But, as Prosper realised with his first glance at it, the hands of ruin and decay now lay heavily upon this place, too. Most of the buildings, obviously, had not been used for many years and the rectangle of stabling enclosing the big yard was irretrievably dilapidated. Except at one corner, most of the stables were broken-roofed—in one place the whole roof had fallen in. Save for a sharp fang of broken glass still clinging to a gapped frame here and there, the windows were unglazed, and the doors hung drunkenly at all angles. The paint had long since flaked off the woodwork, and the ironwork was rusting to red dust. The dwelling-house, set a short distance away, was in little better condition. Just a corner of it was in use, no more.

Nothing stirred there save for a few listless fowls, scratching aimlessly in a wire run set upon what had once been a lawn.

Even in the sunshine the place, set on the big, level expanse of plain—untilled, save here and there for a field of shallow soil, won painfully from the chalk a few inches below the surface—looked bleak and desolate and lonely, and Prosper's face clouded unconsciously as he stopped at the crest of the hill to look down at it.

"Once upon a time, O Plutus mine, this was a—a tiny town—busy with fine horses, brisk with men. Waggons came and went, there was a sound of maids in the dairy, and cocks crowed . . . that poor wretch down there looks as if he had never crowed in his life.

Certainly he has nothing to crow about. . . . Where are they all, Plutus—or their descendants! Living in dreadful jerry-built little hutches on the skirts of some great town—in various capacities swelling the vast army of ‘civil’ servants. There’s something wrong with our English countryside, Plutus . . . we see too many places falling to ruin or half ruin nowadays—the countryside is not what it was!” He shrugged, then laughed. “But then it never is—nothing ever is what it was. That’s a joke, Plutus. One laughs at it—with both sides of one’s mouth. In a few years’ time they will still be laughing at that fine crusted old joke . . . on the wrong side of their mouths, Plutus! Meantime—what have we here?”

A couple of horses had swept up over a slight rise on the plain beyond the house, coming on with the beautiful, springy, bounding movements of thoroughbreds—a small black and a light chestnut. A woman was riding the chestnut and a tiny boy, a mere scrap of humanity, was crouching in the saddle of the black. Prosper pressed on down the hill, as the horses were pulled up at the stable yard and the riders dismounted.

## CHAPTER VII

A MINUTE or so later Prosper looked in at the door of the stable. On the hard surface of the yard his rubber soles had made no sound, and it was evident that neither of the two in the stable were expecting visitors.

At first glance it seemed to Prosper that the boy was very little taller than the knees of the black racehorse—but that must have been an illusion for the child, striped to his waist, breeches and minute leggings, was grooming the horse with almost furious energy—far too intent on his work to notice anything else.

The woman, too, was, or had been, engaged in cleaning the chestnut—but had broken off. The brush still in her hand, she was resting her bare arm—the sleeves of the flannel shirt she was wearing were rolled up like a man's—against the shoulder of the chestnut, and her head was resting on her arm.

Prosper saw that she was crying quietly.

The boy, hissing and working in the adjoining stall, spoke without turning, as Prosper looked in.

"I shan't be more'n a minute or two, missus, then I'll slip in and put on the kettle and make a drop of tea for us . . ." he piped. "And don't you worry y'rself about Mr. Oxtan, Missus, for he'll be all right, mark my words, and back home in a day or two. And we can

keep things movin' till then, you mark my words. Yes'm, they ain't going to keep Mr. Oxtan in no jail very long, you mark my words—stand still, hoss——”

Prosper repressed a smile at the sheer elderliness of the scrap, and coughed.

The head of the woman was up in a flash. Prosper, saluting her, saw that she was a thinnish, hawk-faced girl of perhaps twenty-two, with big dark eyes, that even the tears could not dim, and as her brown hand dropped from the horse's withers he caught the gleam of a wedding ring.

She stiffened, staring at him.

“Yes? What is it?” she said crisply, with a faint American accent. “Are you looking for some one?”

“For Mrs. Fred Oxtan,” explained Prosper.

“I'm Mrs. Oxtan. What do you want?” Her tone was suspicious, defensive. The small boy was scowling openly at the intruder.

“I chanced to learn of the difficulty—of the absurd mistake that has been made down at the village concerning your husband, and it occurred to me that possibly I could be of some service to you. So I have called to ask,” explained Prosper, smiling.

For a moment she did not answer, but stood, thinking, her eyes fixed on his.

Slowly the suspicion died out of her gaze as she measured him, and the hardness left her face. Women usually trusted Prosper very quickly—as did most children and almost all dogs.

“Who are you?” she asked presently.



"My name is Fair. I am just an artist on a walking tour. I am camping near Kern, as luck would have it, and I happened to be close by when your husband was arrested——"

"He was arrested at midnight in the garden at Kern Castle. Were you *there*?" she asked swiftly.

Prosper saw that she was quick.

"Yes, I was there," he said gently. "And I saw him going away—to Carisbury—this morning."

She thought for a moment, her fine black eyes very steady on his.

"What were you doing in the garden at that time of night?" she asked. But she did not wait for a reply.

"You saw him this morning, you say? How were they treating him?"

"Properly," said Prosper, slowly, seriously. "He was telling them—what he thought of them."

She smiled faintly.

"Fred would," she said.

The speck of humanity attending the black horse stepped forward. He was uncannily small, but his little pinched, pale face was set in a sort of chill sharp courage.

"Sorry, 'm, but don't you talk too much, 'm, to no strangers, mark my words. Mr. Oxtan, 'm, always said hisself to keep your mouth shut, 'm. This gentleman might be a detective, 'm, and, mark my words, you might be sorry you ever talked to 'im, 'm."

He glared at Prosper like an infuriated baby terrier.

The girl turned to him.

"That's enough, Mark."

"Yessum!"

Mark continued to reach as high on the black as his length would let him, hissing furiously.

Mrs. Oxtan faced Prosper again. Her eyes were weary now.

"Mr. Fair—I've got to the stage where I've just *got* to trust somebody," she said. "I'm tired—tired. I ought to be resting right now. I don't understand the folk down at Kern village—they don't understand me. I've lived here a year, with Fred, and I haven't got a friend—except perhaps one—in the place. They seem to me to belong to a ring—a ring that's a thousand years old—you can't get next to them. Fred says that some time I will, but I'm beginning to ask myself. . . . They're civil enough, but after they've been civil I guess I feel there's about as much friendliness between us as there would be between a bunch of stone statues and me after a formal introduction. . . . Well, Fred's arrested—the village policeman walked out here early this morning to say so—told me I couldn't see him until he has appeared at Carisbury Court. I suppose they all believe he did it—killed Larry Calhoun and the Strange Lady. Well, we shall see about that. We were just carrying on before Fred was arrested—and that leaves it up to me to carry on now—with Mark. . . . I guess we'll manage. The boy and I have been out since dawn with the horses—and if you can help at all, why, Mr. Fair, I'll be glad to have any help you can spare—as long as it's help for Fred!"

She stopped suddenly, very pale.

Prosper stepped into the stable quickly. He had seen women go pale like that before. He took charge and, for a wandering, vagabond artist, he did so with some efficiency.

"I understand, Mrs. Oxton," he said. "There seems to be a lot of things to explain. They shall be explained—later."

He took the brush from the girl's hand.

"Mark," he said, "get across to the house and put that kettle on, just as fast as you can hammer your feet to the ground. I'll finish the horses. Your mistress will be across, ready for a cup of tea and some breakfast in a minute."

The diminutive Mark turned, hesitated, then went without a word. There was something in the voice of the hatless stranger which conveyed to Mark that obedience might reasonably be rendered unto him.

Prosper beamed at the girl. She was trembling a little.

"Nobody can work miracles, Mrs. Oxton. You probably sat up all night waiting for your husband and instead of seeing him return, saw that village policeman clumping stolidly up here—and he would be as tactful as an overloaded motor truck running downhill out of control, if I know anything of the Lesser Village Policeman. Then, after worrying for an hour or so, you went out to give the horses their gallop because that was necessary—all without breakfast, all in a torment of worry! Of course you feel all in—tired.

You *are* tired. But we'll see if we can't take it a little more quietly—talk it over after breakfast—calmly. Slowly. . . . England is a slow, old country—a conservative sort of place, full of slow people—but by not hurrying they save themselves sometimes from making mistakes. I assure you, now, that your husband is all right. He's probably worrying more about you than himself. . . . We'll go and see him presently, if you like."

She stiffened like a steel spring.

"Can you fix that, Mr. Fair?"

Prosper waved an airy hand.

"Why, naturally."

"That's a promise!"

"Absolutely—on condition that you go across to the house and eat your breakfast and make yourself comfortable and bright—for your husband—and oh, yes, and save a big cup of tea for me."

They both laughed. She looked doubtfully at the horses.

"But can you—I mean—do you understand horses? The chestnut's a bit queer-tempered."

Prosper smiled gravely.

"Oh yes—I understand horses," he assured her.

So she went across the yard, slim, graceful, looking like a boy in her well-worn riding kit. . . .

An hour later Prosper had won back for her all her accustomed confidence.

It had all been as simple as he thought.

Larry Calhoun had been killed (or killed himself)

within twenty-four hours of eleven o'clock on August 30th of the previous year. Fred Oxton was travelling to York race meeting with horses on August 28th, had stayed there till August 31st and travelled back on September 1st. Thus he could prove that he was hundreds of miles away on the day or night Calhoun died. The Nameless Lady was killed on July 28th, but Oxton was at Newmarket from July 27th to July 30th. His wife and Prosper had looked up diaries, notes and old hotel bills proving this. . . .

Half way down the chalky hill road to the village they met a boy carrying a note for Mrs. Oxton.

It proved to be from Marjorie Merlehurst—that “only friend” of whom the dark-eyed girl had spoken.

Marjorie wrote to say how sorry she was for what she knew was a “ridiculous mistake” of the police and to explain that she was not well and so could not come herself but that her mother had arranged for a motor and would call soon to fetch Mrs. Oxton and take her over to Carisbury to see her husband and to arrange about lawyers for him.

Her eyes brightened as the boy was sent back ahead with a suitable message. .

“I *knew* she was white,” said Mrs. Oxton. Prosper smiled.

A little further on they met a curate—a small, weak man, rather red in the face and a little out of breath because of the hill.

He explained that he was coming to see Mrs. Oxton with a message from the Vicar bidding her “be of good

cheer" and to be sure that her husband would not be "without support."

He, too, was returned with a suitable answer—as were several others whom they met on their way into the village.

Mrs. Oxton was thrilled with a new discovery.

"Why, they are white folk—after all——" she exclaimed.

"White, yes, but slow—very slow," explained Prosper.

"You have to be in trouble in England before you discover you've got any friends," said Mrs. Oxton very thoughtfully . . .

So they came to a small, charming house, set in a perfect garden, just on the edge of the village nearest the castle, where they found a hired car waiting outside the front gate.

A tall, slender, rather fragile-looking woman came down the flower-bordered pathway to meet them—Mrs. Merlehurst, Marjorie's mother. Though no longer young, she still retained much of what once must have been a rare and striking beauty. Her clear, dark-blue eyes, her fine, delicate features and her still perfect complexion were almost those of youth.

But her eyes were sad and her manner gentle with that quiet gentleness which only comes to those who have themselves suffered.

"We only heard of that absurd detective's blunder an hour ago, Nora," she said. "Of course every one knows how ridiculous it is to think that your husband

had anything to do with those tragedies. Marjorie wanted to go to Druid's Hollow at once and see if everything was well with you—but she, too, had an adventure last night and was so tired that I made her stay in bed."

She turned to Prosper.

"You will be able to guess whether Marjorie and Mr. Barisford told me of you, Mr. Fair, when I say that I recognised you at once when I saw you and Mrs. Oxton coming up the path. I am so grateful to you for what you did for Marjorie in that dreadful garden last night."

"It's a hobby of Mr. Fair's to go about helping people, I think," said Mrs. Oxton eagerly.

Prosper laughed.

"I'm afraid that I can't claim to be more than an ordinary, everyday sort of person——" he demurred—"say, the sort of person who when he sees a bird caught in a trap just stoops down and releases it. And almost anybody in the world would do that. I—just happened to be close by."

"Yes—after a two-mile walk you were quite close to Druid's Hollow!" said Mrs. Oxton.

"And, having taken all sorts of risks, you 'just chanced' to be able to help Marjorie," added Mrs. Merlehurst, with gentle irony.

Prosper laughed again.

"Some day I shall hope to debate the point with you both," he said. "Meantime, if I may use your telephone, I think it would be a good plan to ring up the

police station at Carisbury. I have to arrange for that interview."

That was obviously a good idea. Within a few seconds Prosper found himself at the telephone, in a long, low, delightful room, facing the garden.

The police station number was engaged and, while he waited, he looked about him. He moved to the mantelpiece to see whether the photographs on it included one of Marjorie.

But he looked only at one of the photographs—a large, well-taken, carefully finished portrait of a man's head and shoulders.

A curious chill vibration thrilled him as he looked closely at the photograph. He knew that man—he had met him quite recently, in very unusual circumstances.

It was a photograph of the Iron-Grey Man.

Even as he stared at it, taking it in his hand to assure himself that he was not mistaken, he heard a soft step behind him, and the gentle, rather faint voice of Mrs. Merlehurst.

"Ah, that is a photograph of my husband. I wonder if you and he ever chanced to meet."

There was a far-off wistfulness in her voice—and her eyes.

Prosper shook his head, doubtfully.

"He is a man of striking appearance—and if I had met him I don't think I should be likely to forget him. . . ."

He replaced the photograph and the bell of the telephone saved him from saying anything more.



## CHAPTER VIII

**I**T was eleven o'clock when Prosper and Mrs. Oxton reached Carisbury.

At the police station they were inclined to make difficulties about seeing Oxton. It chanced to be a day on which the local magistrates were sitting, an inspector pointed out, and very soon now Oxton would appear before them, be formally charged and formally remanded. After that they could see him.

But Prosper gently pressed his point. The officer would not yield—but he sent an underling to an inner office and Detective-Inspector Garrishe appeared, quiet, still-faced, with hard, questioning eyes.

"Why is it so urgent that you must see the prisoner before he appears at the court—a purely formal appearance?" demanded the detective. His tone was not pleasant—perhaps because he was feeling none too sure of himself, and the smile faded from Prosper's gay, steady eyes.

"Because I am anxious that Mr. and Mrs. Oxton should be spared the unnecessary humiliation of an appearance at all," he said.

The detective bristled a little.

"That's impossible," he said, curtly.

"Pardon me, I think not."

"Oh, you do! And who may you be?" asked the detective levelly.

Before Prosper could reply there was a slight stir in the outer office, a quick step at the door, and a stiff salute from the inspector by the desk. Prosper turned to see the chief constable, that peppery ex-colonel who had supervised so peremptorily the visit of the jury to the sunk garden.

"What's this? What's this?" he snapped.

"This gentleman desires the immediate release of Mr. Oxtan who has been detained by Detective-Inspector Garrishe in connection with the Kern affair, sir," said the local inspector at the desk.

The chief constable's brick-red face flushed to a purplish tint and he turned on Prosper, who quietly passed him a visiting card, smiling.

"The inspector puts it a little baldly, perhaps a little unfairly, chief constable. I am merely anxious to put before you certain facts which you and, I think, Detective-Inspector Garrishe will be glad to know before you seal the detention of Mr. Fred Oxtan by a formal appearance before the magistrates."

Whether it was achieved by the sight of Prosper's card, or by this last speech, none of the others quite understood, but certainly there came over the chief constable a remarkable change.

His colour became normal and the hard glare of affronted dignity died out of his eyes. He smiled.

"Come into my room, please," he said. "We may

want you, too," he added to the Scotland Yard man. "Meantime, Mr. Oxton is not to leave here for the court!"

He led the way to his room, followed by Prosper.

The colonel gave Prosper a chair and settled down at a writing table. He picked up the card Prosper had given him.

"I do not need to ask you if this is really your name," he said. "You will understand why when I tell you that, years ago, I was several times a member of your father's shooting parties at Deerhurst."

Prosper nodded.

"I understand—you mean my likeness to him," he said easily. "But just at present I am Prosper Fair—an artist on a walking tour."

"Yes—I've heard of your habit of wandering the highways and by-ways. Most people have. Well, about this man Oxton. . . . The thing is complicated and unless you can produce information that will absolutely convince this Scotland Yard man that he is wrong to detain Oxton the affair must take the ordinary course. I can't help you—unless, first, you can help yourself. It isn't necessary to explain to you that a chief constable is tied by rules and regulations as much as—perhaps, in a way, much more than—the rawest police recruit."

Prosper smiled. He could be extraordinarily winning when he chose.

"Why, naturally," he said, and put a small bundle of papers on the table.

"If you will allow the detective-inspector to go through these with Oxton and Mrs. Oxton, who is in the car outside, and interrogate them both, I think you will find that Garrishe will be glad enough to agree that he has made a mistake," he suggested. "I assure you, chief constable, that it can be shown that Oxton could not possibly have murdered either his partner, Calhoun, or the Unknown Woman."

The Chief Constable nodded.

"Very well—er—Mr. Fair." He pressed a bell and the underlings grew intensely active.

In less than a quarter of an hour the Oxtons, aided by Prosper and corroborated by the various books, accounts, hotel bills, racing documents, telegrams and so forth, had satisfied the Scotland Yard man that, at the very best, he had made an extremely premature arrest, and at the worst, a bad blunder.

"It's plain enough that you couldn't have killed those people—and as the chief constable says I can get further proofs that you were at York and Newmarket when they were killed—or killed themselves. But why did you shoot at me in the garden?"

"I shot at a figure which I believed to be the murderer. I've watched that garden for a long time and there's something wrong there. There is a man who prowls about there—armed—but he's as shifty as a fox, as quick as, quicker than, a cat. . . . There's some secret about that garden or pyramid and this chap is either hunting for it or guarding it. I don't care a straw about his secret—but I want to know why

he killed Calhoun, my partner. It helped to ruin us——”

“But you can’t shoot at people on sight—you know that——” said the chief constable.

Oxton agreed. “No, I understand that. It was a mistake. I should not have fired. I see that. Nevertheless although I made a mistake that time it was only a mistake by a fraction of an inch. The murderer—or, say, the mystery man, was about in that garden last night, I’m convinced—nearer than you think. Probably he was watching you. I thought he was watching me.”

The detective thought for a moment, then turned to the chief constable.

“I agree that there is no need to detain Mr. Oxton any longer, sir,” he said curtly. . . .

That satisfied the chief constable. Almost immediately the Oxtons with Prosper—and Plutus—were on their way back to Druid’s Hollow.

Oxton was as frank about his share in the affair as he was grateful to Prosper.

“That lets me out of the mystery-solving business for ever,” he declared. “The only mystery I ever propose to try to solve in future is the mystery of why a horse finishes ninth or thereabouts when you have calculated he will finish first. I sat in that police station cell and it ate into my nerves till I began to think I was guilty of two thirds of the crimes in the book of crimes! And I’ve finished. I am going to devote myself now to safe mysteries only, eh, Nora?”

"I think you are right," agreed Prosper. "A man with serious business interests has no time for outside complications. His business should provide all the excitement his system can accommodate. But when one is a wanderer, a haphazard artist camping out just anywhere, and, moreover, has a weakness for puzzles, it is a different matter."

He began to roll a cigarette.

"Personally, I am intrigued—in a detached sort of way—by this mystery. There's something fascinating about that pyramid," he continued. "It *draws* one—like a magnet."

"Yes, it drew me—into a police cell," said Oxton, grimly humorous. "You want to watch out that it doesn't draw you into an even narrower cell than that!"

Prosper smiled, studying the cigarette.

"Do you know why that poor chap, Calhoun, your partner, went to the pyramid? Was it, for example, to commit suicide?"

Oxton stared.

"Suicide!" he exclaimed. "Larry Calhoun was the one last person in this world to commit suicide. . . . No. He went to the garden because he hoped to get something there—something worth while. You see, Fair, things were pretty bad with us at the stables—the horses were not panning out—and the money was dwindling. We were out of luck—nothing would go right——"

He stopped and turned to his wife.

"Nora, girl, suppose we tell Mr. Fair the whole story. I've finished with the Kern garden, the Kern pyramid, the Kern lord and everything else that's Kern, anyway. What we know—and it's not so much—might help him to solve the puzzle if he's bent on solving it. And I shall always feel curious about Larry's last words. What do you think, girl?"

"Yes. Tell him. I think we ought to, anyway," said Mrs. Oxtan. "I believe Mr. Fair is going to find out the truth about it all."

"All right, I'm willing enough," declared Oxtan. "But suppose we leave it till after we've had some lunch. We're nearly home."

They were already climbing the hill road, and a moment later the half-ruined stables came into view.

Oxtan stared down at them with a queer, half-wistful, half-bitter laugh.

"I never top this hill and look down without feeling sore," he said. "That place—now, it looks like nothing. And, with half a chance, it could be made into as good a training stable as any in the world. We may have missed our chance—Larry Calhoun and I—but we were right to grab at it. How're the horses, Nora, girl?"

"Fine," said Nora.

It was Prosper who, as the car ran up to the lonely house, took care to tell Oxtan exactly how his wife had tackled the task of "carrying on."

"Yes—I know—that's what she would do—'carry

on' till she dropped. It's a thoroughbred characteristic that, eh, Fair?"

He felt furtively for his wife's hand—but he need not have been furtive. Prosper was looking across the downland, very interested in a distant tree. You could always rely on Mr. Fair for a trifle of tact like that.



## CHAPTER IX

OXTON'S story, told a little later, after lunch, proved to be brief—at least, he told it briefly and crisply enough.

Shortly after the Armistice he had found himself in New York—he had fought with the American Army—at a loose end, with an amount of money sufficient to get him a start in business, but not enough to live on permanently. At that period he had met Larry Calhoun, a shrewd, hard and daring gambler, who had just sold a ranch in a western state. Of half these proceeds Calhoun, an Irishman, had promptly, neatly and almost painlessly been trimmed by certain Wall Street crocodiles operating unseen behind the tape machines and notice boards. Acute enough to realise that the particular talents which, in the West, had created him a pile, were not the talents remotely likely to create for him in New York anything but a large, hollow vacuum where his bank account had once been, Calhoun, a good looking and likeable, though not too scrupulous, man of perhaps forty, after a few days had suggested that Oxtan and he join forces and start a racing stable in England.

"We both understand horses, Lord help us—and English racing," said Calhoun. "And racing will be

booming soon over there. I'll find a place and somebody out of my variegated past to start us training a few horses for them. We haven't much capital—but if it proves too little which, with luck, it may not, I've still got another string to my bow—and it's a strong enough string to tie up you, Oxton, and the girl you're going to marry, and me and fifty like us, safe out of reach of poverty for the rest of our lives." He would say no more of this second string then, though later he did . . . "Strangled himself with it," as Oxton said. After a little consideration Oxton and his newly married wife, Nora, had thought well of Calhoun and Calhoun's racing stable scheme. They went into it to the whole extent of their capital and with Calhoun sailed for England.

Within a week Calhoun had discovered the vacant Druid's Hollow stables—and had proved so desperately anxious to take them that he had rushed Oxton fairly off his feet.

"I didn't need much urging, anyway," said Oxton frankly. "I know something about most English stables and the Kern stables were always good, and though large, they were about the most suitable that offered. Anyway, we took a lease of them, subject to termination should Lord Kern desire it when and if he returned. That was a queer clause, but we were not afraid of it—though I didn't care about it. We worked there for three years and our luck was just awful. Nothing went right and bar a horse or two we picked up for ourselves, we couldn't get many others worth

having. I tell you, Fair, our capital melted like snow in the sun. It just faded away. It got so bad that one day Calhoun, out exercising the horses with me—for we were doing most of the work of the place ourselves, with Nora and that withered-up old man of fifteen, young Mark-My-Words—Calhoun pulled up and told me that the time had come when he intended to try out his second string. Like a fool, I encouraged him. ‘If you’ve got a second string to your bow, old man,’ I said, ‘for God’s sake fit an arrow to it and let her go. For we’re broke and furlongs past it. What is the second string, anyway?’

“He would not tell me the details even then, but he hinted at them for the next three days. It seems that some years before—about the second year of the war—a queer Englishman had drifted up to Calhoun’s ranch house one night and carefully fallen unconscious at the door with his lungs all anyhow—boiling back of his chest, you may say. Calhoun did what he could for the party. He thought he had a wandering, down and out Englishman—a remittance man, he thought—to deal with, and he handed the stranger over to his Chinese cook. Well, Calhoun was called away for a fortnight—something to do with his New York gambles, I think—and when he returned the sick man had got well and was gone. But the Chinese cook had a whole lot to tell about him. It seems that he had talked a lot in his delirium. The Chink had saved up a lot of scraps of it and retailed them to Calhoun. He said that the sick chap was an English lord, who was disgusted

with things—everything—his life, some woman or women he seemed to have on his mind, and his money—and had thrown everything up in order to wander about the world watching the way people handled their money. Mostly wrongly, according to this wanderer. A sort of student—no, philosopher's the word. And Calhoun said he seemed to have got it over on the old Chinese cook who believed the wanderer was a very wise man. Well, you know, maybe, what the Chinese are—they are apt, some of them, to respect that sort of thing—wisdom—out of all reason. And this cook did. He couldn't tell a straight story about the lord and his trouble and money—he had it all in scraps—and all mixed up with the philosophy. Anyway Calhoun got the name—and it was near enough to 'Kern' to decide him to close out the deal for Druid's Hollow stables. But he must have gleaned more from the Chink than he told me, for two nights before he died—the day before I took the horses to that York meeting—he said that with luck we shouldn't have to pinch and scrape for railway fares (that's what we happened to be doing just then—for the York journey) much longer."

Oxton leaned towards Prosper, a little excited.

"We were scraping the very sole of the stocking, you understand, Fair. Calhoun had cleaned out his pockets, so had I, and Nora had swept out her housekeeping purse. Calhoun looked at it and took a drink. I remember it as if it was yesterday. And 'Fred,' he said to me, 'that's the finish of this penny pinching

for me. You're not taking any winners to York, though it's worth a try—Rufus might pick up his race, but I doubt it and so do you. So I'm going after the big stuff. I've got a hunch and I'm going to play it. I'm going down to that Kern ruin one of these nights and get busy.'

" 'Kern,' I said. 'Why Kern?'

" 'I'll tell you, Fred,' he said, his face hard and flushed, and his eyes like flint—'I've been thinking over what old Kai Lung said—and I've looked up a few notes I jotted down—and, Fred, I've come to the conclusion that there's a million of money waiting down there at Kern Castle for the man who's got the nerve and the nous to go get it. And I'm telling you, Fred, I'm that man. He's me, by God he is!'

"He poured down another drink and I guess I joined him. He had got me going, too. And I'll not deny I encouraged him. But I didn't know that there was any risk. I was called away to go to one of the horses—we'd about a dozen, of sorts, here then—and when I got back to the house Calhoun had turned in. I never saw him alive again. I was away first thing next morning . . . and when I got back he was dead. Hey? Lying here—waiting for a jury. . . . Poor old Larry! . . . It was tough luck to finish like that after the life he'd had. Full of adventure—risks, any old risks, were daily bread to Larry Calhoun, and he'd had some narrow squeaks in his time. I never thought he would die in a quiet English garden that way. . . .

But he did. And he was killed—though Lord knows how. He wouldn't have committed suicide—last man in the world. He went down there prowling around for a million of money—his own words. But Nora and I talked it over—and we didn't forget that Larry was after money (if there's any there) that didn't belong to him. And we decided for all our sakes to say nothing. D'ye think we were right, Fair? I'll own that we—Nora and I—weren't anxious to mix up in it more than we could help. Who would—in our circumstances? So we lay low and said as little as we could. Nobody bothered us much."

He paused, looking with keen, steady eyes at Prosper who nodded.

"I understand, of course. You could not do otherwise, perhaps," he agreed tactfully.

"But it kind of lay on my conscience at times," continued Oxtan. "I felt I ought to be trying to get next to the man or woman or whoever it was killed him, and many a night I've been down to the garden, looking around—watching out—puzzling over the pyramid. I guess that Lord Kern was touched a trifle—eccentric. . . . What did he *mean* by those bits of Biblical stuff on the pyramid? What was his idea? I gave it up. But a month or two ago, I had my dog—an Airedale—killed on me down there under that pyramid—with nothing to show what killed him. Nobody ever knew how the dog died—I took him out into the woods and buried him myself. Then, a little later, I got my first glimpse of a man about the place—quiet as an owl

flies and crafty as a fox. I kept clear of the pyramid—there's something badly wrong with it—and watched out. One night I nearly got a surprise hold on him. He heard me just in time to slip into one of those dark yew alleys. Then, next thing, the business of this poor soul with the emeralds occurred. I waited a few days and then made another trip to the garden. I hadn't heard about that detective, Garrishe, and—well, I caught the wrong man—and he caught me. . . . That's all. And I've finished. I've got a wife—a good wife—to study. I'm a racehorse trainer, Fair—not a detective. But I sure would like to see some one grab that murderer down there. . . . I believe Larry Calhoun. There's money there—why, I don't know, and where, I don't know—but it's guarded, Fair, believe me, it's guarded. . . . Well, that's all I know, and if it's of any use to you, why, you're welcome."

Prosper thought for a little, thanked him, and presently switched the conversation to racing and racehorse training—no very difficult matter.

But though he talked horses for the next hour at least half his brain was busy with the story which Oxtan had told him.

He still needed a few points. But those he preferred to get casually, by means of an occasional interpolation—thus—"Yes, you're right, Oxtan—they certainly bred some fine stayers in those days—they had not half the freaky, short-distance flyers we have—but some of those old-time horses could pour the miles

past their shoulders for ever and for ever. By the way, about what year would it be when Lord Kern drifted to Calhoun's ranch?"

And so forth. Prosper was nothing if not all things to all men.



## CHAPTER X

WHEN, at about three o'clock that afternoon Prosper came strolling down from the open country towards the hollow in which Kern village lay, he came like a man setting out on the first morning of a vacation.

He had decided to devote that day to collecting information which had a bearing on the mystery of the pyramid and he had been successful beyond his most extravagant hopes. It had been reasonable to suppose that Oxtton would hardly have been in the sunk garden at midnight unless he had known, or suspected, a good deal of the truth concerning the reason why his partner Calhoun had gone to his death in that forbidding place.

But when he decided to get into close touch with the Oxttons he had not dreamed that he would reap such a goodly harvest of information as, grateful for his aid, they had gladly given him.

"Behold me, Plutus—the receptacle of a mass of odds and ends of new knowledge which in due course we will sit down in our lonely habitation and classify," he said lightly. "But it is bad strategy to attempt the solution of a jig-saw puzzle with only a few of the jigs—or are they saws—pieces, I mean—in our possession. Rather let us proceed to the collection of further pieces. Some of them—maybe many—await us, I believe, at

the home of charming Mrs. Merlehurst and pretty Miss Marjorie. Therefore, hound, we will invite ourselves to tea with them."

He paused for a moment as a bend in the road brought them clear of a tree clump and revealed the village nestling in its hollow.

"There are many beautiful and tranquil-seeming places still remaining in this country, Plutus," he said, "and we have seen a great number of them, old way-farer. But I know of none more beautiful, nor more serenely reposeful—in appearance—than this dreamy-looking village of Kern. We shall now go down into this place—and we shall pass a grey, ivy-grown church with a mellow vicarage beside it; a pretty little school-house, with a faint humming of scholars, like bees; a queer, old-fashioned little inn with Mine Host fast asleep in a shady spot of the old garden; a few still cottages drowsing in the sunshine, with a tinkle of china here and there and women preparing to pop in on a neighbour, or be popped in upon, for a cup of tea and a little gossip. Peaceful enough, you will say, my leetle carnivore—but I will venture a guess that the vicar in his vicarage, the teacher in his school, the chapel minister in his manse, Mine Host in his inn, and the village wives in their cottages, will not fail to discuss over their tea one subject—money, my Plutus, money in general, and the millions of Lord Kern in particular! . . . Precisely as I hope we shall discuss that million or those millions over the tea-cups at Mavisholme. There is nothing like a 'million of money' to promote bright

conversation, to enliven placid minds, and to stir from lethargy the instincts of acquisition."

His brown, clear-cut face shadowed a little.

"Speaking of these millions, I would observe that we are standing, like children facing a blackboard, staring at a great 'why'?" he continued, wholly satisfied with his audience—even though that consisted only of the least attractive terminus of Plutus protruding from a rabbit-hole close by. . . . "Why did Calhoun, the Nameless Lady and the Iron-Grey Man go to the sunk garden? Why does something—some one—strike silently out of the darkness and—wipe them out? . . . Thanks to Oxton we will now write our answer to the why? at once. It is '£.' And, Plutus, I would have you note that the letter 'L' provides always a perfect answer to every problem of any importance in the whole world. Either in the form of '£' for money, or 'L' for love. More philosophy by Fair. . . . Meantime——"

He pulled out his worn rubber tobacco pouch and, rolling his cigarette as he went, proceeded on his way. . . .

The little lawn at Mavisholme, the home of the Merlehursts, was almost entirely surrounded by a hedge of tall filbert bushes, too old and overgrown to be productive of many filberts, but an admirable screen. Prosper, strolling up the pathway towards the house, paused at a gap which gave access to the lawn from the garden and for a moment stood looking in.

"Fortunate are they who refrain from expecting

miracles," he murmured, "for they shall not be disappointed. . . . To expect to find two ladies like Marjorie and her mother taking their tea in loneliness would be to expect a miracle indeed!"

He surveyed the little group at the end of the lawn. Besides Marjorie and Mrs. Merlehurst, there were Raymond Barisford, the doctor who had attended the inquest, a small grey-haired person who looked like a lawyer, and one other, a tall, powerfully-built man in white flannels. Marjorie was talking to a girl about her own age—with an older woman. These presently proved to be the wife and daughter of the doctor.

It was Marjorie who, looking up, saw Prosper first and, flushing a little, jumped up and hurried across to him. Marjorie was nothing if not natural.

"Oh, I am so glad that you came in, Mr. Fair. I have been wanting to thank you all day long."

Impulsive as a child she threw out two slender hands to him.

Prosper looked down into the wide, shining eyes.

"But—for what? It is delightful to be thanked by you—but I should be guilty of obtaining thanks under false pretences if I accepted them without a—a—false pretence of demurring."

But Marjorie was not going to allow him to strip himself of the vestments of glory which she had busily spun round him that afternoon.

"Why, of course, for your kindness to me last night in the garden at Kern!" she cried. "When I woke up in the dark and that blaze of white swooped out like a

shining sword I should have been incoherent with terror . . . if I had not seen your eyes and face in the light of Mr. Barisford's torch. But I knew that it was all right—after just that quick glimpse. And you called this morning—on your way to help some one else—and I was in bed! That was mother's fault. She insisted that I was tired. Please won't you come and have tea—your shoes are covered with chalky dust. You have walked from Druid's Hollow—one's shoes always get like that on the road to the downs—and tea is just ready."

Prosper looked down at the fair, flushed face, enchanted by the sheer loveliness of the girl. She was so anxious that he should be quick to resign himself to the comfort of her deck chair and her tea-time ministrations that she was like an eager child, and though she could never be less than almost perfectly beautiful in any mood, it was impossible to imagine a mood that could ever suit her so well as this. She no longer wore that soft and heavy rope of plaited gold down her shoulders—to-day her hair was caught up, curled and bound about her small, fine head as befitted a little beauty engaged in helping her mother entertain guests; and the frock, cream with pale yellow stripes, the white shoes and stockings spoke of a few more minutes before the "laughing mirror" than she had spent yesterday afternoon when Prosper had adored her in the sunk garden. But all this neither took from, nor added to, her charm. She would have looked adorable in sack-cloth. Her big eyes burning with pleasure, vivid with

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youth, undisguisedly radiant at seeing him, she turned to the little group, her slender figure swaying like that of a dancer.

"It is Mr. Fair, mother, dying for some tea. He has just walked from Druid's Hollow all in this sunshine. . . ."

But in her pleasure she did not forget Nora Oxton and turned back to Prosper, wide-eyed.

"Did you—did they—please were you able to help Mr. Oxton?"

Prosper laughed.

"I was not required to work any wonders," he said. "Mrs. Oxton found all sorts of papers which proved to the complete satisfaction of a multitude of police officials at Carisbury that Mr. Oxton could not possibly have done any harm at all, and so of course they released him."

She stared at him, suddenly serious.

"I think you must be a—a"—she blushed suddenly, but did not weaken—"a knight errant, Mr. Fair——" she added softly. The gaiety in her glorious eyes had suddenly vanished—leaving a curious faintly startled look in its place—and she presented Prosper to those of the little company whom he had not met before, with a sweet seriousness that, Prosper divined, had been born in her as suddenly as her look had changed.

"Mr. Fair has been successful in making them release Mr. Oxton," she said, when the civilities were ended.

Mr. Enderby, the old lawyer, looked at Prosper with a new interest.

"I should say that Mr. Fair must have been in possession of some very potent argument to persuade our chief constable and the Scotland Yard detective to release Oxton so soon," he said, slowly.

"I had the Truth—and proof that it was the truth," smiled Prosper. "It is not very easy to imagine a more potent argument!"

"No, no—very true!" Enderby agreed, with a dry little cough, peering at Prosper through his glasses.

"You convinced them that Oxton had been away at race meetings, I suppose," said Eyre-Weston, the tall man in flannels—a swarthy good-looking person with black eyes and an oddly feminine mouth.

"Exactly. That is, the papers which Mrs. Oxton found—and which I merely put before the police—did so."

"It was fortunate for Oxton that the papers were so readily available. You are an old friend of the Oxtons, Mr. Fair?"

Prosper sensed rather than heard the veiled hostility in Eyre-Weston's voice. But he did not need to answer. Marjorie did that.

"Oh, no—Mr. Fair heard that Mr. Oxton was a man in difficulties and so he helped him out," she said.

"Or, in other words, Eyre-Weston, he helped Oxton because he was a man in trouble and not because he was Oxton," said Barisford, his eyes twinkling as they travelled from Prosper to the other.

Prosper laughed.

"Perhaps I ought to explain," he said. "The thought

of people in difficulty worries me when I am painting, and because my gift for painting is extremely limited I have formed the selfish habit of trying to avoid the added handicap of worry. I chanced to see Oxton taken away by the police and it gave me the usual chill feeling. 'There but by the grace of God goes Prosper Fair,' I said—and added, 'and there, too, unless I can erase that sight from my mental vision, goes, too, my next few days' painting!' So I did my poor best to help. That's really all . . . except that I am luxuriating on this lawn instead of diligently painting the sunk garden at Kern Castle."

Even as he expected, mention of the sunk garden was enough to release him from the attention of everybody.

"Ah, the sunk garden!" said the doctor. "A dangerous place in which to linger at an easel, Mr. Fair, I've always said so!"

Mr. Enderby desired the doctor's views as to the nature of the danger, the existence of which (except perhaps in special cases) he questioned. And since—as Prosper presently learned—the firm of Enderby and Sons were Lord Kern's lawyers, Enderby's demur was not without weight. It appeared that Mr. Eyre-Weston also had views about the garden and pyramid and Raymond Barisford, having once been secretary to Lord Kern, was naturally interested in this, the well-worn, but ever fresh, topic of the neighbourhood.

They talked diligently.

Prosper listened and did his best to gossip with the



ladies at the same time—achieving this feat, apparently, to his entire satisfaction. For a vagabond artist, Mr. Fair seemed to possess a rather complete mastery of the art of tea-table talk.

But, even so, it seemed to Mrs. Merlehurst that he brightened a little when presently the girls, Barisford and Eyre-Weston engaged themselves in a game of tennis, Mrs. Benson, the doctor's wife, was called away by the parish nurse to solve some small difficulty in connection with that long-tried good Samaritan's work, and Enderby and the doctor continued to discuss the ever green topic of Kern.

Prosper, for his part, dropped the mystery and began to compliment Mrs. Merlehurst on her garden.

She looked at him with a gleam of appreciation in her fine eyes and asked if he would like her to show him the roses.

"You must not miss those, Mr. Fair," advised the lawyer, "none of us can compete with Mrs. Merlehurst in the matter of roses. It is my secret belief that a rose will grow more willingly for her than for other people. I think she talks to them and that there is a secret affinity between her and her roses!"

Prosper confessed that he had suspected something of the kind from the moment he had met Mrs. Merlehurst in the garden that morning—and so they went to see the flowers.

## CHAPTER XI

**B**UT it was not of the roses that they talked, though they walked among them. From the moment that he had met her that morning Prosper Fair had been aware that there was to be between him and this slim, beautiful, wistful-eyed woman a lasting friendship, and he knew subtly that a similar consciousness had invaded her mind. It had nothing to do with love or passion, for it was a serene and tranquil conviction, without unease or even a quickening of the pulse. They had been *en rapport* instantly—perhaps because both had been well acquainted with sorrow in the past.

Her first words when they had moved out of ear-shot of the others corroborated all that his quick and sensitive instincts had told him.

“Do you want to talk about the roses, Mr. Fair?” she said with an odd little smile. “If you do, here is Juliet, one of the prettiest of all my roses——” she paused by a bush, bending over it, but looking at Prosper. He saw, as she stood so, whom Marjorie had to thank for her inheritance of grace—once Mrs. Merlehurst had been, if that were possible, even more enchanting than her daughter. But now the years had dimmed her. She would never wholly lose her beauty for she was beautiful at heart, but the youthfulness

that no craft can perfectly emulate, no art restore, had gone. Hers was now the beauty of lavender, Marjorie's was of the budding roses. . . .

"No, I do not want to talk of the flowers to-day," answered Prosper slowly. "Though I hope very much that some day I shall be able to walk with you in your garden with no other thought than of the roses you understand so well. But now—I want to correct a wrong impression which I may have given you this morning."

"Yes."

"You asked me if I had ever chanced to meet your husband."

She nodded, very slowly, her eyes darkening.

"Yes, oh yes. That was the most curious impulse. How strange a question it must have seemed to you. I cannot explain in the least why I asked it—and I have thought about it all day."

He saw that the white hand, moving gently like a moth about the roses, was trembling slightly.

"I don't think that it is a very good plan to worry much about the source of any inspiration—any impulse," he advised her gently. "And this particular impulse was inspired by something very much more profound, more intricate, more obscure than either of us can possibly hope to follow. You will understand that better presently when I have explained more fully. . . . I gave you an impression that I had never met your husband. But it has occurred to me since that I may have been wrong. You see, at the time you asked me

that question—this morning—I believed that your husband was here—living here—that he was, so to speak, in the next room. I did not know until later that—it was not so. . . . I had met a man very like the portrait you showed—and that quite recently—but I think this man could hardly be Major Merlehurst.”

She paled, but looked at him with steady eyes.

“You know—you have heard—that my husband sent in his papers, left the Army and—and me—years ago?” she asked in a low voice.

Prosper nodded. He had learned that from the Oxtons, only a few hours before.

“Yes, I have heard that,” he agreed.

It occurred to him that it was about nine years before that Lord Kern had disappeared—and fitting close on the heels of that came the recollection that if Lord Kern did not re-appear soon, Kern Castle and its ground and everything within it would become the property of Marjorie.

“That would be shortly after Lord Kern disappeared,” he began, speaking half to himself. “Have you never seen Major Merlehurst since?”

“I have heard of him once or twice——” she said, oddly pale, “but I have never seen him. I—I think he had a period of bad luck. You see, he—we—had run through the fortune he had inherited—and he was not a man who could easily earn more money.” She hesitated, then seemed to string herself up.

“I think he must have had a bad time—I am afraid

to think just what may have happened to him. I have heard of him being seen once or twice on racecourses—not very prosperous. Mr. Barisford had told me of you—that you were a man who seemed to have travelled much—and so when I saw you holding the photograph it occurred to me to ask you if you have ever met the original.”

Prosper hesitated no more.

“I will tell you now,” he said gently. “But I want to ask you to say nothing to any living soul about what I shall tell you——”

“Oh, I promise that, of course——” she agreed hurriedly.

“Thank you. I believe I saw your husband in this village yesterday afternoon. The man I mean was extraordinarily like the photograph—grown older, of course. He was in rather a bad way—his health, I mean. He asked me the way to Kern Castle. I advised him to rest a little before going there. He said that he would. I suggested that he should rest at the inn and I said that I would join him there in a few minutes. But when I went there he was not to be found. I learned that he had gone on to the castle.”

“But why? He hated Kern—I mean, why should he go to Kern Castle? I am quite sure that Kern Castle is the very last place my husband would want to go to. Oh, *that* is inexplicable——”

Her face cleared.

“You know, that seems to me to mean that the man you speak of could not have been my husband. I am

sure he would not go to Kern Castle in any circumstances."

"I am very glad to hear you say that, for it shows that the Iron-Grey Man could not have been your husband——"

She stopped him suddenly, her face pallid.

"Why do you call him the Iron-Grey Man?"

"It was just my own name for him—he was all grey—clothes, eyes, hair, even the dust on his boots——"

She turned her head away from him, speaking under her breath.

"My husband preferred grey mufti above all colours—and his eyes were grey——" she half whispered.

She was trembling painfully.

"If I see him again—and I shall search—I will not let him out of my sight so easily. I will bring him to you," Prosper told her.

She turned to him suddenly, her eyes full of tears.

"Ah, you understand things so well—you are so quick and sympathetic. I can tell you what I do not tell many people. My husband went away because of a grave misunderstanding. But I would give so much—years of my life—if I could see him and talk for a little. Just long enough to explain something which ought to be explained. . . ."

She said no more for a little, gazing absently across the garden.

And Prosper, remembering the still form in the shadow of the pyramid, was silent also.

"But—but I cannot imagine why he, of all men, wanted to go to Kern Castle——" she said presently.

Prosper leaned to her, speaking quietly.

"Ah, but I suspect that there is something at Kern Castle which attracts people to it as a magnet attracts iron," he told her.

"Something——?"

"Money," said Prosper. "But it is guarded—guarded as carefully, watchfully, inexorably as the hoards of the Indian Kings were guarded by the cobras they were said to place in the vaults with those treasures."

She nodded, her face a little haggard.

"Yes . . . Geoffrey would go to Kern for money!" she murmured. "But if there is money there—and Lord Kern should not come back soon, it belongs to Marjorie. Who would bother to guard it for another person—unknown to her?"

Prosper caught a note of anxiety in the sweet voice—a note he had heard in people's voices before.

"That is what I am trying to discover," he said. "But you need have no anxiety—that is, the money is not of vital importance to you——?"

She faced him again.

"But it is—that is exactly the word—vital. Mr. Fair, Marjorie and I are penniless—worse, we are swamped with debts! I had only a small fortune when my husband left me and I came to an end of that a year ago. This house—this garden—everything—it is all hollow—a shell—a pretence—nothing. Mortgaged

—pledged—we are penniless. If Lord Kern comes back again we are ruined.”

Prosper felt his heart quicken unaccountably. Somewhere, vague, latent, unseen, he sensed behind the wrung words of this woman, tragedy and terror moving.

He stared across the garden, his face suddenly grim.

She watched him anxiously. She, too, was quick and she realised at once that Prosper had suddenly been stirred from his accustomed self-possession.

“Oh, what is it?” she whispered urgently.

But he had recovered himself instantly.

“I was thrilled—almost startled—for a moment by the curious situation, dear Mrs. Merlehurst, that was all.”

“Curious——?”

He decided to tell her.

“It is this. Kern Castle and all it contains will become Marjorie’s—if Lord Kern does not return—and we believe that it is a greater inheritance than it seems to be. Other people seem to be aware that Kern Castle or its sunk garden or its pyramid is worth investigation. But there is a watcher there—a guard—some one or something that strikes down those who investigate too closely. I ask myself for whom is this mysterious watcher guarding whatever it may be worth such jealous and dreadful guarding? For Lord Kern? For himself—or herself—or itself? Or for Marjorie? And what will happen to Lord Kern if, as such an eccentric man may well do, he returns quietly, secretly,



and wanders within reach of the watcher—the killer? Who is he—and what is his motive? Nobody knows his motive—and only one person is aware of his identity——”

Mrs. Merlehurst started at that.

“One person aware of his identity?” she echoed. “But he should inform the police! Who is this person?”

“Marjorie!” said Prosper quietly.

There was nothing but sheer, blank amazement in the eyes of Marjorie’s mother.

“Marjorie, you say?”

“She saw him in her sleep last night. She knew him—and she was on the verge of uttering his name when she awoke!”

“But she has not the faintest recollection of it—of anything—any dream—prior to her waking in the garden! I questioned her this morning,” said Mrs. Merlehurst.

Prosper nodded.

“Ah, I guessed that she would not. But I made another guess—formed another belief, too. I will tell you what it is. I believe that if ever you—or we—find Marjorie walking in that strange, tranced condition again and question her quietly—we might hear the name of the man she saw lurking in the garden—the man I believe to be the watcher—perhaps the killer of those unfortunate people!”

She thought for a moment.

“But that is—a dangerous thing to know,” she said,

her voice sharp. "She—my little girl—might be in very serious danger if this—this watcher of whom you speak happened to know that Marjorie was liable to name him at any moment!"

"Yes. That is why I explained—this—to——"

Prosper broke off, turning suddenly.

The man called Eyre-Weston was within a yard of him, his face rather white, his lips tight.

"Oh, sorry—I did not mean to startle you, these rubber-soled tennis shoes are so silent on the soft grass," he said, "Miss Merlehurst sent me to find you. Barisford has hurt his thumb a little and she wants Mr. Fair to partner her against Miss Benson and myself."

Prosper smiled—for once, with a palpable effort. Eyre-Weston must have heard every word of Mrs. Merlehurst's last sentence, though he gave no sign that he had.

"Oh, certainly, with pleasure. I will come at once."

He glanced at Mrs. Merlehurst, who smiled composedly.

"It should be a good game," she said. "Mr. Eyre-Weston is a splendid player and so is Gwen. Marjorie and you will have to play hard to win, Mr. Fair."

Prosper laughed.

"My friends have sometimes told me that I am a good loser—and I am sure that Miss Marjorie is charitable to any partner who does his best. Besides, like many who are not skillful, I am sometimes lucky."

"Luck," said Eyre-Weston, "can be a good friend. I've found it so. But the trouble is that it can also

be a boomerang—and fly back in its possessor's face."

"Ah, yes—I, too, have found that so," agreed Prosper, gravely.

The boomerang chose, that afternoon, to fly up into Eyre-Weston's face, for Marjorie and Prosper won comfortably enough, so comfortably, and in such quick time, that Prosper found an opportunity to snatch a quarter of an hour's chat with Mr. Enderby, the old Kern solicitor.

## CHAPTER XII

ALTHOUGH Prosper had begun his day with the resolve of making it extremely busy, nevertheless, as he confided to his three-legged ally, Plutus, *en route* to his camp at about seven o'clock that evening, he had not hoped to glean half so much information as he actually had collected and proposed shortly to classify.

"We have not seen our severe friend, Detective-Inspector Garrishe, since this morning, Plutus, my old," he said, as he passed through the woods, "and consequently do not know what his activities may have achieved for him—but even so, terrier, I will venture a diffident opinion that we have advanced ourselves some considerable number of furlongs farther along the road which leads to the solution of the Kern mystery than has the good Garrishe. . . . We have this advantage over him, Plutus—we make friends and he does not. That is the grave handicap under which the professional detective has to work. But let us not be over-confident. We are stalking a clever and crafty quarry—who may also be stalking us."

He stepped into the tiny clearing in which he had pitched his tent.

"We will make all ready for supper, methinks, and then do a little mental arithmetic. After that, we will eat and you will then have arrived at the end of a per-

fect day. With me, it will be otherwise, Plutus, for to-night I propose to make a little exploration."

He slipped off the haversack which he had worn that day and had filled with various requirements at Carisbury.

Then he opened the tent and entered, glancing round. He had not overlooked the probability that his camp might be discovered by the killer—indeed he expected it, and had made his arrangements accordingly. At first glance there was no sign that any one had been near the place since he left it that morning. His few Spartan necessities were almost exactly as he had arranged them before setting out in the morning—but not quite.

If he had not spent some little time in placing certain things with the nicest precision and taken very careful notes of the exact position of one object in relation to that of its neighbours, and particularly so with the contents of his suit case, he would never have noticed that they had been touched. But now the briefest examination told him that the interior of his tent had been subjected to an inspection so searching that practically everything there had been handled and probably scrutinised.

He informed his semi-terrier so as, having concluded his little investigation, he turned to the task of getting something in the way of supper prepared.

"Some one—either that lover of the darkness whom we have decided to call, *pro tem*, the killer, or, maybe, Detective-Inspector Garrishe, has been most carefully

looking us up, Plutus," he said, "and I confess that if, as I hope, our visitor was the killer, I am extremely pleased with the gentleman. For I would point out to you that he replaced everything almost exactly as he found it—which indicates that he is anxious that I do not suspect that he has been here. That is altogether admirable and was greatly to be desired. For he will call again in due course and what he finds relating to my aims and movements he will probably believe. Most satisfactory—we must commence to prepare a little information—a diary—which we will carefully conceal where he can carefully discover it."

He began to open a can of corned beef.

"Properly handled, O Plutus, this may prove a valuable asset to us. We shall see. . . . He desires to keep tabs on us. A lesser scoundrel would have tried to frighten us away—or have destroyed things—or have contrived something uncomfortable to discourage us in our idea of camping here. A small conflagration of the tent and all, for example—a little fire, yes. Not so the killer. He does not desire to kill us, I think—yet—nor to frighten or drive us away. He prefers to watch us and read our private papers and to study our progress in the art of painting. We shall have to begin a canvas to-morrow upon which he can feast his eyes."

Then he settled down to his modest supper of corned beef, bread and butter and tea, musing aloud as he ate, with Plutus eating aloud as he mused.

His eyes were much more serious than one, noting his tone, might have expected, and there was no amuse-

ment at all in his expression. Presently, supper finished and put away, he took out his note book and wrote busily.

"The raw material of the gentle jigsaw accumulates generously, O dog—and at half past eight, if my friends are to be relied upon (as they are) I shall have enough 'bits' to begin to build a small corner—and some equipment that I sorely need!" . . .

At a quarter past eight he rose and lacing the tent flap loosely, went quietly off through the woods—bound for a by-road passing the lake on its farthest side.

By the lake he halted, hesitated a moment, then glanced at his watch.

"Five minutes from the camp—nine from the garden," he muttered, and began to encircle the little lake. It was fringed with green rushes, thrusting up in vigorous growth, and at one end was a dilapidated boathouse from the rickety landing stage of which projected a short diving board.

Mr. Fair paused to study this for a moment.

Plutus, the three-legged, thoroughly enjoying himself among the rushes in urgent quest of water-rats or anything else that inhabited that place, whined suddenly in an odd, excited way.

Prosper, who knew the dog rather better than he knew his prayers, caught the change at once, and went quickly to the spot where, half hidden by the rushes, Plutus, up to his neck in muddy water, stood whining and staring.

"What is it, old man?" said Prosper, following the dog's gaze.

"Ah, yes—I see, Plutus. . . . I thought so."

It was the Iron-Grey Man—Major Geoffrey Merlehurst—again. The body was lying in a queer, uncanny attitude of repose, only half submerged in the shallow, weed-grown water a few yards off the bank.

For a few seconds Prosper studied the poor flotsam and its immediate surroundings in silence. Then he nodded.

"Yes. He is clever and quick and desperately cunning and as strong as a bull," he said softly. "Not a soul would doubt that this man drowned himself. It is all complete—broken reeds where he waded out——" he peered at the soft ground about the margin of the lake—"even a footprint or two."

He took a step forward towards the dead man, then stopped suddenly, called Plutus and moved slowly away, looking about him as a man, strolling idly on the countryside, does.

Presently Prosper stopped at the gate of a field by the side-road he had reached, and talked in low tones to Plutus.

"Yes, old warrior, it seems unnatural to leave that poor chap there—but we have to ca'canny. I do not want to feature as the discoverer of the latest suicide. Let us leave that to some one else."

He made himself a cigarette, but, before he lit it, a big touring car, very silent, driven by a smart military-



looking man of middle-age, came whispering down the road and drew up at Prosper's gate.

Prosper slid down from his seat on the top rail smiling, and greeted the newcomer.

"How are you, Dale? One asks, though one sees that it is unnecessary. Let's go for a little ride. Get in, Plutus. No, you drive, old fellow. I want to talk presently—strange that, for such a tongue-tied, mute person as myself, eh?"

He laughed.

Dale surveyed him with warm eyes—not without a touch of anxiety.

"One needn't ask either if things are going well with you," he said quietly. "You are evidently having the time of your life. . . . I brought all the things you telegraphed for—and some of the information you wanted."

The great car went slowly down the by-road.

"But—I want to say that I am not happy about some of the things you wanted to-night. They—er—put the wind up. They suggested all sorts of risks."

Prosper nodded.

"Of course. I'm involving myself in a risky affair, Dale. Big game hunting—the biggest kind—man-hunting."

Dale looked steadily ahead of him.

"Yes. I guessed that when I learned you were camping near Kern Castle. Of course you're aware that there are quite a number of people at Derehurst who would be—ah—sorry to hear that, by some evil

chance, anything had happened to you," he said casually. "You know, Prosper, there is quite a good deal to be said for the practice of letting the detective people do their own detecting."

Prosper's face was serious.

"Yes, I know. But in this business they detect the wrong people. I should not be amazed, for example, if I am arrested at any moment."

Dale stiffened.

"*You! You*—arrested?"

He laughed.

"But that's absurd. . . . For what?"

"The murders of three people—so far," explained Prosper. "You see, old chap, this is not one of those little happy episodes of the road, of which I've had such a generous share."

"No, one sees that. Most people who know anything at all know the ugly reputation of Kern. But do, please, for God's sake, take care of yourself."

"I'm doing nothing else all day—in a way," claimed Prosper, and glanced over his shoulder at the back of the car. "I think we'll stop here and talk."

They had run out to one of those bits of bare, cattle-cropped common so plentiful about the outskirts of the New Forest. Dale stopped the car.

"There are some things I want you to arrange," said Prosper.

"Right. I'll jot 'em down." Dale produced a small note book.

"I want you to see that a trainer called Fred Oxton,

at the Druid's Hollow stables here, gets four horses—two good ones and two fair, to train for me. Give him a good figure.”

“Very well,” Dale scribbled, speaking as he scribbled. “Nash will grumble, of course.”

“Naturally—but it won't hurt him,” smiled Prosper. “Next, there is a lady I am anxious to help. She is poor and desperately at her wits' end for money. I want to find some plan by which she can be freed from that worry for a time.”

Dale noted it.

“That won't be so easy.”

“No—it won't, will it?” smiled Prosper. “That's why I wish it onto you—the most delightful expression in the world, that, Dale. . . . I will tell you more of this lady presently. . . . Now, what about Lord Kern, have you to wish onto me?”

## CHAPTER XIII

**D**ALE turned in his seat and faced Prosper.

He was a fine, clean-cut, bronzed, soldierly-looking man and his half smart, half jaunty, well-worn soft tweed hat, together with the loose, well-cut, brown tweed shooting coat which he was wearing set him off admirably. Beside him the hatless, youthful-seeming Mr. Fair, colourless, shabby, and dusty in his grey sweater, his baggy grey flannels, and his grimy gym shoes should have looked like a cancelled postage stamp against a big bank note.

Only, somehow, he did not.

His eyes were brighter, his features keener, his mouth, for all its smiling, was firmer. Dale looked an English gentleman—Prosper Fair looked like a gentleman of the wide world. Dale looked a gentleman—Prosper looked like a man who was gentle. A child would have hesitated to tickle Dale—the same child would crawl all over Mr. Fair; a woman would be whispering to Prosper a month before she confided in Dale; a man concerned about his overdraft would ask Prosper's views without uneasiness—Dale's he would never require at all; a tramp would not be too conservative to volunteer to share a night's camp with Prosper—but there was nothing about Dale to magnetise a hobo—nothing whatsoever. Prosper looked like a man who

would say "Hello!" Dale certainly would say "How do you do?"

Yet Prosper was the Duke of Devizes—celebrated, so the newspapers said, for his wealth and his democratic eccentricities—and Captain Dale was simply his confidential agent at Derehurst Castle, Prosper's south of England, and favourite, residence.

Captain Dale was well-bred, an honourable and pleasant man.

Prosper Fair was thoroughbred—not because he was a duke, but in spite of it. And he was a thoroughbred with brains, which was probably the reason why he was happier engaged in what he chose to term his "study of humanity" than in the carrying out of what in his youth had over-often been vaguely described to him as his "duty to his order."

But, just at present—in much the same spirit, for example, as he had once engaged himself as assistant in the sweet shop of an elderly widow, soured by misfortune, and put the tiny business on its legs again—Prosper was engaged in running down the Kern killer—and he was anxious to press on with it. . . .

"Now what about Lord Kern have you to wish on to me?" he asked gaily, revelling in the crisp Americanism.

Dale spoke abruptly.

"I have your message from Rahy when he brought back the little donkey—who is well and apparently happy—and I ran up to town the same evening. I looked up one or two people who remembered Lord

Kern well—and they passed me on to others who knew him even better. . . . Among them, by the way, in case you find it useful, was your uncle, Sir Allyn Weir”—Dale laughed shortly—“to whom you might refer the first zealous detective gentleman that arrests you!”

Sir Allyn Weir was Chief Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard.

Prosper nodded.

“Yes—that is a glorious idea. You always were a bit of a wag, Dale. I’ll remember that,” he said happily. “Did you discover anything interesting about Lord Kern?”

Dale carefully proceeded to tell Prosper a good deal which he already knew.

“Yes—that’s interesting, anything more?” asked Prosper. “Did you find out why he launched out from miserliness to magnificence, endured it for a little, then suddenly reverted to miserliness again?”

Dale nodded doubtfully.

“It was a woman, of course,” he said, “but unfortunately, nobody seems to know which of several women it was.”

“There were several?” Prosper’s tone was that of a man surprised.

Dale referred to his note book, for he was a methodical man, if unswift, and believed in the written word.

“One said one lady, you know, and another said some other lady.”

“Yes?” Prosper concealed his impatience. “And the ladies were?”

"Mrs. Moorhouse, the actress—a great beauty ten years ago; Lady Florence Test—the daughter of Lord Romsey; and Niobe Swayne, the demi-mondaine."

Prosper leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his cupped hands, staring absently down at the self-starter switch by his feet.

"Mrs. Moorhouse is dead—surely?" he said.

"She died some years ago—in an aeroplane smash just before the war."

"Florence Test married Lord Carronford ages ago?"

"Yes. And Niobe Swayne disappeared."

Prosper nodded.

"Yes—they do, poor souls . . ." he said absently. "I never met her—though naturally I have heard of her. . . . But I am certain that the woman who worked the great change—the great double change in Lord Kern's life was neither of the three you mention, Dale. Were there any others?"

Dale nodded reluctantly.

"Yes, there was one other mentioned . . . by an old friend of mine, who was also a friend of the lady's husband. As it chanced I, too, knew both of them. But I don't think my friend was right. . . . She was good—as well as the most beautiful woman I have ever met," said Dale, with a new warmth in his voice.

Prosper glanced at him quickly out of his eye corners.

"Yes?" he said quietly. "You mean Mrs. Merlehurst, of course—the wife of Major Geoffrey Merlehurst of the Seventh Dragoon Guards!"

Dale did not start—few Englishmen of his stamp are given to starting. But his nostrils pinched in a little, his mouth drooped infinitesimally and his eyes seemed to become a little greyer.

"Yes," he said calmly, "I mean Rose Merlehurst." Prosper smiled—an odd secret smile.

"Rose. Her name is Rose? I met a man to-day who said she could do more with roses than any other woman. She showed me Juliet—'prettiest of all her roses' she said. Oh, not that it matters. You knew her in the old days, did you, Dale?"

"I—admired her," said Dale, levelly. "She was really sweet and charming. She adored Merlehurst—a good-looking blackguard—who disappeared. But she was quite the last woman in the world to respond to any advances of Lord Kern—fabulously wealthy though he was said to be. I knew her, you see, Duke—Prosper, that is."

"Prosper it is. . . . You say that she would have laughed at Kern?"

"Laugh at him! Not she! Though I am told that plenty of people did."

"'I was a derision,'" absently Prosper quoted from the pyramid of lead.

Dale stared.

"Sorry—what was that?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . Dale, you say that, in spite of rumours, Mrs. Merlehurst, in your opinion, did not respond to Lord Kern's—friendliness?"

"Absolutely not," said Dale crisply. "But she would



not have laughed at him. She—understood men admiring her.”

“Yet, if Lord Kern does not re-appear within less than a month from now, Mrs. Merlehurst’s daughter—Marjorie May—inherits everything that Kern possessed,” stated Prosper quietly.

Dale was amazed. But he was cool-headed.

“But—how old is the child?”

“Oh, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. How do you, or how would your friend account for that?”

Dale thought.

“Absolutely—I don’t know. Certainly the girl is not Kern’s child.”

“Certainly she is not,” said Prosper. “But he leaves her his money.”

“They say he was worth over a million!”

“Yes? Where is it?”

“Naturally I don’t know.”

“Nor does any one else—except perhaps one. Though I—even I—imagine I can guess!” said Prosper.

Dale thought—but it was clear that he was already a little out of his mental depth.

“Geoffrey Merlehurst might help you—at least I think he would corroborate a great deal that I’ve said,” he suggested.

“Yes, but do you know where to find him?” questioned Prosper.

“No. He was mixed up in some racing scandal, sent in his papers and disappeared years ago.”

Prosper nodded.

"He has re-appeared. I know where he is."

Again Dale stared.

"Merlehurst! Where?"

"Lying in a foot and a half of water, dead, in a lake near the place where I met you," said Prosper.

"But—do you mean he drowned himself?" asked Dale.

"No—he was placed there by the man who killed him."

"He was *killed!*"

"I found his body a quarter of an hour after he was killed—at the base of the pyramid built by Lord Kern immediately before he disappeared," said Prosper.

"The man I am seeking is the man who killed him."

Dale thought, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I simply don't follow."

"Why try, old chap? You've given me some tremendously valuable information. Mrs. Merlehurst is the lady I mentioned before, whom I want to help. I admire her as much as you used to . . . and Marjorie, too. . . . Dale, we must contrive to help her without her knowledge, of course. Enderby's of Carisbury are her lawyers. You had better put our legal folk in touch with them. It mayn't be easy—as you said—but it's possible. Don't forget. . . . Their home—Mavisholme—is mortgaged. Take over the mortgage—things like that. The law people will find a way." He swung back the door of the car.

"I'll be moving, now. It's almost dark. I'm tre-

mendously obliged to you, old chap. You've helped enormously."

Dale was uneasy.

"You're going back to your camp—somewhere in some damned woods—to manœuvre against this murderer. Let me come, Prosper."

But Prosper shook his head.

"Honestly, Dale, there isn't room—or need. With the safeguards you've brought I shall be invincible—I think. Are they in good order?"

"They're the best possible—and they've been tested."

Prosper laughed softly, lifting a bag from the back of the car.

"I hope with all my heart they were tested thoroughly. Where did you get them?"

"It was ludicrously difficult—considering the way they were thrown at our heads a year or two ago. As a matter of fact I got them through a pal at the War Office."

"Ah, good man. Now I must be moving."

He offered his hand. Dale took it, his face clouded and anxious.

"I shall make a point of being pretty close to the telephone for the next few days," he reminded Prosper.

"Thanks. That may be vitally important——"

Dale's eye fell on Plutus, the three-legged remains of a terrier, fidgetting about his owner's feet.

"Why don't you let me bring you one of the *medelans* instead of that little chap? Old Kai would suit

you better for this adventure—mute as he is—and staunch——”

Dale spoke of the Russian bear hounds—*medelans*—fierce and monstrous hounds, averaging a hundred and eighty pounds weight, or thereabouts, a number of which it was the whim of the whimsical Prosper to maintain at home.

But he shook his head.

“Plutus isn’t much to look at, but a lot of brain-owners are like that. Kai would want to eat every one he saw, or suspected, in the woods—this young fellow would first come and ask my opinion—in his own way. No, it’s all right, Dale. You know where I am. If I leave Kern I will notify you at once. . . .”

So Dale wished him good luck, shook hands, and watched him vault the gate into the park and, followed by a flickering white dot, merge himself into the dusk that was beginning slowly to close down on the woody countryside.

He turned at the edge of the lake to wave. Dale returned the friendly farewell and then Prosper was lost in the shadows.

Dale stared for a moment at the reed-fringed lake, then shivered a little in the chill evening air.

“Once an officer of Dragoon Guards and the husband of Rose Merlehurst—now, just a form lying still in a remote lake . . .” he muttered. “What a world!”

He set his engine purring and drove away towards the main road.

## CHAPTER XIV

THE movements of Mr. Prosper Fair, after leaving Dale, became a little complicated.

He reached his tent, entered it and lit a candle. For a moment he stood thinking, then divested himself of the burden he had borne from the car and, kneeling down, carefully cut an oblong of worn mossy turf. This he laid aside, and, working with some care, scooped out some of the earth under the cut.

Then he took from the bag which Dale had brought him a flat, squarish satchel with a strong loop or sling attached. This he fitted neatly to the shallow excavation he had made, enlarging and shaping until he was satisfied that the satchel lay snugly in its bed.

Then he took it out, hung the thing about his neck, tying it so that it rested against his chest securely, and stood up.

He was still for a moment, then snatched at the satchel, whipped his hands to his face, seemed to fumble for an instant, and dropped his hands again.

Plutus, the terrier, eyeing him, suddenly pricked his ears and jumped to his feet, his wiry shoulder hackles bristling slightly. His mouth gaped undecidedly and he wagged very dubiously indeed the short piece which in his youth was all they had left him for a tail.

Prosper had changed, and Plutus was by no means sure he approved of the change. He had never seen

his owner look so odd—so grimly grotesque, for he was not acquainted with box respirators.

Prosper was wearing a gas mask, and there is in the appearance of any man doing that more than a hint of sinister strangeness and of dumb horror. The fixed, uncanny stare of the great glass eye-pieces, the colour of the gas-proof fabric and the forbidding ugliness of the curved air-pipe, together with the air of mute, staring menace with which the contrivance invests its wearer is apt, on first acquaintance, to unsettle more phlegmatic folk than an electric spark of a terrier.

A queerly muffled, dead voice spoke from behind the mask, and Prosper's hand made reassuring movements.

Then he removed the mask, replaced it in the satchel-like container, paused a moment, then snatched it out to repeat the process of swift adjustment.

A dozen times he did this—practising.

"Queer, how quickly a man gets out of the way of using this little device, Plutus, my old . . ." he said quietly, once. "If you knew the purpose of this pretty little article of personal apparel you would understand why I keep you so strictly at home o' nights——"

He donned the thing again, expertly, swiftly—"Yes, indeed, you would, you Plutus creature——" he said in that uncanny muffled voice.

Plutus began a low, half-playful growl of disapproval but changed it abruptly to the genuine article as a shadow flitted to the tent entrance—a shadow in skirts, peeping in.

"Please may I—oh-h!"

The exclamation was one of pure terror.

Prosper turned, quick as a cat.

Marjorie was staring in, wide-eyed. Even in the dim yellow light of the candle Prosper could see the white fear on her face.

He clawed off the mask with extraordinary swiftness.

"I am so sorry!" he said quickly. "I seem always to be startling—frightening—you, Marjorie May."

He used her Christian name without a prefix, though neither of them appeared to notice it. She had the resilient nerves of healthy youth and recovered herself instantly.

"I—I didn't realise it was you," she said. "It startled me so. You see, I was quite sure I should look in and see you—and to see a—stranger with staring eyes and that uncanny tube thing was enough to startle any one." She eyed the dangling mask with profound distaste and aversion.

"It is a gas mask," she said slowly, her eyes widening. "Why have you a gas mask, please?"

Prosper watched her, his mind more set upon her beauty than her words. It was chilling to reflect that she was the daughter of that poor dead thing lying so silently among the shallow water rushes of the lake.

"Because I am going to the pyramid to-night—and perhaps to explore the castle," he said, half absently.

"But please, do you mean that there is likely to be—gas—like they used in the war—there?"

Prosper smiled, folding the mask away.

"No, Marjorie May—but strange fruit grows on the tree of knowledge. And when one designs to climb that tree one takes precautions."

"But—*gas!*" Her exquisite lips formed a red ring. "If you used a mask then it would be dangerous gas." She was working it out step by step, her eyes dilating in the candlelight.

" . . . very dangerous. But why? I have been at the Pyramid so many times—oh, hundreds!—at all hours and I have never noticed any gas."

Prosper smiled.

"No. But have you ever noticed any *glass* there? Just bits—fragments—of fine glass?"

He drew closer.

"Think carefully, Marjorie May, because it is rather important, you see."

"Glass——" breathed the girl. "Yes, once or twice I have seen tiny bits—shining in the sun—like little splinters of a broken electric light bulb."

Prosper nodded.

"Tell me, too, is there electric light fitted in the castle?"

"Oh, no. I went over it for the first time in my life yesterday, and I saw that. *Nobody* has electric light in the village."

"Thank you, Marjorie May," said Prosper gravely.

"But what have glass bulbs to do with gas masks, please?" she asked.

"Why, you see, if an enemy dropped a bubble of



glass charged with some very deadly, invisible and unsuspected poison gas close to some other person in the dark, what would happen? There would be a noise on the ground, the person would stoop to see why, and he (or she, Marjorie) would inhale the gas—and, if it is very deadly, perhaps one whiff would be enough to kill. . . . That is why I shall rarely go to the sunk garden, the pyramid or the castle at night without taking a gas mask. And that is why you must not on any account go near the garden or the pyramid at night—or in the day time—until I say that you can.”

His voice was very serious.

She peered at him in the dim light, blushing, her eyes very wide.

“Very well, I won’t go there any more,” she said with a curious meekness.

Prosper was charmed.

He went close to her.

“We shall shake hands on that,” he said, softly, with a queer, tender, masterful note in his voice—quite unconscious. “I am very pleased with you, dear Marjorie May. You are a good girl.”

A little warm hand found its way into his hard, camper’s palm.

“If you do as I say, it won’t be necessary to bother your head about gas masks and ugly things, Marjorie,” he continued, “and you need not be alarmed about my safety. I—understand gas, you see. Chlorine—phosgene—mustard—tar—all sorts. I had to learn about them once. . . .”

Through the still air the note of the distant church clock vibrated to them, and Prosper stiffened a little, freeing himself from a peculiar and wholly unaccountable dreaminess with which the moment had been fraught.

She was standing before him, in the attitude of one who seems to droop, though her face was raised and her eyes were shining.

"But, Marjorie May, what are you doing here at this hour—in the dark?" he asked, a touch of anxiety in his voice.

"Oh, the dark does not matter," she said. "I have been in these woods at all times—as well as the sunk garden. I am accustomed to it. I came to see you—to ask you something. I wondered if you would tell me, please, what it was you told my mother this afternoon. She is so—different—since this afternoon. Nervous and excited—and she has cried once, though she pretended that she did not."

Prosper was able to answer that without reflection. He knew that Mrs. Merlehurst still loved the husband she had not seen for so long—and would never see again—and he understood that the thought that he was perhaps quite near her again would move her from her accustomed tranquil self-possession.

But knowing where and in what condition Major Merlehurst now was, Prosper could only answer in one way.

"Yes, I can tell you that, of course. It chanced that I met a man yesterday who closely resembled your

father. I told your mother that, and I have no doubt that is the news which moved her so."

Marjorie May studied him thoughtfully.

"Do you know where he is now, please?"

"I only met him for a few seconds—quite by chance. I did not know—I do not know even now—his name. He asked his way—I told him—and he passed on. It was not until long afterwards that it occurred to me that he resembled the photograph of your father . . . that is all."

He was conscious of two big wistful eyes scrutinising his face closely in the dim light.

"Oh, I see now. Thank you for telling me. That would be quite enough to make mother restless. She loved my father very much, you see. Only it made me uneasy to see her so. But I understand. And I will go home now. Good-night, Mr. Fair."

She offered her hand.

"I will come with you, Marjorie May," said Prosper. "It is quite dark now and I do not want you to be alone any more in the woods or the castle grounds after dark!"

"Because of the gas bulbs?"

"Because of those—and other things," explained Prosper gravely.

She reflected.

"I will do whatever you say I must do, for you are cleverer than I am," she stated obediently. "Cleverer and braver."

Prosper was stooping over the receptacle he had ar-

ranged for the hiding of the gas mask. He placed it in the shallow excavation with rather minute care, then replaced the turf he had cut away, and turned again to the girl.

"Shall we go now?" he said. "You can come, Plutus—but quietly."

He slipped his big haversack on, caught Marjorie's hand and held it, and so, hand in hand they went out into the wilderness, followed by the small but ever faithful Plutus.

Perhaps that was not good tactics, for even as the two went a figure stole out from the gloom facing the tent and after a pause entered, flashing on a powerful torch. This one must have been watching from somewhere deep in the shadows, for he bent unerringly to the turf under which the gas mask had been concealed. Working swiftly with the deftness of one well used to gas masks, he took it out, slit the corrugated rubber tube and, puncturing the metal box, poured a few drops of some pungent smelling fluid in on the life-saving chemicals inside the box. Then he carefully returned the useless mask to its hiding place, re-arranged the turf with the nicest precision and moved in absolute silence out of the tent again, switching off his torch. The darkness received him like the thing of darkness he was. . . .

Marjorie May's slim, cool fingers lay quite frankly and unresistingly in Prosper's hard hand.

"It is lovely going through the dark with you," she

said. "I was never afraid here by myself, but it is glorious to be with somebody else."

"You like being with me, Marjorie May?"

"Oh, yes, of course. You are splendid." Her fingers tightened. "And I like the way you say 'Marjorie May.' Isn't it queer to think that we only met yesterday!"

"Very queer. It seems impossible," agreed Prosper. "I am glad you like the way I say 'Marjorie May.' Do you think you would like to say 'Prosper' instead of 'Mr. Fair'?"

"Oh, yes, please. Prosper."

She tried it over several times, very softly—lingering over it.

"Prosper—Prosper—Prosper. It is a splendid name, I think. 'I came home through the wood in the dark with Prosper, mother—with Prosper—' that's what I shall say."

She laughed in the deep shadow like a bird piping a few sweet notes in its dreams.

"Isn't it fine to have a friend, at last?" she said.

"But you've scores of friends, Marjorie May——" Prosper reminded her—"Eyre-Weston, Barisford, and plenty of others, I expect."

"Oh, those—yes, I have plenty of friends like those. But only one like you, Prosper. You're different from them."

"In what way?" Prosper, enchanted with her, could not resist asking that.

"Oh, you see, they always seem so prosperous and a

little overwhelming. But you are like mother and me—poor and not a bit overwhelming. Oh, quite different.”

“You don’t mind having a friend who is poor—and camps out—and looks shabby and dusty and nobody of any consequence?”

“Oh, no. Besides you don’t look shabby and dusty and nobody to any one who looks at your eyes, you see.”

“Thank you, Marjorie May,” said Prosper gravely. “I think you and I were meant to be friends.”

“Oh, yes, I am quite sure of that,” she agreed with an air of conviction.

They walked for the remainder of the way in silence. It seemed to Prosper like walking hand in hand with a lovely apparition which, at any moment, might change into a moth—or with some sweet little ghost who might quite unexpectedly vanish in a wisp of lacy, fading mist. But that was only illusion—glamour.

They came out on the roadway for the last fifty yards of their journey, still hand in hand, for there was nobody to see. It was nearing ten o’clock and the villagers were mostly in bed, though there were still sounds of life—unaccustomed sounds.

A man with a flat, deep, powerful voice was singing some distance along the road—probably outside the village inn—and accompanying his song with a tuneless guitar thrumming. In the still air the words of the song, robustly sung, with a curious, rasping defiant tone in it, were plainly audible to them—

Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket  
And say a poor buffer lies low, lies low.  
And six stalwart Lancers shall carry me  
With step, solemn, mournful and slow.

He was probably singing it mechanically for a few coppers outside the Kern Arms. There was no melody in the deep, hoarse, carrying voice, nor any tone save for that gruff and careless defiance. Yet, oddly, some deep string in Prosper's consciousness vibrated to it. His hand closed a little more tightly on the girl's.

"An old soldier fallen on evil days, Marjorie May," he said. "Listen."

And get you six brandies and sodas  
And lay them all out in a row  
And get you six jolly good fellows  
To drink to this buffer below.

came the distant voice through the gloom—as it might have been the voice of the ghost of some long-forgotten soldier singing to cheer itself and a ring of spectral comrades around a lambent will-o'-the-wisp camp fire in some remote and unfamiliar bivouac.

Prosper's thoughts moved back, hovering over the man in the lake. . . .

And then in the calm of the twilight  
When the soft winds whispering blow  
And the darkening shadows are falling  
Sometimes think of this buffer below.

Marjorie shivered a little.

"Somehow that sounds sad. . . . Please, shall we go home, Prosper?"

Prosper made haste to open the gate. . . .

Her mother was standing by a pillar of the verandah of Mavisholme, looking almost as slender and graceful as Marjorie May herself against the warm yellow background of the lighted doorway.

"I came back through the wood in the dark with Prosper, mother," said the girl, dreamily. "I went to ask what he had said to make you restless and he told me. I understand now, dearest——" She dropped Prosper's hand and went to her mother. "And, mother darling, I hope everything you hope. . . . Prosper and I have arranged that we are going to be friends. Do you mind, mother?"

Mrs. Merlehurst looked at Prosper who, facing the light, was very easily to be seen. Like her daughter, she looked at his eyes and face—and she, also, appeared not to observe that his grey flannels were shabby and dusty.

"No, I don't mind," she said slowly. "I don't mind at all. I am glad you are going to be friends."

She sighed a little.

"It was kind of you to bring her home again through the woods, Mr. Fair. She is too fearless."

"If that is possible," he doubted.

She understood.

"Perhaps it is not possible to you. . . . But with the passage of years one's views change. . . ."



When, a few moments later, he said "good night" and went away, both mother and daughter stood looking after him as, hatless, his haversack slung over his shoulder, he disappeared into the shadows of the garden.

"Do you like him, mother?" asked the girl dreamily.

"Yes, I like him very much—even better than Raymond Barisford. I think he is good and very courageous—and more compassionate and honourable than many richer and more—prominent men!"

"Ah, so do I," said Marjorie May softly, hugging her mother.

## CHAPTER XV

PROSPER did not hasten unduly to return to his small abode on the edge of the woods. He went so slowly that one watching him and aware of his quest might have decided that he was deliberately going slowly and by the longest way.

With Plutus at his heels he went by the roadway, ignoring his private short cut. His progress was that of a man who, conscious that he has to wait an hour for a train, strolls aimlessly up a small-town street and back.

This route back to the castle led him past a small inn situated, with a few cottages, a little way further out of the village than the home of the Merlehursts. It was a minute or so past ten o'clock when he reached this inn and normally the place should be closed and in darkness. But to-night the landlord had not yet extinguished his lights and closed his bar.

He was standing in the doorway facing a man who was talking in a harsh, querulous voice.

"But he passed through this dog-hole village, I tell you—you must have seen him—a fine, aristocratic-looking man—old soldier. He wouldn't pass through without dropping in here—dry work foot-slogging it on these roads!"

"I tell you, mister, there's no such party been in my house. In fact, we ain't seen a stranger here for a month," said the landlord.

The tall man stared at him, absently snapping his fingers.

"It's not like him—I don't understand it."

Prosper, moving quietly and very slowly, studied him.

He had spoken of "old soldiers" and it was evident, even in that gloom, that this man also was an old soldier. He was as straight and stiff-shouldered as a man on a smart parade. Slung over his shoulder he carried a big worn haversack—and a guitar! He wheeled abruptly as Prosper drew near—disclosing, dimly seen in the light of the ill-lit passage, a square rugged face, with a heavy black moustache.

His pale eyes fixed themselves on Prosper for a second, then returned to the innkeeper.

"If you haven't seen him, you haven't," he rasped. "But how the hell anybody with eyes could miss such a striking man I can't see. A tall, grey-looking, aristocratic man—a come-down gentleman—isn't so common in a one-horse place like this that he's not noticed."

He tugged at his moustache, glaring—as obvious an old non-commissioned cavalry officer, also "come-down," as Prosper had ever seen.

"You are in a difficulty?" asked Prosper, mildly.

The hard, flinty eyes of the ex-N.C.O. fastened on the hatless figure in grey flannel.

"Difficulty—yes. I'm hunting for my mate—my

partner. There was a bit of a barney back at Carisbury about my giving them a little music in the streets and the police got gay with me. I had to stop over the night there. But the major pushed on. 'They'll let you out in the morning,' he says, 'and you're fitter than I am. I'll push on to Kern and you can catch up. . . . You go quietly with these police now and follow on when they fire you out in the morning. I'll carry on. You'll hear of me at Kern. I'll look out for you.' And this is the way he looks out. Where is he? Nobody in the village has seen him. Has he passed through—or what?"

"Was he a grey man—very tired—who closed his eyes when he spoke? A man who might once have been a gentleman?" enquired Prosper.

"You've said it. An officer *and* a gentleman and a sportsman. He was once a major of the Seventh Dragoon Guards. I served under him—troop sergeant-major till they broke me. We're on the road together. . . . I—I'm anxious about him for he was not fit. Have you seen him?"

"What was his name? I heard of some one resembling him—in the village yesterday."

The ex-troop sergeant-major looked keenly at Prosper.

"His name was Smith," he answered.

"Smith, yes," he repeated. "He couldn't have come to any harm for he knew this place Kern—well he knew it. But I'm uneasy—I tell you I'm windy—for he was a sick man."

"Well, I'm sorry for you, but I ain't seen him," said the innkeeper, civil but yawning. "And I've got to close my house—so good-night, both."

The oblong of light was suddenly blocked out by the closed door. Prosper smiled at the man with the guitar.

"I think it must have been your friend major—Smith—that I saw," he said. "Are you going this way?"

"Any way will do me—so long as it leads to a barn," was the gloomy reply.

"You are sleeping in a barn to-night, Sergeant-Major——"

"Cass, sir—plain Matthew Cass. There's worse places than barns and I've slept in 'em."

He fell into step automatically.

"Well, we're heading for an empty castle—and that should be better than a barn."

"Kern Castle, is it? That's where my partner was heading, Mister——"

"Fair——" said Prosper. "We must try to find him. The grey man I met asked for Kern Castle."

"It's him—I knew it would be. How did he seem?" asked Matthew Cass anxiously.

"Not—very fit," explained Prosper. "To be frank, he appeared to me like a man on the verge of a grave illness."

Cass agreed reluctantly.

"Yes, he was. . . . 'His chickens were coming home to roost,' he used to say. He's a man who has always

enjoyed himself, the major is. He believes in a gay life—and a long one if you could get it. I used to say that—but I'll not swear it's right. It leads you nowhere—except into barns for your night's rest."

Prosper nodded.

"Perhaps we can improve on the barn. You might turn in with me—if you don't mind a small tent. I can find you something to eat, too. I'm camping near here—an artist. What do you say?"

"Yes to that. Thanks. A square meal is what I'm looking for. If I can get something for my digestion to do, I'll probably feel a bit more hopeful about my partner."

"Good," said Prosper. "I've a natural gift for finding something for idle digestions to do. . . . This is one of the entrances to Kern Castle—we turn in here."

They moved into the dead gloom of the overgrown carriage drive.

Cass sniffed, a little uneasily, seeming to sense the ruin which he could not see.

"It's as black as the Earl of Hell's riding boots," he said, with elaborations. "What hopes of finding the major around here to-night?"

"Very few," agreed Prosper. "This way—and go as quietly as you can."

He made straight to his camp, but stopped at the tent entrance and flashed his torch inside carefully studying the interior for some minutes before he entered.

He was smiling when presently he turned to his guest, though that hardy individual did not notice it.

Half an hour later, the ex-sergeant-major had provided his digestion with exercise, and was busy with tobacco. Skillfully and imperceptibly led by Prosper he was talking freely of his "partner" and himself. His discourse was long and, to most, would have seemed rambling, but Prosper missed no word of it. He let his guest go at his own gait, for until the moon was high, Prosper was in no hurry. . . .

It was nearing midnight before he left Cass, sleeping heavily, with Plutus curled up just inside the tent.

Prosper made his way without haste to the sunk garden, with his gas mask at the alert position. Arrived there, he silently moved to the pyramid, and settled down comfortably in the dark shadow of the north base. His attitude, when presently he was settled to his satisfaction, was curious—and quite the last in which one, knowing his quest, might have expected to see him. He sat close against the pyramid, leaning back, his head turned sideways, his cheek resting against his hand, which in turn rested against the slope of the pyramid.

It was exactly the attitude of a man about to sleep—or to listen.

But Mr. Fair had not gone there to sleep—he had never been more keenly interested and wide-awake in his life. He was engaged in testing a certain theory. And since thought could not check or interfere with the test, he seized this chance of running over the mass

of information he had accumulated during that long and furiously busy day.

From the time that he had first looked down at the crumbling training stable at Druid's Hollow, to the moment when the drifting ex-cavalryman, Cass, had finished talking and fallen asleep where he lay, Prosper had been learning things. And that with no more apparent effort than was required to keep people talking who were perfectly willing to talk. The conversation of almost every one of the people with whom he had chatted that day, taken by itself, led to nothing, for it was incomplete—but when each of these conversations was fitted into place with the others in what Mr. Fair chose to term the jigsaw, the mystery began to clear itself, to become amazingly more sharply defined—like an actual landscape swinging into clean-cut, detailed, clearly-coloured precision through the lenses of a gradually adjusted field glass.

Sitting in the shadow of the pyramid, he was tempted to marvel that a trained detective, such as Garrishe unquestionably must be, could have missed so much of what he should have known. But Garrishe was handicapped in many ways. He was known to be a professional detective, and people did not care to talk too readily to him; he had no social *entrée* to the places and people that seemed to matter; and he was faced with a novel mystery towards a solution of which the records and system of Scotland Yard could not help him. But there were others interested—Raymond Barisford, for example, a quick-witted and clever man,



with many opportunities, and moreover with the added incentive of his love for Marjorie May and friendship for Mrs. Merlehurst; or that logical little schoolmaster who had been so keenly interested in the Kern mystery; or Enderby, the experienced old lawyer. And others. Yet none of them seemed to be an inch along the road upon which the whimsical Mr. Fair was well aware he had made such remarkable progress.

"How quaint to think that I, a grey and baggy-kneed wanderer, should arrive—as I have—in two days and a night—at the threshold of a mystery which has hung unsolved about this garden for ten years!" he said within himself, smiling into the darkness. "Do I throw undeserved bouquets at myself—festoon myself with unearned laurels, I wonder, when I tell myself that I know, or can practically guess rightly all there is to know concerning the Kern mystery? Certainly luck has been hand in hand with me—luck and——"

He broke off his reflections, listening intently.

But presently he relaxed again. Whatever may have been the sound he heard, it was evidently not the sound he was hoping to hear, for he continued to muse, his cheek resting on his palm against the pyramid.

He began to ponder again the deeply cut inscriptions in the light of that day's knowledge.

*"They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit,"* he repeated, inaudibly, nodding slowly.

"Well, that was true enough, penetratingly, pain-

fully true if Kern meant by a 'graven image' or 'delectable things' his money!"

Then he stiffened a little, spurred by a new idea.

"Let us try a small experiment," he suggested to himself. "We will—*pour passer le temps*, as one might say if one hungered to air a *cliché*—paraphrase the inscriptions—bearing in mind the things we have learned during this busy, busy day. Beginning with Lord Kern's cry or confession—'*I was a derision.*' That we will render as 'People laughed at me.' (But Mrs. Merlehurst did *not* laugh at him.) Very good, Prosper. Next, please. We will translate '*A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches and loving favour rather than silver and gold*' as meaning, '*It is better to be loved and respected than to be merely a millionaire.*' (But Mrs. Merlehurst did *not* love him.)"

Prosper nodded in the darkness like a playful mandarin.

"Let us continue to continue—substituting for, '*They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit*' the very free rendering of—um—'*It is of no use to make a god of money—one only loses by it.*' Exactly. It is true. Even I, Baggy-Knees, ought to know that!"

Prosper was right there—his own yearly income was in the neighbourhood of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

"And finally, we will make of '*And even thou, thyself, shalt discontinue from thy heritage that I gave thee,*' this substitute, '*Consequently, I shall stop hoard-*

*ing up a fortune that is of no use to me, and abandon the whole thing.’ ”*

He laughed very softly in the shadows.

“Now, let us see what our translations have brought us to,” he whispered, and repeated them——

*“ ‘People laughed at me—It is better to be loved and respected than to be merely a millionaire—It is of no use to make a god of money—one only loses by it—Consequently I shall stop hoarding up a fortune that is of no use to me and abandon the whole thing.’ Yes, that’s a permissible rendering. Let us edit it a little with an imaginary blue pencil. And remembering that Kern was a miser, it becomes—‘What’s the use of hoarding money if people laugh at you as they laugh at me and if it can’t buy you what you want? I shall abandon my money.’ ”*

Prosper sat up, suddenly.

“Yes—that’s it. Well, what did he do with it when he abandoned it? That is a fair question, I believe. But before we answer it, let us go farther—guessing a little—and render that conclusion of Lord Kern as being this:

*“ ‘Not even my great wealth could buy for me the respect of the people upon whom I lavished it or the love of Rose Merlehurst. Therefore I abandon my hoard, my house and my whole heritage. . . . Poor devil. . . . And the next one hears of him is that he is being nursed by a Chinese cook in the Far West—‘his lungs boiling back of his chest, you may say.’ But, nevertheless, he is sufficiently a philosopher—which is*

to say, a man given to the study and practice of wisdom—to impress deeply that not easily impressionable product of humanity, an aged Chinese cook!”

Prosper shook his head a little gravely.

“I find it in my heart to be sorry for Lord Kern,” he said slowly. “For it must have been a very bitter disillusioning to discover that the mountain of gold, hoarded so long and patiently, could not allure even a glance from the eyes of an exquisite woman who sighed only for the love of the ruined gambler she had married and who—it seems—had tired of her.”

He was uttering his thoughts aloud now. His voice may have carried almost to the deep dead darkness under the yew hedge. Whatever his quest at the pyramid may have been that night he seemed to have forgotten it. He was becoming absorbed in his problem—for he was on the very edge of its perfect solution—and he knew it.

Thinly, across the gulf of darkness, there came the sound of a small dog barking frantically—but it fell so faintly into the sunk garden that it was almost inaudible.

“To continue our condensation—and our guessing—let us reconstruct the affair in this way,” mused Prosper. “Nearly ten years ago——”

Something moved in the shadows of the yews facing the pyramid, the faintly musical, frosty sound of thin glass suddenly shattering, tinkled at Prosper’s feet—and, like lightning, he snatched at the gas mask, “alert” on his chest.

With a curious, ominous, strangling, coughing noise, he adjusted it; sat for a moment drawing short, quick, fiercely laboured breaths, his hands beating desperately before him; then he seemed slowly to deflate, the hands beat more feebly, stilled, and he toppled quietly over on his side, rolled helplessly on his back, and lay very still, face upwards, as though staring up at the sloping side of the pyramid.

A bitter, acrid, and horrifying reek fumed invisibly over the still form . . . a reek which a child, or a person who had never heard of poison gas nevertheless would have guessed instantly—though perhaps too late—was a deadly and devilish atmosphere to breathe. . . .

And Prosper Fair lay very still, in the heart of that poisonous vapour at the base of the pyramid of lead and the sunk garden of Kern was silent and dark and desolate.

## CHAPTER XVI

FULLY ten minutes passed before the impenetrable shadows of the yews gave up to the lesser shadows of the garden, a silent form, making swiftly towards the pyramid—a man whose movements were soundless and confident as only those of one well-accustomed to that place in the darkness could be.

He came to the still body of Mr. Fair, lax under the pyramid, and stood over it for a second. Then the white ray of a powerful electric torch bit into the darkness, wavered, and settled, moth-like, on the head of the fallen man.

His face was hidden wholly by the mask—perfectly adjusted, for, it seemed, Prosper had had just time enough to do that—and the torch-bearer dropped on his knees, craning down to peer close at the masked face. He, too, was masked.

For a full ten seconds the glass-covered eyes of the craning man gleamed into those of the fallen one.

There was no sound nor any comment from the man with the torch. But he shrugged his shoulders as he bent over, in the darkness, and was on the point of straightening when with appalling suddenness Prosper's arms shot up. His fingers missed the throat of the killer by a hairbreadth, but struck in on his neck like closing hooks of steel.

A queer, muffled cry of sheer terror beat out from behind the mask of the killer—for it was as though the icy hands of a dead man had clutched at him.

But almost instantaneously he understood that he had been decoyed, and so began to fight. He realised his position too swiftly for Prosper, handicapped by his grip on the killer's neck, to twist out from under him, and he had just time to drive his knees close into Prosper's sides, gripping him as one grips a saddle. He flung his hands to Mr. Fair's throat, but Prosper, gripping desperately, bowed out his elbows and blocked that attempt.

The killer, gasping under the slow, inexorable and agonising closing of the strong, sinewy fingers at his neck, slid a thirstily questing right hand between the bent arms, but instantly Prosper straightened his arms, forcing back the head and shoulders, so that the killer's hand closed only on the wool at the peak of the sweater.

He withdrew it instantly for the grip at his neck was becoming unbearable; Prosper's thumbs were driving deeper into the glands and muscles. They were fighting in absolute silence.

Pinned by the knees of the killer, Prosper could not move his body. But he was pouring the whole of his strength into his grip, and he knew that if he could hold it so a few seconds longer the other must collapse. It was not possible for any human endurance to withstand it.

But the killer knew that also, and with a violent heave he bowed himself up from his knees to his toes

and putting his knees together dropped them savagely, like one who kneels, with his full weight on the stomach of Mr. Fair, who, guessing the manoeuvre, was able to break the force of the shock a little by a fierce thrusting back of the masked, inhuman face and head looming over him. But, even so, the vicious down drive of the knees forced a slow, deep groan from behind Prosper's gas mask, and in that instant of nausea, of cringing muscles, his grip relaxed. The killer, on the verge of strangulation, tore free with a queer, horrifying sound, half sob, half scream, hardly recognisable as a human utterance and collapsed on his side.

For a second they lay facing each other, their goggled eyes staring blankly.

Then, painfully, each dragged himself erect, so that they seemed to be sitting. They had not been fighting two minutes, but it had been so violent and savage and intense that they were like old, enfeebled men.

The killer was first on his feet—lurching up a fraction of a second before Prosper. He reeled uncertainly as though to renew the struggle, then as Prosper braced himself as well as he could, to receive the shock, the killer staggered, threw up his hands to his neck with a grunt of pain, half turned away, tore off his mask and went swaying into the darkness. Prosper, dizzy, breathing desperately, engaged in a fierce struggle for more air than he seemed able to get through his respirator (not the mutilated one, but the perfect duplicate he had carried in his big haversack from the time he had received both from Dale), stared after



him, reeled round as though to follow, then stopped, overcome by a wave of appalling nausea. He lurched out from the shadow of the pyramid, made his way, half-blindly, across the moonlit patch of the stone paving and so into the dense darkness of the yew hedge, found his way through an archway, and in the jungle of wild growth beyond it, tore off his mask, and dropped to the ground.

Had the killer come to him there with a weapon in his hand, that would have been the end of Prosper Fair—and of the House of Devizes.

But the killer, somewhere in the darkness at the other side of the garden, was in no condition to follow Prosper. He himself would have been an easy capture had Prosper been able to muster up sufficient strength to pursue him.

For nearly half an hour Prosper lay still in the darkness, lax, resting, allowing the waves of nausea which followed each other in quick succession to die down. For a time he was possessed of a dull sick belief that he was injured internally, but as gradually his revolted nerves recovered, his dazed mental faculties won back nearer to normal, and his momentarily torture-sapped will power asserted itself, he felt the old gay confidence stir like a tiny flicker of new flame within him. He laughed very quietly and cautiously—for every movement seemed to set up a jarring ache extending upwards almost to the throat.

“ . . . I almost had him——” said Prosper, face down in the dark. “Next time. . . . He’s as strong

as a bull—with a neck like a motor tire. Almost any other man would have yielded. . . . I should have drawn up my knees quicker to counter that move of his. . . . I thought he had driven me into the ground . . . but—it would appear—that he did not.

“What a godsend I managed to cling on to one last bit of consciousness. . . . If I had not been able to struggle to my feet when he did, he would have had me—if he had had to commit murder on his knees. . . .”

He chuckled faintly.

“A near thing—for each of us. Never mind—better luck next time.”

Cautiously he began to rise. He felt extraordinarily weak. All his muscles seemed flaccid and cold and a chill perspiration broke out on him. A queer trembling seized him, his teeth began to chatter, and a dull, sick pain seemed to invade his very bones.

“I shall be in a charming plight to-morrow——” he said with a shaky laugh, and so, stooping, hugging himself with both arms, he made his slow and painful way back to the camp. . . .

Ex-Troop Sergeant Major Cass was drowsily awake—thanks to the rather querulous barking of Plutus who, aware that he was forbidden to roam, was nevertheless conveniently and thoroughly ignoring the rule against barking. But, like most of his kind, Cass was experienced in men, and drowsy as he was, nevertheless he observed instantly that all was not well with his host.

He sat up in his blankets.

"Hullo, what's wrong?" he demanded.

Prosper's face was greenish white in the light of the small hurricane lamp, which had been among his purchases at Carisbury.

"Late off pass, sergeant-major," chuckled Prosper shakily, and sat down rather heavily.

"You look it," said Cass, wide-awake now. "Man alive, you look as white as a ghost."

"Yes? . . . There's a flask of brandy in that haversack there, sergeant-major. Just pass it over, like a good chap. I—ah—need it."

Cass shook himself expertly out of his blankets.

"Yes, you do," he agreed with brevity. "Here you are. . . . What's it all about?"

Prosper took a long and heartening pull of the liquid which one Binns, butler at distant Derehurst Castle, was wont to affirm was worth its weight in liquid diamonds. Then, politely, he passed the flask to Cass, who took it, surveyed him curiously, hesitated, then put it down.

"You look too groggy to waste brandy on me—just at present," he stated. "Let's look into this."

"That's all right," said Prosper, his arms folded affectionately across his stomach. "I've been for a stroll in the moonlight, and I met a gentleman who played me rather an ungentlemanly trick."

"Oh, did he? What trick?"

"He tried to—ah—do me in—with poison gas, but failed," explained Prosper with slightly forced hu-

mour. "Yes, he failed—so he tried to jump upon my stomach—and succeeded."

Tersely Mr. Cass stated his opinion of such a method of personal warfare, and firmly passed back the brandy.

"I had more than half a notion that I'd dropped into a nice little hurrah's nest of trouble," he said pensively, and indicated a cut turf in the floor.

"I happened to wake up after you'd gone out," he said. "And lying there, wondering why the little dog seemed worried, I spotted that bit of turf. It looked kind of odd, so I lifted it. I know a bit about box-respirators, and I took the liberty of looking over the one I found in the hole under the turf. . . ."

He paused, staring reflectively at Prosper.

"I inspected the box-respirator, sir," he said. "And I want to say I should be sorry to be caught in a gas attack with that thing on. It's been interfered with. It leaks—and I wouldn't swear that the chemicals haven't been damaged."

Prosper nodded.

"Well, I left it there—in that obvious sort of way—for that purpose," he explained. "You see, this little camp is being watched, and I was hoping—expecting—that the gas mask I hid would be tampered with. But the one I wore to-night I kept always with me—and that was in perfect order. I'll explain all that to-morrow, sergeant-major. I feel—fantastic—to-night. My internal economy is not—economic—to-night. Also it feels kaleidoscopic. Have you ever had your

more intimate clockwork jumped upon, sergeant-major?"

"I have—and it's unpleasant——" said Mr. Cass, though he used a broadish synonym for "unpleasant." "Take another drop of brandy and let me run my eye over you. Any lacerations, d'ye think?"

"Oh, several millions, I think." But Prosper's laugh was very thin-drawn.

Silently, Cass "ran his eye" over him.

"Humph! You'll be a picture to-morrow—and as helpless as a jelly fish. What you need is an opiate. Got any?"

The sergeant-major scratched his head.

"Well, then, you'd better have a stimulant—a drop more brandy. . . . Man, it's a marvel he didn't squash you."

The indomitable Mr. Fair tried to laugh. But it was no more than a wiry giggle.

"Easy," said Cass, "easy does it. Is this gas-worker liable to return to duty to-night?"

"Not very liable. He will probably be occupied for some time with his neck and throat—which are liable to be somewhat damaged!"

Mr. Cass, curiously gentle, eased Prosper back on his blankets.

"You take it easy now," he said.

And Prosper was very glad to do as he was told. He lapsed into a sort of aching somnolence, shot with fiery spasms of pain.

## CHAPTER XVII

WHATEVER may have been the failings which had reduced Mr. Matthew Cass to his present condition, early morning sluggardliness was clearly not one of them. He was actively in evidence long before sunrise—indeed, he got little, if any, sleep after the return of his temporarily half-crippled host to the tiny tent.

Over night, after one quick glance round the tent, he had made careful enquiry concerning bathing facilities and, learning of them, he had negotiated for and acquired the rights in Prosper's spare towel.

Thus, at peep of dawn, Mr. Cass might have been observed making his way swiftly down towards the lake, a towel round his neck and rather eagerly shelling a big cake of soap out of a pod of paper. A passion for cleanliness goes but infrequently hand in hand with a passion for alcohol, but the ex-sergeant-major was a man with a lifetime's training in the matter of cleanliness, and he had become aware of a curious desire to be well-esteemed by Mr. Fair.

Therefore, he bathed abundantly, in the paling light, and when presently he dressed and ignited his pipe, it was with a suggestion of slightly increased swagger in his carriage that he moved along the edge of the lake on the way back to the little camp in the Kern woods.

It had been shadowy and the reeds had seemed to stand knee-deep in woolly mist when he came to the lake, but now the day was brightening and there was a pale radiance above the trees away to the east.

Things which had been invisible to him when he came were plainly visible now. It was almost impossible to miss the gap in the reeds which Prosper had first discovered—and any man who saw the gap could not fail to see what lay just beyond it.

The ex-sergeant-major saw it, and stopped short, standing stiff and rigid, staring with narrowed eyes.

"The major! . . . before I see his face, I know it."

He strode into the shallow water, his teeth set, lifted the body and carried it to the bank.

Mr. Cass had caught up with his mate.

He surveyed the still, grey form for a moment.

. . . "Well, major—there was a time when if a man had told me this was going to be the end of it I'd have—hurt him. . . . I wouldn't have believed it could come to this—remembering what you were years ago."

Some of the crispness, the vitality, seemed oddly to have gone out from him, and his mouth was sagging open. He had relaxed and his hand was shaking a little as rather nervously he rubbed the greyish bristles of his chin.

"You were always my idea of a heavy cavalry officer . . . and a man branded with an *S* for success . . . same as I thought I was myself, my God, same as I thought myself. . . . Now, here's me—a poor, shaky

old scrounger picking at a blasted guitar for my beer and bread and cheese—and here's you . . . *here's* you, major. . . ."

He stared for a while in silence, his seamed face puckered, fallen in and wrung, thinking.

"The handsomest man in the regiment—the best horses—the prettiest wife in the world—and a soldier from your spurs up . . . you had all that . . . and here's the finish of it, major!"

He glanced around, then drew himself together, and gravely saluted the dead man.

"I'll have to report this at once," he said, hesitated, made up his mind, and set off back to the camp.

"Eh, it'll be my turn next—in some ditch, some barn," he muttered as he went, then shook his head jerkily, and squared himself.

"Pull yourself together, damn you, Cass," he said aloud—and made a quite creditable attempt to do that.

He found Prosper awake when he reached the tent, and, with Plutus most anxiously interested, engaged in an earnest but indifferently successful attempt to sit up.

"It may seem a somewhat comic state of affairs, sergeant-major," he observed with a wry smile, as Cass entered, "but it appears that I have quite a little difficulty in arising from the recumbent position in which I have stiffened during the night. Perhaps the loan of your strong arm——"

Cass made haste to help him.



"Easy does it, sir. You're stiff—bound to be."

"Rarely have I heard a truer statement," agreed the indomitable Mr. Fair, slowly—very slowly—sitting up. "Stiff to the point of petrification—*a-ah!* That is—or doubtless will be—better. I fancy I heard some of my clockwork adjust itself. . . . Yes, I am still ticking."

He grinned at Plutus.

"Fear not, my old. Little Prosper is mending—with some discomfort, true, but mending."

He continued cautiously to move, wincing as he strove to work off some of the aching stiffness.

Mr. Cass had started the small stove before he went to the lake and almost immediately he was ready with tea.

The hot drink seemed to work some small, mysterious miracle for Prosper. His colour became more nearly normal, his eyes brightened, and he began to breathe deeper.

"Ahaa! I think that with the assistance of a small cigarette the invalid will shortly be convalescent," he announced. "By the time friend Cass has prepared breakfast, say."

Friend Cass was already past his first preparations for the meal, and he turned again to Prosper, his face serious.

"I've been down to the lake," he said. "And—I found my mate. He's drowned himself."

Prosper nodded, slowly, watching the other's face intently.

"You mean Major—Smith."

Cass hesitated.

"Well, no. I said that name—Smith—just by way of marking time, you may say. His name was Merlehurst—in his prime he was a major in my old regiment," he said.

"I understand," said Prosper quietly. "I knew who he was."

The sergeant-major stared.

"You knew who he was!"

"His wife lives in this village," said Prosper, "and I saw a photograph of him yesterday at her house. We spoke of him, also. But Major Merlehurst did not drown himself. He was killed—by the man who endeavoured to kill me last night. He put the body of Major Merlehurst—his third victim—into the lake, arranging it to look like a suicide, for no doubt he felt that there had been enough people found dead by the pyramid. Meantime, will you tell me, frankly, why the major came to this place. . . ."

Cass reflected, eyeing Prosper, and decided that he would.

"I'll tell you all I know—but it's not much."

"Nevertheless it may be enough," replied Prosper. "Tell me when you have breakfasted. Afterwards you will have to report your discovery at the police station. . . ."

Even as Prosper expected, the story of Mr. Cass made it quite clear that the motive impelling the ruined major to visit the sunk garden was identical with that

which had inspired Calhoun to make his fatal quest to the pyramid.

" . . . The major was going all to pieces—worse than me——" said Cass, "and he knew that something had to be done if he wasn't going to die on the road or in a workhouse—or a jail. We were doing badly—half-starved, and he couldn't get enough to drink. He was a man used to a goodish lot to drink right from the old days in the officers' mess. . . . In those days they used to have it very free. . . . He was in a real bad way. But he knew it. And he'd made up his mind just before I was hung up in Carisbury. He had a notion that there was money about this deserted Kern Castle somewhere—if only it could be found—and he told me that he was going to have a try for it, and if that failed he intended to go to his wife's and die there if she'd let him. He knew he was nearly all in, y'see.

" 'I don't know that I care a damn whether I find anything at Kern or not, Cass,' he said. 'For my time is short in the land anyway. I'll get what I can at Kern Castle, and if there's nothing doing, I shall go to my wife and ask her for a corner to pass out quietly in. I never treated her well and I haven't seen her for years—she was always too good for me anyway—but I think she'll do me a little favour like that. Eh, Cass? It isn't such a whole lot for a wreck like me to ask of his wife—just the loan of a bed to die in!'

"That was the way he used to talk, sir, but I believe he had a sort of a hope that she'd take him in hand—forgive him—and all that. . . . He'd had an almighty

rough time in the last few years . . . we both fought in the ranks right through the war and we clicked for some pretty ugly luck one way and another. You know how the luck can turn on you—especially when you can't leave the booze alone. . . ."

Cass shook his head.

"Well—he never got any further than this pyramid. . . ."

"Just what did he expect to find there?"

"Money. That's all I know. He never told me how or where. He must have meant concealed money for the castle's been empty for years, they told me at the village. . . ."

Prosper nodded.

He saw that Cass had told all he knew. This man's story of Merlehurst was, in its way, parallel with Oxtan's story of Calhoun.

Both Merlehurst and Calhoun were after—what they believed might be found at Kern. And if it were possible to trace the past of the woman with the emeralds, no doubt her quest would prove to have been the same—though with less reason, for her jewels rendered her far from destitute.

All this, in conjunction with Prosper's own conclusions concerning the inscriptions, seemed to make it certain that Lord Kern had abandoned his money, but that he had not dispersed it.

Everything pointed to that—the inscriptions, the predatory visits of Calhoun, Merlehurst and the Unknown Lady, and the frank statement on the previous

afternoon of old Enderby, who had made no secret at all of the fact that he had not the very slightest idea of what Lord Kern had done with his money.

Prosper believed he knew where the money was. But he also believed it would do very well where it was until after he had definitely satisfied himself about the identity of the killer and had put the man from Scotland Yard in the way of arresting this dreadful guardian who was prepared apparently to murder without hesitation any one who approached Kern in any predatory spirit. It was only at those who came in search of plunder that this stealthy, cunning and deadly creature struck out so swiftly and mercilessly, yet with such discrimination.

Marjorie May could do exactly as she liked in the garden. That, Prosper had long decided, was because she was innocent of any designs on the money—and came to the garden because she loved it and honestly believed that some day it would be her own. Yet she was like a bird that played and pecked innocently round the very tongue of a steel-jawed gin. It could only be the fact that she was good and motiveless which was like an armour—no, a gas-mask—protecting her, for there seemed to be no sort of protection for those fearless men who came with predacious intent. . . .

Every one who had come to prey, to seek for the money of Lord Kern, had been struck dead. Prosper had come to seek it—in a way—and he too had shaken hands with Death, but had had just enough wit to snatch away his hand. But he was watched—the killer

was watching him closely, silently, patiently as a cat over a mouse's hole. . . .

Prosper, hugging his aches, watching the ex-sergeant-major glumly and silently chew the generous supply of bacon he had expertly fried, considered a careless theory airily thrown out by Dr. Benson, and enthusiastically championed by the black-browed gentleman with the Cupid's bow mouth, Eyre-Weston, on the previous afternoon—to the effect that he, “hard-headed and un-romantic old medical practitioner though he was, would not be greatly amazed to learn some day that Lord Kern had buried his money in the sunk garden, and put a pyramid a-top of it,” and now was guarding it against thieves, raiders, and all comers.

But if that were really so, Prosper knew that Lord Kern was not doing his own guarding.

The man in the gas mask with whom he had fought at midnight was no middle-aged miser—but a very strong and muscular man in his prime. He fought—in that very abominable fighting encumbrance, a gas mask—like a man used both to fighting and to gas masks.

No. Prosper shook his head. He did not believe that Lord Kern was guarding his money—if there really was money there. Nor did he believe the killer was employed by Lord Kern to guard it. That was too wild a theory.

He believed that the killer knew of money there, and that he was guarding—for himself.

The puzzle was that his guardianship had been

extended over so long a period. Calhoun had been killed long before the woman with the emeralds—or the Iron-Grey Man—or the attempt on Prosper himself.

Why?

There was only one possible answer to that. The killer needed time, a long time, either to get at the money or to take it away!

Prosper smiled benignly across at Mr. Cass, still busy with the bacon. He knew that he was right.

But his face clouded again as he reflected that all this mental groping would be eliminated if only it were possible for Marjorie May to walk—and speak—once again in her sleep.

Sleeping, she was aware of the identity of the killer. Had she been able to remember what she had seen on the night she walked, tranced, in the garden, and so have told them all next morning, her father's life would have been saved—for the killer, arrested, could not have been there to receive him at the Pyramid.

But here Prosper's train of thought was broken by the sudden barking of Plutus and the quick stare of the sergeant-major towards a spot which Prosper, where he lay, could not see.

A moment later he understood.

Detective-Inspector Garrishe was paying a call upon the camp.

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE man from Scotland Yard lost no time in making it clear that his call was not inspired by any motives of aggression or suspicion—though he cocked rather an askance eye at Mr. Cass, who, accustomed to askance eyes from the police and police-like people, expertly, though without flurry, proceeded with his task of cleaning up after breakfast.

Prosper was delighted at the pacific air of the detective.

He intended to solve this mystery of Kern—indeed he had already partly solved it—but he had entered upon that enterprise in precisely the spirit in which a sportsman embarks on the enterprise of landing a rainbow trout with a gut cast that the fish could snap like cotton if he were once given a chance to do so. It was the satisfaction of matching himself against the man behind the mystery, fighting him and beating him which counted with Prosper. The credit and glory of winning he did not purpose claiming. He did not issue forth to wander the highways and byeways “studying humanity” for sake of modern-style glory, but for sake of the sport and because he was a man who liked to be with men.

As he frequently said to Plutus—

“Owing to my ancestors, it is indisputable that I am



a duke, absurd as it may seem. But I ought to be a commercial traveller—if I had my rights, haha!”

He proposed to discover and pin the killer. This done, he wanted to hand the whole thing over to the police, cut and dried, and unobtrusively disassociate himself from the affair.

In this spirit he responded to the detective's greeting, invited him to be seated and smoke, excusing himself from rising on the ground that there was civil war within—"a form of mild colic, no doubt."

They talked for a while of unimportant matters.

But when the ex-sergeant-major, having cleaned up, announced his intention of going into the village and, Prosper acquiescing, promptly carried out his intention, the conversation speeded up.

"How are you getting on with the mystery of this place, inspector?" asked Prosper.

"I'm not getting on—I'm standing stone still, Mr. Fair. I can't get hold of a loose end that leads anywhere. Between ourselves, that is, you understand. . . . The chief constable told me that you were above suspicion—without saying who you really were—or I should have found myself looking a little sideways at you. But anyway, I'm in the mood to look sideways at anybody just at present—from that lovely little soul, Miss Merlehurst, to—to the local vicar. It's not an ordinary business—they aren't ordinary murders at all, Mr. Fair—and the ordinary methods don't seem to help a whole lot. It's a deep business—deep and dangerous and difficult."

Prosper nodded.

"Dangerous, yes. But not so deep nor so very difficult. For instance, inspector, I'm only a looker-on—a casual camper on the edge of the thing—but I've practically solved the mystery."

Detective-Inspector Garrishe sat up suddenly, his eyes narrowing.

"What's that?" he said sharply.

Prosper waved an airy cigarette.

"I say I have solved it—practically. That is, I can guess now—and very soon I shall *know*—why Lord Kern built the pyramid."

"You do!"

"Yes. I know why Calhoun came here—and I can guess who the Nameless Lady is and why she came here. I know how they were murdered and why. I believe I know why Miss Marjorie Merlehurst will inherit this property if Lord Kern does not return; what Lord Kern did with his money and why he did it. I have met the murderer—and I know his motives."

The eyes of the detective were frankly bulging.

"You've *met* him! Where?"

"Last night—by the pyramid. We had a—a bit of a scrap, he and I. It was a draw."

"Who is he?"

"Ah, there you have me, inspector," smiled Prosper.

"It was impossible to see his face last night!"

"Perhaps not. Probably he would be a stranger—but you'd recognise him if you saw him again, of

course?" demanded the Scotland Yard man a little excitedly.

"No, I think not. You see, we fought in gas masks."

The detective started.

"Gas masks, hey? . . . Gas. You know, that came into my head—gas. I found a queer bit of glass—like a bit of a bulb . . . but I let it go. A bit he overlooked, I suppose. He uses gas, does he?"

Prosper was suddenly serious.

"He does. And I want to warn you, Garrishe—I should have done it to-day in any case—don't hang about the pyramid or the garden or the castle again without a gas mask on your chest—ready."

"Not—huh?"

The heavy jaw of the detective sagged a little, and his eyes gleamed. Then he shrugged.

"But he's gone by now. After last night he's beat it a hundred miles. He's left the place——"

Prosper shook his head.

"I question it. He's a queer customer—clever and quick, tenacious and diabolically cunning, and he's after a big thing."

The detective ruminated, eyeing Prosper.

"Supposing you tell me all you know, Mr. Fair?" he suggested. "It's your duty to do that, y'know."

Prosper agreed very readily on the subject of his duty. But he disagreed as to the hour when he should do his duty.

"I am not quite ready to do that," he explained. "It is a fancy—a whim—of mine to hand the whole thing over to you complete. And I don't think it will be long before I am able to do that."

The detective was disappointed, but did his best not to show it.

"Well, I wish you thought differently," he said. "But I can't make you tell . . . before you're ready. I'm much obliged to you for your tip about the gas . . . much obliged. . . ." He continued talking, sliding in a quiet, casual question occasionally. Some of these Prosper answered, some he allowed to glance harmlessly over his shoulder.

He told Garrishe of Cass's discovery of the Iron-Grey Man in the lake—but he withheld information as to that one's identity.

Also, he dropped in a few questions himself—mainly about the people of the neighbourhood. It was evident that in this direction the detective had worked very hard, very quickly and, Prosper thought, to a certain extent unnecessarily.

He seemed to have compiled a set of rough dossiers of a number of people who were physically capable of the crimes in the sunk garden—and no doubt because these had led him nowhere, he was willing enough to pass on his information.

Thus, Prosper learned quickly and compactly, that his tennis opponent of yesterday, the dark Eyre-Weston, was an ex-officer living close to the village, extracting a dubious income from the breeding of pedigree Aire-

dales; that old Enderby, the Kern solicitor, was parent of a ne'er-do-well son Ralph, of about thirty, who once had worked in his father's office but had given that up (for reasons not explained but readily guessed at by the gossiping guessers of Carisbury and Kern) and was now a sort of sporting idler in Carisbury—not on speaking terms with his family and badly in debt. He and Eyre-Weston were by way of being friends—Enderby often put up for a few days at Eyre-Weston's bungalow.

Even Raymond Barisford the detective had "looked up," in spite of the real help which Barisford had given him, and the genuine liking Garrishe had taken to him. Barisford, it appeared, had inherited money, and was now a so-far-unacted playwright, specialising in big, spectacular blank verse classical dramas. He was perfectly aware of the hopelessness of getting his works produced in these days of jazz revue, but he was master of a considerable private income—and non-production did not vex him. He could pay for his own production any time the craving to see his works acted became intolerable. He had a small but very beautiful house just outside Kern, with some fifty acres of land. He was going to marry Miss Merlehurst, explained the detective. Prosper nodded gravely.

"A very suitable match, I should say—nice young people, both of 'em . . ." said Garrishe, dismissing them for likelier quarry. He ran through the list of "possibles," watching Prosper's face intently. But if,

as he named them, he was hoping that when he was getting "warm" Prosper might inadvertently give some sign of it, he was mistaken. . . .

Presently he rose.

"Well, I'll be moving along to the lakeside to have a look at that tramp before your—um—guest brings the local police out to take him over. Let me into your secrets as soon as you can, Mr. Fair. I don't pretend to be any Sherlock. I'm just a plain detective accustomed to doing plain work for a plain living—like most other men in my line."

Prosper smiled.

"It won't be long," he promised. "By the way, did you find anything interesting in the castle the other day?"

"Not a thing. Dust and decay, of course—nothing else."

"Nevertheless, I should like to look round the castle myself," said Prosper.

"Well, you can. If you like we'll do it together. I'll get Barisford to come along. He knows it like a book. He lived there for a month when he was secretary to Lord Kern——"

Prosper thanked the detective.

"An admirable idea. I'll hold you to that promise, Garrishe," he said.

"Any time," the detective confirmed, "I don't ride jealous, Mr. Fair—I don't want to be your rival. I'd sooner be your partner. You know where to find me—I'm at the Kern Arms."

"Oh, yes. And—in case you want me, I shall be moving from here to-day," volunteered Prosper.

The detective stared. "Leaving here?"

"I expect to have the privilege of an invitation to stay at Mavisholme—Mrs. Merlehurst's house," said Prosper. "At least, I am going to ask her to invite me there," he explained gaily.

"You don't think this camp is—um—safe?"

"Not to a man with his stomach so exceedingly disgruntled as mine. Every little nerve and muscle I possess is looking forward to a soft and comfortable bed to-night," he added.

"Is it as bad as that?"

"I believe so. Suppose we try. D'you mind lending me your hand a moment?"

With the detective's aid Prosper rose slowly and painfully.

"I—ache—considerably," he stated, pale but smiling. "Yes, indeed." He released his hand from the detective's and promptly fell down—crumpled up.

"My legs appear to be made of pure dough, do they not? Let's try again."

He did so—more successfully, thanks to Garrish's arm.

"Be neighbourly enough, my friend, to guide these faltering footsteps in a little circle around the old camp fire," he requested. "What I need is a little exercise. . . . Quite so. You perceive that I am walking as well as any other clockwork figure ever wound up. . . . Better and better. Yes. I confess that I like a man

who can stand on his own feet, Garrishe. That is what they were designed for."

So, with rather painful persiflage, he worked off the keen edge of his stiffness, and when, a few minutes later, the detective left him, he was in a condition which, though far from normal, nevertheless was sufficiently like it to remove most of the marked uneasiness and concern for him with which Plutus, his semi-terrier, had been only too obviously afflicted—and which he personally had been inclined secretly to share.

"Not so bad, after all, my old," he said. "But—bad enough. Never let anybody jump on your stomach, Plutus. Take warning from me. It's inferior tactics!"

He began to creep about the camp making ready for his anticipated move to Mavisholme. . . .

But in spite of the wearing-off of his stiffness it was nearing eleven o'clock before he emerged from the narrow pathway worn by Marjorie May from the orchard gate of Mavisholme through the woods to the sunk garden of Kern.

Slowly, he made his way through the trimly-kept orchard, into the kitchen garden, passed through the filbert hedge, crossed the tennis lawn and so came to the rose garden.

He heard voices at the entrance gate and moved down the path to see Marjorie May and her mother talking to Nora Oxtan, who was excitedly showing them a telegram. Behind her was the horse Prosper



had seen her riding on the downs, and holding it was ex-Troop Sergeant-Major Cass.

Prosper drew a little closer, silent on the grass border of the path.

"Oh, Nora darling, I am so glad. Oh, I do congratulate you so much. It is just splendid and it means that the tide is turning," came Marjorie's clear voice.

"May I be allowed to add my modest congratulations to those of Miss Marjorie?" said Prosper gaily, his eyes travelling from one to the other of the very attractive trio. "I may not know what happy event it is which calls for them—but that hardly matters," he added.

"But I can tell you, Mr. Fair," cried Nora, and passed him a creased and crumpled telegram. "It's from the agent of the Duke of Devizes—he wants to know if Fred will train four of the duke's race horses!"

"The duke's race horses!" echoed Prosper incredulously.

"Yes, truly," cried Marjorie May. "The telegram came this morning and Nora has just been to the post office to telegraph."

The girl's eyes were shining as though somebody had given her a long desired gift.

"You see, Nora and Mr. Oxtan have been very unlucky at Druid's Hollow, and it began to look as if they would never have any—any clients. And then all at once a telegram came. I expect the duke has heard some one say what a splendid trainer Mr. Oxtan is, don't you, please?"

The eyes of the ladies turned with one accord upon him.

"Of course that would be it," agreed Prosper, judicially. "And I think this Duke of Devizes shows his good sense in snapping up the chance of getting some of his horses into Mr. Oxtan's care."

He turned to Nora.

"One only has to talk with your husband to realise that all he needed was just such a start as this."

Nora's eyes were very bright.

"It may sound odd—but I know that Fred—and I, too—have just prayed for something like this," she said with a catch in her breath. "Oh, Fred will slave to make winners of those horses."

"Yes, and he will succeed. We all prophesy that, don't we?"

Prosper appealed to Marjorie and her mother—to receive enthusiastic confirmation of his prophecy.

"Now, I must go—there is so much to do to get ready. *Four* slashing great race horses—it means such a glorious lot of work."

She was glowing like a flower.

Prosper, watching her mount and ride off, marvelled at the difference between this bright happy girl and she whom, only the day before, he had found weeping in the stables at Druid's Hollow.

It had been his lot, in the course of his great "study of humanity," to contrive many such transfigurations, and it was a hobby of which he never tired—and which

never failed to bring the same old thrill. It had been for this that he had given up the big game hunting which once had been his favourite pursuit. To an intimate friend who had wondered openly about this he had observed that he had stood and seen the light fade from the eyes of many a beautiful wild thing which he had shot—and that he had also stood and watched the light of new hope and happiness dawn in the eyes of those whom he had been able to help, and that of the two spectacles, quaintly enough, he preferred the latter.

“But then, I’m eccentric——” he would explain.

He turned from looking after Mrs. Oxtan to see that Mrs. Merlehurst and Marjorie were scrutinising him with wide and rather anxious eyes.

“But—what is it——?” he asked.

“You look so ill—you are so pale—please, haven’t you looked at yourself in the mirror yet this morning,” said the girl naïvely. “Has something happened to you?”

Prosper laughed reassuringly.

“Yes—something has happened to me,” he said. “I have had a slight accident—nothing dreadful—but sufficient to embolden me to seek a good Samaritan. I have come to beg a night’s shelter——”

It was not necessary to say any more. Mrs. Merlehurst was poor, but she had not unlearned the art of hospitality.

Then Prosper turned to ex-Sergeant-Major Cass.

It was instantly apparent that this hard-bitten way-

farer had offered himself the position of orderly to Mr. Fair and had accepted the same.

He stepped to the gate, with a smart, semi-military, semi-civilian salute.

"I attended to the other matter, sir," he stated crisply. "And the police have it in hand. I went to the post office. There was no mail—but this telegram was waiting for you——" he handed it, "and, as instructed, waited for you here." He hesitated just the fraction of a second, a curious expression on his face and in his eyes.

Prosper, caught by it, thought he could see in it a curious blend of wistfulness, touched with a hint of defiance, and yet not without a suggestion of hang-dog humour.

"Should like to report that I'm now off the—wet canteen," he said—"sworn off." His eyes twinkled. "I've fought John Barleycorn these twenty years, Mr. Fair—and I've put up a bit of a fight. But I decided to let somebody else carry on the good work. I can't stay the course with him—so I'm dodging him. . . . To tell you the truth—it put the wind up—seeing the major's finish—that way down by the lake. So—do you want to buy an old soldier cheap, sir? You know, you ought to have an orderly down at the camp if you're ever going to have time to get on with your painting! I'll work for you for my rations and a trifle over for 'baccy.'"

He was standing very straight and square—perhaps badly damaged by life, sadly ravaged by indiscretion,

deeply corroded by hard years, but still a fair figure of a man. He watched Prosper earnestly, his lips nervous.

But he had drifted to the right man.

Prosper nodded—as all his life he had been accustomed to nod to lame dogs fretting at difficult stiles. His clear eyes caught up the uncertain gaze of the ex-sergeant-major and, for a moment, held it hard.

“Very well—it’s a bargain,” he said quietly.

An extraordinary change came over Mr. Cass.

“I’ll see that you never regret it, sir,” he said urgently.

“Good. You’d better take over the camp, but move it from where it is now to some place near here. Any good spot well away from Kern. I shall be sleeping here for a few nights. . . .” He handed some money. “This will carry you on.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll report back here when I’ve moved camp.”

He saluted, turned and headed away.

Once around the corner he marked the occasion of his return to a steady job not uncharacteristically.

He unslung the battered guitar, surveyed it a second with sheer distaste, then, carefully dropping it onto his rising boot, kicked it clean over the hedge into an adjoining field.

“Dis-*miss*—the one-man band!” he said in a voice of sheer triumph and so headed for the camp.

Prosper turned from the gate to meet the eyes of Marjorie May, who, with an armful of the roses she

had been gathering while Prosper talked with his new retainer, seemed to be waiting for him.

"I think that is the man who was singing in the roadway last night," she said. "He looked so pleased—so I suppose he is another one whom you have befriended. You are always befriending people."

She smiled gravely at him.

"So I have picked the very best of all the roses for your room. . . ."

Her perfect face clouded a little as she surveyed him.

"But you look so tired and quite ill," she went on. "I know that you should be resting. Won't you come in now?"

She flushed a little, her gaze fast on his sunken eyes and drawn cheeks, as he moved from the gate.

"Why—you can hardly walk. Oh, lean on me—I am very strong."

And that being so, naturally Prosper rested one arm around her shoulders—very lightly, for she was so slim and graceful that one would hardly care to risk crushing her, so to express it—and together, with the scent of the roses all about, they went slowly up to the house.

He had quite forgotten to open the telegram. There was something about Marjorie May which seemed, oddly enough, a trifle unsettling.

When, presently, very comfortably settled in a deck chair on the verandah, he remembered it and took it from his pocket, he found it was from Dale who evidently was still busy picking up scraps of any informa-

tion which he conceived likely to be of use to Prosper. It ran :

“Niobe Swayne married a racing man Larry Calhoun and went abroad with him some years ago—Dale.”

Prosper noted that and put the telegram in his pocket.

“And that, methinks, young Plutus, advances us yet a step further in——”

A spoon tinkled at his shoulder.

“Please will you try to take this beef-tea, Prosper? I have just made it for you.” Evidently Marjorie May was taking no risks with her patient. Prosper was far from being a beef-tea fiend and, though decidedly, if temporarily, groggy, was hardly in the beef-tea stage of illness.

But what could he do about it?

He devoured it—as men do. And his way with beef-tea was greatly admired by Marjorie May.

## CHAPTER XIX

ALTHOUGH Prosper chose to take his battering with an air of lightness, it had been sufficiently serious to come within an ace of rendering him a lifelong casualty, and was ample enough to justify his abandoning the good solid earth-bed he loved so well for a somewhat softer couch.

But there were other reasons—and these, too, were serious enough—for his requesting the hospitality of Mrs. Merlehurst.

He had to break to her the news of her husband's death, and, he felt, to help her in what might prove to be a difficult time. Also he desired to be near that exquisite child, Marjorie May. This latter, for two sound reasons, one being that he hoped with considerable confidence that she would again walk in her sleep, and, sleeping, utter the name she had been on the verge of uttering on that first night in the sunk garden. The other reason was merely that he wanted to be near her—because it was the pleasantest place to be in that he knew of. If he had known of a better place, no doubt he would have gone to be in that place—but he did not.

Mr. Fair had reached that state of mind in which it seemed that the sun only shone where Marjorie May was. All other places were foggy and murky and cold and "need not apply." . . .



Already he had formed the ghostly outlines of a complete solution to the mystery of the pyramid, and his keen instincts and edged intuitions were pointing a nebulous finger at the assassin of the sunk garden. But he lacked proof. His shadowy solution so far was partly guesswork, for he had only inserted a theoretical key of explanation into a theoretical lock of mystery. It still needed the practical turning. And he hoped to achieve this when, presently, he explored the castle.

But he was perfectly well aware that not for a day or two would he be fit to explore anything—except possibly the psychology of Marjorie May and her mother.

He had been badly jarred, and he was in no danger of forgetting the fact—for, as he gaily told his gentle little nurse, he was entirely free from pain when he moved, except below the ears and above the ankles. . . .

Nevertheless he did not grudge himself a brief rest from the intensive activities of the last forty-eight hours, for he was blandly and comfortably certain that the man in the gas mask (if ever he went near Kern Castle again) was by no means likely to prowl about the pyramid for some little time.

. . . “Not with a neck and throat like his, I believe, Plutus,” he mused idly, over the newspaper which Marjorie May had bestowed upon him when, after the beef-tea festival, she went off to arrange her roses in the room which was to be his.

He opened the paper, his mind occupied with the contents of the telegram from Dale, rather than with the news.

"Niobe Swayne married Calhoun—and both died under the pyramid—Calhoun without a penny, Niobe with a small fortune in emeralds. . . . That means something—the husband ruined, the wife comparatively affluent."

His eyes were fixed on the close type of the newspaper, but he was not reading. And it was not until he had decided to ascertain from Fred Oxtan whether Calhoun had ever mentioned Niobe Swayne, that he became vaguely conscious that he was staring at two familiar words. He switched his mind to the paper—and instantly the words leaped into sharp focus. They were these "LORD KERN" and the headlines above them were as follows:

THE KERN MYSTERY AGAIN  
TEN YEARS ABSENT PEER  
RECOGNISED IN NEW YORK  
SAILING FOR ENGLAND.

The only information new to Prosper was contained in a ten-line cable dated two days before, which followed the headlines and was followed by a re-hash of the story of Lord Kern's original disappearance and the recent happening at the castle. On the back page, it was announced, would be found a picture of the pyramid. The cable stated briefly that Lord Kern had recently registered and stayed at one of the smaller New York hotels for two days, declined to be interviewed, and had taken his passage on the fast Crescent liner, *Colossic*.

Prosper was staring at this news item, frowning a little as he tried to find a place in his jigsaw for this fresh and unforeseen "piece" when Mrs. Merlehurst came softly on to the verandah and sat in a deck chair facing him.

"You will have to beware of Marjorie's nursing enthusiasm, Mr. Fair," she said in her soft, perfectly trained voice. "She has just told me of her immense success with the beef-tea——"

She broke off, her lips parting as he looked up. She was very quick, for she noticed his minute change of expression instantly.

"There is something—interesting—in the newspaper?" she asked.

Prosper nodded—but did not tell her at once.

"Yes, I think so, but then I have not seen a paper for three days," he said evenly. "Which reminds me of something. The date on which the deed of gift from Lord Kern to Marjorie comes into operation is drawing near, isn't it?"

Her eyes dilated a little.

"Oh, yes . . . if ever it comes into operation at all it will do so in less than a fortnight. But . . ." she checked herself and repeated, "in less than a fortnight. Why do you ask, Mr. Fair? Is there anything about Kern in the newspaper to-day?"

Prosper nodded again.

"I am afraid there is. It seems that Lord Kern left New York on his way home nearly a week ago."

She sat forward in a movement so swift, so galvanic

that it was as though she had been thrust forward. Her great blue eyes went almost black, dilating immensely, but her face was suddenly as white as pearl.

She gasped, catching back her breath, staring.

"I beg your pardon——" she said almost in a whisper. "You say—you say—that Lord Kern is coming home!"

Prosper's heart sank a little. Had she minded so much about the property, built so firmly on Marjorie's accession, that the possibility of disappointment could distress her so?

She was staring—big blue-black eyes in a drawn, paper-white face—like one who sees a ghost.

"Lord Kern returning!" she gasped. "But that—that's impossible! Lord Kern is dead! He—is—dead! I know—I have known so——"

She relaxed suddenly, and sank back limply, with a long tremulous sigh, her eyes closing, so that it was as if she fainted.

But even as he rose Prosper saw that she had not fainted—though, in a moment, he realised that it was only by a sheer effort of will that she had kept herself conscious. Her lips were quivering when, in a few seconds, she opened her eyes again and spoke.

"Forgive me . . . but I have believed for nearly ten years that Lord Kern was dead. And it was a great shock to hear"—she broke off as a doubt came to her—"I suppose there is no question of the truth of what the newspaper says?"

Prosper reflected, then shook his head.

"There may be," he said slowly. "But in a case of this sort it is probably correct. I should be inclined to believe it. This man may be an impostor, but it would be a risky enterprise. . . . And we have to remember that Lord Kern was to be expected to appear now, either within a few days, or, as far as the property is concerned, never. In any case it will be a very narrow shave for him. It seems to me that he will need all his good luck to be here within the time limit he himself fixed. Why"—Prosper's eyes brightened with the beginnings of excitement—"Why, it is going to be—in fact, it already is, a race against time! A hitch, a mishap in the engine-room of the *Colossic*—a rough passage—almost anything out of the ordinary—and Lord Kern will be too late——"

But she shook her head, smiling faintly.

"Oh, but I was not thinking of the property at all when I cried out. A day or two—week or two—would not matter—even though it would be a very timely windfall. . . . Your news was a little two-edged, but—in a way—it was much more like good news than bad."

He looked at her, astonished. The colour had returned to her cheeks and a sudden brightness had dawned on her eyes. She looked younger—happier.

"Ah, you are astonished, Mr. Fair—you will think that I am like a young girl—flushing and paling, laughing and well-nigh weeping, sunshine and shadow, grave and gay, all in the same minute," she said. "But it took a little time for me to realise clearly that what

must seem to you like ill news, for me is really such good news that—a millstone has fallen from my neck!” . . .

Again a new thought seemed to come to her and again she changed,—

“ . . . leaving in its place a necklace of thorns—of keen regrets.”

She leaned forward speaking most earnestly.

“For, you see, all those ten years I have been doing, in my thoughts, a most terrible injustice to—my husband. . . . Some day I hope I may be able to explain that better, Mr. Fair. Perhaps it may seem to you an impossible and fantastic thing if I say that this news of Lord Kern’s reappearance has brought me—after the first shock—an overwhelming sense of happy relief and also a deep and poignant sorrow—regret.”

She was looking straight before her, her fine eyes like those of a girl.

Prosper thought swiftly. It was quite evident that she believed intensely in what she was saying—and he had to decide quickly whether this was a good moment to break to her news which in any case could not be kept from her for more than an hour or so. He decided that it was. Her spiritual mercury was high—her flame soaring. It was better to throw cold water on a high flame than on cooling embers—if one desired to preserve a fire. So he leaned towards her, his face serious.

“I congratulate you with all my heart upon any happiness my news has brought you,” he said, slowly.

"And because I see that it is so, I hope that you will forgive me when I hint at some further news which may hurt you very much, but which must be given you—which some one will have to tell you. . . . We spoke of a man whom I called the Iron-Grey Man——"

She nodded, very pale again, gripping the wooden arms of her chair with white, slender fingers.

"Oh, yes—my husband——" she breathed.

"I promised that I would find him—if I could," continued Prosper.

"Yes."

"I have found him—though it is a difficult and painful task for me to find words in which to tell you how I found him——"

But he had told her. She knew instinctively. He had seen the knowledge steal, grey and gradual, like the breaking of a cold, sunless wintry dawn, upon her face.

She stared, saying nothing for a long time. He saw the fine, delicate knuckles whiten as her grip tightened on her chair arms.

Presently she spoke.

"You mean—you are telling me—that you found him too late. You mean he is—dead! . . . I know that you do."

Prosper nodded, and looked out across the sunny garden. It seemed very quiet there for a few minutes. Mrs. Merlehurst's voice was unexpectedly composed when she spoke again.

"Please—how was it? Was he ill . . . ?"

"They will say that he committed suicide," explained Prosper. "But I can tell you that it was not so. He was killed—in the sunk garden of Kern—as Mr. Calhoun and the Unknown Woman were. But—as yet—only two people know that—the man who killed him and myself. Later—soon, I think—all that will be explained. I share the knowledge with you—because you are entitled to know—and in order that you should not be unnecessarily unhappy. . . . You see, he was coming back to you—to ask you to forgive him. That was his intention. There is a man—his companion—who will tell you of all that soon—some things that you will be glad to hear. . . . But I can tell you that he came here to Kern with the intention of coming home at last to you."

Her eyes filled.

"Ah, I knew he would. I always knew that in the end he would come back to me and—need me. He was only a boy, a big boy, after all. Of course he was bound to come back to me!" . . . she cried softly. "I have tried—patiently—for so many years to be—such a woman as he would be glad and, perhaps, proud and grateful to come home to. . . . If only he knew——"

Prosper was ready for that.

"You may be sure that he knew it. . . . His friend will tell you so presently. He confided in his friend a great deal."

"And all these years I have been haunted—haunted—by a fear—an incubus—a belief that he killed Lord Kern. That Lord Kern never really deliberately van-



ished—but that Geoffrey killed him in a fit of jealousy. . . .” She rose, breathing quickly. “Oh, *that* is what I can never forgive myself for! Never.”

She came closer to Prosper.

“You are hunting for the man responsible for these tragedies at the pyramid, are you not?”

Prosper nodded.

“I thought so. . . . And I have some things to tell you which perhaps may help you a little. Only, not just now. Presently—presently. . . .”

She studied him for a moment, and a sharp anxiety appeared suddenly in her eyes.

“I hope—oh, I hope very much—that you will be successful in settling this mystery that hangs like a black fog over Kern. But surely it is very dangerous. Would it not be wise to have some one to help? That detective from Scotland Yard——?”

“I think that is arranged. He and Barisford and I are going to explore the castle and garden again—every nook and cranny!” he told her.

“Mr. Barisford! But does he know you need him? He went to London this morning.” Her voice fell. “Yesterday, after tennis, he asked Marjorie to marry him. She—would not promise. I think he was terribly disappointed—and he went off early this morning.”

Prosper nodded.

“I did not know that,” he said slowly. “But—there is no hurry. I shall not be ready for a day or two—and he may be back soon.”

Then Marjorie May came on to the verandah. She saw her mother's face and stopped, wide-eyed.

"Mother——!"

Mrs. Merlehurst, moving into the house, slipped her arm about the girl as she went, whispering to her.

Prosper was left alone, staring thoughtfully across the garden. After a little his lips moved as he spoke softly—like one speaking to himself.

But it was only a quotation from the pyramid that he was repeating.

*"They that make a graven image are all of them vanity, and their delectable things shall not profit!"*

From inside the house, somewhere overhead, he could hear the murmur of women's voices, and once, faintly, a low sobbing. Mrs. Merlehurst was telling Marjorie May the news which Prosper, forestalling the officials, had broken to her.

He stiffened a little at that last sound, for few men were more susceptible to, or more easily moved by, women's sorrows than Mr. Fair.

But his face had hardened, his lips tightened, and his eyes were bright and ominous—like steel.

Presently Marjorie May came to him there, very quiet and thoughtful. She would not let him get up, but settled on the arm of his chair.

"Mother has told me the news that you brought, Prosper. Please don't think that I am hard and unkind if I do not seem to suffer so much as mother—only, you see, I was little when my father went away, and it is a long time ago and mother has been every-

thing to me all my life. But it has been a terrible blow for her—the worst she has ever had. She always hoped in her heart that my father would come back here in the end—glad to be forgiven and grateful and content to live quietly here at the last.”

She paused a moment.

“It is so sad. Mother has been most sweet and good and so pretty all her life and yet somehow she has had so much sorrow. . . . It doesn’t seem quite fair. Dozens of men have been in love with mother and yet—out of all that love—she was not fortunate enough to find a little happiness. . . . After all, my father *did* ruin her life—and he is only a dim memory to me. I cannot pretend to be—crushed. But I can look after and take care of mother and I have persuaded her to just rest quietly to-day in her own room. So I have two patients for to-day, you see. . . . And it was so kind of you to tell her the news before somebody with no tact came in to tell her and question her. But you are always tactful and wise, Prosper.”

“And you are a brave and sensible and level-headed Marjorie May,” said Prosper, rather earnestly, for him. She flushed a little, looking across the garden in the direction of Kern Castle.

“Do you think it grasping and avaricious of me to feel rather sorry because now Lord Kern is coming back I shall never have Kern Castle after all?”

Prosper shook his head—carefully, for he ached everywhere.

“Why, of course not. They have let you believe

for years that it would be yours. And you were meant for a castle. . . . Who knows? Perhaps some day you may yet have one of your own!"

Marjorie May laughed rather ruefully.

"Oh, I have several of those already—some in Spain and some in the air!"

She slipped off the chair arm.

"I am going to see about lunch for my patients now," she said, and did so.

## CHAPTER XX

PROSPER, lunching with Marjorie May in the dark-panelled, old-fashioned dining room of Mavisholme, discovered only one cause for regret about that simple function. He found himself a trifle irked because it was not like the meal which a grazing donkey gets—one only per diem, but one which lasts from sunrise to sunset.

Not that he was hungry, but because it was so good to sit facing a girl who looked as fresh and sweet as one of the roses with which she had jewelled the room.

They talked a good deal—softly, almost murmuring, for fear of disturbing Mrs. Merlehurst who, at silent war with a real disturbance, upstairs, would hardly have heard them if they had shouted.

And, as they talked, ever the conviction subtly grew in the heart of Prosper Fair that here in this minute village of Kern, he had found a pearl of price.

It seemed to him that she was as lovely in her spirit as in her face and form. She was quick witted and of kindly disposition, generous, honest and compassionate. One who, like Prosper, is oneself not wholly devoid of these ancient virtues, is apt to be quick to recognise them in others. He knew that she was of a high courage, for she had proved that. Her favourite retreat had been in a place which few of the more material-

minded cared even to pass swiftly through—the sunk garden of Kern. She was courageous because she was innocent—not, perhaps, the most difficult form of courage, but the sweetest, and certainly the most fitting for Marjorie May.

He believed she could be angry—indeed he had no doubt at all that some such spectacle as that of a beer-inflamed carter earnestly endeavouring to help his horse climb a hard hill by semi-flaying it with a large whip, would arouse a white fury in Marjorie May that would leave her unsettled for days—and certainly would cause the carter to wonder at life in general and pretty girls in particular for months. . . .

He listened to her views on things and he perceived that she believed in much which a progressive world has tacitly agreed to regard as obsolete lumber. She believed in knight-errantry, manners, chivalry, courtesy, mercy, giving what one would have liked to keep, or self-denial, self-control, and charity—above all, charity—queer old-fashioned things like that.

Prosper saw that it was hardly possible for her to avoid unhappiness—like her mother before her, she possessed the best of everything that nature could bestow on her, except the chance of being happy. He was a very sentimental man, was Mr. Prosper Fair (even if he did thoroughly understand those jolly little aids to civilisation, the gas-mask, the half-arm-jab, the six-shot automatic, and so forth), and that was curious, for he belonged to a class which is not prone to sentimentality.

Therefore, his solution to the problem of Marjorie May had to do with sentiment, even though not excessively sentimental. He decided that she must be well and truly married off as soon as possible—to a good fellow who would take care of her—cherish her, in fact. Himself, for example. . . .

"You are smiling," said Marjorie May, a little doubtfully.

"Yes," admitted Prosper.

"Please—why?"

"Because I am happy, Marjorie May."

She nodded, her eyes bright.

"Yes, that is a splendid reason for smiling. I do that sometimes."

"Do you, though? Are you happy now, Marjorie May?"

She confessed she was—almost under her breath, a little guiltily.

So they smiled at each other—until a sudden spasm reminded Mr. Fair that he was not wholly himself and, a second later, a maid announced that a man named Cass had desired her to inform Mr. Fair that he, Cass, was "reporting"—at the back door.

Prosper desired very much to see the worthy Cass, for he had a little training to bestow upon the "mate" of the late Major Merlehurst.

So he arose and, reluctantly excusing himself to Marjorie May, issued forth to hold converse with his new retainer.

It was in a quiet corner of the garden, well out of

earshot of the house, that Prosper, giving his little lesson, gleaned almost the last bit of information—for so he preferred, not unreasonably, to describe those overworked things usually called “clues”—he required concerning the problem of Kern.

“I want you to tell me in as few and concise (though less incarnadined) words as if you were conversing officially on a barrack square, all you know concerning the reasons why Major Merlehurst separated himself from his wife, years ago, Cass,” announced Prosper, quietly, and settled himself to listen.

Mr. Cass looked a little uneasy, reflected a moment, then cleared his throat.

“I’ll tell you the truth—for it can’t hurt the major now, and if it does anybody any good, all the better.”

He talked crisply for ten minutes, at the end of which time, Prosper knew that, in Cass’s opinion, Merlehurst could have lived happily with no wife on earth for long. He was a man who should never have married. He could neither be unselfish, considerate, sanely sober, nor faithful. He had a vile temper, he was a crazy spend-thrift and he was not straight. He had been handsome and plausible and as picturesquely dashing as any other cavalry officer—more so, indeed. But his home life had almost ceased to exist long before he made the mistake of being found out in more than one crooked little affair—mainly to do with racing and steeple-chasing, though he had not disdained some queer work hand in hand with a money-lender who had mauled the resources of one or two subalterns of the regiment



rather too clawfully. At the period he had been invited by his colonel to "send in his papers" just about as quickly as he could lay hands on them, his wife was to him rather less like a wife than a landlady. . . .

"I'll say this—he was a fool to himself—mad—for his wife was a lady like—like—a princess, sir," said Mr. Cass. "I've never set eyes on a lovelier woman than the major's wife in any place, in any country—and in my capacity of a troop sergeant-major of Dragoon Guards I've set eyes on a few——" he added, pensively. "But nothing—nobody—to touch Mrs. Merlehurst. There were dozens of 'em worshipped her . . . but the major was blind and—mad. No—just naturally wild. There's plenty like it, bad luck to it. . . .

"After the row with the colonel there was another row at home—about the very Lord Kern that's missing from here, sir. I don't know the truth—except the regimental gossip then, and bits that the major let out now and then since—but it seems that the major found out that Mrs. Merlehurst had accepted a present from this Lord Kern—some wonderful emeralds, it was, the Kern Emeralds, so-called. She denied it from first to last. That annoyed the major—not so much (being, as I said, wild) because she had the emeralds as because she wouldn't sell 'em and give him something to make a fresh start. He was flat broke, sir—and owed thousands. . . . Well—he never got either money or emeralds out of her and there was a bad quarrel—a wicked quarrel, you may say. The major cleared out—left her and the little girl (that would be Miss Mar-

jorie, her mother over again, sir) to look after themselves. He lived on his wits for a few years—race-courses—they called him the Toff Bookie—until he was barred by the police. Soon after I was 'broke' for drink (and something else which was a black lie that only an educated accountant could have fought against) I met the major—and we kind of drifted along together living anyhow—mostly, towards the end, on that blasted guitar I stole from outside a pawnshop in Burslem—the pottery town in the Midlands."

"A guitar in Burslem!" said Prosper absently. "But that's impossible!"

Mr. Cass glanced at him, hurt.

"I got it there, sir," he insisted. But Prosper had forgotten his small joke about the potter's Paradise.

"I see—I see," he said. "And that's all you know?"

He thought for a moment.

"If Major Merlehurst had chanced to find money in Kern would he have gone back to his wife, do you think?"

Cass shook his head.

"Quite so," said Prosper. "He really had—gone to the bad!"

"Absolutely. I—I'm no saint, but he could leave me standing still—at some things."

"Yes? . . . Well, you've got another chance, Cass. He hasn't. That may be why you were left standing still."

He looked steadily at the man.

"A Turkish lady—a Sultana, I believe, once asked

a Spanish Don named Juan this question, 'Christian, canst thou love?'—if the late Lord Byron wrote the truth, that is. I have always regarded that as an unnecessary and superfluous question—even as I regard the question I intend to ask you, namely, 'Sergeant-Major, canst thou lie?' "

"I can, sir," stated Cass, equably.

"Then listen to me. Mrs. Merlehurst presently will ask you exhaustively about her husband. I want you to convey to her that he had long repented of his treatment of her, that he loved her still, that he earnestly believed she still would love him, and that he was coming to end his days with her, perfectly, serenely, and blindly confident that she would welcome him. That is in order to help her towards some of the happiness which has been denied her. Do you understand?"

"I do, sir."

"Can you do it?"

"I can, sir."

"Excellent, Cass. At the right time, do it—and it may be that you will have done a better thing for yourself than you know."

"Very good, sir."

"You don't mind being a thorough-paced, out-and-out liar in order to assure a little happiness to a lady who has deserved—but lost—a great deal of it, Cass?"

"Mind, sir. No. I'm proud of it!"

Prosper's eyes twinkled.

"I believe that you and I are going to get on together, Cass," he stated.

Politely, Cass hoped so—and then, greatly assisted by Plutus, they went into matters of ordinary routine, concerning the camp and so forth. This done, Prosper crawled back to the verandah and Marjorie May, leaving the liar to tack, as it were, in the offing, until called upon. Which was speedily, for, wise Marjorie promptly announcing to her mother that “the man who was ‘father’s friend’ was now available,” Mrs. Merlehurst appeared with rather pitiful suddenness, dry-eyed but pale and a little tremulous, was introduced to Cass and with him disappeared for a long talk in the quieter part of the garden.

She reappeared presently, her wonderful eyes bright with tears—though behind the tears was a sort of happiness. But it was a happiness she was not yet ready to share. She passed into the house and a moment later Cass “reported” again to Prosper, as Marjorie May followed her mother to assure herself that all was well.

“The lady was satisfied, sir,” said Cass. “And she gave me this.”

He passed a crumpled five pound note to Prosper.

“And you brought it to me, eh, Cass?” he said, considering.

He felt in his pocket, found a roll of notes, peeled off a *fiancée* to the fiver, and passed the engaged couple back.

“Marry them, Cass, and pray for the best,” he advised.

The ex-guitar torturer flushed—a strange, bluish, unused sort of flush.

“I—I guess I didn’t want paying for that, sir. . . . I remembered her as a bride—cantering to their quarters on a polo pony of the major’s—years ago.”

“Quite so,” said Prosper, gently. “But a little real money isn’t going to tarnish that recollection, is it?”

Cass realised, with a species of shock, that he had almost become that strange and fearful wild-fowl, a sentimental sergeant-major, gulped, took the money, saluted his semi-salute and headed for the Kern Arms—as cavalry folk will, particularly when they have sworn off “it.”

Sitting alone for a little Prosper considered that matter of the Kern Emeralds.

This was the second time that emeralds had flashed their green rays out of the fog of the Kern mystery. The nameless lady, found under the pyramid, was notable because of the emeralds she wore set in rings and a bracelet. And it was the Kern Emeralds which had finally parted the Merlehursts. Both lots of emeralds were very good.

It occurred to Prosper to wonder whether the emeralds found on the dead lady were, by any twist of chance, the same emeralds as those which Mrs. Merlehurst had denied receiving from Lord Kern.

“But even if they were, what does that prove——?” he asked himself—and was answered almost instantly.

Mrs. Merlehurst had stepped out to the verandah. She came to him, her eyes intent.

"I could not rest without thanking you for telling that poor fellow, Cass, to be quite frank," she said. "He—his story—has made a very great difference to me," she said.

But Prosper declared that he deserved no thanks. He had done nothing, he said, nothing at all, except to try to help Cass pull himself together a little and to tell the truth.

"Ah, you would say that, of course—but I know how much we owe you—Marjorie and I," she said.

Prosper's face grew serious.

"If you feel that—there is no need to feel it at all, but if you do, and desire to pay or over-pay your debt, will you answer me one question, no, two questions?"

"Why, of course."

"They are to do with some emeralds——" Prosper paused.

She nodded, speaking softly.

"Yes,—I understand. I will answer."

"The Kern Emeralds. Lord Kern offered them to you—years ago—when he was in love with you."

Her face was white.

"Yes. To help tempt me to divorce my husband. I declined them, naturally. Though, as Cass has told you, my husband believed I had accepted them, and was keeping it secret from him."

"Oh, yes. I understand. That was a tragic mistake for Major Merlehurst to make," said Prosper swiftly. "But it is past now—forgiven, soon to be forgotten. . . ."

"There was another question, Mr. Fair?"

"Yes—if you will give me leave. Do you know what became of the emeralds after you declined them?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes. But I did not learn it until some years after my husband's mistake and Lord Kern's disappearance . . . and then quite by chance." She paused, thinking.

Prosper waited.

"Let me explain," she said. "Lord Kern originally launched out into his year of extravagance—mainly for my sake, to meet me, and so on. . . . He was in love with me. They used to say that I was pretty—in those days. I can say that now . . . so long ago as it was. Lord Kern believed he could persuade me to divorce my husband. But at last I convinced him it was impossible. It was then he offered me the emeralds—oh, not only the emeralds, but anything I cared to have. He told me of his great wealth—of what it would buy. He tempted me most desperately to divorce Geoffrey and marry him. He hardly spoke of himself—he seemed to pin all his hopes on the power, the allurements, of his great fortune. He seemed stunned when at last I convinced him that it was hopeless. . . . So he went away. I never saw him again. But a long time after I heard that he had given the emeralds to another woman . . . a woman who had a great vogue as a music-hall singer at that time. You may have heard of her—she was called Niobe Swayne! . . ."

Niobe Swayne!

Prosper's lips set—for the first victim in the sunk

garden, Larry Calhoun, had married Niobe Swayne, though Mrs. Merlehurst did not know that.

She was watching him.

"You know—I would like to tell, to admit to you, that I have sometimes wondered whether the emeralds of that poor soul found at the pyramid were the Kern Emeralds," she said, almost inaudibly. "And whether, by some strange twist of fortune she was Niobe Swayne. But I was half afraid. I—hated those emeralds. They were unlucky—to me. And, as you know, I was wicked enough, untrue and mad enough to fear that my husband had killed Lord Kern because he believed I had accepted those very emeralds. . . . I was afraid to tell any one because of that—for Geoff's sake."

Prosper nodded.

"Yes, I see that. It was most natural. But there is no need to be afraid any more. . . . And I believe your doubt—your guess—was right. The woman with the emeralds was Niobe Swayne. She was Calhoun's wife. And the man that killed Calhoun and Major Merlehurst killed her also. . . . And soon—very soon now—that man will be caught and everything will be over. So that there is nothing now for you to worry over any more. . . . Only just to rest—rest and recover."

She heard and accepted the absolute conviction in his voice and she was content. Obediently she went in to "rest and recover," as he had said.



## CHAPTER XXI

**A**ND now it was borne in on Prosper, as he sat, busy brained, that the time had come when the thing grew most urgent and grim. He knew the story of Calhoun, of Niobe Swayne, of the Merlehursts and enough of the story of Lord Kern to complete all but a corner of what he had lightly called the jig-saw.

He leaned back with half-closed eyes. He was very fond of Marjorie May, but he hoped that she would not come out for a few moments. He wanted to think and the Marjorie Mays of this world are not, in their first bloom, good aids to collected thought. It is later in life that they sometimes become sharp spurs to furious thinking.

It seemed to Prosper now that everything was drawing into a perfect focus, clear-cut, sharply defined, wholly free from fog.

He knew that Lord Kern, at his zenith as a miser, had fallen in love with Rose Merlehurst, the neglected wife of a rake—so cruelly in love that he had abandoned his hoarding, and begun to spend his great accumulation in the hope of attracting her to himself and of doing that which most women in her situation very reasonably and with perfect justification would have done—that is, divorcing her worthless husband.

He had, as it were, taken her up to a high place and

spread out before her a vision of all that a million pounds would buy.

"All this will I give thee, the power and the glory . . . if thou wilt worship me all shall be thine . . ." murmured Prosper to the bees busy among the flowers. "It was not wholly original . . . it has been said before. Nevertheless it is, in effect, what Lord Kern said to Mrs. Merlehurst. But, incomprehensibly enough, she loved the man who had treated her as a village idiot may treat a beautiful flower he has found—and she refused to free herself. She even contrived at last to make him see that she meant it—that his great, his glittering possessions were useless to win him the only thing he desired—this beautiful and sweet-natured woman to be his wife. He realised it at last—and so—being eccentric, and Lord knows that is a common complaint among the aristocracy—dry rotten with it, as they are—he abandoned everything. But he was not quite eccentric enough to—take his fortune out to sea and throw it overboard!"

He rolled and lit a hasty cigarette.

"The pyramid of lead, they call it, Plutus mine," he said. "But they would be more accurate if they called it the pyramid of gold!"

He nodded, his eyes dancing.

"The pyramid of gold! . . . For, at a safe guess, Lord Kern had buried his hoard and erected upon it with his own hands a tombstone—a monument. And having deeply inscribed on that monument those age-old truths that had been inscribed not less deeply on

his heart, he turned his back on it all, giving it, after a lapse of time, to the child of the woman he loved—so that the woman's husband would be the less likely to benefit, and—wandered out into the world. . . .”

“Yes, that would be it—that must be it. . . . What did he seek—which would take him ten years to find if ever he found it at all? . . .”

Prosper sat up.

“Whatever it was he sought—forgetfulness, balance, sanity, philosophy, he seems to have found it. For he is coming on the *Colossic*—coming home, doubtless to reclaim his own if he can get here in time! . . .”

“But he has failed to keep his secret. A few, by chance or by guile, discovered it—Calhoun—Niobe Swayne—the iron-grey Merlehurst—and the killer, who guards it so bitterly that one is tempted to believe he may endeavour to guard it even from its owner—from Kern himself! We must look into that aspect of it, Plutus.”

He grinned at the dog.

“Remind me of that, will you, flesheater,” he said.

A movement by the gate caught his eye. He half-turned to see Detective Inspector Garrishe beckoning him.

Prosper went down to find him greatly perturbed about the discovery of the body in the lake.

“He was found by this man Cass whom you seem to have engaged to look after your camp, Mr. Fair,” said the detective in a low voice. “And Cass has reported it to the police and the body is now at the Kern Arms

awaiting the inquest. It's a plain case of suicide. I'm uncomfortable about it somehow. It looks bad—another death here, right under my nose. Headquarters'll want to know something. But what puzzles me is this—Cass says that the man found in the lake is a Major Merlehurst—husband of the lady who lives here—your hostess, Mr. Fair—and, moreover, mother of the young lady who is—was—going to inherit Kern. I'll say to you, though to nobody else—that I'm not at all easy in my mind about this suicide. It looks queer. If the man was somebody else, I could let it go as a plain suicide—but it's got a queer look——”

Prosper broke in, quietly.

“Cass is right. The man is—was—Merlehurst. He went to the dogs and his wife hasn't seen him for years. He was a mate of Cass's—they were on the road together. They had sunk low. Cass used to be in his regiment. . . . Your instinct of uneasiness is right, inspector. Soon—in a few hours—I will tell you something about that suicide . . . but not yet. . . .”

Garrishe was surprised. His face darkened a little.

“You knew more of this suicide this morning when I was talking to you at the camp?”

“I knew of it yesterday,” exclaimed Prosper. “It was one of the things which helped me solve the whole mystery of Kern.”

“Solve—you say you've solved the whole mystery.”

“Oh, yes, didn't I mention it this morning?”

Garrishe's face drew darker still.

“You conveyed that you were well on the way

to solving it—but you weren't quite so definite."

His hard eyes bored into Prosper's.

"I'll tell you something, Mr. Fair," he jarred. "If the chief constable hadn't told me that you were above suspicion—and if I hadn't satisfied myself that he was right—I believe I should put you where I could keep an eye on you."

"And I think you would be right, Garrishe," agreed Prosper readily. "But, my dear man, don't take it to heart and don't get blue about it. I will put the murderer neatly into your open hands within the next few days—and a perfect explanation of the whole thing. You will emerge in a blaze of glory—and promotion will be hurled unerringly at your head. Just be patient and not sullen—trust little Prosper and all will be well."

The detective reflected, staring hard into the gay, jaunty eyes of "little Prosper."

Presently he shrugged, a faint touch of envy in his own sombre eyes.

"All right, all right," he agreed reluctantly. "But don't give him too much law. You're a greyhound all right, Mr. Fair—but don't forget the old lurcher ain't such a bad dog. He cuts the corner where the greyhound follows the hare. . . . And your sport is my livelihood, don't forget that."

Prosper softened to that instantly.

"My dear chap, decidedly I won't forget it. I understand perfectly. It's only a question of a day or so."

"Very well."

Rather reluctantly the detective withdrew.

Then Marjorie May appeared, explaining that she had been making a special cream coffee cake which they would have for tea if the cook (who was by no means wonderful) did not spoil it—and the rest of that afternoon was all for Marjorie May. . . .

Mrs. Merlehurst appeared—in black—at dinner that night, very quiet and kind and gentle.

Nobody came to bother her with demands that she should identify the man lying at the Kern Arms. Prosper had made that right with the detective and Cass had provided all the identification needed.

But—as happens to many a wanderer—Prosper sitting tranquilly in the long, dim dining room, softly lit by shaded candles, talking at leisure with these two clear-souled women, felt once more that the desert was fast losing its charm and that the oasis was good indeed.

“It is good to wander, and there are fine adventures and glorious company to be found upon the road,” he heard himself saying once, his eyes on Marjorie May, “yet in the end a man’s heart yearns for his own fire-side and his own people—to come in and sit down and talk with them and to rest for a little.”

Marjorie May’s eyes were shining like stars as she agreed.

But for a moment Prosper had forgotten the man at the Kern Arms.

“And rest—rest is the best of all,” said Mrs. Merlehurst in a still voice. She was smiling a little—but where Marjorie’s eyes were bright with youth, hers were bright with tears.

## CHAPTER XXII

**I**T was not until two days after that Prosper explored Kern Castle, and he chose to do that alone—for he desired to see privately what was to be seen, before he inspected it again in company with the detective and Barisford. Prosper was ever prone to plough a lonely furrow.

He chose the first peep of dawn as the hour to start, and he went apparently unequipped, even without the gas mask, the use of which he had so earnestly recommended to Garrishe.

The early haze still hung over the sunk garden as he passed noiselessly through, and the dark flanks of the pyramid were damp with dew.

Prosper paused for a moment, studying it.

He no longer pondered the inscriptions, for there was no longer any hidden meaning in them to attract his attention.

It was for something more tangible than veiled meanings and obscure significances that he was seeking now, for he had worked a little at arithmetic in the privacy of his own room on the previous evening and he had arrived at an interesting answer to the small sum he had set himself.

He had chosen to assume that—allowing for the inevitable expansion which every large sum of money undergoes as mention of it passes from lip to lip—the

fortune of Lord Kern was somewhere in the neighbourhood of a million. The Kerns, he knew, had been wealthy in late Victorian days, but standards were different at that time. It took much less actual hard cash to be a colossally wealthy man in those days than it did nowadays, and it was unlikely that the Kern fortune had exceeded three-quarters of a million when the present Lord Kern had inherited it. And a miser as a money handler has very different methods from those of a gambler or financier. He takes not the minutest fraction of risk—and for this solid safety he sacrifices both speed and amount in the matter of increasing his accumulation. But values had risen and the inexorable operation of time had helped Lord Kern. He had inherited while still a very young man, and twenty years of keenly increasing avarice (with the exception of that year of furious extravagance) must have told a tale with a long string of O's attached to it. Prosper let his estimate go at a total of a round million. This, Kern may have hidden in sovereigns—an extremely unlikely method. More probably he had converted that amount, over a long period of time, into pure gold. But gold weighs heavily and until he had worked out his sum, Prosper had thought vaguely of the "nugget" he sought as a thick, long slab of sheer gold about the size of a guncase.

But his figures told a different story.

He had ascertained that a cubic foot of pure gold weighs 1,205.6 pounds. This from an old, dog's-eared book on metals found at the local blacksmith's.



Prosper was no slave to figures, and he could damn a mere decimal with any man—and invariably did so. Also he could gaily ignore queer conflicting memories of troy, avoirdupois, and even apothecaries' weight.

Sixteen honest ounces to an honest pound was ever good enough for Prosper, and he was perfectly willing to accept the statement that a cubic foot of gold weighed 1,205.6 pounds. He went farther in his natural generosity—he cheerfully knocked off the .6 for discount. It got in the way of the more serious figures—like a Pomeranian pup getting mixed up with one's feet when one was running to get near a pack of foxhounds.

He knew in a sketchy sort of way that gold was worth £4 an ounce or thereabouts.

"So, if Kern hid a million in gold, and I divide a million by four, that gives me the number of ounces he hid. Naturally," concluded Prosper.

This worked out at 250,000 ounces.

"That's a large number of ounces," he told himself, a little surprised. "Still—figures can't lie."

He divided that again by 16—to get pounds—honest sixteen-ounce ones. None of your troy stuff for Prosper—anyway, he had forgotten how many ounces went to a troy pound, though he remembered Helen of—which gave him 15,625 pounds.

"Dividing 15,625 by 1,205 surely should give me a rough idea of the bulk of gold in cubic feet which (I believe) Kern hid."

He achieved that division—roughly.

“Thirteen cubic feet—almost—call it thirteen for luck.”

He nodded.

“Thirteen cubic feet of solid gold,” he mused, “would require thirteen cubic feet of space to stow it in. That’s logic—and I am better at logic than mathematics—or is it mensuration? Not a great space to search for, especially when it may be either a tunnel or hole thirteen feet long or deep and one foot thick——” He smiled at the idea of a “thick” hole, but he knew what he meant—“or a square chamber—no, cubic—that’s it, a cubic compartment about—let me see—about thirteen feet square and thirteen feet high!”

He surveyed the result rather dubiously.

“Or, in other words, a room thirteen by thirteen by thirteen—um—five thousand odd cubic feet big—would be required to store thirteen cubic feet of gold, which as friend Euclid did not say, is merely silly! I’ve made a mistake somewhere. I’d better get Marjorie May to work it out. I can cook beans and bacon with any man, but I can’t cook cubic mathematics.”

Later investigations conducted in company with Marjorie May—who did it amazingly in her head, referring to it as “simple”—assured him that thirteen cubic feet of anything (he did not mention gold) would require a square chamber about two and a third feet each way in size to accommodate it.

So Prosper decided that he was hunting for a block of gold two feet four inches every way. Not a big

block—less than a steamer trunk—but worth a million pounds.

It was with these dimensions in his mind that he studied the pyramid of lead.

Un-mathematically-minded though he might be, Prosper had a very clear idea indeed of what he was looking for.

He took out and opened the stoutest blade of a stout pocket knife and scored the knife point heavily along the base of the pyramid—producing a silvery scar at which he peered intently.

“Lead—of the most leaden kind I’ve ever seen,” he murmured. “Evidently Kern was not eccentric enough to blend his gold with lead. . . . Probably that had been tried and proved before—by ‘other investigators.’ ”

He checked suddenly, his mind flashing back to that wound—through the glove—in the palm of the Nameless Lady.

“That might have been caused by a chisel——” he told himself. “She may have come here with a chisel for the purpose of chipping off a trifle of lead to test—and the killer quietly dropped his gas bubble near her as she stooped. She fell, and, as she fell, wounded her hand with the falling chisel, which presently the killer took away, with such fragments of glass as he could retrieve.

“. . . But if that is so, she must have been ‘warm’—close to the secret—or he would not have killed her then.”

His lips tightened, as a thrill of excitement vibrated his nerves. He was indeed on the track, and he knew it.

For a few moments longer he remained there, thinking, then quickly made his way into one of the half-choked yew alleys which would bring him out at the south front of the ivy-masked castle.

He found no trouble in effecting an entrance to that abode of owls, jackdaws and bats. Many of the windows were broken and one—a big leaded window—on the ground floor had been moved completely—probably stolen, for sake of the lead, by a passing band of the degenerate vagabonds which in England have succeeded the genuine Romany.

It was through this space that he entered.

There was no furniture in the huge, echoing, musty-smelling room, but Prosper had not expected to see any. He knew that everything movable of value had been taken away and stored by old Enderby, acting on his own initiative. Marjorie May was a favourite of the old lawyer, and he had frankly told Prosper during their chat at Mavisholme that there had been a great deal of extremely valuable furniture (moved from the Kern town house after the extravagant year) left there by Lord Kern. . . .

"He gave no instructions as to the disposal of this, but it was stupid to let it stay there and rot, Mr. Fair. If Marjorie ever has the castle she may as well have a furnished castle, I think."

"I think so, too," Prosper had said.

"Especially when, among the—um—articles in question are pictures worth at a guess—a lawyer's guess, not a connoisseur's, Mr. Fair—forty thousand pounds," confided Mr. Enderby.

"You are a judge of pictures, Mr. Enderby?"

"No—but I am a lawyer," the old man had said, rather drily. . . .

Certainly he had been lawyer enough to prevent stray cats from making a home among the antiques, bats lairing behind the tapestries, and others of the wild transforming the place from a treasure house into a cavern of rotting and ruined lumber. And never had Prosper feared lawyers less or liked them more as, stealing quietly about the mildewed halls of Kern, he estimated what shrewd old Enderby had done for Marjorie May—assuming that the *Colossic*, now droning steadily across the western ocean, arrived home a little too late . . . legally speaking.

In places he moved ankle deep in last year's dead leaves, blown in through the broken windows like fluttering dun moths; and there were areas of damp, green with woolly fungus. Here and there the splendid oak floors were rotting at the edges; the brass was green and tarnished, and the deep recesses of the carving everywhere were choked by the webs of generations of spiders.

But after the first quick regretful realisation of this ruin and decay Prosper ignored all that. He was on a definite quest.

He had not come here to inventory faded splendours,

or to survey present dilapidations—as he reminded himself at the head of a flight of steps leading into the damp darkness of the cellars.

“It’s a pity, of course—but I am neither a possible buyer of the castle nor a house-agent showing it off—I am just a plain person of an enquiring turn of mind in search of thirteen cubic feet of a metallic element that has been prized from time immemorial—gold, in fact!” he said, pulling out his electric torch.

“But I dislike exceedingly the flavour of these cellars. Nevertheless——” He shrugged and went on, slowly, his eyes active.

Two hours’ slow tour of the castle had proved wholly profitless, and, for the time being, the cellars were his last hope of gleaning a “clue” to-day.

But he had not passed down more than three or four of the stone steps before his face grew more tense and his eyes brighter. He had observed that the stone steps were not entirely as stone steps unused for ten years should be. In the centre of the “tread” of each step the stone was visible like that of a step often trodden on. But each step at the sides of the centre was dark and dirty and damp with a blackish stain.

“These steps have been used a good deal recently . . .” he murmured. “I suppose Garrishe noticed that.”

But, for a long time that was the only discovery he made—except for the fact that if any wines had been abandoned by Lord Kern, old Mr. Enderby had evidently extended a lawyer’s loving care and protection

to these also—for certainly there was not enough to intoxicate a church mouse now left in the cellars.

Prosper did rather an odd thing when he had got an idea of the general plan of the low-ceiled vault-like maze of cellar-space.

He produced and studied carefully a small pocket compass.

"Navigation may not be my chief forte," he said, aloud, indomitably jestful, "but I believe I can say that the pyramid of lead lies in *that* direction."

He stared at the disc of blank wall, hoary with mildew, illuminated by his torch, which barred his way in "that direction," went forward and examined it carefully for its whole length.

Except for a thin, horizontal mark, three feet long, on the mildew, and perhaps four feet from the ground, he found nothing, and at first glance that mark looked no more than a portion of the seam of mortar which for some reason had not been touched by the damp mildew.

If he had not been looking for something unusual about that wall, Prosper would never have given the mark a second thought. But, now, he peered closely at it and perceived that it was not a mortar line but a clearly defined mark on the brick wall. The mortar line was an inch below it.

"If a small shelf had been removed recently from the wall such a mark might be left behind—a line protected by the edge of the board from the encroachment of damp and dirty mildew—yes," he said, peering close. "But the same would apply to the wall space which the

shelf brackets had covered—and there are no bracket marks nor any other marks to indicate how the shelf was held in position. Shelves do not support themselves on edge against a wall—and nobody in his senses would put a shelf there. It was not a shelf.”

He studied the mark, frowning.

“Something has been leaning against the wall—the edge of a tilted box? But why tilt a box here?”

He chuckled in the gloom.

“Quite the last place I, personally, should visit for the purpose of tilting a box—peculiar though I may be!”

His light drooped to the floor as he stood, pondering, and then he saw something else—a minute, pin-head gleam, pale yellow against the dark slab of rough paving stone with which the cellar was floored.

He dropped on his knees and with the point of his knife extracted the speck of stuff which gleamed from the tiny crevice in the stone in which it lay.

He dropped it on the open palm of his left hand and directed the full glare of his torch on it.

It was gold!



## CHAPTER XXIII

**P**ROSPER stared, thrilling a little, at the yellow fragment.

"Gold—yes. . . . I suppose this is a little how men feel when they first see colour in the pan—or a yellow streak in a bit of quartz," he said softly. "But it was careless to drop that tiny nugget here."

He thought for a moment, then drummed with his heel on the stone.

A peculiar, faint, hollow boom told him that there was space under the slab instead of solid earth.

He knelt again examining and probing the narrow joints of the slab closely, then moved to an adjoining slab, the joints of which he inspected also. His knife point sank easily into the soft blackish earth which was the filling of the joints of the first slab—but he tried in vain to insert the knife-point into the joint of the second slab, for it was of solid cement, damp and black—but cement.

He tested several other slab-joints at random. They were all of cement.

So he turned his attention to the first slab again.

"It's movable," he said. "But how is it rendered movable?"

It took him an hour to discover—in spite of the

broad hint given him by the faint line on the cellar wall.

He caught the trick of it only when, failing to find any visible mechanism or sign of mechanism, he sat and, resting from his gropings and lighting a cigarette, leaned against the wall and deliberately thought it out.

"There's a hollow under that stone, my friend, and I believe it is an accessible hollow. But to render it accessible, the stone has to be moved. How? It's too heavy to lift—and there's nothing to grip for the purpose of lifting. It does not slide in under the wall, as a drawer closes."

He stooped to where the base of the wall touched the stone—and perceived that there was no layer of cement between wall and stone. The stone seemed to extend under the wall. None other of the floor slabs did that.

"It may be pivoted—an iron bar passing through the stone crossways, each protruding end set in the adjoining slabs on either side——"

He laughed quietly. He knew he had hit it—even before he pressed heavily with his foot on the slab a few inches from the wall. The stone sank a little under his foot, but the edge nearest the centre of the cellar rose slightly. Leaning forward he caught that rising edge with his finger tips. They fitted into a groove evidently meant for a finger grip.

He pulled and the stone swung up quite easily. He brought it up. Its edge passed through a quarter circle and came to rest against the wall, exactly on the line mark which clearly it had caused.

A small pit yawned at his feet. Half a dozen steps of clay banked with rough oak boards led down into the darkness.

Prosper surveyed the pit with frank distaste.

"Am I supposed to adventure into the bowels of the earth?" he said, plaintively. "It would seem so. But it is all very un-alluring to me, though badgers or rabbits would regard it as a very fine hole indeed."

He sighed and without further comment descended into the pit, carefully tested the weight of the pivoted stone, and, assured that he could raise it on its pivot from below, let it sink into its accustomed position.

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. . . . It only needs that some one should shoot a few tons of coal into the cellar now—and I should be in a decidedly embarrassing position," he told himself.

"That's the worst of an imagination," he added. "However——"

He abandoned his gloomy speculations and, his torch forcing back the darkness before him, went into the low, narrow tunnel opening out from the pit under the slab.

He carried now in his right hand an implement with more potent possibilities than the torch in his left—six potent possibilities in all, five in the magazine, one in the breech.

"A sapper of engineers would revel in this," he murmured as he went forward slowly, "but to my mind it is devilish dark and damp and smells of tombs."

He paused after a little and studied his compass.

"It runs straight as a string for the pyramid," he murmured, pressing on. "But nevertheless I am not enthusiastic—what man with the stomach-ache would be?"

He chuckled softly at his little joke—and it sounded in that low-ceiled, earthy cavern like a dead man chuckling in his everlasting sleep.

But he went on. It was one of his peculiarities—to go on.

Five minutes later he had solved the secret of the pyramid.

He stood in a tiny chamber roughly hollowed out under what must have been the dead centre of the pyramid.

Like the tunnel, it had been cut out of the solid, greenish-blue clay, and from everywhere about the trampled floor of the chamber bright gold specks flashed yellow in the clear, cold electric beam of his torch.

But it was overhead that he stared to see a jagged hole cut through what looked like a slab of iron inches thick. He raised his torch high above his head and peered through the hole.

And so at last he saw the glow of sheer solid gold.

A cylindrical column of it, cased in thick iron, ran vertically up through the centre of the pyramid of lead.

But somebody gnawing with a sharp steel tooth, had taken heavy toll from the base of that pillar of gold, for Prosper could thrust his arm for almost its whole

length upwards through the jagged hole before his fingers touched the warm velvet of the pure gold.

At least a couple of cubic feet—probably more—had been chipped or drilled out so far.

“Two hundred thousand pounds’ worth, perhaps—and more, much more, where that came from!” said Prosper slowly, eyeing the long-handled sharp-edged cold chisel which with drills and other tools were grouped against the side of the chamber.

It seemed extremely simple—now he had solved the thing. The killer—unlike Calhoun, Niobe Swayne and Merlehurst—had penetrated to the heart, and so discovered the secret, of the Kern pyramid. But he had discovered it first—and “first come, first served” had evidently been his slogan.

Prosper, studying the airless, earthy-smelling little den in which he now crouched, perceived that it had not been without labour to the point of slavery, that the gold-worm had bored his secret way to the core of noble metal which was the heart of the pyramid.

He pondered this as he studied the uniquely-ceiled chamber.

“He found it—and he set out to get it—this midnight miner,” said Prosper. “He knew it was quite hopeless to expect to get at it from outside, without discovery, so he drove a sap to it. He dug his entrance in the cellar and rigged up his pivoted slab. Then he dug his way through the clay with infinite stealth and incredible patience—removing his clay as he went—tons and tons of it. He must have worked for

years at it. But he had plenty of time. And he knew it—for the ten years' limit of Lord Kern seems to have been public knowledge. . . .

"Slowly, then, he drove his narrow passage through the clay, and at last—perhaps not so long ago—won to this spot under the pyramid. . . . He needed some nerve to open out this little hollow—with something like seven tons of gold pressing down overhead. . . . It would have been a dramatic finish had the mass slid down and smashed him into the clay—but Kern's iron casing saved him from that. . . . Then he had to drill the base of the iron-casing—a beast of a job. But at last his drill went through and bit sweetly on the soft gold—and crumbs of the heavy, yellow stuff began to trickle out onto his upturned face. . . . By Jove—I can see him at it—almost anybody could picture it."

Prosper drew deep on the cigarette with which he had rewarded himself—thin as a straw because of the atmosphere.

" . . . White-faced, sweating, savagely tenacious, his hands and arms clay-stained, crouched here under the mass, drilling, drilling, drilling at the stubborn iron—steel perhaps—with oily filings trickling on his face. Probably sick with fatigue and excitement—for he could not have been wholly sure the gold was there. He had staked his brutal slavery of years on the chance of drilling into the gold. Then, one night, the drill sinks into something rich and soft and cloggy compared with the iron and the trickling crumbs grow heavier—

and he examines a few. . . . Wipes his arm across his forehead perhaps, and sees a yellow smear. Gold! He's into it—tons of it. Ye-s . . . that would be sufficiently exciting," admitted Prosper, excited himself at the mere vision of it.

" . . . and then, resting a moment, gloating, perhaps he hears what he has always feared—the dull, distant knocking overhead of some other midnight investigator, chipping off a bit of the lead or drilling into the pyramid—a sound of some kind . . . just as I listened for a sound the other night! He had prepared for this . . . and so he steals back along his burrow, comes up through the cellar, with his glass bubble of gas ready, and creeps down to the pyramid. He is perfectly willing to kill intruders rather than allow them to discover the gold . . . and so he kills Calhoun, the first of these—then the woman with the emeralds—and lastly Merlehurst. It is swift, silent and—except for Merlehurst, when he had to act swiftly—safe. He clears up, as well as possible, the shattered glass, and anything likely to betray him—Niobe Swayne's chisel, for instance—and leaves the bodies to be discovered—for obscure reasons. Perhaps it is bright moonlight—or he believes there are prowlers about. . . . But he chances it with Merlehurst because three dead bodies are too many. Two deaths have attracted enough attention—a third might mean a Home Office order to pull down the pyramid. So he carries Merlehurst's body to the lake—in spite of the risk . . . and escapes."

Prosper rose, nodding.

Yes. That would be the way of it. And I think that it is time I took a little fresh air. This place is stuffy and, curiously enough, full of tobacco smoke. Odd, that?"

He moved slowly down the tunnel.

"We will take him red-handed—no, yellow-handed," he said, presently, as he passed up from the dark cellars to the ground floor of the castle. "Yellow-handed," he repeated.

"But if he had only kept himself from killing—one could find it in one's heart to admire the creature for the desperate slavery he faced and endured to get at the gold. . . . As it is, he has put himself beyond mercy," concluded Prosper, and stepped into the sunlight that was struggling through the towering trees—like falling streaks of gold.

He stood for a few moments, thinking, went slowly down to the sunk garden and, for a long time, studied the pyramid.

It was not with the air of one who seeks to discover "clues" that he stood in the deserted and ruined garden now, and there was nothing at all left of the gay and airy carelessness with which he had been made noteworthy when he first came there to study that ugly, but gold-hearted lure to destruction.

Now, his rather thin, hawkish face was drawn and his eyes a little sad.

"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches and loving favours rather than silver and gold



. . . they that make a graven image are all of them vanity and their delectable things shall not profit!"

Again he read that ancient wisdom and again he was aware of the subtly moving blend of veneration, admiration and respect touched with a sort of fear which thrills faintly the spirit of every man confronted with the realisation of a truth and its meaning tested throughout the ages.

Like the gold itself that bit of wisdom was sterling.

They that make a graven image . . . a graven image. . . .

What had that fiercely patient burrower, that self-hounded subterranean slave, that cold and crafty murderer done but made himself a graven image? And what would his ill-omened discovery, his "delectable thing" profit him?

Prosper stared absently at the pyramid, and it seemed for a moment to him that he saw the eccentric action of the eccentric Lord Kern from a new angle.

Had he been right to hide that yellow lure deep, deep down, cased in iron, bedded in stone, sheathed all over in lead, the dead metal, and there abandon it for ever? It seemed so—but only for a second. Prosper knew better than that. Gold? What was gold?

It was not for sake of its red or yellow gleam that men adventured to the very brink of destruction to win it—not even for sake of the great things, the glorious things, the mountain-cave of treasures to which it was the glittering key.

There was more in it than that . . . some deep, com-

elling and unconquerable urge in the spirit of man, fanned from spark to flame by the procession of ages, the rush-past of a million years. . . .

Prosper caught back his mind, wandering as it was on far speculations, shrugged his shoulders and headed slowly for Kern village, thinking as he went.

But it was not of the killer that he thought.

Curiously, his mind was busy with Lord Kern—daily speeding nearer and nearer to his fatal pyramid.

Why was he coming home? Had he repented his eccentricity—or had he discovered a new one? That was what Prosper pondered as he went. . . .

He did not return direct to Mavisholme. Instead he hired the only car available for hire in Kern and drove to Carisbury, where he sent a long telegram to Dale, bought a vast box of chocolates for Marjorie May, had himself examined with reassuring results by a doctor (he had never been quite easy in his mind about the effects of the killer's knees, for they hurt abominably) and, so, went back to Mavisholme, a tired man.

Marjorie May and her mother were waiting lunch for him.

During the glorious afternoon with Marjorie May, in a comfortable chair on the tennis lawn, Prosper talked of many things. But among these was no mention of the gold in the pyramid.

## CHAPTER XXIV

CASS, "reporting for orders" on the following morning was speedily accommodated. His it was to find Detective-Inspector Garrishe straightway and forthwith.

This he achieved with such creditable speed that Marjorie May had not left Prosper ten minutes to attend to her household duties, before the detective arrived, with expectant eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. Fair. You look a different man to-day," he greeted the hatless one on the verandah.

"I am," confirmed Prosper. "I feel practically fit again."

He waved an airy cigarette.

"And that being so, I suppose we may as well polish off this little matter of solving the Kern mystery and arresting the killer."

Garrishe stubbornly refused to look surprised.

"Yes—that's an idea—if we can do it," he said drily.

Prosper chuckled.

"Good. We will. Let us take a stroll towards the castle," he said. "And I will discourse awhile—as we go."

He rose and prattling gaily about his improved con-

dition steered the detective out of the garden. He made no further mention of the pyramid until they passed through the yew hedge and faced its squat, grey bulk.

Prosper stopped, eyeing it.

"Oh, about that thing. I've solved the mystery of it."

Garrishe was watching him sidelong.

"Have you? And is there any objection to a plain everyday detective asking what you have found out about it?"

"None at all," smiled Prosper. "It's a nut—like a nut, I mean."

"So are you——" muttered Garrishe—but under his breath.

"How—like a nut?" he asked.

"It's got a kernel," explained Prosper. "A kernel of solid gold. . . . Garrishe, inside that thing—that pyramid—there's a pillar of gold worth a million!"

Garrishe's face went taut.

"Well, I suspected something of the kind. Lord Kern's 'heritage' hey?" he asked. "Are you sure of that, Mr. Fair?"

"Perfectly. Here's some of the gold."

He passed a few scraps.

"You've actually *seen* it!"

"Oh, yes. Why not? Would you like to see it?  
. . . Come along then. I'll show it to you."

And, a few minutes later, he kept his word. . . .

Garrishe studied the tiny chamber under the pyramid

thoroughly, examined the floor and peered at the tools.

"I shouldn't bother about possible foot marks or finger prints, if I were you, Garrishe," advised Prosper gently. "I know the killer, I believe—and it should be quite easy for you to get him red-handed within a night or so—perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow, certainly quite soon."

Garrishe nodded.

"You mean—to watch for him here."

"Exactly—in couples. You and Cass might watch one night, Oxton and Barisford, if he is back in time, the next night, and, say, you and I on the following night. He has got just enough to whet his appetite—and he will come back like a tiger returning to his kill. Thirteen cubic feet or thereabouts of gold is a great magnet."

Garrishe agreed without hesitation, and, leaving the chamber, they made their plans forthwith. It was decided that the entry to the cellars should be watched from that night onward.

"I'll say this, Mr. Fair—I doubt if our man will come back at all," said the detective. "He must know that to take any more chances after this gold is about the same thing as putting his head in a noose and shouting for somebody to come and tighten it. My own idea is that he's far away by now—ready to be satisfied with what he has got."

But Prosper could not agree.

"I doubt that, Garrishe," he said. "We know that three murders did not scare him off—and I don't think

my small scrap with him will do that. And I don't believe he will kill anybody else either—at least, not in the sunk garden. He is actually in touch with the gold now and he can very soon get all he wants. He may know the pyramid is being watched—but that won't worry him as it did in the days before he had connected with the gold. He can crouch in that chamber and gnaw away as much gold in an hour as he can carry away in three hours. He does not know his private way to the gold has been discovered, and he won't bolt until he suspects that it has."

The detective nodded, a little reluctantly, and they settled at once that he and Cass took that evening's watch.

But they watched without result. Nobody came near the cellars from sunset till dawn.

Prosper had arranged to watch the second night with Oxtan if Barisford failed to return—and Oxtan, in high spirits, over the promise of the racehorses which had arrived, agreed readily.

He said that he would sooner watch with Prosper than any one—but he was disappointed, for, even as Prosper had judged, Marjorie May was a magnet from which Barisford could not stay long away—even though she had refused to be his own personal property. He returned from London on the following day, and called at Mavisholme early in the afternoon.

But Marjorie May and her mother had gone over to Carisbury on business concerned with the funeral of

Major Merlehurst—who had been adjudged by yet another coroner's jury to have committed suicide. . . .

It was Prosper, who, idling on the verandah, received Barisford.

They chatted for a little. Then Barisford confided in Prosper the reason why Kern had seemed distasteful to him. He was a little depressed, but pleasant and frank.

" . . . She wouldn't have me," he said. "I suppose I'm too old. Though she seemed to like me enough a week ago. I—really thought I had a chance. . . ."

He shook the ash from his cigarette and looked at Prosper with a little smile.

"I suppose I ought to hate you vindictively," he said. "For—I don't know whether you realise it, but it's the fact—you are Marjorie's choice. You have cut me out—expressive term."

He spoke quietly, and though his eyes twinkled, his lips drooped.

"If you had not arrived here until, say, next week, I think I might have won her——" he went on. Then he shrugged. "But not in the sense that you have. She fell in love with you that afternoon we played tennis—I saw it. . . . Well, good luck to you, Fair. If it was not to be me, then I'm glad it is you and not Eyre-Weston."

Prosper sat up.

"Eyre-Weston! That dark, sulky-looking person with the feminine mouth! Did Marjorie May like him once?"

Barisford shrugged a little.

"She likes everybody, I think—but there was a time when she seemed to like him better than most. Do you like him?"

"No," said Prosper, very decidedly. "Not at all."

Barisford smiled.

"No? . . . Well, he hasn't a very attractive personality—Mr. Eyre-Weston. I don't like him much myself."

He leaned forward.

"But I fancy that he will not be a very frequent visitor here now," he went on—"If it is true that Lord Kern is on his way home. For that means that Marjorie will lose her—gift. She will cease to be a probable heiress. And, unless I misjudge Eyre-Weston, he was fully alive to the advantages and possibilities of Marjorie's inheritance. The castle and grounds are worth a good deal alone. But, personally, I should not be greatly amazed to learn that there is more in Kern than meets the eye."

"There is," said Prosper quietly. "For example, thirteen cubic feet of gold—perhaps seven tons of it."

Barisford stared.

"You are joking," he said. "Seven tons—*tons*, man, why, is there so much gold in the country?"

"There is that much in the sunk garden," explained Prosper, smiling. "Embedded in the centre of the pyramid of lead. I found it yesterday. And to-night we are hoping that you and Oxton will take a turn at sentry-go over it—as Garrishe and another did last



night—and as I and another will to-morrow night——”

“Just a moment,” said Barisford. “This is news—fascinating news. . . . I’ll do my share of the watching, of course, that’s understood . . . but—seven tons of gold! Man, it’s a fabulous fortune!”

“A million, roughly.”

“Yes, I suppose at least that. Whose gold?—Kern’s or——? Oh, I see.”

He knitted his brows.

“It has to do with the inscriptions—at a guess. The heritage that was discontinued. I mean Kern buried it there before he disappeared. . . . Yes—that would be it. Do you know anything about it——”

“A good deal, I think,” said Prosper, and told something of what he knew.

Barisford listened, keenly interested, to the end.

“But—that’s clever, Fair. You should have been a detective. I envy you—the enjoyment—the adventure—the thrill you’ve found here. Working it out. Why on earth hadn’t I the wit to guess it? Why, I had an enormous advantage over you. I knew that Kern had a hopeless passion for Mrs. Merlehurst! . . . And yet I never connected that disappointment of his with the inscriptions. . . .”

He stared at Prosper with twinkling eyes.

“No wonder Marjorie’s intuition led her to choose you instead of me. You have brains. . . . You think this burrower—the killer—will return?”

“I do,” said Prosper. “But Garrishe doesn’t.”

“Well, to be frank, neither do I. The man would be

mad . . . surely? Still, that needn't stop our guarding the gold till Kern arrives—or fails to arrive. . . .”

His keen, handsome face clouded, as he thought of something else.

“But what perfectly appalling luck for Marjorie and her mother that Kern should be returning now. In a few days—if he had remained away—she would be owner of that great fortune!”

Prosper agreed quietly.

“And now Kern is coming home to hoard it—perhaps bring another fortune to add to it. Eh? Probably more miserly, more eccentric than ever. . . . Build another damned pyramid, possibly.”

His brows knitted.

“I am really sorry; Mrs. Merlehurst needs a wind-fall. They have next to nothing, you know. A fraction—a—er—cubic inch or two, to use your measure—would have been a godsend! And now it all vanishes—for them—like smoke.”

“Perhaps Lord Kern may do something!” suggested Prosper.

But Barisford shook his head.

“Not he. I know him—I was his secretary. As cold as an east wind.”

“Well, perhaps I may be able to contrive something. Paint a masterpiece——” said Prosper, without enthusiasm. “Anyhow, we shall see.” Then he warned Barisford that the girl did not know of the existence of the gold, and need not know till Kern came—or did not come.

There was a short silence.

"I suppose Marjorie has not walked in her sleep again?" asked Barisford presently. "If we all miss the killer there's still a remote chance that Marjorie may name him—when she is somnambulistic again. I agree with you that she probably saw the man—even, perhaps, recognised him that night——"

But Prosper's enthusiasm for that means of solution seemed to have cooled.

"Possibly. But, personally, I hope she will never again fall into that condition."

Barisford understood.

"Ah, yes, I forgot. Let me add my hopes to yours, Fair."

Then Garrishe came in, to settle arrangements about the watch for that night. He was frankly glad to see Barisford back, and did not hesitate to say so.

It was not until some time after, that the detective announced that the *Colossic* had been reported a few hours steaming off Queenstown. He had got that by telegram from head-quarters, in reply to an enquiry he had sent.

"You are going to have Lord Kern shadowed—protected—unobtrusively, from the moment he lands, of course," said Prosper, quietly.

Both the detective and Barisford looked surprised at that.

"Why?" demanded Garrishe. "There's no necessity for that."

He thought.

"The killer won't kill Lord Kern—he knows that would only mean that Miss Marjorie would take possession and probably have a host of work people all over the castle and grounds at once. If the man comes back at all he'll come to grab all the gold he can before Lord Kern arrives. The last chance of another fifty thousand or so is to get it between now and the day after to-morrow," said Garrishe a trifle complacently.

"That's true enough, Fair," supported Barisford.

Prosper nodded.

"Oh, quite—I see that."

But Garrishe had a second thought.

"Of course, if Lord Kern dies, it's obvious that Miss Merlehurst and her mother would benefit by a pretty penny—eh? A million——"

They looked at each other.

"But," chimed in Prosper drily, "nevertheless, one's imagination quails at the task of picturing Mrs. Merlehurst and her daughter lying in ambush to kill Lord Kern—in order that they may snatch the inheritance after all!"

"Oh, yes, I understand that all right," snapped Garrishe a trifle acidly. "But there are quite a number of men-folk who are aiming for Miss Merlehurst—queer customers, some of them. The one who gets her gets a husband's rake-off on the fortune—if Lord Kern dies."

His voice thickened a little.

"I had a good deal of experience of the seamy side, anyway—and I don't know that I'd put it past some of the fortune hunters in this country—to take a

chance at Lord Kern for a million and a wife like Miss Merlehurst."

"Exactly, Garrishe. But I believe you can reduce the number of—shall we continue to say 'fortune hunters'—to one. And he's to be found easily enough," explained Prosper smoothly.

"Oh, is that so?" The latent jealousy and hostility of the detective for Prosper was plain in his eyes and voice. "And who may that one be, Mr. Fair?"

"It is my good fortune to be able to claim that privilege, detective-inspector," smiled Prosper.

"You, Mr. Fair! Is Miss Merlehurst going to marry you?"

"I believe so. . . . But I have no intention of killing Lord Kern because of that."

Garrishe flushed.

"No? Of course not," he agreed. "But, all the same, you seem to know a whole lot about the business of the pyramid and Lord Kern and the gold, don't you?"

His hostility was markedly plain now.

"I suggest nothing, you understand, Mr. Prosper Fair—except that Prosper Fair isn't your right name. But I'd feel a lot easier in my mind if you'd let me hear just exactly why you concerned yourself in this business at all?"

Prosper smiled at him.

"Very well," he said quietly. "I did so because I am just another eccentric—like Lord Kern."

"Yes, I know that. But what's your name? The

one you gave the chief constable!" insisted Garrishe.

"I am the Duke of Devizes," said Prosper, softly, almost, it seemed, apologetically.

There was a queer little silence.

Then Garrishe spoke, eyeing Prosper closely.

"Yes. . . . I've heard of you. Most of us have. Wandering about with a donkey. You're related to the chief commissioner of police, I believe. . . . I ought to have guessed a little thing like that. But I didn't. Well, I'm sorry. I got a little—warm. . . . But, anyway, I guess I won't be afraid of your trying to kill Lord Kern for sake of your wife's inheritance. For you're worth twice as much as he is, anyway, I imagine!"

Prosper nodded.

"They say so. . . . But," he added hastily, "I inherited it. I mean, it's not my fault."

"No—it's your misfortune," said Garrishe, ironically. "Are you holding my mistake against me?"

"My dear man, what a notion! Certainly not."

Prosper offered his hand.

"But I will ask you both to respect my little secret for a few days longer."

That was a condition easily accepted by both Barisford and the detective—though with a difference.

Garrishe promised heartily and instantly. Barisford was less precipitate.

But at last he said:

"Oh, yes, naturally. I promise that. . . . I'm glad—tremendously glad—for Marjorie May's sake, Mr.

Fair. Yet, of you both, I believe that you are even more to be congratulated than she. . . . She will be a wonderful wife. . . .”

He smiled as he spoke. But for once the accustomed twinkle was absent from his eyes.

## CHAPTER XXV

**B**ARISFORD and Oxton did their night watch wholly without result—and they watched well as Prosper, prowling quietly along the edge of the sunk garden at about an hour after midnight realised when abruptly Oxton, noiseless on rubber soles, stepped out of the shadows and held him up with a cocked revolver pressed into his ribs—until, very swiftly, Prosper made himself known. . . .

But there was no hint of the killer. Cautious, crafty, like a wolf lurking about a baited trap, there was no sign of that one venturing out of his obscurity.

Garrishe, apparently itching to be unleashed at something tangible, was reproachful to Prosper on the following morning.

"If we do no better to-night I shall be in a hole with my report, Mr. Fair. I've got to get something solid into headquarters by to-morrow," he said. "And I'm looking to you for it," he said uneasily.

Prosper laughed quietly.

"I don't think you will be disappointed, Garrishe," he said. "I've a feeling that there will be a little excitement for us all before midnight. . . . I tingle to-day, Garrishe. That's because I am super-sensitive to—coming trouble. I woke up tingling. Something is



going to happen to-day. I feel it in all my nerves and veins and sinews."

"Oh, but I hope it will be nothing very exciting," said a soft voice behind him. "I think we have all had excitement enough in Kern to last us a lifetime."

It was Mrs. Merlehurst, looking very slender and fragile in black.

"And so do I," agreed Prosper. "But there will be a little more—when our friend, Garrishe, arrests the man who has caused most of the excitement—probably to-night."

"To-night!" Marjorie May, appearing at the French window, echoed Prosper's last words. Her exquisite voice thrilled a little high. It was clear enough why her mother thought that the excitement had reached a limit. For a child could have seen that the girl was excited. Her colour was more vivid to-day, and her eyes were oddly brilliant.

She looked glorious as she stood facing them—but it was apparent to Prosper, as to her mother, that she was strung up to her highest key, and dazzling though it rendered her, in conjunction with her superb youth and natural loveliness, he would have preferred to see her less brilliant and more tranquil.

Yet, he told himself as he watched her, smiling, she had more reason for excitement than most of them.

She loved him—she had confessed that to him the evening before—she was willing to marry him. But she believed he had no money, except the pittance he

was able to earn—enough to live a sort of gipsy life. She loved her mother—and her mother was almost penniless.

But it was just possible that within twenty-four hours she, Marjorie May Merlehurst, might own Kern Castle and its surroundings—not a great fortune (she believed), but enough to put them all out of reach of money troubles for years. . . .

She understood what their eyes were saying.

“Oh, yes, you think *I* am excited—and indeed I am. To-day means so much to me, you see—to us all. I had a dream—a lovely dream. . . . In my dream Lord Kern did not come back, but he wrote a letter to Mr. Enderby saying that he was very content where he was and that he desired the castle to be mine . . . ours . . .” she caught her breath, her colour deepening, “and it *was* ours. In my dream.”

Garrishe nodded, moving back.

“And it may be yet, Miss Marjorie,” he said. “So I’d better be moving—to see that nobody runs off with it!”

He went away through the orchard, doggedly heading for the path of the pyramid.

“I don’t think I would let the dream make too much impression, my dear,” said Mrs. Merlehurst. “For it is almost certain that Lord Kern will arrive here to-day—don’t you think so, Mr. Fair?”

Prosper nodded gravely.

“Unless the *Colossic* has foundered in the Channel—which is almost impossible—it is certain that Lord

Kern will arrive in plenty of time to take back his tantalising gift," he agreed.

Marjorie May's face clouded a little.

"Oh, yes—I know. Only—it is nice to dream—to play at make-believe just for a few hours," she said, and came to her mother, slipping a strong young arm round the drooping, slender figure.

"After all, it is most of all for you, darling, that I wanted the place. For you—and, perhaps, for Prosper, too," she confessed. "And a little for myself. Oh, I am not ashamed to confess that I love castles and old gardens—I don't care to-day even if you think I am greedy. I am all tingling to-day—when I wake up tingling I know something is going to happen——"

"But *I* am tingling, too, Marjorie May," said Prosper. "Why, it is like that with me, too."

Marjorie kissed her mother.

"There, darling—that just proves that something is going to happen."

"Yes, dear—and I know what will happen if you do not compose yourself to-day," said Mrs. Merlehurst.

Marjorie stared.

"I shall walk in my sleep again," she said, her voice falling a little, "as the doctor said. . . . Very well, I won't be excited any more. Though even if I were—even if I walked—I should be safe."

Her hand slipped almost unconsciously into Prosper's. "Shouldn't I?"

"I think I will venture on the statement that you

would be safe, Marjorie May," said Prosper, in his silkiest voice.

But, nevertheless, she was much too intelligent to encourage the possibility of somnambulism.

"All the same, it would be better not to get excited, and so I think I will do some work," said the girl, "and we will play tennis all the afternoon, if you like, Prosper."

She turned back into the house, but paused on the threshold of the French window, looking sidelong at them.

"But still . . . it is exciting, after all," she said, laughed, and vanished—to reappear a few moments later with a silk handkerchief eclipsing her sunny hair, a duster in one hand and a bit of her mother's cherished—if mortgaged—porcelain in the other.

They watched her from the verandah for a little, then Mrs. Merlehurst turned again to Prosper.

"You think that there will be an end to the excitement after to-day," she said.

Prosper nodded.

"Yes. I believe that the man who committed those crimes in the sunk garden will be arrested to-night and also that Lord Kern will come back to take possession of his own again. After that, the very best thing that Kern village—all of us—can do, is to try hard to forget the whole terrible business."

She nodded, without speaking.

It was not necessary to tell Prosper that as long as she lived she could never forget the Kern affair. . . .

So they started their day with a good resolution that there was to be no excitement.

As far as Marjorie was concerned that was, of course, about the same thing as making a resolution not to look pretty that day. The girl was in much the same position as one who, needing money badly, has drawn a possible winner in a big racing sweepstake. She had lived too long on a narrow and dwindling income not to realise what it would mean to her mother, herself and (she dreamed) to Prosper, if, by chance, Lord Kern did not return to take back his own.

She did her best to be normal—but the air was electric at Mavisholme that day. Prosper's nerves were taut and he knew it. And Mrs. Merlehurst, if not excited in the sense that Marjorie was, made but a poor attempt to conceal a very palpable nervousness which possessed her.

She seized an opportunity to explain this nervousness to Prosper when they were alone for a moment.

"I am uneasy—I can't hide it to-day," she said. "You say that you are watching with the inspector at the castle to-night—and that the murderer will probably be arrested. Does that mean that you are going to help arrest him, Prosper?"

Prosper saw that she was trembling a little—and she saw that he saw it.

"Tell me. . . . Oh, I am all nerves to-day. Prosper, please don't run any risk. For my little girl's sake. I—dread to think how she would take it if there were—if an—an accident happened to you. She wor-

ships you. . . . I don't want her to have the unhappiness that I've had. She is so good—and she has been so gay, so joyous and courageous always in all our difficulties—keeping up appearances—she has worked so hard, too, like a—a—little Cinderella—that it would break my heart if—she were robbed of her happiness after all!"

Prosper's lips tightened. It was no part of his programme to allow the killer to—blot him out. But he was very well aware that the most carefully cut and dried programme of a Kern night's "entertainment" was always liable to sharp, sudden and intensely drastic revision at the hands of a sardonic Fate. . . . His brows knit at the thought. He drove it out—or tried to. Not at all the sort of thought to toy with just now.

Inside the house, changing her shoes for tennis, Marjorie May was whistling—like a small boy, a trick of hers! He listened. It occurred to him that life meant much—incredibly much to him.

And the killer was not just a word—he was very much indeed what the word meant. Another dead man more or less would mean literally nothing to him. . . .

Prosper comprehended that now rather more clearly than ever before—and a great deal more clearly than he liked. . . . Then he caught himself up sharply. There was nothing to be achieved by following that train of thought—except a possibility of meeting the pallid spectre of fear, which has confronted so many

brave men who have given hostages to Fortune. He realised that—and began to roll a cigarette.

"Oh, don't distress yourself for an instant about that," he said. "I confess I am much too fond of life just at present to take any unnecessary risks. Do please not let that worry you a bit. Garrishe is one of the best men at Scotland Yard, and I—understand something of the gentle art of surprise attack. It is all arranged—beautifully. There is literally no risk—no danger at all. . . . As a matter of fact I may whisper to you that the man will be taken quite unawares."

She believed him, he saw that, and she brightened up.

But "Oh, I shall be so glad when to-morrow is here, and we can all—seem to start again."

Prosper agreed very readily with that, as he rose to tighten the tennis net.

Whatever may have been waiting for them all behind the sombre curtain of the coming night, nothing happened to mar their afternoon. Though one curious little incident cropped out.

They had just finished playing when the violent crepitations of an unmuffled motor exhaust came volleying through the village and ceased abruptly outside the gate of Mavisholme.

Marjorie May and Prosper were kindly assisting each other to slacken the net as a man—evidently from the car—appeared through the arch in the filbert hedge and stepped onto the lawn.

It was Mr. Eyre-Weston.

He was smiling as he appeared, but the smile vanished and he stopped short as he saw Prosper.

For a second he stared—seeming to sway slightly—then turned abruptly and passed out of sight again.

Only Mrs. Merlehurst saw him. And her bitter experience of old time made it easy for her to diagnose his trouble. He had been motoring with young Enderby, in that ne'er-do-well's ramshackle tenth-hand old racing car, and both probably had been drinking—though Eyre-Weston had not drunk so much that he failed to realise that he was not quite in form to compete with Prosper for Marjorie May's smiles this afternoon. . . .

Mrs. Merlehurst said nothing of this "caller" to the others. It was her chief concern that day to save Marjorie May as well as she could from any excitement, and a feeling of self-reproach for not mentioning it to Prosper worried her all the rest of the day.

But it was worry in vain.

Prosper, quick-eyed as he was quick-witted, had seen this self-conscious caller. . . .

For a long time after tea the three sat talking on the lawn. Prosper was telling them stories of queer, simple little adventures he had enjoyed from time to time when wandering about. Marjorie May made it clear that she, too, wanted some day to go wandering about with him, please.

The sun seemed to balance wonderfully for a moment on the level ridge of the house, then slowly slid



down on the far side, and the lengthened shadows on the green turf grew less and less clear cut.

Once the parlourmaid, very trim and dainty in her sharp black and white, brought Prosper a telegram. He read it.

"No answer, thank you, Lucy," he said, and read the telegram to Marjorie May and her mother. It was quite short.

"*'Colossic' arrived mid-day. K. on board. Dale,*" read Prosper.

"I thought you would like to know," he added quietly.

"Yes, thank you,"—Marjorie May's voice was oddly subdued. Prosper reached out and took her hand.

"Never mind, never mind, my dear . . ." he whispered.

A little later it was brought out to them by Lucy that ex-Sergeant-Major Cass had "reported."

Prosper asked permission that the excellent Cass should "stand by" in the kitchen. Mrs. Merlehurst seemed glad to give it.

"Oh, of course, yes," she said with a little start from reverie, "as long as he likes. I am glad he is there."

Slowly the painted sky, westward of the house, lost its deep fires and the grey shadows, forerunners of the night, joined hands in the corners of the garden.

"I think we ought to go in now—the dew——" said Mrs. Merlehurst, with careful casualness.

It was just as they entered that somebody called from the gate.

"Why, mother, it's Nora!" Marjorie hurried down to meet her.

It appeared that Mrs. Oxton was in search of hospitality—she wanted to know if she could stay the night. Her nerves had been jumpy all day, she claimed, and as Fred proposed sitting up that night with an ailing horse—"Fred isn't happy unless he feels the pulses of all the duke's horses every half hour"—she thought she would like a little change.

She was welcomed and made much of.

Marjorie May and she were busy at the piano when Prosper went out to see Cass, and it was Mrs. Merlehurst who received him at the French window when, after a few paces across the lawn with the ex-dragon, he came back to the house.

Her face was pale in the twilight.\*

"You think we do not notice, Prosper, but you are wrong," she said quietly. "I have been watching you and thinking. It is your doing that Nora has come to keep us company to-night, isn't it? . . . Because of our—nerves."

"Yes, of course," agreed Prosper, airily. "I wanted that. Nora will be company for you inside—and outside Cass will be about around the house all night. It's all unnecessary, but I know what nerves are, little mother. . . . Be sure that you and Marjorie could not sleep more safely if you were guarded by a regiment. . . ."

He laughed softly, reassuringly.

"Nerves—all nerves," he said.

She laughed a little, too, but her "Thank you, Prosper," was grateful.

Then they went in and a few moments later Prosper left—"to meet a man he expected."

But the man he met was Detective-Inspector Garrish, whom he found awaiting him with a gas mask in one hand and another hanging at his chest, by the path to the pyramid.

"Good," said Prosper and slipped the loop of the satchel over his head. "We probably won't need these—but it's as well to be prepared."

He stared at the sky over Kern.

"There's going to be a moon to-night," he said, and carefully examined the big blue automatic pistol which Garrish had given him with the mask.

"All right? Good! Forward, inspector—the path to Kern—and promotion."

## CHAPTER XXVI

**I**N the still shadows of the yew hedge nearest the pyramid, Prosper halted.

"There is plenty of time," he said, quietly, "and, in any case, it's almost certain that the killer won't go underground after the gold to-night."

"Then what's the idea of our waiting here?" demanded Garrishe.

"To receive and protect Lord Kern—if he comes, as I believe he may."

"Protect him? Who from? This killer?"

"Yes."

"But—why should he kill Lord Kern?" demanded the detective.

Prosper explained.

"It might give him a little more time to get at the gold. If he killed Kern to-night and—concealed him—Miss Merlehurst would not instantly take possession. There would be certain legal formalities—delays. And he might use that time for a—raid on the gold."

"But—it's being watched—we could watch it—six of us—every minute of the day!"

Prosper laughed drily.

"Do you think that would matter to the killer? He could still make another raid. . . . I'll explain that later—no, it will explain itself. Put up with me for

another hour or so, Garrishe—after that, you'll be in the spot light."

Reluctantly Garrishe let it go at that.

"Right," said Prosper and thought for a moment.

The distance-thinned wail of a locomotive whistle came faintly across the night as they waited, and Prosper spoke again.

"That's the last train coming in. I'll meet it. Kern may be on her, and there's nothing like taking time by the forelock. I might stop him from coming here at all to-night. After all, that would make it plain sailing for us."

It sounded like a man talking to himself.

"Will you hang on here for a little, Garrishe? I won't be long," suggested Prosper. "Keep close about the pyramid and just watch and listen. Don't mix into anything until I get back. You may make a mistake. I shan't be long."

"But the gold, man——"

"Never mind the gold. If the killer's out to-night he's out for something more destructible than gold," said Prosper, and was gone.

Garrishe stared into the dense shadows about the pyramid, grumbling under his breath—until it occurred to him that, after all, he was the man who should have been in control, not Prosper. It was simply because Prosper had succeeded where he, Garrishe, had failed, that Prosper was in charge.

Like the hard-headed man he was, he thrust away his pique and concentrated on his work.

That was less easy than it seemed for, even though it was no more than to focus his senses of hearing and of sight on the darkness, he presently became conscious of distractions.

An owl in the woods behind began to hoot, persistently, and, it seemed to Garrishe, more accustomed to town work, weirdly. Presently it floated soundlessly down to alight at the apex of the pyramid, and there continued its eerie vociferations.

Something ran swiftly past his feet—some small nocturnal hunter, a stoat or a weasel—startling him abominably for a moment.

He swore under his breath and waited. He heard the locomotive pull out from the station and wondered if Kern had come.

A little wind wandered out of the night and began to play softly among the tree tops with a low sound like small waves crawling wearily on a sandy beach.

The detective's mind coiled about Lord Kern. . . .

"After all, it's not so important as it looks. Even if he arrived a day or two late, Miss Merlehurst couldn't pin him to his 'gift' for a few hours——" he mused. "She *could*, I suppose, but she wouldn't. It would be a bit too thick. Not that it wouldn't serve him right. I'm fed up with these eccentric swells—fed—Kern, this Duke of Devizes, this broken down cavalry major—fed up——"

He checked suddenly, straining his eyes into the dark, tense, alert, listening.

But it was nothing close at hand that he heard—

only the faint throb of a passing motor, some distance away.

Then the church clock struck.

"Time's getting on. . . . I could have been to the station and back twice over——" said the detective to himself.

Slowly the darkness paled a little as the moon climbed, precariously, it seemed, to the topmost branches of the great elms about the castle, and suddenly the owl at the apex of the pyramid hooted again, rose and fanned itself away towards the woods.

Then a footstep sounded faintly on the far side of the garden—that of a man wearing light leather-soled boots, without rubber—and Garrishe stiffened, craning forward.

Some one was approaching the pyramid. Garrishe believed that it was neither Prosper returning nor the killer, prowling. For these moved silently.

He waited.

The sound of footsteps drew nearer. Whoever it was approaching, he made no effort at all to conceal his coming. And he came confidently like one who knew well his way.

Then Garrishe saw him—a shadowy form that came up under the pyramid and halted, within a few yards of the detective. The newcomer seemed to be peering up at the pyramid.

A second later a powerful torch shot a white shaft of light upon the grey flank of the leaden thing, and a deep voice spoke—reading aloud—

*"They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit! . . ."*

There was a second's silence.

Then the voice continued:

*" . . . Shall not profit those that bow down and worship only. But——"*

The light went out and Garrishe heard him draw a deep breath, almost like a sigh.

The church clock struck ten as the man turned away.

"Ten o'clock," the detective heard him say to himself. "It's late to call at Mavisholme—but she would understand and that was never an early household. And God knows, I would like to see her again. Ten years—ten years. If only to explain that their disappointment shall not be so great as it may seem. . . ."

Garrishe knew then that this was Lord Kern. He remembered the sound of the motor and guessed that it was by car the builder of the pyramid had come.

"Why couldn't he go to the Kern Arms and do his inspecting and calling like a sane man at a sane time in the morning," muttered Garrishe. He hesitated a moment, considering irritably whether to follow Kern or remain at his post. He remembered that Prosper had said that their object in waiting in the sunk garden to-night was chiefly to guard Lord Kern, not to capture the killer, whose taking apparently was to be achieved elsewhere.

The detective decided to follow Kern, who, already



a vague shadow, was moving towards the yew-hedge exit leading into the footpath that wound away to Mavisholme.

"Knows his way, evidently——"muttered Garrishe, and moved to follow.

But he checked himself, for even as he moved another figure had come, ghost-silent, out from the gloom under the pyramid, following Lord Kern.

Garrishe started. The killer? His hand flashed out from his pocket, gripping the automatic. But he steadied himself as he realised that the second figure was that of Prosper Fair. And it was during this pause that, soundless as a tracking beast of prey, yet another shadow stole out from behind the pyramid, silent and swift on the heels of Prosper.

Garrishe hesitated no more. He moved quickly along on the trail of the third man, his pistol ready in one hand, a torch in the other.

And now there were three men moving before him along the path to Mavisholme—and Garrishe knew that the first of these was Lord Kern and that the second was Prosper Fair. And he believed that the third was the killer. He realised the danger to Prosper, and even as he reached the yew-hedge exit his lips opened to shout a warning.

But the cry died away, unuttered, as a sudden blaze of light poured down the pathway towards him, and a low but distinct challenge shot out from the second man—Prosper's voice.

"Halt *you!* Don't move a finger!"

Somebody laughed softly—a familiar sound. It was the third man.

“Oh, it’s you, is it, Fair——” he said in a low voice. “I thought I was on the track of the killer.”

It was Barisford’s voice.

Garrishe was aware of a surge of relief, as he hurried up.

“I’m sorry if I startled you. The fact is I couldn’t settle down indoors—nerves, I suppose—all Kern folk are suffering from nerves just now—and I decided to prowl down to the pyramid to see how you and Garrishe were getting on. I saw two figures—one following the other—and that looked intriguing enough to follow up. I didn’t think you were one of them—had a fixed idea you would be in the castle—or under it, near the gold.”

He turned, as Garrishe came up, and his eyes widened.

“Why, Garrishe! Then—who’s that man in front? The man you were following, Fair!”

“Lord Kern!” snapped Garrishe. “I heard him talking to himself at the pyramid. He’s going to Mavis-holme. I think we’d better follow him. He sounded a bit odd, to me!”

“Odd!” Barisford’s voice was anxious. “Then in God’s name, let’s get on to the house. We can’t allow him to scare them.”

Prosper was certainly no less eager, and they pushed on after Kern. . . .

But he must have known the path as well, if not better than they, for their next sight of him was as he

stepped into the zone of light before the French window opening on to the Mavisholme verandah.

Even as he did so a man, Cass, ran round a corner on to the verandah—with a hoarse command to halt.

But he was too late—as was Prosper, springing on to the verandah at the same instant.

Mrs. Merlehurst had come to the window and was looking out.

She recognised Kern at once—but had no time to speak before the others were facing her.

She stepped back, and Nora Oxton came to her side.

It was, after all, Prosper who spoke first, his eyes searching the room, for Marjorie May. But she was not there.

“Don’t be startled—nothing serious has happened. Only—as you see—Lord Kern has returned, and we are acting as a—sort of escort in case of accident,” he explained. “Without his knowledge.”

Mrs. Merlehurst smiled, her relief palpable.

She faced Kern and her fine eyes widened, as she came up to him, offering her hand.

“It is really you, Charles? Home again at last. I am glad to see you—to welcome you.”

He took her hand with a sort of hunger.

“Thank you, Rose. I wanted to hear someone say that—I feared there would be nobody who cared to say it. And I had no right to expect to hear it from you—or anybody else.”

He was speaking nervously, in a deep, rather fine

voice, and his eyes did not leave her face. It was as though they two were quite alone.

"Time has almost stood still for you, Rose," he said impulsively. "You—are the same—as you were ten years ago."

She was looking at him with a strange intentness.

"You—have changed extraordinarily——" she said in a curious, subdued voice, oddly fraught with a note that, to Prosper, seemed congratulatory.

Lord Kern nodded.

"I believe—no, I know that I have changed. I have—educated myself!" His voice rose a little, touched with a kind of triumph.

"I have changed greatly. And that was why I came back—came home again. . . . You shall see."

Mrs. Merlehurst smiled faintly.

"I—have already seen that," she said.

Prosper, studying Kern's lean, clean-shaven, worn face, his deeply seamed forehead, thin lips, and rather sunken, dark eyes, judged that this man had known much suffering, endured much hardship. He, too, could believe that he had changed greatly from what he had been in the old days, for there was no sign in those deep eyes of the bitter, rapacious avarice for which he had been notorious, nor in the steady voice, the grave, controlled face, any hint of the extreme "eccentricity" which had notoriously been his chief weakness. It was the face of a very sane, serious-minded man with a well-balanced mind that Prosper studied in a mirror behind Mrs. Merlehurst.

Then Kern seemed suddenly to become aware that he was not alone with the woman for whom his passion of old had been so overwhelming, and had borne such tragic fruit. Mrs. Merlehurst introduced him to Nora Oxtou. Then he half-turned, facing the three men.

Barisford he recognised, instantly.

"How are you, Raymond?" he said, offering his hand, with that composure which in a certain class of Englishmen is so often mistaken for coldness.

He smiled as he spoke.

"The years have been kindly to you, also—I hope Fortune has been as kind!"

Barisford shook hands.

"Thank you, Lord Kern. I—have nothing to complain of," he said.

"We, too, must talk over many things presently, Raymond. I remember that I was a heavy burden to you in the old days."

The deep eyes rested on Prosper, and Kern's brows knitted unconsciously like those of one trying to recall an old memory. Mrs. Merlehurst introduced them.

"Prosper—Fair!"

Kern's dark eyes brightened as he repeated the name and Prosper saw that the memory had homed. His likeness to his father had not infrequently been a little awkward. He made haste to amplify the introduction.

"Prosper Fair—just a wandering painter in oils, Lord Kern," he explained very clearly.

Kern seemed to understand.

"A noble but often an ungrateful profession, Mr.

Fair," he said. His glance moved on to Garrishe—who introduced himself. For Garrishe was there on business and was not the man to disguise the fact.

"And I am Detective-Inspector Garrishe of Scotland Yard, my lord!"

"Ah! . . . I am glad to make your acquaintance, inspector," said Lord Kern, paused a moment, then added, "And I trust earnestly that I shall soon improve it—for I have heard of strange doings here—at Kern."

"I agree," replied Garrishe crisply. "We believe that there is a great deal of information bearing on the recent happenings at Kern Castle which your Lordship will be willing, as a matter of public duty, to give us."

His tone was curt, with a sort of official civility.

The detective knew what he was after, and where he stood now. All Scotland Yard spoke in his voice.

His eyes were keen and cold and his tone hard and precise. He was a very different man from that rather befogged and anxious person, hanging on to Prosper for clues. He had a fine clue now, and he proposed to let the sentimental greetings wait until after business was over.

"I am here investigating the murders of two people—Mr. Larry Calhoun, and an unknown woman—generally spoken of as the Lady with the Emeralds—and the suicide of"—he had the grace to give a queer, curt deprecatory movement of his head to Mrs. Merlehurst as he rapped it out—"the suicide of Major Geoffrey Merlehurst, late of the Dragoon Guards. The murders took place near the pyramid of lead in the

sunk garden of Kern—the suicide in Kern lake, my lord! I am sorry to appear to intrude these——”

He broke off suddenly, for Lord Kern had stepped back a pace, staring horrified, motioning him to silence.

“Calhoun . . . a woman with emeralds . . . Merlehurst!” he said, brokenly.

He sat down covering his face with his hands.

“All through the folly of one—misguided—man,” they heard him whisper.

But he recovered himself almost instantly, and raised a white face, set and firm, to them.

“I am sorry to press for some sort of guidance, my lord, but even as I—we—stand here talking, the mass of gold concealed in the pyramid—by your lordship—is there unguarded, unwatched, and the way to it is clear for the murderer!” Garrishe went on, jarringly insistent.

A slow flush flowed darkly over the pale face of Kern.

“The gold, yes, the gold!” he said. “My God! how bitterly I have repented of that folly in recent years—a thousand times—that madness. It was the gold that drew me home—like a great magnet——”

His eyes were those of a man in torment. Prosper yielded to a deep intuition that the man deserved to be freed from these keen thumbscrews of pain which the detective, working grimly, on ruthless but well-accustomed lines, was so inexorably tightening, and he spoke—in a new voice, chill, distinct and authoritative.

"That will do, Garrishe!" he said, sharply. "You exceed your rights. Lord Kern is suffering. There is nothing in the law or custom of this country which gives you the right to—torment this man at this hour—newly arrived home, tired, a stranger in his own place—sorrowful——"

"I've got my duty——" began the detective, harshly.

"Your duty, at this moment, is to be silent, Garrishe!"

The grim and burly man from Scotland Yard was wrong—and knew it. He was silent.

Lord Kern stood up, his face livid. Again he had mastered himself.

"But—if murder has been done—I——"

Him, too, Prosper checked.

"Permit me, Lord Kern!"

His hand flashed to his pocket.

"I will name the murderer at once," he rapped.

But he did not—for even as he spoke the door of the room swung open silently, and a little slender figure came in, moving slowly, staring straight before her.

It was Marjorie May—Marjorie May, wide-eyed with her gleaming hair unbound, flowing about her shoulders, clad in no more than a long white nightdress, and barefooted.

Her face was faintly flushed, her red lips parted, and her hands were a little raised before her as though she guarded herself from some unseen but suspected menace—or some ugly sight. She was fast asleep—but her blue eyes, save for a certain wide fixedness, an unusual



blankness, were those of one awake. . . . The excitement of that day had had its effect. She had gone to bed early to please her mother—but she had risen from it again. She was speaking low but distinctly, and a note of fear was in her voice.

Her mother made a lamentable gesture, mutely imploring them to be silent.

They stood, watching her.

Prosper's heart was racing, and he heard Barisford, with him a little behind the others, draw a long, long breath, like an interminable sigh.

The girl's voice rose, thinner than usual, with a strange, tingling, singing sweetness—like the ring of a thin wineglass—and her eyes were fixed on something beyond them.

"They are all afraid to be in the garden—the sunk garden, but I am not afraid to be in a garden that will some day be my own . . . dear place of dreams. . . . Mother, darling, don't ever be afraid of the grey pyramid—it means something. . . . I can't tell you. . . . I just know, my dear . . . unhappy for a little while . . . nothing . . . I have seen them—coiled—basking in the sunshine. . . . *They* won't hurt you . . . they wind away when you come. . . ."

They watched her spell-bound. She was talking as people dream. Her wide eyes were fixed on the open French window, as though she yearned to go to it and pass out into the night, but was conscious of some unseen barrier.

And yet she talked as though she were in the garden.

" . . . I *like* to see the pyramid in the moonlight . . . birds alight . . . even the owls at night . . . floating . . . never any harm . . . *what is that!* . . . "

She recoiled sharply, and her exquisite face blanched.

"Some one coming . . . keep still, he will not see . . . he will not hurt you . . . control yourself . . . control yourself . . . Marjorie . . . but—he is so *near* . . . 'ssh . . . he is carrying something . . . nursing in his arms . . . 'ssh . . . dangling . . . like a dead man . . . why, it is Mr. Barisford carrying a dead man in the moonlight . . . only Mr. Barisford . . . there, now he is gone . . . into the shadows . . . o-oh! . . . "

She ceased, sighing.

And it seemed to Prosper that only then did the long, sighing inhalation of Barisford's breath cease.

They were all craning to the girl.

"Oh, don't wake her—don't startle her——" breathed Mrs. Merlehurst

But Prosper leaned across close to Barisford, whispering thinly at his shoulder.

"Man, did you hear? Did you hear?"

He was desperately excited—fighting against it. His fingers closed on Barisford's arm.

They moved back a pace stiffly.

"Did you hear, I say. . . . Barisford, I guessed it next morning. . . . You left a shoe track by the yew hedge that night—behind her. . . . I matched it with your shoe next morning. . . . "

Barisford's eyes were on Marjorie May, yearning, renouncing, tragic . . . but he yielded to the urge of Prosper's hand, and silently they passed out through the French window. The others were still intent on the little sleep walker for suddenly she had begun to weep softly.

Barisford tore his eyes from the girl and faced Prosper.

"You, too, know!" he said drearily.

"From the morning after she came to the garden. . . . It was you who lurked in the shadows behind her that night, with the body of the Iron-Grey Man in your arms—*en route* for the lake, Barisford—escaped through the yew gap, threw Merlehurst—her own father, my God, the tragedy of it!—into the bushes a little off the pathway, and came back calling 'Marjorie! Oh, Marjorie!' . . . It was so welcome—you coming, calling . . . but, Barisford, I have a hundred proofs and——"

Whispering on the verandah they were like men in a nightmare.

"Garrishe will understand in a few seconds! . . ."  
But Barisford laughed softly.

"Don't worry, I . . . such an expert in gas and things . . . am fully prepared. . . . Fair, let me say that it was madness, a madness of greed. A streak of madness. . . . Search the black oak bureau in my study . . . all there. . . . I wish you and Marjorie—just everything! . . . Oh, my God!"

His hand moved swiftly to his mouth as Garrishe

came to the French window. In the darkness just beyond them Cass stood rigid as a—sergeant-major.

“Barisford!” rapped Garrishe.

“I am very sorry——” said Barisford suavely, even though he was fighting for breath. “But I am—leaving this place. . . .”

He reeled round and Prosper saw his face clearly in the outpouring of light from the room. Even as he opened his arms to catch the falling man . . . he saw again in those fading eyes that deep-set, unconquerable gleam, a twinkle of mad humour. . . .

“Here’s your murderer, Garrishe!” said Prosper softly, and very gently laid the lax body on the verandah. “He was quite mad, you know. . . . Cass!”

“Sir!”

“Help Inspector Garrishe as well as you can!”

“Very good, sir.”

His nerves quivering, Prosper stepped in through the French window, closed it, and unobtrusively drew the curtain.

Neither Marjorie May, her mother, nor Nora Oxton was in the room now. Lord Kern stared up at him.

“She woke up, that child, and they have taken her back to her room,” he said. “Where is Raymond Barisford?”

“He has killed himself. It was he who committed the murders at the pyramid,” explained Prosper. “He was accursed—with a queer streak.”

Lord Kern nodded.

“I know. Aren’t we all? I know I was—but, God

helping me, I have outlived it. More fortunate than Raymond. . . . Yet, it was my fault at the beginning."

Vainly Prosper shook his head.

"Don't blame yourself, Lord Kern. It goes further back than that——"

The door opened and Nora Oxton came in.

"I will explain that," added Lord Kern swiftly and rose.

"Is all well?" he asked.

Nora smiled.

"Sound asleep in her mother's bed," she explained.

Prosper walked with Kern to the Kern Arms at which he had engaged rooms. It was a silent walk, soon finished.

There were no signs of Garrishe and Cass and Barisford. Somewhere at the back, no doubt, there were grim activities—they had become almost expert in these at the Kern Arms. Or, possibly, they had taken Barisford back to his own home.

Prosper did not enquire—all that, now, was for Garrishe.

## CHAPTER XXVII

**I**N the comfortless sitting room typical of an English village inn it was quickly apparent to Prosper that to exhibit some anxiety to hear Lord Kern's story would be in the nature of a charity. The man was craving to explain, and it was evident that he had no conception that Prosper knew practically all there was to know.

So Prosper sat down and made himself a cigarette.

"It is not too late for you to talk a little about—events?" asked Prosper, glancing at the clock.

"Indeed no—on the contrary——"

Kern was eager.

"It is clear to me that so much unhappiness—so much tragedy—has occurred as a result of my folly, that I am almost intolerably anxious to hear the truth and to explain as well as I can to someone who seems likely to understand,—if it is possible for any one to understand. I confess that, looking back at the things I did during the three years before I left England, it seems to me now that I must have been—unbalanced."

Prosper shook his head—but not emphatically.

"Not so bad as that I think—but eccentric. Your worst fault was—let me be frank—miserliness carried to an extreme. Your conception of great wealth was that it was a thing of irresistible allurements—infallible,

unconquerable, omnipotent. I know—I understand perfectly. I have met other men suffering from that affliction.”

Prosper’s voice was vaguely sympathetic.

“A dreadful affliction,” he continued, “and you were terribly a victim of it. But to your amazement you discovered that there actually existed a woman, apparently sane, certainly good, who valued even the slender hope of being able to retain—no, to regain—the love of her husband, waster though he was, much more than the glittering pile of treasure you had hoarded so long and patiently. She convinced you that she meant this sincerely and unalterably . . . and the vanes of your mind veered again in the wind of adverse circumstance. . . . Like myself—I am the Duke of Devizes—you come of a long, and perhaps considerably inbred line, which tends to make one extreme, not to say eccentric, and, not so very surprisingly to a student of these matters, you went to the extreme of—denying and abolishing your idol. You violently forswore the worship of Mammon, and even buried him—the great god, Gold—in the lead-sheathed stone of the pyramid . . . and leaving all you possessed to the daughter of the woman you loved, you—went out into the world.”

Kern was wincing a little, and Prosper saw that.

“Please don’t think I am trying to hurt you,” he said quickly. “I think I know the wind-blown seed-cases called men too well to want to hurt any one in a world full of them. But I want to make it apparent to you how it all looked to an impartial outsider in

possession of the facts. . . . You accepted, with a sort of fanatical literalness the truths you inscribed on the pyramid. The puzzle is that you did not throw your treasure into the sea in your unreasoning disgust and revulsion."

"I—didn't think of it," confessed Lord Kern, in a low voice.

"No. That is exactly how these extreme things take one. . . . You were like your ancestor, that Baron of Kern who, in the Middle Ages, did very much the same—'buried his treasure and went abroad in sack-cloth.' But *he* was captured and tortured by his heir who mediævally arranged for his elimination when he had revealed his hiding place."

"You know that—legend?"

"It is in all the guide-books. . . . There's a drop of that old baron in you. Oh—I'm no better. I assure you that quite frequently I feel a faint urge to drive fat cattle out of a field when I see them. There's a drop of some ancient cattle-raider's blood in me. . . . Then you disappeared, believing that there was an end of the buried idol. But a few people learned of the contents of the pyramid—one Larry Calhoun——"

"Larry Calhoun! I don't remember——"

"His Chinese cook befriended you out West years ago——" prompted Prosper.

Kern nodded.

"Yes—I remember—I suppose I spoke of the hidden gold in my delirium!"

"In your delirium, yes," said Prosper equably.



"Years after he tried to steal your treasure and was murdered within a few feet of it. . . ."

Kern said nothing to that.

"A little later came a lady—wife of Larry Calhoun, though, I believe, no longer a friend of his. Her name was Niobe Swayne, though they call her the Lady with the Emeralds."

Kern groaned.

"I gave them to her. She was sympathetic to me after—my disappointment—but she could not lessen it. So I gave her the emeralds—they were of no use to me then—and never saw nor heard of her again."

Prosper nodded.

"She heard of the gold, no doubt, during the days when she still shared a home with Calhoun. She, too, came questing for it—perhaps for sake of plunder, perhaps to anticipate, and revenge herself on, the husband she had learned to hate, and from whom she had parted. . . . She, too, was murdered."

The hands of Lord Kern tightened on his chair-arms, but he said no more.

"Next, ranging upwind, like a homeless pointer, came an unhappy man—Major Merlehurst, set on finding the treasure for his old age. How *he* knew of it, I have not discovered. Perhaps, in the old days he may have learned that there was a hollow shaft in the pyramid, of small diameter, cased with iron—like an iron drain pipe—and guessed why, years later. . . . His guess led him within reach of the murderer—who did not let him escape! . . . Three people dead for that—buried

idol! . . . It was my turn next. But I was fortunate. I escaped. Last of all it was the turn of the killer himself—your secretary of old-time—Raymond Barisford—a man accursed with a secret taint of criminal madness, but, in many other respects, a white man. It killed him in the end, this pyramid of lead. . . . I chanced to discover a few minor commissions and omissions on the part of the killer which convinced me that he was Barisford—a lucky shoe print; the fact that the only person safe in the garden was the girl with whom Barisford was in love, and who might some day possess the gold; the discovery that Barisford habitually searched my tent; that he was absent with a swollen neck when I was incapacitated with a bruised stomach; and the fact that Mrs. Merlehurst had not seen Barisford on a night that Marjorie May walked in her sleep and that thus he could not have known she had left her home, though he said he was searching for her; a few little things like that—including a small burglary at his house (on a night he thought he was blinding every one by taking his turn at watching the gold) when I succeeded in reading the book—a curious, rather saddening confession in diary form—of which he spoke to-night . . . almost his last words. He was an underpaid private secretary—and his moral courage failed him when his latent criminal taint whispered that it was not necessary to be poor all his life. He, too, knew of or guessed at the gold—something in your papers concerning the building of the pyramid suggested it, no doubt—and he worked long and patiently to win

it—so desperately that he arrived at a frame of mind in which he preferred to kill with swift poison gas rather than to let any other raider win the gold.”

Prosper broke off suddenly, his face sad and somehow older—waited a moment, then added, gravely:

“Your idol had power to cause a great deal of misery, Lord Kern, securely though you buried it.”

For a moment there was silence in that shabby room. Then Prosper added, quietly:

“And I believe you know why—even as I believe I have somehow managed to learn why.”

Kern spoke.

“Yes, I know now—that was what I meant when I said to-night that I had educated myself. . . .”

He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then, speaking steadily, with extraordinary gravity and a profound authority, he said:

“I have been long, overlong, in learning a truth that every one knows and few realise—that money needs to be managed and not misused. The root of all evil is mismanaged money . . . not just money because it is money. I suppose certain men—a very few—possess the essential meaning of that rather unimposing little phrase from their early youth. My apology is that I did not. I have to plead ignorance. I was—what I was. And it was given to me to possess a great deal of money. I hoarded it, treasured it, watched it grow big—and idle. I turned it into certain yellow stuff, very beautiful to me, gold. Gold. And it failed me. It could buy me everything except the thing I wanted

—I only wanted love. How weak that sounds—if one does not think, when one says it, of what it means. . . . Never mind. It failed me—a million pounds. . . .

“So I flew to the other extreme—embraced another fallacy!

“I abandoned it. . . . I cased it in iron and stone and lead. If it had occurred to me to throw it into the sea, I assure you I would have done that. . . . It was just the fancy of a man half mad—to lock it in cold iron, bind it about with solid stone, sheathe it all in the dead metal, lead. . . .

“Yet, even so, its force, something, bit through all and brought to their deaths even as you have said, certain unhappy folk. . . .

“Gold—treasure—is not to be buried. It is not—buriable. Bury it as deeply as you will—it is dug again. Throw it into the deep sea—it is washed up. It melts and runs from fire, but only to reform; acids it resists; rust cannot end it nor age rot it away——”

He had risen and was walking to and fro upon the worn, inn carpet, talking quickly, jerkily, but with a singular nervous power.

“It is indestructible as a metal—and it is indestructible as a force! It is like fire, like breath, like steam, like bread, it must be controlled, managed. . . .

“There is, in all mankind, a secret flame, a deep unquenchable ember, the imperious desire to create. He must build, or weave, or dig, accomplish any one of ten thousand acts of creation for that is Man and the thing which marks the difference between Man and Beast.

And the whole world has agreed that the best vehicle of creation it has yet discovered is money—call it gold.

“So men strive after it—are driven to strive for it because they are Mankind and not Beast-kind—because it is their nature to strive for it. Not one in ten thousand know that the urge, the drive, the impelling force is not the lust for gold but the lust to create. There are millionaires—I have talked with some of these in a country where millionaires are more numerous and perhaps less an object of avid-eyed curiosity than in this country and I know that it is so. They go on—putting million side by side with million. But they use those millions. Neither weighing them down nor encasing them with iron, stone and lead, regarding them not as solid senseless gold, but as a source of fruitfulness. Man dreams of gold—the socialist, the capitalist, and all men between these. They dream gold because they can no more help it than the sun can help rising in gold. For gold-getting is creating . . . and that is the truth as I have learned it painfully and in great suffering. I have talked with ten thousand men—and ten thousand again—and the deep thought of their deepest heart is of gold. Because they call it gold. But they would be nearer the truth if they called it creation. What man troubles to plant wheat in a wilderness in order to gain a surplus of wheat grains to give away? What does a socialist baker demand for his bread? . . .”

He stopped abruptly.

“No more. . . . I have stated the thing as I see it

now—not as I saw it of old. I have learned many things. And I have come home again to unlock my gold, to un-dam it, to irrigate dry channels, barren soils, to lubricate stiff wheels, and, as well as I may, to endeavour to create fruitfulness where now is sterility. . . .”

He looked at Prosper, his eyes weary, yet not without a promise of hope.

“I grieve for those dead people,” he continued. “If it were possible I would restore to them their lives at the cost of my own. That is the truth—though I suppose few would believe it. . . . I was mad once—now I am sane. . . . No more talk.”

He sat suddenly, dropping his head on arms spread on the table.

Prosper, touched, spoke quietly.

“No more talk,” he echoed. “I think that there is not one of those concerned in the affair of the Kern pyramid who, like you, will not be well content to let this night close like a closed door on the past—and the morning break like an opening gate on a new future—a fresh start. . . . Out of a maze of mistakes mankind painfully wins knowledge. I believe it is the use to which he puts his knowledge that blots out and justifies his errors—just as it is the uses to which he puts his gold that justify his possession of it.”

He smiled, though his eyes were sad.

“More philosophy by Fair,” he added, inaudibly, incorrigibly whimsical.

He touched Kern on the shoulder, offering his hand.

"Good-night," he said, in a studiously normal tone. "You would do well to inaugurate your return home with a pretty determined effort to get back some of the sleep which you have denied yourself, or been denied recently."

"I propose to do that," Kern agreed, quietly, and so Prosper left him.

A small whitish object sitting in the inn porch greeted him as friends greet who have been separated for many long and weary months—Plutus, the "carnivore," left in the porch half an hour before—and so they went off to Mavisholme, through the moonlight, conversing together at leisure, like two who have done a good day's work for a fair day's pay and were wholly aware of it.

"And now, hound of my heart, we go to Mavisholme, having settled this matter of the Kern mystery," said Prosper. "There, in that house we will abide for a little, basking in the rays of Marjorie May. We shall encourage, with our presence, the pending demolition of the pyramid, and the beginning of the restoration of Kern, and by way of diversion, we will at times fare forth to the downs with Marjorie May and exhort the horses to gallop very furiously and fast for the credit of Mr. and Mrs. Oxton—and Mark. Then, after a little, we will abandon our alias—as Garrishe might put it—and take Marjorie May home to Derehurst. . . ."

He halted at the gate, looking along the deserted road. Somehow, it was lonely in the cold moonlight.

"Behold, Plutus," Prosper went on, dreamily, "the

spirit of prophecy moves within me. I say to you now it is written in the stars that Marjorie May will be a duchess whom we shall never cease to glorify. It is so written, I say, in the stars—that one over there. . . . No, no, not that one, Plutus, that's Sirius—the Dog Star—*your* star maybe. But the one of which *I* speak is called Venus!"

He laughed, opened the gate, and, walking on the soft turf for sake of the sleepers within, went quietly towards the house, Plutus flickering, as quietly, after him.

(1)

THE END





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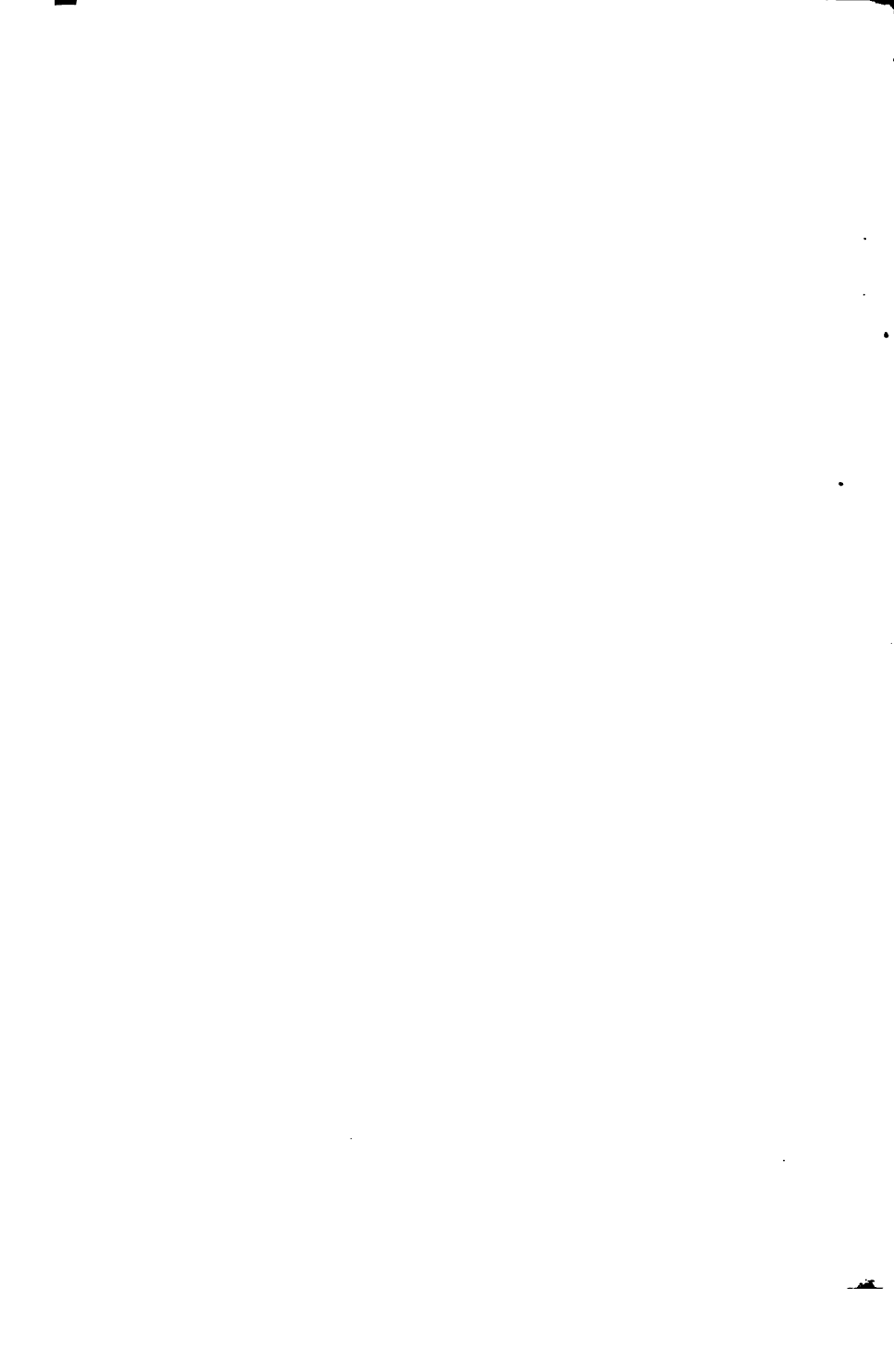
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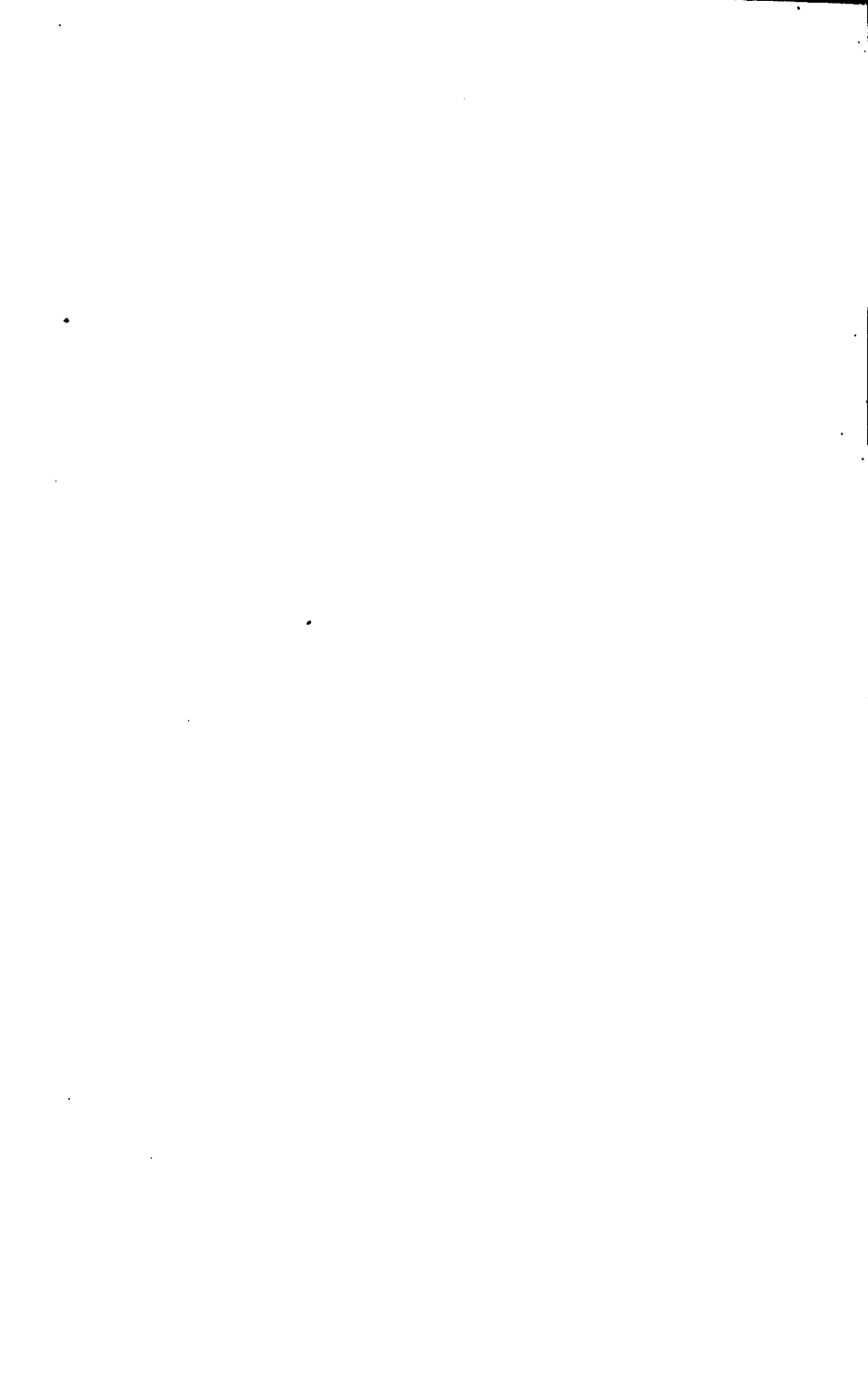
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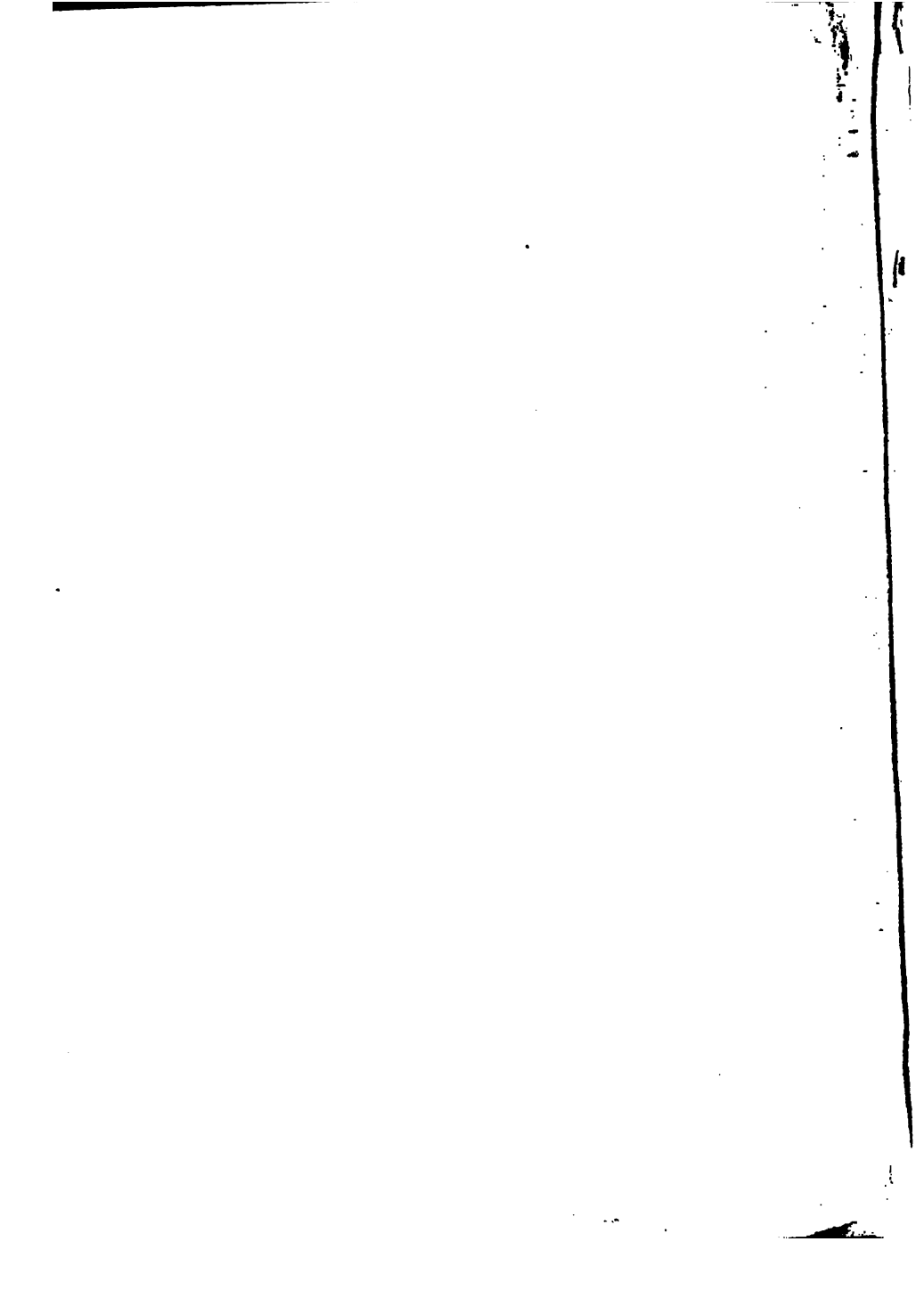
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