More than Once upon a Time

Books by GERALD KERSH

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Stories by

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A Walk in the Snow

'You will get no stories out of me today,' said that queen of comediennes, Bella Barlay. 'No. There is something ghoulish about the public's interest in the youthful escapades of shrivelled old has-beens like me. Go and unwrap a mummy!'

I protested, 'Dear lady, I must contradict on two points: firstly, you are neither shrivelled nor a has-been; and secondly, there is no one like you.'

She said, 'Oh, don't expect to win me over by flattery, my friend. I am in one of my moods today. It would be blasphemous to suggest that this Christmas season is not for lonely old actresses as well as for the young. All the same, sometimes, at this time of the year – especially after dark when the radiators gurgle and give out heat without warmth – I feel like a disembodied chicken-heart kept beating in serum in a deserted laboratory. And so I keep away my memories of the past, not by telling idle stories about it, but by decorating my Tree.'

The wide skirts of her white satin tea-gown made a sighing sound as she sank, somewhat in the attitude of the Dying Swan, to the carpet, and lifted the lid of an old leather trunk. It was full of Christmas ornaments elaborately wrapped in cotton-wool. 'These have been with me all my life,' she said.

'Some were my mother's, and some were my grandmother's. They represent the only property I have ever contrived to keep. All the rest, well —

That which I gained I lost,
That which I saved I spent,
That which I gave, I have.

Would you like to see something precious to me?'

With infinite care she unwrapped a strange little steel star, vaguely reminiscent of a snowflake. Looking closer, I saw that it was made of three crossed pieces of barbed wire, strongly tied at the intersection.

'There was one Christmas,' she said, 'that I had to spend in a concentration camp in Eastern Europe. In that black frost, starving and sick to the heart as we were, it seemed that there could be no holy dawn for us. Still, weak as we were, we found strength to pull up a tiny dead birch tree, and we threw water over it until the bitter night graciously hung it with clear crystals; and we made this star to crown it; and then we sent up such a song in the dark that even the guards who came to silence us hung their heads in shame! So because the idea was mine, and I had led the singing, I was given this star. . . .' Bella Barlay's brilliant black eyes became misty for a moment. Swallowing whatever emotion she must have felt, however, she smiled, and said, 'Still, it was cold. Yes, colder than the Christmas Eve of 1899, even!'

'What happened then?' I asked.

'I ran away from home,' said she.

'What for?'

'Well, for what reason stronger than a disappointment in love does a girl leave a comfortable home?' asked Bella Barlay.

'Oh, come now – in 1899 you couldn't have been more than a baby!'

'No, I was eight years old. Lots of girls fall in love at that age. True, mine was an idealistic kind of passion, and its object was a boy of ten. But such things are not to be measured with calendars and tapes. True, childish love does not live long or loom high. So what, then? Neither does a flower. Is a rose, therefore, less real and beautiful than a hippopotamus?'

Then she shook her dainty little ragged-haired head in a parody of self-deprecation. Still on her knees, busy with her tree ornaments, she muttered, 'It seems that I have talked myself into another silly story.'

So she went on:

. . . on the 24th of December, 1899, my dear father was ravished with delight by an unexpected visit of some people from America: Mr and Mrs Tracy Bestitude and their son Vernon, of Pennsylvania. I say ravished with delight, because at that time my father, in common with many 'progressive' romantics in Europe in those days, had a blind adoration for everything American. It is a fact; while ladies in American drawing-rooms were singing of the glories of the blue Danube, we, in Budapest, were sighing of the romance of the place where the crystalline torrent of the mighty Monongahela embraces the voluptuous current of the Allegheny at the spicy and glamorous city called Pittsburgh. I had an English governess, and was better acquainted with the works of Fenimore Cooper than with our native classics.

When the Bestitudes came, merely in passing, to pay someone else's compliments, my father insisted that they stay to luncheon. Although I was too full of emotion to eat much, I never enjoyed a meal more; for I was smitten by the charms of young Vernon Bestitude. He kindled in my bosom a helpless adoration. I gaped at him, admiring his manly demeanour, his candid blue eyes, his serious pink chin, his

curly yellow hair, while I listened, rapt, to the sonorous voice of his father as he talked of his family history.

Oh to be a Bestitude! True, we Barlays have shed our share of patriotic blood since the eleventh century, and have our noble antecedents. But nothing in my family history had ever stirred my blood half as much as our guest's stern pronouncement, 'Mrs Bestitude, sir, was a Shewangunk Yonker, but my mother was a Kerhonkson Schuyler.' I imagined a Yonker to be a sort of contralto in war-paint, and visualized a Schuyler as a climber of remote peaks. 'My father,' he said, 'lost a leg at Chickamauga; but I came away from San Juan Hill without a scratch.' There was mysterious music in these words.

After this enchanting luncheon, the gentlemen smoked their cigars while the ladies withdrew to exchange small-talk. I led Vernon aside and asked him, 'Have you ever fought Indians?'

'Thousands and thousands,' said he.

'And slain buffalo?'

He uttered a contemptuous 'Ha!' And then I said, 'My father has a great many guns. Do you like guns?' He nodded, and I led him to my father's study, the walls of which that most peaceable of men had hung with the most ferocious collection of weapons you ever saw in your life – needle-pointed Khyber knives, sharp as razors, snake-shaped Malay krises, spiked maces, murderous tulwars, samurai swords, spring-bladed Italian poniards; together with carbines, muskets, rifles, and bell-mouthed blunderbusses of all ages.

'*They're* no good. Give *me* my old six-shooter!' said Vernon. I was abashed. Then I remembered that in the right-hand drawer of his desk, my father kept a loaded revolver, a very handsome revolver with an ivory handle inlaid with gold. With a certain thrill of conscious wickedness – for, in opening private drawers, I was breaking an irrefragable household

law – I took this weapon out. I must win his respect at all costs.

'Like this?' I asked.

He cried 'Yay!' and snatched it from my hands. He looked at it with a cool, professional eye; brandished it, aimed it, said 'Bang-bang!' and twirled it by the trigger-guard. He felt the inside of the barrel with his forefinger. 'Pretty nice,' he said. 'Yes *sir*, yes sir*ee*, yes . . .' His voice faded. A look of consternation marred the bright calm of his face. 'My finger's stuck,' he said.

And the harder he tried to get his finger out, the more firmly it established itself; so now, after a couple of minutes of struggle, my Vernon's big blond face seemed to crack, letting some of his manliness leak out. I said to myself, *He is not afraid – only desperate.* 'Spit on your finger,' I told him, 'and while you keep still I will pull at the handle.'

He did as I said. I laid a wiry grip on the revolver and tugged with all my might. How was I to know that two or three of my fingers were hooked over the trigger? Just as his finger came free the revolver went off with a bang that shook the house. And the recoil! It was as if I had been beaten from fingers to toes with a bundle of nettles, while a mule kicked me in the face – for the recoil sent that weapon up out of my hand to bruise my cheek. The bullet passed over Vernon's head, went through a Chinese gong, and, penetrating the door, knocked the head off a marble Cupid on the landing. This head went bump-bump-bump down the carpeted stairs, to roll to rest at the feet of my father, Mr Bestitude, and the ladies.

My mother fainted dead away into Mrs Bestitude's arms. The men came thundering upstairs. There we stood, Vernon and I, with the smoking revolver between us at our feet.

Our visitor shouted, 'What in thunder is the meaning of this, Vernon?'

My hero stood four-square. He looked his father in the eyes – aie-aie, my beating heart! – and said, 'Dad, I cannot tell a lie. *She* fired that shot.' And he pointed straight at me.

There was an instant of awful silence. Then my father ordered me to my room, saying, 'Wretched girl! You might have killed this noble boy! Go to your room!'

And there I was, on the day before Christmas of all days: in love, disenchanted, out of love, betrayed, heartbroken, and exiled – all in one hour and forty-five minutes! Tolstoy's *Resurrection* was nothing to it, when you come to think of it. If only my bemused father had said, 'You might have killed *yourself*,' I shouldn't have grieved half as much. But his first thought had been for 'this noble boy'; and that rankled. I knew that my parents had long dreamed of having a son. I felt unwanted; or, at the most, something *faute de mieux*, a next-best thing. My face throbbed where the pistol had kicked it. Nobody loved me, I thought, nobody cared.

I tickled my nose to make my eyes water, wept at the sight of my own tears, rehearsed a sob or two, and made up my mind to leave my home forthwith.

Never one to hesitate, once resolved I dressed myself in my warmest clothes, fur-lined coat and boots and all, and wrote a farewell note in the romantic style: *Do not seek me for I have fled your house for ever. Your wronged but forgiving – Bella. P.S. Please feed Casimir.* Casimir was my canary. I had a money-box in the shape of a bank with Grecian pillars and a bronze door, into which I had dropped all the gold coins I had ever received as presents. I knew how to pick the lock with a hairpin; a little larceny comes natural to all women; all sorts of crimes are committed with hairpins.

So, with a heavy purse and a heavy heart, I crept past my governess's room, and down the carpeted stairs, and through the dim passage, past the kitchens which were foggy with the savoury steams of Christmas cooking; into the winy old cellar,

up through the flap, and out into the back courtyard. Everything was leaden grey that afternoon, and cold, while the city froze between two snows. I said good-bye to our great old acacia tree that stood naked now, against the sky, and passed out of the little back door right into the wintry world. Where was I going? If you had asked me two or three hours previous, I would have said, 'Pittsburgh.' But now, if that sneak Vernon lived in the west, well, my road lay east.

But where was east? There was no sun to guide me. I had a general idea that, if you look northwards, the east is sharp right. So I turned right, and walked steadfastly through the slush, with my ears in my fur collar, and my hands in my muff. I would find a gipsy encampment, I thought, and go away with the free nomads. But as the sky grew steadily darker and more menacing, so the streets became narrower and meaner and more ill-lighted. I had never been out in the city alone, but I was not frightened; only curious. People's clothes became coarser and skimpier as the cold increased, and their manner and their accents were uncouth. No gloves here, no muffs – they blew on their fingers to warm them, and their breath looked like dragons' fumes in the frost. Once, I remember, a great staggering man pointed to my little fur hat and let out a long whistle; whereupon, from far away, a siren hooted and there came a clashing noise of trains at a railway junction.

Near by sounded the clangour of some factory, and there was a feverish flush in the sky. I could smell the river. And all the while it seemed that everything was getting narrower and narrower and rushing faster and faster, so that, with the wind having come up behind me, I might have been something whirling away in a funnel.

In spite of myself, I started to run, as fast as I could, between banks of terrible grey snow. But soon I stopped for breath. Now I was lost indeed, for I had put a labyrinth

between myself and the lights of the city; and here were great slag-heaps, sullenly smoking, and a conglomeration of huts huddling close by for warmth. The patchwork walls of these huts seemed to shed a thin rind of patchwork people, who stared at me as I ran, but let me pass. *Is this the wide world?* I wondered, inhaling pins and needles and gasping smoke. My heart was thumping. Clear in the cold I could hear the dreadful ker-thump, ker-thump, ker-thump of a trip-hammer in a foundry; while the inexorable thudding of a pile-driver by the river sounded like the tread of some huge Thing coming out of the ooze; blind, ponderous, but sure.

And then, while I stood as if trapped in a nightmare, a piece of twilight came loose and, standing over me, took the form of a young woman with tattered black hair and a wild white face, carrying an oblong bundle. She was so poor that the very steam of her breath came out ragged; she, too, had been running, but stopped when she saw me, paused, thrust the bundle into my arms, saying, 'Take it, take it,' in a dull grey voice like crushed snow. Then she was gone, and I found myself holding a very young baby swaddled in half a threadbare blanket.

Put yourself in my position. I was numb with bewilderment. I had counted on being alone, and here I was, already, with a baby in my arms! Do not laugh. For me, this was a tremendous predicament, both physical and moral. Understand me: young people were not then as they are now, relieved of all debt to humanity by Committees, Commissions, and other built-in mental responsibility-disposers.

I remembered a song my old nurse Ilonka used to sing, the words of which I freely translate:

Be ye maiden, be ye wed,
Be ye woman I call you Mother.

Born in manger, born in bed,
Every man must be my brother.
Born in bed or born in manger
Every child is a Child of God.
Deliver us this night from danger! . . .

It had been sung to me in certain broken combinations of five notes in a minor key, in a tune that must have been as old as the plains; and so I sang it, in my turn, to this little creature, whom I made comfortable in my arms, using my muff for a pillow and hitching up my fur-lined coat to keep it warm.

Babies, I knew, lived on milk; but I had no milk to offer. However, there was, in one of my pockets, a stick or two of barley sugar. I gave the baby that to suck, and it seemed content enough, what with the unaccustomed warmth, and the gentle rocking motion of my now unhurried walk – for I went unswervingly on and on. I paused, once, under a yellow lamp ringed like Saturn with swimming opal in the haze, and saw that a note was pinned to the baby's blanket. It said: *Kind soul, whoever you may be, keep and guard this fatherless child of my sorrow, for I cannot.*

Now although my mind was somewhat artificially coloured and sweetened with the anailin and saccharin of popular romance, I was not without a certain native intelligence. To keep and guard, etcetera, was all very fine and large. But how? My pride wouldn't let me take the baby back to my parents' house; I had just shaken the dust of that place off my feet, and I'd have died before I returned of my own free will, even alone and unencumbered. In any case, to come out of the snow with a fatherless child in my arms was something unthinkable. The heroine of *More Sinned Against Than Sinning*, a novel I had filched from our cook, had been sent to a convent for something of the sort. As became an eight-year-old

girl in 1899, I was not stuffed with the Facts of Life as children are supposed to be nowadays. So, in my mind's eye I saw my mother weeping into a little lace handkerchief, while my father sternly commanded me to name the father. 'Never – never!' I should sob; although technically the despicable Vernon Bestitude was morally responsible.

I was out in the snow already. Inwardly, I half congratulated myself for having made such good time. It had taken the poor heroine of *More Sinned Against Than Sinning* fifteen chapters to get into my predicament. Nevertheless, the cold was beginning to bite through all the layers of warm clothes I wore, and I was getting hungry. The world was a wasteland, now, full of ogreish men who seemed to have picked all the rags and skinned all the cats in Budapest for something warm to wear, and drained all the lamps for something strong to drink, leaving the city winnowed and dark. I stopped, once, outside a cheap eating-house, just to smell the steam. I was hesitant about going in. Instinct warned me not to show the gold in my purse in that place. I had some small change in my little pocket, which I wore under my outer skirt, but I couldn't get at it without putting the baby down, and the poor thing had moulded itself into such an easy position that I was reluctant to disturb it.

But even as I stood, a girl with a mauve face, yellow hair, and carmine lips came out of the restaurant on the arm of a corpulent man in a thunder-and-lightning overcoat and a green velour hat, carrying a paper of hot, delicious-smelling sausages. Glimpsing me in what was left of the light, she said, 'Ah, the poor darling!' and gave me a sausage, and a kiss that was warm and odorous as a spirit-stove for heating curling-irons. Then she opened her great beaded purse and pressed a silver krone into my hand, just before the man pulled her away.

And as I walked on, eating the sausage – nothing ever

tasted so good! – the baby started to wail. I was terrified. But as luck would have it, a hundred yards or so farther on – in which direction I didn't know, except that I was always keeping a wall to the right of me – I noticed a little covered cart standing in front of a shop that sold oil and firewood. The old horse in the shafts was as melancholy as only a worn-out horse can be, shivering, with a few sacks thrown over its bony back; but in the rear of the cart sat a fat, jolly-looking woman nursing a very young child.

I watched her. She said, 'And where the devil have *you* sprung from?'

I held out to her the yellow-haired girl's coin, and said, very politely, 'If you please, can you oblige me with a krone's worth of milk for my baby?'

She stared, then bubbled and rippled with laughter. 'If it wasn't for the sight of the money, I'd a-thought it was one o' my old man's little jokes,' she said. 'But it ain't for *milk* that *he'd* part with cash. . . . What, the kid thirsty? Gi' us the brat here, then. A krone's worth o' milk! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I could be a rich woman at that rate. . . .' And to my amazement she proceeded to feed both babies at once! 'What's your name?' she asked.

I lied, promptly, 'Bella Bestitude.'

'Queer name. None like that round our way. Where you from?'

'Pittsburgh.'

'This your sister?' she asked, nodding towards my baby.

Sister! I don't know why, but I was appalled at this; I had somehow taken it for granted that this 'fatherless child of sorrow' was a boy. They always were, in the cook's novels.

But I kept my head, and said, 'No, I'm just minding her for somebody.'

'What's her name?'

'Arabella,' I said, desperately.

'Well, ducky, you don't want to be traipsing about in the cold. Where d'you live? When my old man's back from getting tiddly, we'll give you a ride home.'

'Oh, no, thanks very much,' I said, hurriedly. 'I have only five minutes' walk from here.'

She handed the baby back, saying, 'There you are, then. She's drunk her krone's worth, and one for the road. . . . Now put your money away, bless your silly heart! I've got enough *here* for six, bless 'em; and welcome!' She struck herself on the bosom with a flourish, and forced my fist shut over my bit of silver. 'Can *I* oblige her with a krone's worth o' milk – ha-ha-ha-ha!'

I left her still laughing, and hurried on with the baby wrapped as it had been before. Not it – she. *I might have guessed*, I thought, *that any child a mother doesn't want is sure to be a girl!* 'There's a good Arabella,' I said, in the tone one uses to an obedient puppy. Arabella made motions with her legs, as it were riding an invisible bicycle. 'Clever girl,' I said, 'she understands every word you say to her!'

I felt strongly possessive about this baby now. I knew that but for her I should by now be frightened and lonely. But I was dreadfully cold and tired, and a wind was rising. Distant clocks chimed the hour, but what with wind and distance, and the fact that the chimes seemed to start each a little ahead of the other, the bells told me nothing; except that it was about thirty-four o'clock. But there was no such time . . . no such time . . . no such – I pulled myself up short. I was growing dangerously drowsy, while the banks of twilight slush looked more and more wickedly cosy so that I wanted to lie down on them and sleep. Oh yes, I knew then why that alluring witch in the fairy-tales catches you when you are hungry and cold! I desired nothing better than sleep, numb sleep. But wicked as it might be to throw myself away, it would be a most unpardonable crime to carry my poor

fatherless Arabella with me; for sleep in that snow meant death, or so I had been told.

Conscience notwithstanding, I knew that I had to rest somewhere out of reach of the scaly claws of the frost. And then I felt, without seeing, the blacksmith's shed – followed a current of warm air straight to it, just as birds find their way south. I tripped over duckboards and slid on icy clay, picked a path among bits of broken machinery made ghostly by the ice, and so came to this tumbledown affair of old boards with sacking for window-panes, right at the end of nowhere. From a chimney some left-over smoke crawled up, the last gasp of a dying fire, but the wind waved it away. The door was ajar, hanging on a leather hinge. I went in. There was silence, but warmth; nobody present, but a smell of people; and even a wan little light – a bit of burning rag floating in a crock of fat. I could make out the shapes of an anvil and a huge, deflated pair of bellows.

After these I noticed, with the abrupt, belated start of exhaustion, that a woman was sitting by the fire. By her breathing I knew that she was asleep. Beside her, his head on her knee, a young boy was crouching. He, also, was asleep. I went in on tiptoe, partly out of respect for their slumber, but mainly because if they saw me they might tell me to go away. This is a hard world, and who knows what may happen in it? So, feeling a heap of warm ashes near by, I made Arabella fast in my arms, well-protected by my coat, and then I slept too. That the baby slept, I did not observe then as remarkable; I thought that this must be an extraordinarily good baby. I know, now, that she must have spent herself with crying before she had come my way.

But when I was awakened by voices, I did not know how much later, she was still fast asleep. A candle was burning, now, in an empty bottle on the anvil, and by its light I saw a man of such ferocious aspect that I believed (not without

a pleasurable thrill) that I had fallen among robbers and ogres, like the other lost children in the story-books. He was both tall and broad, with a great shock of red hair and a short curly red beard. He was shaking himself like a bear, for there was snow on his head and shoulders. He wore no coat, only his shirt, trousers, and boots; and I had seen arms like his on a copy of the Farnese Hercules. One of his hands was wrapped in a grimy bandage, and in the other he carried a grey paper parcel. There was a bundle of logs at his feet.

The woman, talking quietly in order not to wake her son, said, 'What! Have you sold your coat?'

The man laughed, with something like the sound of a barrel rolling over cobblestones. 'Yes, wife,' said he. 'A warm heart is better than sheepskins, as the saying goes; and it is better to be lined inside than out, as my grandmother used to say.' He pointed to the paper parcel with his bandaged hand. 'So here is a bottle of wine, and some sausage, and some soup meat, and an onion or two. Best I could do, prices being what they are. You know the proverb: He who has never seen a tiger, let him look at a cat; and he who has never seen a robber, let him look at a butcher. . . . Also, a bit of wood, a candle, and —'

'— Why, what's this?' his wife asked, busy with the parcel. She held up a tawdry little tinsel star, and a sticky-looking paper cone.

He replied, 'The star is for your hair. The sweets are for the boy. The Christ Child shall not pass by our door!'

When she could speak she said, 'And no tobacco for your pipe, Lajos?'

'My hand will soon be well again, and then there will be tobacco for my pipe,' he said.

She put her hand in her pocket and took out a small package. 'For your pipe,' she said. 'A happy Christmas.'

'You went without bread for this,' said he.

She replied, 'The boy did not. Can one live by bread alone?'

He said nothing, but put out his huge iron-bender's hand and lightly touched her cheek. Then the boy awoke, and ran to his father. 'Daddy, did you bring something home for Christmas?' he asked.

'There will be something for Christmas, thank God,' the man said. 'Wait and then you'll see.'

'What will Magda have for Christmas?' the boy asked.

The man said, 'Your little sister is in heaven, my boy. She will have chickens, and ducks, and puddings, and pies, sweet music – everything of the best.'

'I wish I could go and see her for Christmas, Daddy.'

'Ah, that's a long journey for living sinners, son!'

The woman said, 'Leave your father be, Laszlo, and you shall have some nice sausage for your supper.'

'And will there be a goose for dinner tomorrow?'

'No goose, child. Better than a goose. A lovely hot stew!'

'And shall I put my shoe by the chimney tonight?'

'Yes, my dear,' the man said.

'But there's a hole in my shoe,' said the boy, wistfully.

'Well then, put down your cap. It's all the same thing. A shoe, a stocking, a cap – in good faith, all is understood.'

'And shall I have another little sister?'

'If God sends one, she'll be welcome,' said the woman.

The fire, which the man had been replenishing stick by stick, now burned hot. I lay still, unseen in the shadows. The good blacksmith, his wife, and their young son ate bread and sausage, and drank a little watered wine. Then the man said, 'My good kind wife, you are tired, and the boy is tired, and I too am a bit tired – what with the fresh air, the walking, and the good food and drink. Tomorrow is another Christmas Day, and then there will be a fresh year. Let's sleep.'

So they stood up. The boy carefully placed his cap by the

chimney, after which they all went behind a partition where their sleeping-quarters were, taking the candle with them. I knew, now, exactly what I had to do. I crept out into the firelight, and laid my little Arabella very gently on the low chair the woman had just left. She breathed easily, sucking her thumb. Taking out the silver pencil I always carried in my pocket, I wrote in a clear round hand under the scrawl pinned to the baby's dress: *Her name is Arabella. She likes milk. She is yours to keep because you are good.* I stealthily emptied my purse of all my capital – there must have been more than three hundred pengo in gold – and put the money in the boy's cap.

Then I went silently to the door, slipped out into the street, closed the door without a sound – and ran!

About half an hour later a policeman caught me. 'What a naughty little girl you are,' he said, 'to give your poor parents so much worry and grief!'

'Did I really?' I asked.

'They're heartbroken. Every póliceman in the city has been searching high and low for you. Your father has offered a reward.'

'For *me*?' I asked.

'Yes, for you.'

I burst into tears at that. So did my mother and father when I was brought home. They smothered me with a mixture of kisses and reproaches. The servants clustered about me with radiant faces. Even my English governess's long eyelids were pink with crying. My nurse Ilonka rubbed me down tenderly and dressed me in fresh clothes. 'Another half-hour, and you would have missed Midnight Mass,' she said.

'Why, how long have I been gone?' I asked.

'Over eight mortal hours, you little wretch!'

I had thought I must have been gone at least three days. I

wish an hour lasted as long nowadays! They made Time more durable when I was a girl; you got your full sixty seconds' worth per minute, then.

So . . . we went to Midnight Mass, and the great baritone Alexius Garmilyon sang 'Noël, Noël' with the mighty choir; and at home there was our resplendent Tree, and sweet sleep with the foreknowledge of fine gifts to come.

I was very happy then. . . .

Bella Barlay sighed. 'That was *then*,' she said.

I asked, 'And now?'

'Now I am happy, but I know it. That isn't the same thing.'

'And what happened to the blacksmith, and little Arabella?'

'I saw them a year later, when we were driving in the Park. A prosperous, happy family. I had lost interest in them by then. What I had really wanted to see was the faces of those good people, when Arabella cried out, and they found her and the gold in the firelight. It gave me pleasure to imagine that. It still does. The keenest pleasures in this life are imaginary, because they are always other people's,' said Bella Barlay. 'Well . . . God bless you and send you a happy New Year. We will drink to a joyous Christmas.'

The Tremendous Trifle

Although he had a cool cellar well stocked with all kinds of good stuff in bins and barrels, all available for his drinking, Mr Elwes still chose to keep a select supply of wines and spirits in a locked sideboard to which there was no key – a knock-kneed old piece of malaria-yellow mahogany with round-shouldered doors on discouraged hinges which you or I could burst with a nudge. He preferred to squat on his heels and pick the lock with a fork. 'There seems to be more relish to one's glass of something this way,' he once told me, 'and where there is zest there is nourishment. Thus, a little of what you fancy does you all the more good.'

I said, 'You're a bit of a natural philosopher, Mr Elwes.'

'I have had some need to be, in my time, sir,' he said, 'for I was in service upwards of fifty years. Yes, I ran the gamut and the gauntlet of it, from knife-and-boots boy up through the several degrees of footmanship to the position of butler. And this, mark you, in spite of great physical disadvantage – I ask you, can you see a shrimp like me as a full-size butler in a great house?'

There was a certain slyness in his sidelong look. This was not a question, it was a test: I could not answer yes or no without committing myself. So I said, 'I don't know what a

butler looks like, Mr Elwes. Butlers are almost extinct, I think. The gentlefolk can't afford them, and those that have them don't know what's what.'

'Well put, well put!' cried Mr Elwes.

Encouraged, I went on, 'Like the old English stag-hound, they aren't bred any more. There's no call for them. A man like me gets his conception of a butler out of the funny novels – somebody portly, plethoric, stultified, portentous, congested and pontifical, with poached eyes and a porridgey voice. Now you are not a bit like that.'

'I admire your turn of phrase,' said Mr Elwes, 'and would be happy if you would give me your opinion of a certain sixty-year-old Scotch of which I can offer you a glass, as soon as I get this door open. . . . But what *do* I look like, then, sir?'

What, indeed? Could I tell him to his face that he looked like nothing at all? The man's vanity was involved. I could not say that a Cockney would call him 'a rasher of wind', because there seemed to be so little of him that no tailor had ever quite caught the knack of making a coat narrow enough for him; that he was papery, dog-eared about the eyelids and as it were faintly underlined in pencil at the expressive parts of his face, like a book, instead of wrinkled like a man; or that even his exact, triangular nose might have been folded and creased into shape like an old-fashioned *billet doux*, while his pale eyes were narrow and elusive as silver fish. Neither could I say that he somehow reminded me of a closed file of musty documents, all labelled CONFIDENTIAL, and all value-less, except to a historian.

So I said, 'You look like somebody in the British Foreign Office, only more intelligent' – which dubious compliment so pleased him that he let slip a smile. It escaped through a crack, and was startlingly puckish. Then he handed me a glass, saying, 'Pray don't dilute it, but sip it neat. There's

only a dozen bottles of this left in the world. It is from Lord Anguish's private stock.'

'Your perquisites?' I asked.

'No, sir. Lord Anguish would rather have parted with his life's blood than this. Yet I received six cases in his name. Your health, sir. . . . Yes, I was in service nearly half a century, waiting for my heart's desire, and putting money by to be master of just such a comfortable, respectable little public house as this. And so I learned a thing or two.'

If the reverberation of a golden gong had a bouquet and a flavour, then I was savouring it.

'And you achieved your heart's desire?' I said.

'I did, sir.'

'Yes, Mr Elwes, you are a lucky man to be landlord and licensee of a snug little pub like The Bricklayers Arms,' I said, nodding at the comforts of the cosy old parlour.

But he corrected me, solemn as a schoolmaster, saying, 'Not a pub, sir; a *house*. And never call it by its right name, The Bricklayers. That'd never do! Why, we've been a servants' rendezvous this past two hundred years. Nobody so particular as a servant. Now I ask you, can you imagine Duke So-and-So's second footman inviting an earl's coachman to have a glass of ale at The Bricklayers? Nothing so low!' To indicate that he was joking, my host winked, and wiped away a smile as carefully as if his mouth were a razor and his handkerchief a shaving-paper. 'Such talk is for the gentry.'

I asked, 'What does one call the house then, Mr Elwes?'

'Well, sir, the playwright Sheridan put it in one of his jingles:

To Marlowe Mews do our fellows repair
For a "You-Know-What" at the "You-Know-Where"

so this is the You-Know-Where. Or sometimes one just says

the address, "Marlowe Mews". To be landlord here was my ambition, sir – my ambition, but not my heart's desire.'

'Where's the distinction?' I asked.

He replied, 'You being an author and therefore a dreamer, I thought you might understand. Mere ambition is something fleshly, d'you see. Heart's desire is a thing of the spirit. Now although you mightn't think so, looking at me, I was always moved by a spirit of Romance – mixed with a touch of harmless mischief. So, material ambition apart, my heart's desire – my long suppressed and seemingly unattainable dream – was to rescue a lady in distress, and at the same time hit a tyrant in the eye with a cream pie.'

'But you never did!' I cried.

Mr Elwes tore off a whole week's ration of mirth straight along the dotted line, in one dry titter. '*Didn't* I, though?'

He refilled my glass, and went on:

. . . You must have heard a thousand people say, 'I could write a book about my life, if I had the time.' They couldn't, of course, even if they knew how to write, because under questioning it generally turns out that most people never had a life. If sufficiently interested you might write a book about the life of the earthworm, or the cockroach, but it's a vain man indeed who has enough to say about himself to fill a volume – except by association with others. Given that proviso, even I could write a book. I always was bookish. When I was in the service of the Earl of Wye I helped him catalogue his library, and in his last days I often read to him in the evening. Many butlers would have looked down on this as mere secretarial work – and not being part of their duty. But I am not too proud to turn my hand to anything.

I would like it to be said of me that I am not so much a butler as a general practitioner in all branches of

servant-hood, so that my pride is something rather more than the pride of the mere specialist.

So, when dear old Lord Wye died insolvent in 1929, and cribs in my line of business were scarce, I was not above going into the service of Lord Anguish. He was definitely not a gentleman, sir. The first Lord Anguish got his barony from King James I, in settlement of a haberdashery bill; and three hundred years later there was still a great deal of the counter-jumping draper about his descendant. He had all the mannerisms and none of the manners of your true gentleman – all the attitudes and none of the instincts.

Don't misunderstand me. My conception of a gentleman is contained in St Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians. My Lord Anguish was quite faithless, hopeless, and uncharitable, although it pleased him to keep up a reputation for benevolence and public wôrks – with an eye to being exalted to a viscountcy, for he was vain as a peacock, if one may apply so gaudy a simile to a man who had as little colour as an unboiled shrimp.

So he sat on all kinds of committees for the Redemption of the Fallen – for whom he found jobs at low wages in several of the businesses in which he was interested, such as laundries and restaurants. Oh, he never missed a chance of gaining a penny, Lord Anguish! He had married a rich wife, too – an American girl from Michigan – and although her money was her own in her own right, he wouldn't let her touch a penny of it. How could he prevent her, you may ask? I don't know. He had what they call an ascendancy over her; she was afraid of displeasing him. No doubt, nowadays, they'd call it an 'inferiority complex' – she had always been made to feel a bit of a lump who didn't know how to hold herself, and blushed when talked to, and moved with a stoop, partly because she was awkwardly large and partly because her poor eyes were so weak. Anguish had a cutting

way of bullying her, and sometimes he would simply ignore her for days together.

Her name was Hetty, and I went out of my way to do little things for her when I went to Anguish House in Bentinck Street. And that house was somehow typical of Lord Anguish – it was a narrow-gutted hypocrite of a house that kept trying to pretend it was situated around a corner, just a little nearer the more aristocratic streets near Cavendish Square. Only two of the servants lived in – Mrs Reed, the cook-housekeeper, and myself, the butler-cum-valet or what you will. Anguish couldn't keep servants; he spied on them, and was parsimonious with the provisions – although, passing him in the street, all got up as he was in his astrakhan coat and breathing kindliness along with the smoke of a five-shilling cigar, you would have sworn that here, at last, was somebody who could leave the world a great deal better than he had found it.

This overcoat of Lord Anguish's was, in its way, the beginning of the curious complications of which I will tell you. It was a lordly garment, sir, designed to lend its wearer an air of importance, of immensity – which air Anguish emphasized by the wearing of built-up clothes. Although his miserable, mean head was something like my own, he wore a wide hat. The shoulders of his jackets were skilfully padded, too – presumably in order that when he shed his outdoor garments he might not conspicuously shrink. Moreover, he wore what they now call 'elevator' shoes to make him look two or three inches taller. He smoked tiny, but expensive, cigars to make his face appear bigger.

Take him all in all, Lord Anguish reminded me of one of those penny mutton-pies they used to sell in the street – all crust and illusion, and precious little meat; and that meat cat's-meat.

Now one spring day, when Anguish was supposed to be

out of the house and busy about some benevolent business, I set myself to tidying his dressing-room. And then I took it into my head to try on that famous astrakhan overcoat of his. So I slipped it on. But it was too long. Then I put on a pair of his architectural shoes, and the effect was much better. I clapped one of his hats on my head – dead straight, brim over nose – and discovered that I was enjoying myself. In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say. I took one of his extra-special cigars and stuck it into my mouth at a cocky angle.

But one thing was missing. What? Why, the air, the expression of Lord Anguish. Now to catch an expression, sir, you must catch a mood. So I remembered the man I had most disliked – a thievish footman who used to beat me for his own misdeeds forty years before, when I was boot-and-knife boy at Ballsacre Hall. He was abject and ferocious, and his mouth was like a half-opened oyster. I tried that expression, and upon my soul, sir, I had Lord Anguish pat!

But then, as it might be in a bad dream, I saw two of myself in the same long cheval-glass; and one of us was wearing a black overcoat. This, of course, was Lord Anguish, who had crept up unawares and caught me posing. I stood, waiting for an outburst – for he had one of those vile and sudden tempers, you know – but he simply looked and looked, and then said, in an unctuous kind of voice, 'Elwes, you look almost as good as your master!'

Expecting the worst, I said, 'Heaven forbid! My Lord, Jack's not only as good as his master, but a shade better, granting that knowledge is power. Shall I resign, or will you dismiss me?'

He said, 'Neither, man, neither! Hang up that coat and lend me yours.'

So he slid out of his padded-shouldered jacket and put

on my round-tailed servant's coat, and while he looked at himself in the glass, I watched him. I saw him become a nobody, sir. I saw Lord Anguish become an Elwes – just as, two minutes ago, Elwes had transformed himself into a Lord Anguish – and I was humiliated.

He said, scraping his chin like Uriah Heep, 'This provides food for thought.'

'Meaning that clothes make the man?' I asked.

He snapped, 'Meaning nothing of the sort, you fool! What's your wages?'

I replied, 'Eight pounds a month, my Lord – as if you didn't know.'

'How would you like to make an extra two or three pounds a week?' Lord Anguish asked. And when I said that I should like to, very much indeed, he sat me down, and gave me a glass of brandy, and, going off at a tangent, said, 'Elwes, seeing you dressed like me just now made me humble.'

I said, 'Me, too, my Lord, when I saw you dressed like me.'

'Shut up! Now you must know, Elwes, that my various humanitarian activities take me to all kinds of places at all kinds of times.'

I knew all about that, but I simply said, 'Indeed, my Lord?'

'Indeed,' said he, 'and it's a wicked world where a man can't keep clean without putting his hands in dirty water. You cannot possibly know half the naughtiness of high society after dark.'

'No, no,' I said.

'I should hope not,' said Lord Anguish. 'Now it so happens that for a while I must be about my Master's business on Sunday evenings. Sunday, I believe, Elwes, is your day off?'

I said, 'Oh, but, my Lord – her ladyship —'

'— I know all about her ladyship,' says he. 'Lady Anguish defers to me in all things, but her Sabbath is sacrosanct. She *will* have me at home on Sunday. Yet it so happens that there is an unenlightened young person in St John's Wood who dances in flimsy costume six days of the week, and is available only on Sunday for improving discussion. Now I ask you, is your Sunday off worth three pounds to you?'

'Four, perhaps,' I said.

'So be it. Now you are aware that Lady Anguish is all but blind?'

'Her ladyship *is* somewhat short-sighted,' I said.

'As a bat! So. We'll change clothes. I'll take your Sunday off, and you'll take my chair by the fire. When I return, we exchange coats. It is as simple as A B C.'

'Yet it seems to me, my Lord, that there are complications.'

'Such as?'

Knowing that I lied, but curious to hear what he had to say about it, I said, 'Between man and wife, I understand, there are generally little, ah, sweet interchanges – endearments —'

He stopped me. 'Why, you fool, if you so much as said "Please" or "Thank you" to her ladyship, in my character, she'd smell a rat at once. Oh dear no. I seldom speak to her. There seems to be nothing to say. You simply occupy yourself with books and newspapers and things. If she ventures a word just say, "Madam! Be quiet! I'm thinking!" . . . Could you imitate my voice?'

Thoroughly tired of the fellow, I said, 'I used to imitate the barking of the Earl of Wye's asthmatic French bulldog for the amusement of his grandchildren. The sounds are similar.'

'*If* she twigs the game, which is unlikely,' he went on,

being the sort of man that can simply not hear an insult, 'why, then I'll say I was just trying her, to test her attentiveness to me.'

I said, 'And if her ladyship should ask me to hook a dress, for example —'

'– Elwes, the first Lady Anguish was a daughter of the Duke of Dungeness, and *she* would never have dared to take such a liberty with me!'

So, to cut a long story short, I fell in with Anguish's mean little game. While he went out in my clothes on my Sunday off, I sat with his poor, patient, peering wife and read books. His amusements were far less innocent, for I knew something of his predilection for saving the souls of pretty young women. At seven, Lady Anguish and I had a cold collation – for Lord Anguish allowed no cooking on the Sabbath – in stony silence, by candlelight. At exactly ten o'clock I would bark, 'Hetty! Go to bed!' And she obeyed. Anguish was always back by midnight, somewhat languid from his works of righteousness in St John's Wood and smelling strongly of champagne. We swopped coats, and he went to his room and I went to mine. It was as simple as he had said it would be.

But in the course of all those evenings, although we never spoke, I took the opportunity to observe Lady Anguish pretty closely; and I'm far from a bad observer, sir. She was somewhat unprepossessing, yes, and lumpish and stooping if you like. But above all she was frightened and unhappy and insecure – she had no faith in herself as a woman, and this alone is enough to turn a staggering beauty plain.

Somehow, she being so miserable and so far from her home and her friends, incarcerated by the ogre Anguish in this musty house, she brought out something of that spirit of romance which I have told you about. And along with this hopped mischief.

So, one evening, having helped myself to some of the self-same stuff you are now drinking, I suddenly barked at her in Anguish's toy bulldog voice, 'It makes me sick to look at you!'

She put down her crochet-work – she was making a most complicated lace tablecloth – and said, 'I'm not surprised, John. I never was much to look at, and now I'm even less.'

Her simple dignity touched my heart, but I yelped, 'Well. There must be *something* underneath all that suet and crumb you're smothered with. You're supposed to be a woman – of a sort – and not an infernal slug. So I'm taking steps to dig you out.'

'I don't understand,' she said.

'No, you wouldn't. But tomorrow morning at nine I've arranged for you to take the car and go and see Mrs Blackadder.'

Now Mrs Blackadder was one of those poor but predatory gentlewomen who live on their connections. They fix things up, effect introductions, and generally make a nice little living out of commissions. They know all about the latest in interior decoration. They start crazes, and are hand-in-glove with all the milliners and dressmakers, to whom they manage to steer a constant stream of wealthy but bewildered customers. They are on intimate terms with restaurateurs and hairdressers. You know the sort? Their male counterparts work with the bucket-shop keepers, the Mayfair bookies, and the wine-merchants.

I went on, 'Mrs Blackadder will help you buy a complete new wardrobe, fashionable but discreet. You are forty years old and look sixty. I want you to look thirty. Get your hair cut, have it tinted. I suggest dark chestnut. Mrs Blackadder will take you to the best – that is, the most costly – beautifiers of dowdy women. They will massage you. They will rub

mud in your silly face, and cosmeticize it – elegantly, but with discretion. She will show you what underclothes to buy – silk, lace, etcetera. Oh, *I'll* never look at them,' I said, truthfully, 'but I am told they make a woman like you *feel* better, and that if you feel better you are better, and therefore look better. Do you hear?'

Lady Anguish was flabbergasted. She began, 'But you have always —'

' – Never mind what I have always!'

'But the cost!'

'It's your own money, isn't it?' I snapped.

'I suppose so. But you —'

' – Well then!' I was magnanimous. 'I don't care if it costs you a thousand pounds – and if Blackadder has a hand in it, you'll be lucky to get away with spending double that. Come back beautified tomorrow night, or I'll know the reason why! . . . Only I forbid you to wear your skirts too short. And if you are very good, I'll let you wear my mother's pearls.'

She made as if to embrace me, but I waved her away, saying, 'You know I hate to be mauled. Go to bed!'

She blew me a kiss, almost handsome in her new-found delight. There would be little sleep for her that night, if I knew anything of the stimulation of anticipated joy. Lord Anguish came in later, and we changed coats.

'Nothing so fragrant as virtue, my Lord,' I said.

'What d'you mean?'

'Only that in your evangelistic zeal you appear to have exuded opopanax,' I said, sniffing my sleeve, and brushing it, 'also pink powder.'

'Go to bed!'

Next day he asked me where Lady Anguish had hidden herself. I said, with a perfectly straight face, 'Why, my Lord, you sent her out shopping. You told her ladyship last evening

that she needed some clothes, and other items. Her ladyship is likely to be out most of the day.'

He snarled like a baffled ferret. 'I —' he began, and swallowed it. 'You —' he started, but gulped, and tried again. 'This —' And at last, 'You'll pay for this!'

I replied, 'Not I, my Lord. I was in St John's Wood, doing righteous works, at the house of Miss Hyacinth Burbage of the Frivolity Theatre.'

'What do you know of Miss Burbage?'

'Her house is at Number 6, Cattermole Villas. We pay the rent. Her maid is named Constance Green. Constance Green is engaged to marry Lord Tygoe's chauffeur – a decent young fellow named Hitchens. Hitchens sometimes plays a game of darts at the You-Know-Where, in Marlowe Mews – a respectable house, where he and I occasionally exchange shop-talk. Miss Burbage uses opopanax perfume. She regards me as a harmless old mug, and has referred to me as an "amorous clothes-moth". She —'

' – Enough!' cried Lord Anguish, mottled with rage.

' – She believes that I may finance a musical comedy.'

'I say, *enough*!'

I concluded, mercilessly, 'Of course, I shall not be light-headed enough to do any such thing, amorous clothes-moth though I may be, for Hyacinth Burbage is completely devoid of talent, and it would be money down the drain. And however ardent I may be in my desire to snatch her as a brand from the burning, the fact remains that she is in love with a certain Captain Bosville of the Hussars, and I inspire her with nothing but disgust.'

That floored him, sir, so that much as I despise a scripture-spouting hypocrite, I was almost sorry for him in his misery and shame. I said to him, 'Come now, my Lord; we'll play our little masquerade just once more next Sunday. Give the Burbage girl a parting gift, and then take my Lady on a nice

long healthy sea-voyage. She deserves it, because she is a good woman, and a sweet woman, and you don't know when you're well off.'

Before he could find breath to answer, Lady Anguish came home; and then even I so far forgot myself as to gasp. She had gone out clay, and returned a statue! Her hair, cut short and subtly tinted a reddish brown, fell into the most agreeable waves. Her mouth, prettily coloured, had definition, now, and her grey eyes shone. One could see that here was a lady conscious of fine silk next to the skin. She carried herself erect, and the effect was very fine – almost Junoesque, as the novelists say; although she was not yet perfectly sure of her footing on her high Spanish heels. She was wearing a rich black satin dress, not too short, as I had advised; and gunmetal stockings such as were fashionable about that time, which revealed the fact that she possessed quite remarkably shapely legs. Over one shoulder, biting its own tail, was slung a magnificent silver fox.

'Well, John,' she said, smiling. I had never seen her smile before, and it was good to see now, for it made her radiant. 'Well, John, does it still make you sick to look at me?'

Staring, open-mouthed, he said, 'No. No, it doesn't.'

'And now will you let me wear your mother's pearls?'

'My mother's pearls? Yes, I suppose so.'

'Mrs Blackadder says pearls get dull and sick if they aren't worn. It was so sweet of you to send me to her, John!'

'Yes,' said he, vacantly, blinking at her, 'yes, yes . . .'

'Wait until you see my new glasses,' she said. 'They've got French frames – tortoise-shell set with *teeny* diamonds! Oh, I know I'm horribly vain and wicked, but I just can't help it – I feel like a girl, and I've never felt like a girl in all my life before!' So she chattered on, like somebody newly released from solitary confinement, while Lord Anguish

stood in a sort of numb daze. But I noticed that the looks he darted at me from time to time grew less and less malevolent, so that by dinner-time he was almost polite to me – and he was the kind of man that regards any expression of common courtesy as a symptom of spinelessness.

So we got through that week easily enough. Come Sunday, however, Lord Anguish was uneasy. He said, 'Elwes, I'll put an end to our idiotic game tonight. But I'm afraid we mightn't get by with it. Who would have suspected my lady of having so much vivacity in her?'

'Well, my Lord, diamond-studded frames don't make better eyesight; and this being Sunday, never fear but Lady Anguish will do her crocheting nice and quiet until bedtime. I shall complain of a headache. Only disembarrass us of that Burbage girl, and we'll all live happily ever after.'

He said, 'I am a fool, and I'm afraid I've ruined my life.'

'Nonsense,' said I, 'there's a good time coming, although we may never live to see it, as the saying goes. Be off at six o'clock sharp, and I'll hold the fort.'

But at a quarter to six, after we had exchanged clothes and identities, there came an insistent ringing at the front door.

'Better answer it,' I told him. So he went downstairs and opened the door, and to my horror I heard a great big Canadian voice booming, 'Ah there, Elwes. We must see Lord Anguish, if you'll show us up. Sorry to burst in on his Sunday, but it's rather urgent.'

I peeped down and saw in the hall two of Lord Anguish's most important business associates – John McGee of Toronto, and a Grecian gentleman named Daphnis. What could I do but play the game cool and steady? I barked downstairs, 'Show the gentlemen up, Elwes, you fool!' And up they came, into the dim old reception-room: McGee hearty, Daphnis jovial, both telling me how well I looked, while Lord Anguish,

indescribably servile in my skimpy little coat, stood by and trembled. So I pushed him out of the room in true Anguish style, ordering refreshments in a piercing voice, while I whispered between two sentences, 'We'll find a moment, and change back.'

Daphnis said to me, 'We are truly sorry, Lord Anguish, but the Alberta Copper deal has gone through ahead of schedule.'

'So we want your signature on two cheques,' said McGee.

'On the Sabbath?' I asked, frigidly.

'Hell, yes!' said McGee. 'Sabbath or no Sabbath, unless you co-sign with Daphnis and me, the deal's *kaputt*. You can ease your conscience by giving a few pounds to the Society for the Abolition of Practically Everything out of your cut of the take.'

I howled at Lord Anguish, 'Champagne! The Brut, 1906!' I had some idea of getting him in the cellar and swapping clothes again. But now Lady Anguish came on the scene, and McGee and Daphnis were ravished and charmed by her new look; so she must needs order up a cold buffet, and there I was, hemmed in, while Lord Anguish, looking like some symbolic figure of disaster, was performing miracles of ineptitude with plates at the sideboard.

Three times I tried to get him alone in the kitchen, and thrice I was headed off. How, you ask, did my true identity escape the sharp eyes of those two visitors? Why, simply, sir, they *took it for granted* that I was Anguish, and found no need to look twice. And I behaved like his lordship, too. I gave him hell. 'You're drunk, you knock-kneed inebriate!' I yapped. 'Give me that carving-knife, you paralytic monkey!' And so forth, praying for a psychological moment. It came, when he brought in the trifle.

This was a tremendous trifle, sir, a beauty, a real creation of sponge-cake soaked in sherry, with fruits and jellies and

masses of whipped cream artfully embellished with brandied cherries and angelica. Now I pretended really to lose my temper. I snarled, 'You staggering chicken! Is that the way to serve a trifle?' I snatched the servers out of his quivering hands, and gesticulated with them, like a man gone crazy with rage. 'What, are you making mud-pies? Why don't you chuck the stuff at us and have done with it?' Here, I simulated a nervous jerk of the wrist – and got him right between the eyes with a great serving-spoonful of trifle.

It was a magnificent and terrible moment! Taking advantage of the shock-effect on the company, I grabbed Lord Anguish by the collar and ran him out of the room, shouting, 'See what you made me do! To your pantry, sir!'

There, while Lady Anguish was apologizing to the guests, I wiped Lord Anguish's stricken face with a wet towel, peeled my coat off him, gave him back his own, and his elevated shoes, and said, 'Back, now, and sign your cheques!'

Five minutes later, having smeared myself a little with trifle, I went in and said, 'My Lord, tomorrow I consult my solicitors!' Then I left the house, vibrating with wounded dignity.

Next day I put it to Lord Anguish that he owed me two thousand pounds. He was a good businessman. He said, 'You have me cornered. I'll pay. But you must go to Miss Burbage and confess that it was you whom she has been receiving these past weeks, and not me – you, dressed up in my clothes. That'll put paid to *that*.'

And save you an extra five hundred, I thought, half admiring the man's cunning. But I agreed, and took my money. As I was leaving, Lady Anguish called me to her sitting-room, and gave me an envelope. 'For you, Elwes – don't open it now. Good-bye!' She dislocated my hand with a farewell grip in the Michigan style, and let me go.

The envelope contained a note. It said, *The Blackadder bit*

was clever, but that business with the trifle was a masterpiece. Thanks a lot. Enclosed was a cheque for one thousand pounds.

Sir, the sea is deep and mysterious. But a woman . . .

Mr Elwes laughed and said, 'So I put my savings together and persuaded old Robbins to retire, and took this comfortable old house, as had long been my ambition.'

'Having first achieved your heart's desire,' I said.

'Just so, sir.'

'Did the Burbage girl give you any trouble?'

'No. She said, "I've been fooled. Keep your mouth shut – I can get your legs broken for a fiver." Then she insisted on returning a diamond bracelet I was supposed to have given her. She was sure I must have stolen it.'

'Did you keep the bracelet?'

'As a *quid pro quo*, sir.'

'And this wonderful whisky?'

'I had it sent to myself. There were no complaints. Pray take a little more.'

'And the Anguishes?'

'Oh, Lord Anguish fell in love.'

'With another dancer?'

'No, with Lady Anguish, his lawful wife. And they lived quite happily I am told – and I am told everything, sir – only she henpecked all the savagery out of him.' Mr Elwes yawned without opening his mouth, as only butlers, lawyers, and psycho-analysts know how. 'It's all like a dream,' he said. 'Touching the matter of which —'

' – It's time I said good night,' I said, taking the hint.

'If you absolutely must,' said Mr Elwes.

No Matter How You Slice It

In a neutral zone high above this world, two angels met in the small hours of a certain dawn, each on his separate way home. One of them glowed in this lightless place with a radiance independent of atoms; the other was somehow darker than no light at all. Thus, they would be completely invisible to the human eye. The dark one was what we would call a Demon, and the other an Angel – poor words, but better than mathematical formulae.

The Angel said, very civilly, 'Good morning to you. Our paths cross, I see. You must be one of Luzbel's children, I presume? I have not seen you before, so you must be pretty fresh at this game.'

The Demon replied, 'How d'you do? I didn't quite catch your name. . . .'

'I haven't got one,' said the Angel, 'I am a tiny particle of the Divine Will – the same as you.'

The Demon said, 'You may speak for yourself. I serve Satan.'

'And what do you think he is?' asked the Angel, smiling.

'I am not here to argue metaphysics,' said the Demon. 'To answer your surmise – no, I'm not as green as you think,

but this is my first important assignment, down there.' He pointed to our planet. 'In the city beside the lake.'

'Oh,' said the Angel, gravely, 'they're all important, you know. And while some may seem easy to the likes of you, I think you'll find you have a pretty rough row to hoe, as they say.'

'Come, come,' said the Demon, with a knowing smile. 'Most of them are ours already, and some aren't even worth our troubling with!'

'Such as?' the Angel asked.

'For example, there is the man they call Frankie the Hog . . . what's the joke?'

'Frankie the Hog? I had a chat with him in his sleep just now. Frankie *is* rather naughty —'

'Rather naughty? Irredeemably damned, sir!' cried the Demon. 'Now *I* have been at the ear of —'

' – Mr Francis Bacon, of Mayhew Heights,' said the Angel.

The Demon said, 'You could have guessed that, of course, because Francis Bacon is one of the finest men in that city, just as Frankie the Hog is one of the very worst.'

'Best? Worst? Hm!'

The Demon went on, 'Frankie the Hog, I repeat, is ours already. And I'll bag your fine, upstanding, virtuous Francis Bacon, body and soul, I will! I wish we could bet on it.'

The Angel said, 'But we can't, you know. It would be like a solitary man idly throwing dice, left hand against right hand. He can't win, he can't lose.'

'You talk as if you and I were parts of the same body,' said the Demon, laughing.

'Do I? . . . Again, a man who is vain of his muscles may fight with himself, left hand against right. He can't defeat himself, or be defeated by himself. Still, the exercise does strengthen his body a little, for what that's worth. . . . No,

we can't bet. But we might have a little educational exercise, my poor Rebellious Particle.'

'I wish,' the Demon said, 'I do wish we could put Frankie the Hog's soul into Francis Bacon's body, and vice versa – they're still asleep —'

'Then you'd see some fun, eh?' said the Angel, smiling. 'Well, we can't. Man's will must be free.'

The Demon said, 'And his instincts?'

'Man is given free will in order that we may see what he makes of his instincts,' said the Angel.

'We might give free reign to the instincts of Frankie the Hog and Mr Francis Bacon just for one day?' the Demon suggested.

'That is permissible, provided the instincts themselves are not tampered with,' the Angel said. 'Is it a challenge?'

'It is!' cried the Demon. 'But you mustn't interfere, no matter what, you know. No butting in with admonitions, etcetera, once the game's started. You keep strictly to one side.'

'So must you.'

'Agreed!'

'Then the game is on!' cried the Angel. The Demon grinned with glee, for he knew a thing or two about the secret mind of Mr Francis Bacon, and to purge it of its civilized inhibitions had been the very purpose of that 'first important assignment' to which he had referred.

'I'll have 'em both in Hell in twenty-four hours!' he cried.

The Angel said, 'Hell? Oh, that. Everybody has to go through Hell. I've been there myself. It's part of a process of refinement. The only permanent residents in Hell are you poor devils – and even your tenure is insecure, at that.'

The Demon replied, 'I don't understand you. Here comes the Earth's dawn. Let's go!'

And without loss, or even lapse, of time, they were back in the bitter, winter-numbed, wicked, smoky city on the lake. . . .

When Francis Bacon was a boy on his father's farm, he had thought it no great hardship to rise at half-past four of a winter's morning. He did not complain if some emergency called him out of bed even earlier – it wouldn't have done him any good if he had. But now, over fifty years old, a city man, and prosperous, he let himself sleep until six, when he got up very quietly for fear of disturbing his wife, who was generally suffering from whatever complaint had recently been made modish by the editors of *The Invalid's Digest.*

It was Francis Bacon's unalterable habit to say an impromptu morning prayer in his dressing-room – whatever came into his mind, somewhat in the Quaker style – and then to make a leisurely toilet. Dressed sprucely, he would make his wife her 'first breakfast' of caffeine-free coffee, dietic fruit-juice, and gluten toast, which he carried to her bedside at seven-thirty. They would discuss her ailments until eight o'clock when, his own breakfast being ready in the dining-room, he always kissed her good-bye for the day, and went down.

But this morning, awakening at his usual time, Mr Bacon was aware of a most unfamiliar exhilaration of mood. He felt, so to speak, as if his spirit had, after a long, hot day, at last taken off a pair of tight shoes. In his dressing-room he stood for a while, head bowed, hands loosely clasped, waiting for a prayer to come. It came very readily, but in the form of an apostrophe. That part of him which now lay submerged in his consciousness was appalled to hear himself say:

'My name is Francis Bacon. I am only fifty-three years old, and fit as a fiddle, strong as a bull and full of vital appetites. All my life I have toiled like a donkey, denying myself

the simplest luxuries, giving everything away. Why? I ask – *Why?*

'Because it was hammered into my head that I must honour my mean and merciless father and my cowardly and timorous mother, I had neither childhood nor young manhood. Celibate and teetotal for fear of my father's fist and my mother's tears, I worked. I became a chemist. I married a plain and stupid girl because she was an orphan and she said I reminded her of her father. I wanted to do research in my own field. But because she said she'd always dreamed of and prayed for a "nice home" I went into Terwilliger-Frost's pill-rolling outfit, of which I am top Vice President.

'What for?'

'For a moping half-wit who turned into an idle, flabby, martini-swilling, canasta-playing purveyor of malevolent gossip? Oh, say it is not so! Yet half my money goes on her back, or down her throat. The other half I devote to Good Works. That is to say, I finance ambitious doctors, to keep alive in a starved and overcrowded world helpless people who pray for death. I "reclaim" delinquent youth; my credulous psychologists send the crime rates soaring. I encourage learning. What does anybody want with learning? A degree, for a better chance to get into a Terwilliger-Frost. I stamp out crime; the bail-bonders get fat, judges are bought and sold, and the gangsters live in palaces.

'And what have *I*? Nothing but the contemptuous title of "do-gooder", while the political fixers laugh in their sleeves at me – their three-thousand-dollar pure vicuna sleeves!

'Enough is enough, and I have had it.'

The sensation he was experiencing – an odd compound of relief and shame – was curiously pleasant to Francis Bacon just then.

He bathed and dressed. Then he went to his wife's bedside.

She was waiting for her first breakfast, being anxious to get back to her second sleep. Her eyes widened when she saw that he was not carrying her tray. He said nothing, but what he did was the more awful because his normally grave and gentle expression remained unchanged. Without haste, and with the meticulosity of the practised chemist, he unstoppered the ice-water pitcher, and poured its contents over his wife's head, saying, in his usual sonorous, thoughtful, friendly voice, 'Try this for a change, you thoroughly spoiled creature.'

Then he went out, slamming the door. Downstairs, Ada, the old cook-housekeeper, said, 'Now, come and eat your breakfast like a good boy.'

Francis Bacon replied, 'Ada, if you don't cut out that mock-motherly business, I'll kick you out of the house.' As she stood, too shocked to speak, he went on, 'Corned-beef hash and scrambled eggs again, I suppose?' She nodded; and then, in composed and considered tones, but using barnyard simile and cattle-breeder's terminology, he told her what he really thought about her cooking in general and her corned-beef hash in particular. Having said his say, he went to the cabinet, helped himself to a good half-tumbler of brandy, and walked out into the street.

There, as usual, a knot of familiar tramps and beggars were waiting to say good morning to him. 'Bitter cold morning, Mr Bacon, sir,' said their shivering leader.

He replied, affably, 'Fine! I sincerely hope you all freeze to death before nightfall. Kindly beat it!'

Arrived at the Terwilliger-Frost building, he went up to his floor, and stood gazing appreciatively at the receptionist, a beautiful brunette wearing a low-cut dress, as receptionists are sometimes permitted to do. She blushed.

'That is a very pretty dress you are wearing, Miss Filigree,' he said.

'Thank you, Mr Bacon; I'm glad you like it,' she replied.

He chucked her under the chin and said, 'It wants a diamond brooch to set it off. I'll see you later, Miss Filigree.'

Leaving her staring blank disbelief in the evidence of her own senses, he went into his private office. There he sat, chin on fist, evidently deep in thought, for his secretary had to cough before he noticed her. She said, 'The Treasurer of the Widows and Orphans Fund —'

' – may go and jump in the lake,' said Francis Bacon, 'and take his widows and orphans with him. I'm not on any account to be disturbed, Miss Greentea.'

She crept away, aghast.

Francis Bacon was thinking of a scheme he had evolved, many months earlier, for the ensnaring of some of the chiefs among the racketeers in his city. This city was one of the centres of operation of a fantastic ring, or series of interlocked rings, of criminals, generically known as The Organization. In other cities, no doubt, this could not happen; but in the city by the lake The Organization, directly or indirectly, levied a tax on everything. You could not buy a newspaper without paying The Organization some fraction of its price, and wherever a bottle of milk or a loaf of bread was sold The Organization took its fee, if only in the form of insurance. This form of insurance did not guarantee the merchant compensation if something untoward happened to himself or his goods – it simply assured him that something would certainly happen if he didn't insure himself with The Organization. Incredible as it may seem, this sinister force is supposed to have had some influence in the Labour Unions; and it was even whispered that The Organization occasionally tampered with the world of Sport.

But it was strongest where the goods in demand were in constant and urgent demand, or perishable. As far as The Organization was concerned, nothing was imperishable.

Nothing, and nobody. And the goods in most constant and urgent demand were narcotics.

Now some time previous, an exceedingly gentlemanly person had approached Francis Bacon with a certain proposition. He put it somewhat as follows:

'It's a sad thing, Mr Bacon, to be a drug-addict; yet such is the nature of many of us, that we must escape from ourselves for a while, or go mad. But wretched though the lot of the addict may be, the plight of that addict deprived of his poor consolation is something nightmarish. . . .' He went on to a description of withdrawal-symptoms, of nerve-pains, of bone-breaking convulsions, and managed to convey that the only humane thing to do was give the unhappy creatures their drugs and let them be. Then he indicated that a man in Bacon's position, director of laboratories in a great drug manufactory, could take what he wanted, and it would never be missed, provided it were taken little by little. In conclusion, he gave Francis Bacon a telephone number to commit to memory, and said that he would pay eight hundred thousand dollars for one kilo of unadulterated heroin.

Francis Bacon said he would think this over; and so he did, but not in the way the gentleman hoped he might. His intention was to let time lapse, and then, working with the co-operation of the Federal authorities, so arrange the matter that the drug-traffickers might be rounded up – in his city, at least. He said nothing of the matter, distrusting some of the local police; and it is fortunate that he kept quiet, for he was being watched. Twice, he received telephone calls – which he was wise enough not to try to trace – and an educated man's voice said, on both occasions, 'The offer still holds, Mr Bacon. So glad to find you discreet.' Then the line went dead.

His was not a clever plan, and rather dangerous than

otherwise; but he was a simple-hearted man, in many ways surprisingly unworldly. As for danger, he had never regarded it.

So, he had one kilo of pure heroin in his private drawer.

Now, while that which had been his everyday consciousness tried vainly to beat through the barrier of what it thought was an alien will, Francis Bacon lifted his telephone and asked for an outside line, saying to himself, 'Eight hundred thousand ought to last me thirty years in Rio. . . .'

The Demon said to the Angel, 'Well?'

'Well what?' asked the Angel, unperturbed. 'Let us take a look at your dead-certain-in-the-bag Frankie the Hog.'

'Oh, *him*,' said the Demon. 'As you will.'

'You sound cheerful,' the Angel said.

'So I am,' replied the Demon.

'Well,' said the Angel, 'we're only young once. Live and learn. Come on.'

And on the word, they were at the bedside of Francesco Cura, better known – and more appropriately – as Frankie the Hog. The sobriquet had stuck to him since his childhood in the waterfront slums. It was not merely that he was an untidy and ravenous eater – he actually resembled that useful animal which people slandered when they referred to him. There was swinishness in the huge hinges of his jaws, and in his little red eyes; the power of the wild boar in his neck and shoulders, in his ferocity and his mad bravery. But he was also intelligent, in a debased kind of way; and cruel, which a boar is not.

He lived, now in a penthouse with a private lift, above the fortieth floor of the Bothwell House on the promontory known as 'Millionaires' Hill'. First with fists and boots and broken bottles, then with knife and gun, he had kicked and hacked and blasted his way from the fetor of the Paradise

Street tenements to his present eminence. Legitimately, he operated a chain of diners and a supermarket. Otherwise, he was a responsible distributor of narcotics, and a collector of the revenues therefrom. He was supposed to be a great man in The Organization. Actually, his rank was equivalent to that of a captain of infantry in a lawful Army; only he did not know the names of his generals. Indeed, the very colonel of the battalion in which he commanded a company was not the man Frankie the Hog thought he was. For his was a world in which nobody knew anybody, and no one was trusted; a twilight world of ambiguities, sealed orders, and sudden disappearances.

That morning, Frankie the Hog struggled in the clutch of a curious nightmare; a bad dream about frogs. Not monstrous frogs, but pitiful frogs – frogs weeping! Awakening with a thumping heart, he wondered why. He had not eaten frogs' legs for supper. His head ached. It was not a hangover, for he drank sparingly – The Organization didn't trust lushes. There was an indefinable pain somewhere in his chest. 'Blood pressure?' he wondered, aloud. It could not be: his doctor had checked him thoroughly only two days previous. He tried to go back to sleep, but as soon as he closed his eyes, there were those frogs again, holding up their little green hands and trying to talk to him, their protuberant eyes brimming with tears; and this, to him, was indescribably horrible.

He sat up and looked at the other bed where his wife lay sleeping; and to his unspeakable disgust, he discovered that he was saying to himself, 'Ah, Gina, poor little Gina, I've given you a hell of a time of it!' He was monogamous, because The Organization preferred it that way; otherwise he would have got rid of her ten years ago. And here he was, thinking, 'A little house, ranch-style, ten kids, a vineyard – that would have made you happy, poor kid!'

Then the frogs came back to memory, and he thought he must be going out of his mind. He went to the kitchen and filled a percolator – an action which, in itself, was remarkable, for he was the kind of man who would call a servant from the other end of the apartment in the middle of the night to pick up a pencil if he happened to drop one. He found a cold roast chicken in the colossal refrigerator, and ate while the water boiled.

Frogs? *What* frogs? Why *frogs*?

Now – and his hands almost refused to obey him – he put the coffee-pot and two cups and saucers on a tray, and carried it into the bedroom. His wife was just opening her sad black eyes. They filled with fright when she saw him offering her a cup of coffee. "Cesco!' she cried, 'What's the matter?'

'Cuppa cawffee,' said he, his features hideously distorted with genuine good will. His wife took the cup with trembling hands, staring at him. He felt that he ought to say something nice to her, just to cheer her up. He said, 'Gina, ya still putty as a picture, though ya did put on weight.' This compliment, uttered in Frankie the Hog's hacksaw-voice, and accompanied by his idea of a smile, so scared her that she screamed.

"Cesco! You've been taking —' She made a graphic gesture, holding a finger and thumb to one nostril and sniffing.

'No,' said he. Then he snapped his fingers, and groaned, 'Frogs! I got it!'

She did not know what he was talking about, but he remembered. Forty-five years ago, when he was only six years old, he and some other boys of his age were playing near a pond. One of them caught an exceptionally fine frog. 'You gimme dat!' said Frankie. The boy would not, so Frankie took the frog by force, and then deliberately killed

it in a manner which I will not describe here. It was then and there that he stamped the pattern for his future, for the sheer ferocity of the act inspired his companions with a kind of frightened, sickly admiration. Frankie would kill anything, Frankie would kill anybody! He was sorry, he was sick with remorse, but he dared not let the others see that.

Oh, Frankie the Hog remembered – he remembered now!

'Let 'em see you're soft, an' —' he began. Two great tears made his eyes sting. He blinked. The image of the frog came back at once; but this time it was clapping its hands and smiling. Then it disappeared with a bound. The pain in his chest was gone. He said, abruptly, 'Gina . . . Poor frog . . .'

'You haven't called me by my right name for years,' she said, sobbing.

'Gina, ya know them Christmas dinners an' Easter treats an' stuff I give away?'

'It comes off tax?' she said, wiping her eyes.

'I like to see the kids havin' themselves a ball,' he said.

Then the telephone rang.

Frankie the Hog lifted the instrument. 'Yeah?' he said. 'Yeah. You do? . . . Be right over.' He hung up, and there was bitterness in his eyes. 'Do-gooders!' he said.

Then he shaved and dressed hurriedly, strapping on his holster and checking his pistol, as was his habit. He favoured a .358 Magnum, and this terrible weapon lay like a toy on his immense palm before he put it up. His specially-tailored coat concealed it. Dressed, he took from a secret place a heavy brief-case, tightly strapped: eight hundred thousand dollars in cash and bearer bonds.

He moved without thought, as it seemed, like a machine. But before closing the secret panel he paused, and took out a black notebook. This contained, in code, the names

and addresses of four hundred narcotics agents in this and several other cities. He put it in his breast-pocket.

Before he left he pressed something into Gina's hand. 'Keep it for me,' he said, and patted her cheek.

When he was gone, she opened her hand and saw that it held her husband's safe-deposit-box key.

She crossed herself, and ran to the door. But Frankie the Hog was already on his way downtown accompanied by two of his lieutenants. One of them asked, 'You okay, Chief?'

Frankie the Hog replied, 'Shad-dap!'

The lieutenants exchanged glances. When they came to the Terwilliger-Frost building, he told them to wait. Then, carrying the brief-case, he went in.

He was shown into Francis Bacon's private office.

When they were alone, Frankie the Hog asked, 'Where's the stuff?'

'Here,' said Francis Bacon, handing him a wax-paper container. 'One kilo of heroin, 99.99 per cent pure. Where's the money?'

'Here,' said Frankie the Hog, opening the brief-case. He took the container. 'One kilo, ha? That'll cut, with grape-sugar, to forty pounds. There's a hell of a lot of fixes in forty pounds of H.' He spoke almost dreamily, if you can imagine a dreamy tone coming from a gaspipe while it is being sawn. 'Hell of a lot of new customers, too, hmm?'

'No doubt,' said Francis Bacon, with a shrug.

'You know, once you're in the racket, you're in,' said Frankie the Hog. 'There's only one way out.'

'I am neither in nor out,' said Francis Bacon, coldly.

'You never said a truer word,' said Frankie the Hog, and shot Francis Bacon precisely in the centre of the chest.

Then he packed the container of heroin in his capacious greatcoat pocket, refastened the brief-case, and walked

stolidly out, and the lift operator said afterwards that he heard him say, 'Okay, frog?'

Now it happened that a Lieutenant of Detectives named 'Square' John McCaughey was walking in the immediate neighbourhood about some other business. He saw Frankie the Hog's men waiting outside the Terwilliger-Frost building, and paused to investigate. Then Frankie himself came out, bloody-eyed, with foam at the corners of his mouth. He saw McCaughey, paused, and stepped towards him, reaching under his coat. Assuming that their chief was reaching for his pistol, the other two gangsters drew theirs.

McCaughey was a marksman, and one of the fastest men on the draw in the county. As Frankie the Hog's hand came free, the policeman snapped a shot at his shoulder. Fast draws seldom end in accurate shooting. McCaughey's bullet missed Frankie's shoulder and struck him in the side of the neck. His second smashed one of the other men's right arm. The third gunman raised his hands in surrender.

The street now seemed full of policemen. McCaughey bent over Frankie the Hog as he crouched on all fours in the slush. He saw that the wounded man had drawn, not a pistol, but a black notebook. 'Grab that, copper,' he said, 'and that – and that —' He touched the brief-case, and the place where his coat bulged over the container. Then, the great artery on the right-hand side of his neck having been cut by McCaughey's bullet, he rested his head on his arms and died – at exactly the same moment in which Francis Bacon's bewildered soul left his shattered body in his office on the eighteenth floor of the Terwilliger-Frost building.

The Demon and the Angel intercepted the two souls in their flight.

'Nice work, I flatter myself,' said the Demon.

'That,' said the Angel, 'is for the Judges to decide, you know.'

'True,' said the Demon, 'but it's an open-and-shut case, as I see it. Aha! Here comes Counsel for the Prosecution!'

'Ah, the Accuser. I know him. The Defence is waiting for him,' said the Angel. Then he addressed the souls of Francis Bacon and Frankie the Hog, freezing in the Outer Dark: 'I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I must ask you to wait a little, while your cases are adjudicated.'

So the two poor souls waited, torn with incommunicable sorrows and shames, lacerated by woes too keen for fleshly perception. And it seemed to them that they were damned to hang there for all eternity, for they were still aware of Time – which is only an illusion – and ten thousand years of Time as we measure it is a snap of the fingers to the Angels. Again, the duration of Time is variable, according to the individual. A moment is an age to the restless, and ten ages to the cowardly. For all his bravery, Frankie the Hog was, as you have read, at bottom a coward, fearing the censure of his fellows as he did; so the wait was longer for him than for the stoical Bacon. But for Bacon, too, the ordeal was terribly severe, for his was a stern, critical soul, and sensibilities with which he must now examine himself were fabulously refined to the absence even of his austere body.

But at last Hell's Attorney returned.

'Sir?' the Demon asked, eagerly.

'We lost again on a technicality,' the Attorney said. 'The Court has found that Francis Bacon's life was a beautiful example of the triumph of Sublime Reason over Brute Instinct.'

'But Frankie the Hog? Surely —'

'Surely what?' growled the Attorney. 'The Court has found that Frankie the Hog's death was a beautiful example of the triumph of Sublime Instinct over Brute Reason.'

'Come, friends,' said the Angel, taking the two souls unto himself, 'You must be tired. Let's rest a while.'

The Demon, on his way to his place in the company of the Accuser, was disgruntled. 'You just can't —' he began, and stopped himself, appalled.

He had almost said, 'You just can't win' – which, by Hell's standards, is a most awful heresy, implying, as it does, that the day may come when the Devil himself will come to his senses in the Infinite Refinery, and, pleading guilty, throw himself upon God's mercy.

A Little Something in the Bank

You have a sharp eye, sir, a very sharp eye indeed, if you recognize me by those photographs of me that used to appear in the newspapers and the sensational magazines, about 1947. I fancy I must have changed somewhat since then; but yes, I am Peter Perfrement, and they did make a knight of me for some work I did in nuclear physics. I am glad, for once, to be recognized. You might, otherwise, mistake me for an escaped convict, or a lunatic at large, or something of that sort; for I am going to beg you to have the goodness to sit in this shadowy corner and keep your broad back between me and the door. Have an eye on the mirror over my head and you will in due course see the reflections of a couple of fellows who will come into this cosy little bar looking for me. You will perceive, by the complete vacuity of their expressions, that they are from Intelligence.

They'll spot me, of course, and then it will be, 'Why, Sir Peter, how lucky to find you here!' Then, pleading business, they'll carry me off. And evading those two young men is one of the few pleasures left me in my old age. Once I got out in a laundry-basket. Tonight I put on a workman's suit of overalls over my dinner-suit and went to a concert. I intend to go back home to the Centre after I've had my

evening, but I want to be left alone a bit. Of course, I have nobody but myself to blame for any slight discomfort I may at present suffer. I retired once and for all, as I thought, in 1950. By then, you know, the inwardness of such atom bombs as we let off over, say, Hiroshima was public property. My work, as it seemed, was done.

So I withdrew to a pleasant little villa at the Cap des Fesses just outside that awful holiday resort Les Sables des Fesses in the South of France. Fully intended to end my days there, as a matter of fact – set up library and study there, and a compact but middling comprehensive laboratory. I went to all the music festivals, drank my glass of wine on the *terrasse* of whatever café happened to take my fancy, and continued my academic battle with Dr Frankenburg. This battle, which was in point of fact far less acrimonious than the average game of chess, had to do with the nature of the element fluorine. I take it that esoteric mathematics are, mercifully, beyond your comprehension; but perhaps you were told at school something of the nature of fluorine. This is the *enfant terrible* of the elements.

Fluorine, in temperament, is a prima donna and, in character, a born delinquent. You cannot keep it pure, it has such an affinity for practically everything else on earth, and what it has an affinity for it tends to destroy. Now I had a theory involving what I can only describe to a layman as tame fluorine: fluorine housebroken and in harness. Dr Frankenburg, whose leisure is devoted to reading the comic papers, used to say concerning this, 'You might as well imagine Dennis the Menace as a breadwinner.' However, I worked away not under pressure nor under observation, completely at my leisure, having access to the great computer at Assigny. And one day I found that I had evolved a substance which, for convenience's sake, I will call fluorine 80+.

I do not mean that I made it merely in formula. The nature of the stuff once comprehended, the physical production of it is really absurdly simple. So I made some – about six ounces of it – and it looked rather like a sheet of hard, lime-coloured gelatine. And potentially this bit of gelatinous-looking stuff was somewhat more potent than a cosmic collision. Potentially, mark you – only potentially. As it lay in my hand, fluorine 80+ was, by all possible calculations, inert. You could beat it with a sledge-hammer, or burn it with a blow-lamp, and nothing would happen. But under certain conditions – conditions which seemed to me at that time quite impossible of achievement – this morsel of matter could be unbelievably terrible. By unbelievably, I mean immeasurably. Quite beyond calculation.

The notebook containing my formula I wrapped in paper with the intention of putting it in the vault of the Banque Maritime des Sables des Fesses. The sheet of fluorine 80+ I placed between two pieces of cardboard, wrapped it likewise, and put it in my pocket. You see, I had a friend in the town with whom I often had tea, and he had a liking for the weird and the wonderful. Like the fool that I am, I proposed to amuse myself by showing him my sample and telling him that this inoffensive little thing, in a suitable environment, might cause our earth to go *pssst*! – in about as long as it takes for a pinch of gunpowder to flash in a match-flame. So, in high spirits, I went into town, paid my visit to the bank, first having got a pot of Gentlemen's Relish and a jar of Oxford marmalade for tea, and so called on Dr Raisin.

He was another old boy who had outlived his usefulness, although time was when he had some reputation as an architect specializing in steel construction. 'Something special for tea,' I said, and tossed my little package of fluorine 80+ on the table.

'Smoked salmon?' he asked.

Then I brought out the marmalade and the relish, and said, 'No' – chuckling like an idiot.

He growled, 'Evidently you have just paid a visit to the Café de la Guerre Froide —' and sniffed at me.

'No, I've just come from the bank,' I told him.

'So,' he said, 'that's a parcel of money, I suppose. What's it to me? Let's have tea.'

I said, 'I didn't go to the bank to take something out, Raisin. I put something in.'

'Make me no mystifications, if you please. What's that?'

'That,' I said, 'is proof positive that Frankenburg is wrong and I am right, Raisin. What you see there is half a dozen ounces of absolutely stable fluorine 80+ – and a critical mass, at that!'

Dry as an old bone, he said, 'Jargon me no jargons. As I understand it, an atomic explosion takes place when certain quantities of radioactive material arrive, in certain circumstances, at what you call "critical mass". This being the case, that little packet may, I take it, be considered dangerous?'

I said, 'Rather so. There's about enough fluorine 80+ there to vaporize a medium-sized planet, more or less.'

Raisin said, 'A fluorine bomb – an ounce of nitro-glycerine – it's all the same to me.' Pouring tea, he asked nonchalantly, 'How do you make it go off? Not, I gather, by chucking it about on tables?'

I said, 'You can't explode it – as you understand an explosion – except under conditions difficult to create and worse than useless once created . . . although, perhaps, while valueless as a weapon, it could be put to peaceful uses.'

'Perhaps me no perhapses. A fighting cock *could* be used to make chicken broth. What did you want to bring it here for, anyway?'

I was a little put out. Raisin was unimpressible. I told him, rather lamely, 'Well, neither you nor anyone else will ever see fluorine 80+ again. In about fourteen hours that piece there will – as you would put it – have evaporated.'

'Why as *I* would put it? How do you put it?'

'Why, you see,' I explained, 'in point of actual fact, that stuff is exploding now. Only it's exploding very, very, gradually. Now, for this explosion to be effectual as an explosion, we should have to let that mass expand at a temperature of anything over sixty degrees Fahrenheit in a hermetically sealed bomb-case of at least ten thousand cubic feet in capacity. At this point, given suitable pressure, up she'd go. But when I tell you that before we could get such a pressure under which my fluorine 80+ would undergo certain atomic alterations, the casing of our ten-thousand-cubic-foot bomb would need to be at least two or three feet thick —'

Being a Russian, Raisin stirred marmalade into his tea and interrupted: ' – It is a chimera. So let it evaporate. Burn your formula. Pay no further attention to it. . . . Still, since you have brought it, let's have a look at it.' He undid the little parcel, and then said, 'I knew all along it was a joke.'

The wrapping-paper pulled away, there lay nothing but a notebook.

I cried, 'Good heavens – that ought to be safe in the bank! That's the formula!'

'And the bomb?'

'Not a bomb, Raisin – I've just told you that fluorine 80+ can't possibly be a bomb of its own accord. Confound it! I must have left it at the grocer's shop.'

He said, 'Is it poisonous?'

'Toxic? I don't think so. . . . Now, wait a minute, wait a minute! I distinctly remember – when I left the house I put the formula in my right-hand coat pocket and the fluorine

80+ in the left. Now first of all I went to the Épicerie Internationale to get this marmalade and stuff, and so as not to crowd my left pocket I transferred . . . Oh, it's quite all right, Raisin. There's nothing to worry about, except that this is not the kind of notebook I like to carry about with me. The sample is safe and sound in the bank. It was a natural mistake – the packages are very much alike in shape and weight. No cause for anxiety. Pass the Gentlemen's Relish like a good fellow, will you?'

But Raisin said, 'This horrible little bit of fluorine: you left it in the bank, did you?'

'Fluorine 80+. Well?'

'You bank at the Maritime?'

'Yes, why?'

'So do I. It is the safest bank in France. Its vaults – now follow me carefully, Perfrement – their vaults are burglar-proof, bomb-proof, fire-proof, and absolutely air-tight. The safe-deposit vault is forty feet long, thirty feet wide, and ten feet high. This gives it a capacity of twelve thousand cubic feet. It is maintained at a low humidity and constant temperature of sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. The walls of this vault are of hard steel and reinforced concrete three feet thick. The door alone weighs thirty tons, but fits like a glass stopper in a medicine bottle. . . . Does the significance of all this sink in?'

'Why,' I said, 'why —'

'– Yes, why? You can say that again. What you have done, my irresponsible friend,' said Dr Raisin, 'is put your mass of fluorine 80+ in its impossible casing. That's the way with the likes of you. It would never dawn on you that a bomb might be an oblong thing as big as a bank. Congratulations!'

I said, 'I know the manager, M. le Queux, and he knows me. I'll go and see him at once.'

'It's Saturday afternoon. The bank's closed.'

'Yes, I know, but I'll ask him to come over with his keys.'

'Hm!' said Raisin. 'I wish you luck.'

A telephone-call to M. le Queux's house got me only the information that he was gone for the weekend to Laffert, about eighty miles inland, up the mountain, where he had a bungalow. So I looked about for a taxi. But it was Carnival weekend, and there was nothing to be got except one of those essentially French machines that have run on coal-gas and kerosene, and have practically no works left inside them – and yet, like certain extremely cheap alarm-clocks, somehow continue to go, without accuracy, but with a tremendous noise. And the driver was a most objectionable man in a beret, who chewed whole cloves of raw garlic all the time, and shouted into one's face as if one were a hundred yards distant.

After a disruptive and malodorous journey, during which the car had twice to be mended with bits of wire, we reached Laffert, and with some difficulty found M. le Queux.

He said to me, 'For you – anything. But to open the bank? No, I cannot oblige you.'

'You had better,' I said to him, in a minatory tone.

'But, Sir Peter,' said he, 'this is not merely a matter of turning a key and opening a door. I don't believe you can have read our brochure. The door of the vault is on a time-lock. This means that after the lock is set and the door closed, nothing can open it until a certain period of time has elapsed. So, precisely at seven forty-five on Monday morning – but not one instant before – I can open the vault for you.'

I said, 'Then as I see it, you had better send for the locksmith and have the lock picked.'

M. le Queux laughed. He said, 'You couldn't open our vault without taking the door down.' He spoke with a certain pride.

'Then I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you to have the door taken down,' I told him.

'That would necessitate practically taking down the bank,' M. le Queux said; and evidently he thought that I was out of my mind.

'Then,' I said, 'there's nothing for it *but* to take down the bank. Of course, there'll be compensation, I suppose. Still, the fact remains that, by the sheerest inadvertence, for which I hold myself greatly at fault, I have turned your bank-vault into a colossal bomb – a bomb compared with which your Russian multi-megaton bombs are milk and water. Indeed, you would no more weigh or measure my fluorine 80+ in terms of mere megatons, than you'd buy coal by the milligramme or wine by the cubic centimetre.'

'One of us is going crazy,' said M. le Queux.

'Call a Hiroshima bomb a megaton,' I said. 'Dealing with my fluorine 80+ we have to make new tables. So! a million megatons equal one Tyrrannoton. A million Tyrannotons equal one Chasmaton. A million Chasmatons make one Brahmaton. And after a million Brahmatons we come to something I call a Ultimon, because it is beyond even the scope of mathematical conjecture. In a certain number of hours from now – and we are wasting time talking, M. le Queux – if you don't get that vault of yours open, the universe will experience the shock of half a Chasmoton. Enough. Please let me use your telephone.'

So I called a certain branch of Security, and after that told a minister, who shall be nameless, to be so kind as to get a move on – referring him, of course, to several other nuclear experts, in case my own name was not enough for him. Thus I was able, within twenty minutes, to tell M. le Queux, 'It's all arranged. Army and police are on the way. So are some colleagues of mine. The Custodia Safe Company, who installed your vault, are flying their best technicians into

Fesses. We'll have your vault open in a couple of hours or so. I'm sorry if this inconveniences you, but it's got to be done, and you must put up with it.'

He could only say, 'Inconveniences me!' Then he shouted, 'After this, Sir Peter Perfrement, you will kindly take your banking business elsewhere!'

I was sorry for him, but there was no time for sentiment just now, for I found myself caught in a sort of whirlpool of giddy activity. Accompanied by the usual quota of secret police from Security, four highly regarded nuclear physicists were rushed to Fesses. I was pleased to see among them my dear old enemy Frankenburg, who would have to admit that in the matter of fluorine he was totally confuted. There was also, of course, a swarm of policemen both uniformed and in plain clothes; and, goodness knows why, two doctors, one of whom kept talking and talking without rhyme or reason about fluorine being found in relatively high concentration in the human embryo, and how good it was for children's teeth. An expert from the quiet old days of the high explosive blitzes said that since one invariably evacuated the area surrounding an unexploded bomb until it was defused, it would be wise to evacuate Sable des Fesses.

At this the *Maire* went into ecstasies of Gallicism. To evacuate this place at Carnival weekend would be to ruin it – death rather than dishonour, and so forth. I said that if my fluorine 80+ blew, the problem of evacuation need not arise; for nobody anywhere, ever, would be any the wiser. The chief of police, giving me a suspicious look, said that the present danger was only hypothetical; but the panic that must attend a mass alarm would be inevitably disastrous. It would be necessary only to surround the block in which the bank was situated. This being in the business district of the town, and most of the offices shut up for the week-end, the matter might be accomplished – a hair's breadth this side impossibility.

So said the chief of police, filling a pipe as a pioneer fills his muzzle-loader with his last hard-bitten cartridge, and pointing it right at me. He made it clear, without speaking, that he thought this was all a put-up job, the purpose of which was to get that bank vault open.

M. le Queux said, 'But the armoured car has been and gone, and the bank is just about empty of cash until Monday.' Still the chief of police wasn't satisfied. Watching him tamp down the charge in his pipe, I could not help reciting a hunting proverb of my grandfather's: *Ram tight the powder, leave loose the lead, if you want to kill dead.* He made a note of that. Meanwhile, Frankenburg and the others were poring over my notes, which I had been compelled to hand over.

Frankenburg growled, 'I want to check, and double-check. I want a computer. I want five days.'

But little Dr Imhof said, 'Come, we must grant the possibility that what we read here is valid. Even for the sake of argument we must grant it.'

'Well, for the sake of argument,' said Frankenburg. 'So?'

'So,' said Imhof, '*any* relaxation of pressure must render Perfrement's so-called fluorine 80+ harmless again, must it not? This being the case, a hole about half an inch in diameter drilled in the vault door should be an ample measure of precaution. This hole made, why, let the matter wait until Monday, I say.'

'So be it,' said I. 'Imhof is talking sense.'

So now, the engineers from the Custodia Company having come in by plane, they unloaded their massive paraphernalia in the bank. And among the cylinders and eye-shields and other gear I noticed a number of gas-masks.

'What are they for?' I asked le Queux.

Frankenburg, unwilling to be convinced of anything, was complaining, 'Yes, yes, bore holes in vaults, and leave

Perfrement's thing until Monday. But unless I misread this formula, his so-called fluorine 80+ will by that time have ceased to exist.'

A certain Dr Chiappe said, in a glum voice, 'Metaphysics: if we leave it, it ceases to exist; if we don't leave it, it ceases to exist; but, as I read Perfrement's notes, if we leave fluorine 80+, we shall be involved with it in a state of co-nonexistence. Better bore holes.'

I said, 'I asked you, M. le Queux, what are those gas-masks for?'

He said, 'Why, when the vault is in any way interfered with, the alarm automatically goes off. We omit no precautions, none whatsoever. As soon as the alarm goes off, the vault is immediately filled with tear-gas which is released from built-in containers.'

'Did I hear you say tear-gas?' I asked.

'In a high concentration.'

'Then,' I cried, 'get away from that door at once!' I appealed to Frankenburg. 'You hate every word I say, old fellow, but you're an honest man. Conceding that my notes are right – and I swear they are – you'll see that my fluorine 80+ has one affinity. Only one. That is with C_8H_7OCl – chloro-acetophenone. And that, damme, is the stuff tear-gas is made of!'

Frankenburg nodded. Chiappe said, 'Slice it which ever way you like – we've had it!'

And old Raisin grumbled, 'This, I believe, is what the dramatists call a perfectly damnable *impasse*. Correct me if I'm wrong.'

It was little Imhof who asked, 'Is there no part of this place at all that's not guarded by alarms, and what not?'

Le Queux said, 'Technically, there is only one part of our vault that's reachable from the outside – if you can call it the outside. The back of our vault abuts on the back of the

jeweller's, Monnickendam's, next door. His vault, you see, is itself two feet thick. Hence —'

'Aha!' said the chief of police.

'Get Monnickendam,' said the minister; and that famous jeweller and pawnbroker was duly produced.

He said, 'I'd open my vault with pleasure, but I have a partner, Warmerdam. Our vault opens by a system of two combination locks which must be operated simultaneously. These locks are so placed that no single person can operate both at the same time. In any case, I have my own secret combination and Warmerdam has his. We must both be present, therefore, whenever the vault is opened.'

'That's how one gets rich,' old Raisin muttered.

Monnickendam corrected him, 'That is how one *stays* rich.'

'Where's Warmerdam?' they asked him.

'In London.'

London was telephoned, and Secret Service agents dragged poor Warmerdam shrieking from a dinner table in a private room at a hotel, and rushed him to a jet-port and fired him over to Sables des Fesses with such dispatch that he arrived in a state of semi-obfuscation, with a napkin still tucked under his chin and a lady's evening slipper in one hand.

'A harmless flirtation,' he kept stammering. 'I am old enough to be her father. . . .'

But now, by the chief of police's expression, it was evident that the whole matter was an open and shut case to him. I was some sort of master criminal, a Moriarty, and my real objective was the jewellers' strong-room. He strengthened the police cordon, and Monnickendam and his partner Warmerdam opened their vault.

The men from Custodia went to work – but not before the two jewellers had got a signed and witnessed indemnity from the president of the bank; they wouldn't trust the Minister –

and so the heavy steel and concrete of the strong-room cut through, we began to bite into the back of the bank.

'Time runs out,' I said.

Raisin irritated everybody by saying, 'Imagination, my friends, and nothing but imagination is making us all sweat. All things considered, do you think that a Megaton, a Tyrannoton, a Chasmaton, or an Ultimon could do us – us personally – more harm than, let us say, a pound of dynamite?'

The chief of police said, 'Ha! You know a great deal about dynamite, it seems.'

'I should hope so,' said Raisin. 'I was sabotaging Nazis, my friend, when you were swinging a truncheon for the *Deuxième Bureau*. And either light that pipe, or put it away – it makes me nervous.'

I had better be brief, however. . . . About five in the morning, we broke through.

I said, 'Fine. You can take it easy now. Whatever happens, fluorine 80+ can't blow.' And when I then suggested a hot cup of tea, M. le Queux took me by the throat and tried to strangle me.

But the men worked on, until the hole was about two feet in diameter; and then one of the smallest of them took my key, wriggled through, and came back with the contents of my safe-deposit box – the little paper package of fluorine 80+.

I pointed out to Frankenburg how greatly it had diminished. 'By George, we had a close call then!' I said.

And that, as you might think, was that. Ah, but you'd be wrong. For you see, in the course of that mad night, when every policeman in Sables des Fesses and its environs was mounting guard at the bank and at Monnickendam's, a gang of thieves broke into the Prince of Mamluk's Galleries, said to contain one of the four finest art collections in the world.

They stripped the place at their leisure. You know what these international crooks are: their spies are everywhere,

and they get wind of everything. They took a priceless collection of antique jewels, three Rembrandts, four Holbeins, two Raphaels, a Titan, two El Grecos, a Vermeer, three Botticellis, a Goya, and a Greuze. Greatest art-robbery of all time, I'm told. They say that Lloyd's would rather have lost a fleet of transatlantic liners, than what they underwrote those pictures and things for.

Taking it by and large, I suppose it's for my own good that I was shipped back to England without delay, and put under guard, as in the old days of the A bomb.

If I'd had any sense, of course, I'd have kept quiet about that confounded fluorine 80+. As it is, I've made a prisoner of myself. They regard me – of all people! – as a compulsive chatterbox. As if fluorine 80+ is anything to chatter about. Why, you could make it yourself. Take five hundred grammes, or roughly one pound, of fluorspar —

– Oh-oh! Here come my two friends, I'm afraid. I will take my leave of you now, sir. . . . Good night to you.

. . . Good evening, gentlemen!

The Spanish Prisoner

Once in a blue moon, when the Albany Post Road near Hetheringham is being repaired, the traveller is directed to a complex of dirt roads whereby he may get to Bunterton. On such occasions, Mr Ciuccia sets a board on a pair of trestles by the wayside and puts on display whatever wizened or retarded fruits and vegetables he may have coaxed out of his obstinate little piece of land. So he makes tobacco-money. He smokes Toscani cigars – not because he enjoys them, but because their exhalations kill greenfly, and he is proud of his flowers. 'Dey likea me, I likea dem,' he told me, reluctantly handing me a fine Easter lily, to which I had taken a fancy.

I paid for it, and said, 'You might give me a bit of paper. The pot's all earthy.'

He growled, 'Paper! You wanna me I should put *jam* on it, maybe?' There was a gutted old ledger or manuscript book to hand. He ripped out the last few pages, tossed the covers into a garbage pail, and wrapped the flower-pot. 'So long,' he said.

When I took the flower home to my wife she unwrapped the pot, stood back, and said, 'What beautiful handwriting!'

'What are you talking about?'

She showed me the wrapping-paper. It was fine, hand-

made stuff, unruled, and covered with marvellously regular lines in a very fine longhand, written in black ink with a flexible sharp nib.

I saw, in the top right-hand corner of the uppermost sheet, *Charles Ouimet. Journal. Paris, 1863–1865. p. 142.* The other pages were headed similarly, with their corresponding page-numbers. Charles Ouimet, whoever he may have been, must have had an eye on posterity. Well, I thought, greater work than Ouimet's has ended in dirtier hands than Ciuccia's – the manuscripts of Bach ended in a butcher's shop.

I read on. Ouimet wrote a stylized kind of French. . . .

'What is it?' my wife asked.

I said, 'It seems that somebody dined out with the great.'

Ouimet had written:

'*Monday*. Mlle T— and I dined with Alexandre Dumas the Elder, and the American actress Adah Isaacs Menken of New Orleans.

'Dumas, gorged with rich food, had the appearance of a sleepy hippopotamus, but his bloodshot eyes were shrewd and sly under his fleshy brows, like the eyes of a mischievous child pretending to hide under a pillow. His coat was too tight, somewhat the worse for neglect, and so marked with the brown tints of ancient sauces as to remind one of the palette of a painter trying colours for an autumnal landscape. Yet the beautiful American could not take her great black eyes off him. As we sipped our coffee, she asked him naïvely, "Master, is it true that in *The Count of Monte Cristo* you took the idea of the escape of Edmond Dantès from the Memoirs of the Baron von Trenck?"

'Dumas answered, "No, sweet lady, but what if I had? Would you, for example, ask the cook downstairs if the sublime omelettes we ate tonight were merely modifications of the work of a chicken? No, dear lady, I'm sorry, I can't help it – I'm a genius. I transcend and transmute the

commonplace. The seed of *Monte Cristo* was blown into the fertile garden of my mind by a curious little tale. I let it germinate, *here* – and *here* —" He struck himself on forehead and breast; one of his waistcoat buttons flew off. "For you, Divine Mazeppa, I'll tell the little story which was to become the germ of what the world wrongly regards as the greatest romantic novel of our age. . . . Yes, wrongly, Monsieur Ouimet! *The Three Musketeers* is the greatest. I rank *Monte Cristo* second, only. I know my limitations."

'So, pausing occasionally to feed Adah Isaacs Menken a grape or an apricot, Alexandre Dumas drew into his immense chest a breath that seemed to exhaust the atmosphere of our little private dining-room, and went on; dry, matter-of-fact, inexorable; covering the table-cloth with diagrams made of forks, fruit and decanters. . . .'

. . . I met him about thirty years ago in Malaga. I love Spain, but the Spaniards disappointed me, somewhat; they are jealous as Moors, and keep their women behind gratings. I refer, of course, to the Spanish gentleman. But even the shopkeeper – even the mechanic, the fisherman, the muleteer, the barber, the cab-driver, the humble artisan – is devilishly quick with a knife if one so much as winks at his wife. I was never perfectly comfortable in Spain. It is the only country in Europe – except Corsica, where the men are just as barbarous – in which I sometimes found myself with time to kill.

In other words, I was bored. I loitered about the wharves, observing the sailors and the ships, and eating *chirimayos*, that sweetest of fruit. They say that a dozen *chirimayos* eaten daily for a fortnight will kill you. Then when my time comes, let me perish of a surfeit of *chirimayos*, in the arms of a beautiful woman, to the music of Rossini! How so be it, one ship in particular caught my fancy – a merchant vessel of antiquated pattern, but of distinctive elegance of line, smartly painted

and decorated with a finely-carved figurehead representing a glorious girl in bridal dress. The name of the ship was the *Mercedes*. As I stood, admiring, a deep voice said, 'My ship pleases you, señor?'

I turned and saw a gentleman who might have been Don Quixote himself, he was so tall and thin and long-limbed; only he was dressed all in that rich black, relieved only by white cambric ruffles at wrist and throat, and was leaning on a long gold-headed ebony stick. His hands, I noticed, were all tight sinew and drawn wire, conveying an impression of immense nervous strength, and although his manner was courteous his tone was peremptory, almost harsh.

I replied, as best I could, that I profoundly admired both vessel and figurehead – that the latter, indeed, interested me most of all. He, grimly smiling – possibly at my Spanish – replied in heavily accented French, 'Ah, yes, the figurehead is handsome, but not nearly as beautiful as its original, after whom the ship herself is named.'

We introduced ourselves to each other, then, and I learned that this was the immensely wealthy merchant, Juan Gutierrez. He continued, 'If M. Dumas will do me the honour to join me in a simple little dinner at my house, such as it is, I shall be most proud to present you to the lady.'

'I shall be enchanted, señor,' said I.

'If you will grant me the privilege of sending my humble four-wheeler to your hotel at eight o'clock . . . ?'

You might have thought that I was to be dragged off in a donkey-cart to eat wormy chick-peas out of a wooden bowl in a sooty hovel. But I was conveyed in a high black-and-gold coach drawn by four peerless matched black horses, to a magnificent house in a high-walled garden of exotic trees and brilliant flowers. The gates were of intricately wrought iron, and guarded by a forbidding keeper and two frightful black dogs as big as lions and twice as shaggy.

I was received in a luxuriously appointed *salon*, adorned with rarities from all over the earth; but my attention was caught and held by a transcendentally magnificent portrait of a breath-taking beauty in the Spanish style. The frame alone must have been worth a hundred thousand francs! Seeing my awestruck gaze, and hearing my gasp of rapture, Gutierrez said, 'It is a good likeness. I do not know about pictures, but the painter, one Goya, is well spoken of in high places, they tell me.' I looked about me expectantly. 'She will join us for coffee,' he said.

Explaining that his lady was indisposed with a passing migraine, he took me into dinner. Courtesy compelled me to take a sip of wine, to his good health and long life. He said, gravely, 'It is written in my *djuk* that I shall not die until snow falls in the heat of midsummer in the streets of Malaga.'

'That will be never, then,' I said. 'But what is a *djuk*?'

'It is a gipsy word, meaning Destiny.'

So, in the course of a superlative dinner, a description of which – since you have already dined – might seem wearisome, the merchant of Malaga told me something of himself.

His family, driven by poverty, had come to the coast from the plains where, for generations, they had been horsemen and cattlemen. At the age of ten, young Juan Gutierrez shipped as cabin-boy aboard a merchantman. Quick to learn, clever with his hands, very tall for his age, and remarkably strong and agile, he was able-bodied seaman at sixteen, and second mate before he was nineteen years old. By this time he had seen much of the world and learned the lingua franca of the sea, which involves a little of every language. There was no situation, he flattered himself, to which he could not adapt himself. So we all think, until we fall in love.

He fell in love with Mercedes de Baeza, daughter of a prosperous ship's chandler, of Malaga. She was only sixteen but already regarded as one of the most beautiful girls in

that city. And there was that about Juan Gutierrez which made her prefer him to any other man she had seen. Her look told him that. He went straight to her father and asked for her hand in marriage.

Old de Baeza laughed at him. 'Do you think I am going to throw my Mercedes away on a mere second mate of a merchantman?' he asked.

'Next year I shall be first mate,' said Juan.

'And after that?'

'In a couple of years, I shall have a command,' said Juan.

The chandler said, 'What then? In Malaga one cannot spit without hitting a sea-captain. No, no, my boy! Come back with a ship of your own, and then we might talk.'

Juan went away bitterly enough, but before he sailed he contrived to talk with Mercedes. 'I will wait for you,' she said.

'When I return,' said he, 'it will be in a ship of my own.'

Then he went down to the port. On the way he saw a crowd of children hissing and making the sign against the evil eye, and throwing fruit-rinds at an old gipsy-woman who was trying to rest in the shade of a wall. Juan, who was a kind-hearted young fellow, and broadminded for a Spaniard, having learned in his travels that it takes all sorts to make a world, drove the children away. He gave the old woman a piece of money, saying, 'Go with God.'

She thanked him and said, 'For your courtesy, young gentleman, I will read you a *djuk* and give you a blessing, for gipsies can bless as well as curse if they wish.' Laughing, he held out his hand, but she put it aside, saying, 'That is for fools. Let me read your eyes.' Her gaze met his and held it so that he could not have looked away if he had tried. 'You shall have your heart's desire,' she said.

'A ship of my own?' he asked.

'Twenty ships of your own, and the girl you love.'

He laughed. It was the old story! 'And when shall I die?'

She said, 'I shall send my Watcher to keep you from harm, but you must die when snow falls in the heat of midsummer in the streets of Malaga. That is written.' With which absurdity, she hobbled away.

So Juan sailed for the East Indies, where his captain traded cheap guns and powder for valuable silks and spices. It was a prosperous voyage, but it brought our hero no nearer his command, let alone the ownership of his own vessel, and his beloved Mercedes seemed ever so far away. They came safely around the coast of Africa. It was when they were in the Mediterranean itself that they were struck by one of those unforeseeable, abrupt, and frightful tempests, luckily rare in those waters. As if fifty batteries of artillery had been waiting in ambush behind the blue of the sky, there was a puff of black cloud, a glare of white fire, and all their masts were gone in one shattering blast! The ship was helpless in a mountainous sea, and at the mercy of all the thirty-two winds in collusion. She foundered. Juan lashed himself to a spar, and with an ardent prayer to Heaven, let the waves take him. He also cried 'Mercedes!' And, to be on the safe side, muttered, 'Remember my *djuk*, gipsy.' Then the waves beat the senses out of him.

He came to himself on a sandy beach, and saw that he was surrounded by armed men in white robes, bearded to the eyes, and very villainous-looking. They gave him water. He spoke to them in the lingua franca, thanking him. They grinned, and one of them said, 'Save your breath. You're coming with us to Sakr-el-Drough.'

Now this, in the old days, was a name that inspired terror in the African desert. Sakr-el-Drough was a great robber sheikh, notorious for his outrageous cruelties, his instability of mood, and his Mohammedan piety. Most Christian sailors would have preferred to be thrown back into the ocean. But

our Juan Gutierrez was young, and level-headed, and in love – astounding combination! – and he went cheerfully enough.

The Sheikh Sakr-el-Drough sat in the shade, drinking coffee. He was a terrible man, Gutierrez said – just like the pet hawk that always perched on his shoulder. 'What is your faith?' he asked the prisoner.

Now I have told you that Juan was a quick-witted boy. He was as good a Christian as the next, but he saw no sense in being flayed or impaled on a point of doctrine; so he answered, looking the Sheikh straight in the eyes, 'I am a servant of God.' He added, for the benefit of the superstitious bedouins, 'Also, I am watched over by a *djuk*.'

'A *djuk*?' asked the Sheikh, with interest. 'Is that some kind of *djinn*?'

'Did I not come alive through that tempest?' asked Juan, evading the question.

'H'm. Where do you keep this so-called *djuk*?'

'It follows me.'

'Can your *djuk* convey you through the air?'

'If need be,' said Juan.

'If I threw you off a roof, would he catch you?'

'Of course!' said Juan boldly; for if the worst came to the worst, he thought, a speedy death would be preferable to a slow one.

The Sheikh said, 'I have read of such things, but never seen them.' He was evidently in a benign mood today. 'I will put you in a pit from which even a panther could not escape, and we will see if your *djuk* can lift you out. . . . Ho, there!'

So they lowered Juan Gutierrez into an ancient stone grain-pit. The deserts of North Africa are full of such forgotten marvels. This pit might have been a thousand years old, or older. It was shaped like a cone; circular, wide at the bottom, narrow at the top, and lined with stone, polished by

the centuries. 'Fly out of this,' said a guard. 'The Sheikh gives you a hundred days. You shall have food and water every evening. Personally, I think you'd be better off buried alive to the neck in the sand – the agony only lasts a day, that way. Whistle up your *djuk*!'

Then Juan touched the stone floor of the grain pit, and saw the guard push a wooden lid into position over the aperture, thirty feet up. He sat down in total darkness, trying to think. He had the navigator's ingrained habit of taking his bearings, so first of all he tried to determine the size of the floor on which he found himself. Prisoners had been kept there before: there was a litter of dried-up mutton bones. Marking a spot with one of these, he measured the circumference of the floor, heel-to-toe, and decided that it was approximately sixty feet. This meant that the diameter of the floor must be eighteen feet, more or less.

Now, lying flat on his back, very stiff and straight, with his heels in the angle where floor and wall met, he measured off about six feet – which was his height – and marked the spot where his head rested. Standing on this spot, he found that by raising his hands above his head he could touch the wall of the pit with his knuckles.

In his mind's eye he made a sort of diagram of a cross-section of the cone, and as he visualized it, about nine feet from the floor on which he stood, the circumference of the cone was only about thirty feet. Its diameter, therefore, would be about nine feet, more or less.

If only he could find some little ledge for his fingers to grip at that point! But there were no ledges, and he had nothing with which to make one, for he was naked.

He sat again, wringing his brain for some solution to this problem, but only trivialities came into his mind. He remembered, for instance, that he had bought jade earrings as a gift for Mercedes, and these were now at the bottom of

the sea. . . . Jade, that was it! It came into his mind vividly, now, that someone had told him how the patient Chinese work this most obdurate of stones, by means of string and wet sand.

He had plenty of sand, of the finest and grittiest, which had drifted into the pit. He had a little water. There was no string, but he would use a bone!

He went to work at once, denying himself the little brackish water he so urgently craved for. 'Mercedes, Mercedes, Mercedes,' he kept saying, over and over again. 'One little finger-hold, for Mercedes's sake!' The stone was not agate, but it was very hard; yet such was the will of the man, that if it had been solid diamond he would have worn it down, my friends!

On the fortieth day the Sheikh himself deigned to shout down, 'You and your *djuk* do not seem to be doing so well after all.' Juan managed to reply, cheerfully, 'Oh, we have really important matters to discuss, noble Sheikh. I'll come up shortly.'

'*Djuk* or no *djuk*, you are a remarkable fellow,' said the Sheikh, 'and I am really interested to see what happens to you.'

That evening the guard, as usual, lowered a little basket of food and water, and this time Juan found a large lump of sweet caramel with sesame seeds. 'For your *djuk*,' the guard explained, before he pushed back the lid of the pit. Juan ate everything to give himself strength, for his little groove was now about six inches long and half an inch deep, and tonight he meant to make his attempt.

Having eaten, and drunk all the water, he slept until midnight, as nearly as he could guess. Then he stood, back to the wall, reached up, found his fingerhold, and lifted himself. I have told you that he was very agile and strong. Now, hope made him lighter and stronger. He drew himself up to the

level of his shoulders, pushed upwards and outwards with all his might, feeling in the darkness with his toes. His feet touched the opposite wall.

Inch by inch at first, and then faster as the cone narrowed, Juan Gutierrez worked his way upwards; and thankful he was for his horny fingers and his sailor's muscles!

And at last he was under the wooden lid. It was not locked – who would waste locks on such a dungeon? He pushed. It lifted. He crawled out, silently lowering the lid back into place. The sentry was squatting on his haunches, fast asleep. Juan thought of knocking him on the head, taking his clothes and arms, and making a dash for liberty. But he did not know where he was, so where was he to run? He therefore whistled shrilly, and the man awoke, spun round, saw him, and let out a great shout. The bedouins, awakened, came running.

'How is this?' asked the Sheikh; and the sentry swore that Juan had been whisked out of the pit before his very eyes, which lie suited Juan very well indeed. The Sheikh had him washed and fed. 'Your *djuk* seems to have scratched your back rather badly,' he remarked.

'Mine is a very rough *djuk*,' said Juan; which was true, since *djuk* is Gipsy for Destiny.

Having feasted him, then, they led him up a long spiral staircase in the ruins where they camped, and put him into a little room with one small, unshuttered window. Pointing to this, the Sheikh said, 'You are free to come and go as you please, with your *djuk*. It is only forty feet down to the soft sand.'

Then they left him. Juan looked out of the window. They had not lied; the soft sand was no more than forty feet below. But between him and it the wall was planted, at various intervals, with huge rectangular iron hooks, rusted to needle-points, and of varying sizes. The nearest row of

hooks was fifteen feet below the window, which had no sill from which a man might jump clear.

He had heard of this horrid device from another sailor. The Moors would simply drop a criminal from the top of the wall, and wherever the point of a hook took him, there the hapless wretch would hang, until death released him. The only way down was a straight drop, and a straight drop meant a terrible death.

Now if I had only six feet of rope! thought Juan Gutierrez. But he had nothing. He was naked, and his cell was bare. He sat, disconsolate, thinking of all the ropes he had ever handled – hemp and coir, grass and rawhide, horsehair – *horsehair!* His own hair, dishevelled, hung eighteen inches long! He had watched the herdsmen plait halters of hair when he was a child, and his mind, as we know was strong to retain. He had heard somewhere that there were as many as a hundred thousand hairs on a human head. His own hair was dense, coarse, and healthy. What more did he need?

Without delay he set about plucking his scalp, hair by hair, and plaiting a thin but very strong cord.

In six weeks he was completely bald, but his cord was made.

It never occurred to his captors to notice any change in his appearance – they had seen too many men lose hair, teeth, and sanity too, whom they had kept locked up. The Sheikh, meanwhile, anxious to see Juan's *djuk* in action – or not, as the case might be – had set up a pavilion by the wall, where he sat watching, smoking and drinking coffee. But our Juan was not disposed to perform for any sheikh's amusement; besides, he had learned the value of a little mystification.

So one night, while the Sheikh slept, he tied his hair cord to a ring that had once held a shutter-hinge, and let himself down. Once on the hooks, he told me, the rest was easy: he had only to swing himself down, hand over hand, from one

hook to the next, so that in two minutes he was standing unhurt on the sand.

Then the sun rose. The sheikh came out to praise Allah and Mahomet – and there stood Juan Gutierrez!

Now the bedouins were truly amazed. 'Join us, with your *djuk*,' the Sheikh said, 'and you shall have high honour.' When Juan refused, he was offended. 'Then go,' he said, dressing him in new clothes. 'Take water, food, and a knife; and go. I will give you a day and a night, by way of start. On the second day I and my men will follow you. If we catch you, you are mine. If not, you are free. It is a sportsman's offer,' said the Sheikh, stroking his hawk, 'for you have your *djuk*, and we have nothing but horses.'

They let Juan Gutierrez go, then, and he, travelling by the sun, went north. But he knew that his chance of escape was negligible. The going was slow in that soft sand, especially for an unmounted man. Because he had only a day's start, the bedouin horsemen would surely run him down.

Notwithstanding, his heart beat high and light. Who else in all the world could have escaped from the pit of darkness and the wall of hooks? Almost he believed in the old gipsy and her Watcher, and his own stories of that so-called *djuk* – the desert affects one like that. Thinking always of Mercedes he strode doggedly northward, where he knew the sea must be, pausing only to swallow a mouthful of water and a handful of dates. He walked throughout the day, and on through the night. But when the second day broke he knew that he was lost.

He found himself in an utterly deserted village which had sprung up and died, long before, in the ruins of an ancient Roman fort. Here, under a broken triumphal arch, savages had penned goats; there a villa had been taken to pieces to make huts. In the centre of this place still stood a proud column raised in honour of some deity, or emperor, or hero. The statue

which it had supported was gone, but the column stood – chipped, battered, sand-blasted, but firm.

By now, Juan reasoned, Sheikh Sakr-el-Drough and his horsemen would have set out to hunt him for sport. His tracks would be clear. Where was he to hide? He did not know. *Can I bury myself?* he asked himself, ironically. Then he found himself thinking, *No, exactly the reverse – go up into the sky.* And of course, the column was the solution. If he could climb to the top of it, and sit there, who would think of looking for him?

He promptly took off his long robe, his head-dress, and his boots, and hid them carefully under some stones. Barefoot, and clad only in his wide cotton trousers, with his knife at his belt, he approached the shaft of the column. To us it might have seemed unscalable. To a mountaineer, or an experienced sailor, it offered a multitude of finger- and toe-holds. He laid hold of the fluted shaft, and began to climb, always calm. It was hard, but he was used to hard tasks. Up the shaft he swarmed, up and past entablature, medallion and fillets. And then he came to that part of the column which curves gracefully outwards – the *cyma recta*, as it is called. Here, he had to stop.

It was necessary at this point to make a deadly decision.

He could climb down by the way he had come up, and trust to the tender mercies of the Sheikh; or he could launch himself into the air, making in the same instant a closing clasp- knife of his body while his long arms strained for the corona of the column – the very lip of the overhang.

If he missed, he was a dead man.

If he did not miss, he was a dead man; for having reached the platform at the top of the column, there were no earthly means by which he could come down again, except by throwing himself down.

He remembered the saying, *If we stand still we die, if we go*

forward we die – better go forward. Calling on the name of Mercedes, he leapt, and his fingertips hooked the very brow of the cornice.

He dragged himself up, and lay, spent, sixty feet above the ground.

Soon, recovering a little, he saw that from his present eminence he commanded a clear view of many miles of the desert in every direction. He recognized certain tiny puffs of smoke far to the north-east as the dust of the Sheikh's riders. Then, regarding the eight-foot square on which he was lying, he found something wrong about it. What? The Romans, in war at least, were a practical people, he had learned. But do practical soldiers build columns in the desert for no reason – not even to support a statue? There was nothing here but a green bronze ring. He then saw that the ring was attached, as a handle, to a circular bronze plate. He pulled at the ring. The plate stirred. A wild excitement surged through him. He pulled steadily, with all his might, and the bronze plate swung up on a hinge. Nothing decays in that dry air; the metal was discoloured, but still strong. The plate was a door. The column was hollow, and inside, at regular intervals, were placed spikes for climbing up or down. It was a forgotten Roman observation-post!

The bedouins, when they came, were amazed to find that Juan's tracks had suddenly vanished. Then he called them from the top of the column: 'Ahoy, Sheikh! I am up here and you are down there, so you have not caught me by a good sixty feet. Well?'

Sakr-el-Drough marvelled. Also, he was somewhat afraid. He answered, 'Certain things are too wonderful for me. How you got up there I do not know; but of one thing I am certain – you cannot climb down, unless your *djuk* carries you again.'

'I will be down before the moon rises,' said Juan.

'If you can do that,' said the Sheikh, 'I will fill your hands with jewels and give you safe conduct to the sea, for I have had enough truck with *djinni* and *djuks* and wizardries.'

So, at sunset, Juan made his way down, and found the panel in the die of the column that opened like a door. It was made to be unrecognizable as such from the outside, but was easy to find from within. Closing the door behind him, and moving quietly as a shadow, Juan stepped into the midst of the Bedouins, who were all staring skyward in the dim light, and said, 'Here I am, Sheikh.'

And the Sheikh Sakr-el-Drough kept his word. He let Juan fill a pouch with jewels from his hoarded plunder, and gave him a good horse, and sent him safely to the coast.

There he took passage to Bilbao, where he sold half his jewels to a reputable dealer, and, with the proceeds, bought a sound merchant ship complete with her cargo of logwood, and sailed her south to Malaga.

So Juan Gutierrez married his sweetheart, and became the richest merchant in the South of Spain.

He told me all this at some length. At last, the doors were opened, and we sprang to our feet as the lady Mercedes herself came in. Forty years previous, when she was eighty pounds lighter, I dare say she might have been as Goya painted her. However, I showered her with compliments; but even as I did so, I could see by the old gentleman's eye that he was jealous still! And when I took my leave, Gutierrez came with me to the great gate, and when it was locked after me the watchman handed him the key, which he clutched tight in his tremendous hand.

So I went to my hotel, musing. This strange character, who had cut stone with sand and struggled out of impossible pits, who had let himself out of dungeons and down over walls of hooks hanging on to his own hair, who had writhed up stark columns and clambered down again in the dark – all to be

his own jailer, in a prison of his own making! Food for thought there, my friends, food for thought. . . .

'. . . Adah Isaacs Menken said, somewhat wistfully, "Ah, it is sad, is it not, to grow old and lose one's beauty?"

'M. Dumas replied, "It is all a snare and a delusion. If in his eyes she was young and beautiful still – then so she was. But as for me, she was old enough to be my mother. This was thirty years ago, so it's all one, now."

'I asked him, "And Señor Gutierrez?'

'"Oh," said M. Dumas, "he had some business on the wharves. It was at the height of summer. The heat was sweltering. At siesta hour, he walked towards his carriage. On the way he had to pass an old man leading a wretchedly overloaded horse carrying panniers. The unfortunate animal slipped on the cobblestones. Being badly balanced, she fell bodily, sideways. Poor Gutierrez was in the way. So as she fell in the street she broke his neck against a post."

'I said, "So much for *djuk*s!"

'M. Dumas replied, "Indeed. The peasant, or whoever he was, was terribly upset. He shouted *Help! Help! Nieva has fallen upon the poor gentleman!* His horse, if washed, would have been white, you see, and so he called her Nieva, *nieve* being Spanish for snow. These gipsies can be so literal, can they not?"

'Then, fearing that he might have put me a̋ little out of countenance, and being the soul of good nature, M. Dumas soon put me at my ease by taking me aside and, confessing that he had left his purse at home, borrowing ten napoleons.

'The hour being late, our pleasant little party broke up, but I have engaged to dine with M. Dumas again on Friday.'

Here the MS. ended. I said, 'Well?'

My wife said, 'Let's go back and see if Ciuccia has any more.'

We did so. Ciuccia growled, 'More paper likea dat? I use for tomato. Gooda paper, holda juice. Allagone. What you wanna for? No good – alla wrote on.'

So we bought a geranium, which he wrapped in the Book Section of *The Times*, and went sadly home.

The Defeat of the Demon Tailor

There is a syndicated comic for which I have a wry affection. It depicts, in one little frame, the embarrassingly familiar life of a character called Carmichael, imbecile in joy and ludicrous in anger. One cartoon sticks in my mind: poor Carmichael, driven at last to desperation, stands, sunken-eyed, brandishing a limp fly-swatter and saying, 'Leave the screens open – I feel mean tonight!' I was in just such a state of impotent harassment when, on upper Broadway, I met for the first time since 1945 no less a man than Colonel Chidiock Reason, late of the Royal Marine Commandos. He had his own way of doing things – which was sideways – and was making a pincer-movement of approaching 42 Street by way of Harlem, for it is beneath the dignity of this dour, inflexible man to ask directions of a policeman.

Nobody expressed more than the coolest kind of formal regret when he transferred from his Highland regiment to the Commandos, where his peculiar kind of autocratic individualism found more room for expression. It was not that he was what they used to call a 'jungly-wallah', meaning Tarzan-like and uncouth. In fact he is, I think, the only man in Malaya who had Spam formally preceded into his tent by a piper. But there is a good deal of the holy terror in

him – he is cantankerous, perverse, cross-grained. For example: he regards penicillin as a superstition, but believes that iron worn next to the skin prevents rheumatic fever, because his mother told him so, and therefore always wears a pony's shoe on a lanyard under his shirt – swears by it. Once, having been captured by the enemy, he applied this little horseshoe to the chin of a camp guard, who at once became unconscious, thus enabling Colonel Chidiock Reason to swap uniforms and, using the only German word he knew, march an entire enemy company into the British lines where it was duly locked up. The word was *Vorwarts*!

On another occasion he took a strong position by simply strolling up to the captain in command of the enemy force that held it, although Chidiock Reason and seven of his men were left of his company, and saying, in his sublimely sweet and reasonable Aberdeenshire accent, 'To avoid further bloodshed, my man, surrender. Do you not see that you are only fifteen to our one?'

I mention only a couple of the fantastic adventures for which he has been heavily decorated – 'kissed by more bewhiskered generals than any ballerina', as he puts it – and got his colonelcy at thirty-six. Yet, measure him, and you have the merest shrimp of a man, a hundred and ten pounds in his clothes, and of that half-opaque, evasive sand-colour which belongs in pools at low tide – all but his eyes, which are brilliant blue. There is a sort of fine gravel on his upper lip and the backs of his hands. He is fanatical in his neatness: the only officer I ever knew who had his shoelaces ironed every morning. And a perfectionist in the matter of trouser-creases.

Whenever you meet him he is either going to or coming from a tailor's shop, generally in a state of suppressed rage. I was not surprised, therefore, when, as he was shaking hands with me for the first time in fifteen years, the first thing he

said was, 'Where can a man get his trousers pressed while he waits?'

'What's the matter with your trousers?' I asked; for his creases were sharp enough to satisfy the normally fastidious man.

'I have sent more than one of my ruffians to the cooler for appearing in public wearing a pair of concertinas like these,' he said.

Now the Carmichael in me came out, and I said, 'Why, Chidiock, two minutes' walk from here there's a tailor called Mr Vara – an artist. He will press your trousers for you while you wait —' adding '– and you will wait, and wait. Mr Vara is known as the Demon Tailor of Columbus Avenue; he is a compulsive story-teller. If he wants to talk, you will be compelled to listen, no matter how much of a hurry you happen to be in.'

The Colonel said, 'Oh, will I? Take me to this man Vara.'

'He will hypnotize you.'

'He'll hypnotize your granny! Come on.' *And now at last,* I thought, *I approach a solution to the ancient riddle: What would happen if an irresistible force met an immovable object?* For nothing but a strong anaesthetic would stop Mr Vara when he is determined to tell you a story, while Colonel Chidiock Reason is well known as a man who will die before he surrenders.

I said, 'I tell you, Vara will hold you whether you like it or not.'

Colonel Chidiock Reason replied, 'He and the gathered might of Europe and Asia could not – with the Ancient Mariner in reserve! On the contrary, it is I who will hold this man Vara in spite of himself.'

'All right, will you bet?'

'I'll lay you two to one.'

'In dollars?' I asked.

'I am not a betting man, for cash. Make it whisky.'

'Bottles?'

'I am not a bartender. I wager half a case to your three bottles.'

'That you will hold Vara, but he won't hold you? It's a bet.'

'A *wager*,' said the Colonel, primly.

But when we came into the little tailor's shop on Columbus Avenue, Mr Vara was methodically tucking his wallet, watch, and a gay silk handkerchief into the pockets of another suit – a jolly-looking outfit of chocolate flannel, with a Newmarket vest – and he was singing under his breath a little tuneless song, of which I caught the following words:

Jennie's brother Irving took a big risk,
Bent to tie his shoelace, got a slipped disc. . . .

Hearing us, he looked up with a start, and said, frowning, 'I thought I had locked the door.'

'What for?' I asked.

'My wife's brother has met with an accident, and she has gone with the children to Bridgeport – and so,' he said gaily, 'I am shutting the shop for the day, and I am going to Jamaica to the horse-races. I have an absolutely certain tip for the second race.'

'But, Mr Vara,' I said, 'my friend must have his trousers pressed and —'

'– Tell your friend to go home and put them under the mattress and sit on them,' said Mr Vara.

At this, Colonel Chidiock Reason stepped forward and said, in a voice that made my blood run cold, 'Are you referring by any chance to *me*?' Their eyes met. Mr Vara blinked.

'Well . . . for an officer and a gentleman . . . it'll only take a few minutes. . . .' Then, recovering himself, Vara

pointed to his little lidless box of a cubicle and said, 'Go in there. Take off your pants. Sit down.' I was surprised when Colonel Reason obeyed promptly and without protest, for I have seen him half kill strong men for addressing him in a less peremptory tone.

I said to Mr Vara, with something unpleasantly like a sneer, 'And you are the artist to whom time means nothing. You —'

'– No discussion, please!' said Mr Vara. 'If Vara says he is going to the horse-races, Vara goes to the horse-races. Enough!'

'Provided your wife isn't here to stop you,' I said.

'My wife is an Act of God.'

'But I told my friend you would tell us a story,' I protested.

'What you tell your friends is your affair,' said Mr Vara, and he went to work faster than I had ever seen him work before; what time the Colonel sat in the cubicle, one eye closed, squinting at Mr Vara with the other, getting his range and taking stock of the position. The trousers were pressed in five minutes. Mr Vara handed them over the side of the cubicle, and said, 'Seventy-five cents. Hurry up, please.'

The Colonel obeyed; dressed briskly, and handed the tailor a five-dollar bill. Mr Vara said, ' My change is in the other pocket —' took the Colonel's place in the cubicle and feverishly gesticulated in my direction '– Mr Kersh, please hand me the brown suit on the hanger over there. I must dress, quick!'

But Colonel Chidiock Reason slid in front of me, quick as an eel and, taking Mr Vara's trousers from the cross-bar, rolled them up, tucked them under his arm and said with an astonishingly agreeable smile, '*I*, my fine-feathered friend, on the contrary, have a good hour to kill. And since you will not tell me a story, by heaven I will tell you one. And if you

are in a hurry, Mr Vara, you must wait until your hurry is over.'

He put the trousers, in the pockets of which lay Mr Vara's watch and wallet, upon a chair and sat on them. Disregarding the tailor's strangled cry of dumbfounded protest, he lit a cigarette and said, 'So, you are going to the races, are you, my mannie? And in your passion for the Sport of Mugs you forget your manners, do you? And you are in a deuce of a hurry to squander your cash at the tracks, is that it? Well, let me tell you about the one and only occasion I laid good money on a horse, acting upon turf information of a kind that demonstrates your precious 'Time' to be an illusion. And I will thank you not to squirm when I talk, for if you do I'll break your leg. . . .'

Mr Vara sat frozen, in a kind of horrified fascination, while Colonel Chidiock Reason went on, very, very slowly . . .

. . . Having put a stop to the highly irregular activities of Herr Hitler in Europe and Africa, and recovering from a hatful of machine-gun bullets in the briskets, I was sent to the Pacific by way of the United States of America in the early summer of 1947, (said the Colonel). I was to be picked up in Los Angeles and conveyed thence to Indonesia where I was to conduct certain extremely tricky operations. The general idea was that, while convalescing on American T-bone steaks, I should make a lecture tour en route; and a very bad idea it was. For what was I to lecture about?

Military discipline, perhaps, but only before servicemen. But civilians? I am no raconteur, such as you have the reputation for being, my fidgety little friend. And if it came to talking about myself and my own adventures – why, modesty forbade me, for the driest citation in my case would bring a blush to the cheeks of a Texan tall-talker. So I talked about nothing at all, but wore my kilt, and that did the trick. It met with deafening applause wherever I appeared. All

the children wanted to play with the skean dhu, or dagger, in my stocking; all the men roared with delight whenever I took a cigarette out of my sporran; and one and all, directly or indirectly, took me aside to ask me, 'What do you wear *underneath*?'

But travelling in trains I wore tropical trousers, for a kilt is hotter than the devil; and so I was in a constant state of miserable bedragglement, since the trains then were still of the wartime vintage, overcrowded and badly ventilated, and that summer was a scorcher. Sir, I have lain wounded on an ant-hill, and I have sat on a Burmese hornet's nest; but never have I experienced the misery that fell to my lot between Chicago and Denver, Colorado. Luckily, the hot and thirsty old train paused for breath and water there, and I had two hours in that pleasing city. Naturally, I looked first for a tailor's shop, but found near the station nothing but a kind of rat-hole like this (saving your presence) where I left a few changes of clothes to be sponged and pressed. Then I sought a bar, and had a glass of whisky-and-water.

It was here that I had my first conversation with a Red Indian. He came in out of the white sunlight like a shadow on the loose; a burly old gentleman with a face like a battered copper kettle. He was dressed all in black: a black leather shirt with fringes at the pockets, black trousers tucked into a pair of those high-heeled cowboy boots decorated all over with beads, and a black hat of the sort they tell me costs a hundred dollars. Instead of a hatband, he had a band of silver a matter of two inches deep, and his hair was done in two long grey braids. The barman said, 'Here's Chief See-In-The-Dark. He's a Character.'

The Chief, if such he was, came and stood by me. He said, 'Beer —' and then pointed to my glass and said '– Shot,' and before I could protest, we were served. So I drank his health politely, and he drank mine with a nod.

'Beer?' I asked him. 'Beer,' he said. So I pointed to his glass and mine, and said, 'Beer – Shot.' I was picking up the language.

After a brief interval, 'Shot – Beer,' he said. And later, 'Beer – shot,' said I. It was most soothing. Every time he ordered he paid with a silver dollar. I liked his style – there is something singularly Scottish about Red Indians – and was prepared to make his better acquaintance, so after a while I said to him, 'Pardon my asking, sir, but do you know any other words in the English language?'

'Some,' he replied, 'but more Spanish.'

'Unfortunately, I know little Spanish, sir. You are not from these parts, I take it?'

'No.' You see? True economy of speech. An Englishman would have said something like, 'What me? From these here parts? Not me. I come from Uxbridge. You take the bus from Shepherd's Bush Station and . . .' etcetera etcetera. But this man gave me a plain and succinct No.

'They call you Chief See-In-The-Dark, I believe?'

'Yes.'

'May I ask why?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'*Futuro* is dark. I see *futuro*.'

'Beer – Shot,' said I to the barman. Then, to the Chief, 'You see into the future, is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' I said, 'I don't much regard that kind of thing. I come of a hard-bitten Presbyterian family, don't you see, and my father was very much down on the Witch of Endor, and all that. But my mother, bless her heart, used to have a go at the tea-leaves on the quiet, in an innocent kind of way.'

'Shot – Beer,' said he. Then he touched my medal ribbons and said, 'You – *valiente*.'

'Brave? Not especially,' I said. 'You know how some men are only sober when they're drunk. Well, I'm so saturated in crisis that I am only really calm when I'm in trouble.' He seemed to understand me. He nodded.

'I tell you *futuro*?' he asked.

I answered him, 'Chief, only cowards and fools want to know the future. But,' I said, handing him that time-tarnished crack vulgar mockers love to make with palmists and card-readers, 'you may tell me, if you like, what's going to win the Derby.'

I was ashamed of myself for having said anything so crass; but it was said, and he nodded, looking somewhat scornful. 'Win? Derby? Yes, I tell,' he replied, and held his forehead. 'Kentucky Derby, hah?'

I said, 'What, do they have a Derby in Kentucky?' He nodded. I went on, 'You'll excuse my ignorance. My question was, so to speak, merely academic. I have not the slightest interest in horse-racing, or in gambling in any form. It's ingrained. My parents were dead set against it, and it never appealed to me anyway. I have never even been to a race-meeting! I was speaking of the only Derby I know, the English Derby —'

He held up a hand, and I was silent. His eyes became still as paint. Then he said, 'English Derby . . . *Nueva Plaza de Mercado?*'

'Why,' I said, 'that means New Market-Place, and it *is* a fact that the English Derby is run at Newmarket.'

'*Pasado – futuro* – nothing! All one. Like —' He drew an imaginary straight line in the air with such a steady hand that if you had put a spirit-level on it the bubble would have come dead centre and stayed there. 'You ask, I tell. *That* win Derby.' And he touched the old SHAEF badge on my sleeve. Now, as you doubtless know, the Supreme Head-quarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces had adopted for

their device a shield-shaped affair, having embroidered on it a crusader's sword surmounted by a very gaudy little rainbow: it looked like the trade mark for some kind of perfumed disinfectant.

'This I don't get,' I said. 'Past and future are all one, and this guaranteed-not-to-hurt-the-most-delicate-skin-advertisement is going to win the Derby. . . . Barman! Beer – Shot.'

Chief See-In-The-Dark said, 'I have few words.' Indeed, I imagine that even in his native tongue he was far from loquacious. 'I see it. *Naranja.*'

'That means orange,' I said.

'Yes. Orange. On *him* —' pointing again to my badge '– in *lluvia.* In *fango.*'

'An orange in rain and mud,' said I. 'Well, I'm obliged to you for the tip, and the pleasure of your company. We'll have one for the road, and I'll be back to my train.'

'Wait.' He touched my chest. 'You have pain there?'

'A little.'

'No sleep?'

'Not as well as I might.'

'Wait. I give you sleep. I make you see in sleep. I have few words. Wait.' He took out an old silver snuff-box, and produced from this a round brown pill. 'Tonight eat that. You sleep, and you see in sleep.'

'Well, thanks,' I said, and put the pill in my cigarette-case. Then I fished out an old silver Seaforth Highlanders' badge. 'Have that for luck,' I said.

So we parted, the best of friends, for all I could not make head or tail of his gibberish; and I got my clothes, and caught the train, and fell straight into the clutches of an elderly lady suffering from what I may describe as vicarious battle-fatigue. She kept reading me letters from her son, who claimed, among other things, to have given General Patton a

hot-foot and got away with it. A barefaced lie: it was *I* who had done this thing!

So, come midnight, I was too irritable and tired to sleep, and the wounds in my chest were throbbing, but then, remembering the Indian's pill, I took it out and swallowed it. The effects were curious. First I fell into a state that was neither sleeping nor waking – nor yet was it a half-sleep. The rocking, clattering old train seemed to rush away, leaving me floating; and as I floated, the heavy parts of my body and mind seemed to flake away from me. Inconsequentially, I saw my SHAEF badge, and it came to me that the rainbow and the sword meant Gay Crusader, which must be the name of a racehorse. *How stupid Chief See-In-The-Dark must think me!* I thought.

Then his image passed out of my mind, and the roar of the train became the confused yelling of a great crowd. I blinked, and felt cold water on my face; opened my eyes, saw a sector of bright green turf through a veil of rain, and knew that I was in England, at Newmarket, on the racecourse on Derby Day. I was in my uniform, but was wearing a trench-coat for the sky was leaking like a sieve, and I was in mud up to my ankles.

A young captain of infantry with whom I seemed to be on friendly terms asked me, 'How's your luck, Chid?'

'Bad,' I replied. 'I came here with two hundred pounds in my pocket, and I'm down to eighty.'

'Well,' said he, 'have a bit on Dark Legend in the next race.'

'That's the fourth, isn't it?' I asked.

A gentleman in civilian clothes said, 'Yes. But my money's on Danellon. He likes a heavy course, and it's been coming down in bucketfuls this past three days.'

'No, sir, no!' cried a third man, 'mark my words, put your shirt on Sir Desmond. *I* have.'

'The more fool you,' said his companion, a bow-legged little major. 'Sir Desmond'll never stay that course in this going. I've put everything but my false teeth on Diadem.'

Other voices said, 'Invincible!' and 'Kingston Black!' But I looked moodily at my card, fumbling the money in my pocket. I read that the Judge was Mr C. E. Robinson; Handicapper, Mr R. Ord; Clerk of the Scales, Mr William C. Manning. . . . Then my eye fell on the name of a horse. Gay Crusader! I had a sudden overpowering feeling that this horse must win. I ran to the nearest bookie, and shouted, 'Eighty pounds to win on Gay Crusader!' 'A hundred and forty to eighty, win, Gay Crusader,' said the bookie, giving me a ticket.

Everybody shouted, 'They're off!' Off they were. A sea-green jockey took the lead, and there was a cry, 'Come on Invincible! Invincible! Invincible!' A purple jockey with scarlet sleeves was coming up close behind, clinging like a marmoset to the neck of his mount. He squeezed ahead. 'Dark Legend! Come on, come on, Dark Legend!' came the cry, as the sea-green rider fell behind.

As I saw it from where I stood, the last of the runners was ridden by a jockey in black and turquoise – they seemed to stand still. 'Dark Legend! Dark Legend!' the crowd roared.

But then a jockey with orange-coloured sleeves seemed to lift his horse out of the mud with his knees and throw it forward with a terrific hitch of his shoulders. The roar of the crowd became a scream: 'Gay Crusader!' And then Gay Crusader was past the post with Danellon three lengths behind, and Dark Legend third.

I took my ticket to the bookie and he paid me two hundred and twenty pounds. 'I don't begrudge it,' he said. The young infantryman said, 'Lend us a tenner, Chid – I'm skinned.' I lent him a ten-pound note, and then I woke up. . . . What the devil are you laughing at, Kersh? . . . I woke up, I

say, with such an intense sense of the reality of this dream, or vision, that I could still feel the crispness of that money in my hand, and smell the bookie's cigar-smoke.

Then I slept deep for several hours, and awoke much refreshed; but the memory of that dream was in my mind with the vividness of a true physical experience. So I wrote it all down, in the form of a letter to my friend and man of business, Mr Abercrombie, of London; and I added a post-script saying, 'Please put eighty pounds on Gay Crusader for me to win the Derby.' And I sent this letter by airmail from Salt Lake City.

I received his reply a week or two later, in San Francisco, where I was lecturing at the Presidio. It ran somewhat as follows:

> 'My dear Chidiock – I have received your very extra-ordinary communication to which, out of curiosity, I have devoted more time than it deserved. Either your Red Indian friend was singularly well-informed as to the past history of the Turf in England and was pulling your leg, or he was prophesying backwards. Gay Crusader won the Derby in the year 1917. Danellon and Dark Legend were, indeed, respectively second and third. Gay Crusader's colours were, in fact, white with orange sleeves. Danellon's were sea-green with purple cap; Dark Legend's were purple and scarlet. The Judge, Handicapper, and Clerk of the Stables *were*, respectively, C. E. Robinson, R. Ord, and William C. Manning. I find, on inquiry, that the race went almost exactly as you described it. Gay Crusader *did* pay 14 to 8. Only you are precisely thirty years too late. Take another pill, and try sleeping with your head in the opposite direction.'

And there you have the naked facts of this extraordinary affair. If you offer me some rational explanation such as,

that at the age of eight or nine I happened, in Northern Scotland, to read a minute account of a race at Newmarket in the South of England, or that Chief See-In-The-Dark kept a complete file of back numbers of *Sporting Life* in his wigwam, and memorized them – well, go ahead.

But I have detained you with this story, Mr Vara, first of all to teach you not to hurry your betters, and secondly, that you may appreciate the fact that time is all on one plane. Past, present, and future are all the same thing in the long run. Let me have my change, if you please.

Mr Vara was silent. He sat, bowed. I was sorry for him. Then he said, in a small, broken voice, 'Mr Kersh, will you be so kind as to lift the telephone and dial Susquehanna 1–2345? Ask Mike what won the second race at Jamaica.'

I did so. 'A horse named Phoenix,' I told him.

'So? I was to have put my shirt on Varsity Express,' he said. 'So much for sure things. I am grateful to you, Captain, for detaining me.'

'Colonel,' said Chidiock Reason, turning to leave.

But Mr Vara uttered a little cry, and said, 'Stop! In all the flurry and unnecessary excitement, I have made a double crease in the right trouser-leg at the back!'

'The devil you have!' said Colonel Chidiock Reason. 'Where?'

'My rat-hole of a shop is too small for a triple mirror, sir,' said Mr Vara. 'Be so very kind as to take them off and I fix it in half a second.'

He banged an iron on to the little stove. The Colonel returned to the cubicle and handed Mr Vara his trousers, growling, 'Make haste, man. I have an engagement down-town in half an hour.'

'More haste less speed,' said Mr Vara, spreading the trousers on the board. 'Past, present, and future are all the

same thing in the long run. And if you fluster me, sir, I am quite likely to burn a terrible hole in this fine garment. Have a cup of tea and relax; I am not going to the horse-races after all. You have reminded me that I, too, was strictly brought up. Sit still, and I will tell you a story about how I was brought up. . . .'

And for three-quarters of an hour he held the Colonel's trousers in jeopardy under a very hot pressing-iron, while he told us the dullest story I have ever heard in my life. When at last he let us go, he said to the Colonel, who was speechless with rage, '. . . And thank you for your fine story. I have great respect for the supernatural. I am not a scoffer. It would never occur to *me* to say to you, "It could perhaps be that Red Indian was in a doughboy's uniform in Europe in 1917, and saw that same Derby." Oh no, no! It would be almost impious to say, "A Red Indian also likes his little joke, mister, and he was pulling your leg" – so I will *not* say it.'

Colonel Chidiock Reason was exasperated into arguing, 'The detail, man! The Judge, the Handicapper, the Clerk of the Scales!'

'I am only a poor tailor in a rat-hole of a shop, but if I were a lawyer in court, I should ask, "How many shots of Scotch whisky was it you mentioned having drunk, General? I put it to you that the Red Indian told you all these things, but –"' Vara shrugged in deprecation.

The Colonel said, 'It's lucky for you you're not thirty years younger!'

'Even old age has its compensations,' said Mr Vara, letting us out of the shop. 'Come again, come again often!'

I let a decent interval pass before saying, 'Well, Chidiock, I'll take my half-case in Old MacTaggart's Highland Dew.'

'You'll take your what?' the Colonel asked, amazed.

'My winnings.'

'Have you gone daft? I held Vara against his will, did I not?'

'Vara held you against yours, didn't he?'

'How d'you know? Since when were you a mind-reader? Who are you to say that I wasn't on reconnoitre, sparring, feeling my enemy out? I have lulled him into a false sense of security.'

'The fact remains —'

' – Oh, of course, if you want to call the wager off, go ahead – if you insist on leaving the issue unsettled. But if I had time to finish this little game I could keep your Vara dancing half the night in his cubby-hole like a squirrel in a wire cage. For now I have my plan of campaign. My next move must nail him to the ground!'

'What move is that?' I asked.

'Obviously, my friend, I put on my tunic, shirt, tie, stockings, shoes – *and nothing else*. Over all, I wear my long great-coat, go into his cubicle ten minutes before closing time, throw off my coat, and scream bloody murder for the return of my kilt, swearing I was wearing it when I came in!'

'We'll call it a draw,' I said. 'Incidentally, what *do* you wear underneath?'

A Lucky Day for the Boar

'Well, what the devil then, where's your title?' said Mr Bozman, the proprietor of *The Baltimore General Press*. 'I see a quotation: "*Ignoscito saepe alteri nunquam tibi*" – which, construed, reads "Forgive others often, but never forgive yourself." Well?'

His editor, a timid man, murmured, 'I advanced the gentleman five dollars.'

'Gentleman? What the devil kind of alpaca-and-steel-mixture hack do you call gentleman? And what do you mean by five dollars? How dared you do it, sir? Silver is dug out of the ground; it does not grow on bushes. Eh? Eh?'

'We might entitle it *A Lucky Day for the Boar*, sir.'

'You make free with my dollars, sir. Read it over to me, mister, if you will.'

'By your leave,' said the editor, and read:

Self-sufficient, Colonel Hyrax came and went like a cat in the Duke's palace. Nobody could deny that there was, in fact, much of the feline in his fastidiousness and in his almost inhuman composure. As Chief of the Secret Police, Colonel Hyrax was not bound by the rules of protocol. Dread followed

him, and awe – awe of the Unknown – and it was whispered that the Duke himself feared Colonel Hyrax.

Certainly, no one but he would have dared to detain the Duke when that potentate was booted and spurred for the hunt. Yet, although he was smiling with pleasurable anticipation as he listened to the baying of his boarhounds in the courtyard below, the Duke put aside his boar spear when Colonel Hyrax appeared, and, bidding him close the door, asked, 'What now, Hyrax?'

'Your Grace, I have good news.'

'My foresters have beaten out a black boar of thirty stone, a monster. So be brief. Good news of what?'

'Of the conspiracy, your Grace,' said Colonel Hyrax.

'I suppose,' said the Duke, with a harsh laugh, 'I suppose you are going to tell me that my traitorous scoundrel of a nephew has named his partners in this plot against me?'

'Precisely that, your Grace,' said Colonel Hyrax, with a thin smile.

'No!'

'By your Grace's leave – yes,' cried Colonel Hyrax. But he looked in vain for some demonstration of relief or joy. The Duke frowned.

'It is hard,' he said, 'it is very hard for me to believe. Are you sure, now? My nephew Stanislaus has named his friends?'

'Your Grace, I have a list of their names. They are under close arrest.'

'Damn it! Stanislaus is of my blood. He had – I thought he had – something of my character. Red-hot pincers could not drag a betrayal of my friends out of *me*. Milksop!'

'Yet he conspired against the life of your Grace,' said Colonel Hyrax.

'I know, I know; but that was all in the family. I trapped him, and he didn't lie about it. Naturally, he refused to name his collaborators. I'd have done the same in his

place. Oh yes, Hyrax – touching the matter of red-hot pincers – you never dared . . . ?'

'I know my duty, your Grace,' said Colonel Hyrax. 'I am well aware that your blood is inviolable, and that it is death to spill one drop of it; or to offer violence, however slight, to any member of your family; or even to threaten it. Neither may any of your Grace's blood be manacled. Oh, believe me, not only was his Excellency your nephew treated with the utmost gentleness – I saw to it, when he was placed in solitary confinement by your Grace's written order, that he could not even do violence to his own person.'

'And still he betrayed his comrades? He's no blood of mine!' The Duke then uttered foul accusations against his dead brother's wife. Growing calmer, he said, 'More, Hyrax; tell me more.' The horns sounded clear in the courtyard, but the Duke threw open a casement and roared, 'Let the boar wait!'

'Your Grace sentenced your nephew to perpetual solitary confinement. His Excellency was to be "left to cool his head", to quote your own words.'

'Did you starve him, Hyrax? You had no right to starve the boy.'

'No, your Grace. He had everything of the best. The passage of Time did our work for us,' said Colonel Hyrax.

'Time? What time? The young fool hasn't been locked up two months. What are you talking about?'

'If I may explain?' begged Colonel Hyrax; and, his master nodding, he continued: 'I had prepared for his Excellency a commodious chamber, padded at walls, floor and ceiling with heavy quiltings of lamb's wool covered with grey velvet. There was a double window, out of which his Excellency might look at the wild countryside surrounding the Fortress.'

'Better than he deserved.'

'His viands were, as I have said, of the best. But his meat

was cut for him, and all his cutlery consisted of a horn spoon. For he was so violent, at first, that I feared the young gentleman might do himself a mischief.'

'Aye, aye, he always was an overbred, nervous young fool. Well?'

'Then we asked his Excellency for permission to shave his head,' said Colonel Hyrax. 'He gave it.'

'What the devil for?'

'Your Grace will see, presently. So, by his leave, we shaved off all his hair. We provided him with some quills, ink and paper, but nothing edged or pointed. To calm him, a mild and harmless opiate was mixed with his Excellency's breakfast. He ate, and then, leaning on the casement, gazed moodily at the landscape under the morning sun. He dozed, leaning thus, for perhaps five minutes. When he opened his eyes he was looking upon a night scene with a rising moon, and the attendants were bringing his supper. His Excellency was bewildered. "Am I bewitched?" he asked. But since, by your Grace's order, he was incommunicado, the attendants were silent.'

'Bewildered?' cried the Duke, 'So am I. From breakfast to supper – morning to moonrise – in a matter of hours. What was the purpose in bringing Stanislaus his supper five minutes after breakfast-time?'

'Pray let me explain, your Grace. The prospect beyond his window was *not* open country. It was a blank wall, upon which I had caused to be projected through a lens, by means of a powerful reflector, highly realistic scenes painted upon glass by one of the finest landscape artists in Europe. Thus, I could create a perfect illusion of the various stages of the day, and of the four seasons.'

'But what for?'

'In order, your Grace, without violating your law, to let his Excellency confuse himself in his conception of *Time.*

Soon, he fell into a deep sleep, and an adroit barber shaved him and trimmed his nails. Men incarcerated can gauge Time, to a certain extent, by the rate of growth of their beards, you see. It was necessary to *bewilder*; it was necessary to let his Excellency *force himself* to have recourse to Reason, and to make his reasoning invalid. Do I make myself clear?'

'Go on.'

'Hence, he would awaken – let us say – at midnight, look out of the window, see high noon; doze again, rise again in ten minutes, and – lo! and behold! – dawn. Or, awakening at dawn, he would see nothing but the rim of the setting sun, while the attendants came in with supper. Sleeping soon after, by the judicious administration of opiates, he would start up to observe another sunset. So, after a week, he asked how many months he had been there. There was no reply of course.'

'Clever, clever,' said the Duke.

Colonel Hyrax bowed, and continued, 'Although the month was July, his Excellency awoke one morning to a scene of naked trees under a blanket of snow. Sometimes, breakfast, dinner and supper would arrive at intervals of only a few minutes after the clearing of the table. Or sometimes hours might elapse, after which his Excellency, starting out of a fitful sleep, might notice that it was early autumn now, where it had been mid-winter when he last looked out.

'I took good care – since men in prison sometimes grow preternaturally observant – to age the guards and waiters, and to see to it that their uniforms showed increasing signs of wear. The chief warder was always accompanied by a pair of great dogs. At first, it was a couple of wolfhounds. I replaced these with older and older wolfhounds. Then there was a new young warder, and he had a pair of mastiffs – which, in their turn, I made appear to grow old, by a system of substitution.

'Naturally, I never entered the young gentleman's chamber myself. But I had my reports to rely upon. Your Grace – within a few weeks, your nephew believed that he had been incarcerated for an incomputable number of years! Your Grace has had the nightmare, no doubt?'

The Duke said, 'I have, and it's horrible. A second is an eternity, or worse. I think I understand you now, Hyrax. Go on.'

'By means of concealed lamps, there was always a diffused light in the chamber which, by the judicious use of hot-air pipes, was maintained at a constant temperature of precisely seventy-four degrees Fahrenheit. As his Excellency slept, his clothes were taken away and replaced by others, precisely the same in pattern, but just a little more worn. I also arranged that his clothes should be made progressively a hair's breadth larger, so that the young gentleman grew gradually convinced that he was becoming shrivelled and wasted with long imprisonment.'

'Oh, clever, clever!' cried the Duke, with a slight shudder. 'I think that, on the whole, given the choice, I'd choose the Iron Boot, the thumbscrew or the rack. Proceed.'

'Ah, but there is no question of *choice*, your Grace; for this method of mine depends for its effectiveness upon complete ignorance of the surrounding circumstances. Do I make myself clear?'

'Your object being, to plant a firm illusion that there has been a prolonged passage of time, when as a matter of fact, only hours have elapsed,' said the Duke.

'Just so,' said Hyrax. 'I have written a carefully annotated "Procedure" for your Grace's perusal. I can make four minutes last forty-eight hours, in the consciousness of the prisoner. I hasten to reassure your Grace that no common hand was laid on his Excellency, your nephew Stanislaus. His table was almost as well furnished as your Grace's own;

only he had the delicacies of the season *out* of season. And, allowing for certain inevitable margins of error, the young gentleman seemed to live a long month in half an hour. Between your Grace's breakfast and dinner, he passed approximately a whole year.'

'Well,' said the Duke, 'that may teach the pup a lesson, not to plot against his poor old uncle, who used to think the world of him. Well, come to the point. What made Stanislaus betray his friends? They are my enemies, it is true, but . . . well, I think the worse of him notwithstanding.'

Colonel Hyrax said, 'But his Excellency did not betray his friends, your Grace.'

'Will you tell me what the devil you are talking about?' roared the Duke.

'I mean, he did not betray them wittingly.'

'Oh? If you have deranged the rascal with your dirty drugs —' began the Duke.

'No, no, your Grace. The drugs were used discreetly, and sparingly, and then only for the first three weeks. Time, Time, Time was the illusion with which I took the liberty of bedazzling the young gentleman – Time as Man knows it, through the contemplation of mere external change. Men and fashions seemed to come and go. Once, on my order, a guard let fall a newspaper. It was postdated fifteen years; I had had one copy only printed before the type was broken up, and it was full of news of people and affairs his Excellency had never heard of.'

'Most damnably clever!' exclaimed the Duke. 'And my poor – I mean that wretched fellow who is supposed to be my brother's son, and couldn't even keep faith with his fellow-criminals: did he write nothing?'

'Only some verses, your Grace.'

'About me?'

'About worms. But I see that your Grace is anxious to

be after the boar, so I will conclude for now. After the young gentleman had been in that chamber about forty days, the door was opened by a young officer in a strange uniform – grey, faced with yellow – and an older officer, in the same colours, but having a dolman trimmed with sable, came in, fell on his knees, and hailed your nephew as martyr, saviour and leader. The Duke, he said, was dead, the New Party was in power, and Stanislaus was to sit on your throne.'

The Duke laughed. 'Ha! And I suppose my nephew jumped for joy?'

'Not so, your Grace. He said – and I quote, so you will forgive me – he said, "The old ruffian was kind to me once upon a time." Then he said, "And all my friends, I suppose, are dead, or old – which is worse."'

'Aha!' cried the Duke, 'We are coming to it, now!'

'Yes, your Grace. The Commanding Officer said, "If you will tell me whom you mean, your Excellency, I shall immediately ascertain." Whereupon, your nephew recited a list of forty names, which are on the paper which I have the honour to place in your Grace's hand.'

'Hyrax,' said the Duke, 'you are *hellishly* clever! And my nephew – how is he?'

'I was listening to the proceedings at a concealed aperture, and did not see his Excellency at first. Then, when he came into my range of vision, I was astounded. For where, a few weeks before I had seen a sanguine young man of twenty-four, I now beheld a decrepit and enfeebled man of sixty!'

The Duke was silent. Colonel Hyrax pointed to the paper upon which the names of the conspirators were written. 'Your Grace will hang them?' he asked.

'No. I shall shock the wits out of them by pardoning them and make forty friends into the bargain. Where's Stanislaus?'

'Asleep, your Grace,' said Colonel Hyrax.

'You are an astonishingly clever man, Hyrax,' said the Duke. 'Did I not say that if you cleared this matter up I'd make a nobleman of you?'

'The work is its own reward, you Grace,' said Hyrax.

'No, you have earned my gratitude. I hereby confer upon you the Barony of Opa, with all lands, rents and revenues pertaining there unto.'

'Oh, your Grace! Words cannot express —'

'– Save them, then. Leave me, now.'

Hyrax having bowed himself out of his presence, the Duke called for his secretary. A soberly attired gentleman came in and made his obeisance. 'Your Grace?'

'Colonel Hyrax is now Colonel the Baron Opa. Make a note of it.'

'Yes, your Grace.'

The Duke paced the floor, tugging at his beard. 'And write me an order to the Lord Provost,' he said. 'Write as follows: "Bearing in mind the new dignity of Colonel Hyrax, whom we have recently created Baron of Opa, you will procure a silk cord and hang him forthwith."' Scrawling his signature at the foot of this document, and impressing the warm wax with his great cornelian ring, the Duke muttered, 'One could no longer sleep with such a man awake. He is too clever by half.'

A nameless cold had crept into his heart. He looked long and anxiously at the morning sun, and listened with more than usual attention to the portentous ticking of a great bronze clock. Presently, he said to his secretary, 'Dismiss the men. I hunt no boar today.'

'Yes, your Grace.'

'I desire to see Stanislaus.'

'Shall he be sent for?'

'No. I go to him.'

The secretary, a good-hearted man, ventured to ask, 'Oh

please, your Grace – is it your gracious intention magnanimously to pardon the unhappy young gentleman?'

The Duke growled, 'Go. My Grace's intention is humbly to beg the unlucky young gentleman, out of his magnanimity, *to pardon me*.'

The proprietor said, 'You gave this person five dollars, you say?'

'He asked twenty,' said the Editor. 'I advanced him five.'

'And what does the confounded author call himself?'

'Ethan Arthur Poland. Confidentially, I think he's the man who wrote "The Raven", Edgar Poe, no less.'

'You throw my dollars about like rice at a wedding, my friend. Yes. You have my leave to print. Let the fellow have five dollars more, if he presses. A Latin title is a drug, sir, a drug. Take a title out of context,' said Mr Bozman, 'out of context, out of context. And since I am paying for the job and writing it too, sign it Bozman – John Helliwell Bozman. Incidentally, you owe me five dollars.'

So saying, the proprietor of *The Baltimore General Press* walked sedately out of doors.

Proud Servant

Mr Elwes, sometime butler to the nobility and gentry, and now landlord of The Bricklayers Arms, primly alluded to as the You-Know-Where, in Marlowe Mews, Mayfair, was a dry, papery little man. He reminded me of a certain thin, flat, dreadfully serious-looking book bound in black cloth which lay for years untouched in my father's bookcase. I was sure that it must contain moral precepts, or something equally repulsive to the young. Then, one day, I opened it and discovered that those stiff, unappetizing covers concealed a really juicy bit of blood and thunder, illustrated with gory woodcuts, and entitled *Tamurlane the Terrible: or Tortured by the Tartars*. Similarly, if not so luridly, I discovered that under Mr Elwes's starched white shirt there beat a compassionate heart, although it was said of him that he could chill a bottle of lager just by giving it a look.

For example, one night – we had become friends, and I sometimes sat up with him after closing-time – he took down a sandwich loaf, cut two thick slices, and made an immense sandwich of cold meats, which he carefully wrapped in greaseproof paper. Then he got yesterday's *Times*, went to one of the garbage cans, opened it and laid the heavy newspaper on top of the refuse, neatly tucking it in at the edges.

He put the wrapped sandwich on the newspaper and added a pint bottle of strong ale; closed the can and, fastidiously washing his hands, said, 'When we are asleep a tramp comes to pick over my dustbins. Who am I to deny the poor creature a little comfort?'

Now, this evening just before the You-Know-Where closed at eleven o'clock, a curious-looking couple came into the saloon bar. The old man was sturdy, portly, dressed in respectable blue serge. His hat was extraordinary: it was a black homburg, unindented, blocked perfectly round; and his immaculate shirt-cuffs almost covered the curved handle of an ebony stick as he leaned on it. And still he looked somehow not so much old-fashioned and eccentric as disreputable. The uneasiness in his small, shrewd eyes did not match the pugnacity of his jaw, and his nose and cheeks seemed to be enclosed in a reticulation of fine violet veins.

His companion, a woman whom he had seated with much tenderness and solicitude at a vacant table, might have been someone out of Grimm's fairy-tales: the old woman with the gingerbread house. Her face was powdered violet-white, and painted at the cheekbones with two crimson circles. Her mouth was fixed in a lopsided smile; she carried an ornate umbrella and wore an elaborate hat; but her heels were run down.

While the man tried to catch Mr Elwes's eye, her disengaged hand played *arpeggios* on the table, every finger vibrating at a different rate, and in a different direction. Mr Elwes came to the bar where the newcomer stood and said in a low voice, 'I think I told you not to come here any more, Mr Bullivant.' The portly man whispered; Mr Elwes shook his head, and I heard him murmur, 'No, sir. You know my policy, surely? I never give any credit.'

I heard the man say, 'It isn't so much for me, Mr Elwes —' he laughed quite heartily, but his eyes remained uneasy '– I've

been on cocoa and water for the past eighteen months. But my wife . . .' Mr Elwes's hand was in and out of his waistcoat pocket, quick as a silverfish, and there was a pound-note on the counter.

'What is the lady's pleasure?' he asked.

'A double gin, if you please, and a glass of stout. I'll have a light ale.'

Almost inaudibly, Mr Elwes said, serving the drinks, 'Pick up the change and have your drinks, and go elsewhere, Mr Bullivant.' And so they did.

Then the gong sounded for closing-time. Mr Elwes beckoned me to stay. The doors being locked on the stroke of eleven, he asked me, 'Does welsh rabbit give you nightmares?'

'Not that I know of, Mr Elwes.'

'Perhaps you'd like to join me in a bite? I make it according to the Earl of Ilford's private receipt —' Just then, the cellar-flap opened, and a yellow-haired weak-faced man of about thirty-five cautiously emerged. Mr Elwes said to him, 'I wanted you in the bar, you know, Saunders.'

The man called Saunders said, abjectly, 'Mr Elwes, sir – I'd lay my life down for you, honour bright I would! But *they* came in, sir, and it's more than I dare do to let *them* see me!'

Mr Elwes said, 'Oh well, sweep up and go to bed.'

He bowed me into his comfortable little parlour. 'Shall we have a glass of port with our little savoury?' he asked. 'I recommend it. It is some of the Marquess of Beckley's Gow 1903. I decanted it this morning. Unless, of course, you'd rather have —' he pointed to the rickety mahogany sideboard, the lock of which it pleased him to pick with a fork instead of using a key, and in which he kept a choice selection of spirits out of the cellars of half a dozen great houses.

I said, 'No, the port, by all means.'

'The Ilford receipt goes down well with the Beckley port . . . but I observed that you were curious about that person in the peculiar hat who was standing next to you, and who frightened Saunders into the cellar.'

'To whom you gave a pound-note,' I said, 'and some drinks – and a full pound's worth of silver in change?'

'You have a sharp eye, sir. He used to be butler to Lord Carabine. His name is Bullivant. A Bullivant had been butler to the Carabines for five generations. He was the last. I was first footman at the time, in that same establishment. Mrs Bullivant, the female who was with him this evening, was my Lady Carabine's maid. You may find it difficult to believe, but she was one of the most fascinating young women I ever saw, and there were few who would have disagreed with me. She came from Normandy, and her name was Emilie Pichegrue.

'Her main fault, as I observed it then, was a certain acquisitive, or avaricious, quality. Also, since she was prettier and, in the French style, more chic than Lady Carabine, she felt somehow that destiny had wronged her. She was discontented and, in the servants' quarters, haughty and quarrelsome. Now Mr Bullivant, on the other hand, seemed as steady and solid a type as you could wish. And still, somehow, he seemed in my eyes to wear two faces – two temperaments, rather, since all servants have two faces. Below stairs that grave, expressionless man laughed too much and too loudly.

'Never trust a man who laughs loud and often, sir, never. And he appeared, sometimes – how unlike his fathers before him! – to be of a wandering, roving, reckless disposition. He was always talking about diamonds and gold to be picked up in Africa, millions to be made in America. Meanwhile he perused the sporting papers, and took to gambling on

horses. To make his wagers he would nip out to the Rose and Crown in Park Lane Mews, and pass his betting slips to Straight-As-A-Gun Charlie Moss, Turf Accountant or, in other words, Bookie.

'Now, as you must know, a bookmaker, however honest in himself, must move on the fringes of the underworld. So, in no time at all, Mr Bullivant found himself in bad company. Also, he was getting deep into Moss's debt. Nowadays a gambling debt is legally collectable through the courts, all above board; but then a bookmaker, having no recourse to the law, could make life unpleasant for a defaulter in all kinds of nasty ways; and Charlie Moss's debt collectors were far from being liked for their finesse. To add to these complications, Mr Bullivant fell in love with Mademoiselle Emilie and she with him.

'I don't know whether this was a matter of, ah, mere biochemistry – he was a well set-up fellow – but from her attitude one had always gathered that she aimed a deal higher than a butler. They walked out together, and she charmed his new friends, so that I think she saved him quite a little unpleasantness by the exercise of French vivacity and Norman cunning. They were engaged. I believe Bullivant would have settled down in the end, if it hadn't been for her. She could twist him around her little finger.

'She can do so to this day, believe it or not. Otherwise, he would never have come here tonight so demeaning himself as to cadge drinks for her, from me of all people, who barred him from my house. . . .

'I dare say you noticed the look of shame in his eyes, sir? And, though he is a drinking man, it was only a glass of beer for him, but double gin and bottled stout for his Emilie?'

I said, 'I don't know, Mr Elwes. If I were in such straits, I rather fancy that it would be to you, of all people, that I'd turn first.'

'Thank you, sir. I hope I know my place. It is my place to do my duty. It is my duty to serve. I was not serving Bullivant the jailbird; I was serving Bullivant, the foolish but true husband. . . . Yes, he went to the dogs.'

I began, 'Where, but for the grace of God —'

'– Don't say it!' said Mr Elwes, almost angrily. 'It is a blasphemy to assume that His grace is reserved for the likes of you and me, and withdrawn from the likes of Bullivant. . . .

'One evening, when Lord and Lady Carabine were out to dinner, and it was my day off, thieves got into the house through a ground-floor window, which had been left unlocked. They tore Bullivant's clothes and bloodied his nose, and gagged him and tied him up. They gagged and bound Emilie. The other servants heard no sound of a struggle.

'The thieves, who might have been working from a chart, carried off the Carabine plate-chest, including some solid gold centrepieces and Lady Carabine's jewels. The latter were kept in an old-fashioned wall safe, of the key to which they must have contrived to get an impression. Scotland Yard said that it was an "inside job", as they called it, plain as print. But there was no proof of any positive kind.

'Bullivant and Emilie stuck to their story, and all the master could do was dismiss them. Also, but without rancour, he dismissed all the other servants, myself included, and took a fresh staff. There was sixty thousand pounds' worth of property gone, you see. So I felt a certain acrimony towards Bullivant and Emilie, for I was devoted to the Carabines. I felt somehow besmirched.

'The police kept an eye on our friends, you may be sure; but shortly after they were married by the Registrar in Marylebone, they went abroad as servants in the retinue of a Senhor Pacheco, of Rio de Janeiro. Everyone knew that Pacheco was an international crook, but there was not a shred of evidence against him. It is that way, you will have

observed, with all the really big criminals – everyone knows all about them, and still they sail their yachts.

'A couple of years later, Mr and Mrs Bullivant came back to England with their child, twelve months old. They appeared to have grown rich in Brazil, for they set up house in an elegant apartment near Chester Square and had servants of their own. Once, being temporarily out of employment, I was sent by an agency to interview a gentleman in that neighbourhood who wanted a butler-valet, one Arnott Arlington Windle, of New York. And who should Mr Windle be but Bullivant, with a heavy moustache, impeccably dressed, and hitting off an American accent almost to perfection. He always had a knack of picking up accents, and even languages.

'I said to him, "That is not bad, Mr Bullivant, only if you are supposed to come from New York you burr your *R*'s a little too emphatically. . . . Do you remember when you used to sing that old music-hall song

. . . Master Dilke upset the milk
Taking it home to Chelsea. . . .

in Latin, in the kitchen?" This was a sly dig, you see, Chester Square being on the fringes of Chelsea.

'I went on remorselessly,

"*. . . Effudit Carolus domum reportans*
Lac Dilkus media procax suburra. . . .

Ah, you always had a quick ear to pick things up, Mr Bullivant! To say nothing of your fingers."

'He said, "Nothing like as sharp as you, Elwes, and drop the Bullivant. Come and work for me, and I'll pay you ten pounds a week."

'I answered, "As a butler, I shouldn't be worth that much. As a thief, I should be worth much more. And I doubt if the

place would be a permanency. Are you still in the jewel-and-plate business?"

'He said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm in the motorcar business. We are putting a model on the market for a hundred pounds."

'"Well, good day to you," said I, and left forthwith. If I wanted to know anything about him, there was no sense in asking a direct question, for he would certainly lie. I inquired among servants, in the bar of this very house – little dreaming that some day I should be landlord here – and so heard of his child, a golden-haired little cherub named Claud; and of his profound devotion to Emilie. It was through one of her friends, who was the lady friend of a gentleman from America, that Bullivant had got into the automobile business. I pulled a face at that.

'But sure enough, show-rooms were ceremoniously opened and models unveiled of the Nemo Torpedo, a four-seater available in four colours, complete with lamps and tyres, priced one hundred pounds; delivery in eight weeks, half the purchase price with order. It was far too good to be true, of course. I don't know how many thousands of people put down their fifty pounds apiece. But when the two months were up, the models remained in the show-rooms and the company had evaporated. Having, as it seemed, the luck of the devil, Bullivant managed to prove that he was a hapless and guileless victim of his coadjutors.

'He got off scot-free. After that, with Emilie's help, he took to selling worthless stocks and shares, circularizing clergymen, retired schoolteachers, and what-not, all over the country. Calculated Risks, Ltd. he called himself. No sum was too small for him to handle, or too large. And when that affair blew up he came away, again miraculously unsinged. Now he was very solicitous of the future of young Claud. And, as soon as the child was old enough, sent him away

from the ambient atmosphere of swell mobsterism and champagne in Mayfair to a highly exclusive boarding-school at Nogent near Paris.

'But such runs of luck as Bullivant's, you know, are not interminable. You can, so to speak, sell only a certain number of gold bricks. *X* gold bricks means getting by with it; *X* + 1 = Disaster. Firstly, there is no one so easy to swindle as a swindler. Always haunted by his vision of South African gold and diamonds – these youthful dreams of Tom Tiddler's Ground are hard to banish, sir – what does Bullivant fall for, but Blauwildebeestefontein Mines! A company promoted by a man Bullivant *knew* to be the crookedest wildcatter in the financial underworld.

'With all the blind vanity of your criminal, Bullivant said to himself, *Jack is the smartest sharper in the City, but he likes and admires me, and he wouldn't swindle ME!* He lost a very large sum over a fantastic proposition that shouldn't have fooled a schoolboy. This reverse, together with Emilie's reaction – and what the servants heard her calling him must have been less than a tenth of all she had to say – took some of the heart out of him.

'But he still maintained a bold, firm front, uncompromisingly respectable-looking in his buttoned-up coats and singular hats. A well-known forger had turned out a quantity of American thousand-dollar bills. Bullivant took these to the United States where, as a visiting magnate out for a discreet good time, he let himself be piloted into the luxurious gambling-houses; then he would buy a hundred thousand dollars' worth of chips, lose thirty or forty thousand at baccarat, plead business, cash in the rest of the chips for real money – and disappear. He tried this once too often.

'The proprietor of a gambling-house in Chicago gave him his change in very false money indeed, which the police, mysteriously advised of, found on his person. For that he

went to jail – I am informed he was lucky not to have been shot – and here Bullivant's spirit began to break. His morale was punctured.

'Now, he had a criminal record, aliases didn't help, because a crook who had been imprisoned always carries something of that prison with him – something indefinable as a bad odour, but none the less recognizable. He is a man under suspicion. His laugh grew heartier. His laugh grew heartier, more frequent and more reassuring, while his eyes got more unrestful. The strained directness of their gaze reminded one of a music-hall hypnotist.

'No, you are going to ask me, "What of Emily and the child Claud?" Well now, through thick and thin that woman stood by her husband, true to him as hilt to blade, although she was still pretty and winning enough to run off with almost any man she'd a mind to; which the servants who forgathered here fully expected her to do. Only she didn't. And what is more, Bullivant was faithful to her, although as far as I know he kept faith with nobody else.

'Emilie had money put by, of course, and she swore she'd never be parted from it. Yet when Bullivant needed it for counsel – what he called "mouthpieces" – she wept, but she gave, sir, she gave. She saw her capital nibbled away by scheme after scheme that went awry.

'Then the great builder Tom Harrigate let her in on the ground-floor in his last big enterprise in the north of England. Harrigate was a man in good standing, and a solid man, and originally an honest man. But he had adversaries in business who saw to it that, at a critical moment of expansion, certain invested capital was withdrawn. So Harrigate forged signatures, was detected, and shot himself – whether in shame at having committed a crime or humiliation at having been found out, who can say? They said in the City that, given seven more days, Harrigate could have bought his

knighthood – but there wasn't seven extra days, and there never will be that seven extra days, and so Emily lost capital.

'Desperate, she opened an exclusive beauty parlour off Grosvenor Square. Now it was not exactly that she had grown too far away from reality to earn an honest living. But it now became apparent that her own sex disliked her; and also they feared her predatory manner. And, when it came to the point, she found herself repelled by contact with other women who paid her to treat them with deference. I believe that the sight of a lady seated at her ease, draped in a sheet, and amiably condescending to her, brought back disturbing memories of her youth, and of the gracious Lady Carabine whom she had robbed. The business failed.

'Nemesis was on the heels of that couple. I met Bullivant in the street about that time, and he told me flatly, and in a flat voice, "Elwes, I'm finished." I said, "You look prosperous enough." He said, "I just cleaned up fifteen thousand pounds. Australian Mac and I took some Texas oilman for thirty thousand, on a deal. Mac nipped off to Africa. I went to the unlikeliest place on earth until the sucker left England: I went to Dieppe. This Texan was non-pross – meaning, he didn't believe in legal processes, but liked to settle his grievances personally. I took a room at the Hotel de la Sole Dieppoise. Who the hell goes to Dieppe? I unpacked and started to go out for a stroll. And whom do I meet in the passage, but this Texan! What did he do? Nothing. He only said that my friend and I must have been pretty hard up to work so hard and long for a paltry thirty thousand pounds. Liking us, he said, he'd have given us the money. Then he smiled, brushed me aside and went on. When I was in jail in the States, I read the works of Shakespeare – and all of a sudden I knew exactly what he meant when he said *The robb'd that smiles steals somewhat from the thief*. . . . Elwes, I'm *finis*, *kaputt*. It's young Claud I'm worried about."

'For Claud, registered under his mother's name of Pichegrue, had long been taken away from his French boarding-school and sent to a preparatory school down in Gloucestershire. The boy had been brought up all higgledy-piggledy: all he knew of his mother was that she was a wonderful lady who descended at holidays with a rustle of silks in a mist of rare perfume to embrace him and give him money; and his father, to Claud, was a hearty but very portentous gentleman, who uttered words of advice, gave him more money, and vanished, as he had appeared, in a cloud of fragrant cigar-smoke.

'His life had been spent in a kind of Pandora's Garden, that paradise of children which the world was supposed to be before Curiosity let loose the Spites and the Mischiefs. It had been his father's ambition to make a lawyer of him – the first thing a crook would think of, naturally. By the same token mothers frequently want their sons to be doctors. Claud was to have gone up to Cambridge and studied the Law there. But as things turned out, he was taken out of school at sixteen and articled to a solicitor in Devizes.

'Bullivant said to me, "You know, and I know, where I've been for certain odd stretches of years. But young Claud thinks I'm a magnate whose affairs keep him rushing around the world. He worships his mother and me. Consider my predicament, Elwes! I was a few years in that Stateside penitentiary – I've done more than one stretch, and more than one lagging —" a *stretch* is a year at hard labour; a *lagging*, two years or more, sir.

'Bullivant went on, "I even wrote a song about the quality of the cocoa in six different British jails. Consider, I say, my plight, Elwes. We went down to Devizes to see the kid after I got back from Dieppe. He's honest as the daylight; but simple. Damn those schools! Double damn that school in

Gloucestershire! It set Emilie and me back a fortune, and they never even taught him to write properly – only a sort of print. He still has his illusions about me. . . ."

'I asked him, "What are you going to do about it?" Bullivant said, "I worked it out on the way down – Emilie and I did. I came the heavy father. I told him it was my theory a young man must make his own way, the way – this is only what I *said* – the way I made mine. I deposited fifteen hundred pounds to his credit, for him to buy into a Law Firm after he qualified. His board and lodging, etcetera, I would take care of. His mother told him she expected great things of him. . . . Elwes, I'm on my way down. That man was right who said you couldn't keep on one level, either of good or evil. It broke our hearts, but for his own sake we've washed our hands of the boy. I don't ask it for my sake or for Emilie's – for I know you don't like us, and quite right, too. But if the chance comes your way, Elwes, try and help the boy, will you? I think you're a good man, Elwes, you know. . . ."

'I asked, "How does your wife take all this?" "Between us, and it's unusual in a Frenchwoman," said Bullivant, "she has developed a habit of drowning her sorrows in you-know-what. Remember what I said, Elwes. I couldn't face things any more if the kid found out that his father was a jail-bird. . . ."

'Well, sir, I did the best I could. But the young fellow Claud was, in a manner of speaking, irresponsible. While there was no harm in him, there was by the same token no good in him. For his preparatory school in Gloucestershire was one of these progressive affairs, in which young people are suppose to govern themselves. You know: smash up the furniture; only if you want a chair to sit on afterwards, go and mend one. That kind of rubbish. I'd just like to see some brat try it on old Lord Snaphaunce's Chippendale!

'The long and the short of it was, I'm afraid, that Claud Pichegrue, as he was called, went wrong. Your pardon, sir – he never *went* anywhere. He got into bad company and, being used to moving in a group, was caught up in it. The Devizes solicitor,who had his reputation to think of, tore up his Articles and wrote to his father; but the letter came back for the Bullivants had moved, and nobody knew where, except me. They were reduced to a two-room flat in Regent Square, off the Gray's Inn Road, and Bullivant was in one of the more unsavoury branches of the estate agency business around Soho. The lawyer kept a close mouth and wrote the matter off.

'Claud, now turned seventeen, having eaten and drunk, but mostly lent and frittered away, his fifteen hundred, got into a nasty scrape in Bristol. Was drawn into it, rather, by some of his flash companions whom he joined in robbing a shop. It was a clumsy and obvious job. Claud, of course, was left holding the bag. The police knew all about him, they said, and the kind of company he had been keeping. The fact of his having kept out of trouble so long seemed evidence of preternatural cunning. The magistrate said that young Claud's having had education and opportunities made matters so much the worse. Claud maintained a stunned silence, which was interpreted as sullenness. So the unlucky simpleton was sent to a reformatory for two years, being too young for jail.

'I got to Bristol from York too late to say a word or go bail for him. But I was there when he came out – uncorrupted by bad company, but sobered by the discipline. So I said to him, "Young fellow, I don't know what I am going to do with you. God help you, you are a hither-and-thithering sort of creature, and I feel a moral duty towards you as being just about the Least of These. Having retired from service I have taken the lease on a public house in Marlowe Mews

in London. Come with me where I can keep an eye on you, and I'll teach you at least how to be a waiter and a cellar-man."

'He said, "I don't know how to thank you, Mr Elwes. I'll serve you with my last breath. Only, as for what has happened – never let my mother and father get to hear of it. They are prominent people. It would break their hearts if they knew that their son had been a jail-bird. . . .'

'I said, "I've covered up for better men than you. We'll change your name, shall we? – because the You-Know-Where is a gossipy sort of house.' And so I brought him home.

There was a timid tap at the parlour door. A quiet voice asked, 'Will there be anything else, sir?'

Mr Elwes answered, 'Go to bed, Claud.' Then, turning to me, he said, 'You understand, now, why Bullivant is barred the house?'

I said, 'For everybody's sake, presumably. I imagine the Bullivants, too, would prefer to be remembered as idols in mists of perfume, clouds of cigar-smoke, and all that. And the Bullivants, I take it, don't know that their son was sent to a reformatory?'

'I believe definitely not, sir.'

'Still, Claud has seen them, hasn't he?'

'Ah, but from a distance. One thing is certain. Bullivant might get over the shock of learning that Claud has been a jailbird. But it would positively break poor Emilie's heart if she discovered that her son had turned out to be a mere servant, and to the likes of me.'

I was impelled to say, 'If it is a virtue to return good for evil, you are indeed a good man, Mr Elwes.' He waved this away.

'She was a loyal woman,' said he. 'Let a Higher Authority

sum her up. As for my being a good man, sir, I am sure that I'm a very sleepy one. . . .'

I rose. He added, 'Of course, I could make you up a bed in the spare room.'

Mr Elwes's hint was too broad to be ignored. I said good night, and went on my way.

Fabulous Bargain

In the trade, some sinister similes were applied to Mr Hadad – he evoked images of danger. 'A coiled spring wrapped in fat, such as the Eskimoes use for catching bears,' said one. Another said, 'Dealing with Hadad is like feeling for a double-edged razor-blade on a slippery floor in the dark.' But in the discreet light of his shop, which was the shyest of all those shops off Fifth Avenue where sensitive tradesmen seem to hide for fear of customers, Mrs Gourock saw only a plump, creamy-skinned, spaniel-eyed little man, forlorn in posture, smiling wistfully. Mrs Gourock was a woman who knew what she wanted, and had the wherewithal to buy it.

'I want a rug for my husband's study,' she said. 'How much is the thing in the window?'

The jeweller in that street exhibited one pearl; the milliner one hat; and Hadad one rug.

'Oh, that? —' said Hadad, thinking: *Some women's egos need inflating; others invite a pinprick* '– the silk Bijar? Oh, say twelve thousand dollars.'

Taken aback, then, she said, 'It's for my husband's study. Twelve thousand dollars!'

'Ah,' said Hadad, 'for your husband's study. You have in mind something somewhat less costly. First, pray be seated,

and let me offer you a cup of coffee. . . . Oh, Dikran – coffee, please —'

And he said to himself: *If a woman like this one buys her husband gifts, she is up to some hanky-panky. She is a payer of payments, not a giver of gifts.*

'– Perhaps a Bijar is too blazing a blue for the seclusion of a study; it is hard to read on a Bijar,' he told her. 'On the other hand, there is something gently hypnotic about a Sarafan. I love a Sarafan. But such as I have here would perhaps cost more than you would be prepared to spend, just for a study.'

'What's that one up there?' she asked, pointing to the wall behind Hadad. 'Is it a rug? Or a tapestry? And why is it framed?'

'So many questions all in one breath!' said Hadad, laughing. 'It is framed, dear lady, because I had it framed. And its history is not for ladies to hear —'

'Do you take me for a child?'

Hadad shook his head, and surmised: *About thirty-nine years and six months old, you; without counting your teeth.*

'In any case, it is a sort of curiosity, ma'am, which you wouldn't care to buy even if it were for sale,' he said.

'Why? How d'you know?'

'Ah, coffee,' said Hadad. His assistant drew up a low table, and set down a tray.

'I can't eat that Turkish Delight,' said Mrs Gourock.

Hadad said, 'Other Rahat Lakoum you cannot eat. This you will eat. . . . Now let me think what would be nice for your husband's study. He is a quiet, reserved man, I think?'

'How d'you know?'

Because, Hadad decided, wordlessly, *it is generally the gentle ones that get grabbed in marriage by great brassy cowardly women like you, who would have your cake and eat it too. Also, I think he has a controlled devil of a temper, and the money is all his – or*

why should you be all of a sudden so considerate of him in his study?

Meanwhile, he murmured, 'I have Mosul, Kir Shehr, and sumptuous Teheran; I have Kirman, Shiraz, and silken Tabriz; and I have Bergama, I have Fereghan, I have Khorasan —'

'I want you to tell me what that is in the frame.'

'Well,' said Hadad, smiling, 'it is *not* something you can get at Mejjid's Auction Rooms in Atlantic City, where – unless my memory deceives me, which it never does – you bought for three hundred dollars a pair of Chinese vases worth, alas, about forty.' He added, '29th June, 1950.'

Then his voice faded, his lips parted, his eyelids drooped, and Mrs Gourock was reminded of Peter Lorre in a murder-movie: Hadad had just that lost, sick, hopeless look.

He forestalled her inevitable, 'How d'you know?' by saying, 'It happens that I was there at the time, and I never forget a face. You were bidding against an old lady in an immense straw hat. Her name was Kitty. She was, of course, a shill.'

'I like auctions,' said Mrs Gourock. 'I didn't want the vases. I've paid more – oh, so much more – than three hundred dollars for two hours' entertainment. . . .' She was surprised to catch herself excusing herself. 'What's a shill?'

'You know,' said Hadad, 'that if anyone is running a so-called game of chance at a fair, somebody must appear to win *pour encourager les autres*. Thus, at a pea-and-thimble game, a seemingly silly farmer will win a hundred dollars when the audience is gathering. He is a shill, employed by the thimble-rigger, and he is not paid in real money.

'Conversely, at a certain type of auction-sale, somebody must get an obvious bargain to excite the onlookers. He pays the auctioneer with a fictitious cheque, and later hands back his purchase; for he is an employee of the auctioneer. Some-

times he forces up the bidding, as Kitty did in the case of those awful vases of yours, and drops out at the last moment —'

'I want you to tell me about that thing in the frame,' said Mrs Gourock, dogged as a spoiled child. Hadad seemed not to have heard her; he went right on.

'– Thus, the attics and thrift shops of the nation are full of Mejjid's stuff, all bought by people who cannot for the life of them say just what made them blurt out that last silly bid before the auctioneer cried, "Gone!" It's no disgrace to you: it is like feeding a slot-machine with silver dollars, but warmer, less impersonal – only, once in ten thousand tries, a slot-machine will disgorge a jackpot, and Mejjid will never disgorge anything.

'You know how it is, dear lady. There is the double-fronted window. On the left, about a quarter of a million dollars' worth of Oriental rugs. On the right, such preposterous objects that you simply *must* stop for a laugh: a pair of silver epergnes, each with sixteen candlesticks and forty-two glass dishes upheld by fat Cupids; a marble Hercules four feet high wrestling with an onyx Death for the ivory body of Alcestis, the whole weighing about six hundred pounds; and so forth. It is fun, it is part of the holiday scene. You look in – only for fun, mind. No harm in that, eh?

'The Auctioneer is about to *give* away a cut-class lemonade set, free of charge. He doesn't want to – personally, he'd cherish such a lemonade-set; make an heirloom of it. But he's paid (sigh) to give things away. . . . *How*ever, first things first; and here's a Moorish coffee-table. . . . Everybody nudges everybody else as the auction-room fills up; everybody is there to kill time. Nobody's going to buy anything at all. The joke's on Mejjid, eh? Poor old Mejjid!

'And so, for the coffee-table some joker bids fifty cents, and there is a titter when a grim old lady in inappropriate

shorts calls seventy-five. Then it's a dollar. "– *And* four bits," says a fat man with a cigar. "– *And* a quarter," you say, just to keep the ball rolling. It really is fun, no? All you have to do is keep saying "– *And* a quarter," and sit back and watch your neighbours making fools of themselves. The bidding is up to thirteen, let us say. "– *And* a quarter," you call, waiting for the inevitable. It doesn't happen.

'All of a sudden, you are the loneliest person in the world, for it is, "*Gone* to the lady for thirteen dollars and twenty-five cents!" —'

Mrs Gourock said, 'About that hanging, or whatever it is, in the frame . . .'

'Yes, yes,' said Hadad, offering her a cigarette. 'Now once upon a time – no, never mind. . . . A rug for a study, eh?'

'Once upon a time what?'

With a helpless gesture, Hadad said, 'You are a very dangerous lady. You must know everything. Once upon a time, driven by necessity, I worked as a shill for Mejjid.'

'Yes, but what about that?' She pointed to the framed tapestry.

'Madam, are you determined to drive me frantic?' cried Hadad, clutching his head. 'I will tell you about it, since you are so insistent. Did you ever hear of the Mighty Mektoub? No, I think not. But you have heard of Casanova? Of Don Juan? Naturally; everybody has. Well, Mektoub was the Syrian Casanova; only Casanova was a mere sower of wild oats, and Don Juan nothing but a juvenile delinquent, compared with Mektoub. His exploits were put into verse by one Shams-ud-Din, in the seventeenth century, but it would take an epic poet like Firdausi, or Homer, to do justice to him as a fighter, a hunter, and, above all, a lover.'

'I'd like to read it. Where can I get a copy?'

'Dear lady, you cannot – the only known copy of that

poem is in the possession of King Farouk. The tapestry you see was Mektoub's counterpane, and it is supposed to convey to its owner some of Mektoub's remarkable powers —'

'And does it? It doesn't!' said Mrs Gourock. 'Does it?'

'Let me proceed,' said Hadad. 'I say, I was one of Mejjid's shills – to my eternal shame and sorrow – for I spoke little English at that time, and had an aged father to support. And I hated Mejjid, with reason. With excellent reason, but that is private and, in a way, sacred.'

'Why?'

'It was not,' said Hadad, looking reproachfully at her, 'it was not that he underpaid me; that was nothing. It was not that – falsely calling himself Mejjid Effendi, a title to which he had no more right than a pig has to the name of Lion – he publicly humiliated me. For I am descended from the kings of Edom, madam, and cannot be insulted by an inferior. A Hadad would not own a dog with the pedigree of a Mejjid.'

'What was it then?'

Hadad sighed. 'I do not know why I tell you this,' he murmured. 'Simply, by bringing the force of his money to bear upon her father, he married my fiancée, a girl of sixteen.'

'How old was Mejjid?'

'Sixty-eight. He had outlived four wives,' said Hadad.

'Pretty hard on the poor girl,' said Mrs Gourock.

'It would be cruelty to animals to marry a hyena to the likes of Mejjid. Still, she bore him three daughters, old as he was. Let us not talk of her any more, if you please. I say, I was Mejjid's shill, and his most trusted one, because he knew that as a gentleman I would die sooner than cheat him. These people make capital out of honour,' said Hadad. 'So it was my business to "buy in" the Mektoub Counterpane.'

'Oh, I see,' said Mrs Gourock. 'But if Mejjid prized it so highly, why didn't he keep it at home?'

'He took it home with him every evening, after I had brought it back – but it is in the nature of a certain type to derive a thrill from imperilling what they value most. So, with me to trust, Mejjid could enjoy every day the sensation of the reckless gambler whose fortune trembles on the turn of a card, and his overwhelming joy when he is dealt the ace to his king; although, with me to trust, he could be sure that he risked nothing. I hope I make myself clear?'

'Yes. So I suppose you had a copy made, and —'

'No, dear lady!' said Hadad, sharply; while the commentator in his head said, *That is just the sort of thing you would have done, you exceedingly horrible woman!*

'I said, my honour was involved,' he said. 'Even if it had not been, Mejjid would not have been fooled for a moment by a substitute. You cannot deceive a man who knows carpets with a fake, any more than you can make a jeweller believe that paste is diamond. I had to *buy* the Mektoub Counterpane – but in order to buy it, I must force the sale, for Mejjid would not part with it at any price.'

'I'd just have walked off with it instead of giving it back,' said Mrs Gourock.

'That, sweet lady, is not Hadad's way. I will tell you what I did. Every day or so, you see, I bought the Counterpane at Mejjid's auction. I was one of those shills that get the unmistakable bargains, you understand. Mejjid had provided me with a cheque-book of the Jersey Provincial Bank, Boardwalk Branch. The cheque I signed was, of course, worthless – I signed myself *I. Mehrabi*, sometimes, and sometimes *T. F. Hafiz*, or *Aram Aramian*, or by any name but my own.

'So came the fatal afternoon when I bid for the Mektoub Counterpane for the last time. The auctioneer introduced it as a "Rare piece of Persian tapesty, in perfect condition, dating back to the year 1580 A.D.", and somebody started the bidding at ten dollars. The auctioneer was shocked, and

rightly so for once. This was one of those days, as auctioneers call periods when things go limp and slack, and interest lies dormant and will not be aroused; generally just before a thunderstorm.

'One of those days. . . . He flogged that crowd and yipped at them like a cowboy rounding up cattle. "Twenty-five, twenty-five, who'll say forty? – Thirty, thirty-five, sixty! – Forty, forty, do I hear fifty? – Fifty-five, fifty-five, sixty! – Seventy, seventy, who said eighty? – Eighty, ninety, ninety, *and* five, ninety-five, one hundred, one hundred – "Two hundred," I said, and someone cried, "– *And* fifty!" "Two hundred and fifty," cried the auctioneer, "who says two seventy-five? – Three, I hear three, three, three! – *And* twenty-five, three twenty-five, three twenty-five, three *fifty!*" He became very brisk then, and talked very fast, "Threefifty-threefifty-goinggoing – *gone* to the gentleman over there for three hundred and fifty dollars! – And if you can find a tapestry to equal that on Fifth Avenue for three thousand I'll eat my hat! . . . Right, let's see that pair of antique brass candlesticks. . . ."

'I took the tapestry with trembling hands, for if the bidding, by some chance, had gone fifty dollars higher, my plan would have come to nothing – although the virtue of this same plan was that it could wait another day, or week, or month, if need be. I wrote my cheque on the Jersey Provincial Bank, but this time I signed it with my own name, Mansur Hadad. Then I carried the tapestry away, while the crowd gave its slightly stimulated interest to the next lot.

'I went to my room, and waited. As I expected, Mejjid rang me somewhat later, and shouted, "Why weren't you here at six?" I replied, "Because I preferred not to be there at six." "I'm coming over," he said. So he did. He asked for his Mektoub Counterpane. "What do you mean, *your*

Mektoub Counterpane?" I asked him. "It's mine." Something in my manner must have alarmed him, for he became sweet as honey. "Of course," he said, "I understand – you're playing a little joke on poor old Mejjid; you want a raise, and this is your funny little way of asking for it. He-he-he! Eh?"

'I said to him, "Mejjid, you son of a dog, you brother of seventeen vile sisters —" I cannot properly tell you what I called him, and in any case it loses in the translation "– you have seen the last of the Mektoub. Go away, before I beat you about the head with a stick. The transaction is complete. The Counterpane is mine."

'He said, "I don't think you understand American law, little fellow. You have stolen my property and swindled me, and I can send you to prison for a number of years. You have to get up pretty early in the morning to steal a march on Mejjid Effendi. Give me back my property. I have not yet torn up the cheque you so foolishly signed. It is 'No Account'. You have committed a felony."

'Feigning innocence, I said, "The other cheques were not good, because I signed them with false names. But this one *is* good, because I signed it with my own.'

'"Give me the Mektoub, and we'll forget this folly," said he. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse. You have broken the law. I will forgive you."

'"The only law I have broken," I said, "is the law that prohibits the keeping of pigs in houses. Go!"

'He said, "I suppose, in your ignorance, you imagine that I fear a scandal. Ha! I have connections, you little crook, connections – I am wired in, if you understand the phrase."

'"I do not," I said. "Unless you refer to the fencing farmers use in America to restrain beasts."

'"I'll have you in jail tonight," he shouted, and ran out. Surely enough, in a very short time he returned with a

policeman in uniform and another in plain clothes, and had me arrested on a charge of swindling him by passing a worthless cheque.

'He begged to the last for the Mektoub Counterpane. "Give it me, and all's forgotten and forgiven," he cried, piteously, until the detective whispered something about compounding a felony.

'I said, "It is where you'll never find it." As a matter of fact, Mejjid was standing on it, for I had laid it under the cheap hooked rug that was on the floor of my little room. So I went to jail —'

Mrs Gourock cried, "No! For how long?"

Hadad replied, 'For exactly sixteen hours. Mejjid, you see, was so perfectly certain that this last cheque, like all the others, was so much stage-money; he acted impulsively. He did not know that I had opened an account in my right name at the Jersey Provincial Bank and, by starving myself and living like a worm, had saved three hundred and eighty dollars. That cheque was good. I had legitimately bought the Mektoub Counterpane. It was mine! At all events, it was not Mejjid's. Then I sued him for false arrest.

'He settled out of court for ten thousand dollars. "Your account is paid, O perverter of innocence," I told him. And with this money, I went into business on my own, dealing in nothing but goods of the most superlative and unquestionable quality and value, adhering always to the honest truth thereafter, so that my brief career as accomplice to Mejjid is behind me – finished – a dream. Mejjid himself, though apparently hale and hearty, suddenly became decrepit, a vegetable. I married his widow. Now I have told you everything.'

'Tell me,' said Mrs Gourock, 'is there really any truth in that Mektoub Counterpane story? I mean, about making its owner like . . . '

Hadad shrugged. 'That is not for me to say,' he said.

'Why not? It's yours, isn't it? And why do you keep it in a frame?'

'Dear lady,' said Hadad, 'youth needs no enchantments – youth is its own magic. I have had my moments. Now, I keep the Mektoub Counterpane in a glazed frame, because it might be more than my life is worth to take it out.'

'Why?'

'Madam, I am afraid of it – I have a weak heart. Now, concerning this rug for your husband's study . . .'

'Eh? Oh, that. You choose one,' said Mrs Gourock.

'I have a very rich old Bukhara – the perfect thing for leather-bound books, lamplight, and contemplation – that I can let you have for thirty-five hundred dollars.'

'Yes, I suppose so. All right, I'll have that. Wrap it up,' said Mrs Gourock, 'but do you know, I'm interested in curios. Antiques with a history. You know?'

'Alas, I deal only in carpets and tapestries,' said Hadad.

'How much would you want for that Mektoub Counterpane?'

'*What?* I beg your pardon! Its intrinsic value – about fifteen thousand dollars – aside, it has other significances, my good lady,' said Hadad, with something like indignation, his hands on his heart.

'Now look —' said Mrs Gourock, moving. 'Listen —' An hour later, gasping painfully, Hadad swallowed a pill.

'Pray talk no more, ma'am, I have no strength to argue,' he said. 'For heaven's sake, take the accursed Mektoub! Give me twenty thousand and take it away!'

She took out her cheque-book.

'After all, perhaps I am getting a little too tired for even such memories as the Mektoub invokes,' said Hadad. 'With the Bukhara, it will be twenty-three thousand, five hundred. Do you want the frame, Madam?'

'I think not. No, I don't want the frame.'

'Dikran, take the Mektoub out of the frame. Now, where shall I send these, good lady?'

'Here's my address,' she said, writing on a pad. 'Send —' she paused '– wait a moment. Let's get this straight: send the Bukhara rug to Mr Ingram Gourock, at that address – put the Mektoub in my car, I'll take it with me.'

'If you are not going directly home, sweet lady, it can be delivered before you arrive —'

'It doesn't concern you *where* I . . . Just put it in my car,' said Mrs Gourock, in some confusion.

When she was gone, Dikran asked, 'What shall I put in the frame this time, Mr Hadad?'

'I will think of something appropriate to its size. First, take this cheque to the bank. And, Dikran!'

'Sir?'

'Wipe that silly grin off your face.'

'Yes, Mr Hadad,' said Dikran.

More Than Once Upon a Time

Hearing footsteps, the young woman rose, holding high the bright tiara of her coppery hair. The low sun caught the bloom of her skin so that she was outlined for a moment in a tingling radiance. Smiling with pleasure she looked down over the garden. A bronzed girl with golden hair walked sedately out of the shade of the wood into the light of the late afternoon, proudly balancing a basket on her head and carrying a round-bellied earthenware bottle as a princess might carry an orb.

'Good evening to you, my darling! You grow prettier every day!' cried the woman.

'Good evening to you, aunt,' said the girl, with a wide, white smile, setting down basket and bottle with a dainty gesture of deference that was at the same time ceremonious and familiar. Then she said, 'My uncle being away at the hunt with the other men, mother sent me to keep you company. She made fresh bread and tapped the new wine – and here are eggs and butter and salt and cream cheese, and honey and apples, too.'

Gravely touching the gifts the woman murmured the formula, 'Long may our hearts be fresh and free to enjoy all good things in peace and quiet.'

In proper form, the girl responded, 'Giving again what we have been given, making again what we have broken, seen or unseen.'

'Amen. I see by your bright face that your mother is well, and so are you. Spread a cloth on the grass, my dear, and let us get dishes and cups. You can eat a second supper, I suppose?'

'Yes, if you please, aunt,' said the girl, and ran into the cottage to get the coarse white cloth and the polished wooden bowls. She unpacked the basket.

'However long I may live, may the scent of new bread always be marvellous to me!' said the woman, inhaling the fragrance of a warm loaf. 'May we both say the same fifty years from now! . . . How old are you now, sweetheart?'

The girl said, 'I am nearly nine. My brother,' she added, 'is ten.'

'Ah, then soon he must leave his mother's house and live among men for seven years, and learn what he is fit to be. The Master Craftsmen will put him to this kind of work and that, until one day his destiny will be revealed to him – his trade, its art and mystery.'

'He is lucky,' said the girl.

'So are you. Your destiny is already revealed. You shall be a beautiful woman, a beloved wife and mother. Not for us the anguish of seeking and the pain of finding, my dear! We are women, and that is enough.'

'Aunt, when will your baby be born?'

'By the end of this summer, I think.'

'Will it be a boy or a girl?'

The woman laughed. 'You are as bad as your brother when it comes to asking silly questions,' she said. 'How should I know, and why should I care?'

'He *does* ask silly questions,' said the girl, very seriously. 'He asked mother how far a man can go into a forest.'

'Silly question indeed,' the woman said, with her easy laugh. 'Even I know the answer to that. A man can go exactly half way into a forest. After that, he is coming out of the forest.'

'But how far is half —' the girl began.

'Stop!' said the woman, laying a finger on the girl's mouth. 'My grandmother used to say – your great-grandmother, that was – that idle questions beget false answers. Asking for asking's sake tempts people to pretend to knowledge. The end is confusion.'

'Mother says so, too. But why is that?'

'Man is so made that when he begins to demand the whys and the wherefores, the whithers and the whences, he'll go mad and die trying to measure the sky with a twig. Once, men thought they could do this.'

'But they couldn't?' said the girl.

'Of course not. No good came of it. We know better now. We wonder, my sweet, we wonder, yes; and let it rest at that.'

'But I don't see why we should.'

'We are a happy people. When your understanding is stronger you will know what it is to be happy. Your prayers will have their full meaning, then. . . . My child, we fear great measurements. You must know how far it is to the other side of the forest? Bless your heart – go and find out! But we talk as little as possible of nearness and farness, and we make no marks signifying such things. If somebody tells you that two crossed sticks means the distance from here to the moon, are you any the wiser? The men go out and see the world when they are big enough, and come home with a story, or a song, or something good; they measure their journeys against things done and seen, the obstacles overcome. So they learn that one man's pace is another man's crawl, one man's year is another man's month, and time and distance

are the same – a dream, a dream! There is a curse on hidden numbers and endless reckonings.'

They folded the cloth and put away the dishes. The woman brought out a brightly coloured blanket and two soft pillows. 'Let's be comfortable,' she said.

'Auntie dear,' said the girl, rubbing her cheek against the woman's dimpled knee, 'what happened to the mad men who wanted to measure the sky with a twig?'

'Promise not to ask how or why, and I'll tell you.'

'I promise!'

'You see, my dear, they were our fathers before us. But first – how must every story begin?'

'*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*,' said the girl.

'*And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep* —'

'– *And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters!*'

'Quite right. But you know, ours was not the only world that was created. Under other heavens there were other worlds.'

'The same as this?'

'No, why should they be? An endless number of worlds, great and small, with people of every size and shape, under suns and moons of all the colours you can think of – and many more. Why, even here you may see that there are not even two grains of sand exactly alike, if you look closely. We never do look very closely, though; too near is as bad as too far, and too little and too big are the same thing – both end in madmen's numbers, you see.

'But as I was telling you, there were other worlds than ours. Some of these worlds, by man's reckoning, were much older than ours, and being older they had picked up a great deal of curious learning and all manner of strange knowledge.

Oh, they were wise ones, some of the people of those old worlds!'

The girl asked, 'Were they like us?'

'Well, the people I am talking about were like us in many ways, yes. But they were not half as strong as I am, and as you will be. They thought too much, you see, and took no exercise. They made engines to dig for them, and cook for them, and hunt for them, and see and hear for them, and sing and dance for them —'

'Poor people! Not much fun in that, auntie dear?'

'Not much fun – poor people indeed. They had been led astray by the madness of numbers until they believed in nothing but what they could count and measure, although the numbers they played with were too great, one way or another, to be imagined, let alone seen. Now you know the law: that if you want wood, you may cut down a tree, and welcome, but where you have cut down one tree you must plant two more?'

'*Giving again what we have been given*,' the girl quoted.

'And making again what we have broken. Quite right. Now these people, clever though they were, took and took from their world. So wasteful and needless were they in their vanity that they even took pride in using up every little bit of what they had. Their earth got tired. Their world got older. And one day they woke up to find that they were in terrible danger. The air they breathed – which was the same as our air – was getting thin and tasteless, and their water was nearly all drunk up. For all their wisdom, their prize was dust!

'And so they decided that they must leave the world they had sucked dry to the rind, and find a fresh world to live in. Now this was easier said than done, because where they ived was right at the very outside edge of all Creation. Places rich with good earth, fresh air, clear water and all that goes

with these fine things are hard to find. For why should God repeat Himself?'

The girl asked, 'What did they do?'

'They made magic with their numbers and their signs, and looked through tubes they had made to scan vast distances; and they saw that there was such a world. For why should God *not* repeat Himself? Only it was ever so far away. It was this very world that you and I find so pleasant now.'

'How far away?'

'I haven't any way of telling you. Anyway, you promised not to ask how or why. However . . . think of something that runs fast.'

'A deer?'

'How long would it take for a deer to run from here to the woods?'

'Perhaps as long as it would take me to count up to six?'

'What is faster than a deer?'

'A deer-fly.'

'But the fastest thing of all is lightning. How long does it take the lightning to come all the way from the clouds and strike? So small a time that its littleness is too great for us to measure. Now think how far a flash of lightning would travel in a year.'

'I can't.'

'Wait! Now that oak tree over there is five times a hundred years old. How far, do you think, could a flash of lightning fly in as long as it would take for fifty oak trees like that to grow and die, one after another? . . . Well, that's how far away this world was, that I am telling you about.'

'I think I see why there is a curse on hidden numbers,' said the girl, wrinkling her forehead. 'They're silly!'

The woman laughed, and stroked the child's golden head. 'Now these ancient people had another difficulty, too. Their

sun was burning itself out, and before it died they knew that it would give one last flare, the way a dying lamp does; and in that great blaze they and their world together would burn to a pinch of ashes. So, while they found out how to get all the way here to our world, they had to hang a shady canopy between themselves and their sun, which was growing hotter and hotter.'

'Put the whole world under a canopy? How?' the girl asked.

'They covered the entire sky with a cloud of dust. You see, far from their place but under the same sun, other worlds moved. With the terrible instruments these people had at their command, they smashed one of these other worlds to powder. So they won time to work in the shade; for it is the light of the sun that kills sooner than the heat of it.'

'Were there people on that other world?'

'Oh, they didn't care about *that*!'

'Bad people!'

'Afraid people.'

'But how did they smash the other poor world to powder?'

'They knew how to bottle the thunderbolts and hurl them to immense distances. I don't know how, and I don't want to know how. I know – because my great-grandmother told me so – that these thunderbolts of theirs went as fast as lightning, and whatever they struck went back to the dust of which all things are made.'

'Like *that*?' the girl clapped her hands.

'In coloured fire and a noise like dropping a red-hot stone into water. So the wise people made their thunderbolts.'

'More than one thunderbolt?'

'Two. They foresaw all kinds of things. So, the moment came, and – *whoosh!* – away went the first, with the rush of a storm!'

'Yes? And?'

'And it missed its mark, and went flying away into empty space. But they were prepared with the second thunderbolt. This struck fair and square. A world flew to dust, and under the cover of darkness the people made a vessel to carry them right across Creation to our fresh green world. Now I have told you that their thunderbolts travelled only as fast as lightning. I have also told you how long it would take a flash of lightning to travel from that world to this. A lifetime for one of these people was no longer than it is for one of us. So they had to find a way to travel *without moving!*'

'I don't understand,' said the girl.

Her aunt laughed. 'Don't you? Well, say you have a length of yarn fifty paces long. How do you get from one end of it to the other? Why, dear heart, you wind your yarn into a ball, take hold of the end you want, and let go of the other! Simple as that, when you know that Time is only another kind of Distance and you have learned how to catch it. Splice the two, and there you are! . . . But though they, with their engines and their enchantments, could think for a whole lifetime in one moment, still they took a long time learning the trick. And even so only one vessel carrying fourscore of them got away from that wasted world before their sun burst and died.'

'But those fourscore got here?'

'Yes; twenty men, twenty women, twenty boys and twenty girls. Of course, these people had known that they were coming to a cosy, rich new world, such as their own had been ever so long ago, before they had eaten it up. But there were things they could not foresee. Look down at a forest from the top of a cliff. What do you see?'

'The treetops!'

'Looking like what, from where you stand?'

'Like moss – soft moss.'

'Just so. But climb down, and you are among the great dark trees in a twilight, and in this twilight other things are walking; and they are at home, which you are not. And if you and your fathers before you had never learned to lift a finger for yourself, but had been attended to always like a new-born baby, where is your strength when you find yourself alone and unprotected? So the strangers were lost in the woods.

'They had thought, *We shall come from the sky, and the people of the new world will bow down before us as before gods.* They knew how to throw thunderbolts and fight with fires and vapours. They had never thought that a man can throw an axe from the cover of a bush – they were much too refined for such thoughts.

'The men who were in the world at that time were not good-natured people like us. They had no houses, no clothes, no laws, no fire. They lived in trees or caves, and hunted with sticks and stones. Yet, my little love, they were men – they had ten fingers and a soul, and they defied the storms and pulled down the great bears and the tigers. They greeted the newcomers with a shower of rocks that seemed to come from nowhere. Then, when most of the men were dead, the forest people came out from their hiding-places and seized the women and the children and carried them off to their cold dens.

'And it was for this that the wise ones had come through the stars, taking Time by the tail! To be wives and slaves to creatures who were far less human, in their eyes, than monkeys are in ours! Many died of the shame, and of hard usage. But we lived on – we, the women. All the knowledge that had been brought from the edge of creation dribbled and dripped away. Children were born to the womenfolk from the stars, who tried to teach their children what they knew. But their minds were too thick and slow. Almost all the ancient

knowledge was lost. But a memory of it lived on. And for this, sometimes, men have cursed their mothers even while they blessed them, in days gone by. From their mothers, they said, came the memory that lies behind the mind, in which so many strange things lie buried.

'So, soon there came into the world a different breed of men. Without knowing why, they always tried to read things in the sky. That is why you stand so straight – because your forefathers loved to look upwards. This fresh breed knew how to make fire, and use it. Fire, wheels, levers, and the arts of growing grain and taming wild beasts and savage bees did not come by accident, my dear.'

The girl asked, 'What became of the vessel these people rode in?'

'It was only a flimsy thing. Its meaning forgotten, it rusted away. So, after some generations had come and gone our forefathers came out of the wilds and went into the valleys; stopped wandering, and settled by a great river which enriched vast meadows. They planted, built strong houses of stone. Among the first high places they built were towers from which they could look at the stars. They did not know it, but they were sick for home. There was pain in their heads – they were trying to *remember*. But what was it they had forgotten? They did not know, but they felt that it had to do with the stars. They gazed and they gazed, until little by little some of the old, dangerous knowledge of great numbers came back to them.

'Always they hungered after the joys of empty air. They watched the birds. They made wings, they flew.'

'High?' asked the girl.

'Higher than the clouds, faster than the wind! They bitted the seas and harnessed the lightnings. And all the while they bred like flies and ate their fill until the whole world was not big enough or rich enough to hold and feed them all. So they

went to war, tribe against tribe, first with plain iron and at last with thunderbolts.'

'They remembered how to make thunderbolts?'

'Small ones, but still dreadful enough. Man's purpose seemed plain, now. Having settled his differences, he meant to bridle his thunderbolts and ride to the stars. This, he felt, was his high destiny, newly revealed. Little did he know that it was a very, very old thing, painfully remembered and best forgotten! And then came one still night. Some men were watching and listening in one of their star-towers, and catching all the sounds in the world and many from beyond. As you must know, nothing is ever lost. A word spoken is still that word, for ever and ever. Now the men came down from their tower with a strange message.

'They said, "A hundred times two hundred and fifty years ago, a certain People on a world at the edge of Creation broke up another world, to make dust to shelter them from their sun. They hurled two thunderbolts, the like of which even we never dreamed of. One struck its mark. The other missed."

'They were asked, "How does this concern us?"

'They said, "Why, these thunderbolts were sent at the speed of lightning. As luck will have it, the one that missed is rushing between the stars in such a direction that in fifty hundred years from now it must hit us fair and square and smash us to fine dust!"

'The others said, "Why, that's more than fifty lifetimes distant from Now. We'll settle our quarrels first, and then consider what is to be done about it."

'So the watchers sighed, and went back to their towers.'

The girl asked, 'What happened then?'

The woman said, 'Oh, nothing much. Presently, the wars being done, such people as were left found the watchers' message in the ruined tower, and asked what was to be done.

The answer came, "Too late. We have taken more than we have been given and broken more than we have made, seen and unseen. The engines are shattered, the metals are all burnt away, and people are tired. What we sowed in heedlessness we must reap in humility."

'And so then everybody sat down with a fresh and free heart to enjoy the good things that remained in peace and quiet.

'But all this was long, long ago.'

'What of the thunderbolt?' the girl asked.

Her aunt said, 'Perhaps it struck another place. Or perhaps it passed us by and is still going. With all their foresight – as I have shown you – the old ones were more often wrong than right. And perhaps it is still on its way towards us. Who knows?'

The girl snuggled close. 'Auntie, what if it hits us?'

'Why, then, dear heart, the world will be without form, and void; and darkness will be upon the face of the deep —'

'– Ah, but the Spirit of God will move upon the face of the waters,' the girl said.

'Of that, you may rest assured,' said the woman.

Greek Tragedy

Charlie Carapace, you dirty dog – what in the name of all that's dissipated bring *you* to Naples out of season? Oh-oh! I beg your pardon, sir, upon my soul I do. I mistook you for my young cousin, Lord Charlie Carapace, blest if I didn't! But of course, you're an American, aren't you – or aren't you? You aren't? Of course you're not – at a second glance I can see you're not. And, come to think of it, Charlie sports a cork leg. No matter. My name's Bangham; never mind the Major the Honourable – Jack Bangham, 44th West African Rifles. Here's my card. Where's my notecase? Never mind, skip the card, damn the card. Find me at the Grand Hotel. Ask for Major Bangham. Make my apologies there in decent style. Fearfully embarrassed, and all that.

Eh? What? I don't hear too well just now – just consumed a tablespoonful of quinine and half a cup of chlorodyne: malaria and breakbone fever. A drink, is that what you want? Delighted, but can't just now. Be happy to offer a fellow countryman refreshment within moderation – though I don't know you, you know – if only to emphasize apology for hitting you on the back just now. I haven't got my notecase, so you'd better come with me to the Grand. I hate to see a gentleman reduced to . . . well, I've been in temporary

difficulties myself, in my time. Can accommodate you with a small loan, if you like – a very small loan. Don't thank me; come along.

What do you say? Oh, *you* want to offer *me* a drink, is that it? Eh? Ah, case explained. I don't mind if I – *As you were!* Cancel that. I do, sir, I most damnably *do* mind if I do! I told you I came out without my notecase. I couldn't accept. Well, if you insist. It's beastly civil of you, sir.

Sit here on the terrace. Sit on your wallet. I hope you don't carry much money about with you in Naples. You're not a rich man, I hope? No, I thought you were not; I'm glad you are not. The day of the honest rich man is gone. We are in the clutches of licensed and unlicensed larcenists. Don't drink whisky here – they drill hole in bottom o' bottle, draw the right stuff out with a syringe and squirt back rubbing alcohol mixed with iodine. Have cognac. Tell him to leave the bottle. I generally take a tumblerful before lunch, mixed with paregoric, for my Lisbon tummy. And stop giving coins to beggars – they're a confounded cartel – most of 'em own real estate in the suburbs. Scoundrels, one and all.

There's not much anyone can tell me about the underworld, from here to the Red Sea. Helped police Africa, sir. Some feared Bimbashi Jackson; some feared Russell Pasha; but it was the name of Crackerjack Bangham that turned their faces pale grey or slate-blue according to race. I drink to the honest poor. What's your occupation? Eh? A writer? I've known scores of 'em. Ever write travel books? No? Good. They're a pack of lies, without exception. But I could tell you some stories! From the *inside*. I have lived, sir, with a capital L. From frying-pan to fire is the goal of the higher vertebrate, and I am no jellyfish. True, I have had my ups and downs. Life has sharpened its claws on me, like a leopard against a tree; I am scarred, sir, but my head is still high. Eh? I didn't get these lines in my face through using the

wrong kind of cold cream. What? And I don't wear this black monocle to sell haberdashery, by George! Red-hot iron. Noromi would have had the other eye, if, in the nick of time . . . Drink up.

I've been in trade, too! It shocks you? Pah – we're all hucksters now. I'm one of those Younger Sons Kipling wrote such rot about. But my brother, the present Lord Bangham, ruined by taxation, lives in our porter's lodge and is forced by the Socialists to exhibit himself to the proletariat at sixpence a time three days a week and twice on Sunday. Our tomatoes are on sale to sightseers, who look over the castle and make dirty cracks about our ancestral portraits. George shows them round. Encouraged by their parents, the children pinch him, just to learn that a Lord is but flesh and blood.

They would do that to me once – exactly once. Damme, I've conducted tours, of a sort; and I've sold goods, in a manner of speaking; but – tomatoes! No, I mean, really!

I was in the slave-trade.

Eh? What's the matter? When I left the Service, found myself with little to do and nothing to get. Had a servant – an Ish boy from the White Nile – called him Carbon. Said to him, 'Carbon, I'm going to sell you for a slave.' He said – marvellous sportsmen, the Ish; wonderful discipline – 'May I bring my wife?' I said, 'Jolly good idea.'

Approached American tourists in Cairo. Disguised myself as an Arab, of course. Said, 'Buy a slave, madame?' They were horrified. I'd made out deeds of conveyance in Arabic, all sealed: Carbon and his missus, five hundred dollars the pair. The Yanks went to the police, naturally. But the local inspectors stood to get a twenty per cent commission. They said, 'Nothing we can do. Try the League of Nations, or something.' Finally, Carbon and wife were sold to Yank for two hundred and fifty dollars American. Gave them their

freedom at once, of course; tore up indentures and invited them to come to America as a couple, cook-housekeeper and so forth. The only meat the Ish cook happens to be man, I may mention in parenthesis; but they are very handy with an axe in single combat.

Being free, Carbon and better half came straight back to me. I sold 'em eighty-six times before the business folded. Sent 'em home with a fortune in trade-goods. Made a king of Carbon, I did. The purchasers were made to feel virtuous. Three of 'em wrote sensational articles for the true-life magazines, and one old fellow got a whole book out of it. Everybody happy.

Then – always disguised – I acted as guide-cum-bodyguard to visitors who'd read Sax Rohmer and thought there was a Secret City inside Cairo. Tricky business, this. You see there ain't any Secret City. It took stage-managing. With brains, sir, one can make a Secret City inside Omaha, Nebraska or Surbiton, let alone Cairo or Alexandria.

As a side-line I took a little of the Stabbed Spy trade. *Eh?* You don't know what *that* is? Great Scott, and you call yourself a writer!

Well. You know the old Apache-dance business, in Paris? Seedy-looking fellow in slovenly cap drags girl who is far from *comme il faut* round the room by her back hair in a bistro. She kicks him. He kicks her. She knifes him. Police-whistle blows. Everybody runs. Infernal fake – girl didn't really kill the fellow. But everybody's thrilled. Nobody's hurt. Money has circulated. All's well. Dismiss!

The Stabbed Spy is an Oriental version of the same, but I elaborated it. We'll come to that in proper order. First things first.

Writers. Sir, I have little to thank writers for. Present company excepted, always found 'em difficult. A lady-writer almost ruined me. She wrote sensational stuff about the East,

politely catalogued as 'non-fiction'. Her syntax was sublimely awful. Grammar she had none. She was without sense, of observation or of humour, of direction or of proportion. She was envied by housewives all over the world as being free, untrammelled, widely-travelled. Sir, she knew as little of the world as a cabin-steward in a liner. Not content with butchering the English language she must needs make hash of several others. She was the only person on earth who ever made an Arab sheikh laugh out loud in the presence of a visitor. It was the way she thought she talked the lingo. She translated literally. Hence, thinking she was telling the old man that his new-born son was a fine little boy, she said, 'You are the father of an attenuated midget.' Hoping that he and his tribe might wax fat, as the salutation sometimes goes, she said, 'Get corpulent on bees' grease.' Then she told him to go and bite his grandmother – Lord knows what she meant by *that*. Luckily, old boy had sense of humour.

Such women start wars. I've seen whole tribes exterminated for less. But such women always get away with it. She was a lady, though, every inch of her. And there were a lot of inches, straight up and down. Mannish-looking. Air of no-nonsense-about-me, kind of style. And underneath it all, a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl, ready to swallow anything; a holy innocent. But with breed. Race. I could have loved that woman, tripe and all. I refer not to the lady's digestive system, but to her books. Her name must remain unmentioned, sir.

I learned that she wanted to write a book about Forbidden Cities – whatever the deuce *they* may be – and if she wanted harmless sensation, I was her man. I started off with a secret message, slipped into her hand by a blind beggar outside Shepheard's Hotel. It read: *Let nobody read this. Disguise yourself, as best you can. Be at the corner of X Street outside the shop of Oromyxos the hairdresser at nine tonight. A blue cab will stop. The*

driver will whistle three times. Get in. Have no fear. Swallow this note.

For her convenience I had written it on confectioners' wafer-paper flavoured with vanilla. I waited for her at my place, got up rather wickedly in a black alpaca suit and a *tarboosh*; and believe me, I can look pretty villainous if I try. Have to in the African Service. My cabbie brought her. I had a shock. Damme if she hadn't dressed herself like a bedouin, in a burnous! And she had put on a little black moustache. A Charlie Chaplin moustache, as I live and breathe! In the dim light, the effect wasn't bad at all.

Know what? It touched my heart. Remembered my sister dressing up for a kid's game. To undeceive her now, as I'd a mind to – and damn the expense – would be to disappoint a child. We'd play the game through, I thought. So I told her I had access to the Secret Pleasure-House of Hassan the Damned, where it was death for a stranger to enter – and worse than death for a woman. Quoted passages from her last book. Complimented her on her inner knowledge. Set a fee – it'd spoil it for her if she thought it cost nothing. Bad psychology. Want to treasure a memory? Pay through the nose for it.

Of course, I wasn't taking her anywhere dangerous. The Hassan the Damned outfit was a rig, sir – exclusive, expensive, etcetera – but nothing but a tourist-trap. All-in-all, the place was somewhat more respectable than a well-run Chicago night club. Only one went from apartment to apartment, each darker than the last. Every now and again there was an awful outcry of women, howling their heads off. A recording – one of me ideas. Once, two mighty Nubians dragged a shrieking blonde girl, heavily chained, along a corridor.

'A slave,' I told my guest.

'What are they going to do to her?'

'Kill her, I fancy,' I said, with real Oriental calm. No need to be otherwise than calm. Blonde girl was a respectable manicurist. Married to an oboe-player. Name of Nellie.

Then, from behind a curtain, came a most appalling noise. Never liked it myself – jarred even me when I wasn't expecting it – a rather scratched old wire-recording of hyenas feeding. Nothing quite like it. Beats stuck pigs hollow.

'What on earth was that?' asks my lady.

'Hassan keeps an ancient crocodile in a certain pool,' I say.

I admired that gel's nerve, by George! She says, 'I've heard crocodiles. They roar.'

Ever so suave, I say, 'True. But not while eating.'

Then there was music. Grey-bearded men sat on cushions and sipped coffee while we drank pink champagne. My little authoress said, 'It's out of keeping for Arabs to drink wine. I shouldn't.'

I purred, 'It is forbidden, of course. But anything is out of keeping here that is *not* forbidden.'

Not to give you the whole rigmarole. Imagine Coney Island all mixed up. The Beautiful Algerian Dancing Girl and the Snake Charmer and the Bubble Dancer and the Contortionist astray in the Haunted House, with the Tunnel of Love thrown in. Undertones of the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's. Over all, incense – a beastly lot of incense – and Arab flutes.

When I thought that enough was enough – just after a Nubian with a drawn sword brushed past with a melon dipped in tomato-ketchup wrapped in a towel – I signalled for the star turn, Slimane the Flop, as he was called.

This person was so called because he was clever at playing dead. He could let all his muscles go limp at once. He came in, now, dressed conservatively, but looking drawn and

terrified. He always did: practically chain-smoked hashish. I whispered, 'See that man?'

'He looks ill,' was all she said. All sand and ginger, sir, all nerve and ticker. What a gel!

I said, 'He'd feel worse than he looks if he were recognized. Nasser would give twenty thousand pounds for a chance to question that man for eight hours. He's Faujas de Saint-Fond.'

'A Frenchman?'

'Part French, part Japanese, part Chinese, part Congolese. His real name is Sardikichi M'Bongo Chang Lebrun. He's a spy-master.'

'A master spy?'

'Lady, there is a difference. As, for instance: the owner of a newspaper is a reporter-master; his valued employee is a master-reporter. We had better go, I think.'

'Are you afraid?' she asked.

'Yes. I am,' I said.

'You know him,' says she, 'and he's worth twenty thousand pounds, betrayed. You like money, I'm sure. Why don't you betray him, then?'

'Madame, I am a gentleman,' I said; and I felt horrible. I paid the wretch Slimane five pounds a time for his act. Now I actually was afraid – scared stiff that she'd find out it was all a game. I said, 'Enough. I pay back your fee. We go.'

'We stay,' said she.

So Slimane the Flop – alias etcetera, etcetera – came over, and sat near us, and I gave him a drink of champagne, which he refused, begging for coffee.

'I have not slept for ten days,' he said, 'I dare not sleep.' It rang true. He dared *not* sleep. Had nightmares about spiders.

But just then there was a fearful commotion. Two men rolled on the carpet, fighting like maniacs. It was a fight

worth watching, because what one did, the other did simultaneously. They might have been one man fighting his reflection in a mirror. Good boys. Discovered 'em myself. Identical twins, and the best rough-and-tumble acrobats in the East. They snatched swords from the wall; disarmed each other simultaneously, and then went into a routine with hippo-whips which would have taken your breath away. A hippo-whip is not something you punish a hippopotamus with. Waste of effort, that. It's made of hippo-hide. Most impressive.

They were separated at last, and dragged off in different directions by those gigantic confounded Nubians.

We turned to look at Slimane, after my lady had caught her breath. So far she was getting her money's worth, I consoled myself.

'He's asleep,' says she.

'Let him sleep,' I advise her.

'What's that on his back?' she asks.

I, with true Oriental irony, say, 'It would appear to be the handle of a knife.' So it was, filigree work, and seemingly attached to a blade buried in his carcass. Slimane was doing his 'flop'. I said, 'You were sitting nearest him. *Now* will you come?'

'Fingerprints —' she began.

'In Egypt they have not yet invented fingerprints. Come!'

I hustled her to the door, corridor after corridor. We were nearly out when, acting on orders, the two gigantic Nubians came carrying Slimane who hung limp as a piece of string, and said, politely, 'You have forgotten your friend, sir' – as if he'd been a bally umbrella, or something. And there we were in the street, supporting Slimane between us. He was light as a feather. Bag of skin full of smoke and nightmares. Pah! We couldn't drop him and run. I whispered; there was a sergeant of police and two coppers nearby, and no end of

witnesses. My blue cab was waiting. We slung Slimane in, and hared it back to my place; hauled him upstairs, and dumped him in the bathroom.

Perhaps, now, you are beginning to grasp the inwardness of the Stabbed Spy business, sir? What?

So. 'Here's a pretty kettle of fish,' I say.

At this point, the customer, much shaken, generally loses his nerve and wants to go home – which, for a consideration, is arranged.

If he doesn't, there's yet a further tactic, which we're coming to in a moment.

My lady says, 'You can sell him to Nasser, now, can't you? If he's dead, nothing can hurt him much, I suppose?'

'Nasser wants him *alive*, not dead. Nasser would be extremely annoyed to receive delivery of Faujas de Saint-Fond dead. He would be annoyed with me, with you, and with everyone within reach.'

'It would be marvellous publicity for my book,' she said.

I simply goggled at her; damme, I gaped like a cod! I said, 'What book? Dead ladies don't write books. Clever as you are, rich and well-connected as you may be, you are not valued by your country as being worth more than, say, Oil. And though fond of reading, I am not yet ready to lay down my life for Literature.'

'I'm selfish, and I'm sorry,' she said. 'You kept faith with your friend, and I'll keep faith with you.'

I was moved to ask, 'How do you know I did not stab him myself?'

She said, 'Oh, you are not the sort of person that would do anything like *that*' – somewhat as if I had mentioned drinking tea out of one's saucer. Primly. Delicately shunning the implication. Ah me! Woman . . . Woman . . .

'Leave it to me, then,' I said.

Then I went on to explain that today – it was dawn, now –

was an auspicious day for funerals. Every day is, out there. Plant 'em quick in that climate. I told her that my house happened to stand on the best route to one of the large cemeteries in the suburbs.

Custom was, I told her, for the coffin of deceased to be carried by several bearers in a procession, on foot. Anybody who liked joined in and had a good cry. When one set of pall-bearers tired, another stepped into place. A coffin might change hands a dozen times between here and the burying-place.

What more simple than to wait for a funeral procession, join it, with poor Thingummy-Bob in a coffin, walk a mile or so, let another set of fellows take it over, and slip quietly away?

Thus, by the time our load had reached its destination, nobody could possibly be implicated. There'd be an extra coffin, unaccounted for.

So I pretended to arrange matters – which were pre-arranged. Four or five fellows came with a good light coffin. We carried it into the bathroom; spacious affairs, Egyptian bathrooms, if and when you find one. I made her wait in the sitting-room downstairs with a cup of coffee: what I had to do, I said, was *not* for her eyes. I suppose she thought I was going to embalm the bloke, or something. Nonsense. Wasn't for her eyes, just the same. I had to give Slimane a fiver, send him out the back way, and see that a couple of sandbags were put in the box. Brought down an Albanian dagger. Gave it to her for a souvenir, saying it was quite hygienic – I'd washed it.

She said, 'This must be awfully expensive for you,' and offered me quite a sum of money. Believe it or not, I refused to take it. I sincerely refused! Three times. Took it only to please her.

So, a procession passed sure enough. Some middle-class

tradesman had popped off. For the sake of clarity – nobody can remember Gyppo names – call him *A*.

We came out carrying our box of sand, she and I taking the head, and all of us crying Oh what a man he was, and all that. And everything was going very nicely, until I noticed that the noise was a lot louder. Stole a glance backward, and saw that another procession had joined the tail of ours, together with a swarming mob of beggars, who always tag on to these affairs for pickings. Call this one *B*. Like algebra, eh?

Well, the more the merrier. What? And it was exactly as I had told my lady – we passed our sand-box to a sextet of total strangers, and would have slipped away, only all of a sudden we were handed the coffin of A. He was pretty heavy. Didn't like it a bit. Hate to see a lady carrying parcels.

And then, out of a side-street, comes bellowing yet another procession, by George! It muscled into our already swollen crowd and turned it into a confused mob. The police started to punch a few heads on the fringes. But the third after us settled in, just behind us. And we'll call the third one *C*.

There was no slipping away, now. We were hemmed in by a press of mourners and loafers, and weighed down, to boot. My lady took it all coolly, which is somewhat more than I did. What stamina! Oh, sir, when I think of that gel I . . .

To proceed, and I hope you follow. *Repeat!* We start carrying Nothing. We are handed *A*. Disburdening ourselves of *A*, we get another, *C*. Nobody wants to take *A* off our hands and the bearers of *B* don't seemed inclined to part with him.

We're caught. As the Irish say, our situation is hopeless but not serious. After all, even in Egypt they can't do much to you for carrying a couple of sandbags in a coffin, what?

Ah, but that lady had so affected me that I would rather have sunk into the earth myself, than be revealed as a kind

of trickster, however harmless. Let her have her dreams – let her write her True Travel Book, and sensationally expose to her innocent heart's content!

So we got to the cemetery. The entire multitude of us. Bearing four coffins.

And then it appeared that there were only two graves! Not three – two.

A and *B* were interred in proper order, what time turmoil raged over *C* and our box of sand. Escape was impossible. We had to stick it out, for the police were there in force.

Naturally, the police wanted documents – credentials, certificates, and what not. Quite right too. The bodies of *A* and *B* were respectable, law-abiding ones. Demises certified, plots long purchased and paid for, chits signed, counter-signed, and approved; all correct and respectable.

But what of the spares? What of *C*'s box, and what of ours? *C*'s mourners were nowhere to be found. 'Open up,' said the Inspector, and they lifted *C*'s lid. 'Well, well well,' said the Inspector. For there lay no less a body than that of the notorious Greek diamond-smuggler Janacopouli, with a neat blue bullet-wound over his right eye.

My lady and I had been the lead-carriers for *C*, you will remember.

The other box, of course, contained the sandbags I had put in it.

'Bring 'em along,' said the Inspector, pretending not to know me. Damned rogue. Many's the hundred pounds he had off me.

'Don't dare touch *me*,' says my lady, trying not to cry. Small blame to her: she'd had a trying morning. 'Don't *dare* touch me! I am —' And she mentioned her name, which I am not going to repeat. A policeman, obeying orders, grabbed her by the shoulder. I lost my temper like a fool – temporary insanity induced by hopeless infatuation – and

hit him on the nose. Was light-heavyweight champion of my College; sparred with Dempsey when I was a boy.

However. It was a false move. I got hell, and served me right. Never hit a policeman in broad daylight; never, sir!

Cut a long story short. My brave lady came out of it beautifully, beautifully, after a bit of an official kerfuffle. I kept me mouth shut tight, for fear of disenchanting her. She, for her part, having been sworn to secrecy over that stupid Hassan the Damned show, said nothing of it, but used all her family's influence to get me clear. It brings the water to my eye when I think of it. She thought of me as Ali Al-Mamoun – a fine type of East-of-Suez gentleman. The police, having nothing on me, satisfied themselves with stealing all my money and kicking me out of the country with an admonition never to come back. Never.

So I went my ways. The mystery surrounding the death of Janacopouli remained a mystery. It was presumed that whoever had shot him got hold of the diamonds he was known to have hidden. He was not holding, but conveying for the Syndicate, a matter of thirty million dollars' worth.

I knew, of course, that someone must have hit on my wheeze for getting rid of a conspicuous body like Janacopouli's. If he could be made simply to disappear, the Syndicate might be fooled into looking for him, on the assumption that he had absconded. Small chance of that. But you know the childishness, the tortuous childishness of the criminal mentality? I do. As a policeman, of sorts.

My bad luck was that whoever shot Janacopouli happened to choose the same morning as I happened on in my innocent deception of that charming lady.

But that's nothing – nothing at all. Here's the rich part of the story. Cream of the confounded jest. A few years later, in Dar-es-Salaam, I happened to meet an Arab houseboy who said he knew me. Wanted a handout. Gave him the

price of a meal. He said he'd seen me often in Cairo. Chattered in a maudlin way about a good master he'd had there – hell of a fine fellow, a grocer, who had a wickedly avaricious wife. Perfect hellcat, thirty years his junior. Grocer died. Wife – widow, now – stood to inherit a comfortable sum. Wasn't enough for her.

'That accursed woman sold her husband's grave to a Greek,' he told me.

He had a keen ear for keyholes, and listened. Overheard the transaction. Greek said he wanted to conceal 'certain documents'. Paid the woman a round sum down, promised her the earth; had the deceased grocer conveyed elsewhere, and filled the coffin with packages. Woman then mysteriously disappeared. Everybody wondered why she hadn't been around at her husband's funeral. Nothing to wonder at. Stupid girl was attending her own.

'Do you remember the date of this funeral?' I asked.

He did. The grocer's coffin was the one I call *A*.

There's your thirty million dollars' worth of diamonds. And then some, I imagine. But that's nothing. What I like is, the *irony*, the jolly old Thucydidean, Sophoclean irony of it! And damn the diamonds! I don't suppose De Beers would pay more than twenty per cent reward for them – and I fancy that six million would be taxable.

No, it's the exquisite watchmaker-precision of the movement of the mechanism of Coincidence that tickles *my* fancy! Seventeen jewels, by George, and warranted watĕrproof! The Greek finds the perfect hiding-place for the diamonds. He hugs himself. I can see the damned scoundrel hugging himself. He does not know that, as Destiny has ordered it, he is to ride behind his loot in another coffin.

Pardon me. I don't laugh often, but when I do, I laugh loud and long.

Dig the stuff up, did you say? What on earth are you

talking about? I couldn't get the tip of my nose into Egypt, and I wouldn't trust anybody else. I'd rather enjoy my little joke. I've got my pension, and something besides. My wants are few.

The really funny thing is that the lady I was telling you of never did write her book. I don't know why. I met her *in propria persona*, once, in Nice. She said I reminded her slightly of a very handsome and gallant Arab she'd met in Cairo. Dabbed her pretty eyes and looked sad. Romantic little darling! 'I hope sometimes Ali thinks of me,' she said, 'in his desert fastnesses.' How d'you like that?

Eh? Eh? What do you say? I told you, I'm not concerned with the infernal diamonds. The only way to flog 'em would be on the Black Market, or whatever they call it now. Or go to fences. De Beers' percentage wouldn't be above twenty – a matter of six million. Then comes tax.

I could do *what?* Form a corporation? A limited company, is that it? Never thought of it. Lone wolf, I. Never did have a head for figures. Few logarithms, bit of trigonometry – all forgotten. Play you chess if you like, for a bottle of wine. Or any spelling-game. But figures? No, sir, I thank you! Could find you any range up to eight hundred yards, by eye. That's instinct. But calculations? I have to do sums with matches, to this day.

If you like figures, try Capuletti. He can do that sort of thing in his head. He's my 'man of affairs', if you can call *my* income 'Affairs'. A damned rogue, I dare say, but clever. Rather deal with him than a fool, any day. Bit of a fixer, as they say. Knows everybody. Hate to believe it, but – *entre nous* – I'm told he was one of Mussolini's accountants. A cheerful rascal. And if you like stories, upon my word, he's full of 'em. All lies, I'm sure.

He can chatter sixteen to the dozen about companies and what not, I'm sure, if you've a taste for that kind of stuff.

Don't try to interest *me* in any of your corporations. *Commerçant* is a questionable epithet in the Bangham family. My poor father was a victim of the bucket-shop wallahs. For all I know you may have an idea. Count me out. Come and have lunch and talk to Capuletti. I owe you a drink, anyway. Drank all your brandy. Bet you thought I was just another cadger. Eh? Eh?

But I can still offer a fellow countryman a luncheon and a bottle. If you like bizarre characters, you'll cotton to Capuletti.

Taxi!

Return of the Dog

Two days ago my valiant tiger-striped Staffordshire bull-terrier suddenly started from the easy doze of pampered old age, sat up on his haunches, threw back his head and howled so forlornly with all that is left of his voice that, although I am not a superstitious man, my flesh crawled. I said to him, 'You're dreaming, Buller. Who is there left for us to howl over?'

Then this morning in the Obituaries column of *The Times* I read that John Pargeter of Pentellow had 'gone to his reward'. Buller was John's dog fourteen years ago. The obituary says, 'Deeply mourned by his sorrowing widow.' It lies. Tabby Pargeter is as incapable of grief as of joy. Life, death – all's one to her. Some people admire this kind of outlook as 'philosophical'. But to me the detestable habit of taking everything for granted implies a cloddish, claylike quality of heart and mind. Man was made to wonder, to laugh and weep, to love and hate, to be sinned against and to sin, and to forgive as he hopes to be forgiven.

But not Tabby Pargeter. When, impotently hating the tax-collectors as I do, I say that I hope they swallow poor John's estate lock and stock, perhaps I convey something of my distaste for that woman. It is not that she ever did – or even

said – anything to my detriment. Perhaps this accounts for some part of the revulsion with which she always inspired me; but only a small part. I do not mind being ignored – I am used to it – but she set my teeth on edge. Her indifference to everything and everybody was all-embracing, and the neutrality of her spirit was so complete that it was something positive, something somehow blasphemous.

For example: one evening while John and I were sitting over coffee and brandy in his study, Tabby happened to walk in. As she passed, a stray fold of her dress knocked over a fragile and beautiful Sèvres coffeepot, which shattered in a hundred pieces on the floor. I leaped up with a cry, but she simply picked up a book she had come for, rang for a servant to sweep up the débris, and sauntered out of the room. John said to me, in admiration, 'Did you see that? She heard the pot smash, so she didn't waste effort looking down! What a woman!'

You see, her emptiness tickled certain imaginations. Some men were drawn by Tabby as others are attracted to caves and deserts. *Surely*, they think, *there must be something beyond the wasteland or at the back of the dark*. So Tabby was a standing challenge to all mankind, defying discovery. She dared you to arouse her interest. I speak of her in the past tense because I have not seen her for more than seventeen years and she seems to belong to another age. She was twenty-three then, and her name was Tabithe de Meerouw; and if by this you infer that she was one of those kindly, easy-going Netherland-ish beauties, all cream and ginger, you are vastly mistaken.

She came lounging out of Belgium in 1940 with some other refugees, an ungracious and unlovely girl, not bony, but with the appearance of having been hastily hung on the wrong skeleton. We all have collar-bones and elbows and knee-caps, but hers somehow advertised themselves. Her hair was of the colour and texture of unravelled string, and she

wore it in two coils, like headphones, to cover her ears, which were large. White lashes fringed tired eyes of a diluted-coffee colour, and there was an uncomfortably soapy quality to her skin. Her pallid mouth was curious in that it formed an unbroken oval, for the upper lip had no indentation. With all this – and a quite nondescript figure haphazardly dressed, and large limp hands which might have been made to flap in disdain, and shoulders designed for nothing but weary shrugging, and a general air of sour resignation – you might have thought that Tabithe de Meerouw would be destined to go through life unnoticed except in pity.

But this was not so. She was one of those women who, without beauty, wit, spirit, charm, good nature or even a desire to please, mysteriously fascinate men. Every village has one. Incomprehensibly, without lifting a finger or uttering a word of encouragement, they attract the unlikeliest mates, cutting out girls rightly regarded as a hundred times more desirable. Biologists say it has something to do with chemistry. I do not believe this. The success of your true *femme fatale* must be attributed to genuine, unfeigned indifference. Hers is the sucking force of the vacuum.

John was at the war when Tabby – as we called her – went to work in the offices of Pargeter and Pargeter, tea brokers, in Mincing Lane – one of the most respectable commercial houses in the city of London. Dr Samuel Johnson drank Pargeter's tea; some chests of it went overboard in Boston Harbour. John's uncle, Sir Percy Pargeter, was managing director, and he gave the lonely Belgian girl a job partly out of benevolence and partly because she could talk and write five languages, dully but with precision, and could type with perfect accuracy whatever she was given, errors and all.

My old friend was invalided out of the Army late in 1943, lavishly decorated but badly wounded. He had taken a pill-box singlehanded under devastating machine-gun fire. That

was like him. At school he had earned the nickname 'Crazy Jack' for just such disregard for danger. He could never see himself as bested or in any way overpowered, although he was neither big nor remarkably strong. His will to win had, so to speak, congealed into a blind spot. Once he and I had a fight – I forget about what – and I won. Sitting on his chest and gripping his collar I pounded his head against the soft turf, waiting for him to cry mercy; but all the time he glared up at me and gasped, between thuds, 'Now will you apologize? . . . Now have you had enough?' He simply couldn't imagine that it was not he who had the upper hand.

For all that, we were as close as brothers. I helped him with his English, and he helped me with mathematics – in which I was a complete dunce – for he had a remarkable flair for figures, which would help him in the safe and comfortable job awaiting him at Pargeter and Pargeter's. It seemed, then, that he was one of Fortune's favourites. He was handsome and likeable, sympathetic and intelligent, and comfortably off as well. His mother had left him an estate of about one hundred acres near Pentellow, in West Devon, and he had an income of £1,500 a year from his father. Over and above this, his salary would amount to £1,200, not counting bonuses. In another year or so, his wounds healed, he would be as good as new, the doctors said. He had a way with women, moreover, and could have married brilliantly if he had so desired. All this and youth too! And before anyone can expostulate, he gets a special licence and marries Tabby de Meerouw.

I concealed my surprise and dismay as best I could when he came to break the news to me a week after the wedding, but he said, 'Oh, I know you don't like her, old boy. You think she's a bore, and mousy —'

'Jack, I've never said a word about the girl, good or bad.'

'No, but you think so. Everybody does. As a matter of fact,

Tabby has been rather withdrawn. The truth is, you see, she's proud as a queen, and she's always felt that if she couldn't be her true self, she'd rather be nobody at all.'

'True self?' I asked.

'Yes. Did you know that the de Meerouws were one of the noblest families in Europe? I've looked them up in the *Almanach de Gotha.* Tabby can trace her ançestry back to Philip the Good,' said John.

'The one who reigned over the Netherlands in the fifteenth century?'

'That's right, old boy.'

I said, 'Well, he had some forty-odd children, I think, legitimate and otherwise. That was five hundred years ago, more or less. Allow thirty years as one generation, and we have, say, sixteen generations of descendants. Of how many people now living is Philip the Good the putative ancestor? You're the mathematician; work it out. Jack, if this was a consideration, you want your head examined!'

'It was nothing of the sort,' he said. 'I was simply giving you a clue to her real self. She's enchanting! You've got to come to dinner tonight – eight o'clock at Bonbon's.'

Bonbon's was a kind of black-market millionaires' dining-club, exclusive solely on account of its absurdly high prices. No self-respecting man in his right mind would be seen dead in such a place, but curiosity drew me there. Not counting the value of the jewels with which poor John had decorated her, Tabby was wearing a small fortune in clothes. Yet despite the fact that she was dressed in rich fabrics and furs which, in time of war when our very socks were rationed, was evidence of the most brutally bad taste – I did not find myself particularly embarrassed. For she had a curiously debasing quality which turned fine silk sleazy and made rabbit of rare sable, while John's mother's noble pearls at Tabby's throat looked like something out of a penny arcade.

It was a dismal dinner. She affected the food, too, so that the caviar became buckshot, the entrée sawdust, the wine vinegar and the flame of the *crèpes suzette* a musty marsh light. She cast an uneasy silence over us like some heavy fog while she shrugged over her dinner, idly pecking at it.

A little later, when John and I were alone for a few minutes, he asked me what I thought of Tabby now. What could I say but 'Charming, charming'?

'She's your true aristocrat,' said he. 'She insists on luxury just to prove that she despises it. She's above it. That French noblewoman who, when she heard that the poor wanted bread, said, "Let them eat cake", was simply showing her disdain for fine pastries, Tabby —'

'You,' I said in irritation, 'are a pigheaded idiot. You've got hold of a fixed idea, and wild horses couldn't budge you. Well, where are you going to live in London?'

He said, 'Tabby hates London, but she can't stand the country. Luckily, I found an apartment in Albany. She'll like that – the walls all around and the porters guarding the old gates. Sort of like a castle, really.'

'How much?' I asked.

'I got the lease for nine thousand.'

'Oh Lord!' was all I could say.

'Don't worry about me,' said this infatuated man. 'I'm on to three or four good things in the City.'

I saw little of John after that, for I avoided Tabby and he could not bear to be away from her for long. We almost quarrelled once when I said to him, 'For heaven's sake Jack! Your income's three thousand, minus tax, and you're spending ten thousand!'

'I know what I'm doing. Mind your own business. I came to ask you to dinner.'

'Well, I'm not coming,' I said.

'You don't like Tabby; that's it.'

I answered, 'Tabby aside, I hate seeing Jack Pargeter sitting limp with awe because his wife can't cook, and because she gives a sable stole to the cat for a day-bed, and because she smashes Sèvres porcelain without batting an eye-lid, and —'

'Oh, go to the devil then!'

'Take care you don't, Jack.'

But his progress from that time on was something which I may liken to a dance I once saw performed by a man with a wooden leg. He started at the top of a flight of stairs, and his footwork was fantastic, dazzling. Cutting, shuffling, tapping to the rhythm of some wild music, he descended and ascended, sacrificing three steps to gain two, squandering four to gain one, always dancing, marvellously adroit. But his routine led him inevitably down. In John's descending dance there was no pride or joy but only hectic fever and, for his arrival at ground level, no applause.

He came to my door one rainy evening scarcely two years after his marriage. After one look at his stricken face I said, 'Give me your coat and sit down. We'll have a drink and see what's to be done about it.'

'What? Done about what?' he stammered. 'What do you know about it?'

'I'm no actuary,' I said, 'but I know that ten into three won't go. You're broke and in debt up to the ears.'

'If that were all!' he said, going into the sitting-room.

Hanging up his overcoat, I felt something hard and heavy in a side pocket. I took it out. It was a pistol, a short-barrelled Italian automatic. I took out the clip and pulled back the slide to make sure the chamber was empty before putting the pistol back. Then I went in where John was sitting with a thick sealed envelope on his knees.

'Make mine a strong one,' he said as I poured drinks.

'Broke and in debt, eh? And ten into three won't go, eh? Fifty into nothing would be more like it.'

'Are you telling me you're fifty thousands pounds in debt?' I asked, appalled.

'Worse. I told you I was on to some good things in the City, I think. Well, I'll cut it short. They aren't good things. They will be, but they aren't yet. And the long and the short of it is I'm into the firm for forty thousand.'

'You mean to say —' I began.

He said, 'Yes. I juggled the books and I took the money. I was sure I could pay it back. I'm still sure it'll come back one of these days. But as matters stand I'm a damned thief. I'm leaving that envelope with you. There's only shares in it, worth about twopence-halfpenny apiece. Keep it for luck.'

'Tabby?' I said. 'Does she know?'

He pretended to laugh. 'I told her first of all.'

'And how did she take it?'

'She is a most extraordinary girl, you know. She simply said, "You have stolen forty thousand and lost it? Take twenty thousand more, and we will go to Brussels." I was absolutely flabbergasted, horrified. So she said, "Well, a thief is bad, but a half-hearted thief is despicable. I see that this is going to be a bore." Then she said, "In justice to myself, the least I can do is refuse to get involved." I said, "It was for your sake, Tabby." She said, "There, you see what I mean?" Packed a bag, said I'd hear from her solicitors and simply walked out, cool as a cucumber. What a girl!' There was actually admiration in his tone. 'So I've had it.'

'And so,' I said, tapping the envelope, 'you came to give me this keepsake and afterward blow your pig-headed brains out, I suppose?'

He shrugged. 'Dear old Uncle Percy has been like a father to me. I won't run, and I can't face him.'

'You can and you will,' said I, 'this very evening.'

Panic took hold of him and he cried, 'No, for God's sake!' As I picked up the telephone he ran out into the hall, and I heard the clothes-closet opening. I listened as I dialled Sir Percy Pargeter's number and caught the click of the pistol. Then the old gentleman growled, 'Hello, hello — Oh, it's you, is it? Where have you been keeping yourself, my boy? Why don't you come and have —'

But when I interrupted him, begging him to come to my place immediately, he said, 'Is it about young Jack? Then I'll be there in twenty minutes,' and rang off. John came back, chalk-white and dishevelled, rubbing the side of his head where, presumably, he had intended to shoot himself. 'Give me another drink,' he said lifelessly. 'What with one thing and another I must be losing my memory. I could have sworn —'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'Then go and comb your hair while I make a drink,' I said. When he was gone I slipped the cartridge clip into a drawer and locked it up.

Winnowed of emotion, my old friend returned and sat down silently. When his uncle arrived, somewhat breathless, he sprang to attention as on parade and said, 'I wish to confess that I am an embezzler and a thief, sir!'

At the best of times Sir Percy was a formidable man to look at. He was one of those men who scowl for fear that they might smile and will go to any length to camouflage their weak point, which is gentleness. Now his mouth grew harsh, and his clipped white moustache turned into something like a steel file. He heard John out and said at last, 'As for that soaked-out tea-bag of a girl, good riddance. As for the money, you must put it back at once and resign from the firm.'

'I haven't got it, sir,' said John.

'I don't care if you are my brother Basil's only son. I'd send you to Pentonville for twenty years if I had my way. But I

can't afford a scandal. I'll refund the money. There's thirty thousand coming to you in my will – or was. You forfeit that. The other ten I'll lay out myself. You'll repay me at the rate of one thousand a year. Thank God, Pentellow's entailed or you'd have gambled that away too. Get out of town, go to Devon, live on the five hundred a year you'll have left, and think yourself devilish lucky. I wouldn't lift a finger to save you,' he added, 'if I weren't convinced that you've got what they call battle-fatigue. Pack up and be off! I never want to see your face again.' He paused in the doorway. 'Except at Christmas, if you like.'

Then he stamped away, and John's face was wet with tears as he said to me, 'You saved my life, if you only knew it.'

'Go to bed.'

Next day, thinking that John might be lonely down at Pentellow, and down-hearted, what with his shame and his loss, I went to a man I knew and bought him a dog. Buller was four months old then and of the true Staffordshire breed, which is the only one the exhibitors have not spoiled – a happy blend of the blood of the great bullbaiter with that of the fearless rat-fighting terrier. I fell in love with that pup and parted with him grudgingly, with a good deal of unnecessary advice as to his care and feeding.

'You'll come and stay with me?' John asked as we parted at the station.

'For a week or so, when I have time — Lean meat, remember. No fat!'

'Stay as long as you like; come and go as you please.'

'A teaspoonful of cod-liver oil every day until he's six months old. Beef bones to exercise his teeth on.'

'Bless you, old man, and thank you for everything.'

'No chicken bones; whatever you do, don't give him chicken bones.'

'Well, good-bye for now.'

I caught myself running alongside the departing train shouting, 'Worm him every fortnight for the next two months!'

'Come soon!' John yelled.

'Yes! Cold tea is good for his coat!'

But business called me abroad, and two years passed before I saw John again. There was a hard-bitten weather-beaten look about him now, and a new kind of combativeness. Although he seemed to have laid away his smooth, easy City manner with his dapper town clothes, he had not the air of a farmer, not even a gentleman farmer. He had always been a punctilious dresser; now an old leather-patched hunting-jacket was good enough for him, with dilapidated old riding-breeches, heavy boots and a rakish little brown check cap. Still you would have said, 'This is some gentleman who has business in the country, but not a country gentleman.'

I said, 'You've put on weight. And is that a moustache you've grown, or a shrubbery?'

'Somehow it seemed to go with the scenery,' he said; and somehow it did. He went on, 'You know, old boy, I'd have sworn I couldn't stand six months at Pentellow. I accepted coming here as a kind of punishment. But I love it!'

'You don't miss the City?'

'Don't even talk to me about the City or anything connected with it,' said John with vehemence. 'I won't even look at a newspaper or listen to the radio. I won't be reminded of your damned City. Here I am and here I'll remain.'

I thought, *Oho! Crazy Jack has got himself another fixed idea; but it looks like a healthy one this time.* 'And Tabby?' I asked.

With complete nonchalance he said, 'Oh, she divorced me last year. Honour of the de Meerouws – ha-ha – and two hundred a year alimony. Skip Tabby.'

Then we came into the drive and so to Pentellow Manor.

A superb little tiger-striped dog, with the loins of a greyhound and the chest of a bull mastiff leaped up to greet us with a tremendous, sonorous bark. 'Buller remembers you,' said John, offering the dog an offhand caress that was almost contemptuous. 'What affection that animal's capable of! He'd die for me with pleasure. And what does he get out of me? A bit of meat and a bone.'

I said, 'What do you expect a dog to want – champagne and oysters? There's more to a Buller than flesh and blood, whatever they may say about animals having no souls.'

'Oh,' said John, 'I wouldn't part with Buller for the world. There never was such a dog. Do you know, before he was eighteen months old he'd killed three foxes singlehanded? And there was a half-wild Airedale that used to be the terror of the neighbourhood. They tangled when it came on to my land, and – no more Airedale. Yet he's got such a soft mouth that I use him for a gun dog. He'll bring back a bird without so much as wetting the feathers. He likes to jump ten feet, standing, and grab an oak bough and swing by his teeth. I've timed him – fifty minutes by the clock. But he can catch an egg in his mouth without breaking it. No fear of the foxes while Buller's about. I hate 'em, and so does he.'

'I remember,' I said, for when I was a boy I spent more than one summer holiday with John at Pentellow, 'this was always a foxy kind of country.'

'A positive sanctuary for foxes,' said John. 'On account of the mires and the quarries it isn't hunting country, as you know. I shoot 'em on sight. They cost me a fortune in fowls. Buller keeps the ordinary kind away, but there's still the Ghost Fox.'

'Ghost Fox?'

'Well, I call it that because it's invisible. I've sat up watching for it. Hughes, my labourer, has sat up. Buller's always on the alert. But there always comes a time when someone

has got to rest, and then a chicken or a duck simply disappears. Without noise, mark you.'

'I'd suspect some human agency,' I said.

'So did I. But there's no tracks except our own. As for Hughes – well, there's been a Hughes at Pentellow these past five generations. He poaches, yes – one doesn't mind that in moderation – but he'd starve before he'd steal. No, it must be some cleverer-than-average fox, which makes it very clever indeed. I'll get it yet, though.'

After dinner, as we stood looking out at the wild landscape, all blurred in the misty autumn evening, John said, 'I've fallen in love with Pentellow.'

Tact made me refrain from saying, 'I'm sorry to hear it. What's wrong with it?' I said instead, 'I always liked the place. Remember how we used to play smugglers in the Blue Quarry? But I don't suppose there's much to be got out of it now except the pleasure of looking at it.'

'Everybody says that,' said he with a hitch of his hard jaw. 'Well, they're wrong. I know the Pentellows on my mother's side got a fortune in slate out of Blue Quarry – no self-respecting billiard table was bedded with anything but Pentellow slate – and another out of the willow trees that all the best cricket bats were made of, and yet another out of the gravel pits. And I know we exhausted all that fifty years ago. What nobody understands is the richness of the mystery of the place. "Moor, mire and tor," they say. All they see is the surface. Believe me; when Nature goes to the trouble of making such an elaborate desolation, she's covering up something marvellous!'

'Nature has her rubbish heaps,' I said. 'Why, were you thinking of draining Thoutenbottom Mire?' It is one of the dreariest and, with its quicksands, one of the most dangerous marshes in England. I spoke with a laugh, but he did not smile.

'You'll never quite understand,' he said. 'As that Persian poet said, "I am a slave to the spirit of the quest."'

'You're nothing but a dreamer without a dream,' I said with some irritation. 'A mystic without a mystery. Such marvels as your uncle's love for you and your friend's love for you and your dog's love for you are matters of course to you. Revealed wonders bore you stiff; daylight's too banal for you. Damn your presumption – you must have shapelessness and emptiness, a chaos of your own, to make your own private creation out of!'

Then I was silent and sick at heart; I saw that what held him at Pentellow was the lifeless, barren, exhausted part of it, the dead, rocky tors and the expressionless mire that gave nothing, but swallowed everything. John had found another Tabby de Meerouw, and this one would never leave him.

'Let's make an early night of it,' he said.

The Ghost Fox came and went again before dawn, taking an especially fine pullet. John said, 'Night after tomorrow is full moon. Like to sit up with me and watch?'

So we did keep watch in the darkened house, muffled in heavy sweaters against the chill of the night, sitting by the open kitchen window from which we could see the fenced chicken run. Buller was silent in his kennel. We neither smoked nor talked. The great yellow moon rose high. The cracked bell of St Osyth's church struck one.

Then John gripped my wrist and whispered, 'Look!' Something was moving stealthily in the moonlight. It was striped. It was Buller. 'Buller's seen something,' John whispered. 'If it's flesh and blood, he'll pin it. Watch —'

Buller crept into the shadow of the hen-coop. He was out a minute later, gripping something limp and white in his jaws – a chicken. He paused, gathered himself, cleared the high fence in one tremendous bound and was gone. 'After him!' John said, taking up his shotgun. We followed. His tracks

were as clear as print in the wet grass. Buller kept to the shadows, skirting the patches of moonlight. Soon he came to the old Blue Quarry. At the lip of it, he disappeared under an overhang of scrub. He had gone to the cave where we had played smugglers when we were boys. John swung down, gun in hand, and I followed, carrying the flashlight. We crashed through the screen of scrub, and I sent a strong beam of light into the cave. 'Buller!' John shouted in agony and rage, and the echoes of his cry sounded in the empty quarry like a thunderclap. 'Buller!'

There, caught squarely in the circle of sudden light, stood our dog. Crouching beside him was a snarling red vixen. Clustered about her lay six cubs. I saw – this was one of those moments when horror speeds the shutter of perception – that two of these cubs were curiously striped. John's gun was up in an instant, but Buller was quicker. Even as his trigger finger tightened, Buller leaped up and caught him by the sleeve, and the shot splashed wide, while the vixen darted between our legs and was gone.

Buller stood, trembling, with lowered head. 'A chicken killer,' said John between his teeth, 'a chicken killer! And turned on his master!' He raised the gun again, and took careful aim at Buller's head. But this time I knocked the gun aside. The shot brought down a shower of shale.

'What's the idea?' cried John. 'He's a chicken killer, and he attacked me!'

I said, 'He only tugged at your sleeve. If he'd wanted your wrist he could have had it. He didn't want you to shoot the vixen. He loves her – she's his wife. Look at those cubs.'

'Then he's gone feral,' said John, feeling in his pocket for more shells. 'Once a killer, always a killer.'

'He did it for the vixen,' I said. 'Did he kill for himself?'

'What's the difference, man? If a farmer's dog kills what he's set to guard —'

'Hold hard,' I said as he reloaded the gun. 'This is not the first time I've happened to divert a gun from the head of a poor fool who betrayed his trust and robbed someone who loved him – and all for the sake of a loveless woman. The other one was forgiven. Or have you forgotten?'

John was silent a long half-minute. His voice was humble when he said, 'Then will you please tell me what I am to do?'

'With vixen and cubs do what you like. But spare me Buller, and I'll take him away.'

'Yes,' said John, nodding slowly. 'Just as you say.'

And the strange, the shameful thing is that I felt now a livelier satisfaction and a clearer certainty of achievement than I had felt two years before. The three of us walked slowly home in the staring moonlight, and next day I got ready to take Buller to London on the afternoon train.

'Won't you take his blanket?' John asked me. 'He's used to that blanket.'

'I'll get him a perfectly new one. He must build a fresh set of memories,' I said.

A few weeks later I came upon certain items of news that sent me hurrying to my bank, where I had left John's wretched great envelope of share-certificates 'worth about twopence-halfpenny apiece', as he had said. There I confirmed the value of his stocks. I was then able to inform him that, while some of his paper was at present of dubious value, he had nevertheless bought into aluminium-and-glass building construction, a 'wonder drug' which a popular magazine published in twenty languages had made suddenly famous, and commercial television. His holdings were worth nearly half a million pounds, all in American and Canadian dollars.

Shortly afterwards he wrote to tell me of an amazing coincidence. He was sitting by the fire thinking of Thoutenbottom Mire and all its mysteries, which he could now afford

to probe, when who should walk in but Tabby? She said, in her ungracious way, that she had been thinking things over, and for the honour of the de Meerouws she was prepared to give him another chance. Then John got a special licence, and they were remarried. 'She actually likes Pentellow!' he wrote.

I wired congratulations and never saw him again.

And now poor John is dead —

Having written that last brief paragraph, I put down my pen. 'The end,' I said to myself. Then the telephone rang. It was Tabby calling from the country. 'I must see you on business,' she said in that voice without cadence which always offended my ears. 'I am coming to London to see you tomorrow. I shall take the morning train, I think. You need not come to the station to meet me. I shall call at your house.'

I am opposed to the idea that hate is akin to love. You might as well say that repulsion is akin to attraction. I do not want to see Tabby Pargeter. I will not meet Tabby Pargeter!

There is a ring at the door.

The least I can do is see who it is —

Heartless Heidi

I was getting out of the lift when a little old lady said, 'Hold it!' There was a rasp of authority in her voice.

'Going up,' said the operator.

But she, stepping in, snapped, 'So? What goes up must come down. I go down.' Then, with a clash and a hiss of machinery, she was gone – but not before she had given me, like a yellow-jacket in passing, two stabbing looks, left and right, so swiftly delivered that I did not feel the sting of them until I was alone in the corridor that led to Bella Barlay's suite.

That greatest and most beloved of comic actresses was still standing near her front door when I rang; evidently she had just seen the little old lady out, for the door opened with a quick jerk as soon as I touched the bell.

'Oh,' said Bella Barlay, 'it is you, is it? Come in and say nice things to me. Comfort me. Just for once, don't expect me to tell you a story. I am sad. Come.' And she led the way into her sitting-room. Silent as a cat in her black velvet housecoat – quick as a cat too – she went to her little desk, and I saw her closing a cheque-book and sliding it into a drawer, all in one movement.

There were two sherry-glasses on the sideboard, one of

which bore traces of orange-coloured lipstick. Bella Barlay used no paint off stage – she had her own glow, old as she was. And while, obedient to her direction. I filled two fresh glasses with old wine, I saw her in the sideboard mirror – catlike again – licking ink off her finger.

Taking her glass, she said, 'Did you meet, in passing, an old lady with a face like a peeled walnut and hair like shredded carrot? A kind of ambulant vitamin?' There was something in her tone that led me to suspect a trap.

'I saw an old lady,' I said warily.

'An old lady, yes. But full of pep?'

'Of pep? Yes.'

'A nutburger topped with tangerines? Somewhat ridiculous?'

Bella Barlay persisted. 'Make me a witty remark!'

I said, 'I won't. You're in a bad temper and you're trying to set me up for a chopping-block. No, ma'am! I saw the old lady you mention. How would I describe her if I were writing about her? I'd say that she was holding her head high between rounds in her conflict with the inevitable, while she and time paused for breath. Still, I should say, time will make his mark – and so he has. But she must have left her mark on time – and a devil of a battle it must have been! Well?'

'For this,' said Bella Barlay, 'I love you. The old lady you saw was the one and only Heidi Hohe, the immortal Heartless Heidi!'

'I read something about her, I think, in a series titled, *Where Are They Now?* I had no idea she was still alive,' I said.

Bella Barlay said, 'You read, you thought and you had an idea. Well, much I care what you pick up predigested out of your pocket-sized magazines. Heidi is alive and kicking, believe me; and she has carried her share of trouble

somewhat like a lady, I think. She is thirteen years my senior, which makes her eighty-three years old. And yet she has *schwung*!'

I asked, 'What is *schwung*?'

Bella Barlay said, 'Here, you ask for a definition of the indefinable. Long before your time, the term *schwung* was in common usage in the theatres in Europe. You have seen an Olympic runner? Well, *schwung* is the extra heartbeat and the last ounce. You have seen two-and-a-half back-somersaults on the flying trapeze? But to make that a triple back-somersault takes *schwung*. It is a quality of spirit.

'Let us take the example of, say, Maurice Chevalier. He has charm enough? No. Can he sing? No, he talks. Can he dance? Can he act? He has what you call personality then. Why, so has any Atlantic City lanolin-salesman. So, with what did Maurice Chevalier conquer the world? With the mysterious quality called *schwung*. It is a life force; what the French call a *je ne sais quoi* – meaning, a little extra something that the others haven't got. *Schwung*! It is beyond analysis. Jimmy Durante has it. To a degree, poor Carmen Miranda had it. It is what makes lions fall in love with mice, so that ladies in pancake make-up ask one another, "But what can he see in her?" *Schwung*.

'Heidi had *schwung*, and this queer quality knows neither doubt nor fear – it sees no middle way, but only the end to which it is aimed; and to this end it must go, come fire or ice, insensitive to pleasure or pain, indifferent to the springtime of love and the cold blasts of hate. *Schwung* is a demon on your back. It is a curse. Once you have it – and you must be born with it, for it can never be acquired – you do not belong to yourself any more. You are its slave and the slave of all the world.'

I said, 'Wait a bit! This *schwung* – this species of genius – dehumanizes, according to you. Yet you are a living contra-

diction of what you say. No woman ever had more *schwung* than you, and none was ever sweeter or better loved.'

She gave me one of her rare, radiant little smiles. 'I had certain advantages,' she said. 'As a child, I was well-beloved by kind parents, whom I could not help loving in return. I was educated in the humanities. And when I was developing, I was guided by the iron hand in the velvet-glove of "Uncle" Jean de Luxe; and through my admiration for him I learned the mysterious consolations of human pity. But Heidi came scratching and biting up out of a Warsaw gutter, wild as an alley-cat and not much more prepossessing.

'Cat,' Bella Barlay continued, musing.

'Yes, there was something of the cat about Heidi. Tortoise-shell – that was her original colouring – but with hard blue Siamese eyes, and that same neat little blunt profile. Furthermore, she was muscled like a cat, to move in a dozen directions at once and, if dropped from a height, land on her feet. A cat in action and a cat in repose – there was Little Heidi for you. Wherever Heidi curled herself up, there was home sweet home, and the world could go to the devil. She could reduce herself to about half her size – and she was only five feet tall – or, yawning, stretch herself like a rubber band most voluptuously and then snap back, relaxed and refreshed. Her weight was ninety-five pounds, but every ounce of it was most appetizingly feminine. She made about three million dollars. But I bore you?'

'No, no,' I said. 'I want you to tell me about her.'

'As if I didn't know,' said Bella Barlay and went on. . . .

. . . I knew Heidi better than anyone else ever knew her. I was, I think, the only one she called a friend. Still, I never knew much about her antecedents or her background. It is certain that she earned farthings at the age of six, dancing in the Warsaw alleys to the twangling music of a cracked

zither. Between this and her sudden blaze into glory about 1895, there is a lacuna, a complete gap. There were scandalous conjectures as to how Heidi made so great a success so early in life. It is so easy to guess, eh? Ah, but how easy it is to guess wrong! So we'll have no guesses. But I will tell you this, my friend, if lack of moral scruple were the key to fame and fortune in the world, then the honourable failures would hold the headlines by sheer force of rarity!

Homeless Heidi, penniless and friendless – for she was not of a nature to inspire warm or sympathetic feeling and had a rude, offhand manner that came of a genuine disregard for other people's feelings – little Heidi, I say, came into the limelight out of nowhere purely by power of *schwung*. Of all the women I ever met, Heidi had the most marvellous shoplifter's knack of abstracting from the world, in passing, exactly what her instinct told her would be useful to her. Imitating nobody, she seemed to derive a little something from everybody and transmute it into something else – original, typical of herself alone. Oh, believe me, in her genre Heidi was a great actress, no question about that.

But she was so hard, so ruthless! She was tooled and grooved to bore her way against the grain of things, sure as a gimlet. She was not especially beautiful, except for her tiny but provocative figure, her superbly modulated voice and her eyes – although, to my mind, these eyes were to be admired as, say, a pair of rare matched sapphires are to be admired, as stones that glorified light in refraction, for they held no light of their own. It was said that she had no feelings – and, curiously enough, people mostly admired her for that. Men vied with one another for the privilege of trying to get a smile and a 'thank you' out of her with presents of costly jewellery. She took everything and gave nothing.

In 1896, when she was about eighteen years old, she was already the leading lady of a minor company – and, wow,

but I shudder to think of the intrigues and the knifings she must have grown proficient at, to get so far so soon! Then, cold as a tax-collector, she married an infatuated old millionaire simply in order to have her own theatre and her own company to do with as she pleased. Having got these, she divorced the old gentleman pitilessly. And then she was not merely a theatrical personality – she was a personage, a power! You may take my word for it that, as such, she made herself felt. She demanded adoration and obedience and she got them; because if you did not adore and obey her, she threw you out. I was nearly a member of her troupe once, when I was nineteen and she in her early thirties. Our eyes met, and she said, 'There is no room for two cats in one bag. *Raus* with you – go elsewhere!' And so I did, but we remained on good terms and often met through the years that followed.

Let me say here that Heidi had no great versatility. She had examined herself with her habitual icy detachment – and she was even more merciless with herself than with her confrères – and discovered that her perfect role was that of Little Fifi.

Now you will ask me, 'Who and what is Little Fifi?' I'll explain, for perhaps the term has become obsolete. Little Fifi is not necessarily the name of a character. It is a generic term for a certain type of character – or used to be in Europe in the old days. Little Fifi is the girl who, suffering pangs of unrequited love for the handsome hero, dons boy's clothes – which happen to fit her as closely as a wet bathing-suit – and, pretending to be a boy, follows him. Heidi evolved an interminable series of variations on this time-worn theme. Sometimes she was a sailor, sometimes a bandit, a soldier, a curate, a pirate, anything that came into her head – this vest-pocket Venus, whose feminine charms were overwhelmingly obvious to the delighted audience although the performers seemed quite unaware of them. And, oh, the situations she got into,

and the predicaments she got out of! No, there never was a Little Fifi like Heidi Hohe. And what a pantomimist, and how she could wink – why, she could do as much with her eyelids as Mae West could do with her hips! In the last scene, Little Fifi appears in a stunning evening dress; the silly hero wonders where she has been all his life, and so, curtain.

All Europe went wild over her, and when she came to America, she made a furore in New York, Chicago and San Francisco too. It was hard at first for English-speaking audiences to understand what she was talking about; but that did not matter. Money poured in, and she grabbed it greedily. She paid her company regularly and well, but once her profits were in the bank, red-hot pincers could not have made her part with a penny.

Her admirers continued to make her handsome gifts. She accepted them as her due. 'Take, always take,' she said to me once, showing me a block of shares some financier had given her with a view to winning her favour. 'Make it a motto. There is no need to be greedy; simply take and keep and give nothing. Some stage-door Johnny offers you a diamond, with a leer, "as a token of admiration for your talent" – accept it precisely as such. If he offers to take liberties, say, "Sir, you admire my talent. You have expressed your admiration. If you wish to continue to admire me, do so from the auditorium – I am to be seen best from there. Thanks for the diamond. Beat it!"'

She was a hard one, our little Heidi! But time passed, and most marvellously she rode with it. At forty she was still Little Fifi. At forty-five she had, she told me, a little operation to take up some loose skin in her throat. Approaching fifty, there she was, the same Little Fifi, with the same frenetic energy and as many admirers as ever. Only, close up, a sharp eye could detect signs of age in her face.

She was a phenomenon. She attributed her still-youthful

appearance to the fact that she had never let herself be touched by human emotion. 'Nothing ages a woman like grief,' she told me, 'and where there is love there is grief.'

'Surely one must sometimes feel pity?'

'No. For where there is pity there is love,' said she.

I said, 'Thank God, I never had any looks to lose. One of these days, as the Americans say, you will get your comeuppance, Heidi.'

'Comeuppance,' she said. 'Strange phrase! But look – how old are you?'

'About thirty-six,' I answered.

'And I am close to fifty,' said Heidi. 'And look – can you do this?' Bending backward, she touched her heels with her head and sprang erect again.

I said dryly, 'No, I cannot. But I must practise. It will, no doubt, be a great comfort to me in my old age, to knock my head against my heels.'

A few years later we met in Mexico City, where she was playing *Little Fifi at the Circus*. If she had been strong enough to lift twice her weight in her arms, she had not the power to raise the corners of her mouth one sixteenth of an inch from where they had to go, which was downward. The acid in her soul was making an etching of her face.

Heidi surprised me by saying, 'Bella, tell me – what would you say if I told you that I was going to be married?'

I answered, 'Who?'

'The Duke Otakar of Moldavia,' she replied. 'And he is not a fortune-hunter. You may rest assured that I had him looked up. His title is genuine, and his credit-rating quite substantial for a duke – he can draw on about half a million dollars, American.'

I said, 'Oh, has Heartless Heidi at last taken her emotions out of cold storage?'

'Maybe. If so, so what?'

'Cook them quickly, or they might go bad,' I said.

Scarcely listening, she went on, 'The other day, when I was doing my morning exercises, I felt something like a knife stab right between the shoulder blades. I cried out in pain. None of my friends was behind me, so it could not have been a knife. And all of a sudden I felt ever so lonely. Otakar loves me truly – I can read genuine emotion.'

'How old is this Otakar?' I asked.

'What's the difference? I am old enough for two. The women adore him.'

'Ah, bah!' I said. 'You want only to irritate your enemies, nothing more.'

'Why not?' she demanded. 'One's greatness may be gauged by the number of one's enemies. Look at Napoleon!'

I replied, 'Look at a rabbit. All creation is his enemy.'

'Rabbits survive,' said Heidi.

'By breeding,' I said. 'Well?'

'Enough! I will present you to the Duke tonight,' said Heidi.

So that night at a small and carefully select dinner party I met the Duke Otakar of Moldavia. He was a handsome man of something less than forty. Thinking of him as Heidi's husband, I said to myself, *Poor Duke Otakar!* But then I observed his friend and secretary, Monsieur George Pappas, who was always at his elbow, and I thought again. For Monsieur Pappas, to a reader of faces like myself, was as tricky as a skeleton key. His head was narrow, as if pressed between two boards, and he had hair like tin and cool tinny hands and a curious silvery-grey quality of skin too. Pappas was dressed all in dark grey, although the other men were in evening dress, and he had a peculiar little subdued voice that reminded you of someone cleverly picking a well-oiled lock in the dead of night.

After our respectable little party was over and the Duke

and Monsieur Pappas had gone to their suite – for we were all staying at the exclusive, the sumptuous, the horribly expensive Hotel Chirimayo – Heidi said to me, 'Well, Bella?'

'Well what?'

'What do you think?'

I said, 'This is what I think: I think that whatever I say I think to a woman like you when she has made up her mind must start an argument. Marry your Duke, be a duchess, and bless you!'

'But what *do* you think?'

'Well, your Otakar is somehow too pliable, too sweet for my liking.'

'So? Do you think I marry a husband to argue with him? Otakar is like a child. I think that's what I like most about him,' said Heidi. 'He loves me for myself. He —'

'All right, all right! But I don't like Monsieur Pappas,' I said.

'No more do I. But the minute we're married, I'll get rid of that one in just about as long as it takes to say, "You're fired!"' said she.

Then we sat and talked of a hundred and one trivialities until nearly two o'clock in the morning, when she said, 'Before I go to bed, let us take a mouthful of this nice cool night air in the gardens.'

I agreed. We walked among the shrubberies in silence until we came to a stone bench under a great overhanging tree and there we sat in the starlight and the shadow, each engrossed in her own thoughts. Then she stiffened and said, 'Someone's coming.'

I listened. 'Two men,' I said. 'Watchmen, perhaps?'

'Stupid! Since when did watchmen smoke fifty-cent cigars?' Then, listening intently, she said, 'It's Otakar and that man Pappas! Hush, now. They're coming this way.

They're talking. I love to hear what people are saying when they don't think I'm listening. Not a word – not a breath, not a motion. Wait!'

Sure enough, growing clearer as they approached, I distinguished the soft bass of the Duke of Moldavia and the oiled-picklock voice of Monsieur Pappas. They stopped, not five yards from where Heidi and I were sitting.

They stood silent for a little while. Then suddenly Otakar said, 'Damn it, no, Pappas! You drive too hard a bargain!'

Pappas said, 'My friend, I have been very patient with you. Be advised – do not try my patience too far.' There was infinite menace in his little voice. 'I am not going to argue with you all night. You will do as I say and sign what I have told you to sign, or I cut my losses and send you to the devil.'

'Our agreement was —'

Pappas interrupted. 'I know exactly what our agreement was, Otakar. Read it again yourself. My percentage is subject to fluctuations in what we call "overheads" and may be varied, terms to be mutually agreed on.'

'We don't mutually agree,' said the Duke sullenly. 'Two thirds for you and one for me doesn't suit.'

'We are going to mutually agree,' said Pappas. 'First, consider my outlay. The cost of living has changed somewhat since Nineteen Twenty. This is the year Nineteen Twenty-Six, my friend. Up to now – I have your signed notes – your clothes, your cars, your entertainments and so on have cost me two hundred thousand dollars. For the look of your credit-rating, I have tied up half a million dollars of capital. True, part of the miscalculation is mine, for I had planned on marrying you to that Californian heiress, and I might have known that you would have bungled the affair. Since then I have trained you in the art of wooing. I have even paid a hack to write your poetry for you! I overestimated you. My error of judgment has cost me dear —'

'That half-million is still yours, since it can't be drawn on without your signature,' the Duke broke in.

'The Californian girl,' Pappas went on, as if he had not heard, 'was worth eight million. I should have been perfectly content with one third of that. But time has passed, expenses have mounted, and this woman Heidi has, let me see' – I heard the snap of a cigarette case and the gentle tapping of a cigarette against it as Pappas counted – 'Heidi has about two million dollars American, about one hundred thousand pounds sterling, a million and a half good Swiss francs and a few more assets. We'll write off her Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, Austrian and German holdings as waste paper. Still, that leaves about three million. It will have to do, but I must have two thirds of it. Is my time and trouble valueless? Why, the engagement ring alone is worth twenty thousand dollars!'

The Duke muttered, 'Was it necessary to spend so much for the ring?'

'Oh,' said Pappas, 'a jewel is always worth something. Besides, I'll get it back after the wedding. I have got that ring back six times to date.'

'And I,' cried the Duke, '*I* have to marry that aged clown!'

'Listen, once again, Otakar. Why do you think I made you a Mexican? And why did I pick on this denationalized woman for you? She will marry you under Mexican law and will thereby become a Mexican. No? Well, are you not aware that under existing Mexican law a married woman may possess not one penny of her own? Her money falls into your lap. As for living with her – you'll divorce her, or she you, in a year.'

'And claim her property back,' said Otakar bitterly.

'Yes, perhaps. But you will have lost the lot, you see, in "unfortunate speculations". That is my department. So, you

come out of it all about three quarters of a million to the good. So sign. Agree, Otakar – no more discussion.'

'And what if I refuse?'

'Nothing much,' said Pappas. 'I could have you killed or crippled, of course. Or I could have you pursued to the ends of the earth by creditors. I think, however, I should just cut my losses and leave you to try and find a job. Well?'

'You win, Pappas. I marry the hag, and you take two thirds.'

'Yes,' said Pappas, 'that is good. Tomorrow – today, rather – is Sunday. We will have a betrothal party on Wednesday and a quick marriage. Now to bed.'

They went, and when the sound of their footsteps had died away, Heidi put her face in my lap and wept like a lost child. I, trying to comfort her, said, 'There, darling, it is like having your tonsils out. If it happens when you are very young, it doesn't hurt much. But after thirty —'

'What are you talking about?'

'Love,' I said.

'Why, you fool!' she cried, 'What has love got to do with it? Do you realize that I shall never be able to play Little Fifi again as long as I live?' Then she sat up, haggard and tear-stained in the starlight. 'Back to the hotel,' she said. 'I have to send a most urgent telegram.'

And the contents of this telegram I ventured a guess at two days later when, on the eve of her betrothal to the Duke Otakar, she received a cable from New York. It said: MOTHER CRITICALLY ILL. RETURN NEW YORK IMMEDIATELY, GEZA. The cable arrived just as she – woman of ice! – was thanking Otakar for her engagement ring, a superb emerald surrounded with diamonds. 'Beloved,' said she, 'the banquet must be postponed for a week or so. My mother is eighty-five. I must go to her. Wait here until I return, dear Otakar.'

Then she was off, like an arrow from a bow, to catch a train. As I kissed her good-bye, I asked, 'Do you feel no bitterness towards Otakar?'

'No,' she said. 'He is no worse than I am, only stupid. I feel bitterness towards myself.'

'And Pappas?' I asked.

'Ah,' said Heidi, '*that*'*s* the one I ought to have married! But this will hit him where it hurts most.' And she held up the engagement ring.

And in New York City she rallied her troupe, remodelled her programme and set out to storm Europe again. But she never played Little Fifi again. She was what you might call mistress of ceremonies in *Heidi's Varieties*, a most lavish and elaborate show which she took to every city where, in the past, she had made a sensation. But this was Nineteen Twenty-Six now, and tastes had changed. She had not. She lost money, but not confidence – so much the worse for her, because the more she lost, the more she plunged.

And so, one day in Nineteen Twenty-Nine, while I was coming from the customs office in New York, I met Little Heidi on Broadway. She said, 'Ho! Have you been buying stocks on margin also?'

'Not I,' I said. 'Have you?'

'I have. My broker has just jumped out of a fifteenth-story window. I have paid off my troupe, and that's that. I sold my jewels. But I saved this for you.' She gave me a little watch, such as ladies used to pin on their bosoms. It was shaped like a coffin, and on its dial, exquisitely engraved, were the words, THIS, TOO, SHALL PASS.

'Oh, my poor Heidi!' I exclaimed.

'Not so poor actually. I still have my *schwung*. And some years ago I bought myself an annuity of a hundred and sixty dollars a month. A lady may live modestly on a hundred and sixty dollars a month surely? An old lady? And let us face it –

Heidi has had it. *Na*! Let us have a glass of wine for old times' sake.'

So we went to a decent little Hungarian café I knew, not far from Washington Square, and outside it stood a blind old man playing a zither. Heidi stopped and said to him, in her barbarous East European lingua franca composed of Romanian, Russian, Polish and Hungarian, 'Can you play Miska Borzo's *csàrdàs?*' He smiled and began to play. Then, to my amazement, Little Heidi kicked off her shoes and started to dance on the pavement! A little crowd collected, laughing and applauding. After a minute or two she stopped, breathless, and said to me, 'Dancing to a zither in the gutter came I into the bright lights of the great world, and dancing to a zither in the gutter —' She left the sentence unfinished, but snapped her fingers with great eloquence.

So we had our glass of wine and, since our roads lay apart, kissed each other farewell; and I did not see her again for many a long year.

There you have the story of Heidi, and I am glad you did not say anything witty about her, because hers is the unquenchable spirit.

Bella Barlay sighed softly. 'And still Heidi survives,' she said.

I said, 'One could live on forty dollars a week in Nineteen Twenty-Nine. But this is Nineteen Sixty-One. How does she manage?'

Ruminatively sucking the ink stain on her finger, Bella Barlay said, 'One must assume that somebody, somewhere, still likes her.' Then she idly locked the drawer in which she kept her cheque-book and went on to talk of other things.

The Nimroud Rug

He appeared so weary that you might have imagined something heavier than blood flowing in his poor old arteries, so that he was dragged down by his own weight. His face was too heavy, his voice was too heavy, and his hands – although they seemed light when they were gesticulating – seemed to break at the wrists and drop into his lap which, as if they had been so much hot printer's metal, appeared to reject them; and so they jerked away in a kind of shrug at the elbow. His name – if he really had a name – was Mourad and he came from Asia Minor. Do not ask me exactly where. He might have been an Iraqi, an Assyrian, or a Persian. Mourad spoke all languages with an extraordinary equality of inaccuracy, and an even degree of smiling enthusiasm. I liked Mourad; it was impossible to insult him, and while he was a perfect little cannibal in a bargain, he would give you, on another impulse, the shirt off his back.

I met him first in Bishopsgate, in 1928, when he was dealing in Persian carpets. In those days he called himself 'Mourad Pasha', a title to which he had no right at all. He called himself, according to the labels on the rugs he sold, 'The King of Kirman' or 'The Prince of Afshar' or 'The Bey of Bukhara'. Actually, Mourad's first love was the Kirman rug.

He was not averse to selling anything – Kirman, Afshar, Bukhara, Teheran, Ispahan, and you or me and himself – but there was something of the artist in Mourad, wherever he came from. I met him, I say, in Bishopsgate, where he was faking ancient Persian rugs. His method was simple: he would get a decent rug or carpet and put it down in a children's playground. In about a week those children would age that rug at least four hundred years. During holidays he hired a camel. Mourad assured me that, although it came more expensive, one camel walking to and fro over a carpet was equal to thirty obstreperous children.

He was one of those peculiar combinations of artist and swindler. There was, for example, during the reign of King George IV a member of His Majesty's Privy Council who had some sentimental regard for a lady named Ayesha, one of the wives of one of the sons of Suleiman the Magnificent. She had a magnificent head of hair. Before she was put in a sack and thrown in the Bosphorus, this Turk was supposed to have had her hair woven into the pattern of a rug. Mourad found it, you can bet your life; only I happen to know that he got the hair out of a barber's shop on Amsterdam Avenue in New York.

It was in New York that I met this charming little crook after many years, in a bar near Madison Avenue, where he invited me to drink champagne. 'I cannot stomach the stuff,' I said.

He looked at me like a spaniel and said: 'Oh, you must. A little brandy takes out the sting of the champagne. . . . Boy! *Pssst!* Waiter, two champagne cocktails. Dry . . . Would you like to see a real rug?'

'Depends what you mean,' I said.

He said 'It is evident that you have not heard of the Nimroud Rug. It was made, I mean woven, a devil of a long time ago. Call it something over a hundred years. Don't

interrupt – I know perfectly well that there are Persian rugs many centuries old. Now look here; I am a crook, a fiddler, and a *tricheur*, but carpets and rugs I love. They soothe me with their patterns, and they clear my intellect.

'And over all I prefer the rugs of Kirman. Hereby hangs a tale. If you sell it, I want fifteen per cent. In advance, let me make you a present of a Bukhara, sixteen feet by twelve. But in order to go forward, I must first of all go back . . .'

I dare say you know how the old Persian carpet-makers used to talk (said Mourad). Invariably, one of them was blind – almost certainly an aged woman. She kept everything going by repeating, according to formula, an old, old story which generally began like this:

Bismilahi Rahmani Rahim! . . .
La Allah il' Allah
Mahoumed Rasoul Allah.

This means, of course: Praise be to God, the God of Mercy, the Merciful! . . . There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His One True Prophet.

Preferably, end with a shriek – *wow!*

Generally, these carpet-makers used, as it were, to pick up the threads not only of rugs but of stories between finger and thumb and, calling upon the Prophet, make a certain opening to their story, usually beginning: Once upon a time, there was a time when there was nobody but God . . . It was a good affair. Come now, think! the old ones, having lost their eyesight, told stories to the youngsters who put in two hundred stitches to the inch, heaven help them!

Now it turned out that in the province of Kirman there was a man named Nimroud, after the great hunter. But it turned out that he was, by some accident of fate, an artist. Now what is an artist? Upon my honour, I do not know. An

artist is someone who sees life as God sends it, at the angle from which the good God sees it. He sees more in a head of hair, or the fold of a dress, etcetera, than you or I see. Always remember this, in the case of an artist: therefore, he dare not be in a hurry.

So it was with Nimroud. He was in no great hurry. He learned his craft from his father, who had learned it from his grandfather. While the dear old lady constantly repeated Persian fairy-tales, almost invariably beginning 'Once upon a time . . .' and going on to a prince without a kingdom, a saddle without a horse, and a hilt without a blade, the men and women and children worked and worked.

Of course, the master of the house dictated the pattern of the carpet. But you must know that, in Persia, Turkey, etcetera, every pattern follows a certain traditional design. It is, therefore, impossible not to recognize the design of, say, Teheran, Ispahan, Kirman, Turkestan, and what-have-you. Almost invariably your weaver of rugs never departs from the one pattern which has been hammered into his mind. He knows no better.

But Nimroud could leap beyond that which used to be. He was a great man. Having laid out the pattern, he taught his sons to follow in his footsteps: his eldest son, his three other sons; and his two daughters, also. It would appear that Nimroud, who was what the old Persians call a *sufi*, or heretical freethinker, flew in the teeth of Mohammedan tradition (he was a Moslem, and not a follower of Zoroaster) and dared to make images of the creatures that live in the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth. As a consequence of this, according to legend, Nimroud lost his eyesight. So did the most devout, who made rugs; so do lace-makers; but it is not for me to argue with theologists.

Nevertheless, before Nimroud died he left a painted

pattern which was supposed to represent the Creation of the World. Believe me, there never was such a pattern! You know the fabulous primary, secondary, and tertiary colours that the Persian rug-weavers get out of vegetables and impart to wool in the most marvellous permutations and combinations of brilliant dye. But this was nothing – beyond it was the design, and this I cannot describe or explain. Nimroud had woven in the manner of the weavers of Kirman: with deadly accuracy, and great minuteness.

Top centre, there was something like a sunburst – more stitches than you have hairs on your head, and all of golden yellow – all in the forms of a stupendous face and a colossal hand. The hand was outstretched, as if scattering seed; and oh, what that Hand scattered! The very seed of Life, I assure you, upon my soul!

First, in black and white, was the division of Light from Darkness, an awesome birth out of Chaos. Then, in black and in blue, the Dividing of the Waters. Following the Book of Genesis, there proceeded to emerge things out of the sea (Darwin copied it) and so, the things that creep and crawl. Vegetation there was, too – but not before an interval of white mist and grey rain – carboniferous forests of giant plants that looked like ferns. So, tumult, earthquake, and what might be described as an experimental settlement of the world, with such as the huge Saurians, and the Ornithorhyncus, which was a bird with teeth, together with the Brontosaurus, eighty feet long; and the Tyrannosaurus, thirty feet high; and a thing that might have been a cross between an armadillo and a rhinoceros, which the scientists call Triceratops.

Over all the sea, my friend, the sea and the rain.

In the Nimroud rug, the great beasts died and, after a last convulsion, the world sighed and grew calm. The Book of Genesis has it all in a few chapters. Now the warm-blooded

beasts came, and the virgin earth threw up a garden. Ultimately, into this garden, came man and woman, and out of it brothers and murder.

At the bottom of the Nimroud rug, that same colossal Hand rising out of a strange white fire, taking everything back: to remodel it, please God.

This last, perhaps, was prophetic? Who knows? The great mystery of the Nimroud rug is that Nimroud conceived it. He could not read or write, and knew nothing but a few *sura* of the Koran and a number of fairy-tales. Yet some unknown something put into his head this wonderful and terrible conception of the beginning and the end of this world!

Now you are going to ask me practical questions. Firstly, how much did he get for his masterpiece? Answer – nothing.

Nimroud never lived to see beyond 'Let there be light, and there was light'. This was around the year 1821 or so, when Nimroud lost his eyesight. All carpet-makers do, who are worthy of their craft. He went blind like his father before him. But Nimroud left the pattern for the others to see. And now it was his turn to chant while the others worked their eyes out.

He died, and you may believe me or not, but two generations more of the Nimrouds came and went before this unique rug was finished – and then, fourteen feet by eight only! This was in the 1890s.

A carpet-merchant named Fahmy, observing this masterpiece, threw down the equivalent of about three American dollars and said to Nimroud's great grandson: 'Roll it up!'

'I beg pardon, but it is not for sale. I have – '

' – Roll it up!'

'Take back your filthy silver!'

'Men,' said the dealer to his followers, 'give him a good beating. Let him work it out that way.'

The carpet-maker having died a few hours later, the dealer

said, with a sigh: 'I feared that he lacked stamina. Any more arguments? Then roll up the rug.'

'Children, take the silver, take the silver!' cried the old lady of the family. 'O, kind sir, leave the silver, take the accursed rug, and go with God!'

'Any more for any more?' Fahmy asked.

'No – please go!'

So Fahmy went away with the fabulous Nimroud Rug, leaving the Nimroud family to bury the dead man. It was already an unlucky rug. But, 'Wow, I have got a prize!' said Fahmy to himself – as, indeed, he had: the product of generations of hereditary craftsmen guided by a man of genius. What more do you want?

Still, the rug brought Fahmy no luck. He planned to sell it to the Sirdar Ikbal (Ikbal was a man of vast consequence, then). Lusting after Nimroud's rug, he asked the price of it. Fahmy said: 'Oh, Sirdar, it is priceless.' The Sirdar then said 'Oh, what a pity. Then I cannot pay for it. Don't bother to get up, Mr Fahmy. . . . Ali, remove me this gentleman's head, and, Chamberlain, confer upon the late Fahmy the Posthumous Order of the Household – Second Class. . . .'

Wry as the humour of the situation may be, it is difficult not to smile at the poetic justice of it. Fahmy was beheaded – and serve him jolly well right – and the Nimroud Rug passed into the possession of the Sirdar Ikbal. This unscrupulous fellow, hoping to get hold of the tobacco monopoly, made a ceremonious present of it to Fa'ouzi Pasha. But this potentate was three-quarters blind with the cataract in both eyes, although only his personal attendant, who was dumb, knew of his affliction.

Fa'ouzi Pasha said, in effect: 'Sirdar Ikbal, you must have taken leave of your senses. Only a madman would offer me a piece of rag for a tobacco monopoly. It is forbidden to kill

those whom Allah has made mad. . . . No! Minister! Confiscate all the goods of the Afflicted Ikbal, give him a little beating, and a bowl to beg with. While you are about it, put out his eyes. I am a merciful man – a blind beggar stands a better chance than one who can see. And what right has this dog to see, when his betters . . . Take him away!'

So much for Ikbal. *Where he went, how he fares, nobody knows and nobody cares*, as the old English epitaph has it.

Well, Fa'ouzi died soon after this memorable interview. Some salesman had convinced him that pink champagne was non-alcoholic, alcohol being forbidden to Mohammedans: cirrhosis of the liver, plus nephritis. His eldest son Ahmed succeeded him – a more diplomatic sort. To keep peace in the land (he hated bloodshed) he had his brothers drowned. Ahmed the Bountiful, they called him.

Ahmed saw what a treasure this Nimroud Rug was. He allowed no feet to tread on it, but had it framed. Then, being a diplomat, changing the frame to one of pure gold, he offered the Nimroud Rug to the Sultan. A little while later, Ahmed was assassinated by one of the Youth Group – shot in the chest with a dum-dum bullet.

The Sultan began to suspect that the Nimroud Rug was unlucky. He entertained a certain dislike for the King of Egypt, and so, having encrusted the frame with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds and topaz, sent it as a gift. But the evil reputation of the rug had preceded it. So the King of Egypt sent it to someone he cordially hated – Abdul Hamid of Turkey, better known as Abdul the Damned.

I dare say Abdul the Damned regarded, first of all, the value of the frame, which was about five hundred thousand dollars. Then he called in some expert, and said: 'What is my expert opinion of this rug?'

'Lord, it is an incomparable masterpiece.'

'Get it copied, then.'

'Lord, with submission, that is impossible in our time.'

'To us, you dog, nothing is impossible. To suggest such a thing is *lèse majesté*.'

'Sire, there are ninety years of work in this wonderful rug. Consider, Lord. To merely weave this, ten men and women and children must work, generation after generation, until they go blind. Merciful, consider their condition! They work for what they may never see. Have pity, I beg.' With that cunning which comes with self-preservation, the expert added: 'You alone in the world possess a masterpiece which cannot be reduplicated in a hundred years.'

'Something in that,' said Abdul Hamid. 'Get out.'

It was in his labyrinthine palace, bargain-hunting, that I saw the rug. Somebody had made off with the frame, of course. Abdul the Damned had fallen (as the Damned must) and there was a kind of pillage, of looting. I wanted that rug as I have never wanted any inanimate object on earth. I had money – I always have, I like it – and offered a good price for it. That is to say, I offered a foolish price for a load of junk, the rug included. Good. It was knocked down to me, the whole lot. But when I came to examine my purchase, the Nimroud Rug was gone!

It appeared that the agent of some Californian whose name I forget – he owned newspapers and magazines, and what-not – had bribed and corrupted his way into my property. The Nimroud Rug was gone. The residue of my purchase, junk though it was, more than covered my outlay. But I was hungry for the Nimroud Rug.

Only it was gone for ever. I dare say that acquisitive California millionaire put it in a crate and promptly forgot about it – as he did with ancient castles, which he bought and transported stone by numbered stone and left to rot. What do I know? But this is not the story of the Nimroud

Rug, not the fantastic part of the story. It is the mere background, as the editors say.

The stranger part is yet to come. . . .

Under pressure of business, I banished the Nimroud Rug from the upper layer of my consciousness, and many years passed. You know me – I am a bloody-minded Middle-Asiatic dealer in Oriental rugs, who would skin you alive if your pelt had market value. Yet I know how to be a friend.

Once upon a time a man did me a good turn. Money, you think? Money's worth? No. He comforted me when I was in distress, alone and among strangers. So he was my friend for ever. He died, and I was his son's friend – a fine young fellow who called me Uncle Mourad. I name no names. He wanted to become an accountant, although his father wanted him to join the Brigade of Guards from which he had retired with the rank of Colonel.

The boy was a fine boy, and I put him through school and saw to it, as his father's friend, that his old mother was not embarrassed by unpaid bills. But then the Second World War broke out, and nothing would content this boy but he must fly aeroplanes. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force – oh, alas for that magnificent figure and type of a boy! – and soon get his commission and became a fighter-pilot. A night-fighter, flying a Hurricane.

Forgive me raising these matters, but they should not be forgotten. Every plane Britain had was in the air against the gathered might of the Luftwaffe; and only six planes in reserve. Foolish I grant you; so the best blood is shed. But noble, you will concede; so the best blood prevails.

Well, after too many operations, the son of my friend was 'grounded' with what the doctors call 'a severe nervous breakdown'. Now have the kindness to tell me, what is a nervous breakdown? It is a euphemistic way of saying, 'I have had it.'

Driven beyond a certain point, the strongest man goes crazy. Thus – oh dear me! – the son of my friend found himself in what they called a 'Rehabilitation Centre' not far from Regent's Park in London. He had flogged his flagging nerves with gin, coffee, benzedrine, and what-have-you, until he went off his rocker.

How did the good doctors rehabilitate him? Not too badly. First, they gave him sedatives. Then, they tried to make him eat and sleep. He could do neither, so they shot him full of insulin to give him a voracious appetite, which they satisfied with food. At night, pills. By day, something the doctors call Occupational Therapy – which is another name for what children cry for when they ask for 'something to *do*'. All madness takes refuge in the beginnings.

No sharp instruments. Preferably knitting-needles, glue, rubber cement, butterfly wings – always with a couple of male nurses around, men of infinite patience and gigantic strength – to see that you did not swallow the stuff. A melancholy spectacle!

This was the ante-room to the lunatic asylum, the penultimate halt for those in the Dark Night of the Soul, the hierarchy of which play with harmless stuff like wool, making a kind of rug, following a printed design. May your heart never bleed as my old heart (aneurism and all) bled at the sight of those fellows thus therapeutically occupied! They couldn't keep their minds on their work. First of all a battle-fatigued veteran of twenty-five would put in a few stitches with that spring-backed weaving needle. Much he cared about colour! Red, yellow, blue, green – anything for something to *do*. Then the morphinomaniacs, the musicians who had become drug addicts, and the alcoholics took their turns – wove a stitch here and there in their nervous listless way, and dropped the business sometimes in the middle of a stitch.

For the sake of the son of my friend, I supplied the wool,

of all the colours of the rainbow. Also, cigarettes. Patients came and went. Mercy on us, more than a thousand war-crazed men must have put their few stitches into that bit of matting before it was filled up! and before they were fetched away, or, if they were lucky, let go, as my friend's son was. (He is junior partner in a sound firm of accountants in Fetter Lane, now, thank goodness.)

But for that madmen's rug I had developed a strange yearning. The crazy memories of a thousand broken consciousnesses put into wool! Think of it. Read it and weep. So I went to the Medical Director and said, 'For comforts,' and put down fifty five-pound notes. A cheque for any amount you like would be suspect – you could stop it – but hard cash on the nail is irrevocable. 'For cigarettes,' I said. My motives were not entirely mercenary; I was thinking of my old friend. 'That rug,' said I; 'I'd like it for a souvenir.'

'Oh,' said the Medical Director, 'it is to go to the Jumble Sale – in aid of Old Ladies. Earmarked for that already, I am sorry to say – '

So I went to the Jumble Sale. Such auctioneering should not happen to a dog. I got the rug for seven shillings and sixpence.

Understand me – I calculated upon merely sentimental value. But when I unrolled the madmen's rug and looked at it, something seemed to congeal where the ribs join, and at the back of my head a low but thunderous voice muttered: 'In the Beginning . . .'

Therefore I took that rug, which was unidentifiably shaggy, and stripped it, as it were a pony or a dog, using by hand a French razor to feel my way down to the original design.

Six days it took me, to get the picture; and a great awe came upon me. Because there was the Nimroud Rug – three generations of craftsmen – and, by accident or sublime design, about thirty thousand years of madness.

Six days, I said. Six days to Creation. But what of the Seventh?

One last panel, only twelve inches deep, I have not dared to strip. I have left it shaggy. There is the Creation, yet, from Light to the Downfall. But what of that awful Hand reaching out of the fire that dieth not? This I dare not contemplate.

It is not a very lucky rug. I will give you a Bukhara. . . . But, as a matter of curiosity, how does it come to pass that Nimroud – like the madmen so many years later – devised the smoke of his undying fire in the form of mushrooms?

The Molosso Overcoats

In any circumstances my friend Karmesin is rather better than life-size, but when the weather turns chilly and he puts on his winter overcoat, passers-by sometimes run around the block simply for the wonder of seeing him a second time, advancing in all his outrageous majesty. For in this coat, which is of some moth-eaten blackish-grey fur, with his great red face and his moustache which, like the philosopher Nietzsche's, hangs down in corkscrew curls, he has something of the air of a hard-up Jove wrapped in his last leaky thunder-cloud.

'Oh, let people look,' he said to me. 'They will never see a coat like this again. It is the last.'

'Too bad,' I said.

'Yes. It is made of the fur of the Mongolian syrax. This pelt was taken off an extinct beast found frozen along with the mammoths in the Siberian snows.' He shot his cuffs. 'You know, considering it is forty-seven thousand years old, it is not very much the worse for wear.'

Now Karmesin has been described as either the greatest crook or the greatest liar the world has ever known. But how is it possible to reconcile the evident pennilessness of this remarkable man with his accounts of his unfailing success as

a master thief? And, if you know Karmesin, you ask yourself, 'How is it possible that such a man could condescend to lie?' *Mongolian syrax*, for example! There was no mention of any such beast, extinct or otherwise, in any available reference-work. No furrier had ever heard of such a creature. Yet I still feel in my heart that somehow or other the authorities must be wrong. 'Look at the Piltdown Skull,' I say to myself. 'Oh, surely, there must have been one – just *one* – Mongolian syrax!'

Such is the power of the man.

He rolled himself a cigarette fat as a cheroot, and put it between his lips. Under that portentous moustache it looked no bigger than a thermometer.

He said, 'I once made a little money out of a kind of overcoat. I cannot bother to recall the exact amount. Tens of thousands – there are people nowadays to whom it would be a small fortune, I hear. Offer me a cup of coffee and I will tell you about it.'

In the café Karmesin settled himself comfortably, pocketed four lumps of sugar and some toothpicks, and went on:

. . . The overcoats to which I refer were, in fact, coats of paint, and the cloth was second-hand canvas. Yes, they were pictures, supposed to be the work of the French artist Paul Gauguin. Even the likes of you, my friend, will have heard of Gauguin, since I am told that both Mr George Sanders and Sir Laurence Olivier have portrayed him in *The Moon And Sixpence*. As a character, Gauguin cannot miss with the general public: he deserted his family, swindled his friends, thrashed his mistresses, and (to paraphrase Mr Longfellow) departing left behind him toothmarks in the hands that fed him.

But he painted some quite decorative pictures in the South Seas. They make suburban homes look artistic, especially in

light-oak frames. And although he was poor in his unsavoury lifetime, some time after his death his pictures became immensely valuable. So, since his brushwork is not too difficult to imitate, the faking of Gauguins was, until recently, something like a little industry in itself. For example, I knew an innkeeper near Arles who made twenty million francs by selling a Gauguin portrait of his grandfather, purported to have been left by the painter in lieu of cash for an unsettled bill. The innkeeper sold two hundred and eighty of these 'originals' before he retired – used to buy them by the dozen from a dealer in Marseilles; nail one over a hole in the chicken-coop, and wait for a tourist to recognize it.

You see, even if your sucker can be persuaded that he has been caught, he can generally be relied on to keep his mouth shut. He craves company. That is why so few clever fakers of works of art are exposed in their lifetimes.

But by about 1945 mere copies of famous paintings by Paul Gauguin became a drug on the market. By that date, it has been calculated, more than five million dollars had been spent on spurious originals of one canvas alone, the one named 'Te Po'. It was necessary to discover a hitherto unheard-of Gauguin picture. I gave only a passing thought to the matter, being occupied with more lucrative affairs just then. But as luck would have it, I ran into an impecunious painter named Molosso – and here, if you like, was an extraordinary type! He was, in a way, a little like the Dutch hero, Van Meegheren, who painted pictures alleged to be old Dutch masters with such consummate skill, and such scientific meticulousness, that he fooled all the German experts, and got undisclosed millions out of such collectors as the Reichsmarshal Göring. Van Meegheren reproduced the same pigments that the old masters had used, ground out of identical earths and jewels in the same kind of mortars with exactly similar pestles; and he applied his paint with hair-

for-hair reconstructions of the old brushes, upon genuine but worthless contemporary canvases, copying the strokes of the great artists to the tiniest capillary, with an exquisite perfection of microscopic skill that has never been equalled.

Or perhaps it has? What Van Meegheren did, might not someone else have done? Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa', in the Louvre, is alleged by some experts to be a fake. Believe me, my young friend, some strange stories might come out if some of our famous art galleries were carefully examined today!

Well, my little Molosso was a lesser Van Meegheren. I really marvel at this kind of man – I am lost in wonder, that one who can paint a new picture as superbly as, say, Vermeer would have painted it if he had chosen the subject, should not elect to be a great genius in his own right. Why didn't this titanic faker cry, 'But I am the master, Van Meegheren'? I can only assume that his genius was not strong enough; it had its rotten spot, and poverty found it, so that he argued, 'Why should I go hungry as Van Meegheren, when I can drink champagne by pretending to be Vermeer?' So he faked, and Göring was fooled, and it was a great joke. But it was also a pitiful tragedy, an Allegory of Genius Strangled by Greed. The great soul takes the rough road.

Little Molosso started to paint with a high spirit and a light heart. But your true artist must be made of tough stuff, and Molosso wanted heart. A great man can whitewash a barn for a bit of bread without losing the glory and the dream; but when Molosso learned that the world preferred to spend its money on greetings cards rather than canvases, he drifted into the position of a disgruntled mediocrity who enjoyed being what they call 'misunderstood'. He would have gone to the dogs completely but for his wife, a cheerful little woman, who adored him and took his ill-treatment of her as a matter of course. And in abusing her Molosso could feel as a hungry genius is romantically supposed to feel – that

if he had been a man like Gauguin, with spirit enough to leave her abruptly with a parting punch in the jaw, he might have been recognized as great. As it was, he was kind enough to stay married to her and let her work for him. For her sake I decided to make Molosso rich.

The idea came to me suddenly one evening after I had walked home with him from the printer's office at which, I being there on business, he had scraped an acquaintance with me. I was amused by his preposterous virulence – it broke out when we were passing a print-seller's shop. Rembrandt painted with mud, he shouted, Da Vinci was a plumber, Van Gogh painted in braille for the blind, and as for Gauguin – *bah!* – he, Molosso, had painted better when he was eighteen!

'And if you don't believe me, come upstairs and I'll prove it,' he said.

Having time to kill, I went to see what he had to show. And indeed, Molosso really did have a most peculiar talent. Alas, it was a talent without soul! He was so empty of original spirit that he almost frightened me. How shall I put it? If you asked him to depict, for instance, a landscape he had seen, he would stand helpless, paralysed, while the paint dried on his palette. But if you said, 'Molosso, paint me a landscape as Salvator Rosa, or Turner, or Van Gogh *might* have painted it,' why, then he would go to work at once, with tremendous energy, and the results would have been astonishing – if he had not tired of the game in the middle.

Since we had been talking of Gauguin, he pulled out a half-finished canvas, saying, 'There. Painted when I was eighteen. I'd thought of passing it off as genuine to some fat pig of a collector, just to show my disdain for collectors in general, and that leprous charlatan of a Gauguin in particular. But I thought, oh what the devil, they are beneath my contempt! But look – there's your precious Gauguin in every stroke, every line, every vulgar splash of eye-aching

colour. It was to have been a variation on one of that ham-fisted stockbroker's Polynesian themes. I was going to call it "Oalámaóa".'

'Meaning?' I asked.

'Meaning simply "Oalámaóa" – men, pigs, women, hibiscus, and bananas. What else is there in the Pacific?'

I looked closely and long. And it was then that my scheme sprouted, swelled, and blossomed to perfection in my head like one of those Japanese paper flowers in warm water. Now as I was about to speak, Molosso's wife came in, carrying a package of groceries and three bottles of wine. He did not even say 'hello' to her – simply jerked a thumb in her direction and said to me, 'That's Lucille, the cross I have to bear.'

I said, 'Madame, I am most impressed by your husband's work, and propose to offer him a commission worthy of his brush.'

'What does she know?' cried Molosso. 'She sews buttons on rich women's drawers in a lingerie shop in the Rue de Miromesnil. But are you serious, sir? A commission?'

'If you are free,' I said.

'Free! I wish I were!' said Molosso, with a bitter look at his nice little wife. 'But, sir, I'd do anything in the world rather than continue to paint sickening cherubs and nauseating roses for Minard's Hand-Painted Greetings Cards.'

'Work for me for six months, then,' I said, 'and I will pay you one thousand dollars American every month. All your expenses will be paid. At the end of our association, I will pay you thirty thousand dollars in cash. Well?'

Well! So began what must be the neatest piece of polite skulduggery that even the rare picture business has ever known. And these, my friend, are very strong words indeed.

So. A few months later I called on no less a person than Mr Egon Mollock, in his suite at the Crillon. He had come

to Paris for his usual annual visit, seeking what he might devour, for he was a multi-millionaire and a collector. Of what? Of anything that nobody else had, of anything any other collector would give his ears for. He was not a lover of beauty; only of rarity. If wart-hogs had been scarce he could have collected wart-hogs. As it was, he went after original works of art, which he kept locked up in his mansion in Connecticut.

To this loveless jailer of the beautiful, I said, 'I have news for you, in confidence, Mr Mollock. Imogene Gribble wants to sell a Gauguin.'

'Very likely,' said he. 'But I happen to know that the Gobseck Collection is entailed.'

'Exactly. That is why I am empowered to speak to you – in the strictest confidence.'

I should explain, here, that Lucien Gobseck was one of those mystery men of money whose histories always have to be hushed up. He came up overnight like a toadstool, and helped to finance Louis Napoleon's *coup-d'état*; had a long, murky career as company promoter, money-lender, and unofficial pawnbroker to the great, and died in 1899, leaving a colossal fortune and an art collection which hardly anyone has ever been allowed to look at. The collection is entailed – in other words, it is an heirloom; it may be inherited, but never sold. And such an inheritance, nowadays, is the legatee's nightmare. There is many a proud inheritor who, ruined by death taxes and insurance premiums, prays day and night for a good hot fire fanned by a hard dry wind.

Gobseck's only child, a girl, reversed the accepted order of things. Generally, it is an American heiress who marries a penniless Frenchman. She married a cowhand out of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, named Three-To-A-Flush Boscobel, said to be the most optimistic poker-player on earth. But even so, their daughter Imogene brought a large

fortune to her husband, a Bostonian named Least-Of-These Gribble, who abhorred gambling and invested only in sure things at 12½ per cent. Thus, when he passed on – Bostonians never die, they simply pass on – Imogene was left with only about twenty-five thousand dollars a year, and this incubus of a Gobseck Collection to keep up and pay insurance on.

I said, 'The Tonkin Necklace is broken up and replaced with a paste replica this five years. So is the Isabella Tiara. Morally, Imogene Gribble is justified; in law, she is culpable. I feel that I am no more a purveyor of stolen property in offering "Oalámaóa", than you would be a receiver of it if you bought it. This kind of technically illicit deal is less reprehensible than, say, smuggling a bottle of cognac. Nobody is the loser, but everyone gains. A copy of "Oalámaóa" moulders in the dark instead of the beautiful original; Mrs Gribble has some money, which she needs; I draw my commission; and you have the joy of possession —'

'—"Oalámaóa"? I never heard of it,' he said.

'Neither had I until I first saw it,' I told him. 'It is possible that old Gobseck foresaw Gaugin's value, and bought some unheard-of canvases. Who knows?'

'I have met Imogene Gribble,' said Mollock, looking at me with that unpleasant smile of his, which has been so aptly likened to a tired earthworm trying to bite its other end. 'What is to prevent my dealing with her directly, as a friend?'

'If the lady chose to deal directly, I imagine she would not have employed me as a go-between,' I said, with some coldness. 'Mrs Gribble mentioned three of her acquaintances whom I might approach in this matter: Karyatidis the shipowner, Gregor Dreidl the theatrical man, and your good self.'

'Why did you come to me first – if you did come to me first?'

'Because,' I said, with a shrug, 'Karyatidis is on his yacht, Dreidl is in New York, and you happen to be in Paris.'

'Well,' he said, grudgingly, 'I'll look at the picture.'

I had it with me. Mollock, who had done so much under-the-counter buying in his time, remarked on the fact that the canvas was still stretched in its framework. He had rather expected it to be rolled up in a cardboard tube. I reminded him, 'This is not a stolen canvas, my dear sir, cut from its frame with a razor-blade. Why mar it even that little, therefore?'

'This is no nineteenth-century canvas,' he said.

'Of course not. It is very much older. The art-dealer, Père Tanguy, from whom most Parisian artists of Gauguin's time got their supplies, had a considerable stock of perfectly good canvases painted by unheard-of mediocrities of every century. The pictures were worthless; the canvases were excellent. So impecunious painters often bought them for a few francs, cleaned them, and painted over them. This you must know. Ah . . .,' I said with a sigh, ' . . . whoever sold Gauguin that bit of canvas is still whistling for his money, I'll wager, wherever he is!'

'But what a blaze of colour!' he exclaimed.

So it was. There was something stunning in the impact of the colour of 'Oalámaóa' as it hit your eye. Little Molosso, in his vanity and his spite, had out-Gauguined Gauguin, so to speak. The central figure was a golden-skinned woman, nude, walking as if under a spell, followed by a group of young men wearing lava-lavas of different tints but all marked with the same meandering, tantalizing design. They were coming out of a jungle flaring with flowers. To the right, in the foreground, a black-and-white pig rooted among the shrubs.

I said, 'He must have enjoyed himself, that man, painting this picture.'

Mollock nodded. 'I wonder what that pattern means, there on the cloth.'

'Some Polynesian ideograph, no doubt,' I said.

'And how much does Imogene Gribble want for this?' he asked.

'Fifty thousand dollars,' I said.

'Like hell she does,' said he. 'Do you realize that if I don't buy, a word dropped by me will make the sale of this picture to anybody else absolutely impossible?'

'Sir,' said I, 'in naming you, Karyatidis, and Dreidl, Mrs Imogene Gribble referred only to the three most respectable of her list of potential buyers.'

I will not bore you with an account of the negotiations that followed. They started before lunch, and ended at cocktail-time. Mollock wheedled me, Mollock tempted me, and at last I fell. With an air of shame I accepted thirty-five thousand dollars as the 'official' price paid for 'Oalámaóa' in this highly unofficial deal, and an extra five thousand dollars strictly off the record as my price for underselling my employer. Mollock was very good at figures. He put it to me, 'Say I pay forty-five thousand for "Oalámaóa". Your dealer's commission, twenty per cent, amounts to nine thousand dollars, and that is that. But say I pay only thirty-five thousand, and give you a private honorarium of five thousand, you make twelve thousand and I save five.'

You can't argue with arithmetic. An expert having, after a secret examination of the picture, pronounced it 'The Gauguin to end all Gauguins', I took my money and Mollock sailed for America. My little game was well begun.

. . . Yes, you heard me correctly – *begun*. Do you think a man like me expends such creative planning and precise administrative work for a wretched forty thousand dollars? Do you take me for a common crook?

To proceed: as soon as he got home, Mollock had his new

acquisition suitably framed and lighted, and gave a select little dinner for a few of the collectors he hated most, and 'Oalámaóa' was unveiled. The effect was all he had hoped it might be; Mollock savoured to the full the joy of seeing the unfeigned admiration of his guests for the picture, and their ill-disguised envy and loathing for himself. Dreidl, the theatrical man, offered him sixty thousand dollars for the picture, on the spot. This finagler had turned himself into something called a Fine Arts Development Corporation, among other slippery things, and could somehow elude the tax-collectors in his artistic sidelines by pretending to be a dealer. But our Mr Mollock would not sell. He wanted to gloat. 'Oalámaóa' was his alone, all for the price of four limousines!

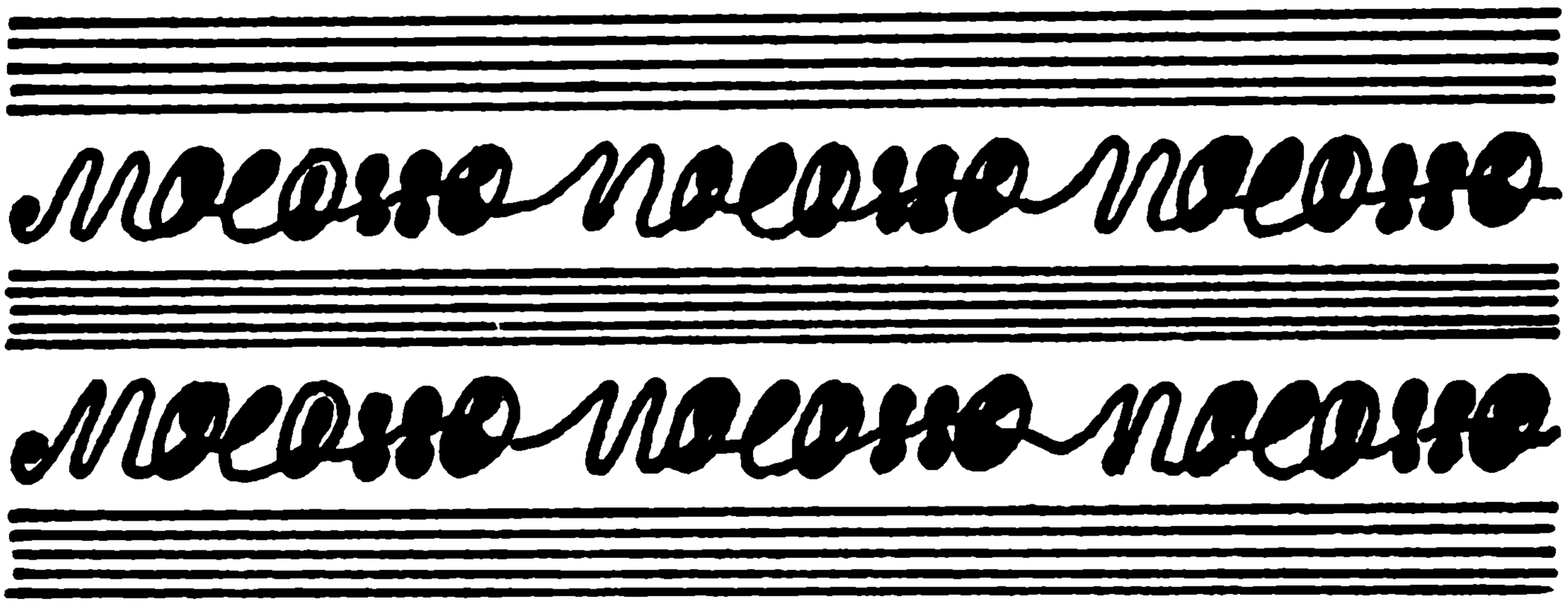
I let him wallow in his base triumph for several days. Then I sent one of my friends to Mollock in the guise of a visiting French expert. This reliable man, whom I had most thoroughly drilled in his role, looked at the picture, did what the theatrical people call a double-take, and burst out laughing. 'Why!' he cried. 'Bless my soul, but what a clever little rascal Molosso turned out to be, after all! I never thought he had it in him to stick to one thing for so long, though.'

'What are you talking about? And who is Molosso?'

'A painter of greetings cards for Minard, in Paris. You have probably seen his signature on the more expensive kinds of birthday felicitations, wedding congratulations, etcetera etcetera. You may certainly see his highly notice-able signature (he is a vain little fellow) in all its glory on this excellent fake. Why, the rogue has had the consummate impudence to paint his name openly – but openly – all over it!'

And he pointed out that interesting meandering design on the men's draperies in the picture – the very design

Mollock had been the first to point out, and which I had said might be some Polynesian ideograph:



'See, sir – you need no magnifying glass – this is simply Molosso's regular signature over and over again. See? *Molossomolossomolosso*, with the loops filled in. But oh, what a beautiful joke!'

I need scarcely tell you that Mollock failed to see the beauty of it. But he was a hard man, and a ruthless man, and a quick-thinking and a persuasive man. He talked to my friend the 'expert'; he wheeled him, he tempted him, and, like me, my friend fell. He agreed, for a consideration – five thousand dollars down, and five thousand more on completion of the deal – to sell 'Oalámaóa' to the Greek magnate Karyatidis.

First, Mollock let it be rumoured that, on account of some unfortunate speculations in Africa, he might be compelled to sell part of his collection. It was not true, of course – the man was a born liar. And then Karyatidis was delicately approached in the matter of the 'Oalámaóa'. Mollock knew his brother art-graspers: if he owned a picture and Dreidl desired it, then Karyatidis would stop at nothing to get it. Then he wrote us an ambiguously-worded authority to act for him in the sale of his recently-acquired canvas, 'Oalámaóa'. *Gauguin never painted better*, he said in the note. But he did not say that Gauguin had painted 'Oalámaóa'.

And Karyatidis bought the picture for seventy thousand dollars, to hang in the saloon of his yacht! Of this not untidily round sum, I sent Mollock not one penny. And when he began to act in a generally offensive, resentful manner, I took little Molosso to see Karyatidis, and I said, 'M. Karyatidis, you have nothing to fear from Mollock. His hands are tied and his lips are sealed. You have only to threaten him with criminal proceedings for trying to sell you a fake Gaugin.'

'What fake Gauguin?'

I pointed out the cunning device of Molosso's signature. I presented Molosso, saying, 'Here is the man who painted the picture entitled "Oalámaóa", which now adorns your saloon.'

Karyatidis had not risen from fig-packer to multi-millionaire by being easily surprised. He rubbed his chin, and looked me up and down, and said, 'What's your angle? Make it good.'

'Why,' I said. 'M. Molosso was employed to paint over the original Gauguin, so that the canvas might not fall into enemy hands during the war. The true "Oalámaóa" is underneath the one you see. Cry "Fake!" and Mr Mollock will cut his imagined losses and keep quiet. M. Molosso will clean the canvas, and you will be the possessor of the original after all. Only Mollock will be out of pocket. I, sir, am the thief here, and nobody else.'

'And what is the subject of the picture underneath?' asked Karyatidis.

'"Oalámaóa",' I said, 'but without Molosso's signature on the draperies.'

'All right,' said Karyatidis. Then he went on to indicate, in a soothing voice, that if I double-crossed him I would soon wish I had never been born; the ocean beds, from Alexandretta to Caracas, were white with the bones of men who had

tried to double-cross Karyatidis. It was not the money, he said, but the principle of the thing. I told him point-blank that I had double-crossed better men than he when he was unhygienically boxing figs for his living in Constantinople. 'I know,' he said. 'You must have something up your sleeve, or why come to me at this point, when you could be far away with seventy thousand of my money? You must know you'll never get another penny out of me.'

'Perhaps you will get a penny out of me,' I said. 'I mean, at the expense of someone you don't like.'

'Ah, that! An enemy's penny brings good luck,' he said. 'I like you. I could use a man like you in my business.'

'Compliment for compliment, I could use a man like you in mine,' I told him.

Well, then Molosso went to work, off came 'Oalámaóa's top coat, and there was a similar picture underneath; only, as I had said, the pattern of the embroidery was different, on the men's garments. The Molosso signature was gone.

'The difference is obvious, now,' said Karyatidis.

'Isn't it?' I said. 'And here is your enemy's penny.' I gave him an envelope. 'This,' I told him, 'contains a sheet of white paper bearing a perfect impression of Molosso's right thumb in ivory black. Look carefully at the lower right hand corner of "Oalámaóa", and you will see, deep in the original paint, an identical thumbprint.'

'Are you telling me *this* is a fake, too?'

'Absolutely. But wait. You do not like Mr Dreidl, I believe? Well, he will come to you and beg you to sell this "Oalámaóa", and you will let him have it at a profit. And I will take dealer's commission.'

With this, I left him, absolutely bewildered, perhaps for the first time in his life.

So I went to visit Gregor Dreidl in his indecently voluptuous office, and I told him, as one crook might tell another,

of the whole affair, and he was tremendously amused. But he stopped laughing when I said, 'The cream of the jest is, that *underneath this second "Oalámaóa" there is a third!* And this one at the bottom is the genuine one!'

And after so much tedious palaver that to give you a mere précis of it would make me so hoarse that I should be compelled to ask you for more coffee, Dreidl went to Karyatidis and bought 'Oaláma óa' for seventy-five thousand dollars and one cent. The Greek insisted on that penny; had to have it brand-new, too. Later, I heard, he had it mounted in diamonds and used it for a scarf-pin.

I took my twenty per cent, and, having grown bored with the affair, concluded it in the following manner:

I went to Mollock, who, to put it mildly, upbraided me. That 'Oalámaóa' he had paid good money for was a fake, he cried. I said yes, I knew, and I was much to blame; for the fake had been deliberately overpainted on the original. But this, I said, was not the worst of it. *Paul Gauguin himself had perpetrated a kind of fake!*

'I mean,' I said, 'that Gauguin was paid to disguise an immensely valuable old master with a comparatively worthless original of his own – oh, Mr Mollock, Mr Mollock – that "Oalámaóa" was painted over "The Stoning of St Stephen" by El Greco, and I would give my right arm to get it back!

Dazed, he said, '. . . That somebody painted a fake Gauguin over a real Gauguin, who painted over a genuine El Greco?'

'Yes, yes! The existence of the Gauguin was known, and it was covered with a replica of itself, it seems. But nobody knew until now that Gauguin himself had been hired by Gobseck to cover the "St Stephen". Here is a letter to prove it. It was written in Paris after Gauguin's last exhibition there in 1893, at Durand-Ruel's. To old Camille Pissarro, who wanted money. Look!'

It was a rambling letter, written in that violet ink which, with the pin-point pen-nib, used to be at the service of the patrons of most French cafés. It was a very good letter – the man I paid to write it could copy a twenty-dollar bill line-for-line in five hours with pen and brush. The cogent passage, freely translated, ran:

. . . The exhibition at Durand-Ruel was a bloody fiasco, a catastrophe. Bah! To the critics I say, 'Shut your mausoleums, you penny-a-liners – the bones stink!' As for money, what does one use for it? How I hate Paris and the Parisians! I earned myself a species of dishonest penny the other day, and oh, my friend, the irony of it! That bloated swine of a Lucien Gobseck got hold of a daub by that maudlin skeleton-man El Greco, of the stoning of St Stephen – stolen, of course, from the Kuwalsky-Brzesky mansion. And for 1,500 francs I was commissioned secretly to paint 'something of my own, just anything' over it. I must admit that it gave me a certain pleasure to smother one of Theotocopouli's maudlin saints. And so my dreamy Oalámaóa's pagan nudity smothers the Cretan priest's boy's sheet-tin-draped, angular, tubercular visions. There is a melancholy satisfaction in this. . . .

'It breathes the very spirit of Gauguin,' I said; and I should have known, for I composed it myself. 'It was for a long time among Pissarro's papers. Nobody seemed to know what Gauguin was talking about. But now we know. And here is the point – no El Greco is listed in the Gobseck inventory, so Imogene Gribble will be free to sell in the open market. Three hundred thousand dollars would not be too much for a new El Greco!'

'You did right to come to me first with this letter,' said Mollock. 'I take it as an act of good faith. I hold you entirely innocent in that other unfortunate affair. Let's talk about this. . . .' He plied me with wine, he charmed me, he put the matter in a kaleidoscope of different colours and a conjurer's

cabinet of angles, and at last he got that letter out of me for five thousand dollars down and a verbal promise of 'a percentage of assessed values to be mutually agreed'.

And after that, I suppose, he went to work on Dreidl: it must have been like an Apache-dance of mud-wrestlers. I simply disappeared. If anybody ever scraped the third 'Oalámaóa' off that tormented canvas, I can tell you what they found: an execrably daubed 'Cupid and Psyche', painter unknown, dated 1610.

'What happened to Molosso and his wife?' I asked, as Karmesin casually pocketed my cigarettes.

'The inevitable. As soon as I paid him his thirty thousand dollars he ran away with a big blonde. I had saved ten thousand for his wife. She divorced him and married a man who has a restaurant at Nogent-sur-Marne. She is happy, and has two children. He had to marry the big blonde, who beats him unmercifully whenever he misbehaves. My mission was accomplished.'

'And Mollock was the main victim, really?'

'Yes. He was not a gentleman. He wounded my sensibilities. He tried to bribe and corrupt me,' said Karmesin. 'Still, all weighed and paid, I suppose I cleared about seventy thousand dollars, give or take a thousand.'

And, having emptied the sugar-bowl, he rose and left the café.