

FICTION

Louis Joseph Vance

The Bandbox

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

THE BANDBOX

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

THE BANDBOX
CYNTHIA-OF-THE-MINUTE
NO MAN'S LAND
THE FORTUNE HUNTER
THE POOL OF FLAME
THE BRONZE BELL
THE BLACK BAG
THE BRASS BOWL
THE PRIVATE WAR
TERENCE O'ROURKE



"Now, sir!" she exclaimed, turning

FRONTISPIECE. See [Page 83](#)

The Bandbox

BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

Author of "The Brass Bowl," "The Bronze Bell,"
"Cynthia-of-the-Minute," etc.



WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS
BY ARTHUR I. KELLER

A. L. BURT COMPANY

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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Published, April, 1912
Reprinted, April, 1912 (three times)

TO
LEWIS BUDDY III

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THE BANDBOX

I

INTRODUCING MR. IFF

At half-past two of a sunny, sultry afternoon late in the month of August, Mr. Benjamin Staff sat at table in the dining-room of the Authors' Club, moodily munching a morsel of cheese and a segment of cast-iron biscuit and wondering what he must do to be saved from the death-in-life of sheer ennui.

A long, lank gentleman, surprisingly thin, of a slightly saturnine cast: he was not only unhappy, he looked it. He was alone and he was lonely; he was an American and a man of sentiment (though he didn't look *that*) and he wanted to go home; to sum up, he found himself in love and in London at one and the same time, and felt precisely as ill at ease in the one as in the other of these, to him, exotic circumstances.

Inconceivable as it may seem that any rational man should yearn for New York in August, that and nothing less was what Staff wanted with all his heart. He wanted to go home and swelter and be swindled by taxicab drivers and snubbed by imported head-waiters; he wanted to patronise the subway at peril of asphyxiation and to walk down Fifth Avenue at that witching hour when electric globes begin to dot the dusk of evening--pale moons of a world of steel and stone; he wanted to ride in elevators instead of lifts, in trolley-cars instead of trams; he wanted to go to a ball-game at the Polo Grounds, to dine dressed as he pleased, to insult his intelligence with a roof-garden show if he felt so disposed, and to see for himself just how much of Town had been torn down in the two months of his exile and what they were going to put up in its place. He wanted, in short, his own people; more specifically he wanted just one of them, meaning to marry her if she'd have him.

Now to be homesick and lovesick all at once is a tremendously disturbing state of affairs. So influenced, the strongest men are prone to folly. Staff, for instance, had excellent reason to doubt the advisability of leaving London just then, with an unfinished play on his hands; but he was really no more than a mere, normal human being, and he did want very badly to go home. If it was a sharp struggle, it was a short one that prefaced his decision.

Of a sudden he rose, called for his bill and paid it, called for his hat and stick, got them, and resolutely--yet with a furtive air, as one who would throw a dogging conscience off the scent--fled the premises of his club, shaping a course through Whitehall and Charing Cross to Cockspur Street, where, with the unerring instinct of a homing pigeon, he dodged hastily into the booking-office of a steamship company.

Now Mystery is where one finds it, and Romantic Adventure is as a rule to be come upon infesting the same identical premises. Mr. Staff was not seeking mysteries and the last role in the world in which he could fancy himself was that of Romantic Adventurer. But in retrospect he can see quite clearly that it was there, in the humdrum and prosaic setting of a steamship booking-office, that he first stumbled (all unwittingly) into the toils of his Great Adventure.

When he entered, there was but one other person on the outer or public side of the booking-counter; and he, sticking close in a far corner and inaudibly conferring with a clerk, seemed so slight and unpretending a body that Staff overlooked his existence altogether until circumstances obliged him to recognise it.

The ignored person, on the other hand, showed an instant interest in the appearance of Mr. Staff. You might have thought that he had been waiting for the latter to come in--absurd as this might seem, in view of the fact that Staff had made up his mind to book for home only within the last quarter-hour. None the less, on sight of him this other patron of the company, who had seemed till then to be of two minds as to what he wanted, straightened up and bent a freshened interest on the cabin-plot which the clerk had spread out upon the counter for his advisement. And a moment after Staff had audibly stated his wishes, the other prodded a certain spot of the chart with a thin and fragile forefinger.

"I'll take this one," he said quietly.

"Upper'r lower?" enquired his clerk.

"Lower."

"Then-Q," said the clerk...

Meanwhile Staff had caught the eye of an impregnable young Englishman behind the counter; and, the latter coming forward, he opened negotiations with a succinct statement:

"I want to book on the Autocratic, sailing tomorrow from Liverpool, if I'm not mistaken."

"Quite so," said his clerk, not without condescension. "For yourself, may I ask?"

"For myself alone."

"Then-Q." The clerk fetched a cabin-plot.

"I'm afraid, sir," he said, removing a pencil from behind his ear the better to make his meaning clear, "there's not much choice. It's quite late to book, you know; and this is the rush season for westbound traffic; everything's just about full up."

"I understand; but still you can make room for me somewhere, I hope."

"Oh, yes. Quite so, indeed. It's only a question of what you'd like. Now we have a *cabine de luxe*--"

"Not for me," said Staff firmly.

"Then-Q.... The only other accommodation I can offer you is a two-berth stateroom on the main-deck."

"An outside room?"

"Yes, sir. You can see for yourself. Here it is: berths 432 and 433. You'll find it quite cosy, I'm sure."

Staff nodded, eyeing the cubicle indicated by the pencil-point.

"That'll do," said he. "I'll take it."

"Then-Q. Upper'r lower berth, sir?"

"Both," said Staff, trying not to look conscious--and succeeding.

"Both, sir?"--in tones of pained expostulation.

"Both!"--reiterated in a manner that challenged curiosity.

"Ah," said the clerk wearily, "but, you see, I thought I understood you to say you were alone."

"I did; but I want privacy."

"I see. Then-Q."--as who should say: *Another mad Amayrican*.

With this the clerk took himself off to procure a blank ticket.

While he waited, Staff was entertained by snatches of a colloquy at the far end of the counter, where the other patron was being catechised as to his pedigree by the other booking-clerk. What he heard ran something to the following effect:

"What did you say the name was, sir?"

"*The name?*"

"If you please--"

"What name?"

"Your name, sir."

"I didn't say, did I?"

"No, sir."

"Ah! I thought not."

Pause; then the clerk, patiently: "Do you mind giving me your name, sir, so that I may fill in your ticket?"

"I'd r'ally rather not; but seein' as it's you and you make a point of it--Iff."

Pause.... "Beg pardon?"

"Iff."

"If what, sir?"

"I-double-F, Iff: a name, not a joke. I-F-F--William Howard Iff. W. H. Iff, Whiff: joke."

"Ow-w?"

"But you needn't laugh."

With dignity: "I was not intending to laugh, sir."

Staff could hardly refrain from refreshing himself with a glance at the individual so singularly labelled. Appraising him covertly, he saw a man whose stature was quite as much shorter than the normal as his own was longer, but hardly less thin. Indeed, Staff was in the habit of defining his own style of architecture as Gothic, and with reasonable excuse; but reviewing the physical geography of Mr. Iff, the word *emaciation* bobbed to the surface of the literary mentality: Iff was really astonishingly slight of build. Otherwise he was rather round-shouldered; his head was small, bird-like, thinly thatched with hair of a faded tow colour; his face was sensitively tinted with the faintest of flushes beneath a skin of natural pallor, and wore an expression curiously naive and yet shrewd--an effect manufactured by setting the eyes of a child, round and dimly blue, in a mask of weathered maturity.

Now while Staff was receiving this impression, Mr. Iff looked sharply round; their glances crossed. Primarily embarrassed to be caught rudely staring, Staff was next and thoroughly shocked to detect a distinct if momentary eclipse of one of Mr. Iff's pale blue eyes. Bluntly, openly, deliberately, Mr. Iff winked at Mr. Staff, and then, having accomplished his amazement and discomfiture, returned promptly, twinkling, to the baiting of his clerk.

"Your age, sir?"

Mr. Iff enquired in simple surprise: "Do you really care to know?"

"It's required, sir, by the--"

"Oh, well--if I must! But, mind you, strictly as man to man: you may write me down a freeborn American citizen, entitled to vote and more 'n half white."

"Beg pardon?"

"I say, I am an adult--"

"Oh!" The clerk wrote; then, bored, resumed: "Married or single, please?"

"I'm a spinster--"

"O-w?"

"Honestly--neither married nor unmarried."

"Then-Q"--resignedly. "Your business--?"

But here Staff's clerk touched the exasperated catechist on the shoulder and said something inaudible. The response, while equally inaudible, seemed to convey a sense of profound personal shock. Staff was conscious that Mr. Iff's clerk glanced reproachfully in his direction, as if to suggest that he wouldn't have believed it of him.

Divining that he and Mr. Iff were bargaining for the same accommodations, Staff endeavoured to assume an attitude of distinguished obliviousness to the entire proceeding; and would have succeeded but for the immediate and impatient action of Mr. Iff.

That latter, seizing the situation, glanced askance at dignified Mr. Staff, then smiled a whimsical smile, cocked his small head to one side and approached him with an open and ingenuous air.

"If it's only a question of which berth," said he, "I'm quite willing to forfeit my option on the lower, Mr. Staff."

That gentleman started and stared.

"Oh, lord, man!" said Iff tolerantly--"as if your portrait hadn't been published more times than you can remember!--as if all the world were unaware of Benjamin Staff, novelist!"

There was subtle flattery in this; and flattery (we are told) will warm the most austere of authors--which Staff was not. He said "Oh!" and smiled his slow, wry smile; and Mr. Iff, remarking these symptoms of a thaw with interest and encouragement, pressed his point.

"I don't mind an upper, really--only chose the lower because the choice was mine, at the moment. If you prefer it--"

"The trouble is," Staff interrupted, "I want the whole room."

"Oh!... Friend with you?"

"No; but I had some notion of doing a little work on the way over."

"Writing? I see. But if that's all--!" Mr. Iff routed a negligible quibble with an airy flirt of his delicate hand. "Trust me; you'll hardly ever be reminded of my existence--I'm *that* quiet. And besides, I spend most of my time in the smoking-room. And I don't snore, and I'm never seasick.... By the way," he added anxiously, "do or are you?"

"Never--"

"Then we'll get along famously. I'll cheerfully take the upper, and even should I tumble out on top of you, you'd never know it: my weight is nothing--hardly that. Now what d' you say? Is it a go?"

"But--I don't know you--"

"Business of making a noise like an Englishman!" commented Mr. Iff with bitter scorn.

"--well enough to accept such a favour from you. I'll take second choice myself--the upper, I mean."

"You won't; but we'll settle that on shipboard," said Mr. Iff promptly. "As for knowing me--business of introducing myself. Mr. Staff, I want you to shake hands with my friend, Mr. Iff. W. H. Iff, Whiff: sometimes so-called: merry wheeze based on my typographical make-up; once a joke, now so grey with age I generally pull it myself, thus saving new acquaintances the mental strain. Practical philanthropy--what? Whim of mine."

"Indeed?"

"Believe *me*. You've no notion how folks suffer in the first throes of that giddy pun. And then when it falls flat--naturally *I* can't laugh like a fool at it any longer--*blooie!*" said Mr. Iff with expression--"like that--*blooie!*--they *do* feel so cheap. Wherefore I maintain I do humanity a service when I beat it to that moth-eaten joke. You follow me?"

Staff laughed.

"Then it's all settled. Good! We shan't be in one another's way. You'll see."

"Unless you talk in your sleep, too."

Mr. Iff looked unspeakable reproach. "You'll soon get accustomed to me," he said, brightening--"won't mind my merry prattle any more 'n the song of a giddy humming-bird."

He turned and saw their booking-clerks in patient waiting behind the counter. "Ah, there you are, eh? Well, it's all settled...."

Thus was the thing accomplished.

And shortly thereafter these two paused in parting at the door.

"Going my way?" enquired Mr. Iff.

Staff named whatever destination he had in mind.

"Sorry. I go t'other way. Take care of yourself. See you tomorrow."

"Good-bye," said Staff, and took himself briskly off.

But Mr. Iff did not at once go in the opposite direction. In fact, he moved no more than a door or two away, and then stopped, apparently fascinated by an especially stupid shop-window show.

He had very quick eyes, had Mr. Iff, so alert and observant that they had made him alive to a circumstance which had altogether escaped Staff's notice--a trifling incident that took place just as they were on the point of parting.

While still they were standing in the doorway, a motor-cab, plunging down Haymarket, had swooped in a wide curve as if meaning to pull in at the curb in front of the steamship company's office. The cab carried a solitary passenger--a remarkably pretty young woman--and on its roof a remarkably large and ornate bandbox.

It was, in fact, the bandbox which had first fixed the interest of Mr. Iff. Only an introspective vision, indeed, such as

that of the imaginative and thoughtful Mr. Staff, could have overlooked the approach of a bandbox so big and upstanding, so profusely beflowered and so prominently displayed.

Now before the cab could stop, its fare, who had been bending forward and peering out of the window as if anxious to recognise her destination, started still farther forward, seized the speaking-tube and spoke into its mouthpiece in a manner of sharp urgency. And promptly the driver swerved out from the curb and swung his car away down Pall Mall.

If it was mere inquisitiveness that held Mr. Iff rooted to the spot, gaping at that uninteresting window show, it served to discover him in the guise of an admirably patient person. Fully fifteen minutes elapsed before the return of the motor-cab was signalled unmistakably by the blatant bandbox bobbing back high above the press of traffic. And when this happened, Mr. Iff found some further business with the steamship company, and quietly and unobtrusively slipped back into the booking-office.

As he did so the cab stopped at the curb and the pretty young woman jumped out and followed Mr. Iff across the threshold--noticing him no more than had Mr. Staff, to begin with.

II

THE BANDBOX

In the playhouses of France, a hammering on the stage alone heralds the rising of the curtain to disclose illusory realms of romance. Precisely so with Mr. Staff, upon the door of whose lodging, at nine o'clock the next morning, a knocking announced the first overt move against his peace of mind.

At that time, Staff, all unconscious of his honourable peril, was standing in the middle of the floor of the inner room (his lodgings comprised two) and likewise in the approximate geographical centre of a chaotic assemblage of assorted wearing apparel and other personal impedimenta.

He was wondering, confusedly, how in thunderation he was to manage to cram all that confounded truck into the limited amount of trunk space at his command. He was also wondering, resentfully in the names of a dozen familiar spirits, where he had put his pipe: it's simply maddening, the way a fellow's pipe will persist in getting lost at such critical times as when he's packing up to catch a train with not a minute to spare.... In short, so preoccupied was Staff that the knocking had to be repeated before he became objectively alive to it.

Then, confidentially, he said: "What the devil *now*?"

In louder tones calculated to convey an impression of intense impatience, he cried: "Come *in*!"

He heard the outer door open, and immediately, upon an impulse esoteric even in his own understanding, he chose to pretend to be extravagantly busy--as busy as by rights he should have been. For a minute or longer he acted most vividly the part of a man madly bent on catching his train though he were to perish of the attempt. And this despite a suspicion that he played to a limited audience of one, and that one unappreciative of the finer phases of everyday histrionic impersonation: an audience answering to the name of Milly, whose lowly station of life was that of housemaid-in-lodgings and whose imagination was as ill-nourished and sluggish as might be expected of one whose wages were two-and-six a week.

Remembering this in time, the novelty of make-believe palled on Staff. Not that alone, but he could hear Milly insisting in accents not in the least apologetic: "Beg pardon, sir..."

He paused in well-feigned surprise and looked enquiringly over his shoulder, as though to verify a surmise that somebody had spoken. Such proving to be the case, he turned round to confront Milly--Milly true to type, wearing a grimy matutinal apron, an expression half sleepy, half sullen, and a horrid soot smudge on her ripe, red, right cheek.

In this guise (so sedulously does life itself ape the conventions of its literature and drama) Milly looked as lifelike as though viewed through the illusion of footlights. Otherwise, as Staff never failed to be gratified to observe, she differed radically from the stock article of our stage. For one thing, she refrained from dropping her *aitches* and stumbling over them on her first entrance in order merely to win a laugh and so lift her little role from the common rut of "lines" to the dignity of "a bit." For another, she seldom if ever brandished that age-honoured wand of her office, a bedraggled feather-duster. Nor was she by any means in love with the tenant of the fust-floor-front.

But though Staff was grateful for Milly because of this strong and unconventional individuality of hers, he wasn't at all pleased to be interrupted, and he made nothing whatever of the ostensible excuse for the interruption; the latter being a

very large and brilliantly illuminated bandbox, which Milly was offering him in pantomime.

"It have just come," said Milly calmly, in response to his enquiring stare. "Where would you wish me to put it, sir?"

"Put what?"

Milly gesticulated eloquently with the bandbox.

"That thing?" said Staff with scorn.

"Yessir."

"I don't want you to put it anywhere. Take it away."

"But it's for you, sir."

"Impossible. Some mistake. Please don't bother--just take it away. There's a good girl."

Milly's disdain of this blandishment was plainly visible in the added elevation of her already sufficiently tucked-up nose.

"Beg pardon, sir," she persisted coldly, "but it's got your name on it, and the boy as left it just now asked if you lived here."

Staff's frown portrayed indignation, incredulity and impatience.

"Mistake, I tell you. I haven't been buying any millinery. Absurd!"

"Beg pardon, sir, but you can see as it's addressed to you."

It was: the box being held out for examination, Staff saw plainly that it was tagged with a card inscribed in fashionably slapdash feminine handwriting with what was unquestionably the name and local address of Benjamin Staff, Esq.

Because of this, he felt called upon to subject the box to more minute inspection.

It was nothing more nor less than the everyday milliners' hat-box of commerce: a capacious edifice of stout pasteboard neatly plastered with wall-paper in whose design narrow stripes of white alternated with aggressive stripes of brown, the whole effectively setting off an abundance of purple blossoms counterfeiting no flower known to botanists. And one gibbous side was further decorated with bold black script advertising the establishment of its origin.

"*Maison Lucille, New Bond Street, West,*" Staff read aloud, completely bewildered. "But I never heard of the d---- the place!"

Helplessly he sought Milly's eyes, and helpfully Milly rose to the occasion.

"Nossir," said she; and that was all.

"I know nothing whatever about the thing," Staff declared severely. "It's all a mistake. Take it away--it'll be sent for as soon as the error's discovered."

A glimmer of intelligence shone luminous in Milly's eyes. "Mebbe," she suggested under inspiration of curiosity-- "Mebbe if you was to open it, you'd find a note or--or something."

"Bright girl!" applauded Staff. "You open it. I'm too busy--packing up--no time--"

And realising how swiftly the golden minutes were fleeting beyond recall, he cast desperately about for his pipe.

By some miracle he chanced to find it, and so resumed packing.

Behind him, Milly made noises with tissue-paper.

Presently he heard a smothered "O sir!" and looked round to discover the housemaid in an attitude of unmitigated adoration before what he could not deny was a perfect dream of a hat--the sort of a hat that only a woman or a society reporter could do justice to. In his vision it bore a striking resemblance to a Gainsborough with all modern improvements--as most big hats do to most men. Briefly, it was big and black and trimmed with an atmosphere of costly simplicity, a monstrous white "willow" plume and a huge buckle of brilliants. It impressed him, hazily, as just the very hat to look ripping on an ash-blonde. Aside from this he was aware of no sensation other than one of aggravated annoyance.

Milly, to the reverse extreme, was charmed to distraction, thrilled to the core of her and breathless--though by no means dumb. Women are never dumb with admiration.

"O sir!" she breathed in ecstasy--"it's a real creashun!"

"Daresay," Staff conceded sourly. "Did you find a note?"

"And the price-tag, sir--it says *twen-ty* five pounds!"

"I hope there's a receipted bill, then.... Do you see anything remotely resembling a note--or something?"

With difficulty subduing her transports--"I'll see, sir," said Milly.

Grunting with exasperation, Staff bent over a trunk and stuffed things into it until Milly committed herself to the definite announcement: "I don't seem to find nothing, sir."

"Look again, please."

Again Milly pawed the tissue-paper.

"There ain't nothing at all, sir," she declared finally.

Staff stood up, thrust his hands into his pockets and champed the stem of his pipe--scowling.

"It is a bit odd, sir, isn't it?--having this sent to you like this and you knowing nothing at all about it!"

Staff said something indistinguishable because of the obstructing pipe-stem.

"It's perfectly beautiful, sir--a won'erful hat, really."

"The devil fly away with it!"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said, I'm simply crazy about it, myself."

"Oh, did you, sir?"

"Please put it back and tie it up."

"Yessir." Reluctantly Milly restored the creation to its tissue-paper nest. "And what would you wish me to do with it now, sir?" she resumed when at length the ravishing vision was hidden away.

"Do with it?" stormed the vexed gentleman. "I don't care what the d--ickens you do with it. It isn't my hat. Take it away. Throw it into the street. Send it back to the place it came from. Give it ... or, wait!"

Pausing for breath and thought, he changed his mind. The hat was too valuable to be treated with disrespect, no matter who was responsible for the mistake. Staff felt morally obligated to secure its return to the Maison Lucille.

"Look here, Milly ..."

"Yessir?"

"I'll just telephone ... No! Half a minute!"

He checked, on the verge of yielding to an insane impulse. Being a native of New York, it had been his instinctive thought to call up the hat-shop and demand the return of its delivery-boy. Fortunately the instinct of a true dramatist moved him to sketch hastily the ground-plot of the suggested tragedy.

In *Act I (Time: the Present)* he saw himself bearding the telephone in its lair--that is, in the darkest and least accessible recess of the ground-floor hallway. In firm, manful accents, befitting an intrepid soul, he details a number to the central operator--and meekly submits to an acidulated correction of his Amurrikin accent.

Act II (fifteen minutes have elapsed): He is clinging desperately to the receiver, sustained by hope alone while he attends sympathetically to the sufferings of an English lady trying to get in communication with the Army and Navy Stores.

Act III (ten minutes later): He has exhausted himself grinding away at an obsolete rotary bell-call. Abruptly his ears are enchanted by a far, thin, frigid moan. It says: "*Are* you theah?" Responding savagely "NO!" he dashes the receiver back into its hook and flings away to discover that he has lost both train and steamer. Tag line: For this is London in

the Twentieth Century. *Curtain: End of the Play...*

Disenchanted by consideration of this tentative synopsis, the playwright consulted his watch. Already the incident of the condemnable bandbox had eaten up much invaluable time. He would see himself doomed to unending perdition if he would submit to further hindrance on its behalf.

"Milly," said he with decision, "take that ... thing down-stairs, and tell Mrs. Gigg to telephone the hat-shop to call for it."

"Yessir."

"And after that, call me a taxi. Tell it to wait. I'll be ready by ten or know--"

Promptly retiring, Milly took with her, in addition to the bandbox, a confused impression of a room whose atmosphere was thick with flying garments, in the wild swirl of which a lanky lunatic danced weirdly, muttering uncouth incantations....

Forty minutes later (on the stroke of ten) Mr. Staff, beautifully groomed after his habit, his manner (superbly nonchalant) denying that he had ever known reason why he should take a single step in haste, followed his trunks down to the sidewalk and, graciously bidding his landlady adieu, presented Milly with a keepsake in the shape of a golden coin of the realm.

A taxicab, heavy-laden with his things, fretted before the door. Staff nodded to the driver.

"Euston," said he; "and a shilling extra if you drive like sin."

"Right you are, sir."

In the act of entering the cab, Staff started back with bitter imprecations.

Mrs. Gigg, who had not quite closed the front door, opened it wide to his remonstrant voice.

"I say, what's this bandbox doing in my cab? I thought I told Milly--"

"Sorry, sir; I forgot," Mrs. Gigg interposed--"bein' that flustered--"

"Well?"

"The woman what keeps the 'at-shop said as 'ow the 'at wasn't to come back, sir. She said a young lidy bought it yestiddy ahfternoon and awsked to 'ave it sent you this mornin' before nine o'clock."

"The deuce she did!" said Staff blankly.

"An' the young lidy said as 'ow she'd write you a note explynin'. So I tells Milly not to bother you no more abaht it, but put the 'at-box in the keb, sir--wishin' not to 'inder you."

"Thoughtful of you, I'm sure. But didn't the--ah--woman who keeps the hat-shop mention the name of the--ah--person who purchased the hat?"

By the deepening of its corrugations, the forehead of Mrs. Gigg betrayed the intensity of her mental strain. Her eyes wore a far-away look and her lips moved, at first silently. Then--"I ain't sure, sir, as she did nime the lidy, but *if* she did, it was somethin' like Burnside, I fancy--or else Postlethwayt."

"Nor Jones nor Brown? Perhaps Robinson? Think, Mrs. Gigg! Not Robinson?"

"I'm sure it may 'ave been eyether of them, sir, now you puts it to me pl'in."

"That makes everything perfectly clear. Thank you so much."

With this, Staff turned hastily away, nodded to his driver to cut along, and with groans and lamentations squeezed himself into what space the bandbox did not demand of the interior of the vehicle.

III

On the boat-train, en route for Liverpool, Mr. Staff found plenty of time to consider the affair of the foundling bandbox in every aspect with which a lively imagination could invest it; but to small profit. In fact, he was able to think of little else, with the damned thing smirking impishly at him from its perch on the opposite seat. He was vexed to exasperation by the consciousness that he couldn't guess why or by whom it had been so cavalierly thrust into his keeping. Consequently he cudgelled his wits unmercifully in exhaustive and exhausting attempts to clothe it with a plausible *raison d'etre*.

He believed firmly that the Maison Lucille had acted in good faith; the name of Staff was too distinctive to admit of much latitude for error. Nor was it difficult to conceive that this or that young woman of his acquaintance might have sent him the hat to take home for her--thus ridding herself of a cumbersome package and neatly saddling him with all the bother of getting the thing through the customs. But ...! Who was there in London just then that knew him well enough so to presume upon his good nature? None that he could call to mind. Besides, how in the name of all things inexplicable had anybody found out his intention of sailing on the Autocratic, that particular day?--something of which he himself had yet to be twenty-four hours aware!

His conclusions may be summed up under two heads: (a) there wasn't any answer; (b) it was all an unmitigated nuisance. And so thinking, divided between despair and disgust, Mr. Staff gave the problem up against his arrival on board the steamship. There remained to him a single gleam of hope: a note of explanation had been promised; he thought it just possible that it might have been sent to the steamship rather than to his lodgings in London.

Therefore, the moment he set foot aboard the ship, he consigned his hand-luggage to a steward, instructing the fellow where to take it, and hurried off to the dining-saloon where, upon a table round which passengers buzzed like flies round a sugar-lump, letters and telegrams for the departing were displayed. But he could find nothing for Mr. Benjamin Staff.

Disappointed and indignant to the point of suppressed profanity, he elbowed out of the thronged saloon just in time to espy a steward (quite another steward: not him with whom Staff had left his things) struggling up the main companionway under the handicap of several articles of luggage which Staff didn't recognise, and one which he assured himself he did: a bandbox as like the cause of all his perturbation as one piano-case resembles another.

Now if quite out of humour with the bandbox and all that appertained thereunto, the temper of the young man was such that he was by no means prepared to see it confiscated without his knowledge or consent. In two long strides he overhauled the steward, plucked him back with a peremptory hand, and abashed him with a stern demand:

"I say! where the devil do you think you're going, my man?"

His man showed a face of dashed amazement.

"Beg pardon, sir! Do you mean *me*?"

"Most certainly I mean you. That's my bandbox. What are you doing with it?"

Looking guiltily from his face to the article in question, the steward flushed and stammered--culpability incarnate, thought Staff.

"Your bandbox, sir?"

"Do you think I'd go charging all over this ship for a silly bandbox that wasn't mine?"

"But, sir--"

"I tell you, it's mine. It's tagged with my name. Where's the steward I left it with?"

"But, sir," pleaded the accused, "this belongs to this lidy 'ere. I'm just tikin' it to 'er stiteroom, sir."

Staff's gaze followed the man's nod, and for the first time he became aware that a young woman stood a step or two above them, half turned round to attend to the passage, her air and expression seeming to indicate a combination of amusement and impatience.

Precipitately the young man removed his hat. Through the confusion clouding his thoughts, he both foreglimpsed humiliation and was dimly aware of a personality of force and charm: of a well-poised figure cloaked in a light pongee travelling-wrap; of a face that seemed to consist chiefly in dark eyes glowing lambent in the shadow of a wide-brimmed, flopsy hat. He was sensitive to a hint of breeding and reserve in the woman's attitude; as though (he thought) the contretemps diverted and engaged her more than he did who was responsible for it.

He addressed her in a diffident and uncertain voice: "I beg pardon...."

"The box is mine," she affirmed with a cool and even gravity. "The steward is right."

He choked back a counterclaim, which would have been unmannerly, and in his embarrassment did something that he instantly realised was even worse, approaching downright insolence in that it demanded confirmation of her word: he bent forward and glanced at the tag on the bandbox.

It was labelled quite legibly with the name of Miss Eleanor Searle.

He coloured, painfully contrite. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "I--ah--happen to have with me the precise duplicate of this box. I didn't at first realise that it might have a--ah--twin."

The young woman inclined her head distantly.

"I understand," she said, turning away. "Come, steward, if you please."

"I'm very sorry--very," Staff said hastily in intense mortification.

Miss Searle did not reply; she had already resumed her upward progress. Her steward followed, openly grinning.

Since it is not considered good form to kick a steward for knowing an ass when he meets one, Staff could no more than turn away, disguise the unholy emotions that fermented in his heart, and seek his stateroom.

"It *had* to be me!" he groaned.

Stateroom 432-433 proved to be very much occupied when he found it--chiefly, to be sure, by the bandbox, which took up most of the floor space. Round it were grouped in various attitudes of dejection sundry other pieces of travelling-gear and Mr. Iff. The latter was sitting on the edge of the lower berth, his hands in his pockets, his brow puckered with perplexity, his gaze fixed in fascination to the bandbox. On Staff's entrance he looked up.

"Hello!" he said crisply.

"Afternoon," returned Staff with all the morose dignity appropriate to severely wounded self-esteem.

Iff indicated the bandbox with a delicate gesture.

"No wonder," he observed mildly, "you wanted the ship to yourself."

Staff grunted irritably and, picking his way through and over the mound of luggage, deposited himself on the transom opposite the berths.

"A present for the missis, I take it?" pursued Iff.

"You might take it, and welcome, for all of me.... Only it isn't mine. *And* I am not married."

"Pardon!" murmured Mr. Iff. "But if it isn't yours," he suggested logically, "what the deuce-and-all is it doing here?"

"I'm supposed to be taking it home for a friend."

"Ah! I see.... A very, *very* dear friend, of course....?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Staff regarded the bandbox with open malevolence. "If I had my way," he said vindictively, "I'd lift it a kick over the side and be rid of it."

"How you do take on, to be sure," Iff commented placidly. "If I may be permitted to voice my inmost thought: you seem uncommon' peeved."

"I am."

"Could I soothe your vexed soul in any way?"

"You might tell me how to get quit of the blasted thing."

"I'll try, if you'll tell me how you got hold of it."

"Look here!" Staff suddenly aroused to a perception of the fact that he was by way of being artfully pumped. "Does this matter interest you very much indeed?"

"No more, apparently, than it annoys you.... And it is quite possible that, in the course of time, we *might* like to shut the door.... But, as far as that is, I don't mind admitting I'm a nosey little beast. If you feel it your duty to snub me, my dear fellow, by all means go to it. I don't mind--and I dessay I deserve it."

This proved irresistible; Staff's humour saved his temper. To the twinkle in Iff's faded blue eyes he returned a reluctant smile that ended in open laughter.

"It's just this way," he explained somewhat to his own surprise, under the influence of an unforeseen gush of liking for this good-humoured wisp of a man--"I feel I'm being shamelessly imposed upon. Just as I was leaving my rooms this morning this hat-box was sent to me, anonymously. I assume that some cheeky girl I know has sent it to me to tote home for her. It's a certificated nuisance--but that isn't all. There happens to be a young woman named Searle on board, who has an exact duplicate of this infernal contraption. A few moments ago I saw it, assumed it must be mine, quite naturally claimed it, and was properly called down in the politest, most crushing way imaginable. Hence this headache."

"So!" said Mr. Iff. "So that is why he doesn't love his dear little bandbox!... A Miss Earle, I think you said?"

"No--Searle. At least, that was the name on her luggage."

"Oh--Searle, eh?"

"You don't happen to know her, by any chance?" Staff demanded, not without a trace of animation.

"Who? Me? Nothing like that," Iff disclaimed hastily.

"I just thought you might," said Staff, disappointed.

For some moments the conversation languished. Then Staff rose and pressed the call-button.

"What's up?" asked Iff.

"Going to get rid of this," said Staff with an air of grim determination.

"Just what I was going to suggest. But don't do anything hasty--anything you'll be sorry for."

"Leave that to me, please."

From his tone the assumption was not unwarrantable that Staff had never yet done anything that he had subsequently found cause to regret. Pensively punishing an inoffensive wrist, Iff subsided.

A steward showed himself in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?"

"Are you our steward?" asked Staff.

"Yes, sir."

"Your name?"

"Orde, sir."

"Well, Orde, can you stow this thing some place out of our way?"

Orde eyed the bandbox doubtfully. "I dessay I can find a plice for it," he said at length.

"Do, please."

"Very good, sir. Then-Q." Possessing himself of the bandbox, Orde retired.

"And now," suggested Iff with much vivacity, "s'pose we unpack and get settled."

And they proceeded to distribute their belongings, sharing the meagre conveniences of their quarters with the impartiality of courteous and experienced travellers....

It was rather late in the afternoon before Staff found an opportunity to get on deck for the first time. The hour was golden with the glory of a westering sun. The air was bland, the sea quiet. The Autocratic had settled into her stride, bearing swiftly down St. George's Channel for Queenstown, where she was scheduled to touch at midnight. Her decks presented scenes of animation familiar to the eyes of a weathered voyager.

There was the customary confusion of petticoats and sporadic displays of steamer-rugs along the ranks of deck-chairs. Deck-stewards darted hither and yon, wearing the harassed expressions appropriate to persons of their calling--doubtless to a man praying for that bright day when some public benefactor should invent a steamship having at least two leeward sides. A clatter of tongues assailed the ear, the high, sweet accents of American women predominating.

The masculine element of the passenger-list with singular unanimity--like birds of prey wheeling in ever diminishing circles above their quarry--drifted imperceptibly but steadily aft, toward the smoking-room. The two indispensable adjuncts to a successful voyage had already put in their appearance: *item*, the Pest, an overdressed, overgrown, shrill-voiced female-child, blundering into everybody's way and shrieking impertinences; *item*, a short, stout, sedulously hilarious gentleman who oozed public-spirited geniality at every pore and insisted on buttonholing inoffensive strangers and demanding that they enter an embryonic deck-quoit tournament--in short, discovering every known symptom of being the Life and Soul of the Ship.

Staff dodged both by grace of discretion and good fortune, and having found his deck-chair, dropped into it with a sigh of content, composing himself for rest and thought. His world seemed very bright with promise, just then; he felt that, if he had acted on impetuous impulse, he had not acted unwisely: only a few more hours--then the pause at Queenstown--then the brief, seven-day stretch across the Atlantic to home and Alison Landis!

It seemed almost too good to be true. He all but purred with his content in the prospect.

Of course, he had a little work to do, but he didn't mind that; it would help immensely to beguile the tedium of the voyage; and all he required in order to do it well was the moral courage to shut himself up for a few hours each day and to avoid as far as possible social entanglements....

At just about this stage in his meditations he was somewhat rudely brought back to earth--or, more properly, to deck.

A voice shrieked excitedly: "*Why*, Mr. Staff!"

To be precise, it miscalled him "Stahf": a shrill, penetrating, overcultivated, American voice making an attempt only semi-successful to cope with the broad vowels of modern English enunciation.

Staff looked up, recognised its owner, and said beneath his breath: "O Lord!"--his soul crawling with recognition. But nothing of this was discernible in the alacrity with which he jumped up and bent over a bony but bedizened hand.

"Mrs. Ilkington!" he said.

"R'ally," said the lady, "the world *is* ve-ry small, isn't it?"

She was a lean, angular, inordinately vivacious body whose years, which were many more than forty, were making a brave struggle to masquerade as thirty. She was notorious for her execrable taste in gowns and jewelry, but her social position was impregnable, and her avowed mission in life was to bring together Society (meaning the caste of money) with the Arts (meaning those humble souls content to sell their dreams for the wherewithal to sustain life).

Her passion for bromidioms always stupefied Staff--left him dazed and witless. In the present instance he could think of nothing by way of response happier than that hoary banality: "This is indeed a surprise."

"Flatterer!" said Mrs. Ilkington archly. "*I'm* not surprised," she pursued. "I might have known *you'd* be aboard this vessel."

"You must be a prophetess of sorts, then," he said, smiling. "I didn't know I was going to sail, myself, till late yesterday afternoon."

"Deceiver," commented the lady calmly. "Why can't you men *ever* be candid?"

Surprise merged into some annoyance. "What do you mean?" he asked bluntly.

"Oh, but two can play at that game," she assured him spiritedly. "If you won't be open with me, why should I tell all I know?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're driving at, Mrs. Ilkington."

"Would it improve your understanding"--she threatened him gaily with a gem-encrusted forefinger--"if I were to tell you I met a certain person in Paris last week, who talked to me about you?"

"It would not," said he stiffly. "Who--?"

"Oh, well, if you *won't* be frank!" Mrs. Ilkington's manner implied that he was a bold, bad butterfly, but that she had his entomological number, none the less. "Tell me," she changed the subject abruptly, "how goes the *great* play?"

"Three acts are written," he said in weariness of spirit, "the fourth--"

"But I thought you weren't to return to America until it was *quite* finished?"

"Who told you that, please?"

"Never mind, sir! How about the fourth act?"

"I mean to write it *en voyage*," said he, perplexed. From whom could this woman possibly have learned so much that was intimate to himself?

"You have it all mapped out, then?" she persisted.

"Oh, yes; it only needs to be put on paper."

"R'ally, then, it's true--isn't it--that the writing is the least part of play construction?"

"Who told you that?" he asked again, this time amused.

"Oh, a *very* prominent man," she declared; and named him.

Staff laughed. "A too implicit belief in that theory, Mrs. Ilkington," said he, "is responsible for the large number of perfectly good plays that somehow never get written--to say nothing of the equally large number of perfectly good playwrights who somehow never get anywhere."

"Clever!" screamed the lady. "But aren't you wasteful of your epigrams?"

He could cheerfully have slain her then and there; for which reason the civil gravity he preserved was all the more commendable.

"And now," he persisted, "won't you tell me with whom you were discussing me in Paris?"

She shook her head at him reprovingly. "You don't *know*?"

"No."

"You can't guess?"

"Not to save me."

"R'ally?"

"Honestly and truly," he swore, puzzled by the undertone of light malice he thought to detect in her manner.

"Then," said she with decision, "*I'm* not going to get myself into trouble by babbling. But, if you promise to be *nice* to me all the way home--?" She paused.

"I promise," he said gravely.

"Then--if you happen to be at the head of the companion-ladder when the tender comes off from Queenstown tonight--I promise you a *huge* surprise."

"You won't say more than that?" he pleaded.

She appeared to debate. "Yes," she announced mischievously; "I'll give you a leading hint. The person I mean is the purchaser of the Cadogan collar."

His eyes were blank. "And what, please, is the Cadogan collar?"

"You don't mean to tell me you've never *heard* of it?" She paused with dramatic effect. "Incredible! Surely, everybody knows about the Cadogan collar, the most magnificent necklace of pearls in the world!"

"Everybody, it seems, but myself, Mrs. Ilkington."

"R'ally!" she cried, and tapped his arm playfully. "You are as stupid as most brilliant men!"

A bugle sang through the evening air. The lady started consciously.

"Heavens!" she cried. "Time to dress for dinner: I must *fly*!... Have you made your table reservation yet?"

"Yes," he said hastily.

"Then *do* see the second-steward at once and get transferred to our table; we have just one vacant chair. Oh, but you *must*; you've promised to be nice to me, you know. And I do so want you to meet one of my proteges--such a *sweet*

girl—a Miss Searle. I'm sure you'll be crazy about her—at least, you would be if there were no Alison Landis in your cosmos. Now, do attend to that right away. Remember you've promised."

Staff bowed as she fluttered away. In his heart he was thoroughly convinced that this were a sorry scheme of things indeed did it not include a special hell for Mrs. Ilkingtons.

What had she meant by her veiled references to this mysterious person in Paris, who was to board the steamer at Queenstown? How had she come by so much personal knowledge of himself and his work? And what did she know about his love for Alison Landis?

He swore thoughtfully, and went below to dress, stopping on the way to make arrangements with the second-steward to have his seat changed, in accordance with his exacted promise.

IV

QUEENSTOWN

Immediately he had allowed himself to be persuaded, Staff felt sure he should not have agreed to change his seat to the table occupied by Mrs. Ilkington's party, especially if he meant sincerely to try to do any real work aboard the Autocratic; and it wasn't long after he had taken his place for the first dinner that he was convinced that he had blundered beyond remedy or excuse.

The table was round and seated seven, though when the party had assembled there remained two vacant places. Staff was assigned the chair on Mrs. Ilkington's right and was sensitive to a not over subtle implication that his was the seat of honour. He would cheerfully have exchanged it for a place on the lady's left, which would have afforded a chance to talk to Miss Searle, to whom he earnestly desired to make an explanation and such amends as she would permit. But a male person named Bangs, endowed with impressive self-assurance, altogether too much good-looks (measured by the standards of the dermatological institute advertisements) and no excess baggage in the way of intellect, sat on Mrs. Ilkington's left, with Miss Searle beyond him. The latter had suffered Staff to be presented to her with (he fancied) considerable repressed amusement. Not that he blamed her, but ...

His position was rendered unhappy to the verge of being impossible, however, by the lady on his own right, a Mrs. Thataker: darkly temperamental and buxom, a divorcee and (she lost no time in telling him) likewise a playwright. True, none of her plays had ever been produced; but that was indisputably due to a managerial conspiracy; what she really needed was a friend at court—some clever man having "the ear of the manager." (Staff gathered that a truly clever man could warm up a play and pour it into the ear of the managers like laudanum and sweet-oil.) With such a man, he was given to understand, Mrs. Thataker wouldn't mind collaborating; she had manuscripts in her steamer-trunk which were calculated to prove a number of things ...

And while he was easing away and preparing to run before the wind to escape any such hideous complication, he was abruptly brought up all-standing by the information that the colour of the lady's soul was pink. She knew this to be a fact beyond dispute, because she never could do her best work save when garbed exclusively in pink. She enumerated several articles of wearing apparel not customarily discussed between comparative strangers but which—always provided they were pink—she held indispensable to the task of dramatic composition.

In his great agony, happening to glance in Miss Searle's direction, he saw her with head bent and eyelids lowered, lips compressed, colour a trifle heightened, shoulders suspiciously a-quiver.

Incongruously, the impression obtruded that they were unusually handsome shoulders.

For that matter, she was an unusually handsome young woman: tall, fair, with a face featured with faint, exquisite irregularity, brown eyes and brows in striking contrast to the rich golden colour of her hair; well-poised and balanced—sure but not too conscious of herself ...

Staff heard himself saying "Beg pardon?" to a third repetition of one of Mrs. Thataker's gratuitous revelations.

At this he took fright, drew back into his reserve for the remainder of the meal, and as soon as he decently could, made his excuses and fled to join Iff in the smoking-room...

He found the little man indulging his two passions; he was drinking whiskey-and-sodas and playing bridge, both in the most masterly fashion. Staff watched the game a while and then, the opportunity offering, cut in. He played till ten o'clock, at which hour, wearied, he yielded his seat to another, leaving Mr. Iff the victor of six rubbers and twelve

whiskey-and-sodas. As Staff went out on deck the little man cut for the seventh and ordered the thirteenth. Neither indulgence seemed to have had any perceptible effect upon him.

Staff strolled forward, drinking in air that seemed the sweeter by contrast with the reeking room he had just quitted. The wind had freshened since nightfall; it blew strong and cool, but not keen. And there was more motion in the seas that sang overside, wrapped in Cimmerian blackness. The sky had become overcast; there were no stars: only the longshore lights of Ireland twinkled, small, bright, incredibly distant over the waters. The decks were softly aglow with electric lights, lending a deeper shade of velvety denseness to the night beyond the rails.

He hadn't moved far forward when his quick sight picked out the shimmer of a woman's hair, like spun gold, about amidships in the rank of deck-chairs. He made sure it was Miss Searle; and it was. She sat alone, with none near her, her head resting against the back of the chair, her face turned a trifle forward; so that she was unaware of his approach until he stopped before her.

"Miss Searle--" he began diffidently.

She looked up quickly and smiled in what he thought a friendly way.

"Good evening," said she; and moved her body slightly in the deck-chair, turning a little to the left as if expecting him to take the vacant chair on that hand.

He did so without further encouragement, and abruptly found himself wholly lacking words wherewith to phrase what he had in mind to say. In such emergency he resorted to an old, tried and true trick of his and began to talk on the first subject, unrelated to his dilemma, that popped into his head.

"Are you a good sailor?" he enquired gravely.

The girl nodded. "Very."

"Not afraid of seasickness?"

"No. Why?"

"Because," said Staff soberly, "I've been praying for a hurricane."

She nodded again without speaking, her eyes alone questioning.

"Mrs. Thataker," he pursued evenly, "confided to me at dinner that she is a very poor sailor indeed."

Miss Searle laughed quietly. "You desire a punishment to fit the crime."

"There are some crimes for which no adequate punishment has ever been contrived," he returned, beginning to see his way, and at the same time beginning to think himself uncommonly clever.

"Oh!" said Miss Searle with a little laugh. "Now if you're leading up to a second apology about that question of the bandbox, you needn't, because I've forgiven you already."

He glanced at her reproachfully. "You just naturally had to beat me to that, didn't you?" he complained. "All the same, it *was* inexcusable of me."

"Oh, no; I quite understood."

"You see," he persisted obstinately, "I really did think it was my bandbox. I actually have got one with me, precisely like yours."

"I quite believed you the first time."

Something in her tone moved him to question her face sharply; but he found her shadowed eyes inscrutable.

"I half believe you know something," he ventured, perplexed.

"Perhaps," she nodded, with an enigmatic smile.

"What do you know?"

"Why," she said, "it was simple enough. I happened to be in Lucille's yesterday afternoon when a hat was ordered delivered to you."

"You were! Then you know who sent it to me?"

"Of course." Her expression grew curious. "Don't you?"

"No," he said excitedly. "Tell me."

But she hesitated. "I'm not sure I ought ..."

"Why not?"

"It's none of my affair--"

"But surely you must see ... Listen: I'll tell you about it." He narrated succinctly the intrusion of the mysterious bandbox into his ken, that morning. "Now, a note was promised; it must have miscarried. Surely, there can be no harm in your telling me. Besides, I've a right to know."

"Possibly ... but I'm not sure I've a right to tell. Why should I be a spoil-sport?"

"You mean," he said thoughtfully--"you think it's some sort of a practical joke?"

"What do you think?"

"*Hmm-mm*," said Staff. And then, "I don't like to be made fun of," he asserted, a trace sulkily.

"You are certainly a dangerously original man," said Miss Searle--"almost abnormal."

"The most unkindest slam of all," he murmured.

He made himself look deeply hurt. The girl laughed softly. He thought it rather remarkable that they should enjoy so sympathetic a sense of humour on such short acquaintance....

"But you forgive me?"

"Oh, yes," he said generously; "only, of course, I couldn't help feeling it a bit--coming from *you*."

"From me?" Miss Searle sat up in her deck-chair and turned to him. "Mr. Staff! you're not flirting with me?"

"Heaven forfend!" he cried, so sincerely that both laughed.

"Because," said she, sinking back, "I must warn you that Mrs. Ilkington has been talking ..."

"Oh," he groaned from his heart--"damn that woman!"

There was an instant of silence; then he stole a contrite look at her immobile profile and started to get up.

"I--Miss Searle," he stammered--"I beg your pardon ..."

"Don't go," she said quietly; "that is, unless you want to. My silence was simply sympathetic."

He sat back. "Thank you," he said with gratitude; and for some seconds considered the case of Mrs. Ilkington, not charitably but with murder in his bosom. "Do you mean," he resumed presently, "she has--ah--connected my name with--"

"Yes," nodded the girl.

"Something lingering in boiling oil," he mused aloud, presently.... "What staggers me is how she found out; I was under the impression that only the persons most concerned knew about it."

"Then it's true? You are engaged to marry Miss Landis? Or is that an impertinent question?" Without pause the girl answered herself: "Of course it is; only I couldn't help asking. Please forget I spoke--"

"Oh, I don't mind," he said wearily; "now that Mrs. Ilkington has begun to distribute handbills. Only ... I don't know that there's a regular, hard-and-fast engagement: just an understanding."

"Thank you," said Miss Searle. "I promise not to speak of it again." She hesitated an instant, then added: "To you or anybody else."

"You see," he went on after a little, "I've been working on a play for Miss Landis, under agreement with Jules Max, her manager. They want to use it to open Max's newest Broadway theatre late this autumn. That's why I came across--to find a place in London to bury myself in and work undisturbed. It means a good deal to me--to all of us--this play.... But what I'm getting at is this: Alison--Miss Landis--didn't leave the States this summer; Mrs. Ilkington (she told me at dinner) left New York before I did. So how in Heaven's name--?"

"I had known nothing of Mrs. Ilkington at all," said Miss Searle cautiously, "until we met in Paris last month."

He was conscious of the hint of uneasiness in her manner, but inclined to assign it to the wrong cause.

"I trust I haven't bored you, Miss Searle--talking about myself."

"Oh, no; indeed no. You see--" she laughed--"I quite understand; I keep a temperament of my own--if you should happen to wonder why Mrs. Ilkington interests herself in me. I'm supposed to have a voice and to be in training for grand opera."

"Not really?"

And again she laughed. "I'm afraid there isn't any cure for me at this late date," she protested; "I've gone so far I must go farther. But I know what you mean. People who sing *are* difficult. However ..." She stirred restlessly in her chair, then sat up.

"What is that light over there?" she asked. "Do you know?"

Staff's gaze sought the indicated direction. "Roches Point, I imagine; we're about due at Queenstown ..."

"As late as that?" The girl moved as if to rise. Staff jumped up and offered her a hand. In a moment she was standing beside him. "I must go below," said she. "Good night."

"You won't tell me who it was in Lucille's, yesterday?" he harked back pleadingly.

She shook her head gaily as she turned forward to the main companionway entrance: "No; you must find out for yourself."

"But perhaps it isn't a practical joke?"

"Then--*perhaps*--I shall tell you all--sometime."

He paused by the raised door-sill as she stepped within the superstructure. "Why not stop up and see the tender come off?" he suggested. "It might be interesting."

She flashed him a look of gay malice. "If we're to believe Mrs. Ilkington, you're apt to find it more interesting than I. Good night."

"Oh--good night!" he muttered, disturbed; and turned away to the rail.

His troubled vision ranged far to the slowly shifting shore lights. The big steamship had come very close inshore--as witness the retarded speed with which she crept toward her anchorage--but still the lights, for all their singular brightness, seemed distant, incalculably far away; the gulf of blackness that set them apart exaggerated all distances tenfold. The cluster of sparks flanked by green and red that marked the hovering tender appeared to float at an infinite remove, invisibly buoyed upon the bosom of a fathomless void of night.

Out of this wind-swept waste of impenetrable darkness was to come the answer to these many questions that perplexed him--perhaps. Something at least would come to influence him; or else Mrs. Ilkington's promise had been mere *blague*.... Then what?

Afterwards he assured himself that his stupidity had been unparalleled inconceivable. And indeed there seems to be some colour of excuse for this drastic stricture, self-inflicted though it were.

Below him, on the main deck, a squad of deckhands superintended by a petty officer was rigging out the companion-ladder.

Very suddenly--it seemed, because of the immense quiet that for all its teeming life enveloped the ship upon the cessation of the engine's song--the vessel hesitated and then no longer moved. From forward came the clank of chains as the anchor cables were paid out. Supple to wind and tide, the Autocratic swung in a wide arc, until the lights of the tender disappeared from Staff's field of vision.

Before long, however, they swam silently again into sight; then slowly, cautiously, by almost imperceptible stages the gap closed up until the tender ranged alongside and made fast to her gigantic sister.

Almost at once the incoming passengers began to mount the companion-ladder.

Staff promptly abandoned his place at the rail and ran down to the main-deck. As he approached the doorway opening adjacent to the companion-ladder he heard a woman's laugh out on the deck: a laugh which, once heard, was never to

be forgotten: clear, sweet, strong, musical as a peal of fairy bells.

He stopped short; and so did his breath for an instant; and so, he fancied, did his heart. This, then, was what Mrs. Ilkington had hinted at! But one woman in all the world could laugh like that ...

Almost at once she appeared, breaking through the cluster of passengers on the deck and into the lighted interior with a swinging, vigorous manner suggestive of intense vitality and strength. She paused, glancing back over her shoulder, waiting for somebody: a magnificent creature, splendidly handsome, wonderfully graceful, beautiful beyond compare.

"Alison!" Staff breathed hoarsely, dumfounded.

Though his exclamation could by no means have carried to her ears, she seemed to be instantly sensitive to the vibrations of his emotion. She swung round, raking her surroundings with a bright, curious glance, and saw him. Her smile deepened adorably, her eyes brightened, she moved impulsively toward him with outflung hands.

"Why," she cried--"Why, Staff! Such a surprise!"

Nothing could have been more natural, spontaneous and unaffected. In an instant his every doubt and misgiving was erased--blotted out and as if it had never been. He caught and held her hands, for the moment speechless. But his eyes were all too eloquent: under their steadfast sincerity her own gaze wavered, shifted and fell. She coloured consummately, then with a gentle but determined manner disengaged her hands.

"Don't," she said in the low, intimate voice she knew so well how and when to employ--"don't! People are looking ..."
And then with a bewildering shift, resuming her former spirit: "Of all things wonderful, Staff--to meet you here!"

She was acting--masking with her admirable art some emotion secret from him. He knew this--felt it intuitively, though he did not understand; and the knowledge affected him poignantly. What place had dissimulation in their understanding? Why need she affect what she did not feel--with him?

Distressed, bewildered, he met evasion with native straightforwardness.

"I'm stunned," he told her, holding her eyes with a grave, direct gaze; "I'm afraid I don't understand.... How does this happen?"

"Why, of course," she said, maintaining her artificial elation--"I infer--you've finished the play and are hurrying home. So--we meet, dear boy. Isn't it delightful?"

"But you're here, on this side--?"

"Oh, just a flying trip. Max wanted me to see Bisson's new piece at the Porte St. Martin. I decided to go at the last moment--caught the Mauretania on eight hours' notice--stayed only three days in Paris--booked back on this tub by telegraph--travelled all day to catch it by this wretched, roundabout route. And--and there you are, my dear."

She concluded with a gesture charmingly ingenuous and disarming; but Staff shook his head impatiently.

"You came over--you passed through London twice--you stayed three days in Paris, Alison--and never let me know?"

"Obviously." She lifted her shoulders an inch, with a light laugh. "Haven't I just said as much?... You see, I didn't want to disturb you: it means so much to--you and me, Staff--the play."

Dissatisfied, knitting his brows faintly, he said: "I wonder ...!"

"My dear!" she protested gaily, "you positively must not scowl at me like that! You frighten me; and besides I'm tired to death--this wretched rush of travelling! Tomorrow we'll have a famous young pow-wow, but tonight--! Do say good night to me, prettily, like a dear good boy, and let me go.... It's sweet to see you again; I'm wild to hear about the play.... Jane!" she called, looking round.

Her maid, a tight-mouthed, unlovely creature, moved sedately to her side. "Yes, Miss Landis."

"Have my things come up yet?" The maid responded affirmatively. "Good! I'm dead, almost...."

She turned back to Staff, offering him her hand and with it, bewitchingly, her eyes: "Dear boy! Good night."

He bent low over the hand to hide his dissatisfaction: he felt a bit old to be treated like a petulant, teasing child....

"Good night," he said stiffly.

"What a bear you are, Staff! Can't you wait till tomorrow? At all events, you must...."

Laughing, she swept away, following her maid up the companion stairs. Staff pursued her with eyes frowning and perplexed, and more leisurely with his person.

As he turned aft on the upper deck, meaning to go to the smoking-room for a good-night cigarette--absorbed in thought and paying no attention to his surroundings--a voice saluted him with a languid, exasperating drawl: "Ah, Staff! How-d'-ye-do?"

He looked up, recognising a distant acquaintance: a man of medium height with a tendency toward stoutness and a taste for extremes in the matter of clothes; with dark, keen eyes deep-set in a face somewhat too pale, a close-clipped grey moustache and a high and narrow forehead too frankly betrayed by the derby he wore well back on his head.

Staff nodded none too cordially. "Oh, good evening, Arkroyd. Just come aboard?"

Arkroyd, on the point of entering his stateroom, paused long enough to confirm this surmise. "Beastly trip--most tiresome," he added, frankly yawning. "Don't know how I should have stood it if it hadn't been for Miss Landis. You know her, I believe? Charming girl--charming."

"Oh, quite," agreed Staff. "Good night."

His tone arrested Arkroyd's attention; the man turned to watch his back as Staff shouldered down the alleyway toward the smoking-room. "I say!" commented Mr. Arkroyd, privately. "A bit hipped--what? No necessity for being so bally short with a chap...."

The guess was only too well founded: Staff was distinctly disgruntled. Within the past ten minutes his susceptibilities had been deeply wounded. Why Alison should have chosen to slight him so cavalierly when in transit through London passed his comprehension.... And the encounter with Arkroyd comforted him to no degree whatever. He had never liked Arkroyd, holding him, for all his wealth, little better than a theatre-loafer of the Broadway type; and now he remembered hearing, once or twice, that the man's attentions to Alison Landis had been rather emphatic.

Swayed by whim, he chose to avoid the smoking-room, after all--having little wish to be annoyed by the chatter of Mr. Iff--and swung out on deck again for a half-hour of cigarettes and lonely brooding....

But his half-hour lengthened indefinitely while he sat, preoccupied, in the deck-chair of some total stranger. By definite stages, to which he was almost altogether oblivious, the Autocratic weighed anchor, shook off her tender and swung away on the seven-day stretch. As definitely her decks became bare of passengers. Presently Staff was quite a solitary figure in the long array of chairs.

Two bells rang mellowly through the ship before he roused, lifted himself to his feet and prepared to turn in, still distressed and wondering--so much so that he was barely conscious of the fact that one of the officers of the vessel was coming aft, and only noticed the man when he paused and spoke.

"I say--this is Mr. Staff, isn't it?"

Staff turned quickly, searching his memory for the name and status of the sturdy and good-looking young Englishman.

"Yes," he said slowly, "but--"

"I'm Mr. Manvers, the purser. If I'm not mistaken, you crossed with us this spring?"

"Oh, yes; I did. How-d'-you-do?" Staff offered his hand.

"Sure I recognised you just now--saw you on the main-deck--talking to Miss Landis, I believe."

"Yes ...?"

"Beg pardon; I don't wish to seem impertinent; but may I ask, do you know the lady very well?"

Staff's eyes clouded. "Why ..."

"Knew you'd think me impertinent; but it is some of my business, really. I can explain to your satisfaction. You see"--the purser stepped nearer and lowered his voice guardedly--"I was wondering if you had much personal influence with Miss Landis. I've just had a bit of a chat with her, and she won't listen to reason, you know, about that collar."

"Collar?" Staff repeated stupidly.

"The Cadogan collar, you know--some silly pearl necklace worth a king's ransom. She bought it in Paris--Miss Landis did; at least, so the report runs; and she doesn't deny it, as a matter of fact. Naturally that worries me; it's a rather

tempting proposition to leave lying round a stateroom; and I asked her just now to let me take care of it for her--put it in my safe, you know. It'd be a devilish nasty thing for the ship, to have it stolen." The purser paused for effect. "Would you believe it? She wouldn't listen to me! Told me she was quite capable of taking care of her own property! Now if you know her well enough to say the right word ... it'd be a weight off my mind, I can tell you!"

"Yes, I can imagine so," said Staff thoughtfully. "But--what makes you think there's any possibility--"

"Well, one never knows what sort of people the ship carries--as a rule, that is. But in this instance I've got good reason to believe there's at least one man aboard who wouldn't mind lifting that collar; and he's keen enough to do it prettily, too, if what they tell of him is true."

"Now you're getting interesting. Who is this man?"

"Oh, quite the swell mobsmen--Raffles and Arsene Lupin and all that sort of thing rolled into one. His name's Ismay--Arbuthnot Ismay. Clever--wonderful, they say; the police have never been able to fasten anything on him, though he's been known to boast of his jobs in advance."

"You told Miss Landis this?"

"Certainly--and she laughed."

This seemed quite credible of the lady. Staff considered the situation seriously for a moment or two.

"I'll do what I can," he said at length; "though I'm not hopeful of making her see it from your point of view. Still, I will speak to her."

"That's good of you, I'm sure. You couldn't do more."

"You're positive about this Ismay?" Staff pursued. "You couldn't be mistaken?"

"Not I," asserted the purser confidently. "He crossed with us last year--the time Mrs. Burden Hamman's jewels disappeared. Ismay, of course, was suspected, but managed to prove every kind of an alibi."

"Queer you should let him book a second time," commented Staff.

"Rather; but he's changed his name, and I don't imagine the chaps in Cockspur Street know him by sight."

"What name does he travel under now?"

The purser smiled softly to himself. "I fancy you won't be pleased to learn it," said he. "He's down on the passenger-list as Iff--W. H. Iff."

V

ISMAY?

When Staff went below a little later, he was somewhat surprised to find his stateroom alight,--surprised, because he had rather expected that Mr. Iff would elect to sleep off his potatoes in darkness.

To the contrary, the little man was very much awake, propped up in his berth with a book for company, and showed no effects whatever of overindulgence, unless that were betrayed by a slightly enhanced brightness of the cool blue eyes which he brought to bear upon his roommate.

"Good morning!" he piped cheerfully. "What on earth got you up so early? The bar's been closed an hour and more."

"Is that why you came to bed?" enquired Staff.

"Sure," agreed Mr. Iff complacently.

Staff quietly began to shed his clothing and to insert his spare frame into pajamas. Iff lay back and stared reflectively at the white-painted overhead girders.

"Got to slip it to you," he observed presently, "for perfect mastery of the dignified reserve thing. I never knew anybody who could better control his tumultuous emotions."

"Thanks," said Staff drily as he wound up his watch.

"Anything 'special troubling you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You talk so darn much."

"Sorry if I'm keeping you awake," said Staff politely.

"Oh, I don't mean to seem to beef about it, only ... I was wondering if by any chance you'd heard the news?"

"What news?"

"About me."

"About you!" Staff paused with his fingers on the light-switch.

"About my cute little self. May I look now?" Iff poked his head over the edge of the upper berth and beamed down upon Staff like a benevolent, blond magpie. "Haven't you heard the rumour that I'm a desperate character?"

"Just what do you mean?" demanded Staff, eyeing the other intently.

"Oh, simply that I overheard the purser discussing me with his assistant. He claims to recognise in me a bold bad man named Ismay, whose specialty is pulling off jobs that would make Sherlock Holmes ask to be retired on a pension."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are you Ismay?"

A broad, mocking grin irradiated the little man's pinched features. "Don't ask me," he begged: "I might tell you."

Staff frowned and waited a minute, then, receiving no further response to his enquiry, grunted "Good night," turned off the light and got into his berth.

A moment later the question came out of the darkness overhead: "I say--what do *you* think?"

"Are you Iff or Ismay--you mean?"

"Aye, lad, aye!"

"I don't know. It's for you to say."

"But if you thought I was Ismay you'd shift quarters, wouldn't you?"

"Why?"

"Because I might pinch something of yours."

"In the first place," said Staff, yawning, "I can't shift without going into the second cabin--and you know it: the boat's full up. Secondly, I've nothing you could steal save ideas, and you haven't got the right sort of brains to turn them to any account."

"That ought to hold me for some time," Iff admitted fairly. "But I'm concerned about your sensitive young reputation. Suppose I were to turn a big trick this trip?"

"As for instance--?"

"Well, say I swipe the Cadogan collar."

"Then I'd stand just so much the better chance of catching you red-handed."

"Swell notion you've got of the cunning of the Twentieth Century criminal, I must say. D' you for an instant suppose my work's so coarse that you could detect grits in it?"

"Then you *are* Ismay?"

"My son," said the other solemnly, "your pertinacity shan't go unrewarded: I will be frank with you. You shall know all. I am Iff--the eternal question."

"Oh, go to thunder!" said Staff indignantly.

But as he slipped off to sleep he could hear the man overhead chuckling quietly, beneath his breath....

The next few days would have provided him with ample opportunity in which to ponder the question of his roommate's identity, had Staff chosen so to occupy his time. As it happened, Heaven was kind to the young man, and sent a gale of sorts, which, breaking upon the Autocratic the following morning, buffeted her for three days and relegated to their berths all the poor sailors aboard, including the lady with the pink soul and underthings. Of Mrs. Thataker, indeed, Staff saw nothing more until just before the vessel docked in New York. He wasn't heartless by any manner of means; he was, as a matter of fact, frankly sorry for the other poor passengers; but he couldn't help feeling there was a lot of truth in the old saw about an ill wind....

Otherwise the bad weather proved annoying enough in several ways. To begin with, Alison Landis herself was anything but a good sailor, and even Miss Searle, though she missed no meals, didn't pretend to enjoy the merciless hammering which the elements were administering to the ship. Alison retired to her suite immediately after the first breakfast and stuck religiously therein until the weather moderated, thus affording Staff no chance to talk with her about the number of immediately interesting things on his mind. While Miss Searle stayed almost as steadily in her quarters, keeping out of harm's way and reading, she told Staff when they met at meals. Mrs. Ilkington, of course, disappeared as promptly as Mrs. Thataker. In consequence of all of which, Staff found himself thrown back for companionship on Bangs, who bored him to the point of extinction, Arkroyd, whom he didn't like, and Iff, who kept rather out of the way, dividing his time between his two passions and merely leering at the younger man, a leer of infinite cunning and derision, when chance threw them together.

In despair of finding any good excuse for wasting his time, then, Mr. Staff took unto himself pens, ink, paper and fortitude and--surprised even himself by writing that fourth act and finishing his play. Again--an ill wind!

And then, as if bent on proving its integral benevolence so far as concerned Mr. Staff, the wind shifted and sighed and died--beginning the operation toward sundown of the third day out from Queenstown. The morning of the fourth day dawned clear and beautiful, with no wind worth mentioning and only a moderate sea running--not enough to make much of an impression on the Autocratic. So pretty nearly everybody made public appearance at one time or another during the morning, and compared notes about their historic sufferings, and quoted the stewardess who had been heard to say that this was the worst westbound passage the boat had ever made, and regained their complexions, and took notice of the incipient flirtations and--well, settled down in the usual way to enjoy an ocean voyage.

Staff, of course, was on deck betimes, with an eye eager for first sight of Alison and another heedful of social entanglements which might prevent him from being first and foremost to her side when she did appear. But for all his watchfulness and care, Mrs. Ilkington forestalled him and had Alison in convoy before Staff discovered her; and then Arkroyd showed up and Mrs. Ilkington annexed him, and Bangs was rounded up with one or two others and made to pay court to Mrs. Ilkington's newly snared celebrity and ... Staff went away and sulked like a spoiled child. Nor did his humour become more cheerful when at lunch he discovered that Mrs. Ilkington had kept two seats at their table reserved for Miss Landis and Arkroyd. It had been a prearranged thing, of course; it had been Alison with whom Mrs. Ilkington had talked about him in Paris; and evidently Alison had been esquired by Arkroyd there. Staff didn't relish the flavour of that thought. What right had Arkroyd to constitute himself Alison's cavalier on her travels? For that matter, what right had Alison to accept him in such a capacity?... Though, of course, Staff had to remind himself that Alison was in reality not bound in any way....

But he had his reward and revenge after lunch. As the party left the table Alison dropped behind to speak to him; and in interchange of commonplaces they allowed the others to distance them beyond earshot.

"You're a dear," the young woman told him in a discreet tone as they ascended the companionway.

"I'm bound to say," he told her with a faint, expiring flicker of resentment, "that you hardly treat me like one."

Her eyes held his with their smiling challenge, half provocative, half tender; and she pouted a little, prettily. In this mood she was always quite irresistible to Staff. Almost against his will his dignity and his pose of the injured person evaporated and became as if they had never been.

"Just the same," she declared, laughing, "you are a dear--if you *don't* deserve to be told so."

"What have I done?" he demanded guiltily--knowing very well on what counts he was liable to indictment.

"Oh, nothing," said Alison--"nothing whatever. You've only been haughty and aloof and icy and indifferent and everything else that men seem to consider becoming to them when they think they're neglected."

"You certainly don't expect me to *like* seeing Arkroyd at your side all the time?"

"Oh!" she laughed contemptuously--"Arkroyd!" And she dismissed that gentleman with a fine sweeping gesture. "Can I help it if he happens to travel on the same ship?"

They halted at the top of the steps.

"Then it was accidental--?" he asked seriously.

"Staff!" The young woman made an impatient movement. "If I didn't like you--*you* know how much--upon my word I'd snub you for that. You are a bear!"

"A moment ago I was a dear."

"Oh, well, I'm fond of all sorts of animals."

"Then I advise your future husband to keep you away from zoos."

"Oh, Staff! But wouldn't you want me to come to see you once in a while?"

He jerked up one hand with the gesture of a man touched in a fencing-bout. "You win," he laughed. "I should've known better..."

But she made her regard tender consolation for his discomfiture. "You haven't told me about the play--our play--*my* play?"

"It's finished."

"Not really, Staff?" She clasped her hands in a charmingly impulsive way. He nodded, smiling. "Is it good?"

"You'll have to tell me that--you and Max."

"Oh--Max! He's got to like what I like. When will you read it to me?"

"Whenever you wish."

"This afternoon?"

"If you like."

"Oh, good! Now I'm off for my nap--only I know I shan't sleep, I'm so excited. Bring the 'script to me at two--say, half-past. Come to my sitting-room; we can be alone and quiet, and after you've finished we can have tea together and talk and--talk our silly heads off. You darling!"

She gave him a parting glance calculated to turn any man's head, and swung off to her rooms, the very spirit of grace incarnate in her young and vigorous body.

Staff watched her with a kindling eye, then shook his head as one who doubts--as if doubting his own worthiness--and went off to his own stateroom to run over the type-script of his fourth act: being fortunate in having chosen a ship which carried a typist, together with almost every other imaginable convenience and alleged luxury of life ashore.

Punctual to the minute, manuscript under his arm, he knocked at the door of the sitting-room of the *suite de luxe* occupied by the actress. Her maid admitted him and after a moment or two Alison herself came out of her stateroom, in a wonderful Parisian tea-gown cunningly designed to render her even more bewilderingly bewitching than ever. Staff thought her so, beyond any question, and as unquestionably was his thought mirrored in his eyes as he rose and stood waiting for her greeting--very nearly a-tremble, if the truth's to be told.

Her colour deepened as she came toward him and then, pausing at arm's length, before he could lift a hand, stretched forth both her own and caught him by the shoulders. "My dear!" she said softly; and her eyes were bright and melting. "My dear, dear boy! It's so sweet to see you." She came a step nearer, stood upon her tiptoes and lightly touched his cheek with her lips.

"Alison ...!" he cried in a broken voice.

But already she had released him and moved away, with a lithe and gracious movement evading his arms. "No," she told him firmly, shaking her head: "no more than that, Staff. You mustn't--I won't have you--carry on as if we were children--*yet*."

"But Alison--"

"No." Again she shook her head. "If I want to kiss you, I've a perfect right to; but that doesn't give you any licence to

kiss me in return. Besides, I'm not at all sure I'm really and truly in love with you. Now do sit down."

He complied sulkily.

"Are you in the habit of kissing men you don't care for?"

"Yes, frequently," she told him, coolly taking the chair opposite; "I'm an actress--if you've forgotten the fact."

He pondered this, frowning. "I don't like it," he announced with conviction.

"Neither do I--always." She relished his exasperation for a moment longer, then changed her tone. "Do be sensible, Staff. I'm crazy to hear that play. How long do you mean to keep me waiting?"

He knew her well enough to understand that her moods and whims must be humoured like a--well, like any other star's. She was pertinaciously temperamental: that is to say, spoiled; beautiful women are so, for the most part--invariably so, if on the stage. That kind of temperament is part of an actress' equipment, an asset, as much an item of her stock in trade as any trick of elocution or pantomime.

So, knowing what he knew, Staff took himself in hand and prepared to make the best of the situation. With a philosophic shrug and the wry, quaint smile so peculiarly his own, he stretched forth a hand to take up his manuscript; but in the very act, remembering, withheld it.

"Oh, I'd forgotten ..."

"What, my dear?" asked Alison, smiling back to his unsmiling stare.

"What made you send me that bandbox?" he demanded without further preliminary; for he suspected that by surprising the author of that outrage, and by no other method, would he arrive at the truth.

But though he watched the woman intently, he was able to detect no guilty start, no evidence of confusion. Her eyes were blank, and a little pucker of wonder showed between her brows: that was all.

"Bandbox?" she repeated enquiringly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he pursued with a purposeful, omniscient air, "the thing you bought at Lucille's, the day before we sailed, and had sent me without a word of explanation. What did you do it for?"

Alison relaxed and sat back in her chair, laughing softly. "Dear boy," she said--"do you know?--you're quite mad--quite!"

"Do you mean to say you didn't--?"

"I can't even surmise what you're talking about."

"That's funny." He pondered this, staring. "I made sure it was you. Weren't you in London last Friday?"

"I? Oh, no. Why, didn't I tell you I only left Paris Saturday morning? That's why we had to travel all day to catch the boat at Queenstown, you know."

He frowned. "That's true; you did say so.... But I wish I could imagine what it all means."

"Tell me; I'm good at puzzles."

So he recounted the story of the bandbox incognito, Alison lending her attention with evident interest, some animation and much quiet amusement. But when he had finished, she shook her head.

"How very odd!" she said wonderingly. "And you have no idea--?"

"Not the least in the world, now that you've established an alibi. Miss Searle knows, but--"

"What's that?" demanded Alison quickly.

"I say, Miss Searle knows, but she won't tell."

"The girl who sat next to Bangs at lunch?"

"Yes--"

"But how is that? I don't quite understand."

"Oh, she says she was in the place when the bandbox was purchased--saw the whole transaction; but it's none of her affair, says she, so she won't tell me anything."

"Conscientious young woman," said Alison approvingly. "But are you quite sure you have exhausted every means of identifying the true culprit? Did you examine the box yourself? I mean, did you leave it all to the housemaid--what's her name--Milly?"

He nodded: "Yes."

"Then she may have overlooked something. Why take her word for it? There may be a card or something there now."

Staff looked startled and chagrined. "That's so. It never occurred to me. I am a bonehead, and no mistake. I'll just take a look, after we've run through this play."

"Why wait? Send for it now. I'd like to see for myself, if there is anything: you see, you've roused a woman's curiosity; I want to know. Let me send Jane."

Without waiting for his consent, Alison summoned the maid. "Jane," said she, "I want you to go to Mr. Staff's stateroom--"

"Excuse me," Staff interrupted. "Find the steward named Orde and ask him for the bandbox I gave him to take care of. Then bring it here, please."

"Yes, sir," said Jane; and forthwith departed.

"And now--while we're waiting," suggested Alison--"the play, if you please."

"Not yet," said Staff. "I've something else to talk about that I'd forgotten. Manvers, the purser--"

"Good Heavens!" Alison interrupted in exasperation. She rose, with a general movement of extreme annoyance. "Am I never to hear the last of that man? He's been after me every day, and sometimes twice a day.... He's a personified pest!"

"But he's right, you know," said Staff quietly.

"Right! Right about what?"

"In wanting you to let him take care of that necklace--the what-you-may-call-it thing--the Cadogan collar."

"How do you know I have it?"

"You admitted as much to Manvers, and Mrs. Ilkington says you have it."

"But why need everybody know about it?"

"Enquire of Mrs. Ilkington. If you wanted the matter kept secret, why in the sacred name of the great god Publicity did you confide in that queen of press agents?"

"She had no right to say anything--"

"Granted. So you actually have got that collar with you?"

"Oh, yes," Alison admitted indifferently, "I have it."

"In this room?"

"Of course."

"Then be advised and take no chances."

Alison had been pacing to and fro, impatiently. Now she stopped, looking down at him without any abatement of her show of temper.

"You're as bad as all the rest," she complained. "I'm a woman grown, in full possession of my faculties. The collar is perfectly safe in my care. It's here, in this room, securely locked up."

"But someone might break in while you're out--"

"Either Jane is here all the time, or I am. It's never left to itself a single instant. It's perfectly ridiculous to suppose we're going to let anybody rob us of it. Besides, where would a thief go with it, if he did succeed in stealing it--overboard?"

"I'm willing to risk a small bet he'd manage to hide it so that it would take the whole ship's company, and a heap of good luck into the bargain, to find it."

"Well," said the woman defiantly, "I'm not afraid, and I'm not going to be browbeaten by any scare-cat purser into behaving like a kiddie afraid of the dark. I'm quite competent to look after my own property, and I purpose doing so without anybody's supervision. Now let's have that understood, Staff; and don't you bother me any more about this matter."

"Thanks," said Staff drily; "I fancy you can count on me to know when I'm asked to mind my own business."

"Oh, I didn't mean that--not that way, dear boy--but--"

At this juncture the maid entered with the bandbox, and Alison broke off with an exclamation of diverted interest.

"There! Let's say no more about this tiresome jewel business. I'm sure this is going to prove ever so much more amusing. Open it, Jane, please."

In another moment the hat was in her hands and both she and Jane were giving passably good imitations--modified by their respective personalities--of Milly's awe-smitten admiration of the thing.

Staff was conscious of a sensation of fatigue. Bending over, he drew the bandbox to him and began to examine the wrappings and wads of tissue-paper which it still contained.

"It's a perfect dear!" said Miss Landis in accents of the utmost sincerity.

"Indeed, mum," chimed Jane, antiphonal.

"Whoever your anonymous friend may be, she has exquisite taste."

"Indeed, mum," chanted the chorus.

"May I try it on, Staff?"

"What?" said the young man absently, absorbed in his search. "Oh, yes; certainly. Help yourself."

Alison moved across to the long mirror set in the door communicating with her bedroom. Here she paused, carefully adjusting the hat to her shapely head.

"Now, sir!" she exclaimed, turning.

Staff sat back in his chair and looked his fill of admiration. The hat might have been designed expressly for no other purpose than to set off this woman's imperious loveliness: such was the thought eloquent in his expression.

Satisfied with his dumb tribute, Alison lifted off the hat and deposited it upon a table.

"Find anything?" she asked lightly.

"Not a word," said he--"not a sign of a clue."

"What a disappointment!" she sighed. "I'm wild to know.... Suppose," said she, posing herself before him--"suppose the owner never did turn up after all?"

"*Hum*," said Staff, perturbed by such a prospect.

"What would you do with it?"

"*Hum*," said he a second time, non-committal.

"You couldn't wear it yourself; it's hardly an ornament for a bachelor's study. What *would* you do with it?"

"I think," said Staff, "I hear my cue to say: I'd give it to the most beautiful woman alive, of course."

"Thank you, dear," returned Alison serenely. "Don't forget."

She moved back to her chair, humming a little tune almost inaudibly; and in passing lightly brushed his forehead with her hand--the ghost of a caress.

"You may go, Jane," said she, sitting down to face her lover; and when the maid had shut herself out of the room:

"Now, dear, read me our play," said Alison, composing herself to attention.

Staff took up his manuscript and began to read aloud....

Three hours elapsed before he put aside the fourth act and turned expectantly to Alison.

Elbow on knee and chin in hand, eyes fixed upon his face, she sat as one entranced, unable still to shake off the spell of his invention: more lovely, he thought, in this mood of thoughtfulness even than in her brightest animation.... Then with a little sigh she roused, relaxed her pose, and sat back, faintly smiling.

"Well?" he asked diffidently. "What do you think?"

"It's splendid," she said with a soft, warm glow of enthusiasm--"simply splendid. It's coherent, it hangs together from start to finish; you've got little to learn about construction, my dear. And my part is magnificent: never have I had such a chance to show what I can do with comedy. I'm delighted beyond words. But ..." She sighed again, distraught.

"But--?" he repeated anxiously.

"There are one or two minor things," she said with shadowy regret, "that you will want to change, I think: nothing worth mentioning, nothing important enough to mar the wonderful cleverness of it all."

"But tell me--?"

"Oh, it's hardly worth talking about, dear boy. Only--there's the ingenue role; you've given her too much to do; she's on the stage in all of my biggest scenes, and has business enough in them to spoil my best effects. Of course, that can be arranged. And then the leading man's part--I don't want to seem hypercritical, but he's altogether too clever; you mustn't let him overshadow the heroine the way he does; some of his business is plainly hers--I can see myself doing it infinitely better than any leading man we could afford to engage. And those witty lines you've put into his mouth--I *must* have them; you won't find it hard, I'm sure, to twist the lines a bit, so that they come from the heroine rather than the hero...."

Staff held up a warning hand, and laughed.

"Just a minute, Alison," said he. "Remember this is a play, not a background for you. And with a play it's much as with matrimony: if either turns out to be a monologue it's bound to be a failure."

Alison frowned slightly, then forced a laugh, and rose. "You authors are all alike," she complained, pouting; "I mean, as authors. But I'm not going to have any trouble with you, dear boy. We'll agree on everything; I'm going to be reasonable and you've *got* to be. Besides, we've heaps of time to talk it over. Now I'm going to change and get up on deck. Will you wait for me in the saloon, outside? I shan't be ten minutes."

"Will I?" he laughed. "Your only trouble will be to keep me away from your door, this trip." He gathered up his manuscript and steamer-cap, then with his hand on the door-knob paused. "Oh, I forgot that blessed bandbox!"

"Never mind that now," said Alison. "I'll have Jane repack it and take it back to your steward. Besides, I'm in a hurry, stifling for fresh air. Just give me twenty minutes...."

She offered him a hand, and he bowed his lips to it; then quietly let himself out into the alleyway.

VI

IFF?

Late that night, Staff drifted into the smoking-room, which he found rather sparsely patronised. This fact surprised him no less than its explanation: it was after eleven o'clock. He had hardly realised the flight of time, so absorbed had he been all evening in argument with Alison Landis.

There remained in the smoking-room, at this late hour, but half a dozen detached men, smoking and talking over their nightcaps, and one table of bridge players--in whose number, of course, there was Mr. Iff.

Nodding abstractedly to the little man, Staff found a quiet corner and sat him down with a sigh and a shake of his head that illustrated vividly his frame of mind. He was a little blue and more than a little distressed. And this was nothing but natural, since he was still in the throes of the discovery that one man can hardly with success play the dual role of playwright and sweetheart to a successful actress.

Alison was charming, he told himself, a woman incomparable, tenderly sweet and desirable; and he loved her beyond

expression. But ... his play was also more than a slight thing in his life. It meant a good deal to him; he had worked hard and put the best that was in him into its making; and hard as the work had been, it had been a labour of love. He wasn't a man to overestimate his ability; he possessed a singularly sane and clear appreciation of the true value of his work, harbouring no illusions as to his real status either as dramatist or novelist. But at the same time, he knew when he had done good work. And *A Single Woman* promised to be a good play, measured by modern standards: not great, but sound and clear and strong. The plot was of sufficient originality to command attention; the construction was clear, sane, inevitable; he had mixed the elements of comedy and drama with the deftness of a sure hand; and he had carefully built up the characters in true proportion to one another and to their respective significance in the action.

Should all this then, be garbled and distorted to satisfy a woman's passion for the centre of the stage? Must he be untrue to the fundamentals of dramaturgic art in order to earn her tolerance? Could he gain his own consent to present to the public as work representative of his fancy the misshapen monstrosity which would inevitably result of yielding to Alison's insistence?

Small wonder that he sighed and wagged a doleful head!

Now while all this was passing through a mind wrapped in gloomy and profound abstraction, Iff's voice disturbed him.

"Pity the poor playwright!" it said in accents of amusement.

Looking up, Staff discovered that the little man stood before him, a furtive twinkle in his pale blue eyes. The bridge game had broken up, and they two were now alone in the smoking-room--saving the presence of a steward yawning sleepily and wishing to 'Eaven they'd turn in and give 'im a chance to snatch a wink o' sleep.

"Hello," said Staff, none too cordially. "What d' you mean by that?"

"Hello," responded Iff, dropping upon the cushioned seat beside him. He snapped his fingers at the steward. "Give it a name," said he.

Staff gave it a name. "You don't answer me," he persisted. "Why pity the poor playwright?"

"He has his troubles," quoth Mr. Iff cheerfully, if vaguely. "Need I enumerate them, to you? Anyway, if the poor playwright isn't to be pitied, what right 've you got to stick round here looking like that?"

"Oh!" Staff laughed uneasily. "I was thinking...."

"I flattered you to the extent of surmising as much." Iff elevated one of the glasses which had just been put before them. "Chin-chin," said he--"that is, if you've no particular objection to chin-chinning with a putative criminal of the d'p'st dye?"

"None whatever," returned Staff, lifting his own glass--"at least, not so long as it affords me continued opportunity to watch him cooking up his cunning little crimes."

"Ah!" cried Iff with enthusiasm--"there spoke the true spirit of Sociological Research. Long may you rave!"

He set down an empty glass.

Staff laughed, sufficiently diverted to forget his troubles for the time being.

"I wish I could make you out," he said slowly, eyeing the older man.

"You mean you hope I'm not going to take you in."

"Either way--or both: please yourself."

"Ah!" said the little man appreciatively--"I am a deep one, ain't I?"

He laid a finger alongside his nose and looked unutterably enigmatic.

At this point they were interrupted: a man burst into the smoking-room from the deck and pulled up breathing heavily, as if he had been running, while he raked the room with quick, enquiring glances. Staff recognised Mr. Manvers, the purser, betraying every evidence of a disturbed mind. At the same moment, Manvers caught sight of the pair in the corner and made for them.

"Mr. Ismay--" he began, halting before their table and glaring gloomily at Staff's companion.

"I beg your pardon," said the person addressed, icily; "my name is Iff."

Manvers made an impatient movement with one hand. "Iff or Ismay--it's all one to me--to you too, I fancy--"

"One moment!" snapped Iff, rising. "If you were an older man," he said stiffly, "and a smaller, I'd pull your impertinent nose, sir! As things stand, I'd probably get my head punched if I did."

"That's sound logic," returned Manvers with a sneer.

"Well, then, sir? What do you want with me?"

Manvers changed his attitude to one of sardonic civility. "The captain sent me to ask you if you would be kind enough to step up to his cabin," he said stiltedly. "May I hope you will be good enough to humour him?"

"Most assuredly," Iff picked up his steamer-cap and set it jauntily upon his head. "Might one enquire the cause of all this--here fluster?"

"I daresay the captain--"

"Oh, very well. If you won't talk, my dear purser, I'll hazard a shrewd guess--by your leave."

The purser stared. "What's that?"

"I was about to say," pursued Iff serenely, "that I'll lay two to one that the Cadogan collar has disappeared."

Manvers continued to stare, his eyes blank with amazement. "You've got your nerve with you, I must say," he growled.

"Or guilty knowledge? Which, Mr. Manvers?"

A reply seemed to tremble on Manvers' lips, but to be withheld at discretion. "I'm not the captain," he said after a slight pause; "go and cheek him as far as you like. And we're keeping him waiting, if I may be permitted to mention it."

Iff turned to Staff, with an engaging smile. "Rejecting the guilty knowledge hypothesis, for the sake of the argument," said he: "you'll admit I'm the only suspicious personage known to be aboard; so it's not such a wild guess--that the collar has vanished--when I'm sent for by the captain at this unearthly hour... Lead on, Mr. Manvers," he wound up with a dramatic gesture.

The purser nodded and turned toward the door. Staff jumped up and followed the pair.

"You don't mind my coming?" he asked.

"No--wish you would; you can bear witness to the captain that I did everything in my power to make Miss Landis appreciate the danger--"

"Then," Iff interrupted suavely, "the collar has disappeared--we're to understand?"

"Yes," the purser assented shortly.

They scurried forward and mounted the ladder to the boat-deck, where the captain's quarters were situated in the deckhouse immediately abaft the bridge. From an open door--for the night was as warm as it was dark--a wide stream of light fell athwart the deck, like gold upon black velvet.

Pausing *en silhouette* against the glow, the purser knocked discreetly. Iff ranged up beside him, dwarfed by comparison. Staff held back at a little distance.

A voice from within barked: "Oh, come in!" Iff and Manvers obeyed. Staff paused on the threshold, bending his head to escape the lintel.

Standing thus, he appreciated the tableau: the neat, tidy little room--commodious for a steamship--glistening with white-enamelled woodwork in the radiance of half a dozen electric bulbs; Alison in a steamer-coat seated on the far side of a chart-table, her colouring unusually pallid, her brows knitted and eyes anxious; the maid, Jane, standing respectfully behind her mistress; Manvers to one side and out of the way, but plainly eager and distraught; Iff in the centre of the stage, his slight, round-shouldered figure lending him a deceptive effect of embarrassment which was only enhanced by his semi-placating, semi-wistful smile and his small, blinking eyes; the captain looming over him, authority and menace incarnate in his heavy, square-set, sturdy body and heavy-browed, square-jawed, beardless and weathered face....

Manvers said: "This is Mr. Iff, Captain Cobb."

The captain nodded brusquely. His hands were in his coat-pockets; he didn't offer to remove them. Iff blinked up at him

and cocked his small head critically to one side, persistently smiling.

"I've heard so much of you, sir," he said in a husky, weary voice, very subdued. "It's a real pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Captain Cobb noticed this bit of effrontery by nothing more than a growl deep in his throat. His eyes travelled on, above Iff's head, and Staff was conscious of their penetrating and unfriendly question. He bowed uncertainly.

"Oh--and Mr. Staff," said Manvers hastily.

"Well?" said the captain without moving.

"A friend of Miss Landis and also--curiously--in the same room with Mr. Iff."

"Ah," remarked the captain. "How-d'-you-do?" He removed his right hand from its pocket and held it out with the air of a man who wishes it understood that by such action he commits himself to nothing.

Before Staff could grasp it, Iff shook it heartily. "Ah," he said blandly, "h' are ye?" Then he dropped the hand, thereby preventing the captain from wrenching it away, and averted his eyes modestly, thereby escaping the captain's outraged glare.

Staff managed to overcome an impulse to laugh idiotically, and gravely shook hands with the captain. He had already exchanged a glance with the lady of his heart's desire.

An insanely awkward pause marked Iff's exhibition of matchless impudence. Each hesitated to speak while the captain was occupied with a vain attempt to make Iff realise his position by scowling at him out of a blood-congested countenance. But of this, Iff appeared to be wholly unconscious. When the situation seemed all but unendurable for another second (Staff for one was haunted by the fear that he would throw back his head and bray like a mule) Manvers took it upon himself to ease the tension, hardily earning the undying gratitude of all the gathering.

"I asked Mr. Staff to come and tell you, sir," he said haltingly, "that I spoke to him about this matter the very night we left Queenstown--asked him to do what he could to make Miss Landis appreciate--"

"I see," the captain cut him short.

"That is so," Staff affirmed. "Unfortunately I had no opportunity until this afternoon--"

Alison interposed quietly: "I am quite ready to exonerate Mr. Manvers from all blame. In fact, he has really annoyed me with his efforts to induce me to turn the collar over to his care."

"Thank you," said Manvers bowing.

There was the faintest tinge of sarcasm in the acknowledgment. Staff could see that Alison felt and resented it; and the thought popped into his mind, and immediately out again, that she was scarcely proving herself generous.

"It's a very serious matter," announced the captain heavily--"serious for the service: for the officers, for the good name of the ship, for the reputation of the company. This is the second time a crime of this nature had been committed aboard the Autocratic within a period of eighteen months--less than that, in fact. It was June, a year ago, that Mrs. Burden Hamman's jewels were stolen--on the eastbound passage, I believe."

"We sailed from New York, June 22," affirmed the purser.

"I want, therefore," continued the captain, "to ask you all to preserve silence about this affair until it has been thoroughly sifted. I believe the knowledge of the theft is confined to those present."

"Quite so, sir," agreed the purser.

"May I ask how it happened?" Staff put in.

The captain swung on his heel and bowed to Alison. She bent forward, telling her story with brevity and animation.

"You remember"--she looked at Staff--"when we met in the saloon, about half-past five, and went on deck?... Well, right after that, Jane left my rooms to return the hat you had been showing me to your steward. She was gone not over five minutes, and she swears the door was locked all the time; she remembers locking it when she went out and unlocking it when she returned. There was no indication that anybody had been in the rooms, except one that we didn't discover until I started to go to bed, a little while ago. Then I thought of my jewels. They were all kept in this handbag"--she dropped a hand upon a rather small Lawrence bag of tan leather on the table before her--"under my bed, behind the

steamer trunk. I told Jane to see if it was all right. She got it out, and then we discovered that this had happened to it."

She turned the bag so that the other side was presented for inspection, disclosing the fact that some sharp instrument had been used to cut a great flap out of the leather, running in a rough semicircle from clasp to clasp of the frame.

"It wasn't altogether empty," she declared with a trace of wonder in her voice; "but that only makes it all the more mysterious. All my ordinary jewels were untouched; nothing had been taken except the case that held the Cadogan collar."

"And the collar itself, I hope?" Iff put in quietly.

The actress turned upon him with rising colour.

"You hope--!" she exclaimed.

The little man made a deprecatory gesture. "Why, yes," he said. "It would seem a pity that a crook cute enough to turn a trick as neat as that should have got nothing for his pains but a velvet-lined leather case, worth perhaps a dollar and a half--or say two dollars at the outside, if you make a point of *that*."

"How do you happen to know it was a velvet-lined leather case?" Alison flashed.

Iff laughed quietly. "My dear lady," he said, "I priced the necklace at Cottier's in Paris the day before you purchased it. Unfortunately it was beyond my means."

"A bit thick," commented the purser in an acid voice.

"Now, listen"--Iff turned to face him with a flush of choler--"you keep on that way and I'll land on you if it's the last act of my gay young life. You hear me?"

"That will do, sir!" barked the captain.

"I trust so, sincerely," replied Iff.

"Be silent!" The captain's voice ascended a full octave.

"Oh, very well, very well. I hear you--perfectly." With this the little man subsided, smiling feebly at vacancy.

Staff interposed hastily, in the interests of peace: "The supposition is, then, that the thief got in during those five minutes that Jane was away from the room?"

"It couldn't have happened at any other time, of course," said Alison.

"And, equally of course, it couldn't have happened then," said Iff.

"Why not?" the woman demanded.

"The girl was gone only five minutes. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said Jane.

"And the door was locked--you're positive about that?"

"Quite, sir."

"Then will anyone explain how any thief could effect an entrance, pull a heavy steamer trunk out from under a bed, get at the bag, cut a slit in its side, extract the leather case--*and* the collar, to be sure--replace the bag, replace the trunk, leave the stateroom and lock the door, all in five short minutes--and without any key?" Iff wound up triumphantly: "I tell you, it couldn't be done; it ain't human."

"But a skeleton-key--" Manvers began.

"O you!" said Iff with a withering glance. "The door to Miss Landis' suite opens directly opposite the head of the main companionway, which is in constant use--people going up and down all the time. Can you see anybody, however expert, picking a lock with a bunch of skeleton-keys in that exposed position without being caught red-handed? Not on your vivid imagination, young man."

"There may, however, be duplicate keys to the staterooms," Alison countered.

"My dear lady," said Iff, humbly, "there are; and unless this ship differs radically from others, those duplicate keys are

all in the purser's care. Am I right, Mr. Manvers?"

"Yes," said Manvers sullenly.

"And here's another point," resumed Iff. "May I ask you a question or two, Miss Landis?" Alison nodded curtly. "You kept the handbag locked, I presume?"

"Certainly."

"And when you found it had been tampered with, did you unlock it?"

"There wasn't any need," said Alison. "You can see for yourself the opening in the side is so large--"

"Then you didn't unlock it?"

"No."

"That only makes it the more mysterious. Because, you see, it's unlocked now."

There was a concerted movement of astonishment.

"How do you make that out, sir?" demanded the captain.

"You can see for yourself (to borrow Miss Landis' phrase) if you'll only use your eyes, as I have. The side clasps are in place, all right, but the slide on the lock itself is pushed a trifle to the left; which it couldn't be if the bag were locked."

There was a hint of derision in the little man's voice; and his sarcastic smile was flickering round his thin lips as he put out one hand, drew the bag to him, lifted the clasps, and pushing back the lock-slide, opened it wide.

"The thot plickens," he observed gravely. "For my part I am unable to imagine any bold and enterprising crook taking the trouble to cut open this bag when the most casual examination would have shown him that it wasn't locked."

"He might 've done it as a blind..." Manvers suggested.

"Officer!" piped Iff in a plaintive voice--"he's in again."

The purser, colouring to the temples, took a step toward the little man, his hands twitching, but at a gesture from the captain paused, controlled himself and fell back.

For a few moments there was quiet in the cabin, while those present digested Iff's conclusions and acknowledged their logic irrefragable. Staff caught Alison staring at the man as if fascinated, with a curious, intense look in her eyes the significance of which he could not fathom.

Then the pause was brought to an end by the captain. He shifted his position abruptly, so that he towered over Iff, scowling down upon him.

"That will do," he said ominously. "I'm tired of this; say what you will, you haven't hoodwinked me, and you shan't."

"My dear sir!" protested Iff in amazement. "Hoodwink *you*? Why, I'm merely trying to make you see--"

"You've succeeded in making me see one thing clearly: that you know more about this robbery than you've any right to know."

"Oh, you-all make me tired," complained Iff. "Now you have just heard Miss Landis declare that this collar of pearls vanished between, say, five-thirty and five-forty-five. Well, I can prove by the testimony of three other passengers, and I don't know how many more, to say nothing of your smoke-room stewards, that I was playing bridge from four until after six."

"Ah, yes," put in the purser sweetly, "but you yourself have just demonstrated conclusively that the robbery couldn't have taken place at the hour mentioned."

Iff grinned appreciatively. "You're improving," he said. "I guess that doesn't get you even with me for the rest of your life--what?"

"Moreover," Manvers went on doggedly, "Ismay always could prove a copper-riveted alibi."

"That's one of the best little things he does," admitted Iff cheerfully.

"You don't deny you're Ismay?" This from the captain, aggressive and domineering.

"I don't have to, dear sir; I just ain't--that's the answer."

"You've been recognised," insisted the captain. "You were on this ship the time of the Burden Hamman robbery. Mr. Manvers knows you by sight; I, too, recognise you."

"Sorry," murmured Iff--"so sorry, but you're wrong. Case of mistaken identity, I give you my word."

"Your word!" snapped the captain contemptuously.

"My word," retorted Iff in a crisp voice; "and more than that, I don't ask you to take it. I've proofs of my identity which I think will satisfy even you."

"Produce them."

"In my own good time." Iff put his back against the wall and lounged negligently, surveying the circle of unfriendly faces with his odd, supercilious eyes, half veiled by their hairless lids. "Since you've done me the honour to impute to me guilty knowledge of this--ah--crime, I don't mind admitting that I was a passenger on the Autocratic when Mrs. Burden Hamman lost her jewels; and it wasn't a coincidence, either. I was with you for a purpose--to look out for those jewels. I shared a room with Ismay, and when, after the robbery, you mistook me for him, he naturally didn't object, and I didn't because it left me all the freer to prosecute my investigation. In fact, it was due to my efforts that Ismay found things getting too hot for him over in London and arranged to return the jewelry to Mrs. Hamman for an insignificant ransom--not a tithe of their value. But he was hard pressed; if he'd delayed another day, I'd 've had him with the goods on.... That," said Iff pensively, "was when I was in the Pinkerton service."

"Ah, it was?" said the captain with much irony. "And what, pray, do you claim to be now?"

"Just a plain, ordinary, everyday sleuth in the employ of the United States Secret Service, detailed to work with the Customs Office to prevent smuggling--the smuggling of such articles as, say, the Cadogan collar."

In the silence that followed this astounding declaration, the little man hunched up his shoulders until they seemed more round than ever, and again subjected the faces of those surrounding him to the stare of his impertinent, pale eyes. Staff, more detached in attitude than any of the others present, for his own amusement followed the range of Iff's gaze.

Captain Cobb was scowling thoughtfully. Manvers wore a look of deepest chagrin. Jane's jaw had fallen and her eyes seemed perilously protrudant. Alison was leaning gracefully back in her chair--her pose studied but charmingly effective--while she favoured Iff with a scrutiny openly incredulous and disdainful.

"You say you have proofs of this--ah--assertion of yours?" demanded the captain at length.

"Oh, yes--surely yes." Iff's tone was almost apologetic. He thrust a hand between his shirt and waistcoat, fumbled a moment as if unbuttoning a pocket, and brought forth a worn leather wallet from which, with great and exasperating deliberation, he produced a folded paper. This he handed the captain--his manner, if possible, more than ever self-effacing and meek.

The paper (it was parchment) crackled crisply in the captain's fingers. He spread it out and held it to the light in such a position that Staff could see it over his shoulder. He was unable to read its many closely inscribed lines, but the heading "Treasury Department, Washington, D. C." was boldly conspicuous, as well as an imposing official seal and the heavily scrawled signature of the Secretary of the Treasury.

Beneath the blue cloth, the captain's shoulders moved impatiently. Staff heard him say something indistinguishable, but of an intonation calculated to express his emotion.

Iff giggled nervously: "Oh, captain! the ladies--"

Holding himself very stiff and erect, Captain Cobb refolded the document and ceremoniously handed it back to the little man.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a low voice.

"Don't mention it," begged Iff. He replaced the paper in his wallet, the wallet in his pocket. "I'm sure it's quite an excusable mistake on your part, captain dear... As for you, Mr. Manvers, you needn't apologise to me," he added maliciously: "just make your apologies to Captain Cobb."

VII

STOLE AWAY!

And then (it seemed most astonishing!) nothing happened. The net outcome of all this fuss and fluster was precisely *nil*. With the collapse of the flimsy structure of prejudice and suspicion in which Manvers had sought to trap Iff, the interest of all concerned seemed to simmer off into apathy. Nobody did anything helpful, offered any useful suggestion or brought to light anything illuminating. Staff couldn't understand it, for the life of him...

There was, to be sure, a deal more talk in the captain's cabin--talk in which the purser took little or no part. As a matter of fact, Manvers kept far in the background and betrayed every indication of a desire to crawl under the table and be a good dog. The captain had his say, however, and in the end (since he was rather emphatic about it) his way.

He earnestly desired that the matter should be kept quiet; it would do no good, he argued, to noise it about amongst the passengers; the news would only excite them and possibly (in some obscure and undesignated fashion) impede official investigation. He would, of course, spare no pains to fathom the mystery; drastic measures would be taken to secure the detection of the culprit and the restitution of the necklace to its rightful owner. The ship would be minutely, if quietly, searched; not a member of the crew, from captain to stoker, would be spared, nor any passenger against whom there might develop the least cause for suspicion. Detectives would meet the ship at New York and co-operate with the customs officials in a most minute investigation of the passengers' effects. Everything possible would be done--trust the captain! In the meantime, he requested all present to regard the case as confidential.

Iff concurred, somewhat gravely, somewhat diffidently. He was disposed to make no secret of the fact that his presence on board was directly due to the missing necklace. He had been set to watch Miss Landis, to see that she didn't smuggle the thing into the United States. He hoped she wouldn't take offense of this: such was his business; he had received his orders and had no choice but to obey them. (And, so far as was discernible, Miss Landis did not resent his espionage; but she seemed interested and, Staff fancied, considerably diverted.) Mr. Iff could promise Miss Landis that he would leave no stone unturned in his private inquiry; and his work, likewise, would be considerably facilitated if the affair were kept quiet. He ventured to second the captain's motion.

Miss Landis offered no objection; Staff and Manvers volunteered to maintain discretion, Jane was sworn to it. Motion seconded and carried: the meeting adjourned *sine die*; the several parties thereto separated and went to their respective quarters.

Staff accompanied Alison as far as her stateroom, but didn't tarry long over his second good-nights. The young woman seemed excusably tired and nervous and anxious to be alone--in no mood to discuss this overwhelming event. So Staff spared her.

In his own stateroom he found Mr. Iff half-undressed, sitting on the transom and chuckling noiselessly, apparently in such a transport of amusement that he didn't care whether he ever got to bed or not. Upon the entrance of his roommate, however, he dried his eyes and made an effort to contain himself.

"You seem to think this business funny," suggested Staff, not at all approvingly.

"I do," laughed the little man--"I do, indeed. It's a grand young joke--clutch it from me, my friend."

"In what respect, particularly, do you find it so vastly entertaining?"

"Oh ... isn't that ass Manvers enough?"

Further than this, Mr. Iff declined to be interviewed. He clambered briskly into his berth and chuckled himself to sleep. Staff considered his behaviour highly annoying.

But it was on the following day--the last of the voyage--that he found reason to consider the affair astonishing because of the lack of interest displayed by those personally involved. He made no doubt but that the captain was keeping his word to the extent of conducting a secret investigation, though no signs of any such proceeding appeared on the surface of the ship's life. But Alison he could not understand; she seemed to have cast care to the winds. She appeared at breakfast in the gayest of spirits, spent the entire morning and most of the afternoon on deck, the centre of an animated group shepherded by the indefatigable Mrs. Ilkington, dressed herself radiantly for the grand final dinner, flirted with the assiduously attentive Arkroyd until she had reduced Staff to the last stages of corroded jealousy, and in general (as Staff found a chance to tell her) seemed to be having the time of her life.

"And why not?" she countered. "Spilt milk!"

"Judged by your conduct," observed Staff, "one would be justified in thinking the Cadogan collar an *article de Paris*."

"One might think any number of foolish things, dear boy. If the collar's gone, it's gone, and not all the moping and glooming imaginable will bring it back to me. If I do get it back--why, that'll be simply good luck; and I've never found it profitable yet to court Fortune with a doleful mouth."

"You certainly practise your theory," he said. "I swear I believe I'm more concerned about your loss than you are."

"Certainly you are, you silly boy. For my part, I feel quite confident the necklace will be returned."

He stared. "Why?"

She opened her hands expressively. "I've always been lucky.... Besides, if I never see it again, it'll come back to me this way or that--in advertising, for one."

"Isn't that dodge pretty well worked out with the newspapers? It seems to me that it has come to that, of late; or else the prime donne have taken to guarding their valuables with greater care."

"Oh, that makes no difference. With another woman it might, but I"--she shrugged--"I'm Alison Landis, if you please. The papers won't neglect *me*. Besides, Max can do much as he likes with them."

"Have you--?"

"Of course--by wireless, first thing this morning."

"But you promised--"

"Don't be tiresome, Staff. I bought this necklace on Max's suggestion, as an advertisement--I meant to wear it in *A Single Woman*; that alone would help make our play a go. Since I can't get my advertising and have my necklace, too, why, in goodness' name, mayn't I get what I can out of it?"

"Oh, well ..."

Staff abandoned argument and resting his forearms on the rail, stared sombrely out over the darkling waters for a moment or two.

This was at night, during an intermission in a dance on deck which had been arranged by special permission of the weather--the latter holding very calm and warm. Between halves Staff had succeeded in disentangling Alison from a circle of admirers and had marched her up to the boat-deck, where there was less light--aside from that furnished by an obliging moon--and more solitude.

Under any other circumstances Staff would have been enchanted with the situation. They were quite alone, if not unobserved; and there was magic in the night, mystery and romance in the moonlight, the inky shadows, the sense of swift movement through space illimitable. Alison stood with back to the rail so near him that his elbow almost touched the artificial orchid that adorned her corsage. He was acutely sensitive of her presence, of the faint persistent odour of her individual perfume, of the beauty and grace of her strong, free-limbed body in its impeccable Paquin gown, of the sheen of her immaculate arms and shoulders and the rich warmth of her face with its alluring, shadowed eyes that seemed to mock him with light, fascinating malice, of the magnetism of her intense, ineluctable vitality diffused as naturally as sunlight. But--the thought rankled--Arkroyd had won three dances to his two; and through all that day Alison had seemed determined to avoid him, to keep herself surrounded by an obsequious crowd, impenetrable to her lover...

On the deck below the band began to play again: signalling the end of the intermission. Alison hummed lightly a bit of the melody, her silken slipper tapping the deck.

"Do I get another dance?" he asked suddenly.

She broke off her humming. "So sorry," she said; "my card is quite full and running over."

"May I see it?" She surrendered it without hesitation. He frowned, endeavouring to decipher the scrawl by the inadequate moonlight.

"You wanted to know--?" she enquired, with a laugh back of her tone.

"How many has Arkroyd, this half?" he demanded bluntly.

"Two, I think," she answered coolly. "Why?"

He stared gravely into her shadowed face. "Is that good advertising, too," he asked quietly--"to show marked

preference to a man of Arkroyd's calibre and reputation?"

Alison laughed. "You're delicious when you're jealous, Staff," said she. "No; it isn't advertising--it's discipline."

"Discipline?"

"Just that. I'm punishing you for your obstinacy about the play. You'll see, my dear," she taunted him: "I'm going to have my own way or make your life perfectly miserable."

Before he could invent an adequate retort, the beautiful Mr. Bangs came tripping across the deck, elation in his manner.

"Ah, there you are, Miss Landis! My dance, you know. Been looking everywhere for you."

"So sorry: I was just coming down."

Alison caught up the demi-train of her gown, but paused an instant longer, staring Staff full in the face, her air taunting and provocative.

"Think it over, Staff," she advised in a cool, metallic voice; and dropping her hand on Bangs' arm, moved languidly away.

Staff did think it over, if with surprisingly little satisfaction to himself. It wasn't possible to ignore the patent fact that Alison had determined to make him come to heel. That apparently was the only attitude possible for one who aspired to the post of first playwright-in-waiting and husband-in-ordinary to the first actress in the land. He doubted his ability to supple his back to the requisite degree. Even for the woman he loved.... Or did he?... Through the wraith-like mists of fading illusions he caught disturbing glimpses--dark shapes of lurking doubts.

Disquieted, he found distasteful the thought of returning to the lower deck, and so strolled idly aft with a half-formed notion of looking up Iff.

From a deck-chair a woman's voice hailed him: "Oh, Mr. Staff..."

"Miss Searle?" He turned in to her side, experiencing an odd sensation of pleasure in the encounter; which, wisely or not, he didn't attempt to analyse--at least further than the thought that he had seen little of the young woman during the last two days and that she was rather likeable.

"You're not dancing?" he asked in surprise; for she, too, had dressed for this celebration of the last night of the voyage.

Smiling, she shook her head slightly. "Neither are you, apparently. Won't you sit down?"

He wasn't at all reluctant to take the chair by her side. "Why not?" he asked.

"Oh, I did dance once or twice and then I began to feel a bit tired and bored and stole away to think."

"Long, long thoughts?" he asked lightly.

"Rather," said she with becoming gravity. "You see, it seems pretty serious to one, this coming home to face new and unknown conditions after three years' absence.... And then, after six days at sea, out of touch with the world, practically, there's always the feeling of suspense about what will happen when you get solid earth under your feet. You know what I mean."

"I do. You live in New York?"

"I mean to try to," she said quietly. "I haven't any home, really--no parents and only distant family connections. In fact, all I do possess is a little income and an immense desire to work."

"You're meaning to look for an engagement, then?"

"I must."

"Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "I might help you a bit; I know some of the managers pretty well ..."

"Thank you. I meant to ask you, but hoped you'd offer." She laughed a trifle shyly. "I presume that's a bold, forward confession to make, but I've been so long abroad I don't know my way round at home, anymore."

"That's all right," said Staff, liking her candour. "Where shall you be? Where can I find you?"

"I hardly know--for a day or two at some hotel, and as soon as possible in a small studio, if I can find one to sublet."

"Tell you what you do," he suggested: "drop me a line at the Players, letting me know when and where you settle."

"Thank you," she said, "I shall."

He was silent for a little, musing, his gaze wandering far over the placid reaches of the night-wrapped ocean. "Funny little world, this," he said, rousing: "I mean, the ship. Here we are today, some several hundreds of us, all knit together by an intricate network of interests, aims, ambitions and affections that seem as strong and inescapable as the warp and woof of Life itself; and yet tomorrow--we land, we separate on our various ways, and the network vanishes like a dew-gemmed spider's web before the sun."

"Only the dew vanishes," she reminded him; "the web remains, if almost invisible.... Still, I know what you mean.... Wasn't that Miss Landis you were with, just now?"

"Yes."

"Tell me"--she stirred, half turning to him--"has anything new transpired--about the collar?"

"You know about that!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Of course; the ship has been humming with it ever since dinner."

"But how--?"

"Mrs. Ilkington told me, of course. I presume Miss Landis told her."

"Doubtless," he agreed reluctantly, little relishing the thought. Still, it seemed quite plausible, Alison's views on advertising values considered. "No," he added presently; "I've heard nothing new."

"Then the Secret Service man hasn't accomplished anything?"

"So you know about him, too?... Can't say--haven't seen him since morning. Presumably he's somewhere about, sniffing for clues."

"Miss Landis," said the girl in a hesitant manner--"doesn't seem to worry very much ...?"

"No," admitted Staff.

"Either that, or she's as wonderful an actress off the boards as on."

"They mostly are," Staff observed. He was hardly ready to criticise his beloved to a comparative stranger. The subject languished and died of inanition.

"By the way--did you ever solve the mystery of your bandbox?"

Staff started. "What made you think of that?"

"Oh--I don't know."

"No--haven't had any chance. I rather expect to find out something by the time I get home, though. It isn't likely that so beautiful a hat will be permitted to blush unseen." His interest quickened. "Won't you tell me, please?" he begged, bending forward.

But the girl laughed softly and shook her head.

"Please!"

"Oh, I couldn't. I've no right to spoil a good joke."

"Then you think it's a joke?" he enquired gloomily.

"What else could it be?"

"I only wish I knew!"

The exclamation was so fervent that Miss Searle laughed again.

Six bells sounded in the pause that followed and the girl sat up suddenly with a little cry of mock dismay.

"Eleven o'clock! Good Heavens, I mustn't loaf another minute! I've all my packing to do."

She was up and standing before Staff could offer to assist her. But she paused long enough to slip a hand into his.

"Good night, Mr. Staff; and thank you for volunteering to help me."

"I shan't forget," he promised. "Good night."

He remained momentarily where she left him, following with his gaze her tall and slender yet well-proportioned figure as it moved along the moonlit deck, swaying gracefully to the long, smooth, almost imperceptible motion of the ship.

He wore just then a curious expression: his eyes wondering, his brows puckered, his thin lips shaping into their queer, twisted smile.... Funny (he found it) that a fellow could feel so comfortable and content in the company of a woman he didn't care a rap about, so ill at ease and out of sorts when with the mistress of his dreams! It didn't, somehow, seem just right....

With a dubious grimace, he went aft. Iff, however, wasn't in the smoking-room. Neither was he anywhere else that Staff could discover in his somewhat aimless wanderings. And he found his stateroom unoccupied when at length he decided to turn in.

"Sleuthing," was the word with which he accounted for the little man's invisibility, as he dropped off to sleep.

If he were right, Iff was early on the job. When the bath-steward's knock brought Staff out of his berth the next morning, his companion of the voyage was already up and about; his empty berth showed that it had been slept in, but its occupant had disappeared with his clothing; and even his luggage (he travelled light, with a kit-bag and a suit-case for all impedimenta) had been packed and strapped, ready to go ashore.

"Conscientious," commented the playwright privately. "Wonder if he's really on the track of anything?"

Idle speculation, however, was suddenly drowned in delight when, his sleep-numb faculties clearing, he realised that the Autocratic was resting without way, and a glance out of the stateroom port showed him the steep green slopes of Fort Tompkins glistening in new sunlight.

Home! He choked back a yell of joy, and raced to his bath. Within twenty minutes, bathed, clothed and sane, he was on deck.

By now, having taken on the health officers, the great vessel was in motion again, standing majestically up through the Narrows. To starboard, Bay Ridge basked in golden light. Forward, over the starboard bow, beyond leagues of stained water quick with the life of two-score types of harbour and seagoing craft, New York reared its ragged battlements against a sky whose blue had been faded pale by summer heat. Soft airs and warm breathed down the Bay, bearing to his nostrils that well-kenned, unforgettable odour, like none other on earth, of the sun-scorched city.

Staff filled his lungs and was glad. It is good to be an American able to go roaming for to admire and for to see; but it is best of all to be an American coming home.

Joy in his heart, Staff dodged below, made his customs declaration, bolted his breakfast (with the greater expedition since he had for company only Mrs. Thataker, a plump, pale envelope for a soul of pink pining for sympathy) and hurried back to the deck.

Governor's Island lay abeam. Beyond it the East River was opening up--spanned by its gossamer webs of steel. Ahead, and near at hand, New York bulked magnificently, purple canyons yawning between its pastel-tinted cliffs of steel and glass and stone: the heat haze, dimming all, lent soft enchantment....

Ranks of staring passengers hid the rail, each a bundle of unsuspected hopes and fears, longings and apprehensions, keen for the hour of landing that would bring confirmation, denial, disappointment, fulfillment.

Amidships Staff descried Mrs. Ilkington's head and shoulders next to Miss Searle's profile. Arkroyd was with them and Bangs. Alison he did not see, nor Iff. As he hesitated whether or not to approach them, a steward touched his arm apologetically.

"Beg pardon--Mr. Staff?"

"Yes ...?"

"Mr. Manvers--the purser, sir--awsked me to request you to be so kind as to step down to Miss Landis' stiteroom."

"Certainly."

The door to Alison's sitting-room was ajar. He knocked and heard her voice bid him enter. As he complied it was the

purser who shut the door tight behind him.

He found himself in the presence of Alison, Jane, Manvers and three men whom he did not know. Alison alone was seated, leaning back in an armchair, her expression of bored annoyance illustrated by the quick, steady tapping of the toe of her polished boot. She met his questioning look with a ready if artificial and meaningless smile.

"Oh, you weren't far away, were you, Staff?" she said lightly. "These gentlemen want to ask you some questions about that wretched necklace. I wish to goodness I'd never bought the thing!"

Her expression had changed to petulance. Ceasing to speak, she resumed the nervous drumming of her foot upon the carpet.

Manvers took the initiative: "Mr. Staff, this is Mr. Siddons of the customs service; this is Mr. Arnold of the United States Secret Service; and this, Mr. Cramp of Pinkerton's. They came aboard at Quarantine."

Staff nodded to each man in turn, and reviewed their faces, finding them one and all more or less commonplace and uninteresting.

"How-d'-you-do?" he said civilly; and to Manvers: "Well ...?"

"We were wondering if you'd seen anything of Mr. Iff this morning?"

"No--nothing. He came to bed after I'd gone to sleep last night, and was up and out before I woke. Why?"

"He--" the purser began; but the man he had called Mr. Arnold interrupted.

"He claimed to be a Secret Service man, didn't he?"

"He did," returned Staff. "Captain Cobb saw his credentials, I believe."

"But that didn't satisfy him," Manvers put in eagerly. "I managed to make him understand that credentials could be forged, so he wirelessed for information. And," the purser added triumphantly after a distinct dramatic pause, "he got it."

"You mean Iff isn't what he claimed--?" exclaimed Staff.

Arnold nodded brusquely. "There's no such person in the service," he affirmed.

"Then he *is* Ismay!"

The Pinkerton man answered him: "If he is and I lay eyes on him, I can tell in two shakes."

"By George!" cried Staff in admiration--"the clever little scamp!"

"You may well say so," said Manvers bitterly. "If you'd listened to me--if the captain had--this wouldn't have happened."

"What--the theft?"

"Yes, that primarily; but now, you know--because he was given so much rope--he's vanished."

"What!"

"Vanished--disappeared--gone!" said the purser, waving his hands graphically.

"But he can't have left the ship!"

"Doesn't seem so, does it?" said the Pinkerton man morosely. "All the same, we've made a pretty thorough search, and he can't be found."

"You see," resumed Manvers, "when the captain got word yesterday afternoon that Iff or Ismay wasn't what he pretended to be, he simply wirelessed back for a detective, and didn't arrest Iff, because--he said--he couldn't get away. I told him he was wrong--and he was!"

THE WRONG BOX

When the janitor and the taxicab operator between them had worried all his luggage upstairs, Staff paid and tipped them and thankfully saw the hall-door close on their backs. He was tired, over-heated and glad to be alone.

Shaking off his coat, he made a round of his rooms, opening windows. Those in the front of the apartment looked out from the second-story elevation upon East Thirtieth Street, between Fourth and Lexington Avenues. Those in the rear (he discovered to his consummate disgust) commanded an excellent view of a very deep hole in the ground swarming with Italian labourers and dotted with steam drills, mounds of broken rock and carters with their teams; also a section of East Twenty-ninth Street was visible through the space that had been occupied no longer ago than last spring by a dignified row of brownstone houses with well-tended backyards.

Staff cursed soulfully the noise and dirt caused by the work of excavation, shut the back windows to keep out the dust and returned to the front room--his study, library and reception-room in one. With the addition of the bath off the bedroom in the rear, and a large hall-closet opening from the study, these two rooms comprised his home. The hall was public, giving access to two upper floors which, like that beneath him, were given up to bachelor apartments. The house was in reality an old-fashioned residence, remodelled and let out by the floor to young men mainly of Staff's ilk: there was an artist on the upper story, a writer of ephemeral fiction on the third, an architect on the first. The janitor infested the basement, chiefly when bored by the monotony of holding up an imitation mahogany bar over on Third Avenue. His wife cooked abominably and served the results under the name of breakfast to the tenants, who foraged where they would for their other meals. Otherwise she was chiefly distinguished by a mad, exasperating passion for keeping the rooms immaculately clean and in order. Staff noted approvingly that, although Mrs. Shultz had not been warned of his return, there was no trace of dust in the rooms, not a single stick of furniture nor a book out of place.

There wasn't really any reason why he should stick in such un-modern and inconveniently situated lodgings--that is, aside from his ingrained inclination to make as little trouble for himself as possible. To hunt a new place to live would be quite as much of a nuisance as to move to it, when found. And he was comfortable enough where he was. He had taken the place some eight years previously, at a time when it was rather beyond his means; today when he could well afford to live where he would in New York, he found that his rooms had become a habit with him. He had no intention whatever of leaving them until the house should be dismantled to make way for some more modern structure--like that going up in the rear--or until he married.

He poked round, renewing acquaintance with old, familiar things, unearthed an ancient pipe which had lain in one of his desk-drawers like a buried bone, fondled it lovingly, filled and lighted it, and felt all the time more and more content and at ease.

Then Shultz knocked at the door and delivered to him a bundle of afternoon papers for which he had filed a requisition immediately on his arrival.

He sat down, enjoying his pipe to the utmost and wondering how under the sun he had managed to worry along without it all the time he had been away, and began to read what the reporters had to say about the arrival of the Autocratic and the case of the Cadogan collar.

In the main they afforded him little but amusement; the stories were mostly a hash of misinformation strongly flavoured with haphazard guesswork. The salient facts of the almost simultaneous disappearance of the necklace and Mr. Iff stood up out of the welter of surmise like mountain peaks above cloud-rack. There were no other facts. And both these remained inexplicable. No trace had been found of Mr. Iff; his luggage remained upon the pier, unclaimed. With him the Cadogan collar had apparently vanished as mysteriously: thus the consensus. The representative of the Secret Service bent on exposing an impostor, the Pinkerton men employed by the steamship company, and a gratuitous corps of city detectives were verbally depicted as so many determined bloodhounds nosing as many different scents--otherwise known as clues.

Jules Max, moreover, after a conference with his star, had published an offer of a reward of \$10,000 for the return of the necklace or for information leading to its recovery whether or not involving the apprehension of the thief.

Several of the papers "ran" unusually long stories descriptive of the scenes on the pier. Staff chuckled over them. The necklace had, in fact, made no end of trouble for several hundred putatively innocent and guileless passengers. The customs examination had been thorough beyond parallel. Not even the steerage and second-cabin passengers had escaped; everybody's belongings had been combed fine by a corps of inspectors whose dutiful curiosity had been abnormally stimulated by the prospect of a ten-thousand-dollar reward. Not a few passengers had been obliged to submit to the indignity of personal search--Staff and Alison in their number; the latter for no reason that Staff could imagine; the former presumably because he had roomed with the elusive Mr. Iff on the way over. He had also been mulcted a neat little sum as duty on that miserable hat, which he had been obliged to declare as a present for a friend.

In memory of this he now rose, marched over to the bandbox, innocently reposing in the middle of the floor, and dispassionately lifted it the kick he had been promising it ever since the first day of their acquaintance.

It sailed up prettily, banged the wall with a hollow noise and dropped to the floor with a grievous dent in one side.

There--out of his way--Staff left it. Immeasurably mollified, he proceeded to unpack and put his house in order. By the time this was done to his satisfaction and Shultz had dragged the empty trunks into the hall, to be carried down-stairs and stored in the cellar, it was evening and time to dress. So Staff made himself clean with much water and beautiful with cold steel and resplendent with evening clothes, and tucked the manuscript of *A Single Woman* into the pocket of a light topcoat and sallied forth to dine with Jules Max and Alison Landis.

It was late, something after midnight, when he returned, driving up to his house in a taxicab and a decidedly disgruntled frame of mind. Alison had been especially trying with regard to the play; and Max, while privately letting the author see that he thought him in the right in refusing to make changes until rehearsals had demonstrated their advisability, and in spite of his voluble appreciation of the play's merits, had given Alison the support she demanded. The inference was plain: the star was to be humoured even at the cost of a crippled play. Between love for the woman and respect for his work, desire to please her and determination not to misrepresent himself to the public, Staff, torn this way and that, felt that he had at length learned the true meaning of "the horns of dilemma." But this reflection availed nothing to soothe his temper.

When he got out of the cab a short but sharp argument ensued with the operator; it seemed that "the clock" was out of order and not registering--had struck in conformance to the time-honoured custom of the midnight taximeter union. But the driver's habitual demand for two and one-half times the proper fare by distance proved in this instance quite fruitless. Staff calmly counted out the right amount, put it in the man's hand, listened with critical appreciation to the resultant flow of profanity until it verged upon personality, then deliberately dragged the man by the scruff of his neck, choking and cursing, from his seat to the sidewalk.

"Now, listen," said he in a level tone: "you've got either to put up or shut up. I've been sort of aching to beat the tar out of one of you highwaymen for some time, and I feel just ripe for it tonight. You either put up your fists or crawl--another yap out of you and I won't wait for you to do either."

The man bristled and then, analysing the gleam in Staff's eyes, crawled: that is to say, he climbed back into his seat and swung the machine to the far side of the street before again resorting to vituperation.

To this Staff paid no more attention. He was opening the front door. The passage had comforted him considerably, but he was presently to regret it. But for that delay he might have been spared a deal of trouble.

As he let himself into the house, a man in evening dress came running down the stairs, brushed past rudely and without apology, and slammed the door behind him. Staff wondered and frowned slightly. Presumably the fellow had been calling on one of the tenants of the upper floors. There had been something familiar in his manner--something reminiscent, but too indefinite for recognition. And certainly he'd been in the devil of a hurry!

In the meantime he had mounted the first flight of stairs and turned through the hall to his study door. To his surprise it wasn't locked. He seemed distinctly to remember locking it when he had left for dinner. Still, memory does play us odd tricks.

He pushed the door open and entered the room. At the same moment he heard the trilling of the telephone bell. The instrument stood upon his desk between the two front windows. Without pausing to switch on one of the lights in the combination gas- and electrolier in the centre of the room, he groped his way through blinding darkness to the desk and, finding the telephone instrument with the certainty of old acquaintance, lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?" he called.

A thin and business-like voice detailed his number.

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

"Just a moment," came out of the night. "Hold the wire."

There was a pause in which it occurred to him that a little light would be a grateful thing. He groped for his desk-lamp, found it and scorched his fingers slightly on its metal reflector. He had switched on the light and said "Damn!" mechanically before he reflected that the said metal reflector had no right to be hot unless the light had been burning very recently.

As this thought penetrated his consciousness, the telephone waxed eloquent.

"Hello!" called a voice. "Is that you, Staff?"

"Why!" he exclaimed in surprise--"yes, Alison!"

"Are you alone?"

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

"I just wanted to know," returned the girl at the other end of the wire. "I'm coming to see you."

"What--now?"

"Of course, silly."

"But why--this time of night--it doesn't seem--"

"Oh, I've got something most important to say to you--very important indeed. It won't keep. I'll be there in five minutes. Listen for the taxi--will you, like a dear boy?--and come down and open the door for me. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he returned automatically, and hung up the receiver.

What on earth could *she* be wanting, that could have turned up so unexpectedly in the half-hour since he had left her and that wouldn't keep till morning?

Abruptly he became aware that the air in the room was stiflingly close. And he had left the windows open when he went out; he knew that he wasn't mistaken about that; and now they were closed, the shades drawn tight!

This considered in connection with the open door that had been locked, and the heated desk-lamp that should have been cold, he couldn't avoid the conclusion that somebody had been in his rooms, an unlawful trespasser, just a few minutes before he came in--possibly the very man who had rushed past him in such violent haste at the front door.

He jumped up and turned on all the lights in the room. A first, hasty glance about showed him nothing as it had not been when he had left six hours or so ago--aside from the front windows, of course. Mechanically, thinking hard and fast, he went to these latter and opened them wide.

The possibility that the intruder might still be in the rooms--in his bedroom, for instance--popped into his head, and he went hurriedly to investigate. But there wasn't anybody in the back-room or the bath-room.

Perplexed, he examined the rear windows. They were closed and locked, as when he had left. Opening them, he peered out and down the fire-escape; he had always had a notion that anybody foolish enough to want to burgle his rooms would find it easy to effect an entrance via the fire-escape, whose bottom rung was only eight feet or so above the level of the backyard. And now, since the Twenty-ninth Street houses had been torn down, lending access easy via the excavation, such an attempt would be doubly easy.

But he had every evidence that his rooms hadn't been broken into by any such route; although--of course!--an astute burglar might have thought to cover up his tracks by relocking the windows after he had entered. On the other hand, the really wise marauder would have almost certainly left them open to provide a way of escape in emergency.

Baffled and wondering, Staff returned to his study. An examination of the hall-closet yielded nothing illuminating. Everything was undisturbed, and there wasn't room enough therein for anybody to hide.

He shut the closet door and reviewed the study more carefully. Not a thing out of place; even that wretched bandbox lay where he had kicked it, with a helpless, abused look, the dented side turned pitifully to the light--much like a street beggar exposing a maimed limb to excite public sympathy.

He struggled to think: what did he possess worth stealing? Nothing of any great value: a modest collection of masculine jewelry--stick-pins and the like; a quantity of clothing; a few fairly good pictures; a few rare books. But the merest cursory examination showed that these were intact, one and all. What cash he had was all upon his person. His desk, where the lamp had been lighted, held nothing valuable to anybody other than himself: manuscripts, account books, some personal papers strictly non-negotiable. And these too proved undisturbed.

Swinging round from the desk, he rested his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands, and lapsed into the most profound of meditations; through which he arrived at the most amazing discovery of all.

Very gradually his eyes, at first seeing not what they saw, focussed upon an object on the floor. Quite excusably he was reluctant to believe their evidence. Eventually, however, he bent forward and picked up the thing.

It lay in his hand, eloquently absurd--in his study!--a bow of violet-coloured velvet ribbon, cunningly knotted, complete in itself. From its reverse, a few broken threads of silk hung, suggesting that it had been originally sewn upon a gown, or some other article of dress, from which it had been violently torn away.

The thing was so impossible--preposterous!--that he sat as if stunned, eyes a-stare, jaw dropping, wits bemused; until abruptly roused by the sharp barking of a taxicab horn as it swung round the corner of Fourth Avenue and the subsequent grumble of its motor in the street below.

Thrusting the velvet knot into his pocket he ran down and opened the front door just as Alison gained the top of the brownstone steps.

He noticed that her taxicab was waiting.

Still in her shimmering, silken, summery dinner-gown of the earlier evening, a light chiffon wrap draped round her shoulders, she entered the vestibule, paused and stood smiling mischievously into his grave, enquiring eyes.

"Surprised you--eh, Staff?" she laughed.

"Rather," said he, bending over her hand and wondering at her high spirit of gaiety so sharply in contrast with her determined and domineering humour of a few hours since. "Why?" he asked, shutting the outside door.

"Just wanted to see you alone for a few moments; I've something to say to you--something very important and surprising.... But not down here."

"I beg your pardon," he said contritely. He motioned toward the stairs: "There's no elevator, but it's only one flight up ..."

"No elevator! Heavens!" she cried in mock horror. "And this is how the other half lives!"

She caught up her skirts and ran up the stairs with footsteps so light that he could hear nothing but the soft, continuous murmuring of her silken gown.

"Genius," he said, ironic, as he followed her--"Genius frequently needs a lift but is more often to be found in an apartment without one. Permit me"--he flung wide the door to his study--"to introduce you to the garret."

"So this is where you starve and write!"

Alison paused near the centre of the room, shrugging her wrap from her shoulders and dropping it carelessly on the table. He saw her shoot swift glances round her with bright, prying eyes.

"I'm afraid I'm not enough of a genius to starve," he said; "but anyway, here's where I write."

"How interesting!" she drawled in a tone that conveyed to him the impression she found it anything but that. And then, a trace sharply: "Please shut the door."

He lifted his brows in surprise, said "Oh?" and turning back did as bid. At the same time Alison disposed herself negligently in a capacious wing-chair.

"Yes," she took up his monosyllable; "it's quite as important as all that. I don't wish to be overheard. Besides," she added with nonchalant irrelevance, "I do want a cigarette."

Silently Staff found his metal cigarette-safe and offered it, put a match to the paper roll held so daintily between his lady's lips, and then helped himself.

Through a thin veil of smoke she looked up into his serious face and smiled bewitchingly.

"Are you thrilled, my dear?" she asked lightly.

"Thrilled?" he questioned. "How?"

She lifted her white, gleaming shoulders with an air of half-tolerant impatience. "To have a beautiful woman alone with you in your rooms, at this hour o' night ... Don't you find it romantic, dear boy? Or aren't you in a romantic mood tonight? Or perhaps I'm not sufficiently beautiful ...?" She ended with a charming little petulant moue.

"You know perfectly well you're one of the most beautiful women in the world," he began gravely; but she caught him up.

"One of--?"

"To me, of course--you know the rest: the usual thing," he said. "But you didn't come here to discuss your charms--now did you?"

She shook her head slightly, smiling with light-hearted malice. "By no means. But, at the same time, if I've a whim to be complimented, I do think you might be gallant enough to humour me."

But he was in anything but a gallant temper. Mystery hedged his thoughts about and possessed them; he couldn't rid his imagination of the inexplicable circumstances of the man who had broken into his rooms to steal nothing, and the knot of velvet ribbon that had dropped from nowhere to his study floor. And when he forced his thoughts back to Alison, it was only to feel again the smart of some of the stinging things she had chosen to say to him that night during their discussion of his play, and to be conscious of a certain amount of irritation because of the effrontery of her present pose, assuming as it did that he would eventually bend to her will, endure all manner of insolence and indignity, because he hoped she would marry him.

Something of what was passing through his mind as he stood mute before her, she read in his look--or intuitively divined.

"Heavens!" she cried, "you're as temperamental as a leading-man. Can't you accept a word or two of criticism of your precious play without sulking like--like Max does when I make up my mind to take a week's rest in the middle of the season?"

"Criticise as much as you like," he said; "and I'll listen and take it to heart. But I don't mind telling you I'm not going to twist this play out of all dramatic semblance at your dictation--or Max's either."

For a moment their glances crossed like swords; he was conscious from the flicker in her eyes that her temper was straining at the leash; and his jaw assumed a certain look of grim solidity. But the outbreak he expected did not come; Alison was an artiste too consummate not to be able to control and mask her emotions--even as she did now with a quick curtaining of her eyes behind long lashes.

"Don't let's talk about that now," she said in a soft, placating voice. "That's a matter for hours of business. We're getting farther and farther away from my errand."

"By all means," he returned pleasantly, "let us go to that at once."

"You can't guess?" She unmasked again the battery of her laughing eyes. He shook his head. "I'll give you three guesses."

He found the courage to say: "You didn't come to confess that I'm in the right about the play?"

She pouted prettily. "Can't you let that be? No, of course not."

"Nor to bicker about it?"

She laughed a denial.

"Nor yet to conduct a guessing contest?"

"No."

"Then I've exhausted my allowance.... Well?"

"I came," she drawled, "for my hat."

"Your hat?" His eyes opened wide.

She nodded. "My pretty hat. You remember you promised to give it to me if nobody else claimed it."

"Yes, but ..."

"And nobody has claimed it?"

"No, but ..."

"Then I want my hat."

"But--hold on--give somebody a chance--"

"Stupid?" she laughed. "Isn't it enough that I claim it? Am I nobody?"

"Wait half a minute. You've got me going." He paused, frowning thoughtfully, recollecting his wits; then by degrees the light began to dawn upon him. "Do you mean you really did send me that confounded bandbox?"

Coolly she inclined her head: "I did just that, my dear."

"But when I asked you the same question on the Autocratic--"

"Quite so: I denied it."

"And you were in London that Friday, after all?"

"I was. Had to be, hadn't I, in order to buy the hat and have it sent you?"

"But--how did you know I was sailing Saturday?"

"I happened to go to the steamship office just after you had booked--saw a clerk adding your name to the passenger-list on the bulletin-board. That gave me the inspiration. I had already bought the hat, but I drove back to the shop and instructed them to send it to you."

"But, Alison! to what end?"

"Well," she said languidly, smiling with amusement at his bewilderment, "I thought it might be fun to hoodwink you."

"But--I fail to see the joke."

"And will, until I tell you All."

Her tone supplied the capital letter.

He shrugged helplessly. "Proceed ..."

"Well," she began with sublime insouciance, "you see, I'd been figuring all the while on getting the necklace home duty-free. And I finally hit upon what seemed a rather neat little plot. The hat was part of it; I bought it for the express purpose of smuggling the necklace in, concealed in its lining. Up to that point you weren't involved. Then by happy accident I saw your name on the list. Instantly it flashed upon me, how I could make you useful. It was just possible, you see, that those hateful customs men might be shrewd enough to search the hat, too. How much better, then, to make you bring in the hat, all unsuspecting! They'd never think of searching it in your hands! You see?"

His face had been hardening during this amazing speech. When she stopped he shot in a crisp question:

"The necklace wasn't in the hat when delivered to me? You didn't trust it to the shop people over night?"

"Of course not. I merely sent you the hat; then--as I knew you would--you mentioned it to me aboard ship. I got you to bring it to my room, and then sent you out--you remember? While you waited I sewed the necklace in the lining; it took only an instant. Then Jane carried the hat back to your steward."

"So," he commented stupidly, "it wasn't stolen!"

"Naturally not."

"But you threw suspicion on Iff--"

"I daresay he was guilty enough in intent, if not in deed. There's not the slightest doubt in my mind that he's that man Ismay, really, and that he shipped with us for the especial purpose of stealing the necklace if he got half a chance."

"You may be right; I don't know--and neither do you. But do you realise that you came near causing an innocent man to be jailed for the theft?"

"But I didn't. He got away."

"But not Iff alone--there's myself. Have you paused to consider what would have happened to me if the inspector had happened to find that necklace in the hat? Heavens knows how he missed it! He was persistent enough!... But if he had found it, I'd have been jailed for theft."

"Oh, no," she said sweetly; "I'd never have let it go that far."

"Not even if to confess would mean that you'd be sent to jail for smuggling?"

"They'd never do that to a woman...."

But her eyes shifted from his uneasily, and he saw her colour change a trifle.

"You know better than that. You read the papers--keep informed. You know what happened to the last woman who tried to smuggle. I forgot how long they sent her up for--five months, or something like that."

She was silent, her gaze evasive.

"You remember that, don't you?"

"Perhaps I do," she admitted unwillingly.

"And you don't pretend you'd 've faced such a prospect in order to clear me?"

Again she had no answer for him. He turned up the room to the windows and back again.

"I didn't think," he said slowly, stopping before her--"I couldn't have thought you could be so heartless, so self-centred ...!"

She rose suddenly and put a pleading hand upon his arm, standing very near him in all her loveliness.

"Say thoughtless, Staff," she said quietly; "I didn't mean it."

"That's hard to credit," he replied steadily, "when I'm haunted by the memory of the lies you told me--to save yourself a few dollars honestly due the country that has made you a rich woman--to gain for yourself a few paltry columns of cheap, sensational newspaper advertising. For that you lied to me and put me in jeopardy of Sing-Sing ... me, the man you pretend to care for--"

"Hold on, Staff!" the woman interrupted harshly.

He moved away. Her arm dropped back to her side. She eyed him a moment with eyes hard and unfriendly.

"You've said about enough," she continued.

"You're not prepared to deny that you had these possibilities in mind when you lied to me and made me your dupe and cat's-paw?"

"I'm not prepared to argue the matter with you," she flung back at him, "nor to hold myself answerable to you for any thing I may choose to say or do."

He bowed ceremoniously.

"I think that's all," he said pleasantly.

"It is," she agreed curtly; then in a lighter tone she added: "There remains for me only to take my blue dishes and go home."

As she spoke she moved over to the corner where the bandbox lay ingloriously on its undamaged side. As she bent over it, Staff abstractedly took and lighted another cigarette.

"What made you undo it?" he heard the woman ask.

He swung round in surprise. "I? I haven't touched the thing since it was brought in--beyond kicking it out of the way."

"The string's off--it's been opened!" Alison's voice was trembling with excitement. She straightened up, holding the box in both hands, and came hastily over to the table beside which he was standing. "You see?" she said breathlessly, putting it down.

"The string was on it when I saw it last," he told her blankly....

Then the memory recurred of the man who had passed him at the door--the man who, he suspected, had forced an entrance to his rooms....

Alison was plucking nervously at the cover without lifting it.

"Why don't you look?" he demanded, irritated.

"I--I'm afraid," she said in a broken voice.

Nevertheless, she removed the cover.

For a solid, silent minute both stared, stupefied. The hat they knew so well--the big black hat with its willow plume and buckle of brilliants--had vanished. In its place they saw the tumbled wreckage of what had once been another hat distinctly: wisps of straw dyed purple, fragments of feathers, bits of violet-coloured ribbon and silk which, mixed with wads and shreds of white tissue-paper, filled the box to brimming.

Staff thrust a hand in his pocket and produced the knot of violet ribbon. It matched exactly the torn ribbon in the box.

"So that," he murmured--"that's where this came from!"

Alison paid no attention. Of a sudden she began digging furiously in the debris in the box, throwing out its contents by handfuls until she had uncovered the bottom without finding any sign of what she had thought to find. Then she paused, meeting his gaze with one half-wrathful, half-hysterical.

"What does this mean?" she demanded, as if ready to hold him to account.

"I think," he said slowly--"I'm strongly inclined to believe it means that you're an uncommonly lucky woman."

"How do you make that out?" she demanded in a breath.

"I'll tell you," he said, formulating his theory as he spoke: "When I came home tonight, a man passed me at the door, fairly running out--I fancy, to escape recognition; there was something about him that seemed familiar. Then I came up here, found my door ajar, when I distinctly remembered locking it, found my windows shut and the shades drawn, when I distinctly remembered leaving them up, and finally found this knot of ribbon on the floor. I was trying to account for it when you drove up. Now it seems plain enough that this fellow knew or suspected you of hiding the necklace in the hat, knew that I had it, and came here in my absence to steal it. He found instead this hat, and knowing no better tore it to pieces trying to find what he was after."

"But where--where's *my* hat?"

"I'll tell you." Staff crossed the room and picked up the string and label which had been on the box. Returning, he examined the tag and read aloud: "Miss Eleanor Searle." He handed the tag to Alison. "Find Miss Searle and you'll find your hat. It happens that she had a bandbox the exact duplicate of yours. I remember telling you about it, on the steamer. As a matter of fact, she was in the shop the afternoon you ordered your hat sent to me, though she steadily refused to tell me who was responsible for that imposition. Now, on the pier today, our luggage was placed side by side, hers with mine--both in the S section, you understand. My examination was finished first and I was taken back to my stateroom to be searched, as you know. While I was gone, her examination was evidently finished, for when I came back she had left the pier with all her things. Quite plainly she must have taken your box by mistake for her own; this, of course, is her hat. As I said at first, find Miss Searle and you'll find your hat and necklace. Also, find the person to whom you confided this gay young swindling scheme of yours, and you'll find the man who was intimate enough with the affair to come to my rooms in my absence and go direct to the bandbox for the necklace."

"I--but I told nobody," she stammered.

By the look in her eyes he disbelieved her.

"Not even Max, this morning, before he offered that reward?" he asked shrewdly.

"Well--yes; I told him."

"Max may have confided it to somebody else: these things spread. Or possibly Jane may have blabbed."

"Oh, no," she protested, but without conviction in her accents; "neither of them would be so foolish...."

"I'd find out, if I were you."

"I shall. Meanwhile--this Miss Searle--where's she stopping?"

"I can't tell you--some hotel. It'll be easy enough to find her in the morning."

"Will you try?"

"Assuredly--the first thing."

"Then--there appears to be nothing else to do but go home," said the woman in a curiously subdued manner.

Without replying verbally, Staff took up her chiffon wrap and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thank you," said she, moving toward the door. "Good night."

"Oh," he protested politely, "I must see you out."

"It's not necessary--I can find my way."

"But only I know how to fix the front door."

At the foot of the stairs, while he fumbled with the latch, doubting him, she spoke with some little hesitation.

"I presume," she said stiffly--"I presume that this--ah--ends it."

Staff opened the door an inch and held it so. "If by 'it,'" he replied, "we mean the same thing--"

"We do."

"It does," he asseverated with his twisted smile.

She delayed an instant longer. "But all the same," she said hastily, at length, "I want that play."

"My play?" he enquired with significant emphasis.

"Yes, of course," she said sharply.

"Well, since I'm under contract with Max, I don't well see how I can take it away from you. And besides, you're the only woman living who can play it properly."

"So good of you." Her hand lay slim and cool in his for the fraction of an instant. "Good night," she iterated, withdrawing it.

"Good night."

As he let her out, Staff, glancing down at the waiting taxicab, was faintly surprised by the discovery that she had not come alone. A man stood in waiting by the door--a man in evening clothes: not Max but a taller man, more slender, with a better carriage. Turning to help Alison into the cab, the street lights threw his face in sharp relief against the blackness of the window; and Staff knew him.

"Arkroyd!" he said beneath his breath.

He closed the door and set the latch, suffering from a species of mild astonishment. His psychological processes seemed to him rather unique; he felt that he was hardly playing the game according to Hoyle. A man who has just broken with the woman with whom he has believed himself desperately in love naturally counts on feeling a bit down in the mouth. And seeing her drive off with one whom he has every right to consider in the light of a hated rival, he ought in common decency to suffer poignant pangs of jealousy. But Staff didn't; he couldn't honestly make himself believe that he was suffering in any way whatever. Indeed, the most violent emotion to which he was sensible was one of chagrin over his own infatuate myopia.

"Ass!" he called himself, slowly reascending the stairs. "You might 've seen this coming long ago, if you hadn't wilfully chosen to be blind as a bat!"

Re-entering his study, he pulled up with a start and a cry of sincere amazement.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Then why not lead a better life?" enquired Mr. Iff.

He was standing in the doorway to the bedroom, looking much like an exceptionally cruel caricature of himself. As he spoke, he slouched wearily over to the wing-chair Alison had recently occupied, and dropped into it like a dead weight.

He wore no hat. His clothing was in a shocking condition, damp, shapeless and shrunken to such an extent as to disclose exhibits of bony wrists and ankles almost immodestly generous. On his bird-like cranium the pale, smooth scalp shone pink through scanty, matted, damp blond locks. His face was drawn, pinched and pale. As if new to the light his baby-blue eyes blinked furiously. Round his thin lips hovered his habitual smile, semi-sardonic, semi-sheepish.

"Do you mind telling me how in thunder you got in here?" asked Staff courteously.

Iff waved a hand toward the bedroom.

"Fire-escape," he admitted wearily. "Happened to see your light and thought I'd call. Hope I don't intrude.... Got anything to drink? I'm about all in."

IX

A LIKELY STORY

"If I'm any judge, *that's* no exaggeration." Thus Mr. Staff after a moment's pause which he utilised to look Mr. Iff over with a critical eye.

Mr. Iff wagged his head. "Believe *me*," said he simply.

Staff fetched a decanter of Scotch and a glass, placing them on the table by Iff's elbow, then turned away to get a siphon of charged water from the icebox. But by the time he was back a staggering amount of whiskey had disappeared from the decanter, a moist but empty glass stood beside it, and Mr. Iff was stroking smiling lips with his delicate, claw-like fingers. He discontinued this occupation long enough to wave the siphon away.

"Not for me," he said tersely. "I've swallowed enough water this night to last me for the rest of my life--half of the North River, more or less; rather more, if you ask me."

"What were you doing in the North River?"

"Swimming."

This answer was evidently so adequate in Mr. Iff's understanding that he made no effort to elaborate upon it; so that presently, growing impatient, Staff felt called upon to ask:

"Well? What were you swimming for?"

"Dear life," said Iff--"life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness: the incontestable birthright of every freeborn American citizen--if you must know."

He relapsed into a reverie which seemed hugely diverting from the reminiscent twinkle in the little man's eyes. From this he emerged long enough to remark: "That's prime whiskey, you know.... Thanks very much, I will." And again fell silent, stroking his lips.

"I don't want to seem to pry," said Staff at length, with elaborate irony; "but in view of the fact that you've felt warranted in calling on me via the fire-escape at one A.M., it doesn't seem unreasonable of me to expect some sort of an explanation."

"Oh, very well," returned Iff, with resignation. "What would you like to know?"

"Why did you disappear this morning--?"

"Yesterday morning," Iff corrected dispassionately.

"--yesterday morning, and how?"

"Because the time seemed ripe for me to do my marvellous vanishing stunt. You see, I had a hunch that the dear captain would turn things over in his mind and finally determine not to accept my credentials at their face value. So I kind of stuck round the wireless room with my ears intelligently pricked forward. Sure enough, presently I heard the message go out, asking what about me and how so."

"You mean you read the operator's sending by ear?"

"Sure; I've got a telegrapher's ear as long as a mule's.... Whereupon, knowing just about what sort of an answer 'd come through, I made up my mind to duck. And did."

"But how--?"

"That'd be telling, and telling would get somebody aboard the Autocratic into terrible bad trouble if it ever leaked out. I crawled in out of the weather--let it go at that. I wish," said Mr. Iff soulfully, "those damn' Pinkerton men had let it go at that. Once or twice I really thought they had me, or would have me the next minute. And they wouldn't give up. That's why I had to take to the water, after dark. My friend, who shall be nameless, lent me the loan of a rope and I shinned down and had a nice little swim before I found a place to crawl ashore. I assure you that the North River tastes like hell.... O thank you; don't mind if I do."

"Then," said Staff, watching the little man help himself on his own invitation--"Then you are Ismay!"

"Wrong again," said Iff drearily. "Honest, it's a real shame, the way you can't seem to win any bets at all."

"If you're not Ismay, what made you hide?"

"Ah!" cried Iff admiringly--"shrewd and pertinent question! Now I'll tell you, and you won't believe me. Because--now pay strict attention--because we're near-twins."

"Who are twins?" demanded Staff staring.

"Him and me--Ismay and I-double-F. First cousins we are: his mother was my aunt. Worse and more of it: our fathers were brothers. They married the same day; Ismay and I were born in the same month. We look just enough alike to be mistaken for one another when we're not together. That's been a great help to him; he's made me more trouble than I've time to tell you. The last time, I was pinched in his place and escaped a penitentiary sentence by the narrowest kind of a shave. That got my mad up, and I served notice on him to quit his foolishness or I'd get after him. He replied by cooking up a fine little scheme that almost laid me by the heels again. So I declared war and 've been camping on his trail ever since."

He paused and twiddled his thumbs, staring reflectively at the ceiling. "I'm sure I don't know why I bore myself telling you all this. What's the use?"

"Never mind," said Staff in an encouraging manner; he was genuinely diverted. "At worst it's a worthy and uplifting--ah--fiction. Go on.... Then you're not a Secret Service man after all?"

"Nothing like that; I'm doing this thing on my own."

"How about that forged paper you showed the captain?"

"Wasn't forged--genuine."

"Chapter Two," observed Staff, leaning back. "It is a dark and stormy night; we are all seated about the camp-fire. The captain says: 'Antonio, go to it.'"

"You are certainly one swell, appreciative audience," commented Iff morosely. "Let's see if I can't get a laugh with this one: One of the best little things my dear little cousin does being to pass himself off as me, he got himself hired by the Treasury Department some years ago under the name of William Howard Iff. That helped him a lot in his particular line of business. But after a while he felt that it cramped his style, so he just faded noiselessly away--retaining his credentials. Then--while I was in Paris last week--he thought it would be a grand joke to send me that document with his compliments and the suggestion that it might be some help to me in my campaign for his scalp. That's how I happened to have it."

"That's going some," Staff admitted admiringly. "Tell me another one. *If* you're Iff and not Ismay, what brought you over on the Autocratic?"

"Business of keeping an eye on my dearly beloved cousin," said Iff promptly.

"You mean Ismay was on board, too?"

"Member that undergrown waster with the red-and-grey Vandyke and the horn-rimmed *pince nez*, who was always mooning round with a book under his arm?"

"Yes...."

"That was Cousin Arbuthnot disguised in his own hair."

"If that was so, why didn't you denounce him when you were accused of stealing the Cadogan collar?"

"Because I knew he hadn't got away with it."

"How did you know?"

"At least I was pretty positive about it. You'll have to be patient--and intelligent--if you want to understand and follow me back to Paris. The three of us were there: Ismay, Miss Landis, myself. Miss Landis was dickering with Cottier's for the necklace, Ismay sticking round and not losing sight of her much of the time, I was looking after Ismay. Miss Landis buys the collar and a ticket for London; Ismay buys a ticket for London; I trail. Then Miss Landis makes another purchase--a razor, in a shop near the hotel where I happen to be loafing."

"A razor!"

"That's the way it struck me, too.... Scene Two: Cockspur Street, London. I'm not sure what boat Miss Landis means to take; I've got a notion it's the Autocratic, but I'm stalling till I know. You drift into the office, I recognise you and recall that you're pretty thick with Miss Landis. Nothing more natural than that you and she should go home by the same steamer. Similarly--Ismay.... Oh, yes, I understand it was pure coincidence; but I took a chance and filled my hand. After we'd booked and you'd strutted off, I lingered long enough to see Miss Landis drive up in a taxi with a whaling big bandbox on top of the cab. She booked right under my nose; I made a note of the bandbox....

"Then you came aboard with the identical bandbox and your funny story about how you happened to have it. I smelt a rat: Miss Landis hadn't sent you that bandbox anonymously for no purpose. Then one afternoon--long toward six o'clock--I see Miss Landis's maid come out on deck and jerk a little package overboard--package just about big enough to hold a razor. That night I'm dragged up on the carpet before the captain; I hear a pretty fairy tale about the collar disappearing while Jane was taking the bandbox back to your steward. The handbag is on the table, in plain sight; it isn't locked--a blind man can see that; and the slit in its side has been made by a razor. I add up the bandbox and the razor and multiply the sum by the fact that the average woman will smuggle as quick as the average man will take a drink; and I'm Jeremiah Wise, Esquire."

"That's the best yet," Staff applauded. "But--see here--why didn't you tell what you knew, if you knew so much, when you were accused?"

Iff grimaced sourly. "Get ready to laugh. This is one you won't fall for--not in a thousand years."

"Shoot," said Staff.

"I like you," said Iff simply. "You're foolish in the head sometimes, but in the main you mean well."

"That's nice of you--but what has it to do with my question?"

"Everything. You're sweet on the girl, and I don't wish to put a crimp in your young romance by showing her up in her true colours. Furthermore, you may be hep to her little scheme; I don't believe it, but I know that, if you are, you won't let me suffer for it. And finally, in the senility of my dotage I conned myself into believing I could bluff it out; at the worst, I could prove my innocence easily enough. But what I didn't take into consideration was that I was laying myself open to arrest for impersonating an agent of the Government. When I woke up to that fact, the only thing I could see to do was to duck in out of the blizzard."

Staff said sententiously: "*Hmmm....*"

"Pretty thin--what?"

"In spots," Staff agreed. "Still, I've got to admit you've managed to cover the canvas, even if your supply of paint was a bit stingy. One thing still bothers me: how did you find out I knew about the smuggling game?"

Iff nodded toward the bedroom. "I happened in--casually, as the saying runs--just as Miss Landis was telling on herself."

Staff frowned.

"How," he pursued presently, "can I feel sure you're not Ismay, and, having guessed as accurately as you did, that you didn't get at that bandbox aboard the ship and take the necklace?"

"If I were, and had, would I be here?"

"But I can't understand why you are here!"

"It's simple enough; I've any number of reasons for inviting myself to be your guest. For one, I'm wet and cold and look like a drowned rat; I can't offer myself to a hotel looking like this--can I? Then I knew your address--you'll remember telling me; and there's an adage that runs 'Any port in a storm.' You're going to be good enough to get my money changed--I've nothing but English paper--and buy me a ready-made outfit in the morning. Moreover, I'm after Ismay, and Ismay's after the necklace; wherever it is, he will be, soon or late. Naturally I presumed you still had it--and so did he until within the hour."

"You mean you think it was Ismay who broke into these rooms tonight?"

"You saw him, didn't you? Man about my size, wasn't he? Evening clothes? That's his regulation uniform after dark. Beard and glasses--what?"

"I believe you're right!" Staff rose excitedly. "I didn't notice the glasses, but otherwise you've described him!"

"What did I tell you?" Iff helped himself to a cigarette. "By now the dirty dog's probably raising heaven and hell to find out where Miss Searle has hidden herself."

Staff began to pace nervously to and fro. "I wish," he cried, "I knew where to find her!"

"Please," Iff begged earnestly, "don't let your sense of the obligations of a host interfere with your amusements; but if you'll stop that Marathon long enough to find me a blanket, I'll shed these rags and, by your good leave, curl up cunningly on yon divan."

Staff paused, stared at the little man's bland and guileless face, and shook his head helplessly, laughing.

"There's no resisting your colossal gall," he said, passing into the adjoining room to get bed-clothing for his guest.

"I admit it," said Iff placidly.

As Staff returned, the telephone bell rang. In his surprise he paused with his arms full of sheets, blankets and pillows, and stared incredulously at his desk.

"What the deuce now?" he murmured.

"The quickest way to an answer to that," suggested Iff blandly, "is there." He indicated the telephone with an ample gesture. "Help yourself."

Dropping his burden on the divan, Staff seated himself at the desk and took up the receiver.

"Hello?"

He started violently, recognising the voice that answered: "Mr. Staff?"

"Yes--"

"This is Miss Searle."

"I know," he stammered; "I--I knew your voice."

"Really?" The query was perfunctory. "Mr. Staff--I couldn't wait to tell you--I've just got in from a theatre and supper party with some friends."

"Yes," he said. "Where are you?"

Disregarding his question, the girl's voice continued quickly: "I wanted to see my hat and opened the bandbox. It wasn't my hat--it's the one you described--the one that--"

"I know," he interrupted; "I know all about that now."

"Yes," she went on hurriedly, unheeding his words. "I admired and examined it. It--there's something else."

"I know," he said again; "the Cadogan collar."

"Oh!" There was an accent of surprise in her voice. "Well, I've ordered a taxi, and I'm going to bring it to you right away. The thing's too valuable--"

"Miss Searle--"

"I'm afraid to keep it here. I wanted to find out if you were up--that's why I called."

"But, Miss Searle--"

"The taxi's waiting now. I'll be at your door in fifteen minutes."

"But--"

"Good-bye."

He heard the click as she hung up the receiver; and nothing more. With an exclamation of annoyance he swung round from the desk.

"Somebody coming?" enquired Iff brightly.

Staff eyed him with overt distrust. "Yes," he said reluctantly.

"Miss Searle bringing the evanescent collar, eh?"

Staff nodded curtly.

"Plagued nuisance," commented Iff. "And me wanting to go to sleep the worst I ever did."

"Don't let this keep you up," said Staff.

"But," Iff remonstrated, "you can't receive a lady in here with me asleep on your divan."

"I don't intend to," Staff told him bluntly. "I'm going to meet the taxi at the door, get into it with her, and take that infernal necklace directly to Miss Landis, at her hotel."

"The more I see of you," said Mr. Iff, removing his coat, "the more qualities I discover in you to excite my admiration and liking. As in this instance when with thoughtfulness for my comfort"--he tore from his neck the water-soaked rag that had been his collar--"you combine a prudent, not to say sagacious foresight, whereby you plan to place the Cadogan collar far beyond my reach in event I should turn out to be a gay deceiver."

By way of response, Staff found his hat and placed it handily on the table, went to his desk and took from one of its drawers a small revolver of efficient aspect, unloaded and reloaded it to satisfy himself it was in good working order--and of a sudden looked round suspiciously at Mr. Iff.

The latter, divested of his clothing and swathed in a dressing-gown several sizes too large for him, fulfilled his host's expectations by laughing openly at these warlike preparations.

"I infer," he said, "that you wouldn't be surprised to meet up with Cousin Arbutnot before sunrise."

"I'm taking no chances," Staff announced with dignity.

"Well, if you should meet him, and if you mean what you act like, *and* if that gun's any good, *and* if you know how to use it," yawned Mr. Iff, "you'll do me a favour and save me a heap of trouble into the bargain. *Good night.*"

He yawned again in a most business-like way, lay down, pulled a blanket up round his ears, turned his back to the light and was presently breathing with the sweet and steady regularity of a perfectly sound and sincere sleeper.

To make his rest the more comfortable, Staff turned off all the lights save that on his desk. Then he filled a pipe and sat down to envy the little man. The very name of sleep was music in his hearing, just then.

The minutes lagged on leaden wings. There was a great hush in the old house, and the street itself was quiet. Once or twice Staff caught himself nodding; then he would straighten up, steel his will and spur his senses to attention, waiting, listening, straining to catch the sound of an approaching taxi. He seemed to hear every imaginable night noise but that: the crash and whine of trolleys, the footsteps of a scattered handful of belated pedestrians, the infrequent windy roar of trains on the Third Avenue L, empty clapping of horses' hoofs on the asphalt ... the yowl of a sentimental tomcat ... a dull and distant grumble, vague, formless, like a long, unending roll of thunder down the horizon ... the swish and sough of waters breaking away from the flanks of the Autocratic ... and then, finally, like a tocsin, the sonorous, musical chiming of the grandfather's clock in the corner.

He found himself on his feet, rubbing his eyes, with a mouth dry as paper, a thumping heart, and a vague sense of emptiness in his middle.

Had he napped--slept? How long?... He stared, bewildered, groping blindly after his wandering wits....

The windows, that had been black oblongs in the illuminated walls, were filled with a cool and shapeless tone of grey. He reeled (rather than walked) to one of them and looked out.

The street below was vacant, desolate and uncannily silent, showing a harsh, unlovely countenance like the jaded mask of some sodden reveller, with bleary street-lamps for eyes--all mean and garish in the chilly dusk that foreruns dawn.

Hastily Staff consulted his watch.

Four o'clock!

It occurred to him that the watch needed winding, and he stood for several seconds twisting the stem-crown between thumb and forefinger while stupidly comprehending the fact that he must have been asleep between two and three hours.

Abruptly, in a fit of witless agitation, he crossed to the divan, caught the sleeper by the shoulder and shook him till he wakened--till he rolled over on his back, grunted and opened one eye.

"Look here!" said Staff in a quaver--"I've been asleep!"

"You've got nothing on me, then," retorted Iff with pardonable asperity. "All the same--congratulations. Good *night*."

He attempted to turn over again, but was restrained by Staff's imperative hand.

"It's four o'clock, and after!"

"I admit it. You might be good enough to leave a call for me for eleven."

"But--damn it, man!--that cab hasn't come--"

"I can't help that, can I?"

"I'm afraid something has happened to that girl."

"Well, it's too late to prevent it now--if so."

"Good God! Have you no heart, man?" Staff began to stride distractedly up and down the room. "What am I to do?" he groaned aloud.

"Take unkie's advice and go bye-bye," suggested Iff. "Otherwise I'd be obliged if you'd rehearse that turn in the other room. I'm going to sleep if I have to brain you to get quiet."

Staff stopped as if somebody had slapped him: the telephone bell was ringing again.

He flung himself across the room, dropped heavily into the chair and snatched up the receiver.

A man's voice stammered drowsily his number.

"Yes," he almost shouted. "Yes--Mr. Staff at the 'phone. Who wants me?"

"Hold the wire."

He heard a buzzing, a click; then silence; a prolonged *brrrrp* and another click.

"Hello?" he called. "Hello?"

His heart jumped: the voice was Miss Searle's.

"Mr. Staff?"

It seemed to him that he could detect a tremor in her accents, as if she were both weary and frightened.

"Yes, Miss Searle. What is it?"

"I wanted to reassure you--I've had a terrible experience, but I'm all right now--safe. I started--"

Her voice ceased to vibrate over the wires as suddenly as if those same wires had been cut.

"Yes?" he cried after an instant. "Yes, Miss Searle? Hello, hello!"

There was no answer. Listening with every faculty at high tension, he fancied that he detected a faint, abrupt sound, like a muffled sob. On the heels of it came a click and the connection was broken.

In his anxiety and consternation he swore violently.

"Well, what's the trouble?"

Iff stood at his side, now wide-awake and quick with interest. Hastily Staff explained what had happened.

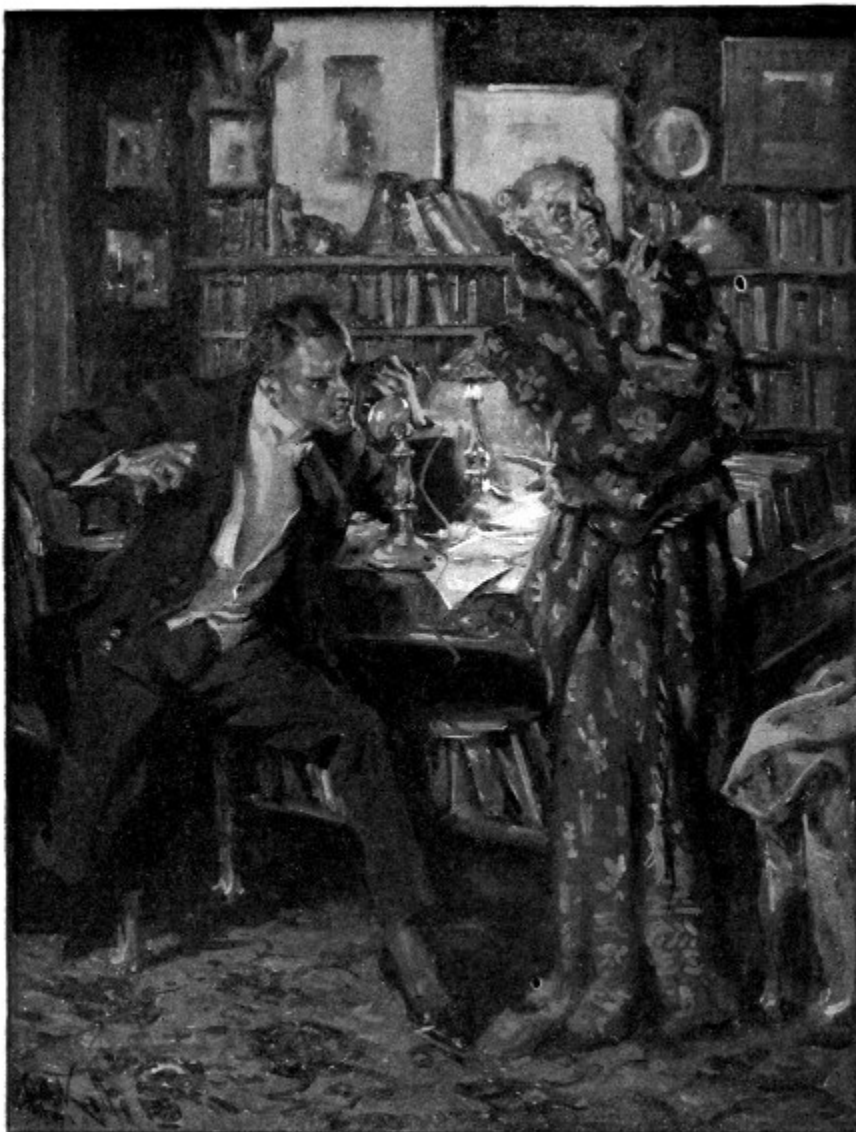
"Yes," nodded the little man. "Yes, that'd be the way of it. She had trouble, but managed to get to the telephone; then somebody grabbed her--"

"Somebody! Who?" Staff demanded unreasonably.

"I don't really know--honest Injun! But there's a smell of garlic about it, just the same."

"Smell of garlic! Are you mad?"

"Tush!" said Mr. Iff contemptuously. "I referred poetically to the fine Italian hand of Cousin Arbuthnot Ismay. Now if I were you, I'd agitate that hook until Central answers, and then ask for the manager and see if he can trace that call back to its source. It oughtn't to be difficult at this hour, when the telephone service is at its slackest."



He fancied that he detected a faint, abrupt sound, like a muffled sob

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X

DEAD O' NIGHT

Beneath a nature so superficially shallow that it shone only with the reflected lustre of the more brilliant personalities to which it was attracted, Mrs. Ilkington had a heart-sentiment and a capacity for sympathetic affection. She had met Eleanor Searle in Paris, and knew a little more than something of the struggle the girl had been making to prepare herself for the operatic stage. She managed to discover that she had no close friends in New York, and shrewdly surmised that she wasn't any too well provided with munitions of war--in the shape of money--for her contemplated campaign against the army of professional people, marshalled by indifferent-minded managers, which stood between her and the place she coveted.

Considering all this, Mrs. Ilkington had suggested, with an accent of insistence, that Eleanor should go to the hotel which she intended to patronise--wording her suggestion so cunningly that it would be an easy matter for her, when the time came, to demonstrate that she had invited the girl to be her guest. And with this she was thoughtful enough to select an unpretentious if thoroughly well-managed house on the West Side, in the late Seventies, in order that Eleanor might feel at ease and not worry about the size of the bill which she wasn't to be permitted to pay.

Accordingly the two ladies (with Mr. Bangs tagging) went from the pier directly to the St. Simon, the elder woman to stay until her town-house could be opened and put in order, the girl while she looked round for a spinster's studio or a small apartment within her limited means.

Promptly on their arrival at the hotel, Mrs. Ilkington began to run up a telephone bill, notifying friends of her whereabouts; with the result (typical of the New York idea) that within an hour she had engaged herself for a dinner with theatre and supper to follow--and, of course, had managed to have Eleanor included in the invitation. She was one of those women who live on their nerves and apparently thrive on excitement, ignorant of the meaning of rest save in association with those rest-cure sanatoriums to which they repair for a fortnight semi-annually--or oftener.

Against her protests, then, Eleanor was dragged out in full dress when what she really wanted to do was to eat a light and simple meal and go early to bed. In not unnatural consequence she found herself, when they got home after one in the morning, in a state of nervous disquiet caused by the strain of keeping herself keyed up to the pitch of an animated party.

Insomnia stared her in the face with its blind, blank eyes. In the privacy of her own room, she expressed a free opinion of her countrymen, conceiving them all in the guise of fevered, unquiet souls cast in the mould of Mrs. Ilkington.

Divesting herself of her dinner-gown, she slipped into a negligee and looked round for a book, meaning to read herself sleepy. In the course of her search she happened to recognise her bandbox and conceive a desire to reassure herself as to the becomingness of its contents.

The hat she found therein was becoming enough, even if it wasn't hers. The mistake was easily apparent and excusable, considering the confusion that had obtained on the pier at the time of their departure.

She wondered when Staff would learn the secret of his besetting mystery, and wondered too why Alison had wished to make a mystery of it. The joke was hardly apparent--though one's sense of American humour might well have become dulled in several years of residence abroad.

Meanwhile, instinctively, Eleanor was trying on the hat before the long mirror set in the door of the closet. She admitted to herself that she looked astonishingly well in it. She was a sane and sensible young woman, who knew that she was exceedingly good looking and was glad of it in the same wholesome way that she was glad she had a good singing voice. Very probably the hat was more of a piece with the somewhat flamboyant if unimpeachable loveliness of Alison Landis; but it would seem hard to find a hat better suited to set off the handsome, tall and slightly pale girl that confronted Eleanor in the mirror.

It seemed surprisingly heavy, even for a hat of its tremendous size. She was of the opinion that it would make her head ache to wear it for many hours at a time. She was puzzled by its weight and speculated vaguely about it until, lifting it carefully off, her fingers encountered something hard, heavy and unyielding between the lining and the crown. After that it didn't take her long to discover that the lining had been ripped open and resewn with every indication of careless haste. Human curiosity did the rest. Within a very few minutes the Cadogan collar lay in her hands and she was marvelling over it--and hazily surmising the truth: Staff had been used as a blind agent to get the pearls into the country duty-free.

Quick thoughts ran riot in Eleanor's mind. Alison Landis would certainly not delay longer than a few hours before demanding her hat of Mr. Staff. The substitution would then be discovered and she, Eleanor Searle, would fall under suspicion--at least, unless she took immediate steps to restore the jewels.

She acted hastily, on impulse. One minute she was at the telephone, ordering a taxicab, the next she was hurriedly dressing herself in a tailor-made suit. The hour was late, but not too late--although (this gave her pause) it might be too late before she could reach Staff's rooms. She had much better telephone him she was coming. Of course he would have a telephone--everybody has, in New York.

Consultation of the directory confirmed this assumption, giving her both his address and his telephone number. But before she could call up, her cab was announced. Nevertheless she delayed long enough to warn him hastily of her coming. Then she snatched up the necklace, dropped it into her handbag, replaced the hat in its bandbox and ran for the elevator.

It was almost half-past one by the clock behind the desk, when she passed through the office. She had really not thought it so late. She was conscious of the surprised looks of the clerks and pages. The porter at the door, too, had a stare for her so long and frank as to approach impertinence. None the less he was quick enough to take her handbox from the bellboy who carried it and place it in the waiting taxi, and handed her in after it with civil care. Having repeated to the operator the address she gave him, the porter shut the door and went back to his post as the vehicle darted out from the curb.

Eleanor knew little of New York geography. Her previous visits to the city had been very few and of short duration. With the shopping district she was tolerably familiar, and she knew something of the district roundabout the old Fifth Avenue Hotel and the vanished Everett House. But with these exceptions she was entirely ignorant of the lay of the land: just as she was too inexperienced to realise that it isn't considered wholly well-advised for a young woman alone to take, in the middle of the night, a taxicab whose chauffeur carries a companion on the front seat. If she had stopped to consider this circumstance at all, she would have felt comforted by the presence of the superfluous man, on the general principle that two protectors are better than one: but the plain truth is that she didn't stop to consider it, her thoughts being fully engaged with what seemed more important matters.

The cab bounced across Amsterdam Avenue, slid smoothly over to Columbus, ran for a block or so beneath the elevated structure and swung into Seventy-seventh Street, through which it pelted eastward and into Central Park. Then for some moments it turned and twisted through the devious driveways, in a fashion so erratic that the passenger lost all grasp of her whereabouts, retaining no more than a confused impression of serpentine, tree-lined ways, chequered with lamplight and the soft, dense shadows of foliage, and regularly spaced with staring electric arcs.

The night had fallen black beneath an overcast sky; the air that fanned her face was warm and heavy with humidity; what little breeze there was, aside from that created by the motion of the cab, bore on its leaden wings the scent of rain.

A vague uneasiness began to colour the girl's consciousness. She grew increasingly sensitive to the ominous quiet of the hour and place: the stark, dark stillness of the shrouded coppices and thickets, the emptiness of the paths. Once only she caught sight of a civilian, strolling in his shirt-sleeves, coat over his arm, hat in hand; and once only she detected, at a distance, the grey of a policeman's tunic, half blotted out by the shadow in which its wearer lounged at ease.

And that was far behind when, abruptly, with a grinding crash of brakes, the cab came from full headlong tilt to a dead halt within twice its length. She pitched forward from the seat with a cry of alarm, only saving herself a serious bruising through the instinct that led her to thrust out her hands and catch the frame of the forward windows.

Before she could recover, the chauffeur's companion had jumped out and run ahead, pausing in front of the hood to stoop and stare. In another moment he was back with a report couched in a technical jargon unintelligible to her understanding. She caught the words "stripped the gears" and from them inferred the irremediable.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously, bending forward.

The chauffeur turned his head and replied in a surly tone: "We've broken down, ma'm. You can't go no farther in this cab. I'll have to get another to tow us back to the garage."

"Oh," she cried in dismay, "how unfortunate! What am I to do?"

"Guess you'll have to get out 'n' walk back to Central Park West," was the answer. "You c'n get a car there to C'lumbus Circle. You'll find a-plenty taxis down there."

"You're quite sure--" she began to protest.

"Ah, they ain't no chanst of this car going another foot under its own power--not until it's been a week 'r two in hospital. The only thing for you to do 's to hoof it, like I said."

"That's dead right," averred the other man. He was standing beside the body of the cab and now unlatched the door and held it open for her. "You might as well get down, if you're in any great hurry, ma'm."

Eleanor rose, eyeing the man distrustfully. His accent wasn't that of the kind of man who is accustomed to saying "ma'm." His back was toward the nearest lamp post, his face in shadow. She gained no more than a dim impression of a short, slender figure masked in a grey duster buttoned to the throat, and, above it, a face rendered indefinite by a short, pointed beard and a grey motor-cap pulled well down over the eyes....

But there was nothing to do but accept the situation. An accident was an accident--unpleasant but irreparable. There was no alternative; she could do nothing but adopt the chauffeur's suggestion. She stepped out, turning back to get her handbox.

"Beg pardon, ma'm. I'll get that for you."

The man by the door interposed an arm between Eleanor and the bandbox.

She said, "Oh no!" and attempted to push past his arm.

Immediately he caught her by the shoulder and thrust her away with staggering violence. She reeled back half a dozen feet. Simultaneously she heard the fellow say, sharply: "All right--go ahead!" and saw him jump upon the step. On the instant, the cab shot away through the shadows, the door swinging wide while Eleanor's assailant scrambled into the body.

Before she could collect herself the car had disappeared round a curve in the roadway.

Her natural impulse was to scream, to start a hue-and-cry: "Stop thief!" But the strong element of common-sense in her make-up counselled her to hold her tongue. In a trice she comprehended precisely the meaning of the passage. Somebody else--somebody aside from herself, Staff and Alison Landis--knew the secret of the bandbox and the smuggled necklace, and with astonishing intuition had planned this trap to gain possession of it. She was amazed to contemplate the penetrating powers of inference and deduction, the cunning and resource which had not only in so short a time fathomed the mystery of the vanished necklace, but had discovered the exchange of bandboxes, had traced the right one to her hotel and possession, had divined and taken advantage of her impulse to return the property to its rightful owner without an instant's loss of time. And with this thought came another, more alarming: in a brace of minutes the thieves would discover that the necklace had been abstracted from the hat and--men of such boldness wouldn't hesitate about turning back to run her down and take their booty by force.

It was this consideration that bade her refrain from crying out. Conceivably, if she did raise an alarm, help might be longer in coming than the taxicab in returning. They had the hat and bandbox, and were welcome to them, for all of her, as long as she retained the real valuables. Her only chance lay in instant and secret flight, in hiding herself away in the gloomy fastnesses of these unknown pleasure-grounds, so securely that they might not find her.

She stood alone in the middle of a broad road. There was nobody in sight, whichever way she looked. On one hand a wide asphalt path ran parallel with the drive; on the other lay a darksome hedge of trees and shrubbery. She hesitated not two seconds over her choice, and in a third was struggling and forcing a way through the undergrowth and beneath the low and spreading branches whose shadows cloaked her with a friendly curtain of blackness.

Beyond--she was not long in winning through--lay a broad meadow, glimmering faintly in the glow of light reflected from the bosoms of low, slow-moving clouds. A line of trees bordered it at a considerable distance; beneath them were visible patches of asphalt walk, shining coldly under electric arcs.

Having absolutely no notion whatever of where she was in the Park, after some little hesitation she decided against attempting to cross the lawn and turned instead, at random, to her right, stumbling away in the kindly penumbra of trees.

She thanked her stars that she had chosen to wear this dark, short-skirted suit that gave her so much freedom of action and at the same time blended so well with the shadows wherein she must skulk...

Before many minutes she received confirmation of her fears in the drone of a distant motor humming in the stillness and gaining volume with every beat of her heart. Presently it was strident and near at hand; and then, standing like a frozen thing, not daring to stir (indeed, half petrified with fear) she saw the marauding taxicab wheel slowly past, the chauffeur scrutinising one side of the way, the man in the grey duster standing up in the body and holding the door half open, while he raked with sweeping glances the coppice wherein she stood hiding.

But it did not stop. Incredible though it seemed, she was not detected. Obviously the men were at a loss, unable to surmise which one she had chosen of a dozen ways of escape. The taxicab drilled on at a snail's pace for some distance up the drive, then swung round and came back at a good speed. As it passed her for the second time she could hear one of its crew swearing angrily.

Again the song of the motor died in the distance, and again she found courage to move. But which way? How soonest to win out of this strange, bewildering maze of drives and paths, crossing and recrossing, melting together and diverging without apparent motive or design?

She advanced to the edge of the drive, paused, listening with every faculty alert. There was no sound but the muted sighing of the night wind in the trees--not a footfall, not the clap of a hoof or the echo of a motor's whine. She moved on a yard or two, and found herself suddenly in the harsh glare of an arc-lamp. This decided her; she might as well go forward as retreat, now that she had shown herself. She darted at a run across the road and gained the paved path,

paused an instant, heard nothing, and ran on until forced to stop for breath.

And still no sign of pursuit! She began to feel a little reassured, and after a brief rest went on aimlessly, with the single intention of sticking to one walk as far as it might lead her, in the hope that it might lead her to the outskirts of the Park.

Vain hope! Within a short time she found herself scrambling over bare rocks, with shrubbery on either hand and a looming mass of masonry stencilled against the sky ahead. This surely could not be the way. She turned back, lost herself, half stumbled and half fell down a sharp slope, plodded across another lawn and found another path, which led her northwards (though she had no means of knowing this). In time it crossed one of the main drives, then recrossed. She followed it with patient persistence, hoping, but desperately weary.

Now and again she passed benches upon which men sprawled in crude, uneasy attitudes, as a rule snoring noisily. She dared not ask her way of these. Once one roused to the sharp tapping of her heels, stared insolently and, as she passed, spoke to her in a thick, rough voice. She did not understand what he said, but quickened her pace and held on bravely, with her head high and her heart in her mouth. Mercifully, she was not followed.

Again--and not once but a number of times--the sound of a motor drove her from the path to the safe obscurity of the trees and undergrowth. But in every such instance her apprehensions were without foundation; the machines were mostly touring-cars or limousines beating homeward from some late festivity.

And twice she thought to descry at a distance the grey-coated figure of a policeman; but each time, when she had gained the spot, the man had vanished--or else some phenomenon of light and shadow had misled her.

Minutes, in themselves seemingly endless, ran into hours while she wandered (so heavy with fatigue that she found herself wondering how it was that she didn't collapse from sheer exhaustion on any one of the interminable array of benches that she passed) dragging her leaden feet and aching limbs and struggling to hold up her hot and throbbing head.

It was long after three when finally she emerged at One-hundred-and-tenth Street and Lenox Avenue. And here fortune proved more kind: she blundered blindly almost into the arms of a policeman, stumbled through her brief story and dragged wearily on his arm over to Central Park West. Here he put her aboard a southbound Eighth Avenue surface-car, instructing the conductor where she was to get off and then presumably used the telephone on his beat to such effect that she was met on alighting by another man in uniform who escorted her to the St. Simon. She was too tired, too thoroughly worn out, to ask him how it happened that he was waiting for her, or even to do more than give him a bare word of thanks. As for complaining of her adventure to the night-clerk (who stared as she passed through to the elevator) no imaginable consideration could have induced her to stop for any such purpose.

But one thing was clear to her intelligence, to be attended to before she toppled over on her bed: Staff must be warned by telephone of the attempt to steal the necklace and the reason why she had not been able to reach his residence. And if this were to be accomplished, she must do it before she dared sit down.

In conformance with this fixed idea, she turned directly to the telephone after closing the door of her room--pausing neither to strip off her gloves and remove her hat nor even to relieve her aching wrist of the handbag which, with its precious contents, dangled on its silken thong.

She had to refresh her memory with a consultation of the directory before she could ask for Staff's number.

The switchboard operator was slow to answer; and when he did, there followed one of those exasperating delays, apparently so inexcusable....



Fascinated, dumb with terror, she watched

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She experienced a sensation of faintness and dizziness; her limbs were trembling; she felt as though sleep were overcoming her as she stood; but a little more and she had strained endurance to the breaking-point....

At length the connection was made. Staff's agitated voice seemed drawn thin by an immense distance. By a supreme effort she managed to spur her flagging faculties and began to falter her incredible story, but had barely swung into the second sentence when her voice died in her throat and her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth.

The telephone instrument was fixed to the wall near the clothes-closet, the door of which framed a long mirror. This door, standing slightly ajar, reflected to her vision the hall door.

She had detected a movement in the mirror. The hall door was opening--slowly, gently, noiselessly, inch by inch. Fascinated, dumb with terror, she watched. She saw the hand that held the knob--a small hand, thin and fragile; then the wrist, then part of the arm.... A head appeared in the opening, curiously suggesting the head of a bird, thinly thatched with hair of a faded yellow; out of its face, small eyes watched her, steadfastly inquisitive.

Almost mechanically she replaced the receiver on the hook and turned away from the wall, stretching forth her hands in a gesture of pitiful supplication....

XI

THE COLD GREY DAWN

"Well?" snapped Iff irritably. "What're you staring at?"

"You," Staff replied calmly. "I was thinking--"

"About me? What?"

"Merely that you are apparently as much cut up as if the necklace were yours--as if you were in danger of being robbed, instead of Miss Landis--by way of Miss Searle."

"And I am!" asserted Iff vigorously. "I am, damn it! I'm in no danger of losing any necklace; but if he gets away with the goods, that infernal scoundrel will manage some way to implicate me and rob me of my good name and my liberty as well. Hell!" he exploded--"seems to me I'm entitled to be excited!"

Staff's unspoken comment was that this explanation of the little man's agitation was something strained and inconclusive: unsatisfactory at best. It was not apparent how (even assuming the historical Mr. Ismay to be at that moment stealing the Cadogan collar from Miss Searle) the crime could be fastened on Mr. Iff, in the face of the positive alibi Staff could furnish him. On the other hand, it was indubitable that Iff believed himself endangered in some mysterious way, or had some other and still more secret cause for disquiet. For his uneasiness was so manifest, in such sharp contrast with his habitual, semi-cynical repose, that even he hadn't attempted to deny it.

With a shrug Staff turned back to the telephone and asked for the manager of the exchange, explained his predicament and was promised that, if the call could be traced back to the original station, he should have the number. He was, however, counselled to be patient. Such a search would take time, quite possibly and very probably.

He explained this to Iff, whose disgust was ill-disguised.

"And meanwhile," he expostulated, "we're sitting here with our hands in our laps--useless--and Ismay, as like 's not, is--" He broke into profanity, trotting up and down and twisting his small hands together.

"I wish," said Staff, "I knew what makes you act this way. Ismay can't saddle you with a crime committed by him when you're in my company--"

"You don't know him," interpolated Iff.

"And you surely can't be stirred so deeply by simple solicitude for Miss Searle."

"Oh, can't I? And how do you know I can't?" barked the little man. "Gwan--leave me alone! I want to think."

"Best wishes," Staff told him pleasantly. "I'm going to change my clothes."

"Symptoms of intelligence," grunted Iff. "I was wondering when you'd wake up to the incongruity of knight-erranting it after damsels in distress in an open-faced get-up like that."

"It's done, however," argued Staff good-humouredly. "It's class, if the illustrators are to be believed. Don't you ever read modern fiction? In emergencies like these the hero always takes a cold bath and changes his clothes before sallying forth to put a crimp in the villain's plans. Just the same as me. Only I'm going to shed evening dress instead of--"

"Good heavens, man!" snorted Iff. "Are you in training for a monologist's job? If so--if not--anyway--can it! Can the extemporaneous stuff!"

The telephone bell silenced whatever retort Staff may have contemplated. Both men jumped for the desk, but Staff got there first.

"Hello?" he cried, receiver at ear. "Yes? Hello?"

But instead of the masculine accents of the exchange-manager he heard, for the third time that night, the voice of Miss Searle.

"Yes," he replied almost breathlessly--"it is I, Miss Searle. Thank Heaven you called up! I've been worrying silly--"

"We were cut off," the girl's voice responded. He noted, subconsciously, that she was speaking slowly and carefully, as if with effort.... "Cut off," she repeated as by rote, "and I had trouble getting you again."

"Then you're--you're all right?"

"Quite, thank you. I had an unpleasant experience trying to get to you by taxicab. The motor broke down coming through Central Park, and I had to walk home and lost my way. But I am all right now--just tired out."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "It's too bad; I was quite ready to call for the--you understand--and save you the trouble of the trip down here. But I'm glad you've had no more unpleasant adventure."

"The necklace is safe," the girl's voice told him with the same deadly precision of utterance.

"Oh, yes; I assumed that. And I may call for it?"

"If you please--today at noon. I am so tired I am afraid I shan't get up before noon."

"That'll be quite convenient to me, thank you," he assured her. "But where are you stopping?"

There fell a brief pause. Then she said something indistinguishable.

"Yes?" he said. "Beg pardon--I didn't get that. A little louder please, Miss Searle."

"The St. Regis."

"Where?" he repeated in surprise.

"The St. Regis. I am here with Mrs. Ilkington--her guest. Good night, Mr. Staff."

"Good morning," he laughed; and at once the connection was severed.

"And that's all right!" he announced cheerfully, swinging round to face Iff. "She was in a taxicab accident and got lost in Central Park--just got home, I infer. The necklace is safe and I'm to call and get it at twelve o'clock."

"Where's she stopping?" demanded Iff, shaking his little head as though impatient. Staff named the hotel, and Iff fairly jumped. "Why that's impossible!" he cried. "She can't afford it."

"How do you happen to know she can't?" enquired Staff, perplexed.

Momentarily Iff showed a face of confusion. "I know a lot of things," he grumbled, evasively.

Staff waited a moment, then finding that the little man didn't purpose making any more adequate or satisfactory explanation, observed: "It happens that she's Mrs. Ilkington's guest, and I fancy Mrs. Ilkington can afford it--unless you know more about her, too, than I do."

Iff shook his head, dissatisfied. "All right," he said wearily. "Now what're you going to do?"

"I'm going to try to snatch a few hours' sleep. There's no reason why I shouldn't, now, with nothing to do before noon."

"Pleasant dreams," said Iff sourly, as Staff marched off to his bedroom.

Then he sat down on the edge of the divan, hugging the dressing-gown round him, scowled vindictively at nothing and began thoughtfully to gnaw a bony knuckle.

In the other room, his host was undressing with surprising speed. In spite of his nap, he was still tremendously tired; perhaps the reaction caused by Eleanor's reassurance capping the climax of his excitement had something to do with the sense of complete mental and physical fatigue that swept over him the instant his back rested upon the bed. Within two minutes he was fast asleep.

But in the study Mr. Iff kept vigil, biting his knuckles what time he was not depleting his host's stock of cigarettes.

Daylight broadened over the city. The sun rose. Not to be outdone, so did Mr. Iff--moving quietly round the room, swearing beneath his breath as his conscience dictated, gradually accumulating more and more of the articles of clothing which he had so disdainfully discarded some hours earlier.

The telephone interrupted him somewhat after six o'clock. He answered it, assuming Staff's identity for the moment. When the conversation had closed, he sat in reverie for some minutes, then consulted the telephone book and called two numbers in quick succession. Immediately thereafter he tiptoed into the bedroom, assured himself that Staff was fast asleep and proceeded calmly to rifle that gentleman's pockets, carefully placing what he found in an orderly array upon the bureau. In the end, bringing to light a plump bill-fold, he concluded his investigations.

The pigskin envelope contained a little less than four-hundred dollars, mostly in gold Treasury certificates. Mr. Iff helped himself generously and replaced the bill-fold. Then he returned to the study, found paper and pens and wrote Staff a little note, which he propped against the mirror on the bedroom dresser. Finally, filling one of his pockets with cigarettes, he smiled blandly and let himself out of the apartment and, subsequently, of the house.

Staff slept on, sublimely unconscious, until the sun, slipping round to the south, splashed his face with molten gold: when he woke, fretful and sweatful. He glanced at his watch and got up promptly: the hour approached eleven. Diving into a bathrobe, he turned the water on for his bath, trotted to the front room and discovered the evasion of Mr. Iff. This, however, failed to surprise him. Iff was, after all, not bound to sit tight until Staff gave him leave to stir.

He rang for Mrs. Shultz and ordered breakfast. Then he bathed and began to dress. It was during this latter ceremony that he found his pockets turned inside out and their contents displayed upon his bureau.

This was a shock, especially when he failed to find his bill-fold at the first sweep. The bottom dropped out of the market for confidence in the integrity of Mr. Iff and conceit in the perspicacity of Mr. Staff. He saw instantly how flimsy had been the tissue of falsehood wherewith the *soi-disant* Mr. Iff had sought to cloak his duplicity, how egregiously stupid had been his readiness to swallow that extraordinary yarn. The more he considered, the more he marvelled. It surpassed belief--his asininity did; at least *he* wouldn't have believed he could be so easily fooled. He felt like kicking himself--and longed unutterably for a chance to kick his erstwhile guest.

In the midst of this transport he found himself staring incredulously at the envelope on the dresser. He snatched it up, tore it open and removed three pieces of white paper. Two of them were crisp and tough and engraved on one side with jet-black ink. The third bore this communication:

"MY DEAR MR. STAFF:--Your bill-fold's in your waistcoat pocket, where you left it last night. It contained \$385 when I found it. It now contains \$200. I leave you by way of security Bank of England notes to the extent of PS40. There'll be a bit of change, one way or the other--I'm too hurried to calculate which.

"The exchange manager has just called up. The interrupted call has been traced back to the Hotel St. Simon in 79th Street, W. I have called the St. Regis; neither Miss Searle nor Mrs. Ilkington has registered there. I have also called the St. Simon; both ladies are there. Your hearing must be defective--or else Miss S. didn't know where she was at.

"I'm off to line my inwards with food and decorate my outwards with purple and fine underlinen. After which I purpose minding my own business for a few hours or days, as the circumstances may demand. But do not grieve--I shall return eftsoons or thereabouts.

"Yours in the interests of pure crime--

"W_HIFF.

"P. S.--And of course neither of us had the sense to ask: If Miss S. was bound here from the St. Regis, how did her taxi manage to break down in Central Park?"

Prompt investigation revealed the truth of Mr. Iff's assertion: the bill-fold with its remaining two-hundred dollars was safely tucked away in the waistcoat pocket. Furthermore, the two twenty-pound notes were unquestionably genuine. The tide of Staff's faith in human nature began again to flood; the flower of his self-conceit flourished amazingly. He surmised that he wasn't such a bad little judge of mankind, after all.

He breakfasted with a famous appetite, untroubled by Iff's aspersion on his sense of hearing, which was excellent; and he had certainly heard Miss Searle aright: she had named the St. Regis not once, but twice, and each time with the clearest enunciation. He could only attribute the mistake to her excitement and fatigue; people frequently make such mistakes under unusual conditions; if Miss Searle had wished to deceive him as to her whereabouts, she needed only to refrain from communicating with him at all. And anyway, he knew now where to find her and within the hour would have found her; and then everything would be cleared up.

He was mildly surprised at the sense of pleasant satisfaction with which he looked forward to meeting the girl again. He reminded himself not to forget to interview a manager or two in her interests.

Just to make assurance doubly sure, he telephoned the St. Simon while waiting for Shultz to fetch a taxicab. The switchboard operator at that establishment replied in the affirmative to his enquiry as to whether or not Mrs. Ilkington and Miss Searle were registered there.

On the top of this he was called up by Alison.

"I'm just starting out--cab waiting," he told her at once--"to go to Miss Searle and get your--property."

"Oh, you are?" she returned in what he thought a singular tone.

"Yes; she called me up last night--said she'd discovered the mistake and the--ah--property--asked me to call today at noon."

There was no necessity that he could see of detailing the whole long story over a telephone wire.

"Well," said Alison after a little pause, "I don't want to interfere with your amusements, but ... I've something very particular to say to you. I wish you'd stop here on your way uptown."

"Why, certainly," he agreed without hesitation or apprehension.

The actress had put up, in accordance with her custom, at a handsome, expensive and world-famous hotel in the immediate neighbourhood of Staff's rooms. Consequently he found himself in her presence within fifteen minutes from the end of their talk by telephone.

Dressed for the street and looking uncommonly handsome, she was waiting for him in the sitting-room of her suite. As he entered, she came forward and gave him a cool little hand and a greeting as cool. He received both with an imperturbability founded (he discovered to his great surprise) on solid indifference. It was hard to realise that he no longer cared for her, or whether she were pleased or displeased with him. But he didn't. He concluded, not without profound amazement, that his passion for her which had burned so long and brightly had been no more than sentimental incandescence. And he began to think himself a very devil of a fellow, who could toy with the love of women with such complete insouciance, who could off with the old love before he had found a new and care not a rap!...

Throughout this self-analysis he was mouthing commonplaces--assuring her that the day was fine, that he had never felt better, that she was looking her charming best. Of a sudden his vision comprehended an article which adorned the centre-table; and words forsook him and his jaw dropped.

It was *the* bandbox: not that which he had left, with its cargo of trash, in his rooms.

Alison followed his glance, elevated her brows, and indicated the box with a wave of her arm.

"And what d' you know about that?" she enquired bluntly.

"Where did it come from?" he counter-questioned, all agape.

"I'm asking you."

"But--I know nothing about it. Did Miss Searle send it--?"

"I can't say," replied the actress drily. "Your name on the tag has been scratched out and mine, with this address, written above it."

Staff moved over to the table and while he was intently scrutinising the tag, Alison continued:

"It came by messenger about eight this morning; Jane brought it to me when I got up a little while ago."

"The hat was in it?" he asked.

She nodded impatiently: "Oh, of course--with the lining half ripped out and the necklace missing."

"Curious!" he murmured.

"Rather," she agreed. "What do you make of it?"

"This address isn't her writing," he said, deep in thought.

"Oh, so you're familiar with the lady's hand?" There was an accent in Alison's voice that told him, before he looked, that her lip was curling and her eyes were hard.

"This is a man's writing," he said quietly, wondering if it could be possible that Alison was jealous.

"Well?" she demanded. "What of it?"

"I don't know. Miss Searle got me on the telephone a little after one last night; she said she'd found the necklace in the hat and was bringing it to me."

"How did she know it was mine?"

"Heard you order it sent to me, in London. You'll remember my telling you she knew."

"Oh, yes. Go on."

"She didn't show up, but telephoned again some time round four o'clock explaining that she had been in a taxicab accident in the Park and lost her way but finally got home--that is, to her hotel, the St. Simon. She said the necklace was safe--didn't mention the hat--and asked me to call for it at noon today. I said I would, and I'm by way of being late now. Doubtless she can explain how the hat came to you this way."

"I'll be interested to hear," said Alison, "and to know that the necklace is really safe. On the face of it--as it stands--there's something queer--wrong.... What are you going to do?"

Staff had moved toward the telephone. He paused, explaining that he was about to call up Miss Searle for reassurance. Alison negated this instantly.

"Why waste time? If she has the thing, the quickest way to get it is to go to her now--at once. If she hasn't, the quickest way to get after it is via the same route. I'm all ready and if you are we'll go immediately."

Staff bowed, displeased with her manner to the point of silence. He had no objection to her being as temperamental as she pleased, but he objected strongly to having it implied by everything except spoken words that he was in some way responsible for the necklace and that Eleanor Searle was quite capable of conspiring to steal it.

As for Alison, her humour was dangerously impregnated with the consciousness that she had played the fool to such an extent that she stood in a fair way to lose her necklace. Inasmuch as she knew this to be altogether her fault, whatever the outcome, she was in a mood to quarrel with the whole wide world; and she schooled herself to treat with Staff on terms of toleration only by exercise of considerable self-command and because she was exacting a service of him.

So their ride uptown was marked by its atmosphere of distant and dispassionate civility. They spoke infrequently, and then on indifferent topics soon suffered to languish. In due course, however, Staff mastered his resentment and--as evidenced by his wry, secret smile--began to take a philosophic view of the situation, to extract some slight amusement from his insight into Alison's mental processes. Intuitively sensing this, she grew even more exasperated with him--as well as with everybody aside from her own impeccable self.

At the St. Simon, Staff soberly escorted the woman to the lounge, meaning to leave her there while he enquired for Eleanor at the office; but they had barely set foot in the apartment when their names were shrieked at them in an excitable, shrill, feminine voice, and Mrs. Ilkington bore down upon them in full regalia of sensation.

"My dears!" she cried, regarding them affectionately--"such a surprise! Such a delightful surprise! And so good of you to come to see me so soon! And opportune--I'm dying, positively expiring, for somebody to gossip with. Such a singular thing has happened--"

Alison interrupted bluntly: "Where's Miss Searle? Mr. Staff is anxious to see her."

"That's just it--*just* what I want to talk about. You'd never guess what that girl has done--and after all the trouble and thought I've taken in her behalf, too! I'm disgusted, positively and finally disgusted; never again will I interest myself in such people. I--"

"But where is Miss Searle?" demanded Alison, with a significant look to Staff.

"Gone!" announced Mrs. Ilkington impressively.

"Gone?" echoed Staff.

Mrs. Ilkington nodded vigorously, compressing her lips to a thin line of disapproval. "I'm positively at my wits' end to account for her."

"I fancy there's an explanation, however," Alison put in.

"I wish you'd tell me, then.... You see, we dined out, went to the theatre and supper together, last night. The Struyvers asked me, and I made them include her, of course. We got back about one. Of course, my dears, I was fearfully tired and didn't get up till half an hour ago. Imagine my sensation when I enquired for Miss Searle and was informed that she paid her bill and left at five o'clock this *morning*, and with a *strange man*!"

"She left you a note, of course?" Staff suggested.

"Not a line--nothing! I might be the dirt beneath her feet, the way she's treated me. I'm thoroughly disillusioned--"

disgusted!"

"Pardon me," said Staff; "I'll have a word with the office."

He hurried away, leaving Mrs. Ilkington still volubly dilating on that indignity that had been put upon her: Alison listening with an air of infinite detachment.

His enquiry was fruitless enough. The day-clerk, he was informed by that personage, had not come on duty until eight o'clock; he knew nothing of the affair beyond what he had been told by the night-clerk--that Miss Searle had called for her bill and paid it at five o'clock; had given instructions to have her luggage removed from her room and delivered on presentation of her written order; and had then left the hotel in company with a gentleman who registered as "I. Arbuthnot" at one o'clock in the morning, paying for his room in advance.

Staff, consumed with curiosity about this gentleman, was so persistent in his enquiry that he finally unearthed the bellboy who had shown that guest to his room and who furnished what seemed to be a tolerably accurate sketch of him.

The man described was--Iff.

Discouraged and apprehensive, Staff returned to the lounge and made his report--one received by Alison with frigid disapproval, by Mrs. Ilkington with every symptom of cordial animation; from which it became immediately apparent that Alison had told the elder woman everything she should not have told her.

"I. Arbuthnot," Alison translated: "Arbuthnot Ismay."

"Gracious!" Mrs. Ilkington squealed. "Isn't that the real name of that odd creature who called himself Iff and pretended to be a Secret Service man?"

Staff nodded a glum assent.

"It's plain enough," Alison went on; "this Searle woman was in league with him--"

"I disagree with you," said Staff.

"On what grounds?"

"I don't believe that Miss Searle--"

"On what grounds?"

He shrugged, acknowledging his inability to explain.

"And what will you do?" interrupted Mrs. Ilkington.

"I shall inform the police, of course," said Alison; "and the sooner the better."

"If I may venture so far," Staff said stiffly, "I advise you to do nothing of the sort."

"And why not, if you please?"

"It's rather a delicate case," he said--"if you'll pause to consider it. You must not forget that you yourself broke the law when you contrived to smuggle the necklace into this country. The minute you make this matter public, you lay yourself open to arrest and prosecution for swindling the Government."

"Swindling!" Alison repeated with a flaming face.

Staff bowed, confirming the word. "It is a very serious charge these days," he said soberly. "I'd advise you to think twice before you make any overt move."

"But if I deny attempting to smuggle the necklace? If I insist that it was stolen from me aboard the Autocratic--stolen by this Mr. Ismay and this Searle woman--?"

"Miss Searle did not steal your necklace. If she had intended anything of the sort, she wouldn't have telephoned me about it last night."

"Nevertheless, she has gone away with it, arm-in-arm with a notorious thief, hasn't she?"

"We're not yet positive what she has done. For my part, I am confident she will communicate with us and return the necklace with the least possible delay."

"Nevertheless, I shall set the police after her!" Alison insisted obstinately.

"Again I advise you--"

"But I shall deny the smuggling, base my charge on--"

"One moment," Staff interposed firmly. "You forget me. I'm afraid I can adduce considerable evidence to prove that you not only attempted to smuggle, but as a matter of fact did."

"And you would do that--to me?" snapped the actress.

"I mean that Miss Searle shall have every chance to prove her innocence," he returned in an even and unyielding voice.

"Why? What's your interest in her?"

"Simple justice," he said--and knew his answer to be evasive and unconvincing.

"As a matter of fact," said Alison, rising in her anger, "you've fallen in love with the girl!"

Staff held her gaze in silence.

"You're in love with her," insisted the actress--"in love with this common thief and confidence-woman!"

Staff nodded gently. "Perhaps," said he, "you're right. I hadn't thought of it that way before.... But, if you doubt my motive in advising you to go slow, consult somebody else--somebody you feel you can trust: Max, for instance, or your attorney. Meanwhile, I'd ask Mrs. Ilkington to be discreet, if I were you."

Saluting them ceremoniously, he turned and left the hotel, deeply dejected, profoundly bewildered and ... wondering whether or not Alison in her rage had uncovered a secret unsuspected even by himself, to whom it should have been most intimate.

XII

WON'T YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?

Slipping quickly into the room through an opening hardly wide enough to admit his spare, small body, the man as quickly shut and locked the door and pocketed the key. This much accomplished, he swung on his heel and, without further movement, fastened his attention anew upon the girl.

Standing so--hands clasped loosely before him, his head thrust forward a trifle above his rounded shoulders, pale eyes peering from their network of wrinkles with a semi-humorous suggestion, thin lips curved in an apologetic grin: his likeness to the Mr. Iff known to Staff was something more than striking. One needed to be intimately and recently acquainted with Iff's appearance to be able to detect the almost imperceptible points of difference between the two. Had Staff been there he might have questioned the colour of this man's eyes, which showed a lighter tint than Iff's, and their expression--here vigilant and predatory in contrast with Iff's languid, half-derisive look. The line of the cheek from nose to mouth, too, was deeper and more hard than with Iff; and there was a hint of elevation in the nostrils that lent the face a guise of malice and evil--like the shadow of an impersonal sneer.

The look he bent upon Eleanor was almost a sneer: a smile in part contemptuous, in part studious; as though he pondered a problem in human chemistry from the view-point of a seasoned and experienced scientist. He cocked his head a bit to one side and stared insolently beneath half-lowered lids, now and again nodding ever so slightly as if in confirmation of some unspoken conclusion.

Against the cold, inflexible purpose in his manner, the pitiful prayer expressed in the girl's attitude spent itself without effect. Her hands dropped to her sides; her head drooped wearily, hopelessly; her pose personified despondency profound and irremediable.

When he had timed his silence cunningly, to ensure the most impressive effect, the man moved, shifting from one foot to the other, and spoke.

"Well, Nelly ...?"

His voice, modulated to an amused drawl, was much like Iff's.

The girl's lips moved noiselessly for an instant before she managed to articulate.

"So," she said in a quiet tone of horror--"So it was you all the time!"

"What was me?" enquired the man inelegantly if with spirit.

"I mean," she said, "you *were* after the necklace, after all."

"To be sure," he said pertly. "What did you think?"

"I hoped it wasn't so," she said brokenly. "When you escaped yesterday morning, and when tonight I found the necklace--I was so glad!"

"Then you did find it?" he demanded promptly.

She gave him a look of contempt. "You know it!"

"My dear child," he expostulated insincerely, "what makes you say that?"

"You don't mean to pretend you didn't steal the bandbox from me, just now, in that taxicab, trying to get the necklace?" she demanded.

He waited an instant, then shrugged. "I presume denial would be useless."

"Quite."

"All right then: I won't deny anything."

She moved away from the telephone to a chair wherein she dropped as if exhausted, hands knitted together in her lap, her chin resting on her chest.

"You see," said the man, "I wanted to spare you the knowledge that you were being held up by your fond parent."

"I should have known you," she said, "but for that disguise--the beard and motor-coat."

"That just goes to show that filial affection will out," commented the man. "You haven't seen me for seven years--"

"Except on the steamer," she corrected.

"True, but there I kept considerably out of your way."

"Considerately!" she echoed in a bitter tone.

"Can you question it?" he asked, lightly ironic, moving noiselessly to and fro while appraising the contents of the room with swift, searching glances.

"As, for instance, your actions tonight...."

"They simply prove my contention, dear child." He paused, gazing down at her with a quizzical leer. "My very presence here affirms my entire devotion to your welfare."

She looked up, dumfounded by his effrontery. "Is it worth while to waste your time so?" she enquired. "You failed the first time tonight, but you can't fail now; I'm alone, I can't oppose you, and you know I won't raise an alarm. Why not stop talking, take what you want and go? And leave me to be accused of theft unless I choose to tell the world--what it wouldn't believe--that my own father stole the necklace from me!"

"Ah, but how unjust you are!" exclaimed the man. "How little you know me, how little you appreciate a father's affection!"

"And you tried to rob me not two hours ago!"

"Yes," he said cheerfully: "I admit it. If I had got away with it then--well and good. You need never have known who it was. Unhappily for both of us, you fooled me."

"For both of us?" she repeated blankly.

"Precisely. It puts you in a most serious position. That's why I'm here--to save you."

In spite of her fatigue, the girl rose to face him. "What do you mean?"

"Simply that between us we've gummed this business up neatly--hard and fast. You see--I hadn't any use for that hat; I stopped in at an all-night telegraph station and left it to be delivered to Miss Landis, never dreaming what the consequences would be. Immediately thereafter, but too late, I learned--I've a way of finding out what's going on, you know--that Miss Landis had already put the case in the hands of the police. It makes it very serious for you--the bandbox returned, the necklace still in your possession, your wild, incredible yarn about meaning to restore it ..."

In her overwrought and harassed condition, the sophistry illuded her; she was sensible only of the menace his words distilled. She saw herself tricked and trapped, meshed in a web of damning circumstance; everything was against her--appearances, the hands of all men, the cruel accident that had placed the necklace in her keeping, even her parentage. For she was the daughter of a notorious thief, a man whose name was an international byword. Who would believe her protestations of innocence--presuming that the police should find her before she could reach either Staff or Miss Landis?

"But," she faltered, white to her lips, "I can take it to her now--instantly--"

Instinctively she clutched her handbag. The man's eyes appreciated the movement. His face was shadowed for a thought by the flying cloud of a sardonic smile. And the girl saw and read that smile.

"Unless," she stammered, retreating from him a pace or two--"unless you--"

He silenced her with a reassuring gesture.

"You do misjudge me!" he said in a voice that fairly wept.

Hope flamed in her eyes. "You mean--you can't mean--"

Again he lifted his hand. "I mean that you misconstrue my motive. Far be it from me to deny that I am--what I am. We have ever been plain-spoken with one another. You told me what I was seven years ago, when you left me, took another name, disowned me and ..." His voice broke affectingly for an instant. "No matter," he resumed, with an obvious effort. "The past is past, and I am punished for all that I have ever done or ever may do, by the loss of my daughter's confidence and affection. It is my fault; I have no right to complain. But now ... Yes, I admit I tried to steal the necklace in the Park tonight. But I failed, and failing I did that which got you into trouble. Now I'm here to help you extricate yourself. Don't worry about the necklace--keep it, hide it where you will. I don't want and shan't touch, it on any conditions."

"You mean I'm free to return it to Miss Landis?" she gasped, incredulous.

"Just that."

"Then--where can I find her?"

He shrugged. "There's the rub. She's left town."

She steadied herself with a hand on the table. "Still I can follow her..."

"Yes--and must. That's what I've come to tell you and to help you do."

"Where has she gone?"

"To her country place in Connecticut, on the Sound shore."

"How can I get there? By railroad?" Eleanor started toward the telephone.

"Hold on!" he said sharply. "What are you going to do?"

"Order a time-table--"

"Useless," he commented curtly. "Every terminal in the city is already watched by detectives. They'd spot you in a twinkling. Your only salvation is to get to Miss Landis before they catch you."

In her excitement and confusion she could only stand and stare. A solitary thought dominated her consciousness, dwarfing and distorting all others: she was in danger of arrest, imprisonment, the shame and ignominy of public prosecution. Even though she were to be cleared of the charge, the stain of it would cling to her, an ineradicable blot.

And every avenue of escape was closed to her! Her lips trembled and her eyes brimmed, glistening. Despair lay cold in her heart.

She was so weary and distraught with the strain of nerves taut and vibrant with emotion, that she was by no means

herself. She had no time for either thought or calm consideration; and even with plenty of time, she would have found herself unable to think clearly and calmly.

"What am I to do, then?" she whispered.

"Trust me," the man replied quietly. "There's just one way to reach this woman without risk of detection--and that's good only if we act *now*. Get your things together; pay your bill; leave word to deliver your trunks to your order; and come with me. I have a motor-car waiting round the corner. In an hour we can be out of the city. By noon I can have you at Miss Landis' home."

"Yes," she cried, almost hysterical--"yes, that's the way!"

"Then do what packing you must. Here, I'll lend a hand."

Fortunately, Eleanor had merely opened her trunks and bags, removing only such garments and toilet accessories as she had required for dinner and the theatre. These lay scattered about the room, easily to be gathered up and stuffed with careless haste into her trunks. In ten minutes the man was turning the keys in their various locks, while she stood waiting with a small handbag containing a few necessaries, a motor-coat over her arm, a thick veil draped from her hat.

"One minute," the man said, straightening up from the last piece of luggage. "You were telephoning when I came in?"

"Yes--to Mr. Staff, to explain why I failed to bring him the bandbox."

"*Hmmm*." He pondered this, chin in hand. "He'll be fretting. Does he know where you are?"

"No--I forgot to tell him."

"That's good. Still, you'd better call him up again and put his mind at rest. It may gain us a few hours."

"What am I to say?"

She lifted her hand to the receiver.

"Tell him you were cut off and had trouble getting his number again. Say your motor broke down in Central Park and you lost your way trying to walk home. Say you're tired and don't want to be disturbed till noon; that you have the necklace safe and will give it to him if he will call tomorrow."

Eleanor took a deep breath, gave the number to the switchboard operator and before she had time to give another instant's consideration to what she was doing, found herself in conversation with Staff, reciting the communication outlined by her evil genius in response to his eager questioning.

The man was at her elbow all the while she talked--so close that he could easily overhear the other end of the dialogue. This was with a purpose made manifest when Staff asked Eleanor where she was stopping, when instantly the little man clapped his palm over the transmitter.

"Tell him the St. Regis," he said in a sharp whisper.

Her eyes demanded the reason why.

"Don't stop to argue--do as I say: it'll give us more time. The St. Regis!"

He removed his hand. Blindly she obeyed, reiterating the name to Staff and presently saying good-bye.

"And now--not a second to spare--hurry!"

In the hallway, while they waited for the elevator, he had further instructions for her.

"Go to the desk and ask for your bill," he said, handing her the key to her room. "You've money, of course?... Say that you're called unexpectedly away and will send a written order for your trunks early in the morning. If the clerk wants an address, tell him the Auditorium, Chicago. Now ..."

They stepped from the dimly lighted hall into the brilliant cage of the elevator. It dropped, silently, swiftly, to the ground floor, somehow suggesting to the girl the workings of her implacable, irresistible destiny. So precisely, she felt, she was being whirled on to her fate, like a dry leaf in a gale, with no more volition, as impotent to direct her course....

Still under the obsession of this idea, she went to the desk, paid her bill and said what she had been told to say about her trunks. Beyond that point she did not go, chiefly because she had forgotten and was too numb with fatigue to care. The clerk's question as to her address failed to reach her understanding; she turned away without responding and

went to join at the door the man who seemed able to sway her to his whim.

She found herself walking in the dusky streets, struggling to keep up with the rapid pace set by the man at her side.

After some time they paused before a building in a side street. By its low facade and huge sliding doors she dimly perceived it to be a private garage. In response to a signal of peculiar rhythm knuckled upon the wood by her companion, the doors rolled back. A heavy-eyed mechanic saluted them drowsily. On the edge of the threshold a high-powered car with a close-coupled body stood ready.

With the docility of that complete indifference which is bred of deadening weariness, she submitted to being helped to her seat, arranged her veil to protect her face and sat back with folded hands, submissive to endure whatsoever chance or mischance there might be in store for her.

The small man took the seat by her side; the mechanic cranked and jumped to his place. The motor snorted, trembling like a thoroughbred about to run a race, then subsiding with a sonorous purr swept sedately out into the deserted street, swung round a corner into Broadway, settled its tires into the grooves of the car-tracks and leaped northwards like an arrow.

The thoroughfare was all but bare of traffic. Now and again they had to swing away from the car-tracks to pass a surface-car; infrequently they passed early milk wagons, crawling reluctantly over their routes. Pedestrians were few and far between, and only once, when they dipped into the hollow at Manhattan Street, was it necessary to reduce speed in deference to the law as bodied forth in a balefully glaring, solitary policeman.

The silken song of six cylinders working in absolute harmony was as soothing as a lullaby, the sweep of the soft, fresh morning air past one's cheeks as soft and quieting as a mother's caress. Eleanor yielded to their influence as naturally as a tired child. Her eyes closed; she breathed regularly, barely conscious of the sensation of resistless flight.

Hot and level, the rays of the rising sun smote her face and roused her as the car crossed McComb's Dam Bridge; and for a little time thereafter she was drowsily sentient--aware of wheeling streets and endless, marching ranks of houses. Then again she dozed, recovering her senses only when, after a lapse of perhaps half an hour, the noise of the motor ceased and the big machine slowed down smoothly to a dead halt.

She opened her eyes, comprehending dully a complete change in the aspect of the land. They had stopped on the right of the road, in front of a low-roofed wooden building whose signboard creaking overhead in the breeze named the place an inn. To the left lay a stretch of woodland; and there were trees, too, behind the inn, but in less thick array, so that it was possible to catch through their trunks and foliage glimpses of blue water splashed with golden sunlight. A soft air fanned in off the water, sweet and clean. The sky was high and profoundly blue, unflecked by cloud.

With a feeling of gratitude, she struggled to recollect her wits and realise her position; but still her weariness was heavy upon her. The man she called her father was coming down the path from the inn doorway. He carried a tumbler brimming with a pale amber liquid. Walking round to her side of the car he offered it.

"Drink this," she heard him say in a pleasant voice; "it'll help you brace up."

Obediently she accepted the glass and drank. The soul of the stuff broke out in delicate, aromatic bubbles beneath her nostrils. There was a stinging but refreshing feeling in her mouth and throat. She said "champagne" sleepily to herself, and with a word of thanks returned an empty glass.

She heard the man laugh, and in confusion wondered why. If anything, she felt more sleepy than before.

He climbed back into his seat. A question crawled in her brain, tormenting. Finally she managed to enunciate a part of it:

"How much longer ...?"

"Oh, not a great ways now."

The response seemed to come from a far distance. She felt the car moving beneath her and ... no more. Sleep possessed her utterly, heavy and dreamless....

There followed several phases of semi-consciousness wherein she moved by instinct alone, seeing men as trees walking, the world as through a mist.

In one, she was being helped out of the motor-car. Then somebody was holding her arm and guiding her along a path of some sort. Planks rang hollowly beneath her feet, and the hand on her arm detained her. A voice said: "This way--just step right out; you're perfectly safe." Mechanically she obeyed. She felt herself lurch as if to fall, and then hands

caught and supported her as she stood on something that swayed. The voice that had before spoken was advising her to sit down and take it easy. Accordingly, she sat down. Her seat was rocking like a swing, and she heard dimly the splash of waters; these merged unaccountably again into the purring of a motor....

And then somebody had an arm round her waist and she was walking, bearing heavily upon that support, partly because she sorely needed it but the more readily because she knew somehow--intuitively--that the arm was a woman's. A voice assured her from time to time: "Not much farther ...". And she was sure it was a woman's voice.... Then she was being helped to ascend a steep, long staircase....

She came to herself for a moment, probably not long after climbing the stairs. She was sitting on the edge of a bed in a small, low-ceiled room, cheaply and meagrely furnished. Staring wildly about her, she tried to realise these surroundings. There were two windows, both open, admitting floods of sea air and sunlight; beyond them she saw green boughs swaying slowly, and through the boughs patches of water, blue and gold. There was a door opposite the bed; it stood open, revealing a vista of long, bare hallway, regularly punctuated by doors.

The drumming in her temples pained and bewildered her. Her head felt dense and heavy. She tried to think and failed. But the knowledge persisted that something was very wrong with her world--something that might be remedied, set right, if only she could muster up strength to move and ... think.

Abruptly the doorway was filled by the figure of a woman, a strapping, brawny creature with the arms and shoulders of a man and a great, coarse, good-natured face. She came directly to the bed, sat down beside the girl, passed an arm behind her shoulders and offered her a glass.

"You've just woke up, ain't you?" she said soothingly. "Drink this and lay down and you'll feel better before long. You have had a turn, and no mistake; but you'll be all right now, never fear. Come now, drink it, and I'll help you loose your clothes a bit, so 's you can be comfortable...."

Somehow her tone inspired Eleanor with confidence. She drank, submitted to being partially undressed, and lay down. Sleep overcame her immediately: she suffered a sensation of dropping plummet-wise into a great pit of oblivion....

XIII

WRECK ISLAND

Suddenly, with a smothered cry of surprise, Eleanor sat up. She seemed to have recovered full consciousness and sensibility with an instantaneous effect comparable only to that of electric light abruptly flooding a room at night. A moment ago she had been an insentient atom sunk deep in impenetrable night; now she was herself--and it was broad daylight.

With an abrupt, automatic movement, she left the bed and stood up, staring incredulously at the substance of what still wore in her memory the guise of a dream.

But it had been no dream, after all. She was actually in the small room with the low ceiling and the door (now shut) and the windows that revealed the green of leaves and the blue and gold of a sun-spangled sea. And her coat and hat and veil had been removed and were hanging from nails in the wall behind the door, and her clothing had been unfastened--precisely as she dimly remembered everything that had happened with relation to the strange woman.

She wore a little wrist-watch. It told her that the hour was after four in the afternoon.

She began hurriedly to dress, or rather to repair the disorder of her garments, all the while struggling between surprise that she felt rested and well and strong, and a haunting suspicion that she had been tricked.

Of the truth of this suspicion, confirmatory evidence presently overwhelmed her.

Since that draught of champagne before the roadside inn shortly after sunrise, she had known nothing clearly. It was impossible that she could without knowing it have accomplished her purpose with relation to Alison Landis and the Cadogan collar. She saw now, she knew now beyond dispute, that she had been drugged--not necessarily heavily; a simple dose of harmless bromides would have served the purpose in her overtaxed condition--and brought to this place in a semi-stupor, neither knowing whither she went nor able to object had she known.

The discovery of her handbag was all that was required to transmute fears and doubts into irrefragable knowledge.

No longer fastened to her wrist by the loop of its silken thong, she found the bag in plain sight on the top of a cheap pine bureau. With feverish haste she examined it. The necklace was gone.

Dropping the bag, she stared bitterly at her distorted reflection in a cracked and discoloured mirror.

What a fool, to trust the man! In the clear illumination of unclouded reason which she was now able to bring to bear upon the episode, she saw with painful distinctness how readily she had lent herself to be the dupe and tool of the man she called her father. Nothing that he had urged upon her at the St. Simon had now the least weight in her understanding; all his argument was now seen to be but the sheerest sophistry, every statement he had made and every promise fairly riddled with treachery; hardly a phrase he had uttered would have gained an instant's credence under the analysis of a normal intelligence. He could have accomplished nothing had she not been without sleep for nearly twenty-four hours, with every nerve and fibre and faculty aching for rest. But, so aided--with what heartless ease had he beguiled and overreached her!

Tears, hot and stinging, smarted in her eyes while she fumbled with the fastenings of her attire--tears of chagrin and bitter resentment.

As soon as she was ready and composed, she opened the door very gently and stepped out into the hall.

It was a short hall, set like the top bar of a T-square at the end of a long, door-lined corridor. The walls were of white, plain plaster, innocent of paper and in some places darkly blotched with damp and mildew. The floor, though solid, was uncarpeted. Near at hand a flight of steps ran down to the lower floor.

After a moment of hesitation she chose to explore the long corridor rather than to descend at once by the nearer stairway; and gathering her skirts about her ankles (an instinctive precaution against making a noise engendered by the atmosphere of the place rather than the result of coherent thought) she stole quietly along between its narrow walls.

Although some few were closed, the majority of the doors she passed stood open; and these all revealed small, stuffy cubicles with grimy, unpainted floors, grimy plaster walls and ceilings and grimy windows whose panes were framed in cobwebs and crusted so thick with the accumulated dust and damp of years that they lacked little of complete opacity. No room contained any furnishing of any sort.

The farther she moved from her bedroom, the more close and stale and sluggish seemed the air, the more oppressive the quiet of this strange tenement. The sound of her footfalls, light and stealthy though they were, sounded to her ears weirdly magnified in volume; and the thought came to her that if she were indeed trespassing upon forbidden quarters of the mean and dismal stronghold of some modern Bluebeard, the noise she was making would quickly enough bring the warders down upon her. And yet it must have been that her imagination exaggerated the slight sounds that attended her cautious advance; for presently she had proof enough that they could have been audible to none but herself.

Half-way down the corridor she came unexpectedly to a second staircase; double the width of the other, it ran down to a broad landing and then in two short flights to the ground floor of the building. The well of this stairway disclosed a hall rather large and well-finished, if bare. Directly in front of the landing, where the short flights branched at right angles to the main, was a large double door, one side of which stood slightly ajar. Putting this and that together, Eleanor satisfied herself that she overlooked the entrance-hall and office of an out-of-the-way summer hotel, neither large nor in any way pretentious even in its palmiest days, and now abandoned--or, at best, consecrated to the uses of caretakers and whoever else might happen to inhabit the wing whence she had wandered.

Now as she paused for an instant, looking down while turning this thought over in her mind and considering the effect upon herself and fortunes of indefinite sequestration in such a spot, she was startled by a cough from some point invisible to her in the hall below. On the heels of this, she heard something even more inexplicable: the dull and hollow clang of a heavy metal door. Footsteps were audible immediately: the quick, nervous footfalls of somebody coming to the front of the house from a point behind the staircase.

Startled and curious, the girl drew back a careful step or two until sheltered by the corridor wall at its junction with the balustrade. Here she might lurk and peer, see but not be seen, save through unhappy mischance.

The man came promptly into view. She had foretold his identity, had known it would be ... he whom she must call father.

He moved briskly to the open door, paused and stood looking out for an instant, then with his air of furtive alertness, yet apparently sure that he was unobserved and wholly unsuspecting of the presence of the girl above him, swung back toward the staircase. For an instant, terrified by the fear that he meant to ascend, she stood poised on the verge of flight; but that he had another intention at once became apparent. Stopping at the foot of the left-hand flight of steps,

he laid hold of the turned knob on top of the outer newel-post and lifted it from its socket. Then he took something from his coat pocket, dropped it into the hollow of the newel, replaced the knob and turned and marched smartly out of the house, shutting the door behind him.

Eleanor noticed that he didn't lock it.

At the same time three separate considerations moved her to fly back to her room. She had seen something not intended for her sight; the knowledge might somehow prove valuable to her; and if she were discovered in the corridor, the man might reasonably accuse her of spying. Incontinently she picked up her skirts and ran.

The distance wasn't as great as she had thought; in a brief moment she was standing before the door of the bedroom as though she had just come out--her gaze directed expectantly toward the small staircase.

If she had anticipated a visit from her kidnapper, however, she was pleasantly disappointed. Not a sound came from below, aside from a dull and distant thump and thud which went on steadily, if in syncopated measure, and the source of which perplexed her.

At length she pulled herself together and warily descended the staircase. It ended in what was largely a counterpart of the hall above: as on the upper floor broken by the mouth of a long corridor, but with a door at its rear in place of the window upstairs. From beyond the door came the thumping, thudding sound that had puzzled Eleanor; but now she could distinguish something more: a woman's voice crooning an age-old melody. Then the pounding ceased, shuffling footsteps were audible, and a soft clash of metal upon metal: shuffle again, and again the intermittent, deadened pounding.

Suddenly she understood, and understanding almost smiled, in spite of her gnawing anxiety, to think that she had been mystified so long by a noise of such humble origin: merely that of a woman comfortably engaged in the household task of ironing. It was simple enough, once one thought of it; yet ridiculously incongruous when injected into the cognisance of a girl whose brain was buzzing with the incredible romance of her position....

Without further ceremony she thrust open the door at the end of the hallway.

There was disclosed a room of good size, evidently at one time a living-room, now converted to the combined offices of kitchen and dining-room. A large deal table in the middle of the floor was covered with a turkey-red cloth, with places set for four. On a small range in the recess of what had once been an open fireplace, sad-irons were heating side by side with simmering pots and a steaming tea-kettle. There was a rich aroma of cooking in the air, somewhat tintured by the smell of melting wax, but in spite of that madly appetising to the nostrils of a young woman made suddenly aware that she had not eaten for some sixteen hours. The furnishings of the room were simple and characteristic of country kitchens--including even the figure of the sturdy woman placidly ironing white things on a board near the open door.

She looked up quickly as Eleanor entered, stopped her humming, smote the board vigorously with the iron and set the latter on a metal rest.

"Evening," she said pleasantly, resting her hands on her hips.

Eleanor stared dumbly, remembering that this was the woman who had helped her to bed and had administered what had presumably been a second sleeping draught.

"Thought I heard you moving around upstairs. How be you? Hungry? I've got a bite ready."

"I'd like a drink of water, please," said Eleanor--"plain water," she added with a significance that could not have been overlooked by a guilty conscience.

But the woman seemed to sense no ulterior meaning. "I'll fetch it," she said in a good-humoured voice, going to the sink.

While she was manipulating the pump, the girl moved nearer, frankly taking stock of her. The dim impression retained from their meeting in the early morning was merely emphasised by this second inspection; the woman was built on generous lines--big-boned, heavy and apparently immensely strong. A contented and easy-going humour shone from her broad, coarsely featured countenance, oddly contending with a suggestion of implacable obstinacy and tenacious purpose.

"Here you are," she said presently, extending a glass filled with the breath of the ice-cold liquid it contained.

"Thank you," said Eleanor; and drank thirstily. "Who are you?" she demanded point blank, returning the glass.

"Mrs. Clover," said the woman as bluntly, if with a smiling mouth.

"Where am I?"

"Well"--the woman turned to the stove and busied herself with coffee-pot and frying-pan while she talked--"this was the Wreck Island House onct upon a time. I calculate it's that now, only it ain't run as a hotel any more. It's been years since there was any summer folks come here--place didn't pay, they said; guess that's why they shet it up and how your pa come to buy it for a song."

"Where is the Wreck Island House, then?" Eleanor put in.

"On Wreck Island, of course."

"And where is that?"

"In Long Island Sound, about a mile off'n the Connecticut shore. Pennymint Centre's the nearest village."

"That means nothing to me," said the girl. "How far are we from New York?"

"I couldn't rightly say--ain't never been there. But your pa says--I heard him tell Eph once--he can make the run in his automobile in an hour and a half. That's from Pennymint Centre, of course."

Eleanor pressed her hands to her temples, temporarily dazed by the information. "Island," she repeated--"a mile from shore--New York an hour and a half away ...!"

"Good, comfortable, tight little island," resumed Mrs. Clover, pleased, it seemed, with the sound of her own voice; "you'll like it when you come to get acquainted. Just the very place for a girl with your trouble."

"My trouble? What do you know about that?"

"Your pa told me, of course. Nervous prostration's what he called it--says as you need a rest with quiet and nothing to disturb you--plenty of good food and sea air--"

"Oh stop!" Eleanor begged frantically.

"Land!" said the woman in a kindly tone--"I might 've known I'd get on your poor nerves, talking all the time. But I can't seem to help it, living here all alone like I do with nobody but Eph most of the time.... There!" she added with satisfaction, spearing the last rasher of bacon from the frying-pan and dropping it on a plate--"now your breakfast's ready. Draw up a chair and eat hearty."

She put the plate on the red table-cloth, flanked it with dishes containing soft-boiled eggs, bread and butter and a pot of coffee of delicious savour, and waved one muscular arm over it all with the gesture of a benevolent sorceress. "Set to while it's hot, my dear, and don't you be afraid; good food never hurt nobody."

Momentarily, Eleanor entertained the thought of mutinous refusal to eat, by way of lending emphasis to her indignation; but hunger overcame the attractions of this dubious expedient; and besides, if she were to accomplish anything toward regaining her freedom, if it were no more than to register a violent protest, she would need strength; and already she was weak for want of food.

So she took her place and ate--ate ravenously, enjoying every mouthful--even though her mind was obsessed with doubts and fears and burning anger.

"You are the caretaker here?" she asked as soon as her hunger was a little satisfied.

"Reckon you might call us that, me and Eph; we've lived here for five years now, taking care of the island--ever since your pa bought it."

"Eph is your husband?"

"That's him--Ephraim Clover."

"And--doesn't he do anything else but--caretake?"

"Lord bless you, he don't even do that; I'm the caretakeress. Eph don't do nothing but potter round with the motor-boat and go to town for supplies and fish a little and 'tend to the garden and do the chores and--"

"I should think he must keep pretty busy."

"Busy? Him? Eph? Lord! he's the busiest thing you ever laid your eyes on--poking round doing nothing at all."

"And does nobody ever come here ...?"

"Nobody but the boss."

"Does he often--?"

"That's as may be and the fit's on him. He comes and goes, just as he feels like. Sometimes he's on and off the island half a dozen times a week, and again we don't hear nothing of him for months; sometimes he just stops here for days and mebbe weeks, and again he's here one minute and gone the next. Jumps round like a flea on a griddle, *I* say; you can't never tell nothing about what he's going to do or where he'll be next.... My land o' mercy, Mr. Searle! What a start you did give me!"

The man had succeeded in startling both women, as a matter of fact. Eleanor, looking suddenly up from her plate on hearing Mrs. Clover's cry of surprise, saw him lounging carelessly in the hall doorway, where he had appeared as noiselessly as a shadow. His sly, satiric smile was twisting his thin lips, and a sardonic humour glittered in the pale eyes that shifted from Eleanor's face to Mrs. Clover's, and back again.

"I wish," he said, nodding to the caretaker, "you'd slip down to the dock and tell Eph to have the boat ready by seven o'clock."

"Yes, sir," assented Mrs. Clover hastily. She crossed at once toward the outer door. From her tone and the alacrity with which she moved to do his bidding, no less than from the half-cringing look with which she met his regard, Eleanor had no difficulty in divining her abject fear of this man whom she could, apparently, have taken in her big hands and broken in two without being annoyed by his struggles.

"And, here!" he called after her--"supper ready?"

"Yes, sir--quite."

"Very well; I'll have mine. Eph can come up as soon as he's finished overhauling the motor. Wait a minute; tell him to be sure to bring the oars up with him."

"Yes, sir, I will, sir."

Mrs. Clover dodged through the door and, running down the pair of steps from the kitchen stoop to the ground, vanished behind the house.

"Enjoying your breakfast, I trust?"

Eleanor pushed back her chair and rose. She feared him, feared him as she might have feared any loathly, venomous thing; but she was not in the least spiritually afraid of him. Contempt and disgust only emphasised the quality of her courage. She confronted him without a tremor.

"Will you take me with you when you leave this island tonight?" she demanded.

He shook his head with his derisive smile. She had discounted that answer.

"How long do you mean to keep me here?"

"That depends on how agreeable you make yourself," he said obscurely.

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that ... well, it's a pleasant, salubrious spot, Wreck Island. You'll find it uncommonly healthful and enjoyable, too, as soon as you get over the loneliness. Not that you'll be so terribly lonely; I shall be here more or less, off and on, much of the time for the next few weeks. I don't mind telling you, in strict confidence, as between father and child, that I'm planning to pull off something pretty big before long; of course it will need a bit of arranging in advance to make everything run smoothly, and this is ideal for a man of my retiring disposition, not overfond of the espionage of his fellow-men. So, if you're docile and affectionate, we may see a great deal of one another for some weeks--as I said."

"And if not--?"

"Well"--he waved his hands expressively--"of course, if you incline to be forward and disobedient, then I shall be obliged to deny you the light of my countenance, by way of punishment."

She shook her head impatiently. "I want to know when you will let me go," she insisted, struggling against the oppression of her sense of helplessness.

"I really can't say." He pretended politely to suppress a yawn, indicating that the subject bored him inordinately. "If I

could trust you--"

"Can you expect that, after the way you treated me last night--this morning?"

"Ah, well!" he said, claw-like fingers stroking his lips to conceal his smile of mockery.

"You lied to me, drugged me, robbed me of the necklace, brought me here...."

"Guilty," he said, yawning openly.

"Why? You could have taken the necklace from me at the hotel. Why must you bring me here and keep me prisoner?"

"The pleasure of my only daughter's society...."

"Oh, you're despicable!" she cried, furious.

He nodded thoughtfully, fumbling with his lips.

"Won't you tell me why?" she pleaded.

He shook his head. "You wouldn't understand," he added in a tone of maddening commiseration.

"I shan't stay!" she declared angrily.

"Oh, I think you will," he replied gently.

"I'll get away and inform on you if I have to swim."

"It's a long, wet swim," he mused aloud--"over a mile, I should say. Have you ever swum over a hundred yards in your life?"

She was silent, choking with rage.

"And furthermore," he went on, "there are the Clovers. Excellent people, excellent--for my purposes. I have found them quite invaluable--asking no questions, minding their own business, keen to obey my instructions to the letter. I have already instructed them about you, my child. I trust you will be careful not to provoke them; it'd be a pity ... you're rather good-looking, you know ..."

"What do you mean by that?" she stammered, a little frightened by the secret menace in his tone. "What have my looks to do with ...?"

"Everything," he said softly--"everything. Not so far as Ephraim is concerned; I'll be frank with you--you needn't fear Ephraim's hurting you, much, should you attempt to escape. He will simply restrain you, using force only if necessary. But Mrs. Clover ... she's different. You mustn't let her deceive you; she seems kindly disposed enough; she's pleasant spoken but ... well, she's not fond of pretty women. It's an obsession of hers that prettiness and badness go together. And Ephraim *is* fond of pretty women--very. You see?"

"Well?"

"Well, that's why I have these people in so strong a hold. You see, Ephraim got himself into trouble trying to pull off one of those bungling, amateurish burglaries that his kind go in for so extensively; he wanted the money to buy things for a pretty woman. And he was already a married man. You can see how Mrs. Clover felt about it. She--ah--cut up rather nasty. When she got through with the other woman, no one would have called her pretty any longer. Vitriol's a dreadful thing...."

He paused an instant, seeming to review the case sombrely. "I managed to get them both off, scot free; and that makes them loyal. But it would go hard with anyone who tried to escape to the mainland and tell on them--to say nothing of me.... Mrs. Clover has ever since been quite convinced of the virtue of vitriol. She keeps a supply handy most of the time, in case of emergencies. And she sleeps lightly; don't forget that. I hate to think of what she might do if she thought you meant to run away and tell tales."

Slowly, step by step, guessing the way to the outer door, the girl backed away from him, her face colourless with horror. Very probably he was lying to frighten her; very possibly (she feared desperately) he was not. What she knew of him was hardly reassuring; the innate, callous depravity that had poisoned this man beyond cure might well have caused the death-in-life of other souls. What he was capable of, others might be; and what she knew him to be capable of, she hardly liked to dwell upon. Excusably she conceived her position more than desperate; and now her sole instinct was to get away from him, if only for a little time, out of the foetid atmosphere of his presence, away from the envenomed

irony of his voice--away and alone, where she could recollect her faculties and again realise her ego, that inner self that she had tried so hard to keep stainless, unspoiled and unafraid.

He watched her as she crept inch by inch toward the door, his nervous fingers busy about his mouth as if trying to erase that dangerous, evil smile.

"Before you go," he said suddenly, "I should tell you that you will be alone with Mrs. Clover tonight. I'm going to town, and Ephraim's to wait with the boat at Pennymint Point, because I mean to return before morning. But you needn't wait up for me; Mrs. Clover will do that."

Eleanor made no reply. While he was speaking she had gained the door. As she stepped out, Mrs. Clover reappeared, making vigorously round the corner of the house.

Passing Eleanor on the stoop, she gave her a busy, friendly nod, and hurried in.

"Eph'll be up in half an hour," she heard her say. "Shall I serve your supper now?"

"Please," he said quietly.

The girl stumbled down the steps and blindly fled the sound of his voice.

XIV

THE STRONG-BOX

Her initial rush carried Eleanor well round the front of the building. Then, as suddenly as she had started off, she stopped, common-sense reasserting itself to assure her that there was nothing to be gained by running until exhausted; her enemy was not pursuing her. It was evident that she was to be left to her own devices as long as they did not impel her to attempt an escape--as long as she made herself supple to his will.

She stood for a long minute, very erect, head up and shoulders back, eyes closed and lips taut, her hands close-clenched at her sides. Then drawing a long breath, she relaxed and, with a quiet composure admirably self-enforced, moved on, setting herself to explore and consider her surroundings.

The abandoned hotel faced the south, overlooking the greater breadth of Long Island Sound. In its era of prosperity, the land in front of it to the water's edge, and indeed for a considerable space on all sides had been clear--laid out, no doubt, in grassy lawns, croquet grounds and tennis courts; but in the long years of its desuetude these had reverted to the primitive character of the main portion of the island, to a tangle of undergrowth and shrubbery sprinkled with scrub-oak and stunted pines. In one spot only, a meagre kitchen-garden was under cultivation.

Southward, at the shore, a row of weather-beaten and ramshackle bath-houses stood beside the rotting remnants of a long dock whose piles, bereft of their platform of planks, ran out into the water in a dreary double rank.

Westward, a patch of woodland--progenitor by every characteristic of the tangle in the one-time clearing--shut off that extremity of the island where it ran out into a sandy point. Eastward lay an extensive acreage of low, rounded sand dunes, held together by rank beach-grass and bordered by a broad, slowly shelving beach of sand and pebbles. To the north, at the back of the hotel, stretched a waste of low ground finally merging into a small salt-marsh. Across this wandered a thin plank walk on stilts which, over the clear water beyond the marsh, became a rickety landing-stage. At some distance out from the latter a long, slender, slate-coloured motor-boat rode at its moorings, a rowboat swinging from its stern. In the larger craft Eleanor could see the head and shoulders of a man bending over the engine--undoubtedly Mr. Ephraim Clover. While she watched him, he straightened up and, going to the stern of the motor-boat, began to pull the dory in by its painter. Having brought it alongside, he transshipped himself awkwardly, then began to drive the dory in to the dock. Eleanor remarked the fact that he stood up to the task, propelling the boat by means of a single oar, thrusting it into the water until it struck bottom and then putting his weight upon it. The water was evidently quite shallow; even where the motor-boat lay moored, the oar disappeared no more than half its length.

Presently, having gained the landing-stage, the man clambered upon it, threw a couple of half-hitches in the painter round one of the stakes, shouldered the oars and began to shamble toward the hotel: a tall, ungainly figure blackly silhouetted against the steel-blue sky of evening.

Eleanor waited where she was, near the beginning of the plank walk, to get a better look at him. In time he passed her, with a shy nod and sidelong glance. He seemed to be well past middle-age, of no pretensions whatever to physical

loveliness and (she would have said) incurably lazy and stupid: his face dull and heavy, his whole carriage eloquent of a nature of sluggish shiftlessness.

He disappeared round the house, and a moment later she heard Mrs. Clover haranguing him in a shrill voice of impatience little resembling the tone she had employed with the girl.

For an instant Eleanor dreamed wildly of running down to the dock, throwing herself into the rowboat and casting it off to drift whither it would. But the folly of this was too readily apparent; even if she might be sure that the tide would carry her away from the island, the water was so shallow that a man could wade out to the motor-boat, climb into it and run her down with discouraging ease. As for the motor-boat--she hadn't the least idea of the art of running a motor; and besides, she would be overhauled before she could get to it; for she made no doubt whatever that she was being very closely watched, and would be until the men had left the island. After that ... a vista of days of grinding loneliness and hopeless despair opened out before her disheartened mental vision.

She resumed her aimless tour of inspection, little caring whither she wandered so long as it was far from the house, as far as possible from ... *him*.

Sensibly the desolate spirit of the spot saturated her mood. No case that she had ever heard of seemed to her so desperate as that of the lonely, helpless girl marooned upon this wave-bound patch of earth and sand, cut off from all means of communication with her kind, her destiny at the disposal of the maleficent wretch who called himself her father, her sole companions two alleged criminals whose depravity, if what she had heard were true, was subordinate only to his.

She could have wept, but wouldn't; the emotion that oppressed her was not one that tears would soothe, her plight not one that tears could mend.

Her sole comfort resided in the fact that she was apparently to be let alone, free to wander at will within the boundaries of the island.

Sunset found her on a little sandy hillock at the western end of Wreck Island--sitting with her chin in her hands, and gazing seawards with eyes in which rebellion smouldered. She would not give in, would not abandon hope and accept the situation at its face value, as irremediable. Upon this was she firmly determined: the night was not to pass unmarked by some manner of attempt to escape or summon aid. She even found herself willing to consider arson as a last resort: the hotel afire would make a famous torch to bring assistance from the mainland. Only ... she shrank from the attempt, her soul curdling with the sinister menace of vitriol.

The day was dying in soft airs that swept the face of the waters with a touch so light as to be barely perceptible. With sundown fell stark calm; the Sound became a perfect mirror for the sombre conflagration in the west. The slightest sounds reverberated afar through the still, moveless void. She could hear Mrs. Clover stridently counselling her Ephraim at the house, the quarter of a mile away. Later, she heard the hollow tramp of two pair of feet, one heavy and one light, on the plank-walk; the creak of rowlocks with the dip and splash of oars; and, after a little pause, the sudden, sharp, explosive rattle of a motor exhaust, as rapid, loud and staccato as the barking of a Gatling, yet quickly hushed---almost as soon as it shattered the silences, muffled to a thick and steady drumming.

Eleanor rose and turned to look northward. The wood-lot hid from her sight both dock and mooring--and all but the gables of the hotel, as well--but she soon espied the motor-boat standing away on a straight course for the mainland: driven at a speed that seemed to her nearly incredible, a smother of foam at its stern, long purple ripples widening away from the jet of white water at the stem, a smooth, high swell of dark water pursuing as if it meant to catch up and overwhelm the boat and its occupants. These latter occupied the extremes of the little vessel: Ephraim astern, beside the motor; the slighter figure at the wheel in the bows.

Slowly the girl took her path back to the hotel, watching the boat draw away, straight and swift of flight as an arrow, momentarily dwindling and losing definite form against the deepening blue-black surface of the Sound....

Weary and despondent, she ascended the pair of steps to the kitchen porch. Mrs. Clover was busy within, washing the supper dishes. She called out a cheery greeting, to which Eleanor responded briefly but with as pleasant a tone as she could muster. She could not but distrust her companion and gaoler, could not but fear that something vile and terrible lurked beneath that good-natured semblance: else why need the woman have become *his* creature?

"You ain't hungry again?"

"No," said Eleanor, lingering on the porch, reluctant to enter.

"Lonely?"

"No...."

"You needn't be; your pa'll be home by three o'clock, he says."

Eleanor said nothing. Abruptly a thought had entered her mind, bringing hope; something she had almost forgotten had recurred with tremendous significance.

"Tired? I'll go fix up your room soon 's I'm done here, if you want to lay down again."

"No; I'm in no hurry. I--I think I'll go for another little walk round the island."

"Help yourself," the woman called after her heartily; "I'll be busy for about half an hour, and then we can take our chairs out on the porch and watch the moon come up and have a real good, old-fashioned gossip...."

Eleanor lost the sound of her voice as she turned swiftly back round the house. Then she stopped, catching her breath with delight. It was true--splendidly true! The rowboat had been left behind.

It rode about twenty yards out from the end of the dock, made fast to the motor-boat mooring. The oars were in it; Ephraim had left them carelessly disposed, their blades projecting a little beyond the stern. And the water was so shallow at the mooring that the man had been able to pole in with a single oar, immersing it but half its length! An oar, she surmised, was six feet long; that argued an extreme depth of water of three feet--say at the worst three and a half. Surely she might dare to wade out, unmoor the boat and climb in--if but opportunity were granted her!

But her heart sank as she considered the odds against any such attempt. If only the night were to be dark; if only Mrs. Clover were not to wait up for her husband and her employer; if only the woman were not her superior physically, so strong that Eleanor would be like a child in her hands; if only there were not that awful threat of vitriol ...!

Nevertheless, in the face of these frightful deterrents, she steeled her resolution. Whatever the consequences, she owed it to herself to be vigilant for her chance. She promised herself to be wakeful and watchful: possibly Mrs. Clover might nap while sitting up; and the girl had two avenues by which to leave the house: either through the kitchen, or by the front door to the disused portion of the hotel. She need only steal noiselessly along the corridor from her bedroom door and down the broad main staircase and--the front door was not even locked. She remembered distinctly that *he* had simply pulled it to. Still, it would be well to make certain he had not gone back later to lock it.

Strolling idly, with a casual air of utter ennui--assumed for the benefit of her gaoler in event she should become inquisitive--Eleanor went round the eastern end of the building to the front. Here a broad veranda ran from wing to wing; its rotting weather-eaten floor fenced in by a dilapidated railing save where steps led up to the front door; its roof caved in at one spot, wearing a sorry look of baldness in others where whole tiers of shingles had fallen away.

Cautiously Eleanor mounted the rickety steps and crossed to the doors. To her delight, they opened readily to a turn of the knob. She stood for a trifle, hesitant, peering into the hallway now dark with evening shadow; then curiosity overbore her reluctance. There was nothing to fear; the voice of Mrs. Clover singing over her dishpan in the kitchen came clearly through the ground-floor corridor, advertising plainly her preoccupation. And Eleanor wanted desperately to know what it was that the man had hidden in the socket of the newel-post.

Shutting the door she felt her way step by step to the foot of the staircase. Happily the floor was sound: no creaking betrayed her progress--there would be none when in the dead of night she would break for freedom.

Mrs. Clover continued to sing contentedly.

Eleanor removed the knob of the post and looked down into the socket. It was dark in there; she could see nothing; so she inserted her hand and groped until her fingers closed upon a thick rough bar of metal. Removing this, she found she held a cumbersome old-fashioned iron key of curious design.

It puzzled her a little until she recalled the clang of metal that had prefaced the man's appearance in the hall that afternoon. This then, she inferred, would be the key to his private cache--the secret spot where he hid his loot between forays.

Mrs. Clover stopped singing suddenly, and the girl in panic returned the key to its hiding place, the knob to its socket.

But it had been a false alarm. In another moment the woman's voice was again upraised.

Eleanor considered, staring about her. He had come into sight from beneath the staircase. She reconnoitred stealthily in that direction, and discovered a portion of the hall fenced off by a railing and counter: evidently the erstwhile hotel office. A door stood open behind the counter. With some slight qualms she passed into the enclosure and then through the door.

She found herself in a small, stuffy, dark room. Its single window, looking northwards, was closely shuttered on the outside; only a feeble twilight filtered through the slanted slats. But there was light enough for Eleanor to recognise the contours and masses of a flat-topped desk with two pedestals of drawers, a revolving chair with cane seat and back, a brown paper-pulp cuspidor of generous proportions and—a huge, solid, antiquated iron safe: a "strong-box" of the last century's middle decades, substantial as a rock, tremendously heavy, contemptuously innocent of any such innovations as combination-dials, time-locks and the like. A single keyhole, almost large enough to admit a child's hand, and certainly calculated to admit the key in the newel-post, demonstrated that this safe depended for the security of its contents upon nothing more than its massive construction and unwieldy lock. It demonstrated something more: that its owner based his confidence upon its isolation and the loyalty of his employees, or else had satisfied himself through practical experiment that one safe was as good as another, ancient or modern, when subjected to the test of modern methods of burglary.

And (Eleanor was sure) the Cadogan collar was there; unless, of course, the man had taken it away with him; which didn't seem likely, all things considered. A great part of the immense value of the necklace resided in its perfection, in its integrity; as a whole it would be an exceedingly difficult thing to dispose of until long after the furore aroused by its disappearance had died down; broken up, its marvellously matched pearls separated and sold one by one, it would not realise a third of its worth.

And the girl would have known the truth in five minutes more (she was, in fact, already moving back toward the newel-post) had not Mrs. Clover chosen that moment to leave the kitchen and tramp noisily down the corridor.

What her business might be in that part of the house Eleanor could not imagine—unless it were connected with herself, unless she had heard some sound and was coming to investigate.

In panic terror, Eleanor turned back into the little room and crouched down behind the safe, making herself as small as possible, actually holding her breath for fear it would betray her.

Nearer came that steady, unhurried tread, and nearer. The girl thought her heart would burst with its burden of suspense. She was obliged to gasp for breath, and the noise of it rang as loudly and hoarsely in her hearing as the exhaust of a steam-engine. She pressed a handkerchief against her trembling lips.

Directly to the counter came the footsteps, and paused. There was the thump of something being placed upon the shelf. Then deliberately the woman turned and marched back to her quarters.

In time the girl managed to regain enough control of her nerves to enable her to rise and creep out through the office enclosure to the hall. Mrs. Clover had resumed her chanting in the kitchen; but Eleanor was in no mood to run further chances just then. She needed to get away, to find time to compose herself thoroughly. Pausing only long enough to see for herself what the woman had deposited on the counter (it was a common oil lamp, newly filled and trimmed, with a box of matches beside it: preparations, presumably, against the home-coming of the master with a fresh consignment of booty) she flitted swiftly to and through the door, closed it and ran down the steps to the honest, kindly earth.

Here she was safe. None suspected her adventure or her discovery. She quieted from her excitement, and for a long time paced slowly to and fro, pondering ways and means.

The fire ebbed from the heart of the western sky; twilight merged imperceptibly into a night extraordinarily clear and luminous with the gentle radiance of a wonderful pageant of stars. The calm held unbroken. The barking of a dog on the mainland carried, thin but sharp, across the waters. On the Sound, lights moved sedately east and west: red lights and green and white lancing the waters with long quivering blades. At times the girl heard voices of men talking at a great distance. Once a passenger steamer crept out of the west, seeming to quicken its pace as it drew abreast the island, then swept on and away like a floating palace of fairy lamps. As it passed, the strains of its string orchestra sounded softly clear through the night. Other steamers followed—half a dozen in a widely spaced procession. But no boat came near Wreck Island. If one had, Eleanor could almost have found courage to call for help....

In due time Mrs. Clover hunted her up, bringing a lantern to guide her heavy footsteps.

"Lands sakes!" she cried, catching sight of the girl. "Wherever have you been all this time?"

"Just walking up and down," said Eleanor quietly.

"Thank goodness I found you," the woman panted. "Give me quite a turn, you did. *I* didn't know but what you might be trying some foolish idea about leaving us, like your pa said you might. One never knows when to trust you nervous prostrationists, or what you'll be up to next."

Eleanor glanced at her sharply, wondering if by any chance the woman's mind could be as guileless as her words or the

bland and childish simplicity of her eyes in the lantern-light.

"Wish you'd come up on the stoop and keep me company," continued Mrs. Clover; "I'm plumb tired of sitting round all alone. Moon'll be up before long; it's a purty sight, shining on the water."

"Thank you," said Eleanor; "I'm afraid I'm too tired. It must be later than I thought. If you don't mind I'll go to my room."

"Oh, please yourself," said the woman, disappointment lending her tone an unpleasant edge. "You'll find it hot and stuffy up there, though. If you can't get comfortable, come down-stairs; I'll be up till the boss gets home."

"Very well," said Eleanor.

She said good night to Mrs. Clover on the kitchen porch and going to her room, threw herself upon the bed, dressed as she was.

For some time the woman down-stairs rocked slowly on the porch, humming sonorously. The sound was infinitely soothing. Eleanor had some difficulty in keeping awake, and only managed to do so by dint of continually exciting her imagination with thoughts of the Cadogan collar in the safe, the key in the newel-post, the dory swinging at its moorings in water little more than waist deep....

In spite of all this, she did as the slow hours lagged drift into a half-waking nap. How long it lasted she couldn't guess when she wakened; but it had not been too long; a glance at the dial of her wrist-watch in a slant of moonlight through the window reassured her as to the flight of time. It was nearly midnight; she had three hours left, three hours leeway before the return of her persecutor.

She lay without moving, listening attentively. The house was anything but still; ghosts of forgotten footsteps haunted all its stairs and corridors; but the girl could hear no sound ascribable to human agency. Mrs. Clover no longer sang, her rocking-chair no longer creaked.

With infinite precautions she got up and slipped out of the room. Once in the hallway she did hear a noise of which she easily guessed the source; and the choiring of angels could have been no more sweet in her hearing: Mrs. Clover was snoring.

Kneeling at the head of the staircase and bending over, with an arm round the banister for support, she could see a portion of the kitchen. And what she saw only confirmed the testimony of the snores. The woman had moved indoors to read; an oil lamp stood by her shoulder, on the table; her chair was well tilted, her head resting against its back; an old magazine lay open on her lap; her chin had fallen; from her mouth issued dissonant chords of contentment.

Eleanor drew back, rose and felt her way to the long corridor. Down this she stole as silently as any ghost, wholly indifferent to the eerie influences of the desolate place, spectrally illuminated as it was with faded chequers of moonlight falling through dingy windows, alive as it was with the groans and complaints of uneasy planks and timbers and the *frou-frou*, like that of silken skirts, of rats and mice scuttling between its flimsy walls. These counted for nothing to her; but all her soul hung on the continuance of that noise of snoring in the kitchen; and time and again she paused and listened, breathless, until sure it was holding on without interruption.

Gaining at length the head of the stairs, she picked her way down very gently, her heart thumping madly as the burden of her weight wrung from each individual step its personal protest, loud enough (she felt) to wake the dead in their graves; but not loud enough, it seemed, to disturb the slumbers of the excellent, if untrustworthy, Mrs. Clover.

At length she had gained the newel-post and abstracted the key. The foretaste of success was sweet. Pausing only long enough to unlatch the front door, for escape in emergency, she darted through the hall, behind the counter, into the little room.

And still Mrs. Clover slept aloud.

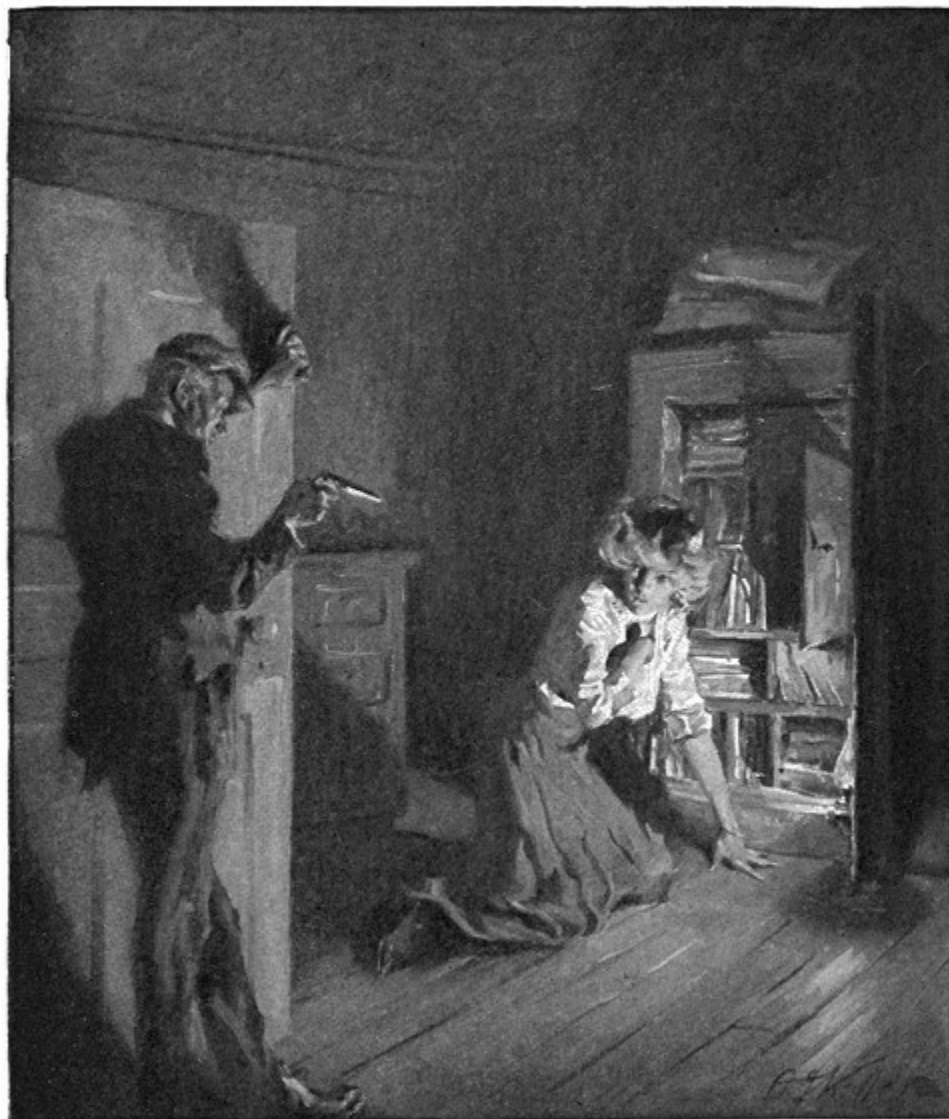
Kneeling, Eleanor fitted the key to the lock. Happily, it was well oiled and in excellent working order. The tumblers gave to the insistence of the wards with the softest of dull clicks. She grasped the handle, and the heavy door swung wide without a murmur.

And then she paused, at a loss. It was densely dark in the little room, and she required to be able to see what she was about, if she were to pick out the Cadogan collar.

It was risky, a hazardous chance, but she determined to run it. The lamp that Mrs. Clover had left for her employer was too convenient to be rejected. Eleanor brought it into the room, carefully shut the door to prevent the light being visible from the hall, should Mrs. Clover wake and miss her, placed the lamp on the floor before the safe and lighted it.

As its soft illumination disclosed the interior of the antiquated strong-box, the girl uttered a low cry of dismay. To pick out what she sought from that accumulation (even if it were really there) would be the work of hours--barring a most happy and unlikely stroke of fortune.

The interior of the safe was divided into some twelve pigeon-holes, all closely packed with parcels of various sizes--brown-paper parcels, neatly wrapped and tied with cord, each as neatly labelled in ink with an indecipherable hieroglyphic: presumably a means of identification to one intimate with the code.



She turned in time to see the door open and the face and figure of her father

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But Eleanor possessed no means of telling one package from another; they were all so similar to one another in everything save size, in which they differed only slightly, hardly materially.

None the less, having dared so much, she wasn't of the stuff to give up the attempt without at least a little effort to find what she sought. And impulsively she selected the first package that fell under her hand, with nervous fingers unwrapped it and--found herself admiring an extremely handsome diamond brooch.

As if it had been a handful of pebbles, she cast it from her to blaze despised upon the mean plank flooring, and selected another package.

It contained rings--three gold rings set with solitaire diamonds. They shared the fate of the brooch.

The next packet held a watch. This, too, she dropped contemptuously, hurrying on.

She had no method, other than to take the uppermost packets from each pigeonhole, on the theory that the necklace had been one of the last articles entrusted to the safe. And that there was some sense in this method was demonstrated when she opened the ninth package--or possibly the twelfth: she was too busy and excited to keep any sort of count.

This last packet, however, revealed the Cadogan collar.

With a little, thankful sigh the girl secreted the thing in the bosom of her dress and prepared to rise.

Behind her a board creaked and the doorlatch clicked. Still sitting--heart in her mouth, breath at a standstill, blood chilling with fright--she turned in time to see the door open and the face and figure of her father as he stood looking down at her, his eyes blinking in the glare of light that painted a gleam along the polished barrel of the weapon in his hand.

XV

THE ENEMY'S HAND

In spite of the somewhat abrupt and cavalier fashion in which Staff had parted from Alison at the St. Simon, he was obliged to meet her again that afternoon at the offices of Jules Max, to discuss and select the cast for *A Single Woman*. The memory which each retained of their earlier meeting naturally rankled, and the amenities suffered proportionately. In justice to Staff it must be set down that he wasn't the aggressor; his contract with Max stipulated that he should have the deciding word in the selection of the cast--aside from the leading role, of course--and when Alison chose, as she invariably did, to try to usurp that function, the author merely stood calmly and with imperturbable courtesy upon his rights. In consequence, it was Alison who made the conference so stormy a one that Max more than once threatened to tear his hair, and as a matter of fact did make futile grabs at the meagre fringe surrounding his bald spot. So the meeting inevitably ended in an armed truce, with no business accomplished: Staff offering to release Max from his contract to produce, the manager frantically begging him to do nothing of the sort, and Alison making vague but disquieting remarks about her inclination to "rest." ...

Staff dined alone, with disgust of his trade for a sauce to his food. And, being a man--which is as much as to say, a creature without much real understanding of his own private emotional existence--he wagged his head in solemn amazement because he had once thought he could love a woman like that.

Now Eleanor Searle was a different sort of a girl altogether...

Not that he had any right to think of her in that light; only, Alison had chosen to seem jealous of the girl. Heaven alone (he called it honestly to witness) knew why....

Not that *he* cared whether Alison were jealous or not....

But he was surprised at his solicitude for Miss Searle--now that Alison had made him think of her. He was really more anxious about her than he had suspected. She had seemed to like him, the few times they'd met; and he had liked her very well indeed; it's refreshing to meet a woman in whom beauty and sensibility are combined; the combination's piquant, when you come to consider how uncommon it is....

He didn't believe for an instant that she had meant to run away with the Cadogan collar; and he hoped fervently that she hadn't been involved in any serious trouble by the qualified thing. Furthermore, he candidly wished he might be permitted to help extricate her, if she were really tangled up in any unpleasantness.

Such, at all events, was the general tone of his meditations throughout dinner and his homeward stroll down Fifth Avenue from Forty-fourth Street, a stroll in which he cast himself for the part of the misprized hero; and made himself look it to the life by sticking his hands in his pockets, carrying his cane at a despondent angle beneath one arm, resting his chin on his chest--or as nearly there as was practicable, if he cared to escape being strangled by his collar--and permitting a cigarette to dangle dejectedly from his lips....

He arrived in front of his lodgings at nine o'clock or something later. And as he started up the brownstone stoop he became aware of a disconsolate little figure hunched up on the topmost step; which was Mr. Iff.

The little man had his chin in his hands and his hat pulled down over his eyes. He rose as Staff came up the steps and gave him good evening in a spiritless tone which he promptly remedied by the acid observation:

"It's a pity you wouldn't try to be home when I call. Here you've kept me waiting the best part of an hour."

"Sorry," said Staff gravely; "but why stand on ceremony at this late day? My bedroom windows are still open; I left 'em so, fancying you might prefer to come in that way."

"It's a pity," commented Iff, following him upstairs, "you can't do something for that oratorical weakness of yours. Ever try choking it down? Or would that make you ill?"

With which he seemed content to abandon persiflage, satisfied that his average for acerbity was still high. "Besides," he said peaceably, "I'm all dressed up pretty now, and it doesn't look right for a respectable member of society to be pulling off second-story man stunts."

Staff led him into the study, turned on the lights, then looked his guest over.

So far as his person was involved, it was evident that Iff had employed Staff's American money to advantage. He wore, with the look of one fresh from thorough grooming at a Turkish bath, a new suit of dark clothes. But when he had thrown aside his soft felt hat, his face showed drawn, pinched and haggard, the face of a man whose sufferings are of the spirit rather than of the body. Loss of sleep might have accounted in part for that expression, but not for all of it.

"What's the matter?" demanded Staff, deeply concerned.

"You ask me that!" said Iff impatiently. He threw himself at length upon the divan. "Haven't you been to the St. Simon? Don't you *know* what has happened? Well, so have I, and so do I."

"Well ...?"

Iff raised himself on his elbow to stare at Staff as if questioning his sanity.

"You know she's gone--that she's in *his* hands--and you have the face to stand there and say '*Wel-l!*' to me!" he snapped.

"But--good Lord, man!--what is Miss Searle to you that you should get so excited about her disappearance, even assuming what we're not sure of--that she decamped with Ismay?"

"She's only everything to me," said Iff quietly: "she's my daughter."

Staff slumped suddenly into a chair.

"You're serious about that?" he gasped.

"It's not a matter I care to joke about," said the little man gloomily.

"But why didn't you tell a fellow ...!"

"Why should I--until now? You mustn't forget that you sat in this room not twenty-four hours ago and listened to me retail what I admit sounded like the damndest farrago of lies that was ever invented since the world began; and because you were a good fellow and a gentleman, you stood for it--gave me the benefit of the doubt. And at that I hadn't told you half. Why? Why, because I felt I had put sufficient strain upon your credulity for one session at least."

"Yes--I know," Staff agreed, bewildered; "but--but Miss Searle--your daughter--!"

"That's a hard one for you to swallow---what? I don't blame you. But it's true. And that's why I'm all worked up--half crazed by my knowledge that that infamous blackguard has managed to deceive her and make her believe he is me--myself--her father."

"But what makes you think that?"

"Oh, I've his word for it. Read!"

Iff whipped an envelope from his pocket and flipped it over to Staff. "He knew, of course, where I get my letters when in town, and took a chance of that catching me there and poisoning the sunlight for me."

Staff turned the envelope over in his hands, remarking the name, address, postmark and special delivery stamp. "Mailed at Hartford, Connecticut, at nine this morning," he commented.

"Read it," insisted Iff irritably.

Staff withdrew the enclosure: a single sheet of note-paper with a few words scrawled on one side.

"I've got her," he read aloud. "She thinks I'm you. Is this sufficient warning to you to keep out of this game? If not--you know what to expect."

He looked from the note back to Iff. "What does he mean by that?"

"How can I tell? It's a threat, and that's enough for me; he's capable of anything fiendish enough to amuse him." He shook his clenched fists impotently above his head. "Oh, if ever again I get within arm's length of the hound ...!"

"Look here," said Staff; "I'm a good deal in the dark about this business. You've got to calm yourself and help me out. Now you say Miss Searle's your daughter; yet you were on the ship together and didn't recognise one another--at least, so far as I could see."

"You don't see everything," said Iff; "but at that, you're right--she didn't recognise me. She hasn't for years--seven years, to be exact. It was seven years ago that she ran away from me and changed her name. And it was all *his* doing! I've told you that Ismay has, in his jocular way, made a practice of casting suspicion on me. Well, the thing got so bad that he made her believe I was the criminal in the family. So, being the right sort of a girl, she couldn't live with me any longer and she just naturally shook me--went to Paris to study singing and fit herself to earn a living. I followed her, pleaded with her, but she couldn't be made to understand; so I had to give it up. And that was when I registered my oath to follow this cur to the four corners of the earth, if need be, and wait my chance to trip him up, expose him and clear myself. And now he's finding the going a bit rough, thanks to my public-spirited endeavours, and he takes this means of tying my hands!"

"I should think," said Staff, "you'd have shot him long before this."

"Precisely," agreed Iff mockingly. "That's just where the bone-headedness comes in that so endears you to your friends. If I killed him, where would be my chance to prove I hadn't been guilty of the crimes he's laid at my door? He's realised that, all along.... I passed him on deck one night, coming over; it was midnight and we were alone; the temptation to lay hands on him and drop him overboard was almost irresistible--and he knew it and laughed in my face!... And that's the true reason why I didn't accuse him when I was charged with the theft of the necklace--because I couldn't prove anything and a trumped-up accusation that fell through would only make my case the worse in Nelly's sight.... But I'll get him yet!"

"Have you thought of going to Hartford?"

"I'm no such fool. If that letter was posted in Hartford this morning, it means that Ismay's in Philadelphia."

"But isn't he wise enough to know you'd think just that?"

Iff sat up with a flush of excitement. "By George!" he cried--"there's something in that!"

"It's a chance," said Staff thoughtfully.

The little man jumped up and began to pace the floor. To and fro, from the hall-door to the windows, he strode. At perhaps the seventh turn at the windows he paused, looking out, then moved quickly back to Staff's side.

"Taxicab stopping outside," he said in a low voice: "woman getting out--Miss Landis, I think. If you don't mind, I'll dodge into your bedroom."

"By all means," assented his host, rising.

Iff swung out of sight into the back room as Staff went to and opened the hall-door.

Alison had just gained the head of the stairs. She came to the study door, moving with her indolent grace, acknowledging his greeting with an insolent, cool nod.

"Not too late, I trust?" she said enigmatically.

"For what?" asked Staff, puzzled.

"For this appointment," she said, extending a folded bit of paper.

"Appointment?" he repeated with the rising inflection, taking the paper.

"It was delivered at my hotel half an hour ago," she told him. "I presumed you ..."

"No," said Staff. "Half a minute...."

He shut the door and unfolded the note. The paper and the chirography, he noticed, were identical with those of the

note received by Iff from Hartford. With this settled to his satisfaction, he read the contents aloud, raising his voice a trifle for the benefit of the listener in the back room.

"If Miss Landis wishes to arrange for the return of the Cadogan collar, will she be kind enough to call at Mr. Staff's rooms in Thirtieth Street at a quarter to ten tonight.

"N. B.--Any attempt to bring the police or private detectives or other outsiders into the negotiations will be instantly known to the writer and--there won't be any party."

"Unsigned," said Staff reflectively.

"Well?" demanded Alison, seating herself.

"Curious," remarked Staff, still thinking.

"Well?" she iterated less patiently. "Is it a practical joke?"

"No," he said, smiling; "to me it looks like business."

"You mean that the thief intends to come here--to bargain with me?"

"I should fancy so, from what he says.... And," Staff added, crossing to his desk, "forewarned is forearmed."

He bent over and pulled out the drawer containing his revolver. At the same moment he heard Alison catch her breath sharply, and a man's voice replied to his platitude.

"Not always," it said crisply. "Be good enough to leave that gun lay--just hold up your hands, where I can see them, and come away from that desk."

Staff laughed shortly and swung smartly round, exposing empty hands. In the brief instant in which his back had been turned a man had let himself into the study from the hall. He stood now with his back to the door, covering Staff with an automatic pistol.

"Come away," he said in a peremptory tone, emphasising his meaning with a flourish of the weapon. "Over here--by Miss Landis, if you please."

Quietly Staff obeyed. He had knocked about the world long enough to recognise the tone of a man talking business with a gun. He placed himself beside Alison's chair and waited, wondering.

Indeed, he was very much perplexed and disturbed. For the first time since Iff had won his confidence against his better judgment, his faith in the little man was being shaken. This high-handed intruder was so close a counterpart of Mr. Iff that one had to look twice to distinguish the difference, and then found the points of variance negligible--so much so that the fellow might well be Iff in different clothing and another manner. And Iff could easily have slipped out of the bedroom by *its* hall door. Only, to shift his clothes so quickly he would have to be a lightning-change artist of exceptional ability.

On the whole, Staff decided, this couldn't be Iff. And yet ... and yet ...

"You may put up that pistol," he said coolly. "I'm not going to jump you, so it's unnecessary. Besides, it's bad form with a lady present. And finally, if you should happen to let it off the racket would bring the police down on you more quickly than you'd like, I fancy."

The man grinned and shoved the weapon into a pocket from which its grip projected handily.

"Something in what you say," he assented. "Besides, I'm quick, surprisingly quick with my hands."

"Part of your professional equipment, no doubt," commented Staff indifferently.

"Admit it," said the other easily. He turned his attention to Alison. "Well, Miss Landis ...?"

"Well, Mr. Iff?" she returned in the same tone.

"No," he corrected; "not Iff--Ismay."

"So you've changed identities again!"

"Surely you don't mind?" he said, grinning over the evasion.

"But you denied being Ismay aboard the Autocratic."

"My dear lady, you couldn't reasonably expect me to plead guilty to a crime which I had not yet committed."

"Oh, get down to business!" Staff interrupted impatiently. "You're wasting time--yours as well as ours."

"Peevish person, your young friend," Ismay commented confidentially to Alison. "Still, there's something in what he says. Shall we--ah--begin to negotiate?"

"I think you may as well," she agreed coldly.

"Very well, then. The case is simple enough. I'm here to offer to secure the return of the Cadogan collar for an appropriate reward."

"Ten thousand dollars has been offered," she began.

"Not half enough, my dear lady," he interposed. "You insult the necklace by naming such a meagre sum--to say nothing of undervaluing *my* intelligence."

"So that's it!" she said reflectively.

"That is it, precisely. I am in communication with the person who stole your necklace; she's willing to return it for a reward of reasonable size."

"She? You mean Miss Searle?"

The man made a deprecating gesture. "Please don't ask me to name the lady...."

"I knew it!" Alison cried triumphantly.

"You puppy!" Staff exclaimed. "Haven't you the common manhood to shoulder the responsibility for your crimes yourself?"

"Tush," said the man gently--"tush! Not a pretty way to talk at all--calling names! I'm surprised. Besides, I ought to know better than you, acting as I do as agent for the lady in question."

"That's a flat lie," said Staff. "If you repeat it--I warn you--I'll jump you as sure 's my name's Staff, pistol or no pistol!"

"Aren't you rather excited in your defence of this woman?" Alison turned on him with a curling lip.

"I've a right to my emotions," he retorted--"to betray them as I see fit."

"And I," Ismay put it, "to my freedom of speech--"

"Not in my rooms," Staff interrupted hotly. "I've warned you. Drop this nonsense about Miss Searle if you want to stop here another minute without a fight. Drop it! Say what you want to say to Miss Landis---and get out!"

He was thoroughly enraged, and his manner of expressing himself seemed to convince the thief. With a slight shrug of his shoulders he again addressed himself directly to Alison.

"In the matter of the reward," he said, "we're of the opinion that you've offered too little by half. Twenty thousand at the least--"

"You forget I have the duty to pay."

"My dear lady, if you had not been anxious to evade payment of the duty you would be enjoying the ownership of your necklace today."

As he spoke the telephone-bell rang. Staff turned away to his desk, Ismay's voice pursuing him with the caution.

"Don't forget about that open drawer--keep your hands away from it."

"Oh, be quiet," returned Staff contemptuously. Standing with his back to them, he took up the instrument and lifted off the receiver.

"Hello?" he said irritably.

He was glad that his face was not visible to his guests; he could restrain a start of surprise, but was afraid his expression would have betrayed him when he recognised the voice at the other end of the line as Iff's.

"Don't repeat my name," it said quickly in a tone low but clear. "That is Iff. Ismay still there?"

"Yes," said Staff instantly: "it's I, Harry. How are you?"

"Get rid of him as quick 's you can," Iff continued, "and join me here at the Park Avenue. I dodged down the fire-escape and caught his motor-car; his chauffeur thinks I'm him. I'll wait in the street--Thirty-third Street side, with the car. Now talk."

"All right," said Staff heartily; "glad to. I'll be there."

"Chauffeur knows where Nelly is, I think; but he's too big for me to handle alone, in case my foot slips and he gets suspicious. That's why I need you. Bring your gun."

"Right," Staff agreed promptly. "The club in half an hour. Yes, I'll come. Good-bye."

He turned back toward Ismay and Alison, his doubts resolved, all his vague misgivings as to this case of double identity settled finally and forever.

"Alison," he said, breaking in roughly upon something Ismay was saying to the girl, "you've a cab waiting outside, haven't you?"

Alison stared in surprise. "Yes," she said in a tone of wonder.

Staff paused beside the divan, one hand resting upon the topmost of a little heap of silken cushions. "Mind if I borrow it?" he asked, ignoring the man.

"No, but--"

"It's business--important," said Staff. "I'll have to leave you here at once. Only"--he watched Ismay closely out of the corners of his eyes--"if I were you I wouldn't waste any more time on this fellow. He's bluffing--can't carry out anything he promises."

Ismay turned toward him, expostulant.

"What d' you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Miss Searle has escaped," said Staff deliberately.

"No!" cried Ismay, startled and thrown off his guard by the fear it might be so. "Impossible!"

"Think so?" As he spoke Staff dextrously snatched up the uppermost pillow and with a twist of his hand sent it whirling into the thief's face.

It took him utterly unawares. His arms flew up too late to ward it off, and he staggered back a pace.

"Lots of impossible things keep happening all the time," chuckled Staff as he closed in.

There was hardly a struggle. Staff's left arm clipped the man about the waist at the same time that his right hand deftly abstracted the pistol from its convenient pocket. Then, dropping the weapon into his own pocket, he transferred his hold to Ismay's collar and spun him round with a snap that fairly jarred his teeth.

"There, confound you!" he said, exploring his pockets for other lethal weapons and finding nothing but three loaded clips ready to be inserted in the hollow butt of the pistol already confiscated. "Now what 'm I going to do with you, you blame' little pest?"

The question was more to himself than to Ismay, but the latter, recovering with astonishing quickness, answered Staff by suddenly squirming out of his coat and leaving it in his assailant's hands as he ducked to the door and flung himself out.

Staff broke into a laugh as the patter of the little man's feet was heard on the stairs.

"Resourceful beggar," he commented, going to the window and rolling up the coat as he went. He reached it just in time to see the thief dodge out.

The coat, opening as it descended, fell like a blanket round Ismay's head. He stumbled, tripped and fell headlong down the steps, sprawling and cursing.

"Thought you might need it," Staff apologised as the man picked himself up and darted away.

He turned to confront an infuriated edition of Alison.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded with a stamp of her foot. "What right had you to interfere? I was beating him down; in another minute we'd have come to terms--"

"Oh, don't be silly, my dear," said Staff, taking his revolver from the desk-drawer and placing it in the hip-pocket of tradition. "To begin with, I don't mind telling you I don't give much of a whoop whether you ever get that necklace back or not." He grabbed his hat and started for the door. "What I'm interested in is the rescue of Miss Searle, if you must know; and that's going to happen before long, or I miss my guess." He paused at the open door. "If we get her, we get the necklace, of course--and the Lord knows you'll be welcome to that. Would you mind turning out the lights before you go?"

"Staff!"

Her tone was so peremptory that he hesitated an unwelcome moment longer.

"Well?" he asked civilly, wondering what on earth she had found to fly into such a beastly rage about.

"You know what this means?"

"You tell me," he smiled.

"It means the break; I won't play *A Single Woman!*" she snapped.

"That's the best guess you've made yet," he laughed. "You win. Good night and--good-bye."

XVI

NINETY MINUTES

Commandeering Alison's taxicab with the promise of an extra tip, Staff jumped in and shut the door. As they swung into Fourth Avenue, he caught a glimpse of Ismay's slight figure standing on the corner, his pose expressive of indecision and uncertainty; and Staff smiled to himself, surmising that it was there that the thief had left his motor-car to be confiscated by Iff.

Three blocks north on Fourth Avenue, and they swung west into Thirty-third Street: a short course quickly covered, but yet not swiftly enough to outpace Staff's impatience. He had the door open, his foot on the step, before the taxicab had begun to slow down preparatory to stopping beside the car waiting in the shadow of the big hotel.

Iff was in the tonneau, gesticulating impatiently; the chauffeur had already cranked up and was sliding into his seat. As the taxicab rolled alongside, Staff jumped, thrust double the amount registered by the meter into the driver's hand, and sprang into the body of Ismay's car. Iff snapped the door shut; as though set in motion by that sharp sound, the machine began to move smoothly and smartly, gathering momentum with every revolution of its wheels. They were crossing Madison almost before Staff had settled into his seat. A moment later they were snoring up Fifth Avenue.

Staff looked at his watch. "Ten," he told Iff.

"We'll make time once we get clear of this island," said the little man anxiously; "we've got to."

"Why?"

"To beat Ismay--"

Staff checked him with a hand on his arm and a warning glance at the back of the chauffeur's head.

"Oh, that's all right *now*," Iff told him placidly. "I thought we might 's well understand one another first as last; so, while we were waiting for you, I slipped him fifty, gave him to understand that my affectionate cousin had about come to the end of his rope and--won his heart and confidence. It's a way I have with people; they do seem to fall for me," he asserted with insufferable self-complacence.

He continued to impart his purchased information to Staff by snatches all the way from Thirty-fourth Street to the Harlem River.

"He's a decent sort," he said, indicating the operator with a nod; "apparently, that is; name, Spelvin. Employed by a garage upon the West Side, in the Seventies. Says Ismay rang 'em up about half-past two last night, chartered this car and driver, to be kept waiting for him whenever he called for it.... Coarse work that, for Cousin Arbuthnot--very, very

crude....

"Still, he'd just got home and hadn't had time to make very polished arrangements.... Seems he told this chap he was to see nothing but the road, hear nothing but the motor, say nothing whatever to nobody. Gave him a fifty, too. That habit seems to run in the family....

"He called for the car around five o'clock, with Nelly. Spelvin says she seemed worn out, hardly conscious of what was going on. They lit out for--where we're bound: place on the Connecticut shore called Pennymint Point. On the way Ismay told him to stop at a roadhouse, got out and brought Nelly a drink. Spelvin says he wouldn't be surprised if it was doped; she slept all the rest of the way and hardly woke up even when they helped her aboard the boat."

"Boat!"

"Motor-boat. I infer that Cousin Arbutnot has established headquarters on a little two-by-four island in the Sound--Wreck Island. Used to be run as a one-horse summer resort--hotel and all that. Went under several years ago, if mem'ry serveth me aright. Anyhow, they loaded Nelly aboard this motor-boat and took her across....

"Spelvin was told to wait. He did. In about an hour--boat back; native running it hands Spelvin a note, tells him to run up to Hartford and post it and be back at seven P.M. Spelvin back at seven; Ismay comes across by boat, is driven to town....

"That's all, to date. Spelvin had begun to suspect there was something crooked going on, which made him easy meat for my insidious advances. Says he was wondering if he hadn't better tell his troubles to a cop. All of which goes to show that Cousin Artie's fast going to seed. Very crude operating--man of his reputation, too. Makes me almost ashamed of the relationship."

"How are we going to get to Wreck Island from Pennymint Point?"

"Same boat," said Iff confidently. "Spelvin heard Ismay tell his engineer to wait for him--would be back between midnight and three."

"He can't beat us there, can he, by any chance?"

"He can if he humps himself. This is a pretty good car, and Spelvin says there isn't going to be any car on the road tonight that'll pass us; but I can't forget that dear old New York, New Haven & Hartford. They run some fast trains by night, and while of course none of them stops at Pennymint Centre--station for the Point--still, a man with plenty of money to fling around can get a whole lot of courtesy out of a railroad."

"Then the question is: can he catch a train which passes through Pennymint Centre before we can reasonably expect to get there?"

"That's the intelligent query. I don't know. Do you?"

"No--"

"Spelvin doesn't, and we haven't got any time to waste trying to find out. Probabilities are, there is. The only thing to do is to run for it and trust to luck. Spelvin says it took him an hour and thirty-five minutes to run in, this evening; and he's going to better that if nothing happens. Did you remember to bring a gun?"

"Two." Staff produced the pistol he had taken from Ismay, with the extra clips, and gave them to the little man with an account of how he had become possessed of them--a narrative which Iff seemed to enjoy immensely.

"Oh, we can't lose," he chuckled; "not when Cousin Artie plays his hand as poorly as he has this deal. I've got a perfectly sound hunch that we'll win."

Staff hardly shared his confidence; still, as far as he could judge, the odds were even. Ismay might beat them to Pennymint Centre by train, and might not. If he did, however, it could not be by more than a slight margin; to balance which fact, Staff had to remind himself that two minutes' margin was all that would be required to get the boat away from land, beyond their reach.

"Look here," he put it to Iff: "suppose he does beat us to that boat?"

"Then we'll have to find another."

"There'll be another handy, all ready for us, I presume?"

"Spare me your sarcasm," pleaded Iff; "it is, if you don't mind my mentioning the fact, not your forte. Silence, on the

other hand, suits your style cunningly. So shut up and lemme think."

He relapsed into profound meditations, while the car hummed onwards through the moon-drenched spaces of the night.

Presently he roused and, without warning, clambered over the back of the seat into the place beside the chauffeur. For a time the two conferred, heads together, their words indistinguishable in the sweep of air. Then, in the same spry fashion, the little man returned.

"Spelvin's a treasure," he announced, settling into his place.

"Why?"

"Knows the country--knows a man in Barmouth who runs a shipyard, owns and hires out motorboats, and all that sort of thing."

"Where's Barmouth?"

"Four miles this side of Pennymint Point. Now we've got to decide whether to hold on and run our chances of picking up Ismay's boat, or turn off to Barmouth and run our chances of finding chauffeur's friend with boat disengaged. What do you think?"

"Barmouth," Staff decided after some deliberation but not without misgivings.

"That's what I told Spelvin," observed Iff. "It's a gamble either way."

The city was now well behind them, the car pounding steadily on through Westchester. For a long time neither spoke. The time for talk, indeed, was past--and in the future; for the present they must tune themselves up to action--such action as the furious onrush of the powerful car in some measure typified, easing the impatience in their hearts.

For a time the road held them near railroad tracks. A train hurtled past them, running eastwards: a roaring streak of orange light crashing through the world of cool night blues and purple-blacks.

The chauffeur swore audibly and let out another notch of speed.

Staff sat spellbound by the amazing romance of it all.... A bare eight days since that afternoon when a whim, born of a love now lifeless, had stirred him out of his solitary, work-a-day life in London, had lifted him out of the ordered security of the centre of the world's civilisation and sent him whirling dizzily across three thousand miles and more to become a partner in this wild, weird ride to the rescue of a damsel in distress and durance vile! Incredible!...

Eight days: and the sun of Alison, that once he had thought to be the light of all the world, had set; while in the evening sky the star of Eleanor was rising and blazing ever more brightly....

Now when a man begins to think about himself and his heart in such poetic imagery, the need for human intercourse grows imperative on his understanding; he must talk or--suffer severely.

Staff turned upon his defenseless companion.

"Iff," said he, "when a man's the sort of a man who can fall out of love and in again--with another woman, of course--inside a week--what do you call him?"

"Human," announced Iff after mature consideration of the problem.

This was unsatisfactory; Staff yearned to be called fickle.

"Human? How's that?" he insisted.

"I mean that the human man hasn't got much to say about falling in or out of love. The women take care of all that for him. Look at your Miss Landis--yours as was.... You don't mind my buttin' in?"

"Go on," said Staff grimly.

"Anybody with half an eye, always excepting you, could see she'd made up her mind to hook that Arkroyd pinhead on account of his money. She was just waiting for a fair chance to give you the office--preferably, of course, after she'd nailed that play of yours."

"Well," said Staff, "she's lost that, too."

"Serves you both right."

There was a pause wherein Staff sought to fathom the meaning of this last utterance of Mr. Iff's.

"I take it," resumed the latter with a sidelong look--"pardon a father's feelings of delicacy--I take it, you're meaning Nelly?"

"How did you guess that?" demanded Staff, startled.

"Right, eh?"

"Yes--no--I don't know--"

"Well, if you don't know the answer any better 'n that, take a word of advice from an old bird: you get her to tell you. She's known it ever since she laid eyes on you."

"You mean she--I--" Staff stammered eagerly.

"I mean nobody knows anything about a woman's heart but herself; but she knows it backwards and all the time."

"Then you don't think I've got any show?"

"Oh, Lord!" complained Iff. "Honest, you gimme a pain. Go on and do your own thinking."

Staff subsided, imagining a vain thing: that the mantle of dignity in which he wrapped himself successfully cloaked his sense of injury. Iff smiled a meaningless smile up at the inscrutable skies. And the moonlit miles slipped beneath the wheels like a torrent of molten silver.

At length--it seemed as if many hours must have swung crashing into eternity since they had left New York--Staff was conscious of a perceptible diminution of speed; he was able to get his breath with less effort, had no longer to snatch it by main strength from the greedy clutches of the whirlwind. The reeling chiaroscuro of the countryside seemed suddenly to become calm, settling into an intelligible, more or less orderly arrangement of shining hills and shadowed hollows, spreading pastures and sombre woodlands. The chauffeur flung a few inarticulate words over his shoulder--readily interpreted as announcing the nearness of their destination; and of a sudden the car swung from the main highway into a narrow by-road that ran off to the right. A little later they darted through a cut beneath railroad tracks, and a village sprang out of the night and rattled past them, serenely slumbrous. From this centre a thin trickle of dwellings straggled along their way. Across fields to the left, Staff caught glimpses of a spreading sheet of water, still and silvery-grey....

On a long slant, the road drew nearer and more near to the shores of this arm of the Sound. Presently a group of small buildings near the head of a long landing-stage swam into view. Before them the car drew up with a sigh. The chauffeur jumped down and ran across the road to a house in whose lower story a lighted window was visible. While he hammered at the door, Staff and Iff alighted. A man in his shirt-sleeves came to the door of the cottage and stood there, pipe in mouth, hands in pockets, languidly interjecting dispassionate responses into the chauffeur's animated exposition of their case. As Staff and Iff came up, Spelvin turned to them, excitedly waving his gauntlets.

"He's got a boat, all right, and a good one he says, but he won't move a foot for less 'n twenty dollars."

"Give you twenty-five if you get away from the dock within five minutes," Iff told the boatbuilder directly.

The man started as if stung. "Jemima!" he breathed, incredulous. Then caution prompted him to extend a calloused and work-warped hand. "Cross my palm," he said.

"You give it to him, Staff," said Iff magnificently. "I'm short of cash."

Obediently, Staff disbursed the required sum. The native thumbed it, pocketed it, lifted his coat from a nail behind the door and started across the road in a single movement.

"You come 'long, Spelvin," he said in passing, "'nd help with the boat. If you gents'll get out on the dock I'll have her alongside in three minutes, 'r my name ain't Bascom."

Pursued by the chauffeur, he disappeared into the huddle of boat-houses and beached and careened boats. A moment later, Iff and Staff, picking their way through the tangle, heard the scrape of a flat-bottomed boat on the beach and, subsequently, splashing oars.

By the time they had reached the end of the dock, the boatbuilder and his companion were scrambling aboard a twenty-five-foot boat at anchor in the midst of a small fleet of sail and gasoline craft. The rumble of a motor followed almost instantly, was silenced momentarily while the skiff was being made fast to the mooring, broke out again as the larger boat selected a serpentine path through the circumjacent vessels and slipped up to the dock.

Before it had lost way, Iff and Staff were aboard. Instantly, Bascom snapped the switch shut and the motor started again on the spark.

"Straight out," he instructed Spelvin at the wheel, "till you round that white moorin'-dolphin. Then I'll take her." ...

Not long afterward he gave up pottering round the engine and went forward, relieving Spelvin. "You go back and keep your eye on that engyne," he ordered; "she's workin' like a sewin'-machine, but she wants watchin'. I'll tell you when to give her the spark. Meanwhile you might 's well dig them lights out of the port locker and set 'em out."

"No," Iff put in. "We want no lights."

"Gov'mint regulations," said Bascom stubbornly. "Must carry lights."

"Five dollars?" Iff argued persuasively.

"Agin the law," growled Bascom. "But--I dunno--they ain't anybody likely to be out this time o' night. Cross my palm."

And Staff again disbursed.

The white mooring-buoy swam past and the little vessel heeled as Bascom swung her sharply to the southwards.

"Now," he told Spelvin, "advance that spark all you've a mind to."

There was a click from the engine-pit and the steady rumble of the exhaust ran suddenly into a prolonged whining drone. The boat jumped as if jerked forward by some gigantic, invisible hand. Beneath the bows the water parted with a crisp sound like tearing paper. Long ripples widened away from the sides, like ribs of a huge fan. A glassy hillock of water sprang up mysteriously astern, pursuing them like an avenging Nemesis, yet never quite catching up.

The sense of irresistible speed was tremendous, as stimulating as electricity; this in spite of the fact that the boat was at best making about half the speed at which the motor-car had plunged along the country roads: an effect in part due to the spacious illusion of moonlit distances upon the water.

Staff held his cap with one hand, drinking in the keen salt air with a feeling of strange exultation. Iff crept forward and tarried for a time talking to the boatbuilder.

The boat shaved a nun-buoy outside Barmouth Point so closely that Staff could almost have touched it by stretching out his arm. Then she straightened out like a greyhound on a long course across the placid silver reaches to a goal as yet invisible.

Iff returned to the younger man's side.

"Twenty miles an hour, Bascom claims," he shouted. "At that rate we ought to be there in about fifteen minutes now."

Staff nodded, wondering what they would find on Wreck Island, bitterly repenting the oversight which had resulted in Ismay's escape from his grasp. If only he had not been so sure of his conquest of the little criminal ...! Now his mind crawled with apprehensions bred of his knowledge of the man's amazing fund of resource. He who outwitted Ismay would have earned the right to plume himself upon his cunning....

When he looked up from his abstraction, the loom of the mainland was seemingly very distant. The motor-boat was nearing the centre of a deep indentation in the littoral. And suddenly it was as though they did not move at all, as if all this noise and labour went for nothing, as if the boat were chained to the centre of a spreading disk of silver, world-wide, illimitable, and made no progress for all its thrashing and its fury.

Only the unending sweep of wind across his face denied that effect....

Iff touched his arm.

"There...." he said, pointing.

Over the bows a dark mass seemed to have separated itself from the shadowed mainland, with which it had till then been merged. A strip of silver lay between the two, and while they watched it widened, swiftly winning breadth and bulk as the motor-boat swung to the north of the long, sandy spit at the western end of Wreck Island.

"See anything of another boat?" Iff asked. "You look--your eyes are younger than mine."

Staff stood up, steadying himself with feet wide apart, and stared beneath his hand.

"No," he said; "I see no boat."

"We've beaten him, then!" Iff declared joyfully.

But they hadn't, nor were they long in finding it out. For presently the little island lay black, a ragged shadow against the blue-grey sky, upon the starboard beam; and Bascom passed the word aft to shut off the motor. As its voice ceased, the boat shot in toward the land, and the long thin moonlit line of the landing-stage detached itself from the general obscurity and ran out to meet them. And so closely had Bascom calculated that the "shoot" of the boat brought them to a standstill at the end of the structure without a jar. Bascom jumped out with the headwarp, Staff and Iff at his heels.

From the other side of the dock a shadow uplifted itself, swiftly and silently as a wraith, and stood swaying as it saluted them with profound courtesy.

"Gennelmen," it said thickly, "I bidsh you welcome t' Wrecksh Island."

With this it slumped incontinently back into a motor-boat which lay moored in the shadow of the dock; and a wild, ecstatic snore rang out upon the calm night air.

"Thet's Eph Clover," said Bascom; "him 'nd his wife's caretakers here. He's drunker 'n a b'iled owl," added the boatbuilder lest they misconstrue.

"Cousin Artie seems unfortunate in his choice of minions, what?" commented Iff. "Come along, Staff.... Take care of that souse, will you, Spelvin? See that he doesn't try to mix in."

They began to run along the narrow, yielding and swaying bridge of planks.

"He hasn't beaten us out yet," Iff threw over his shoulder. "You keep back now--like a good child--please. I've got a hunch this is my hour."

The hotel loomed before them, gables grey with moonshine, its long walls dark save where, toward the middle of the main structure, chinks of light filtered through a shuttered window, and where at one end an open door let out a shaft of lamplight upon the shadows....

XVII

HOLOCAUST

For a period of perhaps twenty seconds the man and the girl remained moveless, eyeing one another; she on the floor, pale, stunned and pitiful, for the instant bereft of every sense save that of terror; he in the doorway, alert, fully the master of his concentrated faculties, swayed by two emotions only--a malignant temper bred of the night's succession of reverses capped by the drunkenness of his caretaker, and an equally malignant sense of triumph that he had returned in time to crush the girl's attempt to escape.

He threw the door wide open and took a step into the room, putting away his pistol.

"So--" he began in a cutting voice.

But his movement had acted as the shock needed to rouse the girl out of her stupor of despair. With a cry she gathered herself together and jumped to her feet. He put forth a hand as if to catch her, and she leaped back. Her skirts swept the lamp on the floor and overturned it with a splintering crash. Instinctively she sprang away--in the nick of time.

She caught a look of surprise and fright in the eyes of the man as they glared past her in the ghastly glow of the flickering wick, and took advantage of this momentary distraction to leap past him. As she did so there was a slight explosion. A sheet of flaming kerosene spread over the floor and licked the chairboarding.

Ismay jumped back, mouthing curses; the girl had already slipped out of the room. Turning, he saw her flying through the hall toward the main door. In a fit of futile, childish spite, unreasonable and unreasoning, he whipped out his pistol and sent a bullet after her.

She heard it whine near her head and crash through the glass panes of the door. And she heard herself cry out in a strange voice. The next instant she had flung open the door and thrown herself out, across the veranda and down the steps. Then turning blindly to the left, instinct guiding her to seek temporary safety by hiding in the wilderness of the dunes, she blundered into somebody's arms.

She was caught and held fast despite her struggles to free herself: to which, believing herself to be in the hands of Mrs. Clover or her husband, she gave all her strength.

At the same time the first-floor windows of the hotel were illumined by an infernal glare. All round her there was lurid light, setting everything in sharp relief. The face of the man who held her was suddenly revealed; and it was her father's.... She had left him inside the building and now ... She was assailed with a terrifying fear that she had gone mad. In a frenzy she wrenched herself free; but only to be caught in other arms.

A voice she knew said soothingly: "There, Miss Searle--you're all right now...."

Staff's voice and, when she twisted to look, Staff's face, friendly and reassuring!

"Don't be afraid," he was saying; "we'll take care of you now--your father and I."

"My father!" she gasped. "My father is in there!"

"No," said Iff at her side. "Believe me, he isn't. That, dear, is your fondly affectionate Uncle Arbuthnot--and between the several of us I don't mind telling you that he's stood in my shoes for the last time."

"But I don't," she stammered--"I don't understand--"

"You will in a minute," Staff told her gently. At the same time he lifted his voice. "Look out, Iff--look out!"

He strove to put himself between the girl and danger, making a shield of his body. But with a supple movement she eluded him.

She saw in the doorway of the burning house the man she had thought to be her father. The other man, he whose daughter she really was, had started to run toward the veranda steps. The man in the doorway flung up his hand and, clear and vicious above the crackling of the flames, she heard the short song of a Colt automatic--six shots, so close upon one another that they were as one prolonged.

There was a spatter of bullets in the sandy ground about them; and then, with scarcely an appreciable interval, a second flutter of an automatic. This time the reports came from the pistol in Iff's hand. He was standing in full glare at the bottom of the veranda steps, aiming with great composure and precision.

The figure in the doorway reeled as if struck by an axe, swung half-way round and tottered back into the house. The little man below the veranda steps delayed only long enough to pluck out the empty clip from the butt of his pistol and slip another, loaded, into its place. Then with cat-like agility he sprang up the steps and dived into the furnace-like interior of the hotel. A third stuttering series of reports saluted this action, and then there was a short pause ended by a single shot.

"Come," said Staff. He took her arm gently. "Come away...."

Shuddering, she suffered him to lead her a little distance into the dunes. Here he released her.

"If you won't mind being left alone a few minutes," he said, "I'll go back and see what's happened. You'll be perfectly safe here, I fancy."

"Please," she said breathlessly--"do go. Yes, please."

She urged him with frantic gestures....

He hurried back to the front of the hotel. By now it was burning like a bonfire; already, short as had been the time since the overturning of the lamp, the entire ground floor with the exception of one wing was a roaring welter of flames, while the fire had leaped up the main staircase and set its signals in the windows of the upper story.

Iff was standing at some distance from the main entrance, having pushed his way through the tangle of undergrowth to escape the scorching heat that emanated from the building. He caught sight of Staff approaching and waved a hand to him.

"Greetings!" he cried cheerfully, raising his voice to make it heard above the voice of the conflagration.

"Where's Nelly?"

Staff explained. "But what about Ismay?" he demanded.

Iff grinned and hung his head as if embarrassed, rubbing a handkerchief over the smoke-stained fingers of his right hand.

"I got him," he said simply.

"You left him in there?"

The little man nodded without reply and turned alertly to engage Mrs. Clover, who was bearing down upon them in the first stages of hysterics. But at sight of Iff she pulled up and calmed herself a trifle.

"Oh, sir," she cried, "I'm so glad you're safe, sir! I was asleep in the kitchen when the fire broke out--and then I thought I heard pistol shots--and I didn't know but somethin' had happened to you--"

"No," said Iff coolly; "you can see I'm all right."

"And Eph, sir? Where's my husband?" she shrieked.

"Oh," said Iff, at length identifying the woman. "You'll find him down at the dock--dead drunk in the motor-boat," he told her. "If I were you I'd go to him right away."

"But whatever will we do for a place to sleep tonight?"

"Help yourself," Iff replied with a generous wave of his hand "You've all Pennymint to ask shelter of, if you can manage to make your husband run the boat across."

"But you--what'll you do?"

"I've another boat handy," Iff explained. "We'll go in that."

"And will you rebuild, sir?"

"No," he said gravely, "I don't think so. I fancy this is the last time I'll ever set foot on Wreck Island. Now clear out," he added with a sharp change of manner, "and see if you can't sober that drunken fool up."

Abashed, the woman cringed and turned away. Presently she broke into a clumsy run and vanished in the direction of the landing-stage.

"You've accepted the identity of Ismay," commented Staff disapprovingly, as they moved off together to rejoin Eleanor.

"For the last time," said the little man. "Until I get aboard Bascom's boat again, only. It's the easiest way."

"How do you mean?"



The light of the great fire illumined not only all the island, but the waters for miles around

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Iff nodded at the blazing building. "That wipes out all scores," he replied. "What they find of Cousin Artie when that cools off won't be enough to hold an inquest over; he will be simply thought to have disappeared, since I won't return to this place. And that's the easiest way: we don't got any use for inquests at the wind-up of this giddy dime-novel!"

The light of the great fire illumined not only all the island but the waters for miles around. As Bascom's boat drew away, its owner called Staff's attention to a covey of sails, glowing pink against the dark background of the mainland as they stood across the arm of the Sound for the island.

"Neighbours," said Mr. Bascom; "comin' for to see if they can lend a hand or snatch a souvenir or so, mebbe."

Staff nodded, with little interest. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see Iff and his daughter, on the opposite side of the boat. Iff was talking to her in a gentle, subdued voice strangely unlike his customary acrid method of expression. He had an arm round his daughter's shoulders; her head rested on his....

Staff looked away, back at the shining island. He could not grudge the little man his hour. His own would come, in time....

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes:

Spaced contractions in the original publication have been joined except where they would probably have been pronounced as two words.

The following changes have been made for consistency:

- [page 132](#), "downstairs" changed to "down-stairs"
- [page 136](#), "desklamp" changed to "desk-lamp"
- [page 151](#), "stupified" changed to "stupefied"
- [page 205](#), "up-town" changed to "uptown"
- [page 212](#), "bell-boy" changed to "bellboy"
- [page 239](#), "newel post" changed to "newel-post"
- [page 269](#), "kitchen-porch" changed to "kitchen porch"
- [page 272](#), "strongbox" changed to "strong-box"
- [page 298](#), "P. M." changed to "P.M."

[page 92](#), "Manver's lips" changed to "Manvers' lips".

[page 126](#), "How-d'-you-do" changed to "How-d'-you-do".

[page 127](#), closing single quote changed to double quote: "But he can't have left the ship!"

[page 150](#), period added at end of sentence, "and came hastily over to the table beside which he was standing."

[page 206](#), ";" added in "this morning; Jane".

[page 284](#), missing ' ' ' added at end of note.

[Book list](#) at end: Apparent typesetting errors noticed by the transcriber were fixed as follows:

- "Bar 20" changed to "[Bar-20](#)"
- "Mulfird" changed to "[Mulford](#)" (for Bar-20 Days)
- closing quote added to "[Uncle William](#)" (for Happy Island)
- "Ellery H. Clarke" changed to "[Ellery H. Clark](#)" (for Loaded Dice)
- "Get-Rick-Quick-Wallingford" changed to "[Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford](#)"
- 'author of the "Broad Higway"' changed to 'author of "[The Broad Highway](#)"' (for My Lady Caprice)
- "Louis Joseh Vance" changed to "[Louis Joseph Vance](#)" (for Pool of Flame)

End of Transcriber's Notes