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IN
FANCY DRESS
A FULL-LENGTH MYSTERY
BOOK BY
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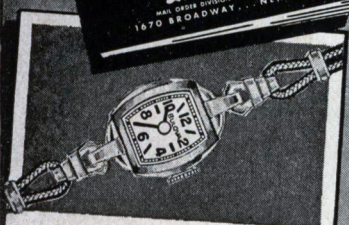
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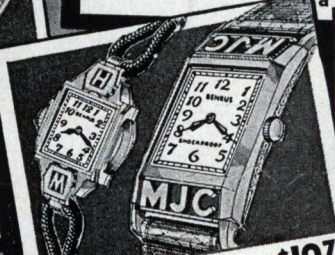
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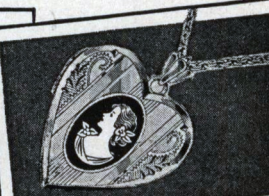
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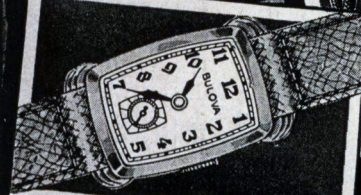
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Detective Book Magazine's \$2.00 Booklength Novel

DEATH IN FANCY DRESS

By Jefferson Farjeon

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All London caroused at the glittering Chelsea Arts Ball. Behind their brief masks, peers grinned at shop-girls; twenty-a-week bank-clerks whirled be-jeweled and haughty debutantes. Everybody who was anybody roistered through steeple-tiered Albert Hall—and Death came, too. Death came to keep a rendezvous with a certain tall, calm stranger. . . . And in the crowd he met a hauntingly-lovely woman, and stayed to dance until dawn.

MR. TRIGGER MAN 106

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Only one man in The Big Town could save dying Vickers' illicit Empire—that man was Paxton, sportsman and Vigilante, sworn enemy of the racket czar.

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"A red-headed woman made a fool out of me,"—hummed the flip dick.

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DEAD MEN DO TALK! 98

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"Dead men—and dames—don't talk!" snarled Big-Noise Cass.

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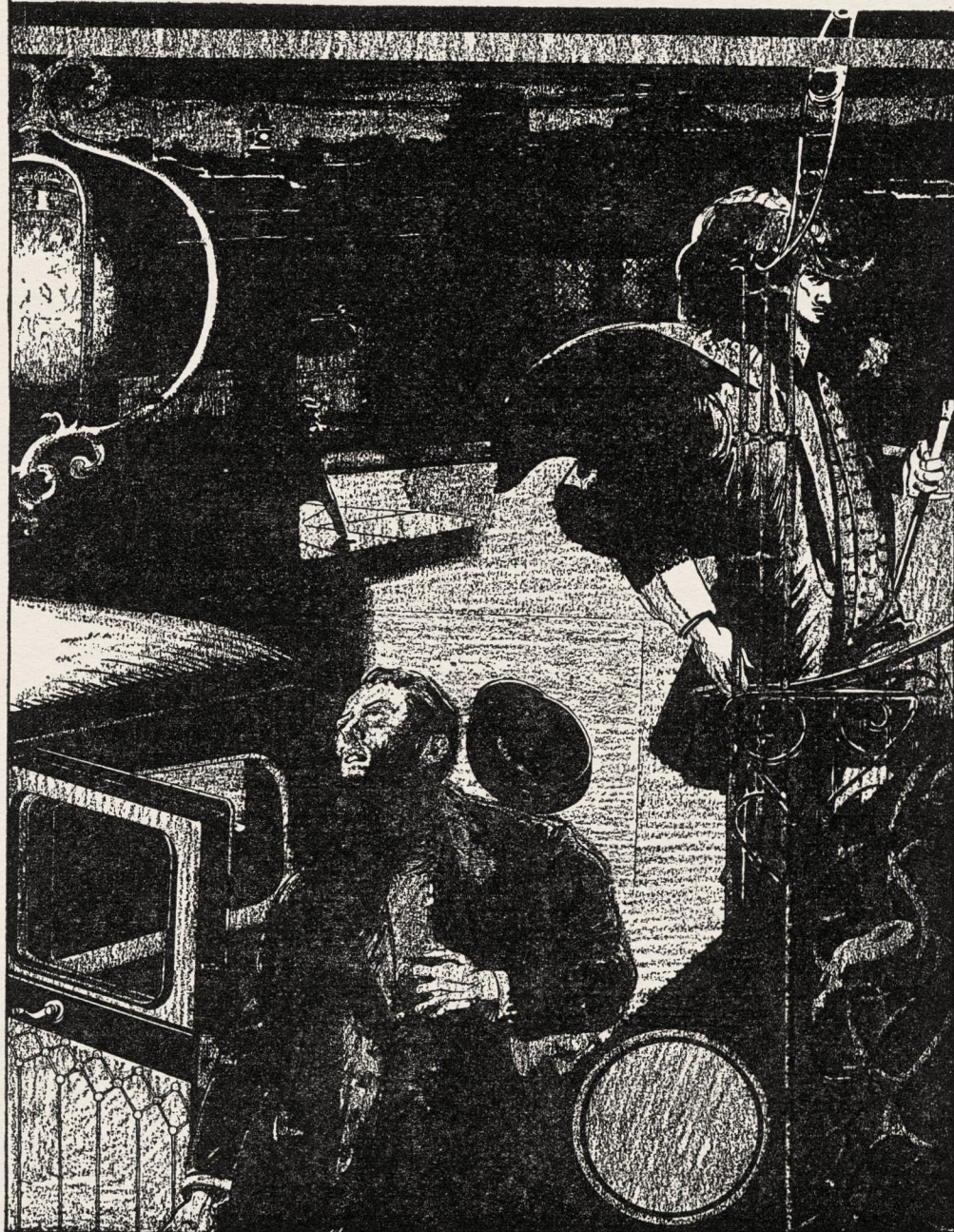
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DEATH IN FANCY DRESS

BY JEFFERSON FARJEON



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All London roistered through steeple-tiered Albert Hall—and Death came, too. Death came to keep a rendezvous with a certain tall, calm stranger. . . . And in the crowd he met a hauntingly-lovely woman, and stayed to dance until dawn.

HENRY BROWN regarded his half-shaved face in the little mirror hanging by his bed. He regarded it with disapproval, almost with panic. It looked worried when it ought to have looked gay, for this was to be a night of nights, an occasion of high adventure and rare audacity, and, if he did not begin in the right mood, in which kind of a mood would he end? He forced a smile into his strained features. "This is *fun!*" he assured himself, overdoing the confidence. His smile did nothing to compose his agitated mind.

He turned from the mirror to the window. The window-glass was obscured by a dark, worn blind. The cord was off the blind and you had to give the bottom a careful tug to get it up. Not a hard tug. If you did that something disastrous happened and the blind stayed down for days. A soft, delicate tug. . . . He gave a soft, delicate tug. The blind shot up with a violent snap, snarled round the top roller, and became wedged. Now it would stay up for days.

"Damn!" muttered Henry Brown.

Life was very difficult.

With the blind up he feared that everybody would see in, and he was not in a condition to be viewed. Almost immediately, however, he realized that he had no need to worry about his visibility. No one could see in if he himself could not see out. A thick fog hung outside the window, a brooding, yellow, impenetrable curtain. It had been threatening all day. The morning paper had predicted it, the evening wireless had confirmed it, and here it was, adding fresh trouble to the occasion. Henry's mind jerked from one trial to another, and the lines of his rather tired face deepened.

"Fog!" he grunted. "That's a nice thing! How am I going to *get* to the blessed place?" Then another thought

struck him. "Yes, and what happens if I *can't?*"

For a brief instant the possibility of not getting there brightened, surprisingly, his horizon. He recognized that although he had planned and plotted to get there, and had scraped and saved to get there, he also dreaded getting there; and no one could call you a funk, could they, for failing to turn up at a place you could not reach! If this particular place could not be reached—if the buses were at a standstill and the taxis were sprawling across the pavement—then Henry Brown would be forced to spend the evening at home, and nobody would ever see him in the ridiculous costume that lay on his bed waiting for his insufficient body. A loose velvet jacket of unfamiliar shape. Strange, hugely-checked slacks. An enormous flowing blue tie. A vast red sash. Or was the tie the sash, and the sash the tie? And above all, in every sense, a mammoth beret. Not the happy beret of a Borotra, but an endless expanse of dark ribbed stuff that flowed over the side of your head almost down to your neck, giving you the feeling that you were in deep mourning for a pancake. It was this Gargantuan headgear that had first upset Henry's morale and that now made him momentarily bless the fog.

The moment passed, however. Henry was even more afraid of fear than of the thing he feared. He did not possess a first-class mind, but it was good enough to recognize the spuriousness of his excuses. And there was, in addition, the financial side of the question to strengthen his resolve and to urge him forward. The hiring of the costume had cost half a guinea, paid in advance. The paid in advance was important. It meant that you could not get the money back again. Then the ticket for the Albert Hall had cost another thirty-one and six. You saved ten-and-six by purchasing it hazardously

before the actual day. Happily the ticket included supper, so you could be sure of getting something definite for your outlay. Then, again, there was a manicure. Henry had thought a lot about the manicure. It was not likely that his small hand would be noticed in the vastness of the Albert Hall, but somehow or other the manicure had seemed necessary; though not a pedicure. He had never been manicured before, and he had suffered acutely when the manicurist had taken his unattractive hand into her pretty one and had replied to his muttered apologies that she had seen worse. Two shillings, that suffering had cost, with sixpence for the girl. That raised the damage to date up to £2 4s. 6d. Almost a week's pay! No, dammit, you couldn't allow yourself to waste so much as that!

THERE was something deeper than purse or pride, however, that drew Henry back into the current of terrifying desire. It was the stirring possibility of adventure and romance. Not that adventure and romance were likely to come his way, for people of his timid type rarely attract them. Still—you never knew, did you? Some girl or other *might* smile at him in the crowd, and he *might* smile back. He might even have the courage to ask her for a dance. Particularly if wine were included in the supper! You never *knew*, did you?

He returned determinedly to his shaving. He could wake up on the morrow resigned to the knowledge that adventure had not come his way, but he would wake up in a torment of distraction, he was convinced, if through eleventh hour funk he failed to resolve the agonizing question!

His shaving complete, he felt his chin. The utter smoothness of it comforted him. No barber could have shaved him closer for sixpence. And he had not cut himself.

Then, taking a breath, he tackled the strange garments on the bed.

His pants and his vest, as he stood in them before the plunge, had never seemed so dear to him. They were like a familiar home about to be obliterated. He decided not to look at himself during the obliterating process, for to watch the metamorphosis bit by bit would be too unnerving. When the transformation was accomplished and he regarded himself in the mirror, the

shock was almost more than he could bear. He discovered, to his dismay, that he had dared to hope.

"Do you mean to tell me," he cried aloud to his reflection, "that any girl is going to dance with *that*?"

He seized the flowing beret from his head and hurled it to the ground. Then he picked it up again.

"Silly ass!" he growled at himself. "You'd think a girl was all I was going for!"

Possibly it was.

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. A quarter past nine. That was a nuisance. He wished it had been later. The ball didn't start till ten, and you'd look a fool if you got there earlier. On the other hand, you didn't want to waste any of it by getting there late. And, of course, the fog would mean slow traveling.

"Five minutes—I'll wait five minutes," he decided.

HE went to the box where he kept his money. His fingers trembled slightly as he unlocked it. The box contained four one-pound notes. Apart from the twelve-and-sixpence in silver which still lay on his bed, these four pound notes were all the wealth he possessed in the world. He began to lock the box. Then quickly, to cheat his intelligence, he unlocked it again and seized the notes. "Just in case," he said aloud.

Putting the empty box away, and fighting against a sensation of theft, he began



to slip the notes in his trouser pocket. The notes slid nakedly over the loose, grotesque material. He discovered to his dismay that his costume did not possess any trouser pockets. The only pockets he could find were two wide ones, painfully obvious, on either side of the velvet jacket. A pickpocket could slip his hand into them with the utmost ease.

"That's done it!" thought Henry.

But the notion of leaving the notes at home because he did not know where to carry them shamed him. It suggested that he was allowing circumstances to steer his course, when tonight he was in a mood to steer circumstances. He wondered whether they would be safe in his beret. There was room in the beret for the whole Mint! Then all at once he found his solution. He took off his black shoes, folded the notes, and put two in each shoe. When he had the shoes on again they tickled his soles pleasantly, giving him an odd rich feeling.

The silver had to take its chance in one of the jacket pockets.

He glanced at the clock again. Twenty past nine. Good! Just right!

"Now I'm really off," he said.

He walked to the door and listened. He wanted to get out of the house without being seen. He had put on his overcoat, but the loud slacks were not obliterated. They shouted for nine inches below where the overcoat ended.

Hearing no one, he turned the door handle softly and peeped out into the passage. Empty. Good again! But the peeling walls seemed to have eyes that bored into his soul and questioned it. He turned, without knowing why, and took a last look at his room. He felt as though he were saying good-by to himself.

IT has been indicated that as yet there was no particular girl in Henry Brown's life, or in his mind. Girls existed for him in the abstract, and it was to be the mission of the Albert Hall to translate the abstract into material terms. But if, while he had struggled with his reflection in his looking-glass, he could have seen the reflection of Dorothy Shannon in another, daintier mirror, he might have gone to the Chelsea Arts Ball already conquered.

The reflection of Dorothy Shannon was

very different from that of Henry Brown. It was wholly satisfactory. From the topmost hair of her auburn crop down to the tips of her golden shoes, she was five-foot-eight of sheer loveliness. In the frankly-expressed opinion of her parents she would easily stand out as the most beautiful sight in the whole of the hall. She was somewhat inclined to this view herself. It was temporary excitement, however, rather than natural vanity that made her hopeful; and her brother Conrad, on the other hand, betrayed a less flattering perspicacity.

"Yes, you look topping, Sis," he admitted, popping his head in through her door, "but don't run away with any high-falutin' ideas about yourself. You'll be utterly lost in the crowd, you know."

"*You* won't!" retorted Dorothy, with conviction. "And, of course, don't trouble to knock when you enter a lady's bedroom!"

Conrad grinned. He had seen to it that he himself would not be lost in the crowd. At the previous New Year's Ball he had been utterly lost as a pirate—in company with countless other pirates—but this year he had vowed that, for better or worse, he *would* be noticed, and the head that had popped in so unceremoniously through his sister's door was completely gold. Completely gold, also, was the rest of him. The gilding process had cost him considerable time and agony; but there are strange occasions in life, and this was one of them, when fools stand out where wise men cease to shine; and, although Conrad did not know it, there was something oddly artistic about his queer appearance. He looked like a golden Grecian statue, of which perhaps the most remarkable part was the curly, gold-clogged hair.

"Do go away," pleaded Dorothy, as he lingered.

"There's nowhere to go to," he answered gloomily. "Nowhere peaceful, I mean. Father's swearing at his wig—you'd think the whole of Cosmos depended upon its set—and Mother's running around him picking up the things he drops, and this house, once so sweet and calm, is a cauldron of despair." He paused and regarded his sister critically. "Of course, I suppose you are aware that you don't look a bit like Du Barry——"

"Oh, *don't* I?" interrupted Dorothy, and

thrust an old copy of a theatrical journal toward him. It was open at a full-page picture of Annie Ahlers on which she had based her conception. "Tell me where I'm wrong?"

"Yes, you look like *that*," he agreed, "but that's out of a musical show, and musical shows aren't history. The Du Barry in the play, I remember, became the mistress of a handsome and attractive French monarch, but the historical Du Barry—the *real* Du Barry—attached herself to a Louis XV who was entering senile decay, so she must have been a nasty, filthy sort of person. Fact. Listen!" He opened a fat book he had brought with him and read: "'When Du Barry met the King of France he was already, at sixty years of age, in his dotage of shame.' So, to avoid historical inaccuracy, my dear, look out for slobbering old boys tonight! Yes, and you want to have some dirty cracks ready for 'em, too. Listen again; 'Her piquant if vulgar wit amused the worn-out dotard.'"

"How *do* you expect me to get on while you babble?" she groaned.

"And you had a most horrible end," continued the gilded youth, irrepressibly. "I trust it is not prophetic. You sneaked over to London to sell your jewels, and when you got back to France you were arrested for wasting treasures of State, and you were guillotined on December 7, 1793. *Voilà!*"

"**A**RE you suggesting that I shall be guillotined at the Albert Hall?" inquired Dorothy.

"Oh, I don't expect it will be quite as bad as that," answered Conrad, "but it might be wise to remember that Du Barry's always a bit of a Jonah. You'd have been safer as Little Miss Muffit. Hallo! Bell! Would that be Harold?"

"If it is, for Heaven's sake go down and give him his shock!" she burst out.

"Good notion," he nodded. "I will! The poor lad's got to get it over. Exit the Golden Statue." He turned, then paused to add, "By the way, I rather like the idea of an M.P. for a brother-in-law. What's the betting Harold proposes tonight?"

He vanished. Dorothy stared after him indignantly. As she turned her eyes back

to the mirror, however, she could not deny that he was probably right. "Though that does not mean," she informed her reflection, "that I shall accept the proposal!"

Passing his parents' bedroom on his way down to the hall, Conrad found the door ajar. His mother's face looked out.

"Go down, dear!" she whispered hoarsely. "We think that's Harold!"

"Just on my way," answered Conrad airily.

Something suddenly smote his soul, causing him to pause. Something about his mother. He wondered what it was. She wasn't half ready herself. Of course that didn't really matter, for although the ball started officially at ten it went on till five next morning, and to miss a dance or two was no catastrophe. Some people didn't turn up till just before midnight. The only real urgency resided in one's own impatience. Still. . . .

"You haven't got very far with your own glad rags," he commented, the hard gaiety momentarily departing from his voice.

She felt vaguely surprised, and vaguely pleased. It was rather nice, somehow, his saying that. She had not even commenced to put on her fancy costume, that of a china shepherdess with a long crook, although she was absent-mindedly holding the crook.

"Mary!" came a shout from the bedroom. Charles II was in difficulties again. "Snuff! What about snuff?"

Mrs. Shannon vanished back into the bedroom, and Conrad completed his interrupted journey to the hall below.

A rather massive man of thirty looked up as he came round the final bend of the staircase.

"Good gad!" exclaimed the rather massive man, involuntarily. "What's this? The Gold Standard?"

Harold Lankester had himself played for safety, and was unimpeachable, if somewhat heavy, as a Russian dancer.

"Please be a little more parliamentary in your language," replied Conrad solemnly. "However, I'm glad you like it."

"Thanks for the information," smiled Lankester. "May I know what you are supposed to be?"

"You may not know. I don't know myself. Someone will tell me. But this you

can bet your seat on—your Westminster seat. When I return home in the small gray hours of tomorrow morning I shall have been either the success or the flop of the show. I've been sent down to talk to you. Bad luck, isn't it? How's the Prime Minister?"

"Very nicely, thank you."

"Good! And where's the next war going to break out?"

"Near East, I should say. Cheerful news for your father, anyway."

Conrad frowned. War meant munitions, and munitions meant business, and business meant motor cars. Might even mean a motor car for himself, Conrad Shannon. A racer! But . . . oh, well, the world was a mad hat, anyway.

Conrad decided to talk about the weather. Instead he found himself saying:

"Look here, you don't mean it, do you?"

"What? War?" Lankester shrugged his shoulders. "Probably not. But who knows? War will go on till the world's temperature cools—and till every man can contemplate his own extinction."

Conrad stared at the speaker. This wasn't exactly ballroom talk! But it fascinated him. People didn't often trouble to talk to him seriously. Out of nowhere he shot the question:

"And till Father's munition factory goes bust?"

"No, munitions don't make war any more than peace conferences stop 'em. It's all a personal matter—and the moment you and I hear the drum, off we'll pop to the recruiting office." He laughed. "But meanwhile, Conrad, we are a Russian dancer and a golden cherub. Where's Dorothy?"

"Still adoring herself in her mirror," he answered, "but I admit she's got a case."

WE have looked into two mirrors. A third gave back to its owner the face of Nell Gwynn framed in long, attractive ringlets. The ringlets fell almost to the gleaming shoulders, and the shoulders, hunched provocatively, escaped from a wide expanse of snowy lace.

Near by stood a man, watching. He was a very different proposition. His suit was practically a sheet of pearl buttons, and his coarse features needed no make-up to complete his conception of a coster king.

He had just arrived, and his small, narrow-set eyes, still smarting a little from the fog, were expressing definite approval.

"Like it?" inquired the woman, shifting her gaze from herself and regarding him through the mirror.

"Bloody all right," he answered emphatically.

"It's got to be," she observed, "or I stand to lose—"

She stopped abruptly.

"Go on, finish it," he urged. "'Ow much do yer stand to lose, Sally?"

"Just as much, Sam, as I hope to make," she answered.

"And wot's that?"

"My business!"

"Oh, is it?" retorted Sam. "Then wot's *my* business?"

"To do what you're told, and to ask no questions," said Sally.

"Fer twenty quid," murmured Sam contemplatively.

"And damn good pay," declared Sally. "But for old times, Sam, I could have got plenty of others to do the job for half what I'm paying you!"

"Twenty quid," repeated Sam. "And 'ow much does that leave yer? Yus, 'ow much does that leave yer? Yus, 'ow much is somebody else payin' *you*?"

She did not answer. She was busy increasing the red of her lips.

"Muck!" commented Sam. "It on'y comes off and leaves a mark."

"Sometimes it's supposed to," smiled Sally.

Sam drew a step closer. No doubt about it, she was a stunner! Pity she'd gone up in the world and left him behind. She was a bit different now from the old days when they'd started working together. He was divided between resentment and admiration.

"It's a big risk fer twenty quid," he remarked, as she laid down the lipstick. "S'pose I don't think it's enough?"

"Making a bit of a nuisance of yourself, aren't you?" she responded.

"I said, s'pose I don't think it's enough?"

"Then you'll have to go on thinking, Sam."

"S'pose I do, and chuck the job."

"You wouldn't do that."

"You'd be dishd if I did!"

"Don't you believe it!" But her heart

stood still for a second. "I could get someone else."

"Not now, you couldn't."

She rounded on him, and her bright eyes flashed angrily.

"I could, and I would!" she exclaimed. "And tomorrow morning you'd wake up twenty pounds short—cursing yourself! Don't be a fool, boy! You're onto a good thing, and you hold onto it before it slips!"

"Gawd, you're a good looker!" muttered Sam. "Damn those toffs!"

The too-red lips curled deliberately. Sam discovered, to his secret mortification, that he was losing a little of his bravado. Her moving up in the world—that was what had done it. The same as him still, at heart, but working in higher circles.

"I wonder if I made a mistake," she said, quietly.

"Wot mistake?" he grunted.

"Trying to hand on a bit of my luck to an old pal? And a real, substantial slice, too."

"Well, Sally, we was pals once!"

"Am I forgetting it?"

"And I taught you some of your tricks. They was the fifty-fifty days. Now it's more like twenty to fifty, I shouldn't wunner!"

"So what are you going to do about it?" she inquired. "Quick, make up your mind."

SAM thought. He closed his eyes especially to do so. Then he made up his mind.

"This is wot I'm goin' to do about it, Sally," he said. "I won't stick you fer more than the twenty—"

"Good boy!"

"—but I'm goin' to stick you fer something else."

"Oh! Really?"

"Yus. Really!"

"Let's hear, then."

"You're goin' to 'ear, then! You're comin' back after the ball to this room—and I'm comin' back with yer! See?"

She sat very still. The notion appalled her. Sam was only half-correct in thinking that she had not changed in her heart. Crooked she remained, for crookedness had been ingrained in her before she had had any time to think about it. Ethically, her sins were as great as Sam's. But since

she had escaped from the gutter which still held him she had acquired a certain fastidiousness, and physically her old pal was as repulsive to her now as once he had been attractive.

Yes, she had made a mistake. That rendered it all the more necessary not to make another. Controlling her repugnance, or the outward show of it—Sam could be ugly when he chose—she answered him.

"We'll see."

Sam shook his head.

"Not good enough," he said. "I want a promise."

"Even if I promised, would you believe me?"

"If a kiss went with it, I might," he grinned.

He took another step toward her chair. For an instant Sally saw red. Driven to it, she could be as ugly as Sam, but she had more control—that was one reason why she had risen out of the gutter and he had not—and she continued to sit very still while the murderous color came and went. Had she acted on her impulse to strike him, certain events at the Albert Hall a few hours later would have taken a very different course. When the instant had flown, she rose calmly from her dressing-table and advanced her lips toward his.

"You're a bad lad, Sam," she said, "but you're going to be a very good lad afterward."

He took his prize. It was not quite as satisfactory as he had hoped, for she pushed him away too soon, but it was enough to make him vow that he would secure bigger satisfaction later.

"Gawd, Sally, this is goin' to be a cinch for you!" he muttered thickly. "In that get-up you'd make jelly of the King o' Calcutta!"

"Let's hope you're right," she responded, returning to her dressing table and making up her lips again.

"'Oo are you s'posed to be?"

"Ever heard of Nell Gwynn?"

"Wot, that tart?" He laughed. "Well, you know something about 'er game, don't yer?"

"How nicely put!"

"Oh, come off it! I expect that's why you chose the dress? Sort of 'ome from 'ome!"

"If you want the truth," she retorted,

"I didn't choose it. It was chosen for me."

"'Oo chose it?"

"A little bird. Well, let's be moving. Have you got your paraphernalia?"

"Me wot?"

"Sorry. I forgot you only knew words of one syllable. The things I asked you to bring?"

"Oh, *them*," he replied, with a wink, and patted his bulging pockets. "But wot's the 'urry? It's a filthy night. Talk about pea soup! Let's stay 'ere fer a bit."

"I've a job to do," she reminded him.

"Well, so've I, ain't I? But there's seven hours to do it in."

"I may need all that. Come on."

"Not even a drink?" he grumbled.

She relented. A drink was not a bad idea. She went to a little cupboard, and his eyes brightened as they followed her. A drop of something was what he wanted, to settle a nasty uncomfortable feeling that was gaining on him about the job.

"Let's 'ave a toast, Sally!" he cried, when she had brought the glasses.

"Right," she agreed. "What'll it be? The King?"

"'Allo, wot's turned *you* patriotic all of a sudden?" he asked.

"Patriotic nothing!" she smiled. "The King I mean is Charles II."

WITH meticulous care, but an odd lack of enthusiasm, Warwick Hilling sat before a cracked looking-glass—our fourth and final mirror—completing his admirable transformation.

He was admitted master in the art of make-up. He was, in fact, considerably better at making-up than he was at acting, which may have explained why he had spent most of his career abroad giving protean performances before All the Crowned Heads of the World. Before no Crowned Head, however, had he exhibited more skill than he was exhibiting at this moment, and his resemblance to the newspaper photograph, propped up against the mirror, on which he was modeling his features offered no possible scope for criticism.

The photograph had appeared that morning in a popular illustrated journal over the words, "Mr. Warwick Hilling, the Protean Actor, in the striking Balkan cos-

tume and make-up he will wear at the Chelsea Arts Ball tonight." But the photograph was not of Mr. Warwick Hilling. It had not even been sent to the illustrated journal by Mr. Warwick Hilling, or by his agent, or by anybody possessing his authority. It must have been sent, Hilling had decided, by the same mysterious hand that two days previously had sent him his instructions, accompanied by twenty-five one-pound notes and the promise of another twenty-five "to be paid, provided the said instructions are carried out, before 10:00 P.M. on the evening of December thirty-first, on completion of our business."

An actor whose chief attribute is his make-up, and who in these democratic days is mainly dependent on Crowned Heads for his audience, is liable to reach a time of life when twenty-five one-pound notes form a serious temptation. Warwick Hilling had reached that time. Penury had not destroyed his good looks and distinguished bearing. Everything about him—even about the shiny suit now laid carefully aside on the plain, neat bed—proclaimed that once he had been successful, and that he was still a gentleman. But his success was now a fading memory, and even to keep a memory alive, one needs a minimum of warmth and food and creature-comfort.

So Hilling had kept the notes. There was indeed no address to which they could have been returned. And when in response to a mysterious telephone call he had confirmed his acceptance, he had faithfully attended to the instructions.

The instructions were odd, but simple. He was to make it known that he was going to the Chelsea Arts Ball. He was to buy the ticket personally and he was to talk freely and loudly about it, declaring that he would wear the costume of one of the Crowned Heads before whom he had performed. In order to complete the illusion he would even remain silent throughout the evening, lest his accent should mar the effect; and, although he could not recall having granted an interview to any reporter, his intention was duly published in the press.

The costume itself had turned up, anonymously, that morning. The parcel containing it, together with the original

of his alleged newspaper photograph, appeared with his breakfast tray. And in the parcel was a further note, bearing further instructions: "The writer has had occasion to learn of your skill at face-transformation and impersonation, and is therefore confident that you will have no difficulty in copying the features of the picture you will find, with your name under it, in today's daily press. In case of accidents, however, an original copy of the photograph is included herewith. Also in case of accidents, you are requested to burn this letter as soon as you have read it, and to continue to conduct the whole matter with the utmost secrecy and discretion. At 9:00 P.M. you will be ready, dressed and transformed. Between that hour and 10:00 P.M. you will be visited, and you will receive the final half of your fee. Till then!"

So here Warwick Hilling sat, as the clock ticked away anxious minutes on the last day of the year, in the perfect guise of a Balkan Prince, awaiting the next step with outward calm but inward trepidation.

OUTSIDE his window curled the cloak of fog. Fog was everywhere, physically and mentally. All at once he shivered. He imagined he heard somebody knocking on the door. He became annoyed with himself. "Though, true," he reflected, "all real artists have nerves." Then he jumped up from his chair. Somebody *was* knocking!

He jerked his head round quickly. The action was peculiarly inappropriate to his dignified role. Yet perhaps a Balkan Prince could be swift as well as imposing, with a heart that beat tumultuously beneath a passive exterior? A voice sounded from the landing. His landlady's voice. Until two days ago her voice had rankled, but it had taken a turn for the better since she had received somewhat unexpectedly her rent.

"The chauffeur, sir," she called. "Your car's here."

Chauffeur? Car?

Then the door opened, and the chauffeur entered. He was a short man, almost squat, and the landlady behind him could easily feast her eyes over the top of his head at the splendid vision of Mr. Hilling.

But only for a moment was the vision permitted to her inferior eyes. The chauffeur abruptly closed the door, shutting her out.

For a few moments the two men regarded each other in silence, while the disgruntled landlady, cheated of a full-length memory, shuffled downstairs. The chauffeur was composed. Hilling merely appeared so. A queer chill had entered the room with the chauffeur, a chill that was more disconcerting than the fog. Fog was British. . . .

The chauffeur's opening words, however, were satisfactory.

"Good! So! Good!" he said.

He spoke with an accent, but with the assurance of one for whom language had no terrors.

"I am glad you approve," answered Hilling, rather stiffly. "You are—er—driving me to the Hall?"

"In a minute I drive—to the Hall, yes," nodded the chauffeur, his bright, very live eyes still boring. Hilling noticed the little pause that broke up the statement. "Yes, in a minute. But, first, some questions. All is done as you are instructed?"

"You observe," retorted Hilling, holding out his arms impressively. He did not quite like that word "instructed." It savored too much of a master speaking to a servant, and the only master Hilling acknowledged, as he had boasted on countless occasions, was his art.

"Cood, so!" smiled the little chauffeur. "I observe! But I observe only that which I see. All has been done with discretion?"

"Naturally, sir."

"Good, naturally. You have said only what was to be said? No more? You burn the letter?" The chauffeur waited till Hilling nodded. "And you have bought the ticket for the ball, good, naturally?"

"I understand that was a part of the contract."

"To mean that you have bought it, that is so?"

"I have bought it."

"Show me, pray."

HILLING waved toward the mantelpiece on which the ticket reigned among lesser objects.

"Ah!" murmured the chauffeur, and speeding to the mantelpiece he took the ticket and pocketed it.

Hilling frowned. This was unexpected.

"I shall need the ticket, to get in," he reminded his visitor.

"But if you do not get in, you do not need the ticket," answered the chauffeur briskly.

"I beg your pardon?" exclaimed Hilling, astonished.

"I explain," replied the chauffeur. "But, no, first I show you the good faith. That is the English way, good, so?" He produced a bundle of notes as he spoke and laid them on the table. "You expect twenty-five. Observe there are twenty-six one-pound and one ten-shilling, and now I add a one-shilling piece and a six-pence piece." He did so. "So we have the twenty-five we arrange, with also the cost of the ticket, good, so?" He smiled amiably. "There is no charge for the costume."

"I—I am afraid, sir, I do not understand you," murmured Hilling, restraining an impulse to snatch the notes lest they, like the ticket, should vanish. "Do I not go to the ball?"

"No, I explain," repeated the chauffeur, still smiling amiably. "It is so. You go down the stairs with me to the car. So many stairs! They made one to puff! But no matter. You have order the car, make remember of that. In the hall is the landlady of the house. Oh, yes, I know the English landlady. She is—you have a strange word for it—ah, agog. She is agog. She sees us get in. Good, so! You in front of me, make note. But as you open the door I step back and tread on her toe, and while she cries 'Ah!' you are in the car, and the door is quick closed, so she does not see another in the car because I tread onto her toe and it is dark and he sit well back and it is a fog. But, pah!" He waved his little fat hands contemptuously. "We do not need your fog. We arrange it all, what is your word, ah, in the water-tight. Then *voilà*, off we go!"

"*Voilà?* You are French?" asked Hilling, catching at straws.

The chauffeur laughed amusedly. "No! *Voilà*, it is all the world over. Japan, even."

"Where do we go off to?" inquired Hilling, fighting against a sensation that he was in a dream, and not necessarily a good dream.

"To your Albert Hall," returned the chauffeur. "Me, I drive there."

"But I understood you to say—"

"That you do not go to the ball? So! You do not go to ball. It is the other man who will go to the ball, the other man who sit well back, but who get out at your Albert Hall, yes, the other man so like you, and you so like him, eh? The brain, it clears?"

"I—see," muttered Hilling slowly. "Yes—I see. The man whose photograph—"

"Was in the papers. I send it. And the interview. I send it. I arrange it. For me, the work. For you—" He snapped his fingers toward the notes. "And now come, it is the time."

But Hilling paused. His head was spinning. There was something likable about the chauffeur, but the sensation that the dream was not a good dream increased each moment. It might be risky to inquire further; inquiry might eliminate the chauffeur's likable quality, and substitute one less appealing. Those bright, live eyes might not be pleasant to encounter in another mood. Still, would the conscience of Warwick Hilling remain passive if its owner funk'd the risk? Hilling was a bad actor, but he was not a bad man, and the two, despite the critics, can be separate.

"One moment, sir," said Hilling, as his visitor made for the door.

"There is no moment," answered the chauffeur, without stopping.

"I insist!"

"So? Insist?" Now the chauffeur stopped, and for an instant anger dawned in his eyes. But he drove the anger away with a quick shrug, and waited.

THREE questions raced round Hilling's mind. Two were easy to ask, the third was not. He began with the simplest and most obvious.

"What happens to me, when the other man gets out of the car at the Albert Hall?"

"We drive away," replied the chauffeur simply. "And—presently—I drive you back." He added, reassuringly, "I look after you. You are all right."

It was not a very satisfactory response, but Hilling passed on to the next.

"How did you come to select me for this—business?" was the second question.

"You ask much!"

"In another sense, sir, I could quote that back."

It pleased Hilling to find that he was keeping up his end with fair credit. Occasionally, on the stage, he had been forced to deal with unruly members of second-rate audiences (for all his audiences were not composed of Crowned Heads) who did not understand serious Art, and his somewhat massive repartee rarely failed.

"Well, perhaps it hurts nothing that you know," said the chauffeur. "You have performed in Europe? Before, as you say in the announcement, the Crowned Heads, so? In one place, then, you were remembered. And when I am here, in your country, I am here to keep the eyes open. So I know of your great talent, Mr. Hilling, and I know also, if you pardon me, of your—difficulties?" He glanced expressively round the shabby room. "And now I hope there is no more question?"

"Just one, I am afraid, sir."

"Then, quick!"

"It is more quickly asked than answered, perhaps. If I am to know little, this I must know. I have my code, and my pride. Yes, sir, even though I also have, as you have just remarked, my difficulties. This—this role of mine—is it a role I shall play with—honor?"

The rather theatrical dignity with which this speech was delivered had a surprising effect upon the little chauffeur. At the words "code" and "pride" a new light sprang into his eye, and he stiffened slightly. Then he stood silent for several seconds, considering.

"Sir," he said at last, in a tone hardly less theatrical than Hilling's, "let the mind be at peace. The world, it is strange. We poor people, what do we know? Only in God lies all knowledge. But the part you play is honorable!" He thumped his chest tremendously. "Good, so?"

He held out his hand. Hilling took it, satisfied. But he descended the stairs with his head in a whirl.

II

HENRY BROWN had never been in a taxi before, and it was unfortunate for him that his initiation should occur in a fog. He had looked forward to the ride

with exaggerated keenness. He had anticipated a journey of nippy speed, of cutting round corners, of passing things; instead, the taxi crawled at pedestrian pace, cheating him of the mildest thrill and giving him more time than he desired for thought. He did not want to think. Thought showed one up! He wanted to plunge rapidly into his adventure, to be caught up quickly into the current that would carry him into the center of it. He wanted to find himself lost in a maze of light and color and movement in which there was no responsibility, and from which there was no escape. But here he was, creeping forward at a snail's gait, stopping, going on again, stopping, going on again, stopping.

Hallo! Things were happening! His taxi had entered a sort of covered way, and it had stopped again, and the driver was gesticulating at him through the window. "Move along, there!" cried a policeman. In a panic Henry opened the door and leaped out. "Where do I go?" he asked the person he leaped into. It was one of the countless touts who haunt the outside of the Albert Hall on big occasions, trying to pick up easily-earned sixpences.

"Foller me, sir," replied the tout. He spoke with a hectoring, semiofficial air, exuding the impression that Henry would be imprisoned if he were disobedient. "White ticket? This way."

He seized Henry's arm, lest Henry should escape and part with sixpence to somebody else.

"Hi! Where's my fare?" bawled the taximan.

"Move along, there!" cried the policeman.

Henry wrenched his arm free and turned back to the cab, thrusting two half crowns at the taximan.

"This way, you foller me," said the tout.

Henry did not like the look of the fellow. Why should he follow him? In spite of the tout's disturbingly insistent manner Henry was convinced that he was not actually an official or anything. If a small cinema could afford uniforms, it was obvious the Albert Hall could!

"Come on!" barked the tout, as Henry hesitated.

"Yes, but wait a moment," murmured Henry.

"What for—you want'er git in, doncher?" retorted the tout, his tone suggesting that to get in was going to be terribly difficult. "White ticket, that's the main entrance, come on." And then he made a psychological mistake that cost him his sixpence. "Do as I tell yer!" he threatened.

Up to a point he had read Henry correctly. Henry was a weak man; a weak man who was confused, wavering, self-conscious. He would dread a scene. But Henry was also in that sensitive condition that may carry even a weak man into a temporary semblance of strength.

He stopped walking. The tout had been pulling him along. Two massive men behind him nearly strode into his back, separated abruptly like a large divided germ, sprayed round him, and joined again beyond. Henry reflected—they weren't being led by anybody!

"Now, then, you listen to me," said Henry, in a voice surprisingly firm. "I don't want you, see? You're not going to get anything out of me, not a thing. Go away at once, this minute, or I'll call a policeman. See?"

Then he walked on again, and to his relief the tout fell behind. But the disappointed guide called after him. He called him a bloody little something. Henry reached the main entrance scarlet but triumphant.

HE joined a little swirl and was carried by it up some wide steps to an open glass door. An official—a genuine official this time—took his ticket. "Oh—you take the whole of it?" jerked Henry. The official did not answer, being busy taking the whole of somebody else's ticket. Henry hoped it was all right. With the complete ticket gone he now had nothing to show that he was entitled to supper. Perhaps you got a special ticket for supper inside. He would have to keep his eyes open. He must be careful not to ask silly questions. Very likely he would see a sign somewhere saying: "Supper Tickets."

Strangely-dressed human beings were ahead of him. Others, behind, pressed him forward into a large vestibule. Some of the costumes were fully displayed, some gleamed from beneath expensive overcoats. Suddenly Henry got in a panic about his

own overcoat. It was worn and shiny, and half an hour's steady brushing had increased the shine. He must get rid of it as soon as he could. He supposed there was a cloakroom somewhere about. He spotted the two massive men who had nearly barged into his back. He followed them. He went down a wide, curved staircase. A girl, coming up the stairs, smiled at him.

"My Heavens!" thought Henry, and stopped as abruptly as though he had been shot.

For this was not a derisive smile. It was a friendly smile. He could not quite believe it. He multiplied its importance by one million. Perhaps he did not look so horrible, after all? Here, among all these others? Perhaps he would "pass." Warmth surged through him, followed by sharp despair. He had not smiled back!

He turned. She was out of sight. "Damn!" he muttered.

He continued down the stairs, and caught up with the two massive gentlemen as they were handing their coats across a counter. They were now wonderful red generals. There was a saucer on the counter, its pattern obscured by silver coins. No copper ones. Pity. He watched the generals to see how much they put in. Sixpence each. He felt relieved. Now *he* need not put in more than sixpence. "Program, sir?" inquired a voice in his ear. "Eh? No," he answered, from force of habit. He hardly ever bought programs; you could nearly always snip an announcement or advertisement out of a paper, or get a squint at somebody else's program. But the program seller paid no attention to his negative, thrust a program into his hand, and demanded a shilling. "Of course, he's right; I don't know what I was thinking about," reflected Henry, hypnotized into becoming worth a shilling less. A shilling, to Henry, was a complete lunch. "Naturally, one needs a program." Now the man behind the counter was taking his overcoat. The two red generals were standing by, lighting cigarettes. Henry felt in his trouser pocket. Oh, of course, he hadn't got any trouser pockets. He groped in his wide velvet-jacket pockets. All the money he had in the world was in his overcoat and his shoes.

He asked for his overcoat back. He re-

ceived it back, while somebody behind him commented, "This chap's in for an all-night job." He rescued three silver pieces, two florins and one half crown. Nothing smaller. "Whew!" he thought. "Can one take change?" If one could, it needed more courage than Henry possessed with people pressing against his back. He threw the half crown into the saucer. He had meant to throw in one of the florins, but had missed.

"Your ticket, sir," said the man behind the counter monotonously, without even thinking him.

He took the ticket mechanically, and mechanically noticed that the number was 789. Then, with fingers itching and finance tottering, he turned away. He did not remember till long afterward that he had left his program on the counter.

HE took out a cigarette, to steady himself. One of the red generals paused in the operation of blowing out his match and offered it. Henry immediately felt better. It almost made him wish he'd entered the army. "Thanks," he said, as he accepted the light. "Thanks."

It was bewildering. Hell one moment, and heaven the next! Which would win? The world was topsy-turvy! Would everybody accept him like this? Red generals, girls on stairs, everybody? For the entire seven hours that stretched ahead of him like a magnificently impossible adventure? This was worth four-and-six an hour, this was! No matter what happened. He'd come every year. He'd even cut his summer holiday short, if necessary. To think that this had been going on regularly, year after year, and he had never realized it!

He searched for a looking-glass before ascending the stairs. He found one in a lavatory. He regarded himself. That was a mistake. But he reflected as he walked hastily away that one couldn't really judge one's own face, could one? He knew he had read that somewhere. If he had looked to those red generals as he looked to himself, he would never have been offered that light!

He returned to the staircase. He joined a little throng that bore him upward. As he passed the spot where the girl had smiled at him, he stared at it. It held a little

thrilling memory. But many bigger thrills lay ahead of Henry Brown.

Now he was at the top of the staircase. Now he was crossing a big space. Now he was in a wide curving corridor. There were doors in the curved inner walls. Most of the doors were closed, but some were ajar, and a few were open, yielding tantalizing glimpses of neat private boxes with elegant chairs and tables and flowers. At regular intervals the curved walls were interrupted by passages. He drifted into one of the passages. On each side of the passage, standing like a sentinel, was a tall beef-eater. He walked between them. He stopped dead, and caught his breath.

Before him was the ballroom. Unbelievably vast, unbelievably dazzling, unbelievably colorful. He found himself in an entirely new world, a world of blatant joy and garish, almost frightening fascination. In the distance, beyond the moving forms of uncountable dancers, was a great orchestra, and beyond the orchestra were, surely, the golden clouds of heaven itself. He had never seen such gold. He had never pictured such immensity. And balloons—thousands of balloons, festooning down from the dizzy ceiling like bunches of enormous, many-colored grapes. . . .

Things he did not know stirred within him.

"ENJOYING it?" asked Harold Lankester, as he danced by with Dorothy Shannon.

"Lovely!" she answered. "Are you?"

"Of course," he replied. "But isn't the whole thing mad?"

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I'm as mad as the rest. Or perhaps to escape from another form of madness. I've been talking politics all the afternoon, and I'm supposed to be at a political conference tonight."

"Sorry I'm keeping you from your duty, Massine! Or are you Idzikowski?"

He smiled.

"You kept quite a number of people from their duty, Madame du Barry," he said. "Even political duty."

"Oh, let's switch off politics," she sighed. "Father's been going potty with them lately. What do you think of his costume? Between you and me, I fancy he rather likes himself! And Conrad—there he is,

with mother, bumping into that girl undressed as a Hawaiian Venus. I say, some of the dresses are rather absent, aren't they? What do you think of Conrad?"

"Unique."

"Let's hope he is! But don't you think mother's rather sweet?"

"She's delightful."

"Tell her so. It'll please her. Oh, look!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Isn't he *wonderful*!"

Lankester turned his head and followed the direction of her eyes. They were resting on an imposing figure standing in one of the entrances to the dancing floor. It was the figure of a Balkan prince. He had just arrived, alone. Near him stood a less impressive figure wearing a velvet jacket, loud check slacks, and an enormous beret.

"By Jove!" murmured Lankester, no less interested.

"You'd think it was the real thing," said Dorothy, "but, of course, it's not. It's some actor or other. Oh, and look at that funny little fellow almost beside him."

Then they flowed on smoothly in the roundabout.

The man who ought to have told Mrs. Shannon that she looked delightful, but who had failed to do so, sat by himself in Box 12, watching.

Mr. Shannon was glad to be alone in the box. He hoped, little realizing what lay ahead of him, that he would be alone most of the evening. That was why when the girl who was to have been the sixth member of their party had suddenly contracted measles he had discouraged any eleventh-hour attempt to secure a substitute. Now Conrad would have to dance with his mother, and Mr. Shannon himself would be released. This might be bad luck on Conrad. Mr. Shannon was rather depressingly aware that youth calls youth. But since Conrad was young he had plenty of flings ahead of him, and tonight Mr. Shannon wanted a fling of the only kind he himself had left—a fling into the glorious orgies of audacious imagination.

He was fond of his wife, but he could dance with her any night he chose to the radio or the gramophone. Much pleasanter now, he decided as he sat well forward in his box, to be alone so that he could imagine himself partnering these other women with

their unknown bodies and tempting skins—to imagine, in fact, that he actually *was* Charles II, possessing the royal prerogative to smile at whom he willed, to dance with whom he willed, and to take home whom he willed. He had the list of Charles's paramours by heart. Lucy Walter, "beautiful, bold, but insipid"; Catherine Pegg; the magnificent Lady Castlemaine; Mrs. Stewart; and above all, and most famous of all, provocative Nell Gwynn, Sweet Nell of Old Drury. . . .

AS Mr. Shannon's mind dwelt on a picture he had recently studied of Nell Gwynn with more than esthetic interest, he smiled dreamily and vividly from his box; and when Nell Gwynn smiled back at him, he thought at first that he was the victim of some pretty trick of fancy. Enjoying the trick, and in no hurry to end so charming an illusion, he augmented his smile . . . and then suddenly discovered that this was no fancy, and that Nell Gwynn was actually smiling at him from the outskirts of the dancing floor.

His heart jumped. He felt like a caught criminal. But even while his forehead became damp, he found a fearful delight in his criminality, and for a fatal instant—for the instant that is one instant too long—he hung onto the smile, praying that no one apart from Nell saw him, and that his wife was dancing at the farthest end of the hall.

That should have been the end of it. As matters eventually transpired, it was only the merest beginning of it. The materialized vision of seventeenth-century loveliness stopped outside his box. She appeared to have dropped something, and her partner, a coster in a marvelous costume of pearl buttons, stooped at her murmured command to regain it. In that moment Charles II, alias Mr. James Shannon, received a very definite wink.

Then the pearly king rose with a fan, and the couple danced away.

"You look hot, my dear," observed a placid voice behind him.

Mrs. Shannon had returned, with her gilded son in tow.

"Do I, dear?" answered Mr. Shannon carefully. He wiped his forehead with his lace handkerchief. "So I am. These wigs are like ovens. . . ."

"WELL, you 'aven't lost no time," grinned Sam.

"I haven't got any time to lose," replied Sally.

"Bah, you can 'ook 'im before midnight," retorted Sam. "The perishin' sop!"

They were sitting on one of the sofas in the outer corridor. They had it to themselves. Later, the sofas would fill up, when the dancing had lost its glamour and couples preferred to sit and whisper, but now the outer corridor was comparatively deserted.

"You don't think much of him?" inquired Sally.

"Think much of 'im? I don't think nothing of 'im," said Sam. "If that simperin' old fool is like King Charles II, they make 'em better now!"

"Just the same, he's not a fool—excepting in the way I'm going to make him one."

"That's right, Sall! It's all You with a capital letter! Leave *me* out of it!"

"He's boss of a pretty big business."

"Oh? And wot's the business?"

"Munitions."

"Wot, bombs?"

"I expect so. That sort of thing, anyway."

Sam whistled softly. Without moving his head he moved his eyes, and looked at her out of the corner of them.

"Onto real big stuff, eh?"

"Well, it's not small stuff."

"Corse, it'd be a pity to *tell* me anything, wouldn't it?"

"The less you know, the sounder you'll sleep."

"Gawd, think I'm a suckling!" he muttered disgustedly. "Yus, and 'oo taught yer that, anyway?"

"You did, Sam. See what a good pupil I am?"

"Good pupil be blowed! Where's the *gratitood*?"

"You'l have twenty pounds worth of gratitude in your pocket tomorrow, if you're a good boy," she reminded him.

"I'll 'ave a bit more than that by tomorrow, don't *you* worry!" he reminded her again. "You make the rest of 'em 'ere look sick!"

Now he turned his head, and looked at her directly. She smiled back coolly, but she was thinking, "I'll have to find some

way of getting rid of him when we're through."

"So it's them bombs, is it?" said Sam, after a little pause. "I 'ope 'e ain't got one in 'is little pocket!"

"Well, you've got something in *your* little pocket," answered Sally.

"That's right, so I 'ave," he grinned. "I'll bomb 'im!" Then suddenly the grin vanished, and he looked dark. "Yus, and if 'e gets fresh with you, I'll give 'im something else 'e won't ferget!"

He spoke with feeling. With equal feeling Sally retorted:

"What's the matter with you? Are you going daft? He's got to get fresh, hasn't he?"

Sam glowered.

"Now, listen, Sam," she went on, and her voice grew hard. "There's to be no nonsense, do you hear? You'll do your job, neither more nor less, and if that's not clear, you can quit right now!"

Sam did not respond for a few seconds. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "I'll do my job, don't worry," he said. "And get full payment for it. If you think—"

He paused. Someone was passing slowly. He waited.

"'Oo was that?" he muttered, when the figure had strolled leisurely by. "The blinkin' Prince o' Rooreytania?"

"Oh, come along!" snapped Sally, jumping up nervously. "Let's have a drink!"

WARWICK HILLING sat alone inside a saloon car as it drove away from the Albert Hall, and he pondered.

"I have been through many interesting experiences in my life," he thought. "I have acted before foreign kings and I have been the hind legs of a horse." He reviewed the ghosts of the past with dispassionate interest, seeing himself as a player of parts. Then, swinging back to the present as the saloon car slid round a corner, he concluded, "But have I ever—I ask, I do not state—have I ever encountered an incident which, for unusualness, transcends—this?"

Hilling usually thought in actual words. He believed in clear enunciation of the mind as well as of the tongue, and he found that, in thought, his words were invariably effective. But now he leaned back against the immense comfort of well-sprung

cushions and reviewed, not in words, but in a series of pictures, the events of the last half hour.

The little chauffeur, whose back Hilling could see as a dark smudge pressed against the dividing glass, had been correct in his forecast. The landlady had been waiting in the front hall, pretending unnecessarily that she was merely putting pictures straight. "Dear me, these picture frames!" she had even murmured as Hilling and the chauffeur had descended the stairs. "'Ow they get shook about beats me!" She had sprung to the door to open it. She had simpered with appreciative respect as Hilling, who really looked impressive, strode by her wordlessly and descended the crackling stone steps to the street. Her eyes had remained glued on him while he descended, while he reached the splendid car, while he paused for an instant, and while he opened the polished door. And then, suddenly, she had started, wincing at an abrupt pain in her foot.

"But pardon!" cried the chauffeur's voice in her ear.

She had turned angrily to meet the smiling apology of the careless fellow who had trodden on her foot. He had not looked very contrite, but her just anger was quelled by the very quality of his composure. There was something in it that froze her.

"I make to pass, Madame. Permit me, yes?"

She had stood aside. He had passed out onto the cracking stone stairs. Then, suddenly realizing that this annoying man was cheating her a second time, she had clapped her eyes again upon the car. Too late! Her lodger, who a week ago had been anathema but who was now healing balm, was in the car, and was to be seen no more.

The chauffeur took his seat at the wheel, and the car glided off.

Inside the saloon was darkness. The little glass globe set snugly in the roof gave no light. It showed dimly, palely, like the ghost of itself.

All at once Hilling became conscious of something small and white and thin before his nose. A cigarette!

It appeared to be suspended in mid-air, and thus carried on the ghostly attributes of everything inside that car. He did not

know that, a few seconds previously, an entire case of cigarettes had been held before his glazed, unseeing eyes, and that the single cigarette had subsequently been extracted by the donor as, possibly, a more effective way of attracting his attention. His fingers rose to the cigarette convulsively. At least, he supposed they were his fingers, but they seemed to have been attracted up to the cigarette by a will not his own. They touched the cigarette and held it. Then a small light glowed before his face. It glowed above a little gold lighter. Mechanically he put the cigarette between his lips and lit it. The light vanished. Ahead of him now was a wisp of curling, gray-blue smoke.

His partner spoke no word. Hilling did not look at him; he had no idea he was not supposed to, and he certainly did not want to. The car purred onward through the thick, yellow fog.

THE sense that everything had been planned and worked out to its final detail was increased by the fact that, when the car stopped, Hilling found himself in the corner farthest from the pavement. He was convinced that this was not accidental. He did not have to move, or to show himself. He was as secure from eyes in his corner as, when he had entered the car, the Balkan Prince had been in his. The Balkan Prince slipped out of the car. The door closed. The next instant the car moved on again. Now Warwick Hilling was alone with his thoughts. . . .

"And what happens next?" he wondered, after he had relived all these incidents in his mind, and the great hall in which he was supposed to be had been blotted out behind him by the fog. "Am I driven home? Or what?"

A study of the geographical position suggested that he was not being driven home, although it was not easy to study geography through the yellow haze. Home lay east, and the car appeared to be traveling west. Not straight west. Zigzag west. Why west? And, even more interesting, why zigzag?

"We might be trying to shake off a pursuer!" reflected Hilling.

The reflection put a startling idea into his head. Perhaps they were!

Now left, now right, now straight for

a block, now left. And, surely, at an unnecessary speed? Too fast for a fog? He bent close to the window and peered out. A panel of the glass dividing him from the chauffeur slid aside, and the chauffeur's voice came through.

"Not that!" called the chauffeur.

His voice was quiet, but authoritative.

"Why not?" demanding Hilling.

"And ask no question," answered the chauffeur. "Please to sit back."

Hilling obeyed, but he felt a little ruffled. His own voice had annoyed him as much as the chauffeur's. Because it was so long since he had used it, it had been thick and unimposing. He cleared his throat softly, then inquired with dignity:

"Am I not to know where we are going?"

"You know sometime," came the retort.

"You are too kind!" murmured Hilling.

"Good, so!" smiled the chauffeur.

Hilling saw the smile in the windscreen, and realized then how the chauffeur had seen him at the window.

"I hope it will prove good, so!" observed Hilling, after a little pause. "You must admit I am patient."

"Like, as you say, the monument."

"And trusting."

"To trust, it is good when you can."

"There, sir, I am with you," replied Hilling, and cleared his throat again softly to add, "'Shed without shame each virtue, an you must, if it shall leave inviolate your trust.' But sometimes one's trust is put to a severe strain. And this, undoubtedly, is one of those times."

"To talk and to drive together, it is forbid," answered the chauffeur. "So, the accident."

He slid the glass panel to as he spoke. But Hilling was not in a mood to be dismissed in this peremptory fashion. He liked the chauffeur. It was odd, but he did. The liking had been increased by the quaint, spontaneous little outburst just before they left his room. But Hilling's soul remained his own, and if it wavered he only had to think of the philosophy of Polonius.

Therefore, he performed an audacious act. He bent forward and slid the glass panel open again.

"This much I insist on knowing!" he exclaimed. "Are you taking me home?"

"No," said the chauffeur, and slid the panel to again.

They traveled on. For how long? Hilling lost all count. He also lost all recognition of locality. The twisting and turning, which continued throughout the journey, the fog, and the confused state of his own mind, played ducks and drakes with time and space. They might be traveling north, or south, or east, or west. He had no idea. They might have been journeying for minutes or hours or months. He had no idea. It dawned upon him that he was probably intended to have no idea. In which case, he reflected gloomily, where was that precious thing called trust?

HE was just beginning to resign himself to a condition of eternal transit when he found that the car had stopped. He did not remember it stopping—it must have done so very softly—and he only knew it had stopped by the abrupt discovery that it was no longer in motion. This was followed by the discovery that the chauffeur's back was no longer visible ahead of him. The next instant the door of the car opened, and the chauffeur's head popped in.

"Now come," he whispered.

Hilling rose, rather majestically.

"But, a moment, first," continued the chauffeur, keeping his voice very low. "Lift the top of the silver ash tray by your window. There is a key. Take it. It will open the door of the house. So open it. Go in. Close it. Wait. It is clear, yes? No, say nothing till you are inside, even when I speak. Nod or shake!"

Hilling nodded.

"Good, so! Now walk with quietness. No haste, no worry, but as you would at the Albert Hall, the great prince! Upright! Magnificent! All so fine and wonderful!"

"Damn the fellow, does he think I do not know my part?" fumed Hilling to himself, while secretly grateful for these definite instructions.

He found the key and stepped out onto the pavement.

The fog seemed thicker than ever. He could hardly see a yard ahead of him. But he made out an iron railing and an iron gate. As he strode toward them, with all the magnificence required, the chauffeur

accompanied him to the gate, and made a little speech. The speech was in a foreign language, and he did not understand a word of it. He nodded, however—the flowing tide had caught him again, and he could only flow with it—and the exaggerated, over-elaborate motion of his head gave him, he thought, a momentary glimpse of another figure somewhere. Somewhere in the fog. Ten yards away? No, it could not be that. A foot? He could not say. It was gone almost before he saw it. If he had seen it at all! Perhaps he had not. Perhaps it had been merely his imagination. . . .

Hallo! What had happened to the chauffeur? He had stiffened suddenly. Where was he? Ah, there he was! No, he wasn't! . . . Gone!"

Hilling stifled an impulse to call after him. It would have been the normal thing to do in normal circumstances, but the circumstances were very far from normal. A startling instinct of self-preservation kept Hilling mute.

Perhaps the chauffeur had only returned to the car. Assumedly he would have to garage it somewhere. But why such abruptness? And why that sudden rigidity? Now Hilling could see nothing. The figure or figures had vanished. The car, even at this short distance, was blotted out. . . . Yes, he could see something. The open iron gate, waiting for him to pass through. And faintly beyond, a door. The door of which he held the key.

If you had asked him, he would have said that his pause lasted ten seconds. Actually it lasted two. But in those strange two seconds the adventure into which he had been so amazingly projected took on an entirely new aspect. Unadmitted and shadowy fears began to gather around him, and to assume a terrifying substance.

He advanced to the door. That, also grew into substance. All he could see was the door. Above it and on either side of it lay invisibility. He raised the key and inserted it in the lock. As he pushed the door inward, a brooding glow widened, and he found himself in an illuminated hall. The illumination came from a red-shaded lamp.

Suddenly the lamp cracked and went out. Stark horror gripped him. Leaping aside, he slammed the door shut fran-

tically, and as he did so the outside wood was stuck by a vicious, spitting, metallic *plop!*

III

THE magic was working.

Two hours ago Henry Brown had been a poor, timid clerk, living in fear of everybody, and without sufficient authority to control an office boy. But now all was changed. A new Henry Brown stood in the old Henry Brown's skin, if not in the old Henry Brown's clothes. He had not yet reached the complete emancipation that was to come; his acts of surprising daring lay still ahead. The sensation of inferiority, however, had lifted from him, and the relief was like the relief from constant pain. This alone, quite apart from a glass of whisky he had drunk, imparted to his head a feeling of unusual lightness. For the first time he could remember, he felt everybody's equal.

The glass of whisky, itself stimulating, had been drunk under stimulating circumstances. He had been treated to it by a man in a leopard skin. The man was only in a leopard skin, and it was a very small leopard for so big a man.

"What, not dancing, Gauguin?" the man exclaimed.

"Oh, so that's who I am," thought Henry, none the wiser, as he answered, "No—er—not just yet."

"Then we must have a drink, Gauguin," cried the man. He had obviously had several, though it was early. "Come along."

Henry hesitated. He could not bear the idea of tearing himself away from the glorious spectacle of the ballroom. He wanted to look, and look, and look. But he also wanted to make friends, and here was one, if not of the chosen sex. So he mumbled, "Well, really, that's very nice of you—thanks," and followed him.

They elbowed their way through crowds to a bar. At the bar was another crowd. They pushed forward to the counter.

"What'll you have, Gauguin?" inquired his host.

"Eh? Oh, same as you," he answered guardedly.

A few seconds later they were raising glasses to each other.

"Here's fun," smiled the leopard man.

"Cheery Honk," replied Henry dashingly.

They drained their glasses. Henry drained his too quickly, and nearly choked. While he was nearly choking, he said, "It's nice here, isn't it?" to prove he could still talk.

"Very nice, Gauguin, oh, very nice."

The leopard man's hand groped about his leopard skin. "I hope he's got a pocket," thought Henry. "Otherwise, how'll he pay?" Perhaps this invitation was a trick, and Henry himself would have to pay? This would be disapointing both financially and socially, and Henry wondered whether the two florins in his own pocket would be sufficient. If not, he would have to resort to his shoe, which would be awkward in public. But it was not a trick. The leopard skin had a pocket. The drinks were paid for, and the leopard man waved good-bye.

"I have to see a *very* important person," he whispered confidentially, and vanished.

The end was a little abrupt, but the incident was satisfactory. Henry had received a light from a red general and a drink from a leopard, and if that didn't mean you were all right, what did?

He returned to the vast ballroom. It drew him with such compelling force that, as he neared the covered passage that had formed his first watching point, he found himself almost running. He pulled up sharply. He did not want to disgrace himself before the sentinel beef-eaters. He nearly knew one of them already. The one with the very long nose.

With a sense that he was home again, he took his stand in the passage, beside the beef-eater with the long nose. The ballroom by now was a familiar spectacle. He knew in which direction to look for the band. He knew where the dance numbers went up—the number was now "Five"—and where, looking upward, the biggest bunch of balloons was suspended. He knew the corner in which was an enormous Golden Shell. (He saw it in his mind in capital letters.) He knew where it was, but he had no earthly idea why it was. He even knew where to turn his head to find one particular private box. He identified it by a sort of historical chap, with a fine long wig, sitting prominently forward. A king, p'r'aps.

But although the spectacle was now so familiar, every tiny point of it tickled every tiny point of Henry Brown with the stimulation of eternal freshness.

"HALLO, Gauguin!" cried a familiar voice. "Still looking for a partner?" He turned his head to smile at the speaker, but he could not find the speaker. Instead, he found himself smiling at the girl who had smiled at him on the stairs. She smiled at him again.

"I say, I say, I must be careful," decided Henry. "I'm becoming a devil."

He moved away from the smile, trying not to feel cold as he passed out of its radius. He felt sure that this was the nicest smile of all the thousands of smiles in the hall. He drifted about like a dismembered body, wanting to attach itself, not knowing where to attach itself, or how. Now he was near the band. Its loud notes clanged in his ears. Now he was very far away from it. The notes came faintly. Now he began to feel definitely dizzy. He was convinced it was the whisky. Had the leopard man given it to him neat? He recalled he had nearly choked. He would have tossed down anything at that moment. Prussic acid. No, he mustn't take any more drink. He couldn't stand drink. He had a sudden desire for the friendly beef-eater. There was something protective, motherly, about the beef-eater. Yes, he must certainly get back to the beef-eater. Otherwise he would find himself in trouble. Funny, he felt like this. Ah, of course, he had hardly eaten anything all day. He had been saving himself up for the supper. He had gone without lunch, putting the shilling saved toward the one-eleven-six.

He groped his way toward the spot where he thought the friendly beef-eater was. He found himself in the middle of a knot of people. It was unlike the usual knot. Something was going on. He tried to get out of the knot, failed, and became inextricably tied up in it. An arm shot out. Not at him, but at some other fellow. By Jove, a fight! He must get away from it. He didn't like fights.

He saw a man on the ground. The man's lip was bleeding. The man who had knocked him down was preparing to deliver another blow. The attacker was a

chap all over pearl buttons. Hey, this wasn't fair! It wasn't cricket! You couldn't hit a fellow who was already down, and whose lip was bleeding! Henry lurched forward and caught the attacker's arm. He held it with all his might. The arm remained stationary for a second, then wrenched itself away with terrible ferocity. "Now I'm going to die," thought Henry, "but I don't care." A fist hit him. He hit back. He became the center of something seething. Something that could not be worked out. The dance had turned into a game of rugby, and he was the ball. "I don't care, I don't care," he went on thinking, as he was pressed from all sides. "You shouldn't hit a man who's on the ground and whose lip is bleeding!"

Then the miracle happened. He was being pulled out. Pulled out through a hole in the human mass. He emerged from the scrum, and the scrum went on without him. It did not even know he had gone. A voice whispered in his ear, "Come away, quick, you mustn't go back!"

Now he was in the outer corridor. He did not remember getting there, though he had a vague memory of having been pulled there. But who had pulled him there? He raised his eyes and his mouth opened. It was the girl who had smiled at him on the stairs, and then again outside the box of the historical fellow.

"Take it easy," she was saying.

He blinked at her. He felt hot, and suddenly foolish and uncomfortable. She looked like a nymph. She was wearing very few clothes, but he swore it was only her face that attracted him.

"I—I expect I must look a sight," he panted unhappily.

"I expect it doesn't matter how you look," she answered. "You were damn silly to go into that mix-up."

"The chap's lip was bleeding," he muttered. "And I—I hate blood."

She looked at him curiously. Her face was close. He smelt the powder on it.

"Yes—I believe you do," she said. "I believe you need looking after. Do you still want a partner—Gauguin?" He stared at her. "I heard someone call you that. Anyway, whether you do or don't, I managed to rescue *this* for you!" She held up a little flashlight, with an unusually large lamp at the end. "How it didn't get broken

beats me! I expect it fell out of your pocket."

Now he stared at the light. It was, if he had known it, the most interesting article in the whole of the hall. He shook his head.

"Not mine," he murmured.

"Oh, not? Then it must have fallen out of somebody else's pocket. But we're not going back to return it, my dear! How about going up now for a bit of supper and watching the New Year in together from the top?"

He did not believe he had heard the words aright.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Feeling queer?"

"Well—as a matter of fact—I do feel a bit funny," he answered. "Yes, I—I should like a bit of supper."

"Atta boy!" she cried, taking his arm with friendly intimacy. The warmth of her own arm sent him direct to heaven. "And p'raps we can rake up a bottle of bubbly to go with it, shall we? Look after this fancy toy, you'd better. Slip it in your pocket!"

"A SPOT of trouble over there," commented Harold Lankester, as he and Dorothy Shannon entered their empty box from the back and looked out into the hall across the low parapet.

"Aren't they mad!" replied Dorothy.

"Ah, you accept my theory," he smiled.

"When it comes to horse-play, yes. The rest—I don't know. In a way, I feel rather sorry for them."

"Them?"

"*Touché!* Us."

"That's right. Us," he nodded. "If it's a rum world, we can't individually escape responsibility. We're all a part of it." His eyes grew serious for a moment, then quickly relaxed. "Wonder what's on? It looks like a miniature war."

"Conrad will tell us," answered Dorothy. "I can see him on the edge of it. Look—he's going closer! Oh, dear. I hope he doesn't make an idiot of himself and get mixed up in it!"

"Shall I go out?" asked Lankester.

"No, stay here," she responded quickly.

"Meaning you're afraid I may get mixed up in it?"

"You might."

"True. Small nations." The remark sounded cryptic, and he did not explain it. "Well, I'm quite happy where I am."

"Yes, it's nice and quiet in here."

A silence fell upon them. He gave her a cigarette, and lit one for himself. As his eyes met hers over the match, he smiled, rather uncertainly.

"Yes—it's a rum thing, life," he said. "We live it all wrong, yet can't help going on with it."

"Would you have us all commit suicide?" she answered lightly.

"I didn't mean that. Perhaps I should have said—continued to live it wrong."

"Well, I love it," she exclaimed immediately, as though afraid of another silence.

"It has good moments," he replied. "But if you love it, why did you say just now that you were sorry for people?"

"I said *these* people."

"And then agreed that we were a part of these people. I'm not telling you anything you don't know—am I?—when I say that all these people we are looking at are thoroughly representative specimens. They reflect our age, our condition, our laws—our necessities. That's what makes it all so interesting and real. And important. Am I boring you?"

"You never bore me."

"But—something?"

"Yes—something. Why are you so serious tonight?"

The door opened again, and Mrs. Shannon entered. She was trying heroically not to look worried.

"Oh, dear!" she murmured. "What is one to do with Conrad?"

Lankester rose and looked at Dorothy inquiringly. She nodded, and he turned to her mother.

"Deserted you, has he, the young rascal!" he exclaimed. "I'll bring him in."

"No, don't," she said. "It's silly to worry. And he'd hate it. He'll be all right. Where's Dad?"

"Mr. Shannon wasn't here when we came in just now."

"Wasn't he? I expect he's just wandering about. What about supper? We might have it brought in after this dance, and then we can all drink to the New Year. There, look! It's breaking up! Oh, and there's Conrad! He's coming back." She sat down, relieved. "What *do* you think

of me, Harold? I'm quite ashamed of myself, because if there's one thing I disagree with, it's parents worrying."

A FEW moments later Conrad burst in like a large golden firework.

"Did you see it?" he cried. "It was a real scrum! One chap almost got knocked out!"

"What happened, dear?" asked Mrs. Shannon.

"Well, I didn't see the very start," he ran on, "but as far as I can gather somebody checked the coster about losing his partner or something."

"And you had lost *your* partner, too, hadn't you?" said Lankester, with a definite inflection in his voice.

"My partner? What do you—?" He stopped abruptly, and flushed beneath the imprisoning gold. "Oh, I say! But I thought—did you get back all right, Mother?"

"Well, I'm here," smiled Mrs. Shannon. "Go on, it was all right. And then the coster hit him?"

"Rather. A real smack. And down the poor chap went! It might have been all right—I mean, there mightn't have been any more of it—if somebody else hadn't barged in—a little chap with a beret twenty miles round and check pants—"

"I've seen him," nodded Dorothy.

"Well, he looks a prize fool, though I'm not one to talk, but he's got some pluck. I believe he was trying to rescue the chap on the ground, but the next moment he was on the ground himself, and nobody ever saw him again."

"If that's the modern idea of sport," remarked Mrs. Shannon, "it's more than I can understand! Did you see Dad anywhere, Conrad?"

"Dad? No! Isn't he here? So he isn't."

"What happened to the coster?" inquired Dorothy.

"We left him still looking. For the chap in the loud pants. He's still a bit upset, but he'll cool down. I say, what about eats? I'm getting a hole in me."

"We'll have supper as soon as Dad comes back."

"Then I'll bring him back! I don't suppose he's far off."

He was out of the box again in a flash.

MR. SHANNON was a considerable way off. He was in a corridor at the far end of the hall, cooling down after a disturbing meeting with a lady in a Nell Gwynn costume.

The meeting, of course, had been quite accidental. So Mr. Shannon assured himself. True, the lady had happened to smile once or twice while passing his box, and maybe he had smiled back, in recognition of the historical coincidence. Yes, he admitted, he had smiled back. Little things like that were nothing! Just part and parcel of the occasion, almost an obligation to the occasion. If you were going to worry over a smile or two, you had better stay at home. But he had merely left the box, after that last smile, to stretch his legs, and he had never expected that, as he stood on the fringe of the great revolving kaleidoscope of dancers, this lady would dance right by him, and drop her fan again. Naturally, he had picked it up. Naturally, she had rewarded him with another smile. And—well, if she had implied to her partner that she was tired, and if the partner had sloped away grumpily, as though dismissed, that surely was not Mr. Shannon's fault? Was it not the partner's fault for acting with such unnecessary boorishness, and for interpreting the lady's attitude in the way he did?

"Well—did you see *that*?" exclaimed Nell Gwynn, herself appearing astonished.

"I—I hope I had nothing to do with it?" murmured Charles II.

"I expect you had everything to do with it," she retorted, with disarming candor. "The jealous idiot! Just because I—" She paused and laughed. "Smiled at an old friend!"

"Old friend?" queried Mr. Shannon, purposely obtuse.

"Well, in a way, you are, aren't you?" inquired Nell Gwynn, and added, with a wicked twinkle, "Charles?" And then, while Charles swallowed, she tossed her head and exclaimed, "Who is he, anyhow? Frankly, I'm not at all sorry to be rid of him!"

"Isn't he a friend of yours, then?" inquired Mr. Shannon cautiously.

"Friend of mine? Gramercy, no!" she retorted. "He's been hanging round me all the evening. I couldn't shake him off. Thank you, Nell Gwynn is a little more

particular! I expect he saw us looking at each other, and didn't like it."

Now was the moment for Mr. Shannon to show his strength and deny the imputation. Or, at least, to imply its insignificance. Yes, this was the moment he should have given the too-attractive lady one more smile and departed. He knew it. She, also, knew it, and watched him covertly from beneath her heavily-blackened lashes. But the moment went by, and Mr. Shannon said nothing. Nor did he move. A little door was opening in his starved soul, and he could not bear to close it.

The silence lengthened. He began to feel slightly foolish. To end the silence, and because he could not think of anything else to say, he murmured weakly:

"Did we look at each other?"

"Didn't we?" she answered. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

"I—I suppose we did," admitted Mr. Shannon. "And as it has caused this little trouble, I apologize."

"What for? Have I complained yet?"

"Well, no."

"Wait till I do, then!"

"Nevertheless," insisted Mr. Shannon, cursing himself for his rusty conversational ability and feeling that he ought to be doing this very much better, "nevertheless I feel I ought to apologize."

"You can, then, on one condition. No, two."

"What are they?"

"The first, Charles, is that you let me hear you call me Nell while you do it!"

"Eh? Well, why not. I apologize, Nell."

The sound of the name on his own lips gave him a disturbing little thrill. "Come, come, this mustn't continue," he thought to himself. But he asked, "And the second condition?"

"That you go on doing it," she laughed, and then suddenly seized his arm. "I say, what's happening over there? A free fight? Let's get somewhere clear of it!"

STILL holding his arm, she led him out of the ballroom. Now they were standing in a comparatively quiet corridor. "How can I get away?" thought Mr. Shannon. "How did it all begin? I was a fool! This won't do, you know! I must go right back to my box."

As though in answer to his thoughts, her voice penetrated his confusion.

"But, of course, you're with a party, aren't you? Lucky man. I'm not."

"Unfortunately—I mean, yes, I am with a party."

She gave a tiny sigh. It was the prettiest compliment. She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then dropped his arm and held out her hand.

"Then I mustn't keep you, Charlie. But it would have been nice if we could have done a bit of exploring together. It's an interesting building. Good-by."

He took her hand.

"Or, perhaps, just *au revoir*," he answered, feeling idiotic.

"Well, if you're lonely any time," she said, "this is where you'll probably find me."

She squeezed his hand, walked away, threw him a final smile over a dazzling shoulder, and vanished.

Mr. Shannon took a deep breath. He knew he had behaved very foolishly and unwisely. But he did not know whether he were sorry or not.

He turned in the opposite direction. After a few paces he stopped. Something was trickling down his forehead. He raised his lace handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He realized that it would never do to return to Box 12 in this condition. He sat down on a sofa to cool.

And there, a trifle too soon for his convenience, his son found him.

"I say, Dad, you look absolutely steaming!" exclaimed Conrad. "Were you in that scrum?"

On the point of asking, "What scrum?" Mr. Shannon changed his mind and answered, "Yes."

SALLY now had two potential meeting places in the Hall. The first was the spot she was leaving. The second was a sheltered recess on the first balcony.

She walked leisurely to the second. There she waited. Her eyes were no longer laughing and flirtatious; they were grim, almost brooding. This was not merely because her job was giving her little pleasure; it wasn't much fun hooking a poor, easy fish like Mr. Shannon. It was because an indefinable anxiety lay in her heart, an uncomfortable sensation that

things were not going right. Menace hung in the air, and almost for the first time in her life she was afraid. The fact that she did not know exactly why was no alleviation.

"Of course, Sam was a bad bloomer!" she confessed to herself. "I ought to have got someone else. His mood's all wrong, and if he bungles we're done for—and good-by to my two hundred!"

Well, he mustn't bungle! She would have to see to that. When he came along she would have a straight no-nonsense talk with him, and if he looked like making trouble. . . .

He came along at that moment, with trouble written all over him. His face was dark.

She attacked him at once. She wanted to cow him, to force him to follow her mood instead of allowing him to force her own. She knew the danger of losing her ascendancy.

"You've made a nice start!" she said.

He looked at her in surprise. How the devil did she know? An instant later he realized that she had not meant what he meant, and that she did not know.

"Making a scene like that!" she went on, admonishingly. "If you're going to get what you hope out of this, you'll have to watch that temper of yours!"

"What do yer mean?" he retorted, deciding to clear up the lesser evil before referring to the greater, which would not be so easy to clear up. "I sloped off when that blinkin' fool come along, didn't I, like was agreed?"

"You sloped off all right!"

"Corse I did! Down goes your fan fer the signal. Fool picks it up. That was my cue fer gettin' 'uffy and leavin' yer, wasn't it? All right, then. I did get 'uffy and leave yer, so what's the complaint?"

"The complaint is exactly what you've just said," replied Sally. "Just exactly! You got huffy and left me. You didn't pretend to get huffy and leave me. You got huffy! And then you lost your head and went off and made a silly scene!"

He frowned. He knew he had lost his head, and he knew he had really got huffy. But he wasn't really the sort of fellow to stand nonsense from any man; he never had been and he never would be; and this play-acting before a lot of fools stuck in

his stomach. Sally was *his* girl! Had been once, anyway, and was going to be again, if he knew anything about it. He had wanted to sock the stupid old josser on the nose. Instead, he had had to slope off like a timid schoolboy. And then somebody who had noticed the incident had followed him, and chipped him about losing his girl before the crowd. Naturally, he had boffed him!

He was about to explain all this and to justify himself when he altered his tactics. Why should he explain? That was another thing about him. He never explained. Certainly not to any girl! If Sally had been any other girl he would soon have sent her about her blinking business! So, instead of offering an explanation which—he well knew—would not have been accepted in any case, he launched a counter-attack.

"Well, was *you* pertendin'?" he challenged.

"What's that mean?" she retorted.

"That Charles II, I don't think!" he said.

Her eyes blazed.

"**S**AM, it's true, you *don't* think!" she flashed. "If you did, you'd know I could never fall for a boob like that!"

In the pleasure of this spirited denial, and in his ignorance of the unspoken thought, Sam felt better.

"Oh, well, don't let's quarrel," he muttered. "Ferget it! Goin' all right with 'im, eh?"

"Easy."

"I said it would be. When you get among 'em, you don't need no bait."

"Leave me to do my part of it. The question is, can you do *yours*?"

She noticed the sudden twitching of his features. Her remark had slapped his memory back to something he would rather have forgotten.

"What's up? Why don't you answer?" she exclaimed. "What on earth are you staring at?"

"Well, the fact is, Sally—" he began.

But she pulled him up with a quickly whispered, "Scram!" Then, as someone passed, she laughed and cried, "What, right into the orchestra? It must have been a scream!"

When they were alone again, Sam mum-

bled, "That blinking Balkan bloke's everywhere!"

"Yes, isn't he?" answered Sally quietly. "Well, go on. Let's have it. The fact is—?"

"Eh? Oh!" He hesitated, then plunged. "The fact is, I—I had a bit of bad luck."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"I am, ain't I? I've lost my little flasher."

She looked at him as though she wished he were dead. But her voice remained quiet. It was like cold steel.

"I guessed something like that would happen," she said. "Right, wasn't I?" She waited while two people ran by, chasing each other. "In the scrap, I suppose?"

"That's right."

"Fell out of your pocket?"

"That's right."

"Both your little flashers?"

He looked uncomfortable, but her eyes were piercing him too sharply for prevarication. They were like cold steel, too.

"I only 'ad one," he said.

"And you wonder why you're going down, while I'm going up!" she blazed, forgetting her caution for an instant, her voice louder with fury. It dropped again, however, as she went on, "I told you to bring two. Why didn't you?"

"I sat on one."

"You'd be a good one to bring up pups! You sat on one, and you've lost the other. And now, we're done!"

"There you are, lookin' on the worst side at once," he grumbled, trying to imply a weakness in her armor to divert attention from his own. "We can find it again, can't we?"

"I believe somebody once found a needle in a haystack," she retorted.

"Yes, by *lookin'* for it," he pointed out.

"Oh, yes, we'll look for it," she answered bitterly. "But I suppose you've done that already?"

"Made a start. Then I stopped to come 'ere to you."

"Suppose somebody has sat on the one you've lost?"

"I ain't supposin' it."

"You ought to be a weather prophet, the way you keep your optimism! Why don't you suppose it?"

"'Cos I think I know 'oo's got it."

"You do?"

"Ain't I tellin' yer?"

"Who?"

"A chap in the scrap. Suddenly 'e joins in, and seizes me arm. And down we go together, with the lot on top of us." He paused and thought. "Yes, I'll swear 'e's got it."

"Go on, go on," she exclaimed impatiently. "Why do you think he's got it?"

"Well, 'e wasn't there afterward. 'E'd skermooosed! Not a sign of 'im. And, if the thing's 'ad broke, I'd 'ave seen some of the pieces."

"Sure there were no pieces?"

"Not on the ground, and not in me pocket."

NOW Sally thought, and all at once her lips tightened.

"I wonder if you've walked into it, Sam?" she said. "Right into it, like a dear little lamb? I wonder whether this has been a put-up job? Scrap and everything!"

"You mean—"

"I mean there's more hangs on this than you guess, as I've told you before. There's the hell of a lot! There may be people here who are working against us—"

"Yus, more than I guess!" interrupted Sam warmly. "And who makes me guess? You don't tell me *nothing*!"

"When it comes to knowledge, Sam," she responded scornfully, "you're best spoon-fed. Now, then. Let's straighten this out. Somebody gets your dander up—on purpose. You go for him, and knock him down. Then another fellow comes along. Working together, of course. And while the trouble's on, he slips the thing out of your pocket, and bolts. What were they like? We've got to find those two men, Sam! What were they like?"

"I can't remember the first one," answered Sam. "It was all too quick. I just 'eard 'is voice be'ind me, and I swung round and 'it 'im. I think 'e was dressed like a sailor, but there's dozens of sailors. And then, you see, I was switched off to the second chap. I remember 'im, though. And 'e's the chap we want. You could 'ardly see 'is face fer 'is 'at—one 'o them berrys, you know, sloppin' all over the place—and trousers—well, slacks, more—that give yer a 'eadache—"

"Checks?" interrupted Sally, her eye brightening. "Loud checks? And a dark velvet jacket?"

"What, you know 'im?"

"I've seen him! Once seen, never forgotten! I heard somebody calling him Gauguin."

WARWICK HILLING did not like it. He did not like it in the least. He possessed the average amount of courage, and at moments of crisis he was able to draw upon the poets and philosophers. "A coward dies many times before his death, a hero dies but once," had fortified him on many an anxious occasion, and his last thought before being operated on for appendicitis had been, "Fear is more pain than is the pain it fears." But philosophy is not of much use when you are standing in the dark hall of a totally unknown house, have just seen a lamp smashed by a bullet from the street, and have heard another patter against a quickly closed front door.

He stood for a few moments perfectly still. There seemed nothing else to do. He waited for the sound, or perhaps the feel, of a third bullet, or for some other demonstration from the invisible enemy. Nothing more happened. The utter silence of the fog-bound house was broken only by the thumping of his own heart.

He had been told to go in and wait. . . . "I cannot pretend that I like this," reflected Hilling, unhappily.

He liked it even less when he heard a sound from the back of the hall. Somebody had got in!

Now there was silence again, saving always for the thumping of his heart. The thumping annoyed him, even through his frank terror. "What is this?" he demanded of himself. "Am I not a man?" He might perhaps have urged in his defense that he was a man with a rather empty stomach.

The sound from the back of the hall started again. The cause of the sound was painfully obvious. The somebody who had got in was creeping softly toward him. Realizing suddenly that immobility would not serve him, Hilling slipped aside. Luck favored him. He slid into an open doorway. Behind him was a dark room. His hand moved about for the electric light switch. Ah! Good! Here it was! He

felt in comfortingly with his fingers, rejoicing in the slight coldness of the metal. Any moment now he could produce a flood of light. But his fingers hesitated. The person in the hall was still advancing, and if Hilling turned on the light now he would reveal his advantage and perhaps gain nothing from it. Better wait a few seconds, maybe, until the person had advanced to the doorway, and was within reach. Then on with the light and spring!

And so it happened. The person continued to steal forward, and now the sound of his breathing was added to the sound of his footsteps. Here he was! A vague movement in the darkness. Up went the lights, and, with a ridiculous roar, Hilling sprang.

His arms went round the small figure of the chauffeur.

"Ei! Ei!" gasped the chauffeur.

"Gad!" gasped Hilling.

As he let go, and the chauffeur slid to a sitting position on the floor, he began to feel a little hysterical. He started to laugh nervously.

"Oh! It is funny?" choked the chauffeur, though more in reproach than anger. "Good, so?"

"Not quite so good, so!" panted Hilling, and leaned against the wall.

They gave each other a full minute to recover. Then the chauffeur rose slowly, and Hilling noticed a red mark on his wrist. The sight sobered him.

"Did I do that?" he asked.

"No, you did not do that," answered the chauffeur, with a pale smile. "As you say, Mr. Hilling, it is not so good, so!"

THEY entered the room that was now illuminated. Instinctively Hilling glanced toward the window, then dashed for it and pulled down the blind. The chauffeur, rapidly reviving, emitted a little chuckle.

"That is wise, yes," he commented. "You show yourself, good. And now you do not show yourself, good. Well, we are here. A drink, do you agree?" He smiled grimly. "For soon it is the New Year!"

He went to a small cupboard. The room was an elegantly furnished sitting room. But Hilling wanted something before the drink. He wanted information.

"How did you get in?" he asked.

"By the back door, and by the key of the back door that I have," answered the chauffeur. "And you?"

"But you know that!"

The little chauffeur looked at him keenly, then nodded. "I, too, have been in a funny time with the bullets. You will bind the hand, good, so?"

He whipped out a large handkerchief with his left hand and held out his right. Hilling took the handkerchief mechanically and bound the wrist. He bound it without speaking. He had been drowned in a sea of words. Then something burst inside him, and he cried, suddenly and despairingly:

"Yes, yes, yes! But in heaven's name—in heaven's name, *what is it all about?*"

The little chauffeur was staring at his bandaged wrist. For a few moments he continued to stare at it. When he looked up his eyes were quiet again. His passages from one emotion to another were swift and disconcerting.

"It is about a statue," he said. "A statue that will be made one day in the so soon New Year, in a place I know. Me, I see that it is made. But who is the statue, you ask? I tell you. It is the statue of Mr. Hilling."

IV

TO feel the sensation of the Chelsea Arts Ball you must be on the dancing floor. You must mix with the dancers, revolve with them, become a part of the kaleidoscope. You must hear their voices and their laughter, and the rustle of their clothes, and the swish of their feet like a great whispering tide; and the music, too—you must listen to that, now loud as you draw near it, now fading as you draw away from it, now hardly audible above the whispering tide of feet. The music is stationary. The tide moves with you. Close your eyes, and you are on a strange shore. Open them, and you are on a stranger. The shore of conscious life, swept by human attraction. And you must catch wisps of scent and of lovers' remarks, sniffing or listening with good-humored impertinence; and you must bump into people. Oh, certainly, you must bump into people! But, being of the Chosen, always with honorable intentions. And whatever you do,

or whatever is done to you, you must not care a damn.

But to *see* the Chelsea Arts Ball, you must be high up. The higher you climb, the more your view will improve.

From the boxes on the first tier you will look down on heads and headdresses with the sensation that you could stretch out your hand and almost touch them as they go by. This is an illusion produced by the fact that, although you are well above them, compared with the complete altitude of the enormous hall you have hardly climbed at all. There is still far more space above you than below you, and without much difficulty, after a bottle of Heidsieck, you could let yourself over the low red-plush parapet, drop into the box immediately beneath you, and be on the floor in a matter of seconds.

From the boxes on the second tier, which is the highest tier of boxes, you find yourself more distinctly separated from the ground. Now you would need several bottles of Heidsieck to risk the descent. You exclaim as you enter the box, to compensate for your disappointment in having applied too late for the more popular boxes on the lower tiers, "Hallo, *this* is the spot to see it from!" There is some justification for your exclamation. Already, at this altitude, the bird's-eye view is beginning to dawn. You watch groups of people instead of individual people. If you suffer from vertigo you may feel a little giddy. But you have not yet found the spot to see it from.

Above your head, in the third, penultimate circle, are people who have paid less for a better spectacle. You need not envy them, however, for they are barred from participation, and must stay where they are put. They are not in fancy dress, or even in evening dress. They have paid five shillings to feast their eyes, to admire, to criticize, or to envy, and to go home afterward to express their admiration or criticism or envy. They have ascended by back ways and cold stone steps, like poor relations. But they are quite happy. They were not forced to come. They get their money's worth. Toward midnight they bring out bottles of their own, or buy cups of coffee, and smile at one another as one year goes and another comes. And they, also, say, "This is the spot to see it from!"

But they, also, are wrong. The spot to see it from is at the very top, in that great last circle that glimmers in the clouds like a vast halo.

The halo is dotted with supper tables. They extend round its complete curved length. And here you sit, unless you are having your supper cooped in one of the boxes, looking down at the Chelsea Arts Ball, and seeing it in all its bewildering completeness.

The dancers look like brightly colored ants. Moving, revolving, changing. Or like a colored ocean, with tides of different hues. You can watch the tides, and see how they are flowing, while those who form the tides are in ignorance. Here comes a current, sweeping inevitably and mathematically toward a little stationary group. You can see that the ants in the stationary group must be swept up in it; but they do not. Now they are caught—spraying away—startled and laughing. One colored ant falls over. Another pulls it up. Both are laughing. That you take for granted, though you cannot hear their laughter. You watch another point. You see a sudden quickening of the movement. It swells, communicates itself, flows halfway round the floor, breaks up. Now the ants are all breaking up. Something quite new is happening. Some are running to the outer edge of the whirlpool, others are floundering, others are slipping and sliding. Your eye concentrates on twenty or thirty bright yellow ants. They are trying to get together. Now they have got together. Now they have formed a line, and are pulling and pushing something in their center, on the top of which is perched a special yellow ant. The thing they are pushing and pulling, and on which the special ant is sitting, is an enormous golden shell. . . . The great organ, concealed behind its camouflage of clouds, rolls forth. . . .

"WHAT'S happening?" whispered Henry Brown.

"Stunts," replied the sparsely-clad nymph who sat opposite him.

"Stunts?"

"Art Schools. Every year the Art Schools make them, and shove them round." She looked at him amusedly, half-curiously. "I'll make a bet you've not

been to one of these shows before?"

"Eh? No, this is my first," he admitted. "But it's not going to be my last!"

"Good for you!" she laughed, and poured out his second glass of Perrier Jouet.

The Perrier Jouet would cost Henry a guinea. Twenty-one lunches! But he had not had the courage to order Famiray et Fils, which would have cost him only fifteen lunches. To her credit, she had done her best to make him.

"What made you come?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "I'd heard people talk about it."

"And wanted a spot of the gay life?"

"That's it."

She raised her glass, and they drank. The wine percolated through him dizzily. She was not quite so distinct as she had been, but she was ten times more desirable.

"What made *you* come?" he inquired.

"Same thing, I expect," she replied. "But I'm an old bird."

"Oh, come! Not so old a bird!"

"Guess how old, then?"

"I'm not good at guessing."

"Funk it?"

"Yes. No. Twenty."

"Thank you, dear," she smiled. "You can add two." Perhaps she was unnecessarily truthful, but this funny little man rather interested her, and she had an impulse to be truthful with him, even over the trivial matter of a couple of years.

"Dear," the funny little man was thinking to himself. "I can't believe it!"

"Now shall I guess?" she went on. "Seventeen."

"Don't be silly!" he blushed.

"How old, then?"

"Twenty-five." He felt ashamed of his three extra years. "Getting an old man, eh?"

"Old man my hat!" she retorted. "Twenty-five's a nice age. That's what I should really have guessed."

The stunts were in full swing below, but Henry Brown had forgotten all about them. He looked at his vis-à-vis, and wondered. Wondered why she was sitting there. Wondered why he was looking at her, and why she was not minding. He had never looked at a girl for so long before. Was it wrong? Somehow he could not feel it was wrong. If she had minded, then, of course, it would have been dif-

ferent, but she didn't mind. He felt, in an odd, bewildering sort of a way, that she was letting him.

"What's going on in that funny mind of yours?" she challenged.

"I'd better not tell you," he answered.

"Married?"

"What?" He turned pink. "Good Lord, no!"

"Well, don't be so surprised about it! Engaged?"

"No."

"Then what's the harm? Once a year?" He gave way.

"All right," he said. "I was thinking how nice you were being to me."

"Who's being nice to you?" she exclaimed. "But perhaps it's high time somebody started! Let me see you without your hat—Gauguin!" She stretched forward her bare arm and whipped the beret off. Then she nodded. "Like you better that way. Much better."

"So do I," he agreed.

"Shall I get rid of it, then?"

SHE made a motion as though to toss it into the hall below. She laughed at his consternation. Then she stuffed it under the table, and her hand touched his knee lightly as she did so. The touch fired him.

"Look here, I say," he mumbled. "I want to ask you something!"

"Forge ahead," she said.

"If I ask you questions, it's half your fault. I mean—"

"You mean that I proposed we should chum up," she interrupted. "That's all right with me. I'll take what's coming. I don't suppose it will kill either of us." But she added, with a sudden little doubt, "Only be sure it's nothing you're going to be sorry about afterward."

"Why should it be?"

She laughed at his expression. She knew more about him than he did.

"It's not going to be," she reassured him, almost like a mother. "Shoot!"

"It's—it's just this. What *made* you propose that we should chum up? Yes, that's it! What *made* you?"

She regarded him thoughtfully for a second or two. He did look better without the beret. Nothing to shout about, but better. And the wine, added to his ob-

vious sincerity, gave an attractive glint to his usually dull eyes.

"Well, I'll tell you," she answered, "though there's nothing really much to tell. You seem to know so little about life—there, that's frank enough!—that I suppose you have to work everything out. I was watching you before you went into that fight. I was watching your expression. You were a bit funky, weren't you? Needn't answer. But you went into it, anyway—and I liked you for it. There! that enough?"

"Of course, I don't understand this at all," he muttered.

"Perhaps you're making too much of it," said the nymph. Then surprised herself a little by adding, "Or perhaps you're not."

They looked away from each other, and stared down into the hall. The golden shell had completed its journey, and was now drawn up at the side and being broken to bits. The colored ants swayed toward it, heaved away from it, climbed up on it, toppled down from it. At first Henry thought another row was on, and a pang of indignation shot through him at this work of destruction. That golden shell must have taken many days to make, and now a lot of excited, thoughtless people were smashing it! But then he noticed that the bright yellow ants, the ants who had pulled and pushed it along, were helping to smash it up. Later, his companion explained to him that it was all a part of the game. The stunts were made for the occasion, made to be smashed up immediately after their brief moment of glory. They were of no use afterward, but the space they occupied was. Meanwhile, another procession was organized, and was being pushed and pulled round the hall. The officiating ants, this time, were sea-blue, and their chariot was in the form of a large breaking wave. It was followed by a cubic effigy of Neptune sitting on a rock. Neptune's rock bumped into another rock, nearly displacing a bunch of mermaids. A high diving board, with a group of bathing beauties, raced perilously around, to the sound of applause and the throbbing of the organ. . . .

"Nearly midnight," said the nymph in Henry's ear. How much prettier she was, thought Henry, than all the others! Nearly

every pretty girl there was prettier, to someone, than all the others. "Glasses ready!"

He felt hot. He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket, and something came out with it. It was the little flashlight with the unusually large glass bulb at the end. He had forgotten about it.

"Be careful, or it'll go off!" she warned him.

"It's only a flashlight, isn't it?" he answered.

SUDDENLY he thrust it toward her, trying to flash it in her face. He wanted to make her laugh, and to see the light fall on her features. She ducked. But no light came.

"Funny," he said. "It seems to be locked or something."

"Well, you put it back in your pocket," she retorted. "I don't like the look of it."

As he did so, a frown came into her face, and she sat very still. Henry, busy with his pocket and his handkerchief, did not notice the frown, nor did he notice the coster with whom he had fought strolling leisurely in their direction.

He was still mopping his forehead as the coster drew level with their table. The coster paused for a moment. Henry's head looked very different without his ridiculous beret. His conspicuous legs were also tucked under the table. The coster passed on. . . .

"What's up?" asked Henry.

"Nothing, darling," replied the nymph, "only I'm feeling a bit hot myself. Toss over the handkerchief!"

The nymph was a wise little person. She had not liked the looks of that coster when she had lugged Henry away from him. That was one reason why she had got rid of the beret.

"Three minutes to twelve," she remarked, as she handed the handkerchief back. "Now for some fun!"

"Do they do anything?" inquired Henry.

"Bound to be something. There'll be pipers, anyway. Listen to the corks!"

Fresh bottles of champagne were being opened all around them, in anticipation of the Big Moment. Shouldn't they have a fresh bottle, too? When purchasing the first bottle he had contrived to secure the contents of his left shoe, having surrepti-

tiously kicked it off and then bent down as though to put it on again; and he had one pound three shillings still in his pocket, and two pounds still in his right shoe. He regarded their half-filled glasses dubiously. The wine looked sad and flat.

A waitress hovered near them, lynx-eyed. He beckoned to her.

"No, you don't?" exclaimed the nymph.

"Yes, I do," cried Henry. "Another bottle of the same as what we've had, and hurry your stumps!"

The waitress vanished and reappeared. She just beat the clock.

"Pop!" laughed Henry happily, as their own cork now flew.

There was a rustle of expectation. In the excitement of the moment and the strange illogical tension of it, neither Henry nor his companion noticed two figures strolling toward their table. One was Henry's first acquaintance, the man in the leopard skin. The other was the coster returning.

People were standing up. Henry followed suit. So did the nymph as he raised his glass to her.

"Not before the moment," she said. "That's unlucky!"

"O.K.—but immediately afterward," he replied. "You know—I've got a feeling—this is going to be some *year*!"

She smiled at him. The man in the leopard skin, a few paces ahead of the coster, was now within a foot or two of their table. He stopped suddenly, and amused recognition entered his face.

"Why, hallo, Gauguin!" he cried. "Lost your hat?"

The coster's head swung round, and his eye glinted. Then all the lights went out.

A swift babel of voices was succeeded by an equally swift hush. For the first moment since the great hall had opened its doors to the throngs now gathered inside it to honor the new year, it contained absolute quietude. But all at once, from the minute spot occupied by Henry Brown, the silence was broken by the sound of a splintered wineglass.

FAR below, in the darkness of Box 12, Mr. James Shannon sat and thought.

Across the big blacked-out space ahead of him things were happening. A dawn-ing grayness began to assume shadowy

shapes. The shapes shifted, expanded; they grew lighter and more distinct. They became clouds, floating about the vast screen of the sky. Then the clouds glinted with radiance at their lowest edges. The radiance spread. The rim of a large rising sun appeared, sliding upward and turning the clouds pure gold as the first *clang* of Big Ben vibrated through the ether on wireless waves. . . . "Happy New Year!" whispered Mrs. Shannon.

But Mr. Shannon did not hear. Neither did his eyes see. They were turned inward, contemplating the bewildering chaos of his mind.

"What has happened to me?" he demanded of himself, again and again. "I have never given 'way like this before! I am James Shannon, senior partner of Shannon, Shayle and Co. I *am* Shannon, Shayle and Co.! Shayle doesn't count. My firm made munitions in the last war. It is making them now—for the next. I have just completed a very big order. A most important order. The stuff goes off the day after tomorrow entirely through my personal skill and organization—and in spite of a threatened strike. Who averted the strike? I did! I smashed it and sacked the ringleader and half a dozen hot-heads. Damned Communists! Why, but for me they'd have blown the place up! But I beat 'em—I don't stand nonsense—and instead of being delayed, here am I two days ahead of the scheduled date. . . . And now, hell, a mere woman. . . ."

The mere woman's face rose before him, blotting everything else out. She was beautiful, but that was the least part of Mr. Shannon's difficulty. There were thousands of beautiful women in the world. One passed them every day. This woman was not merely beautiful, however. She was also accessible.

"Stop, stop!" shouted his thoughts. "Do you hear? Stop! Quite apart from your business, you are a respectable married man. Your name stands high, and is going to stand higher. Any day now there will be an announcement in the *Times* that your daughter is engaged to a rising member of Parliament. And the knighthood, don't forget the knighthood. Strong probability of that. Almost a certainty, if—"

If what? If he stayed in this box, and refused to be tempted out of it?

Come, come! He rounded on his fears. They were ridiculous, childish! He was exaggerating the importance of the woman and the significance of the incident. Making a mountain out of a molehill. Of course, he would not really leave his box to hunt for this rather-too-forward young person, but what harm could come of it even if he did? Would anyone please tell him that? Damn it all, couldn't he be trusted to look after himself?

Imagining himself cool and sane again, he reflected: "I wonder if she was serious? I wonder whether she really meant to hang around that spot? Whether she's there now, at this moment? I don't suppose so. I don't suppose so, not for an instant. It might be rather amusing, though, to find out?"

He pictured himself walking along the corridor—some time or other—to the spot. He decided that she should not be in the picture. But she was. Vividly. Beautiful, warm, and yielding. . . .

"A happy New Year!" repeated Mrs. Shannon.

"Eh?" he jerked.

What was happening? The lights were up again, and the hall had become a mammoth playground. People were sliding about the floor, joining hands, romping, forming processions, galloping, calling out to one another. And, threading through them, were Scottish pipers. Appalled that this transformation could have occurred without his noticing it and almost terrified by his abstraction, he seized a glass and clinked it boisterously against his wife's.

"A happy New Year!" he cried. "Ha, ha, ha! A happy New Year!"

THE rather-too-forward young person was not waiting for Mr. Shannon at that moment. She knew it was a moment when his family would be claiming his presence and attention, and that he would not be able to slip away to the trysting place for some while. She was, therefore, waiting at her second trysting place while Big Ben chimed in the new year and the people went mad. She heard them through walls. Heard their shouts and their singing. They were singing "Auld Lang Syne," their voices growing in volume. Then, regardless of discord, the thin, nasal

notes of the Highlanders broke in, swelled, and fought for dominance. The ill-matched sounds, each refusing to yield to the other or to merge, jangled her nerves, and she stuck her fingers in her ears.

"Same here," said a voice.

It must have been very close for her to have heard. She turned her head and found a Chinaman smiling at her. She removed her fingers from her ears.

"Horrible, isn't it?" remarked the Chinaman.

"Well, no one would call it pretty," she answered.

"No one," he agreed. "Gets on one's nerves. One should carry aspirin."

"A lot of good having nerves in this place!" she retorted.

"Ah!" he smiled. "Not having any aspirin, what about a cigarette? That might help." He held out his case, and as she hesitated, "Not opium, I assure you, madam. Solid English gaspers. I am one myself."

"One what?"

"An English gasper. I gasp at your attractive costume."

He gave a little bow. She gave him a little smile, and wished to Heaven he would go.

"You won't?" he asked sadly, as she shook her head at his case.

"I've been smoking all night like a funnel," she explained.

He shrugged, and lit a cigarette himself. He lingered. The singing in the distance died down, the pipers faded away. The silence grew heavy.

"Queer place, isn't it?" said the Chinaman.

"Well, that's what we come for, isn't it?" she answered, only thinly hiding her impatience.

"Yes," he nodded, "I expect so. Though perhaps *my* reason. . . . Well, anyway we are as queer as the place. Not you, perhaps, but myself, certainly. A Chinaman! Isn't it ridiculous?"

"Who are you when you're at home?" she asked, without interest.

"Who are you?" he countered. "Ah! Those are our secrets! You tell me, and then perhaps I'll tell you!"

Something had to be done about this! The Chinaman was becoming more than a nuisance, and she did not want him hang-

ing around when Sam turned up. She decided to test him with drastic methods.

"Please don't think me squeamish," she said, looking him squarely in the eyes, but if you're trying to pick me up, Li Hung Chang—nothing doing!"

"Ah," he murmured, unruffled. "You are looking for somebody else?"

No Chinaman could have been more inscrutable.

"I'm not waiting for anybody!" she fired.

"Forgive me," he smiled. "I am."

She turned and walked away, making a level bet with herself that he was not speaking the truth.

But whether he spoke the truth or not, the Chinaman remained where he was for over five minutes, smoking contemplatively and watching a series of perfect smoke rings. And when a coster in a wonderful suit of pearl buttons descended a flight of stairs near by and paused, he took his cigarette from his mouth and remarked:

"She went in that direction."

"Funny, ain't yer?" retorted the coster, and, as the Chinaman suddenly looked at him hard, turned promptly in the other direction.

Sometimes Sam was a fool, but not always.

HE traced Sally half an hour later. He looked for her, and found her, in a spot very far from their original trysting place, and his mood was very different from his mood at their last meeting.

"You think I'm no good, don't you?" he exclaimed, boastfully. "Bungler, eh?" He patted his pocket. It bulged like a cheek with an apple in it. The other pocket bulged, too, but that bulged like a cheek with some flatter article of diet.

"What! You've found it?" she said quickly, making no effort to conceal her relief.

"Course I've found it!" he responded, with a wink. "Trouble with you, Sall, is that you give up too soon!"

"Do I? Well, never mind about that." She was too elated to mind his banter. "And it wasn't broken?"

"Course not!" When matters went well, Sam took all the credit. "So 'ow's that fer two blacks making a white?"

"Two blacks?" she queried.

"Yus, two, Sally!" he chuckled. "The second one was when the lights went out! See, that was when I done it. Mark my man. Out go the twinkles. Bing! And I'm off with a New Year present! Ha ha!"

Sally looked at him abstractedly. Then she said, in a voice that was firm and determined:

"Sam, we've got to get this thing over right quick. There've been too many accidents, and I don't like it. But I'm not going to take any chances from this moment, and the next time I meet my fool of a man—and I'll see it's damn soon—I'm going right through with it. Come along, I want to show you something."

"Wot?"

"A place I've found. The place for our job. No, don't walk with me. Walk behind me. Just keep me in sight. There'll be some stairs to go up and down, and—no, wait a moment! I've got a better idea than that! Wait a moment!"

He waited obediently. In spite of his bursts of sarcasm and his periodic attempts to assert his superiority, he knew Sally had the brain, and he respected it. And he, also, wanted to get this over. It was a nasty job. Nastier, somehow, than any job he could ever remember. It hung over him. Its very vagueness was sinister. He couldn't see beyond it. But beyond it, he swore, was more than twenty pounds. Beyond it was Sally herself, he'd see to that. . . .

"Yes, I've got it," said Sally. "We're going to start moving right away. We've got to give a bit of a fillip to my old fool, and before I take you to the nice quiet place I've found, we're going down into the hall, and we're going to walk right before his box. You're behind me, don't forget that. You're the unwanted suitor—and stop glaring! You can do that when we get outside the box, because you're to catch up with me there, Sam, and you're to catch hold of me. Then I'll shake you off. I'll give a look at old Charlie that would melt the Lord Chief Justice. An S.O.S. that will turn his heart into jelly, and do the trick if he's wavering. I'll make him come! But before he comes you'll be tucked away in your little observation box, and you'll be waiting for me to bring him along. Now, then, Sam—is

all that clear, or have I got to repeat it three times?"

"I s'pose you know wot yer talking about?" grunted Sam.

"If *you* don't, we won't waste any more time talking about it," she answered sweetly. "Now, then, watch me go—and then count ten, and follow!"

She walked away as she spoke. Sam counted ten, and followed.

WARWICK HILLING glanced at the ornate little gold clock that whispered on the mantelpiece. He had glanced at it countless times, and had never got any satisfaction from it. It whispered busily enough, as though it were engaged on some important secret matter, but the matter was much too secret. The hands moved slowly toward an undetermined point.

For nearly an hour the ticking of the clock had formed the only sound in the room. Occasionally Hilling shifted his feet and put his left knee over his right instead of his right knee over his left, and vice versa; or softly cleared his throat to rid it of an imagined thickness. Once, in shifting, he had kicked a little table with his foot, and the noise of an earthquake could hardly have startled him more. But, since their repast, simple but ample, of exquisite sandwiches and perfect wine, conversation had died, and the little chauffeur had sat in his chair with folded arms, as though made of stone.

What was the chauffeur thinking of? Hilling would have given much to know. The chauffeur's immobility was not due to lack of interest, or callousness. It was formed of grim control, against the inner walls of which beat hot emotions and unconquerable zeal. It was almost as though the chauffeur were afraid of his emotions, at times so tempestuously expressed, and were sitting still in order to put them to sleep.

"I wonder what he looks like in his ordinary clothes?" thought Hilling. "When not dressed up as a chauffeur?"

A quarter-past midnight. Eighteen past. Twenty-one past. Twenty-three past. Twenty-four past. What did it matter? Half-past. Twenty-seven to. Twenty-six to. What was the difference? Twenty-four to. Were they making for anywhere?

Was anything, ever, going to happen again?

Into the strained boredom, the tense monotony of the passing minutes, stray thoughts entered. At first they were just stray thoughts. Such as: "I wonder whether we are in Highgate or Richmond, or Sydenham or Hounslow?" "I wonder whether a policeman has walked by while we have been sitting here?" "I wonder whether my make-up is getting sticky?" The atmosphere was certainly becoming rather stuffy as well as static. "I wonder how long it takes to turn into a fossil?" But presently, as the stuffiness increased, and the staticism brought an uneasy drowsiness, the thoughts changed subtly, and became distorted. Such as: "The eyes in that picture seem to be moving." "The clock seems to be whispering more loudly. I suppose it *is* the clock?" "The chauffeur came in by the back door, he said. I suppose he closed it?" "Funny, if the chauffeur were mad!" "He looks mad." "Is he mad?" "Is he dead?" "That chair over there is moving!" "Eh? The room's going round." . . . The chair advanced, and asked him for a dance. "Certainly, certainly, though I haven't danced for years. I'm an actor, you know. Warwick Hilling. I've appeared before all the Crowned Heads, but I've never actually danced with them. Still, of course, as I have had fifty pounds, and am a man of honor, I will dance with you, but don't be rough, please—I'm very tired—my Heavens!"

His head had dropped on his chest. He raised it suddenly. The chair was back in its corner by the window, silently protesting its innocence. "Chairs can't move by themselves, you fool!" came the voiceless accusation. "You've been dreaming!" Dreaming? Yes! Very likely, very likely! The room was now as stuffy as a grave, and the fog was getting into it. Certainly chairs cannot move by themselves . . . but *windows*. . .

He screwed his eyes tight, then opened them again. Now he was positive he was not dreaming. And he was positive that something had happened at the window.

He glanced at the whispering clock. Three minutes to one. What, three minutes to one? That was a jump! Twenty-one minutes since his last glance. He re-

membered his last glance. He had been on the point of breaking the silence and of saying, "Twenty-four minutes to," but the chauffeur's relentless immobility had chilled the words, and they had remained unspoken.

Yes, but he would speak now! This nerve-racking silence could not continue! He would burst if he did not tell the chauffeur about the window, if he did not pour out words to him, and receive just one word in reply, or even a tiny flickering of those motionless eyes! Some sign, however trivial and minute, to dissipate this awful, oppressive sense of loneliness—and to prove that the chauffeur was not dead!

He turned to the chauffeur. It was, he found, an effort. He stared at him. The chauffeur was just as he had been at twenty-four minutes to. Twenty-one minutes ago. No—not just as he had been. There was a difference. A subtle difference. What was it? The face looked yellow.

Hilling leaped to his feet. He touched the little chauffeur who sat so silently in his chair. He found that he *was* dead.

V

HENRY'S idea of dancing was straightforward and unsubtle. It was to keep time if you could, and if you could not to stop and start again; and since, until tonight, he had never danced with anybody whose ideas were much superior to his own, he had always maintained a low opinion of the art.

But the nymph's ideas were considerably superior to his own. Dancing with her, he discovered, was an entirely new experience. Not only did she keep time herself, but by some strange compulsion of her body she compelled him to keep time, also, and imparted to his anxious feet a strange felicity. At his first trip, when normally he would have halted like a bus after the conductor's bell, she tightened against him with a deft turn, and he found himself miraculously upright and still moving. "How on earth did she do that?" he wondered breathlessly.

It was not merely her capable dancing, however, that gave Henry Brown his first real taste of heaven. It was her wonderful, permitted proximity. Close to him,

joining her movements to his, was a creature who every moment became more definitely the last word of desirable femininity. His simple soul was convinced that, by some miraculous fluke, by some arrangement that Fate had never intended or foreseen, he had met God's loveliest creation; and he was dancing with her without any sense of guilt or shame. The occasion was sullied by neither coarseness nor cynicism.

He was floating on clouds with an almost holy awe, and it was the nymph-goddess herself who tumbled him off the clouds and brought him down to earth.

"Got a toothache?" she asked.

"No! Why?" he answered.

"You look a bit dental," she commented. "Try a smile!"

His attempt at obedience was not very successful. He boldly argued with her.

"You don't *have* to smile," he said, "when you're feeling happy."

"Well, there's something in that," she admitted. "If anybody died and left me a million pounds, I'd cry my eyes out. So you are feeling happy, then, anyway?"

"Do you want the truth?"

"When it's pleasant."

"Well, this is the truth. You may think it funny. I don't know. But I've never known anything like this."

"Go on!"

"It's a fact."

"I expect it's the wine."

"*Something's* gone to my head!"

"Oh! That champagne has certainly turned you into a good talker!"

"Wasn't I before?"

"Do *you* want the truth?"

"I'll buy it, whatever it is."

"No, I'm giving it to you for nothing. You had as much conversation in you as sheep have kittens."

"Sheep don't have kittens."

"I'm learning!" She laughed. "What do they have, Mr. Schoolmaster?"

"Now you're getting silly!"

But he laughed, too.

A moment later he stopped laughing, however, and muttered, "Blast!"

"What's the trouble now?" she inquired.

"The music's stopped."

"Clap, and see if you can make it go on again?"

He clapped hard. The heroic band magically resumed its endurance test.

Her hand went coyly onto his shoulder again.

"See?" she smiled. "Aren't you clever?"

"Well, if I am, somebody's making me," he responded. "Do you dance a lot?"

"Whenever I can. Do you?"

"Fancy asking!"

"You're not too bad."

"Oh!"

"Fact."

"But this isn't me dancing, it's you. You're doing the work for both of us. Only for you, I'd have been down for the count long ago. Hallo, what's the joke this time?"

"You!"

"What have I said? Or have I got the toothache again?"

"No, your face is improving. It's the funny things you come out with—when before your tongue was just a passenger! 'Down for the count!' You know, I'm sure wine is good for you. You ought to drink a lot more of it!"

"Of course, it don't cost anything."

"True! That's the catch. Why, just think, each of those bottles cost as much as five dancing lessons. I oughtn't have let you do it."

"Good Lord, I've got enough on me for two more bottles, if I like!" he protested.

"Well, you keep it for the dancing lessons," she advised. "If you had dancing lessons, we'd be winning the championship one of these days."

He toyed giddily with the idea. But, of course, she wasn't serious.

"I wish you'd tell me something," he said.

"We're telling each other a lot," she answered.

"What's my worst fault? Don't mind letting me know. Dancing fault, I mean."

"You may get a shock?"

"That's all right. What is it?"

"Distance!"

"What, don't I go fast enough?" he asked.

"Oh, my darling!" she choked. "I didn't mean that sort of distance! We're not a couple of race horses! *This* sort of distance!"

She pulled him closer to her. He held his breath. For a moment the warmth of her breast entered into him. He experienced her form and its softness.

Presently, through a mist formed of every color of the rainbow, he said:

"I expect you think me an awful drip, but I can't help it."

"Then why am I dancing with you?" she answered. "I could get plenty of other partners."

"I can't make out."

"Give up trying. Be satisfied." Then she added, "When men tell me they've never had another girl before, I don't believe them. I'd believe you!"

"It's a fact," he said.

The dance ended. They drifted to a sofa in a corridor. He gave her a cigarette, and sat silently smoking his own for a minute or two. She watched him curiously, with a kind of affectionate amusement. She was not in love with him. Behind her softness and her moments of human tenderness there was something sane and practical. She was, as she had said, twenty-two, but she knew all about life, and she could face up to it without being afraid of it. She knew how to look after herself. If there was any fear in her heart as she watched him now, it was not for her, but for him.

SHE watched him throw his cigarette away, half-smoked, and light another immediately afterward. She guessed something was coming, and prepared to deal with it. A man who had never had a girl before might be far more dangerous than a man who had! She was quite ready to love him a little, but, knowing her own heart, she did not want to be mean to him.

"I think I've got to say something to you," he began, at last.

"Do you think you'd better think again?" she suggested.

He was nearly frightened off, but not quite.

"You guess the sort of thing it is, then?" he murmured, staring hard at the ground. And, before she could formulate the best answer, he went on, "Well, I'm going to say it, anyhow, because it's really for you I'm saying it. Because you're being so nice to me. I don't know why you're being so nice. You told me not to worry about it, and I've tried not to. But I can't help it. I always try to work things out—little things and big things—it's a sort of a habit—and I've come to the conclu-

sion that you're being decent to me, not because of anything to do with me, but just because you *are* decent. Well, you see, I'm not." His cheeks flamed. "In my thoughts, I mean. They'd—astonish you. See, I'm keeping up this game of being truthful. I thought at first I was all right. But then—when—well, it doesn't matter, but what I wanted to say was just this. If you feel you want to go on dancing with me, instead of finding other partners, you're not going to be sorry tomorrow for anything that happens tonight."

His forehead was very damp. He kept very still. He knew his intentions were good, yet he felt that he had just said something terrible. What he did not know was that he had said something that increased the potential danger. But she knew, and she also sat very still, until the music in the hall started again.

He jumped up suddenly, as though to leave her. But she was just as quick.

"I understand," she said. "And I want to go on dancing with you."

After the next dance they did not return to the sofa. They sat on two seats on the edge of the dancing floor itself, just beneath the low red-plush parapet of the privates boxes.

A couple brushed by them.

The man had just caught up with the girl, and was taking hold of her arm.

"Sit tight!" murmured the nymph.

For Henry was jumping up. The man was the coster in pearl buttons.

She pressed him down. Meanwhile, the coster's partner appeared to be having even more trouble with him.

"Will you stop following me?" she murmured, audibly. "I tell you I'm sick to death of you!"

She raised her eyes, and threw a despairing glance over their heads. Into the box behind them. Then she hurried on, and the coster slouched after her.

"I—I ought to go after that fellow!" muttered Henry.

"Don't be an idiot!" retorted the nymph sharply.

"But—you know what happened—"

"I know what you *think* happened, but you don't know it happened! You think he smashed your glass in the dark and took that wretched thing out of your pocket! Well, even suppose he did? That would

just mean that it was his, wouldn't it? So what's the worry?"

Henry frowned heavily, and looked after the coster's retreating back. "If it had been his, he could have asked for it, couldn't he?"

"Perhaps he thought it would mean another row!"

"And he made me upset the wine over your dress."

"Do it good."

"And I saw something, even in the dark, that I don't think you saw I saw. When he went for my pocket you thought he was going for me, and tried to interfere—and he hit you. You had a mark on your arm when the lights went up again."

"It's gone now, anyway," she answered lightly.

"Yes. And so's he. But that chap's a wrong 'un, I'll swear, from the word go—and I'll bet he's up to no good with that little fancy toy of his, as you called it. It wasn't an ordinary flashlight, you know. You remember, I couldn't work it. It was locked, or something. And there was a funny sort of silver paper inside the lamp."

He gave a sudden exclamation.

"Can't you forget it?" she begged.

"I wonder if it was some sort of a bomb?" he replied.

MR. SHANNON rose from his chair and said he thought he would go and get a drink.

"Why not send for it, dear?" suggested his wife. "The waitress is just outside."

But Mr. Shannon shook his head. "No, I'd like to stretch my legs. Getting a bit cramped sitting here so long. Don't worry if I'm away for a bit—I may take a stroll around."

As he left the box Mrs. Shannon sighed.

"Really I can't think what's the matter with Dad tonight," she murmured. "Something's on his mind."

"Business, probably," said Lankester.

"One shouldn't bring business to a ball," retorted Mrs. Shannon. "That's his trouble, he can't forget his work, and it's certainly been heavy lately. You know, don't you, Harold, we nearly had a strike?"

Harold Lankester nodded.

"You're all wrong about Dad," interposed Conrad, with a grin. "I know what

the trouble is. All dressed up, and nowhere to go!"

"He could dance if he wanted to," retorted Dorothy.

"But he won't, 'cos why? His wig's too hot!" chuckled Conrad.

"Conrad knows everything," observed Dorothy.

"Of course, he does—he's a clever little chap," he nodded. "I'll bet at this moment he's trying to find some dark and secret corner where he can take it off and fan himself. When I brought him back from his last little stroll he was melting like buttered toast. I bags his chair, anyway! That's the spot where you get the winks!"

"Conrad!" protested his mother.

"It is," he insisted irrepressibly. "Dad's collected dozens! Go out and give me a glad eye, Sis, will you? I'd love to see how Du Barry does it!"

"Du Barry *doesn't* do it," replied Dorothy.

"Then she jolly well ought to! Nell Gwynn does. Did you see the last one that came winging in? Real fruity!"

"Harold, can you stop him?" asked Mrs. Shannon, anxiously. "She may be sitting just outside!"

"She's not," answered Conrad, poking his head over. "She went by a little while ago, and hasn't come round again since. I keep my eyes open for that lass!" He withdrew his head. "It's that funny little fellow with the noisy trousers just below us, with his new lady-love," he reported, in conspiratorial tones. "I saw 'em parked in this spot before. Lady-love, pretty light-brown hair. Nice, cheeky little nose, and queer taste in men. Funny little fellow, lost his hat but still in his trousers. . . . Hist! Plot thickens! Funny little fellow rises. He hastens away! See him hasten away! Ladylove rises to follow. . . ."

And then happened one of the trivial incidents that lead to far from trivial results. Dorothy made a grab at her too-loquacious brother, missed him, and knocked a box of chocolates over the low red-plush parapet.

"Lady-love's departure delayed by rain of soft centers!" tittered Conrad, before Dorothy could gag him. . . .

Meanwhile Mr. Shannon walked through

the long, curved corridor leading to the spot where he had met and spoken to Nell Gwynn.

He told himself quite distinctly why he was going. There was to be no doubt whatever about his motive at this stage. He was going, through a sense of duty, to clear up a misunderstanding. Nell Gwynn was obviously still having trouble with the objectionable Pearly King, and as she had passed his box she had sent James Shannon a definite glance of appeal. "Can't you help me?" the glance had said, as plainly as glances can talk. "Please, *can't* you?" Well, he could not help her. Of course, he could not help her. But she would never have thrown him that despairing glance unless he had, however unwittingly, given her some right to do so—unless his attitude at their previous meeting had conveyed some wrong impression. It was a point of honor to correct that impression.

"Though perhaps," he added to himself, "I am the one who is under the wrong impression? I may have misread her glance. I may have exaggerated it. It may have meant nothing! Well, in that case, she will not be waiting for me. There will be no one in the little alcove round the next bend, and I shall return to my box—and that will be the end of it. So no harm can come from this in either case!"

HE rounded the last bend anxiously. She was not in the alcove. If his heart permitted itself a twinge of disappointment, his head felt buoyant with relief. He had been faithful to all persons, and could now return to the security of his box and his imaginings. . . .

But the next instant he found her at his side. She had flashed out from somewhere, and had hold of his arm.

"I knew—somehow—you wouldn't fail me!" she whispered breathlessly. "I'm desperate! Quick! Quick!"

The world swam. The thing had been too swift, too unexpected, too volcanic. For a few moments his will power deserted him utterly, and he followed his breathless guide, or was dragged by her, through an open swing door and up a flight of stairs. Then they paused, at the top of the flight, and stood staring at each other.

Her dress was disarranged. He did not notice it—his eyes were too intent upon her face—until she drew his attention to it by hastily adjusting it. Probably the original Nell Gwynn played similar little tricks on the original Charles II, and probably Charles fell for them with even greater ease, protected from his sins by the strange prerogative of monarchs.

"I'm frightened!" she murmured.

So was James Shannon. This was not in the least what he had expected, or what he told himself he had expected. A few friendly words, a composed smile, perhaps a handshake . . . but, instead, this startling, pulsating moment, charged with high tension and drama! Things didn't happen like this. Not, at least, outside the bounds of private visions. But this was happening—or so he supposed!

"What's—what's the matter?" he heard himself saying.

"You saw the start of it."

"You mean—"

"Didn't you? When I was passing your box a little while ago—when I glanced at you?"

Her voice was still low and breathless, and she continually darted her eyes toward the stairs up which they had come.

"Yes, yes, I saw," he nodded.

Suddenly and disconcertingly, she switched away from narrative to the personal equation. The transition was so definite and impulsive—and so deft—that it carried him further into the emotional maelstrom in which he was floundering. "Tell me—I'm right? That *was* why you came? To help me?"

"Well, I—admit I thought—"

"Don't say any more. I understand. It was funny, but somehow I'm not surprised—I knew you would." A tiny, half-wistful smile leaped into her eyes for a moment, then leaped away again like a fawn startled out of its play. "Let's find somewhere else! This is too near where I last shook him off. Then I'll tell you."

"Yes, but where?" he asked, as she seized his arm again.

Something began to rebel in him. It was not his sense of honor. It was his sense of dignity. Of male authority. Mr. Shannon, like many a starved sensualist, was a force in other spheres, and if his dominance did not shine very graciously in

his own home, that was merely because he was too close there to a gnawing realization of personal failure. Each member of his family accused, unconsciously, his private thoughts. Well, he had grown used to that, and he accepted his sanctioned irritability as the only firm route through the psychological morass. But at the office, at the factory, there it was a very different story. He was a force, a man who counted, a man who decided and controlled. How could he have built up his big business otherwise—the business, he constantly told himself, on which his family depended for all they had—and how, otherwise, could he be on the road to a knighthood which would turn his wife into Lady Shannon and his daughter into the worthy wife of a rising M.P.? Private morality did not worry him in his expensive office chair. Business morality ruled. Business morality was direct and simple. All you had to do was to be strong, walk forward, shove other people out of your way, and help your country.

BUT the top of a staircase at the Chelsea Arts Ball is neither one's home nor one's business, and when one is standing there with a strange, attractive woman a new code of morality has to be evolved. Exactly what that code was, Mr. Shannon did not yet know, but whatever it was, and wherever it led, he did not think it should be entirely dissociated from male initiative. And this was why he now paused, momentarily checking the fast-flowing tide with the question, "Yes—but where?"

"Anywhere! Does it matter?" she answered. And then, reading him, added, "Anywhere you like!"

The choice was made over to him, and proved an embarrassing gift. His knowledge of the Albert Hall was negligible. In fact, he could only recall having been in it once before, when he had watched Carnera knock some other boxer about, and then it had looked very different. Well, he had made his insignificant gesture. He presented the gift back again.

"It's all the same to me," he muttered. "You lead."

He regretted his choice of words. They rather gave him the sense of being a lamb. Again Nell Gwynn read him. It had to be a willing lamb.

"No, I've no right—this isn't fair," she murmured. "I'm presuming. Go back to your box."

It was another command, as she had meant it to be. Her choice of words was more astute than his.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" he replied. "Nothing of the sort! I'll see this through!"

Now he was properly committed!

With a sigh of relief, a very feminine sigh that flattered masculine strength, she turned and began walking. Finding himself behind he hastened beside her, to rid himself of the sense of being a lamb. They walked quickly along a passage, a replica of the corridor below; then, after a moment's hesitation, she slipped to another staircase. In a very little while he had lost his bearings utterly.

"Have you any idea where we are?" he inquired presently.

"Not the slightest," she lied. She knew exactly where they were. In the vicinity of the great organ.

"Well—how about stopping here?" he suggested. He was a little breathless, though not entirely from physical exertion. "I expect we've—er—shaken him off?"

"I hope so!" she answered.

"We must have walked three miles!" He wanted to lighten the heavy atmosphere. There was something rather frightening about it. It had the sinister fascination of too much scent. He became suddenly conscious of the fact that his companion had too much scent. "Aren't there any chairs anywhere?"

"Perhaps, in there?" she suggested, pointing.

They were a few yards from the end of the corridor, and until she had pointed he had imagined they had reached a blind alley, but now he saw a narrow turn. It was ill-lit, and gave the impression of being out of bounds.

"Are we supposed to go in there?" he asked, like a schoolboy.

"So much the better if we're not!" she replied. "Then he won't be so likely to follow!"

A little laugh froze on her lips. Something had startled her. Genuinely this time. She seized Mr. Shannon's hand and lugged him forward. They passed into narrowness and shadows. Suddenly darkness.

Had they gone through a door? Mr. Shannon could not say. Now he tripped, as they turned round a dark corner with a descending step. She held him up.

"We'd better not go any farther!" he gasped.

"I agree," she whispered, to his relief. "I can see somewhere where we can sit."

"You've got better eyes than I have!"

"Just to the left. A sort of a ledge or step." She gave a little jump. For an instant he was alone in dark space. Then her voice came back to him through a gradually improving dimness. "I'm on!" she called. "Catch hold of my hand!"

She was only a foot or two off, after all. A white arm gleamed forward through the dimness. Assisted by it, he found a place beside her. He sat down rather limply.

"Yes, but where the devil are we?" he asked.

Again she lied, "I haven't the ghost!"

THEY were in a great, walled-off space that shut the big organ from the view of the hall. A dark, uneven cavern, evolved temporarily out of the need of the occasion. On their side of the enormous partition was silence and darkness. On the other side, brilliance and life. Yet this darkness was also brilliant, in its particular way. Brilliant with blinding, appalling possibilities.

The organ had played its last that night, and the organist had gone to bed.

Did any suspicion hover in Mr. Shannon's mind as he produced his overworked handkerchief and mopped his forehead? Had he been asked, he probably could not have answered. Perhaps there was a lurking doubt. Perhaps his racing thoughts may have wondered whether this bewildering, overscented woman was interested in him not merely as a means of escape from another human being, but as an escape also from the tragedy of boredom. But the situation was too inexplicable for the racing thoughts to work out, or to want to work out. For Mr. Shannon himself was trying to escape from the tragedy of boredom. Had his mind been steady and his blood cool when he had arrived at the hall, he would not have walked so obediently into this predicament.

"But what else could I have done?" he

demanded of himself. That coherent thought did come to him as he mopped his brow, and as his companion sat silently beside him. "Each step—perfectly natural! No one can say I have forced or invited this! And—anyhow—is there anything to worry about?"

Breaking the silence, and anxious to explain it, he asked:

"Well—er—have you got your breath back?"

"Yes," she answered. "Have you?"

"I think so. I'm not so young as I was." There, that was a handsome admission! "It's been a bit of an obstacle race!"

"We're as young as we feel," she remarked. "I've got an idea you're not so very old."

"Well, I'm not a hundred," he conceded, temporizing. "But that's neither here nor there, is it? You're going to tell me how—how I can help you. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"You *have* helped me!" she replied. "You've taken me away from him!"

"I've taken you a little farther away from him," he pointed out, "but—does that complete the solution?"

"I don't know."

"You mean—? I'm still in the dark about the exact position."

"The exact position is that I'm safe for a while, and that's what I'm thanking you for." She added, with a little shiver which he felt against his arm, "Sufficient for the moment!"

"Safe," he repeated. "Well, of course you are! But you're not telling me that the fellow is actually *threatening* you?"

"Do you think I'd have gone to all this trouble—and put *you* to all this trouble—if he hadn't been?" she retorted.

"I see. Yes. Of course," he murmured. "Drunk, I suppose?"

"What a lovely compliment!" she said lightly.

"Eh? I beg your pardon. Naturally, I wasn't implying—but *threats*! Hang it, a man doesn't threaten a woman unless he's drunk—"

"Or jealous?"

Mr. Shannon was silent.

"Oh, let's forget him for a few minutes!" she burst out. "For just five minutes. Will you? And then you shall go back, and I'll—"

"Yes, what will you do?" he asked, as she paused.

"Try and slip away quietly, and go home," she answered.

Her voice sounded depressed. Again he felt her arm against his own. "Man, what a chance you've got!" shouted something crude inside him. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

"Yes, that might be best," he answered, sitting terribly still. "Yes—clearly—that will be best. Damn shame though, spoiling your evening like this."

After a moment's silence came the reply, "I'm not complaining. You've given me something nice to remember."

MR. SHANNON continued to sit terribly still. She turned her head toward him in sudden anxiety. Wasn't he ever going to move? How much more would she have to do? She recalled the memorized page from his private diary, passed on to her by the spying employee who had found it while searching for other things. If the spy's own memory had been accurate, it had run like this: "Rather an odd interview with my doctor today. He couldn't find anything wrong with me to explain my condition, but just before I left he asked if I were happy with my wife, and when I asked him what he meant he said, 'People of our age, Mr. Shannon, are often quite happy with our wives, and go through a sort of physical hell in consequence.' 'Are you suggesting anything?' I asked. 'Not if there's nothing to suggest,' he answered. 'Apart from that you're as sound as a bell.' And feel as nervous as an old woman in a storm! Of course, the damn fool's right. But what is one to do about it? On my way back this evening tried on my Charles II suit for the Chelsea Arts Ball. . . ."

"I expect I'll remember it, too," said Mr. Shannon.

"Lord, he's putting up a fight!" thought Sally. "Is the silly old idiot going to beat me?" She knew that all she had to do was to lay her arm on his shoulder. She could not make out why she hesitated. "Hell! Here goes!"

Her arm slipped toward him through the dimness, but before it touched him she discovered herself on her feet.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm going!" she exclaimed fiercely.

She tried to pass him. He was between her and the door through which they had come. But he caught her skirt and held it.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Why, you poor baby?" she shot back. "Because I shall kiss your innocent little face if I stay!"

"I see," said Mr. Shannon, very quietly, and still holding on. "Well, why shouldn't you? Just once?" He was amazed to find how momentarily calm he had become, when actually on the verge of breathless experience. For it would be no less to Mr. Shannon. "Let's talk it over."

"Talk it over?" she gasped hysterically. "You don't talk things like this over! You do them, or you don't!"

"Then we won't talk it over," he answered.

She felt herself being pulled toward him. She felt his arm go round her waist, preventing escape. For the first time in her life she was weakened by self-nausea.

"I brought you here for this!" she panted with lips close to his.

"And then felt sorry for me and tried to run away again," he whispered back. He was glad he had waited. It was sweeter this way. "Don't feel sorry for me, my dear. I want this more than you do."

Their lips pressed together.

An then came a blinding flash, and the tiny, metallic click of a little shutter. Mr. Shannon's strained arms grew limp, while the momentary gold in his heart became smeared with a horrible redness. For a second or two he could only see the redness.

The limp arms were empty. He heard her stumbling away, gasping and sobbing. He did not attempt to follow. That redness—it held him rooted.

NOW she was gone. But still he sat, rooted. He knew that, although she had gone, he was not alone. Somebody remained; the somebody responsible for that flash and that click; and he had to regain his steadiness to deal with the somebody. Only by utter immobility, only by steeling himself against a frenzied desire to shriek and break things, could he hope to bring back balance to his tottering mind and strength to his weakened muscles.

The somebody was not far off. He was moving softly in a pool of blackness a little

way below where Mr. Shannon sat. If he were making for the exit he would soon be nearer. Yes, now he was nearer, appearing suddenly like a dim shadow slipping by. "He doesn't know I'm still here," thought Mr. Shannon. "He believes I followed her out." The blinding flash had exaggerated the blackness of the immediately succeeding moments, and in those moments it would have been reasonable to assume that both had bolted. "But I have not bolted," thought Mr. Shannon. "I am still here."

He waited a few seconds longer. The shadow came closer still. Then, with an animal roar, Mr. Shannon leaped up and his fist shot out. The fist met air, and the force of it nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket; but the animal roar was more effective. The shadow gave a startled yelp, jumped back, stumbled, and fell. It fell, with a sickening thud, into the pit of blackness.

It did not rise again.

Mr. Shannon found himself out in the narrow passage. He did not know how he had got there. All he could recall was the sound of the thud, and then an attack of vertigo.

He leaned against the wall, breathing deeply and slowly. The air seemed fresh again. There was life in it. Light. From a distance came the faint sounds of music and laughter, like links with a forgotten past. "How wonderful existence would be," thought Mr. Shannon, "if I only could wipe out the last five minutes!" Through the new horror in his mind he could not understand how he had ever complained.

He became conscious that someone was approaching. Mechanically he felt for a cigarette, found one, and lit it. Then he walked out of the narrow passage into a broader one.

It soothed his shocked vanity to find that he was walking calmly and steadily. He could still function. He passed the person who had been approaching—a little man in loud slacks—without giving away his agitation. A faint hope stirred in his mind. Perhaps, after all, if he kept steady. . . .

Five minutes later he walked into his box.

"Hallo, Dad," exclaimed his wife, with a smile of welcome. "Did you enjoy your drink?"

MR. SHANNON did not know whether or not he had left a dead man in the little black hell from which he had escaped, but Mr. Warwick Hilling was in no state of doubt as he staggered out of the stifling sitting room and groped his way blindly through the misty passage. The little chauffeur whose mysterious instructions had led to this unbelievable situation, and whose pound notes were in Hilling's pocket at that moment controlled him no longer. He was indubitably dead.

How had he died? From the effect of the scratch on his wrist? There were such things as poisoned arrows; were there such things as poisoned bullets? Or from his wine? Or from the heavily-laden atmosphere that made one think of gas ovens? The air was foul and sickly, and as Hilling had approached the dead man his bursting lungs had been nearly stifled by a heavy, stagnant cloud. . . . Once, in the war . . . yes, yes, but for the time being, that did not matter. All that mattered was to get out of this house of death—and to find a policeman.

Previously a policeman had been merely a possible solution. Now a policeman became the only solution. In other words, Hilling had given up.

He found his way somehow to the front door. He fumbled with the knob, for the heavily-laden atmosphere seemed to be following him and to be pressing him against the wood. He was no longer dancing politely with a chair, he was wrestling with a gas oven. But he managed to get the door open before the gas oven won, and to lurch out into the invisible front garden.

He lurched onto the hard ground. It rose and hit him long before he thought he had reached it. He lay for a moment or two, partly to get his breath, and partly to see whether it would hit him again. Happily it did not, although any happiness the fact may have brought was strictly temporary.

He rose. Fog walled all round him. He saw nothing but walls of fog. It seemed impossible that, a few yards from where he stood, there was a lighted room with a dead man sitting in it. That he could turn round and, within a few seconds, return to that other world. This world was bad enough, but the world behind him, with its sickly, deathly silence broken only by the

whispering of a little clock, was infinitely worse. He was glad that his immediate and obvious duty lay outside the house, even though he felt an odd sense of desertion while he began to creep away from it.

Now he was at the gate. It surprised him, vaguely, to find that it was still there. It was open, just as he had left it. He paused before stepping out onto the pavement.

Then a figure loomed in the fog, paused also, and stood watching him. A large, bulky figure, without much outline.

"Hi!" gasped Hilling, in a cracked voice. "Policeman!"

The large figure stirred.

"Quick! In here! Murder!" cried Hilling.

This time the figure did advance. It leaped upon Hilling, encircled him with great arms, and bore him out of the yellowness into blackness.

VI

WHEN Henry Brown rose, as reported by Conrad Shannon from Box No. 12, and left the attractive nymph who was sitting beside him, he was obeying an instinct that had been steadily developing ever since the coster had knocked his champagne glass out of his hand and had stolen the queer-looking light from his pocket. The nymph had argued that the light might be the coster's own property. Henry agreed that this was very possibly true. But when you are regaining your own property you do not employ the methods of a pickpocket unless the property has some sinister implication.

Henry did not really believe in his startling theory that the torch was a bomb. He did believe, however, that the coster was "up to something," and that the torch *might* be a bomb, and his sudden evolution into the realms of manhood gave him an increased sense of responsibility. The most wonderful girl in the world—you could never have convinced Henry in his present mood that his companion was not the most wonderful girl in the world—had expressed a good opinion of him. She had referred to his physical pluck, she was honoring him by dancing with him, and she had hinted, if vaguely, that one day they might win a dancing championship together. The only

way to justify such a position was to prove one-self worthy of it in every department of one's being.

Adventure had caught the humble little fellow right off the ground, and he was living at the dizzy top of it. If he eventually fell and bumped his head, that was for the future.

It was ironic that the individual who caused him to speed from his seat was not the individual Henry thought he was, just as it was ironic that, when the nymph rose rather anxiously to follow, a shower of chocolates should shoot out at her from the parapet of Box No. 12 and delay the pursuit. In that delay she lost sight of her peripatetic companion, and was prevented from interfering with a journey that was destined to lead to a disconcerting conclusion.

Henry raced after his quarry. The quarry, whom he had spotted from a considerable way off, unconsciously led him the deuce of a distance. Henry darted, as it were, from glimpse to glimpse; out of the ballroom; back in the ballroom; out again; along a length of corridor; up a flight of stairs; into a cloakroom; out of the cloakroom; along another length of corridor. And when at last he bumped breathlessly into his quarry's back, he discovered his mistake. He had certainly chased a coster but it was not the right coster. "Hal-lo!" exclaimed the wrong coster. "What's the excitement?"

"My mistake!" stammered Henry, panting.

"And my back," said the wrong coster.

"I thought you were somebody else," explained Henry.

"Do it again and you'll wish *you* were!" retorted the wrong coster. "You hit me bang in the middle of my lumbago!"

They parted—but not forever. They were to meet again under even less happy conditions.

While Henry regained his breath he saw a girl somewhere out of the corner of his eye, but he did not realize it until he had returned to the ballroom and had found that the nymph was missing. "Of course she's looking for me," he reflected. She was. And then he remembered the girl he had seen out of the corner of his eye, and hastened back to the spot. But naturally, she was not there. Even if she had been,

he would have found her as disappointing as the wrong coster.

A terrible despair began to settle upon him. Suppose he did not find her? Suppose he never found her? Suppose he never saw her again? The idea was not supportable. What a fool he had been not to get her name—yes, and her address. . . .

He wandered about, like a lost dog, searching without a plan. He found himself in a part of the hall he had not been in before. It was a blind alley. At least he thought it was. He turned, and began to retrace his steps. He went round a corner, and suddenly paused and turned again. He thought he heard footsteps from the direction of the blind alley.

A COUPLE of strides brought him back to the point from where he could see the blind alley. A head was peering cautiously from a dark strip of shadow. Evidently there was a small passage there or something. The head abruptly vanished. It had remained visible for barely a second, but in that second Henry believed he had identified it. The coster . . . and the right one this time. . . .

Now Henry himself popped back as he heard more footsteps coming along the corridor from the opposite direction. The direction from which he himself had come before he had turned back and gone round this corner. Without knowing exactly why, he remained concealed till the newcomers passed the opening in which he stood. Perhaps he remained concealed because he felt something queer in the atmosphere. But he did not know exactly why there was anything queer in the atmosphere, either. Although, of course, if he had not made a second mistake, and if that head *had* been the head of the right coster, the theory that he was "up to something" gained color.

The newcomers went by. They did not see Henry. They were too absorbed in themselves. But Henry saw them distinctly. One of them was a very attractive woman, highly scented—he caught the whiff of her scent as she passed—and in what he described generally as "one of those historical costumes." The man with her was also wearing an historical costume. It was the man he had noticed, and had once stared at, in Box No. 12.

He waited for them to turn and come

back. As they did not come back he grew curious, and advanced a step or two. Now he could see them again. They were standing by the dark shadow from which the coster's head had appeared. Straining forward, he lost his balance and tripped. The woman raised her head suddenly, and, without turning, quickly vanished into the dark shadow with her companion.

Now they were gone, and Henry was alone once more.

"Funny!" he thought. "Or— isn't it? Am I funny?"

He could not decide. He felt nervous and dissatisfied with himself. He wondered whether, if the last two people had not come along, he would have gone through that dark narrow passage himself to interview the coster? He wondered what, had he done so, would have happened.

"But, of course, I can't go poking my nose in there now, can I?" he asked himself. "Well, I mean to say—can I?"

He turned to walk away. But as he turned someone came blundering toward him. It was the historical lady who had disappeared into the dark passage with the historical man, after the coster. She did not stop, or even pause, and while she went by him Henry had an uncanny feeling that she did not see him. Her eyes looked dazed and seemed to be staring blindly above her flushed cheeks.

"That's queer!" he muttered.

He stared after her. He toyed with the idea of questioning her. What about catching up with her and asking her if she had happened to see a chap dressed like a coster? But now she was out of sight—and perhaps it hadn't been much of an idea, anyway.

Now he saw the shadow that marked the dark passage. He had reached the spot from where he had made his previous observations. Halt, again! Somebody was coming out of the passage. Swaying out, as though he were drunk. . . .

The historical man, this time. His eyes didn't seem to be seeing any more than the eyes of the historical lady. He was leaning against a wall.

But as Henry advanced he moved abruptly, and groped toward his pocket. For an instant Henry thought of revolvers, which showed the condition of his mind, but all the historical man brought out was

a cigarette case. Quickly but coolly the historical man lit a cigarette, and walked toward Henry as he slipped the case back into his pocket. He passed Henry quietly, without a sign or a tremor.

"That's *queerer*!" thought Henry. "He didn't look as cool as that when he first came out of the passage!"

Well, three people had gone in, and two had come out again. The third person was still there, and it was the third person he had to interview.

Now Henry was in the dark, narrow passage. He wanted to linger, as he had lingered when leaving his bedroom to come to the ball. He felt again that he was saying good-by to himself, or to some established order of things appertaining to himself. The same Henry Brown would never re-enter that bedroom! Would the same Henry Brown emerge from this passage?

HE came to a doorway. The door was open. Beyond was dimness. What sort of a place was he coming to? There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason in it. There were steps at unexpected places. You had to be careful not to trip. Was it a sort of vast storeroom for odds and ends? Or a disused warehouse? Don't be silly, how could it be a warehouse? Or was it the place where they had kept the stunts? . . .

His foot kicked something. A small object that clattered away as he kicked it. He followed the direction of the clatter, nearly stumbled down a single step, stooped, and picked up the object.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he murmured. "Camera!"

The next moment he forgot the camera. Unconsciously he slipped it into one of his capacious pockets, with the instinctive desire to retain possession of it and to have both hands free. His foot had now touched another object, and this other object was larger, and did not clatter away from him. It was also softer.

Henry stooped again. His heart almost stopped beating. He knew, before he touched it, that he was stooping over the body of a man. The man's costume winked up at him, gleaming incongruously through the darkness. It was a spiritual darkness. . . .

"Here! What's the matter?" said Henry.

At least he intended to say it, but afterward he believed that he had only thought the words loudly. His throat was temporarily out of action.

Even if he had spoken the words he would have received no answer.

Two visions came hurtling through his mind, like vivid nightmares. One was of the historical woman who had passed him with unseeing eyes. The other was of the historical gentleman who had come swaying out of this place, had leaned against the wall, and had then abruptly recovered himself, lit a cigarette, and coolly walked away.

The second vision, unpleasant though it was, had one useful result. It reminded Henry of the soothing qualities of nicotine. Emulating the historical gentleman, he lit a cigarette. Then he counted twelve puffs. Then he walked out of the black hell into the corridor. If it was not a different Henry Brown who emerged from the passage, it was one who had touched grim tragedy for the first time in his life. The Albert Hall was giving him his first experiences of both the depths and the heights. . . .

In a corridor the first person he met was a Chinaman.

"Ah! You're the very person I've been looking for!" exclaimed the Chinaman. "Please, a light!"

Henry was amazed at the steadiness of his hand as he took his cigarette from his mouth and held it toward the unlighted cigarette of the Chinaman.

"Thank you," smiled the Chinaman, and glanced casually at the camera sticking out of Henry's bulging pocket. "Have you taken some good photographs?"

"WHAT about a drink, sir?" asked Harold Lankester, and added in a lower tone, "I'd rather like a word with you."

Mr. Shannon sat very still for a moment. "Does he know anything?" he thought. "Nonsense—how can he?" Then he answered:

"Certainly. But—er—how about Dorothy?"

"She's going to dance the next one with Conrad," interposed Mrs. Shannon, "and I'm sitting out!"

The two men rose. Mr. Shannon walked

slowly to the door of the box, but his mind moved more rapidly.

"He can't know," he thought. "It's impossible. But, even if he does know, there's nothing to do about it. My position is perfectly simple. I have been foolish—yes, but that's all. Anybody can be foolish, and the average fool would have gone a damn sight further than I did. Gad, yes! As for the man, well, I just knocked him down, as he deserved, and now he's probably nursing a bump." Mr. Shannon would have given more than a hundred pounds to have been sure that the man was nursing a bump. The fellow had lain horribly still. But even the happier alternative had its desperate side. "Why the devil didn't I keep my head?" he thought. "Why didn't I get hold of that camera before I left him? I'd have gone back if I hadn't met that confounded little fellow in the check slacks. He's everywhere, that chap. I wonder if he is a member of the gang?" His soul groaned. He tried to wrench his mind back to the immediate moment. "Harold. Now, then, what's this he's going to talk to me about?"

They had left the box and were walking toward a bar. An idea suddenly occurred to Mr. Shannon, and his companion, watching him silently, noted the little pink flush that leaped into his cheek, but did not interpret it.

"Why, of course," Mr. Shannon was thinking. "It's about Dorothy!"

But it was not about Dorothy, as he learned a couple of minutes later when they sat on a couch with their glasses in their hands.

"I hope you won't misunderstand what I'm going to say, sir," began Lankester.

"Eh?" jerked Mr. Shannon, his heart suddenly sinking again.

This was not a very propitious start.

"As a matter of fact, it's not going to be too easy," continued Lankester, looking at his nails. "But when knowledge happens to come your way—"

"Oh! You know something!" interrupted Mr. Shannon, nervously.

"Yes."

"H'm. Well—be sure of your ground, my boy."

"Unfortunately—in one sense, unfortunately—I am quite sure of my ground. The facts are indisputable, or I—"

"Wait a moment!" Mr. Shannon's voice was tense. Harold Lankester looked at him curiously. "Facts, yes. But how about the interpretation of those facts? That's—that's where so many of you politicians go wrong—and where we business men are ahead of you. We judge what's behind the fact, and avoid wrong conclusions!"

Mr. Shannon took out his hard-worked handkerchief and wiped his forehead. His handkerchief and his forehead had never before met so often in a single evening. He felt he was floundering, saying weak, foolish things, but he could not bear to listen to the words he believed were on Lankester's lips. The humiliation would be unendurable! Already there was something in Lankester's expression. . . .

"Nevertheless, sir, I'm going to risk it," said Lankester, "and you can accept the warning or not."

"Warning," repeated Mr. Shannon dully. "Well?"

"You know," said Lankester, "that I've been attending conferences on the Near East situation?"

MR. SHANNON sat very still. Relief surged through him with a sweetness that was almost nauseating. He really felt a little sick.

"Near East," he murmured thickly. "Go on."

"You can guess what's coming?" inquired Lankester.

In his reaction Mr. Shannon indulged in a feeble little joke with himself.

"Never guess when you're going to be told," he answered. "What's up with the Near East?"

"Isn't something always up with the Near East?"

Mr. Shannon nodded while Lankester continued:

"It's where you go to when you want to buy a war. But sometimes it's easier to buy a war than at other times. Everything's set. Political situation—emotional situation—military situation—" He paused. "Even down to the mathematics of the munition supplies."

Mr. Shannon looked at him sharply. His business instinct suddenly flared. For a moment there was no such person as Nell Gwynn, or as a blackmailing photographer paying too heavily, perhaps, for his sins.

The Albert Hall dissolved, and in its stead was an office, with a factory hard by.

"So that's it, is it?" muttered Mr. Shannon.

"Ah, now you do guess," came Lankester's quiet voice.

"And maybe you don't!" retorted Mr. Shannon. "I suppose you think you're the first?"

"First what?"

"To try and queer this big deal! I've been badgered for weeks. Not openly, of course. Quietly, privately. First, just requests. As if we broke our contracts to please any Tom, Dick or Harry! Then, bribery. Why even if I accepted bribes, they couldn't name a figure that would make it worth my while!"

It was on the tip of Lankester's tongue to ask whether Mr. Shannon had gone into the figure, but he desisted.

"And after that, interference! You know we've had trouble? I've had to discharge some of my people for prying and spying—and worse. We were on the edge of a bad strike! And now—"

He stopped abruptly. He had said more than he meant to. Confound this lack of control!

"Who *were* the Tom, Dick and Harry?" inquired Lankester.

"I think I'll keep that to myself," replied Mr. Shannon. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all, sir," answered Lankester. "You see, I'm afraid it won't make any difference, either way. The natural supposition, of course, is that the Tom, Dick and Harry were the people against whom your munitions were to be used—"

"Whoa! Not so fast!" muttered Mr. Shannon, although Lankester's voice had been kept low. He glanced up and down the corridor. Nobody was interested. "This is a—a private order."

"From a man with a rather large estate!"

"I don't measure my customers' estates!"

"Or count the number of pigeons your guns will bring down?"

"That's not my business!"

"No, sir, technically speaking, it's not your business," said Lankester, "which is why, politically speaking, it sometimes has to be another person's business."

"Are *you* the other person?" demanded

Mr. Shannon. As Lankester did not reply, he added, "Well, then, I'll wait till the other person comes along—and if he doesn't come along for a couple of days, I won't worry."

Lankester waited an instant. He was battling against a sensation of nausea. He did not exaggerate Mr. Shannon's attitude, or blame him especially for his self-interest. He knew that it was the common attitude, and in his own walk of life he saw it reflected on all sides. But moments came when he found himself fighting a sickening hopelessness, when he wanted to scrap all the careful rules and wise controls on which he had built his life. And then he waited, till the dangerous impulse was over.

"It's coming along tomorrow," he said.

Mr. Shannon wheeled round.

"Tomorrow?" he exclaimed. And then repeated more softly, "Tomorrow?"

"OF course, only in the form of a request—at first. But I assure you, sir, it'll save the hell of a lot of trouble if you agree to the request."

"Oh! And I get no trouble for breaking a contract?"

"I think I can guarantee that."

"And I lose nothing?"

"There may be an alternative market nearer home—perhaps yielding a little less money, but providing more certainty of getting it."

Mr. Shannon looked thoughtful. He had no personal interest in the customer with the large estate . . . or in the pigeons that might be shot. Once you started thinking along those lines, you'd just sit in a chair and twiddle your thumbs, and the world would stop. Do your job, and let others do theirs. . . .

"What's the position?" demanded Mr. Shannon suddenly.

"It might be something like this," answered Lankester. "I'll suggest it alphabetically. The constitution of a country called A is being threatened by another country called B. When B has received certain munitions from a firm in C—not before—one of its lesser statesmen will be shot at by a paid fanatic in A. This will give B an excuse for invading A. An old formula, but invariably effective."

"No, not invariably," interrupted Mr. Shannon.

"You're right," retracted Lankester. "Generally—not invariably. But B's chances of success are always increased if some larger country—Z—is fathering the enterprise for separate reasons of its own. Z may even finance it. B may want the little war, but Z may want a big war. It may be just the moment for Z. But not, Mr. Shannon," added Lankester, "for X. In fact X may dislike war intensely on any account."

"I see," murmured Mr. Shannon, seeing perfectly. "Of course, you know there is a clause that says, 'Time is the essence of the contract.'"

"Of course," nodded Lankester, rather dryly. "In this case it is particularly the essence. If you are a week late, as it happens, your munitions will be of no use to B."

"Why not?"

"Because, in a week's time, A would be prepared for the sudden attack, and could meet it."

"And attack herself?"

"No. B is the aggressor—this time. A wants peace. So you see, Mr. Shannon, if B cannot attack speedily and successfully—in other words, *this* week—there will be no attack. There will be no war. And the larger country I have designated as X will be delighted."

"H'm," grunted Mr. Shannon. "It's a pity this country you call X couldn't have made up its mind a bit sooner!"

"I agree," answered Lankester sincerely. "As a matter of fact, when peaceful A discovered the plot, they approached us—"

"Us?"

"I should say, X," Lankester corrected himself, with a smile. "But as X was not entirely sympathetic at that moment, and her general policy was vague and undecided, the peaceful A evidently determined not to wait, and—"

"Approach me direct."

"So I understand."

"Yes, and when I wasn't entirely sympathetic, the peaceful A tried underhand methods—for which, as far as I'm concerned, they could be blown to smithereens!"

"Yes, but not as far as X is concerned."

"I see. I've *got* to submit, then?"

"There is no compulsion whatever. You and I are just talking things over unofficially—"

"Oh, to hell with your politics!" burst out Mr. Shannon. "I'm sorry, my boy, but all this shillyshallying. . . . I like blunt dealings!"

HAROLD LANKESTER studied the carpet.

"Very well, sir. You can have them," he said.

"Well, we'd know where we were! As it is, I'm to do something X wants, but X won't take the responsibility! So what am I to tell my client?"

"You mentioned just now that time was the essence of the contract."

"Certainly."

"Then if you are behind your time, through some unavoidable delay—machinery, strike, anything—you can't deliver, and the contract lapses."

"You've worked it all out, I see," observed Mr. Shannon. "But suppose there's a penalty clause? Have you worked *that* out?"

"Yes, I've even worked that out," answered Lankester, "but unofficially, this time. I have no authority whatever for reminding you of a cynical remark I once heard: 'A country honors its dead, and gives honors to its living.' Of course, each kind of honor has its price."

Then Lankester rose rather abruptly and walked away.

Mr. Shannon looked after him, his mind grappling with this new confusion. Oddly, it was not the contract itself he was worrying about. From the hints that had been dropped, that matter would straighten itself out, and in the end might prove to his advantage. . . . "A country honors its dead, and gives honors to its living." . . . But there had been something disturbing in Harold's manner. Something not entirely complimentary. "Say what you like," reflected Mr. Shannon lugubriously, "once you begin to develop an inferiority complex, it's the devil to get rid of again!"

He waited for a minute or two. Then he rose and walked back to his box, while an amorous couple who had been eying the couch with furtive longing made a hasty dart for it, and discussed matters of less public importance.

Outside the box he met his son, coming from the other direction.

"Aren't you dancing with Dorothy?" asked Mr. Shannon.

"I was," replied Conrad, "but I have yielded her to a Balkan Prince."

"The devil you have!" exclaimed Mr. Shannon.

"Ah, not a real Balkan Prince, Dad," explained Conrad. "Merely an actor."

"Well, I can't say I think it was wise," frowned Mr. Shannon.

"Nor do I," answered Conrad sadly, "and it didn't do any good, either."

"What's that mean?"

Conrad shook his head, and looked sadder than ever. His father poked his head forward and regarded him closely.

"Have you been drinking?" he demanded.

"I did have one stiff soda," said Conrad, and then suddenly giggled. "Sorry, Dad, but this idiotic place knocks all the sense out of you. Course I was a mad hat to give Dorothy up, but do you know why I did it? I wanted to chance my own luck with Nell Gwynn. Have you seen her?" He grinned, but his father's expression chased the grin away. Whew! What was the matter with him? Dash it all, on a ridiculous night like this, couldn't one ask. . . . "Anyway, I *didn't* have any luck," he concluded lamely. "So I've come along to trip it with the mater."

SALLY was certainly in no mood for dancing. After her tumultuous exit from the unsavory chamber of darkness in which she had trapped her elderly victim, and regretted it too late, she had waited for Sam in the spot arranged and had waited in vain. Then she had returned to the unsavory chamber of darkness, had poked her head through the narrow passage, and had called Sam's name softly. Receiving no response she had concluded he was not there. There seemed no reason why he should still be there, nor was there any reason why, if he had been there, he should not have answered. So, having no relish for a wild goose chase, she had turned her back on the place, and tried her luck in the body of the hall.

"Sam's a fool, if ever there was one!" she fretted. "Yes—and so am I!"

For what was she going to do when she

found Sam and received the camera from him? Pass it on—or destroy it?

While descending the final flight of stairs she suddenly paused. A wretched thought had struck her to explain Sam's absence. Perhaps he had missed her on purpose! Perhaps he meant to pass the camera on himself, and for his own figure!

The next instant she was calling herself an idiot. He *could* not pass it on. He did not know whom to pass it on to. She had carefully withheld that knowledge from him. . . .

Reaching the ballroom, she paused again. Two men had been in her thoughts, and now she all but ran into one of them. The Balkan Prince was standing on the outer circle of the dancers, and his head was moving slowly, as though following the course of one of the couples. Sally tried to pick out the couple, but failed to do so—for it was difficult to judge the exact direction of the Prince's eyes by the back of his head—until the couple had reached the nearest point of their orbit; and then she only identified them because they stopped.

She recognized the couple as Mr. Shannon's son and daughter.

After that, surprising things happened. The Prince took a step forward. Mr. Shannon's daughter seemed anxious to continue dancing, but Mr. Shannon's son did not. He was staring, not at the Prince, but at Sally herself.

"What's that mean?" Sally wondered.

The meaning soon became clear. The Prince took another step forward and asked, in a low undertone:

"Would Madame du Barry honor a humble prince?"

MADAME DU BARRY looked confused, and her attempt at indignation was not too successful. The Prince's accent was rather charming.

"Someone's spotted who you are!" exclaimed her brother with a grin. "He deserves a prize for his smartness!"

"You permit me to usurp her, then, for just a few minutes—if she herself is willing?" murmured the Prince.

"She didn't say she was willing," retorted Madame du Barry, suddenly finding her voice.

"Oh, come, Sis, be a sport!" remon-

strated her brother. "Chelsea comes but once a year, and, therefore, let's be merry!"

But the Prince shook his head.

"The humble Prince apologizes to Madame du Barry," he said. "Pardon him for a foolish hope."

Then Madame du Barry capitulated, though whether through inclination or embarrassment Sally could not tell. Nor was she given long for conjecture, for the Balkan Prince had hardly glided with his partner into the tide before the partnerless youth bounced upon her. "And now would Nell Gwynn honor a humble Lord-knows-what?" he cried.

"No, thank you," answered Sally definitely.

The face of the Lord-knows-what fell. He had not expected this defeat, for there are moods in which rebuff seems impossible. Lacking the advantages of Balkan tact and splendor—for a golden statue may be dazzling, but it is not necessarily impressive—this golden statue came down with a bump.

"Oh, I say!" was its ineffective comment.

"You see, I'm not dancing," explained Sally, responding to a vague sensation of sympathy.

"That's not the reason," gloomed the disappointed one.

"If I gave you the real reason, young man," thought Sally, "you'd get a shock!" The real reason was that she was looking for a man who had photographed the boy's father while kissing her! Aloud she said, "What makes you say that?"

"Because I've *seen* you dancing," answered the boy. "I'll tell you who with. That chap all over pearl buttons."

"But I'm not dancing any more—with him or anybody. By the way, have you seen him anywhere about lately?" she added suddenly.

"What! Have you lost him?"

She nodded.

"What do I get if I find him?" he asked. "A fox trot?"

She hesitated. He was a nuisance, but he might prove useful.

"Perhaps," she compromised.

"Good, I'll hold you to it," he exclaimed. "But first I will go and finish this dance with my mother. She has been rather

neglected, and I am one of those saintly little boys who die young. A short life and not even a merry one. Heigh-ho!"

He would have been surprised had he known of the odd expression that followed him as he sped away.

WARWICK HILLING opened his eyes in a smoke-filled room. There were other things in the room, but the smoke was all his consciousness first returned to. It wreathed through the darkness, it made his eyes smart. Then he noticed that it appeared to be coming from two quarters, and that every now and then a tiny glow, like the light of a miniature volcano, came and went, illuminating for a meager instant indecipherable outlines.

One of the little glows broke the darkness, and a low mutter came from behind it. Another mutter responded. Hilling was fully conscious now, and he found the consciousness painful.

"I think it would do me good," he reflected, "to say something violent."

He made the attempt, but failed. He found that he could not manipulate his mouth.

But in a few moments a dim form bent over him, and after two small eyes had been lowered near to his, two hands advanced toward his face and removed the gag.

"Not dead—still alive," came the voice of the doubtful Samaritan.

"Yes, sir, I am still alive," spluttered Hilling, "but the credit is mine, not yours—ah!"

The exclamation was caused by a cloud of smoke that was puffed rudely into his face. When it had cleared the faintly seen face had withdrawn, but the voice came again from a little distance.

"You spik what you are ask, no more, and you spik low. You un'stan', so?"

Oddly, it was the final word that affected Hilling the most. It reminded him of another who had used it—another whose accent had been similar, but so much more attractive. While he fought his emotion, the voice sounded again, but now in its own tongue, and it was directed softly to the other person in the room.

The incomprehensible muttering continued for a little. Then the original speaker reverted to broken English, and

addressed Hilling again. He snapped:

"Now, please, to begin. Who are you?"

"Why should I tell you who I am?" replied Hilling, with all the dignity that could be mustered from a recumbent position.

"Becoss I ask."

"And why should I do what you ask?"

The inquiry seemed to amuse his audience. Then came the reason. It pressed suddenly into his chest.

"I show you! You feel, so? And there is other. The gas. You know that, too, I think."

The revolver pressed harder in his chest. "A hero dies but once!" Hilling repeated to himself. He was not quite certain, however, whether he deserved the title, for after he had died the revolver was withdrawn.

"Now spik," said his aggressor. "Two time I ask, who are you? Three time, no. Un'stan'?"

"My name is Warwick Hilling," replied Hilling.

"Who is Warwick Hilling?"

"A man of culture would not have to ask that question, sir! I am an actor, of some repute—"

"Ahi! Actor! And is it a part, so? The clothes?"

A murmur came from the second man, but the first man shut him up.

"Spik quick! It is not to wait! The clothes, explain it, or here is the finish!"

The revolver made a little glint again as it was raised to a threatening position. Hilling swallowed and replied:

"I am permitted, perhaps, to go to a fancy dress ball?"

"Ahi! A ball?"

"I believe I said so."

"And that is why you wear this clothes?"

"I do not generally go about in this costume."

"No! That is so! You wear the stiff collar to choke. But you can be choke as you are, so spik and say why this clothes—"

"I have told you—"

"Wait till I finish, wait till I finish! Pig! *This* clothes, I say, and not another? To fool us, so? Ahi! But now you see who it is the fool!"

Anger spat from the voice. Then it grew calm again. He was like a bad edition of the first, the happier foreigner Hilling had met that evening.

HILLING'S mind began to race. Since silence was denied him by the revolver, he must invent some story, for it was obvious that these two murderous fellows must not learn that he had exchanged places with the Prince. That would reveal the Prince's whereabouts. . . .

A sharp oath rang out.

"How much longer! One, two, three more, and I kill you! Bang, finish! Now, spik quick. Why this clothes, and why were you in—that house?"

"I will explain," replied Hilling slowly. He spoke slowly, so that his chaotic mind might have a chance of keeping pace with his words. "It was a—a sheer coincidence. I had selected this costume because—having performed many times in the East—before Crowned Heads, you may be interested to know—I have always felt that this was a form of raiment I could carry. It suited my figure—my atmosphere—"

"Yes, yes, but not so many words!" came the impatient interruption.

"You have asked me a question, and I am answering it!" replied Hilling stiffly.

It was easy to act stiffly, since he had never felt stiffer.

"But you answer all night!" cried the other. "And now you say the costume is one you like. So, so! And that is why you choose it to go to the ball. So, so! But you do not go to the ball. You go, instead, to that house."

"You wish to know why?" inquired Hilling searching for a reason.

"I insist to know why!" exclaimed the enemy.

"And then, when I am telling you, you interrupt me," retorted Hilling, still searching for a reason. "I believe you called me a pig, sir. A pig, at least, has some brains."

For an instant Hilling thought his last moment had come. Possibly a mutter from the second foreigner saved him. The first quietened down sufficiently to hiss:

"Say, why, *quick!*"

"Because, sir, I was sent for."

"Oh!"

"Yes, sir—sent for!" And, as he floundered, a solution suddenly flashed into his tired mind. He continued with more confidence. "It was, after all, understandable. You see, my photograph had appeared in the papers—before the ball, you understand. Famous people in this country are

frequently photographed before an important occasion so that their pictures can appear in the press. The Prince saw the photograph. It was late this afternoon. He noticed that I had—quite unwittingly—selected a costume similar to his own. I was driven to his house, and was begged not to go. I conceded to the request."

This was the moment when Warwick Hilling would normally have concluded the matter with a contemptuous shrug. Unfortunately, he was not in a position to shrug.

The two men consulted in low voices. Then Hilling was again questioned.

"But why do you not go in some other clothes, when you find out how it is?" came the inquiry.

"It was too late," replied Hilling.

"So! Then why do you stay at the house so long?"

"I was told that it would be dangerous to leave." Hilling was pleased with the way his mind was functioning. He was about to deliver a good point. "I was told that anyone seen in the Prince's clothes might be mistaken for the Prince, and shot at. And that, sir—if I may say so—appears to be true."

"Well, well, continue!" snapped the enemy.

"Continue? Have I not told you everything?" retorted Hilling. "I think it is now my turn to—"

"You have not told me where this ball is."

"Eh?"

"The ball you say you were going to?"

"Is that of importance, then?"

Hilling felt he was floundering again.

"IF you cannot tell me, I may think it is!" What did the fellow mean by that? "To tell me will prove your story, so?"

Hilling fell into the trap. His brain was beginning to spin once more, and his cords bit into him.

"The Albert Hall!" he exclaimed, and swore at himself the next instant. But he had feared to hesitate any longer. That would have proved the importance of the information. And, when your interrogator has a revolver, he always wins in the end. . . .

The two men exchanged glances.

"And the Prince? Where is he? You have not told me that.

"You did not ask me that!"

"So! But now I ask it."

"Why should he tell me where he went?" But the revolver jabbed him again. "Very well, very well!" cried Hilling, desperately, making his last effort. "I will tell you! You force me! He has gone back to his country!" He paused, to try to mark the effect, but the faces of his hearers were mere movements in the smoky darkness. Had he seen them, he would have been disturbed by their smiles. In his ignorance he ran on, "Yes, that is what he has done, though I swore I would tell nobody. He went to the station—you will know which one, I do not—and I was to wait a while with his friend. Then his friend would take me home, and would follow the Prince. . . . Yes, but now he cannot!" cried Hilling, his emotion suddenly rising. "For he is dead! And, by Heaven, sir—"

"Tch! Tch!" interrupted the enemy. "You talk much, all of the sudden!" And then he laughed, and suddenly Hilling found his face hovering palely over him again. "A nice little story, so? And we go to the station, so? Oh, no! Oh, no!" Hilling felt his sleeve pinched viciously. "This clothes, where do you find it, eh? You buy it, so?—what is the word—you hire it, so?" He laughed again, and Hilling's blood froze at the sound. "No, pig! This clothes is not like the clothes of the Prince—it is the clothes of the Prince! Do I not know?"

He leaped back. The other man had risen. Out of the blackness came the final words:

"Ahi! It is plain! The Prince lend you his clothes. The world—and me and my friend—we must think you go to the ball, but you go to his house, and he go to the ball. But why go to the ball, that is not so plain, so you please tell us. Now spik quick, with the one, two, three, becoss the time it go too fast. Why did he go? One!"

"I don't know!" gasped Hilling.

"You do not know. So. The pistol, you can see it? Why did he go? Two!"

"Damn you, I don't know!" shouted Hilling. "And if I did I wouldn't tell you!"

"Three and las', why did he go?"

Then Warwick Hilling laughed. He had come to the end of himself. The journey was completed. Every nerve in him had snapped, and he was roaring himself into Eternity. Ha, ha, ha, ha! This was funny! Ha, ha, ha, ha! He *didn't* know! Ha, ha, ha, ha! To sleep, to dream—now we'd learn! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha—

A shot rang out. The laughter ceased. . . .

VII

"*WELL!*" exclaimed the nymph. "And *where* have you been hiding yourself?"

Henry looked at her flushed, indignant face through a mist. Half a dozen hours ago he had never seen this girl; had not known of her existence; but now she came into his vision as from a long-forgotten past. No, not forgotten. She had been there, in his mind, all the while, but as a phantom, and between him and the phantom lay the reality of a dead man.

"What's the matter with you?" went on the nymph, as Henry merely stared at her. "Are you ill?"

"As a matter of fact," answered Henry simply, "I think I am."

"You certainly look it," she said. "Like me to see you home?"

But Henry jumped up.

"You would say that!" he cried. "You'd do anything for anybody, wouldn't you? Well—not this time. You'd better go away!"

She pushed him down again, then glanced anxiously around. Fortunately nobody was near the spot, and the hysterical little outburst had not been overheard. Though, if it had been, it would not have occasioned more than the turn of a head and a smile. The nymph did not smile, however. She stared at her companion very hard, her prettily made-up eyes perplexed. The make-up was not so perfect as it had been. It had yielded a little to the ravages of carnival.

"Keep steady, Gauguin," she murmured, and put a hand to his forehead. "Hot! What's done it?"

"Didn't I tell you to go away?" replied Henry.

"Sickening for something? And think I'll catch it?"

"There you are!"

"In that case you certainly ought to go home, and *somebody's* got to take you."

"No, no, it's not that!" he exclaimed, as she seized his arm.

She laughed purposely. She wanted to ease the situation.

"I knew it wasn't," she answered, "though I will say you look like the morn-ing after the night before. But what made you pretend?"

"Nothing."

"I see. And what made you leave me like that an hour ago?"

"Nothing, I tell you—"

"Nothing, nothing!" she retorted. "You're the rottenest liar I've ever struck. You need practice! Now, look here, Gauguin, I'm going to be severe with you, but it's for your own good. What the hell's the trouble? Sit up like a good boy and tell mummy!"

"But, I tell you—it *is* nothing—nothing to do with you, that is," exploded Henry, struggling against the knowledge that she was winning, and unable to determine whether he was glad or not. "Yes—since you will keep on—something has happened, but, don't you see, I want you to keep out of it!"

"Keep out of it," she repeated thoughtfully. "That's got a nasty sound. Have you been murdering anybody?"

"No!" he gasped.

"Well, that's a relief, anyway, because if you had it would have meant taking you back and hiding you under my bed! Awful prospect for a nice respectable girl like me. . . . But I'd have *done* it, Gauguin, because the only way to get a person like you to commit a murder would be to lay the body at your feet and give you a pistol and then pull the trigger for you. So now you know."

"You do make it difficult!" he muttered.

"If you weren't as blind as a bat, you'd see I'm trying to make it easy," she retorted. "You're the one that's making it difficult! P'r'aps you are as blind as a bat? You haven't had anything more to drink, have you?"

"Eh? As a matter of fact—"

"As a matter of fact, you have! I've got a new name for you, Gauguin! Mr. As-a-matter-of-fact!" She laughed and poked him. "Oh, Lord, do smile! Give us a bit of help! Somebody been getting

after you, is that it? Well, it's three o'clock, and this is the time to look out for them! Oh, I say, Gauguin—have you been a naughty boy?"

"No!" he shot back immediately.

"My, you are quick in the up-take!" she gasped. "Well, we're clearing the board. You haven't murdered anyone, and you're still a virgin. Hooray, I've made you look shocked! I wanted to, darling. You've looked like a peahen with an ear-ache much too long. Now, then, have I got to go on guessing, or—"

"Wait a minute—I've got to think," interrupted Henry.

"Two thinks are better than one," retorted the nymph, "and you've had an hour all alone and got nowhere. Where have you been?"

WHERE had he been? He hardly knew. At first, he had suddenly lost his head, and fled from the Chinaman. He knew he had been an idiot the moment afterward, but then he *was* an idiot. He had seen the Chinaman turn as he had slipped away, and he believed, though he had no proof, that the Chinaman followed him. The belief, right or wrong, made him lose his head again, and he had continued his flight, behaving like a culprit as many an innocent man had done before him. His sudden movement had upset his control, and his mind became so jumbled that he almost forgot what he was running away from. Was it a Chinaman? Or a corpse? . . .

Then suddenly and startlingly he had seen the corpse. He had stopped dead. The corpse was now erect, and it had eyed him with an unwelcoming grin.

"Still running?" inquired the corpse.

It was the other coster.

The shock had temporarily bowled him over. The coster had taken charge of him for a few minutes, but had been only too glad to pass him on to a man in a leopard skin who said he knew him.

"Then would you like him?" asked the other coster.

"O! friend of mine," babbled the man in the leopard skin. "Gauguin."

It was the man in the leopard skin to whom Henry had opened his eyes, and for a while he thought he was back at the beginning again.

"What you want," said the leopard man, very earnestly, "is a drink."

The leopard man had had several.

Henry would have followed anybody's lead just then. He only remembered the drink vaguely. Had there been more than one? He did not know. But some divine instinct—or perhaps it was just Henry Brown—saved him from reaching a condition that would have incapacitated him utterly till the morning, and suddenly he found himself running away again. He was running away, this time, from the man in the leopard skin and the condition of total incapacity for which he stood.

And then the nymph had slipped into his world again and had gradually made it solid once more . . . and here she was asking him to explain all these things!

"Thanks for all the information!" she smiled, breaking in on his silence with friendly sarcasm. "Perhaps it will come better after a cup of coffee."

There was a counter near them. She led him firmly to a seat at a small table, and brought the coffee herself.

"I'm all right now," he said. "I didn't know people like you lived."

"Florence Nightingale isn't in it," she replied. "Idiot!"

She made him drink his coffee. Her practical behavior and her refusal to be morbid slapped him back into activity. The coffee also helped.

"You really want to hear?" he warned her.

"I'm *going* to hear," she answered, "if I have to use a corkscrew. You went after that coster chap, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And I went after *you*, but was just too late to catch you. Did you find him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In—in some dark place or other."

"Sounds sweet!"

"Please don't joke."

"All right, I won't, but what happened? Did you—go for each other?"

"No."

"Well, that's one good thing. The first thing I looked for was bruises. What did you say to him?"

"I—I didn't say anything to him."

"Why not?"

"He was lying on the ground."

"Oh! He'd been drinking, too?" He did not reply. Suddenly she read his expression. She gave a little gasp, but quickly recovered herself. "You know, Gauguin, it is time you got home!" she said, very soberly.

EQUALLY soberly he now answered her.

"He was dead," he said.

"How did you know he was?" she retorted.

"I could tell."

"In the condition I found you in, Gauguin, I don't think you could tell anything!"

"But I wasn't in that condition then," replied Henry, smiling faintly. "It—it was that—the shock, I expect—that made me go off the reel. You see, afterward—"

"Yes?" she prompted, for he had paused.

"Well, I met a Chinaman chap—I think he saw me coming away—but I don't know—and he stopped me for a light. And then he said a funny thing. He said, 'Have you taken any good photographs?' Oh," he added, as he noticed her blank expression, "I forgot to tell you. Just before I found the—the coster chap, I found this."

He pulled the camera out of his pocket.

"Where?" she frowned.

"On the ground. Near the—the body."

"But why—"

"Why did I bring it away with me? Because I'm a mug! As a matter of fact, I didn't know I had the beastly thing till that Chinaman asked his question—and there it was, sticking half out as large as life. I expect I put it in without thinking when I got the shock."

"Well. Then what did you do?"

Henry colored.

"It's easy to see why people lie," he said, "but I'm not going to—to you. I couldn't, somehow. But now that good opinion you had of me will go west, only don't forget I knew you were wrong from the start."

"Do you mean, you did a bunk?" asked the nymph.

"Good guess," he replied.

"Easy guess! I'd have done a bunk myself! And then I suppose you went quite woolly, and hid in cloakrooms and lavatories and things!"

"Something like that. But what really knocked me over was a ghastly shock I got when I thought I saw the dead chap walking up to me. Of course, it was only another fellow dressed like a coster. I—I—really, I think I fainted. How's that for a girlish thing to do? And somebody gave me too many drinks—"

"Damn fools!"

"No, I was the damn fool. Anyhow, that part of it's over, and now I suppose I'll have to report the matter to somebody or other."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" she returned, sharply. "You wanted to keep *me* out of it—well, I'm going to keep *you* out of it! It's nothing to do with you! We're going to leave this place right now."

"No, we can't do that—I mean, I can't do that!" interrupted Henry earnestly. "You see—I think I know who did it!"

"What!" gasped the nymph.

He nodded, and gave a little gulp himself.

"Yes—that's a bit nasty, but there it is. One can't keep a thing like that back, can one? You see, I'd seen this chap alive a few minutes before—he'd stuck his head out of a passage—and then I saw two people go through the passage after him. A man and a woman, in sort of historical costumes. And when they came out—one at a time—they looked green. I could identify them both. The woman didn't see me, she was too upset, but the man, he came out last and, well, he looked ghastly, too, but when he saw me he pretended to be cool and lit a cigarette. Now, then, I've told you the lot. *Can* I let it go at that?"

"Yes, you're jolly well going to let it go at that!" answered the nymph. "I've only known you a few hours, Gauguin, but I've known you long enough to like you—no, don't interrupt, let me speak for a bit—to like you, and to understand you! You're the kind of innocent person who blunders into trouble, and if you don't drop this right now, you can take it from me you'll end in *real* trouble this time, all right! You know why I first joined up with you here, don't you? To look after you. Well, I'm going to play my stroke through. We're going down right now to get your coat!"

Henry removed his eyes from her gid-

dily and fixed them on the ground. Her words swam warmly round him, giving him sensations that were new to him. He was receiving something he had never received before, a woman's protective interest. A light smile was all he had dared to expect from the Albert Hall, a trivial glance that he could have carried home with him and exalted in his imagination. But this was something bigger. He did not over-estimate it. He dwelt on it soberly, and saw it for just what it was; but that was enough to give him a perilous inclination to cry. He wanted to go home—to be taken home. There was no more harmony for him here, among all these pleasure-seeking crowds. A quiet ending, that would wipe out the nightmare of the last hour. . . . He was very tired.

But could the easy path be traveled? Was it really as easy as all that? Quite apart from the uncomfortable sense that it had not been earned, that it savored too much of running away, would it put "Finis" to the nightmare? After his idiotic behavior, might it not be a direct incitement to the nightmare to follow him?

"You've forgotten this," said Henry, taking the camera from his pocket.

"Quick, put it back!" the nymph whispered to him sharply.

In the distance she had suddenly spotted a Chinaman.

"**T**IME is passing," said a voice in Sally's ear.

She turned her head. The Prince was regarding her gravely. Ever since she had entered the hall—only a few hours ago, but they seemed like days—she had been supremely conscious of his dominating personality. But this was the first time she had spoken with him tonight.

"Where can we talk?" she murmured, in reply to his remark.

"Why not here, surrounded by people whose ears are closed to all but their own poor nonsense?" he suggested.

As she hesitated, he went on, his quiet smooth voice acting on her almost soporifically:

"You know who I am? I am Mr. Warwick Hilling, an actor, who now breaks a vow of silence because his head has been turned by the beautiful Nell Gwynn. What more natural?"

"Mr. Hilling might prefer a secluded couch?" she suggested, half-provocatively, half-practically.

"That is good reasoning," admitted the Prince, "although, were I not Mr. Hilling, but somebody emulating him, I might think that spies are less liable to search in the open than in the places where there are secluded couches. Still, Fate, not ourselves, will decide our issue for us. It will be this or that. So let us move to your secluded couch, in the belief that the choice is our own."

The Prince was silent until they had found their quiet spot. Then he asked:

"This coster—the man who has been working with you—where is he?"

"If I could have found him, you'd have heard from me before now! He's disappeared!"

"Without completing his work?" inquired the Prince, gravely. "That is a pity."

"He did complete his work," returned Sally, frowning. "All but one thing. He—he took the photograph—" The Prince's eyes grew suddenly bright. "Yes, but now I can't find him."

"Do we need him?"

"No, but we need the camera. The film is inside."

"Ah," murmured the Prince. "Then he must be found."

Sally looked at him desperately. Her mind was in conflict. She was torn between a sense of failure, and a desire for failure. She wished she could have met the Prince in entirely different circumstances, and that this hateful business had not been the cause of it. For a moment, as his eyes rested on hers, she wondered. . . .

"Undoubtedly, he must be found," repeated the Prince.

"I have searched for over an hour," answered Sally.

"We must continue our search," answered the Prince.

"And after that?"

"After that? You look ahead! If we are successful, the rest is with me."

"You and Mr. Shannon?"

"Yes."

"He's a poor old fool, Prince, you can take it from me!"

"A poor old fool can be, also, a dan-

gerous old fool. He can, through his folly and his selfishness, imperil countless lives. I do not speak as one who is himself beyond folly. But sometimes the big problem comes—we find ourselves face to face with it—and we try to escape from the folly that is too great and that spells ruin. Yes, we try. Perhaps we succeed, perhaps we do not. If we do not, we return to our folly, and dip our swords in blood. You do not understand these things. Forgive me. I have said more than I meant. . . ." The Prince sighed. He looked Sally in the eye for a moment and then said tiredly: "Now we must return to the spot where you say the picture was taken—"

"I've been back there."

"And searched thoroughly?"

"No—o," she admitted, after a moment's thought. "I just poked my head in."

"He could be hiding, then, and you would not see him."

"Why should he hide?"

"Why, if he does not hide, does he not appear? But I agree there may be another reason, and it is because of this other reason that I say we shall return to the spot."

"What's the other reason?"

"An—accident."

SALLY started. It was odd, but she had never thought of that! She pondered for a moment on the possibility. But—what sort of an accident?

"You were the first to leave, you tell me?"

"Yes. I got out as soon as I could!"

"Then Mr. Shannon was still there, with the photographer?"

"I suppose so. Yes, of course."

"And Mr. Shannon would probably be angry?" She stared at him. "Very angry indeed, one cannot doubt."

Sally gasped, as the horrible idea entered into her. She did not believe it. She did not believe that Mr. Shannon, even in a fit of frenzy, was either courageous or fool enough to commit murder, nor did she believe that Sam was incapable of looking after himself. But the mere possibility froze her blood, and rendered her momentarily incapable of speech.

"So I think there is little doubt about our next step," the Prince continued quietly. "You will show me where this

place is, and I will find out whether the photographer is still there."

Then suddenly Sally found her voice.

"It may be a risk," she said.

"If it is, there is no need for two to take it," he answered. "Can you tell me the way, so that I can find it for myself?"

BUT Sally shook her head at that. She was sure she could not tell him the way so that he could find it for himself, and she was sure she would not have done so if she could. There was no altruism in her attitude. Horrible curiosity and the fear of waiting were at the bottom of it. Perhaps she also had the subconscious thought that a risk shared forms the best cement of friendship.

Now they left the ground floor of the hall, and mounted to the higher regions. It was strange to realize that, with the majority of people they went by, the business of merry-making was pursuing its uninterrupted course, and that other minds had no realization of drama and tragedy. Yet to Sally, as she led her companion up stone staircases and along curved corridors, it was the merry-making that was the unreal thing. Joy did not reside inside these walls for her—it was a prize she hoped for when she had escaped from them. . . .

"Here," said Sally.

The Prince looked toward the dark slit of a passage.

"You will wait?" he asked.

"No, thank you! I'm coming, too."

The Prince nodded, accepting her attitude. Then he gave a quick glance round. Nobody was in sight.

The next moment he was in the passage. He had moved silently but with disconcerting swiftness, and she darted after him in a panic. In the passage he paused, and she nearly ran into his back. Now they moved slowly into the dim, unpalatable space. She shuddered as she encountered its familiar twists and turns and sudden steps. In a few short hours they had become painfully recognizable.

"Be careful!" she whispered.

"Where were you—then?" he whispered back.

She stretched forward a hand, took his arm, and directed it toward the spot. A faint gray line might have indicated the

step on which she had sat with Mr. Shannon.

"And the photographer, where was he?" came the Prince's soft voice again through the darkness.

Once more she directed his arm.

"Ah—lower down," murmured the Prince, and began cautiously to descend.

This time she did not accompany him. She waited, while his vague form dropped lower and lower into the pit. Then she heard a scratch, followed by a little spurt of flame. Now the top half of him became a black smudge against a flickering outline of yellow light. The smudge bent down. The movement produced a large, outrageous shadow that appeared to have been born a mile off, and that nearly made Sally shriek.

"Hold on, it'll soon be over!" she thought, to steady herself.

The black smudge remained in its bent position for a nerve-wracking time. Was it ever going to move again? It was perfectly motionless. But the shadow moved, as the matchlight flickered. . . .

The light went out.

"Oh!" gasped Sally, the situation beating her.

She did not know that the figure below her turned swiftly at her exclamation, for in the sudden darkness it was blotted out completely; but she heard the sound that came a second or two later. A dull, distant thud, as of a body landing somewhere. She gave a little scream. It was stopped by a hand over her mouth.

"Come away quickly," whispered a voice in her ear.

It was—thank Heaven!—the Prince's voice. How had he leaped up to her side so quickly? She had believed at first that the thud was the sound of his own body, and that he had fallen. It was that that had made her scream. But somebody else's body must have fallen, and the Prince must have started his own movement toward her before the sound had broken into the stillness.

They were out in the light again. Nobody was near. The Prince was walking coolly by her side.

"A cigarette is good for the nerves, I think," he said.

She took one from his case. It was the same case that had been held out,

some hours earlier, to a needy actor who at that moment was passing through an even worse experience. As the Prince struck a match, she remembered too vividly the last time he had struck one, and her cigarette trembled between her lips.

They walked on for a while without speaking. The Prince was also smoking. Then he suddenly stopped. They were standing in the bend of one of the smaller staircases.

"I think we part here," he said.

"Part?" she repeated, in astonishment.

"I think it is best," he answered.

"But—why?" she demanded.

"There is nothing more for you to do," he replied. "The rest is now for me. Do not look any more for the photographer. Do not look for the camera. Go home. And presently you will hear from me."

She shrugged her shoulders as she asked—almost mechanically, for she knew the answer—"Well, who was it? You had better tell me."

"The man we went to look for."

"I guessed it. And he was—dead?"

The Prince nodded.

MR. WARWICK HILLING should have died. The bullet missed his body by an inch. But he paid it the compliment of passing through all the agony of death, merely escaping the death itself, for the bullet passed so close that he felt its passage, and the violent snapping of something preceded a complete collapse of his physical structure.

It was with the utmost amazement, therefore, that he found he could still contemplate himself after the violence of the explosion, and that this contemplation was taking place not from some celestial cloud, but from earth.

"I am alive!" he thought, coming out of his swoon. "No, I am not! Yes, I am! Oh, nonsense!"

This line of argument did not advance him far. He flew to Shakespeare. "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy!" This, undoubtedly, was one of them.

"I am not dead," he decided at last. He decided aloud, for the sound of his rather rich voice comforted him. "I was shot at, but the bullet missed. 'Thus by a chance

too fragile to be reckoned, Are we to Harmony or Discord beckoned.' Yes, but if the bullet missed me, why did I snap? Why do I feel as though I had become—unknit?"

He repeated the word "unknit." Then he substituted the word "undone." The substitution was the subconscious device of a clearing mind to interpret the truth. Warwick Hilling sat up.

"I *am* undone!" he said.

The top portion of him was, at any rate. The bullet had snapped not a rib, but a cord.

Complete release, nevertheless, was not achieved without a long and tiring struggle. At various other portions of his anatomy Hilling was firmly tied, and his strength was at a low ebb. His fingers were numb. So were his legs. But on his side were patience and a certain knowledge of knots, acquired in the performance of the Houdini trick, plus the excellent start given to him by the surprisingly friendly bullet; and the struggle ended at last, and he stumbled out of his cords.

He continued to stumble till he reached a wall. He felt his way along it to a door. As was to be expected, the door was locked.

To force the door seemed far beyond his strength, but he might have tried it had not a vague brightening in the darkness attracted his eye to a point on the wall farthest from the door, a little distance above his height. If this was a window, it was a peculiarly dim one. If it was not a window, what was it?

He groped his way back across the room. He found that it was a window. Pushing a table under it—the table to which he had been bound—he stood up and easily reached the ledge. Then the reasons for the dimness were revealed to him. There was a brick wall immediately opposite the window, only a few feet away. This and the fog almost blotted the window out.

He smashed the window by poking a chair-leg through it. He ducked the splinters, though they all fell outward. Then he opened the window's frame, and found that he need not have broken the glass at all. The window opened quite easily, inward, and there was just room, he estimated, for his form to pass through.

Now came an operation that appealed to his dramatic sense, if not to his sense of personal comfort. He was not going to risk a twenty-foot drop. Gathering up the cords that had bound him, he put them to a new use. One end he secured to the window-frame. The other was thrown out into the unknown. He had once performed a similar feat on the stage, but then he had descended onto a convenient mattress.

He followed the rope into the unknown, gripping it tight and allowing his feet to dangle before beginning the perilous descent. Then his dramatic sense received a shock. His feet dangled promptly onto stone flooring.

"So all I need have done," he reflected, "was to open the window and step out. Well, well."

The stone flooring was a step. The steps went up the side of the wall which contained the window, and apparently led from an area to the street. Warwick Hilling mounted to a railing, passed through, and found himself once more on solid pavement.

NOW, at last, he was free to do as he liked, and merely had to decide what to do. For a moment even that seemed difficult. Then he decided on a policeman. He was not in the best costume to interview policemen, but that could not be helped.

For once luck favored him. He floundered into a burly form round the first corner. Or was it luck? The policeman's attitude was not promising.

"Hallo! What's this?" he demanded.

Hilling had never found a simple question more difficult to answer. For a few moments his mind went blank, while the policeman's attitude became less and less promising.

"Been merrymaking?" said the policeman grimly.

The unconscious irony of the question loosened Hilling's tongue.

"If being nearly murdered is merry-making," he answered, "I have been merrymaking."

"What's that?" asked the policeman sharply.

"I am telling you that I have been nearly murdered," repeated Hilling.

The constable eyed his costume, much of the glory of which had departed, formed his own conclusions, and remarked:

"I think the best thing, sir, will be for you to step along to the station. P'r'aps that'll clear your mind a bit!"

The suggestion was really a sensible one, but as the constable laid hold of his sleeve a sudden panic seized him, and Warwick Hilling did a very foolish thing. He interpreted the constable's action as a threat, and struck him.

The blow was too effective. The policeman, thoroughly unprepared, staggered back and sat down. By the time he had risen to his feet Warwick Hilling had vanished.

The policeman blew his whistle. In due course he managed to connect up with two or three other policemen, who were instructed to assist in a search for a pugnacious lunatic. A man who said he was a bloody actor, who looked like a bloody Turk, but who, in the heated opinion of the constable who had interviewed him, was bloody well neither!

The search continued indignantly through the fog, and the fog won.

VIII

THE nymph and Henry were still sitting at their little table. They chatted with a sort of forced gaiety, conscious of each other's effort, or fell into heavy silences. One silence lasted for nearly twenty minutes. Henry felt as though he were chained to his chair. Evidently the nymph felt the same way about it, for all at once she raised her moody, sleepy eyes and laughed.

"Well, what about it?" she said. "Are we booked for the duration?"

"Looks like it," answered Henry.

"That means another hour," she replied, glancing at her wrist watch. "We'll be turned out at five. Heavens, Gauguin, it's almost time to get up, and we haven't yet gone to bed!"

He looked at her with sudden sympathy. She was a nymph at 4:00 A.M., if a somewhat bedraggled nymph—but what would the nymph have to become at 9:00 A.M.? A girl behind a counter. . . .

"I say, you *must* go home!" he exclaimed.

"What's wrong with both?" she retorted.

He might have yielded that time. But a blue-clad figure loomed over them, and then slid into a seat.

"This is quite, quite unwarrantable," said the Chinaman. "But—I wonder—*might* I see that camera?"

"Eh?" jerked Henry, his wits dissipated by the suddenness of the question. "Camera?"

"Yes, that's what I said," answered the Chinaman, eying Henry's telltale pocket.

The nymph kept her head. She turned toward the Chinaman and fixed him with her gaze until he became conscious of it.

"Have you lost a camera?" she demanded.

"It sounds rather like it," answered the Chinaman. "But, of course, you may say there are thousands of cameras answering this description. Certainly. Not, however, with a special mark upon them. Now I could tell you in half a second whether your camera has that special mark. I put it on all my cameras."

"Oh—you have a lot?" queried Henry lamely.

"Twenty or thirty," replied the Chinaman. "I am a photographic chemist."

The moment grew a fraction less oppressive. A photographic chemist—*not* a detective! While Henry was enjoying the information, the nymph was making use of it.

"Now listen, Mr. Photographic Chemist," she said, still retaining her note of severity. "You may be what you say, I'm not saying you're not, and you may have lost a camera, I'm not saying you haven't. But does that give you any right to walk up to anybody and say they've got the camera you've lost?"

"The proof is so simple," murmured the Chinaman.

"Oh, *is* it?" retorted the nymph. "I'm glad you think so! But what about *our* proof? Anybody can say, 'Ah there's the dear old mark, that's mine!'"

The Chinaman smiled.

"You win," he said. "And, after all, it's quite reasonable." He paused for an instant, then proceeded. "A man came into my shop this afternoon—common sort of fellow—and asked for a camera that would take photographs by artificial light. 'What

sort of artificial light?' I said. 'Just an ordinary interior?' 'Well, say it was a fancy dress ball,' he said. 'Oh, you're going to the Chelsea Arts,' I said. 'Who said I was?' he snapped. 'Get on with it!' No, he didn't say get, he said git. Nasty sort of chap. Well, I suggested he should use one of these."

He took from his pocket an object that made Henry jump. The nymph nearly jumped also, but just managed to refrain. It was the odd-looking flashlight she had rescued from the floor after the tussle earlier that evening, and that had been snatched from Henry's pocket later on. . . . The glass bulb at the end looked different, though. . . .

"Whatever is it?" asked the nymph.

"Sashalite. Never seen one before?" inquired the Chinaman. "They're rather good. You fix them onto an ordinary electric torch by unscrewing the small lamp with which the torch is ordinarily fitted, and then screwing in this thing in its place. Fix your camera, open the shutter—so it will stay open—doesn't mater in the artificial light—press the jigger on the torch, and you get your flash. Picture's taken. Close camera. There you are. Of course, this looks a mess now because it's been used," he added, "but before they are used they are prettier. Like an ordinary electric lamp stuffed with bright silver paper."

They recognized the description. The glass bulb had looked like that when it had been in their possession.

"**N**OW," continued the Chinaman, replacing the contrivance in his pocket, "my funny friend bought two of these things. I don't know where the other is. . . . No, my mistake, he didn't buy them. He didn't buy anything. They were on the counter with the camera and a roll of films, and I'd just turned my back to add a camera-case he had suddenly asked for, when he did a bunk."

"Oh, a thief," said the nymph.

"Yes. One of those fellows who like to get things cheap. Of course he took the goods with him."

"Bad luck," said Henry.

"Yes—wasn't it. It made me sore. And all at once—just as I was about to go to bed, in fact—I wondered whether he really *was* going to the Chelsea Arts

Ball—he had seemed suspiciously upset by my suggestion—and whether he was going in for any crookedness there. The idea of catching him redhanded rather appealed to me, especially as I have an Oriental costume in which I sometimes juggle at children's parties. Incidentally—one sees sights here. And pretty ladies." He bowed to the nymph. "So here I am."

"Well, did you find the thief?" asked the nymph, ignoring the bow.

"So far, all I've found is this," he said. He produced the flashlight again.

"Find anything else?" asked the nymph.

"Not the camera," answered the Chinaman, his eyes on Henry. "I thought *you* might have found that—"

Then Henry answered an insane impulse and took the camera from his pocket.

"Have a look," he said. "The man I got it from won't mind. He's dead!"

MR. SHANNON was alone once more. He sat in his box and watched the thinning crowd. It would be an hour before the floor was cleared of dancers and a new army took their place—an army of attendants and charwomen whose joyless job would be to wipe out frivolous memories with brooms and mops and water—but already there was a sense that limbs were flagging and minds were spent, and that people were flogging themselves to secure their full money's worth. Only half of them were dancing. The other half were sliding perilously, sometimes singly and sometimes in long processions, shouting senselessly, or smiling vacuously. One elderly man, the managing director of a company, was earnestly eying a large yellow balloon, one of the few that had failed to descend into the scrum. He had been eying it for a quarter of an hour, hoping it would come down softly and quietly so that he could secure it. He had tried to secure over a dozen other balloons, but had always failed to gain the prize. Once a man had hit him on the nose just as success was within his grasp. Another time he had hit a man on the nose. But he was quite certain he would not fail to get this yellow balloon, if only it descended. He would get it if every scrap of clothing were torn from his body. Why he wanted the balloon, or what he would do with it when he got it, were unimportant details.

. . . Another man was strolling around singing serenades, accompanying himself on an imaginary guitar.

"Idiots!" thought Mr. Shannon.

Two of the idiots galloped by his box at that moment. They were his wife and his son.

He envied them.

Somebody knocked softly on the door. He did not hear the knock. His eyes were on another couple. They floated by, very close together. They seemed oblivious to everyone but themselves. The girl's eyes were half-closed. The man was obviously refraining from a primitive desire to kiss her. They were Mr. Shannon's daughter and Harold Lankester.

The soft knock was repeated.

"Eh? Come in!" called Mr. Shannon.

The door opened quietly, and the Balkan Prince stood in the doorway.

For a few seconds the two men regarded each other. They had never met face to face before, and beyond the fact that they had been born into the same world they had nothing in common. Their ideas, their reactions, their ambitions, their philosophies, were antipathetic. But Fate had thrown them together for this instant of time, and the instant had to be dealt with.

The Prince broke the silence with a remark that seemed trivial enough.

"Your daughter's handkerchief," he said. "She lost it when she danced with me."

"Thank you," answered Mr. Shannon.

The Prince advanced and held out the handkerchief. As Mr. Shannon took it, the Prince continued in a low voice:

"Many things get lost here. Have you, by chance, also lost a camera?"

Mr. Shannon did not reply. The separate pieces of a jig-saw, startled into violent kaleidoscopic activity, whirled round his mind and settled into a pattern.

"Or found one?" added the Prince.

Mr. Shannon swallowed slowly. Then he murmured:

"I see—I see! So—*that's* it!"

"You understand quickly," answered the Prince. "And that is well, because—"

"P'r'aps I understand a damn sight too quickly!" interrupted Mr. Shannon. "Have you lost a camera?"

"Somebody has lost a camera," replied

the Prince, "but that somebody is no longer interested. He has ceased to be interested in any earthly thing."

"The devil!" thought Mr. Shannon.

THE irony of the situation bit into him. He must bargain, after all, even though, had his visitor known it, he had nothing now to bargain with! And his visitor must not know it! There lay the humiliation. Mr. Shannon must make a pretense of yielding to blackmail.

"Well, say what you've come to say, and make it snappy!" he growled. "I'm listening."

"This is what I have come to say," responded the Prince, and his voice suddenly grew as edged as cold steel. "If you send any munitions out of the country in the next seven days you will be hanged for murder."

"You are, of course, a madman," remarked Mr. Shannon, after a pause, "but even madmen must be dealt with. So I am to be hanged for a murder I have not committed—is that it?"

"If you send those munitions you will commit a thousand murders. You will murder peaceful people, and bring tragedy into countless homes. But those are not the murders you will be hanged for. Such are permitted. To kill a worthless man, however—that is counted a sin."

"How about employing a worthless man?" countered Mr. Shannon, remembering too late that he was admitting facts by pursuing the argument in detail. "Is that a sin?"

The Prince shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Not so long ago," he answered, "millions of men died fighting for peace. They did not have to pass moral examinations first. Nor did those who told them they were dying for peace—"

"Yes, yes, very interesting," interrupted Mr. Shannon nervously, and glanced out into the ballroom for an instant. This couldn't continue much longer. "But forgive me if I do not discuss moral questions with lunatics. Let us keep practical, for Heaven's sake! Suppose—suppose I do *not* dispatch these munitions you talk of? What guarantee have I that you will not proceed with your lunacy?"

"You have my word."

"A promise from Colney Hatch!"

"And if I do not keep my word, why should you keep yours?"

"Well, that's true," admitted Mr. Shannon. "Yes—of course—And the camera?"

"Ah, the camera." The Prince looked at Mr. Shannon searchingly. "You have not the camera, then?"

"That means *you* haven't!" replied Mr. Shannon sharply.

Confound it! But for his conversation with Harold Lankester and this new pressure that was being put upon him, he might have found some way of beating his opponent yet!

"It means that neither of us has," said the Prince. "But if I had it, it would now be of no use, since I would not use it. I have, as you call it, a stronger card. And if you had it, it might be an awkward possession."

"You are full of information!"

"May I ask, did you touch the camera?"

"May I ask, why the devil do you want to know?"

"It will be better for you if there are no fingerprints."

"I am obliged to you, sir for your solicitation! No, I did not touch it." Sudden horror entered his face, driving away its sarcasm. "But *somebody's* got it!"

"Yes, that is unfortunate. It is the slight risk, for you, that remains. But perhaps, after all, it is only slight. You and I, at least, have no need to fear each other any more. That is so?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, yes, that's so. But how about your accomplices? What about *them*?"

"One is dead."

"But the other. Yes, by gad, p'raps *she's* got the damned thing—"

"She has not got the camera," interposed the Prince. "And if she had, she would destroy its contents."

"Yes—I see," murmured Mr. Shannon. "You mean they might incriminate her also?"

"That is only a part of my meaning," responded the Prince, with a faint smile.

"What's the other part?"

"I have spoken with her since you saw her yourself, and I have formed the conclusion that, for a lady of her kind, she has too many scruples."

The heavy situation became momentarily a little brighter, although it was a hopeless sort of illumination that made Mr. Shannon's eyes suddenly glow for an instant.

"Are you telling me she's sorry?" he demanded.

"I am certain of it," replied the Prince.

He turned toward the door, and as he did so, it burst open. Conrad bounced in, stopped suddenly, and grinned.

"Aha! I'm right, Sis!" he cried over his shoulder. "He's brought your handkerchief!" But then his grin vanished and he looked puzzled. "Yes, but that's a funny thing! How've you got here so quickly? Didn't I see you on the other side of the hall a minute ago trying to catch a Dago in a black cloak? . . . Good Lord—he's gone!"

THE Prince had told Sally to go home. She had completed her job, or as much of it as was possible, and all that remained as far as she was concerned was to return and await her pay. Even the necessity of passing on a portion of that pay to her accomplice had been gruesomely removed. But she had never regarded this commission in a mercenary light, and she found it impossible to leave the hall with so many other issues undecided.

What would be the outcome of the interview between her employer and her victim? The fact that this was not her concern did not eliminate her necessity to know the result. When would her accomplice's body be found, and what would be the interpretation of those who found it? This was her concern, as were the questions—where was the camera, and into whose hands had it fallen? If the camera fell into the hands of the police and were traced to Sam, the spool of films would probably be developed with disastrous results. That flashlight photograph would be a scoop for the detectives and the journalists!

"Yes, I've got to find the camera!" she thought. "Somehow or other!"

The thought turned her steps in the direction of the spot where she had last seen it. Perhaps it was still knocking around there, in some odd corner. It might have fallen into the dark well before Sam's own body had followed it. Her mind remained undecided while she walked. She

was not sure whether she possessed sufficient courage to return again to that black hell. But her feet ignored her mental indecision, and carried her on. . . .

"Good-evening!"

She managed not to jump. It was the Chinaman.

"Good-evening," she answered, coolly. "Do I know you?"

"We met once before," he reminded her.

"I'm afraid I don't remember," she replied.

"You have less cause to than I!" he sighed, rather fatuously. "A Chinaman makes no impression, but beauty—"

"Yes, thank you, but it's a bit too late for compliments, the varnish has worn off," she interrupted. "And, now I look at you, I do remember you. You haven't lost your ivy manner."

"Ivy?"

"It clings, doesn't it? Well, as before, I'm not in a clinging mood, so—"

She stopped abruptly. The Chinaman had raised a protesting hand, and a capacious blue sleeve had flowed back a little from the fingers it had all but concealed. The fingers were clasping a camera.

"So what?" asked the Chinaman.

Sally's eyes were not on the camera when she answered him. If it held any interest for her, she was astute enough not to show it.

"Nothing, Mr. Wu," she yawned. "I believe I was going to be rude, but you must forgive me, I'm tired. Was there anything particular you wanted to say?"

"Oh, no," answered the Chinaman casually. "I hope you found your friend, that's all."

"Friend? What friend?" demanded Sally, covering her palpitations with a frown. "I thought it was *you* who were waiting for someone?"

"Ah, your memory is improving," smiled the Chinaman. "Yes, I was. I had an idea you were, too. A man dressed as a coster I'd seen you with before."

"He *does* know something—how much?" thought Sally rapidly, and her interest in the camera doubled. Aloud she said, "Coster? Oh, yes—early in the evening. But one could hardly describe him as a friend."

The Chinaman smiled unbelievably. "No?"

"He picked me up—and then I dropped him. You may have gathered yourself that I don't like being picked up."

"I have," replied the Chinaman.

He looked at her solemnly. Her story seemed a very probable one. People did pick each other up at public balls. . . .

"Then you're not interested in him?" he inquired.

"My dear man, why should I be?" she retorted, with wide, innocent eyes. "Are you? If you know anything about him, perhaps you had better put me wise, in case I bump into him again. I had a hope he had gone home!"

SHE wanted to scream in the little silence that preceded his answer, but her eyes remained serene and innocent. They gave no indication of their owner's mood.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I don't really know anything about him either," said the Chinaman, "but he seemed pretty drunk when I came across him, and so I'm glad for your sake, that he *isn't* a friend. I hope he wasn't in that condition when he danced with you?"

"Drunk as a lord," declared Sally, "so you can imagine I dropped him early!"

"Disgraceful! Personally, I've no use for drinking—save medicinally. Still, ideas differ. He struck me as the kind of chap who could get himself right bowled over—creep away somewhere to sleep it off—and then crawl home after the milkman. That your impression? Or should I be hauled up for slander?"

"It's distinctly my impression," said Sally. "But—if one may ask—what made you develop yours to that extent?"

The Chinaman laughed. He seemed suddenly rather pleased with life.

"To be perfectly truthful, I'm a little more interested in that fellow than I've pretended," he said confidentially, "and I'm clearing up a minor mystery. There's a man here—probably an Edgar Wallace fan—who thinks he has seen the fellow's corpse! Don't be alarmed. I imagine the Edgar Wallace fan has been drinking pretty steadily himself, and it's a curious fact that one drunken man never recognizes another—he assumes something

worse. Anyhow, as I'd also been in the spot where the alleged corpse lay and hadn't seen anything, I put two and two together, and I'm just on my way to prove that they make four. I may say my conversation with you has confirmed my theory."

"The theory being—"

"Haven't I told you? That—if my friend saw anything at all—the dead man he saw wasn't dead but drunk, and has crawled home."

"I see," said Sally slowly. "Well, if I've confirmed the theory I should let the matter drop, and crawl home yourself."

"No, no—I do things thoroughly," replied the Chinaman. "Oh, by the way, I don't suppose the fellow took your photograph?"

"Why should he have?" asked Sally sharply.

"What? I'm sorry," answered the Chinaman, pulled up by her tone. "I meant without permission, of course. You see, he had a camera. Here it is. He evidently dropped it."

"Then how did you get hold of it?" inquired Sally, grateful for the opportunity of putting a question she had longed to put before.

"It was returned to me by my rather morbid friend."

"Returned to you—?"

"Even so, madame. It is mine. Our rascally coster stole it from my shop only this afternoon—no, I am wrong—yesterday afternoon—and as he also stole a roll of films and a flashlight, and had previously mentioned a fancy dress ball, I concluded his object was to snap Venuses. That was why I asked whether he had snapped you. How mysterious everything is when you don't know it, and how simple when you do!"

Sally's mind had raced many times that evening, but never faster than it was racing now. The camera was in the Chinaman's hand. A quick snatch, and it could be in hers. Sally had snatched things before. . . .

"Well, I mustn't keep you any longer," said the Chinaman, preparing to depart. "If I fail to find my man—and, to let you into another secret, he's the only reason for my being here at all—I've found the goods, and when I develop the film it will be interesting to see who he *has* taken."

To the Chinaman's surprise he found the attractive lady's hand upon his arm.

"I'd leave matters where they are, if I were you," she said. "If that drunken fellow *is* still lying about, you'll only get into trouble."

"Oh, no—*he'll* get into trouble," replied the Chinaman.

"Why let anybody get into trouble?" she asked. "The party's nearly over. Let's dance it out?"

SHE gave him a provocative smile, although she did not feel in the least provocative. She seemed a very different creature now from the cold individual of their original meeting. The Chinaman, ignorant of the cause, was conscious of the change.

But he hesitated for only a second or two.

"No, no," he exclaimed. "You said you were tired and didn't like people who tried to pick you up. This is just kindness. I won't take advantage of it. I'll finish my job, reassure my anxious friend, and then go home. Good night!"

He turned away with a quick smile. "Damn him!" thought Sally. "Idiot I was!" thought the Chinaman. He was really keen on finishing his job, but he had a depressing sensation that he had missed the chance of a lifetime.

He continued on his way. He was not far from his destination. A short curve brought him to a point from where he could see the shadow of the passage. He hurried forward, with a sudden desire to get it over.

Now he was in the passage. Now he was through it, and in the dark, uncharted space. Dash! He had no more matches. How the deuce was he to search this place without any light? Well, he would have to grope about, and perhaps, if he did it systematically. . . .

He tripped on a stair, and just saved himself from falling. In saving himself, he all but lost the camera. He placed it on the ground marking the spot. If there were many more trips he wanted both hands free. Besides. . . .

Besides what? He refused to admit it at first. Then, raising his head sharply, he did admit it. It was a nasty sensation that he was not alone. He could not be

sure that he had just heard a soft sound, or that, a few seconds earlier, a vague form had flitted in and out of the corner of his eye. This certainly was a spot for imagination, all right! But he was very nearly sure.

"Anybody there?" he called.

If there was, the person betrayed no disposition to reveal himself.

The Chinaman continued to grope about unsatisfactorily. He felt rather like the blind man who was sent to search in a dark room for a black cat that was not there. The coster—dead, drunk, or sober—seemed as absent as the cat. Unless, of course, that shadow over there. . . . What shadow? It was gone.

"I'm seeing things," decided the Chinaman. "I'll chuck it, and report all clear. And then—why not?—I'll try and find something more appealing than a corpse—that attractive lady. If she's still in the mood, I rather think I've earned my dance!"

He turned and felt his way back to the spot where he had left the camera. He knew it exactly. He had a good bump of geography. But when he stooped, his hand met empty floor.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he muttered. "I could have sworn—"

He moved to another spot. Then to another. Annoyance, dismay, and uneasiness contended against one another as he moved about, and twice he turned swiftly with a nasty feeling that somebody was immediately behind him. But in each case he stared into nothingness.

"This is ridiculous!" he told himself. "Confound it all! I haven't been drinking!"

He was quite certain that he had not made a mistake in the spot where he had left the camera. Another person would have derided his certainty, but that made no difference. Sometimes you are sure of a thing even though you cannot explain why, and the Chinaman was sure of this. He was also sure that his hand had not missed the camera as it had groped about. Still, he returned to the spot, for another hopeless search. . . .

His hand touched something.

"Whew!" he muttered.

The camera was there!

He stood, considering. He struggled

to convince himself that he had been mistaken, after all, and the fact that he could not convince himself made the place doubly uncanny. He imagined footsteps. He imagined whispers. He knew, this time, that he was imagining. But he did not know that something was shortly to happen within a few feet of where he stood that was far beyond anything he could imagine. . . .

"What am I standing here for?" he suddenly asked himself. "What am I waiting for?"

He had got his camera. He had searched diligently and dutifully, and fruitlessly for the alleged corpse. True, he had not descended into the most precipitous part where the long, seatlike steps appeared to fall away into a bottomless pit, but he did not see why he should risk a sprained ankle, or that the risk held out any prospects of success. It was fairly obvious that the fuddled fellow whose hallucination the Chinaman was proving had not come upon his vision down in the pit, or he would never in his condition have got up again. This logic may have been faulty, but the Chinaman was not in a mood to examine it searchingly. He wanted to go, and to forget gloomy things in the brightness of a lady's eyes.

But, when he was outside, he did not find the lady, though he made a complete search of the thinning throngs.

AT the beginning of the Chelsea Arts Ball, you will have no chance of slipping by the lynx-eyed officials and securing your entertainment for nothing. You may ascend the few wide steps to the entrance, but you will soon be descending them again if you cannot show your ticket. Gate crashers find it easier to attend parties where there is no entrance fee. But toward the end of the evening, or more correctly speaking the beginning of the morning, the official eye has grown a little sleepy, and you may encounter it when it is inattentive. This fact assisted two people to join in the final flicker of the ball without any right to do so.

Each had to adopt a little ruse, however. The first, who arrived outside the hall some while before the second, paused for a few moments until there was a little crush in the doorway. Then, quickly, he joined it.

He had nearly pushed his way in when an official vaguely barred his way.

"Please! I have my taxi, it will not wait!" snapped the gate-crasher. "My friends—they are inside—I must tell them to hurry!"

The official melted away. He was not really interested. And he did not know that the black-coated gentleman with a slight foreign accent who had just spoken to him had a dagger in his pocket.

The second gate-crasher was very different. Earlier in the evening he had been an imposing figure, and would have commanded respect. Now his glory had departed. His splendid clothes were creased and stained, even torn in places. His cheeks were pale. His breath came in tragic gasps. But he, too, had the sense to wait for a few moments in order to collect himself a little before he walked unsteadily up the steps to the entrance.

"Hallo! Somebody's had a gay time!" laughed a young man in his face.

"A bit too gay," reflected the official, stifling a yawn. Not that excess of gaiety was a matter for comment. The official's ideas of life had broadened considerably during the past half-dozen hours. Responding to a vague sense of duty, possibly inspired by the return of a policeman who had just assisted an inebriate Viking off the premises, he intruded himself in the path of the bedraggled newcomer and said, "No pass-out checks, sir. You're not supposed to come in again, once you've been out."

"I've got to come in," muttered the newcomer.

"Oh, have you?" frowned the official.

"Yes, I have," answered the newcomer, and suddenly made a pathetic attempt to be authoritative. "I am Warwick Hilling—the actor."

"Ah!" said the official. Warwick Hilling? Never heard of him! But perhaps he ought to have—and, now he came to think of it, he did believe he had seen a chap togged up something like this. Only then, of course, he hadn't looked as though he had been thrown up by a volcano. . . .

Hallo! The fellow had dived by! Given him a push, too! The official turned to follow him, then stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

"What's it matter?" he smiled to the

policeman. "It'll be all the same a hundred years hence!"

The policeman did not respond. His eyes were following the disappearing figure. Slowly he trudged in its wake. It looked rather like another spot of trouble, but he wasn't going to hurry to overtake it.

IT is doubtful whether the policeman could have overtaken it even if he had hurried, for Warwick Hilling had lost his self-confidence as well as his judgment, and the panic that had caused his abrupt and unwise rush continued for a full minute. In that space of time he covered a considerable distance, and amused or startled a number of people. These people were of no importance to him provided they merely stood and stared, and did not interfere with his object of placing as great a distance as possible between himself and the entrance, but one man with the hunting instinct did give a "Huick-holler!" and set chase. Hilling did not shake him off until he had traveled round an appreciable length of the hall's vast circle and had ascended to the second tier. Then he spied the open door of an empty box. He dived in, like a hunted fox, closed the door, and sank into a chair.

The huntsman ran by, and lost the scent.

The box proved a godsend. Its original occupants had long gone home, and nobody disturbed him. Recovering gradually, Hilling began to take a slightly more intelligent interest in his surroundings, but complete intelligence could not be his until he had had twelve hours of solid undisturbed sleep. His brain seemed finally to have given up its struggle from the moment he had burned his boats and struck the constable in the foggy street, and how he had subsequently muddled his way from that point to this was a mystery which Hilling himself could never explain. Had he asked the way of an old woman in a door-step? He couldn't be sure. Had he passed an uneasy period at a coffee-stall? It might be. Had he managed a short spell in a taxi? He couldn't remember. Everything was vague, and strange, and inexplicable. . . . But here he was! And below him was a scene that was equally vague and strange and inexplicable. Balloons. Haze. Lights. Music. People dancing. People sliding. People careening about. Yes, and

somewhere among all these people were two with whom he, Warwick Hilling, was vitally concerned. "Oh, nonsense!" thought Hilling. "That can't be. I'm not *really* here." "You *are* really here!" he told himself the next moment. "Stick to it! You know you're really here, and you are only trying to fool yourself because you are tired!" Heavens, he was tired!

He opened his eyes suddenly. Had he been asleep? Damn all these unanswerable questions! Wasn't he ever to know anything again, not even about his own personal actions? "Heavens above!" he thought. "I've even forgotten why I'm here!" His eyes closed again. He forced his fingers into them and opened them. "Now, why am I here?" he asked aloud. "It'll come in a minute. You've been drugged, you know. Why was I drugged? It'll come in a minute!"

He waited for it to come. He knew how to do it. Just make your mind a perfect blank—that was easy—and then a picture would appear. It would develop suddenly on the negative of the mind. . . . The negative of the mind. Rather a good expression, that. Was it his—or Shakespeare's? . . .

But it did not come suddenly. It came softly, and slowly. And it began with a slight, a very slight creak.

"Ah!" thought Hilling, vividly. "A creak. Something about a creak—"

Now another soft sound, as of a handle turning. Creak. Handle turning. They didn't make sense. He must wait a moment longer, and keep very still, and then. . . . Ah! Footsteps. Now we're getting somewhere. —Creak—handle turning—footstep—footstep!

And then knowledge pierced the numbness of Hilling's comprehension with a swift, burning pain. This wasn't happening in his mind, it was happening in reality, behind him.

"Ah!" he shouted, and swung round.

He saw two eyes. They stared at him from beneath a sweating forehead. He also saw the gleam of a knife. But the knife was as motionless as the eyes. For the eyes were transfixed with a desperate, almost terrified recognition, and as they recognized Hilling, so he recognized them. The last time he had seen them he had been bound down on a table.

SUDDENLY the assassin turned and vanished. But Hilling was after him. Across the passage. . . .

"There's that fellow again!" called a voice in the distance. "Huick! Huick!"

The huntsman did not set chase this time, however. He had been caught himself, by his wife, and his arm was in the grip of her firm, determined fingers.

Through an opening. Down a staircase. Vague voices about him. . . .

"Personally, my opinion is that the whole thing's sheer lunacy!"

"Oh, I don't know. It does people good to let off steam sometimes."

Down another staircase. . . .

"No, don't interfere. It's only a game."

Along a corridor. Into a youth dressed in gold. Along another corridor. Through a gap. Into a chain of gallopers. . . .

"Go it, Near East!"

"What's this? Training for the Olympic Sports?"

"Come along! Join in! Right round the hall this time!"

Hilling's hand was seized by one of the gallopers.

"Let go!" he gasped.

"No, the other chap's gone and we want you!" cried the galloper. "The more the merrier. Atta boy!"

Humanity swarmed around him. He became imprisoned in a living, whirling mass. For a while there was no escape from it. "Cheer up!" giggled a girl in his face. She was not pretty, but her utter abandon to the moment gave her a certain primitive charm. "The worst is yet to come!" Hilling doubted it. Could worse exist?

The revolving mass broke, re-formed, broke again, re-formed again. Near its center personal volition ceased to exist, and one began to understand the principle of the Solar System. But the Solar System has billions of years of tradition behind it, and the system of this lesser mass had none. It was a momentary, an ephemeral evolution, formed of conflicting particles that were bound together by no permanent unity, and its center changed as its bulk and formation shifted.

Presently release came to the particular particle in which we are interested. The pressure behind Hilling's back took a new direction. He felt himself being squeezed

toward the outer circumference. The final expulsion shot him into an onlooker's arms.

The onlooker, though Hilling did not know it, had stationed himself especially to receive him, and led the limp form away. All at once the Universe ceased to whirl and became very quiet. Hilling looked up, and found himself staring at his double.

"Recover yourself," said his double, in a smooth, low voice. "Then we will talk."

"Are you—are you—?" panted Hilling.

"Yes," answered the Prince. "You and I have met before this evening. But take your time. Unless—there is no time?"

Hilling gulped. The Prince gathered that there was no time, for Hilling's complete collapse looked imminent. He allowed a few seconds to pass, then asked:

"What has happened? Can you tell me?"

"Must tell you—quickly—!" spluttered Hilling.

But as the spluttering ceased, the Prince realized that he must assist in the telling. He recalled a dying soldier from whom he had once extracted vital information in the last available minute. He now adopted similar tactics, although Hilling was not dying.

"Just answer briefly. My friend drove you to my house?" Hilling nodded.

"And you both waited there?"

Hilling nodded again.

"But—there was trouble?"

"Shot at!" gasped Hilling.

IF the information surprised the Prince, he did not show it. He repeated quietly:

"Shot at. The ruse was successful, then, beyond expectation. But—they missed?"

"No. Yes. Then. I'll tell you . . . my head . . ."

"Then?" said the Prince. "They missed—then?" And suddenly he asked sharply, "Where is my friend?"

"Eh?" muttered Hilling. "Yes, I—I was just about to—I'm afraid—"

"They got him?"

Hilling nodded. The Prince swung his head away. In his line of vision stood a woman. He did not see her, but she saw him, and later she tried to describe his expression to her husband. "Do you know, it really frightened me," she said, "though I only saw it for a moment. . . ."

The Prince turned back to Hilling. The expression had come and gone, but it had

left its mark. There was something terrible in his eyes. They glinted with controlled white heat.

"How?" he asked. "A bullet?"

"No. Gas, I think," replied Hilling. "Not—sure."

After a pause:

"But you escaped?"

"Somehow."

"Yes? And then?"

"They caught me." In a sudden nausea of emotion, he grabbed the Prince's arm. "Devils—they're devils! They caught me and drugged me! Bound me! Tried to kill me! Yes, yes, and now one of them's come here and tried again—with a knife—thinking I was you! He's after you—that's why I'm here, to warn you—he's after you—"

The words came in spasmodic gasps. Now, abruptly, they ceased, and the fingers loosened on the Prince's sleeve. An attendant strolled along, and paused.

"My twin brother is not well," said the Prince.

"Ah," answered the attendant, understandingly.

"Do you think we could get him to a couch?" asked the Prince.

"He won't be the first," replied the attendant. "But I suggest you get him home, sir. We'll all be shifting in a few minutes."

"It is those few minutes he needs," returned the Prince. "And I need them, too, for I have something to do here before I go. Could you watch him for me until I come back for him, and see he comes to no harm?"

The attendant looked a little doubtful.

"Well, I'm not sure—" he began. A pound note was slipped into his hand. "Don't worry, sir," smiled the attendant. "I'll keep my eye on him!"

They got him to a couch. Then the Prince slipped away.

You would not have known if you had passed the Prince that he had a care in the world. His attitude was untroubled as he made a leisurely tour of the hall. Above all, it would never have occurred to you that he knew he was being tracked by a man with a knife, for he made no attempt to conceal himself, and seemed indeed to delight in making himself as conspicuous as possible. But the Prince had eyes at

the back of his head, and he noticed all who noticed him.

He strolled three times in each direction round the complete horseshoe of the ground-floor corridor. He made several deliberate excursions onto the dancing floor itself, often pausing to watch the revelers from the prominence of empty spaces. Then he ascended to the higher corridors, and strolled along those. Now he passed fewer people. He came to a corridor where the population was reduced to three. Farther along the corridor there was nobody, but he paused before entering that No Man's Land.

A FEW seconds later, the Prince was in the narrow passage. He groped his way into the dark region beyond. He paused for an instant, listening, but his pose gave no clue to his attentiveness. Then he moved again, feeling his way along the unevenly terraced ground.

Someone moved behind him. As the Prince descended, taking a zig-zag course, toward the spot where earlier the coster had lain, the distance between himself and his follower lessened. The follower walked softly, but the Prince made no attempt to be silent.

Presently the Prince paused and looked about him.

"That is strange," he said aloud. "I thought I dropped it here."

He stooped, groping. The man behind him drew closer still. Now five yards separated them. Now three.

"I wonder whether this is the place, after all?" communed the Prince, still thinking aloud. "Yes, I feel sure. Perhaps a little more to the left—"

He moved to the left. So did the man behind him. Now only two yards separated them. Now one. A dagger gleamed palely, raised suddenly high.

It remained raised. The Prince had swung round with the litheness of a panther, seizing the hand that held the dagger. If the woman who had been frightened by the Prince's expression in the hall below had seen his expression now, she would have screamed. But the only person who saw it did not scream. He stood galvanized. And he only saw it because it was within a few inches of his bulging eyes.

"Devil!" hissed the Prince. "Devil! Devil!"

The dagger slid to the ground, squeezed out by ruthless fingers. It made a hideous little clatter. Then the assassin was lifted higher than the dagger had been and was hurled through the blackness. He fell, with a broken neck, within a foot of where the coster lay.

The Prince stood very still. He had seen many dead men, but this was the first he had killed. His conscience was clear, for his philosophy was only halfway toward the pacifism he believed in. And how few of us have freed ourselves from the axiom that the end justifies the means, and have learned that the means we employ form the only end we can be sure of? But vengeance also lay behind the Prince's act—vengeance for the death of a friend. Though he disliked his act, he would have performed it again.

He stooped, and picked up the dagger. He picked it up by its point, and threw it after its owner. Then something rustled behind him, and he turned. A woman stared at him, dazed.

"How long have you been here?" he asked, harshly.

"All the while," she whispered.

"Then—you saw?"

"Only the end. I was hiding—I didn't know till—and when it all happened—"

She stopped and shuddered violently. She was finding speech difficult.

After a pause the Prince said, with a little shrug, "It was just—it had to be. He would have killed me, and has already killed a man I loved. In this way, sometimes, events must happen." His voice was stern. There was no apology in it. But now it took on a more gentle tone as he continued, "But I do not understand. Did you follow me?"

"No."

"Then how are you here?"

"I came here before you."

"Why?"

"For—this!"

She held up a spool of films. He regarded it for a moment uncomprehendingly. Then, suddenly, intelligence dawned, and he smiled.

"Then nothing is now left undone," he said. "Yes, my friend judged you well. You are clever. But we will talk later.

Now we must go. No, not together—I first. Count ten slowly after I have gone, and if I do not return, you will know the coast is clear."

He moved, but she seized his arm.

"What—about *them*?" she whispered.

"I think they have killed each other in a quarrel," answered the Prince. "How foolish these hotheads are—and how well the world is rid of them."

The next moment he was gone.

IX

"WELL, thank Heaven *that's* over!" exclaimed the nymph, as the taxi bore them eastward.

The remark depressed Henry. He, too, felt that he could not have stood much more of it. His head ached, and his mind felt empty, and his personality, so strangely buoyant during the earlier hours of the ball, had been drained out of him. He had nothing more to give, and hardly any capacity left to receive. Even the fact that the nymph's knee jogged against his as the taxi turned or swerved meant little to him now. And if this was all, wasn't life meaningless? And didn't the future loom uninvitingly, with its new tantalizing memories that led nowhere? Still. . . .

"Didn't you enjoy it, then?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I enjoyed it," replied the nymph, "but even things you enjoy are sometimes best when they're done with. You can have too much of a good thing. And some of it wasn't too good, was it?" She glanced at him solemnly, then giggled at his expression. "Cheer up, Gauguin! By the way, what's your Sunday-go-to-meeting name? Time we shed our glory, my boy!"

"Henry Brown," he replied, trying hard not to be ashamed of it.

"Henry Brown," she repeated, making it sound a little nicer. "Well, Henry Brown, don't you want to know mine?"

"Of course, I do—I was going to ask you," he said. "I know your address—you gave it to the taximan."

"I'm sorry I can't say Evelyn Laye or Tallulah Bankhead," answered the nymph. "It's Elsie Martin. But I didn't choose it, so it'll have to do. And, while we're at it, I work in a shop. Good-bye, dreams!"

"What's wrong with a shop?" demanded

Henry. "People have got to buy things, haven't they?"

"Three cheers for the red, white and blue!" laughed Elsie Martin. "And many thanks for deferding my profession. But I may as well tell you, Mr. Henry Brown, that my shop days may be over. See, a friend of mine wants me to come in with her and give dancing lessons."

"My hat, you could do that all right!"

"Yes, *you'd* think so, because you'd only danced with ha'penny-hoppers before you danced with me—"

"That's true."

"There you are! Just the same, my friend thinks I've got the gift, so I may make good at it. Will you be my first pupil?"

"You bet!" exclaimed Henry. "That is—I mean, yes, you bet!"

"Oh, Henry Brown, you are the most *transparent* thing!" she cried, poking him. "One can see through you plainer than a thin dress on a sunny day! What you meant was, 'If I can afford it!' Well, you can come off your high horse with me, I know you're not Rockefeller! I won't charge you anything. You'll be good to practice on!"

Was she serious? Or was she just making conversation because he himself hadn't any? How she kept up this tongue-rattle amazed Henry. He admired her for it—well, rather!—but all *he* could do was to lie back and answer her questions. He felt somehow that he wanted to be quiet. He didn't know why. . . .

Presently she sensed his need, or found the effort of doing all the work beyond her. They lapsed into a silence. Several times she looked at him oddly—half-sollemn, half-amused—and smiled at the little space between them.

"Heavens, he's good!" she thought. "How does he live?"

But she did not break the silence till near the end of the journey. Then, recognizing local streets, she said:

"Well, we're nearly there. Anything you want to say?"

"Eh?" jerked Henry.

"Oh, nothing," she murmured.

He roused himself.

"I'm awfully sorry—I'm afraid I've been very boring," he apologized. "The fact is. I—I was thinking."

"Can I have the thought for a penny?"

"I was thinking about that—you know—that coster chap." She sighed to herself. "Do you suppose it *really* was all my imagination? I mean, no nonsense. *Really?*"

"Mr. Wu told us he wasn't there."

"Yes, I know he did."

"And I'm quite certain he was speaking the truth. And I'm quite certain, too, that you've seen a *lot* of things tonight that weren't there. So why not this one?"

Henry nodded.

"I dare say," he said. "Yes, I dare say. But it's funny." Then suddenly he burst out, "Do you know, this time yesterday I'd never felt a *thing*—not properly—and now I've been up at the top and down to the bottom!"

THE nymph smiled. She had experienced a reflection of Henry's shock herself, but she knew there were greater depths than the mere sight of a dead man, real or imagined, and greater heights than a dance with a pretty girl.

"I suppose one's bound to feel a bit depressed," murmured Henry.

"Don't you know even *yet* what's worrying you?" exclaimed the nymph. "Silly! See if kissing me will remove the depression! . . .

"Hell!" muttered Henry, a few moments later. "The damn thing's stopping! . . ."

Ten minutes after that, it stopped again; this time before Henry's house. He alighted with exaggerated nonchalance, and his expression while he paid his fare was intended to convey the impression that he was thoroughly bored with existence; but his heart was thumping violently and his soul was whirling wildly with new experience, and the taximan knew all about it.

When he had crept up the long, steep staircases that led to his humble castle and quietly opened his bedroom door, he was astonished to find the room exactly as he had left it, though he would have been more astonished if he had found it filled with appropriate roses. The slightly rumpled bed, the chair, the hairbrush, the boots, one on its side, the little mirror. . . .

He crossed to the mirror and stared in it.

"You know, you wouldn't *think* it," he said earnestly to his reflection. "But, well,

there must be *something* in me. I mean—mustn't there?"

"**W**ASN'T it fun?" yawned Mrs. Shannon, as she struggled out of her china shepherdess costume.

"Eh? Yes. Very much," answered Mr. Shannon abstractedly.

His mind being elsewhere, he was only vaguely conscious that the reply was not quite satisfactory. But as Mrs. Shannon was not conscious of it, either, it did not matter. At 5:00 a.m. one is not particular.

"And didn't Dorothy look lovely?" continued Mrs. Shannon. "Much better than last year. You know, I always hated that Fatima costume, though, of course, I didn't tell her. This was much prettier."

"Quite," agreed Mr. Shannon, removing his wig.

"Oh, well, the children enjoyed themselves, anyway," said Mrs. Shannon, revealing the real truth about her own feelings without intending to.

"I should hope they did—it cost enough!" retorted Mr. Shannon. "But didn't *you* enjoy it, too?"

It ought to have been a kindly inquiry, but it came more in the nature of a challenge.

"Yes, naturally! Didn't I say so?" The challenge flustered her a little. "I'm sure it does one good—once in a while. But, of course, it's really an occasion for young people, isn't it—"

"And we're old and decrepit," interposed Mr. Shannon. "The breadwinner and the housekeeper. Exactly."

He did feel ashamed of himself that time as he pretended not to notice the rather hurt look his wife shot at him, but he was all on edge, and in the conventional security of their bedroom—the dull, dull safety of it—he was suffering from reaction. He wanted to be alone for a week. After that he could face his wife with understanding and even affection for the rest of their lives. Yes, he was sure of that. Especially as there might not be so very much more of their lives. But just at this moment. . . . Not very much more of their lives? Well, of their vital interest in life, anyway! Wasn't that just the whole devil of the business? Before long, perhaps, one or other of them would be struck down . . . and then, the pain of

the one, and the remorse of the other! It didn't bear thinking about. No, one mustn't think about it. But if only the vital interest would end, meanwhile! It wasn't fair that it had ended for her, and not for him! . . .

Had it ended for her? The sudden wonder made Mr. Shannon pause in the operation of removing a red-heeled shoe. It swept over him, with a sense of terrible discovery, that he didn't know anything about his wife. He hadn't known anything for years. Was she equally ignorant of him? "Thank Heaven, I've got my work!" he reflected.

She hadn't.

"I thought Harold was rather quiet," said Mrs. Shannon.

Yes—Harold, by Jove! Harold had delivered that bombshell! But maybe the bombshell would prove a blessing in disguise. If Mr. Shannon had been *forced* into relinquishing this contract, there would have been nothing but loss and humiliation in it. Now, at least, the loss would be minimized, and the gain . . . Sir Henry Shannon! Sir Henry and Lady Shannon . . . might even be a "Bart." after it! After all, damn it, this was a pretty big thing he was doing for his country! And for the peace of the world! For a moment Henry Shannon really thought it was, since justification and self-esteem were second nature to him. Then the vision of a dead man rose in his mind, and wiped out the big thing. . . . No, no, not dead. Just knocked out. These drunken curs could lie like a log for a week. Why, now he came to think of it, he believed he had read a story once in which a drunken chap. . . . His wife had said something. Had he answered her?

"Yes, he was," answered Henry Shannon.

"I wonder if there was a special reason, Henry?" queried Mrs. Shannon.

"Special reason? What special reason?" demanded Mr. Shannon.

"Well—Dorothy!"

"Oh, that! I mean, her. Yes. Yes, that's very likely."

"She hasn't said anything yet. Not to me, at least. But then, you don't always, just at first." She smiled at her husband. "I remember—we didn't—"

Somebody knocked at the door. "Can

I come in?" called Conrad. "Just," his mother called back.

CONRAD had come to say good night. It was quite a superfluous proceeding, but he was tremendously sentimental—(although he would have denied it hotly if you had asserted it)—and he hated going to bed without satisfying himself that there was no trouble anywhere. The reason he gave, however, as he appeared in the doorway was entirely different.

"Five-eighths of the gold is removed, O Parents," he proclaimed, "and I thought you might like to see your scion in his right pajamas before going to sleep."

"You are a silly!" laughed Mrs. Shannon. "But wasn't it fun?"

"Rather! Did you enjoy it, Mother?"

"Every moment!"

"I won't ask *you*, Dad," grinned the boy. "I counted your winks. You just missed your century!"

"You know what *you* want, my boy," retorted Mr. Shannon. "A smack in the pants!"

He grinned back ferociously.

Half a minute later, Conrad was knocking on Dorothy's door, but he poked his head in this time without waiting for permission.

"That was very naughty of you!" exclaimed Dorothy. "I might have been anyhow!"

"You are anyhow," he replied, "and you don't excite me in the least. My mind is full of other women. I say, Sis, do you spend your entire life before your mirror?"

"Do slope off," she answered. "It's a bit late for brilliance!"

"I'm going. I only came to say good night. It's a good, old-fashioned idea."

"Well, good night."

"Good night. Oh, just one question. Was I right?"

"When?"

"To be precise, eight hours ago?"

"What about?"

"About the only thing that matters in a young fellow's life?"

She turned to him, with sudden color.

"Go away, go away, go away!" she exclaimed.

"I am answered," he retorted. "Though, as a matter of fact, I knew. Until the last dance, Harold remained manly. Then he

went all slush. Don't worry—I won't tell the old folks at home. I expect you want to do that yourself. But I may just say, though you won't believe it, that I'm damned glad. I think old Harold's okay—and you ain't bad."

She rushed to him and flung her arms round him.

"There, now I'm all over face-cream," he muttered. "However, once in a lifetime!"

His last remark before going to sleep was made to his pillow.

"Would you mind informing me, sweetheart," he asked, "why I feel so peculiar and weepy?"

THERE was a tiny, dull glow in Sally's fireplace when she returned to her room. She dropped wearily into a chair and stared at it.

"What have *you* waited up for?" she asked. "Did you think I was bringing a friend home?"

The cynical question produced a sudden shudder. But for the gruesome turn of events, she might have brought a friend home with her, however unwillingly. The friend might have thrown himself down on her bed, just as she had thrown herself into this chair, and he might have been lying there at this moment, waiting. "Keep yer promise, Sally!" She heard the rough, unpleasant voice in her imagination, and in her imagination she answered it. "I didn't make any promise." "Yes, yer did." "No—I said 'perhaps.'" "Well, perhaps is as good as a promise to me. Come along—or must I make yer?"

And then? "I wonder if I've been damn lucky, after all?" she thought. For she *wouldn't* have come to him. She swore she wouldn't have! She had risen a cut above Sam! So there might have been a real hellish scrap. She might have—done anything!

The thought brought her head round sharply to the bed, as though she feared to find the materialization of her vision. But the bed was empty. The man who might have lain there had harder substance beneath his back.

With a grating laugh she turned her head again to the dying embers.

"So what *are* you waiting up for?" she repeated ironically. "It's all over bar the shouting!"

Then, all at once, she knew; and the knowledge made her laugh again.

She drew from her bosom a roll of films. Slowly and deliberately, as though fascinated by the process, she unwound the film, separating it from the red paper. When she had finished, the film and the paper made two separate coiling heaps on the floor. The paper heap had no value, but somewhere in the heap of film lay an undeveloped secret that, even now, might be worth a small fortune.

But Sally was not interested in the small fortune. She picked up the film and threw it on the dying fire.

It lay there for a moment motionless. Then it began to coil and sizzle. The next instant the sizzle rose to a tearing roar, the celluloid burst into hissing flames, and shadows leaped faintly along the glowing walls.

The flames died down.

"Well, that's that," she said. "And what's the next?"

She undressed, and stood naked before her mirror. Then she turned out the light and got into bed.

IN another bed lay Warwick Hilling. Sally's bed was wide and yielding. Hilling's was narrow and lumpy, and had ugly black iron rails. And, also unlike Sally's, its occupant had not got into it unassisted. The Prince stood by its side.

"In a moment I must go," said the Prince. "Can you hear me?"

Hilling nodded feebly.

"Then listen, and remember all I say," continued the Prince, speaking slowly and clearly. "Bad things have happened. Things to grieve over. Things to regret. But things, also, to forget. You will assist no one by keeping them in your mind or by proclaiming your knowledge. Indeed, to do so may raise issues which will lead to a chaos you have no conception of, and bring more death to the innocent. Of

three who have died tonight, one at least had a great spirit. That great spirit asks you to continue your faith in it, and not to undo the work for which it has died. Do you understand all this? Do my words mean anything to you?"

Hilling nodded again. The words floated over him like a strange, comforting blanket, removing a responsibility too big to be borne.

"But you are a man of intelligence," went on the Prince, his voice growing fainter and fainter to the man on the bed. "Your mind questions, and will not be satisfied tomorrow with a mere instruction. So I add this, though less for your intelligence than for your conscience. What you have done—and what I have done—these things have not been done for selfish ends. They have been done for the great cause of peace. Three people are dead to save the lives of thousands, and you have helped to save the lives of the thousands. When two of the three are found dead together in the Albert Hall, it will be a good thing for the world if the world thinks they have killed each other. When the third is found dead in a lonely house—no, if he is found there," the Prince corrected himself, after a moment's thought, "it will be good for the world if his death remains a mystery. Fortunately it is in the interest of all who know the truth to preserve silence. So your part, too, is silence."

The Prince was not sure whether he was heard this time. Warwick Hilling's eyes were closed, and he was breathing quietly. But he bent over the bed to conclude:

"In a few hours I shall return, and then, perhaps we can talk of other matters. A trip to the Continent, perhaps? I would like to show you my country, Mr. Hilling."

Then he stole softly to the door and left the room. The streets were still dark when he re-entered them and turned his steps westward, but the fog was clearing,

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RED MEANS DANGER

By EDWARD RONNS

Thorn was out of luck. No murder-motive . . . no clues. . . .
All the flip dick had to go on was the old song, ending—
“a red-headed woman made a fool out of me.”

THE bronze plaque over the ornate, wrought-iron gate read *Cabot Park*. Beyond the gate shone a sun buttered slope of green lawn, while to the

right the path plunged deep into shaded groves of immense, towering poplars. Distantly came the faint murmur of casual voices, but no one was in sight. The big

country house was invisible from the entrance to the grounds.

Thorn pushed open the gate and trod up the path that wound to the right, among the trees. The cool shade offered respite from the hot afternoon sun. Thorn paused, mopped his face. He took another step—and came to an abrupt halt.

Something had moved among the trees behind him. He stood motionless, listened.

He couldn't hear the voices from the house at this point. A slight breeze rustled the high treetops, and somewhere an insect sang on a high-pitched, trilling note. But none of these sounds had brought Thorn up short. He shivered faintly, considered the green growth surrounding him. He had the unpleasant sensation of being stalked. Shrugging, he put it down to an overworked imagination and walked on.

There was a short, flat *crack!* and a bullet splintered flying bark from a tree a foot to his right.

Thorn froze in astonishment, staring at the white scar on the tree trunk. The gun cracked again and a little shower of clipped leaves and twigs pattered on his shoulder. Thorn cursed explosively, dived from the gravel path. He landed on all fours, hastily scrambled away from the open, and then crouched, waiting.

Somewhere a twig snapped. A bird chirped overhead. The insistent song of the insect went on.

Thorn's eyes narrowed watchfully. Slow, cautious footsteps sounded on the gravel path. Three steps, and then a long pause. Twisting his head, he caught a splash of brilliant scarlet cloth through the foliage. His mouth twisted in a wry little grin. He got up soundlessly, stepped quickly through the brush and came out on the path three feet behind the tense figure of a girl.

She was small and slim in a striped silk blouse and white skirt. The fingers of her left hand were at her throat, and she carried a long-barreled .22 in her right. Thorn couldn't see her face.

HE took a long stride toward her, and his shoes crunched on gravel. The girl started to turn, her features white and suddenly frightened. Thorn whipped a swift arm over her shoulder and closed

his fingers firmly around her wrist.

"Let go," he said flatly.

She gasped and struggled against his grip. Thorn released her for a scant second and his fingers jumped for the gun in her hand. The girl's mouth was open in a soundless scream. Her eyes were wild with terror.

Thorn repeated quietly: "Let go. Do you hear me? I won't hurt you. Let go."

"You—you killed him!" She twisted feebly with her effort to be free. Her breath caught in her white throat. "You killed him."

"Not me," Thorn said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He twisted hard, and the girl gave a low whimper of pain and dropped the twenty-two. She stepped back, rubbing her wrist and staring wide-eyed at him.

Thorn was a man of medium size, wide of shoulder and solid of chest, with a grave square face, thick dark hair and expressive eyebrows forming inverted V's over stolid black eyes. He stooped to pick up the gun, studied it with a little grimace, and looked at the girl. She had both hands over her mouth, her wide gray eyes watching him. He said gently:

"My name is Thorn, Lieutenant Guy Thorn. DeFrehn sent for me."

"L-Lieutenant?" she faltered.

"Police," he nodded.

Disbelief flashed in her eyes. "How could you know he was dead and be here already, when I only just found him now?" She shivered violently. "You're lying to me. You were trying to get away—"

She broke off at Thorn's impatient gesture. "DeFrehn sent for me," he repeated. "Are you trying to tell me that he's dead?"

"Dead, yes. Quite dead."

He took a quick step forward, gripped the girl's quaking shoulders. His voice was harsh. "How do you mean, dead? Murdered?"

"Murdered, yes," she repeated. "Shot."

Thorn shook her. "Where?" he demanded.

A man's heavy voice drawled behind him: "If you don't mind, mister, will you kindly take your paws the hell off my wife?"

He was a big man in a somewhat shabby blue serge suit and gray felt hat. He

stood with his feet spread a little on the gravel path, his legs braced. His big hands were jammed in the side pockets of his coat, pulling the cloth tight about muscular shoulders. His brown eyes were blood-shot and his mouth was loose. He was a little drunk.

The girl said breathlessly: "Charles, Uncle Walter is dead. He's dead and I went out to look for you and tell you, and I found this man, I don't know who he is, but I—"

"Be quiet, Natalie."

"But Charles, Uncle Walter is dead, he's been shot, and somebody—"

The big man yelled suddenly: "Shut up, I said!"

The girl shrank back as though struck a physical blow. Her fingers touched her lips again. Her face went ashen and her eyes shone with new fear—fear of the big man. Her shoulders suddenly sagged and her head bowed before the big man's irritated glare.

Thorn stood silent, his mind reaching querulous fingers into the past. He recollected the sensational marriage these two had made. It was the familiar story of the wilful, spoiled daughter of a wealthy magnate in love with the old man's chauffeur. Natalie DeFrehn had once been front-page news—hot headed, colorful, with a passionate zest for life. Her stunts had always made good copy, her marriage to Charles Clys, her father's chauffeur, especially so. Now Thorn looked at her and felt a dull shock go through him as he saw how crushed she was before the big man.

He stared at the girl, said softly: "Where is DeFrehn—your father's body?"

She lifted her head a little. Her grey eyes were dull. "In the study."

"Who knows about it?"

"N-no one. Just us."

Thorn turned on his heel. "Suppose I have a look," he said.

THE big downstairs hall was cloaked with thick brown shadows. There was no sound in the house, although a woman laughed out on the grounds, near the swimming pool. Her voice sounded unreal. There was a hushed, waiting quality to the warm, stuffy air, as though the house had stopped breathing when its master died.

Thorn opened the study door and stepped silently inside.

DeFrehn's legs stuck out from behind a massive mahogany desk. A heavily leaded casement window was ajar, and a hot draught swept along the green rug, stirring the dead man's trouser cuffs and rustling a Japanese screen near the door. A wall safe hung open, a little heap of papers on the floor in front of it.

Thorn walked slowly around the desk and stared down at the short, sprawled body. DeFrehn lay on his face, his head pillowed on one twisted arm. His bright tie flowed from around his thick neck and dipped its tongue into a little puddle of thick red blood. He had been shot through the side of his head with a heavy caliber gun, and the bullet had blown half his scalp away.

Thorn jerked his head up, stared abruptly at the open safe, the little scatter of papers on the floor. He spun around abruptly as a little ghost of a sound reached him. He said softly:

"Don't go yet, Miss Croyden."

A girl froze with her hand on the bronze doorknob. She had come from behind the Japanese screen, and she carried a small sheaf of papers in her hand, close to her breast. She was tall in a white tailored suit and a smart green hat that matched the silk scarf at her throat. Her flame-colored hair struck a keynote to the bright defiance in her eyes. Her mouth was square with bitter rebellion. She stood motionless for a second, then turned slowly and leaned back against the door, stared deliberately at Thorn.

"So it's you," she whispered. Her voice was husky. "I know what you're thinking. You think I killed him. But I didn't."

Thorn smiled mirthlessly. "Then what are you doing here?"

"I'm—I was Mr. DeFrehn's secretary."

"I know that. But you just lifted those papers from the safe."

Julie Croyden's underlip quivered suddenly, and she sank small white teeth into it. She said bitterly: "You're always a cop, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh," he nodded.

"You can't see beyond your nose."

"Maybe not."

"And you think I'm lying to you."

His eyebrows lifted. "Aren't you?"

She said passionately: "No, I'm not! I've never lied to you. But you wouldn't believe anything I ever said, anyway. You're always the cop."

The girl's eyes flamed dangerously. A spitfire, Thorn thought. A hell-cat on two beautiful legs. Shrugging his shoulders, he said:

"You're in a jam, baby. A hell of a jam. You said you would even things with DeFrehn, and now it looks as though you have. You and your boy-friend, Pericles Stamos." Thorn shook his head. "The Greek is a bad boy. Which one of you did this?"

She said tightly: "Don't be funny."

Thorn stared at the dead man's legs behind the desk. "It's not funny," he said. "It's murder."

"You—you mean you're going to hold me for it?" she whispered.

Thorn said grimly: "Stick around and find out, baby."

The girl's lips moved a little; her face was white. She had the creamy, flawless skin that goes with her type of red hair. She sank into a chair with a helpless sigh, looked away from the dead man.

Thorn touched a pulse at the side of his neck and was annoyed at the way his blood throbbed under his fingertip. He recalled the last time he had seen this girl, this wildcat, and he cursed very softly as he turned to the telephone. After a while he spoke into it: "McShain?"

"Guy? Go ahead."

"I'm out here at DeFrehn's, but it's too late. Whatever he was afraid of, got to him before I came. He's dead."

"Murdered?"

"Yeah," Thorn sighed. "What's more, that girl is here—Julie Croyden. I caught her rifling DeFrehn's safe." He glanced sidewise at the tall girl, saw her lips part. Her eyes blazed antagonism at him. Thorn went on flatly: "So I'm quitting."

"You're nuts, Guy! That girl's got you."

"Sure," Thorn drawled.

"LISTEN, Guy—hold on to her." Captain McShain sounded irritated. "She's been seeing Perk Stamos, and you know what a number that hood is. She visited Stamos in town today—anyway, a precinct man saw her go into his apart-

ment. We sewed the place up tight after a quick look."

"And Stamos?" Thorn asked. He didn't meet the redhead's quick, inquiring glance. He looked out the window, at the brightly striped umbrellas below. Some people were grouped out there, still unaware that their host was dead.

McShain said: "Stamos wasn't in, but we'll get him. You sit tight on that spitfire redhead, and stay sitting. It's building up fast and you've got to keep her away from the Greek."

Thorn exhaled tiredly. He flicked a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face with savage impatience. McShain was the skipper; McShain gave the orders. Thorn held the telephone away from him at arm's length and stared at its hot black shine.

A month ago he had first seen Julie Croyden. Then she had been frightened and helpless. Her father, Amos Croyden, was missing. Could the lieutenant please find him? She was afraid for her father's life. Afraid he had been kidnapped.

Thorn knew about Amos Croyden, one of the country's outstanding research chemists. It was rumored he had perfected an amazingly efficient formula for viscose compounds. A formula that was certain to revolutionize the synthetic manufacturing industry. The dead man lying here behind the desk could have used the Croyden formula to make millions. The girl, Julie Croyden, had thought that DeFrehn had something to do with her father's disappearance.

Thorn remembered her anger at his faint, incredulous smile. Why should a wealthy, nationally known figure like Walter DeFrehn descend to kidnapping. He had millions to spend on something like the Croyden formula. The girl shook her head stubbornly. DeFrehn, she insisted, had hired Stamos to kidnap her father and get the formula. She had last seen her father departing with Stamos.

Thorn had smiled his disbelief, promised to do all he could. It wasn't strictly in his department. The problem belonged to Missing Persons, not Homicide.

But it dropped into Homicide's lap a week later, when the twisted and tortured body of old Amos Croyden was found in the salt marshes along the Jersey coast. . . .

Thorn sighed, looked out the window. He scarcely heard the girl's quick, shallow breathing across the room. Sunlight danced over the green lawn below. Somewhere a radio hummed softly.

The girl had come into Homicide headquarters the day after her father's tortured body was found. She marched straight into Thorn's office, produced an old army revolver and stood in the doorway, calmly proceeded to shoot up the floor, the walls, and the desk that sheltered Thorn himself. After the gun had been taken from her and her fury lessened, she had delivered herself in cold, bitter terms.

IT was Thorn's fault that her father was dead, she said. He hadn't believed her about DeFrehn and Stamos. And since she couldn't expect help from the police, she was determined to seek justice in her own way. She would prove that Walter DeFrehn, the manufacturing magnate, and Perk Stamos, the gunman, had conspired to get the Croyden formula.

Thorn never forgot the way she looked as she stood there, declaring herself. He never forgot the way the light was caught and came alive in her burnished copper hair. She worried him.

Julie Croyden was as good as her word. Thorn went out of his way to keep tabs on her. Her next move was amazing. She met Stamos and deliberately befriended him. She was seen with the Greek on various occasions. Then she disappeared for three days, and when Thorn located her she was secretary to Walter DeFrehn. DeFrehn had explained it as a benevolent act to help out a girl left alone by tragedy, when Thorn had called on him. Which was so much eyewash, as far as Thorn was concerned.

Now there was this: DeFrehn sprawled dead behind his desk, the girl rifling his safe, and Stamos vanished while the police spread a cordon around his hideout.

McShain's voice rattled in the receiver: "Guy, Guy, dammit, you still there?"

Thorn started, turned back to the phone, said: "What shall I do about DeFrehn? I'm over the County line here. I'll have to ring up Sheriff Ebsworth."

"That hick!" McShain snorted. "But what was that about you quitting?"

"Because of the girl," Thorn said.

"What about her?"

"I'm prejudiced."

"You're nuts." McShain devoted himself to melting the telephone lines with a string of profanity. "Go ahead and call up Ebsworth. Hang on to the girl. She must've gone off her nut and let DeFrehn have it because of her father's death."

Thorn said heavily: "Yeah, I guess so."

"You're going to stick?"

Thorn said: "I'll stick." He hung up and sat still, facing the window in the breathless heat; then he stared at his left hand. It was balled up into a hard, white-knuckled fist, and his handkerchief was in it. He wiped the back of his neck, stuffed it back into his breast pocket. Turning his head, he looked across the room at the girl's chair.

It was empty.

He just had time to start halfway up from his seat, a startled curse on his lips. Porcelain flashed over his head, came down with a crash. He toppled backward, blinded by the blood that streamed from his gashed forehead. His fist lashed out in a wild, looping arc. Another blow fell savagely, riveting pain through his skull. He spun dizzily down into darkness. Somebody laughed softly. The sound rippled away in dimming eddies until there was nothing.

SHERIFF EBSWORTH was a short wisp of a man, built like a bantam rooster. He had thin red hair that stood up in a crest along the center of his scalp. His eyes were hot and excited in his red face.

He said shrilly: "So she got away, did she? And you couldn't stop her! You let a dame slug you and she just walks out! I like that, I do! I think that's swell—in a pig's eye!"

Thorn blinked, winced as pain knifed through his head, and sat up dizzily. He looked around the room at the sheriff's deputies, at the low evening sunbeams. He frowned at the bantam-weight sheriff.

"Shut up," he growled.

Ebsworth's face turned dusky purple. "You're telling *me* to shut up? Listen, fella! You city guys have pulled plenty of stunts before this, but never one so raw!"

Thorn staggered to his feet, lifted his eyebrows and grunted: "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about! You ducked that girl out of here and over the line, into the city. Just so you guys could grab the glory."

"Nuts," Thorn muttered. He touched the tender gash on his forehead. "I guess I gave myself this just to provide atmosphere?"

Ebsworth said doggedly: "I don't know what you done. All I know is it ain't right. Something's screwy around here."

"Your brain," Thorn suggested.

The bantam bristled. "All right," he warned. "I'm holdin' you as material witness, for obstructin' justice, and as accessory after the fact. I'll throw the whole book at you."

Thorn's face darkened. His eyes settled somberly on the red-headed little sheriff. A muscle twitched along the line of his jaw.

"You mean I'm under arrest?"

"You know what I mean."

"You're going to hold me here?"

"What do you think?"

Thorn said softly: "I think you're all wet. I'm walking out now. I don't think you can stop me."

Ebsworth made sputtering noises. His two deputies grinned openly. Thorn walked around the desk, stared down at the dead man, and found his hat where it lay in a corner. He put it on gingerly.

Ebsworth said: "Wait, now."

"The hell with you."

"Now listen, Thorn—"

"I'm going out."

"Thorn, maybe I was a bit hasty—"

Thorn didn't answer. He walked past Ebsworth, and the little sheriff lifted one hand tentatively to Thorn's sleeve, then dropped it hurriedly as Thorn swung dark, bitter eyes his way.

Thorn went out.

IT was seven o'clock when he strode into the lobby of his hotel and found Captain McShain in a deep-cushioned chair under a huge potted palm. The skipper was a big man with iron-gray hair and a square, blue-tinged jaw. He was smoking an acrid cigar.

"Guy!" he called.

Thorn stopped and looked at him. His mouth twitched a little. His eyes were lidless, staring at the skipper.

McShain said: "Sit down, Guy—sit down. You look tired."

Thorn said: "I feel sick."

"Yeah, I guess you do. You ought to. But she's a hell-cat, you said so yourself. I shouldn't have talked to you so much on the phone. It's my fault you couldn't watch her like that."

"You think she killed DeFrehn?"

"Hell, sure she did. She or Stamos."

Thorn waved a hand impatiently. "She didn't. She's in danger of her life every minute she's loose. The only reason I meant to hold her was to keep her safe."

McShain's eyes sharpened on Thorn's square face. "That what's troubling you?"

"Among other things," Thorn nodded. "Have you nailed Stamos?"

"Not yet, but we will. We've got his place sewed up. It adds up to this, Guy: Julie Croyden and Stamos were working together. She wanted revenge and Stamos wanted dough. I don't know whether DeFrehn had a hand in her father's death or not. Suppose he did? Then maybe he crossed Stamos somehow, so Stamos had a grudge against DeFrehn, like the girl. Maybe the Croyden girl intended to frame Stamos for the kill and get justice done that way, according to her lights. It's plain she's after revenge for her father's death."

Thorn was scarcely listening. The lights of the hotel lobby chandelier played on his face and grim, taut lips. His eyes were dark in the shadow of his hat brim. He said suddenly:

"I'm being tailed, Mac. It may be Ebsworth, or it may not; I don't know. I was picked up just outside city limits and a car's been following me ever since."

"That can be taken care of."

Thorn said: "I don't want the shadow bothered. Let him work. But you could put a tail on the tail, if you will."

"All right, Guy." McShain's eyes were shrewd. "You got an angle?"

Thorn smiled twistedly. "I've got a headache," he said.

In Verdi's Marine Bar, across the street, he had two short drinks. Thorn finished them quickly and walked out. The night was very warm. The city sweated under

the relentless, stifling pressure of heat. The sky was like a huge black mouth breathing warmly over the city.

In Angelo's he had another drink. He stood close to the bar and lifted his glass to his reflection in the mirror. His face was wan and drawn and his mouth was twisted harshly. His eyes glistened with dull reproof in his dark, square face. He grinned mirthlessly and toasted himself.

"To you, you chump."

He dropped a coin on the bar and left.

THE Lincoln Arms was a small three-story apartment house of red brick. The lobby was tiny, the directory under the mailboxes short. Thorn came across *Charles Clye* in Apartment 202 and pressed the buzzer. He got no answer. He tried again, then went up the stairs and knocked softly on the door.

After two minutes of this Thorn used a steel lock-pick and turned the bolt. The door-chain wasn't fastened. He found himself in a small, untidy living room, and snapped on the light. The furniture was cheap and carelessly dusted. Newspapers strewed the floor around an armchair. He could see into a kitchen, and there were unwashed piles of dishes in the sink. He grimaced a little. Natalie DeFrehn had come down far from the quiet splendor of her father's country estate.

Thorn paused, his dark eyes swinging around the room. A window was open and a hot puff of air stirred the grayish curtains, rustled the newspapers on the floor. A corner of one page lifted high in the air, waggled a little, and folded over with the force of the draught, but the opposite corner stuck fast to the floor.

When Thorn walked over he found that the paper was glued fast to the hardwood by a little trickle of dried maroon. He knelt and touched it very gently. It was blood. A small stream of it had seeped from beneath a closet door behind the armchair.

He straightened with a soft curse and listened. There was no sound. Not even the ticking of a clock. His throat ached suddenly. He stepped carefully around the bloodied newspaper and opened the closet.

Natalie DeFrehn was inside.

She was seated on the floor, in a corner,

partly hidden by a row of hanging dresses. She looked small and slim. Her head was bowed, her dark hair loose in a curtain over her face. Light edged into the closet and shone on one scarlet manicured toenail and a trickle of red blood that flowed from a knife wound in her breast. The knife was missing.

Thorn hunkered down slowly and touched one slim, dangling hand. The smooth skin was cool, the fingers soft and still somewhat flexible. He still couldn't see her face, and he didn't want to. He got up, his mouth grim, and dried his hands, closed the closet door, looked once more around the room, and crossed to switch off the light. He left the apartment silently and went downstairs to the hot street.

A car was parked near the corner. Thorn couldn't see anyone in it. He lit a cigarette, letting the match flame glow on his square, tired face; then he got into his own car. When he started up the other sedan was rolling casually along behind him.

NUMBER 775 Chambers Street, which was Perciles Stamos' living quarters, was the end house of a long row of monotonous brownstone houses. The pavements were deserted when Thorn parked his car and walked slowly down them to the corner. There was no traffic.

Pausing, Thorn stared at the darkened end house, and then moved across the street to a dingy, fly-blown cigar store. Two men were intent on a pinball game inside. Thorn walked in and said: "Hello, Casey. Hello, Lund."

The two men jerked around and looked embarrassed. Lund was a big man, wearing a derby. He said: "Hi, lieutenant. What's up?"

Thorn shrugged. "Just poking around."

Lund said: "We heard about you missing that girl for Ebsworth. County'll be sore about that for a year."

"Let them rave. Has Stamos shown up yet?"

"Not yet. He may be wise that we're waiting for him."

"How many men in the stake-out?"

"A round dozen, lieutenant. The Greek is a tough baby. You heard about that gun of his?"

Thorn nodded gravely. "Misty Blue."

"Yeah, that's it. He gives it a name like it was a prize pet, or something. He knows how to handle it, too."

Thorn jerked his head across toward the dark brownstone house. "Have you got any men placed upstairs?"

"Duffy and Irv Cohen," said Lund. He looked puzzled. "Are you taking cards in this, lieutenant?"

"No, not here."

Thorn put a nickel in the pinball machine. Casey moved to the window and stared up and down the dark street. He sighed and took out a handkerchief, dried his palms.

"This waiting," he complained softly.

Lund said: "Shut up."

Lights flashed on the bagatelle backboard. Thorn won a pack of cigarettes. He collected from the frightened storekeeper and tossed the pack to Lund, then went to the phone booth. He made a call to the county seat and learned that Julie Croyden was still missing. He turned to the directory and ran his finger down the list of "C's." He stopped in the middle of the page.

Croyden, Julia . . . The Palms . . . BA5-5435.

Thorn stepped out of the phone booth. Casey, from the store window, was swearing softly. He said again: "This waiting."

Lund yawned.

Thorn said: "So long, boys. Good luck."

"So long, lieutenant."

THE Palms was a U-shaped apartment hotel of white stone, set back a little among bedraggled trees and shrubbery. Circling the building, Thorn walked up an alley that was like a black slot between high, oppressive walls. The starless sky was only a little lighter than the black buildings surrounding him. He found a fire tower and went up eight flights on noiseless feet.

Tension took a hard grip on his stomach and squeezed. Perk Stamos was not the sort of man you went up against single-handed. Stamos required the riot squad and the stakeout. You needed tear gas and Thompson-guns and stolid, dependable cops like Casey and Lund surrounding the place.

There was nothing to be seen through

Julie Croyden's kitchen window. The four little panes of glass reflected Thorn's square face in their shiny black surfaces. Then far back in the apartment there was a faint pink glow, beyond the door that opened into the living room. The tip of a cigarette moved in a short arc and vanished in darkness.

Thorn grunted with soft satisfaction. He glanced once at the netted railing of the fire-escape and the lights twinkling peacefully from the apartments around him, and then he drew his gun. The heavy automatic felt slippery in his fingers. He wiped his hands dry.

He touched the kitchen doorknob with his left hand and pulled it slowly toward him, tightening the slack. Then he turned it carefully to the right, as far as it would go, still pulling it toward him. After that he eased it forward, pressing on the door with his knee. The door wasn't fastened; the lock was broken.

It took him five minutes to get inside and close the door behind him. He stood flat against the kitchen wall, accustoming his eyes to the blackness. He breathed shallowly in the dark heat, and the faint ticking of his wrist watch sounded louder than the whir of an electric clock over the stove. There was a scent of cigarette smoke in the air, mingled with a trace of Julie Croyden's perfume.

THE man sitting in the living-room chair wasn't aware of Thorn's shadowy presence behind him. He sat facing the front door, slumped comfortably in the chunky chair. On the flat right arm of the chair was a big blue-steel automatic. Thorn could see faintly oily highlight on the barrel as he stepped noiselessly across the carpet.

He pressed the muzzle of his gun against the back of the man's head.

"Don't move, Perk," he breathed.

The man in the chair had no nerves. He didn't jump or start. Breath sighed from between his lips. His voice was ragged, startled.

"What the hell—"

Thorn said grimly: "Take your hand away from your gun."

Stamos moved his hand in the darkness.

Thorn said: "Waiting for someone?"

"Maybe. You're a copper, huh?"

"Who are you waiting for, punk?"

Stamos drawled: "A dame." He slumped again in his chair. He repeated: "A lousy, double-crossing dame."

"Julie Croyden?"

"You guessed it, copper."

"What do you want with her?"

"Maybe I wanted to kiss her goodnight. Maybe I wanted to kiss her—with this." Stamos' voice tightened suddenly, and just as suddenly he wasn't in his seat.

Thorn swung at the dark, moving blur of the gunman's head. The automatic in the arm of the chair vanished in clutching white fingers. Thorn heard a thud as Stamos hit the floor with his knee. He swung again. The butt of his gun connected with a dull sound. Action released explosive energy in his over-taut muscles, and he dived headlong over the back of the chair, full on Stamos' crouching figure.

The gunman's automatic crashed frantically, spitting vicious flame past Thorn's head. Thorn dropped his own gun. He kneeled over the slender man's figure and smashed down hard with his left, then his right, then his left again. Stamos' head cracked repeatedly against the floor. His wiry body jerked and twisted. Thorn lifted his fist again. Blood was warm on his knuckles.

Stamos said whimperingly: "Don't . . . don't."

Thorn rolled off him, picking up both guns. He was breathing heavily, air whistling deep in his throat. He snapped on a floor lamp and stared at the dark-faced man on the rug. Stamos was on his hands and knees, shaking his head like an injured animal. With each movement he spattered drops of blood like red exclamation marks over the rug.

Thorn said reprovingly: "Don't mess up the place, Perk."

Pocketing both guns, he stepped to the hall door and looked out, made certain that the shot hadn't raised an alarm, and then returned. Stamos was standing with his feet apart, swaying a little. His dark gray suit was rumpled over slender, muscular shoulders. His mouth was a harsh, bitter line; his eyes flared with hatred.

"You'll get it for this, copper."

Thorn ignored him. He crossed the living room, reaching his left hand for the telephone to call McShain—

MOVEMENT stirred the darkness of the kitchen doorway. A white hand flashed and metal twinkled in the light. A bone-handled knife streaked across the room and thudded hard into Thorn's hand, pinning it to the telephone table.

Pain struck up his arm in sickening waves. He twisted, reaching for his gun, and then stood rooted as a hoarse voice said:

"Hold it, copper. No funny business."

A grunt of surprise came from Stamos. The dapper gunman's eyes flicked to the knife embedded in Thorn's hand, and then to the doorway. He said softly: "Hello, Charlie."

Charlie Clye stepped into the room. He pushed Julie Croyden in ahead of him. His gray felt hat was pulled low over his blood-shot brown eyes, and his mouth was slack. He didn't look drunk any more, but now his handsome face was distorted by hate and fear. He shoved the red-haired girl roughly aside and the twitchy smile on his lips faded. His face slowly went ashen.

"Damn you, Perk," Clye whispered. "You get it, too."

His big hand flashed for his pocket.

Stamos moved then. His body whipped smoothly forward in a long dive toward Clye. The big man struggled to get his hand from his pocket and finally came up with a gun. Stamos' flying body struck him at the same time.

Clye swore savagely. Stamos' fist lashed out and both men staggered, locked together and fell to the floor, rolling over. The girl sucked air and hugged the floor, her eyes wide.

Thorn's face was dead-white. He reached for the knife stuck in his left hand and braced himself, then quickly yanked it out. Blood welled from the deep wound. He paid no attention to it. Dropping the knife, he started for the two struggling men, his gun in his good right hand.

"Cut it!" he snapped. "Both of you!"

They didn't. With one accord both men separated and leaped for Thorn. His gun cracked and Charlie Clye staggered, spun around in a half circle and fell heavily against the wall. He stood like that, his breathing raw, clutching his shoulder.

Stamos suddenly lunged for the girl, his face convulsed with rage. Thorn's gun clicked empty.

The redhead slipped away smoothly from the gunman's blind rush. Her arm flashed out, her fingers closed on a vase, and it sailed through the air. It crashed hard on Stamos' head. The man staggered, dropped to one knee and then rose again, dazed.

Thorn hit him with his right, stepped back, hit him again with his right. Stamos dropped to both knees and lay down carefully on his face. His legs twitched for a little while.

TWENTY minutes later Thorn explained tiredly to McShain and the headquarters cop who had tailed Charlie Clye, in Thorn's wake. A police surgeon carefully bandaged his hand while he spoke.

"Charlie Clye is your murderer. He killed Amos Croyden and DeFrehn and his own wife, Natalie. It goes back to when he married Natalie in the hope that her father's wealth would come to him. But DeFrehn disowned the two of them and Clye was back where he had started from, without a job and with Natalie on his hands.

"He conceived of the plan to kidnap Amos Croyden, with Stamos' help, and got the viscose formula that DeFrehn needed so badly for his business. In the process of extracting the formula he happened to torture the old man to death. That was his first murder. He did that in the hope of forcing DeFrehn to accept him into partnership.

"But when he approached DeFrehn with the formula, the old man was horrified and called the cops. That's when I came in. Clye had to shut his mouth before he talked to me, and Clye killed him. That way he saved himself from exposure and stood to inherit the DeFrehn fortune through Natalie—and he kept the formula, to boot.

"Later, Natalie suspected the truth of her father's death and Clye killed her, too.

"The difficulty was that Stamos hadn't been paid since his assistance in the Croyden kidnaping. DeFrehn had refused to come through and Clye was as broke as before. Stamos couldn't rat on Clye without putting his own neck in a noose, so he planned to snatch DeFrehn and extort money from his daughter.

"Julie Croyden had seen her father going off with Stamos and she knew that Stamos had helped in her father's murder, although we couldn't prove it then because Stamos had bought himself an alibi. She took matters into her own hands, then, and played up to Stamos. She thought DeFrehn had been behind her father's death and the theft of the formula. So she fanned Stamos' plans to snatch DeFrehn, intending to double-cross Stamos at the last moment. When she found DeFrehn dead, she thought the Greek had done it and she opened the safe in order to get evidence to plant in his apartment. She aimed to put the Greek in the chair. She was quite willing to frame him for a murder she was certain he had committed. It was unethical, maybe, but then she never does the usual thing."

Thorn paused, looked at Julie Croyden, at her coppery hair and creamy skin and bright, wary eyes. There was a glow behind those eyes as she met his glance. They never left him. Her lips smiled involuntarily to his grin.

Thorn went on: "Stamos, figuring a double-cross, came here and waited for her, realizing she was framing him. And it was Julie who dropped me when I called you, Mac. She has a weakness for smashing vases. She still wanted to do a little sleuthing on her own. Unethical, as I said."

"Strictly," McShain grunted.

Thorn grinned slowly, and waved away the M.E. who was bandaging his hand. He said: "I want you to release her into my custody, Mac."

The girl was startled. Her eyes looked questioningly at Thorn, then jumped to Captain McShain. An impish flame replaced the defiance in her eyes.

McShain growled: "Hell, you're asking for a wildcat on your hands, Guy."

For an answer, Thorn crossed the room toward the girl, bent over and calmly kissed her. For the briefest moment the girl's eyes still flickered with rebellion—and then she made a soft little sound and her arms crept around Thorn's shoulders.

Thorn looked across at McShain's astonished face.

"Wildcats can be tamed," Thorn grinned. "You see?"



MURDER IN HIGH SOCIETY

By STEWART STERLING

One look at *la* Hettring and clipper-jawed Steve Koski figured the angle was "*cherchez-la-femme*." But in a High Society bump-off, a snazzy dame bats .000 in the murder-motive market.

A NIGHT breeze ruffled the waters of Long Island Sound; stars were diamond dust in a black velvet sky; police boat number nine, the *Alert*, bobbed comfortably along in the lee of the City

Island shore, its propeller barely turning over. Big, beet-complexioned Mulcahey, at the wheel, cocked an appreciative ear at the purring motor.

"The old girl is turning over a bit better

since the Maintenance Department took the permanent wave out of her piston rings, Steve."

"Wait till we've abused her a week or so, Sarge. Fishing stiffens out of the tide rips and shagging after junk boats. She'll begin grumbling again." The long-faced, weather-beaten man leaning his broad shoulders against the side of the pilot house pointed with his pipe-stem across the white-capped surface.

"What's that baby doing?"

Mulcahey squinted. Half a mile ahead, an excursion steamer swept grandly along, all lights ablaze. "Sure, what else would the night boat be doing but giving a crowd of vacationists a running start on their two weeks off?"

Steve Koski grunted: "Not the steamer, Irish. The other one. The sailboat."

The sergeant peered through the wind-shield again, saw a white hull heeling over to the breeze, cutting straight across the steamer channel.

"There's a blind man at her helm or else somebody is aiming to collect collision insurance. They will be meeting practically head-on, Steve!"

"Rev'er up," muttered Koski. "All you gut!"

Mulcahey swung a lever on a quadrant—the hundred and eighty horses under the motor hatch shuddered and thundered their response. The *Alert* lifted its nose and took a seething bone of froth in its teeth. A hundred yards away, the deep-throated whistle of the steamer bellowed a frantic protest at the sailboat, sheered off desperately. But it was too late.

Keeping straight on its suicidal course, the yacht smashed headlong into the excursion boat's starboard bow, slammed into the steamer's lower-deck railings with a rending of fabric and a splintering of wood.

The sailboat's foremast snapped with a sound like a cannon shot. Then the excursion boat had swept past, majestically, into the night. In its wake a badly battered yacht staggered over on its beam ends.

THE *Alert* closed in without slackening speed. Koski made a flying leap, caught at sagging shrouds, dropped into the sailboat's cockpit. There was no one

on deck. No one answered his gruff shout down the open hatch.

Mulcahey craned his neck over the *Alert's* side.

"What happens, Steve?"

Koski shouted: "Doesn't seem to be anybody about, Sarge. Snake a line out from your towing bitts. We'll have to haul this tub home." He went below.

There were plenty of signs of occupancy. In the tiny forecabin a duffle bag of sailor's belongings, an enlarged snapshot of a baby playing with a sailor's hat. On the white canvas of the hat was stitched the lettering:

S-E-A—S-A-W
New York

In the main cabin he found an ashtray with a half-smoked cigar. A coffee pot was still warm on the galley stove. A cup and saucer on a cork-bottom tray still had some dregs in them. No yachtsman would bother to take his own coffee up to the cockpit on a tray, but a paid hand would have used such a tray in serving his skipper. That, Koski reasoned, meant there had been two men aboard. One man couldn't have handled a yacht of this size alone, anyway, he knew.

On a teakwood grating at the foot of the ladder leading to the deck, the Harbor Squad's number one trouble-shooter saw something red and sticky. He put a finger to it; frowned. Then he lifted up one of the floor-boards; scowled at what he saw.

He climbed to the cockpit; got down on hands and knees; saw where the planking had been recently scrubbed clean. . . .

The sergeant did things, up at the bow, with a coil of inch manila. "'Tis the first time in my long and cockeyed career I ever knew of a runaway yacht smacking into one of the Sound steamers."

Koski's face hardened in the dim light from the yawl's binnacle. "Runaway, hell! There were a couple of lads aboard here, five minutes ago."

The big Irishman clambered aft. "For one man to fall overboard is not so unusual, Steve. But for two to do such a thing simultaneous, is too much of a coincidence."

From the *Alert* sounded the keening "ee-e-ek ee-e-ek" of the marine division

short-wave signal. Koski growled: "Probably be for us, Sarge."

Mulcahey lumbered forward, laboriously got across to the patrol boat's deck. He tuned up the amplifier so Koski could hear the announcer at Pier One:

"*Calling number nine . . . Harbor Squad headquarters calling the Alert. Be on lookout for yacht Sea-Saw . . . gone adrift off Stepping Stones light near main ship channel. Owner, Raoul Hettring of the Corinthian Yacht Club, reports deck-hand Charles Todd knocked overboard by jibbing boom about half a mile east-southeast City Island point, approximately eleven-fifteen pee-em. That is all.*"

Mulcahey bellowed: "Hear that?"

"I heard it." Koski yanked loose some of the folds of the reefed mainsail. "But I don't believe it. Twist the old girl's tail, Sarge. We've got business over at the Corinthian."

Mulcahey objected. "Them instructions was to look around, Steve. Maybe that sailor is still afloat."

The crack plainclothesman of the Harbor Squad set his jaw grimly:

"He must be a hell of a swimmer then, Irish. He'd have to keep his head above water all this time with a fifty-pound hunk of ballast tied to his feet."

II

THE sergeant lifted his eyebrows, made his mouth into an astonished O. Then he ducked back into the pilot-house and made the patrol boat's exhaust roar.

On board the *Sea-Saw*, Koski found things as they should have been if the yacht had suffered a sudden jibe in a gust of wind. Suppose the helmsman had been standing up when that quarter-ton boom swung across the cockpit like a giant bat—he'd have gone overside, all right. Like as not the man at the tiller would have had his brains knocked out. But there was that peculiar, greasy red smear on the grating below. At first, Koski had thought it was blood, but it wasn't! Also, he had found a freshly-cut end on a coil of half-inch rope on the aft deck. That settled it.

The gayly-illuminated clubhouse of the *Corinthian* emerged from behind the point. The Harbor Squad's number-one trouble-shooter went forward.

From the cloud of spray and exhaust-steam veiling the *Alert's* stern, Mulcahey shouted:

"This Hettring kid, Steve. He'd be the playboy, now?"

Koski called: "Guess so. I only know what I read in the papers."

"You must have seen Hettring's puss on page one every so often, Steve. He got himself heaved out of college for marrying some bubble dancer, as I recall."

Koski freed an anchor chain. "No law against that, Irish. Come on—cast off. It's too shallow to run this yawl to the float. I'll drop her hook about here. Come alongside and pick me up."

The tow-line came free; the anchor splashed down into twenty feet of water. The *Sea-Saw* swung lazily to the tide. As the police boat circled back, Koski stepped to its deck from the yacht.

"Drop me at the club float, Sarge. Then come back here and tie up to the *Sea-Saw*. Nobody comes aboard—but *nobody!*"

Mulcahey nodded solemnly. "You must of forgot something, Steve."

"What?"

"Your tuck-seeder and vanilla pants. You do not aim to mix around with the high life, garbed in ordinary store clothes?"

The harbor detective grinned tightly. "I'm just a low-life, Sarge. After the low-down." He leaped for the float.

A tall, stoop-shouldered, bespectacled youth in slacks and sweater ran down the gangway.

"You sure got here quick," he cried. "I only phoned the alarm in five minutes ago."

Koski eyed him coldly. "You Raoul Hettring?"

The thin youth seemed surprised. "Not at all. I'm his cousin, Bill Garland."

"How'd you know about this . . . accident . . . on the yacht?"

Garland made an impatient gesture. "Raoul told me, of course."

"Where is he?"

"Over on the *Regallo*, our uncle's cruiser. I just came in from there, to telephone."

"Okay," said Steve. "You can run me right back out there."

Garland jumped into a squat rowboat with an outboard motor in its stern.

"Hey!" he pointed excitedly to the anchored *Sea-Saw*, "you picked her up already. You guys certainly work fast."

Koski said: "That's what we get paid for. Why didn't your cousin send in his own alarm? Or do you usually run his errands?"

Garland pulled a cord; the motor buzzed like a hornet. "Raoul was shot to hell and gone—he'd been rowing steady for three-quarters of an hour. Looking for Todd. He just managed to get to the *Regallo*. . . don't believe he could've made the clubhouse under his own steam."

The float slid astern. They rushed through the moored fleet, toward the yellow-glowing portholes of a sleekly streamlined power cruiser. Behind them throbbed the sensuous pulse of a Hawaiian dance band; from the anchored yachts came bursts of singing and laughter. But Koski's mind was on other things. Out where the Stepping Stones light glared greenly over the ship channel, a sailor lay on the bottom at the mercy of the eels and crabs. . . .

THE outboard ceased spluttering; the dinghy coasted up to a companionway platform. Above the rail Koski saw a sharp, sallow face with a curved beak of a nose and small black eyes under fierce, shaggy brows and a polished egg-shell of a skull. The man was peering overside with the somber sullenness of a vulture.

"Uncle Clem," called Garland, excitedly, "the cops already picked up the *Sea-Saw*."

"So I see," murmured Clement Hettring.

Koski got up the gangway to the *Regallo's* deck. "You don't see Charles Todd, though," he growled. "We didn't pick him up."

"That," the bald man's face didn't alter its expression, "is most unfortunate, but—"

Koski cut him short: "Where's Raoul?"

Garland pointed to the lounge aft deck. "There. Lying down. I told you he was all in—"

Koski didn't wait to hear the rest. He strode aft. Garland ran ahead to a husky blond youth sprawling sloppily on a wicker chaise-longue. His face was drawn and lined with worry; his right hand clutched the neck of a whiskey bottle resting on

the deck beside his chair. There was no glass.

"Raoul!" cried Garland, excitedly. "The police found the *Sea-Saw*. She's dismantled."

The boy in the chair lifted the quart to his lips, drank without taking his eyes from his cousin. "Ah-h-h," he breathed, letting the bottle trail to the deck. "Who cares . . . 'bout *Shee-Shaw*? Only thing mattersh . . . whatsh happen t' Charlie. . . ."

"They didn't find Todd, Raoul." Garland grabbed for the whiskey, wrenched the bottle out of young Hettring's grasp. "You've got to cut out the dipso stuff, Raoul—there's a detective here who wants to ask you some questions." He bent lower, whispered into the blond youth's ear.

"Nutsh," Raoul muttered thickly. "Don' have t' be careful, Bill. Hell with that shtuff. Let'm come—ask anything they damn well want. . . ." He put a palm on Garland's chest, pushed him away, clumsily.

Garland swore in disgust, turned and hurled the liquor overside. Koski stepped up to Raoul's chair. The boy stank like a bar-room at closing.

"Up on your feet, rum-dum," snapped the Harbor detective, "and tell me what happened out there on your ship."

The boy made no move to get up. "Didn' Bill tell you?" he mumbled thickly. "But should've tol' you." He made an attempt to stand up, gave it up, sank back into the chair. "I was down b'low; Charlie was shpell—spelling me at the tiller." He hic-coughed. "Wind blew up; we jibed, and Zowie!—when I got up on deck, no shight of Charlie."

"You're a liar!" Koski reached down, got the knot of Raoul's necktie in his fist, brought him up snarling. At the harbor detective's back, Clement clutched fiercely at the plainclothesman's arm:

"Keep your hands off the boy. He's had a bad time of it. I won't stand for any of your bulldozing flatfoot tactics."

Koski shook him off with a jerk of his elbow. "If you think this is bulldozing, wait 'til you see what I'm going to do to him if he doesn't come clean!"

Raoul swung a roundhouse right at the detective's chin. Koski moved his head two inches; let the blow slip. Then his

arm shot out. He grabbed a handful of blond hair, jerked the boy close to him.

"Maybe you'll cut out the horsing, when I tell you you're under arrest! On a charge of murder!"

III

RAOUL sobered; made a ludicrous effort at squaring his shoulders and standing straight.

"Who do you think you are—come on board here, make a charge like that? You haven't made any investigation; you haven't got any warrant. Guess where you give me a pain!"

Koski's eyes narrowed. "You hollered for cops, Hettring—now you got 'em."

Raoul struggled in the plainclothesman's grip. Koski got his rawboned frame behind the husky youth, and muscled his wrists up back of his shoulder blades. The bald-headed man had backed away. He stood between Koski and the gangway. He yelled:

"All hands! Aft, here . . . come a-running!"

There was a pounding of feet forward, a rush of white-uniformed sailors. There were four of them. One brandished a long, heavy boathook, the others gripped short lengths of three-inch cable, with huge knots in the end.

With his free hand, Koski got the police positive out of his hip holster: "Come and get it," he said in his throat. "You'll have a bellyache, if you do."

"Get that man!" Clement howled at them. "Heave him overboard!"

The *Regallo's* crew spread out, closed in on him cautiously. Koski stuck out a foot, pushed Raoul sharply—tripped him to the deck.

Garland, who had been standing quietly near the rail, cried out sharply: "You can't get away with that kind of stuff, officer." He rushed at Koski, swinging wildly.

The man from the Harbor Squad smashed Garland on the chops with a short-arm jolt. He ducked as the heavy pole of the boat-hook came flailing down at them. The pole missed Koski and struck Garland back of the ear, dropping him as if he'd been hit with a sledge hammer.

Koski lunged. He grasped the bald-

headed man's belt buckle and pulled Clement close to him.

"Call off your dogs!" The detective lashed out with the barrel of his pistol, brought it smartly across the older Hettring's knee-cap. "Be quick about it. Next time I clip you there it'll be with a .45 slug and it'll be six months before you can walk again."

Clement moaned: "Back up, boys. Leave him alone. Never mind me."

The sailors retreated, sullenly.

Koski angled his revolver so it covered Raoul, who was on hands and knees.

"All right, Rollo. Get up. And down. Into that rowboat."

The youth obeyed, groggily.

"Raoul hasn't killed anybody," Clement groaned, nursing his knee. "You're making a mistake. You'll pay for it."

"Somebody's going to pay for a mistake that's been made." The plainclothesman bent over Garland and felt the lump on the narrow skull. "You try interfering with the law again and I'll see that the Grand Jury takes care of you. Better put this lad down in his bunk. He hasn't got a fracture, but he may be out for a while." He strode down to the rowboat. "Another thing, Hettring. I'm not through with you, yet. If you know what's good for you, you'll stay on board till I come back."

He clambered down into the stern sheets of the rowboat, got the motor stuttering. Raoul sat, dejected, on the forward thwart, head in his hands.

"That the dink you claim you rowed around in for three-quarters of an hour?" Koski pointed to a tiny six-foot canvas dinghy tied to the *Regallo's* rail.

"Yeah." The blond boy didn't seem to expect belief.

WHEN they reached the sailboat, Koski forced Raoul to clamber aboard first. Then the detective tied the rowboat to the *Sea-Saw's* stern, vaulted over the rail.

The police boat lay bow-to-bow with the yacht. Mulcahey was straddling the *Alert's* gunwale, dangling an automatic from his trigger finger.

"'Lo, Steve," he indicated the prisoner. "Who you got there?"

Koski grunted: "The owner. He's been

trying to kid me he's drunk. He isn't kidding me about the story he gave me on what happened on this yawl, though." He turned to young Hettring. "How about leveling a little? Or is it a case of incriminating yourself?"

Raoul grunted: "I told you how it was."

"You're a liar," Koski snapped. "Either you killed Todd yourself or—"

The boy licked dry lips. "Swear to Heaven I didn't—"

Koski pointed the muzzle of the gun toward the clean spots on the cockpit flooring. "No? There was blood there. Who washed it off?"

Raoul said nothing.

The detective pulled loose a fold of the heavy canvas mainsail. There was a hole the size of a lead pencil in the fabric, about six inches above the boom.

"Bullet hole," he said, curtly. "Made tonight. Rest of the canvas is faded gray with salt air, edges of the hole are still white. The guy who made that bullet hole missed Todd—the first time. I'd guess he made the second shot good."

Raoul's face was covered with tiny glistening beads of sweat. "I didn't have anything to do with any shooting. I never knew that hole was there."

The plainclothesman herded him below. "There must have been a hell of a lot going on around here, then. Let's see if you can figure out who took up the floorboard here? Or why?"

The yacht-owner didn't look at the floorboards. He shook his head.

"All right, stew-bum." Koski pushed him down onto a bunk. "After you shot your deck-hand, you planned to heave his body overside, let him rot on the bottom. . . ."

"No, no. You're all wrong." Raoul sagged back against a port light.

"Well, anyway, you dragged out a hunk of ballast that had been painted with red lead." Koski touched the greasy spot. "What'd you use to lash it to Todd's feet? That fresh-cut half-inch line?"

Raoul looked sick to his stomach. "I dumped him overboard," he admitted, dully. "But I didn't shoot him."

The Harbor Squad man jammed a clenched fist under Raoul's chin and forced it up.

"Who did, then?"

"I don't know," Raoul mumbled. "I didn't see it. I was below, here. Charlie was taking the stick for a few minutes. All of a sudden, I heard a speedboat come roaring right up close under our stern. Then there were a couple of shots. I beat it up on deck. Charlie was lying there, dead."

Koski laughed harshly. "Your own lawyer wouldn't believe that. The mysterious lug out of the night who locates a strange yacht in the dark, murders an in-offensive little deck-hand and vanishes like Houdini." He wagged the gun in Raoul's face. "If you're giving me the McCoy, why didn't you leave Todd's body alone and holler for help, instead of weighting him down with pig-iron and heaving him over?"

Raoul shivered. "I didn't dare to . . . on account of the revolver."

"What revolver?"

"Mine."

"All right," Koski complained in disgust. "If you're going to give me this double-talk—"

"I had a gun on board. Loaded. I was going to use it to protect myself. Now it's gone. It isn't here, anywhere . . . and if it turns out that that's the gun Charlie was shot with—"

Koski smiled sourly. "You didn't kill your own deck-hand, but you were gunning for someone. Who—and why?"

TEARS of self-pity came into Hettring's eyes. "I didn't say I intended to shoot anyone. I had the gun—just in case the Count started anything."

The Harbor Squad man gestured impatiently. "Am I supposed to know all your visiting firemen? Who is this Count you claim is so dangerous?"

Raoul sighed wearily. "He's the world's champion louse. The rat who's been fooling around with Lola. Lola's my . . ." he hesitated . . . "my wife."

"Oh—that's the picture? Couldn't stand a little competition, so you decided to snap the switch on the other guy?"

"No," Raoul corrected him. "The other way 'round. I heard he was planning to fix my wagon. You see, tomorrow morning my lawyers start suit for divorce. They'll name Dufour. Lola found out about it. She told Bill Garland that if I

went through with it, the Count would kill me. Maybe you think that's the old bunk. You wouldn't if you knew Dufour. He's one of these excitement crazy foreigners who gets a kick out of risking his neck a dozen times a week, anyway. Flying, motorboat racing. . . ."

"Where's this hell-raiser now? Any reason to think he's around here?"

Raoul inclined his head wearily toward the clubhouse on shore. "Evidence of my own eyes. He's at the dance there. With Lola. That's why I was out sailing. I just couldn't take it anymore."

Koski seemed puzzled. He stepped to the foot of the companionway.

"Mulcahey," he called. "Run the *Alert* into the float. Pick up Mrs. Lola Hettring. Bring her out here. And if you happen to get a peek at a gent named Dufour—Count Dufour—yank him along with you."

Mulcahey said: "On my way!" A moment later Number Nine roared away from the side of the *Sea-Saw*.

"Let's get it straight." Koski returned to the blond youth. "You say someone got wise to this gun you had on board."

"Lola knew where it was. She was the only one who did. Except maybe—" Raoul paused, his forehead puckered.

"Maybe who . . .?" Koski wanted to know.

"Well, I just happened to think. The only other person—"

There was a deafening explosion. A finger of livid orange stabbed at Hettring from an open porthole.

Before Koski could catch him, Raoul had collapsed to the floor.

There was a round hole a quarter of an inch above Hettring's left eye. A single drop of blood began to ooze down the dead man's forehead.

IV

KOSKI made the deck in two jumps. There was a loud splash in the water off to port. He angled his gun that way. He saw nothing to shoot at—only a circle of ripples on the calm surface of the anchorage.

He whirled to starboard. There was nothing near the *Sea-Saw* except the rowboat, astern. But the rowboat's position

was somehow wrong—it was off to one side, not trailing directly astern from the line Koski had made fast. It was drifting!

The plainclothesman sprang for the rigging; climbed up the shrouds so he could look down into the slowly-moving small-boat. It wasn't empty!

It was too dark to see clearly, but there was something dark huddled on the bottom boards. Koski bent his knees, swung his arms straight out full length before him and left the rat-lines in a long, shallow dive.

He came up ten feet from the rowboat's bow, reached up and grabbed the gunwale. Something glittered momentarily. There was a smashing blow across his hand. It paralyzed his fingers. He let go; sank beneath the surface. When he came up, he was a couple of yards beyond the stern. He porpoised; reached above his head while he was still under water; made a grab to get hold of the outboard motor. He missed.

The outboard didn't. It chattered violently, churned the water into a white froth.

The detective made another desperate leap, high out of the water. He caught the stern of the boat; began to haul himself up and over. He had a brief glimpse of a hand that shot up to the rudder handle of the motor and swung it around in a half-circle.

The rowboat stopped its forward motion and began to slide backward toward Koski, forcing him down under the boat . . . pushing his legs relentlessly into the slashing propeller blades. He twisted himself in the water like a fish fighting to get free of the hook. . . .

It was no use. A savage pain bit across his thighs, an agony like the knifing teeth of a shark. Then he was driven far under the surface. The boat passed over him and roared off into the darkness.

He fought his way up, lungs bursting; gasped in air that stung like nettles. He could still use his legs—that meant none of the tendons had been severed. But the salt water burned venomously in the raw wound. He shook his head to clear it of the numbing effect of the pain and then lashed out for shore.

He could hear the brittle staccato of

the outboard, circling far off. The wailing strains of steel guitars came plaintively across the water. . . .

The murderer was making a mistake if he figured Koski was out of the running now. The plainclothesman gritted his teeth. If he could swim, he could walk. If he could walk, he could fight. . . .

He muscled himself up on the canvas float. Under the pier light the water dripping to the canvas under his feet looked like pink champagne. The legs of his trousers had been practically ripped off, a couple of inches above the knees. His thighs were badly lacerated, but he couldn't take time to have a doctor look after them now. . . .

The *Alert* was still tied to the float. Koski hoisted himself painfully over the rail; used the first-aid kit that was kept in the pilot-house. He was climbing into a dry pair of pants when he heard Mulcahey's voice, up at the head of the runway leading from the clubhouse.

"You'll go along, now," the sergeant was roaring, "and you'll like it. I have my orders. I'll either carry them out, or you. Mosey on, now."

Koski put his head out of the cabin. The sergeant was herding a woman down the gangway toward the float. She was a slinky brunette with a dead white complexion and heavily mascaraed eyes. She wore something low-cut and tight-fitting, covered with sequins of electric blue. She came shimmering down the sloping gangplank with an undulating hip motion. She looked as if she could bite the heads off ten-penny nails.

The sergeant saw his partner. "Love of the Lord, Steve. How did you get in off the yacht?"

"Swam, Sarge. Had to see Mrs. Hettring in a hurry." Koski looked somber.

The girl snarled. "Is this a pinch, dumb cop?"

"It might be," the detective said. "Unless you give me some real straight talk about that killing out on your husband's yacht."

"Killing?" She was startled. "Who's dead?"

"Deck-hand named Charlie Todd. Know him?"

"Yes, I knew Charlie, copper." Her head drooped over one shoulder. Her eyes

were sly. "And I know something else, too, now."

"Give!"

She arched her eyebrows, sneered:

"Somebody killed the wrong man."

V

KOSKI stretched out a hand. "Come aboard, Mrs. Hettring. Sorry—we don't have any fancy ladders on patrol boats." He hauled her onto the *Alert*, motioned the sergeant to take the wheel, run her out to the sailboat. "Now, what's this gag about the wrong man, Mrs. Hettring?"

She lounged back against the deck-house, took a cigarette out of her silver mesh-bag, waited arrogantly for Koski to proffer a match.

"It's simple enough, isn't it? Somebody meant to kill Raoul. Not Charlie."

"How you figure that?" The police boat began to gather speed.

She blew smoke at the plainclothesman insolently. "Nobody had any reason to hurt Charlie. Somebody had a good reason for shooting Raoul. And—" she twisted up one corner of her lips, "Charlie looked a lot like my husband—at night in a cockpit, anyway."

The detective thought fast. It might be true. If the murderer had expected to find Raoul at the tiller and had seen a figure of the same general size and build. . . .

"Why would anybody want to kill your husband?"

She held her hand up in front of her eyes, rubbed thumb and forefinger together.

The detective was grim. "This is a confession?"

"No," she said blandly. "I hate Raoul—there've been plenty of times I've wanted him dead. But I wouldn't go to all that trouble. It would be too easy to do it according to Hoyle. He's given me a thousand excuses. I could shoot him any day in the week—show the jury the black and blue marks he makes on me when he's drunk. They'd probably vote me a medal."

The police boat nosed in beside the *Sea-Saw*. Wordlessly, Koski got her arm, led her onto the sailboat, down into cabin. . . .

Lola got as far as the second step of the companionway when she saw the body; went rigid. She stood, for several sec-

onds, like a statue. Then her shoulders shook; her breasts quivered, she burst into harsh, shrieking laughter.

He got her by the shoulders, shook her—hard.

"He did it, after all." She giggled a little. "He tried again—and this time he did it."

"If you're accusing someone," growled Koski, "say so. Don't carry on like a half-wit."

She went over to the corpse; stood looking down at it, hard-faced. "Of course, I'm accusing somebody. The man who's been handling Raoul's estate," her eyes slitted, "—or mishandling it."

"That prissy cousin with the goggles? Garland?"

"Don't be a stupe," Lola said scornfully. "Bill Garland's too much interested in his stamp collection and amateur photography. I doubt if he even knows they make bills in any other color than green. Bill's never had a dime and never given a damn, as far as I know. His uncle's taken good care of that."

"Oh." Koski led her along. "You mean the uncle did the dirty work. Clement, huh?"

"Dear old Clem," she purred. "Good old Clem. Never wanted Raoul to be 'bothered' about finances. Always insisted on clipping my husband's coupons himself. Well—" Lola shrugged, bitterly. "Clem'll clip all of them, now."

"What you mean? You'll be taken care of, won't you?"

"Not by darling Clem, I won't. He hates the sight of me. Oh, he might pay through the nose to make sure I don't stir up a stink—but I don't get any part of the Hettring estate." She blinked her eyes and scowled, as if in pain.

Koski pointed to the porthole. "Shot came through there. Person who fired it stood in a rowboat outside that port. You say it was Clement. Saying so doesn't put you in the clear. I'll have to know where you were, the last hour or so. . . ."

Mrs. Hettring bit her lips. "I've been with Count Dufour."

"Where?"

"On his little speedboat."

Koski was curt. "I'll check that. Until I do, maybe you can tell me what you did with your husband's gun. The one

you took out of the cabin, here. Or is that one of the things you wouldn't care to discuss until you see your lawyer?"

LOLA put a hand to her throat, rubbed it slowly. "I never touched Raoul's gun—I wouldn't know how to use one if I had it. I'm afraid of the damn things."

"Um. How about the Count—he afraid of a gun, too?"

"Why don't you ask him?" She bared her teeth in a grimace of defiance. "What good does it do me, or the Count, to have Raoul dead? I can't get alimony from a corpse. It's a cinch I'll have been cut out of Raoul's will. He was going to divorce me, anyway—so there wasn't any need to worry about that. And Dufour has all the money I'll need, anyhow. . . ."

Koski's voice was ugly. "You rich dolls are all the same. You're thinking about your own skins—how much money you can get without working for it. It doesn't matter to you what happens to the innocent bystander. Well—I'm *thinking about Charlie Todd!* And that poor mugg's kid, who'll have no father because of some filthy finagling by one of your society scum!" He went angrily over to the dish-rack and took something out of a tin can. "Let's go get it over with. I'll have to see this glamour-guy of yours." He shoved her up on deck; got her aboard Number Nine. "Show us where his speedboat's moored."

She pointed to the other end of the anchorage. Mulcahey twirled the spokes. The police boat began to growl.

"There it is," she muttered presently, "—but the Count isn't there."

He wasn't. There wasn't anyone on board the narrow mahogany runabout. Koski sprang lightly down onto the rubber guard-mat; crawled forward; passed a line up to Mulcahey.

"Tie her astern," he ordered gruffly. "And hike her over to the *Regallo*. It wouldn't surprise me to find that the Count might be trying to make a deal with Uncle Clement."

KOSKI stayed on board the speedboat; went over it from stem to stern. The crust of salt on the polished deck said the boat had been out of the anchorage that evening. The hot oil in the motor base verified it. The plainclothesman opened

the gas tank, examined the batteries, searched for a weapon and found none.

As the police-boat and its tow pulled alongside the *Regallo*, three men lined up at the rail on the big cruiser's aft deck. Clement was one, Garland another—the third man was a dark, handsome individual of middle age, with a distinguished bearing and a neatly waxed mustache.

"Dufour!" cried Lola. "Raoul's dead."

The three men stared suspiciously at each other. Then the lean, stooped-over figure of Bill Garland faced the Count, angrily. There were hot, crackling curses in the air before Clement stepped quickly between the two younger men. The bald-headed man was still calm and unruffled.

"Dead? He was all right when Bill and I saw this officer take him away, half an hour ago. What happened, Lola?"

It was Koski who answered. "Shot. Through a porthole on the *Sea-Saw*. Thirty-eight caliber gun used. By somebody who knew how to shoot."

"But why?" Garland cried. "—Why would anybody want to kill Raoul?"

Koski climbed to the companionway, shoving the girl before him. "To shut his mouth," he said curtly. "He was just about to tell me who put a slug into Charlie Todd."

Clement Kettring rubbed his chin, moodily. "I can't imagine Raoul saying anything that would have been . . . ah . . . really significant—in that connection. He'd already admitted to me that he knew absolutely nothing—"

"Yeah." Koski's eyes were as cold as an undertaker's night bell. "He knew something. He knew who had pinched his gun. The gun Todd was shot with."

Lola caught at the Count's sleeve. "This cop thinks you stole the gun and killed Raoul for his money—"

Dufour laughed harshly. "Ha! His money. Why would I need it . . . ?"

Clement snapped, bitterly: "Why, indeed, Count? By the terms of the arrangement you'd just concluded with me, you would receive a very sizable sum—which I agreed to, merely to save Raoul . . . and the Kettring good name . . . from possible embarrassment. Now—under the unhappy circumstances—such an . . . ah . . . arrangement . . . will, of course, be unnecessary."

The Count bowed stiffly. "Naturally. Naturally." He turned to Lola, but Bill Garland clamped a hand on Dufour's shoulder, swung the other around to face him squarely.

"You didn't *intend* to make any such arrangement, Count. You knew you didn't have to. I don't know how you killed Raoul, but I know you did. You've been planning it for days—ever since you and Lola started to put something over on him."

Dufour scowled savagely. "For that, my young fool, you will give me satisfaction." He slapped the back of his hand across Garland's teeth with a sound like the breaking of a stick.

Garland struck at him, blind with rage. The Harbor Squad detective got behind the boy, put an arm around his throat, pulled his head back. Garland cursed, chokingly.

Koski released him, with a contemptuous shove. "Break it up, break it up. I'll do any rough-housing that has to be done. Now, Count Dufour—I'd like to get a fair answer to one question."

The foreigner stood very straight, clicked his heels. "*Service*, sir."

"You ever take any of the Kettrings out on your speedboat?"

"No. Except, naturally," the Count's chin lifted, "Lola."

"Okay." Koski turned his back on the three men, called to Mulcahey. "Let me have those print films, Sarge. The ones I made on the speedboat. And our print comparison outfit."

The Irishman goggled. "In the name of all that's holy, Steve—"

Koski went on, explaining to the others: "We've got prints of the man who ran that speedboat out off Stepping Stones light, tonight—the one who chased Raoul and Todd in the *Sea-Saw* and shot Todd by accident, mistaking him for Raoul. I'll check those with the prints of everyone here—"

But he didn't finish. There was a shout from Clement. Bill Garland raced to the stern of the *Regallo*, vaulted up and over the taffrail—down onto the forward deck of the speedboat.

Flame stabbed out of the darkness from his automatic. Lead spattered the cruiser's deck-house. Then the great motor in the

speedboat exploded into action. The mahogany craft rushed away in a smother of foam.

VI

KOSKI shouted to Mulcahey: "Get 'er going, Irish!" and dived head-first over the cruiser's rail into the *Alert's* cockpit. The police boat swung about in a thundering half-circle. The sergeant said: "That thing he's in makes sixty or better, Steve. We'll never catch him in this world."

Koski snapped: "Hang on his tail. Don't lose him. I gave him the chance to get away, on purpose. I don't want to muck it up."

The Irishman shook his head. "I will not be kidding myself I know what you're talking about. You know well we have no photographs of fingerprints on number nine—not so much as a camera."

The crack man of the Harbor Squad smiled tightly. "He thought we did, Sarge. That's all that mattered. I had to get him to show his hand, make a break."

They roared on, past the point. Mulcahey kept the *Alert's* bow on the rapidly receding stern of the speedboat.

"Why would the man be killing his own cousin, Steve?"

"For dough, Irish. He's one of the principal heirs. And old Clement hadn't been very lenient with Garland, in the matter of money. The boy saw Raoul tossing it around like cigarette coupons and thought it would be fun to do the same. Only way he could get it was to have Raoul dead. So. . . ."

Mulcahey sighed: "Still and all, I don't see—"

Koski gestured impatiently. "Raoul probably told him about bringing suit for divorce. So Garland had it figured out that if his cousin was murdered, everyone would suspect Lola—or her boy-friend. I did, too—for a while. His faking that knockout back there on deck. . . ."

Mulcahey pointed ahead. "Look, Steve! He's stopped!"

"Watch it, Sarge. Don't get too close. That crumb can shoot. He got Hettring dead center with a snapshot, through that

porthole, while he was standing on the thwart of that dinghy."

THE speedboat rolled heavily in the choppy waters, its motor dead. The policeboat circled. Bullets smashed the deckhouse windows over Mulcahey's head. Koski lay full-length on the forward deck and pumped lead at the speedboat's water line. The *Alert* circled closer and closer. The Sergeant called: "He's sinking, Steve!"

"Better call it a day, punk. You might live another six months, if you get a good lawyer," Koski shouted. "This way, you'll be under water in a minute."

Garland's spectacles glinted in the *Alert's* running light. He pulled the trigger of his gun again. It didn't fire. With a snarl of rage he hurled it into the water.

"I sure . . . will," he gasped. "You won't . . . have the . . . fun of . . . watching me . . . go to the . . . chair."

Waves lapped over the speedboat's side. The bow dipped under. Garland pointed to his left wrist—it was lashed to the steering wheel of the doomed craft.

"Heaven above!" murmured Mulcahey. "He's going down with it."

Koski stripped off his coat, stepped to the rail for a dive. But the stern of the speedboat lifted; the nose slipped quietly under the waves. Koski watched until Garland's head had disappeared. Then he leaned wearily on the deckhouse.

Mulcahey wiped his face on his uniform sleeve. "One thing I will have to know. You knew his motor was going to stop, Steve. How did you figure it?"

Koski's voice was tired. "Thought he might try a getaway like that. Hoped he would. Best evidence we could get against him. So I put a few lumps of sugar in the gas tank."

The sergeant goggled. "Mother of saints! Sugar! 'Twould gum up the feed-line, clog the carburetor. . . ."

The Harbor Squad detective sighed. "Yeah. It worked, Irish. But I never figured it would wind up . . . just this way."

A great bubble burst from the surface, making a little fountain of spray.

In the police-boat's red running light, it looked like a bubble of blood.



DEAD MEN DO TALK!

By GILBERT K. GRIFFITHS

"Dead men—and dames—don't talk!" snarled big-noise Joe Cass. But superstitious Eddie Kirk wasn't so sure!

FOR a brief moment, a ray of hope replaced the stark terror on the trembling girl's face, but a minute later she sank back in utter hopelessness. She had sharp ears, and she could hear most of what the two gangsters in the next

room were saying—enough to know what was happening.

"I don't care whether they're bulls or not," the one she knew as Joe was saying. "We ain't gonna have no nosey guys snoop-in' round here. . . . Eddie, get that type-

writer from downstairs. An' keep away from the windows."

"Wh-what you figuring on doing, Joe?" Eddie Kirk asked nervously.

"Do as I say, dope. So long as these gees are alive, they're plenty dangerous. But stiffs can't do you nothing—not even dead cops."

The girl moaned. For a moment she had hoped that she might be rescued, but now she knew that the gangsters would take no chances. They would shoot first, then ask questions.

In the other room Joe Cass, standing well back from the second floor window, was watching the approaching car through binoculars. It was only the second car, apart from their own, that the two gunmen had seen on the dirt road during the whole time they had been there.

Joe Cass speculated on the identity of the big touring car. It might contain cops, which meant prison for the rest of their lives; or it might hold emissaries of Tony Scappi, who had reason to be gunning for Joe. Even if it contained innocent strangers, it still was suspect. They could not afford to have anybody know that they were there—they or the girl.

Eddie lumbered back in the stairs, cradling the tommy-gun. He came into the room, panting a little, and stared out of the window anxiously.

When the car reached the part of the road where the trail led to the cottage, it slowed. Left to himself, Eddie would have been all for fleeing to the woods back of the cottage, leaving the girl behind. But flight was not Joe's way. There on the road were three men who spelled possible danger to him. But, as with any other enemies or potential witnesses against him, they would be harmless if they were dead. Therefore, the only problem would be to kill them. The tommy-gun would take care of that. It was all very simple, according to Joe's philosophy.

THE men in the car looked toward the cottage, and the machine came to a stop. Eddie licked his lips nervously, but after a moment—apparently because they saw no signs of life there—they proceeded along the dirt road. Eddie heaved a loud sigh of relief. The girl in the next room sobbed a little. The gunmen watched the

car out of sight but stayed at their vantage point, lest the car return.

Eddie whined: "I don't like it, Joe. I tell you I don't like it. The snatch racket ain't healthy, anyway—though I ain't beefing about what's done. What I mean is no good ever come to no one who double-crossed a guy. It's bad luck, I tell you."

Eddie had "muscle man" written all over him. He had a slight cast to one eye, and his face was big, ugly and rather vacuous-looking.

"Shut up!" Joe Cass snapped. "We haven't pulled a double-cross. The old guy should have coughed up with the dough right away, instead of stalling. I asked for a hundred grand at first, but we woulda took as little as fifty grand for a quick pay-off. It's the old guy who is trying to double-cross us, if you ask me."

"But he swears he ain't got the dough," Eddie Kirk objected. "He give us the eighteen grand, like he promised, an' he didn't call in no bulls. We should oughta have let the skirt go, like we told him we would, an' then beat it. He says he's up against it. If we crowd him too close, it's a cinch he'll call copper on us."

Joe Cass looked across at his companion and sneered. What a come-down, he was thinking, that he, Joe Cass, former big-time gang noise, should have to tie up with a stupid, two-bit, punk like Eddie. Unfortunately, Joe's own gang was not available. Those members who were not in jail were in pine boxes underground, as a result of lead poisoning.

"What's ailin' you? Gettin' cold feet?" Joe demanded. "The old guy's got the dough all right. He just hates to give—see? First he swears he can't get up more than ten grand. Then, when we tell him N.G.—he finally comes across with eighteen g's. And this morning, he says he can't dig up no more. Tries to tell us that he had to borrow even the first eighteen g's he give us. But that's the mallarkey. He had it all the time. If we put on enough pressure, he'll come across with the whole fifty grand—maybe more."

"But suppose he's tellin' the truth an' really can't get up no more dough," Eddie retorted. "Then what's the guy gonna do? When he's give us all the cabbage he can and still don't get the skirt back, he'll blow the whistle. Three more days now, and

we'll have had the kid for ten days. That'll mean the G-heat as well as the local bulls. An' with the Feds on our trail. . . ."

"Look, dope," Joe interrupted. "I say he's got the dough. But maybe I'm wrong. Well, there's only one way to find out—and that's to put the screws on. We got his eighteen grand anyway. An' when we get all through old Villard has got to call the bulls in anyway. But they ain't gonna be no witnesses—see!"

Eddie turned pale. "Aw, Joe," he whined. "At's just writin' ourselves a ticket to the Chair."

Joe snarled: "Dead men—and dames—don't talk! We ain't takin' no chances."

Joe wondered what had come over Eddie, who formerly had had a reputation for toughness.

And if Eddie thought that Joe was going to let the kidnaped girl live, perhaps to identify him some day—well Eddie must be even dumber than he looked.

Dumb! Joe wondered suddenly if Eddie had given him the right dope that morning.

They had ridden the twenty miles into Palm City and with Joe acting as a lookout Eddie had gone into a booth with a dial phone and called Damon Villard at the Palace Hotel, where the old man was stopping.

Old Villard had been in a fighting, desperate mood. He had said that he could not give them another cent. If his granddaughter were not home by the following evening he would notify the police and the F.B.I. He cursed the kidnapers and called upon Heaven to punish them. Finally he calmed down a little, said that he might be able to raise another five thousand dollars, if they gave him a week more. But the girl must come back right away. Eddie told him that he would have to consult the "big shot" and that Villard was to remain home that evening in his room, with the lights fully on and the shade up. They would communicate with him then.

"He swore that he'd get us if the girl was hurt," Eddie had explained to Joe. "Near as I can remember, his exact words was these: 'If Doris is harmed, or if she isn't back by tomorrow night, I swear on my mother's grave that I'll spend the rest of my life and every penny I can lay my hands on in bringing you to justice on earth. God will punish you after-

ward. If I die, it won't make any difference. I'll come back from the grave and kill you.'"

Joe Cass had snorted contemptuously. "So that's what's been eatin' you all day. You're afraid of that curse—afraid he'll jump up outa his grave an' haunt you or something. Cheez, don't be such a sap! How can a dead man haunt you? When a gee's dead, he's dead and he stays dead. You don't need to worry about him no more."

Joe understood now. Eddie had more superstitions that a leopard has spots, but the one fear that took the starch out of him completely was that of graves, coffins, morgues and the dead.

Funny, too, because Eddie was pretty handy with a gat, and he didn't seem to fear death for himself so much.

Joe was just the opposite. He could have fallen asleep peacefully, even if he knew that he had a couple of stiffs in bed with him. His whole career had been based on the theory that "a stiff can't do you nothing."

But Joe had a tender regard for his own neck. He had plenty of the old moxie, of course—you had to have moxie to run a racket—but he felt a whole lot better when another member of the mob was taking the risks. Joe wasn't afraid of the dead ones, but he was mighty careful of the live ones.

TAKE this kidnaping, for instance. Joe was taking a risk, of course, but not as much as Eddie. The snatch had not been premeditated. Joe and Eddie had been hiding out in this five-room cottage for three weeks now. It had been bought a good many years ago, when Joe's gang was still intact. It had been purchased in the name of a girl friend of a gang member's moll. It had served as a perfect hideout for four months, during which the mob had waited for the heat to cool off on a bank job. Nobody had even suspected the location of their hideaway, and so it had been retained for possible future emergencies.

This time, Joe was hiding out from Tony Scappi, whom he had double-crossed. He was negotiating with the mobster's moll to turn her gunman pal over to the police, the consideration to be ten grand. If Joe

couldn't appropriate the moll, who was pretty, he intended to rub her out and get the money back.

About a week ago, Joe and Eddie had been returning from town one night in their sedan, and were a short distance along the dirt road, when they took a curve at high speed. Another car, in order to avoid a collision, had turned off the road and, with brakes squealing, had struck a tree. It had partly overturned, and the only occupant, a girl, had been knocked unconscious.

Seeing that the overturned car was an expensive one, Joe had returned and, on the spur of the moment had conceived the kidnap plan.

They took the girl back to their cottage in their own car. She was nearly conscious again by then, as she had not been badly hurt. A slug of whiskey brought her round, with nothing worse than a headache and a lump on her forehead to show for the accident. Then Joe, keeping in the dim background, had Eddie bind her to the chair and blindfold her. She could see enough of Eddie as he did this, so that she probably could identify him later, but Joe was merely a shadow to her. Careful Joe!

Meanwhile, a hasty glance through her handbag had disclosed that the girl was named Doris Villard and that she was staying with her grandfather in Palm City, at the Palace Hotel. She apparently was alone in the world, except for her grandfather, and she evidently had money.

Leaving her bound and gagged, Joe and Eddie then went back along the dirt road, disposed of the damaged car in some desolate words ten miles away, and continued on into Palm City, where they had telephoned the girl's grandfather. They warned him that if he so much as breathed a word to anyone about the snatch the girl would be killed, instantly. Three days later they had collected the eighteen thousand.

AND now—it was nearly two p.m.—Doris Villard's last hope of rescue vanished. From the kidnaper's conversation, she gathered that the mysterious car had returned toward Palm City.

Joe, satisfied that the coast was clear, went downstairs with Eddie.

"There ain't but one smart thing you've said in a week," Joe snarled. "That's about the G-heat. We want to collect the dough and clear out, pronto. That's why I'm going to put the screws on."

Joe then told Eddie what he had in mind.

"That ain't right, Joe," Eddie protested. "I never did believe in monkeying around with no dames. In fact, I never went in for rough stuff at all—unless someone got tough with me first. I never yet plugged a gee, unless he was gunning for me."

"Shut up and do as I tell you," Joe snapped, glaring malevolently at his companion. "What's the matter; are you goin' soft on me or something? Or are you afraid of dead men rising from their graves and killing you?" Eddie, who was used to obeying orders, lowered his eyes.

So the two gangsters, with handkerchiefs tied about their faces to act as improvised masks, went back upstairs to the girl's room.

Doris Villard was bound hand and foot to a chair, blindfolded and with her lips partially sealed, so that she could mumble words, but could not call out. She had the freshness of youth but was not especially beautiful. Which was lucky for her.

"Your grandpa wants proof that you still are alive," Joe told her, as he had Eddie remove her blindfold and tear the tape from her lips. A sadistic gleam crept into Joe's eyes. "So we are going to give him what he wants. At the same time, we're going to give him an idea of what is going to happen to you, if he doesn't pay up in a hurry."

Then Joe propped up in her lap a copy of that day's issue of the *Palm City Record*, which they had brought back that morning. The headline was plainly visible.

Next Joe loosened one of the trembling girl's legs, removed her shoe and stocking, and then re-bound her leg to the chair.

Doris Villard looked up with great, staring eyes. She guessed about what was coming.

"All right, Eddie. Here's my cigarette lighter. You know what to do."

Joe then reached for the camera which he had brought along. It was a good one, with a fast lens. Joe had made rather a hobby of photography. He liked to snap

pictures of his women in unconventional poses.

"O.K., Eddie," he ordered, as he focused the camera on the girl. Eddie, perspiring and nervous, snapped the lighter to flame. "I'm sorry to have to do this, Miss," Joe told the girl suavely, though it was plain that he was rather going to enjoy it. "But your grandpa is a mighty stubborn man. He needs convincing."

"You fiends!" Doris whispered fearfully. She threatened pathetically: "My grandfather will make you suffer for this. He'll kill you," she babbled on.

"Maybe we'll kill him first," Joe snarled. Gripped in a new terror, the girl subsided for a moment.

"If you do, he'll come back from the grave and get even with you—maybe drive you mad," she sobbed. "He always managed to avenge himself on anyone who harmed him."

EDDIE went pale. There was that talk again of dead men coming back from the grave. His hands trembled visibly, and he almost dropped the lighter; but at a few curt commands from Joe he steadied himself and brought the flame near to the girl's bare instep. She gritted her teeth and summoned up her courage. She tried hard not to let the terror show in her face.

"Nearer, you dope. Let the flame touch her!" Joe ordered.

Then, as the flame seared her foot, the girl could stand the excruciating agony no longer. Her features were contorted with pain. Her lips parted in a terrifying scream. At this precise moment, Joe clicked the shutter of the camera. Then, after a brief pause, he told Eddie to hold the flame to the flesh under the girl's knee. He took another snapshot, as Doris again screamed in pain and terror.

"That'll be all for today," Joe told her. "But, if your grampa doesn't come across tomorrow, we'll burn you so that it really hurts. If he still holds out, we'll start to work on your nice fresh complexion. You'll be scarred for life. If he still is stubborn. . . ."

They now freed the girl, let her rub ointment into her wounds, and then allowed her to stretch her muscles for a few minutes. Joe had his gun handy, in case she got ideas.

Finally, Joe handed her writing materials and ordered her to write a letter to her uncle, explaining the pictures and telling him what the thugs were going to do to her if he did not pay the additional money. She addressed the envelop to her uncle, marking it "Special Delivery," in bold capitals. Then they re-tied and re-blindfolded her.

By six o'clock, Joe had developed and printed the films from the camera, using a cupboard for a dark room.

Donning their make-shift masks once more, the thugs freed the girl, gave her food and then made her lie on the small iron cot on which she had been sleeping while a prisoner. They bound her to the four corners of the bed with heavy picture wire.

For the next half-hour, Eddie was busily engaged in packing their personal belongings and loading them on their car. Joe had observed, cannily: "In case anything should go wrong in Palm City, we better be ready to light out quickly, leaving the skirt here. Then they'll never be able to tie us in with the snatch."

Indeed, for a few minutes, Joe almost decided to release the girl and call it a day, as Eddie wanted. But that would be foolish. Dead people couldn't harm you. Then, too, he might never get another chance to collect big dough—and he was convinced that Villard could pay far more. Racketeering today wasn't what it used to be. With another thirty thousand from Villard, he could kill Eddie and the girl, and beat it down to South America.

He wondered whether he ought not to kill Eddie and the girl now, but finally decided against it. Instead, he sent Eddie out to give the car a thorough inspection to see that it was ready for fast traveling. That was just an excuse to get rid of Eddie for ten minutes. He wanted to do something to which Eddie might object.

He crept up to her room, pulled down the shades and lit the kerosene lamp. He looked down on her, as she lay there. His eyes roved over her body. Doris recoiled in horror. But Joe only leered at her and picked up the lamp, holding it so that its flickering light fell upon her bound and gagged body. The girl felt his obscene gaze roam over her. She shrank back fearfully.

"Be seein' ya, Toots," Joe sneered. "Too bad I ain't got more time. You an' me could be real good friends."

The girl moaned through sealed lips. Her eyes stared up at the gangster. Then he moved out of her sight and in a moment she heard him going away. He went downstairs, and she heard him moving about there for several minutes. Then he came back up the stairs, hesitating a few seconds on each step. He came back into her room—and again terror gripped her. But he merely turned out the kerosene lamp.

A few moments later, she heard him slam and lock the front door downstairs, and then he was gone. But a peculiar odor began to seep into her nostrils. It was a pungent odor, which she soon recognized as—kerosene!

BY the time that Joe and Eddie arrived in Palm City it was almost eight o'clock. They parked their car in a side street near the Palace Hotel, which was built on a small plaza. They then walked to the side of the plaza opposite the hotel. Villard's room was on the fourth floor, almost directly over the entrance.

From the plaza they could see him plainly, as he walked up and down the room, a wiry, white-haired man of seventy. He had obeyed instructions, leaving the shade up and the lights full on. He was plainly restless and worried.

Satisfied, Joe and Eddie walked toward the town's post-office, some six blocks away. They had nearly reached their destination, when Joe pulled up sharply, with a warning whisper to Eddie. There, a mere ten steps in front of them was Bert Avery, of the F.B.I., who had arrested them six months ago for an attempted national bank holdup, though he could not make the charge stick.

Avery was lounging outside a tobacconist's store. He had nothing on Joe and Eddie, they felt sure, but they had no desire to be seen. After the kidnaping story came out, Avery might put two and two together.

As the Federal man started to turn his head toward them, Joe grabbed Eddie's arm and hustled him into a store.

Eddie almost fainted. It was a funeral parlor, and groups of people were gathered

about three coffins. Sweat ran down Eddie's brow and he closed his eyes in horror. He was as white as a sheet. Joe was secretly amused. He deliberately marched him right up to one of the coffins—a coffin which held the mortal remains of a policeman.

"See!" he whispered to Eddie. "Here's a bull, but he can't harm you. He's dead as a mackerel. He's cold meat. It's just the same as though you were looking at a steak at a butcher's shop. You ain't scared of a steak, are you?" Eddie, who had opened his eyes, was on the verge of hysterics.

"Look, Joe," he whispered back, as soon as he could talk. "You—you shouldn't make fun of the dead. There—there was 'Dummy' Klein. He quarreled with his doll, Maizie, and stuck a shiv in her. She haunted him for a whole year, like she had said she would as she was dying. Only the week before he kicked off, I met him running down an alley. He wouldn't stop. Said Maizie's ghost was chasing him. Then, she kept it up so bad he ran downstairs in his nightshirt early one morning, as her ghost chased him, an' hot-footed out into the street, where a truck killed him. It ain't smart to poke fun at corpses, Joe."

"Nuts!" Joe whispered back. "Dummy Klein's trouble was drink and fear of the cops. After he killed Maizie, he drank worse. He had the heebie-jeebies—the D.T.'s. He probably saw pink elephants chasing him, as well as Maizie."

Avery hung around the place for almost thirty minutes, and Joe fumed. They were wasting valuable time. Finally Avery left, and Eddie, heaving a great sigh of relief, practically charged out into the street and away from the stiff. The two gangsters hurried to a mail box just a block from the post office and Joe deposited the letter, on which he already had affixed the proper stamps. The time was nine fifteen and, according to the information on the mail box, a collection was due to be made at nine twenty.

Almost opposite the mail box was a restaurant, and Joe and his companion went in. Joe ordered a steak sandwich, but Eddie thought he never would be able to look at a piece of meat again. He gulped a couple of straight rye whiskies instead, and felt a little better. From the restau-

rant, they carefully watched the mail box, to see when the carrier emptied it. The collection was late; it was nearly ten o'clock before the mailman got around to the box.

Joe and Eddie paid the tab and strolled back to the point opposite the Palace Hotel. The old man still was pacing anxiously up and down the floor. Evidently he had not called the police, Joe decided.

The dapper gunman had been keeping his eyes peeled for bulls ever since they had arrived in town. He was sure there were none near the hotel. Joe could smell a copper just as easily as a pig could locate a truffle.

THEY walked up and down opposite the hotel, waiting for the mailman to bring the special delivery letter to the hotel.

But after half an hour the carrier still had not come. It was getting close to eleven o'clock, and Joe was getting badly worried. In a fit of nervousness he told Eddie what he had done at the cottage, while Eddie was out looking over the car.

After Joe had revived Doris from her faint, he had gone downstairs and scattered kerosene-soaked rags about the place, with a trail of them leading up to Doris' room. Amid the rags, he had set a lighted candle, so arranged that when it had burned down to within half an inch of the floor it would ignite the rags. The whole cottage would go up in flames, and Doris' body would be burned beyond recognition. He had had to guess at the proper length of candle to use, but he had figured that the holocaust would occur somewhere around midnight, if they had not returned by that time to extinguished the candle.

Joe had been scared lest old Villard might have set a trap for them in Palm City. If they were arrested and detained, then the cottage would burn down and Doris Villard never would be able to testify against them. There were no other witnesses.

It was all Joe could do to keep Eddie from rushing back to the cottage. They might be too late, he moaned, to save the girl. But Joe insisted upon waiting for another fifteen minutes.

It was about two minutes to eleven, when they finally saw the mail carrier enter the Palace Hotel. A few moments later, they saw old Villard go to the door of his room

and receive the letter from a bell-boy.

As soon as the old man read the letter and saw the torture pictures, he went almost berserk with rage. He paced madly up and down his room, came to the window and shook his fists in imprecation of the devilish swine who had so brutally burned his grandchild. Twice he picked up his room telephone, evidently with the intention of calling the police, but each time he put the instrument down again, frightened by the kidnaper's threat to kill Doris if he called in the authorities.

"Look, Eddie; the old codger's going to call the bulls in a second. I'm going to phone him right now and tell him to calm down," Joe said. "Maybe he'll get some sense after I speak to him."

The only telephones in sight were those in the lobby of the hotel. They were dial phones, so there was no more risk of using them, in reality, than of using any others. So Joe started across the street to the hotel entrance.

Eddie tried to follow, but there was a sudden rush of traffic on the street, and they were separated. Joe had almost reached the hotel before Eddie left the pavement on his side of the street.

Suddenly Eddie screamed a warning. "Look out, Joe! Above you! Old Villard!"

Scared by the shout, Joe stopped in his tracks. He was directly under Damon Villard's window. Seeing a flash of movement above him, he instinctively craned his neck to look up.

It was at the exact second that Joe looked up, that Damon Villard's body came hurtling down head first. His white-haired skull struck Joe squarely on the forehead. The force of the impact was terrific and, with Joe's head stretched back like that, there was only one thing that could happen. It did. There was a thin snap, like a dry twig breaking, and then the dull plop, as the old man's body struck the ground soddenly.

A large crowd materialized at once from nowhere. "Both dead," one of the hotel employees called out. "The guy looking up had his neck broken." The crowd milled about. "Those damned suicides!" someone angrily called out. "They don't give a damn how many people they kill, just so long as they can knock themselves off."

In a few moments, there were the screams of radio car sirens, followed, a little later, by that of the ambulance. Eddie, almost paralyzed by fright, had managed to cross the street and find a position at the edge of the mob. He heard what the ambulance surgeon was saying.

After he had examined the bodies, he said: "They're both dead all right. But it wasn't suicide. The old boy was dead when he fell. Heart failure. Probably felt the attack coming on and went to the window for air—and then toppled out. Maybe some sudden excitement or shock brought it on."

When the full meaning of these words penetrated Eddie's dull brain, he was galvanized to sudden action. "He was dead when he killed!" a voice inside him screamed. "He came back from the grave and got his revenge, like he said he would. He'll get me, too, the same way!"

The gunman dashed around to where the car had been parked, jumped in and frantically gunned the motor. If any among the crowd saw him flee, they thought that he had become hysterical at seeing two dead bodies, and did not pay him too much attention. Two women had already plopped to the ground in a faint.

Going out of town, Eddie took the paved road at better than seventy miles an hour. The throttle was flat on the floor.

A state trooper on a motor-cycle saw him flashing by at reckless speed, swaying from side to side of the road, and decided to give chase. But the trooper, no matter how he poured it on, could not gain on this insane motorist. In fact, he was losing ground. Probably he would never have seen Eddie turn off the dirt road and take the bumpy trail leading to the cottage—so far was the gunman ahead—but for the fact that there was a sudden burst of flame shooting up from a deserted cottage far off the road.

The officer was still nearly a half-mile away when he saw the mad motorist stop his car by the cottage, leap out and then dash crazily for the door. He saw the madman break a window and disappear inside

the cottage. But he saw no signs of life within the place.

Most of the downstairs part of the cottage was rapidly becoming a raging inferno, and already the flames were licking greedily at the upper floor when the trooper turned off the dirt road.

He had difficulty in making time over the rocky, unaccustomed trail and before he could reach the cottage he saw the mad motorist emerge from the building. His face was blackened, his clothes were smoldering, and he staggered blindly. But in his arms, he carried a bundle which the trooper saw on coming nearer, to be an unconscious girl.

The trooper, amazed, saw the apparent lunatic deposit the girl on the ground and then throw himself to his knees. He clasped his hands beseechingly and looked toward the sky. As the trooper reached the scene, the man was saying: "Oh Gawd, old man, don't come back. . . . I've saved the girl. . . . It wasn't my fault."

When Eddie saw the trooper, he rose to his feet and ran wildly toward the wood at the back of the cottage, his clothes still smoking.

The trooper was going to follow him at first, but then decided to give attention to the girl. After carrying her farther away from the flames, he forced some brandy between her lips, and she began to stir in his arms. She was only slightly burned, and probably had fainted from fright.

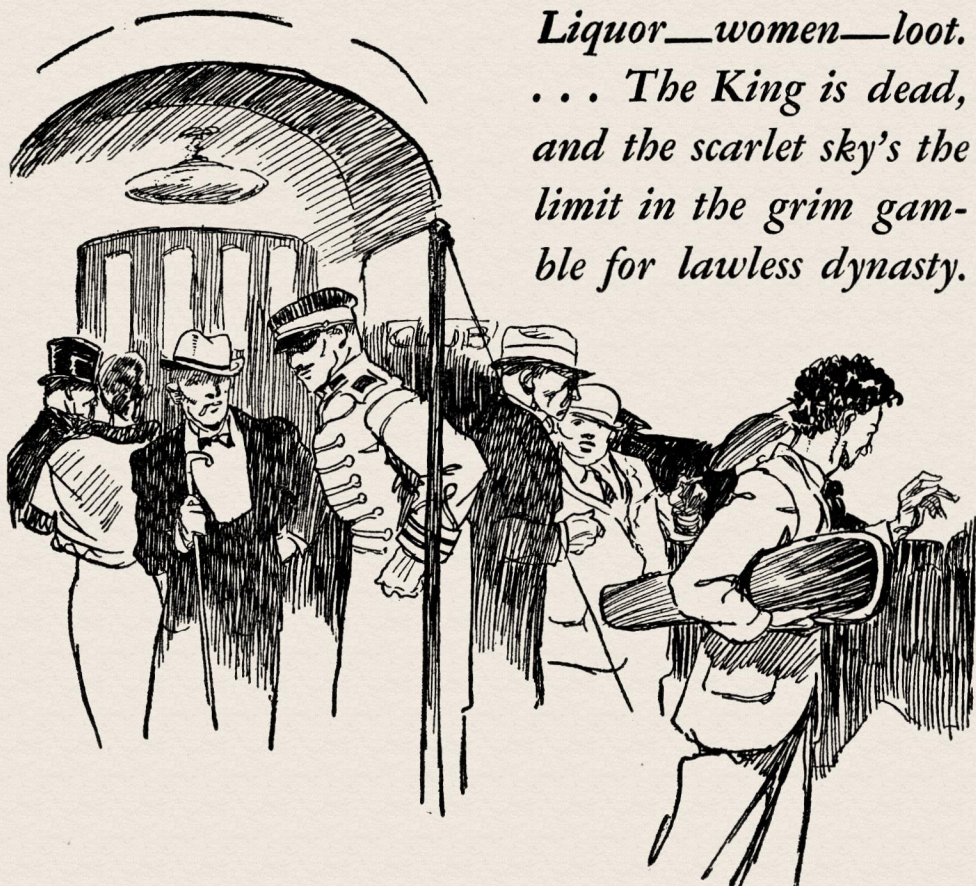
The trooper looked after the fleeing Eddie. "Crazy as a bed bug," he murmured. "But he had guts enough to save the girl. I wonder how the devil he knew the cottage was in danger of catching fire, though."

And then he noticed a piece of picture wire still around one of the girl's ankles. The trooper looked thoughtful.

They found Eddie later that night. But there was nothing they could do about him. He had blown his top. He kept talking over and over about dead men who returned from their graves.

"They do come back," he moaned. "They do come back."





*Liquor—women—loot.
... The King is dead,
and the scarlet sky's the
limit in the grim gam-
ble for lawless dynasty.*

MR. TRIGGER MAN

A Tommy-Gun Tempoed Crime Novelet

By FRANKLIN H. MARTIN

THE pungent reek of antiseptics and the monotonous song of the powerful motors made Sid Blue groggy. The brilliant light over the improvised operating table hurt his eyes. He went to the back of the compartment and sat down. He lit a cigaret but it tasted bad. That stuff the Doc was using stunk up the whole place.

Three thousand feet below was a little cluster of lights. They had passed another town. Sid looked at his wrist watch. . . . New York in another hour.

He watched Doctor Arnold bending over Dave Vickers who was stretched out on the bunk. The doctor's instruments glittered, seemed like live things in the power-

ful spotlight that was rigged above. Vickers' face was as white as the bandages that swathed his torso, but as devoid of expression as the surgeon's own. The plane lurched in an air current and the doctor put down his instruments. He stripped off his rubber gloves, tossed them aside impatiently.

"I'll finish when we get to New York," he said. He switched off the strong light and lit two cigarets. He stuck one in Vickers' mouth and took a deep drag on the other.

Dave Vickers lifted one hand slowly and removed the cigaret. He flicked off the ash and put the cigaret back in his mouth. He made no sign that would in-



dicate that he had heard Doctor Arnold. Sid Blue came up and stood beside the bunk.

"How is he, Doc?"

The surgeon shoved a heap of rolled bandage and medical adhesive tape aside and sat down on the edge of a small porcelain table. He glared at the figure stretched out before him.

"Look here, Mr. Vickers," he said sharply. "Unless you abandon this mad scheme of yours, and place yourself entirely under my orders, I wash my hands of you."

Vickers removed the cigaret again—slowly, with an effort. His jet black eyes, glowing dully in his pale face, were two lumps of coal in snow.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he said in a low, level tone. "You'll continue to render your service—when and how I direct."

Doctor Arnold shrugged and took a hypodermic needle from a case. He dipped the point in alcohol. "This will ease the pain," he said.

Vickers waved him aside and spoke to Sid Blue: "How long before we'll be in New York?"

"About an hour, boss. The pilot says we're makin' good time."

"Put the needle away, Doctor," Vickers ordered. "Now you may start to tape me up. Make a rather sound job of it, Doctor. . . . Lay out my evening clothes, Sid."

"But there is still a bullet, lodged within

a fraction of an inch of your heart," the doctor protested. "You should be removed to the hospital immediately. I dare not probe for it here. Your life depends—"

"Put the black pearl studs and links in my shirt, Sid," Vickers said. "Better shave me again. Then get dressed yourself. . . . Now then, Doctor, the adhesive tape corset, if you please."

THE powerful motors droned their steady monotonous song. Patches of light, indicating towns, became larger and more frequent on the earth's black carpet below. Sid Blue laid out Vickers' evening clothes and affixed priceless black pearl studs. Doctor Arnold worked expertly, running a smooth layer of gauze and medical tape over Vickers' torso. Finished, he unscrewed the top of a silver flask and held it to Vickers' lips.

"Not doped, is it, Doctor?" Vickers purred.

"No."

"All right." Vickers took a long drink. Then he tried to draw a deep breath. He stopped half way, his face twisted in pain. He let the air out between his teeth with a whistling sound.

"You're throwing away your chances of recovery, Mr. Vickers."

"Would you mind lighting me a cigaret, Doctor?"

Doctor Arnold made a gesture of despair and placed another cigaret in the wounded man's mouth. Then he walked back and watched Sid Blue getting out the shaving kit.

"It's sheer madness," the doctor told Sid. "Even kings and emperors listen to a doctor."

"There's one thing that don't," Sid Blue answered. "That guy will sit up in his coffin and direct his own funeral."

"He's practically directing his own funeral right now," the doctor snapped. "What is this occasion that it is so important? Why must he go to this party before he goes to the hospital?"

"He's been away," Sid explained, "and some of the boys are giving him a welcome home blowout."

"Why can't he tell them to postpone it, until he's well again?"

"Say, Doc, you know who that guy is, don't you?"

The doctor looked up calmly. "Certainly."

Sid Blue peered at the doctor intently. "You may be a swell croaker, but you got a lot to learn about some things," he said. Suddenly his eyes hardened. He stared at the doctor menacingly. "You're right, ain't you? You know your part, don't you? The guy that got you said you knew your stuff—and could keep your mouth shut. Was he right?"

"Yes, yes—of course."

"Still curious?"

"No, but—"

"Nuts. Help me with this hot water."

The doctor obeyed mechanically.

Sid switched on the bright light and lathered Vickers' face. He started a line of chatter, mimicking a barber. "Shampoo, massage, manicure, mister?" He scraped carefully with a safety razor. The co-pilot came back and watched him.

"How's Mr. Smith?" The flyer jerked his thumb toward Vickers.

Sid stopped shaving and looked up. "How often do you an' your pal get a grand each for flyin' a guy to New York?" he asked.

"Once every eighty-five years."

"Okay then. What the hell do you care how Mr. Smith is?"

"Oh, so that's how it is?" the flyer grinned.

"Yeah," Sid growled, "that's how it is."

He resumed his work. "Hey, boss," he complained. "You're sweatin' so much you wash the lather off, as fast as I kin put it on."

Vickers shifted his eyes from the roof of the cabin to Sid Blue's face.

"That bright light . . ." he said softly.

"It's rather warm. . . . That steady drumming noise—that's the plane's engines, isn't it, Sid?"

"Yeah. But it ain't very loud."

"Not very loud, but steady, Sid, very steady."

Sid Blue looked at Doctor Arnold inquiringly. The physician shrugged.

It took the two of them to get Vickers into his evening clothes. When the job was finished, Vickers sat on the edge of the bunk and flexed his knees carefully. The plane banked slightly and he grabbed the sides of the bunk with both hands.

"Looks brand new, don't he, Doc?" Sid Blue grinned.

Doctor Arnold scowled. "He looks like a ghost—face the color of his shirt front. . . ." He handed Vickers a mirror. "See for yourself."

Vickers took the mirror and stared into it for a full minute. "Sid," he said in a flat tone, "you never will learn to tie a dress tie. Hold the mirror, I'll show you. . . ."

"It's plain suicide," the doctor grated. "You're dying on your feet."

"By the way, Doctor," Vickers said. "Do you mind sewing my sleeve to the breast of my coat? My right one. It's rather a strain, holding it up."

Sid Blue walked forward and stuck his head into the control compartment. "You put us off at Newark Airport, see?" he told the two pilots. "Then you scam—back where you came from, without gettin' outa this wagon. He's splittin' an extra grand between you, see? An' you was askin' about Mr. Smith's health. He had a slight bellyache, but he's okay now. . . . Does that cover everything?"

The two flyers grinned and nodded. "May I never get a bellyache like that one," the co-pilot said.

The big aircraft slid into a patch of bright light at the Newark Airport and came in for an easy three-point landing.

Three figures emerged: A tall man in evening clothes who held himself very erectly, a hard-faced young man in a dinner coat, and a professional-looking gentleman with a doctor's kit. They walked in a leisurely manner toward a large black Hispano-Suiza limousine. The tall man in evening clothes leaned slightly on a gold-headed cane.

II

THERE were thirty-five men in the Platinum Room of the Hotel Admiral. Thirty-five of them—every race and creed and size and color under the sun. A waspy ex-jockey whispered from the corner of his mouth to the paunchy negro who was the best-dressed man in the room. A lean Jap spoke Harvard's most precise English for the benefit of a hulking, blank-eyed Swede and a stocky Sicilian who was present without benefit of quota.

Thirty-five of them. . . .

They stood in groups of two and three,

talking quietly, eyes keen and alert, waiting. Gold chains gleamed against the white of formal vests. The jewels that sparkled from well-manicured fingers and faultless shirt-bosoms was the real McCoy. For Racketeer Row was on parade.

Only one man stood alone. Occasionally he moved to this group or that, speaking cheerfully and grinning. He walked across to the ex-jockey and greeted him by name:

"The haul of a lifetime for a good heist mob, huh, Tod?"

The waspy little man looked him up and down and turned away.

Jack Kramer grinned around his short briar pipe. He blew his breath on a square-cut emerald on his left hand and rubbed it on his sleeve. He looked at the clock on the wall and walked over to Frank Effinger, the big shot of the bail bond boys: "Five Cs says he won't be here at eleven, five more says he won't show at all—and five more I win both bets."

Kramer grinned with his mouth but his round blue eyes were expressionless. He ran the fingers of a lean hand through curly blond hair.

Effinger grunted, "Bet," without even looking at Kramer or the clock, and went on talking to Sol Beibler.

Jack Kramer stood there unabashed. "I'll give you the same bet, Beibler," he said.

Beibler took the cigar out of his mouth and knocked the ashes off on the rug. Fire gleamed in the stone on his fat finger when he moved his hand.

"I only bet with my friends," he said.

"All right, Counsellor," Kramer giped, "save your dough."

He looked at the rock on Beibler's finger, then at his own piece of green ice.

When neither man seemed inclined to talk to him Kramer moved on. He still had that set grin on his round face and his beady blue eyes were still as expressionless as two marbles. He kept taking the pipe out of his mouth with two fingers of his left hand, and putting it back again.

"The Mad Dog thinks he knows something," Beibler said.

"If I lose that bet with him," Effinger answered, "I stand to lose plenty more."

At one end of the long room a table was set. Light glinted from glassware

and silver. Flowers adorned the table. A hundred dollars in cigar smoke lingered near the ceiling and was carried away by ventilating fans.

Kramer went over to Horse-Face Johnnie Dikes and pulled him off into a corner. Dikes was aptly named. He had little or no forehead but from his eyebrows down, his face was very long—long, sad and bony. A Broadway gag man had once said that the geegees never crossed him up because they liked to be good to their own kind. Only his face did not suggest a thoroughbred. It was like a cab-horse's face—a very tired cab-horse.

Horse-Face Johnnie had never seen a race in his life, but he rarely lost a bet on one. Why should he go to see a race, when he could talk to jockeys beforehand? He talked to lots of jockeys.

His deep-set eyes stared from between over-hanging brows and high cheek bones at Kramer. "What do you want, Jack?" he asked. When he talked his adam's apple shot into view from behind his high, stiff collar.

"Listen, Johnnie," Kramer said. "With the Big Boy out of the way you'd make some real jack on your hand books, wouldn't you?" He blew on his ring and rubbed it.

Johnnie Dikes looked around nervously. His long upper lip quivered. "I never said that," he said hurriedly. "I got no kick comin' at all."

"Cut me in for a third if I take him out?"

"Hey," Dikes whispered, "lay off that talk. I don't want any part of it."

"Forget it, pal. . . . I'm doing it for you. It'll be worth plenty to you."

Johnnie Dikes mopped his long, sad face with a handkerchief and walked away hurriedly. He threw a startled glance back over his shoulder. Kramer was standing there, still grinning. When Dikes looked back again, Kramer was talking quietly with Louie Molinaro from Brooklyn. Louie was shaking his head.

"Listen, Louie," Kramer was saying. "I'm doing you a favor, see? I'm taking the Big Boy out of the way for you. Nice an' easy—no trace. Will that make you a big guy or not? Would that be worth ten grand, or would I just be doing it 'cause I want to see you get ahead?"

"I'm runnin' my own business, kid," Molinaro said. His black eyes pierced Kramer's bland expression. You didn't have to be half smart to know that Louie was doing some fast thinking. The few boys who had tried to crowd Louie weren't around any more.

"But if I do you a big favor—it would be *my* business, too, wouldn't it. Louie?"

"Hey," Molinaro said suddenly. "A little while ago you came around layin' bets that the Big Boy wouldn't show to-night. You don't fool me, Jack." His voice dropped to a hushed whisper and his short, thick body tensed. "I bet," he husked, "I bet—you already done it. . . . I bet you already knocked off the Big Boy himself!"

Kramer still grinned. He neither denied nor affirmed it.

"Ain't that a break for you?" he asked.

Molinaro looked away from Kramer's round little bright blue eyes. "I—run—my—own business, Jack," he said hoarsely.

Kramer watched him walk across the room with quick, stiff strides. He blew a thin stream of smoke after him.

THE buzz of conversation in the Platinum Room seemed to change in tone. It became a series of hoarse whispers. The atmosphere became subtly more electric. A knot of men, laughing over a funny story, stopped laughing when a man joined them and said something under his breath. Faces stared questioningly and eyes invariably sought out the figure of Jack Kramer. Men shot quick glances at the Mad Dog, then looked away just as quickly.

At the head of the elaborate table was a floral piece. Hundreds of roses spelled out, "Welcome Home."

Jack Kramer walked over and yanked out one of the roses and stuck it in his buttonhole. He caught the eyes of several men upon him and grinned.

Almost wordlessly, it went the rounds.

"*The Mad Dog has knocked off the Big Boy!*"

Jack Kramer, the Mad Dog, the curly-haired kid who had come down from a walk-up incubator in the Bronx two years ago, to a shake-down doll house off Times Square, with a pair of glassy, cold blue eyes and a pair of hot black guns. Who

preyed on these birds of prey, who got huge sums of money for just letting them alone. The Mad Dog who, in some inexplicable way, had gotten away with it. And now, in this select gathering of chisellers who had come together to welcome home the arch chiseler, the hushed word went the rounds: The Big Boy wouldn't show. . . . Because the Mad Dog had rubbed him out.

Still, nobody left. Nobody made a move to go home. They stared at each other, unbelievably.

In the mind of each man was the same thought. . . . Who would step into the shoes of Dave Vickers, the Sultan of the Rackets, the King of Loaded Dice? Without question, the new leader would be one of the men in that room. In one way or another they would test each other's strength, expand their territories. Some one man in that room would outsmart the rest. There could be no equitable distribution of power. There had to be a scramble. There would be killings. Men who now operated in peace would be mortal enemies. . . .

Effinger was looking at Louie Molinaro through narrowed lids. Louie's bright eyes were riveted on Horse-face Johnnie Dikes. Unconsciously, Louie licked his lips. . . . Louie and his cousin, Frankie. Would they throw in together, or not? Johnnie Dikes' gaze followed the restless paces of Jack Kramer, the Mad Dog. He walked around, holding his pipe in two-fingers of his left hand, apparently unconcerned, smiling vacantly. Furtive glances from thirty-four pairs of eyes were directed his way.

Whoever took Vickers' place would have to take care of Jack Kramer. Kramer wasn't a leader. He couldn't plan nor organize. He wasn't diplomatic, nor did he have the gift of handling men or situations. He was just a cold blooded, ruthless killer who would burn a man down for the slightest provocation, or none at all. He was the Mad Dog.

If the rumor were true—if he *had* knocked off Dave Vickers—there would be hell to pay in the Big Town. There would be wholesale mob killings. The resulting chaos would be unprecedented, more terrible than anything that could be imagined. . . .

Louie Molinaro caught the eye of his cousin, Frankie, and jerked his head toward the door. His heavy eyebrows went up and down, like the flapping of small black wings. Frankie was sidling along the wall, right hand near his left armpit. Kramer was watching both of them. He was fixing the flower in the lapel of his coat, fussing with it, while he stood with his legs wide, braced. Right hand near the bulge under that flower.

Sol Beibler gripped Effinger's arm and jerked his head toward the three near the door. His cigar hung lax from loose lips. Perspiration ran down his thick neck, wilting his collar.

Hell was due to pop.

And tonight would only be the start of it.

The table was all set for a swell party. . . . And over in the corner the Molinaro boys were ready to go for their hardware because the Mad Dog had put the bee on them. The Mad Dog's gun hand was fussing with the flower in his buttonhole. The flower that was right over the bulge in his coat.

Any minute now.

Then, from near the door, someone said excitedly: "Here he comes! Here comes the Big Boy himself!"

A RUMBLE of animated chatter broke out. Brittle, relieved laughter. Men pushed toward the door. The band, seated on a dais behind the table, broke into a tune. They started to play "Hail to the Chief!"

"Hi, Dave!"

"Hello, Mr. Vickers."

Slowly Dave Vickers walked into the room. He was a picture of sartorial elegance. His evening clothes fitted him as though moulded to his form. Nodding gravely to men here and there, he proceeded to the head of the table.

Sid Blue, showing two gold molars in a wide grin, followed two paces to the rear. He returned greetings, waved and grinned to the men as they spoke. Vickers walked gravely to his place, holding his cigaret in its long holder in his right hand. A waiter held back his seat and he sat down.

Jack Kramer tried to take a seat near the head of the table. Frank Effinger

shouldered him aside. "Scram, bum," he said.

Kramer took a seat farther down the table. His eyes were fixed in an unblinking stare on Vickers' face. Someone had given him a bum steer. Someone had told him he had seen Dave Vickers stretched out on the floor of a hunting lodge up near the Canadian Border, his body full of slugs—dead as a herring. . . .

Kramer continued to stare at Vickers' face with his round blue eyes.

Five minutes before, every man in that room had been wondering who would take Dave Vickers' place. The next leader would be someone in that group and each had been figuring—sizing up his neighbor.

But now. . . .

The tension that had permeated the room dissolved. They were all friends again. There were no more hurried conferences in hoarse brittle voices. Men laughed and spoke out loud. They drank, and grinned across the table at each other.

From time to time, a man would glance curiously at the Mad Dog. What had he been trying to get away with? What did he have in mind, when he had gone around laying bets that Vickers wouldn't show up?

The Mad Dog smiled—said nothing.

Vickers placed his left palm on the table. Slowly he got to his feet. He seemed to push himself up with the spread fingers of his large white hand. Waiters stopped pouring wine and stood back. The orchestra leader snapped his fingers and the music broke off in the middle of a bar. The King of Loaded Dice looked down the table; his right hand, clenching the long cigaret holder, was held across his breast. His voice was flat, and as emotionless as his face.

He made a practice of speaking softly, so his listeners had to lean forward and be especially attentive to hear him.

"I am pleased to see all you gentlemen looking so well and prosperous," he said. "I had a very pleasant trip but it is good to be back again, among friends."

Sid Blue, sitting next to Vickers, grinned. Pleasant trip, huh? Three hot slugs in his belly—about to cave in on his feet—and he stands there giving them all the cold eye and telling them he had a pleasant trip. Back among friends. . . .

There wasn't one man in the whole chiseling crowd that wouldn't knock the Big Boy off if he thought he could get away with it.

But they needed him, and feared his power. They prospered under his rule, and squirmed under his cold, contemptuous look. They were envious of his position but lacked the nerve and the brains to depose him. So they grinned and smirked, and said, "Hi, Big Fella." They threw expensive parties for him and had big floral pieces made, with "Welcome Home," on them.

Some day they hoped to donate other and more ornate floral pieces with sympathetic platitudes inscribed, such as: "We Mourn Our Loss," and "Our Departed Pal."

VICKERS' left hand came away from the table for a moment and toyed with the ribbon of his monocle. The monocle that he wore but never put to his eye. He put the hand back on the table, appeared to steady himself.

"And now," he said, sweeping the table with eyes that were as cold and black as the twin muzzles of a sawed-off shotgun, "if you will excuse me—I'll be leaving."

Loud handclapping. Calls of, "Atta boy, Dave." "Glad you're back." Glasses raised in toast. Friendly grins. "Hey, waiter. Give this sawbuck to the guy in the band. Tell him to play, 'He's a jolly good fella,' see?"

Slowly, and with great dignity, Vickers made his way to the door. He held himself erect and without support.

Jack Kramer, the Mad Dog, stood in front of the door. His teeth showed in a vacant grin. His round eyes probed Vickers' face.

"Heard you weren't feeling so good," he said.

"Feeling splendidly, thanks," Vickers told him. You'd never guess from Vickers' words or manner that he'd graduated from the gutter. He looked and sounded like a blue blood. Except for that grim, cold expression. Even then, he'd fool you if you didn't know. . . .

"Ain't been sick, or anything?"

"Never felt better. Good night, Jack."

Kramer still stood in the way. He was staring at the pinched white lines around

Vickers' mouth and nostrils. Suddenly he put his hand out. "That's good," he said.

His smile was frozen.

He grasped the hand that Vickers had been holding up carelessly, across his breast. Kramer shook it heartily, pumping it up and down. There was a small ripping sound, and little black threads showed on the breast of Vickers' coat, where Doctor Arnold had sewed the sleeve up to support his arm.

A pulse throbbed visibly at Vickers' temples. Sweat ran down from his perfectly groomed hair. His bottom lip sucked in sharply. But his big white hand gripped Kramer's hard. The Mad Dog released the pressure and stepped back.

"Yeah," Kramer said. "I heard you weren't feeling so good."

Vickers' black eyes bored into Kramer's like gimlets. He stepped very close to Kramer, holding him in his stare. His voice lost its Park Avenue intonation. It was hoarse, low and menacing.

"I'll live to spit in your grave, Mad Dog," he snarled. He stood there, piercing the Mad Dog's blank stare, his jet black eyes burning with a murderous light. Kramer's good natural color deserted him suddenly. Slowly, Vickers' hand reached in his vest pocket. Kramer's eyes followed, fascinated. . . . Vickers drew out a limp leather case and fitted a cigaret into the long holder. They stood, not three feet apart—eyes locked. Kramer's gaze wavered, dropped. He pulled out a lighter and held the flame to Vickers' cigaret. His hand trembled a little. Vickers blew a cloud of smoke in Kramer's face and turned away. He walked on out the door.

Kramer stood there, pale as a ghost. He moistened dry lips and watched Vickers' retreating back. Suddenly he smiled again, a vacant, ghoulish smile. He breathed on his emerald, rubbed it slowly. He was looking at a dark stain that was spreading over the back of Vickers' perfectly tailored evening coat. The stain was too big and dark to be perspiration. It had a coppery tinge in the light of the doorway.

Sid Blue had taken Vickers' arm, was helping him into the elevator.

"Wasn't a bum steer after all," Kramer snarled under his breath. "The guy's been plugged, sure enough. . . . Might

fool these other chiselers. But . . ."

Doctor Arnold was waiting in the limousine. He pulled the shades as Sid Blue helped Vickers in. From his surgical kit he extracted a hypodermic needle. "Take those scissors," he snapped to Sid. "Cut his coat off—slit it up the back. . . ."

The chauffeur eased the car into gear and swung out into traffic, disregarding lights. A young man with a granite chin sat beside the driver, his eyes probing every car that approached.

"Before you use that needle, Doctor," Vickers said. "Let me give Sid a few instructions."

"You've overdone it, already," the doctor growled. "We may be too late as it is."

"You'll still do as I say," Vickers commanded softly. "Sid, get Sol Beibler, call up Judge Francis—and send a wire to Gerald Paxton, Cascade Hotel, Seattle. Tell him to come on at once by plane."

The cloth of Vickers' coat ripped in Sid's suddenly gripped hands. The scissors he had been using clinked on the floor of the car.

"Paxton!" Sid Blue spat. "That's the guy that smacked me in the chin, and filled your hide with lead!"

"Exactly," Vickers said, his voice getting a bit fainter. "And see that nothing happens to him—before I talk with him. . . . All right with your needle now, Doctor."

III

GERALD PAXTON stared idly from the window of his taxi as it wheeled into Fifth Avenue and headed north. It was dusk, and a light spring rain was falling, making everything glisten as though it had just been freshly lacquered—cops' slickers, store fronts, motor cars and pavement.

"The old town look like home, Max?" Paxton said.

Max Howard was looking out the window on the other side. He grunted and pointed up Fifth Avenue. "When it's raining at night on this street, with the pavement black and shiny, and all the lights are lit—it reminds me of a nigger gal wearing a diamond necklace."

"How many do you know that wear diamond necklaces?"

"Daisy Miles, from the Old Plantation. Jack Vaughan gave her a pretty string of ice—just before Vickers cleaned him. . . . Daisy was black as licorice, but she had a voice like an angel—among other things."

"Jack left town when Vickers cleaned him, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Howard said.

Paxton started to laugh. Howard turned toward him and stared curiously. "Understand," he said, "I've got a sense of humor and all that, but what's funny about a fellow being cleaned and having to leave town?"

"I just remembered," Paxton said. "I bought Jack Vaughan's polo ponies when he was cleaned. Less than a year later, Vickers clipped me for five hundred thousand, and I had to sell them again, together with my own string."

"You're not exactly starving now."

"No, but that's an expensive pastime. . . . About this time of the year, the boys are bringing their ponies up north. Out on Long Island and down at Rumson the welkin is ringing to the click of mallet and ball. . . ."

"And here you are," Howard broke in, "with a gun strapped on, about to keep a date with some of New York's leading hoodlums."

"I'm through with that now." Paxton touched the bulge under his left armpit. "I just carry this from habit. How would you like to up to the Canadian woods, for a month's fishing?"

Howard yawned. "No thanks," he said. "You invited me to cruise in Cuban waters and we get mixed up in a shooting. I accepted your invitation to go to California, and I get an awful beating—damn' near killed—while you shot it out with Vickers. . . . I think I'll go back to work. The police beat on a New York tab isn't exactly a gold brick job, but it's better than these vacation trips with you. If we went to Canada you'd probably declare war on the Northwest Mounted. . . . No thanks. I'm going to ask the city editor for my old job back."

The cab turned east at Fifty-eighth Street and went up Park Avenue.

"Come up and have a drink, anyway," Paxton said. "I'm really through. I put Vickers out of the way. That's all I was after."

"Then why did you rush back here in answer to his wire?"

"Curiosity."

"And you're through with rackets, and racket busting?"

"Absolutely."

"Maybe you are," Howard said skeptically. "And maybe I'm Lady Godiva."

As they got out of the cab, a young man in a brown slicker and snap brim soft hat stopped talking to the doorman of Paxton's apartment and walked away, his coat collar turned up. On the far corner was a chemist's shop. The man in the brown slicker went into a phone booth and called Headquarters.

"I want Cleary," he said. After a minute. "Lieutenant, this is Molki. . . . Paxton's back in town." He listened and said, "yeah" several times; then hung up. He bought two cigars, one for a quarter and one for a dime. He lit the quarter one. The dime one was for the doorman. He might as well be talking to him until Cleary showed up. He made an entry in his note book under expenses, "Telephone and cigars—\$2.50."

PAXTON picked up and sorted a handful of mail while Howard got out the decanter and glasses. He unstrapped his shoulder holster gun and dropped it in a drawer, just as the phone bell rang.

"Tell her to bring a friend," Howard said.

Paxton grinned. "With your two front teeth out?"

"My looks are only part of my charm," Howard said. "That was an awful belt that guy hit me. How much do store teeth cost?"

Paxton picked up the phone. "Yes, this is he. . . . Mr. Beibler? Yes. Twelve tonight at the Club Oriental. . . . Good bye."

Howard stopped with a jigger of excellent brandy halfway to his lips. "I'm through with the rackets," he mimicked. "What's the idea of making a date with Counselor Beibler, the Underworld's famous mouthpiece—if you are through?"

Paxton picked up his glass. "It's about Vickers. He's still in a bad way from those slugs I poured into him. . . . It's a peace conference."

"I can go back to the paper," Howard said, "and tell the boss that he'd better put

me on quick, because I got a swell story about how Paxton, the millionaire play-boy, is gonna be rubbed out—in retaliation for gunning Vickers, patron saint of the mobsters."

Paxton had laid out his dinner clothes and was digging in his Gladstone for shaving tools when a knock sounded at the door.

"See who it is, Max," he called.

Howard put down his glass and opened the door. "It's the Law," he shouted. "And us with a load of gong and Chinaman!"

Cleary walked in.

Cleary was tall and flat bodied. He had a square red face with a lot of vertical lines in it, and thick gray hair. He had the bright blue eyes and wide shoulders of a young athlete. Down on Centre Street they said that Cleary would pinch his own brother if he pulled a wrong one. But he had more friends and less money in the bank than any man on the force.

Paxton came out of the bedroom, tying the knot of his dressing gown.

"Hello, Cleary," he said. "Pour the captain a drink, Max."

"Not captain, Paxton," Cleary said. "Lieutenant, I've only been on the force twenty years, and we don't get ahead as fast as some of the boys on Broadway. . . . But sometimes we get to live longer."

"Take off your hat and coat. That brandy is better than the stuff you have down at headquarters."

"Why should I take off my hat—ladies present?"

"Well, there's Max. He's sensitive."

"What happened to your front teeth, Howard?" Cleary grinned.

"I was talking when I should have been listening. A meteor hit me. Spontaneous combustion. And I was going to have 'em pulled out anyway. You don't eat with your front teeth—what good are they?"

Cleary poured himself a jigger of brandy. "All reporters," he said, "should have their teeth knocked out. Who did it?"

"Not a cop," Howard said.

"What are you doing back in town, Paxton?" Cleary asked.

"I live here; don't you remember?"

Cleary pushed his hat back on his head and sat down on the arm of a chair.

"This isn't a bad town to live in," he

said. "And it's a pretty big town. But it isn't big enough for you and Vickers at the same time. He's back. Why don't you stay away?"

"Cleary, may your life be as peaceful as mine is going to be from now on," Paxton said.

"My education," Cleary answered. "Might be called elementary. I don't know anything about psychology. As I see it, a man is either smart or not. If you're smart you'll pack your bags again."

"Maybe—soon."

"I could have pinched you four months ago, for the Blue-Chip Charley Regan kill."

"It would have been a mistake."

Cleary got up and pushed his hat forward over his eyes. "It's raining outside. I'll give you a lift, if you're going downtown, Howard."

"Then I can brag to my friends that I rode in a P.D. car," Howard grinned. He looked so funny when he grinned with his two front teeth out that Paxton roared with laughter.

Cleary looked at Paxton. "Some guys might ride in one yet—and they may not brag about it."

"Tell him on the way downtown how I've reformed, Max," Paxton said. "Any time you're cruising in this section of town, Cleary, and want to take a shower, stop in."

Cleary turned with his hand on the door knob. He pushed his hat over to one side and scratched his head noisily. He looked at Paxton standing there in his dressing gown, teeth bared in a wide grin. "If you had been born poor, Paxton, you probably would have been a cop."

Paxton made a mock gesture of despair.

"He's big enough," Max Howard said, "but not quite dumb enough."

Cleary dropped a big hand on Howard's shoulder and yanked him out of the door with a good natured sweep of his arm. As the door closed Paxton could hear Howard's voice in the hall, "Look out you big shamus, you hurt. Next time you make a pinch I'll spell your name wrong."

"For all his clowning, that Cleary means business," Paxton told himself. "I'm glad I'm through with that racket mob." He whistled as he went back to shave. In the bathroom he shadow-boxed for a few steps

and smacked a wicked left hook at the shower curtain.

Dressed, he went into the living-room and filled his cigaret case from a long cedar box. He picked up his hat and coat and paused, hand on the light switch. Then he wheeled suddenly and went back into the bedroom. He removed his coat and took a smooth leather shoulder holster from the top drawer. The holster had a blunt .38 automatic in it. He strapped on the holster, felt that the gun was secure in the spring clip, and donned his coat again.

He stood in front of the mirror a minute and smoothed the bulge under his left armpit. Then he went out and picked up his hat and topcoat. He switched off the lights.

IV

IT was early when Paxton arrived at the Club Oriental. The door man gave him a respectful salute that only the most valued patrons rated. The ravishing brunette who checked his hat called him by name, dimpled, and gave his hat an affectionate pat. The headwaiter bowed and murmured an obsequious, "*Bon soir, M'sieu Paxton,*" He led the way to a small table with a reserved sign on it.

Paxton gave him a folded banknote.

Music, soft and seductive, shaded lights, subdued laughter, beautiful women, jewels, and more jewels, wisps of gowns that cost their weight in radium.

Paxton sat down and stretched his legs under the table. A fresh-faced young girl in abbreviated costume crooned a blues song in throaty contralto. . . . Paxton lighted a cigaret and looked around. Same crowd, same expressions if not the same faces, still kicking the same tunes around. . . . Pay one cover charge and you've seen 'em all. True, the orchestra at the Club Oriental was the best in the city. The atmosphere was smarter, the girls in the floor show were younger and prettier than elsewhere. But it was all on the check. . . . They didn't want you there if you couldn't stand the gaff when the check came.

At a small table with shaded lights a girl was staring with round eyes at her escort, old enough to be her father. He was quite drunk. She was biting her lower

lip and nodding to something he was saying. Her thin white hands were twisting a flimsy bit of lace handkerchief. . . . A young man with a lot of curly black hair was stroking the arm of a heavily jeweled woman. She was smirking, making ridges in the enamel on her face. . . .

Then Kitty Shane walked to the center of the floor, and started to sing. She sang in a liquid silver voice. The buzz of conversation stopped. Men held their breath as they listened. Women took hurried glances at themselves in hand mirrors, then devoured Kitty's beauty with envious eyes. The curly haired gigolo forgot to whisper sweet things to his elderly patron. . . . While Kitty Shane sang.

Paxton watched her and listened. He broke matches into little bits, then broke the pieces smaller. He and Kitty had been fond of each other once. Very fond. That was before—

A hand fell on Paxton's shoulder, a fat hand with a huge diamond on the second finger. Paxton looked up. "Oh, hello, Beibler," he said.

"Hello, Paxton. Vickers wants to see you. Come on." As Beibler talked he rolled his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and back again, with his tongue. He talked around it.

"Wait till Kitty is through singing."

"Pretty important. Let's go."

"Wait till Kitty is through."

"Still carrying the torch for Goldilocks?"

Paxton didn't answer. He just sat there and listened. The rock on Beibler's finger threw fire. Paxton had been all set to buy Kitty one like that—for the third finger of her left hand. . . . That was some time ago.

Things had changed since then. . . .

When Kitty stopped singing Paxton stood up. He handed a bill to the waiter and followed Beibler's squat figure between the rows of tables. The young man with the mop of curly black hair was stroking the arm of his elderly companion again. She was smirking once more—cracking the enamel.

They passed an empty table with a lacy wisp of handkerchief lying on it—torn and shredded.

They got into the elevator. Paxton said, "What's up, Beibler?"

Beibler lifted his eyebrows and jerked a pudgy thumb at the elevator boy's back.

THE elevator shot up past the second and third floors, where the lights were much brighter than downstairs. Where there were green baize tables. Where there was the subdued whirr of the wheel, the light click of ivories, and the soft slap of cards.

At the seventh they got out and Beibler fitted a key into a lock. They entered a small lobby and Beibler rang a bell by short circuiting two flush screwheads near the base board with his key. Somewhere a slot opened and closed. Sid Blue admitted them into Vickers' apartment. Either Vickers had excellent taste, or he was a good imitator.

Beibler said: "Good evening, Sidney."

Sid Blue's eyes bugged when he saw Paxton. He shot a quick glance at Beibler but the counselor had walked on down the hall.

"No funny business, you," Blue snapped at Paxton.

Paxton looked at him hard. Then recognition dawned in his eyes. "Oh, it's you," he said. "The last time I hit you, remember? I pulled my punch. . . . The next time I'll let it ride—and probably tear your head off." He followed Sol Beibler down the hall.

Vickers' bedroom had been transformed into a miniature hospital. A doctor and a nurse were standing by the bed. The King of the Rackets was stretched out. His eyes were dead black in a face the color of kaolin clay. The head of the bed was raised so Vickers could see around without lifting his head.

Vickers said hello and motioned for the nurse to give him a cigaret.

"How are you?" Paxton asked.

"Brand new," Vickers said. "Beibler tell you anything?"

Paxton shook his head.

"When you shot me," Vickers said in his usual flat tone, "you thought you finished your business with me. That right?"

"I showed you I was a better man. You shot first."

"You think you finished something. But you just started. . . ."

Paxton raised his eyebrows. He pressed his bicep against the bulge under his arm,

and looked around the room. Sid Blue was standing on spread legs, glaring. Sol Beibler shrugged lumpy shoulders.

Paxton relaxed. "Well?" he said.

"My condition," Vickers said, "is a secret. But somehow the rumor has gotten around. . . . And the scramble is on. The coyotes are ready to break out and snap at the spoils. There will be killings—no end."

"Good," Paxton said. "All the little rats will kill each other off."

Vickers' tight lips bared his teeth in a brief smile. "There will be killings. And it will be your fault, Paxton. I could hold them in check. I could rule them. With me out of the way—there will be hell to pay."

"And—?" Paxton prompted.

"In your zeal to buck me, Paxton, you did a lot of snooping. You have a good line on my activities. You've got to take hold. You've got to run things—until I am better."

Paxton snorted. Then he laughed out loud. "I promised to break you. I did. The hell with you. . . . Remember a year ago? You said I was soft. You said I couldn't take it. . . . Now you want my help. *Me* bossing a pack of rats! Doctor, your patient is delirious."

"That's why you'll do it, Paxton," Vickers purred. "Because you *are* soft. You can't stand hearing about wholesale slaughter—when you know it's *your* fault."

Beibler broke in: "Listen, Paxton. It's better you should. I got a fellow uptown. He looks enough like Vickers to pass for him at a distance. He shows, once in a while, riding in Vickers' car. They look a lot alike, see? This fellow is a Russian prince that got run out of Russia. He's broke—works in a ladies' hairdressing parlor. But he's got swell manners, like Vickers here. He puts on plenty dog. But we don't tell him anything. You keep the boys in line. This guy puts up the front. And we keep them all guessing until Vickers is on his feet again. Better you should do it."

Paxton laughed again. Vickers, a graduate of the gutter, who aped the manners of a gentleman. Who acted like a prince, born to the purple. Vickers was going to hire a prince to double for him—as King of the Underworld. Screwy!

"I don't care," he said, "if all your hoodlums ride up and down Broadway and spatter the pavements with each other's gore. . . . I wouldn't lift a finger." He bowed toward Vickers, stretched out on the bed. "Thanks for the trust and confidence," he said.

He turned to Beibler. "Can I get out of here without the pass word?"

Sol Beibler shrugged and looked at Vickers.

Vickers said, "I'll hold the job open for a few days."

Paxton's face got very red. He forgot that there was a nurse in the room. He suggested a very crude and ungentle thing for Vickers to do with the job. He walked out.

Sid Blue made a motion toward Paxton's retreating back. He jerked his hand suggestively. Vickers shook his head.

PAXTON was still red around the ears when he got out of the elevator on the ground floor. Music from the dance floor filtered through the heavy hangings to the corridor. He sent word in to Kitty Shane's dressing room. Then he paced the corridor and cursed Vickers' nerve. Of all the mad, impossible propositions. . . . Gerald Paxton, directing the activities of a young army of hoodlums. The same gang he had spent a small fortune trying to break up!

Kitty Shane's face was very grave when she came down the corridor to meet him. But her voice still had the ability to do things to him.

"You asked to see me?" she said.

"Yes. Have dinner with me tomorrow, won't you? I haven't talked to you in a long time."

She didn't answer at first. Just stood there.

"Well?"

"No," she said very softly but firmly. "I don't think so."

"Why?" He was hurt and surprised. He'd been too busy to see her lately.

"You aren't the same man, any more. You've changed. You are up to your neck in this ghastly racketeering business. Let's forget—everything."

"You work for a racketeer." Paxton was angry.

"Mr. Vickers doesn't pretend. He isn't

a hypocrite." Her face was flushed and her voice took on a huskier note. "You, with all your advantages, pretending to live up to a proud name." Her hand came up, finger pointing accusingly. "You're carrying a gun—right now!"

She turned away.

He stood there and watched her go. She walked very fast, almost ran, down the corridor.

Paxton felt the bulge under his left armpit. "You're damn' right I'm carrying a gun," he muttered.

He could still hear the smooth rhythm of the best dance orchestra in the city as he bought back his hat from the check girl.

A young man was standing in back of him looking at him. As Paxton started for the door, the young man took a small briar pipe from his mouth with two fingers of his left hand and grinned.

"You're Paxton," he said.

"Well?"

The young man put the pipe back in his teeth. Out of the corner of his mouth he breathed on a big square-cut emerald on his finger. "I'll do it for you," he said. He rubbed the emerald on his sleeve.

"What?"

"I'll take the Big Boy out of the way."

"You've got the wrong man. Don't know what you mean."

"I'll do the job. Then we'll talk business."

Paxton turned and started to walk out. The young man fell into step at his side. "All you got to do," he said, "is fix it for me to get in his room. Up there where he's in bed. That's all you got to do."

He walked to the curb with Paxton and started to get into the same cab. Paxton put a hand on his chest and pushed him back on the sidewalk.

"You were gypped on that ring," he said. "They got the real one back."

He slammed the cab door and left Kramer standing on the curb. . . .

JUST about the time Paxton was crawling between the sheets, a young man walked into the Sepia Club, up in Harlem. Frankie Molinaro from Astoria was throwing a party for some new friends. The intruder took a small briar pipe from his mouth and said to Frankie, "Come outside."

"I'm just havin' a little party, Jack," Frankie said.

"Come outside. . . Vickers wants you."

They were just a few steps from the doorway of the Sepia Club. Kramer took Frankie's arm and steered him toward a cab at the curb. Molinaro pulled back. "I ain't over here on business, Jack," he said.

"You should have stayed in Astoria, Frankie," Kramer said. He emptied his gun into Frankie Molinaro's white shirt front. He held it so close that every hole ringed with powder burns.

"Just—havin'—a party." Frankie gasped. But nobody heard him. He was dead when they picked him up.

At One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street the ambulance took a corner on two wheels and just missed Kramer's cab. It roared north with the bell pinned down.

"Those guys are reckless with that wagon," Kramer said to the driver. "They're apt to get hurt some day."

V

MAX HOWARD shifted the bundle of morning papers to his other arm, and held his finger on the bell until Paxton let him in.

"Can't you let a man sleep?"

"Time to get up anyway," Howard said. He threw the papers on the table and pointed to the headlines. "The season is open."

"So they got Frankie Molinaro."

"His cousin, Louie, will be over to square it."

"That will be all right with me. Hope they wipe each other out." Paxton picked up a copy of the *Examiner*, Howard's tabloid. Under the screaming headlines was a picture of the figure of Frankie Molinaro, slumped on the sidewalk. Also a smiling photograph of John L. Kramer, arrested in connection with the killing, and released after proving "another iron-clad alibi."

"How come your paper got a picture, Max?"

"I went back and got a photographer—and tailed you." Howard grinned and showed two new gleaming white teeth in front.

"Me?"

"Sure. And when you left the Mad Dog, we tailed *him*. It was all I could do to keep McGuire from taking that flash before the cops got there."

"First I knew of it was right now."

"Yeah—yeah. I know. You reformed." Howard grinned again.

"When did you get the new teeth?"

"This morning. These are temporary. The ones I'm getting will be pips. Got 'em with the bonus money."

"Bonus for what?"

"That story." Howard pointed to his paper.

"What will the teeth be? Diamond—or just plain gold?"

"Emerald," Howard said. He sat in a deep chair, picked up a magazine.

Paxton was in the shower when the bell rang. Howard let in a Western Union boy and took a small paper package. "Open it," Paxton called.

Howard unwrapped it and brought it in to the shower. He held it up so Paxton could see. It was a copy of the *Examiner*, like the one on the table. But written in heavy black pencil on the margin was, "*How's your conscience?*" There was a heavy line drawn from the sentence and around the picture of the dead ganster on the sidewalk.

"Meaning what?" Howard said.

Paxton grabbed a heavy Turkish towel and started to rub himself briskly. His face was fixed in a scowl.

"You'll wear your skin off," Howard said. "I could have turned you up long ago. Don't be afraid to tell your Uncle Max."

"Better order two sets of teeth. If you keep on playing dumb you'll need them. . . . And it will be my fault."

"Don't worry about me. Worry about Cleary. . . . Every time that guy looks at you I can see them dusting off the electric chair."

"Vickers sent me that paper."

"Vickers?"

"Yes, Vickers. He says that because I plugged him I broke up the ball game. He says that the boys will start a merry scramble while he's out of the running. Plenty killings—all my fault."

"So you hired the Mad Dog?"

"How would you like a shower—with all your clothes on?"

"After all I've done for you," Howard sighed.

"You'd take a picture of your grandmother in the electric chair—for a bonus."

"You birds who never had to work for a living—you'd never understand."

"If it weren't so early I'd offer you a drink."

"Who said it was early? I've been up all night."

The phone rang and Howard answered it. "Sol Beibler," he said.

"Tell him in his hat," Paxton said.

Howard said, "In your hat, Sol," and hung up.

THE reporter called his paper and asked for the city desk. He held the receiver between his ear and a hunched shoulder and reached for Paxton's brandy decanter with his hand. He said, "Yeah—when?" Then he listened for a minute.

When he hung up again he turned to Paxton. "While I've been fooling around, brightening your life, the party has been going on without me."

"For instance?"

"Horse-face Johnnie Dikes was knocked off, fifteen minutes ago. He was coming out of Effinger's real estate office—right in broad daylight."

Paxton's face paled a little. He threw his cigaret savagely at the fireplace. It landed on a rug and he let it smolder.

"You won't have to buy any papers for a while," Howard said. "Vickers will send them to you—nice marked copies."

"Why don't you get yourself a respectable job—like grave robbing?"

Max Howard grinned.

"I'll be on my way. If Cleary drops in—tell him I said thanks for the ride the other night."

Paxton finished dressing. He put on a mustard tweed suit, and thick-soled English walking shoes. He crammed a handful of cigarets in the pocket of his jacket, loose, and selected a heavy black-thorne stick from the collection in the closet rack.

He swung out of the apartment and turned north, the heels of his walking shoes making a military click on the sidewalk. At Central Park he turned in. His shoes crunched the gravel with the same impatient, long-striding gait.

"Which is natural?" he said to himself,

"the grass and trees in the middle of the city—or the city that surrounds the grass and trees?"

Everything was green: grass, trees and benches. People were boating in the lake. Their laughs carried across the water. Nursemaids wheeled their charges slowly, or loitered by benches. Couples ambled or sat close together on the grass. Automobiles drove by leisurely.

The air was balmy. The scene was peaceful. . . . But Gerald Paxton strode through the paths like the answer to a three alarm fire. He lighted one cigaret from the butt of another. From time to time he would send several pebbles flying with a slash of his heavy stick.

The man who was tailing him mopped his brow. He, too, had thick-soled shoes, and he had done his share of walking in the past five years. But this pace was killing him. He went past a pretty and willing-looking nursemaid with hardly a second glance. . . . He was glad when Paxton paused at the side of the walk and looked down at the lake below. Paxton stared for a long time but didn't seem to be seeing anything. Then he relaxed. He turned back and walked at a much slower gait. He looked around and appeared to admire the scenery. He went all the way down to the south gate and turned down Park Avenue.

Paxton grinned at the doorman and the headwaiter at Marcel's and ordered a big lunch: soft shelled crabs, a steak, cheese and crackers and coffee. When the waiter brought the check Paxton pointed to a big shouldered young man, seated several tables away.

"He'll take it," Paxton said. He grinned at the surprised expression on the dick's face. He walked past the table and said, "Put it on the expense account. Cleary will understand. Hope I didn't tire you—on that little stroll."

"I was just gettin' warmed up."

"Well, I'll make it easy for you. I'm going over and buy a ticket for Montreal."

"You don't need to tell me. . . . I'll find out myself."

Paxton left the restaurant and walked south to the Grand Central. At the office of the Colonial Airways he bought a ticket for Montreal. Then he took a cab back to his apartment.

He was packing his gladstone when Cleary arrived. Paxton knew it was either Cleary or Max Howard, because they were the only ones who got past the operator in the lobby without being announced. When the knock sounded he called, "Come in."

Cleary walked in and pushed his hat back on his head. "Going to use that ticket you bought?" he said.

"Yep."

"Sometimes I think I'm too soft to be a cop," Cleary said.

"So I've heard."

"This is the time of year," Cleary rambled on, "when people are breaking out their lawn mowers—and garden hose. We've got a hunk of garden hose down at Headquarters."

"I've heard about that, too."

"When you and Mad Dog separated last night, my man followed you. If he'd tailed the Mad Dog—we'd have you both by now."

"It isn't too late to pick up the Mad Dog, Cleary."

"And it isn't too late to pick you up either. . . . Listen, Paxton, take advantage of my soft heart. Use that ticket to Montreal—and stay the hell out of town. Everything was pretty peaceful before you came back."

"Do you remember when O'Hearn was Police Commissioner," Paxton said.

"Yeah. But he only lasted a month."

"Remember how he used to get a bunch of cops in plain clothes and a machine gun—and they'd go out and knock off mobsters. And the papers would say it was another gang. . . . Remember?"

Cleary remembered all right. "Yeah," he sighed. "But O'Hearn only lasted a month. . . . That's got nothing to do with you. You ain't O'Hearn. I could take you in now, Paxton."

"Only the D.A. is tired of a lot of pinches—and no convictions."

"A break is a break. No matter who gives it to you."

A Western Union boy came in with a small package. Paxton didn't open it. He knew it was an early edition of an evening paper. A marked copy—telling about the Horse-Face Johnnie Dikes kill.

Paxton tossed the package in his gladstone and said, "I'm going to do some fish-

ing—up in the Canadian woods, Cleary."

Cleary scratched his head noisily and pushed his hat forward over his eyes.

"I'll be seeing you," Paxton said.

Cleary said, "I hope not." He walked out.

INSTEAD of going over to La Guardia Field in the Colonial Airways bus, Paxton took a cab. He had a fifteen minute wait before the plane left on the New York-Boston-Montreal run. He walked over and looked at the fleet of Douglas two-seaters on the line in front of the National Guard hangar, then went into the waiting room and ripped open the package the messenger boy had brought.

It was just what he had thought. The story of the Dikes kill in headlines and along the border of the paper was penciled: "How about it?"

He walked out of the waiting room toward the big tri-motored ship that was being serviced for the run. A tall thin man with a straw hat came out of the waiting room and stood beside him. He pointed to the plane. "Big baby, isn't it?" he said.

Paxton nodded. "You going up this trip?" he asked.

"No—waiting for someone to come in."

"I didn't think Cleary would have me tailed all the way to Canada."

"Huh?"

"The other dick he had following me used to multiply everything on his expense account by five. He bought my lunch today."

"You got me wrong, brother."

"Sure. You know Max Howard on the *Examiner*? Tell him I'll be at the Mount Royal Hotel for a few days. Don't tell Cleary that—make him guess."

He climbed in the plane with the other passengers and waved a hand to the tall thin man who stood watching.

The plane rose to about three thousand and circled north. Looking down on Manhattan, Paxton could span it with one hand. Soon it was left behind. The country below all looked alike. Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts. He was glad to leave the Big Town in the distance. He wasn't leaving because Cleary had warned him. He didn't feel like sticking around and having Vickers send him a marked paper—every time a hoodlum got himself

killed. He remembered the night he had seen Farrelli and Berg shot down on lower Broadway. . . . The night Farrelli had died calling for his mother—begging for another chance.

The drone of the three motors was making passengers sleepy but the countryside was still quite light below. The co-pilot came back and offered Paxton some chewing gum. They talked for a few minutes. . . .

Vickers had called Paxton soft. He had repeated again and again that Paxton didn't have the guts to fight him. He had said that Paxton couldn't stand to see someone else take it for him. . . . Paxton dozed and awoke with a start. He had heard Farrelli's voice again. The way he had sounded that night when he'd stopped a burst of Tommy slugs with his chest. Only he'd been dreaming. He'd seen the faces of Horse-Face Johnnie, the sad gambler. And Frankie Molinaro, the young hoodlum from Astoria, who had a wife and three kids.

Paxton sat erect impatiently. The hell with Vickers and his ideas. Let them all kill each other. Let them all turn into mad dogs. He was going to Canada and fish.

The plane came into Boston for a twenty minute lay-over. Paxton went into the restaurant at the field and ordered a steak. The waiter was an Italian. He had a round, ruddy face, like Frankie Molinaro. Paxton left the steak unfinished and went outside.

A newsboy was hawking an extra. Gang killing in New York. Paxton thought they had just got on the street with the Dikes kill until he saw the headlines.

MOB GUNS KILL MOTHER AND BABE

Paxton bought a paper and read the flash. A car, loaded with hoodlums, had come speeding through Amsterdam Avenue and blasted away at the front of the Seven Club. Mrs. Charles P. Dugan and her young son, aged three, had been in the line of fire. Mrs. Dugan had been wheeling the boy in his carriage. The boy was dead when they picked them up. Mrs. Dugan had died on the way to the hospital. Another youngster, named Corso, had been wounded by flying lead.

The paper went on to summarize the gang killings of the last few days. A new reign of Tommy terror had gripped the city. Shootings in broad daylight. Day and night killings—killings.

Paxton guessed that, about now, a Western Union boy would be ringing his doorbell with a marked copy of the papers.

"All aboard, mister," a porter said. "Plane's leavin' for Montreal."

Paxton looked up from the paper he held grasped in his two fists. "Get my bag out of the plane," he snapped. "I'm going back to New York."

"No more planes leavin' tonight, mister."

"I'll hire a private plane. . . . Who's got the fastest ship on the field?"

VI

FOUR of them were standing around Vickers' bed: Sol Beibler, Paxton, Sid Blue and Paul Bardoff. Bardoff looked enough like Vickers to be his brother. The same erect, military carriage. Same dark, thin face. He had big white graceful hands like the King of Loaded Dice. From a little distance you couldn't tell them apart.

Vickers lay back against the raised head-piece of his bed and listened. Doctor Arnold had gone out. The nurse was in her own quarters, reading.

"When you go out in Vickers' car," Paxton said harshly to Bardoff, "act like him. Keep your eyes front. That's all you are supposed to do. Do you think you are riding around on a pleasure jaunt?"

Bardoff shrugged his shoulders and spread his large white hands.

"What did I do?"

"Everytime you pass a girl you turn and stare. You're not a colonel in the Czar's Guards now, understand? You are impersonating the King of the Hoodlums—to keep the little hoodlums in line!"

"Twice today he wants to stop and pick up janes," Sid Blue grated.

"Really," Bardoff said, "if you think you can order me about—"

"Shut up," Paxton snarled. "If you spoil this before your usefulness is over—you're through. You are as good as dead, right now. The Russian revolution will seem like class-day at Vassar compared to the hell that's due to pop."

Bardoff took a cigaret from a case and put it in a long holder. He put the holder in his mouth. The act was so characteristic of Vickers that Sid Blue snapped his lighter and held it to Bardoff's cigaret.

Vickers, on the bed, grinned thinly.

As soon as he had lit the cigaret Sid Blue noticed Vickers' smile. His face got red. "Yeah, Ruski," he snarled. "Save them tricks for when we need 'em."

"Tonight," Paxton snapped. "You, Sid, and Bardoff ride in Vickers' car with his chauffeur. Follow me. Stop where I stop. I'll tell you what to do when we get there. . . . I'll go down now and stand in the lobby. When I give you the signal come out and get in the car. And, Bardoff, look straight ahead, no matter how many women there are around. You stick with him, Sid. Everything clear?"

Bardoff bowed. Sid said, "Yeah." Beibler smiled and rubbed his hands.

Vickers said: "Keep up the good work, Paxton, and I'll give you a regular job."

Paxton growled. "You know damn well why I'm doing it," he said.

"Certainly," Vickers purred. "You are so soft you don't like to see anyone get hurt."

Paxton didn't answer. He picked up his hat and started for the door. Beibler called after him: "Hey, Paxton. . . . Look out for the Mad Dog."

In the elevator, going down to the street level, Paxton muttered to himself: "A prince—honest-to-Heaven royalty trying to imitate a gutter rat—and not man enough to get away with it. . . ."

He waited in the lobby until he saw Sid Blue and Bardoff come out of the elevators and go back to the rear of the corridor. When the hat check girl was busy and there were only a few people in the lobby, he motioned for them to come out. Bardoff strode down the hall regally. His high silk hat—Vickers' hat—was straight on the top of his head. The collar of his Chesterfield coat turned up in back. A white silk scarf muffled his chin. From fifty feet he would have fooled anyone. Sid Blue walked close to Bardoff's side. Sid's eyes darted from side to side constantly.

The doorman saluted: "Evening Mr. Vickers." Bardoff walked past, looking straight ahead. At the curb was Vickers'

big Hispano-Suiza limousine. The driver swung the door open.

A car had drawn up in back. Feminine laughter sounded. A man in evening clothes held the door open. A slim, silk clad leg was thrust out—then a blond head.

Bardoff stopped and stared. His eyes traveled from the silk clad leg to the blond head, and back. He kept staring. Sid Blue was standing very close to him. He smashed his heel down on Bardoff's in-step.

"Move, Ruski!" he snarled.

Bardoff got in quickly, favoring the injured foot. Sid jumped into place beside him and the chauffeur pulled out into traffic. He drove slowly until Paxton passed in his roadster. The big car followed Paxton's.

THE Hispano swung west and turned down Broadway, riding hub to hub with a jam of taxis and other private cars. Cars filled with people on pleasure bent. Men and women.

"Look straight ahead, mug!" Sid Blue warned.

They drove south through Times Square, down Seventh Avenue to Thirty-sixth Street, then over to Broadway again. Traffic stopped them every other block. Coming through Times Square, bound north, a man in front of Green's Drug Store watched them pass. He threw away his cigaret, went inside and called a number on the phone.

In front of the Tivoli a man with a light gray suit grabbed his companion by the arm, pulled him over to look at the pictures of Anne Sheridan and Lamour. "Don't look around!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. "There goes the Big Boy."

A young man with a short briar pipe was leaning against an orange drink stand at the corner of Forty-eight. He looked hard at the big black Hispano-Suiza. Then he took the pipe out of his mouth and breathed on a big, square-cut emerald on the second finger of his left hand. He rubbed it slowly on his sleeve. When the car had passed, he shoved the pipe in his pocket and ducked down a subway entrance.

At Columbus Circle, Paxton turned his car right, the limousine following. They shot across town to Second Avenue and

rolled downtown under the L structure. They turned left to the waterfront and stopped a little beyond a building marked Empire Chemical Company.

Paxton walked back to the Hispano. "Go inside, Sid. Tell Levy the boss is outside. Ask him if the trucks went out."

For two hours Bardoff and Sid Blue, in the big black Hispano, followed Paxton's roadster. East Side, West Side—Midtown, Harlem, the Bronx. Stopping long enough to be seen. Sid Blue and Bardoff, riding behind the bullet-proof glass of Vickers' limousine.

Several doors off Seventh Avenue on One Hundred and Thirty-eighth, they stopped in front of the Richmond Garage. At the last top Paxton had told Sid Blue to go into the Richmond Garage and say, "How are things?" Then walk back to the Hispano. Bardoff sat, looking straight ahead, when Sid went in. The car was parked under a light so he could be seen.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bardoff watched Sid Blue go into the garage. Then he hunched forward on the seat. A girl walked out from the shadows of a doorway. She was young, slim, blond and pretty. White girls weren't often seen in this section of town at any time . . . and hardly ever at this hours of the morning.

She approached the car and smiled. Bardoff seemed to have been expecting her. He rolled down the bullet-proof glass window and leaned out. As he started to speak the girl suddenly threw herself down on her face—flat on the sidewalk.

Bardoff was still staring at her in amazement when they let him have it.

A burst of seven slugs—right in the chest. Before his torso slipped below the window they gave him another burst. The shots echoed in the quiet street like sudden thunder.

Sid Blue came out of the garage on the run. The street light gleamed on the blue steel gun in his hand. There was a flash of fire that ripped from a doorway. Blue dropped behind the wheel of the car and waited for another. When he looked again the girl was gone. Quiet had descended on the street as abruptly as it had been shattered.

Paxton had left his roadster at the first shot. He was at Sid's side now. They jumped in the far door of the car and told

the chauffeur to get under way. Only one look was needed to tell them that Bardoff was dead.

Gripping Sid Blue's arm, Paxton said, "Drive like hell to the Disposal Works docks. See Pop White. They're loading scows with garbage to take out and dump at sea. . . . Drive the car on one of the scows—with everything in it." He jerked his thumb at the huddled form of Bardoff. "Have it covered with garbage and towed out to sea—and dumped with the rest. . . . White's in charge—Pop White. I'm going back for my car."

He opened the door and jumped out while the Hispano was still rolling.

PAXTON had just returned the doorman's salute and was walking up the steps of the Club Oriental when a big-shouldered man fell into step beside him.

"Cleary wants to see you," the man announced.

"Certainly, any time," Paxton said. "Come on in—want to see somebody. Be right with you."

He motioned to the head waiter. "Francois, give my friend a quiet table for two, I'll join him presently—be right back."

"Why don't you stay with me?" the dick said. "Cleary would like that better."

"Not an arrest—is it?"

"No. But don't try to duck. I'll be watching the door."

"Of course not. Wouldn't think of it. Go in and listen to the music and watch the girls. Order yourself a steak—I'll take the check. See you in a minute."

He walked quickly down the corridor, leaving a half-puzzled detective in care of Francois. The elevator shot up to the seventh floor. He used his key and rang the combination bell by short-circuiting the two screw-heads. A square-faced young man let him in.

Vickers was propped up in bed, reading Plutarch's Lives. He held his forefinger in the place when Paxton came in.

"They got Bardoff—right under our noses," Paxton said.

"You see who did it?"

"No."

"It was Kramer—the Mad Dog," Vickers said calmly. "I was expecting it."

Paxton glared angrily. Vickers waved his hand carelessly. "I think Bardoff was

crossing us. I think he sold out to Kramer. . . . You've got to kill him, Paxton. He's behind all these killings. You must kill him—matter of business necessity."

"Like hell I will."

"He wears a bullet proof vest. You'll have to shoot him—above the neck."

"I thought I was to prevent killings?"

Vickers nodded. "That's right. That's why you must rub out the Mad Dog."

Paxton looked at him thoughtfully. "You had that in mind all along—didn't you?"

Vickers said, "What did you do with Bardoff?"

"Had Sid get rid of him the way you disposed of Judge Proto, last year."

"Burial at sea—with full military honors, for a prince of Russia." Vickers said, half to himself.

Paxton lighted two cigarets and handed one to Vickers. "Better count me out of this deal. As a boss hoodlum I don't click. . . . By the way. I had them take the magnetic controls off the roulette wheels—and last night the take was four thousand better. Honest percentage."

"Still the idealist," Vickers scoffed. "That would be trusting too much to luck—and we can't do that. You should be consistent, Paxton. Have signs painted warning the suckers out of Wall Street. And print little inserts to go in citizens' tax bills to read: 'Dear Sir, thirty-three cents out of every dollar you pay goes to graft.' You shouldn't discriminate."

The bell from the hall rang. The square-faced young man went to open the door.

"Probably Sid Blue," Paxton said.

From the foyer came a startled "Geez!"

Jack Kramer, the Mad Dog, walked into the room. He was holding his short briar pipe in two fingers of his left hand. In his right he gripped a short blunt automatic.

Vickers looked up without change of expression. His forefinger still held his place in the thick volume.

"Bardoff sold me out, didn't he, Kramer?"

"Yeah. The Ruski sold you out. . . . I just paid him off." Kramer grinned ghoulishly. The gun in his hand covered the man in bed. Paxton looked from one to the other—fascinated. The square-faced young man was flattened against the wall, staring.

"You're next, Vickers," Kramer said. "You and me could never work together."

Vickers turned to Paxton. "Do you remember the story of Achilles?" he said. "Achilles just had one vulnerable spot. You couldn't kill him except by hitting that spot." He looked from Paxton to Kramer. His eyes fixed themselves on a spot between Kramer's eyes.

Paxton started visibly. Vickers was reminding him that the Mad Dog wore a bullet-proof vest.

"Who the hell was Achilles?" Kramer said.

"A man who tried to cover too much territory," Vickers told him.

Paxton watched Kramer's gun hand. It was steady as a rock. He was going to kill Vickers in bed. Then he'd be next.

"You got gypped on that ring," Paxton said desperately.

Kramer grinned vacantly. He put his pipe between his teeth and breathed out of the corner of his mouth on the big emerald. "No I didn't. . . . What—"

Paxton's gun was in his hand. They stood on either side of the bed. Paxton's first shot caught the Mad Dog right between the eyes. He was crouched behind the bed when Kramer's slug buried itself in the wall.

Vickers, lying in bed between the cross-fire, didn't move a muscle. The finger of his big white hand still marked the place in his book.

"No one but a marksman could have done it, Paxton," he said.

Kramer had fallen face forward over the bed. The big square-cut emerald on the second finger of his left hand caught the light as the hand dangled limp.

Vickers called, "Moe!"

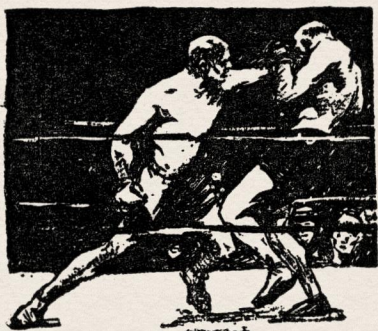
The square-faced man came away from the wall and walked over to the bed. Vickers pointed to the limp form of the Mad Dog.

"Take him up over the roof. Dump him in an alley."

Paxton's face was white and set. He took off his coat and vest and unbuckled shoulder holster. He threw it with the gun on Vickers' bed.

"Make you a present of them," he said.

Vickers nodded. "I hated to have you messing around my business," he drawled. "But I did want you to get the Mad Dog."



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... You were just the man for the job."
"We're quits!" Paxton snarled. "I never should have fallen for your game."

"As long as you mind your own damn business—we're quits," Vickers purred. "Men don't usually shoot at me, and get away with it. If you're smart you'll let that be a lesson to you—and keep the hell out of my way."

Paxton was about to walk out of the door of the Club Oriental when he remembered the dick who was waiting for him. He went in and found the man moving into a big steak, enjoying the floor show.

"You took your time, fella," the dick said.

"Had to see a man," Paxton clipped.

"Well, we might as well wait. Cleary is on his way up here."

Paxton looked about him nervously. There was a ten-to-one shot that he could clip the shamus on the chin and make a get-a-away. . . . Maybe they had intercepted Sid Blue before he could load the Hispano on the garbage scow.

Maybe. . . .

"He says for me to stick with you till he shows," the dick said.

Paxton sat back. Maybe Sol Beibler could get him out. Cleary had warned him. Vickers had played him for sucker. Being defended by Sol Beibler was a tacit admission of red guilt—but Sol had a way of winning cases.

For the first time in his life, Paxton was unmoved when Kitty Shane sang. He ordered food and toyed with it. . . . He was actually relieved when gray-haired Lieutenant Owen Cleary walked in.

"Hello, Paxton," Cleary said. "Didn't like Montreal?"

"Like New York much better," Paxton stalled.

"Very foolish. You have a way of getting into trouble in this town."

"Trouble? Me?"

"Yeah."

Cleary turned to the dick who had been with Paxton. "They just found the Mad Dog in an alley," he said.

Paxton gripped the table and spread his legs ready to jump up.

"Yeah?" the dick said.

"Yeah. . . . It's a good thing you were with Mulcahy, Paxton, or I'd quiz you about it. I'd ask you plenty questions if

you hadn't been here for the last two hours."

"Sure," the dick grinned. "We been here for the last two hours."

"Still carry a gun, Paxton?" Cleary asked.

"Not me." Paxton slapped his hips and armpits.

Cleary stood up. "Come on, Mulcahy," he said. "If you're gonna stay around, Paxton, don't be surprised if the boys keep in touch with you."

"Sure." Paxton grinned. It was hard to keep from wiping the perspiration from his face as he sat looking up at Cleary. "I wouldn't even break the parking law."

"Good idea," Cleary said.

The orchestra was still kicking the same old tunes around. But doing it better than any other band in town. Same crowd, same faces, same expressions. Prettiest and youngest girls in town in the floor show. Gayest spot in town. Up and down the stem, lights flashed on and off. Broadway, bright as day. Crowds milling around, looking for excitement.

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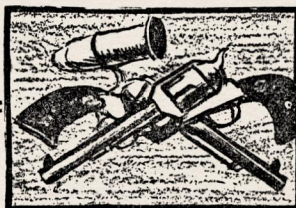
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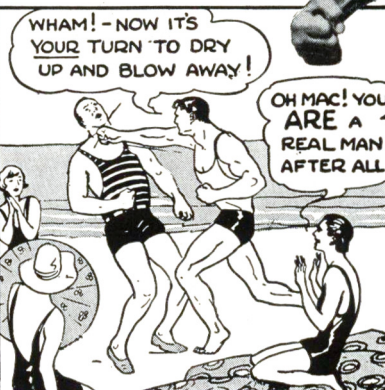
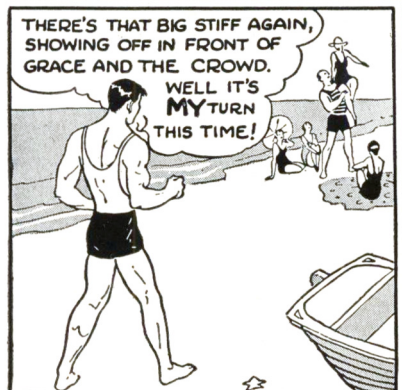
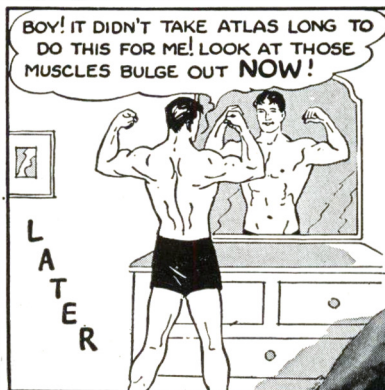
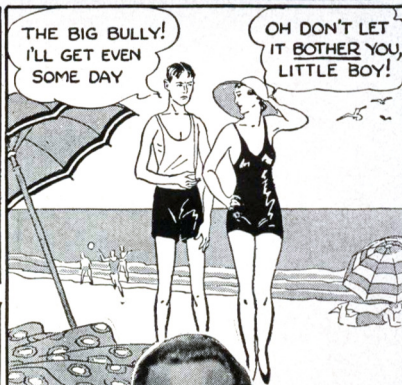
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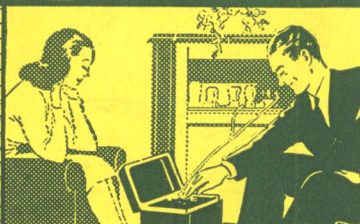
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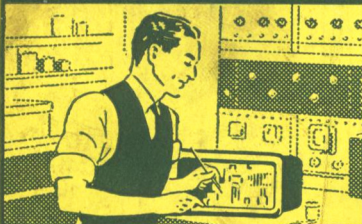
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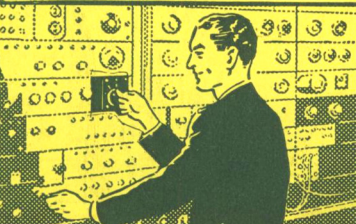
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