

THE THREE DAYS' TERROR



BY
J·S·Fletcher

THE THREE DAYS' TERROR

By the Same Author

WHEN CHARLES THE FIRST WAS KING

THE PATHS OF THE PRUDENT

THE BUILDERS

LIFE IN ARCADIA

THE WONDERFUL WAPENTAKE

GOD'S FAILURES

THE HARVESTERS

MISTRESS SPITFIRE

THE MAKING OF MATTHIAS

MORRISON'S MACHINE

WHERE HIGHWAYS CROSS

A PICTURESQUE HISTORY OF YORKSHIRE

3 Vols.

THE THREE DAYS' TERROR

By

J. S. Fletcher

Author of

"When Charles the First was King," "The Harvesters,"
"The Paths of the Prudent," etc.



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TO

ROSAMOND

MY FICTION FOR HER FACTS

LONDON

New Year's Eve, 1900

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CHAPTER I.

THE NEW MEMBER FOR CORNCHESTER.

THE newly elected member of Parliament for the borough of Cornchester stood by the open door of the reserved compartment in which he was to travel to London, and shook hands, one by one, with certain gentlemen who, as principal supporters of him and his party during the election, had earned the right to give him a final benediction. The hand-shaking was warm and cordial, and quite free from any appearance of mere ceremony. It wound up with the oldest man of the group, a tall, white-haired old gentleman, who took the young member's hand in his own with something of a fatherly gesture.

"Well, good-bye, Mr Graham," he said. "You carry away with you the best and warmest wishes of all of us—of the whole town, sir. We shall watch your future career with no common interest. We have reposed a great trust in you, sir, and we are confident that we shall never regret it."

Graham's face, youthful almost to boyishness, flushed with emotion as he responded to the pressure of his chairman's hand.

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"That you shall not, sir, God helping me!" he said, warmly. "And in whatever duty I do, as your representative I shall never forget all the kindness that has been shown me. I hope to see you all again ere very long, and to——"

"We're due out, sir," said the guard, with polite insistence. "Now, gentlemen, please."

Graham sprang into his compartment, and the door closed sharply behind him. He let down the window and leaned out as the train began to move slowly forward.

"Good-bye, good-bye, everybody!" he said, with the cheery smile and frank manner that had gained him so many friends in Cornchester during the storm and stress of the previous fortnight. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, sir, and good luck!" cried the agent. He lifted his hat, and the other men followed his example. Their united voices reached Graham as he waved his own in answer to their salutation; then they grew faint, the people on the platform were resolved into a blurred, indistinct mass, the great wheels revolved with swifter movements, and in another moment the Great Northern express was steaming steadily across the meadows outside the little town.

Graham sank back on the soft cushions with a sigh of supreme satisfaction. He looked out upon the level land over which the train was now rushing with swift, irresistible advance, and it seemed to him that he had never seen an English landscape look so fair. It was not yet noon, and the June sunlight was flooding the fields and woods

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with the glory of the morning, and gilding spire and gable with its beams until they shone like burnished gold. Everything seemed full of the joy of life, and the new sense of triumph, unfettered yet by cares and responsibilities, which Graham felt in his heart, accorded with its fulness. Never in all his life had he experienced a greater sense of satisfaction with the mere fact of existence—something within him was urging him to sing, even to dance, for the mere delight of being alive, and it was only through a sense of unfitness that he restrained himself from throwing his hat up to the roof of the railway carriage and indulging in a wild whoop of boyish delight.

That Henry Graham had good and adequate reason for feeling that all was right with the world and himself that June morning, no one need wonder to whom all the circumstances which surrounded him are communicated. He was young, rich, clever, and healthy, and Fortune had blessed him as she blesses very few of us. Ever since his boyhood she had been showering gifts upon him which most men strive all their lives to obtain, and usually die without laying hold of. Nothing seemed impossible to him. Without appearing to work unduly hard, he had gone up from Rugby to Oxford with something more than a reputation, and nobody was in the least surprised when he took a brilliant degree. Everybody prophesied that he would make a name for himself and possibly become something of a power in the land : the only debatable question was—What will Graham turn to? That question he allowed to remain unanswered for

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a year after leaving the university, and during that year he travelled from one European capital to another, devoting most of his time to Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. Then he came home and answered the question which his friends were asking. A new Ministry was in process of formation, and Graham's uncle, Mr Wynyard, who in previous Governments had been respectively President of the Board of Trade and Secretary for the Colonies, was made Chancellor of the Exchequer. Within a week of Graham's return, all his friends knew that he had undertaken the duties of—unpaid—private secretary to Mr Wynyard, and that he meant to go in for politics.

It had been a characteristic of Graham's life so far, that whatever he did was done thoroughly, and it soon became evident that, having made choice of what in popular parlance is called a walk in life, he meant to devote himself to its duties and responsibilities with energy and resolution. He worked hard and constantly, and became almost indispensable to Mr Wynyard, who, having much affection for him, and possessing great confidence in his talents, was not slow in noising his nephew's praises abroad. He was much in evidence at the House, was liked by men of all parties, and was soon talked of as a likely recruit to the Government forces. No one was surprised when, on a vacancy occurring at Cornchester, Graham was put forward as the Ministerial Candidate. Two or three men who had been urging their claims as contestants of safe seats on the wirepullers for some time, grumbled in a quiet way because a mere boy of

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four-and-twenty was preferred to them, but they were too well aware that Graham was a species of spoiled darling of the party to dare to say anything aloud. Everybody, from the Prime Minister, Lord Grandminster, downwards, was agreed that Mr Wynyard's brilliant young kinsman ought to be in the House, and regarded the sudden vacancy at Cornchester as being quite providential.

Cornchester had always been regarded as a safe seat for the Ministerialists, and Graham was somewhat disappointed when the Chief Whip and the local agent informed him, jointly and severally, that his opponent would not have the least chance against him. He had wanted to experience the joys of a stiff electoral campaign, to feel the excitement increasing in intensity day by day, and to mount to victory at last a short head in front of a formidable rival. Finding, however, that these joys were not to be his, Graham made up his mind that he should not be satisfied unless he doubled the majority by which the previous member had been returned at the last election. He went down to Cornchester with this idea firmly fixed in his mind, and threw himself heart and soul into the contest with the intention of carrying it out. His cheerful and sunny nature, his frank manner and genial courtesies, did as much to help him as the clear common-sense which revealed itself in his speeches, and it soon became evident that he would not only win the election, but succeed in drawing a part of the electors of the opposite side over to his own camp. In the end it was found that his majority exceeded that of the previous member by nearly a

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thousand votes, and he was now returning to town satisfied that he had transformed the easy victory which had been prophesied for him into something like a great triumph.

As the express sped onward across the great level plains which extend nearly all the way from Cornchester to London, Graham spent most of the time in thinking over the events of the past few days and of the career which lay before him. He was human enough, and it pleased him greatly to know that during his brief sojourn amongst his constituency he had made many friends and no enemies. He might regard Cornchester as a safe seat for ever, somebody had enthusiastically remarked to him just after the declaration of the poll, and it certainly looked at present as if he might. But there were other matters to think of than these. Graham was ambitious—ambitious as only a clever man who knows his own power can be. He meant to be a force in England, to lead men, to strengthen his party, and in certain respects to reform and improve it. His face grew grave, and he sat thinking for a long time of the responsibilities which lay before him. He was not the sort of man, despite his sunny nature and cheerful temperament, to esteem things in a light manner, and he had already seen enough of life to know that it is a serious affair and not to be danced through.

It was not until Peterborough had been passed and the train had settled down for its final long run into London, that Graham opened the newspapers with which he had provided himself at Cornchester. They were of all sorts and of all

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shades of opinion, from *The Times* to the *Cornchester Herald*, and each had a good deal to say about Graham's victory. According to the ministerial organs, that victory meant much to the Government. It showed that public belief in the Government was healthy and increasing, and that the policy which had hitherto been carried out had met with the full approval of the electorate. As for the opposition papers, they had little to say, save that Mr Graham's very attractive personality and his evident great talents had exercised a considerable influence upon the electors of Cornchester. It was all very pleasant and very gratifying, and Graham smiled as he laid the last newspaper down.

"I wonder if Evie has read all these things?" he said to himself. "If so, she will doubtless have cut them all out, trimmed the edges very neatly, and tied the bundle up with blue ribbon. I must go there first—it seems an age since I saw her."

And after that, the thought of his sweetheart having come into his mind with irresistible force, Graham forgot all about his election and his new glories and dignities, and was merely impatient for the express to reach King's Cross. He had been engaged to his cousin, Evelyn Wynyard, for one short month ere political exigencies called him away to Cornchester, and the politician was now lost in the impatient lover as he thought of all that returning to her, armed with the spoils of victory, would mean. He sighed impatiently as the train rattled along through Huntingdon, and Hatfield, and Barnet, and hailed the first peep of the great city's outskirts with a feeling of devout thankfulness.

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The train ran into King's Cross at last and came to rest, like a tired thing, alongside the dingy arrival platform. Graham's servant, who had amused himself all the way from Cornchester by narrating the incidents of the election to a compartment full of interested listeners, appeared at the door of his carriage with remarkable promptitude, and began to collect his master's impedimenta. Graham got out and walked across the platform, searching for his brougham amongst the mass of cabs and carriages lined up beyond the barriers. Suddenly the sound of his own name, spoken by a voice which he knew better than any in the world, made him turn sharply.

"Harry!"

"Evie! You here?—but how good of you, dearest. You knew that I was travelling by this train?"

The people round about, intent as they were on their own affairs, paused in whatever they were doing to look at these two young people as they stood holding each other's hands perhaps a trifle longer than was necessary. The same thought passed through the minds of all of them—the thought that it was not often that one saw such a handsome couple. Graham, dark of hair, eyes, and complexion, tall, slight, and muscular, formed a striking contrast to Evelyn Wynyard, whose sunny hair, rose-tinted cheeks, and laughing violet eyes were suggestive somehow of an English June. She, too, was tall for a woman and eminently graceful of figure, and now, as she stood with her hand in her lover's, her cheeks flushed and eyes

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moist at the pleasure of meeting him, she made a picture at which every passer-by felt inclined to stop and gaze. Graham suddenly recognised this, and drew her aside.

"How good of you to meet me!" he said, again. "I was coming to you at once—the time has seemed very long, Evie."

"Has it?" she answered. "So it has to me, dear. And I was half afraid that you might drive straight to the House—you are to take your seat this afternoon, are you not?—and I wanted to see you first, so I drove round here — there's the brougham."

"And there's mine," said Graham, recognising his own amongst the crush. "Stay a moment, Evie, and I'll pack Wilson off with my things and go home with you—I shan't go down to the House before four o'clock."

In a few minutes the two lovers were driving away through the crowded streets. Graham forgot everything but the fact that he was once more with the woman he loved; he took her hand in his, and they sat for a long time in silence, looking at each other. At last Evelyn spoke.

"And so you are really a Member of Parliament, Harry?" she said, with an affectionate glance. "I was half afraid lest you should descend from the train looking ten years older on account of your new responsibilities, but you are just the same, except that you look rather tired and a little worn. How did everything go off? Was everybody very nice and pleased with you, and did they seem to like your speeches?"

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"Everybody was most pleasant," answered Graham, smiling. "You would have been quite amused if you had seen the becks, and nods, and wreathed smiles which I received from the ladies. I am quite an authority on various matters of which I knew nothing until I went to Cornchester. Babies, for example—I forget how many I have had presented to me during the past fortnight."

"How amusing!" said Evelyn. "But you must have worked very hard, dear, to get such a majority. Papa is immensely pleased about it, and so is Lord Grandminster. And the papers!—I have cut out all the leading articles and put them safely aside."

Graham laughed again and pressed his sweetheart's hand. He was wondering if it were possible for a man to be happier than he was at that moment. It was delightful to be in London again, to see the familiar, dingy, dusty streets, to hear the well-known roar and rattle of the ceaseless traffic, to feel that curious beating of the nation's pulse which one can only hear in the metropolis. It was delightful, too, to feel that one had come back to the centre of things empowered by a section of the nation to take part in the government of the country, to help to make laws and to provide for the happiness of the people and the security of the empire. But it was more delightful still to be with the woman one loved, to feel one's hand holding hers, to see the light in her eyes and smile, and beyond all, to know that one's coming had made her unfeignedly happy.

"It's good to be alive, Evie," he said, suddenly,

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after they had sat for some moments in silence. "It's very good. But it's very solemn, too."

The girl's hand tightened on his with a quick, instinctive pressure, and she turned her face, full of feeling, towards him with a confidence which showed how well they understood each other.

"Yes," she said, quietly, "I know, Harry. I've been feeling it all the morning. It's when one is happiest that one feels most. I understand, dear."

After that they said no more until they reached the Wynyards' house in Berkeley Square. They went straight to the library expecting to find Mr Wynyard there, but the room was empty.

"Since its master is out, I must perform the house's devoirs," said Evelyn, with a laugh. She turned and held out her hands to her lover. "Welcome, sir—welcome to the member for Cornchester!" she said, gaily.

Then Graham took her into his arms and her lips met his.

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNT DE REINEVILLE.

THE Chancellor of the Exchequer came in just as Graham and Evelyn were about to sit down to lunch in his absence, and greeted his nephew with great warmth and cordiality.

"Ah, Harry, my boy!" he exclaimed. "Here you are, with all your blushing honours thick upon you. I congratulate you heartily—you have done most excellently, and everybody is delighted. Grandminster sent me a very cordial message late last night. There is no doubt that your splendid majority will strengthen our hands greatly—you have read the newspapers, no doubt? I think I saw Evelyn cutting the leading articles out this morning very industriously."

"Oh, they are all put quite safely away, papa!" said Evelyn. "I intend keeping them until Harry grows old and conceited, and I shall then bring them out, just to prove to him that he was once a neophyte."

"He'll learn that very soon, my dear," said Wynyard, drily. "'Tis a good thing that he enters the House at such a callow age—he will attain wisdom ere the years of wisdom are supposed to

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come. Well, Harry, I suppose you are to take your seat this afternoon. Who introduces you?"

"Hesketh, the member for South Broadshire, sir, for one, and Bellasis for the other," answered Graham. "Both were extremely kind in helping me at Cornchester—Bellasis made some most effective speeches."

"Bellasis is a clever fellow," said Wynyard; "very clever indeed. He spoke last night—quite a short speech, but full of good sense. Of course you are well drilled in the ordeal, Harry? It is something of a farce; I am always reminded of the baptismal service by it."

"Oh, I think I shall get through it," replied Graham, laughing. "I have seen it so often. Evelyn will doubtless tell me very plainly what the effect was when we next meet."

"I know quite well that you will all look ridiculous," said Evelyn, laughingly. "Mr Hesketh so resembles the conventional pictures of John Bull, and Mr Bellasis invariably fixes his eye-glass and immediately loses it when he is at all perturbed, and you, Harry, will look like a criminal at the bar. It is really a dreadful ceremony."

"There are a good many men who would give half their fortunes to stand in Harry's shoes to-day, though," said Wynyard, eying his daughter with a fond glance. "By-the-bye, Evie, I dine at home to-night, and Harry will dine with us. I want you, Harry, to meet a gentleman who is to dine here—I quite forgot to tell you about that, Evie, I'm afraid—the Count de Reineville, who is in London for a few weeks. He is a man of singular attain-

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ments and of great reputation as a scientist. I met him a day or two ago at Lord Grandminster's—you know how fond the Prime Minister is of scientific pursuits. I met him again this morning, and asked him to dine here to-night. It is a private members' night, Harry; we need not go back to the House."

"What is the Count de Reineville like, papa?" asked Evelyn. "Is he young, or old?"

"To that very feminine question, my dear, I can only make answer that the Count de Reineville appears to me to be a man of thirty, that he is not at all handsome, not what we vulgarly call a lady's man, and in nowise like the count of the cheap romance," answered Wynyard. "There, is that satisfying?"

"Quite so," said Evelyn. "But how uninteresting your description is! I suppose he talks science, and finance, and the higher metaphysics."

"He is certainly a very remarkable man," said Wynyard. "Well, I must hurry away. Harry, can I drop you anywhere? I have time to leave you at the Albany if you are going there."

"Thanks, sir, but Evelyn has promised to drive me round there on her way to the House," said Graham.

"Then I shall see you in the House about four o'clock," said Wynyard, rising, "and we will drive home together at half past seven. You must go to bed early to-night, Harry. That is the best place for fledgling members of Parliament, isn't it, Evie?"

The two lovers, left alone, evinced a disposition to linger, until Graham, suddenly glancing at the

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clock, leapt to his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

"Evie!" he said, "it's a quarter past three, and I'm due at the House at four. We must hurry; I promised to meet Hesketh at the Megatherium at ten minutes to four."

"There's the brougham at the door now," said Evelyn. "Come along, dear—you won't be late. Poor dear!—how nervous you must feel about it; it must be dreadful to have to walk up the floor with so many pairs of eyes fixed upon you. Never mind, it will soon be over, and I will tell you exactly how you looked. I am going on with Cynthia Beachcroft."

"If we do anything ridiculous, Cynthia Beachcroft will see its every point and possibility," said Graham, with mock horror. "Please beg of her to be lenient with us. Tell her that Hesketh can't help his figure, and that Bellasis is not really nervous."

"Oh, Cynthia will be merciful," laughed Evelyn. Then, as they drove away, she said, with a sudden change of tone, "I say, dear, I wish papa had not asked the Count de Reineville for to-night—it would have been so much nicer if I had had just papa and you all to myself for one evening. It is so seldom that we three are ever alone, isn't it, Harry?"

"It's one of the responsibilities of public life, Evie," said Graham. "I have often had the same feeling myself—the longing for the old days when we were children in the country. Do you remember them?"

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Evelyn nodded her head dreamily, and her eyes assumed a far-away expression.

"What a lot of freckles you always had, Harry!" she said. "And you were always so—so dirty and untidy. Your head was like a mop."

"And you were a perfect fright," he retorted, laughing. "A great, overgrown slip of a girl, all legs and wings, as old Mrs Grant used to observe so very candidly."

"Poor old Grantie," said Evelyn. "I wish she could see Master Harry take his seat as Member for Cornchester. Ah! here's the Albany. Now, Harry, dear, don't be nervous. Remember I shall watch you most critically from my perch behind Mr Speaker. And don't let papa be late for dinner—I have no wish to talk science or finance with this clever guest of his for an hour."

She drove away, and Graham turned into the Albany with the radiance of her smile reflected on his own face. He changed his clothes hurriedly, and went off to the Megatherium to meet Hesketh, who, after a brief inspection of Graham's brougham, declined to entrust his bulk to such a ladylike-looking vehicle, and insisted on walking through the Horse Guards down to the House. Graham began to fume and fret, but Hesketh was imperturbable, and took his way across the parade ground with great respect for his weight, and with serene contempt for his companion's fidgetiness.

"You're all right, Graham," he said. "I know how you feel—all young members are like that—I've known scores of them. I'll see that you're all right."

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Nevertheless, when they reached the House, it was to find Bellasis in a state of almost speechless anxiety, and just in time to hear the solemn call for new members to come forward. Graham was conscious that his feet carried him up the floor, that Hesketh was panting and groaning on one side, and that Bellasis was performing strange tricks with his eye-glass on the other, that the men on the Government side of the House were welcoming the new Member for Cornchester with unusual cordiality, and that certain mysteries were performed at the table in which himself and the clerk played the principal parts. He was also conscious that he shook hands very affectionately with Mr Speaker and with sundry gentlemen who seemed to swim or float on the Treasury Bench—and after that he was not very conscious of anything until he found Wynyard patting him on the shoulder outside the House.

“That was very pleasant, Harry,” said the genial minister. “Very nice effect—I should think Hesketh had been rehearsing it. Supposing you rescue Evelyn and her friend Cynthia from the Ladies’ Gallery and give them some tea on the terrace—that might restore your shattered nerves.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Graham, still only dimly conscious that he had passed through an ordeal of some sort. “I’ll seek them out at once. It is certainly rather a trying experience.”

“Well, my boy, you’ll never go through it again, you know,” laughed Wynyard. “It’s one of those things which one can only do once in a lifetime. There, run away with you.”

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He gave his nephew an affectionate pat on the arm and strolled slowly back into the House, there to bestow his burly figure between those of two colleagues of the Front Bench, and to give a perfunctory attention to an orator who was introducing a Bill for the Better Management of Parish Pumps, and had already worked himself into a state of high indignation because of the apathy of the Government in the matter.

Graham, rescuing Evelyn and Miss Beachcroft from the retreat provided by male wisdom for such females as desire to visit the House of Commons, conducted them to the Terrace in something of a chastened silence. It was not yet an hour since Evelyn had left him at the Albany, and yet it seemed to Graham that long ages had elapsed since then, so dreadful had his recent ordeal proved.

When they had reached a quiet part of the Terrace and had sat down, they looked into each other's eyes with interrogative glances. Then both began to laugh, softly at first and afterwards with genuine enjoyment of the situation. Cynthia Beachcroft, who had a great reputation for her perceptive powers, regarded them with attention.

"But how beautiful, to take it in that way!" she remarked. "Thank you so much, Mr Graham, for providing us with so interesting an exhibition of how the male animal does things. As an object lesson it was most satisfactory."

"It was delightful," said Evelyn. "The grace of Mr Hesketh!"

"The charming concern of Mr Bellasis!" said Miss Beachcroft.

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"The unconcern of Mr Speaker!"

"The cordiality of the Front Bench!"

"And the hang-dog look of the chief criminal," said Graham, laughing. "I am sure that must have been the most amusing feature of the whole performance. However, it's over, and now will you have some tea?"

"Ought not you to go back and offer thanks for your kindly reception?" enquired Miss Beachcroft. "I think it would look so nice to see you standing at the table and saying how pleased you are to find yourself a member of such an august assembly, and that you will strive to comport yourself with the dignity which appertains to—and all that sort of thing, you know. Isn't that usual?"

"I think we must leave all that until ladies sit with us," said Graham.

"I believe we should certainly impart a little grace into the proceedings of the House," said Evelyn. "Look at papa, now—all the time your procession—I had almost said to the scaffold, dear—was advancing up the floor, he sat with his feet on the table, regarding you all with a smile of the most intense amusement. His position was full of grace and elegance. And yet he is really a very handsome man, is he not, Cynthia, dearest?"

Miss Beachcroft nodded her head and glanced along the Terrace.

"Very, indeed," she said, "when he does not sit with his feet on the table. And talk of the—here he comes, and who is it that's with him, Mr Graham?"

Graham and Evelyn turned at the same time.

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They saw the Chancellor's tall figure advancing slowly along the Terrace. He came towards them with his usual leisurely stride, his hands clasped loosely behind him, his head and shoulders thrown back, his long, full beard, once sunny as his daughter's hair, but now of a dark brown shot with grey, blown slightly aside by the fresh breeze from the river, his entire manner that of one on whom the cares of life and the responsibilities of office sat lightly. Evelyn's eyes softened as she looked at him. She loved her father with a passionate devotion and belief, perhaps because she was his only child and had inherited his tastes and qualities and temperament in an extraordinary degree. But the softness died out of them as she turned from Wynyard to his companion. The man walking at the Chancellor's side was of the medium height, strongly built, and a little inclined to stoutness. He was faultlessly attired in a tightly-fitting frock, dark trousers, patent leather boots, and a very glossy hat; his linen and cravat were superlative in quality; there was an air of distinction in the pearl-grey gloves, ornamented by black stitches, which encased his small hands, and in the way in which he carried his walking-cane. But after a rapid, comprehensive glance Evelyn found herself gazing with something like a feeling of fascination on the stranger's face. It was an uncommon face—a face which at first seemed to possess nothing of interest. The features were somewhat homely, common even, harshly cut too, but a second glance showed that there was a sense of power in them, and an abundant evidence of strength of

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will. The features, however, were not the most striking characteristics of the man's countenance. As he drew nearer, walking at Wynyard's side, the three people watching him saw that his face was of a dead-white tint—a curious dead-white such as one sees on a polished skull or on that of a bone which has lain long exposed to the weather. In the midst of this unnatural whiteness of face, made still more white by the blue-black tint of a heavy, upward-curling moustache, were two eyes which within the same instant could betray two emotions—one of cold, icy indifference; the other of fierce, burning passion. It was the first which the watchers now saw, and the effect was to make each feel as though he or she were looking at a dead body whose eyes had never been closed.

Graham heard Evelyn catch her breath with a sharp sigh as Wynyard and the stranger drew nearer. A second later and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and his companion were standing before them, and Wynyard was introducing the Count de Reineville. The Count regarded each in turn with polite attention, fixing on each a keen look of scrutiny, which changed to something like a glance of real interest as he turned to Graham, murmured some few words in answer to Evelyn's greeting, and appeared anxious to continue his conversation with Wynyard. He took a cup of tea from Evelyn in the same distantly polite fashion, sipped it with scarcely concealed indifference, and appeared to wait with impatience while Wynyard, who possessed a healthy appetite at all times, emptied two cups and

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consumed a plateful of bread-and-butter. He bowed with great politeness, but in silence, to the ladies and to Graham when Wynyard rose and suggested returning to the House, and began conversing very volubly with the Chancellor as they turned away. Cynthia Beachcroft, who was rarely amazed at anything, stared after him with open mouth.

"Who is that man?" she asked, presently.

"The Count de Reineville," answered Evelyn. "He is, I suppose, remarkably clever—a great scientist."

"Um," said Cynthia. "He possesses a very remarkable countenance. I consider that one sight of it should satisfy an ordinary being."

"He is dining with us to-night," said Evelyn.

"Then how glad I am," remarked Cynthia, "that I am not!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PRIME MINISTER'S STRANGE NEWS.

EVELYN WYNYARD was too much accustomed to her father's well-known *penchant* for surrounding his table with strange guests, to feel any particular astonishment that he should have invited the remarkable-looking foreigner to dine with him, but she confessed to herself, as she entered the drawing-room that evening and found Wynyard and the Count in earnest conversation, that she had never previously been called upon to play hostess to so strange or mysterious an individual. As the evening progressed, her convictions on this point deepened. De Reineville became more and more of an enigma. It was speedily evident that he was not merely a clever man, but an extraordinary one. He talked without undue brilliance and with the confidence of the man who knows that he is thorough master of the subject which he discusses. His range of subjects was wider than that of any person Evelyn had ever met. He appeared to have travelled everywhere, to have seen everything, to know or know of everybody, and to have accumulated vast stores of information on things past, present, and to come. It was very clear, she con-

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fessed to herself, that he was not a devotee to her own sex, for beyond a few polite remarks delivered in the tone which one might adopt to an interesting child, he paid little attention to her. Graham he regarded with more interest, putting to him a few clever questions respecting the recent contest at Cornchester, and showing himself quite perfectly acquainted with the chief features and characteristics of a country-town election. But this over, he devoted his attention to Wynyard, who, himself celebrated on both sides the Atlantic as a lover of brilliant and clever talk, was only too ready to lead his guest into the full flow of the latter's powers. It seemed to Evelyn that the effect was not altogether to her liking—there was something uncanny in the marvellous knowledge which de Reineville displayed, and she finally left the table feeling as though she had been assisting at some wonderful intellectual feat, and had become dazzled and dazed by its mere brilliance.

Graham soon joined Evelyn in the drawing-room, Wynyard and the Frenchman having become engaged in a discussion in which he felt little interest. She looked up as he entered, and he noticed that her glance passed him and rested on the door.

"Alone, Harry?" she said.

"Alone," he answered. "Your father and his guest are deep in the question of bi-metallism, and though I daresay I ought to sit at their feet and listen, I don't feel much inclination to do so."

Evelyn uttered a long sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you're alone," she said, sinking back in her chair with something of a tired expression.

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"I don't think I could endure another hour of M. de Reineville's conversation—it is almost too informing, isn't it?"

"He is certainly a most remarkable man," answered Graham, taking a chair at her side, "and also a very mysterious one. Did you observe, Evie, that his face is like a mask, that its expression never changes, that his eyes are just the same if he is taking a potato as when he is delivering his opinion on some burning question of the day?"

"Ah, yes!" exclaimed Evelyn, with a faint shudder. "I didn't like that, Harry; it seemed so unnatural. And did you notice another curious thing—that he speaks in one continuous monotone? It is almost sleep-compelling, that strange, smooth, regular voice. But what an extraordinary man—fancy anybody at his age having accumulated such stores of knowledge and having travelled so much!"

"I should say that M. de Reineville's age is somewhat enigmatical, dear," said Graham. "He may be thirty but I think he may be sixty. If he is only thirty, he has used his life to very great advantage. Thirty or sixty, he is a remarkable man, Evie."

"We are somewhat used to remarkable men and strange characters in this house," laughed Evelyn. "I believe papa will really out-do his liking for odd and remarkable characters some day, and bring the latest murderer to breakfast, or ask one of Barnum's freaks to dine. But, seriously," she added, "I don't think we have ever

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had quite so strange a guest as M. de Reineville. Do you know, dear, I had a strange feeling more than once to-night that there was something—something—oh, I don't know what the right word is!—something—well, uncanny about him. That curious white tint on his face, and the deadness of his eyes—like the open eyes of a dead person——”

Graham stopped her with a gesture.

“Don't talk like that, Evie,” he said. “I'm afraid it's not de Reineville—it's an attack of Cornchester. Weren't you very anxious, now, until you got my wire last night?”

“Only about the extent of your majority, dear. Oh, no! I knew you would win—everyone knew. The only question was as to how greatly you would increase the last majority. Papa thought you would do very well if you kept it—he is very practical about these things, isn't he? I got your wire and a message from him, from the House, at the same time, and I telephoned to quite a lot of people immediately. So you see what——”

At that moment Evelyn was interrupted by the entrance of Wynyard's butler, an old and a confidential servant, who advanced to Graham's side and informed him that a gentleman, who preferred not to send up his name, desired to see him in the library at once. Graham glanced at the old man in some surprise, and received a look which appeared to possess something of significance.

“I think the gentleman wishes to see you on political business, sir,” said Phillips, with a slight cough and a glance at his mistress, who was looking in another direction.

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Graham made a laughing excuse to Evelyn, and preceded the old butler out of the room. Phillips closed the door very gently.

"What's this mean, Phillips?" asked Graham.

The old man advanced his face towards Graham's ear; the latter bent down to catch his whisper.

"It's the Prime Minister, sir," said Phillips. "He wants to see Mr Wynyard most particular, and nobody is to know. I told him that Mr Wynyard and the foreign gentleman were in the dining-room, so he asked if you were in the house. I've put him in the library, Mr Graham."

Graham ran downstairs and opened the library door. The room was only half lighted, but he saw the tall figure of the Prime Minister standing near the hearth and went in hastily. Lord Grandminster advanced to meet him, and held out his hand.

"How do you do, Mr Graham?" he said, in a low voice. "My hearty congratulations on your well-deserved success—you have done very well indeed, very well."

"Your lordship is very kind——" began Graham.

"Not at all," said the Prime Minister, hurriedly. "I understand that Mr Wynyard has a guest, and is in conversation with him—it is M. de Reineville, I believe?"

"Yes," said Graham, wonderingly.

"I am most anxious to see Mr Wynyard at once, Mr Graham, and I am also anxious that no one—no one—should know that I am here. Can you engage Mr Wynyard's attention and bring him to me quickly?"

"I will do so at once," answered Graham.

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He left the room, closing the door behind him, and went straight to the dining-room. Wynyard and the Frenchman, seated in close proximity at the end of the table, were deep in conversation—Wynyard leaning forward with elbows propped on the table edge, de Reineville inclining towards him, each palpably anxious to elucidate whatever point it was that they were discussing. As Graham entered, de Reineville, who was speaking, paused, and Wynyard looked round with something of impatience. A man of quick perception, he saw at once that Graham had important business to communicate, and with a brief apology to the Count, he rose and followed his nephew into the hall.

“What is it, Harry?” he said, as the door closed upon them.

“Lord Grandminster is in the library,” said Graham. “He wishes to see you at once, and he is extremely anxious that no one should know he is in the house.”

Wynyard looked at Graham with surprise evidenced in his expression. Then, with an expressive glance at the closed door of the dining-room, he walked over to the library, and Graham went to the Count, wondering why Lord Grandminster should pay Wynyard a visit in this mysterious fashion. He sat down and endeavoured to engage the Frenchman in conversation, but de Reineville's mind was evidently running on the subject which he and his host had been discussing, and he replied to the younger man's observations almost indifferently. Graham was beginning to

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feel the situation irksome, when Wynyard hurriedly re-entered the room. It was obvious that something serious was in the air, and both men saw it.

"I fear I shall have to beg you to excuse me, Count," said Wynyard. "I have unexpected business which will occupy me for some time. A minister's time, you know——"

"Ah, quite well!" said de Reineville. "Do not apologise, Mr Wynyard. I, too, have a most important appointment within the hour, but I had hoped that we might have had time to finish our little controversy. Another time, eh? I will make my adieux to Miss Wynyard if Mr Graham will have the kindness to conduct me."

Wynyard said good-night to his guest with renewed apologies and hurried back to the library. Graham heard the door closed and locked as he led the Count upstairs. The latter said good-night to Evelyn in his polite, indifferent manner, and went downstairs again in silence. Graham accompanied him to the hall door. It was a lovely June night without, and both stood for a moment enjoying the cool breeze. De Reineville lighted a cigar and held out his hand to Graham with a cold "Good-night." As Graham took it in his own, their glances met, and the young member suddenly perceived that the hitherto dull, lifeless eyes were filled with a strange fire—a fire of white, vivid light. It was but a momentary glance—then de Reineville was gone, and Graham turned back into the house. He felt as if he had seen something weird.

"That was strange," he mused, as he went up

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to the drawing-room. "It was the first gleam of life in the man's eyes that I have seen so far. And how curiously it came!—something like the flash of an electric current. De Reineville is certainly a wonderful person."

He said nothing of the events of the last few minutes to Evelyn when he re-entered the drawing-room, only making some jesting reference to the exigencies which surround newly-hatched Members of Parliament, and they settled down to conversation on various personal matters. But Evelyn, with a woman's quick intuition, perceived that her lover was thinking of other matters as well as of those more pertinent to themselves.

"You are very distraught to-night, Harry," she said, suddenly. "What is it that is on your mind?"

"Nothing, I assure you, dear," said Graham, coming to his senses with a start. "I suppose I am just a little bit tired, Evie—it was a stiff day at Cornchester yesterday, you know."

"Poor boy, of course you must be tired," she answered. "I remember now that papa said you must go to bed early—that is his usual advice, you know, to young men who have just fought an election. Say good-night, dear, and run away."

But Graham made some half-humorous excuse and lingered. He was straining his ears to catch some sound which would tell him that Lord Grandminster had left the house. The two ministers had now been closeted together for nearly an hour. Graham wondered what it was that engaged their attention. Another half-hour went by: then he heard a heavy footstep ascending the staircase,

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and presently Wynyard appeared, standing in the open doorway.

"I want you, Harry," he said, simply. "Come down to the library, will you? Better say good-night to Evelyn—I have some work for you."

"Work!" exclaimed Evelyn. "Oh, papa!—and you yourself said that he must go to bed early."

Wynyard laughed and turned away. Graham hastily said good-night to his sweetheart and followed her father down into the hall. With his hand on the door of the library, Wynyard paused and looked at his nephew.

"Pull all the wits you have together, Harry," he whispered. "Here is certainly the most mysterious business I ever had to do with in my life."

Then he opened the door and the two entered, Wynyard locking it again behind them. The room was still in a half-light: it was only with an effort that Graham took in the scene before him at the first glance. The Marquis of Grandminster sat at Wynyard's desk, his elbow resting on the slope, his hand shading his face from the light of the adjacent reading-lamp. He looked up as the two men approached him, and Graham observed that his face wore an expression of anxiety which he had rarely seen there. Wynyard motioned Graham to sit down, and himself took an easy chair on the hearth. For a moment no one spoke: then Lord Grandminster turned to Wynyard.

"I have thought your proposal over, Wynyard," he said, "and I believe you are well advised in making it. The only thing to be considered is Mr Graham's pleasure."

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Graham looked up quickly, and found the Marquis regarding him with a keen, scrutinising expression.

"I think you are a brave man," he said, suddenly. "Brave, I mean, in the physical as well as the moral sense. You are not greatly troubled with nervousness? You would not be afraid to—to execute a mission in which there might be—I only say *might* be—some considerable personal danger to yourself?"

Graham's heart leapt within him. He had no fear of anything, but the thought of Evelyn flashed across his mind. He put it from him firmly, and looked the Prime Minister squarely in the face.

"I have no fear, my lord," he said. "If your lordship asks me to undertake some difficult task, I will undertake it."

"I don't know that it is either difficult or dangerous," sighed the Prime Minister. "I am assured, indeed, that it is neither. But I am speaking to you in riddles, Mr Graham. If you will give me your attention, I will endeavour to be as plain as I can. Mr Wynyard is already in full possession of the facts I am about to put before you, and I may say that up to now he is the only person who is in possession of them. After what I tell you, he, you, and I will alone hold this secret. I need not ask you, Mr Graham, for any formal expression as to your keeping counsel in the matter."

Graham bowed. Lord Grandminster slightly turned in his chair and faced him more directly as he began speaking.

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"It is something of a lengthy story," he said. "You must know, Mr Graham, that about a month ago I received a document of some length, which was delivered at my private residence through the medium of the post. I opened it, read it, and came to the conclusion that it was the work of a madman, and I tore it in pieces and threw the pieces into my fire—an act for which I am now sorry. I cannot now recall everything which that document contained, but I can give an account of the gist of it. It purported to come from a secret society, and it put forward a claim so extravagant that I could only regard the entire affair as a hoax, or as the work of some maniac. It announced that this society had been formed for the express purpose of extracting what it termed ransom from the great European Governments, and that its operations were to begin in England. It demanded that within twenty-eight days the sum of one hundred millions sterling should be paid over to it, and it gave the most remarkable—and I am bound to say clear and practical—directions as to the secret payment of this sum. It further intimated that unless this demand was complied with within the time specified, belligerent operations would at once be commenced against this country——"

"A secret society against the resources of an Empire!" exclaimed Graham.

The Marquis raised his hand.

"——and that these operations would result in the most frightful calamities, the most terrible loss of life, and the most stupendous destruction of property which the world has ever known. That,

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Mr Graham, was the conclusion of this remarkable document."

Graham gazed at the Prime Minister with astonished eyes.

"I beg your lordship to forgive me for my interruption just now," he said, "but, really, I cannot conceive how a secret society could possibly enter into war with an Empire like ours. We——"

"Yes, yes!" said Lord Grandminster, somewhat brusquely. "You are forgetting, of course, Mr Graham, that secret societies operate in secret fashions. It is not a question, supposing there to be anything in this, of our army or navy fighting hostile forces in open warfare, but of our being attacked by an unseen foe. But let me resume:—As I told you before, I believed this document to be a mere hoax, or the work of a madman, and I destroyed it. Fifteen days later I received a further warning, delivered to me in the same ordinary manner, in which I was reminded that I had but a fortnight wherein to fulfil the terms of the ultimatum, and that failing fulfilment, vengeance was surely at hand. That document I have preserved. This evening I have received a third document, which lies here, and in which I am informed that unless the society's terms are agreed to by noon to-morrow, the threatened operations will commence. Now, Mr Graham, I have discussed this matter very closely with my old friend and colleague, Mr Wynyard, and we are both inclined to believe that there is something in all this. It appears to me that one of the secret societies, of whose existence the European

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police are well aware, intends to begin a series of those outrages from which we, at any rate, have happily been free for some time. The question is—To what extent are those outrages likely to go, and what are we to do to prevent them? Everything is so vague, so shadowy, that a present appeal to the police seems likely to be quite ineffectual. It may be that these threats are idle threats. It may be that they are not. Science has made such wonderful advances, and misguided intellects have so misdirected those advances, that it is possible for a few men, greatly skilled, to work much harm to life and property. However, I waste time in these conjectures. I am not sure, no one can be sure, of what these documents really mean. I cannot estimate their precise value and importance, or, indeed, be certain that they are not what I first thought them to be. But here is where your services may be of value, Mr Graham. In the final ultimatum which I received this evening, I am desired to send an accredited representative to meet an emissary of the society to-night. Stay—you shall read the passage yourself."

Lord Grandminster took a sheet of folded paper from the desk, and handing it to Graham, pointed to a paragraph near the foot of the sheet. Graham examined the document with much interest. It was a sheet of plain foolscap paper, of stout quality, dated at the top, but bearing no address, and the handwriting was clear and bold, and reminiscent of that of a solicitor's clerk. The paragraph to which the Prime Minister pointed ran as follows:—

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"If it is your pleasure, as head of the British Government, that your final answer to this ultimatum shall be delivered personally, let your accredited representative present himself to the appointed representative of this society at one hour after midnight on the centre arch of the East side of Westminster Bridge. Your representative shall come and go free; no harm shall befall him at our hands. With him our representative shall be empowered to hold full and free converse, affording such explanation and information as shall seem good to him; and what is said and done between them shall be said and done, so far as we are concerned, in the spirit of men anxious to avoid strife and bloodshed. Believing in your strict sense of honour, we deem it unnecessary to ask that our representative should receive the same consideration which we shall pay to yours; and it only remains to say that these two shall be known to each other by your representative saying, on reaching the place appointed, *Marengo*, to which our representative shall reply *Austerlitz*."

Graham laid the paper down on the desk and looked at the Prime Minister. Both ministers were regarding him with attention, not unmixed with anxiety.

"Your lordship desires me to keep this appointment?" he said.

"It was my suggestion, Harry," broke in Wynyard. "There are many reasons why, if this thing is a mere hoax, it should be kept quiet: if there really is anything in it, why, it were well to know something of these gentry. And as Lord Grand-

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minster came first to me, I thought that we could find a man in our own house who would keep counsel and do the work."

Graham rose to his feet and drew out his watch.

"It is now half-past twelve," he said. "May I ask for your lordship's final instructions?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE RIGHT OF MIGHT.

LORD GRANDMINSTER rose from his seat and took Graham's hand within his own.

"You are very prompt, Mr Graham," he said, kindly, "and I sincerely trust that you will run into no danger. Should you meet the person mentioned in this document, enter into conversation with him. Tell him, as my accredited representative, that the demand put forward is too vague and shadowy to be dealt with, that the people whom he represents must be more explicit, and that if they have wrongs which need redress, they must employ legal and constitutional means. Endeavour to estimate from the man's conversation what class of person it is you are dealing with, whether he is a fanatic, a revolutionary, or an Anarchist. Finally, pledge yourself to nothing whatever. Come to me early to-morrow and tell me what you have done. I think that is all."

Graham bowed and left the room, accompanied by Wynyard. The latter looked anxious, and followed his nephew to the hall door.

"Be careful, Harry," he said, in a low voice. "I fear there is something in all this, and if it's a trick

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of those Anarchist fellows, you may possibly find yourself in a tight hole. Are you armed? If not, I can provide you with a revolver."

"No, thanks," said Graham, "I'll keep to the spirit of the offer—I don't expect any danger, really. It seems to me that the whole affair is the work of fanatics or half-mad enthusiasts. Anyway, Westminster Bridge is not so lonely a place at midnight that I need fear anything. If the interview is a short one, I will drive back here and tell you how I have progressed."

"Then I will sit up until half-past three for you," said Wynyard, and went back to the library.

Graham walked quickly away from Wynyard's house, his brain still busily striving to comprehend the strange news which the Prime Minister had just communicated to him. He could not bring himself to believe that there was anything really serious in it—it appeared to him to be beyond all belief that a secret society, however influential it might be, could seriously set itself to cope with the resources of a nation like England. "It is the scheme of fanatics," he said to himself over and over again. "The thing is absurd, on its very face." And seeing a passing hansom, he hailed it and got in, and was driven to the north end of Westminster Bridge, feeling little, save that he would like to know what manner of men they were who dared thus to threaten a Government.

The bridge was by no means tenantless as Graham walked across it. The night was clear and bright, and the lights of the great city were reflected in the vast dome of sky above. Figures

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passed and repassed him—figures of the familiar sort ; voices of men and women sounded in his ears, pitched in notes of laughter, or of sorrow, of anger, or despair. A fierce-eyed face came out of the gloom and begged of him ; a woman laid her hand on his arm imploringly. In the centre of the bridge the figure of a man stood leaning against the parapet. Graham passed it slowly, wondering if this were the secret ambassador he was to meet. It was not yet one o'clock, and he walked a little way southward. Coming back on the stroke of one, he found the figure still there, motionless. The great clock overhead struck a single booming stroke and Graham paused. The man leaning against the parapet turned and stepped towards him. Graham, feeling as if he were playing some part in a transpontine melodrama, murmured the password scarce above his breath : the stranger gave the countersign in a low voice.

"Shall we walk about?" said the man. "We are less likely to attract attention, and this is not the quietest place in London, Mr Graham."

"You know me?" said Graham, with some astonishment.

"Oh, quite well," answered the other. "And I am very pleased that Lord Grandminster has appointed you as his envoy—though you must comport yourself with rather more exactitude and dignity than you did in the House this afternoon, eh?"

This was said in a bantering tone, but without any trace of malice, and Graham could not help laughing.

"I do not know your name——" he began.

"Name!" said the other. "I have no name ; I

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am a number. Never mind that—it is quite immaterial. Suppose we walk backward and forward on this side the bridge? Now, Mr Graham, with what answer are you charged respecting the final ultimatum which was delivered to Lord Grandminster this evening?”

Graham looked round him. They were pacing slowly side by side along the bridge, and though there were people in sight, there was no one close at hand. He replied in a low voice :

“I am charged, sir, by Lord Grandminster to inform you, as the representative of the society which has forwarded what you term an ultimatum to him, that the demands preferred are too vague and shadowy to be dealt with ; and that those who drew up these documents must, if they have just cause of complaint, be more explicit, and must resort to legal and constitutional means of obtaining redress for their wrongs.”

The stranger sighed, and nodded his head two or three times. Graham, who had been watching him with close attention, and had already written down in the tablets of his memory that the envoy was a tall, well-built, bearded man of apparently middle age, that he spoke in a calm, cultured voice, and was evidently one used to exercise authority, waited anxiously for him to speak.

“Do I understand,” he said at last, “that this is Lord Grandminster’s final answer to the society’s ultimatum?”

“That I am not instructed to say,” answered Graham. “I am but a mouthpiece——”

“And an ear,” interrupted the other. “Well, Mr

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Graham, you may know that we have given Lord Grandminster until noon to-day—*this* day—for a final answer. He knows where that answer may be sent in safety. Personally I expect no answer. This nation, so used to accomplishing her own ends by force, will only be conquered herself by force. And yet, if she, if Lord Grandminster, if you, did but know how utterly hopeless is the struggle upon which you are entering——”

Graham interrupted him almost impatiently.

“You forget,” he said, “that all this is an enigma to me. Do I understand that your demands will be insisted upon by force?”

“Yes, sir, you are to understand that,” replied the stranger. “We shall compel your Government, as we shall subsequently compel every Government in Europe, to accede to our full demands by the use of force—of such force, Mr Graham, as you have never even dreamed of.”

“Your society, then, is powerful?” said Graham.

“It is the most powerful thing in the world,” replied the other, coolly.

“You can place a vast army in the field?”

“We have no army.”

Graham uttered a puzzled exclamation.

“I do not understand this,” he said. “What is this force which you propose to employ against Governments? You speak in the tone of a dictator—what force is it that lies behind your words?”

The stranger paused, and advancing to the parapet of the bridge, laid his hand on the rail and looked out across the river and the lights beyond.

“Mr Graham,” he said, “we have said that we

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will, through me, give you such information and explanation as we think good. So be it. Now listen to me, and what I say to you, repeat faithfully to your chief. We, who have addressed him, are, as you say, dictators, for though we are few in number, we are, at this moment, masters of the world. It is hopeless for any Government, for any nation, to resist us, for we are in possession of a physical force which the world has never known. It is our desire to exert that force for good. We are lovers of peace, and of brotherhood, and of the human family, and our earnest desire is for the welfare and prosperity of all men. But we know, being acquainted with this world's history, that it is in the blood and tears of the few that the happiness of the many must find its foundation. Many will suffer that many more may enjoy. We do not expect that our demand for ransom will be acceded to until we have scourged this nation with fierce tribulations. Let those who suffer reflect that from their sufferings the peace, the enduring peace of the world shall spring ! ”

“ I do not understand,” said Graham, who was now sure that he was listening to the ravings of a fanatic, and was yet dismayed by the calm tones in which the man spoke. “ You speak of demanding what you term ransom from various Governments—what right have you to make such demands, and for whom are these enormous sums intended ? ”

“ Our right is the only right which man has ever had any respect for,” said the stranger, calmly, “ the right of Might, Mr Graham. As for the purposes to which our society will apply the

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enormous sums, as you rightly call them, which we shall certainly exact from the various Governments, they should surely be evident to you. We shall apply them to the amelioration of the common lot of man, to the establishment of society on a sound basis."

"I believe, sir," said Graham, drily, "that one has heard all that sort of thing very often."

"Oh, constantly!" said the other, in tones of perfect agreement. "It has been talked by Socialists, Anarchists, and all other sort of 'ists' for centuries. The difference between them and us, however, is that they were in no position to do anything, and that we are!"

"Then I am to understand——?"

"You are to understand, Mr Graham, that we have said our last word. We are, as you observed, in the attitude of dictators. We are more than that, we *are* dictators. Unless our demand—a very modest one—is acceded to by noon to-day, we commence operations. Before nightfall comes upon this proud city of yours, wives will mourn their husbands, husbands their wives, mothers their children, children their parents. The innocent shall die with the guilty, the young with the old, the strong man with the sick. But the death shall be swift, and, please God, painless. Let the innocent blood be visited on the guilty! Mr Graham, I wish you good-night."

Ere Graham could say a word in reply, the stranger had passed towards the south end of the bridge with long, swift strides. Graham watched him disappear and then turned away, muttering, "Mad!—mad as a hatter!"

CHAPTER V.

TWELVE O'CLOCK STRIKES.

NOW that the interview was over, Graham felt a distinct sense of relief and satisfaction. He was convinced that the man with whom he had spoken was mad. Once or twice as they passed a lamp in their pacing up and down the bridge, he had caught a glimpse of his companion's eyes, and it had struck him that the light of insanity shone in them. He had endeavoured to see more of the man's face, but the large sombrero-like hat which he wore kept his features in shadow, and Graham had been unable to study it closely. However, the final outburst of the secret society's representative, which was accompanied by something very like frenzied gesture, served to convince Graham that he was dealing with a madman, and he was not sorry when the man closed the interview and strode abruptly away. He glanced at the clock above him; it was not yet half-past one. The meeting had been short indeed, he said to himself, as he lighted a cigar and strolled away from the bridge.

So satisfied was Graham that there was nothing in the affair but the foolish vapourings of a wholly,

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or, at any rate, half mad enthusiast that he put it entirely out of his mind as he drove back to Berkeley Square. He was getting very tired and very sleepy, and now that the excitement of being employed by the Prime Minister on a secret mission had worn off, he wanted to go to bed. He reflected in a sleepy fashion that he had come to the end of a very exciting and busy day. It was little more than twenty-four hours since he had stood on the balcony of the Town Hall at Cornchester, bowing in response to the hurricane of applause which had followed the declaration of the poll—not yet twelve hours since his return to town; and yet how many strange things had happened within that short space of time! He had taken his seat—met that strange person, de Reineville—heard wonderful news from the Prime Minister—and been employed as ambassador from England's Premier to a secret society. Decidedly it was time, he said to himself, that he should wind up such a day by going to bed, and with the intention of doing so as speedily as possible, he kept his cab waiting while he went in to give Wynyard his news.

Wynyard was alone in the library, and was engaged in reading some papers on his desk when Graham entered. He looked up as the latter closed the door and came across to his side.

“Well?” he said.

“I have seen the man,” answered Graham.

“Ah!—there was a man, then? And the result?”

“I believe the man I met to be a madman, or,

Twelve o'Clock Strikes

at any rate, an enthusiast whose enthusiasm has brought him to the verge of madness," answered Graham. "But I will tell you briefly of what passed between us," and he sat down by Wynyard's desk and gave the Chancellor a short account of his interview.

Wynyard listened attentively and in silence, and when Graham had finished, he still remained silent and apparently in deep thought. At last he rose and patted his nephew affectionately on the shoulder.

"Well, I'm glad you came back in safety, Harry," he said. "I think you have done all that Grandminster wanted. Now run home to bed—you must be dead tired."

"I am," said Graham. He paused on his way to the door and looked back at Wynyard's rugged features. The Chancellor was standing on the hearth in one of his characteristic attitudes—one hand clutching his coat-tails at the back and gathering and ungathering them in a lump, the other combing out his long beard. Graham knew from that that Wynyard was in deep thought, and he turned back towards him. "What do you think of all this, sir?" he said.

Wynyard started as from a reverie.

"Eh?" he said. "Oh, what do I think? I don't know what to think, my boy. I think—I think I shall know more in a few hours, Harry."

"You think there is something in this?" asked Graham, with some surprise.

"It will not surprise me if there is," answered Wynyard. "What I would like to know is how

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much that something will prove to be. Now, Harry, off with you! Good-night again, my boy."

Graham went out of the house somewhat mystified. Ever since boyhood he had regarded Oliver Wynyard as the wisest and cleverest man of his generation, and it staggered him now to find that Wynyard seemed to attach importance to what he himself had been disposed to dismiss lightly. But he was too sleepy to think very clearly about anything, and within half an hour he was in bed and dreaming that Westminster Bridge had somehow been transported to Cornchester and placed across the market square, and that he was addressing a vast crowd from the parapet, while Lord Grandminster, and the Speaker, and Evelyn Wynyard, and Hesketh, and a man with white face and dead eyes, danced fantastic jigs on the roof of the market hall opposite.

While Graham was on his way to visit him next morning, the Prime Minister, who had risen at a very early hour, was closeted with two persons in his study. These persons, though differing in appearance, were alike in one respect—the face of each wore a certain watchful expression, as if the brain behind it were continually striving to see its way through problems and mysteries. They sat on either side the Prime Minister's desk, listening attentively to his account of the secret documents and of the mission with which he had entrusted Graham at midnight. Lord Grandminster, in fact, had passed an uneasy night. He was conscious that something was about to happen. However he strove to explain his fears away, the convic-

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tion was strong upon him that something real and serious lay behind the veiled threats. By morning he had grown so uneasy that he had sent down to Scotland Yard for the two officials with whom he was now in conference, and in whose ability and experience he had a firm confidence, and to them he repeated the story which he had already told to Wynyard and Graham. They listened to it in perfect silence, and Lord Grandminster failed to discover from their manner whether they attached great importance to it or not.

"That is the whole story so far," he concluded. "I do not know whether I have done well or not in not entrusting this matter to the police earlier, but until last night I really believed it to be a hoax or the work of some madman. What is your opinion?"

The younger of the two men addressed, a tall, soldierly man, replied without hesitation.

"I think your lordship has done everything that could be done," he said. "I fail to see what steps we could have taken on the information you could have given us. There is absolutely no clue whatever in these documents. We appear to be entirely in the dark."

The elder man, a person of somewhat peculiar appearance, on being asked his opinion by the Prime Minister, remained silent for a moment, and then said that before saying anything on the matter he should like to hear Mr Graham's account of what happened at the interview with the society's agent, supposing such interview had taken place.

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"I expect Mr Graham here every moment," said Lord Grandminster. "It is now ten o'clock—he cannot be long."

Within a few moments Graham was announced. He seemed somewhat surprised at finding the Prime Minister engaged with persons who were obviously of the police service, and began to wonder if any fresh news or information had reached Lord Grandminster since midnight. The Prime Minister briefly explained matters, and having assured himself that he and his companions were quite alone, begged Graham to sit down near his desk.

"Now, Mr Graham," he began, "did you meet the representative of this society at the place and time appointed?"

"Yes, I did," said Graham.

"Ah—then there is something in it!" exclaimed Lord Grandminster. "Well, tell us—these gentlemen know the whole story up to your leaving Mr Wynyard's last night—tell us exactly what took place between you."

Graham told his story clearly and plainly, placing his own impressions in the background, and taking care to deliver the strange man's exact words as far as he could remember them. The three men listening to him heard him with widely different expressions — Lord Grandminster's face grew anxious and troubled; the military-looking official, on the contrary, seemed reassured; the man of peculiar appearance preserved an inscrutable countenance until the end.

"What was your own private impression re-

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specting this man, Mr Graham?" asked Lord Grandminster, when the story had come to an end.

"That he was insane, or nearly so," answered Graham.

"His words and his conduct gave you that idea?"

"Yes, especially his concluding words."

"And yet, you say, he was cool, even jocular, at times?"

"Yes, he was," admitted Graham, remembering the bantering remark which the stranger had made on their first meeting.

"He struck you, too, as a man of culture—a gentleman?"

"Oh, yes; he was a remarkable man altogether," said Graham. "I wish I could convey some impression of him to your lordship."

"In the final threat which he used, did he speak coolly, as if he knew perfectly the real meaning of his words?" asked Lord Grandminster.

"He spoke with the utmost coolness throughout," answered Graham. "His final threat of what would happen if his society's terms were not acceded to, was spoken with a determination that was all the more striking because of the unconcerned tone in which it was uttered. It was only when he spoke of the effects of the action which the society would take that he grew excited or passionate. Then he began to declaim and to gesticulate, and his last words and abrupt departure convinced me that I had been conversing with a person of unsound mind."

Lord Grandminster turned to the officials.

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"Well, gentlemen," he said, "what do you think of all this?"

"I am of Mr Graham's opinion," said the military-looking man. "I feel confident, my lord, that the whole affair is the work of madmen or fanatics. I confess, my lord, that I regret very much that Mr Graham was not accompanied by the police last night—this man ought certainly to have been arrested."

Lord Grandminster shook his head.

"It is very probable that Mr Graham's life might have been sacrificed if any attempt had been made to arrest the man," he said. He glanced at the other official. "What is your opinion?" he enquired.

The man with the peculiar expression shook his head.

"I do not know what to say," he replied, quietly. "I am at a loss. If this thing is real, we are in presence of a danger which we cannot estimate. If what the man said is true about this terrible force, it appears to me that a few men in possession of it can defy a nation. I believe your lordship is very learned in the science of chemistry—can your lordship inform us if anything new is known regarding explosives?"

Graham listened to this with feelings of astonishment. He gazed at the speaker with a vague curiosity—it seemed to him that the last few words had somehow produced a new train of thought in his own mind. He turned to the Prime Minister.

"I believe," said Lord Grandminster, "that experiments are constantly being made in explosives.

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But, gentlemen, if this *is* true, if it is really the fact that we are menaced by a determined group of Anarchists—for these people are nothing else—who are in possession of some terrible force, what is to be done? What can we do?”

The officials were silent: Graham sat staring at the floor. At last the strange-looking man spoke.

“We can do nothing,” he said, softly—“nothing. But these people, if they exist, are not of the old gang of Anarchists, my lord. I know where every Anarchist in Europe is. These are a new factor. There is nothing to be done until——”

He paused and looked at the Prime Minister with a curious significance.

“Continue,” said Lord Grandminster. “Until ——?”

“Until they have delivered their first blow, my lord.”

Graham suddenly felt a sense of fear. It struck him for the first time that nothing could be more awful than to be aware of the presence of an implacable and a powerful enemy in the midst of a great city, and yet to be unable to trace its movements, to know anything of it, to be powerless in face of its power. He uttered a sharp exclamation and half rose from his chair as if impelled to run away. Then he sat down and stared from the detective's face to the Prime Minister's.

Lord Grandminster, usually phlegmatic and somewhat cynical in manner, was intensely moved. He appeared to be lost in thought for some time,

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but at last he rose and spoke firmly and with dignity.

"I think we can do no more, gentlemen. We appear to have formed the opinion that this threatened danger is a real one. I trust it may not be. At any rate, we cannot be dictated to by an unknown and an unseen enemy. We must wait. It seems useless to adopt precautions at present, for we do not know what to guard. We cannot arrest people whom we do not know—who are, as it were, mere shades. There is nothing to do but wait—and in the meantime you will please to regard all this as being strictly confidential."

The two officials bowed and retired. Lord Grandminster detained Graham with a word. "I wished to thank you for your promptitude and carefulness last night, Mr Graham," he said, kindly. "I trust the next mission I charge you with will be of a much pleasanter nature."

"I am grieved that your lordship should feel so much anxiety," answered Graham.

"It is useless to deny that I am anxious," replied the Prime Minister. "I will tell you why. Has it never occurred to you, Mr Graham, that a few men, armed with the possession of some new secret in chemistry, could practically set the whole world at defiance?"

"No," said Graham. "What an awful thought! It frightens me."

"And it frightens me too," said Lord Grandminster. "I pray Heaven that these fears may be groundless."

Graham left the house somewhat depressed in

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spirits. He felt as if something was going to happen. But as he walked along the streets, gay and joyous with the freshness of a bright June morning, his thoughts flowed into a livelier channel, and his light-hearted temperament began to assert itself. After all, he said to himself, there was probably nothing in this strange matter. It seemed impossible that aught should befall London on such a joyous day as that—a day full of the finest colour of life, a day meant for love and laughter and happiness.

As he turned out of St. James's Street into Pall Mall, Graham met a well-known member of the Opposition, who stopped to congratulate him on his election. They stood chatting for some little time, but in the middle of a sentence Graham suddenly paused.

All around him the clocks were striking twelve.

Graham endeavoured to gather up the broken thread of his speech. The man to whom he was speaking looked at him curiously.

"Aren't you well, Graham?" he said, suddenly.

"I am quite well," Graham answered. "I—that is—— My God! what's this?"

A sudden curious darkening of sun and sky seemed to envelop street and houses, things and people, as he spoke, and a wave of bitterly cold air rolled past them like a moving fog. The other man gasped and clutched at Graham, and his face turned grey.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Graham—what is it? God in Heaven—what is it?"

Then, clutching each other's arms, they began to

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run eastward. Other men joined them as they ran—men with staring eyes and faces blanched with fear. They saw men they knew standing at the doors or leaning out of the windows of clubs; others stood on the pavement as if petrified; here a cabman had pulled up his horse and stood up behind his cab, staring in the direction of Trafalgar Square; there a lady driving a phaeton had dropped the reins and buried her face in her hands.

The man who held Graham's arm suddenly dropped it and fell against the wall, panting. Graham ran on—ran and ran until he found himself crossing Waterloo Place. The sudden veil which had fallen over the sky was lifting—he saw the sun shining clear again. People were running on all sides—coming down the slope from Piccadilly Circus, up the steps from the Park, out of all the side streets. The cold wave was passing—Graham began to breathe more freely. He began meeting people running from the opposite direction, people who ran as if from some awful thing. A lad dashed into his arms; he was moaning and crying, and wrung his hands, and there was foam on his lips as if he had had a fit. Graham laid him down in an open doorway, and still the people ran by as if they were demented. He caught fragments of what they said. A policeman came up to him, shivering and sweating at the same time. "Charing Cross is blown up!" he said, with chattering teeth. "Charing Cross—Charing Cross—they are lying dead in thousands all round it! It's Charing Cross—Charing Cross!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DESTRUCTION OF CHARING CROSS.

THE boy presently reviving, Graham resigned him to the policeman, whose agitation was passing away, and set out again in the direction of the Strand. The groups of hurrying people increased in density ; he soon found himself in the midst of a surging crowd with which cabs, omnibuses, carts, waggons, and motor-cars were inextricably mixed. Everybody was asking what had happened, and every face was pale with a fear such as Graham had never seen before on a human countenance. There were wild cries and murmurings of Anarchism, dynamite, earthquake, and the like. In the midst of the excited multitude, and close to Graham, a man had gone mad and was screaming at the top of his voice of the Last Day and of Hell. But by that time the fiercely cold wave which had struck terror into every heart as it swept along had passed away, and the veil of sudden gloom had lifted, and overhead the sun was shining as gaily as ever.

Pushing his way out of the stream of human life which would have carried him to the south side of Trafalgar Square, Graham made his way

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as rapidly as possible towards the steps of the National Gallery. As he fought a course out of the crowd he felt a hand on his arm and looked round, to find the police official of peculiar appearance whom he had seen an hour previously at Lord Grandminster's house. The man was pale and panting for breath as if he had wrestled hard with the multitude, but he contrived to shout, "Follow me!" in Graham's ear, and drew him to the edge of the crowd. "This way, Mr Graham," he said, and darted down a side passage at the western extremity of the National Gallery. There was scarcely a soul in sight there, and both men suddenly leaned against the wall, exhausted. The police-agent put both his hands on his chest and laboured for breath. He looked up at Graham at last with a curious expression.

"They lost little time, sir," he said. "It was just three minutes past twelve when that cold wave struck me. I was walking down Waterloo Place."

"Do you know what it is that has happened?" panted Graham.

"They say that Charing Cross is blown up. Did you hear any sound, Mr Graham? I heard none. I was just thinking what a glorious morning it was and how hot, and all of a sudden—ah! my God! it was terrible!—there was a deadly coldness came along in waves and the sky went dark—ah!"

"Yes, I know," said Graham, shuddering. "But—can we not get round there somehow?"

"Follow me, sir. I'll show you a place from

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which we can see what has happened without getting in that crowd again. This way."

He advanced a few steps along the passage, turned into a railed-in yard in the basement of the National Gallery, and tapped at a door. A woman, frightened and trembling, presently opened it, and on seeing the police-agent, stood aside to let him pass in. Graham followed at his heels. His guide appeared to have a very intimate acquaintance with the place, and passed on rapidly through numerous cellars, apartments, and corridors, until it seemed to Graham that they must have traversed the entire length of the great building. Then they turned up several flights of stairs, and suddenly opening a door, walked out on to the roof at a point almost exactly opposite the north-east corner of Trafalgar Square.

As they emerged into the sunshine, each man caught his breath with a sharp exclamation of horror and surprise. For the past ten minutes Graham had known instinctively that something very terrible had happened, but he was not prepared for the awful spectacle upon which he now looked. For a radius of a hundred yards from where the ancient cross had stood in front of the station which took its name from it, London lay in ruins. The triangular block of masonry which stood between the Strand and Duncannon Street, facing Trafalgar Square, was a mass of fragments. A part of the north wall of St. Martin's Church was still standing, as if to show where the force of the explosion had begun to weaken—the rest of the building was mingled with the ruins of the houses

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opposite and with those in the triangle formed by Adelaide Street, King William Street, and the Strand. On the south side of the latter thoroughfare the destruction was not less appalling. Half the east side of Northumberland Avenue, with its monster hotels and vast buildings, had gone ; the Station Hotel at Charing Cross no longer obscured the view ; nothing was left of the great arch of the station but a fragment of twisted girder at the further end of the long platform, standing out like the branch of a dead tree against the sky ; the buildings between Villiers Street and the Adelphi had crumbled away like the house of cards which a child builds and destroys out of mere caprice. It was as if some giant, standing in the midst of the Strand at Charing Cross, had swung a mighty club in mad circles around him and laid everything within reach at his feet.

But the most awful characteristic of this terrible scene, to Graham's mind, was the dread silence which brooded over it. All around it the fear-maddened crowds were struggling and shouting in their terror and in their anxiety to draw nearer, but over the stricken area itself there was nothing but peace. It was a mere mass of ruins, reduced, by the awful force which had so suddenly stricken it, to a dead level, a mere rubbish heap, formed of stone, iron, wood, steel, of human bodies, of dead animals. There was scarcely a distinguishing feature in the entire expanse—it was like looking over some vast field on which the refuse and debris of a city has been shot down and smoothed over by the rain and wind. Nowhere, from its outer

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edge, which surged up to the walls of the National Gallery, could Graham see any movement, any sign of human life, any feature that would have enabled a man to say, "This is where such a place stood," or "This is part of such a thing." Everything was still, motionless, and very silent. It struck him with a sense of awful horror that they were gazing upon Death as no man had ever gazed before.

Both men stood riveted to the spot for moments ere either spoke or moved. Then the police-agent caught his breath with a gasp, and Graham suddenly found himself clutching at the wall for support. A deadly nausea seized him; it seemed to him that he must faint. A sharp exclamation from his companion caused him to look up, and following the police-agent's gaze, he saw a man leaning over the parapet in an angle of the roof close by. He was quite motionless, and stood in an attitude of profound attention—one hand gripping the stone in front of him, the other shading his eyes as he gazed steadfastly at the scene below. Close by him a charcoal fire burnt in a tripod, and a pot of molten lead hissed and bubbled above it. A workman's bag, with the end of tools protruding from it, lay on the roof at the man's feet.

The police-agent went up and touched this man on the shoulder. The man turned, and Graham saw that all the colour had left his face and that his eyes had assumed a strange, fixed expression. He glanced at the police-agent and at Graham, and shook his head with a curiously listless movement, ere he turned away again to stare out across the

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ruins. The police-agent shook him by the shoulder.

"Did you see it?" he cried, in the man's ear. "Did you see it?"

The man nodded half-sullenly.

"I saw," he said, in a dull, spiritless voice. "I saw."

"Tell us what you saw! Tell us."

"I saw—it. I was waiting for the lead to melt, and I looked over just to pass the time. I was thinking what a fine day it was, and what a lot of people there were. I think there was a block there"—he pointed tremblingly towards Duncannon Street—"there were so many cabs and 'buses about. They made a long line on both sides the street, right down to the foot of Charing Cross, and the Strand was jammed just there, too. I was watching them—I wondered how long they would be in getting free. Then—then I saw the earth rise up—right in the middle of the Strand there—just where you went across from the corner of the church to the station—yes, it rose up. Look here, did you ever see a pantomime at the Lane? Well, you know how those demons and things spring out of traps in the stage-floor—they come through the middle, and the trap opens up like wedges cut out of a round cake, doesn't it? Well, the earth opened like that—it seemed to split up all ways, and everything went down—just as if—I don't know what it was like. There wasn't any noise, either—I didn't hear any. It was over in a second—all fell to pieces, you know. Something dark seemed to come over everything, and it turned

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bitter cold—colder than ever I felt anything in winter.”

The man began to tremble and then to weep.

“What is it?” he cried. “Is it the end—Is it the last day? There are thousands of them there—yes, thousands! Will it be our turn next? Did you see it, too?”

Graham strove to reassure him: the police-agent carefully removed the pan of molten lead from the brazier and put it out of harm’s way in a corner of the parapet. He leaned over the wall again and presently beckoned Graham to his side. Graham looked out once more across the awful waste of ruins. People were crowding to the edge in tens of thousands; Trafalgar Square was packed from side to side; a continuous murmur of voices came up to him. The police and firemen were surrounding the destroyed area with a cordon, but there was little need to keep the crowds back—the sight of that heap of grey ruin forbade the boldest to set foot within its confines.

“The work has been well done,” said the police-agent, in a low voice.

Graham shuddered. He was thinking of what the secret society’s emissary had said to him ere they parted as to his desire that the coming death should be swift and painless. It seemed ages since that interview on Westminster Bridge, and yet it was not twelve hours since he had left the man whom he at the time thoroughly believed to be mad.

“What *do* you think of this?” he cried, suddenly turning to his companion. “An hour ago I could not have believed it possible!”

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The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I think what I have thought all along, sir," he said. "I think that this affair is only beginning."

"Beginning?" exclaimed Graham. "But London will be reduced to ashes if this goes on!"

"Exactly," said the police-agent. "That is precisely what we have to deal with. London will be reduced to ashes, as you say, if this continues."

"It must be prevented," said Graham, almost excitedly.

"Ah!" said the police-agent. "Prevented! Yes, but how, Mr Graham, how?" Then seeing Graham's astonishment, he continued: "Pardon me, sir, but I have seen more of the world than you, and have been dealing with crime and criminals ever since I was a boy. It has been my speciality to deal with Anarchists and their operations. You do not know me—I am Stephen Gotto."

Graham recognised the name with a start.

"I know you well by repute, Mr Gotto," he answered. "I am told that you know more of this sort of thing than any man living."

Gotto shook his head.

"Mr Graham," he answered, "I am speaking the honest truth to you when I tell you that I know no more than you do of *this* sort of thing. It is new to me. I have had experience of Anarchist outrages in several European capitals, and of the dynamite outrages of some years ago, but I am nonplussed here. This, sir, is not the work of Anarchists—at least, not of the old sort. This is the work of chemists of the first ability. Look across this waste of ruin and death, Mr Graham—

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observe how clearly the work has been done. There is just a death-area—within it everything is not merely destroyed, it is annihilated and reduced to ashes ; outside it, with a clear line of demarcation between them, is life and safety. They are no ordinary men who have done this, Mr Graham. I tell you they are chemists of the first rank—and they are our masters. They are, as their representative remarked to you last night, in the position of dictators, for they possess a power of which we know nothing. Can we stand against an enemy like that ? ”

“ It is a most awful thing,” said Graham ; “ I do not know what to think. It seems impossible that we can be at the mercy of a few unscrupulous individuals—we, with all our resources, our wealth, our——”

“ Sir,” said Gotto, “ the few men who are in possession of the force which caused yonder disaster can afford to sneer at all the armies, navies, and wealth in the world. I have always said that the chemist would eventually become master of the world, and here is the first proof of it. What secret it is that lies behind all this I dare not even guess at. Who ever saw the like ? Vast masses of masonry, iron, wood, steel, all reduced to ashes within a moment ! It is wonderful. And there is nothing to be done.”

“ Nothing to be done ! ” exclaimed Graham. “ With the perpetrators still at large ? ”

Gotto shrugged his shoulders.

“ The men who could accomplish *that*,” he said, “ will have taken good care to provide for their

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own safety. I wonder how they did it—what this awful force is, this force which can slay ten thousand people as easily as a Maxim gun mows down half-a-dozen—aye, more easily.”

“Ten thousand!” exclaimed Graham. “Do you think that so many lives have been lost in this outrage? My God, how terrible!”

“I consider that a moderate estimate, judging from what the crowds round about Charing Cross were at noon on a summer day,” answered Gotto. “But I must descend, Mr Graham. There will be work enough for us during the next few hours.”

Graham looked once more across the desolate space, which was now entirely surrounded by an enormous crowd that stretched away in every direction. A great silence had fallen upon the people. The awful, unexplainable character of the catastrophe had become known, and a hush that was frightening in its depth had succeeded the first clamourings and cries.

Gotto touched the workman on the shoulder. He appeared to have fallen into a stupor and sat on the roof beside his tool-bag staring vacantly at the charcoal fire. “Come with me,” said the police-agent. “It may be that no one saw quite so much as you did. Pick up your brazier and come downstairs.”

The man rose mechanically, obeyed Gotto's instructions, and in response to the latter's sign, preceded him and Graham down the stairway.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ASHES OF THE DEAD.

EMERGING from the National Gallery by another basement entrance opening into St. Martin's Lane, Graham and his companions found themselves on the western edge of the devastated area. By this time a cordon of police and of firemen had been drawn round it. Graham observed that the duties of these men were unusually light—the vast crowds stretching away along the side streets in every direction had become quiet, orderly, and unnaturally silent. It was like assisting at the obsequies of some illustrious dead. Everybody appeared to be too much impressed by the gravity of the occasion to have any thought of unmannerly behaviour. Scarcely a word was heard on any side. Men and women alike stood in closely packed ranks, their faces strained and anxious, gazing at the open space of sky which scarcely an hour before had been obscured by great blocks of masonry. Now and then a whispered remark or frightened question was heard, but on the whole the people were silent.

Closely following Gotto, who pushed his way with adroit movements through the belt of people

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intervening between them and the cordon of police, Graham and the workman soon found themselves only separated by the latter from the actual verge of the ruined space. The police were drawn up in close lines, effectually barring any closer approach, but a word from Gotto to an inspector made entrance easy for the three, and within the instant Graham found himself within actual touch of the sea of wreckage. He paused for a moment and gazed about him with horror-stricken eyes. The cordon of police and firemen formed a perfect circle, extending from the north-west corner of St. Martin's Church to the same point by way of the ruined buildings in King William Street, the Strand, Buckingham Street, and Northumberland Avenue, and the open space on the east side of Trafalgar Square. Within this circle, sharply defined as if cut by a knife, everything in the shape of life and property was destroyed. It was quite easy to see where the final force of the explosion, or whatever the destructive cause had been, had spent itself. The north wall of the church remained. A segment of Gatti's restaurant was still standing. Some of the buildings in Buckingham Street and in Villiers Street appeared to have been cut in two, and the interiors of apartments were laid bare. Some fragments of the great arch of Charing Cross railway station rose like spectres against the clear sky. The wave of destruction had cut clean through Craven Street and through the monster hotel at the corner of Northumberland Avenue. In the half-wrecked rooms of the latter, folk were seen still standing or sitting as if rooted to the

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spot with horror. Over this fearful scene of devastation the sun burnt brightly in the midst of a cloudless sky.

Gotto, who had advanced close to the wreckage in company with the inspector to whom he had spoken on approaching the cordon, touched Graham on the arm. The latter turned mechanically: for the past hour he had seemed to live in a dream, and as yet found it impossible to think or to realise anything clearly.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it, Mr Gotto?"

"Mr Graham," said Gotto, "this is beyond all human experience. I have had great — vast — experience in explosives since the affair in Paris in 1870, but I have never known anything like this. Do you perceive, sir, that this vast mass of ruin is already in process—very rapid process, too!—of disintegration? Look!"

Graham cast his eyes across the wide area in front of him, and made a strong effort to regain full control of his faculties. He saw that the police-agent was right—the mass of debris, of whatever it had been composed, was quickly settling down, as if some fiercely-biting acid were consuming it.

"See," said Gotto, stepping nearer the edge of the wreckage and taking up a handful of what looked like the ash from a cigar, "it is being transformed into dust—absolutely into dust, Mr Graham! Whatever chemical can it be that can do this thing? Remember what this mass of wreckage contains—masonry of the strongest description, iron, steel, wood, human remains."

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"It is horrible—horrible!" exclaimed Graham, with an expression of disgust. "Mr Gotto, it is the work of devils—no human mind could conceive such things."

"It is the work of human hands, nevertheless, sir," answered Gotto, "and I would give the riches of the world to know what the secret is. A man who could discover it——"

Here Gotto was interrupted by the inspector, who had stood close by listening very attentively to what he had said.

"Mr Gotto," said he, "here is the Prime Minister's carriage coming through the crowd. Help me to make an entrance at this point for it."

Graham looked up and saw Lord Grandminster's liveries advancing slowly through the multitude from the direction of Pall Mall. Thickly massed as it was, the great crowd gave way silently, and within a moment the inspector had opened the door of the brougham. Lord Grandminster, looking many years older than when Graham had left him an hour and a half before, alighted, and behind him came an old gentleman whom Graham recognised as Sir Septimus Bellhouse, then acting as Chairman of the Committee on Explosives, who was followed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and M. de Reineville. As the Prime Minister alighted, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Colonel Hexham, rode up and dismounted, and the two walked a little way apart. Graham watched Lord Grandminster with a feeling of vague curiosity. The Prime Minister, pale,

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distressed, looked at the awful scene of desolation as if he scarcely comprehended its significance, and for some moments he did not speak. Then he addressed the Commissioner in a low voice, apparently asking some questions, to which Colonel Hexham gave no other reply than a shake of the head. Lord Grandminster inclined his head, too, and then drawing his tall figure to its full height, he looked once more across the wrecked space and stood gazing at it in silence.

Wynyard, as he alighted from the Prime Minister's brougham, recognised his nephew and advanced to his side. His face betrayed great emotion, and he seized Graham's arm and leaned heavily upon it as if the desolation about him were more than he could bear to see.

"Did you see this happen, Harry?" he said. "Were you close by?"

Graham shook his head, with a sudden feeling of disinclination for conversation of any sort.

"No," he said, "I saw nothing until I came here—just after. There is a man who saw it—he was at work on the roof of the National Gallery. I think it has affected his mind."

He pointed to the workman, who, like a child that is afraid, had kept close to Gotto ever since they had entered the cordon. The workman certainly looked like a man distraught. He whimpered softly, and looked round about him with frightened eyes as if he feared some further horror. Wynyard gazed at him curiously, and then spoke to Gotto.

"You had better keep him with you, Mr Gotto,"

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he said. "There will be a Cabinet Council this afternoon, and his account of what he saw may be wanted. What is your opinion of this outrage? Have you ever seen anything like it in your experience?"

"Sir," answered Gotto, "there has never been anything like this in the history of the world. It is marvellous. The agent employed must be tens of thousands of times stronger than any explosive known to us. Ask Sir Septimus there what his opinion is."

Sir Septimus Bellhouse, accompanied by M. de Reineville, had advanced to the edge of the mass of wreckage on alighting from the Prime Minister's carriage, and was now engaged in an earnest conversation with the Frenchman. It was evident that both English and French *savant* were utterly nonplussed. Each held a handful of the rapidly disintegrating ashes, examining them by touch, smell, and taste; each looked at the other with a blank expression of countenance. Lord Grandminster suddenly caught sight of them and walked back with the Commissioner to where they were standing; Wynyard and Graham also advanced and joined the group, and Gotto and the workman hung on its edge, listening.

"Well?" said the Prime Minister, in a low voice.

Sir Septimus Bellhouse shook his head with a half-despairing, half-impatient gesture.

"It is beyond me," he said. "I have spent a lifetime in the study of explosives, but I know no more of the cause of this affair than the child unborn. If I had been told of it I would not have given

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credence to the story for one second. Is there any one here who saw what happened?"

"This man saw," said Gotto, drawing the workman forward. "He was on the roof of the National Gallery."

"What did you see, my man?" asked Sir Septimus. "Come—tell us; don't be afraid. It has given him a terrible shock, whatever he saw," he added in a low voice, as the man stammered and whimpered.

The workman repeated his account, helped out by Gotto. He was now much more shaken than when Graham and the police-agent had first met him on the roof, and he halted for words and stared at the men gathered round him as if he feared them.

"It is beyond me," said Sir Septimus for the second time, as the workman concluded his story. "Here has been used some explosive force powerful enough to utterly destroy everything within a vast area. It is not merely human life that is destroyed—it is everything! As your lordship is aware, there was matter within this space which could not have been destroyed so rapidly by any agent that we know of. Marble—granite—iron—steel—what have we that within an hour can reduce these things to mere ash? Yet look here—this vast mass of ruin is already reduced to something like dust—it is at this moment being disintegrated at a rate which is positively affrighting. It is beyond me—I am as a child that knows nothing."

"And I too," said de Reineville in a low voice. "The results of the employment of this force are indeed amazing."

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After that there was a brief silence, broken at last by the voice of the Prime Minister.

"We can do no more here, gentlemen," he said, with much emotion. "Let us return," and he moved towards his carriage, accompanied by the Commissioner, who asked him some question. Wynyard turned to Graham.

"Will you go to Evie, Harry?" he said. "She will have heard of this and it will frighten her. And don't leave Berkeley Square for the next hour or two. I may want to communicate with you."

"I am going there now," answered Graham, dully. "I—great God, sir, what does all this mean—what will be the end of it?"

Wynyard shook his head.

"I cannot tell, my boy," he answered. "It is worse than if all Europe had combined against us. We cannot see our enemy. We are in the dark, in the dark!"

He turned away and entered Lord Grandminster's carriage. The Prime Minister and Sir Septimus Bellhouse had already taken their seats; de Reineville stood at the door talking to them. He did not re-enter the carriage with Wynyard, and it presently drove away, leaving him within the cordon. He came back to Graham's side.

"I think I heard you speak of some elevated position from which you recently viewed this scene, Mr Graham?" he said, with polite interrogation. "Is it possible that I too may view it from the same place?"

Graham was still too much confused to under-

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stand the exact meaning of de Reineville's words. Gotto, who still stood near, hastened to speak.

"Pardon me, sir," he said. "Mr Graham is somewhat dazed by this terrible occurrence. If you will permit me I will take you to the roof of the National Gallery."

Graham suddenly awoke to the meaning of what was going on. He turned to de Reineville.

"I'm afraid I seem out of my wits, M. de Reineville," he said. "This—this has knocked me over. I must go to Berkeley Square at once. Mr Gotto here will show you the position we spoke of. Forgive my abruptness—I feel very far from being myself."

The Frenchman bowed with perfect composure and politeness.

"I understand," he said, gravely, "and I honour your feelings, Mr Graham. *Au revoir!* Mr Gotto, I am at your disposal."

"I am at your service, sir," said Gotto, "when I have arranged with this poor fellow here, who has almost lost his wits from fright. See here, my man, will you go down to New Scotland Yard with the inspector there? he will give you some refreshment and treat you kindly until I come there."

The man, whose discomposure seemed to increase every moment, began to weep.

"I am afraid," he said. "I want to go home. My—my wife and child—they may have been in that." He pointed a trembling finger at the mass of wreckage, which now looked like a vast bed of grey ashes. "She goes out shopping at noon on

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Saturdays, because it is quieter. She—and the baby—they may have been there.”

“Where do you live?” asked Gotto.

“In Newport Street,” answered the man. He began to weep again. “Let me go home,” he said.

“I’ll send some one with you,” said Gotto. He went up to the inspector, and presently came back with an officer in plain clothes. “There,” he said, “this man will go home with you and tell you what to do—keep those newspaper men away from him, Smithson,” he added, as the two moved away. “They’re bearing down on him now.”

“That man saw?” said de Reineville, as he and Gotto pushed through the crowd.

“Yes, sir, he saw!” answered Gotto. “He was fortunate—and did not know it.”

“Ha! you would like to have seen it yourself?”

“It will be one of the regrets of my life that I did not,” answered Gotto, as he ushered the Frenchman into the basement of the National Gallery. “Such a thing as that has never been seen before—never!”

“You are interested in it?”

“Very much. If I were possessed of all the wealth of the world, I would give it all to know the secret which the men who have done this hold in their keeping.”

“Ha!—and why, Mr Gotto?”

“Because I should then be master of the world,” answered Mr Gotto, drily.

The Frenchman made no reply to this. He followed the police-agent up the stairs in silence.

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As Gotto opened the door in the roof, a sudden gust of wind smote them in the face. "There is a wind rising," said he, and strode sharply forward to the parapet, with de Reineville close at his heels. They looked over, and a simultaneous exclamation burst from the lips of each.

"The wind! the wind!"

A strong, fresh breeze was blowing up the Strand, and already the vast area of ashes was being stirred by it. The atoms came along like dirty snowflakes, flying over the heads of the crowd in Trafalgar Square. Every second the wind increased in strength, and the shower of dust-like particles thickened. All over the devastated space they were whirling in mad circles; they came floating up to the roof of the National Gallery; the air was darkened by them all along the neighbouring streets.

Gotto muttered something under his breath: the Frenchman, drawing himself up, folded his arms across his chest and stood motionless, watching the ashes of the dead as they were whirled away from the death-scene.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PANIC BEGINS.

IT was with difficulty that Graham extricated himself from the vast crowd which had gathered around the scene of this catastrophe and some time ere he could find a cab whose driver was sufficiently in possession of his wits to be able to comprehend what was required of him. Everybody seemed to be dazed. Groups stood at every street corner; shopkeepers had left their counters and come to their doors; clerks and warehousemen had rushed away from their duties; the drivers of vehicles had pulled up wherever they happened to be—the whole scene suggested that some mighty hand had suddenly put forth its fingers upon London, and occasioned a cessation of all traffic and business. Graham, noticing affairs with a new-born keenness of perception, observed that there was little talking and few signs of excitement amongst the people he passed. Everybody was in a tense state of suspense, shocked by the horror which was yet a mystery to them, and afraid of worse things happening.

Graham did not succeed in getting a cab until he had made his way as far as the north-west

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corner of Leicester Square. He had attempted to rouse more than one driver and had failed signally. The man in each case had replied to him with a vacant stare and had preserved a stupefied silence. When at last he came across a man whose composure was less disturbed and had made him understand that he desired to be driven to Berkeley Square as rapidly as possible, Graham sat down in the cab with a feeling of utter exhaustion. He felt physically tired, wearied out, utterly fagged ; his limbs ached and his head throbbed. He had never felt so weary in his life, he said to himself, and he began to wonder in a dull, vague fashion what it was that had tired him out so.

He got slowly out of the cab at the door of the house in Berkeley Square and went up the steps like a worn-out man. The door was open, and Phillips and two of his subordinate men-servants stood in the hall. One of them, a lad of eighteen, was talking in an excited tone.

"And they do say," he was exclaiming as Graham appeared, "they do say as 'ow——"

Phillips stopped him and came forward to meet Graham.

"Miss Wynyard is in?" said Graham, in a listless fashion that surprised even his own dulled senses.

"Miss Wynyard is lunching with Lady Cheriton, sir," answered the old butler. "I think she expected to meet you there, Mr Henry."

"I had quite forgotten," said Graham, suddenly remembering that he had promised to lunch with Lady Cheriton. "Quite forgotten, quite."

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He dropped into a chair in the hall, feeling limper than ever. The two footmen stared at him with frightened eyes. Graham glanced at the three men and read interrogation in their looks.

"I don't think you need be afraid of anything at present," he said. "I think there will be nothing further. I—Phillips, I wish you would give me some brandy."

The old man trotted away hurriedly, and until his return Graham sat staring at the ground, and the footmen noticed that his hands were trembling. He drank the brandy eagerly, and felt something of the dazed feeling pass away.

"Are you feeling better, sir?" asked Phillips, anxiously.

"Yes, thank you, Phillips. I will go to Lady Cheriton's now. Don't let the servants get alarmed," he added, as the old man followed him to the door. "I think the worst is over at present."

"What is it, Mr Henry?" the old man asked. "Reports have kept coming in for the last half hour. Is it dynamite, sir?"

"I don't know what it is," answered Graham. "But don't let the servants get into a panic if you can help it." Then he added that he had just seen Mr Wynyard and that he was safe, and walked away towards Lady Cheriton's house in South Audley Street, muttering to himself, "If a panic sets in—if a panic sets in!"

Something like a panic had already set in when he reached Lady Cheriton's door. A confused

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babel of voices reached his ears as he went up the steps, and no notice being taken of his knock, and the door standing slightly ajar, he pushed it open and walked in, to encounter a scene which at any other time would have excited his laughter. On one side of the hall stood Lady Cheriton, indignant and angry; behind her were grouped some of her guests who had obviously followed her from the luncheon table; in front of her were grouped the servants, from a prim housekeeper and solemn butler to a somewhat dishevelled and sorely frightened scullery-maid who hovered on the edge of the little crowd and wept. Lady Cheriton was speaking as Graham entered.

"How can you be so ridiculous?" she said. "Is there not as much danger to me as to you, you foolish creatures? Do you suppose they are going to destroy the whole of London? The affair will be explained in the newspapers before night—it is some terrible accident. Go back to your duties, pray, and let me hear no more of this."

"Begging your ladyship's pardon," said the solemn butler in accents of profound agitation, "but our information leads us to think different, your ladyship. Your ladyship is perhaps not aware——"

"I am aware of it just as much as you are, Perkins," interrupted Lady Cheriton. "Don't you think I am as anxious about my life as you are about yours? I tell you you are frightening yourselves about nothing."

Mr Perkins shook his head and his fellow-servants groaned.

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"Our lives is our first consideration, my lady," he said. "We consider Mayfair a very dangerous locality, as being the abode of the first families, your ladyship. If these miscreants selects Mayfair as their next——"

"Oh!" said Lady Cheriton, with a gesture of angry impatience, "you exasperate me beyond measure, Perkins. You are as safe here as you would be anywhere in London."

"Begging your ladyship's pardon," urged Perkins, "but we was thinking of the country, your ladyship. We——"

A very young man who stood behind Lady Cheriton, gazing through a single eye-glass at the group of frightened servants, here pushed himself forward and interrupted the butler.

"I say, you know," he said, "I think you're awfully mistaken, you know—awfully. I think this affair's not the sort of thing you think it is, you know—terrible accident, of course, you know—but not—er—dynamite and that sort of thing, you know; and I say, you know, you can't all troop off and leave Lady Cheriton without a servant in the house, you know—you can't really, you know."

To this earnest appeal the butler was beginning an equally earnest answer when Lady Cheriton caught sight of Graham.

"Oh, here's Mr Graham!" she exclaimed, with something very like joy and relief. "Mr Graham, do speak to those foolish people—you really are foolish, you know, Perkins—and tell them they need not be afraid. They want to leave the house in a body."

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Graham came forward, feeling that something which he could not define made it increasingly difficult for him to undertake this new mission. He looked at Perkins and saw real anxiety in the man's face.

"I don't think you need be alarmed," he said. "I believe you are quite safe here. I have just come from the scene of the disaster, and I think there will be no further outbreak at present."

Perkins' gloomy countenance lightened.

"I have great respect for Mr Graham," he said, "and for Lord Marchford"—here he bowed to the young gentleman who had spoken so eloquently—"and I'm sure her ladyship knows that none of us would put her ladyship to any inconvenience——"

"Then let this ridiculous scene end at once, Perkins," said Lady Cheriton, "and trust to me to provide for your safety if any need arises. There's a nice state of things, Mr Graham," she said as she motioned her guests back to the luncheon table. "Those silly people rushed up here like a pack of sheep, and wanted to go away at once—they think all London is to be blown up. Do you say you have just come from Charing Cross? Sit here and tell us all about it."

Graham sat down by his hostess. Evelyn Wynyard, sitting on the opposite side of the table, caught his eye and looked at him with some anxiety. He smiled at her reassuringly, but she saw that the smile was forced and that he had undergone some shock—he looked years older than when she had seen him the previous evening.

"We have heard scarcely anything," Lady

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Cheriton continued. "Tell us what all these rumours really mean."

Graham looked at his hostess's good-humoured, well-fed countenance with a vague feeling of inquisitiveness. Although he had known Lady Cheriton from the time when he was a schoolboy and she a motherly middle-aged woman, he felt at that moment as if he had never seen her before—between her and her surroundings and the scenes he had just left there was a difference so great as to almost drive his old acquaintance with her out of his mind. He looked at her again, and then at the people and things by which he was surrounded, and the sharp contrast between them and the sight he had seen at Charing Cross smote him with stinging force. Not a mile away was such a scene of death and desolation as the world had rarely if ever seen; here was life and laughter, the enticing scent of food and wine, an atmosphere of refinement and luxury, and for the moment Graham had a distaste for all of them.

"What is it that has happened?" asked Lady Cheriton for the third time. "We have only heard confusing accounts. Is it a dynamite outrage?"

"I heard it was a sort of bomb and that several people were killed," said Lord Marchford. "A man told me he'd heard it, you know, and I thought once of driving down there, you know, and then I thought I wouldn't."

"Is it a very serious affair, Harry?" asked Evelyn.

The sound of his sweetheart's voice recalled Graham to his senses. He looked round him.

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Lady Cheriton, who had no children of her own, was fond of the society of young people, and liked to gather them about her table. Graham noticed, in the swift fashion in which a man always notices things during moments of intense thought and feeling, how bright and careless all the young faces were, and how each as it was turned upon him betrayed an interest that amounted to little more than pardonable curiosity in what he might be about to say.

"It is a much more serious affair than I fear you recognise it to be," he answered, making an effort to speak calmly. "It is a very dreadful affair, Lady Cheriton. I think you cannot comprehend how dreadful. It—it has quite unnerved me."

"But—what is it?" said Lady Cheriton. "What is it that has happened? A man came rushing along here crying that Charing Cross Station was blown up—another said Trafalgar Square had been destroyed by dynamite. We have all heard rumours, but we want to know what the precise nature of the affair is."

Graham, who was making a poor pretence of eating, hesitated. It seemed impossible to describe what he had seen at that moment and in that place. But he remembered ere long they must all know the truth—the evening newspapers would be full of details and particulars—and there was accordingly no reason why he should not give them such information as it was in his power to give.

"I cannot tell you who or what it is that has caused the damage," he said, half-unwillingly ;

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"but I can tell you what I have seen. I can scarcely believe that I have seen it. A vast space at Charing Cross is totally destroyed. St Martin's Church, a large block of buildings in the Strand, that triangular block of which Morley's Hotel formed a part, a considerable portion of the north end of Northumberland Avenue, and the whole of Charing Cross Station and the hotel are literally razed to the ground."

Something dropped to the floor with a smart crash at Graham's side, and he turned to see the footman, white and trembling, at his elbow. The man gazed at him with imploring eyes, taking no heed of the dish which had fallen from his hands.

"Oh, sir! Charing Cross, did you say, sir? I've a brother at the bookstall there—did you say the station was destroyed, sir?" he said.

"I fear it is entirely destroyed," said Graham, gently.

The man wrung his hands in agony.

"He was such a bonny lad," he wailed. "And a good lad—oh, my lady, let me go and see after him!"

"Yes, yes, James—go at once," said Lady Cheriton. She followed the man from the room, coming back presently with an expression of concern and trouble on her face. "Do you think many lives have been lost?" she asked as she took her seat again.

"Thousands!" answered Graham in a low voice. "Thousands!"

"Thousands! Do you mean to say that thousands have been killed—absolutely killed?"

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"Remember how many people are massed together about Charing Cross at noon," said Graham. "The hotels, the station, the Strand, the shops and restaurants, the people in the streets leading to the Strand. There must have been at least ten thousand killed."

"But—I do not understand!" cried Lady Cheriton. "Killed!—why, what agency has been used to bring about a holocaust like that? it sounds like the work of supernatural causes."

"I cannot tell," said Graham. "I think no one can tell. I do not think the explosive—if it is an explosive—is known to any one. It makes no sound, and it reduced the ruins to ashes—literally to ashes—within an incredibly small space of time."

There was a dead silence after this. Graham looked at the faces which were turned towards his own, and saw consternation, alarm, horror, mingled with fear, in each. Lady Cheriton stared at him with wide open eyes; the young men were looking at him with knitted brows, as if wondering whether he had gone mad or not; the girls had instinctively drawn nearer together; Perkins, standing behind his mistress, had turned green in colour, and was breathing painfully.

Lady Cheriton suddenly rose from her chair.

"This is no time for eating and drinking," she said sharply. "How do we know that some of our friends have not met their deaths in this affair? Perkins, order the brougham round at once—I am going out."

Graham and Evelyn left the house together a few minutes later.

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"What does it all mean?" she asked. "Can you tell, Harry?"

Graham shook his head.

"I cannot tell," he answered. "It is, I fear, the work of a secret society whose members are in possession of some terrible chemical force equal to the almost instantaneous destruction of life and property over a large area. What that force may be I cannot even guess at."

"But that means—that means, that we are at their mercy?" she said.

Graham bowed his head. Evelyn said no more, and they walked on in silence; she, bewildered by the sudden horror which had fallen upon London; he, secretly musing on the possibilities of the future. At the corner of Mount Street a messenger from Wynyard met them and requested Graham's presence at the Foreign Office immediately. There was an empty cab passing at the moment, and Graham, with a hurried adieu to Evelyn, sprang into it and was driven quickly away.

CHAPTER IX.

MR GOTTO STARTS OUT.

AFTER watching the ashes of the now thoroughly disintegrated mass of wreckage float through the wide space beneath them until Trafalgar Square and the streets beyond looked as though a snow-storm had settled down with startling suddenness, Mr Gotto and the Frenchman descended from the roof of the National Gallery and made their way to the door in the basement by which they had been admitted. Leaving this, they turned as by a common impulse towards Leicester Square, threading their way thither through various courts and alleys until they reached its south-east corner. Here they stood outside the edge of the drifting cloud of ashes, and here Gotto paused, and drawing out his handkerchief, leaned against the wall of a house and wiped away the heavy beads of perspiration which had gathered upon his forehead. De Reineville also paused and looked at his companion with unemotional eyes. His own face betrayed no sign of feeling.

"I fear you are not well, Mr Gotto," he remarked.

Gotto shook his head, and then jerked it over his shoulder in the direction from which they had come.

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"I confess readily, monsieur," he answered, "that the sight which I have just seen has upset me. I experience a feeling of moral and physical sickness which I have never known in my life until now."

"And yet," said de Reineville, "you must often have seen very terrible sights during your career. There are, I should imagine, few agents of the police who have seen as much as you have, Mr Gotto."

"It is true, monsieur," replied Gotto. "I have seen things at the memory of which I have shuddered long years afterwards. You understand what sort of shuddering I mean, monsieur? There are times, for example, when one's brain is comparatively inactive—when one is sitting over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, or speculating in idle fashion on a mere nothing . . . suddenly the recollection of a thing seen a generation before flashes into the field of mental vision, and one turns of an icy coldness at what one sees through the aid of memory. Yes," he continued, again wiping his forehead, "I have many memories, but I shall never have one which will equal that of this past hour."

De Reineville gave him a penetrating glance—the first sign of interest or emotion which the police-agent had seen in his inscrutable eyes.

"You forget, Mr Gotto," he said, "that what we have just seen is in all probability a mere preliminary to scenes of still greater horror. Come—let us realise to ourselves what all this means. You, like myself, are not an Englishman—you are, I think, a native of Italy? Yes—so I believed.

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But you have lived in England so long, and served the English Government so much, that you know the English character. Here is a band of—what shall we call them?—Anarchists? Conspirators? Well, let us call them conspirators, who have deliberately declared war against this mighty Government, and, after it, against every principal power in Europe. The band, group, society, has struck its first blow—we have beheld the result. Never in the history of the world has such a blow been struck at a great power, nor in such a fashion. But is it your belief, founded upon your keen observation of the English character, Mr Gotto, that these people will submit at the first blow? What do you say?”

Gotto shook his head.

“They will not,” said he. “They are not the people to be subjugated by one blow, nor by two. Therefore——”

“Therefore,” interrupted de Reineville, “more blows will succeed that which has just fallen. I should say that each blow will be heavier than the last; therefore, again, you are like to be much more shocked than you have been just now. Having proved this to you I will thank you for your courtesy and go my way. *Au revoir*, Mr Gotto.”

“*Au revoir*, monsieur,” replied Gotto, raising his hat. “I am at your service at any time.”

He remained leaning against the wall for a moment or two after de Reineville had walked away with swift strides, but presently straightening himself he passed out of the square into a

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small, dingy side street wherein was situated a café-restaurant which he often frequented. Here, seated in a dark corner, over a cup of black coffee, a *petit verre*, and a cigarette, Mr Gotto proceeded to speculate on the events of the morning—events which, as he confessed to himself, had far outdone those of any day which he ever remembered. The summons to attend the Prime Minister's house had been followed by the Prime Minister's marvellous news; to the marvellous news had succeeded the awful catastrophe at Charing Cross; after the affair of Charing Cross had come his meeting with the Count de Reineville. In sheer truth Gotto was more puzzled by de Reineville than by any other feature of that day's proceedings.

"It is strange," he said to himself, "that I cannot place that person. I had a belief that I knew everybody in Europe whom it is necessary that one should know, but I do not know him. Nevertheless, that we have met before is certain. But where? Was it in Paris, during the Reign of Terror? I cannot say. Or in St. Petersburg when the Czar Alexander was assassinated? I cannot think. Or was it—bah! it is useless, my brain is playing me false—I shall forget my own name next! Again, what is it in him that I remember? It is not his voice. It is not his face—face! a mask, rather! Well, then, what is it? It is—it is—it is a . . . something. But what *is* that something? That I cannot say."

The result of these meditations was that Gotto

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suddenly finished his coffee and cognac, and left his seat in the dark corner of the café-restaurant for the light of the street without. Once outside, he set out at a round pace for Piccadilly Circus. Passing swiftly through that crowded corner of London, Gotto observed that every group assembled at the doors of the restaurants, at the corners of the streets, and on the islands in the middle, were discussing the event of the morning, and that the air was already vibrating with a sense of fear which his experienced mind knew was the forcing-bed in which the seeds of panic would quickly grow and flourish. He did not pause, however, to examine the state of things more carefully ; making his way through a considerable crowd which had assembled in front of the Circus entrance to the Café Monico, he turned up in the direction of Golden Square, and having soon reached that once fashionable, but now dingy neighbourhood, knocked at a door on its south side and waited patiently for an answer to his summons.

The house to which Gotto's steps had led him was anything but prepossessing in outward appearance. Its woodwork had evidently not been painted for some years, and where the window-panes were not obscured by dirt they were replaced by squares of brown paper or stuffings of dirty rag. The bell at the front door had been torn out, and its wire hung in a rusty festoon against the door-post. In the middle panel of the door there had once been a name-plate ; this, too, had been torn away, and where it had aforetime shone was a scar

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of blistered and splintered wood. The steps leading to the door were greasy with accumulated filth—there was, indeed, nothing in the exterior appearance of the house to show that human beings lived there. Nevertheless ere Gotto had waited two minutes a soft feminine voice sounded within, asking who knocked, and his quick ears caught the sound of a light footfall on uncarpeted boards.

"It is I, Gotto, Margharita," he replied quickly. "Open, child!"

When the door opened it revealed a hall-way somewhat dirtier and even more neglected than the outside of the house, and standing within it a young woman of considerable beauty of face and form, attired in the fashion of an Italian peasant, and making an agreeable picture set in an ugly frame. She smiled as the police-agent entered, and made haste to close and fasten the door behind him. Gotto greeted her with a smile and a jest; she laughed, and preceded him along a gloomy hall to the foot of an uncarpeted staircase.

"Is the grandfather in?" said Gotto.

The girl nodded, smiled, and showed her white teeth.

"At his work as usual," she said. "Always at work—at work day and night. You will go up to him?"

Gotto nodded his head and sprang up the stairs. On each side of him the walls were stained and dirty; the balusters had disappeared here and there, and in one place a length of the hand-rail had been torn away and hung dangling against the wall. That the lower rooms of the house were not

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used was evident from the fact that numerous spiders had spun their webs all over them, and that thick accumulations of dust lay at the foot of each. Overhead the lath and plaster of the ceilings hung in grotesque wreckage, and the atmosphere was composed of an admixture of the odours generated by the cooking of food, the mingling of chemicals, and the gradual increase of dirt in every corner. As Gotto climbed the stairs to a higher point, however, a certain amount of improvement became visible. The doors of the rooms stood open and gave evidence of some sort of life being lived within; through one of them came the notes of a singing bird, in another cooking operations, which plainly included the preparations of garlic, made themselves apparent. Gotto paid no heed to any of these things—he pressed up the stairs until he reached the topmost storey, and there found his progress barred by a door.

Knocking three times at this door the police-agent was immediately bidden to enter by the deep voice of a man. He turned the handle and went in. The same voice said, "A moment ere you speak." Gotto dropped quietly into a chair close by the door and waited.

The room in which he now found himself was of considerable size, and evidently occupied the whole of the top floor of the house. In one respect it differed to all the rest of the house—its windows were clean and even brightly polished, and it received a further supply of light from a casement in the sloping roof. It needed but one glance at its contents to see that it was the work-

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shop or laboratory of an experimental chemist—here were crucibles, retorts, scientific apparatus, curiously-shaped jars in glass and earthenware, and all manner of things mystifying to an unlearned man, and over and around everything hung a heavy odour of chemicals. Gotto, however, did not look at the room or its contents; his eyes fixed themselves on the room's one occupant, a man who sat in a far corner with his back to the door, bending over an ancient bureau, on the sloping desk of which lay stretched out a large sheet of paper.

"But one moment more," said this person. "Ah, there, now I have it!" He bent lower over the paper, and Gotto heard the sound of a scratching pen. The man straightened himself and turned round—a tall man, dressed almost in rags, but of much dignity of stature and face, and with a certain bearing which always reminded the police-agent of the conventional statue of Jupiter. A massive head, thickly covered with curling grey hair, a rugged face, fringed with a great grey beard and lighted by a pair of peculiarly penetrating eyes of steely blue, a somewhat bent but sturdy and commanding figure—such was the outward presence of the man who turned from his desk and made his way through the litter of his workshop in Gotto's direction.

"Ah, Gotto!" he exclaimed. "Well, and what brings you here? You have not yet come to cut off my poor head or hang me out of the window, eh? Not yet, eh, friend Gotto?"

"Not yet, Paolo," answered Gotto. Then, re-

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garding the old man attentively, he said: "Have you heard the news?"

Paolo sat down on a chest opposite the police-agent and shook his head.

"Well?" he said. "This news, friend Gotto—what is it?"

Gotto shook his head also.

"It is difficult to tell," he said. "There has that happened—it was at the hour of noon—which never happened before. You know the place called Charing Cross, perhaps?—well, at the precise stroke of noon an area of one hundred yards from the Cross which stood in the station yard was swept out of existence at one blow, without sound, without sign. Swept out, I tell you—oh, there has certainly never been anything like it."

The old man listened without showing any great astonishment. He pulled the chest nearer to Gotto's chair and laid his hand on the latter's shoulder.

"Tell me everything," he said.

Gotto told of all he knew, of the mysterious catastrophe, of the rapid disintegration, and of the flying ashes. The elder man listened and said nothing until the younger had concluded his story. When it was over both men gazed at each other in astonishment.

"Well?" said Gotto, at last.

The old man shook his head.

"No," he said. "I cannot say anything to you—not even I. Marvellous? Wonderful? Astounding? Bah—one wants some new names for a thing, a triumph like this. What an achievement!

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A force that destroys utterly—utterly. Then I must be a mere—oh, these men are great masters!”

“They are masters of the world, or soon will be,” said Gotto. “And—who can they be?”

The old man shook his head once more. It had fallen upon his breast and he moved it with a certain helplessness which showed how entirely he was surprised at the news just communicated to him.

“I thought I knew of everybody who was at all likely to compass a great deed of that sort,” he said, “but no one that I know has come within a thousandth part of such success. Ah! this is not the ordinary sort of thing, Gotto—this is most extraordinary. It is, so they say, a new force. But what force—what force? Do you think this to be an Anarchist outrage?”

“No,” answered Gotto. “I know where every Anarchist in Europe is. This is the work of men to whose knowledge of science your own is as—as——”

“As nothing,” said the old man quietly. “As a mere nothing. No, this is beyond my dreams. To disintegrate! You say that the whole mass of wreckage was reduced to ashes?”

“To the finest ashes,” answered Gotto.

Paolo pondered a little. He suddenly looked up at Gotto with a new intelligence in his eyes.

“These men can establish a Dictatorship!” he exclaimed. “They can do anything they like, or sweep mankind out of existence. What a power! Who can they be? Do you not admire them, friend Gotto?”

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"Very much indeed," answered the police-agent. "And I should like to know them personally and professionally."

The old savant laughed.

"You will not do that, Gotto," he said. "No, you will not do that."

"Umph," said Gotto. "Well, I am going. By-the-bye, do you know anything of the Count de Reineville, a French savant? I met him at the scene of the catastrophe."

"De Reineville? Yes, oh yes!" answered Paolo. "He is an amateur. He is a corresponding member of the Royal Society, and has written a tract or two on various small matters."

"Is he a great chemist?" inquired Gotto. "Or does he play at the science? Ah, I see your opinion. I asked because he seemed to be regarded as an authority by some of the great men who brought him to the scene."

Gotto then said good-bye, left the house, and hurried away southward, and as he went he muttered to himself, "But I have not yet remembered where that man and I met."

CHAPTER X.

THE DUKE OF ST. ORBYN.

APPROACHING the Foreign Office by way of the Horse Guards Parade, Graham found that such a dense crowd had assembled between the park end of Downing Street and the railings on the opposite side of the road that it was quite impossible for his cabman to drive further. He accordingly left the cab and proceeded to push his way through the crowd. He was much struck by the orderly conduct of the people who had assembled in such numbers, and by the subdued tones in which conversation was being carried on. As he gradually edged his way towards the steps leading into Downing Street he heard many remarks and opinions, and gathered from them that the general notion of the recent catastrophe was chaotic in the extreme. Once, hemmed in at a point where the crowd was especially dense, he was obliged perforce to listen to a discussion between two persons who had become somewhat heated and to whose words those in their immediate neighbourhood were listening with eager attention.

"I tell you, sir," said one of the persons, "that the affair is of Anarchist origin. The infernal

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miscreants must have contrived to plant some new-fangled machine at Charing Cross and to have set it off by clockwork, or a time-fuse, or something of that sort. What else could have led to such awful results?"

The other man smiled as with the consciousness of superior knowledge.

"My dear sir," he said, "nothing that any Anarchist knows of *could* have led to such awful results. I am acquainted practically with the science of chemistry, and I know that there is no agent known to us which could have done what has just been done at Charing Cross. No, sir, this is no ordinary Anarchist outrage. It is, as I said, a new manifestation of natural force; it is, in other words, a visitation of God, and we must bow the neck before it, my dear sir, we must bow the neck before it."

The person who advocated the Anarchist theory shook his head, and was about to make an angry reply, when a third man interrupted him by enquiring of the man practically acquainted with chemistry whether he believed that further outrages or visitations would follow.

"My dear sir," answered the person thus interrogated, "it is more than possible that the Lord intends to destroy the whole city. We are a wicked and a froward nation, and the Lord has dealt mercifully with us so far, but even His patience may be tried too much——"

"That is blasphemy!" cried another voice, and signs of disorder began to make themselves apparent. "You have no right to say such a thing."

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Graham pushed his way on, feeling that it would be well if all London were not in a state of riot and confusion, not to say extreme panic, ere the night was come. He had hard work to penetrate through the crowd, but at last he found a policeman who knew him and who helped him forward on his journey. With this man he exchanged a few words of conversation.

"I hope the crowd will not go on increasing," said Graham.

"It is increasing every moment, sir," answered the policeman. "Downing Street is crammed from one end to the other, and there are thousands of people between Parliament Street and Whitehall. They want to know what the Government will do, and what it all means. This is a bad day for London, sir."

Graham agreed with him, but could offer no original remark on the subject. He presently found himself within the shelter of the Foreign Office, and had hardly sat down in an ante-room to recover his breath, when an official came up to him with a message from Wynyard, who was awaiting his coming in another apartment. Thither Graham immediately repaired, and found his kinsman pacing the floor with impatient strides. Wynyard's first enquiry was for his daughter, and he sighed with satisfaction when assured of her present safety.

"Now, Harry," he said, "the Cabinet is sitting, and Grandminster wants you to tell your story of last night's adventure in person. Tell it as plainly as you can, but don't omit a single detail. This is

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a worse business than I had feared, much worse. There is no doubt that London is in the hands of a most powerful foe, and in a worse case than if she were occupied by a foreign army, and we shall need all our wits and all our resources if we mean to get out of the present situation with credit and safety. Come with me—they are waiting for us.”

Graham, feeling that much of what was going on had all the semblance of a strange dream, presently found himself in that apartment wherein the members of successive British administrations have for some time held their councils. He looked around him and saw faces as familiar to him as those of his nearest and dearest kinsfolk—faces which he was accustomed to seeing every day in one or other of the Houses of Parliament—and he was conscious of a vague feeling that something had made them all strange to him. Every member of the Grandminster Cabinet was present, with the exception of the Duke of St. Orbyn, who was ill in bed. Graham looked from one to the other, and noted the deep anxiety which was evident on every face. When he entered the room in Wynyard’s wake, Lord Grandminster was speaking in a low tone, and the rest of the ministers were leaning forward to catch his words. Here one of the most prominent members of the Government—a man whose iron nerve, boundless confidence in his own powers, and illimitable resource had recently carried the country through a great crisis—sat with eyes fixed on his chief, mouth drawn in a rigid line, his whole attitude one of strange doubt, wonder, and dread; there, an older

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man, white-haired and feeble and dressed in an antiquated fashion which formed a strong contrast to the fashionable attire of most of his companions, sat with one hand behind his ear, his withered face drawn into anxious and painful lines, his dull eyes lighted with a new sense of perplexity. Perplexity, indeed, was the dominant keynote of the entire assemblage. Faces that usually bore the unmistakable stamp of conscious power, were now overcast by a sudden sense of failure to grasp a situation. As the Prime Minister went on speaking in his low, somewhat husky tones, the members of his Cabinet, turning from one to the other, looked into each other's eyes with an expression which said much more plainly than words could say it, 'With all ordinary situations we are prepared to deal, but here is a situation which it is impossible to understand and with which we accordingly cannot deal.' The entire atmosphere of the apartment, indeed, was permeated by dread of the unknown. There was that in every man's face which seemed to ask whether the blow which had fallen upon London was the work of men or devils, or of a power greater than either.

Lord Grandminster presently finished speaking, and looking across the room in Graham's direction, beckoned him to come forward to the table at which he and his fellow-members of the Cabinet were sitting. He motioned Graham to a seat near his own, close to which was one occupied by the aged peer whom Graham had noticed as evincing so much anxiety. As the young man sat down, the old one put up his glass and looked him over

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with evident curiosity ; then, as if not understanding what one so young did in that assembly of the old and middle-aged, he shook his head and sighed deeply. Graham, finding himself sitting at the table with the great rulers of the land, was conscious of a deep emotion—an emotion which increased in intensity as he thought of the reason why he was there at all. He was not yet certain that all this was not a dream, and that he should wake to find himself——

The Prime Minister's voice roused him. He was being asked to tell his story of last night's meeting with the mysterious stranger, and the ministers sitting round the table were gazing at him with inquisitive eyes. Graham fancied that in at least two faces he saw the question, "Why should one so young and inexperienced have been employed?" shape itself. This acted as a tonic—he stood up and began to tell his story clearly and concisely. The old peer, sitting at his side, and nursing his shrivelled ear with a bird-like claw, kept up a mumbling accompaniment to Graham's story ; the man of iron nerve and boundless confidence watched him from the other side of the table with steady eyes and set face in which there was no sign of tremor or emotion seen as Graham's account was unfolded.

He finished the story which he had already told twice, and sat down amidst a dead silence. Lord Grandminster leaned towards him.

"Do not go away, Mr Graham," he said. "Take a seat near the window there and wait—I may want you."

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Graham bowed and left the table, no one having questioned him or desired further information. Lord Grandminster looked at his colleagues.

"I believe Sir Septimus Bellhouse is now ready to give us his report," he said. "It must necessarily be somewhat hurried, but he has been on the scene of the catastrophe since one o'clock, and will be able to tell us more than we know from mere rumour."

The men sitting round the table looked at the great authority on explosives as he entered with something of the expression of children who have been sorely puzzled by some occurrence, and who hail the advent of an adult likely to explain their difficulty. The aged peer, still anxious and flurried, turned to his next neighbour and said, audibly, "Who—who?" and on being answered "Bellhouse," muttered, "Very right—very right—clever man," and once more prepared to listen. The rest, also recognising that here was practical evidence which might be understood, bent forward with something like eagerness in their faces as Sir Septimus, at the Prime Minister's invitation, stood up and consulted his tablets. His face was very grave, and he shook his head as he looked around him. "I greatly fear, my lords and gentlemen," he said, "that my hurried examination of the site of the outrage, or catastrophe, at Charing Cross has told me nothing really definite as to its origin. To put the matter into brief language, the facts are these:—At noon to-day, when the Strand at Charing Cross and the streets debouching upon it at that point were very full of people owing to

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some interruption of the traffic, something occurred which utterly destroyed a circle extending about a hundred yards in each direction from the Cross in the station yard. The only person whom I have yet encountered who appears to have seen anything of the actual occurrence, says that the ground appeared to rise up in segments in every direction. Those in the neighbourhood at the time say that there was no sound, but that a strange darkness fell over the district, accompanied by a wave of intense cold which was felt for some distance. When the darkness cleared off, the area I have mentioned was found to be a perfect mass of ruin, in which it was almost immediately impossible to distinguish between objects. My lords and gentlemen, I confess that this thing is utterly beyond me! Within quite a short time this immense mass of material, in which lay thousands of human bodies and bodies of animals, was in process of swift disintegration, and certainly within forty minutes the whole had been reduced to a fine grey ash. I was on the spot at twenty minutes to one, and saw this myself. About one o'clock a strong wind began blowing from the east and dispersed the ashes, which had gradually been settling down into a compact heap, and before two o'clock the space was quite clear of them. I made a careful examination of the space, and found that the area of destruction was quite clearly defined—as clearly, indeed, as though some gigantic knife had cut through buildings and horses and earth. There is an excavation of the earth to a considerable depth, but not a trace of any agent used in the

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destruction of this vast area. That is all I can say at present. Indeed, I do not know that I can say more at any time. There is no explosive known to modern science which could have produced these awful results. To have produced such a wreckage by means of any one of the most powerful explosives known, would have necessitated its being stored in vast quantities within the area affected. But supposing that had been done, it would still have left the signs of life—it would have merely wrecked, not annihilated! Here everything has been swept out of existence—literally made to be as if it had never been. I can say no more—this is beyond my understanding.”

Sir Septimus Bellhouse sat down and covered his face with his hands, and the men grouped about him looked at each other with eyes in which something more than perplexity was beginning to dawn. There was a dead silence for some moments, and then Lord Grandminster spoke.

“That we are in the hands of a very powerful and utterly unscrupulous foe, there seems no room left for doubt,” he said. “The situation appears to be this: There is in our midst a body of men, calling itself a society, the members of which are possessed of the secret of some awful destructive force of a nature which not even our most learned chemists can yet guess at. They have declared war upon us, and have demanded ransom—that is practically what this demand comes to—to the amount of a hundred millions sterling. That being refused, they have shown us their power—have given us awful proof of its greatness. I

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confess that in my own opinion, they will continue to demand, and will destroy until their demand is satisfied. The question, then, is what to do? In the presence of such power as this, our army is of no avail; our police can do nothing. We are—it is useless to deny the fact—in a state of absolute helplessness, and the question is, What shall be done?"

There was silence for a moment, and then—

"If that were really the case," said a Minister, "there is only one thing that could be done—a full surrender. But it may be pointed out that the perpetrators of this outrage are in our midst—here, amongst us; here, in our own walls. Have we no police who can lay hands upon them? What of our secret police service? Can its agents do nothing?"

"If this were an ordinary Anarchist outrage," replied Lord Grandminster, "the police could do much. But its very character shows that it is not. Our secret police know the whereabouts of every suspicious character in London. It is my firm belief that if we arrest the whole body of suspected people, we shall arrest persons absolutely innocent of this crime. This is a new feature in the world's history. I am sure of it. It is the beginning of a war of science against mere brute force. Has it never occurred to you that a day was sure to come when two or three clever men would be able to defy a whole nation and even the world? It has been a thought of mine for long."

The Prime Minister spoke earnestly, and those sitting about him felt the force of his words. A murmur ran round the table, but was suddenly

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hushed by Wynyard's voice. Everybody turned to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"It is my opinion," he said, "that everything which has fallen from the Prime Minister is of wise counsel. We are attacked by a foe whose power we do not yet recognise in its fulness. The men who can destroy thousands of lives, millions of pounds' worth of property, and, as Sir Septimus Bellhouse has said, make, within a few moments, that which was as if it had never been, can dictate what terms they please to any nation in the world. They can destroy our buildings, our banks, public places, arsenals, ships, palaces—they can destroy us. The only thing to do is to agree with these men ere it is too late. We have heard that their emissary spoke of the ransom they demand being used for the amelioration of the poor of the world. Well—why not meet these men and parley with them——"

Wynyard's speech was interrupted by a slight commotion at the door. Graham, who had been listening with wonder and amazement to the sentiments of the Premier and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whom of all men living he least expected to find advocating a policy of surrender or compromise, turned to see the Duke of St. Orbyn being assisted into the room by a servant. A general murmur of sympathy and astonishment arose from the Duke's colleagues. He had been confined to his room for some weeks, and there had been rumours in circulation during the past day or two that his malady threatened to prove fatal. As he advanced into the room, leaning on

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the arm of his servant, several hands were stretched out to help him, and by their aid he was assisted to a chair next to that occupied by the Prime Minister, who chided him gently for his temerity in thus endangering his health.

"It was not in me to remain absent from your councils at a time like this," said the Duke. "If ever there was need of self-effacement it is now. May I know what has been said or done?"

The Prime Minister drew his own chair nearer to his invalid colleague's, and commenced to tell him of what had happened prior to his arrival. Graham, watching this scene with intent curiosity, noticed that the pallor on the Duke's face increased as he listened, and that the transparent fingers which rested on the arms of his chair began to clutch at them with tremulous and almost spasmodic action. Once or twice the Duke turned and gazed earnestly at the Premier, as if to question him, but he spoke no word until, at length, his face suddenly flushed crimson, and he started to his feet with a sharp exclamation that made every man in the room turn towards him. Graham noted the sudden vigour which seemed to animate the Duke's tall frame. He had drawn himself to his full height; his figure, wasted by illness, was still commanding, his eyes flashed with the fire which in his time had cheered or dismayed different parties in both Houses, and he stretched out his hand with a familiar gesture.

"Surrender? Compromise!" he cried. "You do not, cannot mean that! Has it come to this that we—we"—his voice grew louder and

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clearer as his indignation increased in intensity—"that we should yield at a first blow from a desperate enemy who burrows underground in order to murder innocent folk, or should condescend to parley with him? I am an old and dying man, and I have seen many things and many vicissitudes, but never yet have I known this England of ours to show a craven front. I beseech you—I beseech you as though I spoke my last word to you—not to surrender your trust! If this unseen enemy is to conquer us, let us at least fight him to the end, fight while there is a man of us left, not yield to him at his first assault. Remember our honour, our glorious past, our clean record—oh, you cannot, will not do this thing! What matter if we are fighting the evil one himself, as we truly are in one way or the other, we must not surrender, nor even treat with him for terms. For the honour of England, my lords——"

What more he would have said no one ever knew, for at the last word he staggered slightly, leaned forward, and then fell heavily on his side. Graham, who had seen the first sign of the seizure and had darted towards him, half-caught him as he fell, and in an instant had lifted his head upon his knee. The other men crowded round with horror-stricken faces. One glance, however, showed that the Duke was beyond all earthly help, and within a few moments the dead man was being carried from the chamber which he had entered but a little while previously intent on spurring his fellow-ministers on to firm resistance against England's unknown foe.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECOND ULTIMATUM.

GRAHAM assisted to remove the body of the Duke of St. Orbyn from the apartment, and was away for some little time. Returning to the ante-room, he found that the council had already broken up and that ministers were hurrying away. The Prime Minister, looking aged and careworn, went by with weary steps, alone ; other ministers went in groups of twos and threes, conversing in subdued whispers. Last of all came Wynyard, grave and perturbed, plucking at his beard. He caught sight of Graham, and coming up to him took his arm.

"Come away, Harry," he said. "I want to talk to you. I suppose there is an enormous crowd outside—let us try to get away quietly."

"What has been decided?" asked Graham.

Wynyard shook his head with some show of dissatisfaction.

"Practically nothing," he replied. "The usual thing. There are to be increased precautions—police are to be posted everywhere—the military are to be called upon to protect public buildings—all suspicious persons are to be arrested at once. Pshaw! as if all that will do any good!"

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Graham looked at his kinsman in utter astonishment.

"Do you really mean to say," he exclaimed, "that you would advise surrender to these people, or debate terms with them? I could hardly believe my ears when I heard Lord Grandminster and you say what you did."

"You are in poor St. Orbyn's case, my boy," replied Wynyard, with a heavy sigh. "You do not quite grasp the full significance of the occasion, nor the exact conditions of the case. If this were an ordinary enemy which we had to fight I would not advise surrender or compromise — no, not if that enemy took the form of all the armies in Europe rolled into one! Of any force that can be seen and reckoned with, neither Grandminster nor I are afraid. But we know a little more of this matter than most people, and we know that we are dealing with perhaps the most awful thing in the world—the powerful, implacable, ruthless enemy who cannot be seen or reckoned with. That man you met, Harry, spoke the absolute truth when he told you that he and his friends were in the position of dictators. They are, for you will find that they will dictate their own terms to us!"

Graham never remembered his kinsman speaking so earnestly before, nor with so much animation, and the horror of the situation began to dawn upon him more intensely as he listened.

"You believe, then," he said, "that these people, who and whatever they are, will destroy London unless their terms are agreed to."

"I believe," answered Wynyard, "that with

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that force in their possession they may, if they please, destroy every city in the world, and every man, woman, and child, too, if time is given them. Poor St. Orbyn!—that was a brave and chivalrous speech of his, Harry, but he did not recognise the awful pass to which we are come.”

“I’m afraid I do not, either, sir,” said Graham.

“Pray God we have not reason to recognise it still more fully ere another twenty-four hours have gone by!” said Wynyard fervently. “But come, let us endeavour to get away—I want to go to my club—I have an appointment there in a few minutes.”

To leave the Foreign Office, however, was a difficult and at first sight almost impossible undertaking. The crowds which had been gathering for the past two hours in the neighbourhood of the Government offices had now increased to such a size as to become unmanageable, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that the police and officials prevented people from entering the precincts of the various buildings. The Prime Minister’s carriage was recognised and besieged, and he himself as soon as he appeared was greeted with anxious cries of “What’s to be done?” “What measures are you taking?” “What does it all mean?” and the like. Some of the ministers mingled with the crowd and got away with comparative ease, but Wynyard’s tall figure and bearded face were recognised as soon as he emerged into the closely-packed thoroughfare, and in an instant an excited group was surging around him and his nephew.

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"That's Mr Wynyard—he'll tell us what's to be done!" cried an excited voice, and Wynyard's name was caught up by a hundred throats. "Tell us what has been settled, sir!" cried another man. "Tell us if there's immediate danger of another outrage," pleaded a third.

Wynyard stopped and faced the excited faces. He raised his hand.

"I wish you would behave like level-headed Englishmen," he said, calmly. "Why do you hustle me in this way? This is not the place to ask questions. Rest assured that we are doing our best for you all. But you—you are not doing your best for us in gathering in vast numbers like these."

"He's right!" cried a voice from the depth of the crowd. "Three cheers for Wynyard!"

The Chancellor of the Exchequer and his nephew moved on in the direction of Whitehall, but their progress was slow, and every now and then they were obliged to stop and reply to questions. Reaching quieter quarters near the Admiralty, where the crowd had thinned, Wynyard remarked: "If there is another catastrophe like that of to-day all London will be in panic, and what may happen I dare not contemplate! There is already a feeling abroad that something strangely horrible is in the air, and you will see, Harry, that even shrewd, hard-headed men of business will flee from an unseen, ungetatable foe who would fight to the death—aye, with a yard-wand, as Tennyson said—against Frenchman or Russian. Do you not begin to comprehend," he concluded, turning

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to his companion, "the reasons which induced Grandminster and myself to advise our colleagues as we did? It is better to know what we are fighting, and with whom, than to receive blow after blow from an unseen enemy upon whom we cannot lay one finger."

"But do you suppose," said Graham, "that these people would consent to a conference between your representatives and theirs? Would they not be afraid of summary arrest?"

"No," answered Wynyard. "They know that we should keep faith, and moreover that *we* are in *their* power. I have no doubt whatever, Harry, that if any attempt had been made to seize the man you talked with last night, a most awful catastrophe would have followed in which you and he would have lost your lives. No, these people know they are safe—it is we who are in danger."

Coming to the corner of Spring Gardens, they paused and looked across the square towards the scene of the morning's catastrophe. It was now nearly five o'clock, and the June afternoon was at its brightest. A brilliant blue sky hung overhead; there was a scent of summer and of flowers in the air, and behind the columns from the summit of which the effigy of the great Admiral gazed over half of London the fountains were throwing glittering showers of water to catch the sunbeams and be converted into diamonds. Round the fatal area workmen were already constructing a barricade, lest people should crowd too near the half-devastated buildings and be crushed if the latter fell, and a cordon of military and police protected them

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from the crowd as they worked. Trafalgar Square was thronged with people whom no entreaty on the part of the police could move, and the streets and thoroughfares leading into it were crammed with vehicles of all descriptions, from the elegant equipage of the woman of fashion to the humble donkey-barrow of the costermonger.

"That fatal habit of curiosity!" said Wynyard, with a sigh. "If our enemy chose to deal us a second and heavier blow, what better place, time, and occasion could he select than this! When will people learn that——"

At that moment the Chancellor was interrupted by a great babel of sound, coming from the direction of the Strand, which increased momentarily, and presently shaped itself into articulate form. Hundreds of newsboys, distributing their wares as they dashed along and clutching at the coins thrust out to them, were shouting and screaming the words:

"Ultimatum of the Dic-ta-tors! Another outrage to-morrow! London to be entirely destroyed!"

Graham darted into the road, and seizing a newsboy, almost tore a copy of the paper from him. He had only gold in his pocket, and he thrust a piece into the outstretched hand and saw it pocketed without surprise on the lad's part or demur on his own. He rushed back to Wynyard, and together they drew aside into a quiet doorway. Graham opened the paper—one of the most intensely respectable evening journals of the day, noted for its unflinching support of Lord Grandminster's ministry—and turned eagerly to its inner

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pages. Never perhaps had that particular journal, usually so fastidious about its appearance, and so spick and span in the arrangement of its news columns, made such a notable departure from its usual rules as in this instance. The fourth page was almost entirely blank ; in the middle, an island of heavy black type in the middle of a sea of pink, appeared a brief announcement of the catastrophe at noon, estimating the number of slain at over twelve thousand, and the damage to property at several millions. Horror and detestation of the crime was expressed, and this was followed by an exhortation to the people to remain calm and collected in the face of what the writer termed the most awful Anarchist outrage of the century. Later news was promised in subsequent editions, and it was added that a Cabinet Council was being held at the Foreign Office, and that the result of its deliberations would be announced in due course.

Over the brief lines in which this news was communicated the eyes of Wynyard and his nephew swept swiftly. Each was accustomed to getting the pith out of a page with one glance, and they took in the gist of the oasis-like paragraph in a passing look. The fifth page drew and arrested their attention. There, too, was an unusual pro-digality of margin. Right across the page ran a line of heavy type which merely announced that the communication printed beneath had been delivered by post at all the principal newspaper offices in London at three o'clock that afternoon, and that it was believed to be a genuine com-

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munication. Then, in heavier type, followed a document headed—

TO THE PEOPLE OF LONDON.

MEN AND WOMEN!—We have declared war upon your Government. With You we have no quarrel—with your Government and your Laws our quarrel is bitter and deep.

IN OUR HANDS rests the power of regenerating the World, of re-forming Society, of re-moulding the Laws.

MANY DAYS AGO we warned the Head of your Government of our Power and Intention, and we repeated that warning more than once, without effect.

OUR POWER IS THIS—We are the sole possessors of a new Force, mighty enough to wreck the world.

OUR INTENTION IS THIS—Backed by our possession of this Force we will exact Ransom from every Government in existence.

THAT RANSOM we will lay out at our discretion in rebuilding the Social Edifice on the lines of Truth, Justice, and Equity.

THE RANSOM we demand from your Government is the sum of One Hundred Millions of Pounds Sterling.

WE DEMANDED the payment of that sum ere noon to-day, and gave warning of what would happen if our demand were not complied with.

YOUR GOVERNMENT did not comply with our demand, and at noon to-day the Blow fell on you.

MEN AND WOMEN! You have seen the effects of that Blow. You know our Power. Some of you have lost friends, kindred, acquaintances—you weep, you are agonised, you suffer tortures. Receive our condolence; we weep with you!

BUT WE ARE IMPLACABLE! We are masters of the world, and we will save the world. Out of the blood of these Martyrs, out of your tears, a new World shall spring.

MEN AND WOMEN, rise with Us! Be one with Us! Compel your Government to accede to our Demands.

HEARKEN! if those demands are not complied with in twenty-four hours from now there shall fall a blow upon

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this city to which that which has fallen shall be counted as Nothing!

MEN AND WOMEN! Think well of this. We are Greater than you—Stronger than you. You are in our Power.

WE HAVE SPOKEN to you. You are greater than Governments.

YOU ARE THE PEOPLE.

Given at our Headquarters in London
this 22nd June 19—

THE DICTATORS.

“I am more than ever convinced,” said Graham, as he finished reading this remarkable document, “that these people are madmen. Did you ever read such absolute rhodomontade? They weep for their victims! Imagine a murderer calmly writing to his victim’s friends, and telling them that his heart is wrung for them! They tell the people that they are with and of them, and then threaten them with their diabolical power. They are madmen—madmen!”

Wynyard, who was still perusing the ultimatum, sighed deeply.

“I have never denied that, Harry,” he said. “But I perhaps attach a different meaning to the term ‘mad’ than you do. I have not a single doubt that these men, whoever they are, are *insane*. So, I believe, was Napoleon Buonaparte after he had reached a certain stage of his career. Does that alter the fact that his action destroyed millions of lives, and convulsed European society to its very foundations? What does it matter if these men are mad or sane if they possess the power to ruin an empire? And then—between madness and genius how thin a line is drawn!

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But come—we are wasting time here, and if I mistake not, there will be work to do ere night. See! the news is already beginning to have its effect upon the crowds.”

Graham, who had been staring at the pavement in moody abstraction, looked up and saw that the vast array of people and of carriages was beginning to break up in agitation. Some would go this way and some that; officials were gesticulating and shouting; women had already begun to scream; and the first signs of the coming pandemonium were unmistakably apparent. Immediately in front of Wynyard and Graham, a horse, tortured and straining, fell, screaming miserably. The mass of struggling beasts around it, forced on by drivers who had already lost their wits, stamped and trampled on it—a hansom turned over, and a woman's shrill scream was added to that of the dying brute. Wynyard set his teeth, and seizing his nephew by the arm dragged him away.

“It has begun!” he said. “Nothing will stop it now—nothing!”

“Where are we going?” asked Graham, as they forced their way through the crowd towards the nearest side-street.

“Home,” answered Wynyard with grim determination. “We must think of our own folk first. Evelyn must be got out of this at once.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC CLUB.

AFTER Gotto had taken his departure from the house in Golden Square the old chemist sat for some time thinking deeply over the news just communicated to him. From time to time he wagged his leonine head as if in sorrow; now and then he lifted his face and drew a deep breath which was followed by a sharp exclamation. A hissing sound from the corner of his laboratory roused him from his meditations; he crossed the floor, and removing a crucible from his furnace set it down on the bench close by and began to stir its contents with a glass rod.

"They must be men of marvellous brains, those," he murmured abstractedly. "I would give much to know what this secret is. Once upon a time, when blood was hot, and youth fiery, I would have given all the world to use such a force. But now—bah! the world will never be regenerated by that means! Poor fools who think that it will—poor fools! No—no; one comes to see all these things so differently as age and experience come upon one. It is by enlightenment, not by force, that society must be re-shaped. We build, and unbuild,

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and build again, and each building excels the other."

He set the crucible aside, and leaning against the bench, folded his arms and assumed an air of deep meditation.

"I wonder if I could ever have discovered an agent like that if I had gone on," he said presently. "Who knows? I was near it once. I should have been a rich man and a master of men if I had, but 'tis dangerous to put sharp-edged tools into the hands of children. No, it was better that I chose the distilling of these simple herbs, the innocent experiments which have made this poor shed a paradise to me, than that I went on in search of a power which would rob Governments of their authority—far better! I have had peace these many years, even if there has been poverty with it. And yet one who has experimented as I have cannot help feeling some sort of envy that another should at last have solved the great mystery—the mystery of destruction—of destruction!"

Paolo repeated the last word several times and then lapsed into a silence which lasted for some little time. He suddenly roused himself from the fit of abstraction into which he appeared to be falling.

"I should like to see the results of this awful blow," he said. "It is a thing that one should not miss."

He raked out the ashes of his furnace with great care, set the still hissing and bubbling crucible in a place of safety, and with a final look round his laboratory, went out and closed the door behind

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him. The rotting stairs creaked under his heavy tread, and the girl who had admitted Gotto looked out from the door of the apartment in which the police-agent had heard birds singing, and glanced up the stairway in some surprise.

"You are not going out, grandfather?" she said. "At this time?"

"For a little while, Margharita," he answered. "Only for a little while. I will be in time for the meal, child, in good time."

"But you must change your clothes," she said, opening the door of another room. "It is not fit that you go out in the daylight with so many stains upon you."

The old man shrugged his shoulders, but went into the room with the obedience of a child. In a few moments he appeared again, clad in a workman's suit of dark blue serge, a flannel shirt tied with a red ribbon at the throat, and holding a soft hat of vandyke shape in his hand.

"Shall I do, Margharita?" he said, humbly.

The girl laughed and pulled him into the room where the birds sang. She produced a comb and ran it through his white hair and beard, put a stout staff in his hand, and standing on tiptoe lifted her lips to his.

"Blessings upon thee, child of my heart and light of my last days!" said the old chemist. "I will not stay long away from thee."

He went down the dilapidated staircase without so much as a glance at the dirt and cobwebs which encrusted it, and Margharita leaned against the broken balustrade and watched him. When she

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heard the door close upon him she went back to her room and resumed her usual amusement of whistling to the birds. The room was hot and stuffy, and the scent of garlic was strong, but Margharita was content.

The old man walked slowly out of the square in the direction of Regent Street, and once within that crowded thoroughfare knew from the remarks of passers-by that everybody was talking of what had happened. He listened eagerly as he made his way towards the Quadrant, and now and then he shook his head, foreseeing the panic that must surely come. As he drew nearer the scene of the disaster the crowd increased ; it was only by the exercise of his still vigorous shoulders that he managed to push a way through the multitudes surging along Pall Mall East until he came in view of the stricken area. Nearer than the front of the National Gallery he could not get, but from that point he saw the wrecked houses, cut as it were in two, the twisted girders of the railway station's roof, and the wall of the church which bounded the area of destruction. He shook his head as he gazed, and sighed heavily, and again he thought admiringly of the genius which could do so much at one blow.

Paolo presently turned away, and pushing through the crowd in the direction in which he had come, turned up Whitcomb Street and escaped from the unpleasant company in which he had found himself confined for the best part of an hour. By various byways and alleys he betook himself to Wardour Street, and after traversing that thoroughfare for some little distance he broke off to

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the right and plunged into the labyrinth of small streets lying between it and Charing Cross Road. In one of the smaller of these streets Paolo paused at the open doorway of a tenement house, and after consulting the dial of an ancient watch which he drew from his waistcoat pocket, entered the bare, comfortless passage and climbed the stair to the first floor. Here, directly facing him on the landing, was a door, the upper half of which was panelled with glass, obscured by whitewash, over which, painted in black letters, appeared the words *Social Democratic Club*. Paolo turned the handle of this door and walked in without ceremony.

The room which the old man thus entered had at some time been an apartment of certain pretensions, and was now divided into two portions by a rude wooden screen, pierced by a doorway. The half in which Paolo now stood was furnished in very simple fashion—a plain deal table, unstained or varnished, occupied the centre of the floor, a few rush-bottomed chairs of unpainted wood stood here and there about it or in the corners of the room; nowhere was there any sign of ease or comfort. Above the mantelpiece hung a card of printed rules; on either side of it was a pipe-rack contrived to hold numerous clay pipes of various sizes. Some small attempt to decorate the place had been made by placing a damaged bust of Mazzini on the mantelpiece, and by tacking some prints of famous leaders of popular causes on the walls, but over everything hung the stamp of utter poverty and dreamy hopelessness. On a large card pinned to the door of the inner apartment

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were painted the words 'Conversation-Room'; on another, tacked on the wall immediately facing the door by which Paolo had entered, was the injunction 'Silence,' the reason for which was seen in the presence of a few foreign newspapers, much thumbed and greasy, lying about on the rough table.

There was no one in the first apartment, and the old man crossed to the door of the Conversation-room, pushed it open, and looked in. Like the other place it was bare and dismal enough, but two men sat in it, at an open window, talking earnestly in low tones. They looked round as Paolo entered, and one, with the courtesy of respectful homage to old age, rose and handed his own chair to the old man. Paolo sat down with a word of thanks.

"Well, you have seen?" he said, interrogatively.

One of the men nodded; the other turned away moodily and stared through the open window at the splendid walls and roof without.

"Yes, we have seen," answered the man who had given Paolo his chair. "We have seen."

Paolo sighed deeply.

"So have I," he said. "It is a terrible matter. It will put the clock back many, many years. What I cannot think is—Who are they who have done this thing?"

The man staring out of the window turned with a scowl.

"They are devils," he said. "They are not of *us*. In the old days when we used force we did not stoop to wanton murder. Oh!"—he lifted

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his fist, and shook it in the air—"I would like to have the handling of one of these fellows. But you, Paolo, you are a learned man—what can this force be which they have used? Such a thing was never heard of before."

The man who spoke was a thick-set, swarthy individual of Paolo's own nationality, and, like himself, dressed in a rough suit of blue serge, with a bit of scarlet ribbon at his neck. His eyes flashed when he spoke, and his face was full of a certain intellectual power. The other man with whom he was in the act of conversation when the old chemist entered, was slight in build and unhealthily pale of face; he was shabbily dressed, and his eyes had a dreamy, abstracted expression.

"Yes," he said, echoing the other's words. "What can this force be?"

Paolo shook his head.

"I cannot tell you, children," he answered. "It is beyond my power to do so. I never heard of such a power before. They are great scientific geniuses who have wrought this."

"And for nothing!" said the swarthy individual, bitterly. "For nothing. See you, comrades, it was only yesterday that I was thinking——"

These three drew their chairs close together and began to talk eagerly of their dreams. After a time another man came in and joined them, and later on another. The conversation became enthralling: Paolo forgot his promise to Margarita, and, with his companions, paid no heed to the passage of time. Suddenly one of them remarked—

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"There is a great commotion in the street outside!"

The man who was then speaking looked up impatiently, listened, and then crossing to the window of the outer room, gazed out. He uttered a sharp exclamation.

"It is the police!"

The other men rose to their feet and stared at each other. The dreamy-looking man smiled.

"I understand," he said. "It is that the police are going to arrest all suspicious persons. That was to be expected."

At that moment the outer door was pushed open and an inspector, followed by several policemen, entered the room. The inspector glanced round him sharply. "In the King's name!" he said. Then, looking at the men; "You are all under arrest. It will be best for you to accompany us quietly."

The swarthy-faced man stepped to the front.

"By what right?" he said. "We are peaceable citizens——"

The inspector waived him aside.

"It's no good," said he. "I am only carrying out my orders. There is a raid on all clubs of your sort. You've only got to account for yourselves at the station, and you'll be all right. Come along now, don't make any bother."

"Let us go quietly," said Paolo, stepping forward.

The other men followed him, and the police closed round them. They descended the stairs in silence—the hall was full of police too. Outside

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rose the murmur of a mob. The inspector went out first, closely followed by his men with the five prisoners in their midst, and he had no sooner reached the street than he wished that he was safely within the house again. From court and alley came swarming hundreds upon hundreds of men and women, and ere the police had well drawn their truncheons the prisoners were being torn from their custody. Cries of "Lynch them!" "Death to the bloody Anarchists!" were raised, and the shrieks of half-mad women rose high above the piercing trill of the constables' whistles.

When the mob had finally been hunted back to its foul haunts, two or three men lay dead or dying in the street. Gotto, returning through the labyrinth of byways from a visit north of Soho, came up and saw an old man amongst these, with blood running from his grey head, and turned him over. He shrank back in astonishment.

"Why, it's old Paolo!" he exclaimed. "Paolo Ferrari—and quite dead. How came he here? Well, innocent must suffer with guilty. But that's bad for Margharita."

Meanwhile, Margharita, wondering why her grandfather should remain from home so long, whiled away the time of waiting by whistling to her birds, and making her final preparations for the evening meal.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COUNT DE REINEVILLE'S THOUGHTFULNESS.

WHEN Wynyard and Graham reached the former's residence, wellnigh exhausted from their struggles with the crowds now filling the streets, they found everything in a state of chaos. In the hall stood Evelyn and Cynthia Beachcroft, staring helplessly at a nondescript pile of luggage which was gradually being deposited there by the servants, who appeared to have taken leave of their wits and were weeping, scolding, threatening, and cajoling each other in the same breath. The old butler, wringing his hands, stood near his young mistress, and on catching sight of his master, begged her to witness that all this was none of his doing and that he had striven with might and main to bring his fellow-domestics to their senses. From her he turned to the foremost of the would-be deserters, expostulating in tones which alternated from that of anger to those of entreaty and derision. Wynyard laid a hand on his arm.

"Never mind, Phillips," he said, "let them go. I fancy everybody is in the same predicament. After all, one can't blame them for wanting to place them-

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selves in a position of safety. Pay them their wages and let them go."

Most of the servants, however, had no mind to stop for wages or anything else. Some of them, without any ceremony, and careless of any farewell from anybody, were already trooping out of the doorway. Cynthia Beachcroft followed them to the open door and looked out into the square. She suddenly began to laugh immoderately. Evelyn and Graham turned to her in surprise. "Did you ever see such a ridiculous sight?" she exclaimed, pointing a slender forefinger into the square. "Look!"

Had it not been for the gravity of the occasion, Graham would have experienced a feeling of decided amusement. The panic which had seized Wynyard's servants had evidently seized everybody else's. From the great houses on every side domestics of all sorts were trooping, some of them openly lamenting their fate, others arguing in loud voices on the merits of the case, but all hurrying away to some imaginary place of refuge. A more curious assemblage it would have been hard to find. Here a couple of footmen, liveried, powdered, and hatless, were making away as rapidly as their fine calves and slender ankles could carry them; there two kitchenmaids were staggering beneath the weight of a heavy box; yonder a boy in buttons, hands in pockets, was capering along as if the whole thing were a lark. Highly respectable butlers and gentlemen's gentlemen moved through the throng with a vain attempt to preserve their dignity; here and there

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a very stout cook, still arrayed in her kitchen garments, exchanged sentiments with capped and aproned parlour-maids. As Graham watched this remarkable scene he saw several coachmen and footmen leave the horses and carriages entrusted to their care and mingle with the fugitives, whose numbers were being reinforced at every moment.

"This is a time to test the devotion of one's faithful, attached servants!" said Cynthia Beachcroft, with something very like a sneer. "They stream away like rats from a sinking ship. I expect to find that Julie has decamped with all the things she could lay hands on when I get home."

"There is one faithful soul at anyrate," said Graham, pointing to the old butler, who was now left alone and looked very indignant.

"Are things really so bad?" asked Eyelyn. "What does it all mean, Harry? Everything seems to be happening so quickly!"

"There is no doubt that a panic is setting in," answered Graham. "I am almost afraid to think of what will happen at the railway stations if all these foolish people crowd there. Many of them will be crushed to death."

Wynyard joined them at the door. He looked out at the incongruous crowd and shook his head.

"Worse and worse!" he sighed. "This sort of thing will do more damage than another catastrophe. What is to be done? Once the notion of flight is started the whole of the metropolis will be set in motion, and then——"

"Papa," said Evelyn, suddenly interrupting,

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"is not that M. de Reineville signalling to you from the cab there?"

Graham looked in the direction indicated by Evelyn's glance, and saw the Frenchman's impassive countenance turned towards them from a hansom, which appeared to have become hopelessly entangled in the mass of cooks, footmen, scullions, and lackeys of every description. Its driver, standing up on his perch, favoured those around him with certain observations which came with refreshing zest to Cynthia Beachcroft, whose contempt for the refugees was increasing by leaps and bounds.

"Nah, then, w'y don't yer git aht o' the wye there, yer bloomin' set o' Gawd-forsaken flunkeys? Yer needn't be in no sich grite 'urry—they tikes 'em in at the loonertic ersylums at any time—night or dye. *Are* yer goin' to move aht—Gawd love a duck, s'elp me if I don't come dahn and give yer wot for in abaht annuver minnit, yer bloomin' lot o' circus performers. Who am I a-talkin' to? I'm a-talkin' to you, yer blighter, you wot's rubbed yer bleed'n 'ed in the flahr-bin. Will yer git aht o' the wye? Oh! well then, yer tikes the consekuences, and don't sye as 'ow I didn't warn yer when the crowner sits on yer. Come up, there, come up!"

By dint of skilful piloting the hansom was brought through the crowd and up to the front of the house, and de Reineville, cool and imperturbable as ever, and as faultlessly dressed as usual, descended. He said a word or two to the cabman, who responded: "All right, guv'nor, thank'ee. /

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ain't a-goin' to sling no bloomin' 'look!" and came up the steps. As the cab approached, Evelyn and Cynthia withrew into the house, and Graham followed them. All three went into the morning-room and looked out upon the strange sight outside; they heard Wynyard greet de Reineville and exchange some conversation with him; then the two walked up the hall to the library and the door closed upon them. The old butler, forgetting his dignity, went outside and chatted with the cabman. Evelyn and Cynthia amused themselves in listening to the latter's opinion of the whole day's proceedings as it came in snatches through the open window. Graham, standing apart, wondered what had brought de Reineville there, and what it was that made Wynyard show the man so much consideration. He was unable to disguise from himself that he felt an instinctive dislike to the Frenchman, and he scarcely understood his kinsman's evident belief in him. When several minutes had passed, Wynyard came from the library with de Reineville at his side. The Chancellor looked flurried and anxious; his companion bowed to the ladies and to Graham with perfect composure.

"My dear," said Wynyard, hurriedly addressing Evelyn, "M. de Reineville is most thoughtful and generous. He has come to offer us a shelter until this terrible affair is over. It is absolutely useless to deny, Evelyn, that we are running great risk every moment we spend in London, and only a lesser risk in remaining in England. M. de Reineville has kindly offered me his château in Normandy, and I am so assured of the absolute

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necessity of your leaving here that I wish you to go there at once."

"I, papa?" exclaimed Evelyn, with evident astonishment. "I alone?"

"No, no!" said Wynward. "No, of course, Cynthia, you will go with her? I want to see you in safety also. You will go? M. de Reineville will be most happy."

"I shall be most honoured," said de Reineville, in a very sincere manner.

"I am much obliged to M. de Reineville," said Cynthia. "But—is it really necessary, Mr Wynyard, that Evelyn should be sent out of the country? What of your own place in Yorkshire? Would that not prove a suitable refuge?"

Wynyard made an impatient movement.

"You forget," he said, "that as a minister of the Crown my various domiciles will be well known to these people. No—I want Evelyn to be placed in perfect safety. Let me tell you briefly exactly what is to be done. Harry"—he turned to Graham and spoke in sharp, business-like tones—"I wish you to take your cousin and Miss Beachcroft over to the Château de Reineville, and remain there as their guardian until all this is over. That is M. de Reineville's own thoughtful proposition. You must all leave at once—and now as to your manner of leaving. It is hopeless to expect to get down to the coast by train—the stations are doubtless besieged already. M. de Reineville's yacht is lying at Gravesend, and he has added to his other kindness by sending down instructions that she is to have steam up and to be

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ready to take you on board for Havre, as soon as you reach her. You must start at once—that is, as quickly as possible.”

“But, papa,” said Evelyn, “what of yourself? I cannot leave you here. You”—she crossed the room and laid her hand on his arm—“you are coming with me?” Wynyard stooped and kissed her forehead.

“I cannot, my dear,” he said decisively. “My place is here in London. I will be all right—I shall go into barracks at the Treasury until the war is over. There, do not say any more, Evie—you will be safe and happy in the retreat M. de Reineville is offering us, and you will have Cynthia and Harry with you.”

“I beg that each of you—Miss Wynyard—Miss Beachcroft—Mr Graham,” said de Reineville, “will honour me by looking upon my house as your own. I owe much to Mr Wynyard—he was my great friend—my benefactor—in other days, and it will be a source of delight to me to know that I can offer his daughter and her friends a refuge. I have sent my servants the fullest commands. I beg that you will honour me by your acceptance of all I can offer.”

“It is most good of you, M. de Reineville,” said Evelyn, with real gratitude in her voice. “But you yourself—are you not crossing over?”

The Frenchman shook his head.

“I have work here,” he said, with a significant emphasis. “It is my regret that I cannot do my duty as host. I beg Mr Graham to discharge that duty for me. Permit me to make my adieux.”

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Before Graham had recovered from his astonishment at these remarkable proceedings, de Reineville had shaken hands with the ladies and himself, and was being escorted into the hall by Wynyard. In another moment the cab had driven away, and Wynyard came hurrying back.

"There is no time to be lost," he said. "Evelyn—Cynthia—you must make your preparations at once. Harry, come with me—there are things yet to arrange."

Graham followed his kinsman into the library, and closed the door upon them.

"I do not like this, sir," he said, before Wynyard could speak. "I do not like it at all, and I must tell you so."

Wynyard, who was bending over his desk, raised his head and stared at his nephew. It seemed to Graham that a new expression had come into his face.

"You do not like it?" he said. "Do not like—what?"

"I do not like this arrangement. Is it really necessary that Evelyn should be sent to M. de Reineville's house—to the house of a stranger?"

"Stranger? I have known him—ah!—thirty years."

"I did not know that, sir. I beg your pardon. But—could I not have taken her and Miss Beachcroft to Paris?"

Wynyard stamped the floor in his impatience.

"Where the Dictators may begin operations at any moment!" he cried.

"Then to some obscure village in the South of

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France, or in Spain. I know several where we could be lost to the world," said Graham. "Why this particular house?"

"This is foolish," said Wynyard. "Do you not see that as things are, the very spot on which we are standing might for all practical purposes be the mouth of a volcano? I want my child placed in safety—de Reineville offers me speedy means of escape from England for her, a comfortable home for her, and absolute security there—should I not be a fool to refuse his kindness? And yet you, who should have her safety most deeply at heart, would throw that kindness back to him!"

Graham started as though some hand had smitten him in the face. He could scarcely believe his ears—he had never heard Wynyard adopt that tone since his first remembrance of him. His immediate impulse was to utter an indignant denial, but he suddenly remembered that Wynyard was weighed down with burdens and responsibilities, and that the events of the day had been enough to shock the strongest nerves, and he spoke gently.

"Very well, sir," he answered. "I will do all that you wish. I will take Evelyn and Miss Beachcroft over to this gentleman's house, and remain there with them until you desire our return."

"That's a good boy!" said Wynyard, with a return to something like his old manner. "Now, listen, Harry. It may be"—he placed his hand with an affectionate gesture on Graham's shoulder—"it may be that in the events of the next few days

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my life will go with the rest. That's on the cards, and one must take the chances. If it is so all my private affairs are in Crawford's hands—he can tell you everything. When this—this awful business is over, if I should not be here, you will come back with Evelyn, and attend to everything. I——”

“I don't like all this, sir,” said Graham once more. “I wish you would not send us away. At anyrate, let me return to you when I have seen the others in safety.”

“No, my boy,” replied Wynyard. “Your first duty is to Evelyn, and you must do it. Well—all there is to do now is to arrange for your departure. The railway's no good—you mustn't trust your lives to such scenes as will go on for the next few hours at all the stations. You'll have to drive, Harry. Go round to the stables and arrange about a carriage and horses—get what you want for yourself from your own rooms, and be ready to start from here in an hour.”

Recognising that there was nothing left but to follow out his kinsman's behest, Graham left the room, and after a word or two with Phillips as to the provisioning of the travelling carriage, set out for the stables. As he passed the door of the morning-room, Cynthia Beachcroft came out.

“How soon do we start, Mr Graham?” she inquired.

“Within an hour—I am going to see about the carriage now,” answered Graham.

“And I am going round to Bruton Street in the hope of finding my rooms still unsacked, and of bringing away at least a travelling-cloak,” she said.

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"Evelyn, if Julie has disappeared with my effects I shall fall back on you."

Evelyn smiled, but Graham, watching her anxiously, saw that she was considerably distressed, and that she scarcely seemed to understand the situation. He and Cynthia left the house together, and as soon as the door had closed upon them she turned to him with a meaning look.

"I want to talk to you," she said. "Walk a little way with me. Look here—what does all this mean? I don't like it—I don't half like it."

"Nor do I," answered Graham, shaking his head. "But what can we do? Mr Wynyard has set his mind on accepting de Reineville's offer—after all, they are old friends—you heard what de Reineville said."

"I didn't attach an atom of importance to that," she replied. "I do not like that man, Mr Graham, and I never shall like him. I believe that he has some influence over Mr Wynyard—some evil influence. I am only going on this mad expedition because I love Evelyn and I mustn't desert her. You and I are to act as policemen, remember——"

"Good God!" exclaimed Graham. "You—you don't think that any harm is intended to Evelyn in all this? If I thought so I would not consent to our leaving London, whatever my uncle might say or do."

"No," answered Cynthia, after a moment's reflection. "I cannot say that I think that. It is quite possible that I am wrong in having any suspicions. Oliver Wynyard is an extraordinarily

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clever man, a man of great wisdom, and he loves Evelyn more than his own life. I cannot reasonably think that he would place her, or us, in any position of peril. But I do not, I do not like that man! I am uncomfortable about anything that relates to him. I do not like, or understand his evident influence over Mr Wynyard. And what I mean is that I want to help you, if need should arise, to safeguard Evelyn."

"You are a good woman, Cynthia," said Graham, who was moved by this genuine outburst of feeling from Miss Beachcroft's usually cynical lips. "I pray God there may be no ground for our fears. We are perhaps overwrought and anxious—I can scarcely believe that it is little more than twenty-four hours since I came back to town!"

Then they parted with a pressure of hands, and while Cynthia hurried to her rooms, Graham sped away to the mews where Wynyard's stables were situated. But the stables were well-nigh empty. The harness-room was unoccupied; not a man was visible in the yard: the various carriages were all in their places, but two or three horses had disappeared from their stalls.

Graham stood peering about him in blank astonishment. What was to be done? It was impossible for him, unaided, to put horses to a heavy carriage, and then drive them down to Gravesend through all the growing confusion of the London streets. He cursed the faint-heartedness, the base ingratitude, of the men who, having fattened on his generosity for years, had fled from their master's service at the first signs of danger.

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A low hissing sound roused Graham from his disagreeable reverie. It seemed to come from a door opening out of the stable in which he was then standing, and he walked across and pushed it open. There, busily employed in rubbing down a horse, was a stable-lad, who, as he worked, made the peculiar sibilant noise common to hostlers. The click of the opening door made him pause in his labour; he straightened himself and turned round, revealing to Graham a shrewd, young-old face, from the mouth of which protruded a half-chewed straw, and a lean, lanky body poising itself on two ridiculously thin legs. As the stable-boy caught sight of Graham, he touched his cap and grinned widely.

"Hullo!" said Graham, smiling in spite of himself. "Are you the only person left here? Where are all the rest of the men?"

"I'm afeerd they're all run away, sir," said the other. "They said as how all London were goin' to be blowed up, and off they went."

"Why didn't you go, too?" asked Graham.

The stable-lad scratched his head; his grin spread from ear to ear.

"Why," he said, hesitatingly, "I hadn't finished this here mare, and besides, if I'd gone who'd ha' looked after all t' hosses? An' I'm none so sewer about t' blowin' up."

"You're a Yorkshireman?" said Graham.

"Yes, sir. I come thro' Somerlease,"—naming Wynyard's seat in the broad-acred county.

Graham thought matters over thoroughly. There was nothing left but to make the best of what

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materials remained. He sat down on a corn-bin and talked the matter over fairly and squarely with the stable-lad, whose name was Robert Gibson, and the end of their conversation was that within half an hour, Robert—having assumed a new suit of whip-cord in which he seemed to take particular pride—and himself had made all preparations and were taking the carriage round to Wynyard's house. At the door they encountered Cynthia, staggering under a bundle of garments. She smiled grimly.

"Just as I expected!" she said. "The demure and virtuous Julie has helped herself freely and decamped. This is indeed a wonderful day, but I'm not sure that it mayn't do good in the end. It's telling us at anyrate who our friends are, and teaching us to act for ourselves. I never carried such a weight in my life before—nor cared so little for appearances!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE YACHT *L'HIRONDELLE*.

HAVING thrown her various impedimenta into the carriage, Cynthia favoured the entire turnout with a long and critical stare, and then enquired where the servants were who were to take it in charge. Graham explained the situation, adding that he believed that Robert Gibson and himself might be trusted to get through to Gravesend. Cynthia's expression of countenance on hearing this news seemed to imply her doubt on the point, but she offered no remark and disappeared into the house to assist Evelyn in making her final preparations. As she entered the hall Wynyard came out, and seeing his carriage at the door went down the steps in order to inspect the arrangements which Graham had made. He evinced no surprise on hearing that his stable staff had departed, but he seemed doubtful whether Graham and the boy would succeed in piloting their charge through the crowded streets.

"There is nothing else for it," said Graham, who by this time was in a state of angry despair which had developed the worst sort of apathy. "We must do our best."

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As good fortune would have it there came up at this moment the hansom cab in which de Reineville had driven away three-quarters of an hour before, and the driver, noticing the arrangements that were being made, drew up and showed considerable interest in them. He contrived to catch Graham's eye, and touched his cap.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he said, leaning from his perch, "was you a thinkin' o' drivin' that there turn-aht through the streets anywheres? I see you ain't no coachman, nor nothink. Nah, them streets" — he jerked his thumb over his shoulder—"them streets is gettin a fair treat—I tells yer strite! 'Ow fur might yer be thinkin' o' goin', guv'nor?"

"Oh!" said Graham impatiently, "to Gravesend."

"To Grivesend! Well, s'elp me! Guv'nor, yer'll never do it! They sye as 'ow its 'ell itself all dahn the East End wye—yer'll 'ave the bloomin' carriage wrecked afore yer gits ter San Paul's! Look 'ere, guv'nor, I mikes yer a fair offer—there's precious few drivers in London as knows there wye abaht as I do—I'll drive yer dahn there meself. I can 'andle a pair as well as I can 'andle this 'ere old hoss, guv'nor. 'Ere. I'll do the strite thing by yer—if I tikes yer dahn there all right yer gives me a couple 'o fivers—see? If I don't, w'y, yer gives me somethink for me trouble, eh? What d'yer sye, guv'nor?"

Graham would have sent this person about his business, but Wynyard, who had followed the man attentively, laid his hand on his nephew's arm.

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"That's the very thing, Harry," he said. "My man—I'll close with your offer. But what will you do with your own horse and cab?"

"All right, sir," answered the man with alacrity. "They ain't mine—I 'ires 'em from a proprietor just at the back 'ere, and I was a-goin' 'ome with 'em, when I come acrost this little lot 'o yours. I'll deliver 'em up safe 'afore this 'ere blowin' up begins, and be back wiv yer in no time."

Whipping up his horse the loquacious cabman drove off, and Wynyard and Graham went back into the house. For the next ten minutes all was hurry and confusion. The old butler and the stable-boy carried out a case of provisions and stowed it away in the carriage; the things which Evelyn had put together were packed away beneath one seat and those of Miss Beachcroft's bringing reduced to order on the other, while Graham, who always kept a change of clothes and linen at his uncle's house, ran upstairs and packed a portmanteau with absolute necessities. When he came down again the cabman had returned, and was looking the horses and the harness over in a very knowing and business-like way. There was now nothing to do but depart, and after a tearful parting between Evelyn and her father, the three voyagers entered the carriage, the volunteer coachman and the stable-lad climbed up to their places, and the signal was given to start. Evelyn looked back as the carriage moved off. Wynyard was standing at the open door waving his hand, and by his side lingered the old butler, wiping his eyes with a napkin which he had inadvertently caught

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up in passing through the dining-room and had carried about with him for quite half an hour.

It was now seven o'clock in the evening; the news of the Ultimatum had spread everywhere; rumours of the helplessness of the Cabinet had permeated clubs, hotels, restaurants, private houses; a general feeling of coming disaster had extended to the suburbs. All London was rising—London usually so bright and joyous at that hour of a June evening, when the toil of the day was over for the workers, and the pleasures of the night were beginning for the butterflies. Overhead the sky was blue and cloudless; the scent of flowers was everywhere; the promise of a perfect June night lay dreaming in the twilight that was yet to be born. Of all these things London thought nothing. From north to south, from west to east, the fear of Death ran throbbing through her arteries, nerves, sinews, and the magnificence of her scornful contempt for aught but her own might was suddenly destroyed. She shivered like a mighty beast into whose heart the hunter's bullet has sped with swift and silent wings, and the shivering left her cold and sick and sore afraid. In the golden-tinted eventide, she began to weep and tremble as the man weeps and trembles who is afraid of the thing he cannot see. Had it but been some blessed, healthy foe, some enemy that she could have clasped hands with and kissed, the bloody fight once over, and the enmity wiped out in honest fashion by the shedding of clean-spilt life, how had she rejoiced! Instead of whimpering like a child in the palpitating darkness of an unlit room, she would have risen, great,

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grim, glorious, laughing at the smell of the blood that she and the hosts arrayed against her must spill like water, confident in her strength, and beautifully insolent because of it. Had the armies of Europe suddenly shown themselves massed along the low hills about her, her careless laughter would have rung out clear against them, and behind the laughter would have come the cheering of her sons and the rattle of the steel with which they would have gone out to resist, and die, and conquer. Let any of the old, honourable, beautiful foes come!—one by one, one down, the other come on—let them come all together, seeking to pay off, once for all, the ancient, clean-thoughted grudge—and she was ready, and willing, and stern-eyed.

But against *this*—this awful unseen terror that sat in her midst, intangible, mysterious, like a thing wrapped about with all the loathsome ceremonies of hell and the final blackness—what that was earthly could fight? Put the bravest man who ever drew breath into a room in which he must stand in darkness; let him know that out of that darkness there may at any moment glide, flash, or creep to his heart a touch that will mean death—death against which he cannot shield himself in any way, and a tremor will run from the top of his head to the end of his great toe or his little one, whichever you like. He may—doubtless will—stand up bravely and wait, wait, wait, until the thing is on him, but despite his bravery he will age in those moments of waiting, and if he should come out alive, his face will not be pretty to look at. Put a weak man into such a position;

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he will weep and slobber and grovel, and run from one corner of the room to another crying in such a fashion that if you heard the noise of it—the poor, wee thin noise only heard under such circumstances—you would wake up every night for a year, sweating and praying God to blast the thing out of your memory for ever. And most men are weak, weak and very much afraid of anything that they cannot see, and if you cannot explain a thing to them in terms which their limited intelligence permits them to understand they begin to run, and the further they run the more they fear, and their last state is worse than their first.

London was afraid, and London was beginning to run. Seven millions of people seized with panic—think of it, dear fools, who let the marvel of the world spread and widen in a fashion so inconsequent. They began to move slowly at first, and some, after setting out, went back, and then set out again, and maybe went back a second time, but kept on moving. They came out of the fashionable quarters and the fever-stricken slums, and naturally everyone fought for himself. Few had any very clear notion as to a port of salvation. If you stand beneath a mighty weight, knowing that in one second more it will fall and make a nasty mess—*you*—on the flags or the carpet, you don't consider which way you will run—you jump, quick. These people's first instinct, then, hearing of the Ultimatum of the Dictators, was to jump as quickly and as far as possible—in any direction. And so the streets and thoroughfares into which

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our fugitives, piloted by the heaven-sent jehu who swore and cursed and made beautiful unconscious repartees from the box on which, under less heroic circumstances, a well-fed coachman had majestied, were crowded with men and women, into whose souls such a fear had entered as the world had not known since the Lord drove their forebears out of Sodom and Gomorrah.

How the man got them out of London Graham will never know to the day of his death. But get them out he did, saving his horse-flesh in wonderful fashion, and displaying a knowledge of local geography which was marvellous. Moreover, once clear of the Metropolis itself, he betrayed a distinct genius in avoiding highroads, and an acquaintance with the by-lanes of Kent, which suggested a notion that he must at one time have gone a-hopping. It was in one of these by-lanes, at one o'clock in the morning, with a silver moonlight flooding all the land, and the lights of London lying far behind, that he pulled up his horses and turned to Graham.

"I sye, guv'nor," he said, "yer aren't so very pertikler abaht 'urryin' on to Grivesend nah that we've got aht o' the thick of it, like, awr yer? 'Cos yer see, me an' the boy 'ere's a bit on the empty side, like, and I hears the old bloke sye as 'ow 'e'd put plenty o' pervisions in the kerridge. 'Ow would it do to 'ave a sort o' picnic, guv'nor, like they does on the Dahns, Derby Dye?"

"I beg your pardon," said Graham, humbly. "I had quite forgotten that you must be famished."

"And that we must, too," said Cynthia, unrolling

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herself from a mass of wraps. "I think that man's a perfect genius. Picnic! Of course; let's picnic in the moonlight. Aren't you awfully hungry, Evelyn? Remember, we had no dinner."

"What a forgetful brute I am!" said Graham. "I have been thinking of far different things and I thought you were both asleep. Pull up, my man—we'll see what Phillips has put up for us."

In the moonlight they stayed their flight and ate and drank with some appetite, forgetting for the moment that panic-stricken London lay behind them, and that out of every exit men and women less favourably situated than themselves were trooping. "They was a very nice haffable lot, they was," said the heaven-sent cabman, when he reported his adventures to an appreciative audience later on. "Me an' the boy—which was Yorkshire, an' knew a thing or two abaht osses, and no bloomin' error—me an' the boy, I tells yer, we was all like one wiv' em. 'E'd a tysty hidea o' doin' things, that there old flunkey wot packed the wittals, you tike my tip. They give me a rare pliteful o' stuff—little sackvichers wot yer could shift at abaht a dozen at a time, and a leg o' cold fahl and 'am—oh, they done me an' the boy a fair treat, and give us a big bottle o' fizz between us, and a drop o' somethin' short and tysty to keep the sparkle dahn. 'Have a cigar, my man,' says the young swell, w'en we'd made them wittals look silly, and gives me an' the boy a 'andful. Lor' lumme! I don't care if London's blowed up once a bloomin' fortnight ser long as I gits a job like that whenever the blowin' up stawts!"

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At three o'clock in the morning, with the radiance of a June sunrise filling the eastern sky, Graham and his charges arrived at Gravesend, and saw the yacht lying in mid-stream, with steam up. In answer to his signal a boat immediately put off from her, and Graham began to make his final preparations for leaving English soil. He paid the stipulated fee to the impromptu coachman, and gave him a handsome *douceur* into the bargain, and dismissed him with a regret which was fully reciprocated. The stable-lad Gibson he decided to take with him as his personal attendant, and Gibson was nothing loth to go. And so, all things being in order, the four fugitives awaited the boat with calm acquiescence in their fate.

As the boat drew near to the landing-stage Graham noticed that the men who pulled it were of exceptionally fine physique and very smartly attired, and that the officer at the tiller wore a uniform corresponding in many respects to that of a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. This personage, on bringing the boat up to the steps, saluted Graham with great politeness of manner, and superintended the arrangements for taking the party off with many evidences of thoughtfulness for the comfort of the ladies. He addressed Graham in the French language, apologised for his ignorance of English, and added that the captain possessed a perfect knowledge of the latter tongue, and had, indeed, resided in England for many years.

Upon approaching the yacht Graham was much struck by her size, and by the beauty of her lines.

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She lay upon the water as a seabird sits it, rising and sinking as the waves ran past in a gentle swell. She was schooner-rigged, and her two tapering masts and buff-coloured funnel rose skyward at exactly the same saucy rake, while her rail came in a beautiful curve from her fine high bow, dipped gently amidships, and rose as gently towards her stern. Graham observed the bow particularly ; it was beautifully overhanging and suggestive of clearing the waves without sending up a shower of spray all over the decks ; the counter, equally fine, took away all appearance of weight. She was painted white, with a thin gold riband which showed to advantage the sweep of her side. A fine mahogany steam launch hung from the davits on the starboard quarter, forward of which was a pretty four-oared gig, while aft, on the port side, was a powerful sailing cutter. Her stanchions, binnacles, and brass work generally shone with great brilliancy in the first rays of the morning sun, and Graham, who had some experience of the sea and of ships, was bound to confess that he had never looked upon a smarter craft.

Had Graham and his companions been members of a reigning house they could not have met with a more impressive reception than that which awaited them on board M. de Reineville's beautiful vessel. The ship's company was drawn up to receive them and greeted their coming aboard with a general salute ; the captain, meeting them at the head of the gangway, welcomed them in the name of the Count de Reineville with great cordiality and respect, and immediately conducted them to a

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magnificently appointed saloon where several domestics of both sexes were in waiting to receive them and to attend to their wants. Offers of hot food and of wine were declined by the ladies, who expressed a wish to retire to their apartments. Graham, having assured himself that they were in safe hands and wanted for nothing, bade them farewell for the time, and accepted Captain Popinot's invitation to drink a little whisky and water and smoke a cigar in the latter's cabin. Thus engaged he complimented the captain on the beauty of the yacht, and at the same time remarked how strange it was that he had never seen her before in any of those English ports where steam yachts are usually to be found at certain seasons of the year.

"No, sir," replied Captain Popinot. "There is no wonder in that. *L'Hirondelle* has never entered English waters, or at anyrate those waters which lie in close proximity to the English coast, until a few days ago, when she brought my master to London. I have had the great honour of commanding her ever since she was built ten years ago, and during that time we have made three separate voyages round the world. She is indeed a magnificent vessel in every way, and I believe it is no secret that her owner spent the sum of seventy millions of francs in building, fitting, and furnishing her. It is impossible to believe, sir, how beautifully she behaves even in the roughest weather, until you have had experience of her sea-going qualities. On more than one occasion it has been my good fortune to make practical test of her powers of endurance, and I can honestly

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affirm that there is no vessel of her tonnage in the world which can do what she can. I remember, sir——”

Here the worthy captain wandered away into the meadows of reminiscence, wherein he proceeded to pluck so many flowers that Graham, who was already weary and exhausted of brain, gradually lost him and only found him again on waking with a sudden start to a discovery of the fact that he had been asleep. He apologised profoundly to the captain for this breach of good manners, and requested permission to retire for what remained of the night.

“Sir,” said Captain Popinot, “if I were you I would sleep long in the morning. Everything that you desire will be performed, and you may breakfast at whatever hour you please. You will perceive from the extremely slight motion of the vessel that our voyage has already commenced and that we are progressing at a fair speed. When we have once passed the Nore we shall go full speed ahead, which, in our case, let me tell you, sir, means twenty-four knots an hour.”

Having mentioned this fact with great pride Captain Popinot shook hands with his guest and went on deck, while Graham repaired to his cabin, an extremely convenient apartment in which were a bedroom, a dressing-room, a bath-room, and a parlour. He immediately retired to bed, and after reflecting a few moments upon the strange events of the past thirty-six hours, fell asleep, and was fortunately too much exhausted to dream.

CHAPTER XV.

AN ISLAND IN THE SEA.

IN unconscious accordance with Captain Popinot's desire, Graham slumbered so soundly in his luxurious bed that the sun had already passed the meridian when he opened his eyes for the first time since closing them on his retirement. At first astonished by his unfamiliar surroundings, he gradually remembered all that had happened during the previous day, and reflecting that his charges might already have appeared in the saloon and be in need of his services, he made haste to perform his toilet and to join them there. Immediately upon rising from his bed, he was waited upon by an obsequious valet, who performed his duties with rare skill and celerity and with a noiseless ease which proved extremely gratifying to the senses. So deft in his movements, and so thoroughly versed in all the mysteries of his art was this person, that Graham found it quite unnecessary to ask a question or issue an order. Upon making some trifling remark as to the state of the weather, however, he discovered that the man was a deaf-mute. This discovery made him reflect upon the mystery which appeared to circle

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round de Reineville's doings. Although it was not yet forty-eight hours since he had first met that strange personage, Graham felt that in him he had encountered the most remarkable man whom he had yet known.

Upon entering the saloon Graham found that Evelyn and Cynthia had only just risen. Eight hours of sound and dreamless sleep had restored the bloom to their cheeks, and to one of them at least her wonted animation. Miss Beachcroft, indeed, was lavish in her praise of the arrangements which de Reineville had made for their comfort.

"If it were not for the circumstances under which we were bundled out of London," said she, "one might feel all this to be extremely delightful. This is, without exception, the most gorgeous floating palace I ever set foot on. Why, it's *much* more comfortable and better appointed than the Emperor of Franconia's is! My cabin, or berth, or whatever you call it, was quite oppressively grand. I tell you what, though, I had something of a shock. Do you know, that maid who was told off to attend to me is deaf and dumb?"

Evelyn uttered a sudden exclamation.

"And so was my maid!" she said. "How very strange!"

"As to that," said Graham, "I'm afraid it isn't. The man who discharged the duties of valet for me was also deaf and dumb. It appears to me that M. de Reineville cherishes some *penchant* for deaf-mutes."

"He perhaps finds it advisable to have them

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about him," remarked Cynthia. "However, all this is very nice, and I'm fearfully hungry—it's one o'clock."

At that moment the door of a small *salle à manger* was noiselessly drawn back and a solemn butler bowed himself to the carpet in token that breakfast awaited the travellers. The meal which followed was delightful in every respect: the cooking was perfection; the fruit such as could not have been obtained in London under fabulous prices; the butler and his two satellites anticipated every wish and moved literally in velvet slippers. Graham formed the notion that they, too, were deaf and dumb, but they were so highly trained in the performance of their duties that there was never any need to address them, and he contented himself for that time by speculating upon de Reineville's extraordinary arrangements.

"I should certainly have no objection to go for a trip round the world on this yacht," said Cynthia, when they had spent nearly an hour over the breakfast table. "I rather think that we are steaming at a considerable speed, but we scarcely feel the motion, and if everything is arranged after the fashion which we have seen already, it would be rather an ideal sort of thing to put a girdle round the world in her. Don't you think so, Evelyn?"

"I am perfectly content," said Evelyn, with a glance at Graham, "but for one thing. I am anxious about papa. What will happen to-day, or what may not have happened during the night? I wish we could have news of him, and of London."

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"That we can soon obtain," said Graham, rising from the table. "We ought to be in Havre within an hour or two, I should think, and we shall find news there, and be able to wire to London. Shall we go on deck? The French coast ought to be well in sight by this time."

Upon reaching the deck, however, a surprise awaited them. The yacht was steaming ahead at great speed over a smooth, sunlit sea, which stretched away on every side until it mingled with the circle of the domed heavens. Here and there a long trailing cloud of smoke betrayed the course of a steamer; here and there a red sail marked the presence of a fishing-lugger. Sign of land there was none.

"That's strange!" said Graham. He made a rapid calculation—so many hours, so many knots—and turned to a sailor who was busied near the companion. "How far are we from Havre?" he said, touching the man's shoulder. Then he repeated the question in French.

The sailor shook his head, lifted both hands, touched his ear with the forefinger of his left, and his lips with the knuckles of his right, and bowed politely.

"He, too, is deaf and dumb!" exclaimed Evelyn. "Harry, there is something uncanny about all this. Are they all deaf and dumb—all?"

"It certainly seems like it," said Graham, who was not a little puzzled.

"I should say it is some fad of M. de Reineville," Cynthia broke in quickly. "He looks a faddy sort of person. Some one—who was it?—used to trick

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all his men out *à la* Turk, and the Prince of San Finnetta would have nothing but full-blooded negroes on his yacht when we met him at Marseilles two years ago. I say, Mr Graham, do tell me how they work this thing," she went on in a louder voice, walking a few yards along the deck. "This thing, I mean ;" then, seeing that Evelyn remained where she had left her, she added in a whisper as Graham came up to her side, "don't make a fuss, but there's something wrong—we are sailing about due north—see, look at my pocket compass."

Affecting to examine the object to which she had at first drawn his attention, she opened the face of a small compass attached to a cluster of trinkets depending from her belt, and laid the compass level on her hand. Graham gave one glance at it, and uttered a smothered exclamation of astonishment. It was utterly impossible, if they were really shaping a course for Havre, that they should at any time steer N.N.E., yet there was the fact plainly indicated by the magnetised needle trembling in its golden case. Graham and Cynthia looked at each other with a question in their eyes.

"Don't say anything to Evelyn," he murmured in a low tone. "I'll contrive to see the ship's compass—I don't understand this."

Cynthia went back to Evelyn's side, apparently unconcerned. A servant was spreading deck chairs beneath an awning; another was bringing up a smoking-table and a case of cigars; a third was laden with an oblong tray filled with novels of obvious newness. Miss Beachcroft observed these preparations with watchful eyes.

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"That means something more than a few hours' sail," she said to herself. "It is as I thought—that man was playing a game of his own. Well," she said aloud, "M. de Reineville, though absent in the flesh, is certainly with us in the spirit, and his politeness is remarkable."

"He has certainly done everything possible to make our flight pleasant," said Evelyn, with a sigh; "but you know, Cynthia, I would much rather have remained in London. I have a terrible presentiment that worse things are yet to happen, and that papa will suffer. How long will it be before we reach Havre? I don't see a sign of land yet, and we have been steaming since four o'clock at least—that is ten hours."

"I believe Mr Graham is making some inquiry as to that," answered Cynthia. She chose the most comfortable of the deck-chairs, selected a novel, and sat down to read, simulating a composure which she did not feel. "Won't you sit down, Evelyn, till he comes back?"

"No, thanks," said Evelyn. "I'd rather walk about. Oh, there is Harry, talking to the officer on the bridge. I'll go to him."

Graham, on leaving Cynthia, had mounted the bridge, which was in charge of the smart young officer who had brought them off early that morning, and who now exchanged salutations with him of great politeness and cordiality. Conversing with him on the fineness of the day, the beauty of the sky, and the refreshing coolness of the light breeze, Graham contrived to inspect the face of the compass on the bridge. One

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glance at it showed him that Cynthia was right—they were shaping a course to the N.N.E., and the expanse of water around them, instead of being a portion of the British Channel, was an integral part of the North Sea or German Ocean.

Having assured himself on this point Graham quitted the bridge. Evelyn met him as he reached the deck, and a glance at her face made him determine to tell her his suspicions at once. He took her hand in his and drew her away to the side.

"Evie," he said, "I'm afraid there's something wrong. I know you to be brave and strong, dear, so I'm not afraid to tell you this. Did we not understand that this yacht was to take us round to Havre? Yes, of course. Well, we're not on our way to Havre at all. We're heading north-east, and I should say that at this moment we're somewhere off the Yorkshire coast, though we're too far out at sea to get a glimpse of it. We've been steaming ten hours, and the skipper assures me that he can make twenty-four knots an hour. That ought to put us somewhere between Spurn Point and Flamborough Head—and that is not on the way to Havre, is it?" he concluded with a smile which was meant to be cheering.

"What does it mean, Harry?" she asked with a slight tightening of the fingers which rested on his arm. "Do you fear danger—danger from M. de Reineville? If you do, tell me, dear!"

"I don't know what to think," he said. "We have had so much of mystery during the last forty-eight hours that I have more than once wondered

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if I am mad, or dreaming. But whatever all this means, dearest, you are not to be afraid."

"Ah, but I am afraid," she answered. "And I am anxious—terribly anxious about papa. Harry, I did not like leaving him . . . with that man! Oh! I don't know how or why it is, but I am frightened of M. de Reineville, frightened! And . . . we are his prisoners—*his* prisoners! You know that you yourself are—well, perhaps, not afraid, but you are very anxious, dear, are you not—anxious and puzzled?"

"Yes," he said. "That is true. I am both, and I don't know what to do for the best. There is one thing I can do at once, however, and that is to see the captain and find out where we are bound. Go to Cynthia, Evelyn—you may talk to her of all this, for she has guessed a good deal of it already."

Graham went below and sought out Captain Popinot. That worthy gentleman he discovered in his own cabin, comfortably amused by a cigar and a paper-backed novel, and obviously at peace with all the world. He received his visitor with even greater politeness than he had shown earlier in the morning, begged him to be seated, offered him a cigar, and was at his service entirely. He made inquiries after the health of the ladies and of Graham himself, and was charmed to hear that such refreshing sleep had been their lot.

"Captain Popinot," said Graham, abruptly, "your ship is, I believe, heading north by north-east?"

Captain Popinot bowed and smiled.

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"And," continued Graham, "she appears at this moment to be off the Yorkshire coast, though out of sight of land."

"You are perfectly correct, sir," answered Popinot. "I should imagine that we are some sixty miles due east of Flamborough Head, which is a striking feature of that coast, and which was the scene of one of the most remarkable adventures in the history of Paul Jones. Paul Jones, sir——"

"Pardon me," said Graham, interrupting him, "but may I ask what we are doing here when we ought to be nearing Havre?"

Captain Popinot sat up in his easy chair, and regarded his visitor with a stare of genuine astonishment.

"My dear sir!" he exclaimed. "Havre? But what should we do at Havre? We are not going to Havre! We are bound for the Island."

"The Island! What island?" said Graham.

"The island whereon the Count has his castle," answered Popinot, whose perplexity, if assumed, was exceedingly well suggested. "How, my dear sir, do you not know M. de Reineville's most beautiful paradise there? Ah! what happiness to spend the summer in such a spot! the blue waters of the fjord——"

"Fjord!" exclaimed Graham. "Are we bound for Norway, then?"

This question so disconcerted Captain Popinot that he rose with an astonished air and approaching an escritoire drew forth a letter which he handed to Graham with a profound bow. Graham opened it without ceremony, and found it to be a note

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from de Reineville to Popinot. It was dated on the previous day, and written on the notepaper of the Travellers' Club, and it gave instructions that he, Popinot, should have *L'Hirondelle* in readiness at Gravesend to convey the Count's friends to the Island as speedily as possible, and to show them every attention and politeness by the way.

"But this island?" said Graham. "Where is it? To tell you the truth, Captain Popinot, we left London under most agitating circumstances, and I formed the impression that you were to convey us to Havre. It was doubtless my mistake; but as I have never visited the island of which you speak you will perhaps tell me where it is, and when we shall reach it."

"Ah, my dear sir," answered the captain, "it is quite easy to tell you where it is, and when—by the blessing of heaven—we shall reach it. What is of difficulty is to give you even a faint notion of how enchanting it is! It is a regret of my life that I have never yet set foot upon it—M. de Reineville is extremely particular in his arrangements, as you have doubtless observed—but I hope to do so some day, by his generosity and kindness. Well, my dear sir, the Island—we know it by no other name—lies like a gem in the sea, at the mouth of one of the most beautiful fjords of the Norwegian coast. I assure you that I never see it without shedding tears. And yet I see little of it, for no sooner do we arrive than we depart, alas! But you, my dear sir, as the Count's honoured guest——"

"And we arrive at the Island——?" said Graham.

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"My usual time is forty-eight hours," replied Captain Popinot. "Forty-eight hours from the mouth of the Thames. We passed the Nore light-ship this morning at precisely four o'clock, and we may therefore expect to sight the Island, my dear sir, about early evening on the second day from this."

Graham presently left Captain Popinot and went on deck again, where he communicated his news to his two companions. They received it with expressions of astonishment, and for some time endeavoured to explain matters on any plausible ground that suggested itself.

"My profound belief," said Cynthia at last, "is that M. de Reineville is a madman, and that his madness assumes strange forms. What he means to do with us, or what he means us to do, on our arrival at this island, is a mystery which time alone will solve. For my part I intend to make myself as comfortable as possible during the time I spend on board this yacht—that seems the most sensible thing to do at present, doesn't it?"

In spite of the mystery surrounding them and their anxiety about Wynyard, Graham and his *fiancée* contrived to be very happy during the day which followed. *L'Hirondelle* swept through the smiling seas as the bird from whence she took her name skims through a village street at eventide, and everything went as gaily as if the whole party were engaged in making a summer excursion of pure pleasure. Captain Popinot's politeness increased; the *chef* excelled himself at every meal, and the June nights were dreams of loveliness. It was

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towards the beginning of one of these that Popinot, on deck with his voyagers, stretched out a hand that trembled with emotion, and breathed the word "*There!*"

All three looked with eager eyes. Ahead, catching the last rays of the setting sun, they saw something rising out of the sea which appeared to be of a dazzling whiteness. It grew and grew in size, and far behind it, stealing, as it were, out of a diaphanous haze of grey, rose the deep blue and purple of precipitous hills, rose-tipped and mystic, that fell and mingled with a sapphire sea. They waited, watching. Before them at last spread out the eternal glory of a Norwegian fjord, and in its mouth, half belonging to it and half to the ocean, an island, set like a gem in the water, and crowned by a faery palace apparently fashioned of rose-tinted marble.

Captain Popinot burst into tears.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NIGHT OF GRIM DESPAIR.

LONG before Graham and his fellow-refugees had reached the presumable safety of the Count de Reineville's yacht, London had been transformed into a wilderness. The situation had changed hourly. At three o'clock in the afternoon everybody had experienced feelings of wonder and astonishment ; at four, most people began to get frightened ; at five, fear was rapidly changing into terror ; at six, terror developed into panic, and the human stream burst its barriers. As the evening progressed and the panic-stricken folk discovered that a population of seven millions cannot be transported from its base at a few minutes' notice, a sense of despair, akin to that which a rat must feel when fairly trapped, set in all over the doomed city. It mattered nothing to the frenzied people that overhead hung all the glory of a fair June evening ; between them and the sky rested a cloud which their imagination invested with darkness and frowning terrors. Naturally they met the unseen horror with varying manifestations of feeling. Some blasphemed and many wept ; others wandered aimlessly about the houses which they

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were longing to forsake ; others, fleeing in any direction, cursed and sobbed as they fled, and paused constantly to enquire of others in like case whether *they* thought that there was really need to flee ; and with a fine return to primitive feeling, a large percentage of the seven millions, believing honestly that the last day was at hand, began a final carousal and debauch, praying that the threatened blow might fall while the leaves of the vine grew heavy about their brows.

By eight o'clock that evening London was in a state of sublime chaos. Outside the Prime Minister's official residence, only kept back from forcible entry by a mass of sorely-tried soldiers and police, a great crowd clamoured for surrender to the Dictators ; within, the Premier, Wynyard, several members of the Government, heads of the police department, and men of standing from the city, racked their brains in an attempt to decide upon some course of action. Soldiers were marching from every barracks to surround the principal buildings and to assist the police in keeping order in the streets. The effect was similar to that which might be produced by casting a half-hundred of corks into a river in spate, and bidding them check the onrush of the waters. At the railway stations one hour's work was sufficient to disorganise the intricacies of many elaborate railway systems. Trains were boarded without ceremony, and engine-drivers forced to steam out of London at the point of revolvers ; where engine-drivers could not be found, amateur hands pulled the throttles open and steered hundreds to a sudden death. Long

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before midnight every main line leading out of London was blocked, and on most of them accidents involving great loss of life had occurred. Along the main roads moving processions of vehicles and horses journeyed ceaselessly; folk living in the quiet villages without rose from their beds and stared in frightened wonder at the sudden livening of the turnpikes. Down at the docks whatever craft were likely were besieged as zealously as the trains, and captains cursed their stars as the people crowded on board till the Board of Trade line dropped beneath the water's edge. Everywhere there reigned but one notion—the notion of flight.

London had become mightily delirious. Fair, smiling, gracious, a beautifully contrived and smoothly oiled machine in the warm, comfortable days of peace and security, she became a monster when Fear laid an icy finger on her heart. From her condition of pleasant agility she suddenly developed a state of obese incapacity to move. She rolled and floundered where she lay; her limbs assumed an awful stiffness; what seemed to be her strength proved to be worse than weakness, and men saw with concern that if she once fell, she must lie where she had fallen and stink in the sun. At this moment she was for all the world like a great ant-heap upon which some mischievous boy has concentrated his attention for a brief instant—the seven millions which burrowed within her rose like the disturbed insects and poured over each other's bodies, careless of life or death, actuated only by the impulse to move, the natural tendency to flee from the fear of unrealised danger.

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Amidst the pandemonium now created M. de Reineville moved with observant eyes, noting everything that came within the compass of his immediate surroundings. He wandered from one point to another, watching human beings struggle and even fight as though they had been brutes, hearing such interchange of opinion as it was possible to get from people, most of whom were nearly mad with terror, and reflecting upon the narrowness of the line which divides your so-called civilised person from the primitive man. He spent several hours in this fashion, and found each more interesting than its predecessor. More than once he was constrained to give way to surprise—he was bound to admit to himself that under the influence of supreme fear, men and women exhibited the possession of qualities and characteristics of which he had hitherto remained in ignorance.

Wandering aimlessly about, M. de Reineville found himself at half-past ten o'clock that evening in Piccadilly Circus. Here a vast saturnalia was in progress. However the rest of the folk in London were going to take whatever fate the morrow held in keeping, those who had assembled at this point were determined to have their fling ere the end came. The Frenchman confessed that he had never seen such a mob as this in all his life. Despite the efforts of the police and the soldiers mob-law already reigned, and the foul gods of primitive days were being worshipped in the open spaces. It was a peculiarity of the scene that its chief characteristics were youth, beauty, and brilliancy. Most of the men there were young and clad in evening gar-

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ments ; they were plainly of the upper classes, and their eyes were bright with a fever which none of them had ever known before. The women were young, too, and beautiful—each one seemed to have vied with all the others in the matter of apparel, and each flaunted her beauty in the eyes of everyone with an abandon which filled the quivering air with new pulsations. Laughter, such as the earth rarely hears, rang from one corner to another—everybody laughed, shouted, shrieked, and gesticulated—the open space was a mystery of movement. Out of the great restaurants on every side the rioters poured in constant streams, bringing with them whatever their crazy fancy impelled them to lay hands upon. Men and women alike paraded the asphalt and the pavement, waving glasses, chanting songs, abandoned to the wildness of the moment.

A girl, sparkling with diamonds, young, fresh, beautiful, thrust a glass into de Reineville's hand. Her voice, well-bred and sweet, cried, "Drink—drink!"

"To whom shall I drink?" he said, watching her.

"Drink to the Devil!" she cried. "Is not this the Devil's night! Drink—drink to the Devil!"

Then the surging crowd caught her and whirled her away. De Reineville dropped the glass and its contents in the gutter: as he did so he felt a hand on his arm, and looking round he saw Mr Gotto.

"This is a remarkable sight, sir," said the police-agent. "I have been racking my brains for some moments in the effort to decide whether I have

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ever seen anything like it before. I have come to the conclusion that I have not, and that is saying a great deal, for I was all through the days of the Commune, and they, as you of course know, sir, were terrible days."

De Reineville, who was watching the doings of the crowd, inclined his head.

"Mr Gotto," he said presently, "you were good enough to remark this afternoon that it would give you pleasure to serve me. I wish you would give me your assistance at present."

"Sir," said the police-agent, "I shall be delighted. Tell me what I can do."

"Find me some place in which one may eat and drink," answered de Reineville. "I have been wandering about for hours and am hungry. These places," he continued, pointing to the numerous restaurants around them, "are already in the hands of the mob, and I am not minded to pierce the crowds in order to reach my lodging or my club. If you know of some quiet place——"

"Yes," replied Gotto, "I know a place where one may be quiet—a humble place, sir, but presided over by a perfect genius in the culinary art. If you will condescend to follow me——"

"Mr Gotto," said the Count, "I shall feel greatly honoured if you will sup with me. You are a remarkable man in many ways, and to-night you fit my mood exactly. Let us find the person you name."

To this polite speech, Gotto replied with equal politeness, and turning away, conducted the Count along Shaftesbury Avenue as far as the corner of

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Greek Street, where he plunged into the labyrinth of small thoroughfares which cross Soho, and finally paused in one of humble appearance. He pushed open the door of a small café and entered, de Reineville following closely upon him.

"Here, at anyrate, is peace," remarked Gotto, sighing with relief.

De Reineville sat down and looked about him. The place in which he found himself was fitted up after the fashion of an Italian café of humble pretensions; it was very clean, very quiet, and very comfortable, and at that moment was tenantless. Gotto touched a bell. From behind a door in the rear of the apartment there presently advanced a portly man of the police-agent's own nationality who wished his visitors a good-evening in pleasant tones.

"So you do not run away, Luigi?" said Gotto. "You do not fear, eh?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, and nodded towards the glass door from which he had just entered.

"They all go but me," he said. "I am alone—and I cook your supper for you with my own hands. It is all the better for that—I give you the nicest supper you can get in London, and my best bottle of wine. Me—I do not fear their blowings up—I stay here—look after my business. If the blowing up comes my way, well, I get blown up. What can I do for you, Mr Gotto, and your friend—I cook you nice supper, eh? Better than running away, Mr Gotto."

Over this speech de Reineville reflected while

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Luigi set out a snowy cloth, produced and uncorked a bottle of wine, and departed to cook the viands which he had advised them to order.

"It appears to me, Mr Gotto," he remarked, as he filled the police-agent's glass, "that one can only form a real estimate of the character of a nation when one sees that nation in desperate circumstances. We exchanged some confidences this afternoon on the stubbornness of the English character. I confess that I have been surprised by the events of this evening, for I had anticipated different conduct on the part of the inhabitants of this city. I thought that they, being English, would resist to the utmost, and that successive blows would inspire them to new resistance. It now appears that I have been mistaken. These people are fleeing before the Ultimatum of the Dictators as sheep flee before the presence of a small dog who has entered their field out of mere whim. How do you account for this?"

"Sir," replied Gotto, after some reflection, "I account for it in this way. In face of an open enemy the Englishman is unapproachable in his bravery. Whatever he can see or understand he will fight, even though he be outnumbered. But you may have remarked that every nation which relies greatly on what, for the sake of a better phrase, we will call brute force, is invariably afraid of moral force. Now these people are fleeing from a moral force—they are fleeing from fear. The fear from which they are suffering at this moment is a much more serious thing to them than the danger of which they are afraid. They are running

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away from a Notion—it is the abstract which is making them cowards—the abstract! In other words—they are afraid of an unseen enemy.”

“It must be borne in mind, however,” said de Reineville, “that the unseen enemy has given them proof of his power to destroy. Are they not, rather, running away to save their lives?”

“That I grant,” replied Gotto; “but if the Dictators assumed tangible form in the shape of an army of one million men, armed with magnificent artillery, and posted on the various positions which command this great city, these people would not run away; they would stand firm. It is because the Dictators are unseen, unknown, malign influences with something of the attributes of a supernatural power about them, that these people are afraid. Sir, that which is hid in darkness is always more affrighting to the natural man than that which may be seen of the visual eye—is it not so?”

To this profound remark de Reineville made no immediate reply. The supper arriving, he assumed the *rôle* of host and entertained his guest with great politeness and cordiality. For a few moments the two men ate and drank in silence. Then—

“You remarked this afternoon, Mr Gotto,” said the Frenchman, “that you envied these men the possession of their power—a power which, as I think you said, would make you feel, viewed from a personal standpoint, that you were master of the world?”

“Yes?” said Gotto, inviting further observations from a companion in whose personality he was becoming more and more interested.

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"Does it occur to you that the people who are exercising this power at the present time in London may have cause to regret that those whom it is intended to benefit are not more worthy of it? For example," continued de Reineville, "one learns from that Ultimatum of the Dictators which was published in this afternoon's papers that their object is the amelioration of the people's lot. Now, it does not strike me that the people—I speak now of the great mass of population—are at present worthy of so much attention. All about us at this moment is a struggling horde of—what shall we call them?—poltroons? cowards? brutes? or what?"

"Sir," said Gotto, sipping his wine, "one might truthfully remark that they have merely reverted to primitive instincts."

"You are quite right," assented the Frenchman. "I admire your clear insight, Mr Gotto. Yes—they have returned to primitive instincts. This evening, at the railway station of King's Cross, I saw a mob of men, women, and children endeavour to enter a train. The men beat the women and children back with their fists; the women, if they succeeded in effecting an entrance, left the children forsaken on the platform. The primitive instinct of saving one's self was there evidenced. It would seem, then, that under the influence of real fear—real, absolute fear—man becomes a mere savage again, even in civilised countries."

"Sir," remarked Gotto, "if you had spent your life in the distinguished profession to which I have

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the honour to belong, you would know that man is always a savage, wearing a thin veneer which may be scraped off with a touch. How long does it take to transform a well-bred, highly-educated gentleman into a primeval man? Let him find his wife in the arms of his friend, or be himself accused of cheating at cards, and he develops instincts and passions which may have lain dormant, but were always there—*there!*—waiting until something should rouse them.”

“Then,” replied de Reineville, “these Dictators, whoever they may be, are somewhat previous in their campaign, for it is evident that the ground in which they are desirous of planting their seed is not prepared for them.”

“Well, sir,” said Gotto, “that was always so. It has been the common mistake of reformers—that is to say, of re-makers of the world—to imagine that the time was ripe and that the people were ready. If you will permit your mind to revert to the facts of history you will acknowledge that this is so. When Moses, the would-be saviour of the Israelites, was modelling his grand system of laws for their benefit, they were fashioning a golden calf. The great prophet of the Christians was rejected by the people in favour of Barabbas, a criminal. These English folk cut off the head of Charles the First in 1649, and placed his son on the throne eleven years later. So with everything—the prophet and reformer believes the people want him and his message: the people reject both. The people are this to-day and that to-morrow, shouting

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because Charles the Tyrant has lost his head on Monday, and rejoicing because Charles the Libertine turns Whitehall into a bawdy-house and a dog-kennel by the week-end. Ah, the People!" concluded Mr Gotto, with something of a sigh. "I would rather guarantee to balance a drop of quicksilver on the point of a needle than affirm belief in the People, for of the two things," he added, his mood quickly changing to one of amusement, "the latter is the more mercurial."

"You are certainly a person of great discernment, Mr Gotto," said the Count. "I perceive that you have thought much and deeply on many subjects. But as we have concluded our repast, what do you say if we now leave this place and once more amuse ourselves by watching the behaviour of the populace? I confess that I have never seen such sights, nor gained so much knowledge of human nature, as I am seeing and gaining this evening, and it seems a pity to absent one's self from the streets."

The police-agent readily assented to this proposition, and de Reineville having reimbursed Luigi in a manner quite satisfactory to the latter, they left the little café and returned towards the scene which they had quitted an hour previously. They were fated, however, to get no further on their way than the corner of Wardour Street. There they were engulfed in a mob which swept down Whitcomb Street, across Trafalgar Square, and into Whitehall, carrying them along with it like straws which are caught up by the wind. From

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the shouts and cries of the frenzied folk about them Gotto gathered that they were on their way to Downing Street, where the ministers were in conclave, there to demand that the terms of the Dictators should be agreed to before worse evil fell on the city. Desiring to see still more of him the police-agent contrived to keep close to de Reineville for some distance, but a sudden rush of the crowd separated them and another carried them far apart. Gotto, fighting desperately, at last edged his way out of the mob and escaped into Whitehall Place. He leaned against the wall and wiped his forehead.

"That's unfortunate!" he said at last. "I was getting on rapidly in my mental journey towards the discovery of M. de Reineville's identity, and now I must pause for awhile. What a night is this! It is as though hell had broken loose."

He stood for a moment longer, listening to the roar of the crowds surging along the wide thoroughfare towards Westminster, and then, setting off at a rapid pace, he skirted the National Liberal Club and turned westward along the Embankment.

CHAPTER XVII.

SUNRISE ON LONDON.

WHEN the crowd swept de Reineville away from Gotto's side, the former made no effort to turn back to his companion. He allowed himself to drift with it, and was carried forward in its midst until the presence of vaster mobs massed together in front of the Treasury made further progress impossible. Arrived at that point the Frenchman began to make his way towards the opposite side of Parliament Street, and eventually reaching the pavement he gradually shook off the pressure of the throng and reached the corner of Bridge Street. Towards Westminster Bridge a steady tide of human life was rolling ; on the bridge itself, men, women, horses, and vehicles were mixed up in a confused mass that made common use of roadway and sidewalk. At an earlier stage of the evening an omnibus had been overturned at the entrance to the Middlesex end of the bridge and had constituted a partial barricade which it seemed nobody's business to remove. The horses, choked, strangled, or trampled to death, lay amidst the wreckage ; past them and the wrecked 'bus the fugitives pressed without a glance in their direction.

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De Reineville edged his way along the crowded street until he reached the corner of the Embankment. Turning there, and crossing to the parapet overlooking the river, he found himself in comparative loneliness. He drew out a cigar-case and lighted a cigar. When it was well alight he turned his back to the parapet, rested his elbows upon its coping and looked about him. There was no light in the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament; the great buildings overhanging the Embankment on the land side were almost in darkness; a spirit of gloom seemed to have descended upon everything that flanked the river from Westminster to Blackfriars. Into this gloom he presently moved away, meeting scarcely a soul as he journeyed further eastward. He said to himself, experiencing some amusement because of it, that when the human race is menaced, its units love to crowd together in the great highways, each one feeling dire need of the society of the others. "Strange!" he mused. "There would seem to be nothing like fear for breaking down the barriers of reserve erected by long years of proud safety. Yesterday, your Englishman had thought foul scorn of herding with his fellows like rats on the march; to-day, he rubs shoulders with all and sundry because a common danger threatens him and them."

Indulging in these thoughts de Reineville paced slowly along the embankment until he came to the Temple. There he crossed to the steps which lead into Essex Street, and ascending them went forward until he emerged in front of the Law

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Courts. Here he was once more in touch with the events of the night. The vast building looming before him appeared to be surrounded by a cordon of soldiers ; westward the Strand glared with light ; eastward Fleet Street sank away into a golden haze above which hung the mighty blackness encompassing the great cathedral. In the street there was little traffic. The omnibuses which usually roll east and west without intermission had apparently ceased to run, and it was only at rare intervals that a cab passed the point at which de Reineville had taken up his stand. He presently walked across the roadway and found that soldiers were indeed posted at a distance of a few yards from each other all round the Law Courts—they stood, motionless and silent, each man alert, a barrier of flesh set up to guard a treasure of stone.

De Reineville turned away and pursued his journey eastward. Coming to the middle of Fleet Street he penetrated a dark passage, climbed some badly-lighted stairs, and knocked at a door. A voice from within bade him enter ; he pushed the door open and advanced into a small room wherein was nothing but a man, a chair, an American roll desk, an array of tubes, and a telephone. The man had divested himself of coat, waistcoat, tie, and collar ; he sat at the desk grasping a paper pad in one hand and a fountain pen in the other, and the sound of the pen was all that de Reineville heard when he had closed the door behind him. The man lifted a rugged face, crowned by a tumbled mass of iron-grey hair, and gave his

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visitor a sharp nod. De Reineville sat down on a pile of newspapers near the desk; the man with the fountain pen wrote on steadily for five minutes. Then he laid it down, got up slowly, stretched a pair of muscular arms, went over to a cupboard and produced a bottle of whisky, a syphon, and two glasses, and set them on the desk.

"If I were superstitious," he said, suddenly breaking the silence, "I should say that the worst sort of a hell had been exhibited in this city to-night. Did you ever see seven millions of people go stark, staring, crazy before? I guess not, and as I never did, and don't think I'm likely to again, I'm getting my feelings about it down on paper as quickly as I can. Take a drink. If you've seen all I have, I guess you'll do with one."

"I think," said de Reineville, "that you are as likely to know exactly how things stand as anybody of my acquaintance. What is the precise situation?"

The other man took a long drink with evident satisfaction before he made answer.

"Oh, well," he said, "the precise situation is just this—the whole of London is in a state of panic; the people are trying to get away to parts unknown; the railway system has broken down, and several hundreds of lives have been lost on the big trunk lines by running trains into each other; those of the people who have been left behind are either praying or reviving certain pagan rites which aren't pretty to see; and altogether London is behaving in the worst way. Say, did you ever realise before that a Government's precious little

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good at holding back a nation if terror once fairly gets a hold on the people's imagination? It's just twelve hours since the affair at Charing Cross, and only six since the panic began, and London's hell—*hell!*”

“And to-morrow?” said de Reineville.

“Well, now, I daresay there'll be history made to-morrow. I believe that manifesto to be a genuine document, and I'm counting on good material to-morrow, unless the Government surrenders. Say, do you know what's been done?—they've posted cordons of soldiers all around any public building of importance. I do smile at that—if these fellows could do what they did at Charing Cross all the soldiers in the world will not keep their fingers off whatever they want to touch. And they've arrested every suspicious person—there's several prisons full of innocent and indignant persons to-night. Well, well!—but what are they to do? Oh, it's an earthly rehearsal of things that will go on in the other place—I've just seen things proceeding in Piccadilly that I wouldn't have seen for all the money in the world if it hadn't been my business to have to see them. Say, did it ever strike you that when some things happen it turns us back to—ah, now, what is it that it does turn us back to?”

“You mean,” said de Reineville, slowly and thoughtfully, “that under the stress of such fierce emotion as that which these people have felt this evening man reverts to the brute stage?”

The American threw out his arms with a gesture of hopelessness.

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"Brute stage? Ah!" he said. "Well, I don't know about that—devil stage seems a more fitting term. I remember once reading a book—a novel—about a man who robbed a woman of her soul and left her something lower than the brute. Well, I guess some of the people that are playing hell up yonder have had their souls taken out of them to-night."

"But were the souls ever in them?" said de Reineville, softly. "A veneer of manners has often passed as apology for lack of soul. Is it not that these people are now exhibiting themselves in their true form? It was said of old, 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' Are not these people saying the same thing to-night? They——"

A sharp whistle from one of the numerous tubes hanging in close proximity to the desk interrupted him. The American seized it, drew out the whistle, and applied his ear to the tube. "That's from my best man," he said in a low voice.

De Reineville watched the other's face as he kept his ear to the tube. It betrayed no surprise and no emotion save an occasional glitter of the steely-grey eyes. After a few moments he took the tube from his ear, applied it to his lips, breathed the words "All right" through it, put back the whistle, and hung it on its peg again.

"I guess the end is in sight," he said, turning to his visitor. "The Cabinet Council has broken up, and the Prime Minister has gone to Windsor by road. You'll hear the news of surrender to the Dictators by breakfast time."

A slight sigh escaped de Reineville.

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"That will save much loss of life," he said.

"Um," said the other, unconcernedly. "I should say so. Well, this has been a departure from the ordinary run of things, and even if the Government surrenders, the thing's not done with. There'll be all the rest of the European Governments to tackle next. But mark my words, if England surrenders, all the rest will surrender. Eh?"

"You think so?"

"Never made a mistake in foreign politics yet," said the other, coolly, as he sat down at the desk again. "Nor would you if you'd sat here thirty years, with your fingers on the pulses of every European power. No, sir, where England leads, the rest will follow—like lambs. Beat England, and you beat Europe."

"Good-night," said de Reineville. He rose softly from his improvised seat on the newspapers and went across to the door. Here he paused and looked round—the other man had seized his fountain pen and was already writing furiously in his peculiar fashion, gripping the pad with strenuous fingers, and holding it away from him at half-arm's length. He made no reply to the Frenchman's farewell, and the latter went out and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

De Reineville continued his progress eastward, turning aside at intervals, and lingering or hurrying as his fancy prompted him. He found the approaches to Blackfriars Bridge filled with masses of people pressing forward with patient persistence, and in a dumb silence which was more impressive than the shouts and shrieks of the earlier part of

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the evening. Round about St. Paul's Cathedral a cordon of soldiers was drawn, and the Churchyard was closed to traffic. The Frenchman skirted the great church by way of Ave Maria Lane and Paternoster Row, and sauntered slowly down Cheapside, having first ascertained that guards had been set about the great buildings of the Post-office. Similar measures of precaution had been adopted at the Guildhall, the Mansion House, the Bank of England, and the Royal Exchange—seen in the glare of electric lamps the city seemed as if it had been given over to an army. This appearance deepened as de Reineville went further east by way of Eastcheap to the neighbourhood of the Tower. All around her great buildings, her historic houses, her repositories of wealth and treasure, England had drawn this line of red and black, unconscious of their uselessness. Against a foe whose force and power they could see these men would have done marvels. De Reineville, listening to the subdued conversation going on amongst them, knew that not even their stern discipline would avail anything if another manifestation of the power of the unseen enemy were made. The fear of the unseen was holding a strong grip on every man.

It was long past midnight when de Reineville went back towards the west. He sauntered slowly here and there, smoking many cigars, examining everything that came beneath his notice, and occasionally pausing to hold a brief conversation with the sergeant of a guard or an inspector of police. At every principal thoroughfare and at the

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entrances to the bridges the tide of fugitives still rolled forward, but in a steadier fashion than when the first rush set in. It was apparent that London would soon be deserted if this mighty exodus continued, and that its vast area of streets and squares must become a veritable wilderness. There was already an air of desolation about the streets which they would not have worn under the ordinary conditions of night time—something in the very aspect of the houses betrayed the emptiness that lay within.

At half-past three in the morning, de Reineville, having walked about the streets for several hours, found himself standing in the centre of Westminster Bridge, over which still rolled the endless procession of fugitives. He leaned against the parapet, utterly regardless of the folk who pushed their onward way behind him, and gazed at the sweep of the river stretching away towards the east. The darkness of a summer night was dead, and all the sky was bright with the promise of a summer day. The Frenchman looked at the grey tide flowing beneath him ; at the fresh green of the trees bordering the land side of the Embankment ; at the great buildings towering above them ; at the spires, gables, and roofs which rose out of the earth and shot skyward like the traceries of a dream, and at the mighty dome of the great cathedral, lifting its cross into the fresh morning haze like a symbol of protection. He forgot the crowd that elbowed and pressed him ; the cross riveted his attention.

A long shaft of quivering, crimson flame shot

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athwart the eastern heavens—the pale grey of the skies changed into a filmy, delicate blue. On the edge of the southern arm of the great gilded cross a speck of dazzling light appeared, widening as the seconds went on until it suddenly developed into a blaze of glory. The belt of gold and crimson which overhung the river and the dingy houses of the Surrey bank widened and deepened: some invisible hand seemed to be drawing up a great curtain with swift energy; the skies smiled and smiled; with a sudden majestic spring the sun shot up from beyond the outer confines of the great city and bathed its domes and spires in a rare effulgence. A new warmth filled the air; the river flashed back scintillant rays from its myriad dimples; the houses became blots of purple and gold against the blue grey of the morning.

De Reineville turned and looked at the procession streaming forward across the bridge. Not one of the haggard faces turned towards the sunrise; every eye looked ahead, every mouth was drawn into the grim, hard line of despair which is only seen on the face of a man whose footsteps are speeded by terror.

A sudden feeling of intense inquisitiveness prompted de Reineville to address himself to one of these unhappy fugitives. The man his glance fell upon was a stoutly-built little fellow, dressed in the garments usually affected by the small tradesman. He carried a bundle upon his shoulders, and a heavy bag in his right hand; by the left he led a girl of ten or twelve years of age. His wife, to whose skirts a boy, of younger appearance than the

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girl, clung heavily, walked at his side, laden, like himself, with bundle and bag. The boy carried a linnet in a cage ; the girl, a doll, the waxen face of which rolled helplessly over its owner's arm.

De Reineville stepped to the man's side and walked along with him.

"Pardon me," he said, "but why do you do this? Why do you run away from a danger that may be imaginary? The danger, perhaps, is all over."

The man looked at him with a surly, sidelong glance.

"You mind yer own business," he said, gruffly. "I don't want no truck with you—I knows what I'm a-doin' of. You leave honest folk alone, see?"

De Reineville bowed and turned back to the sidewalk. He made his way slowly to the Middlesex end of the bridge, and after lingering a few moments at the corner of Bridge Street and Parliament Street, proceeded up the latter at a smarter pace. It was exactly half-past four o'clock in the morning when he took out his latch-key at the door of his flat in Whitehall Court, and daylight had already put to shame the glitter of the shaded lamps within.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MEN OF MAMMON.

WHEN the carriage conveying his strangely assorted company of fugitives had driven away, Wynyard turned and re-entered his house. The old butler, who had remained at his elbow, followed and closed the door ; the sound echoed hollowly through the wide hall and deserted rooms. A cat, driven by loneliness and silence from its usual haunts in the kitchen, came along the hall howling dismally ; at sight of the two men it paused in its uneasy paces, and stood, wide-eyed and arch-backed, watching them.

Wynyard glanced at it with something of a feeling of horror ; he turned into the empty dining-room and sat down with a groan of despair.

Phillips followed him in.

"Can I get you anything, sir ?" he asked.

"No, thank you, Phillips," said Wynyard. "I don't know of anything that would do me any good. I must get out, back to Whitehall. Now Phillips, my old friend, what are you going to do ? I think you had better lock the house up and go with me."

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The old butler, who was busying himself needlessly, shook his head.

"With all due respect to you, sir," he said, "I would greatly prefer to remain where I am. You see, sir, there are several reasons why I should. It's not safe or seemly, sir, that this house should be left entirely untenanted, and there's no knowing what mayn't happen in London to-night, sir."

"No," said Wynyard, wearily, "there's no knowing what mayn't happen. But you can't stay here alone, Phillips."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I can. It'll not be the first time I've kept guard over a house, sir, as you know; and if the mob should happen to become unpleasant, I shall be better than nothing," said the old man.

Wynyard nodded his head. It seemed to his servant, who was watching him narrowly, that his master was dazed, not entirely himself, that he only half comprehended what was said to him. "You see, sir," continued Phillips, "I'm not so much afraid of what these Anarchists may do, as of what may follow their doings. If the mob knows that all these houses in Mayfair and Belgravia is being deserted, they'll come here and loot them—oh, I know! It's the enemy within, as much as the enemy without, that's to be feared, sir, if I may be so bold as to say so."

"The enemy within," repeated Wynyard. "Yes, yes, the enemy within."

Suddenly he leapt to his feet.

"I must go, Phillips. I—there is much to do. Well—use your own judgment about making the

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house safe. I will return here this evening if I can—if not——”

Then, without another word, Wynyard walked out into the hall, opened the door ere the old servant could reach it, and went away. Phillips followed him to the door, and watched him, shaking his head.

“The weight of responsibility’s hanging heavy on him,” he said, as he turned into the house again, and began to make his preparations.

A long, melancholy wail from the cat pierced the silence, as he went towards his pantry. The old man shuddered—everything in the air savoured of unholy mystery.

Wynyard walked away from the house with almost aimless steps. Big, burly, broad-shouldered, carrying his head in the air, he pushed his way through the crowds without seeming to see them. On ordinary occasions it would have been impossible for him to walk down Berkeley Street, along Piccadilly, and into the Mall, by way of St James’s Street, without being recognised: on this, every man was too much intent on his own affairs to waste a look on anybody else. Everywhere the crowds were increasing; on every side the babble and murmur of the sheep-like multitudes fleeing anywhere for protection, rose and died in the twilight air. Wynyard heeded, or seemed to heed, nothing of it; his feet carried him mechanically to the corner of London where his official life was spent, and he did not pause in his progress until he sat down in his own private room at the Treasury.

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One of his official secretaries came to Wynyard in answer to his summons. He looked pale, worried, and bustled, and glanced nervously at the door which gave access to an ante-room, from which came a sound of excited voices.

"There are several people wanting to see you," he said, with an inquiring inflection of the voice, "City men, most of them." He mentioned the names of some of the greatest financiers of the day. "They are in there. Will you see them?"

"I will see them presently," answered Wynyard. The secretary left the room, and Wynyard, after a moment's thought, rose from his chair and went across the room to a cupboard which he unlocked with a patent safety key taken from his own pocket. From a shelf in the cupboard he produced a small flask of tinted glass, in which shone an amber-coloured liquid. He filled a liqueur glass with the contents of this and drained it slowly. A ray of the evening sun caught the flask as he put it back, and a spark of golden fire shone through the green of the glass. Wynyard locked the cupboard up again and went back to his chair. His step was lighter, and his face had lost something of its worn look.

A moment later he was looking from one to the other of the men who had been kicking their heels, much against their own wishes, in his ante-room. Something about every man of them suggested money, and not merely money, but the fever of dealing with it. There were half a dozen of them, and Wynyard knew each. He motioned them to seats around his desk.

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"Well, gentlemen?" he said. Then as in a lightning flash, something in his brain summarised what it really was that he saw before him. To all outward appearance the semicircle about his desk was formed of six men, more or less well-clad, well-fed, comfortable-looking gentlemen, who might have been anything from merchants to undertakers. There were no great indications of wealth—no massive cable-chains of solid gold, no flashing diamonds, no ostentatious display of purple and fine linen. But beyond the outward quietness of the scene, that little faculty in Wynyard's brain saw almost limitless wealth—the wealth which these men possessed and which they could influence. He seemed to be confronted by a rampart of shining gold.

"Well?" he said again.

The eldest man spoke, looking at his companions as if to receive assent to his words.

"Mr Wynyard," he began, "this is a time for few words. You know who we are, and what we collectively represent. We want to know how things stand. Are we correct in believing that they stand thus: A secret society, calling itself 'The Dictators,' has made a demand upon the British Government for the payment of one hundred millions of pounds sterling as ransom, and has perpetrated the outrage which occurred to-day at Charing Cross as a coercive act?"

Wynyard bowed his head.

"Do we understand that this society threatens further destruction of property if its terms are not carried out?" continued the spokesman.

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"That is understood," answered Wynyard.

"Do we further understand that the experts give it as their opinion, their decided opinion, that the explosive, or whatever force it was that was used, is unknown to science—is, in short, known only to the society?"

"Yes, that is so," answered Wynyard.

"Then, Mr Wynyard, we wish to know what the Ministry has decided upon. It is scarcely worth while pointing out that the amount demanded by these people is a mere nothing in comparison with the amount which will be lost if all this"—the speaker waved a hand towards the windows—"if all this goes on. We are here to say"—he glanced at his companions—"that if it is a question of financial arrangement——"

"There are other questions beyond that of financial arrangement," interrupted Wynyard. "It is not usual to capitulate to an enemy at the first blow, and——"

"Pardon me," said the other. "Whatever is or is not usual in matters of sentiment, has nothing to do with this case. The trade and prosperity of England are threatened by a foe who has already given us a taste of what he can do and will do, and all we can do now is to accede to his terms. If this panic goes on, if more outrages happen, it will not be a case of a paltry hundred millions, but of ten thousand millions in a few hours. It is all very well to talk of England's honour, but we all know quite well that that is a mere figure of speech. Mr Wynyard, the Ministry must give way. This money must be paid. Of course there

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is no difficulty about that, but, by-the-by, we are curious to know something of the manner of payment. How—where—to whom is the money to be paid? What instructions have you?”

“Lord Grandminster has exceedingly elaborate instructions on that point,” replied Wynyard. “The money is to be paid into the hands of certain great European private bankers, of whom you, Mr —, are one, and is to be held at the absolute disposal of the society, whose director will inform you from time to time as to his wishes in respect to its use. It is needless,” added Wynyard significantly, “to point out that whatever wish the society desires carrying out, it possesses the power of having carried out, by force.”

“Quite needless,” replied the other. “A similar amount of ransom is, I believe, to be extracted from all the principal European Governments.”

“So I am given to understand,” replied Wynyard.

The men of mammon looked at each other.

“It is evident,” said one, in a meditative voice, “it is evident that we are on the eve of a new era.”

“On the morning of one, rather,” said another. He glanced at Wynyard. “I should like to know what the Chancellor of the Exchequer intends to propose to Lord Grandminster as a result of this interview?”

Wynyard looked from one to the other. Once more he became conscious of this rampart of shining gold.

“I have followed the same course throughout,”

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he answered ; " I have felt conscious that it was useless to fight against these men, and I advised—surrender."

A murmur of satisfaction ran round the semi-circle.

" There will be a further meeting of the Cabinet presently," continued Wynyard, " and I shall once more counsel surrender. As you say, there will be no difficulty about the amount to be paid. I think you will find"—he hesitated, and then went on speaking very slowly—" I think you will find that before morning the terms of the Dictators have been agreed to."

Wynyard rose from his seat and bowed : the men of mammon went out with silent greetings to him. Two of the younger, separating themselves from the rest, went away together, talking in whispers.

" The whole thing's a mystery," said one, " but what, *what* has come over Wynyard ? He used to stand for the John Bull never-know-when-your-beaten type and now he's as soft as pap. Of course, surrender's the only thing, but I feared he'd show fight and stand on sentiment. Strange—very strange !"

Left in his private room the Chancellor of the Exchequer once more went to the locked cupboard, took out the flask of strange shape, and slowly drank another measure of the amber-tinted liquid. . . . He went back to his desk and sat as if in deep thought for some time ; then he took a sheet of notepaper, and hastily writing a few lines upon it, folded and placed it in an envelope.

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He hesitated about writing an address on this, and when it was at last written he fingered the envelope nervously, as though uncertain what to do with it. It was not until he had twice gone to the door as if to leave the room that he went back to his desk and laid the envelope under some loose papers lying there.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE AMBER-COLOURED LIQUID.

FOR a reason best known to himself de Reineville left the front door of his flat wide open. He laid his hat, gloves, and walking cane aside in the hall, and entering an apartment on the right, turned out the light which burnt there, drew back the curtains, and flung his windows open to the greeting of the fresh morning breeze. For a moment he stood at one of them, absorbed in the contemplation of the flowers with which the jardinières in the sill were filled, and which were at that moment waking to new life and beauty under the blandishment of the amorous sunlight. From them he presently turned away, yawned once or twice, and then began to make leisurely preparations which suggested the enjoyment of a meal. Upon a small table which stood near the flower-laden windows he spread a snowy napkin, and upon this set out two cups and saucers of delicate Sèvres, which he produced from a cupboard that also afforded a beautifully chased coffee-pot of peculiar make and three elegant dishes of exquisitely worked silver. From another cupboard he brought out a magnificent bunch of purple grapes, six nectarines, and a cluster of

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bananas which shone like so many ingots of pure gold and diffused a delicate odour throughout the apartment. This fruit the Count disposed upon his silver dishes, arranging it with great nicety and precision. He further placed upon the table a silver casket containing small manchets of white bread, two plates of curiously patterned china, two knives, the blades of which were of fine silver and the handles of malachite, and crusted with pearls, and two forks, each of which had a double prong of gold and hilts of ebony, set with rings of crystal. The coffee-pot was placed upon a square of porphyry, in the four corners of which glittered as many precious stones—an amethyst, a topaz, a chrysolite, and an opal. Turning once more to his cupboard he took from it a quaintly shaped vessel of meadow-green glass wherein an amber liquid shone like rays of fire. This he placed by the side of the coffee-pot. Having drawn back a little to consider the effect of his preparations, the Count completed them by gathering a handful of rare blooms from his window, placing them in a tall vase of opalescent Venetian glass, and setting the latter in the centre of a triangle made by the three silver dishes.

It was now time to prepare the coffee, and M. de Reineville proceeded to the execution of this important duty with great care and deliberation. From a lower shelf of his cupboard he produced a massive spirit lamp, and placed it upon a slab of marble which lay in the middle of an ancient oak chest that stood in a recess. Having lighted the lamp he carefully measured a certain amount

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of water from a silver-mounted filter, the top compartment of which was packed with ice, into a pipkin, and this he placed over the flame. When the water began to bubble he poured a portion of it into the coffee-pot, allowed it to remain there for a moment, and then poured it back into the pipkin. He now took the coffee-pot to pieces, separating it into three portions. The lower part proved in consequence of this disintegration to be a reservoir or vessel for the reception of the perfect liquid; the second, a receptacle for the coffee; the third, or upper portion, a species of funnel through which the water was to make its way. All being in readiness, the Count unlocked a small cabinet, and took from it a stout bag of fine silk. From this bag he withdrew, one by one, ninety-six coffee-beans, counting their number in a voice which showed how important the operation was. Having put the bag, carefully tied up again, back in its place, he restored the cabinet to the cupboard, and took from the latter a golden mill. Into the hopper of this he dropped the coffee beans, counting them carefully for the second time. Three turns of the handle transformed the beans into a rich golden mass whose odour put the scent of the flowers to shame, and which was immediately transferred to the second compartment of the coffee-pot. With lightning-like rapidity the Count put back his golden mill in its cupboard, seized the bubbling pipkin, and poured its contents with exquisite precision into the place appointed for them. The topmost lid of the coffee-pot was screwed down; the silver

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cap of the long spout firmly fixed on its nose; the pot restored to its jewelled-mounted slab; the pipkin and spirit lamp removed from sight, and the Count took out his watch in order to time the percolation of the boiling water.

As the fourth minute glided away a light tap sounded from the outer door. Without moving his position or taking his eyes from the dial of the watch, M. de Reineville said :

"Be pleased to enter, Mr Gotto!"

The police-agent's footsteps sounded in the hall.

"This way," said de Reineville. He slipped the watch back into his pocket as Gotto entered, and his hand grasped the handle of the coffee-pot. "You are here to the moment, Mr Gotto," he remarked with great politeness. "Be kind enough to seat yourself, and to permit me to pour out your coffee."

"Sir," said Gotto, taking the chair indicated, "you are a man of marvellous intuition. How did you know that I was coming to see you?"

"Ah!" answered the Count. "I knew that quite well, Mr Gotto. Supposing I also tell you why you have come to see me?"

"Well, sir?" said Gotto, questioningly. "Well, sir?"

"You have come to tell me that you are not sure whether or not you ought to arrest me as a suspicious person, and to discuss the matter with me from a philosophical point of view. Is that not so, Mr Gotto?" said de Reineville with an air of gaiety.

Gotto bowed his head with a gesture which

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betokened much admiration for his host's perspicacity.

"Sir," he said, "I have formed a very high opinion of your powers, and I will not insult you by offering a contradiction of what you have just said. You are quite right in your conclusions."

"That," remarked de Reineville, "need not interfere with our first business, Mr Gotto, which is to breakfast. Allow me to recommend this very excellent coffee, made from specially selected beans which I import from a small estate of my own in Java, and these grapes, which came from my château in Provence. Let me advise you to mingle a little of this liqueur"—here the Count indicated the meadow-green glass vessel—"with your coffee—'tis admirably fitted to act as a restorative after such a hard night's work as we have just gone through."

Gotto, who was not above the pleasures of the table, accepted the Frenchman's hospitality with respectful alacrity, seated himself near the window, praised the coffee, the liqueur, and the fruit, and remarked upon the beauty of his host's flowers. For some moments the two men occupied themselves in breaking their fast, Mr Gotto more than once complimenting the Count on the whiteness of the manchets of bread, the lusciousness of the nectarines, the bloom of the grapes, and the delicate flavour of the bananas, which were arrived at that true stage of ripeness whereat this fruit should alone be eaten. As for the Count, he ate twelve grapes, two nectarines, three bananas, and half a manchet, and Mr Gotto's appetite being satisfied

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about the same time, his host produced some very fine cigarettes, offered one to his guest, replenished the latter's cup, and pressed the amber-coloured liquid upon him once again. They then began a conversation of great interest.

"I have been thinking, Mr Gotto," said the Count, "that I would tell you what has been passing in your mind concerning myself during the last eighteen hours. Will it interest you to hear it?"

"Very much, sir," replied Gotto. "I am all attention and eagerness."

"To begin with," said de Reineville, "you were much concerned when you met me at the scene of the catastrophe at Charing Cross as to where and when you had encountered me before?"

Gotto bowed his head, and inhaled the fumes of his cigarette with obvious enjoyment of the excellent quality of the tobacco.

"You were quite certain, and are so still," continued the Count, "that we had met, and you wondered if the meeting took place in Paris, or in St. Petersburg, or in some other of the many cities which you and I have visited in our time."

"You are quite right, sir," answered Gotto with increasing respect.

"But you have not yet been able to satisfy your mind on that point," said de Reineville, good-humouredly.

Gotto shook his head.

"And so, not understanding matters," continued the Count, "you became suspicious, and your suspicion increased when you found me in Piccadilly

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Circus last evening, and afterwards supped with me. Indeed, they increased so much that you were sorry to lose me in the crowd in Whitehall, and much overjoyed when you found me again on the Embankment, half an hour afterwards."

The police-agent uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Ah!" he said, "you saw me?"

De Reineville lighted another cigarette.

"I am afraid that I must have occasioned you much fatigue last night," he answered politely. "I have a bad habit of walking about cities after nightfall, especially when there are matters of great interest afoot. But really, Mr Gotto, an official of your standing and intelligence should be above listening at doors! My friend Mr David P. Strong, of the *New York Morning Telephone*, is a man of wonderful strength and somewhat turbulent passions, and if he had found you eavesdropping at his door he might have thrown you downstairs or made holes in you with his revolver. Otherwise, Mr Gotto, I was glad of your company, and I congratulate you on your adept fashion of keeping out of sight of your quarry."

Gotto, who had allowed his cigarette to go out during this last speech, and who now sat staring at the Count with wide-opened eyes, nodded his head several times, said "Yes—yes—yes—yes!" as if he assented to some proposition which had presented itself to him from within, and then fell into a rigid silence.

"Permit me to refill your glass with my amber-coloured nectar, and to give you another cigarette,

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Mr Gotto," said the Count, suiting his actions to his words. "There—let us resume our conversation. You formed the impression, having due regard to all these things, that I ought not to remain at large, and the warrant with which you armed yourself on coming here is at present reposing in your breast-pocket. I am quite sure that you will presently afford me the amusement of seeing it destroyed. There is also in that same breast-pocket, Mr Gotto, a document which you discovered late yesterday afternoon in the laboratory of poor Paolo Ferrari, whom the foolish mob slew in Soho, and whose domicile you visited soon afterwards. I think I should like to see those papers, Mr Gotto."

Without any demur Mr Gotto unbuttoned his tightly-fitting frock-coat, and produced two documents from his inner pocket. One of these, a much-thumbed and creased sheet of blue foolscap, very thick in texture, the Count examined with some interest ere he refolded it and placed in his own pocket. The other, which the police-agent handed to him with some show of bashfulness, he merely glanced at ere he returned it across the table.

"Oblige me by tearing that up, Mr Gotto," he said.

Mr Gotto destroyed the warrant with no sign of concern, and the Count signed to him to throw the fragments into a waste-paper basket which stood near.

"I am so fond of conversing with you, Mr Gotto," continued de Reineville, "that I am

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anxious to have more opportunity of exchanging ideas and opinions with you, and it will afford me great pleasure if you will consent to accompany me upon a little excursion which I am about to undertake to-day in company with my friend Mr Wynyard, whom I am expecting every moment. What do you say, Mr Gotto?"

"Sir," replied Gotto, "I accept your offer with pleasure—I shall be happy to wait upon you in any way you propose, and to place my services at your disposal. I have always been the devoted admirer of intellect and genius, and in you I recognise the first mind of the age!"

To this speech the Count made no other reply than a polite inclination of the head. He touched one of a series of electric bells which stood close at hand, and then looked at his watch.

"It is now close upon six o'clock," he said, "and there are some preparations to be made. You will forgive me while I transact my necessary business, Mr Gotto?"

"Sir," said Gotto, "I am your very obedient servant."

A door in the rear of the apartment now opened, and a young man entered who carried in his hand a bundle of telegram forms of the various sorts required in sending inland or foreign messages. He bowed politely to the Count, seated himself at a desk, spread out his forms, elevated his pencil, and waited. Mr Gotto, wonderfully comfortable under the influence of the delicious amber-coloured liquid and the perfect tobacco of the cigarettes, watched the proceedings with lazy eyes.

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"Write as follows," said de Reineville.

"To the General Superintendent of the
Great Northern Railway,
King's Cross Station.

"You will have a special train in readiness for me and my guests and servants at precisely nine o'clock this morning. It will travel from King's Cross to Hull by way of Doncaster and Goole, and will be timed to arrive at its destination without fail at one o'clock in the afternoon.

"COUNT DE REINEVILLE."

"Write again," continued the Count.

"To Messrs Thomas Wilson & Sons,
Hull.

"You will have your fastest first-class steamship in readiness to sail from the Humber this afternoon at half-past one o'clock. It will be appointed and provisioned in accordance with your permanent orders, and the stewards will have luncheon ready for service immediately on my arrival.

"COUNT DE REINEVILLE."

"Let the two messages be despatched immediately," said the Count.

The secretary rose, gathered up his papers, bowed, and left the room, and Gotto gazed after his departing figure in an ecstasy of wonder.

"Ah, sir!" said he, "what is there that a great man cannot do? You wire your commands for

The Amber-Coloured Liquid

trains and ships as another man demands a cut off the joint. It is, indeed, a fine thing to be rich."

"It is a greater thing to possess wisdom," answered the Count. "But, Mr Gotto, you have had a trying night—let me advise you to lie down for an hour or two, until our time for departure comes. Follow me into this cabinet"—he opened the door of a small apartment as he spoke and beckoned Gotto, who immediately obeyed the summons, to follow him—"there is here, you see, a couch, upon which you may rest with advantage to yourself. Sleep, Mr Gotto," he continued, as the police-agent stretched himself on the couch, "and wake again at half-past eight."

Gotto's eyes immediately closed; his breathing became regular and placid; his hands folded themselves across his breast. De Reineville glanced at him curiously ere he closed the door. "I think I shall make something of you yet, my friend," he said as he went back to his own apartment.

A step sounded in the hall—the door was opened slowly, and Wynyard entered. His face was grey and drawn, his eyes were bloodshot and the pupils were unnaturally bright and distended; his clothes, which were usually very carefully worn and even smart, were dishevelled and stained. He sank down in the nearest chair and lifted his hand to his forehead with a weary gesture.

"It is all over," he said, in a dull, strained voice. "We have surrendered to the Dictators. It was hopeless all along—Grandminster and I always said so. Heavens! how weary I am!"

De Reineville poured out a glassful of the amber-

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coloured liquid and placed it in Wynyard's hand. The Chancellor drained it eagerly, and the worn look passed out of his face.

"You are coming with me as I suggested," said De Reineville. "There is no more to be done here."

Wynyard nodded his head. He held out the tiny liqueur glass towards the meadow-green glass vessel. The Count filled it with the amber-coloured liquid once more.

At one o'clock on the afternoon of that day a Great Northern special train ran into the Paragon Street Station at Hull, and exactly half an hour later a rakish-looking steamer was heading down the Humber with rapidly increasing speed.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RETREAT UPON LONDON.

WHILE those responsible for the government of the country sat in council that early morning, gradually facing the inevitable, and lending grudging ears to the arguments put before them by the Prime Minister and his favourite adviser, Wynyard, the environs of London presented a spectacle such as no man living could remember to have seen. Out of the seven millions of people then forming the population of the overgrown city at least five millions had contrived by some means or other to force their way to its outer boundaries, and London was thus surrounded at early dawn by a living belt. From six o'clock of the previous evening the people had fled in mad, unreasoning terror, only the bravest, the most daring, the utterly unconcerned, the sick, and the crippled remaining to keep the vigil of the night in company with those whose duty obliged them to remain within the threatened area. Whole districts of the vast metropolis had become depopulated, and were patrolled during the night by police and soldiers keeping an anxious and a half-frightened watch on the houses of the rich, the great com-

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mercial centres, and the public institutions, lest the baser sort should be tempted to begin a campaign of loot and spoliation.

Of that mighty human belt which encircled the stricken city, only the pen of a Dante could write with any adequate exactitude of description. It formed a mighty circle, ragged and untrimmed, it is true, but still a circle such as the world had never known, which extended from Enfield on the north to Croydon on the south, and from Brentford on the west to Barking on the east. Out of the millions of fugitives very few thousands had been able to get well away from London. The train services had broken down hopelessly; on every line leaving London for the south there had been accidents of the most serious nature, involving the loss of many lives. To every station from London Bridge to Victoria the people had crowded in hundreds of thousands in the hope of escaping to the sea-coast at least, if not to the Continent, and the result had been disaster. At Clapham Junction things had quickly come to a perfect *impasse*, and railway officials had lost their reason through sheer inability to deal with a state of things which boards of directors and general managers had never had the wit to perceive as lying within the bounds of possibility. On the northern side of the metropolis affairs had not reached such a serious condition. Early in the evening all the great lines had sent away train after train, and nothing had occurred until a terrible collision at Willesden Junction had reduced the despatching powers of the London and North-Western Company to a

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state closely bordering upon ineptitude. As the evening wore to midnight other disasters occurred on the Great Central at Aylesbury, and on the Midland at Hendon, but the Great Northern and the Great Eastern had contrived to keep their lines open throughout, and had steadily carried the panic-stricken folk away. To carry away thousands, however, who formed but mere fractions of millions, is like baling a hold full of water with a teaspoon, and thus most of the fugitives had forsaken London on foot or in conveyances of every description.

When the dawn broke on the immediate surroundings of the great city, it lighted up sights which were reminiscent of grandmotherly stories of the appearance which the world will present when the angel sounds the last trump. Men, women, and children, utterly wearied out by their struggle in striving to escape, had literally dropped by the wayside ere ten miles of their flight had been covered, and had fallen asleep where they fell. They lay under hedgerows, stacks, within woods and coppices—anywhere. Folk who had money about them besieged the houses in the small towns and villages, begging for lodgings for an hour or two, so that they might rest and sleep. People who were fleeing in their own carriages turned aside into fields and meadows when the worn-out and frightened horses refused to go further, and camped out like any hedge-side gipsy. All round the outer edge of the capital, millions of folk on this night lay as homeless and uncared for as any ownerless dog that noses the gutter for a meal.

This vast ring of humanity was thickest on the

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southern side of the metropolis, probably because the people had an instinctive feeling about reaching the sea. On the outer edges of Wimbledon Common hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children were massed together; as the sun rose upon them the sight was suggestive of a dozen Derby Day crowds rolled into one. They lay here, there, everywhere—folk of position mixed up with folk of no position—a high-born dame and her children huddling in their carriage, under the lee of which a coster had drawn up his donkey-cart. There had been a great silence upon this crowd while the shades of night lasted; as the sun rose and his warmth embraced the earth a low murmur of voices began. The multitude had woke from such slumber as it had been able to snatch, and the multitude began to feel hungry.

Amongst those lying in this segment of the vast girdle of humanity was a man who, unlike most of the men there, seemed to be quite alone. Nearly all the men of the various groups had someone under protection: this man appeared to have no one with him. He was a man of somewhat advanced age, tall, grey-bearded, and stooping in figure, and he had the dreamy eyes of a thinker and the abstracted air of a student. When he rose from his improvised couch at the foot of a furze-bush he drew himself to full height, stretched his arms, and drew in long breaths of the fresh morning air. He looked about him with eyes which gradually assumed a keener expression; then, folding his arms, he stared from group to group across the human-cumbered common.

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People were waking on all sides, and everybody's first thought seemed to be of food. The folks in carriages and conveyances were helping themselves out of the baskets which they had had the foresight to bring with them ; humbler persons were ruefully inspecting such parcels of provisions as they had hastily packed before leaving their homes. The instinct of preservation, of sustentation of life, was still paramount in the minds of all.

The man of the grey beard suddenly recognised that he, too, was hungry. He glanced at a well-worn satchel which lay on the couch he had just left and which had served him for a pillow, and he shook his head. He had never even thought of putting a loaf of bread inside it. He looked around him. Close by, a respectably dressed man and woman were distributing victuals to their three children. The five had lain near the greybeard all night—he had heard one of the children cry with fear and the mother's voice soothing it. He advanced nearer to them and stretched out his hand.

"If you would give me, too, a piece of bread," he said, "I should thank you greatly. I forgot to provide myself."

The man, who had just placed a piece of bread in his own mouth, looked up and stared at the speaker. His cheek bulged out with the bread ; his eyes with astonishment.

"Well, if that isn't cool!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you provide yourself? It's a likely thing I should give bread away when I don't know where I'm going to find bread for myself. This isn't a

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time for charity. Perhaps you'd like to know that I've left a good ready-money grocery business, and all my stock, and escaped with what I've got on my back, and a wife and three children to look after, would you? I'm a bit of a beggar myself, or soon shall be."

The greybeard bowed his head politely and moved away. He picked up his satchel and wandered along amongst the groups. Presently he came to a spot where a stout man, in the attire of a dissenting minister, was munching slices of bread whereon some cold meat or other had been spread. He was holding this provender with both hands and munching furiously. Near him, sitting on the ground, were two young women, obviously his daughters, also eating a hasty meal. The man with the grey beard stopped, and repeated his request for a little food. The man in clerical attire shook his head.

"This is an ill time for charity, my friend," he said. "You perceive that we are fugitives, and we have little for ourselves."

"I can spare a little, papa," said one of the young women.

The minister raised a deprecating hand.

"My dear, we do not yet realise our own need. We have left our all behind us, and fled into the wilderness, and we do not know what is yet to happen. We may be starving ere another day is past."

The old man repeated his polite bow.

"It is no matter," he said, as much to himself as to those standing near. "I merely wondered how

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far this fear of the unseen would influence men in their relations to each other. It was written of old that the wicked flee when no man pursueth; it was also written that certain folk should pray that their flight be not in the winter; two pieces of Scripture which appear to have special application to this event. I——”

“Sir,” said the minister, “your remarks are ill-timed, and in the nature of an offensive jest. This is not a flight of the wicked—we know our danger and have a right to escape from it.”

The greybeard looked at him, bowed once more and went away. He asked bread of several people of all conditions and received none; finally, coming to the edge of the common and to houses, he took money out of his pocket and went into an inn. The place was deserted save for the landlord, who stood behind the counter swearing freely.

“Bread!” he said. “Damme! there’s no bread, or beer either, in the place. Swept clean of everything it was a good half hour ago. Why don’t they send some soldiers or police or something to protect us with a mob like this all over the place?”

Looting, indeed, was beginning all along the line of route. Out of the millions who had fled out of London in the first moments of mad terror only a small percentage had taken precaution to carry provisions with them. The poorer and baser sort’s first and only thought had been to escape from the impending destruction of their city. Once removed from the immediate danger,

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and having somewhat recovered from the struggles of the evening, their thoughts turned to food. Most of them had no money wherewith to purchase it; others were not minded to give it up if they had it. Thus ere day was fairly broken the towns, hamlets and villages all round the metropolis were in the hands of the mob. Its members, sweeping aside any such small show of authority as was in evidence, entered public-houses, dwelling-houses, shops, cottages, and laid hands on whatever food and drink they could find. Nor did those of them to whom thieving and pilfering was second nature stop short at this: they appropriated anything that took their fancy, and as they swept onward, left behind them the tears and groanings of folk who wondered what this sudden outpouring of London's millions meant.

As for the police they were absolutely powerless. With things and the world rolling along in their normal condition the rawest constable in a village or hamlet is a great repressive force; under an event which set free a human avalanche, a hundred such men become as straws, to be swept away and lost in the flood. And so as the Cabinet Council was finally deciding upon surrender, news of fresh dangers and horrors came thrilling along every wire into London—news of the looting and ravaging of towns and villages, of the destruction of property, of utter anarchy and disorder spreading in all directions and widening as it spread. Thicker and thicker came the news of the wholesale demoralisation of the human ring surrounding

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London. The Home Secretary, hurrying, pale and anxious, to his own office after having, with shame and bitterness of heart, seen the formal surrender to the Dictators signed, was overwhelmed with news which made him reel. As he consulted with the chief police officials, another horror dawned upon him. All this was the result of the hurried stampede out of London: what would be the result of the unreasoning retreat upon the city which would follow the announcement of the surrender!

"If we could only keep it back!" he groaned. "If we could only break it gently, and get them back by degrees."

But to keep the news back was impossible. It spread like wildfire along the living lines of communication from the centre of the mighty heart itself to the seething, palpitating mass without. The Government had given in; the surrender was signed; and London was saved! All this the mighty army of refugees heard as the sun rose high, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling it rose up in its mute, unreasoning strength, and prepared to roll back its resistless tide upon the city out of which that tide had poured but a few hours earlier. Men of means and property, hearing that the immediate danger was over, were suddenly filled with an intense desire to return to their homes or places of business, and set out, cursing their stupidity in having given way to panic. Men of no means, hearing that London was once more open to them, bethought them of the rich opportunities presented to such as themselves in the deserted

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streets and squares, and turned townwards with the keen haste of wolves who scent their prey. And so along all the great highroads which debouch on London, the mighty tide came pouring in in worse confusion than when it poured out. It forsook the great city sullenly, unwillingly ; it came back in hungry haste. The men who made it had in most cases left their all behind under the influence of that compelling terror ; they now hurried back to seize upon their possessions lest something should snatch or destroy them ere they returned.

As the great crowds rolled back the suburbs began to feel the effect. As in the case of the outlying towns and villages, the mob showed no respect for suburban authority or property. Its baser element fell upon inns, shops, restaurants, and took what they pleased without demur or thought of payment. Thus as the dismal procession moved forward it left behind it a waste wherein men who had suddenly been robbed and despoiled, howled and wailed like beasts whom fiercer, stronger animals have forcibly deprived of their food. It was useless for strong forces of mounted police to attempt to patrol the leading highroads and keep the people in order ; a row of stakes planted on the sea-shore makes no resistance against the rush of the incoming tide.

And meanwhile a new danger had risen in the heart of London itself. A vast percentage of London's army of habitual criminals, instead of fleeing with the rest of the terrorised population, had calmly remained skulking in their accustomed nooks and corners in the hope of reaping a rich

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harvest when the next blow of the Dictators fell upon London. With their natural instinct of nosing out the possibilities of the future, they recognised that that blow would almost certainly be directed at some portion of the metropolis where its force would be most keenly felt, and they fondly counted on its falling on some area of the West End. In the confusion which would result there would be chances and opportunities for them such as rarely ever came in the way of the predatory classes. It was an opportunity in a million, and to be waited and watched for with no common zeal.

But when these birds of prey, hovering about the stricken body which they hungered to see stricken once more, and this time to death, or to a state of defencelessness, heard that the danger was over and that no further blow would be struck, they turned desperate. The instinct to rob and pillage had been stirred up until it would not be denied, and suddenly it broke out. While the rearguard of the returning army was yet in the suburbs, the army of crime burst upon Regent Street, pouring in thousands out of the streets and squares lying eastward of that thoroughfare and totally surprising such police as were in evidence. With the surrender to the Dictators, military supervision of public buildings had been relinquished, and the troops had marched off to barracks. The police, wearied with the long vigil of the night, had also relaxed their attention to the needs of the hour, and so, ere anyone recognised what was happening, the emporiums of Regent

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Street, Bond Street, and Piccadilly, richly stocked with all manner of goods, were being sacked and looted as ruthlessly as if a mob of howling savages had descended on London. Banks and post-offices were burst open ; officials knocked on the head or relentlessly murdered ; priceless goods were strewn heedlessly about the streets, and London was face to face with a new horror. And then came the usual resort to force—the calling out of the military, and the shooting down of the maddened wretches who had become veritable beasts of prey, and so as the first ripple of the returning tide of human life came rolling back on the great city, it rolled into streets red with blood and grim with the awful spectacle which at some time or other has disgraced every overgrown city in the world—the spectacle of a people gone mad with the lust of destruction and being held at arm's length by cold steel or shot down like dogs with cold lead. Into the midst of these sights the returning tide rolled, mingling and mixing with the elements which made them, and the sun went down on scenes which London had never seen before. The previous night had witnessed spectacles of horror inspired by fear and terror ; this saw a great city suffering from the effects of its own unwieldiness. It is an easy thing for bees to enter and leave their hives singly or in pairs, but if they strive to leave or enter in a solid mass the result is inevitable.

CHAPTER XXI.

NARRATIVE OF MISS BEACHCROFT—I.

IT appears to be generally felt that of all those who were present in one capacity or another during the events of the evening, night, and morning of June 24-25, 19—, there is no one quite so capable of writing dispassionately about them as I am. I believe that to be true. Of course, an exception to the general unfitness of my friends and companions for this task might be made in the case of Robert Gibson, a young man of great imperturbability and of a cool-headed nature, but as his *métier* is the cleaning of horses rather than the driving of pens, it has not even been suggested to him that he should undertake the writing out of this strange story. I possess the capacity and am fairly willing to do that myself.

When that creature Popinot burst into tears on his own quarter-deck, Mr Graham, like a true Englishman, turned away in great discomfort, and professed to be exceedingly interested in a compass, or a binnacle, or something of that sort. Evelyn, who has always cherished a depraved leaning towards sentiment, looked at the snivelling

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wretch with eyes which were already mildly suffused ; as for me, I laughed.

"Why all this emotion, Captain Popinot?" I enquired. "Is it that you are never permitted to land on the island, or that its beauty arouses something of the most tender in your susceptible heart?"

The man mopped his eyes with a handkerchief in which at least nine colours were intermingled.

"Ah, dear madam!" said he, mournfully, "it is something of both. I am a great lover of beauty"—here he swept himself to the deck—"and the rosy-tinted marble of yonder castle, glowing against the superb blue of the cliffs beyond, arouses in me a feeling which can only express itself in tears. Then, again, consider the infelicity of one who has come so near to this wonderful paradise and has never yet been permitted to set foot upon it. Pardon, dear sir and ladies—my composure is now regained, Popinot is once more himself."

He tapped his chest a few times, buttoned his frogged coat across his chest, and held his head a few inches higher. Mr Graham turned round from his contemplation of the thing in which he had professed to take an interest.

"We are still some miles from the island, Captain Popinot," he said. "At what hour do you propose to land us?"

"That, sir," replied Popinot, "is a question which I cannot answer. When we arrive off the little harbour, there will be certain signals exchanged between shore and ship, and from them I shall learn what to do. It may be that I shall not land you until morning."

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—I.

"There is, then, some person in authority on the island?" enquired Mr Graham.

"Certainly, sir," answered Popinot. "There is a major-domo of the Count de Reineville's castle, who always receives his master's guests, and who is, I believe, a very estimable person."

"Do you often bring guests here, Captain Popinot?" asked Evelyn.

"Many, madame. I have brought guests to this island from all parts of the world—from New York, Calcutta, Cape Town, Boston, Naples, Shanghai, Ostend, St. Petersburg, Lisbon, Pernambuco, and many other places. The strange thing is," he continued, rubbing his nose with a meditative air, "that I have never conveyed any person *from* this island."

Mr Graham uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Then how do the Count de Reineville's guests leave the island on the termination of their visit?" he enquired.

Captain Popinot shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not know," he replied, with detestable unconcern. "But the Count employs many steamships, and doubtless charters one now and then to convey his guests to their respective destinations. He honours them by bringing them to the island on board his own yacht."

Captain Popinot, having communicated this remarkable information, made some excuse as to the need of his presence elsewhere, and presently left us to stare at each other with speculative eyes.

"This is waxing more and more mysterious," said Evelyn. "I wish I could think of something more

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original ; but I really can't say anything but—What *does* it all mean ? ”

Mr Graham shook his head. He is a clever young man, in his way, which is the way of the diplomatist who has been schooled according to the traditions of Whitehall and Downing Street, and he will make a name for himself if he is led in the silken strings of office, but he is not exactly the sort of person one would turn to for guidance if one were suddenly placed in a deep intellectual hole.

“ I wish I knew ! ” he exclaimed, fervently.

“ As you don't, ” I remarked, “ suppose we reserve our mental strength until it's really needed ? There's one thing that's certain, and that is the beauty of this mysterious island. Did you ever see marble, or stone, or whatever it is, of that particular rosy tint, Evelyn ? Or such a blue as that which makes a background for the rose-colour ? If everything on the island is as gorgeous as its setting, I expect to be waited upon by slaves in silk, and to—— ”

What I was about to say further was prevented by the appearance of the deaf and dumb butler or steward, who bent himself nearly double as he presented a golden salver on which lay a note addressed to Mr Graham. This turned out to be an overpoweringly polite epistle from Captain Popinot, begging us to honour him with our presence in his cabin.

Thither, preceded by the obsequious steward, or whatever he called himself, we trooped off, each of us wondering what was to come next. Popinot

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—I.

received us at the door of his cabin, ushered us inside with great solemnity, and almost drove me crazy with his dancing-master attitudes. When we were seated he made a speech, to which we all listened open-mouthed. It was full of flowers and of rhodomontade, and it was not until we arrived at the end that we knew what the creature wanted. Boiled down into a sentence, Captain Popinot's speech informed us that he had felt himself greatly honoured by our presence, that he had formed a very high estimate of our qualities and powers, that he was desolate at the notion of losing such a debonair gentleman (poor Mr Graham!) and such charming ladies, and would we do him the distinguished honour of drinking a glass of wine with him before we left his ship?

I felt inclined to exclaim, "Oh, fifty if you like, only let's get it over," but I controlled myself sufficiently to murmur a polite acquiescence to this somewhat remarkable proposition, while Evelyn, whose sentimental side had once more been touched, said, "With great pleasure, dear Captain Popinot," and Graham echoed her words only a little less cordially. The ceremony seemed to me to be wholly unnecessary; I was not concerned about Captain Popinot's health. Besides, I object to drinking between meals. I like a few glasses of good, sound wine at lunch, and at dinner, and I have no objection to one glass of whisky before going to bed, but I hate the habit of drinking on every occasion which offers. However, it seemed to be my fate at that time to have to do many things for which I had no taste, and

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so I resigned myself to drinking the health of Captain Popinot.

Now, I wish to set down, as clearly and plainly as possible, a record of what actually happened during the next few minutes. Receiving our acceptance of his offer, Captain Popinot bowed with his usual politeness and proceeded to unlock a small cupboard, the key of which he produced from his pocket. From this cupboard he took four liqueur glasses of such exquisite design that Evelyn and myself found it impossible to refrain from exclamations of delight at the mere sight of them. We drew near to the table to examine these treasures of perfect glass work, and as we bent above them, Popinot placed before us a curiously shaped vessel of glass, the tint of which was that of the freshly-sprung grass which one sees in an English meadow in early spring. Through the beautiful green of this glass vessel shone an amber light, delicately soft, which proceeded from the liquid within. Captain Popinot filled each glass slowly and carefully with this liquid. As soon as he removed the stopper from the meadow-green vessel the cabin was permeated by a most alluring and delightful aroma. As it was poured out, the liquid appeared to sparkle like fire, and in the middle of each glass there was a curious seething or bubbling, like a miniature whirlpool.

"What a seductive aroma!" exclaimed Graham. "What is it that you are giving us, Captain Popinot?"

Popinot carefully replaced the stopper in the meadow-green vessel. He picked up his own

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—I.

glass by its slender stem, betraying great care in handling it.

"Sir," he said, gravely, "this is a liqueur which no one may taste save those to whom my master offers it. The secret of its preparation is known only to the Count himself—it has come down to him through centuries of years. It is revealed by the head of the family to his successor when the latter reaches a certain age. Some say that it first came into the possession of the de Reinevilles when Sir Ilbert de Reineville went to the Holy Wars. As to the truth of that legend I cannot speak. It is only on such rare occasions as these"—here he bowed most profoundly—"that I ever taste this precious cordial."

"And what is it called, Captain Popinot?" Evelyn asked.

"It is called *Crème de Diable*," replied Popinot with great gravity. Then, raising his glass he pledged us and his master, and wished us great happiness during our stay on the Island. We each drank.

Now to be still more clear and plain as to what happened:—When we set down our glasses I observed that Mr Graham had drunk half the contents of his, and that Evelyn and myself had sipped perhaps half-a-teaspoonful. As soon as the liquid rolled over my tongue I became conscious of a sudden curious feeling. The liquid had an alluring taste—so alluring that I certainly never tasted anything like it—and it produced a *feeling*. Can I put that feeling into words? I can—it was a sudden feeling of veneration for M. de Reineville!

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We each looked at each other. I fancied I saw something of uneasiness in the glance which Evelyn gave me. Mr Graham uttered an exclamation of surprised delight.

"What a magnificent liqueur!" he said. "I never tasted anything in my life like it! And what marvellous tints in the colour, and what an aroma! Really, Captain Popinot, this should be called by a less objectionable name. *Crème de Diable!* Dear me!"

He lifted his glass again and turned to the light, pointing out various gleamings and glitterings to the complacent captain. Popinot half turned with him; his back was towards Evelyn and myself: I touched her arm, gave her a significant glance, and pointed first to our glasses and then to a pot of flowers which stood in the centre of the table.

We both emptied our glasses into the flower-pot. The amber-tinted liquid was swallowed up in the mould. We looked at each other—I saw an expression of fright, of horror, of—oh, I cannot give it a name!—of *something*, in Evelyn's eyes which I hope I shall never see again in the eyes of any human creature. I believe she saw a similar expression in mine. She must have done—I was horribly *afraid*.

The two men turned round. Graham's eyes had become wonderfully bright; his voice was several notes higher; he spoke with a readiness and abandon quite foreign to him—you would have said that he was in the first stage of intoxication. He tossed off the liquid which remained in his glass, and set the latter on the cabin table with an exclamation of delight.

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—I.

"Most excellent!" he said, turning to Popinot. "A liqueur worthy of M. de Reineville's name. What a marvellous man he is! Do you think this is to be tasted on the Island, eh, Captain Popinot?"

"I think there is little doubt of it, sir," replied Popinot. "The Count has a world-wide reputation as a host."

Then to my unspeakable relief he put the meadow-green glass vessel back in his cupboard, locking it safely up. I had been afraid that he would press Mr Graham, and perhaps ourselves, to drink more of the amber-tinted liquid. Mr Graham, who had hitherto been rather taciturn on board the yacht, began to talk to Captain Popinot in a loquacious fashion—he scarcely paid any attention to Evelyn or myself when we bowed to our entertainer and left the cabin.

We went on deck—we found a quiet place—we turned and looked at each other. I suppose we both looked frightened. I remember that the thought flashed through my mind that there was a strange incongruity between the miserable suspicions which were stealing over me and the wonderful beauty of our surroundings. The sun was setting far away in the west, and the rosy-tinted marble of the castle on the island was assuming deeper shades as every moment passed.

As the fjord opened out before us—we were now within a few miles of its mouth—the wonderful blues and purples of its cliffs and headlands increased in beauty. Everything in sea and sky was perfect; our feelings were decidedly imperfect and fragmentary, not to say chaotic.

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"I believe that wretched stuff was drugged!" I suddenly burst out. "Evelyn! listen to me. Were you conscious of any strange, curious, abnormal feeling when you sipped it? Tell me, now."

Evelyn nodded her head two or three times in a slow, meditative fashion.

"Yes," she said. "But I—I don't think it was quite a feeling, Cynthia. It was—oh, I think it was a sort of suggestion that came into my mind, without any volition of my own—it was as if something prompted me to think a certain thought."

"We won't squabble about the precise wording of the matter," I said shortly. "Thought or feeling, what was it?"

Evelyn moved her position in a fashion that suggested physical discomfort.

"I—I—I don't quite know how to put it," she said, very lamely. "I—when I sipped the liqueur or whatever it was I was suddenly conscious of a feeling—that's the only word I can think of, Cynthia—a feeling of great admiration for M. de Reineville. I think that what shaped itself in my mind was, what a great and wonderful man M. de Reineville is, and how one ought to—to——"

"Yes?" I said, as she hesitated. "And how one ought to—what? Go on."

"And how one ought to—I am afraid the exact word is *worship*," she said in a low, frightened voice. "Yes—*worship* his great genius, or talents, or *him*! Cynthia, did *you* feel all that?"

I nodded my head miserably.

"Yes," I replied, "I did. I felt all of it. And

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—I.

I'm glad we had the courage to throw that stuff away. Another sip of it and But, Evelyn, what about Mr Graham? He's drunk a whole glass full of it! And didn't you notice—he was quite changed, quite! What is there in that amber-tinted stuff—some drug, no doubt, but what is it that produces this curious effect?"

Before Evelyn could reply to this question Mr Graham and Captain Popinot appeared on deck. The latter went forward; Mr Graham joined us. I looked at him curiously; his eyes were still very bright, and he looked excited.

"Popinot is just going to exchange signals with the Island," he said, sitting down near us. "He thinks we may land to-night. I am dying to see this wonderful island. We ought to consider ourselves extremely fortunate in possessing such a friend as M. de Reineville has proved himself to be. What a marvellous man he is! What an intellect he possesses! Ah! to serve a man like that instead of an inept, tradition-cumbered old fogey like Grandminster! Fancy the difference in one's career! I am looking forward with intense eagerness to meeting M. de Reineville again. There is certainly no person in the world for whom I possess such a deep respect or admiration."

"Oh, Harry!" Evelyn broke out into a sharp exclamation of astonishment before I could warn her. "You said—not half an hour ago—that you felt a most cordial dislike of the man!"

Mr Graham raised his head and fixed his eyes on his *fiancée*. As I caught the expression in those eyes my heart suddenly leapt with the shock of

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a dreadful recollection. I had seen that expression before, and I remembered when and where. The glance which Mr Graham threw on Evelyn was that which I had noticed in Oliver Wynyard's eyes as he looked from one to the other of us when he told us of de Reineville's generous offer.

Mr Graham's face assumed a look of something very like anger.

"I do wish you would not misunderstand things, Evelyn!" he said, pettishly. "You ought to know that it is quite impossible that I would have said anything of the sort. I have always had a great admiration for M. de Reineville, and a deep respect for his marvellous ability. Please remember that in future."

Having said this Mr Graham rose, put his hands in his pockets, and strolled away in the direction of Captain Popinot. We looked at each other in dismay—for a moment I thought Evelyn was going to cry. She suddenly pulled herself together with a flash of the old Wynyard spirit.

"You are quite right, Cynthia," she said. "That stuff contains some hellish drug. The man who has just spoken to me is not the man we know. Now, Cynthia, what are we to do? You and I will have to fight this out against Captain Popinot."

"If Popinot were all," I answered, "I think we could answer for our victory. But, Evelyn—what are we going to meet on that island?"

We both turned and gazed at the island itself. We were now about three miles from it, and the beauty of its situation was, if anything, greater than before. But to us, agitated as we were, the island,

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—I.

lying like a gem in the mouth of the fjord, suggested I know not what of danger and horror. And with Mr Graham a victim to the enslaving qualities of that accursed liquid, which I now firmly believed to be a drug given to de Reineville's captives—for captives we certainly were!—for purposes of his own, Evelyn and I were practically defenceless.

The yacht was now steaming at a very slow rate, and one of its crew was exchanging signals with the island under the supervision of Captain Popinot, at whose elbow Mr Graham lingered. After a time the signalling ceased; there was some conversation between Mr Graham and the captain, and then the former came back to us.

"We are not to be landed until morning," he announced. Then, scarcely glancing at us, he continued, "As this is our last night on the yacht, I have invited Captain Popinot to dine with us. It is strange that I did not think of this act of courtesy before." With that he turned away and left us again.

Evelyn and I exchanged glances.

"We must go through with it," she said. "There is nothing else to be done."

I trust that I may never have occasion to go through such another evening as that proved to be. At half-past eight Captain Popinot presented himself in the saloon, faultlessly clad, much scented, and wearing a scrap of ribbon in his coat. He dined with us. For an hour and a half he and Mr Graham discussed and extolled the greatness of M. de Reineville. Evelyn and I listened in silence, and wondering what it was

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that had suddenly transformed these two men into brothers.

At ten o'clock we left them and went on deck. A few minutes afterwards they repaired to Popinot's cabin. We looked through a convenient skylight. They were standing on opposite sides of the table ; each held a liqueur glass filled to the brim with the amber-tinted liquid. Popinot smiled and uttered some words ; Graham evidently repeated them. They lifted their glasses and drank.

For two hours Evelyn and I remained on deck. We spoke little, but I know that I thought a great deal. So far as I can now remember it was just about midnight when I heard the sound of a steamship approaching on our starboard quarter ; a moment later I caught the sound of a second. I looked out across the sea ; sky and sea alike were very dark ; I could not see any ship's lights anywhere. Then, with a sickening suddenness there came such a crashing and grinding as I had never heard before, and ere it died into silence the great, whirling arm of an electric search-light shot up and swept the sea.

CHAPTER XXII.

NARRATIVE OF MISS BEACHCROFT—II.

OF the horrors which crowded one upon another during the few remaining hours of darkness, and of the mystery which followed the grey dawn, I find it difficult to write ; it is indeed a source of perpetual amazement to me that I came through that night in full possession of my senses.

I have said that immediately the sound of a violent impact reached us the darkness was partly dispelled by the glare of a search-light. That came from our own vessel, which at that moment was in charge of the officer who had taken us off at Gravesend, and who had invariably shown great courtesy to Evelyn and myself. Thanks to his promptitude, that quarter of the sea from whence the sound of that awful crash came was instantly lighted up, and we, who had started to our feet at the noise, saw all that happened. What happened, happened quickly—it was all over in a few seconds. We heard the advance of one ship—then that of another—then the terrible crash as the collision took place—and then the search-light showed us the final stage of the disaster.

What the search-light revealed was this. Away

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on the starboard quarter, at a distance of perhaps four hundred yards, lay a great vessel, the mighty bow of which had crashed into the side, amidships, of a much smaller one that had evidently been caught as it steamed across the other's bows. As the search-light fell upon the smaller ship, the latter broke up miserably and sank ; its destroyer, scarcely checked in its onward rush, slid swiftly across the seething waters which covered the wreckage.

Neither of these vessels had shown any lights. When I first heard the sound of their advance, I looked in the direction from which it came, and there was no light of any sort to be seen. But as the surviving ship shut off steam, lights flashed out from her at various points, and within a few moments she had swung round and thrown her own search-light across the scene of disaster. We heard orders being shouted in loud tones ; then came the splash of heavy bodies in the water, and we presently saw large boats being pulled away from the ship, which had now come to a dead stop. At the same moment the cutter of *L'Hirondelle* was dropped from the davits—there were thus three boats' crews at the work of rescue within quite a short time of the accident.

I suddenly rushed away from Evelyn's side, prompted by a strange impulse, to find the two men whom we had recently left. I burst into Captain Popinot's cabin, and with the handle of the door in my hand paused, staring at what I saw there. Popinot and Mr Graham were on their feet on opposite sides of the table, staring across

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the cabin with eyes full of fright, or horror, or something worse, which I cannot define—between them, on the table, stood the meadow-green glass vessel *and I noticed that the amber-tinted liquid had lost its fire.*

I burst into language of some sort—the two men appeared to hear nothing. I saw Mr Graham, with a palpable effort, put out the tip of his tongue and slowly moisten, or attempt to moisten, his lips ; Popinot, with a horrible stammering which it made me sick to hear, endeavoured to frame a word, twisting his mouth the while as though he were stricken by some awful seizure. Suddenly, and with an effort which caused his body to writhe as if a mighty convulsion had seized it, he screamed, rather than cried :

“ He calls ! ”

For a second he stood there trembling as I have never seen a human being tremble before or since—then he brushed me aside as if I had been a straw, and fled swiftly out of the cabin, across the saloon, and up the staircase. As he fled I saw a strange expression come over Mr Graham’s face ; he suddenly uttered a deep groan and dropped like a log where he stood.

To call for Evelyn and for Robert Gibson was the work of a second. Ere a minute had passed the three of us had carried Mr Graham to his own cabin and had laid him down. He lay quite still, apparently dead, and Evelyn was half frantic with agony. But remembering what I had seen, and what Popinot had done, I lost no time in making him secure. Between us Gibson and I tore up

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sheets and counterpanes, and within a few moments we had so pinioned him that it was impossible for him to move.

"Did you see the captain when he rushed on deck?" I asked Gibson, as we worked away side by side.

The lad shuddered.

"Yes'm," he answered, in a low voice. "He—he dashed past me, jumped on the rail, and threw himself into the water. I see'd his face, ma'am—it worn't pleasant to look at."

"You must stay here with Mr Graham," I said. "If he comes round, fetch me. He must not leave this cabin."

Then I briefly narrated to Evelyn what I had seen just before I called her, and leaving her with her lover, I went back to Popinot's cabin. It was empty, but the meadow-green glass vessel and the liqueur glasses from which the two men had been drinking still stood on the table. I picked up the vessel and held it to the light. It was one-third full of liquid, but the latter gave forth no colour; it seemed to hang listless and dull in its prison, as I tilted the latter this way and that.

Acting on a sudden inspiration, I poured out a small quantity of the liquid into one of the glasses. *Something* had changed it. It was thin, clouded, almost muddy; all its life, fire, sparkle, its seductive aroma, its mysterious charm, had gone. I hesitated a moment, and then, raising the glass to my lips, I tasted its contents. The stuff was bitter as aloes!

I think I had never been so thoroughly afraid in my life as I felt myself to be when I set that glass

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down. What had changed the properties of the amber-tinted liquid so suddenly? What had Mr Graham and Captain Popinot *seen* as they stared so fixedly across the cabin? Whose voice had called Popinot away?—and where had Popinot gone? Try to conceive these things for yourself, and then ask yourself whether you would not have been terribly afraid if you had been in my case. I *was*—I was absolutely and horribly frightened, and I did not know what I was frightened of.

All this time I had heard tramlings and bustlings on deck, and thither I presently repaired. As I reached the staircase leading from the saloon, I met the officer of whom I have already spoken more than once. He hurriedly asked me if I had seen Captain Popinot or Mr Graham. I told him all that I had seen during the preceding ten minutes. He stared at me as if he could scarcely make up his mind whether I was mad or he was dreaming.

“I am sorely puzzled,” he said, finally. “It appears that yonder ship is a first-class cruiser of the German navy, acting as despatch-boat during the manœuvres, and that she was steaming at full speed with masked lights. The vessel she destroyed was the *Malvolio*, one of the fastest Wilson liners. We have just rescued her second officer. He says that she left the Humber at half-past one on the afternoon of the 23rd, and she must therefore have followed hard upon us for the greater part of yesterday. It was the Count de Reineville’s orders that she, too, should steam with masked lights, but why I cannot conceive. Such a——”

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"The Count de Reineville!" I exclaimed, interrupting him. "Was he on board the *Malvolio*?"

"He had commissioned her from Hull to this island," he answered. "So I am told by the rescued officer. Will you come and see him?"

I followed him on deck. As we emerged from the grand staircase I looked round me. The German warship, a vast monster which lay absolutely motionless in the water while *L'Hirondelle*, a pigmy in size compared to it, rose and sank with the slight swell, had drawn nearer, and we could see crowds of men at her rail, peering over the sea as the search-lights swept its surface. The three boats were still pulling about, and here and there I caught a glimpse of a mass of wreckage or a loose spar. But nothing that I saw impressed me so much as something that I heard as soon as I set foot on deck. That something struck on my ears immediately and made me pause, and then stretch out a hand to the nearest support and grasp it and tremble.

The sound came from the island. What it was I cannot say. It came steadily through the darkness which lay between us and the shore. It was a sound such as I had never heard before. It was not the wailing of human beings, nor the howling of brutes, but it had the note of both in it, and there was another note which suggested things of which I cannot write. I had never believed until I heard that sound that anything can make one's flesh creep.

The officer saw me start and shiver, and he nodded, jerking his head about from side to side in an uneasy way.

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"That has continued from within a few seconds of the collision," he said. "It is a sound which I do not comprehend. I have thrown the search-light on the island once, but I did not see anything. This is a night of mystery."

He led me forward into a cabin wherein sat the man whom they had rescued. He had already got into dry clothes and he was fortifying himself with hot grog. At sight of me he rose to his feet and saluted respectfully. I bade him resume his seat and congratulated him on his escape.

"I understand that M. de Reineville was a passenger on board your vessel?" I said.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "He had commissioned her. She was a very fast boat, and we were making an exceptionally quick run. It was M. de Reineville's own orders that we approached the island with masked lights. We had seen your lights for an hour, but of those of the cruiser we, of course, had seen nothing. *She* was steaming at a tremendous speed—she cut us clean in two."

"And M. de Reineville?"

The young man shook his head.

"I don't know what has become of him," he said. "It is most probable that he and his guests would be in the smoking-room, and in that case I don't see how they could possibly escape."

"He had guests? Do you know their names?" I inquired.

"Yes, ma'am. There was a Mr Gotto, a foreigner, I think; and Mr Wynyard, the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

I made no exclamation either of surprise or

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horror. I thanked the man calmly, and went on deck. I found the first officer of *L'Hirondelle* awaiting my reappearance.

"There is no trace of Captain Popinot," he said. "I have exchanged conversation with the warship, and he has not been picked up by its boats. They, however, have picked up some survivors."

I was thinking rapidly.

"I want to go aboard that warship," I said, suddenly looking at him. "Will you take me there—at once?"

The man became my devoted slave on the instant. While he was issuing instructions to his junior, and having the gig lowered, I ran down to the cabin where I had left Mr Graham in charge of Evelyn and Gibson. He still lay absolutely motionless, but he was alive, and I formed the conclusion that his condition approximated to that of hypnotic trance. During the excitement of these various events my brain had not been altogether inactive, and I had developed a theory as to de Reineville, the amber-tinted liquid, Popinot, and Mr Graham, which I was certain would work itself out in the end.

I said a few reassuring words to Evelyn, and went back to my officer. Everything was in readiness. He assisted me into the gig, and away we went for the German warship. She was now lying within a quarter of a mile of us, and our journey to her was quickly over. But it had an accompaniment which was nauseating—over the rhythmic plashing of the oars came that horrible crying from the shore of the Island.

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There was some interchange of observations when the gig reached the great ship's side—then some tackling was made ready, and I was hoisted through what seemed a considerable amount of space to the man-of-war's deck. Half a dozen surprised Teutons surrounded me immediately. Between their interrogations and exclamations, the brilliant glare of electric lights, and the bustle on their decks, I was in danger of becoming bewildered. As the officer of *L'Hirondelle* came aboard I pulled all my wits together, summoned my best German, and asked for the captain. He stepped forward, a middle-aged, comfortable-looking man, whose keen eyes looked me attentively over from behind his silver-rimmed spectacles.

"You have several survivors from the wreck on board your vessel," I said. "I wish to see them. I had friends on the *Malvolio*. I desire to know if they are saved."

The captain bowed.

"Not several," he said, correcting me. "There are but five altogether. There are three seamen, and there are two gentlemen who appear to have been passengers."

"Permit me to see the latter," I said.

He motioned me to follow him—his subordinates gathered round the officer from *L'Hirondelle*, and began questioning him eagerly. I could see that the mystery of the place had already communicated itself to them.

"This is a much-to-be-deplored occurrence," said the captain as he led me away. "It is not to be argued about that I was steaming at full speed with

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masked lights. I had none—but why should that other ship, which was of a well known English line, be also without lights? By the regulations——”

“I cannot explain,” I made answer. “All I know is that that ship was commissioned at Hull on the 23rd for a voyage to the island off which we are now lying, and that it was by the strict orders of M. de Reineville, who had commissioned her, that her lights were masked.”

“It is strange,” he answered, “very strange. What island is that?—what is that curious wailing sound that comes from it? I do not like that sound.”

“Neither do I,” I replied. “I do not like a good deal of what has happened to-night, I assure you.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “You have some mystery on board your yacht, eh?”

“I will tell you more when I have seen the two gentlemen you spoke of,” I answered. “I may have a good deal to tell you.”

“Is that so?” said he, lifting his eyebrows. “Well, here they are, and the doctor with them. Ah! he does not seem to have brought them round yet!”

We stepped into a well-lighted cabin wherein were several people. I took in the whole situation at a glance. On one bed lay Mr Wynyard, on the other the man Gotto; to all outward appearances each was dead. About them were grouped at least half a dozen men. One of them, a fiercely-moustached, goggle-spectacled, much excited little person, detached himself and came towards the captain.

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“Ah! I do not understand this!” he exclaimed, gesticulating furiously. “It is not of drowning or of injury that these men lie here. No, they are in a trance; they have been subjected to hypnotic influence, or drugged. You understand? It is not their immersion——”

I brushed this man aside and pointed to Mr Wynyard.

“This gentleman,” I said, “is the Right Honourable Oliver Wynyard, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the present British Government. His daughter and his nephew are aboard the yacht *L’Hirondelle*. The other person is Mr Gotto, a police-agent. I believe you, Herr Doctor, are quite right in saying that they are in a trance . . . and on that point I wish to converse with you and the captain.”

The doctor took us into his cabin. I made them sit down at a little table. I took a seat facing them. I don’t know what they thought of me, but they said nothing. Then I told them everything that I knew, and finally propounded my own theory. The doctor nodded his head at least a hundred times during the course of my narrative.

“I believe you!” he said, at last, “Got in Himmel, I believe you!” And, meaning no rudeness to me, he spat on the floor and shuddered.

“Mr Graham shall be brought to this ship at once,” said the captain; “I will send a boat and plenty of men. After that I will stand off the island till the morning breaks. Ach! that tastes bad in the mouth, that story. Is it possible that such things can be!”

“It is possible—and more,” said the doctor,

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nodding his head violently. He spat again, and yet again, and muttered to himself for several minutes, being obviously much overcome by what I had said. He went back to his patients, still spitting.

I followed the captain on deck. He called up an officer, and in my presence bade him take a strong crew, go aboard the yacht, and bring Mr Graham, Evelyn, and the lad Gibson away.

I turned into a cabin for a moment to scribble a line to Evelyn. Much as I loved her I was not going aboard *L'Hirondelle* again—no, not even for her sake! I told her that her father was on board the *Kron Prinz Friedrich*, and besought her to come at once and to do everything that the German officer requested. Then I went back and gave the latter my note and one or two instructions. In a few moments the boat was on its way to the yacht.

I went over to the side and looked down from the great height of the warship upon the area of water in which the boats were still pulling about with the hope of saving life. The captain came to my side, and for some moments we stood there in silence. That horrible sound still came from the island. It was suddenly broken by a shout from one of the boats.

"They have found something!" said the captain.

The boat came towards the ship. We saw the men in the stern sheets bending over a figure which they had evidently just drawn from the water. Within a few minutes we were standing round this figure as it was laid down on deck, and the cover-

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ing drawn aside from the face. The officer from *L'Hirondelle* uttered a sharp cry. I turned to the captain. "That is M. de Reineville," I whispered.

It was perhaps ten minutes after that, that the little doctor came bustling to me and the captain. His face was very white, and there were great beads of sweat upon it. He beckoned us to follow, and we followed silently. I knew we were going to see something horrible.

He led us into a cabin, closed the door behind us, and pointed to the table where a dripping figure lay stretched out, covered by a sheet.

"Prepare yourselves," said the doctor. "Listen! He was dead, quite, this man. And I have made a discovery about him. You saw his face, eh? Well, that was not his real face at all. You comprehend! *It was a mask*—a mask, eh! Now, be brave, brave, you understand! I shall show you his real face!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NARRATIVE OF MISS BEACHCROFT—III.

I WAS by this time so completely case-hardened in respect of horrors that I followed the doctor to the side of the rigid figure lying beneath the sheet without hesitation. The captain hung back somewhat—it was plain that the events of the night had discomposed him.

“What is it?” he whispered.

The doctor turned back a corner of the sheet. For a moment he kept himself between us and the thing he desired us to see.

“It was this way,” he said, in a low tone. “He had been struck on the head, and when I examined the wound I found that what must have been taken for the man’s face was a skilfully built up mask—built up, you understand, on the natural face of him. Ach Gott! you now see him as he was!”

He stepped aside we drew nearer and looked.

For the second time that night I did *not* do the things which women are supposed to do on these occasions. I neither screamed nor exclaimed. I just stood quietly by the dead man and looked at

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him . . . perhaps for a moment. The skilfully built up mask lay in shreds and peelings on each side of his head . . . his face lay amongst the ruin as a nut lies in a kernel . . . a face worn and wasted by the touch of incredible age. There were great cavities beneath the cheek-bones and at the temples; the nose had shrivelled until the cartilage pressed tightly against the skin; the lips, masses of wrinkles and lines, were drawn back from the jaw; over the forehead a thin lock of white hair lay smooth. But the eyes were still open and staring . . . black, brilliant eyes with a strange force still shining in them and making the old face look older and older.

The captain went hastily out of the cabin; the doctor spat on the floor as he turned the sheet back again. Together we followed the captain. He was in his own cabin, and there was a glass with a stiff dose of brandy in his hand. He swallowed it at a gulp, and pushed the decanter across to the doctor.

"You are a brave woman," he remarked to me, with obvious sincerity. "Ach! I never saw such horrors as this night brings. I think I have seen the devil in that man's face. Who was he?"

But there was no time to inquire into that particular. The boat was back again with Evelyn and Mr Graham, and the doctor and myself were busily employed during the next half hour in looking after the new patient.

"He is in the same state as the other two," whispered the doctor to me. "It is a species of trance; the symptoms are the same in each

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case, but less so in his case"—here he pointed to the inanimate figure of Mr Gotto—"than in the others. I think"—here he shrugged his shoulders and wrinkled his face into the semblance of loathing and disgust—"I think that these three will have *seen* something when they come out of that trance. They will have been in the world beyond, *seeing*, eh?"

I persuaded Evelyn to leave the cabin wherein the three unconscious men lay and to come on deck with me. On finding her father lying there in a similar condition to her lover she had almost collapsed, and she now moved at my side with mechanical steps and staring eyes. It suddenly struck me that if she saw any more of the horrors that hung around us she would go altogether, and so I forced her to lie down in a cabin which the captain gave over to us, and made her swallow a strong sleeping-draught. I remained with her until she was asleep, and I locked her into the cabin.

That was a wise precaution of mine—the worst was yet to come.

It was grey dawn when I went on deck once more. I looked in at the cabin where the three men still lay in their strange trance. The doctor moved from one to the other, watching them with eager eyes. I turned away and sought the captain. He stood looking out towards the island, and as he caught sight of me, he beckoned me to his side.

"It will soon be daylight," he said. "I expect to see something then—what, I do not know. But something—Ach Gott! something. I have sent

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—III.

the young man and his crew back to their yacht—it is not good that they should be here.”

I looked for the yacht. There she lay, about five hundred yards away, rising and falling gently in the slight swell in which the great warship lay motionless. She, like ourselves, lay broadside on to the island; upon her decks, as on ours, men crowded, all gazing, as our men did, towards the flickering line of surf which showed where land and sea joined. There was a dead silence over everything—the mysterious wailing sound had died away.

A sudden shaft of rosy light tinged the eastern heavens. The captain drew a long breath. “The sunrise,” he said.

The new light came quickly. Over feld and fjord it spread, and over the dancing waters, and suddenly the island, an amethyst gem crowned with a rose-flushed palace, flashed into clear vision before us.

The man at my side suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation and gripped my arm.

“Look!” he said. “The island!”

He stretched out his hand. Following its direction I saw, poised on a rocky promontory that stood out from the white beach, three figures habited in loose garments of a curious grey tint which mingled well with the almost spent night shadows. They stood motionless on the head of a great rock; as the light strengthened, their figures became more boldly outlined against the rose-tinted walls of the great marble palace which rose behind them. All around us rose murmurs—from

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the commotion on our own decks and on those of the yacht we knew that the men on both vessels had seen the three shapes.

I heard the captain fetch a deep breath; he suddenly pushed his glasses into my hand, and turning away went over to his chief officer. I adjusted the glasses to my sight and directed them upon the island. Then I saw the three shapes clearly. They stood on a rock which rose to a considerable height above the beach, and they seemed to hold converse with each other. But of their faces I could see nothing—from head to foot the three were wrapped in filmy, grey-tinted garments that stirred faintly in the morning breeze.

The captain came back to me. His face was set and white, and I saw his hand tremble slightly as he took the glasses from mine. He directed them once more upon the figures. Suddenly he dropped them.

“See!” he said.

I looked towards the rock. One of the shapes had moved a little forward; it lifted its arms. A long, weird cry came across the waters—then a second—then a third

As the last died away came shouts of “Help! Help! Help!” from the cabin where the three men lay. We rushed towards it—into it. The doctor and his two attendants were struggling with the three men *or with the three demons which had entered into the three men's souls.*

This was the first of the horrors which unnerved me. Swept away by the rush of the sailors who entered in response to the doctor's call I shrank

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against a bulkhead inside the cabin and there remained, trembling and horrified at the scene which took place before my eyes. By the doctor's directions the sailors seized on the three and lashed them firmly to their beds. The sweat dripped from the sailors when they had finished—they gathered together in the centre of the floor, watching. As for the doctor he watched as a cat watches a mouse.

Again the thrice-repeated call came, and again each man as the sound reached him strove to burst his bonds. . . .

I find it difficult to write about this. If I could, I would have fled from the cabin. But I could not move. . . . I was obliged, compelled to witness it all . . . the loathsomeness, the beastliness, the savagery, of it. . . .

Once more the call sounded . . . once more the men strove against the lashings which secured them. One of the sailors suddenly screamed and fell down in a fit . . . they carried him outside.

Then came silence for a long time. The three men lay motionless. As for the rest of us, we scarcely breathed.

A shout of alarm sounded sharply from the bridge. The captain rushed out. . . . I followed him, reviving in the fresh air. I climbed the stairway to the bridge; the captain and the first officer were staring towards the island. As I came up to them the latter handed me his glasses and turned away, shivering as if the ague had fallen upon him.

I fixed the glasses and looked shoreward. The three shapes still stood upon the rock, but they

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were now moving about, gesticulating and beckoning with their arms, and to them from all parts of the beach were approaching crowds of *what?* God in heaven, what were those things? were they men, or beasts, or

The captain's glasses fell from his hands with a crash, and I heard him mutter "Ach Gott! Ach Gott! Ach Gott!" in the fashion in which a frightened child might cry out. Then he picked up the glasses, sighed long and deeply, as if nerving himself, and looked again.

The things were running all over the beach *running on all fours* and when you caught the gleam of their eyes it was as if you looked on the eyes of a man from whom everything but the brute has been driven. And suddenly they began to wail, or cry. They clustered about the Three Shapes clustered as hounds cluster about the huntsman, or apes gather on the side of a rock, and the sound of their crying came clear and distinct.

One of the shapes lifted an arm and pointed seawards. . . . The things broke into fierce yappings of brute delight, and plunged or threw themselves into the sea. In another moment there were hundreds of them swimming swiftly in our direction, and as they swam they yelled. . . .

The captain woke into activity. Some orders rang out sharply; a bell tinkled somewhere; I felt the great ship move; I saw the men running hither and thither; I heard the bustle of preparations going on all around me. Then I looked again at the oncoming throng.

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They were swimming for the yacht, and swimming with incredible swiftness. Their long, bestial arms smote the water like the blades of a powerful screw ; their faces shone in the morning sun as they breasted the rippling waves. And as they drew nearer one heard the horrible chattering sound which they made a sound of terrifying, soul-affrighting laughter.

They were around the yacht, swarming up its sides, running on all fours over its decks, into its cabins, within a few minutes of leaving the island. We saw the officers and crew thrown hither and thither as the mob of beasts swept over them. We saw the beasts emerging from stairways and hatches, jabbering, howling, screaming, running along the decks with lowered muzzles, as hounds run who seek to pick up a lost scent. . . .

Then, suddenly, they quitted the yacht as with one consent, casting themselves pell-mell over the sides into the sea. The great, loose, glistening mass of them, howling and screaming, came in a solid body, swimming swiftly, in the direction of the warship.

A quick order rang out, followed by the sharp rattle of a Maxim-Nordenfeldt from our bows. I saw bright jets of scarlet leap up from the loose mass, but it came on, on, on. . . . Another rattle, and more leaping spurts of blood and still the onward rush never wavered.

Then I heard the captain mutter something hastily to his first officer, and the latter rushed from the bridge. A moment later four sailors ran

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along the deck beneath, bearing a body closely wrapped in a sheet. They went forward—then they flung their burden overboard. The beasts were clamouring round our bows . . . the light shone full on their faces and glittering eyes.

I turned away, sick, sick. . . . When I looked again the brown mass of swimming things was speeding shoreward, bearing the body above it. It returned in silence, and then I heard the laboured breathing of the men about me.

It was some time before we dared look at each other, I think. It seemed quite a long time before that weird wailing which we had heard in the night broke out once more on the island. I looked towards the shore again. . . . The beasts had carried their burden to the rock on which the Three Shapes still stood, and were now crowding about it and them, wailing, wailing. . . .

Suddenly the entire assemblage forsook the rock. It wound, a long, close-packed line, across the beach in the direction of the castle or palace which stood in the centre of the island. And as it moved the warship moved too. The great screws revolved, and the sea seemed to slip past, and within a few minutes we were steaming full speed for the open sea.

I turned presently to look at the yacht. When we were nearly a mile from her she got under way and followed us, at first slowly, then with rapidly increasing speed. I think she sailed much faster than we did; at anyrate within a few minutes she approached to within perhaps half a mile of us.

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It was then that the thing happened. . . . It is hard to describe, though, what *did* happen. I was standing at the captain's side, on the bridge, and we were both looking at the yacht. Suddenly I saw her stagger, just as a man staggers who has been shot through the brain. No, perhaps stagger is not the word . . . she *shivered* ; every mast, spar, stay in her, every bit of cordage, the funnels, the ventilators, the shining brass work on her decks, seemed to shiver, as if she were a human being. And then, all of a sudden, she crumpled up, just as a scrap of paper is crumpled up by a fierce flame, and almost before we knew what had happened the yacht had disappeared.

I gripped the captain's arm. He flung my hand off as he leaped to the communication with the engine-room. I heard a bell tinkle ; I felt the great ship, already steaming at tremendous speed, leap forward trembling ; I felt her quiver, and quiver, and quiver, as she tore through the water. I looked at the captain ; his face was white, and he wiped great beads of sweat from it, and his lips trembled as I heard him say :

" If only we are out of range ! If only we are out of range ! "

CHAPTER XXIV.

NARRATIVE OF MISS BEACHCROFT—IV.

It was some time before I ventured to address the captain. The warship was now tearing through the water at a terrific speed, and her funnels vomited continuous clouds of smoke which went sailing away across the sea in dense masses. I never saw such looks of anxiety in my life, as I saw on the faces of the men by whom I was surrounded. Officers and men alike seemed filled with apprehension since the terrible destruction of the yacht. They kept their eyes fixed on the island, the towers of which we could just see, but once or twice they glanced at the captain, and then at the smoke pouring out of the funnel, as if they wondered whether the speed to which he was forcing his ship was not becoming dangerous. But he, never taking his eyes from the island, neither spoke nor moved until the rosy-hued towers of the castle had dipped—then the bell rang again, and the great warship, groaning and straining, lessened her speed and flew forward in smoother fashion.

The captain wiped his forehead and motioned his first officer to his side. They conversed together in low tones for a few moments, and then

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the captain turned to me and asked me to accompany him to his cabin. We left the bridge together, and I remember that as soon as I began to walk I was conscious of a curiously weak feeling. When we got into his cabin the captain gave me some brandy, and then swallowed a stiff dose of it himself. It was easy to see that he had received a severe shock.

"Miss Beachcroft," he said, "I must talk to you. You told us about the destruction of a large area of your metropolis the other day. Did you witness that event?"

"No," I replied. "But I know exactly what happened—I heard everything about it before I left London."

"From what you heard, did that destruction resemble the destruction of that yacht?" he asked, with a sudden contraction of his fingers. "Ah! I never saw anything like that—I think we are in the presence of the devil!"

"From all that I heard," I made haste to reply, "the area at Charing Cross must have been destroyed in exactly the same fashion. There was no sign, no sound; there was nothing but a sudden disintegration, as one might say, of everything."

"Everything was all crumpled up and became as nothing, eh?" he said.

"Yes."

"Just like the yacht—wood, iron, bones, living men—all destroyed in one touch?"

"Yes," I said once more.

He began to walk up and down, nodding his

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head, opening and shutting his mouth, and giving other remarkable signs of his astonishment and perturbation.

"But I have never heard of such a thing!" he said, stopping in front of me at last and clapping his hands. "These people, whoever they are, must be in possession of some secret which even the very greatest chemists do not know of! Why, not even lightning would have such an effect. They shoot their power forth, and pouf! whatever it hits is gone—disappeared! How do we know that they may not yet destroy us? That yacht—Mein Gott!"

"I have an idea," I said. "Is it not possible that the yacht was destroyed by the explosion of a mine charged with this marvellous force? I ask, because it seems to me that as we were in close proximity to the yacht at the time, they might as easily have destroyed us as her. Perhaps that island is surrounded by mines, and perhaps the yacht crossed one and was——"

"Ah!" he said admiringly. "That was an excellent conception. Mines! Yes—it is most likely. It must have been a mine. Well, but what is to be done now? Here are these three unfortunate men still in the bonds of the devil, and here is that island filled with—Ach Himmel, what *is* it filled with? I ought to go on my way—already I have lost several hours."

"I cannot advise you," I said. "Only one thing—carry us all with you wherever you are going."

He was proceeding to assure me with great politeness that he would never desert us until our

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—IV.

feet were safely planted on German soil, when an officer hastily entered the cabin with the news that a ship flying the English flag was in sight, steaming at great speed towards us. I think I never knew what those words "The English Flag" ever really meant before, but I know that I rushed out and darted up to the bridge ere the two astonished Teutons knew what I was after.

"Why, it's an English man-o'-war!" I exclaimed as the captain came after me. "A first-class cruiser, too—look at the way she's coming along. Oh, give me your strongest glass!"

The captain sighed with a species of envy as he politely handed me his glasses. "I have great admiration for the British Navy," he said. "Some day, perhaps, we will fight them."

"It would be more to the point," I answered, "if you both united at present to fight these island people. You will hail this ship, captain, and let her commander know of what has happened?"

"My dear miss," he replied, "I shall be much mistaken if this great, beautiful ship of your nation's is not making her way here so quickly because of what has happened. We will soon hear all that."

No one can imagine what a feeling of positive relief, of almost childish delight the onward rush of those two great warships gave me as they sped through the sapphire sea to meet each other. I ran down to the cabin where I had left Evelyn, and woke her up and told her the good news. Then I got her some food and wine, and while she was taking it I repaired to the cabin where the

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doctor was still hovering about his three patients. He came to the door and thrust out an anxious, perturbed face.

"I beg of you not to come in," he said. "It is not good that you see these so-afflicted men."

"There is an English war-vessel in sight and the captain is going to speak to her," I said. "Would you like to consult with her doctor?"

"Two heads are better than one," he answered. "I should like to consult. I am greatly perplexed—disturbed"—here he shook his head as if it would come off—"I return to my patients," he said, and closed the door in my face.

I went back to Evelyn, and finding her much better and greatly cheered by my news of the English man-of-war, took her on deck. The two ships were now within half a mile of each other, signals were being exchanged, and one of the younger officers standing near us with his glasses at his eye suddenly read out the English ship's name.

"It is the *Avenger*," he said, turning to us with a nod which was by way of compliment to us and England.

"The *Avenger*!" exclaimed Evelyn. "Why, that's my cousin Eustace Wynyard's ship—you remember the *Avenger*, Cynthia?—we went over her at Portsmouth. Don't you remember that Eustace told us all about her—she's a first-class armoured cruiser, I don't know how many thousand guns and tons and horse-power and all the rest of it."

"Yes, I remember," I said. "But I shall re-

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member seeing her now much better than seeing her at Portsmouth. Let's see, and isn't Winthrop Leyland her commander?—weren't we introduced to him that day? I have misty recollections of something of the sort."

"Oh, Cynthia! We lunched with him!" said Evelyn, reproachfully. "Why—you asked him why they called him 'Fighting Leyland' in the Navy."

"Never mind," I said, "I'll ask him again some day. There—they're going to hail each other."

The two great ships now lay motionless, and almost opposite each other. We listened eagerly as the officer vociferated. The young officer who had told us the name of the English man-of-war explained to us what was being said.

"They want to know have we seen or heard of an English vessel called the *Malvolio*, of Hull," he said, after much shouting had gone on. "We reply—yes, we cut her in two last night. . . . They seem much astonished—they ask if we have any survivors on board. . . . We reply yes, we have Honourable Mr Wynyard, Mr Graham, Mr Gotto, all very sick; two ladies also. . . . They say right-oh, their commander is coming aboard."

"Oh, tell them to bring their doctor!" I exclaimed.

"I hope Eustace will come over," said Evelyn. "One feels to want as many of one's own people about one as one can possibly get at a time like this. I wonder if the *Avenger* has been specially sent to look for us."

"I think that's very likely," I said. "Come,

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let's watch them come over—I'm dying to hear English voices again."

We stood at the side while the gig of the *Avenger* put off and was rapidly pulled across to us. As she came near we recognised her commander, and then Eustace Wynyard, and the latter caught sight of his cousin and waved his hand joyfully to her. Both men, on gaining the deck of the *Kron Prinz Friedrich*, lost little time in making ceremonious greeting to her captain and officers—they did their duty in that way and then rushed at us as if they were going to hug us.

"By Jove, Miss Beachcroft!" said Commander Leyland, as he vigorously shook my hand, "I am glad to find you alive and well. Here's been the very—I mean no end of bother about Wynyard and you and Miss Wynyard and Graham. We've made such a record from the Nore as I should think no other ship ever made in its life."

"Ah, you should have seen us fly this morning!" I said. "We should have given you—what do you call them, knots?—oh, five knots in an hour."

"Oh!" he said, looking first at me and then at the captain of the German ship. "Dear me! But here we are, and I hear Wynyard is on board and very ill. I am all in a fog—I don't know what it all means. I was sent to find the *Malvolio*, get Wynyard off her, find out from him where a certain M. de Reineville had carried you, Miss Wynyard, and Graham to, and bring you all away. Here you all are, strangely enough."

"It is not so strange," I said. "Suppose you

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ask the captain to take us all into his cabin and let us get things put straight."

"That's a clever idea," he said, and in a few minutes Evelyn and I, Leyland and Eustace, the German captain and his first officer, were all in conclave. Leyland became business-like on the instant.

"This is how I happen to be here," he said. "On the morning of the surrender to the Dictators——"

"What!" Evelyn and I exclaimed simultaneously. "Surrender!"

Leyland hung his head. I think he blushed.

"It's true," he said. "The Government surrendered the morning after you left. They say there was no other course—that the payment of the ransom money was the easiest way out of the difficulty. Well, never mind—that morning, or early in the afternoon, somebody at the Treasury found a curious document in Mr Wynyard's private room. It appeared to have been written by the Chancellor himself early that morning. It was rather vague, but it said that he believed himself to have fallen into the power of the Dictators, and that before that power seized upon him altogether, he wished to ask his fellow colleagues to see to his daughter, Miss Beachcroft, and his nephew. He added that as for himself he was being drawn away. Well, there was a fine to-do. The wires were set working in all directions, and though London was in a state of anarchy that day—I assure you they told me it was like pandemonium—they soon found out a lot of things. They found that Miss

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Wynyard, Miss Beachcroft, and Mr Graham had sailed from Gravesend in M. de Reineville's yacht early in the morning, and that M. de Reineville himself, with Mr Wynyard and another companion, had chartered one of the fastest Wilson liners from Hull and left that port at half-past one in the afternoon. All this was found out within a few hours ; in fact, there was word to stop the *Malvolio* received at Hull within two hours of her sailing. The *Avenger* was at the Nore and was selected as the fastest ship handy, and before night we were off. I don't know whether I have made it all clear," concluded Leyland, looking at the Germans, "but here we are, you know, and now I'd like to know what's happened."

The German captain was a man of great discrimination. He perceived that nothing could be so conducive to the total appreciation of the entire situation by the two English officers as a rendering of it by one of their own nationality. He therefore politely replied that Commander Leyland had made everything admirably clear, that he comprehended everything, and that he would request me, so assured was he of my great powers—here he and his first officer bowed—to narrate what had happened. And feeling that no one could tell everything quite so plainly or in such brief terms as I could, I proceeded to set forth all that had passed since we three set foot on the yacht *L'Hirondelle*.

I believe that Leyland and Eustace Wynyard thought they were having bad dreams as I came to tell of what we had seen. Then they thought

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we were all mad. But the phlegmatic stolidity of the Germans assured them that we were neither mad nor lying. And at last the tale came to an end, and there we were, and we all knew everything that had happened, up to then. Now, then, what was to be the next move?

Leyland rose and asked the German captain to accompany him to the sick men in the doctor's charge. They went away and came back with pale faces and an air of distaste for what they had seen, and they sat down again and for a while said nothing.

"Well?" said the German captain, at last. "You have seen and heard."

"More than I ever wished to hear or see," answered Leyland, with a shudder.

Then he looked at me. "Miss Beachcroft," he said, "you and Miss Wynyard had better withdraw—we are going to settle matters."

We left them with their chairs and heads drawn close together, and we went on deck and waited for half an hour wondering what they would do. At last the two Englishmen came out, both walking with an alert, confident step; with them came the German captain, smiling joyously. He caught sight of me and waved his hand.

"Ah!" he said. "You said you would like to see us fight together against those people on the island. You shall have your wish—we go to fight them—England and Germany, ah!"

"But—the mines!" I said.

He held up a reassuring finger.

"We have talked it over," he said. "We think

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those mines are planted in a circle round the island—we shall not approach it.”

“Don’t be afraid, Miss Beachcroft,” said Leyland. “We are both very luckily provided with long-range guns. We’re just going to try to blow that island into the sky or the sea, one or the other. Don’t forget to put plenty of cotton-wool in your ears—you will hear such a pandemonium pretty soon as you never dreamed of.”

Then he exchanged a few more words of a professional nature with the captain of the *Kron Prinz Friedrich*, and after shaking hands with us all, he and Eustace Wynyard departed to their own ship. When they had gone, the German captain turned to us and told us that we had better retire to his cabin, for there was much to do. And so, as the two big ships steamed off for that mysterious island, and the crews of both began clearing the decks for action, Evelyn and I retired, and left the men to do men’s work.

It was, I think, about noon when we came in sight of the island again, and reduced our speed to a gentle motion. Curiosity began to get strong in me: I felt that I must be on deck and somewhere where I could see.

“I’m not going to be cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d here,” I said to Evelyn. “I can’t see anything worse than I’ve already seen. A little clear, healthy, big-gun practice will do me a lot of good.”

I left her and went on deck. The captain saw me coming and rushed at me with requests to withdraw. It was dangerous: I should be thrown down, deafened, injured if I remained. I told him

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I would hold on to something like a limpet, and eventually, after he had obliged me to take sundry precautions, he permitted me to occupy a corner of his conning-tower. I think Evelyn hid her head under the thickest cushion in the cabin.

I know nothing whatever about nautical warfare or about big guns, and I cannot write in technical language about what followed. All that I know is that for about an hour the two warships poured such a storm of shot upon that devoted island as perhaps no single limited area ever received in the same space of time. We were so far away that it was impossible to see exactly how things went on, but after the firing had ceased for a time and the smoke of the big guns had cleared off, we saw that the castle of rosy-hued stone or marble had been levelled to the ground and that flames were bursting out from various parts of the island. Some exchange of signals went on between the two warships, and after a time Commander Leyland once more came aboard the *Kron Prinz Friedrich*. He smiled when he found me in the captain's conning-tower. But I did not smile when I heard what it was that he had come to propose. He actually wanted to form a joint volunteer party of English and Germans, to go ashore and examine the island.

CHAPTER XXV.

NARRATIVE OF MISS BEACHCROFT—V.

I THINK that the German captain and I had already shared so much of surprise between us since our first unceremonious meeting, that something of the faculty had been taken out of us, but we were rendered speechless by Commander Leyland's calm proposal. We stood staring at him, both feeling that the occasion was too great for words. He looked at us—a little longer at me than at the captain—and began to laugh.

"Come!" he said, "that's what I mean, really. I do not believe there is a living thing left on that island—anyhow, I'm going to make sure. I shall take a well armed boat's crew ashore—will you, too, take one, sir?"

The German captain's face was full of admiration.

"You are a very brave man!" he exclaimed. "But, ach Gott!—you did not see what we saw. If you had seen those things with the human faces and the beasts' bodies—if you had seen the yacht crumple up just like the ash of a cigar—eh? Is it a wise thing to do?"

"We've raked that island pretty well," said

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Leyland. "I've just examined it carefully—there's literally not one stone standing on another in that castle or whatever it is. I don't think there's any danger. However, it's my duty to go ashore and see what there is to be seen. Mind, I've no desire to drag you into danger."

The German's face flushed, and he nodded his head several times.

"I will take a boat's crew also," he said, with emphasis. "I will go in person—England and Germany, eh? I will pick my men, and they shall be well armed," and he turned away to confer with his officers.

I looked at Commander Leyland. He was looking at me.

"I want you to do me a favour," I said. "I want——"

"Of course I will!" he began eagerly. "What is——?"

"Yes," I said, interrupting him. "You had better hear what it is before you promise that you will do it. I want you to take me with you!"

His face lengthened by half its normal length, and he drew a yard away from me.

"What!" he exclaimed. "To the island?"

"Yes," I said. "Certainly—to the island. You see, I have seen so much of these terrible events that I want to know all that I can of them and their cause. I think—in fact, I am sure—you will find some strange things on that island. I want to go, and I—I—don't want to go with our Teutonic friend here. I—want to go—with you. Will you take me—Commander Leyland?"

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I kept my eyes on his—save when he would look away—all the time I was making this request in my most persuasive manner, and I never saw a man, especially a big, bronzed, handsome seaman, look so embarrassed or bothered in all my life. When I had finished I waited for an answer. He fidgeted about—he actually stood first on one leg, then on the other, like a schoolboy, and he kept his eyes averted. I persevered in my request.

"There is no danger, you know," I said, persuasively. "*You* said there wasn't." I saw him start, guiltily. "Will you take me with you—Commander?"

Then he turned on me with a look.

"*No!*" he roared. "No—I—I'm damned if I will! And look here, Miss Beachcroft, if you try to persuade that German chap to take you with him I—I—I'll exert my authority over you as a British subject, and I'll have you clapped in irons. Look here," he continued in milder fashion, "can't you see that that island's no place for a woman after the awful gruelling we've given it? Come, now, go to Miss Wynyard in the cabin, and stay there till we come back."

I faced him once more.

"Will you take me?" I said again.

"Not if you were the Queen of Sheba herself!" he said quietly. "There, be a sensible girl, and go away. Leave men to do men's work."

And he put me calmly aside, as if I had been a broomstick, and went striding off to the German captain. In a few minutes he went over the side and back to the *Avenger*. I turned into the

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—V.

cabin, got into an easy chair—and began to cry for sheer vexation of spirit. I had so much wanted to see what there was on that island, and I had asked that odious man to take me there in such persuasive fashion—and he had threatened to clap me in irons. And so—I cried.

In a moment Evelyn's arms were round me.

"Cynthia! what is it? You're ill—overwrought, worn-out—all this has been too much for you," she began, in the customary sympathetic way. "Let me get you some *sal-volatile* from the doctor."

"Oh—*damn* the doctor!" I said. "There, I'm all right again, Evie. I'm neither overwrought nor overworn. Commander Leyland has just threatened to have me put in irons—that's all."

"You!—put in irons? Cynthia! But why?"

"Because I wanted—and threatened—to go on the island. They're going to see what *is* on that island, and I wanted to go too. Never mind—I'll pay him out yet."

"But, Cynthia—isn't that awfully dangerous? Are they really going—suppose they never return?"

"Then, of course, we shall never see them any more," I said. "And as that's quite on the cards, perhaps we'd better go on deck and see the last of them."

She followed me on deck, somewhat mystified at my strange behaviour, and we went over to the side and looked towards the island. Since the bombardment had finished both ships had steamed closer in, and were now almost near the spot where the *Kron Prinz Friedrich* and the *Malvolio* had

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collided—or, rather, where the former had cut the other completely in two—the previous evening. It would not have surprised me if we had suddenly found ourselves crumbling into ashes, or seen the *Avenger* doing likewise, or if the two boats now being rapidly pulled toward the landing stage had disappeared into air or water. Nothing happened, however, to ships or boats, and we saw the armed crews of the latter land, and, headed by their officers, go marching towards the ruins of the castle.

Now that we were nearer to it, it was easy to see what havoc the heavy shell fire to which the island had been exposed for an hour had wrought across its entire surface. Here and there it looked as if it had been ploughed up; in some places a shell had cut its way through a wood or coppice and left a clean-edged gap behind it; everywhere there were abundant signs of desolation. But nowhere was there a sign of life.

We saw the two boats' crews disappear amongst the ruins of the castle, and suddenly we heard the sharp rattle of musketry. At first it was quick and continuous, then it dropped away to a single shot at long intervals; a deep silence followed. It seemed to be some time yet before we saw the men coming down to the boats again. They came in a compact body, English mingling with German, and it seemed to me that they were guarding something in their midst. One of the officers brought his glasses to bear upon them, and presently exclaimed that they had a prisoner. As they came to the water's edge we saw them lift some-

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thing into one of the boats; then the men embarked and the boats were pulled rapidly back to the ships. As they drew nearer we saw that both boats were heading for us, and presently the English boat shot ahead of the other and came on at great speed. As it came under our side we saw that Eustace Wynyard was in it, and that Commander Leyland was not to be seen. He was not in that boat at anyrate. I strained my eyes towards the other, and at last saw him with the German captain. They and several men seemed to be guarding something that sat or lay in the stern.

Eustace Wynyard came on board in what appeared to be a great hurry. He made immediately for us. I noticed that he was very pale and that he looked as a man looks who has just seen unpleasant things.

"Miss Beachcroft and Evelyn," he said hastily, looking from me to his cousin, "I am charged with the duty of attending you to your cabin. Will you come, please, at once?"

"Certainly," I replied. "Are we to be locked up?"

He made no answer, but preceded us to the cabin which the German captain had graciously set apart for us. He bowed us both inside with great politeness, and followed us with all the dignity of a youthful naval officer. Once inside, he locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and threw away his grandeur. He sank down on a lounge and turned white to the lips.

"For God's sake!" he said, staring at us, "if

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you know where the captain keeps his liquor give me some!—never mind what it is. I never wanted a drink so much in my life.”

I knew where the liquor case was, and got it out. The boy literally snatched at the brandy decanter, poured out a liberal quantity and swallowed it with a sigh of relief which would have melted the heart of a teetotaller. He set down the glass, looked expressively from me to Evelyn, and from Evelyn to me, and shook his head.

“Now that you are much better, Eustace,” I said, “perhaps you will tell us why we were all three locked in here?”

“Oh—ah—well, you see,” he answered, “I think Leyland and the German Johnny didn’t want you to see what they’re bringing aboard.”

“And what are they bringing aboard?”

“Well—I—you see—I say, look here, you girls,” he continued, “you see, I think that if I were you—I—that is—I—I wouldn’t be too inquisitive. I wouldn’t bother—oh, dash it, I say, don’t you see that a fellow doesn’t want to talk about it? We—well, never mind.”

He nodded his head sagely and fixed his eye on the liquor case.

“You always had a rare turn for description, Eustace dear,” said Evelyn.

“All right,” he said. “All right—go on, but you’re not going out of that door, that is, until Leyland lets you. I wish there were some water here—I’d have some brandy-and-water. Brandy’s too strong, but I—well, I haven’t got the taste out of my mouth yet. Ugh!”

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"There is water in the filter there," I said, pointing it out. "Eustace! What did you see? what is it that you've brought on board?"

He mixed himself some brandy-and-water, and pulling out a cigarette-case from some mysterious corner of his uniform, lit a cigarette before he spoke.

"As to what we saw," he said slowly, "I can't—at least, I won't—tell you. I shall dream about it. As to what we brought on board—well, there's no harm in telling you that. It's an old man. Old! I should say he was living when the Pyramids were mere bricks. He's the very oldest looking thing I ever set eyes on. We found him sitting amongst the ruins, just like a statue or a mummy—yes, a mummy's more like it."

"Eustace," I said, "what were the men shooting at?"

"Cats," he said promptly. "Awful lots of cats about that place—Leyland thought we'd better kill 'em off."

"You invented that *en route*, no doubt. Why didn't you think of dogs, eh? Or, Eustace, why didn't you think of something like dogs with human faces, and——"

"Look here!" he said, suddenly sitting down. "Don't! If you'd seen what I've seen, you'd feel bad. I *can't* talk of it. If Leyland likes to tell you, let him—I wish him joy of it. But I won't, not even for you."

"Leave him alone, Cynthia," said Evelyn. "Don't you see his nerves are unstrung?"

"Pooh!" I said. "Who ever heard of a midshipman having nerves? You're a midshipman, aren't you, Eustace?"

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"I'm a lieutenant of exactly two years' standing, if you care to know," he answered, "and you may tease as much as you like, but you don't get any more out of me, nor the key either until Leyland comes."

"Well, here he is, or somebody else," I said, as a knock came at the door. "So open it, quick."

"Right-oh!" said he, and took care to finish his brandy-and-water. "Now then—try the next man."

He strode to the door and unlocked it. Leyland entered hastily. Man-like, his eyes sought the liquor-case. I think he looked at it before he looked at—me. "There, we are back, you see!" he said. "Stay, Wynyard. Don't go. Give me a drink, there's a good boy." He sat down and wiped his forehead. "Phew! that was warm work. Miss Beachcroft and Miss Wynyard, I want your assistance. There can be no doubt that yonder island was the headquarters of the Dictators, and that the man de Reineville was either one of them or their active agent. We have found one living man on that island—a man so old that I dare not guess how old he may be—and we purpose to examine him presently. I should like to have present as many witnesses of our own nationality as we can get, and I have sent for two more of my officers. Do you—would you—mind being present, too?"

"I should like it," I said.

"If you think it necessary, Commander Leyland," said Evelyn.

"Well, it is wise to have as much publicity as

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—V.

possible," he said. "Then I will send for you when we are ready. Wynyard, stay with your cousin and Miss Beachcroft until then."

He went away, and for half an hour we remained in custody of Eustace, alternately teasing and scolding him. At last came a message for us. I felt a decided catching at the heart as we rose to go, and Evelyn turned pale. Eustace stopped us at the door.

"I say," he said, kindly, "pull yourselves together—you've never seen anything like this man in your life."

We followed him and the German officer who had come to fetch us along the deck into a cabin, at the door of which stood a guard. The German officer preceded us and saluted as he entered. I followed, and as I entered I looked curiously about me. At that end of the cabin in which we now stood sat Commander Leyland and the German captain at a table on which the Union Jack and the German flag had been jointly spread; grouped right and left of them were several English and German officers; standing a little apart were the doctors of the two warships. As we stepped in and took the seats which our guides silently pointed out to us no one greeted or regarded us; the eyes of every man in the cabin were fixed on the figure of another man who sat, guarded by three men, immediately in front of the two captains.

I felt a sense of indescribable awe, not unmixed with horror and fascination, as my glance fell on this man. He sat in an elbow chair, his head slightly

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bent forward, his eyes cast down, his hands folded passively on his knees, his whole attitude one of absolute resignation. He wore garments of a dead-grey hue, cut something after the fashion of those of the Chinese, and they hung upon his shrunken figure as the drapery hangs upon a skeleton. A species of pointed cowl half covered his head and framed his face. That face! I wonder if any of us had ever even dreamed of seeing such a suggestion of awful, mysterious age! The forehead was vast and noble in its proportions, the eyes large and well set, the nose and jaw prominent, but there appeared to be no flesh beneath the skin, and that hung in folds and wrinkles and seams and was of a curious grey tint that seemed to have had all brighter colour bleached or dried out of it. Of that grey tint, too, were the hands, long and thin, which rested on the old man's knees in perfect quiescence. Never have I seen anything so absolutely suggestive of death, of the utter obsession of all the faculties of life in the greyness of death as I saw in this man, who for all the signs of life he gave might have been a thing long dead.

But as we watched him in amazement the man's sunken and withered eyelids were raised, and his glance fell upon the two officers who sat as it were in judgment upon him. The effect was terrible, weird, frightening. I felt Evelyn start, and her hand instinctively sought mine. For just as the awful greyness of the face and hands suggested death, so the unutterable brilliance of the eyes suggested life—life such as we had never seen before. The light of the man's eyes seemed to

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—V.

shine from somewhere far back in his brain, and it shone clearly and steadily. I heard the German doctor mutter an exclamation, and I glanced at the two captains and saw they were not altogether unmoved. And then suddenly the old man spoke, and his voice was even more soul-affrighting than his face or his eyes. It was a voice out of which everything had been driven that was suggestive of human passion, and it sounded very far off, and was yet clear and distinct. His lips scarcely moved as he spoke, and the only expression in his face was that produced by the slight moving of mouth and jaw. It was only by watching him closely, indeed, that one could see that he was speaking—otherwise one had thought that the clear, passionless voice came from him by some other method than ordinary mortals use.

“You would speak with me?” he said.

It was a positive relief when Leyland’s bluff, hearty, business-like English tones broke in on the silence which followed.

“Um—er—well, you see, sir,” he began, “we want to know something about that island of yours. You were the only living thing—at least, man—we could find on it, and we look to you for some explanation. You see, there have been some very strange things going on during the past few days in Europe, and we rather fancy that you and your friends on that island have been mixed up in them. Perhaps you are not aware that a terrible outrage was committed in London the other day, through the agency of some awful force with which our scientists are not acquainted?”

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"I am aware."

"You are? Well, now, this morning the yacht *L'Hirondelle* was destroyed off your island in precisely the same fashion. That makes things a bit—I mean to say, sir, that the fact that these two outrages appear to have been of the same nature tends to make us suspect you. May I ask you a plain question—we wish to be as respectful to you as we ought to be to one of your venerable years, but we are only doing our duty to our respective Governments—may I ask if you are a member of the society or body calling itself the Dictators?"

"I was."

I think we all started. There was a pause. Then Leyland spoke again, and his voice assumed a new tone.

"You *were*?" he said. "What does that mean?"

"That the body no longer exists. Nor was it a body. It was a Trinity, whereof no unit had power without the other two units, as it is in all things. I am all that is left. Every man is mortal, whatever knowledge he possesses. Out of this earthly tabernacle all men must pass once. They are passed."

"You mean," said Leyland, "that your two colleagues are dead—killed during the bombardment?"

"They are passed."

"But you acknowledge that you and they were responsible for these outrages—that you employed this wonderful force—that you have been exerting

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—V.

powers upon humanity which seem to us to be superhuman——”

“The mortal cannot exercise superhuman power,” said the old man.

“Well, we’ll not quarrel about terms,” said Leyland, who appeared distinctly pleased to know that the figure before him *was* that of a man. “You confess that you and your colleagues planned and executed this outrage in London, and destroyed the yacht, and intended, no doubt, to commit outrages in other capitals of Europe——”

“And of the world,” interrupted the old man, very calmly.

“Ah! you admit that? Well, we would like to know what that force was?”

A very, very faint sigh, the ghost of a sigh, escaped the old man’s withered lips, and I thought that I saw the slightest movement of his hands as they rested on his knees.

“Do not seek for knowledge without due search for it,” he said. “Not even I know that secret! It was shared in by three, and each knew his part. Of the knowledge of the two who are passed I know nothing. The work of a thousand years is at an end. So be it. It is Fate.”

The German captain broke in. He was somewhat excited.

“But of these thousands of unfortunate people that you have slain, of the blood and tears, what say you?” he asked. “I saw the yacht destroyed. I saw, too, the sights on your island. Ach Gott! what say you to that?”

“Whoever proposes to conquer, which means

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to regenerate, the world, thinks not of individual suffering," answered the old man. "Which of your modern generals pauses in his operations because of the weeping of the widow, or the cries of the fatherless?"

"But our modern generals do not transform men into beasts!" broke out the German. "Here are three men in my ship who——" he suddenly paused, glancing at Evelyn and me. "I tell you," he went on, "that I have three passengers who by your arts are scarcely human. What say you to that?"

The old man closed his eyes. He bent his head for a moment, almost as if he were praying. Then he raised it, and opening his eyes turned them upon the German doctor. I saw the man's face turn ghastly white as those terrible eyes fell on him, and the sweat came breaking out upon his brow and cheeks like rain.

"Your patients are fallen asleep," said the voice. "For a day they will sleep, and on the next they will be as of old. Go—see if it is not so."

The doctor went out of the cabin as if he walked in his sleep. He came back with a world of conflicting emotions depicted in his face.

"It is so," he said. "They have just fallen asleep like children—it is a miracle!" The tension was becoming too great. I felt that I must scream ere long. Evelyn was gripping me tightly by the hand: behind us I heard Eustace Wynyard breathing as if he had just run a hard mile. It was a relief when the clear, far-away tones of the old man's voice broke the silence.

Narrative of Miss Beachcroft—V.

"What more would you have of me? I would depart."

Leyland coughed, almost, if not quite, apologetically.

"Well, sir," he said, "I—you see, I'm afraid we can't quite allow that. You've been very candid, but you've admitted that you and your colleagues were responsible for these outrages, and I'm afraid that we shall have to detain you, you know. Of course, you will be treated with every consideration, and——"

The old man interrupted him.

"Thou hast no power over me," he said, and closed his eyes. It seemed to me that a sudden calm spread itself over his face. . . .

And now I am going to write down what every person in that cabin has already sworn a solemn oath as to having witnessed. . . . As the calm deepened on the grey, fleshless face, and at length fell into a deep serenity, we saw a substance resembling the palest blue flame that shines about a light gradually assume the shape of a figure, enveloping that of the ancient man and hover above it, wrapping it about and hiding it as in a mantle. As gradually as it came it disappeared, and there was revealed to us the figure in the grey robes, still seated as before . . . and as I looked at it I knew that I was looking, not on the semblance, but on the reality of death.

[Miss Beachcroft's account of these doings was afterwards countersigned by several of her fellow-witnesses.]

CHAPTER XXVI.

BY WAY OF EPILOGUE.

IT was three years after the events dealt with in foregoing portions of this book that I came back to England after a prolonged absence in the South Sea Islands, and was enabled to renew my acquaintance with my old friends. Amongst them there was no one whom I was more pleased to see again than Miss Beachcroft, and my pleasure was all the greater because I felt no pang of regret when I found that she was the wife of Captain Leyland, R.N., and the mother of an uncommonly fine boy. From Mrs Leyland, indeed, I gained most of my information respecting the attack on London which is here dealt with. She had been mixed up in it, and she had become deeply interested in it in all its phases, and it was soon after my return that she lent me the narrative which I have here reprinted. In order to return the manuscript of this narrative to her and to ask some questions arising out of it, I dined with her and Leyland one winter evening, and it was in his smoking-room later on that we had some further discussion about the exciting events of the June of three years earlier.

By Way of Epilogue

"I was dining at Wynyard's last night," I said, after I had given Mrs Leyland her manuscript back, and made some remark upon it, "and I'm afraid I rather made a mess of things. I asked one or two questions of Wynyard, and was obtuse enough not to see that neither he nor Graham liked them until Mrs Graham gave me a very warning look. I don't think she liked them, either."

Leyland and his wife looked at each other and smiled meaningly.

"I ought to have warned you," she said. "No—they can't bear to talk of it. You can easily understand that neither Mr Wynyard nor Harry Graham care to be reminded that they were once under the influence of that horrible drug, and Evelyn, poor girl, suffered so much that the mere memory of that time is hateful to her."

"What happened," I asked, "after the last event recorded in your narrative?"

"Oh, the most ordinary things," she replied. "We had the three sick men transferred to the *Avenger*, and Winthrop brought us all home. It was on the way, by-the-by, that I promised to be put in irons for the rest of my life."

"Oh, yes! And the three sick men——"

"Were all in their right minds on the second day. They had a conference between themselves, and after that no one could get anything out of them. I don't know whether Mr Wynyard ever took Lord Grandminster into his confidence, but he never mentioned anything to us, did he, Winthrop?"

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"Never!" said Leyland, with considerable emphasis. "And no wonder!"

After a pause, I put forth another question.

"There's one thing I don't understand," I said. "What did the man who called himself de Reineville, and who, I imagine, was the active agent of the Three, want with you all on the island? From what Popinot said he had often taken people to the island, but never brought them away again. I don't understand all that."

Mrs Leyland looked at her husband. That magnificent specimen of the modern sea captain began to puff great clouds of smoke out of his pipe, and to betray signs of embarrassment.

"Neither do I," she said. "And it's one of the two things that Winthrop will never talk to me about."

"What is the other?" I asked.

"About what they saw on the island," she answered. "I suppose men never understand that curiosity is one of a woman's virtues, and that——"

Leyland jumped to his feet with a hasty exclamation.

"Cynthia, I'm dead certain I heard that boy howling! His nurse is gallivanting down in the kitchen, no doubt. Hadn't you better——?"

"My dear," said Mrs Leyland, "the boy is, without doubt, as sound asleep as you will be as soon as your head touches its pillow. Why don't you say 'Get out!' plainly and bluntly? Good night, Mr Plowden—I am sent to bed."

When his wife had departed Leyland carefully closed the door, came back to the hearth, filled his pipe, and stared at me.

By Way of Epilogue

"I say, old chap!" he said, "don't ever let my wife talk to you about either of those matters. It isn't good for a woman to concern herself with that sort of thing. I made up my mind long since that I never would tell her what we saw on the island, and I never will."

"Leyland," I said, "what did you see on that island?"

He smoked for some little time before he replied.

"Well," he said, "we found some strange things, Plowden. You've got to remember, to begin with, that we'd simply raked the place with shell-fire from one end to the other. I never expected to see a live thing in it. Of the castle, or whatever it was, there literally wasn't a stone left standing on another. You read, in Cynthia's account, of the sound of firing after our search-parties landed?"

"Yes?"

"Well, when we got near to the ruins we saw a number of things which I never want to see again. They were something like apes, with extraordinarily human-looking faces: they seemed to me to be a extremely low type of primitive man. Most of them were wounded—and we shot them off."

"I see. And as to people?"

"There had been people. Who and what they were we couldn't tell. Some of them were shattered to pieces by the shell-fire—ever seen the effect of a 4.7 on a crowd of people?"

"Ye-es."

"Very well then. So much for most of them.

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But we saw quite enough in several cases to make us certain that some of the people—men *and* women—had been experimented upon—sort of vivisected, you know. Help yourself to some more whisky.”

“Thanks. Well, and about the old man? By-the-by, did you see anything of the other two old men?”

“We found all three. The man whom we found alive sat on a sort of throne in what had evidently been a courtyard, or open-air audience chamber, and the other two sat one at each side of him. We thought they were all dead. One had been killed by a blow from a fragment of shell which had struck him full in the chest; on the other there was no mark. We buried the other two.”

“Were they as old as the third in appearance?”

“Quite. Old as Adam.”

“Leyland—as touching that old man’s death on board the German war-ship: did you see the phenomenon which your wife describes?”

“As plainly as I see you. We all saw it. I never used to believe in anything of that sort—never used to think of such things, in fact, but I saw that, Plowden, as clearly as I ever saw anything.”

“And the old man was dead?”

“Oh, well, our doctor and the German doctor argued a lot about astral bodies and so on, but he was dead as a door nail—a perfect walking skeleton, too, he was, Plowden! I’d give ten years’ pay to know who that man was, what he’d seen, what—No, by Jove, though, I wouldn’t! No, thank God,

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no! From searching into the unseen may the Lord preserve us!"

"Amen!" I said. "Well, I'm going, Leyland."

"Good-night," he said, as we shook hands. "By the way, there's one thing Cynthia forgot to tell you."

"What is that?"

"That the Dutch skipper asked her to marry him. Never saw a man so hard hit in my life."

"It appears to me," I said as I went out, "that you must have been hard hit yourself. Let's see—you were all married on the same day, weren't you,—you and Cynthia, and Graham and Evelyn?"

"Yes," he said, "and the Deutscher sent the brides the biggest bouquets you ever saw, and a note to Cynthia telling her that the sun had set upon his little day for ever. However, he brought his wife to see us the other week—a nice girl, but rather broad in the beam."

"So that all ends happily," I said.

"All ends happily. I say, which do you consider the finest youngster—ours, or Graham's? I only want to know so that I can tell their mothers, next time they squabble about it."

I left him and walked away laughing. But as I went along my way and came where the full winter moonlight shone calmly upon the frosted expanse of Trafalgar Square, the laughter died out of me, and I began to think of other things. I looked across the Square—the area of desolation of which so many had told me, the appearance of which more than one tongue had endeavoured

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to describe to me, was no longer a waste place. London the Marvellous had re-asserted all her powers and risen from the ashes wherein she had lain, and her life flowed on as of yore, with its myriad undercurrents of joy and woe, and happiness and misery, and all the things that spring out of the complex web of her vast, seething, many-coloured life. And here at least, where the blow had fallen, there was no sign of it, nor of any blow to come—there was nought indeed but the signs and evidences of Empire.

For here, where London the Marvellous was for a brief moment crushed and staggered, in the heart of the world—here, where the four lions couch at the feet of the hero of the sea—within the circle of a released carrier-pigeon's first flight, all the strength and power of the Empire is comprised. From within that circle, as by invisible wires, go the bonds of Empire—ever widening, ever being strengthened. This is life—to hear the world's wild heart beating close to your ear, to feel its fierce, keen, but always purposeful pulsation throbbing beneath your touch. Are these streets, stretching away from you as the spokes of a wheel stretch from the hub, commonplace of aspect and dingy of colour? But they are the haunts of the moles who go on scraping the earth persistently and patiently until they have fashioned a kingdom and thrown out high towers above it. This is the very prospective of Empire and Government—when you gaze along yonder street your glance goes past the historic buildings which flank it to things and scenes far beyond, to

By Way of Epilogue

wide stretches of continent, to lonely islands, to little scraps of land where the flag of England floats undaunted. Heart of the world!—and more to every Englishman, for there is not a stone about it, new or old, that does not cry out its pæan of praise to the life that throbs and palpitates about it.

*Ever the faith endures,
 England, my England—
Take and break us : we are yours,
 England, my own !
Life is good ; and joy runs high
Between English earth and sky :
Death is death, but we shall die
 To the song on your bugles blown,
 England—
 To the stars on your bugles blown !*

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