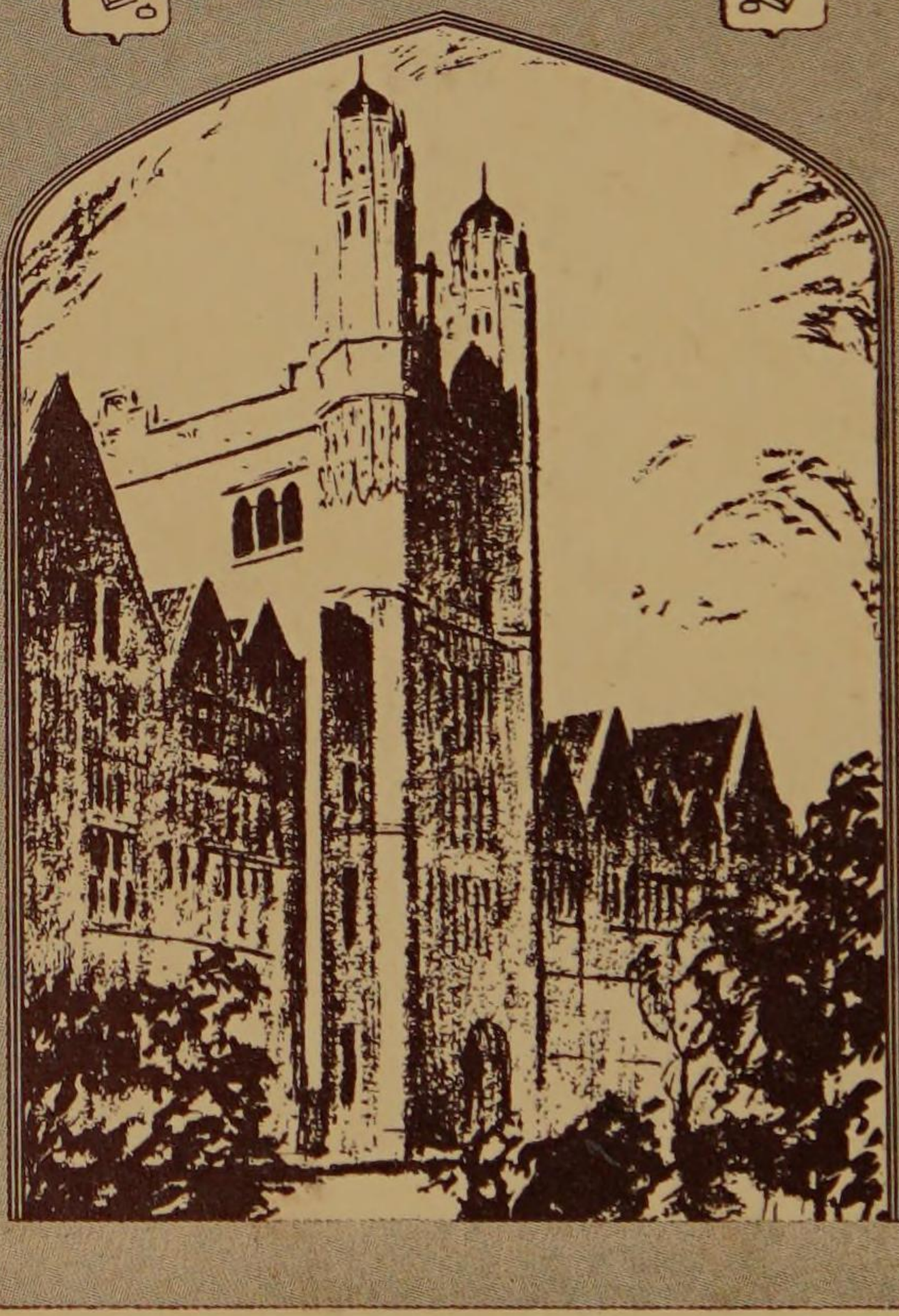
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I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING



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I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING

BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

AND

GERALD BULLETT

NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1933

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I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING

CHAPTER I

THE STEEL CASKET

SIMON HEATH, having entered a first class carriage, and bumped his suitcase into the rack, let down the window and leaned out. He was a pleasant young man in his middle twenties, with a good forehead, clear eyes, a straight nose, and a friendly mouth. Perhaps his manner was a trifle vague, and there was something thoughtful, even studious, about his appearance; but nevertheless he did not look like a lecturer on Ancient and Earlier European History in the University of Cambridge. There was little or nothing about him to suggest that he was already quite an authority on the Dark Ages, that his monograph on the later phases of the Byzantine Empire had been praised at Harvard and received with respect in Heidelberg. But his uncle and guardian, the Dean of Gulforth, could have put you right about all that. The Dean could have told you that Simon had done very well—"ve-ery well indeed, though rather unsound in his Early Church History." And the Dean was there, standing on the platform. At the moment, he was wishing that he had not come, and Simon himself was secretly sharing that wish. Both of them had noticed, with horror, that three minutes must elapse before the train would start. That meant they would have to remain idiotically where they were, trying to make conversation. How to live through these three enormous minutes—

that was the problem. It was the Dean who plunged manfully into the silence.

"Well, my boy," said he, "you've three minutes to spare. There's nothing like punctuality."

"Yes," said Simon. "I mean, no. If we'd been three minutes later . . ." But the conclusion seemed too obvious to bear stating.

"Ah yes," said the Dean, with an air of sententiousness which no one regretted more than he. "And this train always starts to time."

"Yes, always," agreed Simon.

They abandoned themselves, in silence for a moment, to the rich comfort of this reflection.

The guard, with a little green flag tucked under his arm, sauntered slowly down the platform. Involuntarily the eyes both of Simon and the Dean followed this figure, on whom all their present hopes were set. If only he would turn, blow his whistle and wave his flag, the last handshake could be accomplished and the farewells said.

"There's the guard," remarked the Dean, struggling to keep exaltation out of his voice. "You'll be off presently, I fancy." He seemed to rub his hands in delight at the prospect.

"Yes, there's only two minutes now," said Simon. Two minutes. Two more of such minutes as this that had just reluctantly dragged itself away. He smiled wanly.

"Well," said the Dean, after another silence, "there's no need for me to tell you to keep yourself out of mischief. The only mischief you're prone to is overwork. Try to remember that you're going to London to enjoy yourself. Don't sit up all night reading, my

boy. Keep away from the libraries. Remember," he added sententiously, "that history is being made all round you. Ah, there's the whistle. No, don't lean out. It's dangerous."

Simon prepared to withdraw. "Goodbye, uncle."

"And try to drive a little sense into Oliver," the Dean shouted. "He needs it."

"What?" Simon shouted.

"Needs it," the Dean bellowed, waving a fine plump clerical hand. Then he was gone.

Settling himself into his seat, Simon decided that it was no business of his to try and drive a little sense into his cousin Oliver. The opportunity would be there, for this journey was the beginning of a visit to Oliver, who was a journalist of sorts and had a London flat with a spare bed in it, which he had placed at the disposal of his cousin for this next fortnight, until the end of June, by which time Simon would be ready to return to his stately and stodgy cathedral town before going for his usual summer holiday in the Tyrol. Oliver was rather wild and a bit of an ass, but he would do very well as he was. For he certainly enjoyed himself; there could be no doubt about that; and Simon, having just finished a year's work on the Dark Ages and the Byzantine Empire, and feeling rather jaded and somewhat bored with the monastic and scholarly life, was ready to envy any young man who had the opportunity, as well as the capacity, for enjoying himself. But now, he thought, he need envy Oliver no longer. He too, Simon Heath, would enjoy himself.

He stared idly out of the window at the reddish-brown hedges, the green corn, the summer sky. Trees,

dimly seen, rose up with a kind of shout. A chalky cutting slid across his vision like a white lid pushed over a pencil-box. There was a brief tantalizing glimpse of gaily-colored feminine dresses in some vague happy place. There was a queer sort of challenge in this flowing landscape, so rich and fruitful with life, so much more fascinating and disturbing than the most erudite and ambitious historical works. "If you're not careful," Simon told himself, almost fiercely, "you're going to dwindle and wither into a little don. Like old Torrington." No, never. Not like old Torrington. But what was the use of talking to himself like that? The trouble was, he was *too* careful.

A little shuffling noise disturbed him, and he turned away from the window to discover that he was not alone. There, seated in the centre of the opposite side, was a decidedly foreign gentleman. He was very neatly dressed in a black coat and striped trousers. He had a short black beard, a black pointed moustache, a long brown nose, and eyes that positively flashed as they glanced in Simon's direction. He was nursing on his knees a very opulent-looking small suitcase.

Simon must have looked a trifle disturbed, for the stranger immediately flashed eyes and teeth at him, waved a long brown hand apologetically, and cried in a high-pitched Latin voice: "Many pardons if I disturb! Yes, many pardons indeed. I wish to smoke, and this is Smoking, so I come in." He indicated the door from the corridor. Then he looked sad. "And I disturb?"

Simon, nervously polite, muttered something to the effect that it was all right.

"Good!" cried the foreign gentleman. With the

dexterity of a conjurer he suddenly produced a gold cigarette case and flashed it across at Simon. "A cigarette, eh?" And when they had both lit their cigarettes, he continued: "We go to London now, and we make no stay, eh?"

This was puzzling. "What, in London?" said Simon.

"No, no, no, no. Not in London, but now, in this train. No, we make no stop, eh? Ha-ha!—just vairy queeck—ex-press—no stop." And the foreign gentleman wiggled his fingers at a colossal speed to give point to his observations.

"Oh, I see. You mean the train. But it does stop," Simon told him. "It stops at the next station, Blantley, and then it stops again at the next station after that—Ledworth Junction. After that, it is a non-stop to London."

The stranger's face fell most dramatically at this piece of information. It was as if he had a passion for non-stop trains. "Two, eh? Is it big stops—or just a bagatello? Ten thousand pardons if I am a weariness to you."

Simon waved away the ten thousand pardons, and explained that the train only halted for a few moments at Blantley and then made a stop of several minutes at Ledworth Junction, where part of another train joined it. His companion received this news with a cheerfulness that seemed to Simon forced. After that, although the foreign gentleman did not stop talking altogether, he remained rather thoughtful and looked slightly uneasy. A very fussy traveller and an Italian, decided Simon—and left it at that.

Blantley came and went, and then the landscape

had hardly settled into a steady flight again before they came groaning into the bustling little station of Ledworth Junction. Their train arrived, thought better of it, and wandered away from the platform, only to pull in again and anchor itself, two minutes later, near the waiting passengers and porters and bags. Simon was not interested in Ledworth Junction, but the foreign gentleman was. With hasty apologies, he stood at the window and looked anxiously about.

Suddenly he drew in his head, and made a most extraordinary hissing sound.

"What's that?" cried Simon, startled.

The foreign gentleman stared at him with eyes that seemed to have grown enormous. "Sssssa! Ah! Sa!" The last "Sa" was very short, explosive. He was no longer a beaming foreign gentleman. He was more like an anxious soda-syphon.

"I say, is there anything wrong?" asked Simon, who, though a shy young man, had a sense of hospitable responsibility towards foreign travellers. "Is anything wrong?" he repeated.

The foreign gentleman now burst into talk and activity again. He pointed to Simon's expanding suitcase on the rack, and cried: "For me—Doctor Pianella—one leetle thing you can do, if you are so kind. Your bag—he grows bigger and bigger, isn't it?"

Having said so much, he popped his head out of the window and popped it back again with extraordinary rapidity, then quickly unlocked his own suitcase and took something out of it. "For me one leetle thing —but very important," he continued breathlessly,

"and afterwards—I explain. You put this in your bag for me, and you do jolly good kindness for me—Doctor Pianella—"

"Yes, but wait a minute," said Simon, staggered by this request. "I don't quite see—"

"Afterwards you see," cried Dr. Pianella impatiently. "Afterwards, plenty talk—plenty, plenty. But bags now—bags now, talk afterwards, eh?"

And Dr. Pianella was at once so bustling and persuasive that Simon found himself opening his bag without any further remonstrance. Into it went the thing that Dr. Pianella had been holding, for the last quarter of a minute, in his hand, and Simon had just time to notice that this thing was a steel casket about nine inches long by six, with a depth nearly equal to its width. The next moment the train, with a preliminary bump, began pushing Ledworth Junction out of its life.

"Quick, quick!" cried the doctor. "Fasten him up, the bag. All locked up. All nice and tidy. Yes, yes," he continued, sinking back into his seat, with his own bag locked again and Simon's reposing innocently on the rack. "All nice and tidy, eh?"

Simon was not so sure about this. He looked as he felt—puzzled and dubious.

Dr. Pianella, now smiling again, held up a hand. "You can save your breaths. You say—'Who is this Doctor Pianella? Why does he with so large an impudenza use my bag? What leetle thing does he give me? Is it of the inferno, this parcel?' That is what you say, eh?"

Simon stared at him helplessly. But the word "inferno" conveyed a meaning to him, and a very dis-

quieting meaning too. An infernal machine? Why not? How did he know what had been put into his bag, what this little steel casket contained? This would not do at all. "Well, you know," he said amiably, "I think I ought to have an explanation. I don't want your casket—or whatever it is—in my bag."

"Explanation!" cried the doctor, with enthusiasm, and beaming upon his companion. "You want explanation, is it? I give him. In one moment, I tell you everything."

"Thank you," said Simon, not without irony. He gave a glance at his bag above, as if he felt it might go off at any moment. Then when his glance returned to Dr. Pianella, he saw that that gentleman was staring into the corridor. And for a very good reason too; for outside in the corridor was somebody staring in, staring at Dr. Pianella. A thick-set man with a broad battered face. An unpleasant-looking brute.

Simon said nothing. There was something in Dr. Pianella's strained gaze that implored him to be silent. The man outside stared fixedly for another moment or two, then opened the door, and put his head into the compartment. Having done this, he nodded his head grimly at Dr. Pianella. It was a brief and wordless performance, but an extraordinarily effective one. There was no mistaking its menacing aspect.

"All right, Italiano," remarked the head, putting on a wide gape of a grin.

Dr. Pianella shrugged his shoulders, throwing up both his hands and letting them fall dramatically.

This time the head wagged. "Yeh, this is me all right," it observed. "And don't run away. This

train don't stop till we get to London, and yer might get 'urt if yer tried to leave it, see? Does about sixty, this train does."

"Me run away!" cried the doctor, raising his eyebrows to an astonishing height and then spreading out all his fingers. "Why should I run away, eh? I go to London. Like you."

"That's right. Like us. We'll be there all right, Mister Italiano. Look out for us. We'd 'ate to miss yer." The head grinned again. Then it drew back. Somewhere down the corridor could be heard the "Tickets, please" of the inspector. The intruder shut the door, gave a last nod through the window at Dr. Pianella, and disappeared.

The ticket inspector appeared. Pianella, with a grimace at Simon to enjoin silence, fished in his pocket; and it was not until after the tickets had been collected and they were alone again that Simon ventured to speak.

"Look here," he began, rather sharply, "I don't understand all this. First you put this thing in my bag, then that fellow comes along—"

"Bad man. You see that. Very bad man."

"He certainly looks a scoundrel," Simon admitted, much relieved that they had apparently seen the last of him. "But what is it all about?"

Dr. Pinella lit a cigarette. "Mistaire—er—?"

"My name is Heath—Simon Heath."

"And of which place? London, eh?"

"No, mostly St. Luke's College, Cambridge," Simon told him.

This information seemed to delight Dr. Pianella. "Ah!" he cried, regarding Simon with the most benevo-

lent interest and approval. "A scholar, eh? Me too —Doctor Pianella—yes, jolly good. Philosophy, science, eh?"

"No, history."

"Ah!" It seemed that Dr. Pianella approved of history too. "Well, I give you history now, the most strange, the most romantical—not of Charlemagne, not of Napoleon, not of Garibaldi—but of Doctor Giuseppe Pianella." Here he paused dramatically, and Simon, loath to spoil so admirable an effect, waited and said nothing.

"Yes," said Dr. Pianella, slowly and thoughtfully now, as if mentally examining some epic of strange adventure, "You shall know of me and that leetle casket. I will tell you everything."

Having said this, he looked first at the empty corridor, and then at the wavering fields outside, then gravely fixed his large bright eyes on Simon. "The East—it is all known to you? Like the hand palm, yes?"

No, the East was not all known to Simon. "I've been to Constantinople and Asia Minor, that's all."

"This is much more East," said Dr. Pianella, with something of relief in his manner. "It is in 1911 that I am first there, on the great deserts—"

"Which great desert?" Simon asked. He was a sound scholar and liked exact facts.

"You will see," continued the doctor, waving the interruption aside rather impatiently. "Between Russia and China and India there are great deserts —is it not? I am there, with many tribesmen, with camels, with guns, with food and water enough. Me —I am young—but already I am Doctor Pianella—

I go to explore, to dig, to make famous. There is a speck—it is nothing—no, it is something—not an animal—it does not move—I go to see. What do I find there? I find a tent." And here the doctor stopped, removed his earnest gaze from Simon, and transferred it to the window.

This remote discovery of a tent in 1911 did not appear to be leading very directly to this business of a steel casket in a train in this present year, but nevertheless, Simon, who was not a historian for nothing, and knew that in this strange world there are some very fantastic chains of event, was prepared to listen in patience. Indeed, his curiosity was thoroughly aroused by this time and demanded satisfaction. This was quite an adventure, and he saw himself making a very good story out of it for some of the men at St. Luke's next term. "Go on," he commanded, for the doctor seemed to have lost himself in a brown study.

The doctor recovered himself with a slight start. "Ten thousand pardons again!" he cried, beaming once more. "I see it all again, and so I lose myself. I am not here—I am in the great desert. I find a tent—and in the tent, what is this? Two men—one, two! And they are known to me—yes, they are known to me, though I do not see them before—nevaire before. One is Russian—the Count Boris Stunski!—the so famous Stunski. And the other is your so famous Colonel Boyd-Corry!—the noble English explorer, the pretty good soldier, and—how you say?—jolly old top of a sportsman. Yes, the Count Stunski and the Colonel Boyd-Corry."

"What were they doing?" asked Simon. "Were they lost?"

"They bleed," cried Dr. Pianella, now in the highest state of excitement, his eyes, his teeth, his whole countenance flashing like a mad lighthouse. "They bleed like the stuck pig, these famous fellows. They will die there. No camel, no guide, no nothing. All gone. Why do they bleed? They have fought," continued the doctor, lowering his voice and staring at his listener, "they have fought the duello. There in the great desert, they have fought the duello. You say 'It is the madness'. I say too 'It is the madness'. For what do they fight? Not for love, not for a woman—no, not in the great desert! They care nothing for women. It is for a leetle, leetle bones and for the leetle, leetle old ashes. They are nothing. They are everything. What are these but the leetle bones and ashes of the Iron Prophet, the old Prophet Yann! Of him you have heard in your history, eh?"

Simon rapidly searched his memory. No, he confessed, he had never heard of the Iron Prophet, the Prophet Yann. "It's rather out of my place and period," he added, feeling that something of the sort must be said for the honour of Cambridge scholarship.

"Nevaire mind," said the doctor, who seemed relieved rather than disturbed by this ignorance. "Yann is the greatest of the secret prophets. His bones and ashes work magic—no, no, that you need not believe. We know better—we are men of knowledge, eh? But there—in the East—they believe—and they wait for these—what you call them?—these relics. With them, you go here, you go there, in the East—what happens? They rise up like that—pouf!—bang! For white men then, it is finished. The East has gone —pouf!—like that. And where are these bones and

ashes, these relics? Where are they?" He shot out a long startling forefinger.

"You don't mean that casket?" Simon stammered.

Dr. Pianella crowed with triumph. "But yes," he cried. "In that casket is a leetle box, and in that leetle box is the leetle bones and ashes, the relics, of the Iron Prophet Yann. Now you see. Pianella who talks to you—to him belong the relics—and with him they are quiet, they are safe. If they return to the East, what happens? All is up a glue-tree! Pouf! The East is all on fire. I would not have it so. You would not have it so. But there are some would have it so. In the East, eh? In Russia, eh? They know that I —Doctor Pianella—have the relics, and they have money, much money, and they have *espionage* here—spies, agents, how you say?—and so I tell you it is of the inferno. You have seen one naughty villain. Oh!—he is nothing—an ox, a pumpkin—but there are clever ones who pay him. Every time I move, it is the life in the hands. One day perhaps—Pianella is missing, Pianella is gone, Pianella is dead—" he added, eyeing Simon with a wistful appeal, then suddenly sitting up straight and opening wide his bright brown eyes, "the relics are back to the East and there is fire and torture and massacre. Not nice, mistaire." He shook his head and screwed up his nose distastefully. "Not at all nice. Now you are jolly sportsman, you are Cambridge scholar—and I say to you, hide my leetle casket in your bag—do nothing but that—for a leetle time."

"Yes, I see that," said Simon dubiously. "But after all, you know, this is a law-abiding country. Why not go to the police and have done with it?"

Dr. Pianella give a groan of despair and raised his hands in protest. "Oh, you English! Police, police! It is always police. See here—I go to police. I go to big fat sergeant, and I say 'Prophet Yann'—and what does he say to me? 'Ger-r-r-outch!' Is it not the truth I spik?"

Simon was compelled to admit, after reflection, that there was some truth in this, for it was certainly difficult to imagine the ordinary police sergeant taking kindly to the Iron Prophet Yann and his little bones and ashes.

"But I'd like this made a little clearer," said Simon, in his best donnish manner. "You said these two explorers—I forget their names—"

"Yes, you forget their names," said Dr. Pianella, with a certain bitterness. "Already you forget. Such is famousness, eh? Oh!—it is jolly rotten. But I tell you again—it is Count Boris Stunski and the Colonel Boyd-Corry."

"Sorry! Well, you said that Count Stunski and Colonel Boyd-Corry were lying bleeding in a tent in the desert, because they had fought a duel about these relics. But were these relics there? Have you had them since 1911? You haven't made that very clear, have you?"

"Ten thousand pardons again. The story—it only begins. These leetle bones and ashes, no, they are not there," cried the doctor, warming to his work again. "They are gone—they are stealed, like everything, by guides and porters. The Count Stunski, the Colonel Boyd-Corry, they bleed—and I nurse them—but no, they bleed—and they are dying. They look at me with big eyes, these two famous ones—and they say:

'You are young and you are Pianella. For us it is all finish, eh? Very well, you go find these leetle bones and ashes, these relics, of the Prophet Yann. We have money, much money—and we leave it to you if you swear sacred oath to find these relics, no matter if it take ten year, twenty year, or fifty year.' I swear. On my knees, there in tent. I swear." Here the doctor gave himself a violent blow on the chest. "They make—what you say?—wills, eh? They die and I bury them. I go to England, I go to Russia, with papers, and there is much trouble, but I get the money. Then I begin the finding, the looking. Not ten years. No, but twenty years. Twenty years, and then I find them."

"And where did you find them?" asked Simon, who was now rapidly losing his distrust of this astonishing story. There was something engaging about this enthusiastic and rather childlike Italian. "I hope you don't mind my being so curious."

"No, no, no, no. You do me jolly good twist—"

"Turn?"

"Turn—you do me jolly good turn. I trust you. I tell you all. Oh!—but—" and for a moment the doctor looked rather thoughtful—"what a history—the strangest, the most romantical. I am looking then, and across Asia I look and ask a question here, a question there. For two years—nothing. The leetle bones and ashes have vanished. No one will speak of the old Prophet Yann. Then—a day—and I am walking down a leetle street in Shanghai, and one touches me—so! It is an old Chinese—oh!—it is a Chinese a thousand years old. He touches me—so!—then in my hand he put a leetle—what you say for that?—

a leetle coil of green silk. That is all. A leetle coil of green silk. And from that, everything comes."

"Go on," said Simon, raising his eyes. The doctor had suddenly stopped.

"Perfectly," said the doctor in quite a different tone of voice. "In Shanghai—as you say—it is very hot."

The man with the battered and brutal face had come back, and was now entering the compartment. This time he did not speak but sat down in the corner seat, near the corridor, on the same side as the doctor, looked grimly about him for a moment, and began reading a newspaper. He had all the appearance of a menacing watchdog, and obviously he was there to keep an eye on Dr. Pianella. Every other minute that eye left the newspaper and glared malignantly at its quarry.

It is one thing to listen to a strange tale of danger and desperate men, and it is another thing suddenly to see a new chapter of that tale coming to life. Simon was horrified. He looked at Dr. Pianella, to see the effect of this all too thinly veiled menace. That the poor fellow was in a sweat of fear was obvious enough. But he bore himself bravely, with a smile that was pathetic in its nervousness, with a jauntiness that plucked heroism out of despair. And now affairs took a still more startling and sinister turn, for there, in the doctor's lap, with the fingers of his right hand lightly caressing the butt, lay a revolver.

Simon's blood ran cold. So all this was possible in a railway carriage in England! It seemed absurd and incredible that the Dean of Gulforth, the Master of St. Luke's, Cambridge University, and the London Library, could exist in the same world, and on the

same summer afternoon, as this fantastic pair. The thing was a nightmare, and he wished himself well out of it. This, he supposed, was real life, the world of action of which he heard and read so much and knew so little. In the first shock of recognizing the revolver for what it was, all his civilized fastidiousness revolted, and for an instant he wished himself back among his books. But the impulse to retreat died quickly. The steel casket was in his charge. He had only to look at the brute who had invaded their privacy to declare himself on the side of Dr. Pianella, who clearly was, as he had said, in danger. Moreover, this thick-set ruffian had contemptuously ignored Simon's existence, and even in this new and rather horrible world Simon discovered that he had his pride and quickly resented such treatment.

"You are looking," said Dr. Pianella, with a certain strained hilarity that now completely wrecked his English, "you are looking at my leetle gun, isn't it? I buy him in Shanghai too. See, he has six chambers—all loaded. I let him off—six pops. Then—perhaps—six bodies, eh? What you English call six of one and half a dozen of the other. Ha-ha-ha. Me, I make a very good joke, eh?"

No one joined his laughter: he had the joke all to himself. The watchdog breathed loudly, but not articulately, behind his paper; and Simon could only stare, with a faint deprecating smile. Under that stare the doctor's face changed, and there began a series of mouthing distortions that Simon at last interpreted as an attempt at silent communication. The doctor was asking something of him. What was it?

Simon mouthed back, shrugged his shoulders, made gestures of perplexity. This essentially un-English behaviour sat so ill on him that an onlooker would have perhaps supposed him to be mocking his fellow-conspirator; and he himself became aware of this and suddenly smiled with an air of apology and deprecation. He felt like a clown in a pantomime. "What did you say?" he mouthed silently. "I don't understand you. Say it again." The unwonted facial exercise made his muscles ache. He watched anxiously for the doctor's answer.

And what an answer it was! The teeth flashed, the mouth widened, the eyes bulged, the nose quivered, and the mustachios jerked up and down like the fins of an agitated fish. All this was full of significance, but the significance escaped Simon, who grew hot with the discomfort of his situation. At any moment that watchful brute might emerge from behind his newspaper; and before very long the train would be reaching its destination.

Then at last Simon realized what it was all about. Dr. Pianella wanted his name and address, so that he could claim the steel casket again as soon as it was safe for him to do so. This very thought had been in Simon's head half an hour before, but had been driven out by his curiosity and the doctor's fantastic story. No wonder the wretched Pianella was so agitated. Simon smiled knowingly at him and nodded reassurance. Quite in the doctor's own manner he tapped himself on the chest and articulated silently and with elaborate emphasis: "My name and address, eh? That what you mean? I thought so." He nod-

ded again, and said in a loud, excessively casual voice: "We're due in in five minutes."

"Yes?" said Dr. Pianella, with half an eye on his enemy in the corner.

"Always runs to time, this train. My uncle was saying so only this morning."

"Indeed?" said the doctor.

Simon, seeing that the doctor was about to resume his attempts at secret speech, resolutely turned his eyes away. He had had enough of that. The doctor's foot discreetly kicked him on the ankle: he ignored the appeal. Not till the train slowed down and began entering King's Cross Station did he allow himself to meet that appealing gaze. Then he turned to the rack behind him and bumped his suitcase on to the seat. Dr. Pianella, forgetting caution, leaned forward excitedly. To the handle of the suitcase was tied a label on which Simon's name and destination was inscribed in neat block letters.

"Shan't want that any more," remarked Simon meaningly.

With his back turned to the man in the corner he tore off the label, screwed it into a ball, and tossed it on to the floor of the carriage. The doctor, like a playful kitten, pounced upon it, and without further words opened the door and swung out on to the platform. At the same moment Simon was seized by the scruff of his neck and pushed violently back into his seat. He recovered his scattering wits just in time to see the thick-set man plunge down the platform in hot pursuit of Dr. Pianella.

By the time Simon had reached the exit, they had

both disappeared; and after staring about him for a moment, Simon, still feeling like a man in a dream, took a taxi to his cousin's flat in Bloomsbury. And with him, snugly enclosed within a box, a steel casket, a suitcase, went the little bones and ashes, the magic relics, of the Iron Prophet Yann.

CHAPTER II

VISIT FROM A REVEREND GENTLEMAN

OLIVER BLAND, who was to be Simon's host for a week or two, occupied the first floor of a house in Bloomsbury, eight minutes walk from the British Museum. A region crowded with memories of the good and great, the street in question enjoys the tradition of a golden past, and the hope, we may suppose, of a radiant future; but at present, which is all the time we have, it is little more than a warren of bed-sitting-rooms punctuated by sad if spacious squares. The romantic can find romance in its genteel dinginess; and the detached observer, here as elsewhere, can find ample occasion for irony and even laughter. Both Simon and Oliver, then, were well catered for. Moreover, in the matter of comfort, whether animal or aesthetic, Oliver's rooms were all, and more than all, that a country cousin could have hoped for. It was, indeed, a seductive interior, quietly luxurious. Oliver, who augmented a small private income (meagrely) by book reviews and literary articles and (richly) by writing fantastic tittle-tattle about second-rate newspaper celebrities, had a taste for old prints and modern water-colours, and preferred thick carpets and profoundly easy chairs to the more spartan delights of bohemianism.

Simon, rising for a late breakfast, took conscious pleasure in his surroundings. Sunlight poured into the room where he sat. The crockery gleamed; the toast was crisp and honey-brown; the smell of coffee was ambrosial; and the street sounds of London reached him only as a distant and musical rumour, corroborating rather than disturbing his peace. In this urbane environment he found it hard to believe that he had travelled, only the afternoon before, in the company of two melodramatic figures, and that he had even now in his possession, in witness that the fantasy had really happened, a mysterious steel casket reputed to contain choice relics of an Oriental prophet. What a news-paper story Oliver could make of it! But here was a difficulty; for Oliver in his casual fashion had gone away for the week-end. On arriving at the house, yesterday afternoon, Simon had had a cool reception. For five long minutes he waited in vain for an answer to his knocking and ringing. Puzzled, disconcerted, and almost angry (but not quite, for he was slow to anger), he was turning disconsolately away when, at last, the door began opening. It was opened timidly, narrowly; and a large suspicious nose came peering round its edge. This noble feature belonged to a small, wizened, shabbily dressed old woman who, following it by cautious degrees into the doorway, at last revealed the whole of her face, and one gaunt clutching hand.

"Forgot y'r key again, is that it?" she grumbled. "You'll be the death of me, Mr. Bland, with my old bones."

"Good afternoon," said Simon. "I think—"

"Don't stand there bandying compliments, sir, for

mussy sake," said the old woman, blinking up at him. "Come in if you're coming. If not, I've my work to do downstairs."

Simon, with no more argument, stepped into the house; and not till the entry was safely effected, and the door shut, did he attempt to gain audience. "I'm not Mr. Bland. I'm Mr. Bland's cousin. Wasn't he expecting me?"

"H'm!" said the old woman. "I'll put my glasses on." She fumbled blindly among her skirts for a few anxious moments, lodged a pair of spectacles on that powerful nose, and confronted her visitor sternly. "Maybe he was," she said, after a silent scrutiny, "and maybe he wasn't. Cousin, d'you say?"

"Yes. My name is Heath. Simon Heath. And you must be Mrs. Plumtry."

"No *must* about it, young man. Plumtry 'ad to ask day in day out before I'd 'ave 'im, and never earned what I'd call good money neither. But he's gorn now these thirty years."

Simon gave a nervous cough. "But didn't Mr. Bland tell you I was coming, Mrs. Plumtry?"

Mrs. Plumtry conceded that Mr. Bland might have said something of the kind, and seeing no visible harm in Simon she bestowed the freedom of the place on him by saying: "Barfroom's upstairs. Turn and turn about, like, with the second floor. Breakfast you c'n 'ave, and a bit of something mid-day. But I don't cook no late dinners for no one, not if they go down on their benders."

"I see," said Simon.

"I don't care if they're the Prince of Wales," added Mrs. Plumtry indignantly. And back she went to her

basement, that dim subterranean region in which she lived like a mole, strange, mindless, solitary.

The promised breakfast, which Simon was at this moment enjoying, seemed all that a breakfast should be; and it combined with the brightness of the morning to put him into a good humour. It was tiresome and inconsiderate of Oliver to have gone away, and odd of him to have left no word of explanation with Mrs. Plumtry. Or so Simon thought. Mrs. Plumtry herself was of a different opinion, remarking that it was Mr. Bland all over to go and do a thing like that. A very high-spirited gentleman, Mr. Bland, *and* wilful. You never knew where to catch him, no more than what you did a flea—"if you'll excuse the bad language, Mr. 'Eath!" But a nice gentleman, and a gentlemanly gentleman: open-handed with his money, and always the pleasant word. "He'll come back when it suits 'im, sir. You may take *my* word." Yes, it was tiresome of Oliver; though these rooms were comfortable enough, with a rich abundance of books, an excellent gramophone with a stock of records that ranged from Mozart to "mommas" and "mammies", and, when these amusements should pall, there was all London left, a great bottle of enchantment ready to be broached. But there was also the casket, which Simon now placed on the table in front of him and smoked at, thoughtfully.

It seemed incredible now that this innocent object should have been so hastily and dramatically placed in his charge, less than twenty-four hours ago, by so fantastic a creature as Dr. Pianella. Count Stunski, Colonel Boyd-Corry, and the Iron Prophet Yann—these names returned to his memory with less and less

conviction adhering to them. That vaguely Asiatic background too was very unconvincing. Dr. Pianella's story of the queer duel, the wounded men, his quest, the ancient Chinaman in Shanghai—all, all too thoroughly romantic, too resolutely queer. The historian in Simon decided that none of it would do, and made up his mind to examine the evidence at the first opportunity. Only one thing was certain, and that was the menacing existence of the man with the battered face, of whom Dr. Pianella had been so much afraid. That man—and his associates, if he had any, —meant mischief. This gave a certain credibility to Dr. Pianella's story, though of course, Simon soberly concluded, the whole business of the casket might have some very different explanation. Meanwhile, though his glimpse of a new world, a world of conspiracy and violence, had shaken him a little, Simon could not help being pleased with himself. He had exhibited coolness and resource in a very difficult situation, had shown himself to be full of unsuspected talent; not simply a man who contemplated the deeds of ancient and largely forgotten men of action, but a man of action himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden and unceremonious entry of Mrs. Plumtry.

"Which I *did* tap on the door, sir," said Mrs. Plumtry. "And getting no answer I thought as how the bird had flown." She came nearer and held out a card. "There's a gentleman to see you."

As Simon took the card from her outstretched hand his brain was buzzing with anxious conjectures. Someone from Scotland Yard? Or the villain himself, with a knife up his sleeve? He glanced at the card and read:

The Reverend Walter Mildmay
The Vicarage
Little Salop

But he was not the man, he vowed, to be taken in by a device like that. He looked sharply at Mrs. Plumtry and beckoned her nearer. "What's he like, Mrs. Plumtry?" he asked in a whisper.

"A clergy," said Mrs. Plumtry. She was wearing her spectacles this morning. "Quite the gentleman, there's no doubt."

"Well," said Simon, "there's no harm in seeing him, I suppose. Show him in, will you?"

He wondered how the visitor had so quickly won the confidence of Mrs. Plumtry; but with the reverend gentleman's entry he ceased to wonder. He could have laughed aloud to think of the dark suspicions he had entertained of this very cheerful and ordinary English parson.

"Mr. Heath?"

"Yes," said Simon. He glanced at the card in his hand, and back again at his visitor. "You wished to see me?"

"I hope you'll forgive this intrusion, my dear sir. I've called at a most unseemly hour."

"Not at all," said Simon politely. "Won't you sit down?"

The Reverend Walter Mildmay was a middle-aged man with a frank open face and a general air of unobtrusive kindliness and well being. His complexion was fresh, his eye keen and confident; and he seemed to live in the odour not only of robust sanctity but of carbolic soap. He was the kind of man of whom it

is safe to guess that he had once rowed for his college, if not for his university; and one knew at a glance that in his little country parish he led the lads at cricket, and was in great request on all festive and social occasions. Modestly but clearly, clearly but not aggressively, he struck the hygienic note. Enthusiasm and common sense were married in his person. Simon knew the type well, and had he had time for such speculations it might have crossed his mind that here was just such a man as, twenty years ago, his uncle, the Dean of Gulforth, must have been.

"Thank you," said Mr. Mildmay, taking the chair opposite Simon's. "I'm afraid it's rather a long story. Do you mind if I smoke?"

Simon jumped up again, to do the honours of the house. "So sorry. Have a cigarette."

But Mr. Mildmay had already produced his pipe and his pouch. "I prefer this old friend, thanks." He began filling his pipe, staring meditatively at the carpet. "Yes, Mr. Heath, it's a long story, and not an altogether edifying one, I fear. I shall have to make demands on your patience, and perhaps on your forbearance too. You have recently, I believe, come into possession of a steel casket?"

Simon started. "Yes, but—"

"I know, I know," said Mr. Mildmay, with a melancholy smile. "You're wondering how I know about that affair, and what it's got to do with me. You've every right to ask, and that's precisely what I've come to tell you." He took a pull at his pipe and plunged without more ado into his story. "We will call her the Lady Ann Quaife. That is not her name: it is a name I have this moment invented to conceal the

identity of a very dear friend. For although everything I tell you this morning is told in the strictest confidence, I have no right to divulge the lady's name even to one who would never dream of betraying it."

Mr. Mildmay, whose gaze had been fixed, perhaps in embarrassment, on the floor, glanced at Simon with grave, steady, penetrating eyes. "I didn't expect to be talking like this to you, Mr. Heath. I fancied our interview would take a very different form, as you shall hear later. But as soon as I saw you I realized how mistaken my first conjecture had been. I'm perhaps something of a judge of character, and yours is written clearly enough in your face. After all one has an intuition in such matters, hasn't one? I know that my secret, and her secret, is safe with you. Naturally," he added, with a smile, "or I shouldn't be embarking on this confession. But her name I must withhold. That's a point of—well, a point of honour, if you like. I'm sure you understand."

"Perfectly," assented Simon. "But—" The prospect of hearing a personal confession from a man so much his senior, and a stranger to boot, made him uncomfortable. He was embarrassed in advance by what promised to be an intimate and indiscreet self-exposure. "But must you tell me anything at all—about yourself I mean? After all, it's only the casket that concerns me in any way."

Mr. Mildmay bowed a courteous and grateful acknowledgement of these remarks. "I appreciate your delicacy, sir. You are reluctant, as any gentleman would be, to pry into another man's business. But I've no choice but to tell you, as you'll realize before

I've done. And your attitude, if I may say so, makes a hard task a great deal easier."

It was Simon's turn to bow, but he could not achieve the gesture. "Of course, if you wish it." He resigned himself to listen.

"I'll tell you everything," said Mr. Mildmay. "When I was a younger man, in fact, when I was a pale young curate, as the song has it"—he laughed nervously, mirthlessly—"I had the good or bad fortune to fall very deeply in love with someone who was already betrothed to another man. What made the case infinitely more painful, and at the same time infinitely more rich in meaning and beauty, was the fact that my love was reciprocated. The Lady Ann was an impulsive as well as a lovely girl; and it is difficult—as you will find out for yourself one day, my friend—it is cruelly difficult to keep one's head when one's heart is irrevocably lost, difficult to look into the eyes of love and refuse the incomparable gift they offer one. Ann was a generous and ingenuous girl. She was born to high estate, and destined to attain, by marriage, a still higher. But she rebelled against that destiny; and I, God forgive me, encouraged her rebellion. Not in words, no. I should blame myself less if I had come out boldly into the open and claimed her love before all the world. I lacked courage and decision for that. What I did was to temporize weakly: urge her to her duty in one breath and ask love of her in the next." The man's voice had become hard and dry; the hand that held his unsmoked pipe trembled a little. "But, forgive me—this is not quite to the point. The point is that in due time we parted and went our separate

ways: she to her marriage and I to my church. She married; and I am confident—I trust and pray—she has been a good and faithful wife to her husband. I had nothing left of her but precious memories, and certain letters she had written me, and some of those letters—this is important—were written after she had become the wife of—of her husband. They were the letters of a passionate generous-hearted girl to one who loved her and whom she still loved. I found it hard to destroy those letters. I found it impossible." Mr. Mildmay shifted uneasily in his chair, looked across at Simon with a deprecating smile, and tried to lighten his tone. "I expect it sounds pretty commonplace romantic nonsense to you. But what it all amounts to is this. Those letters have been stolen from my house. I kept them safe, as I thought, under lock and key." He smiled, half whimsically, half wryly. "In short, I kept them in a steel casket. Yes, my dear fellow, in that very casket you have here." And, tenderly, Mr. Mildmay picked up the casket and held it between his hands.

"But I don't understand," said Simon bewildered. "That casket was given to me—or rather, placed temporarily in my charge—by an Italian, a Doctor Pianella, whom I met in the train yesterday." And he hurriedly gave his visitor an account of the events and of Pianella's story.

Mr. Mildmay listened with grave interest. When Simon had done, he smiled pityingly. "Count Stunski? Colonel Boyd-Corry? The Prophet Yann? I do not pretend to be exactly a man of the world, Mr. Heath, though, mark you, I do not approve of clergymen leading a sheltered life. But even I, credulous as

I may be, would not, I think, have been deceived by such a story."

"Oh, I don't think I was deceived—not altogether," cried Simon, red in the face. "But, you see, it was all very strange. What does it mean? Blackmail?"

"Blackmail of the foulest kind. The Lady Ann Quaife, as I have chosen to call her, is now, you must understand, a very wealthy woman and an ornament of society. During the last three months she has been subjected to a devilish persecution at the hands of these cads. Yes, there's more than one of them. They are, in fact, a gang. How these scoundrels are able to discover these secrets of ours I do not pretend to understand, but they make that, I suppose, their business. If these letters were seen by Lady Ann's husband, she feels she would be disgraced and ruined. Moreover," he added, with something like a sigh, "she is now deeply devoted to him, and as anxious to spare him pain as to protect herself. She repents of her youthful follies, and one must thank God for it."

Simon thought he detected a note of regret mingling with this admirable moral sentiment, and his heart warmed to a man who, in despite of his conscience and his cloth, was still human enough to cherish the memory of a romantic passion. "I see," he said sympathetically. "Well, you've got the casket now, Mr. Mildmay, and I'm glad I was of some use in restoring it to you."

"Thank you," replied the clergyman. "I am more grateful than I can ever hope to tell you." And he rose to his feet.

"What I don't understand," said Simon, "is how you came to know it was here."

"Yes, that must seem strange to you," Mr. Mildmay replied, smiling, "though not, I hope, quite so strange as the story of the Prophet Yann. Ha-ha-ha-ha! My dear boy, if our acquaintance is to continue—as I sincerely hope it will—I'm afraid you will have to suffer a good deal of friendly chaff from me about that. But the explanation," he continued, in a graver tone, "is quite simple. One of the leaders of this foul gang is a certain Italian—"

"Ah!—Doctor Pianella?"

"That is one of his many aliases, I understand. He fell into the hands of the police last night, having been betrayed by a member of his gang with whom he had quarrelled. He was known to have been in possession of this casket. A luggage label bearing your name and this address was found upon him. I thought you might know something; and when I was shown in, there—to my delight—was my casket on the table. That is all."

Nothing could be more reasonable. "And this Italian," Simon asked, "he's a thorough rascal, is he?"

"My dear Mr. Heath," cried Mr. Mildmay, swelling a little with righteous indignation, "I should like to speak of him with Christian moderation and forbearance, but I cannot do so."

"I'm sorry about that, you know," said Simon, half musing. "He didn't look so bad."

"I agree. His appearance deceived me for some time," the clergyman remarked ruefully. "Deception is his natural element. He is a man who would wantonly indulge in falsehood for its own sake, taking a pleasure in deceit. Yes, Mr. Heath," he con-

tinued sadly, "there are such men. Appearances are very deceptive. But not all, you know. Not all." He was smiling now. "The moment I entered this room and caught sight of you, my friend, I realized at once that you could not be what I had half suspected you might be, one of that Italian's associates. Within five seconds of meeting you, I knew I was in the presence of an honest, sensitive, kindly nature, one who might have been—if you will allow me to say so—my own younger brother."

Simon found to his embarrassment that his hand was being warmly shaken, and much as he respected this grateful cleric, he felt now that he would be glad to see the last of him.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer," said Mr. Mildmay, picking up the casket and his hat. "Many, many thanks. You have made me very happy. And I trust we shall meet again very soon. You have my card, I think. Excellent. No, don't come down. Goodbye. Goodbye."

So much for Count Stunski, Colonel Boyd-Corry and the Iron Prophet Yann, Simon told himself as he listened to the deliberate steps of Mr. Mildmay descending the stairs. He could not help feeling a little disappointed, for though he was glad that Mr. Mildmay and his Lady Ann Quaife were now beyond range of the foul blackmailers, he discovered a certain anti-climax in all this. Though even to himself he would hardly admit it, the fact remained that he was a trifle disappointed in that steel casket.

He lounged over to the open window, which was on the first floor and overlooked the front door. He was just in time to see the Reverend Walter Mildmay

on the point of entering a waiting car. The driver was leaning intently towards him.

"Easy as kiss your hand, George," said Mr. Mildmay in a startlingly unclerical voice. "One of my very best shows, boy. And now—step on the gas! Hell for leather!"

He jumped into the car and shut the door.

"Stop, thief!" yelled Simon incontinently. He turned and ran out, and went tumbling down the steps. But the car had vanished long before he could find his way into the street.

CHAPTER III

ZOE

AFTER lunch, a casketless and bewildered Simon set out for his club, the Old Universities, where he spent the afternoon writing letters and glancing at the reviews. He was determined to dismiss the whole monstrous affair of the casket from his mind, and at first he was not unsuccessful. But now and again, as the afternoon droned away in that somnolent leather-bound atmosphere which is to be found in any respectable London club, one of the casket figures, perhaps the bleeding Count Stunski or the weeping Lady Ann, would suddenly pop up and make its bow to his imagination. And at tea time there was no escape for him, for as he sipped his China tea he found an evening paper at his elbow. He glanced through it idly, until his eye rested on a small paragraph, which told him that the action of a Thames waterman, who had fished some clothes out of the river and promptly taken them to the police, had led to a grave suspicion of foul play. The unfortunate owner of the clothes, who could not be traced, was of Italian nationality; his name, Dr. Pianella.

"My hat!" cried Simon, using his favourite expletive. He did not cry this really aloud, but he must have made some sort of noise, for several fellow members looked at him with the distaste always inspired

by signs of life at a good club. Simon stared at the paragraph until its smudgy print ran together and refused to form words. This was no joke. Dr. Pianella had gone in fear of his life, and now apparently he had been done to death. Mildmay had said that Pianella was in the hands of the police, which was clearly untrue. But then it was obvious that Mildmay had been a clever imposter, so clever, so impudent, that Simon went hot with shame whenever he thought of him. But did this mean then that poor Pianella had been speaking the truth after all, that the casket had contained not letters but the relics of the Prophet Yann, and that the casket was now in the hands of people who might use it to fire all Central Asia? Simon dealt mechanically with his tea and toast, and tried in vain to make sense of it all. The more he thought about it, the more bewildered he grew.

The Old Universities Club has an excellent reference library, and there Simon instinctively repaired after tea, to see if books would help him. As he suspected, Crockford made no mention of any Walter Mildmay. But that was not all. No reference book he could find contained mention of Dr. Pianella, of those famous explorers, Count Stunski and Colonel Boyd-Corry, or of that dangerous old prophet, Yann. That, Simon admitted to himself, was not conclusive, for he knew only too well that the best works of reference have their blind spots; but nevertheless, it all looked fishy. Both the historian in him and the natural curious man were loath to leave this mystery unsolved; but the fact remained that the casket had gone, vanishing into the mad warren of London with the unscrupulous Mild-

may, and that there was nothing Simon could do about it except tell the police. This he shrank from doing because he had more than a suspicion that he would look a fool, and he had all a shy man's dislike of being implicated in any fussy official business. No, he would not tell the police. There was nothing now to connect him with the casket, for Mildmay would steer clear of him, and poor Pianella could not return to claim his property. So Simon left it at that, a brief glimpse of a savage, fantastic, unimaginable world, existing side by side with the comfortable and civilized world of colleges, libraries and clubs. He returned to Oliver's flat, trying to think about other and more fruitful matters.

Oliver's flat consisted of three rooms on the first floor: his own bedroom at the back; the sitting-room at the front; and a small spare room, now used as bedroom by Simon, which had to be entered through the sitting-room. As Simon climbed the stairs, unseen by Mrs. Plumtry, who haunted the mysterious dim ground floor regions, his eager spirit preceded his body into that comfortable sitting-room, and enjoyed in anticipation the pleasures of an hour's quiet reading in that deep armchair by the window. He uttered a sigh of contentment as he went in.

He stopped. He stared. Something seemed to have happened. The bookshelves were bare, and the books were scattered over the floor in hideous disorder. The sight was painful to Simon.

"That's odd," he said. He stood in the middle of the room, thoughtfully ruffling his hair. "That's very odd. They were all right this afternoon, and now . . . It's Mrs. Plumtry, I suppose." Another and more

sinister possibility presented itself to him: what if it were burglars, some of the Reverend Mildmay's friends? "The great thing is not to get flustered and excited," he admonished himself. "A little quiet thought is what one needs here." Once already, today, impulsiveness had led him astray. He had learned his lesson and was resolved not to make that mistake again. Action was at a discount; cool reasoning was the thing. "This looks," he said, "like spring-cleaning, but it's a little behind its time." And then the likeliest explanation of all flashed into his mind. He glanced towards his bedroom door. "Hullo, Oliver! Are you there?" No reply. The likeliest explanation was evidently not the right one. There were two simple courses open to him. One was to ring for Mrs. Plumtry and make pointed enquiries. The other was to let well alone. After an instant's reflection he decided on the latter. He felt he was entitled to a rest. Sooner or later the mystery would be solved without his intervention: perhaps Mrs. Plumtry would burst in, full of apologies, and explain that she had been interrupted in the middle of cleaning them books and she was ever so sorry, ever so. There would follow a few pensive remarks about the late Mr. Plumtry, and that would be that. Meanwhile, Simon was for having a rest.

So he sat down and put out a hand to the nearest pile of books. No sooner had he done this than he heard his bedroom door open, and found himself looking down the barrel of a revolver held at a convenient distance from his nose. Behind the revolver stood the prettiest girl in the world.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Heath," said the girl, who spoke with a slight foreign accent, a most delicious

disturbance of the King's English, "but I wish to have a quiet talk, if you don't mind."

Simon could only stare open-mouthed. He was so astonished, so confused, that the significance of the revolver had as yet hardly reached him. The situation was too fantastic to admit of real fear. Moreover the appearance of the girl herself put fear out of the question. What did such a girl want with revolvers? Nothing less murderous, except to a man's peace of mind, could he imagine, nothing more enchanting, than the face that confronted him: the cheeks delicately flushed with excitement; the scarlet bow of her lips, a little parted; the lovely impudence of her nose; and her eyes, a deep sparkling blue, in which humour and kindness seemed at war with a natural alarm. The beret she wore did not wholly conceal her clustering black hair, and this hair had the good sense not to obscure her miraculous ears from the sight of a world ready to adore them. There was something slightly foreign about her appearance, just as there was about her accent, and this seemed to Simon, who was a romantic at heart, to add the last touch of perfection. Here at last—overwhelmingly real, alive, disturbing—was the lady from a far countree.

"If you were to move or shout," remarked this paragon of girlhood breathlessly, "this little gun would go off and kill you."

It had not occurred to Simon to do either of these prohibited things: his life was in his eyes, and he was content to stare. The danger symbolized by a mere revolver was as nothing compared with the tremendous tumult within him. It was not courage that helped him to keep his head: indeed he had already lost his

head, and more besides, and accounted the loss a gain. It was not courage, then, that made him unafraid, but sheer incredulity. He found it quite impossible to believe that she would shoot him. Her eyes belied what her words seemed to threaten. And her fluttering pulse betrayed her.

At last he found his voice. "Don't be frightened," he said. "There's nothing to be frightened about. Really there isn't."

"Frightened!" she cried. "It's you who ought to be frightened."

"All right then," said Simon, regarding her with abject adoration. "I'm frightened. How's that?"

"Don't be silly." She seemed to reflect, but still kept him covered in a slightly wobbling fashion. "Are you straight or crooked? That is what I cannot make out. You *look* all right. But so many of them do."

"Don't tire yourself holding that revolver," said Simon with concern.

"Never mind that!" Her voice was suddenly curt. "Let's get to business—"

"But hadn't you better put that thing away first?" ventured Simon. He spoke in all innocence: it seemed to him a sensible suggestion. And the weapon was, after all, beginning to get on his nerves. "It might go off, you know," he explained. "And then you'd be sorry."

"You're clever, aren't you?" she retorted. A small sneer disfigured her beauty. But with a change of tone she added: "How do you know I'd be sorry?"

"It stands to reason," said Simon. "I've got eyes, after all."

She gave a contemptuous shrug. "I dare say you

think yourself rather smart. And maybe you are. But you know very well what I'm here for. Where is it?"

"I don't, I assure you," said Simon simply. "But really," he added, continuing his former line of thought, "it would be much better to put the revolver away. Suppose Mrs. Plumtry comes in. It would look so odd."

Perhaps it was the subconsciously heard sound of distant footsteps that had put the idea of Mrs. Plumtry into his head; for now, as though to her cue, she tapped at his door.

"Say you're engaged," commanded the girl fiercely.

But Simon had already called "Come in!" He smiled a kind of apology at his visitor. "Don't let her see the revolver," he whispered hurriedly. "She'd misunderstand."

Mrs. Plumtry shuffled in, breathing noisily, and rubbing her gaunt hands on her apron. "How about a nice kidney—?" she began. "Beg pardon, miss. But I thought you might like a nice kidney for your breakfast tomorrow, Mr. 'Eath, sir. Mr. Pew's kidneys is always tender eating." Simon agreed to have kidneys for breakfast: he was impatient of the interruption. And Mrs. Plumtry finished drying her hands. "Seasonable weather, miss. You couldn't wish for better, Mr. Pew says; though he likes it cold himself. Butchers do. But I mustn't stand 'ere gossiping. Some folks 'ave work to do, if others 'aven't." Receiving scant response, she moved reluctantly away, and the door closed behind her.

"What did you do that for?" asked the girl.

Simon saw with relief that the revolver was now

out of sight. He was glad to have a chance of forgetting it. "What did I do what for? Honestly, I've no idea what you're talking about. I don't know what you've come for, or where you've come from, or anything about it. But I'm very glad to see you." This last was no more than the simple truth, but he stammered a little in uttering it and fell into some confusion.

"As to where I've come from," said the girl, with a laugh, "I've come from your bedroom. I'm afraid I've made it rather untidy too. And as for what I want—" She paused and looked at him steadily, and her smile became satirical.

"Yes, do tell me what it is you want," he urged. "I'm longing to be of service to you." The obvious truth dawned on his bewildered intelligence. "You haven't by any chance come about a steel casket, have you?"

"Yes. Where is it?" she demanded.

"Not here. It's gone."

"Gone!" There was no mistaking her extreme agitation. "It has been here then? What have you done with it?"

"I gave it, this morning, to a visitor," said Simon, speaking with a delicate precision that hinted at irony, "a clerical gentleman, the Reverend Walter Mildmay. As a matter of fact, he was not really a clerical gentleman, and I don't know what he was, except a quite superb actor. If you had heard his story of the Lady Ann Quaife, you would have given him anything. It was, I must confess, a great performance."

"Describe him, this man," cried the girl imperiously. And when Simon had described him, and had briefly

told the Lady Ann Quaife story, she nodded, as if something had confirmed her previous suspicions. "Yes, I know him," she admitted. "It is what you call an old gag of his, that."

"New to me," remarked Simon gloomily. He could not help reflecting how delighted he would have been to give this girl the casket. And now it was somewhere far away, in the possession of an ingenious rascal who had brought off an "old gag" so smoothly. He looked at the girl, who was still standing there, with something hesitant about her now. "But won't you sit down?" She sat down. "And have a cigarette?" She took a cigarette, and with trembling hand he held a lighted match for her. This conjured up between them the ghost of a cosy intimacy. They looked at each other through the friendly smoke.

"Might I ask your name?" said Simon, throwing a little irony into his formal manner.

"You may call me—Zoe," she told him. She was rather more foreign now than she had been before. Her foreignness was evidently a somewhat fluctuating quality; but it made no difference to the enchantment of her presence. "Yes, yes," she continued, rather impatiently, "yours I know. You are Simon Heath."

Simon Heath agreed ecstatically. Zoe!

"And now you see what you have done," said Zoe, with a mournful smile. "I have no casket."

"I'm terribly sorry." And Simon meant it. There and then he would have handed over, without a doubtful word, five hundred caskets.

Zoe jumped to her feet. "I must fly. Yes, at once. I have to telephone."

"No, don't go. If you go now without telling me anything, I shall go mad with curiosity. You can telephone here. The instrument's in the other room," he added dryly, "as you probably know."

Zoe, who no doubt had made a thorough search of the flat, evidently did know; but all she said, with a waywardness that Simon found delightful in her, though it might have seemed mere impudence in anybody else, was: "Don't be rude, or I shall go at once." She went out, however, and was back within three minutes, during which time Simon's thoughts had been unevenly divided between her and the casket.

"And now do tell me more about this infernal box," he entreated. "By the way, it's *not* an infernal box, is it?"

"A bomb, you mean? Oh, no, not as bad as that. A bomb!" She laughed. "How can you be so absurd?"

Simon laughed with her as best he could. "Well, after all," he said, "it might be anything. This morning, it merely contained the love letters of poor Lady Ann Quaife—"

"How could you believe such stupid stuff?" cried Zoe derisively.

"Then yesterday afternoon, it was the last resting place of the little bones and ashes of the Prophet Yann," he began.

"Is that what he told you?" Zoe was more amused than ever.

"Is that what *who* told me?" asked Simon sharply, not particularly anxious to appear a fool all the time.

The question was successful. She was taken aback for a moment, but only for a moment. "Why, the

man who gave you the casket," she replied. "Did you say the Prophet Yann? Who is he? Tell me."

There was no help for it, so he told her the story of Dr. Pianella, Stunski and Boyd-Corry, and the Prophet Yann, but stoutly affirmed throughout that he had never believed a word of it. "I tried to look them up in the Club library, this afternoon," he added, rather solemnly, "but of course there was no trace of them."

Now she did not laugh outright in his face, but it was clear that she was capable of it at any moment. "Oh, Mr. Simon," she cried, being more foreign than ever but still equally entrancing, "but you must be so simple. No, don't be offended. It is nice, that—in a way. I think," she mused, regarding him with wide clear eyes, "that I am rather tired of men who are not—well, so simple."

Simon did not know whether to be pleased by this or not. He was in the state of mind in which a man desires interest and approbation from the fair one at almost any cost; but an excess of simplicity, an oafish guilelessness, seemed to his alert vanity rather a heavy price to pay. "I don't think you're quite fair to me," he said. "After all, the whole circumstances were fantastic—and there was the steel casket in my bag—so that it seemed quite likely that the explanation would be fantastic too. Though, I repeat, I always had my doubts about Count Stunski, Colonel Boyd-Corry, and the Prophet Yann. Now tell me the truth."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "The truth is dangerous," she said slowly. "And if the secret were

mine alone, that would be different, but as it is—" she shrugged her shoulders.

"You owe me some explanation, after coming here like this," Simon told her. "No, wait a minute. I'm not going to harp on that. But I should like to be your friend, to help you. I feel responsible about that casket."

"I do not say I could not do with a friend to help me," she admitted, with some show of reluctance. "But can I trust you?"

"To the death!" cried Simon enthusiastically. The next moment, he was astonished at himself. What an extraordinary lapse into melodrama!

"Then I'll tell you everything," the girl began.

Simon gave a start. The phrase seemed familiar. He gave Zoe what he intended to be a searching look.

"It begins," said Zoe gravely, "in Euravia, and takes us back to the time of the Great War. I was a child then, and so were you, I suppose. Do you know Euravia at all?"

"Only as a minor province of the Roman Empire," replied Simon. "Afterwards it had a very curious history. When the Empire was split up into Eastern and Western Empires, the position of Euravia, situated as it was—"

She stopped him with a quick impatient gesture. "No, no, Monsieur Simon, there is no time for that. Besides, why tell me the ancient history of my own country? I have had governesses."

"What? Are you a Euravian?"

"I am a Euravian," said Zoe proudly. She looked more beautiful than ever, now that she was a proud Euravian. "As you know about my country, I need

not say much. You know that it is small, mountainous, very lovely, largely agricultural, and the home of freedom."

He nodded agreement, and wished passionately that he had gone to Euravia, instead of to the Black Forest, during the Easter vacation. At this moment, it seemed to him easily the most interesting country in Europe. Why hadn't he taken more trouble with contemporary affairs in Euravia?

"Well, during the Great War," resumed Zoe, "Euravia managed to preserve not only its independence but its neutrality. King Sergius was on the throne then, and the last years of his life were darkened by the fear that his country would sooner or later be either annexed or painlessly incorporated into the body of a large Balkan republic. His fears were well grounded but misdirected. We had little enough to fear from the belligerent countries, as events proved. We lived very largely on our internal resources; the degree of our isolation was, in the modern world, a thing to marvel at; and the military powers all round us hardly noticed our existence. The King's real enemy was in our midst. A fellow called Schidimski, a village chemist, began making trouble among our people. He was a fiery creature, dynamic and ambitious. He first appeared in the public eye as a sort of rural Napoleon. He was a fountain of fine words, an inspired demagogue. In less than nine months, from being a petty local hero, he had made himself one of the most influential men in Euravia. Then, at precisely the right moment—for he has a genius for theatrical effect—he appeared, as if magically, at Fruhlingstadt."

"Fruhlingstadt?" exclaimed Simon. "Why, of

course. I know Fruhlingstadt. A friend of mine at Cambridge spent a night or two there last vacation. But I'd forgotten it was in Euravia, I'm afraid."

"It's the capital, that's all," said the girl whimsically. "The Euravians think a lot of it. Anyhow, Schidimski came to Fruhlingstadt, was swept on a tide of popular excitement into the Senate, and then, for a while, behaved with extraordinary gentleness and circumspection. His chance came with the death of King Sergius in 1917. By force and trickery, like any common brigand, he managed to hustle my—to hustle the royal heir out of the way; he proclaimed a republic, and systematically murdered all who raised hand or voice against him."

"Murdered!" Simon stared.

"Yes, I know it sounds incredible," said the girl. "But these things *do* happen, even in the twentieth century. By some devilish means or other he had secured the support of the Royal Guards: that is to say he had secured their treachery to the royal house. Prince Paul was not temperamentally a soldier, though he had to look like one on state occasions. He had been educated largely in France and England, and had rather a turn for scholarship. For this reason or another he wasn't popular with the military caste."

"And the military caste ruled Euravia. Is that it?"

She shrugged her shoulders, as if reluctant to face a fact so discreditable to the country she championed. "I suppose it comes to that. The personal prestige of the King was everything. The Senate was a collection of old fogeys."

"Senates nearly always are," cried Simon. "But do go on."

"There's not much more to tell," she assured him. "And now we come to the crux of the whole affair. During the last ten years the friends of the old regime have been active, and Schidimski's stock has fallen. He's extortionate and insolent in his public policy, and the people he began by flattering have learned to hate him."

"Ah!" Simon's eyes glowed. "And the King will come to his own again, eh?"

"That's our hope."

"Where is he, the King?"

She looked mysterious. "He escaped to England. It's not that I don't trust you, Simon. But it would be unwise to say more than that. For your own sake, as well as for the cause, it's best that you shouldn't know where King Paul is. But he's safe with friends, and waiting for the hour to strike."

"I understand," said Simon. He felt solemn and excited and wonderfully happy. His spirit purred within him.

"But," went on the girl, after a warm glance at her audience, "Schidimski isn't the only enemy. There's a counter conspiracy, with your friend Mildmay as one of its agents. They've got a pretender up their sleeves, and unless we're quick, unless we get that steel casket back—"

"The steel casket!" exclaimed Simon, jumping out of his chair. "How does the steel casket come in?"

"My dear friend," said the girl, in low urgent tones, "consider. It's ten years or more since King Paul was seen in Euravia. He was then a mere boy of twenty-one or so. Nothing would be simpler for a clever gang—and they *are* clever, there's no denying that—

nothing would be simpler than to palm off an imitation king on the Euravian Senate."

"But wouldn't they want evidence, proof, documents?" protested Simon.

"Certainly they would." A kind of despair came into her eyes. "When Paul escaped from Euravia," she said, almost tonelessly, "he took with him the Royal Seal and certain state documents that prove, beyond shadow of doubt, his identity and his right of succession. Those documents were carried in a steel casket."

"How frightful!" Simon was pale with excitement and sick with a sense of disaster. "How perfectly monstrous! And it's all through my stupidity that they're lost to you! You'll never forgive me. Tell me what I can do, princess, to help the Cause!"

She gave him a quick frown. "No, no! You mustn't call me that—"

"But you admit it," he challenged her. "I mean, you *are*, aren't you—what I said? Educated in England like your brother, but—"

She rose quickly to her feet and with an imperious gesture silenced him. "I admit nothing of the kind. You're talking nonsense."

Unconvinced, he smiled ruefully. "As you wish," he said, with a little bow. "But at least you will let me serve you. I will do anything, anything."

"We must meet again," said the girl, more kindly. "And soon. Meanwhile I must think of a plan." She held out her hand. "So it's *au revoir*, my friend. I am glad you will let me call you that."

He bent over her hand and kissed it. "Anything, anything," he stammered again.

A wan sweet smile rewarded him. But, when they

stood in the hall together, and he held the street door open for her, she turned to him with a franker friendliness. "The first thing I would like you to do, Simon, is to buy yourself a revolver. You'll need it before long, I fancy. And don't," the lovely creature added coldly, "don't buy one of the new Detchkitz automatics, because they're useless. *Au revoir.*"

CHAPTER IV

CHEZ FRED

AFTER a dull Sunday, enlived only by tantalizing visions of Zoe, Simon went hopefully to bed, and rose the next morning tingling with expectation of new adventures. He breakfasted early, wrote a few letters, and read a chapter or two from some half a dozen different books that he found on Oliver's shelves. He was in a very restless state of mind and could settle down to nothing, the events of the past few days being somehow more real to him than were the four walls of Oliver's sitting-room. But at last it flashed into his mind that Zoe had advised him to buy a revolver, and that this incomparable girl should be anxious for his safety was honey to his enchanted heart. After lunch he set out in search of a gunsmith. In a turning off the Strand, within a bowshot of St. Clement's Dane and a stone's throw of London's river, he found, under the sign of EDWARD MANTIS, the very place he wanted: small, discreet, well-stocked, and sympathetic. These epithets could be applied with equal propriety either to the shop or to the gentleman behind the counter, and of this gentleman it may be added that he was blue-eyed, soft spoken, silver-haired, and radiated an ecclesiastical mildness and a pickwickian simplicity of heart. A master in lethal mechanism, he displayed his wares with a rosy enthusiasm, being eager rather to show than to sell them.

"A pistol?" said this charming person. "Indeed, sir, I can show you a very pretty selection. I am obliged to you for the opportunity." From a recess at the back of the shop he fetched an ancient piece measuring about two feet long. "Now here is a pistol some three hundred and fifty years old. I do not ask you to buy it, sir, for it is possibly not your purpose. It is not, for example, a weapon for general use. It is rather in the nature of an antique—an heirloom, if I may so put it."

"An heirloom?" said Simon in some perplexity.

Mr. Mantis (if such was his name) twinkled benevolently. "It belonged, sir, to Captain William Gospel Sturgess, an officer in Cromwell's army, and, unless I am mistaken, a distinguished ancestor of yours. You hang it in the lounge hall, sir, and it looks very well, very well indeed—besides providing something to talk about when guests prove apathetic."

"Well, you know," said Simon, "the fact is—"

"I understand," murmured Mr. Mantis. "Captain Sturgess is not the man for your money. You are tired of Captain Sturgess. He has been the idol of your family too long. Moreover, you are a Royalist, a descendant of that great Lord Haverford who leaped into the Atlantic from a Cornish cliff rather than yield to the victorious enemies of his king. And, by a touching coincidence, it was from the very weapon, sir, that my Lord Haverford fired his last shot. You see the broad idea?"

Mr. Mantis's demeanour seemed to exclude the suggestion of mere levity; nor was Simon, in his present exalted state, willing to countenance any lapse from high seriousness. Schidimski reigned; King Paul was

exiled; the casket was in traitorous hands; and Zoe's matchless eyes were bright with unshed tears. Assuredly, this was no time for joking.

"Yes," he said, with knitted brow, "I think I can see what you mean. But the fact is—"

"The fact is," interrupted Mr. Mantis, in silken tones, "you want something for practical use. Something a little more modern."

"Exactly," said Simon.

"Now what *sort* of use, I wonder?" murmured Mr. Mantis, with his eyes raised reflectively to the ceiling.

"Well, that's a point I'd like you to advise me on," said Simon eagerly.

"Indeed!" cried Mr. Mantis. "Well, if it's advice you want, sir, I flatter myself you've come to the right shop. Tell me everything."

Simon started back in alarm. "Tell you *what!*"

The shopkeeper emitted a quiet soothing noise. "There, there! Don't take offence, sir. I am not prying; I am not asking questions, except in the way of business. Many of my clients, it is true, think fit to confide in me. Only the other day a lady came here—But my lips are sealed. And I stray from the point. Now may I take it that you want an instrument for the purpose of shooting?"

"Of course. What else could I want a revolver for?"

"Ah, a revolver. Pardon me, sir, you said a pistol; and though a revolver is a pistol, a pistol is not necessarily a revolver. May I ask what sort of object you intend to shoot?"

"Oh, just people, you know," said Simon. "Men and women."

"Quite, quite!" said Mr. Mantis. His eyes shone. "It's a pleasure to hear of the old sports being revived. So you won't want an heirloom, sir, or a service weapon, but rather, I fancy, something suitable for the pocket? Ah, I thought so. I've the very thing for you." Within twenty seconds he had found this "very thing," and placed it on the counter. "It's a pretty little duelling pistol, sir, originally of French invention, but now manufactured in America. For the rough and tumble of an Officers' Mess, for a Hunt Supper or a Literary Party, I would recommend a somewhat heavier weapon. But for ordinary drawing-room use you can't do better than have a Reville Carter. It nestles confidingly in the palm of the hand; its barrel, as you see, is no longer than your first finger; and, as in the larger automatics, you can fire your six shots in rapid succession without the trouble of recocking: a point well worth considering, sir, if there's a committee meeting in question, or an Old Boys' Dinner. Yes, she's a little darling," concluded Mr. Mantis, much moved, and eyeing the weapon with an artist's love. "She'll pick you off a Baptist minister as nicely and neatly as heart could wish."

"But—why a Baptist minister?" asked Simon.

"Why not?" said Mr. Mantis simply.

At this point in a perplexing dialogue, the door of a back room opened and there entered a man who had so much the air of being at home in his own shop that Simon fell into confusion and could not meet the twinkling eye of the pseudo-Mantis. The shopkeeper himself seemed surprised to find that gentleman standing behind the counter, but he knew better than to question the whim of an old and valued customer.

"Very sorry, Sir Roderick," said the shopkeeper. "I can't lay my hand on it at the moment. But I'll put it in the post tonight. That I can promise you."

"All right, Mantis. There's no raging hurry. While you were inside I've been running the shop for you. Nearly sold this gentleman a revolver. Good day."

He left the shop, seeming mightily pleased with his joke, but leaving behind a somewhat unappreciative audience. Simon had already conceived a distaste for the whole subject of firearms, and when the shopkeeper asked to see his licence he was glad to be able to say that he hadn't got one, and that it didn't matter. He hurried out of the shop.

The idea of spending the rest of the day sunk deep in an armchair with a book in his lap was now positively repugnant to him. He was restless, expectant, happy and impatient. Immortal longings troubled him, and a royal carnival moved in his mind. He went to the Embankment and stared for hours at the river, watching the great galleons of his fancy sail by. The mellow day waned and cooled; a small wind awoke; and at last it was borne in upon him that he was feeling desperately lonely. Lonely or hungry? He couldn't be sure which; and the sensations are easily confounded. But after resorting to a restaurant, and working through a far more elaborate dinner than he could well afford to pay for, he found that his loneliness persisted. The illumination of the morning had vanished, leaving him desolate. Zoe was "gone out of his life". It was true that she had promised that they should meet again; but where and when? He looked forward with a sick expectancy to that next

meeting; but to be in ignorance, meanwhile, of where she was, and of when she would communicate with him, was almost more than he could endure. Nor did his feasting bring any appreciable relief of heart. The wine, so far from soothing him with comfortable dreams, made his mind (he flattered himself) more lucid than ever, so that he saw with a new and dreadful clarity the starkness of life and the hopelessness of his own situation. She was an angel, and was of royal blood, and he was—what? A lecturer in Ancient History whose highest ambition was (or had been till this morning) to become a Fellow of his College. He gave a bitter laugh, and liked the sound of it so much that he began to feel happier at once. "Did you require anything, sir?" It was the waiter, curious to know more of this solitary gentleman who laughed to himself for no visible reason. "Certainly not," said Simon severely. "Can it be," he asked himself, "that I am in love? Why, I've only seen the girl once. I know nothing about her. It's quite absurd and impossible. What a frightful ass I am, to be sure!" But the absurdity of his being in love made the experience the more fascinating; and as for being an ass, he was proud of it; he had not realized before the richness of his nature. "To hell with cold caution!" he cried. "Folly for ever!" The waiter came running: "My bill, please," said Simon, giving the fellow a stern look. "*L'addition*," he added. "*Die Rechnung. Il conte.* You follow me, yes?"

When he got back to Oliver's rooms he found Oliver himself in possession. Oliver was a tall, shock-headed, bright-eyed young man with an enviable talent for extracting amusement from the most unlikely

sources. He was delighted to see his cousin Simon, and greeted him warmly; but Simon, aware of having taken more wine than he was accustomed to, responded with a certain caution.

"You seem dazed, cousin," said Oliver. "I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that it is all a beautiful dream. But no, Simon, it's true, my dear fellow. This is really me. When did you arrive?"

"Friday."

"I hope you've managed to amuse yourself in my absence?"

Simon's eye gleamed. "I've been pretty busy with one thing and another."

"Ah! then you aren't bored with our quiet urban existence after the rush and turmoil of your cathedral town? By the way, have you dined yet? Good. So have I. Well, what about a whisky and soda?"

"Thanks," said Simon. "But I think I won't just now." He was longing to tell Oliver about his adventures, but was resolved to let fall no mention of Zoe as yet. "London's an extraordinary place, Oliver. The most crazy things have been happening to me."

A few minutes later, newly fortified with the whisky he had said he wouldn't have, Simon found himself launched on the full tide of his story. "The whole thing started in the train," he said. "There was an Italian chap called Doctor Pianella . . ." Oliver's eyes sparkled as he listened. He threw in a question from time to time; he laughed; he applauded; and Simon, greatly enjoying himself, told everything in detail up to the point where the Reverend Mr. Mildmay took his sensational departure. And there the

story ended. Wild horses, vowed Simon, should not drag any more from him. Zoe's visit was Zoe's secret, and all that she had told him must be kept from profane ears. In time, it might be that Oliver, too, would be permitted to join their councils and help Euravia's cause, and when that time came Simon would be glad enough of his company in the great adventure. But until Zoe herself should sanction speech, he must be silent.

"What do you think I ought to do, Oliver?" he asked. The question was disingenuous, designed to throw his cousin off the scent of a romance too young and precious to bear the least breath of publicity; for, although indeed Oliver had had no chance of scenting it, Simon in his present state hardly recognized that fact: to his excited fancy it seemed as though his own thoughts of Zoe were in imminent danger of being betrayed. "D'you think," he added quickly, "that I ought to report it to the police?"

"Police," echoed Oliver, with a laugh of high elation. "Nothing of the kind, my dear chap. You leave all this to me. Have a drop more whisky. Yes, do. It will keep your courage up. And we shall need all the courage we can get before the night is out."

"What do you mean?" said Simon. "We're in no danger. They've got what they came for, so why should they bother us again?"

"My poor Simon," said Oliver, with a smile of unusual expansiveness, "you think they came for that casket, but that's only because you haven't got the trained mind. Trained, I mean, in criminology. The casket is obviously a mere blind."

Simon began to think his cousin a little crazy. "But—" he said.

"But me no buts, Simon. This is no time for your clever sophistries. We must act, cousin, and at once. And the first thing to do is to disguise ourselves."

"Oh nonsense!" said Simon. "You've had too many whiskies."

"We must disguise ourselves," repeated Oliver firmly. "It is essential. You shall wear a black beard and an opera hat, and I'll do the best I can with a golden wig and a skirt which dear Mrs. Plumtry will lend me. I'm sure she won't grudge the loan of her skirt when a man's life is in the balance."

"Whose life is in the balance?" asked Simon.

"That," said Oliver, "is neither here nor there. I must say, Simon, I wish you wouldn't talk so much. Action, my boy. We must go out into the night together."

Oliver had already flung open the door, and was waiting with every sign of impatience, mingled with hilarious delight.

"What about those false beards and things?" said Simon cunningly. Convinced now that Oliver was dangerously intoxicated, he thought to humour him.

"Upon my word, Simon," said Oliver, "I begin to think you have a frivolous mind. Here we are, you and I, standing on the brink of heaven knows what grim adventure, and all you can do is to prattle about false beards."

"Well," said Simon, "do you mind telling me where you propose we should go?"

"We're going to see Fred," answered Oliver promptly.

"Who the deuce is Fred?"

"Fred Huggins. A master mind. The underworld quakes when it remembers Fred."

"D'you mean he's a detective?"

"Yes," said Oliver. "He was once an ordinary Robert. He carried a truncheon and wore a blue helmet. But now he is Robert no longer. He is Fred. He had a rich old aunt, the widow of a brewer; and she, acting in the best possible taste, died, leaving Fred a nice little legacy that brings him in a few pounds a week. This enables him to live entirely for his art. He's just the man for this case of yours."

"Oh, all right," said Simon goodnaturedly. "We'll go and see him, if you're set on it."

"He lives in a so-called mews," explained Oliver, "within a stone's throw of Gamage's. We can do it easily in twenty minutes."

"Perhaps he'll be out," remarked Simon hopefully.

But Fred was not out. He lived in a bed-sitting-room on the top floor, and his landlady, to whom Oliver was evidently well known, offered no objection to their seeking him unannounced. A tap on his door elicited no response from within; but Oliver, undaunted, turned the handle and boldly entered the room, followed timidly by Simon.

Fred's room, in its general style, was perhaps the oddest domestic interior that Simon had ever seen. It was crowded with furniture, and the walls were covered with a pattern of salmon-pink roses for which there could be no excuse. Fortunately, not much of the wallpaper was visible. Watching over the bed was a vast photograph of Fred's parents, the man smirking, the woman simpering, and both looking ex-

tremely uncomfortable in their best clothes. For the rest, the greater part of the wall space was pasted up with pages from the sensational press. Whichever way he turned, large headlines—PRETTY TYPIST FOUND DEAD IN TRUNK or BOGUS WEST-END COLONEL IN DOCK—caught Simon's eye. In final witness to Fred's master passion, a bust of Sherlock Holmes, based on Mr. Sidney Paget's famous drawing of that hero, occupied a commanding place on the dressing-table, the back of his plaster head being reflected in the oval looking-glass. The proprietor of all this richness lay back in an easy chair enjoying a nap. He was a large muscular young man with a plump freckled face crowned with a head of red hair. At the moment his dignity was somewhat impaired, his intelligence obscured, by the open mouth and the stertorous breathing.

"Ah, there he is," said Oliver. "Flushed with innocent sleep. Very winsome."

Fred woke with a start. "Wotta matter?" he murmured.

"I've got a case for you, Fred," said Oliver. "A mystery. Let me introduce my cousin, Mr. Simon Heath. Staunch in friendship but a tiger in battle."

Fred roused himself, got up from his chair, and shook hands with Simon. "Is it you that's in trouble, sir?"

"This is a very shady affair," said Oliver, cutting in before Simon had time to reply. "And my cousin Simon insisted on coming to see you. Afraid to stay in the house, poor fellow. You know how it is with these beginners. He's been drinking, too: which

makes matters worse. But I think he's sober enough to answer your questions."

"Very well, Mr. Bland," said Fred judicially. "Let's get to work. First of all we'll have the facts. The plain facts, if you please. No theories yet. That's one of my rules."

"And a very good rule too," said Oliver. "Now, Simon. Speak up for yourself, my dear chap."

"Well, it's a queer business," began Simon.

But Fred raised an admonitory forefinger. "Begging your pardon, sir, and no offence meant. But that's for *me* to say. When I've got the facts."

Unruffled by this rebuke, for there was something essentially likable about Fred Huggins, Simon told his story much as he had told it an hour earlier to Oliver.

"Well, sir," said Fred, when the recital was over, "I think I may say I agree with you. This *is* a queer business. I've seen queerer in my time, mind you," he added hastily. "Oh yes, queerer by a long chalk. But this certainly has its interesting points."

"And you'll take the case on, Fred?" asked Oliver humbly.

"With pleasure, Mr. Bland. As it happens, it'll fit in very nicely with some work I've got on hand already. Waterloo Station, f'rinstance, that's very handy. Because, you see, I'm doing a lot of what I call shadowy work at Waterloo Station just at present. You might say I'm surrounding Waterloo Station in a manner of speaking. Of course," added Fred, importantly, "I'm not at liberty to tell you why. That would never do. You see my point, Mr. Bland?"

"Of course," said Oliver. "And I think you exhibit a very nice professional feeling."

"As a matter of fact," said Fred, ingenuously confidential, "I do a lot of this railway station work even when there's nothing particular on. It keeps a fellow in practice, you know; and anyhow you're always running into something at them places. Yes, I'm a great believer in station work. It's part of my method."

"And what do you think of this casket business?" asked Simon, beginning to weary of these generalizations.

"Early to say, sir. Very early indeed. My method is to keep an open mind as long as possible. Of course once I start putting two and two together—well, then it's another story."

"Then we may take it," suggested Oliver, "that at present you have allowed yourself to form no theory?"

"That may be the case, Mr. Bland," said Fred cautiously. "Or again it may not. We'll have to wait till I've put my thinking cap on. If I was to tell you it was a case of coining or a case of bank-forgery, well, I might be right or I might be wrong. I might be telling you the truth, or I might be telling you a lie. Do I make my meaning clear, Mr. Bland?"

"I think I get your general gist," said Oliver. "And I quite agree that you must work in your own way. But on one thing I feel I ought to insist, and that is that the investigation be conducted on a generous and dignified scale. There must be no dearth of disguises, Fred. False beards shall not be stinted. Rich variety is the thing to aim at. Don't you agree?"

Fred nodded sagaciously. "You can depend on me for all that kind of thing, sir. I've always had a taste for it, same as yourself."

CHAPTER V

WATERLOO

ON the breakfast table next morning Simon found a letter addressed to himself in a strange, attractive, feminine handwriting. He ripped it open and read it through, and at once a romantic orchestra began playing in his mind. He was translated. He could not believe his luck. He stood dreaming, with the letter in his hand . . . and then Oliver came bursting into the room, interrupting his raptures.

"Morning, Simon. Now where shall we go today? I must run up to the office, and write a dozen fruity paragraphs. Then I'm free to take you by the hand and show you the Tower and other secret haunts of old London. What do you say to that?"

Simon hardly knew how to answer. He felt acutely uncomfortable. Here was his host generously proposing to devote the afternoon to amusing him, and somehow or other he, Simon, must contrive to say no.

"But you know, Oliver," he said hypocritically, "I don't want to be a burden to you. You mustn't let me be a tax on your time. If you've really got a dozen paragraphs to write, you'll have a busy morning. It's nearly ten already."

"Shrewdly observed," said Oliver. "But don't you worry about me. The paragraphs are as good as done. I was thinking about them just now while I was lather-

ing my face. Did you know that Lady Dorothy Brewster lost her dear little dog yesterday?"

"Who's she?" asked Simon, innocently. "I didn't know there was such a person."

"There isn't," said Oliver. "But if there were, she would have lost her dear little dog yesterday. It was a cocker spaniel, and it used to sleep in a hat-box on the end of her bed. Many readers will remember the curious lawsuit in which the dog figured as the principal exhibit."

"How can they remember it," objected Simon grinning, "seeing that it never happened?"

"I know it's confusing at first," said Oliver soothingly. "But it'll be in print before the day's out, all the same. It will be called, I fancy, 'Battles Long Ago', and will be followed, perhaps, by 'Hamlet and Debrett'. Lunching at the Senior Swashbucklers' Club yesterday, who should I see but Lord Parkinson, the actor earl. He was with his daughter, the charming young wife of Colonel Montgomery, whose prowess as a big game hunter has earned him the grim sobriquet of Sudden Death. Afterwards, in the smoking-room, Lord Parkinson, who once played Hamlet for the O.U.D.S., told me the following amusing anecdote: It appears that in the winter of 1909 . . . But I haven't invented the anecdote yet, Simon, so we'll pass on to 'The Tiger of Downing Street'. Talking of mascots, it is not generally known that Lord Oxford, in the days when he was Mr. Asquith, and Prime Minister of England, kept a tame tiger in the garden of Number 10 Downing Street. . . . Why is it not generally known, Simon? Because it isn't true, dear boy. There're three paragraphs for you."

"And you want nine more," suggested Simon hopefully.

"The fourth shall have a political flavour. Mention of Mr. Asquith reminds me that in well-informed political circles the Postmaster General's blunt refusal to reform the Telephone Service is regarded as a distinct feather in the cap of his opponents. Not merely a feather, Simon; but a distinct feather. An indistinct feather is such a bore, I always think. You will notice, too, that the P.M.G.'s opponents have only one cap between them. Hence the expression 'caps the lot'. They pass it round from one to the other, like the three old ladies in the Perseus story who had only one eye. And that is my fourth paragraph. My fifth begins with a B, because it is better. My sixth—but enough! Suffice it, cousin, that I have 'em all in hand, and can frisk with you this afternoon without a thought of care."

"That's awfully decent of you, Oliver, but the fact is—"

"You're surely," said Oliver, thoughtfully slipping half a cold sausage into his mouth, "you're surely not still worrying about that clergyman of yours, Simon? Now that Fred's on his track, the ruffian is as good as caught, convicted, and serving his time. Hark, what is that I hear?" He held up his fork and assumed a listening attitude.

"I can't hear anything," said Simon.

"It is the clang of the prison door, the turning of the prison key. It is Fred's triumph. Honestly, old man, it's simply too absurd of you to go on fussing when you've got Fred on your side. There's that indefatigable fellow being a white-bearded professor

one minute and a seedy commercial traveller the next, and all for your sake, and you sit here shivering behind closed doors afraid to venture out into the sunshine for fear of your life. It isn't manly, cousin. It isn't fair to Fred."

"It isn't that at all," said Simon nervously. "It isn't that I'm afraid to go out. Nothing of the kind. It's only—"

"It's only that you want an excuse for dressing up. I believe you live for pleasure, Simon. Well, you shall have a bonnet of Mrs. Plumtry's if it'll make you any happier. But if you insist on corsets I wash my hands of you. And I tell you what: instead of the Tower we'll go to a matinee. How does that suit you?"

"Couldn't we go in the evening?" ventured Simon.

"Not to a matinee, dear boy. Come, come! Forgotten your French already?"

"I mean to a theatre, you ass. Couldn't we go this evening instead of this afternoon?"

"Certainly we could," admitted Oliver. "But why? Give reasons for your choice."

"Well, it's an awful nuisance," said Simon, "but I'm not absolutely sure of being free this afternoon. I've got an appointment." Simon's sensitive conscience forced him to add: "The appointment's for the morning actually, but it might, you know, spin itself out, if you see what I mean."

A quarter of an hour later, Oliver set out for Fleet Street, leaving Simon to his own devices. Those devices were not quite those of a sane man, for no sooner was Simon alone than he pulled out of his pocket that letter he had already carefully perused, gazed at it

in ecstasy, then read it through again several times. This suggests that it was a complicated communication, but actually it was nothing of the kind. It was not really a letter at all, but only a short note. "Dear Monsieur Simon," it began, rather fantastically, "if you would really like to help me—or the Cause—will you be outside the British Museum at eleven fifteen tomorrow morning? I will be there in a little blue car!" And it was signed, with a fine dash, "Zoe." This seemed to Simon Heath, historian, the most important document that had ever come into his possession. Everything about it, the phraseology, the handwriting, the ink and paper, was entrancing. Even the quite unnecessary exclamation mark after "car" pleased him. If she wanted to sprinkle her letters with unnecessary exclamation marks, why shouldn't she? And he promptly damned all the sneering pedants (there were several in his own college) who would have disliked that exclamation mark.

This note was so wonderful because it brought them together again, and for the last two days he had been increasingly tormented by a suspicion that she was lost to him. He had spent half his time during this interval in trying to summon a clear image of her face, and he had never quite succeeded. Sometimes a nose would emerge out of the shifting dark of memory, sometimes the flash of an eye or the curve of a lip, but never the whole enchanting face. And yet somehow as a person she grew and grew in his memory. It had been maddening to him to think that she was somewhere in this city and yet even now might be gone from him for ever. And now, like a glorious crimson and golden rocket shooting up in the dark,

had come this note. She wanted him to help her. As he still stared at the note, he could feel a mounting excitement within him.

At eleven o'clock he was there, just outside the main gate of the British Museum. Of course, she was not there, and he had not expected that she would be, so early. But he was determined not to lose a minute of her company, and was terrified lest by some malicious accident all the clocks should deceive him and she arrive, not find him there, and go away again—a series of events too dreadful to be contemplated. She had his address, but he had not hers, and had not the least idea where she could be found. If they missed one another now, she would probably never write to him again, and all would be lost.

From eleven o'clock to eleven fifteen, waiting was pleasant enough. From eleven fifteen to eleven twenty was increasingly unpleasant. Eleven twenty to eleven twenty-five was a nightmare of dwindling hope and misery. And then, of course, she arrived, and the moment he saw her face smiling up at him he could not possibly imagine how he came to forget it, for just as it seemed the most delightful face in the world, so too somehow it seemed the most familiar now, as if he had known her for years and years.

"I'd almost given up hope," he admitted breathlessly, after he had climbed in and seated himself by her side.

"You did not mind doing something for me, then?" she enquired.

Simon made it plain that he did not mind.

"Though it is not for me," she continued, as they waited for the traffic to move on in Tottenham Court

Road. "It is for the Cause I ask you. Still, if you help the Cause, then you will be a friend to me too. I think of nothing now—nothing at all—but my beloved little country."

"I understand," said Simon. He spoke a trifle gloomily, for though he was now an enthusiastic admirer of that beloved little country, he could not help feeling that there was something oppressive about such single-minded devotion. Clearly a girl who could think about nothing but Euravian politics would not have much thought to spare for him, probably the humblest of the many men who adored her. The prospect was anything but hopeful. Still, here he was, by her side, and she had asked him to help her.

After that, they said little, for Zoe was busy guiding her little car down Charing Cross Road, across Trafalgar Square, and finally down Northumberland Avenue towards the river. He did not know yet where they were going, and he thought it better not to ask. It was not until they had crossed Westminster Bridge and were approaching the neighbourhood of Waterloo Station that she began to tell him.

"It is only a little thing I want you to do," she began, with that trace of a foreign accent he found so delicious, "but to us—to me—it is very important. There is no time to explain it all, but you will find it quite a little simple thing to do." And as she said this, she turned into one of the side streets, not far from the station, and pulled up. "No, don't get out yet. I am going to stay here, in the car, to wait for you." Out of her bag she produced a slip of paper. "All that you must do, first, is to take this to the cloak-room in Waterloo Station and they will give you a

bag. You will bring that bag to me here. That is all."

This was childishly simple, though a little puzzling, for there seemed no reason why she should not do this herself.

She must have guessed the thought in his mind, for she continued: "You are wondering why I should bring you here to do such a simple thing. I cannot tell you everything now, but I will tell you this—because I trust you, Simon—"

Simon! He beamed, then thought better of it and looked earnestly at her. "You can trust me absolutely, Zoe."

"There are people watching there, we think," she told him gravely. "An agent of Schidimski's, and possibly one or two of those other people—"

"Mildmay's crowd?"

"Yes. And they know me. That is the trouble. I must have that bag—it is terribly, terribly important—and so I thought of you, Simon. Get it and bring it straight back here. Do not stop to talk to anybody while you have the bag with you. It is all very simple for you—but I shall be very, very grateful."

With this last phrase, in which there was a melting note of pathos, still haunting his ear, he took the cloak-room check and hurried off to the station, which looked its usual self and did not suggest for a moment that the destinies of Euravia might be settled there. He handed over the check, paid an extra sixpence on it, and received the bag, which was a small leather week-end affair. Within a quarter of an hour he was back in the car, seated beside Zoe, in whose bright glance there were now distinct traces of excitement.

"Now you will see something very strange to you, Simon," she said. "Give me the bag, and you, please, hold this."

He found himself staring at a small steel casket. "Why," he gasped, "that's the casket, surely? I don't understand. I thought you said it was lost now." He examined the thing and was convinced that there could be no mistake. Here in his hand was the famous steel casket, the home of the little bones and ashes of the Iron Prophet Yann, also the repository of the love letters of the Lady Ann Quaife, and the proof that Paul was truly heir to the ancient throne of Euravia, whose Royal Seal reposed within these little walls of steel.

Zoe gave a laugh, but did not answer him. She was busy opening the bag he had brought from the station.

"Oh help!" cried Simon faintly. For there, in the bag he had just given her, was another steel casket, the very twin of the one he was still holding. He had a sudden vision of the world getting madder and madder, until finally the sky rained steel caskets. "You must explain," he continued hastily, "or I shall think I'm going crazy. There can't be more and more steel caskets. I can't bear it."

"It's perfectly simple," said Zoe calmly. "This casket is the one you had, the one that Mildmay tricked you into giving him. As I told you, it contains the Royal Seal of Euravia and the documents that prove that Paul is the real king. The one you have in your hand is exactly like it, except that there is nothing—or nothing of any importance—inside it. We're going to trick Mildmay just as he tricked you—"

"Good!" cried Simon, with the heartiest approval. The thought of that smooth rascal, with his pathetic story of Lady Ann, still made him squirm.

"We found out that Mildmay had left the casket at the station in this bag, until he had completed his plans for getting out of the country with it," Zoe proceeded, a little more triumphantly now. "And we were able to get hold of the cloak-room check. I can't tell you how. That is our secret. But we're going to give him another cloak-room check and another casket. This is where we have to be careful, Simon, because if we mixed up these two caskets we'd never be able to tell which was which. Now look! —I'll put this one, the real one, here on the floor for a minute. Give me yours. That's right. There." She put the casket that Simon handed her into the bag, locked it again, then gave the bag to him.

"Thank goodness that's done!" she cried, with a rather startling lack of any foreign accent. "Now all you have to do, Professor Simon, is to go back to the station with this bag and get a check for it and bring the check back to me. And this time you needn't be terribly careful, because the real precious casket is here. You understand, don't you?"

"I understand what I have to do," Simon admitted readily, "but I must say it's easily the most confusing business I've ever been mixed up in. I still don't understand how you came to know that Mildmay had left the casket here, how you got hold of the check, and how you propose to deceive him with this other check. It's the craziest thing I've ever heard of."

"Now please don't be tiresome," she told him, look-

ing rather wistful and altogether disarming. "I thought you were willing to help me and be my friend."

"Oh but I am, I am," cried Simon fervently. "I won't ask another question. I'll go now."

Curiously enough, Waterloo Station seemed a much more sinister place now than it had been before, though there was no suggestion that it was seething with enemy spies and secret-service agents. But this time Simon felt distinctly ill at ease, possibly because he could not make head or tail of Zoe's story. The cloak-room attendant who took the bag seemed to Simon to have a queer sharp glance. Then there was a solid red-faced man standing very squarely near the cloak-room, and it occurred to Simon that this fellow appeared to be more interested in him than was necessary. So as soon as he had the check in his pocket, Simon walked away as quickly as he dared, so quickly indeed that as he hurried through the great arch he nearly ran into a strangely red-whiskered gentleman wearing a bowler hat, a loud suit, and a pair of enormous black boots of a pattern associated with the Metropolitan Police Force. This personage was leaning against the wall and pretending to read the morning edition of an evening paper. His appearance was not only startling, but oddly familiar.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Simon, forgetting caution in his surprise. "What are *you* doing here?"

Fred winked. "Didn't I mention the other night, Mr. Heath, that I was keeping my eyes open down here?"

"Yes, I remember. You did."

"Then mum's the word, sir. Don't forget. What

d'you think of the disguise? First time I've used this. Typical Derby Day figure, eh, Mr. Heath?"

Simon nodded his approval.

"Notice that C.I.D. man over there," Fred continued, lowering his voice and bringing his face so close that Simon had to draw back to avoid being tickled by the red false whiskers. The man Fred indicated was the solid man who had been standing near the cloak-room. "Got his eye on us, d'you notice? Think they're smart, these Yard men. I'll give him the surprise of his life if he asks me my business here." And Fred chuckled rather hollowly in the shadow of his monstrous whiskers.

"I think I'd better go," said Simon hastily.

His reception by Zoe was woefully disappointing. "Thank you," she said, quite calmly, when he handed over the cloak-room check. "And now I must rush. But I'll drop you at the British Museum if you like."

"But you're not going?" he cried, as they moved off.

"I must."

"Oh but let me give you some lunch. Let's make a day of it."

"I couldn't," said Zoe, and without any trace of melancholy. "Time's precious, and the Cause must be served."

Simon damned the Cause heartily under his breath, and then was silent for a minute or two. In truth, he was sulky.

Zoe stole a glance at him, then adroitly slipped past a large lorry. "I believe you're cross," she said softly, or at least as softly as it was possible to speak and yet be heard in thick traffic. "Don't be cross, Simon. I really am grateful, and I do like you, if that's what

you're worrying about. But don't start thinking I'm human, because I'm just not. I'm heart and soul in the Cause. Nothing else matters. Nothing."

"I see." Simon felt very small, insignificant, and lonely. This lasted about a minute, at the end of which he felt it was time to assert himself, if only for the honour of St. Luke's College, Cambridge. He now spoke in his more donnish voice, and achieved what was, under the circumstances, quite a good specimen of the precise, cold, and cutting tone. "I can quite understand, Zoe, that nothing else matters," he announced. "But that must not make you forgetful."

"Forgetful?"

"Yes, forgetful. It's a comparatively small matter, but you might as well try to tidy it up. You see, you keep forgetting to talk with that admirable slight foreign accent of yours. Or, if you prefer to put it the other way, I might say that you keep forgetting that you have quite a good English accent."

Zoe's reply to this was very short but very fierce: "Pig!"

Simon, feeling that he had scored, was content to receive this in silence. Wisely, he determined to leave the next move to her.

"I think I'd better drop you here," Zoe declared coldly.

"Oh no!" He was alarmed now. He did not mind quarrelling with her, but the idea of their parting filled him with horror.

"It's not very pleasant," she continued severely, "to trust someone and tell them your deepest secrets, and then to find that you're not even believed. And it's much worse when that someone seems to have been in

the habit of believing any silly nonsense that he's told. I apologize for putting such a strain on your powers of belief, Mr. Simon Heath. Please don't trouble any further about it."

"Oh, I say—" Simon began, in a panic.

"It's all the silliest nonsense, of course. There's no such place as Euravia, and there's no royalist movement there, and no King Paul, and I—well, of course, I'm probably a milliner's assistant who's gone crazy." All this, as she gazed ahead at the back of a wholesale butcher's van with great disdain, was uttered in a tone of the bitterest irony.

Simon's panic now resembled a landslide or avalanche. In another minute, this pearl of human beings, this constant enchantment, might stop the car, coldly dismiss him, and then vanish for ever. It was not to be thought of. "But, Zoe, that's terribly unfair," he pleaded desperately. "I didn't say that I didn't believe you. I do. I always did. You've no right to talk to me like that when I've shown how anxious I am to serve you."

"You're not going to let me forget this trifling service, are you?"

"Oh, I know—this has been nothing. That's why I'm so disappointed. I want to do something much more important than this, something really big—anything you like."

"Did you buy that revolver?" she asked coldly.

"I went to buy one, but I didn't get it. The licence business rather put me off. But I will get one, if you really want me to."

"No," she replied thoughtfully, "it doesn't matter now. You might get hurt—"

"You wouldn't like me to be hurt?" Simon asked eagerly.

"No, you see it would be rather awkward if you got killed and the Euravian connection became known. It would all get into the papers. And then where should we be?"

"Well," said Simon, feeling pardonably nettled, "I should be in my grave, presumably. Where you'd be I can't say. Not crying in the churchyard, I gather."

This made her laugh.

"I suppose it has its humorous side," Simon continued, in the usual heavy manner of the wounded male, "but at the moment I rather fail to see it."

"That's a pity, because you're quite right—it's distinctly funny. And now we're here."

And so, to Simon's horror, they were, back at the place they started from, outside the British Museum. Wounded dignity, hurt vanity, meant nothing now. "Listen, Zoe," he cried, "I'm awfully sorry if I've said anything to offend you. I believe it all, and I want to help—as I said. Give me something to do—now, immediately. There must be *something*."

She regarded him steadily, but with a certain gleam in her fine eyes. "Yes," she said slowly, "there is. But I don't know if you're the man to do it."

"I'm sure I am. Only try me."

"You promise to do what you're told, and to ask no stupid questions? Because, you see, you don't deserve to have your questions answered."

"I promise," he assured her eagerly.

"Listen carefully, then," she said earnestly. "Do you know the Alexandra Palace?"

"I know where it is, though I've never been there."

"Very well. You must go to the Great Hall and be near the clock there at half-past three this afternoon. Is that clear? No, I've not finished yet. You must wear one of those black overcoats trimmed with astrachan."

"What!" Simon stared at her in dismay. "You don't mean one of those astrachan fur coats? But it's so hot. I can't possibly want a fur coat in the middle of June."

"If you're there at half-past three this afternoon," said Zoe impressively, "you must be wearing an astrachan overcoat. If you don't want to go, you can say so now."

"All right. Of course, I'll come. But I must say—"

She waved his objection aside. "You've not much time. The first thing you have to do—if you don't happen to have an astrachan coat—is to hire one. That'll be easy enough. No, I'm not going to talk to you here any longer. Out you get, Mr. Simon. Shall I say *au revoir* again, or shall it be goodbye this time?" She gave him a sudden ravishing smile, waved a hand, and then left him to stare after a little blue car that swiftly disappeared into the press of traffic.

CHAPTER VI

FETE GALANTE

"THAT'LL be easy enough," Zoe had said. But Simon, recalling this prophecy an hour later, considered it to have been already falsified. He was on the point of entering the shop of Mr. Blickenheim in the region of King's Cross; and this would be the third second-hand clothes dealer from whom he had tried to hire a black overcoat with an astrachan collar. "They're not much worn nowadays, mister," he had been told. Staring reflectively at the dazzling pavement the shopkeeper had added: "Not this time of year, anyhow." Simon remarked, mendaciously, that there were amateur theatricals in prospect, and with this likely story he went into his second shop. "Just so," said McSwinney Brothers, "but we haven't such a thing in the place. We did 'ave a couple yesterday, but they've been snapped up."

And now there was Mr. Blickenheim to face.

Mr. Blickenheim greeted him with affable surprise. "What, again! Yes, mister, I've just one left. You can have it for twenty-five shillings, and that's a good cheap article, that is."

"I don't want to buy the thing," said Simon, eyeing the overcoat with distaste. "Is it—is it clean?"

"Clean?" echoed Mr. Blickenheim, admiringly, and not at all offended. "You'll not get a cleaner second-

hand overcoat than that, mister; nor a warmer. I've been doing a brisk little business with 'em the last day or two. Quite a boom, you might call it. I don't say it's everybody's fancy, but for a gentleman that likes to keep himself warm it's the very article." Pausing, he mopped his brow with a red silk handkerchief. "I like my customers to please themselves," concluded Mr. Blickenheim benevolently. "If they please themselves they please me. That's the way I look at it. How long would you be wanting this handsome coat *for*, mister?"

A few moments later Simon wished Mr. Blickenheim a good day, and set off in the direction of the station with the overcoat carried over his arm. By the greatest good luck there was a train to the Alexandra Palace due out in thirteen minutes. He did not think it necessary to wear the coat just yet: time enough for that when he reached his destination. He got a compartment to himself, and after five minutes' sombre silence the engine gathered together all its energy and steamed slowly out of the station. The carriage was unbearably hot, in spite of its open windows; the train was sad and slow, stopping at every one of the seven intervening stations. At Holloway, Simon gave an involuntary start, remembering the prison associated with that name; Finsbury Park made him glad he was going further north; Stroud Green and Crouch End gave pause to his gladness; and at Highgate he was moved to murmur "Poor old Coleridge!" It was an unpromising prelude to adventure, but his enthusiasm was proof against discouragement. He was serving King Paul, he was pleasing Zoe, and he was taking part in a movement

that might change the face of Europe; for it is from such obscure episodes as this, he reflected, that some of the most exotic flowers of human history have mysteriously and dramatically blossomed.

The Alexandra Palace has been called, with cruel accuracy, the Monster of Muswell Hill. Nothing so hugely hideous was ever built before. The magnificently situated terrace, where a few small children of the raggeder kind may sometimes be found at play, commands a wide view of roofs, a steeple or two, now and again a tall chimney, a large brick-red gasometer, and the green ribbon of the local racecourse. The Monster itself is built of small glazed bricks. There are huge cracks in the facade. The veneer of marble has broken away from most of the pillars, and at each side of the entrance is a plaster woman, very dirty and weather-beaten. The exterior of the building promises something exceptionally dismal, and the interior richly fulfils this promise. Everything seems to be peeling, shredding, rotting away. There are long corridor rooms filled with penny-in-the-slot machines and a jumble of plaster statues, and thronged with the ghosts of forgotten bank holidays. This monster boasts a railway station contiguous to its territory and called by its name. It is a kingdom of twilight and despair. It should be the favourite resort of intending suicides, for nothing more calculated to reconcile one to the thought of death can be imagined. The train stops; three or four sad mortals step out of it; the vault echoes with their reluctant footsteps. They ascend the stairs, give up their tickets, and turn to the right. It is impossible to believe there is a world beyond this world, a world of sunlight and untainted

air. Here we are tunnelled and confined, and with no hope of escape. We tread the dusty boards and breathe their sour effusion. We hear the hollow echoes. This, this is the end.

But on this particular Thursday afternoon there were but two passengers alighting at the station; and one of them, Simon Heath, was by no means wholly sad. He was uplifted by a sense of gathering expectation. From the station he passed into a long hall, musty, abandoned, a desolation. He glanced in surprise at the tattered canvases, the peep shows, the glass cases containing prehistoric bones which nobody for perhaps twenty years had wanted to inspect. He still carried the coat over his arm, but now, he thought, with quickening pulse, it was high time to put it on. He glanced at a broken down cast of the Discobolos and envied him his nakedness; this place was like a well-heated oven. He shrank from his duty, but at last, looking hastily round to make sure that no one was observing him, he slipped into the coat. It was more than a trifle too large, the sleeves reaching within half an inch of his knuckles; and he could not altogether resist the fear that he would be a somewhat conspicuous figure in this afternoon's proceedings. Nevertheless he trudged manfully on. In three minutes he was sweating profusely and feeling selfconscious; and it was a comfort, as well as a surprise, to observe a fellow-sufferer some twenty yards ahead of him.

He quickened his pace and overtook the stranger, who was plump, red-faced, middle-aged, and numerously chinned. The poor fellow staggered along at a snail's pace, with much panting and grunting and mopping of brow. He seemed far from happy, and

indeed had reason to be so; for, like Simon himself, he wore, on this warm June afternoon, a heavy black overcoat with a wide astrachan collar. Simon greeted this stranger with a smile of fellow-feeling. "Beastly hot, isn't it!" The overture was not well received, a scowl and a grunt being the only response. Flushed with mortification, Simon passed quickly on, wondering how he had blundered, and why his fellow-conspirator was so morbidly resentful of attention.

A few seconds later he found himself in the Great Hall, at one end of which was an organ, at the other a clock. It was a vast place and Simon felt peculiarly homeless in it. He made for the clock. The hour of three had but lately struck, and the appointment was for half past. He hardly dared to hope that Zoe would be so much before her time as all that. But what the devil was this? Under the clock, in attitudes of strained attention, were five gentlemen, each wearing an astrachan coat. Simon was disconcerted, but he reproved himself. If this was to be a large conference, it was not for him to complain. He was there to serve Zoe and the Cause. He walked up to the five men and wished them a good afternoon.

"Good afternoon," said the nearest.

The voice was forbidding, the stare hostile. And Simon, his glance travelling from face to face, perceived that he was unwelcome.

And now the man of many chins arrived. He arrived, scowled, and turned away with a muttered exclamation of disgust.

Simon began seriously to doubt whether the conference would prove a success. That these five men were fellow-conspirators he could not being himself to

doubt, but they were evidently not happy together. They were unsociable, implacable, individualistic, each one contriving to look as though he were the only person present. This disappointed him profoundly, for he was very ready for a little conversation. Yet there was something exciting, too, in this astonishing reticence. Presently, he thought, one of these unknown men would approach him and explain what was toward; and it might well be that King Paul himself would eventually put in an appearance and show himself to the faithful.

Taking his cue from the others, Simon stood alone and apart, watching furtively for a sign. He did his best to look coldly unconcerned, but in this endeavour he was no more successful than his fellow-sufferers: on such a broiling day, and in such a costume, it was impossible to look anything coldly. Meanwhile, the numbers increased; newcomers arrived every few minutes; when the clock struck the half hour, something between thirty and forty men pricked up their ears and looked expectant. They represented all shapes and sizes, all colours and kinds. Fat and thin, tall and short, whiskered and shaven; brown shoes, black shoes, red canvas shoes, plimsolls, hobnails; bowler hats, soft hats, wide-brimmed colonial hats and discreet little trilbies, five cloth caps, two berets, one newly cleaned straw hat twenty years out of fashion, and one tall silk hat, emblem of gentility. But in one respect, and in one respect only, these men were all alike: they all wore astrachan coats.

The afternoon wore wearily on. At first the general orientation was towards the great organ at the other end of the hall. With their backs towards the

clock, these much-tried men gazed in the direction of those clustering pipes; for the instrument provided a convenient point of focus for the eyes of men resolved not to look at each other. But gradually this resolve seemed to weaken. The appointed hour came and went. And the looked-for event did not happen. Four-thirty struck, but no one came, no word of release was spoken.

"I've had enough of this!" said a voice suddenly.

There was a snort of approval on all sides, and the silence that followed was broken by the abrupt departure, the echoing tramp tramp tramp, on the boarded floor, of several astrachanders in whom patience and hope were exhausted.

At this a change came over the company, a change such as may be seen in a field of tall grass when a wind rises and runs restlessly here and there. The grass becomes like a lake in motion; stirs and rustles and bends obediently under the common impulse. So this company of dripping men, whose pores during the past hour had exuded an aggregate of perhaps four and a half gallons of honest and hopeful sweat, began relaxing their rigid attitudes, breaking their ranks, turning towards each other, and half considering the possibility of beginning a conversation. They now frankly, instead of furtively as before, looked at the clock; frankly, and with open indignation, they compared its report with that of their watches and were appalled to find little or no discrepancy. There was no burking the fact: it really *was*, as near as made no matter, a quarter to five. Some of the bolder spirits among them went so far in anarchy as to take off their great-coats: an example that was widely but not universally

followed. The majority, bound by the letter of their law, permitted themselves no greater excess than brow-mopping.

Simon shared to the full the general discontent. But he was more than discontented: he was dismayed. What could have happened? It was painfully clear by now that the conference was not proceeding according to programme, or at least not according to his conception of a programme; and he feared that some disaster had befallen the Euravian cause. The greatest disaster his mind could conceive was that Zoe had fallen into the clutches of her enemies, Mildmay and his treacherous gang. But these fears did not occupy for long the whole of his heart. Doubts assailed him, doubts of Zoe, the suspicion that she was playing with him. While his mind was swaying unhappily between these alternative tormenting theories, his eye was caught by that of a man on the outskirts of the astrachan crowd. He had noticed this person before, and had been inclined to resent a certain sly inquisitiveness he had seemed to detect in him. Now his resentment was definite. With an enormous air of precaution, the stranger favoured him with a secret wink. Simon turned disgustedly away. The fellow was wearing a grey bowler hat and a black spade of beard; but he was also wearing Fred's boots, and his presence at this gathering did not please Simon.

"Warm day," remarked a voice at his side.

Simon's nearest neighbour, who ventured to think the day warm, was one of those men who would do well to give up vainly contending with nature, and grow a beard, and have done with it. He was small, scrubby, and in his middle forties. There is no rea-

son to suppose that he had not shaved that morning; but Nature had designed him with definitely barbatorial intentions, and the weather was against him in his heroic endeavours to frustrate her. A fine stipple, fiery red in the sunlight, covered the greater part of his face.

"Yes, it *is* warm," agreed Simon.

"Don't know about you," said his new acquaintance, "but I'm about fed up with this joint."

"Funny business," admitted Simon. "I could do with a drink, couldn't you?"

"You've said it, mister." The little man drew a third person into the conversation: a long, lean, dark, cadaverous fellow who stood a few yards away and had evidently overheard these remarks. "What do *you* say?" asked the short man, sociably. "Gentleman here," he explained, as the tall man turned to respond, "says he could do with a drink."

"No, not a drink." The tall man, who looked like an undertaker's mute, smiled sadly and shook his head. "A tall glass filled with clear, cold, amber-coloured ale. Cold, very cold, and rather bitter. No, I should hate that."

"A quiet pint of it," insinuated the short man. "Just off the ice. Eh?"

"Horrible!" exclaimed the tall man, shuddering so violently that a shower fell from his beaded brow. "Don't speak of it."

"Or even," suggested Simon, "a cup of tea."

"Want to introduce Mr.—er—"

"Heath," supplied Simon.

"Mr. Heath," said the short man, "Mr.—er—"

"Porson," said the tall man. "P for Percy."

"Mr. Heath, Mr. Percy Porson. And me, I'm Mr. Moate. Now we're all friends."

"Not Percy," said Mr. Porson. "P for Percy—O-R–S–O–N, Porson. Have to say that, or people call me Dawson or Mawson. So intelligent of them," he ended, with a gloomy satisfaction.

"I see," said Mr. Moate. "Very inter*est*ing. Well, gents, it doesn't look as though she's coming, does it?"

"Who?" asked Mr. Porson quickly.

"Yes, who?" echoed Simon.

"Ah," said Mr. Moate with a smile, "that's what we all want to know, isn't it? Since we're friends I don't mind telling you I thought I *did* know when I first come here. But now, I'm not so sure. To tell the truth, I didn't expect to see such a crowd."

"Didn't you really now? You surprise me," said Mr. Porson.

"Oh, do I?" retorted Mr. Moate truculently. "Well, if it comes to that, *you* surprise me, Mr. Percy Porson. She's not your young lady anyhow."

"Quite so," said the ironist imperturbably. "She made that clear at the outset. I've set my heart on Moate, she told me, because he's merry. Moate is my man, she said. 'The Barber's Joy'."

"When I see you come in here, Percy," said Mr. Moate, "when I see you pushing in where you'd no manner of business, I admired your ruddy impudence. Straight I did. You could have knocked me down with a feather."

"Thanks, old man. I didn't bring my feather with me. Else I would have done. Deuced kind thought all the same," said Mr. Porson.

Hoping to create a diversion, Simon remarked that people were beginning to go. The exodus was indeed now general. "Tired of it," he said, "and no wonder."

"Percy isn't tired. Are you, Perce?"

"It's a pity to quarrel," suggested Simon, the peace-maker, "when we might be clearing up this mystery. Why are we here, that's what I want to know."

"Very good," said Mr. Moate. "You begin, mister." With the long nail of a plump forefinger he scratched his chin: the stubble responded with a metallic twang. "You begin," he repeated. "Why are *you* here, for one, Mr. Heath?"

Simon was not prepared for this question. He grinned uncomfortably and looked away. "I have very good reasons," he said. "But I'm only a beginner. I'm new to the Cause. It's not my business to talk about it."

Mr. Moate uttered a snort of derision. "You're not giving nothing away, are you! No more am I, then. See?"

"I assure you I've nothing to hide—" began Simon soothingly.

"Quite so," said Mr. Porson. "Soul of candour, and so lucid."

"—nothing to hide," repeated Simon. "I'm here to do what I can to help, as I suppose we all are."

"It's all quite clear now," said Mr. Porson gravely. "I came here to meet a lady, and you came to help me meet a lady. Devilish good of you. Nice friendly spirit."

Simon had an inspiration. Into his mind there flashed a significant word, a word of power, by the mere utterance of which he could reveal himself tc

fellow-initiates without betraying secrets to the profane. "I say," he said eagerly.

"Yes?" said Mr. Porson.

"Spit it out," advised Mr. Moate.

"Schidimski," murmured Simon mysteriously.

"Eh?" said Mr. Moate.

"Schidimski," repeated Simon.

"Tishoo yourself," said Mr. Moate.

Simon could no longer resist the conclusion that he had been sent to this place on a fool's errand.

"Gentlemen!" said a loud brisk voice.

"Hullo, hullo!" exclaimed Mr. Moate. "Bloke in the top hat's going to make a speech."

"Now, gentlemen, I think you'll agree with me that we've waited here long enough. It's time we got together and came to an understanding. Very well then. Beg to suggest that we all adjourn to the buffet—"

"Can't get a drink at this time of day," complained Mr. Moate audibly. "We're not in America."

"—buffet or tea room. Very well then. Those in favour kindly signify. Thank you, gentlemen."

The meeting became a movement. Like a large, black, writhing, many-legged insect, it crawled out of the Great Hall in the direction of the refreshment room, of which every member had taken grateful notice on his way in, nearly two hours earlier. A place, he had thought, conveniently situated for a quiet tete-a-tete. And soon this many-headed monster in astrachan had disposed itself upon the floor of the refreshment-room and ordered tea and tea-cakes for twenty-seven men, all that remained of the great army.

"Now, gentlemen," said the man in the top hat,

"let's put this affair on a business footing. That's my way and always has been. I think I'm correct in stating that we all came here to meet a lady." Murmurs of assent. "Very well, then. Now the point is this: how many ladies did we come to meet? One lady between us or one lady each? Now we're all men of the world here, and I take it we've no time to waste. Very well then. I propose we put our cards on the table; and as proof of good faith, I'll begin. Very well then. This morning, gentlemen, I opened my paper, and what did I find? I glanced down the Personal Column and what did I find? I found, gentlemen, what I fancy you all found. Very well then. I'll read it to you." He whipped a newspaper out of his breast pocket, unfolded it, folded it, slapped it, double-folded it, and slapped it again: all in the briskest possible manner. Then he held it in front of his nose like a soldier presenting arms, and resumed his discourse. "The paragraph, gentlemen, reads as follows: 'Will the gentleman who was so kind to lonely young lady last Friday be under the clock in Great Hall, Alexandra Palace, Wednesday, 3-30, wearing astrachan coat.' Now we're all men of the world here, and it so happens" —the speaker paused to cough—"it so happens that I myself was able to render a trifling service to a young lady last Friday. Very well then. I not unnaturally concluded that I was the person referred to. And my theory is—a mere suggestion, gentlemen, and I throw it out for what it's worth—is that each of you had the good fortune to perform some similar service to some other young lady. After all, London is not a small place. It boasts a population, I understand, of many million souls. Very well then. It is possible, on the

face of it, that these little acts of kindness are more frequent, in any given day, than we—you, gentlemen, and I—had realized. Very well then. We're all men of the world here, and we know how to take a joke—"

"Yes, but why didn't she come?" cried a Cloth Cap. "The one what put the piece in the paper, why didn't she turn up?"

"That, my friend," answered the Top Hat loftily, "is more than I can tell you."

Simon had had enough. He would not even wait for his tea. With the buzz of argument and comment at its loudest, he slipped out. Just outside the door he encountered a black-bearded man.

"Hullo," said this gentleman, giving him a sly nudge. "You don't know me, do you? I've been here all the time, keeping my eye on things. I'm Fred Huggins." He waited confidently for Simon's applause.

Simon's cup of bitterness brimmed over. But when, after a painful pause, he managed to reply, his voice was velvet-soft. "I felt sure I knew your face, Fred. The beard is so characteristic, you know. It was your boots that put me off the scent," said Simon with cruel irony.

It was as if the spirit of Mr. Porson had taken possession of him.

CHAPTER VII

THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

SIMON crawled back to Bloomsbury feeling like a beaten dog. "So that's the end of that," he thought, flinging himself into a chair. He smarted with a sense of anti-climax. He felt wretched and desperately forlorn, cut off at one swift stroke from the world of crazy romance in which he had been living for the past few days. This morning, existence had teemed with marvellous possibilities; now it was empty as a drum. This morning he had been a gallant adventurer; now he was nothing, nothing—at best a dull young man alone in London and with nothing to do, at worst a foolish dupe. Nothing was left to him. The casket, the Prophet Yann, Dr. Pianella, the Reverend Mr. Mildmay, the King of Euravia, and, worst of all, Zoe herself—they, who had filled it with sudden brightness, were all gone out of his life, leaving him desolate.

It made matters no better that Oliver did not come in till after midnight. He did not want Oliver, he told himself; he was in no mood for Oliver's nonsense; but as hour after hour went by he realized that any company would be better than his own. But he would not go out. London was full of strangers, and he would have none of them. He sat with an open book on his knee and brooded unhappily. At last, tired of

waiting for Oliver, he went out and got himself a meal. Returning to find Oliver still absent he became indignant and went to bed in a temper, having spent one of the wretchedest evenings of his life.

In spite of the June sunshine the next morning came like a bleak crown on his disillusionment. The dark hours had been melancholy, even tragic; but morning was merely sensible, prosaic, hopeless. Impossible that anything so wonderful as Zoe could have happened in this ordinary, unmysterious, uninteresting world of plain fact! Simon began to feel that he had dreamed it all, or at least that he had dressed it up in a glamour of his own invention; and this suspicion was so intolerable to him that as soon as breakfast was over he poured out the whole story to Oliver. "And to crown all," he ended bitterly, "there was that frightful ass Fred, wearing the falsest pair of whiskers you ever saw in your life." He scowled at his cousin accusingly. "Go on, *laugh*, confound you! Why don't you laugh, Oliver?"

Oliver did not laugh. His eyes were unnaturally bright, but his features maintained their composure. "No, Simon," he said, "there is a time to laugh and a time to abstain from laughing. A crude mind would find comic elements in your story. I admit it freely. But we who have Hesiod propped up against our marmalade pot at breakfast, we are above such buffoonery."

"If it's me you're getting at," retorted Simon irritably, "I've never read Hesiod at breakfast in my life."

"More shame to you," said Oliver. "If you won't do it, who will? *Sagesse oblige*, you know. We look to you, Simon, to keep these old customs alive."

"Oh, go to the devil!"

"But you take me too literally," continued Oliver, ignoring the interruption. "I spoke, shall I say, allegorically."

"Say what you like," said Simon wearily. "But for heaven's sake don't stop talking. It might hurt you."

Oliver laughed goodhumouredly. "A palpable hit," he conceded. "But there's something behind all this, my boy. It takes more than a trip to the Alexandra Palace to make you rage like the heathen. Tell me more."

Simon shrugged his shoulders. He knew that his narrative had been disingenuous; for he had been at pains, throughout, to hide the fact that he was head over ears in love with Zoe.

"I've told you all I know," he equivocated. "That girl has made a fool of me, and I'm sore about it. That's all. And the trick was so *pointless*," he went on, with rising anger. "It isn't as if she got anything out of it. Sheer gratuitous lying. As for this last piece of humour—she wasn't even there to see the fun of it. Why does she waste her time playing silly devils with a perfect stranger, whom she'll never see again?" Never see again, echoed Simon's heart. The phrase was like a knell.

"Heaven forbid that I should pretend to understand women," said Oliver piously. "I'm not young enough. But I should think very likely she's rather fond of you and so enjoys making you squirm."

"What rot!" Simon's heart leaped.

"She sounds to me rather fun," said Oliver, with shining eyes. "Pity she's so plain."

"Plain? She's not plain." Simon was decisive on this point.

Oliver turned to him a face full of innocent surprise. "Didn't you tell me she was plain? Are you sure you didn't? How extraordinary!"

"As a matter of fact," said Simon, in an off-hand way, "she was uncommonly pretty."

"Was, Simon? Still is, I hope. Your friend's not dead, is she? Well, I'm glad to hear she's pretty. It makes up for a lot, this personal beauty. There's me now. No gifts, no accomplishments, no ready flow of talk. Yet somehow—well, you see what I mean? Without my looks I should have had no chance at all in the battle of life. I see what you're going to say, Simon. It's not merely that I'm handsome, you're going to say. I'm dressy too. And that's true enough," conceded Oliver, glancing fondly down at his ancient, shabby, baggy, grey flannel trousers. "Indeed, they call me Beau Bland in Fleet Street. And why not?"

Simon yawned, a trifle ostentatiously.

"Now this girl of yours, I take it," said Oliver, "is one of these adorable pink-and-white little ninnies, all fluffy and feminine. No brains, but bags of artless charm."

"I don't know why you should suppose anything of the kind," retorted Simon. "She struck me as decidedly intelligent. Quite the reverse of a fool, I assure you. Delightfully young, yes. But not immature or insipid. Far from it."

"Really?" Oliver listened with grave attention.

"Yes, I assure you. She's got a sort of wit—well,

not wit exactly, not verbal wit anyhow, but a sort of quickness. I suppose one would call it personality."

"I suppose one would," agreed Oliver.

"She's vivid, if you know what I mean. And spontaneous. Like—like a flower. Yet there's a serenity about her too, an exquisite poise. That's what makes it so baffling that she should have played this idiotic joke on me. And all that stuff about the Euravian royalists—I suppose I ought to have known better than believe such nonsense. Things of that kind don't happen nowadays," he concluded wistfully.

"There you're quite wrong, my boy," said Oliver. "Things of that kind are constantly happening. Almost every other man you meet is an exiled king, and the rest are spies, conspirators, and coppers' narks. Sleek foreign fellows, all speaking perfect English, and carefully disguised as business-men, merchants, accountants, and what not. They meet for lunch in teashops and pretend to play chess, or draughts, or even dominoes, on those nasty little marble-topped tables. Dominoes, Simon! I put it to you: would any man play dominoes except as a cover for secret political activities?"

This eloquence was wasted on Simon, who, without the trace of a smile, stuck to his point. "It's a gigantic spoof, and I've been made a fool of. Euravia or no Euravia, the girl who sent me off on that wild goose chase yesterday isn't bothering her head about international politics. She's out for amusement. And I hope she gets it," said Simon, viciously ironical.

"You take that business too seriously," said Oliver. "Girlish high spirits. A merry prank to brighten the

home. That's all it was. You'll be enjoying a hearty laugh about it tomorrow."

Later in the day the two cousins set out for Mr. Blickenheim's shop. They strolled down to the corner of Tottenham Court Road and waited for a bus. Meanwhile the irrepressible Oliver went on talking.

"You know, Oliver," said Simon pointedly, "I'm quite capable of taking this damned coat back by myself."

"You think you are," answered Oliver, "but I'm not so sure. You're not looking your best this afternoon, and I feel it my duty to keep an eye on you. You walk in a world of unknown perils, Simon."

"What do you mean?"

"This Euravian situation. That's what I mean. It begins to look pretty serious to me."

"Here's our bus," said Simon.

When they had boarded the bus Oliver resumed his admonitions. "By the way, are you a Britisher, Simon?"

"Well, I'm not a foreigner, if that's what you mean."

"No. When I say are you a Britisher," explained Oliver, "I don't mean are you a Briton. There's a distinction. The Britishers are a band of noble, military-minded gentlemen. Patriotic chaps. Pukka sahibs. They're White Men, Simon. They're going to make England clean. And you must join them."

"Make England clean?"

"Clean of cranks and bounders," explained Oliver solemnly. "Musicians, artists, poets, communists, vegetarians, and Jews—they've all got to go, my dear fellow. The Britishers have pledged themselves to that. And their method is simplicity itself. Put 'em

up against a wall and shoot the scoundrels—that's the general idea. I tell you they're a hot lot, and just the friends you need. They'll make short work of these Euravian pests. Tell you what, Simon! We'll go and see them at their headquarters, and I'll put you up for membership. Between us we'll make the world safe for pukka sahibs to live in."

"But I don't want to," protested Simon. "I prefer Jews any day."

"That's neither here nor there," cried Oliver severely. "Why confuse the issue? The Britishers are worth their weight in gold. They practice fatuity on a scale never before dreamed of. I revere them. And Major Carraway, their founder and leader, is of the purest ray serene. You'll like Major Carraway, Simon."

"I shall not," said Simon. "I shall not like Major Carraway, because I shall not meet him. I've no use for these Britishers of yours."

"There you're wrong, dear boy," said Oliver earnestly. "There you're profoundly wrong. Here you are in London, surrounded by dagoes and desperadoes of every description, and you say you've no use for the Britishers. And that reminds me, Simon. You're not wearing your coat. You've got it safe, I'm glad to see. But do you think it's quite playing the game, old boy, to be not *wearing* your coat? I mean, is it cricket? That's what I always ask myself. And that's what Major Carraway asks *him*self."

Simon, ignoring these remarks, began to make small talk about other things. For five hundred yards the bus had a clear road. They put on speed, and in a few minutes Mr. Blickenheim's shop became recognizable

in the distance. "That's the place," said Simon. He got up, with a sigh of relief, and descended to the street, the overcoat hung over his right arm, his left hand cautiously in touch with the stair-rail.

Oliver joined him on the pavement.

"So this is the shop the coat came from," said Oliver. "This is the Jew that keeps the shop the coat came from. This is the man that spoke to the Jew that keeps the shop the coat came from . . ."

Simon was not listening. He had not heard a word of Oliver's nonsense. He was staring at a man who, on his way into the street, paused for a moment in the doorway of Mr. Blickenheim's shop. It was a revealing moment; it gave Simon the chance of a steady view.

"Why this brown study, Simon? Is anything biting you?"

Simon, staring fixedly, still heard nothing. His heart pounded, his eyes bulged with excitement, as he struggled to compose himself for a second interview with an old acquaintance. This was a gentleman who, in a sane world, ought to have been quietly dead for the last few days. But here he was—Dr. Pianella, very much alive and evidently not pleased to see Simon. Giving Simon one sharp glance of recognition, he made off down the street at a brisk pace.

"Here, Oliver!" Into his cousin's reluctant arms Simon thrust the astrachan coat. "Hold this a minute."

"What's the idea?" asked Oliver.

But Simon was already away, hot on the enemy's trail. He was definitely roused at last. He had been made a fool of—by Pianella, by Mildmay, by Zoe, and in a degree by Oliver. The whole world, indeed,

seemed bent on making a fool of him; and he would stand it no longer. His plans were vague; his mood was fierce. What he should say and do to this fellow when he caught him, he hardly stopped to enquire. "Tell me the truth about that wretched casket," he would perhaps demand, and then, obeying Shakespeare's injunction, he would stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, and imitate the action of the tiger. He no longer greatly cared about the confounded casket, he told himself; whatever its importance to these rascals—to Pianella, to Mildmay, to Zoe—it contained nothing that could restore to him his lost heart and his temper; but it provided essentially the note on which to begin what promised to be a lively conversation.

Meanwhile Dr. Pianella, overcome by shyness, quickened his pace still more. Simon followed suit. Pianella plunged across the road; Simon, speeding ahead, crossed at a lower point in the hope of heading him off. Pianella, finding no convenient side street to disappear into, came back on his tracks; Simon followed; the pursuit changed direction. Presently Pianella stopped dead, stood at the pavement's edge, and waved a greeting to his pursuer. This unexpected geniality bothered Simon. What the devil was he to do next? But despite this inward indecision, his pace did not slacken; he came steadily on to where Pianella appeared to await him. But what should he do? This question troubled but did not delay him, and he now arrived within ten yards of Pianella, in time to see that gentleman leap upon a passing bus.

"Hi!" yelled Simon. The bus was unresponsive. It diminished in his sight, and his hope of a pleasant chat with Dr. Pianella suffered an equal diminution.

But the bus, after all, was not under Pianella's control, and it must be accounted a misfortune from his point of view that he had boarded it within fifty yards of a stopping-place. Simon, glancing about him in a frenzy of impatience, was enchanted to observe a taxi moving hopefully towards him. He waved a welcome. The taxi stopped and he jumped in. "Follow that bus," said Simon breathlessly. He was suddenly and surprisingly the man of action, but had no time to admire himself. Had Pianella seen the manoeuvre? He didn't know. All he knew was that Pianella was somewhere on that bus. But even as his mind framed this consolatory thought, the bus stopped and a familiar figure stepped out of it. "Go slowly for a bit," said Simon, with his head out of the window. "Do you mind?"

The driver, a taciturn fellow, obeyed instructions without a word. Simon, exposing as little of himself as possible, watched warily. "Go on a hundred yards," he said, "and then turn. I'm after that foreign fellow." He withdrew from the window and crouched down, bobbing up, however, every twenty seconds, to have another peep at his quarry. "Now turn back," said Simon. At last his vigilance was rewarded: he was just in time to see Pianella hail another taxi.

"Follow that cab," said Simon.

"Making a day of it?" asked the driver, speaking for the first time. "I'm not a blood'ound, yer know."

Inexperienced in the ways of the world though he was, Simon guessed the answer to that. He produced a ten shilling note. "Here's your fare, and another if I catch him."

"That's all right," conceded the driver, pocketing the note coolly. "But suppose he's going to Scotland?"

"I don't care if he's going to Timbuctoo," said Simon recklessly. "I'm following him. See?" He had never felt so fierce in all his life before. His hunting blood was up.

It was rather less than three quarters of an hour later that the cab came finally to a standstill. "Your party's getting out," said the driver. "What about that half quid?" Simon descended from the cab into a world entirely new to him: a world grimly suburban yet with a near prospect of river to beckon him on. Of the river he had indeed caught a heartening glimpse but a moment ago; and he judged that it ran past the front of this row of houses to whose back parts his attention was now being called. Pianella's taxi was disappearing in the distance, but Pianella himself had just darted into one of those back entrances, the one, noted Simon, of which the door had been newly painted green. He ran quickly towards it.

In the cab he had had ample time in which to decide upon a course of action, but his thoughts had moved in a circle, unprofitably, and he was no nearer knowing precisely what he proposed to do than he had been at the very beginning of this pursuit. He had a vague idea that it would perhaps be best to see all he could without himself being seen: see and report to his comrades in adventure, Oliver and Fred. Why he should have so suddenly felt a softening for his tormentor, Fred, is more than his biographer can explain: it may be that at this moment he felt the need of disguise, and so was able to think kindlier for a moment of that man

of many whiskers. How agreeable it would be to knock at Pianella's front door, speak suavely to the domestic, and, when admitted, to peer at the villain himself from behind the shrubbery of a copious black beard! What a triumph to emerge, ten minutes later, as unknown as he had been on entering! And then, what then? Simon was in the mood for practising the art of detection, but in no mood for the tedious business of making elaborate plans. He had had time, in the cab, to subdue his first fine frenzy of anger, and to listen to the counsels of sweet reason. But he had not so employed his time. He had looked out of the window, and dreamed of Zoe, and wished the cab would go faster, and wondered where this chase would end, and wished he had never seen the casket. It is true that some of his first heat of indignation had evaporated, but that was none of his doing. Such evaporation was an inevitable natural process, and this, as he himself half-consciously realized, was the chief danger inherent in delay. If he could have got at Pianella in that first moment of recognition, what a joyous dust-up there would have been! But now—he was not so sure. He was, indeed, no longer sure of anything. He was not sure that he loved Zoe, for example; and he was not sure that he didn't love Zoe. For many consecutive hours he had been telling himself —sternly, angrily, even contemptuously—that she was nothing to him; a chit and a cheat; a heartless picture of loveliness; an illusion of his amorous senses; a figment of midsummer fancy.

But if, as he pushed open the green door, he was no nearer a plan of action, he was scarcely handicapped by lack of one. The original impulse, though less

violent, was still alive; stubbornness came to fortify it, and sheer curiosity added a pinch of spice. He must find out all there was to be found out about these people: of that there could be no question. And here he was, he flattered himself, within an ace of finding out. The green door had admitted him to a narrow strip of back garden. By Simon's standards—for his uncle the Dean's garden was as well cared-for as a lady's lapdog and even more fragrant—this wretched rectangle of grass-plot and tillage was no garden at all. There was a high fence on three sides; there was a patch of tired-looking lawn, flanked by a path that was little better than a cinder track. Yet, blooming in this desolation, as if by a beautiful accident, were half a dozen different varieties of the English rose: a miracle which, on any less urgent occasion, Simon would have paused to admire. At present he had no thought to spare for the aesthetics of this adventure: his concern was with what stood at the other end of this so-called garden, a solid, grey-stone, harmoniously proportioned house that had obviously seen better days and had once, perhaps, in the eighteenth century or earlier, been the home of pride and beauty. Simon's mind glanced back wistfully to those spacious days, which he saw through a mist of romantic conjecture quickened and at points corrected by an active historical imagination, and he experienced a pang of disgust in the reflection that the place had fallen on such evil times as to have become a refuge—a den, a shameful sanctuary—for so patent an imposter as this fellow who called himself Pianella.

Simon had given up the idea of knocking at the front door like a gentleman: his intention now—in so

far as he had any intention—was to effect an entrance secretly, like a thief in the night. Here he was at a disadvantage, for he must work not in the night but in a singularly bright summer's afternoon. But fortune favoured him. Sneaking up the garden-path, hoping against hope that he was not observed from the window, he approached the back door, and with his fingers on the handle put his luck gingerly to the test. The door was unlocked; he pushed it open a few inches and peered inside. The room, a scullery—was empty of everything but crockery, a plate-rack, a gas cooker, a sink, and a large black sleeping cat. He entered. The door communicating between scullery and kitchen was open, and the kitchen was equally empty and inviting. Never had Simon seen a more ordinary and respectable-looking domestic interior, never one less suggestive, on the surface, of a thieves' kitchen or a coiners' den. The sober English propriety of the place was a shock to Simon. It sapped his confidence, filled him with doubts. He had not precisely expected to find robbers' loot crowding the walls or human remains strewn on the floor; but he had expected, in his vague romantic heart, something more sensational than this. Doubts came creeping upon him—was he, after all, assisting the world in its persistent endeavour to make a fool of him, or had nature, in designing him, made that endeavour superfluous? Surely this *was* the house? Surely he *had* seen Pianella steal into it? He paused, for a moment irresolute, and his thoughts went back to that revolver which he had never succeeded in buying. He wished he had it now, for he had an idea that it would have been uncommonly useful. If he was indeed thrusting himself into an in-

nocent house, a little play-acting with a revolver would have helped (he thought wildly) to keep him out of the hands of the police. And if his earlier conviction should be justified, and the lurking Pianella be presently discovered, a revolver would be very much in the picture. Suddenly he recalled, from his boyhood's reading, how Sherlock Holmes or some similar hero had levelled the straight stem of a tobacco pipe at his antagonist, and got away with it. That was a happy thought. He felt in his pocket, and his fingers closed gratefully about the bowl of his own pipe.

A moment's reflection showed him that there was no very cogent reason why the kitchens and sculleries of a criminal's house should differ essentially and superficially from those of more reputable households. He smiled at what he now saw to have been his naive expectations to the contrary. But his smile was a wry one; his breath came short; his heart beat with uncomfortable emphasis. Tiptoeing across the room, he noiselessly opened the door and listened. Nothing was audible but the pumping of his own heart. He peered round the door's edge and looked down a carpeted passage: to his left a stairway, to his right the closed doors of two rooms, and in front the door of the street. The house had so decisively the air of being inhabited that he could not believe it unoccupied; nor did it seem probable that its tenants would have gone out, even for a few moments, leaving the back door unbolted. Besides, had he not seen Pianella go into that garden by way of that green door? All thoughts led back to Pianella, and the memory of that plausible trickster, with his Prophet Yann, his wreathed smiles, his all too foreign accent, rekindled the smoul-

dering anger in Simon's breast. He went on, boldly opened the first door on his right, and looked in. A cream-coloured interior, a grand-piano, a six-foot standard lamp, and a few pieces of Oriental porcelain on the mantelpiece: all this his glance took in. But not Pianella, nor any semblance of him. "Very well," said Simon, "I'll try the next. He must be somewhere, and I mean to find him, the blighter!" With his right hand in his jacket pocket he took a firm grip of his pipe and passed on to the second door, which, without hesitation or delay, he flung wide.

"Hands up!" cried Simon. The words came out in something of a squeak, for he was profoundly excited. This room was altogether more to his taste than the drawing-room had been. It was half-panelled in oak, and at once more sombre and more comfortable; its big bow window looked out on to the river; and, above all, it was full of books. A friendly human room; a room for browsing in; a room in which a man might sit and smoke at ease and talk with his friends, or, were he so minded, enjoy an afternoon siesta without fear of being disturbed by wild young men with revolvers. And here, in fact, centre and soul of an agreeable picture, sat an elderly gentleman of a most distinguished appearance. He was not unlike one of the fine romantic actors of the old school. He was tall, lean, and brown, with a beautiful head of grey hair, a long brown clean-shaven face dominated by a magnificent aquiline nose, and long brown hands that immediately quitted the book in his lap and raised themselves above his head. The elderly gentleman, having raised his hands, gave Simon a most charming smile.

"Good afternoon," said the elderly gentleman, still smiling. "Very pleasant of you to call, I'm sure. But wouldn't it be better if we began our acquaintance a little more formally? Suppose I lower my hands and then you replace your—let me see, it's your pipe, isn't it?—yes, your pipe in your pocket. Don't imagine for a moment I can't enjoy a little joke of this kind, even with a stranger. But we mustn't carry it too far, must we?"

Simon had been made to look foolish many times during this last crazy week, but never had he felt so foolish as he did now. He did not know where to look. He could not even return the glance of this easy smiling personage. He grew hot, blushed, choked, and stammered.

"Won't you sit down?" the elderly gentleman continued, waving a hand towards a large armchair. "I'm sorry you have had to come in unannounced. My name is Sylvester. And yours is—?"

Making a great effort, Simon contrived to bring out his name.

"Mr. Simon Heath, eh?" said Mr. Sylvester thoughtfully. "I seem to remember a very valuable historical work on the Byzantine Empire by someone of that name. Not yours, by any chance? My dear sir, please accept the congratulations of a layman. I can't pretend to any sort of scholarship myself, but I have a sort of dilettante interest in such things. I can't believe, however, that I owe the pleasure of this call to that interest." And he looked at Simon enquiringly.

This reference to his one published work flattered the author in Simon, but it did nothing to make his task

easier. That task was obviously to explain his presence there. The fact that Mr. Sylvester was a reader of comparatively obscure historical works made Simon feel that his intrusion and his ridiculously melodramatic entrance were all the more absurd and unpardonable.

"I must apologize, Mr. Sylvester," he began hurriedly. "You must think me a lunatic. The fact is, I've made a silly mistake. I've been plunged into a series of the most extraordinary adventures lately, and this afternoon I caught sight of a man—an Italian who called himself Dr. Pianella—who really began the whole thing. I followed him down here, and I thought I saw him enter this house—or at least the garden of this house. I was very excited, came after him, and found my way in here."

"Where no harm has been done, I assure you, Mr. Heath," said Mr. Sylvester, with his air of smiling old-world courtesy. But then he looked grave and examined Simon's flushed face thoughtfully. "You will, I know, pardon what may seem at first an impertinent question. But have you been working very hard lately?"

Simon admitted that he had, having just come to the end of the trying summer term at Cambridge.

"Exactly," said Mr. Sylvester, putting his two long hands together. "You have your own arduous researches, and you have your students—your lectures to give, your essays to correct, and so forth. I know. I'm an Oxford man myself, Mr. Heath, though things were a little easier in my time, I believe, than they are now. So I suggest to you—and I speak as a man who would have liked nothing better than to be a scholar

—that you have been overworking yourself and that you are sadly in need of a rest and a change."

"But—" Simon began, for now he saw the drift of his host's argument.

"Hear me in patience for a moment, Mr. Heath. I have no doubt, that, as you say, you have had the most extraordinary adventures lately, though I do not intend to trouble you by asking you what those adventures were. No doubt some Italian has been a nuisance. Into that I would rather not enquire. You may rest assured, my dear fellow, that I do not think you a lunatic. But I do think—if you will allow me to say so—that you are suffering from nervous strain. When you came in, I was not alarmed—as you may have noticed—and for the simple reason that I was expecting a young man who is interested in some of my rare editions. I am something of a collector—in a modest way, you know, for I can't pretend to compete with American millionaires. I do not know the young man; he had written to me; and so I thought you were he. But now I count it a fortunate accident that has brought you here like this, because I can take advantage of my age and perhaps wider experience and give you this advice. Forget these extraordinary adventures of yours and these mysterious Italians; go away, abroad, to the Tyrol or the Dolomites; and have a thorough rest."

Simon felt he was a small boy again, facing his headmaster. Nevertheless, he could not allow all this to pass entirely unchallenged. "Possibly I have been overworking, sir," he said apologetically, "and I can't blame you if you do jump to the conclusion that I'm suffering from hallucinations—"

"My dear boy, I don't go so far as that," cried Mr.

Sylvester. "But—" and he shrugged his shoulders and smiled—"I think you'll agree this is hardly the place in which to look for mysterious Italian scoundrels and to shout 'Hands up!' "

"I know," said Simon, in full agreement at once. "I admit that, and I'm awfully sorry to have annoyed you. I only wanted to assure you that Pianella and all the other people I've been suddenly mixed up with are quite real, and that I'm not simply the victim of my own imagination. Obviously I've come to the wrong house, that's all." He stood up. "I quite understand how you feel, and I think it's very decent of you to be so interested and concerned."

"Not at all, not at all." Mr. Sylvester stood up too.

There was that moment's hesitation which often precedes a rather awkward farewell, and before either of them moved or spoke again, the door was flung open and a girl rushed into the room. "Oh, I say, uncle," she began. And then she saw Simon. It was Zoe.

"You!" she cried.

Simon glanced quickly from niece to uncle, from uncle to niece. "Yes," he said. "Me!"

CHAPTER VIII

SYLVESTER EXPLAINS

THERE could be no doubt that for once Zoe was abashed, and Simon could not help enjoying the situation. He knew now that he had been right after all, that Pianella had entered this very house. It was possible of course that Mr. Sylvester, who seemed completely at ease, knew nothing about it. But that seemed incredible, for in this house Mr. Sylvester was certainly the master. And now he took charge.

"My dear," he said to Zoe, a little sharply, "obviously you know Mr. Heath. I hope you haven't been playing any of your pranks?"

"Uncle!" cried Zoe reproachfully. Her heightened colour made her look still more delightful, and Simon's resentment was melting away at a furious rate. He noticed at once that now every suggestion of the foreigner had vanished, and she looked and spoke like an ordinary English girl, except that to Simon there was nothing ordinary about her.

Mr. Sylvester shook his head at her. "I must hear more about this. Mr. Heath, I hope you will join us over a cup of tea. My dear, ask them to bring tea in here for the three of us."

"The maid's out," said Zoe. "I'll go and make tea myself—" and then the impudent creature flashed a glance of sheer mischief at Simon—"just as a punishment." And off she went.

"Sit down, Mr. Heath," said Mr. Sylvester with grave courtesy.

Simon lost no time in accepting this invitation. It gave him a shock to realize that if Zoe had not burst into the room, two minutes before, he might have been out of the house and she might have been lost to him for ever. And he would never have known what it was all about. Then, remembering the way in which his host had brushed aside his references to Pianella, he looked at that bland gentleman with some suspicion.

"Mr. Sylvester," he began, still keeping his gaze fixed on that gentleman's face, "you are not by any chance a Euravian?"

Mr. Sylvester raised his fine eyebrows. "I am not, Mr. Heath. And I flatter myself that I don't look like one. In fact, I have never set foot in the country, though I know such a place exists. Why do you ask?"

Simon did not choose to answer this question. "And you are not by any chance a friend or relative of Lady Ann Quaife or any unfortunate lady whose love letters were stolen?"

"That is a more difficult question. I know many unfortunate ladies who have written a great many love letters and possibly some of their letters may have been stolen. But if they have, I have heard nothing about it. But go on, Mr. Heath. I am at your service. If this is a new game, it will help to pass the time pleasantly until tea."

"It's not quite a game," said Simon, red in the face. "I suppose you're not an authority on the Prophet Yann, whose relics would set all Central Asia in a blaze of rebellion? Or an old friend of those two explorers, Count Stunski and Colonel Boyd-Corry?"

This time a little flicker of amusement passed over Mr. Sylvester's noble features. But his voice was quite grave. "I seem to have heard something about these strange personages, Mr. Heath."

"Something?" Simon was rather bitter.

"Something," replied Mr. Sylvester. He said no more, but looked at Simon enquiringly.

Simon hesitated for a moment, then plunged in. "Mr. Sylvester, I think you ought to tell me what this casket business is. I'm quite sure you know all about it, though you may not know all the ridiculous stories I've been told. Of course you're at liberty to tell me that it's no business of mine, but a series of accidents has made it my business, as I think you know. Indeed, I'm sure you know. You knew when I first came into this room, didn't you?"

"Perhaps I did," replied Mr. Sylvester calmly.

Zoe looked into the room. "If you want to make yourself useful," she remarked, not without a suggestion of domestic burlesque, "you can carry the tray for me."

Simon found himself in the kitchen with her. "How nice of you to come and see us!" she said brightly.

Dumbly gazing, he felt the heart turn over in his breast. He had a grievance, a bitter one, that he had been busy nursing and coddling these last twenty-four hours. This girl had fooled him royally. In the intervals of vowing that he hoped never to see her again, he had rehearsed many a biting speech to her: brief, dignified, final, some piece of quiet and devastating irony. But nothing of the kind presented itself to him now. This little domestic scene with her left him

speechless, confused, and curiously happy in his confusion; for something in her manner convinced him that she was glad to see him. Crooked she might be—but her smile had a delicious and disarming candour. Mischievous and deceitful she certainly was—but what a girl, what style, what marvellous self-command! Her voice was now friendly and cool, amused but not mocking. And the poise of her body and the shape of her nose—this last, had she lacked all other charms, would have been enough to prevent his cherishing unkindness against her. He sighed deeply. "What a fool I am!" he said to himself.

"Well?" And she smiled at him over the tea tray.

He could bear it no longer. "Look here, Zoe, what the devil are you playing at?"

"Not playing at anything. I'm making a satisfactory brew of China tea, and if you knew my uncle you'd know that making tea for him wasn't playing. Now don't get in the way, darling."

"Don't call me that, confound you!"

"No?" said Zoe, looking at him with wide eyes. "Don't you like being called darling? Some people do. They think it sounds friendly."

"Not in that damned heartless tone, making a beastly joke of it. But what are you up to with this gang? Who are you? What's the game?"

"Taking your questions in order and one at a time," said Zoe with exasperating cheerfulness, "what do you mean by 'this gang'? The phrase puzzles me. And it sounds horribly vulgar too. And now there isn't time to answer the other questions. Tea's ready."

"What do I mean by gang? I mean Pianella and that Mildmay fellow. How do you come to be mixed

up with them? What are they doing, anyhow, with their precious steel caskets?" He seized her by the arms and made her face him.

"I can't be bullied, you know. I'm not at all the cave woman." But some of the gaiety had gone. "Why should I answer your questions, my dear Mr. Heath? Who are *you*, pray?"

"I'm the man that's in love with you, blast it. That's who I am."

Her eyes faltered. She was moved. But the character of her emotion was something he could not guess. "It's useless to talk like that," she said wearily. "Would you mind letting go of my arms?" Simon's hands dropped to his side. He stared at the floor unhappily, not knowing what to do or say next. Zoe solved part of this immediate problem by remarking, with a change of tone: "But you can carry the tray for me."

He despaired now of getting any explanation of these many mysteries, and so was the more agreeably surprised when, on returning with Zoe and the tea to the room that held Mr. Sylvester, that gentleman remarked, with the air of one who has been thinking the matter over: "I rather think, my dear, we should do best, at this stage, to take our friend Mr. Heath into our confidence. What do you say?"

What Zoe said was lost on Simon, for she said it only with her eyes and he was at that moment watching his host. But, whatever her response, it apparently offered no check to her uncle, who, having tasted his tea and consumed a small sandwich, once more addressed himself to Simon.

"I feel," he began gravely, "that I owe you an apol-

ogy. In this, I am sure that my niece, who I am sorry to say seems to have deceived you not altogether out of necessity but partly out of sheer mischief, will join me. And the best way of proving to you that these apologies are sincere, I think, is to tell you—the truth."

Zoe gave a sudden exclamation, and Simon was quick enough to see her give her uncle a startled glance.

"Yes, the truth," said Mr. Sylvester firmly. "You have been deceived, by one person or another, long enough. That I can see, though I don't really know yet exactly what has happened to you. Perhaps you would not mind giving me—as briefly or fully as you please—your version of this muddled affair."

Once more Simon sketched the curious events that followed his meeting with Dr. Pianella in the train, and once more Lady Ann Quaife followed the Iron Prophet Yann, and King Paul of Euravia followed Lady Ann Quaife. Mr. Sylvester listened quietly, but now and then he looked at Simon with a whimsical smile.

"I admit," Simon concluded, with a special reference to this smile, "that it was stupid to believe any of this stuff for a single moment. I never did believe any of it for long, though."

"Not even Euravia?" said Zoe, and looked at him with what can only be described as impudent reproachfulness.

"That will do, my dear," said her uncle, in a tone of light reprimand. "You are, we don't doubt, very plausible at times. But you must not put a strain on Mr. Heath's good nature. Even the most charming young ladies can go a little too far."

"Sorry!" said Zoe, and made a little grimace.

"The fact is, my dear fellow," said Mr. Sylvester impressively, "that the true story of all this business, though it may not sound quite so romantic as some of these—er—legends, is nearly as strange as they are. Indeed, it is really stranger, perhaps more romantic in its own way." Meditatively he filled a pipe, and did not speak again until it was going to his satisfaction. Simon lit his pipe too, and Zoe accepted a cigarette. They made a pleasant domestic trio round the tea table.

"I'll tell you everything," said Mr. Sylvester, "though I must omit a good many details that might be tedious to you, and one or two matters that I am compelled, by the circumstances of the case, to keep to myself. I am, as you have probably guessed, a man of leisure, who has spent his time ranging among many interests. I have sufficient means to keep this modest place going, also a small old manor house in the country, at Berners End, near Chilford. And I am something of a traveller, in a quiet way. Up to eighteen months ago I had been living very quietly for some years, among my books here and my coins and medals and flowers down at Berners End. But then, eighteen months ago, something happened that changed my whole life. One night, as I was returning late from a theatre, I found somebody lying stretched across the path out there. It was a young man, and he seemed to be in the last stages of exhaustion. I brought him in here—out of the cold and wet, for it was a miserable night—gave him a hot drink and a little food, and tried, successfully I flatter myself, to revive him and make him comfortable. I then discovered that he was a neighbour of mine, and that in his exhausted condition he had mistaken this house for the one in which

he lodged. Indeed, I remembered having seen him once of twice, for he was a noticeable sort of figure, a very shabby, rather wild-looking young fellow with an unusually large head. His name was Theodore Waters, and he was half-English—his father was English—and half-Russian. He was also a research chemist. And not least—and I'm sure this will fire *your* imagination, Mr. Heath—he was a genius. Yes, it did not take me long to discover that. He was a starving young chemist, and without any dispute whatever—a genius."

Mr. Sylvester, who had an excellent sense of dramatic values, now paused, and fussed a little with his pipe. Simon had time to notice that Zoe sat perfectly still, keeping her eyes fixed on her uncle's face. She was curiously intent, and for a moment he had a sudden spasm of jealousy, for it occurred to him that she might be in love with this Theodore Waters, the chemist and genius.

"Waters had no money," Mr. Sylvester continued. "Like other geniuses, he was determined to do nothing but the work that interested him at the moment, and what little means he possessed he had spent on experiments. These experiments—one of which at least might change the face of the world—he had conducted in secret not a hundred yards from where we now sit. Which just shows you that this is a fantastic world, forever spinning its new romances, even though they have neither prophets nor exiled kings in them—eh, my dear?"

Zoe's reply to this was unexpected: she said nothing, but got up and walked straight out of the room.

"Ah!" cried Mr. Sylvester, when he encountered

Simon's bewildered glance. "These girlish moods! These whims and vagaries! When you're as old as I am, my dear boy, you'll give up bothering your head about why they do this and why they do that. But where was I? Oh yes! I remember. I was talking about Waters's experiments. Well, on this first night, he told me a good deal about himself and I could see that this was no ordinary youngster. He was wretchedly ill, partly from overwork, and partly from persistent under-nourishment. He interested me, and so I helped him in various ways. He was able to complete his greatest piece of research."

Simon looked puzzled. "You talk about him as if he were dead."

"He *is* dead," Mr. Sylvester replied. "He died just over a year ago. He had never been strong and he had badly overtaxed his constitution. On the last morning of his life he called me to him—for he spent his last few weeks in this house—and told me that he was leaving with me his great discovery. He gave me the papers and the final formula, and tried as best he could to explain it all to me. It was very difficult. I'm no chemist, and he was very weak. But I did my best to grasp the essentials, and of course I had the papers. He died that night," added Mr. Sylvester, with that simplicity which is the secret of good pathos, "a young man in his twenties. And I sometimes wonder if his death was not the profoundest European tragedy since the War."

Simon could not help being moved by all this. He also could not help wondering what it had to do with the steel casket and all his curious adventures. "So far, of course, I don't see the connection between this

unfortunate fellow and the things that have been happening to me lately," he remarked.

"Naturally," said Mr. Sylvester. "I was going on to show you that connection. But—well, I don't pretend to be an emotional man—but I was compelled to face the fact of poor Theodore's death all over again." He cleared his throat.

"I suppose it has something to do with that great discovery you mentioned?"

"It has."

"Do you feel at liberty to tell me what that is?"

"I will be entirely frank with you, Mr. Heath," said Mr. Sylvester somewhat sternly, "the last thing I wanted to do was to bring another person into this. Already I know only too well the difficulties and dangers of doing that. But—if you don't mind my putting it in this way—you have already brought yourself in—"

"Through no fault of my own, you know."

"Of course, my dear fellow. I realize that." Mr. Sylvester stopped looking stern for a moment, then looked sterner than ever, and his voice was very grave. "But as I said before, I feel that our apologies are due to you. On the other hand, you may prefer not to receive this confidence. It might be better not to possess such a dangerous secret as this. So far, thanks to circumstances, and the inventive powers of certain people like my niece here, you may imagine that you have got entangled in a comedy. Believe me, this is nothing of the kind. You understand me? Now shall I go on, or do you feel that you have had enough to do with my affairs already?"

It is possible that there are men who could have re-

sisted the temptation to become possessed of this secret, but certainly Simon was not one of them. And even while he was telling Mr. Sylvester to go on, Zoe came in and looked questioningly from one to the other.

"You have returned at the right moment, my dear," said Mr. Sylvester solemnly. "I am about to tell our friend here what has really been happening."

Zoe nodded, glanced quickly at Simon, sat down and said nothing.

"This last piece of research by poor Waters," Mr. Sylvester continued, "ended in the discovery of a means of making synthetic petrol."

"My hat!" Simon was staggered.

"When I say petrol, I simply mean a liquid that has the same power as refined petroleum. It is not petrol, of course, but it is a perfect substitute for petrol. Indeed, Waters assured me that it would prove to be superior to even the best airplane spirit. And—what is far more important—he was positive that it could be manufactured on a big scale at a far cheaper rate than that at which petrol can be bought, and I do not mean bought by the small consumer but by the wholesale importers. And of course it can be made practically anywhere. You see the importance of that?"

"I do," cried Simon. "Why, if this is true, this stuff might easily change the whole course of the world's history during these next fifty years."

"Exactly. And Waters left me—first, the formula itself, then some documents describing his own experiments and giving detailed accounts of how this spirit could be manufactured on a large scale, and, lastly, a small bottle of the spirit itself. All these I placed, for safety's sake, in a small steel casket. Yes, the very

casket you have had in your possession. And now, I hope, you begin to understand."

Simon assured him eagerly that he did. A hundred questions leaped to his mind.

"You can imagine my position," continued Mr. Sylvester, with one of his charming smiles. "I am no chemist. I am not a business man. To be candid, I doubt if I can pass muster even as a man of the world. And here I was left with this tremendous and dangerous secret in my hands. I had to do something. I can't begin to describe in detail what I did. It is enough, I think, so far as you are concerned, if I say that I made use of an old acquaintance of mine, a man with some technical experience, an Italian—"

"Doctor Pianella?"

"Yes, Pianella. He introduced me to a man who posed as an expert in such matters, a fellow who completely took me in, though perhaps I need not be too ashamed of that, because he seems to be one of the most plausible rascals living. Yes, you've met him."

"Mildmay, of course."

"That is not his real name—though probably nobody but himself knows his real name—but that is the fellow. And the story, so far as you are concerned, can be put into a nutshell. Pianella was tempted by Mildmay to betray my trust in him, and then the two of them quarrelled and—as they say in Mildmay's circles—tried to double-cross one another. The position now is this. We have in our possession now, as you know, the original casket, with the formula, the papers and the sample spirit, and we are continuing negotiations with a very big Anglo-American syndicate. All this, you will understand, Mr.

Heath, is in the very stictest confidence. These negotiations have to be carried on in the most difficult conditions of secrecy. Meanwhile, I am now convinced that the fellow you call Mildmay is one of a gang employed by a very dubious syndicate, largely South-American, which has been trying to get a sight of the formula and possession of the specimen. I have reason to believe that our friend Mildmay is the member of this gang known as Number Seven, which suggests what I have feared for some time —that they are a very well-organized party of rascals, spies, and roughs. And I am terrified— I admit it frankly, I am terrified—lest the casket should be stolen. You are probably wondering why we cannot put it in some safe place—a bank or something of that kind. The reason is, that the negotiations with the Anglo-American syndicate are going forward now; I must have the casket to hand; and the syndicate naturally insists upon the very strictest secrecy. These other people are shadowing us all the time. Of that I am convinced. There can be no doubt whatever that they all know me. My niece too —eh, my dear?"

"I'm not so sure about that," said Zoe dubiously.

Simon turned to her. "I suppose that explains the Waterloo Station business? You thought one of them would recognize you?"

She nodded. "I'm afraid I just made use of you, Simon. I don't know many people here in London, you know."

"I don't mind," said Simon stoutly. "I think it was terribly unfair to send me afterwards to make an idiot of myself at the Alexandra Palace. But I was glad to

help. And I want to help again." He looked at her, then looked at Mr. Sylvester.

That gentleman was regarding him with a speculative eye. "I wonder if you would care to spend the week-end at my little country place, Berners End? It's very charming down there."

"Thank you. There's nothing I'd like better," cried Simon jubilantly. The thought of being near Zoe all the week-end made his heart leap. He looked at her to see if her face welcomed the idea. She returned his glance, and there seemed to him something rather odd about her. There was a hint of mute entreaty in her eyes. But was she asking him to go or stay away?

"It will be a great pleasure for us," said Mr. Sylvester. "Moreover, you could do me a service, if you cared to. It's very simple and, I'm afraid, rather monotonously like the other little services you've already performed."

"No, uncle, not again!" There was an odd mixture of alarm, disgust, and reproachfulness in Zoe's voice.

"Why, my dear—" her uncle began.

Simon plunged boldly in. "If you want me to take the casket for you, I will. Is that it?"

"It is. I must get it down to my country place, where I expect some representatives of that syndicate. It might be safe to carry it ourselves, but I doubt it. I feel sure they are watching us, both here and down in the country. You would pass unnoticed, my dear boy, just as you did in Waterloo Station, the other morning. I feel I've no right to ask even this trifling service—"

"Not at all," Simon assured him. "I'd like nothing better. I'm not really happy now unless I have a steel casket with me."

Mr. Sylvester appeared to enjoy this mild witticism, but Zoe did not even smile. Her high spirits seemed to have vanished for ever. What was the matter with her? Her silence and unsmiling glances were taking the heart out of the happy adventure. Simon was worried.

"I must get through to Spalding at Berners End," said Mr. Sylvester. "He's my chauffeur down there, Mr. Heath, and he'll meet you at Chilford Station. That's not quite as simple as it sounds, because we have to work a little scheme to guard ourselves against imposters. When you meet Spalding, you must mention Covent Garden, and then he will say to you 'Half a pound of ripe cherries, and no trumps.' Can you remember that?"

"Half a pound of ripe cherries, and no trumps," Simon repeated dutifully. "I feel it's one of those idiotic things you never forget."

"Then you don't know Spalding. He'll probably forget it. But it's an excellent rough-and-ready means of identification on both sides. Well, I'll get through to the house to tell them we're all coming down tonight and to give Spalding his instructions."

"Zoe," said Simon, the moment they were alone together, "don't you want me to stay with you?"

"Yes, why not?"

To this obviously useless reply it was difficult to make a suitable rejoinder. "Nothing. Only—well, you don't seem to be very cheerful about it, that's all." Simon spoke with a certain bitterness.

"I don't think I am quite so cheerful, now that I'm no longer a Euravian princess," said Zoe, trying to speak lightly. She smiled at him. "I much preferred

being a Euravian, Simon. Didn't you like me better then than you do now?"

"Perhaps," replied Simon.

"That's a stupid answer. But never mind."

"Look here, Zoe, you've not really told me whether you want me to stay with you this week-end or not. I believe you don't, and it worries me, because after all it's for your sake I'm in this at all."

"How narrow-minded of you! Haven't you forgotten that this petrol formula may change the history of the world? That's it, isn't it? All right, don't get cross. I'll be honest with you, Simon. I'd quite like to see you at Berners End. It's a lovely old place and I much prefer being there to being here. I loathe this. And if you're really a friend of mine, well of course it would be nice to see you down there. But—"

"I knew this was coming."

"But I feel you oughtn't to be mixed up in this business. It's much—well—trickier than you imagine, and I don't see why you should be dragged into it."

"I want to be dragged into it," Simon told her. "But that's all right, so long as you've no objection to my staying with you."

She gave him a quick brilliant smile. "On the contrary, I think it may be fun. But be careful with that casket tonight. You'll have to go down by the seven five train from Waterloo, and uncle and I will drive down by car."

Mr. Sylvester returned, carrying the bag that Zoe had brought with her on the morning she and Simon went to Waterloo. Mr. Sylvester opened the bag and solemnly showed Simon the steel casket inside. "I give

this into your charge now, my dear boy, and I've no need to tell you to take care of it. And, by the way, we don't dress for dinner down in the country. My dear, just arrange for our friend to be taken to the station in the car. And here's the address. You're quite clear about everything now, aren't you? It's all quite simple, but you must not let that bag out of your possession until we meet again, at Berners End. And remember, my dear fellow, by doing this you are not only doing a kindness to my niece and myself, but are also helping forward a great work. Tonight, you are not the historian, you are one of the makers of history. Yes, you may smile, but when you stop to consider what may come of this, you can see for yourself that you are now engaged in making history. This," continued Mr. Sylvester, with his whimsical smile, "may go down in the archives or the folk songs of our country as Heath's Ride."

CHAPTER IX

HEATH'S RIDE

Zoe came back into the room, and Simon jumped up and stood as it were at attention. His eyes glistened with homage and devotion; his heart filled with a sense of the solemnity of the moment.

"The car's ready, Simon," she said.

"And so am I," he answered. "I must go to the flat first, and pack a few things."

"I hate hurrying you off like this," said Mr. Sylvester. "But you see how it is, my dear fellow. And I won't disguise from you that there's an element of danger in this mission. However . . ."

Simon cut him short. "Never mind that. I'm sure I shall be all right." He felt at this moment definitely heroic, and by no means unwilling to cut an heroic figure in the eyes of Zoe. But he could not achieve a gesture. His diffidence defeated him. He could only repeat: "I'm sure I shall be all right."

"And we shall all be together again," said Zoe, "very soon."

With this golden promise ringing in his mind he seized his suitcase and followed her out of the house to where the car stood waiting.

"Does he know where to take me?"

"Yes," said Zoe. "First to your flat—he has the address. And then straight to Waterloo. There's a train at seven five. I think you'll do it nicely."

Having taken his seat in the car Simon leaned out to her, anxious to prolong this moment if only by a few seconds. He looked and looked. She gave him her hand in farewell. The silence between them was just long enough to have meaning for Simon. But he must not delay.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "goodbye."

"*Au revoir,*" she corrected him, "till tomorrow. And good luck."

The door slammed on him; the panting engine changed its rhythm; and the street began flowing past him towards the house that was now left behind. Till tomorrow, his heart repeated; and already he seemed to taste the queer anxious blissful quality of that looked-for reunion. What a charming pair they were, these Sylvesters! And how richly it added to his knowledge of Zoe to have seen her in her home! It gave her a background of sober and solid fact. It made her more human, more of this world, more actual, but in no degree less enchanting. Her mystery was still inviolate, and would, he vowed, for ever remain so. Even if he ultimately won her for his own—and now he hardly dared to entertain the desolating idea of failure—there was something of her, some secret, some magic, that would always remain to baffle and exasperate and delight him. Eagerly he contemplated this prospect: a lifetime of ecstatic pursuit, of infinite discovery. Meanwhile the car moved smoothly on; and the man in front, the man they had called Harvey, sat so still and so silent in the driver's seat that he seemed to be no more than a part of the extremely efficient mechanism that was transporting Simon to Waterloo. From Zoe his thoughts went to the casket,

and to the strange exciting story connected with it. Even now, in spite of being attracted by the personality of Mr. Sylvester, and in spite of the glamour that Zoe's presence had thrown over everything, he was aware of certain doubts. Formula of a petrol-substitute? Perhaps. Perhaps not. He was in a reckless adventurous mood now, and felt that all such questions were of minor importance. What mattered, what filled him with dancing satisfaction, was that he was on his way to perform a service for Zoe's uncle, and for Zoe, and that there was a prospect of seeing her again in a few hours.

Half an hour's drive, and the car came to a standstill at Oliver's front door. Simon turned, as he alighted, to glance at his driver. "Hullo!" he exclaimed. But he said it under his breath and looked quickly away. This was the same driver as had accompanied the Reverend Mr. Mildmay on a recent occasion still fresh in Simon's memory. What did it all mean? He did not pause to answer the question, but ran up the steps and let himself in with a latchkey. Oliver was not at home, but he found Mrs. Plumtry in her kitchen and to her he entrusted a message.

"I'm going to stay a night or two with some friends of mine. The name is Sylvester. Can you remember that? And the address is Berners End, Chilford. Here, I'll scribble it down for you. Can you read that?"

The next thing was to pack a few necessaries. Pyjamas, shaving kit, and a change of hosiery and linen. He selected his best suit of pyjamas, pink silk pyjamas of which he was secretly rather proud. He regretted that no one was likely to see him wearing them. He

regretted, too, that Mr. Sylvester had vetoed dress clothes; for he would have liked to appear in splendour at his first dinner with the incomparable Zoe. But there was no time for idle dreaming. He had brought the casket into the house with him, and now he folded it in the pyjamas and placed it reverently at the bottom of a small suitcase.

And so, back to the car. He was now so excited that he troubled himself no further about the driver's identity. He was intoxicated with hope. The car moved off again, and, precisely twelve minutes later, turned into the station yard. A porter opened the door for him, and Simon, after an instant's hesitation, yielded his precious bag into the man's hands, reflecting that it was as safe in a porter's keeping as in his own, and perhaps safer.

"Which train, sir?"

"The seven five to Chilford."

"Very good, sir. Platform 6."

At the booking office, while he was buying his ticket, he became suddenly agitated by doubts of that porter. He sweated with anxiety, and could not stop to count his change, but hurried off in quest of Platform 6. There he was greeted by the porter; the bag was safely restored to him; and his heart leaped with relief. He sat back in his corner seat and reflected that everything had gone very nicely so far. Glancing out of the window just as the train started he caught sight of a familiar figure, the lank lean figure of the sardonic Mr. Porson, who, with an appearance of weary indifference which even haste did nothing to dispel, was stepping into the next carriage. Odd, very odd, thought Simon. But when he came to think of it he felt in-

clined to reverse that verdict. There might, after all, be nothing in it. A mere coincidence. Nevertheless enough of suspicion remained to make him vaguely uneasy for a moment, until, presently, the words of his message to Oliver came floating back into his mind, especially that magical address, Berners End, Chilford, which conjured up before his mind's eye a picture of rural Sussex in all its midsummer beauty—green hills and wooded valleys, farms and fields, harmonious gables and cottage thatch, a pastoral paradise. Being alone in the carriage he closed his eyes the better to contemplate this vision, and so, daydreaming, saw himself and Zoe wandering together through a leafy lane, and could find nothing more to wish for.

So occupied, Simon found the journey pass pleasantly and quickly. Before very long the train was carrying him through green fields, and his eyes followed with pleasure the undulating lines of the horizon, until the train-steward came down the corridor calling "Take your seats for the second dinner, please." Simon rose and followed this benefactor.

Two hours later he was alighting at Chilford. There was one decayed car there, obviously plying for hire, and a few little cars into which husbands or wives immediately disappeared and drove away with their respective spouses. But there was nothing that resembled Mr. Sylvester's car. Ten minutes passed, twenty; then half an hour. Simon was beginning to wonder if he had contrived to get out at the wrong station. Finally, however, a very fine large car rushed at the station entrance, looked as if it were about to smash clean through into ticket office and waiting room, but was pulled up dead not four yards from

where Simon was standing. A small bandy-legged chauffeur, somewhat red in the face and agitated in manner, shot out of the car, seized a neighbouring porter, and asked if the London train was in. On being told that it had arrived over half an hour before, the chauffeur looked more agitated than ever, took off his uniform cap, rubbed his head hard, and at last noticed Simon.

"Good evening," said Simon noncommittally.

"Evening, sir."

The conversation hung fire.

"I've just arrived from London," Simon ventured, "where Covent Garden is, you know." He darted a quick glance at the chauffeur, who for his part stared back like a man in a dream.

Finally, after a most awkward pause, the chauffeur said: "Either you knows it or you doesn't, so you might as well say it if you knows it. As for me—I give you my word—it's 'opeless. Ought to have wrote it down."

Simon went nearer. "Do you mean," he began in an eager undertone, "Half a pound of ripe cherries, and no trumps?"

The man instantly went into raptures of agreement. "That's it," he cried triumphantly. "You've got a proper memory, you have, sir. I was told it by Mr. Sylvester, not four days since, when I brought him here, and I never put it down in writing, and for the last three blessed days I've been trying to remember them cherries and no what's-its. Driving me to drink it was," he added—with some truth, if his breath were to be taken as evidence. He relieved Simon of his bag, and ushered him into the car.

"Have we far to go?" asked Simon, as he took his seat.

"About seven miles," replied the chauffeur cheerfully. "Usually do it just under ten minutes."

Simon leaned back, trying to look at ease, though he felt a little dubious. The car moved a few yards, gave a loud groan, then hurled itself at the distant line of hills. It looked to Simon as if the first part of his purpose, the conveyance of the casket to the Old Manor, would soon be fulfilled. The road came running to met them, then seemingly avoided the encounter.

Another road, not far away, was doing the same thing for a man in another car, a man who bore a curious resemblance to the Reverend Mr. Mildmay. In fact, this car and Simon's were now swiftly converging upon the point where the road to Chilford and the road to Watermouth meet and cross each other. And at these crossroads, in the shadow of the eighteenth century monolith that celebrates the death of a felon and the rescue of a maiden lady, we find Police Constable Dumble in conference with his superior, Sergeant Flack.

The day was faded gold, the air quiet and fresh with newly fallen rain. The smell of earth and wet grass was in the dusk, and from time to time, whenever a small wind rose and fluttered, the warm breath of hawthorn floated into the road. Belated birds sang for Police Constable Dumble; the sky, like a shadowy face, bent tenderly over him; but he paid no attention to either, his mind being occupied with other things. He was a tall young hobbledehoy of a policeman who looked as though he had been packed, limb by limb,

into a uniform designed for his younger brother. His features were large and knobbly, his mouth wide, his ears sticking out; his expression was solemn, like that of a good-natured and rather intelligent ox. He listened to his sergeant's admonitions with every sign of respect, every now and again removing his helmet in order to scratch sapiently at his head of thick, startled, straw-coloured hair: an exercise notoriously conducive to clear thinking. Sergeant Flack was a more portly figure lacking a good seven inches of Dumble's height, but by virtue of his authority he towered above him, so that Dumble, though in fact he looked down on the sergeant, had quite the sensation of looking up. Such is the power of a great intellect. Sergeant Flack had no doubt at all of his own importance. He was new to this rural district and had every intention of smartening it up. He, like his subordinate, was insensitive to the blandishments of nature. For him, as for Dumble, the nightingales were mute, and the hedges had flowered in vain; the first shy star shone unnoticed in the west.

"Now, Dumble," said the sergeant briskly, "you're a young feller as wants to get on, ain't you?"

Dumble nodded gravely. "I be that right enough, sergeant."

"A young feller," pursued the sergeant, warming to his theme, "as means to make his way in the force."

"That be good gospel," agreed Dumble.

"A young feller," said the sergeant, clinching the matter, "as doesn't mean to miss his chances. Am I right or am I wrong?" The sergeant was a man who liked to make sure. A cautious steady soul.

"I takes your meaning, sergeant," said Dumble. "And right you are, says I."

"Very good!" The sergeant clicked his tongue, and thrust his face forward with an air of menace. "Then let me tell you this, Police Constable Dumble, my man. You've got to be more spry. You've got to be more fierce. I've been looking up your record, Dumble, and it give me a pain in the stummick, see? I'm talking to you for your good, mind. It makes no mortal matter of difference to me. But if you want to get on you've got to get convictions."

Dumble grinned unhappily. "I'm a pretty fierce chap by nature, sergeant. You're right there. But these folks of mine here, they be so plaguey quiet, they never give me a chance to bring out the handcuffs. There's no crime here, sergeant, that's the long and the short of it."

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped the sergeant. "The trouble is you've no go in you, Dumble. Crime indeed! I never heard such a tale. There's crime everywhere. Get that into your head. All day and every day, there's crime."

"Is there really?" said Dumble hopefully.

"Of course there is," said the sergeant more kindly. "Else what's the law for, and what are we for? Answer me that. Now see here, Dumble, I don't want to be hard on you, so I'll give you a tip. You goes your rounds, and what do you hear, what do you see? You hears a man using bad language. You takes him in charge and puts him in your notebook. You sees a pack of boys playing football in the High Street to the danger of the public. You warn them, they laugh at you, you warns them again, they throw stones, so what do you do?"

"I takes 'em in charge," said Dumble, "and puts 'em in my notebook." The light of intelligence shone in his eager eyes.

"Good lad!" cried the sergeant. He was impressed by the constable's quickness, for which, indeed, he could remember no precedent. He slapped him genially on the shoulder, and you could hardly have noticed, so dignified was his bearing, that he had to reach upwards to do so. "We shall make a man of you yet. Ha, what's this? A car coming. And driving to the danger if you ask me."

There were in fact two cars approaching, and one of them, as we know, held Simon, who for the last two or three minutes had been wondering whether he were not on the racing track at Brooklands. It was exhilarating, this speed, and he could not have too much of it. But suddenly he caught sight of the other car, and it seemed to him that a collision was imminent. At the last moment the other car swerved; Simon opened his mouth to yell but could achieve nothing louder than a gasp; and the whole world became one vivid nightmare of expectation. The gaping policemen saw the rear car, Simon's, leap at the front car like a cat; the wheels locked and buckled, and the cars spun round on each other and came to a standstill. But in Simon's mind this complicated operation was converted into slow motion, and it distressed him when, after what seemed an age, he found himself still alive and in a stationary vehicle, with nothing visible but a segment of night sky.

Presently he was aware of a large red face that filled this skylight and peered down upon him curiously.

"Reckon you've had a bit of a smash, sir," remarked Constable Dumble judicially.

"Yes," agreed Simon, rather shakily. "Anyone hurt?"

Dumble brought out his notebook. "I'll have to ask you a question or two," he said sternly. "And you be careful what you say."

Simon made no answer. He was feeling disinclined for conversation and wanted nothing but to be assured that no one was hurt. "Where's my chauffeur?" he demanded.

"Come along, come along, come along." It was the voice of Flack, brisk and commanding. "Bring the gentleman out, constable, and don't stand there gossiping."

Dumble's manner changed. He became timid, friendly, confidential. "The sergeant says you're to get out, sir. So come you along for mussy sake. He's a rare bustling officer, is the sergeant, poor fellow."

Simon raised himself unsteadily and with Dumble's help climbed out into the road. "But where's my driver, confound you?" he asked again. "Is he hurt? My driver," he repeated urgently. "The chap that was driving my car," he explained, having, in the interval between one jerky sentence and another, taken the measure of Dumble's intelligence.

"There *was* a man," admitted Dumble. "There *was* a man sure enough. We took him over yonder and laid him out on the grass."

"Laid him out?" echoed Simon. "Do you mean—"

"Ah, here we are," barked Sergeant Flack. "Name and address, *if* you please. Pretty bad business, this. Driving to the danger, and you'll hear more of it. Gentleman here all cut about the face."

"Where? Who?" asked Simon. "Is he hurt?"

"All cut about the face," returned Flack nastily. "I didn't ask if it 'urt 'im or not. I'll have your name, sir, please."

"And you're welcome to it," said Simon. "But why the deuce don't you help the chap if he's hurt? Where is he, anyhow?" Turning about, he saw a man sitting, head in hands, on the step of the strange car. "I say," he said, stepping impulsively forward, "I hope you're not badly hurt?"

The stranger raised his head slowly, and Simon had a double shock. First, the face presented to his gaze was bleeding profusely, a sensational sight. And second—"Hullo!" cried Simon accusingly. "We've met before, I think, Mr. Mildmay!"

"A happy reunion, Mr. Heath," said the ex-pseudo-cleric. "Have you got the swag with you?"

Lacking his clerical garb, and with his face copiously bleeding, our Mr. Mildmay cut a far less impressive figure than he had done on the occasion of his first encounter with Simon. Vanished was that dignity, that chastened buoyancy, that air of benign self-appreciation; and the suave insolence that he had now assumed did not avail to hide his true quality. In discarding his black coat in favour of a grey flannel suit, Mr. Mildmay had discarded his old-world gentility; by fastening his collar in the front instead of at the back he had made himself more than a little lower than the angels; and by pitching forward against the windscreen of his car he had blunted the edge of his personal beauty. Taken all in all he seemed a somewhat shabby character, and Simon had no difficulty in believing him to be—as Mr. Sylvester had represented him—a dangerous fellow, a commercial spy, a man who would stop

at nothing in his determination to get hold of this priceless formula.

Simon ignored the sneer. "Whose fault was it, this crash—yours or ours?"

"Who cares? We're both insured, aren't we?"

Simon turned away, shrugging his shoulders. "Yes, all right," he said, as the sergeant once more demanded his name. "Here's my card. Have you taken this gentleman's name too?" he asked. But did not stay for an answer. "I say, what *has* happened to that chauffeur of mine?"

"He's gorn, sir. That's what's happened to him," said Dumble, with a sort of pride. "We laid him out on yonder grass by the hedge, and what does he do but get up on his two legs when our backs is turned, and take himself off. No, there's not a sight or sniff of him, sir, as you may see for yourself."

Simon stared his astonishment. "But I thought he was injured or something?"

"True, sir," said Dumble. "Kind of dizzled he was, sir. Oh yes, he seemed very sadly indeed, sir."

"By Jove," exclaimed Simon, "I hope—" What he hoped was that his bag was still safe in the car, for it had suddenly flashed into his mind that the chauffeur had perhaps been bought by the other side and persuaded to some treachery. He ran to the car and looked in. All was well. The bag had been pitched on to the floor, but the locks had held and there was no question of the casket's being safe. He sighed with relief, but chancing to look up he caught sight of something that made him jump with excitement.

"Hi! What's that!" he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Mr. Mildmay.

Mildmay smiled uneasily. "Anything I can do for you, Mr. Heath?"

"Yes there is, by Jove," said Simon, trembling with his sense of crisis. "You can jolly well give me that casket."

"Basket?" said Mildmay, knitting his brows. "But I have no basket, dear Mr. Heath."

"Now, gentlemen, what's all this?" Sergeant Flack popped up again, bristling with officiousness.

"Casket, not basket," said Simon, with nervous violence. "I said casket. What's more," he added indignantly, "you know I said casket. You—you—jolly well know I said casket." Simon was overwrought. The excitements of the day, crowned by the nasty shock of this car accident, were proving almost too much for his self-control. But he stuck to his guns. "I saw you take it out of your car, or somewhere, and put it in, in your pocket or somewhere, inside your overcoat." He turned to Flack. "Sergeant, I accuse this man of theft."

"Ho," said Sergeant Flack. "You accuse him of theft, do you? And a very serious accusation too, mark my words. What's he stolen? Tell me that."

"The gentleman complains," put in Mildmay smoothly, "the gentleman complains that I have taken something from somewhere and put it somewhere else. I don't think he's quite himself, officer. He had a bad shaking up, remember."

"A casket, a steel casket," insisted Simon. Goaded by desperation he made a sudden rush at his antagonist, who, despite his injuries, dodged cleverly, leaving Simon to feel and look very foolish. He stood, blushing and scowling, and repenting of his rash impulse.

"Now, now, now!" said Flack reprovingly. "We can't allow vi'ence. Any more of *them* tricks, and off you goes to the station, be you 'oo you may. That's the law, that is. Ain't it, Dumble, my man?"

"Yes, sergeant. And very pretty law too, sergeant. Which another thing, sir," added Dumble, turning persuasively to Simon. "It stands to reason you can't go fighting a face like that. 'Tis not Christian fighting, sir. What you want," concluded Dumble, addressing himself now to Mr. Mildmay, "what you want on that eyeball of yourn is half a pound of nice beefsteak, sir. Likewise a strip or two of plaster for that nose."

"True enough, Dumble," said the police sergeant. "But don't have so much to say, my man. You'd best come along with me, sir, and have that face of yours put to rights. And as for you, mister," he added to Simon, "you 'ave a nice lie-down and you'll soon feel better. Dumble'll see you're all right, won't you, Dumble?" He shot a meaning glance at Dumble, which that ambitious young man interpreted in his own way.

"But didn't you hear what I said?" protested Simon, aghast at this spectacle of folly and injustice. "I tell you this fellow's a thief. He's stolen a steel casket from me. I saw the thing in his hand a moment ago. If he denies it, I say he ought to be searched."

The sergeant turned to Mildmay. "And what do you say to that, sir?"

"Well," said Mildmay, in the tone of a man who has made up his mind to humour a lunatic, "I don't mind admitting that I *have* got a steel casket in my possession. I've never denied it. Where this gentleman deludes himself is in thinking that the casket is his." His

right hand went searching down into a large deep inside pocket of his leather motoring coat. And the next minute—there was the casket in his hand. "Is this what you're worrying your poor crazed head about?" he asked Simon, almost tenderly.

"That is the casket," said Simon. He was profoundly uncomfortable, being puzzled, and suspecting a trick. He wondered what tactical subtlety could lie concealed in this apparent candour.

"Excellent," said Mildmay. "Well, if it will be any comfort to you, take it, my dear sir." He handed the casket to Simon, who received it without a word. "And heaven restore his poor wits," murmured Mr. Mildmay piously. He tapped his forehead significantly. Both speech and gesture were for Sergeant Flack's benefit.

"Can I be of any assistance?" enquired a voice.

They all turned to look at the newcomer, a pleasant young man in a two-seater. They had all been too busily occupied to notice his approach.

"Yes, sir." The police sergeant began to remember his duties. "There's been a bit of an accident. No lives lost, no bones broken, but this here gentleman here has cut his face something crool."

"Let me run him in to Chilford," suggested the young man. "It won't take us five minutes."

"Right, sir. Much obliged. And if it's all the same to you," said Flack importantly, "I'll ride with you in the dickie." He opened the door for Mildmay. "Will you get in, sir?"

"Thank you," said Mildmay. But with one foot on the step he paused to ask: "And where is our friend with the casket bound for?"

"He'll be all right with Dumble. Won't he, Dumble?"

"Very likely," said Mildmay, a trifle snappishly. "But where is he bound for?"

"Me?" said Simon. "Oh, I was on my way to Seaworthy." He was determined not to admit, in Mildmay's hearing, anything that should connect him with the Sylvesters; and on the spur of the moment "Seaworthy" was the best he could do in the way of invention. As soon as the word was pronounced he recognized that it was not all he could wish for.

"Seaworthy?" said the young man in the two-seater. "Where the deuce is that? I've never heard of it."

"Nor me, sir," admitted Flack. "Do you know a Seaworthy hereabouts, Dumble my man?"

"Come, come!" protested Mr. Mildmay, now seated by the motorist's side. "Surely you know Seaworthy, sergeant! Great shipbuilding centre on the coast of Bohemia. Take care of your patient, constable. He needs it."

Mildmay had had the last word, but Simon, having secured the casket, did not grudge him that minor triumph. He went to the car and lifted his bag into the road. With a slight feeling of indelicacy, but with an excitement that he could hardly control, he opened the bag, exposing to view—to Dumble's view as well as his own—a pair of pyjamas, a set of shaving tackle, a clean shirt, and sundry articles of underclothing. The sight of these things was oddly startling. He had assumed that Mildmay, by some devilish stratagem, had opened and rifled his bag and abstracted the casket. Yet here was no sign of disorder; the contents of the bag appeared to have been untouched; and yes!—won-

der of wonders, wildest of all improbabilities—here at the bottom of the bag, snugly hidden under the pyjamas, lay the casket itself, just where he himself had placed it. He stared at the casket in the bag; he stared at the casket in his hand; and wondered if he were dreaming. They were as like as two peas; he could not have told one from the other; and no matter how often he counted them he could not make them less than two. He recalled his visit to Waterloo Station with Zoe, and tried to fit this casket puzzle together. But his head was throbbing; he felt far from well; and in his extremity he came near to appealing to Dumble for enlightenment. He did indeed turn to him with a puzzled gesture, and Dumble, with no word said, quietly took the casket out of his hand.

That roused him from his dream of bewilderment. "Here, what are you doing?"

"I'll carry un along for ye, sir," said Dumble soothingly. " 'Twill be safe with me, my sonny, never fear."

"Oh, as you please," said Simon wearily. "But look here," he added, anxiously confidential, "you keep this quiet, will you? Or at any rate," he hastily corrected himself, "don't let that fellow Mildmay know about it."

Dumble scratched his head. "I don't rightly unnerstand you, my sonny."

Simon shut and locked the bag. "Never mind. For heaven's sake tell me the way to Berners End."

"Ah," said Dumble sagaciously. "It'll be the Old Manor you want, likely enough."

Simon looked suspicious. "How do *you* know what I want?"

"Ah, but it's a crool long step to the Old Manor, my sonny. You'll not get there on your two feet tonight, all shook up and doidered as you are. What you want is a nice lie-down, same as sergeant said."

"Nonsense!" said Simon. He repudiated the suggestion the more emphatically because he was secretly inclined to it. He had the casket; indeed he had a superfluity of caskets. The danger of that loss had been averted, and he felt that he had done almost enough for one day. This was a weakness not of the spirit but of the flesh. His mind was set on Zoe; his heart yearned to serve her and his eyes to see her again; but his stomach—ah, that was another matter. For some minutes past he had been trying to ignore a certain sickness that began to make itself felt. Now it was a fear, now a sensation; and the two played upon each other, and the malady did not diminish. "What about the cars?" he said. "Will the sergeant send somebody out to put them right?" He felt he ought to say that his car belonged to Mr. Sylvester of Berners End, but a blind instinct for concealment kept him silent. And anyhow, what did the car matter compared with the casket that he carried in his bag?

"They'll put un to rights tomorrow sure enough," said Dumble.

"But dash it, they can't stay here all night, in the middle of the road."

"They'll put un to rights tomorrow," repeated Dumble woodenly.

Simon gave it up and tackled another aspect of his problem. "Can't I get a cab or something from the village?"

"There be Harry Bates back at Chilford do keep a

motor car for hire, as you might say. But we'll have to go fetch un. And that be three miles or more."

"And how far is Berners End?"

Dumble cunningly considered. "It might be five and it might be more nigh ten," he said sadly.

"That settles it," said Simon. "I'll get the cab."

"D'ye mean Harry Bateses's cab?" asked Dumble. "Ah, but that don't run now, my sonny. 'Tis a terrible old cab, and Harry be afeared to drive un."

"But I thought you said—" began Simon.

"No, sir, you must put Harry out of mind. Harry's no good to ye. Better take and walk on your two feet than trust to Harry. A long sight better, unless you want to lay your poor bones in the churchyard, sir."

"Oh curse!" cried Simon with feeble violence. He was spent, he was disgusted; his stomach was in revolt and the universe of his dreams was shaken.

"Now there's Mother's house, sir, that's another pair of shoes altogether, as the saying is. I lives with Mother, and 'tis only a step or two along, sir, and Mother'll give you a bed as soon as clap eyes on you, so sadly as you are."

"Oh, very well," Simon gave in. "Let's go there. After an hour's rest," he said hopefully, "I shall probably feel better."

"That's good gospel, sir," cried Dumble cheerfully, as they began walking. "And it's time you took and had a lie-down, sure enough. You're not looking your best, as they say."

"Do I look bad?" asked Simon. Was it possible that he looked as bad as he felt?

"I wouldn't say bad," said Dumble. "Bad's more than I'll say. But I'll say sadly. Minds me of my

poor old father time he was took with yaller jarnders. And he never got out of bed again, didn't Father."

"Let's get along to this cottage of yours," said Simon, rather curtly.

His manner enjoined silence, and Dumble, having gained his point, was willing enough to say no more. The pace quickened; Simon's queasiness waxed and waned and waxed again. Half an hour went by, and Dumble's mile was apparently still unachieved.

"How much farther?" asked Simon in despair.

"Here we are, sir. That's the liddle place yonder."

They turned off the main road into a lane and a few more steps brought them to a small and rather dilapidated thatched cottage. To Simon's eyes it was a most welcome sight.

The door of the cottage was open, for it was a warm night, and hesitating on the threshold Simon discerned through the dusk the figure of a wizened old woman with a brown, crab-apple face. He was also vaguely aware of some kind of large animal curled up in the dark corner of the room.

"What d'ye want?" said the old woman sharply.

" 'Tis a gentleman, Mother, as do want a nice bed for the night."

"He can't have mine," said Mrs. Dumble. "But he can have yours, Joe, and welcome."

"And what'll I do?" asked Dumble.

Mrs. Dumble did not appear to think this question worth answering. "Or if he'd rather he can sleep with George. It's all one to me."

At the magic word "George" the monster sprawling in the far corner began, with many grunts, collecting its scattered limbs into a human posture. Presently it

rose to its feet and stared at the visitor with puzzled indignation.

"Eh?" said George.

Joe Dumble was a lanky fellow with a chest measurement that had commended him to the Police Force; but compared with his brother George he was undersized. George was like the Strong Man at a village fair. His presence, when he stood up, dwarfed the room; and his large square foolish face was far from winsome. Simon could tell at a glance that it would be difficult to make a friend of George.

"Gentleman wants your bed to sleep in," said Mrs. Dumble.

George growled interrogation. His mother repeated her remark. George growled again, this time with a suggestion of ferocity. George seemed nettled. Something had disturbed George.

"Not at all," said Simon hastily. "I shouldn't think of it."

"Don't you mind poor George, my sonny," said Joe Dumble soothingly. "He's a quiet enough boy if you takes him the right way."

"Fell off a nayrick five years ago, and never been quite the same since," supplemented Mrs. Dumble. "Touch of temper, that's all. He's very hard to please when he's had his glass, is George. Isn't he, Joe?"

"That's right, Mother," agreed Dumble. "And he's had his glass now, by the look of things."

"He has that," said Mrs. Dumble grimly. "Well, if the gentleman wants a bed, I suppose he must 'ave one," she grumbled, getting up from her chair. "Come along, Joe, and 'elp me put the room to rights. Clean sheets and sech."

"But," protested Simon, "I'm not going to turn George out of his room. Nothing would induce me to do such a thing. I'd rather do anything than that. I'd rather—"

"Turn George out!" Mrs. Dumble tittered wheezily. "That's a good un, that is. Turn George out of his room! I can see George letting you. D'ye know what George did the other day?"

Simon did not know what George had done the other day; nor did he wish to hear the story. And here Joe came to the rescue.

"Don't you worry about old George, sir. You can have my bed and welcome. Me and mother'll put everything apple-pie for you—"

"Yes," interrupted Simon. "Thanks very much. But where are you taking that casket? I'll put it in my bag if you don't mind."

Dumble surrendered the casket reluctantly, his large soft eyes sparkling with suspicion, and with the wistful hope, which he had cherished ever since seeing those caskets, that here, in Simon, he had his first criminal, his first step to promotion. Then he followed his mother upstairs, leaving Simon alone with the bag, the Mildmay casket, and George.

George seemed to be now in a pleasanter and quieter mood. He was watchful, sluggish, silent. Reassured by these portents of good humour, Simon was able to turn his attention to the two caskets. The new one lay on the Dumbles' table. The other was safe in the bag, and nothing would content Simon but that he should have another look at it and make sure that there was indeed no difference between the twins. He opened the bag, but he did not take the casket out: he merely

lifted the pall that hid it from sight. This, as we know, was a pair of pyjamas.

"Give it George," said George.

It was George's first articulate utterance in Simon's hearing, and it alarmed him not a little. "What's that?"

George stared but made no answer. Was it possible that he wanted the casket?

"Er . . . did you speak?" asked Simon nervously.

George laughed, and reached for the beer jug. He poured himself out a glass of beer. His second, thought Simon. Or perhaps . . .

"Give it George," said George. The glass was already empty. He came lurching across the room, his eyes fixed not on the casket, not on Simon, but on that pair of pink silk pyjamas. A latent dandyism was waking in the breast of George. He saw himself clad in those pyjamas and was uplifted by the vision. He came, he saw, he conquered. Simon, indeed, did not think of opposing his innocent whim. George snatched up the pyjamas and retired to his corner with them.

"I say, George!"

"Eh?" said George.

"Those are my pyjamas, you know. Would you mind?—I rather want them. I rather want to go to bed."

George looked cross, and Simon changed his mind.

"All right. Don't bother. I'll manage without them for one night."

"Eh?" said George. "What's a bother?"

"Don't bother," said Simon. He shut his bag in

some haste, picked it up, and made for the stairs, leaving the second casket forgotten on the table.

Mrs. Dumble and Joe met him at the stairhead.

"I say," said Simon. "Your brother's been behaving rather oddly. He's taken a fancy to my pyjamas. In fact, I think he's trying to put them on."

"Ah," said Dumble, "that means he's been having his glass again. All right, mister. I'll see to old George."

Mrs. Dumble conducted him to the bedroom, and as soon as he was left alone he began taking off his clothes. Dumble might, or might not, shortly appear with the pyjamas. A roaring and rumbling from below, punctuated by an occasional crash as of an overturned chair or a bottle smashing against the wall, suggested that George was being reasoned with. But presently Simon was lying naked in bed; the house became quieter; and the long anticipated comfort of cool sheets and a soft pillow wooed him to sleep. The pillow was not, in fact, as soft as it might have been; for Simon had taken the precaution of putting the casket underneath it; but it would have taken more than that trifling discomfort to keep him from sleep tonight.

He woke at early dawn; the first shaft of sunlight, the first sound of birds. He sat up in bed, astonished to find himself in a strange room, and unable to believe that it was indeed morning. He looked at the watch on his wrist. But it had stopped, for he had forgotten to wind it overnight. There was no sound in the house. He glanced about him, and was mildly surprised not to see his clothes on the bedside chair where he had laid them. Or had he dropped them on the bed? Or under the bed? Or on the floor? Im-

possible that he should have put them in that cupboard! He looked everywhere, and at last came to a standstill in the middle of the room, unable to believe his senses. Of his bag, of his clothes, there was no sign. He rushed at the bed and snatched up the pillow. Thank heaven, the casket was safe. Only one casket—the other he now remembered to have left on the kitchen table—but luckily it was the right one, the one that contained the great Sylvester formula for petrol. He was stark naked, and now began to be painfully conscious of the fact. Not a stitch of his clothing could he find. All he possessed in the world was a steel casket measuring nine by six.

CHAPTER X

OLIVER IN ACTION

OLIVER came back to his flat hoping to find Simon there. Seeing the room empty he summoned Mrs. Plumtry.

"D'you know where Mr. Heath is, Mrs. Plumtry?"

"I do and I don't, sir," answered Mrs. Plumtry, wiping her always wet hands on her always soiled apron. "Now if only you'd been a few minutes before yourself, Mr. Bland, you'd have caught him."

"Is this a time for metaphysics?" asked Oliver. He was impatient but not unkind. He had got used to Mrs. Plumtry, and liked her. "Let me make this affair plain to you, Mrs. Plumtry. I've got a couple of press tickets for a first night. In short, I want my cousin to come with me to a theatre. There's no time to lose. So please, if you can, tell me where he is and let us have done with idle speculation."

"What a shame you didn't catch him!" said Mrs. Plumtry. "Only a few minutes ago he come rushing in here like a whirlpool, Mr. Bland. Goodbye, Mrs. Plumtry, says he, and thank you for all you've done, he says. I'm going away, says he. I'm off to see Bernard's friend at Leicester, he says. And that's the message, sir, and that's what I was to tell you. Such a nice spoken gentleman!" she ended wistfully.

"Bernard's friend at Leicester!" Oliver frowned. "Are you sure you've got it right?"

"If you don't believe me you can see for yourself." Mrs. Plumtry was indignant. "He wrote it down on a bit of paper."

"And that bit of paper," said Oliver. "Have you got it?"

For answer she fumbled in the pocket of her apron and produced a scrap of folded pasteboard.

"Thanks," said Oliver, almost snatching. Simon's note was very brief: *c/o Sylvester, Berners End, Chilford.* And underneath this was written: *Queer stuff —explain later. Simon.*

"Ah!" Oliver looked very thoughtful. "There is more in this, Mrs. Plumtry, than meets the eye. I rather think that I shall be away this week-end. So if you find in the morning that my bed has not been slept in, don't give way to womanly grief. Promise me that."

"Very well, Mr. Bland. Backer Monday?"

"What?" Oliver had all but forgotten Mrs. Plumtry. He was deep in thought.

"Backer Monday?"

"Ah, yes. You are asking shall I be back on Monday. Who can say, Mrs. Plumtry? All flesh is grass. But I promise you I shall endeavour to be back on Monday."

"Suppose Mr. Heath comes back and wants to know where you've gorn, sir?" insinuated Mrs. Plumtry.

"He won't do that, I think. But for your own information, Mrs. Plumtry, I rather think I shall go to Leicester. Bernard's friend, you know. Any friend of Bernard," said Oliver, "is a friend of mine. Good night, Mrs. Plumtry."

He returned to his room and lifted the telephone

receiver. "Holborn 2525. Is that you, Fred? No, I want Holborn 2525. Sorry. I say, I asked for 2525. Two fife two fife. Yes, drum and fife. Fife in Fifeshire. The one after four. Right . . . Is that you, Fred? Oh Fred, listen. My cousin's affair. You know, the casket. Well, I can't tell you on the telephone. Even the exchange has ears, though you might not think it. Now listen, Fred. I want you to come here in your fastest car. What? You've only got one car? Well, come in that. We've got to get together and talk. You're not too busy, are you? No corpses in tow? No blackmail in high life or anything? Good. Well, come along then. And, I say! Are you there? Bring some kit with you. Manacles, toothbrush, and so on. I rather think we shall have to get on the trail tonight and go down into the country."

Oliver replaced the receiver, and began making brisk preparations for departure, and when Fred arrived, less than half an hour later, he was all ready for him.

"Hullo, Fred! Good man!" Oliver jumped into the seat by Fred's side. "Start her up, lad, we've a two hours journey before us. We can talk as we go. The movement of the car will loosen my tongue."

Fred's was a good car, and Fred was a good driver. Cars were Fred's passion, and he asked nothing better —unless it were a good murder—than to have a passenger who did not object to speed.

"Where are we going?" asked Fred, as they moved off.

"We're going to Leicester," answered Oliver promptly. "But," he added, on a note of warning, "remember that when I say Leicester I mean Chilford,

and when I say Chilford I mean Berners End. Got that? Very useful alibi in my opinion. We can't be too careful in a case like this."

"Eh?" said Fred, pardonably bewildered. He slowed the car down. "Where are we going, Mr. Bland? That's what I want to know. I can't drive you to a place if I don't know what the place is, can I? See what I mean?"

"Very closely reasoned," said Oliver approvingly. "You put the whole thing in a nutshell. The trained mind, Fred. I envy you that gift of remorseless logic. We're going to Chilford. Or rather to Berners End, which I take it is somewhere near Chilford."

"Chilford in Sussex. I've been there before. I know the road." Fred accelerated. They glided swiftly round a corner.

"That's a piece of luck. What took you to Chilford?"

"A matter of business," said Fred.

"Aha, it's a hotbed of crime, is it? I thought as much. I'm glad you were free tonight. I couldn't possibly have managed this job without you."

"Only too pleased," said the gratified Fred. "Fact is, Mr. Bland, this is our slack season, and I've more time on my hands than I care about. You'll let that go no farther, I'm sure, sir. Now let me see, our best plan is to go down by Fulham and make for the Kingston by-pass. Then on to Guildford and so on. Yes, I remember."

"Well," said Oliver, "we're making tolerably good speed already, heart of the metropolis though it is. My conversation doesn't distract you, I hope? Good. Then let's get this thing straight. My cousin Simon

Heath has been spirited away to this Berners End near Chilford. What I mean is, he's run off there, leaving a very snappy message behind him. He appears to be with some people called Sylvester. He doesn't say much, but I gather that there's queer work in hand down in those savage Sussex regions, and you and I must be there. I fancy it has something to do with that stolen casket and the Euravian conspiracy. You remember the details? Of course you do. The trained mind again. Well, I never did believe that story."

"Nor did I," said Fred.

"Nor did you," agreed Oliver. "How could you? So it seems to me time you and I took a hand in the affair. By the way, when did you last have a meal?"

"It must have been getting on for half past five. I had a nice meat tea."

"And I a boiled egg," said Oliver. "So we are fortified against the worst of all disasters. Do you think we shall find decent accommodation at Berners End? And a few sandwiches?"

Fred hoped so; the conversation languished; and for the next hour or so little was said. Oliver became absorbed in his own thoughts. He promised himself a great deal of entertainment from this expedition; the prospect of getting his fingers into Simon's preposterous pie was delightful, and he could think of no better way of spending a week-end. His curiosity was fully engaged; his mischievous humour saw a chance of exercise. But curiosity and mischief were not the beginning and end of his resolve to pursue his cousin into Sussex. Underneath his lighthearted-

ness there lurked a small genuine suspicion, a half-formed and scarcely regarded thought, that Simon, in his innocence, might have been tricked into a situation of some danger.

"Rover," remarked Fred.

"What?" asked Oliver, startled out of his reverie.

"That was a Rover," explained Fred. "Nice little thing."

"Glad you liked it," said Oliver. "But look here, Fred. About those sandwiches. Ought we to risk it at Berners End? I mean, is Berners End in the real sandwich country? I'm not at all sure, you know. I begin to think a grilled steak would be the wiser choice. There's something deuced subtle about sandwiches: it's not everyone that understands them."

"Bentley," murmured Fred.

"Very likely," agreed Oliver. "But don't you think—"

"Daimler," said Fred, with a nod. "I've got my own ideas about this case, Mr. Bland. There's a gang in this, mark my words. Humber. Riley. Vauxhall. Lot of good stuff on the road this evening."

"Fred," said Oliver, "you are not yourself tonight. You are a changed man, Fred. This preoccupation with the traffic is sinister. Life is real, Fred; life is earnest; and the petrol pump is not its goal."

"The new type of Austin," answered Fred. "What were you saying, Mr. Bland?"

"I was asking if you'd brought your disguises with you."

"Yes, indeed I have, sir. The way I look at it is this way. No matter what the job is, whether it's a big job or a little job, whether it's a murder or a jewel

robbery or a divorce court business, you should have a disguise. That's my motto. A false beard always comes in. It can't do any harm, and it may do good."

"It may do a great deal of good," said Oliver. "It may make all the difference between success and failure. Also, it may be a source of innocent fun."

"In my profession," said Fred, "you never know what you may want next. It all depends on the job. Sometimes a smart little black moustache is enough, and a bag of samples. Commercial traveller, d'you see? Other times it's best to be well covered. White beard, blue spectacles, gold-headed cane. You follow my meaning, don't you, Mr. Bland?"

"I do, Fred," answered Oliver, gravely attentive. "I see exactly what you mean. And I think, if it's not an impertinence to say so, you're absolutely right . . ."

The village of Berners End was a peaceful and heartening sight. The hush of late evening was upon it; the spirit of fancy was abroad in the quiet air; the roofline of the clustering cottages was like a strange writing, and, on the western horizon, a clump of tall trees on a hill showed black against a dimly glowing sky. The hanging sign of The Harvesters Inn attracted our two travellers, and before many minutes had passed they were sitting in the landlord's private parlour discussing the plans and prospects of their somewhat mysterious campaign.

"Now, Fred," said Oliver, "we are old campaigners, you and I, and we must remember that this is not the Savoy Grill. While Phyllis is fetching our plates of ham and our tankards of ale, let us reason together. Tell me your view of this strange Sylvester business.

The case of the steel casket. The Adventure of the Euravian Princess. Spill it, Fred. The floor is yours."

Fred leaned across the table. His manner became extremely confidential. "It's dope, sir. That's what it is."

Oliver started back. "You surprise me, Fred. You really think that?"

"I do, sir. And what's more, I'm pretty sure of it. That casket contains dope."

"You interest me profoundly," said Oliver. "Tell me more."

But at this moment the daughter of the house appeared and began laying the table for their meal. Oliver's thoughts turned to the question of accommodation.

"My friend and I," he said, in a somewhat formal tone, "my friend and I are about to collaborate in the writing of a novel, and we have come down here to get local colour. We want two single rooms. Can it be done?"

The girl thought it could.

"Excellent," said Oliver. "This is a very charming inn, and I think we shall be happy here. My friend," continued Oliver, with a certain unction creeping into his voice, "is a famous man. But for the purposes of incognito he wishes to be known, during his stay here, as plain Fred Huggins. As for me, I am John Henry Sylvester. A name which in literary circles— But never mind that." He gave a modest cough. "I do not expect you to have heard of me." In pronouncing these last words he eyed the girl keenly.

"Yes, sir. No, sir. Any relation to them at the Old Manor House, sir?"

"Not that I know of," said Oliver innocently. "Are there some Sylvesters in Berners End, then?"

"Indeed yes, sir. Real gentry they are too. An oldish gentleman, very clever they say, and lots of money. Then there's his niece . . ." She bustled out of the room.

"Alone at last," said Oliver.

Perplexity and admiration contended in Fred's eyes. "Neat, very neat, the way you got her talking about Sylvester. Them's the folks Mr. Heath is with, I think you said?"

"Right," answered Oliver approvingly. "Nothing escapes you. A mind like a strongbox."

"But, if you'll excuse me, I don't quite see why you said all that about us being novelists."

"Don't you, Fred? You disappoint me a little. For my own part I think that was one of my happiest strokes."

"But what's the point of it?" asked the baffled Fred, knitting his brows, anxious to understand.

"Don't you see?" said Oliver. "Why, my dear fellow, it complicates everything."

"Oh, I see." But it was evident that Fred did not see. The cloud of perplexity did not lift. He sat brooding. And throughout the meal that followed he remained unusually silent and thoughtful, trying to puzzle it out. Oliver, having a considerable hunger to satisfy, made no further attempt at conversation, and by tacit agreement the discussion was postponed till after the meal.

"And now," said Oliver briskly, as he folded his napkin, "we must get to work. First of all, show me your beards."

Fred obediently rose from the table and walked over to his bag, which he had set down in a corner of the room. Oliver eagerly followed. Having opened the bag, Fred drew out a handful of assorted whiskers.

"This one'll do," remarked Oliver. He selected a copious black beard. "Have you a pair of smoked spectacles?"

"I've the very thing somewhere," Fred assured him. He rummaged about at the bottom of the bag. "Yes, here we are. What's the idea, Mr. Bland? You don't want disguising, do you? Nobody knows you here. It isn't," explained Fred, with a slight touch of complacency, "it isn't as if you was in the profession, like myself."

"Bless your heart!" cried Oliver. "I'm not going to wear them, my dear fellow. No, they're for you, Fred. Beard and spectacles, all for Freddie."

"But I'm not at all sure—" began Fred.

"But I am. I've thought it all out, and I'm sure I'm right. Be guided by me just for tonight. Tomorrow's another story. Tomorrow shall be your day. But tonight, Fred, I feel I have a flair. Now what I want you to do is to put these things on and sneak into the road and hang round for a bit, taking careful note of all who come and go."

"Well, if you think it best, sir, I'm sure I don't mind."

"Thank you, Fred. I'd do it myself," said Oliver airily, "but I haven't the talent for it. I should only make myself conspicuous. Whereas you, in that beard and those spectacles, will pass quite unnoticed. You see what I mean?"

"Um . . . m yes," said Fred dubiously.

"Of course you do. Brain like a knife. Well, while you're out there, I'll scout round inside and join carelessly in the conversation. I shall pick up a lot that way. A chance phrase, an indiscreet word, and the whole devilish plot may be laid bare in a flash. I don't say it will, but it may be."

Fred had already put the black beard on, and now he was adjusting the spectacles. "How's that, sir? Would you know me?"

"Not if I could help it," said Oliver. "My boy, you look grand. The perfect criminal type."

So Oliver and Fred parted company for a while and went their several ways. Oliver, prospecting for amusement, found gold almost at once. In the bar were three gentlemen of a military cut, yapping together like fox terriers. They were straight, stiff, well-groomed men in their middle forties, and to Oliver's eye they were all exactly alike. They had little close-clipped moustaches, and a staccato close-clipped manner of speech, admirable for commanding doomed battalions to attack impregnable salients. Each held in his right hand a cigarette and in his left a glass of whisky.

"Surely I know that voice?" said Oliver, speaking as if to himself but loud enough to be overheard. They turned as one man and directed at him a long, sharp, suspicious stare. Their faces were slightly in shadow, and Oliver, looking from one to the other, was moved to add: "Forgive me, gentlemen, but your voice is oddly familiar to me. And, by an astonishing coincidence, you all strongly resemble my friend Major Carraway." A few excited barks from his audience encouraged him to continue: "Surely you, sir—?"

He addressed himself to the middle man of the trio, who differed from the others in that he wore a monocle. The owner of the monocle now interrupted him.

"Bland, isn't it? Thought so. Never forget a face. Let's see—you you you you you—"

"Yes," agreed Oliver, "You're right. I did. I called on you at Britisher House and we had a long talk. And a profoundly interesting talk it was too, if I may say so."

"Stout fella!" said Major Carraway. "Introduce. Major de la Touche ffoster . . . Captain Stanton-Strood . . . Mr. er-er Bland. Stout fella! Have a spot?" He rapped smartly on the counter with a coin. "Double Scotch and soda."

"A most happy encounter," said Oliver cheerfully, with a courtly inclination of the head in the direction of the gentleman who answered to the name of de la Touche ffoster. "The old Wiltshire family, I presume?"

"Wiltshire? No," replied the ffoster. "Spell my name with two little effs."

"I certainly will," said Oliver heartily. He lifted his glass. "Here's luck."

"Chin chin," said the three military gentlemen in unison. They sipped. They sipped again. There was a silence which Major Carraway broke by remarking, to nobody in particular and about nobody in particular: "Stout fella!"

This contribution to thought set the ball of conversation briskly rolling.

"Is he one of us, Carraway?" asked Captain Stanton-Strood.

"I forget. Did you join us, Bland?"

"I confess," said Oliver, "that my name has not yet been added to the honourable roll of Britishers. But I am with you in spirit. My connection with the Press, you understand, gentlemen, makes it a little difficult—"

"Humph! Writin' fella, eh?"

"Don't know how you fellas think of all the damned nonsense you write. No offence, of course, Bland."

"Offence?" cried Oliver. "I should think not. I often wonder about it myself."

"Every decent fella should come in," said Major de la Touche ffoster severely. "Sake of country. Too many Bolshies and agitators and cads about. That's what I say. Clear the lot out. Put 'em against a wall, if they refuse to go."

"Agreed," snapped Captain Stanton-Strood.

"Splendid!" said Oliver. "But what are you doing down here, and in mufti too?"

"Camp down here," explained Major Carraway. "Men arrive tomorrow. First Britishers' summer camp. We three staff wallahs got a shake-down here for the night. Busy tomorrow. Up bright and early, eh, you fellas?"

"Well, there's plenty of time before tomorrow," said Oliver. "What about another spot? Spots all round—like leopards."

"Funny you talking about leopards," said Major Carraway. "I'd just begun to tell these fellas—when I was out East, went hunting one time. My *shikaree* came to me . . ."

But Oliver did not pay much attention to the anecdote. The evening, he considered, needed livening a little. An imp of mischief suddenly put in his head

the thought of Fred outside in a black beard and smoked spectacles. He mused for a moment, and the conversation of his companions, ready to cap one staccato anecdote with another, drifted in scraps through his mind.

"They were all pukka sahibs, so just before tiffin . . ."

"So we put on a pipe and got yarning together . . ."

"So I said to him 'Is he a gentleman or is he a cad? That's all I want to know.' He saw my point at once . . ."

The impulse could not be resisted. "Gentlemen," said Oliver gravely, "I hate to break in on your conversation. But I have just remembered something which I think concerns you."

"What's that, Bland?"

"Five minutes before I met you," said Oliver lowering his voice, "I put my head out of the door to have a look at the weather, and I saw a fellow hanging about that I didn't like the look of at all. Fellow in a beard and smoked spectacles."

"Don't like the sound of him," barked Major de la Touche ffoster. "Eh, Carraway?"

"Carry on, Bland."

"He looked vaguely Bolshie to me. I couldn't think what he might be doing down here, but then I didn't know you fellows were about to camp here. Queer, don't you think?"

"The Moscow hound!" exclaimed Captain Stanton-Strood. "The old country's riddled with them."

"Undermining the Empire."

"Told you fellas," said Major Carraway, "Bolshies would get wind of this camp. Damned good intelli-

gence service the swine have got. But we're not played out yet."

"I thought I'd better tell you," said Oliver demurely. "Of course you fellows know more about this than I do."

"Know too much. Good work, Bland. Stout fella!"

"He *is* rather stout," Oliver admitted. "But come and see for yourselves. We may catch sight of him from the bar parlour window."

In single file, led by Oliver, the three Britishers marched bravely down the passage and into the little side room where two villagers were playing darts. Oliver drew aside a corner of the window curtain and peered out.

"When I was out East—" ffoster began.

But Oliver plucked him by the sleeve. "Hush! There he is. Look!"

They looked in turn, nodded sternly to each other and to Oliver, and in grim silence filed back to the bar, where they could talk without being overheard and could call gloomily for further spots.

"It's my belief he's a Russian," said Oliver, looking from one to the other of them with bright eyes. He hesitated, and his eyes grew brighter still. "You can tell by his boots."

"Boots too, eh?" cried Carraway. "Beard's not British."

"Suspect goggles too," cried Stanton-Strood. "And notice the rotter's walk."

"Bolshie written all over him," declared de la Touche ffoster.

"Must be on our guard, you fellas," said Carraway.

"Remember the women and children," Oliver reminded them. "The brave little women. The kiddies."

At this very moment, by the greatest good fortune, the door slowly opened and a heavily built, foreign-looking person wearing a black spade of a beard and a pair of smoked spectacles put his head in, glanced quickly at the four men, and was out again before anyone could challenge him.

Oliver shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows, glancing shrewdly from one Britisher's face to another.

"Gad, Bland," cried Carraway. "The very fella, eh?"

"The very same. What do you make of it, you fellows? Pretty sinister, I think?"

Major Carraway stood erect, and his two colleagues stiffened too. "We're all in this together," said Carraway. "Eh, Bland?"

"I'm with you, sir," returned Oliver gravely.

Again the street door opened, and again a man came in. This time it was Fred, beardless and unspectacled, his honest self once more. Nobody except Oliver noticed his boots.

"Hullo, Fred," cried Oliver. "Come and have a drink, my dear fellow. You're just the man we need. Gentlemen, this is my friend Detective Huggins—British to the backbone—and the whitest man I know. He may not look it at the moment, but that's because he's disguised as a novelist."

CHAPTER XI

SATURDAY MORNING

At the blue and gold height of a Saturday morning, the Old Manor, Berners End, presented a most deceptive aspect of peace and quiet. A small Queen Anne country house, smiling upon a delightful old rose garden and a rock garden, a lawn like green satin and some twinkling adventurous shrubberies, it looked the ideal journey's end of the anxious Friday night to Monday morning visitor. To savour its antique charm was to imagine Saturday and Sunday passing like a midsummer day's dream. On this particular morning, the June sunlight was sweet and abundant; the old house, the gardens, and lawn and shrubberies were as charming as ever; but inside the house itself there was neither peace nor quiet.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Spalding alternately wept and raged; as well she might, for Spalding was missing. In the chauffeur half of his double capacity as chauffer-gardener, he had been sent off, the night before, to meet a young gentleman at the station. He had not returned yet. There was no young gentleman, no car, and no Spalding. At one moment, Mrs. Spalding thought that he must have been killed in an accident, and wept. The next moment, she thought he must have run away with the parlour-maid at the Chilford Vicarage, and raged. Jenny, the older of the two maids at the Old Manor and therefore by right of

seniority Mrs. Spalding's confidante, was ready to weep and rage herself, and, indeed, had already burst into tears twice and broken two teacups. There was some excuse for Jenny. Not only had she to bear with the cook's tantrums: she had also to suffer from the bad temper of the gentry of the house.

They too were all upset on account of the young gentleman, the car, and Spalding, though it seemed to be the absence of the young gentleman that worried them most. Mr. Sylvester himself, usually as nice a master as you could wish for, had paced up and down and worried and fussed, stayed up late, got up early, until at last he was *that* snappy, you never *did*. The young lady had not a smile for anybody, and was looking very heavy about the eyes, as if she was ready to rush away and cry at any moment. The Italian gentleman who was staying in the house had been going on for hours like a madman. This Italian gentleman always did act a little queer, but now there was no sense in him at all. And then there was that awful surly ugly man, Roach, slinking and muttering and cursing all over the house, so that you were likely to catch sight of his nasty flattened face every time you turned a corner. Jenny had her notice on the tip of her tongue, and if this state of things went on much longer, that notice was going to pop out and surprise some people. Jenny had had enough.

Miss Sylvester herself had had enough too. She was facing her uncle and the Italian gentleman across a table in Mr. Sylvester's study on the first floor.

"It's no use, uncle," she was saying miserably. "There must have been an accident. It's the only explanation. And we must *do* something."

"Perhaps so," said the Italian gentleman, with a rather unpleasant glitter in his fine eyes, "but suppose your little friend—"

"Do you mean Mr. Heath, Tolva?" the girl asked sharply.

"As you please," said the Italian, with a shrug and a smile. "If you will have it so—Mistaire Heath. But I say—suppose he's not so silly, after all. Suppose he try the double-cross."

"Oh, don't be silly," cried the girl.

"Easy, my dear," said Mr. Sylvester, rather heavily. He was not at all his usual suave self this morning.

"It's just possible, and of course, Tolva, I must bow to your superior knowledge of double-crossing. But all the same I don't think it likely. I put my trust in a certain fine scholarly simplicity I observed in our young friend. Then again, he seemed to me to have some interest—a passing interest, perhaps, but still a decided interest—in the movements of this young lady here."

"Uncle!" cried the girl, suddenly scarlet. "You might leave me out of it, please."

Mr. Sylvester held up a fine gentlemanly hand. "I only used it as part of an argument, my dear."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders. "All that may be—what you say?—a gag. We have all worked that in our time. Yes, it may easily be a gag."

"Well, as it happens," remarked Miss Sylvester icily, "it isn't a gag—as you call it. Don't be ridiculous. I know very well how he feels about me. And I assure you it's no gag. But what's the use of talking to Tolva about it? He can't understand things like that."

"Me not understand!" The Italian was amazed and horrified. "Love? And me not understand! Aw—that is good, that is very good." He laughed bitterly, hollowly. "I wish I didn't understand. I only wish I didn't. That is all. If I didn't, I should be rich man now. Love. It is the only thing I do understand—curse it!"

"We're wasting time, Tolva," interposed Mr. Sylvester, with some show of authority. "Please don't trouble us with your amorous reminiscences just now. There's still another argument against this youngster having played us false, and that is Spalding. Where is Spalding and the car?"

"Oh!—Spalding is a fool," replied Tolva, with a gesture of contempt. "Maybe he's in a ditch now—with a crack to his head. Spalding—that is nothing."

"All this is too absurd," cried the girl passionately. "There must have been an accident. I *know* there's been an accident. And that would explain everything. Either we ring up the police or I shall go myself and try to find out what's happened. Yes, uncle, it's no use. We must get to know something."

Mr. Sylvester and the Italian exchanged glances. Then Mr. Sylvester shook his head, at the same time giving his niece a little pat on the shoulder. "I don't like risking the police yet," he told her. "You can see for yourself how tricky that might turn out to be. If there has been an accident, then it might be all right. But if there hasn't been an accident, they might get curious and then where are we? No, that's too risky—yet. Better send for a car from Chilford, and do some cruising about ourselves. Bringing the

police into this means a big bold bluff, and obviously it will have to be the last move on the board."

"That is so," cried Tolva excitedly. " No police—no, no. No police. I will go and find what I can myself first."

"I'll go," said the girl, looking defiantly from one to the other. "If there's been an accident to Simon—to Mr. Heath—then it's all my fault. And I warn you, uncle—I can't stand any more of this. Don't count on me any longer." She moved towards the door.

It was Jenny, however, who opened that door. "Please, sir," she announced, with a certain deceptive demureness, "there's a sort o' policeman called."

All three of them stared at her. One—two—three seconds of absolute quiet, then the bomb exploded. The Italian hissed some shocking expletive. The girl gave a short sharp cry. Even Mr. Sylvester, not being quite himself this morning, was shaken out of his usual easy poise. "A sort of policeman?" he cried. "What d'you mean?"

"He's at the front door downstairs," Jenny continued. "He's askin' for you, sir. A young man and looks like a sort o' policeman." There was a slight suggestion that Jenny was at last beginning to enjoy herself. She had succeeded in creating a sensation in this madhouse. And if they didn't like it, they could take her notice, which was still trembling on the tip of her tongue.

The Italian had crossed to the window. "Come away, Tolva," said Mr. Sylvester sharply. "What's the use of playing the fool there! All right, Jenny, we'll see this sort of policeman. Show him up." The

moment Jenny had closed the door behind her, he continued: "You clear out, Tolva. No, that way; and wait upstairs. You stay here, my dear. Put that manuscript on the table, the Chilford Church history one. Where's my reading glass? All right now. Keep calm. Quiet, quiet."

Mr. Sylvester was now seated at the table, the manuscript in front of him, a reading glass in his hand. He was not the same man as had been talking a minute before. The sunlight played upon his fine silvered head; there was something scholarly about the stoop of his shoulders; a wistful charming smile lingered on his face; and he presented to the door the picture of an unworldly elderly gentleman, who struggled in vain to adapt himself to these rough times. At his back, looking down with affectionate interest, was a delightful young lady, obviously amused by the antic of her old relative on his hobby-horse. It was a tableau to charm the eye and warm the heart.

Jenny had returned and was opening the door. "Come in," said Mr. Sylvester, in his richest baritone. His niece drew a long breath as she looked towards the door, and the hand that was resting on the back of her uncle's chair was trembling slightly. A figure entered the room. The two of them looked, stared, gasped.

This figure that came staggering in was most fantastically dressed in an old policeman's-tunic far too big for it, a pair of gigantic old cricket-trousers, and the remains of some enormous boots. It was deplorably hot and dusty, and looked as if at any moment it would collapse and perhaps disappear altogether into

the loose folds of its absurd garments. And though the face was so thickly powdered with dust, through which there ran little rivers of sweat, though its hair was all rumpled, though it wore a new expression of glazed agony, this face could easily be recognized still as the face of Mr. Simon Heath, M.A. (Cantab), lecturer in St. Luke's College in Earlier European History, Winner of the Butterworth and Knipe Essay Prizes, and Honorary Fellow of the Historical Societies of England and America.

This astonishing visitant staggered up to the table, let fall upon it a small steel casket, gave a groan, tottered back, collapsed into a chair, gave another groan, then apparently sank at once into a coma.

"Simon!" the girl shrieked.

It was not at Simon but at the steel casket that Mr. Sylvester was looking. He held it in his hand for a moment, gave a sigh of relief, then jumped up and crossed the room to the recumbent figure.

"Thank you, my boy," he cried, in full diapason, bending over him. His relief was obvious. "This is splendid, this is noble of you. No, don't talk yet. Take your time, take your time. The great thing is —you're here, and you've brought the casket. We shan't forget this, shall we, Zoe? My dear boy, you've saved England, perhaps the civilized world. This means more than you can imagine, Mr. Heath. A drink—that's the first thing. You must have a drink. We must all have a drink. Afterwards we can talk."

He went to a small cupboard and brought out of it some glasses and a bottle of champagne, which he proceeded to open with great dexterity.

The girl, recovered from her first shock, was all

anxiety now. "You're not hurt, are you?" she cried, standing in front of him. "Tell me. Are you hurt?"

The figure stirred, even contrived to lift its head. "Not really," it mumbled. "It's these damned boots. I've walked miles and miles in them." And with a prodigious effort, he managed to kick one of them off, and then sank back into the depths of his chair again.

The girl looked at him for a moment longer and then suddenly laughed. Simon, staring at her in dumb anguish, was heard to mumble something to the effect that it was not funny.

"Certainly not," observed Mr. Sylvester severely, approaching with the champagne. "Nothing funny about it. I'm surprised at you, Zoe. Mr. Heath does us a great service, and you laugh at him. Here—drink this, my boy. Zoe, behave yourself. Your health, Mr. Heath, and with it all our thanks. And if you feel a little recovered, I'd like to know what happened. That tunic, for example," he added, a trifle severely, "needs some explanation. I trust you haven't embroiled yourself in any way with the police. But have another drink first. This Bollinger will do you good. You can't improve on Bollinger if you are cracking a bottle in the morning. Now then."

Simon, who was very thirsty, gulped down half of his second glass of champagne, and felt very swimmy. He had had no breakfast, he had walked three miles under a hot sun, and he was in no condition to resist the potency of the wine. He found himself laughing in rather a foolish manner. "I've had," he announced with pride, "a hell of a time. Yes—really, a hell of a time." Having brought this out, he felt he had said enough for the time being, and so fell

silent. He glared at the remaining boot, tried to kick it off, did not succeed in kicking it off, leaned forward to try to unlace it, and almost fell out of the chair.

"Let me help you," said Mr. Sylvester gravely, and promptly put Simon back into the chair and removed the boot.

"No socks," said Simon, gloomily regarding his bare and dusty feet, which were badly blistered. "No socks. Miles and miles. A hell of a time."

"What a shame!" cried Zoe. And for a moment her face softened. Indeed, a very acute observer might have remarked in it certain indications of shame. Then she flashed at her uncle a quick hard look.

"Now, my boy, just pull yourself together for a minute or two," Mr. Sylvester commanded, "and try to tell us in a few words what happened. You know as well as I do that this is a big thing—terribly important not only to us but to the whole world—and that we daren't waste time. Just tell us in a sentence or two; then you can have your bath and we'll find you some clothes and you can tell us the whole story at lunch. Now then."

"Yes, Simon—please," said Zoe, fixing her eyes upon his.

Simon gave a shake, sat up erect, then said slowly: "We had a crash last night, on the way here. That fellow Mildmay—you know, the one who pretended to be a parson and you say is working for the petrol syndicate—"

"What, was he there?" cried Mr. Sylvester sharply.

"Yes, his car crashed into yours. Your car was smashed and your chauffeur knocked out. I was

pretty dazed. Mildmay or whatever his name is was knocked out too. There were two idiotic officious policemen there. The sergeant went away with Mildmay. The constable, Dumble, offered me a bed. I was pretty sick and couldn't have walked here then. Some time during the night he must have taken my clothes away and my suitcase. I had the casket under the pillow so he didn't take that, probably forgot about it."

"Thank God for that," said Mr. Sylvester.

"This morning I woke very early, couldn't find my clothes and discovered that the door of my room was locked on the outside. I found these things in a cupboard, put them on, and got out of the window. Then I walked a mile or two down the road, tried a short cut through a wood and got lost in it, found the road again and walked miles and miles. I think that fool Dumble deliberately misled me about this place, last night."

"Did he know you were coming here?" Zoe asked.

Simon nodded. "I told him last night. But that doesn't matter, does it?"

"Not at all, not at all," said Mr. Sylvester smoothly. "I know the man. He's practically an idiot. Naturally we don't want the police interfering—though we've nothing to hide from them—but I don't care about a lout like that. You didn't see him following you here, did you?"

"No," replied Simon, with the air of one who has painful memories. "I remember all the people I saw, and so would you if you had been wearing these clothes. There were three little boys who threw stones at me, and a gamekeeper and an old farm-

labourer, who laughed. And well they might," he added bitterly.

"Certainly an unpleasant experience," remarked Mr. Sylvester in his best manner, "and I feel for you. But I wish some of us had gone through nothing worse than wearing a few odd clothes for an hour or two, for the sake of this great cause—eh, Zoe? Man of the world though you are, Mr. Heath, you little realize yet what it means—and has already meant—to some of us, to be involved in these great international intrigues, with desperate forces at work. We have to strive and to suffer, and my niece will bear me out in that."

His niece, who did not seem very comfortable, gave no indication of bearing him out. She stared out of the window.

But Mr. Sylvester was not the man to be disturbed by such a small matter. "One last question. You say that Number Seven—Mildmay, you know—went away with the sergeant?"

"Yes," said Simon wearily. "Mildmay went with the sergeant to have his face bandaged. That was all right; but I thought there was something fishy about the sergeant's manner. I think he meant to keep an eye on Mildmay. And that's all I can tell you."

"Quite enough, quite enough," Mr. Sylvester proclaimed. "You came out of it very well, amazingly well. You're a man of action, Mr. Heath, as well as a scholar. You'll go far. And we're very grateful to you, aren't we, Zoe? Come along, my dear, express your feelings a little. You must have some feelings somewhere. These modern chits, my dear Heath—amazing, hard as nails—they frighten me."

"Oh bosh!" cried Zoe. She was vexed about something, it seemed. "We must see about that bath and those clothes now. Show Mr. Heath where to go, uncle, and I'll see if I can find some things of yours that might do for him."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Simon came limping down, looking a very different man. His hair was nicely brushed, his chin nicely shaven, and his whole face nicely shining. Unfortunately, however, the clothes that had been found for him, though a great deal better than the grotesque garments he had just doffed, were by no means a good fit. Mr. Sylvester was taller than Simon and considerably broader and thicker, and so his old-fashioned Norfolk jacket was too big for Simon, and the flannel trousers that went with it had a most unprepossessing concertina effect. Simon was no dandy, but he could not help feeling that he cut a somewhat comic figure in these clothes, and he was compelled to cut this figure in the eyes of the girl with whom he was in love, a girl who seemed to be possessed of rather too active a sense of humour. This fact was not without influence on his conduct. Moreover, this wearing of clothes that did not belong to him, and could not possibly have belonged to him, made him feel that he was not now his usual self, that he was acting a queer part in some masquerade. This fact too was not without influence on his conduct.

The first person he met, after changing, was neither Zoe nor her uncle but the Italian scamp, late Dr. Pianella, now called Tolva.

"Mistaire Heath," cried the Italian, who had evidently heard the whole story, "it is to me a great

pleasure to meet you again. You are now a gr-r-rand adventurer, eh?"

This was actually Simon's own private opinion, but he was not ready to admit as much in public. He modestly disclaimed the honour.

"The clothes too—they are charming," Tolva continued, his fine eyes brightening with mischief. "I like you in them. Do you know, Mistaire Heath, of who you remind me? I will tell you. Of my old friend, the Count Stunski. Or was it the other one, the Colonel Boyd-Corry? Of one of them, I am sure."

"You needn't imagine for a moment," said Simon, sturdily if not altogether truthfully, "that I really believed all that rubbish."

"Quite so, quite so," the Italian murmured. "I understand. Me—I am deeply sorry to have done with them—the Count Stunski and the Colonel Boyd-Corry, the Iron Prophet Yann and dear Doctor Pianella. Him—Pianella—I liked very much. I am sorry he had to go."

"It sounds the most incredible nonsense now," Simon observed.

"Oh yes—the most ter-r-rible nonsense, now that we know it has all to do with a petrol substitute and a syndicate and all that, eh? How much better! Oh how much better!" And the Italian gentleman smiled broadly.

Simon liked neither the intonation of his voice nor this smile. "What do you mean?" he asked, hoping that the glance that accompanied this question was really piercing.

But Tolva, late Pianella, met both question and

glance quite easily. "What do I mean?" he repeated airily. "Just what I say. What can I mean, eh? I think you have been reading Pirandello. That is it —Pirandello. We are talking nonsense. And there is nothing better for the worn nerves than nonsense. But let us find out what is happening now. Lunch will be ready soon. For you, today it is specially early."

"I need it," said Simon, who felt horribly empty now.

They were outside the small study, and no sooner had Simon spoken than the door opened, to reveal the awkward presence of Simon's late host and warder, Police Constable Dumble. Behind him, easily dominating the situation, was Mr. Sylvester, holding in his hand a steel casket.

"A-ha, Mr. Heath," cried Mr. Sylvester jovially, "here is your friend Dumble, who has brought back the bag, your clothes, and your casket. Here you are. Give it to him, Dumble."

Mr. Sylvester handed the casket to Dumble, who in turn handed it to Simon—the second casket, the one he had taken yesterday from Mildmay. Simon had forgotten its very existence.

"Thank you," said Simon, with an irony that he knew would be lost on Dumble. "So you're the blighter who took my clothes."

Dumble's was a resilient nature. In spite of Mr. Sylvester's rebuke the sight of Simon raised his spirits and his pride.

"'Twas me right enough," answered Dumble, sheepishly proud of himself. "I be a young fellar as means to get on, sir, same as sergeant says. George

was with me," he added in an ecstasy of explanation. "George was with me, I'll give him his due. He come along by in case you wok, sir. But 'twas me took the clothes sure enough." He grinned radiantly.

"Very kind of you," said Simon, a trifle bitterly; for he was still conscious of cutting an odd figure in Sylvester's suit.

"Not at all, sir. Only too pleased. And Mother says, sir, the bed's two shillings."

Simon gave a hollow laugh. "Tell your mother—" he began. "No, tell her nothing." He laughed again, this time with genuine mirth; and dived into the study where his clothes lay piled on a chair. From the pocket he extracted his pipe, his pouch, and a box of matches. He began to feel himself again.

"We needn't keep you any longer, Dumble," said Mr. Sylvester. "And now, a little lunch, I think. Eh, Heath?" he called. "And well-earned, too. This way." He led the way downstairs to the dining-room. Simon followed, mechanically clutching the casket that Dumble had brought back. The Italian brought up the rear. They found Zoe already in the room.

"And there goes Dumble on his bicycle," said Mr. Sylvester, staring out of the french window. He seemed to be in very good spirits now. "A sadder man, Dumble, though not a wiser. We must not expect too much. It is doubtful if Dumble will ever be wiser, though no doubt the ass and the ox have their wisdom. But fortunately for them, the ass and the ox are not expected to write in notebooks. The fact is, of course, our friend Dumble belongs to the pre-notebook era. He is not really a policeman but a

member of the watch, a contemporary of Dogberry and Verges."

He chattered briskly in this fashion throughout the earlier part of the lunch, and might have chattered through to the very end if circumstances had allowed it. But with the sweet there came an interruption. First, there were sounds of voices raised in angry argument outside in the hall. Then the door was flung open, and there fell rather than entered through the open doorway a somewhat tattered figure. It was the chauffeur, Spalding, and he looked very strange and wild indeed. Behind him were the loutish Roach and a very angry little fat woman, no other than Mrs. Spalding the cook. Roach was trying to tell Spalding to "come out of it." Mrs. Spalding was conducting at the top of her voice her part in some conjugal argument that involved many references to the parlourmaid at the Chilford Vicarage. Spalding, ignoring them both, glared round at the four at table. His face was very pale, his eye wild. When his gaze rested upon Simon, recognition dawned. He rushed forward, seized Simon by the hand, and cried: "Half a pound of ripe cherries, and no trumps. Hurray! I got it. Han't I got it? That's right, ain't it? Half a pound of ripe cherries, and no trumps."

Having achieved this triumph, he staggered back into the doorway, putting his two arms across it to steady himself, Roach and Mrs. Spalding being compelled to retreat into the hall.

"Spalding," called Mr. Sylvester sharply, "don't be a fool. Mrs. Spalding, take him away."

"He must have hurt himself last night, uncle," said Zoe, her face rather white.

"A bit of shock probably," replied her uncle coolly. "He'll be all right now he's back here. Won't you, Spalding?"

"All right. I'm fine now, sir. I am. It's all coming back. That's what did it. Half a pound of ripe cherries, and no trumps. I've been trying to get that properly into my head, out o' my head, for hours and hours and hours and hours. *And* hours," he added gravely.

"But where have you been since last night?" asked Zoe.

"All over. I don't know."

"Oh, don't cher!" cried an angry voice from the rear. "Well, I do. And I've told you once, and I'll tell you again. Don't know where you've been indeed! It's written all over you," continued Mrs. Spalding, warming to her work, "where you've been. With your half pound of cherries."

"Don't talk silly," Spalding retorted. "Silly, silly, silly. You don't know what's going on. You're out of it, see? No compree—that's what's wrong with you." He now turned his attention to the dining table. "When I say I don't know where I've been, sir, it's all in a manner of speaking—" Here he broke off, stared at the window, and his jaw dropped. "Here, steady on," he shouted, and the next moment was out of the room, with the door slammed behind him.

By this time they had all turned towards the window. And there, in the act of stepping through into the room, was Number Seven or Mildmay. His clothes were worn and dusty. His face was disfigured by two large pieces of sticking-plaster. He bore little

resemblance now to that Reverend Walter Mildmay, of The Vicarage, Little Salop, who had once called to see Simon. But his glance was bright enough. It travelled swiftly from face to face, then came to rest on the casket that Simon had set down on the table between himself and Mr. Sylvester.

"Timed it nicely," said the uninvited guest, suddenly disclosing a revolver in his right hand. "Don't move, Pembury. Keep still, all of you. That's right. I won't keep you a minute." He spoke with all the suavity of a photographer.

CHAPTER XII

SIMON ASKS QUESTIONS

"No," said Mildmay, still covering them with his revolver, "don't let's have any general conversation. There's not going to be much talking, but I'll do all that's necessary."

"Ah!" And Mr. Sylvester, who seemed quite at his ease now, smiled gently. "You were always an egotist, my dear Newton."

Newton now! Mildmay or Number Seven, it seemed, was Newton too. And Newton or Mildmay, when he had first produced the revolver, had distinctly said: "Don't move, *Pembury*." Who was Pembury? Was Mr. Sylvester Pembury? How many names had these people? Had they any real names at all, any real personalities, or did they just go off in an unending series of aliases and disguises? These and other maddening queries raced through Simon's mind as he sat there, keeping an anxious eye on that revolver.

"You're taking it very well," said Newton—as he must be called now. "A gentleman to the last, eh? But, if you ask me, a poorer gentleman than you thought you were going to be. That casket trick of yours was very clever. I didn't discover it was empty until I got down to Southampton, and I wouldn't have found out then only there was a little accident. I didn't know you had two caskets, Pembury. That was very clever. But then—damn you—you *are*

clever. I still don't see how you palmed off that empty casket on to me."

"I don't mind telling you," said Mr. Sylvester genially. "It might possibly be a little lesson to you, Newton, though I doubt if it will do you much good. The trouble with you, as I've pointed out before, is that you don't pay enough attention to the details—"

"My dear Watson," Newton added with a grin. "Go on, Sherlock Holmes."

"If you had given that attention to detail necessary in your mode of life," Mr. Sylvester continued, with charming precision, "you would have noticed at once, after that rather sudden sleep that fell upon you in our London house—"

"So it was dope," the other put in quickly. "I wondered why I slept so long, even though I *was* rather short of sleep. Dope eh? Go on."

"I say, you would have noticed at once that the cloak-room ticket from Waterloo Station, the check for the casket you had left there, was not the same. It had, in fact, been changed. The check ticket you found in your pocket, when you woke up, was for a steel casket, but unfortunately for an empty one, and not for the casket you were trying to steal from your old associates."

"I see," said Newton, narrowing his gaze. "You took the ticket while I was asleep, changed the caskets, and put the new ticket in my pocket. Yes, I was a fool not to notice any difference in the tickets, I suppose. Though who would have noticed any difference!"

"Ah yes!" cried Simon. "That time at Waterloo

Station!" He looked hard at Zoe, but she continued to stare straight at the wall.

"So it was you, my little professor, was it?" cried Newton, giving him a curious glance. "How the devil you come to be in all this, beats me. Either you're a lot cleverer than I thought you were or you're a bigger fool even than you look. Keep still, Tolva. I'm watching you. Put both your hands on the table. That's right. What became of the casket I turned over to you, last night, Clever Simon or Simple Simon or whatever you are, eh? Did that lout of a policeman get hold of it?"

"Yes, he took it," said Simon, and would have said more, but a sharp glance from Mr. Sylvester checked him.

Newton grinned. "Well, no doubt you'll have a good explanation ready for them, if they get curious. You're all a lot of smart boys, I can see that. And now—" here he dropped the easy bantering tone and his voice immediately took on a startling ferocity—"put your hands above your heads all of you—sharp! Stand up. Come on—the lot of you. Stand up. Back from the table. By God, Tolva, another move like that, and I'll drill a hole in you."

Clearly, he meant what he said. Simon found himself away from the table, with his hands raised well above his head. The other three had followed suit. Newton bounded forward, pounced upon the casket on the table, swiftly retreated with it, and stood at the open window a moment, still covering them with his revolver. "Don't trouble to come after me," he cried, triumphant now. "I've a car not five hundred yards away, and your car is being towed to a garage, six

miles off. I saw it. Pity, isn't it? But you can't have all the luck, Pembury. You'll have to continue the good work a little longer, I think. But I'm retiring. You'll be glad to know that. So long. Don't write to the old address. I shan't be there."

And the next moment, he had backed through the window, had turned and was racing across the lawn, towards the drive.

The Italian, his face white with rage, sprang forward to the window and shook his fist at the golden morning. At first, he was screaming in his native language.

"Don't be a fool," said Mr. Sylvester, coolly sitting down again. "You'll upset yourself. Remember your digestion. Now then, let us finish our lunch in peace."

"Oh but you are mad, mad!" Tolva shouted.

"Surely you're forgetting something, Tolva," Mr. Sylvester remarked, in easy conversational tones. "Unless, of course, you dislike Newton so much that you refuse to make him a present even of an empty steel casket."

"Empty!" The Italian stared wildly for a moment. Then he burst into a roar of laughter. "But yes, of course. I see him now, I see him. He has run away with the empty one. It is the same one, eh?"

"The very same. The original one is still in my study upstairs. Newton appears to have a passion for that casket—strange, no doubt, but still, we all have our little fancies—and I for one don't feel that we ought to stand in his way. What do you say, my child? You've got a liberal mind, Mr. Heath. I think you'll agree with me. Our friend Newton was quite welcome to the casket—"

"Oh yes—quite welcome!" Tolva crowed. He was bubbling over with excitement, and banged Simon on the back, blew a kiss across the table to Zoe, and hopped about on his chair.

"He could have had it with pleasure, without any of these melodramatic antics with a revolver," Mr. Sylvester continued, carefully cutting out a segment of Camembert. "But I always suspected that Newton had a secret passion for melodramatics. Something too theatrical about the fellow. Moreover, he was always in too great a hurry."

Simon gave only half his attention to this talk at the table. He found himself trying to piece together the various scraps of new information that had lately come his way. And it was like trying to do a jigsaw puzzle in which the scattered pieces were forever changing shape and colour. A fragment of Newton's parting talk worried him: "Clever Simon or Simple Simon or whatever you are". It was certain that in this fantastic tangle of affairs, whatever else he had done, he had not played the part of any clever Simon. One or two things he had brought off rather neatly, he concluded with some complacency, pleased to be something of a man of action at last. But on the whole he had not been clever. Well, had he been a Simple Simon? More than once already, in this adventure, he had come to that conclusion himself, unaided. There was Zoe. Was she laughing at him still, though secretly now? He looked at her, as if to find in her face some evidence of what she really felt. She kept her glance lowered to her plate, on which she was idly crumbling a biscuit. Her face was still pale and troubled, though not the less lovely for that. There

was now a faint weariness in it, and a suggestion of fragility, that made it infinitely disturbing to Simon. At last, she raised her eyes and returned his earnest glance. She smiled. It was a weary little smile, but Simon took heart at the sight of it.

With the coffee and the cigarettes, there came the ring of the telephone bell outside in the hall. "For me, I imagine," said Mr. Sylvester, rising. "I'm expecting a long-distance call." He went out.

Tolva followed him out, leaving Simon and Zoe silent at the table. There they remained until, after a strained minute or two had passed, Simon said: "Let's go out into the garden, shall we?" And when she had led the way, and they were blinking a little in the bright sunshine, he added ruefully: "Good lord!—I suppose I ought to go and change these ridiculous clothes, now that my own are back here. I think I'm rather tired of looking silly, Zoe. But I so badly want to talk to you that I hate to postpone it, even for ten minutes."

She turned to him swiftly, and there was a new urgency in her manner. "No, go on. Change your clothes now."

He was surprised. "Why? What does it matter? I want to talk to you."

"And I want you to go and change your clothes, and for a very good reason. You see, I think you ought to go away."

He could have cried out with disappointment. "Oh, but I say!" he protested. "You don't mean that, surely? You don't want me to go away now?"

"Yes, I do. Now—this very minute."

"But I mean, I thought I was staying here for the

week-end." All his disappointment was in his voice. "I can't ask myself to stay if you really want me to go, but—well, I don't understand."

They were drifting near to a garden seat that was in the shade of an old cherry tree on the far side of the lawn. She sat down, almost drooped upon the seat, and Simon, puzzled and miserable, followed and stood in front of her. For a moment they were silent.

"As a matter of fact," Simon continued, with the air of a young man with a grievance, "there are a lot of things I don't understand. It all gets more bewildering every minute. I wish you'd explain. I think I've a right to know."

"Do you?" she said idly, without looking at him.

He was very much in love, but he was not without spirit, and after all, he had suffered a good deal for her sake, he felt, and so far had not come out of it too badly. Such treatment was not fair. "Yes, I do," he declared hotly. Then, changing to that tone which all young men in love imagine to be dignified if somewhat bitter irony, he continued: "Of course, I don't wish to pry into your private affairs. I realize that the state of the Republic of Euravia, or the destination of a formula for a petrol substitute—or, for that matter, the letters of Lady Ann Quaife or the bones and ashes of the Prophet Yann—in short, none of these everyday matters—is any business of mine. I don't wish to be thought a meddler. I realize that it is nothing to do with me that Dr. Pianella is really Tolva, that Mildmay is not Mildmay, not even Number Seven, but one Newton, and apparently an associate of your uncle's, and that your uncle himself is sometimes Sylvester and sometimes Pembury. And I don't wish

to magnify any small services I may have performed for you. But, at the same time, seeing that I have willingly and not unsuccessfully done anything you have asked me to do, I do think that I am entitled to some explanation."

The reply to this grand speech was surprising. Zoe looked at him with glimmering eyes. "Oh darling!" she cried, it seemed involuntarily. "Don't be so pompous."

"I'm not pompous. Nobody can call me pompous. But—wait a minute—did you say 'Darling'?"

"Oh!—that's nothing," she retorted, obviously cooling rapidly. "I only called you that because you stood there looking such an absurd great baby."

This statement gave Simon no pleasure at all. He was on his dignity at once, and the fact that he was wearing an ancient Norfolk jacket much too large for him only made him all the more determined to be dignified. "It seems to me that I have some interest—even if it is not quite a proprietary interest—in this famous casket, which seems to be capable of containing so many different things. After all, I brought it into London, I seem to have taken it out of Waterloo Station, and I certainly took it back to Waterloo Station and brought it here. You can hardly blame me if I think it is high time I learned a little more about it. Surely," he added, with what seemed to him fine sarcasm, "all your inventive powers haven't suddenly deserted you?"

She looked at him steadily. "If it was so terrible, being deceived like that, then I'm sorry. And now you'd better go."

"No, I ought to be sorry, Zoe. I wasn't deliberately

trying to hurt you. If you don't want to tell me anything more, then I'll be quiet until you are ready to tell me. And surely I needn't go?"

"Yes, now. This very afternoon."

"But what about your uncle?" Simon persisted, ready to use any argument now. "After all, he asked me to stay for the week-end, didn't he?"

She made a quick gesture of impatience. "Oh, don't be so stupid—"

"I'm not being stupid."

"Yes, you are. Can't you see that my uncle only wanted you so that you could bring the casket down here, simply because he was afraid of travelling with it himself? Now that you've brought the casket, he doesn't want you here any longer. He'll get rid of you at the earliest opportunity. Do you think I don't know him?"

"Well," said Simon, with more apparent cheerfulness than he actually felt, "I didn't come down here to see your uncle. I don't care a rap about him. You know very well that I really came down here to be with you, to prevent you from disappearing into the unknown again. So let's drop your uncle out of it. I don't understand him, anyhow. We'll stick to you and your point of view."

"Very well," she replied wearily. "But you're being very difficult. I want you to leave this house as soon as you can. Is that plain? Oh don't look at me like that! You're just being as difficult as you can, just when—when—everything's difficult."

"That means—you're still in some sort of trouble, you know," Simon told her. "That's obvious. Then

I ought to stay. I can do something to help. After all, I'm not altogether a fool, you know."

And now she was really cruel to him. "Yes, you are," she cried. "If you could only see yourself in those absurd clothes! If you could only have seen yourself this morning! If you could only have seen yourself yesterday and on Monday and Tuesday! Why do you stay to be laughed at? You've been just used as a catspaw already by four of us. And then you say you're not altogether a fool! What can you do to help?"

With this last contemptuous cry still ringing in his ears, he dumbly watched her cross the lawn and enter the house. Not for years and years had he felt so small, so helpless, so wretched. She had made use of him; she had laughed at him; and now she utterly scorned him. The wisest thing for him to do now, it seemed, was to follow her advice, to go away at once and try to forget that he had been such a trusting fool. He did not care a snap of his fingers about the others, and he consoled himself with the thought that he had never quite believed their various stories. But with Zoe it was different. The moment she had come into it, the whole tangled adventure had been raised to another level of interest. Go away? Why, while she remained here, there did not seem to be anywhere in the world to go. The very thought of going in any direction away from this house filled him with a horrible sense of approaching desolation. He sat down, and spent the next few minutes thinking over what she had said, and finally arrived at a conclusion that might have been more comforting than strictly honest. That she wanted him to go was certain, but

it was her motive that was uncertain. It was not a mere matter of wishing to get rid of him because he had served his fool's purpose. He was sure that she did not really dislike him. There was some other reason for her desire to see the last of him. Something must have happened to change her. She was not the high-spirited creature who had fooled him so easily earlier in the week. Now she was quieter; she was uneasy; perhaps she was downright unhappy. No, he could not leave her like that, whatever she saw fit to say to him. He rose and returned to the house in search of her.

The geography of the house was mostly still a mystery to him, and he felt a natural diffidence about poking his nose into every possible room that offered itself. So he hung about the deserted hall for a few minutes, after ascertaining that the dining and drawing rooms, which were both open for inspection, were empty. Then he went upstairs to the first floor, where he lingered a moment outside the small study. Everything was quiet. It was the drowsiest hour of the midsummer afternoon. He wandered past the door of the small study and found himself on a landing that ended in a window framing brilliant blue sky. At the end of that landing, outside the second door, where he stood among the motes in a shaft of sunlight, he heard a slight sound. He went closer and listened. Somebody was crying. Zoe was crying.

He knew that he ought to have crept away, but he could not go. He knocked at the door. A muffled little voice asked who it was. He told her. "Oh go away, go away," it replied. He waited a moment after that, but there was no other sound, so he slowly

retraced his steps along the landing. But now his mind was made up. If Zoe was so unhappy, then her uncle must know something about it, and to Zoe's uncle he would go to demand an explanation.

He found Mr. Sylvester in the small study, where there were signs of considerable activity on the part of Mr. Sylvester, who was now busy burning a number of papers.

"Always welcome, of course, Mr. Heath," said Mr. Sylvester. "But, if you press me, I shall have to admit that this is not the perfect moment for one of our delightful little talks."

"I'm sorry," answered Simon. "But I felt I must say something to you."

"Indeed! Well, I confess that I have been trying to summon up courage enough to say something to you too. The fact is, my dear boy, circumstances have arisen—and I've no need to tell a man of your experience how they have a trick of arising—that make it difficult to do what I had promised myself to do, that is, to be your host for the week-end here. I can hardly bring myself to look you in the face when I tell you this," Mr. Sylvester continued cheerfully, looking Simon very boldly in the face, "for it goes against all my instincts, and of course against my inclinations. I had been so eagerly looking forward to showing you some of my books and other treasures. But it can't be helped, I'm afraid. There's an excellent train to town, I believe, in about two hours time from Chilford, and we'll contrive to get you there—by hook or crook—in good time for it. It's the least we can do. Your clothes, by the way, are on the chair over there."

"I see," said Simon slowly. In one particular, Zoe had certainly been right. "But there are one or two things I want to say first."

"Of course, of course," replied Mr. Sylvester, waving a fine white hand. "But do understand, my dear boy, that this is not the last time you will be here. On the contrary, we shall make a point of not counting this as a visit. No, I insist. You have not really been our guest here yet. That shall be arranged at the earliest possible opportunity. I look forward to writing you a very strong warm letter, dragging you—positively dragging you—down here to make a stay as long as you like. Can I say more?" he concluded, with what even Simon had to admit was a very charming smile.

"Very kind of you," Simon mumbled, feeling foolish. But he stuck doggedly to his task. "But what I wanted to say is that Miss Sylvester, Zoe, seems to be very unhappy about something. In fact," he added hastily, "I heard her crying a few minutes ago."

Mr. Sylvester raised his eyebrows, and there was something rebuking in his smile. "My dear Heath, you must allow us to have a little private life. Some day, when our friendship has ripened, as I don't doubt it will, you will hear all our little secrets. By that time, possibly, we shall be for ever running to you for sympathy. But isn't this—if I may put it so crudely—a little early in the day? We're typical old English stock, you know, and you must forgive us our natural reserve."

Simon told himself very promptly that this was plain humbug. He refused to be taken in by such

stuff any longer. He hung on grimly. "I feel she's unhappy on account of all this mysterious business that's going on here. Yes, I mean this casket business. You asked me to help you, and I think I *have* helped you—"

"And of course you are quite right to draw attention to the fact," remarked Mr. Sylvester drily. "I hadn't forgotten, however."

"I've had several explanations, all of which appear to be false," Simon continued doggedly. "The business seems to get more mysterious every hour. I don't really care about that, but I do care about Zoe. Yes, I'll admit it. I care a great deal about her, and it was for her sake I came down here at all. And—well—" he concluded, lamely, "she's unhappy now and I want to know something more."

"You've talked to her, I gather? Did she tell you anything herself?"

"She asked me to go away," Simon admitted, "though I'm not sure she really wanted me to go. And she told me that I'd been made a fool of, used as a mere catspaw, and that you asked me to bring the casket down here because you were afraid of travelling with it yourself."

"There's nothing new in that," said Mr. Sylvester quietly. "I told you as much myself, yesterday. I told you quite frankly that the gang who were working for the syndicate were determined to get that casket away from me, with the sample and formula of the petrol substitute inside it. Come, come. Nobody could have been more frank than I was."

"Yes, but—you see—I don't believe it. I think the petrol substitute story is like the Euravian story

and all the other stories I've been told. And Zoe almost admitted as much."

"She did, eh?" Mr. Sylvester looked thoughtful.

"It seemed to me she did. And now she won't speak to me and she's miserable, and I refuse to go away leaving her like that."

"Ah!—what it is to be young and flushed with chivalry," cried Mr. Sylvester, with an air of great wistfulness. He was silent for a moment. Choosing a cigar from the box in front of him and examining it with care, he gave Simon a quizzical glance; then looked suddenly grave, and began slowly: "Well, Mr. Heath, now that you have pressed me, I must admit that we have not been as candid as we might have been, for reasons that will soon appear. It is not always easy—indeed, it is not always possible—to tell the whole truth. Knowing you as I do now, I realize that it might have been better if we had been entirely frank from the beginning. We underestimated your intelligence, your perception, not realizing that it would be impossible to deceive for long a man of your attainments. I can see now that the time has come to take you into our confidence. It's a strange story," he added thoughtfully, "a very strange story."

Simon had no doubt whatever that it would be a very strange story indeed. But he said nothing.

Mr. Sylvester gave him a speculative look. "I suppose I had better tell you everything," he began.

At the sound of this familiar and fateful phrase, which to Simon by this time had become the prelude to every succeeding wild fantasy, Simon's face must have taken on a very dubious expression, for Mr. Sylvester stopped short, stood erect, and looked very stern.

"I am not accustomed to being disbelieved, Mr. Heath," he said sharply. Then he smiled. "However, perhaps you have some excuse for looking so sceptical. But we'll soon change that. I'll begin not by telling you anything, but by letting you see for yourself. Follow me."

He marched out, followed hastily by the bewildered Simon. They ascended to the second floor, then climbed by a narrower staircase to the third and highest floor. At the end of a corridor, immediately under the roof, Mr. Sylvester halted outside an open doorway. Simon was surprised. It looked so dusty and neglected in this remote part of the house that he could not imagine what he would see there.

"Allow me," said Mr. Sylvester, going through the doorway. "We've deliberately left this place in this neglected state, because nobody who did not know would expect anything of any importance up here. As it is—well, you shall see for yourself."

They were now in a small boxroom that contained nothing but a few old trunks. But it led into a further room, the door of which was closed. It was at this door that Mr. Sylvester now pointed. "Here we are," he announced, and proceeded to unlock this door in rather an impressive manner. "After this, I don't think you will be able to complain of our lack of candour. There's a switch here somewhere for this room, and if you'll go in I'll have the light on in a second."

He stood aside to let Simon pass into the room. Simon hesitated in the open doorway for a moment. Then he felt a violent push in the middle of his back and found himself flying into the room. The door

was promptly locked behind him. Before he had even time to turn round, he heard a further door being closed. The old scoundrel had tricked him very thoroughly this time. He was now locked away in a remote corner of the house, completely out of sight and sound of everybody—a prisoner.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RISING OF THE MOON

It was very late when Oliver Bland roused himself from sleep on Saturday morning. There were certain vague but distinctly depressing signs that he possessed a liver, and so he breakfasted on a glass of hot water. After that he bought four newspapers and glanced through them with that curiously combined air of eager interest and profound distaste which may be remarked in many journalists when they are reading newspapers. Then, after enquiring about Fred, who apparently had been scouring the countryside since a very early hour, he retired to the Smoke Room of the inn and began concocting a few paragraphs for Monday's issue. At twelve o'clock precisely he ordered a gin and bitters, and at twelve fifteen he ordered another, thereafter falling into a routine that left him with his fifth gin and bitters when Fred marched in for lunch at one.

"What disguise is this, Fred?" said Oliver, examining him with an appearance of great care. Oliver's liver seemed to have melted away now, and he was his usual self.

"It's the heat, Mr. Bland," replied Fred, who was indeed innocent of any disguise but was astonishingly red in the face and covered with dust.

"A pity," said Oliver mournfully. "I thought it

was Admirals All or perhaps Farmer Giles in Modern Dress."

Fred grinned sheepishly, then emptied half a tankard of beer with considerable noise and gusto.

"You were out and about early, Fred," his companion went on, approving him. "What are the developments? I take it, you've made a thorough survey of the ground, questioned villagers, and all that sort of thing?"

Fred had to confess, over the lunch table, that so far he had drawn blank. "I had a bit of a chat with the local man in the force," he continued. "And he's Dumble by name and just about Dumble by nature."

"Well hit, Fred!" cried Oliver. "These rural constables, eh? Dear, dear, dear!"

"I look at it this way, sir," said Fred, impressively raising a gigantic fat forefinger. "If this is a dope ring job—and I give you my word it has all the look of it—then where would you find a better headquarters than in a place like this, where you've got nobody but a chap like Brother Dumble to keep an eye on you? What's the answer to that, Mr. Bland?"

"The answer is—nowhere," replied Oliver promptly, with the air of a bright pupil.

"Right, sir! Right first time." Fred coughed and looked very stern. "In a way, you might say that so far I've done nothing. But look at it fairly, Mr. Bland—"

"As I *am* doing, Fred."

"Look at it fairly, and I've done a lot. Already, I've done a lot. If this Manor House isn't the headquarters of a dope gang, then my name's Dumble. And it all fits in with Waterloo Station, sir, and you

know the work I've put in there. I met one of the Yard men down there, the other day, and he laughed at me. 'All right, you'll see,' I said to him. And now it's beginning to fit in, Mr. Bland. Waterloo Station, this Berners End and Manor House, and Mr. Heath's affair—all of a piece. Give your mind to it, and you'll see it's a dope job or nothing, and this is what you might call the distri-*bu*-ting centre, 'ead-quarter on this side. Yard men!" Here Fred laughed contemptuously. " 'Idebound, that's what they are. 'Idebound. Strangled with red tape."

"Bitter words, Fred," said Oliver, shaking his head, "but, I fear, all too true. And my cousin Simon is in that house?"

"In that 'ouse," repeated Fred emphatically. "And in the hands of a dangerous gang, though himself as innocent as a babe unborn."

"An apt description, very apt. Old Simon to the life. Well, Fred, this is where I take a hand. We must make our plans. You must do the outside work, surrounding the house, watching all exits, and so on. That's where your experience comes in," he added, and was rewarded by the huge gratified smile that spread itself over Fred's broad face. "And I—I'll plunge straight into the inside work. This afternoon, Fred, I visit that house, and if Simon's there I propose to see him."

Fred looked dubious. "Dangerous work," he said. "You'll have to be careful there. Perhaps I'd better tackle that."

"Not at all. It's what I'm best at—the inside work, the visiting work. And remember the power of the Press, Fred. *Journalist Bland Disappears—What Do*

They Know At Berners End? Can't you see the posters? No, no, I'll be safe enough," continued Oliver, who privately had no doubts at all in the matter, though he was genuinely curious about his cousin's movements and the queer folk with whom Simon seemed to be consorting. Lunch was over now, and Oliver carefully lifted his legs on to another chair and leaned back in his own. "Now, Fred," he said sleepily, "I shall just close my eyes for a few minutes. But you can start as soon as you like. Don't wear a beard, Fred; you might be recognized. Just take one with you, to put on in case you want to declare yourself and prove your identity." And Oliver closed his eyes.

"I didn't quite get that bit about the beard, Mr. Bland," said Fred anxiously. But he received no reply, and when he left the inn, ten minutes later, he was still thoughtful.

It was at least an hour later when Oliver set out for the Manor. He was a trifle dazed after his nap, which had not been long enough to sober him completely, but otherwise he was his usual cheerful self. He sauntered over the two miles or so that lay between the village and the house, taking his time, for he did not wish to arrive there much before tea. As he went, he found entertainment in imagining himself arriving at the house, being introduced all round, and then amusing an odd company that would include the pretty girl who had been haunting Simon. There was also a pleasure in the thought of the energetic and thoughtful Fred, now busy surrounding the house and watching all exits. Thus, the little journey and the time passed pleasantly enough.

The house was charming. Oliver regarded with approval its mellowed facade, its trim lawns and flourishing flower beds. Nothing sinister about this place, unless it might be the strange silence and the lack of movement everywhere. But probably, Oliver reflected, they were all out, bathing somewhere and picnicking; a state of things that would be a lamentable anti-climax. And of course uncommonly like life, which seems to specialize in anti-climaxes.

At the front door, he hesitated a moment. Should he ask for Simon or for Mr. Sylvester? He plumped for Mr. Sylvester, and announced the fact to the maid who came. He was shown into the lounge hall, and there Mr. Sylvester, who descended the stairs in a very dignified manner and yet contrived to suggest that he was a busy man and had no time to waste, received him. And Mr. Sylvester, tall, portly, grave, was undoubtedly a most imposing personage, fully worthy of his house.

"You have called at a rather unfortunate time, Mr. Bland," said Mr. Sylvester, polite but firm. "Still, if there is anything I can do for you—" His hand said the rest.

"It's about my cousin, Simon Heath," Oliver began, apologetically.

Mr. Sylvester looked hard at him, then raised his eyebrows. "Ah!—your cousin? Perhaps you had better come this way." And, motioning Oliver forward, he climbed the stairs and ushered his visitor into a small study on the first floor. There was ample evidence here that its owner was making certain preparations for departure.

"You see," Oliver continued, "he left a message

with me in town to say he was coming down here. And—well, to be candid—there seemed to be something queer about it. He's had some rather extraordinary adventures lately." And no sooner had Oliver said this than he nearly gave a jump. For there—lying in full view on the table, not two yards away—was a small steel casket, obviously Simon's famous casket.

"Well, even though you are calling—uninvited—on a stranger, Mr. Bland," remarked his host smoothly, never once removing his gaze from Oliver's face, "I think you are quite right to be so candid. What's the matter?"

"I'm sorry," said Oliver, whose sudden change of expression had invited Mr. Sylvester's last question. "The fact is, I've just remembered now that I've seen you before. You were in the Savoy Grill, a few weeks ago, and there was a very pretty girl with you. I remember the girl particularly."

There was a smile, a charming wistful smile, on Mr. Sylvester's handsome face. Then the smile gradually faded. "This makes an unpleasant task easier," Mr. Sylvester began, in grave tones. "The young lady to whom you pay so sincere a compliment is my niece, Euphrosyne. An unusual name. But then she is an unusual girl. Beautiful, affectionate, intelligent, gifted in many different ways, Euphrosyne would undoubtedly be a pattern of our delightful English girlhood if it were not—" and he lowered his voice,—"for one fatal defect. She is unbalanced, and—to be entirely truthful—is so unbalanced that she has to be placed under observation. It is a pitiful case, Mr. Bland, and I rarely talk about it. From time to

time, Euphrosyne contrives to elude our vigilance, and then she goes about London, talking to strangers in the wildest manner, calling herself Zoe, and pretending that she is one of the central figures in impossible intrigues, Royalist and revolutionary plots, all of course the product of an uncontrolled imagination. These caskets, for example—" and Mr. Sylvester carelessly took up the one on the table—"I have these things made for me to hold my various little collections of coins and medals, and you would hardly believe, Mr. Bland, what extraordinary legends the poor girl has concocted out of these innocent collectors' caskets. But why should I tell you all this?" He paused impressively.

"Does my cousin Simon come into it?"

"I am sorry to say—he does. He appears to have met Euphrosyne in one of her wildest moods, to have listened to her pitiful absurdities, and—I am being entirely frank with you, Mr. Bland—to have paid the poor girl attentions, marked attentions, which, I have no need to point out to you, are eminently undesirable. They seem to have met somewhere in London yesterday. They arrived here together, last night. I had no alternative, I think you will agree with me: my duty was plain. I took Mr. Heath on one side, explained the situation to him, and he was considerate enough to agree that it would be better for everybody concerned if he returned at once to London. I imagine he caught the nine forty-five. Euphrosyne remained here overnight, but was removed to a nursing home—near Eastbourne, and a most excellent establishment, where she receives every care—this morning. She could not stay here in any event, for I am about to

go abroad, to attend a numismatic conference in Leipzig. And now, my dear sir, you have the whole story."

"And a very good story too," Oliver remarked, but only to himself. Aloud he said: "It only remains for me then, Mr. Sylvester, to apologize for this intrusion at such an inconvenient time and to thank you for receiving me with such courtesy."

Mr. Sylvester was slightly taken aback by this very fine speech, into which Oliver had thrown a hint of his host's manner of delivery. He gave Oliver a quick hard look, but Oliver's face remained a beautiful blank, though its owner was telling himself that the smooth old devil did not like being paid in his own coin.

"I wish you a good afternoon, then, sir," said Mr. Sylvester somewhat shortly.

As Oliver turned to go, his glance rested on a suit of clothes that lay folded on a neighbouring chair. There was nothing remarkable about this suit, which appeared to be made of a light herring-bone grey tweed, yet Oliver could not help feeling that there was something vaguely significant about it. He had seen it—or one like it—somewhere before. As for Mr. Sylvester, Oliver told himself as he walked away from the house, he was undoubtedly an ingenious old liar. That recital, in the Eighteenth Century manner, of poor Euphrosyne's weaknesses—no, no, it was much too raw. It would not do. Oliver shook his head at the very thought of it. But the fact remained that there were no signs of either Simon or the girl. (And if that was the girl he had seen at the Savoy—what a girl! How did Simon do it?) And if they

were not there, where were they? Why had old Sylvester handed that yarn to him, that Euphrosyne stuff, that belated contribution to Addison's *Spectator?* Oliver left the Manor grounds in what was for him an unusual state of mind, that of a man who keeps asking himself questions and cannot find any answers to them.

Some four hours after Oliver's departure there emerged from this same Manor House an Italian gentleman carrying under his arm a largish rectangular object wrapped in newspaper. Closing the door gently behind him, he hesitated on the top step and glanced furtively about him. His every gesture was that of a man in a definitely unsociable mood. Whatever Signor Tolva wanted, he did not want company: he was heart and soul for the solitary life. His hesitation, however, was but momentary. The next instant he ducked his head, ran down the steps, and went pacing along the drive towards the open road, not daring (or so it seemed to Fred, who watched him from the shrubbery) to give so much as a glance at the shadows that flanked his path. He gained the road without disaster. But here fate was unkind to him, for he had not gone more than five yards on his way when a tall, sad, bowler-hatted gentleman stepped out of the shadow of the hedge and wished him good evening. Tolva was in no mood for idle compliments, but the stranger was not easily to be shaken off.

"Excuse me," said the stranger. "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes, yes," answered Tolva. "A most pleasant night indeed. But you give me pardon that I speak not the good English."

He doffed his hat ceremoniously and was for passing

on, but the tall sad gentleman, who seemed to have suddenly conceived a great liking for his company, put out a restraining hand.

"Won't keep you a moment," said the tall man. "But I've got my job to do, same as others. No work, no money. No money, no food. Such a pleasant arrangement, I always think. And my job is to ask you a question. It's what I'm paid for, see?"

"Well?" said Tolva. "And what is that you question me?" This delay made him frantic with impatience, and grave suspicions of the stranger made him clutch his parcel the more tightly. But he judged it politic to simulate calmness.

"Simply this," said the tall man. "Do you take a Sunday paper?"

"Do I what? You waste time. It is the great big silly nonsense."

"I know," said the tall man. He nodded sympathetically. "You wouldn't think they'd pay me good money to go round asking a question like that. But they do. And that's that. I can't quarrel with my bread and butter, can I?" He took off his hat, and with the air of a conjurer fished out of it a substantial wad of newspaper. Replacing his hat, he took hold of the wad with both hands and shook it vigorously. It responded to this treatment, and to the friendly slapping and smoothing that followed, by revealing itself as a specimen copy of *The Sunday Gazette*. "Now if you happen to want a Sunday paper, this is the sort of Sunday paper you may happen to want. Or again, you may not. I'm not in a hurry this evening, and if you'd like to take a peep at this paper, I don't mind holding your parcel for you. And I'll

show you a light with my torch. Nice clear print, isn't it?"

Tolva allowed himself to exhibit some of the irritation that tormented him. "It is the large size tomfoolery. I not want the Sunday papaire. I not want newsy-papaire of no kind of sorta. It is of a stupid impudenza, this parleyment."

"I know," said the tall man, with gloomy satisfaction. "You're bored to death by the thing. Of course you are—you needn't tell *me*." He uttered a short bitter laugh. "But this paper is no ordinary paper. It's clean, this paper is. No wicked sex stuff. It's full of wholesome reading—Murderers' Last Moments and suchlike. That's what I'm paid to say."

The tall gentleman still blocked Tolva's path, and the frustrated Italian was all but dancing in his frenzy. "Have the gracious kind goodness to remove from the road," he demanded. "I not want your papaire. No, no, no, no."

"Quite," said the tall gentleman. "Between ourselves you'd be a fool if you did. But they pay me good money, so I can't grumble. Is there anything doing at the house, d'you think—the big house on the right there? You just came out of it, didn't you?"

"It is the low mendacity," cried Tolva. "Nevaire, nevaire have I been so stupidly chattered. Please you yourself to remove."

"As you wish," said the tall gentleman, not at all offended. "Thanks for the pleasant evening." He stepped aside. "And I say—if ever you change your mind, just mention my name, will you? Porson, my name is. P for Percy, O-R-S-O-N. Don't forget."

Tolva hurried on, very eager to put distance between

himself and Mr. Porson, his uneasiness concerning whom was far from abating. But in this endeavour he achieved a dubious success. He could not, it is true, positively hear the sound of following footsteps, but in his imagination he heard them, and he had a very powerful fancy that his tormentor had stepped back on to the grass edge of the road and was coming stealthily upon him. At last, after he had been walking for some ten or twelve minutes, his nerves got the better of him and he looked round. And there, well within sight of him, was Mr. Porson, who promptly responded to Tolva's hasty glance with a wave of the hand. A friendly man, Mr. Porson, in spite of his uniformly sad demeanour. But Tolva, curiously shy, would have none of him. He went on his way with more haste than ever, so that very soon he had good reason to hope that a bend in the road now hid him from the sight of his importunate acquaintance. But he could not go on like this. The importance of his errand and his doubts of Mr. Porson would not allow him to continue along the main road, where, even if he were not overtaken, he might at any moment be intercepted. His mind began feverishly searching for a new plan of action. His original intention had been to walk by road to Chilford Station and catch the first train to anywhere, preferably to London. But somehow or other he must do better than that. Meanwhile his legs were carrying him further and further on the road. Darkness was fast gathering, and presently the moon, like a ripe and luminous orange, began to appear above the black mass of Cheney Wood, which stretched away on his right. At the same moment a moon rose in his mind, and he

recalled, vaguely, that he had heard talk of a short cut to Chilford, a path through the wood, that reduced the distance by a good third. Excellent. It was the very thing. But how to find this path? And how to find it before Mr. Porson caught up with him? His thoughts were all of Porson: he was unaware, happily for what little remained of his composure, that on the other side of the hedge to his left a stooping figure kept pace with him.

A few hundred yards further on the Chilford road, and moving towards Tolva with slow measured tread, was one to whom all the short cuts of this rural region were as familiar as the palm of his own hand. Joe Dumble was in a mood of unusual alertness and expectancy. For perhaps half an hour after his visit to the Old Manor, earlier in the day, he was aware of having committed a blunder and felt rather foolish. But this, to our Dumble, was no novel sensation, and it caused him no great uneasiness. He had suffered at the hands of fate and Mr. Sylvester a rebuff such as would have seriously discouraged a more sensitive young man. It had no such effect on him. That gallant spirit was not quenched; that fiery ambition, that lust for glory, that resolve to win promotion by the capture of some notable rascal, burned in his breast as brightly as ever. He walked at this moment in a world enriched by fragrant essences and enchanted by an unearthly radiance. Cheney Wood, sprinkled with moonlight and peopled with a numerous host of tall trees, crowded so closely upon him as to cast a sharp serrated shadow on the whiteness of the road. The silence was warm and personal; a rabbit flickered across the road; and the occasional rustle of bird or

small beast in the hedge was like a whispered secret. In the heart of this breathing and shining mystery Dumble marched slowly on, his head filled with a joyous phantasmagoria of handcuffs and prison cells culminating in the vision of a police court with himself giving evidence of arrest. He was still stubbornly of the opinion that Simon had been in unlawful possession of those caskets, and he was inclined to think that Mr. Sylvester was shielding that guilty young man; for it is notorious, and had reached the ears even of Police Constable Dumble, that the gentry are reluctant to let each other down in the presence of the lower orders. Mr. Sylvester was too kindhearted: that was probably the truth of the matter. Not from such as Mr. Sylvester could an ambitious young policeman look for assistance in his quest for crime.

At this point in his meditations Master Dumble observed coming towards him an unfamiliar figure whom he at once suspected of being a foreigner. This alone was a matter for indignation, but what made the affair worse was that the stranger, hurrying along in a very eccentric manner, at something between a walk and a trot, carried under his arm a parcel. Dumble made up his mind that he would challenge this person and by a series of cunning questions discover what that parcel contained. But before he could put this purpose into effect, the stranger quickened his pace, smiled expansively, and gave every sign of being about to address him.

"Please, good evening, sir!" said Signor Tolva, raising his hat. "You will tell me the brief road to Chilford, is it not so?"

"Eh?" said Dumble. "If 'tis the Chilford road you

want, sir, you be on it now. Straight away along, and a matter of five miles as the crow flies, as they say."

"Ah, but you mistake," cried Tolva, with a radiant and forgiving smile. "I am not a crow. Alas, I am not. I am *il dottore* Pianella, very clever man. But I have not the good English tongue. It is the brief road who I wish to seek." Seeing the vacancy in Dumble's eye, he judged it expedient to temper the fine edge of his foreignness. "It is, how you say, the short cut to Chilford. The quick slice, yes? The short quick cut through this so beautiful little woods or forest." He stretched an admiring hand towards Cheney Wood.

"There *is* a short cut," admitted Dumble, half reluctantly. "Man and boy I've been of these parts twenny-eight years, and there baint much you can learn me about short cuts. If 'tis short cut to Chilford you want you've come to the right shop, sir."

"It is very gracious," said Tolva. "Ten thousand thankings."

"I'll maybe put you on the way, sir," said Dumble, gratified by this politeness. " 'Tis easy to lose your whereabouts in they woods."

Tolva acknowledge this courtesy with a bow. He had no particular wish for Dumble's company, but he felt that at least he had nothing to fear from this amiable bumpkin. What irked him was that Dumble, impervious to hints, could not be persuaded to make haste. Grinning and sociable, the young policeman sauntered along with Tolva at his side. They were in the wood in no time; already a belt of trees shut them off from the sight of the road.

"Ay," remarked Dumble, coming at last to a standstill, "'tis a wunnerful pretty spot, sure enough."

This remark, so little in Dumble's character, would have put you and me on our guard. But the astute Tolva saw nothing unusual in it.

"Maybe I could carry your passel for you," suggested Dumble. "It be a heavy un, by the look."

At this strange saying Tolva stared askance. He was now definitely uneasy. He had the nightmare feeling that Sussex had become full of obliging people anxious to carry his parcel for him. First the lunatic Mr. Porson, and now this lump of rustic lethargy.

"No, no, no, no, no," he answered. "It is a very not heavy article. It is a little box full of the ham sandwich so I have not hunger in the train journey. Let us please hurry. It is this way? Very well, then I shall with many complimenti leave you so kind and grateful."

"Oi, wait a minute!" said Dumble. He was by no means prepared to let this foreigner go until he had made a close inspection of that parcel. He removed his helmet and thoughtfully scratched his head, hoping by this exercise to light upon a plan of action.

But he was spared the pain of further thought, for at that moment the quiet night was disturbed by a sudden squawking and a whirr as of wooden wings, and a monstrous creature—for so it seemed to Tolva—started up from the undergrowth, within a yard of where the two men stood, and Tolva, with a little squeal of terror, loosened his grip on the precious parcel.

"Ho!" cried Dumble.

On the ground, glistening in the moonlight, lay a

steel casket of a pattern very familiar to the policeman. Tolva, stooping to recover his treasure, found himself suddenly pushed aside by rough hands. A frenzy seized him, and a stinging blow on the left ear communicated this frenzy to the astonished Dumble.

"Oi!" roared Dumble. "You maun't do that to pleeceman." To emphasize the prohibition, he lurched heavily forward and gave Tolva a corrective tap on the nose. At this moment, unseen by either combatant, a hand stole out of the environing darkness, and eager fingers clawed at the casket.

Tolva, his brain bursting with strange stars, took incontinently to his heels; and Dumble stooped to gather up the spoils of victory. The ground was bare. No sign of a steel casket. Dumble gaped and stared, turned slowly round, looked this way and that, and wondered what strange trick it was that the moon had played him. "Now there *were* a shiny box, weren't there? I couldn't ha' *dreamt* that shiny box, could I? Lordy mussy I'm fair mazed."

And so we leave him wondering, and follow the triumphant Fred. This was Fred's great moment, and all that he needed to make his joy complete was a friend to share it with. Heaven sent him his wish in the person of Mr. Porson, who, for reasons of his own, had kept closely in touch with every moment of the woodland comedy. He had seen Tolva meet Dumble, he had seen Fred shadowing them, and he had invisibly attached himself to Fred.

Now for the first time he made his presence known.

"Good evening, mister."

Fred nearly jumped out of his skin. "What you want?"

"Name of Porson," said Mr. Porson. "P for Percy. That's a pretty thing you've got there, and it was a smart bit of work the way you got it." Fred drew back. He was not yet sure of Mr. Porson. "Oh, you needn't worry about me," that gentleman assured him. "Me, I'm in the newspaper world. Canvasser, you know. Suppose I can't interest you in *The Sunday Gazette?*"

"I don't think so," answered Fred. "So you saw everything, did you?"

"Oh, that's all right." Fred was now on his way back to the road, and Mr. Porson, taking his welcome for granted, fell into step with him. "That's all right," repeated Mr. Porson. "Neatest thing I've seen for a long time."

"You see," explained Fred, "I'm a detective." Despite himself pride crept into his voice. He glowed with triumph. "And I've come out on top."

"Detective?" A gloomy joy irradiated Mr. Porson's saturnine features. "Well I never did! That's what I call a real slice of luck for yours truly. D'you know, mister, I've always wanted to see a detective, ever since I was a boy. And now I'm seeing one. And that was a smart piece of work you did just now. You ought to be pleased with yourself. Where are you taking the little box of diamonds?"

"Diamonds?" echoed Fred. If the treasure proved indeed to be diamonds, what glory, what fame for him! "Well, whatever it is, I'm taking it to my client. Mr. Bland he is. Mr. Oliver Bland. He's in the newspaper business too: you may have met him."

"Bland?" said Mr. Porson. "What, old Bland!" It was as if he could hardly believe his good luck. "I should just think I do know him! Why, we were at school together. That is, if it's the same fellow."

"You'd call him a tallish sort of young man with a wonderful flow of talk," supplied Fred.

"So I should," agreed Mr. Porson. "You've hit it. That's just what I should call him. Well, well, well. Fancy old Bland. Staying in the neighbourhood, is he?"

"We're at The Harvesters together," said Fred. "Working this case, you know. I'm off there now to tell him the good news."

"D'you mind if I come with you?" asked Mr. Porson. "It'd be a real treat to meet Mr. Bland again."

Meanwhile, however, Mr. Bland, quitting the inn immediately after dinner, had arrived at the Britishers' Camp, which was situated in a pleasant little hollow, between Berners End and Chilford, two and a half miles from the inn and approximately the same distance from the Manor. The camp consisted of some thirty-odd bell tents and several marquees, and it was in one of these marquees, which was doing duty as an officers' mess, that Oliver found his acquaintances of the previous evening, together with a number of other close-clipped military gentlemen. They were all in the Britishers' uniform now: khaki shirts; with a Union Jack embroidered on the left side; khaki shorts; and somewhat astonishing red stockings. The staff wallahs appeared to have been doing themselves very well, and were now busily engaged in mopping up spots of liquor.

Oliver reported at once to Major Carraway, who seemed to be the person in most authority there. "Major Carraway," he began, gasping a little, for he had hurried all the way and was hardly in the best of condition for rapid walking.

Carraway corrected him. "General now, Bland. Think you know some of these fellas. Colonel de la Touche ffoster. Colonel Stanton-Strood. Colonel Barry. Major Forbes-Wickham. Have a spot, Bland? Orderly, whisky and soda for Mr. Bland."

"General Carraway," began Oliver, who had already had too many spots. "Gentlemen. I congratulate you all on your rapid promotion. They talk about decadence, and yet here are you gentlemen climbing the ladder, pushing on, accepting new responsibilities, and all for the old country's sake. The British public has got to hear about this."

"Spoken like a sahib, Bland," barked Colonel de la Touche ffoster.

"Stout fella!" said General Carraway, promptly obliterating another spot. All of them appeared to have had at least their fair share of spots, for the table was littered with empty bottles, and some of the military gentlemen's faces had a bulgy, empurpled, glassy-eyed look. They were not expansive—being by nature and training such close-clipped persons—but they had obviously arrived at the stage at which ordinary men become very expansive indeed, and cannot quite decide whether to cheer and sing at the top of their voices or to plunge into the friendliest confidences with the nearest stranger.

"Seen anything more down there, Bland?" asked General Carraway. "Nothing we can do, eh?"

"Shoot the lot," muttered Colonel Stanton-Strood. "Sorry, sir!"

"All right, Puggy," said the General gruffly, a strong man crushing emotion. "Understand. All feel like that, eh? What you say, Tubby? What you say, Nibby?"

Colonel de la Touche ffoster and Major Forbes-Wickham instantly agreed.

"But carry on, Bland."

"General Carraway and gentlemen," Oliver began solemnly, "I came down here to look for my cousin, who's been getting mixed up lately with some very queer people—very queer people indeed. I know he came down to stay at the Old Manor, here in Berners End. I called there this afternoon, and was told that he'd come and gone." He paused.

"Little lady in the case, eh?" asked Colonel Barry.

"No names in mess, gentlemen," said the General. "You understand, Bland? No names in mess."

The gentlemen understood, and an additional round of spots was ordered at once by three of them.

"I was told this," Oliver continued impressively, "by a very smooth elderly gentleman, who seemed to me to be lying. He told me a preposterous cock-and-bull story. But I happened to notice a suit of clothes that was lying folded on a chair in his study there. It struck me at the time that I'd seen that suit before—"

"Stout fella!" cried several of his listeners.

"And then, tonight, while I was having dinner at the pub, I suddenly remembered. General Carraway and gentlemen, that was the suit my cousin had been wearing yesterday. I could swear to it. I believe my cousin's a prisoner in that house."

"The cads!" ejaculated Colonel de la Touche ffoster.

General Carraway disposed of his spot, then looked sternly about him. "Gentlemen, this is serious. Came to the right place, Bland. What d'you think it is?"

"My friend, Detective Huggins, whom you met last night, tells me he's certain it's a dope ring. I'm not sure."

"Bolshies, sir," cried Colonel Stanton-Strood. "Certain of it."

There was a general bark of agreement.

General Carraway silenced them with an iron glance. "No chatter, you fellas. Action's what we want. Looks Bolshie to me. That fella with the beard, too, last night. This cousin—what's he? Scribblin' fella?"

"My cousin, Simon Heath, is a lecturer on history at Cambridge—"

"Decent fella? White man?"

"White all through," replied Oliver promptly, "but simple. Lives up to his Christian name. He'd believe anything you told him, provided it had all happened since the eleventh century. Earlier than that, you can't catch him out. But that doesn't help him much, does it? It isn't as if we'd got Attila and some of his Hun boys disguised in the village."

"No, not Huns now," the General barked. "Finished them in the War. Bolshies now. Red cads. Took the house to be near this camp. We'll settle 'em. Don't worry, Bland." He paused for a moment, then in a super-military voice, so superbly masculine, iron-bound and ruthless, that it was extremely hard to tell what it said, he yelled: "Officers o' the'

Bri'shers!" and staggered rather than sprang to his feet.

The rest of them jumped up at once and stood at attention, so many steel colonels and iron majors. Oliver could have cheered.

"T'yer comp'nies," the General barked at them. "All available men fall in at once. Adjutant will report to me here. Stand by, Bland. See you through. Dismiss." They hurriedly left the marquee. "Keen," said the General, looking after them not without emotion. "Keen, Bland."

"God, yes! They're keen, General," said Oliver with fervour.

They finished their spots to the accompaniment of a great deal of shouting and odd noises outside. Presently the Adjutant, a very long thin young man, so long and thin that Oliver stared at his bare knees in fascinated horror, came in to report the parade all ready. Out went the General, with Oliver in close attendance.

"Bri-she-ers, Tchown!" yelled the Adjutant.

The parade of Britishers, some eighty strong, sprang to attention, then extended their right arms, with fists clenched, straight in front of them, and Oliver stared at these antics with the same fascinated horror with which he had just regarded the Adjutant's knees.

"Britisher salute," General Carraway, talking out of one side of his mouth and letting the other side remain very military and grim. "Good, isn't it? 'Tirely my idea." He looked proudly at his men, who by this time were standing at attention again, and began to roar: "Bri-shers—proud to say opportunity arrived serve best interests old country—Bol-

shie spies reported near camp—headquarters thought to be house near—suspicious circumstances—call for twenty volunteers proposed raid—volunteers, three paces forward!"

The two ranks seemed to shiver in the mingled dusk and moonlight—that was all. But then it was found that they had all taken the required three paces forward. The Britishers had volunteered to a man.

"Keen!" whispered Oliver to the gratified General, who now commanded the Adjutant to select twenty men for the raid, told everybody on the parade ground that they were worthy of the flag, then retired to the marquee to order another round of spots. He was followed by most of the officers.

"Like to lead the raid myself," the General announced gruffly.

"Your duty's here, sir," Colonel de la Touche ffoster reminded him, not without suitable deference.

"You're right, Tubby. Put you in charge of the raiding party. Take Puggy and Nibby with you. Bland goes too, of course."

"Thank you, General Carraway," said Oliver, his eyes a trifle wild but his voice quite sober, even grave. "England shall hear of this."

"Stout fella!" said the General, and then quite suddenly fell asleep.

They marched in double file, Tubby de la Touche ffoster and Oliver in front, then the men, with Puggy Stanton-Strood and Nibby Forbes-Wickham bringing up the rear. Through the fragrant magic of the summer night they went, across fields, down lanes, up the white road, singing the marching song of the Britishers, with its refrain:

Brit-Brit-*Brit*-Brit-*Brit*ishers
Marching along,
Singing a song
Of E-em-pire.
Brit-Brit-*Brit*-Brit-*Brit*ishers
With the Union Jack
That never goes back
And loses the track
Of E-e-e-em-pire!

And not the least of these voices making the night harmonious was that of Oliver.

"Good work, eh, Bland?" said the Colonel, as they swung along together.

"My dear Tubby little double eff," cried Oliver, who was very excited, "it's great stuff. I've dreamt of moments like this."

"Carraway's stout fella, eh?"

"Heaven bless the Carraway!" cried Oliver. "And may his seed be fruitful." And on, on they marched —*Brit*-Brit-*Brit*-Brit-*Brit*ishers—under the brighten-ing pumpkin of a summer moon.

CHAPTER XIV

MIDSUMMER MAGIC

THE time that Simon spent as a prisoner in that little room under the roof may be divided into three periods. The first period, which lasted the greater part of the afternoon that remained to him, he passed partly in eager anticipation of being released and partly in angry meditation. During that time, he expected to be let out at any moment and so, beyond trying the door several times, made little or no effort to get himself out. The second part was spent in exploring the rubbish that had been stored in the room and in further exploring the possibilities of breaking down the door or climbing out of the grimy little skylight. Even in full daylight, there was very little light in the room, and no sooner had the daylight begun waning than some other illumination was urgently necessary. There was no electricity or gas laid on in the room. Fortunately, however, it was a lumber room, and lumber rooms have their own resources. One of Simon's first finds was perhaps the most important, a cardboard box containing a number of candle ends, chiefly of those fancy candles that were once used to decorate and illuminate the front of upright pianos. These enabled him to continue his search.

The Simon who groped among these piles of household rubbish was a different Simon from the one we have met before. The historian and lecturer, the

mild young man of research and contemplation, had almost completely vanished. His place was rapidly being taken by quite a grim young man of action, who, if he was rather uncertain what to do, was still determined to do something. This last trick that Sylvester-Pembury had played upon him had made him really angry. He could not bother his head to be merely mystified any longer. The thought of how he had allowed himself to be bamboozled by that plausible old rogue sent him into a rage every time it entered his mind, which it did rather often. He saw himself meekly following the smooth rascal up the stairs, ready to swallow any new nonsense that might be handed to him. And Sylvester-Pembury, or whatever his name was, had contemptuously flung him into this hole, thus neatly disposing of him and all his awkward questions within two minutes. He knew now only too well that he had been used as a mere catspaw—a carrier of dangerous steel caskets, the discovery of which might get them into trouble with the police—by a gang of ingenious criminals. That they were criminals, he had now no doubt whatever. And Zoe, whose delicious image, whose heart-melting tones, still haunted and disturbed him—what about her? He did not know, and did not dare to think about her too much, for even now she might be far away, laughing at him again. But if, by a happy chance, she was still here, to be stormed at, she too was about to see a very different Simon Heath, cool, stern, masterful. Let her look to it.

Meanwhile, however, he himself had to look to it. Not a step approached the room, and only the vaguest sounds came from the outside world at all. Anything

might have happened in the house, for all he knew, during these hours. With three or four candle ends, absurdly frivolous things in gilt and green and mauve, burning briskly, giving him a clear yellow light, he conducted a thorough search through the astonishing litter of this lumber room. The passing generations had each contributed its quota to these dusty corners. There were piles of old magazines, torn schoolbooks, a broken croquet set, scattered chess men of varying patterns, wrinkled dancing slippers, enormous photograph albums with great metal clasps, moulting fans, three mossy tall hats, sets of engravings illustrating the Classical and Picturesque Beauties of Great Britain and Ireland, sightless and mutilated dolls, boxes of shattered birds' eggs and tin soldiers, hunting boots that had not known a horse since the sixties, crinolines and frock coats, souvenirs of Victorian foreign travel, guides to Great Exhibitions, and a hundred other disregarded oddities. And in spite of his uncomfortable situation, not improved by a growing hunger and thirst, and in spite of his urgent desire to escape, Simon could not help finding a certain fascination in the mere examination of this pathetic litter. These poor witnesses to frivolities dead and gone, these buttons and gloves and artificial flowers that had long outlived their wearers, this flotsam and jetsam from the roaring tide of years, they could not be thrust aside without their first firing his imagination a little. It is possible that from that hour of grimy search and discovery among the lumber, he became a better historian.

His work had long taught him both patience and thoroughness, and, though he was anxious to escape, he did not spoil his chances and waste time by not mak-

ing a full and proper examination of his resources. Now and then he would take something out of the pile he was engaged upon and put it in the middle of the room. Thus, when he finished his search, he knew exactly what he had to work with, either to climb out of the little window or to break down the door. He had now entered his third period. The exit by way of the skylight did not seem at all promising. The roof obviously sloped sharply and was fairly high, and Simon was not at all eager to try his skill at roof-climbing, a sport he had always left to other and wilder spirits at Cambridge. The door was the thing. It was by no means a gimcrack and rickety door, though, on the other hand, it was not one of those tough old slabs of oak sometimes to be found in country houses. It was simply a fairly stout deal door, with the usual four panels, thinner than the rest of it, but still formidably thick.

After carefully examining his treasure trove in the middle of the floor Simon began operations by giving the door a few heavy blows with a croquet mallet. These had surprisingly little effect. It was tiring work, and the door seemed to enjoy the impact of the mallet. So Simon dismissed this crude method of attack, and turned to a more important find, namely, a box labelled *The Boy's Fretwork and Carpentering Box of Tools*. A great many of the tools were clearly missing, and those that remained were in no shape to delight the eye of a craftsman. Simon was no craftsman, but even he knew rust and blunt edges when he saw them. There was a hammer, however, and with it two chisels and—what looked most promising—one of those long thin saws used by the fret-

worker. So, taking these, he set to work on the panel nearest the keyhole.

After slogging away with the hammer and a chisel for a few minutes, he found he had made some impression on the wood, and so tried to push through the end of his fine saw. It was far too early in the day for that, however, and he had to return to the hammer and chisel, and batter the corner harder than ever. This time, he managed to get the end of the saw through, and, after tremendous and wearying efforts, he was able to move the saw and to compel its ancient and rusty teeth to get a grip on the wood. Sylvester's big old Norfolk had long since been discarded, and now he felt tempted to strip himself of the rest of his clothes, for it was very close in here, just under the roof, and this sawing—always an exhausting business for a beginner—soaked him in perspiration. By the time he had cut down through about four inches of the wood, he was almost blind with sweat, and his thirst was frightening. He retired to contemplate his handiwork. He had now cut about four inches deep in the corner of the panel nearest the keyhole, and that was all. There would have to be hours and hours of frenzied sawing before he could cut out a hole big enough to admit his arm. And even then, if Sylvester had removed the key from the other side of the door, as he might well have done, this hole would be useless. Despairing, Simon pulled out the saw, flung it on the ground, picked up the croquet mallet and with all that remained of his strength aimed a tremendous blow at that cut in the door. It was this last berserk stroke that defeated the door. Quite a large section of the panel went splintering in, and

there was left a space easily large enough for Simon's hand and arm to twist through. Sylvester had left the key on the other side of the door, and after a little difficulty, Simon was able to turn it in the lock. He was free.

He had not quite finished with his treasure trove in the room yet, however; for there awaited him there two possible weapons of defence. One was an ancient horse-pistol, of massive weight and calibre. Even though it had not been fired for a century, it still looked rather formidable. The other weapon was a long curved sword that had probably been brought back from the Levant some sixty or seventy years ago. It had been greased a little and then snugly encased in its scabbard, with the result that it still retained something of an edge. Moreover, it was a weapon of great moral effect, one to give courage to any man—a long, sinister, insolent blade. Taking up this sword and the pistol, Simon blew out the last of the coloured candles and marched out into the dim corridor. Only the very faintest trace of daylight remained in this part of the house now, for the search for tools and the subsequent use of them on the door had stolen hours and hours away.

Simon stumbled on a switch at the head of the stairs, turned on the light, and discovered that it was after ten o'clock. There was not a sound in the house. He went down the narrow stairs to the second floor, from which he was able to see that at least there were lights on in the house. Almost without thinking where he was going, he slowly descended to the first floor and then turned in the direction of that end room in which Zoe had been crying. The house was un-

cannily quiet, but he did not hesitate. At the present moment he bore hardly any resemblance to the mild young man who had first accepted the charge of that famous steel casket. His uncle the Dean of Gulforth, his cousin Oliver, and his colleagues and pupils at Cambridge, would not have recognized him. He was still coatless, for he had scorned to accept the offices of that Norfolk jacket again; his hands and most of his face were black; his hair stood wildly on end and was thickly powdered with dust; and in one hand he carried an immense pistol and in the other a long curved sword, now shorn of its scabbard and nakedly revealed. He looked like one of the murderers in a hearty and realistic production of *Macbeth*.

Thus there was some excuse for the man Roach, who cannot be accused of being unduly imaginative and nervous. Roach was lolling in a chair in the corridor, just outside Zoe's room, and he was reading a newspaper when Simon first appeared. But he very quickly forgot his newspaper when he caught sight of this ferocious apparition. He gave a shout and scrambled to his feet.

"'Ere, half a minute," he said, in not at all bold or challenging tones.

"Where is everybody?" asked Simon.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Roach stared at him in amazement.

"Yes. Where is everybody?"

"'Ere," and Roach took a shambling pace forward, "you're not supposed to be let out till tomorrow morning. That's what the guv'nor said to me. Tomorrow morning."

"Did he? Very kind of him. But I'm here now."

Simon did not like the look of Roach, who was a big brute; nevertheless he spoke firmly.

"Well, get back again," said Roach, having recovered from his first shock of surprise. "Them's my orders. You up at the top till tomorrow morning, and 'er in 'ere, see?"

"What, is Miss Sylvester still in there?"

"That's right. Guv'nor's orders. She's in there, and she stays there. I eat 'er dinner, though. She wouldn't touch it. Tantrums—full o' tantrums. And you've 'ad no dinner, I know that much," he added, with a grin.

This reference to the lack of dinner had the immediate effect of annoying Simon. He was angrier and more determined than ever, though the thought that Zoe too had been made a prisoner brought him a wonderful sense of relief. It meant they were both ranged definitely on the same side.

"And now, mister, you can just go back to your little cubby hole," Roach continued, his grin more impudent than ever. "Them's the orders."

"Get out of the way," Simon suddenly blazed at him.

"You what?" Roach could not believe his ears.

"Get out of the way. I want to open the door of that room. Clear out." Having issued these commands, Simon tightened his grasp on the sword and the pistol.

"Start talking to me like that," Roach growled, "and I'll dot you one. 'Ere steady!" This last was a cry of alarm, for Simon had suddenly brought the point of his sword very close to his face. And he did not stop there. He pressed his advantage, and in such

a way that Roach had to rise, push back his chair, and get nearer to the wall. Fortunately, it was an unusually broad landing, so that there was room to manoeuvre, and Simon did manoeuvre, slowly circling round until at last Roach had backed against the wall. But it did not look as if this initial advantage would last long. There was an unpleasant glare in Roach's little eyes, and any second now Simon expected him to knock up the sword and charge. And once that had happened, it was all up. Simon had a horrible conviction that one good blow from this brute would smash him into the wall, completely extinguishing him. It was a moment for strategy and bluff. Brains must outwit brawn. Simon summoned all his nerve.

Still holding the sword in front of him in his right hand, he suddenly shot forward his left hand and brought the ridiculous old pistol to within a few inches of Roach's waistcoat. "Put your hands up," he yelled, hardly knowing what he was saying, "or I'll blow you to pieces. Now then! Turn round. Go on. Go on. Keep your hands up, or I'll blow your inside out. Go on. March, march."

And it worked. Roach, a creature of slow wits, had not time to consider that this vast and very formidable looking pistol could not possibly be loaded. Overawed by Simon's sudden and unexpected ferocity, he was taking no chances with that young cannon which was poked first in his belly, then in his back. He marched down the landing, holding his hands well above his head, and Simon, a figure of martial supremacy, marched close behind him, with the pistol digging itself into Roach's back.

Only one thing marred Simon's triumph, one small

consideration. Roach was marching, undoubtedly he was marching, but where was he marching to? In other words, what was to be done with Roach? This problem bothered Simon, and while his brains raced to solve it, he could do nothing but keep Roach marching. But, obviously, they could not go marching round and round the house for ever. No safe lock-up suggested itself. He had read of men who tied up other men single-handed, but he was not acquainted with the difficult technique of this art, and felt that Roach was not the person on whom to practise it in its early and slower stages. They were now marching down the stairs into the hall. Something must be done, and quickly. Then he had an inspiration—another bluff, but it might work.

"Roach," he said curtly, like a stern man addressing a slinking guilty cur.

Roach grunted, and continued marching.

"Sylvester—Pembury, that is—has gone. So has Tolva. And Newton. The game's up—do you hear? I telephoned to the police to come here, quarter of an hour ago. They're on their way now."

"Oh, I say, mister—'ere, you're not going to give a feller away," replied Roach, in his most persuasive growl. He half-turned as he spoke, and his hands dropped a little.

"Keep on," Simon commanded sharply. "Hands up. That's right. Now, listen." They were at the bottom of the stairs. "I've no time to bother with you. I'll give you a chance. Clear out. Go on. Get out of it." Simon fairly spat out these last few words. Nor did Roach wait to hear any more. He had always taken orders from somebody—not being

a man with a very independent mind—and now that somebody was Simon. He hurried across the hall and vanished through the open doorway, and Simon, watching him go, was convinced that he had seen the last of him. Triumphant, if a little dizzy and shaken, he turned to mount the stairs again, and what he saw then made him catch his breath.

At the stairhead stood Zoe: a slim gallant figure miraculously emerging from the dark confusion of this day. Light itself seemed to come from the pale oval of her face. One hand covered her breast; with the other she grasped the curving bannister; and she was all expectancy, a figure at once courageous and forlorn. And now Simon saw her as he had never seen her before. This world of crazy adventuring, of crime and fantasy and self-deception and dubious pride, fell away from them both. The last flicker of doubt left him, and the events of the last few days seemed no more than fading wisps of dream. Here, he was convinced, was meaning, was sanity. He was a man, and awake.

"That fellow won't come back," he cried to her, with a pardonable affectation of coolness, as he climbed the stairs.

"I heard you," she said, regarding him with brilliant eyes. "Then I came out—and saw you."

They were facing one another now. He let the sword and pistol drop, and her eyes never left his. "Listen," he cried. "I don't know what it's all about. I don't care. I love you. I adore you," he added wildly, "I worship you. And you're going to have to put up with it. Yes, you are. I don't care a damn."

He made as if to clasp her in his arms, but she retreated a step or two, putting out a hand to ward him off. "Wait, wait," she cried tremulously. "No, Simon, please. Please wait. You must. It isn't fair."

Simon did not know what was not fair, and at this moment, being triumphant and masterful, did not very much care. It was not what she said, but the entreaty in her tones, her look, that held him back.

"You see, Simon," she continued faintly, "you've got a lot to learn yet."

"I don't care," he muttered. "But you've got to understand that I'm in love with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure?" he thundered. "Of course I'm sure. Look at me. Look at that ridiculous pistol and that sword. Look at everything. Either I'm in love, or I'm crazy. As a matter of fact, I'm both."

"Darling!"

"That's right. Now say it again. And please put more meaning into it. And don't add that it's because I'm pompous and a baby, though how one can be both pompous and a baby, I fail to see."

"It's quite easy," she told him, sparkling at him again in the old delicious way. "Lots of babies are. You must have noticed them. Though I don't know much about that—because, really Simon, you don't notice much. I can tell you at least one important thing you've failed to notice."

"What's that?"

But she had turned away now, making for the small study. He followed her in there, to find that she had picked up a note and was gravely considering it. He

let her read it twice before he attracted her attention.

"It's from my uncle—to me," she explained, in a tiny subdued, rather lifeless voice. "He's gone—gone for good. And of course he's taken the jewels with him—"

"The jewels?"

"Yes, the jewels that were in the steel casket. Oh I'll explain all about that afterwards. That's what I wanted to tell you. He's gone abroad—by plane, I think—first to Amsterdam, and then he says he's retiring to a villa we have in the South of France. And that's the end—at last. He'd planned to get away today, he says, and that's why he had to lock us up. You—because you were getting too inquisitive. And me—well, because of what I said to him today. But we shouldn't have been locked up long."

"I knew that," said Simon gently, for there was something piteously apologetic about her last remark. "I gathered that from Roach. Your uncle wanted us out of the way while he cleared out, I take it?"

"Yes. It's quite a nice note—in a way. He asks me to please myself whether I join him over there or not. If I don't choose to, well, I can stay here and earn my living somehow. And he's left me this house to do what I like with. I shan't go. He must have known that. He's gone, and I only hope he gets safely away. And that's all." And Zoe, after looking at him in silence for a moment, suddenly and very disconcertingly turned away, dropped into a chair, and burst into tears.

"No, no, no. Don't cry. Zoe, you mustn't cry. It doesn't matter," Simon babbled, with a protective

arm embracing sometimes the girl and sometimes only the chair. "I'm sure there's really nothing to cry about. Never mind, darling. Nothing to cry about."

"There is," said the lovely stricken creature, in muffled tones.

"Well, what?" demanded the bewildered male.

"Oh!—everything." And having said this, the astonishing girl suddenly sat up, stopped crying, and smiled at him mistily.

"Do you really love me?" she asked.

He told her again, with even more emphasis. Then they both looked enquiringly at one another, for suddenly there came from the night the sound of voices, men's voices raised in martial chorus. Simon went to the open window. After listening a moment, he came away. "Some fellows from the village. I suppose."

"It's Saturday night, isn't it?" she replied. "Well then, it's probably the local cricket team. They must have won a match. But let's not talk about them, shall we? Let's talk about *us*."

"My hat!—I should think so," said Simon, standing in front of her. "By the way, has everybody gone? I know your uncle's gone, and Roach has gone. What about Tolva? I suppose he's cleared out too. And what about the servants? There doesn't seem to be a soul about."

"They must have been here to cook the dinner," Zoe replied, "because Roach said there was some for me. And I wouldn't have it, and now I'm frightfully hungry."

"So am I," Simon declared, "though food was the

last thing I should have thought of, if you hadn't mentioned it."

"Well, I'm not *really* hungry, you know, though I shall be soon, I think. Perhaps," and she glanced at him mischievously, "when I come down to earth again."

Then, after a pause, she said coolly: "Kiss me, Simon. Or don't you want to?"

Simon's answer was prompt and ardent. It was strangely accompanied by the martial chorus of the cricket team from the road outside. After a moment or two she gently pushed him away and sat upright.

"It doesn't necessarily mean anything, you know," she told him, smiling rather uncertainly, "except that I fancy I'm rather fond of you. We haven't really begun talking, Professor Heath."

"I'm not a professor. I'm miles away from being one. Though I could be, of course," he added, with a touch of pride, "if I left Cambridge and went to some God-forsaken university somewhere."

"Oh, could you do that?" she cried, looking at him with wide eyes. "Go right away, and be a professor there? But never mind about that, now. I've got to tell you about all this, and it isn't going to be easy. I think I'm frightened. You know," she added quickly, putting out a hand that he caught swiftly, "I didn't mean that horrid stuff this afternoon—all about your being a fool and a catspaw and the rest of it—I said it because I really wanted you to go—though of course I didn't *really* want you to go, darling—and I thought I might be able to drive you away."

"But I was a fool, of course," Simon admitted, though not very ruefully. "Though I was chiefly a

fool about you. I mean, that was why I didn't care whether I was a fool or not."

"Lovely! But now I suppose I'd better begin at the beginning."

"Yes, do."

"And tell you everything."

"No," said Simon. "Not that again. I couldn't bear it."

"Why, what's the matter, Simon?"

"Sorry! But don't you realize—of course, though, you couldn't, but nevertheless it's a fact—that every time one of you started one of those monstrous Prophet Yann—Lady Ann Quaife—Euravian legends, you've begun by saying that you would tell me everything? Honestly, I can't bear to hear that phrase again. Sorry, Zoe!"

"I wish you wouldn't keep calling me Zoe—it makes me feel jealous. It's as if you were talking to some other girl. You see—my name's Ann."

Simon groaned. "I know I shall go crazy yet. So you are Ann and not Zoe? You're sure you're not an old gentleman, or that you won't disappear, vanish into thin air, in another minute?"

She smiled at him very sweetly. "Poor Simon! Yes, I'm positive I'm not an old gentleman, and I'm positive I won't disappear or anything, unless you wish me to. I'm a real girl, and I'm twenty-four years and three months old, and my name is Ann—Ann Pembury. I hope you like it?" she added anxiously.

"It's a splendid name," he assured her. "I realize now that I never did like Zoe."

"Well, then," she began, with a captivating little

businesslike air. "I'm Ann Pembury, and my mother and father died when I was quite young, and I was brought up—away at schools and things, you know—by my uncle, Sebastian Pembury. Hullo! What's that?"

"There seems to be a whole crowd of people outside there," said Simon. They both went to the window and looked out.

"*Bri-shers, ha-olt!*" a voice barked out.

There below were a number of men in queer hats and khaki shirts, standing in line. Obedient to succeeding words of command, delivered in the most approved military style, these men turned to face the house, then stood at ease.

"Stout work, Colonel," cried a voice below, the voice of a high-spirited young man who was evidently enjoying himself. "England will not forget. And now I will go forward and parley with the enemy."

Simon did not stay at the window to hear any more. He dragged Ann back into the room. "That's my cousin Oliver—the ass!" he gasped. "And those asses with him must be the Britishers. Let's get out of this or we'll have no peace for hours and hours."

"Who are the Britishers?" asked Ann. But she didn't wait for an answer. "Come on." She put her hand in his and they scampered like two children out of the study, along the landing, and down some back stairs into the kitchen, whose sole occupant, Jenny, leaped up at their approach.

"And I'm sure," cried Jenny breathlessly, "what with Mrs. Spalding taking Spalding away, and then Rose saying her mother wouldn't like her to stay and going as well, I'd have gone myself, 'cos I'd my notice

ready the day long, but I thought, miss, I'd have a word with you first—"

"Listen, Jenny," said Ann hastily. "Some silly people are coming here to ask a lot of stupid questions. You tell them everybody's away, will you? And we're going down to the summer-house at the bottom of the garden, but don't tell them that. And if you can, slip out and bring us some sandwiches or anything there is and a bottle of wine or something. I know I can depend on you, Jenny."

Before Jenny could reply, a bell jangled violently, and a little red star in the indicator section labelled F.D. began to wag.

"They're there now, Jenny," cried Ann. "Now don't forget. Off you go, and keep them talking. Simon, we can get out here and creep right round behind the shrubbery. Oh!—I adore this, don't you?"

They found themselves, close together, in the enchantment of moonlight and shadow, silvered leaf and blossom, dew and spilled fragrance, that was the garden of a midsummer night. And Simon as he went, blessed the Prophet Yann and the shattered dynasty of Euravia. Now, if never again, he lived.

CHAPTER XV

A BUNCH OF KEYS

"I THOUGHT, you see, that the family must be quite rich," said Ann in the summer-house. "And then, when I'd finished my education, my uncle told me. He'd gone wrong somehow when he was young until at last he was—well, you know—a crook. The only thing to be said in his favour is that he and his crowd only took rather useless things—like diamonds—away from people who could well afford to lose them. I know that's no argument, really. But still, it helps, doesn't it? I honestly think poor uncle wouldn't do anything really horrible, anything mean or cruel. But when he told me what he did, I must say it was a frightful shock."

"It must have been," said Simon bitterly. "But what I can't understand is—why he let you into the secret? Why couldn't he have kept you out of it?"

"I can tell you that. He explained that. You see, he'd really nobody he could trust. That's one of the awful things about that sort of life. You have to work with other people, but you can't trust any of them."

"That seems a miserable reason for dragging a girl like you into it," said Simon.

"It was, in a way," replied Ann earnestly. "But uncle never meant to go on and on. His idea was to pull off one big *coup*, and then he could retire—"

"Retire!" Simon gave a rather sardonic laugh.

"Now don't be stupid, darling. After all, it's a sort of work—and frightfully hard work too—and you can retire from it. Well, he wanted to make a lot of money and then clear out. So he asked me to help him until he could do that. Of course, I suppose I ought to have been very stern with him, but I liked him and I'd been educated and everything on his money, so I couldn't be. Besides, he's awfully good at persuading you to do anything he wants you to do."

"Yes, I've noticed that," admitted Simon, with a certain ironic reflection that Ann wisely chose to ignore.

"He told me," she continued, "that if he had just one person he could trust, he would be all right. And he knew he could trust me. He had to work with people like Newton and Tolva, but he couldn't trust them. That's why everything's been so complicated this last week. Once we had the jewels—"

"Wait a minute, Ann. What jewels were they?"

She hesitated a moment, then replied in a low voice: "The Hunterton jewels. You must have read about it?"

"My hat! Yes, I did read something about their being stolen. They're rather famous, aren't they? And they'd been put inside that steel casket, I suppose?"

"Yes," she sighed.

He looked at the profile, pale, exquisite and magical in the dim light, of this delicate jewel-thief, and he marvelled—at her, at himself, at the fantastic round world enmeshed in mingled threads of destiny. And then, his mind returning to the inexplicable adventures

of the week, he began to question her. "But I don't understand. Why didn't your uncle keep the casket himself?"

"He believed that one of the Scotland Yard detectives was on his track," Ann replied, with equal eagerness. "And as he had to come down here to see a man from Amsterdam, he left the casket behind with Newton and Tolva. They were both capable of double-crossing him—I'm sorry to sound so criminal, darling, but we always called it that, and there was plenty of it to call—but not together, because they hated one another. He couldn't leave it with me, because he thought this detective had seen uncle and me together. So I went with him. Then Tolva—I learned this afterwards, of course—stole a march on Newton and Roach and got away with the casket, but not for long because they guessed where he'd gone and went after him in a car."

"Of course," cried Simon excitedly. "He saw them at Ledworth Junction, and that's why he passed the casket over to me, and told me that ridiculous story about the Prophet Yann."

"Yes, and they made him go to the London house—the one by the river, you know—and took his clothes away. Newton must have found your name and address in his pocket. And then there was something in the paper about a Doctor Pianella."

"There was," said Simon grimly. "And I had to listen to another long story, all about the poor Lady Ann Quaife. What an ass! I mean *I* was."

"I don't know," said Ann thoughtfully, almost with a professional air. "Newton could be very plausible, sometimes. Well, then things got terribly exciting,

because we returned to the London house unexpectedly and found Tolva, who confessed everything. He remembered your address, so uncle thought I had better try to get the casket back first, by telling a different story, if necessary.

"Hence Euravia and King Sergius and Prince Paul," said Simon, with a sudden idiotic and disturbing vision of himself listening to her in Oliver's sitting-room. "You must have thought me a complete fool."

"No, not altogether. In fact, I thought you were rather sweet. You were so different from people like Newton and Tolva, for instance."

"I should hope so. But the casket had gone then. Why didn't Newton get away with it?"

"Because he was too cocky. He left it in Waterloo Station—you know all about that—but he had no idea we knew he had it, because he didn't know I'd been to see you—so he called at the house, and then uncle drugged him. You heard them talking about that this morning, you know."

"Yes, your uncle—and, if you don't mind my saying so, he's a most ingenious old rascal—had the caskets changed, and put the new check in Newton's pocket. And *we* changed the caskets, Ann. Why did you bring me into it again? Just to use me as a catspaw, I suppose?"

"Simon, you mustn't say that," she protested. "If you had been caught with the casket, nothing serious would have happened to you, you know, being such a respectable person. Besides, if I hadn't sent you that letter, asking you to meet me, we would never have seen one another again."

"That's true," said Simon, brightening. Then he

looked gloomy again. "But I don't suppose you thought of that for a single moment."

"Well, you're wrong. I did. You see, I rather wanted to meet you again. Though why—when you're such a grumpy creature—"

Simon threw all grumpiness to the winds. All explanations were discontinued for the next few minutes, after which Ann, disentangling herself, continued: "But then, after I'd sent you to the Alexandra Palace —and that, I confess, was sheer naughtiness—I'd read that advertisement in the *Times* that morning, and laughed at it—we really had finished, I thought. And suddenly I found you in the house. My dear, I could have died! I thought you'd discovered everything. But uncle told you another story—"

"He did," said Simon. "Trust uncle! Like the rest of you, he told me everything. He was about to tell me everything all over again this afternoon, when he lured me into your beastly lumber room. Well, I can guess the rest. Newton went off with the empty casket, came back with it, went off again with it. Your uncle had me carrying the jewels down here for him—I seem to have been a sort of postman for him—and now he's gone off with them. They've all gone, but us. You're here, and I'm here and—" he stared, then quickly rose—"somebody else is here."

It was Jenny, excited, breathless, bringing sandwiches and a bottle of wine. Plainly Jenny was enjoying herself at last; loyalty had brought its reward. The house was loud with young men in khaki shirts and shorts, and now here was the young mistress sitting in the summer-house with a young man in his

shirt sleeves, a really terribly untidy young man. "And the job I had, miss," cried Jenny, panting, "you'd never believe, with all them big boy scouts or whatever they are roaming about the place. I told 'em when I answered the door you was all gone, but they said they'd have to look round, and one of 'em—just in ordinary clothes he is, but the sauciest of the lot—talked about dirty work at some crossroads. And I said 'Well, go to your crossroads, then, if that's what you want, for you won't find any dirty work here,' I says, 'the very idear!' But I couldn't stop 'em, if they wanted to look, and I didn't try very hard. But when I'd got this ready, I gives 'em the slip all right, khaki shirts or no khaki shirts. And they've all got little Union Jacks sewed on to them, and red stockings—they look proper sketches. And now I'll get back, miss. They'll get as good as they give. But I'd rather have real soldiers—or sailors." For one second, Jenny remained to sigh over the entrancing possibilities of a house filled with sailors; then, with a brisk nod, she hurried away.

"A fine girl, Jenny," said Simon approvingly, as he helped to unpack the basket. "She must stay with us."

"Darling, what *are* you talking about?" cried Ann.

"About us," said Simon, taking a large bite out of a ham sandwich. "When we are married, she must stay with us—as a parlour-maid or whatever she is. I look to you, Ann, to see about that."

"But who said we were going to be married?"

Simon waited a moment until he could get clear of the sandwich, then said: "Nobody has definitely declared we are. No banns yet, of course. But we are

going to be married, aren't we? I thought that was understood."

"But—after what I've told you—"

"Yes, of course." Simon drank some burgundy and found it good. "Only you must promise to lead a new life. There won't be many opportunities at Cambridge, of course, but if uncle turned up—"

"Oh, Simon, don't be funny about it, please, darling. It's not really funny, you know."

His manner changed abruptly. He ignored the food and the wine in front of him, and he took her hands. Then he looked steadily at her until at last her face swam mistily in his sight. "I'm sorry. It must have been beastly for you. But it's done with now. I don't know what exactly you yourself had to do—"

"I'd rather not talk about it, though it wasn't anything very dreadful."

"Quite. And I don't want to know. But I do know I want to marry you. And, because I love you so much, I want to be honest with you. I imagine you've been used to travelling about and staying at luxurious big hotels on the Riviera and all that sort of thing. You may not have liked your life with your uncle, but you must have found it pretty exciting. Now either I shall stay as lecturer and history tutor at Cambridge or take a professorship in one of those God-forsaken universities I mentioned. Either way," Simon continued gloomily, "it isn't much to offer you. We people haven't much money, you know, and you might find it all terribly tame, respectable, dull."

"Really," said Ann in a queer toneless sort of voice. "You mean to say that if I married you, we should be

just tame, respectable, dull, professorish sort of people, living in the same old place for ages and being asked out to dinner in the same old way by the same old people."

"Yes, that's it," he admitted ruefully. "Though it wouldn't be dull for me—not with you there. It would be marvellous. But that's what it would seem like to you, I suppose."

"No more excitement," Ann mused. "All safe and comfortable and respectable."

"Yes," replied Simon dully. It was all up, he concluded, and cursed himself for being so honest.

"Adorable!" cried Ann, slipping a hand underneath his arm and then squeezing that arm quite hard. "Adorable, adorable, adorable! Darling, let's get married—quick!"

Simon could only stare at her in mute bewilderment.

"Oh, don't you see," she continued, "that's just what I want. I'd love to be respectable and be asked to dinner in nice dull old professors' houses. I'd love to talk to their nice dull old wives about Italian scenery or Dutch pictures or babies or whatever they do talk about. I'd adore to be a comfortable safe Mrs. Professor, ordering little joints for dinner and darning your socks. Can't you understand—you absurd creature! —I don't want any more expensive travel and excitement and adventure. I've had enough to last me a lifetime. I loathe and abominate all luxurious hotels and the Golden Arrows and the Blue Trains and Monte Carlo and Cannes. I never want to see another millionaire or duchess or film star or diamond necklace again—never, never, never. I think I could be happy with someone only half as nice as you are, Simon, if

only he did something decent and honest and respectable, and could stay in the same place for a long time, and had real friends that he could trust, and knew as little about stolen jewels and caskets and revolvers and disguises and double-crosses and detectives as you do, darling. You don't know what it would mean to me to be a real person again, and not somebody pretending to be somebody else. And I don't care where the place is, if they make you a professor there and you take me with you—it won't be God-forsaken to me. Mrs. Heath. Mrs. Professor Heath. I adore it, I adore it, I adore it. Now then!"

He had never dreamed of anything so good as this. Here was the girl that the kindly gods, perhaps bearing in mind his sympathetic researches into the decline of the Byzantine Empire, had fashioned for him, and for him alone. Above the neglected food, the forsaken wine, he prepared to clasp her in his arms. He did not succeed, because a voice halted him.

"Not that I wish to intrude," said the voice. And Oliver came in out of the broken moonlight.

"Hullo, Oliver," said Simon, in a disgusted tone. He was not at all curious about Oliver. He did not wonder how Oliver came to be there, to be near the house at all. He had no interest at all, at this moment, in Oliver.

"Not that I wish to intrude, my dear Simon," Oliver continued, "but having found you here, I must say a word. You see, I came here to rescue you, backed by a stout force of Britishers—a stout force of stout fellas."

"Yes, we saw you—and heard you," said Simon shortly. "That's why we came here. I'm sorry.

Ann—this is my cousin, Oliver Bland. Miss Pembury. We're engaged," he added proudly.

"I congratulate you both," said Oliver with enthusiasm, shaking hands with Ann. "Particularly you, Simon. Wonderful work, Simon—quick, deft, lightning stuff. Down here one minute, and engaged—beautifully, ecstatically engaged—the very next minute. This is what comes of concentrating on the Dark Ages. I misjudged you, Cousin Simon. I didn't know you were capable of such things. Oliver, old man," he told himself, though speaking aloud in cheerful tones, "you're getting old indeed. You don't understand. You must take a back seat. The very dons pass you unheeded in the race."

"Don't be an ass, Oliver," said Simon rather irritably. He was in no mood for his cousin's pleasantries.

But Oliver was now staring at Ann. "Forgive me, Miss Pembury, but I've seen you before. Bland never forgets, they say in Fleet Street. I saw you once in the Savoy Grill, with the elderly gentleman I met here this afternoon. Yes, I've been here before—but don't interrupt, Simon. Don't you remember seeing me, Miss Pembury? You don't? Ah!—they never remember. That's my tragedy, Simon—they never remember."

"I'm awfully sorry," Ann smiled, "but I'm afraid I don't. I did go with uncle to the Savoy Grill once or twice."

"Of course you did," Oliver continued enthusiastically. "I stared at you hard, and afterwards I consoled myself by making a paragraph or two out of you and your uncle. I said that you were the beauti-

ful Miss Montelimart—of the old Huguenot family—who of course will be remembered as the owner of the finest collection of old Italian fans in the country. I must dig out that paragraph for you, some time. It had rather a wistful cadence, I fancy. But where—if you don't mind my asking—*is* the elderly gentleman—your uncle, I think you said?"

"He had to leave," Simon replied promptly. "We'll explain afterwards. And now look here, Oliver, you brought those Britisher idiots here—"

"And you can take them away again," said Oliver brightly. "That's what you were going to say, isn't it? All right. I agree—they're dreadfully in the way. Well, two sharp words of command—one!—two!—and the stout fellas will be marching down the road in no time, singing as they go. I'll look after them. But don't think you can get rid of *me* so easily. It's much too early to pull down the curtain yet. I must have all the news. I must pronounce judgment on the situation. By the way, you've not seen a false beard about here have you? If you have, you may depend upon it that Fred is lurking behind it—"

"What?" cried Simon. "Fred here too?"

"Fred is here too. At this very moment he's probably changing wigs somewhere in the neighbouring undergrowth. Eating and drinking, eh?" Oliver continued, helping himself to a sandwich. "You do yourself very well, Simon, I must say. Nothing gets past you. But I'll shoo off the Britishers, and then wait for you in the house."

"Yes, do," said Ann, smiling.

"Give me about ten minutes. But then—you'll hear them go. You can't mistake them. The whiter

the man, the bigger the noise. *Au revoir*, my children, and accept an old man's blessing."

They remained in the summer-house, after Oliver had gone, another quarter of an hour, and as in a dream they heard the Britishers depart. By the time they returned to the house, through the sweet-smelling moonlit garden, everything was quiet again. There was a light in the dining-room, and they made for the open french windows. Oliver was there and at that moment was receiving a drink from the hand of Jenny, who had turned upon him a wide fascinated gaze, just as if she found the nonsense he was rattling off some superb conjuring trick.

Oliver sprang up and saluted them. "You heard the Britishers go? Into the night go one and all. I was sorry to part from Tubby de la Touche double little eff ffoster. Old comrades—ah!—old comrades. I'm afraid I'm making myself at home here in the most outrageous manner, Miss Pembury—"

"Not at all," she told him, smiling. "I like it."

"That's good of you, very good of you. Because I like it too. And then I haven't got a home, you know. Poor Bland will never have a home. No, don't stop me—I'm in that particular mood tonight. It's the moonlight and the scent of the roses and you people getting engaged and everything—ah!—youth, youth! *This carol they began that hour, How that life was but a flower.* But let's all sit down and talk. Tell me the whole story, and if a few tears are seen coursing down the old man's cheek, do not give heed."

"This fellow, Ann, is just two years older than I am," said Simon.

"Ah!—but what years, what years! Some day—

tonight perhaps—I will tell you the story of those two years and then you will understand what your poor cousin conceals behind a grinning mask. But look at this."

A figure was standing in the open window. It stopped, hesitating, then moved forward a pace or two into the room. It was Fred, a tired, dusty, but triumphant Fred, and in his hand was a steel casket. Behind him was a second figure, that of a tall, seedy, sad person.

"It is," cried Oliver, springing up. "It's Fred."

"That's right," said Fred, grinning broadly. "And I've been looking all over the place for you, Mr. Bland."

"I could hardly recognize you, Fred," said Oliver, in high glee. "There's something different about you tonight. I know what it is. You aren't disguised, that's it. Cunning, Fred—devilish cunning. But what's this?"

"Well, if you ask me, Mr. Bland, I'd say that when this casket's opened and the contents revealed, the case is complete."

Simon felt a hand on his arm. It was Ann, and he knew what she was thinking. But what could he do? If he claimed the casket for Ann, then she was saddled with it. If he did not claim it, then in another minute it might be opened and the famous jewels would be there to condemn everybody who had had any previous knowledge of the casket.

"Excuse me," exclaimed a new voice. And then the second figure—lank, cadaverous, sad, and wearing a bowler hat—came forward into the light. "Porson's the name. P for Percy. Have to say that, or people call me Dawson or Mawson."

"Exactly," said Oliver, regarding this new oddity with great satisfaction. "They might even call you Lawson."

"Or Rawson."

"But not, I think, Korson,—K for Katie," said Oliver. "And now, Mr. Porson, on behalf of our hostess, Miss Pembury, who's a bit bewildered—as well she might be—may I ask your business here. Business. B for Bertram."

Made aware of a lady's presence, Mr. Porson removed his hat. He stood waiting, gloomy, and sympathetic, the perfect undertaker.

"He's been with me all night," Fred explained, with the air of a master introducing a pupil. "He saw me get the casket."

"And a very neat piece of work too, Detective Huggins," said Mr. Porson. "It didn't save me any trouble, did it? Oh, no—not at all. I'm not interested in that casket. Or that Italian who was sneaking off with it. Oh, no. Bored stiff. Good evening, sir," he added, looking at Simon. "Remember me?"

"Yes, quite well," said Simon, with no great enthusiasm.

"I don't understand," said Ann. "Where did you meet him, Simon?"

"We met, miss, at the Alexandra Palace, the other afternoon," said Mr. Porson gloomily. "Some people call it Ally Pally. That's what some people are like. We met there, and had a very happy time. Quite a number of us. So cosy."

Ann made no reply. The Alexandra Palace episode was heavy on her conscience.

"Well, if nobody's any objection," said Fred, "I'm

going to open this casket. And first I'll tell you what's in it. Dope. That's what's in it. Dope."

Simon found that his arm was being tightly squeezed by Ann. He moved closer to her.

"And I'll make a little bet with you, Detective Huggins," said Mr. Porson, speaking in a brisker tone than he had used before. "I'll bet you five shillings you can't open that casket, and I'll bet you another five that when it is opened it won't have dope in it. Now then!"

"Mr. Porson," said Oliver, "I know what you are. You're a mystery man—M for Maeterlinck. Fred, be careful. You're getting out of your depth."

"Cards on the table," said Mr. Porson, and actually produced a card and put it on the table. "Anybody who likes can read that. Porson—representing the Hawk Private Inquiry Agency. In this instance, working on the Hunterton case, on behalf of Lady Hunterton. I've been following that Italian round for days. Knew him of old, but he didn't know me."

"What! You're a detective too?" cried Fred, gaping at him.

Mr. Porson shook his head reproachfully. "Not a detective *too*." Just a detective. Call and see me sometime, my boy, and I'll put you wise to a few things. And now, with or without anybody's permission, I propose to open this casket, because I think that in this casket I shall find some if not all of the Hunterton jewels. Anybody any objection?"

Simon could feel Ann trembling at his side. He gave her a quick sidelong glance, and she replied with her tiny shake of the head. Her face was quite pale, and she was biting her lower lip.

Mr. Porson brought out of his pocket a most extraordinary bunch of keys, which he handled with great dexterity. In a minute he had the casket open. Simon put an arm round Ann. Mr. Porson gave an exclamation of triumph. There was certainly something in the casket. Then he looked bewildered. All that he could find in the casket was a small tin and a note. He put a hand on the tin and read the note aloud. "'My dear Tolva,'" he read slowly, "'I'm making you a present of the casket and this tin, because I admire persistence even in double-crossing. Do not throw the tin away. It contains a good brand of spaghetti, which you may one day find very useful. Yours sincerely, Sebastian.' Very rum, this!"

Oliver gave a shout of laughter, and clapped the bewildered Porson on the back. Ann drew a sudden sharp breath of relief, and Simon knew exactly what was passing through her mind. She realized, as he did too, that her uncle must have taken the jewels out of the casket that morning, and then left it as a trap for the Italian.

"All the same, we'll have this tin open," said Mr. Porson hopefully, and, with the same dexterity as before, he contrived to find a tin opener in his astonishing bunch of keys and sent it round the top of the tin in less than no time. But it was all to no purpose. It was a genuine tin of spaghetti.

"Oi!" cried a loud voice. A third figure had entered through the open window. It was P.C. Dumble, and a very worried and angry Dumble too. "Oi! All stand away from that shiny box or be charged with hindering law. Begging your pardon, Miss Pembury,

but 'tis my dooty to charge some un wi' that shiny box, the same having been in my possession."

"Oh, Dumble," cried Ann, "don't you be tiresome too."

"Begging your pardon again, miss, but 'tis my dooty to charge."

"Don't you forget what you did to me last night, Dumble," said Simon, looking very threatening. "I was going to overlook that, but now I'm not so sure."

"Come, come, officer," cried Oliver, patting Dumble on the shoulder. "I don't like this tone of yours. I shall put you in the papers if you're not careful. What's this country coming to, if a few gentlemen interested in the latest developments in spaghetti tinning can't have a little conference without the police interfering? Come, come, come, come. Remember the liberty of the subject. Bear in mind Magna Carta and Habeas Corpus."

"And where's your authority, my lad," said Mr. Porson, in his most sinister tone, "for entering this house uninvited? Show me your warrant."

"I remember three sergeants—good men too—being broke by the very same thing," said Fred menacingly. "You don't know who you're talking to. Charge me, and I have you out of that uniform inside a week. No authority, no warrant, nothing."

If there had been only half this opposition, Dumble would probably have collapsed under it, but now, after all the misadventures and worries and doubts of the day, he was a desperate man, and he faced them like a goaded bull. Indeed, he had just let out a bull's bellow, when Ann stopped him.

"All right, Dumble," she said, ringing the bell, "if

you *will* be so tiresome." Jenny came in. "Jenny, Dumble is bullying us."

"Is he, miss? I'll see to him." A look of utter scorn and contempt for the wretched Dumble appeared on Jenny's pretty pert face. The situation between them was obvious. P.C. Dumble was not only an officer of the law: he was also a young man who could admire and adore. At the very sight of Jenny, his features became creased in a wide, sheepish grin, which, however, very quickly gave place to a look of doglike shame and devotion.

"Joe Dumble," said Jenny. She looked at him and gave a little sniff. She tossed her head with delicate disdain.

"Jenny," said Ann, "take Dumble into the kitchen and if he behaves himself and stops being tiresome, you can give him a glass of beer."

"Yes, miss," said Jenny, and marched out without another glance at the policeman, who followed her at once.

Fred and Mr. Porson looked at one another, like men who are entertaining the same thought. To tell the truth, they had both been instantly impressed by the appearance and behavior of Jenny, and it seemed to them that both she and the beer were wasted on this rural oaf of a policeman.

Mr. Porson cleared his throat, and looked at Ann. "I wonder, miss, if it mightn't be a good idea if we just looked into the kitchen. There's one or two matters that—er—well—"

"But of course," cried Ann. "Do go. And please ask Jenny to give you some beer—if you like beer."

"I believe, miss," said Fred solemnly, "I could do

with a glass." He looked at Mr. Porson. Mr. Porson looked at him. The two human bloodhounds nodded, smiled, and departed.

Ann drew a deep breath and went to the open window, where Simon joined her. Together they looked out into the lilac-coloured starry night. The garden was filled with mysterious shadows, and to Simon it was as if he caught a glimpse there of the fading ghosts of this adventure, the spectral shades of Count Stunski and Colonel Boyd-Corry and the Iron Prophet Yann and Lady Ann Quaife and King Paul of Euravia and Schidimski and that young chemist of genius Theodore Waters.

CHAPTER XVI

LATE ARRIVALS

BUT the surprises of that memorable day were not over yet. While those scenes of revelation were being enacted in the Old Manor House at Berners End, the Spirit of Mischief that walks abroad on midsummer night, and is nowhere more active than in Sussex, was playing havoc with the wits of two holiday-making gentlemen who had set out that morning from an inn at Petersfield with the heroic intention of walking to Arundel. "For here we are," they had said, "alive and kicking on midsummer morning. We have each a haversack, a raincoat, and a pair of stout shoes, and enough money to buy us cheese and beer on the road. How better can we spend the day than by walking across the county of Sussex?" No one challenging this proposal, they began putting it at once into effect. And in the event they were justified of their high hopes. The day, beginning serenely with a gentle shower of rain that fell out of a blue sky, grew lovelier as it grew older; lovelier, and warmer, and more melodious with birds. Yellowhammers flashed in the hedges; a wagon came creaking and rumbling along the lane; here was a haystack and there an ancient barn; and on the slope of a hill, large and significant against the sky, horse and man pursued an age-old task. Here were sights and sounds mellowed by a thousand years

or more of repetition; here was the simple, conservative, rural civilization of England, beautiful without intention, charming to the eye of a wayfarer because it had no care to charm him, being unaware of him as of itself. Here, too, at intervals, were petrol-pumps and hoardings and other unpleasing sights, which may yet, if they survive, prove agreeable to a remote posterity, the petrol-pump being then judged to be as "quaint", as "old-world", as the stocks now piously preserved in many a village high street. Our two pedestrians discussed this possibility, embroidering the theme with such wit and wisdom as had been vouchsafed to them; and presently they fell to arguing whether beauty was an accidental attribute of function, or a trick of association, or the shadow of an Idea in the Platonic heaven; the one contending for its recognition as a purely sensual harmony, the other fiercely affirming a spiritual origin, and each ready, at a moment's notice, to argue from the opposite side. For that is the kind of people they were.

They were youngish men, these two, but dissimiliar in all other physical respects but one. The shorter and darker man was shaped like a top, plump about the middle but tapering off at the lower extremities to so neat a pair of shoes that it was a marvel to see him balanced in them. The other, the taller and fairer, was loose-limbed, long-faced, with large hands and feet, like a ploughboy; in earlier days he had been the despair of the drill sergeant. Both were something less or more than slim: each, in fact, was in the habit of calling the other fat. Being old friends, they made no secret of laughing at each other's appearance, though each could not helping thinking the other's amuse-

ment a little childish and misplaced. "Poor fellow! If only he could see himself!" they each said.

Laughing, talking, arguing, sweating, admiring the country, and working up a splendid appetite for lunch, they trudged eastward, every step carrying them nearer to Ann Pembury, Simon Heath, Oliver Bland, "P for Percy" Porson, and Police Constable Joe Dumble, to whom they were bringing—though they knew it not—a strange and dubious gift. Until after moonrise, as we have seen, these five personages were scattered at various points within a radius of two miles of the Old Manor. But they were converging upon the Old Manor, and the Spirit of Midsummer, which was bringing them together for the unravelment of many tangles, had arranged that our two pedestrians should at last join the company. Of this, however, they themselves were unaware, thinking, in their innocence, that they would spend the night at Arundel and resume their walk next morning with nothing more burdensome to carry than the haversacks on their backs. At noon the dark one, whose nature had been in some degree corrupted by much riding in motor cars, began to grumble a little, saying that his feet were sore, and that walking was an occupation fit only for dogs and horses. "Has it come to this," he cried, "that I, an immortal spirit, nimble-witted, large-minded, and having the gift of tongues, must pad along these dusty roads hour after hour, in the company of a great sulky fellow who takes tens in shoes and is not ashamed of it? Has it come to this?" The other assured him that it had, and some argument might have ensued had not a turn of the road, at this very moment, brought them within fifty yards of an

inviting tavern, whose sign, The Cock and Bull, executed with much spirit, seemed to promise them entertainment after their own heart.

The landlord of this tavern greeted his two guests with a cordiality not always extended to persons who arrive on Shanks's pony, and before many minutes had passed they were seated at his hospitable board with a saddle of mutton in front of them and a tankard of ale apiece. It was the landlord's whim to wait on them in person, but the friends, liking his looks, would have none of this, but insisted that he must sit down with them and share their meal, while the serving-wench—as buxom and rosy a young person as a milkmaid in a fairytale—saw to it that the tankards did not go dry.

"This is old ale," remarked the landlord, "and strong. I trust it may be to your liking."

"I hope," said one of the twain, "that there is no harm in it, landlord?"

"Dangerous it is," returned the landlord, with a wink. "But what is danger to a man of spirit? Moreover, the danger diminishes with every drop taken. Were you to stop at a mere pint now, I could not answer for the consequences. But a second pint will placate the first, and a third will teach good manners to the second. Then you may consolidate the position with a half quartern of old brandy, and you are masters of the world."

"That's talking," said his guests approvingly, as with one voice. "And I am bound to say," remarked one to the other, as he gratefully assimilated his roast mutton, "this is as good bread and cheese as I ever tasted."

"As for my inn sign," went on the landlord, who

seemed to enjoy the sound of his voice no less than did his guests, "I painted it myself, and I am glad it pleases you. It pictures, as you will have noticed, a moment of crisis. And whether the Bull will succeed in impaling or goring the Cock, or the Cock scratch out the eyes of the Bull, remains a matter for agreeable conjecture. Myself, I have no fixed opinion, though I incline to think that the Cock has somewhat the advantage. But there's no telling, for I remember how, when I was a boy . . ."

The two friends enjoyed their landlord's discourse, and he for his part was in no hurry to make an end of it. He had a great fund of memories, and the old-fashioned urbanity with which he narrated even the tallest of his stories was very much to his hearers' taste. They sat talking and drinking with him for a long time: so long a time, indeed, that when they did at last leave his house they had quite forgotten their resolve to reach Arundel before bedtime. What is perhaps more surprising is that having shaken his hand and wished him a good day they stepped out into a world already silvered by moonlight. This astonished even themselves; and they wondered what Nature could be at, to be playing such tricks with them. "For it was certainly not much after two o'clock when we sat down to lunch," they told each other. "And it is not in nature for the darkness to fall and the moon to rise so early as this on a June day." But they lost no time in debating what they should do, being of one mind that they must push on with all reasonable speed. In their exhilaration—for the moonlight and shadow was a high intoxication to them—they quite forgot to ask each other where they were bound for.

And so, led by who knows what midsummer chance, they came at last to the Old Manor at Berners End, arriving there in time to witness—from the safe shadow of a hedge—the triumphal entry of the Britishers.

"There is rich foolery here," said the one.

"There is," agreed the other. "And we must look into it."

But being still a little bemused by moonlight they would not hurry themselves, but remained pondering the mystery, and spinning strange fancies about it each in the quiet of his own mind. Seated on the grass edge of the road, a point of vantage from which, had they arrived a little earlier, they would have had an excellent view of Dr. Pianella hurrying, poor lamb, towards his encounter with Dumble, they were reluctant to bestir themselves. For one thing they were weary, and, for another, it may be that some premonition of hard work in store came to deter them. They watched the Britishers go in; they saw the Britishers come out and march away. Nor did the arrival of Porson and Dumble pass unnoticed. It was, in fact, this last event that spurred them finally to action. "Come on," said one to the other. "We've simply got to know what's going on."

At this moment Simon and Ann were standing by the open window in the dining-room looking out into the night. But Simon was not thinking of what he saw, and he was no longer dreaming of the fantastic adventure that had befallen him. Simon was thinking of Ann; and Ann, by a touching coincidence, was thinking of Simon. Both were savouring the miracle of their being together, and in love. The common thought made them turn to look at each other.

"Ann," called Oliver, from the other side of the room. "I may call you Ann, may I?"

The lovers started. They had almost forgotten Cousin Oliver's existence. "Of course," said Ann, with a little laugh.

"Well, Ann, do tell me. Was it your uncle who wrote that note to our Italian friend?"

"Yes," said Ann faintly. She was still sensitive about the character of that departed relative.

"I thought so," remarked Oliver, in tones of admiration. "Well, he's a great man. We shall not look upon his like again. Where's he gone?"

"I don't know," faltered Ann. "Don't ask me anything now, please."

"Sorry!" said Oliver. "Some other time perhaps. It's pure disinterested curiosity, you know. Well . . . " Oliver hung fire. He was a trifle at a loss, for it was evident that his company was not, at the moment, essential to the happiness of this betrothed couple. But what could he do? Where could he go? Even if he resorted to the kitchen he would find the same thing going on there—Jenny, surrounded by three solemn admiring men. "The fact is," said Oliver, half aloud, "there's too much love in this house. It's no place for me."

"What d'you say?" said Simon from the window. "Don't go, Oliver."

"Yes, I must go and rout Fred out of it," said Oliver, with a touch of real melancholy. "It's time I took him back to the Harvesters."

"Nonsense!" cried Ann. "We've beds here for everybody."

But Oliver, disregarding her protests, sauntered out of the room.

"I'm very fond of Oliver," said Simon pensively, slipping an arm round Ann. "But there are times when I wish him elsewhere."

"How unkind of you!" murmured Ann in mock-reproach, lifting her face to his.

The voice of Oliver, calling from the hall, came again to disturb them. And it seemed that something had happened to revive Oliver's spirits, for the old exultation rang out in his voice:

"More visitors, children! The night's not over yet."

"Oh, who the devil now?" said Simon. "Aren't we to have a minute to ourselves?"

Before he could say more, Oliver came dancing into the room followed by two unknown gentlemen with haversacks.

"They found the front door open," explained Oliver, "and so they came in. I call that friendly, don't you?"

A little shyly, but with no intention of withdrawing, the two strangers introduced each other to the company.

"This," said one of the other, "is my friend Mr. Priestley."

"And this," said the other, "is my friend Mr. Bullett."

They spoke simultaneously. And in the confusion of the moment they shook hands with each other.

Oliver, without the least sign of surprise, gravely completed the introductions: "Miss Ann Pembury, our hostess. Mr. Simon Heath. And myself, Oliver Bland. Dumble and Porson and Fred Huggins, whom you will meet later, are in the kitchen wooing Jenny

the housemaid. And now we're all acquainted, I think."

"You are probably wondering," said Mr. Bullett, "why we have called on you."

"The explanation is simple," added Mr. Priestley. "We are two very inquisitive men. There is a mystery in this house, and we like mysteries so much that we cannot bear to be left out of one. Something is going on here," he added almost sternly, addressing himself to Oliver, "and since it is no business of ours we are resolved to get to the bottom of it."

"And you need not be afraid that we shall keep what you tell us to ourselves," said Mr. Bullett. "We are not like that, Oliver. Truly we're not, Simon. Rest assured, Ann. If you would have us believe that you three people are anything more than figments of our imagination, shadows in the moonlight, you had best tell us the whole story without a moment's delay. The moon appeared with uncommon suddenness tonight, and it would be disconcerting if it vanished as suddenly, taking you three with it."

"Be careful how you decide," said Mr. Priestley. "Not only is your future at stake. Your past, your very existence, is in danger."

With something between a hum and a hiss—and that so subtle a sound that no one could have been quite sure he had not imagined it—the lights went out. It was not the moonlight that had failed, but the moon's competitor. The room was now a place of rich shadows and vague radiance. Everything was suddenly strange and conjectural. The sound of a near voice was startling in its nearness.

"A fuse," said Oliver. "Does it matter, Ann?"

So little did it matter that no one troubled to answer him, and there followed so long a silence that the two literary gentlemen began to feel uneasy, wondering into what strange country of the mind they might have strayed, and whether the faces of Simon and Oliver and Ann, now dissolved in dimness, had been no more than midsummer fancies.

It was Oliver's voice once more that reassured them.

"Well, Simon? What do you say, Ann? Shall we tell these fellows?"

A second voice answered from the shadows. "Where's the harm?—they're only novelists."

"Yes,"—and it was the girl who spoke now—"let's tell them everything."

And they did.