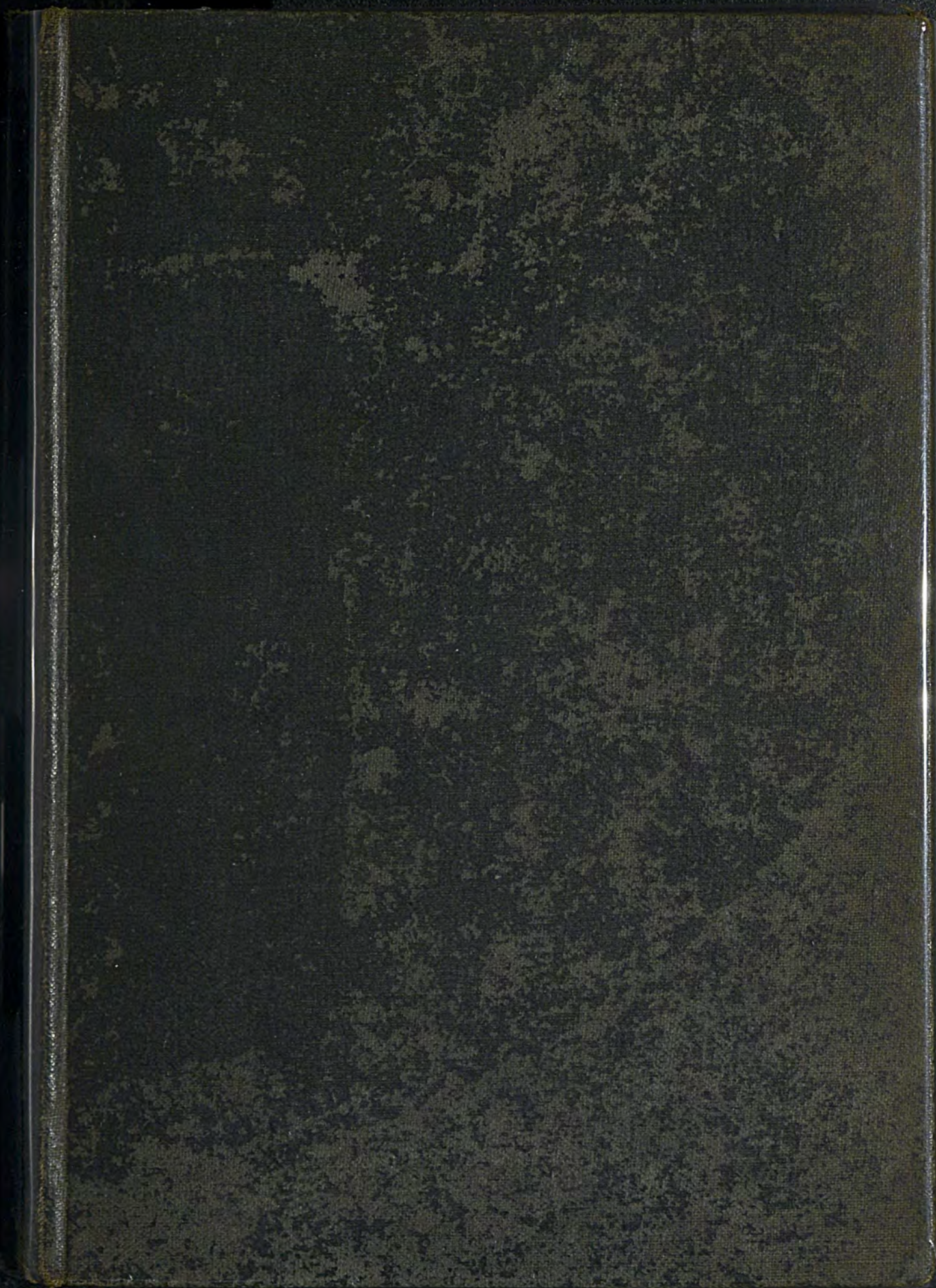


















THE FLOATING CAFÉ  
AND OTHER STORIES



*By the same Author*

MISS BRANDT—ADVENTURESS  
NIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE  
SILKEN SARAH  
THE MADONNA OF SEVEN MOONS  
THE TERRACES OF NIGHT  
BOHEMIAN GLASS  
DRUMS OF YOUTH  
SNAPDRAGON  
RED HEELS  
MADAM HOLLE  
THE CROOKED SMILE  
OVERTURE TO LIFE (*In Preparation*)  
Etc., Etc.



# THE FLOATING CAFÉ

*And Other Stories*

by

MARGERY LAWRENCE

THIRD IMPRESSION

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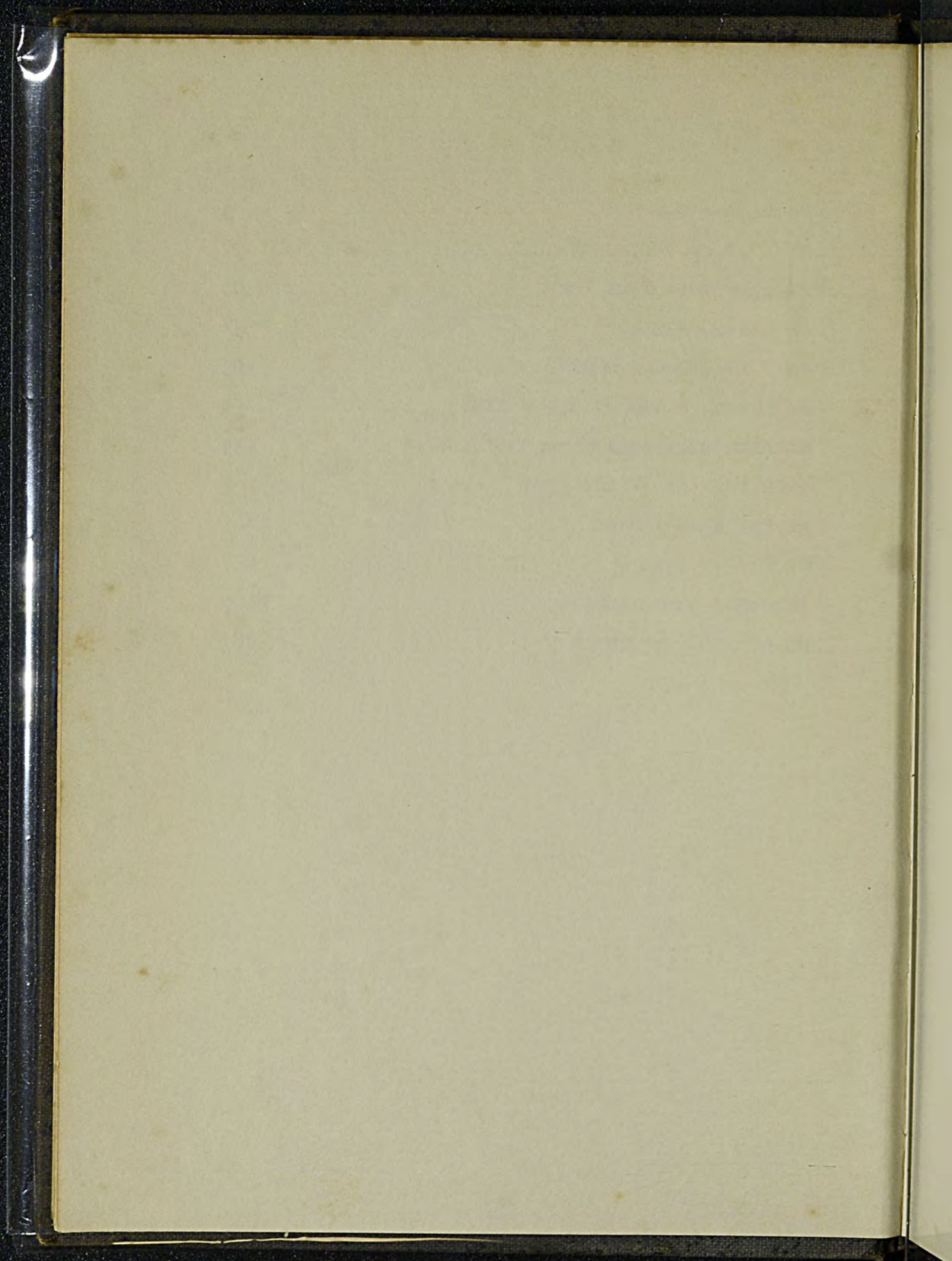
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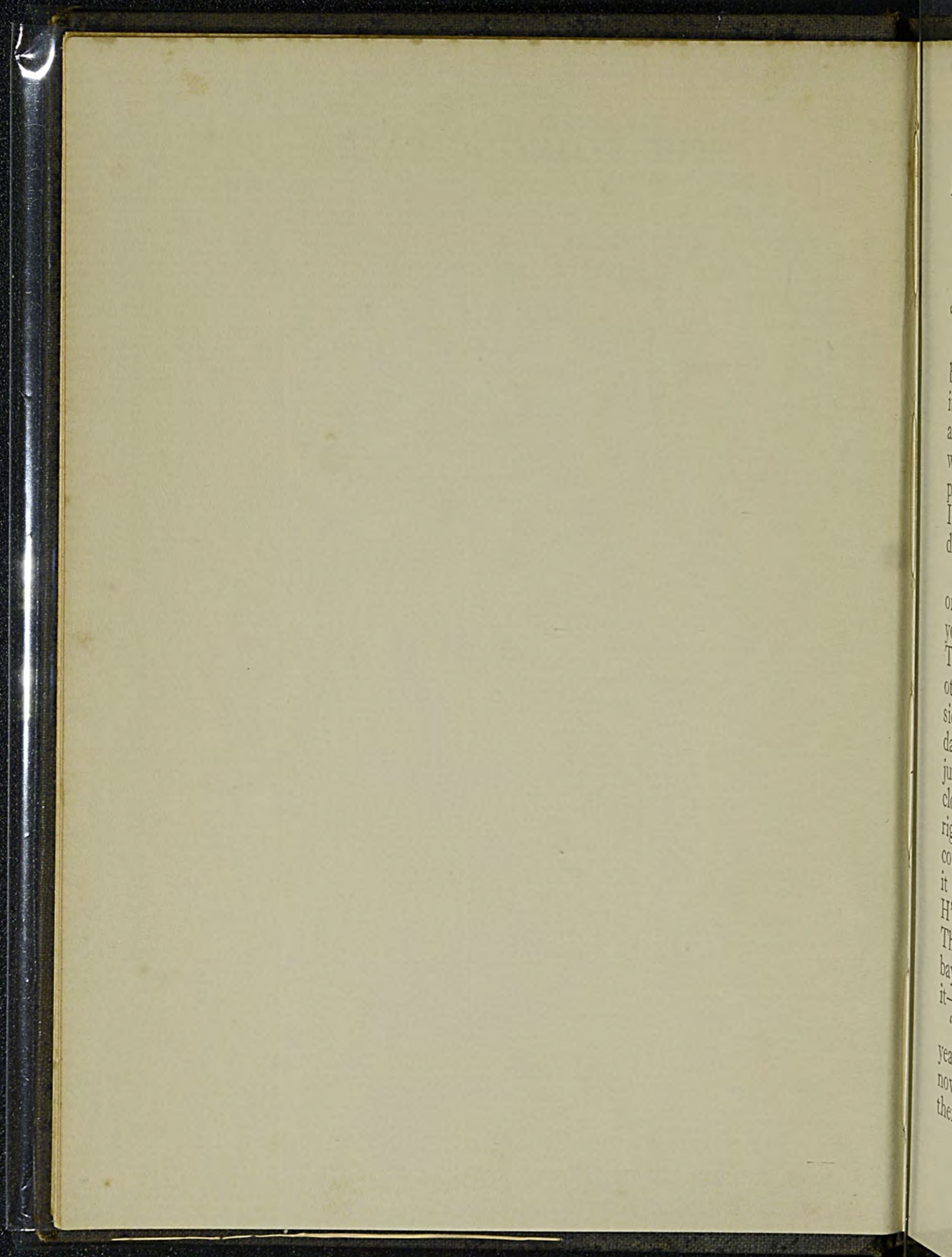






THE FLOATING CAFÉ







## THE FLOATING CAFÉ

*Being the story told by Mrs. Barrett, charwoman, of Mincombe-on-Sea, to Noel Farnworth, journalist. Told in the "Three Bells" Saloon Bar, Mincombe-on-Sea, one evening in September, 1936.*

"SO you saw it last night? Lucky you was—there aren't many get a look at it, and I've been laughed at often enough for saying I've seen it. Not but what it isn't an odd story, I *will* say—and maybe if I hadn't seen it happen myself I wouldn't have believed it. But you'd have thought people *would* have believed me, wouldn't you, when I was cleaner in the place, working regular day after day, and knew it backwards, as the saying is?

"Of course, last night was just the sort of night one *does* see it—when one sees it at all; and mind you, as I say, it's not everybody gets a look at it. This hot weather it seems to come more often than others—nights with a swimmy sort of moon sliding sideways through clouds, and the sea smooth and dark and shining, with a gleam where the ripples curl just along like long lines of white edging to a dark cloth dress. Hot and still it was last night, you're right, and the prom deserted except for a courting couple or two . . . heard one of 'em say it must be a carnival boat of some sort, did you? H'm. So they saw it too! But carnival's not till Thursday—and anyway, there ain't a boat in the bay round-shaped like that. Nor nothing a bit like it—as I ought to know.

"When did it all start? Oh, must be a good few years ago, now. Let me see. I'm going on sixty-eight now—and I couldn't 'a been more than forty-five then. Just widowed, and had to work for my living,



but I was strong and hearty and could do a day's scrubbing with the best of 'em, and so I got the job of 'char' up there at the hotel. That one on the point . . . the 'Marine.' Oh, yes; that's where it all happened. But the management's all changed now and the staff's scattered and gone, and I lay there isn't anybody remembers much about it now but me. But there, as you say, I was in it all through. Nearly got carried off, too! *Very* nearly. And there's times when I come down here along the prom for a stroll by myself in the moonlight, and hear that music sounding faint over the water—oh, yes, I can hear it often even when I don't see the thing—times when I wish I *had* been carried off, too. Like young Gerald.

"It was him that started it, I often think . . . but no. It was the café itself that wanted to go. It called to Those it wanted, and They heard it and came. And when She saw Gerald, of course, the thing was inevitable. . . .

"Well, if you want the story I don't mind telling you. If you *are* one of those Nosey Parker reporter chaps, you're a well-mannered lad, I will say, and I take it kind of you to offer a poor old char a glass of beer and a sandwich 'stead of chasing off after one of those glad-eye bits of girls who are always hanging about the prom. Guinness for me, please. Guinness is good for you. . . . Here's mud in your eye, as the sayin' is!

"Well! It's getting a bit battered now, the Marine Hotel, and no wonder. It's a windswept bit of coast this, and the hotel gets all the force of it, standing on that finger of land running out into the sea. Pro-mon-tory, did you say? I've no doubt



you're right, sir—but I'll leave you to say it. I never was a scholar. Yes, it's getting old, and a bit rusty-looking—like me. But at the time I'm talking about it was just built, and it was a knock-out—all shiny-white outside, with a flat roof and balconies running round it, and the ground floor almost all glass so that the folk inside could see the sea as they sat and ate their dinners, and the prom sweeping round the front of it right round the point. It would ha' been better if they'd left it like that, and not tried to improve the whole thing by building the café on at the point; it never brought 'em any luck, that, and since all this happened the hotel's gone down and down, and all the business gone to the new hotel at the other end of the beach. There isn't any café at the end, you say? Ah, but there *was* one—once! Wait till you've heard the story.

“Well, the place was crammed the first season and nothing would satisfy Mr. Kendal, the manager, but to build a café at the very tip of the pro . . . thank you, sir. What *you* said. He'd leave the prom as it was, he said, sweeping round the front of the hotel, and build up beyond it on the rocks at the point—you c'n see there's a sort of tumbled pile of rocks running out into the sea at the end, a sort of postscript to the solid finger of rock the hotel was built on. He said he wanted a café built right out on these rocks so's the sea came up almost all round it.

He got a well-known artist-gentleman to design it, and they drew it out on paper first—I see it once, laid out on a table in the manager's room at the office in the hotel when I was cleaning up the place. Round it was, like a sort of heathen temple, with a roof



like a Chinese pagoda running up to a point, all covered with green and blue tiles resting on slim green marble pillars, and a polished floor for the folks to dance on, with little tables where they could sit and drink, and a sort of raised platform in the middle for the band to play. Nice it looked on paper, and I never thought it could ever be as nice in real life—but when it was built it was even nicer than it looked in the drawings. Like a grotto it was—‘Neptune’s Grot,’ the papers called it, and everybody went on about it like they was fair crazy.

“Not that it had been easy to build, I heard. Everything happened to hinder them that *could* happen; there was delays in delivering the building stuffs, and once the designs were lost and had to be redone, and then there was a strike amongst the men, and then Mr. Kendal fell on the rocks and hurt himself, till the architect used to grumble and swear, and the builders all said the damn’ place didn’t seem to *want* to be built. . . . I’ve often wondered?

“They had to blast out a bed in the rocks, and build it up with cement, and then lay the floor of the whole thing flat on the top—and it was hot summer weather and they had to mix sea water with the mortar ’stead of ordinary water, ’cos there was a shortage of fresh water all up and down the coast, and the mortar didn’t set so well in consequence. I’ve often wondered whether that—using sea water in the mortar, I mean—wasn’t responsible for a lot of what happened? *And* using sand in the plaster, and shells to make patterns on the walls too . . . bringing the sea into the place, like, as a start. Unlucky, I’d call it, looking back . . . and I’d be right. But my, it was a pretty thing when it was done at last!



"The roof inside was patterned with shells set in the plaster so as to make pictures of sea-horses and ships and mermaids and flying-fish and all manner of sea things. The lamps had mother-of-pearl shades, and the platform for the band was roped round with imitation seaweed and oyster shells, and the chairs and tables were made of what looked like twisty bits of coral . . . 'let's play down to the masses,' Mr. Davidson the architect said, and I didn't properly know what he meant, but it was right pretty. And on the opening night, when the place was crowded with people drinking and dancing, all the girls in their best frocks, with the glasses winking and the shiny-patterned roof catching the lights and the colours and flinging 'em back again, and the orchestra in the middle playing like mad, it was the finest sight you ever did see, and folks came from all over the place to stand along the promenade and stare. It was pretty enough to attract anybody's attention, let alone Theirs, to whom it belonged by rights . . . or so They thought, anyway. And I *will* say it didn't seem fair to use Their sea water and sand, and Their shells and all the rest, without a with your leave or by your leave.

"I think, looking back now, it must have been that very first night when I saw the first of Them? I was standing on the prom watching the café all lighted up, and the folks dancing inside it and the crowds lining the prom to stare. The tide was low, and just below where the café stood, the rocks shelved steeply down to the wet sands . . . when the tide was high, you understand, the water wasn't more than a foot or two below the level of the café floor itself.

"Well, from where I was standing I could see the



rocks sideways, if you take my meaning, like a dark mountainous outline against the shiny sea—there was a moon, I remember and the water as light and bright as glass with it—and it seemed to me there was what looked like a long sinuous figure like a seal, leaning up on its elbow all along the rocks and peering up at the dancers above, but taking good care to keep out of the light itself. I only caught a glimpse of it, and I blinked and stared, wondering if it was a midnight bather trying to climb up the rocks to see . . . but when I looked again it seemed to turn and slip downwards, like a vague dark shadow, and was gone. I've often wondered once whether it wasn't Her, come to spy out the land . . . and maybe getting her first sight of Geraldi, fiddling away there like mad, with the lights full on his pale face and black hair, and those dark blue eyes of his that were the colour of the sea itself on a sunny day.

"Eyetalian he said he was, for all his blue eyes, and so he might have been for all I know. He spoke English with an odd little accent that sent half the girls fair daft about him, and I used to tease him about them; we used to be quite chummy, if you get my meaning, for many's the hour he used to spend doing out his scores, as he called 'em—composing his little tunes sitting at one of the café tables while I got the place ready of a morning. And many's the time I've had a cup of coffee with him when I'd done, just before the first of his boys turned up.

"Five they were, all English but Geraldi—and they used to get chipped a bit that their leader had to be an Eyetalian. But there, they couldn't play like him. Not a one of 'em, though they was nice boys enough, and all used to call me 'Ma' and pull



my leg, as nice and pleasant as you like. But he was a winner, was Geraldi—lived for his music, he did. Often after the café closed down at midnight he used to stay on, having a bite of supper alone and either scribbling down notes for his music, or sitting smoking and staring out to sea . . . and now and again when the town'd gone to sleep and the prom was deserted and all the hotel lights put out, he used to get out his fiddle and play to himself, sitting all alone there with the night wind blowing through his dark hair, and only the stars to listen. Only . . . so I thought. But I wasn't right.

"*She* was listening . . . but I didn't realise it till a lot later on.

"But after a while a funny thing happened. I was laid up for a week, and the first morning I took up me job again afterwards, I found Mr. Kendal, the manager of the hotel, had sent for the architect, Mr. Davidson, to come over. They was out at the café and both of 'em looking no end perturbed. They talked and scratched their heads and poked the ground, and I wondered what was up—so directly I got done with my work in the hotel I went out for a blow to the point. And I got a shock—for between the café and the prom there was a great crack going down into the ground!

"Now I told you the prom ran *round* the hotel—and the café was built out beyond like, on a little jutting-out bit of its own on the rocks; they'd had to lay a special strip of concrete paving as a sort of pathway, of course, from the main promenade to the café, and it was right across *that* the crack was, just as if someone had taken a great knife and driven it down so as to split the café away from the mainland. When



I got there Mr. Kendal and the architect were still scratching their heads. They looked worried, though the architect gentleman was trying to laugh it off.

" 'Looks as though the damn' place was trying to get off and float away on its own,' he said. Lord, if I'd dreamt then how near the truth he was !

" Well, they talked and they talked, about shifting sands and badly laid foundations, and so on and so forth, and the end was the crack was filled up with fresh cement and everything went on as before. I took up me work and young Gerald his, and it was a busy season, and they were taking plenty of money, so everything ought've been O.K. But I had a funny feeling that it *wasn't*.

" I've never been able to understand quite *why* in my own mind I linked up that crack with that long dark Thing I'd seen that night lying peering up at the café and keeping so carefully out of the lights . . . but I did, in some confused sort of way, though I didn't rightly think it out, if you understand me ? Only felt sort of uneasy and queer, and not wanting particularly to stay out there in the café too long alone after dark, though I did it 'cos they paid me good money to go in and clean up after the folks left at midnight. But Gerald had'n't got any feelings like that. On the contrary, he seemed to get more and more attached to the place, and spent all his spare time there even when he wasn't rehearsing, sitting at one of the tiny tables smoking his eternal cigarettes and staring out to sea with his odd eyes that were the colour of the sea.

" Told me once he'd got sea blood in him, he did—came of fisher people in Italy, and had always loved the sea. Maybe that helped things to go Their way.



He used to talk to me at odd times, too, even more than before—but often I used to get a queer feeling that he was talking to *himself* more than to me? And now and then half-way through a speech he'd break off and sit staring before him, and when you asked him to go on he'd jump and stare as though you'd just waked him, and never remember what he'd started to say. I didn't like it somehow, and to keep my own spirits up I took to teasing him about his girls—'cos at the start of the season he'd had a whole string of girl pals. But now he'd dropped them all. . . .

"And he said: 'Oh, *them*! That was all right then, Ma. That was before I knew . . .'

"Then he stopped suddenly, and got up and lighted another cigarette, and went out of the café and sat on the rocks outside staring out to sea as he always stared. He didn't want me to ask him any more, that was plain . . . so I didn't. But I wondered what he'd been going to say, and the wonder seemed to join hands with the memory of the Thing on the rocks and the crack in the promenade—and I didn't like the feeling the three of 'em gave me at all. But I didn't say no more. After all, it wasn't none of my business.

"Well, next thing was the crack opened again! I noticed it first, like a tiny dark hair-line running right alongside the mended gash in the paving. Mr. Kendal was away on his holidays, and the assistant manager didn't often come down to the café, so it seemed nobody much noticed it at the start—but Gerald did, and he mentioned it to me with a queer, almost elated light in his eyes.

"He was packing up his music after the show one



night. The boys had all gone and most of the lights out, and I was clearing up—I didn't like the place after twelve, as I told you, but I didn't like leaving him there neither. Silly of me you'll say, and I dare-say you'll be right. But I *was* a bit silly about the boy, I'll admit—worried about him and all. I often used to hang about on the prom after everything was shut up and watch him sitting alone playing to himself or smoking his cigarettes and watching the moon on the sea . . . I'd got a sort of feeling that he might be safer if I was there. Stupid feeling—it didn't do any good, of course—They were too strong ; and when Their desire for him joined hands with the café's desire to be gone . . . well !

“ ‘ The café's trying to go to sea again you see, Ma,’ he said. ‘ Presently it'll succeed—and what if I go with it ? ’ His eyes shone oddly, and he gave a funny excited little laugh and looked at me sideways over the piles of music-sheets he was trying to pack into his shabby black leather case. I had a nasty cold feeling run like an icy finger down my spine—and I'm blest if just at the moment there didn't come a tiny jar all over the café ! The feeling you might get if something—say a chair—was being stealthily pulled at, and you sitting in it all the time. A tug, stealthy and queer, and then another tug. I gave a squawk and clutched at the table I was polishing—it was the nastiest feeling I ever got in all my life—and the jarring feeling stopped. The café was steady again—but he laughed queerly again, an almost exultant laugh. And as I looked at him, just past where the ridged rocks loomed black against the moonlit sea, I could have sworn I caught a glimpse of two dark lithe Things—not seals, though they



moved like 'em, with that same quick silent turn and dive—moving swiftly away down the rocks as though they'd been crouched alongside the café. They vanished—noiseless and without a ripple—into the oily sea, and I squawked again and nearly fainted. Gerald rushed over to me, suddenly all himself again, bless the lad, and as concerned as could be to see me so upset. He gave me a nip of brandy out of the little flask he always carried, and in two ticks I was O.K. again, but all of a quake still, and I clutched his arm and begged him to come home with me.

“Or to let me go back with him and see him safe to his lodgings. . . . I told him that I was worried about him—that I didn't like his staying out here so long all alone, and he smiled queerly and patted my shoulder.

“‘Don't worry, Ma,’ he said. Pretty his little foreign accent was and all. Yes, you may say I loved him like a son, and maybe you wouldn't be far wrong. ‘*I'm not alone . . .*’

“Then he caught his breath back, as though he'd said something he'd not meant to say, and I stared at him. For those words just joined up with those other things, and a whole lot more too small to tell about, and that cold feeling came again, not like a finger on my spine, but like a hand taking a grip on my heart.

“‘Gerry,’ I said. ‘Then I'm right! You got . . . *Friends* out there. And I believe there's been a bunch of 'em undermining the café ever since it was built. It was two of Them I saw. . . . But what *are* they, lad? What *are* they?’

“He looked at me oddly.

“‘Yes, I've got friends . . . friends that my music makes for me, everywhere in the world, thank good-



ness, Ma,' he said. 'But what do you mean about "Friends Out There," and having seen two of 'em—why, that's all nonsense,' he said. But I knew well enough that he was only . . . avoiding . . . no, evading's the word. Didn't want to answer me straight. And maybe actually, poor lad, he *couldn't* . . . then, or any other time, really. Well, not a word more did he say, but packed up and came back with me as cheery and obedient as possible, with his arm tucked in mine, and I slept sound for that night at least, knowing him safe and sound at Mrs. Grout's. His landlady she was, and as kind a body as ever stepped. . . . Glad I was, if I couldn't look after him, that she'd got the job; a good soul, and never skimped her lodger's food like some I could tell about. . . .

"Well, the crack next morning was so big you couldn't help but notice it, and folks were stopping on their walk round the prom to stare into it and test its depth with their sticks—so word got to the assistant manager, and he came out to see. He was properly upset, and no wonder, and more upset still when next day it had widened so's you had to make quite a stride in order to get across to the café! Deep down it seemed to go, too, so that not only the concrete was cracked but the rocks too, in a deep, narrow sort of cleft so that when the tide came in, a tiny ribbon of deep water gurgled between the promenade and the café. They had to lay planks across for folks to cross, and some of the women got scared, and wouldn't go across to the café at all, so the men wouldn't either, and the business went to pieces that afternoon and evening.

"So Mr. Kendal was wired to, and he came flying back next day in a fine old stew—and there was the



same thing all over again ! Mr. Davidson came down, and a strange engineer gentleman with him, who talked all sort of stuff about different levels and the settling of the concrete, and the strain of a building causing displacement, and the rocks under the café being on quicksands, not solid earth . . . but there, it was all guesswork, as anyone could see. Short of blowing up the café nobody could say exactly what was going on at the bottom of those rocks—and if I'd told 'em *my* guess they'd have put me down as loopy ! But there the great crack lay across the white concrete of the pathway to the café, gaping up at the anxious gentlemen like a great toothless mouth set in a zigzag grin. . . .

“ Well, they filled it up again with sand and rubble, and ran concrete into it, and cement and mortar and the lord knows what, and left it at that and hoped for the best. And Mr. Kendal heaved a sigh of relief and said that was that . . . and me, I hoped so. But I wondered. Because from quite a way away one could see the crack that divided the café on its point of rock from the mainland, the crack that split the rocks from the level of the prom down to the sands below, now filled with white cement and plaster and looking like a narrow white waterfall running down the sides of the green-black rocks. One could see—if one used one's eyes—*that the café had shifted !*

“ It was two feet and more nearer the sea now than it had been ; nearer the sea that it longed for and belonged to—and the sight filled me with a miserable sort of uneasiness for that boy Gerald. For he was getting more than ever detached and odd.

“ He spent night after night sitting out on the rocks just below the café or else at one of the little



tables writing or playing his fiddle—or now more often just smoking and staring over the sea. There he used to stay sometimes more than half the night, not coming back to his lodgings till some godless hour of the morning—Mrs. Grout told me so, and she was getting as worried as I was about it. Not that she guessed, of course. . . . Nor did I—until one night. The night I saw—*Her*. And then I knew all at once that the fear—the monstrous absurd suspicion that had been at the back of my mind for ever so long—was real after all !

“ It happened one night, after I’d cleaned up at the café and left him writing at his usual table. I’d wrung a promise out of him that he’d not stay out too long—I mumbled something about catching cold,—though it was hot August weather and that was nonsense ; but somehow I was shy about talking about Them and my own fears, for fear it ’ud make him think more of Them, if it was possible. Not that it *was* possible. For by that time, I know now, he was thinking far more of Them than of anything else in the world. Thinking, that is, of *Her*. . . .

“ Well, I left him there and turned along the prom to walk home. But after I’d gone along a bit I got a funny sort of feeling, and turned back. It was one of those glimpsy nights, if you take my meaning—warm and lovely, but with a little restless wind, and ragged clouds streaming across the moon like strands of long dark hair. And the sea smooth but patched with light here and there where the moon caught it—marbled, like the back of a snake rather. Pretty, but difficult to see in, and most of the lights along the prom were out ; but as I got near to the point again it seemed to me I saw—or maybe I sort of *felt*



(sensed, you say? Yes, that's the word)—I *sensed* a sort of stealthy movement about the rocks below the café! The tide was half-way up the rocks below, and in amongst the shadowed boulders and the dark-lapping water there seemed to be still darker shadows. Swiftly-moving shadows, dark and seal-like, all busy about something I could not see . . . and as I got to the end, where the main promenade swept out in a curve seawards. I saw the crack had started once again across the entrance to the café!

"But for once I hadn't time to be scared. I stepped across the crack as silent as a cat, and ran to the café, and peered round a pillar, and crouched, while all the while below me in the dark waters They worked and delved like beavers in their element. I didn't look down, for I was shaking with fright, and if one of Them had poked a head above the rocks into the faint light that still shone from the café, and showed me its streaming hair and uncanny eyes, I'd have flopped down like a dead woman with sheer fright. But They didn't hear me . . . nor did She, at first, at any rate. For She was there . . .

"She must have come slithering up the rocks on the far side—like the first Thing I'd seen there. She was sitting on the edge of the café floor, just beyond the table where he was working. He hadn't seen her yet, and his dark head was bent over his paper, and she sat and watched him with a funny little smile curling the corners of her pale lips. All pale she was, an odd paleness like the underside of a mackerel and her wet hair streamed down over her shoulders in great dark oily ribbons, like purple kelp-weed; her arms were long and supple-like, as though they had no bones, and her body wasn't quite *like* a



woman's somehow. And if you're going to ask me what I mean by that I can't tell you, that's all. The shape was there in a vague sort of way—but it seemed to be *boneless*—just supple muscle and nothing else, with that corpse-coloured skin enclosing it. A tail? Don't ask me, for I can't rightly tell you that. You see, she was curled up like on the edge of the café floor, where it went down in a sort of step to the bare rocks, and I didn't quite see how she . . . ended. But the way she sat there, curled like something between a snake and a fish . . . ugh, I tell you, it gives me the horrors to think of it even now!

"As I stared she lifted one long hand, and the way the fingers curled back, boneless and long—twice as long as any human's—made me fairly shiver! She laid it on his arm, and at the same moment she raised her eyes and looked at me—and I went cold all over. Green they were—pale, clear green, and there was no pupil to 'em! Don't know how to explain—but even a cat's green eyes have a sort of black slit to 'em, and these hadn't; and somehow it was—dreadful. Just two green-glass lamps. . . .

"And she looked at me and smiled as much as to say '*Got him—for all you!*' And then I only remember his turning to her and holding out his arms so's you could see this wasn't the first time by many a one that they'd met, and with a sort of leathery twist of that horrid, eel-like body she slithered forward into them—and then I don't remember any more, for I passed out with sheer fright, and when I came to myself the café was deserted and everything was silent in the moonlight. But as I stepped quavering over the crack to walk home I saw it had opened further still. . . .



"I plucked up courage to speak to Geraldi about it the next day, but he stared at me blankly and faced me out that it must have been a dream. So sure he was and he spoke so certainly that to this day I think probably he meant what he said. I think those days he was living in some sort of dazed state between one world and another, if you know what I mean, and he didn't really know which was truth and which the dream! But it shut me up all right, anyway, and I said no more—and from then it was only a short time to the end. I suppose, as one might say, it had to happen.

"Well, September came, and the season all but over. Not that the weather had gone cold or anything—a hot, still sort of summer it had been and September as warm as toast still; but Mincombe's a sort of family place, and bit by bit the people began dropping off and going back to their homes; the men had to go back to their offices and the kids to school, and Mr. Kendal began to talk about shutting up the café, and Geraldi's boys to discuss where they were likely to play during the winter months.

"Most of 'em had an itch to get back to London—they were town boys, gen'rally speaking—and they got more than a little ratty with Geraldi because he kept putting them off. Wouldn't discuss plans or listen to suggestions, merely seemed to shut his eyes and ears to the fact that come the end of September they'd have to quit, for their job would be over, and there didn't seem to be anything being arranged for 'em to go to! They were rather scared of Gerry, for he'd got a right Eyetalian sort of temper if he was irritated—and, after all, he was their leader; they'd got to leave it to him to make arrangements



for their winter bookings, and tell 'em when he'd made 'em. But I felt a bit sorry for them, all the same—as they said to me, 'He's so stuck on the dam' café and the whole dam' place he doesn't really *want* to leave at all! If the place was to keep open all the winter he'd stay here and play to the Wood family!' (That was their comic way of meaning rows of empty chairs, of course.) It was true—and I was sorry for 'em when they muttered and grumbled between themselves, and looked sideways at Gerry when he went out and sat on the rocks outside the café after performances, while they'd all pack up their instruments and go into the town for a spot of fun with their girl friends.

"It did seem odd and unfriendly, I'll say, and from being the most popular young chap in Mincombe Gerry was gradually becoming the least popular. The girls that used to hang around worshipping him sheered off with their noses in the air and collared more easy-going fellows; the young lads stopped slapping him on the back and offering him drinks, the older folks that used to pet him a bit called him spoilt, and stopped petting him, and he didn't care.

"He didn't seem to care for anything in the world these days, except to spend every second he could spare at the café. He'd 'a slept there if there'd been a bed—and come to think of it, I'm not sure he *didn't* sleep there sometimes, either on the floor curled into a warm corner with just, maybe, a few tablecloths for a cover, or perhaps even out on the weed-hung rocks—brrh, it makes me shudder to think of it, and *That* rising stealthily out of the water as the tide rose, to lean peering over at him and maybe



stroke his dark hair with those curling fingers like sea-worms, without any bones in 'em!

"Well, I'm wandering, and I'd better stick to the point. Yes, I *will* have another Guinness, since you're so kind, sir—it'll just carry me to the end of the story. Not that there's much more to tell—worse luck.

"September went on, and the summer visitors dwindled one by one, so that Geraldi and his band played to empty seats more often than not, and if it hadn't been that they'd a contract with him to play in the café until the end of September, I make no doubt Mr. Kendal 'ud have sent 'em packing to save their weekly pay. But he couldn't. And the boys grumbled and whispered and looked sideways at Gerry when he wasn't looking, and I got more and more nervish, though of just *what* I couldn't say—and out there They lay low, waiting and hovering around! I could feel it in my bones, but I never saw Them again till right at the end.

"The crack was too wide to stride over now, and I was never a one for jumping, and it being the end of the season Mr. Kendal wouldn't bother to have it filled up again, merely laid a plank bridge over it. And it was odd, but now every night that bridge was somehow moved away, to the far side of the cleft, so that a poor old char couldn't possibly reach it! They *meant* to get him—and from that one time when I saw him meet Her, I never managed to get near enough to the café after dark to see inside. But it didn't matter. I knew She was there.

"Knew by the growing haggardness of the lad's face, and the hollows round his eyes and the absent wandering way with him—above all, by the look in



his eyes. It was that same look you get in the eyes of someone who's living in a crazy, impossible dream—and never wants to wake up from it. A sort of blank, enchanted vagueness. . . . Lord, hark at me talking! Must be the Guinness, sir, begging your pardon! Or talking to a gent like you, as deals in high-flown language . . . well!

"The last day came, and it was a stormy one in more ways than one. There was a terrible row between Gerry and his boys early in the morning before they began their midday show—they up in a body and asked him plump out what plans he'd made for their winter. Gerry just looked at them blankly and passed his hand over his forehead, and it was then I noticed how thin he'd got. His hand was always long and white—sort of artistic. But now it was lean, not merely thin, and the blue veins and muscles stood out like cords. . . .

"Billy the saxophonist was the spokesman, a stocky little Londoner. Used to be fond of Gerry, and I could see he didn't like his job much—but, after all, there was reason on their side. They'd got to earn their livings, and one or two of 'em with wives and children and all.

" 'We don't know what's come to you,' said Billy, gruffly. 'You've always been so keen and all, and we'd got two or three decent offers for London and more for the provinces and you don't seem to have done anything about any of 'em! I met Arden, of the "Tivoli" in Birmingham, only yesterday, and he told me he'd offered you to take us on there for the winter; good money and easy hours. But he told me you hadn't even had the politeness to answer his letter; and now he's booked another band!'



"Angry murmurs arose from the others, and Gerry looked at them uncertainly.

" 'I don't remember,' he began, and my heart bled for him for all I was sorry for those boys, for I knew he was speaking the truth. He *didn't* remember—now—anything but Her. Didn't he pass me, these days, either with a bare nod or a look of blank non-recognition? It was long enough now since the old times when he used to throw his arm round my shoulders and hug me and call me 'Ma!' Billy broke in sharply.

" 'That's not the only offer we've had that you've either turned down flat without consulting us or simply ignored,' he said. And there was a red flush on his nice honest face. 'And the result is that we're through, Gerry. We've tried to understand these extraordinary cranks and moods of yours—though the lord knows something odd's happened to you, you're nothing like the man you used to be. We've tried to get you down to brass tacks, to fix us up proper for the winter's work, like you've always done before, but it's no use. We can't wait. We're through. We're joining up with Cotton's College Boys. They want to enlarge their band, and they've made us a good offer—so this is good-bye.'

"There was a little pause. Gerry blinked, opened his mouth, then suddenly turned away with an odd little lift of his shoulders.

" 'O.K.,' he said, indifferently. 'Good luck, boys—and now let's give 'em a good show—for the last time!'

"He was so extraordinarily indifferent that the boys were quite speechless. They looked at each other and didn't say a word, just one by one filed



into their places and went through their last performance—to a couple of old ladies and three old gentlemen, that was all—and at the end they packed up and left, all very subdued, with furtive glances at the silent figure sitting at an empty table staring out to sea. He never turned his head even to tell 'em good-bye, those boys he'd worked with and trained for five years—and something cold went down my back again as I watched him, so odd and inhuman, so unlike the old warm-hearted laughing Gerry I knew! I asked him—awkward like, but there, I'd got almost scared of him myself by that time—whether he'd have a cup of coffee with me for the last time, since it was the end, and he turned to me and laughed on a suddenly triumphant note.

“ ‘The end, Ma? Oh no, it's the beginning!’ he said. And standing up he stretched his arms over his head like a man who's dropped a burden and stands free at last. ‘The beginning . . . don't ask me of what, for I don't know. But I *do* know—that!’

“He caught me suddenly by the shoulders and stared into my eyes—and I turned mine away, for there was a look in his that frightened me, for all I loved him.

“ ‘You've been a darling to me, Ma. The only approach I've had to a real mother since I was a *bambino* playing with the sea-urchins and *calamari*’—and what he meant by that I didn't know—‘on the shores of Lepanto. And because of this . . . because of this . . . you shall be privileged to see the apoth—’ (there again. Ah, yes, sir. You got it!) ‘Apo-the-osis of Ivano Emilio Gerald! You shall see him enter into his own!’ He threw his arms into the air and his eyes shone with an insane light. ‘To-



night, *cara mamma*—*cara carissima mamma*—to-night at twelve, come and stand on the promenade, just where you can see the point on which this café stands—and you shall see ! ’

“ He was gone, with a swift kiss on my old cheek, and a laugh that both warmed and chilled me together, and I didn’t see him again during the whole day, though I looked for him all over the place to beg him not to go to the café that night. I knew in my bones that They would come. And though I didn’t know *what* I was scared of, frightened I was, cold and sick with fright, because although I didn’t know what he meant by his wild talk I knew—I knew—They boded no good to my Gerry ! But there. . . .

“ Well, that night I crept down to the prom—and it was blowing up fast for a storm. Dark and gusty, and a cloudy sky with the moon only showing now and then. The boys had all gone off by an afternoon train, there wasn’t to be no evening performance, and where Gerry had his supper, or if he’d had it at all, the Lord only knows. He didn’t go back to Mrs. Grout’s, that I know, for I called there, and all his things were still in his room ; and no word from him at all if he was going or staying. I couldn’t eat a bite, but I drank a cup of coffee just to steady me, for I was all of a shake with fear, and I buttoned my old reefer coat tight against the wind and went down to the dark promenade.

“ Clean deserted it was, and the hotel showing only a light here and there between the shutters fastened against the rising storm, and the sweep of the bay with its twinkling string of lights like a sparsely-threaded necklace stretching out behind me, and



the promontory where the café stood running out into the sea. The tide was half-way up, a restless, rising sea that heaved and beat against the sands and ran up the rocks below the café as though a horde of creatures fought and wrestled within it, straining to storm the land as an army storms a fortress.

"As I stood clutching the rail of the prom I saw that the crack that ran between the mainland and the café had widened by more than two feet—and that into the crack the sea was pouring, writhing and heaving, never still, as though it was working like a conscious thing to force the gap still wider . . . and then I stopped and . . . my goodness!

"The flying clouds tore apart and let the moonlight through, and I saw that the sea and the rocks below the café were fairly alive with *Them*! Heaving and thrusting and clambering on each other's backs amongst the swirling water, working like fury to loosen the foundations of the café, while out at sea more black shapes flashed and dived and came hurrying shorewards, and the whole dark outline of the promontory was alive with movement, shadows against shadows, but all alike working furiously, fiercely . . . and then all of a sudden the lights flashed up in the café and I saw inside it, and there they were!

*Her*, sitting with her arms round him, and *him*. He never looked shorewards, but straight into *Her* eyes, those lamping pale green eyes that never blinked nor moved from his . . . and round them came climbing, slithering up into the café, more of *Her* people. Long and lithe, corpse-pale and supple, the women with their seaweed hair green and olive and purple and sepia-brown, the men, huge-shouldered and



coloured like conger-eels . . . And even as I gaped it happened !

"A great wave came rushing and roaring inland, and with it a horde of Them, diving and twirling like a troop of seals. Into the cleft it poured, up to the level of the café floor, and all but on to the promenade . . . it rose boiling to my feet, and as I jumped back, terrified, the thing was done ! In a flood They swept round the café with the swirling waters, thrusting and tearing, and with a jolt and a swoop the whole thing slid off into the deep water as a boat is launched from a slipway . . . and to the sound of strange, triumphant cries, the roaring of waters and the shouting of the wind, the café floated away into the night.

. . . . .

"Yes, that's all. Oh, there was a fine excitement, you may be sure to start with, when they found the café gone and only a ragged heap of broken concrete foundations on the rocks where it had stood !

"There were all sorts of theories, but not one near the truth, and *I* didn't want to be called either a liar or a drinker—which I'm not, as you'll bear me witness, sir, only having had two Guinnesses. So I held me tongue. Even when old Ben, one of the fishermen, come in one night a bit later on all of a dither, full of a story that when he'd been setting out his lobster-pots he'd seen the café floating away out at sea, with all its lights on and young Gerald playing his fiddle, accompanied by a band of mer-folk blowing conches and beating drums, and the pick of sea society sitting round at the little tables, just like it might be the Ritz or the Carlton. You



never seen such a sight, Ben said! Everyone as gay as could be, and young Gerry as happy as a king, with Her holding his portfolio of music and smiling at him while he was playing . . . oh yes, Ben described *Her* all right. And the sea all round fair black with merfolk peering and listening to the band . . . *hoi polloi*, you say, sir? Maybe you're right, though I never heard the word before. Anyway, there they were, like poor children peering through the windows of the 'Marine' while all the rich folks was dancing and having a good time inside, like at the height of the season in Mincombe. Drunk, Ben thought he was—and specially when he heard young Gerry shout to him, 'Tell Ma I'm O.K. *and* happy!' And drunk he might well have been, for old Ben was always one for his glass. So everybody laughed at him but me—but *I* didn't.

"So there you are, sir, and thank you kindly. No, I've never forgotten—not likely! I loved young Gerry like he was my own son—and though for all he sent me that message, I still worry about him sometimes. Seems a funny life, even for an Eyetalian. But there's times I wish I could ha' gone too, I do and all? Even if it meant cleaning up after all Them—which doesn't seem to me to be a job for a Christian woman to take on. But there. *She'd* 'a been there, and I doubt we shouldn't 'a got on. So maybe it's better as it is.

"Well, it's a cold night, sir . . . and perhaps you're right. I don't mind if I do."



THE TALE OF BIDDEY WIGGIN



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## THE TALE OF BIDDEY WIGGIN

MR. PRIDGEON, Civil Servant, of the Overseas Trade Department, Whitehall, sat at the wheel of his tiny car and gazed about him contentedly. The weather was perfect, the country through which his Austin Seven was travelling—not at its advertised speed, since Mr. Pridgeon was not one to whom speed of any sort appealed, but at a steady thirty-five miles an hour—was equally perfect, and he had a whole glorious fortnight's idleness ahead of him. A holiday—and of all months, in June!

Normally, Mr. Pridgeon, of all conscientious Civil Servants the most conscientious, would have paled with horror at the mere idea of taking a holiday at any time but in the usual August or September—the exact time and month depending on the convenience of at least five of his seniors in the Department of Overseas Trade. And as a rule the said seniors would have paled with equal horror at having to do without Mr. Pridgeon at any time, since, like many of the minor and worst paid members of a large concern, Mr. Pridgeon succeeded in doing not only the work he was paid to do, but a large proportion of their work as well, which he was *not* paid to do. But having done this, with the best will in the world, for several years on end, Mr. Pridgeon proceeded to faint dramatically one day at his cramped little desk, and the doctor who was called in pronounced him in urgent need of immediate rest—in which opinion Mr. Pridgeon's seniors, startled and disconcerted at the vision of a future in which Mr. Pridgeon's patient and unobtrusive work might not only not be easily available, but might not even be available at all,



gloomily concurred. So before he realised quite what was happening, Mr. Pridgeon found himself aboard the tiny car that was his greatest joy in life, a bundle of fishing-tackle and a couple of battered suitcases wedged tightly into the back, a packet of sandwiches and a map reposing on a neatly-folded Burberry on the seat beside him, and the whole blue glory of a June day spread before him in which to reach the little fishing village that was his objective.

As he steered carefully round a stationary car, parked at the side of the road, while its owner, a plump woman in green tweed accompanied by two riotous offspring, gathered honeysuckle in the hedge, he ruminated blissfully on the excellence of life, and on his amazing good luck. On the beauty of the day, and the kindness of his seniors in allowing him the unexpected holiday ; on the amiability of the old aunt who, for some odd and unexplainable reason, had left him a legacy a year ago just sufficient to purchase the Austin Seven that was now bearing him swiftly onwards towards his chosen goal, and on the luck that had led him toward Lex Regis as the said goal. A thought struck him, and a faint frown marred his beatific expression. What if he didn't like Lex Regis ? After all, he had no idea, beyond a photograph and an ecstatic description, what the place was like ; wouldn't have gone but for the fact that at the place where he usually spent his holidays, Linton, in Hampshire, they couldn't take him in. He had fallen for the idea of Lex Regis simply on the strength of Charlie Payne's enticing snapshot, that had shown a picturesque village alongside a river deep and shady. A river "fairly bursting with fish" so Charlie Payne had said—and, his mouth



watering at the words, Mr. Pridgeon had promptly written to the only inn the place boasted for a room.

The "Waggoner's Arms," as an address had sounded too delightfully story-bookish to be true, and for a moment Mr. Pridgeon knew a doleful certainty that the place simply could not live up either to Charlie Payne's enthusiastic description nor to his own expectations. But, after all, he told himself, if he did not like it he could always move on and try somewhere else. That was the best of having a car. It made one independent. So in high good-humour Mr. Pridgeon drove onwards through the dust, rejoicing in the warm June sunshine playing on his bald head—like many Civil Servants, outside office hours he belonged to the Hatless Brigade; in the feel of the wheel under his small, precise hands, and in the fact that his landlady had remembered to put him in several of the cheese sandwiches he loved, along with the ham that she considered more sustaining. And when he swung round a wide bend and came in sight of a picturesque village strung along one side of the road, with a river running smooth and dark under the willows and poplars along the other, his cup of content was definitely filled. *Lex Regis* was going to live up to its name. . . .

And so, it seemed, was the "Waggoner's Arms," if that low, whitewashed, red-roofed building at the end with the swinging sign above the door was real, and not something belonging to a stage-set! Mr. Pridgeon, alighting from the dust-covered car before the low-porched doorway, drew a long breath of delight. This was the goods! This, most definitely, was the goods! Though as a rule Mr. Pridgeon hated slang and avoided it with the same care with which



he avoided split infinitives, there seemed no other phrase except the crisp American one quite to express his abounding satisfaction, and he beamed broadly upon the innkeeper, as he hurried forth to greet the arriving guest.

Fat John Doolittle again might have stepped out of a Christmas annual, with his red waistcoat and brown curduroy breeches, and when a neat little woman in lilac print patterned with small black and white flowers appeared in the doorway, smiling a shy welcome, the picture, Pridgeon whimsically felt, could not have been made more complete. He shook hands with Mrs. Doolittle and murmured platitudes while her husband, assisted by a lanky youth in blue overalls, hauled his luggage out of the car—the Austin Seven was trundled into the tiny garage just beyond the inn, and timidly Mrs. Doolittle turned to her guest.

“You’ll like to go upstairs and see your room while John takes the things up, won’t you, sir?”

The soft Devonshire burr in her speech was very apparent, and Mr. Pridgeon, who was Devonshire born, felt a fresh little thrill of pleasure as he followed her into the small, red-tiled hall.

The place had evidently once been a coaching inn. Old prints hung on the walls, mostly pictures of coaching scenes, famous drivers and so on, and nailed to the huge oak beam that crossed the end of the little hall were several whips, a row of huge old buttons, two horse-shoes, and a battered metal coaching horn. The original inn had obviously been added to from time to time, and “improved”—but not, Mr. Pridgeon noted with thankfulness, as he followed his hostess up the narrow, winding stairs, to the extent



of spoiling the quaint, old-time charm of the place. The whole building was delightful, full of narrow, low-roofed little passages, uneven floors and oddly-shaped little windows, with steps up and down into almost every room. With a heart full of satisfaction he followed the plump little figure to the very end of a long corridor, where she flung open the door of a large, sunny room.

"I've given you a room in the older part of the house, sir," she said. "Me and Doolittle's having the new part painted and papered, and this is the only room we've to spare in the old just now. But I'm sure I hope you'll be comfortable."

Her voice on the last words held an odd note of doubt that he noted subconsciously at the time, to recall later with some force. But the room certainly looked comfortable enough. It was a large, square chamber with a wide, old-fashioned window, green-curtained and furnished with a window-seat, and in one wall was a deep, panelled alcove, forming a bed-place that could, by drawing a green linen curtain, be shut off from the main part of the room entirely. The bed was covered by a many-coloured patchwork quilt, the floor was uncarpeted except for a rag rug before the fire and another beside the bed; there was an old-fashioned round table, a cushioned arm-chair and two upright chairs, a bowl of wild flowers on the mantelpiece and a canary singing vigorously in the window. From the doorway Mr. Pridgeon looked about him, well pleased.

"My dear Mrs. Doolittle," he said, and his voice was almost tender, "I can't tell you how comfortable I think I'm going to be here? It couldn't be nicer. I take it you've a bathroom—unless that's being



painted and papered—and that I can have my breakfast up here, say, about nine o'clock? I've a horror of coffee-room breakfasts! I shan't be much bother to you otherwise, as I shall spend most of the day fishing. You can put me up some lunch to take with me, I suppose?"

All these questions being answered eagerly in the affirmative, Mrs. Doolittle withdrew. Mr. Doolittle appeared, laden with suitcases, and Mr. Pridgeon settled down to arranging his various possessions, sorting his tackle and arranging his fly-books, papers and so on. He was interrupted by the entrance of a red-armed country girl, clad in blue gingham—"gingham!" thought Mr. Pridgeon happily—with a shining copper can of hot water and the shy request that she might "'elp with 'is things?" Most of them were already in their places, Mr. Pridgeon being one of those tidy souls who cannot settle down until everything about him is in apple-pie order, but he gave his boots to the girl—whose name, he discovered, was Nellie—and bade her ask Mrs. Doolittle what time he might expect the evening meal to be ready?

The answer came promptly. Whenever Mr. Pridgeon liked. Would he like to eat alone in his room, or would he, for to-night at least, honour mine host and mine host's wife with his company to supper, in a quarter of an hour's time? Feeling convivial, Mr. Pridgeon accepted, and within a quarter of an hour found himself sitting in a cosy, red-tiled kitchen, with oak beams, laden with drying herbs, vegetables, apples and countless other things, over his head, a crackling wood fire—not unwelcome, since even June nights can be chilly—at his back, and a meal of



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cold roast pork, pickles and salad fit for a king, before him.

John Doolittle accepted, greatly gratified, one of his guest's cigars, Mrs. Doolittle made coffee that was not merely drinkable, but excellent. And when at last, at eleven o'clock, with a huge yawn, Mr. Pridgeon rose, shook hands with his hostess, and preceded by his host carrying a huge oil-lamp—sought his room and bed, he felt more than pleased with the world, and especially with that corner of it whither the gods had chosen to send him for his holiday.

It was in a mood of supreme content, therefore, that he undressed himself that first night at the "Waggoner's Arms." A small fire—a luxury he adored and never allowed himself at home—burnt in the grate, his books had been arranged in a neat pile upon his bed-side table, his bed was turned down—every detail that could make for a guest's comfort had been remembered, and Mr. Pridgeon whistled cheerfully as he undressed. It was only when, pyjama'd and slippered at last, he threw back the clothes to climb into bed that he paused, frowning. The shutters—were they securely closed or not? Pattering to the window, he drew back the long, green, linen curtains, and sighed. The windows were closed, but *not* the shutters—and with all his old-fashioned heart Mr. Pridgeon hated a single chink of light to enter his sleeping-place. There were the offenders that should have been standing guard against the moonlight that was filtering through the curtains; there they were, lying back against the outer wall—with a vexed sigh the little man climbed upon the window-sill and set to work.



The shutters were heavy and stiff and cobwebbed, and had obviously not been in use for some considerable time ; but after some vigorous tugging and banging they acknowledged defeat and came gracefully to. The bolts were shot home, and panting, his hair on end and his pyjamas smeared with rust, Mr. Pridgeon jumped down from his perch, satisfied. Expeditiously he washed his hands, turned out the oil-lamp and climbed into bed, offering a silent prayer of thanksgiving when he discovered it to be what he dearly loved, an old-fashioned goose-feather bed ; pulled the clothes, pleasantly scented with garden herbs, up to his chin, and fell almost instantly asleep.

He slept for about an hour—but it seemed to him, when he awoke, that he had been asleep for but a few moments. He lay and blinked dazedly for a minute or two, wondering where he was, then with a start woke completely and sat up. On the table beside his bed the shining hands of his luminous travelling-clock showed twelve-fifteen—the fire had burnt to a handful of red-glowing embers, the lamp was unlit, yet the room was not in darkness, and after a few seconds he realised why it was not. Through the thin linen curtains the moonlight seeped, lighting the room with a ghostly bluish light—for the shutters were open !

Bewildered and annoyed, Mr. Pridgeon struggled out of bed, climbed up on the window-seat once more, and examined the bolts. Quite definitely they were unbroken, as sound as when he had shot them home into their sockets, and frowning, he wondered how on earth they had ever managed to come undone ? There was no wind—and even if during the time he had been sleeping a strong wind had sprung



up, how could a mere wind manage to draw back two solid iron bolts, unlatch two complicated latches, and fling two shutters flat back against the outer walls? The more he thought the odder the thing seemed. . . .

However, this time there should be no doubt about the things being fastened really securely. With set lips he drew the shutters to, latched and bolted them firmly once more, and fetching a piece of string from the pocket of his Burberry, wound it securely round the head of the bolt on one shutter and the latch on the other, and tied it. Satisfied, he jumped down, and wiping his hands fastidiously on a handy piece of newspaper to rid them once again of rust, he tied the cord of his pyjamas more securely about his lean little middle and made for his bed. But stopped, startled and alarmed—for from somewhere in the big room there had come the sound of a laugh!

Not a loud or alarming sort of a laugh in itself. More like, rather, the echo of a laugh than a laugh actual and concrete. A faint whisper of a laugh, as though some unseen person, hiding in the distant shadows of the big room, had watched his struggles with the shutters and been vastly amused by them . . . a swift chill like the passage of an icy hand ran down Mr. Pridgeon's spine and he spoke, aloud and sharply.

"Who's there? Kindly answer me at once!"

There was no answer, and with fingers that trembled unaccountably, Mr. Pridgeon held the lamp above his head and surveyed the room. Empty! Nobody in the angle behind the old-fashioned wooden "spider" that held coats and hats and sticks; nobody in the big wardrobe, nobody in the corners



. . . but the sound did not come again, and after a moment Mr. Pridgeon's nerves relaxed their tension. Imagination ! It could be nothing more. A draught siffling round the old rafters, a mouse behind the wainscot, that was all—and comforted, Mr. Pridgeon sought his bed and slumber once again. But even now he was not to slumber for very long . . . and indeed, it was barely half an hour afterwards when he awoke again !

For a moment he lay staring vaguely upwards at the heavy dark-wood roof of the alcove that spread, like the roof of a bunk on a liner, over the bed in which he lay ; then, realising with a start where he was, he propped himself up on one elbow and stared about him. The room was now actually moonlit—not only were the shutters wide open, but the curtains also ; and even as he blinked and gaped, astounded, he saw the person who must have opened them leaning out, as though looking down into the moonlit road below. Nellie, the housemaid, presumably—a young woman's figure wearing a light-coloured dress at least, and startled and scandalised, Mr. Pridgeon exclaimed aloud.

“ Young woman ! What are you doing in my room, I should like to know ? ”

Sitting bolt upright in his bed, the clothes clutched modestly to his narrow chest, the little man glared in fury—and even as he spoke, the girl leaning out of the window, as though hearing his voice, turning and looked at him. As she did so a sudden gust of wind whistled through the room, the curtains billowed out, the far shutter against which she had been leaning blew inwards with a slam, and in the sudden noise and darkening of the room, with a soft sound like



the rustle of a drift of dry leaves, she fled. At least, when Mr. Pridgeon, for the first time regretting the speed and clarity of electric light, ran to the mantelpiece to light the oil-lamp, there was no sign of a woman in the room. Nothing but the moonlight lying along the floor at war with the sickly yellow gleam of the lamp, and both shutters swinging loose against the outer wall. Completely puzzled, angry—and although he tried hard to deny it to himself, a little frightened—Mr. Pridgeon re-bolted the shutters and retired to bed once more. And this time he was not disturbed until morning. But, when a timid knock announced Nellie and a cup of early tea, he could not help noticing that the shutters were once more hanging open.

Thoroughly puzzled and out of humour, he bathed dressed and ate his breakfast in a ruminative silence. Once or twice he cast a furtive glance at the sturdy Nellie as she waited on him, breathing heavily through her nose and clumping about the uncarpeted floor in her heavy, country-made shoes as she moved. Of course, he said to himself, it was quite clear now what had happened last night. The shutters had blown back again, despite the string he had tied to them, and the girl, who probably slept somewhere above, had heard the noise, and come into his room to fasten them again. But there were certain odd aspects of the thing, all the same. If the shutters had swung back with sufficient noise to awaken Nellie sleeping above, why had they not awakened him? It was odd, also, how much more lightly she must have moved last night, to have crossed this floor, that now creaked to her solid tread, and gone out of the door, all so swiftly and softly that he had heard



neither her footsteps nor the snick of the heavy old-fashioned latch as she lifted it to escape? Probably she had removed her shoes before coming into the room, so as to avoid waking him—but however well meant the action was, and however considerately performed, it was one that must not be repeated. It was—er—open to misinterpretation; and like all men supremely unlikely to be suspected of Don-Juan-like propensities, Mr. Pridgeon had a super-sensitive dread of being so suspected.

It was a delicate thing to talk about—and it was not until the room was straight, the table cleared and Nellie, balancing a laden tray, was making for the door, that he summoned up the necessary courage to speak.

“Er—by the way, Nellie, it was very obliging of you, but you needn’t trouble to come and try to refasten the shutters again in my room? As you did last night, I mean.”

She made no answer, and he glanced at her in surprise. She was standing stock still beside the door staring at him, her wholesome ruddy face quite pallid all of a sudden, and her mouth open . . . panic-stricken lest he had hurt her feelings, for he was an eminently kind-hearted little man, Mr. Pridgeon rushed on.

“I’m not at all annoyed, my good girl, I assure you! You needn’t look so upset. But I—er, I’m a very light sleeper, and the smallest thing wakes me. That’s all. Oh—and you might ask Mr. Doolittle on your way down to see to the fastening of these shutters? They kept coming apart last night and waking me—as of course you know. That’s all.”

For a brief second she continued to stare at him,



then, without a word, departed, and Mr. Pridgeon, conscious of having handled a somewhat delicate situation with tact and discretion, set out for his first day's fishing in great good cheer.

The day went well on the whole—although, since it was bright and warm, he had not expected much sport, a sunshiny day not being the best sort of day for fishing as a rule. But the river was certainly well stocked, although the trout were not precisely jostling each other out of the water, as Charlie Payne had led him to expect—and six o'clock saw him returning, tired but well pleased, carrying a gleaming string of fish as proof of his prowess. Mrs. Doolittle received them with suitable cries of amazement and gratification, and undertook to grill them for supper at seven-fifteen, only reserving a couple of the finest for his breakfast on the morrow. Mr. Pridgeon would like to take supper in his own room to-night, as he had some writing to do? Certainly! Nothing could be easier. Nellie should lay the table right away.

The little woman bustled energetically away, and satisfied, Mr. Pridgeon retreated to his eyrie on the first floor. He had been half afraid that, since he had taken supper with the Doolittles on that first night, that they might take it for granted he wanted to do so every night. But obviously there was nothing of the give-an-inch-and-take-an-ell about them. Greatly relieved, he washed his hands, changed his coat for an ancient grey alpaca one, and sat down to read the morning paper—which did not arrive until the afternoon in *Lex Regis*—while Nellie prepared the table for supper.

Seating himself on the window-seat to get the



best of the fading sunlight, he brushed against the curtain, and surprised at the unfamiliar "tickly" feeling turned round to examine it. The green linen curtains of the previous night had vanished, and in their place hung heavy draperies of a solid light-resisting dark-brown serge. They were not as pretty as the linen; looked as though they rightly belonged to a billiard-room or library (as indeed they once had done) and annoyed, Mr. Pridgeon gave a vexed exclamation.

"Why on earth—really, I wish Mrs. Doolittle wouldn't do things like this without consulting me!"

Mrs. Doolittle's voice, accompanied by a tempting smell of grilled fish, answered him, diffidently enough.

"It's me, sir—I just come in with the fish. It's all ready and nice and hot, and I made you some toast, and there's junket and stewed gooseberries to follow, and cream."

Her tone was appealing, but Mr. Pridgeon was not to be so easily put off.

"That's all very nice, Mrs. Doolittle, but it's not the point—at the moment." Mr. Pridgeon when intent upon a subject, was apt to become didactic, almost magisterial. "Why on earth have these very ugly curtains been hung here? I don't like them. They destroy the atmosphere of the room entirely. Please have them removed."

Mrs. Doolittle bit her lip—her pleasant country face was troubled.

"It's to keep the light out at nights, sir," she said.

Taking his place at the table Mr. Pridgeon stuck a fork into the largest and most succulent fish.

"There's a perfectly good pair of shutters, Mrs.



Doolittle—if your husband has seen to their fastenings. I left a message for him to do so this morning ”

“ I’m sorry, sir.” The little woman spoke with something of the calmness of desperation. “ But—those shutters won’t *keep* shut.”

Startled, Mr. Pridgeon raised his head and stared.

“ Won’t keep shut—what *do* you mean ? ”

“ Just that, sir. They won’t keep shut ! ”

She was twisting her plump little hands in her apron agitatedly—quite bewildered, Mr. Pridgeon continued to stare at her in silence as she went on.

“ There—there must be some sort of a draught at the side, sir. At least, that’s the only reason we can think of. But they *won’t* keep shut. We don’t know just what happens exactly, but time and again we’ve tried to keep them shutters shut, and it isn’t no good. So . . . ” her round blue eyes looked almost ready to cry, “ it was me gave orders to put up these heavy curtains that’s just as good as shutters to keep the light out, sir. And I do hope you’ll understand and forgive the liberty ? ”

She was on the verge of tears, and astonished and uncomfortable, Mr. Pridgeon hastily assented, and with a mixture of relief and bewilderment, saw her retreat. As he ate his fish, perfect both in quality and cooking, he ruminated, puzzled, upon the question of the shutters. Obviously the woman was doing her best to please him . . . but at the same time it did seem odd that a mere draught whistling round the corner of an old house should prevent a pair of shutters well latched and bolted from remaining fastened ? Apart from which there could scarcely be a severe draught every night of the year. This night, for instance, was as still as could be. Not a



leaf stirring . . . his supper over, Mr. Pridgeon examined the fastenings of the shutters once more, and with a dissatisfied frown retreated to his arm-chair and a book. Between Lord Riddell's *Diary* and a fresh tin of his favourite tobacco, he passed a couple of hours very pleasantly, and on the stroke of ten tumbled into bed. As he extinguished the lamp—which by some odd instinct that he did not care to analyse, he took care to place upon the table by his bed, not upon the mantelpiece—his last waking thought was relief that, the shutters now being securely fastened back into their old positions against the wall, he was secure of a decent night. But he was wrong. . . .

It must have been about twelve o'clock, again, when he awoke. Or rather, was awakened by that strange sixth sense that tells us even in sleep that we are not alone. Anxious to keep out every possible gleam of light, he had not only drawn the serge window-curtains close, but after getting into bed he had drawn also, across the front of it, the green linen curtains that shut off the bedplace entirely during the daytime. But even securely hidden inside those curtains, like a mouse behind the wainscoting in his niche against the wall, he was conscious that somebody had entered the room. Was it that girl Nellie again? His suspicions thoroughly aroused, he drew the curtain an inch or two aside and peered out.

Dark and empty—but as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he saw that he was wrong. The room was *not* empty. Neither was it entirely dark. A sort of pillar of pale light, like a mist-wraith, hovered beside the mantelpiece—the red embers of the dying fire could be seen clearly through



the mist, yet in the middle of the cloud, as though surrounded by a faint, uncanny nimbus, there seemed to stand the figure of a woman. A woman dressed in a pale-coloured print frock and wearing a cap that covered her hair entirely, stood by the mantelpiece examining something. A woman—but it was not Nellie! A light sweat broke out upon his skin and his eyes bulged, for as he stared the figure seemed to strengthen and grow more distinct—and most certainly it was not the red-armed, tousle-haired little maid of the inn. This figure was small and ultra-slender, and in the eerie silvery light that seemed to emanate from her, forming the misty cloud in which she stood, he could see that from under the closely-tied cap, fair curls escaped at the back of the neck. Nellie's hair was frankly red—and she was a good six inches taller than this slim shadow bending over something on the mantelpiece. This shadow of another day—for that high-waisted gown with its tiny flowered pattern and puffed sleeves, that Quakerish cap never belonged to this bristling century. . . .

Summoning up his entire courage, Mr. Pridgeon spoke, though the words came in a mere croak.

“Who . . . who are you?”

As before, the figure turned sharply to face him—and lo! even as it turned, it was not there at all! It had vanished as completely as though it had never been, and darkness, blank and complete, filled the room. For a moment Mr. Pridgeon sat upright, shaking, then setting his teeth he climbed out of bed, lighted the lamp, and going to the mantelpiece, picked up the article the shadowy figure seemed to have been examining.



He had taken no particular notice of it before, the mantelpiece bore at least half a dozen china ornaments ; but now he examined it with a definite interest. It was a dumpy little jar with a handle, shaped somewhat like a tankard and made of biscuit-coloured china ; decorated with a coloured wreath of china flowers about its rim, and within, to startle the unwary drinker as he came to the bottom of his draught, a green china lizard was cunningly placed at the very bottom of the cup. And on the outside was written, in uneven black letters, the words " Biddey Wiggin, 1780." Nothing more. . . .

On the following morning after breakfast he demanded an interview with Mrs. Doolittle. He fancied Nellie's bovine gaze held a spark of nervous interest as he gave the order, but she nodded without comment and disappeared expeditiously with the tray in search of her mistress. One advantage of a room's being haunted, reflected Mr. Pridgeon sourly as he filled his after-breakfast pipe, was that the work in that room got done with the most remarkable despatch, every girl being anxious to get out of it with as much speed as possible ! A haunted room. Interesting ! He had often heard of such things, but had never imagined it might be his lot to have to sleep in one . . . his tone, as Mrs. Doolittle, a faintly apprehensive look in her blue eyes, presented herself at the door, was almost fatherly.

" Mrs. Doolittle—come in and shut the door, please. Now Mrs. Doolittle, *why* didn't you tell me that this was a haunted room ? "

The little woman's face twisted as though she were about to cry, and she swallowed hard once or twice.



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"I don't know . . ." she murmured, but Mr. Pridgeon interrupted.

"Now don't try and say you don't know what I mean, Mrs. Doolittle? Because of course you know what I mean perfectly well. You are quite well aware that this room is haunted—and all I want to know is who haunts it. Why, and what and all about it. I'm not going to blame you for putting me here, you know? I was—a little startled—but that's all, and I'm very much interested. I don't blame you for letting the room, for all I know she—it—may only be visible to certain people. I believe there are—er—laws that govern these things?"

Mrs. Doolittle drew a trembling sigh of relief and sat down heavily in a chair beside the table.

"I can't tell you how kind I take it of you not to go for me for putting you in here, sir!" Her mouth quivered. "We *was* going to give you another room, sir—we don't let this one unless we got to, though being the best room on the first floor, it's often difficult to refuse; people see it and want it, and there you are. But the gentleman whose room we was going to give you suddenly decided to stop on, and as he's a regular gentleman who works in the corn mills near here, we couldn't say no. And, after all—as you say, sir, it isn't everybody that sees her."

Mr. Pridgeon nodded portentously.

"Ah—just as I thought. Only those gifted with—er—some peculiar psychic sensitiveness can see her. But who *is*—she?"

There was a faint pause, and Mrs. Doolittle spoke, her voice lowered to the tone in which one speaks of the dead.

"They say that jar on the mantelpiece was made



for her, sir—the one marked ‘Biddey Wiggin.’ It was made for her by her sweetheart. Once there was china clay in the neighbourhood, and quite a flourishing trade in pottery making at Dallington—fifteen miles off—though o’ course that’s all gone now. But the story is that this girl’s folks kept this inn, and she had a sweetheart who was apprenticed to one of the big potteries, and used to draw designs for these pots and vases and such. Anyway, they say he made that for her—Biddey Wiggin. Poor girl. Poor girl . . .”

“Why ‘poor’?”

Insensibly Mr. Pridgeon spoke also in a whisper. It seemed, despite the clear brightness of the morning sunshine all about them, as though a slender shade hung beside them listening to the story of her life. Of that life so long ago that, even to her, it seemed but a story after all. . . .

“This was her room, they say, and the locals still call it ‘Biddey Wiggin’s room.’ She used to lean out of the window to watch him coming down the road from Dallington. That’s why the shutters won’t keep shut, you see? She still leans out to watch for him—but he never comes no more.”

“Did he die?”

Mr. Pridgeon’s pipe was out, and he sat forward, tense with interest. Mrs. Doolittle shook her head.

“Nobody never knew! And it was that suspense—the not knowing what had happened—that killed Biddey Wiggin. He had promised to bring her a fairing from the market at Dallington; he was seen at the market, and he was seen to leave, coming in the direct of Lex Regis. But he never came to Lex Regis, and he was never seen again, neither him nor



his fairing, and the poor girl hung out o' window watching for him and watching. . . . And when day went past, and day after day and still he didn't come, they say she went queer in the head and at last drooped and died. And all for love. Folks hinted he'd gone off with a richer lass—all sorts of things—and she fretted herself to death at last. Well, that's all I know about it, sir, but it do seem to hang together with the—the haunting, don't it? The way she hangs about that poor little jar he made for her, and looks out of the window for him still, and all?"

"What happens if you move the jar to a different room? Does that free the room of the haunting? I believe these things need a sort of 'focus'?" asked Mr. Pridgeon. Mrs. Doolittle shook her head.

"We tried that—but then she goes all over the house hunting for it, and keeps one awake tapping and whispering and rustling! It was that that convinced John it wasn't all women-fancies, as he used to swear. 'Twas he that tried moving the jar—he hid it in a cupboard somewhere, and for a week we were driven fair mad! After that he was for keeping the jar to this room; then the rest of the house ain't disturbed. It's only this room she haunts—and as I told you, it's not everybody that sees her. There was a commercial gentleman and his wife come here for their honeymoon, last summer, for instance, and while *she* saw her twice—only luckily she thought she was another housemaid—he never saw her at all! So there you are. And all I can say is that I'm properly sorry you should have been disturbed, sir. I suppose you'll be wanting to leave us now?"



Her pleasant dimpled face was troubled, but cleared like magic as her guest rose to his feet.

"Not at all, Mrs. Doolittle! On the contrary, I'm deeply interested. I've often heard of haunted houses, but never had the luck to sleep in one before. And certainly, unless our poor little friend Biddey does something far more alarming than she has done up to date, I don't propose to go. My sandwiches ready in the hall? Thanks."

He stumped out, basket and rod in hand, and greatly relieved, Mrs. Doolittle bade him good-bye and good luck.

"A real nice gentleman," she murmured as at last she turned to her clearing of the breakfast things. "A real gentleman. *Nel-lee!*"

Her call was urgent—for now Mr. Pridgeon was gone, Mrs. Doolittle had no mind, even in broad daylight, to be left alone in Biddey Wiggin's room. . . .

The day was Friday, and baking-day at the "Waggoner's Arms," and Mrs. Doolittle and her assistants—Nellie, her cousin Kate and a fat little woman from the village who "came in to help when wanted"—were soon up to the eyes in flour and lard, butter, jam and sugar. John Doolittle invariably absented himself for his midday meal on Fridays, and relieved of the necessity of looking after the male animal, the women got through an unbelievable amount of work, and at the end of the day enough cakes, pies, tarts, pastries and puddings, both cooked and uncooked, to feed a garrison, stood in proud array along the stone larder shelves.

Mrs. Doolittle, flushed and contented, had just mounted the stairs to tidy her plump little person for supper, and Nellie was basting the pair of ducks



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that were to form the *pièce de résistance* of that night's supper, when a step came at the kitchen door, and Mr. Pridgeon, dusty and tired-looking, but with his eyes behind his glasses alight with some portentous secret, looked in. His face fell on seeing the serving maid alone.

"Mrs. Doolittle not in?" he demanded.

"She's *in*," said Nellie, "but she's upstairs cleanin' herself. D'you want her?"

"I should scarcely ask for her if I didn't," retorted Mr. Pridgeon. "Will you ask her to come up and see me as soon as she is free? It doesn't matter when—any time will do. And by the way, I want my supper in my room to-night, please."

"I'll tell her," promised Nellie, spooning butter vigorously over the ducks. "But she won't be able to come till late, I don't expect? She's got a busy evening. There's a telephone message just come through from some folks motoring whose car's broke down, who want supper and beds unexpected. But I'll tell her."

Now it happened that the party of motorists—which consisted of two women and three men—were all hungry—all tired, and wet to the skin, having had to walk through the rain for almost two miles from where their car was stranded in a ditch. And between cooking extra food, making hot drinks, airing beds, drying wet clothes and finding dry ones, it was not until almost twelve o'clock that night that Mrs. Doolittle, thoroughly tired, knocked softly at Mr. Pridgeon's door. She half-expected to receive no answer, the little man having given her up and gone to bed, and when his "come in" came in answer to her knock she drew a faintly



apprehensive breath. Twelve—almost—and she did not fancy twelve o'clock at night in Biddey Wiggin's room. Yet guests must be served, and after all, it was only a quarter to twelve by the kitchen clock, she had glanced at it as she left to come upstairs; and everybody knows that ghosts never walk before twelve. . . .

An apology for her lateness trembled on her lips as she pushed upon the door, but it got no farther, for Mr. Pridgeon was obviously too interested in what he was doing to listen. Sitting at the table, he was examining something under the lamp—without a word he beckoned her to come forward, and as she wonderingly approached she saw that beneath the circle of amber light cast on the table by the lamp, there lay an old-fashioned leather wallet. It had been fastened, cover to cover, by a small tongue of leather passing through a rusted buckle; but somehow during the long hours since dinner-time, Mr. Pridgeon had teased this open, and the interior, folded back, lay exposed to view. The cover was of old brown leather, much discoloured with damp, and the inside was lined with leather likewise; but with leather much thinner and of a different colour. On each side was a small pocket, and beside the wallet lay the things that had been in the pockets. A few papers, so blotted and patched with damp as to be unreadable, a key, a few coins—and a tiny jeweller's case. An old-world velvet case, probably originally white or light grey, now faded to a neutral dead-leaf colour. The hinges and fastening were, like the buckle of the wallet, corroded, but the fastening had been easily forced, and there, against a backing of blue satin, lay a little gold locket. On



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the front of the tiny thing two engraved initials set to partners with two others—"B. W. from J. L."—a double heart pierced with an arrow between them, and inside was a single curling scrap of dark hair. Mr. Pridgeon looked at Mrs. Doolittle and she looked back at him.

"Is it possible," he said soberly, "that I've found Biddey Wiggin's fairing, after all these years? What was her sweetheart's name?"

"His name," said Mrs. Doolittle in a scared whisper, "was Joseph Lake. And they say he had dark curly hair—like that. Oh, you've found it all right, sir—'B. W. from J. L.' But where, and how, did you find it?"

"I was looking for some place to hide the papers that had contained my lunch," said Mr. Pridgeon. "On principle, I never leave litter about anywhere, even in so remote a place as this. Well, I wandered down what seemed to be an old path, running between marshy ground on one side, and a small stream—a sort of tributary of the river, I suppose—on the other. And quite by chance I stubbed my foot against the stump of a willow—an old stump—and fell down; and when I picked myself up I found I'd kicked out, from where it must have been lying for goodness knows how many years at the base of the stump in some hollow or other, this wallet. It must have lain there for years and years, in all weathers—dropped, I suppose, by Joseph Lake as he passed along there on his way from Dallington. I find that that path's a short cut from Dallington across the marshes. I suppose he took that for speed's sake, poor chap, wanting to get to see his girl as soon as possible—didn't know the way, or



missed it, fell in and was drowned and never found again ! ”

For a moment there was silence in the shadowed room. Mrs. Doolittle nodded.

“ That ’ud be it, sir. Poor lad—and poor girl, to fret herself to death wondering whether he ’d gone off with another woman ! They say that killed her more than anything else. Pity she couldn’t have got the fairing, anyway, just to show he loved her till the end. I reckon if she got it now, even, she wouldn’t walk no more.”

Mr. Pridgeon sighed as he rose to his feet.

“ Yes. A tragedy, poor girl. Still—there it is for her, after all these years ! ”

Walking to the mantelpiece, he dropped it into the biscuit-coloured china jar.

“ Let’s hope, if she comes again, she’ll find it, and know he was her true love as she was his.”

There was a pause—then suddenly Mrs. Doolittle emitted a strangled gasp and clutched the table.

“ Look out, sir—*there she is !* ”

Mr. Pridgeon whirled about—and his heart leapt into his throat and stayed there, thumping.

There, indeed, she was, standing against the doorway, as though she had just come inside and were standing timidly awaiting their permission to come farther into the room. She was clear and yet faint to see ; a silvery shadow glimmering against the dark wood of the door as the shadow of a silver birch glimmers on the surface of some gloomy mere. As before, she seemed to bring with her her own uncanny light, and in it one could see that she was frail and young, with a wistful little face, and that she wore a high-waisted gown of flowered



pink material, with a tiny apron girded up under the armpits, and a demure little cap tied under her chin, hiding all but a few tendrils of her fair curly hair—with his heart thudding like a steam-engine, Mr. Pridgeon caught Mrs. Doolittle by the hand to steady himself, and tried to speak. Yet no sound came but a frightened squeak—all the same, she seemed to understand that they welcomed her, and a faint shy smile broke across her shadowy face.

“Come back—come away—let her get at it!” panted Mrs. Doolittle, and hand-in-hand they backed towards the window, leaving the hearth empty—as they did so the figure glided, swift as a flash, from the doorway to the fireplace, bent over the china jar, and in a flash turned round, both hands clasped tightly to her bosom. She faced them, motionless, transfigured, and for a moment the shadowy form, as though joy had infused it with sudden force, grew strong and vivid, showing, like a picture painted in light, a lovely young woman smiling with happiness, surrounded with an aura of silver brilliance. So bright was it that with an involuntary exclamation, Mr. Pridgeon blinked and covered his eyes with both hands—and even as he did so the light vanished, and with it the figure.

But that was not—as Mr. Pridgeon, relating the story later, was wont to aver—the most remarkable thing about the whole experience. The most remarkable thing was that when he looked inside the china jar for the locket and chain that he had so light-heartedly placed there, that they had gone. Vanished as though they had never been.

. . . . .

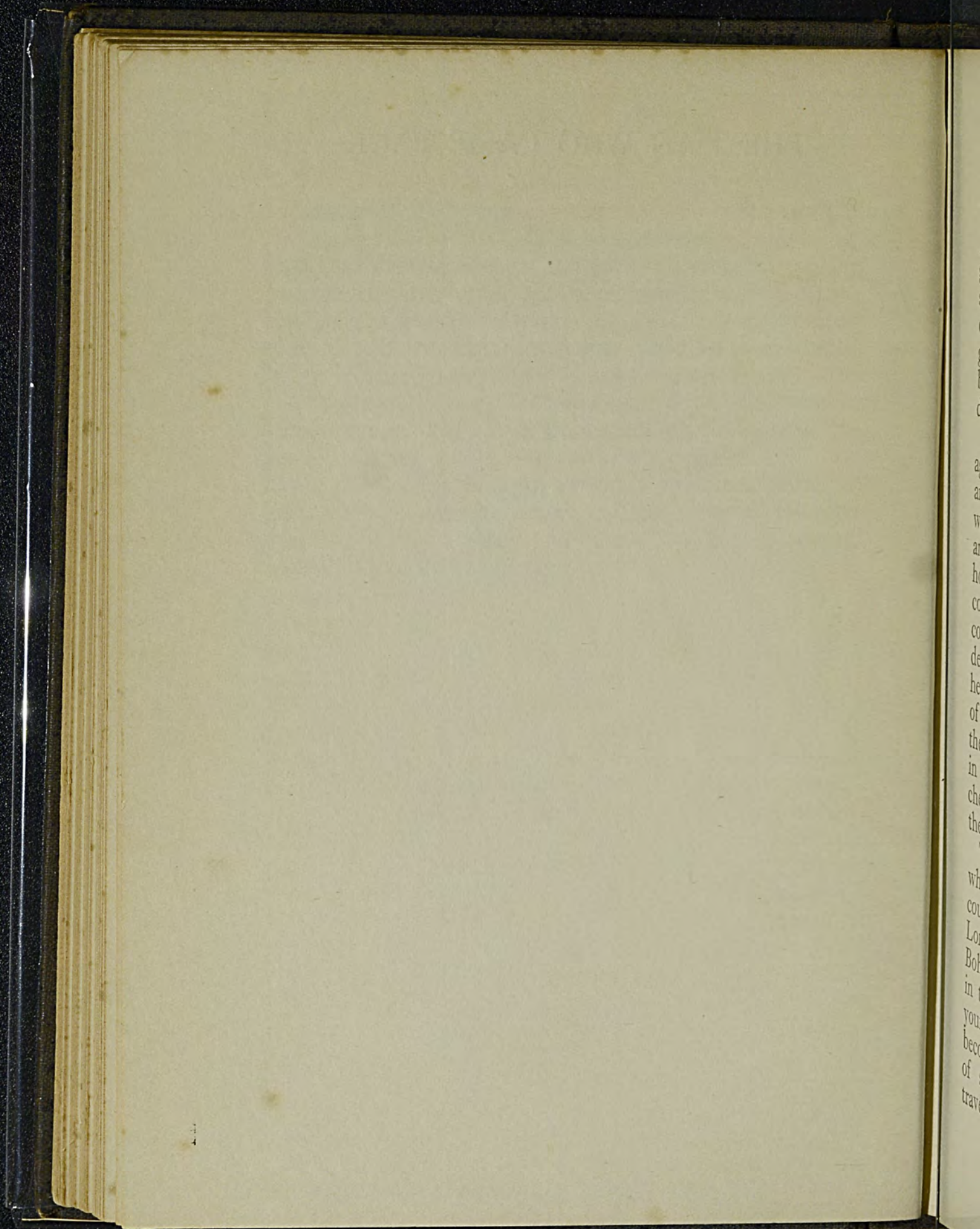


The biscuit-coloured china jar—given by Mrs. Doolittle in gratitude to one of her most regular clients—reposes now upon the mantelpiece of Mr. Pridgeon's modest flat in town. It seems to have brought with it—perhaps as Biddey Wiggin's blessing—a considerable amount of luck ; at least, since receiving it, Mr. Pridgeon has had two promotions in his grade, so that now when he goes down to the "Waggoner's Arms" (which he does regularly at least once a year) it is as a man of substance and responsibility. He invariably occupies his old room—"Biddey Wiggin's room" as it is still called. But Biddey Wiggin, poor, restless little ghost, has gone to her own place. Where doubtless she found Joseph Lake awaiting her.



THE MAN WHO CAME BACK







## THE MAN WHO CAME BACK

IT was a very merry house-party. The givers of it, Colonel and Lady Garrison, were two pleasant, gregarious souls. Not peculiarly interesting in themselves, but possessing that priceless gift, that, in my opinion should be subsidized, when found, by the government of the country to which the owner of it belongs—that gift that the Americans crisply describe as “mixing!”

The Garrisons, childless, well-to-do and middle-aged, gave, it was well known, by far the most amusing parties in their particular coterie, and fierce was the competition for invitations, especially to the annual Christmas house-party, held in their country house, a rambling, old-fashioned, but supremely comfortable old manor in a well-known hunting county. The Colonel was a keen man to hounds, and despite his increasing years and weight, still easily held his own with the younger men, and several of his rivals in the hunting field were members of the present party who, sitting round a blazing fire in the drawing-room after dinner, were eating chestnuts and cracking jokes, well pleased with themselves, their dinner and their hosts.

Ted Boulter, the M.F.H., and his pretty little wife, whose Dresden-china beauty belied her pluck across country. The two Symons, brother and sister. Londoners, dark, given to odd clothes and odder Bohemian jargon; altogether too “arty and crafty” in the Colonel’s private opinion. But indubitably young people to know, since they were rapidly becoming the only people who counted in the matter of smart house decoration. The Todhunters, travellers and explorers, Cecily Fleet, a county



beauty, just embarking on a film career, and her two admirers, Len Ponsonby and Terry Walters; a couple of young nephews, all bounce and brawn, and two new acquaintances that Lady Garrison had picked up at the bridge club she frequented in town. Doctor and Mrs. Playfair—charming people, thought the Colonel, as, with his glasses perched precariously on his forehead and his dinner-jacket rumpled as usual between his shoulders, he twiddled with the knobs on his beloved radio in a vain endeavour to get Rome or Milan. Charming people! Playfair himself was a brilliant young feller; one of the coming men in Harley Street, everybody said. And his wife was a dam' pretty woman! Small and slim and exquisitely dressed, with hair the colour of a new chestnut and golden hazel eyes.

The two were complete love-birds. At least, Playfair was obviously madly in love with his wife, never let her out of his sight unless he could help it; while she seemed sincerely fond of him—but between love and mere fondness lies a world of difference! Still, it seemed to be working all right, thought the Colonel to himself, as he struggled with the wireless. But neither Rome nor Milan responded, and, defeated, he turned to his guests.

"Something wrong with the blasted thing! Not that it matters. Anybody care for a game of billiards?" he demanded.

A chorus of assent came from the younger men, but Lady Garrison's motherly voice rose above them.

"Not a bit of it! I'm not going to let one of you out of here yet. I've got a surprise!"

"Not another ghost?" demanded Cecily Fleet, who had been at last year's gathering, and still



retained vivid memories of the amazingly well-staged "ghost" scare that Lady Garrison had got up for the amusement of her Christmas guests. Lady Garrison, plump and matronly in plum-coloured satin, shook her well-marcelled grey head.

"Nothing so ordinary!" She looked round the expectant circle with a smile of satisfaction. "I've got another 'stunt'—as you young people call it. I've got—what do you think? I've persuaded Madame Esperanza, the famous medium, to come and give us a sitting!"

There was a general chorus of acclaim.

"How splendid! How perfectly *marvellous*!"

The Boulters, who had a passion for bridge and considered any evening not spent at cards an evening wasted, smiled with tempered enthusiasm and said nothing. Cecily Fleet pressed her fingers, long and slender and tipped with shining scarlet nails, to her correspondingly scarlet lips and rolled scared blue eyes over them at the company in general.

"I shall be simply *terrified*!" she proclaimed, but from his post at one side of the fire Ned Playfair responded, smiling indulgently.

"No need to be in the least alarmed, Miss Fleet!" His rich, pleasant voice was comfortingly reassuring.

"It's only an amusing game, of course. I assure you there's nothing whatever in these so-called mediums. Nothing supernatural, that is."

"What do you mean by 'nothing whatever'?"

Lady Garrison's tone was faintly nettled. With a bend of his handsome head in her direction the young doctor deprecatingly replied.

"Please forgive me, Lady Garrison. But really, you see, as a doctor we know what this kind of thing



is worth. And surely you, of all people, only regard a thing like this—this sitting, séance, whatever one likes to call it—as an amusing sort of game? You don't think there's really anything in it?"

There was a pause. Lady Garrison's plump face was faintly flushed, and her lips were pressed together. She was sharply irritated, in truth. Not that she herself was an ardent believer in spiritualism, in which, to be honest, she was merely a dabbler, half believing and half sceptical. But Playfair's undisguised contempt stung her at least momentary championship.

"I don't know?" She spoke defiantly. "I'm not clever enough to argue the point, Doctor Playfair, and I freely admit that I, personally, haven't done enough of it to be able to speak with any authority. But if people like Marshall Hall and Oliver Lodge and—er, Conan Doyle, and so on—find something worth considering in it, it surely can't be dismissed so easily as that?"

There was an awkward pause. Cecily Fleet broke it, with a little gush of girlish earnestness.

"I'm sure the doctor didn't mean . . . er . . . that?" she said, skilfully skimming over what precisely she meant by "that." "But I'm sure the rest of us want to see Madame What's-her-name most frightfully! *I* do, for one."

"We do!" chorused the Symons eagerly, and a general murmur of enthusiasm arose. It was obvious that the doctor's attitude of antagonism was not popular, and he was clever enough to see the wisdom of retreating at least a little way. He had no desire to quarrel with the Garrisons and their very well-to-do circle. He smiled disarmingly.



"I'm sure I apologise, Lady Garrison, if inadvertently I said anything you might have construed into a sneer or a slight on your 'surprise'?"

He smiled again at the old lady where she sat stiffly braced, upright in her favourite red satin Victorian chair, and against her will she thawed, smiling reluctantly back. Certainly Playfair knew how to handle women, reflected the Colonel, amused. Repute had it he had had plenty of experience with 'em! Even that his large practice was due to his extraordinary influence over—and charm for—women. But that was gossip in all probability. Mere jealousy directed against a rising man, and the Colonel, who was strictly fair-minded, scouted the idea almost as soon as it raised its head. Yet it would not be entirely banished . . . like a sardonic imp it sat there, in the remotest corner of his mind, listening and watching as the young doctor smoothed down the ruffled feelings of his hostess and re-established himself in her good graces.

"You know I didn't mean to be at all rude, Lady Garrison—far from it! I spoke on impulse, that's all—and I had no idea you took the thing so seriously. But since you do—why, then, I withdraw! Of course, I shall be only too pleased to join in anything you like to arrange."

Lady Garrison arose, appeased.

"That's all right," she said. "I'll go and fetch Madame Esperanza. She's here already—resting and preparing in my room."

Mrs. Boulter gave a little squeak of delighted fear.

"Oh, is she here? Have you kept her hidden until this moment! Oh, Ted, how *thrilling*!"

"I only hope," said Lady Garrison, "that the



sitting *will* be thrilling? But mind—I don't promise anything. She said herself that unless the conditions were favourable she couldn't guarantee anything at all."

"The usual guff!" muttered Ned Playfair to his wife, as the Colonel, ever courteous, shuffled after his plump wife to open the door for her. Ida Playfair glanced up at him curiously, her hazel eyes starry under the shadow of her fringe of chestnut hair.

"Don't you like it, Arthur? If you'd rather not sit, I'm sure we can get out of it. I'm a little bit scared, to be honest!"

He shook his head and glanced round the rest of the group, their eyes fixed expectantly on the door.

"I'm afraid not. I've rather foolishly put the old girl's back up by joking about it, and since I want to get 'em as patients, or at least, some of their friends—they've a hell of a lot of influence—I suppose we shall have to sit through it. But you've no reason to feel scared, Ida. It's all rot. Clever posing, with a spot of telepathy or hypnotism or guesswork thrown in as make-weight!"

He smiled down at her reassuringly, but her eyes were on the fire. Her expression was faintly dissatisfied.

"I don't know," she began. "If, as Lady Garrison says, all these brilliant men have come to the conclusion that there *is* something in it, surely it can't be *all* rubbish? And Tillie van Heyden told me . . ."

Impatiently he interrupted, his black brows drawn together in a dangerous-looking scowl.



"I don't care what Tillie van Heyden said. She's a silly twittering fool, anyway—just the type that likes to mess about with what it describes as 'the occult.' I tell you, it's fraud, and when it's not deliberate fraud it's a mixture of hysteria and self-delusion and hypnotism, and I don't know what all! If it didn't mean that I can't afford to offend the old folks—we've only just got to know 'em—I'd go upstairs to bed right away, and not waste time on their damn silly séance. But, however . . ."

He paused, for the door opened and Lady Garrison entered, followed by a strange woman. An insignificant little woman wearing a shabby black velvet dress ornamented with a conglomeration of cheap beads about the neck; she had greying hair, untidily bundled into a "bun" at the back of her head, pince-nez, and a small, faded, indefinite face behind large horn-rimmed glasses. An almost audible hush of disappointment ran round the room, for nobody less like a professional sybil could possibly be imagined—but Lady Garrison, experienced hostess, instantly filled in the awkward moment with a flood of introductions.

"Madame Esperanza—Mrs. Boulter, Miss Fleet, Mr. and Mrs. Todhunter . . ."

The little woman, warming her meagre hands at the fire, nodded and smiled vaguely at each fresh name until Lady Garrison ended her litany with:

"Dr. and Mrs. Playfair. And that's the lot!"

The medium, raising her eyes from the fire, surveyed the owners of the last two names—he still standing with one arm on the mantelpiece, watching the proceedings with a quizzical eye, she crouched on a black velvet pouffe at his feet, her white tulle frock billowing about her like a summer cloud. For



a moment Madame Esperanza eyed the pretty woman at her feet, then spoke suddenly.

"Are you going to be at the sitting?" she asked.

Her voice was reedy, and she spoke with a faintly uneducated twang. Ida Playfair regarded her with a slight sense of distaste mingled with wonder and a rising sense of incredulity. Surely nothing that this common, shabby little woman could say could be really worth while? Probably as Ned declared, she was just a clever *poseuse*, some back-street pythoness who had somehow managed to impress dear old Thedosa Garrison—but quite obviously nobody to feel afraid of. She laughed breezily.

"Certainly I am! I'm not going to miss shaking hands with a spook!"

The medium looked down at her in silence. Behind, the room was in a cheerful uproar as chairs were hastily arranged in a circle, tables, cushions and whatnots pushed into corners, the door locked and a length of scarlet silk draped over the chandelier to dim its brightness to the requisite subdued glow; Lady Garrison, in her element, was bustling about directing operations, and for the moment the three beside the fire were alone, unnoticed, the shabby little woman with the intent eyes and the handsome young doctor and his wife. As if hypnotised by that strange, steady stare, for a moment Ida stared back without speaking—then Madame Esperanza spoke, suddenly and decidedly.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," she said.

Ida's eyes flew wide with amazement, and her husband laughed drily.

"Why not?" he said curtly.

The medium looked at him, opened her mouth to



speaking, and changing her mind, looked back at the fire and went on warming her hands in silence.

But Ida Playfair's curiosity was aroused. Moreover, she felt faintly irritated that the woman's warning should coincide with a deep-seated sense of reluctance in her own heart. She did not want to take part in the sitting, in truth—but it was odd that Madame What's-her-name should have voiced, echoed, that feeling!

"Why don't you think I should go to the sitting?" she persisted.

The medium lifted her thin shoulders in an oddly foreign shrug. Perhaps, reflected the doctor sardonically, she actually deserved the name under which she worked. "Esperanza!" It was a convincing name with which to tickle the groundlings, and she was quite a good actress, anyway. All this, of course, was according to type. She wouldn't be able to say *why* she had said that to Ida; would only hedge and hint. Yet . . .

"I can't tell you why I said that," the medium said, almost brusquely, "but sometimes before a sitting I get the feeling that for a certain person it would be better if they didn't join in. I don't know why—but it's always right." She raised eyes, suddenly piercing behind their horn-rimmed glasses, to Playfair, standing leaning against the mantelpiece with his hands in his pockets, a barely-concealed smile of derision on his dark face. "It applies to you, too, you know," she said bluntly. "I'd keep away from this sitting if I were you!"

Playfair's mouth fell open—then he laughed aloud and scornfully.

"My dear lady! What on earth have I to fear?"



Again that dark glance, and again the shrug.

"You know best. I don't know a thing about your life, of course. But if you've a secret in your life—if you've something to hide, or if you've done something—well, that you don't like to look back on—then if so, I'd find some excuse not to join in this circle."

Ida Playfair's hand flew to clasp her husband's.

"Something to hide?" Her voice was sharp with affectionate resentment. "What a perfectly idiotic idea! Darling . . ."

But for once an appeal by his adored wife passed Ned Playfair by. He did not hear, for he was staring at the woman with sudden attention. Staring fixedly—and for a moment it seemed as though his handsome brown face was a trifle white and strained. Then with a brusque laugh he seemed to dismiss the whole thing and turned away.

"Absurd! But I congratulate you," he spoke coldly over his shoulder. "I congratulate you on playing the part excellently, from the very first minute you came on the stage. Brilliant, really. You ought to go on the stage proper."

The taunt was blatantly rude, but the medium did not seem to hear. She was staring down into the fire, apparently lost in thought—flushed with excitement, Lady Garrison bustled up, talking as usual at the top of her voice.

"Come on now—come along! It's all ready. That's right, isn't it, Madame?"

The medium turned, and surveying the room, nodded briefly.

"That's right—you have the door locked, so that servants can't come in and interrupt? Good. Then we'll start."



Entering the circle she seated herself in the central chair, the huge leather "grandfather" generally sacred to the Colonel, and glanced round the ring of eager faces that surrounded her. Taking off her glasses, she put them neatly away, like any maiden aunt, in a leather spectacle-case, and tucked them into the beaded bag that swung from her waist—and for a moment Ida Playfair blinked, surprised. For the eyes that the horn-rimmed glasses had hidden were dark and amazing, set in deep hollows that emphasised their darkness—piercing, oddly dominant eyes. Eyes that—suddenly—seemed to promise all sorts of possibilities . . . a faint sense of fear touched her once more like a passing wing, and she reached for her husband's hand and gave it a quick squeeze to give herself courage as she settled into her place. He glanced at her, surprised and touched—for as the Colonel had shrewdly surmised, their relations were definitely, as the old French song says, "*l'un qui baise, et l'autre qui tend la joue.*" Despite his desperate love of her, it was still, with her, only a gentle turning of the cheek.

"There is one thing I must ask of you all, please?"

It was the medium speaking, and her voice already sounded oddly drowsy and slow. "That is, that when I am once *in* trance you keep your places until I come *out* of trance."

She blinked and paused, as though collecting thoughts already growing hazy.

"I—it may be very dangerous to me for anyone to leave their seat without permission from my control. If he gives it—all right, but not otherwise. I can't explain the—conditions—but I am sure you will accept my assurance that this rule is necessary."



A subdued murmur of assent arose from the circle, and settling back into the chair with her head against the padded back, Madame Esperanza closed her eyes, and drawing a long breath, appeared to go to sleep. Playfair smiled faintly to himself as he watched her. Of course! The usual thing. Talk a lot of vague stuff about "conditions" in order to *impose* conditions that made it utterly impossible for anybody to investigate the thing! The usual thing . . . except that it was odd that she had said . . . that; but here Dr. Playfair, like the Colonel, hustled a certain thought deliberately and firmly into the background and settled down to watch events.

Everything was quiet. At first an excited giggle or two from one of the women broke out, a rustle of movement as somebody changed their position, a subdued whisper—but now, as though hypnotised, everyone sat very still, and dead silence lay like a deep unfathomable pool over the dimly-lit room. In the great chair the medium lay sunk in sleep, and the red light, falling almost directly upon her, etched curious lights and shadows on her shrunken little face. Watching, Ida Playfair shivered suddenly, thinking the face had changed, gained a curious dignity and power; the lines down each side of the mouth, the deep hollows about the eyes, looked as though carved in stone—the whole face looked, indeed, like the face of some old Crusader reclining "mansize in marble" upon his tomb. Or the death-mask, stern, immovable, of some ancient king, long forgotten of mankind . . . even as Ida Playfair stared and shivered, clutching her husband's hand, the medium shuddered violently, gave a smothered ejaculation in some unknown tongue, and then



with an indescribable majesty sat upright in her chair. With eyes still shut she turned her head slowly from side to side, following the ring of faces as though she saw, indeed, through those fast-closed lids; and her face was sternly unfamiliar.

Mrs. Boulter clutched her husband's arm.

"It's—it's not the same woman!" she whispered agitatedly. "It's a man's face! Oh, Tony, I wish we hadn't started, I'm frightened. . . ."

A deep voice broke the silence, uttering a few unintelligible words. "The usual bastard Hebrew or Egyptian," muttered the doctor under his breath, but he dared not speak aloud. Although he was still utterly convinced that the whole thing was nothing but a clever fraud, against his will he was impressed. Impressed at least into silence . . . and that change in the face, that voice, heavy, masculine, rich, was certainly amazingly well done. Who'd have thought that shabby little Aunt Jane had it in her?

The voice was speaking again, but now in English.

"Peace be to this house!" The head bowed gravely in the direction of Lady Garrison, sitting upright, clutching the hands of her neighbours, her wholesome pink face flushed with excitement and nervousness. "Peace!" The blind eyes went round the circle again as though seeking something, then paused. "Peace and greetings to all, from the world of Spirit. I know what you would have—you would hold talk with those whom you call dead. With those who are on *this* side. And that is well—when you take care to whom you talk."

There was a pause while the sitters, bewildered, looked at each other. Lady Garrison broke it at last.

"Er—how do you do?" The lame modern



phrase sounded incredibly foolish. "I—we are very glad to see you, and of course you are quite right about what we want to do. But we don't quite understand. . . ."

"I will explain!"

The deep voice paused, then continued.

"I am what you call the 'control' of this instrument here on earth—and the name I use is Sekhet. On this side we do not like to allow these instruments—what you call mediums—to be used by anyone who chooses. We try to keep back those whom we do not think should speak to you; yet our powers are limited, and if the force is very strong—we must stand aside and permit it to speak. But—in this case I do not think it would be wise."

"What *do* you mean?"

It was Ned Playfair's voice, brusque, unbelieving, that broke the puzzled silence that had followed on the control's speech. The figure bowed its head.

"I mean, that there is here, amongst other souls who wish to speak, one soul that I would try to keep from speaking. And for that reason I think it would be wise," he bowed once more, with ineffable grace and courtesy, towards Lady Garrison, "to what you call 'break up' the meeting? Release your hands, thus shutting the current off, and I will bring the medium out of trance at once."

A chorus of astonished and indignant voices answered him.

"Give it up—just when it's getting interesting? *What* an idea! But why?"

The chorus rolled round the circle while Ned Playfair sat back and smiled. Just as he had expected! The woman, seeing from the outset that



he was not to be fooled like the others, had tried to frighten him—first through Ida, then directly away from the sitting; and now, finding he was not to be so frightened, she had recourse to this childish expedient! She was prepared to break up the circle, to lose her fee, and disappoint a group of eminently worth-while people sooner than risk discovery—now nothing in the world would persuade him to allow the circle to be broken, and he added his sharply-cut drawl to the chorus.

"Surely, Mr.—er—Sekhet—you don't think you can frighten us in that way? I can assure you that we are prepared for any and everything that may happen! But we are *not* prepared to abandon the sitting."

There was a momentary pause. The others looked gratefully at their champion, but Ida Playfair, suddenly white, half rose from her seat.

"I—I want to go!" she whispered. Her face was curiously strained, her great eyes ringed like a doe's. "I don't know why—but I want to go."

The deep voice answered from the centre of the circle.

"That is wise, little lady! You may go. But for you others—close the circle in as she leaves, friends, so that the current is broken as little as possible."

Without a word the white-clad figure rose and fled, and as the door closed behind her the voice resumed.

"With regard to what you say, my son," the blind eyes seemed to pierce right through the dark young doctor where he sat, "if you insist—all have free will, and if it is the will of all to go on with this sitting, so be it! But—I still advise you against it."



There was a faint pause. Lady Garrison, more impressed than she cared to admit, glanced uncertainly round the circle. The Boulters looked doubtful, the Todhunter's puzzled, the Symons cynically amused, Cecily Fleet and her attendant swains definitely disappointed—a very little would have persuaded the good lady to take the mysterious Sekhet's advice and dissolve the circle altogether, but Ned Playfair's voice rose again, brusque, antagonistic.

"I suggest we are rather wasting time, Lady Garrison? I, for one, refuse to be alarmed by vague hints and warnings. We formed this circle for the definite purpose of seeing signs and wonders. And if Madame Esperanza feels that for some reasons" (the sneer was patent) "she cannot to-night produce these signs and wonders, then let her say so plainly and candidly? But if she is *not* prepared to say so—why, then let her carry on!"

"And we'll take the consequences," suggested Cecily Fleet with a giggle. "If there are any?"

"And," agreed Playfair suavely, "we'll take the consequences. At least, if there are any consequences we shall all agree not to blame you, Mr. Sekhet!"

The sternly upright figure in the centre of the circle bowed its head resignedly.

"So be it. You have, as I said, free will. And if you will insist, against my advice, upon opening this door to-night, then I will do my best to control the soul that already beats upon it, desiring to re-establish contact with the earth he has left. Be still, all! I go to prepare the way."

There was a slight convulsion of the body, and the



medium, drooped together, fell back into the chair. In the red light her face was again the face of a weary little middle-aged woman, lined and tired—Cecily Fleet, who was sitting on the other side of Ned Playfair, nudged him eagerly as she whispered.

"Look, isn't that odd! Her face looked just like a man when *That* was talking—and now it's herself again! Isn't that queer?"

But there was no time to answer, for the medium, muttering rapidly and unintelligibly to herself, was rising upright in her chair again. Her face was twisted and distressed, and the voice that came through her lips was hoarse, with a rattle now and then—like the voice of somebody striving, through the stress of furious excitement, to speak clearly and connectedly. A voice entirely and utterly different from the measured, level tones of Sekhet! Suddenly the hoarseness left it and it came clear, ringing, a strong masculine voice—and at the sound of it Ned Playfair bounded in his chair, his face suddenly chalk-white, his eyes blazing.

Yet the voice was not addressing him—it seemed to be arguing with someone unseen, so that it sounded for all the world like a human voice arguing with a telephone operator.

"Let me get through, will you—oh yes, I'll remember! I'll keep steady—at least, I'll do my best, but don't lecture me now, d'you hear? I've *got* to get through—I tell you I must, I know she's there!" Then, in a ringing shout that rang through the room like a clarion call: "*I want my wife, I say! I want my wife!*"

The call was so electric, so painful in its intensity, that a loud and startled gasp ran round the circle,



Cecily Fleet, her flippancy vanished, gave a pitiful little cry that echoed Mrs. Boulter's, and the hot tears pricked behind Lady Garrison's eyes, as in a strangled voice she stammered.

"Your wife? I'm afraid . . . who is it speaking?"

"Neil Ramsay!" came the answer instantly, sharp and clear, and Cecily Fleet, hearing a quick-drawn breath at her shoulder, turned and peered at the man beside her. Odd that Ned Playfair, who, of all people, had been at the start the hardest, the most defiantly sceptical, should be so shaken now! Even in the dusky red glow from the scarlet-draped lamp one could see how white he was.

"Did you know Neil Ramsay?" she whispered. But Playfair shook his head.

"No! No!" he muttered feverishly—and the entire circle started with amazement and alarm as the voice came again, this time in a furious shout.

"*Liar!* You to say you don't know me, Ned Playfair?"

With a huge effort the medium staggered from the chair and, standing planted firmly on her feet, faced the white-faced doctor. Half risen from his chair, Playfair stood shaking, endeavouring to steady himself with one hand upon his chair-back, but with the sweat of sheer terror running down his face, while within him two things fought fiercely for mastery. Cynicism—the bitter atheism that refused, even at this moment, to believe that he beheld anything other than a horribly brilliant *tour de force* of acting—and fear. That dreadful aching fear that turns a man's bones to water and his soul to a stone that sinks therein . . . madly he snatched at his vanishing self-control, and tried to laugh. But all



that came was a cracked whisper, a ghastly echo of a laugh.

"Ha, ha! Of course I remember you now, old fellow. Neil Ramsay! But why . . ."

"You know why I come. You don't need to ask."

The little figure in black was menacing now. Frail as a shadow, yet charged with a dreadful shattering power.

"You know why I come, Playfair. To find my wife. My wife—of whom you robbed me!"

A terrified shuddering ran round the circle, and Mrs. Boulter slipped quietly to the ground in a faint—but held in the steel grip of sheer fascinated horror nobody could either move or speak. Playfair stood as though turned to stone, his eyes fixed on the grim little figure before him as the voice thundered on.

"Of whom you robbed me, Ned Playfair. *The wife for whom you murdered me!*"

With a spring like that of a coiled snake, on the last word she was on him, her lean fingers knotted in his throat. Shrieking, hysterical with fear, the women sprang up and scattered as the two fought, swaying and staggering wildly about in the centre of the circle, while the men, flinging chairs aside, seized the combatants and tried to force them apart—then suddenly in their arms the woman went limp and a great voice spoke, it seemed, from over their heads.

"Put her down—there, in the chair—and leave her to come round. I have removed the poor love-crazed soul who just possessed her—I warned you, I, Sekhet, but you would not be warned. Yet retribution is just . . . see to *him* now. Farewell!"



It ceased, and in silence the shaken group gathered about the prone form of the young doctor, lying just where he had fallen, among a welter of fallen chairs, scattered bags and scarves and fans, stark in the brilliance of the white light from which the shrouding red drapery had been removed. His face was set in a terrible expression of fear and rage, and there were red marks round his throat where the thin, vicious fingers had clutched—he lay deadly still, and with a sudden fear catching at his heart Colonel Garrison beckoned Todhunter over to his side. As becomes an explorer, the brown-faced man had a good working knowledge of medicine. Kneeling, in a dead and awful silence he opened the prostrate man's shirt, tested his heart and held a mirror to his lips, then looked up with a grave face. Cecily Fleet, reading the news in his eyes, burst into tears, and a general murmur of horror ran round the room as, soberly, Todhunter rose to his feet.

"Dead—of heart failure, as far as I can judge," he said gravely. "Those marks on the throat are nothing—only superficial. Although the spirit that moved her to attack him was a man—or so it seems—she was only a frail little woman, and it wasn't her attack that killed or even injured him. He died of shock. And if to-night's experience is as genuine as I believe it to be—no wonder!"

"But what is it all about—and who was Ramsay?" breathed the Colonel his healthy red face palpably pale with horror.

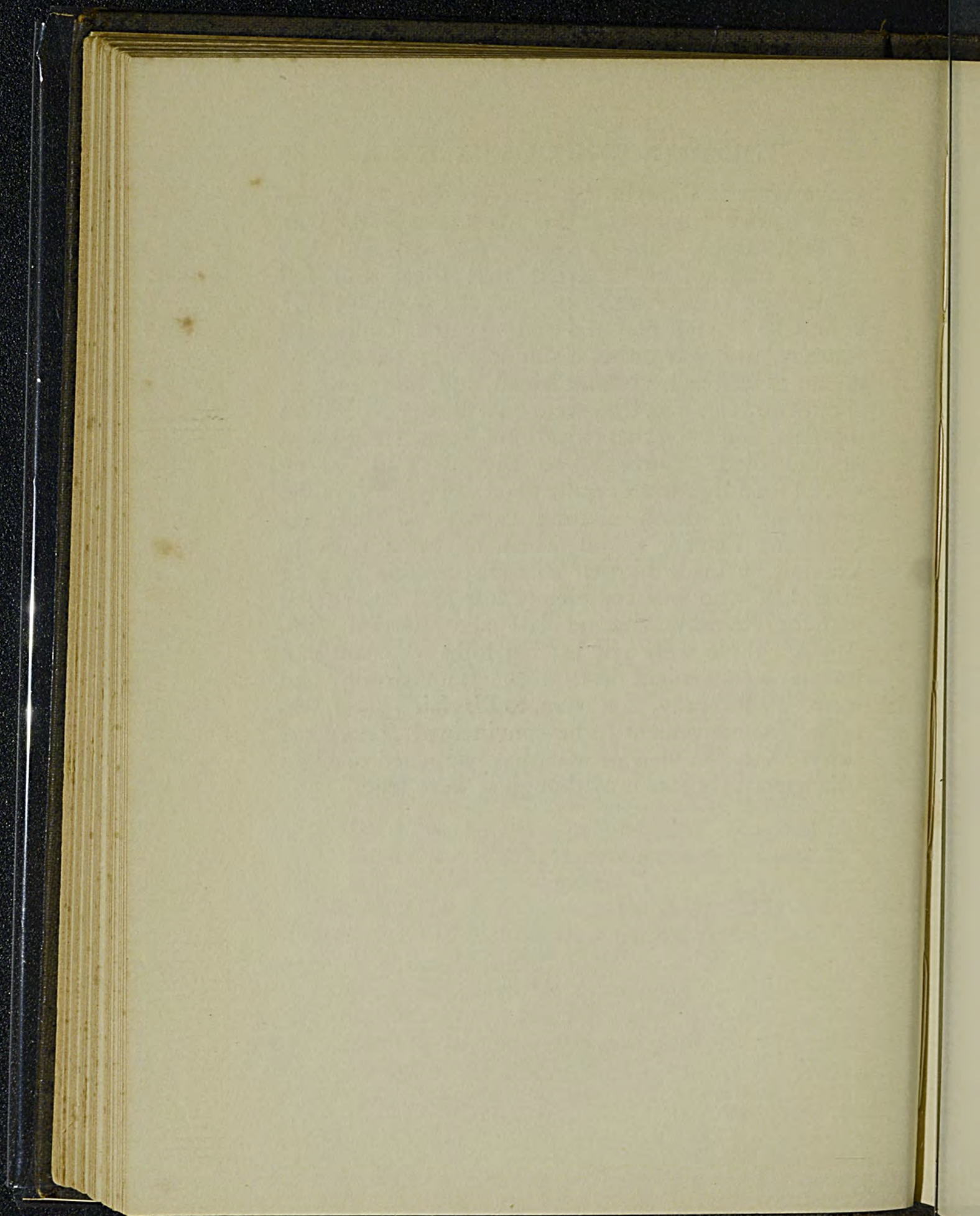
Todhunter hesitated for a moment.

"I don't like to say much," he said. "Especially as the man's dead now—and has paid for his sins. But—whoever spoke through the woman's mouth



spoke what is thought, by many people, to be the sober truth? Ida Playfair was Ida Ramsay—the wife of Neil Ramsay—until a year or two ago, and they adored each other. Playfair met them and fell desperately in love with her. But she wouldn't look at him, so Playfair played a waiting game. Cultivated Ramsay, who was rather a simple soul; became his doctor as well as his bosom friend, and, one summer, about two years ago, they went on a fishing expedition together, and upon that expedition Ramsay was taken ill and died. Through—so Playfair said—eating tinned food that wasn't quite good. Playfair gave the certificate of death—natural causes—so that was O.K. for Playfair. And when he came back to London he made himself so indispensable to poor little Ida, who was completely lost and bewildered without Ramsay, that at last she married him. Though there were not lacking folks who said that Ramsay's convenient death, that left a charming and wealthy wife ready, as it were, to Playfair's hand, was rather too convenient to be convincing! That's the story. And—in view of what has happened to-night—it looks very much as though it were true."

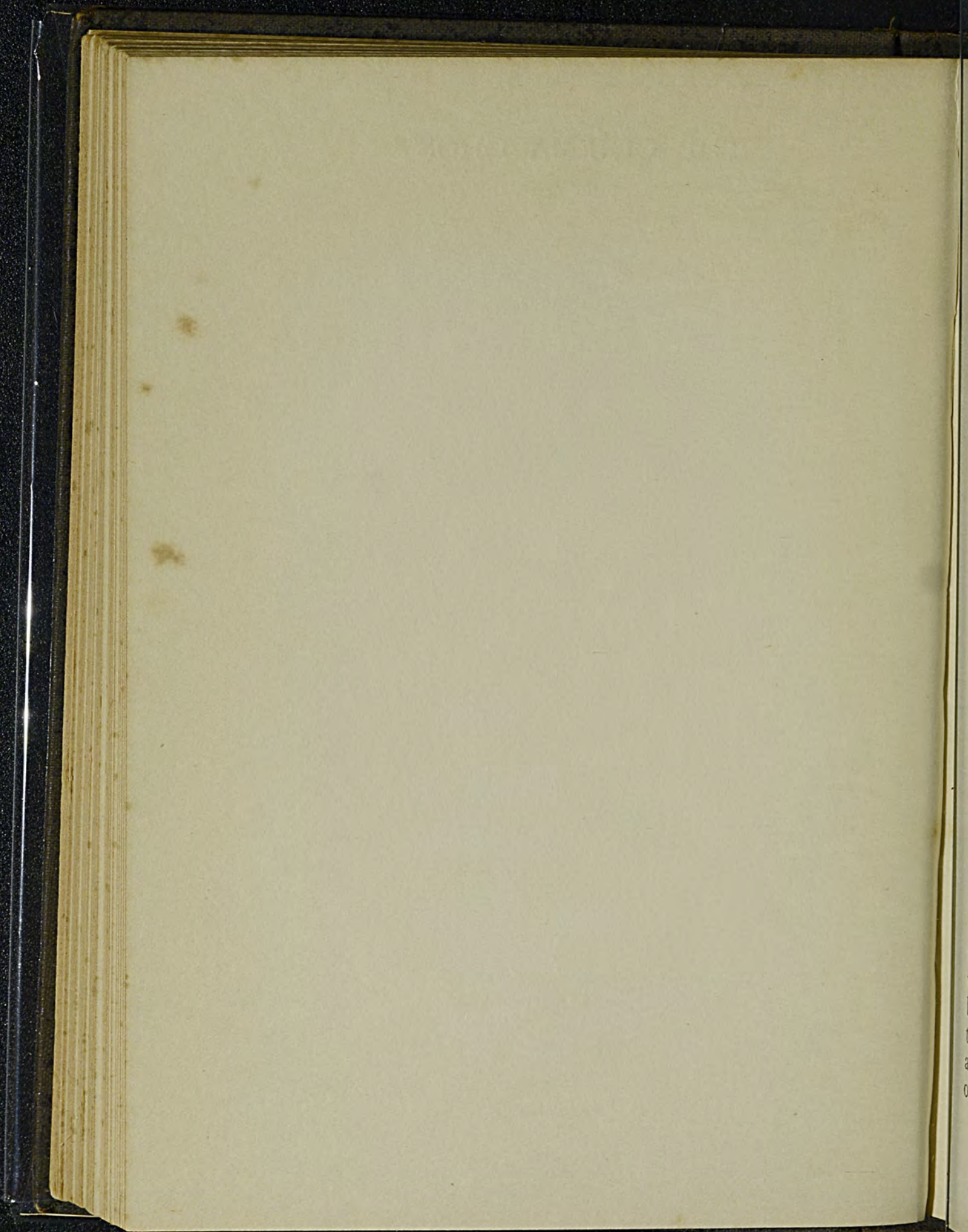






THE CINEMA GHOST





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## THE CINEMA GHOST

"GHOSTS?" said the night watchman of the "Gorgeous" Cinema. "Don't you start talking rubbish of that sort to me. Ghosts? There ain't no such things!"

He sat down heavily on the nearest chair and drew a belligerent breath as he stared at me and my drink. It was after hours, but at the little pub, the "Cock and Bottle," just round the corner from the "Gorgeous," they were kindly folk, and besides, the proprietor had been an old pal of mine since I was a cub reporter in my first year on the *Daily Record*. Got my first scoop through him—inside story of poor Sissie Mayhew's suicide. She was an *habituée* of the "Cock and Bottle," and old Price knew what the story was worth to me . . . he was the only chap in London who knew why she'd done it, and he handed the fat to me. One doesn't forget a thing like that, and I often drop into Price's for a drink and a yarn now if I'm up that way.

On the particular day on which this story opens I'd been covering a burglary story in Cumberland Place, and was pretty thirsty. The "Cock" was pretty full when I got in, but old Price beckoned me into his private room beyond the bar—a jolly Early Victorian room with knobbly-patterned red velvet on the dumpy chairs, and a horsehair sofa that was soft with wear, and a mantel border of plum-coloured velvet with a tasselled fringe along the edge and vases filled with dusty grass sitting on it, and a black marble clock like a small mausoleum. I loved that room. God, how cosy and nice it always looked after the steel-and-glass-furnished modern flats I occasionally have to visit when I'm doing gossip stuff!



It looked specially cosy that night, I remember. There was a roaring fire, Mrs. Price was sitting mending Price's socks, with a large basketful of socks and stockings and wool all mixed up on the hearth before her—there was a cat asleep on the rug, and the kid was doing homework at a corner of the one-legged mahogany table, the green-rep cloth turned back so that he shouldn't ink it. I sank into a chair with a sigh of relief, and Mrs. Price beamed at me over her sock while Price poured me out a whisky-and-splash.

"Tired you look," she said. "Been havin' a busy day?"

"Killing," I said. "Been at it since early dawn—dog's life a newspaper man's, believe me." I took off the entire glassful at one draught, and Price, laughing, poured me out another.

"I don't believe you," said Mrs. Price, drawing her brown wool carefully through the sock. "You'd never change your job for another one."

"I suppose you're right," I admitted. "Once a reporter always a reporter. Wish I could find a fresh story for my rag, though—I've had a rather blank day on the whole."

"Old Greggs' coming in for his nightcap in a minute," said Price, filling a port-and-lemon for Mrs. Price. "Ask him to tell you about 'seat forty-seven.'"

"I know about seat forty-seven," pipes the kid, but Price shut him up.

"What about seat forty-seven?" I demanded. "Do you mean a seat in the 'Gorgeous'?"

"Yes," said Price. "Seat forty-seven. You arst Greggs about it."



"There didn't seem anything odd about it as far as *I* could see," said I. "*I* had number forty-eight to-night, so I ought to know?"

"The devil you did!" exclaimed Price.

"Then I'll bet you never sat the show out?" said Mrs. Price.

I started. As a matter of fact I had *not* sat the show out—and yet, I remembered, it was a good show? I had left the place only half an hour after I went in, and for the life of me now I couldn't remember quite *why* I had suddenly decided to leave and stroll round to the "Cock and Bottle" instead? I frowned, rather ruffled.

"You're right—I left," I said. "But why on earth. . . ."

"Nobody what sits in either forty-seven or forty-eight ever sits a show out," said Mrs. Price flatly. "Don't ask me why, 'cos I couldn't tell you—nor couldn't nobody else. It's just . . . well, they just leave, that's all."

I scoffed. This, from practical little Mrs. Price—Mrs. Price, who could make the best beef-steak pudding in London, whose sane common sense (I don't mind admitting it) had saved me from making a prize fool of myself more times than I care to remember. Mrs. Price, full of kindness and good cheer, with her small, plump feet planted firmly and four-square on life, implying that she believed in the curious, the uncanny, the inexplicable? I didn't like it at all. It seemed to upset all my preconceived notions of life, and I didn't like it.

"Don't you tell me it's anything to do with ghosts," I said crossly, "for I simply shan't believe you."



"Ghosts?" said a large voice behind me, "don't you start talking that rubbidge to me . . ." and that brings me back with a jerk to the beginning of my story.

With a wave of the hand Price introduced us. Greggs, a large man with a beery eye and several chins sunk in a huge striped scarf, regarded me at first with a faintly suspicious eye. But my offer of a cigarette and a drink melted him somewhat, and he sat heavily down, removing the gigantic scarf and revealing a thick red pullover under a corduroy waistcoat, rather resembling a game-keeper's.

"Keeping warm, ain't you, George?" remarked Mrs. Price.

"Not more'n I need," grunted George. "Cold as 'ell in that damn' place it gets at night. Yeh wouldn't believe . . . every hour I'm supposed to go round the 'ole place, from the bar to the gallery, to see as anybody 'asn't got in, and towards mornin' it gets somethin' chronic, the cold do. But it ain't a bad job on the 'ole. Might be worse."

Mrs. Price shivered.

"Sooner you than me," she said. "*I* wouldn't take it on for any money. Might meet . . ." she stopped suddenly, but the red-faced man nodded reassuringly.

"No charnst of that. No. She don't *show* at all, y'know. Though she's there all right . . . but only when the flims is on. Pore old soul."

"Thought you said there wasn't such a thing as a ghost?" murmured Price from the shadows, as he sucked at his pipe. The giant looked shamefaced, and glanced unhappily at me. I hastened to reassure him.



"I shan't lampoon you in my paper as 'watchman who sees ghost,' if that's what you're afraid of," I said. "But I'd love to hear the story, if there is one?"

George looked relieved.

"Spoken like a real gent," he said, sucking his drink noisily down. "'Tisn't that I mind bein' larfed at among friends, if y'understand me? But it's 'ard times to find a job these days, and if it got about that I'd been puttin' across a story about the 'Gorgeous' 'aving a ghost . . . why, attendances might drop off in a twink, and the boss 'ud fire me without a ref. So I keeps me mouth shut, like the rest of us."

I was by this time simply bursting with curiosity.

"Do for goodness' sake tell us the yarn?" I begged. "If I use it I'll only write it in the form of fiction, I swear!"

"'E's O.K.," said Price firmly. "Won't let you down. Giddup, George!"

George glanced at the clock. It showed exactly eleven-fifteen.

"Just got nice time" he said, wiping his ragged moustache. "Give us another drain, Price. Awright. I'll tell you all I know."

. . . . .

"She was a little dried-up scrap of a woman—Mrs. Martha Brown. First saw 'er outside the 'Gorgeous' a matter of four years ago, I s'pose it 'ud be. Sort of little woman who might 'a been a superior sort of housekeeper—matter of fact we found afterwards that was just what she *was*. Married to a bullying brute of a chap—ex-butler—and they ran an



apartment house for gentlemen in Quebec Street ; very genteel, personal service and real silver spoons and all that. He knew his job, did Harvey Brown, I'll say, though he was a narsty, mean, scraping sort of chap and kept his pleasant manners for his lodgers . . . precious little of anything pleasant in life did his wife get, I lay. Well, I first saw 'em after they got settled in at Quebec Street. They come past the 'Gorgeous,' and he steps into the porch to light 'is pipe—lot o' fellows do that, see the pictures on the screens and then go in. But 'e wasn't for goin' in . . . she was lookin' at a picture of Norma Shearer, and she tugs at 'is arm."

" 'Oh, 'Arvey,' she says. 'Isn't she beautiful? Oh, do let's go in for once—just for once? I never seen a flim in me life.' "

" 'E just laughs, sharp like, and tells 'er not to be a fool. They 'adn't got no money to waste on pictures. Well, she shut up—and they went off. But after that I often useter see 'er 'anging about, starin' at the posters and the photos, with a look in 'er eyes like a kid what never tasted sweets faced with a whole shop-window full of 'em. I was commissionaire then, y'see—so I know 'ow many times she useter come. Poor little soul."

I opened my mouth to ask why he was no longer commissionaire, but merely a shabbily-dressed night watchman . . . but I caught Mrs. Price's eye. I glanced from the brimming glass to the over-reddened nose of the story-teller, and understanding, changed my question for another.

" Did you get to know her at all ? "

" In a sort of a kind of a way," admitted George.  
" Though she was never a one for talking—kept



herself to herself like, though I was a decent-looking chap then, with a chest on me and a moustache like a bandmaster, and the pale blue uniform and the red facings looked swell, or so the girls seemed to think then."

He stroked his ragged moustache with a gesture that was like a faint echo of past vanity.

"I useter know a chap cobbled shoes round Quebec Street way, and I run into Harvey Brown sometimes in his place when I dropped in to pass the time o' day . . . didn't like 'im much, though he was always as smooth and polite as you please to me. The cobbler told me he useter go and have supper with 'em sometimes—said the 'ole place was clean and neat as a pin and the food first-class. Mrs. B. was a fair marvel at housekeeping, and there wasn't a shop roundabouts that didn't shy when she came in—she always got her money's worth, no matter 'ow you tried to diddle 'er. But if she drove a 'ard bargain it was always a fair one, which was more than one could say for Harvey Brown. He was a proper screw. However well she shopped, my pal told me, that stingy devil was grumblin' at 'er because she 'adn't done better still; if she got a penny's worth for a penny, according to 'im she'd ought to 'ave got a penny's worth for three fardens. *And* they used to argufy about it till one's 'ead fair went round. . . ."

"Well, that ain't part of my story, except pr'aps to prove that the poor little soul didn't 'ave much of a time at 'ome. 'Twasn't a marvel she ached for a sight o' life, even if it was only in pictures—but, says my pal the cobbler, never a penny would Harvey Brown spend on fun."



"Well, I saw 'er so often that I got some'ow sorry for the poor little cuss, always lookin' and never goin' in, and one day I stepped up to the cash desk—I was making good money then—and I says to the girl I says :

" 'When the old girl in the dried-up 'at with the violets comes 'overing round again, call 'er over and say there's a seat going for 'er free, if she'll accept of it. I'll pay for it, only don't you say so.'

"I lugged out me purse and the kid at the desk laughed. Pretty kid she was, with red curls over 'er eyes, and a pair of legs . . . but there. She's married to a bank clerk chap now and got two kids . . . they live over in Fulham. But that's another story. She laughed and said :

" 'Something doing, George? Why don't you pick a prettier one?'

"I says 'None of your cheek,' being on me dignity with the youngsters, if y'understand my meanin', and I pays for the ticket and sees it stuck up. And the very next night little Mrs. B. comes steppin' along alone, and as she was passin', I walks out and stops 'er.

" ' 'Scuse me, ma'am,' I says, 'I think the management 'ave a message for you, if you'll kindly step to the desk?'

"She stops and looks at me like a rabbit caught in a cabbage patch.

" 'I—they—don't mind me coming and lookin' at the pictures outside, do they, even if I can't pay to go in?'

"She was all of a quiver, pore little soul, thinkin', I suppose, they'd have 'er up for looking and not goin' in. I was glad then I'd got the ticket, and



that it wasn't a measly one-and-thrippenny one, either.

" 'Oh no, madam,' I says, 'they're only too pleased for the public to take an interest in their shows. You go on up, now.'

" She goes up to the desk like a cat on hot bricks, her eyes large and round with fright, and when the ticket was put into 'er 'ands she stood still and gaped, and didn't understand. Gracie was quite touched, she was.

" 'It's all right, madam,' she says. 'From the management, in token of your appreciation of our pictures outside.'

" Now that was smart, y'know . . . I'd never 'ave thought of that. Little Martha Brown straightened up, relieved, and smiled, and setting that comic 'at with the violets straighter on 'er 'ead she marched inside . . . and I tell you, I felt as if I'd given a kid a bag of toffees!

" Well, when she came out she looked like someone drunk—you know, not stupid drunk, but dazed drunk. Eyes shining, face flushed, mouth smiling all silly like . . . and she passed by me and Gracie without so much as a blooming word. Just walked orf into the night, smiling and all enchanted like, like someone gorn loony. . . ."

He reached a large hand for his glass and drank a long draught thirstily before he resumed his tale.

" It was some time after that before I see 'er again. Six months or more, I shouldn't wonder. And then a taxi drew up outside the 'Gorgeous' and out stepped me lady. Just the same as ever, old violets in the old black 'at and the same old dark grey coat



and skirt, but she was dragging a dog on a string, and I never seen 'er with a dog before. Little fox it was, not a bad little beast, with a black patch over one eye. She come straight up to me and she says, says she :

“ ‘What’s the name of the manager ’ere, Mr. Greggs ?’

“ ‘I told ’er, ‘Mr. Stratton,’ and I says by way of bein’ pleasant :

“ ‘It’s some time since we seen you about ’ere, missis ?’

“ ‘She nodded, and smoothed down her coat . . . and then I see a black band on ’er arm.

“ ‘ ‘Ad a loss, I see ? I’m sorry,’ I says.

“ ‘She nods, but her funny little thin face didn’t change a morsel.

“ ‘ ‘Lost me ’usband,’ she says. ‘Two or three nights after I come in ’ere. Please can I see Mr. Stratton ato nce ?’

“ ‘ ‘Well,’ I thought to meself, ‘if you’re not one to talk I’m sure I’m not one to try and make yeh,’ so I rung up the manager’s room, and he happened to be there. Didn’t want to see Mrs. Brown to start with, of course, but she jogged me elbow and said : ‘Tell ’im it’s business !’

“ ‘Well, nobody’s going to spit in the eye of a bit of business these days, and the upshot was me lady goes upstairs. She comes down after about half an hour, and comes over to me with her eyes bright and a flush on her face . . . just like she looked after that time she saw her first movie—the night I’d bought ’er a ticket.

“ ‘ ‘Mr. Greggs,’ she says to me, solemn like, ‘I’m coming ’ere twice a week, from now right on !’



"I stared at 'er, but she nodded.

"Mr. Stratton says so. And I'm to choose my own seat, and always have it kept for me, Mondays and Thursdays. Two seats I've paid for, one for me and one for Tuck."

"She looked down at the dam' fox, and I'm blessed if he didn't look up at her and all but wink . . . well, I was floored, but orders is orders, and if the boss said so, so it was. She went into the place and chose two seats. Forty-seven and forty-eight they was. She 'ad forty-seven and the dog forty-eight."

There was a long pause, and I shifted my seat. I was not, somehow, feeling quite comfortable . . . forty-seven. So I had been sitting next to her for quite half an hour. . . .

"Go on," I said. "What happened—about paying for them, I mean?"

"Husband 'ad gorn off in a fit about a month after we seen 'em together, the time I told you."

George drank the dregs of his beer and wiped his moustache on his sleeve. I winked at Price, who rose once more to fill his glass as the older man continued.

"Left her decently off, it seemed—all that scrapin' and savin' 'ad mounted up nicely in the end. Well, she sold the house and got 'erself into a bed sitting-room somewhere . . . been poor and thrifty so long she couldn't see 'erself in anything like a flat, I s'pose. She buried 'im decently . . . and then when she'd settled things right and proper, she made up 'er mind to do two things she'd always wanted to do. Buy a dog—and get 'erself a permanent ticket



in a cinema house, so's she could soak herself in pictures as much as ever she liked! Only sort of pash she'd ever had, y'see, and never 'ad but the one dose of it that I'd given 'er . . . so she'd trotted up to us. Bit of luck my paying for that one ticket had brought the 'Gorgeous.' . . .

"Stratton told me afterwards 'e'd 'ad the surprise of his life when she said she wanted two permanent seats for the rest of her life! Had a bit of a nargument with 'er, 'cos she couldn't see that it not bein' possible to see how long she'd live, it made it pretty difficult to size up a time-limit . . . however, they settled it after a while this way. Stratton suggested she paid five years in advance, and they'd 'ave another talk then—and she jumped at it. Paid down 'er money like a duchess and came away with 'er chin in the air and 'er eyes bright and shinin', draggin' that damn' dog on a string. 'Straordinary. . . ."

Draining his third glass to its very dregs, the night watchman stood up to go. But a chorus of voices arose, with mine the loudest among them.

"But you haven't . . ."

"There ain't much more to tell," said George, winding his many-coloured muffler about his bull-neck. "That's four years or so ago. And she died—not six months after she'd made that bargain with Stratton." He paused in the doorway and looked back at us, a spell-bound group watching him. "She died. Got under a bus one night, dog an' all, on 'er way to the 'Gorgeous'—and phut! But she comes to 'er place still, y'know . . . she and 'er dog, Tuck. Oh, yes! Nobody else ain't allowed to sit in forty-seven and forty-eight. *She* ain't goin' to be done out



of the seats she paid for—not Martha Brown. G'night."

One would think that that was the end of a story—and a good story, too. But it isn't. At least, not quite, and I was lucky enough to see the real end to it. It happened this way:

On a rainy November night about a year later I was passing the brightly-lighted entrance of the "Gorgeous Cinema." The night was damnably cold and windy, and I wanted to light my pipe, so I stepped inside the wide marble-paved porch of the cinema, where a magnificent blue-uniformed commissioner stalked majestically up and down, and tubs of pink and flame-coloured azaleas flanked huge screens plastered with photographed scenes from the film plays showing at the moment.

Pleased with the sensation of warmth, the smell of flowers and the general air of opulent comfort after the bluster and turmoil of the windy streets, I loitered a minute, staring at the pictured stars, with their huge eyes, arched brows, ultra svelte figures and exaggerated mops of hair, as years ago little Martha Brown had likewise stared, and jumped as I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"G'evenin'. Got a light?"

I swung round. It was old Greggs, talking to the commissioner . . . as I turned he saw me, and a grin of recognition creased his weather-beaten countenance.

"Whatcher! Here's a go . . . h'are ye?"

We shook hands and grinned at each other. Old George still wore his preposterous knitted muffler,



and the wet shone brightly on his ancient oilskin—his nose was redder than ever, but his grin was cheerful enough.

“Still watching?” I said.

“Still watchin’—as you say,” agreed George. “I’m late to-night tho’—too late for a drink at the ‘Cock’ before goin’ on dooty. It’s ’arf-past eleven, and they’ll be just comin’ out. . . .”

Even as he spoke the great doors leading into the inner sanctuary of the picture-house opened, and a huge concourse of people streamed pell-mell out into the light. Retreating before the rush, we drew into a corner, watching the crowd as it streamed past us with the interest that a crowd always rouses in every normal human breast. Girls with saucy little knitted caps clinging to their well-waved heads, with fur collars huddled up round their pretty cheeks, clinging to the arms of their young men, mackintoshed and felt-hatted. One or two groups of smartly-gowned West End folk, wearing satin slippers under their delicately coloured frocks, and cloaks of fur and velvet, exclaiming in horror at the sight of the slanting rain. Schoolgirls arm in arm; plump mothers of families, carrying parcels and dragging, as a rule, a bored-looking child in a sailor cap, sucking a lozenge that left a strong trail of peppermint behind him—one or two obviously business men who glanced furtively about them as they emerged, evidently hoping that they ran into nobody who might raise an amused or enquiring eyebrow as to the social status of the rather over-painted little girl hanging on their arms. Pell-mell and helter-skelter, the usual cinema crowd streamed out into the night and dispersed in search



of Tube, bus or taxi . . . gradually they thinned out and drew away, and George and I, left alone, watched the commissionaire, yawning, turn to carry in the screens laden with photographs, shut the doors and close the great iron gates. The huge "electrics" went out one by one, leaving only a glimmer . . . and then out of the great inner doors, the last belated member of the audience, *she* came!

A little dowdy woman followed by a frisking fox-terrier . . . oh yes, some of the lights were still on, though the brightest had been already extinguished, and she was perfectly plain to see. Small and thin and pale, dressed in a decent dark-coloured coat and skirt with a crumpled little hat of the type that sort of woman always seem to wear, with a bunch of purple cotton violets in it—and her left arm showed a band of black. She passed quite close to us where we stood, clutching each other like two schoolchildren, and old George Greggs was as white as a sheet, and myself not much better, I'll bet! She passed quite close to us, and a cold wind came with her, and for a minute she stood and looked at us—at George, that is—and then she smiled. A smile of complete and triumphant satisfaction that illuminated her plain, lined little face like a lamp suddenly turned up in a darkened room.

"Good night, George. And thank you!" she said.

And she was gone. Like *that*—just gone! And George and I found ourselves hanging on to each other and dithering like a couple of kids. . . .

Time or not, we went straight round to Price's and had a couple of stiff ones—neat. And when George got calm enough to reckon it out we found—

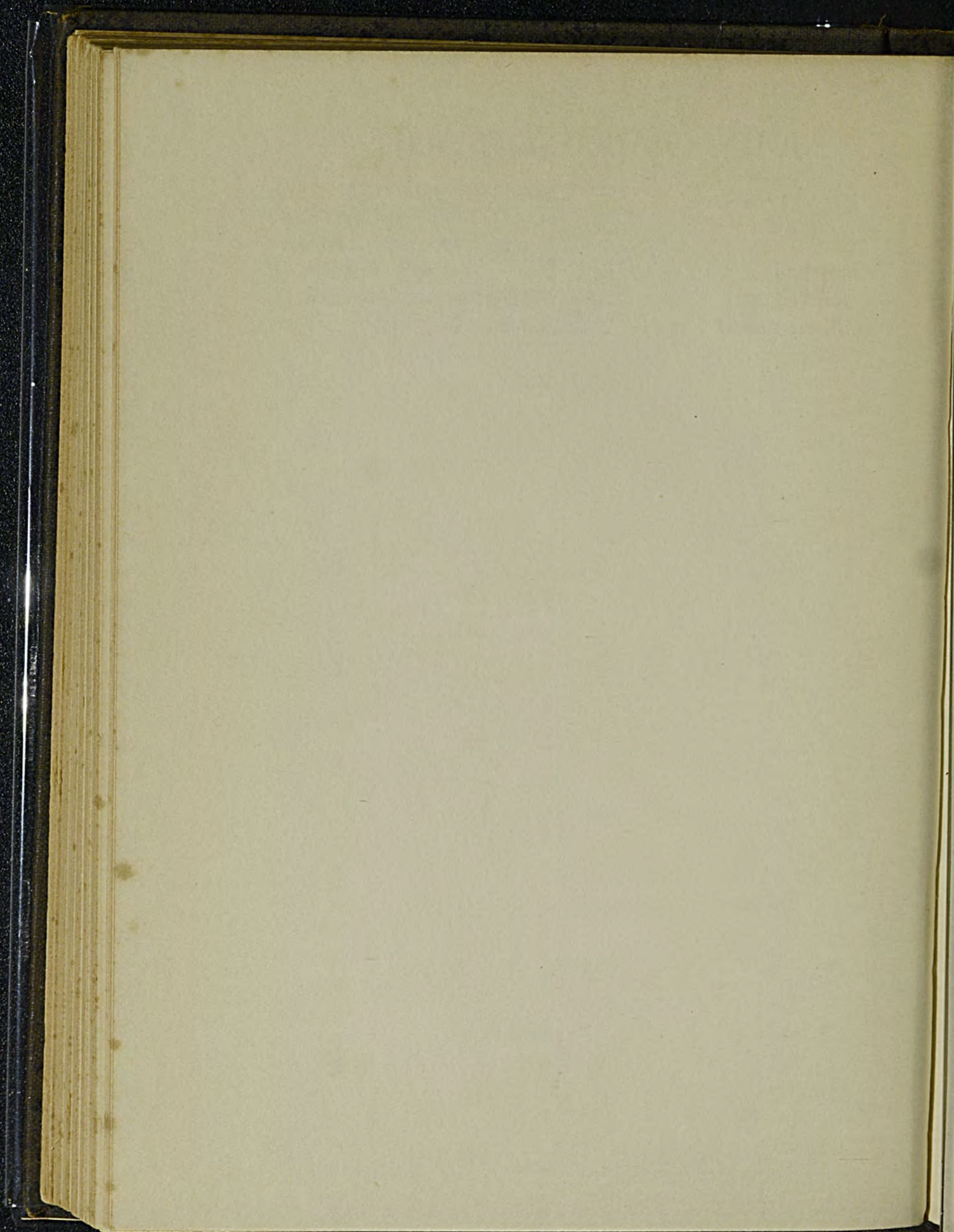


of course—that that night was the very night on which her contract with old Stratton had terminated. The five years was up. She'd had her feast of the films, sat in the seats she'd paid for as long as she was entitled to 'em—she'd got her money's worth, had Martha Brown. Dead or alive. As old Greggs said, she always would. . . .



JOHN CHALLONER'S WIFE





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## JOHN CHALLONER'S WIFE

GRACE CHALLONER was dead. The dreary, awful rites were over and the mourners dispersing—the grey rainy day seemed typical of the grey ceremony, of the dour gloom in the murky old church where the flower-heaped coffin, small beneath the immensity of the shadowy dome above, had looked so pitifully childish and pathetic. The villagers, sympathetic but afraid of the white, hard grief of the squire, huddled away in little groups as he came down the pathway, his two children, Dan and Rosa, a little way behind, still too stunned by the sudden shock quite to realise what had happened. Grace Challoner's heart had never been very sound, but who could have foreseen the awful end—a day's overstrain gardening, then just a faint thud above her husband's head as he sat reading in his study below her room, and no more; they found her lying where she had fallen, a crumpled white heap on the floor, her garden hat still in her hand as she had taken it off to dress for dinner. There was a faint smile on her face, almost a look of pleased surprise—she was one of those demure little women whose main charms are an odd irregularity of feature and the most delicious sense of humour—the doctor said she died without a moment's pain, but this scarcely consoled John Challoner, half crazed with grief for the wife he adored so entirely.

Now at the gate of the little churchyard he turned, ignoring the two children at his elbow, their faces turned to him in piteous appeal. There under the grim lean cypresses was the white stone, as small and pitiful as had been her white coffin in the great echoing church—there was Grace, Grace who had



loved life and picnics and pretty things and laughter, Grace of the gurgling laugh and funny little freckled nose, Grace of the great heart, his beloved, his wife and sweetheart and goddess in one. . . .

The man's face was set like stone as the knife twisted within the wound, and Dan whimpered, faintly scared.

"Daddy—Daddy!" Rosa's cold hand slid into his, and John Challoner started and looked down—the child's face was wry with hard-held tears, and his face softened.

"All right, babies. Try—try not to cry—that's brave, Rosa. . . . You know—mother—wouldn't want you to cry. . . ."

His voice shook uncontrollably and Rosa buried her head in his coat-sleeve.

"Oh, Daddy—oh, Daddy!" The tears came irresistibly, and John Challoner lifted his firstborn into his arms.

"Dear—come back home now, and we'll try to live the way mummy would like, won't we? All right, Danny-man—now walk. . . ."

The sad little group disappeared up the steep path that led to Henning Morton, the lovely home, set in rolling woodland, that John Challoner's people had owned for generations, and the old vicar shook his head sadly as he stared after them.

"The saddest thing I've known for years, Mander—the most loving and delightful couple in England divided; truly the ways of the Lord are strange. . . ."

. . . . .

A little while later, the two children handed over to the care of their old nurse Jakie—otherwise



Jackson—John Challoner stood at his study window staring out at the garden. At the far end of the great lawn, studded with cedars, their fringed branches sweeping the turf, coppice and woodland and distant meadow ran straight, it seemed, into the sky, now brightening with the faint, watery sunshine that comes so often after rain. Long beds of roses edged the winding drive, the window was framed in jasmine and clematis, all the beauty that Grace had loved was displayed before him complete, perfect, but for all John Challoner saw of it, it might have been a stretch of arid desert. The man's lined face was utterly pitiful in its grim misery.

"To what end, my God—to what end?" he murmured. His voice was husky, desperate, as for a second his thoughts fled to the tangle of guns, revolvers, and so on, so close to hand—but there were the children. Also Grace hated a coward, and he could not take so easy a way out—yet life without Grace, without that dear chuckling laugh of appreciation, that ready sympathy, that endeavour to understand! Suddenly he choked and laid his hand over his eyes, but dropped it in a moment and raised his head, dry-eyed; things were too great for tears. Clearing his throat, he spoke aloud, huskily, but determinedly.

"Grace—I know you're somewhere, waiting for me. If you can—listen! You are, now and always, my one and only love, and because of this I will make you a shrine in this your house that you loved. Your room—the room you chose when you came here as a bride—shall be closed for ever except when I myself shall go in, once a day, to remember you and think of you. Nothing shall be moved or touched—



no one shall go there ; it shall be your shrine, the outward and visible sign of the shrine in my heart where I shall worship you always, my dear, my beloved . . . Grace—Grace ! Do you hear ? ”

The room was very silent, yet to the man's intent ear there seemed to come a tiny sigh. The jasmine rustled outside the window, and the windows were old ; it might have been a leaf in the wind, a drift of air, yet it sounded like a sigh . . . and somehow, just a little sad.

. . . . .

Jakie was conversing earnestly with the gardener—six months had elapsed now since Grace Challoner's death, and to the unobservant life at Henning Morton had resumed its usual course, more or less ; yet Jakie seemed troubled and her kind old face was wrinkled into lines of anxiety as she talked. It was early summer and the sound of young voices in the tangled flower-beds came faintly over the grass to where old Allen leant on the mowing machine—he nodded an interested head in the direction of the sound.

“The young 'uns seem to be doin' all right—they're there with Miss Dorothy, aren't they ? ” Jakie nodded.

“Master Dan and Miss Rosa's too young to take things to 'eart like the master—nacherally,” she said. “No—it's the master I'm worried over. Seventeen years I've bin at Henning Morton, and I know every way of the master's—and I don't like his looks, Mr. Allen. I thought, maybe, when he asked Miss Emmeline to come with Miss Dorothy for a while to keep the children company it'd do him good—



always fond of his sister, was the master, and Miss Dorothy, she's just like her mother. But after the first day or so I knew it wouldn't do no real good. . . ."

"What's he do in the mistress's room every day?" asked Allen interestedly.

Jakie shook her head.

"I don't know, Mr. Allen—nobody knows. It's my belief he just goes and shuts himself up there and thinks about her, and how happy they were, and all—all alone in that shuttered-up place! Not a soul but himself's bin inside since he give orders, when the funeral was over, to leave it just as it was. It's all wrong, Mr. Allen, and the mistress 'ud be the first to tell him so; she loved air and sunshine and freedom. But I daren't say so to the master—he isn't a one to be crossed, and it's not my place. I know Miss Emmeline once said something to him about thinking it a pity, and he just shut her up—quite polite and nice, but she's never said anything else. He's just brooding and brooding, and lost all his interest in everything, and Lord, he's getting that thin—I can't tell you what he's lost in the last six months! It's not living at all, the way he goes on now. . . ."

Indeed, John Challoner was thinking just the same thing, as he sat after dinner that night staring into the red heart of the huge fire. Not living at all—just existing—without Grace, the one dear woman, whose chair opposite to his was now occupied by his sister, Emmeline Blanchard, her graceful head, silver-shadowed at the temples since her tragic widowing two years ago, bent over a heap of white knitting. Behind him the subdued giggles of Dan and Rosa, playing a ridiculous game with counters



under the motherly eye of Dorothy, aged sixteen, interrupted his sombre meditations, like ripples breaking the surface of a brooding sea. Mrs. Blanchard glanced at him anxiously as she folded up her work—indeed he had altered sadly since his wife's death, this beloved brother of hers, and deeply though she sympathised and longed to help, he had retreated within a shell of silence where neither her love nor sorrow seemed to reach. With a little sigh she rose, looking at the clock.

"I've a headache, John—if you'll forgive me, I think I'm going to bed. Dorothy dear, send the children to bed within the next half-hour, and don't sit up reading by yourself—good night, dear."

The door closed softly behind her, and Challoner relapsed into his brown study again. The room was silent but for the subdued whispers and laughter from behind—dreamily they wove themselves into an accompaniment to his sad thoughts, and it was the cessation of the sounds that at last penetrated into his half-dreaming consciousness, and slowly he awoke to the fact that there had been silence behind him for some moments. Rousing himself, wondering vaguely if they had gone to bed, and if so, why without saying good night, he turned round—no, the little group was still there, bent absorbedly over something. As he turned, Rosa's ecstatic whisper came.

"Oh, look—look! It's moving!"

Vaguely curious, Challoner rose, and looking down over the trio of bent heads, saw that a palette-shaped piece of wood, pierced by a pencil and balanced on three tiny wheels, lay under Dorothy's fingers on a sheet of paper. The three were so



absorbed that they never looked up, and for a few seconds John Challoner watched—the piece of wood quivered, and lo, it began to slowly crawl across the sheet of paper!

"What on earth do you three think you're doing?" queried the father.

The trio jumped, and Dorothy raised a flushed, excited face.

"It's a ouija-board, Uncle!" she explained breathlessly. "You watch—I only got this the other day. You've seen them, haven't you? You just put your fingers on it lightly—like this—and it writes. . . ."

John Challoner's brows were wrinkled as he stared.

"Writes—how do you mean? Is it a game?"

He was aware of growing distaste as Dorothy answered.

"Oh, no—it's quite serious! You see—it's difficult to explain. I don't make it write, it writes by itself—I mean that someone makes it write."

The distaste was more marked in Challoner's frown, and his voice was a little sharp as he put his next question.

"Writes by itself? What appalling rot, my dear child! How on earth can a piece of wood write—you must do it yourself."

"Oh, Uncle, I don't!" protested Dorothy, her cheeks flushing. She was rather frightened by her uncle's scornful tones, but she stood up for her point of view dauntlessly. "I don't push it—I suppose you think it's rot. But *really* it isn't—something makes it write all by itself. I've often known it write when I used my left hand and kept



my eyes shut. One of the girls used to have one at the convent. . . ."

Challoner's contemptuous laugh interrupted her. His forehead wrinkled in disgusted amusement, he picked up the board and studied it, then put it down again.

"Something makes it write? What on earth do you mean by that?"

"I don't know what *does* make it write," admitted Dorothy. "Some people think it's spirits that want to talk to the people they've left behind. . . ."

"Good God!" Challoner's tone was angry, jerked from easy amusement to strong disapproval. He frowned as he picked the offending ouija-board up again. "Do you mean to say your mother approves of this tomfoolery? I never heard such superstitious rot—if Emmeline lets you do this I'm surprised, but this is flat! I'll have nothing of the kind done here while you stay, Dorothy—understand me? It's utter rubbish, but on principle I object most strongly to your playing about with anything so—so outrageously silly. I knew Emmeline was always interested in that spiritualistic sort of tommy-rot, but this—good Lord? And she lets you?"

Dorothy was flushed with mortification and nearly crying, but she stuck to her point.

"Yes—she does it herself. She's awfully interested in it, and really, Uncle, it *isn't* always rot—you've no idea."

"It's a thing I absolutely disapprove of, whatever it is, and I shall tell your mother to tell you to burn this affair—this board thing, what d'you call it. In fact, you'd better chuck it in the fire now at once."



Dorothy was dogged enough, despite her delicate face, and her pointed chin was out now.

"It's mine—I don't want to burn it. I'm sorry, Uncle, if you don't like me doing it, and I won't do it again before the children. . . ." Dan and Rosa exchanged downcast glances, "but I shan't burn it."

With an impatient movement John Challoner jerked the offending board on to the top of the bookcase, then turned away with an angry shrug. "Well—it's yours, my dear child, and if your mother lets you have it I suppose I can't insist on your burning it. But I disapprove extremely of that sort of thing—and till you go it can stay up there; yes—all right, kid. I'm not really angry. But you know—that sort of thing is really—really impossible."

Dorothy had barely recovered her temper by next morning, but her sympathies were always at war with her capacity for sustained sourness, and the latter promptly vanished at the sight of her uncle's clouded face and tired eyes at breakfast the next morning. He slumped wearily into his chair, and stretching out a long arm, took a piece of toast, but pushed his plate of bacon and eggs away.

"Aren't you well, John?" queried Emmeline solicitously, her narrow hands poised over the coffee-pot. Her brother shook his head.

"Not awfully, Em. I slept vilely, and had the oddest sort of restless dreams—can't remember anything definite, though."

"What sort of dreams, Dad?" asked Dan greedily—he devoured all sorts of ghostly and suchlike lore with avidity.

"I don't remember clearly—except that somebody



seemed to be trying to persuade me to do something I didn't want to!" laughed his father. "Rather a hopeless job that, eh?"

"Can't you remember anything at all?" said Dorothy, from her seat on the window-sill. Challoner's forehead lined with puzzled thought for a moment as he replied:

"Funnily enough, there's only one thing I *can* remember in the least clearly, and that's a French name—a woman's name, I should think, though I never heard it before. It kept repeating itself in a sort of urgent, anxious way—what *was* the name, now? I know it impressed itself upon me as having been said to me in a very impressive sort of way just as I was waking . . . wait a minute—it's coming! 'Colette'; something ending like that. 'Nichette'? Got it! 'Planchette!'"

Dorothy and her mother flashed each other a quick glance, and the older woman spoke quietly.

"Planchette? That's an odd thing, John. Didn't you know that many people call the ouija-board—that thing you were so annoyed about last night—planchette?"

Challoner jumped and sat round like a flash. His sister's eyes were intent on him.

"Planchette—that thing?" He lay back and roared. "Oh, Lord—that explains it all! I get that episode fast in my brain and go to bed thinking about it, and it translated itself into the most tiring dream I ever had. Planchette—by Jove. . . ."

"But, Uncle—did you *know* it was called planchette?" Dorothy's tone was puzzled as she looked at him. Challoner's laughter was stopped for a moment as he pondered.



"No—now I come to think of it, I didn't," he admitted. "Not consciously, at all events."

"I'm positive I never called it planchette last night," said Dorothy.

Challoner shrugged his broad shoulders as he rose.

"Maybe—no, now I think of it I don't think you did. But obviously I must have heard it somewhere and remembered without knowing I did. So much for my famous dream. So long, Em."

Dorothy and her mother looked at each other when his tall figure, a child clinging to each arm, had disappeared towards the stables. Emmeline's soft eyes were full of sorrow and her daughter slipped a firm young arm through hers.

"Dearest mums—poor Uncle! It's too bad—but I *wish* he'd let me go on with that last night. *She* was trying to come through. I know she was. . . ."

"You didn't tell him we'd heard from her already, did you?" said Emmeline gravely. Dorothy shook her head.

"No. I was going to—but he flew off at a tangent and I didn't dare."

Emmeline sighed. "We must wait," she said. "But it's obvious that in sleep last night Grace was trying to ask him to use it—poor little soul. Still, we can't force things. One must wait. . . ."

The day was spent in tramping round the farmlands, inspecting new calves and discussing the repairing of two cottages with Eppingley, his agent, and the strange dream of last night passed completely from John Challoner's downright mind. It was therefore with a completely blank consciousness that he sank to sleep that night—indeed, his last



waking thought was a reminder to himself to speak to Eppingley again next morning about the fences down by the long meadow where old Gillman had been complaining his cattle got out—that, and the question of extending Alcott's lease.

He had spent his usual vigil in his wife's room, but for a wonder he was not thinking of her when he fell asleep, and it was with a sudden shock and chill of fear that he awoke, some time after falling asleep, with a woman's voice, sharply distinct, and seemingly charged with urgent need, ringing in his ears. For a second he lay, his eyes wide, staring into the silent dark, every muscle tense with alertness—fear hovered menacing in the offing, but John Challoner was no coward. Something had sharply awakened him. But what—or rather—who? A thin shaft of moonlight lay across the foot of his bed, and stretching out a lean arm, he switched on the electric light and looked at his watch. Just after one o'clock. At the same hour last night, he remembered now, he had awakened, or been awakened, by precisely the same thing; a voice in his ears, a voice urgent, almost imperiously insistent. A voice that repeated one word definitely, determinedly, then the word itself flashed complete into his mind, furiously seeking for light in its abrupt transition from sleep to waking, and he sat up, startled.

"*Planchette—planchette—planchette,*" seemed to ring in his ears, and now—wasn't there something familiar in the quick, eager voice that spoke! Fear stirred within him, and wonder and a sudden hope, wild, insane—then reaction came, and he cursed himself for an imaginative fool, and ruffled, half angry, yet more puzzled and disquieted than he



would have cared to admit, with a contemptuous shake of his shoulders, flicked out the light and composed himself to sleep again.

But sleep did not come easily. Vaguely he knew that something, some knowledge or consciousness was drawing slowly nearer and nearer him, and that while one-half of him rejoiced and held out eager hands to it, that the other half, the hard-headed, practical man of the world, the man who "had no truck with that sort of thing," shivered and held back, alarmed, unbelieving. Refusing to believe. . . .

And when at long last he slept, lo ! the dream came again, with its pleading, insistent voice, that sense of urgent, imploring need—and again he awoke with the same word ringing in his ears.

"Planchette . . . planchette. . . ."

John Challoner's mood was strange and unaccountable next day, and Dorothy confided in her mother that her "uncle frightened her a little." Emmeline, her white hands buried in a bowl of gooseberries that she was "topping and tailing," for she had a passion for the domestic arts, looked up at her gravely.

"What do you mean, dear ? How is he 'funny' ?"

Dorothy considered, her pretty head on one side like a thrush.

"Well—he was awfully silent and funny again to-day at breakfast, and you know he's generally quite talkative ; he's not one of those people who bury themselves in a paper at breakfast. Then he never went out all day, but just messed about doing little things, and thinking hard—just as if he was trying not to think about a thing and couldn't help it—you know what I mean ?"



Her mother nodded, and the girl continued.

"Well—Dan and I were playing patience in the smoking-room—after lunch, it was, about three, I think—and he came in. I just said something to him and he took no notice—and wandered over to the window and stood and stared—you know the way he does?"

Mrs. Blanchard winced. She knew that solitary great figure, in its well-worn country tweeds, with its bent head outlined against the wide windows—how pitifully often had she seen it so since Grace's death!

"Well—in a few minutes, what do you think he did? He came back into the room, stood on a chair, and fetched down my ouija-board from the top of the bookcase where he put it the night he got so cross about it—now isn't that extraordinary?" Dorothy paused for comment, but her mother's brows were wrinkled.

"Go on," she said briefly.

"He didn't say anything—he just stood turning it over and over in his hands, and thinking. He looked so absorbed I didn't like to speak, and Dan kicked me to point out how we'd scored—you know what I mean, after Uncle had been so cross about it. I kicked him to be quiet, and just then Uncle gave a sort of impatient exclamation and threw the board up again on the bookcase and walked out, shrugging his shoulders as if he was awfully annoyed about something!"

The older woman's brows were still knitted as she absently snipped at the lucent green globes that filled the great bowl in her lap.

"It seems evident to me that he's tempted to try



it—but the sceptical side is fighting against it all the time. Leave him alone—he'll come to it in time; if that is his Way of Approach sooner or later he'll *have* to take it."

Dorothy nodded, her eyes on her mother's—the young disciple beside the old.

"Mother! I'm sure it's Aunt Grace trying to get him to talk to her! If he can't or won't speak—can't *we* try? I'll fetch it now. Shall I?"

Mrs. Blanchard shook her head.

"She's talked to us already. It's John she wants, that's obvious. You remember how his name came again and again in her writing? We can't force him—let her work on him in her own way, as she is obviously doing. Leave it at that."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Blanchard's mind was troubled and wistful as she covertly watched her brother sitting opposite to her in his great chair that night—quiet he always was, but this seemed excessive.

He sat brooding, his square chin on his hands, his eyes remote. . . . Dorothy was subdued, and sat quiet on the other side of the hearth, her usual quicksilver restlessness quenched and a little frightened. From time to time she glanced at her silent uncle and at her mother, but said nothing, until at last Emmeline folded her knitting and rose. Her hand on her brother's shoulder made him start suddenly, and he turned eyes that for the moment showed fear towards her—just as she saw their expression his eyes changed, and he smiled and patted her hand.

"Going to bed, my dear? I shan't sit up long—Dan and Rosa have been very quiet to-night, or I haven't heard them?"

"I sent them to bed early with Jakie," said his



sister, resting a slim foot in its buckled shoe upon the low kerb. "I thought you seemed tired and would rather be quiet, John. You look rather done up to-night, you know. Any more—dreams?"

This was a direct lead, but the man evaded it, either intentionally or unintentionally, his eyes staring into the fire.

"Tired, Em? No—I don't think so. But I'm sleepy to-night—think I shall sleep well—and no more dreams!"

"I hope so," said Emmeline soberly, "but anyway—you could never have any dreams but dear and charming ones in this house, John, where you and Grace have been so happy. Come, Dorothy. Good night, dear." Her warm lips brushed his forehead, and she was gone, and John Challoner sat still, staring into the fire, his chin on his hands, sunk back in the huge leather chair.

The fire blazed up the wide chimney—in spite of the sunny weather, the nights were cool, and it was, or rather had been, a craze of Grace Challoner's to have fires always burning at nights, whatever the season.

The smell of burning wood filled the warm room, and the leap and crackle of the flames made a pleasant accompaniment to the master of Henning Morton's thoughts, sad as those thoughts were, hovering lonesomely around the solitary chair, the empty house, and the eternal gnawing ache at his broken heart. From the warmth and comfort of his hearth John Challoner's thoughts fled to the cold dour churchyard in the blue whiteness of the moonlight, the lone little white stone under the cypresses. . . . how Grace would have crinkled her dear freckled



funny nose at the idea of spending a night there, she who loved warmth and light and gaiety! Where was she now? It was impossible that she who had so loved life should now be where no life was! Nothing would make him believe in the chill and glassy Heaven the old vicar preached about!

Like many men who in normal times think they are really devout churchmen, John Challoner in his bitter need had reached out to his faith for help, and found in his grasp a straw, a handful of wordy platitudes, of worn-out aphorisms. He was too utterly weary to-night with grief and exhaustion to analyse things, but dimly he realised that he could fight no more; that his whole soul was sick, exhausted with fruitless queries and doubts and agonies, that even his daily vigil in his loved wife's little room brought him no comfort—everything seemed somehow so utterly useless, and he was so tired. His last thought as he fell asleep was a sudden flash of memory of the vague, disquieting dream that seemed to haunt his sleep these days, with its recurrent, insistent repetition of one word—he was too sleepy to remember the actual word now, but it didn't matter. Odd, very—never mind. . . . The crackling fire answered him, and was the last flicker of consciousness as he fell asleep.

Extreme weariness, both physical and mental, lulled him swiftly into oblivion, and his long form lay stretched at ease before the kindly fire, purring up the huge chimney; the room grew very silent, as if to listen to the even breathing that rose and fell faintly in the red-lit gloaming.

Little flickering memories of the day's trivial doings flashed and darted across the surface of the



sleeper's mind—Dorothy and Dan among the pigs, Dorothy with her dainty nose screwed up in disgust as Dan poked about among the squeaking new litter to find the smallest. Emmeline's grave laughter at the group, and apple-cheeked Rosa with her hot grubby little hand in his. . . .

How he loved the children, his own and Grace's ! Then Grace came into his mind, in a lupin-blue muslin gown, with a huge floppy hat, protesting loudly at the destruction of a wasps' nest. How she had loved all things, his Grace ! How dear she was, how sweet, how loving . . . in sleep his mind went seeking her as in waking, but more hopefully, for sleeping, he did not realise the truth ; yet still death haunted his dreams vaguely, distressingly, and he reached out more anxiously for the hand of the dear shadow that stood at his elbow, protesting even for the lives of her dreaded enemies, the wasps that haunted the rose-garden.

The shadow drifted away, and his mind sank into vagueness, restless, seeking. Then for long it seemed, a blank darkness descended and John Challoner sank into that deeper, more profound sleep, that semi-trance that comes only to those utterly exhausted in mind, body and soul.

It seemed to him then, after æons and æons had passed, that from a far distance a small and eager thing strove to wake him, to touch his consciousness—strove imperiously, insistently, with a passionate intensity that pierced perforce his heavy slumber of exhaustion. Sluggishly his mind moved, groping, blind, in the thick darkness of sleep, while from, it seemed, a far-distant star in the illimitable ether of the Unconscious, Someone stood and called to him,



a shrill imperious call that, thinned by distances unspeakably immense, yet pricked and stirred into faint response something in his sleep-drugged mentality!

A voice—a woman's voice—dear and familiar, with a passionate urge behind it, as if wild to wake and hold him before it was too late! A voice that beat like a tiny Chinese gong down the echoing aisles of space that lay between them—a gong that beat to one word, a word that was strange and yet not strange—*what* word? Where had he heard it? . . . Farther and farther away, it seemed, soared the star, with that dear far voice that cried from it still beating and beating persistently at the dull doors of his mentality; speeding away into the illimitable it fled, as in the great chair the man stirred and murmured, waking. . . .

The fire fell together with a crash as John Challoner awoke, clutching the arms of his chair, his eyes wide and startled, that last imperious call in his ears, the word again on his lips!

"*Planchette—planchette!*"

For a second he sat, collecting his scattered senses, weighing, analysing—then, with a decided movement, the big man stood up, and, crossing over to the bookcase, reached and brought down a tiny wooden board, shaped like a shield. The door shut softly as he left the room.

There was no sound as he softly ascended the stairs to the first floor where his adored wife had had her brief reign—the corridors were thickly carpeted, the household deeply asleep, for he had slept long and the clock showed two. John Challoner's strong hand shook a little as he stooped to unlock the



door of Grace's room, turned on the light and stepped reverently inside. He closed and locked the door behind him, and facing the dimness, spoke just below his breath.

"Grace—dearest? Are you here?"

Silence answered him—yet it did not seem the chill and awful silence of a long unused room. Rather the eager silence of Someone who waits a chance to speak. . . .

The windows were closely shuttered, the heavy curtains drawn, dust lay over the tumbled cushions on the wide window-seat and on the silver-littered dressing table. Two small shoes lay idle beside the bed, a pair of brocade mules, red-heeled, and a gay flower-patterned wrapper was flung across the coverlet. Dust, dust, everywhere, except on the little table before her portrait, where a great vase held white roses, to-day's offering at her shrine. Before the portrait now John Challoner stood, his under-lip hard held between his strong teeth, his hand clenched—gravely the portrait looked down, wide blue eyes appraising him, small hands lightly folded in her rose-silken lap.

"Grace!" The little word was huskily spoken, but steady enough. "Grace! Three times now I've dreamt you called to me—I know now it was you!—with the name of this strange thing upon your dear lips. I'm afraid of it—yet I must try and see if it was only a dream. But if it *was*—a message . . . if Those Who must know my bitter desolation without you will let you send me, even if it's through this strange thing, some word in this my awful loneliness, to lighten things a little, to tell me you love me still and are beside me . . . oh, Grace,



Grace! I've tried so hard to reach you—every day in this your room I've tried—and it's all no use! By myself I can't do it. You're just as far away as ever, and my heart's breaking. Now for the sake of our love, try to come near to me—send me a sign! God—my God, let her send me a sign. . . .”

The man's head sank on his hands for a minute—then with a heavy sigh he straightened himself and reached out for a chair. Surely in all the annals of love this sight was one of the strangest, where in his desperate need this country squire, simple, manly, hating every form of what he termed “spiritualism,” sat haggard and watchful, his strong brown hand resting on the hated board, set squarely on the sheet of paper before him. Above, the portrait stared gravely down at his bent head, the single pink-shaded light at his elbow threw a heavy shadow over the paper—a faint flutter of stray draught shook the curtains, or seemed to, and the mice, released from their watchfulness by the renewed silence, scratched and cheeped behind the wainscoting of the old room.

Silence fell, deeper and yet more deep, and the shadows wavered and seemed to gather and peer over John Challoner's shoulder—shadows mauve and lavender and grey, flickering, elusive, passing and intermingling with each other like ripples on a strange dark sea. Was it chance that there seemed one shadow deeper, more luminous than the others, swaying, stooping there at his elbow?

His sunken eyes were intent upon the paper still, and the shadow melted away—but on the blank white sheet a faint and wavering line of pencil-marking showed! Breathing short and quick, his hand held



steady by a mighty effort, Challoner's haggard eyes glared at the slowly moving board—were those letters? *Oh, Grace, Grace, try to speak!*

Slowly, weakly, like a child that tries to walk for the first time, the tiny pencil attached to the board traced an aimless course across the sheet; line on wavering line trailed back and round and back again, while the man's agonised eyes followed its course unwinking, praying grimly, hoping against desperate hope. Faltering, yet obeying some unseen and imperious urge that impelled it, it meandered on, and the watcher caught his breath as he watched it, reluctant, stumbling, laboured, spell out its message.

"*John . . . John . . . John . . .*" spelt out the slow-moving pencil. Then came a wild tangle of lines, then again . . . "*Don't . . . think. . . . Don't think.*"

There was a pause while the pencil made vague circles, and Challoner's mind grasped wildly after a meaning. Faintly he remembered something Emmeline had said in a discussion they had once had upon the subject of the spiritualism that was to her so real—to him so unreal. Until—to-day. . . . "It's never good to try to use your own mind when you want to get messages. It fogs the channel."

Something of the sort—was that what Grace meant? It *was* Grace—of course it was Grace! No possible doubt entered the man's mind—Grace's dear presence was all about him, and the Shadow that loomed at his elbow seemed to waver closer and bend over as he stooped again over the table. Trying desperately to bring his turmoil of thought into subjection, Challoner shut his eyes and leant back, leaving his hand at rest upon the board. A



pause, the board gave a little jerk, and lo ! now it began to travel levelly and steadily over the paper !

Now the Shadow was indeed heavy beside him ! Something even seemed to lie like a faint lavender film along the back of his hand, the strong hand that lay so lightly on the little board, the humble messenger that was bringing healing back to his sore heart ! His eyes tightly shut, feeling the steady movement of the board beneath his fingers, Challoner sat there as slowly, steadily, peace, the peace that only Grace knew how to bring, came pouring along his veins like new blood, soothing, disbanding all the fears and doubts and lonelinesses that had so direly beset him—it was as if Grace stood beside him teasing, reproaching him, a little surprised.

“Why, John dear !” Now he almost heard her speak ! How her dear little astonished voice would always rise just there ! “What rubbish—as if I could forget you—or be anything different from what I was ! As if God would *let* me—don’t be such a silly ! Why, I’m only waiting for you, in the next room. . . .” The faint scrawl of the pencil on the paper ceased, and John Challoner’s head sank forward upon his breast in the first healthful sleep he had known since his wife’s death, as the white light of dawn crept through the chinks of the shutters and showed the pale writing of one of the strangest love-letters ever penned :

*“John. . . . John dear. . . . Let me go. Open the windows, dear. . . . Let me go ! You keep me to earth this way . . . and there’s so much for me to do here. Don’t keep me tied, dear heart—be brave and let me go to where They need me. Stop grieving—let*



*in the light—and go out and play in the sunshine with the children! Let me go—let me go. I'm with you in spirit all the time—but don't keep me earthbound by your grieving. I shall be waiting—I shall be there for you, John, my John, when the time comes! But now be brave, my dear, and let me shut the door. It's only into the next room. . . ."*

. . . . .

Emmeline was early for breakfast that morning, but she was surprised to find her brother still earlier, and still more surprised to see his changed expression. The sombre haggardness of sorrow had vanished like a stormy day and his eyes were peaceful as they smiled into hers. He sat on the sill, feeding the birds that clustered below, hungry for crumbs—but he jumped to his feet and came and kissed her as she entered.

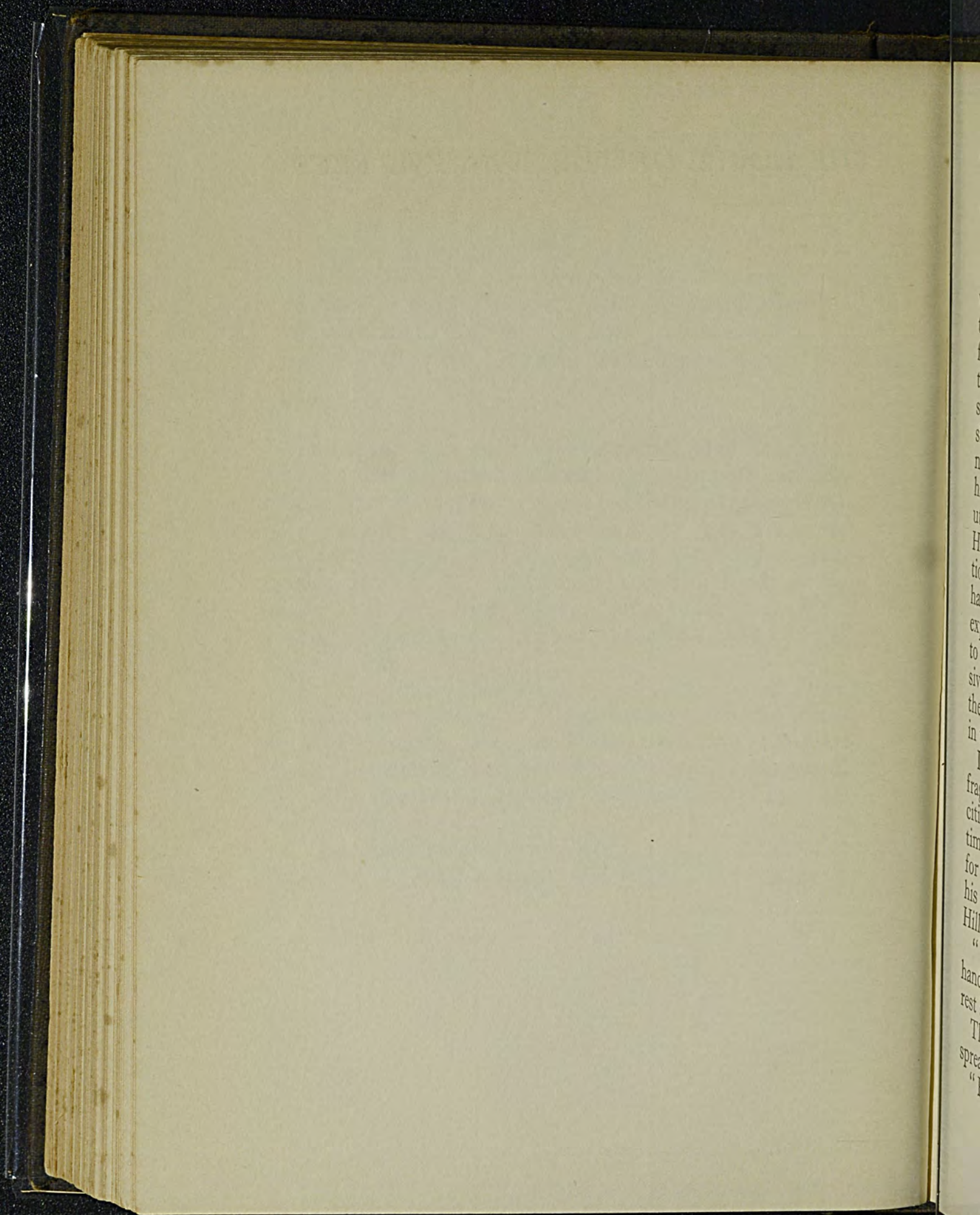
"Why, John—how bright you look! What have you done to yourself?" Emmeline held him away at arm's length, delighted—the entering children flung themselves into his big arms with whoops of joy as he answered, smiling, his brightened eyes on her thankful ones.

"The clouds have gone, Em. I have opened the windows of Grace's room, and let in the sunshine."



THE HOUSE OF THE DANCING FEET





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## THE HOUSE OF THE DANCING FEET

“**H**UZOOR, not there! Your servant is your slave, Huzoor—but not there, not there!”

Jack Hillyard stared at his faithful Faiz Ullah with undisguised astonishment. What had come to the man? Here they were in a patch of jungle that fairly crawled with dangers, the night drawing on, there in the valley below was at least shelter of some sort within the broken marble walls that showed dimly amongst the crowding green—and now for Faiz Ullah, on sight of the ruined pile that had brought such instant relief to Hillyard, to utter this sudden cry of dread and terror! Derek, Hillyard's young cousin, turned at the man's exclamation, wide-eyed—the group of native beaters that had accompanied the two in the jungle on their expedition after game, had lowered their bundles to the ground and stood together looking apprehensively towards the pile of buildings that, ghostly in the gloom of the Indian twilight, loomed below them in the valley.

India's jungles are strewn thick with these pitiful fragments of her gorgeous past—lost palaces and cities, great temples to forgotten gods—and many a time had Faiz Ullah made camp within their walls for Hillyard, his beloved master. This attitude of his was new, therefore, and greatly disturbed Hillyard, who spoke sharply in Hindustani.

“What do you mean? Is not the night at hand, Faiz Ullah, and we in need of shelter and rest?”

The man salaamed agitatedly, his brown hands spread in deprecation.

“Huzoor—indeed, yes! But let us camp here in



the forest. I will see you well guarded. The Huzoor will not descend to the valley ? ”

The supplication in his tone was altogether disproportionate to the subject ; it seemed to Jack, moreover, Faiz Ullah had evaded answering his question.

“ That is not the point. Obviously, we should be far better off between good strong walls than in the open, and that place below looks to me fairly sound if it *is* a ruin. What’s your objection to going there, eh ? ”

There was a faint pause before the headman answered, reluctantly, his dark eyes furtively on the gleaming pile in the valley below, half-hidden among the trees.

“ The Heaven-born will laugh—but we, his poor servants, know and dread the place. It is not well to go within the walls of what was once the hidden palace of Kuja Raò, of Bhodalpore, called the Cruel ! ”

Derek’s eyes were alight with excitement and interest.

“ The Cruel Raj ! Oh, I say, Jack, this is interesting. I’ve heard of this guy, but father said the site of his palace was lost ages ago. Aren’t we lucky ? Come on ! I’m going down to see it now whatever happens ! ”

His tone was jubilant, and Jack was torn between his own desire to agree, and a faint recollection of sundry other occasions when his refusal to follow wise old Faiz Ullah’s advice, however seemingly absurd, had resulted in ignominious repentance.

Faiz Ullah, watching his face eagerly, broke in.

“ If the heaven-born wills, we could go to-morrow—but see, it is already dark and late, and the young sahib is weary.”



The tactfully meant words whipped Derek's quick temper, always resentful of the fact that he was supposed to be delicate, and he bit his lip, turning away to the descent.

"I'm going down—now. Come on, Jack, unless you want to be left behind." His provoked young voice came up from the slope below them, and Hillyard, alarmed at the thought of possibly losing track of his beloved young cousin, caught up his rifle again and moved after him.

"Come on, Faiz Ullah! We camp below!"

With a fatalistic shrug the headman shouldered his burden and, motioning to the silent beaters to follow, plunged into the dark silence of the jungle. The descent was not difficult; an easy slope to the valley, and the vegetation, while luxuriant, not thick with the coarse primeval growth that distinguishes the virgin forest land. Indeed, as they neared the flat ground it became more and more evident that here had been the hand of man, clearing, planting, training, and not even the obliterating green that now rioted over what was once a king's pleasure could entirely extinguish the memory of those patient gardeners of a bygone age.

Faiz Ullah had taken the lead, with the philosophical resignation peculiar to his caste, and across waving stretches of tangled green that had once been lawns, between sprawling hedges of a myriad sweet-scented blossoms, up terraces whose broken balustrades were fringed and tasselled with furiously climbing things, he led them straight as an arrow towards the great white pile that shone opalescent, unreal as a soap bubble in the moonlight.

A faint suspicion that this was not the first time



Faiz Ullah had visited the Hidden Palace of Bhodapore crossed Jack Hillyard's mind as he panted after him, but he had no time to question—it was enough to follow, through labyrinthine tangles of foliage, creeper and clinging vine, praying that one's boots were proof against snakes and crawling things, and that no larger and more unpleasant form of savage life launched itself upon one from the shadows! But all was well, and the forest slept in the chilly blue light as though poison-fang and tearing claw were alike strangers to it.

A series of wide terraces paved with white marble surrounded the palace; but the great blocks were cleft and forced apart by determined growing things before which even marble had to give way; they mounted a flight of shallow steps, gleaming like alabaster, and passed a ruined pavilion of carved marble like fine fretwork, wherein, long ago, groups of gaily clad women had laughed and chattered—a great well with an arched roof like a cupola above it, its stone kerb worn in hollows where slaves had rested their brass lotahs before filling, and a ruined fountain where, around the uplifted arm of the beautiful figure that crowned it, was twisted a great black snake, whose rippling body glistened in the light. At last, breathless and spent, they arrived at the walls of the palace itself, brooding, sombre in the midst of its spreading green, and Faiz Ullah, his expression grim in the moonlight, turned to his employer as he swung his burden to the ground.

"The Huzoor is here. Is he satisfied? But he will at least sleep in the garden—not—not within these walls?"

Derek's impatient young voice answered him, as



his eager, beauty-loving eyes scanned the imposing marble structure that towered above them into the night sky.

"Satisfied? Don't be funny, Faiz Ullah. I'm going to spend the night inside this place. Fancy sleeping where old Push-in-the-Face held his court, or where the harem used to be! I wouldn't miss this for worlds. Come on!"

Against his will, Jack Hillyard hesitated, struck by something in the headman's steady dark eyes, fixed on the boy. But his incurable British obstinacy won the day.

"We shall sleep within the walls," he said curtly. "Why not? If you have a real reason against our spending the night here, out with it—but I'm not going to be put off merely by hints and head-shakings!"

With his usual shrug the old Sikh turned away to where a stupendous carved archway yawned like an open mouth ready to swallow them.

"I have no more to say, Huzoor. I have seen, but it may be you will not see, and you will laugh at your slave for his fears. It is well. These foolish will not enter, because they fear. But I will attend you. Bid these go and nurse their little hearts in the forest alone."

It was certainly true that the beaters would not enter; they huddled in a nervous group peering into the entrance of the great courtyard, but farther in they flatly refused to come. Hillyard, losing his temper, rated them soundly, but their attitude had crystallised into absolute determination his inclination to spend the night in the palace, and he dismissed them to their camp with a few contemptuous



words, and the warning that he expected to find them awaiting him by the spur of the hill in the morning.

Turning abruptly into the courtyard he found Derek lost in rapturous contemplation of the marvellous carved tracery of marble, like black lace against the moonlight, the serried rows of columns that led to the main halls. Left by himself, indeed, the boy would scarcely have gone to sleep that night at all, but wandered about the magnificent ruin in an ecstasy of delight; but Jack Hillyard, knowing something about the risks concealed in ancient buildings—snakes, unsafe floorings, tottering walls and the like—managed to confine his peregrinations to the centre of the palace, which was the soundest part—though for a ruin several centuries old, it was altogether in a surprising state of preservation.

They had supper in a corner of a great echoing hall, once, probably, the hall of audience, whose marvellous carved walls and inland floor of rainbow mosaic seemed to mock in their beauty, albeit a broken and decayed beauty, the shabby, travel-stained little group squatting on the dais at one end. This single step, wide and shallow, led up to a large semi-circular niche, seemingly curved to frame a throne or divan, and the carving that patterned the great walls broke here into a very frenzy of fretted stone, men and beasts and flowers entangled in an orgy of decoration, reckless, prodigal and extraordinarily beautiful.

Staring at it as he munched his welcome tinned tongue and biscuit, Hillyard mused on the proof everywhere to be found in these relics of old India of the complete disregard for human life—outside



the ruling caste. This prodigious piece of carving alone—how many nameless men had slaved out their lives over this, and died, and been replaced by others, their only epitaph a mere exclamation of impatience from their imperious lord that the work moved so slowly? The very fabric of the place was cemented with blood and tears—the blood and tears of the humble men and women used, abused and flung aside like worn tools; so untaught and simple, so abased that they did not even dream of raising a voice against the imperial hand that so misused them!

At the far end of the great room and running the full length of the wall facing the dais, was a wide grille of carved stonework; an arched corridor ran away sharply to the right from the corner of the room, and turning subsequently at an abrupt angle, disappeared into a maze of smaller passages now impassable, and unsafe for exploration.

Peering through the latticed interstices of the stonework, it was possible to see that behind the grille was a large room of sorts, with very beautiful painted and inlaid walls, and further rooms leading out of it, but a fall of masonry made entrance impossible, so the two friends had to content themselves with interested peering. Faiz Ullah, opening a tin of apricot jam, nodded in the direction of the grille as the two discussed it, sitting over their supper.

"Will the Heaven-born eat of this sweet stuff? Yes? You look at the stone trellis, Huzoor; they say the women's quarters lay there—and that it was from behind that stone fretwork that the fair ladies of the household of the Raj that built this



poem in marble for one of them, looked out to see her die ! ”

“ Gosh—that’s cheerful ! ” mumbled Derek over a mouthful of jam and biscuit. “ Go on, Faiz Ullah, there’s a story about this place ; I can see it in your wicked old eye ! ”

Neatly Faiz Ullah gathered up the crumbs of the feast, and throwing them into a corner of the great room, began to unroll the bedding.

“ There is a story, Huzoor—but is there not to all such ? For a woman, Shah Jehan built the Taj, and for a woman was this, the Hidden Palace, built, so that her lover, the Raj, might hide her from all but his love. Njahal-al-Gulek was her name—Njahal of the Dancing Feet. To-morrow I may tell the tale, but not to-night. Talk makes echoes that it is as well—sometimes—not to raise. Will the Heaven-born be pleased to retire ? All is prepared ? ”

Not another word could either Derek or Hillyard get out of the old Sikh, and, laughing and grumbling, after a last cigarette, they rolled themselves in their rugs and went to sleep, curled comfortably against the wall on the dais from whence, if Derek’s laughing fancy was correct, the Cruel Raj, Kuja Raò, had once issued his immutable decrees. Faiz Ullah was to take first watch, and happy in his reliance on his old headman, Hillyard went peacefully to sleep. But deeply devoted as was Faiz Ullah to his master’s service, it seemed there was something to-night that meant shaking that devotion to its very core.

For long the Sikh fought it, sitting with his back grimly braced against the wall and his sunken eyes fixed on the pavement, pale in the moonlight, with that huge pattern silhouetted blackly on it where the



great carved window's shadow fell; dead silence, oppressive, and in it his muttered feverish prayers that grew more agitated, his drawn, hurried breathing and restless movements rang loud; there was no sign, only the silence, yet at last, shuddering, sick at his cowardice, but driven by a fear he could not fight, Faiz Ullah rose tremblingly from his post beside his master and crept away.

. . . . .

It seemed to Jack Hillyard, thinking over things afterwards, that he had slept a long time. At least the moon had crept round very far when he awoke with a start and prickling of his scalp that startled him profoundly. Never a nervous man, he stared round the great shadowy place in which he found himself with a frown of perplexity. The brilliant whiteness of the moonlight on the floor had given place to a subdued light in which the details of things were strange and shadowy. Slowly awaking to a dazed realisation of where he was, Jack Hillyard awoke to another fact.

The quick movement of something near him had awakened him. Derek had left his side—the boy's place was empty as was Faiz Ullah's! The defection of the latter was sufficiently astonishing, but Derek's disappearance was alarming. The old Sikh could look after himself, the jungle was his native heath—but Derek, new to India, heedless, adventurous? Surely he had not been mad enough to try exploring the ruined palace alone at night? Agitatedly Hillyard sat up, staring into the velvet gloom about him.

At first he could not see a thing except in his immediate neighbourhood; then, as his eyes grew



accustomed to the dimness, he seemed to see a figure at the far end of the room leaning against the grille, that delicate screen that had once barred what lovely laughing youth from the gaze of the court? It was Derek, a mere shadow against the crowding shadows—peering in, with his hands pressed clingingly against the latticed stone, his dark head bent as if to whisper through the meshes. Jack Hillyard opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

His tongue was dry, his brain bewildered, groping, when suddenly, with a shock, he realised whence his terror came. Derek looked, even in the dim light, somehow *different*. Always tall and thin, he seemed now to be emaciated, shrunken almost, and surely the brown curly crop seemed to have lengthened into a tangle of wild black hair, pressed close and yearningly against that mysterious grille—and now it seemed to the bewildered onlooker, torn between dreams and reality, that from behind the grille came faint sounds and rustlings, stifled sobs and murmurs, and the restless glimmering of a muffled light!

Even as Jack Hillyard stared, blankly, in growing terror, it came—a distant sound of music, sinister, rhythmic, like the approach of Doom itself, a dreadful thin crooning with macabre laughter in its very monotony! Something—or someone—approached! Down the corridor, now hidden from Hillyard's view by the angle of the room, came that which the music heralded. As it came, the figure that was Derek and yet not Derek fell back against the wall, and with a fluttering wail the light behind the grille fled away as Derek faced *That* which entered!

There was no sound but the music, shrilly faint,



like the echoes of a moaning laughter that jeered goblin mockery at the ghastly face of the boy, framed in long matted hair and seared with lines of pain and terror that his normal young life had never known. The moon brightened, and Jack Hillyard caught his breath in horror as he saw this awful, emaciated, broken thing that was Derek, yet Another, fling itself on its knees and drag across the floor towards—nothingness! Yet—*was* there nothing there? The shadows shifted and drove in clustering hordes, the moonlight wavered across the broken floor, yet though Hillyard's eyes told him the great hall was empty, every shaking fibre of his being called out its frenzied denial of the lie. Empty?

With the advent of that diabolical music came—life! Life, invisible but potent, peopled the echoing hall with an unseen multitude crowding, whispering, peering! Now again behind the grille came the flickering light, the shrill whispering and sobs of many voices—young, feminine voices—and prone upon the marble floor at the feet of the Unseen lay a dark shattered figure weeping, imploring, in harsh broken tones horribly, utterly unlike the voice of the boy Derek whose throat uttered the sounds!

As in a trance Hillyard heard the words spoken in Hindustani, a language the boy, fresh from England, did not know, could not know, cutting through the shifting, whispering sounds that filled the vast chamber with a crooning like the distant sea! They came in, a voice raucous, hoarse with agony and old despair.

“Let her go! Protector of the Faithful—Saviour of the poor—All-Merciful! I, I alone am guilty! Mine be the blame—let her go!”

With a jerk the words were cut short, and the



crouching figure, with a sharp gurgle, rolled over on its back. Hillyard was reminded, though he told himself dazedly he was mad, of the sudden spurning of an angry foot—then suddenly, panic-stricken, he rolled off the dais and made a dive for a broken pillar, driven by an insane rush of ungovernable terror. *Someone* was coming, slowly, slowly, accompanied triumphantly by that terrible music—towards the dais! *Someone* whose mere advent, although unseen, shook him to the very soul, and he cowered, shivering, dazed. . . .

Around him the air surged heavy with movement and noise, the sharp rustle of stiffly-embroidered silks, the creak of leather scabbards and clink of metal and jewels—the whispering of many voices, the pushing and jostling of many forms; the reek of mingled odours assailed his nostrils till his head swam again; betel-nut, the scent of attar of roses, of jasmine and cinnamon, henna and musk and sweet oil—all the stir and sound and smell of a crowd beat about him, faint but growing clearer every moment. Yet though he strained his suffused eyes till they ached again, he could see nothing—nothing but the shadows and the moonlight on the floor and, ah, God, that awful sobbing figure! As he looked, the figure began to drag itself up the room towards the dais, slowly, painfully, with the horrible suggestion of a tortured man nerving himself to a dying effort—but as it moved, the music rushed to a high pitch and stopped!

The sudden silence came like a whiplash across strained nerves, and Hillyard all but shrieked. Then in the shaking silence a Voice spoke alone. Whatever sat invisible, enthroned upon the dais in the niche where they had so happily lain down to sleep, was



speaking, and speaking with a cold deliberate dreadfulness that turned one's bones to water, and the very blood in one's veins to ice! Lower and lower on the floor crouched the wretched creature addressed, grovelling, praying, utterly abased—it was horrible to watch any human thing reduced to such abject fear.

The voice seemed to cease, and the terror for which all this seemed but a long preparation, was upon them! Like a haunting ghost itself, the music stole again upon the brief silence that followed the voice—close to the wall the tortured thing that had been a man had crawled, yet it lifted its head, alert, as the music stole upon the air, now no longer shrill and mocking, but a chanted love-song; beautiful to hear, but horrible, sung to the half-dead ears of this poor wretch that listened! It was monstrous, detestable, a brutal mockery, and a deliberate mockery, for vaguely Hillyard realised that the Horror that sat invisible upon the invisible throne moved behind this, delicately relishing each cruel detail. All moved slowly, inevitably to the appointed end—and the end was near.

The light of the moon grew low and blue, the flickering lights behind the grille moved restlessly, and the faint distant crying of the hidden women grew louder—and lo! out into the vast hall, from the arched corridor, out into the hush of that gloating unseen multitude, danced a pair of little feet! Surrounded by their own faintly-phosphorescent light they moved, soundlessly, lightly; little feet, young and small and delicately made, and they moved swiftly and surely, dancing, dancing, over the pale marble floor towards the dais! Straining his eyes, his heart pounding against his ribs, a cold sweat



on his brow, Hillyard stared. No! No, it was no dream, he was not mad! Two tiny feet, henna-stained and brightly jewelled, danced visibly before him in the moonlight—and both slender ankles showed the red stumps where the sword had shorn them through!

But Hillyard had come to the end of his tether; consciousness mercifully went from him then, and as he collapsed in a faint the last thing he remembered was a great and awful cry, as the figure that was Derek flung itself forward before the dancing feet—and then the darkness came down!

When Hillyard came to himself he found Faiz Ullah, with tears of remorsefulness running down his face, holding brandy to his lips; against the wall still lay the insensible figure of young Derek, and Hillyard, gulping down the drink feverishly, stumbled to his feet and went to the help of his cousin. It was long before they got any sign of returning consciousness from the younger man, and the eyes that he turned upon the two bending anxiously over him at last were blank as glass and wide with terror and anguish. Turning his head piteously from side to side, he muttered hoarsely, unintelligibly, in a strange tongue, and with a stab of terror at his heart Hillyard recognised that the boy was still living in the past; that dreadful past of which, in some mysterious way, he had had so terrible a glimpse. Faiz Ullah looked at his master.

"Huzoor, he is awake, but his mind sleeps still. We must get him away from this place that has drawn him so strangely."

"But why—why?" breathed Hillyard, his drawn face haggard in the cold dawn light that pierced the



high, broken windows. The old Sikh hesitated, and answered guardedly :

"The Heaven-born would not understand—yet we of our race would say that Derek sahib had come suddenly upon this place where once he lived before ; and that those influences that still dwell here had stretched out their hands and touched his sleeping memory. And so in his sleep he knew again that suffering and tragedy that once were his—his and another's. . . ."

"You mean that—that other that danced ?" muttered Hillyard. The native sent him a quick glance.

"The Huzoor, then, saw ? Yes, I too have seen them—twice now I have seen the feet that dance alone in the moonlight, and heard the rustle and the murmur of that great and cruel Court that watched their death, those lovers of old ! Long ago, as I have said, Protector of the Poor, *she* lived. She was a dancer, Njahal-al-Gulek, Njahal of the Dancing Feet, and they say she was more beautiful than the women of all the old tales—eyes of the mountain gazelle, lips of pomegranate, red and pouting, and a skin of ivory—ah, beautiful as a dream, young as the springing corn, and but thirteen years old, when Kuja Rao the Cruel saw and desired her, and bought her for his delight in his palace at Gundhal in Bhodalpore.

"Bought her for his toy, his plaything ; yet such were her ways with men, her tricks of loving, her laughter like the spray of a waterfall, her beauty, beyond all other women, of face and body, and above all her dancing, light as wind over the young green rice, that the Raj who had never known love, grew to love her with a jealous passion that waxed bitter



almost as hate. For she was young, Heaven-born, and light of heart, and he, though he was Kuja Raô, the Great Raj, yet he was growing old, and to him she was the sun, the moon and all the world—and men are thieves, even from the palace of a Raj ! ”

“ So he planned to take her away from Gundhal, to build her a palace, the loveliest the world could see, hidden away in this valley from the world of men—there, at last, could he guard his pearl in safety, and feel her beauty and her love safe for himself alone ! So here were gathered together the greatest builders, the sculptors, the gardeners and makers of fountains, the workers in metal and stone and wood, and it rose soon from the forests around, a poem in marble, to enshrine a poem in women. And when she came with her train of laughing girls, Njahal the Beautiful, and danced for sheer delight and clapped her little hands weighted with his jewels, then indeed he felt himself King in truth, of Life and Happiness, Kuja Raô, the Great Raj—for it was not then that he was called the Cruel !

“ Not then—not till . . . but the light grows bright, and I will hasten. Lie quiet, Derek sahib ! All is well, Heaven-born. He is sleeping again, and sleep cures all things. So for a while the Raj was happy and secure, and in his love for this wilful, lovely child, grew young again, he who had grown hard and bitter and weary with life ; yet when man feels secure, the gods stretch out their hands to test his house of life and prove it built only of cards after all. And so it was. . . .

“ So great a thing as the building of the Hidden Palace could not but be known, strictly as had the Raj enjoined secrecy upon his followers—and young



blood being hot, there were those among the young men whose curiosity was excited by the stories of this wondrous maiden guarded like a precious stone. There were not a few adventurous ones that came to their death among the swamps that hedged the mouth of the Valley of the Secret—so they named the valley—or found a speedy end on the swords of the guards that kept the Gate of the Palace. Yet one won through at last, to love and death. One. His name is lost, but you—we—have seen him. Fired by youth and daring and tales of the fair Njahal, he hid himself by night in the branches of a peepul tree that hung over the wall of the Palace Garden, and watched and waited.

“Now in that garden Njahal the Beautiful loved to wander in the evening alone and unveiled, since in this secret valley there was none to see; crouched in the peepul tree he saw her, and forgetting safety and prudence in the flame of love that seized him, dropped from the tree to her feet, and in the moonlight the two young things beheld each other, and held their breath for joy and awe—for straightway she loved him even as he her. They say he was a handsome lad, tall and straight as a palm, and with a laughing voice that could sing like a bird at dawn. . . .

“You saw what he was when the Raj had finished with him—I, too, sahib, for I had crept back in my shame to your side. I saw—I saw! Well, it was soon over, poor children. For perhaps a wild month or two, he lurking without the walls, aflame for her; she within, torn 'twixt love and fear. Meeting in the moonlight under the trees for a feverish hour of love, ashake with terror lest Kuja Rao's spies be on them . . . but at last one saw them, and sped with



the news to the Rajah. And the Raj was like a man run wild.

"They say he shut himself within his rooms and ate no meat for the space of three days, and those that dared creep near and listen heard the tramp of feet as of a caged beast walking, walking, mingled with great cries and moanings like some dumb creature that dies in agony! His face was white and lined when he came forth, and his eyes hard like stone and glittering.

"None knew what was done to the rash lad that had robbed him of his treasure. But there was a dark chamber in the heart of the earth—some say it lies beneath the floor of this room, the hall of audience—and there they shut the wandering lover with men who knew how to use those things that were hidden there; instruments of torture, of iron and fire and horror indescribable! At least, when the poor young lover was haled before the glittering Court at last to receive sentence, he was no more than a wrecked shadow of a man; shivering and dazed, weak with anguish, and broken like a reed in the storm.

"Yet he was all a man, and valiant, that nameless boy! Shattered and dying as he was, yet did he venture to beg forgiveness for her even at the last, at whatever cost to himself . . . and she? The three dreadful days since they had been taken together, she had spent shut behind the grille there; through there she watched the Court assemble, the great lords clinking and rustling in their silks and jewels, the rows of slaves, the eager-murmured talk, the excitement—for from all Bhodalpore the Raj had summoned his nobles to the Hidden Palace to witness the punishment of faithlessness!



"Gorgeous in his imperial robes, his face set like stone under the jewelled turban, he listened to the lover's plea; and with a smile that shook the listeners' hearts like leaves in the dawn wind, he bade his slaves bring Njahal the Beautiful before him—to dance! Allah alone knows what brief words had passed between these two unfortunate lovers when, the grill between them, they managed to exchange a last trembling kiss, a last vow of faithfulness whate'er befell—they say a kindly guard allowed them that ere the advent of the court—ere Njahal-al-Gulek, dancer and uncrowned queen of Bhodalpore, came at her lord's call to try a last throw with fate!

"It was a futile, desperate hope, yet she clung to it. If she might but win him to let them go, scarred and tortured and broken, yet together—only together! It might be he would relent. . . . With a last desperate hope she painted her eyes with kohl, decked her loveliness in delicate-tinted silks and jewels, rubbed arms and throat with perfumed oils and her toes and hands with red ere she launched herself into that dance that had drawn him to her that first day in far-away Gundhal, when she first danced for his delight. She was but a frail child, yet she was brave, Huzoor.

"They tell how her painted lips smiled valiantly to hide the great haggard eyes of terror, how the lovely body that had been his delight swayed and balanced in the languorous dance! How the little feet that had lain like twin rose-leaves in the palm of his brown hand hovered and glided over the marble floor . . . and the Rajah nodded and bade her go on, go on! Now the dance was long, and her strength little because of her anguish of soul, and she



blanched and quivered at the order till the hardened lords of the court, who knew all of her faithlessness, yet frowned and turned away lest their hearts be softened. And again she danced, and again—and still the Raj nodded and smiled and bade the music continue!

“And it wrought mightily with her agony of weariness that the air was a love song that had been a signal between her lover and herself during their brief passion (that much had one of the Rajah’s spies told him) so that she danced at last with her feet bleeding and the hot tears bedewing her loveliness like fresh drops on a rose, and her breath came in great sobs like that agony of spent wind in a runner after a great race. And *still* the Rajah smiled and ordered her to dance on—but she could no more! She knew now, Njahal-al-Gulek, that her hour was come, and she stopped dead before the throne, and laughed a laugh of defiance and despair.

“‘My time is ended, Kuja Raô!’ she said. ‘Do with me as you will now—but I dance for you no more!’

“‘Say you so?’ quoth Kuja Raô, Rajah of Bhodalpore. ‘Then at least, Njahal the fair, those dancing feet of yours shall dance for no other man on earth!’ And ere man could move or guess his mind, he stepped from the throne, and looking down with a strange smile into the upturned face of the woman, suddenly drew his curved sword, sharp as a razor, and with a swift slash sideways through the slender ankles, shore away her feet. So that Njahal the Beautiful dropped without a word, and her wretched lover, flinging up his arms with a great cry, fell upon her body and lay still, while beside them upon the marble floor they stood alone, those



little feet, dabbled in their own blood! The court shuddered and murmured and turned away as the Raj spurned the prone bodies savagely with his foot.

"Take these away, slaves—to their own place! And these . . . ' he looked down at the pitiful little feet with a ghastly smile—"these place in a beauteous casket of gold, and take them to my women, that they may learn their duty to their lord.' "

Hillyard shuddered. Despite the sunshine that was now streaming through the gaps in the old walls and roof, he felt cold and frightened.

"What a beastly tale, Faiz Ullah!" he said, with a faint attempt at a laugh. "Is it supposed to be true?"

The old Sikh shrugged as he rose to put the bedding together.

"The Heaven-born knows!" he said over his shoulder. "Did he not see what I saw—hear what I have heard? The feet that danced in the moonlight, the music, the light behind the grille and the voices of the court, and Derek sahib, whose ancient soul saw even farther than did we—nay, lived again the days when he was that unknown lover who died for love of a King's mistress?"

"Oh, well, that's as may be!" said Hillyard brusquely, with the Englishman's dislike of admitting the truth of anything strange and disturbing. Laying the sleeping boy tenderly on the floor, he rose and dusted his knees. "He's waking now—think he'll be all right. By the way, Faiz Ullah—er, what happened to those two afterwards?"

"Ah—the tale stops there, Huzoor. Yet I have heard that they were flung together into that dark cavern under this floor. Like all those that crossed a king's will in those days, they disappeared; then the Raj went mad with cruelty, and steeped his hands in



blood till men murmured against him up and down the land, and he died at last by his own hand, raving of two little dancing feet that would not let him rest! But long before that he had left the Hidden Palace, since the pearl for which it was the casket had been lost; and it soon fell into decay, for men feared it, with the sounds of strange music and weeping and laughter that echoed about the place."

A loud yawn resounded in the pause that followed, as Derek rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Hullo, Jack! Striking camp already? Good lord, do you know, I've had *the* maddest dream—can't remember it properly, only bits—but it was a proper nightmare! Let's get out into the open; this old place gives me the hump for some reason."

. . . . .

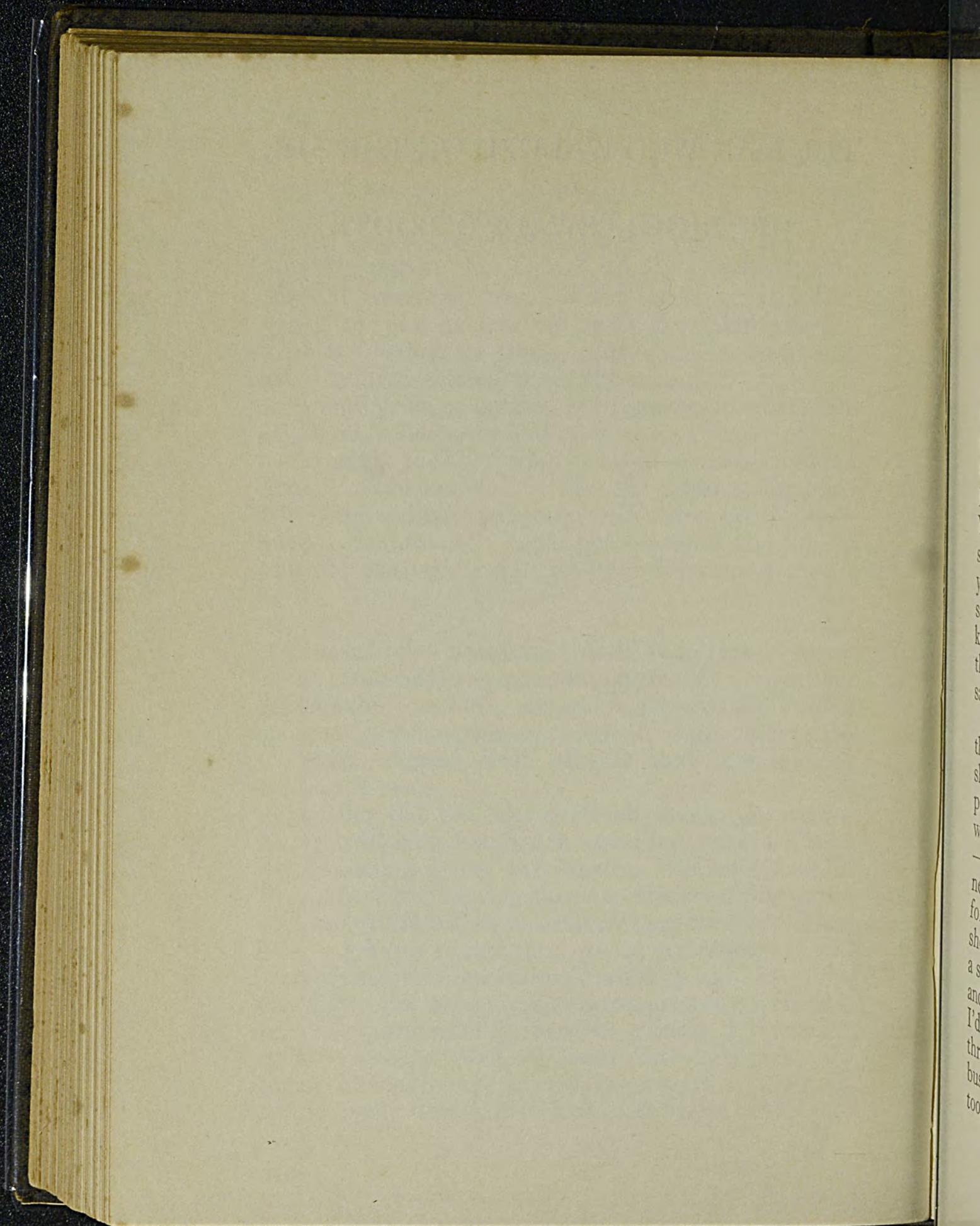
It is scarcely necessary to add that Jack Hillyard made no attempt to get his young cousin to remember his dream; and the strange uprush of subliminal memory that had taken possession of the young man in sleep slipped back silently and mysteriously whence it came.

Neither did he inform Derek that a few weeks afterwards, with Faiz Ullah and a few workmen who did not mind facing the dreaded Hidden Palace in broad daylight, he dug down to the level below the flooring of the hall of audience where they had spent so terrifying a night; and found a circular subterranean chamber, reached by a winding stair, in which chamber were not only several ancient metal instruments of torture of so hideous a kind that merely to look at them made Hillyard physically sick, but the skeletons, twined in each other's arms, of a man and woman. And the woman's feet were missing!



THE MAN WHO WALKED ON THE AIR,  
OR  
MR. BIGGLESWADE'S BOOTS







## THE MAN WHO WALKED ON THE AIR

OR

### MR. BIGGLESWADE'S BOOTS

THAT ? Why, I'd forgotten I had that still left. Stuck away among all those old papers it must have been, all these years, and I'd forgotten all about it. Well, well, who'd 'a thought it ? *The Canterdown News*—vanished this thirty years now that little paper has ; belonged to the time when Canterdown was a real little village, not a suburb of London—a bit before your time, as you say, sir. You're only a bit of a boy still—twenty odd, if I should make a guess—and I'm old enough to be your grandfather. Though I don't look it—as you say. That's because I've moved with the times ; kept up a bit with things, and if I couldn't say something nice about the newest ideas, why then, I'd say nothing at all about 'em. That's the way.

Not but what I could say a good deal about some things, 'specially these young females going about in shorts and that, showing their thighs like what we'd 'a paid a good deal to see in my young days. I like the wireless, I *must* say, and the cinemas are well enough—but I can't abide that brand new petrol station just next door, with great noisy stinking cars drawing up for a refill any hour of the night. And my nice little shop what I took such pride in, just look at it ! Like a square white box with a great shiny front all glass and metal—if I was still serving behind the counter I'd feel like a minnow in a tank when folks look through into the windows ! But my son's got the business now, and my grandson growing up to it, too, and they *would* have the old place rebuilt—



modernised, they said. Modern—sheets of glass and metal and concrete. No kind o' comfort to live with. But it's a very good business. Oh, a very good business indeed! It was "Quigley's for Quality" in the old days, and it's "Quigley's for Quality" still, thank goodness. But when I come to think of the old days . . . Lord!

Just a little village this was, when I was young. When all you're reading in that paper happened. *Did* it happen? Of course it happened! And folks 'ud still be talking about it if it hadn't been for the War and a few other little things driving it out of their minds. Of course, as I was telling you, this wasn't the "prosperous suburb of Canterdown" then. It was a village—Little Canterdown. The trams ran only as far as Highley then, and you had to walk a mile and a half on to Canterdown; but folks didn't mind walking in those days. A sleepy little place it was, with one main street, and me the only grocer, with the only chemist next door to me, and the only butcher just beyond him; and there was a sweet shop beside, and a draper's—but there was plenty of good families living round about, and we all drove a pretty steady trade.

Of course, being such a little place everybody knew everybody else and I being next-door neighbour to Biggleswade—yes, that very Biggleswade that's written about in that paper there—well, we chummed up more than a bit. A nice little chap he was. A bit shy and absent, and used to peer at you before speaking, rather like a rabbit peering through the bars of its cage—but that was because he was terribly near-sighted. Had to wear very thick glasses that made his eyes look huge if you met 'em straight on, as it were.



Big pale-blue eyes, and dark hair, goin' a bit thin on top, and trousers kneed-out and shiny in the seat. He was a good bit older than me, unmarried, and hadn't many friends. He'd built a sort of lean-to shed out in the little square of garden we all had behind our shops; he called it his "laboratory," and used to potter about there with his tools and his bottles and gadgets and so on, every night after he'd shut up the shop.

We used to have a word or two evenings across the wall when the missus was upstairs putting the kids to bed. The walls between all the gardens wasn't more than four feet high, and sometimes of an evening when I was trimming the box 'edge that grew along our wall I couldn't help looking over into his place. Now and then he'd come out of his shed for a breath of air, and chew the rag with me a bit before he went in again . . . and at last, one night, as a great favour, he asked me to come over and see his lab'ratory.

Well, I went. And I could see how he thought it was the biggest compliment he could pay me, and he kept looking up at me eagerly through those great glasses of his to see how it impressed me, and I was impressed all right—not that I understood a dam' thing I saw! Shelves running all along the walls filled with great bell-glasses and retorts and what d'ye call 'em—alembics, isn't it? Anyway, there was all manner of funny-shaped bottles and containers and suchlike in glass and metal, and a furnace in one corner, and a sort of work-table beside it, with a shelf full of tattered books—and I said the first thing that came into my head. Dam' silly, of course.



"What's up?" I said. "You trying to make gold?"

Big laughed.

"Not gold exactly—something more exciting than gold."

He blinked at me mysteriously. "What'd you say if I said I was on the track of something more valuable than gold? Something nobody's ever found yet?"

Of course I laughed and turned it off—thought he was a bit batty; and after that I often used to go in and watch him working. It used to fascinate me to see, for instance, a piece of blue litmus paper turn pink at the touch of acid—and to see what he could do with metals! Quicksilver, for instance, like a live thing, darting about; and lead—to watch a lump of solid grey metal melt slowly at first to the consistency of mud and then of thick cream, and then begin to boil and splutter like a spoonful of milk over a gas-ring. To see it bubble like soup, and change colour when something else was dropped into it. . . . Marvellous.

Well, it didn't take me long to see that Biggleswade was after trying to make some new sort of metal, but what it was I couldn't make out. And I wasn't really interested, as I say—thought it just a harmless sort of bug in the brain. But—one day I was sitting alone in my garden after supper smoking a pipe, a curly briar I was rather proud of, and reading a sporting paper in the light from the little parlour behind, where my wife was sitting doing some mending for the kids. We'd had a good supper. Cold pressed beef and pickles and cheese and beer, and I'd drunk plenty of beer, it was a warm night, being



June . . . and, upon my word, for a minute, when for a minute I glanced up from my paper and looked in the direction of Biggleswade's garden, I thought I must 'a drunk a drop or two too much !

It was still light enough to see pretty clearly, and there was Biggleswade—unless I was drunk and imagining it—on the other side of the wall, apparently hopping up and down in his garden ! Now it might strike some man who thought a lot of his figure to go in for jumping by way of exercise (as I'm told some of these smart ladies do to get their fat off), but I'd never have thought it of Big, though he was a dumpy little chap. 'Sides, if he'd been doing it for that he'd 'a done it regular, one-two, one-two, wouldn't he ? But he didn't ! He was jumping most *irregular*, sometimes quick and sometimes slow ; and, besides, it was a funny sort of jumping, somehow, if you take my meaning ? He seemed, each time he jumped, *to stay up in the air* for a second or two at the top of each jump ! Well, I rubbed my eyes and stared and stared until my eyes began to water, and then I got up—cautious like, in case I was really tight—but there he was still. Jumping up and down off the ground, his coat off and his hands clenched, and his big glasses shining goggle-eyed in the dusk like an owl's, as he bounced. No, I wasn't tight !

He was so intent on his bouncing that he never saw me, and when I called out to him he jumped into the air higher than ever, and gave a little thin cry of mingled fright and astonishment, and I cried out too. For that time—*he stayed in the air* ! For quite a minute he stayed there, just as though there was something invisible holding him up—then, whatever was holding him up gave way, and he tumbled down



to the ground in a heap. I jumped over the wall, for he went such a purler I thought he'd been hurt; but he was up in a second, quivering, laughing, panting, like a man half-crazy with excitement, and crying out—but under his breath for fear of people hearing.

"My boots, my boots! Wait while I take 'em off. . . ."

What on earth he meant I couldn't make out, but there wasn't time to argue. Hanging on to me with one hand, with the other he fumbled frantically with the laces, lugged off the boots, and gathering them up under one arm, dragged me after him across the tiny garden and into the shed. Completely dumbfounded, I followed him, and as he turned and locked the door behind him, he dropped one of his boots. And, sir, you may believe me or believe me not—but *the thing rose straight up in the air*. All by itself! It rose steadily up as though a string from the ceiling was pulling it—but with a wild swoop Big caught it as it rose level with his nose, laid both boots on the table, and put a heavy book across each toe. Then turning to me, standing there gaping like a fool, he smiled.

"I've done it!" he said, quite quietly.

"Done what?" I snapped. I was badly frightened and puzzled, and as angry at being frightened and puzzled as most young chaps are. "Doing what, I should like to know?"

He laid a hand on my shoulder, and his eyes shone like two flames behind his gig-lamps.

"Jim!" His voice dropped to a sort of reverential whisper, "I've found what nobody else has ever yet found—I've found out how to make a metal that *neutralises the force of gravity!*"



While I gaped like a fool he let go my shoulder and made a dart for the boots.

"Look here!" He turned them sole upwards, and I'm damned if they weren't new-soled—I'd wondered why he'd recently taken lessons in cobbling from old Newsam in the High Street! Round the edges, and studded in a pattern in the centre of each sole and heel, were quantities of small, shining nails. Larger than ordinary shoe-brads—more like the nails you gents wear in your golf shoes, and made of some brilliantly shining white metal. But that wasn't all Big was out to show me. He let go of one of the boots and *it began to rise slowly upwards into the air*. Big caught it again as it passed his nose, and went on.

"Those nails are made of my new metal—my secret metal that can cut a man off from the magnetism of the earth. Insulate him, d'you see—so that he can *walk on the air*! Isn't it marvellous? This was the first way I thought of, but it's not perfect yet. The stuff is, though—look at it."

He darted across the laboratory to a distant corner and produced a big round tobacco tin—one of mine, I remembered giving it to him. He didn't smoke, and I'd wondered what he wanted that old "Navy Cut" tin for. He gave it tenderly into my hands and eased the lid open, very carefully, as though there was something alive in it—and I peeped inside. And there inside was a lump of shiny white metal as big or bigger than my fist—but it wasn't lying on the bottom of the tin! It was bobbing about against the raised lid, for all the world like an animal trying to escape. I was so astonished and—yes—shocked in some funny way, that I dropped the tin, and like a



flash that lump of metal was up and away to the ceiling, where it hung like a shiny, irregular-shaped witchball, clinging to the ceiling as a needle clings to a magnet. Cursing my stupidity roundly, Biggleswade scrambled on a chair, and by dint of much stretching and swearing he managed to capture the stuff again and confine it to its tin. I felt pretty much of a fool, and thankful it hadn't happened outside, else the blooming metal poor Biggleswade had made with such care and pains might have shot straight up to the moon! Or gone on travelling for ever . . . nothing, as Biggleswade explained to me very carefully afterwards, could have brought it down again. The stuff did not respond to the force of gravity, therefore there was nothing to hold it to the earth. I'll never forget that evening, sitting in that hot little place with only the light of one red lamp about me, and Big with his glasses aglow with excitement, sitting with his legs curled round each other and his hands pressed together between his knees. Talking, talking, talking. . . .

It appears—though I didn't know it until he told me, and I daresay there's lots of folks don't know it even nowadays—that we only “stay put” on the earth because of the magnetic attraction of the earth that scientists call the force of gravity. And for years, shut up in that little shed in the back garden in Canterdown, Biggleswade had been on the track of a certain “metallic element” (he called it that) that would cut one off, as it were, from the influence of the force of gravity—insulate one, d'you see, so as it wouldn't have any effect. Same as insulating an electric current. . . .

How he ever got on the track of the stuff—the



"element" as he called it—I never discovered. Nor what it was made of—he didn't know himself exactly, 's far as I could make out. It was a chance combination—an *alloy*, he said; several quite ordinary metals together that produced it—like two perfectly commonplace people suddenly combining and producing a freakish and astonishing child! It was frightfully volatile stuff, he explained; as bad as quicksilver to deal with, and for months he despaired of ever making it really handleable, so to speak; but after, endless experimenting and testing and trying it out, he'd managed to—er—combine it with certain more stable elements into a sort of white metal that could be treated like iron or silver. Melted or hammered into shape; that sort of thing. And there it was—that shiny lump of silvery stuff in my "Navy Cut" tin. A new metal that was going to astonish the world!

Well, my missus was shouting to me over the wall to come to bed before I'd realised how the time had gone, and of course I had to leave. I didn't want her to come nosing round—so we said "G'night," and I promised to come over to supper next night so's we could talk some more.

We realised, of course, the reason for the failure of his first idea, the nailed boots. One wasn't *completely* insulated from the earth's drawing power, as it were—the metal nails "cut" the force, it was true, but the leather of the soles still responded to it; hence the irregular rising and falling, like a sort of jumping, that had first arrested my attention in the garden. One force wanted to rise, and the other wanted to stay down—see? That was easy. I suggested my going round the corner to Newsam with a pair of



Big's most comfortable boots, and asking him to make a pair of all-metal soles and fix 'em on top of the leather ones . . . but Biggleswade demurred. He wasn't going to let that precious lump of metal go out of his hands! And, moreover, he doubted whether an ordinary cobbler could do it. The making of a pair of solid metal soles seemed to come under the heading of a blacksmith's work, rather than cobbling; also Newsam was a curious sort of man and a noted gossip, and he'd be sure to chat about the odd job he'd got on hand. And then—a final argument which clinched things—we'd have to tell Newsam of the metal's peculiar qualities at the outset, or he'd dump it down somewhere and then have to get a step-ladder to fetch it off the ceiling—and bang would go the whole secret! To say nothing of the possibility of the old chap's fainting, or going mad at the shock of seeing a chunk of solid metal rising up in the air like the smoke of a picnic fire!

No! There was nothing for it but to do it ourselves. And I don't mind telling you that to make a pair of metal soles and attach them really neatly and securely to a pair of walking boots, is no easy job for a couple of novices to tackle—but anyway, after experimenting a bit with other metals and making a lot of failures, we did it O.K. A solid pair of jack-boots—Biggleswade thought he'd better choose something good and strong—each with a shiny metal sole stretching from toe to heel-tip. There they stood—with two good heavy lumps of lead inside 'em to keep 'em down—side by side on the work-table in the laboratory one night a week or ten days later, and with quivering fingers Biggleswade stooped down and undid his shoes.



"It's now or never," he muttered. "Have I succeeded or haven't I? Look here, there's no use in trying it here—we'd better get out into the garden. Nobody'll be about at this time of night."

He made for the door in his little stockinged feet, the boots tucked under his arm, and but for me he'd 'a been away and up in the air in a twinkling. I caught his arm just in time.

"Stop, stop!" I cried. "Don't be an ass . . . try 'em on here first. Don't you see that we don't understand 'em yet, nor what you can do and what you can't—and it seems to me that though you may be able to get *up* into the air all right, we don't know you can come *down* when you want?"

That shook him a bit. He stared at me with his great owl's eyes behind his glasses, and came back and sat soberly down.

"You're right, by Jove—I never thought of that," he admitted. "We'll find a way—of course we will—but I'll try 'em in here first. Safer."

With a tug and a shove the boots were on, and looking quite pale from excitement, he caught hold of my arm and stood up, then slowly released his grip of me. And, by God, he'd done it!

The minute he let go he rose into the air, looking a bit wobbly and unbalanced, but safe enough. He took a step forward, upward, and another step—and then his head was bumping on the ceiling and the boots were on a level with my nose! Looking down at me from above, he laughed quaveringly, triumphantly.

"I've done it," he choked. "My heavens, I've done it. But you're right. We'll have to find some way of getting down." He giggled, almost hysterical



with excitement. "You could *pull* me down now, but I can't *walk* down the air like I can walk up it, that's evident. As it is I obviously daren't go out or I'd stay up altogether! I've got to find a way of getting myself down somehow. Haul me down, like a good chap, and let's put our heads together about this?"

Well, that was a bit of a facer. But we weren't going to be done, and at last we evolved a system that was both simple and easy to manage. We made a pair of hooked iron stirrup-things, like the climbing-irons they use for climbing trees that have high, smooth trunks and nothing in the way of branches to put your feet on for ever so far up. I'd seen some pictures of 'em somewhere—hooked irons fixed to the toes of one's shoes to stick into the trunk and give a purchase. Well, we made a pair of things like those only hooking *upwards*, if you see what I mean, so when he wanted to come down he'd only to catch on to a chimney or a tall tree or a steeple and *climb* down to earth, same's the ordinary man would climb upwards.

Then after that we had to invent another thing for when he went walking too high—right above the trees and houses, I mean—but that was easy. We made a sort of grappling-hook at the end of a length of thin rope that was wound round his waist like a fireman's; he could let this down so's it caught into something—a tree or a roof or something—and pull himself down to the level where his climbing-irons would come into action.

When it was all ready and him dressed up, he looked the oddest little figure of fun you ever saw, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee out of *Alice*,



with his huge boots and a muffler—'cos even in summer I guessed it 'ud be cold in the upper air—and the climbing-irons curling up from his toes and the grappling-hook swinging, and yards and yards of thin rope wound round him like a cocoon from waist to shoulders. I was damn' nervous of anything happening to him and insisted on his carrying God knows how much too much rope. Later on we found that by tacking and taking heed of air currents he could keep down to a certain level quite easily, and he never went above that, being a nervous little cuss, and didn't need more than about half the length of rope he started out with. But we were experimenting then, and I wasn't taking chances.

It was a darkish night when he made his first real attempt, and I don't mind admitting that when we left the shed and came out into the dark little garden, him clinging on to me like grim death and me fixing the last knot of the rope round his waist, my heart was thumping like billy-o. But Big didn't seem to have a qualm. He grinned happily in my face, let me go, and as I stepped back, rose gently and levelly into the air. He balanced gingerly as though feeling his feet, then took a step forward, and another step—same as though he were climbing a gentle slope—and dam' uncanny it was, I give you my word, to see him doing it up in the air a good three feet above the ground!

He paused a minute, standing on a level with my shoulders, then nodded, beamed broadly down at me, and walked away over the wall of our garden, walking steadily upwards all the way, and vanished into the dark; and I sat down and mopped my face and drew a long breath. He'd done it—that odd,



indifferent little chap that all the smarties in the village used to laugh at!

I sat there staring into the sky after him, and speculating as to what he was doing, and feeling a bit lonesome, I'll admit. There I sat, for hours it seemed, until I began to worry a bit. Had he lost his way? Canterdown from the air 'ud look a bit different from the ground. Had he got caught in the tree-tops on Farnley Copse, or maybe been shot by some stray keeper passing over Sir Joshua Laybourne's place, Laybourne Park? I looked at my watch, and I'd really begun to be nervous when I heard a scraping and a clinking, and saw the grappling-iron swinging against the roof of the shed, trying to get a purchase on the chimney. I stood up and waved like mad and the iron came twirling down towards me—I caught it and hauled away like fury, and he came down with such a rush on top of me that we both went over like ninepins. But I was too glad to see him back to care, and we sat up and grinned at each other.

"I've been all over the place," he panted. "My God, Quig, if you could only know what it feels like to be able to walk on the air! The freedom—the peace—the sense of being above all the petty worries and tangles of everyday life . . . it's marvellous! I went over Farnley Copse and heard the birds chattering to each other as they settled off to bed—and there wasn't half a frightened squawking when they saw me! I walked over old Joshua's estate and saw him sitting smoking a cigar on the terrace with a couple of fat-stomached friends, so I thought I'd give them a fright, and walked right over their heads whistling. But they were either too intent on their



talk or too sleepy with port to look up—I only scared a poor innocent housemaid instead, who was just going to bed. I passed right by her window . . .”

“Naughty, naughty,” I grinned, but Biggleswade was too excited to pay any heed.

“Right by, and she happened to come to the window to draw down the blind for the night just as I passed. Poor girl got the fright of her life, and fell in a heap with hysterics—I was in two minds to climb in at the window and try to do something to help her, but on the whole I thought better not. If one of the other girls came in, hearing her yell, and found me there . . . well, it ’ud ha’ been a bit difficult to explain. And I don’t want the truth about these,” he caressed his boots tenderly, “to come out just yet.”

“What’s it like—walking on air?” I asked curiously. “Is it easy?”

“It’s a bit difficult at first,” admitted Biggleswade. “And I can see I shall have to practise landing. Going *up*’s easyish; but I never was a climber, and climbing down’s a good deal worse than climbing up, anyway. I tried one steeple, but it’ll take a bit of practice—roofs are easier; there’s eaves and gutters and things for the hook to catch on to. Once it catches one can come down pulley-haul way, hand over hand, till one takes hold oneself—’sif one was a boat and hauling oneself in by the painter. As to actual *walking*—well, I sh’d think it’s rather like walking in a diving-suit, from what I’ve heard? Like walking on something semi-solid—spongy rather; something that gives a bit at each step, like thick cottonwool—and yet it’s solid enough to give your feet the feeling that they *are* walking on some-



thing. Suppose it's the force of gravity I'm walking on really—sounds almost irreverent, don't it?"

We both laughed, and Big tenderly removed his precious boots; put a heavy stone inside each, and tucked them under his arm.

"We'd better go to bed," he said, "and tomorrow, about the same time we'll have another rehearsal. I'm not going to launch this on the world until I feel ready. 'Night."

Well, next night and the next, and for several nights after that, we met, and in a very little while Biggleswade got quite expert at air-walking. I tried the boots on once—but they were too small for me and hurt like the dickens. I managed to keep them on for a little while, but I couldn't "walk" at all, and wavered and fell on my nose so many times that I got scared and refused to try again. So I contented myself with sitting in Biggleswade's garden watching him cavort against the sky . . . and almighty funny it used to look sometimes, that comic little figure with coat-tails flying, holding on to his hat with one hand and waving a stick with the other, striding away up there, silhouetted against the stars. We had a bit of fun about that stick. He tried an ordinary one at first, said he felt odd walking without a stick, and took his own up with him. But the pull of the earth on it was so strong that it pulled it out of his hand, and it came down with such force that it drove a hole several inches deep in the soil of the garden! So after that he made a little ferrule out of his patent metal—there was a bit left—and fixed it on the stick, and after that he'd take it out night after night. I can see him now, striding along there, way up in the sky.



We'd meant to keep the whole thing secret until we could go to London . . . but it leaked out, as I suppose it was bound to do. They didn't believe the housemaid's story, of course; everybody said she'd got hysterics after a nightmare. And when an old lady was found in a fit outside the "Canterdown Arms," saying, like the housemaid, that she'd seen a man walking 'way up in the air, well, they said she was tight. And as it happened to be old Sal Higgins, one of the hardest cases in Canterdown, everybody said "of course" and dismissed it. But when it come to my own wife looking out of the window one night when it was too hot to sleep, and seeing Biggleswade talking to me down in our garden, and then, with a twirl of his stick, rise in the air and walk rapidly away in the direction of Laybourne Park—well, nobody could ignore what she said, being a strict Baptist and all.

It was that that really made Big and me decide to launch the thing at once. Couldn't 'a hoped to have kept it a secret since Mary'd got hold of it—but it must have given the poor girl a norful shock. I heard her give a screech at the window—she'd gone to bed but couldn't sleep, and got up to open the window; saw Big and fell in a heap in a faint. I yelled like mad for Biggleswade to come back at once and explain, but he'd got out of range of hearing by that time, so I rushed indoors and found her flat on the floor, and had to get busy with sal volatile and brandy and so on.

Mind you, she wouldn't believe me at first. Thought she'd had a bad dream and all . . . but she insisted on sitting up with me and waiting till Big came back, and when a woman gets set on a thing,



well, you know how it is! And when she saw him first, a mere dark speck in the sky looming over the dark tree-tops of Farnley Copse, and then coming nearer and nearer, a real live man swinging his stick and whistling aloud, walking up there in mid-air, as free and easy as you please . . . well, I'd thought she'd a thrown a fit! I did indeed.

Well, I called Big in. He thought I must be alone and climbed down by the chimney-stack and the eaves—and even I was surprised to see how expert he'd got now at catching on to anything that projected or gave any sort of a hold, with those hooked foot-irons we'd made. He came in at the sitting-room window and found us there—and he was rather chopfallen to find that our secret had leaked out. But he was nice about it, and explained everything as best he could to Mary, though I could see it was rather beyond her. The explanation, I mean. But the boots and the stick weren't. He took 'em off in the parlour, after carefully closing all the windows, and laid 'em on the table. And having no weights in 'em to keep 'em down, up they went to the chandelier and hung there, for all the world like two odd-shaped fruits hanging to a brass tree! It was three o'clock before we'd done talking, and then Mary never slept a wink, she was so excited at the thought of the fine story she'd have to tell all the village on the morrow. Though we begged her not to—but there, you can't stop a woman talking. So Biggleswade and I decided to act right away, and without saying a word to Mary we packed the irons and rope and boots and stick—which had been made to screw and unscrew, so's to go into a bag with the boots—and started out for London early next day.



We got there about lunch-time, and had a meal—cold ham and pale ale—at a little tavern in the Strand. We were too excited to eat much, though. Then took our way to Fleet Street—for it was obviously in the heart of newspaperland that the coup would be best brought off. If you want to make a noise go where there's plenty of people to hear it! In a little deserted alleyway off Fleet Street Big slipped off his own shoes and pulled on his jack-boots (me holding him down so's he wouldn't rise off the ground till he wanted to), took his stick, and then we walked off into Fleet Street arm in arm, and stopped opposite the offices of *The Daily Report*. Then—he let go of me, and soaring up straight as a rocket into the air, caught a window-sill with one hand as he passed, and vaulted straight through the open window into the Editor's Room on the fifth floor!

My God, you *should* have seen the scene in Fleet Street! It was noon, and a bright sunny July day, and the place packed with traffic. Cars and horse-vans and buses and bicycles, and carts unloading paper, and crowds of people. Half a dozen cars crashed into each other, the drivers being so startled at the sight of Biggleswade's rising in the air that they let go the wheel. Cart-horses reared and squealed, women fainted, four men took the pledge on the spot, and you couldn't hear yourself speak for a minute for the shrieks of startled people, the barking of dozens of excited dogs, crashing of colliding vehicles, and the general hubbub. The Editor was entertaining a girl—that is, she was sitting on his knee, quite friendly, and when Biggleswade bobbed up outside, came through the window and right on to the desk and stood smiling down at them quite amiably, well, of



course, she gave a screech and went off in a dead faint.

The Editor sat gaping at Big. He was as white as a sheet, and said in a dying sort of voice, "I swear I'll never touch drink again!" And Biggleswade merely grinned at him and said:

"It's all right. I'm real. Touch!"

The Editor pinched his arm in a dazed sort of way and then blinked and pinched himself. The girl came round, after screaming again, and shuddering and hiding her face on the Editor's shoulder, you know the sort of thing—and to cut a long story short, in two twos they was all three sitting hobnobbing like old friends. Big explaining what he'd done in his shy, stuttering way, and showing the boots, and the girl and the Editor gaping and asking questions, and the rest of the staff hanging round outside the door breathless with excitement and trying to overhear all they could, though they dursn't venture into the Great Man's own room.

Artless little chap Big was. He got so excited about the success of his experiment that he clean forgot to be shy, and the Editor—Hamble his name was—rang for the Assistant Editor, and they asked questions nineteen to the dozen. Scratched the metal, and smelt it and bit it, and tapped it with pencils, and talked like mad, and the girl sat by and goggled at 'em. That Editor was a good business man. He pinned Biggleswade down right away to write 'em a series of articles about himself—how he got the idea of the metal, what he meant to do with it, where he was born and what he liked for breakfast and so on. Biggleswade stared, and said he couldn't write for toffee, but that didn't seem to matter.



The girl was a "free-lance journalist" she said with a smirk. Well—in those days women in a newspaper office wasn't a usual thing, and B. said it looked to him, from the way she was acting when he walked in, as if she was a free-lance something-else! But that wasn't his affair anyway, as long's she'd write the articles for him he was content; I understand that's the way most of the writings by notable folks are done in papers nowadays. *They* don't write the stuff at all—just give somebody like that girl the facts and she works 'em up into a story. Funny business—but the cash was good, and Biggleswade closed with the offer at once. And then the Editor produced a paper for Biggleswade to sign, undertaking he wouldn't let any paper but *The Daily Report* back him when he really started stunting.

I think he'd 'a done better to have waited and seen what other papers 'ud have offered before he signed; but Big never was a business man, and the terms wasn't bad. I'll say that for the *Report*. Well, that closed the interview—and Big was for stepping out of the window again, but the Editor stopped him. Told him he was under contract now to the biggest paper in the country, that he mustn't go cheapening his value by giving free displays to the multitude. He'd done enough by holding up the entire traffic of Fleet Street, to give himself and his discovery a first-class advertisement, and now he must go quietly away by a back door. The whole street before the front entrance was black with people now, of course, waiting to see him come out, alternately peering in at the doors that the perspiring commissionaires were holding against them, or craning upwards, hoping that Big would step out of the win-



dow and sail down, as he'd sailed up. Gosh, the money that must have changed hands that day, with fellows betting each other they were drunk or mad—or that if it happened at all it was a trade “ad.,” and so on and so forth!

Well, Biggleswade saw Hamble's point, and with the precious boots tucked under his arm, he crept down the backstairs and out through a private door into a remote little alley, where I was waiting for him. (Hamble had sent out an office-boy to find me and bring me round that entrance, so as to dodge the crowd—intelligent fellow, Hamble, very.)

Well, we took a cab back to the little hotel where we was staying; left the boots and stick safely locked up, and then went out and had a damn' good dinner at a pub in Cheapside. Steak and onions, and an apple charlotte to follow, with lots of beer, and as a finish up a couple of glasses of port each. Biggleswade got a bit squiffy between excitement and exhaustion and the drink—he never took much as a rule—and I had to dump him in bed at last. But he was awake bright and early in the morning, and came rushing into my room waving a bunch of papers.

I must say Hamble had done us proud! There was a whacking great headline, black as your hat, across the front page. A studio photograph of Biggleswade—God knows where they got it!—and yards about his “revolutionary discovery,” and more yards about how clever *The Daily Report* was to have found him out . . . though nothing about his merely walking into the Editor's room and catching him kissing a “contributor.” Oh, no! But it was a good story, though little Biggleswade was rather disturbed at



some of the frills they'd put in—and the other papers were most amusing.

Some of them said it was a clever stunt of the *Report's*, others that a sort of mass hallucination had overtaken the whole of Fleet Street, and quoted yards of stuff about "mass hypnotism" and "crowd psychology." Some sneered, and some came out flat and said it was all a hoax—and one or two, cautious like, ignored it altogether. But it was easy to see that they were all mad with jealousy of the *Report*.

Well, we were discovered, of course, before luncheon, and then the fun began. One reporter after another, one Pressman after another, photographers, curiosity-mongers, Nosey Parkers of every kind, on business and not on business. They came in hordes and droves, until the manageress of the hotel—it was a little homely place in Bloomsbury, nothing much, but comfortable enough—came to me in tears at last and begged us to go! Said she couldn't keep anybody who had so many people coming to the door, it wasn't fair on the girl, who'd given notice already and wouldn't be pacified unless we went at once.

Well, Big had had about enough of it too by then, so we sneaked out into the back garden, got over the garden wall into the garden of another house—friend of the landlady's who let us over—and through that house into a quiet square, and so we got away without being recognised.

Back we went to Canterdown then, and they fairly hung the flags out for us, till old Biggleswade nearly turned and fled, and I had to take and tell folks not to make so much fuss of him. I had a brainwave, and said he was planning something even more startling than the boots, and that he mustn't be



disturbed else some colossal idea might be lost to humanity. That appealed to folks no end, and they drew off to a respectful distance.

But he only got peace for a time. The London papers came down on Canterdown in full force, and Biggleswade's life, poor chap, was a misery, until finally he hung out a notice on the front door of the shop that he'd gone away, address unknown. Made himself up a bed in the shed, and spent his time there; and after a while they got tired of knocking and ringing and left him in peace. I had to get him his food and hand it to him over the wall nights when my wife was asleep—of course, if Mary'd guessed he wasn't really away, then the whole show would ha' been done for. As it was she was as mad as a hawk because I hadn't taken her up to Fleet Street with us. I pacified her, and thought everything was O.K., but it wasn't very long before *The Daily Report* got busy. And it was no use Biggleswade's trying to bluff that Editor. He was on to anything you might do or say.

Not but what he didn't have a spot of bother with old Big at first. All the reporting and fuss and people chasing him and that had scared little Big out of his life, and he was thoroughly sorry by this time he'd ever given the story of his discovery to the world! Upon my Sam, y'know, I think that he'd 'a been capable of sitting there hugging that staggering discovery to himself, all the days of his life? But it was too late. The articles were being published—somehow the girl had managed to pad out Biggleswade's stuff into a whole series—and Hamble was insistent that Biggleswade followed up his initial success. *How* that man talked! Talked about Big's



duty to the world and the British people—how it was a sin to himself and humanity to refuse to appear and give demonstrations of the boots—how Biggleswade 'ud earn a golden name for himself and his children, might have a statue erected to him, become a peer, and so on and so on.

Wonderful he talked, I give you my word—I used to sit and listen and realise just how he'd become Editor of the biggest paper in Fleet Street, and though Big dug his toes in at first, little by little he began to wilt.

The bit about earning a golden name for his children left him cold, 'cos he hadn't any children nor didn't want any—but I could see the hint of a possible peerage made him sit up a bit! He grinned and looked awkward and pooh-poohed the idea, but I could see he was secretly tickled to death . . . and when after Hamble had left he asked me to get him a second-hand copy of Debrett and a book on heraldry, I knew the deed was done. S'pose we've all got some secret snobbery, and Big's was a coronet. Anyway, after that he'd do whatever Hamble wanted—and Hamble wanted him to walk across the Channel!

I must say I gasped at the notion at first, and so did Biggleswade. It *was* rather staggering. To stroll about in the air over Farnley seemed one thing, and to go walking over the sea quite another—though 'point of fact as long as he had the boots on, he couldn't 'a come to any harm. But somehow the idea of having water beneath you is a lot more intimidating than the idea of having solid earth, and it took a bit of persuading to get Biggleswade to do it. However, I told you Hamble could 'a talked a bird off a tree, and he was dead set on this Channel idea.



My, what a week that was ! Hamble didn't leave it too long, for Big to think things over and get scared ! He plastered the length and breadth of London with posters announcing " The Greatest Sensation of the Century " ; got in touch with the Dover authorities, and before they'd recovered from their bewilderment, got 'em to consent to do anything he wanted. Arranged things on the French side, and before Biggleswade and I really had time to realise what was happening we found ourselves being whirled down to Dover with Hamble and a perfect horde of newspaper men. Men from every paper in the kingdom, I should think, waylaying us on the station, hovering about the country-side, thronging like bees about us when we got out at Dover—and talk about crowds !

The platform was packed, the streets and windows and roofs were lined with people, the cliffs as far as you could see, and the quays were fairly solid, so much so that I heard afterwards several were pushed into the water and nearly drowned—but the mayor had foreseen that and got boatmen waiting below to rescue any casualties. The mayor was a huge fat fellow in red robes with a cocked hat and a gold chain as thick as your wrist. He had a lot of local bigwigs with him, all in uniforms of varying sorts, and when he shook hands with Hamble and was introduced to Biggleswade and me, his voice fairly trembled with excitement. As well it might—it was the greatest day of his life, in the life of most of the thousands of people who lined the Downs overlooking the sea and packed the decks of the scores of boats, big and small, that were dodging about the harbour entrance.



When we walked down the pier they all raised a cheer and a brass band started playing "Now we shan't be long!" Big walked with the Mayor, and Hamble and I walked behind, me carrying a Gladstone bag containing the precious boots and stick and the irons and all the rest. At the end of the quay a sort of pylon had been erected—sort of small platform on a high stand with steps up to it, rather like the kind of thing a tight-wire walker has at each end of his wire, only bigger and much more elaborate.

Up this climbed the Mayor and Hamble and a bunch of other notables, with Biggleswade in the middle of 'em, looking small and rather scared, poor little cuss, and me, as usual, bringing up the rear. There was a dead silence as Big took off his ordinary shoes, pulled on the boots and took his stick in his hand. I fixed the straps that carried his irons round his waist, and wound him up in his rope, and he stood holding tight on to me while the Mayor made a short speech, saying the usual sort of things mayors always say—and on the last word I felt Big draw a deep breath. He gave me a final clutch of the shoulder and a rather quavery smile—and with one stride he stepped off the edge of the stage and walked away towards France! Walked away as safe and as brisk as you please, about ten feet above the tips of the tallest masts on Dover harbour, and for a minute there was a silence. You could 'a heard a pin drop, people were so stupified—and then, my word, what a noise! It fairly cracked the skies, thunderous, amazing; volley after volley of cheering.

The Mayor and the bigwigs and Hamble—and me, of course—tumbled over each other down the steps of the pylon and managed somehow (though to this



day I don't know how, there was such a crush) to get into the private packet-boat that the Mayor had chartered to accompany Biggleswade to France. Somehow we contrived to draw safely away from the pier, though there was a fine shemozzle going on there; people being pushed into the water in the crush, getting trampled on, having their pockets picked and so on, and every man-jack who could beg, borrow or steal a boat dodging about to see what he could see. At least twenty craft—more than forty at the start, but the smaller ones fell back one by one—accompanied us over to France, their decks solid with staring people pointing and shouting at Biggleswade overhead, with flags waving and bands playing and every kind of excitement . . . and all the time little Biggleswade tramping cheerfully along up in the air, waving his handkerchief now and then to the Mayor's boat to show me he was all right.

My goodness, that was a day! I was too excited to be sick, though I was sitting over the paddle of the old boat that was chugging us over, and that generally used to turn me up good and proper—but there was too much to think about to feel sick. When we got near Calais one could see the cliff-sides there fairly black with people. These Frenchies 'ud go anywhere for a thrill. Well, they got it all right. Soon's they saw old Biggleswade, just a speck up there against the clouds, there was a proper pandemonium. They screeched and threw their hats in the air, and hugged and kissed each other—y'know the style, furriners can't help it when they get excited—and when we landed, and little Big let down his rope and hook and caught on a piece of cross-rigging on one of the ships moored to the quay and came down



hand over fist among 'em, they fairly let themselves rip. Never heard such a thing . . . if we hadn't made a pretty solid wedge round Biggleswade he'd 'a been pushed off the quay into the sea and done for there and then! The women hugged and kissed him and wept with excitement, but when the men got to kissing him too—well, Big nearly collapsed between embarrassment and exhaustion!

Well, of course, there was a "civic lunch," as they called it, and champagne and speeches, and a laurel wreath hung round Biggleswade's neck, though he did his best to dodge it, and all the usual newspaper hounds and autograph-hunters—yes, we had 'em all right, though they wasn't so persistent as they are now.

Big was dog-tired and half dazed with the excitement and the strain; so he fell asleep half through the lunch, and Hamble hustled him away into a private room to rest, while the French Mayor was spouting to the crowd. I envied old Big just then, for the Mayor was going on like a mill-stream, and not a dam' word did we English understand! However, at last they all departed, and we went quietly back to England in a specially chartered boat, and went straight to a first-class hotel to supper and bed—at the *Report's* expense.

I thought then it awfully good of Hamble to spend all that money on keeping Biggleswade from being worried by people—never thought then that it cut both ways. He didn't want the cream to be skimmed off his dish by letting other people come too near it! Knew the value of surrounding a star with a bit of mystery, did Hamble; so after that he spirited Biggleswade and me away to his country house—



nice little place in Surrey—for a week or so, while the world clamoured for news about the great stunt, and the *Report* doled it out carefully, just a little bit every so often, and their rivals champed with fury at not being able to get any fresh stuff themselves!

Meanwhile, of course, the avalanche came. Letters from every sort of crank in the world, from religious maniacs who said that Biggleswade would bring about the end of the world by flying in the face of the Providence who never meant us to walk on the air, to the scientific crank who argued that by walking Biggleswade might cause some "displacement of the atmosphere" that might upset the balance of the entire world! Letters from people wanting him to advertise patent foods or medicines or underwear or hair-wash, letters from hysterical women asking him to marry them or begging for his photograph, from music-hall proprietors and publishers and fair-ground owners, and any and every amusement purveyor, offering contracts . . . and friend Hamble dealt with 'em all.

I must say I got to admire that man! Either he or his "second," or his secretary was forever at Big's elbow, fending off enquirers and shunting them in the direction of the *Report's* office. Smart it was—real smart. . . .

Well, on Hamble's advice Big accepted a contract for a music-hall tour at last—the money was too good to miss—but that was the only time I ever knew Hamble to slip up. *And* he slipped—badly!

The tour turned out a simply frightful flop, and Hamble was no end wild. Music-halls in those days were a good deal different from what you call music-halls to-day, of course. The Coliseum and such—



why, nowadays they're nice, clean, polite places, where children go with their dads and mothers . . . but then! Noisy, smoky places they was, where a bad turn was shouted down and likely as not things thrown at 'em to hurry 'em off the stage . . . specially in the provinces. And Big—poor little chap—he didn't go down at all!

The turn was planned this way. He was to be "introduced" by somebody got up as a professor, who gave a short talk on the laws of gravity, and how Big'd surmounted 'em. Then Big was to come on the stage, make a sort of speech, showing the boots and irons and the grappling-hook and explaining 'em, sort of, and then "take off" from the chair he was holding on to and soar out into the audience. But it didn't go down with those tough nuts in the halls at all! After the first minute's surprise they decided he was hung on a wire from the roof, and voted him dull stuff . . . he *might* 'a got away with some sort of success o' course if he'd been comic. But he *wasn't* comic, and just walking round in the air over their heads wasn't half good enough, as one manager disdainfully put it—any cheap wire-walker could do it, or something as near it as made no matter.

And though in desperation Hamble made Big learn a comic song and a bit of a patter, and sent him on with a red nose and pair of pants three times his size, it wouldn't do. Big was all of a tremble, and his voice a mere squeak, and he was just the biggest frost you ever saw—in Manchester it was, and I think it was only sheer pity for the poor little scared devil that kept t'laads from breaking loose and fairly howling him off! The tour was hastily cancelled . . . and Hamble was really concerned. Y'see—it meant an



awful wipe in the eye for the *Report*! He was wild, but not with Big; with himself, for ever letting him start the halls idea. Fair-minded man, Hamble. I will say that for him.

Big and I went down again to Hamble's country house, and rested while he cast round for some other stunt. Something *must* be done to reinstate the *Report* after such a crash—for, of course, the other papers all jeered like mad, and the jokes and cartoons about Hamble and Big, with me running behind carrying the bags as it were, were thick as flies in August. And caricatures—my! Chronic, some of 'em were! Used to make me wince, though they never went for me in particular, always Hamble, playing Big like a puppet on the end of a string.

Week-ends they used to come down, Hamble and his second—fellow name of Preston. Nice, but always smelt of dogs. And they'd sit around for hours, chewing the rag and trying to find some way of staging a come-back. Y'understand, they couldn't let it go at that—not by no means?

The *Report* had to be reinstated somehow, and Hamble had to do it, and the only way of doing it was to *prove* Big wasn't a fraud. Preston suggested making Big walk across the North Sea, but Hamble was peevish over that. It 'ud only be a repetition, he said, of the Channel-crossing idea. Walking to America he wouldn't hear of—he was terrified that if Big got over there money would talk to such an extent that he'd lose control of us both . . . and maybe he was right. Anyhow, he wasn't prepared to hand us over to America with a pound of tea, as it were; not, at least, until we'd put the *Report* on the map again.



It was Preston that suggested it, I think. We were sitting quietly in the garden smoking our pipes, after a damn' good dinner—Hamble kept a first-class cook, and always said he refrained from marrying simply because Mrs. Bunt said she would only serve a single gentleman. Roast veal, we'd had, and beans, and a first-class roly-poly pudding filled with gooseberry jam, and as much wine as we liked . . . and I was sleepy I frankly confess. So sleepy that when I heard Preston's voice I thought at first I must be dreaming.

" . . . to the moon ! "

Then I was waked right up by Hamble slapping his knee and shouting aloud with triumph.

" Got it ! Preston, you're a genius. 'Mystery man will walk to the moon' . . . *what* a headline ! "

I sat up with a jerk, and faced Biggleswade, also sitting up, but with a very disturbed expression on his face.

" Walk to the moon—don't be so idiotic ! " I snapped. I was frightened, y'see. "*Nobody* could walk to the moon, and nobody's going to try ! "

" Don't you think so ? " said Hamble kindly. " Don't you really think so ? "

Damn the man, he talked at times like a mother soothing a foolish child—and in a little while you'd find yourself wondering whether you weren't, after all, rather a foolish child, and hadn't you better leave everything to the kind gentleman to decide for you ? That was the way he got round people, of course . . . and there we sat, while he talked. Big and me, both of us as scared as cats, but neither of us really strong enough to put up a fight against him !

He explained that he didn't mean, of course, that



it would really be an *actual* walk to the moon. Of course, that was too far—even if Big learnt to sleep in the air standing up, like horses do, he'd never get there. Besides, he wouldn't get down again—couldn't hook on to a cloud! But he could *pretend* he'd been there. . . .

Big looked rather shocked, and I must say I didn't quite like the idea of gulling the public to that extent. And what on earth was Big—who had no imagination at all—to say as regards life on the moon and so on, when he came back? Hamble said that was easy. The girl who'd written up B's life would do it, or somebody else like her. All he wanted Big to do was to make such a big splash by making the start that the *Report* would be instantly reinstated in public favour and credit—the “frills” were to be left to him, Hamble and his crowd. And of course Big himself would stage a magnificent come-back, as it were. . . .

That argument, I must say, went a long way towards persuading Big into consenting. He'd been most awfully sore when the music-hallites insisted that he was merely a puppet dangling on the end of a cleverly-concealed wire, and he was itching to prove 'em wrong. Of course, the failure of his tour on the halls had caused his previous Channel performance to be a trifle blown upon, and people were beginning to wonder whether they hadn't, after all, been cleverly deceived by some sort of super wire-walking stunt? For both their sakes, Hamble pointed out, the scoffers must be given the lie! Whether he walked to the moon or not (Hamble said *that* wasn't so important), what *was* important was that the whole world should see him walking alone, unassisted, in an open space



where there was no possibility of a wire or support being present. Walking on the air!

He would start, Hamble said, from the Liver Building, Liverpool. It was in the North that he got the bird on the stage, and, taking it all round, the hard-headed Northerners remained the core and centre of doubt. Therefore it would be in the North that the Great Refutation should take place.

He'd carry an elaborate equipment, of course—the picture should be well painted. Compressed food, specially-designed clothes (though he insisted on wearing his old brown overcoat and bowler hat on top of them; said they were lucky), a compass, special goggles and the Lord knows what, besides his usual equipment of irons and grappling-hooks and so on. He would start walking, Hamble said, on an upward incline and continue so until he got safely behind a bank of solid cloud. There he would await nightfall, and directly it was dark let down his grappling-hook to catch on to the Liver Bird, the weather-cock on the Liver Building. From thence, in the dark, he could haul himself down to the street level, where he would be met by Hamble himself in a curtained car, and spirited away to Hamble's house in the country, where he would lie doggo for three days or so—perhaps a week. Everyone there 'ud be in the know, of course, but too well paid to give it away.

Well, they talked and they talked... though on one hand the project shocked Big, and in some odd way scared him too, yet on the other hand he was so mad to force people to believe once more in the truth of his beloved invention that at last that weighed the balance down, and he consented. *I* didn't agree—but my opinion wasn't asked, so *I* didn't give it.



Well, Hamble went at it at once. Flaring headlines, special photographs, long articles attacking the North for its "crass ignorance and imbecility," and so on and so forth, and the usual stir arose. Half England wrote letters to the *Report* saying they had "no right to support the claims of a man proved to be a fraud," and the other half wrote praising them for supporting a "brilliant and much-wronged man." People prophesied that Big 'ud get caught in a wind and blown down into the sea; that he'd never manage the distance, that he'd be hit by lightning, frozen by the cold of the upper air, suffocated by the clouds, and so on and so forth . . . and I admit I was worried to death. Quite why, I didn't know, for it sounded pretty simple. I tried to put Big off—but he'd got bitten now with the ambition to do it, and nothing would stop him. So on the great day we all went up to Liverpool in a special train—and I felt as though I was travelling with a lump of lead inside my waistcoat, though I tried to laugh it off. Premonition, you'd call it—and you'd be right.

It was four o'clock on a gusty, silvery sort of autumn day when he started. From the Liver Building he took off, as Hamble 'ud said. The sea was crowded with boats and every roof was black with people, not cheering, but hushed with amazement into complete silence as that tiny figure went out into the vast sky. I was standing far below, on the deck of a boat, and the lump in my waistcoat had gone up and settled in my throat . . . goodness knows why, I'd seen him walk on the air often enough by this time. Anyway, he went, higher and higher to get away from the wind that was beating round the



lower levels. He was holding his hat on, and forging ahead in fine style . . . when *It* happened!

I suppose it was bound to have come some time or other—but it gives me a shiver down the back now to remember it! There he was, tiny but quite distinct, tramping away with his old stick, his coat-tails flapping in the breeze and his foot-irons swinging, and there below was a silent throng, a sea of white faces filling every street and every roof, all turned upwards, staring, staring, and every boat out in the water plastered with those same white faces. I had a strong pair of glasses, and Hamble too, so we saw what happened better than most.

Far off I saw them coming first! A wedge of wild geese flying towards the south, like a handful of black arrows against the mauve and grey and purple patterning of the clouds. I saw them sweeping southwards on their great wings, fast, fast, and I saw that they must sweep across Big's path, and with all my force I yelled, panic-stricken. Dam' silly thing to do, of course. He couldn't possibly hear me, but I couldn't help it . . . was rather fond of poor little Big, y'know. Hamble saw 'em the same time, and I saw him frown and screw his glasses closer to his eyes.

"Will he miss 'em?" he muttered, and I yelled again . . . and now everybody could see what was likely to happen, and they were all pointing and discussing with faces white and agitated . . . *what would happen if Big tripped and fell?* Nobody had ever thought of that . . . and there was Big, trudging along with his one hand holding his hat on, the other his stick, right into the path of a bunch of great creatures one touch of whose wings might send him flying!



Even as we started he altered his course a bit, and a great sigh of relief went up. He *might* just miss 'em now—they were driving down the sky at express speed, never altering their course a mite, their heads set towards the south, and Big, with his hand clamped to his silly hat, quite evidently never saw them! With the wind in his ears and that hand blocking his view to his right, he never saw them . . . and in two minutes they were on him!

The outward sweep of a huge wing caught him on one ankle . . . for a moment he made a frantic effort to recover his balance, but another great wing caught him before he could do so, and before you could blink he was over and hurtling head-downwards like a plummet into the sea! Just a tiny splash ever so far off, among those grey, heaving billows . . . with one accord every boat in sight set out racing towards him, though it seemed impossible that he could be reached in time to be saved. Motor-boats then weren't what they are now—and although the captain of our boat turned on every ounce of speed, when we got there we never expected to see hair nor hide of him.

But there he was! Bobbing about on the surface of the water, quite unconscious but keeping himself afloat by feeble motions of his arms. The captain lowered a boat, and Hamble and I tumbled into it, and within two minutes we were dragging him out . . . he was completely unconscious when we laid him tenderly down on the deck and stripped off his sodden clothes. The jack-boots were still on his feet—and just then the oddest thing happened. Hamble and I were so absorbed in wondering whether poor Big was dead or not that for the moment



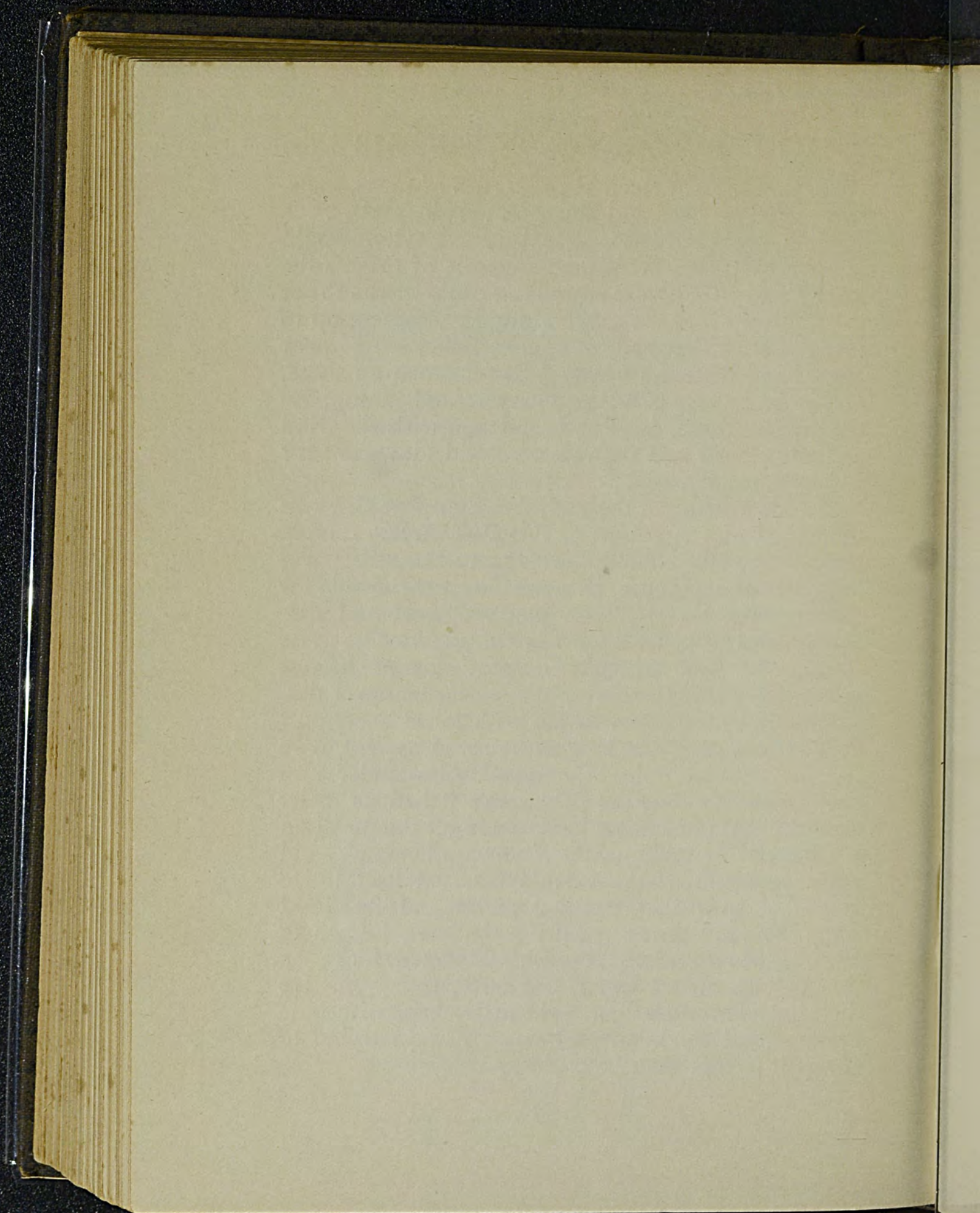
we entirely forgot the odd properties of those boots. We pulled 'em off and slung 'em aside, and . . .

Well, we ought to have guessed what would happen. Up they went, like a couple of rockets the sailors said—they were scared out of their wits to see it! Right up into the grey, windy sky, soaring up to join the stick that had, of course, fallen out of poor Big's hand when he fell, and so remained up there, and nobody ever saw them any more! I suppose they're still there, dancing a fandango with the wind and the clouds and the rain . . . odd idea, isn't it? Rather uncanny. . . .

He got over it, in the end, did Big. But that was the end of him as a stunt of *The Daily Report* at least. He never walked on the air again—the secret was lost. Because, you see, he never *had* any formula for making that metal—'twas just an accidental discovery, and he never knew himself just how he came to make it. And although he spent most of the rest of his life trying to recover the secret, he never did.

How did he happen to fall with those boots on? Well, that's easy. As long as he stood *upright*, d'ye see, he was all right—the metal soles under him cut the earth's drawing power so's it had no effect on him. But once upset him—once get the metal on *top* instead of underneath, if you understand—and the magnetism of the earth reasserted itself! He stumbled over that damned goose and fell head foremost—and once turned upside-down he had to come down to earth at once. Damned lucky he was that he struck water, not earth, to fall on. He died only ten years ago. Odd little chap, with blue eyes behind thick-lense glasses. Always trying to see a bit farther than he could. . . .

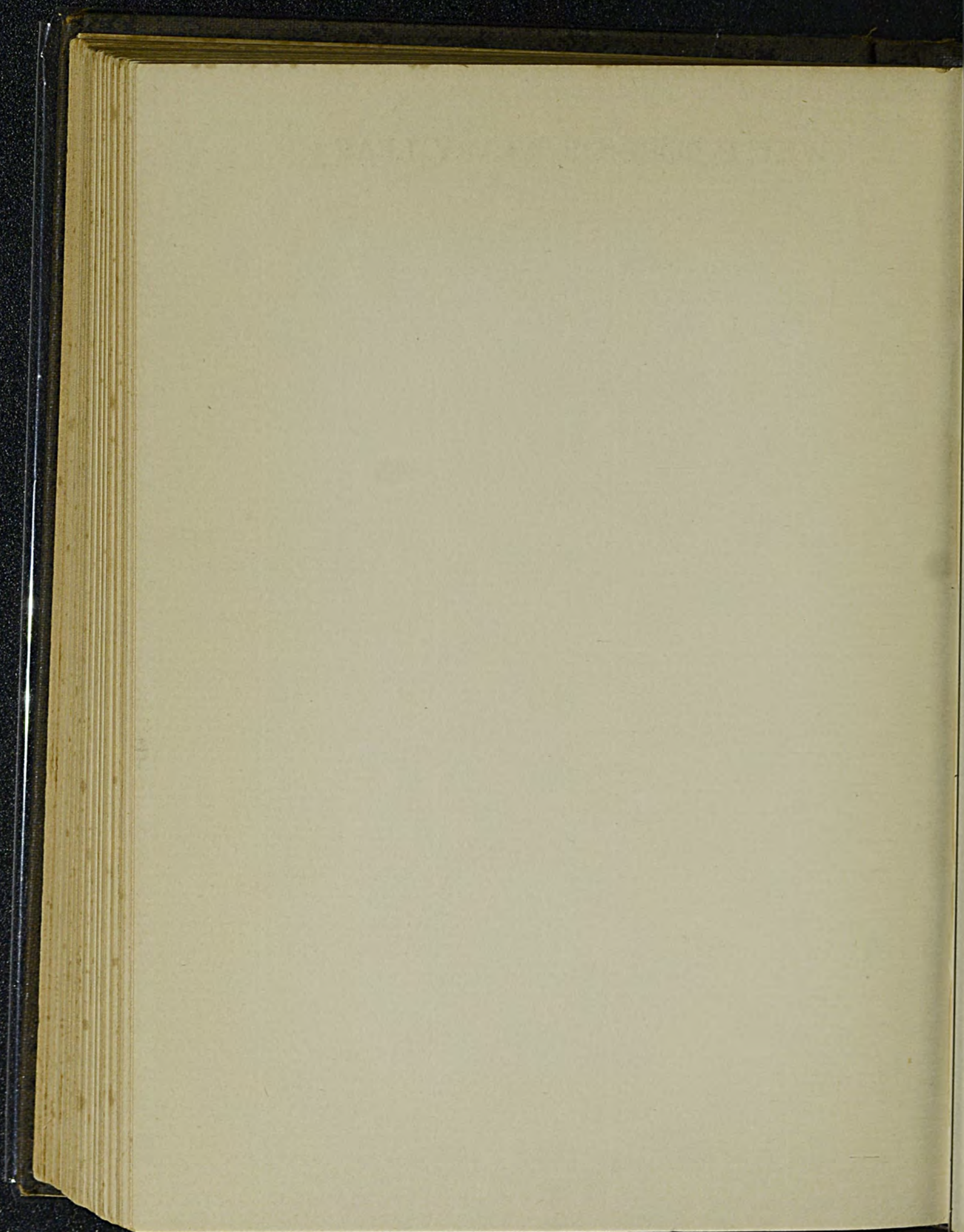






WHITE ROSE OF WEARY LEAF





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## WHITE ROSE OF WEARY LEAF

IT was too hot, really, for a fancy-dress party, decided Clementine Herriott dismally as she turned her back upon the brilliantly lighted little ball-room at the Pavillon Henri Quatre, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and wandered thankfully out into the moonlit night.

Fortunately her gown—stiff white silk, wide-skirted, with a tight bodice and falls of lace over her slim elbows, with her dark hair arranged in long curls wherein one white rose nestled—was one easy to wear on a hot night. How sincerely she pitied May Latham as a Russian soldier, in fur cap, high-collared tunic and long scarlet boots! Lulu Heyland too, swathed in black velveteen as Mary Queen of Scots, little Chloe Martin as an Eskimo, Zoe as a harem lady muffled in a yashmak, and dozens of others . . . but everybody was having a glorious time in spite of the heat. Perhaps it was not the heat after all—perhaps she was in no mood for the moment, for crowds and gaiety. Certainly something to-night bade her escape from the noise and laughter and glitter, to sit alone on the old wall and stare out over the deep valley below where the Seine wandered, twisting and turning in the moonlight like a silver snake under the round moon sailing serenely amongst her fleet of stars.

The truth was that Clementine Herriott, of Little Rock, Arkansas, was hopelessly out of tune with Mrs. Carter's party—though Mrs. Henry Carter, self-constituted patron of the young American art-student *clique* in Paris, gave parties that were notable in their excellence.

Wealthy, idle, and generous to a degree, the



millionairess loved to gather round her as many of her young compatriots as she could find, and give them—to use her own words—“one whale of a good time.” For young palates wearied of French food, of *omelettes* and *ragôuts*, *soupe à l’oignon* and black coffee, she provided waffles and chicken, Maryland corn on the cob and coffee thick with whipped cream. For tastes wearied of sitting discussing Art, Life or politics round slop-stained tables at the Dôme or the Coupole—more weary still of wearing paint-smeared overalls or defiantly Bohemian sweaters and berets—she provided entertainments that demanded the girls’ prettiest frocks, the boys’ rarely-used tuxedos; and once a year at least came the big fancy-dress party—most popular of all, although it was named (irreverently enough!) even by those who fished most shamelessly for an invitation, “Carter’s Circus.”

Of all the kind-hearted American woman’s yearly parties, “Carter’s Circus” invariably went with the snappiest swing of all—and it was all the more remarkable that at this especial party Clementine Herriott, pretty, popular and one of the best dancers in the young artistic set, should choose to be sitting out this lovely June night, alone and moodily staring out over the valley whilst the finest dance band in Paris gave out its best in the crowded ball-room only a short distance away.

A strolling couple hailed her, but she merely turned a silent shoulder and ignored them, and they wandered on into the sweet-scented gloom beneath the trees. She was alone again . . . staring ahead of her, she drew a deep breath and clenched one small hand where it lay amongst the pale, shining folds of her skirt.



So it had come . . . her *lettre de cachet* ! In other words, the order to go home. Home . . . to leave all she had learned to love since she came to Paris. To leave—not a man, for she worked too hard, said her aggrieved male colleagues, to be able to spare time to love a man—but to leave her work. To leave her ambitions, her longing, almost painful in its intensity, to make a name and a future for herself in the city she had learnt to love so dearly. . . .

It was more than three years now since she had arrived, fresh from the small Middle-West town that had given her birth, to take the humblest place in stern old Gerbault's studio. Now she was first and most beloved of all his pupils, working as hard—harder, so he sardonically remarked to his male pupils—than any man amongst them.

It did not matter how late she might be up the night before, she would be at her easel promptly at nine next morning, her brushes cleaned and ready, colours in order, palette-knife, mahlstick, every etcetera at her hand, on the tiptoe of eagerness to start work. Often and often Gerbault had spent an hour working alone with her before the others would trail into the studio one by one, blinking, yawning, trying to pull themselves together, trying shamefacedly to find some new excuse for their lateness. And as long as the light held she would work on, until sometimes old Gerbault had to take her brushes bodily from her, plant her hat on her head and bundle her out neck and crop, saying gruffly : “ All work and no play make Jill a bad painter ! ”

She would work on, forgetting meals and exercise and health, in an ecstasy of absorption, until the



brush fell from her hand from sheer physical weariness . . . and her work was good. Bold, decisive, finely conceived, with a luscious appreciation of colour and light amazing in a girl of barely twenty-three.

Outdoor scenes were the things in which she specially delighted, and above all, scenes of Paris life. These she caught with a success quite astonishing. A race-meeting at Longchamps, the sun hot on the green course and the crowded paddocks, the grand-stand a jigsaw pattern of colour; a glimpse of the Boulevards in the rain, women running across the shining road, high heels splashing and tiny hats held down, and the wet sides of cars reflected in the wet roadway. Early morning in the Halles, the serried rows of crowded stalls, shawled and saboted women and blue-bloused men; a first night at the "Michaudière," with its rows of gazers staring at the gaily-dressed crowds entering the theatre, a glittering river of light and colour streaming between two sullen drab banks. . . .

This last had been bought by the "Michaudière" as a poster, to Clementine's delight, but her old master's annoyance. She was too good, grunted Gerbault, to become a mere poster artist, and he would not be comforted even when Clementine pointed out that unless she could make some money—even as a poster artist!—she could not remain much longer in Paris at all. And now—it seemed that whatever she did she could not remain in Paris for more than a few weeks! The knell had rung. . . .

In the distance a masculine voice called "Clem—Clem! Where are you?"

She frowned. That would be Mac, to whom she



had promised the next dance—she could see his tall figure, in the close-fitting scarlet of Mephistopheles, standing just outside the shining oblong that was the entrance to the hotel. Now he was speaking to a couple just advancing across the space of green grass towards him, returning from their stroll in the gardens. Mary Jordan and her partner Nicky Clay, the two who had called out to her . . . she rose, on a sudden impulse. They would tell him where she was—and she was so utterly, so hopelessly out of tune for love-making! And Mac, who had been worshipping at her shrine these four months past, would undoubtedly seize the moment to propose again!

Seized with a sudden panic, she picked up her delicate rustling skirts and, rising, fled like a frightened hare into the depths of the dark trees behind her, stumbling now and then in her high-heeled satin shoes in the soft uneven ground, until the calling voice died away in the distance. She paused, breathless, and stared about her.

She stood in a tiny clearing, and just before her a giant tree lay prone, half-buried in the tall grass and ferns about it. Behind it another giant rose, stretching its branches upwards to the grave star-speckled sky. Sinking down upon the log with a sigh of relief, the girl leant her dark head back against the crumpled bark of the tree behind. Thank heaven, she was safe for the moment at least—to think. But what was the use of thinking? What was one to do? Above and beyond her reluctance to leave the career that was, she felt, only just beginning, lay a deeper reluctance—to leave Paris itself. The Paris that had grown into her heart, it seemed, until



the idea of leaving it felt like uprooting her entire being.

From the first moment she had set foot in the place she had felt not only happy, but at home. Day after day she had wandered about the streets, savouring the age-old atmosphere of this courtyard and that house-front; the sharp-flavoured modernity of the newly built flats in the Boulevard Haussmann, the magnificent shops in the Grands Boulevards. Relishing with an ever-new delight the Marché des Puces, whence she had furnished her tiny two-roomed flat, the tattered bookstalls that still, valiantly defying time, squat along the banks of the Seine; the little cafés where one can get a drink for a few *sous*, the Tuileries with its dancing fountains, the Place de la Concorde where France died and rose again from the dead. . . .

For three years Paris had been her home, and now she knew that she wanted no other—and it seemed that she would have to leave it. Leave—and go home to Aunt Luella! To that dreary little house in that dreary Middle-West town, to spend the rest of her life teaching painting and drawing to thick-fingered, small-town children. Say good-bye to all her ambitions, to the life and companions she loved; say good-bye, above all, to Paris.

Slow tears forced their way between her eyelids as she tilted her head back against the rough trunk of the tree, and she drew a long breath that was half a sob. Oh, it was hard! When not only Gerbault, but others who knew, predicted a fine future for her if she could only continue her studies!

It had been hard work enough in the beginning to



persuade Aunt Luella to release the purse-strings that she held so tightly, enough to pay for these three years' training, plus a tiny—oh, so tiny!—allowance for living expenses. It had only been thanks to old Fenton, her father's friend, that she had succeeded at last in getting her way—and he had alternately bullied, argued, persuaded and finally, virtually forced the grim New England woman into consent. But during the last three years old Fenton had died, and there was no ally now left at home on whom to call for help.

She glanced towards the distant building—between the tree-trunks it showed—a blur of lights in the distance, and the faint lilt of music came like a breath on the summer wind. They were all there, having such a marvellous time—and this time last year she, too, had been having an equally marvellous time; then she had felt gay, lighthearted, ready for laughter and dancing, but to-night it was more than she could do to pretend. To-morrow she must reply to Aunt Luella. Aunt Luella had written a final letter; more than a letter, in fact. An order . . . to pack up and come home, since her allowance was to be discontinued. She knew enough about art after three years, said Aunt Luella, to become a drawing-teacher, and there was a good post waiting for her in the local school. Aunt Luella had accepted for her. And that was that!

Fresh tears squeezed themselves between her eyelids—she gave a forlorn little sob and felt for her handkerchief. Her soft silken bag was momentarily lost amidst the wide folds of her gown and she blinked, seeing the world about her in a mist of tears—so it came to pass that she did not see the



advent of the stranger, and started violently when his voice came.

"White rose of weary leaf . . . how sweet you look!"

Sheer astonishment drove the tears from her eyes as, sitting bolt upright, she stared up at the speaker. He stood silhouetted, a tall shadow against the shadowy tree-trunks, looking down at her—a magnificent figure dressed in kilt and sporran; his black velvet coat had ruffled lace at throat and wrists, and the faint light picked out silver sword-hilt and silver buttons, square shining buckles on his shoes, a diamond hiding amongst the folds of lace at his throat. . . .

"Who on earth . . ." she blurted, then sheer admiration won the battle against curiosity. "I say, what a *magnificent* costume! Where did you get it?"

The man laughed as he looked down at her. His face was in shadow, but she got an impression of a countenance young in years but old in experience; cynical, unhappy, yet with an odd inextinguishable gaiety and charm underlying all like the basic colour of a painting. Strange, she reflected, that she had not seen him earlier amongst the crowd now dancing in the Pavillon! That costume would have stood out anywhere, apart from the fact that here was neither a face nor figure easily to be overlooked—but perhaps he had come late, since her solitary mood had sent her early away from her fellows. She felt suddenly shy at her impulsive question.

"I'm sorry . . . that was a shockingly rude thing to say. But it *is* lovely."

The stranger laughed gently. "I am compli-



mented. May I return the compliment? Mademoiselle looks like the white rose to which I likened her when I first spoke."

She looked at him doubtfully. This was not the manner, the phraseology of the slangy, casual young crowd of art-students with whom she spent her days. Yet the measured, graceful phrasing pleased her; appealed to something lying unknown, unsuspected in some deep mysterious core of her being.

"You—I didn't see you dancing?" she hesitated. The man shook his head, and she saw the outline of a fine head with springing wavy hair held at the nape of the neck with a knot of black ribbons. What a wig! Yet perhaps it was the way he wore it. Recollections of the doll-headed effect of Douglas Norton's white wig as Sir Peter Teazle, of Hal Tighe's as Charles II, flitted across her mind as she stared and blushed, feeling a sudden insane and unaccountable desire to run her hand over the smooth waves outlined against the moon. This was soppy—idiotic! Result of a depressed mood, loneliness, the moon . . . nothing else, of course. He did not answer her question at first, but remained silent, staring down at her, and she repeated it curiously. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not dance these dances, mademoiselle. You should see the dances of my own country. My ain countree. . . ."

The sudden wistful note in his voice as he spoke the last two words enlightened her.

"Oh!" She sat up, interested. "Then you're a Scotchman—and that's the Scottish costume." She surveyed him again, interested. "Is it a family one—real, I mean, not theatrical-costumier stuff?"



The stranger smiled faintly and she caught the gleam of white teeth in his shadowed face.

"Ah, it is real enough. We all wear it in Bonnie Scotland. It is a pretty thing, the Scottish costume—and successful, they say, with the ladies."

There was a faint edge of mockery in his voice that both irritated and intrigued her. With chin tilted she faced him, sitting back against the dark bole of the tree, her pearl-coloured gown shining lambent in the dusk, her small pale face, set in its dark curls, a pearl itself above it. Something in the intent gaze on her was making a curious thrill, half-fear, half-wonder, throb faintly through her body, yet virgin to the touch of man, despite her years spent in cynic, casual Paris. . . .

"What's your name?" she said abruptly.

The man smiled again.

"Does it matter? Call me what you will, Mlle White Rose! I knew a girl once—she looked like you—who called me 'sweetheart.' I should like to hear you call me that, in your voice that sounds so like hers!"

She sat clutching at her whirling sanity. How was it that the deep caressing voice with its hint of inner laughter seemed to touch something in her brain, in her heart—something that vibrated as the string of a harp vibrates when waked by a master-hand! Fingers clumsy, fumbling, eager, had touched those strings before—but never one had waked them to this dim echoing music. . . .

Her voice quivered as she answered, very low:

"Why are you talking to me like this? I've never met you before."

He looked down at her intently, one lace-frilled



hand on his sword-hilt, the other on his hip. The diamond at his throat gleamed as he moved slightly and the wind lifted the loosely tied ribbons behind his head.

"I should say too that I have never seen you before. And yet—in that white silk gown, with your dark hair in curls and the white rose above one ear, I swear that you could be again my bonnie lass of Camlachie . . . ah, well, that's an old story now, though it came to life as I looked at you!" He sat down upon the log beside her, barely a foot away, his back turned to the moon, one long, fine hand, half-veiled by the falling ruffle of lace, spread on the rough wood beside her.

"So by virtue of old acquaintance—or old resemblance, have it which you will—my pretty Echo of Other Days, my White Rose, will you tell me why you were crying when I came across you here?"

It seemed so natural, so obvious to tell him. . . .

She found herself tearfully pouring out the whole history of her starved life, of her early craze for painting, for beauty and art—the craze that her aunt, viewing it with the horror of her type, had tried so hard to eradicate. She told him of her fight for freedom to come to Paris for training—of her love for the city, its ways, its people, its life—of her eager ambition to use and develop her gift of painting, that gift that now seemed doomed to peter out in the desert of a life of teaching in a dreary little American town, as a lusty young river peters out in a waterless veldt.

If only she had some money! If only her father—father sweet, kindly, but always under the dominant thumb of Aunt Luella—had left her a tiny income of



her own instead of leaving everything under his sister's control! In two years' time, Gerbault had said, she could count on getting her foot into the serious world of art sufficiently to earn her bread at least, if not much butter on it to start with. And she would be able to stay in Paris. In the Paris that she loved as she had never dreamt she could love any place in the world. . . .

The tall man in the Scottish costume listened quietly, his eyes fastened on her face as she talked, twisting her hands in the thick folds of her silken gown, blinking away the tears that threatened to well up time and again . . . when he spoke at last, she felt vaguely disappointed, since his remark seemed quite irrelevant.

"So you love Paris . . . and so did she! Odd that the more I look at you, the more I listen to your voice, the more I seem to see in you the very soul of the one woman I really loved . . . the only one I remember now, God forgive me, of all the others in my life!" He sighed heavily, and the diamond glittered at his throat. "Ay me—my Clementine!"

She shot upright, startled and amazed.

"Clementine . . . ? But *my* name is Clementine!"

There was a long pause while his eyes, intent, bored into her face uplifted in the moonlight. Then he spoke under his breath quickly.

"Oh, no! It cannot be by chance that we have met. It *cannot* be by chance . . . tell me, Mademoiselle, *why* did they call you Clementine?"

She answered half mechanically, her gaze still upon him.

"Why? I had some sort of an ancestress called Clementine, that's why. She lived in Paris, and she



had a daughter that I'm descended from. It's long, long ago. . . ."

There was a pause. The tall figure sat utterly still, its veiled eyes staring fixedly into hers. Meeting that intent gaze, that strange thrill stole once more through her being. What *was* it, this curious sense of awe, almost of fear, of mingled wonder and bewilderment, that brought with it a queer tremulous joy that was strange yet not strange—like the echo of a song once known and sung full-throated, now sounding haltingly, faint and muted by the long corridors of time down which it was coming to her straining ears, yet recognisable still?

He spoke at last in a strangely hushed whisper.

"An ancestress—called Clementine? Oh, White Rose of my dreams, is it possible? You know not what you say, yet tell me more—tell me more!"

"I don't know—very much."

She could not take her eyes from the hidden ones that were fastened on hers, and her heart beat thickly, hotly in her bosom under the close-strained, white silk bodice.

"I—she was a Scottish girl. Clementine her name was—I don't know the surname. She left her home and her people in Scotland to follow her lover to Paris, and there they had a child, a girl . . . and she, Clementine, died. And the child grew up and she had a child, though I don't know if she was ever married . . . But the child married a Frenchman called Heriot, who emigrated to America and settled there. My family are descended from him. So I, you see—I'm descended from that girl. From that other Clementine."

There came a long sigh, like the breathing of



tremulous wind through the leaves overhead, and the fine hand beside hers on the tree-trunk moved slightly. The dark head silhouetted against the moonlight nodded gravely once, twice and again.

"I might have known it—from the first moment I saw you!"

He rose to his feet, sombre, magnificent, a tall shadow shot with little restless gleams where diamonds, shoe-buckles, shining buttons, glimmered together against the darkness. In his voice, grown strangely fading and remote, there rang, like the desolate echo of that music in her heart, an aching regret that was more painful than tears.

"Have we *not* met before! I might have known it—I *did* know it—but how many lives ago indeed! Oh, the good days when the heart was young, and my White Rose rode beside me here beneath the beeches, and laughed at the rain and the wind! Oh, Paris, where we loved and parted, where we meet again so strangely! Never another like you, my Clementine—even at the end when I left you, white rose of weary leaf!"

Sobbing, bewildered, she stretched her hands out blindly towards him.

"Oh, don't go—don't go! You whom I never saw before—you whom I know and love as I shall never love any other man!"

Faint and receding came the voice—far away, yet close to her heart that had never, she knew now, forgotten its cadences down all the centuries since they had met.

"Oh, love, be brave! Across the Great Divide we have met again—touched hands, at least, and so gained courage to go on our appointed ends. But



this at least I can do for you, you who were my love, who are still my love and yet so strangely my child also—O, white rose that was, white rose that is once more, for ever mine ! At least I can do one thing for you ! I can keep you here—here in the Paris where we loved—I can give you your heart's desire. And so, good-bye ! ”

And then there was only the moon shining steadily down through the tangled leafage of the trees ; no sound but a sleepy bird cheeping peevishly to his mate, and a girl in white lying silently beside the great log from which she had fallen. . . .

“ Yes, ma'am, she must have fainted. We found her lying right in the grass alongside a fallen tree—lying just like she was dead. We found her, Mary and me.”

The gay group, clustering round the prone figure of the girl looked like a kaleidoscope of vivid colours ; Dutch girls and Spanish pirates, Pierrots white and green and red, frilly and satiny, sequinned Mae Wests, cowboys in chaps and Stetson hats, veiled sultanas, all alike gorgeous and absurd . . . but for the moment gaiety was forgotten.

Nicky Clay, his wholesome young face quite pale with concern in the shadow of his preposterous blue-plumed Cavalier hat, looked up at Mrs. Carter, fussing anxiously with water and smelling-salts over the prostrate body of little Clementine Herriott, lying white and still upon one of the opulent brocaded sofas of the Pavillon Henri Quatre.

“ She'll be all right in a minute,” said Mrs. Carter briskly, dabbing the girl's forehead with water and



fanning vigorously with her expensively laced handkerchief at the same time. "It's the heat, I guess."

"And she was fretting herself to fiddlestrings about having to leave Gerbault's and go back to that one-horse town where her aunt lives," put in Mary Jordan.

"She ought to've let *me* look after her," muttered Mac.

"Poor child!" said Mrs. Carter. "Feel her pulse, Norah—why, what's that in her hand? She seems to have got it clenched round something."

"We found her with her hand stuck fast into a knot-hole in the old tree she'd been sitting on," said Mary. "She was lying beside it, and there was a hole in the wood, and she had her hand stuck inside it as though she was taking something out . . . it looks like a lump of decayed wood, doesn't it?"

"We tried to prise her fingers open, but she hung on to it like grim death," said Mac.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Carter. "She's coming round. Give me the salts again, Mary, and stand away a bit, all of you—let her have some air."

Clementine's eyes opened slowly upon a clustered group of anxious faces. She smiled vaguely, uncertainly, and raised a hand to her head—then feeling a weight within it, she blinked and tried to sit up, startled. Supported by Mac's eager arm, she leant up, staring at the square moss-stained object so tightly clutched within her hand.

Where had she seen that before . . . oh, but long, long ages ago . . . that dumpy, solidly made little box, made of wood, with blackened metal lock and hinges now clamped together with age and rust? She knew it well, that box! Some time, long ago,



she and another had known it well ; had known also that natural post-box, the knothole in the old tree, then standing in all its glory amongst its fellows. . . .

She raised a hand blindly to her forehead, feeling the world and time spin round her as during that unforgettable moment in the wood, and Mrs. Carter hastily proffered the smelling-salts again.

"Lay her down, Mac—she's not fit yet to sit up !"  
But the girl shook her head violently, and clasped the box to her breast, staining its white with green-mossed marks as she did so.

"No, no, I'm all-right—really . . ."

"Open the box—quick, quick. Oh, this is simply thrilling !"

It was Mattie Dunn, eagerly squeezing forward to see, and a general clamour of excitement arose from the clustered group. For a moment Clementine hesitated.

For some vague reason that she could not analyse she longed to open the box alone, not amidst this crowd of eager gapers, kind and cheery as they were . . . but after a moment's hesitation she bent her head to the inevitable, and the battered box, its locked fastening easily breaking under the pressure of her strong, artist-trained hands, lay open on her knee. Inside lay a small flat package wrapped in a piece of worn and ancient silk patterned with silver bees upon a purple ground. The silk was faded, and patched with streaks of damp where the wet had seeped through the chinks of the box.

With fingers that trembled oddly and unaccountably, Clementine unwrapped the stiffened folds and revealed a small leather case lying in the top of two or three letters. Letters written in a pointed scrawling



hand, in faded ink on ancient yellowed paper ; her hands shook still further as she opened the first and read :

" My own dere Luv—my sweetest Clementine. . . . "

" My, look out—the excitement's too much for her ! " cried Mrs. Carter as the girl leant suddenly back against Mac's supporting arm, her face as white as paper.

" I'm all right ! " muttered Clementine. " The shock . . . "

" It's certainly an odd coincidence to find your own name in this old stuff," said Mrs. Carter, peering excitedly at the sheet. " But this looks interesting to me, d'you know ? *Mighty* interesting . . . if we only knew who'd written the letters they might be worth a packet of money. Go on, open 'em out ! "

" I know who wrote them ! " Clementine's voice was oddly hushed, and the eyes through which she was staring at the hushed group about her were filmed, half tranced. " Oh, I know very well ! I remember . . . he was mine, all mine, and I was his. Oh, Charles, Charles . . . "

" Now she's *really* fainted—I expected as much ! " muttered Mrs. Carter as, dropping the letters, she snatched up her salts again. " All over the place she is—never saw her in such a funny state. Mind those things in her lap, somebody—we haven't seen inside the leather case yet. "

But Mary Jordan's curious fingers were already busy with the catch, and even as the old lady spoke the case sprang open. The bright blue of the leather case itself had long ago faded to a dirty brownish shade, but round the two miniatures that faced



each other inside, the blue satin lining still shone gaily, like the gold rims of the tiny paintings, oval shaped, tenderly coloured, and bright as the days on which they were painted. A man and a woman. The woman dark-haired and young, wearing a white rose stuck in her hair and a white silk gown, stiff-bodiced and wide-skirted, the man in Scottish costume, black velvet coat, lace-ruffled, and tartan kilt, one long hand on his sword-hilt, a black riband tying back his thick brown hair. Amidst a breathless silence Mrs. Carter took out the miniatures, and laying them face downwards on the girl's lap read out the inscriptions engraved upon the golden backs.

"Clementine Walkinshaw, Paris, 1760," ran the legend behind one; on the other "Charles Edward Stuart, 1760," with a royal cypher below. Round the rim of the man's miniature ran a finely-engraved group of words. "For my luve, to my luve, with my luve," and the initials C.E.S.; and the same ran round the rim of the woman's portrait, but it was signed "C. W." In an awed silence Mrs. Carter picked up the uppermost letter again and spreading out the sheet fully, examined it under the white light of the electric lustre overhead. Her eyes widened, and she spoke in a voice almost awe-stricken.

"Good sakes alive—d'you know what the child's found, folks? Three genuine love-letters of Bonnie Prince Charlie to a woman! *And* his miniature and that of the woman they're written to—named Clementine Walkinshaw it seems. Of *all* the odd coincidences—but mercy, *what* a wonderful find! What a piece of luck!"



Beaming, the kind woman patted the limp shoulder of the girl before her as the wide, dark eyes opened once more. "Round again? That's fine. Well, well, *will* you take a look here? There's no need for you to worry about money now, Clem."

Mac's voice was awed. "These letters'll fetch pots of money, and as for the miniatures . . ."

"I shan't sell—this." The girl's eyes rested with an oddly intent expression on the pictured face of the man. "Maybe the other . . . I don't know. But never this."

Mrs. Carter rose from her knees, brushing down the crimson velvet gown she wore as Katharine Parr with an expression of intense satisfaction.

"Well, that's as you like," she said. "But you'll get enough for the letters alone to be able to stay on here, anyway, and go on with your painting. Aren't you pleased?"

Voiceless, the girl nodded, her eyes far away, and the kindly woman glanced curiously at her. Odd that such a thrilling—such an amazingly exciting thing should have happened, and she seemed so unmoved about it! She could not know, of course, that through every fibre of the girl's being still thrilled the echo of a voice, of a laugh, once heard, but never again to be forgotten.

"I can at least give you your heart's desire . . ."

O gallant ghost, O blindly-groping memory, O yearning heart, reaching backwards into the past that yet seemed so strangely one with the present! Dumbly she stared downwards at the two miniatures lying facing each other in the faded leather case within her lap; clutched the crackling sheets of her old love-letters, and had no words, as the excited group mar-

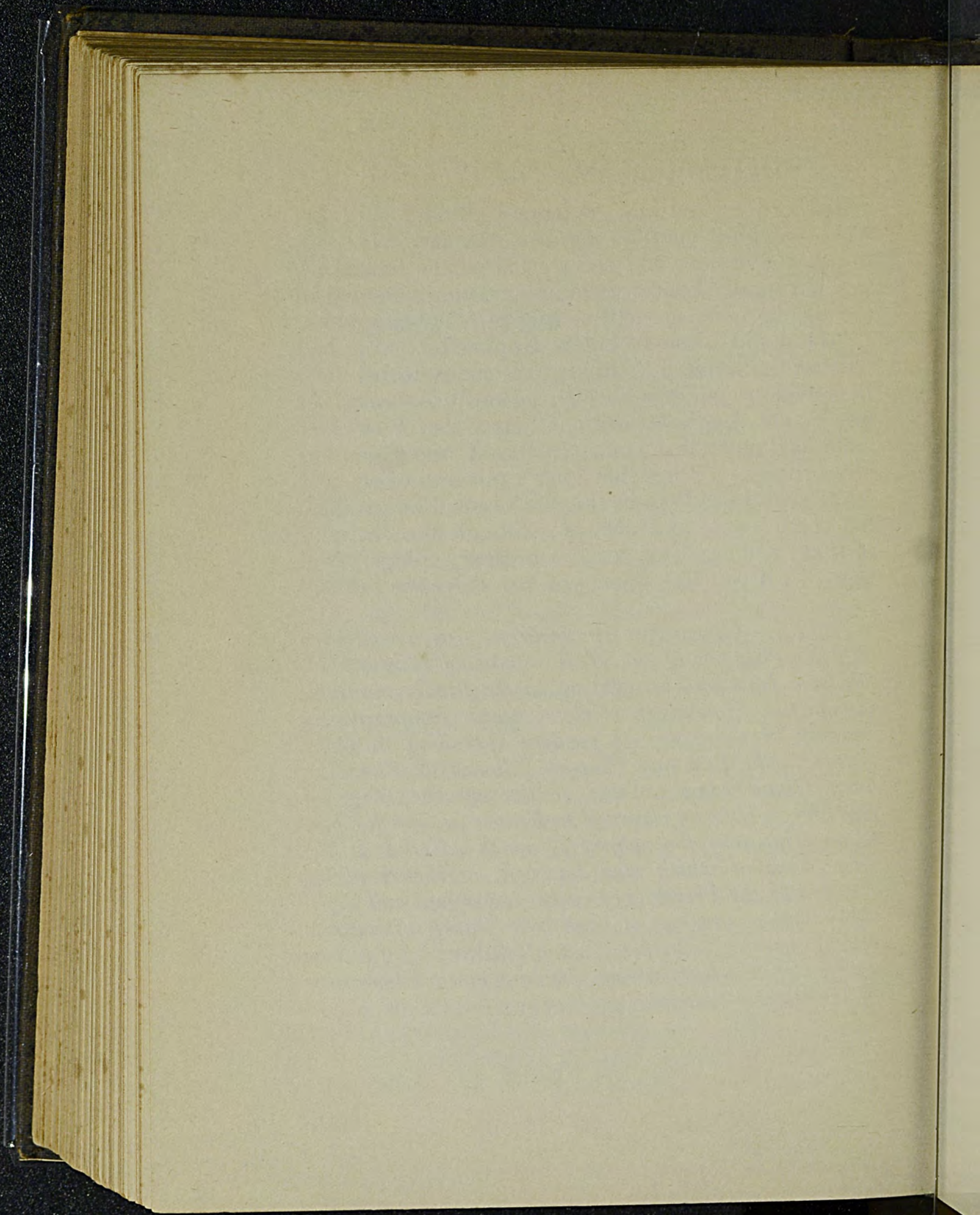


velled and argued and exclaimed about her. Only Mac, watching wistfully her downcast face, ventured to ask a question, and she started as she looked up into his kindly honest young countenance framed in the incongruous scarlet hooding of Mephistopheles.

"How did I know—before I opened it—who had written the letters?" Rising unsteadily to her feet, the precious package clasped jealously between her hands, she laughed faintly. "How can I tell? I just *did* know, that's all. Just as I know—now—other things. Things that I can't put into words and never shall be able to in this life. I shall be thankful for them—now and always; though the memory of them will spoil me for . . . ordinary things. And now . . . if you like, Mac, you can drive me home."

*NOTE.*—Clementine Walkinshaw was a well-born Scottish girl, one of the Walkinshaws of Barrowfield. She was born and brought up in the family mansion, Camlachie House, that stood until comparatively recently in Glasgow, its gardens extending to Duke Street. She first met Charles Edward at Bannockburn House when he was conducting the Siege of Stirling. After he returned to France he sent for her. Clementine was the subject of much scandal at the time, none of which was deserved, as she remained devoted to the Prince even in his latter and evil days. They had a daughter, Clementine Stuart, afterwards known as the "Bonnie Lass of Albany," of whom Burns wrote—from whom the imaginary Clementine of the story is descended.







THE PROFESSOR'S RING



THE END OF THE WORLD

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## THE PROFESSOR'S RING

"**S**ORRY to lose 'im—I am! A real nice gentleman—and a steady let."

Mrs. Craik shook a regretful head as she lifted a sizzling piece of bacon—small but appetising—on to her spouse's plate. Craik, of "Craik's Private Hotel," Bury Street, St. James's, responded with another head-shake, more profoundly gloomy even than his wife's.

"Just as biz'ness is so bad, too!" he said lugubriously. "Emmer, it makes one fair sick, it does, workin' and slavin' like we do and gettin' it in the neck worse ev'ry day! 'Eaven knows we tries 'ard enough to please our gents, but they goes and goes. . . ."

"It's 'ard times for all of us," commented little Mrs. Craik wistfully. Heroically repressing a violent desire to snatch the second piece of bacon from the pan and devour it before her hungry husband's eyes, she slipped it before him, with a firm shake of the head to his enquiring eyes.

"Don't seem to feel 'ungry these days—you got to go out too. Eat it up, Jack, naow, and don't worry yerself—we'll get another professor in soon, we will. You see if we don't!"

The departure of "the Professor," their most reliable "let" certainly seemed to be the last straw that looked like breaking the back of the fortunes of the tiny apartment-house dignified by the name of "Craik's Private Hotel." The valiant little couple, ex-head groom and housemaid, had, by pooling the united savings of years of honest hard work, taken the narrow gloomy little house five years before the beginning of this story, and after a riot of cheap



distemper, sale-price cretonne covers and much soap and water, settled hopefully down to await the expected stream of clients.

At first they did moderately well—it was a busy season, and lodgings for single gentlemen let well—but after those first halcyon months things slumped, and as the time sped by, went slowly but surely from bad to worse in the little household. Mrs. Craik cooked—and cooked well, as well as she scrubbed and swept and dusted; her husband valeted “the gentlemen”; carried trays, answered the door, and down in the basement performed prodigies of energy in the shape of odd jobs. With the exception of a “char” in the mornings the little couple did the entire work of the house; but now, alas! even the “char” had been dismissed, and the Craiks, despite their valiant endeavours to hide the miserable truth from each other, found themselves faced with imminent disaster. The loss of their venture, and with it their entire small capital—and the alarming prospect of going out into the world and starting again, at their respective ages of fifty-three and forty-eight. Somehow the “gentlemen” did not come as plentifully as they should, nor stay so long. Occasional rooms were let for a week, a month, a few days—but as Craik gloomily said, this wasn’t no use, they wanted more like the Professor. Good solid all-the-year-round lets, with meals served reg’lar, drinks ordered, guests entertained—then you knew where you were, and could make a bit of decent profit.

Craik roused himself from his brown study with a sigh, and rising, reached for his cap.

“You goin’ to see Mr. Purkiss?”



Mrs. Craik's voice was apprehensive. Mr. Purkiss, the landlord, though she had never actually seen him, was her pet bogey—she dreaded him, and with reason. They were behindhand with the rent—and not for the first time.

“Yes. I got to arsk 'im to let things run on a bit—I got a letter from a young gentleman arskin' terms, this morning. We may get a reel good let, and then it'll be all right—I'll show 'im the letter, and maybe if 'e sees the money's comin' 'e'll be all right. Goo'-bye, Emmer—don't worrit. Get the Professor's rooms cleaned up and we'll show 'em to the young gent—maybe we're just turnin' the corner, and things'll change. Keep up yer pecker.”

The little man kissed his wife hastily, and struggling into his shabby coat, disappeared up the steep stairs from the basement to the front door and out into the busy, narrow little street. As he climbed to the top of a bus going towards the City his brow bore a portentous frown, and he muttered below his breath, rehearsing what he meant to say to Purkiss, arbiter of the destinies of “Craik's”, piteous little foundering boat upon the rough seas of life . . . rehearsing what he knew he would never, could never, summon the temerity to utter, before that fiercely-jutting jaw—those cold eyes. Oh, he was a hard devil, was Purkiss! Mr. Purkiss believed in personally collecting rents—and had already called twice at “Craik's” for this quarter's. He would not be pleasant about it—little John Craik drew a shaky sigh of apprehension, and settling back against the hard slatted wooden back of the omnibus seat, prepared himself for the meeting with much the same amount of hopefulness that presum-



ably characterised the lamb trying to make itself comfortable upon the sacrificial altar. He must try his best, anyway, and 'ope for the best!

At home, undeterred by the occasional fall of a tear into the already cloudy scrub-water, Mrs. Craik threw herself with energy into the cleaning of the Professor's old sitting-room—study, as he would persist in calling it. Certainly he had studied a great deal in it, thought Mrs. Craik, as she scrawled across the floor, pushing her soapy brush into every crevice; if books were any proof—mercy, the 'eaps and 'eaps of books and papers and such, and 'ow cross 'e'd get if you moved any of 'em! And not only books and papers, but all sorts of odd little things—pieces of stone and flint, old beads and scraps of pottery, bones and bits of things like that—all was fish that came to his net, and he would pay almost anything for any fresh oddment, no matter of what kind. Mrs. Craik remembered the hullabaloo that had been made when old Mrs. Kitson threw into the dustbin a semicircle of metal that she had found in a corner! It was a battered, rusty scrap that she had rightly considered an anachronism in any well-kept modern "apartment"; but it appeared it was something of vast importance—an ancient British "tork" the Professor had said, though privately Mrs. Craik thought the description as hopelessly crazy as the Professor.

Anyway, the "tork" had been dug out of the dustbin with the greatest care, and ever since then any fragment found in the old gentleman's room, no matter how ancient and battered, had been sedulously left untouched. Ruminating, as she scrubbed, on the "'orrible temper" that the Professor had



displayed on this memorable occasion, Mrs. Craik dug her hard-bristled brush into a crevice in the floor, and sat back with a sharp exclamation, as the movement jerked a small object from the crack on to the clear, shining expanse of wet boards before her, a small round thing that rang like metal. A ring! Seizing it, Mrs. Craik sat back upon her lean little haunches and considered it attentively in the sharp, pale morning sunshine.

One of the Professor's funny ole things, o' course. He must 'a dropped it, and it rolled down there—what a nugly thick thing, though, big enough for two fingers nearly! Anyway, wotever it looked like, the Professor'd want it back, sure as eggs was eggs. Better clean it up before 'e come for it—make it look better like. . . .

Filled with housewifely energy, Mrs. Craik hastily finished the floor, staggered downstairs with her bucket, emptied it outside, and sitting down in the dark little kitchen, extracted her silver-cleaning materials from the kitchen drawer and set to work on the ring.

. . . . .

“What you want, I suppose, is what all you people always want—more time to pay in?”

Mr. Purkiss, sitting back luxuriously in his padded chair behind the desk, tapped his gold-filled teeth with his gold pencil, and regarded with a sardonic amusement the shabby little figure of John Craik, crushed into as small a space as possible, balanced on the edge of a sumptuously upholstered chair.

The small man nodded, and fished for the letter from the “young gent” with a trembling hand.



"I know it's arskin' a lot, sir, but we been very unlucky—very unlucky indeed, sir. Just lost our best let—and 'aven't 'ad time to get another—but I got a letter this morning arsking terms . . ."

"If you're depending on one let only you're doing even worse than I thought!" said Purkiss, acidly. "The fact is, Craik, you've failed, and you'd better realize it—better sell up and get out."

"Oh, no . . . give us another charnst, please, Mr. Purkiss, sir!"

In the extremity of his anguish the little ex-groom forgot his nervousness—was he not fighting for Emmer, for their venture in life, for "Craik's," upon which they had built such high hopes! He clutched his hat in two hot, damp hands as he pleaded.

"It's just a bitter bad luck—we been workin' very 'ard, sir! Just another week or so, and I'll be able to pay up, and thank you f'r your kindness. . . ."

"It's no use trying sob-stuff on with me!" retorted Mr. Samuel Purkiss sharply—the more sharply because for a moment he had almost, almost been inclined to give the ridiculous watery-eyed little fool a fresh chance. Hopeless couple, they were—"Craik's" would never pay—much better kick them out and start afresh. He would let the place to Weller, who had plenty of experience running apartment houses. He could screw Weller up to paying fifty a year more for it than these Craiks—that would just pay for the difference between the school Stella was at at the moment and that new one Mamie was so keen on sending her to. That new smart one Lady What's-her-name's daughters went to—nothing in the world was too good for Stella,



bless her little heart! The cleverest, prettiest little monkey in London—in England, as far as that went. Wait till she grew up—he'd show 'em! . . . with a jerk Mr. Samuel Purkiss brought himself back from his day-dream of his adored daughter and stood up in dismissal.

"Well—sorry for your bad luck and that, Craik, but it can't be helped. 'Fraid I've given you longer already than I meant—but you'll have to clear out now, and that's flat. Good morning!"

The door closed upon a dazed and horrified Craik, and Mr. Purkiss, trampling down a faint, unaccountable desire to recall his tenant and give him another week's grace—a symptom that he quite honestly felt was a sign of weakness and much to be deplored—sat down, and calling in his secretary, instructed her to draw up a formal letter giving notice to Mr. and Mrs. John Craik.

Meantime Craik, stumbling down the dim-lit stone stairs, sobbed a little despairingly from time to time. Blindly he climbed up to the top of a bus, and mechanically paying his fare, gave himself up to be trundled whither the bus might please to take him. His mind, for the moment, was utterly stunned by the vastness of their misfortune but he felt that somehow he must have a little time to pull himself together before facing Emmer, before telling her their last chance was gone, their tiny all, their venture for their old age . . . the bus stopped at Hyde Park Corner, and vaguely attracted by the green, the cool stretch of turf and trees, the bewildered man stumbled down, and after half an hour's blind wandering, lost in his own misery, found himself down by the Serpentine. Not with any sinister



motive in mind—Craik was not of that desperate type that finds its solution in suicide—but feeling vaguely comforted by the wide stretch of water, grey as a pigeon's breast, the faint echoing laughter of the children that played at its edge, the darting boats, like water-spiders, that starred its gleaming surface, he leant upon the balustrade of the bridge and gave himself up to dismal brooding. Emmer! What'd she say? Coo, wasn't it awful—notter charnst to pay, not another charnst! If only Mr. Purkiss wasn't such a nard man . . . a touch upon his elbow distracted his attention, and he turned. Turned and jumped back, with an ejaculation of alarm.

“What the jooce—'ere, what's the game?”

Mr. Craik's astonishment was not surprising, for the object of it was a native—a nigger, in his own parlance! And not one of the lean, shivering London natives tightly buttoned into a shabby ulster—the usual uniform, excepting a dirty fez, or turban, of the brown-skinned visitor to our chilly shores! But a towering Magnificence in flowing robes of brightest orange, wearing great gleaming ear-rings, and red leather shoes with gold tips, and all crowned with a startling snowy turban, beneath which his smiling brown face beamed and nodded amiably to the astounded Mr. Craik the while he mouthed incoherencies in a strange tongue and bowed himself to the earth!

“'Ere!” said Mr. Craik uncomfortably. “Stop that—you can't go on like that! What d'yer want, anyway?”

His first idea, that the Magnificence was begging, was obviously absurd, in the face of those robes, that



spotless turban and gold-embroidered shoes—yet what could he want? Regardless of the unfortunate little man's uneasy glances about him at the apparently uninterested passers-by, the apparition, smiling more broadly and amiably than ever, proceeded to "go on" more profoundly yet, waving eloquent brown hands in the air, pointing, gesticulating, tapping Mr. Craik on his shrinking chest. . . .

"Oh, go away—I don't wantcher! Can't you speak English, 'ang it?"

John Craik had all the typical Englishman's vivid dread of the unusual, and as the stranger showed no signs of taking the hint and departing, the little man broke out into a gentle perspiration of despair, and turning away, hurried across the bridge hoping to leave his interlocutor behind—'e didn't like to be seen talkin' to a guy like that, lookin' like a brasted conjurer! Got enough to think of, 'e 'ad, with pore little Emmer and all. . . .

Breathless but relieved, Mr. Craik found himself standing alone on the brink of the Serpentine among the children—but on the very heels of this relief came a fresh shock, as a soft, guttural voice spoke at his elbow. The Magnificence was there once more . . . had evidently followed him silently, treading like a cat in his red leather slippers, down from the bridge. The realisation came on Mr. Craik like a douche of cold water, and frankly frightened, he faced round, very red and breathless, but ready to fight.

"'Ere, you—I tole you I didn't *want* you! You get orf—followin' me like this . . ."

The brown face, peering into his, wreathed into a sudden grin, the "devilishness" of which, as Mr.



Craik subsequently described it "fairly curled 'im up"—then retreating slowly, the figure nodded several times as though in understanding, and laying one long brown finger on his lip, pointed with the other hand to a group of children playing near the stone base of the bridge. The amount of profound meaning in his gesture, the pursed mouth and eloquent, dark eyes left Mr. Craik with his mouth open, staring—what the jooce, and several other things, *did* the chap mean now?

Mechanically he watched the tall, gay figure, so incongruous in its flame of gorgeous colours against the dour greyness of an English autumn day, pick up its flowing robes and stride swiftly towards the group of children, absorbed in some youthful prank at the very edge of the sluggish water. So absorbed, Craik noted in astonishment, that they did not even glance up at the apparition so rapidly approaching, an apparition yellow-clad, scarlet-shod, white-turbanned, a startlingly strange figure enough to see, one would have said. Surely one of the little group would look up, start, nudge its companions, perhaps be scared, pore little soul . . . then even as he stared Mr. Craik started forward with a loud sob of horror and amaze! The Figure, having reached the little cluster of children, stooped low, the sweep and tangle of his garments obscuring them for the moment, then rising, made a wide gesture towards the water as though flinging something in, and lo! a child was struggling in the deep weed-filled current that flows beneath the stone arches of the bridge!

The next few moments were sheer blind nightmare to Mr. Craik! Vaguely afterwards he remembered racing madly, furiously down the path, remem-



bered feeling the chill shock of the water, remembered splashing wildly out, clothes-hampered and spluttering, towards the struggling child, its shrieks mingling with a chorus of shouting voices above the roaring in his ears . . . then all went dark. And when the darkness cleared away there was a blessed feeling of rest and peace, the sting of brandy down his throat, and he found himself lying prone upon the bank surrounded with gaping people, his small person excessively wet and shivery, but the child, albeit weeping with fright and shock, safe in the arms of her white-faced nurse! Vaguely Mr. Craik tried to struggle to his feet, but the doctor that somehow always appears in crises of this sort, gently pressed him back again.

"Lie still now—you're all right. You got her out—good for you! You can't swim either, can you?"

"Nor a stroke," murmured Mr. Craik as he sank back on the pillow of piled overcoats. "But . . . couldn't see the kid chucked in like that . . . bloomin' nigger. . . ."

"He's wandering!" said the doctor with an understanding nod to the circle of interested faces.

Mr. Craik blinked up at him indignantly.

"Wandering? What d'you mean? Anybody caught 'im? The Nigger, I mean. Him that threw her in. Ast the children—they musta seen 'im. White turban and oringe robes. . . ."

The doctor patted his arm soothingly. "There, there, you'll be better soon. Here's the ambulance—we'll get you home at once! Don't you worry!"

It certainly annoyed Mr. Craik, despite his faintness—he had been, truly, half-drowned before he managed finally to struggle to the bank—but it



certainly annoyed him not a little, the fact that the doctor, indeed, everybody else, persisted, at any mention of the "Nigger," in treating Mr. Craik with the kindly tolerance one accords people not quite right in their heads. Despite his protests that he was "right as rain," his repeated endeavours to explain the exact cause of the accident, it was obvious that his story of the "Nigger" was regarded as a delusion pure and simple, and that the child had merely stumbled and fallen in.

Cosy in his warm bed at Bury Street, Mr. Craik overheard the doctor's last words to Emmer, and chafed, furious but impotent.

"He's got a few little delusions to get over yet, Mrs. Craik—talks about having seen a native of some sort, although obviously there was no such person about or others would have seen him. Take no notice of that, though—a shock like this leaves traces, you know. Keep him quiet! And now I'm going to see how the child's getting on—and I shall *certainly* tell her parents how much they owe to your husband's bravery. *Good afternoon!*"

"Emmer? Come 'ere."

As the door slammed after the doctor, Mrs. Craik turned towards her husband, absurdly pathetic in his washed-out pink pyjamas, propped up in the huge double bed. Thank God he was safe, but it was just like quiet little John to go and do a thing like that . . . moved to affection, she hugged her husband with tears of pride and relief in her eyes.

"Ooh, *Jack*—I'm that glad! But 'ow did it come about?"

"That's just what I can't make out," frowned Craik. "I'll take my dying oath I saw a damn



great nigger in an oringe sort of gown take and pitch that kid into the water. And now they say there wasn't no nigger and she *fell* in?"

Mrs. Craik regarded her husband with an open mouth, her eyes bulging.

"Nigger—tall, with a white turban and ear-rings, and red slippers?"

Craik nodded eagerly, comforted. Here at last was confirmation—so he could not be cracky after all!

"That's the chap," he nodded. Then a thought struck him and he sat suddenly bolt upright in bed.

"But how on earth did you. . . . Emmer, he didn't follow me here, did he? He ain't outside, is he?"

His voice held frank terror. The nigger was getting on his nerves. . . . Mrs. Craik shook her head, but her eyes were still round and frightened.

"'E come here this morning, pretty soon after you left," she said, in awe-struck tones. "I was sitting in the kitchen, rubbing up this ole ring that I found in the Professor's room. Must be one of 'is oddments. Look, ain't it a funny old thing?"

Craik regarded it thoughtfully as it lay in a neat bed of tissue paper, a heavy circlet of some gleaming silvery metal bearing a flat shield-shaped signet of dark reddish stone with a sort of hierographical sign carved deeply upon it; the ardent polishing of Mrs. Craik had removed the dirt of ages, but nobody could call it anything but a clumsy-looking affair. Slipping it on one finger, the little man regarded it thoughtfully as he replied.

"Rummy-lookin' thing! Anyway, we'll keep it safe, Emmer—'e's sure to call or send for it. 'Ullo? Someone at the door?"



It was indeed someone—someone in a large limousine, in a fur-collared coat and spats—someone who, ushered in by the frightened Emmer, fell upon Mr. Craik and, seizing him by the hand, burst into a storm of voluble gratitude—Mr. Samuel Purkiss, no more and no less, in the flesh!

“Craik, my good chap—I haven’t enough words! What can I do—my kiddie—the only one I’ve got? Talk of leaving—not on your life! You’re here for as long as you like to stay, both of you. I’ll have the place modernised, done up—I’ll get every one of my friends to stay—I apologise a million times over for anything I may have said this morning! Get over this, and I’ll show you what I’ll do for the man that saved my Stella’s life.”

And Mrs. Craik, still gasping, realised that the child to whom her John had proved a saviour was none other than the beloved only daughter of Mr. Purkiss. . . .

As in a confused dream she listened to her husband’s stammered disclaimers, to Mr. Purkiss’s renewed thanks, promises, apologies—watched the two shake hands, Purkiss with a grip that brought a grimace of pain to little John Craik’s face, weak as he was—and blinked and tried to pinch herself, to be certain this was no gorgeous impossible dream! She was still speechless as Mr. Purkiss whirled himself out again to his waiting limousine and, turning to her husband, they gaped at each other, dazed with thankfulness and amazement combined.

“Well, if that don’t beat cockfighting—that kid being Purkiss’s daughter!” John Craik’s voice was almost awe-struck. “The luck’s turned, Emmer! *Something’s* turned it—thank ’Evins we ain’t going



to be turned out ! And now if we can only get a few reg'lar lets like the Professor to keep us going . . . gosh, I wish e'd come back ! That reminds me ; we'd better let 'im know we found 'is ring."

He regarded the ring, still on his hand, thoughtfully, and blowing on it, rubbed the flat red stone with his cuff. "Pity the stone in this don't shine—it 'ud set a gent's 'and off proper if it did."

"If I can't make it shine with all the rubbin' I did this morning," said Mrs. Craik with asperity, "you won't do nothing more with that sleeve of yours !"

She paused, arrested by the look in her husband's face, and following his fixed stare at the window, gave a sudden shriek of fright—for a brown face looked in at them ! A brown face with swinging ear-rings each side of it, crowned with a white turban—a face smiling, nodding, as though satisfied, but neither of the Craiks were in any shape to appreciate that. John Craik let out a roar of exasperation and tried to struggle out of his chair.

"Dammit, there 'e is again, with 'is grin an' all. Call a bobby, Emmer ! I'll give 'im in charge ! Call one, quick. . . . There, now 'e's gorn, but he can't 'ave gorn far. Run, run !"

The little man was still struggling furiously against the restraining hands of his frightened wife when there was a heavy step on the dark stairs, and as if to crown the good fortune that appeared to be showering itself suddenly upon the little couple, there appeared upon the threshold, bearded and bespectacled, the Professor himself !

Ignoring the delighted ejaculations of welcome from both, and Mrs. Craik's feverish dusting of a



chair, the old man stood and frowned portentously upon them, his huge eyebrows knotting themselves alarmingly above his piercing eyes.

"Back—yes, I'm coming back, woman! Was just passing here—and I decided I was sick of my new digs. Don't like 'em, anyway—can't think why I left. Anybody in my old rooms? If they are, clear 'em out! I'm coming back right away, d'ye hear? Send for my things—but what on earth's the matter with *you*, Craik?"

Mrs. Craik slipped discreetly away the while Craik tried blunderingly to explain, but the Professor cut him short, his eyes wide, staring at the ring that still adorned the ex-groom's lean little hand.

"Good God, Craik—where did you find that? Thought it was gone for good. . . ."

He almost snatched at it, scarcely listening to Craik's stammered explanations; turning it reverently about, holding it to the light, as he muttered disjointed ejaculations below his breath—ejaculations that "moithered" Craik still further, as he said privately to his wife. They seemed to be in some sort of foreign tongue—similar to that used, it struck Craik, by the Nigger. . . .

"Mm. Maybe there's more in that than you think!" said the Professor, suddenly and disconcertingly—but he had an awkward trick of guessing what one was thinking; always had had. Reverentially he placed the ring inside his waistcoat pocket and turned to the invalid with sudden attention.

"Now tell me—exactly *all* that happened, don't miss out a thing—since you say your wife found this ring in a crack of the floor?"

Nothing loth, Craik complied, and to his great



gratification, the Professor, far from scoffing his tale of the Nigger to scorn, listened in silent interest, absorbed, nodding his head from time to time as though certain conclusions known only to himself were being confirmed. Encouraged, Craik told the entire story, from Purkiss's visit in the morning that had brought the hopes of the House of Craik to ruins, to his second one that had so miraculously rebuilt them . . . the Professor nodded reflectively as he finished.

"Seems as though the ring was almost a mascot, don't it, sir. All of a sudden-like things comin' our way! But," Mr. Craik frowned, "what stumps me is the way that bloomin' Nigger slung the kid into the water and without any a one of the other kids seein' 'im, too, nor nobody else but me! Stumps me clean, that does . . . unless I went loopy and imagined it?"

"Oh, no!" said the Professor. "You didn't imagine it. But you see, only the Holder of the Ring has the Power to see. . . ."

"Well," said Craik doubtfully, "I don't quite know what you mean, but only me and Emmer seem to have seen 'im as far as I c'n see?" He looked at the Professor with sudden hopefulness. "Unless you saw 'im, sir—just naow as you come along the street? I'd just said to Emmer 'ow much I wished you'd come back when there 'e was grinnin' through the window, and before I could nip out and collar 'im, you came!"

"Ah!" The Professor stared with sudden attention at the little man, then laughed softly, reflectively. "Now I understand my sudden impulse to come back here!" He fished out the ring



and balanced it between thumb and finger with a whimsically thoughtful air. "No, Craik, I didn't see him—but I certainly believe that he was there!"

He looked at the little man. "What I'd like to know is—who called him up first? Who sent him out on his first errand—the errand that brought you such wonderful luck? Purkiss's daughter falling in, I mean?"

Craik looked blank.

"I dunno what you mean, sir," he said.

"You hadn't the ring on you then, had you—you weren't wishing that something could happen to change Purkiss's mind?"

Craik shook his head again.

"It was the missus found the ring after I'd gorn out," he said. "*I* never see it until a few minutes ago when she showed it to me."

"This morning? That's interesting. Then it was she!" He turned to Emma Craik listening eagerly. "Mrs. Craik, tell me just what happened when you found the ring? Go on, now!"

Gulping, Emmer stammered out her story. How she'd bin cleanin' the ring, rubbing it up with silver paste . . . sittin' talkin' to herself a bit-like, wishin' things would change . . . wishin' pore John could do something to melt Mr. Purkiss's 'eart. . . .

"Then," interjected the Professor. "You turned and saw the Gen. . . . I mean the Nigger, eh?"

Emmer nodded eagerly.

"Bowin'—in the doorway! Oringe robes sweeping the floor and them gold ear-rings shinin', and 'is 'orrible teeth grinnin' . . . oh, I got such a turn! I scrawked out for 'elp and run into the other room, and when I come out 'e'd gone. . . ."



The Professor grinned oddly.

"I see—I see it all now! And less than half an hour after you wished that wish as you rubbed the ring—wished that your husband could find a way to melt Purkiss's heart—the wish is granted! He is given a chance of rescuing Purkiss's child from the Serpentine! They work quickly, the Genii."

"I don't know what you mean by ginny, sir," said Mrs. Craik a little stiffly. "But I'll take my oath I never touched a drop of spirits this day! Never do, but for colds and such. . . ."

The Professor's laugh was odd as he replied.

"Oh, no! I wasn't thinking of that, Mrs. Craik." He patted the little woman's shoulder kindly. "Anyway, the—er—Native has gone, believe me, for good. Unless he's summoned again . . . and that isn't likely." He held the ring up to the light. "Yes—yes. An interesting proof that the Old Powers are still strong—but I fancy on the whole that humanity is better left to work out its destiny alone and unaided by the Outer Forces. I think—I think, well as it has done its job this time, the ring will be safer in the British Museum!"

"I'm sure you know best, sir," said Mrs. Craik politely. "And now, sir, what'd you fancy for your bit of dinner?"

. . . . .

That is some years ago now, and despite frequent puzzled discussions, not only regarding the mysterious native—whom not even a prowling reporter seems to have seen—but concerning the Professor's cryptic remarks re the whole affair, the Craiks still failed to come to any satisfactory conclusion, and

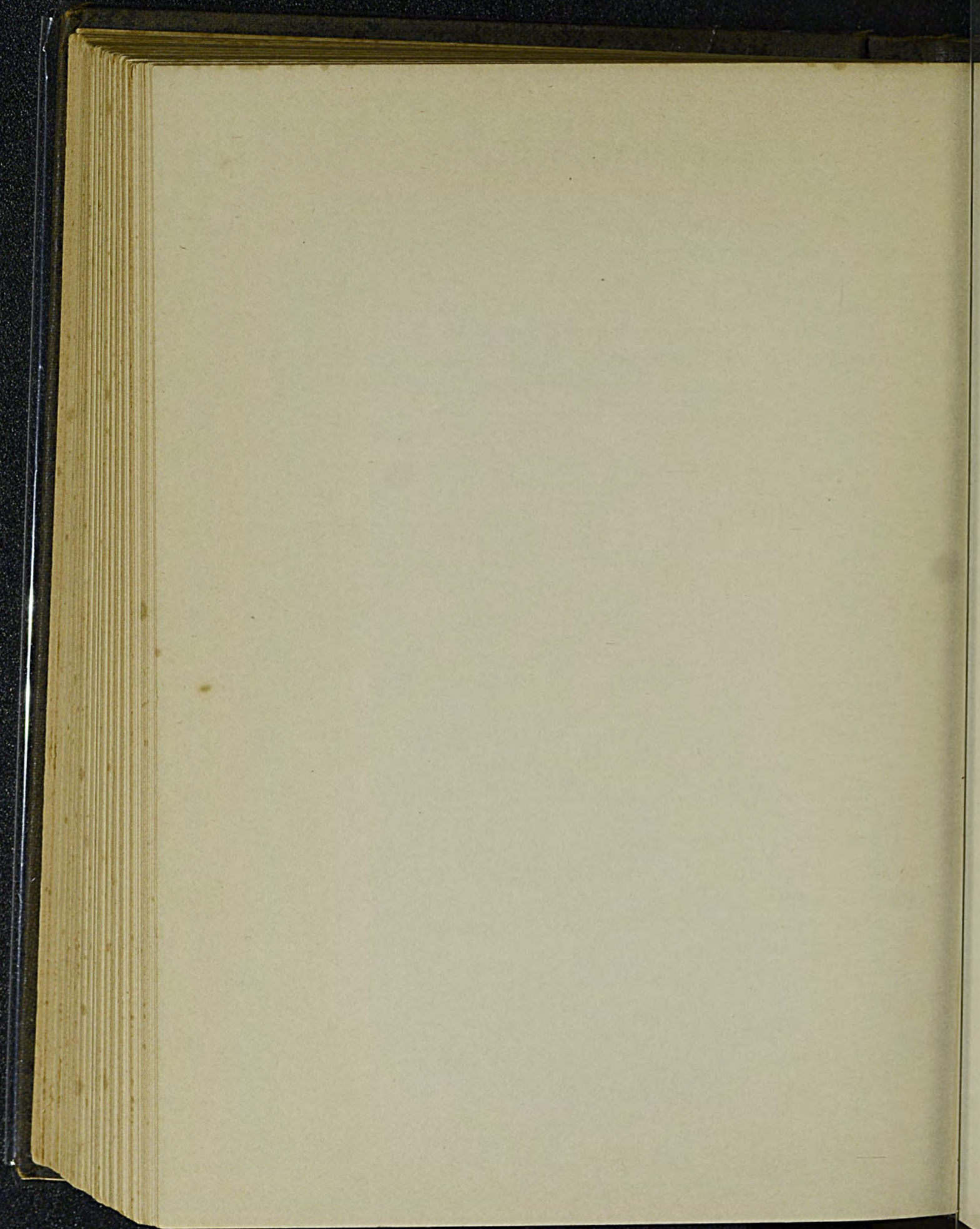


at last dropped the subject and forgot it. But the Ring is safely housed behind glass in the British Museum; and only the old Professor, now comfortably settled in the best suite of the prosperous little "Bury St. Hotel" that has replaced the old "Craik's," knows that between the unconscious hands of little Mr. and Mrs. Craik, there once lay that mighty wonder-worker, the Ring of Suleiman the Great!



THE BEAUTY SPOT





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## THE BEAUTY SPOT

THE pretty girl in the long white coat turned and went her way back again down the long deck, followed by the appreciative gaze of a row of masculine eyes. The *Aurora* was not, this trip, notable for the good looks of its women passengers—though the tall girl in white would, even among a crowd of acknowledged beauties, more than have held her own, with her level blue gaze, her soft crown of brown-gold hair, and the alluring little cleft in her determined chin. MacWhirter, the engineer, who was Irish and susceptible, sighed as he banged out the dottle of his pipe on the deck and shook his head sorrowfully.

“And all that’s going out to marry a lout of a soldier in South-West India!” he proclaimed mournfully. “Some folks have all the luck!”

The others laughed—fat Irwin, on his way out to the Sudan, Manley, the writer, Tyrwhitt, professor of languages, wearing his red hair and beard carefully arranged à la Bernard Shaw, and lanky, pleasant-faced Dean, the ship’s doctor.

It was eleven o’clock on a sunny morning in the Mediterranean, two days out of Marseilles, and the *Aurora* was bowling merrily along, on a sea like glass, smooth and absolutely flat, and blue as Miss Stanley’s disturbing eyes. Mac looked after her disappearing white figure and signed again, lugubriously.

“Did ye ever see a prettier wench in all your lives, you fellows, I ask you?” The question was dramatic, and the doctor laughed.

“She’s certainly pretty enough—the only thing that spoils her is that birth-mark on one side of her neck. Seen it?”



Mac shot upright indignantly.

"Birth-mark—never a mark is there on that neck, I'll swear!" Then curiosity got the better of indignation. "How d'you know, doc?"

Dean laughed again.

"Professionally speaking I score over you chaps. I only saw it when she called me into her cabin about a sprained finger. It's about the size of a shilling—a brown mole just at the back of the neck! As a matter of fact she hides it very cleverly. She wears one of those wide, flat necklaces that are the thing these days—or so my daughter tells me—that hides it at night, and the collar of her frocks does the hiding during the day. Oh, it's not a serious blemish, but it's not pretty—not as pretty, for instance, as a regular beauty spot."

"Ye mean one of those little black things?" said Mac curiously. "Velvet things like women wear with a powdered wig? I thought they were always stuck on?"

Dean shook his head.

"Oh, no, Mac. Some women are born with 'em—little round black patches—and they're regarded as a beauty. Not on a man, though. I was born with one!"

"Where?" demanded Mac, and a chorus of improper suggestions arose. Dean grinned.

"Oh, in a perfectly decent place—on my face, to be exact. But it's gone now."

"How d'you mean—*gone*?" demanded Irwin. "That sort of thing doesn't just get up and go, like a man walking out of a bar-room, does it? I thought they had to be cut out or burnt off or something?"

"D'you mean to say you've been to a beauty



doctor and had it taken out?" laughed Tyrwhitt, who was secretly proud of his thick white skin that threw into such effective contrast his mane of ruddy hair.

The doctor frowned a little, embarrassed, and glanced round the waiting circle.

"Well," he began unwillingly, "there's a story . . . but I don't know whether you fellows would think me mad or not?"

"Story?" Manley sat up, alert for "copy" as a dog after scent. "Mad or not, if there's a story, tell us, there's a good chap? We've been kicking our heels here for two hours, longing to be entertained . . . and I for one won't call you mad, no matter how apparently cracked the yarn is. Go on!"

"I'm not prepared to call anything or anybody mad," said Irwin heavily. "Seen too many damn queer things myself to risk criticising another chap's experiences. Tell us, D?"

"But first," said Mac luxuriously. "I'll order a round of drinks, and then—let her go, Doc."

. . . . .

"When I was born," began the doctor, screwing up his eyes behind their smoked glasses as the unbelievable sun dazzled on the glassy sea, "I had a beauty-spot—you needn't laugh!—on my lower lip. It wasn't a mole nor a wart, nor anything of that sort, but a round black spot just like the velvet patches Mac was talking of. Exactly as though somebody had injected a blot of ink under the skin of my lower lip, bang in the centre. Well, of course, all my boyhood I was called 'Blot' and 'Blob'."



and 'Patch' and worse things, but I didn't care a damn; I was a pugnacious little cuss and liked using my fists, and it was all a good excuse for having an extra fight or two—and I wasn't worse liked for that. Well, time went on, as the novelists say when they want to bridge a gap in their stories it's too much trouble to write about in detail; and I went first to Shrewsbury and then to Oxford."

"Oh, mamma, he's a Public School boy!" moaned Mac.

Dean aimed a sidelong kick at him and the Irishman subsided, wryly rubbing his shin as his colleague went on.

"Well, I'd already made up my mind to take up medicine as a career, and it was in my last year at Merton when I met a girl."

"*The* girl?" queried Manley eagerly. Dean shook his head.

"No. Sorry—you authors must have your little romance, mustn't you? But in this case it wasn't anything approaching a romance, on my side at least. Though on hers. . . ."

He paused, so long that Mac ventured a further dig.

"Did you love and ride away and leave her lamenting?"

"Not quite. Though I found out later—oh, much later!—that, being a young ass, I'd hurt her more than I meant. Oh, there wasn't anything in it really. Just a term's flirtation. She came up to stay with somebody; Molly Dearden was her name. Fair and slim, and pretty—and we used to spend a lot of time together on the river and sneak out to dances, and once or twice up to town for a



theatre and back before we could get caught. You know the kind of thing. Several other fellows were rather desperate about her, and so I was quite determined to be the first . . . but beyond a certain amount of rather childish flirting there was really nothing at all to the affair. We were just—or so I thought—good friends. To be sure, there was one rather sentimental evening, the night before she left, when we sat and held hands and sighed and talked a lot about what might be in the future and so on, but nothing definite; frankly, I'd no idea of anything definite and never had. I was mad keen to get qualified and start in practice, and certainly hadn't the remotest intention of getting married then to any girl, this or any other.

Well, she went away, and for a while we corresponded; but she was from the first a good deal more regular in her writing than I was, and gradually, as those things do, it faded out, and I forgot about her. I'll skip the next ten years. During that ten years I passed my medical exams, married my cousin Emmie, who's always been the Only Girl for me . . . still is, though she died five years ago . . . and had my first child, Ronald, that lantern-jawed scoundrel some of you know. He was just a year old when a most odd and inexplicable thing happened."

. . . . .

He paused, took a sip of the gleaming lemon-coloured liquid in his glass and continued. Miss Stanley's step approached, turned and retreated again, but for once the group of men round the sunburnt grey-haired speaker were too interested to turn their heads to look. There was a faintly



quicken'd beat in the smooth footsteps as though the maker of them were a trifle annoyed.

. . . . .

"It was the morning of my small boy's first birthday, and I remember I was a bit late, and hurrying so as to get down. Emmie'd got a pile of presents for the kid and wanted me to be there to see him have 'em before starting off on my rounds. I was just beginning to shave, and was passing the razor under my lower lip, when I saw something—or rather missed something—that made me jump so that I nearly cut myself. The blot had gone! I bent forward and scrutinised my lip in the mirror—it was a bright sunny day and it was plain there wasn't an abrasion on the skin, it was smooth as silk and quite untouched. But the blot had gone just as though somebody had taken a sponge and wiped it clean off my face—like that! I finished shaving and went downstairs, still puzzling, and directly she saw me, Emmie nearly dropped the coffee-pot. Her eyes went round as saucers.

"What on earth have you done with the blot?" she demanded. Well, she came and examined my lip and we both scratched our heads and talked and argued, but got nowhere at all. The blot had been there on the previous night—we'd had old friends in to dinner, and if it hadn't been there somebody would certainly have noticed it—and now it had vanished, completely and utterly!

Well, discussing led us just precisely nowhere, and after a while we dropped it. Got used to the absence of the blot just as we'd been used to its presence (though, womanlike, Emmie perversely declared that



she liked me much better with it than without!) and in course of time we forgot the thing. Another kid arrived—my girl Nannie—and then another boy; my work increased, and in time I had a very nice little practice. You know,” he paused a moment, “it’s only since Emmie died and my daughter married that I took to being a sea-doctor. Couldn’t stand the loneliness ashore and I’d always loved the sea. . . .”

“Good thing to do,” said Mac gruffly, and patted his colleague’s arm sympathetically with one hand, while with the other he made frantic signals to the barman for another round of drinks.

“Doesn’t the first girl—Molly What’s-her-name—come into the story again?” asked Manley, disappointed.

Dean grinned.

“What a wolf you are for romance, Manley!”

“I’m not,” said Manley, aggrieved. “But I can’t see why, if she’s got nothing to do with the finish of the story, she should be made so much of in the beginning. It’s what *I’d* call bad construction, that.”

“I didn’t say she hadn’t anything to do with the finish of the story,” said Dean. “I only said there wasn’t any *romance* connected with her . . . not, at least, the obvious sort of romance. A clinging of arms and ‘the Voice that breathed o’er Eden’ getting ready to blow off when you turn the final page.”

“You’re an incurable leg-puller,” said Manley, “but I’ll acquit you of bad construction, since evidently she *does* come in again. Go ahead.”

. . . . .



"Well, as I told you—four years ago Emmie died. That was an awful crash for me, but I got through it by working like the devil so as I needn't think, and my girl Nannie, bless her heart, looked after the house and me like a little mother. And after a year or two a skin grows over the worst wound, I suppose—one begins to manage to get along somehow, though pretty lamely. And it was about two years after Emmie's death that I met Molly again.

It was at dinner at a friend's house. I'd taken Nannie, and directly we got into the drawing-room she was immediately engulfed by a group of young friends. Come to think of it, it was at that very party that she met Hugh Lane, whom she subsequently married—damn him, though he's a thoroughly nice fellow! I shook hands with my hostess, bowed in answer to two or three introductions—and found myself looking into the eyes of Molly Dearden. Plumper than she used to be; a woman where I'd left a girl, but as charming as ever, and obviously delighted to see me. Our pleasure at meeting was so patent that our hostess stopped blank in the act of introducing us and laughed.

"Introductions are obviously unnecessary with you two," she said. "So you look after each other, will you, while I go and do my duty?" She hurried away and Molly and I sat down upon a sofa and surveyed each other.

"Well," she ejaculated. "What an extraordinary coincidence this is—and what a nice one!" Her eyes—just as blue and bright as ever, though faintly lined at the corners—studied me rapidly and affectionately up and down. "You haven't altered



a bit, except " . . . there was a long pause while she stared at my mouth. "What have you done with your beauty spot?"

In the old days, you know, she would persist in calling it that, never "blot" or "blob" like other people. She had rather a soft corner for me—as I told you. I laughed.

"I know," I said. "It vanished—mysteriously—one night years ago."

She sat bolt upright and looked at me hard.

"*Did it?*" she breathed. "When?"

"Honestly, I can't say just when—not offhand like that," I said a trifle surprised. "Does it matter?"

She nodded vigorously.

"It matters quite a lot. As I think you'll agree when you hear something—a really odd story—that I want to tell you. Look here," her warm hand closed impulsively over mine, just as it used to do in the old days, "we mayn't get another chance to talk quietly here—I know Amy's parties, there's always a crush—but I *do* want to see you for a really long talk? I want to hear about your children and your work and your life. I know, of course, what a success you've made since we met—and I'm sorry," her voice dropped to a sweetly sympathetic note, "I was awfully sorry, my dear, to hear that a few years ago you lost your wife."

What man is not gratified to hear that a charming woman he once knew has taken the trouble to keep in touch with his life and career? I was no exception to the rule, and warmed quite frankly to the pleasant flattery.

"That's most kind of you, my dear," I said



cordially. "And I *should* like immensely to have the chance of a talk with you. I take it, like me, you've married and enriched the world with a family?"

She nodded.

"O, yes, I married. Had to divorce my husband a few years after marriage, though (I wasn't as lucky as you!), and got the custody of my two girls. No, they're not here to-night," for my eyes, interested, had immediately focused themselves on the group of young people with whom Nannie was still talking. "They're both engaged, and to-morrow night both the young men are coming to dine at my flat and take the girls on to some show afterwards. Won't you come and make a sixth—and when they go we two old folks can stay and chat by the fireside?"

The idea appealed to me very much. I promised to be there, and made a note of her address, and it was as well I did, since immediately after that, dinner was announced. I was borne away by a fearsome six-foot creature who wrote books and talked about them all dinner-time, and with the exception of a few moments, I never got a chance of going near Molly again that night. We exchanged nods and smiles on leaving, and I admit that I looked forward greatly to the following night.

Nannie was going out the following evening to dance with some of her graceless young friends, so I was free, and duly presented myself, in my best dinner-jacket and with a red carnation in my button-hole, at Anhall Mansions, Kensington, punctually at eight-fifteen. The janitor took me up in the lift, a neat little maid let me in, and I found myself in a small but very neat and charming flat overlooking Hyde Park. Various interesting fragments decorated



the walls of the entrance lobby—a Korean chest of polished hardwood strapped and hinged with bronze, a Malay *kris* and two handsome pieces of old Persian silver proved Molly's life to have been somewhat of a wandering one, but she had certainly found a delightful haven of rest at end of it . . . if it is gallant, that is, to describe an attractive woman of under fifty as being at the end of her life! Almost fifty Molly must certainly have been, although she "wore well," as women put it; and certainly as she rose to greet me from a low chair beside the fire in the drawing-room—a restful place of dull-blue hangings and Queen Anne walnut—she did not look a day over forty. A few grey streaks in her pretty hair, a few extra pounds on what had been the slimmest figure I'd ever seen . . . but she wore a filmy black frock with roses at her waist, she was cleverly made up (that is, so cleverly that she didn't look it) and altogether she was a sight for sore eyes. She shook hands delightedly and at that moment in came her two girls—Anna and Rosa; two slender brown-haired elves, one darker than the other—and their respective betrotheds. A serious young lawyer and a very shy young soldier. But doctoring as a rule teaches one to make shy people talk, if not to make serious ones gay, and after cocktails had been brought in things thawed out and soon we were talking like old friends.

Dinner was excellent—it was evident that Molly's alimony was both handsome and regularly paid—well cooked and perfectly served, and we had a very merry meal. Coffee was served in the drawing-room and, after it had been drunk, plus an excellent cognac, Molly glanced at the clock.



"If you youngsters want to go, don't let us keep you," she remarked. "I've asked Doctor Dean to keep me company while you dance the midnight hours away, and warned him that you were only having your dinners with us and then leaving. So . . ."

Anna—the elder of the two—laughed mischievously as she rose.

"In other words, you want to be left alone for a quiet flirt with your old flame," she retorted. "In that case—come on, folks!" The others rose as Molly laughed and retorted.

"No such luck! If you'd any idea how adamant Dr. Dean has always been to my charms you wouldn't suggest any such thing. Be off with you, you cheeky little wretch."

Anna—she was wearing a cerise-coloured frock, a creation of chiffony stuff the same colour as her lips—balanced on one foot as she hung on the arm of her young man, the soldier, and laughed audaciously down at me.

"I'm not so sure," she said. "And in any case, I shouldn't blame you, Mother, if you *did* have a shot at seducing the doctor. *I* think he's a dear!"

They vanished through the doorway, laughing, chattering, a swirl of youth and life and colour, and as the outer door of the flat banged behind them, Molly sat back against the dull blue cushions of the sofa and laughed.

"She's an audacious imp," she said. "But a darling . . . she's my favourite, you know, though I suppose a mother shouldn't have favourites."

"I don't see how she can sometimes help it," I said, choosing a cigar from the handsome box of



Larranagas she held out to me, and undoing its paper band with careful fingers. "But she shouldn't let that favouritism lead her into spoiling one child at the expense of the others!"

"I don't think I've ever done that." Molly did not look at me, but into the coal fire—I hate your gas-stoves—that leapt and crackled cheerily in the low grate. "But—I've a special reason for loving Anna. A very odd reason."

"What it is?" I asked gently. For answer she turned and looked at me.

"Where's your beauty-spot, Dickie?"

Her sudden and unexpected use of the diminutive brought to me, so suddenly, Oxford! The river on a moonlight night, tea on the High, strolls in the woods leading down to the water—all the silly delightful things of my youth—that a lump rose to my throat and I answered very gently:

"You know, I told you. It just—vanished."

She nodded.

"I suppose you can't tell me just *when*—not even if you think about it?"

A recollection came to me so suddenly that I all but shouted with surprise.

"But of course I can! It was on the night of the fifth of June—now I remember, because it was my eldest boy's second birthday! First birthday, I mean—he was just a year old. That would make it exactly twenty-four years ago. But why..."

She gave a soft exclamation and beat one hand on her lap.

"But that's amazing! Simply amazing... and yet why should I be surprised? I always knew..."

"What did you always know?" I demanded



curiously, sensing something behind all this. She turned a curiously searching glance upon me.

"Dick—I'm going to tell you something rather extraordinary. But first . . . tell me, did you notice anything about Anna?"

I frowned.

"Only that she's a very pretty girl. Why?"

Molly paused a moment, then went on with increasing intensity.

"Did you notice that she'd got a beauty-spot on her left shoulder—almost on the collar-bone—just where the strap of her frock passes down?"

"Why, yes." Now she came to mention it, I *had* just noticed a tiny black blot on the smooth white expanse of skin. "But why . . ."

Molly leant forward, staring into my puzzled eyes. . . .

"Why? Because, Dick—*that's your blot!*"

I was so astounded that I merely gaped—then I laughed, rather vexedly, I must admit. I had never thought Molly Dearden an imaginative woman.

"O, come, my dear! Don't let's talk nonsense."

"You can call it nonsense if you like when you've heard why I say that," said Molly firmly. "So sit still and listen, will you?"

I lighted my cigar and sat back, and after a momentary pause she began.

"You'll have to forgive my lack of womanly modesty, Dick, if I admit to you that I was far more in love with you that time in Oxford than you had any idea of. Oh, I know absolutely no blame attaches to you—in fact, you were all along only too strictly platonic, though I knew you liked me! But I—well, I was rather badly bitten, if I must be



honest. But I had just enough common sense to keep it to myself . . . well, we parted, as you know. But for a long time I cherished the stupid little hope that in my absence you might find your heart grow fonder, and you might look me up when you came to London to study for your degree, and we might . . . well, you know the sort of thing! But you didn't. Your letters got fewer and further between, and I realised that I was merely becoming a nuisance to write to; so at last I had the courage to stop writing—and had the sour reward of knowing myself right when you didn't even write to ask me why I'd stopped! And life went on, and I got engaged to Mayne Preston, because there didn't seem anything else to do except to get married. . . .”

“Were you in love with him?” I asked. Then I wished I hadn't, for she sent me a look I didn't in the least know what to do with.

“Don't be silly, Dick! There's only one person I've ever been in love with, and you know who that was—perhaps is.”

I fidgeted uncomfortably and she went quickly on.

“I chose him because he'd got quarts of money—and if I couldn't marry for love, to marry for money seemed the best thing to do. But it went wrong from the start—he drank and was a brute all round, and I don't suppose I was any particular comfort as a wife, since I didn't care a bean for him. I had a first child and it died a few days after its birth, and when Anna was on the way I was lying awake one night thinking rather drearily about life and the mess I seemed to have made of it, and what it might have been . . . and that brought you back, and



Oxford, and I suppose I cried a bit, and at last I went to sleep, thinking of you. And I had the most extraordinary dream !”

I sat silent, listening. Against my own will I was becoming interested, and Molly, her pretty low voice tense, went steadily on.

“I dreamt that the child was born and lying in my arms. She was a girl, little and dark and oddly like you. And as I lay adoring her the door opened and *you* walked in—looking just as you used to look in the old days in Oxford, wearing your grey flannel trousers and shirt, with your hair all ruffled and the old black blot on your lower lip. You came to the edge of the bed, and stood looking down at me where I lay with the child. And you said :

“‘Look here, Molly. This child might be mine—is, I think, spiritually mine—yet physically it isn’t. Yet to prove to you that I have not forgotten you, and that I know you have not forgotten me, I am going to leave my mark on her for life.’

“And with these words you bent over the child and kissed her on the shoulder—and when you rose up again the black blot was gone from your lip and was on the shoulder of the child ! And while I lay staring at you . . . of a sudden I woke up, quite dazed, and after a minute I laughed at myself and told myself not to be absurd. It was only a dream . . . but let me tell you that when Anna was born, a fortnight later, directly I emerged from under the chloroform (ages before I could possibly have heard or known anything about the baby) I said feebly to the doctor. ‘It’s a girl, isn’t it ? Dark and small and with a black beauty-spot on her left shoulder ?’ And they were completely amazed. . . .”

. . . . .



There was a long pause. Fat Irwin shook a perplexed head.

"My Lord," he grunted. "I've heard some odd stories . . . but this!"

"And you hadn't even *seen* Molly from the time you were twenty-odd until you were over fifty," mused Manley. "That wipes out pre-natal influence. What's your explanation of it, Doc.?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Don't ask *me*! I've turned and twisted the thing over a thousand times, and it's still a mystery to me. Even if it *was* pre-natal influence—mother's thought leaving an imprint on the child sort of thing—that doesn't explain why the blot should have gone from *my* lip, and on the very night of her dream? I tell you, I sent Anna a present for her wedding, and d'you know I felt quite odd, as though I were sending it to my real daughter? I can't make it out at all—never shall."

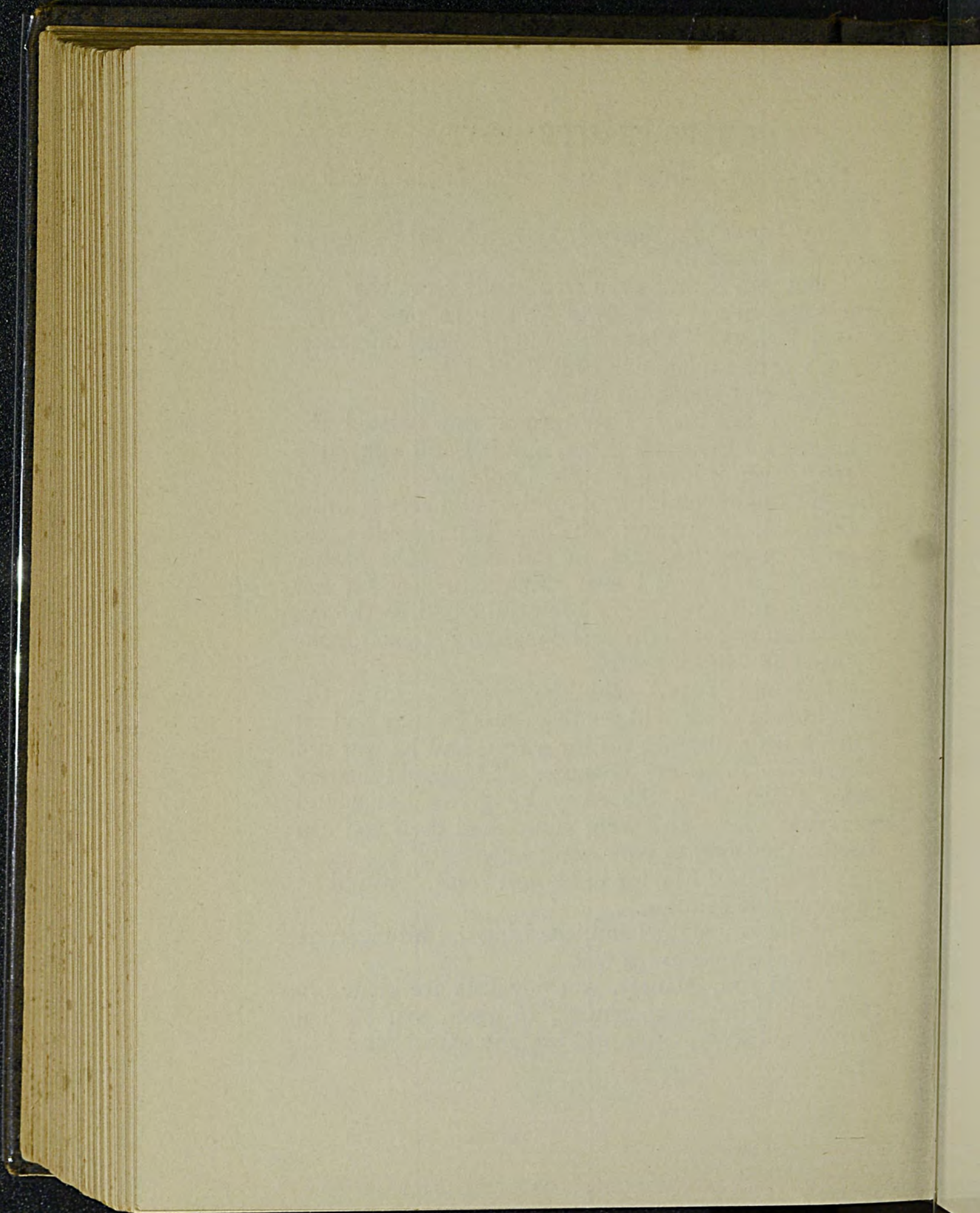
"I shouldn't try," said Mac, rising. Out of the tail of his eye he could see that Miss Stanley had sat down a little distance off for a rest, and he was not minded to miss any chances. "I should merely make a sequel to the story by going home and marrying Molly, if I were you. And then you can discuss the thing to your heart's content."

"That," said Manley in his soft voice, "would be an admirable solution."

The doctor laughed and, crushing out his cigarette on the desk, rose to his feet.

"I told you, Manley, you novelists are incurably romantic. But now, since I've given you such a damn good story, come and buy me a final drink!"

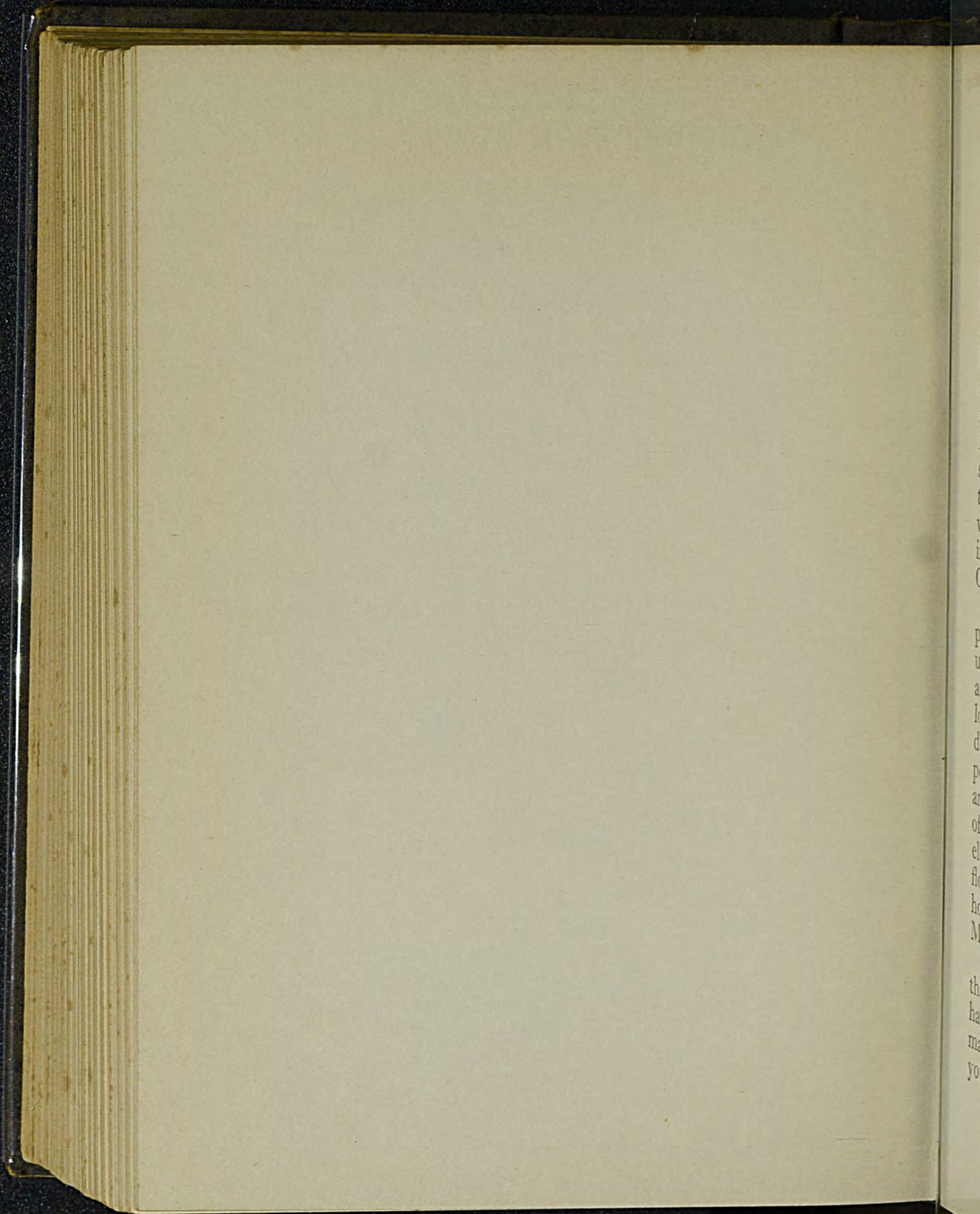






“ I’LL HELP YOU OVER . . . ”







“I’LL HELP YOU OVER . . . ”

IT was nine o’clock at night when Philip Trent, weary from travelling almost without cessation for six days and nights, arrived at the locked door of his London flat. So great had been his haste to reach home that he had left his heavy luggage at the station, to be sent for on the following morning, only bringing with him a kit-bag containing night-things and the MS., paper and note-books without which he never dreamed of moving. Writing was his job in life, and although he did not make the enormous sums earned by those of his trade who wrote detective novels, summer-time romances or sagas six volumes long, he made a sufficiently comfortable income to content the heart of any reasonable man. Or woman. But there was the crux. . . .

He paused a moment before the door, one hand pressed to the left side of his waistcoat—the long climb up to his sixth-floor flat always tried his heart, never a notably strong one—but after a moment drew a long, relieved breath as the pain quieted down, and depositing his bag on the mat beside him, felt in his pocket for his keys. As he stood there fumbling and cursing, not for the first time, the niggardliness of the landlord that would not allow more than one electric bulb, and that a very small one, on the top-floor landing, he wondered, half-frightened, half-hopeful, what sort of a reception he would get from Marion, his wife?

His wife these six years, and more adored now than on the day he married her . . . though things had not gone quite as they should, alas! He did not make enough money for Marion; pretty, spoilt, young, she needed money as a flower needs sun.



Truly they were ill-mated, dearly as he loved her. He was diffident and shy. A solitary creature, often in indifferent health, who hated parties, theatres, crowds, the whole gay gamut that made up her life. Marion adored racing and gambling, dancing and sitting up late, drinking cocktails and romping . . . and for her sake he tried to like it too. But without conspicuous success.

For several seasons he had patiently followed in her train to Paris, Cannes, Biarritz, Switzerland in the winter and the South of France in the summer; wandered in and out of Casino and cocktail bar; sun-bathed, surrounded by the Best People, while his whole soul yearned for a silent beach and her alone; danced and played bridge because she liked doing both, though he did them badly—until finally she told him, brutally enough, the truth.

“You’d better stop at home and write your eternal stories, Phil. Frankly, you’re simply a dud at parties. A complete blight—you wander about looking like a death’s head at a feast, and wet-blanket everybody. You’d better stay at home!”

He had winced—though he knew it for the truth, it hurt absurdly to hear it said. The words, coming from Marion’s curved red mouth, so deceptively soft and babyish, cut like cunning little knives, all directed as though by some devilish unseen surgeon at his heart. Yet he had said very little in reply. Merely flushed up and grunted something and bent over his desk, and she had swept out of the room, with a wave of perfume, a tinkling of bangles, a rustling of satin and ruffled lace and fur. And from that day the rift had grown, wider and wider, until before his setting-out for this expedition to



Istanbul to oversee the filming of certain scenes in his last novel, *The Woman of the Harem*, he seemed to have seen his wife only twice a day ; before lunch-time, when she appeared, just bathed and dressed in her outdoor things, lovely, sparkling, all ready for another of her interminable lunch parties, and before dinner, when she rushed back to change—and sometimes, greatly condescending, to drink a cocktail with him before she went out again, resplendent in a new and gorgeous gown.

He bored her, he knew, and humbly did not wonder at it. As long as she accorded him an occasional casual kiss, a pat on the back, an arm, white and slender and perfumed, laid about his shoulders for a moment now and then, he could be, he told himself, moderately content. He had done her a wrong in marrying her, he, forty-eight, delicate, weary, to her gay young twenty-six. The least he could do for her now was to let her have her head ; let her live the frivolous, irresponsible life she preferred, and bide his time as best he could, believing against all doubts and fears that at heart she loved him only ; waiting, like a patient, silent watchdog, in the background, until she wearied of childish play and came back to him and the hearth-fire of his love at last.

She had been, he remembered, especially charming to him the night before he had left for Istanbul, three long months ago. She had actually cancelled a dinner and dance at the Crewdson's—people he detested, but great friends of hers ; wealthy and mad on entertaining—in order to spend the last evening with him alone. So encouraged had he been by this, that he had even ventured to hint that she



might perhaps accompany him to Turkey? He would put off his going for a day, if so, gladly, eagerly . . . but she had flinched at the idea. Frowned and flushed oddly, and fearful of spoiling the atmosphere of the evening, so unusually sweet and friendly, he had hastily dropped the subject. She had written to him several times while he had been away, hasty little letters written between engagements as it were, but for two weeks he had heard nothing from her at all. Certainly he had been unable to let her know the precise date of his leaving Istanbul; but he had sent her a wire before leaving, and she might have dropped him a line to Paris, where he had spent a night before taking the boat for England . . . still, Marion had always hated writing. She would be waiting—certainly after that charming gesture in keeping the last evening free for him, she would have kept this free likewise.

All this passed through his mind as he at last sorted out, from among a dozen others, his latch-key, inserted it into the lock, and picking up his bag, walked into the tiny dark lobby of the flat. Dark—then she was not in after all! His heart sank unaccountably, then rose a little. She might be in, and resting in the dark—dumping down his kit-bag in one corner, he called her name aloud.

“Marion! Darling, are you there?”

Dead silence answered him, and with his heart in his boots, the bitterness of disappointment stinging saltily behind his eyelids, he pushed open the door of the sitting-room and entered. Dark and cold, the fire unlighted—as he switched on the light and stood looking round the room the light revealed a pale, narrow-faced man with fine dark



eyes, a sensitive mouth and a slight stoop. A man dusty with travel and with a great wistfulness in his gaze. . . .

He stood in silence looking round the room that had known all the sweet as well as all the bitterness of his brief married life. A small elegantly decorated room, furnished with a few handsome antique pieces, with hangings of an ultra-modern material in beige and brown and orange. A Marie Laurencin, all pastel pinks and blues, over the mantelpiece, a handsome carved oak standard lamp on one side of the hearth, and two leather arm-chairs standing each side of the empty grate. On the mantelpiece a red lacquer clock was flanked by two antique brass candlesticks, and propped against the clock there showed a white square. A letter . . . for a moment Philip Trent stood looking at it, his heart stopped dead, like the clock, then in two strides he was at the hearth and the letter in his hands. Marion's writing . . . and dated two days ago.

"MY DEAR PHILIP,

I know this will be a hateful homecoming, but there's no use beating about the bush. I've gone off with Ned Crewdson. It's been going on for some time, but I hadn't the face to tell you frankly; this is the best way. His wife will divorce him, she wants to marry Eric Dubois, so please do the same for me as soon as you can. I knew it was coming when I saw you off—tried to be as nice as I could at the last, and I felt pretty beastly; you can believe me or not as you like. But there's no help for it—Ned can give me the sort of life I



want and I'm crazy about him as well, so there you are. Sorry and all that—and I hope you'll get along all right.

MARION."

Then not only his heart, but the whole of time and the world itself stood still for Philip Trent, and he fell without a sound into the great leather chair behind him.

. . . . .

When he came round it was some time before he realized things. He was feeling cold and his heart seemed to be beating both faintly and irregularly. He felt dazed as well, and wondered dizzily, as his eyes wandered round the familiar walls and ceiling, what had happened to make him feel at once at home and far away, conscious, yet not quite mentally coherent . . . he moved his head heavily and sighed, and stared round the room once more, at the carpet, the furniture, the fireplace, still black and empty, and finally at the chair opposite. And started, for a small boy sat in the chair watching him !

He was a grubby small boy of about eight years old, and dressed in a pair of grey flannel shorts and a white cricket-shirt open at the neck ; a small boy with brown legs and freckles on his snub nose, and a most surprisingly bright red head of hair that stood up round his bullet head like a new form of nimbus . . . but there was nothing of the saint about the snub-nosed, ugly, but likeable little face beneath the scarlet mop. Bright, intensely blue eyes, surrounded with sun-wrinkles, a big mouth set in an engaging grin, a nose that only his mother could have called beautiful, since it was a mere button set between two



plump cheeks. . . . Trent stared and blinked, and stared again, then sat weakly upright.

"Who on earth . . . and how did you get in?" he demanded.

The urchin jerked his red head in the direction of the door, which was still standing open, Philip Trent noticed.

"I just *walked* in!" The voice was bluntly direct—the sort of voice one would have imagined came with that determined cleft in the small chin. He stretched out both legs, stockingless and ending in scuffed brown leather sandals, and studied them with interest. "I'm small—but you wouldn't think how far I can walk! Miles 'n miles—'n *miles!*"

The voice was prideful, the eager eyes searched the face opposite him with a flickering question in their depths—*does he believe me?* Philip smiled.

"I'm sure you can walk just as far as ever you want to?" he said cordially, and the blue eyes between the sun-wrinkles widened and beamed at him. This was a man after childhood's own heart—and the small creature hitched himself confidentially forward until he was balancing on the very edge of the deep chair. He began in the eagerly intimate tone of the child who knows it can trust, and in its turn is trusted.

"I say! You don't remember much, do you?"

Philip frowned and passed his hand over his forehead. Certainly at the moment he felt bewildered and rather exhausted, and couldn't remember very much about anything, but that would pass. He had had a shock of some sort, but just what it was he couldn't remember. . . .



"I don't know why you should say that?" He hesitated and frowned again. "It's true, of course . . . but how do you know it, anyway?"

The small boy nodded, squeezing both hands between his knees, scarred with innumerable tumbles. He gave an ecstatic grin.

"I *do* know—'cos you've forgotten *me*!"

"*You*?" Philip stared, then laughed. "Upon my soul, you're right! I do remember now, I've seen you somewhere? I remember your confounded red head, you little brute!" His voice grew suddenly tender. "I remember you were a cheeky little varmint who persisted in bowling your confounded hoop between my legs whenever you could! But where and when . . .?"

"My hoop," said the urchin. Stretching down over one arm of the chair in which he was sitting, he fished up a huge wooden hoop with a stick attached, and grinned again. "I brought it along. I thought perhaps you wouldn't remember me without it. Though," his grin was shy now, "I *hoped* you would."

Philip Trent scratched his head, completely bewildered.

"Well, I'm hanged! How did you drag that thing up here? And what on earth are you doing with a hoop in the London streets—in the middle of November, too?"

"Nobody stopped me," said the small boy indifferently. "And I never mind weather. You know—I never *did* mind what weather it was. And it can rain—even in Cannes. Can't it?"

"Cannes!"

In a flash memory brought to Philip Trent the



vision of the Promenade Anglais on a rainy day, windswept, deserted but for himself and this sun-burnt sprite, trying vainly to drive his hoop against the wind. He laughed aloud, triumphantly.

"Of course! I used to see you playing on the front at Cannes? Isn't that right?"

The urchin nodded and shifted his position in his seat, dandling the immense hoop idly between his small roughened hands.

"Of course it's right. And now maybe you know why I've come to see you?"

Again Philip passed a hand across his forehead. Of course! Something—something elusive, deep down, was telling him quite plainly why this red-headed little *gamin* had come; something knew and understood the whole position quite well, and yet he could not yet drag that something, that knowledge, up to the light of his conscious mind. For a moment he puzzled over it, frowning, then dismissed it with a fretful little gesture. He couldn't be bothered worrying the thing out just now—he was too tired. And the kid was too amusing—the whole odd adventure was amusing, was taking his mind off himself for a minute. And God knew he wanted to take his mind off himself—there was some dark cloud, some memory, hovering in the background that he must turn and face sometime, and the bare idea of facing it turned him cold and shuddery. The longer he could put it off, the better—and this unexpected visit was diverting him for the moment very nicely. He smiled at his small guest.

"I don't know quite, frankly, why you've honoured me by this visit, sonny—unless your people have taken a flat in the house and you've



found me out and come wandering up? I suppose that's it—and I must have left the outer door open, though I thought I heard it slam. Anyway, it doesn't matter—I'm very glad to see you. Gladder than you can imagine, perhaps. . . ."

His mind was fumbling oddly, painfully, for words, and for an instant everything, even the red-headed child sitting in the chair opposite him, clear under the lamplight, flickered and danced like shadows on a screen. Strange, unreal . . . but even as he caught at his sanity, startled and terrified, all was clear again and the urchin sat there smiling at him. Philip blinked and paused, then recollecting himself, tried to hoist himself out of his chair. It seemed unexpectedly difficult. . . .

"I've—I ought to have a tin of toffee, or some chocolates, somewhere," he said heavily. "Always keep something of the sort for my small niece and nephew. And to tell the truth," he smiled somewhat bashfully at the small creature staring so steadfastly up at him, "to tell the truth, I've rather a sweet tooth myself. Suppose I'm a bit of a baby really at heart."

"Don't bother about the chocs—I don't want them." The child's voice was unexpectedly sweet. "But—you're right about the last. That's why, I suppose, they sent me to you."

Philip Trent stared, puzzled.

"They?" he muttered. "Who are 'they'?"  
Your—your parents, do you mean?"

The child shook his head, shining like a living flame beneath the light of the standard lamp, and tilted the hoop idly upwards until it stood up about him like a giant circle enclosing a picture.



Philip was faintly reminded of an old Della Robbia plaque, the Bambino surrounded by a circle of light, but he had no time to analyse impressions, he was too intent upon what the child was saying. Somehow, somehow he must really clear up this muddle and bewilderment that was ruling his mind . . . with his bright blue eyes steady on the man before him, the child spoke, slowly, carefully.

"I'll have to explain, then—but you'll understand quite easily if you can remember one thing. D'you remember one day at Cannes, I was bowling my hoop along the Promenade—and it was wet and I fell under a car, only you rushed at me just in time, and threw me on to the other side of the road?"

In a flash memory lighted a vivid lamp in the bewildered darkness of Philip Trent's mind—almost he gave a cry of relief. Certainly he laughed aloud.

"Now I've got you—of course, I remember. Dickie Stevens! The confounded car skidded just as you dashed into the road after your damned hoop, and I only just managed to push you out of the way in time. I got badly bruised, but you had to go to hospital, I remember. You were pretty badly damaged, Dickie, weren't you?"

"I was," said the child. "And you came to see me once in hospital. Do you remember?" His eyes dwelt on the man affectionately. "You were on your way to catch the train to Paris—you were going back to England, but you came to see me first. You brought me a new hoop, 'cos my own was broken, and a picture book. *And a train.*"

Philip nodded. Somehow it hurt to remember that scene, the sunny, white-walled ward in the English Hospital at Cannes; the narrow bed with



its neatly folded blue coverlet, the dimpled pink-cheeked sister bending over the little bandaged figure on the bed, its scarlet hair sprouting like some strange vegetable growth from the white wrappings about its head.

"You were awfully badly knocked about," he said tenderly. "But not too badly to grin at me! I'd cursed you often enough for teasing me with your confounded hoop, but I was jolly glad to see your grin then."

The child laughed, a joyous outburst that ran round the silent room like a chord of music.

"You used to stand so often with your hands in your pockets, staring out to sea, with your legs far apart, and I couldn't help trying to drive my hoop between them! You used to call me a dam' nuisance—and I s'pose I was."

"Dam' nuisance or not, I'm glad to see you again," said Philip with a smile.

He stretched out his hand, but the child remained seated, the hoop balanced upright on the ground before the chair, forming a huge round O in the middle of which he sat, like some small wizard inside his magic circle, surveying his companion.

"*I'm* glad," he said bluntly. "But do you remember what I said to you when you came to see me in hospital?"

Philip Trent shook his head.

"No—not the exact words. I was only allowed to stay a little while—but I was too glad to see you alive at all to listen much to what you actually said."

"I said," said the child, "'thank you for helping me over.'"



There was a moment's pause, then Philip nodded.

"Of course! I remember now. 'Thank you for helping me over the road,' I suppose you meant—though if you call literally throwing you on to the opposite pavement to try and get you out of the way of a car, 'helping,' I think you're putting it very nicely!" He paused, surveying the sturdy sun-burnt little figure in its loose-necked shirt, shabby shorts and sandals with a new attention. "You must have made a fine recovery, young 'un. Never saw anyone look fitter—and when I left Cannes nobody in the place thought you'd ever recover."

There was a little pause, and the child laughed. A quaint reflective little chuckle.

"They were right," he said. "*I didn't!*"

There was a trenchant silence. Then the child slipped suddenly from the seat of the chair to the ground, and standing thus framed in the giant circle of his hoop, his flaming hair glorified by the lamp behind him, he looked gravely at the man sitting frozen with amazement before him.

"I said, when I saw you then, 'thank you for helping me over.' But I said something else, too, that you've forgotten. I said, 'Some day I'll help *you* over.' And so . . . I'm here!"

The light of the lamp seemed at once to brighten and to darken behind that shining head. The little figure itself seemed to glow, to expand and dazzle, yet all the while retaining its beloved childish outlines—and surely the circle that had been but a wooden hoop upright before a leather chair was now a huge and open gateway, all flame and glory, in the midst of which stood a shining small figure with a nimbus round its head! A figure that held

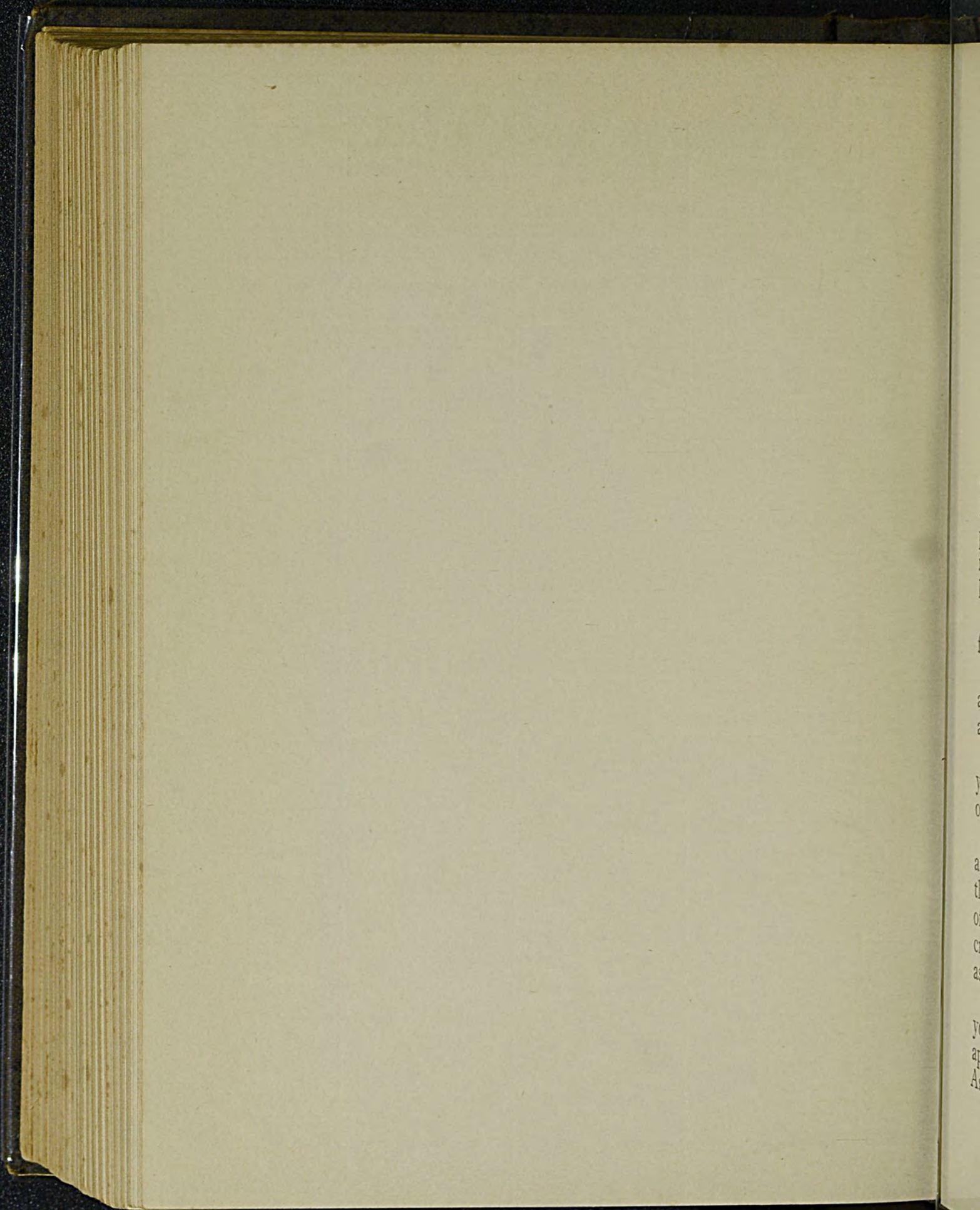


out welcoming arms . . . and Philip Trent, standing upright, at last awake and understanding, looked down beside the chair into which he had fallen on reading his wife's letter, and knew the truth. For on the far side of the chair there lay his body, dead.



THE MASK OF SACRIFICE







## THE MASK OF SACRIFICE

IT was a horrible thing, really. Jack Trelawney picked it up in some old curiosity shop near the Strand, and carried it home in triumph—now it sat tilted up against the inkstand in Trelawney's study, its narrow eye-holes squinting sideways at the firelight, the round red cap on its head a little askew. One wisp of coarse black hair hung straight each side of the long thin face, dull yellow-brown in colour and creased with a thousand lines and wrinkles; huge gilt rings swung from the hidden ears, and the thin-lipped mouth was bitterly sardonic. Maisie Trelawney, bride of a year, stood with her pretty brows wrinkled in obvious disfavour, regarding it with a doubtful finger at her lip, the bright light shining on her curly hair.

"Jack! Another horror—what a beastly old face!"

Trelawney laughed uproariously as he slipped an arm about her shoulders, rising white and round above her black velvet dinner-gown.

"Horror—oh, Maisie, you're incorrigible! Will you never have any sympathy with my craze for oddities?"

She turned a bright face up to him, and tiptoed for a kiss. The fire crackled and flared suddenly, and threw an odd shadow across the pale sardonic face of the mask, almost like a sudden smile, fleeting and cruel; Maisie slipped an arm inside her husband's as she turned again to look at the new purchase.

"Sympathy? Jack, you know I love some of your oddments, but this is—somehow not very appealing—to me at any rate! Sorry, dearest! As long as you like it, it doesn't really matter, and



certainly, as a piece of work, it's frightfully clever. An unpleasant face, I think, but immensely well done. Is it Chinese?"

"I don't know," Trelawney admitted. "The old villain who sold it to me didn't seem to know much about it—or wasn't in a communicative mood. I got it absurdly cheap, too—only a fiver, and it's obviously worth much more. As a matter of fact, I fancy it's stolen goods—at any rate the old chap seemed deuced anxious to get rid of it, and jumped at my offer. Wish now I'd offered three quid!"

Maisie shook her head.

"I'm not—it was cheap, I admit, but anyway, he seemed satisfied—if you'd beaten him down I shouldn't have liked it. But somehow I don't think. . . ."

"What don't you think, you funny shrimp?" Trelawney's tone was very tender as he kissed the tiny frown between her eyebrows.

"I don't quite know," she said doubtfully, "but anyway, I rather wish you hadn't bought it, dear. I have a rather funny feeling about it—I don't like the look on its face when the firelight catches it sometimes."

The flame flared again, and Trelawney released his wife with a rather irritated little shrug.

"Really, Maisie! I never thought you were superstitious—anyway, I'm sorry I ever got the thing, since it seems to get on your nerves so. I can sell it again if you like."

His tone was edgy, and Maisie looked a trifle hurt.

"Of course not, Jack—what nonsense! But you



always like to hear just what I think—or you always said so. . . .”

There was an edge in her tone, too, and Trelawney hastily changed the subject.

“I like your frock, Maisie. Anyone coming to-night?”

She nodded, sinking into a big leather chair and lighting a cigarette.

“Only Miles. He rang up to say he’d got the Staff appointment he wanted, and was only waiting orders to go abroad now, so might he come and talk it over with us to-night.”

“Miles—good scheme! I haven’t seen the old chap for weeks—all right; I’ll go and change.”

The door slammed, and the room was silent, save for the occasional leap and purr of the flames flickering up the chimney. It was a charming room, cosy and well furnished, lined with books, an antlered head or two over the door and fireplace, heavy velvet curtains shutting out the cold wind that whistled outside, and a thick Persian carpet, wonderfully coloured, on the polished floor. A regular man’s room, the room of a well-bred Englishman of rather bookish tastes, the only incongruous note struck by the mask that now rested on the table, facing the fire, its lined, sallow face oddly and unpleasantly alive in the dancing lights and shadows. Maisie glanced at it again over her shoulder, and shivered a little.

A horrible thing—she loathed it—and Jack was sure to insist on its being put up in the drawing-room, a lovely room stacked with curious and beautiful things, mostly Oriental, from Trelawney’s many wanderings.



Many were presents from Miles, too—her cousin, a burly, shy soldier to whom she had always been a second sister. The bell rang sharply, and Miles himself was shown into the room, his square, good-humoured face still red from the sharp wind. Maisie sprang up from her seat and held up her charming face for the usual kiss. At the same moment as he bent towards her, the man's eyes caught the mask, and with a sudden exclamation he raised his head, without kissing her.

"By Jove—what an extraordinary thing!"

He picked up the mask, studying it intently, regardless of Maisie's pout—then as she flounced into a chair again, put it down with a half-embarrassed little laugh.

"Sorry, May! That wasn't very polite, I admit—but all of a sudden I saw this thing, and it almost looked as if—well, as if it was laughing. . . ."

His tone was suddenly shy, and his honest blue eyes, always so completely frank and open about his affection for her, looked oddly troubled—looking away, he sat down opposite her and fumbled for his tobacco pouch, awkward and embarrassed. Maisie herself fell silent—how often and often, before Jack, before anybody, had she not kissed Miles, with the same frank, happy affection that she would have shown towards a real and only brother—now suddenly, this one kiss not kissed, seemed to have changed the whole position. Extraordinary! Why had she never felt this consciousness of sex before towards Miles—she was no child, in this her radiant twenty-sixth year, and he an experienced soldier of thirty-two? The silence grew heavy between them, till resolutely shaking his broad shoulders, the man



laughed and turned the old smile of frank good-fellowship upon her, his white teeth gleaming in the firelight.

"Tell me, May—where did old Jack pick up this recent horror?"

"I'm so thankful you think it's a horror too!" The girl laughed in return, as she answered: "He got it in some old shop in the Strand—you know, the same he got the Algerian knife and those Chinese coffee-cups from. Coffee-cups, now—they're nice useful, charming things—but this!"

Miles' thick, fair brows were knitted.

"Strand? Not near the corner of Southampton Street?"

"Yes. Why?" Maisie was alert at his tone. Miles reached out a hand behind him and fished up an evening paper. Rustling over the pages, he turned to a paragraph, and folding the paper up, passed it over, a brown thumb marking the place. The two heads were bent over the paper, close together, brown short hair against a tangle of fair curls, and Jack Trelawney, entering quietly at the door, stood silent, suddenly struck by a thought that had never entered his happy, straightforward head before. It was an unworthy thought, and he scouted it on the moment, hot with anger at himself, and strode into the circle of the firelight, a cheery greeting on his lips. But the thought had been there—and was to come again. Miles turned a delighted grin to him, and Maisie sprang up and caught him by the arm, waving the crumpled paper.

"Jack! Isn't this your old man—this thing, I mean?"

The paragraph was headed "Shocking Murder,"



and Trelawney's brows went up as he read. The police, hearing groans, had forced their entrance into the back room of the little antique shop where he had purchased the mask, only a short time after he left it, and found the wife of Schroeder, the old proprietor, dying from a dozen knife-thrusts from an old Moorish dagger.

According to the doctor, she must have been dying at the moment he purchased the mask—with a faint feeling of sickness, Trelawney remembered that he had subconsciously noted the old man's hasty and furtive glances at his hands once or twice during the transaction. He must have come to attend Trelawney straight from the awful deed—no reason give, except that the neighbours said that recently the old couple, once devoted, seemed to have done nothing but quarrel. Old Schroeder was dazed, vague, seemed scarcely to realise what he had done. "Committed for trial. . . ."

"Good God, how ghastly!" Trelawney put down the paper with hands that were none too steady. "That's really too awful—the police must just have come in only a few minutes after I left! I never heard anything—she must have been lying there. Oh, Lord, it's ghastly. The old brute—I wish I'd known! And he must have come straight out to serve me with this thing!"

"Oh, throw it away—throw it away!" shuddered Maisie. "It's awful! Fancy what it may have seen—he brought it out from the room behind, didn't he?"

Trelawney nodded.

"I went in to ask about a carved screen they had in the window—he knows I like oddities, and he



said he'd like to show me this. No—I won't get rid of it, May. It's an ugly story, but it's nothing to what it must have seen in the old days, if it is, as I suspect, a sacrificial mask."

Maisie turned away with a shrug, and led the way to the dining-room.

"Well," she said over her pretty shoulder, "do as you like, of course—but personally, I can't congratulate you on your taste, Jack. Come on, Miles."

Dinner was a rather constrained meal—Maisie, presumably by way of marking her displeasure with her husband, talked mainly to Miles, who, unconscious of the strain, ate hugely, laughed bluffly and talked cheerfully all through the courses, to Trelawney's increasing annoyance; he and Miles had always before been inseparable chums, and the younger man's cheery, good-tempered humour one of the joys of life—now that same humour was getting steadily and slowly on his nerves, and heavens, how that perpetual "Ha! ha!" maddened one!

Trelawney wished to goodness Maisie wouldn't laugh at all his futile jokes. Damn it, she was looking amazingly pretty in that black velvet thing; it was his frock—he'd given it to her, she was his wife, and she should know it, should be made to know it if necessary. Why should he pay for frocks that were palpably being used to attract other men? Why should Maisie sit tilting her face up towards Miles in that fashion that always drove men mad? Oh, well, women were all alike, jades every one—never mind—we should see! With a sudden shock of nausea and anger at himself, Trelawney pulled



himself sternly together and joined in the talk, but Maisie was still annoyed, and was so frigid that he relapsed into silence again, and played moodily with his bread till she gave the welcome signal for release.

Afterwards in the drawing-room, a return of the ugly mood seized Trelawney, and he insisted on bringing the mask into the drawing-room. Miles was genuinely interested, and the two men sat studying the thing and discussing it for a long time, but Maisie chose to consider it—as indeed it was!—a deliberate “slap back” for her behaviour at dinner, and was correspondingly aloof and disagreeable. At last the suppressed acrimony of the situation reached even Miles’ none-too-perceptive brain, and he relapsed into awkward silences, until the most uncomfortable evening ever spent in the Trelawney’s cheerful house drew to a close, and with a barely suppressed sigh of relief, Miles Burnaby rose to his feet and held out a large hand to his host.

“Well! Must be getting along, old man. Thanks for another awfully cheery evening——” The lie fell like a plummet into the waiting silence, and Miles hurried on. “Hope this priceless old chap you’ve got here isn’t going to bring you the rotten luck he seemed to land on old Schroeder and Co.!”

“I sometimes wish, Miles,” said Trelawney very distinctly, “that you would learn to talk a little sense for a change.”

Miles’ open mouth of astonishment was a study, but Maisie intervened.

“Jack’s got the black dog on his back to-night—all because I hate his ugly old mask,” she said sweetly. “I’m afraid you’ve had a rotten time,



Miles, you poor dear, with us two in a state of suppressed hostility all evening! Never mind—next time we'll choose an evening when Jack's away! Kiss me, Miles!"

Her charming face lifted towards the soldier's in the firelight, and Trelawney turned suddenly away, sick with the wave of red fury that surged up. The kiss that passed between the two who had loved each other so long and well as brother and sister love, seemed no longer to him the frank and innocent thing it had been till this night, when they kissed under the baleful shadow of the mask. . . .

Standing at the table, his head bent, Trelawney heard Miles cross the room, say "Good night," and slam the door. Turning, he surveyed his wife, her slim velvet-shod foot on the kerb, humming a contented little tune as she stared into the fire.

"Maisie." His voice had an odd harshness, carefully controlled. "Maisie, I won't have you kiss Miles again. D'you hear?"

The toss of her head was unmistakable, and there was a hint of steel in her voice as she answered:

"My dear Jack! Isn't it rather late in the day to try and come the early Victorian husband over me? I've always kissed dear old Miles—I shouldn't dream of hurting his feelings by stopping now, for no reason!"

"You don't seem to mind hurting *mine* by doing it!" retorted the man.

"Nor you mine by refusing to throw away things I hate like this old mask!" Maisie responded swiftly. "It doesn't matter now, though. As a matter of fact I've changed my mind. I rather admire the thing. In its horrible way it's rather



decorative. I'm going to hang it over the fireplace in the drawing-room. Now you ought to be contented—anyway, stop talking nonsense about Miles and me, and what I'm to do or not to do about him, see ? ”

The door closed after her, and Trelawney, vanquished, stared moodily into the fire. He did not look up to where the mask was resting, or he might have seen again the odd effect of the flickering flames upon it—almost, again, one might have said that it smiled. . . .

Jack Trelawney's brow was clouded as he left home for his accountants' office next morning. Things seemed no better between Maisie and himself, despite his tentative efforts at reconciliation. True to her word, Maisie had with her own hands hung the mask above the fireplace in the drawing-room, and pronounced it “ odd, as I said, but rather decorative, after all ! ”

She was nonchalantly charming to him, bidding him good-bye with a dutiful kiss on the cheek, but Jack's sensitive heart ached for the old Maisie again, teasing, possessive, full of instructions as to how he was to take care of himself this cold day, running after him for another kiss, her warm lips pursed to meet his. With a frowning brow he read through his letters, dictated answers to his secretary, answered telephone calls and interviewed impatient clients, and at last by dint of savage work managed to deaden a little the pain at his heart—lunch-time was almost in sight when a messenger knocked at the door. Trelawney looked up with a brusque “ come in ”



and jumped, for the blue helmet of a stalwart constable loomed over the glass half-door.

"What on earth . . ." The door closed, and the policeman saluted, moving heavily into the room. Trelawney's face was blank with astonishment and consternation, not lessened when the man in blue fished out a note-book and pencil.

"Excuse me, sir. Only called to arsk a few questions about the murder and sooicide at Schroeder's yesterday—from the hentry in the old man's books, sir, you was the last person served, and it's thought you might be able to help us with a little information, sir?"

"Suicide? I only knew there had been a murder?" interrupted Trelawney, suddenly remembering he had been so preoccupied that he had never seen a morning paper. The constable nodded.

"Old man committed sooicide late larst night in the cell where he was waitin' his trial—strangled himself with his braces. Now what we want to know, sir, do you know anything about a marsk?"

Trelawney jumped—the question was so unexpected.

"Mask? Yes, of course I do. I bought a mask from him that day—a sort of Chinese thing, I think. Why?"

"Don't know where he got it—anything of its hist'ry, like?"

The constable was ponderously ploughing on his official way, regardless of Trelawney's question—the latter shrugged his shoulders.

"No—I don't know a thing. He professed ignorance as to where it came from, even—why do you ask?"



"Why? Because he was calling and screaming out about the thing like a lunatic all the way to the station—and all the time he was locked up too. Going on awful he was—telling it to keep away, or close its eyes, because he'd done all it wanted—awful it was, I give you my word, sir. Seems stoopid, but I was told to c'lect information about it. . . . So you're quite sure you can't throw any light on this here matter, sir?"

Trelawney's decided negative closed the interview, and the constable creaked slowly out. Alone, Trelawney stood frowning, his head on the mantelpiece, thinking. Pretty horrible, what? Telling it to keep away, or close its eyes—come to think of it, the thing's eyes, or rather eye-holes, *were* rather unpleasant; narrow and almost with a beastly sort of laugh in them. Where *did* the thing come from, anyway? Perhaps Maisie had been right, as she often was, and he would have been better advised to re-sell the head.

Poor little Maisie! By Jove, she *had* been upset last night! He had been a bad-tempered brute, anyway, and she deserved a treat to make up.

There was a new show at the Lyric—what about going to-night?

Acting on impulse, Trelawney took up the receiver and rang up his home number. The answer came promptly—the maid speaking. Trelawney's face darkened suddenly as he listened, and with a curse he slammed the receiver home. His square-chinned face was not good to look upon as he flung on his hat and went out to lunch, muttering viciously to himself.

"Out motoring with Miles, eh? Not likely to be



back till late, so don't bother about waiting dinner ! My God, Maisie, you're playing a dangerous game with me ! ”

Business suffered badly during the rest of the day, for Trelawney was quite incapable of diverting his mind from its growing obsession of jealousy, and he snapped furiously at his clerks till they wisely put away any further important business matters till the following day, when “the boss” might have recovered his usual genial temper. Twice he rang up his home, to discover that no further news had been received of Maisie—going home through the driving rain in a taxi, he sat glowering out at the wet streets and hurrying crowds with the dark mood riding his shoulders like the veritable black dog of Maisie's laughing remark, and ate his solitary dinner in a silence that grew grimmer and more grim as the hours wore on and Maisie did not return. Stretched at full length in a huge chair before the fire, the mask above his bent head staring out into the gloom of the big room, only lighted by the flaming heaped coals in the wide grate, the man brooded, chin on hand, seeing in the red heart of the fire endless pictures of the two, Maisie and Miles, each of which added fuel to the fire that was slowly rising in his jealous heart. Pictures, too, of the past year, that had been so entirely happy and blessed till last night, now such untold ages ago. Till their quarrel, the quarrel over that mask—everything seemed to have gone wrong since he bought the wretched thing !

How Maisie had hated it at first, yet now she didn't seem to mind it ; she had hung it there above the mantelpiece with her own pretty hands . . . funny, how the firelight leaping up then seemed to give the



thing a horrible look of life ! Almost as if it smiled, and the eye-slits looked down at him oddly, obliquely . . . whoever it was taken from, he must have been a horrible old devil, with a taste for blood. . . . Getting up from his seat, Trelawney stood staring at the head, hung on a level with his own to the left of the tall mirror that occupied the centre of the space above the mantelpiece.

"Now what put that into my head, I wonder ?" he muttered, as his troubled grey eyes wandered over the sinister, fine-drawn face etched clearly in the leaping firelight. "I suppose it's that murder business. *What* did the old man say ? 'Turn your eyes away' or something of the sort ? 'I've done what you wanted'—extraordinary idea ! I suppose it was a mask worn by some priest for sacrifices—perhaps human—who knows ? Anyway, you old brute, I suppose one of those psychic asses would get a fine yarn out of your 'thirst for blood' still fulfilling itself . . ."

The words died away, and Trelawney's gaze was fixed on the curious, dreadful hollows where eyes should be—his jaw was dropped, a little slack, and his eyes were dull and fixed. Holes in a mask—blank hollows where human eyes had once looked out on horrors unspeakable, orgies of blood and evil ! Holes, blank and black and eyeless—yet *were* they eyeless, in truth ? In the leaping flicker of the firelight, how could one be sure that eyes no longer hid behind those long slits in that lean and terrible countenance, wreathing now into a faint but significant grin of knowledge and understanding as those dark holes, alight now with horrible life, stared back into Trelawney's own ?



Gripping the edge of the mantelpiece with his trembling hands, the man tried dimly to pull himself together, to withdraw his gaze from those awful hollows where his very soul seemed to be sinking, disappearing into some wild, dark vortex wherein sanity, decency, all that made him a man must inevitably drown and vanish! Wider and wider wreathed the sardonic grin on the lean, leathern face, crossed and recrossed with lines of age-old evil, as the blank black eyes glared into his, and from them seemed to flow a sort of spiritual miasma, a dark, slow flood of mental poison that was slowly but with ghastly sureness sucking down, drowning, extinguishing, all that went to make a sane and well-balanced man!

The clock ticked slowly, distinctly into the dead silence. The tiny flop of a breaking coal, the cheep and scutter of a mouse behind the wainscoat—otherwise, not a sound broke the hush of the waiting-room, where Jack Trelawney, clean, healthy Englishman, clung to the stone mantel, drawing little sobbing breaths that barely stirred the warm air, his eyes blank and fixed, his mind wandering at large in strange and dreadful lands!

Dark glades and a lowering sky, and strange figures that followed a faint flickering light to a distant hill-top where, between the twisted trunks of a group of trees, another light glistened, a light blue-green and horrible . . . blue flames dancing on a crude altar about which moved a shadowy throng of horrible shapes! The sound of drums beating, softly, maddeningly, and a voice that chanted, muffled, as though singing from behind a mask . . . a chorus of voices that took up the chant,



and at last one high-pitched scream of shrill and dreadful agony as the blue flame leapt high and showed in the flash of a moment a knife dripping blood, held in the hand of a masked figure stooping over a writhing form! Then a mad dancing whirl of cruel faces daubed with a crimson that stained more deeply than any dye, and the rising of the blue flame triumphant into the midnight skies, as the dance waxed wilder and more terrible in that dread orgy of blood-worship wherein, naked, screaming and horribly glad, man forgot he was man and made in the image of God, and returned to his primeval filth! The drums throbbed whimpering throughout the quiet room, the distant voices screamed, hysterical, abandoned, and all the time the masked figure chanted, chanted beside the blue flame. . . . *The mask. The mask. . . .*

The grind of a car stopping outside the house broke across the infernal spell that held the man standing frozen, hypnotised, beside the fire. Livid, shaking, Trelawney released his grip of the mantelpiece and, fumbling for his handkerchief, wiped his wet brow. Yet it was not the old Trelawney, genial, jolly, open-hearted, that peeped between the thick window-curtains at Miles and Maisie ascending the steps, and after rummaging in a drawer at the writing-table, crouched away behind those same curtains, one furtive hand clenched about the butt of a revolver!

Laughing and chattering, Maisie came in, unbuttoning her thick grey motor wrap—for Miles, open-air fiend, insisted on an open roadster. The old Trelawney? Was it the old Maisie who, glancing hurriedly about her, said in a whisper:



"It's all right, darling," and turning, held out her arms to Miles.

Trelawney's fingers clenched tighter, but he forbore. No! Let her hang herself completely, damn her, and the fellow too! Wait—wait—and he'd get 'em both. . . . Miles, his open brow creased by an anxious frown, switched on the light and came half hesitatingly forward.

"Maisie—I don't know whether I'd better stay. Where's Jack?"

Ill at ease, vaguely uncomfortable, he stood looking down at the girl on the hearthrug. Above them the mask grinned, as she reached up to put her arms round his neck.

"Jack—Jack—he's asleep—fed up with me for running off with you, Miles!" she laughed, drawing her slender length up against the soldier's stalwart frame. Still uneasy, he held her away, frowning, puzzled.

"Wait awhile, May. Look here, old thing, there's something wrong to-night. I swear there is! You—we never acted like this before . . . and you know . . ." The lame sentence was drowned as she laid a slim hand across his mouth and laughed up into his troubled eyes.

"Silly—don't argue! Now you know you never kissed me yesterday—you stopped half-way, you ungallant boy. Kiss me now, Miles—oh, kiss me, kiss me, kiss me . . .!"

A red flame darted before Trelawney's eyes as he saw their lips meet in a wildly passionate kiss. With a hoarse laugh of rage that, strangely enough, seemed to be echoed and surrounded by another and a more terrible laugh that seemed to fill and



deafen the very air around him, he flung the curtain aside and stood revealed, the revolver level in his hand. Even as he pulled the trigger he saw the mask, sharply distinct in the light, its cruel mouth all awry with awful merriment, its blank eyes alight and blazing, watching him. . . .

“Jack! Jack! Jack, dearest—look at me!” Surely it was Maisie’s voice, her old loving, darling voice, shaking with tears and full of love? From a long way off, it seemed to Trelawney, that voice penetrated through a thickness of gloom and dark terror and anguish that had for untold ages hidden him.

With a great effort he opened his eyes, and blinking up in the strong light, looked straight into his wife’s anxious face, and above it, Miles’ square, honest countenance, fixed in a portentous frown of anxiety. Feebly reaching after memory, Trelawney whispered:

“Maisie—Miles! Why—I thought you—what’s happened? Have I dreamt everything?” He struggled into a sitting position, his head against Maisie’s knees, and on doing so his foot knocked against something, and he glanced down with a sudden cry. The mask lay in pieces on the hearth-rug—he stretched out a curious hand, but Maisie stopped him with a cry of dismay.

“Don’t, Jack—don’t touch it again! It’s horrible—it’s wicked!”

Trelawney’s eyes, rapidly regaining their old brightness and sanity, widened as he looked from Miles to her and back again. The soldier nodded



frankly, and kicked a fragment of the mask away as Trelawney spoke.

"I—can't remember clearly. But I thought—I thought I saw you two . . ."

Flushing a dull scarlet, Miles nodded, and Maisie gripped her husband's hand.

"There's no use lying, Jack, old man. For a crazy moment or two—while this beastly horror was hanging there, only!—something seemed to take us both by the throat! I swear that though I've always been awfully fond of May as a brother, I never had the remotest feeling for her any other way, nor she for me, I'll take my solemn oath. But somehow, as I say, for a moment something happened to us both—but it's gone now, for ever, and everything's clear again. You *do* believe me, old man?"

Trelawney's old, frankly affectionate glance met his, as he held out his hand.

"You don't need to ask, my dear old chap! Now things are coming back to me again. I remember now, faintly, some of the awful things I seemed to see when I was looking at the mask. . . . I seemed to go off into a sort of dream of sacrifices and magic and lust and blood and the Lord knows what sort of horrors . . ."

Maisie broke in.

"I believe you were right all along, Jack. It must have been a thing somehow used to having blood sacrifices before it, and tried to get them again—I believe old Schroeder's murdering his wife was done under the same influence."

Trelawney shuddered as he put his arms round his wife and buried his head in her soft shoulder.

"Good God! To think that I nearly fed the vile



thing with a double sacrifice to-night—how I missed you I don't know!"

"You slipped a little on the polished floor," supplied Miles, "and that just saved us all, for your shot went wide and crashed full into the mask. It fell on the hearthrug just as you made for me, and we rolled about fighting each other and rolled on top of the mask—you were still mad, but the minute the mask smashed, May and I got sane at once, and the one thing she was screaming about the whole time was for *me* not to hurt *you*! Well, that scrap of ours finally flattened the thing to smithereens, so all's well. And we're all three out of the most awful danger we're ever likely to meet this side of hell, where I believe that devilish mask was made."

"How did you know it was the mask that had that effect on all of us?" Trelawney asked curiously.

Miles frowned.

"Once in India I came across something of much the same sort. And, too, I had a funny feeling about the thing directly I saw it," admitted Miles, for once shedding his English dislike of admitting any belief in the supernatural. "And what made me *certain* was that the second the thing was broken the—well, the sort of passion that May and I had for each other just for that moment when we kissed, all vanished as clean as a whistle, and we were back in the common-sense, cousinly, affectionate atmosphere again, thank the Lord. And all we wanted was to stop *you* hurting yourself till you came to your senses. That took longer with you, I suppose, since you let the thing hypnotise you more or less. Anyway, thank heaven it's smashed up and done for now, and nobody else can suffer what we've been through.



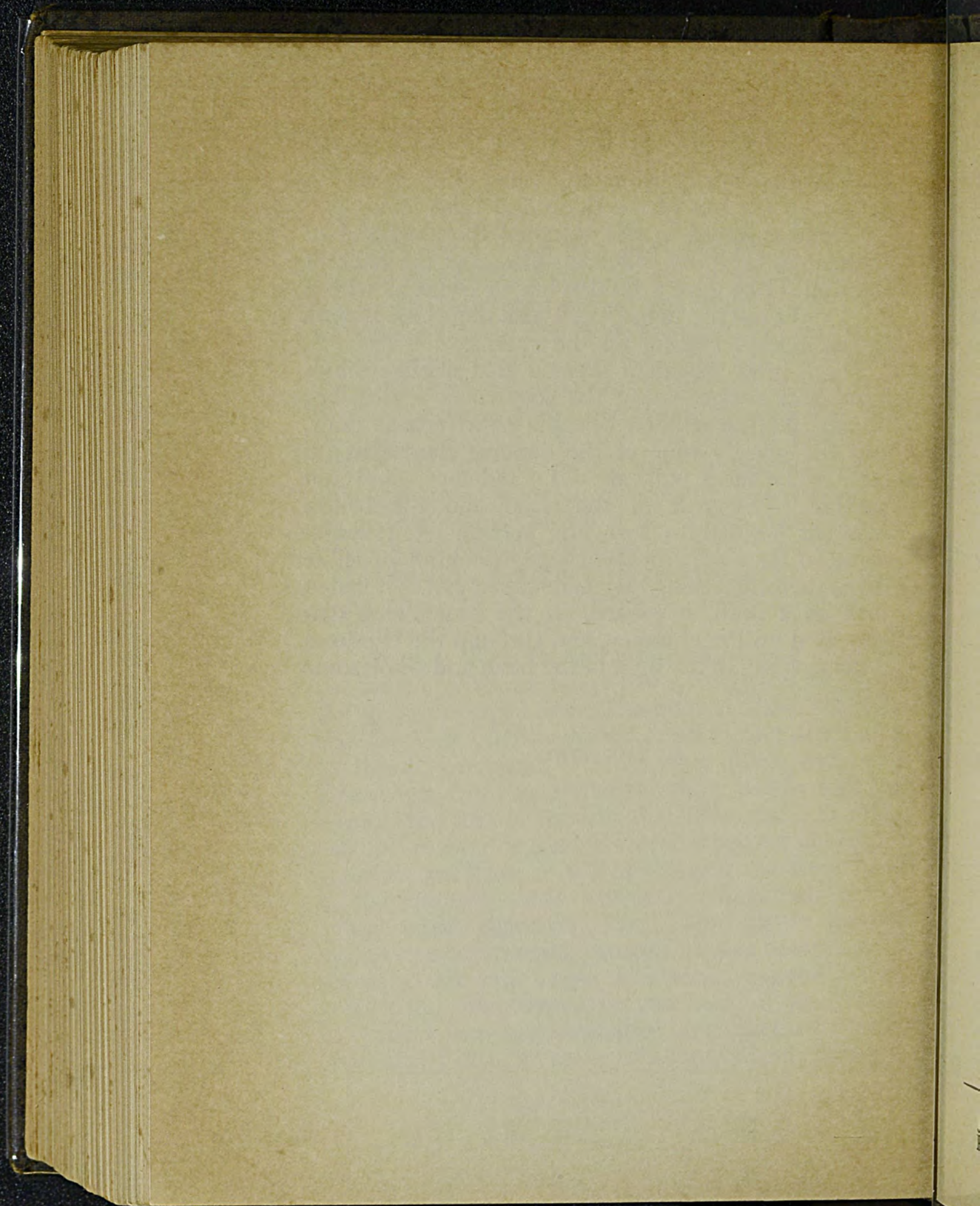
Now with your permission, May, I'm going to gather up the bits of the thing and burn 'em."

Maisie shivered as she watched the shovelful of fragments, carefully collected, placed at the back of the fire. Then gave a sudden cry of fright as with a crackle the electric lights fused, as a huge blue tongue of flame leapt roaring up the chimney!

For a brief second it seemed that a huge wind, fierce and savage, swept the cosy room with a hot breath like the sudden opening of a furnace door, and the ghastly blue of the dancing flames lit up their white faces with an awful radiance, livid and terrible. The roar of the wind and the flames together seemed to soar and scream as if something in frenzied, impotent rage shook an invisible fist at them, shrieking fury and baffled evil as it fled—then in a flash, it passed, as the blue flame disappeared up the chimney, and through the windows came peeping in the light of the fresh and wholesome dawn.

THE END









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*Thirty-three years old and married, Thomas Bell was born in Braddock, Pennsylvania, where his father was a steel worker and a bartender. He got a job at fifteen in the steel mills, and has since worked in railway shops, electric shops, a machine shop, and a book store. He also went to sea for two years. His two previous novels are "Equestrian Portrait" and "Striker Go Down".*



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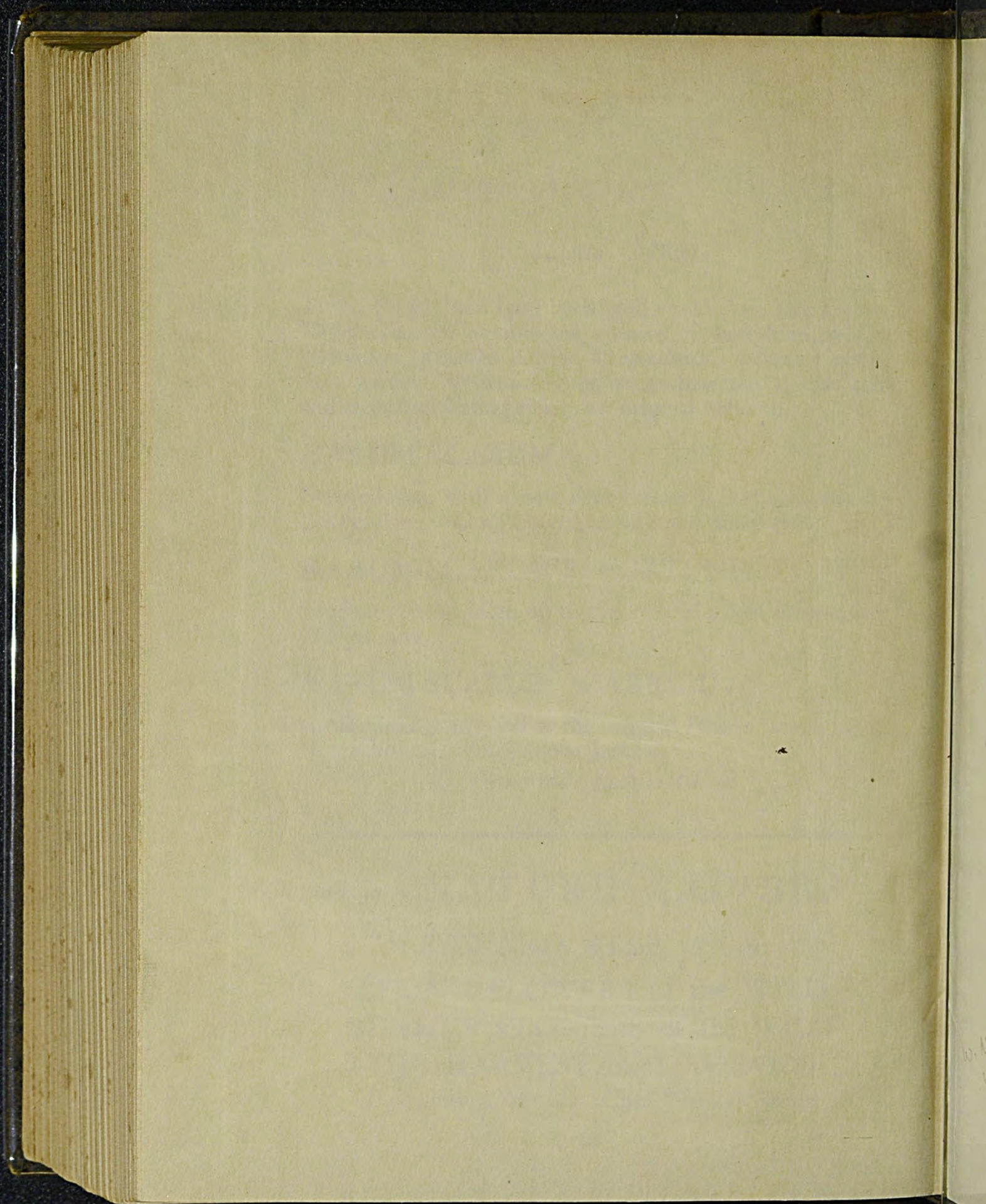
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