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THREE OWLS EDITION

THE GAY CONSPIRATORS

BY

PHILIP CURTISS

Author of "Crater's Gold,"

"Wanted: A Fool," etc.

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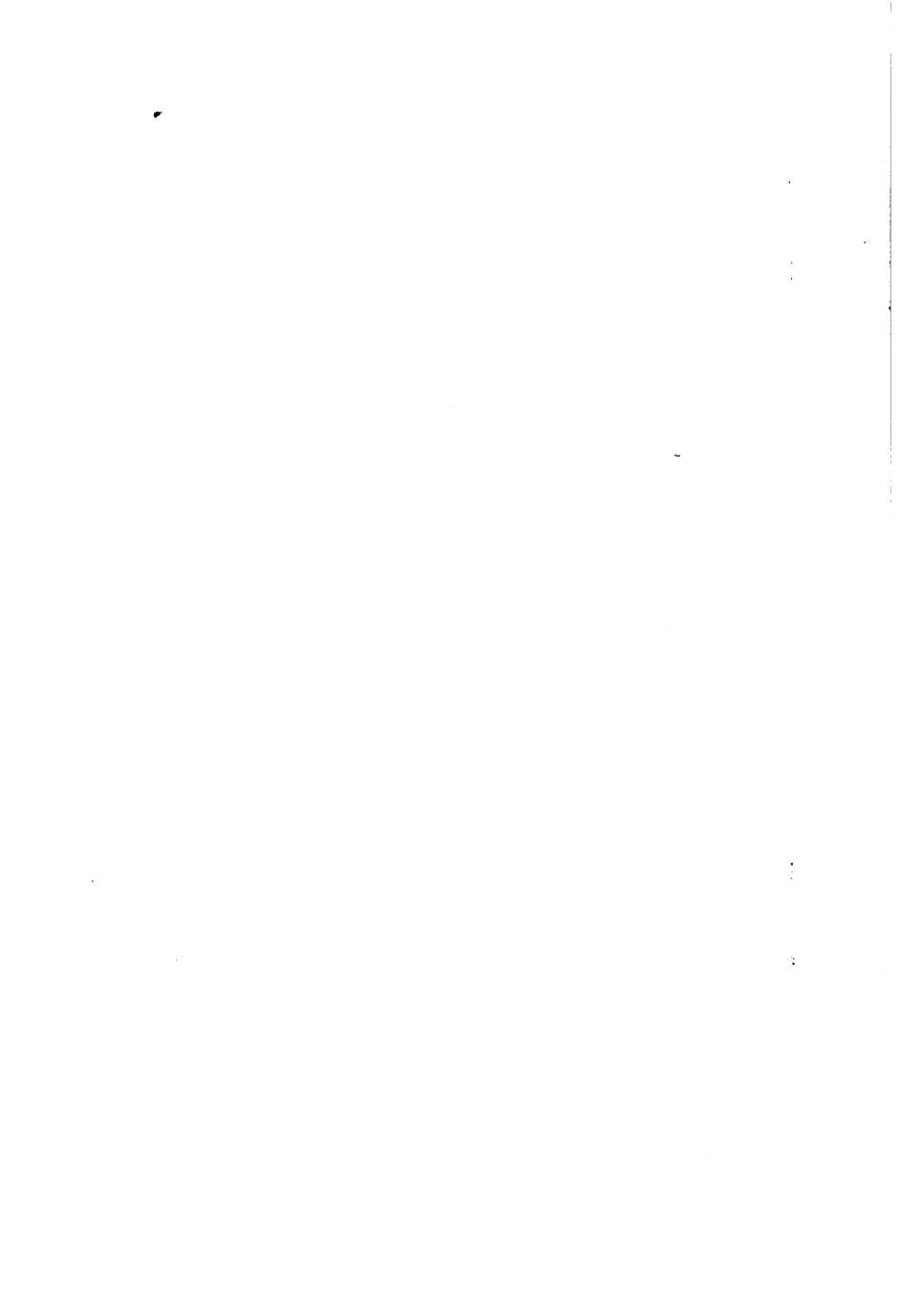
THE GAY CONSPIRATORS

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THE GAY CONSPIRATORS



Chapter I

IT was at quarter of nine in the morning—during the breakfast hour—that the great adventure came to Royal Besant. And the day was one of the softest and sunniest of a beautiful June. Those facts in themselves always struck Royal Besant as among the strangest features in the whole affair, for adventure, romance, and mystery had always been connected in his mind with midnight, with clanking chains and vaulted stone passageways far underground, with whirring limousines flitting ghost-like through gray city streets, with sinister, black-bearded men with masks and revolvers, with shrinking, terrified ladies in disarray, with a fear-some, haunting “something” which spread inky dread through all its surroundings.

Yet here he was, lingering over his second large cup of coffee flecked with thick dairy cream, seated under his own grape arbor above the mildest, most peaceful little harbor on the Massachusetts coast. Among the big, flat leaves of the grape vines over his head a bumblebee, misled perhaps by the fragrance of the sugar bowl, had worked its way into the matted arbor and now was trying to work its way out again. From the big estate which adjoined Besant’s own little place and stretched far out to the headlands, the cheerful click of a lawn mower came fitfully and by jerks as the gardener, apparently, mowed in and out of the

edges of flower beds. From time to time the dull, beady hum of a motor car could be heard on the distant concrete of the state highway, a quarter of a mile away. All around lay the sweet, fresh June scent of grass and flowers from which the dew had not yet entirely vanished while, framed in the archway of the arbor, below the end of the lawn, lay a clear-cut circle of vivid blue harbor, as still as a millpond and as deep as turquoise. Out at the end of the little inlet, just before the rich blue of the bay, joined the thinner gray of the ocean, a local fishing boat was rocking, almost motionless, with blunt, square bows and an incredibly heavy mast. One could never believe that that fishing boat had started from anywhere or was going anywhere. It was just put there to complete the picture. "Picture?" thought Royal Besant to himself. "No, that's not a picture. It's a chromo on a music box or an old-fashioned mirror. No painter would ever dare try to do anything so obvious—and so completely satisfying."

Besant leaned back from his green garden table and lighted his pipe, while overhead the bumblebee poked and blundered in perfect good nature and a little, faint breeze, freshly cool, lifted one or two of the grape leaves. Everything was just as it should be on this magnificent morning, even the pipe, for Besant had just pried open a new can of rare, fragrant "Hermitage," an exquisite English tobacco, received only the night before from a quaint little dealer whom he had discovered up an odd alley in Boston.

Besant drew in three or four of the sweet, dry puffs, stared down for a moment at the deep blue bay, then cautiously looked over his shoulder. Hannigan, his cook, valet, gardener, and man-of-all-work, was nowhere in sight, so Besant, with a shamefaced, apologetic air, decided to allow himself the final sentimentalism to fit such a morning. Rising guiltily, he went into the little cottage and came back with a violin. He tuned it hurriedly, almost by chance, and then sat down to play softly the two or three airs which constituted almost his entire repertoire.

By no stretch of the imagination could it be said that Besant played the violin well. In the evening by the firelight, perhaps, it sounded well enough, but, out here in the glaring light of the morning, the sunshine and the flowers and the bumblebee were doing it so much better than he could ever hope to do it. Laying his violin on the table, he fumbled in the pocket of his tweed golfing coat for another match, then turned with a guilty start, for behind him a voice had suddenly spoken, not without a faint twinge of amusement.

"Good morning, Mr. Besant. I'm sorry to interrupt you."

At the upper end of the arbor, near the kitchen door, a man of perhaps forty-five was standing, the top of his hat almost touching the grape vines overhead. He was a complete stranger to Besant, but was obviously a city man, a New-Yorker, in fact rather a Wall Street type. He came down the arbor and held out his hand.

"I have a letter to you from Mr. Shea," he began; then added, informally, "I wish that you would go on playing. You play awfully well and I shouldn't have broken in, but I have come clear from New York to ask you a very great favor."

Besant rose from the table and took the offered hand with a laugh.

"If you can say that I play the violin well," he replied, "you must want something very badly indeed."

The stranger laughed with him and Besant waved toward the table. "I was just finishing breakfast and I didn't suppose that there was a soul within a million miles. Won't you have a cup of coffee?"

The stranger shook his head. "No, thank you. I had breakfast in the buffet car, coming up." But as he took off his hat and the gentle breeze from the grape vines faintly ruffled his hair, he added with a sudden impulse; "Will you let me take that back? With a view like this and a morning like this, there would be nothing in the world more luxurious than lingering over breakfast until at least noon."

"That's what I thought, myself," answered Besant. He went into the kitchen and came back with a cup and a huge enameled coffee pot. He pushed the cream and sugar within reach of his visitor and then himself accepted the long, fine cigar which the stranger offered. As he took it, Besant noticed that the band was marked "Federal Club." The stranger waited until he had

sweetened and tasted his coffee before he continued with his introduction of himself.

"Mr. Besant," he said, "my name is Cramp—of the law firm of Cramp & Stallard. There are four Cramps and two Stallards in the firm, but take it for granted that I am one of them. Your name, as I say, was suggested to me by Mr. Shea, managing editor of the *New York Record*——"

The visitor paused suddenly, in doubt. "You are Mr. Royal Besant, are you not?"

He pronounced the name with the accent on the last syllable and Besant laughed again.

"My real name," he said, "is *Besant*, plain old Yankee *Besant*, to rhyme with 'peasant,' but people are so determined to make me a Frenchman and call it *Besant* that I have given up the struggle. *Besant* I will be—at your orders."

The stranger smiled. "I wish that I could be sure of that, for Mr. Shea gave me quite another impression." He paused and looked for a moment estimatingly at his host, then reached to an inner pocket. "Perhaps the simplest way would be to show you Mr. Shea's letter. He says some very nice things about you."

Besant unfolded the letter which the visitor handed him. It gave him rather a curious feeling to see again that familiar, slightly dingy stationery of the old *Record* office—a faint tinge of homesickness on the one hand but, at the same time, a little dart of distaste, for it had been to escape the *Record* office and all the things that it represented that he had come to this distant little hermitage

by the sea. Nevertheless, as the stranger had hinted, the letter itself proved to be a most diplomatic beginning.

MR. ARTHUR J. CRAMP,
CRAMP & STALLARD,
NEW YORK CITY.

MY DEAR MR. CRAMP:

I have your confidential letter asking me to name the most skillful police reporter in the United States, but, as usually happens in such cases, the man you want is the very one that you will not be able to get.

As nearly as I can interpret the rather guarded terms of your letter, what you want is a man who combines the sagacity of Sherlock Holmes, the diplomatic genius of the late Joseph Choate, and the personal charm of Douglas Fairbanks. As you yourself will admit, this is a rather tall order and the only person I ever knew in my life who even approached this ideal is a highly exasperating young man named Royal Besant. (The name sounds like a yacht club, but actually he is a person.)

Until six months ago Mr. Besant was a member of the staff of the *Record* and I had got to the point where I did not see how I could bring out the paper without him, when suddenly, without warning, fate struck me a nasty blow. Some misguided relative died and left Mr. Besant a small income—not much, I believe, but enough to free him forever from my personal tyranny. The news came to Mr. Besant himself through the columns of the *Record*. He read it, walked into my office, and resigned then and there. He said that he never wanted to see another policeman, another crook or even the streets of New York again, and, so far as I can find out, he has had his wish, for I have never seen him since. He left town the same day, bought a cottage somewhere on the Massachusetts coast, and, they tell me, has settled down to the tasks of coloring meerschaum pipes, raising poodles, and

writing books on "How to Tell the Wildflowers from the Tame Ones."

At the time, I did not believe that he would stick to it a week, for a man less fitted to seek a haunt in some far wilderness and one more fitted to hunt out crooks in the streets of New York never lived. I expected to see him again almost any bright morning, but I should have known better. Twelve years of intimate association should have taught me that anything that Royal Besant *said* that he would do, he *would* do, and I suppose that, if you must have him, the only thing for you to do is to hunt him up in his lair and find out the same thing about him—one way or the other.

So there you are. That is your man if you can get him; but I warn you that, like most geniuses, Royal Besant is as pig-headed as a setting hen. Even so, I don't name any substitute, for there isn't anyone in his class and the minute you see him you will know what I mean.

In appearance Mr. Besant is very deceptive. At first glance—and at second glance—and at third glance—you would take him for a pleasant-mannered, rather studious young man who was an instructor in English at Princeton or perhaps an expert on old paintings at the Metropolitan Museum. As a matter of fact, if there is anything about the dark and seamy side of life that Royal Besant does not know, I never want to know it myself. It was he who really dug out the facts in the Cassaway case, five years ago, and he gave me a detailed account of just what was going to come to light in the Savage murder six months before the police knew it themselves.

Incidentally, if you have any skeletons in your own private history that you don't want known, my advice to you is to keep away from Royal Besant. He is the nearest thing to a mind-reader that I ever saw—for a man who does not pretend to be one.

Without any question, Mr. Besant is the ideal man for your job, but if you can pry him away from his garden and his pipe, you will be doing more than I have ever

been able to do. Still, if you must try, call me up and I will dig out his present address.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

ROLAND R. SHEA.

It was natural that when Royal Besant looked up from his old chief's letter, he was smiling faintly, but as he pushed the sheets back across the table, a cloud of reluctance began to form over his face.

"Mr. Shea is certainly flattering," he remarked, "but at the same time he manages to make me look like an ass."

The visitor lifted his hand in protest. "On the contrary, he manages to make you look like a very wise man." He nodded toward the glimpse of blue harbor, framed like a church window in the end of the trellis. "Anyone who, at your age, has the sense to choose this instead of the streets of New York and the grime of the police courts is, I think, a very sane man indeed."

"And yet," replied Besant, "you come up here and want me to go back to it."

The visitor looked at him in surprise. "Who said that I wanted you to go back to it?"

"Well, at any rate," suggested Besant, "you didn't come all this way to hear me play the violin."

The attorney laughed with him. "I am not so sure of that."

Chapter II

THE visitor fumbled for a moment with the cigar case which he still held in his hand, then swiftly brought the matter to a diplomatic beginning.

"Am I to understand, Mr. Besant, that you—that your services are not open to an offer of any kind? Was Mr. Shea quite correct on that point?"

"Well, he was and he wasn't," confessed Besant. "Naturally I am curious to know what is coming." As his visitor himself had done, he waved his hand toward the lawn and the harbor. "So far as pure inclination is concerned, I would be content to stay here and smoke the rest of my life, but still I am only thirty-two years old and if you have come to offer me the presidency of the Standard Oil Company, I will be a very attentive listener."

The stranger nodded. "Quite so." But before he could answer any further, Besant himself broke in with a dubious note.

"Is it another newspaper job?" he inquired.

The attorney hastened to reassure him on that point. "Oh no," he said. "In fact, in strict terms, it isn't really a job at all."

He still sat fumbling awkwardly with his cigar case, apparently finding it very difficult to explain his errand tactfully, and Besant again cut in with a hint.

"Since you asked Mr. Shea for a police reporter,"

he began, "it would be natural to guess that you wish me to make some sort of investigations."

Again he spoke with a faint air of distaste that made the attorney more cautious than ever.

"Well, perhaps I should not say exactly 'investigations,'" he replied. "Possibly 'studies' would be the better word."

Royal Besant broke into a laugh. "Mr. Cramp," he exclaimed, "you are certainly master of the sugar-coated pill. Then it *is* investigations that you wish me to undertake?"

The visitor was obliged, in a qualified way, to admit the surmise.

"Have you any objections to that sort of thing?"

The shade of reluctance was growing more clearly pronounced on Royal Besant's rather boyish face. "It is not very pleasant," he answered, "taking money for poking your nose into other people's business. To tell the truth, Mr. Shea either has a very wrong idea of my tastes or else he is determined that I shan't enjoy my first vacation in over ten years. Only a month ago he sent me an offer to go to the Bahamas and Cuba to investigate the sources of bootleg liquor."

"Probably," answered the lawyer, quietly, "he has a better appreciation of your true talents than you have yourself and is determined not to let them go stale. Mr. Shea is not a man who throws around flattering remarks just for the sake of throwing them."

This was perfectly true and no one knew it better

than Royal Besant. "What is this?" he persisted, quietly. "A criminal matter?"

"That's just the point," answered the visitor. "That's just what we don't know and that is exactly what we wish to find out."

The attorney suddenly drew his chair closer to the table. "Mr. Besant," he began, "there is no use making a Chinese puzzle of this thing and I will try to explain it as briefly as I can." He paused a moment and then plunged directly into his subject.

"We are not," he explained, "a firm of criminal lawyers. I imagine that you have already guessed that much. If we *were* accustomed to that sort of thing, it would probably never have been necessary for us to look for your aid. But we never have had any experience in that line and we do not wish to get either ourselves or our clients entangled in that side of the law. That in itself may explain to you why we do not take this matter straight to the police or even to a detective agency. The truth is that we have got to have the services of a private individual—a gentleman, in brief—who is trained in criminal work, but yet has the same tact, the same discretion and—well, the same social viewpoint—that we would expect from the members of our own firm. As Mr. Shea has pointed out and as we knew ourselves, there are not very many such men in the world. Whatever may develop in this little matter of ours, we want to be sure that it will be locked up in the same secrecy in which we would guard it ourselves. Most of all,

we do not wish to send into it a man whose appearance and manners would stamp his profession from the start. In short, since seeing you, Mr. Besant, I am convinced that Mr. Shea was absolutely right, that you are exactly the man for our purpose. If you can see your way clear to helping us out, it is not necessary to say that almost any sum you ask for your services will be paid without question."

From the other side of the table, Royal Besant was watching him with amused impatience. "You are certainly whetting my curiosity," he repeated.

The lawyer laughed curtly. "I hoped that I might." For a moment he sat tapping idly on the green table, still finding it difficult to get his subject under way.

"Mr. Besant," he began once more, "it was a very curious thing that when I came here this morning I found you playing the violin. If I were superstitious, I should regard it as a good omen."

As if with a sudden resolve, the attorney looked up sharply and fired his first shot.

"Would it interest you in this matter if I told you that one of the central figures in this case was Ruiz Serrano?"

As the attorney had expected, his shot had gone home, but Besant was still faintly guarded in his reply.

"Who?" he asked, cautiously.

"Ruiz Serrano," repeated the lawyer, "the famous violinist. Doesn't that quicken your interest?"

"Yes," answered Besant, "it naturally does." But for a moment more he made no further reply. He had apparently forgotten the cigar which the lawyer had given him and began once more to cram the bowl of his pipe with his beloved "Hermitage" while the visitor sat watching him with an attentive but rather complacent air. When, however, Royal Besant did reply, his question proved to be a shot even more startling than the visitor's own.

"Mr. Cramp," he suggested, quietly, "you represent the Crewe family, do you not? You have come here to find out whether Ruiz Serrano is as big a scoundrel as old Damon Crewe believes him to be. Is that about it?"

In his own turn Royal Besant leaned back and puffed at his pipe while at the other side of the table the visitor had turned almost white.

"How in the world did you know that?" he demanded.

Besant gently blew the fresh, hot sparks from the top of his pipe. "Mr. Cramp," he said, apologetically, "I am afraid that I have been very rude and childishly melodramatic, but the temptation to make that guess was too great to be resisted."

The attorney looked down at the grass-grown flagstones which paved the arbor. "Unfortunately," he replied, "your guess is absolutely true, but you still haven't told me how you made it."

"It was very childish," repeated Besant, but before he could say any more the lawyer himself

gave a warning jerk of his head and both men settled into an attitude of studied indifference. For another shadow had fallen across the end of the arbor and a step was approaching over the flagstones.

"Yes, Mr. Besant," drawled the visitor, a little self-consciously, "as I was saying, I don't believe there's a finer view on all the Massachusetts coast than that little bit right there at the end of your garden."

Chapter III

THE figure which had caused this interruption and was now approaching slowly down the arbor would have been a comic one under any circumstances, but under the present circumstances was almost beyond belief. It was the figure of a raffish young man of about twenty-five with the grinning, wizened face of a street arab, but the body of Udo, the Caucasian giant, in his extreme and most callow youth.

This amazing person was not less than six feet, six inches in height, but incredibly thin. On his wild shock of dark-red curly hair he was wearing a white cook's cap like a mushroom, a cap so small and so exaggerated in shape that it could not have had its origin anywhere except at Weber & Fields's or in the movies. Around the front of his body was tied a white butcher's apron which would have fully covered an ordinary man, but on this lank beanpole merely occupied a section of the torrid zone, leaving above it a long vista of rumpled, purple shirt without a collar, but with a very aggressive brass stud at the neckband. Below the apron, which merely fell low enough on its wearer's legs to give the effect of a scant, Zulu waistband, showed a long pair of very tight, badly worn trousers, like stovepipes, turned up at the bottom to display broken tan sport shoes, fastened with straps, and wrinkled, ox-blood

cotton socks, worn obviously with no help from garters.

As to the face, Cramp, the lawyer, was conscious at first only of a very long, broken nose and a wizened, good-natured grin, but a moment later, as he recovered his breath, so to speak, he noticed the most remarkable pair of ears that he had ever seen in his life. Had Arthur Cramp been less of a family lawyer and more of a sportsman, he would have recognized them at once as "cauliflower ears," the result of being pounded for years in the prize ring or being scrubbed lustily over the unfriendly canvas of a wrestling mat. As frequently happens in abnormally tall persons, the small, quaintly humorous face of this telescopic young man had apparently no connection with the rest of his body, but merely gave the effect of some diminutive jockey riding high on a borrowed mount. To cut short an introduction which Cramp himself was to make at very slow intervals, this newcomer was Tim Hannigan, originally known as "Tim, the Newsboy," later as "The Human Scissors," and at present as Royal Besant's cook, gardener, and valet.

Accustomed as he was to his henchman's habits, even Besant himself had to smile at his present appearance.

"Well, Tim," he asked, "where in the world have you been? They've called me up from the village and said that the car is ready whenever you want to go down and get it."

The valet came forward and leaned his reversed palms familiarly on the edge of the table, in the manner of a sociable waiter at a very cheap restaurant. His attitude brought into the foreground a long pair of thin, freckled forearms, composed, apparently, of nothing but bone.

"I've been over raising hell with that Polish gardener next door," he replied with an air of righteous indignation. "It's that blamed peacock of Mr. Sanford's. I comes down this morning and finds him out in our lettuce again, chewing away at the roots and dragging that broom of a tail all over the seed beds. I chased him back over where he belongs and then I looked up the gardener and told him that if we found that bird in our lettuce again, you or I would come over and wring his damn neck."

Besant laughed. "Well, Tim, you know we're only newcomers here. It's up to us to keep on good terms with the neighbors."

"Just the same," retorted Tim, "I ain't going to have that bird digging up all the seeds just as soon as I get them planted. Say, Mr. Besant, I met a man down in the village who says that a peacock is afraid of a ferret. Is he lying, I don't know. But I'm going to get one and leave it over there in a box by the wall and see what will happen. If they're going to keep a peacock, they can't object if we keep a ferret."

Abruptly Tim broke off from his air of hot indignation and nodded sociably down toward the table.

"You through with them dishes yet?" he demanded.

"Yes, Tim," answered Besant. "You can take them all and when you get them cleaned up you can go down to the village and bring up the car. Unless," he added, as a sudden afterthought, "unless Mr. Cramp will have another cup of coffee?"

Tim, who had already seized the big coffee pot in his hand, held it as a good-natured threat over the visitor's head, but the lawyer refused with a smile.

"No, thank you," he said. "It's a great temptation, but I've already had one more cup than the doctor allows me."

As Tim began to sweep up the dishes from the table and then to rattle them noisily in the little kitchen, half a dozen paces away, Besant soon saw that the shaded arbor was no longer the place for a confidential conversation.

"What do you say," he suggested, "to going down to the end of the lawn and having a look at the ocean?"

"Excellent," answered his guest, and, lighting a fresh cigar, he rose to his feet, prepared to follow.

Chapter IV

AT the end of the lawn the land dropped abruptly for six or eight feet to a short width of pebbled and rocky beach over which the waves of the inlet were rising and receding in a gentle and modified swell which had not been visible from the arbor. Out toward the neck of the bay the fishing boat was still rocking idly in the same position, one or two figures now being clearly discernible, sitting motionless under the shadow of the useless mainsail. On the far horizon a coastwise steamer was progressing slowly northward, leaving an ever-increasing pennant of trailing black smoke.

In the clear, baking sunlight, Royal Besant stretched himself luxuriously on the hot turf, while the attorney, seeming less at ease in his city clothes, sat upright and hugged his knees up before him.

"I am sorry for the interruption," began Besant. "You were just at the point of telling me something."

"On the contrary," laughed the attorney, "you were just at the point of telling *me* something that I am still very anxious to learn. How, for instance, did you know that I represented the Crewe family? And how did you know just what I had come up here for?"

"The first of those questions," said Besant, "is

really very easy. If you will pardon my saying so, you are just the kind of attorney who *would* represent the Crewe family. If a firm with four Cramps and two Stallards were in this case at all, it would be in the interest of someone like Damon Crewe."

"I know," answered the lawyer, "but I didn't mention the Crewe family at all, not even to Mr. Shea. What made you think of them?"

"That I am afraid," said Besant, "is merely town gossip. You mentioned the name of Ruiz Serrano, the violinist. You surely must know that it has been all over New York for a year or more that the daughter of Damon Crewe has been very devoted to Ruiz Serrano—or else that he has been devoted to her—or both. It is also common gossip that the young lady's family is furious about it. So, when you mentioned the violinist, Ruiz Serrano, and intimated that one of your clients wished to make some investigations, my mind naturally jumped to the Crewe family. I knew at the very least that you had never come here in the interests of Ruiz Serrano."

As he spoke, the attorney was nodding slowly and with a marked reluctance. "Yes," he confessed, "I am afraid that that is about the size of it. But *is* all New York really talking about it? That is just what we have all been afraid of. Is it really as bad as that?"

Royal Besant turned toward him with good-natured impatience. "My dear Mr. Cramp, you surely must know that, so far as gossip is con-

cerned, New York is the greatest village in the world—provided, that is, that the persons concerned are interesting enough, or important.”

He made a sudden gesture with the stem of his pipe. “Of course I don’t mean to say that people are talking about it in the public parks or the subways, but certainly all of Miss Crewe’s own friends must know about it and a thing of that kind very quickly becomes known in the newspaper offices.”

As Besant had talked, the attorney had been nodding impatiently, and as soon as his host had ended he broke in abruptly:

“Well, there’s the case in a nutshell, Mr. Besant. You are perfectly correct in your supposition. I *am* representing the Crewe family in this affair. They are naturally frantic about the whole business and are determined to put an end to it as speedily as possible.”

“Why?” asked Royal Besant, very calmly.

The lawyer turned toward him, aghast. “Why?” he echoed. “Isn’t that obvious on the face of it? If there are very clear signs that a girl like Cynthia Crewe is about to be hypnotized into a marriage with a common adventurer like Ruiz Serrano——”

Besant interrupted him with his same maddening quietness. “*Is* Ruiz Serrano a common adventurer?”

“Well, isn’t he?” replied Cramp. “At least he is, from the Crewes’ point of view. Doesn’t any young man of unknown antecedents who is trying to marry a girl who is heir to fifteen or twenty

million put himself at once under suspicion of being an adventurer? You said yourself that he was a scoundrel."

"I beg your pardon. I didn't say anything of the sort," answered Besant, still in that easy, good-natured calmness, and for the first time the attorney began to see what Shea had meant when he had spoken of him as an exasperating and pig-headed young man. "What I said was that Damon Crewe thought him a scoundrel. Under the circumstances, I presume that he does. As you say, it is wholly natural, but still that doesn't make him one."

Puffing gently at his pipe, Royal Besant stared thoughtfully at the thick, rank grass which, in the glaring sunlight, took on a faint grayish color. "Please understand," he continued, "that on general principles I realize that you may be entirely correct. Ruiz Serrano is possibly all that you think he is—and worse. But isn't it rather an unfair thing to impute the lowest motives to a young musician simply because he wants to marry a girl with a great deal of money? There is always the chance, you know, that he may be very deeply in love with her."

"Have you ever seen him?" asked the lawyer, curtly.

"No," answered Besant.

"If you had," replied Cramp, in a rapid, unconsidered way, "you would probably feel very differently. Ruiz Serrano is one of these tea-haunting, hand-kissing Spaniards, one of the sleek,

hopping kind who manages to get invitations to things on the strength of his foreign airs and his music. He is the kind of man——”

The attorney paused, at loss for a word sufficiently contemptuous, but already Besant had caught a waning, uncertain note in his description. Quietly he put in a question of his own.

“Frankly, Mr. Cramp, have you ever seen him yourself?”

The lawyer flushed to a deep brick color. “No,” he admitted, gruffly; “to be honest, I haven’t, but naturally my information comes from the most intimate sources.”

Besant smiled slightly, but for a moment he said nothing. “At least,” he offered, after a pause, “Ruiz Serrano is supposed to be a very great artist.”

“Some people say that he is,” answered Cramp, “and some say that he isn’t. There are certain people in New York who are unkind enough to say that he is a downright faker. The main thing is that no one knows anything about him and no one can find out. He has played his cards very shrewdly in that way. He flashed into sudden fame two or three years ago at a concert down at some little slum theater or in Greenwich Village or some place of that kind. After that he went up like a meteor on the strength of all this futuristic, new-art sort of business.”

“Is that true?” asked Besant, in surprise. “I have never heard him, but I had had the impression that his music was almost severely classical.”

Again the lawyer flushed uncomfortably, for again he had been caught off his guard. "Of course," he confessed, "I was only giving my general impression. Personally, I don't pretend to know anything about music. I am merely concerned with the man."

Cramp suddenly abandoned his rather ungracious attitude and turned to Besant in a kindlier way. "But, good Heavens! Mr. Besant," he suggested, "there is no use our getting into an argument over a minor point. Can't we drop that phase of the matter for the time being? I have certainly told you enough about the whole thing to show you why we don't wish to take any more persons into our confidence. At least won't you let me give you some further idea of just what I had in mind?"

But Royal Besant had thrown himself again at full length on the grass and was thoughtfully staring out at the fishing boat in the harbor which now had caught a faint breeze and was slowly edging its way toward the opposite shore.

"Mr. Cramp," he began, "I don't want to seem rude and I don't want to seem what Mr. Shea calls me—obstinate and pig-headed—but the plain truth is that, the more I hear of this business the less I like it. To put it bluntly, what you want me to do is to step in and interfere in a purely family matter. You want me to stop a marriage between an impetuous young lady and some one whom she is apparently very fond of. Isn't that her own family's business, not mine?"

"But yet you must see," answered Cramp, diplomatically, "that this is very far from being an ordinary case. All the members of the Crewe family are practically persons in public life. Precautions that would be merely ridiculous in most cases are very necessary for the family of—well, some one like the Governor of the state, or a famous banker, or the inheritor of a great fortune, or in fact any man in the position of Damon Crewe."

"But for that very reason," suggested Besant, "they ought to have facilities at their command for guarding themselves to their own satisfaction."

The attorney looked toward him humorously. "May I suggest, Mr. Besant, that that is exactly what we are attempting to do?"

Even Besant was forced to grin in reply. "And you wish me to enlist in the Crewe family's private police force?" he suggested. "I am sorry, Mr. Cramp, if my sense of Yankee humor makes me see the funny side of all this, but, honestly now, isn't it rather a humiliating thing to suggest to a simple, hard-working reporter that he give up his well-earned leisure and take on a job as watchdog to an infatuated and headstrong young lady? She, for one, would never thank me for it and I doubt whether any one else would."

The humor of the idea seemed to carry him along. "Understand, please, Mr. Cramp, that I have all sympathy for Miss Crewe's family, but, frankly, if they are really determined that she shall not marry this Ruiz Serrano, why don't they

just forbid her to do it—lock her in her room, take her to Europe, do any one of the things that, as you say, an ordinary family would do?”

At his side, the attorney was chuckling quietly. “If you say that, Mr. Besant, it shows that you never had a daughter and it shows especially that you don’t know Miss Cynthia Crewe. If you were as experienced in daughters as you are in other lines, you would know at once that the very way to force a high-spirited young lady into the arms of an undesirable lover is to forbid her to see him. Besides, what *can* be done? Miss Crewe is of age. She is completely her own mistress. Furthermore, she is entirely capable of defying her family any moment they decide to cross her. We don’t live in an age of convents and duennas. If Miss Cynthia Crewe should take it into her head to put on her hat and walk out of the house, she’d do it in a minute. There is no way to stop her. In that respect the Crewes are on a par with any other family.”

In spite of himself, this spirited picture had done more to enlist Royal Besant’s sympathy than anything else that the lawyer had said.

“And so,” he suggested, “Miss Crewe’s parents have not taken any steps to interfere in this affair?”

The attorney shook his head. “Not directly. In that regard they have acted very wisely. Of course Miss Crewe knows that they disapprove of it—disapprove very deeply, but, so far as I know, there has never been any open break about it.

On the contrary, this Ruiz Serrano has been at perfect liberty to go and come as he pleases. In a formal way he is sufficiently well known as an artist to make that completely plausible. In fact, if I am not mistaken, he is up there now."

"Up where?" demanded Besant, suddenly.

"At Mr. Crewe's country place—up at Legget's Harbor."

The visitor paused, as if debating the wisdom of firing his second big shot, then suddenly decided to fire it. "And that," he added, "is exactly where we wish you to go—in case you decide to help us."

"To Legget's Harbor?" asked Besant, looking up in surprise.

The attorney nodded. "We wish to send you up there—ostensibly as an innocent guest—to one of Mrs. Crewe's house parties."

Royal Besant laughed outright. "How perfectly ridiculous!" he exclaimed. "It's like a French farce!"

The smile, however, with which the attorney answered him was merely perfunctory. "Unfortunately," he said, "it isn't like a French farce at all. It is apt to be very grimly serious. At the very least Miss Cynthia Crewe is likely to come home again, in three or four months, a saddened and disillusioned young lady. The truth is that I haven't yet told you the whole of the story."

With what Besant already recognized as a nervous mannerism of his, the visitor slowly drew out his cigar case and began to tap his hand with the edge of it.

"Mr. Besant," he said, very sincerely, "I must confess that I understand absolutely just how you feel about going into all this. It may be that I have introduced my offer in the clumsiest possible way, but I wonder whether this suggestion will not make you look at it differently:

"Suppose," he continued, "that I use for a moment a very well-worn comparison. Suppose that *you* had a sister, or a daughter, or any carefully brought-up, impulsive, innocent young girl in your family. And suppose that this girl should become infatuated with some unknown young man in any Bohemian profession—an actor, let us say, or a horseman, or possibly a professional aviator. And suppose——"

Already, however, Besant had seen the drift of his argument.

"But hasn't Miss Crewe any brothers," he asked, "or uncles, or cousins, or anyone in her own family who could properly do this thing for her?"

"She has not," answered Cramp. "That is just the point to which I was coming." He paused a moment, then asked, suddenly, "Have you ever seen Mr. Damon Crewe himself?"

"Never," said Besant. "I know him merely by reputation."

The lawyer nodded and continued. "Mr. Damon Crewe is not as young a man as he once was. Officially he is still at the head of all his big financial interests, but actually even his personal affairs are now managed by other persons—my own firm among them. We would not care to

have it generally reported, but Mr. Crewe has had one slight paralytic stroke and at any time may have another. His mind, while not actually failing, is nevertheless becoming exceedingly—imperious. Over certain trifles he has tended to become inordinately preoccupied. On the other hand, of certain more important things he seems to remain completely oblivious.”

“This particular affair among others?” suggested Besant.

“No, as to this unhappy entanglement he seems thoroughly awakened,” answered the attorney, “but at the same time no one can ever tell when he will fly off the handle and do some eccentric thing that will send the whole affair off like a powder mill.”

“What position does Mrs. Crewe take?” asked Besant.

The attorney smiled faintly. “Mrs. Crewe,” he replied, “is a very extraordinary woman. I think that I can sum it up by saying that Mrs. Crewe is not a perfect balance wheel for the family.

“In brief,” resumed Cramp, “all of us who are interested in the Crewe family feel that it is very necessary at this particular time that there should be some young, active man up there in the household, as a safeguard, some one of good judgment, tact, and shrewd knowledge of the world, to do all the things that a brother or son would do—in short, all the things that Mr. Crewe himself would have done five years ago. The position would be entirely on a self-respecting basis. To all intents

and purposes this young man would be a confidential representative of our own firm—of the Crewe estate, for that matter. Although I know that in your case the matter of money does not enter into the question; yet, merely to show you how highly we consider the responsibilities of the situation, I will say, right now, that we would offer you a thousand dollars a month and all expenses—for an indefinite period.”

“That is a great deal of money,” said Royal Besant. but, as the lawyer had intimated, that was not at all the point that he was considering.

“Mr. Cramp,” he continued, thoughtfully, “you are putting me into a very difficult position. Of course I understand that you are paying me a very genuine compliment. I appreciate that it is not everyone whom you would be willing to send up to Legget’s Harbor to enter into the intimate life of the Crewe family.”

“Distinctly not!” interjected the lawyer.

“At the same time,” pursued Besant, “I can’t seem to get away from my first repugnance to the whole idea. You are very courteous about it and I know that Mr. and Mrs. Crewe would be the same, but in cold fact I would *not* be there as a member of the family. I would not even be there in your own position of confidential attorney. I would simply be there as a paid informer.”

To his surprise, the attorney did not take the offense at the word that he had expected.

“Mr. Besant,” replied Cramp, “I really wonder whether you are not merely arguing against your-

self—whether you are not making a fetich of a word, a Quixotic point, a preconceived idea which has become fixed in your mind.”

“But just what would you want me to do,” asked Besant, “if I should go up there?”

“I will not attempt to gloss it over,” answered the lawyer. “You have already guessed. Your principal duty would be, of course, to keep an eye on this Ruiz Serrano, form your own opinion of him, find out as much of his history as you can. But if, also, while you are there, the opportunity should present itself to keep Miss Cynthia Crewe from taking some sudden step which she would be sure to regret in the future, that also would be part of your duty. If such a chance should present itself and you should find it possible to prevent such a misfortune, you could be very sure that you would earn the sincere gratitude of the entire Crewe family.”

But Royal Besant was looking at him in an oddly fixed manner. “Mr. Cramp,” he demanded, “are you sure that that is actually what you want me to do?”

The lawyer turned in surprise. “Why not?”

Besant himself began to fumble with the stem of his pipe. “Is it not the plain truth,” he replied, slowly, “that what you really want me to do is go up there and load the dice?”

At that term the lawyer did stiffen into an air that was slightly offended. “I don’t think I understand you.”

But Royal Besant was not to be deterred. “Is it

not true," he insisted, "that my real duty would be to go up there and put this Ruiz Serrano out of the running?"

"Mr. Besant!" exclaimed the lawyer sharply. "I don't think you realize what you are saying."

Almost instantly Cramp seemed to repent of his angry outburst, but nevertheless he retained for some moments the offended reserve of the confidential family attorney.

"What we want," he insisted, stiffly, "is the truth—and the whole truth. After that, I suppose that Mr. Crewe himself can take whatever steps he thinks advisable."

For his own part, Royal Besant had made no apology for his question and, further, gave no signs of making any.

"Frankly, Mr. Cramp," he asked, "have you any real reasons for distrusting Ruiz Serrano, except that you all dislike him and don't think him a proper husband for Miss Cynthia Crewe?"

The lawyer nodded. "Unfortunately we have—certain very grave reasons, but their nature is such that I do not think that it would be wise to tell them to you unless you were definitely enlisted in the case. They are facts that we certainly would not wish to disclose to an outsider."

"I can understand that," agreed Besant, "and naturally I do not wish to ask them."

And with that, again, the whole matter seemed to come to a deadlock. Both men relapsed into a silence which threatened to become interminable until suddenly the lawyer turned, as if with a new

inspiration. His manner of injured dignity was now entirely gone.

"Mr. Besant," he suggested, "I see that it is hopeless to offer you pay for this mission. Will you undertake it for nothing?"

Besant looked up, surprised. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say," answered Cramp. "I see exactly how you feel about this affair and I have to confess that I sympathize with you entirely. In fact, your attitude in itself makes me more than ever convinced that you are exactly the kind of man that we are after. I cannot appeal to your interests, but can I not appeal to your chivalry? You know the facts. Here is a young lady of your own sort who is likely to find herself in a very ominous situation. There is no one in her own family who can properly step in and guard her safety. Representing her friends, I feel that you are the proper man and ask you to do it, just as I might ask her cousin or one of her closer relations. Not a cent will ever be offered you. You can be your own free agent, form your own conclusions, and drop the whole affair any minute you wish. You will simply be acting as any decent man of the world and honest friend of the Crewe family would act in similar circumstances."

The attorney paused while Besant looked again, rather unhappily, at the rank, thick grass at his feet.

"Mr. Cramp," he said, "you really do make me ashamed of myself. The way you put it seems to

make it almost caddish when I try to get out of it." He looked up quickly. "Have you got to know this minute?"

The lawyer hesitated. "Time is valuable in this affair," he replied. "The sooner you could get up there the better. But still——"

"I tell you what we will do," continued the lawyer, eagerly; but, before he could finish, a most outlandish screech broke out behind them, followed by a loud clamor of angry voices.

Chapter V

BOTH men leaped to their feet and turned just in time to witness a most astounding spectacle.

Across the lawn, in huge, angular leaps, came bounding Tim Hannigan, his tiny cook's cap still on one side of his head, the ends of his apron flying out behind him. Ten yards ahead of him scuttled a horrified peacock, half flying, half running, his badly demoralized plumage trailing in masses behind him. Thirty yards ahead of the peacock, but on the other side of the wall, the Polish gardener of the Sanford estate could be seen sprinting for the shelter of the tool house, throwing away his hoe as he ran, like a terrified soldier throwing away his gun in the face of an overwhelming enemy.

As soon as he could recover from his laughter, Besant added his own voice to the general din.

"Tim! Come back here!" he ordered. "Tim! Scissors! Leave that bird alone!"

Tim Hannigan, however, refused to answer to any of his names. He paid no attention until he had reached the wall, to which the peacock had beaten him by the length of its tail. There Tim stopped and contented himself by throwing clods of plowed turf at the retreating creature. At last he gave up the fight and went back to the kitchen, wiping his face on his purple sleeve and muttering

streams of unrepeatable language. Besant turned to his companion.

"Unless I look out," he suggested, "I am going to have a serious affair right here on my own hands, without looking any farther for trouble."

Cramp nodded his head toward the big stone house which stood sheltered in the midst of its trees in the center of the neighboring estate. "Are they friends of yours?" he asked. "Your neighbors?"

"No," laughed Besant, "and at this rate they never will be. The place belongs to J. N. Sanford, a New York broker. The house has been closed all winter. I don't know whether they are going to open it this summer or not."

"J. N. Sanford?" repeated Cramp. "I know him well. He ought to be a good neighbor."

He turned abruptly to his host and by his manner showed that he had at least one trait of a successful lawyer. He knew the wisdom of ending an interview at a favorable moment. He held out his hand. "Well, Mr. Besant, please think over what I have suggested. I am on my way now up to Mr. Crewe's place at Legget's Harbor, but I won't say anything about our talk until your own mind is made up. I am coming back to-morrow."

With scarcely another word he had shaken hands and the motor car in which he had arrived was grinding away from the front of the house and turning out of the little driveway.

Chapter VI

WITH a slow realization of just how canny the lawyer had actually been, Royal Besant turned back to a seat on a little stone terrace at the west side of his house, as Tim Hannigan, for the moment, had made the grape arbor untenable.

If Cramp had only remained a minute more, Besant knew that he would have refused, point blank, to undertake this grotesque mission. Now, however, with the attorney already gone, he began to feel himself curiously committed to the adventure; but his reluctance, which only increased as the day wore on, was not so much due, now, to his original sense of distaste as to a sense of absurdity—to that and a woeful dislike of the idea of leaving the comfort and solitude of his own beloved little cottage.

After lunch he found himself gravitating back to the terrace again. He lowered the awnings against the hot, slanting rays of the afternoon sun and, taking a book, attempted to regain his attitude of care-free indolence, but, as he already knew in his own heart, the visitor had injected in him the venom of unrest. He read scarcely a page in the book—and that only by the sternest effort. Constantly he found himself merely dreaming over the lines, his real attention far away on the curious situation which the attorney had presented to him.

What did Miss Cynthia Crewe look like? he wondered. What sort of man really was this famous—or infamous—Ruiz Serrano? What were the facts about him that the attorney was keeping back? What would the daily routine of life be like in the big country house of the millionaire banker, Damon Crewe? How would he himself be treated and what might he be called on to do if he should actually accept the attorney's invitation and—entirely gratuitously—attempt to mix his own hand in this odd situation?

It must have been about four o'clock when, in the midst of his reveries, he heard his own name spoken and, looking up, saw a smiling young woman in sport clothes standing at the edge of the awning. She had evidently been watching his abstraction for some time, with keen amusement.

Deeply embarrassed, Besant leaped to his feet and the girl hastened to explain herself.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Besant. I am Dorothy Sanford, your neighbor. I have come to see whether there is any way to keep your gardener from murdering mine. It would really be quite distressing to open the summer with blood on our hands."

Besant laughed. "I am awfully sorry about that, Miss Sanford. I have tried very hard to keep my wild man in leash. Tim has really the kindest heart in the world, but he is a man of sudden impulses."

"Yes," admitted Miss Sanford, "but he's got our prize Polack quaking with terror." She imitated

the frightened gardener with surprising vividness. "He keel me, Miss Sanfor'. He keel me. He like a dam' Turk!"

Besant laughed again.

"The principal issue," he suggested, "seems to lie in a certain peacock."

"I know," answered the girl. "That absurd Randolph. That's the peacock's name. He's a ghastly nuisance. He isn't even a very good peacock—as such. Personally, I think he's part bird-of-paradise or guinea hen or something like that. But father insists on having him around. They used to have one on some big estate that father used to admire when he was a farmer boy, peddling potatoes, so father thinks that a country place isn't complete without a peacock. It's been the dream of his life and, bless his heart, let him have one if he wants to."

"By all means!" agreed Besant. "I know just how he feels. When you hunger and thirst for a peacock there's absolutely nothing that will take its place. I've already done everything I could to make my Tim steel himself against sudden anger. I'll talk to him again—very sternly—make threats and so on. Perhaps I might put a collar around Tim's neck and tie him to a crowbar driven in the lawn, the way they do cows."

A shade of apprehension crossed the girl's face, "But you won't discharge him, will you, or anything like that? I don't think he really meant any harm and I'd hate to have a fuss start on my complaint."

Besant laughed. "Good gracious, no! I wouldn't fire Tim for the world and I don't think he'd leave, even if I did. I couldn't exist without him. Tim's like your father's peacock. As a valet he's rather a mongrel, but to me he's priceless. He has a strong sentimental value."

Besant turned a large wicker chair to face the lawn. "Won't you sit down awhile? Can't I offer you some tea?"

The girl shook her head. "No, thank you. This isn't really a formal neighborhood call. We can't do that until we get the trunks unpacked and clean our white gloves with gasoline. We just arrived this morning."

She turned to go, but Besant sprang quickly to her side.

"Anyway," he suggested, "I can give you safe conduct through the enemy's lines."

Together they walked, with no great haste, over the modest stretch of lawn which lay between the house and the wall. The girl turned casually back toward the cottage.

"You know," she said, "it's awfully good to have the cottage occupied again. It was horrible to see it all boarded up, as it was for three years. I am a sociable soul. I like neighbors. I like to see the lights shining through the trees. I hope that you are going to be here all summer."

"Indeed I am!" answered Besant, but before the words were even finished he realized that they were probably not true and, with this new development, the realization was more vexatious than

ever. "That is to say," he amended, "I did expect to be here. I may possibly have to be away for a week or two, but not far, merely up at Legget's Harbor."

"Legget's Harbor!" echoed the girl. "Why, I have just come from there! I was visiting the Crewes. Do you know the Crewes? If you are going to Legget's Harbor, you must. There is no one else there."

For an instant Besant debated mentally, but he had always found that one gained more than one lost from complete frankness. "Oddly," he said, "that is just where I do expect to go—if I go at all."

"To the Crewes'?" asked his neighbor. "Isn't that funny? Then of course you know Cynthia Crewe."

Besant shook his head. "I am sorry. I don't. Like your own call this afternoon, my visit is to be largely a business matter. Miss Crewe's father is interested in some work I have been doing."

"Well, I can't say I envy you," answered the girl. "Things are in a horrible mess up there just now."

"What about?"

The girl looked at him shrewdly. "I guess you know just as well as I do. It's a perfectly frightful place to visit. I don't believe that any two members of the family are on speaking terms with each other. It's like going to make a sociable visit in an icebox. Personally, I like a little merry chaff and sunshine."

"So do I," replied Besant.

"Well, you won't find it there," answered the girl. "You'd better stick around with us and the peacock."

"I wish I could," answered Besant.

They had reached the wall. He gave Miss Sanford a hand to the top and she jumped lightly down, with a friendly nod, on the other side. Besant watched her for a moment as, without looking back, she made her way up through the trees of the little park, then turned, himself, back toward his own house.

Halfway across the lawn he heard the telephone in his library jangling and, on reaching it, found a voice which he recognized as that of the village station agent.

"Mr. Royal Besant?" asked the voice. "Telegram for you from Legget's Harbor. Signed 'Arthur Cramp.' Shall I read it? All right. Are you ready?"

"Imperative you come at once. Take motor to Band-box Inn, Gaylordsville. Meet me there eight this evening. Be prepared for several days. Please do not refuse. Do not answer by wire, but be sure to come.

ARTHUR CRAMP."

Chapter VII

A MOTOR guide showed that Gaylordsville lay thirty-six miles to the north by a road which wound like a thick, black ribbon across that part of the state. Legget's Harbor was not so easily found, but was at last discovered as a tiny dot near the end of a blunt point of land. It was reached by no road that was recognized by the map, but apparently was only six or eight miles from Gaylordsville. Six o'clock, Besant decided, would be plenty of time for a start, and so informed Tim Hannigan.

Tim, for his part, was delighted, for he gloried in driving the car under any conditions. Half an hour before the time set he appeared, looking very subdued and respectable in his best brown suit, and began to close all the blinds and lock up the house. This done, he handed his master a good cigar, lighted one himself, and announced to Besant that he was ready "any time now."

Thus, at six to a dot, the car turned out of the side road into the concrete highway and began to hum swiftly northward. The high, firm ground which surrounded the village of Manhasset soon gave way to a long stretch of flat, salt marshes, relieved now and then by a lone, gaunt tree over which, like as not, a single hawk would be hovering, like a turkey buzzard. Set against the hot, red circle of the late afternoon sun the effect was

strangely tropical. It suggested rice plantations and slave days and Southern swamps in a way that appealed to a certain melancholy strain in Besant's rather wistful nature. It had been one of the most difficult tasks of his whole proprietorship to teach Tim Hannigan that at times such as this he liked to be left in absolute silence, but on this occasion, for once, Tim seemed to remember the rule. Neither master nor man spoke a word until nearly thirty miles had been passed and, in the treacherous, steel-colored light which comes between daylight and darkness, they began to meet an occasional car with cold, flashing head lamps, at which Tim remembered that their own tail light was only working spasmodically. He stopped, went to the rear of the car, cuffed the offending light back into action, and the motor ticked on again peacefully northward.

The odd but very genuine friendship which existed between Royal Besant and his curious servant had begun twelve years before with a chivalric incident. Both of them had stepped aside from the day's routine to assist a lady in distress. It had been a very old lady, to be sure, and their efforts had not been thoroughly appreciated, but the act had been sufficient to make their interests forever one.

Tim Hannigan had been a train boy at the time, and Royal Besant had been a cub reporter, commuting on the Harlem Division. One day a rather rustic-looking old lady had been apparently taken very ill on the train, and Royal Besant, with

Tim Hannigan's help, had assisted her off at White Plains, from where the train had gone on and left them both stranded. The conductor had supposed that Besant belonged with the old lady, while Tim Hannigan had been in the station, trying to get a tin cup of water, but had been delayed in his errand of mercy because the cup was fastened with a chain. As soon as the train had gone on and the crowd of onlookers had dispersed, it developed that the old lady was merely an eccentric and querulous character who had intended to get off at White Plains in the first place. Nothing was the matter with her except that she liked to make a fuss. She was taken in charge by an ill-tempered man with a flowing beard, who drove her away in a hack, returning no thanks to anybody, but leaving Besant and Tim Hannigan with a wait of nearly two hours on the station platform.

From that day on, Tim Hannigan had fastened himself to Royal Besant like a friendly leech. Probably Besant was the first person of education and apparent position who had ever been willing to listen respectfully to the lad's endless jabber. Tim formed the practice of leaving his iron-bound news box every day on a seat in the smoker, thus reserving a place for his friend and patron. As soon as Besant appeared Tim would move his box to the floor, sit down beside him, and pour out his ambitions to a listener who was sometimes amused and always sympathetic. These ambitions of Tim's were entirely pugilistic and, at the time,

they seemed in a fair way to be realized, for Tim was both quick and big and had been fighting almost since infancy in all the freight yards of the New York Central.

Very shortly, however, nature put a disastrous end both to Tim Hannigan's main profession and to his ultimate dreams. Already large for his age, he suddenly started to shoot straight into the air at a rate that promised to be endless. When he had passed six feet three with no sign of a halt, he was obliged to give up his work as a train boy. Age, as Tim often lamented, would have been no bar. In after years he used to speak regretfully of train "boys" he had known who were over forty, but even the humorless eyes of a railroad balked at the sight of a "newsboy" who had to stoop every time that he entered a Pullman.

Thus Tim had been forced prematurely into professional ranks as a fighter and, if one were to believe his own account, he had been, for the next six or eight years, one of the leading lights of the sporting world of New York City. As a matter of fact, he had been merely one of its comic characters, although in some ways rather a tragic one.

He had never appeared in a public bout. How could he? In spite of his skeleton frame, Tim seemed to have been a fast, rangy boxer and naturally he had a colossal reach. But the trouble was to find anyone with whom to match him. At seventeen, when he should have made his proper début, he was already six feet, five inches in

height, but weighed only a hundred and thirty-two pounds. To have put him against an ordinary lightweight would have looked like a fight between Mutt and Jeff, or like a grown man maltreating a child. Any crowd would have hooted them out of the ring. One or two friendly managers expected that ultimately Tim would develop into an average heavyweight but he never did. The maximum weight that he ever reached was barely a hundred and fifty. He was destined to remain, apparently, one of nature's unfinished jobs—like a double house of which one half has never been built.

Unwilling to leave the field of his chosen ambitions, Tim gradually drifted into all the odd occupations by which such men retain their right to exist in the sporting world. He was a rubber, a waiter in training camps, a tout, usher, watchman, and sometimes a sparring partner for slow heavyweights who would have killed him if they had ever struck him squarely in the ribs. More often than not he was merely tolerated for his high good humor and his funny face. Every fight audience knew "Scissors" Hannigan and always gave him a cheer. Between times Tim would drift into other ventures at which such men will labor as long as they are not sullied with the actual name of "work." He used to appear around the tents of traveling carnivals, he would sell cigars at the ballgrounds, and once, for a week or two, he threatened to become a stage hand at the Hippodrome.

During all of this time Tim scrupulously kept up his acquaintance with Royal Besant, for, like the entire sporting world, he had implicit faith in the ability of newspaper men to make and unmake reputations. Nor could he ever quite grasp the fact that Besant had nothing to do with the sporting page. Tim himself could have seen no other reason for working on a paper. From time to time Besant actually would accompany him to some third-rate fight in Harlem or Jersey City and write up a subtly jocular column in which Tim himself would be made to appear as the principal figure of the evening. These "write-ups" Tim would carefully cherish and carry around in his pocket for months as being literally true.

The one stroke of good luck which brightened poor Tim's unhappy life lay in the fact that, at just the moment when he was reaching the absolute bottom of his fortunes, his patron was about to leap to the summit of his. For weeks Tim Hannigan had been coming around to the *Record* office for "loans" which had tapered from five and ten dollars down to fifty cents, when Royal Besant had suddenly read of his own unexpected inheritance. His first act of *largesse* had been to put Tim on the permanent payroll. He had had, to be sure, no great faith in the experiment, but, to his surprise, it had succeeded very well. Like all such men, there was absolutely nothing which Tim Hannigan would admit that he could not do—from rolling a lawn to

making an omelette. In revolt all his life against discipline and dictatorship, he would work twenty-four hours a day under the stimulus of flattery.

As for Tim Hannigan himself, he had apparently reached in Manhasset his ideal seventh heaven. Among the idlers around the village garage and the Portuguese lunch room he became an oracle and a lord. His pugilistic ability he was always ready to prove with a quick demonstration, and for that reason his other stories of sporting life in high circles were taken as true. At least Tim believed that they were, but it is possible that the young fishermen and chauffeurs who congregated in Henning's garage or Portuguese Joe's illicit back parlor were apt to "josh" him rather more than he realized.

Chapter VIII

TOWARD eight o'clock, when the summer evening was now becoming thoroughly dusky and the car should have been almost at Gaylordsville, Tim suddenly put on his brakes with a grunt. Ahead, a long bar was stretched on two kegs across the road and, beyond it, a steam roller, piles of loose stone, and other signs of construction work loomed in the gathering twilight. Temporary signs, hanging under red lanterns, showed "detours" in both directions and, on general principles, Besant chose the one to the right. For some time it seemed to be a wise choice, a fairly good country road, but at the end of a mile a second choice offered itself at a fork, and this time Besant chose the road to the left, supposing, naturally, that it would bear back to the main highway.

A very few hundred yards proved that this second choice was a poor one, for the road showed less and less signs of travel until at last the long grass and tall weeds began to tinkle against the number plate at the front of the car. Nevertheless, they drove on until a dim lamp was discernible in a farmhouse and Tim got out to ask directions.

The course of their travel had long since left the region of salt marshes, striking six or seven miles inland. In this part of the country the dark,

looming landscape was distinctly rural. As soon as Tim had silenced the engine to its lowest point there sprang up immediately the chirp of crickets and "peepers," and while Besant sat waiting in the darkness there came to him faintly the scent of distant lilacs or honeysuckle.

But also, as Besant sat there waiting in the darkness, he slowly became aware of a curious, faint, rustling and scratching sound over his shoulder. He would almost have said that it was in the rear of the car. The faint noise stopped, then began again. Besant turned and peered into the darkness, expecting to see some prowling cat or belated, exploring chicken around the farmer's neglected fence. He saw nothing and, a moment later, forgot all about it when Tim came bounding down the farmer's front path and jumped into the car.

"The man says we could get to Gaylordsville on this road if we wanted," announced Tim, "but it's very rough and he wouldn't advise us to try. He says we hadn't ought to turned at that last fork. We should have ought to gone on and then taken the second left."

The directions sounded simple enough, as such directions always do, but, when the car was back on the other road from the fork, a number of cart paths developed and caused the usual discussion as to whether any of them could be counted as the "first left." At last an old sagging guide post in the darkness seemed to offer promise and Tim climbed out to examine it with a match.

"We're all right," he shouted, cheerily, "'Gay-lordsville one M.'"

While Tim had been gone, however, Besant had again become aware of the faint, mysterious scratching and rustling in the rear of the car.

"Tim," he demanded, "what in the world have you got back there in the car that's moving around? Just listen! Now! Hear it?"

In perfect innocence Tim listened and then gave a yell.

"Oh, good gosh!" he exclaimed, "that must be the ferret! I'd forgot all about him."

In guilty haste he opened the slanting deck at the rear of the roadster, then brought into the glow of the dash light a peach basket with burlap tied over the top. Through the slats of the basket could be seen a pair of beady eyes like shoe buttons and a long, sinuous, writhing body.

"Where in thunder did you ever get that?" asked Besant.

"From the man who first told me about him," replied Tim. He grinned in a shamefaced way. "But I guess his principal object was to unload a second-hand ferret, 'cause the boys at the garage told me later that that was all nonsense about a ferret chasing peacocks.

"But, anyway," Tim consoled himself, "he don't stand me in but a dollar. That's what I give the man on deposit. We agreed on a price of four dollars in all, and double or quits according to whether he did or did not lick the peacock. But I

guess that's all off. The man's got my dollar, but I've got the ferret.

"And that reminds me, Mr. Besant," added Tim. "I've got some sandwiches there in the back of the car. It's lucky this little rascal didn't get at 'em. Probably that's why he was scratching. Smelled the olives."

Putting the ferret back in the rear of the car, Tim took out a paper package which he untied and offered to Besant. As soon as Besant's hand, however, had grasped a thin, moist sandwich, he knew that it was none of Tim's manufacture. He held the dainty slices of bread and lettuce leaves under the dash light.

"Where did these come from?" he asked.

Tim grinned in sheepish amusement. "Them?" he returned. "Them's a gift from a friend. Go ahead and look at the box."

Imperiously he forced the package into his master's lap and, not knowing in the least what it was all about, Besant pushed aside the paper coverings. At one end of the box, besides the sandwiches and a row of stuffed eggs, was a tiny toy suitcase, about three inches square, of the kind sold in candy shops for dinner favors. To the little handle was tied a card with the words "Bon voyage!" written gayly in a vigorous, feminine hand.

"Open it," insisted Tim. "Go on and open the suitcase."

Besant opened the absurd little traveling bag and found within it a miniature outfit, complete,

consisting of brush, comb, mirror, and even a tooth brush, none of them more than an inch and a half long. There was also a bottle of scent in size to correspond. Apparently nothing had been forgotten. In the top of the suitcase were tucked little sheets of notepaper and envelopes about as big as one's thumb nail. Underneath the brushes were some pieces of striped pink cloth, neatly folded, and, impatient of his master's apparent stupidity, Tim reached in and held them up to the light. They proved to be an infinitesimal pair of pajamas—of a size to fit a very small brownie—but with Besant's own initials, "R.B.," neatly embroidered on the breast pocket.

Besant turned to Tim. "Where in the world did all this come from?"

Tim was chuckling with delight. "The young lady next door, Miss Sanford, she sent 'em. She and me fixed it all up together."

"Miss Sanford?" repeated Besant. "But how did you come to know Miss Sanford?"

"Well, it was like this," explained Tim. "You see, I knew that she had come over this afternoon to put in a kick about me and the peacock. I was afraid maybe I'd got you in wrong. So while you was looking up in the guide book about the roads I see her walking down toward the stables and I hops over the wall and told her it wasn't your fault. I told her I didn't mean nothing by running the Polack. That was just my way."

"So then we gets to talking, the way people do, and I told her me and you was just starting off

on a long motor trip up the coast. I thought I'd make it sound important while I was about it. I said I'd got to hustle back and get the house all fixed up ready or you'd give me hob. Then she asked me if you was that kind of a man and, I says: "Oh, no! He's a fine man, only kind of——"

"Only kind of what?" interrupted Besant.

Tim grinned. "'Only kind of sleepy.' That's what I told her, but you understand we was just joking. But I says, anyway, that I got to go back and put up a lunch to eat on the road, and she says what's the use? Seems her and her maid had just come in by motor, themselves, and they had a lunch that they hadn't even touched. We was welcome to it. 'Come up and get it,' she says. So up we goes to the house and, Gee! Mr. Besant, it's a swell joint, believe me! Almost as big as the New York Athletic Club! But all the furniture was still covered up—like with sheets. The servants ain't coming 'til to-morrow or next day, 'cept that one maid, and I didn't see her. Miss Sanford she says she's the cook, herself, and a damn good one, she says. I didn't believe her until she took me into the kitchen, and there was her coat and her bags all dumped down, just where she'd left 'em.

"So, next she fished out this box of eats and I thanked her. But suddenly she began to laugh and says. 'Wait a minute.' Then she went climbing off upstairs. I could hear her giggling up there with her maid or someone. Then down she hops with this comic little suitcase, all written

out with that note and everything, and we packs it in with the sandwiches.

"Well, you know how one thing leads to another. We was standing there, wondering what we could put in it besides the brushes and comb, and she says, 'Oh I know!' and off she flickers again upstairs, and comes back with a little doll dressed up in these pajamas. She took 'em off, but they was glued in one place and I had to help her with a nut picker. Then, when we was packing 'em in, all tidy, I says, 'They'd ought to have initials on 'em, like Kid McCoy's.' She said that was a ripe idea and went off and comes back with a needle and thread and sewed 'em on before you could bat your eyelash. Say, let me tell you she's a fast worker. And that's how it happened."

"I see," commented Besant, smiling quietly. "But in the meantime we ought to have been in Gaylordsville twenty minutes ago."

"It won't take us long," reassured Tim. "The signpost says it's only one M."

And this time, at least, the signpost was right, for the country road lasted only a few hundred yards more. At the foot of a short, steep hill it joined again with the concrete highway and almost immediately the car bowled under the arching elms and sparse electric lights of Gaylordsville. From the time they had left their last stopping place, neither Besant nor Tim had spoken a word until they turned in at the gravel driveway of the Bandbox Inn, where Tim, who had been thinking deeply, gave a short chuckle.

“Mr. Besant,” he said, “I’ve got a brain wave. Why don’t you take that suitcase and write her a letter on one of those little bantamweight envelopes?”

Chapter IX

FOR the next half hour, however, Besant was to have little time to think either of Miss Sanford or the suitcase. As he walked up the steps of the inn, Arthur Cramp rose eagerly from the shadows of the vine-covered piazza.

"I began to think you weren't coming," he announced. "It's tremendously good of you that you did."

Besant laughed rather wryly. "I'm glad that you're not selling books," he replied. "You have a subtle way of making a man do what you want before he even knows where he's at."

Cramp answered his laugh "I hope it's not as bad as that."

"Oh, no!" confessed Besant. "I'll admit that I'm getting exceedingly interested, but you must grant a lazy man the right to groan."

In five or six minutes a pleasant-faced New England woman in a white apron came to the screen door and looked inquiringly at Cramp, who nodded and led the way into the house.

"I've engaged a private dining room," he informed Besant. "It will give us a chance to talk."

Besant followed him down the old-fashioned hall to a door under the stairs, but, as he turned in, his last glimpse was of Tim Hannigan, his hair soaked and brushed to the nines, already

seated in lone state in a corner of the main dining room, attacking a platter of cold ham and pickles.

The "private dining room" was obviously a bedroom, in which all the original furnishings still remained, except the bed, but Cramp had ordered a tender steak and other persuasive hot dishes in place of the usual cold supper which was offered by the menu of the inn. As soon as the steak had been served, Cramp closed the door, glanced at the open, screened window, and leaned back from the table.

"Well," he announced, "we're up against a fine kettle of fish!"

"What's happened?" asked Besant.

"Miss Cynthia Crewe," replied the attorney, "has left home—walked out—last night."

For a moment Besant said nothing, for, as the lawyer had spoken the words, a curious flash had come across his mind, one of those maddening thoughts that escape one's consciousness just before one can pin them down—the feeling that one knows the answer to a certain thing, but can't seem to identify it among the general pictures that float through one's mind. It was like one of those lucid, satisfying answers to a problem that come to a wakening sleeper just between dreaming and daylight. In the instant of their passing, one knows that they are a perfect answer to the problem in mind, but, on waking completely, one can never recover them intact. Thus Cramp's words had connected themselves instantly in

Besant's mind with something that he already knew. But what was it? That was what just escaped him.

All this had taken only a second of time, but to Besant it seemed to have taken much more.

"Miss Crewe has left home?" he repeated. He looked up and saw the lawyer sitting placidly enough. "You don't seem very much worried about it."

"Well, I'm not," answered Cramp, "in the sense that she's in danger or anything of that kind. She told her maid that she was going and took some of her things. She also left a note for her father, but it didn't say much. I'll show it to you presently, if you think it necessary. So far as all that's concerned she's able to take care of herself. But naturally the family is in a horrible stew. They haven't any idea where she is. I found them at their wits' end when I arrived there this noon."

By this time Besant considered himself sufficiently in the case to ask the obvious question.

"How about this Ruiz Serrano?" he suggested. "Has he left, too?"

"That's the funny part of it," answered Cramp. "No, he's still there—up at Legget's Harbor. As nearly as I could judge, it was as much a mystery to him as to all the others. He was as much worried about it as anyone else."

"And that may mean," said Besant, "that Miss Crewe is not as much in love with him as you all seem to believe."

"That's possible," answered the lawyer, "but I don't think it's probable—after all that's gone on for over a year."

"But at any rate she may have had a tiff with him. Possibly he wouldn't leave the house and so she did."

"I thought of that, too," replied Cramp, "but there hadn't been any signs of it. We know that they had been together all of that morning and all of the evening before—talking very earnestly about something or other."

The lawyer drew himself back to the table with a sudden air of impatience. "You see, Mr. Besant, that's what makes the whole affair so completely maddening. No decent father and mother can spend the whole day spying and snooping after their own daughter as if she were a thieving housemaid or a common crook."

"That's what I told you, myself," answered Besant, quietly.

"I know you did," admitted the lawyer, "but nevertheless, here we are! Facts are facts."

"But how does all this change *my* status?" asked Besant. "Now that Miss Crewe has left home, what do you want me to do about that?"

"Find her," replied the lawyer, grimly.

"Umm!" answered Besant.

To the lawyer at least there did not seem to be anything funny about it, and Besant himself couldn't say that there was.

"Of course," he suggested, "you've always got to take up a trail from the place where it starts.

That means that I should have to go out to Mr. Crewe's house at Legget's Harbor as soon as possible."

"I intended to have you go to-night."

"Are you going with me?"

The attorney shook his head. "I think that that would defeat the whole program—if it were known that you had any connection with me." He smiled to himself. "I am afraid that I am not very popular with the feminine members of the Crewe family and it would be wholly natural if Ruiz Serrano regarded me with distrust. He knows that I don't like him. In my capacity as financial watchdog of the Crewe estate it has been necessary for me to throw many a wet blanket on some wild scheme. Mr. Crewe had been almost persuaded to buy a big Diesel yacht this summer and to promise the backing for a symphony orchestra next winter—with this Serrano as conductor, I suppose. I know that I am blamed personally for putting a quick stop to both of those mad ideas. No, it would be best for you to appear there entirely independently of me. That is one reason why I had you meet me here."

"But yet you telegraphed me openly from Legget's Harbor," suggested Besant.

"I hesitated about that," answered Cramp, "but I didn't think that there would be any risk. The household never uses the Legget's Harbor station. It is only open at train times. They send all their own telegrams from Black Point."

"But yet there must be *some* excuse for my going up there," said Besant.

The lawyer smiled slightly. "I took the liberty," he replied, "of making you into a mining engineer. You see all of Mr. Crewe's confidential men in the banking business are known to the family already but from time to time some young mining man, usually from the West or South, does come up for a few days' conference. It seemed to be the only plausible way."

"That's all right," agreed Besant, "except that I don't know anything about mining, if anyone should happen to ask me."

"Who would?" asked the lawyer.

"You never can tell," answered Besant.

"And next to finding out where Miss Cynthia Crewe has gone," he added, "I suppose that my real job is still to keep an eye on Ruiz Serrano."

"Exactly," answered Cramp. It was apparently a relief to him that Besant had at last accepted the idea.

Besant considered the possibilities for a moment. "Now this morning," he suggested, "you intimated that you had some rather ugly facts about Serrano that you were holding back. Do you wish to tell them now?"

"I presume I had better," agreed Cramp. Again he glanced cautiously toward the open window and put his hand to his inside pocket, then hastily withdrew it, for a step had sounded in the hall and a thunderous knock had come on the door.

Chapter X

BESANT was not as startled by the knock as the lawyer had been. "That's my Tim," he announced. "He always knocks at a door as if he were going to break it down. . . . Come in, Tim!" he called. "What is it?"

Tim opened the frail, old-fashioned door, completely filling the frame. "Say, Mr. Besant," he demanded, "do you want me to bring in the bags, or what? I thought if you was going to be here some time, I'd go out and look around the town and see if there's anything doing."

At the mention of "bags" Cramp looked up quickly. "So you did bring your luggage?" he asked. "Prepared to stay?"

"Oh yes," answered Besant, absently. "That was what you suggested."

As a matter of fact, however, Besant was hardly listening to the other man, for at Tim's mention of "bags" there had come to him quite another suggestion. In an instant his memory had slipped back into its proper cog. He had found the missing idea for which, a few minutes before, his mind had been vainly searching. He looked up at Tim.

"I'll let you know in three or four minutes," he said. "You might go out and wait around the car."

The moment that the door had been shut behind Tim, Besant turned back to the table with an

alert, smiling air that was quite new to the lawyer. He held out his hand almost imperiously.

"Didn't you say," he asked, "that when Miss Crewe went away she left a note for her father?"

With some hesitation the lawyer handed it over, but as soon as he had looked at the note Besant could understand perfectly the reason for his reluctance. Written in a firm, strong hand on the heavy stationery of the Legget's Harbor estate, the little note was touching in its simple directness.

DEAR FATHER:

Something has happened which makes it necessary that I should go away for a short time. I am in no mood to talk about it now. Don't worry and don't let mother stir up things too much. You know in your heart that I can be trusted to do the right thing in the long run.

Love—your daughter,

CYNTHIA.

As he looked up from the little note, Besant felt almost apologetic that he had asked to see it at all. Its quiet, sad tone almost checked at its source the inspiration which had come into his mind, but his reason told him that a certain guess which lay in the back of his mind was still probably right.

"This note shows one thing, at least," he commented. "It shows that Miss Crewe is closer in affection to her father than to anyone else in the family."

"That is quite true," agreed the lawyer. "And her father is to her. He worships her, really. It's cutting him up pretty badly—all this mess."

For a moment longer Besant sat in thought, then abruptly glanced toward the open window and saw Tim Hannigan wandering up and down the driveway. At his call Tim came stamping up on the porch and peered in through the window. It gave him the air of a small boy stooping to peer in at a cave.

"Tim," said Besant, "how long would it take you to drive back to Manhasset?"

Tim Hannigan responded with his usual gay insolence. "It's you," he retorted, "who will never let me really step on her. Let me boss the old boat the way I want and we'd been here in half the time that we did take."

"An hour?" suggested Besant.

"Well, perhaps," answered Tim. "Maybe a little more for the deetoor."

Besant turned to the lawyer. "How soon ought I to be over at Legget's Harbor?"

"No fixed time," answered Cramp, rather puzzled. "But what are you going to do?"

"There's something I'd like to get from home," said Besant, "before I go any further. It may be a false trail and yet it may clear up a lot of the mystery right at the start."

He turned to the window. "Tim, take out my bag and get the car backed around. I'm not going with you and you can drive as fast as you like. If you get arrested, Mr. Cramp will go bail."

"But look here," suggested Cramp. "If you are not going, yourself why don't you let me send you over to Legget's Harbor in another car and

have your man follow you when he gets back. He can find the place very easily. It's the biggest house in this part of the country."

"Sure! I can find it," agreed Tim. "There ain't no place that I can get lost very long."

"All right, then," said Besant. He rose to his feet and nodded to the lawyer. "I'll be back in a minute."

Passing out through the front door, he joined his servant at the car.

"Tim," he asked, quietly, "when you talked with Miss Sanford this afternoon, how did she look? Tall? Short? Light? Dark? Or what?"

"How did she look?" returned Tim, indignantly. "She looked just the way she always looks—yellow hair, about half my size, and always laughing. I knew who she was, all right. I seen her when she come over to talk to you—earlier in the afternoon."

Besant nodded briefly. He had been merely checking up on a possible point of his evidence.

"Now, Tim," he continued, "did you tell Miss Sanford just where we were going this evening? You didn't say so, but I thought that perhaps you had forgotten it."

Tim wilted slightly. "To tell the truth I did say we was going first up to Legget's Harbor to visit some old friends of yours. She wanted to know and I told her. I didn't think there was any harm in it."

Besant smiled slightly to himself. "And did

Miss Sanford," he pursued, "ask you anything about Mr. Cramp's visit—this morning?"

"Now that I think of it," said Tim, "she did say something about it, but I've forgotten just what it was. I told her I didn't know who he was, myself."

"And you say there was nobody else in the house when you were there?"

"I told you there was nobody there except Miss Sanford's own maid, and I didn't see *her*—just heard her giggle. Least I heard *somebody* giggle."

"All right, Tim. Tune up the car and wait here until I come back; but first hand me that little suitcase that Miss Sanford gave you."

"Going to write that letter to her on that little paper?" asked Tim in great glee, and Besant knew that Tim's own pride of invention would add speed to the trip if he himself confessed the truth.

"Yes," he replied, "that is just what I am going to do, and you are going to deliver it. I'll be back in a minute."

At the front of the inn, Besant found a general parlor and writing room with a desk in the corner, rather dim and entirely vacant. Laying the tiny suitcase on the desk, he put beside it Miss Crewe's letter which Cramp had given him and looked quickly back and forth from the letter to the card on the suitcase. Once or twice he rubbed his thumb over the words "Bon voyage."

Smiling to himself, Besant took one of the minute envelopes and a sheet of the little note-

paper from the suitcase. It was a regular watch-maker's task to get more than three or four words on each side of the tiny paper, but his message had already been condensed to its simplest proportions in his own mind.

The grotesque little letter finished and addressed to his own satisfaction, Besant took it out to Tim, who slipped it into his vest pocket.

"Now drive back to Manhasset as fast as you can," Besant directed, "and if you see lights in Miss Sanford's house, call her up from our house on the telephone and say that you have a message from me which you would like to deliver. Tell her you'd like to bring back an answer to-night. But don't, in any case, go there first without calling her up. If she's all alone it might alarm her. If you don't see any lights or can't get her on the phone, wait until morning and give her the letter then. Then follow me up and bring me the answer at Mr. Damon Crewe's house at Legget's Harbor."

"Key-rect!" answered Tim as he jumped into the car and before Besant was well inside the inn he could hear the car roaring out of the driveway.

Smiling to himself, but, now that it was done, rather daunted at his own impertinence, Besant passed on to join the attorney. On the little envelope which was now speeding southward at forty miles an hour in Tim's vest pocket, was written,

Miss Dorothy Sanford.
Kindness of Tim.

Inside the envelope were these words:

MY DEAR MISS SANFORD:

Thank you and also Miss Cynthia Crewe for the lunch and the trousseau. If you still have Miss Crewe concealed in the upper regions of your house, will you kindly tell her to come home at once?

Austerely, your neighbor,

ROYAL BESANT.

Chapter XI

THE smile with which Besant returned down the narrow hallway of the inn was quickly dissipated as he entered the little dining room under the stairs, for the manner with which the attorney was awaiting him was anything but flip-pant. Without preliminary, Cramp took a long leather folder from his inside pocket and sorted out a series of papers of different sizes.

"Now for the case of Señor Serrano," he announced.

Besant took his seat at the other side of the table, lighted his pipe, and waited for the story.

"In the first place," began Cramp, "Mr. Crewe has been receiving some very ominous letters for some little time."

To the lawyer's slight chagrin, Besant did not seem surprised. He did not even seem very much interested.

"I wondered," he replied, "whether anonymous letters lay at the bottom of this. They usually do. They *are* anonymous, are they not?"

The lawyer flushed. "Well, yes, in a way. That is, they can't be traced."

"Are these the ones?" asked Besant.

At the attorney's nod, he took the first from a pile of three or four.

"That's the first one," commented Cramp, as

Besant opened it. "At least it's the first that I have in my possession."

Besant ran his eye over the letter with an interest that was still only perfunctory. The note was written in a painful, illiterate hand on the cheapest of violet-ruled paper. It had no date or address at the top of the sheet. It read:

DER MR. CREWE:

I lern Ruiz Serrano going to mary your daughter. No let him do it. I warn you, a frend. I no rite English good. I his country woman. Ask him why he leave Spain and go to Mexico so sudden. He no want to answer. I no some things I no tell. I warn you.

AMIGO.

Besant laid down the sheet and glanced at the envelope in which it had been contained. It was addressed to Mr. Damon Crewe at the Federal Club, a fact which Besant noted mentally, but on which he made no comment. The other letters, which he ran through hurriedly, were all of the same general stamp, although one or two of them were typed on thin little slips of paper and written in correct English. They hinted at all sorts of things which none of them exactly stated. The envelopes were postmarked from various places ranging from the Madison Square Station, in New York City, to a little town in California. They had been sent to almost all of Damon Crewe's possible addresses, including Legget's Harbor.

Besant tossed down the last of them with an expression which was not lost on the attorney.

"You don't seem to attach very much importance to them," Cramp remarked.

"No, not very much," replied Besant. "That is, not for themselves. Anonymous letters, as a rule, show nothing except a cowardly and disordered mind on the part of their author. You say that there were more of these?"

"Yes," answered Cramp, "there were three or four which arrived before Mr. Crewe was persuaded to give them into my hands. The first ones which arrived he merely tore up in disgust."

"Good for Mr. Crewe!" was the comment which formed itself in Besant's mind, but he did not state it.

The attorney, however, apparently felt that Besant was not assigning due importance to this phase of the case.

"At the very least," he suggested, "these letters seem to show that Ruiz Serrano has certain very disagreeable connections. An unpleasant enemy might show a man's history as clearly as an unpleasant friend."

Besant smiled slightly. "No man can exactly choose his enemies," he replied, "but I can see what you mean. With even a hint of that sort of atmosphere I can understand that Serrano would appear as a man whom the Crewe family would not care to have around."

"Exactly!" agreed Cramp.

Besant smoked his pipe thoughtfully for a moment.

"As you say," he commented at last, "these

letters show that someone is highly determined to upset any marriage between Miss Cynthia Crewe and Ruiz Serrano—and willing to use the most contemptible means to do it.”

“And succeeding thoroughly,” added the lawyer, “if that is the only view you take of it. So long as letters like this keep coming in, you can understand that Mr. Crewe could only regard any association between his daughter and Ruiz Serrano with the utmost repugnance.”

Besant nodded. “That’s what I meant. And it’s rather a shame, because they are all stupid forgeries.”

The lawyer looked up in a surprise which was almost anger.

“Forgeries?” he echoed.

Besant nodded again. “And very poor ones. If you don’t believe me, take them down to police headquarters in New York and ask the first detective you meet. He will tell you the same thing.”

Besant took up the first note he had read and pointed out various words with the stem of his pipe. “Look at that M,” he said, “in ‘Mr.’ You never saw an illiterate person write a sweeping double M like that. And you never saw an illiterate person begin a letter with a colon. Such people don’t even use commas. Although the letter is badly written it is perfectly punctuated—which is an intellectual impossibility. Nor would a person of that type, especially an ignorant foreigner, ever begin a letter, ‘Dear Mr. Crewe,’

no matter how it was spelled. Such a person would begin it 'Der Sir' or more likely 'Esteemed Sir' or with some other obsequious flourish. The simple 'Dear Mr. Crewe' is a form used only by persons of social experience—unless they should happen to know him very well indeed—which this person doesn't pretend to do. Furthermore, the writer pretends to be a woman and yet signs herself as a man. 'Amigo' is masculine."

"Do you speak Spanish?" asked Crewe, in surprise.

"Not really," answered Besant, "but I know the rudiments of Latin."

The attorney did, too, for he nodded, in unwilling conviction.

"And look at that word 'Mexico,'" pursued Besant. "Any real Spaniard would have spelled it with a 'j'—'Mejico.' Anyone who has been as far as Texas knows that. Finally, a Spanish or Mexican woman, as illiterate as the author of that letter pretends to be, would not be able to write at all. Writing even one's name is not a common accomplishment among Spaniards or Mexicans of that class. On the other hand, those who *can* write even a little, write with remarkable politeness and grace.

"And *never*," thought Besant to himself, "would such a person have the inspiration to send a letter to the Federal Club." But this thought also was one which he kept to himself.

The lawyer was gazing at the little pile of letters with lingering doubt. "And you think, then," he

asked, "that they were all written by the same person?"

"Absolutely," replied Besant. "In the first place, that would be the natural guess. A person who would write one such letter would write another. But also, read through those letters again, if you like. From the most illiterate to the most polished of them, you will see the same general methods of thought. I can't explain it exactly, but you will almost hear the same person talking. I could point it out bit by bit if you wanted to have me, but it wouldn't be worth the time. Of course the letters may have been *mailed* in different places, but they were all conceived by the same mind."

"How about an organized gang?" asked Cramp, rather weakly.

"Rubbish!" retorted Besant.

The lawyer sat looking down at the letters and shaking his head. Slowly he picked them up and inclosed them in a rubber band. In his next question there seemed to be a distinct new respect for Besant's judgment.

"Then, in your opinion," he asked, "what sort of person wrote those letters? Have you any idea?"

"Yes," answered Besant, "I have a fairly distinct idea, but it would be utterly futile to state it now. I might only have to retract it to-morrow."

"But do you think it was a man or a woman?" insisted the lawyer.

Besant laughed curtly. "Really, Mr. Cramp, it wouldn't be fair to ask me that now."

Cramp took a cigar from his case and lighted it thoughtfully.

"I suppose," he said, "that you think me very stupid about those letters."

"No," answered Besant. "Such letters are repulsive things for anyone to have around. I merely think that you accepted them without much examination because they fitted in with an idea that you already had, fully formed, in your mind."

"I will confess," admitted Cramp, "that my one instinct was to help the Crewe family get a disagreeable atmosphere out of their way. Certainly if Ruiz Serrano had never appeared those letters would never have come. I wasn't fighting *his* battles for him. My natural feeling was that, if he were got rid of, the letters would stop."

"And without giving the poor fellow a chance to defend himself," was the thought that came to Royal Besant, but this again was a thought that he did not express. Instead, he picked up the little packet of letters.

"Do you want me to take these?" he asked.

"If you want them," replied the attorney.

Besant held the letters a moment, before slipping them into his pocket. "To my mind," he commented, "these letters point to only one genuine danger—that similar letters, or possibly even more contemptible ones, may have come to

Miss Crewe, herself. Do you know whether any have?"

The lawyer flushed. "I have worried about that, too, but I can't say yes or no. If Miss Crewe *has* received any such letters, she is exactly the kind of person to keep the fact strictly to herself. If she really does care for this Ruiz Serrano and should receive any of these accusations of him, it would be apt to fan her loyalty rather than otherwise. Such letters would probably succeed merely in making her very unhappy without in the least accomplishing their intended purpose."

"That's what I thought, myself," answered Besant. "And is it possible that her present disappearance may have something to do with some such letter?"

The attorney looked up, in genuine alarm. "By George!" he exclaimed, "I had never thought of that!"

As if in defense of his own negligence he added, "You see, all those letters had begun to figure in my mind as old evidence. All of them date back for several months. There were other things of more recent occurrence which had diverted my attention. I must have been blind."

Besant gave him a reassurance which was apparently genuine.

"Well, I shouldn't worry about that phase of it," he remarked. "Wait for a day or two and we will see what happens. What are the other facts that you have?"

The attorney began at once to produce them,

but the puerile flaws which Besant had already pointed out in the letters seemed, somewhat, to have shaken his certainty in his own case. Opening his leather folder, he took out a single scrap of paper, which he handed to Besant with the remark, "This seems to me evidence of quite another kind."

The attitude in which Besant took this new slip of paper was, indeed, quite different from that in which he had received the anonymous letters, for the first glance showed him that it was the same kind of paper on which Miss Cynthia Crewe's own letter had been written—the heavy, gray-green stationery of the Crewe estate. It was badly crumpled and torn and was only a fragment of a letter, but, whatever it was, it gave evidence of being a genuine document. It was written in what even Besant could see was fluent, idiomatic Spanish, and, as soon as he had grasped its general appearance, the attorney handed him a typewritten translation. Beginning at the fag end of a sentence, the torn fragment read:

. . . otherwise. But I must insist, dear Chita, that for the time being you stop these demands for money. I haven't any and I can't give you any. But let me alone. Let me wind up this one little affair and we will all be easy on the money score for the rest of our lives. It won't be hard if I can only wait for the proper moment and keep up all the appearance of an affluent, successful artist in the meantime. These wealthy New Yorkers are really very simple-minded sort of people, but also they are as suspicious of a stranger as the old mules of Andalusia. Easy, easy, I am told, is the word. It will never do for me to push my hand too rapidly. Diplomacy and time will do the trick, but, once it is done, the rest is easy.

Also, when the trick is finally turned, I have got to have *some* money saved in order to do things in careless style for at least the first month or two. You know the Castilian proverb, "Don't be too eager to grab the first plums when you've planted a new little plum tree."

I sent you two hundred dollars last week, but that must be the last until the "*grand coup*" is finally turned. I could, perhaps, pick up a few easy dollars in the old way, but the risk of detection is now too great. I have an idea that already certain prying eyes are watching me for just some such thing. Until then, please be contented.

FRANCISCO.

Besant looked up from the letter. "Who is Francisco? Serrano?"

The lawyer nodded. "His full name is Francisco Ruiz y Serrano."

At Besant's more respectful contemplation of this new letter Cramp's air of confidence was rapidly returning. "You think that that is genuine?" he asked.

"It seems to be," admitted Besant, soberly. "Do you know whether or not that is his handwriting?"

"Without question," replied Cramp. "We have several other samples of it and we are satisfied that it is the same." The lawyer himself could now afford to be slightly humorous, and he added, lightly, "Although probably *you* would say that it wasn't."

"I wouldn't say so unless I believed it," answered Besant. He held up the crumpled fragment of the note. "Where did you get this?"

Again Cramp flushed. "It was found at the house over at Legget's Harbor?"

"Since Serrano has been there?"

"Within a week."

"And by whom was it found—one of the servants?"

"No, not by one of the servants," replied Cramp, slowly, "but by—by some one connected with the household."

The answer was not very precise, but for reasons of his own Besant was not especially eager to push his question.

"And are these all the facts that you have?" he continued.

Cramp hesitated again. "All the documentary facts," he replied. "As to the others, I don't know whether you will connect them with this case or not."

"For instance?" suggested Besant.

The lawyer paused, and then said, quietly. "For one thing, Mr. Crewe's house has been broken into—twice during the last month."

As Cramp had apparently been afraid that he would, Besant did smile slightly.

"Broken into?" he replied. "You could hardly lay that to Ruiz Serrano. If a man is already inside a house, why need he break in? Besides, if he is after bigger game, no man except a born fool would run the chance of being caught in petty larceny. I beg your pardon, Mr. Cramp, but you don't seem to remember that, after all, Ruiz Serrano is a fairly well-known artist, with at least a temporary reputation. From any point of view he could not afford to be caught as a sneak thief or a second-story worker."

"Just a minute, please, just a minute," interrupted Cramp. "You have a way of making my statements sound more foolish than they actually are. I didn't say that it was a case of petty larceny. As a matter of fact, nothing was taken whatever. Nor did I *mean* to say, necessarily, that the intruder came in from the outside. But some one *was* heard in the halls during the night, and the next morning things had been disturbed, not merely in Mr. Crewe's library, but in several of the rooms on the upper floor. That episode naturally put everyone more or less on guard. About a week later—last Monday, in fact—when one of the gardeners was coming home late at night he saw what he thought was a shadow moving over the lawn. He called and ran after it. He swears there was a figure there which ran to the hedge and got away from him.

"Why do you say 'figure'?" asked Besant, bluntly. "Wasn't it a man?"

"Well, that seems to be a matter of doubt," confessed Cramp. "At first the gardener thought that it *was* a man—a very small man or a prowling boy, after the cherries—but when he got to thinking it over afterward, he began to believe that it was a young woman dressed in man's clothes, or possibly knickerbockers."

"What made him think that?"

"Oh, general impression—the way the figure ran. And he has an idea that he caught a whiff of scent—of perfumery."

"And how big is Serrano?"

"Medium size. No, I couldn't call him small."

"And he doesn't use perfumery?"

"No," admitted Cramp, "I'll give the devil his due. That is one thing that I can't lay against him."

"And was anything touched in the house, that night?"

"Not touched, exactly," answered Cramp, "but a window was open." He nodded toward the fragment of letter which Besant still held in his hand. "And it was on the next morning that that bit of letter was found—in just about the spot where the figure had disappeared through the hedge."

The attorney looked at his watch. "Well, Mr. Besant, I suppose that if you are going over to Legget's Harbor to-night you really ought to get there before they lock up. You will naturally want to start in by attracting as little attention as possible. Also I am hoping to get an early start, myself, for New York, in the morning. Is there anything more that you want to ask?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Besant.

The attorney smiled. "I have already learned enough about you," he remarked, "to know that you will never be really satisfied with anything until you have seen it with your own eyes."

"Isn't that common sense?" asked Besant.

"Yes, it is," replied Cramp, "but I have been reminded to-night that sometimes even lawyers are apt to forget it."

Chapter XII

CRAMP went out to the little office of the inn to telephone for a car, and in the few minutes before it arrived he gave Besant a few general directions about introducing himself when he should arrive at Legget's Harbor. He also gave him his own address and telephone number in New York.

The two men were chatting idly as they waited on the steps of the inn, when suddenly Cramp, who had turned to glance back at the door, burst into a roar of genuine laughter.

"Which of those," he demanded, "is your bag?"

Besant turned and joined him in the laugh, for at the top of the steps, standing solemnly side by side, a perfect picture of "Dignity and Impudence," were Besant's huge English kitbag and the miniature little suitcase.

"The big one," replied Besant, "is the one I intend to use, although I believe that my pajamas are in the little one.

"That must be Tim's work," he added. "That little affair is a joke that some one once left in the car, but Tim never can understand that a joke has any time limits."

Nevertheless, Besant decided to end the joke then and there. It would hardly do, he felt, for a mining engineer to arrive at the Crewe estate with that absurd toy as a part of his luggage. He

rammed the little suitcase into his pocket just as the lights of the hired car began to spread up the driveway.

The two men shook hands and from the tonneau of the car Besant leaned forward to the driver.

"I want to go to Mr. Damon Crewe's place at Legget's Harbor."

The driver nodded and slipped in his clutch, but, once in the village street, he called back over his shoulder.

"Do you want to go to Mr. Crewe's house itself," he asked, "or just to the superintendent's cottage?"

"To Mr. Crewe's house itself," said Besant, and the answer seemed to impress the driver, for immediately he straightened in his seat and began to drive with great punctilio.

"This," his whole attitude seemed to say, "is a more important matter than I realized."

Chapter XIII

AS the map had indicated, no main highway led to Legget's Harbor. At the end of the village street the car turned sharply to the right, passed between half a mile of hay fields and meadows and then into woods which closed down thickly about it. The trees and bushes, heavily leafed, stood out in the lights of the car with an artificial, white-greenish appearance that made them look like stage scenery.

At the end of another mile the woods ended abruptly in open headlands, and, as if a curtain had been drawn aside at one stroke, there came not only the sound, but the damp salt breath of the ocean. Way off to the left, with no line in the darkness dividing the water from the shore, could be seen the lights of some boat at anchor and, far ahead, straight across the moor, at the end of the point, dots of lights twinkled in rows and clusters, low on the horizon. The driver turned in his seat.

"That's Mr. Crewe's place, on ahead—all of those lights. Don't it look like a regular city?"

The road from that point across the moor was not long but the deep white sand made it slow going. It was fifteen minutes at least before the car drew up at a high, grilled gate in a wall. Imperiously the driver sounded his horn, and, after a pause, a disgruntled man with his coat

collar turned up over his nightshirt came out of the gate house.

"Gentleman for the big house," asserted the driver, and without further question the lodge keeper opened the gate.

Inside the high walls the landscape was completely changed in an instant. The sparse grass of the moors gave place to lawns, and the sand of the road to hard, well-kept gravel. As they neared the house, beds of flowers showed a brilliant scarlet in the light of the head lamps. Under a lighted stone porte-cochère, the driver jumped down with no little manner.

"Well, here we are, sir!"

With some hesitation Besant looked up at the outer doors of the house, which were of bronze grill set before huge sheets of plate glass. The driver remained to watch his success with good-natured interest. Before Besant could search for a bell, the doors were opened and a footman came down the steps with an attitude of alert inquiry. The first sentence, however, brought a respectful welcome.

"I am Mr. Besant. I believe that I am expected."

The footman leaped at once for his bag—now, happily, only the big one.

"Oh yes, sir! You are expected. Have you any more luggage, sir?"

Inside a second pair of glass doors another man, obviously the butler, was waiting, and he, at least, did not wait for a name.

"Mr. Besant?" he inquired with a bow. "Mr.

Crewe is expecting you, but he has retired and begs to be excused until morning. Shall I have you shown to your rooms or would you care for something before you go up?"

The form of the inquiry made it plain to Besant that his rooms were his expected destination, and, on following the footman through a high, paneled hall and up a great, wide staircase, he found that the word "rooms" had been used advisedly. There were three of them assigned to him—a sitting room with a pleasant fire burning on the hearth, a dressing room with its bath, and, much the largest of the three, a bedroom with a huge, canopied bed.

After moving deftly around for a moment—lowering the shades, touching up the fire, and unstrapping the bag, the footman went silently out, leaving Besant with the curious feeling of not being wholly awake or quite in his senses, for, since leaving home, he had given strangely little thought as to what the Crewe house would be like or as to what would be his actual reception.

The long, open vista of the three luxurious rooms embarrassed him particularly. It gave him the feeling of being about to undress in hotel parlors, so he closed the doors, put on a bathrobe, and then sat down in a big, chintz-covered chair in the bedroom to smoke a pipe and pinch himself—mentally. He had a constant feeling that something more ought to happen that night—that some one ought to come up and tell him that it was time to go to bed—or that it wasn't. But nothing did happen. Outside the house could be heard faintly

the swish of the sea, but beyond that—silence. The only thing that he could see—of the grounds—was a huge copper-beech tree just outside his window. From inside the house came the same complete silence. Besant decided that there was nothing for it but to put out his lights and go to bed.

He must have dreamed, off and on, for, apparently in the middle of the night, he was merely half conscious of a knocking which seemed to fit vaguely in with his dreams. Growing slowly awake and gradually realizing where he was, Besant switched on the light at the head of his bed and called: "Yes? What is it?"

The door of the dressing room opened an inch or two and the discreet voice of the footman answered:

"Your man has arrived, sir. He says that he has a message for you which must be delivered at once. Shall I send him in?"

"Yes, have him come in," replied Besant, and a moment later Tim Hannigan, looking at least nine feet tall, was grinning over his bed.

"One hour and two minutes, Mr. Besant!" he announced. "Even counting the deetour. I took it easier, coming back."

Tim looked around the room in amazement. "Holy smoke! Mr. Besant, you're fixed up in style! I think we're going to enjoy this picnic."

Now fully awake, Besant returned his grin. "Have they said anything about putting you up here?"

"Sure!" answered Tim. "I'm all fixed up. Going to sleep over the stables. They're a fine lot of boys downstairs. One of 'em used to be a fighter in the British navy. He says he saw Bombardier Wells knocked out by Carpentier."

"But about the message?" suggested Besant.

"Oh yes," recollected Tim.

Reaching two fingers into his waistcoat pocket, he took out a note of the same exact size as that which Besant had given him to deliver. On the tiny envelope was written:

Mr. Royal Besant.
To the great delight of Tim.

Inside was this message:

MY DEAR MR. BESANT:

You are really so clever as to be astounding. Or did Tim spill the beans? Concerning Miss Cynthia Crewe, I beg to report that she is home already. As to the trousseau, have you yet discovered that the little scent bottle is really filled with my father's best Burgundy?

Selah! and yet demurely,

Your neighbor,

DOROTHY SANFORD.

Chapter XIV

THE news that Miss Cynthia Crewe had returned to her father's house proved to be entirely correct on the following morning, although it was not until later in the day that Besant was able to verify it in person. His first impression on awakening was of the grinning face of Tim Hannigan watching him from the foot of the huge canopied bed.

Tim himself was in marvelous spirits. He allowed his wondering eye to roam over the borders of flounces and ruffles, across the blue, silk, embroidered counterpane, then back at the sunburnt face of his master.

"Glory! Mr. Besant," he announced. "You look like the Chinaman's bride in that crib."

"Maybe," admitted Besant, "but it makes me feel likes Moses in the bulrushes."

Besant hitched up on his pillows. "Had your breakfast?" he asked.

"A whopper!" said Tim. "And I killed it. Bacon and eggs, three cups of coffee, and a card of hot rolls as big as first base. The lads downstairs asked me wasn't I going to come up here and help you get up. But I says, 'Shucks! He's dressed himself for thirty years, and if he can't do it now he'd better stay in bed.'"

"What did they say to that?" asked Besant.

"They said that was true of most people, but the trouble was that they didn't know it. There's one guy down there that's valet to a gentleman here in the house, and I guess he has to do everything for him except scratch his nose. This valet he's a Swede. No, that ain't it. More like a Frenchman. Wait a minute and I'll tell you."

"A Swiss?" suggested Besant.

"That's the tribe!" replied Tim. "He's a Swiss. I got to calling him 'Polly'—that means 'Polly-voo'—and the girls in the kitchen all laughed, but the fellow himself didn't like it."

Besant began to see that, while Tim Hannigan was going to be a troublesome problem in the Crewe house, he might also be a valuable source of information.

"Tim," he asked, "who's staying here now? Do you know?"

"There ain't nobody here now," replied Tim, "except us and that other gentleman—the one that the Switzer is valet to. He's a violin player. His name's—I dunno. I've forgotten it. But the lads was telling me that sometimes there'll be as many as thirty to forty people all staying right here in the house. I says, 'You people must be keeping a regular hotel!' 'I wish we was,' says one of 'em. 'Then they'd have to come across when they paid the check. In a private house you can never tell whether you're going to get fifty cents or ten dollars.'"

Besant smiled. "Tim," he said, "I think that you had better go out and wash the car."

Wandering slowly toward the door, Tim began to obey the order in his own good fashion, taking time, as he went, to study all the pictures on the wall. Most of them were French prints of the Louis XV epoch and Tim was not quite certain whether he ought to pass them by with a gruff contempt or wink over them as one man to another. The powdered court beauties and simpering gallants, however, were all forgotten when he caught sight of a little statue of Hercules in a niche in the wall.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "That fellow's got a build!" Then he added, in qualified admiration: "But I bet he'd be slow on his feet. Those big lads usually are. Still, there was Frank Gotch."

As usually happened, Tim had got clear to the door before he remembered his original errand.

"Say, Mr. Besant, when do you want your breakfast? They told me to tell you you could have it any time you want."

"About twenty minutes," replied Besant. He called Tim back to the bed. "Tim," he cautioned, "it might be just as well if you said as little as possible about me downstairs."

Tim grinned. "Don't worry, Mr. Besant. Trust me for a fox when it comes to talking. They began to ask me about you first thing this morning—who you was and what you did for a living. But I says: 'Him? He don't do nothing. Why, he's got so much money,' I says, 'that every few years he has to move to get out of its way!'"

Chapter XV

TIM'S report of his own full morning had made the day seem farther advanced than it actually was, for when Besant rolled hastily out of bed and looked at his watch, he found that in reality it was only twenty minutes past eight. Through the deep stone casings of the narrow windows the leaves of the copper-beech tree still showed the dark, cool freshness of early morning, while the close-cropped grass of the lawn still sparkled with dew. From somewhere just under his windows Besant heard a girl's voice calling to some one inside the house and, moved by a natural curiosity, he crossed the room and looked out.

Seen thus in daylight, the lawns and gardens of the Crewe estate appeared much smaller than they had on the night before. The gate house was only some two hundred yards away, but a single glance at the far expanse of white, tufted sand showed at what immense labor even this little patch of greenery had been reclaimed from the moors. In contrast, the four or five acres inside the walls had an unusually rich and jeweled appearance. As for the house itself, Besant saw that it must be enormous. Its leaded windows, whispering ivy, and rounded stone towers extended as far as his very limited angle of view would take him in either direction.

The sound of the clear voice calling again to some one below him made Besant look hastily down at the lawn to see a girl of apparently not more than eighteen come strolling idly along the wall of the house. A hoe and a trowel were tucked under one arm, and as she walked she was brushing the dirt of a garden bed, in a rather finicky way, from the tips of her fingers. She was a girl of a fragile, intermittently solemn type, wistful rather than pretty, one of those far-gazing, self-absorbed girls who, in moments of rest or preoccupation, have an appearance that is startlingly childlike. Her hair, which had once been bobbed, was now in the first stages of being put up again, giving her even more of a willful, just-escaped-from-the-schoolroom appearance. She was dressed in a one-piece, elbow-sleeved gingham gown which was scarcely more than an apron.

Her apparent age was the thing most puzzling to Royal Besant. Could this, he wondered, be the headstrong and rebellious Cynthia Crewe—the storm center of this family feud which he had been called to untangle? She certainly did not look it, for instinctively, in his own mind, Besant had formed a picture of a tall, imperious young woman—a Gibson type, given to black evening gowns and stately manners.

The girl was moving nonchalantly across the lawn when something in one of the flower beds attracted her attention. She paused, looked down at it for a moment, then, seizing her hoe, she began to dig with a vicious determination. From time

to time she would stoop to her knees and shake out one of the weeds which were, apparently, the source of her indignation. It was while in this kneeling position that she suddenly seemed to become aware that some one was watching her. For a moment she remained perfectly still, like a young nymph caught by a startling sound, then slowly her large, dark eyes were turned straight up at Besant's open window.

Besant had seen the movement just in time and slipped back into the shelter of the room. A moment later, from the safe retreat of the shadows he rose to his toes and peered cautiously over the casing. The girl had turned back to her work, but when, after fifteen minutes, Besant returned to the outer rooms, shaved, tubbed, and ready for the day, the amateur gardener had gone and the lawns once more remained silent and deserted.

A decorous knock, which might have been timed to the second, called Besant away from the windows and back to the door of his little sitting room. The manservant who had greeted him on his arrival entered with a tray and deftly laid out his breakfast. Besant stood and watched him with a faint amusement, for, on entering, the man had said merely, "Good morning, sir," and as he turned to leave he added, simply, "Is there anything more, sir, that you require?"

There really was nothing that Besant could possibly require, for the breakfast was perfect, but with each new move in this strange situation his bewilderment was increasing. Was this sort of

thing to go on forever? Was he to remain isolated in his rooms, like a pampered prisoner in a tower? Or was he expected to sally forth and make himself known in this world of strangers? He stopped the man as the latter was leaving.

"Has Mr. Crewe left any message for me?"

The man shook his head. "None, sir—that I know of. Do you wish me to inquire?"

"Oh no!" said Besant. "I merely thought that he might have."

The half hour which he consumed with breakfast and a meditative pipe still brought no further enlightenment. So far as the household was concerned, he might, Besant decided, remain in his rooms unnoticed for months and years. The members of the Crewe family were either extremely polite or extremely indifferent to his presence. From what he had read in novels and stories of English life, this was apparently the custom in large country houses—to leave each guest to his own devices, but for a stranger like himself, who was already none too happy about his own position, it was decidedly embarrassing. Besant recalled the description that Dorothy Sanford had given of a visit to Legget's Harbor—"about as pleasant as making a sociable call in an icebox." Already Besant could understand what she meant and, for more than one reason, now he began to wish that his vivacious little neighbor were there to help him.

At ten o'clock—then half past ten—then eleven—had come no further word from anyone, even

from Tim. Besant decided to make the plunge of his own accord. Still feeling ridiculously like a prisoner making an escape, he cautiously opened the door and stepped out into the heavily carpeted hall.

The passageways and the stairs were as deserted as the lawns. Hearing voices in a room at the foot of the stairway, Besant made his way in that general direction, but saw only a maid and another houseman dusting the room and straightening the pictures. The huge front doors, he imagined, could not be for ordinary, casual use, so he turned in the other direction and wandered past room after room, tall, formal, and completely deserted.

At last he saw a row of open French windows, leading apparently to a long stone terrace, pleasantly shaded by a striped awning. He stepped out and instinctively drew a quick breath of delight, for all the warmth, sunshine, and informality of the Crewe estate seemed to be concentrated on this side of the house. In three directions, almost at his feet, was a semicircle of the limitless sea, sparkling in myriad glints and flashes, while at the foot of the slope half a dozen small boats rocked and tossed at their moorings, completing with dashes of dancing white the general effect of vivacity and animation. Nearer at hand, a wealth of soft, golden sunshine bathed the whole headland, sifting, even, with placid, diluted warmth, through the broad red and white stripes of the awning.

On the terrace itself, moreover, were all the signs

of a comfortable, homelike existence. Tropic palmettoes and dwarf orange trees in green boxes broke up the harsh lines of the stonework. Deep willow armchairs with red cushions, showing signs of a frequent use, were scattered about at informal angles. A Boston newspaper of the evening before was lying on a wicker table, and into a hanging pocket of sweet grass was tucked a half-completed piece of embroidery. A silver box of cigarettes invited Besant from beside the newspaper, and—a thing beyond belief—there was also a half-used tin of his own precious “Hermitage.” Besant filled his pipe from his own pouch and sat down in the comforting sunshine. At last, he decided, he had discovered the secret of existence in the forbidding Crewe mansion.

At the same time, from the house behind him he began to be conscious of new sounds of life. At intervals of every few minutes he would hear voices, steps through the halls, occasionally the slamming of a screen door, interminable comings and goings. The first few times, at the sound of approaching steps, he would look up over his shoulder, ready to rise, but still no one intruded on his solitude. He became accustomed to it, in the end; indeed, began rather to like it.

“For, after all,” he mused, “here I am. Now what are they going to do about it?”

Chapter XVI

BESANT had been on the terrace for fifteen or twenty minutes before he slowly realized that he, himself, was not actually the only human being in sight. A hundred yards away, to the right, a short pier extended over the water, at its end a small, round pavilion, like a summerhouse, sheltered on two sides by green rattan awnings. It was only when a woman's arm appeared, raising one of the awnings, that Besant realized that two persons were sitting out there in apparent conference—the woman who had rolled up the awning and a slouched old gentleman in a wheel-chair, muffled down in a steamer rug and gazing, unmoving, out at the sea.

This latter figure, it was not hard to guess, must be that of the head of the house, Damon Crewe, and it was natural that Besant's attention should now be centered upon him. Having neatly fastened the ropes of the awning around a cleat, the woman resumed her seat beside her companion and, as it looked from a distance, began to read aloud, but, as he watched, Besant slowly grasped the fact that she was taking notes from dictation which the old gentleman was giving without once glancing in her direction or moving his eyes from the distant horizon.

The taking of notes a hundred yards away was not an exciting pastime for an onlooker, and

Besant's eyes had wandered away to the nearer points of the shore, when again, for at least the fifth or sixth time, he heard padding steps in the hallways of the house and a sudden cheery voice broke over his shoulder.

"Hello-hello-hello!" exclaimed the voice. "Who's smoking my tobacco?"

Besant looked up as a round and beaming young man in a brown tweed coat with white-flannel trousers and spotless white shoes came shooting through the screen door and out on the terrace. The newcomer was inordinately blond and inordinately jovial, even to a little whitish mustache, drawn out to two pin points. In his careless sport clothes and with his bouncing, good-natured manners he might have been a young Swedish prince off on a vacation.

The two men caught a full sight of each other at exactly the same moment and both drew back in some confusion. The newcomer was the first to apologize.

"I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed. "I had no idea who it was. I merely smelled the tobacco clear back in the halls and wondered who on earth could have sense enough to smoke it." As if with an afterthought he held out his hand. "My name is Ruiz Serrano."

"And mine is Besant."

With a quick, sharp glance of mutual appraisal, the two men shook hands. The newcomer's confusion had completely vanished, but Besant remained more bewildered than ever. If, mentally,

he had come prepared with a hundred separate images of the man whom he was employed to study, not one of them would have resembled, in the least detail, the figure before him. He tried to cover his amazement with his next sentence.

"Of course I have heard of you——" he began. But the other man broke in before he could finish.

"I know what you are thinking," he laughed. "You never saw a white-headed Spaniard. That's what everyone always says. As a matter of fact, there really are millions of them. They tell me that it's the Celtic strain. But I will admit that I am the worst in existence. I should have been a Norwegian. Then people wouldn't hoot every time they see me."

It was only as he continued to talk that a marked foreign intonation began to creep into his English speech, but his fluency remained perfect. Indeed, as he rushed on and on he seemed to acquire a friendly deluge of words that made it difficult to keep up with him. Besant, for his part, had to wait for some time before he could get in his own intended apology.

"Please let me explain," he suggested, "that I was not really stealing your tobacco."

Serrano glanced toward the little tin box on the table. "But why not?" he said. "You're perfectly welcome to it."

Besant took out his own crowded pouch and at last the other man seemed to grasp his real meaning.

"Oh, that's it!" he exclaimed. "You carry

'Hermitage,' too? That's very remarkable. I supposed that I was the only man in the world who had ever discovered it. We must form a club. Isn't it wonderful? Did you ever smoke 'Cobden Mixture'? I used it for years and thought it couldn't be beaten. But 'Hermitage' does it. Am I right? Yes? No? You agree? There's nothing can touch it."

But already his enthusiasm was growing forced and his alert, nervous gaze had begun to wander over the headland.

"I was just looking for Cynthia—for Miss Crewe," he explained. "You haven't seen her anywhere, have you?"

"I am sorry," answered Besant. "I am not even sure that I know her by sight. I only arrived last evening."

Serrano turned to him with a beaming grin, once more full of friendly interest.

"And you haven't yet seen any of the family?" he supplied. "Not even a mouse. I know how it is. Isn't this a curious house? I like it. Great. They never bother you. Never will. Restful. It's that. But it isn't exactly one's idea of a beehive."

Besant nodded out toward the little pavilion at the end of the pier. "That isn't Miss Crewe out there, is it?"

Serrano looked quickly out at the pier with a genuine eagerness that was not lost on Besant, but the eagerness turned at once to a clear disappointment.

"Oh, good Heavens, no!" he replied. "That's

Miss Dessler, the secretary. A nice woman, but—so exact. Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Besant, but I must tear on and find the lost household. Take all of that tobacco you want. I've tons and tons of it up in my room."

With the same bouncing, eager air with which he had come through the screen door, the young musician leaped off the steps of the terrace and disappeared around an angle of the house. Besant sat watching his retreating figure with a puzzled expression.

"About that young man," he mused to himself, "only one thing is certain. He may be all right and he may be all wrong, but, whichever he is, it will take Tim Hannigan a long time to like him."

Chapter XVII

IT would seem, indeed, as if the bouncing advent of Serrano had started more than one thing in motion, for when Besant looked back at the little pavilion the conference was apparently at an end. The secretary had risen to her feet and now came slowly down the pier, her notebook and pencil still in her hand. As she crossed a small stretch of turf and began to climb the steps of the terrace, Besant was able to recognize that if Serrano's description of her had been a little unkind, it was still very accurate. Miss Dessler, who might have been any age between thirty-five and fifty, was one of those women who seem determined to hold the whole world at bay by a sheer wall of tight-lipped refinement.

"Mr. Besant," she asked, coldly. Without waiting for even a nod in reply, she added, "Mr. Crewe will see you now," and passed abruptly into the house.

Besant looked at her rigid back with something almost a gasp. It was not a pleasant introduction for the interview which was ahead, and as he walked out on the echoing boards of the pier his whole attitude unconsciously stiffened. For a moment, in fact, it really did seem as if the secretary's manner were to reflect completely that of her employer, for, as Besant reached the little pavilion and paused, the old gentleman in the

wheel-chair did not even look over his shoulder. His eyes were still fixed out at sea where a sailing vessel with a curious barkentine rig was painfully creeping along the horizon.

"Will you kindly tell me," he began, in a harsh, carping voice, "what sense there can be in rigging a ship like that? If they are going to carry a crew large enough for a square-rig, why do they compromise with a schooner?"

"I am sure I can't tell you, sir," answered Besant, and at the stiff note in his voice the older man looked around sharply.

"Oh!" he grunted. "I thought it was one of the men."

Even now, however, he seemed to have forgotten completely for whom he had sent. He looked at Besant with gray eyes in which there was neither interest nor recognition until Besant himself felt called on to prompt him.

"My name is Besant," he prompted. "I came here on the suggestion of Mr. Cramp."

For a moment longer the gray eyes stared with indifference, then suddenly changed into an expression of complete recollection.

"Oh yes, yes, Mr. Besant!" replied the banker. "I had forgotten entirely. Sit down. Sit down."

With a faint hesitation Besant obeyed the command, but in spite of himself he felt his own hurt pride vanishing into a curious feeling of sympathy. It sometimes happens like that, in a way that upsets all reason. Two natures meet with a clash which is almost a passage of arms, then, with

hardly another word spoken, settle immediately into complete understanding.

Besant's first impression was that at last he had met a man who looked exactly like his preconceived image. Call the old financier "Colonel" Crewe, and the picture would need no further elaboration. His motionless limbs and his shrunk attitude explained his malady, but Besant had not heard him speak two sentences before he knew that what he had taken for signs of senile decay were merely the traits of a deep and wearied abstraction. Here was a man who lived in a world entirely apart, completely in his own intellect. How shrewdly, in return, he himself had been studied and placed on his peg, Besant was only to realize after some minutes.

The banker began to fumble with the wheels of his chair and Besant sprang up to help him.

"Just turn it a little—like that," said his host. "I wanted to get my eyes out of the sunlight."

Whether or not that were his real intention, the slight change in position brought him half facing his guest and started the conversation on an entirely new level. The older man looked across at Besant and his dull, gray eyes began to lose their absent expression.

"So Mr. Cramp sent you?" he began. But before Besant could make any answer his host ended his words with a curt explosion, "What a fool Arthur Cramp is!"

The sentence expressed so exactly Besant's own conclusions that he almost burst into a roar of

laughter. He knew that his complete agreement was not lost on old Damon Crewe, but he did feel obliged to put up a certain polite deprecation.

"I have really not known Mr. Cramp very long," he offered.

His host nodded bluntly to show his acceptance of the formal defense, but it was apparently not his habit to let anything interrupt his own train of thought.

"Just what did Cramp tell you?" he inquired. But immediately he seemed to recognize the unfairness of his own question. He added an interjection, "I suppose, among other things, he gave you to understand that my whole affairs are now entirely in his hands?"

Besant smiled openly. "Well, he did give me the impression that he was carrying a pretty heavy load."

The banker looked back at the sea and his shoulders gave a gruff, humorous hump. "Well, let him think so," he commented. "It doesn't do any harm and it keeps him contented. Arthur Cramp," he went on to explain in his tired, heavy monotone, "Arthur Cramp is one of the busy little hens of the legal profession. Such men do nine-tenths of the work in our world. In fact, they are so unceasingly active that if only one out of ten of the things they do amounts to anything, they still get through an amazing amount. We have to have them. They play their part. No one else would ever work so long or be so punctilious. In short, if I wanted to find out the name of every

stockholder of the Erie Railroad, I would get Arthur Cramp to do it for me. But if I had been arrested for arson, I think I should go to some other attorney."

"Perhaps I had better explain," interrupted Besant, "that I had no wish at all to go into this matter in the first place. I refused to take a cent for it and would be only too eager to drop it right now."

The banker stopped him by lifting his hand three inches from the wheel of his chair. "Oh, don't get angry, young man! I know all about you and I'm glad to have you. I saw Mr. Shea's letter from the *Record* office and I have made other inquiries. Mr. Shea is one of the shrewdest men in this universe and his recommendation is quite sufficient."

Although the old banker's mind was apparently as active as ever, yet there could still be no doubt about his physical malady. Even with these few sentences, he seemed to be fighting a weariness which again had begun to settle upon him. As if, indeed, recognizing the shortness of time, he plunged at once to the heart of the subject.

"Arthur Cramp showed you some letters?" he demanded.

Besant nodded. "Yes."

"And he tells me that you believe them all fakes."

"I do."

"But why should anyone go to all the trouble of writing such vicious nonsense?"

Besant paused for a moment before he replied. "A very small part of the trouble in the world," he answered at last, "is caused by persons who are genuine criminals. Most of it is caused by persons who merely lack strength in their hearts—or minds—by persons who are jealous, or foolish, or embittered."

The banker looked at him very sharply. "Have you," he asked, "any suspicion as to who might have written those letters?"

His manner more than his wording gave Royal Besant his real cue. He answered with some hesitation: "In a general way. Haven't *you*?"

The older man received the question without surprise or offense. He looked away at the sea, rather wearily. "For the moment," he said, "I don't think we had better go into that."

He turned brusquely. "Have you seen this man Ruiz Serrano?"

"I saw him for the first time," said Besant, "about ten minutes ago."

"And what do you think of him?"

Again Besant paused thoughtfully before he replied. "On general appearance," he commented, slowly, "I should hardly say that he was a crook."

The banker hitched his shoulders in curt impatience. "A crook, no!" he snorted. "You don't think, do you, that I would have a man under my roof for ten minutes if I had any real idea that he was a crook? But is he an imbecile? That's what I want to know. Is he as much of an ass as he looks?"

Besant laughed outright. "In reality," he answered, "of course he can't be. But I know what you mean. To the average person he probably would appear just what you have called him."

"But you haven't told me yet," insisted his host, "what you actually think of him. That's what I asked you."

"To be perfectly frank," said Besant, "I like him—in spite of myself—or, rather, in spite of *himself*."

To his utter amazement, the gruff old banker received his remark with a second humorous grunt. "And so you like him, eh?" he chuckled. "You think he's a pretty good fellow in spite of himself? Well, to tell the plain truth, so do I. And now that we understand each other, let's get down to business."

Chapter XVIII

THE old gentleman hitched his wheel-chair so that now he was completely facing Besant.

"Young man," he said, "do you smoke?"

"Indeed I do!" answered Besant.

"All right, then," said his host. "Turn around and you'll find an electric bell under that rail. Push it twice and I'll have some one bring you a cigar."

"If you don't mind," suggested Besant, "I'd much rather smoke my pipe. It will not be necessary to get a cigar."

"Yes, hang it! but I want one for myself!" retorted the banker. "I'm not supposed to smoke at all, but you're the first person of common sense that I've seen in three days, and I'm going to enjoy it."

Besant had already reached the rail and was fumbling for the push button when the old gentleman stopped him. "Wait a minute," he ordered, sharply. "In case you don't want a cigar yourself, ring it three times. That will bring some member of the family. No, wait a minute," he interrupted again. "Don't ring it at all. Just stand there and wave your hand at the terrace."

In natural perplexity, Besant looked up at the terrace and saw the girl whom he had watched from his windows that morning. In rather timid obedience to his orders he half raised his hand, but

the girl, who was looking down at the wicker table, moved around so that her back was toward him.

"Whistle!" commanded his inexorable host; but before Besant's dry, embarrassed lips could even attempt to comply, the girl turned again and looked squarely at the pavilion. Feeling quite like a schoolboy who was being hazed in some ridiculous way, Besant raised his arm in a stiff and angular fashion. He beckoned.

For a moment, apparently, the girl could not believe her own eyes. In a sort of stiff, uncomprehending anger she remained stockstill, staring out at the pier. Then understanding, no doubt, the true situation, she started toward the pavilion with slow and reluctant steps.

The banker made no greeting until she was standing at the side of his chair.

"Connie," he said, "this is Mr. Besant. And this is my younger daughter, Cornelia."

The girl looked up at Besant and met his gaze squarely with large, dark, unmoving eyes—and never in his life had Besant been so completely put in his place with a single look. Her acknowledgment of the introduction the girl confined to the faintest of bows, a slow, cold nod so deliberate and so indifferent that even Besant felt guilty for being himself. In a calm and straightforward way the girl was telling him that he played no part in her life and must never expect to. Quite so, thought Besant. But why make it so brutally obvious? What had he done?

The girl had not moved an inch from the side

of the wheel-chair and her father put his hand over hers.

"Connie," he said, "I'm smuggling. Mr. Besant has made me want to smoke. Go up to the closet of my dressing room—on the top shelf—and get me one of those thin, brown cigars without any bands. The ones that look like wood licorice."

The girl looked down at him with an expression not entirely different from that which she had given Besant.

"Father," she said, unsmiling, "you really ought not to. You know what the doctor said."

"Yes, I know," answered Damon Crewe, "but I'm going to do it just the same. Now run along, and if your mother sees you, the cigar is for Mr. Besant."

"Then why not bring the whole box?" The girl's slow, indifferent look had remained completely unchanged.

"All right. Bring the whole box."

In a silence expressive as a shrug the girl turned and walked up the pier. Her father waited until she was out of hearing, then turned to Besant.

"Now there, Mr. Besant, is a genuine problem and one that you can thank your lucky stars that you are not called on to solve. That child and her future are agony to me. You mustn't mind if she was rude to you. It probably means that she likes you very much indeed. She treats us all exactly the same. That girl has got every one of my own private faults. But what good are they going to do her? *She* can't go on the stock exchange."

Chapter XIX

BEFORE Besant could make any reply—possibly, indeed, to keep him from making any—the old gentleman briskly took up the thread of their previous conversation.

“Mr. Besant,” he said, “I’m troubled. I want to get a fresh viewpoint. That’s why you’re here. The men like Arthur Cramp are no use. And all my own friends are prejudiced, one way or the other. I can’t leave my wheel-chair. When I want to talk with the world I have to send out my wires and bring the world in to me. How long have you known J. N. Sanford?”

Besant looked up in utter bewilderment. “I don’t know him at all.”

His host was not in the least disturbed. “He says he knows *you*.”

“He is my neighbor,” answered Besant. “Possibly that was what he meant.”

His host nodded curtly. “Yes, possibly that was what he did say.”

“And I have met his daughter,” suggested Besant—“just once.”

The banker gave way again to one of his humorous grunts. “There’s another young lady,” he said, “who ought to be spanked. At any rate,” resumed the older man, “J. N. Sanford was here over the week end and, when I learned that Arthur Cramp’s young superdetective lived in Manhasset, I

asked him about you. Put your hand in my inside pocket—on the right-hand side.”

More bewildered than ever, Besant did as he was ordered and drew out a long clipping from a newspaper. At the sight of it he blushed, and the banker smiled with amusement.

“That yours?” he demanded. “Didn’t you write that?”

Besant nodded, for the clipping was his sole literary effort since leaving the *Record* office. It was a contribution to the Manhasset newspaper written during the heat of a taxation fight between the large summer property owners and the local town authorities. In tone it was highly humorous, but in substance it was deadly truth. It gave a whole column of blunt financial facts with the lightning strokes of a rapier wit. It was entitled “How to Extinguish the Revenue of a Given Village.”

Damon Crewe held out his stiff, rather trembling fingers and Besant gave back the clipping.

“Sanford,” commented the banker, “has been carrying that piece of yours in his pocketbook for months. He takes it out and reads it every time he feels blue. He showed it to me the moment I mentioned your name. And when I read it, myself, I sent right for Cramp. I told him: ‘All right. Bring on your young man from Manhasset.’”

For a moment the old financier turned his head again toward the sea. Once or twice in the silence he lifted his hands from the wheels of his chair and let them drop. As he began to speak again, his tone had a slow, monotonous accent in which

he might have been laying the state of a mortgage loan before a meeting of bank directors.

"Mr. Besant," he said, "my daughter Cynthia wants to marry a young musician. He is a man about whom I know nothing. If it were Connie, I would say, 'Go ahead, and Heaven help the young musician.' But Cynthia is a different proposition. Money doesn't enter into it. I can support a son-in-law if it comes to that. But character does. My oldest daughter is a girl for whom the whole face of life could be changed by a single week with a brute—or a hypocrite—or a weakling—or a cad.

"It was about two years ago," continued Damon Crewe, "that this young man, Ruiz Serrano, began to come to our house—in New York. He was not the first of his kind. In fact, my wife has a periodical weakness for celebrities—artists, musicians, and lions of all kinds. It was a good many months before I really grasped the fact that my daughter and this young Serrano were really intending to marry each other."

The old banker paused for a moment thoughtfully, and then went on in his same monotonous tone.

"About my own position in this affair there have been a good many false reports. It has been said that I was bitterly opposed to the whole romance—that I was determined to stop it at any cost. That is not wholly true. I was merely cautious. I fought the thing off to see if it would not die of its own accord. If I had really wanted to stop it, don't you suppose that I could have found some

way to do it? No matter what the cost to my daughter or anyone else? But understand, Mr. Besant, that while I am determined that my daughter shall not be led into a disastrous marriage, yet at the same time I am not going to kill the one real love of her life. She doesn't know that. I couldn't afford to let her know it just yet. She is better off with the brakes apparently on from all sides. Nevertheless, it is true. If this Serrano is the real thing, she can marry him, and God bless her. No one else has ever meant so much to her and probably no one else ever will."

Again the banker was obliged to stop for a moment, but in spite of his physical weakness a keener and liver tone had begun to creep into his voice.

"So far, so good," he resumed. "So long as it was merely a question between myself and two other persons, the matter seemed to be settling itself. It must, I suppose, have become obvious that I was making up my mind to consent and some one apparently was determined not to have it end that way. For, all at once, it would seem as if an organized cabal had sprung up against Ruiz Serrano—a determination to make a disagreeable business of the whole affair. Arthur Cramp has told you the main features. You yourself have seen the letters."

Besant nodded and the old gentleman continued with gathering disgust.

"It isn't just the letters," he almost exploded. "To those I didn't attach any more importance

than you do. But it's other things. Things that I can't even explain to myself. For six months or more there has been an air of distrust, of apprehension, all through my household. It may be merely my nerves. One little thing after another has just worn me down. I begin to distrust my own judgments. These endless, insidious things are beginning to get me. I begin to waver. I think to myself, 'No smoke without fire.' "

Again the old gentleman paused. Two or three times he raised, then dropped, his hands as if punctuating his own thoughts.

"I am a sick man, Besant," he exclaimed. "I can't leave this chair. A hideous crime could be committed out there on the beach ten yards before me and I couldn't raise a finger to stop it. I couldn't even get up and ring the bell. You have no idea what a hopeless feeling that gives you. Will power alone is not enough to fight it down. I need a man with health and youth and a keen, clear humor to lean on—to help me to see this thing with my old point of view."

There was only one thing for Besant to say as he sat looking down, self-consciously, at the rail before him. "I am sure, sir, that I appreciate your confidence in me."

But the banker wished none of that sort of thanks. "Oh yes, yes!" was all he replied.

A silence, a potent, uncomfortable silence, fell for a moment over the little pavilion. Slowly Besant looked up at the older man.

"Mr. Crewe," he said, "there is one question that

I naturally hesitate to ask, but which I really must ask if you want my actual judgment."

The banker looked at him sharply for a moment, studied his eyes, and then said: "Go ahead. I think I know what it is. But go on."

Even with this permission, Besant found it difficult, but with some effort he forced himself into his question. "How," he said, —"how does Miss Cynthia's mother look on this matter?"

For answer Damon Crewe looked wearily over the water, then slowly turned back. "Mr. Besant," he replied, "you are a very courageous young man to ask me that question, but I will give you an honest answer. Thirty years ago, Mr. Besant, I was married. I married a beautiful woman——"

The banker paused, but his pause was not hesitation. It was a deliberate stop. "Does that answer your question?" he asked.

"Yes," said Besant, "I think that it does."

Chapter XX

ECHOING steps, coming down the pier, would have put an end to this line of conversation even if there had been any desire on the part of either man to continue it. With the same curt air Cornelia, the younger daughter, marched into the little pavilion and without a word laid down in her father's lap a large box of cigars. With his slow-moving, trembling hand, the old gentleman opened the cover and then looked up in surprise. And well he might, for the cigars were huge, smooth, heavy, and as black as ink. They were cigars that, on the face of them, would have staggered a Cuban horse jockey.

"Good gracious, Connie!" demanded Damon Crewe. "What are these? I told you to bring me one of those health cigars that Mr. Sanford gave me."

"I know you did," answered the girl, "but I knew at the same time that these were what you really wanted. I thought that if you were going to break your rules at all, you might as well do it for something that you really enjoyed."

Her father answered with one of his grunting chuckles. "If you're going to sin, eh, sin for something worth while? Excellent logic, Connie, but the courts don't understand it. As it happens, I no longer want to smoke. But I will keep these cigars here now as a bait for Mr. Besant. I find

that he will make an excellent alibi for all my relapses."

Hitherto the girl had taken no more notice of Royal Besant than if he had been a plank in the floor or a pebble on the sand, but now she included him in a broad, impersonal statement, as she might have included an incompetent child or an upper servant.

"If Mr. Besant is going to have any lunch," she suggested, "he had better come now. They are just sitting down."

Her father nodded and waved his hand in a friendly way. "Go ahead, Besant," he commanded. "Don't mind me. I just peck a bit when they bring me a tray. Go along with Connie. She'll show you the way."

The girl had already turned, when her father called her back with a curious gentleness and again put his hand over hers.

"Connie," he suggested, "I don't suppose there is any use in wishing that sometimes you could see your way clear to showing a little better manners?"

Into the girl's cold, yet oddly childlike eyes came a faint flicker of amusement. "I'm sorry," she said. "I am distrait this morning. I am sure that Mr. Besant doesn't mind."

"I wasn't thinking of Mr. Besant," answered her father. "I was thinking of you. Mr. Besant is a far cleverer young man than you have any idea. If you carry on this way, you are going to wake up some day and find that he is laughing at you

in his sleeve. And you know that that is the one thing that can really cut you—so it hurts.”

The girl's eyes dropped under long lashes. “I am sorry,” she repeated, quietly, but if her father's admonition had had any effect she gave no sign of it as she walked up the pier with Besant, keeping rigidly just half a pace ahead of him and looking neither to right nor left.

With a cold, impersonal courtesy which was almost worse than actual hostility, she led the way across the terrace, through a long, dark hallway, and into a bright little room at the other side of the house. It was a built-out room of which three sides were composed of open glasswork and, in the clear, almost artificial light which this gave, three persons were seated at luncheon. At the far side of the round, glistening table showed the beaming face and brown tweed coat of Ruiz Serano, while of the other two persons there could no longer be any doubt. One of them must be the mother and the other, at last, was—Cynthia Crewe.

Chapter XXI

IF the situation was embarrassing for Besant as he stood, slightly hesitating, in the doorway, it was apparently no less so for the persons in the room. Instantly all conversation stopped and three pairs of eyes looked up. Serrano was the first to break the silence. He leaped to his feet with a jovial exclamation.

"Ah! Mr. Besant!" he called. "We'd begun to wonder what had become of you. Lost in the passageways. That was *my* theory. I was, myself, the first time I came here. You remember, Mrs. Crewe? All dressed for dinner, that night? Started out bravely from my rooms. My fiddle under my arm, like a wandering minstrel. Then lost. Absolutely lost. Right in the hallways. You remember you had to send out men with lanterns and ropes. I was nearly starving before they found me and carried me in. I'd keep dogs if I were you. Save endless lives. Dogs can find people like a shot!"

His hostess looked up from the table. "Francisco!" she commanded. "Don't be absurd."

"But I *was*, Besant," insisted Serrano. "I swear I was. Lost for an hour at the very least. When they found me I was sobbing like a child."

From behind Besant's shoulder came a calm, cool voice.

"Does it occur to any of you," asked Connie,

"that Mr. Besant does not know a soul here? Mother, this is Mr. Besant."

The hostess half turned at the table and nodded in a fashion that was friendly enough—a stout, rather silly woman with a vague wealth of fine yellow hair. Fat wrists, jeweled fingers, rather old-fashioned costume, and figure very pronounced—everything about her was dowager-like except her face, and that, still faintly pretty and faintly discontented, showed a mind which, in some far distant day, had been locked up and sealed at the age of nineteen.

With this introduction, the younger daughter apparently felt that her obligations had been fulfilled, but immediately the older sister took up her duties. She rose hospitably and came toward Besant, holding out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Besant?"

Except Serrano's it was the first friendly hand which had been extended to him since his arrival, and a recognition of it must have showed in Besant's eyes, for as they met Cynthia Crewe's she flushed faintly and her own eyes dropped. Her slight confusion gave Besant an instant in which to take in a picture of her, completely supplanting those which he had already formed in his imagination.

Slightly taller, slightly darker, and slightly simpler in outline, Cynthia Crewe was, in general appearance, not unlike her sister, but with none of her sister's tartness and, possibly, with less of her strength of mind. Where the younger girl's

eyes were those of a hoyden, a rebel, the older sister's were gentle and kind.

A manservant appeared from somewhere and held a chair for Besant. Connie had already slumped into hers, near the door, with the attitude of a sulky child called in from its tricycle and forced to gulp down its bread and milk. Until almost the end of the meal she did not say another word. Her momentary flash of good nature was apparently gone. Just once her mother looked toward her.

"Connie!" she ordered. "Please don't draw pictures with that stick of celery. It makes me nervous."

Without a word the girl tossed the celery on the plate before her and the talk of the others went on as before.

For his own part, Besant did not find the luncheon as great an ordeal as he would have supposed. Whatever undercurrents of distrust may have lain beneath the peace of their table, the members of the Crewe family had the happy gift of commonplace talk. Serrano's terrific flow of banter seemed to die down after its first rush and this was somewhat to Besant's relief. Indeed, he began to wonder whether the young musician did not deliberately adopt this rather clownish method to get over awkward moments in a house where he must have been almost constantly ill at ease.

It was not until almost the end of the meal that Besant himself was forced into the prominence

which he had hoped to escape. There had been some talk of a sailing trip in the afternoon, and with an implication that might or might not have been intended, the hostess turned.

"I suppose, Mr. Besant," she said, "that you will be occupied with my husband most of your time?"

With a glance that was absolutely malicious, Connie looked up from her side of the table and spoke her first word. "I hope," she said, "that you won't tire poor father too much with facts and figures." Very demurely she looked down at her plate and added, for all the world, "Mr. Besant is a mining engineer."

The deliberate cut was too obvious to be mistaken, but instantly from the other side of the table Besant had a friend in need.

"And you, young lady," exclaimed Serrano, "what do you know about a mining engineer?"

"Only one thing," answered Connie, significantly. "A mining engineer is a man who is trained to dig very deep."

"She bites!" exclaimed Serrano. "But now, thank Heaven, there are two of us to share her stings."

Chapter XXII

THE luncheon ended as informally as it had begun, and the afternoon dragged on in the same desultory way. Connie disappeared first of all, and then Cynthia and Serrano—presumably on their boating expedition. Mrs. Crewe announced that she was about to take “my nap” with all the pomp of a woman who believes that her most intimate affairs are of supreme importance to all the world. Besant was left to himself, not even his host or the secretary making any calls on his time. Even Tim could not be located when his master began to wonder what new form of mischief he might have discovered. On inquiry through the butler, the chauffeur, and some of the stablemen, Besant found that Tim had gone to Gaylordsville, ostensibly to get new grease cups for the car, but probably to go to the movies. Besant, himself, read for a while, walked down and inspected the boats, but put in most of the hours simply smoking and basking in the sun.

At tea time the family met again, straggling out on the terrace in the same lackadaisical manner. As usual, Connie was absent, but as for the general tone of the occasion, the afternoon’s occupations seemed to have done them all good. Even Besant began to feel strangely at home.

The tea itself had just been brought out and Cynthia Crewe had sat down at the spirit lamp

when the butler came to her chair and said something over her shoulder. She rose, went into the house, and when she returned spoke at once to Besant with a mischievous smile.

"Mr. Besant, I have good news for you. Dorothy Sanford is coming to-night. She asked after you and told me to give you her love."

Naturally Besant flushed, but already Mrs. Crewe had looked up at the name.

"Dorothy Sanford?" she asked. "What is she coming for? She's only just gone."

Her daughter looked toward her in surprise. "Why, mother!" she exclaimed, gently. "I'm sure she won't come if you don't wish her."

And apparently her mother had spoken more tartly than she had intended. "Oh no!" she said. "I didn't mean that. I'm glad to have her. But Dorothy Sanford's so noisy. I don't want a lot of fuss in this heat."

As if this outbreak were a matter of frequent occurrence, the daughter smoothed the matter down, but nevertheless proceeded just as she had intended to do in the first place.

"The poor child's lonely," she explained, more to the company at large than to her mother. "She finds that her father won't be up, this week end, at all, and naturally she doesn't want to stay in that great, empty house all alone."

From inside the long, screened windows sounded a voice that was now familiar and Connie came stalking out on the terrace in better spirits than Besant had yet seen.

"Who doesn't want to stay in a great empty house?" she demanded. "Who's coming now?"

"Dorothy Sanford," answered Serrano, promptly, "the antidote to you!"

To Besant's surprise, Connie did not take the slightest offense. Indeed, she seemed to enjoy a good, sportsman-like thrust.

"Well, well, well!" she mused. "Our little Dorothy. So she's coming back, is she? That's good. Now our cast will be all complete." With her slow, calm manner she turned to Besant. "You know Dorothy Sanford, don't you, Mr. Besant?"

Besant found no answer but to nod, and Connie added, with a faint twinkle, "And what kind of a mining engineer is *she*?"

Chapter XXIII

IF Dorothy Sanford, however, was to make her appearance that day, she would have to make it, as Besant had done, very late in the evening. At dinner time she had not arrived, nor for an hour or so afterward. Coffee was served in one of the long, formal drawing-rooms and Besant's one hope was that Serrano would be induced to play. He even spoke of this tentatively, to Cynthia Crewe, and, somewhat to his embarrassment, she repeated the request to Serrano. The latter came at once to where Besant was standing.

"You really like music?" he asked. "You want me to play? I only wish that I could, but the salt air has got into all of my strings. I haven't one that is any good. I am hoping to get some more by mail to-morrow."

His eagerness was quite unexpected to Besant, who had the idea that famous musicians could never be persuaded to play in private houses, but, from their first meeting that morning, Serrano had attached himself to Besant with a good will which Besant himself was not quite ready to explain.

In any case, it was too fine an evening for any of them to stay long indoors and the company quickly dissolved, Besant finding himself again in sole possession of the terrace with nothing to do but smoke in the starlight. When all the lights behind him were extinguished except those in the

halls, he rose and went up to his rooms. There were some books up there on saddlery and gardening, more curious than interesting, into which he had wished to look. He had just taken down the first volume when he heard a motor car on the drive outside and, a few minutes later, feminine voices in the hall.

Again the house grew quiet, and Besant read in a casual fashion until nearly twelve o'clock. He had just replaced the books in their former order and was going to bed when a knock came at his door. In some surprise he called out, "Come in."

The door opened and Ruiz Serrano entered the room with a quiet, matter-of-face manner completely different from his usual bouncing air.

"I hope I am not disturbing you, Mr. Besant," he said, "but the girls left me all alone, just as they did you. I can never sleep. I was strolling around the grounds when I saw a light in your room. I thought perhaps you would not mind if I came up for a few minutes' chat."

"Not at all," answered Besant. "Won't you sit down?"

Looking around the room casually and selecting a chair, the visitor sat down. He seemed completely at his ease and said nothing more while he carefully inserted a fresh cigarette in the long ivory holder which he held in his hand. As he lighted a match he looked up again with a smile.

"Well," he announced, "your little neighbor, Miss Sanford, has arrived at last."

"I'm thoroughly glad of it," he added, a moment later. "She's good for the soul."

The visitor paused in a way that showed clearly enough that he was merely making this casual statement until he could get to the point of what he had actually come to say. For a moment he watched the smoke of his fresh cigarette a little uneasily, then turned abruptly.

"Mr. Besant," he said, "I think it is only fair to tell you that I know perfectly well why you are here."

It was the frankness of the statement rather than the fact itself that took Besant most completely by surprise.

"I imagine that you *all* must," he answered, rather stiffly. "Miss Connie's rather pointed statements at luncheon left little doubt of that in my mind."

"Poor Connie," smiled Serrano. "She is a good girl, but how difficult life is going to be for her if she never passes an opportunity to bang humanity in the eyes."

Besant smiled a faint agreement, but Serrano drew the conversation immediately to its main theme.

"This is going to be a very difficult situation for both of us, Mr. Besant. You are here to watch me and as long as you are here I must be eternally conscious that I am being watched." He drew a long puff from his cigarette holder, then added, more in his usual way: "But if I must be watched, Mr. Besant, by a man of your sort, can't we agree

on a certain etiquette of the duel? In other words, is there anything to prevent a humorous twinkle or two between the clashes of arms?"

"I don't see why there should be," agreed Besant. He added, slowly, "It is possible that my own position is not quite thoroughly understood."

"I hope so," said Serrano. "Well, then——"

But before he could continue Besant held up his hand. "Wait a minute," he commanded. "What is that?"

For a moment both men sat in a tense, listening silence in which nothing was heard. Then softly, from out of the darkness, under the window, began a strange snuffling sound. There was another moment of silence; then came a woman's voice, in a piercing shriek!

Chapter XXIV

AT the wild shriek from under the walls of the house both men leaped to the windows, only to realize, as quickly, the utter futility of that move. With a single impulse, both turned and rushed to the door. Serrano was the first to reach it, but, his hand on the knob, he stopped with an oddly firm air of authority.

"Mr. Besant," he said, quietly, "just a minute, before we go out. Don't let us make this thing any worse than it is."

"Open that door!" commanded Besant, sharply; but before the words had been even spoken he realized that the other man had been entirely right. The shriek had not been repeated. In other parts of the vast stone building it might not even have been heard. A wild rush down the halls would only have served to rouse the whole household.

Serrano flushed at the sharpness of the tone in which he had been addressed, but he did not stop to argue. He opened the door at once, and Besant followed him out.

In the hallways, which were lighted only by dim night lights, were found merely that heavy padded silence and the faint smell of upholstery which Besant had begun to associate with them, and the two men crept quietly to the broad main staircase. At the bottom, under a dim red light,

could be seen a furtive, listening figure in a padded Chinese-silk dressing gown, one hand on the stone newelpost, peering anxiously into the dimness of the lower hall.

As the two men stepped cautiously down the stone stairs, Serrano spoke in a low tone. The figure started in alarm, then relaxed and waited for them to come down. It was Cynthia Crewe. As Serrano reached the step above her and put his hand out solicitously, she looked first at him and then at Besant with pleading, frightened eyes.

"It's Connie!" she whispered. "Where is she? What's happened? Where can she be?"

"Connie?" exclaimed Serrano. "What do you mean?"

The girl's arm in its wide, drooping sleeve, moved with an angry impatience. "Connie!" she insisted. "Didn't you hear her? I knew her voice. Aren't you going to do something? Go see what's the matter."

Again taking the lead, Serrano cautiously stepped down into the darkness of the hallway, Besant following at his heels. At the opening of an alcove they were met by a sudden shaft of cool, fragrant night air and Serrano stepped quickly into a little side corridor as black as ink. As Besant followed he could hear Cynthia Crewe's quick, frightened breaths over his shoulder. Ahead was an open doorway into the starlight, on the landward side of the house, and the two men crowded through it almost together.

Beyond the open doorway were two stone steps,

and Besant half missed the first. As he recovered himself he gave a quick, unintended exclamation, and Serrano whispered; "Be careful. There's another below." A moment later Besant felt the cool turf of the lawn through the thin soles of his evening shoes.

But still only silence met them, the friendly silence of a June night—the chirp of a cricket, the scent of damp grass, and the faint, distant swish of the sea. Cautiously the two men had stepped out to explore in different directions, when Besant's ear was caught by the same low, snuffling sound which he had heard from the window above. Looking in the direction from which it had come, he saw a dim patch of white in the darkness and turned quickly back toward the wall of the house. As he drew nearer he heard a repressed sob, a quick, hysterical drawing of breath, and saw a frail figure shrinking back into an angle of the stonework, not ten feet from the door. He had almost reached the figure before he saw that it was Connie, weeping in frightened, muffled gasps, her hands over her face.

"Miss Crewe!" he said, in a low voice. "What's happened?"

Instantly Serrano was at his side, but Cynthia Crewe, who had been waiting timidly in the doorway, rushed almost fiercely past them both and took the younger girl in her arms.

"Connie! Connie, sweetheart!" she begged. "What is it? What are you doing here?"

For a moment her sister answered only with

frightened gasps, then replied in thin, broken sobs. "There was someone there!" she gasped. "Some one touched me. It brushed against me. I could hear some one breathe!"

"Who touched you?" asked Besant, quickly. "What direction was it?"

But the older sister put up her arm and waved him back. "Please don't," she begged, gently. "Not now."

Still supporting her trembling and shrinking sister, the older girl carefully led the way back up the steps of the house. The two men waited until they had passed through the little dark corridor and the outline of their heads had appeared again in the faint, red light of the main hall beyond. Only then did they follow, Serrano carefully closing and locking the door from the inside. As they, themselves, passed into the light of the hall there began to be visible the first signs of a tardy and hesitant general alarm. At the rear end of the hall a service door opened and there appeared the blinking, uncertain face of one of the menservants. Seeing the two guests still in their dinner clothes, walking casually toward the stairs, the man apparently concluded that he must have been mistaken and hurriedly closed the door. A moment later, in the hallway above, Besant could hear Mrs. Crewe's querulous, anxious voice, and then hear Cynthia reassuring her in quiet, firm tones.

"Nothing, mother. It's absolutely nothing.

Nothing's happened at all. I'll tell you about it in the morning."

By the time that Besant and Serrano had reached the head of the stairway both sisters had disappeared, and without a word the two men turned off to their rooms. It was hardly necessary for either of them to say that there could be no continuance of their talk that night.

Chapter XXV

AS usual, it was Tim Hannigan who wakened Besant on the following morning.

"Well, Mr. Besant," he hailed, "and who are you going to lick *to-day*?"

By this cheery salutation, Besant knew that Tim had settled once more into the habits of his regular routine, for Tim had greeted him with exactly that same phrase on every pleasant morning for six months. On stormy days he varied it by saying: "Well, Mr. Besant, raining again. Guess we'll have to give back the money and send the crowd home."

Besant, however, was not in the mood to respond to gayety, and apparently even Tim had been boisterous merely as a matter of form. As soon as he saw that his master was thoroughly awake he stepped to the side of the bed and spoke in a tone of heavy confidence.

"Say, Mr. Besant," he demanded, "what kind of a place is this, anyway? What's the big idea? Of this midnight business?"

"What do you mean by this midnight business?" asked Besant.

Tim nodded his head and winked his eye with the air of a man on whom the world had never yet slipped over any of the shady stuff.

"I'll tell you," he said. "Last night I was

coming home pretty late. Fact it was just about twelve o'clock——"

A sudden suspicion which might be highly enlightening or highly vexatious crept at once into Besant's mind. "What were you doing out at that hour?" he interrupted.

Tim wilted into a shamefaced grin. "I'll tell you," he repeated. "You see, I had a little business back at Manhasset."

"Back at Manhasset? You ought to have told me if you were going back there."

"I know," confessed Tim, "but I didn't want to get you all worked up. You see, this was just a little matter of the ferret."

"The ferret?" echoed Besant. "Have you still got that little beast with you?"

Tim's eyes opened with righteous indignation. "And where else could I have him?" he demanded. "Somebody's got to feed him, ain't they? He's made all the trips with me except this last one, and now I've got him up in a box in my room."

"Go on," said Besant, helplessly.

Tim was willing to meet him halfway and at once he dropped his own indignant tone.

"You see," he explained, "me and that fellow downstairs was wondering what we could do to start up a little interest in the sporting line."

"What fellow downstairs?" asked Besant.

"The Englishman," replied Tim, "the one that saw Bombardier Wells fight Carpentier. He's the sort of odd man around the house—cleans the silver and waxes the floors and so on. Him and

me is getting quite pally. So, yesterday afternoon, I asked him if he ever see a first-class ferret and he says, 'No-indeed,' and so I takes him down to my room over the stables and shows him REXY."

"Is that the ferret's name?" asked Besant.

"Well it is until I find a better one," replied Tim. "I tells the little loafer that if he wants a better name he's got to earn it.

"Anyway," continued Tim, "when the Englishman sees REXY he says, 'Aoh!' he says, 'do you call that a ferret? That's what we calls a polecat in the aold country.'

"'You're a damn liar,' I says. 'A polecat is a skunk and this is a ferret.'

"'Well, we won't fight about it,' he says. 'What can he do?'

"'He can kill rats, for one thing,' I says.

"'You don't say!' says the Englishman. 'Let's see him kill one.'

"So he fussed around downstairs where the horses are and comes back with a big wire trap with a rat in it—alive and all whiskers. Seems they always have trouble with rats around the grain and they have a trap set all the time. But they leave one rat in it to draw the others. Get the idea?"

"I get it," replied Besant, solemnly.

"And so," continued Tim, "we poked around until we found a big empty crate that some fancy poultry had come in—live ducks. It had wire netting over the top. 'This 'll make an excellent ring,' says the Englishman.

"So the Englishman opens the trap and dumps in the rat and I opens the peach basket and dumps in Rexy. Then we claps the wire netting back over the top. 'Now go to it!' we says."

"Did they?" asked Besant.

"Naaw!" replied Tim, contemptuously. "All they did was to each sit in a corner. They didn't even look at each other. There was some feathers there of the poultry and the ferret he begun to sniff a little at those. So I kicked the box. 'Come on, gentlemen,' I says. 'The gong ain't rung yet. What you stalling for? Trying to sell us the picture rights? Give us a little action,' I says. But even that didn't do no good.

"'That's a hell of a ferret,' says the Englishman, and, as it was, I didn't have no comeback.

"So then we sits down and begins to figure how we could work some kind of a game on the other lads, especially the lads in the stable. I says: 'I tell you what I'll do. I'll go back to the man who sold me this ferret and find out what he *will* fight.'

"'Maybe he won't fight nothing,' says the Englishman.

"'Well, I never saw anything yet,' I says, 'that wouldn't fight *something*. Even actors will fight each other.'

"So just about dark I hops in the car and zipped it back to Manhasset to have a talk with the man who had sold me the ferret. I guess he knew I'd be coming back sooner or later, 'cause he looked at me kind of funny. I told him how the ground

lay and he says, right off, 'What you want,' he says, 'is a weasel.'

"'Why do I want a weasel?' I says. 'You can't work that on me again. You've already sold me a bum ferret. If I buy anything more of you, it 'll be a rattlesnake or a tiger. I want something with guts,' I says, 'something you 'll guarantee to win the belt or money refunded.'"

"'All right,' says the man, 'I'll do business with you on that basis.'

"You see," explained Tim to his master, "a weasel and a ferret looks just about alike, but a weasel is ten times as good a fighter. The only trouble is that a weasel ain't white except in the winter. I told the man I was staging a ferret fight inside a week and I couldn't wait until winter."

"And so," interrupted Besant, "I suppose that the man advised you to paint a weasel."

Tim grinned. "Well it wasn't exactly that," he confessed, "but something like it. Give him a week, the man says, and he'll furnish a weasel that couldn't be told from a ferret. You see what we're going to do? We're going to stage a fake fight, maybe this evening—Rexy *versus* the rat, us rooting hard for Rexy, talking big about what a wonderful scrapper he is and how we wouldn't take *no* money for him. Course when they get in the ring Rexy lies down on us cold and the other lads give us the ha-ha. They see there ain't nothing to it. Then of course me and the Englishman we pretend to get awful disgusted and sore—call the poor ferret all kinds of names. We let the

other lads kid us for two or three days—do nothing but stand it. Then sudden we seem to get angry. Now do you get me? We offer to bet that our ferret can lick any rat they bring on. Then of course we ring in the weasel—put him up on the bills as Remy—and clean the whole crowd right down to their boot straps.”

“But how,” suggested Besant, “do you know that that man in Manhasset won’t simply sell you another ferret?”

“I’ve thought of that,” replied Tim, “but a ferret’s got red eyes and a weasel ain’t.”

“But won’t the rest of the crowd see that,” asked Besant, “on the night of the avalanche?”

Tim grinned. “No they won’t,” he replied. “Not where we’re going to stage it.”

Chapter XXVI

BESANT turned on his pillows and picked up his watch from the little stand at the head of the bed.

"Tim," he suggested, "I don't want to break in on the sporting films or the news of the day, but when are you going to spring your big-feature story?"

"Just a minute," said Tim. "I'm coming to that, but I wanted to explain how it was, so you wouldn't think I was running away just for nothing.

"Well," resumed Tim, "what with the man and all and a bunch of boys who wanted to see me down at Portuguese Joe's, it was pretty late when I got back here, and I had forgotten clean that the main gates to the grounds was likely to be locked. Sure enough, they was. I wasn't going to wake up that crab who lives in the gate house and make any more disturbance. I nearly had to punch his head for him the first night I got here. So I runs the car down to the service gates near the stables; but they was locked, too. The only thing for it was to douse my lights, lock up the transmission, and leave the car outside in the sand.

"Then I begins to say to myself, 'Now, how do I get into this dandy arena?' It looked for a time as if I'd have to shinny up over the wall, but then I remembered that I had seen a little foot gate with

a turnstile, just wide enough to let in one person. It was dark as Joe Gans out there in the lots, and all the sand in Massachusetts got into my shoes. But I goes feeling my way up along the wall and had almost got to the place where the gate ought to be, when sudden I stops. Click! goes the turnstile and someone comes out. It looks to me just like a girl.

"Whoever it was, they didn't see me. They looks around for a bit and then gives a sort of low whistle—like this, 'Hoo-hoo.'"

Tim grinned. "Well," he said, "I'm willing to hoo-hoo with anyone. So, thinks I, I'll take a chance. And I whistles back—just the same way. 'Hoo-hoo,' I says, 'Hoo-hoo.' But I guess I wasn't the lad for who they was giving the party. The girl, or whoever it was, ducks back through the gate, and at the same time some one else comes sliding down the outside of the wall on the far side of the gate, making an awful crash in the ivy."

"Did you see who it was?" asked Besant, quickly.

"Gosh, no!" replied Tim, "but I could hear him grunt as he landed and I could hear him run. 'Don't mind me,' I says to myself—'don't mind me. I ain't got no warrant for nobody.'"

"Just the same, while I was waiting for things to quiet down I thought I'd nosy around a little. So I goes sneaking along in the same direction and, by George! there was another car waiting outside the walls—with all the lights out and nobody in it. 'Smokes!' I says to myself, 'if I

didn't know this place was respectable, I'd begin to think they was selling something here.'

"Thinks I, I'll give this little car the once-over. It was one of them snappy little Eyetalian cars—a four-cylinder Fabre with a New York license and a funny radiator. As soon as I sees it I gets a sort of a hunch. I says to myself, 'I've seen that car somewhere before.' You know them little Fabres ain't as common as flivers. 'Mr. Car,' I says, 'I'm going to get your number. Then the next time I see you I'll know who you are.' I had a match all ready to light, but then I thinks, 'Shucks! it's none of my business.' I decided I'd scared enough people for one night. So I goes back to the turnstile.

"By this time," continued Tim, "the coast seems to be all clear. I walks in through the gate and starts toward the house. Then, by Jiminy! back again through the little park comes this same lassie I'd seen before. I could tell her because the spots of white was all in the same places. I stood right still and hugged up to a tree like I was part of it. She passed not ten feet away."

"Did you see what she looked like?" demanded Besant.

"It was too dark for that," replied Tim, "but, Mr. Besant, let me tell you something. You know that little joke suitcase that we rigged up for you—me and Miss Sanford?"

"Yes."

"Well, when Miss Sanford first brought it out, that afternoon in Manhasset, the little bottle inside

it was full of perfumery. 'Smell,' says Miss Sanford, and so I smelled. Fine stuff, I thought it. I said you'd like it fine for when you wore evening dress. But Miss Sanford says, 'No, we'll have to give him something more suitable to his viryle character.' So she dumped it all out, right in the sink. For a minute you'd thought they'd been giving a flower show right there in the Sanfords' kitchen—or maybe a Syrian wedding. Then she washed out your little bottle and filled it up with some kind of wine. But last night when this lady passed in the dark I smelled exactly the same kind of perfume. You couldn't miss it. I'd already smelled too much of it not to know it again.

"But was it Miss Sanford herself that you saw last night in the grounds?" asked Besant.

"How was *I* to know?" retorted Tim. "At any rate, I was hoping to Nob that it wasn't. So I hugged up to my tree and crossed my fingers and tried not to breathe. Then what do you think?"

"I've given up thinking," answered Besant. "What was it?"

"Just then," replied Tim, "when I was making up my mind to sneak out and go on, *another* young lady comes creeping up right to my tree, not knowing I was behind it. She stood there and waited nearly a minute, I'll bet you. I must have moved or something, for sudden she gave a little sort of 'Heh!' then put out her hand and touched—not the bark of the tree, like she expected, but Scissors Hannigan!"

"What did she do?" asked Besant.

"Do?" answered Tim. "She yelled. Gol-lee! what a yell! I never heard anything like it except a fire engine, and I never heard *that* three inches from my ear. I must have jumped ten feet on the first hop, and the next thing anyone knew about *me* I was up in my room over the stables, pulling the blankets on top of my face and snoring like all-get out—to prove my own alibi."

Chapter XXVII

ALTHOUGH Besant was already in possession of one or two details to supplement Tim Hannigan's narrative, he saw no reason for sharing them with his ingenuous valet. As soon as Tim had gone he arose to a day which, in its outward features, promised to be much like that which had preceded it. The same manservant, with his polite "Good morning, sir," served his breakfast in his rooms, then left him entirely to his own devices; but, as Serrano himself had pointed out, the utter solitude in which one was left in the Crewe house was not without its advantages. For one thing, it left plenty of time to think, and, like Tim, Besant began to feel that the time had come to settle down to the serious business of his mission. Having now, as it were, surveyed the field, he might draw at least some preliminary conclusions. He lighted his pipe, picked out a big, cool chintz armchair in his little sitting room, and sat down to think matters over.

Concerning Serrano, Besant could still hold but one serious opinion. The man might, at the worst, be a vexatious trifler, one of those glib, cosmopolitan creatures in whom a fast flow of inconsequence passes for charm. In the sense that he was willing to marry a wealthy girl in order to further his own career, he might even be rated as an ambitious adventurer. But with these

points—purely as such—Besant did not see how he himself could have more than a formal concern. He might state them—yes. Damon Crewe had distinctly asked him to do that. Besant had been twice assured that his office was not so much that of an investigator as of a friendly guardian; but if there were nothing more serious than this against the young violinist, the real decision must, in Arthur Cramp's words, rest ultimately with Cynthia Crewe and her father. In order to reduce the matter to that simple basis, Besant saw that his first efforts must be to sort out the more noxious evidence, to eliminate those facts which were puerile or accidental and be prepared to use his cold common sense in judging any new developments which might arise.

If Royal Besant's very genuine police experience had taught him nothing else, it had at least taught him not to waste effort in vague, romantic directions. In actual life a detective does not spend much time on finger marks or cigar ashes. To get at the pith of a case he simply asks at once for a list of the victim's nearest acquaintances.

In this light Royal Besant was ready to treat the packet of anonymous letters. Taken purely by themselves, it would have required the whole Post Office Department of the United States to make any real effort to trace them. Besant had decided to use a more common and much simpler method—to discover first the person who would be most *likely* to have written them, and then, working backward, connect that individual with the

letters. From his general knowledge of such affairs, as well as from the way in which the letters themselves had been phrased and addressed, Besant had been convinced from the first that the web of ill will cast over Serrano had originated somewhere within the confines of Damon Crewe's own social circle. That Damon Crewe himself believed the same thing, he had distinctly hinted.

For the present, then, Besant decided that his principal task lay right at his hand, within the Crewe household—to study the personalities centered therein and to formulate a more definite picture of what was actually happening. What made this task peculiarly difficult was the rather chivalric plane on which he had volunteered his own services and on which, apparently, they had been accepted. Except for old Mr. Crewe himself, he was not even at liberty to ask the simplest questions.

The episode of the previous evening was a case in point. What had Connie been doing out there in the park at midnight? Did her presence there have any connection at all with the presence of the other young woman whom Tim had seen, with that of the man who had jumped off the wall, or with that of the unlighted car which had been waiting outside the gates in the darkness?

In the case of a girl of Connie's bleak, rather sullen temperament, her part in the adventure might have been wholly by chance. She was of just the type and just the age to form habits of strolling around at all hours of the night, simply

to vent her smoldering moods on the starlight. Two or three direct, harmless questions might have immediately cleared away this whole phase of the incident, but even those questions Besant knew that he would never be permitted to ask. Cynthia Crewe's pleading gesture in the darkness had silenced for all time that line of investigation.

That the nature of his own mission was known to several persons in the house was also a matter of no great surprise to Besant. Cynthia Crewe and Serrano, at least, would have been very simple indeed if they had not suspected it. In the sensitive, nervous state in which both of them must have been living for months, such facts have a way of communicating themselves by a sort of self-conscious intuition. When a single problem has been distorting a household for months and an utter stranger appears for an indefinite visit, it would be an exceedingly innocent mind which did not at once look for some connection.

Furthermore, thanks to the peacock and Dorothy Sanford, Besant was now anything but a stranger—and anything but a mining engineer. As Besant himself had suspected in advance, Cramp's clumsy ruse concerning his profession must have been about as deceptive as a baby's rattle. Whatever its purpose, Cynthia Crewe's first flight from home had been terminated abruptly at the house of her friend and ally in Manhasset—and terminated, without doubt, because the family attorney had immediately appeared in the same vicinity. In Dorothy Sanford's words, it had

been Arthur Cramp, and not Tim, who had prematurely spilled the beans.

That Cramp had appeared in Manhasset largely by accident the two conspirators next door could have had no absolute way of knowing. The fact that Cramp and Besant had spent a long hour in close consultation must have been quite sufficient for them at that awkward moment. For all they knew, Besant might have been in touch with the family lawyer for months and, whether he had or not, his connection with the case had been obvious from that time on. Under Dorothy Sanford's adroit questioning, poor Tim Hannigan had told several things that both young women knew to be the most ridiculous fabrications. And the next day Besant himself had appeared at Legget's Harbor. It would have been an idiot indeed who would not have suspected, at least in a general way, why he had come. The only surprise to Besant was that Cynthia Crewe and her lover were willing to accept his intrusion in such a sportsman-like spirit.

Nothing, in short, had yet occurred to alter materially Besant's original opinion of the situation. In rather eager interest as to what this new day might bring forth, he rose from the chintz armchair in his little sitting room, knocked out his pipe, and prepared to sally forth. A new development was to appear, however, from an unexpected quarter, for, without a knock, the door suddenly burst open and Tim Hannigan came grinning in.

Tim carefully closed the door and looked cautiously around, as if half the world were within hearing. Then, facing his master, he gave a huge, confidential wink and jerked his head over one shoulder.

"Say, Mr. Besant," he announced, "I've got a good one!"

Besant was rather fed up on Tim for the moment, impatient to get away. "Don't tell me," he said, "that you've been to Manhasset again—or arranged a new fight between an angleworm and a spider."

"Oh no!" replied Tim. "It ain't nothing like that. But you remember what I was telling you—about last night? About the man on the wall that jumped down and ran away when I told the girl hoo-hoo?"

"Yes, I remember," said Besant. "What about it?"

"Well, this about it," said Tim. "You know that Swiss fellow down in the servants' quarters—the one that's valet to Mr. Serrano?"

Besant nodded and Tim winked again. "Well, I just found out something about that Switzer. He ain't appearing to-day, he ain't. Know why? He's in bed with swollen-up hands and a fine sprained ankle!"

Chapter XXVIII

HAVING learned from the previous day where to find the center of life in the big Crewe mansion, Besant, on leaving his rooms, headed at once for the sunshine of the east terrace. His instinct, moreover, had been quite correct, for, as Besant hesitated for a moment at the long French windows, he found Dorothy Sanford and Ruiz Serrano engaged in a sober and intimate conference across the little wicker table. Serrano looked exceedingly cool and well groomed in a suit of white flannel, while as for Dorothy Sanford, Besant knew that he would never find any better description than Tim's of his little neighbor—"yellow hair, about half my size, and always laughing." The flaxen hair was especially noticeable this morning, for, even in the second in which Besant hesitated at the windows, he could see the morning sunlight glimmering through its light, piquant waves in a peculiarly fascinating manner.

Besant was almost obliged to give a stage cough before the two persons on the terrace were aware of his presence. He clicked the screen door, and both of them looked up with a guilty air which was not less conspicuous for the nonchalance with which both tried to cover it.

Dorothy Sanford was the first to speak as Besant stepped out on the flagstones. "Hello,

Sherlock!" she hailed, gayly. "Do you always sleep as late as this? Because if you do we shall never see anything of each other in Manhasset."

Besant laughed. "I haven't been sleeping," he said. "I have been indulging in the rare luxury of having breakfast hurled at me in my own rooms. Also I have been going through a great mass of deep thought. I always make it a practice to think for twenty minutes after breakfast, and then I am through for the day. But why do you call me 'Sherlock'?"

His little neighbor laughed. "Fine question for you to ask—after the letter you wrote me." She broke off abruptly and made a move as if to include Serrano in the situation. "But, anyway, you're just in time, Mr. Besant, to tell us something we both want to know. What's good for poison ivy?"

"Fertilizer, I suppose," answered Besant, "frequent watering, pulling up all the other weeds, and careful hoeing between the rows."

"Oh, don't be silly!" retorted the girl. "I mean what will cure it?"

"Nothing," answered Besant, "except time. Why? Who's got it? Not you, I hope?"

"Thank Heaven, no," answered Miss Sanford, "but Frankie's manservant is in the most acute stages."

For the first time Serrano broke into the conversation. "Look here," he commanded. "If you call me 'Frankie' again, I'll take you down and throw you off the dock. 'Francisco' is bad

enough, but 'Frankie' sounds like a plush purple suit and a broad lace collar."

He turned to Besant. "Mr. Besant, what would you do if your parents had given you any such gosh-awful name as 'Francisco'?"

"You're no worse off than I am," answered Besant. "My parents named me 'Royal.'"

"That is the limit," agreed Dorothy Sanford, pensively. "The only other thing one can call you is 'Roy' and that's worse—if possible."

She glanced in her quick, eager manner from one to the other. "Haven't you got any middle names—either one of you?"

Serrano looked at Besant and Besant looked at Serrano in the odd, humorous sympathy which, in spite of their official relationship, they seemed so strangely to have established. Serrano turned back to their joint tormentor.

"If I should tell you my name in full," he replied, "you wouldn't even stay with me on the terrace. You would go down of your own accord and *jump* off the dock."

"Well, try me, anyway," answered the girl. "Come on. Out with the rest of it. Don't tell me it's 'Modeste Hyacinthe.'"

"No," answered Serrano, "but it's almost as bad. It's 'Vivian Bernardo Patrick.'"

The girl clapped her hands and banged both feet on the pavement of the terrace, like the gallery gods at a movie show.

"Marvelous!" she exclaimed. "Let me have it again. 'Francisco Vivian Bernardo Patrick Ruiz

Serrano!" Why, it gets better and better as it goes along—like a Shriners' parade! 'Bernardo Patrick'? That's the real backbone of the title. Hereafter it's only a question of whether I call you 'Barney' or 'Pat.' That's something I'll have to think over. Come on, now, Royal. What's *your* middle name?"

"My middle name," said Besant, "is 'Gammidge.'"

The girl threw herself back convulsively in her chair and covered her face with her hands. "Don't! Don't!" she begged. "I can't stand it. I really can't. 'Royal Gammidge,'" she repeated, morosely. "And I had so hoped that your other name would be 'Highness.'"

"Why not 'Baking Powder'?" suggested Besant. "That was what they used to call me at school."

The girl slowly drew her hands from her face and looked at him with an air of slow wonder. "What a glorious idea!" she exclaimed. "That's exactly what I *will* call you."

"But you can't," retorted Besant, "because you say I don't rise."

Serrano plunged suddenly forward and began to bang vigorously on the little wicker table. "Stop! Stop!" he commanded. "Stop this outrage at once. Have I no rights—as an innocent bystander?"

"I quite agree with you," answered Miss Sanford. "These vigorous, masterful men like Royal never do know when to stop. What were we

talking about when he came crashing into the conversation?"

Serrano rose from the table. "We were talking," he said, "about my injured Swiss. I really think I ought to go up and see how much the poor fellow is actually suffering. They say he's a terrible sight."

Instantly the girl herself changed to an honest solicitude. Her manner became as serious as it ever could be.

"No, really, Frank," she urged, "do just what I tell you. Go into the house and flush one of the maids and tell her to go to my room. She'll find a gray tube of some stuff like a sort of yellow cold cream. She'll know it because it's got a French label. It's wonderful for anything of that kind."

Serrano looked down at her, and for an instant, in their expressions Besant thought that he detected something almost like a signal passing between them. However, a brief "Much obliged" was all that Serrano actually said, and, presumably to obey instructions, he went into the house.

Chapter XXIX

THE moment that he had gone the girl turned to Besant with an air which again was completely altered.

"And now," she suggested, in a fraternal fashion, "what are *your* plans? You surely don't want to hang around here on the terrace all day?"

It was certainly a relief to receive a frank invitation of that sort after being practically ignored by the rest of the Crewe household ever since his arrival. Furthermore, Besant knew that, wittingly or unwittingly, his lively, audacious little neighbor might prove to be his most direct source of counsel. Yet he did feel a certain reluctance at the idea of committing too freely any of his time. He glanced toward the little pavilion at the end of the pier, but saw that it remained still entirely vacant, with its awnings rolled up.

"I should like very much," he replied, "to do anything that you have to suggest, but I suppose that I ought to say a few words to Mr. Crewe. You know that, after all, I really have got certain things to talk over with him."

Dorothy Sanford came back at him promptly: "And what have I said to suggest that you haven't?"

Besant flushed, for, in a way, he saw that he had exposed his own hand a little more than was necessary. "You haven't said anything," he

replied, "but I gathered from your manner that you didn't take me very seriously."

"My dear man," answered the girl, "I take you very seriously indeed. But haven't you found that when a group of people have something very serious in the back of their minds, the best way to get around it is to keep up an air of utter foolishness?"

There could certainly be nothing fairer than that, and Besant was glad to answer the boldness of her confession with a similar confession of his own.

"Serrano said something very much like that, last night," he suggested, "and I suppose that you are both right."

The girl looked thoughtfully at the little wicker table. "Frank told me that he had tried to talk to you," she commented, briefly, "but you didn't get very far."

"That wasn't my fault," said Besant.

"No," answered the girl, "I know that it wasn't."

She turned to Besant in a burst of confidence. "For Heaven's sake, what *was* Connie doing out there last night and what was it that frightened her? Have you found out yet?"

"I know what it was that frightened her," answered Besant. "It was something quite harmless."

"What was it?"

"Miss Sanford, please forgive me, but I don't know that it would be exactly my place to go through the whole story."

The girl shrugged, a bit stiffly, "Just as you like."

A little note of offended constraint still remained in her manner and Besant was eager enough to dispel it. He hastened to add, "But what Miss Connie was actually doing out there at that hour I haven't any idea. Have you?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I haven't. I'll tell you that, frankly—except that it would be just like that infernal Connie. I don't think I have to tell you that Connie and I get on like salt and vinegar."

Besant laughed, and apparently it was impossible for Dorothy Sanford to continue long in a hostile reticence. Once more she turned suddenly, with her friendly, disarming smile.

"Mr. Besant," she demanded, "don't tell me unless you want to, but are you honestly a detective?"

Besant laughed aloud. "My dear Miss Sanford, do you think that any real detective would take a house and settle down in Manhasset for a whole winter?"

"You haven't answered my question," retorted the girl, "but I think you meant to. Then, are you a lawyer?"

Besant did feel that he was making a very caddish return for her own frankness. "No, Miss Sanford," he said, quietly, "I am nothing but a plain ex-newspaper man. If it will simplify matters, I will say right off that I never heard of the Crewe family until the day before yesterday—

except through general sources. I never saw Mr. Cramp in my life until he came to see me that morning that Tim chased the peacock."

"You may think," answered Dorothy Sanford, "that you are making matters very clear, but actually you are just about as easy to probe as a jellyfish. I know that it is none of my affair, but Cynthia Crewe says that she knows for a fact that you are up here to keep her from marrying Frank Serrano."

"I am very sorry," answered Besant, slowly, "if Miss Crewe thinks that—at least if she thinks it in just that way."

"But isn't it true?"

"Not wholly," answered Besant. Then he added, quietly, "To use a very vulgar but very useful phrase, I am really up here to see that nobody takes any wooden money."

Chapter XXX

OVER the phrase the girl pondered a moment, and then sprang abruptly up from the table. "Well, that's that!" she exclaimed. "And now the question arises, are we or are we not going sailing? The others don't want us around. It's up to us to amuse ourselves—the Manhasset delegation."

"If you can sail a boat, which I can't," replied Besant, "I'd like nothing better."

"I can run the speed boats," answered his neighbor. "They are much more fun. How about it? Are you on?"

"With all my heart," answered Besant. But again he hesitated. "I might do this: I might send word to Mr. Crewe and ask him whether or not he wants to see me. Do you think he would mind?"

"He mind?" retorted Miss Sanford. "Never in the world. Mr. Crewe's an old dear—except on one subject. I'll ring, if you want, and send some one to ask him."

With her usual vivacity she stepped to the electric button beside the door, but before she could ring, Besant's query was answered from another source. Dorothy Sanford stepped back with a rather chill air and Miss Dessler, the secretary, appeared in the doorway. With her prim, rigid manner she did not even look at Besant's

companion, but spoke curtly and directly to him, not even granting him his name.

"Mr. Crewe wishes to see you for a few moments," she said. "He is not leaving his room this morning. He wishes you to come there."

Without another word she stepped back into the house, but as she disappeared in the shadows Besant saw Dorothy Sanford's eyes following her with a narrowed expression. There was some one else in the house beside Connie Crewe who had distinctly earned his little neighbor's violent antipathy.

"Respectability at its very worst," was Dorothy Sanford's comment on the retreating Miss Dessler. "Well, do you think you can go?"

"I'll soon find out," answered Besant.

"All right, then. I'll wait for you, either here or at the boathouse."

Chapter XXXI

IN the gloom of the stairway, Miss Dessler was waiting in a sort of martyred, stony impatience, and as she heard Besant's step she merely turned and continued to the second floor. Besant followed her to a double doorway on the seaward side of the house, where the secretary stood aside like a court official and allowed him to pass.

Inside, Besant found Damon Crewe propped up on pillows in his bed, but looking infinitely more ashy and shrunken than he had on the previous day. Nevertheless, he attempted to hail his visitor with a feeble gayety.

"Sorry, Mr. Besant, to have to drag you to a sick room, but I wanted to talk to you just a few minutes." The old gentleman looked nervously around the room. "Please shut that door," he suggested. "Now come and sit down."

Besant took a chair by the side of the bed and again there swept over him the same wave of pity which he had felt on the previous day. Unlike the previous day, however, the sick man seemed to feel that he had no time for general conversation.

"Besant," he asked, abruptly, "what happened last night?"

Willingly enough Besant could tell his own early version of Connie's adventure, including the fact that Serrano had been in his—Besant's—own

rooms at the time and was thus exonerated from any immediate connection. Also Besant was able to inform his host that it had been merely his own harmless Tim who had frightened Connie. This part the banker heard with visible relief.

"So that was it, was it?"

He paused a moment, then looked sharply at the younger man. "And now what is it," he said, "that you are holding back? There's something, I know."

Besant had hoped to spare the invalid any unnecessary worry about the other and more mysterious facts which had come to his knowledge, but he also knew that he could never deceive Damon Crewe. He concluded, indeed, that, as matters stood, the unknown might be more upsetting to him than the known. Thus, as briefly and as lightly as possible, he repeated the rest of Tim's story—the details of the second young woman who had been in the gardens and who could have been neither Cynthia nor Connie, of the man who had jumped off the wall, and of the car which had been waiting outside on the moors.

Only one detail did he omit—the identity of the man who had jumped down and run away in the darkness. For both Serrano's sake and that of the anxious father Besant believed that it was not necessary to emphasize that detail until the facts had been more clearly established. He merely said that Tim, whose instinct on the underworld was as accurate as his own, had been quite sure

that the man on the wall had been some one connected with the servants' hall and that the whole affair might easily have been nothing more than a romantic rendezvous with one of the housemaids. Or, taking another suggestion from Tim, it was wholly possible that a little petty bootlegging was being carried on over the wall—that some outsider was smuggling a little moonshine to some of the men on the place. This would account for the car. In any case, Besant stated that he was ready to trust Tim's instinct and that Tim had seen nothing about the affair over which to be alarmed.

The old gentleman heard the whole story with a firm composure which was a relief to Besant. Deliberately he asked one or two more questions.

"About this car that was waiting outside," he suggested. "What kind of a car did you say it was? Or didn't you tell me?"

Besant hesitated, for he had not foreseen this question and a truthful answer would hardly accord with his well-meant theory of petty bootlegging. Nevertheless, a truthful answer was the one that he decided to give.

"According to Tim," he replied, "it was an Italian car—a four-cylinder Fabre."

The old gentleman looked toward him with an odd expression. "The only Fabre that I know of," he said, "belongs to J. N. Sanford."

Besant started up with a look of protest. "But, my dear Mr. Crewe, you can't believe that Miss Dorothy Sanford had anything to do with it."

The banker smiled faintly. "I merely said that the only Fabre that I knew belonged to Sanford."

"But Miss Sanford," argued Besant, "came in long before the gates were shut. I heard her come into the house and come upstairs. And I had already heard her car on the driveway. If some one took it and drove it outside the walls again, it must have been——"

"Who?" asked the banker, bluntly.

"I don't know," confessed Besant, in a shame-faced way, "but probably the same man who jumped off the wall."

To this suggestion the invalid made no reply, and Besant continued, lamely, "And in any case Miss Sanford is surely a perfectly harmless young lady."

But again in return the old banker smiled. "I will admit," he said, "that Dorothy Sanford is a very nice girl, but in this case I am not so sure that she is entirely harmless. Mr. Besant——"

The old gentleman stopped short and this time it was Besant who attempted to supply the interpretation.

"What were you going to say, sir?" he asked. "You think I am making a mess of it?"

The old gentleman laughed curtly. "Oh no!" he answered. "I am not afraid of your brains, but I *am* a little afraid of your good intentions."

The sick man suddenly drew the embroidered counterpane two or three inches higher over his chest, and as if with that movement he ended one

phase of the subject, his whole tone and manner also changed.

"Besant," he said, "something is brewing in this house to-day. I can feel it in the atmosphere."

His conviction and his agitation were so genuine that Besant looked at him in sudden alarm—alarm for his physical condition.

"For one thing," continued Damon Crewe, "another of those rotten letters came in my mail this morning. Put your hand under my pillow."

Besant did as he was told and drew out a slip of paper. On it was written in a round, non-committal hand:

DEAR MR. CREWE:

You have been warned and have paid no attention to any warnings. If you must wreck your daughter's life there is no more to say. There is only one last chance. Get that charlatan out of your house and lock up your daughter in it. Two or three days more and you will find it too late.

ENOUGH.

There was no other signature than this to the note and, as Besant found it, there was also no envelope. After the briefest study Besant put it in his pocket. His indignant wonder was not at the note itself, but at the unspeakable cruelty of anyone who, in the old gentleman's present condition, had allowed him to see it. His indignation swept sharply into his next question.

"When did this come?" he asked.

"This morning, with the other letters."

"And did you open your own mail this morning?"

"Oh no!"

"Then who did?"

"Miss Dessler opened the business part and my wife looked through the personal. They brought them to me."

"And which part did this thing come in?"

Besant asked the question, then suddenly stopped, for the old banker had turned aside and was gazing at the open windows with the same weary look with which, on the previous day, he had answered a similar question. At last he turned back with a slow, feeble movement.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "this thing came to me with Miss Dessler's part of the mail." Then he curtly added, "Thank Heaven."

Chapter XXXII

FOR nearly a minute there was a silence in the sick room; then laboriously the old gentleman gathered himself together.

"Well, Mr. Besant," he concluded, "I think that's all. At any rate, I don't feel up to talking any longer. But there is one thing I want to ask you. I may be foolish—I haven't told any of the family—but this is one of my very bad days. I would feel a little happier if you would promise me to keep an eye out—on matters in general—to-night. Possibly it might be just as well if you didn't go to bed."

Besant answered, eagerly: "Indeed I will, sir, I'll be on watch from this minute."

The old gentleman shook his head. "Oh no!" he said. "Nothing like that is necessary. Nothing will happen during the day—at least nothing that I care about. My daughter has promised to come in to see me at lunch time, and then to read to me between six and seven. She is the only one that I am really worrying about, and she will keep her promise."

Besant hesitated guiltily at the side of the bed. "To tell the truth, Mr. Crewe, I had promised to go for a little sail with Miss Sanford this morning. Probably I had better call it off."

Old Damon Crewe smiled. "Oh no! Go ahead.

If you can keep that young lady out of mischief, so much the better."

Besant answered his smile. "I can't really feel," he insisted, "that poor Miss Sanford is much of a menace. If she really does know anything about all this business, I am very sure that she will speedily tell it."

"Yes, yes," agreed the banker. "You are probably right. Go ahead and have a good time. Only please come in and see me again for a minute or two this evening—just before the family goes down to dinner."

Chapter XXXIII

IN spite of this reassurance, it was with none of his previous anticipation that Besant returned to his motor-boat expedition. Dorothy Sanford was not on the terrace and Besant continued at once to the boathouse, a most substantial affair, built of gray stone in a uniform style with all the other buildings on the estate. The lofts and storerooms through which he entered were echoing and vacant. There was nothing in them but a few odd oars, a pennant or two, a few trophy cups, and a strong smell of varnish, but, emerging from the building again, on the water-front side, Besant found a series of docks and basins in one of which an oldish boatman was tuning the engine of a long, racy speed boat. This man, of a very different type from the house servants, looked up at Besant in a genial manner.

"You going out with Miss Sanford?" he inquired. "She told me to tell you that she would be back in a minute." He dabbed the engine a few last times with a bit of cotton waste, then looked up at Besant. "You going to run this ship to-day?"

"I hope not," laughed Besant. "I don't know any more about motor boats than I do about flying."

The man nodded, evidently relieved. "Well, you needn't worry," he said. "Miss Sanford is

one of the best skippers on the coast. She'll get you back safely."

There was a step on the boardings, and Dorothy Sanford appeared through the door with a basket in her hand. The boatman greeted her like an old friend. "I was just telling this gentleman, Miss, that if he thinks you're going too fast, not to jump overboard. It's just part of your regular schedule."

Dorothy Sanford laughed. "All right, Mr. Tibbals. I'll hold him tight if I see that he's getting scared."

Handing the basket to Besant, she jumped lightly down to the deck and then to the cockpit, Besant following her in a more cautious and lubberly manner.

"Sit there," the girl ordered, pointing to the stern.

"And hold on to your hair," added the jovial boatman.

Pushed cautiously out with the padded end of a boathook, the craft drifted idly around, and then, with the help of a line from the dock, swung its nose toward the open sea. Not until the friendly attendant had entirely cast off his own responsibility did Dorothy Sanford give more than a listless turn or two to the wheel.

The boatman coiled his end of the line and skillfully tossed it on to the little deck.

"All right. Pilot's ashore," he called. "Now, Cap'n, you're in command."

Dorothy Sanford answered him with a wave of

her hand, then suddenly straightened in her seat. Instantly there came a series of deafening, unmuffled explosions. At the same moment the boat began to churn and shove, then settled down to a steady, whizzing roar, while, suddenly appearing from nowhere, two blades of green-and-white water began to curl over the bows almost to the gunwales. The shores of the harbor began to skim by and, looking back, Besant saw the boathouse suddenly pulled and shrunk far into the distance.

Out toward the mouth of the harbor the speed of the boat and its unearthly roar both began to slacken, and Dorothy Sanford looked over her shoulder.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Well," answered Besant, "it's novel."

The girl laughed. "To tell the truth," she confessed, "I was just showing off. I had no business to shake the boat up in that manner. Now I'll let you enjoy it. Come up here and sit beside me."

The junction of these two sentences was apparently accidental, and Besant took it as such. He obeyed the second command, but the question of enjoyment was still a matter of taste. The boat, to be sure, was not going now at such a trembling, arrow-like speed, but, once the end of the headland had been passed, the swell of the sea became rather alarming. The girl seemed to be increasingly amused at her companion's obvious anxiety.

"Mr. Besant," she said, "for a man who lives all the year on the edge of the ocean it strikes me that you are not much of a sailor."

"For that matter," retorted Besant, "you live on the edge of the Shore Line Railroad, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you'd be at home on a locomotive."

"Score for you!" exclaimed the girl. "I certainly wouldn't. And, to tell the truth, I don't like the look of this sea any too much, myself. Do you see that island?"

She pointed ahead to a bit of land which had been only a dot from the shore, but now was beginning to assume quite sizable proportions.

"That," continued Miss Sanford, "is Brickling's Island, one of the many where Captain Kidd or Blackbeard or some one is supposed to have hidden his treasure. Rather than go out to sea any farther, I propose that we go ashore there and eat the sumptuous lunch which I have provided in that basket."

Besant looked away from her and at the island in some embarrassment. Agreeable as it might have been in other circumstances, the idea of staying out for lunch was not at all one with which he had signed for this cruise. Indeed, although he had noted and wondered about the basket, this was the first suggestion that Besant had heard of any such proposal. In view of his compact with Damon Crewe, he was now more anxious than ever to make the expedition as short as possible. Still, at the same time, half an hour on

the island might be better than being shipwrecked out in the Atlantic. Apparently, one or the other was his daring neighbor's only alternative. By way of suggesting a parley, he asked:

"Can you make a landing?"

"You can if you're careful," replied the girl. "I did it the other day with Cynthia and Frank Serrano. He's not even so good a sailor as you are. All *he* does is crouch in the stern and howl for me to be careful."

Besant said no more—he didn't know what he could say—and ahead of them the island continued to grow larger and more distinct—a little hillock of brown, barren ground and rocky shore without a sign of a tree or a building. As the boat came nearer, some gulls rose up and began to circle with interest.

Apparently, moreover, Dorothy Sanford had been heightening, from sheer amusement, the difficulties of the situation. As they came nearer a very neat little bay opened out before them, with no more surf than there was in Besant's own little harbor at Manhasset. Miss Sanford idled the engine and allowed the boat to slide along with its own decreasing momentum.

"Now you get up there at the bow," she commanded, "and take that boathook. Your only job will be to keep it from hitting those rocks too violently."

This did not seem a very difficult feat, and Besant rather glowed at the skill with which he finally accomplished it. The bow painter in his

hand, he leaped to the rocks and moored one end of the boat in deep water while with her usual deftness and seamanship, his companion anchored the stern, then lowered several canvas buffers over the side as an extra precaution.

"There!" she exclaimed. "That 'll be all right so long as we stay near by to keep an eye on her."

With the same brisk deftness the girl hovered for a moment or two over the engine, performing one of the many operations which were all Greek to Besant. This done, she tossed the basket ashore and lightly followed.

"Well, here we are," she said. "Now how about luncheon?"

With this task, fortunately, Besant could be of more service. A short tour of exploration proved that the summit of the little island was much too windy for comfort. After trying and rejecting two or three other picturesque spots they returned to the sheltered warmth of a smooth mound of turf just above the spot where the boat was moored. In three or four minutes more the hostess's promise had been completely fulfilled—a really sumptuous lunch had been produced from the basket and spread invitingly on a series of paper napkins.

The edge of his appetite satisfied, Besant lighted his pipe and stretched himself at full length, luxuriously. Just faintly outlined on the distant mainland he could see the gray dots and red roofs which denoted the various buildings of the Crewe estate. Between them and the island

extended at least six miles of blue, sparkling water.

For a moment Dorothy Sanford watched him with increasing amusement.

"You like it?" she suggested, innocently.

"Oh, it's bully!" answered Besant. "It's just my idea of existence."

The girl's eyes twinkled. "I'm very glad of that," she answered, demurely, "because it's the same existence that you're going to lead until midnight, to-night."

Besant sat up with a start. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

The girl nodded in mischievous reaffirmation. "You and I," she repeated, "are going to remain on this island until midnight, to-night."

"But why?" gasped Besant.

"Why?" repeated the girl. "You know well enough. Or, if you don't know, you're going to know now. Cynthia Crewe and Frank Serrano are going to be married to-night. They would have been last night if Connie hadn't blundered into the plan and spoiled it. My car was all ready for them outside the walls and it will be all ready again this evening. The really delicious part is that your own precious Tim is going to drive them. At least he's going to drive them as far as Manhasset. Frank Serrano's own man would have done it last night, but he had to fall off the wall and get a sprained ankle. Therefore we had to find the most likely substitute. So I put it up to Tim while I was waiting for you this morning.

Tim is really a much better sport than you are. He leaped at the plan, the minute I proposed it."

Besant had already jumped to his feet. "Miss Sanford," he exclaimed, "this is really nonsense! I've got to get back! I simply must!"

The girl, however, remained placidly seated by the paper napkins.

"Sit down," she said. "You might as well enjoy yourself while you are here. You can't do anything about it."

"I can't run the boat," agreed Besant, "but if necessary I can compel you to do it."

Such threats were not in the least disturbing to Dorothy Sanford. "Oh no, you can't!" she insisted, quietly. "To be sure, you might try to use force, but if you do that——" She held up a tiny bit of nickeled metal. "Here is the main switch to the whole ignition system. The boat can't run without it. If you really get too insistent, all I shall do will simply be to toss this into the ocean——"

Chapter XXXIV

FOR a moment the girl sat idly tossing the bit of glistening metal in the palm of her hand. She glanced toward the water which swished and curled at the foot of the rocks.

"Perhaps," she suggested, mischievously, "it might be just as well to throw this in at once. That would end the discussion for good and all."

Obedying her previous command, Besant sat down rather weakly. "Did you think," he asked, "that I would use force?"

His captor laughed. "I didn't really think so," she confessed. "I merely *hoped* that you would. I have always wondered how it would seem to be on a desert island alone with a caveman—especially one I was sure I could handle."

"And you think you can handle me?" asked Besant.

"Oh, goodness! yes!" replied his companion. "You're really a rather dear and helpless old thing. I knew that the first time I saw you. 'He's mine,' I said to myself, 'to have and to tease—the new little boy next door.' No, Royal, old grump, you may be quick in your wits and amusing to have around, but if it came down to primitive things, I wouldn't have the least fear in the world. If we really were shipwrecked on a desert island, I know that it would be I who would gather the firewood and capture wild goats."

"Suppose I decide to swim?" suggested Besant.

His gaoler looked thoughtfully toward the six or seven miles of blue water which lay between them and the mainland.

"I knew you'd say that," she answered. "That's the first thing that Lionheart always does—in the movies. But in the first place, you couldn't—not in your clothes. And as for starting without them—well, really, Royal, it just isn't done."

Besant smiled rather grimly. "As the afternoon drags on," he suggested, "I may decide that getting back is more important than strict proprieties."

The girl immediately assumed a briskness to match his own. "Oh, very well, then," she answered. "In that case I suppose I shall just have to chase you and bring you back. Even you can't suppose that you can swim faster than the motor boat. Go ahead and try it if you want. But you must see how ridiculous it is going to make you—the hero out in the water, dodging hither and yon—the heroine chasing him frantically with a boathook and making a swat at him every time his head appears above the waves."

"I have always heard," retorted Besant, "that when the hero is captured by a pirate chief and held prisoner on an island, the pirate chief always gloats and tortures him first, but I didn't suppose you would do it."

"It's your own fault," replied Dorothy, promptly. "Sit still and behave yourself and I'll act like an angel—sing to you, if you wish—perhaps even let you hold my hand, toward sundown."

"At other times——" laughed Besant; but Dorothy interrupted him.

"Ah—other times! Other times!" she mocked. "What, in Heaven's name, do you want? I could think for hours and, from the man's point of view, I couldn't imagine a more ideal situation. You don't think it is everybody I would consent to kidnap, do you?"

"Look here!" demanded Besant, suddenly. "Suppose I had kidnapped you and held you as a prisoner on a lonely island. And suppose that I should calmly fold my arms and begin to say, 'Ah-ha! Ah-ha!' What would *you* do about it?"

"Oh, I'd cry," admitted his captor, frankly, "and then you'd simply have to take me back. That's the ghastly unfairness of it—the double standard of island morality. Still," she meditated, "if you were the proper man, I'd probably stop after a minute, gurgle, and say, 'Alone at last!'"

Besant was obliged to grin in spite of himself. Less and less was it conceivable to him that his little neighbor could be serious in her intentions.

"But hasn't it occurred to you," he suggested, "that if we are gone so very long, some one is going to get anxious about us and come out looking for us in a boat? If they do I shall simply cast propriety to the winds and take off whatever garment is largest and whitest, and run it up on a stick."

"I take it you speak of your shirt," commented Dorothy. "Even so you don't frighten me in the least. For no one will come. Every detail has

been thought out with the most fiendish cunning. I told my good friend Tibbals, at the boathouse, that we were simply going up to Rock Beach for luncheon and supper—and told him in such a coy, blushing way that he will keep our secret like a clam. He's quite convinced that, so far as I am concerned, you are the lucky party. I told him that if the sea got at all rough we would leave the boat at Black Point and come back by motor. Instead of which"—she waved her hand—"the sea is steadily getting milder and milder. There 'll be a flat calm by sunset. He 'll never worry. And nobody else knows anything about it. So there we are. Next?"

"As a matter of fact," answered Besant, "somebody else does know about it, some one who will be very anxious indeed if I don't appear by dinner time."

"Who?" demanded the girl.

"Mr. Crewe, himself," answered Besant. "He knew that I was going, and going with you."

Chapter XXXV

OVER the girl, as over Besant himself, the mention of the name threw immediately a more somber silence. Instantly Besant saw that the time had come to center the matter on a more common-sense basis.

"Miss Sanford," he said, "I don't know how far you really mean to carry this ridiculous game, but, seriously, I must get back and see Mr. Crewe. I have made him a promise."

The girl nodded. Her frivolous air had disappeared as completely as his own. "Perhaps you have," she replied, "but I also have made a promise. Don't think that, because I am willing to joke about it, I am not in the most utter earnest."

"But do you realize," persisted Besant, "that Mr. Crewe is a very sick man?"

The girl looked thoughtfully down at the rocks on the shore.

"Yes," she answered at last. "I have considered all that, and Cynthia has considered it. That is the very problem that she has been fighting for months. If it hadn't been for her father's health, she and Frank would have run away long before this. As it is, every day that she puts it off only makes it the harder. If he—if anything should happen to Mr. Crewe, it would make it almost

impossible. It would be doubly hard for Cynthia to go against his wishes after that."

In the words, as she said them, there was an air of finality, of complete solemnity which had been really lacking before, and, mistaken, infantile as her sentiments might be, nevertheless by her and by Cynthia Crewe they had apparently been conceived in deadly earnest. Besant began to realize that if this situation, even now, appeared entirely grotesque, yet by reason of the girl's childish and stubborn obstinacy it might become extremely tragic—to the anxious and lonely old father of Cynthia Crewe, if to nobody else.

For moments the two sat in a curious silence, the girl lost in some thoughts of her own, Besant still vaguely attempting, in his own mind, to bridge the gap between the absurd and the real. In the mind of each, presumably, thought passed after thought, yet nothing broke into their meditations save the faint stir of the thin, dry grass and the clock-like lap of the waves. As the interval threatened to become unendurable, Dorothy Sanford looked toward Besant in a tentative hesitating way.

"You don't seem to be very sociable," she suggested, weakly.

"How can I be?" answered Besant, but within him began to stir the first faint ray of hope. In the girl's voice there had been a note which was unmistakably wavering. Silence more than anything else had seemed to threaten control of her nerves. Nevertheless, for lack of anything better,

it was to silence that both returned. It continued with spasmodic interruptions for a long, long time. A slow realization that the afternoon sun was beating squarely in his eyes made Besant look at his watch. To his amazement, and somewhat to his alarm, he found that it was twenty minutes past three.

"Miss Sanford——" he began.

But the girl held up her hand. "There is one thing," she interrupted. "Please do drop that awful 'Miss Sanford.' We may get very angry at each other before we are through but we needn't make it like a scene in a drawing-room tragedy. As long as you can call me anything, call me 'Dorothy,' and we will let it go at that."

Inwardly Besant smiled again, for the testiness in the girl's tone was now unmistakable. Nearer perhaps than she knew herself she was to the breaking point. But at the same time there swept over Besant a wave of admiration. The poor child was at heart so completely brave in her Quixotic determination. For all her jaunty assurance, it must have been no little task for her to face this test of wills on a lonely island with a man whom, after all, she hardly knew. With all the powers within his command Besant wished to keep that test from reaching any actual issue. In a way that he intended to be frank and reassuring he attempted to bring his own words to a friendly and common-sense level.

"Won't you please listen a moment?" he begged. He tried again to take up his own story from

the beginning. "I am not here," he urged, "to work against Cynthia Crewe, as you all seem to think. In a general way, to be sure, you have already guessed why I came up here to Legget's Harbor——"

For the girl, however, things had long since gone beyond that. "Oh, never mind why you came," she burst out. "You're here now and Cynthia's going to be married. What more is there to say about it?"

"Now please," begged Besant. "I was making every effort to put it before you tactfully."

"Tactfully! Tactfully!" echoed his companion and more and more did she continue to show that her apparent command had, in reality, only covered an appalling concentration of sheer nervous force. Once she had begun to release her grip, her nerves gave every sign that at any moment they might tumble headlong. If Besant did not take care he would soon have something far worse than mere romantic mischief with which to deal—in short, a young woman in the blind, unreasoning obstinacy of hysteria.

"Well—wisely," he corrected his previous statement. "I am trying to put it before you sensibly."

As if drawing herself into one final, all-inclusive statement, the girl made a single broad sweep with her hand. "Wisely—sensibly—tactfully!" she repeated. "Don't you realize that that has been the whole trouble for over a year—that words like that have been wearing down Cynthia Crewe until they have forced her into what she is doing

now? 'Be cautious'—'Go slowly'—'Consider the rest of us.' Her father, her mother, her friends and that idiot, Arthur Cramp, have all been preaching nothing but that since she first announced that she wished to marry. If you were really in love would you listen long to it, yourself? I'm hanged if I would. 'Be cautious'—'Go slowly.' And still they did nothing to help her. Just repeated those same things over and over. Then you came up here and forced the issue. If it had come to the point where even outsiders had been dragged in to spy on her, then Cynthia simply had to take matters into her own hands. And I for one am blame glad to help her!"

Defiantly the girl turned away and stared out at the sea, but, in all conscience, Besant could not let the matter rest at that point. Over and over in his own mind he turned the amazing sentences which Cynthia's father had spoken so gently on the day before. Besant could almost repeat them verbatim.

"Understand, Mr. Besant," the old gentleman had said, "that while I am determined that my daughter shall not be led into a disastrous marriage, yet at the same time I am not going to kill the one real love of her life. She doesn't know that. I couldn't afford to let her know it—just yet. Nevertheless, it is true. If this Serrano is the real thing, she can marry him and God bless her. No one else has ever meant so much to her and probably no one else ever will."

Would he, Besant wondered, be justified in re-

peating that frank, confidential promise to this honest but obstinate little Nerissa? And would it do any good if he should? Would she not simply regard it as merely one more of the delaying and unconvincing subterfuges which for over a year had kept her friend from the man she loved? Cautiously, Besant tried to approach the matter in a roundabout way.

"Miss Sanford," he began, then corrected it—"Dorothy——"

The girl neither answered nor turned, but, in a growing obstinacy as dogged as her own, Besant kept quietly on.

"Dorothy," he repeated, "I am certain that your real interest in all this matter——"

The girl turned sharply. "Oh, please don't talk like a lawyer," she commanded. "In fact, don't talk at all."

"Listen or not, just as you please," replied Besant. "I suppose that it is really the happiness of Cynthia Crewe that concerns you, not that of Ruiz Serrano."

"Naturally," snapped the girl.

"Well, then," argued Besant, "has it ever occurred to you that possibly all of those who are urging her to go slowly may really have some reason? Do you yourself know as much about Serrano as you might? Isn't it possible that there may really be some reason why she should not marry him—at least just yet?"

Again the girl made a single gesture of sweeping impatience. "Oh, those old stories again!" she

exclaimed. "I shouldn't think that even you would have any patience with them. Can't you tell what a man really is, simply by looking at him and talking to him?"

"Yes, usually," agreed Besant, "but if there is nothing against Serrano, why not wait until it is all cleared up?"

"Because poor Cynthia has already waited and waited," repeated his companion, blindly, "and nobody has yet said anything definite against him—or tried to clear up what *has* been said. Just rumors, rumors, rumors. Cynthia knows all that there is to know about his past life. Her father and mother might think it shameful, but Cynthia doesn't."

Besant's eyes opened slightly at this unexpected detail. "Has she told you what it is?" he asked.

"No, she hasn't," answered the girl, "and I wouldn't have any respect for her if she did. It's her secret and his, not mine."

Chapter XXXVI

A GAIN Besant lapsed into a futile silence. Minutes passed, then quarter hours. Once or twice his companion shifted her position nervously, but still remained looking steadfastly over the harbor. Furtively Besant looked at his watch and found that the long minute hand had already crept perilously beyond four o'clock. The afternoon sun was beating, hot and straight, from over the mainland. From sheer lapse of time, if from nothing else, the situation was getting serious. Apparently Dorothy Sanford intended to hold on until the very last minute of her romantic pledge.

Gradually all the plans which he had proposed in broad humor began to review themselves more seriously in Besant's mind. He even considered the idea of plunging into the water and trying to swim. Assuredly his companion would not let him go very far without assistance, but even then he would only end in greater absurdity a situation which was already absurd enough.

Another and better idea came into his deliberations. Would the little madcap consent to go back herself to the mainland and leave him as a hostage alone on the island? The complete unexpectedness of that idea might appeal to her. If she would consent, Besant had a plan so entirely bold that he almost felt that it might succeed. He could send a note—not to old Mr. Crewe, not to Cynthia,

but to Ruiz Serrano himself. Whatever might be the facts to which Dorothy had just made reference, Besant still had at heart a respect for Serrano as genuine as her own. The talk on the previous evening had quite opened the way. Besant could simply put the other man on his honor with some sort of chivalric bargain, ask him to defer his plans until he, himself, returned, and then talk it out—or fight it out—as man to man.

Yet even this would not really accomplish the purpose. For it was not to Serrano or even to Cynthia Crewe that Besant was actually pledged. His solemn promise had been given to the sick man waiting anxiously in his room. It was not Besant's absent assistance that was most necessary to old Damon Crewe at this hour, but the reassurance of his actual, physical presence.

Quietly Besant rose to his feet. "Well, Miss Sanford," he announced, "we're going back now."

The girl looked up at him with an air which she meant to be calmly defiant, but which in reality was distinctly apprehensive.

"How are we going back?" she demanded.

"By the boat, of course," replied Besant. "I am sorry but you will have to run it."

Instinctively the girl's hand strayed over the shining ignition switch which lay on the turf at her side. Besant paid no attention to the movement, but, for the last time, attempted persuasion.

"Miss Sanford," he said, "I am completely in earnest. I ask you to come down and start the boat."

The girl did not move. "I, too, am in earnest," she said. "I have given my word. I don't break a promise."

"But," replied Besant, "I have made a more important promise to Mr. Crewe. One or the other will have to be broken."

"I shan't go," exclaimed the girl, curtly.

Royal Besant took two steps toward her and she lifted the little switch of the motor boat. Her eyes were flashing as she looked up.

"Take care," she commanded. "I meant what I said. Come one step nearer and I will throw this into the water."

Besant made no move to stop her. "You seem to have forgotten," he said, "that the boat also has oars. It would be a hard job, I know, to paddle her in, but I think we could do it. You will have to help, anyway, so you had better keep the switch."

The girl lowered her hand, but she still remained seated resolutely on the ground. Quietly Besant stepped forward until he was towering above her. The girl drew back in genuine alarm.

"What"—she gasped—"what are you going to do?"

"I am going to request for one last time," answered Besant, "that you get up and come with me of your own accord. If you won't, I am going to take your own suggestion and use force."

As stolidly as ever the girl remained seated, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Will you come?" asked Besant.

There was no reply, and he asked again.

"Will you come?"

"No!" blurted the girl. "Absolutely no!"

Instantly Besant stepped forward, grasped her arms and, like a flash, lifted her to her feet. For a moment he had a glimpse of a horrified, upturned face, looking at him in amazed unbelief. Even he had been unprepared for the slightness of her weight, for the childlike thinness of the arms that he grasped. Even in that grotesque moment there came to him again Tim's apt remark, "Yellow hair, about half my size, and always laughing."

But Dorothy Sanford was certainly not laughing now. With wide, outraged eyes she stood for a moment, slightly swaying on uncertain feet, hardly able to realize what had happened. Then in sudden blind fury she turned at Besant and struck him with all her force in the face.

"You outrageous brute!" she cried, with all the vindictiveness of the blow itself.

The blow had hurt. It had hurt like a whiplash. Besant turned a fiery red, but he did not move. He put both hands behind him and merely waited.

Again the girl half raised her hand, then weakly let it fall, but the two remained standing, face to face, and staring into each other's eyes. Besant could feel himself growing a little faint with a half-realized horror. The girl was trembling with rage and shame. Then abruptly, rather absurdly, she sank down again and crouched on the ground. Besant waited a moment, then again stepped for-

ward and gently grasped her by the arms. The girl's rage returned in all its fury.

"Don't touch me! Don't you dare touch me!" she cried. But with the same determination Besant lifted her up.

This time she refused to stand on her own feet, letting her body sag with all her weight, more grotesquely than ever like a sulky child. For two or three seconds Besant supported her, then, lowering his left hand, he lifted her clear in his arms. Her own arms pinioned by his, her struggles and spasmodic turns were as ineffective as those of a sparrow. She tried first to turn her face away from him, then turned it toward him to hide it. The only place was his shoulder.

Still carrying her, clasped tightly in his arms, Besant took two or three steps toward the landing. Then suddenly he stopped, looked over the harbor a moment, and gently put her down.

"I am very sorry," he announced, "that that had to happen. It seems it was quite unnecessary. Here comes another boat!"

If she heard him, the girl made no sign. She merely turned on the grass at full length and, burying her face in her arms, began to sob convulsively. Besant waited as long as he dared, then spoke again.

"I am very sorry," he repeated, "but I really think that you had better go back with me now. If you don't wish to go, I had better begin at once to signal that boat."

And, curiously, this was the only purely theatric

pose of the whole situation, for Besant had no necessity to signal the other boat. Of its own accord it was already coming straight toward the island. As it began to grow more and more distinct, Dorothy Sanford herself sat up and moodily watched it. Then suddenly, as if nothing had happened, she seemed in one move to dismiss all her anger against Besant.

"That abominable Connie!" was all she exclaimed.

Chapter XXXVII

THAT the skipper and sole occupant of the approaching boat was indeed Connie Crewe, the passing of three or four minutes left no further doubt. Nor could there be any question that the island harbor was her deliberate destination. With the same abstracted, almost insolent air with which she did everything else, she was steering idly toward the spot where their own boat was moored. Although she handled it with perfect nonchalance, her own craft was nothing like the long, white racer in which Dorothy Sanford and Besant had left the mainland. It was a humble, slow launch of broad beam and old-fashioned type, and yet, as he watched it, Besant began to realize how typical the craft was of Connie. As in the case of her clothes, her gardens, her very manners, he felt that Connie Crewe would have held a secret contempt for anything more presentable.

At Besant's own feet Dorothy had begun to gather hastily the odds and ends of their luncheon service. Rather diffidently, Besant himself stooped to help her. His companion said nothing, rigidly avoiding meeting his gaze. Once, when he handed her something, she muttered a stiff, formal, "Thank you." Yet even Besant could feel how oddly the coming of a third person had drawn Dorothy and himself back into a single community of feeling.

It was rather a thrilling thing for him to realize—"fight among ourselves as much as we please, but for outsiders keep up a solid front."

Unintentionally Dorothy looked up and caught his eye. Instantly her own expression changed to one of alarm.

"Good gracious!" she whispered. "Look at your face! For Heaven's sake, do clear it off!"

Bewildered, Besant put his hand to his cheek and drew it away. His fingers were streaked with red. At the same time his companion was looking, half in repentance, half in amusement, at her own little palm.

"It must have been my rings," she whispered. "Here! Quick! Do mop it off. Whatever you do, Connie mustn't see that."

Ineffectually, she reached for the first thing at hand. It was one of the paper napkins, but before Besant could use it she snatched it away from him and substituted her own tiny handkerchief. Reluctantly, Besant touched it to his cheek, and as the girl watched him with a complete and maternal solicitude, she must have seen an odd expression come into his eyes.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's happened?"

Besant hesitated for a moment, then crumpled the little handkerchief in his hand. He turned away. "Oh, nothing!" he said.

The words, although sincerely meant, seemed even to Besant rather ineffective. Frantically eager, now, to make peace, he added: "May I keep this? As a flag of truce?"

Dorothy looked at the ruined handkerchief and laughed. "In the condition in which it is now," she answered, "I guess you'll have to." Then as if, for her part, she were not yet willing to let good nature go too far, she added in a stiffer tone, "But if that's all you want, wait until we get to shore and I'll give you a clean one."

Chapter XXXVIII

THE delay, at any rate, had been sufficient for Connie to reach the foot of the rocks and moor her own boat. For this Besant was not unthankful, for he knew that if he had gone down to offer his own services, they would, as likely as not, have been contemptuously refused. Yet in spite of himself he was grudgingly forced to admire the perfectly natural, unembarrassed way in which Connie joined them on the strip of turf above the rocks. It could not have been an easy situation even for her. If, moreover, as she looked first at Dorothy and then at Besant, she had any realization that something extraordinary had occurred, she gave not the faintest sign of it, not even her usual glint of lurking, sardonic amusement. Instead, she looked down at the remains of the luncheon.

"Deviled eggs, paper napkins, and ants," was her opening remark.

"There aren't any ants, at least," retorted Dorothy, hotly. "That's one reason why we came to the island."

"Pardon me, flies," persisted Connie. "They're just as bad."

The manner in which neither young woman made the slightest attempt to conceal her hostility for the other was distinctly alarming to Besant, even after the scene through which he himself

had just passed. Connie, however, put him at ease on that score by stating at once the reason for her sudden appearance.

"Mr. Besant," she said, in her usual drawl, "I am sorry, but father would like to see you as soon as possible. He began to get anxious about you and wanted some one to look you up."

"Thank you very much," replied Besant, a little stiffly. "We were just starting back when you came."

But something in Connie's attitude, possibly something in her tone, had made him look at her again. Dorothy Sanford had stooped to her knees to put the last of the forks and spoons in the picnic basket, and, as Besant glanced over her bowed head at Connie, he saw the latter's eyes looking at him in a quick, intense way that, without any question, was meant to convey some unspoken message.

"Then you'll be along soon?" repeated Connie. Even into her voice had crept a faint hint of a double meaning, and again her eyes were signaling very plainly.

It was clear enough what she meant, and Besant nodded to show that he understood. Old Mr. Crewe had never sent any such message or, if he had, it had not been the one which his daughter had repeated. All that Connie wished him to understand was that he was needed on the mainland—and needed at once. That much was perfectly obvious, but, coming from that supercilious, unfriendly source, the effect was almost uncanny.

It was, to Besant, quite as if he had received a friendly flash from the Sphinx.

Dorothy Sanford rose from the picnic basket and, entirely unconscious of what had passed, entered into the conversation.

"How did you know," she demanded, "where we had gone?"

Over Connie's lips came her old, slow smile. "I watched you," she answered, calmly. "Through father's binoculars, to make it worse. Very poor taste, I know, but if you *will* start off with a noise like the battle of Jutland . . . I quite expected any moment to see your propeller shaft come shooting clear through the stern."

Dorothy flushed, but to this bald confession she evidently considered that silence would be the most killing reply. Besant took the basket from her hand and all three started for the landing, both young women observing what Serrano would probably have called the chill punctilio of the fray. To make matters more unpleasant, they found, at the foot of the rocks, that Connie's old launch had been so carelessly moored that it was rubbing steadily against the spotless bow of the finer craft.

Dorothy Sanford muttered over her shoulder to Besant, "Now I'll be blamed for that. Just look at that paint."

If Connie heard this remark she paid no attention, but went at once to the mooring lines of her own boat. Never in his life had Besant seen two young women so close to a stand-up fight, and

with all his heart he began to long for the comparative peace of the open sea. Nevertheless, as his own companion showed no signs of doing it, he felt obliged to offer Connie the obvious invitation.

"Can't we give you a tow?" he suggested. "I'd offer to run the extra boat, but I don't know how to do it."

For answer Connie looked back at him with cool amusement, but at the same time the faintest trace of that same warning signal came into her eyes. This time, unhappily, the other girl saw the look between them, but Connie, at least, cared nothing for that.

"Oh no, thank you!" she answered with a sweetness that was positively saccharine. "I journey alone. My life is that of the hermit thrush."

From the cockpit of their own boat Besant saw Dorothy Sanford look up sharply, on the verge of some quick retort. Whatever it might have been, she apparently thought better of it, and almost immediately both engines started with rival roars. Ten rods outside the little harbor the slower craft was straightway left far behind, but once or twice Besant, looking over his shoulder, saw it lurking there between them and the island in a peculiarly mocking way, like some irritating little skirmisher gleefully watching a larger enemy's ignominious retreat.

If Dorothy Sanford shared his phantasy she gave no sign of it, in fact did not once look around. Straight as a dragon-fly she steered for the boat-

house on the mainland, and the stiff silence with which she warned off all friendly advances was no more than Besant had the right to expect. At the same time he could not help wondering how much of it was due to the later episode and how much of it was the natural reaction from their own little affair.

Only once did Dorothy give any inkling, and that was when they were already within easy hail of the landing. She turned abruptly, evidently expressing at once the sum of her thoughts.

"Have you been lying to me?" she demanded.

"Lying to you?" repeated Besant. "Not that I know of."

"Just the same," she retorted, "I'll bet that you have. You told me that yesterday was the first time you ever saw Connie Crewel!"

Chapter XXXIX

AT the boathouse Dorothy gruffly tossed the bow line to the waiting Tibbals and immediately walked away in a manner that was quite distressing to the friendly old boatman. Completely hurt, he stared after the girl and then at Besant, but, while the latter could at least offer a friendly word, he could naturally give no explanation.

Besant himself waited tactfully until Dorothy had disappeared in the main house, and then followed slowly to the terrace. As he approached, the butler and one of the footmen were clearing away the remnants of an afternoon tea which must have been very scantily attended.

Besant looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes to six. His rescue or his escape, whichever it was, had not been any too soon. Just how far the main situation had been changed, or would be changed, by the collapse of Dorothy Sanford's part in the adventure, Besant had, of course, no way of knowing. He realized, moreover, that a very brief time now remained, before nightfall, in which to find out.

His first step, of course, must be to get in touch with Mr. Crewe, and to this end he spoke to one of the men at the tea table.

"Will you please go to Mr. Crewe's room," he asked, "and tell him that I have come back?"

Please ask him whether he wishes to see me now or later."

"Certainly, sir," answered the man, and, putting down his tray, disappeared at once. He returned directly with very much the message which Besant had expected to receive.

"Mr. Crewe says, 'Thank you very much,' sir. He says that it will not be at all necessary for you to see him until just before dinner, and not even then if you are going to be busy. Miss Cynthia is up there reading to him now."

The man went into the house with his tray, while Besant turned back toward the harbor, where Connie's boat still lingered far out from land, sauntering along in a placid way that, even at that distance, quite suggested the character of its skipper.

The servant's report had answered for Besant two questions at once. It proved, first, that Cynthia Crewe was still in the house. It also indicated that Besant's own suspicion had been quite correct—that old Mr. Crewe had not been in the least disturbed by his absence and that Connie's little scouting trip to get him back from the island had been undertaken entirely on her own initiative.

What in the world, then, *had* Connie meant by her message? There could, of course, be only one immediate way to find out—to go down to the landing and meet her when she came in, or else to remain within sight as she came up to the house. Natural caution voted slightly against both

of these plans, but natural tact voted much more. Even as briefly as he had been able to observe her, Besant knew that Connie was distinctly a person to be left alone. She would choose her own time and place when she wished to call for any further co-operation.

Chapter XL

THERE was, happily, at least one other person at Legget's Harbor of whom Besant stood in no such awe—his own ingenuous Tim. Natural instinct as well as Tim's own confessions suggested at once where the lanky sportsman could probably be found, and, leaving the terrace, Besant wandered down to the long stone stables at the north end of the grounds. Surely enough, Tim was there, just outside the doors, in company with two stablemen, gleefully shooting craps on a rubber blanket spread over a bale of hay. The two other men noted first the approaching figure and stiffened into a respectful silence which caused Tim himself to look around. Besant nodded his head and Tim immediately joined him. The two walked a dozen paces away.

"Tim," began his master, abruptly, "your plans for this evening have been called off."

Purely as a matter of habit, Tim straightened at once into a sort of aggressive defiance. "What do you mean—my plans?" he retorted.

"I mean," answered Besant, "that you had been asked to drive Miss Cynthia Crewe and Mr. Serrano to Manhasset this evening. There is nothing doing. You will not have to go."

Tim wilted immediately into a guilty grin. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Did they get cold feet?"

Tim pondered the matter in mild vexation. "I wish they'd told me two hours ago," he said. "Leaving it until the last moment makes it kind of bad for me. I was looking forward to driving that little Fabre. And, besides, I took all the trouble to call off the rat fight, so I could go. Rexy was turning out to be more of a fox than I thought. Seems he works better in the dark than he does in the daylight. We tried him again with the rat this morning, with a blanket thrown over the box, and if we hadn't stopped it right off we'd had to been looking around for another rat. We could have put on a real scrap to-night, after all. And then let Rexy meet the weasel in the finals. I didn't give Rexy nothing to eat all day, so's to get him into fighting trim. But when Miss Sanford asked me to drive for the bridal couple, I give him a whole half chicken I swiped from the cook. Now he wouldn't put up his dukes to a mole."

"Yes, that's too bad," agreed Besant in complete solemnity, "but as it happens, I shall want you myself."

Long experience had taught Besant that the only sure way to enlist Tim's entire co-operation was to make some direct appeal to his sense of importance.

"Tim," he began, "the truth is that Mr. Crewe is a little worried about certain things that are going on in his house."

Tim grinned. "He'd been more worried yet if he'd known how I was intending to drive that little

Fabre. An airoplane could have caught me, but nothing else could."

"No, Tim," said Besant; "this is quite another matter. To put it briefly, Mr. Crewe has begun to feel that a place like this isn't safe without a watchman, some man with a good wise head and a whole lot of nerve."

The line of approach had been sublimely successful. Tim nodded sagely and spat through the side of his mouth. A minute more and he would have taken off his coat.

"Well, that's all right," he answered. "The only trouble with a watchman is that he has to sit up all night."

Besant laughed. "Oh, it's nothing as serious as that," he said. "Mr. Crewe just wanted to know that there was such a man somewhere within call. You know, when you look at it, this is a pretty isolated spot."

Tim nodded again. "That's what I thought, myself, last night when I was trying to get in the walls. Anyone who really wanted could take all the silver in the place and drive it away in a five-ton truck. Course there's four or five men sleeping in the house, but—hell! That big fat butler, for instance. Give him a stick in the ribs and he'd die on the spot."

Tim broke off with a sudden inspiration of his own. "Say, Mr. Besant," he demanded, "you ain't got suspicions of nobody inside the house?"

"No, no," replied Besant, quickly. "I don't even know that there's anything wrong, but Mr.

Crewe has been sick for a very long time. Every now and then he gets extremely nervous."

"They do get that way," agreed Tim, as if nervous patients came to him as a regular practice. "And what do you want me to do? You know I've got a gun in the pocket of the car."

"Then for Heaven's sake let it stay there," replied Besant. "No, Tim, the principal thing I want of you is to have you stay around where I can find you. No more trips to Manhasset until I tell you. Have you had your supper?"

"All I want for a couple of hours or so," answered Tim. "They calls it tea."

"Very well, then. Go up to my rooms in five or ten minutes and, if I am not there, wait until I come. Possibly you may sleep in the house to-night. If anyone should happen to come into my rooms and find you there, just stir around and act like a valet. Pretend to be busy brushing my coats or getting out my soiled clothes or something of that kind. Understand?"

"I understand," replied Tim, "I understand. Trust me for the wise guy."

Chapter XLI

ODDLY enough, Besant returned from his interview with Tim possessed by a cheery new confidence. A talk with his private ex-pugilist usually did inspire Besant in that manner. It was not wholly a question of Tim's physical strength, but something really deeper. No thoughtful intellectual man like Besant can ever quite lose an instinctive faith in the steady, cocksure quality which is second nature to a gamin.

Besant re-entered the house as he had left it, by way of the terrace, and a quick glance showed him that Connie's boat was no longer in the harbor. Nor was Connie herself anywhere within sight. Wisely or unwisely, Besant had let slip that immediate chance for further information, and he went at once to his own rooms. Fifteen minutes would be ample time in which to dress for dinner, and a full half hour remained, beyond that, before his appointment with Damon Crewe. With his tweed golfing coat half off his shoulders, Besant began to debate on the shrewdness or folly of a certain very direct step which had been in his mind ever since he had left the island. Nothing, he decided, could at least be lost by the attempt, so, slipping his coat back on, he left his rooms and stepped quietly down the hall to a door which he had already identified as Serrano's. He knocked, but for a moment there came no reply. Besant

repeated his knock, and after some further delay a muffled, distant voice answered.

Besant opened the door and stepped into a sitting room much like his own, where the muffled and distant quality of the voice was immediately explained, for Serrano was standing at a dressing table at the far end of the suite, tying, with elaborate pains, his evening cravat. His eyes were fixed with intense concentration on the mirror before him, while, clenched in his teeth and pointed up at one eye, was the longest and thinnest cigarette holder that Besant had ever seen.

The young violinist did not look around until Besant had passed through the two intervening rooms and was standing six feet away. At that point Besant's reflection must have come gradually into the mirror, for suddenly Serrano's hands dropped to his sides and he turned like a flash, his face blank with amazement. At the same time the cigarette holder fell with a crash to the hard glass top of the dressing table and sparks flew in every direction. Serrano, however, paid no attention, merely stood and stared at Besant as if he were seeing an apparition.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "And where did *you* come from?"

Besant, for his own part, returned the stare with an inward surprise hardly less than Serrano's. It was several seconds before he could actually grasp the amazing truth—that Serrano had still supposed him to be a prisoner on the island. That simple idea had never occurred to him, and yet, appar-

ently, that was the fact. Engrossed in her own humiliation, poor little Dorothy Sanford must have gone directly to her own room—and slammed the door. In the meantime, the gallant lover, in blissful ignorance, had been going right on with his fond dreams for the midnight elopement. It was almost pathetic, if viewed in that light.

Yet the explanation was simple enough, now that Besant had the wit to grasp it. Cynthia Crewe had been closeted with her father when Dorothy and he had returned. Dorothy could have had no opportunity to communicate with her friend, even if she had wished it. The first news to Cynthia must have been Besant's own message, carried up by the servant. Besant could only imagine what must have been the unhappy girl's emotions at first hearing the news of his escape at her father's side and in that unexplained manner. It must have been torture for her to sit out the hour, trying calmly to read, but knowing in her own heart that all the plans for her intended elopement were now in the hands of what she must regard as the enemy. And still she had remained unable to communicate with her lover. Besant himself had done that before she could reach him.

So far as Besant and Serrano were concerned, the situation was too ridiculous to continue long on the melodramatic plane. Ruefully and tardily the violinist began to stamp out a few of the larger sparks which had already begun to smoke on the carpet. This done, he sank rather vaguely into a chair.

"What happened?" he asked. "I suppose it's no use trying to conceal anything now. How did you get away?"

Besant smiled. "I'm sorry," he answered. "I simply had to shoot poor Dorothy and bury her on the highest part of the island. Then I swam six miles to the shore, my head in a sack and the handcuffs still on my wrists."

Serrano himself smiled faintly, but Besant relapsed at once to a serious tone. "No," he explained, "the truth was that another boat happened to come along at just the right moment. I had promised to be on shore—and so I came."

Serrano glanced up with a new anxiety. "You don't mean to say," he exclaimed, "that Dorothy is still out there?"

"Oh no," Besant reassured him. "She is safely in her room."

Serrano looked back at the carpet in unhappy thought. "And now," he continued, "I suppose you have come here to tell me to pack my trunk."

Besant shook his head. "No," he answered, "I have simply come here to talk."

To this overture the other man made little response. "I don't see what use there is in talking," he answered. "If you don't put me out of the house, Mr. Crewe will."

"Now wait a minute," commanded Besant. "You're putting a tone on this affair that I, at least, have never put on it. In the first place, Mr. Crewe knows nothing at all about what has happened. At least I don't think he does."

The young violinist looked up with a sudden expression of wistful hope, a look that was almost boyish in its simplicity. However, it quickly extinguished itself.

"But he will know about it," he answered.

"And what if he does," argued Besant. "It's no crime to fall in love."

The other man shrugged. "Oh, isn't it?" he answered, ironically. "It certainly is a crime when the girl is a girl like Cynthia and the man is merely a Spanish fiddler—a Wop."

"Oh don't be an ass," interrupted Besant.

"I'm not being an ass," replied the other. "I'm merely telling the truth."

Besant stopped abruptly, for he saw that along that line they could make no progress at all. When he began to speak again it was completely on another tack.

"Serrano," he said, "I'm going to tell you something that it may be very foolish for me to tell. When I was first asked to look into this case I refused pointblank. I am going to tell you the reason—because I have been on the wrong side from the very start. I mean that all my own sympathies have been with your romance. Early in my own life I spent several very miserable, unhappy years because I faced a situation very much like your own. At that time I hoped to be an artist like yourself. To be a novelist was my ambition. So far, at least, I have never attained my own ambition in that line. You have. Otherwise the stories were the same. I was in love for

years with a girl whose people thought her above me in every respect—wealth, social position, general inheritance. I was weak enough—or saint enough—to let them crowd me out. As matters have proved, perhaps they were right. That story is done. But the whole thing made five years of my life an unspeakable hell, and when I heard of your case I said to myself, ‘If I can help it, that thing is not going to happen now.’”

The other man looked partly up in a blurting, reluctant way. “That is very decent of you,” he said, “to tell me that, but if you have been through it you must know it isn’t any use.”

“On the contrary,” said Besant, “the one thing I want is to keep you from making the very mistakes that I made myself. Incessantly I did just what you are doing. I wanted everything to happen immediately. I wanted to use the grand gesture, to stand continually on my own dignity and force at once some yes or no.

“Now, Serrano,” he went on, “if you will only keep your head and use patience—not try to rush things in this back-hand, melodramatic manner, I don’t see any reason at all why, ultimately, you should not marry Miss Crewe. Listen, please. I want you to make me a promise.”

The other man, however, merely shook his head in the same dogged way. “If you want me to promise,” he said, “not to marry Cynthia Crewe the first chance I get, I won’t make any such promise.”

After his own frank confession and his own

diplomatic efforts, the tone somewhat nettled Besant. To the sentiment itself he could take no exception, but Serrano's persistent attitude seemed to throw their relations back to the point on which they had rested before.

"Very well, then," answered Besant, "I can't do much more than I have done. Personally, I have told you frankly that my sympathies are with you, but officially my duties lie on the other side. If you are determined to rush matters, I shall merely take steps to stop you."

The other man shrugged. "That is obvious." As if, however, he began to realize his own ungracious position, Serrano himself tried to make amends. "Mr. Besant," he said, "I didn't mean to be boorish, but you yourself must realize what I am feeling to-night. For six months, now, Cynthia and I have been at the very point of ending the agony—taking things into our own hands and being married at once. And every time something has come up at the very last moment to stop us—our own good will more often than not. We have never got any gratitude for it. They merely watched us more closely than ever. We have both decided that we have had enough of that. We are going to end it ourselves—no matter what happens—end it once and for all."

Again Serrano had taken a stand with which, in itself, Besant could only agree, but at the same time there still remained the one real purpose for which he had forced this call. To that one point

nothing had, as yet, brought them nearer, and Besant saw no way but to plunge in headlong.

"Serrano," he said, "I have one more question to ask you. Is there anything in your history that you are not willing to have come to light?"

At such a question it was only natural that the other man should look up with angry and flashing eyes. Nevertheless, when he answered, his words were as calm and as measured as Besant's own.

"In my past life, Mr. Besant, there is absolutely nothing of which I am ashamed and nothing which I have not already told Miss Crewe. If that answer is not sufficient, I am very sorry. I have nothing more to say."

Besant nodded. He glanced at his watch.

"Sometime," he said, "I think that we may come nearer to understanding each other. In the meantime I am going to ask you to make me one very small promise."

Serrano looked at him curiously. "What is it?"

"I am going to ask you," said Besant, "to give me your word not to leave this house—I mean, of course, the walls of the Estate—before this same hour to-morrow night."

Serrano had risen from his chair, and in his manner was apparent even more regret for his own ill-humor. Nevertheless, he shook his head. "No, Mr. Besant," he answered, "I can make no promises. The time has gone by for that. And you forget that I am not alone in this matter. There is also Miss Crewe."

Besant glanced around the walls until he saw

an electric button. "I am sorry, too," he answered. "In that case you leave me only one thing to do. I shall have to send for my own man and post him right here in your rooms, with plain instructions to keep you in them."

Already Besant's finger was on the button when Serrano held out his hand.

"All right, Mr. Besant, I'll promise."

Chapter XLII

IT was with a very live sense of achievement that Besant went back to his own rooms, a genuine belief that, for twenty-four hours at least, he had insured some measure of calm for the troubled household. His chief hope now was that he could impart that same sense of security to old Mr. Crewe without, at the same time, giving too detailed a story of just what had happened. This interview Besant decided to postpone until after dressing, giving himself at least that length of time to formulate his own report.

In his own rooms, however, Besant was to find very little chance for meditation, for as he opened the door he was met by a whirlwind. Tim Hannigan had been sitting in grandeur in the big chintz chair with his feet on the sill of the open window. The instant the knob of the door was turned, Tim took one complete vault out of the chair, holding in one hand a clothes brush and in the other Besant's dinner jacket. He began to flog the coat with all the vigor of a threshing mill.

Besant, who had forgotten completely about his own orders, held up his hand, laughing.

"Never mind, Tim, it's only me."

It was some time before Tim would cease what he evidently regarded as exquisite comedy. "Perhaps it needs a good brushing, anyhow," he replied.

Assuming a very dainty, Miss-Nancy air, Tim began to pick imaginary long hairs from the sleeves of the jacket, rolling them carefully around his finger and snapping them in fancy toward the open window.

"If you really want to help me, Tim," suggested his master, "you might start a warm bath. I'm in a hurry. Then try to find me a dress shirt which isn't frayed at the neckband."

If not called upon to do it too often, Tim occasionally enjoyed being a valet in fact as well as in title. With good-natured languor he started the bath, put studs in the shirt, and then stood around with the air of a bystander watching another man shoeing a horse.

"Say, Mr. Besant," he began, with one foot on the little stand which held his master's kit bag, "I thought you told me that all that business was off for to-night!—that getaway by Miss Crewe and Mr. Serrano."

Besant looked up from the chair where he was unlacing his shoes.

"It *is* off," he affirmed. "What makes you think that it isn't?"

Tim grinned and winked with his usual air of having shrewd inside information. "Well," he announced, "it may be off so far as you and me are concerned, but I've got some pretty wise dope that the others are going right on with their preparations. What did they think—that I couldn't drive a Fabre as well as the Switzer?"

Besant put down his shoes and leaned back in

the chair. "What makes you believe that?" he demanded.

Before replying, Tim turned and studied his favorite work of art, the little statue of Hercules in the niche in the wall. In an estimating way he placed his thumb nail on the plaster-of-Paris biceps.

"Maybe they wouldn't want me to tell you."

Without a word Besant stood up and continued undressing. Tim laughed and at once surrendered.

"You see it was this way," he confessed. "Just before I came up here, about ten minutes ago, I went into the garage to take a look at our own car. The other fellows are always shoving it around where I don't want it. I thought I was all alone there until I hears a noise, and there was Miss Sanford fooling around her little Fabre—kicking the tires and inspecting the oil gauge and so on. I thinks I'll go over and josh with her a little, like we always do when we see each other. So I slips up beside her.

"'Well, Miss Sanford,' I says, 'I guess your people don't go for their joy ride this evening.'

"'I bet you they do,' she snaps out, sudden.

"I saw right away that she had said something she didn't mean to, for then she turns red as fire, and next I see that she was mad as a tick over something or other.

"'Go away, Tim,' she says, 'I don't want to talk to you.'

"'Hell's bells!' I says to myself, 'if you're going

to eat my ear off, I don't know as I want to talk to you, either.'

"So I did go away, as far as the washstand in the carriage house, but pretty soon in comes the head chauffeur. They talked for a minute and I see her slip something in his hand—and there's only one thing they slips to chauffeurs in a joint of this kind. By and by, after she goes, this guy comes out and I begins to pump him. You see, all I wondered was what I had said to make her so angry. I asks him, 'What's the Queen of Hearts so mad at?' I says.

"'Search *me*,' says the guy. 'Oh, she's just a wild one! But she can get as mad as she wants at me any time. She just give me twenty dollars to leave the garage door and the stable gates unlocked in case she wants to go out late this evening. Don't tell anyone, will you?' the guy says. I told him I wouldn't."

Besant slipped on his bathrobe and started for the tub. "I think, Tim," he explained, "that that merely means that Miss Sanford is going home very shortly. I had an idea that she might."

"Oh, that's what it means, is it?" retorted Tim. "And when she goes home does she usually take a man's hat box and a pair of man's riding boots in the tonneau? And does she take pains to throw a lap robe over them when she sees someone coming?"

Besant laughed. "Well, those had probably been there since afternoon, before the plans were changed."

"Not much they weren't!" answered Tim. "They'd been put there inside of an hour. I know because I went all over that car from top to bottom about five o'clock, when I still thought it was me who was going to do the driving!"

More impressed with this story than he intended that Tim should realize, Besant finished his bath and returned to his dressing.

"So that's your news, Tim?" he said, to pick up the conversation. "Have you got any more?"

"Well, no," replied Tim. "Oh yes, there is, too. I'd almost forgotten. I've got a letter here I was told to give you."

Fishing it out of his pocket, Tim handed his master a thin, sealed envelope without any inscription. Besant looked at it, perplexed.

"Who gave you this?" he asked. "Who is it from?"

Tim grinned again, highly pleased with the part he was playing.

"Oh, that," he said. "That's from the other young lady—Miss What's-her-name? Miss Connie."

Chapter XLIII

A LETTER from Connie! Here *was* an event and one that must have cost no little effort to that aloof and contemptuous soul. When actually opened, however, the note proved to be unexpectedly human and friendly.

DEAR MR. BESANT:

Please forgive the intrusion of this afternoon, although I am sure that D. S. never will.

As you may have gathered, I did not go to the island purely for the sake of being malicious.

It has occurred to me that you might have left your hat or any other small object down at the boathouse this afternoon, and that about half an hour after dinner would be an excellent time for you to go down and retrieve it.

Yours—

THE HERMIT THRUSH.

Besant put the letter back in its envelope, but its contents gave him serious thought during all the minutes that remained before he had completed his dressing.

The invitation itself was perfectly simple. If he would go down to the boathouse after dinner, Connie would meet him there and would tell him her reason for wishing to get him back from the island, a reason which apparently still held in full force. But Royal Besant was no longer willing to regard such a casual engagement with the amused detachment with which he might have

regarded it twelve hours before. His adventure with that determined little madcap, Dorothy Sanford, had distinctly opened his eyes in that regard.

In fact, an increasing number of things had occurred that day which had completely sobered Royal Besant in his viewpoint toward his odd mission. That Ruiz Serrano intended to run away with the daughter of Damon Crewe regardless of consequences, and run away at the very first opportunity, was not now a vague conjecture, but an established and determined reality. That Serrano, moreover, really did have certain facts in his past history which he was not willing to have come to light was no longer a matter of malicious rumor, but of direct confession on his own part. More than Besant had been inclined to believe, the anonymous letters seemed to have some basis for their contemptible insinuations. Cynthia Crewe, to be sure, might know Serrano's secret and still remain unchanged in her devotion, but, as Besant began to realize with greater and greater solemnity, the viewpoint of an infatuated young woman was not a wholly sound basis for judgment on the acts of her lover. Neither was the mere personal impression which Besant himself had formed of Serrano. Damon Crewe, for one, would never be satisfied with opinions as partial as those. It was not for any such careless guardianship that he had laid his trust in Royal Besant.

To go no further than simple known facts, Dorothy Sanford, for better or for worse, was apparently still determined to forward, that very

night, the elopement that Besant himself was pledged to prevent. The fact that Serrano had given his word not to leave the grounds was, after all, merely a forced and unwilling promise. If Serrano *should* prove to be a scoundrel he would merely laugh at Besant for being such a trusting and innocent fool. Promise or no promise, Besant had already realized that to leave the walls and the gates unguarded that night would be nothing less than criminal negligence.

And now came this invitation of Connie's, to be at the boathouse, at the opposite side of the grounds and at the very time when his vigilance at the walls might be most needed. Could that be another ruse, another trap exactly similar to the one into which he had already fallen? Coming from anyone else but Connie, he would have immediately suspected it, but every evidence had been that Connie and Dorothy Sanford could always be found on opposite sides of every enterprise.

No, Connie's request was not one that could be ignored, but at the same time Besant could make at least a temporary disposition of his limited forces. He called to Tim Hannigan, who was now strolling around the outer rooms, making a critical examination of their art objects.

"Tim," he said, "I want you to do something for me and not ask too many questions. I want you to go down now and keep your eyes on the gates of the grounds and especially on the garage. If any strange car comes up to the walls let me know at

once. Send for me through one of the servants. If Miss Sanford's car attempts to go out, I want you to stop it."

At this odd order Tim looked at his master with a vague uncertainty.

"But, Mr. Besant," he protested, "what's the big idea? I must have missed a trick somewhere in all this fast dealing. Just who is it that's got this date with the orange blossoms—Miss Crewe or Miss Sanford? It looks to me now as if you was trying to jinx the whole business. What do you care, so long as nobody don't try to slap a contract on to Miss Sanford?"

"Well, never mind that," said Besant. "You'll know soon enough. Do just as I tell you."

"But, Mr. Besant," persisted Tim. "Suppose Miss Sanford herself is driving, what can I do? If it were the Switzer, now, I could put a grain sack over his head or stick a wagon spoke into his wheels, but you can't do that to a lady."

Besant laughed. "I don't think you'll have to worry, Tim, as long as it's daylight. By the time it's dark I'll come myself. If Miss Sanford *should* happen to take out her car, just go up and begin to talk to her—and stick like a leech. I don't think she'll go as long as you're there. Just make yourself an intolerable nuisance."

Tim nodded. "Well, sure," he agreed, "I can do that."

Chapter XLIV

BESANT glanced at his watch as he took it from the dressing table and slipped it into his pocket. Twenty minutes before seven. Damon Crewe would be expecting him at any time now. Putting Connie's letter beside the others, which were locked in his kit bag, Besant followed Tim, who had already gone forth into the halls, shaking his head doubtingly over his strange commission.

At the end of the hall, the double doors of the invalid's bedroom were slightly open and, hearing a low, droning voice within, Besant paused, then knocked. At the knock, the low, droning voice came to a sudden stop and Damon Crewe's voice itself called, "Come in."

The lights in the long, high room had not been turned on and, in the gathering twilight, two anxious faces looked toward Besant as he entered. The first was the pale face of Damon Crewe, poised against the pillows. The other was that of a man in evening dress who sat in close conference, at the other side of the bed. As the door swung open, this other man hastily gathered some papers from the counterpane and slipped them into the pocket of his coat.

At the sight of Besant, the old banker gave his usual abrupt nod of recognition, but, when he spoke, his tone was oddly strained.

"Oh, it's you!" he said. "Come in, Besant."

At the same time, the other man rose to his feet. "How do you do, Mr. Besant?" he said, in the same suppressed tone, and it was only then that Besant recognized that the man in evening dress was the lawyer, Arthur Cramp.

Something important had been interrupted. Besant could feel that in the whole atmosphere of the room. For several seconds both he and Cramp remained standing in awkward silence, both with their eyes toward the banker, both awaiting their cue from him. Invalid that he was, the old gentleman did not delay long in assuming his natural position of command. Again he nodded curtly at Besant.

"Shut those doors, please," he ordered. "Now kindly sit down."

In complete bewilderment and in something approaching fear, Besant closed the doors, then drew a chair to the nearer side of the bed. Damon Crewe turned to him, but only absently.

"Anything happened?" he asked. "Had a good day?"

Besant nodded to the latter part of the question. "No, nothing has happened—of any great moment. I think that everything is quiet, for the time being."

As Besant himself realized, his own tone was a very weak attempt at carrying conviction. In ordinary circumstances he could not have had the slightest hope that the shrewd old banker would be deceived, but Besant had already realized that any report of his own was now a thing of very

slight consequence. That he had guessed correctly, the old banker showed at once by his indifferent nod.

"That's good," he answered, absently, then immediately fell back into some other and previous deliberation.

In the silence that followed, Besant looked anxiously at the pale, troubled face on the pillows. The invalid had not been shaved during the day and the scant white bristles that showed on his chin gave to his cheeks an unusually gaunt and sunken appearance. From time to time, outside the windows, came the twittering of a restless bird in the ivy of the walls, and within the room a watch could be heard ticking, intermittently, under the pillows or in somebody's pocket. Once Cramp moved uneasily at the other side of the bed and his stiff evening shirt gave an unpleasant creak which he himself immediately tried to suppress.

After minutes, it seemed, Damon Crewe painfully moved himself on his pillows and turned to Besant.

"Mr. Besant," he began, "you are already aware of the situation in my house. Mr. Cramp has just brought to my attention certain facts which give it a very serious aspect. In my own mind I am not yet satisfied what steps I should take, but it is apparent that some steps should be taken at once."

The old gentleman paused again, then looked sharply at Besant. "Mr. Besant, I am sorry to say

that three thousand dollars in bills have been taken from the safe in my study."

If the banker, however, or Cramp, had expected any surprise from the younger man, both were disappointed.

"When?" asked Besant, quietly.

"At some time between last evening and six o'clock this afternoon," answered his host. "As you can see, it has become very difficult for me to use my hands. I do not even write my own checks except when absolutely necessary. But I have a large payroll and other weekly expenses here at this place, and so I find it simpler to keep a large sum of money in bills. The money arrived yesterday afternoon and was placed in the safe under my own direction. When Mr. Cramp came back, this evening, he wished to get certain certificates from my safe and was unable to find them. I was wheeled out there myself, and, while I found the certificates untouched, yet I discovered that the money was missing."

"Was there any way to identify the money?" asked Besant. "I mean, was it in large bills, or small?"

"It was all in new bills, directly from the bank, and was mostly in twenties."

"How did the money come?" asked Besant.

"By express," replied Damon Crewe, "yesterday afternoon. It was brought to me personally by the agent from Black Point. He is an old man, absolutely trustworthy, who has been doing the same thing for years. He counted the money in

my presence, took his receipt, and then tied up the package for me again. It remained in my lap until it was put in the safe."

Besant pondered a moment. His previous question had been merely the usual ones on such occasions. He now asked the question that was actually on his mind.

"You say, Mr. Crewe, that this package of bills was put in the safe by your direction. Who actually put it in?"

The invalid hesitated a moment, then his answer came in his usual tones. "My daughter Cynthia," he replied. "Cynthia put it there, under my eyes."

It was decidedly not the answer that Besant had expected, but his next question followed easily enough.

"And was anyone else in the room at the time?"

"Nobody," answered his host, "but my daughter Connie came in while we were still discussing it. I remember that because Cynthia was unable to close the lock of the safe and Connie, who is very much quicker at all those things, pushed her aside and did it herself."

"But other people," persisted Besant, "must have known that you were accustomed to keeping money in that safe?"

The banker hitched a little impatiently on his pillows. "Presumably," he answered. "I always have to have money here. That would be the obvious place to keep it."

Besant thought a moment. "And the safe has been locked all day?"

His host looked quietly toward the lawyer at the other side of the bed. "Mr. Cramp says that it won't lock at all."

Besant also looked toward the attorney. "Just what do you mean?"

Cramp hastened to answer. "I mean just that," he replied. "I opened the safe to-night easily enough—by the combination. I have known it for years. But when we closed it we found that the bolt would slide and remain apparently locked, but actually it would open again at a turn of your hand."

Besant turned to his host. "Do you wish me to look at it—now?"

The old banker raised his hands from the counterpane, their usual scant three inches. "Just a minute," he commanded, "just a minute. That is not the only thing I had to discuss." The invalid paused and then went on in the same even tones. "Mr. Cramp," he explained, "has also brought to my attention certain very serious facts concerning a guest in my house." He half turned toward the man at the other side of the bed. "Cramp, do you wish to submit those facts to Mr. Besant?"

With his usual deference the lawyer bowed slightly. "Just as you say, Mr. Crewe."

The host deliberated and glanced at the fading light of the room. "I think," he replied, "that it will be sufficient, Cramp, if you yourself lay the

facts before Mr. Besant just as you told them to me. Sometime later, I mean. I do not think I care to go all over the matter just now. But before you go down, Mr. Besant, will you kindly stop here a minute? I have something to say."

"Now?" asked Besant.

"Yes, now, if you will."

Chapter XLV

BESANT rose from his chair and waited while the attorney passed out of the room and closed the door. He paused a moment, then turned again toward the bed to find the old banker looking at him with a completely changed expression, quite the expression which he had worn the previous day. His pale lips even wore a faint, lurking smile.

"Well, Besant," he hailed, abruptly, "what have you done to my daughter—my daughter Cynthia?"

Completely bewildered, Besant returned his look. "Miss Cynthia?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

Damon Crewe was still smiling faintly. "She's afraid of you," he insisted, "and, as it is, I guess it's a very good thing. When you sent up your message to me this afternoon, poor Cynthia was reading beside my bed. I knew from the way she acted that something had happened. Now tell me what it was."

Besant laughed quietly, only too glad to see the invalid back in this mood.

"I am afraid," he confessed, "that Miss Cynthia was more upset by circumstances than by anything that I had done. To tell the truth, Mr. Crewe, your daughter had planned to be married to-night."

The old gentleman nodded quietly, in his same amazing way. "Yes," he answered, "I guessed

that much. And how about it? How do things stand now?"

"I think," answered Besant, "that the plans will be changed."

The older man looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, studying Besant himself rather than any words that he actually said.

"You really think that?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Besant, "for two reasons. In the first place, I have had a serious talk with Serrano. He has given me his word that he will not leave the grounds to-night. In the second place, I intend to watch him to see that he keeps his promise."

The thin lips of the older man tightened in grim amusement. "Besant," he said, "I am afraid that you do business very much in the way that I do myself. But I'm glad you told me."

Again there fell over the room one of those odd, potent silences in which the two men, the older and the younger, seemed to find a strange, unspoken communion. It was Damon Crewe himself who broke it at last.

"Besant," he said, quietly, "what are we going to do about this young man—Serrano?"

Royal Besant looked away at the open window where still a bird was fluttering nervously in the ivy. The older man watched him a moment, then added, slowly:

"You find it very hard to lose your faith in him—don't you Besant?"

"I don't know at all that I have lost it."

From behind him Royal Besant heard a faint, grunting chuckle. Again there was silence, and for a second time Damon Crewe broke in abruptly.

"Besant," he demanded, "who stole my money?"

Besant looked calmly at the face on the pillows. "Did anyone?" he asked, quietly.

"It's certainly gone," replied Damon Crewe. "And you don't think that Serrano took it?"

Besant looked at him firmly. "Absolutely not," he replied.

"Then who did take it?"

"The same person," replied Besant, "who has been trying to get him out of this house ever since he came into it. If that money is ever found on Serrano, this other person will be found not far in the background."

The banker looked down at the counterpane. Fundamentally his attitude made no great effort to contradict Besant, yet, superficially, in his voice, there was a slightly sharper tone.

"But, Mr. Besant," he insisted, "you can't keep on believing this man an angel if facts prove him something else."

"I don't think him an angel," replied Besant, quickly, "but at the same time I don't think him a fool. I quite agree with you, Mr. Crewe, that there is something in that man's history which we don't know. Certainly he ought not to marry your daughter until we find out what it is. But if Ruiz Serrano were the biggest blackguard on earth and intended to drain your treasury from now until the end of his life, he would certainly

not risk his own chances by robbing you of a paltry three thousand dollars on the eve of his marriage. On the other hand, if some one wished to prevent his marriage by involving him in a robbery that would be exactly the time to do it."

Besant stopped, rather hotly, and the older man answered but one word:

"Correct!"

"Half an hour ago," continued Besant, "I was talking with Ruiz Serrano and I was not talking to a man who had just robbed a safe. That is one thing to which I can swear. And, Mr. Crewe, I can swear to another. Ruiz Serrano is very deeply and very genuinely in love—very pitifully in love I could call it."

"Yes," replied the older man, gently, "that is the very great pity of it, if anything is wrong. They are both very deeply in love." As if to go no further on this line, he looked up, smiling. "Well, Besant," he exclaimed, "you do me good. You have a way of coming in at just the right moment and bracing up my own convictions. Now go talk to Cramp and see if he's going to shake you as he has shaken me. He's got some very astounding facts."

Besant rose from his chair, then came suddenly back to the bed. "Mr. Crewe," he said, in a very low voice, "we've got to talk plainly. What about this attorney of yours—Mr. Cramp?"

In his own turn Damon Crewe glanced at the door, but seemed to see no reason for secrecy. Instead, he laughed.

"Besant," he answered, "what did I tell you yesterday about Arthur Cramp?"

Besant smiled rather ruefully, reluctant to repeat the word. "You told me," he admitted, "that he was an idiot."

"I said 'a fool,'" corrected the older man. "I have known Arthur Cramp for over thirty years, and twenty-four hours ought not to change my opinion. But he's honest enough, if that's what you mean."

"But because he is honest," suggested Besant, "that would not prevent him from being a tool for some one who was a great deal cleverer and not quite so honest?"

"Ah!" answered Damon Crewe. "Now you're raising entirely another question."

Chapter XLVI

TO face immediately a man who has been discussed as Arthur Cramp had been discussed by Besant and his host is rather a trying ordeal, but in this case there was no help for it. As Besant left the banker's room and passed down the heavily carpeted hall, the attorney appeared from another room, two or three doors away, and stopped him with a nod of his head. Glancing up and down the hallway, he took Besant by the arm and led him into the room from which he himself had just emerged.

The room they entered was obscured in a heavy twilight, deeper on that—the eastern—side of the house. Softly closing the door, Cramp turned on a light. In the added gleams, Besant looked around at what was obviously Damon Crewe's private study and den. The furniture here was of a homelier, more substantial kind than that in the rest of the house. There were one or two heavy, black-leather armchairs of the sort used in clubs. The bookcase, which lined one wall, was packed with law books and miscellaneous volumes of railroad and industrial reports. The walls and hangings were permanently saturated with the faint, stale odor of heavy cigar smoke.

"Now here—" began the attorney.

But Besant held up his hand. "Where does that

lead?" he interrupted, nodding to a door at the side of the room.

The lawyer glanced toward it indifferently. "That leads to Mr. Crewe's dressing room. Beyond that is his bedroom."

Besant quickly opened the door, glanced into the dressing room, then nodded for Cramp to continue.

The lawyer turned at once to a safe set into the wall, a primitive, old-fashioned affair placed there probably thirty years before, when the house had been built. Cramp grasped the handle of the iron door, turned it sharply, and the safe came open at once.

"You see?" he whispered.

Without answering, Besant stepped to the safe, closed it, and twirled the combination dials. He turned the handle, and again the door opened. Cramp had been perfectly correct. Do what he might, the safe would not lock.

Thoughtfully, Besant studied the inner side of the door, which contained the mechanism of the combination. It was covered with a single painted plate of sheet iron or steel, but the screws which held it in place were covered with undisturbed rust and their edges remained as true as on the day on which the safe had been built. The lock at least had not been touched.

Besant closed the safe again and threw the bolt back and forth in various ways, first gently, then violently, then gradually, with steadily increasing force. There came to the palm of his hand a

softly yielding and very suspicious feeling. Throwing open the door, he turned to Cramp.

"Do you think you could get me a long, thin nail file with a very sharp point?"

The lawyer picked up from the table a small brass paper-knife in the form of a dagger. "Wouldn't this do?"

Besant shook his head. "No, a nail file is just what I want. If you haven't one, there is one in my room, but, if you don't mind, I should like to keep working at this while you are gone. Perhaps you had better put out the light, if you are going to open the door."

Willingly enough, Cramp turned out the light and went into the hall, but the instant that he had gone Besant swiftly dropped to his knees and picked up the very implement which he had refused from Cramp. This he ran cautiously into the deep hole in the frame of the safe, the channel into which the bolt should have properly passed. He found exactly what he had expected. Very gently, taking pains not to tear it, he pried out of the hole a small, tightly wadded bit of gray-green paper. There was no time to examine it now, and, slipping it hurriedly into the pocket of his dinner jacket, he resumed an elaborate show of turning back and forth the handle of the bolt and the combination.

Cramp appeared almost immediately, carefully closed the door of the room, and turned on the light. He held out a nail file with an ivory handle. "Is this what you want?" he asked.

"Excellent," answered Besant. "Now, Mr. Cramp I am going to show you an old safe-cracker's trick. Only now I am going to work it backward—to close a safe, not to open it. Please slowly turn the dials to the first letter of the combination."

There were two dials on the lock and, rather stiffly, Cramp turned the larger one to the letter 'K.' Immediately Besant, with a great show of careful precision, inserted the point of the nail file under the edge of the dial and pried it slightly.

"Now then," he commanded, "the second letter."

Cramp turned the small dial to the letter 'R,' then the pointer on the large dial to the letter 'N,' and the pointer on the small dial to the letter 'F.' Each time Besant went through his same elaborate hocus-pocus with the nail file.

"That all?" he asked, at last.

"That's all," replied Cramp.

Very carefully Besant pretended to examine both sides of the door, gently tapped the inner side with the palm of his hand as if to shake down the tumblers of the lock, worked the bolt slowly in and out and then stood up in feigned triumph.

"Now go ahead and close it," he commanded. "I think it will lock."

Suspiciously Cramp obeyed. He swung the door and turned the handle. Naturally, with the wad of paper gone, the bolt slid clear home and remained in place. The attorney looked at Besant in bewilderment.

"How did you do it?" he exclaimed.

Besant laughed. "Oh, it's just a little matter of adjustments."

"But could you open it again?"

"Certainly," replied Besant and he spoke quite truthfully, for Cramp himself had just taught him the combination. "But," he added, "now that we both know it's safely locked, let's leave it so."

The attorney looked at his watch. "Mr. Besant, you'd be a dangerous man to have in an office. But there still remains that other matter of which Mr. Crewe spoke. Do you think we can postpone it until after dinner?"

"I should prefer not to," replied Besant, "but I think we had better. Could you make some excuse and come up to my rooms immediately afterward?"

Turning out the light, the attorney opened the door and passed down the stairs, while Besant went straight to his own rooms. Here he took from his pocket the wad of paper which he had picked out of the lock of the safe. He smoothed it carefully on the table, studied it for a few moments, and a very odd expression came into his eyes. Rising quickly, he went back into his dressing room, unlocked his kit bag, and from his packet of letters took out the fragment which Cramp had given him in the inn at Gaylordsville—the fragment written in Spanish in Serrano's handwriting. Returning to the table, Besant put the two bits of paper side by side. They fitted exactly! On the fragment taken from the safe only a few words

remained, but the two had undoubtedly once been part of the same letter.

For a moment more Besant deliberated; then rising again, he glanced around the room until he saw a bit of newspaper stuffed into the fireplace, ready for kindling. Tearing off a piece three or four inches long, he first made on it certain notations in pencil, and then rolled it into a small, compact ball. Going to his door, he looked carefully up and down the hall, and then slipped back to the darkened little study. To open the safe now, with the combination, was a very simple process, and quickly Besant slipped his own wad of paper in the channel of the bolt. Once or twice he tried the lock. Each time it came open to a single turn. The safe now remained exactly as Cramp had found it.

Chapter XLVII

DINNER in the Crewe house that evening was naturally a very curious ceremony, but for once the presence of Arthur Cramp proved to be a boon. The lawyer chatted briskly throughout the whole meal with Mrs. Crewe, or rather *at* Mrs. Crewe, for the hostess largely confined her part in the conversation to single remarks or to nodding from time to time in her querulous, indifferent manner. In either case, the effect was the same, for it freed the rest of the company of any necessity of making forced conversation.

Dorothy Sanford, it was announced, was confined to her room with a headache, while Connie was absent without any explanation whatever. That Cynthia Crewe and Serrano had not also followed their example was the source of main surprise to Besant. Both were present and, while neither could have been expected to say very much, yet both sat quietly enough through the whole trying ordeal and even joined the rest of the party for a moment or two on the terrace.

Besant, himself, was, in fact, the first to make his excuses. Taking a little stroll through the grounds, he found Tim still on duty near the garage, but beginning to weary of his occupation. So far as any attempt on the part of Dorothy Sanford to get her car outside the gates was concerned, Tim reported all quiet along the Potomac, but he

did have one bit of news of which, for a moment, Besant did not realize the significance.

"Say, Mr. Besant," exclaimed Tim, "how long does it take a man to get over sprained ankle?"

"Anywhere from a week to ten years," said Besant.

"All right, then," said Tim. "Now I'll ask you another. Did you ever hear of a Swiss named 'Lawrence McCarthy'?"

At this, indeed, Besant did begin to pay attention. "What do you mean, Tim?" he demanded.

Tim winked and nodded his head, as he always did when he felt that Besant was about to realize his acumen.

"I'll tell you," he said. "You know that valet of Mr. Serrano's that was supposed to be in bed to-day with a sprained ankle and poison ivy? Well, he *was* in bed so far as any of us knew. He didn't come to breakfast with the other servants and he didn't come to lunch, but now this evening he begins to hobble around again with a cane and his hands all done up in bandages. The other lads begun to guy him, and so he seemed to be keeping away by himself. 'Fontaine'—that's what his name was supposed to be, but I always called him 'Polly.'

"Well," continued Tim, "when you told me to keep Miss Sanford's car from leaving the garage, I thought the best way would be to put another car in front of it. So I comes down here and shoves the next car around a little, so the rear fenders was just overlapping. Now, I figures, if anyone

tries to get out that car of Miss Sanford's and I ain't present, there'll either be one hell of a crash or else they'll have to take time to move it. Then I slips around here outside the building where I could keep an eye both on the garage and the gates. I was getting a little tired of waiting, so I took out my dice and began to toss a few throws, one hand against the other.

"Pretty soon," resumed Tim, "I begins to hear a little *tap, tap* on the gravel and I takes a squint around the corner of the building. Sure enough, there comes Mr. Switzer, just like a lame soldier out for an airing. First he walks back and forth like he weren't going nowhere in particular, and then he turns and hobbles into the garage.

"'Aha! Me hated rival!' I says. 'So you're going to drive that car, after all!' And with that I slips in behind him.

"By this time," explained Tim, "you understand it was beginning to get dark. There was one light in the washroom, but there wa'n't none at all where the cars was. I keeps outside in the shadows, and straight as a shot Mr. Switzer goes for Miss Sanford's car. He looks it over, monkeys a little with the levers, then he sees how the other car is placed. Then what does he do? Puts down his cane, walks over, just as well as you or me, takes off the brake, and shoves that other car back in position. And you know that ain't no easy trick for a well man. 'So *that's* it!' I says. 'The kind of sprained ankle *you've* got is the same kind a fighter gets when the purse ain't big enough.'

"So then," continued Tim, "I wanted to see what Mr. Switzer would have to say for himself. Just when he was coming back into the washroom, where the light was, I squats down, begins to whistle, and starts throwing my dice again—very innocent. Then out he comes, hobbling again.

"'Hello, Polly!' I hails him. 'How's the injured member?'

"'Pretty gude,' he answers and starts to go past me.

"'Come on, Polly,' I says. 'Forget your troubles. Sit down a minute and I'll roll you a couple. Fifty cents a throw. Simplest game in the world. First one gets a pair gets the whole shooting match.'

"Polly holds up his bandages. 'How can I woll,' he says, 'wid hants like dese?'

"'Easy enough,' I says. 'I'll roll for us both, out of my cap.'

"I guess," explained Tim, "that Polly begun to see that there was only one way to get rid of me. So I got him a blanket and helped him sit down, and begun to toss the bones out of my cap for the both of us. Polly won the first. I intended he should. Then he won three more and he wanted to quit.

"'Quit now?' I says. 'When you're winning? No gentleman does that. But all right. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll roll you double or quits.' So I tossed a pair and he owed me four dollars."

Distinctly impatient at the speed with which

this story was progressing, Besant broke in at once.

"Tim," he ordered, "I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

"Now don't rush the pitcher," retorted Tim. "I'm coming to the end. You see, now the question comes—with his hands all bandaged, how is Polly going to pay me? I wondered that myself. But Polly begins to fumble inside his pocket. He takes out a billfold and holds it just with the tips of his fingers. It was clumsy work, but I got my money. Then sudden, *slap! bang!* Down on the floor goes his billfold, wide open. On the inside of it was one of these isinglass things with a driver's license. And it wasn't no Massachusetts license, either. It was District of Columbia. I knew it well because I carried one myself in war time. And on it, as plain as your eye, was the name 'Lawrence McCarthy'!"

"Did he know that you saw it?" asked Besant, quickly.

"I didn't mean he should," replied Tim, "but he may have."

"All right, Tim. You stay right where you are. I'll be back, myself, inside of an hour, but if you want me, go down to the boathouse and whistle. If I don't answer, go to my rooms."

Chapter XLVIII

TO KEEP his engagements both with Arthur Cramp and with Connie would now mean hurried work, and Besant went directly to the house and up to his rooms. As he entered, the lawyer was rising from a chair by the fireplace.

"I began to think that you weren't coming," he explained, "or else that I had misunderstood you."

Besant laughed, rather humorlessly. "I had to give some instructions to my man," he explained, "and I am also afraid that I shall have to go out again in just a minute."

With Connie's note in his mind and with the news that Tim had just given him, Besant's tone had been sharper than he had intended, and, in return, the lawyer himself bridled slightly.

"I won't keep you long," he answered. "I can cover my matter in just one minute."

Suiting his actions to his promise he immediately drew from his pocket two objects. The first was a soiled but recent photograph of Ruiz Serrano, made by a New York photographer, but with some figures and dates in ink on the mounting. The second was a large printed sheet covered with halftone pictures. Cramp spread the latter out on the little table in the center of the room, and then stood back, rather dramatically.

"Now," he demanded, "what do you make of those?"

Besant sat down at the table and studied first the photograph and then the sheet. "Where did you get these?" he asked.

Cramp smiled. "Both of them," he announced, "were given to me this morning by the police of New York City. That explains why I came back here to-night."

Besant looked at him sharply. "I thought you told me that you did not intend to go to the police in this matter."

For answer, Cramp merely smiled again. "I didn't," he retorted. "They came to me."

"Last night," he continued, "a lieutenant from the detective bureau came to my apartment. He had been first to the Founders' Trust Company, Mr. Crewe's bank, and they had referred him to me as personal attorney. The police had learned that"—Cramp did not mention the name of Serrano, but merely jerked his head toward the photograph—"they had learned that our friend there was very intimate with Mr. Crewe's family and they wished to find out just where he was and what he was doing."

"Did you tell them?" demanded Besant.

"Of course I told them."

"But why," asked Besant, "didn't they send a man right up here themselves? The man himself could have looked at Serrano."

"That's the very point," replied Cramp. "That's exactly what they did want to do. They wanted to send a man with me to-night. I had to use Mr. Crewe's name and carry the matter to very

high quarters to keep them from doing it. In fact, I had to go to the commissioner himself. Naturally, if anything of this kind is going to come to light, the very last place where it must happen must be in Mr. Crewe's house. As I told the commissioner, our first thought must be to let Mr. Crewe's family get clear of the whole situation. Let Mr. Crewe get rid of this man of his own accord, and then the police can go as far as they like with the matter."

The attorney stopped, and again Royal Besant studied the large sheet spread on the table before him. It was a page torn from *La Semaine*, a well-known Parisian illustrated weekly. The date remained still at the top—"12 Octobre, 1919."

In the center of the page was a large scene of a sort very familiar to the scandal-loving French papers—a crowded street with a closed motor bus like an ambulance waiting at the curb. Through two lines of craning spectators a woman, heavily veiled, was being led by two police officers. Around this central photograph was a circle of smaller photographs, close portraits, one of the same woman in a Spanish dancing costume, the rest of four men and two other women. Beside one of these a large cross had been made in ink. It was an indubitable picture of Serrano.

The printed lines, wound among and below the photographs, evidently repeated a story well known at the time to the Parisian public.

La Luciernaga—"The Firefly," Taken to Trial for the Murder of the Belgian Millionaire, Lucien Hervé.

This was the line under the central photograph, and at the bottom of the page was the following brief summary:

No arrest since the Copeau affair has gripped the imagination of Paris as vividly as that of Maria Perales, Spanish dancer, known as "The Firefly" and leader of a band of "aristocratic" criminals who have made a practice of swindling wealthy foreigners at fashionable resorts of France, England, and Italy, culminating in the murder in a house in the Rue Garber, last June, of M. Hervé.

Under the smaller portraits were various identifications, that of Serrano bearing this brief and contemptuous comment:

The "Count Luis de Montsain," identified as Manuel Narvaez, a Spanish adventurer once expelled from Monte Carlo and later leader of an orchestra in a low resort in Montmartre. Accomplice of "La Luciernaga."

The identification was unmistakable, quite apart from the photograph which had apparently been obtained in New York and marked by the police. Besant looked up at the lawyer.

"But if this man was tried for murder in Paris, why is he here now?"

Cramp shook his head. "That I can't tell you. The commissioner did not know, himself, or else did not see fit to tell me. But as nearly as I can make out, information had come to the police from abroad that certain members of this gang were still at large and were beginning to work in America."

Besant looked down again at the sheet on the table. "Can you let me keep this?"

Again Cramp shook his head. "Unfortunately, not. I had difficulty enough in getting the police to let me have it for twenty-four hours. It required a special order by telephone from the commissioner himself. A detective met me with it at Grand Central Station."

Besant quietly folded the sheet and, with the photograph, handed it back to Cramp. "And what do you propose to do now?" he asked.

"I told Mr. Crewe," replied the lawyer, "that the only thing for him to do was to summon the authorities from Black Point, have this man held for examination, and communicate with the New York police department. Then we could take up the matter with the highest authorities. See if we cannot have him quietly shipped out of the country and no one the wiser. His connection with Miss Cynthia Crewe is too widely known to risk a trial now."

Besant smiled slightly. "And what did Mr. Crewe say to that?"

"He said to talk it over with you."

"And can Mr. Crewe see me again this evening?" asked Besant.

"I think he expects it."

Besant rose from the table, and the lawyer, understanding the signal, moved toward the door, but the younger man stopped him.

"Mr. Cramp," he said, "would you mind answering two questions?"

"Why, certainly!" replied Cramp. "What are they?"

"First," asked Besant, "who is Miss Dessler?"

The lawyer was not exactly facing him as he asked the question, but Besant felt very certain that, slightly, he flushed. Nevertheless, he answered with apparent readiness.

"Miss Dessler is a very capable woman. For nearly a year she was an employée of my own. In my office she became familiar with the affairs of the Crewe estate, and so when Mr. Crewe needed a secretary here I sent her with my recommendation."

"When?" asked Besant.

"About six weeks ago, when Mr. Crewe opened this house for the season."

"And, now, if you don't mind, the other question," pursued Besant. "Who was Mrs. Crewe before her marriage?"

Again the lawyer looked at him with a very odd expression. "Why do you ask that?" he said.

Besant shrugged carelessly. "For one thing," he answered, "because of the apparent difference between her age and Mr. Crewe's. There must be fully twenty years' difference. Is there not?"

The lawyer nodded. "Yes, there is," he confessed. He paused a moment, then, as if seeing no harm in the question, he continued:

"Mrs. Crewe was married in Paris when she was only nineteen. She had been born and brought up abroad. Her father was a Massachusetts man with quite a notable history. He was a colonel in the Union army during the Civil War, and after the war, with a number of other

American officers, entered the service of the Khedive of Egypt. He was married in Europe to a Frenchwoman, took part in the Franco-Prussian War, and, I believe, in some other excitements which followed the Empire. After that he settled down and for thirty years was United States consul at Pau, in southern France."

A second time the lawyer paused, then added, abruptly: "Perhaps I had better tell you, Mr. Besant, that it was through Mrs. Crewe that I became associated with her husband's affairs. Mrs. Crewe is a first cousin of my own."

Chapter XLIX

AS soon as the attorney had left, Besant turned back to the windows and for several minutes stood looking out into the night. Then quietly he extinguished all the lights in his room, opened the door a few inches, and, hidden in the darkness, began to study the general layout of the upper hall.

Almost opposite from his own room was the door of the private study where the safe was located. At the end of the corridor, to the right, were the double doors of Mr. Crewe's bedroom. Slightly to the left and on the opposite side was a large, open rotunda where two broad, winding staircases led down from the upper hall, meeting at the first landing. Beyond the staircase and on the same side of the hall was the first door of Serrano's apartment. Where the other rooms of the second story were placed Besant knew only in a general way.

Very softly Besant closed his door and moved back to turn on the light, but in the darkness he missed calculations and his hip struck the table, knocking a book to the floor. With an exclamation Besant put out his hand to find the outlines of the table, when suddenly, from the blackness of his own inner rooms, he heard a low whisper:

"Mr. Besant!"

Besant stopped in his tracks, his hand still

uplifted toward the switch. He paused a moment, heard no other sound, then answered in a low voice: "Yes? Who is it?"

The door of the dressing room moved slightly and Besant could hear a rustling sound as some one moved forward.

"Who is it?" he repeated.

For a second more the voice gave no answer, then, as a vague shape slowly began to emerge in the darkness, a whisper came again:

"Please not so loud. It's I. It's Connie."

Immediately Besant stepped forward, and at the same moment the figure of Connie Crewe was standing in the darkness, not two feet away. He could hear her quick, frightened breathing, could almost feel, rather than see, a long cape she was wearing.

Besant lowered his hand. "Yes, Miss Crewe," he whispered. "What is it? I'll turn on a light."

The girl put out her hand and touched him. "No, no!" she begged. "For Heaven's sake don't do that! I can tell you now. You didn't come down to the boathouse. I began to be frightened. I had to speak to you. I saw a light here a minute ago. I came in through the door of your bedroom. from the servants' stairway."

In the darkness Besant could still hear her breaths coming in frightened gasps, and he put his hand on her shoulder. "Miss Crewe," he said, "I understand perfectly. I think you know you can trust me. Please tell me. What's happened?"

"It's this," whispered the girl. "You must take it. Please take it and put it back."

"Put what back?" asked Besant.

"This! This! I'm trying to give it to you! It's in my hand! Take it! Take it! Please!"

Against his coat, in the darkness, Besant felt something pressed, and, putting up his hand, grasped a thin, heavy package. Immediately Connie's own hand fell away.

"What is this?" Besant whispered.

"It's money—a package of money. From father's safe. I found it to-night. Don't ask me any more. Please don't."

"But, Miss Crewe," urged Besant, "*you must* tell me more. Where did you get this? Don't you realize what it may mean?"

"Yes, yes," begged the girl. "I know. I thought I knew more than you all. I knew that Cynthia was planning to run away with Frank Serrano. I was glad to have them. I was ready to help them. I thought that the talk against Frank was merely mother. She has always been hostile to him. She didn't want Cynthia to marry him. But this afternoon——"

The girl stopped with a choke, and again in the darkness, Besant pressed his hand on her shoulder. He could feel it rise and fall convulsively under his grip.

"Please, Miss Connie," he whispered. "You must tell me. Tell me it all."

For a moment longer the girl stood sobbing, then she went on in slow, painful effort: "I was

on the balcony, this noon, outside father's rooms. It was when I watched you and Dorothy Sanford. Miss Dessler was with father, in his bedroom—taking dictation. I had thought that she was spying on Cynthia. I thought that mother had paid her to do it. I had never liked Miss Dessler. I had been watching her. That was *my* part in the plot, but the others didn't know I was helping."

The girl stopped again. In the blackness Besant could feel her hands moving convulsively under her cape. Then she went on.

"I turned to go in through father's study, and then, through the windows, I saw someone was in there. I thought it must be Miss Dessler, so I hid behind one of the columns—on the balcony. And it wasn't Miss Dessler. It was Frank Serrano. He was kneeling in front of the safe."

With this point in her story once passed, poor Connie now seemed to find it easier to go on.

"I knew there was money in the safe. I had helped Cynthia to put it in. I knew that Frank hadn't much money, but I couldn't believe *that*."

"Did you actually see him take this?" asked Besant. "From the safe?"

"No, no!" pleaded the girl. "But he was working there in front of it. Then suddenly that manservant of his came down the hall, tapping with his cane. His ankle was sprained. And at once Frank got up and left. And then, right afterward, Miss Dessler came out of father's room. She looked into the study and went off, too."

"Miss Connie," asked Besant in a very low voice,

"do you know how long Serrano has had this man, this Swiss?"

"Only a few weeks. The last time he came up he had another, an Englishman."

"And all this happened," asked Besant, "before you came to the island?"

"Yes, that," answered Connie, "but I didn't know where the money was. I hadn't found it."

"But where *did* you find it?"

Connie did not answer, and again Besant urged: "Please tell me. I really must know."

"I—I can't," sobbed the girl. "Take it. Please take it. Give it to father. Tell him anything you like, but don't ask me any more."

"Miss Connie," replied Besant. "I can't take this at all unless you will tell me where you found it."

For a long interval the girl stood silent, then choked it out: "It was in Cynthia's room."

Instantly, however, the poor child saw that she had made it sound worse than it actually was. "Wait, please wait," she added, hurriedly. "It wasn't Cynthia that had it. She couldn't have known it was there. But when I came back from the island I wanted to find out whether they still planned to run away. I knew that Cynthia had packed a bag. I knew where she had hidden it. I went and looked there and the bag was gone, but Cynthia's motor coat was there, all ready, and rolled inside it was a coat of Frank's. I wasn't sure at first, so I took it out. There was something in the pocket. I seemed to *know* what it was. It was this money."

As again she began to weep convulsively in the darkness Besant tightened his grasp gently on her shoulder.

"Miss Connie," he said, "you have done exactly the right thing. This money can be returned to your father very easily. No one need ever know where I got it."

"But it isn't the money," gasped Connie. "It's Cynthia. She mustn't go away with him now."

"She will not go away with him to-night," assured Besant, quietly. "Do you know where they are now?"

"They were on the terrace when I came back from the boathouse, but that was fifteen minutes ago."

Besant paused a moment and then said, simply: "Miss Connie, I have got to turn on a light while I examine this package. It may be very necessary for me to see you again. Can you go down through the little door into the garden and wait outside? I will promise you that I will be there in three minutes. If I am not there by that time you needn't wait."

For a moment the girl did not answer, and Besant glanced away. Through the leaded and stone-cased windows came the faint gray of the starlight, giving in the room a peculiarly eerie and monastic effect. Then slowly, in the shadows, Besant could see Connie nod her head. Taking her by the hand, he led her back through the inner rooms and saw her pass safely under the

single dim light at the landing of the servants' stairway.

Closing the door quietly, Besant fumbled his way back to his own sitting room and turned on the lights. With trembling hands he untied the package, which still bore its original address and its broken seals. As its contents came to his eyes he first stared with alarm, then with slow bewilderment, then suddenly he laughed aloud.

Hastily tying up the package again, he slipped it into an inner pocket and went calmly down the main stairway. A moment later he had passed through the little side corridor and into the garden. Outside the doorway he paused, spoke a low word, and Connie came up to him at once. Immediately Besant held out the package toward her reluctant hand.

"Miss Connie," he whispered, "you must take this package back and put it exactly where you found it."

In fear, Connie drew away. "But I can't," she begged. "It mustn't be there. Do whatever you want to Frank, but nothing must happen to Cynthia."

In a low tone Besant insisted. "Miss Connie," he said, "your father himself brought me here to guard your sister. That is just what I am doing. So please do exactly as I say."

Reluctantly the girl took the package and hid it under her cape. Yet still she whispered frightened objections: "But suppose she is there? Suppose Cynthia is in her room."

“In that case,” answered Besant, “slip it under a pillow, drop it behind a bookcase—do anything—but leave it in her room.”

Chapter L

TOO FRIGHTENED to offer further objection, Connie went back through the doorway. Besant waited until he had seen her safely inside, then swiftly walked across the damp turf and completely around the house. As he approached the terrace, on the seaward side, he slackened his pace into an appearance of strolling nonchalance, but the precaution was quite unnecessary. If, as Connie had said, Ruiz Serrano had been on the terrace a few minutes before, he was not there now.

Besant glanced up at the Spaniard's window and saw a light. For the moment at least that was reasonably reassuring, but the time had come, Besant knew, when he must tighten his watch. Only one very necessary errand remained before he must call in Tim from his outpost at the stables and, with Tim's support, concentrate his guard for the night on a single point.

Entering the house casually by the terrace doors and climbing the main staircase, Besant went at once to Damon Crewe's rooms. As they usually were, the double doors were ajar for six or eight inches, and through the opening Besant could see the invalid sitting in bed, while a maid, in white cap and apron, was stirring around, preparing the room for the night.

Besant knocked softly and entered. Damon Crewe looked up.

"Oh, good evening, Besant! You want to see me?"

At a nod, the maid left the room, and Besant closed the doors, making sure, this time, to see that the door to the dressing room was also closed. As he finished, his host was waiting anxiously.

"Well?" he asked. "You have talked to Cramp?"

Besant nodded. "And I have also found out something else which I can't explain now. I have found out where your money is. You will have it to-morrow."

Impatiently the invalid raised his hands from the bedclothes. "Oh, damn the money!" he exploded. "My daughter is all I care about."

Besant flushed. "I didn't mean to put it in just that way. But when the money is found I think the other matters will be settled also."

"But Cramp showed you those pictures?" insisted the banker.

Besant replied with as great a show of nonchalance as he could muster. "Yes, I have seen them, but there is one thing that Mr. Cramp did not seem to notice. That page from *La Semaine* bore the copyright of the American News Corporation in one corner. It was not printed in France, but was an American edition printed from plates shipped to this country."

Damon Crewe looked up with excitement. "Do you mean to say it wasn't genuine?"

"Unhappily," replied Besant, "it was genuine

enough, but Mr. Cramp seemed to intimate that the New York police had received it from France. The fact probably is that that picture sheet was cut out and furnished to them by some one in this country, someone who had saved it until it suited his purpose. You can rest assured that the New York police are not regular readers of *La Semaine*. Whereas if the Paris police had sent it they would have sent the French edition."

"But the facts remain the same."

"Yes, certainly," answered Besant, "the main facts are the same. In brief, Mr. Crewe, on one point Mr. Cramp is entirely right. This man must be kept under my eye until this thing is cleared up. I have let him go too long as it is, but you can rest assured that I am going to begin now. Furthermore, I shall have with me my own man, who, on occasion, can be one of the ugliest customers anyone would care to meet."

The invalid turned wearily on his pillow. "Thank you for that, Besant," he answered. "I know that I can rely on you, but you can easily guess that I shall do very little sleeping to-night." The old gentleman quickly changed his tone. "But don't let me keep you. You ought not to stay here."

Besant nodded hastily, for the same thought was uppermost in his own mind. With a brief, "Good-night," and a promise to look in again, he opened the doors and passed down the hall, but as he passed his own rooms he saw Tim Hannigan standing inside at the table. He entered, and

closed the door. The lights were still turned up as Besant had left them, and under their glare Tim stared at his master with a frightened and angry face.

"Where the devil have you been?" Tim demanded. "I looked for you everywhere—down at the boathouse and all."

Besant glanced again at the door. "Not so loud, Tim," he said. "What's the matter? What's happened?"

"What's happened?" repeated Tim. "They've gypped me. That's all!"

"Who's gypped you?" asked Besant.

"Miss Sanford and the Switzer," retorted Tim. "They've taken the car and they've got away!"

Chapter LI

FOR a moment Besant's face became as white and as angry as Tim's.

"Who was in it?" he demanded, sharply. "How many were there?"

"How should I know?" gasped Tim. "Out there in the darkness? I was sitting outside the garage when all of a sudden I remembered that I hadn't fed Remy——"

"That cursed ferret!" exclaimed Besant.

"It wasn't Remy," defended Tim, stoutly. "I wasn't gone three minutes. I brought him back with me wrapped up in a coat to keep me company and then I took a look in the garage to see that everything was all right. And there was the Switzer again, tap-tapping around with his cane. He looked at me, kind of guilty, and then he went out. He started up toward the house and then he looked over his shoulder and doubled back toward the walls. 'Aha!' I says. 'You're up to something!' And so I followed him, sneaking along in the dark. It was just a trick and I bit like a fool. All of a sudden he stopped dead short and turned right around.

"'What you following me for?' he asks.

"'None of your business,' I says.

"With that he takes a whirl at me with his cane. I makes a dive and he turns and runs like a deer, sprained ankle and all. I started after him and

got a good hundred yards away when sudden I hears a racket behind me and *zip! bang!* out of the garage comes Miss Sanford's car with Miss Sanford driving. I could see her head plain against the light in the washroom. She changed the gears, one, two, three, and was hitting it thirty for the gates before I could 'draw my breath."

"And what became of the Swiss?" demanded Besant.

"Oh, the Switzer? I don't know what became of him. All I was thinking of was the car. I beat it back as fast as I could, hoping the gates would hold 'em, but somebody else must have been there and got them open, for the car never stopped a flicker—just went shooting out into the sand roads outside the walls!"

Hastily, frantically, Besant was attempting to think against time, to patch up his shattered plans. Pursuit now would be almost out of the question. There would be five or ten different ways in which the elopers could turn after reaching Gaylordsville or Black Point. Clinging to one faint ray of hope, he continued hurriedly to question Tim.

"And you didn't see anyone except Miss Sanford?"

"She was all I *see*," affirmed Tim, "but somebody else must have been there to open the gates. And how many others——"

Besant held up his hand and stopped him. "Tim," he ordered, "you stay right here, and don't you dare to move out until I come back."

Without another word Besant opened the door

and passed down the hall directly to Serrano's room. At the threshold he could see a faint sliver of light, but, as he realized now, that might mean nothing. Without even pausing to knock, he threw open the door and pushed in abruptly.

The sitting room was certainly empty, and the dressing room next to it was dark, but, in the bedroom beyond, a shaded light gleamed dully at the head of the bed. Casting aside all caution, Besant stalked through the intervening rooms and looked about him.

In the bedroom, indeed, there were no signs of a hasty flight, or, rather, the room displayed an innocence that was highly artful. The bed was neatly turned down for the night, a dressing gown and a pair of slippers lay ready beside it. In a large closet, which stood half open, a number of coats remained placidly on their hangers. On the little night table, under the lamp, were an open book and a pipe with ashes spilling out of the bowl. Under the pipe was an opened letter and Besant moved toward it. He had his hand at the table when he heard a matter-of-fact voice behind him.

"Hello, Besant!" said the voice.

Besant turned sharply. In the door of the dressing room, still in his dinner clothes, stood, calmly—Ruiz Serrano.

Chapter LII

WITH the utmost nonchalance in the world Serrano stepped forward and turned a switch which flooded the room with light.

"What's the matter, Besant?" he asked. "Anything that I can do for you?"

"Now that you are here," replied Besant, "you can tell me where you keep that 'Hermitage' tobacco."

Serrano laughed outright. "Besant," he exclaimed, "that line should have been in a play. What a pity that you couldn't have thought of it just a minute earlier.

"But, certainly," he added, after a moment's hesitation. "Come out here and I'll give you all you want of it."

Turning quietly, he led the way into the sitting room. From the drawer of a desk he produced a brand-new can of "Hermitage" and offered it to Besant. "Take it with you," he urged. "Or, better yet, won't you sit down and smoke here?"

So absurdly calm, so completely matter-of-fact, was his manner that, before Besant realized what he was doing, he found the can of tobacco already in his hand and a murmur of thanks on his lips. Nevertheless, the undercurrent of thought was too strong in the minds of both men for either of them to ignore it. For a moment Serrano stood

looking straight into Besant's eyes, then slowly he shook his head.

"Mr. Besant," he said, "I am disappointed. I gave you my word and I thought you trusted me."

Besant flushed. "I did trust you," he said, "when you made the promise. But when your man decoys my man away from the gates and then your car leaves the grounds at thirty miles an hour——"

Serrano interrupted him with the same baffling smile. "My dear Mr. Besant," he protested, "that was not my car. That was Miss Sanford's. I didn't know that my promise extended to her."

"It didn't," retorted Besant, "but the car contained your luggage."

Serrano flushed in turn. "That," he admitted, "was placed there before Miss Sanford knew of my promise. Even as it was, she didn't think it much of a promise, but, personally, I did. That I am here now is not due to Miss Sanford. If she had had her way, she would have thrown a rope over my head and dragged me along, whether or no."

"And yet your man was still in the trick," replied Besant.

"Quite so," confessed Serrano. "I will even volunteer the information that I personally opened the gates. In doing so I may have broken my promise to the extent of eight or ten inches. That was why I was not here when you came in. But, Mr. Besant, if you are going to use the most absurdly melodramatic methods to keep Miss San-

ford from doing whatever she pleases, you cannot object if she does the same."

For answer, Besant burst out sharply, "Serrano," he demanded, "what in the world are you up to, anyway?"

But if Besant had lost his temper, Serrano had not. "I have told you frankly what I am up to. I am determined to marry Miss Cynthia Crewe at the first possible moment."

Besant made a gesture of impatience. "I don't mean that, and you know I don't. I mean your past—your record. Why don't you come right out and tell the truth? I have met you halfway and more than halfway. I will tell you frankly that if it had not been for me you would have been put out of this house to-night, and you might have been put out in handcuffs. I have enough facts myself to put you in jail."

Serrano looked up at him quickly. "You have?" he said. "Why don't you do it?"

"For two reasons," replied Besant. "In the first place I am here to prevent a scandal in this house—not to force one. In the second place, I have believed in you from the start. I told you that, some hours ago. I have preferred to judge your case by the man instead of the facts. Serrano, I have had ten years of police experience and I have known thousands of crooks. If you are one, my whole ten years haven't taught me a thing. On that basis I have been fighting your battles ever since I came into the case. But that sort of thing can't go on forever. If you won't

come out and tell me the truth yourself, I will simply quit, give way to some one less friendly, and let you fight your own battles with them."

Besant stopped short and waited; but for a moment the other man made no reply. Then slowly he held out his hand.

"Mr. Besant," he said, "I am not going to ask you what you know and what you don't know. You *have* played fair, and possibly I haven't." He paused again and then continued. "You seem to have fixed in your mind the space of twenty-four hours. That is quite enough for me. I made you one promise and you didn't believe it. Just the same I will make you another. If, in twenty-four hours, you have not found out all you wish to know, I will tell you, myself."

His hand still remained held out before him, but as yet Besant had not taken it. Rather reluctantly, he did so now.

"And in the meantime," he asked, "your other promise remains the same?"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Serrano, with a smile. "Really, Mr. Besant, you seem to have a most singular idea of my promises."

Chapter LIII

WITH a very sobering knowledge of how much he was leaving to faith, Besant returned to his own rooms. He was also possessed by a very live knowledge that whatever was going to happen would happen within a very few hours. Serano's frank promise, as well as his own intuition, convinced him of that. In every tense situation there comes a moment in which the very atmosphere is charged with a sense of impending crash, and, quite apart from the evidence in his hands, Besant would have been dumb and blind if he had not felt this situation now creeping nearer and nearer to its climax.

Tim Hannigan, wandering nervously around the room, broke into his meditations. "Mr. Besant," he pleaded, "I've got to go down again to the stables. Only a minute. I'll be right back."

"Why have you got to go?" demanded Besant.

Tim grinned guiltily. "You see, it's Rexy. I left him there on the ground done up in my overcoat. It's a forty-five dollar coat. If I don't let Rexy out pretty soon, he'll either chew the coat all to pieces or else he'll smother to death."

Besant grunted a laugh. "All right," he said, "but for Heaven's sake don't make it more than five minutes. And, Tim——"

Already at the door to the hall, Tim turned and his master added: "Tim, don't go out that way.

There's another door at the end of the bedroom that leads to a service stairway. I don't know where the other end leads, but you can soon find out."

Willingly enough, Tim stumbled his way through the darkness of the inner rooms. Besant watched him fumblingly open the door to the stairway, then close it behind him; but for a moment a dim square of light had shown at the end of the room and with that square of light had come to Besant a sudden recollection. And with recollection had come inspiration. The recollection had been of Connie. The inspiration had been that of the balcony of which she had told him an hour before. Excitedly Besant leaped to his feet. His whole course of strategy had come to him in a single flash and now began to elaborate itself in leaps and bounds. When Tim returned, a few minutes later, Besant was pacing back and forth across the room.

Triumphantly Tim held up an overcoat, rolled in the crook of his arm.

"He hadn't hurt it a bit," he announced. "Just the same, it's a wonder that he didn't smother."

Besant glanced absently at the overcoat and nodded. "All right," he said. "I'm glad of that. Now, Tim, you're going to begin your real job as night watchman."

Tim made a good-natured grimace. "I don't know as I like the idea of sitting up all night," he said, "but just the same, if I catch that Switzer I'll night-watchman *him*!

"And say, Mr. Besant," added Tim in a lower voice. "I don't know just what you're up to, but while I was down at the garage I thought I'd get that gun I spoke of and bring it along."

Besant held out his hand. "Give it to me," he ordered. "If anyone needs it, I'll need it more than you."

Reluctantly Tim drew forth a heavy, squat, blue-steel revolver, a typical thug's weapon, short and ugly as a rattlesnake, but of colossal bore. Next to the ferret it was evidently the pride of Tim's heart. Besant glanced at the chambers, saw it was loaded, and then slipped it into his own hip pocket.

"Now, Tim," he said, "listen carefully. I want you to do just one very simple thing. I am going out of the room for a few minutes. While I am gone, leave the door open and the lights just as they are now. Fuss around here as if you were cleaning up. Empty the ash trays, whistle a tune, do anything you like. But keep your eye on me as long as I am in sight. Almost opposite this room is a door. When I go out I will stand in front of it long enough to light a cigarette. Watch me and remember which door it is. That's all you've got to do—remember that door."

"And is that the room where I spend the night?" asked Tim.

"You may spend part of it there," replied Besant, "but in the meantime I've got a lot of other things for you to do."

Chapter LIV

EXACTLY according to his plan, Besant opened the door to the hall and, leaving it open, strolled carelessly down the hall, stopping before the study which contained the safe long enough to light a cigarette. Behind him he could feel, rather than see, that Tim was faithfully obeying instructions. As he passed slowly down the huge main staircase he could even hear Tim begin to whistle a tune.

On the lower floor the house gave every appearance of being deserted, although there was no special significance in that. In the Crewe house it seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. At least the lights had not been lowered for the night. A great globe still shed an indirect white glow over the whole rotunda of the staircase, and a single bulb, fiercely beset by moths and other insects, still flared outside the screened doors on the terrace.

Keeping his appearance of an idle stroll, Besant walked out on the terrace and down the stone steps to the lawn. From the darkness he looked back and studied the second-floor balcony, which, broken by columns of a portico, stretched across the whole main front of the house, terminating in two jutting wings. The balcony suited his purpose even better than he had hoped. From it opened French windows not only to Mr. Crewe's

dressing room and his study, but, on the other side, to Serrano's rooms as well. Between these, higher and arch-shaped windows gave a view on to the staircase itself.

Completely satisfied, indeed almost elated as he felt the hour of his final stroke drawing near, Besant went back to the terrace and into the house. At one side of the rotunda he had already observed a little writing room with a desk, amply furnished with the now-familiar gray-green stationery. Hastily scrawling a note, he went to the terrace door and pressed the button which he had seen used by Dorothy Sanford that morning. After a long delay a rather disheveled manservant appeared, looking from room to room. At the sight of Besant he stopped hastily and straightened into some form of respect.

"Did you ring, sir?"

"Yes," answered Besant. "Will you please take this note up to Mr. Cramp? Also, will you find Miss Dessler and ask her to come down here at once?"

The man looked at him doubtfully. "I am afraid, sir, that Miss Dessler has retired. She always does, very early."

"I am sorry," insisted Besant, "but it is very necessary that she come down. Tell her that I have instructions for her from Mr. Crewe."

"Very good, sir," said the man, and turned to the stairs.

Again ensued a long delay, in which Besant strolled into the writing room, then back to the

terrace, then into the writing room again. He lighted another cigarette. It was fully fifteen minutes before he heard a firm, regular step on the stairs, and, a moment later, the secretary was standing before him, looking at him in her usual cold, disdainful way.

"You wished to see me?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Dessler," replied Besant. "Will you kindly step in here?"

The woman hesitated a moment, then followed him into the little writing room. Besant turned and motioned her to a chair.

"Miss Dessler," he said, "we might as well both lay our cards on the table at once. Are you a detective?"

The woman looked at him fixedly for a moment. Her expression did not even change. "Yes, I am," she answered. "Was that all you wished to know?"

"And you are employed by the Zankrouf agency?" pursued Besant.

At that name the woman did start slightly, but immediately she recovered herself. "I have been employed by the Zankrouf Bureau," she answered. "At present I am doing work for private individuals. Why do you ask me these questions?"

"Because," replied Besant, firmly, "I am doing the same sort of work myself. I intend to make an arrest in this house to-night. If there is to be any conflict of authority, I want it straightened out right now. If you insist, we can carry the matter at once to either Mr. Cramp or Mr. Crewe."

The woman shook her head. "I do not think," she replied, "that there will be any conflict of authority. Is that all you wished?"

"That is all I can ask," answered Besant. "If you care to volunteer it, I could use your assistance. I am all alone in this case except for one man, and he is of no use except as a 'strong-arm.'"

The woman smiled slightly. "I have seen him. What do you want me to do?"

"Only one thing," answered Besant. "Be in readiness all night. You will know well enough when I have copped my man. I can handle him easily enough, but Mr. Crewe is not in a condition to be excited. When you hear my little affair start, can I rely on you to go at once to Mr. Crewe's room and reassure him that I have the matter entirely in hand? I have just sent a note to Mr. Cramp, asking him to be ready also."

"Yes, I can do that. Is that all?"

"That is all."

Chapter LV

GIVING the secretary time to ascend the stairs alone, Besant idly finished his cigarette on the terrace, then returned to the second floor. As he reached the upper hall the same manservant who had answered his ring was passing along, putting out the lights one by one. At his own rooms, Besant found that, for once, Tim Hannigan had followed instructions to the letter. Still whistling softly, he had apparently done everything except pack the bag. Besant closed the door.

"Now, Tim," he announced, "we begin to work. Your next job is to go back to the gates."

Tim looked at him in blank dismay. "Mr. Besant!" he exclaimed. "Have I got to go back there?"

"Yes, you have," ordered Besant, peremptorily, "but you may not have to stay there long. Keep yourself in the darkness and first go and see whether the service gates are still open. If they are, leave them so. Keep an eye on the main gates as well, and if Miss Sanford's car or any other comes back, get up here and let me know at once."

"But where will you be?" asked Tim.

"I showed you that door across the hall," answered Besant. "That leads into a little room. On the other side of that room are long glass doors which lead to a balcony. I shall be out on the balcony. If Miss Sanford's car comes back, sneak

into the house, go into that room across the hall and out to the balcony. If, by any chance, you can't get into the house, come around under the balcony and call to me very quietly. But don't do that except as a very last resort. Now do you understand?"

"Sure, I understand," replied Tim.

His master was not so certain, but, at any rate, Tim was following the least important of the clues. If he couldn't do much good he couldn't do very much harm. As Tim turned to leave, Besant called him back for one last word.

"And, Tim," he warned, "if you should happen to see your friend the Switzer, leave him strictly alone. To-morrow, if you still want to do it, you can beat him up to your heart's content."

Chapter LVI

THE instant that Tim had left, Besant slipped off his dinner jacket and replaced it by a heavy sweater, a tweed golfing coat, and a cap. The night, so far, had been mild and balmy, but, with the mists of the seafront only a hundred yards away, a sentry-go on the balcony might, before morning, become a very chilly affair. In his hip pocket Besant still carried Tim's heavy revolver, and to this he added a small hand search-light.

With one last glance at his room, Besant turned out his lights and slipped into the hall. The high white bowl of light over the double main staircase had been extinguished and the huge rotunda was now a great cavern of shadows, with only a faint night lamp on the floor below and similar little dim lights at long intervals in the upper hall.

Besant stepped slowly and silently across the hall to the study, opened the door, and closed it again behind him. A single flick with his search-light showed no apparent change in the room since the time when he and Cramp had been there before, and, preferring to work in the darkness, he crept to the long French windows and tried the catches. There were three of these windows, opening with handles which moved long bolts at both the top and the bottom. Besant tried them

all, for he wanted no chance for bungling when Tim should come along. All three of the windows opened freely, and, satisfied, Besant slipped through the middle one on to the narrow tile pavement of the balcony.

A faint, slow breeze of night air, curiously dry, touched his cheeks and his hands as he emerged into the darkness. It brought a scent of the sun-dried turf in front of the house rather than of the sea. There was something about it oddly calming and oddly reassuring, and, in the welcome spring-like air, Besant stood for a moment, letting it play on his face, until his eyes and his nerves could be accustomed to the darkness. Then, gradually, cautiously, he began to take stock of his situation.

Behind him, the interior of the little study was as black as ink. Besant could hardly see a foot inside the glass doors, but to his right and to his left showed lights from other rooms of the house. Those to the right were in Damon Crewe's long bedroom, which jutted out into a wing. Those to the left must be in Serrano's sitting room. Between them, at intervals, were four immense pillars, which formed the great stone colonnade of the house.

Making no quick motions, keeping to the shadows, and taking only a step at a time, Besant crept slowly to the first of the columns, from which he could look in at the arch-shaped windows which gave on the great rotunda of the staircase. The result was reasonably satisfactory. Once he had

found a position which avoided the glints on the glass, he discovered that he could see faintly the top of the staircase and four or five steps down.

Again slowly, Besant crept to the second of the columns and then to the third. He raised himself cautiously on his toes. He could now look squarely into Serrano's sitting room.

At first he saw nothing. The room remained as calm and as innocent as when Besant had last entered it. However, peering a little more boldly around the column, Besant could see Serrano himself moving back and forth in an inner room. Suddenly Serrano turned squarely around and walked out into the sitting room. Here he paused for a moment idly and then sat down at the center table, his head in his hands. For three minutes at least the two men remained there, one outside, one inside the glass.

Then suddenly Serrano looked up, rose to his feet, and Besant slipped behind his column, standing absolutely rigid. He could no longer see into the room, but he could hear the long bolt scrape at the top and the bottom of the glass door. The door was opened. For minutes which seemed like hours Besant could feel that Serrano was standing there at the open doorway. Then abruptly the bolts scraped again and the door was closed.

Again it was minutes before Besant dared to peer around the surface of the column, but now all was quiet. He could see Serrano passing again to the inner room. He watched him return and again sit moodily at the table, his face in his hands.

Besant dropped quietly to the tile flooring beside the column and sat in its shadow. At last he found himself at his post of guard. At this point he could remain until Serrano himself made some decisive move.

Chapter LVII

SLOWLY, endlessly, began to drag the minutes and hours of the night. Neither the man inside nor the man outside the room changed position. The little dry breeze died down at intervals, and for a brief moment would come to Besant a damp, salt breath from the rocks on the shore. Then again the land breeze would rise up with its steady, unvarying scent of dry, heated turf. From the little harbor a ship's clock on one of the cabin launches at anchor suddenly chimed out the hour—*ting-ting, ting-ting, ting-ting, ting-ting*—eight bells. Midnight. From time to time came the swish of the waves on the rocks, vividly clear, then again almost inaudible. Far out at sea sounded, just once, a deep, mournful *hoo-o-o* from a coasting steamer. Then silence again.

The ship's clock had sounded one bell and two, when suddenly Besant heard a low whistle in the darkness below him. Inside the room he saw Serrano look up, stare about him, then rise from the table and go to the inner rooms. Almost instantaneously from the other end of the balcony came the scratching of a bolt and a whisper from Tim:

"Mr. Besant! Where are you? Mr. Besant!"

Besant stepped quickly along the balcony, but Tim was already outside.

"They've come," whispered Tim. "Miss San-

ford's car has come back, and her with it. Without no lights. The Switzer met them at the gates. They came up to the house. They are in the house now. They came in the little side door. They left it open."

Besant nodded quickly. "All right, Tim," he whispered. "You follow me. Stay just behind me, but keep out of sight if you can."

He looked at Tim and saw that he was still carrying his overcoat rolled in the crook of his arm.

"Get rid of that coat!" whispered Besant.

Tim took the roll of coat and tucked it carefully inside the study door from which he had just emerged. From the outside Besant softly closed the door. Turning, he crept stealthily back along the balcony. Serrano's lights had gone out!

Besant turned in his tracks and glanced through the higher arched windows over the staircase. He waited a minute, but saw no one moving in the halls or on the stairs. He knew that he must lose no more time. He opened again the door to the study, motioned Tim inside. In the close air and pitch darkness of the little room he could hear Tim's excited, sibilant breathing and he whispered again:

"Now follow me at a little distance. Remember, keep out of sight."

Opening the door to the hall, Besant slipped immediately to the head of the main stairway and down the right-hand staircase itself. Keeping close to the curving walls, he reached the lower

hall without making a sound. His objective was the little open door at the other side of the house; but suddenly, in the semidarkness, he saw a figure moving near the end of the hall, toward the big front doors.

Besant stopped short. His eyes gazing tensely the length of the hall, he saw a faint sliver of light as a door was opened for six or eight inches. Apparently at a signal the figure slipped through the gap of light and the door was swiftly closed again. Besant started forward and crept down the hallway. He was only ten feet from the door which he had seen opened when, sharply, a hand gripped his arm from the darkness and a harsh, strange voice spoke in his ear:

"Just a minute, sir. Where are you going?"

With a violent twist of his body Besant jerked his arm free, and as he turned, a foot from his own he saw the tense face of the Swiss.

Instinctively Besant's hand leaped to the big revolver in his pocket, but the next minute, as if shot from a catapult, past his eyes whirled a long black body and the Swiss went down with a crash. From the struggling heap at his feet Besant could hear Tim's exultant oaths.

"I've got you now, you damned crook! I've got you this time!"

Violently Besant stirred himself into action.

"Hold him, Tim! Hold him where you've got him!" he cried and he himself ran forward to the door where he had seen the sliver of light. He turned the handle. The door was locked.

Inside he heard silence, then a low murmur of voices. He threw his weight against the huge door, but he might as well have thrown it against a stone wall. Within continued steadily, hurriedly, the murmur of voices, then suddenly they stopped. Fiercely Besant took the big revolver from his pocket and with its butt began to pound on the heavy door.

"Open that door," he ordered, "or I'll shoot it open."

Another moment of silence, then slowly the knob of the door was turned from the inside. A key scraped and the door was opened a few inches then quickly closed. The lights in the room had gone out but on the outside, in the dim hall, stood Ruiz Serrano.

"Well, Mr. Besant," he said, "what do you want?"

"Come here," commanded Besant, sharply.

Quietly Serrano obeyed the command and stepped further into the hall.

"Mr. Besant—" he exclaimed but before he could finish the sentence, from the upper hall there suddenly came an unearthly shriek.

Equally startled, Serrano and Besant stared at each other and both stepped forward, but Besant grasped the other man by the arm. He forced him against the wall where Tim was now holding the Swiss with a wrestler's twist.

"Stand there!" commanded Besant. He took the big blue revolver by its barrel and gave it to Tim.

"Tim," he ordered, "hold those men there until I come back."

Without even waiting to see how Tim might obey his orders, Besant leaped up the stairs. As he went up, lights began to flash out above him. At the end of the upper hall the doors of Damon Crewe's room were standing wide open. White-faced, the invalid was staring from his bed. At the door of the little study stood Arthur Cramp—fully dressed, his hand on the switch of the lights. As Besant reached him he snapped them on and disclosed a strange tableau. Inside the study, at one side of the room, was the door of the safe, swinging wide open. At the other wall crouched Miss Dessler in abject terror. At her feet a small, white, uncanny shape writhed and twisted, then suddenly disappeared.

Chapter LVIII

AT the same moment other figures began to appear from the other end of the hall—a frightened butler, half dressed; a woman's figure which appeared at a doorway and then vanished. From his own room Damon Crewe began to call. Besant walked the few steps to the door.

"Mr. Crewe," he said, "everything is perfectly all right. Your daughter is safe and is in the house. If you care to have it, this matter can all be settled up in a very few moments. Is it possible for you to come out here?"

For answer the old gentleman tried convulsively to rise, and Besant turned back to the study door.

"Mr. Cramp," he ordered, "kindly go and help Mr. Crewe."

Cramp and the frightened butler hastened into the bedroom, and Besant went to the top of the stairs.

"Tim," he called, "bring those men up here now."

From below there came a moment of silence and then a string of angry words in Tim's voice. At the point of his revolver, Serrano and the Swiss were marched up the stairs. Supported by Cramp and the butler, Damon Crewe was wheeled slowly from his room.

Besant turned to the banker. "Mr. Crewe," he

said, "I think that first Miss Dessler had better tell you her story."

Still gasping with fright, the secretary came to the door of the study and into the hall. She began to speak wildly in rushing, choking tones.

"Mr. Besant told me what he was going to do to-night and told me to be ready, Mr. Crewe, where I could go to you in case of alarm. I heard the noise in the halls and came in here first. I wanted to see if everything was all right with the safe. I knew you had money there. The door was open. I knew it had been broken into. I was going to call out to Mr. Besant, when suddenly I felt something touch me and a thing like a great white snake went crawling over my feet. That was what made me scream——"

Besant held up his hand and stopped her. He still spoke in calm, even tones. "She is perfectly correct, Mr. Crewe. As you know, yourself, a package of money was taken from your safe." He turned sharply to Serrano. "Where is that package now, Serrano? Is it still in your overcoat? I will send and get it."

Serrano shook his head. "No such trouble, Mr. Besant. You will find the package in my inner pocket—right here."

Not daring to look in the other man's face, Besant put his hand into Serrano's pocket and drew forth the long, thin package still bearing its express seals. Curtly he tore off the wrappings and held the contents before Damon Crewe's

eyes. Arthur Cramp, looking over the banker's shoulder, gasped out a word:

"Paper! Nothing but paper!"

"Exactly," replied Besant. "But please read what is written on it."

Besant pointed with his finger to some penciled words on the paper, and Arthur Cramp read them aloud:

"To whom it may concern. On or about June 26, this package will be discovered on my person or in my belongings. Before it is used as evidence against me I suggest that a search be made in the safe from which it was taken. The money will be found there, quite intact. As often as it is taken out and hidden in my luggage I shall merely have to recover it and put it back again.

"(Signed) FRANCISCO RUIZ Y SERRANO."

As Cramp finished, Damon Crewe stared at Serrano.

"What does all this mean, sir?" he demanded. "Who are you, anyway? What are you trying to do?"

Serrano hesitated a moment, then spoke quietly: "I am just what I pretend to be, Mr. Crewe—a private citizen and a professional musician. That is absolutely all. But since Mr. Besant has forced this issue I will tell you both at once. Until I came to this country four years ago I was an officer in the French army and later a member of the secret service of the French foreign office." He paused again, then added, "And if it will make any difference to you, sir, I will also

repeat what I thought you already knew—that I am the son of the Duke of Prada.”

At the name, the old gentleman started, his face growing whiter and whiter. He swayed a moment and Arthur Cramp moved closer, to support him, but Damon Crewe waved him away.

“The Duke of Prada,” he repeated, slowly. For him, indeed, with that single name, the whole story seemed to be at an end, but Arthur Cramp burst in pettishly.

“How can you prove what you say?”

Before Serrano could answer, a broad, Middle Western voice spoke from his side. The voice came from “the Swiss,” still standing under Tim’s guard.

“I can prove it for him, Mr. Cramp, and if I’m not enough, there are two other men down below who can do it.”

“And who are you?” demanded Cramp.

“The Switzer” smiled. “My name is Lawrence McCarthy and I am a federal agent—of the Department of Justice.” He tapped his pocket. “I’ve got my credentials right here, if you want to look at them.”

Besant glanced at him curiously. He held out his hand and the officer gave him a little black book. Besant examined its contents, then showed them to Damon Crewe and to Cramp. “These are all right,” he said. “This man is just what he says he is.”

Besant turned back to “the Swiss” and nodded

his head toward Miss Dessler, who still stood at the door of the little room.

"And is that the lady," he asked, "for whom you are looking?"

"That's the lady," replied McCarthy, "as soon as this gunman of yours will let me go."

The secretary shrank back again to the doorway.

"Mr. Crewe!" she cried, "this is nonsense! I am a detective myself, employed by——"

Besant stepped toward her sharply. "Be still," he ordered. He turned back to his host. "Yes, Mr. Crewe, she may have been a detective once—employed by the so-called Zankrouf Bureau—which is really the dirtiest blackmailing organization in the city of New York."

Again the woman struggled to pass him and face her employer. "Mr. Crewe," she shouted, "it's a lie! It was Serrano there who opened the safe. Ask your own daughter, Miss Connie. She saw him. Examine it now. You will find the lock stuffed with paper."

Apparently hearing nothing, or caring little, for what she was saying, Damon Crewe stared blankly at her for a moment and then looked vaguely toward Besant. Besant turned to Cramp.

"Mr. Cramp, you had better find out right now whether or not that statement is true. Look in the hole of the safe where the bolt slides. If you find any paper there, please bring it here."

Stiffly and suspiciously Cramp went into the study and examined the safe. "Yes," he called,

"there *is* something here. It feels like paper."

"Pry it out," ordered Besant. "Now bring it here."

The lawyer did as he was told and, bringing a wad of paper, handed it to Besant, who unfolded it and handed it back. Again he pointed to some pencil marks on the new bit of paper and Cramp read aloud:

"This paper was placed here by Royal Besant with compliments to Miss Dessler or to anyone else who may be idiot enough to suppose that a real safe robber would leave a paper in his own handwriting."

"But where," demanded Cramp, "is the money?"

"The money," replied Besant, "is right there in the safe, exactly where Mr. Serrano put it this noon—with Miss Connie as an unintentional witness. But if my servant's pet ferret had not scared Miss Dessler, I wouldn't have answered for its being there now."

"Now Mr. McCarthy—" began Besant, but before he could continue, he was interrupted by Damon Crewe's sharp voice.

"I've had enough of this, Mr. Besant. You and the officers can straighten out that matter of the money between you. I don't want to hear any more about it to-night."

For a moment the old gentleman gazed fixedly at Serrano. "Young man," he ordered, "I wish you to come to my rooms at once. And, Mr. Besant, I want you to summon my daughter."

With a curt gesture to his butler, the old gentleman was wheeled slowly back to his room and

the double doors were closed behind him. McCarthy, the federal agent, had already moved to the door of the study where Miss Dessler stood sullenly waiting. Besant nodded to the officer.

"I think," he suggested, "that it might be just as well for you to take that woman out of the house at once. If you want a car my man will drive you."

"The Switzer" looked back at him with a grin. "Do you think, sir," he asked, "that it's safe to trust your man and me together in the dark?"

"Oh, don't be afraid of me, Polly," broke in Tim. "All I wanted was one good whack at you. I've had that and now we're all square."

Waiting until the two men and the woman had passed out of sight in the lower hall, Besant nodded to Serrano. The latter followed him to the head of the stairs, where Besant leaned toward him and spoke in a very low voice.

"Serrano," he said, "where is Miss Crewe? Is she with Dorothy Sanford in that room downstairs?"

Serrano grinned. "She is," he answered, "and, if you will go down, you can release four very anxious people." He paused a moment, glanced toward the double doors at the end of the hall, and then added: "Besant, don't envy me what I've got to face now, when I meet Mr. Crewe. Cynthia and I were married in that room downstairs, ten minutes ago!"

Chapter LIX

A GRAY leaden light and a strong suggestion of fog from the sea were still in the air outside the open windows when Tim Hannigan came to call Royal Besant on the following morning. "Call," not "waken," would certainly have been the word, for Besant had been in his bed less than an hour, staring, open-eyed at the ceiling. Tim Hannigan also showed strong marks of a sleepless night, but at least it had not affected his buoyancy.

"It's all right, Mr. Besant," he announced. "I've got him at last! And where do you think I found him? Right in that same little room, 'cross the hall, hiding under the bookcase!"

Besant started up on his pillows. "Found who?" he demanded.

"Rexy," replied Tim. "You know I lost him when I laid him down last night in my overcoat—just before we started the fighting." Tim shook his head with his usual grin. "Ain't you going to give Rexy a medal of honor, when you come to hand out the prizes? Smokes! what a fright he did give that woman!" Tim gazed thoughtfully at his master for a moment and then continued in a more serious tone. "Say, Mr. Besant," he demanded, "don't you think it's about time you let me in on the secrets?"

"Why, Tim," laughed Besant, "I thought you got all the news just as soon as it happened."

"Well, I ain't got *this* news," retorted Tim. "At least I ain't got all of it. I know that the Switzer is a government bull and that Mr. Serrano is king of Spain or something of that kind. I know that Miss What's-her-name is a bad egg and that the Switzer and I and two other officers took her to Gaylordsville and put her in the jug. But when I left here last night you and Mr. Serrano were just squaring off for a shooting match. When I gets back, you two are drinking champagne, old Mr. Crewe is laughing his head off in his wheel-chair, and Miss Sanford is playing 'Hail to the Bride' on the grand piano. And now you ask me do I want an explanation!"

Besant laughed. "Tim," he said, "there is an old saying, 'If the mountain will not come to Mohammed, Mohammed will have to go to the mountain.'"

"That may be all very well," replied Tim, "but just the same it's a fine way of saying nothing."

"In this case," replied Besant, "it is a good way of saying everything, for that is exactly what caused all the rumpus last night. As you know yourself, Tim, Miss Cynthia Crewe and Mr. Serrano have been very anxious to be married for a long time. They have had a license, and our neighbor, Miss Sanford, had hunted up a young Harvard man, a friend of her own and a justice of the peace, who had promised to marry them. But Mr. Serrano had made a promise that he would not leave

the grounds for twenty-four hours. 'All right,' said Miss Sanford, 'if they can't be married outside the house they will have to be married *inside* it.' So, with the help of your friend the Switzer, she slipped over to Gaylordsville, brought back two more government agents who were needed here and at the same time brought back the justice. While I was hammering at that door downstairs and you were slowly killing the Switzer, they were saying 'I do' inside the room and the marriage was over."

"But what about this woman we jugged?" demanded Tim. "And what about Mr. Serrano being a French spy or something?"

"Mr. Serrano," replied Besant, "is the son of a Spanish nobleman—the Duke of Prada. If he wished to do it, Mr. Serrano could call himself the Marquis of Lanz, but, years ago, his father backed the wrong party at home. He fought for a gentleman called Don Carlos, who wanted to be king of Spain. Don Carlos lost the war and Mr. Serrano's family had to get out and live in a place called Pau, in southern France."

Besant paused a moment and looked sternly at his valet. "Tim," he continued, "I am afraid that in his early days Mr. Serrano's career was very much like your own. He had a great fondness for the sporting life. What little money he had he took immediately to Monte Carlo and lost it all. After that he had to earn his living by taking another name and playing a violin in the cafés of Paris. When the war broke out he became an

officer in the French army, but, not being a Frenchman by birth, they thought he could be of more use in the secret service. After the war he continued in the service, and one of the things he did was to bust up a gang of high-life swindlers. But, to get the evidence, he had to become a member of the gang and be locked in prison along with the rest. Some of the gang were still at large and he couldn't afford to get the others suspicious until he had found where they were. One of the bunch was a Spanish dancer called 'The Firefly'——"

Instantly Tim held up his hand. "Now, Mr. Besant, just stop a moment. If that woman we caught last night is a Spanish dancer and a firefly, I'm a tenor and my name is Al Jolson."

Besant laughed. "No, Tim. That woman we caught last night is an Englishwoman who was only a very small and distant member of the gang. She didn't work with the others. Her job was to scout ahead—appear very proper, drink tea and knit sweaters at fashionable resorts, and become acquainted with wealthy people. And she was one of those who got away. Another who got away was a man—the real brains of the crowd. Apparently both of them came to this country, got in touch with each other, and started up their old tricks."

"But have they got the man yet?" asked Tim. "The main squeeze?"

"Yes," answered Besant, "they got him ten days ago in New Orleans and they traced him largely by letters sent by this Dessler woman. With that

man behind the bars, Mr. Serrano decided that he was free to go ahead with his own plans and get married as soon as possible. You understand, Tim, that Mr. Serrano himself had been out of that sort of work for several years. He was merely trying to make a name for himself with his violin. When he spotted this Dessler woman quietly working her way into the family he notified the authorities in Washington, and they sent your Swiss friend, McCarthy, to work on this end of the case. But, long before that, the woman herself must have spotted Mr. Serrano, and for over a year she used every possible method to get rid of him. She wrote blackmailing letters and had them posted all over the country. She had learned how to do it by working for an agency which makes a business of doing just that sort of thing, which frames up the evidence for divorce cases when it can't secure it legitimately. She sent the police a hint of the 'Firefly' story in France and finally she tried to fake a robbery of three thousand dollars and plant the evidence on Mr. Serrano. By that time she must have known that the man behind her had either skipped or been captured, for her job with the safe was very crude work and that was the trap into which she fell, herself."

"But what," asked Tim, "were they planning to pull off up here?"

"Apparently their old game," replied Besant. "Miss Dessler was planted, a year ago, in Mr. Cramp's office to get a knowledge of Mr. Crewe's affairs. With Mr. Crewe's health rapidly failing,

they evidently thought that it would be easy to loot the estate by working into the confidence of some of the—well, more susceptible members of the family.”

“But why,” persisted Tim, “did the Switzer pull all that bunk about a sprained ankle and blood poison?”

“I wondered that myself,” answered Besant, “until I asked Mr. Serrano. He told me that when he himself decided to run away and get married, somebody had to remain to keep an eye on this Dessler woman. Your friend the Switzer really did twist his ankle a little, two nights ago, and the simplest way was to make the injury worse than it actually was. No one would put a sick man out of the house, and if Mr. Serrano had had to leave before matters came to a head, McCarthy intended to be in such pain that he couldn’t be moved. And so, Tim,” concluded Besant, “that is the story.”

Tim stood for a moment scratching his head. “I’ve heard some wild ones in my day,” he remarked, “but that wins the pennant.” He shifted slowly from one foot to the other. “But, Mr. Besant,” he began again, “with all this rumpus settled up pretty, why didn’t Mr. Serrano just wait and get married in church like a Christian?”

Besant looked thoughtfully at the foot of the bed and then he spoke slowly.

“Tim,” he said, “first and last I’ve told you a good many things that I wouldn’t tell most people, and now I’m going to tell you one more that has got to stay just between you and me. Years ago,

in France, Mrs. Crewe was deeply in love with Mr. Serrano's father, the Duke of Prada, and for a time he intended to marry her. But after a while he found someone else whom he loved more and he broke the engagement. When Mr. Serrano came to this country he had a letter for Mrs. Crewe, but Mrs. Crewe never told her husband who he really was, and she was determined, also, that he should never marry Miss Cynthia. When Miss Dessler began to hint that she could get rid of Mr. Serrano, Mrs. Crewe was apparently ready to back her as far as she dared. There was one thing that she could never forgive, and she had never forgiven Mr. Serrano's father."

"And how long was it," asked Tim, "that she'd been holding this grudge against him?"

"About thirty years," said Besant.

Tim thought it over, scratched his head, and looked up with a grin.

"Ain't women hell?"

Chapter LX

FOR the last time, Besant breakfasted alone in his rooms, the same imperturbable manservant entering in the same imperturbable way. Besant watched him curiously as he put down his tray, uncovered the toast, and then stood back for further orders. It was easy to imagine how the servants' hall must have been buzzing since daylight. Yet had this man remained as completely unaffected as he appeared? Besant had poured his coffee and picked up his spoon when he heard a decorous cough and, looking up, saw that the man was waiting for a chance to address him.

"I hope you will pardon me, Mr. Besant. If I may speak to you on a personal matter——?"

"Why, certainly!" said Besant. "What is it, er——?"

"Rennie, sir. My name is Rennie. And if I may ask you, sir—I have always been very fond of reading about detectives. I have always understood that there was great opportunity in that line for servants like myself who knew how to enter large houses and conduct themselves with discretion. And if, sir, you might know of some opening——"

To conceal his smile, Besant looked hurriedly down at the table.

"Rennie," he answered, "in the past ten years I have looked into several thousand cases requir-

ing detectives, but this is the first in my experience which has ever taken me to a house of this kind. If you will accept my suggestion, you will find yourself far happier and far better off doing just what you are now."

"I have no doubt, sir," replied the man, "and I trust you will pardon my asking."

"And one thing more, sir," he added. "Miss Sanford wished to inquire whether you could be ready to start for Manhasset inside of an hour. Her father has telephoned that he has come up from New York and wishes her to be back this morning."

Chapter LXI

SENDING word for Tim to come up and pack the kit bag to the best of his vigorous ability, Besant went into the hall and looked toward Damon Crewe's apartments. To his surprise, the double doors were wide open and the morning light was streaming into the room, while the bed was made up for the day and unoccupied.

Besant passed down the stairs and out to the terrace. Slowly rising above the cloud banks, the sun was now burning its way through the mists on the ocean and, one by one, the landmarks up and down the coast were becoming visible. In the little pavilion at the end of the pier, Besant could see Damon Crewe sitting in his wheel-chair, just as he had seen him on his first morning at Legget's Harbor, but now it was Connie who was sitting beside him.

Besant walked down the echoing boards and greeted his host.

"Good morning, Mr. Crewe. This is the biggest surprise of all—seeing you here at this time of day."

The old gentleman looked up and his shoulders hitched with amusement. "Besant," he said, "in the last twelve hours I have done everything that my doctors had told me would be fatal. I have suffered a severe nervous shock. I have sat up all night. I have smoked six cigars and given way

to violent anger. And I never felt better in my life. How do you explain it?"

Besant sat down at his side, while Connie remained in what had become again her accustomed place—the silence of the background. For several minutes, in fact, no one spoke in the little pavilion while, merely, the waves continued to lap at the foot of the pier and the mounting sun continued to push the mists farther and farther toward the horizon. Damon Crewe spoke at last.

"Besant," he said, "we had enough explanations last night to do me for a lifetime. The last thing on earth that I want to do now is to go all over it again, but there is one direct question that I want to ask you. How much of the truth did you actually know before this matter finally exploded?"

In answer Besant laughed. "Mr. Crewe," he replied, "I was hoping to get away without ever letting you guess how appallingly little I really did know. Two things I knew at sight—that Frank Serrano was all right and that Miss Dessler was all wrong."

"I believed in Serrano myself," answered the banker. "As to Miss Dessler, I had never paid much attention. Excepting yourself, I never paid much attention to *anyone* whom Arthur Cramp recommended."

"In my own mind," explained Besant, "I had sufficient confidence in Serrano to wish him good luck, but not quite sufficient knowledge to let him get away without a showdown. From a fact that my man discovered I had also had suspicions

that the so-called Swiss might be a federal agent, but whether he was watching somebody else or watching Serrano himself was a thing which still remained to be discovered.

"But one other thing," continued Besant, "I had known from the first. When Mr. Cramp first showed me those anonymous letters, I noticed a single name. One of the letters had been mailed from a little town in California named Las Hayas. Two or three years ago I worked on a blackmail case in New York in which there had been a similar set of letters, and one of those letters had also been mailed at Las Hayas. In that case there was very strong reason to believe that all the letters had been forged and sent by the Zankrouf agency. Last night I forced an opportunity to mention the Zankrouf Bureau to Miss Dessler. I knew at once by the way she acted that the name was at least familiar—that either she herself had worked for the bureau or else had employed it to do this work for her. I had no more doubt, then, as to where the letters had started."

"But about the safe," asked Henry Crewe. "I don't understand yet just why you put that paper in the lock."

"The paper that I put in the lock," explained Besant, "was not the original paper that was there. When I first examined the safe there was part of a letter there—in Frank Serrano's own handwriting. It was another fragment of the same letter which Mr. Cramp had shown me before. The letter itself had been a perfectly harmless

thing written to Frank's own sister in Paris. Apparently it was the only recent sample of Ser-rano's handwriting which Miss Dessler had been able to obtain and she had to make it go as far as possible. The original half of the letter sounded very incriminating. It appeared as if Frank were intending to swindle every rich man in New York. The other half of the letter showed that he merely referred to his musical ambitions with the backers of the new symphony orchestra and implied that, where art was concerned, wealthy New Yorkers were apt to be very stubborn and conservative customers. This letter was written in Spanish and, without a translation, Miss Dessler did not know just what words to tear off."

"And where is this letter now?" asked Damon Crewe.

"I burned it, last night," said Besant, "along with the others."

For some time more the two men sat in a silence which was suddenly interrupted by the violent and persistent blowing of a motor horn at the other side of the house. From her corner of the little pavilion, Connie looked up with a sardonic smile and Damon Crewe glanced toward the source of the noise with some impatience.

"That horn," he said, "has, to me, all the earmarks of Dorothy Sanford."

In immediate proof of his statement Dorothy herself appeared on the terrace and then came swinging jauntily down the pier.

"Good morning, Mr. Crewe," she said, demurely,

then turned to Besant. "Well, Sherlock, are you ready to make your way back to the bushes of old Manhasset?"

Damon Crewe started gruffly. "What's this? What's this?" he demanded. "Are you going to kidnap Besant a second time? I was expecting him to stay for the rest of the week and help me to keep up my spirits."

Besant, however, had already risen to his feet. "I am sorry, Mr. Crewe, but I am afraid that I shall have to be off this morning." He turned to Connie. "And, Miss Crewe, I hope that I shall see you again."

In answer Connie slowly nodded her head. "Good by, Mr. Besant." Beyond that she said nothing more than on the first time he had seen her.

The banker was slowly turning his wheel-chair to face the shore. "Well," he conceded, "if you must go, I suppose you must, but come up soon and see me again." Then quizzically he turned to Dorothy Sanford and nodded his head. "And, Besant," he warned, "look out for that young lady there. She's the only one of the crowd that I have known, from the first, was a regular bad 'un."

Chapter LXII

AT the landward side of the house two motor cars were waiting with the luggage—Besant's own car and Dorothy's. Tim, grinning from ear to ear, was sitting at the wheel of the little Fabre.

"But who's going to drive the other car?" demanded Besant.

"You are," replied Dorothy Sanford, "and you are going to take me along with you. Ever since yesterday I have owed Tim a chance to drive the Fabre."

"But," protested Besant, "he'll smash it to bits."

"Well, what if he does," replied Dorothy, "so long as neither of us is in it with him?"

Already fearful lest the debate might be decided against him, Tim had started his motor, and by the time the others had reached the main gates he was almost out of sight toward the woods at the base of the headland.

At Gaylordsville they came to the smooth, tarred road of the regular highway, with motor cars busily humming north and south, with the little stores of the village standing open for their morning trade, with a group of children playing and shouting on the village green, and with sedate villagers passing across the street to the post office. To Besant it seemed like something wholly unreal—as if he had suddenly come out of a theater, as if he were trying to adjust himself to scenes which

he had once known but to which his eyes, for a time, had become unaccustomed. Something of the same spirit must have been felt by Dorothy Sanford, at his side, for she, too, had fallen into a moody silence.

At the end of the village street the *détour* was still enforced, and on the brief quiet of the country roads Besant found an atmosphere that was more in sympathy with his own spirit. Very quietly he took one hand from the wheel and put it over Dorothy's which lay in her lap. She did not draw her own hand away and Besant stopped the car. Dorothy looked up at him with eyes quite unfrightened.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him.

Besant looked back and saw that no other car was in sight. Very gently he put his arm over her shoulder and drew her toward him. "I think you know very well," he said, "what I am going to do."

The girl gave a sigh. "Oh, well," she said, "I don't know how I can stop you. You've already proved, on the island, that you are stronger than I am." Suddenly she pushed him away. "Don't! Please!" she begged. "There's a farmer laughing at us from that hay field."

With no great hurry, Besant started the car again, and this time they continued without a pause to Manhasset. They passed up the winding drive of the Sanford place and came to a stop at the doorway. Besant looked through the trees to his own little house.

"Peace!" he exclaimed. "Perfect peace. And a long summer ahead of us."

But again he was wrong. There was no peace. For hardly had they left the car when Tim, in his shirt sleeves, came darting up to them.

"Say, Mr. Besant," he ordered, "come look at this! Just take a look at it!"

Dorothy and Besant followed him to the dividing wall and Tim waved his hand toward Besant's own garden. On the other side of the wall was a lettuce patch scratched down to the roots.

In the center of it stood—a completely undaunted peacock.

THE END

