TERROR KEEP



EDGAR WALLACE

PIPCUB EDITIONS

Terror Keep

Edgar Wallace

THE AUTHOR



Edgar Wallace

1875 - 1932

AI-created interpretation after Agence Rol press photograph, June 1928, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Rol 130561.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edgar Wallace

Edgar Wallace was a British journalist, novelist and playwright, born in London in 1875. Raised in the household of a fish porter, he experienced working life from an early age. Newspapers became central to his career, first as a source of employment and later as a training ground for his writing.

He served in South Africa and subsequently worked there as a correspondent for Reuters and the Daily Mail. Reporting encouraged attention to striking incidents, compressed explanation and the need to hold an audience. Those habits remained visible in his popular fiction.

Wallace became an exceptionally prolific writer of crime and adventure stories, as well as plays and other works. His books reached a large readership, and adaptations helped carry his plots into other media. Commercial success did not remove his financial difficulties. He died in 1932, leaving a large and varied body of work.

Readers can follow the distribution of information: what an investigator knows, what a suspect conceals and what the reader has been allowed to see. A brief conversation or sudden interruption may change the direction of a scene. Wallace's pace makes it useful to pause over the assumptions behind an accusation, particularly when a character's public position seems to offer an easy explanation of guilt or innocence.

Biographical references: Edgar Wallace Society and National Library of New Zealand. Portrait source: Agence Rol press photograph, June 1928, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Rol 130561. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

TERROR KEEP

BY
EDGAR WALLACE

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

[DEDICATION]

TO
LESLIE FABER
("The Ringer")

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TERROR KEEP

FOREWARD

RIGHTLY speaking, it is improper, not to say illegal, for those sadly privileged few who go in and out of Broadmoor Criminal Asylum, to have pointed out to them any particular character, however notorious he may have been or to what heights of public interest his infamy had carried him, before the testifying doctors and a merciful jury consigned him to this place without hope. But often had John Flack been pointed out as he shuffled about the grounds, his hands behind him, his chin on his breast, a tall, lean old man in an ill-fitting suit of drab clothing, who spoke to nobody and was spoken to by few.

"That is Flack—the Flack; the cleverest crook in the world... Crazy John Flack... nine murders..."

Men who were in Broadmoor for isolated homicides were rather proud of Old John in their queer, sane moments. The officers who locked him up at night and watched him as he slept had little to say against him, because he gave no trouble, and through all the six years of his incarceration had never once been seized of those frenzies which so often end in the hospital for some poor innocent devil, and a rubber-padded cell for the frantic author of misfortune.

He spent most of his time writing and reading, for he was something of a genius with his pen, and wrote with extraordinary rapidity. He filled hundreds of little exercise books with his great treatise on crime. The Governor humoured him; allowed him to retain the books, expecting in due course to add them to his already interesting museum.

Once, as a great concession, old Jack gave him a book to read, and the Governor read and gasped. It was entitled "Method of robbing a bank vault when only two guards are employed." The Governor, who had been a soldier, read and read, stopping now and then to rub his head; for this document, written in the neat, legible hand of John

Flack, was curiously reminiscent of a divisional order for attack. No detail was too small to be noted; every contingency was provided for. Not only were the constituents of the drug to be employed to "settle the outer watchman" given, but there was an explanatory note which may be quoted:

> "If this drug is not procurable, I advise that the operator should call upon a suburban doctor and describe the following symptoms... The doctor will then prescribe the drug in a minute quantity. Six bottles of this medicine should be procured, and the following method adopted to extract the drug..."

"Have you written much like this, Flack?" asked the wondering officer.

"This?" John Flack shrugged his lean shoulders. "I am doing this for amusement, just to test my memory. I have already written sixty-three books on the subject, and those works are beyond improvement. During the six years I have been here, I have not been able to think of a single improvement to my old system."

Was he jesting? Was this a flight of a disordered mind? The Governor, used as he was to his charges and their peculiar ways, was not certain.

"You mean you have written an encyclopaedia of crime?" he asked incredulously. "Where is it to be found?"

Old Flack's thin lips curled in a disdainful smile, but he made no answer.

Sixty-three hand-written volumes represented the life work of John Flack. It was the one achievement upon which he prided himself.

On another occasion when the Governor referred to his extraordinary literary labours, he said:

"I have put a huge fortune in the hands of any clever man—providing, of course," he mused, "that he is a man of resolution and the books fall into his hands at a very early date—in these days of scientific discovery, what is a novelty to-day is a commonplace to-morrow."

The Governor had his doubts as to the existence of these deplorable volumes, but very soon after the conversation took place he had to revise his judgment. Scotland Yard, which seldom if ever chases chimerae, sent down one Chief-Inspector Simpson, who was a man entirely without imagination and had been promoted for it. His interview with Crazy John Flack was a brief one.

"About these books of yours, Jack," he said. "It would be terrible if they fell into wrong hands. Ravini says you've got a hundred volumes hidden somewhere——"

"Ravini?" Old John Flack showed his teeth. "Listen, Simpson! You don't think you're going to keep me in this awful place all my life, do you? If you do, you've got another guess coming. I'll skip one of these odd nights—you can tell the Governor if you like—and then Ravini and I are going to have a little talk."

His voice grew high and shrill. The old mad glitter that Simpson had seen before came back to his eyes.

"Do you ever have day-dreams, Simpson? I have three! I've got a new method of getting away with a million: that's one, but it's not important. Another one is Reeder: you can tell J. G. what I say. It's a dream of meeting him alone one nice, dark, foggy night, when the police can't tell which way the screams are coming. And the third is Ravini. George Ravini's got one chance, and that is for him to die before I get out!"

"You're mad," said Simpson.

"That's what I'm here for," said John Flack truthfully.

This conversation with Simpson and that with the Governor were two of the longest he ever had, all the six years he was in Broadmoor. Mostly when he wasn't writing he strolled about the grounds, his chin on his chest, his hands clasped behind him. Occasionally he reached a certain place near the high wall, and it is said that he threw letters over, though this is very unlikely. What is more possible is that he found a messenger who carried his many and cryptic letters to the outer world and brought in exchange monosyllabic replies. He was a very good friend of the officer in

charge of his ward, and one early morning this man was discovered with his throat cut. The ward door was open, and John Flack had gone out into the world to realise his day-dreams.

CHAPTER I

THERE were two subjects which irritated the mind of Margaret Belman as the Southern Express carried her towards Selford Junction and the branch-line train which crawled from the junction to Siltbury. The first of these was, not unnaturally, the drastic changes she now contemplated, and the effect they already had had upon Mr. J. G. Reeder, that mild and middle-aged man.

When she had announced that she was seeking a post in the country, he might at least have shown some evidence of regret: a certain glumness would have been appropriate at any rate. Instead he had brightened visibly at the prospect.

"I am afraid I shan't be able to come to London very often," she had said.

"That is good news," said Mr. Reeder, and added some banality about the value of periodical changes of air and the beauty of getting near to nature. In fact, he had been more cheerful than he had been for a week, which was rather exasperating.

Margaret Belman's pretty face puckered as she recalled her disappointment and chagrin. All thoughts of dropping this application of hers disappeared. Not that she imagined for one moment that a six-hundred-a-year secretaryship was going to fall into her lap for the mere asking. She was wholly unsuited for the job, she had no experience of hotel work, and the chances of her being accepted were remote.

As to the Italian man who had made so many attempts to make her acquaintance, he was one of the unpleasant commonplaces so familiar to a girl who worked for her living that in ordinary circumstances she would not have given him a second thought.

But that morning he had followed her to the station, and she was certain that he had heard her tell the girl who came with her that she was returning by the 6.15. A policeman would deal effectively with him—if she cared to risk the publicity. But a girl, however sane, shrinks from such an ordeal, and she must deal with him in her own way.

That was not a happy prospect, and the two matters in combination were sufficient to spoil what otherwise might have been a very happy or interesting afternoon. As to Mr. Reeder…

Margaret Belman frowned. She was twenty-three, an age when youngish men are rather tiresome. On the other hand, men in the region of fifty are not especially attractive; and she loathed Mr. Reeder's side-whiskers, that made him look rather like a Scottish butler. Of course, he was a dear….

Here the train reached the junction. She found herself at the surprisingly small station of Siltbury before she had quite made up her mind whether she was in love with Mr. Reeder or merely annoyed with him.

The driver of the station cab stopped his unhappy-looking horse before the small gateway and pointed with his whip.

"This is the best way in for you, miss," he said. "Mr. Daver's office is at the end of the path."

He was a shrewd old man, who had driven many applicants for the post of secretary to Larmes Keep, and he guessed that this, the prettiest of all, did not come as a guest. In the first place, she brought no baggage, and then too the ticket-collector had come running after her to hand back the return half of the railway ticket which she had absent-mindedly surrendered.

"I'd better wait for you, miss…?"

"Oh, yes, please," said Margaret Belman hastily as she got down from the dilapidated victoria.

"You got an appointment?"

The cabman was a local character, and local characters assume privileges.

"I ast you," he explained carefully, "because lots of young wimmin have come up to Larmes without appointments and Mr. Daver wouldn't see 'em. They just cut out the advertisement and come along, but the ad. says *write*. I suppose I've made a dozen journeys with young wimmin who ain't got appointments. I'm telling you for your own good."

The girl smiled.

"You might have warned them before they left the station," she said good-humouredly, "and saved them the cab fare. Yes, I have an appointment."

From where she stood by the gate she had a clear view of Larmes Keep. It bore no resemblance to an hotel and less to the superior boarding-house that she knew it to be. That part of the house which had been the original Keep was easily distinguished, though the grey, straight walls were masked with ivy that covered also part of the buildings which had been added in the course of the years.

She looked across a smooth green lawn, on which were set a few wicker chairs and tables, to a rose garden which, even in late autumn, was a blaze of colour. Behind this was a belt of pine trees that seemed to run to the cliff's edge. She had a glimpse of a grey-blue sea and a blur of dim smoke from a steamer invisible below the straight horizon. A gentle wind carried the fragrance of the pines to her, and she sniffed ecstatically.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" she breathed.

The cabman said it "wasn't bad," and pointed with his whip again.

"It's that little square place—only built a few years ago. Mr. Daver is more of a writing gentleman than a boarding-house gentleman."

She unlatched the oaken gate and walked up the stone path towards the sanctum of the writing gentleman. On either side of the crazy pavement was a deep border of flowers—she might have been passing through a cottage garden.

There was a long window and a small green door to the annexe. Evidently she had been seen, for, as her hand went up to the brass bell-push, the door opened.

It was obviously Mr. Daver himself. A tall, thin man of fifty, with a yellow, elf-like face and a smile that brought all her sense of humour into play. Very badly she wanted to laugh. The long upper lip overhung the lower, and except that the face was thin and lined, he had the appearance of some grotesque and foolish mascot. The staring, round, brown eyes, the puckered forehead, and a twist of hair that stood upright on the crown of his head, made him more brownie-like than ever.

"Miss Belman?" he asked, with a certain eagerness.

He lisped slightly, and had a trick of clasping his hands as if he were in an agony of apprehension lest his manner should displease.

"Come into my den," he said, and gave such emphasis to the last word that she nearly laughed again.

The "den" was a very comfortably furnished study, one wall of which was covered with books. Closing the door behind her, he pushed up a chair with a little nervous laugh.

"I'm so very glad you came. Did you have a comfortable journey? I'm sure you did. And is London hot and stuffy? I'm afraid it is. Would you like a cup of tea? Of course you would."

He fired question and answer so rapidly that she had no chance of replying, and he had taken up a telephone and ordered the tea before she could express a wish on the subject.

"You are young—very young,"—he shook his head sadly. "Twenty-four—no? Do you use the typewriter? What a ridiculous question to ask!"

"It is very kind of you to see me, Mr. Daver," she said, "and I don't suppose for one moment that I shall suit you. I have had no experience of hotel management, and I realise, from the salary you offer——"

"Quiet," said Mr. Daver, shaking his head solemnly: "that is what I require. There is very little work, but I wished to be relieved even of that little. My own labours"—he waved his hand to a pedestal desk littered with papers—"are colossal. I need a lady to keep accounts—to watch my interests. Somebody I can trust. I believe in faces, do you? I see that you do. And in the character of handwriting? You believe in that also. I have advertised for three months and have interviewed thirty-five applicants. Impossible! Their voices—terrible! I judge people by their voices—so do you. On Monday when you telephoned I said to myself, 'The Voice!'"

He was clasping his hands together so tightly that his knuckles showed white, and this time her laughter was almost beyond arrest.

"But, Mr. Daver, I know nothing of hotel management. I think I could learn, and I want the position, naturally. The salary is terribly generous."

"'Terribly generous,'" repeated the man in a murmur. "How curious those words sound in juxtaposition! My housekeeper. How kind of you to bring the tea, Mrs. Burton!"

The door had opened and a woman bearing a silver tray came in. She was dressed very neatly in black. The faded eyes scarcely looked at Margaret as she stood meekly waiting whilst Mr. Daver spoke.

"Mrs. Burton, this is the new secretary to the company. She must have the best room in the Keep—the Blue Room. But—ah!"—he pinched his lip anxiously—"blue may not be your colour?"

Margaret laughed.

"Any colour is my colour," she said. "But I haven't decided——"

"Go with Mrs. Burton; see the house—your office, your room. Mrs. Burton!"

He pointed to the door, and before the girl knew what she was doing she had followed the housekeeper through the door. A narrow passage connected the private office of Mr. Daver with the house, and Margaret was ushered into a large and lofty room which covered the superficial area of the Keep.

"The Banquittin' 'All," said Mrs. Burton in a thin, Cockney voice remarkable for its monotony. "It's used as a lounge. We've only got three boarders. Mr. Daver's very partic'lar. We get a lot in for the winter."

"Three boarders isn't a very paying proposition," said the girl.

Mrs. Burton sniffed.

"Mr. Daver don't want it to pay. It's the company he likes. He only turned it into a boardin' house because he likes to see people come and go without having to talk to 'em. It's a nobby."

"A what?" asked the puzzled girl. "Oh, you mean a hobby?"

"I said a nobby," said Mrs. Burton, in her listless, uncomplaining way.

Beyond the hall was a small and cosier sitting-room with French windows opening on to the lawn. Outside the window three people sat at tea. One was an elderly clergyman with a strong, hard face. He was eating toast and reading a church paper, oblivious of his companion. The second of the party was a pale-faced girl about

Margaret's own age. In spite of her pallor she was extraordinarily beautiful. A pair of big, dark eyes surveyed the visitor for a moment and then returned to her companion, a military-looking man of forty.

Mrs. Burton waited until they were ascending the broad stairway to the upper floor before she "introduced" them.

"The clergyman's a Reverend Dean from South Africa, the young lady's Miss Olga Crewe, the other gent is Colonel Hothling—they're boarders. This is your room, miss."

It was indeed a gem of an apartment; the sort of room that Margaret Belman had dreamt about. It was exquisitely furnished, and, like all the other rooms at Larmes Keep (as she discovered later), was provided with its private bathroom. The walls were panelled to half their height, the ceilings heavily beamed. She guessed that beneath the parquet underneath was the original stone-flagged floor.

Margaret looked and sighed. It was going to be very hard to refuse this post—and why she should think of refusing at all she could not for the life of her understand.

"It's a beautiful room," she said, and Mrs. Burton cast an apathetic eye round the apartment.

"It's old," she said. "I don't like old houses. I used to live in Brixton——"

She stopped abruptly, sniffed in a deprecating way, and jingled the keys that she carried in her hand.

"You're suited, I suppose?"

"Suited? You mean am I taking the appointment? I don't know yet."

Mrs. Burton looked round vaguely. The girl had the impression that she was trying to say something in praise of the place—something that would prejudice her in favour of accepting the appointment. Then she spoke.

"The food's good," she said, and Margaret smiled.

When she came back through the hall she saw the three people she had seen at tea. The colonel was walking by himself; the clergyman and the pale-faced girl were strolling across the lawn

talking to one another. Mr. Daver was sitting at his desk, his high forehead resting on his palm, and he was biting the end of a pen as Mrs. Burton closed the door on them.

"You like the room: naturally. You will start—when? Next Monday week, I think. What a relief! You have seen Mrs. Burton." He wagged a finger at her roguishly. "Ah! Now you know! It is impossible! Can I leave her to meet the duchess and speed the duke? Can I trust her to adjust the little quarrels that naturally arise between guests? You are right—I can't. I must have a lady here—I must, I must!"

He nodded emphatically, his impish brown eyes fixed on hers, the bulging upper lip grotesquely curved in a delighted grin.

"My work suffers, as you say: constantly to be brought from my studies to settle such matters as the fixing of a tennis net—intolerable!"

"You write a great deal?" she managed to ask. She felt she must postpone her decision to the last possible moment.

"A great deal. On crime. Ah, you are interested? I am preparing an encyclopaedia of crime!" He said this impressively, dramatically.

"On crime?"

He nodded.

"It is one of my hobbies. I am a rich man and can afford hobbies. This place is a hobby. I lose four thousand a year, but I am satisfied. I pick and choose my own guests. If one bores me I tell him to go—that his room has been taken. Could I do that if they were my friends? No. They interest me. They fill the house; they give me company and amusement. When will you come?"

She hesitated.

"I think——"

"Monday week? Excellent!" He shook her hand vigorously. "You need not be lonely. If my guests bore you, invite your own friends. Let them come as the guests of the house. Until Monday!"

She was walking down the garden path to the waiting cabman, a little dazed, more than a little undecided.

"Did you get the place, miss?" asked the friendly cabman.

“I suppose I did,” replied Margaret.

She looked back towards Larmes Keep. The lawns were empty, but near at hand she had one glimpse of a woman. Only for a second, and then she disappeared in a belt of laurel that ran parallel with the boundary wall of the property. Evidently there was a rough path through the bushes, and Mrs. Burton had sought this hiding-place. Her hands covered her face as she staggered forward blindly, and the faint sound of her sobs came back to the astonished girl.

“That’s the housekeeper—she’s a bit mad,” said the cabman calmly.

CHAPTER II

George Ravini was not an unpleasant-looking man. From his own point of view, which was naturally prejudiced, he was extremely attractive, with his crisp brown hair, his handsome Neapolitan features, his height, and his poise. And when to his natural advantages were added the best suit that Savile Row could create, the most spotless of grey hats, and the malacca sword-stick on which one kid-gloved hand rested as upon the hilt of a foil, the shiniest of enamelled shoes and the finest of grey silk socks, the picture was well framed and embellished. Greatest embellishment of all were George Ravini's Luck Rings. He was a superstitious man and was addicted to charms. On the little finger of his right hand were three gold rings, and in each ring three large diamonds. The Luck Stones of Ravini were one of the traditions of Saffron Hill.

Most of the time he had the half-amused, half-bored smile of a man for whom life held no mysteries and could offer, in experience, little that was new. And the smile was justified, for George knew most of the things that were happening in London or likely to happen. He had worked outward from a one-room home in Saffron Hill, where he first saw the light, had enlarged the narrow horizons which surrounded his childhood, so that now, in place of the poverty-stricken child who had shared a bed with his father's performing monkey, he was not only the possessor of a classy flat in Half Moon Street but the owner of the block in which it was situate. His balance at the Continental Bank was a generous one; he had securities which brought him an income beyond his needs, and a larger revenue from the two night clubs and spieling houses which were in his control, to say nothing of the perquisites which came his way from a score of other sources. The word of Ravini was law from Leyton to Clerkenwell, his fiats were obeyed within a mile radius of Fitzroy Square, and no other gang leader in London might raise his head without George's permission save at the risk of waking in the casualty ward of the Middlesex Hospital entirely surrounded by bandages.

He waited patiently on the broad space of Waterloo Station, occasionally consulting his gold wrist-watch, and surveyed with a benevolent and proprietorial eye the stream of life that flowed from the barriers.

The station clock showed a quarter after six: he glanced at his watch and scanned the crowd that was debouching from No. 7 platform. After a few minutes' scrutiny he saw the girl, and with a pat to his cravat and a touch to the brim of his hat which set it tilting, he strolled to meet her.

Margaret Belman was too intent with her own thoughts to be thinking about the debonair and youngish man who had so often sought an introduction by the conventional method of pretending they had met before. Indeed, in the excitement of her visit to Larmes Keep, she had forgotten that this pestiferous gallant existed or was likely to be waiting for her on her return from the country.

George Ravini stopped and waited for her approach, smiling his approval. He liked slim girls of her colouring: girls who dressed rather severely and wore rather nice stockings and plain little hats. He raised his hat; the Luck Stones glittered beautifully.

"Oh!" said Margaret Belman, and stopped too.

"Good evening, Miss Belman," said George, flashing his white teeth. "Quite a coincidence meeting you again."

As she went to walk past him he fell in by her side.

"I wish I had my car here, I might have driven you home," he said conversationally. "I've got a new 20 Rolls—rather a neat little machine. I don't use it a great deal—I like to walk from Half Moon Street."

"Are you walking to Half Moon Street now?" she asked quietly.

But George was a man of experience.

"Your way is my way," he said.

She stopped.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Smith—Anderton Smith," he answered readily. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to tell the next policeman we meet," she said, and Mr. Ravini, not unaccustomed to such threats, was amused.

"Don't be a silly little girl," he said. "I'm doing no harm, and you don't want to get your name in the newspapers. Besides, I should merely say that you asked me to walk with you and that we were old friends."

She looked at him steadily.

"I may meet a friend very soon who will need a lot of convincing," she said. "Will you please go away?"

George was pleased to stay, as he explained.

"What a foolish young lady you are!" he began. "I'm merely offering you the common courtesies——"

A hand gripped his arm and slowly pulled him round—and this in broad daylight on Waterloo Station, under the eyes of at least two of his own tribe. Mr. Ravini's dark eyes snapped dangerously.

And yet seemingly his assailant was a most inoffensive man. He was tall and rather melancholy-looking. He wore a frock coat buttoned tightly across his breast, and a high, flat-crowned, hard felt hat. On his biggish nose a pair of steel-rimmed pince-nez were set at an awkward angle. A slither of sandy side-whiskers decorated his cheek, and hooked to his arm was a lightly furled umbrella. Not that George examined these details with any care: they were rather familiar to him, for he knew Mr. J. G. Reeder, Detective to the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the fight went out of his eyes.

"Why, Mr. Reeder!" he said, with a geniality that almost sounded sincere. "This *is* a pleasant surprise. Meet my young lady friend, Miss Belman—I was just taking her along——"

"Not to the Flotsam Club for a cup of tea?" murmured Mr. Reeder in a tone of pain. "Not to Harraby's Restaurant? Don't tell me that, Georgio! Dear me! How interesting either experience would be!"

He beamed upon the scowling Italian.

"At the Flotsam," he went on, "you would have been able to show the young lady where your friends caught young Lord Fallon for three thousand pounds only the night before last—so they tell me.

At Harraby's you might have shown her that interesting little room where the police come in by the back way whenever you consider it expedient to betray one of your friends. She has missed a treat!"

George Ravini's smile did not harmonise with his sudden pallor.

"Now listen, Mr. Reeder——"

"I'm sorry I can't, Georgio." Mr. Reeder shook his head mournfully. "My time is precious. Yet, I will spare you one minute to tell you that Miss Belman is a very particular friend of mine. If her experience of to-day is repeated, who knows what might happen, for I am, as you probably know, a malicious man." He eyed the Italian thoughtfully. "Is it malice, I wonder, which inhibits a most interesting revelation which I have on the tip of my tongue? I wonder. The human mind, Mr. Ravini, is a curious and complex thing. Well, well, I must be getting along. Give my regards to your criminal associates, and if you find yourself shadowed by a gentleman from Scotland Yard, bear him no resentment. He is doing his duty. And do not lose sight of my—um—warning about this lady."

"I have said nothing to this young lady that a gentleman shouldn't."

Mr. Reeder peered at Ravini.

"If you have," he said, "you may expect to see me some time this evening—and I shall not come alone. In fact,"—this in a most confidential tone—"I shall bring sufficient strong men with me to take from you the keys of your box in the Fetter Lane Safe Deposit."

That was all he said, and Ravini reeled under the threat. Before he had quite recovered, Mr. J. G. Reeder and his charge had disappeared into the throng.

CHAPTER III

"An interesting man," said Mr. Reeder, as the cab crossed Westminster Bridge. "He is in fact the most interesting man I know at this particular moment. It was fate that I should walk into him as I did. But I wish he wouldn't wear diamond rings!"

He stole a sidelong glance at his companion.

"Well, did you—um—like the place?"

"It is very beautiful," she said, without enthusiasm, "but it is rather far away from London."

His face fell.

"Have you declined the post?" he asked anxiously.

She half turned in the seat and looked at him.

"Mr. Reeder, I honestly believe you wish to see the back of me!"

To her surprise Mr. Reeder went very red.

"Why—um—of course I do—I don't, I mean. But it seems a very good position, even as a temporary position." He blinked at her. "I shall miss you, I really shall miss you, Miss—um—Margaret. We have become such"—here he swallowed something—"good friends, but the—a certain business is on my mind—I mean, I am rather perturbed."

He looked from one window to the other as though he suspected an eavesdropper riding on the step of the cab, and then, lowering his voice:

"I have never discussed with you, my dear Miss—um—Margaret, the rather unpleasant details of my trade; but there is, or was, a gentleman named Flack—F-l-a-c-k," he spelt it. "You remember?" he asked anxiously, and when she shook her head: "I hoped that you would. One reads about these things in the public press. But five years ago you would have been a child——"

"You're very flattering," she smiled. "I was in fact a grown-up young lady of eighteen."

"Were you really?" asked Mr. Reeder in a hushed voice. "You surprise me! Well... Mr. Flack was the kind of person one so frequently reads about in the pages of the sensational novelist—who has not too keen a regard for the probabilities and facts of life. A master criminal, the organiser of—um—a confederation, or, as vulgar people would call it, gang."

He sighed and closed his eyes, and she thought for one moment he was praying for the iniquitous criminal.

"A brilliant criminal—it is a terrible thing to confess, but I have had a reluctant admiration for him. You see, as I have so often explained to you, I am cursed with a criminal mind. But he was mad."

"All criminals are mad: you have explained that so often," she said, a little tartly, for she was not anxious that the conversation should drift from her immediate affairs.

"But he was really mad," said Mr. Reeder with great earnestness, and tapped his forehead deliberately. "His very madness was his salvation. He did daring things, but with the cunning of a madman. He shot down two policemen in cold blood—he did this at midday in a crowded City street and got away. We caught him at last, of course. People like that are always caught in this country. I—um—assisted. In fact, I—well, I assisted! That is why I am thinking of our friend Georgio; for it was Mr. Ravini who betrayed him to us for two thousand pounds. I negotiated the deal, Mr. Ravini being a criminal..."

She stared at him open-mouthed.

"That Italian man? You don't mean that?"

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"Mr. Ravini had dealings with the Flack gang, and by chance learnt of Old John's whereabouts. We took old John Flack in his sleep." Mr. Reeder sighed again. "He said some very bitter things about me. People, when they are arrested, frequently exaggerate the shortcomings of their—er—captors."

"Was he tried?" she asked.

"He was tried," said Mr. Reeder, "on a charge of murder. But of course he was mad. 'Guilty but insane' was the verdict, and he was sent to Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum."

He searched feebly in his pockets, produced a very limp packet of cigarettes, extracted one and asked permission to smoke. She watched the damp squib of a thing drooping pathetically from his lower lip. His eyes were staring sombrely through the window at the green of the park through which they were passing, and he seemed entirely absorbed in his contemplation of nature.

"But what has that to do with my going into the country?"

Mr. Reeder brought his eyes round to survey her.

"Mr. Flack was a very vindictive man," he said. "A very brilliant man—I hate confessing this. And he has—um—a particular grudge against me, and being what he is, it would not be long before he discovered that I—er—I—am rather attached to you, Miss—Margaret."

A light dawned on her, and her whole attitude towards him changed as she gripped his arm.

"You mean, you want me out of London in case something happens? But what could happen? He's in Broadmoor, isn't he?"

Mr. Reeder scratched his chin and looked up at the roof of the cab.

"He escaped a week ago—hum! He is, I think, in London at this moment."

Margaret Belman gasped.

"Does this Italian—this Ravini man—know?"

"He does not know," said Mr. Reeder carefully, "but I think he will learn—yes, I think he will learn."

A week later, after Margaret Belman had gone, with some misgivings, to take up her new appointment, all Mr. Reeder's doubts as to the location of John Flack were dissipated.

* * * * *

There was some slight disagreement between Margaret Belman and Mr. Reeder, and it happened at lunch on the day she left London. It started in fun—not that Mr. Reeder was ever kittenish—

by a certain suggestion she made. Mr. Reeder demurred. How she ever summoned the courage to tell him he was old-fashioned, Margaret never knew—but she did.

"Of course, you could shave them off," she said scornfully. "It would make you look ten years younger."

"I don't think, my dear—Miss—um—Margaret, that I wish to look ten years younger," said Mr. Reeder.

A certain tenseness followed, and she went down to Siltbury feeling a little uncomfortable. Yet her heart warmed to him as she realised that his anxiety to get her out of London was dictated by a desire for her own safety. It was not until she was nearing her destination that she realised that he himself was in no ordinary danger. She must write and tell him she was sorry. She wondered who the Flacks were; the name was familiar to her, though in the days of their activity she gave little or no attention to people of their kind.

Mr. Daver, looking more impish than ever, gave her a brief interview on her arrival. It was he who took her to her bureau and very briefly explained her duties. They were neither heavy nor complicated, and she was relieved to discover that she had practically nothing whatever to do with the management of Larmes Keep. That was in the efficient hands of Mrs. Burton.

The staff of the hotel were housed in two cottages about a quarter of a mile from the Keep, only Mrs. Burton living on the premises.

"This keeps us more select," said Mr. Daver. "Servants are an abominable nuisance. You agree with me? I thought you would. If they are needed in the night, both cottages have telephones, and Grainger, the porter, has a pass-key to the outer door. That is an excellent arrangement, of which you approve? I am sure you do."

Conversation with Mr. Daver was a little superfluous. He supplied his own answers to all questions.

He was leaving the bureau when she remembered his great study.

"Mr. Daver, do you know anything about the Flacks?"

He frowned.

"Flax? Let me see, what is flax——"

She spelt the name.

"A friend of mine told me about them the other day," she said. "I thought you would know the name. They are a gang of criminals ——"

"Flack! To be sure, to be sure! Dear me, how very interesting! Are you also a criminologist? John Flack, George Flack, Augustus Flack"—he spoke rapidly, ticking them off on his long, tobacco-stained fingers. "John Flack is in a criminal lunatic asylum; his two brothers escaped to the Argentine. Terrible fellows, terrible, terrible fellows! What a marvellous institution is our police force! How wonderful is Scotland Yard! You agree with me? I was sure you would. Flack!" He frowned and shook his head. "I thought of dealing with these people in a short monograph, but my data are not complete. Do you know them?"

She shook her head smilingly.

"No, I haven't that advantage."

"Terrible creatures," said Mr. Daver. "Amazing creatures. Who is your friend, Miss Belman? I would like to meet him. Perhaps he could tell me something more about them."

Margaret received the suggestion with dismay.

"Oh no, you're not likely to meet him," she said hurriedly, "and I don't think he would talk even if you met him—perhaps it was indiscreet of me to mention him at all."

The conversation must have weighed on Mr. Daver's mind, for just as she was leaving her office that night for her room, a very tired girl, he knocked at the door, opened it at her invitation and stood in the doorway.

"I have been going into the records of the Flacks," he said, "and it is surprising how little information there is. I have a newspaper cutting which says that John Flack is dead. He was the man who went into Broadmoor. Is he dead?"

Margaret shook her head.

"I couldn't tell you," she replied untruthfully. "I only heard a casual reference to him."

Mr. Daver scratched his round chin.

"I thought possibly somebody might have told you a few facts which you, so to speak—a laywoman!"—he giggled—"might have regarded as unimportant, but which I——"

He hesitated expectantly.

"That is all I know, Mr. Daver," said Margaret.

She slept soundly that night, the distant hush-hush of the waves as they rolled up the long beach of Siltbury Bay lulling her to dreamless slumber.

Her duties did not begin till after breakfast, which she had in her bureau, and the largest part was the checking of the accounts. Apparently Mrs. Burton attended to that side of the management, and it was only at the month's end, when cheques were to be drawn, that her work was likely to be heavy. In the main her day was taken up with correspondence. There were some 140 applicants for her post who had to be answered; there were in addition a number of letters from people who desired accommodation at Larmes Keep. All these had to be taken to Mr. Daver, and it was remarkable how fastidious a man he was. For example:

"The Reverend John Quinton? No, no; we have one parson in the house, that is enough. Tell him we are very sorry, but we are full up. Mrs. Bagley wishes to bring her daughter? Certainly not! I cannot have children distracting me with their noise. You agree? I see you do. Who is this woman... 'coming for a rest cure'? That means she's ill. I cannot have Larmes Keep turned into a sanitorium. You may tell them all that there will be no accommodation until after Christmas. After Christmas they can all come—I am going abroad."

The evenings were her own. She could, if she desired, go into Siltbury, which boasted two cinemas and a pierrot party, and Mr. Daver put the hotel car at her disposal for the purpose. She preferred, however, to wander through the grounds. The estate was a much larger one than she had supposed. Behind, to the south of the house, it extended for half a mile, the boundary to the east being represented by the cliffs, along which a breast-high rubble wall had been built, and with excellent reason, for here the cliff fell sheer two hundred feet to the rocks below. At one place there had been a little landslide, the wall had been carried away and the gap had been temporarily filled by a wooden fence. Some attempt had been made

to create a nine-hole golf course, she saw as she wandered round, but evidently Mr. Daver had grown tired of this enterprise, for the greens were knee-deep in waving grasses.

At the south-west corner of the house, and distant about a hundred yards, was a big clump of rhododendrons, and this she explored, following a twisting path that led to the heart of the bushes. Quite unexpectedly she came upon an old well. The brickwork about it was in ruins; the well itself was boarded in. On the weather-beaten roof-piece above the windlass was a small wooden notice-board, evidently fixed for the enlightenment of visitors:

> "This well was used from 935 to 1794. It was filled in by the present owners of the property in May 1914, one hundred and thirty-five cart-loads of rock and gravel being used for the purpose."

It was a pleasant occupation, standing by that ancient well and picturing the collar serfs and bare-footed peasants who through the ages had stood where she was standing. As she came out of the bushes she saw the pale-faced Olga Crewe.

Margaret had not spoken either to the colonel or to the clergyman; either she had avoided them, or they her. Olga Crewe she had not seen, and now she would have turned away, but the girl moved across to intercept her.

"You are the new secretary, aren't you?"

Her voice was musical, rather alluring. "Custardy" was Margaret's mental classification.

"Yes, I'm Miss Belman."

The girl nodded.

"My name you know, I suppose? Are you going to be terribly bored here?"

"I don't think so," smiled Margaret. "It is a beautiful spot."

The eyes of Olga Crewe surveyed the scene critically.

"I suppose it is: very beautiful, yes, but one gets very tired of beauty after a few years."

Margaret listened in astonishment.

"Have you been here so long?"

"I've practically lived here since I was a child. I thought Joe would have told you that: he's an inveterate old gossip."

"Joe?" She was puzzled.

"The cab-driver, news-gatherer, and distributor."

She looked at Larmes Keep and frowned.

"Do you know what they used to call this place, Miss Belman? The House of Tears—the Château des Larmes."

"Why ever?" asked Margaret.

Olga Crewe shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Some sort of tradition, I suppose, that goes back to the days of the Baron Augernvert, who built it. The locals have corrupted the name to Larmes Keep. You ought to see the dungeons."

"Are there dungeons?" asked Margaret in surprise, and Olga nodded. For the first time she seemed amused.

"If you saw them and the chains and the rings in the walls and the stone floors worn thin by bare feet, you might guess how its name arose."

Margaret stared back towards the Keep. The sun was setting behind it, and silhouetted as it was against the red light there was something ominous and sinister in that dark, squat pile.

"How very unpleasant!" she said, and shivered.

Olga Crewe laughed.

"Have you seen the cliffs?" she said, and led the way back to the long wall, and for a quarter of an hour they stood, their arms resting on the parapet, looking down into the gloom.

"You ought to get some one to row you round the face of the cliff. It's simply honeycombed with caves," she said. "There's one at the water's edge that tunnels right under the Keep. When the tides are unusually high they are flooded. I wonder Daver doesn't write a book about it."

There was just the faintest hint of a sneer in her tone, but it did not escape Margaret's attention.

"That must be the entrance," she said, pointing down to a swirl of water that seemed to run right up to the face of the cliff.

Olga nodded.

"At high tide you wouldn't notice that," she said, and then, turning abruptly, she asked the girl if she had seen the bathing-pool.

This was an oblong bath, sheltered by high box hedges and lined throughout with blue tiles; a delightfully inviting plunge.

"Nobody uses it but myself. Daver would die at the thought of jumping in."

Whenever she referred to Mr. Daver it was in a scarcely veiled tone of contempt. She was not more charitable when she referred to the other guests. As they were nearing the house Olga said, *à propos* of nothing:

"I shouldn't talk too much to Daver if I were you. Let him do the talking: he likes it."

"What do you mean?" asked Margaret quietly; but at that moment Olga left her side without any word of farewell and went towards the colonel, who was standing, a cigar between his teeth, watching their approach.

The House of Tears!

Margaret remembered the title as she was undressing that night, and, despite her self-possession, shivered a little.

CHAPTER IV

THE policeman who stood on the corner where Bennett Street meets Hyde Lane had the world to himself. It was nearing three o'clock on a sultry spring morning, airless, unpleasantly warm. Somewhere in South London there was a thunderstorm; the hollow echoes of it came at odd intervals. The good and bad of Mayfair slept—all, apparently, except Mr. J. G. Reeder, Friend of the Law and Terror of Criminals. Police-Officer Dyer saw the yellow light behind the casemented window and smiled benevolently.

It was so still a night that when he heard a key turn in a lock, he looked over his shoulder, thinking the noise was from the house immediately behind him. But the door did not move. Instead he saw a woman appear on the top doorstep five houses away. She wore a flimsy négligée.

"Officer!"

The voice was low, cultured, very urgent. He moved more quickly towards her than policemen usually move.

"Anything wrong, miss?"

Her face, he noticed in his worldly way, was "made up"; the cheeks heavily rouged, the lips a startling red for one who was afraid. He supposed her to be pretty in normal circumstances, but was doubtful as to her age. She wore a long black dressing-gown, fastened up to her chin. Also he saw that the hand that gripped the railing which flanked the steps glittered in the light of the street lamps.

"I don't know... quite. I am alone in the house and I thought I heard... something."

Three words to a breath. Obviously she was terrified.

"Haven't you any servants in the house?"

The constable was surprised, a little shocked.

"No. I only came back from Paris at midnight—we took the house furnished—I think the servants I engaged mistook the date of my return. I am Mrs. Granville Fornese."

In a dim way he remembered the name. It had that value of familiarity which makes even the most assured hesitate to deny acquaintance. It sounded grand, too—the name of a Somebody. And Bennett Street was a place where Somebodies live.

The officer peered into the dark hall.

"If you would put the light on, madam, I will look round."

She shook her head: he almost felt the shiver of her.

"The lights aren't working. That is what frightened me. They were quite all right when I went to bed at one o'clock. Something woke me... I don't know what... and I switched on the lamp by the side of my bed. And there was no light. I keep a little portable battery lamp in my bag. I found this and turned it on."

She stopped, set her teeth in a mirthless smile. Police-Officer Dyer saw the dark eyes were staringly wide.

"I saw... I don't know what it was... just a patch of black, like somebody crouching by the wall. Then it disappeared. And the door of my room was wide open. I closed and locked it when I went to bed."

The officer pushed open the door wider, sent a white beam of light along the passage. There was a small hall table against the wall, where a telephone instrument stood. Striding into the hall, he took up the instrument and lifted the hook: the 'phone was dead.

"Does this——"

So far he got with the question, and then stopped. From somewhere above him he heard a faint but sustained creak—the sound of a foot resting on a faulty floor-board. Mrs. Fornese was still standing in the open doorway, and he went back to her.

"Have you a key to this door?" he asked, and she shook her head.

He felt along the inner surface of the lock and found a stop-catch, pushed it up.

"I'll have to 'phone from somewhere. You'd better..."

What had she best do? He was a plain police-constable, and was confronted with a delicate situation.

"Is there anywhere you could go... friends?"

"No." There was no indecision in that word. And then: "Doesn't Mr. Reeder live opposite? Somebody told me..."

In the house opposite a light showed. Mr. Dyer surveyed the lighted window dubiously. It stood for the elegant apartment of one who held a post superior to chief constables. No. 7 Bennett Street had been at a recent period converted into flats, and into one of these Mr. Reeder had moved from his suburban home. Why he should take a flat in that exclusive and interesting neighbourhood, nobody knew. He was credited by criminals with being fabulously rich; he was undoubtedly a snug man.

The constable hesitated, searched his pocket for the smallest coin of the realm, and, leaving the lady on the doorstep, crossed the road and tossed a ha'penny to the window. A second and the casement window was pushed open.

"Excuse me, Mr. Reeder, could I see you for a second?"

The head and shoulders disappeared, and in a very short time Mr. Reeder appeared in the doorway. He was so fully dressed that he might have been expecting the summons. The frock coat was as tightly buttoned, on the back of his head his flat-topped felt hat, on his nose the pince-nez through which he never looked were askew.

"Anything wrong, constable?" he asked gently.

"Could I use your 'phone? There is a lady over there—Mrs. Fornese... alone... heard somebody in the house. I heard it too..."

He heard a short scream... a crash, and jumped round. The door of No. 4 was closed. Mrs. Fornese had disappeared.

In six strides Mr. Reeder had crossed the road and was at the door. Stooping, he pressed in the flap of the letter-box and listened. No noise but the ticking of a clock... a faint sighing sound.

"Hum!" said Mr. Reeder, scratching his long nose thoughtfully. "Hum... would you be so kind as to tell me all about this—um—happening?"

The police-constable repeated the story, more coherently.

"You fastened the spring lock so that it would not move? A wise precaution."

Mr. Reeder frowned. Without another word he crossed the road and disappeared into his flat. There was a small drawer at the back of his writing bureau, and this he unlocked. Taking out a leather hold-all, he unrolled this, and selecting three curious steel instruments that were not unlike small hooks, fitted one into a wooden handle and returned to the constable.

"This, I fear, is... I will not say 'unlawful,' for a gentleman of my position is incapable of an unlawful act.... Shall I say 'unusual'?"

All the time he talked in his soft, apologetic way he was working at the lock, turning the instrument first one way and then the other. Presently with a click the lock turned and Mr. Reeder pushed open the door.

"I think I had best borrow your lamp—thank you."

He took the electric lamp from the constable's hand and flung a white circle of light into the hall. There was no sign of life. He cast the beam up the stairs, and, stooping his head, listened. There came to his ear no sound, and noiselessly he stepped further into the hall.

The passage continued beyond the foot of the stairs, and at the end was a door which apparently gave to the domestic quarters of the house. To the policeman's surprise, it was this door which Mr. Reeder examined. He turned the handle, but the door did not move, and, stooping, he squinted through the keyhole.

"There was somebody... upstairs," began the policeman with respectful hesitation.

"There was somebody upstairs," repeated Mr. Reeder absently. "You heard a creaky board, I think."

He came slowly back to the foot of the stairs and looked up. Then he cast his lamp along the floor of the hall.

"No sawdust," he said, speaking to himself, "so it can't be *that*."

"Shall I go up, sir?" said the policeman, and his foot was on the lower tread when Mr. Reeder, displaying unexpected strength in so weary-looking a man, pushed him back.

"I think not, constable," he said firmly. "If the lady is upstairs she will have heard our voices. But the lady is not upstairs."

"Do you think she's in the kitchen, sir?" asked the puzzled policeman.

Mr. Reeder shook his head sadly.

"Alas! how few modern women spend their time in a kitchen!" he said, and made an impatient clucking noise, but whether this was a protest against the falling-off of woman's domestic qualities, or whether he "tchk'd" for some other reason, it was difficult to say, for he was a very preoccupied man.

He swung the lamp back to the door.

"I thought so," he said, with a note of relief in his voice. "There are two walking-sticks in the hall stand. Will you get one of them, constable?"

Wondering, the officer obeyed, and came back, handing a long cherrywood stick with a crooked handle to Mr. Reeder, who examined it in the light of his lamp.

"Dust-covered, and left by the previous owner. The spike in place of the ferrule shows that it was purchased in Switzerland—probably you are not interested in detective stories and have never read of the gentleman whose method I am plagiarising?"

"No, sir," said the mystified officer.

Mr. Reeder examined the stick again.

"It is a thousand pities that it is not a fishing-rod," he said. "Will you stay here?—and don't move."

And then he began to crawl up the stairs on his knees, waving his stick in front of him in the most eccentric manner. He held it up, lifting the full length of his arm, and as he crawled upwards he struck at imaginary obstacles. Higher and higher he went, silhouetted against the reflected light of the lamp he carried, and Police-Constable Dyer watched him open-mouthed.

"Don't you think I'd better——"

He got as far as this when the thing happened. There was an explosion that deafened him; the air was suddenly filled with flying clouds of smoke and dust; he heard the crackle of wood and the pungent scent of something burning. Dazed and stupefied, he stood stock still, gaping up at Mr. Reeder, who was sitting on a stair, picking little splinters of wood from his coat.

"I think you may come up in perfect safety," said Mr. Reeder, with great calmness.

"What—what was it?" asked the officer.

The enemy of criminals was dusting his hat tenderly, though this the officer could not see.

"You may come up."

P.-C. Dyer ran up the stairs and followed the other along the broad landing till he stopped and focussed in the light of his lamp a queer-looking and obviously home-made spring gun, the muzzle of which was trained through the banisters so that it covered the stairs up which he had ascended.

"There was," said Mr. Reeder carefully, "a piece of black thread stretched across the stairs, so that any person who bulged or broke that thread was certain to fire the gun."

"But—but the lady?"

Mr. Reeder coughed.

"I do not think she is in the house," he said, ever so gently. "I rather imagine that she went through the back. There is a back entrance to the mews, is there not? And that by this time she is a long way from the house. I sympathise with her—this little incident has occurred too late for the morning newspapers, and she will have to wait for the sporting editions before she learns that I am still alive."

The police-officer drew a long breath.

"I think I'd better report this, sir."

"I think you had," sighed Mr. Reeder. "And will you ring up Inspector Simpson and tell him that if he comes this way I should like to see him?"

Again the policeman hesitated.

"Don't you think we'd better search the house?... they may have done away with this woman."

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"They have not done away with any woman," he said decisively. "The only thing they have done away with is one of Mr. Simpson's pet theories."

"But, Mr. Reeder, why did this lady come to the door——"

Mr. Reeder patted him benignantly on the arm, as a mother might pat a child who asked a foolish question.

"The lady had been standing at the door for half-an-hour," he said gently; "on and off for half-an-hour, constable, hoping against hope, one imagines, that she would attract my attention. But I was looking at her from a room that was not—er—illuminated. I did not show myself because I—er—have a very keen desire to live!"

On this baffling note Mr. Reeder went into his house.

CHAPTER V

Mr. Reeder sat at his ease, wearing a pair of grotesquely painted velvet slippers, a cigarette hanging from his lips, and explained to the detective inspector, who had called in the early hours of the morning, his reason for adopting a certain conclusion.

"I do not imagine for one moment that it was my friend Ravini. He is less subtle, in addition to which he has little or no intelligence. You will find that this coup has been planned for months, though it has only been put into execution to-day. No. 307 Bennett Street is the property of an old gentleman who spends most of his life in Italy. He has been in the habit of letting the house furnished for years: in fact, it was vacated only a month ago."

"You think, then," said the puzzled Simpson, "that the people, whoever they were, rented the house——"

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"Even that I doubt," he said. "They have probably an order to view, and in some way got rid of the caretaker. They knew I would be at home last night, because I am always at home—um—on most nights since..." Mr. Reeder coughed in his embarrassment. "A young friend of mine has recently left London... I do not like going out alone."

And to Simpson's horror, a pinkish flush suffused the sober countenance of Mr. Reeder.

"A few weeks ago," he went on, with a pitiable attempt at airiness, "I used to dine out, attend a concert or one of those exquisite melodramas which have such an appeal for me."

"Whom do you suspect?" interrupted Simpson, who had not been called from his bed in the middle of the night to discuss the virtues of melodrama. "The Gregorys or the Donovans?" He named two groups that had excellent reason to be annoyed with Mr. Reeder and his methods.

J. G. Reeder shook his head.

"Neither," he said. "I think—indeed I am sure—that we must go back to ancient history for the cause."

Simpson opened his eyes.

"Not Flack?" he asked incredulously. "He's hiding—he wouldn't start anything so soon."

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"John Flack. Who else could have planned such a thing? The art of it! And, Mr. Simpson"—he leaned over and tapped the inspector on the breast—"there has not been a big robbery in London since Flack went to Broadmoor. You'll get the biggest of all in a week! The coup of coups! His mad brain is planning it now!"

"He's finished," said Simpson with a frown.

Mr. Reeder smiled wanly.

"We shall see. This little affair of to-night is a sighting shot—a mere nothing. But I am rather glad I am not—er—dining out in these days. On the other hand, our friend Georgio Ravini is a notorious diner-out—would you mind calling up Vine Street police station and finding out whether they have any casualties to report?"

Vine Street, which knew the movements of so many people, replied instantly that Mr. Georgio Ravini was out of town; it was believed he was in Paris.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Reeder, in his feeble, aimless way. "How very wise of Georgio—and how much wiser it will be if he stays there!"

Inspector Simpson rose and shook himself. He was a stout, hearty man who had that habit.

"I'll get down to the Yard and report this," he said. "It may not have been Flack after all. He's a gang leader and he'd be useless without his crowd, and they are scattered. Most of them are in the Argentine——"

"Ha, ha!" said Mr. Reeder, without any evidence of joy.

"What the devil are you laughing about?"

The other was instantly apologetic.

"It was what I would describe as a sceptical laugh. The Argentine! Do criminals really go to the Argentine except in those excellent works of fiction which one reads on trains? A tradition, Mr. Simpson, dating back to the ancient times when there was no extradition treaty between the two countries. Scattered, yes. I look

forward to the day when I shall gather them all together under one roof. It will be a very pleasant morning for me, Mr. Simpson, when I can walk along the gallery, looking through the little peep-holes, and watch them sewing mail-bags—I know of no more sedative occupation than a little needlework! In the meantime, watch your banks—old John is seventy years of age and has no time to waste. History will be made in the City of London before many days are past! I wonder where I could find Mr. Ravini?"

* * * * *

George Ravini was not the type of man whose happiness depended upon the good opinion which others held of him. Otherwise, he might well have spent his life in abject misery. As for Mr. Reeder—he discussed that interesting police official over a glass of wine and a good cigar in his Half Moon Street flat. It was a showy, even a flashy, little menage, for Mr. Ravini's motto was everything of the best and as much of it as possible, and his drawing-room was rather like an over-ornamented French clock—all gilt and enamel where it was not silk and damask. To his subordinate, one Lew Steyne, Mr. Ravini revealed his mind.

"If that old So-and-so knew half he pretends to know, I'd be taking the first train to Bordighera," he said. "But Reeder's a bluff. He's clever up to a point, but you can say that about almost any bogey you ever met."

"You could show *him* a few points," said the sycophantic Lew, and Mr. Ravini smiled and stroked his trim moustache.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the old nut is crazy about that girl. May and December—can you beat it!"

"What's she like?" asked Lew. "I never got a proper look at her face."

Mr. Ravini kissed the tips of his fingers ecstatically and threw the caress to the painted ceiling.

"Anyway, he can't frighten me, Lew—you know what I am: if I want anything I go after it, and I keep going after it till I get it! I've never seen anybody like her. Quite the lady and everything, and what she can see in an old such-and-such like Reeder licks me!"

"Women are funny," mused Lew. "You wouldn't think that a typewriter would chuck a man like you——"

"She hasn't chucked me," said Mr. Ravini curtly. "I'm simply not acquainted with her, that's all. But I'm going to be. Where's this place?"

"Siltbury," said Lew.

He took a piece of paper from his waistcoat pocket, unfolded it and read the pencilled words.

"Larmes Keep, Siltbury—it's on the Southern. I trailed her when she left London with her boxes—old Reeder came down to see her off, and looked about as happy as a wet cat."

"A boarding-house," mused Ravini. "That's a queer sort of job."

"She's secretary," reported Lew. (He had conveyed this information at least four times, but Mr. Ravini was one of those curious people who like to treat old facts as new sensations.)

"It's a posh place, too," said Lew. "Not like the ordinary boarding-house—only swells go there. They charge twenty guineas a week for a room, and you're lucky if you get in."

Ravini thought on this, fondling his chin.

"This is a free country," he said. "What's to stop me staying at—what's the name of the place? Larmes Keep? I've never taken 'No' from a woman in my life. Half the time they don't mean it. Anyway, she's got to give me a room if I've the money to pay for it."

"Suppose she writes to Reeder?" suggested Lew.

"Let her write!" Ravini's tone was defiant, whatever might be the state of his mind. "What'll he have on me? It's no crime to pay your rent at a boarding-house, is it?"

"Try her with one of your Luck Rings," grinned Lew.

Ravini looked at them admiringly.

"I couldn't get 'em off," he said, "and I'd never dream of parting with my luck that way. She'll be easy as soon as she knows me—don't you worry."

By a curious coincidence, as he was turning out of Half Moon Street the next morning he met the one man in the world he did not wish to see. Fortunately, Lew had taken his suit-case on to the

station, and there was nothing in Mr. Ravini's appearance to suggest that he was setting forth on an affair of gallantry.

Mr. Reeder looked at the man's diamonds glittering in the daylight. They seemed to exercise a peculiar fascination on the detective.

"The luck still holds, Georgio," he said, and Georgio smiled complacently. "And whither do you go on this beautiful September morning? To bank your nefarious gains, or to get a quick visa to your passport?"

"Strolling round," said Ravini airily. "Just taking a little constitutional." And then, with a spice of mischief: "What's happened to that busy you were putting on to tail me up? I haven't seen him."

Mr. Reeder looked past him to the distance.

"He has never been far from you, Georgio," he said gently. "He followed you from the Flotsam last night to that peculiar little party you attended in Maida Vale, and he followed you home at 2.15 a.m."

Georgio's jaw dropped.

"You don't mean he's——" He looked round. The only person visible was a benevolent-looking man who might have been a doctor, from his frock coat and top hat.

"That's not him?" frowned Ravini.

"He," corrected Mr. Reeder. "Your English is not yet perfect."

Ravini did not leave London immediately. It was two o'clock before he had shaken off the watcher, and five minutes later he was on the Southern Express. The same old cabman who had brought Margaret Belman to Larmes Keep carried him up the long, winding hill road through the broad gates to the front of the house, and deposited him under the portico. An elderly porter, in a smart, well-fitting uniform, came out to greet the stranger.

"Mr. ——?"

"Ravini," said that gentleman. "I haven't booked a room."

The porter shook his head.

"I'm afraid we have no accommodation," he said. "Mr. Daver makes it a rule not to take guests unless they've booked their rooms in advance. I will see the secretary."

Ravini followed him into the spacious hall and sat down on one of the beautiful chairs. This, he decided, was something outside the usual run of boarding-houses. It was luxurious even for an hotel. No other guests were visible. Presently he heard a step on the flagged floor and rose to meet the eyes of Margaret Belman. Though they were unfriendly, she betrayed no sign of recognition. He might have been the veriest stranger.

"The proprietor makes it a rule not to accept guests without previous correspondence," she said. "In those circumstances I am afraid we cannot offer you accommodation."

"I've already written to the proprietor," said Ravini, never at a loss for a glib lie. "Go along, young lady, be a sport and see what you can do for me."

Margaret hesitated. Her own inclination was to order his suit-case to be put in the waiting cab; but she was part of the organisation of the place, and she could not let her private prejudices interfere with her duties.

"Will you wait?" she said, and went in search of Mr. Daver.

That great criminologist was immersed in a large book and looked up over his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Ravini? A foreign gentleman? Of course he is. A stranger within our gate, as you would say. It is very irregular, but in the circumstances—yes, I think so."

"He isn't the type of man you ought to have here, Mr. Daver," she said firmly. "A friend of mine who knows these people says he is a member of the criminal classes."

Mr. Daver's ludicrous eyebrows rose.

"The criminal classes! What an extraordinary opportunity to study, as it were, at first hand! You agree? I knew you would! Let him stay. If he bores me, I will send him away."

Margaret went back, a little disappointed, feeling rather foolish if the truth be told. She found Ravini waiting, caressing his moustache, a little less assured than he had been when she had left

him.

"Mr. Daver said you may stay. I will send the housekeeper to you," she said, and went in search of Mrs. Burton, and gave that doleful woman the necessary instructions.

She was angry with herself that she had not been more explicit in dealing with Mr. Daver. She might have told him that if Ravini stayed she would leave. She might even have explained the reason why she did not wish the Italian to remain in the house. She was in the fortunate position, however, that she had not to see the guests unless they expressed a wish to interview her, and Ravini was too wise to pursue his advantage.

That night, when she went to her room, she sat down and wrote a long letter to Mr. Reeder, but thought better of it and tore it up. She could not run to J. G. Reeder every time she was annoyed. He had a sufficiency of trouble, she decided, and here she was right. Even as she wrote, Mr. Reeder was examining with great interest the spring gun which had been devised for his destruction.

CHAPTER VI

To do Ravini justice, he made no attempt to approach the girl, though she had seen him at a distance. He had passed her on the lawn the second day after his arrival with no more than a nod and a smile, and indeed he seemed to have found another diversion, if not another objective, for he was scarcely away from Olga Crewe's side. Margaret saw them in the evening, leaning over the cliff wall, and George Ravini seemed remarkably pleased with himself. He was exhibiting his famous Luck Stones to Olga. Margaret saw her examine the rings and evidently make some remark upon them which sent Ravini into fits of laughter.

It was on the third day of his stay that he spoke to Margaret. They met in the big hall, and she would have passed on, but he stood in her way.

"I hope we're not going to be bad friends, Miss Belman," he said. "I'm not giving you any trouble, and I'm ready to apologise for the past. Could a gentleman be fairer than that?"

"I don't think you've anything to apologise for, Mr. Ravini," she said, a little relieved by his tone, and more inclined to be civil. "Now that you have so obviously found another interest in life, are you enjoying your stay?"

"It's perfectly marvellous," he said conventionally, for he was a man who loved superlatives. "And say, Miss Belman, who is this young lady staying here, Miss Olga Crewe?"

"She's a guest: I know nothing about her."

"What a peach!" he said enthusiastically, and Margaret was amused.

"And a lady, every inch of her," he went on. "I must say I'm putty in the hands of real ladies! There's something about 'em that's different from shop-girls and typists and people of that kind. Not that you're a typist," he went on hastily. "I regard you as a lady too. Every inch of one. I'm thinking about sending for my Rolls to take her a drive round the country. You're not jealous?"

Anger and amusement struggled for expression, but Margaret's sense of humour won, and she laughed long and silently all the way to her office.

Soon after this Mr. Ravini disappeared. So also did Olga. Margaret saw them coming into the hall about eleven, and the girl looked paler than usual, and, sweeping past her without a word, ran up the stairs. Margaret surveyed the young man curiously. His face was flushed, his eyes of an unusual brightness.

"I'm going up to town to-morrow," he said. "Early train... you needn't 'phone for a cab: I can walk down the hill."

He was almost incoherent.

"You're tired of Larmes Keep?"

"Eh? Tired? No, by God I'm not! This is the place for me!"

He smoothed back his dark hair and she saw his hand trembling so much that the Luck Stones flickered and flashed like fire. She waited until he had disappeared, and then she went upstairs and knocked at Olga's door. The girl's room was next to hers.

"Who's that?" asked a voice sharply.

"Miss Belman."

The key turned, the door opened. Only one light was burning in the room, so that Olga's face was in shadow.

"Do you want anything?" she asked.

"Can I come in?" asked Margaret. "There's something I wish to say to you."

Olga hesitated. Then:

"Come in," she said. "I've been snivelling. I hope you don't mind."

Her eyes were red, the stains of tears were still on her face.

"This damned place depresses me awfully," she excused herself as she dabbed her cheeks with a handkerchief. "What do you want to see me about?"

"Mr. Ravini. I suppose you know he is a—crook?"

Olga stared at her and her eyes went hard.

"I don't know that I am particularly interested in Mr. Ravini," she said slowly. "Why do you come to tell me this?"

Margaret was in a dilemma.

"I don't know... I thought you were getting rather friendly with him... it was very impertinent of me."

"I think it was," said Olga Crewe coldly, and the rebuff was such that Margaret's face went scarlet.

She was angry with herself when she went into her own room that night, and anger is a bad bedmate, and the most wakeful of all human emotions. She tossed from side to side in her bed, tried to forget there were such persons as Olga Crewe and George Ravini, tried every device she could think of to induce sleep, and was almost successful when...

She sat up in bed. Fingers were scrabbling on the panel of her door; not exactly scratching nor tapping. She switched on the light, and, getting out of bed, walked to the door and listened. Somebody was there. The handle turned in her hand.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"Let me in, let me in!..."

It was a frantic whisper, but she recognised the voice—Ravini!

"I can't let you in. Go away, please, or I'll telephone..."

She heard a sound, a curious muffled sound... sobbing... a man! And then the voice ceased. Her heart racing madly, she stood by the door, her ear to the panel, listening, but no other sound came. She spent the rest of the night sitting up in bed, a quilt about her shoulders, listening, listening...

Day broke greyly; the sun came up. She lay down and fell asleep. It was the maid bringing tea that woke her, and, getting out of bed, she opened the door.... Something attracted her attention.

"A nice morning, miss," said the fresh-faced country girl brightly.

Margaret nodded. As soon as the girl was gone she opened the door again to examine more closely the thing she had seen. It was a triangular patch of stuff that had been torn and caught in one of the splinters of the old oaken door. She took it off carefully and laid it in the palm of her hand. A jagged triangle of pink silk. She put it on her dressing-table wonderingly. There must be an end to this. If Ravini was not leaving that morning, or Mr. Daver would not ask him to go, she would leave for London that night.

As she left her room she met the housemaid.

"That man in No. 7 has gone, miss," the woman reported, "but he's left his pyjamas behind."

"Gone already?"

"Must have gone last night, miss. His bed hasn't been slept in."

Margaret followed her along the passage to Ravini's room. His bag was gone, but on the pillow, neatly folded, was a suit of pink silk pyjamas, and, bending over, she saw that the breast was slightly torn. A little triangular patch of pink silk had been ripped out!

CHAPTER VII

WHEN a nimble old man dropped from a high wall at midnight and, stopping only to wipe the blood from his hands—for he had come upon a guard patrolling the grounds in his flight—and walked briskly towards London, peering into every side lane for the small car that had been left for him, he brought a new complication into many lives, and for three people at least marked the date of their passing in the Book of Fate.

Police headquarters were not slow to employ the press to advertise their wants. But the escape from Broadmoor of a homicidal maniac is something which is not to be rushed immediately into print. Not once but many times had the help of the public been enlisted in a vain endeavour to bring old John Flack to justice. His description had been circulated, his haunts notified, without there being any successful issue to the broadcast.

There was a conference at Scotland Yard, which Mr. Reeder attended; and they were five very serious men who gathered round the superintendent's desk, and mainly the talk was of bullion and of "noses," by which inelegant term is meant the inevitable police informer.

Crazy John "fell" eventually through the treachery of an outside helper. Ravini, the most valuable of gang leaders, had been employed to "cover" a robbery at the Leadenhall Bank. Bullion was John Flack's specialty: it was not without its interest for Mr. Ravini.

The theft had been successful. One Sunday morning two cars drove out of the courtyard of the Leadenhall Bank. By the side of the driver of each car sat a man in the uniform of the Metropolitan Police—inside each car was another officer. A City policeman saw the cars depart, but accepted the presence of the uniformed men and did not challenge the drivers. It was not an unusual event: transfers of gold or stocks on Sunday morning had been witnessed before, but usually the City authorities were notified. He called Old Jewry station on the telephone to report the occurrence, but by this time John Flack was well away.

It was Ravini, cheated, as he thought, of his fair share of the plunder, who betrayed the old man—the gold was never recovered.

England had been ransacked to find John Flack's headquarters, but without success. There was not an hotel or boarding-house keeper who had not received his portrait—nor one who recognised him in any guise.

The exhaustive inquiries which followed his arrest did little to increase the knowledge of the police. Flack's lodgings were found—a furnished room in Bloomsbury which he had occupied at rare intervals for years. But here were discovered no documents which gave the slightest clue to the real headquarters of the gang. Probably they had none. They were chosen and discarded as opportunity arose or emergency dictated, though it was clear that the old man had something in the nature of a general staff to assist him.

"Anyway," said Big Bill Gordon, Chief of the Big Five, "he'll not start anything in the way of a bullion steal—his mind will be fully occupied with ways and means of getting out of the country."

It was Mr. Reeder's head which shook.

"The nature of criminals may change, but their vanities persist," he said, in his precise, grandiloquent way. "Mr. Flack does not pride himself upon his murders, but upon his robberies, and he will signify his return to freedom in the usual manner."

"His gang is scattered——" began Simpson.

J. G. Reeder silenced him with a sad, sweet smile.

"There is plenty of evidence, Mr. Simpson, that the gang has coagulated again. It is—um—an ugly word, but I can think of no better. Mr. Flack's escape from the—er—public institution where he was confined shows evidence of good team work. The rope, the knife with which he killed the unfortunate warder, the kit of tools, the almost certainty that there was a car waiting to take him away, are all symptomatic of gang work. And what has Mr. Flack——"

"I wish to God you wouldn't call him 'Mr.' Flack!" said Big Bill explosively.

J. G. Reeder blinked.

"I have an ineradicable respect for age," he said in a hushed voice, "but a greater respect for the dead. I am hoping to increase my respect for Mr. Flack in the course of the next month."

"If it's gang work," interrupted Simpson, "who are with him? The old crowd is either gaoled or out of the country. I know what you're thinking about, Mr. Reeder: you've got your mind on what happened last night. I've been thinking it over, and it's quite likely that the man-trap wasn't fixed by Flack at all, but by one of the other crowd. Do you know Donovan's out of Dartmoor? He has no reason for loving you."

Mr. Reeder raised his hand in protest.

"On the contrary, Joe Donovan, when I saw him in the early hours of this morning, was a very affable and penitent man who deeply regretted the unkind things he said of me as he left the Old Bailey dock. He lives at Kilburn, and spent last evening at a local cinema with his wife and daughter—no, it wasn't Donovan. He is not a brainy man. Only John Flack, with his dramatic sense, could have staged that little comedy which was so nearly a tragedy."

"You were nearly killed, they tell me, Reeder?" said Big Bill.

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"I was not thinking of that particular tragedy. It was in my mind before I went up the stairs to force the door into the kitchen. If I had done that, I think I should have shot Mr. Flack, and there would have been an end of all our speculations and troubles."

Mr. Simpson was examining some papers that were on the table before him.

"If Flack's going after bullion he's got very little chance. The only big movement is that of a hundred and twenty thousand sovereigns which goes to Tilbury to-morrow morning or the next day from the Bank of England, and it is impossible that Flack could organise a steal at such short notice."

Mr. Reeder was suddenly alert and interested.

"A hundred and twenty thousand sovereigns," he murmured, rubbing his chin irritably. "Ten tons. It goes by train?"

"By lorry, with ten armed men—one per ton," said Simpson humorously. "I don't think you need worry about that."

Mr. J. G. Reeder's lips were pursed as though he were whistling, but no sound issued. Presently he spoke.

"Flack was originally a chemist," he said slowly. "I don't suppose there is a better criminal chemist in England than Mr. Flack."

"Why do you say that?" asked Simpson with a frown.

Mr. Reeder shrugged his shoulders.

"I have a sixth sense," he said, almost apologetically, "and invariably I associate some peculiar quality with every man and woman who—um—passes under review. For example, Mr. Simpson, when I think of you, I have an instinctive, shadowy thought of a prize ring where I first had the pleasure of seeing you." (Simpson, who had been an amateur welter weight, grinned appreciatively.) "And my mind never rests upon Mr. Flack except in the surroundings of a laboratory with test tubes and all the paraphernalia of experimental chemistry. As for the little affair last night, I was not unprepared for it, but I suspected a trap—literally a —um—trap. Some evilly disposed person once tried the same trick with me; cut away the landing so that I should fall upon very unpleasant sharp spikes. I looked for sawdust the moment I went into the house, and when that was not present I guessed the gun."

"But how did you know there was anything?" asked Big Bill curiously.

Mr. Reeder smiled.

"I have a criminal mind," he said.

He went back to his flat in Bennett Street, his mind equally divided between Margaret Belman, safe in Sussex, and the ability of one normal trolley to carry a hundred and twenty thousand sovereigns. Such little details interested Mr. Reeder. Almost the first thing he did when he reached his flat was to call up a haulage contractor to discover whether such trucks were in use. For somehow he knew that if the Flack gang were after this shipment to Australia, it was necessary that the gold should be carried in one vehicle. And why he should think this, not even Mr. Reeder knew. But he had, as he said, a criminal mind.

That afternoon he addressed himself to a novel and not unpleasing task. It was a letter—the first letter he had written to Margaret Belman,—and in its way it was a curiosity.

> "My dear Miss Margaret," it began, "I trust you will not be annoyed that I should write to you; but certain incidents which disfigured perhaps our parting, and which may cause you (I say this, knowing your kind heart) a little unhappiness, induce this letter——"

Mr. Reeder paused here to discover a method by which he could convey his regret at not seeing her, without offering an embarrassing revelation of his more secret thoughts. At five o'clock, when his servant brought in his tea, he was still sitting before the unfinished letter. Mr. Reeder took up the cup, carried it to his writing-table, and stared at it as though for inspiration.

And then he saw, on the surface of the steaming cup, a thread-like formation of froth which had a curious metallic quality. He dipped his forefinger delicately in the froth and put his finger to his tongue.

"Hum!" said Mr. Reeder, and rang the bell.

His man came instantly.

"Is there anything you want, sir?" He bent his head respectfully, and for a long time Mr. Reeder did not answer.

"The milk, of course!" he said.

"The milk, sir?" said the puzzled servant, "The milk's fresh, sir: it came this afternoon."

"You did not take it from the milkman, naturally. It was in a bottle outside the door."

The man nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"Good!" said Mr. Reeder, almost cheerfully. "In future, will you arrange to receive the milk from the milkman's own hands? You have not drunk any yourself, I see?"

"No, sir. I have had my tea, but I don't take milk with it, sir," said the servant, and Mr. Reeder favoured him with one of his rare smiles.

“That, Peters,” he said, “is why you are alive and well. Bring the rest of the milk to me, and a new cup of tea. I also will dispense with the lacteal fluid.”

“Don’t you like milk, sir?” said the bewildered man.

“I like milk,” replied Mr. Reeder gently, “but I prefer it without strychnine. I think, Peters, we’re going to have a very interesting week. Have you any dependants?”

“I have an old mother, sir,” said the mystified man.

“Are you insured?” asked Mr. Reeder, and Peters nodded dumbly.

“You have the advantage of me,” said J. G. Reeder. “Yes, I think we are going to have an interesting week.”

And his prediction was fully justified.

CHAPTER VIII

LONDON heard the news of John Flack's escape and grew fearful or indignant according to its several temperaments. A homicidal planner of great and spectacular thefts was in its midst. It was not very pleasant hearing for law-abiding citizens. And the news was more than a week old: why had Scotland Yard not taken the public into its confidence? Why suppress this news of such vital interest? Who was responsible for the suppression of this important information? Headlines asked these questions in the more sensational sheets. The news of the Bennett Street outrage was public property: to his enormous embarrassment, Mr. Reeder found himself a Matter of Public Interest.

Mr. Reeder used to sit alone in his tiny bureau at the Public Prosecutor's Office and for hours on end do little more than twiddle his thumbs and gaze disconsolately at the virgin white of his blotting-pad.

In what private day-dreams he indulged, whether they concerned fabulous fortunes and their disposition, or whether they centred about a very pretty pink-and-white young lady, or whether indeed he thought at all and his mind was not a complete blank, those who interrupted his reveries and had the satisfaction of seeing him start guiltily had no means of knowing.

At this particular moment his mind was, in truth, completely occupied by his newest as well as his oldest enemy.

There were three members of the Flack gang originally—John, George, and Augustus—and they began operations in the days when it was considered scientific and a little wonderful to burn out the lock of a safe.

Augustus Flack was killed by the night watchman of Carr's Bank in Lombard Street during an attempt to rob the gold vault; George Flack, the youngest of the three, was sent to penal servitude for ten years as the result of a robbery in Bond Street, and died there; and only John, the mad master-mind of the family, escaped detection and arrest.

It was he who brought into the organisation one O. Sweizer, the Yankee bank-smasher; he who recruited Adolphe Victoire; and those brought others to the good work. For this was Crazy Jack's peculiar asset—that he could attract to himself, almost at a minute's notice, the best brains of the underworld. Though the rest of the Flacks were either dead or gaoled, the organisation was stronger than ever, and strongest because lurking somewhere in the background was this kinky brain.

Thus matters stood when Mr. J. G. Reeder came into the case—being brought into the matter not so much because the London police had failed, but because the Public Prosecutor recognised that the breaking up of the Flacks was going to be a lengthy business, occupying one man's complete attention.

Cutting the tentacles of the organisation was an easy matter, comparatively.

Mr. Reeder took O. Sweizer, that stocky Swiss-American, when he and a man unknown were engaged in removing a safe from the Bedford Street post-office one Sunday morning. Sweizer was ready for fight, but Mr. Reeder grabbed him just a little too quickly.

"Let up!" gasped Sweizer in Italian. "You're choking me, Reeder."

Mr. Reeder turned him on to his face and handcuffed him behind, then he lifted him by the scruff of his neck and went to the assistance of his admirable colleagues who were taking the other two men.

Victoire was arrested one night at the Charlton, when he was dining with Denver May. He gave no trouble, because the police took him on a purely fictitious charge and one which he knew he could easily disprove.

"My dear Mr. Reeder," said he in his elegant, languid way, "you are making quite an absurd mistake, but I will humour you. I can prove that when the pearls were taken from Hertford Street I was in Nice."

This was on the way to the station.

They put him in the dock and searched him, discovering certain lethal weapons handily disposed about his person, but he was only amused. He was less amused when he was charged with smashing

the Bank of Lens, the attempted murder of a night watchman, and one or two other little matters which need not be particularised.

They got him into the cells, and as he was carried, struggling and raving like a lunatic, Mr. Reeder offered him a piece of advice which he rejected with considerable violence.

"Say you were in Nice at the time," he said gently.

Then one day the police pulled in a man in Somers Town, on the very prosaic charge of beating his wife in public. When they searched him they found a torn scrap of a letter, which was sent at once to Mr. Reeder. It ran:

> "Any night about eleven in Whitehall Avenue. Reeder is a man of medium height, elderly-looking, sandy-greyish hair and side-whiskers rather thick, always carries an umbrella. Recommend you to wear rubber boots and take a length of iron to him. You can easily find out who he is and what he looks like. Take your time... fifty on acc... der when the job is finished..."

This was the first hint Mr. Reeder had that he was especially unpopular with the mysterious John Flack.

The day Crazy Jack was sent down to Broadmoor had been a day of mild satisfaction for Mr. Reeder. He was not exactly happy or even relieved about it. He had the comfort of an accountant who had signed a satisfactory balance-sheet, or the builder who was surveying his finished work. There were other balance-sheets to be signed, other buildings to be erected—they differed only in their shapes and quantities.

One thing was certain, that on what other project Flack's mind was fixed, he was devoting a considerable amount of thought to J. G. Reeder—whether in reprisal for events that had passed or as a precautionary measure to check his activities in the future, the detective could only guess: but he was a good guesser.

The telephone bell, set in a remote corner of the room, rang sharply. Mr. Reeder took up the instrument with a pained expression. The operator of the office exchange told him that there

was a call from Horsham. He pulled a writing-pad towards him and waited. And then a voice spoke, and hardly was the first word uttered when he knew his man, for J. G. Reeder never forgot voices.

"That you, Reeder?... Know who I am?..."

The same thin, tense voice that had babbled threats from the dock of the Old Bailey, the same little chuckling laugh that punctured every second.

Mr. Reeder touched a bell and began to write rapidly on his pad.

"Know who I am?—I'll bet you do! Thought you'd got rid of me, didn't you? but you haven't!... Listen, Reeder, you can tell the Yard I'm busy—I'm going to give them the shock of their lives. Mad, am I? I'll show you whether I'm mad or not... And I'll get you, Reeder..."

A messenger came in. Mr. Reeder tore off the slip and handed it to him with an urgent gesture. The man read and bolted from the room.

"Is that Mr. Flack?" asked Reeder softly.

"Is it Mr. Flack, you old hypocrite!... Have you got the parcel? I wondered if you had. What do you think of it?"

"The parcel?" said Reeder, gentlier than ever, and before the man could reply: "You will get into serious trouble for trying to hoax the Public Prosecutor's Office, my friend," said Mr. Reeder reproachfully. "You are not Crazy John Flack... I know his voice. Mr. Flack spoke with a curious Cockney accent which is not easy to imitate, and Mr. Flack at this moment is in the hands of the police."

He counted on the effect of this provocative speech, and he had made no mistake.

"You lie!" screamed the voice. "You know I'm Flack... Crazy Jack, eh?... Crazy old John Flack... Mad, am I? You'll learn!... you put me in that hell upon earth, and I'm going to serve you worse than I treated that damned dago..."

The voice ceased abruptly. There was a click as the receiver was put down. Reeder listened expectantly, but no other call came through. Then he rang the bell again and the messenger returned.

"Yes, sir, I got through straight away to the Horsham police station. The inspector is sending three men in a car to the post-office."

Mr. Reeder gazed at the ceiling.

"Then I fear he has sent too late," he said. "The venerable bandit will have gone."

A quarter of an hour later came confirmation of his prediction. The police had arrived at the post-office, but the bird had flown. The clerk did not remember anybody old or wild-looking booking a call; he thought that the message had not come from the post-office itself, which was also the telephone exchange, but from an outlying call-box.

Mr. Reeder went in to report to the Public Prosecutor, but neither he nor his assistant was in the office. He rang up Scotland Yard and passed on his information to Simpson.

"I respectfully suggest that you should get into touch with the French police and locate Ravini. He may not be in Paris at all."

"Where do you think he is?" asked Simpson.

"That," replied Mr. Reeder in a hushed voice, "is a question which has never been definitely settled in my mind. I should not like to say that he was in heaven, because I cannot imagine Georgio Ravini with his Luck Stones——"

"Do you mean that he's dead?" asked Simpson quickly.

"It is very likely; in fact, it is extremely likely."

There was a long silence at the other end of the telephone.

"Have you had the parcel?"

"That I am awaiting with the greatest interest," said Mr. Reeder, and went back to his office to twiddle his thumbs and stare at his white blotting-pad.

The parcel came at three o'clock that afternoon, when Mr. Reeder had returned from his frugal lunch, which he invariably took at a large and popular teashop in Whitehall. It was a very small parcel, about three inches square; it was registered, and had been posted in London. He weighed it carefully, shook it and listened, but the lightness of the package precluded any possibility of there being concealed behind the paper wrapping anything that bore a resemblance to an infernal machine. He cut the paper tape that fastened it, took off the paper, and there was revealed a small cardboard box such as jewellers employ. Removing the lid, he found

a small pad of cotton-wool, and in the midst of this three gold rings, each with three brilliant diamonds. He put them on his blotting-pad and gazed at them for a long time.

They were George Ravini's Luck Stones, and for ten minutes Mr. Reeder sat in a profound reverie, for he knew that George Ravini was dead, and it did not need the card which accompanied the rings to know who was responsible for the drastic and gruesome ending to Mr. Ravini's life. The sprawling "J. F." on the little card was in Mr. Flack's writing, and the three words "Your turn next" were instructive, even if they were not, as they were intended to be, terrifying.

Half an hour later Mr. Reeder met Inspector Simpson by appointment at Scotland Yard. Simpson examined the rings curiously, and pointed out a small, dark-brown speck at the edge of one of the Luck Stones.

"I don't doubt that Ravini is dead," he said. "The first thing to discover is where he went when he said he was going to Paris."

This task presented fewer difficulties than Simpson had imagined. He remembered Lew Steyne and his association with the Italian, and a telephone call put through to the City police located Lew in five minutes.

"Bring him along in a taxi," said Simpson, and, as he hung up the receiver: "The question is, what is Crazy Jack's coup? murder on a large scale, or just picturesque robbery?"

"I think the latter," said Mr. Reeder thoughtfully. "Murder, with Mr. Flack, is a mere incidental to the—er—more important business of money-making."

He pinched his lip thoughtfully.

"Forgive me if I seem to repeat myself, but I would again remind you that Mr. Flack's specialty is bullion, if I remember aright," he said. "Didn't he smash the strong room of the *Megantic*... bullion, hum!" He scratched his chin and looked up over his glasses at Simpson.

The inspector shook his head.

"I only wish Crazy Jack was crazy enough to try to get out of the country by steamer—he won't. And the Leadenhall Bank stunt couldn't be repeated to-day. No, there's no chance of a bullion steal."

Mr. Reeder looked unconvinced.

"Would you ring up the Bank of England and find out if the money has gone to Australia?" he pleaded.

Simpson pulled the instrument towards him, gave a number and, after five minutes' groping through various departments, reached an exclusive personage. Mr. Reeder sat, with his hands clasped about the handle of his umbrella, a pained expression on his face, his eyes closed, and seemingly oblivious of the conversation. Presently Simpson hung up the receiver.

"The consignment should have gone this morning, but the sailing of the *Olanic* has been delayed by a stevedore strike—it goes to-morrow morning," he reported. "The gold is taken on a lorry to Tilbury with a guard. At Tilbury it is put into the *Olanic's* strong-room, which is the newest and safest of its kind. I don't suppose that John will begin operations there."

"Why not?" J. G. Reeder's voice was almost bland; his face was screwed into its nearest approach to a smile. "On the contrary, as I have said before, that is the very consignment I should expect Mr. Flack to go after."

"I pray that you're a true prophet," said Simpson grimly. "I could wish for nothing better."

They were still talking of Flack and his passion for ready gold when Mr. Lew Steyne arrived in the charge of a local detective. No crook, however hardened, can step into the gloomy approaches of Scotland Yard without experiencing some uneasiness, and Lew's attempt to display his indifference was rather pathetic.

"What's the idea, Mr. Simpson?" he asked, in a grieved tone. "I've done nothing."

He scowled at Reeder, who was known to him, and whom he regarded, very rightly, as being responsible for his appearance at this best-hated spot.

Simpson put a question, and Mr. Lew Steyne shrugged his shoulders.

"I ask you, Mr. Simpson, am I Ravini's keeper? I know nothing about the Italian crowd, and Ravini's scarcely an acquaintance."

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"You spent two hours with him last Thursday evening," he said, and Lew was a little taken aback.

"I had a little bit of business with him, I admit," he said. "Over a house I'm trying to rent——"

His shifty eyes had become suddenly steadfast; he was looking open-mouthed at the three rings that lay on the table. Reeder saw him frown, and then:

"What are those?" asked Lew huskily. "They're not Georgio's Luck Stones?"

Simpson nodded and pushed the little square of white paper on which they lay towards the visitor.

"Do you know them?" he asked.

Lew picked up one of the rings and turned it round in his hand.

"What's the idea?" he asked suspiciously. "Ravini told me himself he could never get these off."

And then, as the significance of their presence dawned upon him, he gasped.

"What's happened to him?" he asked quickly. "Is he——"

"I fear," said Mr. Reeder soberly, "that Georgio Ravini is no longer with us."

"Dead?" Lew almost shrieked the word. His yellow face went a chalky white. "Where... who did it?..."

"That is exactly what we want to know," said Simpson. "Now, Lew, you've got to spill it. Where is Ravini? He said he was going to Paris, I know, but actually where did he go?"

The thief's eyes strayed to Mr. Reeder.

"He was after that 'bird,' that's all I know," he said sullenly.

"Which bird?" asked Simpson, but Mr. Reeder had no need to have its identity explained.

"He was after—Miss Belman?"

Lew nodded.

"Yes, a girl he knew... she went down into the country to take a job as hotel manager or something. I saw her go, as a matter of fact. Ravini wanted to get better acquainted, so he went down to stay at the hotel."

Even as he spoke, Mr. Reeder had reached for the telephone, and had given the peculiar code word which is equivalent to a command for a clear line.

A high-pitched voice answered him.

"I am Mr. Daver, the proprietor... Miss Belman? I'm afraid she is out just now. She will be back in a few minutes. Who is it speaking?"

Mr. Reeder replied diplomatically. He was anxious to get into touch with George Ravini, and for two minutes he allowed the voluble Mr. Daver to air a grievance.

"Yes, he went in the early morning, without paying his bill..."

"I will come down and pay it," said Mr. Reeder.

CHAPTER IX

"THE point is," said Mr. Daver, "the only point—I think you will agree with me here—that really has any interest for us, is that Mr. Ravini left without paying his bill. This was the point I emphasised to a friend of his who called me on the telephone this morning. That is to me the supreme mystery of his disappearance—he left without paying his bill!"

He leaned back in his chair and beamed at the girl in the manner of one who had expounded an unanswerable problem. With his finger-tips together he had an appearance which was oddly reminiscent.

"The fact that he left behind a pair of pyjamas which are practically valueless merely demonstrates that he left in a hurry. You agree with me? I am sure you do. Why he should leave in a hurry is naturally beyond my understanding. You say he was a crook: possibly he received information that he had been detected."

"He had no telephone calls and no letters while he was here," insisted Margaret.

Mr. Daver shook his head.

"That proves nothing. Such a man would have associates. I am sorry he has gone. I hoped to have an opportunity of studying his type. And by the way, I have discovered something about Flack—the famous John Flack—did you know that he had escaped from the lunatic asylum? I gather from your alarm that you didn't. I am an observer, Miss B. Years of study of this fascinating subject have produced in me a sixth sense—the sense of observation, which is atrophied in ordinary individuals."

He took a long envelope from his drawer and pulled out a small bundle of press cuttings. These he sorted on to his table, and presently unfolded a newspaper portrait of an elderly man and laid it before her.

"Flack," he said briefly.

She was surprised at the age of the man; the thin face, the grizzled moustache and beard, the deep-set, intelligent eyes suggested almost anything rather than that confirmed and dangerous criminal.

"My press-cutting agency supplied these," he said. "And here is another portrait which may interest you, and in a sense the arrival of this photograph is a coincidence. I am sure you will agree with me when I tell you why. It is a picture of a man called Reeder."

Mr. Daver did not look up or he would have seen the red come to the girl's face.

"A clever old gentleman attached to the Public Prosecutor's Department——"

"He is not very old," said Margaret coldly.

"He looks old," said Mr. Daver, and Margaret had to agree that the newspaper portrait was not a very flattering one.

"This is the gentleman who was instrumental in arresting Flack, and the coincidence—now what do you imagine the coincidence is?"

She shook her head.

"He's coming here to-day!"

Margaret Belman's mouth opened in amazement.

"I had a wire from him this afternoon saying he was coming to-night, and asking if I could accommodate him. But for my interest in this case I should not have known his name or had the slightest idea of his identity. In all probability I should have refused him a room."

He looked up suddenly.

"You say he is not so old: do you know him? I see that you do. That is even a more remarkable coincidence. I am looking forward with the utmost delight to discussing with him my pet subject. It will be an intellectual treat."

"I don't think Mr. Reeder discusses crime," she said. "He is rather reticent on the subject."

"We shall see," said Mr. Daver, and from his manner she guessed that he at any rate had no doubt that the man from the Public Prosecutor's Office would respond instantly to a sympathetic audience.

Mr. Reeder came just before seven, and to her surprise he had abandoned his frock-coat and curious hat and was almost jauntily attired in grey flannels. He brought with him two very solid and heavy-looking steamer trunks.

The meeting was not without its moment of embarrassment.

"I trust you will not think, Miss—um—Margaret, that I am being indiscreet. But the truth is, I—um—am in need of a holiday."

He never looked less in need of a holiday: compared with the Reeder she knew, this man was most unmistakably alert.

"Will you come to my office?" she said, a little unsteadily.

When they reached her bureau, Mr. Reeder opened the door reverently. She had a feeling that he was holding his breath, and she was seized with an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh. Instead, she preceded him into her sanctum. When the door closed:

"I was an awful pig to you, Mr. Reeder," she began rapidly. "I ought to have written... the whole thing was so absurd... the quarrel, I mean."

"The disagreement," murmured Mr. Reeder. "I am old-fashioned, I admit, but an old man——"

"Forty-eight isn't old," she scoffed. "And why shouldn't you wear side-whiskers? It was unpardonable of me... feminine curiosity: I wanted to see how you looked."

Mr. Reeder raised his hand. His voice was almost gay.

"The fault was entirely mine, Miss Margaret. I am old-fashioned. You do not think—er—it is indecorous, my paying a visit to Larmes Keep?"

He looked round at the door and lowered his voice.

"When did Mr. Ravini leave?" he asked.

She looked at him amazed.

"Did you come down about that?"

He nodded slowly.

"I heard he was here. Somebody told me. When did he go?"

Very briefly she told him the story of her night's experience, and he listened, his face growing longer and longer, until she had finished.

"Before that, can you remember what happened? Did you see him the night before he left?"

She knit her forehead and tried to remember.

"Yes," she said suddenly, "he was in the grounds, walking with Miss Crewe. He came in rather late——"

"With Miss Crewe?" asked Reeder quickly. "Miss Crewe? Was that the rather interesting young lady I saw playing croquet with a clergyman as I came across the lawn?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"Did you come across the lawn? I thought you drove up to the front of the house——"

"I descended from the vehicle at the top of the hill," Mr. Reeder hastily explained. "At my age a little exercise is vitally necessary. The approaches to the Keep are charming. A young lady, rather pale, with dark eyes... hum!"

He was looking at her searchingly, his head a little on one side.

"So she and Ravini went out. Were they acquainted?"

She shook her head.

"I don't think Ravini had met her until he came here."

She went on to tell him of Ravini's agitation, and of how she had found Olga Crewe in tears.

"Weeping... ah!" Mr. Reeder fondled his nose. "You have seen her since?"

And, when the girl shook her head:

"She got up late the next morning—had a headache possibly?" he asked eagerly, and her eyes opened in astonishment.

"Why, yes. How did you know——"

But Mr. Reeder was not in an informative mood.

"The number of your room is——?"

"No. 4. Miss Crewe's is No. 5."

Reeder nodded.

"And Ravini was in No. 7: that is two doors away." Then, suddenly: "Where have you put me?"

She hesitated.

"In No. 7. Those were Mr. Daver's orders. It is one of the best rooms in the house. I warn you, Mr. Reeder, the proprietor is a criminologist and is most anxious to discuss his hobby."

"Delighted," murmured Mr. Reeder, but he was thinking of something else. "Could I see Mr. Daver?"

The quarter-of-an-hour gong had already sounded, and she took him along to the office in the annexe. Mr. Daver's desk was surprisingly tidy. He was surveying an account-book through large horn-rimmed spectacles, and looked up inquiringly as she came in.

"This is Mr. Reeder," she said, and withdrew.

For a second they looked at one another, the detective and the Puck-faced little proprietor; and then, with a magnificent wave of his hand, Mr. Daver invited his visitor to a seat.

"This is a very proud moment for me, Mr. Reeder," he said, and bent himself double in a profound bow. "As an humble student of those great authorities whose works, I have no doubt, are familiar to you, I am honoured at this privilege of meeting one whom I may describe as a modern Lombroso. You agree with me? I was certain you would."

Mr. Reeder looked up at the ceiling.

"Lombroso?" he repeated slowly. "An—um—Italian gentleman, I think? The name is almost familiar."

Margaret Belman had not quite closed the door, and Mr. Daver rose and shut it; returned to his chair with an outflung hand and seated himself.

"I am glad you have come. In fact, Mr. Reeder, you have relieved my mind of a great unease. Ever since yesterday morning I have been wondering whether I ought not to call up Scotland Yard, that splendid institution, and ask them to despatch an officer to clear up this strange and possibly revolting mystery."

He paused impressively.

"I refer to the disappearance of Mr. George Ravini, a guest of Larmes Keep, who left this house at a quarter to five yesterday morning and was seen making his way into Siltbury."

"By whom?" asked Mr. Reeder.

"By an inhabitant of Siltbury, whose name for the moment I forget. Indeed, I never knew. I met him quite by chance walking down into the town."

He leaned forward over his desk and stared owlishly into Mr. Reeder's eyes.

"You have come about Ravini, have you not? Do not answer me: I see you have! Naturally, one did not expect you to carry, so to speak, your heart on your sleeve. Am I right? I think I am."

Mr. Reeder did not confirm this conclusion. He seemed strangely unwilling to speak, and in ordinary circumstances Mr. Daver would not have resented this diffidence.

"Very naturally I do not wish a scandal to attach to this house," he said, "and I may rely upon your discretion. The only matter which touches me is that Ravini left without paying his bill; a small and unimportant aspect of what may possibly be a momentous case. You see my point of view? I am certain that you do."

He paused, and now Mr. Reeder spoke.

"At a quarter to five," he said thoughtfully, as though speaking to himself, "it was scarcely light, was it?"

"The dawn was possibly breaking o'er the sea," said Mr. Daver poetically.

"Going to Siltbury? Carrying his bag?"

Mr. Daver nodded.

"May I see his room?"

Daver came to his feet with a flourish.

"That is a request I expected, and it is a reasonable request. Will you follow me?"

Mr. Reeder followed him through the great hall, which was occupied solely by a military-looking gentleman, who cast a quick sidelong glance at him as he passed. Mr. Daver was leading the way to the wide stairs when Mr. Reeder stopped and pointed.

"How very interesting!" he said.

The most unlikely things interested Mr. Reeder. On this occasion the point of interest was a large safe—larger than any safe he had seen in a private establishment. It was six feet in height and half

that width, and it was fitted under the first flight of stairs.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Daver, and turned back. His face screwed up into a smile when he saw the object of the detective's attention.

"Ah! My safe! I have many rare and valuable documents which I keep here. It is a French model, you will observe—too large for my modest establishment, you will say? I agree. Sometimes, however, we have very rich people staying here... jewels and the like... it would take a very clever burglar to open that, and yet I, with a little key——"

He drew a chain from his pocket and fitted one of the keys at the end into a thin keyhole, turned a handle, and the heavy door swung open.

Mr. Reeder peeped in curiously. On the two steel shelves at the back of the safe were three small tin boxes—otherwise the safe was empty. The doors were of an extraordinary thickness, and their inner face smooth except for a slab of steel the object of which apparently was to back and strengthen the lock. All this he saw at once, but he saw something else. The white enamelled floor of the safe was brighter in hue than the walls. Only a man of Mr. Reeder's powers of observation would have noticed this fact. And the steel slab at the back of the lock...? Mr. Reeder knew quite a lot about safes.

"A treasure-house—it almost makes me feel rich," chuckled Mr. Daver as he locked the door and led the way up the stairs. "The psychology of it will appeal to you, Mr. Reeder!"

At the head of the stairs they came to a broad corridor; Daver, stopping before the door of No. 7, inserted a key.

"This is also your room," he explained. "I had a feeling which amounted almost to a certainty, that your visit was not wholly unconnected with this curious disappearance of Mr. Ravini, who left without paying his bill." He chuckled a little and apologised. "Excuse me for my insistence upon this point, but it touches me rather nearly."

Mr. Reeder followed his host into the big room. It was panelled from ceiling to floor and furnished with a luxury which surprised him. The articles of furniture were few, but there was not one which

a connoisseur would not have noted with admiration. The four-poster bed was Jacobean; the square of carpet was genuine Teheran; a dressing-table with a settle before it was also of the Jacobean period.

"That was his bed, where the pyjamas were found."

Mr. Daver pointed dramatically. But Mr. Reeder was looking at the casement windows, one of which was open.

He leaned out and looked down, and immediately began to take in the view. He could see Siltbury lying in the shadow of the downs, its lights just then beginning to twinkle; but the view of the Siltbury road was shut out by a belt of firs. To the left he had a glimpse of the hill road up which his cab had climbed.

Mr. Reeder came out from the room and cast his eyes up and down the corridor.

"This is a very beautiful house you have, Mr. Daver," he said.

"You like it? I was sure you would!" said Mr. Daver enthusiastically. "Yes, it is a delightful property. To you it may seem a sacrilege that I should use it as a boarding-house, but perhaps our dear young friend Miss Belman has explained that it is a hobby of mine. I hate loneliness; I dislike intensely the exertion of making friends. My position is unique; I can pick and choose my guests."

Mr. Reeder was looking aimlessly towards the head of the stairs.

"Did you ever have a guest named Holden?" he asked.

Mr. Daver shook his head.

"Or a guest named Willington...? Two friends of mine who may have come here about eight years ago?"

"No," said Mr. Daver promptly. "I never forget names. You may inspect our guest-list for the past twelve years at any time you wish. Would they be likely to come for any reason"—Mr. Daver was amusingly embarrassed—"in other names than their own? No, I see they wouldn't."

As he was speaking, a door at the far end of the corridor opened and closed instantly. Mr. Reeder, who missed nothing, caught one glimpse of a figure before the door shut.

"Whose room is that?" he asked.

Mr. Daver was genuinely embarrassed this time.

"That," he said, with a nervous little cough, "is my suite. You saw Mrs. Burton, my housekeeper—a quiet, rather sad soul, who has had a great deal of trouble in her life."

"Life," said Mr. Reeder tritely, "is full of trouble," and Mr. Daver agreed with a sorrowful shake of his head.

Now, the eyesight of J. G. Reeder was peculiarly good, and though he had not as yet met the housekeeper, he was quite certain that the rather beautiful face he had glimpsed for a moment did not belong to any sad woman who had seen a lot of trouble. As he dressed leisurely for dinner, he wondered why Miss Olga Crewe had been so anxious that she should not be seen coming from the proprietor's suite. A natural and proper modesty, no doubt; and modesty was the quality in woman of which Mr. Reeder most heartily approved.

He was struggling with his tie when Daver, who seemed to have constituted himself a sort of personal attendant, knocked at the door and asked permission to come in. He was a little breathless, and carried a number of press cuttings in his hand.

"You were talking about two gentlemen, Mr. Willington and Mr. Holden," he said. "The names seemed rather familiar. I had the irritating sense of knowing them without knowing them, if you understand, dear Mr. Reeder? And then I recalled the circumstances." He flourished the press cuttings. "I saw their names here."

Mr. Reeder, staring at his reflection in the glass, adjusted his tie nicely.

"Here?" he repeated mechanically, and, looking round, accepted the printed slips which his host thrust upon him.

"I am, as you probably know, Mr. Reeder, a humble disciple of Lombroso and of those other great criminologists who have elevated the study of abnormality to a science. It was Miss Belman who quite unconsciously directed my thoughts to the Flack organisation, and during the past day or two I have been getting a number of particulars concerning those miscreants. The names of Holden and Willington occur. They were two detectives who went out in search

of Flack and never returned—I remember their disappearance very well now the matter is recalled to my mind. There was also a third gentleman who disappeared."

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"Ah, you remember?" said Mr. Daver triumphantly. "Naturally you would. A lawyer named Biggerthorpe, who was called from his office one day on some excuse, and was never seen again. May I add"—he smiled good-humouredly—"that Mr. Biggerthorpe has never stayed here? Why should you imagine he had, Mr. Reeder?"

"I never did." Mr. Reeder gave blandness for blandness. "Biggerthorpe? I had forgotten him. He was an important witness against Flack if he'd ever been caught—hum!"

And then:

"You are a student of criminal practices, Mr. Daver?"

"A humble one," said Mr. Daver, and his humility was manifest in his attitude.

And then he suddenly dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper.

"Shall I tell you something, Mr. Reeder?"

"You may tell me," said Mr. Reeder, as he buttoned his waistcoat, "anything that pleases you. I am in the mood for stories. In this delightful atmosphere, amidst these beautiful surroundings, I should prefer—um—fairy stories—or shall we say ghost stories? Is Larmes Keep haunted, Mr. Daver? Ghosts are my specialty. I have probably seen and arrested more ghosts than any other living representative of the law. Some time I intend writing a monumental work on the subject. 'Ghosts I have Seen, or a Guide to the Spirit World,' in sixty-three volumes. You were about to say——?"

"I was about to say," said Mr. Daver, and his voice was curiously strained, "that in my opinion Flack himself once stayed here. I have not mentioned this fact to Miss Belman, but I am convinced in my mind that I am not in error. Seven years ago"—he was very impressive—"a grey-bearded, rather thin-faced man came here at ten o'clock at night and asked for a lodging. He had plenty of money, but this did not influence me. Ordinarily I should have

asked him to make the usual application, but it was late, a bitterly cold and snowy night, and I hadn't the heart to turn one of his age away from my door."

"How long did he stay?" asked Mr. Reeder. "And why do you think he was Flack?"

"Because"—Daver's voice had sunk until it was an eerie moan —"he left just as Ravini left—early one morning, without paying his bill, and left his pyjamas behind him!"

Very slowly Mr. Reeder turned his head and surveyed the host.

"That comes into the category of humorous stories, and I am too hungry to laugh," he said calmly. "What time do we dine?"

The gong sounded at that moment.

Margaret Belman usually dined with the other guests at a table apart. She went red and felt more than a little awkward when Mr. Reeder came across to her table, dragging a chair with him, and ordered another place to be set. The other three guests dined at separate tables.

"An unsociable lot of people," said Mr. Reeder as he shook out his napkin and glanced round the room.

"What do you think of Mr. Daver?"

J. G. Reeder smiled gently.

"He is a very amusing person," he said, and she laughed, but grew serious immediately.

"Have you found out anything about Ravini?"

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"I had a talk with the hall porter: he seems a very honest and straightforward fellow. He told me that when he came down the morning after Ravini disappeared, the front door had been unbolted and unlocked. An observant fellow. Who is Mrs. Burton?" he asked abruptly.

"The housekeeper." Margaret smiled and shook her head. "She is rather a miserable lady, who spends quite a lot of time hinting at the good times she should be having, instead of being 'buried alive'—those are her words—at Siltbury."

Mr. Reeder put down his knife and fork.

"Dear me!" he said mildly. "Is she a lady who has seen better days?"

Margaret laughed softly.

"I should have thought she had never had such a time as she is having now," she said. "She's rather common and terribly illiterate. Her accounts that come up to me are fearful and wonderful things! But seriously, I think she must have been in good circumstances. The first night I was here I went into her room to ask about an account I did not understand—of course it was a waste of time, for books are mysteries to her—and she was sitting at a table admiring her hands."

"Hands?" he said.

She nodded.

"They were covered with the most beautiful rings you could possibly imagine," said Margaret, and was satisfied with the impression she made, for Mr. Reeder dropped knife and fork to his plate with a crash.

"Rings…?"

"Huge diamonds and emeralds. They took my breath away. The moment she saw these she put her hand behind her, and the next morning she explained that they were presents given to her by a theatrical lady who had stayed here, and that they had no value."

"Props, in fact," said Mr. Reeder.

"What is a prop?" she asked curiously, and Mr. Reeder waggled his head, and she had learnt that when he waggled his head in that fashion he was advertising his high spirits and good humour.

After dinner he sent a waitress to find Mr. Daver, and when that gentleman arrived Mr. Reeder had to tell him that he had a lot of work to do, and request the loan of blotting-pad and a special writing-table for his room. Margaret wondered why he had not asked her, but she supposed that it was because he did not know that such things came into her province.

"You're a great writer, Mr. Reeder—he, he!" Daver was convulsed at his own little joke. "So am I! I am never happy without a pen in my hand. Tell me, as a matter of interest, do you do your best work

in the morning or in the evening? Personally, it is a question that I have never decided to my own satisfaction."

"I shall now write steadily till two o'clock," said Mr. Reeder, glancing at his watch. "That is a habit of years. From nine to two are my writing hours, after which I smoke a cigarette, drink a glass of milk—would you be good enough to see that I have a glass of milk put in my room at once?—and from two I sleep steadily till nine."

Margaret Belman was an interested and somewhat startled audience of this personal confession. It was unusual in Mr. Reeder to speak of himself, unthinkable that he should discuss his work. In all her life she had not met an individual who was more reticent about his private affairs. Perhaps the holiday spirit was on him, she thought. He was certainly younger-looking that evening than she had ever known him.

She went out to find Mrs. Burton and convey the wishes of the guest. The woman accepted the order with a sniff.

"Milk? He looks the kind of person who drinks milk. *He's* nothing to be afraid of!"

"Why should he be afraid?" asked Margaret sharply, but the reproach was lost upon Mrs. Burton.

"Nobody likes detectives nosing about a place—do they, Miss Belman? And he's not my idea of a detective."

"Who told you he was a detective?"

Mrs. Burton looked at her for a second from under her heavy lids, and then jerked her head in the direction of Daver's office.

"He did," she said. "Detectives! And me sitting here, slaving from morning till night, when I might be doing the grand in Paris or one of them places, with servants to wait on me instead of me waiting on people. It's sickening!"

Twice since she had been at Larmes Keep, Margaret had witnessed these little outbursts of fretfulness and irritation. She had an idea that the faded woman would like some excuse to make her a confidante, but the excuse was neither found nor sought. Margaret had nothing in common with this rather dull and terribly ordinary lady, and they could find no mutual interest which would lead to the

breakdown of the barriers. Mrs. Burton was a weakling; tears were never far from her eyes or voice, nor the sense of her mysterious grievances against the world far from her mind.

"They treat me like dirt," she went on, her voice trembling with her feeble anger, "and she treats me worst of all. I asked her to come and have a cup of tea and a chat in my room the other day, and what do you think she said?"

"Whom are you talking about?" asked Margaret curiously. It did not occur to her, that the "she" in question might be Olga Crewe—it would have required a very powerful effort of imagination to picture the cold and worldly Olga talking commonplaces with Mrs. Burton over a friendly cup of tea; yet it was of Olga that the woman spoke. But at the very suggestion that she was being questioned her thin lips closed tight.

"Nobody in particular... milk, did you say? I'll take it up to him myself."

Mr. Reeder was struggling into a dressing-jacket when she brought the milk to him. One of the servants had already placed pen, ink, and stationery on the table, and there were two fat manuscript-books visible to any caller, and anticipating eloquently Mr. Reeder's literary activities.

He took the tray from the woman's hand and put it on the table.

"You have a nice house, Mrs. Burton," he said encouragingly. "A beautiful house. Have you been here long?"

"A few years," she answered.

She made to go, but lingered at the door. Mr. Reeder recognised the symptoms. Discreet she might be, a gossip she undoubtedly was, aching for human converse with any who could advance a programme of those trivialities which made up her conversational life.

"No, sir, we never get many visitors here. Mr. Daver likes to pick and choose."

"And very wise of Mr. Daver. By the way, which is his room?"

She walked through the doorway and pointed along the corridor.

"Oh yes, I remember, he told me. A charming situation. I saw you coming out this evening."

"You have made a mistake—I never go into his room," said the woman sharply. "You may have seen——"

She stopped, and added:

"—somebody else. Are you going to work late, sir?"

Mr. Reeder repeated in detail his plans for the evening.

"I would be glad if you would tell Mr. Daver that I do not wish to be interrupted. I am a very slow thinker, and the slightest disturbance to my train of thought is fatal to my—er—power of composition," he said, as he closed the door upon her and, waiting until she had time to get down the stairs, locked it and pushed home the one bolt.

He drew the heavy curtains across the open windows, pushed the writing-table against the curtains so that they could not blow back, and, opening the two exercise-books, so placed them that they formed a shade that prevented the light falling upon the bed. This done, he changed quickly into a lounge suit, and, lying on the bed, pulled the coverlet over him and was asleep in five minutes.

Margaret Belman had it in her mind to send up to his room after eleven, before she herself retired, to discover whether there was anything he wanted, but fortunately she changed her mind—fortunately, because Mr. Reeder had planned to snatch five solid hours' sleep before he began his unofficial inspection of the house, or alternatively before the period arrived when it would be necessary that he should be wide awake.

At two o'clock to the second he woke and sat up on the edge of the bed, blinking at the light. Opening one of his trunks, he took out a small wooden box from which he drew a spirit stove and the paraphernalia of tea-making. He lit the little lamp, and while the tiny tin kettle was boiling he went to the bathroom, undressed, and lowered his shivering body into a cold bath. He returned fully dressed, to find the kettle boiling.

Mr. Reeder was a very methodical man; he was, moreover, a careful man. All his life he had had a suspicion of milk. He used to wander round the suburban streets in the early hours of the morning, watch the cans hanging on the knockers, the bottles deposited in corners of doorsteps, and ruminate upon the enormous

possibilities for wholesale murder that this light-hearted custom of milk delivery presented to the criminally minded. He had calculated that a nimble homicide, working on systematic lines, could decimate London in a month.

He drank his tea without milk, munched a biscuit, and then, methodically clearing away the spirit-stove and kettle, he took from his grip a pair of thick-soled felt slippers and drew them on his feet. In his trunk he found a short length of stiff rubber, which, in the hands of a skilful man, was as deadly a weapon as a knife. This he put in the inside pocket of his jacket. He put his hand in the trunk again and brought out something that looked like a thin rubber sponge-bag, except that it was fitted with two squares of mica and a small metal nozzle. He hesitated about this, turning it over and over in his hand, and eventually this went back into the trunk. The stubby Browning pistol, which was his next find, Mr. Reeder regarded with disfavour, for the value of firearms, except in the most desperate circumstances, had always seemed to him to be problematical.

The last thing to be extracted was a hollow bamboo, which contained another, and was in truth the fishing-rod for which he had once expressed a desire. At the end of the thinner was a spring loop, and after he had screwed the two lengths together he fitted upon this loop a small electric hand-lamp and carefully threaded the thin wires through the eyelets of the rod, connecting them up with a tiny switch at the handle, near where the average fisherman has his grip. He tested the switch, found it satisfactory, and when this was done he gave a final look round the room before extinguishing the table lamp.

In the broad light of day he would have presented a somewhat comic figure, sitting cross-legged on his bed, his long fishing-rod reaching out to the middle of the room and resting on the footboard; but at the moment Mr. J. G. Reeder had no sense of the ridiculous, and moreover there were no witnesses. From time to time he swayed the rod left and right, like an angler making a fresh cast. He was very wide awake, his ears tuned to differentiate between the normal noises of the night—the rustle of trees, the soft purr of the wind—and the sounds which could only come from human activity.

He sat for more than half an hour, his fishing-rod moving to and fro, and then he was suddenly conscious of a cold draught blowing from the door. He had heard no sound, not so much as the clink of a lock; but he knew that the door was wide open.

Noiselessly he drew in the rod till it was clear of the posts of the bed, brought it round towards the door, paying out until it was a couple of yards from where he sat—with one foot on the ground now, ready to leap or drop, as events dictated.

The end of the rod met with no obstruction. Reeder held his breath... listening. The corridor outside was heavily carpeted. He expected no sound of footsteps. But people must breathe, thought Mr. Reeder, and it is difficult to breathe noiselessly. Conscious that he himself was a little too silent for a supposedly sleeping man, he emitted a lifelike snore and gurgle which might be expected from a middle-aged man in the first stages of slumber....

Something touched the end of the rod, pushing it aside. Mr. Reeder turned the switch and a blinding ray of light leapt from the lamp and focussed in a circle on the opposite wall of the corridor.

The door was open, but there was nothing human in sight.

And then, despite his wonderful nerve, his flesh began to go goosey, and a cold sensation tingled up his spine. Somebody was there—hiding... waiting for the man who carried the lamp, as they thought, to emerge.

Reaching out at full arm's-length, he thrust the end of the rod through the doorway into the corridor.

Swish!

Something struck the rod and snapped it. The lamp fell on the floor, lens uppermost, and flooded the ceiling of the corridor. In an instant Reeder was off the bed, moving swiftly, till he came to the cover afforded by the wide-open door. Through the crack he had a limited view of what might happen outside.

There was a deadly silence. In the hall downstairs a clock ticked solemnly, whirred and struck the quarter to three. But there was no movement; nothing came within the range of the upturned lamp, until...

He had just a momentary flash of vision. The thin, white face, the hairy lips parted in a grin, wild, dirty white hair, and a bald crown, a short bristle of white beard, a claw-like hand reaching for the lamp....

Pistol or rubber? Mr. Reeder elected for the rubber. As the hand closed over the lamp he left the cover of the room and struck. He heard a snarl like that of a wild beast, then the lamp was extinguished as the apparition staggered back, snapping the thin wire.

The corridor was in darkness. He struck again and missed; the violence of the stroke was such that he overbalanced and fell on one knee, and the truncheon flew from his grasp. He threw out his hand, gripped an arm, and with a quick jerk brought his capture into the room and switched on the light.

A round, soft hand, covered with a silken sleeve...

As the lights leapt to life, he found himself looking into the pale face of Olga Crewe!

CHAPTER X

For a moment they stared at one another, she fearful, he amazed. Olga Crewe!

Then he became conscious that he was still gripping the arm, and let it drop. The arm fascinated Mr. Reeder: he scarcely looked at anything else.

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Reeder. "Where did you come from?"

Her lips were quivering; she tried to speak, but no words came. Then she mastered her momentary paralysis and began to speak, slowly, laboriously.

"I—heard—a noise—in—the—corridor—and—came—out. A noise—I—was—frightened."

She was rubbing her arm mechanically; he saw a red weal where his hand had gripped. The wonder was that he had not broken her arm.

"Is—anything—wrong?"

Every word was created and articulated painfully. She seemed to be considering its formation before her tongue gave it sound.

"Where is the light-switch in the hall?" asked Mr. Reeder. This was a more practical matter—he lost interest in her arm.

"Opposite my room."

"Turn it on," he said, and she obeyed meekly.

Only when the corridor was illuminated did he step out of his room, and even then in some doubt, if the Browning in his hand meant anything.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked again. By now she had taken command of herself. A little colour had come to her white face, but the live eyes were still beholding terrible visions.

"Did you see anything in the passage?" he answered.

She shook her head slowly.

"No, I saw nothing—nothing. I heard a noise and I came out."

She was lying: he did not trouble to doubt this. She had had time to pull on her slippers and find the flimsy wrap she wore, and the fight had not lasted more than two seconds. Moreover, he had not heard her door open; therefore it had been open all the time, and she had been spectator or audience of all that had happened.

He went down the corridor, retrieved his rubber truncheon, and came back to her. She was half standing, half leaning against the door-post, rubbing her arm. She was staring past him so intently that he looked round, though there was nothing to be seen.

"You hurt me," she said simply.

"Did I? I'm sorry."

The mark on the white flesh had gone blue, and Mr. Reeder was naturally a sympathetic man. Yet, if the truth be told, there was nothing of sorrow in his mind at that moment. Regret, yes. But the regret had nothing to do with her hurt.

"I think you'd better go to your bed, young lady. My nightmare is ended. I hope yours will end as quickly, though I shall be surprised if it does. Mine is for the moment; yours, unless I am greatly mistaken, is for life!"

Her dark, inscrutable eyes did not leave his face as she spoke.

"I think it must have been a nightmare," she said. "It will last all my life? I think it will!"

With a nod she turned away, and presently he heard her door close and the lock fasten.

Mr. Reeder went back to the far side of his bed, pulled up a chair and sat down. He did not attempt to close the door. Whilst his room was in darkness and the corridor lighted, he did not expect a repetition of his bad and substantial dream.

The rubber truncheon was a mistake, he admitted regretfully. He wished he had not such a repugnance to a noisier weapon. He laid the pistol on the cover of the bed within reach of his hand. If the bad dream came again——

Voices!

The murmur of a whispered colloquy and a fierce, hissing whisper that dominated the others. Not in the corridor, but in the hall below. He tiptoed to the door and listened.

Somebody laughed under his breath, a strange blood-curdling little mutter of a laugh; and then he heard a key turn and a door open and a voice demand:

"Who is there?"

It was Margaret. Her room faced the head of the stairs, he remembered. Slipping the pistol into his pocket, he ran round the end of the bed and into the corridor. She was standing by the banisters, looking down into the dark. The whispering voices had ceased. She saw him out of the corner of her eye and turned with a start.

"What is wrong, Mr. Reeder? Who put the corridor light on? I heard somebody speaking in the vestibule."

"It was only me."

His smile would in ordinary circumstances have been very reassuring, but now she was frightened, childishly frightened. She had an insane desire to cling to him and weep.

"Something has been happening here," she said. "I've been lying in bed listening, and haven't had the courage to get up. I'm horribly scared, Mr. Reeder."

He beckoned her to him, and as she came, wondering, he slipped past her and took her place at the banisters. She saw him lean over and the light from a hand-lamp sweep the space below.

"There's nobody there," he said airily.

She was whiter than he had ever seen her.

"There *was* somebody there," she insisted. "I heard their feet moving on the tiled paving after you put on your flash-lamp."

"Probably Mrs. Burton," he suggested. "I thought I heard her voice——"

And now came a newcomer on the scene. Mr. Daver had appeared at the end of the corridor. He wore a flowered silk dressing-gown buttoned up to his chin.

"Whatever is the matter, Miss Belman?" he asked. "Don't tell me that he tried to get into *your* window! I'm afraid you're going to tell me that! I hope you're not, but I'm afraid you will! Dear me, what an unpleasant thing to happen!"

“What has happened?” asked Mr. Reeder.

“I don’t know, but I have an uncomfortable feeling that somebody has been trying to break into this house,” said Mr. Daver.

He was genuinely agitated; the girl could almost hear his teeth chatter.

“I heard somebody trying the catch of my window and looked out, and I’ll swear I saw—something! What a dreadful thing to happen! I have half a mind to telephone for the police.”

“An excellent idea,” murmured Mr. Reeder, suddenly his old deferential and agreeable self. “You were asleep, I suppose, when you heard the noise?”

Mr. Daver hesitated.

“Not exactly asleep,” he said. “Between sleeping and waking. I was very restless to-night for some reason.”

He put his hand to his throat, his dressing-gown had gaped for a second. He was not quite quick enough.

“You were probably restless,” said Mr. Reeder softly, “because you omitted to take off your collar and tie. I know of nothing more disturbing.”

Mr. Daver made a characteristic grimace.

“I dressed myself rather hurriedly——” he began.

“Better to undress yourself hurriedly,” chided Mr. Reeder, almost playfully. “People who go to bed in stiff white collars occasionally choke themselves to death. And there is sorrow in the home of the cheated hangman. Your burglar probably saved your life.”

Daver made as though to speak, suddenly retreated and slammed the door.

Margaret was looking at Mr. Reeder apprehensively.

“What is the mystery—was there a burglar?—Oh, please tell me the truth! I shall get hysterical if you don’t!”

“The truth,” said Mr. Reeder, his eyes twinkling, “is very nearly what that curious man told you—there was somebody in the house, somebody who had no right to be here, but I think he has gone, and you can go to bed without the slightest anxiety.”

She looked at him oddly.

"Are you going to bed too?"

"In a very few moments," said Mr. Reeder cheerfully.

She held out her hand with an impulsive gesture. He took it in both of his.

"You are my idea of a guardian angel," she smiled, though she was near to tears.

"I've never heard," said Mr. Reeder, "of guardian angels with side-whiskers."

It was a mean advantage to take of her, yet he was ridiculously pleased as he repeated his little *jeu d'esprit* to himself in the seclusion of his room.

CHAPTER XI

Mr. Reeder closed the door, put on the lights, and set himself to unravel the inexplicable mystery of its opening. Before he went to bed he had shot home the bolt, had turned the key in the lock, and the key was still on the inside. It struck him, as he turned it, that he had never heard a lock that moved so silently, or a bolt that slipped so easily into its groove. Both lock and bolt had been recently oiled. He began a scrutiny of the inside face of the door, and found a simple solution of the somewhat baffling incident of its opening.

The door consisted of eight panels, carved in small lozenge-shaped ornaments. The panel immediately above the lock moved slightly when he pressed it, but it was a long time before he found the tiny spring which held it in place. When that was found, the panel opened like a miniature door. He could thrust his hand through the aperture and slide back the bolt with the greatest ease.

There was nothing very unusual or sinister about this. He knew that many hotels and boarding-houses had methods by which a door could be unlocked from the outside—a very necessary precaution in certain eventualities. Mr. Reeder wondered whether he would find a similar safety panel on the door of Margaret Belman's room.

By the time he had completed his inspection it was daylight, and, pulling back the curtains, he drew a chair to the window and made a survey of as much of the grounds as lay within his line of vision.

There were two or three matters which were puzzling him. If Larmes Keep was the headquarters of the Flack gang, in what manner and for what reason had Olga Crewe been brought into the confederation? He judged her age at twenty-four; she had been a constant visitor, if not a resident, at Larmes Keep for at least ten years, and he knew enough of the ways of the underworld to realise that they did not employ children. Also she had been to a public school of some kind, and that would have absorbed at least four of the ten years—Mr. Reeder shook his head in doubt.

Nothing would happen now until dark, he decided, and, stretching himself upon the bed, he pulled the coverlet over him and slept till a tapping at the door announced the coming of the maid with his morning tea.

She was a round-faced woman, just past her first youth, with a disagreeable Cockney accent and the brusque and familiar manner of one who was an indispensable part of the establishment. Mr. Reeder remembered that the girl had waited on him at dinner.

"Why, sir, you haven't undressed!" she said.

"I seldom undress," said Mr. Reeder, sitting up and taking the tea from her. "It is such a waste of time. For no sooner are your clothes off than it is necessary to put them on again."

She looked at him hard, but he did not smile.

"You're a detective, ain't you? Everybody at the cottage knows that you are. What have you come down about?"

Mr. Reeder could afford to smile cryptically. There was a suppressed anxiety in the girl's voice.

"It is not for me, my dear young lady, to disclose your employer's business."

"He brought you down? Well, he's got a nerve!"

Mr. Reeder put his finger to his lips.

"About the candlesticks?"

He nodded.

"He still thinks somebody in the house took them?"

Her face was very red, her eyes snapped angrily. Here was exposed one of the minor scandals of the hotel.

It was not an uninteresting sidelight. For if ever guilt was written on a woman's face it was on hers. What these candlesticks were and how they disappeared, Mr. Reeder could guess. Petty larceny runs in well-defined channels.

"Well, you can tell him from me——" she began shrilly, and he raised a solemn hand.

"Keep the matter to yourself—regard me as your friend," he begged.

He was in his lighter moments a most mischievous man, a weakness that few suspected in Mr. J. G. Reeder. Moreover, he wanted badly some inside information about the household, and he had an idea that this infuriated girl who flounced out and slammed the door behind her would supply him with that information. In his optimistic moments he could not dream that in her raw hands she held the secret of Larmes Keep.

As soon as he came down Mr. Reeder decided to go to Daver's office; he was curious to learn the true story of the missing candlesticks. The sound of an angry voice reached him, and as his hand was raised to knock at the door it was opened by somebody who was holding the handle on the inside, and he heard a woman's angry voice.

"You've treated me shabbily: that's all I can say to you, Mr. Daver! I've been working for you five years and I've never said a word about your business to anybody! And now you bring a detective down to spy on me! I won't be treated as if I was a thief or something! If you think that's behaving fair and square, after all I've done for you, and minding my own business... yes, I know I've been well paid, but I could get just as much money somewhere else... I've got my pride, Mr. Daver, the same as you have... and I think you've been very underhand, the way you've treated me... I'll go to-night, don't you worry!"

The door was flung open and a red-faced girl of twenty-five flounced out and dashed past the eavesdropper, scarcely noticing him in her fury. The door shut behind her; evidently Mr. Daver was in as bad a temper as the girl—a fortunate circumstance, as it proved, and Mr. Reeder decided it might be inadvisable to advertise that he had overheard the whole or part of the conversation.

When he strolled out into the sunlit grounds, of all the people who had been disturbed during the night he was the brightest and showed the least sign of fatigue. He met the Rev. Mr. Dean and the Colonel, who was carrying a golf-bag, and they bade him a gruff good-morning. The Colonel, he thought, was a little haggard; Mr. Dean gave him a scowl as he passed.

Walking up and down the lawn, he examined the front of the house with a critical eye. The lines of the Keep were very definite: harsh and angular, not even the Tudor windows, that at some remote period had been introduced to its stony face, could disguise its ancient grimness.

Turning an angle of the house, he reached the strip of lawn which faced his own window. Behind the lawn was a mass of rhododendron bushes, which might serve a useful purpose, but which in certain circumstances might also be a danger-point.

Immediately beneath his window was an angle of the drawing-room, a circumstance which gave him cause for satisfaction. Mr. Reeder's experience favoured a bedroom which was above a public apartment.

He went back on his tracks and came to the other end of the block. Those three windows, brightly curtained, were evidently Mr. Daver's private suite. The wall was black beneath them, the actual stone being obscured by a thick growth of ivy. He wondered what this lightless and doorless space contained.

As he returned to the front of the house he saw Margaret Belman. She was standing in front of the doorway, shading her eyes from the sun, evidently searching her limited landscape for somebody. Seeing him, she came quickly to meet him.

"Oh, there you are!" she said, with a sigh of relief. "I wondered what had happened to you—you didn't come down to breakfast."

She looked a little peaked, he thought. Evidently she had not rounded off the night as agreeably as he.

"I haven't slept since I saw you," she said, answering his unspoken question. "What happened, Mr. Reeder? Did somebody really try to get into the house—a burglar?"

"I think they tried, and I think they succeeded," said Mr. Reeder carefully. "Burglaries happen even in—um—hotels, Miss—um—Margaret. Has Mr. Daver notified the police?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know. He has been telephoning all the morning—I went to his room just now and it was locked, but I heard his voice. And, Mr. Reeder, you didn't tell me the terrible thing that happened the

night I left London. I saw it in the newspaper this morning."

"Terrible thing?"

J. G. Reeder was puzzled. Almost he had forgotten the adventure of the spring gun.

"Oh, you mean the little joke?"

"Joke!" she said, shocked.

"Criminals have a perverted sense of humour," said Mr. Reeder airily. "The whole thing was—um—an elaborate jest designed to frighten me. One expects such things. They are the examination papers which are set to test one's intelligence from time to time."

"But who did it?" she asked.

Mr. Reeder's gaze wandered absently over the placid countryside. She had a feeling that it bored him even to recall so trivial an incident in a busy life.

"Our young friend," he said suddenly, and, following the direction of his eyes, she saw Olga Crewe.

She was wearing a dark grey knitted suit and a big black hat that shaded her face, and there was nothing of embarrassment in the half smile with which she greeted her fellow-guest.

"Good morning, Mr. Reeder. I think we have met before this morning." She rubbed her arm good-humouredly.

Mr. Reeder was all apologies.

"I don't even know now what happened," she said; and Margaret Belman learnt for the first time what had occurred before she had made her appearance.

"I never thought you were so strong—look!" Olga Crewe pulled back her sleeve and showed a big blue-black patch on her forearm, cutting short his expression of remorse with a little laugh.

"Have you shown Mr. Reeder all the attractions of the estate?" she asked, a hint of sarcasm in her tone. "I almost expected to find you at the bathing-pool this morning."

"I didn't even know there was a bathing-pool," said Mr. Reeder. "In fact, after my terrible scare last night, this—um—beautiful house has assumed so sinister an aspect that I expect to bathe in nothing less dramatic than blood!"

She was not amused. He saw her eyes close quickly, and she shivered a little.

"How gruesome you are! Come along, Miss Belman."

Inwardly Margaret resented the tone, which was almost a command, but she walked by their side. Clear of the house, Olga stopped and pointed.

"You must see the well. Are you interested in old things?" asked Olga, as she led the way to the shrubbery.

"I am more interested in new things, especially new experiences," said Mr. Reeder, quite gaily. "And new people fascinate me!"

Again that quick frightened smile of hers.

"Then you should be having the time of your life, Mr. Reeder," she said, "for you're meeting people here whom you've never met before."

He screwed up his forehead in a frown.

"Yes, there are two people in this house I have never met before," he said, and she looked round at him quickly.

"Only two? You've never met me before!"

"I've seen you," said Mr. Reeder, "but I have never met you."

By this time they had arrived at the well, and he read the inscription slowly, before he tested with his foot the board that covered the top of the well.

"It has been closed for years," said the girl. "I shouldn't touch it," she added hastily, as Reeder stooped and, catching the edge of a board, swung it back trap fashion, leaving an oblong cavity.

The trap did not squeak or creak as he turned it back; the hinges were oiled; there was no accumulation of dust between the two doors. Going on to his hands and knees, he looked down into the darkness.

"How many loads of rubble and rock were used to fill up this well?" he asked.

Margaret read from the little notice-board.

"Hum!" said Mr. Reeder, searched in his pockets, brought out a two-shilling piece, poised the silver coin carefully and let it drop.

For a long, long time he listened, and then a faint metallic tinkle came up to him.

"Nine seconds!" He looked up into Olga's face. "Deduct from the velocity of a falling object the speed at which sound travels, and tell me how deep this hole is."

He got up to his feet, dusted the knees of his trousers, and carefully dropped the trap into position.

"Rock there may be," he said, "but there is no water. I must work out the number of loads requisite to fill this well entirely—it will be an interesting morning's occupation for one who in his youth was something of a mathematical genius."

Olga Crewe led the way back to the shrubbery in silence. When they came to the open:

"I think you had better show Mr. Reeder the rest of the establishment," she said. "I'm rather tired."

And with a nod she turned away and walked towards the house, and Mr. Reeder gazed after her with something like admiration in his eyes.

"The rouge would of course make a tremendous difference," he said, half speaking to himself, "but it is very difficult to disguise voices—even the best of actors fail in this respect."

Margaret stared at him.

"Are you talking to me?"

"To me," said Mr. Reeder humbly. "It is a bad habit of mine, peculiar to my age, I fear."

"But Miss Crewe never uses rouge."

"Who does—in the country?" asked Mr. Reeder, and pointed with his walking-stick to the wall along the cliff. "Where does that lead? What is on the other side?"

"Sudden death," said Margaret, and laughed.

For a quarter of an hour they stood leaning on the parapet of the low wall, looking down at the strip of beach below. The small channel that led to the cave interested him. He asked her how deep it was. She thought that it was quite shallow, a conclusion with which he did not agree.

"Underground caves sound romantic, and that channel is deeper than most. I think I must explore the cave. How does one get down?"

He looked left and right. The beach was enclosed in a deep little bay, circled on one side by sheer cliff, on the other by a high reef of rock that ran far out to sea. Mr. Reeder pointed to the horizon.

"Sixty miles from here is France."

He had a disconcerting habit of going off at a tangent.

"I think I will do a little exploring this afternoon. The walk should freshen me."

They were returning to the house when he remembered the bathing-pool and asked to see it.

"I wonder Mr. Daver doesn't let it run dry," she said. "It is an awful expense. I was going through the municipality's account yesterday, and they charge a fabulous sum for pumping up fresh water."

"How long has it been built?"

"That is the surprising thing," she said. "It was made twelve years ago, when private swimming-pools were things unheard of in this country."

The pool was oblong in shape; one end of it was tiled and obviously artificially created. The further end, however, had for its sides and bottom natural rock. A great dome-shaped mass served as a diving-platform. Mr. Reeder walked all round, gazing into the limpid water. It was deepest at the rocky end, and here he stayed longest, and his inspection was most thorough. There seemed a space—how deep he could not tell—at the bottom of the bath, where the rock overhung.

"Very interesting," said Mr. Reeder at last. "I think I will go back to the house and get my bathing-suit. Happily, I brought one."

"I didn't know you were a swimmer," smiled the girl.

"I am the merest tyro in most things," said Mr. Reeder modestly.

He went up to his room, undressed and slipped into a bathing-suit, over which he put his overcoat. Olga Crewe and Mr. Daver had gone down to Siltbury. To his satisfaction he saw the hotel car

descending the hill road cautiously in a cloud of dust.

When Mr. Reeder threw off his coat to make the plunge there was something comically ferocious in his appearance, for about his waist he had fastened a belt to which was attached in a sheath a long-bladed hunting-knife, and in addition there dangled a waterproof bag in which he had placed one of the many little hand-lamps that he invariably carried about with him. He made the most human preparations: put his toes into the cold water, and shivered ecstatically before he made his plunge. Losing no time in preliminaries, he swam along the bottom to the slit in the rock which he had seen.

It was about two feet high and eight feet in length, and into this he pulled his way, gripping the roof to aid his progress. The roof ended abruptly; he found nothing but water above him, and he allowed himself to come to the surface, catching hold of a projecting ledge to keep himself afloat whilst he detached the waterproof bag from his belt, and, planting it upon the shelf, took out his flash-lamp.

He was in a natural stone chamber, with a broad, vaulted roof. He was in fact inside the dome-shaped rock that formed one end of the pool. At the farthermost corner of the chamber was an opening about four feet in height and two feet in width. A rock passage that led downward, he saw. He followed this for about fifty yards, and noted that although nature had hewn or worn this queer corridor at some remote age—possibly it had been an underground waterway before some gigantic upheaval of nature had raised the land above water level—the passage owed something of its practicability to human agency. At one place there were marks of a chisel; at another, unmistakable signs of blasting. Mr. Reeder retraced his steps and came back to the water. He fastened and resealed his lamp, and, drawing a long breath, dived to the bottom and wormed his way through the aperture to the bath and to open air. He came to the surface to gaze into the horror-stricken face of Margaret Belman.

“Oh, Mr. Reeder!” she gasped. “You—you frightened me!... I heard you jump in, but when I came here and found the bath empty I thought I must have been mistaken.... Where have you been? You

couldn't stay under water all that time…"

"Will you hand me my overcoat?" said Mr. Reeder modestly, and when he had hastily buttoned this about his person: "I have been to see that the County Council's requirements are fully satisfied," he said solemnly.

She listened, dazed.

"In all theatres, as you probably know, my dear Miss—um—Margaret, it is essential that there should be certain exits in case of necessity—I have already inspected two this morning, but I rather imagine that the most important of all has so far escaped my observation. What a man! Surely madness is akin to genius!"

He lunched alone, and apparently no man was less interested in his fellow-guests than Mr. J. G. Reeder. The two golfers had returned and were eating at the same table. Miss Crewe, who came in late and favoured him with a smile, sat at a little table facing him.

"She is uneasy," said Mr. Reeder to himself. "That is the second time she has dropped her fork. Presently she will get up, sit with her back to me… I wonder on what excuse?"

Apparently no excuse was necessary. The girl called a waitress towards her and had her glass and table shifted to the other side. Mr. Reeder was rather pleased with himself.

Daver minced into the dining-room as Mr. Reeder was peeling an apple.

"Good morning, Mr. Reeder. Have you got over your nightmare? I see that you have! A man of iron nerve. I admire that tremendously. Personally, I am the most dreadful coward, and the very hint of a burglar makes me shiver. You wouldn't believe it, but I had a quarrel with a servant this morning, and she left me shaking! You are not affected that way? I see that you are not! Miss Belman tells me that you tried our swimming-pool this morning. You enjoyed it? I am sure you did!"

"Won't you sit down and have coffee?" asked Mr. Reeder politely, but Daver declined the invitation with a flourish and a bow.

"No, no, I have my work—I cannot tell you how grateful I am to Miss Belman for putting me on the track of the most fascinating character of modern times. What a man!" said Mr. Daver,

unconsciously repeating J. G. Reeder's tribute. "I've been trying to trace his early career—no, no, I'll stand: I must run away in a minute or two. Is anything known about his early life? Was he married?"

Mr. Reeder nodded. He had not the slightest idea that John Flack was married, but it seemed a moment to assert the universality of his knowledge. He was quite unprepared for the effect upon Daver. The jaw of the yellow-faced man dropped.

"Married?" he squeaked. "Who told you he was married? Where was he married?"

"That is a matter," said Mr. Reeder gravely, "which I cannot discuss."

"Married!" Daver rubbed his little round head irritably, but did not pursue the subject. He made some inane reference to the weather and bustled out of the room.

Mr. Reeder settled himself in what he called the banqueting-hall with an illustrated paper, awaiting an opportunity which he knew must present itself sooner or later. The servants he had passed under review. Girls were employed to wait at table, and these lived in a small cottage on the Siltbury side of the estate. The men servants, including the hall porter, seemed above suspicion. The porter was an old army man with a row of medals across his uniform jacket; his assistant was a chinless youth recruited from Siltbury. He apparently was the only member of the staff that did not live in one of the cottages. In the main the women servants were an unpromising lot—the infuriated waitress was his only hope, although as likely as not she would talk of nothing but her grievances.

From where he sat he had a view of the lawn. At three o'clock the Colonel and the Rev. Mr. Dean and Olga Crewe passed out of the main gate, evidently bound for Siltbury. He rang the bell, and to his satisfaction the aggrieved waitress came and took his order for tea.

"This is a nice place," said Mr. Reeder conversationally.

The girl's "Yes, sir" was snappy.

"I suppose," mused Mr. Reeder, looking out of the window, "that this is the sort of situation that a lot of girls would give their heads to get and break their hearts to lose?"

Evidently she did not agree.

"The upstairs work isn't so bad," she said, "and there's not much to do in the dining-room. But it's too slow for me. I was at a big hotel before I came here. I'm going to a better job—and the sooner the better."

She admitted that the money was good, but she had a longing for that imponderable quantity which she described as "life." She also expressed a preference for men guests.

"Miss Crewe—so called—gives more trouble than all the rest of the people put together," she said. "I can't make her out. First she wants one room, then she wants another. Why she can't stay with her husband I don't know."

"With her——?" Mr. Reeder looked at her in pained surprise. "Perhaps they don't get on well together?"

"They used to get on all right. If they weren't married I could understand all the mystery they're making—pretending they're not, him in his room and she in hers, and meeting like strangers. When all that kind of deceit is going on, things are bound to get lost," she added inconsequently.

"How long has this been—er—going on?" asked Mr. Reeder.

"Only the last week or so," said the girl viciously. "I know they're married, because I've seen her marriage certificate—they've been married six years. She keeps it in her dressing-case."

She looked at him with sudden suspicion.

"I oughtn't to have told you that. I don't want to make trouble for anybody, and I bear them no malice, though they've treated me worse 'n a dog," she said. "Nobody else in the house but me knows. I was her maid for two years. But if people don't treat me right I don't treat them right."

"Married six years? Dear me!" said Mr. Reeder.

And then he suddenly turned his head and faced her.

"Would you like fifty pounds?" he asked. "That is the immense sum I will give you for just one little peep at that marriage certificate."

The girl went red.

"You're trying to catch me," she said, hesitated, and then: "I don't want to get her into trouble."

"I am a detective," said Mr. Reeder, "but I am working on behalf of the Chief Registrar, and we have a doubt as to whether that marriage was legal. I could of course search the young lady's room and find the certificate for myself, but if you would care to help me, and fifty pounds has any attraction for you——"

She paused irresolutely and said she would see. Half an hour later she came into the hall with the news that she had been unsuccessful in her search. She had found the envelope in which the certificate had been kept, but the document itself was gone.

Mr. Reeder did not ask the name of the bridegroom, nor was he mentioned, for he was pretty certain that he knew that fortunate man. He put a question, and the girl answered as he had expected.

"There is one thing I would like to ask you: do you remember the name of the girl's father?"

"John Crewe, merchant," she said promptly. "The mother's name was Hannah. He made me swear on the Bible I'd never tell a soul that I knew they were married."

"Does anybody else know? You said 'nobody,' I think?"

The girl hesitated.

"Yes, Mrs. Burton knows. She knows everything."

"Thank you," said Mr. Reeder, and, opening his pocket-book, took out two five-pound notes. "What was the husband's profession: do you remember that?"

The woman's lips curled.

"Secretary—why call himself secretary, I don't know, and him an independent gentleman!"

"Thank you," said Mr. Reeder again.

He telephoned to Siltbury for a taxicab.

"Are you going out?" asked Margaret, finding him waiting under the portico.

"I am buying a few presents for friends in London," said Mr. Reeder glibly; "a butter-dish or two, suitably inscribed, would, I feel sure, be very acceptable."

The taxi did not take him to Siltbury. Instead, he followed a road which ran parallel to the sea-coast, and which eventually landed him in an impossible sandy track, from which the ancient taxi was extricated with some difficulty.

"I told you this led nowhere, sir," said the aggrieved driver.

"Then we have evidently reached our destination," replied Mr. Reeder, applying his weight to push the machine to a more solid foundation.

Siltbury was not greatly favoured by London visitors, the driver told him on the way back. The town had a pebbly beach, and people preferred sand.

"There are some wonderful beaches about here," said the driver, "but you can't reach 'em."

They had taken the left-hand road, which would bring them eventually to the town, and had been driving for a quarter of an hour when Mr. Reeder, who sat by the driver, pointed to a large scar in the face of the downs on his right.

"Siltbury quarries," explained the cabman. "They're not worked now: there are too many holes."

"Holes?"

"The downs are like a sponge," said the man. "You could lose yourself in the caves. Old Mr. Kimpon used to work the quarries many years ago, and it broke him. There's a big cave there you can drive a coach-and-four into! About twenty years ago three fellows went in to explore the caves and never come out again."

"Who owns the quarry now?"

Mr. Reeder wasn't very interested, but when his mind was occupied with a pressing problem he had a trick of flogging along a conversation with appropriate questions, and if he was oblivious of the answers they produced, the sound of the human voice had a sedative effect.

"Mr. Daver owns it now. He bought it after the people were lost in the caves, and had the entrance boarded up. You'll see it in a minute."

They were climbing a gentle slope. As they came to the crest he pointed down a tidy-looking roadway to where, about two hundred yards distant, Reeder saw an oblong gap in the white face of the quarry. Across this, and filling the cavity except for an irregular space at the top, was a heavy wooden gate.

"You can't see it from here," said the driver, "but the top hole is blocked with barbed wire."

"Is that a gate or a hoarding he has fixed across?"

"A gate, sir. Mr. Daver owns all the land from here to the sea. He used to farm about a hundred acres of the downs, but it's very poor land. In those days he kept his wagons inside the cave."

"When did he give up farming?" asked Mr. Reeder, interested.

"About six years ago," was the reply, and it was exactly the reply Mr. Reeder had expected. "I used to see a lot of Mr. Daver before then," said the driver. "In the old times I had a horse cab, and I was always driving him about. He used to work like a galley slave—on the farm in the morning, down in the town buying things in the afternoon. He was more like a servant than a master. He used to meet all the trains when visitors arrived—and they had a lot of visitors in those days, more than they have now. Sometimes he went up to London to bring them down—he always went to meet Miss Crewe when the young lady was at school."

"Do you know Miss Crewe?"

Apparently the driver had seen her frequently, but his acquaintance with her was very limited.

Reeder got down from the cab and climbed the barred gate on to the private roadway. The soil was chalky and the road had the appearance of having been recently overhauled. He mentioned this fact to the cabman, and learnt that Mr. Daver kept two old men constantly at work making up the road, though why he should do so he had no idea.

"Where would you like to go now, sir?"

"To a quiet place where I can telephone," said Mr. Reeder.

These were the facts that he carried with him, and vital facts they were. During the past six years the life of Mr. Daver had undergone a considerable change. From being a harassed man of affairs, "more like a servant than a master," he had become a gentleman of leisure. The mystery of the Keep was a mystery no longer. He got Inspector Simpson on the telephone and conveyed to him the gist of his discovery.

"By the way," said Simpson at the finish, "the gold hasn't been sent to Australia yet. There has been trouble at the docks. You don't seriously anticipate a Flack 'operation,' do you?"

Mr. Reeder, who had forgotten all about the gold-convoy, made a cautious and non-committal reply.

By the time he returned to Larmes Keep the other guests had returned. The hall porter said they were expecting a "party" on the morrow, but as he had volunteered that information on the previous evening, Mr. Reeder did not take it very seriously. He gathered that the man spoke in good faith, without any wish to deceive, but he saw no signs of unusual activity; nor, indeed, was there accommodation at the Keep for more than a few more visitors.

He looked round for the aggrieved servant and missed her. A discreet inquiry revealed the fact that she had left that afternoon.

Mr. Reeder went to his room, locked the door, and busied himself in the examination of two great scrap-books which he had brought down with him. They were the official records of Flack and his gang. Perhaps "gang" was hardly a proper description, for he seemed to use and change his associates as a theatrical manager uses and changes his cast. The police knew close on a score of men who from time to time had assisted John Flack in his nefarious transactions. Some had gone to prison, and had spent the hours of their recovered liberty in a vain endeavour to re-establish touch with so generous a paymaster. Some, known to be in his employ, had vanished, and were generally supposed to be living in luxury abroad.

Reeder went through the book, which was full of essential facts, and jotted down the amounts which this strange man had acquired in the course of twenty years' depredations. The total was a staggering one. Flack had worked feverishly, and though he had

paid well he had spent little. Somewhere in England was an enormous reserve. And that somewhere, Mr. Reeder guessed, was very close to his hand.

For what had John Flack worked? To what end was this accumulation of money? Was the sheer greed of the miser behind his thefts? Was he working aimlessly, as a madman works, towards some visionary objective?

Flack's greed was proverbial. Nothing satisfied him. The robbery of the Leadenhall Bank had been followed a week later by an attack upon the London Trust Syndicate, carried out, the police discovered, by an entirely new confederation, gathered within a few days of the robbery and yet so perfectly rehearsed that the plan was carried through without a hitch.

Mr. Reeder locked away his books and went downstairs in search of Margaret Belman. The crisis was very near at hand, and it was necessary for his peace of mind that the girl should leave Larmes Keep without delay.

He was half-way down the stairs when he met Daver coming up, and at that moment he received an inspiration.

"You are the very gentleman I wished to meet," he said. "I wonder if you would do me a great favour?"

Daver's careworn face wreathed in smiles.

"My dear Mr. Reeder," he said enthusiastically, "do you a favour? Command me!"

"I have been thinking about last night and my extraordinary experience," said Mr. Reeder.

"You mean the burglar?" interrupted the other quickly.

"The burglar," agreed Mr. Reeder. "He was an alarming person, and I am not disposed to let the matter rest where it is. Fortunately for me, I have found a finger-print on the panel of my door."

He saw Daver's face change.

"When I say I have found a finger-print, I have found something which has the appearance of a finger-print, and I can only be sure if I examine it by means of a dactyscope. Unfortunately, I did not

imagine that I should have need for such an instrument, and I am wondering if you could send somebody to London to bring it down for me?"

"With all the pleasure in life," said Daver, though his tone lacked heartiness. "One of the men——"

"I was thinking of Miss Belman," interrupted J. G. Reeder, "who is a friend of mine and would, moreover, take the greatest possible care of that delicate piece of mechanism."

Daver was silent for a moment, turning this over in his mind.

"Would it not be better if a man... and the last train down——"

"She could come down by car: I can arrange that."

Mr. Reeder fumbled his chin.

"Perhaps it would be better if I brought down a couple of men from the Yard."

"No, no," said Daver quickly. "You can send Miss Belman. I haven't the slightest objection. I will tell her."

Mr. Reeder looked at his watch.

"The next train is at eight thirty-five, and that is the last train, I think. The young lady will be able to get her dinner before she starts."

It was he who brought the news to the astonished Margaret Belman.

"Of course I'll go up to town; but don't you think somebody else could get this instrument for you, Mr. Reeder? Couldn't you have it sent down——"

She saw the look in his eyes and stopped.

"What is it?" she asked, in a lower voice.

"Will you do this for—um—me, Miss—um—Margaret?" said Mr. Reeder, almost humbly.

He went to the lounge and scribbled a note, while Margaret telephoned for the cab. It was growing dark when the closed landau drew up before the hotel and J. G. Reeder, who accompanied her, opened the door.

"There's a man inside," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. "Please don't scream: he's an officer of police, and he's going with you to London."

"But—but——" she stammered.

"And you'll stay in London to-night," said Mr. Reeder. "I will join you in the morning—I hope."

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Reeder was in his room, laying out his moderate toilet requirements on the dressing-table, and meditating upon the waste of time involved in conforming to fashion—for he had dressed for dinner—when there came a tap at the door. He paused, a well-worn hairbrush in his hand, and looked round.

"Come in," he said, and added: "if you please."

The little head of Mr. Daver appeared round the opening of the door, anxiety and apology in every line of his peculiar face.

"Am I interrupting you?" he asked. "I am terribly sorry to bother you at all, but Miss Belman being away, you quite understand? I'm sure you do...?"

Mr. Reeder was courtesy itself.

"Come in, come in, sir," he said. "I was merely preparing for the night. I am a very tired man, and the sea air——"

He saw the face of the proprietor fall.

"Then, Mr. Reeder, I have come upon a useless errand. The truth is"—he slipped inside the door, closed it carefully behind him, as though he had an important statement to make which he did not wish to be overheard—"my three guests are anxious to play bridge, and they deputed me to ask if you would care to join them?"

"With every pleasure in life," said Mr. Reeder graciously. "I am an indifferent player, but if they will bear with me, I will be down in a few minutes."

Mr. Daver withdrew, babbling his gratitude and apologies. The door was hardly closed upon him before Mr. Reeder crossed the room and locked it. Stooping, he opened one of the trunks, took out a long, flexible rope-ladder, and dropped it through the open window into the darkness below, fastening one end to the leg of the four-poster. Leaning out of the window, he said something in a low voice, and braced himself against the bed to support the weight of the man who came nimbly up the ladder into the room. This done,

he replaced the rope-ladder in his trunk, locked it, and, walking to a corner of the room, pulled at one of the solid panels. It hinged open and revealed the deep cupboard which Mr. Daver had shown him.

"That is as good a place as any, Brill," he said. "I'm sorry I must leave you for two hours, but I have an idea that nobody will disturb you there. I am leaving the lamp burning, which will give you enough light."

"Very good, sir," said the man from Scotland Yard, and took up his post.

Five minutes later Mr. Reeder locked the door of his room and went downstairs to the waiting party.

They were in the big hall, a very silent and preoccupied trio, until his arrival galvanised them into something that might pass for light conversation. There was, indeed, a fourth present when he came in: a sallow-faced woman in black, who melted out of the hall at his approach, and he guessed her to be the melancholy Mrs. Burton. The two men rose at his approach, and after the usual self-deprecatory exchange which preceded the cutting for partners, Mr. Reeder found himself sitting opposite the military-looking Colonel Hothling. On his left was the pale girl; on his right the hard-faced Rev. Mr. Dean.

"What do we play for?" growled the Colonel, caressing his moustache, his steely blue eyes fixed on Mr. Reeder.

"A modest stake, I hope," begged that gentleman. "I am such an indifferent player."

"I suggest sixpence a hundred," said the clergyman. "It is as much as a poor parson can afford."

"Or a poor pensioner either," grumbled the Colonel, and sixpence a hundred was agreed.

They played two games in comparative silence. Reeder was sensitive of a strained atmosphere, but did nothing to relieve it. His partner was surprisingly nervous for one who, as he remarked casually, had spent his life in military service.

"A wonderful life," said Mr. Reeder in his affable way.

Once or twice he detected the girl's hand, as she held the cards, tremble ever so slightly. Only the clergyman remained still and unmoved, and, incidentally, played without error.

It was after an atrocious revoke on the part of his partner, a revoke which gave his opponents the game and rubber, that Mr. Reeder pushed back his chair.

"What a strange world this is!" he remarked sententiously. "How like a game of cards!"

Those who were best acquainted with Mr. Reeder knew that he was most dangerous when he was most philosophical. The three people who sat about the table heard only a boring commonplace, in keeping with their conception of this somewhat dull-looking man.

"There are some people," mused Mr. Reeder, looking up at the lofty ceiling, "who are never happy unless they have all the aces. I, on the contrary, am most cheerful when I have in my hand all the knaves."

"You play a very good game, Mr. Reeder."

It was the girl who spoke, and her voice was husky, her tone hesitant, as though she were forcing herself to speak.

"I play one or two games rather well," said Mr. Reeder. "Partly, I think, because I have such an extraordinary memory—I never forget knaves."

There was a silence. This time the reference was too direct to be mistaken.

"There used to be in my younger days," Mr. Reeder went on, addressing nobody in particular, "a Knave of Hearts, who eventually became a Knave of Clubs, and drifted down into heaven knows what other welters of knavery! In plain words, he started his professional —um—life as a bigamist, continued his interesting and romantic career as a tout for gambling hells, and was concerned in a bank robbery in Denver. I have not seen him for years, but he is colloquially known to his associates as 'The Colonel'; a military-looking gentleman with a pleasing appearance and a glib tongue."

He was not looking at the Colonel as he spoke, so he did not see the man's face go pale.

"I have not met him since he grew a moustache, but I could recognise him anywhere by the peculiar colour of his eyes and by the fact that he has a scar at the back of his head, a souvenir of some unfortunate fracas in which he was engaged. They tell me that he became an expert user of knives—I gather he sojourned a while in Latin America—a knave of clubs and a knave of hearts—hum!"

The Colonel sat rigid, not a muscle of his face moving.

"One supposes," Mr. Reeder continued, looking at the girl thoughtfully, "that he has by this time acquired a competence which enables him to stay at the very best hotels without any fear of police supervision."

Her dark eyes were fixed unwaveringly on his. The full lips were closed, the jaws set.

"How very interesting you are, Mr. Reeder!" she drawled at last. "Mr. Daver tells me you are associated with the police force?"

"Remotely, only remotely," said Mr. Reeder.

"Are you acquainted with any other knaves, Mr. Reeder?"

It was the cool voice of the clergyman, and Mr. Reeder beamed round at him.

"With the Knave of Diamonds," he said softly. "What a singularly appropriate name for one who spent five years in the profitable pursuit of illicit diamond-buying in South Africa, and five unprofitable years on the Breakwater in Capetown, becoming, as one might say, a knave of spades from the continuous use of that necessary and agricultural implement, and a knave of pickaxes too, one supposes! He was flogged, if I remember rightly, for an outrageous assault upon a warder, and on his release from prison was implicated in a robbery in Johannesburg. I am relying on my memory, and I cannot recall at the moment whether he reached Pretoria Central—which is the colloquial name for the Transvaal prison—or whether he escaped. I seem to remember that he was concerned in a banknote case which I once had in hand. Now what was his name?"

He looked thoughtfully at the clergyman.

"Gregory Dones! That is it—Mr. Gregory Dones! It is beginning to come back to me now. He had an angel tattooed on his left forearm, a piece of decoration which one would have imagined sufficient to keep him to the narrow paths of virtue, and even to bring him eventually within the fold of the church."

The Rev. Mr. Dean got up from the table, put his hand in his pocket and took out some money.

"You lost the rubber, but I think you win on points," he said. "What do I owe you, Mr. Reeder?"

"What you can never pay me," said Mr. Reeder, shaking his head. "Believe me, Gregory, your score and mine will never be wholly settled to your satisfaction!"

With a shrug of his shoulders and a smile, the hard-faced clergyman strolled away. Mr. Reeder watched him out of the corner of his eye and saw him disappear towards the vestibule.

"Are all your knaves masculine?" asked Olga Crewe.

Reeder nodded gravely.

"I hope so, Miss Crewe."

Her challenging eyes met his.

"In other words, you don't know me?" she said bluntly. And then, with sudden vehemence: "I wish to God you did! I wish you did!"

Turning abruptly, she almost ran from the hall.

Mr. Reeder stood where she had left him, his eyes roving left and right. In the shadowy entrance of the hall, made all the more obscure by the heavy dark curtains which covered it, he saw a dim figure standing. Only for a second, and then it disappeared. The woman Burton, he thought.

It was time to go to his room. He had taken only two steps from the table when all the lights in the hall went out. In such moments as these Mr. Reeder was a very nimble man. He spun round and made for the nearest wall, and stood waiting, his back to the panelling. And then he heard the plaintive voice of Mr. Daver.

"Who on earth has put the lights out? Where are you, Mr. Reeder?"

"Here!" said Mr. Reeder, in a loud voice, and dropped instantly to the ground. Only in time: he heard a whistle, a thud, and something struck the panel above his head.

Mr. Reeder emitted a deep groan and crawled rapidly and noiselessly across the floor.

Again came Daver's voice:

"What on earth was that? Has anything happened, Mr. Reeder?"

The detective made no reply. Nearer and nearer he was crawling towards where Daver stood. And then, as unexpectedly as they had been extinguished, the lights went up. Daver was standing in front of the curtained doorway, and on the proprietor's face was a look of blank dismay as Mr. Reeder rose at his feet.

Daver shrank back, his big white teeth set in a fearful grin, his round eyes wide open. He tried to speak, and his mouth opened and closed, but no sound issued. From Reeder his eyes strayed to the panelled wall—but Reeder had already seen the knife buried in the wood.

"Let me think," he said gently. "Was that the Colonel or the highly intelligent representative of the church?"

He went across to the wall and with an effort pulled out the knife. It was long and broad.

"A murderous weapon," said Mr. Reeder.

Daver found his voice.

"A murderous weapon," he echoed hollowly. "Was it—thrown at you, Mr. Reeder?... how very terrible!"

Mr. Reeder was gazing at him sombrely.

"Your idea?" he asked, but by now Mr. Daver was incapable of replying.

Reeder left the shaken proprietor lying limply in one of the big arm-chairs, and walked up the carpeted stairs to the corridor. And if against his black coat the automatic was not visible, it was nevertheless there.

He stopped before his door, unlocked it, and threw it wide open. The lamp by the side of the bed was still burning. Mr. Reeder switched on the wall light, peeped through the crack between the

door and the wall before he ventured inside.

He shut the door, locked it, and walked over to the cupboard.

"You may come out, Brill," he said. "I presume nobody has been here?"

There was no answer, and he pulled open the cupboard door quickly.

It was empty!

"Well, well!" said Mr. Reeder, and that meant that matters were everything but well.

There was no sign of a struggle; nothing in the world to suggest that Detective Brill had not walked out of his own free will and made his exit by the window, which was still open.

Mr. Reeder tiptoed back to the light-switch and turned it; stretched across the bed and extinguished the lamp; and then he sidled cautiously to the window and peeped round the stone framing. It was a very dark night, and he could distinguish no object below.

Events were moving only a little faster than he had anticipated: for this, however, he was responsible. He had forced the hands of the Flack confederation, and they were extremely able hands.

He was unlocking his trunk when he heard a faint sound of steel against steel. Somebody was fitting a key into the lock, and he waited, his automatic covering the door. Nothing further happened, and he went forward to investigate. His flash-lamp showed him what had happened. Somebody outside had inserted a key, turned it and left it in the lock, so that it was impossible for the door to be unlocked from the inside.

"I am rather glad," said Mr. Reeder, speaking his thoughts aloud, "that Miss—um—Margaret is on her way to London!"

He pursed his lips reflectively. Would he be glad if he also was at this moment en route for London? Mr. Reeder was not very certain about this.

On one point he was satisfied—the Flacks were going to give him a very small margin of time, and that margin must be used to the best advantage.

So far as he could tell, the trunks had not been opened. He pulled out the rope-ladder, groped down to the bottom, and presently withdrew his hand, holding a long white cardboard cylinder. Crawling under the window, he put up his hand and fixed an end of the cylinder in one of the china flower-pots that stood on the broad window-sill and which he had moved to allow the ingress of Brill. When this had been done to his satisfaction, he struck a match and, reaching up, set fire to a little touch-paper at the cylinder's free end. He brought his hand down just in time; something whizzed into the room and struck the panelling of the opposite wall with an angry smack. There was no sound of explosion. Whoever fired was using an air pistol. Again and again in rapid succession came the pellets, but by now the cylinder was burning and spluttering, and in another instant the grounds were brilliantly illuminated as the flare burst into a dazzling red flame that, he knew, could be seen for miles.

He heard a scampering of feet below, but dared not look out. By the time the first tender-load of detectives had come flying up the drive, the grounds were deserted.

With the exception of the servants, there were only two people at Larmes Keep when the police began their search. Mr. Daver and the faded Mrs. Burton alone remained. "Colonel Hothling" and "the Rev. Mr. Dean" had disappeared as though they had been whisked from the face of the earth.

Big Bill Gordon interviewed the proprietor.

"This is Flack's headquarters, and you know it. You'll be well advised to spill everything and save your own skin."

"But I don't know the man; I've never seen him!" wailed Mr. Daver. "This is the most terrible thing that has happened to me in my life! Can you make me responsible for the character of my guests? You're a reasonable man? I see you are! If these people are friends of Flack, I have never heard of them in that connection. You may search my house from cellar to garret, and if you find anything that in the least incriminates me, take me off to prison. I ask that as a favour. Is that the statement of an honest man? I see you are convinced!"

Neither he nor Mrs. Burton nor any of the servants who were questioned in the early hours of the morning could afford the slightest clue to the identity of the visitors. Miss Crewe had been in the habit of coming every year and of staying four and sometimes five months. Hothling was a newcomer, as also was the parson. Inquiries made by telephone of the chief of the Siltbury police confirmed Mr. Daver's statement that he had been the proprietor of Larmes Keep for twenty-five years, and that his past was blameless. He himself produced his title-deeds. A search of his papers, made at his invitation, and of the three tin boxes in the safe, produced nothing but support for his protestations of innocence.

Big Bill interviewed Mr. Reeder in the hall over a cup of coffee at three o'clock in the morning.

"There's no doubt at all that these people were members of the Flack crowd, probably engaged in advance against his escape, and how they got away the Lord knows! I have had six men on duty on the road since dark, and neither the woman nor the two men passed me."

"Did you see Brill?" asked Mr. Reeder, suddenly remembering the absent detective.

"Brill?" said the other in astonishment. "He's with you, isn't he? You told me to have him under your window——"

In a few words Mr. Reeder explained the situation, and together they went up to No. 7. There was nothing in the cupboard to afford the slightest clue to Brill's whereabouts. The panels were sounded, but there was no evidence of secret doors—a romantic possibility which Mr. Reeder had not excluded, for this was the type of house where he might expect to find them.

Two men were sent to search the grounds for the missing detective, and Reeder and the police chief went back to finish their coffee.

"Your theory has turned out accurate so far, but there is nothing to connect Daver."

"Daver's in it," said Mr. Reeder. "He was not the knife-thrower: his job was to locate me on behalf of the Colonel. But Daver brought Miss Belman down here in preparation for Flack's escape."

Big Bill nodded.

"She was to be hostage for your good behaviour." He scratched his head irritably. "That's like one of Crazy Jack's schemes. But why did he try to shoot you up? Why wasn't he satisfied with her being at Larmes Keep?"

Mr. Reeder had no immediate explanation. He was dealing with a madman, a thing of whims. Consistency was not to be expected from Mr. Flack.

He passed his fingers through his scanty hair.

"It is all rather puzzling and inexplicable," he said. "I think I'll go to bed."

He was sleeping dreamlessly, under the watchful eye of a Scotland Yard detective, when Big Bill came bursting into the room.

"Get up, Reeder!" he said roughly.

Mr. Reeder sat up in bed, instantly awake.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong! That gold-lorry left the Bank of England this morning at five o'clock on its way to Tilbury and hasn't been seen since!"

CHAPTER XIII

At the last moment the bank authorities had changed their mind, and overnight had sent £53,000 worth of gold for conveyance to the ship. They had borrowed for the purpose an army lorry from Woolwich, a service which is sometimes claimed by the national banking institution.

The lorry had been accompanied by eight detectives, the military driver being also armed. Tilbury was reached at half-past eleven o'clock at night, and the lorry, a high-powered Lassavar, had returned to London at two o'clock in the morning and had been loaded in the bank courtyard under the eyes of the officer, sergeant, and two men of the guard which is on duty on the bank premises from sunset to sunrise. A new detachment of picked men from Scotland Yard, each carrying an automatic pistol, loaded the lorry for its second journey, the amount of gold this time being £73,000 worth. After the boxes had been put into the van, they had climbed up and the lorry had driven away from the bank. Each of the eight men guarding this treasure was passed under review by a high officer of Scotland Yard who knew every one personally. The lorry was seen in Commercial Road by a detective-inspector of the division, and its progress was also noted by a police-cyclist patrol who was on duty at the junction of the Ripple and Barking roads.

The main Tilbury road runs within a few hundred yards of the village of Rainham, and it was at this point, only a few miles distant from Tilbury, that the lorry disappeared. Two motor-cyclist policemen who had gone out to meet the gold-convoy, and who had received a telephone message from the Ripple road to say that it had passed, grew uneasy and telephoned to Tilbury.

It was an airless morning, with occasional banks of mist lying in the hollows, and part of the road, especially near the river, was patchily covered with white fog, which dispersed about eight o'clock in the morning under a southeasterly wind. The mist had almost disappeared when the search party from Tilbury pursued their investigations and came upon the one evidence of tragedy which the morning was to reveal. This was an old Ford motor car that had

evidently run from the road, miraculously missed a telegraph pole, and ditched itself. The machine had not overturned; there were no visible marks of injury; yet the man who sat at the wheel was stone dead when he was found. An immediate medical examination failed to discover an injury of any kind to the man, who was a small farmer of Rainham, and on the face of it it looked as though he had died of a heart attack whilst on his way to town.

Just beyond the place where he was found the road dips steeply between high banks. It is known as Coles Hollow, and at its deepest part the cutting is crossed by a single-track bridge which connects two portions of the farm through which the road runs. The dead farmer and his machine had been removed when Reeder and the chief of Scotland Yard arrived on the spot. No news of any kind had been received of the lorry; but the local police, who had been following its tracks, had made two discoveries. Apparently, going through the cutting, the front wheels of the trolley had collided with the side, for there was a deep scoop in the clayey soil which the impact had hollowed out.

"It almost appears," said Simpson, who had been put in charge of the case, "that the trolley swerved here to avoid the farmer's car. There are his wheel tracks, and you notice they were wobbling from side to side. Probably the man was already dying."

"Have you traced the trolley tracks from here?" asked Reeder.

Simpson nodded, and called a sergeant of the Essex Constabulary, who had charted the tracks.

"They seem to have turned up north towards Becontree," he said. "As a matter of fact, a policeman at Becontree said he saw a large trolley come out of the mist and pass him, but that had a tilt on it and was going towards London. It was an army trolley, too, and was driven by a soldier."

Mr. Reeder had lit a cigarette and was holding the flaming match in his hand, staring at it solemnly.

"Dear me!" he said, and dropped the match and watched it extinguish.

And then he began what seemed to be a foolish search of the ground, striking match after match.

"Isn't there light enough for you, Mr. Reeder?" asked Simpson irritably.

The detective straightened his back and smiled. Only for a second was he amused, and then his long face went longer than ever.

"Poor fellow!" he said softly. "Poor fellow!"

"Who are you talking about?" demanded Simpson, but Mr. Reeder did not reply. Instead, he pointed up to the bridge, in the centre of which was an old and rusted water-wagon, the type which certain English municipalities still use. He climbed up to the bank and examined the iron tank, opened the hatches and groped inside, lighting matches to aid his examination.

"Is it empty?" asked Simpson.

"I am afraid it is," said Mr. Reeder, and inspected the worn hose leading from its iron spindles. He descended the cutting more melancholy than ever.

"Have you thought how easy it is to disguise an ordinary army lorry?" he asked. "A tilt, I think the sergeant said, and on its way to London."

"Do you think that was the gold-van?"

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"I'm certain," he said.

"Where was it attacked?"

Mr. Reeder pointed to the mark of the wheels on the side of the road.

"There," he said simply, and Simpson growled impatiently.

"Stuff! Nobody heard a shot fired, and you don't think our people would go down without a fight, do you? They could have held their own against five times their number, and no crowd has been seen on this road!"

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"Nevertheless, this is where the convoy was attacked and overcome," he said. "I think you ought to look for the trolley with the tilt, and get on to your Becontree man and get a closer description of the machine he saw."

In a quarter of an hour the police car brought them to the little Essex village, and the policeman who had seen the wagon was interviewed. It was a few minutes before he went off duty, he said. There was a thick mist at the time, and he heard the rumble of the lorry wheels before it came into sight. He described it as a typical army wagon. So far as he could tell, it was grey, and had a black tilt with "W.D." and a broad-arrow painted on the side, "W.D." standing for War Department, the broad-arrow being the sign of Government. He saw one soldier driving and another sitting by his side. The back of the tilt was laced up and he could not see into the interior. The soldier as he passed had waved his hand in greeting, and the policeman had thought no more about the matter until the robbery of the gold convoy was reported.

"Yes, sir," he said, in answer to Reeder's inquiry, "I think it was loaded. It went very heavily on the road. We often get these trolleys coming up from Shoeburyness."

Simpson had put through a telephone inquiry to the Barking police, who had seen the military wagon. But army convoys were no unusual sight in the region of the docks. Either that or one similar was seen entering the Blackwall Tunnel, but the Greenwich police, on the south side of the river, had failed to identify it, and from there on all trace of the lorry was lost.

"We're probably chasing a shadow anyway," said Simpson. "If your theory is right, Reeder—it can't be right! They couldn't have caught these men of ours so unprepared that somebody didn't shoot, and there's no sign of shooting."

"There was no shooting," said Mr. Reeder, shaking his head.

"Then where are the men?" asked Simpson.

"Dead," said Mr. Reeder quietly.

It was at Scotland Yard, in the presence of an incredulous and horrified Commissioner, that Mr. J. G. Reeder reconstructed the crime.

"Flack is a chemist: I think I impressed it upon you. Did you notice, Simpson, on the bridge, across the cutting, was an old water-cart? I think you have since learnt that it does not belong to the farmer who owns the land, and that he has never seen it before. It

may be possible to discover where that was purchased. In all probability you will find that it was bought a few days ago at the sale of some municipal stores. I noticed in *The Times* there was an advertisement of such a sale. Do you realise how easy it would be not only to store under pressure, but to make, in that tank, large quantities of a deadly gas, one important element of which is carbon monoxide? Suppose this, or, as it may prove, a more deadly gas, has been so stored, do you realise how simple a matter it would be on a still, breathless morning to throw a big hose over the bridge and fill the hollow with the gas? That is, I am sure, what happened. Whatever else was used, there is still carbon monoxide in the cutting, for when I dropped a match it was immediately extinguished, and every match I burnt near the ground went out. If the car had run right through and climbed the other slope of the cutting, the driver and the men inside the trolley might have escaped death. As it was, rendered momentarily unconscious, the driver turned his wheel and ran into the bank, stopping the trolley. They were probably dead before Flack and his associate, whoever it was, jumped down, wearing gas masks, lifted the driver back into the trolley and drove on."

"And the farmer——" began the Commissioner.

"His death probably occurred some time after the trolley had passed. He also descended into that death hollow, but the speed at which his car was going carried him up nearer the cutting, though he must have been dead by the time he got out."

He rose and stretched himself wearily.

"Now I think I will go and interview Miss Belman and set her mind at rest," he said. "Did you send her to the hotel, as I asked you, Mr. Simpson?"

Simpson stared at him in blank astonishment.

"Miss Belman?" he said. "I haven't seen Miss Belman!"

CHAPTER XIV

Her head in a whirl, Margaret Belman had stepped into the cab that was waiting at the door of Larmes Keep. The door was immediately slammed behind her, and the cab moved off. She saw her companion: he had shrunk into a corner of the landau, and greeted her with a little embarrassed grin. He did not speak until the cab was some distance from the house.

"My name's Gray," he said. "Mr. Reeder hadn't a chance of introducing me. Sergeant Gray, C.I.D."

"Mr. Gray, what does all this mean? This instrument I am to get…?"

Gray coughed. He knew nothing about the instrument, he explained, but his instructions were to put her into a car that would be waiting at the foot of the hill road.

"Mr. Reeder wants you to go up by car. You didn't see Brill anywhere, did you?"

"Brill?" she frowned. "Who is Brill?"

He explained that there had been two officers inside the grounds, himself and the man he had mentioned.

"But what is happening? Is there anything wrong at Larmes Keep?" she asked.

She had no need to ask the question. That look in J. G. Reeder's eyes had told her that something indeed was very wrong.

"I don't know, miss," said Gray diplomatically. "All I know is that the Chief Inspector is down here with a dozen men, and that looks like business. I suppose Mr. Reeder wanted to get you out of it."

She didn't "suppose"—she knew, and her heart beat a little quicker.

What was the mystery of Larmes Keep? Had all this to do with the disappearance of Ravini? She tried hard to think calmly and logically, but her thoughts were out of control.

The station fly stopped at the foot of the hill, and Gray jumped out. A little ahead of him she saw the tail light of a car drawn up by the side of the roadway.

"You've got the letter, miss? The car will take you straight to Scotland Yard, and Mr. Simpson will look after you."

He followed her to the car and held open the door for her, and stood in the roadway watching till the tail light disappeared round a bend of the road.

It was a big, cosy landaulette, and Margaret made herself comfortable in the corner, pulled the rug over her knees, and settled down to the two hours' journey. The air was a little close: she tried unsuccessfully to pull down one of the windows, then tried the other. Not only was there no glass to the windows, but the shutters were immovable. Something scratched her knuckle. She felt along the frame of the window.... Screws, recently inserted. It was a splinter of the raw wood which had cut her.

With growing uneasiness she felt for the inside handle of the door, but there was none. A search of the second door revealed a like state of affairs.

Her movements must have attracted the attention of the driver, for the glass panel was pushed back and a harsh voice greeted her.

"You can sit down and keep quiet! This isn't Reeder's car: I've sent it home."

The voice went into a chuckle that made her blood run cold.

"You're coming with me... to see life.... Reeder's going to weep tears of blood. You know me, eh?... Reeder knows me. I wanted to get him to-night. But you'll do, my dear."

Suddenly the glass panel was shut to. He turned off the main road and was following a secondary, his object being, she guessed, to avoid the big towns and villages en route. She put out her hand and felt the wall of the car. It was an all-weather body with a leather back. If she had a knife she might cut——

She gasped as a thought struck her, and, reaching up, she felt the metal fastening that kept the leather hood attached. Exerting all her strength, she thrust back the flat hook and, bracing her feet against the front of the machine, dragged at the leather hood. A rush of cold air came in as the hood began slowly to collapse. The closed car was now an open car. She could afford to lose no time. The car was

making thirty miles an hour, but she must take the risk of injury. Scrambling over the back of the hood, she gripped tight at the edge, and let herself drop into the roadway.

Although she turned a complete somersault, she escaped injury in some miraculous fashion, and, coming to her feet, cold with fear and trembling in every limb, she looked round for a way of escape. The hedge on her left was high and impenetrable. On her right was a low wooden fence, and over this she climbed as she heard the squeak of brakes and saw the car come to a standstill.

Even as she fled, she was puzzled to know what kind of land she was on. It was not cultivated; it was more like common land, for there was springy down beneath her feet, and clumps of gorse bushes sent out their spiny fingers to clutch at her dress as she flew past. She thought she heard the man hailing her, but fled on in the darkness.

Somewhere near at hand was the sea. She could smell the fragrance of it. Once when she stopped to take breath she could hear the distant thunder of the waves as they rolled up some unseen beach. She listened, almost deafened by the beating of her heart.

"Where are you? Come back, you fool…"

The voice was near at hand. Not a dozen yards away she saw a black figure moving, and had all her work to stifle the scream that rose in her throat. She crouched down behind a bush and waited, and then to her horror she saw a beam of light spring from the darkness. He had an electric lamp and was fanning it across the ground.

Detection was inevitable, and, springing to her feet, she ran, doubling from side to side in the hope of outwitting her pursuer. Now she found the ground sloping under her feet, and that gave her additional speed. She had need of it, for he saw her against the skyline, and came on after her, a babbling, shrieking fury of a man. And now capture seemed inevitable. She made one wild leap to escape his outstretched hands, and her feet suddenly trod on nothing. Before she could recover, she was falling, falling. She struck a bush, and the shock and pain of the impact almost made her faint. She was falling down a steep slope, and her wild hands clutched tree and sand and grass, and then, just as she had given up

all hope, she found herself rolling over and over on a level plateau, and came to rest with one leg hanging over a sheer drop of two hundred feet. Happily, it was dark.

Margaret Belman did not realise how near to death she had been till the dawn came up.

Below her was the sea and a slither of yellow sand. She was looking into a little bay that held no human dwelling so far as she could see. This was not astonishing, for the beach was only approachable from the water. Somewhere on the other side of the northern bluff, she guessed, was Siltbury. Beneath her a sheer fall over the chalky face of the cliff; above her, a terribly steep slope, but which might be negotiated, she thought hopefully.

She had lost one shoe in her fall, and after a little search found this, so near to the edge of the cliff that she grew dizzy as she stooped to pick it up.

The plateau was about fifty yards long, in the shape of a half-moon, and was almost entirely covered with gorse bushes. The fact that she found dozens of nests was sufficient proof that this spot was not visited even by the most daring of cliff-climbers. She understood now the significance of the low rail on the side of the road, which evidently followed the sea-coast westwards for some miles. How far was she from Larmes Keep? she wondered—until the absurdity of considering such a matter occurred to her. How near was she to starvation and death was a more present problem.

Her task was to escape from the plateau. There was a chance that she might be observed from the sea, but it was a remote one. The few pleasure-boats that went out from Siltbury did not go westward; the fishing fleet invariably tacked south. Lying face downward, she looked over the edge, in the vain hope that she would find an easy descent, but none was visible. She was hungry, but, though she searched the nests, there were no eggs to be found.

There was nothing to be done but to make a complete exploration of the plateau. Westward it yielded nothing, but on the eastern side she discovered a scrub-covered slope which apparently led to yet another plateau, not so broad as the one she was on.

To slide down was an easy matter; to check herself so that she did not go beyond the plateau offered greater difficulty. With infinite labour she broke off two stout branches of a thick furze bush, and, using these as a skier uses her stick to check her progress, she began to shuffle down, feet first. She could move slowly enough when the face of the declivity was composed of sand or loam, or when there were friendly bushes to hold, but there were broad stretches of weatherworn rock to slide across, and on these the stick made no impression and her velocity increased at an alarming rate.

And then, to her horror, she discovered that she was not keeping direction; that, try as she did, she was slipping to the left of the plateau, and though she strove desperately to move further to the right, she made no progress. The bushes that littered the upper slope were more infrequent here. There was indication of a recent landslide, which might continue down to the sea-level or might end abruptly and disastrously over the edge of some steep cliff. Slipping, sometimes on her back, sometimes sideways, sometimes on her face, she felt her momentum increase with every yard she covered. The ends of the ski-sticks were frayed to feathery splinters, and already the desired plateau was above her. Turning her head, she saw the white face of it dropping to the unseen deeps.

Now she knew the worst. The slope twisted round a huge rock and dropped at an acute angle into the sea. Almost before she could realise the danger ahead, she was slipping faster and faster through the loam and sand, the centre of a new landslide she had created. Boulders of a terrifying size accompanied her—by a hair's-breadth she escaped being crushed under one.

And then without warning she was shot into the air as from a catapult. She had a swift vision of tumbling green below, and in another second the water had closed over her and she was striking out with all her strength....

It seemed almost an eternity before she came to the surface. Fortunately, she was a good swimmer, and, looking round, she saw that the yellow beach was less than fifty yards away. But it was fifty yards against a falling tide, and she was utterly exhausted when she dragged herself ashore and fell on the sand.

She ached from head to foot; her hands and limbs were lacerated. She felt that her body was one huge bruise. As she lay recovering her breath she heard one comforting sound, the splash of falling water. Half-way down the cliff face was a spring, and, staggering across the beach, she drank eagerly from her cupped hands. She was parched; her throat was so dry that she could hardly articulate. Hunger she might bear, but thirst was unendurable. She might remain alive for days, supposing she were not discovered before that time.

There was now no need for her to make a long reconnaissance of the beach: the way of escape lay open to her. A water-hollowed tunnel led through the bluff and showed her yet another beach beyond. Siltbury was not in sight. She had no idea how far she was from that desirable habitation of human people, and did not trouble to think. After she had satisfied her thirst she took off her shoes and stockings and made for the tunnel.

The second bay was larger and the beach longer. There were, she found, small masses of rocks jutting far into the sea that had to be negotiated with bare feet. The beach was longer than she had thought, and so far as she could see there was no outlet, nor did the cliff diminish in height. She had expected to find a cliff path, and this hope was strengthened when she discovered the rotting hull of a boat drawn high and dry on the beach. It was, she judged, about eight o'clock in the morning. She had started wet through, but the warm September sun dried her rags—for rags they were. She had all the sensations of a shipwrecked mariner on a desert island, and after a while the loneliness and absence of all kinds of human society began to get on her nerves.

Before she reached the end of the beach she saw that the only way into the next bay was by swimming to where the rocky barrier was low enough to be climbed. She could with great comfort to herself have discarded what remained of her clothes, but beyond these rocks might lie civilisation, and, tying her wet shoes and stockings together, she made fast her shoes, and, knotting them about her waist, waded into the sea and swam steadily, looking for a likely place to land. This she found—a step-shaped pyramid of rocks that looked easier to negotiate than in fact they were. By dint of hard climbing she came to the summit.

The beach here was shorter, the cliff considerably higher. Across the shoulder of rock running to the sea she saw the white houses of Siltbury, and the sight gave her courage. Descending from the rocky ridge was even more difficult than climbing, and she was grateful when at last she sat upon a flat ledge and dangled her bruised feet in the water.

Swimming back to the land taxed her strength to the full. It was nearly an hour before her feet touched firm sand and she staggered up the beach. Here she rested, until the pangs of hunger drove her towards the last visible obstacle.

There was one which was not visible. After a quarter of an hour's walk she found her way barred by a deep sea river which ran under the overhung cliff. She had seen this place before: where was it? And then she remembered, with an exclamation.

This was the cave that Olga had told her about, the cave that ran under Larmes Keep. Shading her eyes, she looked up. Yes, there was the little landslide; part of the wall that had been carried away projected from a heap of rubble on the cliff side.

Suddenly Margaret saw something which made her breath come faster. On the edge of the deep channel which the water had cut in the sand was the print of a boot, a large, square-toed boot with a rubber heel. It had been recently made. She looked farther along the channel and saw another: it led to the mouth of the cave. On either side of the rugged entrance was a billow of firm sand left by the retreating waters, and again she saw the footprint. A visitor to the cave, perhaps, she thought. Presently he would come out and she would explain her plight, though her appearance left little need for explanation.

She waited, but there was no sign of the man. Stooping, she tried to peer into its dark depths. Perhaps, if she were inside out of the light, she could see better. She walked gingerly along the sand ledge, but as yet her eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, revealed nothing.

She took another step, passed into the entrance of the cave; and then, from somewhere behind, a bare arm was flung round her shoulder, a big hand closed over her mouth. In terror she struggled

madly, but the man held her in a grip of iron, and then her senses left her and she sank limply into his arms.

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Reeder was not an emotional man. For the first time in his life Inspector Simpson learnt that behind the calm and imperturbable demeanour of the Public Prosecutor's chief detective lay an immense capacity for violent language. He fired a question at the officer, and Simpson nodded.

"Yes, the car returned. The driver said that he had orders to go back to London. I thought you had changed your plans. You're staying with this bullion robbery, Reeder?"

Mr. Reeder glared across the desk, and despite his hardihood Inspector Simpson winced.

"Staying with hell!" hissed Reeder.

Simpson was seeing the real and unsuspected J. G. Reeder and was staggered.

"I'm going back to interview that monkey-faced criminologist, and I'm going to introduce him to forms of persuasion which have been forgotten since the Inquisition!"

Before Simpson could reply, Mr. Reeder was out of the door and flying down the stairs.

* * * * *

It was the hour after lunch, and Daver was sitting at his desk, twiddling his thumbs, when the door was pushed open unceremoniously and Mr. Reeder came in. He did not recognise the detective, for a man who in a moment of savage humour slices off his side-whiskers brings about an amazing change in his appearance. And with the vanishing of those ornaments there had been a remarkable transformation in Mr. Reeder's demeanour. Gone were his useless pince-nez which had fascinated a generation of law-breakers; gone the gentle, apologetic voice, the shyly diffident manner.

"I want you, Daver!"

"Mr. Reeder!" gasped the yellow-faced man, and turned a shade paler.

Reeder slammed the door to behind him, pulled up a chair with a crash, and sat down opposite the hotel-proprietor.

"Where is Miss Belman?"

"Miss Belman?"

Astonishment was expressed in every feature. "Good gracious, Mr. Reeder, surely you know? She went up to get your dactyscope—is that the word? I intended asking you to be good enough to let me see this——"

"Where—is—Miss—Belman?—Spill it, Daver, and save yourself a lot of unhappiness."

"I swear to you, my dear Mr. Reeder——"

Reeder leaned across the table and rang the bell.

"Do—do you want anything?" stammered the manager.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Flack—you call her Mrs. Burton, but Mrs. Flack is good enough for me."

Daver's face was ghastly now. He had become suddenly wizened and old.

"I'm one of the few people who happen to know that John Flack is married," said Reeder; "one of the few who know he has a daughter! The question is, does John Flack know all that I know?"

He glowered down at the shrinking man.

"Does he know that after he was sent to Broadmoor his sneaking worm of a secretary, his toady and parasite and slave, decided to carry on in the Flack tradition, and used his influence and his knowledge to compel the unfortunate daughter of mad John Flack to marry him?"

A frenzied, almost incoherent voice wailed:

"For God's sake... don't talk so loud...!"

But Mr. Reeder went on.

"Before Flack went to prison he put into the care of his daughter his famous encyclopaedia of crime. She was the only person he trusted: his wife was a weak slave whom he had always despised. Mr. Daver, the secretary, got possession of those books a year after Flack was put in gaol. He organised his own little gang at Flack's old headquarters, which were nominally bought by you. Ever since you

knew John Flack was planning an escape—an escape in which you had to assist him—you've been living in terror that he would discover how you had double-crossed him. Tell me I'm a liar and I'll beat your miserable little head off! Where is Margaret Belman?"

"I don't know," said the man sullenly. "Flack had a car waiting for her: that's all I know."

Something in his tone, something in the shifty slant of his eyes, infuriated Reeder. He stretched out a long arm, gripped the man by the collar and jerked him savagely across the desk. As a feat of physical strength it was remarkable; as a piece of propaganda of the frightfulness that was to follow, it had a strange effect upon Daver. He lay limp for a second, and then, with a quick jerk of his collar, he wrenched himself from Reeder's grip and fled from the room, slamming the door behind him. By the time Reeder had kicked an overturned chair from his path and opened the door, Daver had disappeared.

When Reeder reached the hall it was empty. He met none of the servants (he learnt later that the majority had been discharged that morning, paid a month's wages and sent to town by the first train). He ran out of the main entrance on to the lawn, but the man he sought was not in sight. The other side of the house drew blank. One of the detectives on duty in the grounds, attracted by Mr. Reeder's hasty exit, came running into the vestibule as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Nobody came out, sir," he said, when Reeder explained the object of his search.

"How many men are there in the grounds?" asked Reeder shortly. "Four? Bring them into the house. Lock every door, and bring back a crowbar with you. I am going to do a little investigation that may cost me a lot of money. No sign of Brill?"

"No, sir," said the detective, shaking his head sadly. "Poor old Brill! I'm afraid they've done him. The young lady get to town all right, sir?"

Mr. Reeder scowled at him.

"The young lady—what do you know about her?" he asked sharply.

"I saw her to the car," said Detective Gray.

Reeder gripped him by the coat and led him along the vestibule.

"Now tell me, and tell me quickly, what sort of car was it?"

"I don't know, Mr. Reeder," said the man in surprise. "An ordinary kind of car, except that the windows were shuttered, but I thought that was your idea."

"What sort of body was it?"

The man described the machine as accurately as possible; he had only made a superficial inspection. He thought, however, it was an all-weather body. The news was no more than Reeder had expected —neither added to nor diminished his anxiety. When Gray had gone back to his companions and the door was locked, Mr. Reeder, from the landing above, called them up to the first floor. A very thorough search had already been made by the police that morning; but, so far, Daver's room had escaped anything but superficial attention. It was situated at the far end of the corridor, and was locked when the search-party arrived. It took less than two minutes to force an entrance. Mr. Daver's suite consisted of a sitting-room, a bedroom, and a handsomely-fitted bathroom. There was a number of books in the former, a small Empire table on which were neatly arranged a pile of accounts, but there was nothing in the way of documents to reveal his relationship with the Flack gang.

The bedroom was beautifully furnished. Here again, from Reeder's point of view, the search was unsatisfactory.

The suite formed one of the angles of the old Keep, and Reeder was leaving the room when his eyes, roving back for a last look round, were arrested by the curious position of a brown leather divan in one corner of the room. He went back and tried to pull it away from the wall, but apparently it was a fixture. He kicked at the draped side and it gave forth a hollow wooden sound.

"What has he got in that divan?" he asked.

After considerable search Gray found a hidden bolt, and, this thrown back, the top of the divan came up like the lid of a box. It was empty.

"The rum thing about this house, sir," said Gray as they went downstairs together, "is that one always seems on the point of making an important discovery, and it always turns out to be a dud."

Reeder did not reply: he was too preoccupied with his growing distress. After a while he spoke.

"There are many queer things about this house——" he began.

And then there came a sound which froze the marrow of his bones. It was a shrill shriek; the scream of a human soul in agony.

"Help!... Help, Reeder!"

It came from the direction of the room he had left, and he recognised Daver's voice.

"Oh, God...!"

The sound of a door slamming. Reeder took the stairs three at a time, the detectives following him. Daver's door he had left ajar, but in the short time he had been downstairs it had been shut and bolted.

"The crowbar, quick!"

Gray had left it below, and, flying down, returned in a few seconds.

No sound came from the room. Pushing the claw of the crowbar between architrave and door at the point where he had seen the bolt, Reeder levered it back and the door flew open with a crash. One step into the apartment and then he stood stock still, glaring at the bed, unable to believe his eyes.

On the silken counterpane, sprawled in an indescribable attitude, his round, sightless eyes staring at the ceiling, was Daver. Mr. Reeder knew that he was dead before he saw the terrible wound, or the brown-hilted knife that stuck out from his side.

Reeder listened at the heart—felt the pulse of the warm wrist, but it was a waste of time, as he knew. He made a quick search of the clothing. There was an inside pocket in the waistcoat, and here he found a thick pad of banknotes.

"All thousands," said Mr. Reeder, "and ninety-five of them. What's in that packet?"

It was a little cardboard folder, and contained a steamship ticket from Southampton to New York, made out in the name of "Sturgeon"; and in the coat pocket Reeder found a passport which was stamped by the American Embassy and bore the same name.

"He was ready to jump—but he delayed it too long," he said. "Poor devil!"

"How did he get here, sir?" asked Gray. "They couldn't have carried him——"

"He was alive enough when we heard him," said Reeder curtly. "He was being killed when we heard him shriek. There is a way into this room we haven't discovered yet. What's that?"

It was the sound of a muffled thud, as if a heavy door had been closed. It seemed to come from somewhere in the room. Reeder took the crowbar from the detective's hand and attacked the panel behind the settee. Beneath was solid wall. He ripped down another strip, with no more enlightening result. Again he opened the divan. Its bottom was made of a thin layer of oak. This too was ripped off; beneath this again was the stone floor.

"Strip it," said Reeder, and when this was done he stepped inside the divan and seesawed gingerly from one end to the other.

"There's nothing here," he said. "Go downstairs and 'phone Mr. Simpson. Tell him what has happened."

When the man had gone he resumed his examination of the body. Daver had carried, attached to one of the buttons of his trousers, a long gold chain. This was gone: he found it broken off close to the link, and the button itself hanging by a thread. It was whilst he was making his examination that his hand touched a bulky package in the dead man's hip pocket. It was a worn leather case, filled with scraps of memoranda, mostly undecipherable. They were written in a formless hand, generally with pencil, and the writing was large and irregular, whilst the paper used for these messages was of every variety. One was a scrawled chemical formula; another was a brief note which ran:

> "House opposite Reeder to let. Engage or get key. Communicate usual place."

Some of these notes were understandable, some beyond Mr. Reeder's comprehension. But he came at last to a scrap which swept the colour from his cheeks. It was written in the same hand on the selvedge of a newspaper, and was crumpled into a ball:

> "Belman fell over cliff 6 miles west Larme. Send men to get body before police discover."

Mr. J. G. Reeder read and the room spun round.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Margaret Belman recovered consciousness she was in the open air, lying in a little recess, effectively hidden from the mouth of the cave. A man in a torn shirt and ragged trousers was standing by her side, looking down at her. As she opened her eyes she saw him put his finger to his mouth, as though to signal silence. His hair was unkempt; streaks of dried blood zigzagged down his face, and the hair above, she saw, was matted. Yet there was a certain kindliness in his disfigured face which reassured her as he knelt down and, making a funnel of his hands, whispered:

"Be quiet! I'm sorry to have frightened you, but I was scared you'd shout if you saw me. I suppose I look pretty awful."

His grin was very reassuring.

"Who are you?" she asked in the same tone.

"My name's Brill, C.I.D."

"How did you get here?" she asked.

"I'd like to be able to tell you," he answered grimly. "You're Miss Belman, aren't you?"

She nodded. He lifted his head, listening, and, flattening himself against the rock, craned out slowly and peeped round the edge of his hiding-place. He did not move for about five minutes, and by this time she had risen to her feet. Her knees were dreadfully shaky; she felt physically sick, and once again her mouth was dry and parched.

Apparently satisfied, he crept back to her side.

"I was left on duty in Reeder's room. I thought I heard him calling from the window—you can't distinguish voices when they whisper—and asking me to come out quick, as he wanted me. I'd hardly dropped to the ground before—cosh!" He touched his head gingerly and winced. "That's all I remember till I woke up and found myself drowning. I've been in the cave all the morning—naturally."

"Why naturally?" she whispered.

"Because the beach is covered with water at high tide and the cave's the only place. It is a little too densely populated for me just now."

She stared at him in amazement.

"Populated? What do you mean?"

"Whisper!" he warned her, for she had raised her voice.

Again he listened.

"I'd like to know how they get down—Daver and that old devil."

She felt herself going white.

"You mean… Flack?"

He nodded.

"Flack's only been here about an hour, and how he got down God knows. I suppose our fellows are patrolling the house?"

"The police?" she asked in astonishment.

"Flack's headquarters—didn't you know it? I suppose you wouldn't. I thought Reeder—I mean Mr. Reeder—told you everything."

He was rather a talkative young man, more than a little exuberant at finding himself alive, and with good reason.

"I've been dodging in and out the cave all the morning. They've got a sentry on duty up there"—he nodded towards Siltbury. "It's a marvellous organisation. They held up a gold convoy this morning and got away with it—I heard the old man telling his daughter. The funny thing is that though he wasn't there to superintend the steal, his plan worked out like clockwork. It's a curious thing, any crook will work for old Flack. He's employed the cleverest people in the business, and Ravini is the only man that ever sold him."

"Do you know what has happened to Mr. Ravini?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"He's dead, I expect. There are a lot of things in the cave that I haven't seen, and some that I have. They've got a petrol boat inside… as big as a church!… the boat, I mean… hush!"

Again he shrank against the cliff. Voices were coming nearer and nearer. Perhaps it was the peculiar acoustics of the cave which gave him the illusion that the speakers were standing almost at their elbow. Brill recognised the thin, harsh voice of the old man and grinned again, but it was not a pleasant smile to see.

"There's something wrong, something damnably wrong. What is it, Olga?"

"Nothing, father."

Margaret recognised the voice of Olga Crewe.

"You have been very good and very patient, my love, and I would not have planned to come out, but I wanted to see you settled in life. I am very ambitious for you, Olga."

A pause, and then:

"Yes, father."

Olga Crewe's voice was a little dispirited, but apparently the old man did not notice this.

"You are to have the finest husband in the land, my dear. You shall have a house that any princess would envy. It shall be of white marble with golden cupolas... you shall be the richest woman in the land, Olga. I have planned this for you. Night after night as I lay in bed in that dreadful place I said to myself: 'I must go out and settle Olga's future.' That is why I came out—only for that reason. All my life I have worked for you."

"Mother says——" began the girl.

"Pah!" Old John Flack almost spat the word. "An unimaginative commoner, with the soul of a housekeeper! She has looked after you well? Good. All the better for her. I would never have forgiven her if she had neglected you. And Daver? He has been respectful? He has given you all the money you wanted?"

"Yes, father."

Margaret thought she detected a catch in the girl's voice.

"Daver is a good servant. I will make his fortune. The scum of the gutter—but faithful. I told him to be your watch-dog. I am pleased with him. Be patient a little while longer. I am going to see all my dreams come true."

The voice of the madman was tender, so transfigured by love and pride that it seemed to be a different man who was speaking. Then his voice changed again.

“The Colonel will be back to-night. He is a trustworthy man… Gregory also. They shall be paid like ambassadors. You must bear with me a little while, Olga. All these unpleasant matters will be cleared up. Reeder we shall dispose of. To-morrow at high tide we leave…”

The sound of the voices receded until they became an indistinguishable murmur. Brill looked round at the girl and smiled again.

“Can you beat him?” he asked admiringly. “Crazy as a barn coot! But he has the cleverest brain in London: even Reeder says that. God! I’d give ten years’ salary and all my chance of promotion for a gun!”

“What shall we do?” she asked after a long silence.

“Stay here till the tide turns, then we’ll have to take our chance in the cave. We’d be smashed to pieces if we waited on the beach.”

“There’s no way up the cliff?”

He shook his head.

“There’s a way out through the cave if we can only find it,” he said. “One way? A dozen! I tell you that this cliff is like a honeycomb. One of these days it will collapse like froth on a glass of beer! I heard Daver say so, and the mad fellow agreed. Mad? I wish I had his brain! He’s going to dispose of Reeder, is he? The cemeteries are full of people who’ve tried to dispose of Reeder!”

CHAPTER XVII

It seemed an eternity before the tide turned and began slowly to make its noisy way up the beach. Most of the time she was alone in the little recess, for Brill made periodical reconnaissances into the mouth of the cave. She would have accompanied him, but he explained the difficulties she would find.

"It is quite dark until the tide comes in, and then we get the reflected light from the water and you can see your way about quite easily."

"Is there anybody there?"

He nodded.

"Two chaps who are tinkering about with a boat. She's high and dry at present on the bed of the channel, but she floats out quite easily."

The first whirl of water was around them when he came out from the cave and beckoned her.

"Keep close to the wall," he whispered, "and hold fast to my sleeve."

She obeyed and followed him and they slipped round to the left, following a fairly level path. Before they had come into the cave, he had warned her that under no circumstances must she speak, not even whisper, except through hollowed hands placed against his ear. The properties of the cave were such that the slightest sound was magnified.

They went a long way to the left, and she thought that they were following a passage; it was not until later that she discovered the huge dimensions of this water-hollowed cavern. After a while he reached back and touched her right hand, as a signal that he was turning to the right.

Whilst they were waiting on the beach he had drawn a rough plan in the sand, and assured her that the ledge on which they now walked offered no obstacle. He pressed her hand to warn her he was stopping, and, bending down, he groped at the rocky wall where he had left his shoes. Up and up they went; she began to see dimly now,

though the cave remained in darkness and she was unable with any accuracy to pick out distant objects. His arm came back and she found herself guided into a deep niche, and he patted her shoulder to tell her she could sit down.

They had to wait another hour before a thin sheet of water showed at the mouth of the cave, and then, as if by magic, the interior was illuminated by a ghostly green light. The greatest height of the cave it was impossible to tell from where she sat, because just above them was a low and jagged roof. The farther side of the cave was distant some fifty yards, and here the rocky wall seemed to run straight down from the roof to the sandy bottom. It was under this that she saw the motor boat, a long grey craft, entirely devoid of any superstructure. It lay heeled over on its side, and she saw a figure walk along the canted deck and disappear down a hatchway. The farther the water came into the cave, the brighter grew the light. He circled his two hands about her ear and whispered:

"Shall we stay here or try to find a way out?" and she replied in like fashion:

"Let us try."

He nodded, and silently led the way. It was no longer necessary for her to hold on to him. The path they were following had undoubtedly been shaped by human hands. Every dozen yards was a rough-hewn block of stone put across the path step fashion. They were ascending, and now had the advantage of being screened by the cave from people on the boat, for on their right rose a jagged screen of rock.

They had not progressed a hundred yards before screen and wall joined, and beyond this point progress seemed impossible. The passage was in darkness. Apparently Brill had explored the way, for, taking the girl by the arm, he moved to the right, feeling along the uneven wall. The path beneath was more difficult, and the rocky floor made walking a pain. She was near to exhaustion when she saw, ahead of her, an irregular patch of grey light. Apparently this curious gallery led back to the far end of the cave, but before they reached the opening Brill signalled her to halt.

"You'd better sit down," he whispered. "We can put on our shoes."

The stockings that she had knotted about her waist were still wet, and her shoes two soggy masses, but she was glad to have some protection for her feet. Whilst she was putting them on, Brill crept forward to the opening and took observation.

The water which had now flooded the cave was some fifty feet below him, and a few paces would bring them to a broad ledge of rock which formed a natural landing for a flight of steps leading down from the misty darkness of the roof to water-level. The steps were cut in the side of the bare rock; they were about two feet in breadth and were unprotected even by a makeshift handrail. It would be, he saw, a nerve-racking business for the girl to attempt the climb, and he was not even sure that it would be worth the attempt. That they led to one of the many exits from the cave, he knew, because he had seen people climbing up and down those steps and disappearing in the darkness at the top. Possibly the stairs broadened nearer the roof, but even so it was a very severe test for a half-starved girl, who he guessed was on the verge of hysteria; he was not quite certain that he himself would not be attacked by vertigo if he made the attempt.

There was a space behind the steps that brought him to the edge of the rock, part of the floor of the cave, and it was this way that he intended to guide Margaret. There was no sound; far away to his right the men on the launch were apparently absorbed in their work, and, returning, he told the girl his plan, and she accompanied him to the foot of the steps. At the sight of that terrifying stairway she shuddered.

“I couldn’t possibly climb those,” she whispered as he pointed upwards into the gloom.

“I have an idea there is a sort of balcony running the width of the cave, and it was from there I was thrown,” he said. “I have reason to know that there is a fairly deep pool at the foot of it. When the tide is up, the water reaches the back wall—that is where I found myself when I came to my senses.”

“Is there any other way from the cave?” she asked.

He shook his head.

"I'm blest if I know. I've only had a very hasty look round, but there seems to be a sort of tunnel at the far end. It's worth while exploring—nobody is about, and we are too far from the boat for them to see us."

They waited for a while, listening, and then, Brill walking ahead, they passed the foot of the stairs and followed a stony path which, to the girl's relief, broadened as they progressed.

Margaret Belman never forgot that nightmare walk, with the towering rock face on her left, the straight drop to the floor of the cave on her right hand.

They had now reached the limit of the rocky chamber, and found themselves confronted by the choice of four openings. There was one immediately facing them, another—and this was also accessible —about forty feet to the right, and two others which apparently could not be reached. Leaving Margaret, Brill groped his way into the nearest. He was gone half an hour before he returned with a story of failure.

"The whole cliff is absolutely bored with rock passages," he said. "I gave it up because it is impossible to go far without a light."

The second opening promised better. The floor was even, and it had this advantage that it ran straight in line with the mouth of the cave, and there was light for a considerable distance. She followed him along this passage.

"It is worth trying," he said, and she nodded her agreement.

They had not gone far before he discovered something which he had overlooked on his first trip. At regular intervals there were niches in the wall. He had noticed these, but had failed to observe their extraordinary regularity. The majority were blocked with loose stone, but he found one that had not been so guarded, and felt his way round the wall. It was a square, cell-like chamber, so exactly proportioned that it must have been created by the hand of man. He came back to announce his intention of exploring the next of the closed cells.

"These walls haven't been built up for nothing," he told her, and there was a note of suppressed excitement in his voice.

The farther they progressed, the poorer and more inadequate was the light. They had to feel their way along the wall until the next recess was reached. Flat slabs of rock, laid one on the other, had been piled up in the entrance, and the work of removing the top layers was a painful one. Margaret could not help him. She sat with her back to the wall and fell into the uneasy sleep of exhaustion. She had almost ceased to be hungry, though her throat was parched with a maddening thirst. She woke heavily and found Brill shaking her shoulder.

"I've been inside"—his voice was quavering with excitement. "Hold out your hands, both together!"

She obeyed mechanically, and felt something cold drip into her palms, and, drooping her head, drank. The sting of the wine took her breath away.

"Champagne," he whispered. "Don't drink too much or you'll get tight!"

She sipped again. Never had wine tasted so delicious.

"It's a storehouse; boxes of food, I think, and hundreds of bottles of wine. Hold your hands."

He poured more wine into her palms; most of it escaped through her fingers, but she drank eagerly the few drops that remained.

"Wait here."

She was very much awake now; peered into the darkness towards the place where he had disappeared. Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour passed, and then to her joy there appeared from behind the stony barrier, revealing in silhouette the hole through which Brill had crawled, a white and steady light. She heard the crack and crash of a box being opened, saw the bulk of the detective as he appeared in the hole, and in a second he was by her side.

"Biscuits," he said. "Luckily the box was labelled."

"What was the light?" she asked, as she seized the crackers eagerly.

"A small battery lantern; I knocked it over as I was groping. The place is simply stocked with grub! Here's a drink for you."

He handed her a flat, round tin, guided her finger to the hole he had punched.

"Preserved milk—German and good stuff," he said.

She drank thirstily, not taking her lips from the tin until it was empty.

"This seems to be the ship's store," he said, "but the great blessing is the lamp. I'm going in to see if I can find a box of refills; there isn't a great deal of juice left in the battery."

His search occupied a considerable time, and then she saw the light go out and her heart sank, until the light flashed up again, this time more brilliant than ever. He scrambled out and dropped down the rugged wall and pushed something heavy into her hand.

"A spare lamp," he said. "There are half a dozen there, and enough refills to last us a month."

He struck the stone wall with something that clanged.

"A case-opener," he explained, "and a useful weapon. I wonder which of these storehouses holds the guns?"

The exploration of the passage could now be made in comparative comfort. There was need of the lamps, for a few yards further on the tunnel turned abruptly to the right, and the floor became more irregular. Brill turned on his light and showed the way. Now the passage turned to the left, and he pointed out how smooth were the walls.

"Water action," he said. "There must have been a subterranean river here at some time."

Twisting and turning, the gallery led now up, now down, now taking almost a hairpin turn, now sweeping round in an almost perfect curve, but leading apparently nowhere.

Brill was walking ahead, the beam of his lamp sweeping along the ground, when she saw him stop suddenly, and, stooping, he picked something from the ground.

"How the dickens did this get here?"

On the palm of his hand lay a bright silver florin, a little battered at the edge, but unmistakably a two-shilling piece.

"Somebody has been here——" he began, and then she uttered a cry.

"Oh!" gasped Margaret. "That was Mr. Reeder's!"

She told him of the incident at the well; how J. G. Reeder had dropped the coin to test the distance. Brill put the light of his lamp on the ceiling; it was solid rock. And then he sent the rays moving along, and presently the lamp focussed on a large round opening.

"Here is the well that never was a well," he said grimly; and flashing the light upward, looked open-mouthed at the steel rungs fitted every few inches in the side of the well.

"A ladder," he said slowly. "What do you know about that?"

He reached up, standing on tiptoe, but the nearest rung was at least a yard beyond his hand, and he looked round for some loose stones which he could pile and from the top of which he could reach the lowest bar of the ladder. But none was in sight, except a few splinters of stone which were valueless for his purpose. And then he remembered the case-opener; it had a hook at the end, and, holding this above his head, he leapt. The first time he missed; the second time the hook caught the steel rung and the handle slipped from his grip, leaving the case-opener dangling. He rubbed his hands on the dusty floor and sprang again. This time he caught and held, and with a superhuman effort pulled himself up until his hand gripped the lower rung. Another struggle, and he had drawn himself up hand over hand till his feet rested on the bar.

"Do you think if I pulled you up you have strength to climb?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. Go up alone; I will wait here."

"Keep clear of the bottom," he warned her. "I may not fall, but as likely as not I shall dislodge a few chunks of rock in my progress."

The warning was well justified, she found. There was a continuous shower of stone and earth as he progressed. From time to time he stopped to rest. Once he shouted down something which she could not distinguish. It was probably a warning, for a few seconds later a mass of rock as large as a man's head crashed down and smashed on the floor, sending fragments flying in all directions.

Peeping up from time to time, she could see the glimmer of his lamp growing fainter; and now, left alone, she began to grow nervous, and for company switched on her light. She had hardly

done so when she heard a sound which brought her heart to her mouth. It was the sound of footsteps; somebody was walking along the passage towards her.

She turned the switch of the lamp and listened. The old man's voice! Only his, and none other. He was talking to himself, a babble of growling sound that was becoming more and more distinct. And then, far away, she saw the glow of a reflected light, for the passage swept round at this point and he would not be visible until he was upon her.

Slipping off her shoes, she sped along in the darkness, tumbling and sliding on the uneven pathway. After a while panic left her and she stopped and looked back. The light was no longer visible; there was neither sound nor sign of him; and, plucking up courage, after a few minutes she retraced her steps. She dared not put on the light, and must guess where the well opening was. In the darkness she passed it, and she was soon a considerable distance beyond the place where Brill had left her.

Where had Flack gone? There were no side passages. She was standing by one of the recesses, her hand resting on the improvised stone screen, when to her horror she felt it moving away from her, and had just time to shrink back when she saw a crack of light appear on the opposite wall and broaden until there was outlined the shape of a doorway.

"... To-night, my dear, to-night.... I'm going up to see Daver. Daver is worrying me... you are sure nothing has happened that might shake my confidence in him?"

"Nothing, father. What could have happened?"

It was Olga Crewe's voice. She said something else which Margaret could not hear, and then she heard the chuckling laugh of the old man.

"Reeder? He's busy in London! But he'll be back to-night..."

Again a question which Margaret could not catch.

"The body hasn't been found. I didn't want to hurt the girl, but she was useful... my best card.... I could have caught Reeder with her—had it all arranged."

Another question.

"I suppose so. The tide is very high. Anyway, I saw her fall..."

Margaret knew they were talking about her, but this interested her less than the possibility of discovery. She walked backward, step by step, hoping and praying that she would find a niche into which she could shrink. Presently she found what she wanted.

Flack had come out into the passage and was standing talking back into the room.

"All right, I'll leave the door open... imagination. There's plenty of air. The well supplies that. I'll be back this evening."

She dared not look, but after a while his footsteps became fainter. The door was still open, and she saw a shadow growing larger on the opposite wall, as Olga approached the entrance. Presently she heard a sigh; the shadow became small again, and finally disappeared. Margaret crept forward, hardly daring to breathe, until she came behind the open door.

It was, she guessed, made of stout oak, and the surface had been so cunningly camouflaged with splinters of rock that it differed in no respect from the walled recess into which Brill had broken.

Curiosity is dominant in the most rational of individuals, and, despite her terrible danger, Margaret was curious to see the inside of that rocky home of the Flacks. With the utmost caution she peeped round. She was surprised at the size of the room and a little disappointed in its furnishing. She had pictured rich rugs and gorgeous furniture, the walls perhaps covered with silken hangings. Instead, she saw a plain deal table on which stood a lamp, a strip of threadbare carpet, two basket chairs, and a camp bed. Olga was standing by the table, looking down at a newspaper; her back was towards the girl, and Margaret had time to make a more prolonged scrutiny.

Near the table were three or four suit-cases, packed and strapped as though in preparation for a journey. A fur coat lay across the bed, and that was the only evidence of luxury in this grim apartment. There was a second person in the room. Margaret distinguished in the shadow the drooping figure of a woman—Mrs. Burton.

She took a step forward to see better; her feet slipped upon the smooth surface of the rock, and she fell forward against the door, half closing it.

"Who is there? Is that you, father?"

Margaret's heart nearly stopped beating, and for a moment she stood paralysed, incapable of movement. Then, as Olga's footsteps sounded, she turned and fled along the passage, gripping tight her lantern. Olga's voice challenged her, but on and on she ran. The corridor was growing lighter, and with a gasp of horror she realised that in the confusion of the moment she had taken the wrong direction and she was running towards the great cave, possibly into the old madman's hands.

She heard the quick patter of footsteps behind her, and flew on. And now she was in the almost bright light of the huge cavern. There was nobody in sight, and she followed the twisting ledge that ran under the wall of rock until she came to the foot of the long stairs. And then she heard a shout. Somebody on the boat had seen her. As she stood motionless with fear, mad John Flack appeared. He was coming towards her through the passage by which she and Brill had reached the interior of the cave. For a second he stared at her as though she were some ghastly apparition of his mad dreams, and then with a roar he leapt towards her.

She hesitated no longer. In a second she was flying up that awful staircase, death on her right hand, but a more hideous fate behind. Higher and higher up those unrailed stairs... she dared not look, she dared not think, she could only keep her eyes steadfastly upwards into the misty gloom where this interminable Jacob's-ladder ended on some solid floor. Not for a fortune would she have looked behind, or vertigo would have seized her. Her breath was coming in long sobs; her heart beat as though it would burst. She dared pause for an infinitesimal time to recover breath before she continued her flight. He was an old man; she could outdistance him. But he was a madman, a thing of terrible and abnormal energy. Panic was leaving her; it exhausted too much of her strength. Upward and upward she climbed, until she was in gloom, and then, when it seemed that she could get no farther, she reached the head of the stairs. A broad, flat space, with a rocky roof which, for some reason, had been

strengthened with concrete pillars. There were dozens of these pillars… once she had taken a fortnight's holiday in Spain; there was a cathedral in Cordova, of which this broad vault reminded her… all sense of direction was lost now. She came with terrifying suddenness to a blank wall; ran along it until she came to a narrow opening where there were five steps, and here she stopped to turn on her light. Facing her was a steel door with a great iron handle, and the steel door was ajar.

She pulled it towards her, ran through, pulled the door behind her; it fastened with a click. It had something attached to its inner side, a steel projection… as she shut the door a box fell with a crash. There was yet another door before her, and this was immovable. She was in a tiny white box of a room, three feet wide, little more in depth. She had no time to continue her observations. Some one was fumbling with the handle of the door through which she had come. She gripped in desperation at the iron shelf and felt it slide a little to the right. Though she did not know this, the back part of the shelf acted as a bolt. Again she heard the fumbling at the handle and the click of a key turning, but the steel door remained immovable, and Margaret Belman sank in a heap to the ground.

CHAPTER XVIII

J. G. Reeder came downstairs, and those who saw his face realised that it was not the tragedy he had almost witnessed which had made him so white and drawn.

He found Gray in Daver's office, waiting for his call to London. It came through as Reeder entered the room, and he took the instrument from his subordinate's hand. He dismissed the death of Daver in a few words, and went on:

"I want all the local policemen we can muster, Simpson, though I think it would be better if we could get soldiers. There's a garrison town five miles from here; the beaches have to be searched, and I want these caves explored. There is another thing: I think it would be advisable to get a destroyer or something to patrol the water before Siltbury. I'm pretty sure that Flack has a motor boat—there's a channel deep enough to take it, and apparently there is a cave that stretches right under the cliff.... Miss Belman? I don't know. That is what I want to find out."

Simpson told him that the gold-wagon had been seen at Sevenoaks, and it required a real effort on Mr. Reeder's part to bring his mind to such a triviality.

"I think soldiers will be best. I'd like a strong party posted near the quarry. There's another cave there where Daver used to keep his wagons. I have an idea you might pick up the money to-night. That," he added, a little bitterly, "will induce the authorities to use the military!"

After the ambulance had come and the pitiable wreck of Daver had been removed, he returned to the man's suite with a party of masons he had brought up from Siltbury. Throwing open the lid of the divan, he pointed to the stone floor.

"That flag works on a pivot," he said, "but I think it is fastened with a bolt or a bar underneath. Break it down."

A quarter of an hour was sufficient to shatter the stone flooring, and then, as he had expected, he found a narrow flight of stairs leading to a square stone room which remained very much as it had

been for six hundred years. A dusty, bare apartment, which yielded its secret. There was a small open door and a very narrow passage, along which a stout man would walk with some difficulty, and which led to behind the panelling of Daver's private office. Mr. Reeder realised that anybody concealed here could hear every word that was spoken. And now he understood Daver's frantic plea that he should lower his voice when he spoke of the marriage. Crazy Jack had learnt the secret of his daughter's degradation—from that moment Daver's death was inevitable.

How had the madman escaped? That required very little explanation. At some remote period Larmes Keep had evidently been used as a show place. He found an ancient wooden inscription fixed to the wall, which told the curious that this was the torture-chamber of the old Counts of Larme; it added the useful information that the dungeons were immediately beneath and approached through a stone trap. This the detectives found, and Mr. Reeder had his first view of the vaulted dungeons of Larmes Keep.

It was neither an impressive nor a thrilling exploration. All that was obvious was that there were three routes by which the murderer could escape, and that all three ways led back to the house, one exit being between the kitchen and the vestibule.

"There is another way out," said Reeder shortly, "and we haven't found it yet."

His nerves were on edge. He roamed from room to room, turning out boxes, breaking open cupboards, emptying trunks. One find he made: it was the marriage certificate, and it was concealed in the lining of Olga Crewe's dressing-bag.

At seven o'clock the first detachment of troops arrived by motor van. The local police had already reported that they had found no trace of Margaret Belman. They pointed out that the tide was falling when the girl left Larmes Keep, and that, unless she was lying on some invisible ledge, she might have reached the beach in safety. There was, however, a very faint hope that she was alive. How faint, J. G. Reeder would not admit.

A local cook had been brought in to prepare dinner for the detective, but Reeder contented himself with a cup of strong coffee —food, he felt, would have choked him.

He had posted a detachment in the quarry, and, returning to the house, was sitting in the big hall pondering the events of the day, when Gray came flying into the room.

"Brill!" he gasped.

J. G. Reeder sprang to his feet with a bound.

"Brill?" he repeated huskily. "Where is Brill?"

There was no need for Gray to point. A dishevelled and grimy figure, supported by a detective, staggered through the doorway.

"Where have you come from?" asked Reeder.

The man could not speak for a second. He pointed to the ground, and then, hoarsely:

"From the bottom of the well... Miss Belman is down there now!"

Brill was in a state of collapse, and not until he had had a stiff dose of brandy was he able to articulate a coherent story. Reeder led a party to the shrubbery, and the windlass was tested.

"It won't bear even the weight of a woman, and there's not sufficient rope," said Gray, who made the test.

One of the officers remembered that, in searching the kitchen, he had found two window-cleaners' belts, stout straps with a safety-hook attached. He went in search of these, whilst Mr. Reeder stripped his coat and vest.

"There's a gap of four feet half-way down," warned Brill. "The stone came away when I put my foot on it, and I nearly fell."

Reeder, his lamp swung round his neck, peered down into the hole.

"It's strange I didn't see this ladder when I saw the well before," he said, and then remembered that he had only opened one half of the flap.

Gray, who was also equipped with a belt, descended first, as he was the lighter of the two. By this time half a company of soldiers were on the scene, and by the greatest of good fortune the unit that had been turned out to assist the police was a company of the Royal Engineers. Whilst one party went in search of ropes, the other began to extemporise a hauling gear.

The two men worked their way down without a word. The lamps were fairly useless, for they could not show them the next rung, and after a while they began to move more cautiously. Gray found the gap and called a halt whilst he bridged it. The next rung was none too secure, Mr. Reeder thought, as he lowered his weight upon it, but they passed the danger zone with no other mishap than that which was caused by big pebbles dropping on Reeder's head.

It seemed as though they would never reach the bottom, and the strain was already telling upon the older man, when Gray whispered:

"This is the bottom, I think," and sent the light of his lamp downwards. Immediately afterwards he dropped to the rocky floor of the passage, Mr. Reeder following.

"Margaret!" he called in a whisper.

There was no reply. He threw the light first one way and then the other, but Margaret was not in sight, and his heart sank.

"You go farther along the passage," he whispered to Gray. "I'll take the other direction."

With the light of his lamp on the ground, he half walked, half ran along the twisting gallery. Ahead of him he heard the sound of a movement not easily identified, and he stopped to extinguish the light. Moving cautiously forward, he turned an angle of the passage and saw at the far end indication of daylight. Sitting down, he looked along, and after a while he thought he saw a figure moving against this artificial skyline. Mr. Reeder crept forward, and this time he was not relying upon a rubber truncheon. He thumbed down the safety-catch of his Browning and drew nearer and nearer to the figure. Most unexpectedly it spoke.

"Olga, where has your father gone?"

It was Mrs. Burton, and Reeder showed his teeth in an unamused grin.

He did not hear the reply: it came from some recessed place, and the sound was muffled.

"Have they found that girl?"

Mr. Reeder listened breathlessly, craning his neck forward. The "No" was very distinct.

Then Olga said something that he could not hear, and Mrs. Burton's voice took on her old whine of complaint.

"What's the use of hanging about? That's the way you've always treated me.... Nobody would think I was your mother.... I wonder I'm not dead, the trouble I've had.... I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't murder me some day, you mark my words!"

There came an impatient protest from the hidden girl.

"If you're sick of it, what about me?" said Mrs. Burton shrilly. "Where's Daver? It's funny your father hasn't said anything about Daver. Do you think he's got into trouble?"

"Oh, damn Daver!"

Olga's voice was distinct now. The passion and weariness in it would have made Mr. Reeder sorry for her in any other circumstances. He was too busy being sorry for Margaret Belman to worry about this fateful young woman.

She did not know, at any rate, that she was a widow. Mr. Reeder derived a certain amount of gruesome satisfaction from the superiority of his intelligence.

"Where is he now? Your father, I mean?"

A pause, as she listened to a reply which was not intelligible to Mr. Reeder.

"On the boat? He'll never get across. I hate ships, but a tiny little boat like that...! Why couldn't he let us go, when we got him out? I begged and prayed him to... we might have been in Venice or somewhere by now, doing the grand."

The girl interrupted her angrily, and then Mrs. Burton apparently melted into the wall.

There was no sound of a closing door, but Mr. Reeder guessed what had happened. He came forward stealthily till he saw the bar of light on the opposite wall, and, reaching the door, listened. The voices were clear enough now; clearer because Mrs. Burton did most of the talking.

"Do you think your father knows?" She sounded rather anxious. "About Daver, I mean? You can keep that dark, can't you? He'd kill me if he knew. He's got such high ideas about you—princes and

dukes and such rubbish! If he hadn't been mad he'd have cleared out of this game years ago, as I told him, but he'd never take much notice of me."

"Has anybody ever taken any notice of you?" asked the girl wearily. "I wanted the old man to let you go. I knew you would be useless in a crisis."

Mr. Reeder heard the sound of a sob. Mrs. Burton cried rather easily.

"He's only stopping to get Reeder," she whimpered. "What a fool trick! That silly old man! Why, I could have got him myself if I was wicked enough!"

From farther along the corridor came the sound of a quick step.

"There's your father," said Mrs. Burton, and Reeder pulled back the jacket of his Browning, sacrificing the cartridge that was already in the chamber, in order that there should be no mistake.

The footsteps stopped abruptly, and at the same time came a booming voice from the far end of the passage. It was asking a question. Evidently Flack turned back: his footsteps died away. Mr. Reeder decided that this was not his lucky day.

Lying full length on the ground, he could see John Flack clearly. A pressure of his finger, and the problem of this evil man would be settled eternally. It was a fond idea. Mr. Reeder's finger closed around the trigger, but all his instincts were against killing in cold blood.

Somebody was coming from the other direction. Gray, he guessed. He must go back and warn him. Coming to his feet, he went gingerly along the passage. The thing he feared happened. Gray must have seen him, for he called out in stentorian tones:

"There's nothing at the other end of the passage, Mr. Reeder——"

"Hush, you fool!" snarled Reeder, but he guessed that the mischief was done.

He turned round, stooped again and looked. Old John Flack was standing at the entrance of the tunnel, his head bent. Somebody else had heard the detective's voice. With a squeak of fear, Mrs. Burton had bolted into the passage, followed by her daughter—an excursion

which effectively prevented the use of the pistol, for they completely masked the man whose destruction J. G. Reeder had privately sworn.

By the time he came to the end of the passage overlooking the great cave, the two women and Flack had disappeared.

Mr. Reeder's eyesight was of the keenest. He immediately located the boat, which was now floating on an even keel, and presently saw the three fugitives. They had descended to the water's edge by a continuance of the long stairway which led to the roof, and were making for the rocky platform which served as a pier for the craft....

Something smacked against the rock above his head. There was a shower of stone and dust, and the echoes of the explosion which followed were deafening.

"Firing from the boat," said Mr. Reeder calmly. "You had better lie down, Gray—I should hate to see so noisy a man as you reduced to compulsory silence."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Reeder," said the penitent detective. "I had no idea——"

"Ideas!" said Mr. Reeder accurately.

Smack... smack!

One bullet struck to the left of him, the other passed exactly between him and Gray. He was lying down now, with a small projection of rock for cover.

Was Margaret on the boat? Even as the thought occurred to him, he remembered "Mrs. Burton's" inquiry. As he saw another flash from the deck of the launch, he threw forward his hand. There was a double explosion which reverberated back from the arched roof, and although he could not see the effect of his shots, he was satisfied that the bullets fell on the launch.

She was pushing off from the side. The three Flacks were aboard. And now he heard the crackle and crash of her engine as her nose swung round to face the cave opening. And then into his eyes from the darkening sea outside the cave flashed a bright light that illuminated the rocky shelf on which he lay, and threw the motor boat into relief.

The destroyer!

"Thank God for that!" said Mr. Reeder fervently.

Those on the motor launch had seen the vessel and guessed its portent. The launch swung round until her nose pointed to where the two detectives lay, and from her deck came a roar louder than ever. So terrible was the noise in that confined space that for a second Mr. Reeder was too dazed even to realise that he was lying half buried in a heap of debris, until Gray pulled him back to the passage.

"They're using a gun, a quick-firer!" he gasped.

Mr. Reeder did not reply. He was gazing, fascinated, at something that was happening in the middle of the cave, where the water was leaping at irregular intervals from some mysterious cause. Then he realised what was taking place. Great rocks, disturbed by the concussion, were falling from the roof. He saw the motor boat heel over to the right, swing round again, and head for the open. It was less than a dozen yards from the cave entrance when, with a sound that was indescribable, so terrific, so terrifying, that J. G. Reeder was rooted to the spot, the entrance to the cave disappeared!

CHAPTER XIX

In an instant the air was filled with choking dust. Roar followed roar as the rocks continued to fall.

"The mouth of the cave has collapsed!" roared Reeder in the other's ear. "And the subsidence hasn't finished."

His first instinct was to fly along the passage to safety, but somewhere in that awful void were two women. He switched on his light and crept gingerly back to the bench whence he had seen the catastrophe. But the rays of the lamp could not penetrate into the fog of dust for more than a few yards.

Crawling forward to the edge of the platform, he strove to pierce the darkness. All about him, above, below, on either side, a terrible cracking and groaning was going on, as though the earth itself was in mortal pain. Rocks, big and small, were falling from the roof; he heard the splash of them as they struck the water—one fell on the edge of the platform with a terrific din and bounded into the pit below.

"For God's sake, don't stay here, Mr. Reeder. You will be killed."

It was Gray shouting at him, but J. G. Reeder was already feeling his way towards the steps which led down to where the boat had been moored, and to which he guessed it would drift. He had to hold the lamp almost at his feet. Breathing had become a pain. His face was covered with powder; his eyes smarted excruciatingly; dust was in his mouth, his nose; but still he went on, and was rewarded.

Out of the dust-mist came groping the ghostly figure of a woman. It was Olga Crewe.

He gripped her by the arm as she swayed, and pushed her against the rocky wall.

"Where is your mother?" he shouted.

She shook her head and said something: he lowered his ear to her mouth.

"... boat... great rock... killed."

"Your mother?"

She nodded. Gripping her by the arm, he half led, half dragged her up the stairs. He found Gray waiting at the top. As easily as though she were a child, Mr. Reeder caught her up in his arms and staggered the distance that separated them from the mouth of the passage.

The pandemonium of splintering rock and crashing boulder was continuous. The air was thicker than ever. Gray's lamp went out, and Mr. Reeder's was almost useless. It seemed a thousand years before they pushed into the mouth of the tunnel. The air was filled with dust even here, but as they progressed it grew clearer, more breathable.

"Let me down: I can walk," said the husky voice of Olga Crewe, and Reeder lowered her gently to her feet.

She was very weak, but she could walk with the assistance that the two men afforded. They stopped at the entrance of the living-room. Mr. Reeder wanted the lamp—wanted more the water which she suggested would be found in that apartment.

A cold draught of spring water worked wonders on the girl too.

"I don't know what happened," she said; "but when the cave opening fell in, I think we drifted towards the stage... we always called that place the stage. I was so frightened that I jumped immediately to safety, and I'd hardly reached the rock when I heard a most awful crash. I think a portion of the wall must have fallen on to the boat. I screamed, but hardly heard myself in the noise... this is punishment—this is punishment! I knew it would come! I knew it, I knew it!"

She covered her grimy face with her hands, and her shoulders shook in the excess of her sorrow and grief.

"There's no sense in crying." Mr. Reeder's voice was sharp and stern. "Where is Miss Belman?"

She shook her head.

"Where did she go?"

"Up the stairway... father said she escaped. Haven't you seen her?" she asked, raising her tearful face as she began slowly to realise the drift of his question.

He shook his head, his narrowed eyes surveying her steadily.

"Tell me the truth, Olga Flack. Did Margaret Belman escape, or did your father——?"

She was shaking her head before he had completed his sentence, and then, with a little moan, she drooped and would have fallen had not Gray supported her.

"We had better leave the questioning till later."

Mr. Reeder seized the lamp from the table and went out into the tunnel. He had hardly passed the door before there was a crash, and the infernal noises which had come from the cave were suddenly muffled. He looked backward, but could see nothing. He guessed what had happened.

"There is a general subsidence going on in this mass of earth," he said. "We shall be lucky if we get away."

He ran ahead to the opening of the well, and a glad sight met his eyes. On the floor lay a coil of new rope, to which was attached a body belt. He did not see the thin wire which came down from the mouth of the well, but presently he detected a tiny telephone receiver that the engineers had lowered. This he picked up, and his hail was immediately answered.

"Are you all right? Up here it feels as if there's an earthquake somewhere."

Gray was fastening the belt about the girl's waist, and after it was firmly buckled:

"You mustn't faint—do you understand, Miss Crewe? They will haul you up gently, but you must keep away from the side of the well."

She nodded, and Reeder gave the signal. The rope grew taut, and presently the girl was drawn up out of sight.

"Up you go," said Reeder.

Gray hesitated.

"What about you, sir?"

For answer Mr. Reeder pointed to the lowest rung, and, stooping, gripped the leg of the detective and, displaying an unsuspected strength, lifted him bodily so that he was able to grip the lower rung.

"Fix your belt to the rod, hold fast to the nearest rung, and I will climb up over you," said Mr. Reeder.

Never an acrobat moved with greater nimbleness than this man who so loved to pose as an ancient. There was need for hurry. The very iron to which he was clinging trembled and vibrated in his grasp. The fall of stone down the well was continuous and constituted a very real danger. Some of the rungs, displaced by the earth tremors, came away in their grasp. They were less than half-way up when the air was filled with a sighing and a hissing that brought Reeder's heart to his mouth.

Holding on to a rung of the ladder, he put out his hand. The opposite wall, which should have been well beyond his reach, was at less than arm's-length away!

The well was bulging under unexpected and tremendous stresses.

"Why have you stopped?" asked Gray anxiously.

"To scratch my head," snarled Reeder. "Hurry!"

They climbed another forty or fifty feet, when from below came a rumble and a crash that set the whole well shivering.

They could see starlight now, and distant objects, which might be heads, that overhung the mouth of the well.

"Hurry!" breathed J. G. Reeder, and moved as rapidly as his younger companion.

Boom!

The sound of a great gun, followed by a thunderous rumbling, surged up the well.

J. G. Reeder set his teeth. Please God Margaret Belman had escaped from that hell—or was mercifully dead!

Nearer and nearer to the mouth they climbed, and every step they took was accompanied by some new and awful noise from behind them. Gray's breath was coming in gasps.

"I can't go any further!" croaked the detective. "My strength has gone!"

"Go on, you miserable...!" yelled Reeder, and whether it was the shock of hearing such violent language from so mild a man, or the discovery that he was within a few feet of safety, Gray took hold of

himself, climbed a few more rungs, and then felt hands grip his arm and drag him to safety.

Mr. Reeder staggered out into the night air and blinked at the ring of men who stood in the light of a naphtha flare.

Was it his imagination, or was the ground swaying beneath his feet?

"Nobody else to come up, Mr. Reeder?"

The officer in charge of the Engineers asked the question, and Reeder shook his head.

"Then all you fellows clear!" said the officer sharply. "Move towards the house and take the road to Siltbury—the cliff is collapsing in sections."

The flare was put out, and the soldiers, abandoning their apparatus, broke into a steady run towards Larmes Keep.

"Where is the girl—Miss Crewe?" asked Reeder, suddenly remembering her.

"They've taken her to the house," said Big Bill Gordon, who had made a mysterious appearance from nowhere. "And, Reeder, we have captured the gold-convoy! The two men in charge were a fellow who calls himself Hothling and another named Dean—I think you know their real names.... Caught them just as the trolley was driving into the quarry cave. This means a big thing for you——"

"To hell with you and your big things!" stormed Reeder in a fury. "What big things do I want, my man, but the big thing I have lost?"

Very wisely, Big Bill Gordon made no attempt to argue the matter.

They found the banqueting-hall crowded with policemen, detectives, and soldiers. The girl had been taken into Daver's office, and here he found her in the hands of the three women servants who had been commandeered to run the establishment whilst the police were in occupation. The dust had been washed from her face, and she was conscious, but still in that half-bemused condition in which Reeder had found her.

She stared at him for a long time as though she did not recognise him and was striving to recall that portion of her past in which he had figured. When she spoke, it was to ask a question.

"There is no news of—father?"

"None," said Reeder, almost brutally. "I think it will be better for you, young lady, if he is dead."

She nodded.

"He *is* dead," she said with conviction. And then, rousing herself, she struggled to a sitting position and looked at the servants. Mr. Reeder interpreted that glance and sent the women away.

"I don't know what you are going to do with me," she said, "but I suppose I am to be arrested—I should be arrested, for I have known all that was happening, and I tried to lure you to your death."

"In Bennett Street, of course," said Mr. Reeder. "I recognised you the moment I saw you here—you were the lady with the rouged face."

She nodded and continued.

"Before you take me away, I wish you would let me have some papers that are in the safe," she said. "They have no value to anybody but myself."

He was curious enough to ask her what they were.

"They are letters... in the big, flat box that is locked.... Even Daver did not dare open that. You see, Mr. Reeder"—her breath came more quickly—"before I met my—husband, I had a little romance—the sort of romance that a young girl has when she is innocent enough to dream and has enough faith in God to hope. Is my husband arrested?" she asked suddenly.

Mr. Reeder was silent for a moment. Sooner or later she must know the truth, and he had an idea that this awful truth would not cause her very much distress.

"Your husband is dead," he said.

Her eyes opened wider.

"Did my father——"

"Your father killed him—I suppose so. I am afraid I was the cause. Coming back to find Margaret Belman, I told Daver all that I knew about your marriage. Your father must have been hiding behind the panelling and heard."

"I see," she said simply. "Of course it was father who killed him—I knew that would happen as soon as he learnt the truth. Would you think I was heartless if I said I am glad? I don't think I am really glad: I'm just relieved. Will you get the box for me?"

She put her hand down her blouse, and pulled out a gold chain at the end of which were two keys.

"The first of these is the key of the safe. If you want to see the—the letters, I will show them to you, but I would rather not."

At that moment he heard hurrying footsteps in the passage outside; the door was pulled open, and a young officer of Engineers appeared.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but Captain Merriman thinks we ought to abandon this house. I've got out all the servants and we're rushing them down to Siltbury."

Reeder stooped down and drew the girl to her feet.

"Take this lady with you," he said, and, to Olga: "I will get your box, and I may not—I am not quite sure—ask you to open it for me."

He waited till the officer had gone, and added:

"Just now I am feeling rather—tender towards young lovers. That is a concession which an old lover may make to youth."

His voice had grown husky. There was something in his face that brought the tears to her eyes.

"Was it... not Margaret Belman?" she asked in a hushed voice, and she knew before he answered that she had guessed well.

Tragedy dignified this strange-looking man, so far past youth, yet holding the germ of youth in his heart. His hand fell gently on her shoulder.

"Go, my dear," he said. "I will do what I can for you—perhaps I can save you a great deal of unhappiness."

He waited until she had gone, then strolled into the deserted lounge. What an eternity had passed since he had sat there, munching his toast and drinking his cup of tea, with an illustrated newspaper on his knees!

The place in the half gloom seemed full of ancient ghosts. The House of Tears! These walls had held sorrows more poignant, more hopeless than his.

He went to the panelled wall and rubbed his finger down the little scar in the wood that a thrown knife had made, and smiled at the triviality of that offence.

He had reason to remember the circumstances, without the dramatic reminder which nature gave. Suddenly the floor beneath him swayed, and the two lights went out. He guessed that the earth tremors were responsible for the snapping of wires, and he hurried into the vestibule, and had passed from the house, when he remembered Olga Crewe's request.

The lantern was still hanging about his neck. He switched it on and went back to the safe and inserted the key. As he did so, the house swayed backwards and forwards like a drunken man. The clatter of glass, the crackle of overturned wardrobes, startled him, so that he almost fled with his mission unperformed. He even hesitated; but a promise was a promise to J. G. Reeder. He put the key in again, turned the lock and pulled open one of the great doors —and Margaret Belman fell into his arms!

CHAPTER XX

He stood, holding the half-swooning girl, peering into the face he could only see by the reflected light of his lantern, and then suddenly the safe fell back from him without warning, leaving a gaping cavern.

He lifted her in his arms, ran across the vestibule into the open air. Somebody shouted his name in the distance, and he ran blindly towards the voice. Once he stumbled over a great crack that had appeared in the earth, but managed to recover himself, though he was forced to release his grip of the girl.

She was alive... breathing... her breath fanned his cheek and gave him new strength....

The sound of falling walls behind him; immense, hideous roarings and groanings; thunder of sliding chalk and rock and earth —he heard only the breathing of his burden, felt only the faint beating of her heart against his breast.

"Here you are!"

Somebody lifted Margaret Belman from his arms. A big soldier pushed him into a wagon, where he sprawled at full length, breathless, more dead than alive, by the side of the woman he loved; and then, with a whirr of wheels, the ambulance sped down the hillside towards safety. Behind him, in the darkness, the House of Tears shivered and crackled, and the work of ancient masons vanished piecemeal, tumbling over new cliffs, to be everlastingly engulfed and hidden from the sight of man.

Dawn came and showed to an interested party that had travelled by road and train to the scene of the great landslide, one grey wall, standing starkly on the edge of a precipice. A portion of the wrecked floor still adhered to the ruins, and on that floor the blood-stained bed where old man Flack had laid his murdered servant....

The story which Olga Flack told the police, which appears in the official records of the place, was not exactly the same as the story she told to Mr. Reeder that afternoon when, at his invitation, she

came to the flat in Bennett Street. Mr. Reeder, minus his glasses and his general air of respectability, which his vanished side-whiskers had so enhanced, was at some disadvantage.

"Yes, I think Ravini was killed," she said, "but you are wrong in supposing that I brought him to my room at the request of my father. Ravini was a very quick-witted man, and recognised me. He came to Larmes Keep because he"—she hesitated—"well, he was rather fond of Miss Belman. He told me this, and I was rather amused. At that time I did not know his name, although my husband did, and I certainly did not connect him with my father's arrest. He revealed his identity, and I suppose there was something in my attitude, or something I said, which recalled the schoolgirl he had met years before. The moment he recognised me as John Flack's daughter, he also recognised Larmes Keep as my father's headquarters.

"He began to ask me questions: whether I knew where the Flack million, as he called it, was hidden. And of course I was horrified, for I knew why Daver had allowed him to come.

"My father had recently escaped from Broadmoor, and I was worried sick for fear he knew the trick that Daver had played. I wasn't normal, I suppose, and I came near to betraying my father, for I told Ravini of his escape. Ravini did not take this as I had expected—he rather overrated his own power, and was very confident. Of course, he did not know that father was practically in the house, that he came up from the cave every night——"

"The real entrance to the cave was through the safe in the vestibule?" said Mr. Reeder. "That was an ingenious idea. I must confess that the safe was the last place in the world I should have considered."

"My father had it put there twenty years ago," she said. "There always was an entrance from the centre of the Keep to the caves below, many of which were used as prisons or as burying-places by the ancient owners of Larmes."

"Why did Ravini go to your room?" asked Mr. Reeder. "You will excuse the—um—indelicacy of the question, but I want——"

She nodded.

"It was a last desperate effort on my part to scare Ravini from the house—I took it on my way back that night. You mustn't forget that I was watched all the time; Daver or my mother were never far from me, and I dared not let them know, and through them my father, that Ravini was being warned. Naturally, Ravini, being what he was, saw another reason for the invitation. He had decided to stay on until I made my request for an interview, and told him that I wanted him to leave by the first train in the morning after he learnt what I had to tell him."

"And what had you to tell him?" asked Mr. Reeder.

She did not answer immediately, and he repeated the question.

"That my father had decided to kill him——"

Mr. Reeder's eyes almost closed.

"Are you telling me the truth, Olga?" he asked gently, and she went red and white.

"I am not a good liar, am I?" Her tone was almost defiant. "Now, I'll tell you. I met Ravini when I was little more than a child. He meant... a tremendous lot to me, and I don't think I meant very much to him. He used to come down to see me in the country where I was at school..."

"He's dead?"

She could only nod her head. Her lips were quivering.

"That is the truth," she said at last. "The horror of it was that he did not recognise me when he came to Larmes Keep. I had passed completely from his mind, until I revealed myself in the garden that night."

"Is he dead?" asked Mr. Reeder for the second time.

"Yes," she said. "They struck him down outside my room.... I don't know what they did with him. They put him through the safe, I think." She shuddered.

J. G. Reeder patted her hand.

"You have your memories, my child," he said to the weeping girl, "and your letters."

It occurred to him after Olga had gone that Ravini must have written rather interesting letters.

CHAPTER XXI

Miss Margaret Belman decided to take a holiday in the only pleasure resort that seemed worth while or endurable. She conveyed this intention to Mr. Reeder by letter.

> "There are only two places in the world where I can feel happy and safe," she said. "One place is London and the other New York, where a policeman is to be found at every corner, and all the amusements of a country life are to be had in an intensified form. So, if you please, can you spare the time to come with me to the theatres I have written down on the back of this sheet, to the National Gallery, the British Museum, the Tower of London (no, on consideration I do not think I should like to include the Tower of London: it is too mediaeval and ghostly), to Kensington Gardens and similar centres of hectic gaiety. Seriously, dear J. G. (the familiarity will make you wince, but I have cast all shame outside), I want to be one of a large, sane mass—I am tired of being an isolated, hysterical woman."

There was much more in the same strain. Mr. Reeder took his engagement book and ran a blue pencil through all his appointments before he wrote, with some labour, a letter which, because of its caution and its somewhat pompous terminology, sent Margaret Belman into fits of silent laughter.

She had not mentioned Richmond Park, and with good reason, one might suppose, for Richmond Park in the late autumn, when chilly winds abound, and the deer have gone into winter quarters—if deer ever go into winter quarters—is picturesque without being comfortable, and only a pleasure to the aesthetic eyes of those whose bodies are suitably clothed in woollen underwear.

Yet, one drab, grey afternoon, Mr. Reeder chartered a taxicab, sat solemnly by the side of Miss Margaret Belman as the cab bumped and jerked down Clarence Lane, possibly the worst road in England, before it turned through the iron gates of the park.

They came at last to a stretch of grass land and bush, a place in early summer of flowering rhododendrons, and here Mr. Reeder stopped the cab and they both descended and walked aimlessly through a little wood. The ground sloped down to a little carpeted hollow. Mr. Reeder, with a glance of suspicion and some reference to rheumatism, seated himself by Miss Belman's side.

"But why Richmond Park?" asked Margaret.

Mr. Reeder coughed.

"I have—um—a romantic interest in Richmond Park," he said. "I remember the first arrest I ever made——"

"Don't be gruesome," she warned him. "There's nothing romantic about an arrest. Talk of something pretty."

"Let us then talk of you," said Mr. Reeder daringly; "and it is exactly because I want to talk of you, my dear Miss—um—Margaret... Margaret, that I have asked you to come here."

He took her hand with great gentleness as though he were handling a rare *objet d'art*, and played with her fingers awkwardly.

"The truth is, my dear——"

"Don't say 'Miss,'" she begged.

"My dear Margaret"—this with an effort—"I have decided that life is too—um—short to delay any longer a step which I have very carefully considered—in fact"—here he floundered hopelessly into a succession of "ums" which were only relieved by occasional "ers."

He tried again.

"A man of my age and peculiar temperament should perhaps be considering matters more serious—in fact, you may consider it very absurd of me, but the truth is——"

Whatever the truth was could not be easily translated into words.

"The truth is," she said quietly, "that you think you're in love with somebody?"

First Mr. Reeder nodded, then he shook his head with equal vigour.

"I don't think—it has gone beyond the stage of hypothesis. I am no longer young—I am in fact a confirmed—no, not a confirmed, but —er——"

"You're a confirmed bachelor," she helped him out.

"Not confirmed," he insisted firmly.

She half turned and faced him, her hands on his shoulders, looking into his eyes.

"My dear," she said, "you think of being married, and you want somebody to marry you. But you feel that you are too old to blight her young life."

He nodded dumbly.

"Is it my young life, my dear? Because, if it is——"

"It is." J. G. Reeder's voice was very husky.

"Please blight," said Margaret Belman.

And for the first time in his life Mr. J. G. Reeder, who had had so many experiences, mainly unpleasant, felt the soft lips of a woman against his.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Reeder breathlessly, a few seconds later. "That was rather nice."

THE END

Colophon

Terror Keep
Edgar Wallace

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