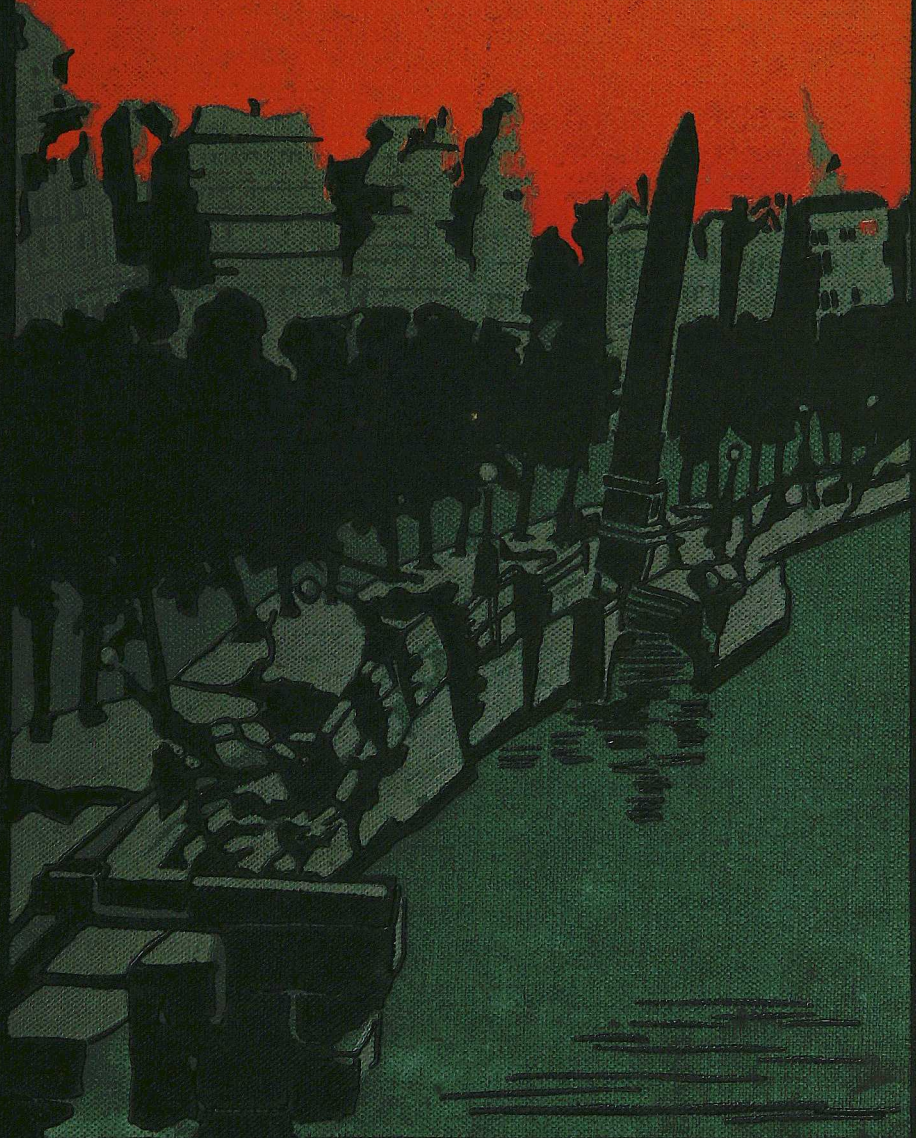


THE EARTHQUAKE

W. HOLT WHITE



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A Romance of London
in 1907

BY

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E. GRANT RICHARDS

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I

LADY FRANCIS MANHAM was so amazingly old-fashioned that she always ate with diffidence while music was being played. So she waited until the Savoy orchestra had crashed its way to the last bar of the "Soldiers' Chorus" from *Faust* before she put forth a long, lean, and carefully manicured hand and helped herself to a peach.

Lady Francis was old; she was so old that she gloried in the fact, even as St. Paul did in his infirmities. Lady Francis was so old that one could say with absolute assurance that she had been a great beauty in her day. When that day had been was not quite certain. Some there were who held that it was in the early Victorian period. Others said that she broke hearts at the Court of the First Gentleman in Europe. Her nephew had declared that her greatest conquests had been chiefly in the reign of Charles Stuart; but he was a person to whom little credence was given.

As Lady Francis stretched out her hand for the peach an affluent-looking clock, with a voice as rich and mellow as a well-dined alderman's, comfortably chimed the hour of midnight. Late sitting was the only dissipation which Lady Francis allowed herself; and this was a compulsory one, for she quite openly spoke of the prodigious cheque which she received for introducing into the fashionable world of London Miss Virginia Newcombe, whose father had emigrated from Virginia to found an almost incalculable fortune in New York.

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“When your family has such a long and disreputable past as mine,” Lady Francis had said, “you can afford to do anything—even become a sort of superior nursemaid to an American heiress.”

As she pronged her peach with delicate precision and proceeded to peel it in methodical strips, her wrinkled face was puckered into a smile. She had a pair of shrewd blue old eyes that seemed to dart in all directions, and yet see nothing; but as a matter of fact, Lady Francis saw everything.

At the moment her shrewd blue old eyes were concerned with her peach and the three other people who sat at her table. Of these, one, of course, was Virginia; the others were men. One was an obvious Englishman, and the other an equally obvious Saxon.

Virginia sat opposite to Lady Francis, and she might have just stepped daintily out of one of the pages of Dana Gibson. Her brown hair was dressed with that apparent ease which signifies an infinite amount of pains. About her rather round face there was that faint suggestion of the Red Indian from which no true-born American can escape. The eyebrows were arched and finely pencilled, the nose was slightly aquiline and delicate, and there was great determination in the round, strong chin. Virginia had brown eyes, and a mouth that circumstances could either make too hard or too tender. Upon her whole countenance, indeed, were written certain signs of immaturity. It was a face that waited for adversity to make it cold, or for love to make it tender. In the meantime it laughed.

On her right was Wilmers. To be exact, John Patrick Grieves Blair, seventh Earl of Wilmers. He was the type of man that still passes for a boy at thirty-five. He was tall and straight and clean and fair and blue-eyed. He was, in fact, if one may say so, a most unmitigated Englishman.

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His chief claim to distinction was that he was the nephew of the Right Hon. John Blair, Prime Minister and humorous cynic. Apart from this, Wilmers, entirely unhampered by an unnecessary amount of wealth, had walked with the men of his company across the yellow sands of the Soudan and the grey-green veldt of South Africa. And with the almost undeserved ease which comes to men of his kind, he had won laurels in the East and in the South. He had in him the makings of a man who rules men; but this seemed hardly the sort of thing to do, and a peculiar dread of becoming a celebrity prompted him to achieve nothing more than riding very straight to hounds and absenting himself for long periods from the country which he might well have served.

Von Prosen, who faced him at the table, was as tall as Wilmers, but bulkier. He also was fair and blue-eyed; but his eyes were not pleasant. As Lady Francis had once said in a more than commonly unkind moment, Von Prosen had the eyes of a successful and wholesale assassin; and though Lady Francis jested, she spoke the truth, though she did not know it then, and did not even live to know it. But Wilmers the careless and Virginia with the waiting face were to learn and remember.

For the rest, an unblemished banking account and the *Almanach de Gotha*, that continental *Debrett*, proved Von Prosen's *bona fides*. He seemed to be with the Saxon Embassy, and yet not of it. He paid his debts of honour with punctiliousness, and yet men mistrusted him. He was courteous to a fault, and yet women were afraid of him. He cultivated an air of mystery of the respectable, not to say polished, kind.

When Lady Francis had pared the third strip from her peach there came that curious silence which usually embarrasses people in an English restaurant, where men and women seem more or less afraid of their own voices

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unless there is sufficient music to half drown them. The crowded room paused to take breath and search for new ideas. But Virginia, being American, had no fear of the sound of her own voice, or, for that matter, anything else; and she began to speak in her clear and rapid way.

"I like the 'Soldiers' Chorus' from *Faust*," she said, "because it is about men who fight, and when women begin to think about men who fight they forget themselves. That is the real reason of the power of the uniform.

"I am not so sure," she went on with the naive outspokenness of her race, "that I shall not fall in love with and marry a soldier. You see, I have to marry, and so I may as well fall in love first. When you are so rich as I am you have to marry when you come of age. Orphaned heiresses like myself always have old gentlemen for trustees, and they invariably expect you to marry as soon as you are twenty-one. It saves them a tremendous amount of worry, and it ought to be every nice girl's ambition to assist the aged."

Lady Francis successfully removed the seventh strip of skin from her peach, and said: "Really, my dear, really!" Which is not an original remark, because it has always been used by elderly ladies forced through convention to rebuke a girl who is saying something which savours of the daring.

By instinct Wilmers and Von Prosen looked at each other. Men always watch each other when they are together in the presence of the woman they love. And there was a strange contrast in their looks. Wilmers' eyes were a shade pained and uneasy; he was hoping that the waiting face of Virginia might some day come to be tender. But in the eyes of Von Prosen there was calm satisfaction. He believed that the girl's life might be so shaped that her face must of necessity become hard. He

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saw in her a born fighter ; he hoped that she might be his second in none too clean or pleasant enterprises.

But Virginia was looking at the wrinkled face of the old lady. And, looking at her age and wrinkles, her mood changed. She grew a little earnest. Perhaps she was thinking that it is easier to jest at the beginning of life than at the end.

"Really," she went on, "I am serious. As I have to marry, I mean to marry the man who has either done something, or is doing something, or will do something. It sounds rather like conjugating the verb 'to do,' but after all it only means an admiration for a life that is of some use."

Von Prosen pushed the points of his moustache up a little more briskly than before. He meant his life to be of considerable use—to himself. Wilmers pulled at his sun-bleached moustache hard and thoughtfully. He was wondering if his life would ever be of use to any one. He had it in his heart that it might be of use—to Virginia.

By this time Lady Francis had become seriously disturbed. "If you are in the marriage market," she said to Virginia, with some severity, "there is no reason why you should advertise yourself."

But Virginia laughed, and said, "Why not? I come of business people who trusted themselves. I cannot trust agents. It is rather painful, but none the less it is a fact that I am—or at any rate shall be—on the marriage market quite soon."

Von Prosen passed his tongue with a sort of satisfaction along the waxed rim of his moustache, and Wilmers looked straight before him with the air of a man who beholds a sacred thing made sport of.

"Do not think me very horrid, Lady Francis," Virginia continued with smiling apology. "I am only telling the

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truth. Of course, that is a crime in itself. It is almost worse than murder to tell the truth."

She looked at Von Prosen and then turned from him. In a way he was a man who was understood to have done a good many things for his country's credit and for his own. He was spoken of as a man who would do more. But Virginia turned away from him to Wilmers, the man who had done what he called nothing, and stood in the prospect of doing less. Even if one is an earl it is a useful asset to be the nephew of a Prime Minister; but it is an asset that is difficult to realise. Virginia looked at him with frank eyes.

"Why do you not do something?" she said. She was so entirely frank that she did not see the deduction which could be drawn between her statement and her question. Von Prosen saw it, and drew in his mouth. Wilmers looked at Virginia with a somewhat unhappy face.

"Yes," Virginia went on, "why do you not do something? You have brains, but you think it is rather bad form to use them. And I know that you are brave enough." Wilmers grew uncomfortably red. Once or twice, in a careless and accidental way, he had done a thing about which people still talked. But the face that Virginia turned on him was the face of a child asking a question.

The question which was to be answered later was not to receive an answer then. For at this moment a low rumbling noise made the members of the little supper-party look at each other. The silver rattled on the table.

Glad to escape from the questioning, Wilmers laughed and said, "A motor omnibus has broken loose."

But the noise grew, and he became silent. He started as he glanced across at Virginia. She was leaning forward with parted mouth and wide-open eyes, in which he read alarm.

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"I have heard that noise before," she said quickly. "It was in San Francisco, in the earthquake. It killed papa, and thousands of people besides."

Von Prosen raised a pair of incredulously polite eyebrows. But the incredulity of his eyebrows was born only to die, for the noise now had grown greater—so great that even the men of the orchestra heard it above their music, and they dropped their violins from their chins.

The whole room grew instantly silent, and the people sat rigid on their chairs.

Suddenly the floor began to swing to and fro, and the carpet became creased. Men and women rose from their chairs and stood gripping the tables to steady themselves, and staring at each other in fear. Waiters zigzagged to and fro like stewards staggering from the ship's galley in a storm.

The ceiling, too, slid backwards and forwards in a sickening way. Women put their handkerchiefs to their mouths as though suddenly stricken with nausea. A tall old man with white moustache, who had ruled France in the early days of the Republic, put his hand to his heart and pitched heavily across a table. Wine bottles fell over on their sides, and the wine poured in red and yellow streams down the gowns of the women.

The thought, humorous and utterly out of place, occurred to Wilmers that he was in some fantastic side show at an exhibition. In every part of the room men and women were struggling to keep their feet as the floor swayed dizzily. He saw Lady Francis clinging to Von Prosen with one hand, while in the other she grasped the unfinished peach. He noticed even at that moment that the juice was trickling from her fingers. He saw Virginia with eyes full of fright and pleading.

He stretched out his hands to her, and then the end

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came. The floor buckled and broke, shooting the shrieking men and women amid a torrent of broken furniture and glass into the pit that opened beneath them. There were screams that split the long grinding crash that was like the roar of many waters. The ceiling fell in a blinding, stunning hail of plaster. Wilmers felt Virginia's hand torn from his, and then a great blackness engulfed him.

II

ON coming to his senses Wilmers' first thought was of death, and then the impression that he was dead convinced him in some illogical way that he was alive. He had a dreadful fear that he was blind. He could see nothing but a sort of white mist. He put up his hand as he thought of his eyes, and to his great relief found them covered with a cloth. Then he sat up and pulled the cloth from his face, and found that others had made the same mistake as he at first had, and had taken him for dead. For on either side of him lay a body under a white tablecloth.

Again a fear seized him as he thought of Virginia. But Virginia, he saw in a moment, was not either of the bodies by his side, for below one cloth peeped the skirt of the gown that Lady Francis had worn, while a man's boots protruded from the other. He looked round in the semi-darkness, and at first could see but little.

The silence was oppressive—all the more oppressive and full of terror because, perched on a broken piece of a marble pillar, a waiter sat talking rapidly to himself. He was babbling in German, breaking the flow of his own tongue here and there with an interjection of "Yes, sir"; and then the man, upon whose face the blood from a scalp wound had clotted, would flick at something with his napkin and start babbling to himself again. The man was mad.

In front of him Wilmers could see the open sky above the river. That side of the room, which had been mainly

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made of glass, had been torn away. He turned to the door which used to lead to the flight of steps giving on to the big ante-room on the Strand side. But no door remained. Instead, in the distance, the floor and the roof nearly met together at an angle. Where the point of the angle should have been there was a long stretch of light. The wall on the farther side had also been peeled away.

At different points about the broken floor and amid the heaps of wreckage there were bodies covered with table-cloths. It was apparent to Wilmers that after the crash an attempt had been made to restore some sort of order and to help the wounded.

As he looked slowly round on the white objects lying so still, his heart grew fearful again. It was possible, it was indeed even likely, that Virginia was among their number.

By this time he had somewhat recovered, though he was very dizzy. A little way off he saw a bottle of champagne half empty, that had evidently slipped from a table and had fallen by some chance on its base. His throat was dry, and his eyes half sealed with a fine white powder. It was the plaster from the ceiling. He picked up the bottle and looked round for a glass, but there were only the stems of glasses or little chips of them. So he drank from the bottle, and in doing so called to mind that it was not the first time that he had drunk in that manner. But that was at a different kind of picnic.

Then painfully and slowly he began to pick his way across the debris. He lifted one sheet, and found beneath it a woman. In her tightly-clasped hands was a portion of a string of pearls that she had torn from her neck in a paroxysm of pain or fear. The pearls were scattered round her, and no one had thought to pick them up.

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Beneath another sheet he found a far more awful figure. A man, who might have been an American, had been covered over where he lay, with both legs pinned down and splintered by an iron girder. His face was twisted into an expression of inconceivable agony. In his temple there was a little hole from which the blood had trickled and afterwards dried. Close beside him lay a revolver. Presumably the man had been carrying it at the time of the disaster, and to rid himself of his pain had shot himself.

Beneath a third sheet he found a lad with whom he had played racquets on the day before.

He had evidently not been killed outright, for on his shirt-front there was scrawled in shaky pencilling the message: "If Ethel is alive, tell her that I loved her."

And Wilmers, wondering who Ethel might be, and if the boy's message would ever be delivered, crept and staggered on across the room. He searched it completely, and to his great joy did not find Virginia. Therefore, seeing that all the dead had apparently been left where they were, Wilmers argued hopefully with himself that Virginia must be alive.

He crept slowly down the incline of the floor towards the stretch of light. He crawled through a gap in the scattered masonry, and found that the sun was shining and that the morning was soft and fair. For the summer was scarcely over.

The greatest disaster that ever overwhelmed a city had happened on the morning of 3 September. He sat down upon what had seemingly once been a window-sill, and was then lying amid a mass of bricks, broken stones, and ironwork, in what, on the night before, London had called the Strand. And Wilmers had to sit for a long time before he could realize the change that had come over the face of London.

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The front of Savoy Court had been sliced off as though with some gigantic razor. But the steel frame stood, and the floors, twisted and bent, still represented in some degree the different stories of the building. Along them lay an endless litter of broken furniture. Beside the stone on which he sat a brass bedstead had been pitched on to its head. The pillows had fallen away, and on one a kitten sat and blinked in the sunshine. Wilmers watched the little animal in a dazed way as he saw it lift a paw and begin to clean itself. Then for the first time it occurred to him to think of his own appearance. And with a strange inappropriate humour that came to him at unwelcome moments he realized that he was committing the social crime of sitting out in the Strand in his dress-clothes at an apparently early hour in the morning. He remembered his watch, and drawing it from the pocket of his dirt-stained white waistcoat, found that it was half-past six.

Being still partially dazed, he began to examine the scene slowly, almost methodically, that he might master the situation. The more he examined it the greater was his wonder. The older houses opposite had better withstood the shock of the earthquake than the newer buildings of the American type. The roofs were sagging, the walls bulging and cracked; the windows had all fallen out, and the glass, shattered into myriads of atoms, lay scattered on the debris in the road, shining like countless little diamonds; but if the houses stood in an uneven row, at least they stood.

He looked to the east in the direction of St. Mary-le-Strand, and saw that the steeple was still there. It had fallen perpendicularly through the roof, and the broken walls, closing round, held it upright.

There were people in all directions, though not so many as he expected to see. The crash had come after midnight, when the Strand had been half empty, but

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even at that late hour it had, of course, held considerable traffic, and the wreckage of the traffic remained. Opposite Romano's a motor omnibus lay on its side. It was tangled up with a splintered brougham, from the pole of which the two horses, both dead, had been cut.

Scattered along the street a score of hansom's lay in fragments. And amid the fragments lay more dead horses—killed by falling masonry. A few of the horses had survived, and these were tethered in twos and threes to twisted lamp-posts.

Picking his way as best he could, Wilmers turned eastward. His one idea was to get to Downing Street by way of Wellington Street and the Embankment, to see his uncle, Mr. Blair. For Wilmers realized with a certain grim satisfaction that his uncle must still be living. He could trace the Prime Minister's quick and heavy hand in the heroic attempts which were being made to restore discipline to the Strand.

On every side indeed were evidences that some high authority was at work, and Wilmers did not err in supposing that authority to be Mr. Blair.

He even smiled to think of the joy with which the Prime Minister would seize the opportunity to play the part of capable autocrat—a role to which he was eminently suited. He had, it seemed, even then begun.

The police, for instance, were in the Strand in considerable force. They were picketed at the corners in groups of three and four and five. Wilmers wondered why this might be, till he reached the corner of Wellington Street. And then, as if in answer to his mental inquiry, he heard a woman's scream—a long-drawn, dreadful scream. Two of the constables detached themselves from their fellows and ran round the corner. Wilmers noticed that they carried their truncheons in their hands.

Wilmers, who came to a sudden standstill when he

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heard the scream, felt his face go white. If ever, he thought, Virginia should scream like that. A man slunk past him, a man with tattered clothes and hideously evil face. He saw the horror in Wilmers' eyes, and grinned in his ragged beard in a bestial way, and Wilmers, though the man had done nothing but give that bestial grin, shot out a hand and sent him spinning across the neck of a dead horse.

The sergeant at the corner of the street nodded in an approving way.

He glanced down the street. Most of the houses, of course, were shops in which people did not sleep, and so the goods they contained, boots, stationery, eatables, and all manner of merchandise, lay in jumbled heaps open to be preyed on by any passer-by.

On the cracked pavement opposite one shop a little Jew jeweller was wringing his hands and wailing—wailing in the Hebrew tongue, which he had probably spent a lifetime in trying to forget. Two of his assistants, clad in shirts and trousers, were flinging rings and watches and brooches into an odd assortment of bags. A couple of policemen with their truncheons in their hands stood at the door.

At other shops, too, where the people who owned or managed the business lived on the premises, attempts were being made to shelter the goods. Men were feverishly collecting broken bits of planks and wedging them into and across the exposed shop-fronts with stones and bricks. They even took the harness from the dead horses to make their crazy defence works the more secure.

Wilmers was about to move on when he heard the shrill voice of a woman raised in anger. He turned about and saw probably the strangest little exhibition of human nature that he was ever destined to behold.

A family, evidently the tenants of a fish shop three

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doors westward from the Strand entrance of the old Lyceum Theatre, had been getting their breakfast in the street. A spirit lamp was perched upon a stone, and the children had been entrusted with the task of gathering materials from the house. At any rate, a little girl of about six had dropped a jug she had been carrying, and it lay in pieces on the ground. The child's mother took her by the nape of her neck and shook her. The child began to cry, and the mother scolded her the more, and then she cuffed her soundly.

It seemed almost past belief. London was lying in ruins on every side. Behind her the woman's home was nothing but a wreck. And now because the child had broken a jug in the midst of the ruin she must needs scold her violently.

Wilmers walked over to the woman and bade her cease. She looked at him sullenly, but desisted. On a sudden there was a great shouting and the sound of scuffling feet.

III

AT the sound of the disturbance, Wilmers faced about. A woman was tearing along the broken roadway. She was dressed in white satin, and her neck and arms were bare; her hands were clasped to the sides of her face, and between them her eyes were nearly starting from their sockets. Her hair streamed behind her, and she ran at a great pace and in complete silence. Wilmers wished that she would scream. It would have been less ghastly than her silence.

After the woman were running several men; two in evening dress were leading. Their eyes were terrible in their anxiety, and their faces white to the lips.

The woman slipped and fell upon the ground; she was up again in a moment, but the men were upon her, and, seizing her arms, they held her fast. She threw herself down, bearing the men with her. Her strength was the strength of one possessed.

Down in the dust and the refuse and debris of the street there began an awful struggle, awful as a struggle between the sane and the mad must always be. One of the men—he was old and his hair was white—sought to hold her by the wrists. She tore one hand loose and buffeted him again and again about the face till her rings cut his flesh and the blood began to trickle from his mouth. All the while as he fought with her the old man was crying, “Marion, Marion, Marion. Oh, Marion!” in a voice heartrending to hear. The younger man had seized the woman by the feet, and lay across them as

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one dead, or as a wrestler lies upon an opponent when he has him on the mat.

Faint with fighting, the old man fell away, crying, "Oh, daughter, dear daughter!" A crowd had gathered about—a crowd with mouths agape with horror.

Two constables broke through the press, brushing the staring people away like straws.

They seized the hands of the woman roughly—it was no time for gentleness; and, kneeling upon her, they got her wrists together and handcuffed them. They handcuffed the poor mad thing as they might have done a felon.

Lifting her up, they bore her, still struggling fiercely, into a house. The old man was upon his knees, praying, and great tears were rolling down his face. The young man raised him up and half carried him to the door through which they had borne the girl.

From the empty casements of different houses peeped out the scared, tense faces of women. A little girl had been watching the scene with a face transfixed with terror. Her mother came up behind her, placed a hand before her eyes and drew her back from the window-sill.

Sick at heart, Wilmers watched the gaping crowd disperse, each man to resume the occupation in which he had been disturbed. One man had actually stood and watched the scene with a razor in his hand and lather on his face. He had been shaving himself before a looking-glass at the side of a shop door. Walking back, he recommenced to scrape his chin as though nothing had occurred.

People's sense of proportion and the fitness of things had been suddenly turned upside down.

Others of the crowd went back to the barricading of their shops, or to the little encampments on the pavement where women were cooking breakfast.

The street was full of live people going about their tasks in a dead city.

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In other directions knots of two and three people dressed in evening clothes emerged from various houses and looked up and down the street as though expecting to find hansoms. They were evidently people who had been making their way home when the earthquake shook London into pieces. Then, fearing the shambles and the perils, and the darkness of the streets, they had taken refuge where they could. After gazing up and down the street for a few moments they turned westward and quietly walked away, making for their homes—the homes that had been wrecked while they amused themselves.

Two men who walked on either side of a lady Wilmers recognized as having seen in the Savoy on the night before. But as he did not know them he made no sign.

A policeman came to a door and blew his whistle sharply once. Two other constables on the opposite side of the road went into a house for a few moments and then reappeared, carrying with them a litter. They passed through the door from which their mate had whistled.

It was not long before they came out again; they carried the litter between them, and there was something on the litter beneath a dragged blanket.

Cautiously carrying the huddled something, they moved along the street, and passed into what had been a hosier's shop. Over the doorway was nailed a little strip of black cloth. It marked a house that had been selected by the police for the reception of the dead.

During the passage of the constables with the litter and the dead something beneath the blanket few people turned their heads. Men went on barricading the shop-fronts, and women rattled china among the disorder of bricks and stones along the curb.

There had been road-mending going on just here, and an old night watchman, who had passed through the

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general downfall unharmed, sat at the door of his little hut blinking at the charcoal brazier which burned before him, and placidly smoking his pipe. Two tiny children were playing at touch-wood at the back of his hut. They ceased playing, and laughed, and pointed as the dead went by.

Utterly heart-sore, Wilmers turned away and looked southwards.

He gazed across a mass of fallen buildings towards the river, and saw that Waterloo Bridge lay like a great broken reed across the stream. It formed a sort of bar against which the water had backed on one side and was falling in a cascade over the other. But the water was not running fast enough over the unusual weir. The water had risen nearly to the level of the parapets, and the Strand stood in peril of being flooded. The warehouses on the farther bank were flooded already.

On one of the piers of the bridge which still stood half a dozen men were working quickly. They climbed about the broken pier like active monkeys.

Wilmers, wondering what the men might be about, turned and asked a stout police serjeant if he knew.

"It's dynamite, sir," said the fat serjeant. "Mr. Blair's orders. The river has to be cleared somehow, so they are blowing up what's left of the bridges. As a matter of fact, the river is the only street we have left for use in London."

Wilmers nodded, and the fat serjeant became conversational.

"Where were you, sir, when the earthquake came?" he asked.

Wilmers briefly told him.

"I was here," said the serjeant, "right on this very spot. And in all my life I never saw anything like it," he added, quite unconscious of the absurdity of his remark.

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"I should think," he went on, "it was more like hell than anything else—everywhere men and women going mad from terror all over the place, and they came running out of the houses like bees out of a hive. Some of 'em had better have stopped in, for numbers of them were killed by falling stones, and others were so wild that they bolted slap into the traffic and were killed that way.

"The inspector was along at the time, and he passed the word for every policeman to collar six men in the King's name, and then we started clearing up the mess."

"As a matter of fact," he continued, "the clearing up was easier than what you'd think, because of the helpers we got by calling on them in the King's name. We got the women and the children into the houses, and we carried all the wounded out into the streets and concentrated 'em, so to speak, at corners. You see, it was handier for the doctors and for us.

"As for the dead, and there wasn't so many dead as you might think, we got 'em into empty shops that we commandeered as mortuaries. They do say that they'll be buried in the river, but as to that I can't be sure. That's brought us up to this morning. But the Lord knows what's going to happen now."

As the serjeant gave his narrative, Wilmers looked about him. He saw the doors of the public-house opposite were closed.

"It's no use, sir," said the serjeant. "You can't get a drink. The pubs are all closed by orders."

"If that's the case," said Wilmers, "I'll get on to Downing Street. I suppose I can get over by way of the Embankment?"

The serjeant touched his helmet. "You can, sir," he said, standing a little more stiffly and becoming a little more serious, "if you can scramble down. The steps of the bridge are just a bundle of bricks. But, excuse me,

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sir," the serjeant went on. "I don't know that you'll get very far. There are troops all round Downing Street, from the top of Whitehall to the bottom."

"I'll get through," said Wilmers quietly, and the serjeant, touching his helmet again, looked at him with curiosity.

Wilmers turned towards Waterloo Bridge. It was like going down a steep hill. When he got to the bottom he looked east, and saw that the whole of the Embankment as far as Blackfriars had ceased to be an embankment at all. The made ground at the back of the Strand had slipped away, carrying with it in its rush a goodly portion of the buildings which stood on it. Once Wilmers had visited a wooden town that had been wiped out by a cyclone in America. And what he saw now was rather similar to what he had seen then.

With considerable difficulty he climbed down the broken stonework to the road below, for west of Waterloo Bridge the Embankment had not been greatly affected. He looked for the Houses of Parliament. The tower was there, snapped in half jaggedly, like a broken stick. The towers of Westminster Abbey leant together in a drunken way.

Looking nearer at hand, he saw for the first time from the outside the wreck that the earthquake had made of the southern front of the Savoy Hotel. The two tiers of verandas, encased with glass, within which he had so often lunched and dined and supped, had been lifted bodily off the face of the building and flung, a wrecked house in themselves, on the road. They had crashed across the narrow strip of roadway on to the railings of the gardens, shattering them and tearing down a number of trees. The state of the Cecil was still more curious. The base of it stood, but the upper stories on the southern side had fallen out.

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Wilmers walked briskly along the Embankment until he came to Whitehall Court, and the face of this building wore a stranger expression than was on any of the others. Portions of the walls stood intact from top to bottom. But other portions had been stripped neatly off. It reminded Wilmers of the manner in which poor Lady Francis had been wont to peel her peach.

Wilmers stood in the centre of one of the paths of the Embankment garden looking at the damage, and he was still stretching his chin upward when he heard the sound of softly running footsteps behind him.

A sudden sense of danger possessed him, and, whipping round, he saw the man who had grinned at him in the Strand rushing headlong towards him down the path. Wilmers braced himself to leap out of the man's way, when he heard a rifle-shot fired close at hand, and he saw the man throw up his arms and pitch forward on to his face.

IV

H EARING the shot, and seeing the man fall by the rifle of some unseen marksman, Wilmers stood for a few seconds as a man suddenly turned to stone.

Since he had come back to his senses amid the wreckage of the Savoy Hotel, he had lived like a man in a dream. And now the dream was more like a hideous nightmare than ever. But the effects of the shock told, and he came back to the realization of things, and to a complete acceptance of the circumstances by which he was surrounded. It did not even seem strange that he should be standing there in his dress-clothes in the little sunlit garden at eight o'clock in the morning, with the dead man lying before him.

A soldier, a Grenadier Guardsman, came out of the bushes and stepped quickly over to him.

Having his rifle in his hand the man did not salute, but he stood for a moment stiffly at attention.

Then he relaxed, turned, and touched the dead man lightly with his boot. "When you have an earthquake, sir," he said, "queer things begin to happen. And mark my words that this won't be the queerest.

"And excuse my saying so, sir," he went on, "but I think I was just in time."

He stooped and picked up a clasp-knife from the grass; he shut the knife with care and slipped it into his pocket. "Spoils of war, sir," he said, and laughed.

He was a Cockney, and therefore had a peculiar and humorous etiquette of his own, which forbade him to

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show any emotion, except crude wit, no matter how unusual the circumstances in which he found himself. This is why your Cockney Tommy can cheerfully lie wounded on a battlefield and comment on the joy that his approaching demise will afford his mother-in-law. The method of the Eton man is much the same, only a trifle more refined.

Wilmers put a thumb and forefinger into his dirty waistcoat pocket and found a couple of sovereigns. "Don't think that I hold my life at quite this value," he said, "but it is all I can find just now."

For a moment the Guardsman hesitated. "It's very kind of you, sir," he said, "but it hardly seems right."

Wilmers said: "You'll kindly oblige me by thinking it right and by shaking hands." So Wilmers, in his dress-clothes, and the Cockney Guardsman shook hands across the dead outcast.

"And now excuse me, sir," said the soldier. "I have got to ask you what you want. The shot's brought up the serjeant, and there's a cordon here through which you can't pass."

The serjeant came bustling up.

"I am obliged to my friend here," said Wilmers, "for doing me the service of shooting this," and he pointed to the dead man. He did not explain that he had met the dead man earlier in the morning and struck him when he laughed at a woman's scream. It did not seem necessary to explain. He had come to see that he was living in a time when explanations were probably not required and would only give needless trouble.

"As a matter of fact," Wilmers went on, "I was trying to get to Downing Street. I want to see my uncle, Mr. Blair."

The serjeant surveyed him with a quick eye. "It's beyond my power to let you through, sir," he said.

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"You'll have to come to the guard-house. It's only across the road here, down by Westminster Bridge.

"And now," he said, turning to the private, "make your report, and be quick." The soldier gabbled a few brief sentences which would have done credit to a constable giving evidence in the Bow Street witness-box.

"I'll send a file for the body," said the serjeant. "Please come with me, sir." They walked along in silence till Wilmers saw a dull red glow begin to creep above the houses on the farther side of the river. The serjeant saw him note it, and remarked, "Yes, I expect that's the beginning of a good deal more than we can do with."

Then they came to the District Railway station at Charing Cross.

This little building was standing almost intact, and a sentry was stationed at the entrance. Wilmers and the serjeant passed within and turned into the booking-office, where, amid a litter of tickets which the earthquake had cast from their pigeon-holes on to the floor, sat two officers of the Guards. With them was a small, slight man in evening dress.

He had an opera hat tilted at an angle which was sufficient to be debonair, and not enough to be vulgar. The opera-hatted young man was smoking a cigarette. He was altogether immaculate in dress, and had the aspect of a man who lives a good deal in the open air, for his face was tanned above his astoundingly high collar. He looked, indeed, as though he divided his time between playing polo and giving fastidious little supper-parties to bright, particular stars of the lighter drama. And, as a matter of fact, his appearance told a true tale.

When Wilmers came in he rose quickly and easily from his chair.

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"Bless my soul," said he, "why it's Wilmers," and Wilmers, as he shook hands, said: "Why, it's Jim!"

For this was Jim Mendip, who once complained that he ruined a hat every week through acknowledging bows in Bond Street.

One of the officers Wilmers knew, the other he did not. There was a brief introduction, and then Wilmers quietly detailed his experiences of the night before. "And now," he said when he had finished, "I want to get up to Downing Street. I suppose my uncle is there?"

"There?" said Mendip. "He was never more there in his life. Curiously enough, when the earthquake came he was standing on the steps of the Athenæum. I was going by at the time, and stopped to speak. Then when London started tumbling down we ran out into the open space and made for the steps going down to St. James's Park. Only, by Jove, we forgot the York Column. It came down like a ninepin, and I tell you I was in such a funk that my hat pretty well rose from my head."

"And my uncle?" asked Wilmers.

"Oh, he is very fit," said Mendip, "very fit indeed. We got to Downing Street across the park, and since then Blair has been working like a steam-engine. His first remark when we got into the house—which, by the way, looks rather like a decayed tub now—was that the founder of his family had been a cattle thief, and that he himself still possessed uncivilized tastes. So he took off his coat and put on a pipe, and since then he's been attending to the troubles of the British Empire like the good man he is.

"I was with him until seven this morning, and then he sent me down here on a sort of roving commission which ought to have its uses, but which I can't explain just now. And it shows you to what a pass we've come

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when a man like myself is given a job and expected to be useful."

Wilmers was looking thoughtful. The time had evidently come for him to be useful, too. But mostly he thought of Virginia.

"There's one thing I can do for you," Mendip went on. "I can get you through the lines, and if you are in a hurry you'd better come along now." So Wilmers shook hands with the Guardsmen without a word, which is a way men have when there are better things to do than converse. Then he went out again into the sunshine with Mendip.

The railway-bridge had partially fallen, but they were able to pass beneath it, and they walked across to the corner of the National Liberal Club. "I am thinking," said Mendip, surveying with disgust the emptiness of his cigarette-case, "that Liberal principles received a pretty good shaking up last night. But the men in the club worked like good 'uns after the crash came. They've got the wounded from Charing Cross Station in there now."

"That was bad," suggested Wilmers.

"Horrible!" said Mendip, soberly. "Horrible! The last of the theatre trains was just starting away when all that glass came down. And by the shambles there was it must have been like a rain of razors. They are taking them out still.

"Have you thought of the Underground?" continued Mendip. "Up to the present we do not know how many of the tunnels have stood, and there are only about three or four places where we can get down in them. Blair is trying to get engineers from Chatham by boat. The railway-lines are blocked, of course, all over the place. But God only knows if we can save the people down below before they are starved.

"The one blessing was that the power-station was

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wrecked absolutely and completely, or there'd have been a live current doing its work all along the line. As it is, at the Temple and Blackfriars the water's in and over the top of the railway. I am afraid there is no hope down there."

Wilmers was slowly realizing the frightful dimensions of London's tragedy as they walked up Whitehall.

Here the scene was one of absolute desolation. The half-classic architecture of the street resembled to some extent a modern pretence of a Greek ruin. The towers of the new War Office had fallen, and lay tumbled in the roadway as a box of children's bricks might be spilt.

The solid mass of the Foreign Office and the Treasury still stood, but there were ugly cracks running from ground to roof. There was no traffic, and the only people to be seen, with the exception of the red-coated sentries who lined the pavement at every fifty yards or so, were a few government messengers.

Wilmers remarked upon the extraordinary quiet of the place.

"Yes," said Mendip, in cheerful answer, "it is quiet enough. Blair said he wanted quiet. He's got the Guards from Wellington Barracks in the park now, and the whole of Whitehall is ringed round with troops. If you look up the street you will see that they are building barricades there. Blair is expecting trouble."

"He must have been marvellously quick," said Wilmers.

"Blair always was a miracle of quickness," Mendip made reply.

By this time they had got to the corner of Downing Street, and Wilmers looked along it curiously, to see how much of it stood. As a matter of fact, there was more remaining of the queer old-fashioned little houses on the north side than he expected. In the quaintest and queerest and most cracked of them he knew that his

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uncle would be fighting in his cold, cynical, and energetic way against the consequences of his country's disaster.

The walls of the little house bulged outward, and looked much as Mendip had described it—a decayed tub. The door had become so jammed that it had been necessary to batter it down, and it lay in pieces on the pavement. The stone steps were as uneven and as crazy as the steps of a slum tenement.

Mendip led the way down the dark passage where the pictures were hanging all askew, and the floor was uneven where it was not splintered.

At the end of the passage he knocked on a door which led to the back of the house.

A CRISP, cold voice said "Come in," and Wilmers and Mendip passed into the room where Mr. Blair was trying to set in order, almost single-handed, the chaos that follows on an earthquake.

Mr. Blair, who was in his shirt-sleeves and held a briar-root pipe in his hand, rose up to meet them. He was a tall man, and spare, with a rather ruddy and strong, clean-shaven face. At that moment his features looked a little thin and drawn, but it was the fineness of a man in training rather than the attenuation of a man who is tired.

Mr. Blair had won to the Premiership by sheer hard hitting. His own explanation of his remarkable success was that he had never stopped to consider anyone's feelings. "To be popular," he had said, "one must have the majority on one's side, which means that the less you consider the minority the more popular you really will be. That's by comparison, of course, and you have to be sure that the odds are on your side."

A woman who admired him—and there were many women who admired him—had once attempted to flatter him by speaking of the great amount of good he did. Mr. Blair, who never recognized the importance of any woman, and certainly never courted their flattery or even their approval, made a reply which did him justice. "The more good you do," he said, "the worse some people will say of you, and the harder will be the task. I have no particular liking for doing good. I simply do it

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because it entails a struggle which is bracing to the nerves."

His colleagues in the Cabinet, to use a convenient phrase, feared him as much as they hated him; and their hatred of him could only be adequately calculated with the assistance of algebra.

Mr. Blair was fond of his nephew, and affected to approve of his indolence. "When a man," he said, "has no need to work, and does nothing, he proves that he understands his job."

Apart from this, he had a private impression that Wilmers would understand any job if it were given him to do.

As he stepped towards Wilmers with an outstretched hand he said quite simply, "I am glad to see you. I want help, all the help I can get. The thing that has occurred to me in the present situation is the truth of the words of Bismarck, 'What a city to loot!' Now has Bill Sikes come into his own."

He said nothing about the earthquake, expressed no horror and no dismay. He accepted it, with the utmost placidity, as an established fact, and it apparently did not depress him much more than the state of the weather. His attitude, indeed, towards the catastrophe might have struck some people as being almost indecently flippant. But Wilmers knew his uncle, and knew that a man may smile and be a strong man because he has the strength to smile in the midst of affliction.

Mr. Blair, however, now saw trouble in Wilmers' face, and his keen mind at once told him that that trouble came from personal distress rather than from a general anxiety.

He did not waste any time in asking questions. He simply stood by the fireplace refilling his pipe as Wilmers told him where he had been the night before.

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"I know," Wilmers said at the close of his short narration, "that you want me to help you. And I can help you, and I will help you. But in return I want you to help me. I want to find Virginia."

Wilmers did not realize at the time that he should have said Miss Newcombe. But Blair noted the slip, and found a second in which to feel amused. With considerable self-sacrifice, however, he denied himself a smile.

"So far as I can gather from Mendip," Wilmers went on, "you seem to have placed London under a species of martial law. And so I want a pass—a pass that will enable me to get up to Park Street to find out whether Virginia has returned."

By this time the Prime Minister had accepted Virginia as Miss Newcombe's proper title, and he even made a mental note that he would have to wear lavender kid gloves at some date in the future. And he hated lavender kid gloves. Then he swept down again on the practical side of things.

"You could go up yourself," he said, "but it will mean considerable trouble and do practically little good. If you want to ascertain Miss Newcombe's fate, or, at any rate, whether she has returned home, I will send up Mendip to see. In the meantime I have a good many things to say to you. By to-night I have got to attend to more duties than probably ever fell to the lot of one man in one day before."

The Prime Minister spoke in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. He knew that he was the one man to deal with the present crisis, and it would have seemed foolish to him to indulge in conventional and needless modesty.

He turned to Mendip. "Get a horse," he said, "and go up to Park Street." Then he spoke to Wilmers. "If Miss Newcombe is there," he said, "you can go up afterwards. She will probably want you, as Lady Francis is

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dead, and I would suggest that it will be better for us all if you brought her here."

Without waiting for thanks, he pointed out a chair to Wilmers.

"In twenty minutes' time," he said, "the clerks I have got will have finished what I have given them to do, and then I can get to work again. In the interval, as I can at once give you a task which will take you about London as best you are able to travel, I may as well explain all I know of the situation.

"Briefly, then, I have got a man through to Windsor, which has been damaged by the shock, but not much. The King should be in town by to-night. What the precise effects of the earthquake are I cannot say, for on the one day when I should have found a newspaper useful there are no newspapers to be had.

"For all I know, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, and the rest of our big cities may be in ruins. No news has come through as yet, because all the wires are down. At the present moment I have men on their way to the various railway-stations to ascertain what has happened to the lines. The river has been blocked at Westminster, Waterloo, and Blackfriars. For some extraordinary reason London Bridge is still standing. I presume it wants to indulge in a course of conduct unusual in its predecessors. The other bridges I am having destroyed, as we must keep the river clear."

The Premier flicked some tobacco-ash from his waist-coat, and went on speaking rapidly. "The first thing I did was to send Manners—you know Manners—to look for a motor. Goodness knows how far he has had to go to find one, and whether the roads are clear for his purpose. If they are not passable to a car, he has orders to ride to Aldershot. I am going to have every man of the garrison there brought up to London.

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"One of the first difficulties I found was the impossibility of issuing proclamations, or rather, I might say, instructions to the local authorities as to what to do. The Stationery Office has been wrecked, but I am getting some printing-presses to work in Westminster.

"The greatest nuisance of it all is that I cannot get hold of the police very quickly. They are not on the telephone—a gross piece of folly—though it is true the telephone would not help us much, seeing that most of the wires are down. I hope, however, that we shall have mended matters to some extent in that direction by midnight.

"Fortunately I had one great slice of luck. Brand—the First Lord, you know—and Halcombe, of the War Office, it appears were having a private confab together at the Admiralty when London was capsized. They got round to me about two. So we have given the order to mobilize on sea and on shore, and I am concentrating the fleet at the mouth of the Thames. Some of our friends across the water may not scruple to give us trouble, and the mouth of the Thames is the best place for striking both east and west.

"Every man who has ever served the King is coming back to the colours as fast as we can get them. Not only the Regulars, but the Militia and the Volunteers. And if there is trouble there won't be any question of blank cartridge, my boy, it will be ball cartridge from the start."

The Prime Minister took a few short turns up and down the hearthrug like a sailor pacing the bridge, and then resumed his discourse.

"The only thing for which I bless my predecessors in office," he said, "is the fact that London is now split up into municipalities. As fast as I can get them I am sending out picked men as special commissioners, and I don't

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care whether they are civilians or soldiers, so long as I can get the right men through to the mayor of each borough.

"I have told these new commissioners of mine not to bother in the slightest about the law, but to do whatever they think fit. And if the mayor on the spot doesn't think to see fit too, my commissioners will take charge. If there is any trouble, they have my instructions to quote poor dear 'C.-B.' at the mayors, and say 'Enough of this foolery.'

"Of course, I am absolutely *ultra vires*. Positively and absolutely beyond my powers. Free England during the next few weeks, perhaps months, is going to be an autocracy. It is the only way. Nice sentence that—sounds like Martin Harvey.

"In fact," Mr. Blair continued, "I have already suspended the Constitution in about fifty different ways. I am glad enough, I can assure you, that Parliament isn't sitting. If it were, I'd have it dissolved. The parliamentary hecklers produce just as irritating and evil results as the questions which a child fires off at his father when the good man wants to work. We are too busy for questions.

"I have even, thank goodness, got an emergency Cabinet. St. Quinten is good enough to look after the Foreign Office, and for once we'll adopt the wise policy of leaving the Colonies to themselves. What really concerns us at the present moment is the parish pump, and to do the pumping and keep the water running the Board of Trade man and myself will work with the Admiralty and the War Office.

"The matter that troubles me most is the problem of food. I am afraid even the unemployed are going to be hungry. At present, however, because I know so little, it is difficult to say what is going to happen."

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Blair paused and arranged the pens on his writing-desk in order. Wilmers had listened to his extraordinary discourse without amaze. He knew the greatness of purpose and the powers of strength and tenacity that lay beneath his uncle's light manner of treating things. He only felt a little thankful that certain right honourable members of the Opposition and certain editors of the Opposition Press were not there to hear.

Mr. Blair passed easily from the affairs of the anguished State to Wilmers' physical needs.

"You'd better get some breakfast," he said, "for no man does good work on an empty stomach. But first get upstairs and change. It is hardly decent to go about in that kit at this time in the morning."

He looked his nephew up and down. "I can give you thirty years," he said, "but we are much of a build. I don't think that many of our people, what with governing countries or fighting or playing at games, ever had much time to get fat."

Wilmers nodded his head, and went slowly upstairs. Mr. Blair's valet—a man who was such an excellent servant that it was never necessary for him to even ask a question—was arranging a disordered room.

He bowed without a word as Wilmers entered, and then silently laid a tweed suit upon the bed.

When Wilmers descended again, feeling a little odd and awkward in his unaccustomed clothes, he went straight into his uncle's room. The Premier was dictating something very rapidly to a stenographer who sat by his side. Mendip, swinging his eyeglass from its cord, was looking out of the window with a greatly troubled face.

When Mr. Blair looked at his nephew there crept into his eyes something distantly related to compassion. Wilmers had the sense of a curtain going up upon a

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tragedy. He took hold of a chair that he might stand quite steadily. Mr. Blair saw him, and hastened to speak.

“It is not the worst, my boy,” he said. “It simply is that Virginia is not there, and nothing has been heard of her.”

VI

ON learning from his uncle that nothing had been heard of Virginia in Park Street, Wilmers merely straightened himself up and asked quietly: "Has anything been seen of Von Prosen?"

Mr. Blair glanced at him sharply. "As a matter of fact," said he, "I have had inquiries made, and nothing has been heard of Von Prosen. From that I think we may gather some hope. Von Prosen is a very clever man—a peculiarly clever man—and if Virginia is with him, I think that she will be fairly safe."

Sympathy was not the characteristic with which Mr. Blair was most richly endowed. He seldom administered any sympathy at all, and then only in homœopathic doses. The attitude he took up towards Wilmers' distress was practical rather than sentimental.

"I am afraid, my boy," he said, "that little can be done. There must be thousands of people looking for missing relatives at the present moment, and the means of looking for them are small. London is so topsy-turvy that they might as well hunt for needles in haystacks."

The last remark was so unfeeling that Wilmers winced, and seeing this, Mr. Blair hastened to say—

"However, we will do what we can. As soon as it is possible to circulate the description of Virginia and Von Prosen among the police and the various local authorities, we will do so.

"I know that till we have some news," he went on, "you will, of course, be anxious, but as you are practi-

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cally powerless, I would suggest that, as an antidote to anxiety, you should help me as much as you can."

All that Wilmers said was: "I shall be very glad."

"Now," said Mr. Blair, "we will get to breakfast, and while we are at table I will tell you what I want you to do, and what is being done. I shall not apologize to you for not putting on my coat, though really I am beginning to think that I am contracting the habits of a Labour member."

The breakfast had been laid in Mr. Blair's library, or rather, as it would better be described, his workshop. The Prime Minister closed the door of the adjoining room that he might not be disturbed by the clicking of busy typewriters.

Wilmers smiled when he saw the repast. It consisted of beefsteak and goodly tankards of beer.

Mr. Blair saw his smile and laughed. "We have," he said, "strong work before us, and we want strong food."

The Prime Minister attacked his steak with vigour, and at intervals rattled off his programme in his own clear, precise, quick way.

"It is wonderful how fast one can go ahead with a constructive policy," he said, "when you decide to ignore as many laws as is necessary. At the end of a few days I shall be looked upon as a sort of Trepoff. As it is, I have made the superintendents of the various police divisions so many minor dictators.

"Looters are to be shot out of hand, and people caught creating disturbances will be tried by military court-martial. London is going to have a species of martial law under a civil dictatorship.

"Really," he went on, helping himself to potatoes, "I almost wish I were a policeman. The police are going to have an excellent time, heaven bless them, with no newspapers to insert little paragraphs headed 'Police

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and public.' Though I suppose," he added with a sigh, "that the newspapers will be at it before very long.

"The funniest thing that has happened yet is the shake-up at Wormwood Scrubbs. About two hundred of the prisoners there have escaped, and we haven't mopped them all up yet. I understand that some men from Hounslow are rounding them up now."

"But when you catch them," asked Wilmers, "what are you going to do with them?"

"Do with them, my boy?" said the Prime Minister with his mouth half full of potato chips. "We'll settle them very easily. It is wonderful what you can do when you have a vivid imagination and means to secure the realization of your ideals.

"First of all, we shall clear the streets. Without transit a city is bound to stand still. I am commandeering the omnibuses, and so many will be placed at the disposal of the officer commanding each district, and every omnibus will be a potential 'Black Maria.'

"Gaols, of course, are not of much use when they have cracks in the walls, and houses are useless as prisons. So I am going to have all the folk who give us trouble put on barges on the Thames. What do you think of that? An excellent scheme, eh?" And the Prime Minister refreshed himself with great gusto from his tankard.

"I tell you," Mr. Blair went on, "that Plato's ideal Republic won't be a patch on Blair's London when Blair has finished with it."

"I am afraid," suggested Wilmers, "that you will have awkward questions asked about the liberty of the subject."

"I don't think so," said the Prime Minister. "I am attending to the liberty of the subject. I am going to curtail the liberty of some of the subjects for the benefit

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of the rest. I am going to see that London is free from looters, free from robbers, and free from murderers. Of course, we may not be able to deal with them all, but we shall be able to take care of a good many.

"I only wish to goodness," he went on, "that I knew a little better how we stood. At the present I feel like a man whose only view of life is that of shadows on the wall.

"For one thing, I have to bow my acknowledgments to some of our pet cranks. Some of us, I imagine, thought it rather absurd when the Naval Volunteers on the *Buzzard* asked for wireless telegraphy, but it is going to be of use. I am having the plant brought up here now, and soon we'll be getting off messages from the Treasury roof.

"At least, we shall get through to Chatham, and that will be better than nothing. Marshall, of the War Office, is trying to arrange a heliograph service from here to Dover and Portsmouth.

"At the present moment my greatest concern is the fire in Southwark. From what I hear it is a bad one.

"In fact, what I want you to do is to cover as much ground as possible. I'll get you a horse and provide you with a pass, and between the two you ought to be of some use. First, I want you to go down to the Bank—indeed, I want you to discover what is happening in the City, for as far as I can see we are in the position of having plenty of money without being able to get at it. I have sent a regiment down to Threadneedle Street already.

"From what I can gather, too, the Bank is in such a state that it is impossible to get either in or out of it. All the same, some of our dear friends in White-chapel will probably attempt to get in if we allow them half a chance. That is an allowance which I do not propose they shall have."

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The Prime Minister had been talking quickly and eating quickly too, and now he had finished his breakfast. He got up quickly, jerked his waistcoat into place, and reached for his inevitable briar pipe. Wilmers lit a cigarette and waited for his uncle to proceed.

"Breakfast," said Mr. Blair—"and, by the way, that was a very excellent steak—reminds me of food supplies. I have sent out a lot of second-class clerks to go and hunt up the railway directors."

"Rather a job to find them," said Wilmers.

"Not at all," said the Prime Minister, "not at all. In the course of the day they will be found at the various railway termini. A railway director gravitates as surely towards his central office when there is a smash as a mother runs for her baby when it howls."

From the matter of railways the Prime Minister turned again to the question of food.

"When it comes to feeding London," he said, "people seem to eat an inordinate number of things. Bread, of course, is the most important. I have often been sufficiently hard-hearted to smile when a beggar has asked me for bread for his starving children. But I am realizing now that bread is, after all, the one food that we cannot conveniently go without, and I do not mind confessing that I am rather alarmed about the Southwark fire. If it spreads to Rotherhithe and Deptford, then flour will be running short. I should very much like to know what has happened to the mills.

"Anyway, I am going to put them under Government control. I am determined not to have any fancy prices if it can be avoided. In fact, I am going to preach the gospel of the cheap loaf in a most thoroughgoing way."

"What a time," suggested Wilmers, "for a grain corner in the States!"

"By Jove, yes," said the Prime Minister, "what a time

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indeed; though I should think that even a Chicago operator could hardly be so heartless as to spring one on us just now."

On this occasion Mr. Blair's estimate of human nature was too kindly, as he was soon to learn.

He seated himself in a chair and ticked off various articles of diet on his fingers. "There's meat," he said, and laid his right forefinger on his left thumb. "There ought not to be any trouble about meat unless the docks have been greatly disturbed. The difficulty will come with its distribution. The same, of course, will apply to vegetables and milk. In fact, I can see that by the time things are ship-shape again we shall either be relying for our chief articles of commerce on colossal trusts with the State regulating the prices, or we shall be indulging in a wider system of municipal trading than ever the Socialists hoped to see."

"Have you thought," asked Wilmers, "what is to become of the children?"

"I have," replied the Prime Minister, "and I may say that I have already fashioned some sort of a scheme. But it is impossible to do anything until we find out how severely the earthquake has affected the rest of the country. My notion at present is to get rid of the children as fast as we can.

"Most of the schools will have to be rebuilt, and the youngsters will be more trouble in their homes while the houses are under repair than they would be on washing-day. So as soon as I find out what areas have been the least affected I propose to pack the infants off in batches, and board them out in the country. "I'll be a sort of benevolent uncle to every County Council child."

"Surely it will be rather a tall order to billet half a million children," said Wilmers.

"It does appear like it," agreed Mr. Blair, "it certainly

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does. But, as a matter of fact, it should not be difficult at all. No scheme is really difficult if you put enough people to work to carry it out. I shall simply instruct various local authorities to form committees for the children's reception, and they will have to do the rest."

"And if the parents object?"

"From what I know of London parents," replied Mr. Blair, "I think that they will be much obliged. A much worse problem than that of the children is how we are going to get things rebuilt. Obviously, we cannot rely in that respect upon home resources alone. We shall have to get workmen from half the world over to build up this city of ours again. However, that can wait for a day or so."

At this moment there was a knock at the door. Mr. Blair said "Come in," and there entered a weather-beaten river-policeman. In his hand he carried a dispatch. The Prime Minister tore it open and read it with keen attention. As he put it carefully down on the table he made a clucking sound with his tongue, indicative of annoyance.

"This," said he to Wilmers, "is the deuce. We have cattle, and frozen meat, and grain, and goodness knows what on the high seas, but how they are to reach us I don't quite see. The earthquake, it seems, has created an impassable barrage across the river below Gravesend."

VII

THE Prime Minister was so annoyed at the news of the barrage at the mouth of the Thames that he whistled a bar of "There's no Luck about the House" before he turned to Wilmers. Then he was as brisk as ever.

"Really," he said, "this is a nuisance, a very great nuisance. And if I were not so anxious about the bank I'd send you down to Gravesend, but with the bridges only partially destroyed it would mean a long trip.

"I think you had better get on to the Bank," he continued, "and I would suggest that you go by way of Regent Street and then straight down Oxford Street to the City. That long stretch of road is practically the northern boundary of London's heart, and unless we keep the heart in good order the circulation of the whole body will be bad. You will find some caps in the hall."

Wilmers said "Very well, sir," and passed out of the room.

Anxious though he was as to Virginia's fate, his heart felt lightened. It was a long day since he had done any work, and the work that he found at his hand now was good work, and the opportunity a great one.

The horse that Mr. Blair had promised him was one from New Scotland Yard. It was a great upstanding brown, and its face wore that patient and philosophical expression which is the distinguishing mark of chargers that have seen service.

At its head a constable eyed Wilmers a trifle doubt-

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fully. He saluted, and then held out the stirrup-iron. Relief overspread the constable's face when he saw how easily Wilmers swung into the saddle, and with what a workmanlike way he gathered up the reins. Wilmers nodded to the constable, touched the horse with his heel, and turned the corner into Whitehall.

He knew that his journey would be a long one; it was not a question of miles, but of obstacles; and so, finding the roadway fairly clear in Whitehall, he trotted up to Trafalgar Square.

Here the fallen Nelson column lay across the pavement in fragments like a broken sugar-stick. The statues by the fountains had slipped from their pedestals, and the façade of the National Gallery had a dissipated air.

A cordon of Guards was stretched across Cockspur Street at the corner by Atlantic House, but the badge with which Mr. Blair had furnished Wilmers secured his free passage. The subaltern on duty saluted him.

Seeing a great litter in the Haymarket, Wilmers rode on down Pall Mall, meaning to turn up Waterloo Place. At the corner an old gentleman with a furious and a purple face stood dancing on the steps of the United Service Club. The club porter was standing on the pavement below him, making heroic efforts to appear respectful.

"Don't tell me," the old gentleman was shouting, "that you can't get me a cab. The thing's absurd! It's nonsense! Utter nonsense!"

But Wilmers had no time to pay attention to the outbursts of unreasonable old gentlemen in an excited state of mind, and he turned up Waterloo Place.

As he neared Piccadilly Circus he heard a considerable uproar, and when he reached the open space the scene might have been that of the gigantic stage of a theatre which has suddenly been wrecked. Gilbert's figure of Mercury had fallen from its lofty perch, and lay shattered

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in the basin of the fountain. About the fountain's base were stacked the debris of broken cabs.

There was a great crowd of people before the Pavilion. Workmen, and men in dress-clothes, under the directions of policemen, were working in haste. The main exit, it appeared had become blocked, and there were people imprisoned on the staircase within. And so men who had been out for a night's pleasure, cabmen who had lost their cabs, newspaper boys, and the porters of the theatre, were toiling at the work of rescue.

At one corner of the building, surrounded by a sympathetic crowd, a pretty little Frenchwoman, seated on her dressing-basket, which she had recovered from the music-hall, was weeping in a broken way. The tears, as they ran down her face, had made such havoc of her paint that her cheeks wore the complexion of a bruised pear.

On various bits of wreckage sat odd little parties. Outside Scott's there was quite a family circle of strangely assorted people gratefully drinking coffee which was being served out to them by dishevelled waiters.

A man with a face distorted with pain was propped up against the lamp of a refuge. Over him was bending a sister from the Roman Catholic school in Leicester Square. A burly navvy was helping along a woman in evening dress who had lost one of her shoes.

"Don't you take on, mum," he was saying. "There's a boot shop at the corner, and if we can't buy anything for yer foot I'll steal something for yer."

The woman, a middle-aged little woman with a frightened face, looked up at the navvy and smiled.

The busiest place was the Criterion. This building had not been damaged to any great extent, and was doing a mighty trade. The doors stood wide open, and through them Wilmers could see a crowd of people

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clamouring for seats. A huge German, evidently the manager, was jollying the press of people in the manner of a City constable dealing with a crowd. Wilmers could even hear laughter greeting his shouted jokes.

It was not, however, his task to loiter in the contemplation of such incidents as these, quaint and even amusing for all their dreadfulness though they were.

Therefore, at as great a speed as he could accomplish with safety, he rode up Regent Street.

Here the scenes were similar to those he had witnessed along the Strand. Shopkeepers with hosts of assistants in their shirt-sleeves were endeavouring to barricade the broken windows.

Through the splintered shutters of milliners' and drapers' shops, Wilmers could see girls in untidy costumes hastily collecting and removing dresses, hats, and the various toilet paraphernalia of woman.

Four mounted constables were making an endless patrol of the street. Two were riding up, and two were riding down. When they met they would wheel about and return by the way they had come.

At the corner of New Burlington Street a Salvationist in a red jersey was preaching from the kerb.

A few people were standing idly by to listen, and three or four women were upon their knees.

At the south-west corner of Oxford Circus a handful of policemen were struggling to keep the crowd back from the entrance to the Waterloo and twopenny tubes. The iron gates to the booking-halls of the stations had been drawn to, and on them hung little pasteboard notices bearing the inscription, "Closed."

Through the iron lattice-work Wilmers could see workmen moving to and fro. The silence within the gates was ominous.

Though he could well guess what was happening,

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Wilmers drew up and spoke to a police-serjeant on the farther side of the way.

"Yes, sir," said the serjeant, "the earthquake has wrecked the lifts, and some of them have got fixed so that they won't go up or down. The stairs, too, are impassable for the present, though they think they can repair them soon. As it is, men have gone down one of the shafts in baskets.

"They have got a number of people up already, but there's a train jammed just outside the station towards Bond Street, and they haven't been able to get at that yet."

Before turning eastwards, Wilmers looked up the northern section of Regent Street, and outside All Souls' Church he observed a great crowd.

Following his glance, the serjeant nodded his head. "That," said he, "is Mr. Milton preaching."

Anxious though he was to lose no time, Wilmers was irresistibly attracted towards that crowd.

Drawing near, he saw the form of the grey-haired rector standing on the summit of a pile of fallen masonry. He had been speaking, and was about to bring his remarks to a close. He had raised one arm, and Wilmers in the profound silence heard him say, "Remember that we are in the hands of God."

Wilmers lifted his cap and sat bareheaded on his horse. The crowd by some tacit understanding began to sing, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me."

The singing rose, and people farther along the street paused to listen. Men removed their hats, and the policeman on the far corner stood singing lustily with his helmet in his hand.

Not a little moved, and feeling a fresh sense of the solemnity of the time, Wilmers turned through Castle Street, and so regained the main road.

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Oxford Street was sufficiently clear for him to proceed at a fair pace, and he looked but little either to the right or to the left, for the outlook was one to which he was now becoming accustomed. There were the same picnicking parties on the kerb, the same people evidently trudging to distant homes, the same barricading of the shops. The same little black rags were nailed over doors within which the dead lay. There was the same wreckage of vehicles, the same dead horses. Oxford Street was one long path of tragedy.

He drew rein for a few moments at the corner of Newman Street, as a few yards up it a small riot was in progress. Across the *mêlée* of tossing arms he could see the hard, shiny hat and the white smock of a milkman. Above the shouting he could hear the rattle of cans. There was laughter, and not a little swearing, as men and women fought for the milk. Then came a crash, and the struggling people fell in a heap together.

Some stout Frenchwomen from the Soho area on the southern side of Oxford Street stood on the edge of the pavement and laughed. The children with them laughed too.

The milk was spilt, and they were not going to cry over it—at least, not as yet.

Alien men with evil faces were slinking along the road, and policemen followed them with by no means kindly eyes.

So Wilmers rode on. For a stretch his progress would be rapid, and then he would be compelled to dismount and lead his horse across a tangle of fallen telephone-wires or over pitfalls in the pavement.

It took him in this way nearly an hour to reach Holborn Circus. Just beyond this a barrier had been thrown across the street, and half a dozen constables were patrolling it. As they saw Wilmers approaching, one of

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them stepped forward and motioned to him to halt. Wilmers held out the Scotland Yard badge which he carried in his hand. The constable touched his hat and asked, "Where do you want to go, sir?"

"I am," said Wilmers, "making for the Bank."

"Then you will have to go round for a bit, sir," was the answer, "as Holborn Viaduct's down. And a nice mess it is."

"Which way do you suggest I should go?" Wilmers asked.

"Well," was the answer, "you might get round to Ludgate Hill, but they say that the wreckage of St. Paul's has blocked the whole of Cannon Street, and the railway bridge is lying all across Ludgate Hill. The best thing you can do is to get down to Smithfield Market and then work up along to the Post Office. I would not try Newgate Street. You might get past on foot, but you'd never do it with a horse. I cannot direct you any better than that, but I fancy if you try that way you will manage to get through."

Wilmers thanked him and rode down towards Smithfield.

There the bustle was great. In places the roof of the huge market had fallen in, carrying with it masses of meat. Through the open doorways Wilmers could see the carcasses of sheep piled upon each other in great confusion.

Men in blue blouses were carrying the carcasses out and stacking them on the pavement. All along the street great square mounds of meat were arising.

It was with great difficulty that Wilmers finally worked his way round to St. Martin's-le-Grand.

By a miracle, the dome of the Cathedral had not fallen. As it was, it leant towards the south-east in a threatening way. The golden cross from its summit had

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been pitched on to the wine shop at the corner of Cheap-side, and lay embedded in its ruins as though it had sunk into a house of butter.

The wreckage at this point was such that only a space of about four feet in width permitted entrance to Cheap-side. Wilmers had to dismount and lead his horse with caution through the gap.

VIII

PICKING his way carefully along Cheapside, Wilmers came to the open space by the Bank, where half a battalion of Grenadiers had piled arms.

Finding the major in command, Wilmers explained his mission. "I think," said the major, "you had better come across to the Mansion House. The Lord Mayor is a capital fellow, and we are more or less guests there. Even the men have the run of the kitchens to enable them to prepare their food."

Looking at the Mansion House, Wilmers saw that the flag-pole had fallen from the roof, but the Union Jack and the flag of the City had been hoisted on to the balcony. The Doric pillars of the colonnade were bulging outwards.

As Wilmers walked across to the entrance, the major spoke of what had been done that morning.

"I do not know whether you knew young Gordon of ours. Awfully nice chap, Gordon—he was on duty at the Bank last night. He was, as far as we can make out, in his room when the smash came. We found him there just now with his back broken. He had been pinned down by a cupboard that had fallen on him.

"The Lord Mayor," he added, "insisted upon our bringing his body to the Mansion House. So poor Gordon is lying in the ante-room now."

As they passed through the doorway the Lord Mayor came bustling forward. Wilmers was introduced.

"I have just been seeing to the disposal of Lieutenant

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Gordon," said the chief magistrate. "Poor fellow, he looks awfully young. It is sad, dreadfully sad. But then, it is all very sad," he added vaguely.

The Lord Mayor was a stoutish man, with a full, florid, capable face, and side whiskers. Energy was written large all over his person. As he led the way upstairs to the Egyptian Gallery he was talking volubly.

"Lucky for us down here in the City," he said, "that our population at night is not great. One thing to be thankful for is that we had nothing doing at the Mansion House last evening.

"This has left me free to attend to Mr. Blair's instructions. What a wonderful man, sir—what a wonderful man! When we are through with our troubles we must present him with the Freedom—we really must."

In the Egyptian Hall men were busy at work fitting up trestle tables. Some of them had been spread with green baize, and furnished with inkpots, pens, and paper. Others were being got ready for luncheon.

The Lord Mayor waved to the tables, and the sweep of his arm was comprehensive. "This is where our Committee of Public Safety is going to sit. I have decided on not having more than a dozen members. If you get above twelve men there's too much talking, and I mean the arrangements for looking after the City of London to serve as a model to the younger boroughs." The Lord Mayor settled his mouth in a satisfied sort of way.

"You will honour me," he continued, "by taking some refreshment. Let us say a little whisky and soda? Not that I approve of whisky and soda before lunch in the ordinary way, but these are exceptional times."

"As Mr. Blair wishes to know what we are doing," he said to Wilmers presently, "it would be better if you were to come out and see. Our position, of course, is difficult in the extreme. There are so many banks about

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here, and so many offices of importance, that we have to keep our communications open.

“On the other hand, I feel most decidedly uncomfortable about our neighbours on the east. If we had Englishmen to deal with it would be another matter, but since the Aliens Bill was wrecked the condition of Whitechapel has become worse than ever. We must have had at least sixteen or twenty thousand most undesirable additions to the population down there during the last six months, and I am afraid that unless they are kept under very tight control they will give us a great deal of trouble.”

By this time they had got down to the street again, and the Lord Mayor, with Wilmers at his side, was walking briskly towards Cornhill. At the corner he paused and pointed down the street.

“We will go a little way down,” he said, “and then you can see what we are about. It seems rather an unpleasant thing that one portion of London’s population should have to barricade itself against another, but it is unfortunately absolutely necessary.

“We have had trouble already. Two or three hundred of the very worst class of Jews—Russians, Poles, and goodness knows what—were rummaging round the Bank of Scotland this morning, and so we have come to the conclusion that the best thing to do is to put ourselves into a state of siege.

“As all work is suspended in the City we have plenty of helpers, and the bullion of the Bank of Scotland is to be moved up here. It lies too much on the outskirts for us to take proper care of it there.”

Wilmers and the Lord Mayor had now reached the corner of Gracechurch Street, and at this corner was being erected a huge barricade. To construct it furniture had been taken wholesale from the neighbouring offices,

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and the work of building it was being superintended by a tall young man in a rough tweed suit. He turned round as they approached, and the Lord Mayor waved towards him in his large manner.

"My son," he said. To Wilmers he added in a lower voice, "I flatter myself that boy will prove that Oxford is not a bad preparation for the City.

"You will observe," the Lord Mayor continued, "that we have left a space in the centre large enough for the passage of carts. On the other hand, we have sufficient material in readiness to fill the gaps when need be."

Wilmers was rather surprised at the elaborateness of the preparations. He could not foresee then the fighting that he would witness a few days hence at that very barricade.

From Cornhill the Lord Mayor conducted Wilmers to various points, and finally led him back to the Mansion House. Here the chief magistrate turned upon him with the air of a man who has done his business well and is conscious of the fact.

"I trust that you will be able," said he, "to tell Mr. Blair that you did not find us sleeping."

"I think," replied Wilmers, "that my report will give Mr. Blair very great pleasure. Not even he, I am sure, could be much more wideawake than you are."

The Lord Mayor was delighted, and pressed Wilmers to stay to lunch. It was then about three o'clock in the afternoon; even aldermen miss their meal times when earthquakes happen.

Learning that the collapse of the south side of St. Paul's made the passage of Cannon Street impossible, Wilmers, after luncheon, decided to ride back by the way he had come. On arriving in Downing Street he found his uncle with a map spread out before him and a little heap of paper by his side on which he was making notes.

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As Wilmers entered the room Mr. Blair looked up at him and then glanced at the clock. It was quite sufficient a hint to Wilmers for him to keep his story short, but his account of things entirely satisfied his uncle.

"An excellent man, the Lord Mayor," said Mr. Blair. "Excellent. Quite a treasure of a man. Just shows you what a wholesale grocery business will do for you in developing powers of organization. I am glad you have arranged to have reports sent up to me twice a day. It will be necessary for me to be well informed as to how things go in the City, but apparently, for the present at least, we can leave it pretty well to itself.

"I hear from various depots that the Reservists and Volunteers are turning up very well. I am sending the City of London down to do duty by St. Martin's-le-Grand. The Post Office hardly holds out many temptations to thieves, and from there, if need be, troops can easily get to the Bank.

"However," he continued, bending over the map again, "enough of that. This barrage across the Thames is a much more serious affair, and I am afraid it looks like requiring all my attention.

"Thanks to the fool that they sent me to further explain the dispatch, I am unable to gather as completely as I should like exactly what the position is, but apparently the earth's disturbance has made a sort of shallows of the river below Gravesend. Beyond that there is a ridge along which people can walk.

"This would be bad enough, but, of course, all the water going down stream has to find an outlet somewhere. It has swamped the most easterly part of Gravesend, in the lower portion of the town, but the water cannot get very far there because of the hills. All the mischief is on the Essex side, where Tilbury is in flood."

The Prime Minister began to sharpen his pencil, and

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continued speaking the while. "In the docks, as I understand it, the water is already level with the quays, and the hotel is in the midst of a sort of ocean. You know how flat the land is round that district, and I am afraid that there will be a very considerable flood, because not only have we to consider the fresh water going down, but the sea water coming up.

"You had better take a look at the map just to get the hang of the country. It is too late to go down now, as it will be dark in an hour or so, but I shall want you to get down stream as early as you can in the morning."

As Wilmers inspected the map, the Prime Minister walked over to his favourite spot on the hearthrug and continued his voluble and explicit statement of affairs.

"While you were away," he said, "we got the wireless telegraphy instruments fixed up, and we've been speaking to Chatham, and I tell you Brand of the Admiralty has been putting the fear of God into the people down the Medway.

"I mean to have a dozen or so torpedo-boats—more if I can get them—between Putney and Gravesend. I may say that the Imperial Government is going to take the shine out of the County Council fleet even in its own waters.

"Talking of the County Council, the earthquake has done them one good turn. It has disposed of the incubus of the Aldwych site."

Wilmers was glad to hear his uncle jesting in this vein. He knew that the more Mr. Blair joked the better the grip he had on things, and the stronger his purpose to carry matters through.

"This afternoon I have fetched Sir William Histon, the engineer, and old Moss, the contractor, out of their comfortable abodes in South Kensington. They are down

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the river now with Brand, and a youngish chap that I found quite by accident at the Foreign Office.

"Pritchard sent him along from there when he heard about the barrage. Cole, his name is, and he was in charge of some of the works when they built the Nile dam. Moss and Sir William were rather annoyed at his being included in the party, so I explained that he was simply going as my representative, and that smoothed them down a bit.

"But, by Jove! if old Moss and Sir William are going to differ about how the barrage is to be raised, I shall take Cole's casting vote. When doctors differ as to a cure, your best hope lies in a quack, or perhaps we had better say an amateur.

"No dressing for dinner to-night, my lad," said the Prime Minister, as he saw his nephew look at his watch. "It is chops, I think, and one can eat chops in one's shirt sleeves quite as comfortably as in a boiled shirt. Besides," he went on, "don't think that the day is over. I shall be here till two. His Majesty is due to arrive from Windsor at about ten, and that means that I must get down to Buckingham Palace soon after.

"As for you, you can go through these reports. I have had a special table set aside for them. Just come in here for a moment, and I will show you what I want."

The Prime Minister went briskly along to the dining-room, where the oblong table was dotted with small piles of documents.

"This table," said Mr. Blair, "represents London, and I want you to chalk it out into rough squares, one borough for each square. I have had the map hung on the wall, and you can work by that. There are not many reports in as yet. But as they arrive, file each one under the name of the borough from whence it came in the book-case over there. Before you do so, make a digest of

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each, writing the summary out in short lines. Then get some drawing-pins and fasten each one down to the district it represents. Then when my service is really in working order, I shall be able to know by simply a glance at this desk what is happening in different parts.

“To-morrow I’ll get some Treasury clerks in and put them to the work, but to-night I want you to get it in order for them. The chops,” added the Prime Minister as he paused at the door, “will be served in my room at nine.”

On the following day Wilmers went down by launch to Gravesend, where he found Sir William Histon and Mr. Moss, the contractor, fuming at the discomforts of a very third-rate hotel.

The work of making a passage through the bar was, however, in progress.

On Friday, the third day since the disaster, Wilmers went down again, and all the way he saw evidences of his uncle’s handiwork.

Off Westminster were moored a series of barges, round which police-boats were patrolling. They had been covered in with rough canvas, and over their edges peeped a collection of hard and evil faces. Mr. Blair had been absolutely true to his word in saying that he would turn the barges into gaols.

Upon the fore-deck of one barge was a desk at which two gentlemen were sitting. An inspector of police and several constables were standing before them. A string of men were being conducted from a police-boat over the side.

And Wilmers, noting the extraordinary scene, could not refrain from laughter, for what he observed was a floating police-court. It struck Wilmers as being at once the most humorous and the most practical thing that he had ever seen.

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At intervals along the river, ragged men crawled along the foreshore, picking up garbage and whatsoever they could find that seemed to them of use. They were like carrion crows haunting the borders of a stream in winter-time.

Here and there were great black charred spaces where warehouses had been burned to the ground. Except for police-boats and launches there was but little traffic on the stream. But as he went farther down the river Wilmers saw scores of empty barges moored together. They were waiting for the foodstuffs and the merchandise that the barrage still held up in the river's mouth.

Landing at Gravesend, Wilmers made his way to the sort of sandbank upon the removal of which the salvation of London largely hung. As he walked along it he saw at a short distance from the shore that what appeared to be a launch had been brought up against the bank. Three officers of the Engineers were in parley with the people in the launch.

On his approach two of the officers moved aside, and he saw a girl with pleading in her face steadying herself against the rail of the boat.

It was Virginia.

IX

WHEN the Savoy crumpled up like a house built of cards, Wilmers went into the outer darkness of unconsciousness. But Von Prosen was unharmed.

He was like a man who, used to fishing and falling into troubled waters, immediately and almost unconsciously commences to swim. The selfishness, the self-love of the man, was so supreme even at that dreadful moment that it drowned even the fear of death.

By the red flickering glow which shimmered for a moment when the electric lights fused, he saw Wilmers throw out his arms to Virginia, and Virginia stretch out her hands to him. He seemed to realize in a moment that the one paramount passion of all his evil thoughts would slip from him if those hands met and were clasped.

Poor Lady Francis's hand was closed upon his wrist, but he shook it off, and, with the swiftness and stealth and strength of a panther, flung himself forward, and caught Virginia by the waist. In the twinkling of an eye—a long phrase to illustrate so short a space of time—he saw the floor buckling, and the screaming, struggling men and women who, but a few seconds before, had been laughing over their wine, slipping into the pit.

In a flash he realized that the table at which he sat was at the edge of it. He flung himself back with all the strength of his body—and it was a great body, and strong. He held Virginia in the hollow of his right arm. He flung back his left hand and grasped with the strength

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born of the necessity of the moment the base of the marble pillar behind him.

He knew that Lady Francis and Wilmers were sliding down into the horrid pit. And then there came complete darkness.

Virginia felt the marvellous strength of the man, and lay passive in his arm like a dead thing and yet afraid. Even at that moment she felt the chill of his starched shirt-front as it struck her cheek sharply. And the chill of it seemed to numb her into placidity.

Von Prosen slowly drew himself and his burden up from the slope. His strength, great as it was, was exhausted, and he let Virginia fall heavily upon the floor, and himself lay back panting.

In the darkness there began a horror of sounds. He heard the splintering of wood, the tinkling of breaking glasses, the slither of silk dresses along the floor, the thud of colliding bodies, the sharp, low cries of men in pain, the screams of women in anguish and in fear.

Then there came a sort of long and dreadful skirmishing in the pit where all those men and women had been flung together. Above the general mutter of things he heard men's voices calling upon women, and the voices of women calling upon men. But above all, louder and louder, rose the screams of women. They died away. There was a hideous shriek of laughter—a woman's laughter—sad, dreadful, piteous, heart-rending laughter.

Von Prosen gathered within himself his mental and his physical forces. With all his brutality and his faults he was a man of courage—of a large, fierce, irresistible courage. Throughout his life he had charged at difficulties as a bull charges in a china shop.

He rolled upon his side and groped in the darkness for Virginia. The warm touch of her arm came as something real in the awful unreality of the moment. He

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put out both hands and drew her to himself. She lay passive against him.

Out of the unthinkable *mêlée* below there were returning some symptoms of coherence and understanding. Away in the darkness Von Prosen saw matches struck, and as the light of them quivered for a few moments in the blackness he saw men with ashen faces peering with frightened eyes here and there. They were men looking for women.

The matches went out, and others were struck. Von Prosen put his hand into his pocket and found matches for himself. And always afterwards, as he recalled scratching a lucifer upon the bottom of his silver match-box, which was worn rather shiny, he remembered the groans and the sharp, short cries that pierced the darkness.

Von Prosen got a match aflame and looked at Virginia. She with a white face and dull expression sat up and said, "Wilmers?"

It was a natural thing to say, for she had learnt the story of her life in the preceding seconds of terror. But it was not a terror so great that it could destroy what might be called the "maiden sense," the sense that all conventionality sets out to cultivate in the young girl.

She corrected herself hastily. "Lady Francis," she said, with interrogation in her voice, and then after a little pause, "Wilmers."

Von Prosen was mortified, and out of his mortification sprang an undefined desire for conquest.

"Can you stay here alone?" he asked Virginia. She answered in a heavy way, "I can stay here alone."

Von Prosen took the matches carefully out of his silver match-box, put them into his waistcoat-pocket, and felt the sole of his boot. It was dry. He could strike matches on it. He edged away in the darkness, feeling for the slope. It was not so steep as he had thought it; he let

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himself down it gently. So he went for a few yards till his foot touched something soft and yielding.

He got into a sitting posture, scraped a match upon the edge of his boot, and craned forward. He was touching the body of Lady Francis. In a moment he satisfied himself that she was dead. In her lean old hand she was still clutching the peach, and her eyes, though dead, still appeared to be darting at everything. It seemed to Von Prosen that they pierced him with suspicion. Across her knee lay a napkin. The match went out and burnt Von Prosen's fingers. He groped for the napkin and then covered the dead woman's face.

He struck another match, and saw that the supper-table had been brought up sharp against one of the iron supports of the sunken roof. The legs of the table had torn their way through the cloth, and in the sack of it was a jumble of broken glass and plaster. Upon the further side lay Wilmers. And in the suspense of wondering whether Wilmers were dead or alive the second match went out and burnt his fingers anew. He would not light a third. He was afraid lest he might see that Wilmers was alive. He shuffled with bent knees, as a monkey might shuffle, among the broken glass and plaster. He reached Wilmers and thrust his hand into the opening of his shirt. Wilmers' heart still beat.

For a few seconds Von Prosen, squatting on his haunches, turned over a thousand plans in his mind. Wilmers was stunned, and Von Prosen groped for a weapon in the darkness that he might stun him the more. And he prayed that he might do more conclusive work than stunning.

But he could find nothing upon which he could lay his hands. He felt Wilmers' heart again a second time. It was beating more feebly than before. It seemed to him to beat slower and slower and slower. He grasped the

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edge of the tablecloth and dragged it towards him. He covered Wilmers' face with it and left him. He struck a match and groped back to Virginia.

The match went out, and he took Virginia's hand. He modulated his voice to a tone of extreme kindness.

"Lady Francis?" asked Virginia. Von Prosen answered, "She's dead." He felt Virginia's hand tighten on his own.

"And Wilmers?" asked Virginia.

"Dead too."

Virginia said nothing, but Von Prosen felt her hand grow cold.

For a few moments both listened to horrid noises below them.

Then Virginia said, "We must go down and help."

Von Prosen said, "It is impossible. We cannot help."

"Down there," he went on, pointing with a hand that Virginia did not see in the darkness, "the men that are alive are looking for their women."

A scream, probably the scream of some woman so disturbed that the movement gave her pain, came up from that dreadful valley of death below.

"Here," said Von Prosen, "we can do nothing. It is our duty to get out and get help. If this is an earthquake, then there are worse shambles than here. What can we do in the darkness?"

"We ought to go down," said Virginia.

Again Von Prosen said, "It is impossible."

"We ought to go down, we ought to go down, we ought to go down," said Virginia, and her voice grew fainter and fainter as the voice of a child falling to sleep. Then she became silent, and by the light of a match Von Prosen saw that she seemed to be in slumber, and he felt grateful for the fact.

He knew the Savoy like a book. He knew that behind

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the table at which they had sat was a staircase which led down on to the Embankment, but the question was whether the staircase could be passed, and what he could do if he reached the street. Somewhere down there in the mass of broken vehicles was Virginia's electric brougham. But of what avail was that to him? The disturbance that had wrecked the Savoy must have wrecked the streets.

Rapidly, however, Von Prosen thought out the way. There was the river.

Almost opposite the gardens outside the Savoy there was a flight of steps at which there were always to be found boats, whether by night or by day. Could he reach the Embankment?

Von Prosen struck another light, and saw that Virginia was still unconscious. He also saw a wax candle lying on the floor. He lit it, and with quick steps made for the staircase. Holding the candle out at arm's length, and with his eyes fixed upon the stairs, he went swiftly down. He murmured a word of thanks to the God whom he had no right to address when he found them whole enough to be safe. He gained the door, and felt the cold breath of the night upon his face.

The knowledge that there was an exit was sufficient for Von Prosen's needs. He went quickly up the stairs again and into the dim place of pain.

Down in the pit he could now see other lights, and from below him came the murmur of bruised humanity. He heard a man's voice say, "How can we get out?" Von Prosen knew, but he would not say. He had another thought at the back of his mind than that of helping his fellows. He wanted to save Virginia; he wanted to save her for himself. He needed her for the success of the most dastardly blow that it had ever been proposed to strike at this country—a blow which a little group of

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American millionaires with the help of the Saxon had been nurturing for months. And the fewer people there were to choke the stairs, and the fewer people there were to learn the secret of the boats, the better for him.

Von Prosen carried the candle to the head of the stairs, spilt some of its grease upon the marble balustrade, and set the candle upright in its own wax.

Then he went back, for he knew where to place his feet by now, and lifted Virginia up.

At the head of the stairs he paused, shifted Virginia to his right shoulder, picked up the candle in his left hand, and climbed down.

As he came to the foot of the stairs a puff of wind from the river blew the candle out, and Von Prosen stumbled across a dead horse. He stood still for nearly a minute, that his eyes might become accustomed to the night. It was not so very dark, for the moon was up and still climbing upwards in a serene sky.

The confusion about him was awful. A great portion of the hotel had fallen upon the long line of vehicles waiting for the people above, who now would never need them or could never use them.

Here and there he saw a stab of light as a coachman or a groom with a lamp staggered about amid the splinters of carriages, dead and dying men, and dead and dying horses.

Having looked carefully about him, Von Prosen saw that with discretion he could find a clear path on to the Embankment. Down this he walked with long and quick steps.

When, however, he reached the limit of the gardens he found that the Embankment had slipped away, and nothing remained but a rough slope of rubbish strewn with fallen trees, fragments of iron railings, and bits of stone. For a moment Von Prosen feared that the landing-

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stage and the boats might have been swept away. He had, however, no alternative but to go on.

To go back would be to return to the point from which he had started. To attempt to struggle into the Strand would be futile, if not impossible.

He told himself fiercely that there must be a boat. So, walking with a keen eye to pitfalls, he went slowly on towards the east and towards that point where he trusted to find salvation.

Slowly he went on, until there suddenly rose from behind the bushes of a prostrate tree, three forms. He heard a shrill and ugly woman's voice exclaim, "Go on, it's a toff!"

And Von Prosen knew enough of cities in a state of disturbance to know his danger.

Quickly he placed Virginia, still seemingly asleep, upon the ground, and his right hand flew to his hip pocket. For Von Prosen was in one way sentimental and picturesque. He liked to think as he went about his somewhat questionable intrigues that it was necessary to be armed; and he pulled out a revolver.

But here in a flash he saw a difficulty. If he fired it might save him. On the other hand, a shot might bring about his destruction. Who could tell how many homeless Ishmaelites had survived from the wreckage of their open-air dormitory to still prey on others?

Von Prosen knew his strength, and he saw too that as the men came on one of them ran ahead of the other. He saw further that they carried nothing in their hands. So he caught his revolver by the barrel, holding the stock downwards in his palm, and as the fellow came up he sent him crashing backwards. As he fell the second man was upon him; but Von Prosen gave him as savage a blow as he had dealt the first.

Virginia was his next thought, and he ran back to her,

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and as he gathered the one woman into his arms he saw the other woman kneel beside her man. Nor did he forget the mingled stream of oaths and lamentation that came from that foul woman's throat.

Von Prosen went on again, and found no further opposition until he reached the shattered Temple stairs; he looked round him for the boats.

The better to do so, he placed Virginia again upon the earth, propping her head against a stone and using his handkerchief to soften the edge of it against her neck.

When he had stumbled down to the water's edge he saw a man lying upon his face. It was a boatman, who lay with the top of his head crushed in and his feet in the lapping water of the river.

And the boat upon which Von Prosen had built an hour's hope and to reach which he had made an hour's struggle, lay high and dry, wedged, crushed, and with her back broken, in a crevice in the torn Embankment.

X

VON PROSEN, seeing the boatman with his crushed head and the splintered boat jammed into a broken niche of the Embankment, knew that the river was a high road to safety on which he could not travel, and fell into an unreasoning anger against the dead man, and cursed him in good round English.

English seemed to Von Prosen to provide more full-bodied curses than his own tongue. And when it came to gratifying his own desires, he was not over-patriotic even in the matter of swearing. And Von Prosen had a keen desire to swear.

The moon cast a long silver bar up stream. It irritated Von Prosen to behold it. It was a silver track upon which he could not walk; it seemed to mock him. But Von Prosen was not without a certain sense of humour. "Now," said he to himself, "I know what moonshine is."

Then he fell to cursing the dead man and the moonlight again, while his quick mind searched about for some other means whereby he could get himself and Virginia up to Richmond. He searched for it with the quick care that a player of chess uses when he finds his queen attacked.

His sharp ears caught the sound that oars make when they are paddled in water, and, looking across the silver streak of moonlight on the river, he saw a boat being slowly rowed over from the other shore. A voice hailed him from the boat. "Hullo!" it said.

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And Von Prosen answered "Hullo!" A simple answer to give, but none the less calculated to be non-committal.

Von Prosen thought of the dead man; if the man in the boat were a mate of his, he might find trouble in persuading him to leave his dead friend. So he grasped the dead boatman by the front of his guernsey and dragged him in shore and left him behind a rock.

After this he went quickly back to the water's edge and stood waiting. Again a voice said "Hullo!" and again Von Prosen shouted "Hullo!" in answer.

"Is that you, father?" asked the voice. "Is that you, dad?"

Like the diplomat that he was, Von Prosen had waited for his opening, and now he had it.

"Oh," he shouted back, "you're young What-you-may-call-'em, are you?"

A voice which betrayed no great intelligence answered, "Yes, sir."

The boat came in shore, and the lad in it stood up, steadying himself with an oar thrust upon the beach. Von Prosen, leaning forward, looked at the lad's face. His glimpse of the face pleased Von Prosen mightily, for it was an exceedingly stupid face.

"I have been waiting for you," said Von Prosen, "waiting for you some time. Your father was getting anxious. He was beginning to wonder if you were coming across."

It seemed a bold thing to say, but, as a matter of fact, it was not. Von Prosen saw perfectly well that the lad must have been on the farther side of the water when the crash came, or he would have known of his father's death, and he calculated that the first thing the boy would do would be to seek an older and a wiser head in time of trouble. Von Prosen was used to subtleties.

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Not entirely satisfied, the lad asked, "Where's father gone, sir?"

"He has gone down stream," said Von Prosen, "with the river police. They were lying along shore when the thing happened, and had their boat smashed."

"Is that it?" asked the lad, pointing to where his father's boat lay jammed and broken among the stones. The light was too bad, and the wreckage of the small craft too hidden, for him to see plainly.

"That's it," said Von Prosen. "Now I've got a job for you. Your father did not know when he would get back, and expected that you would come across, and you have got to take me up stream."

The lad hesitated, wobbling on his oar as his mind wobbled. Von Prosen saw his hesitation, and drew out from his pocket a dozen or so sovereigns.

"There's money in it," he said. Von Prosen felt grateful for the moonbeam that danced on the gold. The lad's face was not too stupid to appreciate the glitter.

"How far do you want to go?" he asked.

"To Vauxhall," said Von Prosen. "To Ketting's Wharf."

The lad looked at him surprised. "It's a funny place," said he, "for a gentleman to go to."

"I don't think," said Von Prosen, "that any place is too funny for a gentleman to go to in an earthquake." The appearance of the boat had thrown him into an excellent humour.

"All right, sir," said the lad, "but we'd best be quick. The tide's just on the turn now, and it'll be running down in half an hour."

"Never mind," answered Von Prosen. "I'll lend you a hand."

The lad looked at him with as much disdain as the

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prospect of enriching himself allowed. "Why," said he, "you're a gentleman."

"Gentlemen row in the Boat-race," said Von Prosen, and the stupid face of the youth paid tribute to an entirely new idea.

"And besides," went on Von Prosen rather sharply, "do not think that because a man wears a white shirt that he cannot do a man's work." To himself he added under his breath, "It's because this is not realized that strikes and the labour disturbances fail."

He had done with arguing. "Get out," he said, "and pull the boat up a bit. I have a lady here whom I am taking with me." And the lad, whose experience in life had been gained in a school where he had to promptly do what he was told, and in employment where he got his orders in a rough tongue, climbed out of the boat and pulled it up on to the shore.

"Stay here," Von Prosen ordered. He had no desire that the lad should wander about and find his dead father. Then he went up the strip of beach and picked Virginia up.

As he did so, partly to his relief and partly to his annoyance, Virginia opened her eyes. She asked the question that most people ask when they come out of the blank that follows on an accident that has brought about their unconsciousness, "Where am I?"

Von Prosen would have liked to answer, "In my arms," but the time had not come for that.

"You're out of the hotel," he said, "the Savoy, you know. We got lights after the smash, and pulled things round somehow. Most of them got out by the street. We are down by the river. I can get you home better this way than the other."

By this time he had got Virginia down to the boat and laid her in the stern sheets. The lad standing by

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was agape with wonder. It was the first time that he had ever shipped a big man in evening dress and a girl who seemed like the original of the ideally glorious picture postcards that he was wont, "when removed from his father's eye," to purchase in the New Cut.

Von Prosen picked the seat out of the stern sheets and laid Virginia on the floor of the boat, and, having taken off his coat, he rolled it up and placed it under her head. Virginia settled back with a little sigh and looked thoughtfully and with extraordinary unconcern at the diamond-like stars overhead. She had not yet come to that point of recovery when the mind is wakefully curious.

At this minute a great black mass sullied the stream of moonlight—a black mass drifting from the farther bank. Behind it was another black mass.

Startled out of the necessity of ordering himself lowly and reverently to his betters, especially to betters whose pockets are full of sovereigns, the lad exclaimed, "Good gawd, the barges are adrift!"

For a second Von Prosen looked at the black mass of the barges, which seemed to be swaying gently on the water. He saw that they were drifting neither up stream nor down.

"Half an hour to the swing of the tide, you said?" he demanded sharply.

"Half an hour, sir," was the answer, and the young boatman gazed at the barges as though they fascinated him.

"Then there is not much time to lose," said Von Prosen. "Get in and give me the boat-hook, and I'll shove off. Now, get on to the stroke-seat and pull. I'll take the bow. It will keep her down at the head a bit, but if it comes to barges, I can probably deal with them better than you can."

Von Prosen took an oar, and he and the lad began

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to pull rapidly up stream, and as he pulled Von Prosen looked about him. Upon the southern bank several warehouses were ablaze, and as they came to pass them the flames breathed hotly on them. Little sparks fell and hissed as the water extinguished them.

Wondering what the time might be, Von Prosen looked swiftly round over his shoulder as he pulled. He expected to see the white shining face of Big Ben. But Big Ben was not there.

Many barges, as the lad had first discovered, had got adrift from their moorings, and were lying like unwieldy logs upon the stream. On one of them a man was pulling desperately at a sweep.

He hailed the boat and asked to be put ashore. Von Prosen paid no heed. On other barges, as he passed them, there were other men pulling at sweeps, and they also hailed him. Von Prosen made no answer.

As they drew near to Westminster Bridge he became conscious of an awful hubbub behind him. He turned and saw that Westminster Bridge was down. He ceased pulling, and peered about to find an opening, but the distance was too great; so he pulled on, and he prayed that Virginia might not see. For the bridge had gone in the middle, and in the split lay a horrible wreckage of omnibuses and cabs. Two or three boats were edging gingerly along the broken bridge where its roadway lay upon the surface of the water, and he could see men lifting bodies from the bridge into the boats.

As he drew nearer he had to go with care, as he became entangled in a maze of floating vehicles. Hansom cabs and four-wheelers, their shafts sunk with the weight of dead horses, bobbed past him. Upon an omnibus were three men, who shouted to him for help. The face of a dead man stared at him out of a cab. The boat bumped against something, and looking over the side he

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saw the battered face of a girl thrust through the spokes of a wheel and floating above the water.

From either end of the bridge, where some of the piers still stood fast on their foundations, came a succession of hideous wails.

Von Prosen took off his waistcoat and climbed past the boatman to Virginia. To his dismay he saw that she was awake.

He put his yellow-bearded mouth close down to her ear and spoke quickly and firmly. "Listen," he said. "You are not to get up; you are not to move. You will feel the boat bump and you will hear cries, but you are not to move. Round us there are people in distress; they are being attended to as fast as they can be. We shall stop wherever we can be of assistance. Meantime, you are to be perfectly still, and I am going to put this over your face."

Virginia said, "I would like to get up and help," and Von Prosen made the same answer that he had in the hotel: "You cannot help," and, he added, "you will help most by sitting still."

He laid the waistcoat across her eyes and thrust her softly back. Then he climbed again into the bow and spoke sharply to the terrified lad. "Listen," he said, but he said "Listen" in a different tone to that which he had used to Virginia; he said it sharply; there was menace in it.

"I don't think we can get under the piers. The only way is to make for the gap in the middle. It is rather nasty there, but do as I tell you and we will get through. Do not stop to look; I'll do the looking. Keep your eyes on the boat. Disobey and in the river you go with the rest."

The lad began to pull again, and went on pulling till Von Prosen ordered him sharply to take his oars in. Von Prosen himself began to pick and prod a passage through a tangle of dead.

XI

THE tide had been at the slack when the bridge had collapsed, and so the vehicles and the people that had been hurled into the water had not drifted far.

First Von Prosen got his hook on to the roof of a brougham, and thrusting past it, looked for something else which would give him a hold. On a bit of a broken pier that just cleared the water a man was impaled on a piece of ironwork. He was dead, for his head was under water, as were his feet.

Another man might have hesitated, but Von Prosen did not. He threw out the boat-hook and caught at the man's body. He felt the hook sink into the flesh.

This brought him to the edge of the net of destruction, the meshes of which were dead things.

The course was now sufficiently clear for Von Prosen to resume rowing. The lad was pulling well, and with a strong stroke, but there was a ghastly smile across his face, and he kept his eyes glued on Virginia's little slippers. His main object in life seemed to be to prevent his own clumsy boots from crushing them.

As they pulled up stream Von Prosen became conscious of a slight but live ripple beneath the boat, and he knew that the tide had turned. He told the lad to pull a stronger stroke.

On the right bank a timber yard was ablaze, and from the stream two firefloats were playing upon it. At the sight of this, Von Prosen marvelled not a little.

As he put his back into his work he wondered idly if

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anything would ever entirely upset the British official mind. "After all," he reflected, "perhaps one achieves more by plodding stupidly through one's duty than by having courage and resource. I wonder?"

To the left of him the Houses of Parliament were a mass of nothing. The soil had apparently sunk under them, and the great buildings had become but a tumble of stones. A horse with bloodshot eyes whinnied as he swam past them.

The Embankment beyond St. Thomas's Hospital had partially given way, and along it black figures were flitting. Von Prosen pulled on strongly and steadily, and realized with a great relief that Vauxhall Bridge had so completely collapsed that it would not hinder his course.‡

There were lights in the well-to-do houses along the Albert Embankment. Some of the houses had fallen, and the rest were cracked or had gaping wounds in them. Men and women in evening dress were hurrying up and down the steps, removing furniture or articles upon which they set great store. Half-clad servants were assisting them.

They seemed to be working very fast and in great quietness. But now and again in the stillness of the dawn, for the sun was coming up hard and red and angry in the east, he could hear the sobbing of a woman or the sudden cry of a child.

Von Prosen speculated as to how much the shadows running up and down the crazy steps of the battered houses would save. Little stacks of furniture were springing up like stooks in a cornfield after the reapers have finished their work.

To cut short the bend of the river hereabouts Von Prosen pulled across to the other side. Evil faces were looking out from the shore, but they paid little heed to him. They were hungry faces looking out greedily

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across the stream towards the spoils on the other side, and Von Prosen thought that those along the Albert Embankment might feel grateful that the bridge was down. Then he remembered the slums of Westminster, and concluded that it would not be long before the work of salvage was disturbed.

Lambeth Palace was a ruin. Von Prosen thought that it would look picturesque if left as it was when London came to be rebuilt. After all, it would be just as easy for an Archbishop to attend to his duties in a modern dwelling as in a castle which had nothing but its quaintness and its past to recommend it.

Von Prosen knew well enough that he had much to think of and much to plan, but he was not going to run the risk of making any mistakes in his calculations by scheming at an inconvenient hour. Pulling a boat against stream along an avenue of wreckage is not conducive to collected thought. He preferred idle thoughts just then.

Sufficient for the moment satisfied Von Prosen, and his objective was Ketting's Wharf.

There, if all had gone well, or had at any rate gone sufficiently well to be convenient to him, he knew he would find a launch.

For of late, after he had strolled from his club in St. James's Street, as most men thought to go back to his rooms, Von Prosen had contracted the habit, born of necessity, of running down the midnight river to Greenwich, Gravesend, and even beyond.

For months he had been working quietly, but with a steady purpose. He knew what certain innocent-looking hulks lying down in the lower reaches of the Thames contained. He knew their object and their striking power. They were to produce the fulfilment of a long-laid plot which was quite to Von Prosen's liking. The hulks were full of rifles.

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None the less, he was a little uneasy about the launch, because, lest its appearance should excite comment, it was kept in a shed into which it was hauled up slips by a winch. And the shed might be demolished.

Of one thing, however, he did feel certain; he felt certain of the man whose duty it was to take him down the river; and if that man had fulfilled his duties that night—and he had no reason to suppose that he had not—the launch would have been afloat and waiting for him before the earthquake came. Nor was even an earthquake likely to disturb the skipper of the launch. He had that same sort of plodding capacity for blind adherence to orders which prompted Casabianca to stand upon the deck of his father's ship and be burnt, and so become the hero of a lurid and sentimental poem. A few lines of Casabianca even ran through Von Prosen's head as he looked across his shoulder for the launch.

To his immense relief he saw it—saw, too, that steam was up. It was headed up stream, and as he and the lad stopped pulling for a minute he could hear an occasional revolution of the screw. Mannheim, who professed to be a Southern American, but was, as a matter of fact, an Englishman who had drifted from the 'Varsity to crime, and from crime to the Saxon Government's service, was evidently keeping station.

Von Prosen put the boat alongside the launch gently. Mannheim, with one hand at the tiller, looked at him without surprise; he did not, as might have been expected, touch his cap, or, indeed, make any demonstration of respect beyond removing a pipe from his mouth.

All that Von Prosen said was, "Get the doors of the cuddy open," for the launch was a big launch, and possessed what the enthusiastic agent who had engineered her sale declared was "a cabin with ample sleeping accommodation for two."

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While the man was seeing to the cabin, Von Prosen hitched the boat to the launch's side. When he had done this he picked up Virginia and stepped into the well of the launch, and laid her on what was by courtesy called a couch. Finding one of the port-holes open, he closed it and screwed it tight, and then, stepping again into the well, he closed the doors behind him softly but securely.

"Are you ready?" he asked Mannheim. Mannheim nodded "Yes."

At this the lad in the boat woke as from an ugly trance and laid hold of the rail of the launch. Von Prosen rapped him smartly across the knuckles with a handy piece of rope-end.

"Get off," he said.

The boy fell on his knees and looked about him wildly.

Von Prosen, never careless, always even methodical, and sufficiently just to pay people enough to prevent their grumbling in the future, took a handful of sovereigns from his pocket, tore off a piece from a newspaper which was lying in the stern of the launch, wrapped the money in it, and threw the jingling package into the boat.

"I have paid you," he said to the boy.

The lad fell forward from his seat on to his knees, and looked at Von Prosen with a piteous face. "Take me in the launch," he said. "Don't leave me here. Take me in the launch. I can't go back. I can't go back to that."

He had his back to Westminster Bridge, and he jerked his head backwards.

"Don't be a fool," said Von Prosen, and with his foot he thrust the boat away. Seeing that he was to be left alone, the boy lost all control of himself. He flung himself face down across a seat and began to cry with

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loud, sharp sobs of terror, as a frightened child cries in the dark.

"Go ahead," said Von Prosen to Mannheim, and the engines began to throb. That was business, and, business done, Von Prosen sought pleasure by cursing the weeping lad under his breath.

When he had taken his fill of unkind hopes as to the boatman's future state, he turned and caught a look of inquiry in Mannheim's face.

"Yes, Richmond," was all Von Prosen said, and he went into the tiny cabin.

So great was his stature, and so low the roof, that he had to stoop almost two-double. Virginia saw his blue eyes and his yellow beard shining in the pearly grey light of the morning, and gave a little cry.

"Sh—sh," said Von Prosen, and, squatting upon his knees, he took one of her hands and stroked it.

Virginia turned upon her side. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Listen," said Von Prosen. "You are now on board my launch, and I am taking you to safety. I am taking you to my aunt, the Gräfin Von Helsburg. She has a house at Richmond, and you can stay there till some of this trouble is over."

Virginia attempted to speak. She had a pent-up torrent of questions for which she desired to find an outlet.

Von Prosen saw the questions coming, and stemmed the tide.

"Yes, yes, I know," he said in a soothing way, "I know. You want to know how you got here, and lots of other things. But don't ask now. In half an hour I will tell you—tell you everything you want to know; and if you have anything to suggest, I will help you. Remember, I am the only one who can help you now."

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He gave Virginia's pillow a tender little prod that made her head lie softer on it. In a vague way she realized that, kind as this man was, and possibly though she owed her life and her reason to him, there was a struggle coming between them; and she had sufficiently got back her senses to know that if the struggle was to come quickly, she had best have all the strength that she could get for it. So she lay still.

The great Saxon could not walk about the cabin. He could only move about it as Captain Cuttle used to move about his little room. Like Captain Cuttle, he could sit down and with his tremendous arms reach anything upon which it was necessary to lay hands.

First he drew a little table into the centre of the cabin, and then, sitting as he was upon the couch opposite Virginia, he began swiftly and without any noise to collect various things—a little spirit-lamp, a tea-canister, cups and saucers, sugar, and a tin of condensed milk. Von Prosen forgot nothing.

The engines of the launch were throbbing quickly. Suddenly Von Prosen felt them slow down, and then almost cease. One of his hands was on the door-knob as a kick came at the door. Looking out, he saw Mannheim gazing intently ahead.

"It's Putney Bridge," said Mannheim, "and it's badly messed about. Chelsea Bridge was all right, but this is a bit of a lick."

Carefully, quickly, and minutely, Von Prosen took stock of the fallen masonry.

"That looks like a gap towards the other bank," he said. Mannheim put the tiller over, and the launch crawled across the stream.

"It's a gap all right," said Mannheim, "but it's doubtful if it's big enough. I don't like the way the water is running through just there."

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"Have we got anything that can lighten her?" asked Von Prosen.

"There's the ballast."

"Well, chuck over the ballast."

Without another word they collected the lumps of lead and threw them over.

"We'll have the screw half out," said Mannheim.

"Oh, be hanged," was the lazy answer. "We haven't far to go. Put her at it as soft as you can," Von Prosen went on. "I'll get forward and take a sounding."

And he went up to the bows with a boat-hook.

"We can do it," he called back, "just do it." They went at it cautiously, and were successful, but not without a mishap. As they went right across the bar, Von Prosen climbed right on to the peak of the bow to lift the propeller, but the propeller scraped on something, and there was a snap. Mannheim looked over the stern and said: "Blade gone." Von Prosen said: "Two's enough. Get on." The launch jiggled on again, the broken propeller thrashing the water.

By this time morning was fair and soft, and Virginia, sitting up with a teacup in her hand, was looking out of the little port-hole as Von Prosen re-entered the cabin. He seated himself and took the empty cup from her hand.

"You want," he said, "I know, to get back. You want, if possible, to recover Lady Francis and Wilmers."

Virginia nodded her head.

"You want to get back to Park Street. You want to know what has happened to your household. You think you can help. You want to do the one useful thing that a woman can do when trouble of this sort comes. You want to go back and nurse the wounded—by preference, your own wounded."

Von Prosen paused and made a mental note that if there were any housemaids in Park Street with broken

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limbs they would have to find other assistance. He went on talking with the air of a logician advancing a theory.

"No man and no woman can work until they have themselves recovered from a shock such as you have had. Do not think me flippant. I am not. But it is a case of 'Physician, heal thyself.' A victorious army cannot follow up a rout when it is falling asleep. You have got to sleep. You will sleep at Richmond, and the Gräfin will be kind.

"When you have slept we will see how you can get back. It is certain that you could not go back alone and face what we have passed through."

"What was that?" asked Virginia.

"Never mind," said Von Prosen. He had persuaded himself that he was dealing with a child, and up to the present he was succeeding admirably along those lines.

But then Virginia had not yet slept, and he forgot that she might go to sleep as a child and wake as a woman.

XII

VIRGINIA nodded her head again, and Von Prosen knew that he had made his point.

The launch was now running slowly, and Von Prosen went out into the sunshine. Looking about him, he saw that they were nearing Kew, and he noted that there was nothing that could greatly disturb Virginia. Therefore he went back to the little cabin and suggested that she should come out into the sun.

On their right the river looked as though it were in flood. It had spread out and engulfed the quaint little cottages along the left bank, upon most of which hung invitations to an excellent tea at the price of one shilling.

"We had best put right in shore," said Von Prosen, "on the Middlesex side of the bridge. It may be that there is enough water to float us round the end of it. If not, we can land and make a detour. In any case, we shall not have more than a mile and a half to walk," he added as he turned to Virginia. "The Gräfin's house is well this side of Richmond Bridge."

Mannheim put the launch in shore gingerly until her keel touched bottom. A stretch of water still divided them from the dry land. They were then at the base of the slope which leads up to the tramway terminus.

In the middle of the road half a dozen cars were heaped together. The metals were torn and wrenched out of the ground, and the cables had fallen and lay across the tops of the cars.

Round the debris was an extraordinary concourse of

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people. It seemed to be the general meeting-place for all Brentford.

Some one who had not lost his head in the emergency had made a kind of zareba of broken furniture, and over the edge of this peeped the heads of innumerable children.

In the midst of the compound of children were the babies, and most of the babies were wailing. Mattresses had been laid on the ground, and upon the mattresses women were kneeling soothing the crying infants.

The idea of a children's compound was a good one. It left the parents free to rescue what they could from their flooded houses. For the most part, the women, in all manner of garb, stood chattering together. As a punt-load of furniture was pulled to the shore they would run down and vociferously claim their own belongings. The women quarrelled about little things. To two of them the importance of the ownership of a battered copper kettle dwarfed the calamity of the night.

The riverside men, with their sleeves rolled up, were working as never they worked before, even on a sunny summer Sunday. Down their faces rolled the sweat, but they never paused in their work, except to now and then straighten their backs. After a stretch they fell to again.

Half a dozen constables were stationed at various points, and they were being assisted by men who were distinguished by the fact that they had pocket-handkerchiefs tied round their sleeves in imitation of a constable's "on-duty band."

There were also a great number of loafers. These sat by the water's edge on their haunches, with their knees drawn up, smoking and talking. When a man's home is a common lodging-house, he is never particularly distressed when he loses it.

"Excuse me," said Von Prosen, when Mannheim had beached the boat, and he drew off his boots and rolled

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his trousers knee-high. He added, "You will have to be carried, you know."

For a moment he turned to Mannheim.

"You can stay here," he said, "as well as anywhere else. I'll send you word presently. But, mind you," he continued in an undertone, "don't let that tender heart of yours prompt you to any foolishness such as salvage work."

Mannheim grinned at the idea. Von Prosen then nodded his head at Mannheim, picked Virginia up in his arms, and stepped over the side of the launch.

On the shore he sat her down and drew on his boots again. Several women standing near looked at Virginia with curiosity, and whispered among themselves. But they had too much on their own minds to give her much attention.

Von Prosen put his arm under Virginia's, and drew her up the slope. Three men leaning against a half-demolished shed stared at them as they passed. One of them, a low fellow, leered at her, and said, "What a night!"

Von Prosen looked round with a sense of impotent anger. It was impossible to pick quarrels just then.

But the men on either side of the one who had leered and shouted struck the fellow in the ribs with their elbows, and lifted their caps. It was their apology for their mate.

Von Prosen felt curious, and not a little anxious, to see how much damage the Gräfin's house had sustained, and he was not reassured when he found the gate of the drive dangling from only one of its hinges. Beyond the bend in the avenue of cypress trees, however, he could see that the house, red-bricked, old-fashioned, and ivy-clad, still stood square and solid-looking in spite of the cracks in its walls.

Virginia had often heard of the Countess, but never

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seen her, and she felt a little nervous. It was but rarely that the old lady ever came up to London to pay perfunctory calls, and when her social field-day was over the inmates of the houses she had visited drew deep breaths of thankfulness that she had gone. For the Countess lived nobly up to her reputation of being the most cross-grained and the rudest and the most complaining woman who ever troubled her acquaintances. Friends she had none.

The only intimate member of this extraordinary old woman's household was her daughter Freda, a girl who had no figure and could hardly be said to possess a face. But if she were round and shapeless and most astoundingly dull, her heart was uncommonly soft. It was a great deal too soft where Von Prosen was concerned. It was so ridiculously soft that it caused poor little round-about Countess Freda considerable anguish, and Von Prosen a vast amount of annoyance due to unwelcome attentions.

The Countess was sitting moodily at the breakfast-table, dividing her attention between her coffee and a newspaper. She looked up through her round-rimmed spectacles as Von Prosen and Virginia came in. She surveyed the pair sourly and began to grumble. "This tiresome earthquake——"

Von Prosen cut her short. Briefly he told her the story of the night. At the end of it the Countess extended to Virginia an extremely hard, cold hand. With a stab of her finger she pointed out a chair, and Virginia, a prey to a great weariness, sank into it.

As she did so, the roundabout figure of Countess Freda loomed in the broken doorway. She was dressed in what presumably was a "morning wrap," but which to most people would have looked like a bath-sheet. Slowly she lumbered rather than walked across the room. Slowly

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and awkwardly she looked first at Von Prosen towering in his shirt-sleeves over the Countess's chair.

Then she looked at Virginia. And a dull and ugly understanding crept into her eyes. A woman can jump at many conclusions and be wrong. But she never jumps at a wrong conclusion where a man and another woman are concerned.

Virginia met her gaze of heavy suspicion, and she jumped to her own conclusion, too. She felt a pang of pity for the poor little roundabout Countess Freda.

XIII

AFTER her frigid reception by the Countess, Virginia went to bed and slept till late in the afternoon, when she was awakened by a French maid, who dressed her as well as she could in some of the plump Freda's clothes.

She went downstairs to dinner, looking rather like a butterfly wrapped in a voluminous silk handkerchief, and after a dreary meal, at which the garrulous Countess ate bread and milk, Von Prosen took her into the library that he might discuss her plans.

The library was a cheerless place, which had obviously never known the care of a librarian. It had apparently been furnished by a man whose bibliophilic ideas fluctuated between the "Encyclopædia Britannica" and the "complete works of Charles Dickens bound in half-calf." It was a room calculated to frown down any emotions of the heart, and this was to Von Prosen's liking, for he had nothing but business in his mind just then.

And he dealt very ably with the business, pointing out the impossibility of Virginia's return to Park Street and the fact that he himself was under orders for Berlin. He mentioned furthermore, with becoming modesty, his sincere desire to do his duty towards his family. It was impossible, he said, that he could leave his aunt and Freda at Richmond, and therefore he proposed to take them to Ostend on the following day, making the journey as far as Dover by motor-car. Virginia, he insisted, should accompany them, as it was out of the question

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that she could be left behind with no one to befriend her.

"My aunt," he said, in conclusion, "is not a very pleasant person, but she will at least be able to afford you that protection which a girl in your position needs.

"I must point out, too," he added, "that you are a person of considerable importance, and that it will be necessary to at once communicate with your trustees in New York as to your safety and your whereabouts. This cannot be done from here, as the cables are all down."

But Virginia, still heedful of her household in Park Street, and with some faint hope that she might be able to recover the bodies of Lady Francis and Wilmers, could not make up her mind to go.

"By refusing," urged Von Prosen, "you place me in a very awkward predicament. My orders are imperative, and I dare not delay any longer than is absolutely necessary. On the other hand, I cannot leave you here."

"You will not, however," said Virginia, "be leaving before the morning, and therefore, as I am still doubtful as to what I shall do, I will give you my answer then. I am sorry to distress you, because I am most grateful for all the service you have done me."

When she re-entered the gloomy drawing-room the Countess glanced at her for a moment, and then once again buried herself behind her newspaper. The girls sat upon either side of the fire, staring into its glow. Countess Freda was tortured with the idea that they were both thinking of the same man. But she was mistaken, for Virginia was thinking of Wilmers.

After a little while Virginia rose, and, going over to the French window, passed out on to the terrace. At the farther end of it Von Prosen was phlegmatically smoking a cigar.

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She went out so quietly she imagined that he had not become aware of her presence. There was no wish in her heart that he should.

As she stood looking out over the placid garden full of the peaceful end of summer she was startled to see three men slouching up the drive. Von Prosen went on smoking his cigar, though his attention was obviously fixed upon the strangers.

They came up to within speaking distance, and then halted. They seemed disconcerted at the towering figure of Von Prosen.

"Nice night, guv'nor," said one.

"The night," said Von Prosen smoothly, "is delightful. It is so light a night that I am surprised that you should have mistaken your way. This path is private."

"Ho," said the man who had spoken first, "there isn't much private in earthquakes."

"There are some things," said Von Prosen in level but cold tones, "that are always private. This garden is one of them. You will oblige me by leaving it."

There was a pause, and one of the men said—

"You're a nice hospitable gent, ain't yer? You 'as yer dinner, you 'as yer wine, and you 'as yer cigar, and us poor devils what is shut out from the pubs by blooming Mr. Blair's orders can get blindo round the nearest pump. What d'yer say to offering three 'ard-working men a drink?"

Without a word Von Prosen went back into the hall and took something which glittered out of a drawer. He said something in a low tone to the old butler, who was standing there with a scared but at the same time disgusted face. The old servant muttered to himself, "I don't hold with the goings on of the masses," and he chuckled when Von Prosen spoke to him. Then he ran almost briskly into the dark of the house.

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Von Prosen returned to the terrace and addressed the men.

"If you will wait for a few moments, gentlemen," said he, and there was a ring of irony in his voice which, unfortunately, did not touch them, "I shall be glad to offer you the best hospitality that this poor house can afford. But you will kindly remain where you are."

The men put their heads together and talked for a few moments. Seemingly they were concocting some clumsy plan of campaign. But while they talked together, Von Prosen went again into the darkness of the hall. When he emerged he held upon a chain two great grey-bodied boar-hounds.

The three men drew close together. "Gentlemen," said Von Prosen, with the same ring of sarcasm, "I regret that you have called at an inconvenient hour. I propose to now give my puppy-dogs a walk. Unfortunately they have no respect for my guests, and if you value your personal safety very highly, allow me to suggest that you should withdraw."

So frightened were the men that they did not even curse him; they turned and walked away down the drive, looking back apprehensively over their shoulders.

Von Prosen helped himself to a fresh cigar. "At least," he said, "one craze of my aunt's has stood us in good stead. But for her admiration of Bismarck we should never have had you," and he stooped and quieted the great beasts which stood quivering with distended nostrils.

From the other end of the terrace Virginia watched Von Prosen's play-acting. For Von Prosen had seen her, though she thought that he had not. And he had been calculating the effect of the dramatic little scene in which he played the hero.

Certainly it brought the realization of many hard facts

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more closely home to Virginia. She appreciated that to have a man such as Von Prosen at hand would be to have a powerful ally. With him to pilot her through the present troubled waters she need fear no rocks. "I think I will go," she said to herself. The only thing she had to fear was the pilot himself. But she counted herself strong enough to hold her ally under control.

At first she thought of going quietly back from the terrace into the drawing-room and saying no word of what she had seen—not even to Von Prosen; and then to let him know of her altered decision in the morning.

This, however, seemed to Virginia a mean thing to do, and she was strong enough to despise meanness.

Therefore she walked along the terrace and touched Von Prosen lightly on the arm.

"After what I have seen," she said, "I have made up my mind to go."

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On the following morning, in spite of the Countess's protests, Von Prosen roused the household at five, as he knew that obstacles along the road would probably delay his progress, and he wished to be at Dover before dusk. By six he had bribed and bullied a lighterman into ferrying the car and the complaining Countess across the river.

At first, owing to the broken roadway through Richmond, the speed Von Prosen made was not great, but once in the open country his course was comparatively clear. Here and there on either side of the long white road a cottage lay in a heap. There was no life in the fields. The sheaves of corn lay upon the golden autumnal stubble unstacked. Shaggy draught horses grazed on the pasture land in the appreciation of an extra Sunday.

For the most part the country folk had gathered in

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the villages. When men are afraid they always run together. As the car passed them by, labourers would run into the road and shout for news; but Von Prosen shook his head and did not slacken in his speed.

The sun was sinking to sleep across the sea in a fleecy tumble of bedclothes when the car drew near to Dover. It climbed heavily up the chalk-white road across the Downs and then slid down again towards the town. Here there were signs of great confusion, for the earthquake had evidently struck Dover with a heavy hand. At the head of the narrow struggling High Street several electric cars had been tossed off the rails, and at this point there was a strong military picket.

No challenge, however, was issued to Von Prosen in the car, and he proceeded to run down the narrow strip of street towards the sea.

Fortunately, along most of the way the houses were set back a little from the road, so that in their falling they had not greatly obstructed the thoroughfare. There were, however, places where it was obvious that the road had been blocked, but subsequently cleared.

Von Prosen turned to the left and made for the Burlington Hotel. It was part of his system in life never to lead people, especially women, into unexpected contingencies which might not be pleasing.

The Burlington had lost much of its staid and prosperous air. Many of its windows had fallen out, and there were slits in the walls through which a man might thrust a hand. Its general appearance suggested that of a City man who, once prosperous, had fallen on evil times. But the cashier's desk still stood, and while it was there no visitors were likely to be turned away.

Having seen the ladies to their rooms, Von Prosen set out westward towards the quay.

Till then he had learned nothing of the disaster which

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had befallen Dover. Through the streets he had passed unchallenged, and in the hotel nothing had been said. Possibly they thought he knew.

But when he had got half-way along the parade even Von Prosen's heart gave a bound and then sank.

All that overhanging portion of the cliff which lies to the westward of the town had been torn away. It had fallen sheer down and buried a great part of Snargate Street. Half of the Lord Warden Hotel had been crushed to pulp.

That section of the pier upon which was the railway-station was buried under incalculable tons of creamy chalk. From out the farther side of the white mountain peeped the battered end of a train. One of the Channel steamers lay sunk beneath the quay.

All this Von Prosen could see from the distance. He had no chance to approach, for the basin and all its precincts were strictly guarded by strong pickets of marines.

Then he noticed for the first time what he had failed to observe before—that five of the cross-Channel steamboats with steam up were moored inside the new breakwater.

Set on the esplanade within a cordon of ropes lined at every few paces by Volunteers, were a series of long deal tables at which sat men in blue clothes and peaked caps.

Within the ropes and round the tables there was an excited gathering of people of the better class. The men were standing opposite those presiding at the tables, and talking in loud and sometimes angry voices. They appeared to be bargaining for passages, and a heap of luggage lay everywhere about.

When he had reached the cordon he was challenged by one of the sentries. Von Prosen, with a quick eye, saw that a staff-officer was standing a little distance away,

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switching his right trouser leg with a cane as though extremely bored.

Von Prosen fished a card from his pocket. "Have the kindness," he said, "to tell that gentleman," and he indicated the bored-looking officer, "that I should like to speak to him."

The staff-officer looked at the card, and glanced sharply round. He was, as a matter of fact, delighted to find something to do. And, coming across, he saluted Von Prosen, who in his turn lifted his cap.

Von Prosen was a man who knew precisely when to have and when not to have papers upon his person which established his identity. The necessary papers were not lacking now. The staff-officer was impressed, even deferential, and presently Von Prosen walked back to the hotel with the tickets that he needed.

XIV

“THIS,” said the Countess with a sniff, as she sat on the deck of the *Roi des Belges* on the following morning, “this is the first time that I have ever been called upon to travel as a tourist, and I trust it will be the last.” The acrimonious lady seemed to regard the inconvenient consequences of the earthquake more as a sign of the democracy of the times than as a visitation of nature.

Von Prosen, to do him justice, had done his best, and having secured chairs for the ladies, had tucked them up in rugs as warmly as he could against the keenness of the morning. He said as little as possible, for he was coming to see that the less he spoke the more progress he made with Virginia, and he was content to rely almost wholly upon deeds to plead his cause.

As the vessel cleared the breakwater and stood out across the sea the eyes of Von Prosen’s party were attracted to a spectacle which, in spite of the fact that it did not awake in them any depth of feeling, none the less struck them with its magnificence. It was a section of the British Fleet making its way up Channel.

A cloud of cruisers was steaming at a great pace towards the east; then came six battleships in double line of column ahead, surrounded by a halo of destroyers.

The women, as they watched the ships of war cross the bows of the *Roi des Belges*, said nothing; they had, indeed, nothing to say. Von Prosen, however, was none

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too pleased to behold the sight. Blair seemed to be working a great deal too quickly to suit his hopes. He saw that the men-of-war must be bound either for the mouth of the Thames or the North Sea; and a British fleet in either of those quarters was calculated to upset the niceness of his own Government's aspirations.

At Ostend the quay was crowded and the excitement was intense. It was known there in some measure what had befallen London, and people were greedy for news.

There were numerous English families who pressed round the gangway and scanned the faces of the passengers as they disembarked, for though the season was late, Ostend still held many English; and the English people were fearful of the fate of their relatives across the water.

In his own calm way Von Prosen seized upon and held a carriage against all comers. He knew precisely where to look for it and how to retain it. In the sense that he knew the world sufficiently well to enable him to make smooth his travels through it, he was a thorough cosmopolitan.

A short drive brought him to the Grand Hotel, where, with scarcely a word, he secured immediately more attention than most people can contrive to obtain through a deal of vociferation and self-assertion.

It was not, however, to his purpose that Virginia and the Countess should remain here. In the Grand Hotel he knew that many people would come and go, and the fewer who saw Virginia the less likelihood there was that she would learn what she did not then know—that in a few days, by reason of her immense wealth and her interests in America, she would be called upon to play a great part in England's calamity.

So having seen them safely to a private room and provided them with a breakfast, every feature of which was

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so complete that there was nothing left to ask for, he himself went downstairs and at once made inquiries as to the leasing of a villa.

He was not a man to walk in search of an unaccustomed address when he could use a telephone, and he used the telephone now to such effect that while he sat contentedly amid the bustle in the hall a fat Frenchman, at once servile and important, arrived from a neighbouring estate office.

Von Prosen was accustomed to liars, and therefore fully qualified to deal with the Ostend house-agent. His method of cross-examination precluded the necessity of his visiting the house that he was about to take. Ten minutes were sufficient to see the agreement signed.

The terms were sufficiently liberal to persuade the fat Frenchman to be obliging even after he had concluded his deal. "Domestics?" Monsieur should have as many domestics as he desired.

"By noon?" asked Von Prosen.

"By noon," said the fat house-agent, "most certainly by noon. I who speak to you, I promise it."

Von Prosen looked at him as much as to inform him that it would be exceedingly unpleasant for him if he failed in his compact, and the fat Frenchman was reduced to such a degree of nervousness that for once he kept to his word.

The ladies took the ordinary second breakfast at mid-day, and afterwards Von Prosen drove out with them to the Villa Franc-Tireur.

The name of the place amused Von Prosen; it seemed peculiarly appropriate. He even took it as an omen.

Flat-faced and bare, the house was as ugly as any Ostend could produce, which is to say an unkind thing, but unfortunately to speak the truth. The architecture of Ostend is redolent of the bathing-machine.

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The house stood almost on the foreshore, in a desolate garden of its own, half-way towards Blankenburg. It was exactly the place that Von Prosen had hoped for.

"Chance," thought he, "will be very much against me if they get to learn over much here."

Within, the house was sparsely furnished, as most Belgian and French houses are. It was, indeed, the equivalent of the English seaside lodging-house, only in place of the frowsy Brussels carpets, horsehair chairs, and wax flowers under shades, that flourish on the English coast, it had parquet flooring and endless red-velvet-covered chairs studded with myriads of brass nails.

As there had been no fires in it for upwards of a week, the damp sea air had invaded it, and its dreariness struck a chill into Virginia's heart as her footsteps echoed on the hard wooden flooring in the passages.

Though he gave no signs of impatience, Von Prosen was in spite of that eager to be away. He had already been cabling busily to Berlin, and Berlin, on the receipt of his wires, had been cabling busily to New York.

Much as he had gone through during the past two nights, Von Prosen was in no way tired, which was just as well for him, seeing the gigantic enterprise upon which he was about to embark.

The hour that he spent in the chilly villa by the sea might have been a lull between the storms, yet into this lull Von Prosen, with a fixed idea, proposed to introduce a period of anxiety and strife.

True, it was to be strife of a peculiar kind. It was to be strife with a woman. He had made up his mind that before he left for Berlin he would ask Virginia to be his wife.

He proposed to do this as an ordinary business transaction. It was material to his plans. If she refused him he could still succeed, but if she accepted, his success,

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instead of having to be won hardly, would fall more or less into his hands.

That he loved Virginia he had no pretensions, though he was going to pretend to her that he did. So precisely, in fact, had Von Prosen planned his method of proposing that he was rather thankful that he felt no passion in the concern. There are times when hot passion will win a woman against her will, but Von Prosen saw that on the present occasion judgment rather than passion must prevail.

His most formidable antagonist was Wilmers, whom he devoutly hoped was dead. Very often a woman's affection conceived for the dead is stronger than any love awakened for the living.

Knowing that if he could accentuate Virginia's sense of loneliness and helplessness it would at least do him no harm, he led her, when he had found her, into the *salle à manger*. Here there was not even the customary red velvet. The high, cane-backed, cane-seated chairs suggested that standing would be preferable to sitting.

Von Prosen took Virginia into the light and offered her one of the repellent chairs. Then he seated himself beside her with about as much animation as he would have displayed had he been on a visit to a manicurist. But the look he bent upon her was kindly and even tender.

"In an hour," he said, "I must be on my way to Berlin."

Virginia merely looked at him, and there was quite open regret in her eyes. He had been a most useful friend.

"I leave you here," Von Prosen continued, "in safety, but all the same with misgiving.

"My aunt, I am aware," he went on, "is not a particularly pleasant person, but none the less she will afford you that protection which a girl in your position needs."

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Unconsciously he employed the same words which he had used in the Countess's villa at Richmond.

Virginia now saw what was coming, and laid her hands in her lap with the thumbs clasped tightly in her fingers—which is the way of women who mean to fight.

Von Prosen looked at her more kindly than before. "On and off," said he, "I have known you for some while as time counts, and you and I have become more acquainted in the last forty-eight hours than most people do in forty-eight years. We have been together so much that I trust we have come to know each other rather well."

Drawing up in his chair, Von Prosen became, if possible, a little more formal than before. "I may as well," he said, "go straight to the point. I am going to ask you to marry me, and I feel that it is better to tell you this before I tell you why."

A little spot of colour began to glow in each of Virginia's cheeks. She set her mouth and looked out of the window. The sunshine had gone and the sea was grey and dull.

"I am perfectly aware," Von Prosen continued, "of the enormous fortune that will soon be yours. I had better mention it, because every man who proposes to an heiress finds himself in the position of being dubbed a fortune-hunter. I am not that.

"I merely mention it because this idea about which men are peculiarly sensitive has resulted in more unhappy marriages for heiresses than is quite pleasant to think about.

"Now, there is no reason why I should seek any fortune. The means I have are considerable and my position is assured. It is only a matter of a few years that divides me from an Embassy."

Virginia opened her mouth as if about to speak, but she reflected that it would be better to let Von Prosen

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go on to the end. She had only one answer to give him, but if she listened to all his reasons now he could have little excuse for repeating them in the future.

Then Von Prosen very simply said, "I love you," and paused for some moments with the intention of letting the words sink into Virginia's mind.

"I love you," he continued, "a great deal more than I have any right to at this present time. If I had not loved you I should not have delayed so long to see to your safety, placed myself in an embarrassing position with my Government, and have allowed to drift many matters which require immediate attention.

"It would be, I am aware, indecent for me to make any violent protestations. It would, as a matter of fact, be cowardly to further disturb your heart, which, I know, must at the present time be greatly distressed. I simply tell you that I love you in order that I may help you, and because I feel that if I become your acknowledged fiancé your position will be far more secure and safe."

Here Virginia did the man a credit which he did not deserve.

"I fear," she said, "that you only love me because you pity my present strait."

She spoke of love calmly, and without emotion, and if Von Prosen had paid as much attention to women's hearts as he had done to their minds he would have appreciated his defeat. No woman who loves discusses love in the manner that Virginia did.

"That," said Von Prosen, "is not the case. I have loved you for a long while, for a longer while than you can have any idea. I have loved you so well that I have honoured you very much. I think that the last two nights and days have given me an excellent excuse for thrusting myself upon you. But I loved you too much to do that; I had no desire to take you off your guard.

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"I know that this is a peculiar time and a peculiar place in which to urge my cause, but you must remember the circumstances by which I am surrounded. Please understand, too, that I am forced to the point because it will be so much better for both of us to have your answer before I go to Berlin. If I go there with your promise to marry me, I leave you alone and yet not alone, and, believe me, it is not good for a woman to be alone just now. Do not think that I am in undue haste. It is my great desire to marry you at once."

Virginia rose from her chair and held out her hand. "I am sorry, my friend, I am sorry," she said, "to disappoint you—very sorry. I fear, however, I must. You have been a good friend—have done me greater service than any man has done me before, and I am grateful—profoundly grateful. Still, I cannot marry you on gratitude. I admire you, and I will not pretend that your going away does not leave me a little helpless. But I do not love you, and I cannot marry you."

Steeled as he was against the possibilities of defeat, Virginia's refusal was more disturbing to Von Prosen than he had foreseen. The earthquake had come to him as an unexpected help in the scheme which he had so carefully laid during so many anxious months; her acceptance must have ensured its success. The knowledge of this, and the pique which all strong men feel when a woman denies them, stung Von Prosen into that touch of passion which he had lacked before.

Almost roughly he seized both Virginia's hands and held them against his breast. She felt the strength and warmth of his great body, and gave a little shiver.

"Dearest," he cried, "this will not do. You must not say no—indeed, you must not say no. I love you."

Virginia drew away her hands and looked at him rather wistfully. She knew that but for the dead Wilmers she

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would have said yes. There was pain in Von Prosen's face, and only a woman without all heart gives pain to a man who has helped her.

Then she made an error which many women make out of the simple kindness of their hearts; she held out a false hope. "I like you," she said. "I like you very much indeed. I will think of you, and I will think of what you have said—when you have gone to Berlin."

Von Prosen with simple and almost touching courtesy lifted both her hands and kissed them slowly, one after the other.

Then he drew away and took on again his air of grave politeness.

"There is one thing at least," he said, "which I can do before I start. I can cable for you to your agents in New York."

"If you will," said Virginia, "I should be much obliged. Geisler & Harman, Broadway, is a sufficient address. You had better sign it in my name and simply say that I am safe and here."

Von Prosen nodded and wrote the address down on a slip of paper. Then he shook hands, said good-bye, and walked out of the door without once turning back.

At the station he dispatched the telegram, but the message he sent was this: "Arrived here safely. Am going on to Bristol Hotel, Berlin.—VIRGINIA NEWCOMBE."

XV

A GIRL'S face—a red, round, angry face—watched Von Prosen drive away from the Villa Franc-Tireur. The girl's angry face was peeping through a crack in two of the villa's green shutters. When the carriage had become a speck on the long, straight, dusty road, Countess Freda threw the shutters open as one desiring air.

She drew several deep breaths, and then walked over to her looking-glass. There never was a woman yet who before setting forth to meet another woman did not first consult the mirror.

Mechanically Countess Freda straightened a bow on her breast. Then she drew back her upper lip and said "Pah!" and ran heavily down the stairs.

In the dining-room she found Virginia standing by the side of the table twisting a knife on its axis. It is always of assistance to fidget with something when the human mind is trying to find its balance.

It was a very angry Countess Freda that flounced her plump form into Virginia's notice from the other side of the table.

"Well?" she demanded shortly.

Virginia, with a sense of what was coming, ceased twirling the knife. All the answer she made was, "Well?" But her tone was quite kindly.

It was so kindly that it maddened Countess Freda.

"I know, I know," she began hotly, "why Von Prosen was here. Von Prosen has been telling you that he is in

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love with you, and has asked you to marry him. Oh, don't speak. I know, I know."

If the Countess Freda had been a little less angry and a trifle less indelicate in her anger, Virginia would have done her best to soothe her. As it was, her face became hard and her tones like ice.

"I know you," she said, "very slightly. Do you think it is quite the thing to attack me in this way? It is surely, too, rather damaging to you to show excitement in this manner. You must know that Baron Von Prosen has been of great assistance to me. I have affairs which must be attended to, and no friends. Your cousin offered me his help, and I accepted it. I had no other course, and this outbreak of yours is impertinent."

All discretion cast aside, Countess Freda banged her plump fist on the table.

"You think you will deceive me in that way?" she cried, her voice rising to nearly a scream. "You must be a fool, a bad fool, a wicked fool. I know, I know!"

Pausing for a few moments, she eased the ribbon at her throat. Virginia was entirely amazed, though not altogether astonished, at the display of passion. She had guessed poor plump Freda's secret. Seeing, however, that if some explanation were necessary it would be just as well to allow the girl to abate her heat, Virginia waited with a quiet face.

"How much do you know?" asked Freda.

"Know?" echoed Virginia, in astonishment. "Know what?"

"Ah," said Freda, wagging her head, "you are going to pretend now that you do not know what Von Prosen has been doing all these months. You are going to pretend that he did not ask you to help him. You are going to pretend that you do not know that if he succeeds in what he is trying to do, you will be twice,

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or three times, or four times, or five times as rich as you are now."

Virginia stared at her with a face on which there was nothing but surprise. Freda saw that face of surprise, saw, too, that that surprise was genuine. "Ah, then," she said, "he did not tell you. The devil—that Von Prosen is a devil."

The girl laughed till her plump sides shook. It was most unpleasant laughter.

"But in spite of the fact that he did not tell you," the Countess went on, "he asked you to marry him all the same. Don't tell me he didn't. I know he did. He had to. He had to, because he was going to steal. He was going to steal your money to make himself rich. And if he did not tell you it was because he was afraid that you would not be a thief too, or worse, too. He wanted you to be a murderer."

Virginia continued to stare round-eyed, more lost in wonderment than before.

"Tell me," insisted the little Countess, "did Von Prosen ask you to marry him? Tell me that, and I will tell you why he did."

"He did," said Virginia, "he did," and she said the words very slowly. The flush on Countess Freda's face deepened. She seemed unsteady on her feet, and supported herself by the edge of the table. "And what did you say?" she demanded.

"I said no," answered Virginia. "I said no," and she spoke more slowly than before.

Even her quick mind could find no reason for Countess Freda's extraordinary behaviour, but a dread that she could not account for was taking hold of her heart.

Countess Freda sucked in her breath as with relief.

"Then you don't love that man—that devil?"

"No," said Virginia, "I do not."

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The face of the girl opposite her went white, then red, and then white again.

"You swear that?" she asked.

Relieved of Von Prosen's presence, Virginia realized how little she cared for him.

"I do not know," she said, with the ghost of a smile, "that swearing is necessary, but I will swear it if you like."

"Then," said Freda, "we can be friends, and I will tell you all about Von Prosen. If you loved him I would not tell you. I would hate you—I think I would kill you."

Her eyes quivered and danced, and though plump people are seldom given to indulging in what the French call "crime passionelle," Virginia could quite believe her capable of such an act.

"For, look you," the little Countess went on, "I love that man, love that devil, I love that Von Prosen."

She drew herself to the full of her short height and smiled a smile of triumph as if she were proud to confess her love.

"He is a bad man, but I don't care. If he loved you it would be otherwise. If you loved him he could do without me. If you don't love him he cannot do without me. If you don't love him he can be ruined, and when he is ruined he will come back to me. I am rich, and if he does not love me it does not matter—at least not very much. I love him, and that is enough. I am not beautiful as you are. I will love him and I will be content. But he must come back."

"Suppose," suggested Virginia almost softly, "you tell me what it is all about?"

"When I talk of love," said Freda, "I stand up. When I talk of business I can sit down." She drew a chair up to the table and soused herself into the seat.

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Her little round eyes had taken on a look of cunning, and she nodded her head energetically at Virginia. "Ah," she said, "and I can talk business, good business."

So, with a comical little smile, Virginia seated herself opposite, and folded her hands on the table. She still imagined that the little Countess was making mountains out of mole-hills; but she was to be roughly undeceived.

As if she delighted in being businesslike, Countess Freda cleared her throat, and stabbed a fat forefinger on the tablecloth.

"You are," she began, "very rich—the richest woman in the world—or you will be when the money comes to you. At the present your agents hold it in trust, and they—I don't quite understand why—have given it to men in Chicago. They are men who deal in grain—operators, I think you call them."

The matter was beginning to be of greater interest than Virginia had supposed.

"These operators have been planning to make what they call a 'corner.' Forty millions of yours and the millions that they have besides is so much money that they can buy up nearly all the grain in the market there. They do not mean to hold up the market to the people who want grain in America. They will not do that, because it would make their countrymen angry with them, and they do not wish that. But they will hold up all the grain that should come to England, and the prices will go up and up, and they will make more millions than they can count. Probably you would get some of them, but they would get the most."

Virginia nodded her head. "Yes, I see that," she said. "My father used to operate somewhat in that way, and I know that once some of his friends tried to corner wheat, but they failed because there was so much grain coming from Russia—I think it was shipped from the Black Sea."

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"Yes, yes, I know," said the little Countess, nodding her head more violently than before, and with the pleased expression of one who has a mastery of details.

"But that is where Von Prosen comes in."

All that Virginia, who was still in the dark, could ask was "How?"

"Why," said the girl opposite, "England has been having a to-do with the Sultan. England has been having trouble with him for a long time. I am not quite sure what it is all about, but I think it is about Egypt. The Sultan says that some land belongs to him, and England says that it doesn't.

"Von Prosen was in New York last year, and he got to hear that the corner was being thought about. Sometimes financiers tell things to diplomats because they think they can help.

"Von Prosen could not think how to help them, but he found out a way afterwards, and now they have planned it all out between them. It is awfully simple."

The plump girl was speaking of a great crisis that was coming between two or three nations, and she spoke of it with the assistance of slang. Lost as she was in a hopeless love for Von Prosen, the possible sufferings of millions did not trouble her. All the trouble she knew or cared about was her own.

With Virginia, however, this was not the case. Slowly she was realizing the awful position of responsibility into which she was being unwittingly placed.

Countess Freda resumed. "When the corner is ready and the price of grain goes up, the Sultan is to be rude. England will send more troops to Egypt, or something of that sort, and the Sultan will close the Dardanelles while the matter is being discussed. In this Saxony is to support him. That is where Von Prosen comes in. That is what he has arranged.

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“Then England will be starving, and there will be no grain from America, and no grain from the Black Sea, and the Dardanelles will be closed, and Saxony will stand by and help Turkey until they both get what they want. Von Prosen has gone to Berlin to arrange what Saxony wants now.”

Thus in disjointed and bald sentences did this plump little schoolgirl—for Countess Freda was practically only a schoolgirl—disclose to another girl across the table in the *salle à manger* of an Ostend villa one of the most charmingly iniquitous plots that ever statecraft devised.

XVI

HAVING made her disclosure, Countess Freda sat rosy and smiling with triumph. Virginia's face had gone grey. The more she thought of Von Prosen's atrocious scheme, the more she became dismayed. It would have been in her eyes an appalling thing to strike such a blow at a nation at any time ; but to strike it now, when England was staggering beneath a cataclysm such as no other country had known, seemed more frightful still.

It was, too, all the more shameful and hideous to think of, because the money which was being used for this work was in a large part hers. In a few weeks millions of helplessly starving people in England might well be cursing her name.

It was a long while before she spoke ; then she inquired of Freda—

“How do you know all this?”

Freda gave a fat little chuckle of satisfaction. “I found Von Prosen's papers in his room in Jermyn Street one day when mother and I were waiting for him.”

“Yes, but what made you look?” asked Virginia.

The other girl went crimson. “I'll tell you,” she said, “though it sounds silly. I thought perhaps Von Prosen had letters from other girls. I wanted to see, that's all.”

There was another silence, during which Virginia turned the matter over in her mind. There were several points still beyond her comprehension.

“I cannot understand,” she said at last, “why you should tell me.”

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The events in the *salle à manger* had left her suspicious of everything.

"I told you," Freda answered, "because I want to ruin Von Prosen. All his money is in this scheme, and if he loses it he must come back to me. I am going to be rich. Not so rich as you—but rich."

Virginia was aghast at the callousness of Countess Freda's tones. The plump girl was apparently in no way distressed that a nation stood on the verge of starvation; her only thought was for herself. Virginia looked at her with contempt.

"Perhaps," she said, "as you have been so clever, you can suggest what I can do."

"I can," said Countess Freda. "I can tell you. I have thought of all that. Ah! I am fat, but I am clever."

Very sadly Virginia was coming to see that this was true.

"You will have to go back to England and see the Prime Minister, Mr. Blair. I should have told you before we came away, only I was not quite sure that Von Prosen cared about you. If I had known, I should certainly have let you know then.

"You will have to go back to Mr. Blair, because he is a clever man. Von Prosen hates him because he is clever. He says that Mr. Blair is Saxony's one piece of bad luck at the present time.

"When you see Mr. Blair he will understand, and will know what steps to take. You can stop this thing, but you cannot stop it alone. You would not know how to deal with your trustees, and trustees are tiresome and nasty people. I know, because mother has trustees, although she is a widow."

"Yes," said Virginia, "I see that I shall have to go back."

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"I will help you," cried Freda, with eagerness, "I will help you as much as I can. I have money upstairs if you need any. I will give you all I have got to get you over to Mr. Blair and bring Von Prosen back."

The extraordinary medley of high finance, statesmanship, and a schoolgirl's calf-love was grating on Virginia's nerves, and, wishing to be alone that she might think out some plan of action, she rose up from her seat.

It was almost with pleading in her eyes that Countess Freda looked at her. "You are not angry?" she asked. "I would like you to be my friend now that I know you do not love Von Prosen. Shall we shake hands?"

Virginia smiled in spite of herself, and bent forward, and the two girls, who were discussing affairs of state of three nations as the side-issue to a troublesome love episode, shook hands across the table.

Virginia walked slowly out of the room, and Countess Freda listened to her footsteps retreating along the passage. She listened anxiously, with a strained face. When she could hear them no longer she threw herself in a plump heap on the table and broke into passionate weeping.

The first thing that Virginia did on reaching her room was the last that Countess Freda had done before she left hers. She looked in the glass.

Her appearance was a surprise and a shock to herself. The colour had all gone out of her face, and her eyes were tired and faded and hard, and there were lines about her mouth which had no right to be there for another twenty years. It was an old face, a grave face, but a brave face. Even Virginia realized that it was a brave face, and in some curious way the glimpse she got of the outward signs of her determination gave her fresh courage within.

Picking up her hat from the bed, she proceeded to pin it on to her head, but she stood with the pin held

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in mid-air as she realized on a sudden that she was without any money. True, Freda had offered her assistance in that respect. But that money she could not take. To her nature, abnormally sensitive at that moment, it would have seemed not wholly clean.

She had, however, the string of pearls that she had worn on the night when the present strange happenings began, and, taking them out of a drawer, she placed them in the bosom of her gown, for the bosom of a woman's gown is to a woman what trouser-pockets are to a man.

When she had closed the front door of the Villa Franc-Tireur behind her, the dusty stretch of road looked interminably long; but she did not stop to dwell upon its length or upon its dustiness, and she started out to walk briskly towards Ostend.

Fortunately, before she had gone very far an empty *fiacre* overtook her. She hailed it, and stepped in.

As she gave the man no address, he touched his hat, which among cabmen the world over is a polite inquiry as to the fare's desired destination.

Virginia found herself in doubt. She did not know where she could find a market for her necklace, and so she simply told him to drive into the town.

On the way, however, she bethought her of the manager of the Grand Hotel. She had stayed there once with her father, and the cheerfulness with which Mr. Newcombe had discharged his tremendous bill had made a lasting impression on the manager's heart. Virginia only hoped that he would remember her.

As, however, an hotel manager's success largely depends on his memory, he did; though he was rather surprised when Virginia said that she wished to see him alone.

Going straight to the point after a brief explanation of the events that had brought her to Ostend, she placed the pearls on the manager's desk.

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The manager, like most of his kind, was a Swiss, who, beginning life as a lift-boy, had done wonders in his own way of business, and had incidentally acquired the manners of an exaggerated Polish prince.

With his hand on his heart, he protested that it was totally unnecessary for mademoiselle to leave her pearls. His memory of Miss Newcombe was sufficient for him to be desirous of conferring upon her any favour which she wished to ask. If she needed money, she was welcome to as much as there was in the house. If there were not sufficient, he would send for more. Security? It was absurd!

That it was absurd he knew very well, and he also knew that a loan made without security to millionaires in a state of temporary embarrassment usually resulted in compound interest.

Virginia's notions of money were extremely vague. She had not the remotest idea whether it cost five pounds or fifty pounds to journey from Ostend to London, even at normal times. So she confided her ignorance to the manager.

Even he was rather at a loss. He had been informed that no passages were to be booked at all. The English Government had declared that as many people as cared to leave the country at the present time were heartily welcome to do so. But they would have no one coming back.

In the end, Virginia said that she would have two hundred pounds.

The manager, protesting that it was far too little, counted out the notes, and Virginia received them with as much concern as she might have done some odd change in a draper's shop.

On leaving the hotel, she drove down to the shipping office, only to find the fears of the manager of the Grand

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Hotel confirmed. Not for any money that she could offer them would the officials give her a passage. They were polite, but they were adamant. They explained that it was utterly futile for them to take passengers who on their arrival at Dover would only be sent back again.

Utterly at a loss to know what to do, Virginia began to walk along the jetty. At every step her perplexity and her distress of mind became greater. Delay might be fatal, and yet delay was forced upon her.

Suddenly, as she moved along, paying no heed to any one, she heard a cheery voice exclaim, "Hullo, Miss Newcombe! What are you doing here?"

Turning about, she saw Arthur Rawlinson. And seeing him she smiled.

There was that about Rawlinson which always induced people to smile when they beheld him and to laugh when they spoke of him.

This was in some degree a mistake, because though Rawlinson was in many respects a decidedly peculiar young man, he possessed attributes which might have been turned to good account.

Poor Lady Francis had asked him now and then to dinner, and after each occasion had declared that she would never do so again. "A young man," she said, "who is so careless about his hands as Rawlinson ought to be employed on a railway rather than eating dinner in my house." For young Rawlinson's hands, though in reality clean, were always dark with oil. He was a motorist of that enthusiastic type which attends to its own mechanics. Rawlinson, though not ordinarily conversational, could become oratorical on the subject of clutches and rhapsodic in the matter of a carburettor.

Only recently he had startled society by building himself a car out of which he was certain he could extract a speed of two hundred miles an hour. He had essayed

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this feat on the road between Calais and Rouen. Before his departure he had wired for rooms at the Hotel Scribe in Paris. Unfortunately, a bridge intervened, and the rooms at the Hotel Scribe had to wait a fortnight before their prospective tenant was able to emerge from a Normandy hospital.

Since then he had taken to the sea. He explained that there was more room on the ocean, and that it could not be harder than a high road to fall into in case of accidents.

His cheeriness was of that radiating kind that warms other people, and Virginia, in the midst of her trouble, found even this harum-scarum young man's greeting a considerable comfort.

Rawlinson, who possessed more thought than he was given credit for, observed Virginia's haggard face. "I say," he said, "you look tired. Suppose we sit down." He led the way to a little glass-covered shelter.

"Upon my soul," Rawlinson continued, as he glanced at Virginia again, "you look as if you had been shaken up in that beastly earthquake. I was here, so escaped it. I suppose you were here, too?"

"I was not," said Virginia, in a weary voice. "I was there, in London—at the Savoy. And I was shaken up, as you say—shaken up more than I care to think about." For once Rawlinson looked grave.

"Lady Francis?" he asked.

"Lady Francis," said Virginia, "is dead."

Rawlinson gave a whistle of shocked surprise. Then he checked himself, stumbled over an apology, and grew silent, looking at Virginia with concerned eyes. "I suppose," Virginia went on in a tired way, "that I shall have to tell you all the story."

"If you are here alone," said Rawlinson, "perhaps you had better. I may be able to lend a hand."

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Virginia smiled a little doubtfully. She knew the record of Rawlinson's helping hands. But she reflected that at least he might be able to devise some means of her return to England, and so in as few words as she could she sketched out the events of the previous two days.

Naturally she said nothing direct of Von Prosen's proposal, nor of the subsequent scene. She was, however, faced with the necessity of at least hinting at it.

"Don't think me mad," she said, "but since Von Prosen left for Berlin I have found out something about—well, about Von Prosen.

"I cannot give you the details, because it would not be right of me to do so. It is an affair with which only Mr. Blair and the Government in England can deal."

Rawlinson looked at her in surprise. "Yes," Virginia continued, "I daresay it sounds astonishing. You would find it a great deal more astonishing if I could tell you all, but all I feel that I may tell you is this—that a very grave state of affairs will be brought about in a few days' time between England and Saxony and Turkey, and—I am sorry to say—the United States. Von Prosen is at the bottom of it.

"At the present time no one knows anything about it except a few diplomatists, some financiers in New York, and, oddly enough, another girl besides myself.

"It is, however, so serious a matter that I must get back to London and see Mr. Blair at once, and if," she said, looking him full in the face, "you have any love for your country you will get me to Mr. Blair as quickly as you can. Perhaps you can think of a way. I myself have tried to get a passage to Dover, and have completely failed."

Here Rawlinson stood up, his face beaming. "I can do that," he said, "as easily as anything. What a tremen-

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dous stroke of luck. I have got my motor-boat in the harbour."

"Can you really do it?" she asked.

"Do it?" exclaimed Rawlinson. "Do it? I should think I could. There is nothing to beat her on the water. I'll land you in London in less than twelve hours."

"Where is the boat?" asked Virginia.

Rawlinson took hold of her elbow and hurried her to the quayside. "There she lies," he said, and he pointed across the little strip of water.

Virginia looked, and saw the long, ugly craft moored against the pier. It seemed a frail barque to entrust with so weighty a mission.

No such thoughts, however, oppressed Rawlinson, and he made haste to get to sea, and once outside the harbour made good speed. Towards midnight, Virginia, who, wrapped in oilskins, had been dozing in the stern of the boat, was aroused by the stopping of the engines.

"All right," said Rawlinson, seeing that she was awake, "you go to sleep again. I'll fix her up in ten minutes."

This proved to be a far too optimistic prophecy, and it was nigh upon ten hours before Rawlinson, very grimy and very grumpy, got his engines going again. Therefore it was late the following afternoon when they ran up the mouth of the Thames, to find their passage stayed by the barrage.

Rawlinson put the boat alongside the strip of mud, and parleyed with the officers on duty there. They were politely concerned at Virginia's distress, but quite unable to assist her.

If she cared to land, they said, she was quite at liberty to do so, but further passage up the river was an impossibility.

Virginia herself pleaded with them, but they could offer her no assistance, and it was when she looked about

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her seeking for some way out of the difficulty that her eyes fell upon Wilmers coming along the bank—Wilmers, whom Von Prosen had declared was dead.

The shock of seeing him was a great one, but the joy of it counterbalanced the effect of the shock, and she stood up in the launch with parted lips and glad eyes, waiting for Wilmers to draw near.

XVII

WHEN Wilmers beheld Virginia's pleading face looking up from the launch, his heart leapt like a live thing, but he did not quicken his pace.

A man of less stable temperament than his would have stopped dead in astonishment first, and run afterwards. But this was not Wilmers' way. Nothing shook him out of his method in life, which was that of the tortoise—slow, but uncommonly sure.

On reaching the water's edge Wilmers stood quite still, looking down on to Virginia's upturned face. Their eyes met, and she could read the relief in his eyes, and he the thankfulness in hers.

He was so amazed at the sight of her that for the moment he could think of nothing to say, and he stood silent, with his hat in his hand. Rawlinson, looking up from his engines, said: "Wilmers, by all that's lucky!"

The officers who had been parleying with Virginia, and had watched the silent meeting with some astonishment, moved a little away. Virginia, steadying herself against the rail of the launch, said: "How do you do, Lord Wilmers?"

Wilmers smiled. It was a strange little greeting for such a time. He thought for a moment of Livingstone and Stanley.

"I am glad you have come," said Virginia after another period of silence; "more glad than I can say. I have some important information which should be given at once to Mr. Blair. I was at Ostend when I made a

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discovery, and Mr. Rawlinson kindly brought me over. I wanted to go on up the river, but these gentlemen said it was impossible. I hope you will be able to help me, for I must see Mr. Blair at once."

Looking at Virginia, Wilmers noted that her clothes wore a fine white crust where the spray of the sea had wetted them. But all he said was: "I can get you through to Mr. Blair.

"Is there anything that you wish to say to me? I am here on my uncle's behalf."

Virginia looked him squarely in the eyes. "I think I do," she said, and then added in a lower voice: "It's about Von Prosen."

The blood began to creep up the back of Wilmers' neck. He imagined that Virginia's complaint against Von Prosen could only be a personal one.

"I think," said he, "I had better get into the boat," and he stepped down into the well of the launch. Here they shook hands, as men might shake hands at a casual meeting.

Rawlinson looked at them for a moment doubtfully and a little jealously. Then he jumped out of the launch on to the shore.

"Must get a stretch," he said, "my legs are so stiff I can hardly move."

Wilmers and Virginia sat on either side of the steering gear, and the girl with great rapidity told him what she knew. Wilmers nodded his head now and again to denote his grasp of the various points, but he made no remarks.

"So you see," said Virginia, in conclusion, "that I am anxious to see Mr. Blair as soon as possible."

"I have a launch lying inshore on the other side of the bar," said Wilmers, "and we can get to Downing Street at once. We had best make haste, because he is to see

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the King to-night. And it is eminently necessary that we should see the Prime Minister first."

He assisted Virginia up the bank, and the three officers drew near again.

"This," said Wilmers, "is Miss Newcombe, who has at great inconvenience to herself come over from the Continent to see Mr. Blair on business, which I am able to say is of serious importance. It is my duty to take Miss Newcombe to the Prime Minister at once."

The three officers made half-salutes and half-bows such as officers always make when they are divided between the etiquette due to their uniform and their courtesy due to a woman.

Virginia held out her hand to Rawlinson. "I cannot thank you," she said, "for thanks would sound a little feeble after your kindness. What are you going to do? Shall you stay here, or will you come up the river with us?"

"Thanks very much," said Rawlinson, "but I'd better stay here. Can't leave the boat, you know, especially after that breakdown. I am frightfully sorry about that. I can't make it out at all. We ought to have been here this morning instead of to-night."

"Never mind," said Virginia, "I am really grateful for the delay. If we had arrived this morning instead of now, Lord Wilmers would not have been here." In her heart she felt that the path which had seemed maddeningly lengthened by accident was in reality one of Heaven's short cuts.

Rawlinson shook Virginia warmly by the hand and walked back to the launch. There he muttered something about "lucky dogs" into the machinery.

As Virginia started to walk she uttered a little cry that was half a laugh.

"My feet," she said, "are so cramped that I can hardly feel the ground."

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Wilmers put his hand beneath her arm. "If you would like to rest a little while," he said, "when we get into Gravesend, I will arrange for you to do so." But to rest Virginia declined.

A quarter of a mile's stumble along the wet, uneven sand of the bar brought them to Wilmers' launch. The engineer stood up and saluted with a stolid face. He had been trained in a school where questions are not the thing.

Having settled Virginia with as great comfort as was possible, Wilmers said, "Shove off."

As the boat throbbed her way up stream, Wilmers fished some sandwiches and a whisky-flask out of a locker, and for a while he and Virginia sat and munched in silence.

On their right the river stretched out like a flat and desolate sea. On their left it rippled along the slightly higher ground that held it in bondage on the shore of Kent.

Ahead of them was the afterglow of a cloudless sunset. The sky above the horizon was stained a dull red, as though it had been smeared with blood.

By the time they made Woolwich it was quite dark, and with the darkness had come a fine damping mist. Wilmers, with his hand on the tiller, looked into the inky moisture with contracted eyes.

Virginia had taken hold of the hem of Wilmers' coat, and was gripping it tightly. The engineer was for'ard and beyond earshot.

Wilmers in the darkness leant a little towards the girl. "Virginia," he said.

Virginia leant towards him; both were quite unconscious that he had called her by her Christian name.

"Forgive me," said Wilmers, "if I ask a question which I should not ask, but did you tell me everything about Von Prosen?"

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No answer came from Virginia, and Wilmers understood. The lights of Woolwich showed very dimly in the darkness. Beyond Woolwich the black mist engulfed them. It was like passing through a midnight cloud.

"We shall have to slow up a bit," said Wilmers, and he shouted an order to the engineer. The engines of the launch grumbled a little and then throbbed more steadily.

After a space the river narrowed in, and here and there a light was visible along the banks. Wilmers judged that they must be drawing near to Wapping.

The engineer yelled, "Look out, sir!" just as Wilmers saw a light flash for a moment over their left bow.

He put the helm over, but not very hard, fearing to go too close in shore. Out of the darkness from the point where the light shone came a hail. A hoarse voice yelled "'Hoy!"

In his passage up and down the river in the past two days Wilmers had received many hails, and had learnt to pay no heed to them; and he was about to turn the launch into her course again when there came a loud cry of "Help!" It came again a second and a third time; and dreadful it sounded in the black solitude.

Wilmers peered into Virginia's face. Virginia nodded, and he slowed the launch down till she stopped and the water lapped idly along her sides. Just abreast of them he could see a black something that was blacker than the night.

"Are you a launch?" came a voice.

Wilmers shouted, "Yes."

"Then for the love of God," came the answer through the mist, "stand by and lend us a hand. We are a barge, and one of our mates has slipped from his sweep and fallen from the fore-deck. 'E's broke 'is legs, and we're adrift. God knows where we shall fetch up."

Wilmers edged the launch a little nearer to the black

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patch in the darkness. Standing by, he cried: "What can we do?"

"Can't you take our mate, sir, and put 'im into Wapping? There's a 'orspital not many yards from the steps."

"If I can find the steps," said Wilmers.

"God bless you, sir," came the voice. "Now ease her up a bit, and we'll stand by to hook on."

Very carefully Wilmers edged towards the barge till he felt a slight bump. He stood up and took hold of the edge of the barge. Over the edge a face looked at him keenly.

"Is that a lady you have got there?" asked a voice.

"It is," said Wilmers, "and I want you to be quick. We'll put your man ashore, but we must hurry."

The face melted away in the darkness, and Wilmers heard low voices. Then he heard something clank. The face came back again out of the darkness and grinned at him. "Lord lumme," said a voice from the face—it was a coarse voice now, and there was no anxiety in it—"but I do believe you're the very gent we want."

"What do you mean?" asked Wilmers sharply.

"Just this, guv'nor," said the man again; "just this." And Wilmers felt a cold little ring of steel against his forehead.

"Don't move," the voice went on roughly, "or it'll be the worse for you and the lady."

"You hound," said Wilmers, "what is the meaning of this?"

The man laughed in an unpleasant way. "Well, you're a soft 'un, and no mistake," he said. "Got you as clean as a whistle, and all through your dear, kind 'eart. God bless yer. Ah, don't wriggle, milord. This isn't a bluff—it's loaded."

Wilmers stood perfectly still, and the moisture started from his face when he thought of Virginia.

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"Look 'ere, milord. It is just this. We want the launch, and we mean to have it. Say nothing, and we'll spare your precious life. What's more, we'll spare the lady, too. What we want is the launch. We want a little trip up stream, say, just for a change of air, and you're the very man to take us. We are not experts at machinery, so to speak, and you seem to know your way about. Now, all you've got to do is to run us up to Richmond."

"I decline," said Wilmers.

"Oh, you decline, do yer? Then I'm sorry for yer and yer dear little sweetheart there, for you're all copped as fair as fair. Now you can turn your 'ead if you like, and I 'ope you'll feel pleased. One of my mates 'as got yer man covered, and the other one's dead nuts on the lady."

Wilmers peered with agonized eyes into the darkness. He saw on his left a man leaning across the barge with a gun to his shoulder. With fascinated horror Virginia was staring along the barrel.

XVIII

AT the sight of the terror in Virginia's eyes, Wilmers' methodical brain began to work faster than it had ever done before. The position was extraordinary. Here he was standing in a launch, clinging to the edge of a barge, with the nozzle of a revolver biting the flesh of his forehead.

On his right the engineer was clinging to the barge's side, in the same ridiculous plight. On his left hand was Virginia, gazing with horrible fixity along the shining barrel of a gun. Except for the foul breathing of the man whose face was so near to his, and the noise of the water lapping alongside the launch, the night was profoundly still. And all round him was complete blackness.

"Might be the sensation scene at the old Adelphi," he thought, and despised himself for the idea, which he could not help, when he remembered Virginia's eyes.

His mind stabbed in all directions, seeking for some means of escape.

What would his engineer do? A thousand things might happen between here and Richmond. Would the man have sufficient sense to jam the engines if an opportunity offered?

A plan of that sort was at the moment running through the man's head, and he was wondering in a complicated sort of way if it would dawn upon Wilmers that he could imagine such a thing. To a certain extent he answered Wilmers' thoughts by saying, "I'm standing by, sir."

"No talking," said the man who was breathing into

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Wilmers' face, and he pressed the revolver a little harder against his head.

"Now, 'urry up, 'urry up," he went on. "We 'aven't all night. It's either take it or leave it, and if you take my tip you'll take it."

Very quietly Wilmers said: "Very well, I will take you up the river, but it will be on my own terms."

"Ho!" said the man behind the revolver, "oh, indeed!"

"Yes," said Wilmers, "indeed."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. You say you can't manage the launch. Therefore, if I decline to take you, you cannot get up the river. You could shoot me, of course, but that would not assist you. At least, you could do nothing more."

"Oh!" said the man, and he leered to where Virginia sat as though turned to stone.

Wilmers winced. He had thought of Virginia, too.

"Well, at all events," he went on, "you wish to go up the river, and I will take you, as I said before, on certain terms."

"What are they? Be quick," said the man.

"That you and your friends do not molest us in any way. If you wish to keep us under a supervision, one of you can sit aft of the engines, but the two others of you must sit for'ard of them.

"Furthermore," Wilmers went on, "the lady will sit by my side, and there will be no insolence. If you insult us in any way I shall stop the boat and take the risks. You quite understand me?"

The man thought for a moment, evidently turning things about in his mind. Then he said: "All right, guv'nor, that'll do."

He drew back a little and took the revolver from Wilmers' head, but still kept him covered.

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"Now you go back and sit down by the tiller," he said.

Wilmers stepped back and sat down by Virginia's side. He held out his hand to Virginia, and she took it and held him fast. Her fingers were wet and cold, like ice.

The man who had been the spokesman had climbed into the launch, and sat on the starboard side of the engine.

He settled himself down comfortably, nursing his six-shooter on his knee.

"You, Bill," he said, looking up at the black mass of the barge overhead, "can let the engineer go. Get in on the other side, and, mark you! no monkeying. Keep your shooting-iron somewhere about the middle of his back.

"As for you, Jem," he went on, "the bow'll do for you. I should smoke if I was you, and behave as a gentleman should.

"Now then," he added sharply, "shove off and let her go."

The launch started again, and cut quickly through the water and the night.

The man with the revolver was seemingly no seaman, for he fidgeted a little nervously as he felt the launch leaping into the mist.

"You, sir," he said, looking at Wilmers, "put her in towards the left bank. I have no liking for being drowned, and I reckon it's a bit deep in mid-stream."

"I fancy that a man of your description is hardly likely to drown," said Wilmers.

"No sauce!" said the man, jiggling the barrel of his revolver up and down. "No sauce! You put her in where I tell you."

"Very well," said Wilmers, "I will, and you will take your chance. Evidently you do not know much of the river, or you would see that to get near the bank will be

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to smash the launch up. Have you forgotten that we shall be soon getting to London Bridge, and that unless we keep amid-stream we shall break her back on the half-sunken piers?"

The blackguard facing him wavered. "Very well," he said sullenly; "how do you propose to go?"

"I purpose," said Wilmers, with the air of a man on a pleasure jaunt, "to keep mid-stream till we pass the Temple. I shall put in to the right bank till we pass Westminster, and then take to mid-stream again. There's wreckage in the river by the Abbey which would hardly do a launch much good."

"Have it your own way," said the man; "only, mind you, no 'ank." And he jiggled the barrel of his six-shooter up and down again. Wilmers leant over till his mouth brushed Virginia's ear. "Courage," he said, "I think there is a way."

In a flash the barrel of the revolver turned its one ugly eye upon them.

"You and the lady can say yer sweet nothings when we gets through," said the man who levelled it. He thrust forward his jaw in a truculent way. Virginia heard, and held more tightly to Wilmers' hand.

As the little boat thumped her way quickly through the darkness, Wilmers speculated as to who his captors might be and for what purpose they were bound up stream. From the manner in which they had seized the launch he had no doubt that they had marked him as he had passed up and down the river before. But to what end they could need a launch puzzled him sorely.

Blair had already dealt with a heavy hand with those he considered had no right on the river. The stream, in fact, was alive with additional police-boats. Curiously enough, at this moment a little splotch of deepest black appeared in the mist abreast of them.

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Wilmers guessed it was a police-boat.

The man behind the revolver guessed the same thing, too, and he leant forward towards Wilmers in the darkness.

"Perhaps you reckon," he said in a low voice, "that that's some of your pals. If they hail you, you answer them as if it was all right. If you don't——" and with his elbow on his knee he wagged the revolver at Virginia.

It was perhaps a blessing that the darkness hid the contempt on Virginia's face. Wilmers shut his teeth hard.

The blotch of black grew bigger. Wilmers could see the figure of a man leaning over the bow of the boat. But no hail came. They had seen the white ensign floating from the stern of the launch gleam in the blackness, and let her pass.

Presently, as they hurried on through the darkness, Wilmers wondered whether speech or silence would be the more politic. He remembered that nothing was more calculated to arouse suspicion than a still tongue; and so he spoke.

"Might I ask"—and there was a tone of banter in his voice—"what might be your business up the river?"

"You're not there," was the answer, "to ask questions. You're there to take us safe or get plugged. You 'old your tongue. I might as well ask what you're doing with a lady on the river at this time of night."

"You had better be careful," said Wilmers. "There are limits to human endurance."

"If you want 'uman endurance from me," answered the man, "you 'old your mug."

So the boat ran swiftly on up the stream, and presently Wilmers put in a little in shore to get his bearings, for the night was so dark and the lights so few and far between that he was a trifle lost as to his whereabouts. At this

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moment, however, the mist lifted a little, and he saw that he was passing Blackfriars. The engineer saw this, too.

Suddenly the engines began to throb as they had not throbbed before. Wilmers felt the bow of the boat lift with the increase of the speed, and in his heart he rejoiced, for it favoured the idea he had in mind.

The man on the seat before him turned to the engineer. "'Ere, I say," he said, "'ave a care, or we'll be running into something."

The engineer on his knees was working feverishly at something, and he was muttering to himself.

"Have a care yourself," he shouted back without turning his head. "If you can stop her, you can; I can't."

"What do you mean?" asked the other man, and there was fear in his voice.

"I mean that her throttle's jammed and that I can't ease her." As he said this he stretched himself out on the bottom of the boat, apparently the better to see to her mechanism. But this was not the motive that prompted him. He reached out his leg and struck Wilmers twice sharply on the foot.

Wilmers tapped him twice in reply. Evidently the engineer had some scheme of his own at work. What was it? Wilmers could not imagine, unless it were that he meant to beach her.

The boat ran on at greater speed than before, and Wilmers saw the broken mass of Westminster Bridge that still blocked the centre of the stream. He put the helm hard down, and the boat heeled over as she swooped round in a curve.

"Great heavens!" said the man with the revolver, "but you'll have her on the shore."

Wilmers said nothing. That was where he was going.

But first he fetched the tiller over and sent the boat

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flying up stream again. His eyes were aching with the effort to pick out the spot he was seeking for.

He knew that on the eastern side of Westminster Bridge the Embankment had been torn away, and was now covered with a deep layer of soft mud. He knew, too, that, just where the steps leading down from the Boadicea statue had been, the floating landing-stage had been stranded high and dry, and was now used as a guard-house.

The water was shallow, and Wilmers prayed that the boat might not touch bottom.

The man before him had in his fright turned away from him, and was staring over the side.

Then the guard-house that he had looked for seemed to rush at Wilmers with the speed of an express train.

He stood up in the launch, seized Virginia in one arm, and with the other thrust the tiller over with all his strength.

The boat came round with her gunwale awash, and went smashing up on to the mud-bank.

Wilmers shouted at the top of his voice, "Guard, turn out!" Then as he thrust himself before Virginia he heard the crash of fire-arms at his back.

XIX

WHEN the launch went crashing up on to the mud-bank the shock threw Wilmers, with Virginia in his arms, wellnigh over the side.

The discharge of fire-arms that he had heard came from the revolver of the man who had menaced him all the way from Wapping, for he, when he found himself lying on his back and saw a guardsman leaping down upon him, had in his folly fired at the soldier.

He paid dearly for his mistake, for a second later a bayonet skewered him to the bottom of the boat.

He gave one dreadful scream, and Wilmers wrapped Virginia's head in his coat that she might not see or hear. The soldier, who was excited, but not so excited as to finish his job with enthusiasm, fired point-blank into the man as he lay wriggling on the bayonet.

The engineer had gripped the man nearest to him about the waist, and lay struggling with him on the mud. The third man, half stunned, was in a sitting posture, staring dreamily about him.

The guard came tumbling down from the pier, and it took them but a few moments to secure the unharmed men. In their haste they laid rough hands on the engineer as well.

After the guard came a dapper figure surveying the scene with mild surprise with the assistance of a monocle. This was Mendip.

At the sight of Wilmers and Virginia he displayed no surprise. A large part of his upbringing had consisted

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of being taught that only vulgar people display outward signs of astonishment, no matter what the occasion.

On the other hand, he was singularly quick to grasp the situation, and without a word he helped Wilmers and Virginia to their feet.

And by common consent the men in silence assisted Virginia up the bank and into the guard-house.

There, when he had found her a seat, Mendip stood by her chair polishing his eyeglass, with the air of one politely offering his services.

Wilmers went over to Virginia and took her hand. "I hope," he said, "that this has not completely upset you?"

Virginia said, "I am afraid we should have been much more upset if we had not reached the bank."

Mendip replaced his monocle, that he might survey Virginia with a polite admiration.

Then Wilmers turned to him. "I have forgotten the engineer," he said. "Your fellows may have collared him, too, and it is thanks to him that we are here now."

He glanced an apology at Virginia, and went out, followed by Mendip. With a good deal of *sotto voce* swearing, the guard were dragging the three men up the bank. The engineer was protesting with vehemence.

A moment sufficed to release him, and Wilmers related to Mendip what had occurred. The officer of the guard came up and listened with attention to the story.

"The question is," concluded Wilmers, "what do you intend to do with them?"

The officer of the guard gave a short laugh.

"Mendip," he said, "is one of Mr. Blair's commissioners, and can do whatever he likes with them."

A smile overspread Mendip's placid countenance.

"I cannot," he said, "do exactly what I like with them, because I have certain definite orders as to how to deal with gentlemen of this description."

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"What is that?" asked Wilmers.

"You, nice, chivalrous man that you are," said Mendip, "will plead for them if I tell you precisely what it is. Because they had designs on your life you will naturally wish them to be treated more leniently than if they had proposed the murder of some one else."

"Well?" asked Wilmers.

"Well," replied Mendip, "there are still plenty of walls standing. The one beauty of an earthquake is that you have a number of spare walls. In a few minutes, when you and Miss Newcombe have gone up to Downing Street, these particular friends of yours will be standing up against the nearest wall. I fancy the guard will be able to manage the rest."

"Surely," urged Wilmers, "that is a little drastic. The ringleader seems to have met his deserts. Would it not be possible to deal with them in some other way?"

Mendip proceeded again to carefully polish his eyeglass.

"I am afraid not," he said: "and I should strongly advise you not to plead for them."

"But can't you," insisted Wilmers, "give them some sort of a chance?"

"The prisons on the river," said Mendip, "are quite full enough already. Besides, this isn't a matter for prison. You see, we are getting out returns now of people we deal with like this, and the returns are being circulated. Mr. Blair is a great believer in moral suasion."

Wilmers shrugged his shoulders and returned to the guard-house. Mendip gave some orders to the officer, who received them with evident pleasure, and then followed Wilmers.

Virginia was standing at the guard-house door.

"I am," she said, "thinking that we ought to go up to Mr. Blair at once."

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"I am sorry, Miss Newcombe," said Mendip, "that we have no carriages at our disposal. It is not really necessary that I should accompany you and Wilmers, but if you will allow me I will walk part of the way."

They moved across the road and skirted the corner of the National Liberal Club, which Wilmers had passed a few days before without Virginia.

Mendip asked no questions. It was not the thing to do. Many men pass for not being curious simply because they are well bred.

To some extent, however, Virginia satisfied his unhinted curiosity.

"I suppose," she said, "that Lord Wilmers has told you about the Savoy?"

Mendip said "Yes" with the tone of one who is politely surprised at the turn of the conversation.

"Von Prosen got me out," Virginia resumed, "and I thought that Lord Wilmers was—was dead."

"Really?" said Mendip.

"Yes. Von Prosen told me he was, but I suppose Von Prosen made a mistake."

There was not one of the three who in reality thought any such thing.

"Yes," Virginia went on after a little pause, "and then he took me up to his aunt at Richmond. Finally, he got us across to Ostend. As a matter of fact, in all that he behaved extremely well, and with considerable courage. He is," she added, "a most remarkable man."

"I am afraid," said Mendip, "that he is."

Virginia glanced at Mendip, and had half a mind to ask him why, but by this time they were ascending the cracked steps of the Prime Minister's house, and at that moment they heard the sound of a volley fired in the distance.

Virginia halted, and looked back at Mendip.

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"What was that?" she asked.

"Well, you know," said Mendip in an apologetic way, "we have a little trouble at times at the barriers, and that's a sort of *feu de joie* to intimate to disorderly persons that there is still a Riot Act."

Looking at Mendip, Wilmers caught a twinkle behind that placid young man's eyeglass, and he understood that the officer of the guard had lost no time in getting to work.

Unfortunately the officer of the guard made a mistake. The men he had shot against the wall had declared that they had something to say, but he had declined to hear them. As they shouted at him he had merely hurried up the firing party.

Now this was a pity, for if he had only listened he might have spared Wilmers and Virginia a tragedy that left its mark upon them all their lives.

For what those men had wished to say concerned Von Prosen.

XX

ON entering the Prime Minister's house they found that Mr. Blair had already left for the Palace.

Wilmers therefore led the way to Mr. Blair's room, where Virginia surveyed with curious eyes the many maps that hung on the walls and the array of documents neatly piled on the tables. Through the closed door at the end of the room came the incessant clicking of typewriters.

It was with some perplexity that Wilmers looked at Virginia.

"Now that you are here," he said, "I am not at all sure what we are going to do with you."

"I suppose," said Virginia, "that I shall stay here until I have seen Mr. Blair, and then go back to Park Street."

"That, I am afraid," said Wilmers, "is out of the question."

"To be quite honest," he went on, "there is only one little spot in London which is free from disturbances, and that is round about here. As a matter of fact, some of the houses in Park Street have already been attacked, and I am sure that Mr. Blair will forbid your being exposed to more danger than is necessary. You see, apart from your life being very precious to us personally, it is, in addition, very precious to the State."

"Do you mean that I am to stay here?" asked Virginia.

"Well, yes, that's about it," said Wilmers. "Mr. Blair is a bachelor, it is true, but I daresay that the accommodation which we can find you will suffice you for the present."

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It was an hour later when Mr. Blair ran up the steps of his house. He was in evening dress, and humming a tune. He might have been a man fresh returned from an evening spent at the theatre, with snatches of the music of the play still haunting his mind, rather than a man who had come back from a Privy Council to continue a very stiff fight for his country in his country's hour of need.

Catching sight of Wilmers, he called to him.

"Observe in your uncle," he said, "a man who is a prophet not without honour in his own country—a man of mark, the greatest statesman of modern times, and (metaphorically, of course) a species of king who can do no wrong. I speak without any intention of disloyalty. At the Palace I had, to speak in flowery language, bouquets thrown at me by the dozen—a very pleasant evening, in fact, which has quite refreshed me for the business before us."

Wilmers regarded his uncle with a grave smile.

"Miss Newcombe," he said, "has come back. I found her down at the barrage, to which young Rawlinson had brought her by motor-boat from Ostend. She had gone there with Von Prosen and his aunt. Von Prosen, it seems, rescued her from the Savoy."

Mr. Blair held out his hand. "My dear boy," he said, "I am delighted."

"Yes," answered Wilmers, "and I am delighted too; but Miss Newcombe brings very serious news."

Mr. Blair, still unimpressed, was jingling some coins in his pocket, and Wilmers was nettled at his uncle's levity.

"To use a common phrase," he said, "I fear that Miss Newcombe's news will make you a sadder and a wiser man."

"Out of the mouths of babes, eh?" suggested the Prime Minister. "Upon my soul, Wilmers, you are getting quite dramatic. What's it all about?"

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"Do you remember," said Wilmers quietly, "my remarking what a splendid opportunity this would be for the Chicago operators to start a corner in grain?"

The Prime Minister narrowed his eyes. "Well?" he asked.

"The corner has been started," said Wilmers, "and Von Prosen is at the back of it."

For a moment the Prime Minister closed his eyes, as though mentally reviewing what that would mean. Then he said, "Tut, tut! I think I will see Miss Newcombe at once."

Wilmers led the way up to the little sitting-room where Virginia was waiting for them. Mr. Blair shook her warmly by the hand.

"My dear young lady," he said, "this is indeed a pleasure, a great pleasure. I suppose my nephew has explained to you how things stand, and asked you to stay with us?"

"I am," said Virginia, "very grateful for that, and I will try to express my gratitude afterwards; but, first of all, I want to tell you something of great importance."

"Certainly," said Mr. Blair, "by all means"; and he proceeded to balance himself on his heels on the hearthrug.

"It is rather a long story," Virginia said, "and I have told it to Lord Wilmers already."

"Oh," said the Prime Minister, and then Virginia told him.

At the close of her recital the Prime Minister went over to her and took her hand. "You are," he said, "a brave girl, a dear, brave girl, and from the fact that you have gone through so much to come and tell me this, I gather you want to help us?"

"I am not goody-goody," said Virginia, "but I should be miserable all my life if I did not do everything I could to stop this thing. It is simply horrible."

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"It is," said the Prime Minister, "extremely so.

"If you will let me, Miss Newcombe," he went on, "I will get Wilmers to give me a cigarette."

The Prime Minister helped himself from Wilmers' case and sighed. He was thinking of his pipe.

"Unfortunately, and yet fortunately, what you tell me," he went on, addressing Virginia again, "makes clear several things that perplexed me early this evening. The cables are in working order again, and the news that I have received from Egypt and from Constantinople is what the newspapers would probably call 'disquieting.'

"The Sultan has very chivalrously decided to recommence his old tactics of worrying us about Egypt. He is on forbidden territory again, and although, of course, we shall threaten him with every kind of retribution, our hands are so tied just now that it is difficult to see what we can do. And we may be quite sure that Saxony is not going to act as paternal adviser to the Sublime Porte for our benefit on this occasion.

"The idea which you suggest Von Prosen has, that Turkey will close the Dardanelles while they speak with us in the gate, is an excellent one—from their point of view, of course.

"For this, however, we can only await developments. Our immediate concern is the grain corner.

"To-night," Mr. Blair went on, "we will get the cables to work, and see what we can find out from the States. I will also get the Saxon Ambassador to call on me to-morrow. He can hardly be so unreasonable as to expect me to go hunting for him at such a time.

"The next question is," he said, looking at Virginia, "what you can do in regard to the corner."

"That," said Virginia, "is where I thought that you could help me to help you. I know less of grain corners than I do of football."

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The Prime Minister beamed on her with appreciation. This girl had a point of view entirely after his own heart.

"You will be prepared," he asked, "to go to America?"

"Certainly," said Virginia, "if that would be of any use."

"Going to America may be of very great use," said Mr. Blair, "but it is impossible to tell to-night. Meanwhile the Saturday's steamers will have sailed. If, therefore, you have to be off to the States, we may have to spare you a cruiser.

"You say," he pursued, "that your money is so left that you can have no say in its use until you come of age?"

"I fear that is so," said Virginia.

"But perhaps you have influence?"

"Not much, I am afraid. With my uncle I can do nothing at all, and my cousin is only a junior partner in the firm."

"Well, we shall have to see," said Mr. Blair. "Unless your influence is of some avail, we shall have to smash the corner by some other means, and the only means that I can think of is by running a syndicate against them. Thank goodness, the credit of this country still holds good."

"But you would not send me alone?" asked Virginia.

"Good gracious, no!" said the Prime Minister, quite shocked, though in a sense rather different to that which Virginia imagined.

"When you go you shall have Lord Wilmers for escort, and the best financial advisers we can find. For instance, we will send old Crow from the Treasury. He has a longer head than any I know of outside Lombard Street—or in it, for that matter.

"However, there is no need to discuss these details just now. There will be still time for that in a day or so. In

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the meantime I have a commission for Wilmers which only he can successfully carry out. There is a bit of risk about it, but he is hardly the man to mind that."

The Prime Minister went over again to Virginia.

"I want to thank you once more," he said, "for all that you have done, and now I think if you will allow me I will take Wilmers downstairs and tell him what I want him to do."

"Can't you trust me to hear?" asked Virginia.

"My dear young lady," said the Prime Minister, "I would trust you with my immortal soul, but this is a matter concerning men's work about which it is not very nice for girls to hear."

"I can't hear very much worse," said Virginia, "than the things which I have actually seen, and if it concerns Lord Wilmers I would much rather know what it is about."

For the first time for many years the Prime Minister hesitated. Then he said, "Very well."

"Things, you see," he continued, as he lit another cigarette, "are getting not exactly serious, but troublesome. To-day, for instance, there has been considerable rioting round the flour mills at Rotherhithe, and the Bank has been twice attacked. There has been, too, a good deal of fighting at most of the barricades in the City. I have sent a couple of additional regiments down.

"The curious part of the business is that all the rioting seems to be conducted by aliens—Saxons, Russians, and Jews alike. I suppose," he added, looking at Virginia, "you heard nothing of Von Prosen being connected with anything like this?"

"Nothing," said Virginia.

"Yet," the Prime Minister went on, "there must be some organizing mind at the back of it all. It appears

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that before the earthquake came there were many thousands of rifles stored on the hulks below Gravesend. These rifles are now missing.

"We have collared the people who own them, and find that they have money at their back. They had an office in St. Mary Axe, and on perfectly businesslike lines conducted a semi-illegal trade in arms. We can get, however, nothing out of them, and it makes me regret that the days of torture are over.

"However," he went on, "the fact remains that the arms are gone, and that they have apparently gone to Whitechapel; and, lest the police should be murdered in detail, the whole force has had to be withdrawn across the bridge to the Isle of Dogs, where the Irish will give them ample protection. We endeavoured to restore order down Whitechapel way, but it was found that it would occupy too much of our time and too many of our resources. So we have left Whitechapel to itself. And Whitechapel has rewarded us by attacking the City.

"Now, I am not to be persuaded that Whitechapel's conduct is not the result of a thoroughly workmanlike scheme, and I mean to know who is pulling the strings and who is commander-in-chief down East. And the man to find that out is Wilmers."

Virginia was looking at Wilmers, wondering if their lives were to be full of strange partings and meetings. Only she hoped that there would be a balance on the meeting entries in her life's ledger. Wilmers was looking at his uncle.

"You speak German?" he asked.

Wilmers nodded.

"And Russian?"

Wilmers nodded again. "A little," he said.

"And Yiddish?"

Wilmers nodded and smiled once more. The study

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of foreign tongues had been Wilmers' one hobby in an idle life.

"You won't mind," said the Prime Minister, "going without your bath for once and wearing clothes of doubtful cleanliness?"

Wilmers smiled. But Virginia did not smile.

"Then," said Mr. Blair to Wilmers, "you will go?"

"Yes," said Wilmers. "I will go."

The Prime Minister turned quickly round to Virginia.

"And you," he said, "will you let him go?"

"Yes," said Virginia, in a quiet voice. "I will let him go."

Mr. Blair flashed a look of triumph at Wilmers, and Wilmers turned away with a scarlet face, for the Prime Minister had laid a little trap for Virginia, and she, without knowing it, had fallen into it. She had, in effect, admitted that she had a great interest in the conduct of Wilmers' life.

XXI

IN his haste to leave for Berlin, Von Prosen forgot one thing—that he had wired to his Government that his address was the Grand Hotel, Ostend, and that it was quite within the bounds of possibility that they would communicate with him there.

This is precisely what they did, and Von Prosen went on to Berlin knowing nothing whatever about it.

As all travellers know, the express for Berlin stops for an hour at Cologne, and here Von Prosen alighted and went into the great restaurant which divides the station into two equal halves.

Knowing the time he had to spare, and conscious that he had a good deal of leeway in the matter of food to make up, Von Prosen proceeded to carefully select a satisfying luncheon. He had finished it, and was sitting, cigar in hand, calculating precisely how many minutes it would take him to find his seat before the train was on the move, when his speculations were interrupted by a voice saying—

“Pardon, Herr Baron Von Prosen.”

Von Prosen looked up and saw Reidewitz, who had lately been appointed one of the King of Saxony’s messengers. He was in no way surprised to see him, knowing that he was constantly upon the road, but the expression of Reidewitz’s face showed plainly that he was surprised to see Von Prosen.

“Pardon, Herr Baron,” said Reidewitz again, “but you are not in Ostend?”

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"Hardly," said Von Prosen, "unless I am the unwitting possessor of an astral body."

But Reidewitz did not smile.

"You must forgive my saying so, then," he said, "but I have caught you at a lucky moment. The Chancellor wired to you last night to the Grand Hotel."

And then Von Prosen remembered. But he allowed none of his annoyance to creep into his face.

"Well?" he asked.

"They wired to you in cipher," replied Reidewitz, "but apparently you did not know that you were to remain in Ostend until I arrived with dispatches."

Von Prosen rose quickly from the table and looked at the clock.

"If necessary, I will forget your answer," he said; "but tell me at once whether I am to go to Berlin or not. I have not a moment to lose."

"No, Herr Baron," answered Reidewitz, "I can at least tell you that. You are not going to Berlin."

Von Prosen looked into the lad's face—he was only a lad—and saw that he knew more.

"Ah," said he, "then I am not to go to Berlin. It is equally apparent, unless I am to be retired, that I am not to stay in Ostend. Perhaps you can tell me—I will forget your answer again—where I am to be sent."

"Yes," said Reidewitz, "I can. You are going to London, and I am coming with you."

At this there was black anger in Von Prosen's heart, and, forgetting himself for a moment, he asked, "Why?" He asked it with some heat.

"That," said Reidewitz, "I cannot tell you. I am to be entirely at your orders until I am recalled. If you will permit me, I will give you the dispatches."

Von Prosen took the big sealed envelope and turned it about in his hand. He had a certain misgiving as to

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what its contents might be, and he had no desire to read them before Reidewitz lest they should betray him into a display of feeling.

Therefore he put the paper into his pocket and buttoned up his coat.

"If it is London," he said, "then it is London by way of Ostend, and there is a train in ten minutes. Now we will see what the might of his Imperial Majesty's Government will do in rescuing my baggage. I have unfortunately booked it through."

Half an hour later, as Von Prosen sat in the train which was rattling and shaking its way to Ostend, he opened the packet. He glanced first at the signature, and was surprised at the name. Then he turned thoughtfully to the dispatch, because the name belonged to one who expected his commands to be attended to speedily, and argument with him was impossible.

As he read, Von Prosen's face grew still more grave, though his anxiety was lightened in one respect. At least he had not been superseded.

To his own undoing, indeed, Von Prosen learnt from the document he had carried out his schemes just a trifle too well. He had laid them in such excellent train that they did not any longer require his guiding hand.

All the details of the corner were now complete—so complete that agents already on the other side of the Atlantic could be trusted to attend to the setting of the machinery in motion.

The Sultan had been brought to see that it was to the betterment of his prestige, and decidedly to his financial advantage, to follow the violation of Egyptian territory by closing the Dardanelles. A loan to Russia to assist her through one of her wonted temporary embarrassments had been sufficient to purchase goodwill in that quarter.

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Precisely what means Saxony would adopt to recompense herself for all the trouble that she was taking was left more or less to opportunity. There were several alternative proposals, but the turn of events was to decide.

Then came the instructions regarding Von Prosen himself, and his was the most dangerous portion of the programme.

It was a commission of such a nature that, even if carried out with success, Von Prosen would hardly feel inclined to glory in it.

If he failed it would mean official denial of him and all his works, and such everlasting disgrace that, even if he escaped the vengeance of his opponents, death by his own hand would be the only decent solution to his troubles.

On the other hand, while the credit that would come to him with success would not be great, the financial reward would be substantial.

He was, in short, to take charge of the alien rising in the East End, which had been methodically planned by Von Prosen himself to further harass the British Government in its hour of trial.

It was, however, upon the last paragraph of all that Von Prosen brooded longest. It read as follows :—

“Reidewitz has orders that you shall read these instructions in his presence, and that upon your having committed them to memory, as far as is necessary, they shall be destroyed by you, and the destruction witnessed by him.”

Reading this, Von Prosen was vaguely uneasy. He felt that the Chancellor had come to see that he was a man so dangerous as to be dreaded even by his own friends. This was in no way to Von Prosen's liking. Armed with such a document, he could at least insist upon official recognition of the task on which he was about to embark.

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Without it, should he lose the game, he would be lost indeed.

As he read this concluding order over again he speculated quickly as to whether it would be possible to dupe Reidewitz. He wondered how much Reidewitz knew, though he could see quite plainly that the boy must be aware at any rate of the dispatch's concluding passage.

He studied Reidewitz's face, and found it abominably honest. He knew, moreover, that nothing which he could offer him would influence Reidewitz one whit. It was apparent that Reidewitz was an honourable man.

Reidewitz, indeed, had no liking for the man whom he was now compelled to serve. Von Prosen had a great name in the Chancellery, but when people discussed it they usually did so under their breath. They did not say so in so many words, but every one knew that Von Prosen was the Government's jackal, and that his hands, so far as honour went, were stained beyond all cleansing.

Presently Von Prosen looked across at the lad again and said: "I presume you are acquainted with the last passage in this dispatch."

"You mean," said Reidewitz, "the passage relating to the destruction of the papers?"

Von Prosen nodded his head.

"Yes," said he, "that is what I mean, and as we have the carriage to ourselves we had better set about the business at once. This would not be a very pretty document to be found with if there happened to be a smash. And fate is capable of stranger freaks than wrecking this train."

"How do you propose to destroy the papers?" asked Reidewitz.

Von Prosen held up his cigar. He puffed at it till it glowed, and then thrust one corner of the paper, which was extremely thin, into the burning ash.

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It flared up readily enough, and Von Prosen held the paper till it was reduced to ashes. The ashes he and Reidewitz ground with their feet into the carpet on the floor of the carriage.

At Ostend, Von Prosen drove first to the Grand Hotel and called for the telegram that he should have received that morning. When he had read it he looked at Reidewitz.

Reidewitz said: "Why not destroy it as you did the other?"

Reidewitz had been at Harrow, and by his Saxon friends was called "The Sportsman."

"If I were you," he repeated, looking Von Prosen in the eyes, "I would deal with it as you dealt with the other." He saw that Von Prosen knew that he had made a mistake which he regretted, and he had an honest desire to help him.

"But," objected Von Prosen, "you must remember that you met me at Cologne."

"As to that," said Reidewitz, "I don't suppose, even if we get out of London alive, that I shall ever be asked where I gave you the paper, and even if I am I have no objection to saying that I gave it you at Ostend."

Von Prosen held out his hand, and Reidewitz shook it; but he shook it rather coldly.

XXII

VON PROSEN'S acquaintance with the Villa Franc-Tireur was not a long one, but he remembered one thing—that any one who cared to turn the handle of its front door could walk in without being announced. It was with this lack of ceremony that he entered.

Plump Countess Freda was coming down the stairs and met him face to face in the hall-way. And fear crept into the little Countess's heart in some way she could not account for ; for she coupled Von Prosen's return with the disclosures that she had made to Virginia.

Her face went red as she said: "You have come back?"

Von Prosen, indeed, had come back sooner than she expected—sooner than she had hoped for—and she wondered if his arrival boded her any good.

"Yes," answered Von Prosen, shortly, "I have come back." Then he added: "Come into the dining-room, I have something to say to you."

Countess Freda's knees faltered. She was full of the panic of the betrayer of secrets who imagines that the betrayal has been found out.

In the dining-room Von Prosen stood for a few moments stroking his yellow beard with his large calm hand.

"We are," he remarked in a casual way, "returning to England. Before we go, it is necessary that I should see Miss Newcombe."

Countess Freda was so relieved that she gave a sigh of satisfaction.

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It was such an audible sigh that it drew Von Prosen's attention to her.

"Miss Newcombe," said the Countess with the precision born of confidence, "has gone back to England."

Von Prosen stared at her with the gaze of a man who finds the truth so astounding that he thinks it must be a lie.

"Oh," he said at last. "And why?"

Countess Freda shrugged her fat shoulders and spread out her plump little hands.

Von Prosen answered her gesture as though she had spoken her reply.

"That," said he, "is no answer. It is impossible Miss Newcombe went back without leaving some explanation."

"Oh," replied Countess Freda, "she did—of a kind."

Von Prosen, with the patience which he knew all women exacted, waited silently for a further explanation. Yet he could hardly contain himself. The absence of Virginia left him in a state as near to fright as he had ever been in his life.

"I am not Miss Newcombe's keeper," said Countess Freda; "all I can tell you is that she went out shortly after you left. I should say not more than half an hour after you had driven away."

"Mamma and I were, of course, rather worried, but about five o'clock we received a note from her written at the Grand Hotel. She simply said that she had decided to go back to England, and that she had found a friend who was taking her on a boat."

Von Prosen looked at the poor little Countess so savagely that she trembled.

"The matter," he said, "is so serious that I will thank you to say nothing to your mother until I have considered what may be done."

He turned and went out of the room, leaving the

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Countess Freda in as great a panic as she had been when she first saw him.

It was on her part a panic all the more distressing because she understood nothing. The fact that Von Prosen was not acquainted with Virginia's departure made his return all the more inexplicable.

Von Prosen walked out into the garden. Men always walk out into the fresh air in moments of great perplexity.

He hardly believed Countess Freda's explanation, and yet he was compelled to.

Balancing things in his mind, he finally came to a conclusion which was the result of a bad man crediting good people with better motives than even good people possess.

"Virginia has gone back," Von Prosen decided, "because she is anxious about her confounded household in Park Street. The little fool!"

This was an explanation which at once satisfied Von Prosen, and yet left him in doubt. And the more he thought of the matter the greater his doubt grew.

One thing was perfectly obvious—that, his back being turned, Virginia had escaped from his influence. The thought angered him more than anything had angered him in his life.

Trained though he was to control his feelings, Von Prosen let his anger loose, and his rage became intense, and passed beyond the bounds of reason.

The dispatches he had received from Berlin had partially broken down his self-control; the flight of Virginia robbed him of his one saving quality altogether.

And presently out of his rage sprang an entirely new feeling towards Virginia—a feeling of unrestrained savage passion, dominated with the one idea of mastery.

Von Prosen, looking out across the grey sea which divided him from Virginia, licked at his dry lips. The

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Chancellery in Berlin had burned all his boats for him. The absence of Virginia filled him with a spirit of fighting that made it immaterial whether the boats were burned or not.

Here, indeed, began the madness of Von Prosen. A scientific mind might say that the mania which seized him in the bare little garden of the Villa Franc-Tireur was but the natural reaction to all the years of self-suppression that he had so carefully practised. The savage broke out in Von Prosen, and the savage dominated his every mood until his madness brought about his own destruction.

Insanity, long latent in Von Prosen's family, seized hold upon him now. Method in his madness he still retained, but he went about his business from that moment at a fever heat which no human mind or human body could long endure.

Von Prosen lost the slow grace of his movements. He became as a panther, quick and strong and blindly ruthless.

He had gone out of the house in his usual quiet way. He came back with an impetuosity that startled Countess Von Helsingburg.

None of his cunning, however, was lost to him in the change so suddenly brought about in his nature. Rather it was increased.

"This," said he to the Countess, when he found her grunting behind her inevitable newspaper, "is a dreary place."

"So dreary," replied the Countess, "that if I were a man I should be ashamed to bring a woman here."

Von Prosen laughed a quick, hurried laugh.

"Perhaps," he said, "you would be glad to return?"

"It is like you," answered the Countess, "to taunt me with impossibilities."

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"Not so," retorted Von Prosen, "for I find it is sharper than a serpent's tooth to have a thankless aunt. The news that I have received from England assures me that it is perfectly safe for you to return, and as my business necessitates my leaving for London to-night, I propose to take you with me."

At that moment Von Prosen had no notion as to how he should return, but he felt that the fire within him was sufficiently strong to burn every obstacle to cinders.

The Countess had grumbled at Ostend, but she had done so simply through force of habit. She had no actual wish to return. But she had committed herself, and, having committed herself, she never turned back. Therefore all she did when Von Prosen announced his intention was to glare at him maliciously, and then resort, muttering, to the pages of the *Kölnische Zeitung*.

As to why he had come back so quickly she asked no questions. She had given up endeavouring to account for the ways of man long before she buried her extraordinary husband, and she felt that she was too old to solve the riddle now.

Von Prosen went out of the house and walked away with a long steady stride towards Ostend. Once again Countess Freda watched him from the window with her mind all at sixes and sevens. She had plotted, she had planned, she had lied, that Von Prosen might come back. Von Prosen had returned, and she was only filled with a sense of dread and of being out of her depth.

When Von Prosen reached the quayside he found difficulties in his path in the way of securing a boat; but he brushed them aside.

He bought them, so to speak, out of his path, for the money at his back was not his money, and his purpose was a savage one. His idea was to go up the Thames and be met by the launch for which he would wire to the

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Embassy. The master of a tug-boat became at a price his not unwilling victim.

The tug master knew by this time of the barrage across the Thames, but Von Prosen apparently had no knowledge of it; and the sailor did not enlighten him. He had no mind to lose a good deal.

It was the following evening when, in the dusk, Von Prosen first became acquainted with the barrage. He cursed the master of the tug, and the master assumed righteous indignation. It was the first he had heard of it, he said. Von Prosen put off in the tug's one cranky boat to negotiate the bar. His approach had been watched with interest by several officers standing on the sandy stretch.

Von Prosen pulled in, and stepped on to the mud, and, looking up, he saw the exquisite and imperturbable Jimmy Mendip.

The men had only met once before, but Von Prosen never forgot a face, and Mendip, if he forgot faces as he did most things, was not likely to forget Von Prosen's.

Unfortunately, Jimmy found himself in the position of a person possessed of knowledge who, as a rule, has no knowledge at all. And, like most persons in such circumstances, he could not withstand the temptation to make the most of it. He made no offer to shake hands with Von Prosen, but addressed himself to him as though resuming a conversation which had been broken off a few moments before.

"We were," he said, "hardly expecting you."

Von Prosen looked at him shrewdly, and knew that Mendip could only have learned of his movements through Virginia. So Virginia must have seen Mendip. Von Prosen wondered what she had said.

"I fear," continued Jimmy with elaborate calm, "that the temperature of Berlin must be high. They are

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suffering, I understand, from an autumn heat-wave [over there.]”

“Berlin?” said Von Prosen. “I have not been there.”

“Oh!” said Jimmy.

“Suppose,” said Von Prosen, “we talk of something else. I am in London by the orders of my Government, and am expected at the Embassy, and the question is how I can cross this infernal bar. I wired for a launch last night, and it should be here now.”

“Perhaps,” said Jimmy, indicating a boat that was lying inshore, “that is the craft you want. There’s a man in it, at any rate, who has a letter from your Embassy. But for that he would not be here now.”

Von Prosen looked at the launch narrowly. “Yes,” he replied, “that is the boat I want.

“You will have no objection, I presume,” he went on, “to my aunt and my cousin going up the river with me? I desire to take them to Richmond.”

“We cannot refuse,” said Mendip, “to comply with the wishes of any one who has authority from your Ambassador.”

There was an insult in the words, and Von Prosen saw it; but he said nothing.

Instead, he asked, “May I inquire if anything has been seen of Miss Newcombe? She came on here, I understand, twenty-four hours before I started.”

“You will be gratified to hear,” said Jimmy, “that Miss Newcombe is excellently well. At the present moment,” he added deliberately, “she is staying with Mr. Blair.”

Jimmy spoke merely with the purpose of making Von Prosen uneasy. He succeeded in that respect, but at a price which Virginia afterwards had to pay.

Having effected the transference of the grumbling Countess and the plump Freda from the tug to the

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launch, Von Prosen set the boat up stream at as great a pace as she could manage.

He had a vague sense that things which he could not see or understand were encompassing him about. He had a sense of being enmeshed in a mystery against which he could not contend because he could not fathom it.

It was dark when they got to the landing-stage in the garden of the Countess's house. Here the Countess walked away across the lawn, making her common complaint about the evils attendant on damp feet.

Von Prosen, however, stayed the departure of Countess Freda and held her with his eyes.

"I have," he said, "work on hand which I need not explain. I have enemies, the existence of whom I did not even up till to-day suspect."

Countess Freda looked at him with round eyes, and her breathing was hurried.

Von Prosen's tones grew silky.

"Little cousin," he said, "I need not say very much. You must have known what would come. If I come out of the sea of trouble that is ahead of me with credit I shall ask you to marry me."

Countess Freda placed a fat hand under her heart.

"But I am going into danger—greater danger than you can imagine—and I may not return."

Von Prosen paused, and the little Freda pressed her fat hand harder than ever against her heart.

"I want you to promise me one thing—that you will trust me, and that you will help me if need be without question and without comment."

"I promise," said Countess Freda, in a low voice.

"If I ask you to come to me, will you come?"

Freda nodded with shining eyes.

"If I send you certain instructions, will you carry them out?"

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Freda nodded again, and her eyes were brighter than before.

“Then,” said Von Prosen, “I will say *Aufwiedersehen*.”

He took the fat hand that was not pressed against her heart and kissed it.

Then the little Countess went up to her room and cried and laughed, and laughed and cried, while Von Prosen, licking his hard, dry mouth, went rapidly down the river again, cursing his engineer for the lack of greater speed.

XXIII

ON the morning following the strange little conference which Virginia and Mr. Blair had held on the subject of the measures to be taken against the grain corner, Wilmers was awakened by the long, sharp fingers of the Prime Minister prodding him in a tender spot on the shoulder.

Mr. Blair was as fresh as the morning, clean-shaved and rosy and smiling. In his hand he held a paper, which he laid before Wilmers' blinking gaze.

"Finding nothing to do for a few minutes," said Mr. Blair, "I thought I would call you. I have some information here which may assist us greatly. Marcomb, of Scotland Yard, sent up to me at five o'clock this morning, saying that one of his men has got through from White-chapel with information as to the whereabouts of the head-quarters of our dear aliens' plot."

Wilmers sat up in his bed, and waited for the Prime Minister to further explain.

"It appears," Mr. Blair went on, "that for a long time past there have been mysterious meetings at a Russian restaurant in Essex Street, and that to these meetings has come a dramatically mysterious personage whose identity has never been allowed to leak out, and who was always treated with the utmost deference. The conclusion, of course, that one jumps to is that this person is Von Prosen. I only hope that the conclusion may be correct."

"If it is," said Wilmers, "I don't see how it can

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help me much. By this time Von Prosen should be in Berlin."

"Yes," answered the Prime Minister, "that may be so. But where the carcass is there will the vulture be. And the carcass which particularly concerns Von Prosen is in Whitechapel. Without a doubt he will come back."

Wilmers wrinkled his forehead. He was thinking that should Von Prosen return, it would be a shrewd disguise which the Saxon could not penetrate. With the prospect of increased danger Wilmers' spirits rose.

"I woke you early," said his uncle, "because if you are to get down to Whitechapel to-night clothed for the occasion and in your right mind, it will take us some trouble to find you an outfit. Outfitters' shops suitable for down-at-heel aliens unfortunately do not flourish in the neighbourhood of Whitehall."

Wilmers smiled.

"I have," the Prime Minister went on, "arranged for the launch to be ready as soon as it is dusk, and the Scotland Yard man who has brought the information will accompany you part of the way.

"Your best plan will be to go down to the pier just east of Execution Wharf. There you will be among the Irish, and therefore among your friends and possibly your relatives.

"From here, Jones — that's the name of your distinguished colleague at Scotland Yard — will take you to the bridge which divides the docks along Old Gravel Lane. There was fighting there yesterday, and there may be more to-night, and Mr. Jones is of the opinion that he can slip you through if there is another scrap. You may not be aware of the fact, but that bridge in Gravel Lane divides the Irish from the Jews as markedly as ever a careful shepherd divided his sheep from his goats.

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"Now," the Prime Minister concluded, "get up, and after breakfast we will see what we can do for you in the way of fancy dress."

It may perhaps sound rather astonishing that a man should have to spend the whole of a day in searching for a disguise. But only those who have never tried to disguise themselves will feel astonished.

Wilmers, it had been decided, should play the part of a German. In this his square-cut head and his blue eyes assisted him. It was the clothes that were the difficulty. Finally he secured from a waterman a suit of blue "reach-me-downs," so decayed that they would not have excited suspicion in the breast of even the most disreputable tramp.

A cloth cap with the peak half torn away, and a pair of sea-boots in which Wilmers' feet slopped somewhat uncomfortably, completed his costume.

In these extraordinary garments he sat with Virginia in the little sitting-room at the back of Downing Street, and watched her taking charge of the tea-table.

They said very little, though Wilmers wished to say much. He made up for lack of conversation by consuming a vast quantity of tea.

A little after five o'clock Wilmers rose to go. The autumn afternoon was drawing to a close, and there was no light in the room beyond the flickers from a cheerful fire. By that light Wilmers watched Virginia's face. It looked sad, and yet it was a little hard and set.

When Wilmers stood up Virginia rose too, and going over to him looked into his face with wistful eyes.

Quite unembarrassed, they stood thus looking at each other for some moments before either spoke. Then Virginia said—

"Do you think that you will be gone for long?"

"That all depends," said Wilmers, "upon what success

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I have. I may discover at once who is engineering this rising, but, on the other hand, it may take me days to ascertain."

"Yes, I know that," answered Virginia. "But what I am thinking of is another possibility—the possibility that you may not return."

Wilmers took her hand. "Would it distress you very greatly," he said, "should I not come back?"

Virginia made no reply, but Wilmers could see that her eyes were full of pain.

"At least," urged Wilmers, "I am doing something—and I'm doing it partly because you told me once that you had no admiration for men who did nothing."

All that Virginia said was, "God help you on your mission."

Wilmers said nothing more—there seemed to him nothing more to say. So he lifted Virginia's hand and kissed it, and went quietly out of the room. Half-way down the stairs he paused. He had no desire that his uncle should see that his eyes were misty.

In the hall the Prime Minister was standing at the door of his room, pipe in hand.

"Ah!" said he, "you are beginning well by being punctual. This is Mr. Jones. He will tell you all that is necessary on your way down the river."

Mr. Jones, a large, heavy man, in untidy clothes, rose from the chair on which he had been sitting, and carefully inspected Wilmers with a pair of eyes of a peculiar light glittering blue. They were the kind of eyes which, strangely enough, are mostly seen in the heads of criminals or detectives.

Wilmers shook hands with Mr. Jones, who seemed a trifle disconcerted, and then he turned to his uncle.

"Well," said the Prime Minister, "I am only thankful that there are not many people about. It would

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hardly do for such a scarecrow as you look to be seen leaving my house. Good-bye, and God bless you!"

Settling his battered seaman's cap on his head, Wilmers moved towards the door. As he reached it the Prime Minister put his head out of his room and shouted at him—

"Remember," he called, "that time is all-important."

Wilmers nodded, and went down the steps with Mr. Jones.

At the guard-house by the river, where he and Virginia had so narrowly escaped from death the night before, Wilmers missed the placid and smiling face of Jimmy Mendip. Jimmy, the officer in charge of the guard-house told him, had gone down the river to the bar.

The launch which carried Wilmers down stream was a fast one, but it was dark before they began to skirt along the shore off the Isle of Dogs. Presently they slowed up and saw the broken quay looming above them in the dusk.

"You will have to be careful, sir," said Mr. Jones; "the steps are damaged. You'd better let me go first."

For all his bulk the Scotland Yard man was agile enough when it came to swarming the quayside. Wilmers followed him more slowly, not being so sure of his foothold.

At the top of the steps were a couple of Volunteers on sentry-go. They did not challenge Wilmers or his companion, as Jones was known to them and they had been ordered to expect him.

"This way, sir," said Mr. Jones, and turning the corner by a dilapidated public-house, he began to walk rapidly up a narrow street.

In spite, however, of the darkness and narrowness of the thoroughfare, the place was teeming with life. Untidy women called to each other across the roadway, and a host of children sprawled in the gutter.

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Now and again they met little parties of men marching along armed with thick sticks, and with the light of battle in their eyes.

The Irishmen of the Isle of Dogs were defending their position against the Jews with more than a little relish.

A turning brought them to a second street, wider than the first, but more deserted. On the right hand rose the plain immensity of a dock wall. On the left were huge warehouses, sombre and heavy and dull.

There were no lights in the street, and Jones plucked Wilmers by the sleeve.

"It isn't far to the barrier now, sir, but I don't want you to trip before we get there," he explained. "Ah! there it is."

In the darkness Wilmers observed some dim obstruction before him, and on drawing closer to it he could see that a barricade some ten feet high had been built across the street.

It was composed for the most part of sacks of sawdust, and on the nearer side a platform made of packing cases ran along its full length. On this platform were stationed about a dozen Volunteers, who, gun in hand, were looking down the stretch of road beyond.

Other Volunteers sat along the edge of the platform, while in a corner two officers sat drinking coffee out of cans.

They recognized Jones, and rose as he and Wilmers approached, and after greetings the four held a consultation as to how Wilmers should cross the bridge spanning the neck of the docks, and gain the district of the Jews beyond.

There had, it appeared, been fighting at the barricade that afternoon, and the aliens had been driven off with the loss of half a dozen or so of men.

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But they had not retreated far, and the watchers by the barricade knew that rifles were trained along the road.

The difficulty of passing Wilmers through was therefore great; but Wilmers found a way. The officers accounted it a good one, and Jones then proceeded to give Wilmers instructions as to how he should find his path.

"The road beyond," he said, "is Cannon Street Road. Some way up this there is a fairly wide cross thoroughfare. That is Cable Street. Do not turn off here, but go straight on, when you will come to the Commercial Road. Here you turn to the left and cross over, and if you walk straight along you will see Essex Street on the right-hand side.

"I should strongly advise you," he continued, "to take very great care that you are not followed. If you find that is the case, dawdle about until you find a suitable opportunity of getting into Essex Street.

"The restaurant which we suspect is on the left-hand side, about two-thirds of the way down, and stands at the corner of a little cul-de-sac. There is only one of its kind in the street, and you can't miss it, because of the Russian lettering in the windows and over the door.

"The question to be considered now is how you are going to get back, and if I were you I would come back by the same way, because in that kit you would stand little chance at the other barricades. I may as well be quite blunt—by attempting to get back a different way you might very easily be shot."

"That is true," said Wilmers, "but, on the other hand, how do I know that I shall be recognized here? The men on duty now may not be on duty always."

"That," said one of the officers, "is a simple matter. My lieutenant and myself will probably be at this

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barricade the whole of the time ; but in case one or both of us should not happen to be on the watch when you come back, I will get four of the men to take a good look at you now, and so arrange that there will always be one of them ready to assist your return."

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FOUR of the men were called up and bidden to take stock of Wilmers, and as they were Volunteers they allowed their faces to show some surprise, though they naturally asked no questions.

Wilmers then shook hands with the officers and Jones, and climbed up the barricade. The street beyond was entirely quiet. He had little fear of being observed in the darkness, and so, after one searching look ahead, he dropped quietly down on the farther side.

Then, as had been arranged, he began, half crouching, to slink along the wall on the left-hand side of the way. When he had got about thirty yards, there was a cry from the barricade, a sharp order, and half a dozen rifles spat fire behind him. But this did not disturb Wilmers in the least, for he knew that the cartridges were blank.

The ruse had its desired effect. From the dark walls of the apparently empty warehouses two or three shots answered back the firing from the barricade.

Wilmers uttered a cry of well-feigned terror, and then, cursing in Yiddish, ran like a madman down the middle of the street.

From two or three of the doorways men shouted to him in various tongues to stop. They yelled after him that he was safe. But Wilmers paid no heed to them, and ran on, and they made no effort to bar his flight, for they had no reason to suspect a man who had been fired upon from the barricade.

When he got to Cable Street, Wilmers paused that he

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might gather breath and collect his thoughts. Then he walked on quickly up the Cannon Street Road. Half-way up it he passed a large building that had the aspect of a hall. It was, as a matter of fact, an Anarchist club, which was now in use as a hospital. Even as he went by it four men, carrying in a sheet a lad who groaned as the movement jarred him, passed through the door.

In the Commercial Road Wilmers, to his surprise, found the lamps ablaze, and the street crowded with people as though at holiday time. The shops, though most of them had been wrecked, seemed to be doing a roaring trade, and at every corner there were groups of people talking with great excitement and many gestures.

At the end of Cannon Street Road there had been pasted up a notice in Yiddish, which Wilmers paused to read. It ran as follows :—

“Citizens are requested to maintain as good order as possible, and to refrain from troubling their neighbours. The good work is in progress, and no assistance can be given by individual action. Above all, the Committee begs the Citizens of the World not to foul their own nest by looting among themselves. There are other spoils to be had.

“By order of the Committee.”

Wilmers was completely puzzled by this extraordinary document. To him its terms were cryptic, but the fact that such mysterious language was employed in a public notice argued that the people for whose benefit it had been posted up were well acquainted with the nature of the conspiracy that had produced it.

He hung about for some time at the corner, walking first a few yards in one direction and then a few yards in another, to satisfy himself that no one in particular was

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interested in his movements; and as he hung about he fell to speculating as to the nature and the purpose of the mystery he was seeking to unravel. It was apparent that concerted action was being taken by some committee, but for precisely what purpose it was indeed difficult to say. It was also obvious that the matter must have been planned, and the arrangements to a large extent completed, long before the earthquake had taken place; and this made the riddle all the harder to solve.

It was evident, too, that some mind with a marvellous capacity for organization had been at work. The tram-lines, where they had been twisted and wrenched from the ground by the earthquake, had been replaced, and the horse-cars were running up and down the street. But they were not being employed to carry ordinary passengers. They were either full of bodies of men armed with rifles, or contained vast quantities of bread and other food-stuffs, which were apparently being concentrated at some spot in the direction of the City.

There were no police to be seen, for, as Mr. Blair had told him, they had all been withdrawn from the district.

The police-station in the Commercial Road, indeed, had been seized by the rioters, and was being used by them as a species of military head-quarters. Two men armed with rifles and old-fashioned bayonets stood at the doorway, and from time to time foreign men with scarves round their arms passed in and out with a brisk and businesslike air.

Wilmers mingled with several groups of people, and found to his relief that his appearance aroused not the slightest suspicion. He was, in fact, as disreputable-looking as even the most down-at-heel of them. At a fruiterer's shop he paused to purchase some apples.

"Things seem to be going well," he remarked to the fat Jewess who flopped the apples into a bag and then

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gave the receptacle a couple of quick turns in order to close it.

The woman leant one of her fat sides against the door-post and beamed on him.

"Yes," she said, "they say that to-morrow they will take the Bank and the Mansion House. Then we shall get our rights."

Wilmers was curious to know what these rights might be, but he dared not ask lest he should be regarded as a stranger and an outcast.

Fortunately the woman to some extent gave him the information that he desired. "Yes," she went on, "and about time, too. I suppose the Christian folk in the West End think that they can sweat us as long as they please. But that's all a mistake; and why should we have to submit to their laws and their rates and their taxes and their domination, when we are a people apart? Why should the Christian policeman bully the poor Jew?"

Wilmers was growing interested; but at this point in the conversation a man came up with a small order for bananas, and politics had to be discarded in the interests of commerce.

Though the woman had not said much, Wilmers was considerably enlightened. It appeared that these people, about whom Londoners know so very little, had ideals of their own, and were prepared to strike a blow for them. It seemed, however, to Wilmers that they would never have struck that blow without receiving encouragement from some powerful outside agency that had its own particular axe to grind; and he had little doubt that that agency was Von Prosen, who was working out the scheme in the interests of his Government.

Turning these things over in his mind, Wilmers walked down Essex Street, and found the Russian restaurant at

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the corner of the little cul-de-sac to which he had been directed by Jones.

The exterior of the place was dirty and dingy. Across its front above the windows were big straggling Russian characters, and dirty bits of paper—the menu for the day—were pasted on to the smeared window-panes.

Reading them through, Wilmers found that it would be a hard task to spend more than fourpence on a square meal, and, pulling a wry face over the prospect of consuming cat's meat, he went up the grimy steps.

As he pushed open the door a little bell rang, and a dozen men sitting about the frowsy room at small tables looked up as he entered. Most of them stared at him in a none too friendly way, but Wilmers reflected that this was probably due to the fact that he was not an habitué of the place rather than because they actively suspected him.

At the farther end of the room was a bar on which were dishes holding most unsavoury-looking bits of food. The place, however, boasted a service lift, and a withered old hag stood by it screaming raucous orders up the gap.

A large, dirty, ponderous man with a black beard, whose waistcoat did not meet his trousers by some six inches, stood with a proprietorial air at the other end of the bar. He was a surly-looking man, but he had sufficient sense of his duties as host to nod to Wilmers as he seated himself at one of the tables.

Out of a room at the back of the bar came a tall, untidy girl with a face like the face of a Madonna. She placed a pair of unclean hands on the edge of the table and leant over towards Wilmers, looking at him with a note of inquiry in her great black, slumbrous eyes.

Wilmers glanced across at the pile of revolting food on the counter and found that he could not face it. So he called for a glass of tea. The girl went over to fetch it,

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and as she did so the large, dirty man spoke to her in a low voice. The girl nodded her head and came back with the tea.

It was the colour of toffee, and a piece of decayed lemon floated on its muddy surface. Wilmers dropped a couple of pieces of beet sugar into it, and stirred it thoughtfully with a pewter spoon.

Without any apology except for a little smile of her red, full-lipped mouth, the tall, untidy girl drew up a chair and sat down by Wilmers' side. For a few moments she looked dreamily towards the door, and then she turned to Wilmers.

"We don't often see you here," she said.

Wilmers became conscious that the voices in the room dropped and that newspapers ceased to rustle. The room was doing its best to pretend that it was not listening.

For a moment Wilmers was perplexed as to what answer he should make. Then he reflected that the girl had evidently been commissioned to sound him, and that a lie would probably be a mistake. Therefore he decided to speak the truth.

"I have never been here before," he said.

"So," said the girl with a drawling gentleness.

Wilmers then found that he had spoken as much of the truth as he dared, and therefore he turned to lying.

"Yes," he said, "my ship has been a good deal knocked about, and they have no use for me now, so I am just wandering—wandering about; and I am fortunate, indeed, to have come here. He looked at the girl with what was an excellent imitation of bold admiration in his eyes, and, thinking of Virginia, felt unhappy for so doing.

"You are of the brotherhood?" she asked.

"No," said Wilmers, "I am not. But at such a time I would gladly serve them if I could."

"So," said the girl again in her gentle drawl.

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An argument was now in progress between two men who sat one on either side of the room. They were shouting to each other loudly. Wilmers and the girl listened, and three men seated at a table in a corner, where they were going through some papers, looked up, too. It was a curious kind of argument, one of the men holding for socialism and the other for anarchy.

"It is always so," said the girl to Wilmers, "it is always talk, talk, talk; but sometimes it is necessary to do something—and we are doing something now."

"So I hear," said Wilmers. "It seems that they hope to take the Bank to-morrow."

"And you," he added, "you also think of politics?"

"Ah, yes," said the girl, "I do. I am a Russian and a Jewess, and I come from Odessa. It was a long, cold trip that. I remember it well, and oh, wasn't I sick! But you," she added, "you would never be sick? You are of the sea?"

"Yes," answered Wilmers. "I am of the sea; but even on the sea we think of politics. I should like to know what you think."

"Oh, I," said the girl, with a little laugh, "am what they call 'advanced.' I went to the elementary school, and I passed for the gymnasium. But only so many can get into the gymnasium, and I was not one of them. Just after that we came to England, and I study here. It is a great thing is study."

Wilmers' attention was becoming aroused. This was a type that he had never met before.

"Education, that is what we want," explained the girl, "education, and always education. Education, it is the one civilizing force. Every one ought to be able to go to school and college till they are twenty. It is a shame any one should work before then. It is the fault of the present

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system. If all the work were equally distributed no man need do more than four hours' labour a day.

"And," she added, "there should be no money. It is money that is the curse."

"But," laughed Wilmers, "how could any one pay? If there were no money, how, for instance, could I pay for this tea?"

"Oh," said the girl, "you would work for it, of course. It would not matter whether you were a doctor, or an architect, or a stonemason. You would receive so much credit for what you did, and would be entitled to certain rations. All labour should be equal."

"Yes," agreed Wilmers, "but supposing I wanted a watch?"

"Well," said the girl, "you would have to work for the watch. Some watchmaker might need furniture. He would get the furniture in exchange for the watch, and you in return for that would contribute its value in some other way."

"Do you really believe all this?" asked Wilmers in amaze.

"I do," said the girl, "and so do many of us. It will, of course, be a long day before such things come to pass—but they will come to pass some day."

Now, while Wilmers had been thus sitting talking with the girl he had heard the little bell over the door tinkle; but he had not turned round. He wondered afterwards, when he knew whom that door had admitted, whether it would have been the better or the worse for him had he done so; for the man who had entered was Von Prosen.

Wilmers' profile was sharply outlined against the soiled whitewash of the wall when Von Prosen came in, and Von Prosen knew him at once.

He was so taken aback that he stood on the threshold holding the door on the swing, and his first impulse was

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to go quietly out again and take counsel in the street as to what should be done.

One thing, however, was imperative—that Wilmers should not escape from his sight, and that steps should be taken to prevent his doing mischief. For Von Prosen saw in a flash the reason of Wilmers' presence.

Therefore he came into the room, walking softly and with averted head. He walked over to the table where the three men sat in consultation. There he too sat down with his back to Wilmers, and drew the high collar of the ragged overcoat that he was wearing up round the back of his neck and his ears.

Making a sign, which prevented any demonstrations on the part of the three men, he whispered to them across the table, "Go on talking, and let me think. We are in trouble. It is the man talking to Rachel," and he jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

The men went on with their talking and the drawing of certain diagrams on scraps of paper. Von Prosen sat staring straight before him, his blue eyes blazing. With his tongue he licked the yellow beard round his mouth. He looked like a great angry yellow tiger.

Presently he glanced anxiously round and saw that the sombre gaze of the proprietor was upon him; so he beckoned him over.

The ponderous man lumbered across and sat down by his side, and Von Prosen began to speak into his ear in quick, fierce whispers, and the face of the big dirty man went pale.

When Von Prosen had finished his whispering, the large man nodded his head and shuffled back to the bar. He called the girl to him on some pretext, and went with her into the inner room. A few moments later the girl came out again, and her eyes were no longer dreamy. There was a glitter in them.

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She went over to Wilmers, and reseated herself at the table.

"Will you have another glass of tea?" she asked.

"Thank you," said Wilmers, "no. I fear that it is time I was going."

"Back to your ship?" asked the girl.

"No; not back to the ship. That is impossible. I must go out and look for a lodging."

He dared not ask if a lodging were to be had in the eating-house, lest any one should suspect him.

The girl, however, leant towards him and pouted her red lips and closely scanned his face with her slumbrous eyes.

"Why go out and seek for lodgings when bed and board are to be obtained here for the asking—and," she added, with a little laugh, "for the paying."

This was vastly better than anything which Wilmers had hoped for, and he thought to himself that his luck was in; but, mindful still lest he should arouse suspicions, he did not display too much enthusiasm.

"Are you sure," he asked, "that you will welcome me as a guest? You know nothing about me."

"You are a sailor," said the girl, "and sailors are always honest. I will tell my father what you need," and she rose and went over to speak to the large untidy man.

Wilmers, watching him, saw that he looked doubtful, and his heart sank. When the girl came back she looked doubtful, too.

"It seems," she said, "that two of our friends are expected to-night, and I knew nothing of their arrival. The best that we can offer you is a little room in the basement. It is dry and it is clean. Its only drawback is that it is a little dark."

"At least," said Wilmers, "I can look at it."

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“Good,” said the girl. “If you care to see it you can do so now.”

Wilmers got up from his chair, and the girl led him through into the room behind the shop and passed down a flight of rickety stairs. At the bottom of the steps she fumbled in the dark for the handle of a door. She found it, and, the door opening, Wilmers saw a large bare room in almost total darkness, for the only light came from a little lamp hung at the farther end.

“Ah, wait for a minute,” said the girl, “I have forgotten that we shall need a light. If you will stay here for a moment I will fetch one.”

Wilmers walked into the bare room, and as he did so he heard the door close behind him. Turning about, he saw, to his astonishment, that it was made of steel, and that its surface was as smooth as glass. Nor was there any handle to it.

Outside he heard laughter on the stairs and a man’s voice. He stood stock still, staring at the impassable door. For the voice that he had heard was the voice of Von Prosen.

XXV

WHILE Wilmers stood staring at the steel door which had no handle the laughter died away, and Von Prosen's voice became more and more distant.

Then did the truth come home to Wilmers. He had been trapped—trapped most neatly, really quite artistically, by the girl with the Madonna face and the highfalutin politics.

He had discovered what he had come out to seek—the head-quarters of the conspiracy and the man who engineered it. That Von Prosen was at the head of affairs Wilmers could no longer doubt. The question was what use Wilmers could make of his knowledge. He was in the possession of information which he saw no prospect of ever being able to impart. He knew Von Prosen well enough to see that he was not the kind of a man who would allow his secrets to leak out, no matter what the price of silence.

Wilmers took no shame to himself that he was greatly disturbed at his position. "What I am thinking," Virginia had said to him, "is that you may never come back." And it seemed that he might never go back.

Though the prospect of escape was small he nevertheless began to quickly examine the room. The floor, he found, was of concrete and the walls whitewashed brick. At the end of it were two doors side by side. Wilmers went over to them and examined them carefully, only to find that, like the other, they were of steel and without handles.

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On one side of the room was a long deal table that had been stained and burned by chemicals. Beneath the table were eight or nine iron boxes, each about two feet square. Out of curiosity he endeavoured to pick one up, and found that he could scarcely move it.

With an appalling suspicion growing on him he again examined the stains on the table, and he remembered that in the explosive works at Woolwich he had seen stains like those before. They were stains such as came from the upsetting of picric acid, and Wilmers judged that the iron cases which he could scarcely move contained high explosives of some kind.

Here, indeed, was the place that he had been seeking for.

Scarcely had he completed the examination of the room when the door by which he had entered opened again, and there came in two of the men whom he had seen seated in the café above.

Wilmers went to meet them.

"What," he asked, "is the meaning of this?"

"We have asked you no questions," said one of the men, "and we shall answer none from you. That is a matter for other people. Our business is of a different kind. We will trouble you to step here by the light."

One of the men took Wilmers by the arm and the other pushed him gently in the direction of the lamp. When they had got him into the best light they could find, the man who had spoken looked into Wilmers' face.

"Yes," he said in English, "I think there are no doubts about your identity, Lord Wilmers."

Wilmers was too astonished at the man's words to make any reply, but he looked at the man closely.

He was a thick-set, powerful fellow, with a clean-shaven face that had about it certain lines betokening good breeding, but it was now battered with drink. In a vague way Wilmers recognized him, but could not give him a name.

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"You may look," said the man, "as much as you like, and I don't mind satisfying your curiosity. You have seen me before—at Cambridge."

"Your name," said Wilmers, "was Charles?"

"My name," said the man, "is Mannheim. I don't mind telling you that, or for that matter anything else, because I don't expect that anything which is said to you here will ever be repeated."

In after days Wilmers always said that he knew what fear was at that moment. Probably the man saw fear in his face then, for he laughed and seized him roughly.

"I should advise you," said he, "not to struggle. We have orders to search you for weapons, and we are going to do our duty. Oh, I tell you, we are fond of doing our duty."

And he and the other fellow, who said nothing, began rapidly to dive into his pockets and run their hands all about his person. They found nothing but a penknife, and this they took.

Afterwards Mannheim pulled a stout leathern band from his pocket and ran it about Wilmers' waist in the form of a slip knot. The end of it he fastened with a heavy chain and a stout padlock to the wall.

Wilmers at first had thoughts of resisting, but resistance, he saw, was useless.

"We have," said Mannheim, "had unwelcome visitors such as you before."

This was the only explanation he vouchsafed, and without speaking further he and the other man left Wilmers alone, letting themselves out through the steel door by means of a key like the key of a safe.

When they had gone Wilmers found that the leathern belt was sufficiently long to allow of his sitting down, and so he squatted on the floor, wondering what would befall him next.

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He had not long to wait, for soon he heard a heavy footstep. The door swung open on its noiseless hinges, and Von Prosen came in.

Von Prosen closed the door, and then leant with his back against it, and fell into a great fit of laughter—sharp, hard, dry laughter that was beastly to hear.

Wilmers, searching Von Prosen's face, noted the flush on his cheeks and the sparkle in his eyes. At first he thought him to be drunk. But when he walked across the room his step was quick and steady, and his voice, when he spoke, was clear. Wilmers wondered then if he were mad. Without paying any heed to Wilmers, Von Prosen began to pace up and down the room, with his shoulders stooped like some great beast crouching for a spring.

At last he came to a stand opposite Wilmers, and bared his strong white teeth at him in an ugly grin. He drew back his upper lip like a snarling dog.

"This," he said, "is a pleasure—an unexpected one, but a pleasure indeed. Of all the men in this world that I should like to have seen here you are the very one. And how, may I ask, is Miss Newcombe?"

"I will thank you," said Wilmers, with a white face, "to leave that lady's name alone."

"Very pretty sentiments," said Von Prosen, "that really do you honour; but I am afraid that I shall have to pain you. It will be very necessary to discuss Miss Newcombe presently, but I have something to say to you first."

He paused.

"You would not care, I suppose," Von Prosen went on, "to tell me how you got here? That Mr. Blair sent you I have no reason to doubt, and why he sent you I can also guess. And allow me to congratulate you. You have by this time discovered what Mr. Blair sent you out to find."

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"That, in a way, is very clever of you, but I fear you will find that your ingenuity is of no avail. I trust that you parted with your uncle on good terms. You are not likely to see him again."

Von Prosen lifted the lamp from its bracket on the wall and walked over to the centre of the room. "You will observe," he said to Wilmers, "if you look carefully at the floor, that part of the concrete here is of a slightly lighter shade than the rest. The lighter patch represents, I may inform you, a grave."

"There is going to be another lighter patch quite soon."

Wilmers, who had got on to his feet, said nothing. The only recourse he had left was his dignity, and he was determined to employ that.

"Now," said Von Prosen, "we have to speak of Miss Newcombe. I have a sincere attachment for Miss Newcombe, and I propose to marry her."

"God forbid!" said Wilmers.

"I don't see why," said Von Prosen, "and what is more, I propose to marry her here—here, in this cellar, with yourself as witness."

Wilmers felt the blood leave his face.

"You may wonder how that is to be achieved. It will in reality be quite a simple thing. I have just perfected a little plan."

Von Prosen paused, and smiled with a horrible satisfaction.

"You may not think it," he went on, "but at the present moment Lord Wilmers is lying in Whitechapel on a bed of sickness—the victim of his country, shot down in some street-fighting while he was doing his duty. What could a man ask for more?"

"And what," he went on, "could be more fitting than Miss Newcombe should come to see him; and when Miss

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Newcombe comes down to Whitechapel she will see Von Prosen, too."

"You cur!" said Wilmers.

"Ah, you are getting rude now. It is always a pity to be rude. But I will take no notice of it now, because I wish to have you for my best man."

"Good God," said Wilmers, "you must be mad."

Von Prosen leant against the wall and laughed loud and long. His great body shook with laughter.

"Oh, yes," he said at last, "I am mad—mad for success, and I am mad for Miss Newcombe. I am mad. Oh, yes, I am quite mad; I feel it myself. But no one will ever know that I am mad. I shall be too clever. I shall be a genius instead. It is better."

And he laughed again.

"Now," said he, "I must go. I must make preparation for this mad marriage of mine. I will not leave you quite alone. I will send down the pretty Madonna from upstairs to bring you food. I will not starve you, for you will have all the need of your strength before I have done with you. So, good-bye for the present."

In the intensity of his mind's agony Wilmers closed his eyes.

When he opened them again Von Prosen had passed out through the steel door. Wilmers sat on the ground rocking himself to and fro like a woman crazy with grief, and holding his head lest it should burst from the torture of his thoughts. So he sat on through the night, awake and yet in a dream—in a stupor born of horror.

When the slovenly girl with the Madonna face came down in the morning with a cup of coffee the hair round Wilmers' temples was white.

After Von Prosen had left Wilmers he went back to the café. His unwonted excitement drew the eyes of all upon him as he stood in the centre of the room and shouted for

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Reidewitz. Reidewitz, who had been waiting on the step, came in from the door.

"Listen to me," said Von Prosen sharply. "You will stay here to-night. There is below a prisoner who must on no account be allowed to escape. If you permit him to get away you will answer to me for it with your life."

Young Reidewitz looked at his chief in a troubled way. He had never seen Von Prosen in such a mood before, and his words struck him as wild and inexplicable.

"I shall be back," Von Prosen resumed, "about noon to-morrow. I have other work to do now."

Without another word he swung out of the door.

In such haste was he that Von Prosen almost ran along the street, and he was muttering to himself rapid, incoherent words.

"Ah," said he in his beard, "my gentle Wilmers, I will harrow your soul as never the soul of man was harrowed. You shall dance at my wedding-party, if I have to whip you to make your feet lively. I keep my word."

And then—

"Oh, my fat little cousin, it is you who have betrayed me, and you shall pay the penalty. I will betray you. I will fill your fat little head with trouble and your fat little heart with woe. You shall think that I love you so much that you will bring another girl to me, and then you shall see me marry the other girl.

"Ah! It is a good idea—an excellent idea. It takes a Von Prosen to think of things like that."

As he hurried on he leered at the darkness, and passed his tongue along his lips.

XXVI

THE way that Von Prosen took lay along the same roads which Wilmers had traversed earlier in the evening.

As he crossed the light and crowded Commercial Road not a few people turned to look at the big man who walked so fast and talked so quickly to himself. One or two of them nudged each other and exchanged glances. Von Prosen was known to more people than would have pleased him had he been aware of it.

From the Commercial Road he walked down Cannon Street Road and across Cable Street to the entrance to Shadwell Basin.

The man at the gate touched his hat as he passed through, for Von Prosen, in seeking an outlet to White-chapel which should be free of barricades or persons of an inquisitive turn of mind, had made smooth his path through this little dock.

Running down a flight of steps, he found the launch which the Embassy had secured for him, and, jumping into it, he curtly ordered the man to get under way.

Owing to the partial collapse of the dock walls, the passage from the basin was somewhat narrow, but this, nor indeed any trouble of the moment, mattered much to Von Prosen then. He sat with his yellow beard pillowed in his great hands, staring into space.

His mode of thought on the way up the dark, quiet river to Richmond was quite unusual for him.

When he had conceived a plan and perfected it, he, as

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a rule, gave it no second thoughts till he put it into execution; but now he sat repeating over and over again the details of the piece of villainy he had in mind.

From time to time the engineer looked at him uneasily, for Von Prosen's face was not a sight calculated to give a man comfort. Now he would laugh in a silent, snarling way, as a dog laughs; and then his face would suddenly grow drawn and pinched, and he would stare with anxiety in his blue eyes in a manner that was not wholly good to see.

And all the while he muttered to himself—

“This is a cursed world—a most cursed world. Things will not go right in it, though the finding of that beast Wilmers was a piece of good fortune. Ah! my dear, nice Englishman, if I tore the flesh out of you with hot irons, I could not hurt you more than when I force you to face Virginia in the morning.

“Not that I would hurt Virginia if I could avoid it; but needs must when the devil drives. It is the only way. If you will not marry me, Miss Newcombe, then I will compel you to change your mind through cruelty to the man I fear you love.

“You may not love me now, but you shall love me presently. I will put fear into your heart, and with women the fear of a man is the beginning of love.

“As for you, my fat cousin, your fatness shall waste away with sorrow. You thought that you could outwit Von Prosen. You shall be undeceived. And your grief when you lose him shall be the greater because of the secure hope that you shall have of winning him in the morning. I am a master mind—I, Von Prosen. A man can do anything if he be brute enough—and my heart is hardened.”

The launch came that instant to the Countess's house at Richmond, and Von Prosen, having bidden the man sleep

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in the boat, walked quickly across the lawn to the house. The door stood open, and the hall within was in half-darkness, but as he entered he saw the plump little Countess Freda about to ascend the stairs.

She turned an anxious look upon Von Prosen. His comings and his goings always brought her heart into her mouth.

Von Prosen paused for a few moments with his hand upon the balustrade, that he might bring himself under good control. The little Countess stood watching him, with the colour alternately flooding and leaving her face.

At last Von Prosen said, "Freda, I have something to say to you." And he led the girl into the library.

There he motioned her to the same chair in which Virginia had sat three days before. Von Prosen, with a critical eye, was pleased to see that the girl before him then showed symptoms of being more amenable to his dictates than Virginia had.

"When I spoke to you this afternoon," he began, "asking you if you would help me if you could, and if you would obey my orders if necessary, I had no idea that I should return so soon or should have any request to make of you."

"I am glad it is so soon," said Countess Freda.

Von Prosen twisted his head and looked at her sideways, and watched her for a little while before speaking again.

"I do not suppose," he said, "that you know how much I have at stake. If you did you would feel sorry for me."

He knew the softness of the heart of a woman in love, and played on it without scruple. Freda looked at him with shining eyes.

"A part of my plans," he went on, "concerns a rising in the East End. It was none of my wish to be mixed up in such a business, but I was obliged to take a hand in it

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as the result of orders from home." And he jerked his head to the south with a movement intended to indicate Saxony.

"Mr. Blair, of course, by this time has found that rising out, and is now trying to discover who has planned it. He suspects me, and he is quite right to suspect me, because I did plan it. I am in charge of it.

"That was why I returned so suddenly to Ostend. My journey was cut short by urgent dispatches from Berlin. Unfortunately I had laid the lines of the rest of the scheme so well that they could do without me; and so as a reward I was apportioned all the dirty work."

Freda wagged her head wisely. In spite of her love for him she could hardly believe that Von Prosen would have any objection to work that was not clean. She was, as a matter of fact, quite prepared, at his bidding, to do dirty work herself.

"And now," said Von Prosen, "I am in great distress, and in a hole from which it will be extremely difficult to extricate myself unless you help me. My papers have been stolen.

"These papers, if they ever reach Mr. Blair, will mean my ruin, and my ruin will mean yours, because, Freda, you see I had meant my life to be yours when we had got through this business."

"Is that really true?" asked Freda.

"Little girl, it is quite true," said Von Prosen, and he covered her hands with his.

"And the papers?" asked the girl.

"The papers were taken from me this evening, somewhere in Whitechapel, and Wilmers knows where they are. By a piece of good luck, however, I stumbled on Wilmers to-night after I discovered the theft. He had been sent east by Blair to try and probe the mystery of the rising there. He is a clever fellow, that Wilmers; his

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disguise was almost perfect, and he speaks Yiddish as well as a Jew. But I knew him for all that."

"What have you done with Wilmers?"

"Wilmers," said Von Prosen, "is where no harm can come to him except through me, and where, on the other hand, he can do me no damage. He is my prisoner."

"I have," he went on, "asked him to tell me where the papers are, but he altogether refuses. I even threatened to flog him, but he took no notice of that. I was therefore completely at a loss, because, if, as I said, these papers pass out of my keeping I shall never be able to show my face again in Saxony—or, for that matter, in Europe."

"But the Government, surely the Government will support you?" said Freda.

"Not so," said Von Prosen, "the work that I have been given to do is such that, unless it succeeds, they will not acknowledge me at all. I shall be denounced as a renegade who was simply seeking to feather his own nest by engineering a grain corner against England, and furthering that project by arousing a rebellion in the East End. It is not a pleasant business to be in."

"Is there no way out?" asked Freda.

"Yes, there is a way out, if you will help me," said Von Prosen. "If you will not help me there is no way out."

"I will help you," said Freda, "if—if—" and her face grew scarlet—"you will love me but a little."

Von Prosen saw now that he had gained his end, and therefore lied easily and with conviction.

"Freda," said he, "I love you much. I have always loved you. I shall always love you. If you help me I shall succeed in what I have set myself to do, and then I shall be a rich man, and even if my Government discards me—well, we can do without the Government."

"Are you really sure," asked Freda, "that you love me? I am fat, and I am not pretty—like Virginia."

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"Little woman," said Von Prosen, "love is not a matter of prettiness. If my love had no foundation but gratitude the foundation would be secure."

"Then," said Freda, "what shall we do?"

"This," answered Von Prosen, "is my plan. It is a dangerous plan, but it can be carried out."

"The only way to make Wilmers yield is through Virginia. We must take Virginia down to Wilmers, and once more make him an offer. If he refuses to give up the papers, then we will flog him before Virginia until Virginia makes him consent."

Countess Freda's face paled. It was not so long since she had said to Virginia, "Then we are friends," and had shaken hands with her across the table at Ostend.

"Is that the only way?" she asked.

"It is the only way," said Von Prosen.

"But how," asked Freda, "are we to get Virginia there?"

"That," said Von Prosen, "is where you help me. Listen," he went on, "this is how it will be done. Tomorrow morning Mr. Blair goes to see the King. While he is absent from Downing Street you will go to see Virginia. That can easily be arranged, as I have the launch, and the purport of your supposed mission will get you through to Downing Street."

"When you see Virginia you will tell her that Wilmers has been shot, that he is, in fact, badly wounded—so badly, indeed, that there is some doubt as to whether he will recover. You will also tell her that he has been asking for her. She will, of course, go. You can explain to her that you can secure her safe passage to White-chapel and back."

"But that," said Freda, "would be difficult."

Again Von Prosen said, "Not so. It will be easy. It can be arranged in this way."

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"A few yards from here are the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. There you know the Mother Superior, and if you tell her that your mission is one of mercy, I have no doubt that you can sufficiently overcome her scruples to induce her to lend you a sister's dress. Otherwise your passage through the streets of Whitechapel would be unpleasant. For Wilmers' sake, you can easily persuade Virginia to put on a similar disguise."

"There is only one other difficulty," said Freda, "that I can see, and that is how to explain to Virginia why I come from Whitechapel on such an errand. I presume that I am to say I come from there?"

"I have thought of that, too," said Von Prosen, "and there is also a way out of that. Tell her that in the fighting I was injured too, and that you went down there to me and so found Wilmers."

"But that," protested Freda, "will betray you."

"I am betrayed already," replied Von Prosen. "It is simply a question of whether the thing in the future is declared as a piece of official knowledge or whether it will remain a sort of unofficial secret."

"That, I think," Von Prosen concluded, "is all. And as you must be up betimes you had better be off to bed. I am sorry that you will have to go alone in the morning, but I must go down the river again. It would not do for us to be seen together to-morrow. Mannheim has full instructions as to how to bring you to Whitechapel. I feel that I can fully trust you to carry out the rest."

He walked with the little Countess across the hall to the staircase. There he allowed her to mount three steps before he called to her to stop. Turning about, she found her face on a level with Von Prosen's.

She looked straight into his eyes.

"I will do this thing," she said, "because I think you cannot love Virginia—not even a little bit."

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"No," said Von Prosen, "I do not," and he added, with a little laugh, "not even a little bit."

"Then why," demanded Countess Freda, with a sparkle in her eyes, "did you ask her to marry you at Ostend?"

That Freda knew of this was news indeed to Von Prosen, but he had an answer ready.

"Because," he said, "I simply proposed to make use of her. She could then have extricated me from the difficulty out of which you are going to help me now."

The last spark of Freda's dying suspicions gleamed for a moment in her eyes. She put up her hands and held Von Prosen by the shoulders.

"You are sure," she said, "that you are not merely making use of me now?"

"Heaven be kind to me if I lie," said Von Prosen, and he bent forward and kissed her.

The little Countess ran up the stairs with a burning mouth and a burning heart, and if she did not sleep it was because the night was happy. But it was the night before the dawn of a misery which did not set till the close of her stormy little life.

XXVII

COUNTESS FREDA rose up in the morning more refreshed from a night of happy wakefulness than she had ever been from a night of sleep.

She sang as she dressed herself; she sang as she crossed the lawn, and she was still humming a light-hearted air when she came to the convent gate.

The extern sister who peeped at her through the grating was a trifle astonished at the early hour of the call. Freda stopped her humming and drew a solemn face.

When she found herself in the bare little waiting-room with its stiff wooden chairs and the big iron grille through which the Mother Superior and the Sisters held converse with the outside world, Freda found her conscience somewhat troublesome. She even found herself unable to face the crucifix which hung upon the wall, and so turned her back upon it. And her face was solemn and troubled enough when she heard the trailing of the Mother Superior's gown behind the grille.

But, like Von Prosen, Countess Freda had burnt her boats; and so, like Von Prosen, she hardened her heart and set about playing her part.

The Mother Superior put her hand through the grille, and Freda seized and kissed it.

"Oh, mother," she said, "I am in great distress."

She had some difficulty in saying more, for it was an unpleasant thing to hold that hand and lie.

"Mother," she went on, at length, "I have to confess. I am engaged to Baron Von Prosen."

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The Mother Superior smiled at her gently through the grille. She remembered the big man with the yellow beard who had often sat humped up on the little *prie Dieu* in the waiting-room when on former occasions Countess Freda had spoken to her through the grille.

"Last night," Freda continued, "he went down to Whitechapel. He went there by the orders of his Government. There was fighting and he was wounded. He was wounded very badly, and he sent word by a messenger this morning, praying me to go down to him. I cannot, of course, refuse—for one thing, my heart would not let me. The difficulty is to see how I can get to such a spot."

"What would you have us do?" asked the Mother Superior.

Freda faltered, and her hesitation was well feigned.

"You can help me if you will," she said. "I know I have no right to ask what I am going to, but I feel that the time and the case excuse me. I want you to lend me a sister's dress—I want to go down to Whitechapel as a sister of mercy."

The Mother Superior looked at her doubtfully through the ironwork.

"You see," urged Freda, "I should be a sister of mercy in a way, and—oh, I must go down there. Please do not refuse me. I want a dress, too, for my maid."

"Are you sure, Countess," asked the Mother Superior, "that the blessing of God can rest on this?"

Freda drew back a step. This was a question which she had not bargained for, but her dismay was only momentary, and the Mother Superior read in it only a natural indignation on the Countess's part.

"Should I come to you and ask you to do such a thing," said Freda, "if there were any harm in it?"

Her face was crimson; but again the Mother Superior only saw in her colour the natural shame of a girl.

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"Very well," she said, "we will do it, though I fear it is rather wrong—even for me it will mean confession."

Freda, still holding the Mother Superior's hand, kissed the slim white fingers with passion.

"Believe me," she said, "I will never forget this, never."

The Mother Superior gave her an answering and sympathetic squeeze of the hand, and then trailed away into the dimness beyond the grille.

Freda sat with a beating heart for the little extern Sister to bring her the garments she had asked for.

Sister Rose came in smiling in a half-frightened, shocked sort of way, and there in the bare little waiting-room, with the sun streaming in through the windows, Freda unrobed and dressed herself again in a Sister's garb. When Sister Rose had settled Freda's hood, she made the spare dress into a neat bundle.

Poor Freda was so distressed that she caught the Sister about the neck, and clung to her and cried a little on her shoulder.

But this outburst did not last very long, and she picked the bundle up and stepped briskly to the door.

"*Auf wiedersehen*," she said, and kissed the good Sister once more. She never saw her again.

By the landing-stage on the lawn Freda found Mannheim in the launch. He looked at her with curiosity, but asked no questions and made no comments: it was not his business, and it was not his way.

They ran down quickly along the sunlit river, and at about half-past ten came to the guard-house at Westminster. Once or twice a police-boat had pulled out from one of the banks, but the Saxon flag flying from the launch prevented any questionings.

When she got to the guard-house, Freda's nerve had come back to her; she had never felt her nerves quite so

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steady before, and without so much as a tremor she faced the officer, who stood with his busby in his hand.

"I want," she said, "to see Mr. Blair. It is about Lord Wilmers."

The officer started. He was one of the two who had bidden good-bye to Wilmers on the night before, and, though not wholly acquainted with his mission, he knew that it took Wilmers into danger.

"I hope," he said, with a shade of anxiety in his voice, "that all is well with Lord Wilmers?"

"It is not," said Freda; "it is very far from well. There has been fighting, and Lord Wilmers has been wounded. I carry a message from him to Mr. Blair and Miss Newcombe."

"If that is the case," said the officer, "you had best go up to Downing Street at once. I will see that you are conducted there in safety"; and he beckoned up a corporal of the guard. Freda thanked him with a little nod and smile, and walked briskly along beside the stolid soldier up the deserted space of Whitehall to Downing Street.

Here the door stood open, as it always did in those days, and the butler rose heavily from his seat in the hall.

"I want," said Freda, "to see Mr. Blair."

Though always suspicious of visitors, the butler looked with deference at Freda in her Sister's dress.

"I am sorry, madam," he said, "but Mr. Blair is not at home—he has gone down to the Palace."

Freda gave a silent sigh of relief.

"And Miss Newcombe," she asked, "is Miss Newcombe not here? I come on urgent business. It is about Lord Wilmers."

"If you will step inside," said the butler, "I will go and see."

The man was not gone very long, but the time seemed

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an eternity to Freda. When he came back she followed him thoughtfully upstairs. She had thought of many ways in which she would speak to Virginia, but she had cast them all aside, preferring to trust to the inspiration of the moment.

Virginia, who had been standing by the window, turned to meet her as she entered the little sitting-room at the back of the house.

She looked at the Sister's face with a curiosity that did not hide the fear in her eyes. A strange sense of recognition held her as she looked at Freda's round rosy face half-hidden in the white hood. But, though she felt that she had seen that face before, she could not altogether place it.

It was then that Freda, casting aside the last of her nervousness, ran over to Virginia and reached up her small round face to hers. She caught Virginia by the arms.

"Don't you know me?" she cried. "Don't you know me, Virginia? It is I, Freda."

Virginia's face went a little paler than before.

"Yes," she said, "I know you now; but what do you want that you come to me like—like this?"

"Virginia," cried Freda, "I will tell you more about it when we are away from here, but we must be quick now. I have come about Lord Wilmers."

Virginia caught in her breath and steadied herself with her hand against the plump little Countess; but the only question she asked was with her eyes.

"Do not be too much troubled," said Freda, "but Lord Wilmers has been hurt. There was fighting, and he was shot. It was in Whitechapel. They would have killed him, only by the mercy of heaven Von Prosen was there, and Von Prosen stopped them."

"Yes?" whispered Virginia, and there was a dreadful anxiety in her voice.

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"Von Prosen stopped them and got Lord Wilmers away. He is safe now and being nursed. Von Prosen was hurt, too, badly—almost as badly as Wilmers. He sent for me early this morning, and I borrowed this dress from the Sisters near me, and went down to him."

"Yes?" whispered Virginia again.

"Von Prosen and Wilmers were side by side. Lord Wilmers is very badly hurt. He asked for you. Von Prosen had said that I could go to Whitechapel without danger, and he suggested that I should come for you. So I came back to ask you if you will come."

"There is no need to ask," said Virginia. "I will come."

"Then," said Freda, "you had better dress yourself as I am dressed. It is the only way for women such as we in Whitechapel."

"You have brought a dress for me?" asked Virginia.

"Yes," answered Freda. "I have one here." And she nodded to where she had laid the bundle on the floor.

Without a word Virginia picked it up and went out of the room.

"Be quick," Freda called after her, "be quick. For heaven's sake be quick."

Virginia did not turn back, but nodded. She was thinking of Wilmers, but the anxiety in Freda's voice was not due to any thought of Von Prosen. She was thinking of Mr. Blair and the possibilities of his return.

It seemed a long while to Freda before Virginia appeared. She looked very tall and stately and calm in her Sister's dress, and even at that moment the fat little Countess spared a second in which to feel jealous. They went down the stairs together.

On the ground floor Virginia turned into Mr. Blair's room. "One moment," she said. "I must leave word as to where I am going."

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This greatly disturbed Freda. She knew Mr. Blair sufficiently well to appreciate what steps that decided man was likely to take when he heard of Virginia's departure. But she could say nothing. It would merely have aroused suspicions for her to have demurred.

The two girls passed out of the door, and Freda looked with terror down the street lest she should see the Prime Minister approaching. Except, however, for the sentries, the street was quite deserted, and under the guidance of the guardsmen they walked quickly down to the river.

As the launch started down stream Freda looked again into Virginia's face.

It was a very calm face, and the trouble of the time had merely given it an expression of benign beauty. Looking at it, Freda felt that her heart was bursting. It was impossible that she could betray this girl. She would tell her the wickedness of the whole thing.

With a sharp cry she leant over to Virginia and caught hold of her hand.

XXVIII

WHEN, however, Freda's burning hands caught at Virginia's cool ones she remembered Von Prosen, and she drew back with a set though frightened face.

"You are overwrought," said Virginia, and she tried to draw the plump little Countess to her. Freda shook herself free almost roughly.

"Leave me alone," she said hoarsely; "leave me alone. I am overwrought. Of course I am overwrought." She gathered up the loose ends of her voluminous sleeves and buried her face in their folds.

When the launch had wriggled its way into Shadwell Basin and had been brought alongside the quay a couple of Von Prosen's men spoke to Countess Freda, and the two girls, having scrambled ashore, set out to find Von Prosen.

"Is it far?" asked Virginia.

Freda, not knowing what to answer, said: "It is some way."

It was farther than either of them imagined, and the tramp was an unpleasant one. The Jews in the Commercial Road stared at them, and now and again some woman would shout insults at them in a tongue that mercifully they could not understand.

At the corner of Essex Street a band of youths jeered at them, and one of them plucked at Countess Freda's gown.

Freda turned on him with a face aflame with passion, and one of the guides said something to the boy in a low

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voice. What he said Virginia could not hear, but the lad slunk away.

It was with some dismay that Virginia looked at the filthy exterior of the dingy eating-house, in which, unknown to her, Wilmers lay a prisoner and a prey to a dread that was wearing his strength away.

With feminine instinct, Freda realized that the goal was reached, and as though she had visited the place before, she passed swiftly up the dirty steps and pushed open the door with its tinkling bell.

All her faculties of observation keenly alive, Virginia, as she crossed the threshold, noted every detail of the sordid place—the groups of dirty men sitting at the dirty tables; the large, ponderous, black-bearded, evil-eyed proprietor; the counter bearing its weight of loathsome food; and last, the slatternly girl with the Madonna face.

It was the girl who came to meet them. Von Prosen had felt that it was not men's work to take these girls below stairs, and so the young Jewess with the slumbrous eyes was the one he had chosen for that unenviable duty.

The girl came over to them, and in her gentle drawl said: "Their Excellencies are lying below."

But now some unaccountable fear seized Freda.

"But I—I," she said, "I am not to go below?"

"Yes," said the Jewess, "you are to go below. The Herr Von Prosen is awaiting you. If you ladies will accompany me I will take you to him and to the Herr Wilmers."

The Countess took hold of the bosom of her Sister's dress and walked unsteadily after the Jewess with the Madonna face. In silence the three girls picked their way carefully down the creaking stairs.

At the bottom of the flight the Russian girl opened the door through which Wilmers had passed on the night

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before, and with a little curtsy that was half mocking and half servile waved them with her slender, dirty hand into the gloom.

When they had passed in she said, "I will only be a moment," and went out and closed the door softly after her.

Virginia, turning about, saw, as Wilmers had seen, that the door was of steel, and had no handle in it. For a moment the suspicion that Freda had deceived her crossed her mind, but the keenness of this was dulled by the sight of the terror in the little Countess's round face.

"Where are we?" asked Virginia.

Now Freda had not reckoned that she would be left in this manner with Virginia, and she could only press her hands to her breast and say, "I do not know, believe me, but I do not know."

"But," urged Virginia, "you surely must know. You said you did know."

Freda went over to the bare wooden table burnt with chemicals and leaned heavily against it. "I do not know," she said. "I really do not know."

At this moment the steel door opened, and Von Prosen entered. There was a strange flush on his face, and his eyes were bright. As she looked at his face, Virginia seemed to feel an icy hand encircling her heart.

Looking up, Freda saw Von Prosen, and ran over to him and cast her plump little self against his great body. But Von Prosen put her from him almost gently, holding her arms in his great hands. Then he stooped and spoke into her ear, and Freda, with a little sob, ran with a staggering gait out through the open door.

Von Prosen closed it quietly after her and turned to Virginia.

Virginia was afraid, horribly afraid. But with an effort she contrived to show no fear.

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"May I ask," said she in a cold voice, "what is the meaning of this?"

Unconsciously she echoed the words that Wilmers had made use of the previous night.

"If," answered Von Prosen in suave tones, "you will have the kindness to be seated, I will do my best to explain."

He dragged a deal chair into the centre of the room.

Virginia said, "I prefer to stand," and stood up clutching the back of the chair.

Von Prosen looked into Virginia's face and then walked once or twice with long, stealthy strides across the cellar.

"I understood," began Virginia, "that you had been wounded. That was not what brought me here. I understood that Lord Wilmers had been wounded too."

Von Prosen came into the centre of the room and stood opposite to Virginia. His eyes were blazing, and he drew his breath quickly.

"Ah," said he, "behold me! Behold Von Prosen on his knees!"

And so saying he knelt upon the concrete floor.

"Listen," he cried; "oh, Virginia, listen. Listen to the man who loves you more fiercely than any man can love you."

Virginia had drawn back, and was staring at him with a white face.

"No harm," Von Prosen went on, "has come to Wilmers, and if you will listen to me, and if you will listen to reason, no harm shall come to him. But Wilmers is in my hands. I will, however, release him, I will let him go unhurt, if—if you will only marry me."

In a voice that was so faint that it could hardly be heard Virginia said, "You are mad!"

This brought Von Prosen to his feet, and he went over to her stooping, and peered into her frightened face.

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"Yes," he said, "I am mad—quite mad. I was so mad that before that night in the Savoy I proposed to marry you. I mean to marry you. And what I mean I always do. I was so sure that I could win you that I had even, out of a whim, taken out a special licence."

He paced up and down the room again, and then once more stood still, peering into Virginia's face.

"Yes," he went on—and by this time he was almost shouting—"I thought that I should win you, and having won you, I meant to marry you quickly—I feared that you might repent—and so I had armed myself with the papers that I needed.

"The earthquake set all my plans by the ears. Naturally, things fell out quite otherwise to what I had expected. But all this does not change my determination. I mean to marry you still.

"I am down here in Whitechapel by the orders of my Government. It is not my fault that I am doing their dirty work. Yet it will help me. When all this business is over I shall be a rich man—richer than most men in this world."

"Yes," said Virginia, looking at him, "you will be a rich man because you have persuaded my trustees to use my money!"

Von Prosen started.

"Yes," Virginia went on slowly, "I know the whole story. I know about the grain corner, and I know the full depths of your wickedness.

"That you played this game with me I am not surprised, but it was beyond any meanness that I could think that you could use Freda, the girl who really loves you, to bring this about. That is the meanest of it all. As for marrying you, I will never marry you. I will not so defile myself, and there is no power on earth which could make me do it."

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Von Prosen now was crazy with anger. He stood first on one foot and then on the other, and laughed harshly.

"Ah," he chattered, "but there is a power—the power of love. You shall marry me through the power of love."

"Love?" cried Virginia. "Love? Why, I despise you. You are the meanest cur who ever lived."

"But," shouted Von Prosen, "it will be through love. I tell you, it will be through love. You dare not tell me you do not love Wilmers."

In the excitement her blood had crimsoned Virginia's face. At the mention of Wilmers' name the blood flowed back again.

Von Prosen saw her change of colour, and danced in savage ecstasy.

"Beyond that door," and he pointed to the end of the room, "is Lord Wilmers."

With frightened eyes Virginia followed the direction of his finger.

"In two minutes I will have Lord Wilmers brought here. You observe that hook in the ceiling?

"To that hook in the ceiling Lord Wilmers shall be triced, and he shall be flogged till the blood runs from him. And if you continue to refuse me I will flog him till he dies."

"You lie," said Virginia. "You cannot do it. This is Christian England."

"This is not Christian England," he laughed, "but Aliens Land in London—and I, I control it."

"You are not a man," cried Virginia, "but a fiend, a fiend from hell."

"Ah, yes, I am from hell, and I am a fiend. And I will bring hell here—hell for you, hell for Wilmers, and perhaps hell for myself."

He rushed over to the steel door and shouted up the stairs.

XXIX

AT the sound of Von Prosen's voice half a dozen men came tumbling downstairs. At the head of them was young Reidewitz.

Von Prosen was like a man possessed, but he steadied himself and gave his orders calmly.

"Put that lady's chair in the corner," he said.

So they took Virginia's chair and put it in the corner.

"Now close the door."

They closed it.

"Bring in Lord Wilmers."

Reidewitz, who had been looking at Von Prosen and listening to him with an open mouth, made as though to speak. But he apparently thought better of it, for he said nothing.

Virginia sat crouched in her chair in the corner with her hands so tightly clasped that her nails were pallid. She sat staring with a tense white face at the door through which Lord Wilmers was to come.

Four of the men went into the inner room and presently came out holding Wilmers by the arms.

Virginia saw that the hair about his temples was white, and that he was so weak that his feet made a trailing noise along the floor as he walked. Von Prosen stood in the centre of the cellar, with his hands so fiercely clenched that the knuckles looked as though they would burst through the skin.

"Stand him in the corner," he said.

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Then he opened his hands and held out one to Virginia and one to Wilmers.

"Be silent while I speak," he shouted, and his voice rang like a trumpet.

Wilmers, lifting his face, saw Virginia crouching in the corner, and uttered a dreadful cry.

"Gag him!" said Von Prosen, and they thrust a dirty cloth into his mouth.

He went over to Wilmers and shook his fist in his face.

"You cannot speak," he bellowed, "but you can see and you can hear. And you shall see and hear that which you will wish that you had never been born to witness."

Virginia half rose from her chair with a stifled cry. Von Prosen dashed across the cellar and forced her back into her seat, and then he stood beside her, gripping her by the shoulder and pointing to Wilmers.

Wilmers' face was growing grey like the face of a dying man.

"The circumstances," said Von Prosen, "I need not explain. The circumstances are not of my seeking."

He paused and made a sucking noise with his mouth. His throat was so dry that he could hardly speak.

"The one fact that remains," he said at last, "is that I am going to marry Miss Newcombe. You hear me, Lord Wilmers, you hear me?"

Wilmers spluttered behind his gag.

"But Miss Newcombe has declined. She has declined me twice. I ask her a third time; and this time she will not refuse me."

He moved a little way off from Virginia and turned to her. His voice had ceased from bellowing, and was low and penetrating and eager.

"Will you marry me," he asked.

Virginia shook her head.

"I have told you the consequences," he cried. "I will

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ask you once more. This is the last time. Will you marry me?"

"No," said Virginia in a strangled voice, "I will not."

"Then," said Von Prosen, "you force me to do what I shall have to do."

Turning to the men who held Wilmers, he shouted, "Trice him up."

Again Virginia started from her chair and again Von Prosen thrust her back.

The men seized Wilmers and brought his hands together and bound them with thongs. They put slip knots of fine cord about his thumbs and passed them through the ring in the roof. He stood up and steadied himself like a soldier on parade.

And while Von Prosen held Virginia in her chair the men pulled on the thongs in the ring in the roof until Wilmers' hands were extended above his head. They pulled the thongs till he was lifted from his heels and stood upon his toes.

His mouth was so gagged that no sound could come from it, but there was an awful agony on his face.

Young Reidewitz, waking as from a trance, dashed across the floor.

"Let him go," he cried.

A couple of men who had been standing idle in a corner seized him by his arms, but he tore himself from their grasp and went over to Von Prosen.

"Herr Von Prosen," said the boy, "you are mad. This is not the work which our Government sent us to do. This is not your work, and this is not my work. This is the work of devils. You are my chief, but I forbid you to go on. What you do is impossible."

Von Prosen turned on him like a flash.

"Anything is possible here and now. Anything is possible to me."

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Reidewitz turned from him to the men who held Wilmers.

"Let him go," he ordered.

"You dog," cried Von Prosen. "You impudent dog," and he leaped on him and took him by the neck, and with his great strength flung him into a corner as a man might fling a cat. The boy's head went crashing against the wall, and he lay quite still. Two of the men rushed over to him and raised him up, but young Reidewitz's head only dangled limply on his shoulders.

"Good God, sir," said one of them, "you've killed him! You've broken his neck."

Von Prosen was beside himself.

"I am here to kill scum," he yelled.

He went over to the lad's body and thrust it against the wall with his foot.

"Who," he cried, turning about, "dares to disobey me? Who?"

As his eyes swept the men his gaze bleached the colour from their faces. They stood silent and submissive. Virginia sat frozen with horror.

"Trice him up," shouted Von Prosen again, and the men sullenly hauled on the ropes, and once more Wilmers was hoisted on to his toes.

"You still refuse?" shouted Von Prosen at Virginia. "You still refuse?"

No answer came from Virginia's blanched lips.

"Good. Then I will show you what I can do. Take his shirt off."

The men looked doubtfully at Wilmers' extended hands. In the position in which he was it was impossible for them to obey the order.

Von Prosen saw this, too, and stepped over to Wilmers. He caught Wilmers' shirt by the neck and tore the garment from him in strips.

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Virginia stood up with a parted mouth.

Von Prosen went over to the deal table, and after searching beneath it picked up a jambok. With the jambok in his hand he went and stood over by Wilmers and raised his arm.

"Once more," he said to Virginia, "I ask you."

"You cannot do it," whispered Virginia. "It is impossible that you can do it."

Throwing back his head, Von Prosen laughed. Then he brought down his raised arm.

Wilmers' body writhed under the blow, and in the silence that followed the men who held the trices could hear the joints of Wilmers' thumbs crack as the weight of the wriggling man's body came upon them.

Virginia heard it, too, and fell forward on her knees. Her hands were on the concrete floor, and she knelt with an uplifted face like the face of a pleading dog.

Looking at it, Von Prosen laughed in a savage way and lifted the whip again.

"Once more," he said to Virginia.

Wilmers, with an ashen face, was swaying to and fro upon his toes. He could not speak, but he shook his head violently at Virginia, and the twisting of his body brought his weight again upon his thumbs, and he winced.

Virginia still held silence. It seemed impossible that Von Prosen could continue.

But she did not know Von Prosen. Again he brought the cutting leather across Wilmers' back.

Again Wilmers' body writhed, and then it was quite still. His knees were bending forwards; all his weight was upon his thumbs. The life for the time had gone out of him.

Virginia was still upon her knees looking up at him with the terrified gaze of a beaten dog.

"He has fainted," cried Von Prosen, "he has fainted."

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Now, if you still refuse I will kill him. Ah, you may kneel, but I will flog him till he dies!" And he lifted the whip again.

Virginia pitched forward on her face.

"I will," she said very faintly, and lay still.

Von Prosen went across to her and lifted her up as though she had been a child, and laid her on the deal table that was burned and stained with chemicals.

Using all his strength, he hoisted one of the little square tin cases beneath it on to the table and pushed it under Virginia's head.

Then he turned to the men who had triced up Wilmers. When he had fainted they had let him fall in a huddled heap on the floor.

"Put him in a corner," said Von Prosen.

They dragged Wilmers across the stone floor and propped him in an angle of the walls.

"Water," commanded Von Prosen, and they fetched water.

Virginia had not wholly fainted. Hers had been more the numbness of great terror.

Seeing that she had still some sense in her, Von Prosen lifted her down from the table and carried her over to the chair. There he held her upright in the seat.

"Fetch down the pastor," he said.

Two of the men went up the stairs, and soon there came the clatter of feet on the rickety steps. They half led, half supported, an old man into the room. Von Prosen went over to him.

"You're drunk!" he shouted.

"Herr Baron," mumbled the old man. "Herr Baron."

Von Prosen thrust his big fingers in the old man's beard and twisted it till he screamed.

"Ah!" said Von Prosen, "I thought that would make you sober."

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"I am sober enough for my work," answered the old man, in German, "I have been paid."

Von Prosen went over to Virginia, hooked his arm about her, and lifted her into a standing position, then dragged her over to the old man. To him he said—

"Get on!"

The drunken old pastor groped in a feeble way in the breast-pocket of his coat for a book. When he drew it out it was soiled and tattered.

Leaning over her, Von Prosen whispered into Virginia's ear—

"This is our wedding. It is not the wedding that I could have wished, but you forced me to it."

In a dim, vague way Virginia wondered if it were legal. Possibly Von Prosen read such doubts in her face, for he drew out of his pocket a long foolscap-shaped piece of paper on which was a mass of writing in printed copper-plate.

"Ah, my little one," he said, "do not think that I am making any mistakes. This is as legal as your Doctors' Commons can make it."

On a sudden Virginia had a fresh mind to refuse to go farther in the business, but when her eyes alighted on the huddled body of Wilmers, propped in an angle of the walls, she weakened.

So she went through the ordeal somehow. The drunken old pastor swayed to and fro on his feet.

Von Prosen said "I will" in a fierce whisper, but Virginia said "I will" in so low a voice that Von Prosen made her say it again.

When it was all over Von Prosen bade them carry the old pastor out. Then he turned to Virginia and again seated her in her chair. He stood towering above her.

"Man and wife," he said, "man and wife. Man and

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wife! One flesh, you understand? One flesh. We can never be parted again."

He knew well enough that the courts might have said otherwise as matters stood then, but he had a design whereby even if the courts had felt so disposed Virginia would not.

As he stood thus with gloating eyes above her there was the noise of a man coming rapidly down the stairs.

Mannheim came in with a scared face.

Seeing news in the man's eyes, Von Prosen merely said—

"Yes?"

"I am afraid," said Mannheim, "that they are coming to look for Miss Newcombe. Mr. Blair's got wind of it somehow, and they are pulling down the barricades by the Bank. They say that cavalry is on the way."

XXX

THE approach of peril to some extent brought Von Prosen to his senses.

"The great thing at least is done," said he, and looked at Virginia.

He turned about and ordered the men to carry Lord Wilmers away; picking him up, they bore him into the little room at the end of the cellar.

When he had seen to the secure fastening of the door, Von Prosen went across to Virginia and bent over her with what was almost gentleness. He called her by name, but Virginia sat like a dead thing in the chair.

Von Prosen stroked her head, but even that did not rouse her; she was paralysed with fear.

"I am sorry, believe me that I am very sorry," Von Prosen whispered into her ear, "more sorry than I can say.

"Now," he went on, "I am in danger, and you are in danger, and we must take measures against it. For a little while you must rest. You had better come with me."

Virginia still sat huddled in the chair, heedless as the dead.

Von Prosen could see the men growing uneasy as the moments went by, and so, without another word, he picked Virginia up and carried her over to the second room at the end of the cellar. He opened the door with a key, and then passing in laid her there upon a truckle bed.

For a few moments he hovered about her, seeming to have some design of speaking to her or of offering her

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some comfort. Virginia, however, lay quite still, making no sign, and staring at the dirty ceiling above her with dull eyes.

Von Prosen, therefore, merely humped the pillow beneath her head for her greater comfort's sake, and went out without speaking.

In the cellar he handed the keys to Mannheim, who stood uneasily, shuffling with his feet.

"You will stay here," said Von Prosen.

"And Miss Newcombe?" asked the man. "What shall I do with Miss Newcombe?"

Von Prosen's eyes blazed as he answered.

"There is no Miss Newcombe. The lady is now the Baroness Von Prosen. You will remain here till I return, and see that no harm befalls her. Above all, you will see to it that she is not removed from here. You understand?"

He took the man's chin between his finger and thumb as he might have done a child's, and tilting up his face, looked into his eyes. Mannheim, whose nerve was broken, shrank away.

With a short little laugh, Von Prosen made for the door and went up the stairs.

When he had passed from the inner room into the café, silence fell upon the place, and all eyes were turned upon him.

Several of the dirty men still sat round the dirty tables. The large, ponderous proprietor lurked in his corner with the air of a man who no longer takes any interest in life. His daughter with the Madonna face was leaning upon her elbows across the bar, looking with a curious and troubled face at Freda.

For the fat little Countess was still there. She sat in her nun's dress at one of the tables with her hands folded before her, and a burning face.

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When she saw Von Prosen she rose up and stretched out her hands to him.

At the sight of her Von Prosen fell again into his madness. He went over to her side, looking down at her, making a noise in his throat as though he were about to spit on her.

He clenched his hands and dug his knuckles into the table as he leaned in her direction. He spoke in a low, hot, quick whisper.

"You little fool," he said, "I have found you out. It was you who betrayed me to Virginia."

Freda's face went from red to white, and Von Prosen laughed at its whiteness.

"You!" he cried, "you fat little fool. You think that I would marry you? Bah!"

Freda looked at him with an incredulous wonder.

"You," he said again, "I would not wipe my boots on you. I will fill your fat little head with trouble and your fat little heart with woe. I have married Virginia."

The look on Freda's face was one of utter amaze.

"Yes," he went on. "I tied him up and I flogged him till Virginia consented. A man such as I is not for such as you. You fool, you little fool!"

He said no more, but drew himself up straight. He did not even deign her another glance, but walked with a quick, heavy step out of the café. Such was the violence with which he slammed the door to after him that the glasses on the tables rattled and the little bell tinkled as though it would never cease.

As he passed out the little countess stood staring after him in a stricken way.

But with the closing of the door Countess Freda's face changed. The door had shut Von Prosen out of her life, and with the passing of Von Prosen there passed also from her heart all desire of evil.

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The girl with the Madonna face, watching from between her dirty hands, saw little Freda's face transfigured. It grew slowly to be the face of a little saint.

The men about the room were staring at her in speechless astonishment, but, utterly unmindful of their presence, Countess Freda rose and covered her face with her hands, saying as she did so in a loud, clear voice, "Father, forgive me for what I have done."

The girl came round from behind the bar and stood before her. Her face seemed also cleansed.

"When men fall out," she said, "we women suffer."

"God alone knows," said Freda, "how we suffer."

She held out her hands, and the Russian girl took them, and they stood there for a few moments looking into each other's eyes, while the men stared at them stupidly.

Freda gave herself a little shake, and whispered to the other girl, "Let us be quick. There is a great wrong to repair and much to do. Take me at once to Lord Wilmers."

The girl took her by the arm and led her towards the inner room. The large, heavy-browed proprietor stood up to bar their passage. A gleam came into his daughter's eyes, and she struck him in the chest, so that he fell back a step; and the two girls went down the stairs together.

In the cellar they found Mannheim sitting idly playing with the keys. He was sitting in the chair in which Virginia had sat throughout her hour of trial.

Saying no word, the Jewess took the keys from his hands and went over to the two doors at the farther end. She knocked at that behind which lay Wilmers. There was no answer. The girls could hear their breathing in the silence.

The Jewess knocked at the other door, and there came no answer either. And so she placed the key in the lock, and Countess Freda and she passed in. Virginia was

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sitting on the edge of the bed ; her face was as pale as the face of the dead, and as cold.

Freda fell upon her knees and stretched out her arms to her. In a cold, stiff way Virginia brushed Freda's hands aside.

"Oh, Virginia," cried the little Countess, "forgive me, forgive me, forgive me. I did not know, I could not know, what was going to happen. I did it from love of Von Prosen. If you know what love is, listen to me."

Virginia swept her eyes slowly across Freda's face. Her own was as the face of a sphinx ; but when she saw the anguish of Freda's twisted mouth and piteous eyes her look in some degree softened.

"All the vows that a man could make to me," Freda went on, "Von Prosen made to me, and he has broken them all. He told me that he wanted you here that you might recover certain papers which, he said, Lord Wilmers had stolen from him—they were papers which concerned his honour and his life, and he swore that his life was mine."

Virginia held out her hands to Freda, and Freda took them, and, falling on her knees, hid her face against Virginia's breast.

"Last night," she sobbed, "he asked me to marry him—he promised to marry me—he swore he loved me—and he kissed me ! Oh, Virginia, Virginia !"

Virginia could feel the plump little body shaking with great heaving sobs.

"And now," said Virginia, in a low, cold tone, "Von Prosen has married me. It was not my fault, Freda, it was not my fault. You know how it was done."

Virginia could feel the nodding of Freda's shaking head against her bosom.

The Jewess with the Madonna face stood and watched them with wide eyes.

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Suddenly Freda leaped to her feet and looked at Virginia with a sharp glance.

"Do you wish to remain with Von Prosen?" she asked.

"No," said Virginia, in a dull voice; "I will never remain with him."

"Then I can get you away," cried the little Countess, "now."

"If I go," said Virginia, "I must take Lord Wilmers with me. Not, you understand," she went on, "for my own sake; unfortunately, I cannot now say that. But he must be taken away from here for the sake of his country."

Freda rubbed the knuckles into her eyes to wipe away her tears, and when she removed her hands Virginia could see that her face was as the face of a strong man in battle.

"I have the keys," said the little Countess, "and if we are quick we can do it. There is Mannheim, and Mannheim must help us."

In Virginia's eyes there was doubt.

"Oh," said Freda, "do not fear. I will manage Mannheim—or I will kill him."

And she shut her teeth together with a snap.

Without any more talking the three girls passed out of the little room, and Freda opened the door leading to the one in which Wilmers lay. They found him lying on his back, his face distorted with pain, his hands still lashed together, and the gag in his mouth.

It was Freda who went to the door and called to Mannheim. The man came slowly shuffling across.

"Cut him loose," said Freda. And Mannheim took a knife from his pocket and cut the thongs that bound Wilmers.

While Mannheim shuffled across the floor Virginia had stooped and taken the gag out of Wilmers' bleeding mouth.

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Wilmers sat up, pulling a face of agony as he did so.

The three girls helped him to his feet, and he stood for a moment swaying to and fro.

"Can you walk?" asked Freda.

"Yes, I can walk," said Wilmers. "I am sorry to seem so weak, but really I cannot help it. Has Von Prosen gone?"

Then it was that Freda took charge of things.

"Von Prosen," she said, "has gone, but only for a little while. Mr. Blair has found out that you and Virginia are here, and he has sent cavalry down to look for you. It is a sortie, and Von Prosen has gone to repel it.

"I don't suppose he will be able to do that; but if your soldiers get through here Von Prosen will come back, and he will get here first, and then—God help us.

"There is only one way: we must get out now. Mannheim here and Virginia will help you to the launch. There is a launch in Shadwell Basin—only we must be quick."

"Wait for a minute," said the Jewess, "and I will get a drink for his Excellency from above"; and she ran out of the cellar.

"Can you bear your coat?" asked Freda.

"I can bear anything," answered Wilmers, "so long as I can get away."

Mannheim picked up Wilmers' coat and helped him into it. He winced as the lining touched his back.

"I am little," said Freda, "and I am not very strong. You," she said, turning to Virginia, "and Mannheim had best help Lord Wilmers up. I will show you the way."

"Don't trouble about me," said Wilmers, and took a few steps forward; but he tottered in his gait, and Virginia and Mannheim caught him, and holding him up on either side they reached the foot of the stairs.

There the Jewess met them with a glass containing

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brandy. Wilmers drank it down, and the colour crept back to his face.

The four of them helped him up the stairs.

The café was then empty, and the proprietor merely stared at the little party in an unfriendly way.

The young Jewess held the door open while Mannheim and Virginia helped Wilmers down the steps.

When they had gained the street the girl with the Madonna face called to them—

“My God and your God bless you!”

Then she went in and closed the tinkling door after her.

In Essex Street people stared at the little party—at the women in nuns' dresses and the wounded man they helped along. But they said nothing. They had other things to think of, for they knew that there was fighting not half a mile away.

When they reached the corner of the Commercial Road Wilmers and the girls heard a great uproar coming from its western end.

Not far away they could see a great mass of men half running and half struggling. Above the tight-packed press of men they could see the red jackets of mounted soldiers and the flickering blades of swords rising and falling. As the swords fell there were screams.

Then the press suddenly loosened, and shouting, swearing men came running pell-mell down the street. Behind them the swords flickered and rose and fell. And still as they fell there were screams.

Virginia and Mannheim thrust Wilmers, who was now almost beyond speech, into a doorway.

Mannheim flattened himself against the wall, and let the flood of flying men sweep by. Virginia and Freda, with white faces, thrust themselves before Wilmers to shelter him from any impact.

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The troops came down the street riding in the road and on the pavements, stretching all across the roadway from house wall to house wall.

It was just in time that a trooper saw the girls against the wall, and spurred his horse into a swerve that left them uninjured. Behind this line of troops, driven in the centre of the road, was a light dog-cart, and in the dog-cart was a young man with a monocle in his eye and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

It was Jimmy Mendip.

Virginia saw him, and ran out into the middle of the road. Relief chased astonishment across Mendip's face. He pulled the horse up short, and shouted to a couple of troopers who were riding hard behind him.

No words were spoken at this strange meeting. In silence Virginia pointed to where Wilmers sat propped up against the doorway. It was in silence that Mendip beckoned to one of the troopers to dismount, and then, assisted by the soldier, lifted Wilmers into the cart.

Without a word Virginia and Freda climbed into the cart after him. It was a tight squeeze, for Virginia and Freda both sat beside Mendip, while Wilmers was hunched on the floor of the cart between them.

As the rioters had broken their order so had the troops, and little skirmishes were now taking place at different points along the road.

Mendip turned the dog-cart, and, heading for the City, called to an officer, who fetched up half a dozen troopers as an escort.

Passing the corner of Houndsditch, Mendip saw a big man with a yellow beard lean out of a window on his right. It was Von Prosen, with his face all awry with passion.

The dog-cart dashed past the house, and then there came a shot.

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Virginia felt a hot wet splash on her cheek, and saw Freda pitch forward. With a little cry, she caught Freda and held her to her.

Freda was heavy in her arms.

“Are you hurt?” she asked. But the plump little Countess made no answer.

She was dead.

XXXI

VIRGINIA'S cry caused Mendip to turn quickly. A glance showed him that the base of Countess Freda's skull was shattered.

He drew the horse up so sharply that the troopers riding behind him had barely time to escape crashing into the dog-cart.

Turning about and standing up in the trap, Mendip saw Von Prosen still at the window grinning in his yellow beard, but his hands were clasped on the window-sill, and there was no sign of any gun. As Mendip looked at him Von Prosen drew back from the casement.

A few sharp words sent half a dozen troopers scurrying back to the door from above which Von Prosen had grinned, and then Mendip turned to the bundle of tragedy by his side.

Wilmer was lying in a heap on the floor of the cart, but Virginia sat bolt upright, holding the dead girl in her arms.

Looking at her face, Mendip read such courage that he asked—

“Can you hold her till we reach the Mansion House?”

“Yes,” said Virginia; “I can hold her.”

Mendip laid the lash across the horse's back, and the cart shot forward with such a jerk that Virginia nearly fell out with the dead girl.

The noise of the battle was drifting away behind them, and, the rest of the troopers closing round the dog-cart, they clattered down an empty street.

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Cornhill was silent and deserted, but at the farther end of it they could see movement about the barricade, which had been partially destroyed. A company of Coldstream Guards was standing easy about it.

The officer on duty saluted Mendip as he passed, and looked with sympathy and horror at the dead and the living in the cart, for Wilmers still lay in a heap on the floor, and Virginia, with an ashen face, still sat upright holding the dead Freda.

The space beyond the Royal Exchange was quiet, though strongly picketed with troops.

The large side-whiskered Lord Mayor was leaning over the balcony of the Mansion House with the excitement and eagerness of a Sister Anne.

When he saw the dog-cart approaching he ran down the steps, his long-limbed athletic son pounding after him.

Mendip shouted to him from the trap, "I am going round to the door."

And the stout Lord Mayor, breathing heavily, followed the dog-cart as it spun round the kerb.

Turning to the Lord Mayor's son, Mendip said—

"Lend me a hand with this." And together they lifted down the dead girl and carried her into the house.

With a scared face the Lord Mayor offered to help Virginia out, but she shook her head and asked him to aid her in bringing Wilmers into a sitting position.

He had now come back to his senses, and was staring vacantly about him like a man overcome with lethargy.

Having laid the body of Countess Freda on a couch, Mendip came out again and began to briskly polish his eyeglass.

"I am sorry," he said to the Lord Mayor, "to distress you in this way."

"It is a terrible tragedy," said the Lord Mayor.

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"Terrible, terrible; but, thank God, some of you got through."

"We were only just in time," said Mendip. "I fancy it was a matter of moments—and it is a matter of moments now. Therefore you must excuse me for hurrying on the arrangements."

The Lord Mayor nodded.

"I am afraid," Mendip continued, "that I must leave the body of Countess Freda with you."

"As soon as I have seen Mr. Blair I will arrange for its removal. In the meantime we ourselves must get to Downing Street as quickly as we can. We have a long drive before us, and I fear that Lord Wilmers is not very strong to bear it."

Even at this moment the inherent and traditional civic hospitality of the Lord Mayor asserted itself.

"You cannot go," he urged, "without some refreshment first. This lady," he added, turning to Virginia, "is looking badly shaken, and Lord Wilmers seems to be in a sad plight."

Mendip looked at Virginia and then at Wilmers, and nodded his head.

"I think you are right," he said, "but first let me send a trooper on to warn Mr. Blair of our arrival."

Calling up a trooper, he gave him such urgent instructions that the man dug his spurs into his horse and started at a hand gallop along the still broken roadway.

"Now," said Mendip, uncommonly brisk and business-like, "as you have offered us your hospitality, my Lord Mayor, we will make it champagne."

The Lord Mayor bustled into the house, and Wilmers and Mendip turned to Virginia.

"It may seem," he remarked to Virginia, "a little unfeeling to drink champagne just now; but it will do us all

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good—at least you need it, and it may be the saving of Wilmers.”

Virginia was beginning to have new ideas concerning Mendip.

The Lord Mayor came hurrying back, and opened the magnum himself. A servant stood by with glasses on a tray. With the face of one who dispenses gold, the Lord Mayor poured the champagne out. Wilmers had about sufficiently recovered to take the glass for himself, but for a moment the little party stood looking at each other before they drank.

“I think,” said Virginia quietly, “that we will drink to better times.”

So they drank this toast in silence in a flood of autumn sunshine. It was now about three o'clock. All about them lay the ruin of London, and the troopers sat patiently on their horses and watched them.

They did not say very much, for there was little to be said. Wilmers they placed on the floor of the cart, and Virginia propped his head against her knee. Mendip took up the reins and held out his hand to the Lord Mayor.

“I cannot thank you enough for this,” he said.

The Lord Mayor's son lifted his cap and cried, “Good-bye, good luck!”

And Mendip gathering up the reins, the trap started away. The Lord Mayor hurried back into the Mansion House, even at that moment possessed of visions of a barony.

The drive was a long one and a dreary one, and marked by little incident. Holborn Viaduct was still down, and so they were forced to make a detour by Smithfield.

Far up the Farringdon Road they could hear the sound of firing, and north, somewhere towards St. Pancras, pale flames were flickering against the daylight of the autumn sky.

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Kingsway was clear, and Mendip drove down it towards the Strand. As he passed along he saw that the work of reconstruction had already been begun. Hammers rang in all directions, and now and again there was a loud noise as some piece of debris fell to the earth. Hundreds of men were busy at the work of clearing away the wreckage in preparation for building up again.

By the time they had reached Downing Street, Wilmers could sit up and speak, but Mendip rather curtly ordered him not to talk. "You will need all your strength presently," he said.

The Prime Minister came out to the door to meet them, and on his face there was a greater anxiety than Wilmers had ever seen there before.

Mr. Blair, however, indulged in no enthusiasm, and, indeed, in no demonstration of any kind.

All he said to Jimmy Mendip was—

"So you have got them through?"

Jimmy answered, "Yes; we got through, but it was a pretty near thing."

Wilmers winced, and gave a little groan as he was helped out of the dog-cart.

"Good gracious," said the Prime Minister, "what have they been doing to you?"

"That," replied Mendip, "is Von Prosen's work."

For once Mr. Blair was startled out of his general calm.

"Good heavens!" he said.

Mendip hesitated and looked at Virginia. The words had called Virginia back like a blow to the reality of things, and her face was stony in its distress.

"First," said Mendip, ignoring Mr. Blair's exclamation, "let us get Wilmers in. If I am not much mistaken, he wants medical attention. After that I will tell you what has happened. There is no need," he added, and there

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was meaning in his voice, "to trouble Miss Newcombe as yet."

"All right," murmured Wilmers, "I can manage for myself."

He took hold of the railings and began to crawl up the steps. Virginia caught him just in time, and they carried him to the little sitting-room at the back of the house.

"Don't lay me on my back," said Wilmers; and so they laid him on his face. Taking a knife, Mendip cut away Wilmers' coat. The Prime Minister started, and his face hardened when he looked on Wilmers' lacerated back.

"I have got a tame doctor," he said, "chained up at the Treasury over the way, at the general utility depot which I have established there. I will send across for him."

"I," said Virginia, "will get what things I can from the house." When she had left the room Wilmers turned a strained face to Jimmy Mendip.

"Did she marry him?" he asked.

Mendip and Mr. Blair stared at him as though he were light-headed.

"Who?"

"Von Prosen."

"Von Prosen?" echoed Mendip. "What on earth do you mean?"

He went over to Wilmers, and, sitting down by his side, took hold of his hand.

"Better rest awhile, old chap," he said.

For a few moments Wilmers let his head fall on to his arms; then he lifted up his face again, and Mendip saw that it was very troubled.

"Ah," said Wilmers, "I forgot—of course, I forgot. I fainted. Yes, that was it—I fainted. And Virginia, she hasn't told you?"

"You must remember," answered Mendip, "that Virginia

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has had no time to tell us anything except that you were flogged. We found you in the Commercial Road, bundled you into the cart, and here you are. And that is about all I can tell you."

Mr. Blair had come over to Wilmers' side, and appeared to be listening intently.

"What's this about marriage?" he asked.

Wilmers looked up at him wearily.

"Why, it was in the cellar. You see I got to the restaurant that Jones had spoken of, and found that it was really the place that we were looking for. I asked whether I could obtain lodging, and they told me that it was to be had there. On the pretence of showing me a room, a girl took me downstairs. It proved to be a cellar with a steel door."

Here Wilmers paused.

"Yes, yes, go on," said Mr. Blair.

"They shut me in there, and then Von Prosen came down. I honestly think that the man is mad—as mad as he can be. He stamped up and down like a fury, and swore that he would fetch Virginia down to see me, with the excuse that I had been wounded.

"I spent an awful night in the cellar, or rather in a little room just beyond it. This morning they came and fetched me out, and I saw that Virginia was there.

"They triced me up and gagged me, Von Prosen swearing that if Virginia would not marry him he would flog me till I died. He did flog me a bit—in fact, I fainted. You see, I was weak; and what I am asking now is whether Virginia did marry Von Prosen or whether she did not."

The Prime Minister and Mendip were staring at each other in amazement. They had suspected much, but they had not suspected that.

At this moment Virginia came into the room.

XXXII

SEEING the bewilderment on the faces of the Prime Minister and Jimmy Mendip, and seeing, too, the anxiety in Wilmers' eyes, Virginia made a shrewd guess as to the trouble that was perplexing them. But following her footsteps came the doctor, and the time was not then one for explanations.

Therefore she merely said—

“I can see you want to ask me questions. You can ask them presently, and I will answer them, but for the moment let us attend to Lord Wilmers.”

Mr. Blair and Mendip stood aside, that Virginia and the doctor might see to Wilmers' hurts.

It was some time before Virginia and the doctor finished their work, and then the doctor, who was a portly man, straightened himself and took a deep breath.

“Lord Wilmers,” he said, “will have to rest. He has been badly cut.”

He had sufficient forbearance not to ask any questions.

“What you most need,” added the doctor to Wilmers, “is sleep, and as you seem to be fairly wide awake, I will send you something across. I would caution you against moving about too much, or you may suffer seriously from the consequences.”

With a formal little bow the doctor then withdrew, and Virginia found herself with the questioning eyes of the three men upon her.

“You are wondering,” she said, “about Von Prosen?”

Mr. Blair nodded. It was some moments before Vir-

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ginia spoke, but when she did so it was in a clear and collected way. The events of the morning seemed to have left her in a great calm.

Only Wilmers, with eyes sharpened by love, could see that the calm was forced.

"Very well, then," said Virginia, "I did marry Von Prosen. At least, so it appears. Lord Wilmers, I suppose, has told you?" she asked, peering at Mr. Blair.

Again the Prime Minister nodded.

"After Lord Wilmers had been flogged," Virginia went on, in the same cold, even voice, "I saw no other way out of the difficulty. I was quite sure that Von Prosen was mad, but that in no way helped me. I felt sure, too, that Lord Wilmers' life was at stake, and it was impossible for me to do anything else but comply with Von Prosen's wishes."

Wilmers buried his face in his hands and lay very still.

The hush in the room was so great that it jarred even on the Prime Minister's nerves, and he stirred uneasily in his chair.

"And how was this done?" he asked.

Virginia recounted the story of the drunken pastor and the special licence.

"It is so extraordinary," said Mr. Blair when she had finished, "that I can scarcely believe it true. When things are a little more straightened out we must see what can be done. I feel pretty confident that such a marriage cannot be accounted legal."

Virginia listened to him in calm silence. The marriage under discussion might have been some one else's rather than hers. Wilmers lay very still, with his face in his hands.

"Perhaps," suggested Mendip, rising, "I had better go."

"Not," said the Prime Minister, "unless Miss New-

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combe wishes you to do so. I have a good deal to say that it is necessary for you to hear. And furthermore, I wish to ask Miss Newcombe certain questions."

Virginia gave a little inclination of her head.

"To begin with," said Mr. Blair, "tell me how you went away from here."

Quite simply Virginia told him.

"I could not, of course, see precisely what the move meant," said Mr. Blair, "but I was sure that it boded no good. That was why I sent Mendip after you."

"We owe our lives to Mr. Mendip," said Virginia.

Mendip murmured, "Oh, really—now," and began to polish his eyeglass.

The Prime Minister tapped his toes impatiently on the floor.

"Now," he pursued, "I have something to say, and if Wilmers is strong enough he must listen."

Taking his hands from his face, Wilmers painfully turned upon his side. He did not look at Virginia, and Virginia did not look at him. They knew well enough what was in the heart of each of them, but they felt a bar between them—a bar of honour.

"Though it is not many hours since I discovered that Miss Newcombe had gone," Mr. Blair began, "many things have happened—things which, I fear, are exceedingly serious.

"You are still of a mind, I suppose?" he went on, looking at Virginia, "to help us if you can?"

"Anything that I can possibly do," said Virginia, "I will do."

"Then," Mr. Blair replied, "you will sail from Liverpool to-morrow morning. I imagined that would be your answer, and I have wired instructions that the boat is not to sail without you. The question is, Who shall I send with you?"

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Though he made a wry face, Wilmers succeeded in sitting up on the couch.

"If I lie on my face on the way up to Liverpool and nurse myself on the voyage," he said, "I should be fit again by the time we got to New York. If Miss Newcombe will allow me, I will at least make one of the party."

"I did not like to suggest it," said Mr. Blair, "but I think you are the man who ought to go.

"In addition," he continued, "I propose to send old Crow, of the Treasury—I think I spoke of him before. He is better fitted than any man in London to grapple with a serious financial problem, and this is really a problem."

The Prime Minister was cut short in his speech by Virginia, who had suddenly begun to laugh.

She went on laughing in a hysterical way for full half a minute. The tears springing from her amusement trickled down her face, and the Prime Minister, Mendip, and Wilmers fastened their eyes on her in astonishment.

As suddenly, however, as Virginia had begun to laugh she grew grave again.

"Please forgive me," she said; "you must see that I have been rather upset. But I have just remembered something—something of great use to us all."

"Yes?" said Mr. Blair; and his voice was soothing and yet expectant.

"To-day, at noon," said Virginia, with a queer little smile of triumph, "I was twenty-one, and I quite forgot it until this minute."

The Prime Minister leapt to his feet.

"Then the money," said he, "at the back of the grain corner is yours?"

"I suppose so," said Virginia.

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Mr. Blair strode over to her and took her hands.

"Then, my dear young lady," said he, "if you will, you can save this country."

The Prime Minister was so delighted to find that the money which held the grain corner was now Virginia's that he became a boy again.

"This is not," he said, "as Disraeli once remarked, the Armageddon, but let us at least follow in the footsteps of my distinguished predecessor by going to lunch. Or, rather," he added, "let us have lunch here, for it will be difficult to move Wilmers. And as we all have to part to-night, we shall probably have a good deal to say to each other.

"Miss Newcombe, I fear that my housekeeping is not of the best. I regret that I can offer you nothing else but chops."

When the table had been laid the Prime Minister picked up the loaf.

"Already," he said, growing grave again, "people are asking for bread. And that reminds me that I have not told you of the news.

"The corner," he went on, "does not, so far as I can gather, begin its operations for several days, but in view of the approach of famine I have been husbanding our resources. The grain ships arriving in this country have been taken out of private hands, and are now Government property—that is, such as are left of them; for this morning I received wires from Newcastle, Hull, and Glasgow saying that various grain ships lying in these ports were blown up last night."

"Good heavens!" cried Mendip.

"I hardly think," said the Prime Minister, "that that remark fits the case. It is about the most fiendish piece of work that I ever came across."

Wilmers said: "It is probably Von Prosen."

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"So I imagine," replied Mr. Blair, "for the different outrages are presumably connected.

"It appears that dynamite was used in every case, and, though I have not all the details, I have at least some information as to what happened at Newcastle.

"There a sentry on the quay saw a man, apparently a dock labourer, deliberately throw what looked like a bomb on to the deck of the *Ariadne*.

"It was a miracle that the sentry himself was not blown to pieces, as immediately after the explosion the ground about him was strewn with wreckage.

"Fortunately, too, he kept his mental as well as his physical head, and immediately after the affair he spotted the man who had thrown the bomb crawling on his hands and knees along the quay. Unhappily, the soldier did not keep cool long enough, for when he saw that the wretch was still alive he shot him. The man fell into the water.

"They retrieved the body and searched it, but beyond the fact that the fellow looked rather like a foreigner, they discovered nothing except a scrap of paper, which had evidently been the heading of a letter, and the only clue that this afforded was the single word 'Birmingham.' How much that scrap of letter may help us I cannot say; but one thing is pretty certain—that if these outrages were the result of one plot, that plot was hatched, or at any rate carried out, from one particular centre. And that centre may be Birmingham. Of course, it is only a long shot, but all the same it is a chance not to be missed, so I have sent young Hatherly, of the Explosives Department, and Wilmers' friend Jones up to Birmingham to see what they can rout out. If we have any more grain ships blown up in the next week things will go hard with us indeed."

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"Then you haven't succeeded," asked Wilmers, "in opening the Dardanelles?"

"That," said Mr. Blair, "is where I have not succeeded. It is indeed a ticklish business. There is a good deal more than bluff at the back of the Sultan this time. The story that sixty thousand troops have been concentrated on the Egyptian frontier is on this occasion, I regret to say, true. If they once get over the frontier we shall be swamped, and it will only complicate matters to attempt to force the Dardanelles and bombard Constantinople. In spite, however, of all our difficulties our credit is still good, and so I am pursuing the policy which the Britons followed when they bought the Picts off. I am trying to buy the Sultan out. Matters, however, are made the more difficult because our dear friends the Saxons are concentrating their fleet at Kiel. Therefore I presume we are to expect trouble from that quarter too—though in precisely what form I cannot judge as yet, except that the Saxons are most undoubtedly stiffening the Sultan's back.

"That means that I have had to fetch up all the ships that can be spared from the Mediterranean, and having also mobilized the ships in reserve in almost record time, we have quite a nice little Armada if the Saxons want to try conclusions with us. As a matter of fact, they have really no excuse for so doing, though I believe they would have tried it before now if we had not been too quick for them."

Mendip helped himself to another chop, and remarked, "It seems to be a pretty kettle of fish all round."

"Your metaphor," answered the Prime Minister, "is slightly mixed, but it explains the situation. However, while there is bread there is hope, and, thanks to Miss Newcombe, I trust that we shall be getting bread."

Virginia smiled in a rather tired little way across the table at him.

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"How," asked Wilmers, "are things going on in London?"

"Not altogether well," said the Prime Minister.

"We've had the dickens of a time with the fire in Southwark," he went on, "but that is out now. The difficulty was the shortage of water. That has been perplexing me a good deal.

"The mains, however, are less damaged than we feared, and I do not think we have much to be afraid of on that score.

"Illumination was another problem. The electric plants are hopelessly out of gear, and it will be some days before they are got into anything approaching order again. I should be sorry to say how many fires we have had from fusing wires.

"This morning I have been devoting all my attention to the feeding of the people, which is naturally the most serious problem of all.

"And it has actually come to the municipalization of the food supplies. I am the last man to encourage that sort of idea, but it was the only thing to do. The milkman, and the butcher, and the baker, and the candlestick-maker do not call any longer as they used to. The local authorities have for the time being stamped the tradesmen out of existence. It has already more or less come to a question of rations, and I will say that our mayors are in the main doing very well indeed. I am, in fact, not uneasy about meat or vegetables. It is the lack of wheat that is really beginning to keep me awake at nights.

"And that reminds me that, now we have finished lunch, I had better send for old Crow.

"The conversation when that gentleman arrives," the Prime Minister went on, "you will, I fear, Miss Newcombe, find somewhat dull, but that cannot be avoided. It will be all the duller because I do not suppose that we

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shall be able to come to any definite decision as to what steps we shall take. With your permission I shall have to leave that to Crow when he arrives in New York. There, I expect, he will find things a little troublesome, especially as you believe that your uncle is lending his weight to the deal.

"If that is so, we shall have to see what your cousin can do, and, if necessary, we shall have to bring pressure to bear on your Government to help us out, at any rate to the extent of seeing that your money is used in the way you wish. There is only one thing of which I would remind you before it is too late—that you must inevitably lose an enormous amount of money."

"I do not mind," said Virginia, "how much I lose so long as I can be of use. This does not seem to me a question of private interests, or even of national ambitions. It is a question of common humanity."

The Prime Minister looked at her with wondering approval.

"You are," he said, "the first philanthropist with a conscience that I have ever met."

At this point the butler announced "Mr. Crow."

Mr. Crow was a very shrivelled old gentleman with wrinkles above his eyebrows that suggested a chronic state of astonishment. He seemed to be perpetually wondering how it came about that people so mismanaged their financial affairs.

There was, however, about him a quiet decision of manner that bred confidence. He shook hands with Virginia on being introduced to her, and listened with a face that betrayed no emotion, except that of mild wonder, to Mr. Blair's explanations.

"I am sorry, Crow," concluded the Prime Minister, "but I fear we shall have to hurry you off to-night. The lines have been to some extent repaired, but I understand

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that the journey to Liverpool is still a twelve hours' trip. Lord Wilmers," and he pointed in Wilmers' direction, "is not very strong as yet, but he will be strong enough when you reach New York to afford you assistance there—not, of course, in the financial way."

Mr. Crow bowed.

"The financial side of things I leave entirely to your own discretion. I have such implicit confidence in you that it does not seem to be necessary to send any one else to assist you, but if you would like any other financial expert to accompany you, I will see what can be done."

XXXIII

MR. CROW turned his habitually astonished-looking face on the Prime Minister.

"Really, sir," he protested gently, "you need not trouble."

He appeared feebly vexed that Mr. Blair should suggest he needed assistance.

The financial methods of Mr. Crow, indeed, were entirely different to any one else's, and Mr. Crow never allowed criticism. This was an uncompromising attitude to take up, but it was justified by his successes.

"There is only one thing more that occurs to me to mention," Mr. Blair resumed after a little while. "Shall we or shall we not cable now to Miss Newcombe's trustees to inform them that she is leaving for New York, and give them some clue as to the reason of her return?"

"I understand," said Mr. Crow, "that one of Miss Newcombe's trustees—her uncle, to be precise—is hardly likely to be in favour of her visit."

"I am afraid that is so," said Virginia.

"In that case," replied Mr. Crow, "we will not inform them. We will take them by surprise." And he chuckled and rubbed his hands together.

For once Mr. Crow made a mistake. But then he could not foresee the calamitous consequences which were to follow on his decision not to communicate with Virginia's guardians.

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It was about eight o'clock in the evening when Mr. Blair roused Wilmers from a light slumber. Wilmers, looking up, saw that there was a twinkle in the Prime Minister's eyes.

"How's the invalid?" he asked.

Wilmers got up stiffly and answered—

"Fairly well, thanks."

"You are going to be a real invalid this time," said Mr. Blair; "in fact, you and Virginia and old Crow are all going up to Euston together in an ambulance. There will be a Sister on the box, and a nice little red cross on the panels. The mode of progress will not perhaps be particularly entertaining, but it will at least be safe. There are a number of people up St. Pancras way who, in spite of the lessons we are trying to teach them, do not behave very respectfully to private vehicles."

"How soon do we start?" asked Wilmers.

"Now," said the Prime Minister, "if you please. Virginia is waiting down below."

"By the way, the plot has thickened since you have been asleep. I have just received an application for a pass for a messenger to Liverpool from the German Embassy. I had to grant one, and the man will cross with you on the *Teutonic*. You had better keep your eyes open."

With some slight assistance Wilmers was able to walk downstairs, and there found Virginia already sitting in the corner of the ambulance. Their luggage had been stacked at the farther end, and old Mr. Crow, his wrinkles expressing more astonishment than ever, was perched on a portmanteau.

One of the litters was down, and on this Wilmers was laid, he protesting much till it was pointed out that it would be better for all if the ambulance really held a sick man.

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The Prime Minister got into the wagon after him and whispered into his ear.

"Look after Virginia as best you can," he said. "By the by, I've put something under the pillow which may assist you in that direction at a pinch—though I hope that that pinch may not come."

Wilmers slipped a hand under the pillow and felt the cold butt of a revolver.

He nodded at his uncle with understanding.

"Now good-bye," said the Prime Minister, and he shook hands with Mr. Crow. To him he said: "You have *carte blanche*—but cable me in cipher what is doing."

Mr. Crow's face merely expressed mild surprise that the Prime Minister should think it necessary to give him such instructions.

When he came to Virginia Mr. Blair hesitated.

"Good-bye, my girl," he said. "If you continue to be as brave as you have been up to the present we shall do wonders." He hesitated again, but finally bent forward and kissed Virginia lightly on the cheek.

Then the Prime Minister, blushing very painfully, stepped out of the ambulance.

A man in uniform came to the door and looked in.

"Euston, sir?" he asked in tones that were half mocking. Wilmers raised his head from his pillow and looked at the smiling face of the man in the peaked cap.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "it's Mendip." Mendip put his head through the door and winked with portent.

"Come along," urged the Prime Minister, "there's none too much time."

So Mendip climbed to the box, and the ambulance drove away.

Half opening the little pane of frosted glass by his side,

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Wilmers peeped out that he might see what road they were taking.

Mr. Crow sat on his portmanteau reading Keble's *Christian Year*. He always found that this volume sustained him in hours of financial crisis.

Virginia sat with her hands folded, apparently staring at her thoughts.

The approach of the ambulance having been notified to the authorities earlier in the evening, there were no challenges along the route. Soldiers stared at the vehicle by the hundred and officers by the score. But they had no idea who travelled within.

Mendip chose to drive along the Strand as far as Aldwych, when he turned northwards.

As they passed the wreck of the Savoy Virginia and Wilmers glanced at each other. Virginia shuddered a little, but neither of them said a word.

The Prime Minister's prophecy that at last the County Council site in Aldwych would be put to some use had to some extent come true. It held the tents of a regiment of Volunteers.

The wide length of Kingsway was practically deserted, though strongly picketed with troops.

From Southampton Row onwards the road was clear and silent. The law students, lady journalists, half-pay colonels, and German tourists had all fled from the boarding-houses which had tumbled about their ears.

As they drew near to the Euston Road, Wilmers, looking out of the window, saw that the flames in the north which had looked so pale by daylight were now rosy red against the sky.

The glare from them lit up the interior of the vehicle, and Mr. Crow remarked: "This is really most trying to the eyes."

"Where's the fire?" asked Wilmers.

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"Do you want to run after the engines?" inquired Mr. Crow.

Even Virginia smiled, while Wilmers laughed outright.

"Not quite," he replied.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. Crow, "I believe the fire is somewhere in the Midland goods yard. Been burning for three days now. Awful pity, but can't be helped. The water-supply is short."

And he wrinkled up his eyebrows and rubbed his nose thoughtfully, as though calculating the probable financial loss.

The first challenge came when they reached the station yard, where the passes with which Mr. Blair had furnished them underwent rigorous scrutiny.

The main portion of the great station had stood the shock better than most buildings in London, though the glass roofs covering the platforms had been completely demolished. The litter, however, had all been cleared away, and things looked much as usual.

The Prime Minister had seen to it that accommodation was reserved for them, and Virginia, Wilmers, and Mr. Crow enjoyed the sole use of one corridor carriage.

Wilmers, when he had been settled comfortably in his own compartment, sat up and glanced out of the window.

Virginia was standing by him in the corridor, looking out into the shadows along the platform, for the place was but badly lighted with oil lamps.

Suddenly she drew back with an exclamation.

"Quick!" she cried. "Who's that?"

Wilmers craned his neck and stared out into the half darkness. He was just in time to see a man draw a little farther into the shadow cast by a pillar. He had it on the tip of his tongue to say, "Why, surely, it's Mannheim!"

"I have seen that face before," said Virginia, as she

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looked at Wilmers with distress. And the sight of her distress decided him.

"I don't think so," he replied slowly and indifferently; but in his heart there was some anxiety.

"I am very tired," said Virginia, "and I think I will go to bed. Good night."

Her face was troubled as she walked to her compartment.

The train began to dawdle through the night, and dawdled on till Wilmers, who was a light sleeper, was aroused by its suddenly stopping at about five o'clock in the morning. Looking out, he saw the reason for the delay was that the viaduct across the Manchester Ship Canal had been partially destroyed. Wooden trestles had been substituted for its stone pillars, but they were not strong enough to allow of a train passing over them except at a snail's pace.

As they drew near to Liverpool Wilmers saw that the brick walls of the deep cutting beyond Edge Hill had been in part demolished. One line, however, had been cleared of debris, and along this line the train moved slowly until it reached Lime Street.

Finding that they had an hour to spare before the sailing of the *Teutonic*, Wilmers decided that Virginia, Mr. Crow, and he should breakfast at the North-Western Hotel. The hotel, however, though business was still being done there, was but a chaotic mass. In the coffee-room the windows were half choked with masonry that had fallen from above.

The famous square beyond presented an extraordinary appearance. The whole of the farther side of the great St. George's Hall had been torn away, and lay along the slope. As in London, the roadway was picketed with troops and Volunteers.

The road to the riverside was through an avenue of

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broken buildings, and at the water's edge the quay had been so damaged that it was impossible to bring ships alongside. Tenders were running to and fro between the liners and the shore.

On the quay there was a great crowd of people, a greater crowd than usual, and every one appeared to be an intending voyager. For things were far from pleasant in Liverpool just then. On several days the roughs of the docks had got hopelessly out of hand. Several banks had been broken into, and Lord Street had been looted. Therefore every man of means who could secure passages to the States for his family had booked accommodation at no matter what the cost.

Virginia and Wilmers stood side by side watching the tangled skeins of baggage being unravelled and the endless stream of people passing along the gangway to the tender.

As they so stood an official came up and touched his cap to Wilmers.

"You are Lord Wilmers?" he asked.

"Yes," said Wilmers, "I am."

"Then there's a telegram for you at the office, sir."

Wilmers and Virginia walked over to the little wooden hut where two or three dozen yellow envelopes had been thrust into the criss-cross elastic work of a green baize-covered board that hung upon the outer wall.

One of the telegrams was certainly addressed to Lord Wilmers. Wilmers claimed it, opened it, and uttered an exclamation. Virginia saw that on his face there was a look of bewilderment and despair.

"There is nothing wrong with Mr. Blair, I hope?" she asked.

"No," said Wilmers, "it is not that. Though I am sorry to say the telegram contains—for me, at any rate—bad news. I am not going across with you."

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Virginia held out her hand for the telegram, and Wilmers gave it to her. What she read was this :—

“Believe we have discovered head-quarters of our friends at Birmingham. Regret you cannot now accompany Miss Newcombe. Imperative that you should go to Birmingham at once. Ask for Manners, Midland Hotel. Extremely sorry, but unavoidable.—BLAIR.”

XXXIV

VIRGINIA was so dismayed that she could say nothing. She merely handed the telegram back to Wilmers, and at that moment the siren of the tender began to shriek.

Upon the future Virginia and Wilmers had said nothing. They had come to a tacit understanding to work it out together as far as immediate necessities went. In spite of the bar between them the companionship of each meant much to the other; and this was a blow indeed.

Virginia felt the greater part of her strength slipping away from her. Wilmers learned in a few moments that the bitterest trial a man can have is to be unable to serve the woman he loves.

When they reached the gangway they paused and looked at one another.

"You had better take the telegram," said Wilmers, "as you will have to explain to Mr. Crow."

Mr. Crow had already gone on board.

Virginia held out both her hands, and Wilmers took them. She saw the trouble in his face, and said, "Do not fear for me."

"No," said Wilmers, "I will not fear for you. I will pray for you."

He watched Virginia till her figure grew vague in the distance as the tender steamed out to mid-stream.

Virginia, when she had reached the *Teutonic*, went to her cabin, and there remained sitting in silence till she felt that the vessel was under way.

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Then, leaving her cabin, she walked along the deck with the idea of taking a last look at Liverpool.

As she came to the steps by the bridge she saw a man coming up from the deck below. It was the figure of a big man with mocking eyes and strong, clean-shaven face.

At the sight of that face Virginia's heart stood still, for the clean-shaven face of the big man with the mocking eyes should have worn a yellow beard.

Virginia drew back against the door of a cabin and waited for the big man to come up the steps. He did so slowly and with method, and, standing on the deck, he took off his cap.

Drawing near, he made a little bow to Virginia.

"I believe," said he, "that I have the pleasure of meeting my wife?"

Virginia shrank farther against the cabin door, and Von Prosen looked sharply along the deck.

"We may not," said he, "have many points in common. But I fancy we are agreed upon one thing—that scenes in public are distressing."

Drawing herself up, Virginia looked Von Prosen squarely in the eyes.

"You are right in that respect," she said.

"That being the case," grinned Von Prosen, "suppose that we go into my cabin. Do not let that worry you. It is a saloon which I have secured, and, after all, it would be rather hard if husbands and wives were to require a chaperon."

Virginia caught the insolence in his tone and shrank within herself.

"If you will permit me," continued Von Prosen, "I will open the door. You happen to be leaning against it."

With a movement of disgust, Virginia stood aside, and

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Von Prosen, taking the brass ring of the door in his hands, turned it and bowed her in.

He went in softly after her and closed the door.

"Permit me," he said, "to offer you a seat."

"Thank you," answered Virginia, very pale and straight and quiet, "but I would rather not."

"As you will," said Von Prosen, "but it seems a pity."

For a few moments he paused, and in the silence Virginia got back her courage and moved to the attack.

"This," she said, and her voice was as cold and as even as Von Prosen's, "is somewhat of a surprise."

"If you knew me," said Von Prosen, "as you should know me, you would not find it so."

Then Virginia remembered something. She remembered the hot wet splash on her cheek and the body of poor little Countess Freda hanging heavy in her arms. She drew her dress about her.

"I think," she said, "that I had better go. I am not fond—of murderers."

Von Prosen raised his thick yellow eyebrows.

"So," he said—and the manner in which he said it was a purr.

Very quietly Virginia said, "You shot poor little Freda."

Von Prosen was quite unmoved. "You make a mistake," he answered, "I did not. I give you my word of honour that I did not."

Contempt twisted Virginia's face.

"Oh! Your honour!" she cried.

"My honour," Von Prosen smoothly repeated; but his eyes began to dance.

"I understand," said Virginia, "that you have something to say to me. If you do not propose to say it, I propose to go."

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"Wait," said Von Prosen.

He swallowed several times, and cast his eyes up at the ceiling and then back at Virginia. He was wondering how he should begin.

Then he saw that his position was weak. He had nothing to say until Virginia spoke, and therefore he sought to draw her with a question.

"You are, I presume," he inquired, "going to New York with the idea of breaking the corner?"

Virginia said: "It is not an idea. It is a thing which I propose to accomplish."

"I would suggest," urged Von Prosen, "that you will find your uncle a little troublesome."

"It is written," said Virginia, "that a man may do what he likes with his own. I presume that that is a rule which applies to women as well. The money with which you and my uncle have been juggling belongs to me."

Von Prosen put up his hand to his chin and passed it between his fingers and thumb. He took his hand away again, looking a trifle disconcerted. He had not yet got used to the loss of his beard, and even that detail disturbed him at such a time.

"Yes," he drawled. "Well, what then?"

"Then," said Virginia, "I propose, no matter what the cost, to break that corner down. I for one am not going to starve a helpless people."

"You are very philanthropic," sneered Von Prosen.

"I am only human," said Virginia.

As quickly as he might Von Prosen cast things about in his mind. With Virginia he saw that he could achieve nothing—at least not then. His game could only be played with waiting—waiting to see what Virginia would do. And so he waited.

"It seems to me," Virginia said at last, "that I might well inquire how you came to be here."

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Von Prosen gave a little chuckle.

"I knew," he replied with a simplicity that was well done, "that you were sailing on the *Teutonic* to-day."

He said this so quietly, and Virginia came so near to believing him, that after a while she did believe. And this belief possessed her of an exaggerated notion of Von Prosen's ability.

She was hard now, and when one is hard one stands in peril of becoming vulgar.

"That," she said, "is clever of you."

"Ah," murmured Von Prosen, "I am clever," and he puffed out his chest a little. For some minutes they stood regarding one another closely. Von Prosen was the first to break the pause.

"Just now," said he, "you remarked that a man may do what he liked with his own. I propose to do what I like with my own now."

He stopped short in his speech, and the blood reddened his face. His eyes began to dance more than ever. Stretching out his hands, he cried, "I am going to claim my wife."

Virginia went white, but her eyes were eyes of steel. She pointed a long finger at him.

"Von Prosen," she cried, "you had best be careful, and I will tell you why."

Von Prosen shrugged his shoulders, but he fell back a pace.

"First of all," continued Virginia quietly, "it has to be decided whether that marriage that you are beginning to boast yourself about is legal or not. Again, and I judge you in spite of your word of honour—I would as soon take the word of a thief—that you did shoot poor little Freda."

"I swear," said Von Prosen sharply, "that I did not."

"That remains to be seen."

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"I am sorry that question has to wait an answer, but it must wait for the present. Just now I have other things to say to you."

She drew in her gown more tightly about her and took a long breath.

"One thing," she went on, "at any rate is certain—that, judged from an ordinary standpoint, the marriage is shameful to you, but not shameful to me. If you are so anxious to claim it as an accomplished fact, let us establish it now. But if it is to be established, the circumstances must be explained. And I must ask you to see that, when the circumstances are explained, protection will be given to me on board this ship. That would be somewhat disastrous to you."

At this Von Prosen was upset. He cast his mind back to that evening at the Savoy, when he had licked his lips to think what a born fighter Virginia was. Only his plans as he had fashioned them on that occasion had gone astray. The fighting powers of Virginia were not with him, but against him. He was quick enough to see his mistake and rectify it as best he could.

"Very well," he said, "we will let that matter stand over."

With a little laugh he added, "We will call a truce. I will be Von Prosen, a lone bachelor, till I reach New York, and you shall be Miss Newcombe. It may occur to you and it may occur to me to discuss the matter further before we see Sandy Hook. If you wish to, I shall be glad to talk it out."

"I fancy," replied Virginia, "that there will be no need to talk it out till we reach America. And then, I fancy, too, that the talking will be on my side."

So suddenly that Virginia was taken completely aback, Von Prosen shifted his ground.

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"Virginia," he cried in a low voice, creeping a little closer, "you are very cruel."

Recovering herself, Virginia said, "I think not—it is rather hard to be cruel to a brute."

Von Prosen's face was now crimson with the blood in it, and his eyes were glittering.

"In spite of all you think of me," he pleaded, "and in spite of what I am, I love you, Virginia."

"I can quite understand it," she said. "You have enough at stake to induce you to love any one if need be. You will kindly allow me to go."

Von Prosen went over to the door and stood with his back against it, holding out his hands.

"Virginia," he cried, "think again—think once more. Cannot you understand all that this means to me? Cannot you understand what I have gone through to make you mine? Ah! I admit it now; I have done things of which I am ashamed, for which I even despise myself, that I might win you. Will you deny me always?"

"Always!" said Virginia.

And she said it in such a way that Von Prosen stood aside and held the door open for her. He stood and watched her walk quickly away from him along the deck.

When she had gone beyond his sight he went back into the cabin again and passed into his sleeping-room. There, with a fierce cry, he took the pillow and propped it up against the wall. He drew back for a moment and then hammered the pillow against the wall with his great hard fist. He hammered at the pillow again and again, till even through the down his knuckles were bruised and the woodwork behind the pillow split.

After that he stood for a few moments looking at his bruised hands, and then began to laugh. Having finished laughing, he cast himself upon his knees. In his mind there was some wild idea of prayer.

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But prayer does not come to such men as Von Prosen. So he rose up again and laughed, and laughed, and laughed. His face was the face of a fiend.

"Till I reach New York," he muttered, "there will be nothing but torture for me. If I am mad I might as well be drunk. I will drink. Oh, how I will drink!"

He thrust his thumb on the electric button and bellowed at the steward when the man came.

Down below Virginia was upon her knees.

So Von Prosen drank with a savage zest in drinking. When he ate he ate alone. Sometimes he would leave his cabin and take a walk upon the deck.

There was chatter about Von Prosen in the saloon. The captain, when he was asked questions concerning him, shrugged his shoulders, and for information referred inquirers to the passenger list. There was not much to be gleaned from that.

Twelve hours from Sandy Hook Von Prosen ceased to drink. He had drunk merely to pass the time between one action and another. Action was facing him now.

Sitting on the side of his bed, he went through his papers, scanning them closely with bloodshot eyes. At last he found what he was seeking for. It was the address of Virginia's agents in New York.

Von Prosen pondered over the address and then he wrote out a message.

The early autumn fogs had gathered more thickly than usual, and the *Teutonic* was screaming her course through the cotton-wool-like mist.

Von Prosen groped his way along the deck till he came to the office from which marconigrams were sent. The clerk was surprised at the length of the message that Von Prosen handed in. But as the money accompanied it he made no comments.

It was in code, and the young man, being of an in-

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genious turn of mind, tried to decipher it, but in this he failed. Had he succeeded, Virginia would have been spared the most cruel hours of her life.

Having handed in the message, Von Prosen went back to his cabin. There he flung himself upon his bed in his clothes, and with poetic injustice slept the sleep of a child.

On the following morning the fog lifted a little, and the heights of Sandy Hook half hidden in clouds loomed up ahead of the steamer.

Virginia was slowly promenading the deck with the surprised-looking Mr. Crow.

Von Prosen passed them at the entrance to the saloon and lifted his cap.

And not a few people were surprised at Von Prosen's greeting of Miss Newcombe.

Mr. Crow wrinkled his eyebrows more than ever, for Virginia had told him of Von Prosen's presence on board the ship and her surmise as to his mission. She had, indeed, even urged upon him the necessity of sending a wireless telegram to her agents, but Mr. Crow had advised against this. All through his life Mr. Crow had pursued the habit of creeping up to his prey and then pouncing upon it. That was his idea now.

Unfortunately—and better men than he have made mistakes—he did not see that you cannot pounce on prey if the prey has already been warned. And Von Prosen had sent his warning.

It was several hours before the vessel was berthed, and then Virginia and Von Prosen, some little distance apart, both hung over the rail, scanning the faces on the quay.

Amid the crowd was standing a tall thin man in a long black frock-coat and a very high silk hat. He was clean-shaved and had a legal air. He was looking vaguely along the vessel's length.

Presently his eyes alighted on Von Prosen, and Von

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Prosen, catching his glance, gave an almost imperceptible smile. But he made no other sign.

The tall thin man was among the first to step up the gangway, and as he did so he rubbed a long, bony forefinger across his upper lip.

Unlike most of the visitors, he made no inquiries of the steward at the gangway's head. Without hesitation, he turned to the left, and with his long thin legs walked quickly towards Virginia and lifted his hat.

Von Prosen held his great hands before his mouth that he might hide his laughter.

XXXV

UNCONSCIOUS of the tall thin man's approach, Virginia still hung over the side of the vessel.

The tall thin man stepped up behind her in a rather cat-like way, and, seeking to draw her attention, coughed. Virginia took no notice of the cough, and so the man coughed again.

Turning her head, Virginia met the thin man's by no means unpleasant gaze.

He took off his tall silk hat and bowed with ceremony.

"Miss Newcombe, I believe?"

Virginia, who was always amused at ceremony, smiled.

"Yes," she said, "I am Miss Newcombe."

"That being the case," rejoined the long thin man, "perhaps I may ask for a few minutes' conversation with you?"

He made a distressed little movement with his hands as though apologizing for so troubling a lady.

Drawing away from the rail, Virginia went over to the side of the deck cabins, and there she was bowed into a seat by the strenuously polite stranger.

"Permit me," said he, and he placed his hat on a bench.

"It is necessary," he went on, "that I should introduce myself."

With great care he drew from his waistcoat-pocket a card-case, and with another elaborate bow presented Virginia with a little slip of pasteboard. She took it and read, "Mr. Silas Rowe, Managing Clerk, Messrs. Geisler and Harman."

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"Oh," she said with a smile, "you are from my uncle?"

"That," agreed the tall man, closing his lips with precision, "is precisely the state of the case."

"But," protested Virginia, "I did not send my uncle any word as to my arrival. I can hardly understand how he has come to hear of it."

"Madam," replied Mr. Rowe, thrusting two long fingers between the middle buttons of his waistcoat, "when a lady is so well known as yourself, and is endowed with so much of this world's goods, her movements are public property."

"You do not mean to tell me," said Virginia, with some concern, "that the newspapers are aware of my arrival?"

"No," answered Mr. Rowe, "they are not." And he smiled with a significance which Virginia had good cause to recall afterwards.

"No," Mr. Rowe went on, "we discovered your name quite by accident among the list of passengers, which was cabled on in advance. Hence my presence here."

He paused and beamed politely upon Virginia.

"And now," she asked, "what do you propose that I should do? I may as well tell you that I am under the escort of a gentleman named Mr. Crow." Here she stopped dead short in her speech, wondering whether she should indulge in further confidences.

Mr. Rowe placed his long fingers together in the manner of an amateur Sherlock Holmes.

"Mr. Crow, ah, Mr. Crow," he said, and there was a note of inquiry in his tones.

"Yes," said Virginia, "Mr. Crow." And she laughed a little. The conversation seemed to be tending towards the comic.

"Doubtless," said Mr. Rowe, "Mr. Crow's name was in the passengers' list, but, of course, it would convey

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nothing to us. He accompanies you, I presume, merely as an escort?"

"Not at all," replied Virginia. "He accompanies me here on business."

"Dear me," said Mr. Rowe, and he seemed a shade hurt.

Virginia noticed his slight expression of pain, and hastened to make amends.

"I will introduce you to Mr. Crow," she said, "and if he sees fit he may possibly explain the reason of his presence. But I think I had better leave that to him."

"As you will," said Mr. Rowe, and he sighed. "Of course, you understand that I am entirely in the confidence of Mr. Harman, that I have been sent here in confidence, and that you may, in short, unworthy though I be, with safety say anything of which you have it in your mind to speak."

"That being the case," said Virginia, rising briskly, "I should like to speak about getting my things through the Customs."

Mr. Rowe rose and bowed.

"Anything that is of assistance to you," he said, "is at once my pleasure and my duty."

Virginia said "Tut, tut," under her breath, and led the way to the gangway.

At the head of it they met Mr. Crow. There followed an introduction, and Mr. Crow's wrinkles were never more surprised in their life. Mr. Crow, however, said that he was charmed, quite charmed, to meet Mr. Rowe.

Mr. Crow tucked his Keble's *Christian Year* under his arm that he might the more conveniently shake hands with Mr. Rowe.

"It was my idea," said Virginia, after Mr. Rowe had brought the Customs officials into a slightly less insolent frame of mind, "that I should go to Park Avenue Hotel. You see it is quiet there, and I want to be quiet."

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"That is, fortunately, quite unnecessary," replied Mr. Rowe. "Arrangements have already been made for you. Your uncle has kept your father's house on Fifth Avenue in excellent repair, and he has opened it for you. You will find quite a household waiting to receive you."

This did not altogether please Virginia. Her uncle seemed to be conducting arrangements as though she had no right to a say in them herself. But then she recognized that her uncle could not know that she had returned to New York in a new spirit of independence.

"Very well," she said at last. "Then I suppose we had better go up there. Perhaps you will be kind enough to arrange for cabs."

Virginia knew the New York cabman, and had no desire to have any dealings with him herself.

"Cabs?" said Mr. Rowe with great disdain. "This is out of the question. Your uncle's car is just the other side of the quay."

"If Mr. Crow," he continued, "will so far honour us, we will go ashore at once."

Mr. Crow closed his book with a snap, and followed Virginia down the gangway. His eyebrows by this time were quite rude in the intensity of his surprise at the manners of New York.

The car was a large one with a hood. "If Mr. Crow will not object," said Mr. Rowe, "I will get him to sit in front. There are several matters of which I have to speak to Miss Newcombe."

"But Mr. Crow," protested Virginia, "is my adviser."

Mr. Rowe bowed to an old-fashioned degree.

"Quite so, quite so," he replied; "but at the same time there are certain things relating to your family, Miss Newcombe, of which I would rather speak to you alone. Afterwards, I can assure you that we shall be

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only too delighted to receive Mr. Crow's assistance in purely business matters."

Mr. Crow made no response beyond looking a little more surprised than ever and climbing into the place which had been allotted to him.

The car slipped away quickly from the docks, and was soon zigzagging at a rather high rate of speed between the traffic along Broadway.

The drivers of the street-cars leant across their levers and cursed the chauffeur as he passed them. The chauffeur was quite pleased and happy at their dislike of him. Virginia could see him smile as now and again he turned sideways in his seat and surveyed the amazed-looking Mr. Crow.

Half-way up Broadway Virginia sat upright.

"We shall be at my uncle's office in a minute," she said. "Perhaps we had better stop."

"No need, no need," said Mr. Rowe. "Your uncle awaits you at the house. He judged it best to welcome his niece back on the threshold of her home."

This punctiliousness of sentiment on the part of her exceedingly bearish uncle left Virginia wondering not a little.

But she said nothing, and the car zigzagged on.

Soon it was running swiftly along Fifth Avenue, and Virginia, leaning back, pondered for a few moments on the pleasantness of being home.

The early autumn was a hot one, and few who could afford to stay away from New York had returned; but there were plenty of folk about, and the place, in spite of the heat, held that sense of pulsating life which is peculiar to New York alone.

The road was clear, and the car flew along it at a great pace, Virginia idly watching the sun-scorched foliage of Central Park.

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The great houses at the farther end of Fifth Avenue seemed to drowse in the sunshine, their blinds drawn down like so many closed eyelids.

Suddenly she leant forward.

"Why, Mr. Rowe," she exclaimed, "we have passed the house."

Mr. Rowe drew up one of the windows of the car, and then leant as though with curiosity out of the other.

"So we have," said he, and his voice drawled in a languid way.

Virginia became conscious of a very strong, sweet smell. She gave a little gasp. Looking back from the window, Mr. Rowe remarked pleasantly, "I am afraid you are feeling the heat."

Virginia gave another gasp, and the pupils of her eyes began to dilate. She leant back against the cushions as one overcome by the heat of the day.

When Mr. Rowe saw her so sink back he turned about in a flash. With one arm he caught her about the waist, and for all his appearance of age his encircling arm was lithe and as strong as steel.

"Try these smelling-salts," he cried, and he pushed a bottle beneath her nose.

Virginia took a breath and felt more dreamily drowsy than before. Her head sank against the cushions. She looked with sleepy eyes at Mr. Rowe. He was still holding the bottle beneath her nose, and there was an inscrutable smile on his face. In a drowsy way, Virginia was possessed of the idea that he was enjoying a good joke. Then she fell asleep.

Mr. Rowe took the bottle away from Virginia's nose, stopped it, and pulled down the blind in front of the car. On the front seat Mr. Crow was sitting hunched up, looking with anxious surprise about him as the car went bounding on down the long strip of road.

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Virginia slept for quite a time. When she awoke it was dark. In the gloom of the car she realized that poor little Mr. Crow was sitting hunched up by her side apparently in slumber.

Mr. Rowe, with the same inscrutable smile that she had last seen on his face, was sitting on the opposite seat, holding the bottle of smelling-salts in his hand.

When he beheld Virginia open her eyes he drew the stopper out of the bottle and put it again beneath her nose.

She made a feeble little movement with her hands, and then lay quiet again. She felt very drowsy and entirely content. She did not wonder in the least why she was there, or what had befallen her. She did not marvel to feel the car bumping along the road, nor to see Mr. Crow hunched up asleep by her side; nor did she marvel that she herself was most unaccountably drowsy. Sleep was her all-absorbing desire, and so she slept once more.

She did not wake till she opened her eyes and dreamily perceived that she was in the cabin of some ship. She could hear the gentle lapping of water.

For a little while she lay back with closed eyes, endeavouring to understand what had come about.

At first she thought that she was still on the *Teutonic*, and that the advent of Mr. Rowe and the drive in the motor-car were but the shadows of a dream.

But then, just beyond the cabin-door, she heard a cool, deliberate, and not unpleasant voice.

"Really," said the voice, "it was quite artistic. We ought to write a book, you and I, called *The Kidnapping of the Heiress*."

Then Virginia heard laughter, the laughter of a man with a deep chest.

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And her drowsiness fell away from her, and she sat up with a scared face. The laughter was Von Prosen's. With all her senses now alert she swept her eyes about the cabin, and with terror realized that it was not her state-room on the *Teutonic*.

XXXVI

WALKING stiffly along the broken pavement from the quay Wilmers made his way back to Lime Street. His back gave him great pain, his heart was heavy, and, above all, he was oppressed with a sense of loneliness.

Thankful for small mercies, he was grateful that he found a train in waiting which would take him as far as Crewe. At the same time, the most hopeful estimate that the railway authorities could form as to his arrival in Birmingham pointed to the hour of midnight.

The train rattled slowly over the roughly-mended tracks, and Wilmers had a deal more time in which to think than he found quite pleasant.

He wondered about that odd marriage in the cellar, and assured himself again and again that at least there could be no legal bar between himself and Virginia. In spite of his self-assurances, however, he was unable to satisfy himself to the full on this point. But mostly he felt the sorrow of parting with her.

He could see that nothing except great urgency would have induced the Prime Minister to cancel his mission to the States at the eleventh hour, and therefore he did his best not to feel sore with his uncle for the action that he had taken.

But think which way he would, his thoughts always came back to Virginia—to the sadness of Virginia's face as it became blurred in the distance while the tender which carried her from him drifted farther and farther

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away. At last he shrugged his shoulders with a little sigh.

"What will be, will be," he muttered, and settled himself into a corner of the carriage.

The pain between his shoulders where the lash had cut him was greater than ever, and the weakness that was stealing upon him did not leave him strong enough to stand up and defy the bludgeonings of chance.

At Crewe they roused him, and Wilmers wandered uneasily about the platform as he waited for the second train.

When it came he was so drowsy that he fell asleep almost as soon as he had entered the carriage.

As the train drew near to Birmingham he was awakened by a great glare. He looked out of the window and saw fires in the Black Country that he had never seen before. Some miles away there was a long wall of flames like the flames of a prairie fire. They were far away, these flames, but the smoke hung overhead like a fog cloud, and red-hot cinders pattered on the roof of the carriage.

He remained looking out of the window, watching the leaping fires in the distance, till the train was swallowed up in the black, silent approach to Birmingham.

On stepping on to the platform of the Central Station the light which filtered in through the roof was rosy red. Wilmers wondered if the great fire that he had witnessed was drawing near.

The porter who took his bag said, "We shall have to make a bit of a round, sir."

Wilmers, peering about in the uncertain light, asked, "Why?"

The man jerked his thumb across his shoulder.

Then Wilmers saw that a great portion of the Queen's Hotel had tumbled into the station, and that the place was blocked with the mass of masonry.

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At last, after what to Wilmers was a weary walk, during which he and his guide had stumbled across the maze of debris, they found themselves on the steep bit of hill leading up to the bottom of Corporation Street. They turned to the left, and made for the Midland Hotel.

The door of the building was shored up with huge beams, and the marble-lined passage leading to the central hall had been squeezed into an imitation tunnel. In the main, however, the building stood, and was apparently doing a vast amount of business.

At the bureau Wilmers gave his name, and a waiter darted up the battered staircase with his card. He had not long to wait before young Manners, who, till the earthquake, had been one of Mr. Blair's private secretaries, came down into the hall. His appearance was not quite so dapper as usual; his coat, for instance, was buttoned up to the chin, and Wilmers glanced at him with some astonishment.

"You will have to excuse me," said Manners, "but I was just getting into bed. We did not receive any notice from Mr. Blair as to your arrival till this evening, and then Jones and myself—that's Jones of Scotland Yard, you know—came to the conclusion that you could not possibly arrive till morning. So I was just going to turn in. Jones is still out making inquiries somewhere."

"I see," said Wilmers; "but surely the matter was rather too urgent for you to wait for me? Or have you collared the lot?"

Manners looked at Wilmers in a puzzled way.

"Collared the lot?" he asked. "What do you mean? Oh, I see. You are speaking of our bomb-slinging friends?"

"I was," said Wilmers, rather wearily. He was beginning to judge that Manners was not a particularly brilliant young man.

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"Oh," replied Manners, "but about that we were waiting for you."

"For me?" echoed Wilmers, puzzled in his turn. "Why, the telegram I received from Mr. Blair said that you had found the place, and that I was to come on here to assist in its being raided."

Manners stared at Wilmers in an incredulous way.

"But that's impossible," he said; "we have not informed Mr. Blair of any such thing. On the contrary, Mr. Blair said in his wire to us that you were in possession of the information which would be of assistance to us. I may say that, so far, we have not succeeded in the slightest degree in tracing any of the outrages to Birmingham."

"If that is the case," replied Wilmers, "some one is making a very curious mistake."

For a moment a suspicion crossed his mind, but it was a suspicion so grotesque that he dismissed it at once.

"Do you know," he asked, "if the telephones are in working order?"

And then he saw the uselessness of his inquiry, for the Prime Minister was not on the telephone.

"As to that," said Manners, "I cannot say, but the ordinary telegraph service is working pretty well."

That gave Wilmers an idea.

"By the way," he asked, "did you notice from what office in town Mr. Blair's telegram was dispatched?"

"I can't be sure," said Manners, "because Jones has got it, but to the best of my recollection it was handed in at Charing Cross."

"H'm," said Wilmers, "that seems all right. So was mine. Unfortunately I cannot refer to it, because I left it with Miss Newcombe to give to Mr. Crow."

Manners looked more perplexed than ever.

"Oh, of course," Wilmers continued, with a laugh, "I

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forgot. I was, I may say, this morning about to sail for America with Miss Newcombe and old Crow, of the Treasury. It was a mission of Mr. Blair's. I received my uncle's telegram just as I was about to start. Mr. Crow had already gone on board, and so I gave the form to Miss Newcombe that she might explain to him."

"Seems a funny business altogether," said Manners. "I don't mean your errand for Mr. Blair," he added hastily, "but the telegrams."

"It does," said Wilmers. He looked at the clock and saw that it was half-past one.

"If it were not so late," he went on, "I would send my uncle a wire. But if any mischief has been done, it has been done now, and matters may as well rest until the morning."

"In that case," said Manners, "I think I'll be off to bed. Are you coming up, too?" He rose from his chair and yawned.

Wilmers thought for a few moments.

"No," he said, "I don't think I will. I am not in the least bit sleepy, and I have no desire to lie awake for hours."

"All right, then," answered Manners, "I'll be off. Suppose Jones is still out and scouting round somewhere with the local police. There may be some news in the morning. Good night."

"Good night," rejoined Wilmers rather wearily, and fished a paper from a neighbouring chair.

He held it before him, but read nothing. He was trying to understand the mystery of the telegrams, and the more he thought of the matter the more uneasy he grew. He wondered if he had again fallen into some trap. He speculated on this for a little while, and then dismissed it as impossible. After all, there were the wires, and at the present time not even Von Prosen was likely

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to be sending imaginary wires in the Prime Minister's name. Again, what purpose would it serve? Ah! it would separate him from Virginia.

The idea that there might be something in this was so agonizing that he threw down the paper and stood up. Then he became conscious of a queer little old gentleman dancing before him like the proverbial cat on hot bricks.

The old gentleman was very little and very bald. But the hairlessness of his head was compensated for by a superfluity of white moustache. He was dressed in a neat tweed suit, and wore white spats over his patent-leather boots. Wilmers smiled as he beheld him, thinking him the personification of the traditional retired colonel of fire-eating propensities.

Not that the little gentleman was in a fire-eating mood at that moment. Far from it. He bowed, and he scraped, and he bobbed, and he hummed, and he hawed. "Excuse me, please, my dear sir, excuse me," he said to Wilmers. "I hate to mention so trivial a matter, but, at the same time, I should like to inquire—mind, it pains me to do so—if you have finished with my paper!"

"Really," said Wilmers, with a smile, "I am very sorry. But I had no idea that it was yours. You must excuse my taking it in ignorance."

"Not at all, my dear sir, not at all," said the little old gentleman, standing in an excited way first on one leg and then on the other, "since it has given me the excuse of making your acquaintance."

Wilmers was at such a loss to know what to do or say that he made a slight bow.

"I assure you, sir, it is a very great pleasure," the little old gentleman went on, "to meet any one to whom one can speak in this dull hole. Beastly place, Birmingham! Full of trade and all that sort of thing. You," he added,

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looking at Wilmers, "I should imagine, were in the service?"

He said "service" in a grand way. One could imagine that he spelt it with a capital "S."

"Well," said Wilmers, "I am not—at least, not now. I was once."

"Indeed," cried the little old gentleman; "that's capital, capital. Permit me, then, to introduce myself, for I was in the service too, though you must understand"—and here he looked a trifle chagrined—"not in the Regulars, but in the Volunteers. Bishop is my name, Fifoot Bishop, Colonel Fifoot Bishop."

Again Wilmers smiled. He could quite imagine that the little old gentleman's associates called him "Colonel" in the smoking-lounges of the hotels he doubtless frequented.

"If you will permit me," Colonel Fifoot Bishop went on, "I will not detain you long. I am just about to retire. We will drink to the honour of the service—the finest service in the world, sir."

Wilmers once more looked at the clock and hesitated. The hour was late. On the other hand, Colonel Fifoot Bishop was an amusing person in his way, and would serve to pass half an hour with.

"Very well," he said at last, "I will."

Colonel Fifoot Bishop fussed about the table and bullied the sleepy waiter. His voice rang trumpet-like through the deserted hall, for by this time every one else had gone to bed.

In a few minutes two very long whiskies and sodas were before them.

"Excuse me once more," said Colonel Fifoot Bishop, "but would you tell me if that object on the table over there is a book? My sight is not so good as it was."

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Wilmers looked across in the direction indicated by Colonel Fifoot Bishop.

"Yes," said he, "it is a book."

"Oh!" chuckled the colonel, "that's what I have been looking for. Leave my books and papers all over the place. Very silly—absent-minded, you know. I'll get it when I go up to bed. No need to disturb myself now. Old age loves its ease, you know."

And he leant back in his chair.

Being of a chivalrous turn of mind, Wilmers said, "Allow me to get it for you," and got out of his chair. The colonel leaned forward.

"My dear sir," he expostulated, "my dear sir, on no account." But as he said the words Wilmers was striding across the hall. When he turned round he fancied that he heard the chink of glass, and he noticed that the colonel was thrusting something into his pocket. A curious little smile, too, played beneath the old gentleman's big white moustache. Though he noted the occurrence, Wilmers gave it no thought then. He was to call it to mind very sharply later.

For a little longer the colonel and he sat and sipped their whiskies and sodas and talked. And Wilmers, to whom sleep had been far distant half an hour before, became suddenly drowsy.

He yawned all the way upstairs, as the little colonel skipped up the steps by his side.

"Permit me," said the little old gentleman when they reached the landing, "to see you safe to your room. No. 100, I think you said? Good number, 100. Always like it myself in hotels. Perhaps I can be of some service. Been in this wretched hole a week now, and beginning to know it by heart. Let me see, 100, I think you said? Well, here we are. Good night, good night."

Once in the room Wilmers found that the electric

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light had evidently not been repaired, and that a newly-furnished gas bracket was supplying the illumination.

When he had undressed, and was about to get into bed, he discovered that he had no matches. Nor could he find any about the room. He therefore turned the gas down to just a flicker of light.

Propped up against his pillows, he tried to review the events of the day. As a matter of fact, he wished to think, and so he roused himself afresh ; but sleep held him most surely.

His eyes closed, but hearing some slight sound he opened them dreamily again. Quite calmly and without any curiosity he saw the little colonel tiptoeing past the foot of his bed. Colonel Fifoot Bishop stood on the points of his neat little boots, and, puffing out his red cheeks, blew out the gas.

In the darkness Wilmers could hear somebody moving softly about, and then came the closing of the door. But he cared nothing for this. A great peace had stolen over him. Not even a strong scent of gas roused him from his pleasant lethargy ; and so he fell asleep.

XXXVII

WILMERS woke gasping and shivering. He had dreamed that he had been plunged into the sea, and he woke to find his head dripping with cold water and to feel the cold night air playing strongly on his face.

He felt chilled to the bone, but none the less he was drowsy, and, letting his head fall again upon the wet and icy pillows, he once more fell asleep. But that was only for a second or so. A pair of strong hands grasped him by the shoulders and shook him with violence. He opened his eyes, and once more lay back upon the pillows.

A second time the strong hands seized him, and on this occasion they wellnigh dragged him from the bed. Wilmers gasped again, too, as he felt more icy water being poured upon his head.

Still, however, he struggled to free himself, and still he struggled to sleep. Then he was dragged from the bed, and he fell with a crash on the floor. The pain from his lacerated back as it met the ground was so great that Wilmers was roused to wakefulness in spite of himself. Sitting up, he asked in a dazed way: "What is it?"

An arm encircled his neck and a glass was placed to his lips. A voice quick and anxious said: "Drink this."

Wilmers felt neat brandy pouring like a stream of flame down his throat.

Somewhat revived by the brandy, he leaned against the bed-post, and tried in the gloom to make out the personality of the man who had given him the drink. He was conscious of a figure at his side, but could not discern

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the features of his extraordinary visitor. The man, however, apparently came in a friendly spirit, for Wilmers was conscious that some one took his cold hands and chafed them. He sat quite still, trying to collect his thoughts, and wondering what had befallen him.

Presently he said: "Better get a light." Even to himself his voice sounded weak and far away.

"Can't get a light just yet," answered the stranger, "the room is too full of gas. How are you feeling now?"

"All right," said Wilmers. He was awake enough to feel cold and miserable and curious, not to say suspicious.

"Then," answered the voice, "I'll help you on to the bed," and a pair of strong hands were thrust beneath Wilmers' armpits, and he was hoisted on to the bed. There the man he could not see wrapped him in the blankets and again gave him more brandy to drink.

For quite a while after this the man remained chafing his hands. At last Wilmers had sufficiently recovered to demand an explanation.

"Wait a minute," said the man in the darkness, "I'll get a light. The air is pretty clear now."

So saying he moved across the room, struck a light, and relit the gas. As he turned about Wilmers could not suppress a little cry. It was one of the men who had triced him up in the cellar of the Russian eating-house.

"All right," said the man, coming across to him, "I see you recognize me. But don't worry yourself, for as a matter of fact, I am here to help you. But for me you'd be dead now. That old fiend, Colonel Fifoot Bishop, as he calls himself, mixed your drinks down below. Then he came in here, and having first blown out the gas, turned it full on again.

"In the morning you would have been as dead as mutton and the room full of gas. You would have died, of course, by accidental suffocation—a very adequate

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story—which no one, especially just now, would stop to worry about.”

“Good heavens!” cried Wilmers, “I believe that’s true. Did I see Colonel Fifoot Bishop come in here or did I dream it?”

He addressed this question more to himself than to the man, and passed a hand across his eyes.

“Oh, you saw him right enough,” said the man. “There wasn’t much dream about that. And but for the fact that he was fool enough to come and tell me what he had done you wouldn’t be talking to me now. As it was, I was only just in time.”

“Yes; but what’s it all about?” asked Wilmers, who was puzzled beyond all understanding.

“Well, I’ll tell you, and I must be quick about it, too, if you want to save half Birmingham from being blown to bits. It is just this.” The man paused and considered for a moment.

“After you had got away from Whitechapel, which was, by the way, no small thanks to me, the troops came down and collared the whole place. Von Prosen would have come back, but his passage was cut off, and so, as we took good care to escape in time, we met him afterwards in another place—never mind where exactly, but in another place which we knew of.

“When Von Prosen came down I was sick of the whole business. Oftentimes when a man’s hard pushed for money he is reduced to doing things which he otherwise would not consider for a moment. That was the case with me. And when I engaged with Von Prosen I had no idea that the contract was going to include murder, or at any rate what looks very much like it.

“The long and the short of it is that Von Prosen knew that same night that Miss Newcombe was going to the States. When you get back to Downing Street I’d make

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a few inquiries about the household there. They are not all quite so loyal as you think them. Though I will give the devil his due by saying that the man who sold us the information had no idea to what use it was going to be put."

Wilmers was too astonished to make any comments, and let the man run on. "When Von Prosen," he continued, "found out about Miss Newcombe, he raved like a madman, and I believe fixed it up with the Embassy to go to the States too.

"Any way, Mannheim went up to Euston with him and saw him off to Liverpool.

"After that Mannheim and I met and came on here. Von Prosen saw that the game was up, and, to my way of thinking, lost his nerve. Anyhow, he gave instructions to Mannheim and myself that we were to contrive to blow up all the explosives that had been accumulated here. It was from Birmingham, you see, that we had been distributing the dynamite to Newcastle, Liverpool, Hull, and the rest of the places, for Von Prosen's Saxon pals to destroy your grain ships."

"One minute," said Wilmers. "How did Von Prosen know that I was coming here?"

The man laughed.

"Know that you were coming here?" he said. "Why, he sent you here. It was Mannheim who arranged for the wires to be dispatched."

"But the wires were sent from Charing Cross," objected Wilmers. "It is impossible. It's reserved for the Government."

"It wasn't impossible, as it happened; but it was a pretty hard job. It was done like this. When our man went up to get the information as to Miss Newcombe, he was able to get through to Downing Street, because, of course, it seemed that he had legitimate business there.

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And as a matter of fact he even went into the house. There he got hold of Mr. Blair's messenger and begged him as a favour to send off a couple of wires. He enclosed the money for them in an envelope, asking that they should not be opened. And as they came through all right, I suppose the envelope was not opened. The very fact that they were sealed in an envelope—borrowed, by the way, from Mr. Blair's writing-table—would only satisfy the clerk the more that they were both urgent and private."

When Wilmers thought of how he had been duped, and of Virginia sailing alone to America in the same ship as Von Prosen, he covered his face with his hands.

The man came over and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't give up like that, sir," he urged, "there's a good deal still to be done. If you want to help yourself and Miss Newcombe and poor old England, you've got to rouse yourself and be quick."

"What do you mean?" asked Wilmers.

"Why, just this. Mannheim's gone up to the house where they keep the explosives now, and old Fifoot Bishop—that isn't his name, but I do know that he was cashiered from the army some years ago, and is the worst old scoundrel unhung—was left here to see that you were put properly to bed. I was to stay and watch.

"And now I'll tell you," he went on, "what I didn't tell Mannheim—that I meant to watch you for your own good. Don't think me a miserable hound, sir. I am telling the truth now and trying to make amends for what I have done. Believe me that I had no idea what I was in for when I started with Von Prosen. I have been trying to get away from him and from the job for weeks, but he set other men on to watch me, and to have tried to bolt would simply have been to be shot. But

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now, thank Heaven, I have got the chance, and I am going to use it."

"Yes," said Wilmers, "yes. Well?"

"Well, sir, you've got to rouse Mr. Manners and Mr. Jones, and come along as quick as you can, or half Birmingham will be blown to glory. I am not quite sure how Mannheim's going to manage the business, but I think he's laid electric wires on to the house where the explosives are, and is trusting the rest to luck. If we hurry we can catch him at the game."

Wilmers jumped from the bed and stood up.

"Are you sure," he asked, "that this is not a game, too?"

The man spat across the bed with some contempt.

"Would I be here, rousing you out of what ought to be your last sleep, if I wasn't honest?"

"All right," said Wilmers; "then help me to dress."

He hurried into a few clothes, and then accompanied by the man started out to look for Manners. As they raced past the corner of the passage they might have seen the bald head of the little colonel disappearing down the stairs.

They pounded on Manners' door, and a sleepy voice called, "Come in." So they went in, and found Manners sitting up in bed with his hair tumbled over his eyes. "Nice time of night," he grumbled, "to disturb a chap."

Wilmers lost patience.

"Get out of bed," he said sharply, "and listen to what I have to say."

The man plucked him by the arm. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I think I had better get Mr. Jones."

"Very well," said Wilmers. And then he gave Manners an outline of the story. Manners whistled softly, and reached for his trousers. The man came back with Mr. Jones, and to his surprise Wilmers saw that Mr. Jones was fully dressed.

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"By the way," remarked Wilmers, "before we go any farther we had better have your name," and he turned to the man who had saved him from the gas.

The man hesitated for a few moments. "Ramsay, sir," he said; "Ramsay, that'll do."

"Well," said Wilmers, "Ramsay—" and a second time he plunged hotly into the tale, on this occasion for the benefit of Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones, solid and urbane, listened with a face that was apparently full of wisdom.

When Wilmers had finished his story the man from Scotland Yard grew practical.

"We'd better start out at once," he said.

"Right you are," agreed Manners, "but wait half a minute, till I have tied this bootlace."

They waited for Manners, went down the staircase together, and passed out of the hotel.

"If the house is at the end of Sumner Lane," said Jones, "we'll go by way of New Street and across Victoria Square."

They walked on in silence and came to the Square. There, on the left, the Post Office was ringed round with troops. On their right troops were guarding the Council House. It seemed an unnecessary precaution, for the building merely resembled a refuse heap.

They turned off here and made for the police-station, where Mr. Jones was quiet, but insistent. As the result of his insistence the inspector in charge furnished them with a dozen constables. Together they tramped through the dark of Great Charles Street till they came to the railway-bridge at Snow Hill. This was so buckled that they had to stoop almost to their knees to pass beneath it. Beyond, Sumner Lane stretched its interminable length, broken and gloomy and desolate.

Wilmers found himself walking like a lame man, from

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the pain in his back. Mr. Jones seemed to realize that he was halting in his gait, and crooked his arm through his.

Thus they walked for about three-quarters of a mile, when Ramsay took a sharp turn to the left, and plunged into a network of courts. Once or twice he stopped and looked keenly about him in his efforts to recollect the way. When he did so the policemen drew up in a bunch behind him, and for comfort's sake made ribald remarks to one another about the dark.

At last Ramsay came to a standstill and said in a low voice—

“It is here—about twelve houses down.”

The party walked on, treading as lightly as they could, till Ramsay held up his hand.

“This is the place,” he said.

Wilmers looked up at the house and saw that it was a three-story building, which might have been a lodging-house just escaping the class labelled “common.”

It was in complete darkness.

Then Mr. Jones took charge of things. On either side of the door and stretching across the road he placed six constables.

“Wait a minute,” he said to Wilmers. Having so said, he crept up the steps and tried the door. It was securely fastened.

From overhead there came the sound of a window being softly closed. Wilmers stared upwards, but could see nothing.

Jones went over to where Wilmers stood with Manners and Ramsay.

“I am armed,” he said. “I suppose you are?”

Wilmers drew a revolver from his pocket.

“Lend it to me for half a minute,” said Jones. “I am going to blow open the lock.”

He himself drew a revolver from his own pocket with

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his right hand. In his left he took the weapon that Wilmers handed to him.

"Now, stand clear," he said, "and we'll see what happens."

Creeping up the steps again, Jones placed the muzzles of both revolvers dead against the keyhole in the door. He pulled the triggers, and there was a loud report. A flying splinter caught him upon the hand.

From within the darkened house there came a yell.

"Now for the door," shouted Jones. Wilmers, Manners, and Ramsay dashed up the steps and hurled themselves against it.

The lock, they felt, no longer resisted, but a bolt held fast at the top. But they hurled themselves at the door again, and it burst open with a crash, shooting them into the passage. Of the four, two of them went sprawling to the ground. Then came a shout, and three men dashed out of the darkness, stumbling across the prostrate body of Jones. They fell outwards, and went rolling down the steps, and there the constables fell upon them and held them fast.

Wilmers picked himself up, and saw that Jones had already risen and was searching the darkness with a lantern. They went down the passage, and at the foot of the stairs found Colonel Fifoot Bishop.

The little old gentleman, with his hands raised in horror, was standing at the bottom step.

"Really," he said in a complaining voice, "this is most extraordinary, most extraordinary. I——"

But he said no more, for at that moment there came from above the sound of a shot. A bullet ricocheted against the wall, and, coming off at an angle, went with a soft "flup" into the little colonel's head. He toppled over, and Wilmers found himself staring at a purple patch on the little colonel's baldness.

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A second bullet came zipping and skidding down the wall.

This brought Wilmers back to the business to be done, and, raising his own weapon, he fired at random up the well of the staircase into the dark. After the report he heard the sound of a low cry and the pattering of feet on bare boards.

"Come on," shouted Jones, "that fiend upstairs may blow us to bits if he gets a chance."

The light of Jones's lantern cast fantastic shadows across the stairs, and half a dozen times, mistaking shadow for substance, Wilmers and Jones missed their footing as they blundered on. When they got to the landing they paused for breath.

"You see to this floor," said Wilmers, "and I'll get on to the next."

The stairway loomed dimly before them.

"Right," said Jones, and plunged into a doorway.

Wilmers crashed up the next flight of stairs two steps at a time. As he gained the next landing he saw a ray of light stealing beneath a closed door. In a second he was across the landing and had flung the door wide open. He saw that the room was little and bare, and lighted only by a candle perched on a ragged packing-case. In a corner crouched a man holding one hand to his side. Blood was trickling through his fingers. Between his knees he held what looked like a battery, and in his right hand he grasped the loose ends of half a dozen wires, which ran downwards through a hole in the floor.

Remembering Ramsay's story, Wilmers realized in a flash the purpose of the man's actions.

He was trying to connect with the battery the electric wires which would fire the explosives stored below. He made a rush towards the man, but as he did so a great wave of pain convulsed him. The man heard his stag-

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gering footsteps, and looked backwards over his shoulder. And Wilmers saw the face of Mannheim.

Wilmers tottered across to him, and to stave him off Mannheim took his disengaged hand from his side. As he did so the blood spurted from his body.

Mannheim released the wires and stood up. He and Wilmers faced each other, with their knees giving way beneath them from weakness and from pain. They fell against each other and rolled over on to the floor. Gathering what strength remained to him, Wilmers turned Mannheim over and kneeled upon his chest. In the uncertain light he could see Mannheim's face going from white to grey.

"Let me go," whispered Mannheim. "I'm done. Prop my head up and be quick. I've something to say."

Wilmers took his knees from Mannheim's chest and squatted on the floor beside him. Very feebly he lifted up Mannheim's head. He could hear Jones coming up the stairs, and wondered if he would come in time.

"Quick. Be quick," whispered Mannheim. "Put your head down."

Wilmers put his head to Mannheim's mouth, and Mannheim jerked out a few spasmodic words.

Suddenly Wilmers felt the weight of Mannheim's head grow tenfold in his hands. He let it go, and it fell with a little thud on to the floor.

"Thank Heaven!" he said, "thank Heaven!"

Jones came tearing into the room, and Wilmers fell heavily across Mannheim's body.

XXXVIII

WHEN Jones found Wilmers lying across Mannheim's body he dragged him off, and then whistled for the constables below. They came clattering up with heavy feet, and stood awkwardly about the little room.

Then began a search for water, and at last a constable brought some from the basement in his helmet. But it was a good while before Wilmers' eyes were opened.

"Mannheim?" he asked.

"Dead," said Jones, in a level tone and his best official manner. "Dead as a doornail," he added unofficially.

Without consulting Wilmers further he ordered two constables to carry him downstairs.

Here they laid him upon a bed made of a couple of constables' top-coats. The sound of the firing in the house had brought up a patrol of mounted police, and through the open door Wilmers could see the horses moving about the road. Mr. Jones lingered by his side, evidently waiting for him to speak, but it was some minutes before Wilmers was able to do this.

"Do you think you could get some vehicle to take me to the hotel?" he asked at length. "I'm too shaken up to walk, and it is necessary that I should go back to London at once."

"I am afraid," said Jones, doubtfully, "that we can find nothing better than a stretcher at this time of night."

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"Say, rather, this time in the morning," said Wilmers, with a feeble smile, for, looking out of the doorway, he could see that the shadows were growing pale with the dawn.

Mr. Jones still hovered about him, and presently Wilmers felt strong enough to give some sort of an explanation as to what had befallen him in the little room upstairs. But first he asked questions.

"What did you find?" he began.

"Everything," said Mr. Jones, comprehensively. "The cellar was choke full of stuff. I should think it would have pretty well blown the street to blazes if they had started it. Those wires that Mannheim was holding the heads of were to be linked up with other wires that stretched across to the back of a house in a street running parallel with this. It was a clever idea, and if they had carried it out they might have destroyed the whole of the plant below and got off without a scratch.

He paused for a few moments and said, "Now, sir, if you don't mind, I'd like to know what took place upstairs."

"Look here, Jones," said Wilmers, "I'd like to be frank with you, but I can't. I'd like to tell you what Mannheim told me before he died. But I feel that it is impossible for me to speak of it to any one except Mr. Blair. That is why I am anxious to get back to London. In the main, Mannheim's communication concerned me. In part it concerns distinctly high affairs of State. Now, my own business, in spite of all your kindness, I wish to keep to myself; as for the affairs of the State, they must naturally go to the Prime Minister."

"Very well, sir," said Mr. Jones, and his manner was a trifle huffy.

By this time the stretcher had been brought to the door.

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"It seems to me," said Mr. Jones, "that we are going to have rather a lively passage home. The rumpus has aroused half the neighbourhood. Just listen."

Wilmers raised himself on his elbow and listened. In the distance he could hear the sound of shouting and the trampling of horses' feet. He looked inquiringly at the placid Mr. Jones.

"Mob," said the official briefly, "and the police are riding them out of the street, I expect."

Wilmers groaned as he was lifted into the stretcher, and then a couple of policemen picked him up, and without more ado carried him down the steps and into the road. The constables who had accompanied him to the house had already disappeared. They had got off with all the speed they could as soon as they had secured their prisoners.

Half a dozen mounted policemen formed up about the litter, and there began a slow and, for Wilmers, a very painful progress back to the Midland Hotel.

As they passed through the streets the people of Birmingham, now rousing from their slumbers, stared at the strange little procession from the windows or came running out from the doorways. Wilmers drew a handkerchief over his face and feigned sleep till the hotel was reached. He was rather weary of the questioning of the complaining Manners.

When they reached the hotel Wilmers found that to some extent his luck held good. There was a train starting for London in less than an hour. The news brought Wilmers such relief that for the first time since he had fallen unconscious across Mannheim's body he realized the great weight that had been lifted from his mind by the words of the dying man.

He smiled serenely throughout the journey back to town, and Manners and Jones, in their own corners of the

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carriage, eyed him from time to time with a shade of suspicion.

A long wire sent on in advance to Mr. Blair brought an ambulance to Euston, and in this Wilmers travelled back to Downing Street alone.

He thought very tenderly of the last trip that he had made in that ambulance. Then Virginia had been with him, but none the less his heart had not been so light as it was now.

At Downing Street he had sufficiently got back his strength to be able to walk up the steps alone, and so into Mr. Blair's room.

As he entered, the Prime Minister looked at him with a none too pleased expression.

"You seem," he said, "a somewhat easy man to dupe."

"The duping," replied Wilmers, a trifle nettled at his reception, "was exceedingly well done."

"Perhaps," agreed Mr. Blair; "and there may be some excuse for you in that. Now let me hear as quickly as you can all that you have to say."

In as few words as he could contrive Wilmers gave him the history of the past forty-eight hours, till he came to the point where Mannheim had pulled Wilmers' ear down to his dying lips.

Here Wilmers paused. He had no intention of being dramatic, but, as it came about, the pause was not without its dramatic effect.

"What Mannheim told me," said Wilmers, "was this. That the marriage in the cellar was not a marriage at all, because the so-called pastor was no pastor. He was, it seems, some disreputable old Jew that Von Prosen had hired for the purpose."

"Ah," said the Prime Minister. His tone was by no means sympathetic. Much less did he congratulate Wilmers.

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"Yes," Wilmers went on, "and he told me, too, where to find Von Prosen and where to find Miss Newcombe." He would have said "Virginia" had his uncle's manner been a little less frigid.

"Then the last dying speech and confession of our friend Mannheim was apparently of some use," suggested the Prime Minister.

"I think that you will find that is the case," answered Wilmers. "For what he told me was this—that Von Prosen was making for the yacht belonging to Miss Newcombe's uncle, and that that yacht is at the present time hanging about outside Sandy Hook. He also told me that there was a scheme to get Miss Newcombe on board the vessel. That was all he told me, but the information seems valuable."

"It will be very valuable," answered the Prime Minister, "if the man were speaking the truth."

"I see no reason to suspect him of lying," said Wilmers. "He was contrite enough over the part that he had played."

"Villains about to die are always contrite," said the Prime Minister.

"Too contrite to lie, I fancy," said Wilmers.

"That is probably the case," agreed Mr. Blair, "and we will act on the information at once."

He walked across the room and ran his finger along a list of vessels.

Then he turned round sharply, and Wilmers saw that a sudden change had come over his uncle's face. The Prime Minister was beaming.

"Forgive me, my boy," he said, as he walked across the room and held out his hand, "if I was a trifle snappy just now. Nothing annoys a man more than to be badly done, especially at a time when it is extremely undesirable to fall into the pitfalls which your adversary has prepared

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for you—and we seem to have fallen into one in a most obliging way.”

He took a turn down the room, as though anxious to shake off the atmosphere of that subject.

When he came back to Wilmers he was his own old cheery and businesslike self.

“Now to work,” he said. “After all, you will have to make that trip to the States—not with Virginia, I am sorry to say, but to find her.”

“The best I can do for you,” he went on, “is the new Admiralty yacht, the *Enslaver*. Unless our authorities are grievous liars, she can outsteam the *Teutonic* any day in the week. And so there is just the chance that she may overhaul the liner before she gets to New York.

“The *Enslaver* is at Chatham, and as there is now a hole in the barrage sufficiently large for the passage of small craft, you will be able to get round to Chatham by water. But for that trip you will want a pretty big launch, and I am afraid we shan’t be able to lay hands on one for a couple of hours. Till then you had better rest.”

“There’s just one point,” said Wilmers. “I am wondering what has happened to old Crow. They may have got hold of him, and he may not be with Virginia. If so, we shall be without any financial assistance on the other side, and I am about as capable of grappling with the grain corner as I am of darning socks.”

“Quite so,” replied Mr. Blair, “quite so. In that case I’ll send across to the Treasury for young Saunders—quite as good as old Crow at this sort of business, as a matter of fact, only we dare not admit it because of Crow’s seniority. Any one else you want?”

“I think not,” said Wilmers. “If Saunders is a good man at figures I can take my whack at scrapping, if it comes to that—only I am so jolly weak. If you could spare me Mendip——”

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The Prime Minister interrupted him.

"All right," he said, "Mendip shall go."

"There's one other matter," resumed Wilmers, "on which I should like your advice. If we reach New York before the *Teutonic* gets there all will be plain sailing, but if we do not we may find Virginia missing. In that case it seems to me that the best steps to take would be to immediately investigate the ship's company of her uncle's yacht. But that may require more authority than we possess."

"Never mind authority," replied Mr. Blair. "I'll stand by the risk of anything you do. In any case, you will have weight of numbers and certainly weight of armament on your side—and, if you have to turn to and be pirate, turn to and be pirate. Just go ahead, and do what you think is best, and don't worry about the consequences. I'll take care of them. Things will hardly be looked on in a very serious light when all the circumstances are explained—if it is ever necessary to explain them."

"Do I understand," asked Wilmers, "that I have authority to board this yacht if need be?"

"You have authority to sink her," said the Prime Minister, "if it comes to that—and now get upstairs to rest. Then for the last act of this singularly thrilling melodrama."

XXXIX

THE engineer-commander of the *Enslaver* did his best, but when Sandy Hook showed up on the horizon it was certain that the *Teutonic* had, with her two days' start, reached New York before them.

It was then that Wilmers called a minor council of war in the captain's cabin, with Mendip as chief adviser.

"It seems to me," Wilmers began, "that there is not much use in racing into New York and making inquiries for Miss Newcombe there, because, seeing the man with whom we have to deal, Von Prosen would most likely come to hear of our arrival—you cannot escape from the New York reporter—and would, with the warning that he got, be able to outwit us."

Wilmers was very grave. After the sudden lightening of his heart that came with Mannheim's confession a great anxiety had settled down on him as to how Virginia would fare in Von Prosen's hands. There was one dread in particular which tortured him to the verge of breakdown.

The captain settled himself with what to Wilmers was almost an intolerable cosiness into his chair. The skipper was a good seaman, but given to posing. Fortunately, his great pose was that of immeasurable sang-froid and unruffled bravery. Also fortunately, he possessed a heart in a sufficiently healthy state to enable him to sustain his pose. He was, in fact, for all his vanity, a man to rely on when one's back was against the wall.

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"I propose," Wilmers continued, "that we slow down and see what we can see."

"By which," interjected Mendip, "I presume you mean that we should endeavour to discover the whereabouts of the mysterious yacht?"

"Just so," Wilmers agreed, "and the name of her, as I discovered by searching the textbooks before we started, is the *Trust*."

"Good dog, *Trust*," murmured Mendip under his breath, being careful that the jest did not reach Wilmers' ears.

"She's two-masted and square-sail schooner rigged," Wilmers went on, "and therefore, unless they've been changing her outward aspect, she should not be hard to find."

"And when we have found her?" asked the captain.

"When we have found her," said Wilmers, "we will go on board, and you will be kind enough to furnish me with a galley and a full crew and, say, half a dozen spare men. We are flying the blue ensign, and unless the skipper of the *Trust* is a particularly smart man he will hardly suspect us—for this packet really does look like a yacht.

"When we go aboard, too, I suggest that we put our men into jerseys. Navy jumpers will hardly suit our purpose, and certainly won't act as a disguise."

"I suppose," remarked the captain with a grin, "that you'd like muffled oars and the crew rowing with cutlasses between their teeth?"

"Not exactly," said Wilmers, and his tone was not one to encourage flippancy.

"What's it to be, then?" asked the skipper, "shooting-irons?"

"Shooting-irons' will do admirably well," said Wilmers.

"That point being settled," returned the captain, "suppose we discuss the question of command. I'd quite like the

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job myself, but unfortunately, even though etiquette and the King's regulations seem to be going rather cheap just now, I don't feel inclined to take the responsibility of leaving my ship."

"You needn't bother to do that," said Wilmers. "You can give me an officer, or a brace of them if you like, but it must be on the understanding that I have the command."

At this moment a bluejacket—a messenger from the officer of the watch—knocked at the door of the cabin. He followed immediately on his knock and pattered across the carpet in his bare feet. In one hand he carried his cap and with the other he held out a slate on which were written hieroglyphics in chalk.

The captain glanced at them casually. Then in a leisurely way he said—

"If we are going to do business to-night we'd better get up on deck, or we shall be past Sandy Hook before we know it."

The three men went up to the quarter-deck, and the captain sent word to the bridge for half speed; and as the vessel began to lose way they scanned the shipping that was dotted thinly about them.

"Square-sail schooner rigged, I think you said?" asked the captain.

Wilmers took his glasses from his eyes and nodded.

"Then there she lies," said the captain, and he pointed to the southward.

"Five miles, I should say," he added.

Wilmers felt the muscles tighten about his heart. This was the time for literally steaming full speed ahead.

"We'd better go south," he said, "and get to work at once."

A quarter of an hour's steaming brought them to

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within a biscuit's-throw of the yacht. Then the skipper of the English boat let her drift upon the tide. From the bridge of the other yacht glasses were turned upon the *Enslaver*. But all hamper that could betray the Admiralty boat had been removed, and with the exception of half a dozen hands the crew had been sent below. The decks of the *Enslaver* were, as a matter of fact, artistically untidy.

The galley was lowered away, and Wilmers and Mendip, with a lieutenant, took their seats in the stern. And as they made the crossing of the gently heaving water the coxswain cursed the unevenly dressed crew for pulling too regular a stroke.

As they swept alongside the gangway a Yankee sailor-man with a cigar in the corner of his mouth came to the side, and with a challenging glance shouted, "What d'ye want?"

Mendip, having polished his monocle, placed it daintily in his eye and surveyed the scowling Yankee with a sweet smile.

Wilmers said not a word, but jumped on to the grating and ran up the gangway steps. Mendip followed him, and they stood together on the deck.

"I want your skipper," said Wilmers.

"Is that so?" said a drawling voice, and a big man, hands in pockets, lounged out of the break of the bridge.

"Skipper of this yacht?" asked Wilmers.

"That's so," answered the drawling voice.

"Then," said Wilmers, "perhaps you will be kind enough to send word to Baron Von Prosen that I wish to speak with him."

"Is that so?" drawled the Yankee skipper's voice again. "And who shall I say does him the honour of calling?"

"It will be quite sufficient," answered Wilmers, "if you

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tell him that a gentleman of his acquaintance wishes to see him. You may tell him, if you please, that I have called about a little business matter in Chicago."

The captain stared at him, and before he answered walked to the side and looked down at the galley.

"Say," he asked, turning round, "have you come to steal the ship?"

"Never you mind," said Wilmers, and called the officer up from the boat.

When he stood on the deck Wilmers spoke into his ear.

"Mendip and I will start the racket," he said. "If it comes to business, tumble the men out of the boat."

With a grin the officer glanced down the gangway. It was obvious that the men in the boat knew that something was in the wind, and not being clothed for once in His Majesty's uniform there was less discipline among them than usual. One man, for instance, was holding his heart and rolling up his eyes in mock terror. Another nudged his mate in the ribs and then spat into his hands, highly pleased anticipation lighting up his eyes.

"Now," said Wilmers, turning to the captain again, "perhaps you will be kind enough to send that message."

"Jest so," was the answer, and the dilatory captain called a man from the fore-deck.

When he had given the man his orders he turned again to the side. "Now, if you was to ask me," he remarked slowly, "I should say that that boat-load is a pretty good fake. I have seen the cut of that boat before—and it belonged to the British Navy."

"Oh!" said Wilmers. His tone was pleasant and amused.

He had, however, no time for conversation with the surly captain, for he heard the sound of a hoarse, sharp little cry, and, turning about, he saw the huge bulk of Von Prosen looming in the alley-way by the deck-house.

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Von Prosen was standing with his head thrust forward, his mouth lolling open, and his eyes bulging. He was staring at Wilmers like a man who beholds a ghost. He threw up his hands to his head and reeled. Then, without a word, he faced about and began to run with quick though staggering steps along the alley-way.

Wilmers was so astounded at the terror of the iron-nerved Von Prosen that he stood and watched him run along the alley-way. But he saw the folly and the possible consequences of letting Von Prosen go, and, shouting "Come on" to Mendip, he dived into the opening beneath the bridge.

On the after-deck the wonder-struck face of a sailor gazing at the companion showed them the way which Von Prosen had taken.

Wilmers plunged through the hatch, Mendip hard upon his heels, and the Yankee skipper lumbering after them.

In the saloon they saw Von Prosen standing with his back to a door at the farther end of it. He was holding his tightly-clenched fists out before him. His face was the colour of clay, and was twisted as though with an awful agony. His eyes were mad with fear, and his tongue drooped over his fallen jaw.

Wilmers and Mendip dashed across the saloon, but even as they did so Von Prosen tottered, and without uttering a word, crashed forward on to his face.

They rolled him over, and it took but a second to see that he was dead. His countenance was so distorted and hideous in its rage that Wilmers clutched the cloth from off the table, heedless of the silver that he sent spinning to the floor, and wrapped it about Von Prosen's head.

There was no movement on the yacht, and in the silence Wilmers and Mendip looked at one another with startled faces across the dead, for in the hush they could hear the sound of a woman weeping.

XL

WILMERS was first to reach the door. He found it locked.

Without the slightest hesitation he bent over Von Prosen and searched the dead man's pockets. In one of them he found what was evidently the key of the door from behind which came the quiet weeping.

In the meantime the surly captain had been standing by looking stolidly on. To him Wilmers turned and said, "Get this out of here," and he pointed to Von Prosen.

The captain nodded his head without a word, and then went up the hatch. Soon a couple of men came down to carry the dead man out.

Wilmers fretted and fumed as the men bungled at their work.

"In the name of goodness," asked Mendip, "how long are you going to be before you open that door and see what is happening to Miss Newcombe?"

"Nothing," answered Wilmers, "is very seriously the matter with Miss Newcombe, or she would hardly be crying like that. The thing now is to avoid giving her a shock. If we break in on her, especially with Von Prosen lying there, she might well be frightened out of her wits. Besides, she does not expect us. Go and find the captain and send him down to me. He'd better break the news to her."

When the captain came down again he looked at Wilmers in his surly way.

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"Nice doings," he grumbled ; "not that it matters much to me. I am glad to be rid of the man. It is none of my business to keep young ladies locked in their rooms, and if it was not for Mr. Harman's orders it would never have been done."

"It is not our business," answered Wilmers, "to keep that young lady there now ; but I am anxious she shall learn of my arrival here as gently as possible."

"And who shall I say is here ?" asked the captain.

"My name is Lord Wilmers ; but that you need not mention. Here's the key. Now go in and tell her that Von Prosen has been taken ill, and that friends of hers have arrived from England. I will wait here."

The captain opened the door and went in, knocking softly on the panels first. Wilmers could hear him saying something in a low voice. Then the captain came to the door again and beckoned.

"It occurs to me," said Mendip, "that we'd better send for the doctor," and he went out of the saloon.

The captain, too, seemed struck with the idea that the cabin was no place for him, and he followed Mendip up on deck. Virginia came to the door of the cabin and stood looking out with eyes bright with tears and wonder and hope. When she saw Wilmers she remained standing in the doorway. She was too astonished even to cry out.

Wilmers went over to her, led her into the saloon, and there sat her down. They gave each other no greetings. Wilmers simply narrated what had occurred since the telegram had divided them at Liverpool.

"So you see," he said, in conclusion, "as things came about it was pretty easy for us to find you. But what we want to know is how you came to be here ?"

Virginia told her tale in a simple and practical way, but it was easy to see that she was a good deal shaken by the terror through which she had passed.

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Coming to the point where on awaking she had heard Von Prosen's laughter outside her door, she paused for a little while.

"Von Prosen," she said at last, "knocked before he came in, and when he did so he seemed in a way quite changed. The madness had left him, and he was quite quiet—but he was quiet in a horrible way. I could tell that he was triumphant. He imagined that at last things were working as he wanted them.

"He apologized," Virginia went on, "for making me a prisoner. Of course, he blamed me, and not himself. I asked him what he proposed to do, and he said that he should remain on the yacht for two or three days while the corner was got to work. Of that he said my uncle had absolute charge. He then went on to explain that he would be compelled to keep me on the boat, and that it would be impossible to allow me very much liberty.

"I assure you that I do not think, no matter what might happen, that I could ever feel more helpless than I did then. If I had been a man I should have tried to kill him. As it was, I could do nothing. I saw, too, that any outburst on my part would simply increase his sense of triumph. So I said nothing, absolutely nothing. I did not even tell him what a miserable cur he was."

"And the marriage," asked Wilmers, "what did he say of that?"

"Very little. He had attempted that subject on the *Teutonic*, but what I said to him then did not encourage him. I think that, as a matter of fact, he was content to leave that subject alone for the time being. He felt so sure of himself, you see."

Wilmers, of course, had told Virginia of Mannheim's confession, and Virginia had received the news quite calmly. All emotion, indeed, had been crushed out of her. "It is a great weight off my heart," she had

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said, "but I felt all along that the marriage was too hideous to be really true."

"Now," said Wilmers, when they had told each other as briefly as possible all that there was to tell, "we must go aboard the *Enslaver* and make for New York. There is little time to be lost. But, first—and it is very important—where on earth is Mr. Crow?"

Virginia stared in a bewildered way. Up to that point they had both of them, with some excuse, forgotten Mr. Crow's existence.

"Well, we'll get on deck and ask the captain," said Wilmers. And they went out of the saloon together. On deck Mendip came up and shook hands with Virginia. They said "How do you do?" as though they were meeting in a London drawing-room. Then Mendip took Wilmers on one side and spoke of Von Prosen.

"The doctor's not quite sure," he said, "what killed Von P. He could not say without an autopsy, but he judges it was a clot of blood on the brain, as the result of the great mental stress. However, that's a matter to see to afterwards, I presume. While you were below it occurred to me to ask for Mr. Crow. He, too, it appears, was a sort of state prisoner. I have scared the captain pretty well out of his drawl, and have told him to bring the poor old gentleman on deck. Ah! here he is."

Mr. Crow, looking a little white and shaken, and more surprised than ever, emerged from the hatch on the fore-deck. He still carried his *Christian Year* tucked under one arm. Virginia ran over to him and stood with her hands on his arm, smiling down at him.

"Poor Mr. Crow," she said, "poor Mr. Crow."

Mr. Crow looked in a dazed way from her to Wilmers, and from Wilmers to Mendip and back again.

"This is really," he said, "most surprising, most surprising." Then he grew a little stiff and formal.

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"It occurs to me," he continued, "that some sort of explanation is required. I came to New York on a matter of business, and not to indulge in theatricals."

"You shall have the explanations, Mr. Crow," said Wilmers, "but first let us get on board our own vessel. It is useless for us to remain here, and I do not suppose that any of us possess a desire to do so."

"And Von Prosen?" asked Mr. Crow.

Wilmers told him what had befallen Von Prosen. Mr. Crow blinked at the fading daylight and looked more surprised, if possible, than before.

As they went over the side the captain of the *Trust* came to the gangway.

"What are you going to do about the Baron?" he asked.

"That," replied Wilmers coldly, "is your affair. I am not responsible for his death. I presume you will have to make explanations to Mr. Harman, and possibly to other authorities."

If Virginia had not been there it is quite certain the captain would have sworn. As it was, he made a choking noise in his throat and walked away to his cabin. He was at that moment the most harassed and unhappy man on the high seas.

The explanations to Mr. Crow on the *Enslaver* occupied so long that they were barely concluded when the yacht reached New York. There was the usual palaver with the wolf-like Customs officials before they went ashore. It had been decided that Mendip should accompany Virginia to the Park Avenue Hotel, and that Wilmers and Mr. Crow should seek Mr. Harman at his office.

Wilmers had suggested that in all probability the financier would not be there, but at this Virginia had smiled.

"You do not know New York," she said. "At such

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a time my uncle will probably be working till midnight."

The porter at the cathedral-like building in which were Mr. Harman's offices informed Wilmers in an off-hand way that he had not seen the gentleman in question for two days. There were, however, he added, still clerks in the office.

Wilmers and Mr. Crow entered the gilt-edged lift and arrived on the eighth story before Mr. Crow had time in which to add another wrinkle to his eyebrows.

In Mr. Harman's offices they found a young man in a shirt like a blouse and a pair of trousers so carefully creased that they had the appearance of tin tubes.

"If you want to see Mr. Harman," he said, eyeing Wilmers as he might have done a man who had come to push a new line in typewriting tapes, "you will have to go to Chicago."

"Chicago?" echoed Wilmers. "Chicago? Why Chicago?"

"Business," said the young man in the tin tube trousers, and turned away. Mr. Crow sighed. He had tasted the very heights of surprise.

On regaining the street they took a cab up Broadway to the Park Avenue Hotel.

When they reached the huge building, Wilmers, who was already unconsciously picking up some of the conversational methods of New York, went over to the inquiry clerk's desk and asked, "When can I get to Chicago?"

The man did not raise his eyes from his ledger. "The Limited goes in an hour," he said, "but every seat is booked."

Unperceived by Wilmers, Virginia had been standing at his elbow.

"Is my uncle in Chicago?" she asked.

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"He is," replied Wilmers; "and I find that we cannot get there to-night."

"Oh, yes, we can," said Virginia, "for this is New York, and there are special trains."

"Surely," said Wilmers, "you cannot get a special train that will take you to Chicago at this time of night?"

The clerk had looked up from his ledger now and laid his hand on the receiver of the telephone.

"Shall I order one?" he asked.

"Yes," said Virginia, "right now," and she gave the clerk instructions for the special train with less concern than most women display in the selection of a new hat.

That night they slept in the train, and in the morning on arriving at Chicago they drove immediately to the hotel where, so the young man in the tin tube pants had said, they would find Mr. Harman.

But Mr. Harman had gone down to the offices of Messrs. James and Swann. To these offices they followed him.

The offices were of rather an old-fashioned order, dull, sombre, and solemn. They were the quiet birthplace of many a wild panic, and the decorous manufactory of innumerable financial bombs.

Wilmers scribbled Virginia's name on one of his own cards, and a depressed-looking clerk disappeared with it into the gloomy fortress of the great financier. On his return he merely bowed in polite intimation that the visitors were to follow him.

As they entered the room Mr. Harman rose up to greet them.

He was an enormous man, with the neck and shoulders of a bull, and huge red animal face, the lower part of which was half hidden by a ragged beard. His eyes were

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little steel-blue slits, and his nose gleamed like a beacon. He had a jaw so rock-like that one could fancy that if John L. Sullivan struck it the prize-fighter would merely smash his fist. He was an ugly man to look on in every sense of the word.

XLI

MR. HARMAN'S calm was so colossal as to be terrifying, and the least disconcerted of the visitors was the everlastingly surprised Mr. Crow. Mr. Harman did not offer to shake hands with even Virginia ; he merely gave his great body a sort of circular twist, which was intended to be a triple bow.

There was an extremely awkward pause. Mr. Harman was as conversational as the sphinx. At last Wilmers said rather lamely, "You are probably surprised to see Miss Newcombe?"

"On the contrary," replied Mr. Harman, "I was expecting her. I learnt of her departure from New York last night."

There was another pause, during which Mr. Harman bored the gloomy wall opposite him with his gimlet eyes.

"The matter on which we have come," said Wilmers, "is one of business."

"I hardly imagined," remarked Mr. Harman, without the shadow of a smile, "that you were touring round for pleasure."

"Talking of business," said Mr. Crow, with an apologetic wave of his hand, and elevating his surprised eyebrows still more towards the ceiling, "I should be glad if you would allow me to say a few words. Perhaps, however, I had better explain my position in this matter."

"Only waste of time," said Mr. Harman. "I know all about it."

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"That is excellent," said Mr. Crow; "there is nothing I detest so much as personal explanations."

Mr. Harman looked at the old gentleman as though he did not like him.

"As you are fond of brevity," Mr. Crow went on, "I will be brief myself. The money which Miss Newcombe inherited was, I understand, left to you in trust till she reached the age of twenty-one?"

"That is so," said Mr. Harman.

"Upon her coming of age, I also understand, her father arranged that Miss Newcombe's fortune was still to be handled by you, but that you were to give an audited account of your stewardship, and that you were to continue to act for her. No investments, however, were to be made, and none of her property was to be realized, without her knowledge and consent."

"You are correctly informed," said Mr. Harman.

"The matter," Mr. Crow continued, "is one of some delicacy. As I gather, you have during the past few days realized a considerable amount of her property. It is very painful for me to have to do so, but I am compelled to suggest that you have overlooked the fact that Miss Newcombe came of age more than a week ago."

Mr. Harman, having scanned Mr. Crow thoughtfully for some moments, realized the situation, and instantly decided on his course of action.

"Then I can only say," said he, "that you do not do my memory much credit. I was perfectly aware of Miss Newcombe's coming of age, but as, owing to circumstances in England, I was unable to approach her as to her wishes, I have continued to act as I imagine her father would have wished me to do."

"You will forgive me," protested Mr. Crow, "if I do not see eye to eye with you on that last point. However, that is beside the matter. One fact remains, which I trust that

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you will see your way not to dispute—that Miss Newcombe is now fully entitled to do as she pleases with her own.”

The big man opened his mouth, but Mr. Crow raised a thin forefinger at him.

“Pardon me, my dear sir, pardon me for just one moment longer,” he said. “We will grant, for the sake of argument, that your motives were of the best, but, at the same time, there can be no doubt that you have exceeded your powers, and that you have unfortunately exceeded them in a direction which does not win Miss Newcombe’s approval.”

Wilmers was listening with interest to the new Mr. Crow, who was revealing himself. The surprised-looking old gentleman was apparently a living encyclopædia on the polite conduct of hard business affairs.

“There are other matters which unfortunately dovetail in with your primary action,” Mr. Crow continued. “I really dislike to mention them, but there is the affair of your yacht, the *Trust*; then there is the most unwelcome interference of Baron Von Prosen, and other delicate details. I can assure you that we do not wish to harp on them. Our mission is purely pacific. We press no claims, we ask what is merely reasonable, and we trust that you will not belie your reputation of being reasonable too.”

Mr. Harman smiled a trifle grimly, and, picking up a paper-knife, balanced it on his forefinger, as though weighing the pros and cons of the situation. Then he laid it carefully down and shut his big mouth tight.

“Well?” he asked.

“Ah,” said Mr. Crow, “I perceive that you are a man of profound business instincts. I will therefore ask you to what extent you have realized Miss Newcombe’s property to engineer this grain corner.”

“Forty million dollars,” said Mr. Harman. He might have been mentioning a few cents.

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"How much of that has already been employed?"

"Thirty million dollars."

"That is a large amount. You apparently proposed to make a record in corners."

"It would have been a record," agreed Mr. Harman calmly, "because it could not have failed. No existing opposition could smash us, and the thing would have been done before your Government could gather forces to oppose us."

"The Market?"

"From my point of view—excellent. Prices are advancing steadily, but that we can afford."

"You forget," interposed Mr. Crow gently, "that it is Miss Newcombe who is to afford it."

"Quite so," said Mr. Harman. "I am simply using 'we' as a figure of speech."

"Let us leave that and return to actual figures," said Mr. Crow.

"The corner has already got so far," replied Mr. Harman, "that the crash will be pretty considerable. If we stop now, Miss Newcombe stands to lose, roughly, thirty million dollars."

"And you?"

"About a million."

"Ah. Very well. Of course there is no obligation on Miss Newcombe's part to do so; but, in view of the peculiar circumstances, I shall advise her to allow that amount of compensation—after I have examined the books. The compensation, of course, will only be made in consideration that you throw no obstacles in my way of taking over the entire charge of Miss Newcombe's affairs during the coming twelve months."

Mr. Harman was still utterly unmoved. "Very well," he said.

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"Just a moment," Mr. Crow reminded him urbanely, "till we have consulted your niece."

He turned to Virginia. "Are you prepared, Miss Newcombe," he asked, "to suffer this loss? I would remind you that, while I am here for the purpose of serving you, I cannot forget the needs of my country."

"I am quite prepared," said Virginia quietly.

Wilmers gave her a quick look of gratitude. She had saved England.

"Now," said Mr. Crow, "we will proceed to action. You are, I suppose, operating in the Pit to-day?"

Mr. Harman nodded.

"Then down to the Pit we will go, and you shall have the pleasure, Mr. Harman, of operating in a different way from the methods you pursued yesterday."

"I have not been into the Pit for years," Mr. Harman said. "My operating is done by deputy."

"But, I think," said Mr. Crow, "you will see the advisability of conducting operations in person this morning."

Mr. Harman rose from his chair, and a little thrill ran through every one in that quiet room. The climax was approaching.

XLII

VIRGINIA and Wilmers drove through the forenoon racket and roar of workaday Chicago to the Board of Trade.

Here there was a great press of clamouring humanity before the doors, and fat, perspiring policemen were ruthlessly pushing men and women from the steps.

"It is not the thing," said Mr. Harman, "but we will try to get in the side way. The gallery is jammed by now, and you wouldn't stand an earthly chance."

When they had gained the building Mr. Harman made his way to the secretary's office, leaving Virginia and Wilmers standing in the passage. He came out again in a few minutes with a depressed and inoffensive-looking gentleman attired somewhat like an undertaker. This was the secretary. To him he introduced Virginia.

"I have explained the situation," said Mr. Harman, "and this gentleman, seeing the action you are taking, and what you have at stake, says that he will allow you and your friends to occupy the official gallery. I may say that it is an honour without precedent."

Virginia spoke her thanks, and they all moved down the corridor to the vestibule. Here the crush was terrible. The staircase was impassable. On every step men and women struggled for a foothold. There were plump men and thin men well known on Wall Street, clerks, workmen, and even farmers.

There was a riot of voices, above which the policeman on the top of the stairs could be heard shouting—

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“Get off there! Get down! There isn’t a seat here. Go back!”

But the only answer was the redoubled straining of the people on the stairs and an increase in the shouting.

When the secretary opened the door of the little gallery the tumult staggered them like a blow. It seemed to Wilmers as the most colossal and senseless and purposeless hubbub that he had ever heard.

He and Mr. Crow sat by the rail of the gallery, and Virginia was given a seat behind them, lest the presence of a lady should arouse too much attention.

As a matter of fact, however, the people in the visitors’ gallery were far too excited to pay any attention to them. They were leaning over the balustrade, watching with hot, eager faces and feverish eyes the pandemonium in the Pit.

From the well rose an indescribable noise. It was like the roaring of rapids. Shouts, cries, bellows, cheers, shrieks of laughter, and groans all blended into a great and deafening noise that rose ceaselessly from the human whirlpool.

Looking down, Wilmers could see one lone, calm man perched up on a high desk. He looked like a man sitting on a rock in the midst of a boiling human sea. For with apparently no reason each man in the vortex was jostling, pushing, or tearing at his neighbour.

Now and again some man would shout louder than the rest—some man evidently shouting on business. Then there would be a swaying rush towards him till the man became wellnigh engulfed. A second voice would split the tumult, and the struggling, fighting crowd would surge back again. One man was buying and the other was selling. And the struggling crowd was mad with excitement of the buying and the selling of that which was not theirs.

To Wilmers it was not at all clear how matters were

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proceeding, but he gained some slight amount of knowledge from the bellowing of a great red-necked man who, with eyes that appeared to be bursting from his head, was leaning over the corner of the strangers' balcony shouting and gesticulating like a madman.

Mr. Crow was taking stock of things in his gentle and surprised way; and as the tumult grew, and the man with the straining neck on his right bellowed the louder, he began to look more surprised than ever, and taking out his watch, gazed at it with some concern.

And well Mr. Crow might gaze; for the position now was this: The opponents of the corner were offering wheat for sale as fast as Harman's agents could buy it. They were pouring the harvest of half the world into the Pit, and Harman was buying it as they poured it in. They believed that no man could keep pace with such a tide of grain. They calculated that they had more to sell than Harman could afford to buy.

Then would come the break. The moment that Harman ceased to buy, the corner would cease to be. The price would come down with a rush, and they would buy back again cheap what they had sold dear. Then would a thousand fortunes be made at the price of one man's ruin—or, at least, the ruin of the corner.

They did not know that the corner could afford to buy all that they had to sell. Still less did they know that the buying was to be stopped at ruinous cost by the girl whose money could guarantee its safety.

But old Mr. Crow knew. He knew also that every moment that Harman delayed, the greater would be the cost. Harman's agents were buying, buying, buying. And every second that they bought, thousands of thousands of dollars were trickling from Virginia's pocket. The longer that Harman delayed in coming to stop the buying, the greater the amount Virginia stood to lose.

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And still Harman did not come.

Wilmers made a megaphone of his hands and shouted into his ear—

“How long is this going on?”

Mr. Crow tried to shout back, but his voice was lost in the hurricane of sound. Therefore he took a pencil out of his pocket and scribbled rapidly on an old piece of paper: “Waiting for Harman. We are losing thousands every minute.”

The man in the corner was bellowing more than ever. Something extra big was seemingly doing in the Pit. For down there in the maddened crowd a man was standing with both hands raised above his head and shouting. He was shouting with such force that his face was purple, and the veins on his neck swelled out like cords above his collar.

“Go on; go on!” bellowed the big man in the gallery. “Whack it all in; they’ll never buy it! Whack it all in!”

Immediately beneath Wilmers a lanky man was wrinkling up his face in a puzzled way and scratching his head, his eyes darting here and there as though in search of some one. A hundred men were clamouring about him, yelling across other men’s heads to him, and pressing on him. It was his duty to buy wheat for Mr. Harman, but as yet he had received no instructions.

Time, however, pressed, and so he made up his mind to buy, though he had no orders so to do. He struggled violently in an obvious endeavour to raise one arm to signal that he would buy. He had got his hand as far as his head, when all the noise that had gone before became as nothing to the shout which rose then. But it was a shout that died quickly away and left nothing but a long rustling murmur. It was as though a heavy sea beating on a beach had suddenly become stilled. The

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period of silence, however, might have been counted by seconds. Then came a riot worse than any as yet. Above the din could be distinctly heard the shouted words of "Harman! Harman!"

Mr. Crow gave a little sigh, and put his watch into his pocket. There would be no more unnecessary losses. Harman had come to stop the buying.

"Another five seconds," he yelled to Wilmers, "and it would have cost us another million dollars."

But Wilmers could not hear, and if he had he would not have understood.

On the other hand, Virginia saw what had come to pass, and, forgetful of the necessity of hiding herself, stood up and pressed against the rail.

Far away beneath her she saw her uncle standing, rugged and solid as an oak in the midst of a storm-tossed copse.

The lanky man who had scratched his head in puzzlement fought his way to Harman's side with the ferocity of a tiger cat. He wanted to know what Harman's presence meant. He concluded he wanted to buy.

Without the slightest ceremony he grabbed the great man about the neck, and, drawing his head to his, shouted something into his ear and pointed across to where the other man with the purple face still stood shouting, offering wheat for sale.

Mr. Harman turned his great strong beast-like face and gimlet eyes in that direction. His mouth was shut like a trap in his ragged beard. At the bellowing man with the purple face he slowly shook his head.

Every eye was on him as he gave that sign of negation, and there was a sudden hush. The silence fell so swiftly that it came as a shock. Harman had ceased buying. The corner was at an end.

But in a second all was bedlam once again. Men shook

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their fists at Harman and screamed at him. Others danced and sang, and, leaping from the ground, fell again and reeled against other men. The clamour was awful, but the dominating feature of it seemed to be that of joy. Harman had come into the Pit and declined to buy. Therefore the corner by that one nod of Harman's head had ceased to be.

The man at the end of the gallery yelled "Busted, by gum! Busted." And then fell back in his seat with a face on which was written blank amazement.

Blank amazement, too, began to lessen the hubbub down below. It was pretty well known by now what resources Harman had at his back, and to the older heads it seemed impossible that Harman should have gone under at that stage of the game; and this reasoning kept many of the men quiet.

Then it was that the big man in the corner of the gallery, rolling his eyes about him in his wonderment, observed Virginia.

"By heaven!" he shouted. "By heaven!" And he brought his fist crashing down on to the rail. At his cry a dozen people turned and beheld Virginia too. The big man was pointing at her with a shaking hand.

"Miss Newcombe!" he yelled. "Miss Newcombe!"

The gallery took this cry up, and it drowned every other shout. "Miss Newcombe! Miss Newcombe! Miss Newcombe!" was yelled along the length of the gallery. They yelled it for the most part without reason, for it is doubtful if any of them, saving only the big man, knew her by sight. But the enterprise of a Chicago newspaper had unearthed the mystery of Mr. Harman's colossal resources, and they understood what the cry of "Miss Newcombe" meant. Miss Newcombe had returned to New York and stopped the grain corner.

Virginia shrank back, and Mr. Crow and Wilmers

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thrust themselves before her. The precaution, however, came too late. Every one in the gallery had turned towards her, and louder and louder rose that deafening shout of "Miss Newcombe! Miss Newcombe!"

Even the men in the Pit heard it above the uproar there, and a hundred tense and straining faces were turned upwards to the little gallery, where sat the girl who had, to her own great loss, smashed a record corner. And the men, who had danced and shouted and sang when Harman had come into the Pit and stopped the buying, danced and yelled and shouted again. And they cheered—sharp, high, nervous, staccato cheers.

There followed a tornado of shouted questions. Each man in the seething Pit yelled queries at his neighbour. They understood now that it was Miss Newcombe who had stopped the corner. But why?—why?—why?

"Millions gone!" they yelled. "Why?"

"If they've taken that lot nothing can stop them!"

"What's it mean? It's foolery. Madness."

"What's the game?"

The shouted inquiries and comments raised a fresh storm of noise.

One fact, however, stood out plain. Miss Newcombe had "busted" the corner—"busted" it on her own account, and Harman had "busted" it for her. And the majority standing to win by that, they fell to cheering, cheering, and cheering.

Harman was swaying gently to and fro, as men hurled themselves upon him with wild questionings. He looked up, and flashed a glance of his gimlet eyes at Virginia. A momentary and inscrutable smile passed across his face.

Then he shot out his long, powerful arms and breasted the crush. Deliberately, and with sheer brute force, he began to fight his way to the door.

Every man then turned and also began fighting for the

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exits. The excitement was too great for them even to think any more of profit or loss. It was the mystery of the "busting" of the corner that engrossed them.

They wanted news—all the news. And they fought madly with one another to follow Harman and gain the door. The people in the gallery, too, had already risen up, and were crushing and fighting and scrambling across the seats for the exit. They also wanted news—all the news. They wanted to understand what had happened. So far as they were concerned, the heavens and the earth had fallen away.

Virginia was still sheltering behind Wilmers and Mr. Crow when the door opened and the secretary came in like a polite tornado.

The secretary yelled, but they could not hear him for the racket. With a lightning-like bow of apology he grasped Virginia by the arm and whisked her out of the door, and, dragging her by the arm, began to run down the passage. Wilmers and Mr. Crow trotted at his heels. At the end of the passage the secretary opened a door with a key, and Wilmers saw that there was a flight of steps.

"Quick," said the secretary, and pushed Virginia through. Wilmers he thrust in after her. Then he slammed the door to and seized hold of Mr. Crow.

"Come on down to Mr. Harman," he shouted, and ran along the passage towards a second flight of stairs. He was just in time, for, at the end of the corridor, four struggling constables could no longer hold the crowd in check.

The press had become so great that the policemen were swept away, and yelling men and women came tearing down the passage.

Virginia and Wilmers found themselves standing on the stairs, on the farther side of the door, gazing at each

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other in perplexity. They heard the whooping, roaring crowd go tearing past the door, and, splitting the din, they heard cries of "Miss Newcombe! Miss Newcombe!" Then they understood.

"The secretary's idea," said Wilmers, "was evidently to save you from your friends, and apparently he has done that with about two minutes to spare. I am sure I do not know where we are. We had better go up and see."

They went up the stairs together and found themselves in a short passage out of which there opened two small rooms. They were apparently offices, but there was no one in them.

"Here, I suppose," said Wilmers, "we shall have to wait till Mr. Crow returns." And he led the way to a window-seat at the end of the corridor.

The view from the window was one of the endless roofs of Chicago's sky-scrapers enmeshed in a tangle of telephone wires. Virginia gazed out in silence.

For weeks incident after incident of a bewildering nature had seemed to lead her upwards towards some tremendous climax, and presumably that climax had come in the pandemonium of the Pit. She had saved England's hungry millions from becoming the victims of a desperate debauch in finance; and yet—and yet. If this were the climax, then it seemed flat and unprofitable. Her heart was beating to the words, "Is this all, is this all?"

For his part Wilmers was silent, too. In that quiet little corridor in Chicago he seemed at last to have awakened from a blurred and frantic dream. He felt that with the rush of the people past the door through which Virginia and he had escaped there had also passed away the chiefest purpose of his life—to serve Virginia.

He had served her in part from a sense of duty, but in a great measure through love. The immediate and paramount duty had been done. Why, therefore, should what

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he desired to make the service of a lifetime be brought to a close here? For love remained.

At last he spoke.

"Virginia," he said, "do not think I am indulging in heroics. It may sound a little bombastic for me to stand here in this little corridor in Chicago, and thank you in the name of my country for what you have done—but, all the same, I must do it."

Virginia said nothing. She was still looking away wistfully out of the window.

"During the last fortnight," he went on, "your heart has been so set on one thing, that you have, I know, thought of nothing but your duty. I had no justification in hoping that it might be otherwise; but, dear, there is love, too. Often love and duty are spoken of together, as though they were opposing forces. Need they be so?"

He paused and tried to search Virginia's eyes, but Virginia was still looking away out of the window.

As he could not read her eyes, Wilmers gave a little sigh.

"Forgive me," he said, "if I have done anything amiss. I know that you still feel your responsibilities are great. I only spoke because I feel that love and duty need not be of necessity divorced."

"How can they be," cried Virginia, with scarlet cheeks, as she turned about, "when they have not been married?" She caught the lapels of Wilmers' coat and hid her face in them.

"I have not only thought of duty," she whispered.

L'ENVOI

WITH the collapse of the "corner," the fabric of machinations of which that great deal was the corner-stone crumbled away.

The releasing of wheat from the States made the Sultan's closing of the Dardanelles to grain from Russia a futile thing. And with the assurance of a full food supply, Great Britain, though hardly pressed, was able to turn upon her foes.

Saxony dared not, after the shattering of the corner, move to the attack. The summoning of all the naval strength of Britain to the North Sea, and the massing of the French army upon her borders, left her impotent.

So in the end the genius of Mr. Blair won through—not, however, before a long and exceeding bitter fight. For, in the three months that followed the earthquake, troubles, instead of decreasing, multiplied; but troubles were of use. They revealed to their utmost extent the weak spots in Great Britain's social and political system, and they were revealed only to be dealt with by the Prime Minister's demolishing and reconstructing hand.

But first he carefully cleared the way for his reforms, so that at the end of six months, when Parliament again assembled, the legislators of an enthusiastic Government found themselves with practically little to do except to confirm measures which Mr. Blair had instituted when he had suspended the Constitution.

With the knowledge that had been won of its poten-

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tiality for evil, such steps were taken as rendered the alien peril a thing of naught.

Again, the dangers of slumdom and over-populated districts of poverty-stricken people being understood to their full, they were greatly mitigated.

From the ruins of the old London arose a new London that could show a clean face to the world.

The lines of the great city stood, of course, much as they always had been, much as they always must be. Only in place of the broken succession of streets running between Shepherd's Bush and Whitechapel there was one great through thoroughfare, sufficiently wide to enable a system of shallow tramways to run along the whole of its length.

Farther south it became possible for one to traverse in practically a straight line the distance lying between Hammersmith and the Bank.

Four great roads running from north to south bisected the new London, crossing the Thames at Westminster, Waterloo, Blackfriars, and London Bridges. And along the length of these too ran shallow tramways.

That individuality of architecture from which London cannot escape, of necessity remained; and therefore, while the metropolis of the world at last achieved to some extent the regularity of street construction of the younger cities of New York and Berlin, it still possessed that multitudinous variety of buildings which kept for it its charm.

And as London was physically cleansed, so was it morally bettered. The folly of leaving the known foes of society to pursue their predatory habits was recognized at length. The distress of London at the time of its earthquake encouraged the thousands of her hardened wrongdoers to reveal their collective iniquity.

The possibility of their doing much harm was fortu-

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nately frustrated by the prompt action of Mr. Blair, who, when he had caught criminals at their work, declined to any more let them go. And the nation, disgusted with people who should seek to profit through their country's misfortune, confirmed Mr. Blair's verdict in depriving such blackguards of the power to do such wrong again.

At the finish, Great Britain stood on a stronger basis than she had ever done before. Purity is strength, and her afflictions had purified her.

THE END

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