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THE BLACK BAG

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THOMAS FOGARTY

1908

TO MY MOTHER

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THE BLACK BAG

I

DIVERSIONS OF A RUINED GENTLEMAN

Upon a certain dreary April afternoon in the year of grace, 1906, the apprehensions of Philip Kirkwood, Esquire, *Artist-peintre*, were enlivened by the discovery that he was occupying that singularly distressing social position, which may be summed up succinctly in a phrase through long usage grown proverbial: "Alone in London." These three words have come to connote in our understanding so much of human misery, that to Mr. Kirkwood they seemed to epitomize absolutely, if not happily, the various circumstances attendant upon the predicament wherein he found himself. Inevitably an extremist, because of his youth, (he had just turned twenty-five), he took no count of mitigating matters, and would hotly have resented the suggestion that his case was anything but altogether deplorable and forlorn.

That he was not actually at the end of his resources went for nothing; he held the distinction a quibble, mockingly immaterial,--like the store of guineas in his pocket, too insignificant for mention when contrasted with his needs. And his base of supplies, the American city of his nativity, whence--and not without a glow of pride in his secret heart--he was wont to register at foreign hostelries, had been arbitrarily cut off from him by one of those accidents sardonically classified by insurance and express corporations as Acts of God.

Now to one who has lived all his days serenely in accord with the dictates of his own sweet will, taking no thought for the morrow, such a situation naturally seems both appalling and intolerable, at the first blush. It must be confessed that, to begin with, Kirkwood drew a long and disconsolate face over his fix. And in that black hour, primitive of its kind in his brief span, he became conscious of a sinister apparition taking shape at his elbow--a shade of darkness which, clouting him on the back with a skeleton hand, croaked hollow salutations in his ear.

"Come, Mr. Kirkwood, come!" its mirthless accents rallied him. "Have you no welcome for me?--you, who have been permitted to live the quarter of a century without making my acquaintance? Surely, now, it's high time we were learning something of one another, you and I!" "But I don't understand," returned Kirkwood blankly. "I don't know you--"

"True! But you shall: I am the Shade of Care--"

"Dull Care!" murmured Kirkwood, bewildered and dismayed; for the visitation had come upon him with little presage and no invitation whatever.

"Dull Care," the Shade assured him. "Dull Care am I--and Care that's anything but dull, into the bargain: Care that's like a keen pain in your body, Care that lives a horror in your mind, Care that darkens your days and flavors with bitter poison all your nights, Care that--"

But Kirkwood would not listen further. Courageously submissive to his destiny, knowing in his heart that the Shade had come to stay, he yet found spirit to shake himself with a dogged air, to lift his chin, set the strong muscles of his jaw, and smile that homely wholesome smile which was his peculiarly.

"Very well," he accepted the irremediable with grim humor; "what must be, must. I don't pretend to be glad to see you, but--you're free to stay as long as you find the climate agreeable. I warn you I shan't whine. Lots of men, hundreds and hundreds of 'em, have slept tight o' nights with you for bedfellow; if they could grin and bear you, I believe I can."

Now Care mocked him with a sardonic laugh, and sought to tighten upon his shoulders its bony grasp; but Kirkwood resolutely shrugged it off and went in search of man's most faithful dumb friend, to wit, his pipe; the which, when found and filled, he lighted with a spill twisted from the envelope of a cable message which had been vicariously responsible for his introduction to the Shade of Care.

"It's about time," he announced, watching the paper blacken and burn in the grate fire, "that I was doing something to prove my title to a living." And this was all his valedictory to a vanished competence. "Anyway," he added hastily, as if fearful lest Care, overhearing, might have read into his tone a trace of vain repining, "anyway, I'm a sight better off than those poor devils over there! I really have a great deal to be thankful for, now that my attention's drawn to it."

For the ensuing few minutes he thought it all over, soberly but with a stout heart; standing at a window of his bedroom in the Hotel Pless, hands deep in trouser pockets, pipe fuming voluminously, his gaze wandering out over a blurred infinitude of wet shining roofs and sooty chimney-pots: all of London that a lowering drizzle would let him see, and withal by no means a cheering prospect, nor yet one calculated to offset the disheartening influence of the indomitable Shade of Care. But the truth is that Kirkwood's brain comprehended little that his eyes perceived; his thoughts were with his heart, and that was half a world away and sick with pity for another and a fairer city, stricken in the flower of her loveliness,

writhing in Promethean agony upon her storied hills.

There came a rapping at the door.

Kirkwood removed the pipe from between his teeth long enough to say "Come in!" pleasantly.

The knob was turned, the door opened. Kirkwood, swinging on one heel, beheld hesitant upon the threshold a diminutive figure in the livery of the Pless pages.

"Mister Kirkwood?"

Kirkwood nodded.

"Gentleman to see you, sir."

Kirkwood nodded again, smiling. "Show him up, please," he said. But before the words were fairly out of his mouth a footfall sounded in the corridor, a hand was placed upon the shoulder of the page, gently but with decision swinging him out of the way, and a man stepped into the room.

"Mr. Brentwick!" Kirkwood almost shouted, jumping forward to seize his visitor's hand.

"My dear boy!" replied the latter. "I'm delighted to see you. 'Got your note not an hour ago, and came at once--you see!"

"It was mighty good of you. Sit down, please. Here are cigars.... Why, a moment ago I was the most miserable and lonely mortal on the footstool!"

"I can fancy." The elder man looked up, smiling at Kirkwood from the depths of his arm-chair, as the latter stood above him, resting an elbow on the mantel. "The management knows me," he offered explanation of his unceremonious appearance; "so I took the liberty of following on the heels of the bellhop, dear boy. And how are you? Why are you in London, enjoying our abominable spring weather? And why the anxious undertone I detected in your note?"

He continued to stare curiously into Kirkwood's face. At a glance, this Mr. Brentwick was a man of tallish figure and rather slender; with a countenance thin and flushed a sensitive pink, out of which his eyes shone, keen, alert, humorous, and a trace wistful behind his glasses. His years were indeterminate; with the aspect of fifty, the spirit and the verve of thirty assorted oddly. But his hands were old, delicate, fine and fragile; and the lips beneath the drooping white mustache at times trembled, almost imperceptibly, with the generous sentiments that come with mellow age. He held his back straight and his head with an air--an air that was not a swagger but the sign-token of seasoned experience in the world. The most carping could have found no flaw in the quiet taste of his attire. To sum up, Kirkwood's very good friend--and his only one then in London--Mr. Brentwick looked and was an English gentleman.

"Why?" he persisted, as the younger man hesitated. "I am here to find out. To-night I leave for the Continent. In the meantime ..."

"And at midnight I sail for the States," added Kirkwood. "That is mainly why I wished to see you--to say good-by, for the time."

"You're going home--" A shadow clouded Brentwick's clear eyes.

"To fight it out, shoulder to shoulder with my brethren in adversity."

The cloud lifted. "That is the spirit!" declared the elder man. "For the moment I did you the injustice to believe that you were running away. But now I understand. Forgive me.... Pardon, too, the stupidity which I must lay at the door of my advancing years; to me the thought of you as a Parisian fixture has become such a commonplace, Philip, that the news of the disaster hardly stirred me. Now I remember that you are a Californian!"

"I was born in San Francisco," affirmed Kirkwood a bit sadly. "My father and mother were buried there ..."

"And your fortune--?"

"I inherited my father's interest in the firm of Kirkwood & Vanderlip; when I came over to study painting, I left everything in Vanderlip's hands. The business afforded me a handsome living."

"You have heard from Mr. Vanderlip?"

"Fifteen minutes ago." Kirkwood took a cable-form, still damp, from his pocket, and handed it to his guest. Unfolding it, the latter read:

"_Kirkwood, Pless, London. Stay where you are no good coming back everything gone no insurance letter follows vanderlip_."

"When I got the news in Paris," Kirkwood volunteered, "I tried the banks; they refused to honor my drafts. I had a little money in hand,--enough to see me home,--so closed the studio and came across. I'm booked on the _Minneapolis_, sailing from Tilbury at daybreak; the boat-train leaves at eleven-thirty. I had hoped you might be able to dine with me and see me off."

In silence Brentwick returned the cable message. Then, with a thoughtful look, "You are sure this is wise?" he queried.

"It's the only thing I can see."

"But your partner says--"

"Naturally he thinks that by this time I should have learned to paint well enough to support myself for a few months, until he can get things running again. Perhaps I might." Brentwick supported the presumption with a decided gesture. "But have I a right to leave Vanderlip to fight it out alone? For Vanderlip has a wife and kiddies to support; I--"

"Your genius!"

"My ability, such as it is--and that only. It can wait.... No; this means simply that I must come down from the clouds, plant my feet on solid earth, and get to work."

"The sentiment is sound," admitted Brentwick, "the practice of it, folly. Have you stopped to think what part a rising young portrait-painter can contribute toward the rebuilding of a devastated city?"

"The painting can wait," reiterated Kirkwood. "I can work like other men."

"You can do yourself and your genius grave injustice. And I fear me you will, dear boy. It's in keeping with your heritage of American obstinacy. Now if it were a question of money--"

"Mr. Brentwick!" Kirkwood protested vehemently. "I've ample for my present needs," he added.

"Of course," conceded Brentwick with a sigh. "I didn't really hope you would avail yourself of our friendship. Now there's my home in Aspen Villas.... You have seen it?"

"In your absence this afternoon your estimable butler, with commendable discretion, kept me without the doors," laughed the young man.

"It's a comfortable home. You would not consent to share it with me until--?"

"You are more than good; but honestly, I must sail to-night. I wanted only this chance to see you before I left. You'll dine with me, won't you?"

"If you would stay in London, Philip, we would dine together not once but many times; as it is, I myself am booked for Munich, to be gone a week, on business. I have many affairs needing attention between now and the nine-ten train from Victoria. If you will be my guest at Aspen Villas--"

"Please!" begged Kirkwood, with a little laugh of pleasure because of the other's insistence. "I only wish I could. Another day--"

"Oh, you will make your million in a year, and return scandalously independent. It's in your American blood." Frail white fingers tapped an arm of the chair as their owner stared gravely into the fire. "I confess I envy you," he observed.

"The opportunity to make a million in a year?" chuckled Kirkwood.

"No. I envy you your Romance."

"The Romance of a Poor Young Man went out of fashion years ago.... No, my dear friend; my Romance died a natural death half an hour since."

"There spoke Youth--blind, enviable Youth!... On the contrary, you are but turning the leaves of the first chapter of your Romance, Philip."

"Romance is dead," contended the young man stubbornly.

"Long live the King!" Brentwick laughed quietly, still attentive to the fire. "Myself when young," he said softly, "did seek Romance, but never knew it till its day was done. I'm quite sure that is a poor paraphrase of something I have read. In age, one's sight is sharpened--to see Romance in another's life, at least. I say I envy you. You have Youth, unconquerable Youth, and the world before you.... I must go."

He rose stiffly, as though suddenly made conscious of his age. The old eyes peered more than a trifle wistfully, now, into Kirkwood's. "You will not fail to call on me by cable, dear boy, if you need--anything? I ask it as a favor.... I'm glad you wished to see me before going out of my life. One learns to value the friendship of Youth, Philip. Good-by, and good luck attend you."

Alone once more, Kirkwood returned to his window. The disappointment he felt at being robbed of his anticipated pleasure in Brentwick's company at dinner, colored his mood unpleasantly. His musings merged into vacuity, into a dull gray mist of hopelessness comparable only to the dismal skies then lowering over London-town.

Brentwick was good, but Brentwick was mistaken. There was really nothing for Kirkwood to do but to go ahead. But one steamer-trunk remained to be packed; the boat-train would leave before midnight, the steamer with the morning tide; by the morrow's noon he would be upon the high seas, within ten days in New York and among friends; and then ...

The problem of that afterwards perplexed Kirkwood more than he cared to own. Brentwick had opened his eyes to the fact that he would be practically useless in San Francisco; he could not harbor the thought of going back, only to become a charge upon Vanderlip. No; he was resolved that thenceforward he must rely upon himself, carve out his own destiny. But--would the art that he had cultivated with such assiduity, yield him a livelihood if sincerely practised with that end in view? Would the mental and physical equipment of a painter, heretofore dilettante, enable him to become self-supporting?

Knotting his brows in concentration of effort to divine the future, he doubted himself, darkly questioning alike his abilities and his temper under trial; neither ere now had ever been put to the test. His eyes became somberly wistful, his heart sore with regret of Yesterday--his Yesterday of care-free youth and courage, gilded with the ineffable, evanescent glamour of Romance--of such Romance, thrice refined of dross, as only he knows who has wooed his Art with passion passing the love of woman.

Far away, above the acres of huddled roofs and chimney-pots, the storm-mists thinned, lifting transiently; through them, gray, fairy-like, the towers of Westminster and the Houses of Parliament bulked monstrous and unreal, fading when again the fugitive dun vapors closed down upon the

city.

Nearer at hand the Shade of Care nudged Kirkwood's elbow, whispering subtly. Romance was indeed dead; the world was cold and cruel.

The gloom deepened.

In the cant of modern metaphysics, the moment was psychological.

There came a rapping at the door.

Kirkwood removed the pipe from between his teeth long enough to say "Come in!" pleasantly.

The knob was turned, the door opened. Kirkwood, turning on one heel, beheld hesitant upon the threshold a diminutive figure in the livery of the Pless pages.

"Mr. Kirkwood?"

Kirkwood nodded.

"Gentleman to see you, sir."

Kirkwood nodded again, smiling if somewhat perplexed. Encouraged, the child advanced, proffering a silver card-tray at the end of an unnaturally rigid forearm. Kirkwood took the card dubiously between thumb and forefinger and inspected it without prejudice.

"George B. Calendar," he read. "George B. Calendar!" But I know no such person. Sure there's no mistake, young man?"

The close-cropped, bullet-shaped, British head was agitated in vigorous negation, and "Card for Mister Kirkwood!" was mumbled in dispassionate accents appropriate to a recitation by rote.

"Very well. But before you show him up, ask this Mr. Calendar if he is quite sure he wants to see Philip Kirkwood."

"Yessir."

The child marched out, punctiliously closing the door. Kirkwood tamped down the tobacco in his pipe and puffed energetically, dismissing the interruption to his reverie as a matter of no consequence--an obvious mistake to be rectified by two words with this Mr. Calendar whom he did not know. At the knock he had almost hoped it might be Brentwick, returning with a changed mind about the bid to dinner.

He regretted Brentwick sincerely. There was a curious sort of friendship--extraordinarily close in view of the meagerness of either's information about the other, to say nothing of the disparity between their ages. Concerning the elder man Kirkwood knew little more than that they had met on shipboard, "coming over"; that Brentwick had spent some years in

America; that he was an Englishman by birth, a cosmopolitan by habit, by profession a gentleman (employing that term in its most uncompromisingly British significance), and by inclination a collector of "articles of virtue and bigotry," in pursuit of which he made frequent excursions to the Continent from his residence in a quaint quiet street of Old Brompton. It had been during his not infrequent, but ordinarily abbreviated, sojourns in Paris that their steamer acquaintance had ripened into an affection almost filial on the one hand, almost paternal on the other....

There came a rapping at the door.

Kirkwood removed the pipe from between his teeth long enough to say "Come in!" pleasantly.

The knob was turned, the door opened. Kirkwood, swinging on one heel, beheld hesitant upon the threshold a rather rotund figure of medium height, clad in an expressionless gray lounge suit, with a brown "bowler" hat held tentatively in one hand, an umbrella weeping in the other. A voice, which was unctuous and insinuating, emanated from the figure.

"Mr. Kirkwood?"

Kirkwood nodded, with some effort recalling the name, so detached had been his thoughts since the disappearance of the page.

"Yes, Mr. Calendar--?"

"Are you--ah--busy, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Are you, Mr. Calendar?" Kirkwood's smile robbed the retort of any flavor of incivility.

Encouraged, the man entered, promising that he would detain his host but a moment, and readily surrendering hat and umbrella. Kirkwood, putting the latter aside, invited his caller to the easy chair which Brentwick had occupied by the fireplace.

"It takes the edge off the dampness," Kirkwood explained in deference to the other's look of pleased surprise at the cheerful bed of coals. "I'm afraid I could never get acclimated to life in a cold, damp room--or a damp cold room--such as you Britishers prefer."

"It is grateful," Mr. Calendar agreed, spreading plump and well cared-for hands to the warmth. "But you are mistaken; I am as much an American as yourself."

"Yes?" Kirkwood looked the man over with more interest, less matter-of-course courtesy.

He proved not unprepossessing, this unclassifiable Mr. Calendar; he was dressed with some care, his complexion was good, and the fullness of his girth, emphasized as it was by a notable lack of inches, bespoke a nature genial, easy-going and sybaritic. His dark eyes, heavy-lidded, were

active--curiously, at times, with a subdued glitter--in a face large, round, pink, of which the other most remarkable features were a mustache, close-trimmed and showing streaks of gray, a chubby nose, and duplicate chins. Mr. Calendar was furthermore possessed of a polished bald spot, girdled with a tonsure of silvered hair--circumstances which lent some factitious distinction to a personality otherwise commonplace.

His manner might be best described as uneasy with assurance; as though he frequently found it necessary to make up for his unimpressive stature by assuming an unnatural habit of authority. And there you have him; beyond these points, Kirkwood was conscious of no impressions; the man was apparently neutral-tinted of mind as well as of body.

"So you knew I was an American, Mr. Calendar?" suggested Kirkwood.

"Saw your name on the register; we both hail from the same neck of the woods, you know."

"I didn't know it, and--"

"Yes; I'm from Frisco, too."

"And I'm sorry."

Mr. Calendar passed five fat fingers nervously over his mustache, glanced alertly up at Kirkwood, as if momentarily inclined to question his tone, then again stared glumly into the fire; for Kirkwood had maintained an attitude purposefully colorless. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he believed that his caller was lying; the man's appearance, his mannerisms, his voice and enunciation, while they might have been American, seemed all un-Californian. To one born and bred in that state, as Kirkwood had been, her sons are unmistakably hall-marked.

Now no man lies without motive. This one chose to reaffirm, with a show of deep feeling: "Yes; I'm from Frisco, too. We're companions in misfortune."

"I hope not altogether," said Kirkwood politely.

Mr. Calendar drew his own inferences from the response and mustered up a show of cheerfulness. "Then you're not completely wiped out?"

"To the contrary, I was hoping you were less unhappy."

"Oh! Then you are--?"

Kirkwood lifted the cable message from the mantel. "I have just heard from my partner at home," he said with a faint smile; and quoted: "Everything gone; no insurance."

Mr. Calendar pursed his plump lips, whistling inaudibly. "Too bad, too bad!" he murmured sympathetically. "We're all hard hit, more or less." He lapsed into dejected apathy, from which Kirkwood, growing at length impatient, found it necessary to rouse him.

"You wished to see me about something else, I'm sure?"

Mr. Calendar started from his reverie. "Eh? ... I was dreaming. I beg pardon. It seems hard to realize, Mr. Kirkwood, that this awful catastrophe has overtaken our beloved metropolis--"

The canting phrases wearied Kirkwood; abruptly he cut in. "Would a sovereign help you out, Mr. Calendar? I don't mind telling you that's about the limit of my present resources."

"Pardon _me_." Mr. Calendar's moon-like countenance darkened; he assumed a transparent dignity. "You misconstrue my motive, sir."

"Then I'm sorry."

"I am not here to borrow. On the other hand, quite by accident I discovered your name upon the register, down-stairs; a good old Frisco name, if you will permit me to say so. I thought to myself that here was a chance to help a fellow-countryman." Calendar paused, interrogative; Kirkwood remained interested but silent. "If a passage across would help you, I--I think it might be arranged," stammered Calendar, ill at ease.

"It might," admitted Kirkwood, speculative.

"I could fix it so that you could go over--first-class, of course--and pay your way, so to speak, by, rendering us, me and my partner, a trifling service."

"Ah?"

"In fact," continued Calendar, warming up to his theme, "there might be something more in it for you than the passage, if--if you're the right man, the man I'm looking for."

"That, of course, is the question."

"Eh?" Calendar pulled up suddenly in a full-winged flight of enthusiasm.

Kirkwood eyed him steadily. "I said that it is a question, Mr. Calendar, whether or not I am the man you're looking for. Between you and me and the fire-dogs, I don't believe I am. Now if you wish to name your _quid pro quo_, this trifling service I'm to render in recognition of your benevolence, you may."

"Ye-es," slowly. But the speaker delayed his reply until he had surveyed his host from head to foot, with a glance both critical and appreciative.

He saw a man in height rather less than the stock size six-feet so much in demand by the manufacturers of modern heroes of fiction; a man a bit round-shouldered, too, but otherwise sturdily built, self-contained, well-groomed.

Kirkwood wears a boy's honest face; no one has ever called him handsome. A few prejudiced persons have decided that he has an interesting countenance; the propounders of this verdict have been, for the most part, feminine. Kirkwood himself has been heard to declare that his features do not fit; in its essence the statement is true, but there is a very real, if undefinable, engaging quality in their very irregularity. His eyes are brown, pleasant, set wide apart, straightforward of expression.

Now it appeared that, whatever his motive, Mr. Calendar had acted upon impulse in sending his card up to Kirkwood. Possibly he had anticipated a very different sort of reception from a very different sort of man. Even in the light of subsequent events it remains difficult to fathom the mystery of his choice. Perhaps Fate directed it; stranger things have happened at the dictates of a man's Destiny.

At all events, this Calendar proved not lacking in penetration; men of his stamp are commonly endowed with that quality to an eminent degree. Not slow to reckon the caliber of the man before him, the leaven of intuition began to work in his adipose intelligence. He owned himself baffled.

"Thanks," he concluded pensively; "I reckon you're right. You won't do, after all. I've wasted your time. Mine, too."

"Don't mention it."

Calendar got heavily out of his chair, reaching for his hat and umbrella.

"Permit me to apologize for an unwarrantable intrusion, Mr. Kirkwood." He faltered; a worried and calculating look shadowed his small eyes. "I _was_ looking for some one to serve me in a certain capacity--"

"Certain or questionable?" propounded Kirkwood blandly, opening the door.

Pointedly Mr. Calendar ignored the imputation. "Sorry I disturbed you. G'dafternoon, Mr. Kirkwood."

"Good-by, Mr. Calendar." A smile twitched the corners of Kirkwood's too-wide mouth.

Calendar stepped hastily out into the hall. As he strode--or rather, rolled--away, Kirkwood maliciously feathered a Parthian arrow.

"By the way, Mr. Calendar--?"

The sound of retreating footsteps was stilled and "Yes?" came from the gloom of the corridor.

"Were you ever in San Francisco? Really and truly? Honest Injun, Mr. Calendar?"

For a space the quiet was disturbed by harsh breathing; then, in a strained voice, "Good day, Mr. Kirkwood"; and again the sound of departing footfalls.

Kirkwood closed the door and the incident simultaneously, with a smart bang of finality. Laughing quietly he went back to the window with its dreary outlook, now the drearier for lengthening evening shadows.

"I wonder what his game is, anyway. An adventurer, of course; the woods are full of 'em. A queer fish, even of his kind! And with a trick up his sleeve as queer and fishy as himself, no doubt!"

II

"AND SOME THERE BE WHO HAVE ADVENTURES THRUST UPON THEM"

The assumption seems not unwarrantable, that Mr. Calendar figuratively washed his hands of Mr. Kirkwood. Unquestionably Mr. Kirkwood considered himself well rid of Mr. Calendar. When the latter had gone his way, Kirkwood, mindful of the fact that his boat-train would leave St. Paneras at half-after eleven, set about his packing and dismissed from his thoughts the incident created by the fat *_chevalier d'industrie_*; and at six o'clock, or thereabouts, let himself out of his room, dressed for the evening, a light rain-coat over one arm, in the other hand a cane,--the drizzle having ceased.

A stolid British lift lifted him down to the ground floor of the establishment in something short of five minutes. Pausing in the office long enough to settle his bill and leave instructions to have his luggage conveyed to the boat-train, he received with entire equanimity the affable benediction of the clerk, in whose eyes he still figured as that radiant creature, an American millionaire; and passed on to the lobby, where he surrendered hat, coat and stick to the cloak-room attendant, ere entering the dining-room.

The hour was a trifle early for a London dinner, the handsome room but moderately filled with patrons. Kirkwood absorbed the fact unconsciously and without displeasure; the earlier, the better: he was determined to consume his last civilized meal (as he chose to consider it) at his serene leisure, to live fully his ebbing moments in the world to which he was born, to drink to its cloying dregs one ultimate draught of luxury.

A benignant waiter bowed him into a chair by a corner table in juxtaposition with an open window, through which, swaying imperceptibly the closed hangings, were wafted gentle gusts of the London evening's sweet, damp breath.

Kirkwood settled himself with an inaudible sigh of pleasure. He was dining, for the last time in Heaven knew how long, in a first-class restaurant.

With a deferential flourish the waiter brought him the menu-card. He had served in his time many an "American, millionaire"; he had also served this Mr. Kirkwood, and respected him as one exalted above the run of his kind,

in that he comprehended the art of dining.

Fifteen minutes later the waiter departed rejoicing, his order complete.

To distract a conscience whispering of extravagance, Kirkwood lighted a cigarette.

The room was gradually filling with later arrivals; it was the most favored restaurant in London, and, despite the radiant costumes of the women, its atmosphere remained sedate and restful.

A cab clattered down the side street on which the window opened.

At a near-by table a woman laughed, quietly happy. Incuriously Kirkwood glanced her way. She was bending forward, smiling, flattering her escort with the adoration of her eyes. They were lovers alone in the wilderness of the crowded restaurant. They seemed very happy.

Kirkwood was conscious of a strange pang of emotion. It took him some time to comprehend that it was envy.

He was alone and lonely. For the first time he realized that no woman had ever looked upon him as the woman at the adjoining table looked upon her lover. He had found time to worship but one mistress--his art.

And he was renouncing her.

He was painfully conscious of what he had missed, had lost--or had not yet found: the love of woman.

The sensation was curious--new, unique in his experience.

His cigarette burned down to his fingers as he sat pondering. Abstractedly, he ground its fire out in an ash-tray.

The waiter set before him a silver tureen, covered.

He sat up and began to consume his soup, scarce doing it justice. His dream troubled him--his dream of the love of woman.

From a little distance his waiter regarded him, with an air of disappointment. In the course of an hour and a half he awoke, to discover the attendant in the act of pouring very hot and black coffee from a bright silver pot into a demi-tasse of fragile porcelain. Kirkwood slipped a single lump of sugar into the cup, gave over his cigar-case to be filled, then leaned back, deliberately lighting a long and slender panetela as a preliminary to a last lingering appreciation of the scene of which he was a part.

He reviewed it through narrowed eyelids, lazily; yet with some slight surprise, seeming to see it with new vision, with eyes from which scales of ignorance had dropped.

This long and brilliant dining-hall, with its quiet perfection of proportion and appointment, had always gratified his love of the beautiful; to-night it pleased him to an unusual degree. Yet it was the same as ever; its walls tinted a deep rose, with their hangings of dull cloth-of-gold, its lights discriminatingly clustered and discreetly shaded, redoubled in half a hundred mirrors, its subdued shimmer of plate and glass, its soberly festive assemblage of circumspect men and women splendidly gowned, its decorously muted murmur of voices penetrated and interwoven by the strains of a hidden string orchestra--caressed his senses as always, yet with a difference. To-night he saw it a room populous with lovers, lovers insensibly paired, man unto woman attentive, woman of man regardful.

He had never understood this before. This much he had missed in life.

It seemed hard to realize that one must forego it all for ever.

Presently he found himself acutely self-conscious. The sensation puzzled him; and without appearing to do so, he traced it from effect to cause; and found the cause in a woman--a girl, rather, seated at a table the third removed from him, near the farther wall of the room.

Too considerate, and too embarrassed, to return her scrutiny openly, look for look, he yet felt sure that, however temporarily, he was become the object of her intent interest.

Idly employed with his cigar, he sipped his coffee. In time aware that she had turned her attention elsewhere, he looked up.

At first he was conscious of an effect of disappointment. She was nobody that he knew, even by reputation. She was simply a young girl, barely out of her teens--if as old as that phrase would signify. He wondered what she had found in him to make her think him worth so long a study; and looked again, more keenly curious.

With this second glance, appreciation stirred the artistic side of his nature, that was already grown impatient of his fretted mood. The slender and girlish figure, posed with such absolute lack of intrusion against a screen of rose and gilt, moved him to critical admiration. The tinted glow of shaded candles caught glistening on the spun gold of her fair hair, and enhanced the fine pallor of her young shoulders. He saw promise, and something more than promise, in her face, its oval something dimmed by warm shadows that unavailingly sought to blend youth and beauty alike into the dull, rich background.

In the sheer youth of her (he realized) more than in aught else, lay her chiefest charm. She could be little more than a child, indeed, if he were to judge her by the purity of her shadowed eyes and the absence of emotion in the calm and direct look which presently she turned upon him who sat wondering at the level, penciled darkness of her brows.

At length aware that she had surprised his interest, Kirkwood glanced aside--coolly deliberate, lest she should detect in his attitude anything more than impersonal approval.

A slow color burned his cheeks. In his temples there rose a curious pulsing.

After a while she drew his gaze again, imperiously--herself all unaware of the havoc she was wreaking on his temperament.

He could have fancied her distraught, cloaking an unhappy heart with placid brow and gracious demeanor; but such a conception matched strangely her glowing youth and spirit. What had she to do with Care? What concern had Black Care, whose gaunt shape in sable shrouds had lurked at his shoulder all the evening, despite his rigid preoccupation, with a being as charmingly flushed with budding womanhood as this girl?

"Eighteen?" he hazarded. "Eighteen, or possibly nineteen, dining at the Pless in a ravishing dinner-gown, and--unhappy? Oh, hardly--not she!"

Yet the impression haunted him, and ere long he was fain to seek confirmation or denial of it in the manner of her escort.

The latter sat with back to Kirkwood, cutting a figure as negative as his snug evening clothes. One could surmise little from a fleshy thick neck, a round, glazed bald spot, a fringe of grizzled hair, and two bright red ears.

Calendar?

Somehow the fellow did suggest Kirkwood's caller of the afternoon. The young man could not have said precisely how, for he was unfamiliar with the aspect of that gentleman's back. None the less the suggestion persisted.

By now, a few of the guests, theater-bound, for the most part, were leaving. Here and there a table stood vacant, that had been filled, cloth tarnished, chairs disarranged: in another moment to be transformed into its pristine brilliance under the deft attentions of the servitors.

Down an aisle, past the table at which the girl was sitting, came two, making toward the lobby; the man, a slight and meager young personality, in the lead. Their party had attracted Kirkwood's notice as they entered; why, he did not remember; but it was in his mind that then they had been three. Instinctively he looked at the table they had left--one placed at some distance from the girl, and hidden from her by an angle in the wall. It appeared that the third member had chosen to dally a few moments over his tobacco and a liqueur-brandy. Kirkwood could see him plainly, lounging in his chair and fumbling the stem of a glass: a heavy man, of somber habit, his black and sullen brows lowering and thoughtful above a face boldly handsome.

The woman of the trio was worthy of closer attention. Some paces in the wake of her lack-luster esquire, she was making a leisurely progress, trailing the skirts of a gown magnificent beyond dispute, half concealed though it was by the opera cloak whose soft folds draped her shoulders. Slowly, carrying her head high, she approached, insolent eyes reviewing

the room from beneath their heavy lids; a metallic and mature type of dark beauty, supremely selfconfident and self-possessed.

Men turned involuntarily to look after her, not altogether in undiluted admiration.

In the act of passing behind the putative Calendar, she paused momentarily, bending as if to gather up her train. Presumably the action disturbed her balance; she swayed a little, and in the effort to recover, rested the tips of her gloved fingers upon the edge of the table. Simultaneously (Kirkwood could have sworn) a single word left her lips, a word evidently pitched for the ear of the hypothetical Calendar alone. Then she swept on, imperturbable, assured.

To the perplexed observer it was indubitably evident that some communication had passed from the woman to the man. Kirkwood saw the fat shoulders of the girl's companion stiffen suddenly as the woman's hand rested at his elbow; as she moved away, a little rippling shiver was plainly visible in the muscles of his back, beneath his coat--mute token of relaxing tension. An instant later one plump and mottled hand was carelessly placed where the woman's had been; and was at once removed with fingers closed.

To the girl, watching her face covertly, Kirkwood turned for clue to the incident. He made no doubt that she had observed the passage; proof of that one found in her sudden startling pallor (of indignation?) and in her eyes, briefly alight with some inscrutable emotion, though quickly veiled by lowered lashes. Slowly enough she regained color and composure, while her _vis-à-vis_ sat motionless, head inclined as if in thought.

Abruptly the man turned in his chair to summon a waiter, and exposed his profile. Kirkwood was in no wise amazed to recognize Calendar--a badly frightened Calendar now, however, and hardly to be identified with the sleek, glib fellow who had interviewed Kirkwood in the afternoon. His flabby cheeks were ashen and trembling, and upon the back of his chair the fat white fingers were drumming incessantly an inaudible tattoo of shattered nerves.

"Scared silly!" commented Kirkwood. "Why?" Having spoken to his waiter, Calendar for some seconds raked the room with quick glances, as if seeking an acquaintance. Presumably disappointed, he swung back to face the girl, bending forward to reach her ears with accents low-pitched and confidential. She, on her part, fell at once attentive, grave and responsive. Perhaps a dozen sentences passed between them. At the outset her brows contracted and she shook her head in gentle dissent; whereupon Calendar's manner became more imperative. Gradually, unwillingly, she seemed to yield consent. Once she caught her breath sharply, and, infected by her companion's agitation, sat back, color fading again in the round young cheeks.

Kirkwood's waiter put in an inopportune appearance with the bill. The young man paid it. When he looked up again Calendar had swung squarely about in his chair. His eye encountered Kirkwood's. He nodded pleasantly.

Temporarily confused, Kirkwood returned the nod.

In a twinkling he had repented; Calendar had left his chair and was wending his way through the tables toward Kirkwood's. Reaching it, he paused, offering the hand of genial fellowship. Kirkwood accepted it half-heartedly (what else was he to do?) remarking at the same time that Calendar had recovered much of his composure. There was now a normal coloring in the heavily jowled countenance, with less glint of fear in the quick, dark eyes; and Calendar's hand, even if moist and cold, no longer trembled. Furthermore it was immediately demonstrated that his impudence had not deserted him.

"Why, Kirkwood, my dear fellow!" he crowed--not so loudly as to attract attention, but in a tone assumed to divert suspicion, should he be overheard. "This is great luck, you know--to find you here."

"Is it?" returned Kirkwood coolly. He disengaged his fingers.

The pink plump face was contorted in a furtive grimace of deprecation. Without waiting for permission Calendar dropped into the vacant chair.

"My dear sir," he proceeded, unabashed, "I throw myself upon your mercy."

"The devil you do!"

"I must. I'm in the deuce of a hole, and there's no one I know here besides yourself. I--I--"

Kirkwood saw fit to lead him on; partly because, out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of the girl's unconcealed suspense. "Go on, please, Mr. Calendar. You throw yourself on a total stranger's mercy because you're in the deuce of a hole; and--?"

"It's this way; I'm called away on urgent business imperative business. I must go at once. My daughter is with me. My daughter! Think of my embarrassment; I can not leave her here, alone, nor can I permit her to go home unprotected."

Calendar paused in anxiety.

"That's easily remedied, then," suggested Kirkwood.

"How?"

"Put her in a cab at the door."

"I ... No. The devil! I couldn't think of it. You won't understand. I--"

"I do not understand,--" amended the younger man politely.

Calendar compressed his lips nervously. It was plain that the man was quivering with impatience and half-mad with excitement. He held quiet only long enough to regain his self-control and take counsel with his prudence.

"It is impossible, Mr. Kirkwood. I must ask you to be generous and believe me."

"Very well; for the sake of the argument, I do believe you, Mr. Calendar."

"Hell!" exploded the elder man in an undertone. Then swiftly, stammering in his haste: "I can't let Dorothy accompany me to the door," he declared. "She--I--I throw myself upon your mercy!"

"What--again?"

"The truth--the truth is, if you will have it, that I am in danger of arrest the moment I leave here. If my daughter is with me, she will have to endure the shame and humiliation--"

"Then why place her in such a position?" Kirkwood demanded sharply.

Calendar's eyes burned, incandescent with resentment. Offended, he offered to rise and go, but changed his mind and sat tight in hope.

"I beg of you, sir--"

"One moment, Mr. Calendar."

Abruptly Kirkwood's weathercock humor shifted--amusement yielding to intrigued interest. After all, why not oblige the fellow? What did anything matter, now? What harm could visit him if he yielded to this corpulent adventurer's insistence? Both from experience and observation he knew this for a world plentifully peopled by soldiers of fortune, contrivers of snares and pitfalls for the feet of the unwary. On the other hand, it is axiomatic that a penniless man is perfectly safe anywhere. Besides, there was the girl to be considered.

Kirkwood considered her, forthwith. In the process thereof, his eyes sought her, perturbed. Their glances clashed. She looked away hastily, crimson to her temples.

Instantly the conflict between curiosity and caution, inclination and distrust, was at an end. With sudden compliance, the young man rose.

"I shall be most happy to be of service to your daughter, Mr. Calendar," he said, placing the emphasis with becoming gravity. And then, the fat adventurer leading the way, Kirkwood strode across the room--wondering somewhat at himself, if the whole truth is to be disclosed.

III

CALENDAR'S DAUGHTER

All but purring with satisfaction and relief, Calendar halted.

"Dorothy, my dear, permit me to introduce an old friend--Mr. Kirkwood. Kirkwood, this is my daughter."

"Miss Calendar," acknowledged Kirkwood.

The girl bowed, her eyes steady upon his own. "Mr. Kirkwood is very kind," she said gravely.

"That's right!" Calendar exclaimed blandly. "He's promised to see you home. Now both of you will pardon my running away, I know."

"Yes," assented Kirkwood agreeably.

The elder man turned and hurried toward the main entrance.

Kirkwood took the chair he had vacated. To his disgust he found himself temporarily dumb. No flicker of thought illuminated the darkness of his confusion. How was he to open a diverting conversation with a young woman whom he had met under auspices so extraordinary? Any attempt to gloze the situation, he felt, would be futile. And, somehow, he did not care to render himself ridiculous in her eyes, little as he knew her.

Inanely dumb, he sat watching her, smiling fatuously until it was borne in on him that he was staring like a boor and grinning like an idiot. Convinced, he blushed for himself; something which served to make him more tongue-tied than ever.

As for his involuntary protøgøe, she exhibited such sweet composure that he caught himself wondering if she really appreciated the seriousness of her parent's predicament; if, for that matter, its true nature were known to her at all. Calendar, he believed, was capable of prevarication, polite and impolite. Had he lied to his daughter? or to Kirkwood? To both, possibly; to the former alone, not improbably. That the adventurer had told him the desperate truth, Kirkwood was quite convinced; but he now began to believe that the girl had been put off with some fictitious explanation. Her tranquillity and self-control were remarkable, otherwise; she seemed very young to possess those qualities in such eminent degree.

She was looking wearily past him, her gaze probing some unguessed abyss of thought. Kirkwood felt himself privileged to stare in wonder. Her naïve aloofness of poise gripped his imagination powerfully,--the more so, perhaps, since it seemed eloquent of her intention to remain enigmatic,--but by no means more powerfully than the unaided appeal of her loveliness.

Presently the girl herself relieved the tension of the situation, fairly startling the young man by going straight to the heart of things. Without preface or warning, lifting her gaze to his, "My name is really Dorothy Calendar," she observed. And then, noting his astonishment, "You would be privileged to doubt, under the circumstances," she added. "Please let us be

frank."

"Well," he stammered, "if I didn't doubt, let's say I was unprejudiced."

His awkward, well-meant pleasantry, perhaps not conceived in the best of taste, sounded in his own ears wretchedly flat and vapid. He regretted it spontaneously; the girl ignored it.

"You are very kind," she iterated the first words he had heard from her lips. "I wish you to understand that I, for one, appreciate it."

"Not kind; I have done nothing. I am glad.... One is apt to become interested when Romance is injected into a prosaic existence." Kirkwood allowed himself a keen but cheerful glance.

She nodded, with a shadowy smile. He continued, purposefully, to distract her, holding her with his honest, friendly eyes.

"Since it is to be confidences" (this she questioned with an all but imperceptible lifting of the eyebrows), "I don't mind telling you my own name is really Philip Kirkwood."

"And you are an old friend of my father's?"

He opened his lips, but only to close them without speaking. The girl moved her shoulders with a shiver of disdain.

"I knew it wasn't so."

"You know it would be hard for a young man like myself to be a very old friend," he countered lamely.

"How long, then, have you known each other?"

"Must I answer?"

"Please."

"Between three and four hours."

"I thought as much." She stared past him, troubled. Abruptly she said:
"Please smoke."

"Shall I? If you wish it, of course...."

She repeated: "Please."

"We were to wait ten minutes or so," she continued.

He produced his cigarette-case.

"If you care to smoke it will seem an excuse." He lighted his cigarette.
"And then, you may talk to me," she concluded calmly.

"I would, gladly, if I could guess what would interest you."

"Yourself. Tell me about yourself," she commanded.

"It would bore you," he responded tritely, confused.

"No; you interest me very much." She made the statement quietly, contemptuous of coquetry.

"Very well, then; I am Philip Kirkwood, an American."

"Nothing more?"

"Little worth retailing."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?" he demanded, piqued.

"Because you have merely indicated that you are a wealthy American."

"Why wealthy?"

"If not, you would have some aim in life--a calling or profession."

"And you think I have none?"

"Unless you consider it your vocation to be a wealthy American."

"I don't. Besides, I'm not wealthy. In point of fact, I ..." He pulled up short, on the verge of declaring himself a pauper. "I am a painter."

Her eyes lightened with interest. "An artist?"

"I hope so. I don't paint signs--or houses," he remarked.

Amused, she laughed softly. "I suspected it," she declared.

"Not really?"

"It was your way of looking at--things, that made me guess it: the painter's way. I have often noticed it."

"As if mentally blending colors all the time?"

"Yes; that and--seeing flaws."

"I have discovered none," he told her brazenly.

But again her secret cares were claiming her thoughts, and the gay, inconsequential banter died upon her scarlet lips as a second time her glance ranged away, sounding mysterious depths of anxiety.

Provoked, he would have continued the chatter. "I have confessed," he persisted. "You know everything of material interest about me. And yourself?"

"I am merely Dorothy Calendar," she answered.

"Nothing more?" He laughed.

"That is all, if you please, for the present."

"I am to content myself with the promise of the future?"

"The future," she told him seriously, "is to-morrow; and to-morrow ..." She moved restlessly in her chair, eyes and lips pathetic in their distress.

"Please, we will go now, if you are ready."

"I am quite ready, Miss Calendar."

He rose. A waiter brought the girl's cloak and put it in Kirkwood's hands. He held it until, smoothing the wrists of her long white gloves, she stood up, then placed the garment upon her white young shoulders, troubled by the indefinable sense of intimacy imparted by the privilege. She permitted him this personal service! He felt that she trusted him, that out of her gratitude had grown a simple and almost childish faith in his generosity and considerateness.

As she turned to go her eyes thanked him with an unfathomable glance. He was again conscious of that esoteric disturbance in his temples. Puzzled, hazily analyzing the sensation, he followed her to the lobby.

A page brought him his top-coat, hat and stick; tipping the child from sheer force of habit, he desired a gigantic porter, impressively ornate in hotel livery, to call a hansom. Together they passed out into the night, he and the girl.

Beneath a permanent awning of steel and glass she waited patiently, slender, erect, heedless of the attention she attracted from wayfarers.

The night was young, the air mild. Upon the sidewalk, muddied by a million feet, two streams of wayfarers flowed incessantly, bound west from Green Park or east toward Piccadilly Circus; a well-dressed throng for the most part, with here and there a man in evening dress. Between the carriages at the curb and the hotel doors moved others, escorting fluttering butterfly women in elaborate toilets, heads bare, skirts daintily gathered above their perishable slippers. Here and there meaner shapes slipped silently through the crowd, sinister shadows of the city's proletariat, blotting ominously the brilliance of the scene.

A cab drew in at the block. The porter clapped an arc of wickerwork over its wheel to protect the girl's skirts. She ascended to the seat.

Kirkwood, dropping sixpence in the porter's palm, prepared to follow; but a

hand fell upon his arm, peremptory, inexorable. He faced about, frowning, to confront a slight, hatchet-faced man, somewhat under medium height, dressed in a sack suit and wearing a derby well forward over eyes that were hard and bright.

"Mr. Calendar?" said the man tensely. "I presume I needn't name my business. I'm from the Yard--"

"My name is not Calendar."

The detective smiled wearily. "Don't be a fool, Calendar," he began. But the porter's hand fell upon his shoulder and the giant bent low to bring his mouth close to the other's ear. Kirkwood heard indistinctly his own name followed by Calendar's, and the words: "Never fear. I'll point him out."

"But the woman?" argued the detective, unconvinced, staring into the cab.

"Am I not at liberty to have a lady dine with me in a public restaurant?" interposed Kirkwood, without raising his voice.

The hard eyes looked him up and down without favor. Then: "Beg pardon, sir. I see my mistake," said the detective brusquely.

"I am glad you do," returned Kirkwood grimly. "I fancy it will bear investigation."

He mounted the step. "Imperial Theater," he told the driver, giving the first address that occurred to him; it could be changed. For the moment the main issue was to get the girl out of the range of the detective's interest.

He slipped into his place as the hansom wheeled into the turgid tide of west-bound traffic.

So Calendar had escaped, after all! Moreover, he had told the truth to Kirkwood.

By his side the girl moved uneasily. "Who was that man?" she inquired.

Kirkwood sought her eyes, and found them wholly ingenuous. It seemed that Calendar had not taken her into his confidence, after all. She was, therefore, in no way implicated in her father's affairs. Inexplicably the young man's heart felt lighter. "A mistake; the fellow took me for some one he knew," he told her carelessly.

The assurance satisfied her. She rested quietly, wrapped up in personal concerns. Her companion pensively contemplated an infinity of arid and hansom-less to-morrows. About them the city throbbed in a web of misty twilight, the humid farewell of a dismal day. In the air a faint haze swam, rendering the distances opalescent. Athwart the western sky the after-glow of a drenched sunset lay like a wash of rose-madder. Piccadilly's asphalt shone like watered silk, black and lustrous, reflecting a myriad lights in

vibrant ribbons of party-colored radiance. On every hand cab-lamps danced like fire-flies; the rumble of wheels blended with the hollow pounding of uncounted hoofs, merging insensibly into the deep and solemn roar of London-town.

Suddenly Kirkwood was recalled to a sense of duty by a glimpse of Hyde Park Corner. He turned to the girl. "I didn't know where you wished to go--?"

She seemed to realize his meaning with surprise, as one, whose thoughts have strayed afar, recalled to an imperative world.

"Oh, did I forget? Tell him please to drive to Number Nine, Frognall Street, Bloomsbury."

Kirkwood poked his cane through the trap, repeating the address. The cab wheeled smartly across Piccadilly, swung into Half Moon Street, and thereafter made better time, darting briskly down abrupt vistas of shining pavement, walled in by blank-visaged houses, or round two sides of one of London's innumerable private parks, wherein spring foliage glowed a tender green in artificial light; now and again it crossed brilliant main arteries of travel, and eventually emerged from a maze of backways into Oxford Street, to hammer eastwards to Tottenham Court Road.

Constraint hung like a curtain between the two; a silence which the young man forbore to moderate, finding more delight that he had cared (or dared) confess to, in contemplation of the pure girlish profile so close to him.

She seemed quite unaware of him, lost in thought, large eyes sober, lips serious that were fashioned for laughter, round little chin firm with some occult resolution. It was not hard to fancy her nerves keyed to a high pitch of courage and determination, nor easy to guess for what reason. Watching always, keenly sensitive to the beauty of each salient line betrayed by the flying lights, Kirkwood's own consciousness lost itself in a profitless, even a perilous labyrinth of conjecture.

The cab stopped. Both occupants came to their senses with a little start. The girl leaned out over; the apron, recognized the house she sought in one swift glance, testified to the recognition with a hushed exclamation, and began to arrange her skirts. Kirkwood, unheeding her faint-hearted protests, jumped out, interposing his cane between her skirts and the wheel. Simultaneously he received a vivid mental photograph of the locality.

Frognall Street proved to be one of those by-ways, a short block in length, which, hemmed in on all sides by a meaner purlieu, has (even in Bloomsbury!) escaped the sordid commercial eye of the keeper of furnished lodgings, retaining jealously something of the old-time dignity and reserve that were its pride in the days before Society swarmed upon Mayfair and Belgravia.

Its houses loomed tall, with many windows, mostly lightless--materially aggravating that air of isolate, cold dignity which distinguishes the Englishman's castle. Here and there stood one less bedraggled than

its neighbors, though all, without exception, spoke assertively of respectability down-at-the-heel but fighting tenaciously for existence. Some, vanguards of that imminent day when the boarding-house should reign supreme, wore with shamefaced air placards of estate-agents, advertising their susceptibility to sale or lease. In the company of the latter was Number 9.

The American noted the circumstance subconsciously, at a moment when Miss Calendar's hand, small as a child's, warm and compact in its white glove, lay in his own. And then she was on the sidewalk, her face, upturned to his, vivacious with excitement.

"You have been so kind," she told him warmly, "that one hardly knows how to thank you, Mr. Kirkwood."

"I have done nothing--nothing at all," he mumbled, disturbed by a sudden, unreasoning alarm for her.

She passed quickly to the shelter of the pillared portico. He followed clumsily. On the door-step she turned, offering her hand. He took and retained it.

"Good night," she said.

"I'm to understand that I'm dismissed, then?" he stammered ruefully.

She evaded his eyes. "I--thank you--I have no further need--"

"You are quite sure? Won't you believe me at your service?"

She laughed uneasily. "I'm all right now."

"I can do nothing more? Sure?"

"Nothing. But you--you make me almost sorry I can't impose still further upon your good nature."

"Please don't hesitate ..."

"Aren't you very persistent, Mr. Kirkwood?" Her fingers moved in his; burning with the reproof, he released them, and turned to her so woebegone a countenance that she repented of her severity. "Don't worry about me, please. I am truly safe now. Some day I hope to be able to thank you adequately. Good night!"

Her pass-key grated in the lock. Opening, the door disclosed a dark and uninviting entry-hall, through which there breathed an air heavy with the dank and dusty odor of untenanted rooms. Hesitating on the threshold, over her shoulder the girl smiled kindly upon her commandeered esquire; and stepped within.

He lifted his hat automatically. The door closed with an echoing slam. He turned to the waiting cab, fumbling for change.

"I'll walk," he told the cabby, paying him off.

The hansom swept away to a tune of hammering hoofs; and quiet rested upon the street as Kirkwood turned the nearest corner, in an unpleasant temper, puzzled and discontented. It seemed hardly fair that he should have been dragged into so promising an adventure, by his ears (so to put it), only to be thus summarily called upon to write "Finis" beneath the incident.

He rounded the corner and walked half-way to the next street, coming to an abrupt and rebellious pause by the entrance to a covered alleyway, of two minds as to his proper course of action.

In the background of his thoughts Number 9, Frognall Street, reared its five-story façade, sinister and forbidding. He reminded himself of its unlighted windows; of its sign, "To be let"; of the effluvia of desolation that had saluted him when the door swung wide. A deserted house; and the girl alone in it!--was it right for him to leave her so?

IV

9 FROGNALL STREET, W. C.

The covered alleyway gave upon Quadrant Mews; or so declared a notice painted on the dead wall of the passage.

Overhead, complaining as it swayed in the wind, hung the smirched and weather-worn sign-board of the Hog-in-the-Pound public house; wherefrom escaped sounds of such revelry by night as is indulged in by the British working-man in hours of ease. At the curb in front of the house of entertainment, dejected animals drooping between their shafts, two hansoms stood in waiting, until such time as the lords of their destinies should see fit to sally forth and inflict themselves upon a cab-hungry populace. As Kirkwood turned, a third vehicle rumbled up out of the mews.

Kirkwood can close his eyes, even at this late day, and both see and hear it all again--even as he can see the unbroken row of dingy dwellings that lined his way back from Quadrant Mews to Frognall Street corner: all drab and unkempt, all sporting in their fan-lights the legend and lure, "Furnished Apartments."

For, between his curiosity about and his concern for the girl, he was being led back to Number 9, by the nose, as it were,--hardly willingly, at best. Profoundly stupefied by the contemplation of his own temerity, he yet returned unflinching. He who had for so long plumed himself upon his strict supervision of his personal affairs and equally steadfast unconsciousness of his neighbor's businesses, now found himself in the very act of pushing in where he was not wanted: as he had been advised in well-nigh as many words. He experienced an effect of standing to one side, a witness of

his own folly, with rising wonder, unable to credit the strength of the infatuation which was placing him so conspicuously in the way of a snubbing.

If perchance he were to meet the girl again as she was leaving Number 9,--what then? The contingency dismayed him incredibly, in view of the fact that it did not avail to make him pause. To the contrary he disregarded it resolutely; mad, impertinent, justified of his unnamed apprehensions, or simply addled,--he held on his way.

He turned up Frognall Street with the manner of one out for a leisurely evening stroll. Simultaneously, from the farther corner, another pedestrian debouched, into the thoroughfare--a mere moving shadow at that distance, brother to blacker shadows that skulked in the fenced areas and unlively entries of that poorly lighted block. The hush was something beyond belief, when one remembered the nearness of blatant Tottenham Court Road.

Kirkwood conceived a wholly senseless curiosity about the other wayfarer. The man was walking rapidly, heels ringing with uncouth loudness, cane tapping the flagging at brief intervals. Both sounds ceased abruptly as their cause turned in beneath one of the porticos. In the emphatic and unnatural quiet that followed, Kirkwood, stepping more lightly, fancied that another shadow followed the first, noiselessly and with furtive stealth.

Could it be Number 9 into which they had passed? The American's heart beat a livelier tempo at the suggestion. If it had not been Number 9--he was still too far away to tell--it was certainly one of the dwellings adjacent thereunto. The improbable possibility (But why improbable?) that the girl was being joined by her father, or by friends, annoyed him with illogical intensity. He mended his own pace, designing to pass whichever house it might be before the door should be closed; thought better of this, and slowed up again, anathematizing himself with much excuse for being the inquisitive dolt that he was.

Approaching Number 9 with laggard feet, he manufactured a desire to light a cigarette, as a cover for his design, were he spied upon by unsuspected eyes. Cane under arm, hands cupped to shield a vesta's flame, he stopped directly before the portico, turning his eyes askance to the shadowed doorway; and made a discovery sufficiently startling to hold him spellbound and, incidentally, to scorch his gloves before he thought to drop the match.

The door of Number 9 stood ajar, a black interval an inch or so in width showing between its edge and the jamb.

Suspicion and alarm set his wits a-tingle. More distinctly he recalled the jarring bang, accompanied by the metallic click of the latch, when the girl had shut herself in--and him out. Now, some person or persons had followed her, neglecting the most obvious precaution of a householder. And why? Why but because the intruders did not wish the sound of closing to be audible to her--or those--within?

He reminded himself that it was all none of his affair, decided to pass on and go his ways in peace, and impulsively, swinging about, marched straight away for the unclosed door.

"Old'ard, guvner!"

Kirkwood halted on the cry, faltering in indecision. Should he take the plunge, or withdraw? Synchronously he was conscious that a man's figure had detached itself from the shadows beneath the nearest portico and was drawing nearer, with every indication of haste, to intercept him.

"Ere now, guvner, yer mykin' a mistyke. You don't live 'ere."

"How do you know?" demanded Kirkwood crisply, tightening his grip on his stick.

Was this the second shadow he had seemed to see--the confederate of him who had entered Number 9; a sentry to forestall interruption? If so, the fellow lacked discretion, though his determination that the American should not interfere was undeniable. It was with an ugly and truculent manner, if more warily, that the man closed in.

"I knows. You clear hout, or--"

He flung out a hand with the plausible design of grasping Kirkwood by the collar. The latter lifted his stick, deflecting the arm, and incontinently landed his other fist forcibly on the fellow's chest. The man reeled back, cursing. Before he could recover Kirkwood calmly crossed the threshold, closed the door and put his shoulder to it. In another instant, fumbling in the darkness, he found the bolts and drove them home.

And it was done, the transformation accomplished; his inability to refrain from interfering had encompassed his downfall, had changed a peaceable and law-abiding alien within British shores into a busybody, a trespasser, a misdemeanant, a--yes, for all he knew to the contrary, in the estimation of the Law, a burglar, prime candidate for a convict's stripes!

Breathing hard with excitement he turned and laid his back against the panels, trembling in every muscle, terrified by the result of his impulsive audacity, thunder-struck by a lightning-like foreglimpse of its possible consequences. Of what colossal imprudence had he not been guilty?

"The devil!" he whispered. "What an ass, what an utter ass I am!"

Behind him the knob was rattled urgently, to an accompaniment of feet shuffling on the stone; and immediately--if he were to make a logical deduction from the rasping and scraping sound within the door-casing--the bell-pull was violently agitated, without, however, educing any response from the bell itself, wherever that might be situate. After which, as if in despair, the outsider again rattled and jerked the knob.

Be his status what it might, whether servant of the household, its caretaker, or a night watchman, the man was palpably determined both to get

himself in and Kirkwood out, and yet (curious to consider) determined to gain his end without attracting undue attention. Kirkwood had expected to hear the knocker's thunder, as soon as the bell failed to give tongue; but it did not sound although there _was_ a knocker,--Kirkwood himself had remarked that antiquated and rusty bit of ironmongery affixed to the middle panel of the door. And it made him feel sure that something surreptitious and lawless was in process within those walls, that the confederate without, having failed to prevent a stranger from entering, left unemployed a means so certain-sure to rouse the occupants.

But his inferential analysis of this phase of the proceedings was summarily abrupted by that identical alarm. In a trice the house was filled with flying echoes, wakened to sonorous riot by the crash and clamor of the knocker; and Kirkwood stood fully two yards away, his heart hammering wildly, his nerves a-jingle, much as if the resounding blows had landed upon his own person rather than on stout oaken planking.

Ere he had time to wonder, the racket ceased, and from the street filtered voices in altercation. Listening, Kirkwood's pulses quickened, and he laughed uncertainly for pure relief, retreating to the door and putting an ear to a crack.

The accents of one speaker were new in his hearing, stern, crisp, quick with the spirit of authority which animates that most austere and dignified limb of the law to be encountered the world over, a London bobby.

"Now then, my man, what do you want there? Come now, speak up, and step out into the light, where I can see you."

The response came in the sniffling snarl of the London ne'er-do-well, the unemployable rogue whose chiefest occupation seems to be to march in the ranks of The Unemployed on the occasion of its annual demonstrations.

"Le' me alone, carntcher? Ah'm doin' no 'arm, officer,--"

"Didn't you hear me? Step out here. Ah, that's better.... No harm, eh? Perhaps you'll explain how there's no harm breakin' into unoccupied 'ouses?"

"Gorblimy, 'ow was I to know? 'Ere's a toff 'ands me sixpence fer hopenin' 'is cab door to-dye, an', sezee, 'My man,' 'e sez, 'yer've got a 'onest fyce. W'y don'cher work?' sezee. "'Ow can I?' sez I. "'Ere'm I hout of a job these six months, lookin' fer work every dye an' carn't find it.' Sezee, 'Come an' see me this hevenin' at me home, Noine, Frognall Stryte,' 'e sez, an'--"

"That'll do for now. You borrow a pencil and paper and write it down and I'll read it when I've got more time; I never heard the like of it. This 'ouse hasn't been lived in these two years. Move on, and don't let me find you round 'ere again. March, I say!"

There was more of it--more whining explanations artfully tintured with abuse, more terse commands to depart, the whole concluding with scraping

footsteps, diminuendo, and another perfunctory, rattle of the knob as the bobby, having shoo'd the putative evil-doer off, assured himself that no damage had actually been done. Then he, too, departed, satisfied and self-righteous, leaving a badly frightened but very grateful amateur criminal to pursue his self-appointed career of crime.

He had no choice other than to continue; in point of fact, it had been insanity just then to back out, and run the risk of apprehension at the hands of that ubiquitous bobby, who (for all he knew) might be lurking not a dozen yards distant, watchful for just such a sequel. Still, Kirkwood hesitated with the best of excuses. Reassuring as he had found the sentinel's extemporized yarn,--proof positive that the fellow had had no more right to prohibit a trespass than Kirkwood to commit one,--at the same time he found himself pardonably a prey to emotions of the utmost consternation and alarm. If he feared to leave the house he had no warrant whatever to assume that he would be permitted to remain many minutes unharmed within its walls of mystery.

The silence of it discomfited him beyond measure; it was, in a word, uncanny.

Before him, as he lingered at the door, vaguely disclosed by a wan illumination penetrating a dusty and begrimed fan-light, a broad hall stretched indefinitely towards the rear of the building, losing itself in blackness beyond the foot of a flight of stairs. Save for a few articles of furniture,--a hall table, an umbrella-stand, a tall dumb clock flanked by high-backed chairs,--it was empty. Other than Kirkwood's own restrained respiration not a sound throughout the house advertised its inhabitation; not a board creaked beneath the pressure of a foot, not a mouse rustled in the wainscoting or beneath the floors, not a breath of air stirred sighing in the stillness.

And yet, a tremendous racket had been raised at the front door, within the sixty seconds past! And yet, within twenty minutes two persons, at least, had preceded Kirkwood into the building! Had they not heard? The speculation seemed ridiculous. Or had they heard and, alarmed, been too effectually hobbled by the coils of their nefarious designs to dare reveal themselves, to investigate the cause of that thunderous summons? Or were they, perhaps, aware of Kirkwood's entrance, and lying _perdui_, in some dark corner, to ambush him as he passed?

True, that were hardly like the girl. True, on the other hand, it were possible that she had stolen away while Kirkwood was hanging in irresolution by the passage to Quadrant Mews. Again, the space of time between Kirkwood's dismissal and his return had been exceedingly brief; whatever her errand, she could hardly have fulfilled it and escaped. At that moment she might be in the power and at the mercy of him who had followed her; providing he were not friendly. And in that case, what torment and what peril might not be hers?

Spurred by solicitude, the young man put personal apprehensions in his pocket and forgot them, cautiously picking his way through the gloom to the foot of the stairs. There, by the newel-post, he paused. Darkness walled

him about. Overhead the steps vanished in a well of blackness; he could not even see the ceiling; his eyes ached with futile effort to fathom the unknown; his ears rang with unrewarded strain of listening. The silence hung inviolate, profound.

Slowly he began to ascend, a hand following the balusters, the other with his cane exploring the obscurity before him. On the steps, a carpet, thick and heavy, muffled his footfalls. He moved noiselessly. Towards the top the staircase curved, and presently a foot that groped for a higher level failed to find it. Again he halted, acutely distrustful.

Nothing happened.

He went on, guided by the balustrade, passing three doors, all open, through which the undefined proportions of a drawing-room and boudoir were barely suggested in a ghostly dusk. By each he paused, listening, hearing nothing.

His foot struck with a deadened thud against the bottom step of the second flight, and his pulses fluttered wildly for a moment. Two minutes--three--he waited in suspense. From above came no sound. He went on, as before, save that twice a step yielded, complaining, to his weight. Toward the top the close air, like the darkness, seemed to weigh more heavily upon his consciousness; little drops of perspiration started out on his forehead, his scalp tingled, his mouth was hot and dry, he felt as if stifled.

Again the raised foot found no level higher than its fellows. He stopped and held his breath, oppressed by a conviction that some one was near him. Confirmation of this came startlingly--an eerie whisper in the night, so close to him that he fancied he could feel the disturbed air fanning his face.

"_Is it you, Eccles_?"

He had no answer ready. The voice was masculine, if he analyzed it correctly. Dumb and stupid he stood poised upon the point of panic.

"_Eccles, is it you_?"

The whisper was both shrill and shaky. As it ceased Kirkwood was half blinded by a flash of light, striking him squarely in the eyes. Involuntarily he shrank back a pace, to the first step from the top. Instantaneously the light was eclipsed.

"_Halt or--or I fire_!"

By now he realized that he had been scrutinized by the aid of an electric hand-lamp. The tremulous whisper told him something else--that the speaker suffered from nerves as high-strung as his own. The knowledge gave him inspiration. He cried at a venture, in a guarded voice, "_Hands up_!"--and struck out smartly with his stick. Its ferrule impinged upon something soft but heavy. Simultaneously he heard a low, frightened cry, the cane was

swept aside, a blow landed glancingly on his shoulder, and he was carried fairly off his feet by the weight of a man hurled bodily upon him with staggering force and passion. Reeling, he was borne back and down a step or two, and then,--choking on an oath,--dropped his cane and with one hand caught the balusters, while the other tore ineffectually at wrists of hands that clutched his throat. So, for a space, the two hung, panting and struggling.

Then endeavoring to swing his shoulders over against the wall, Kirkwood released his grip on the hand-rail and stumbled on the stairs, throwing his antagonist out of balance. The latter plunged downward, dragging Kirkwood with him. Clawing, kicking, grappling, they went to the bottom, jolted violently by each step; but long before the last was reached, Kirkwood's throat was free.

Throwing himself off, he got to his feet and grasped the railing for support; then waited, panting, trying to get his bearings. Himself painfully shaken and bruised, he shrewdly surmised that his assailant had fared as ill, if not worse. And, in point of fact, the man lay with neither move nor moan, still as death at the American's feet.

And once more silence had folded its wings over Number 9, Froggall Street.

More conscious of that terrifying, motionless presence beneath him, than able to distinguish it by power of vision, he endured interminable minutes of trembling horror, in a witless daze, before he thought of his match-box. Immediately he found it and struck a light. As the wood caught and the bright small flame leaped in the pent air, he leaned forward, over the body, breathlessly dreading what he must discover.

The man lay quiet, head upon the floor, legs and hips on the stairs. One arm had fallen over his face, hiding the upper half. The hand gleamed white and delicate as a woman's. His chin was smooth and round, his lips thin and petulant. Beneath his top-coat, evening dress clothed a short and slender figure. Nothing whatever of his appearance suggested the burly ruffian, the midnight marauder; he seemed little more than a boy old enough to dress for dinner. In his attitude there was something pitifully suggestive of a beaten child, thrown into a corner.

Conscience-smitten and amazed Kirkwood stared on until, without warning, the match flickered and went out. Then, straightening up with an exclamation at once of annoyance and concern, he rattled the box; it made no sound,--was empty. In disgust he swore it was the devil's own luck, that he should run out of vestas at a time so critical. He could not even say whether the fellow was dead, unconscious, or simply shamming. He had little idea of his looks; and to be able to identify him might save a deal of trouble at some future time,--since he, Kirkwood, seemed so little able to disengage himself from the clutches of this insane adventure! And the girl-- what had become of her? How could he continue to search for her, without lights or guide, through all those silent rooms, whose walls might inclose a hundred hidden dangers in that house of mystery?

But he debated only briefly. His blood was young, and it was hot; it was

quite plain to him that he could not withdraw and retain his self-respect. If the girl was there to be found, most assuredly, he must find her. The hand-lamp that had dazzled him at the head of the stairs should be his aid, now that he thought of it,--and providing he was able to find it.

In the scramble on the stairs he had lost his hat, but he remembered that the vesta's short-lived light had discovered this on the floor beyond the man's body. Carefully stepping across the latter he recovered his head-gear, and then, kneeling, listened with an ear close to the fellow's face. A softly regular beat of breathing reassured him. Half rising, he caught the body beneath the armpits, lifting and dragging it off the staircase; and knelt again, to feel of each pocket in the man's clothing, partly as an obvious precaution, to relieve him of his advertised revolver against an untimely wakening, partly to see if he had the lamp about him.

The search proved fruitless. Kirkwood suspected that the weapon, like his own, had existed only in his victim's ready imagination. As for the lamp, in the act of rising he struck it with his foot, and picked it up.

It felt like a metal tube a couple of inches in diameter, a foot or so in length, passably heavy. He fumbled with it impatiently. "However the dickens," he wondered audibly, "does the infernal machine work?" As it happened, the thing worked with disconcerting abruptness as his untrained fingers fell hapchance on the spring. A sudden glare again smote him in the face, and at the same instant, from a point not a yard away, apparently, an inarticulate cry rang out upon the stillness.

Heart in his mouth, he stepped back, lowering the lamp (which impishly went out) and lifting a protecting forearm.

"Who's that?" he demanded harshly.

A strangled sob of terror answered him, blurred by a swift rush of skirts, and in a breath his shattered nerves quieted and a glimmer of common sense penetrated the murk anger and fear had bred in his brain. He understood, and stepped forward, catching blindly at the darkness with eager hands.

"Miss Calendar!" he cried guardedly. "Miss Calendar, it is I--Philip Kirkwood!"

There was a second sob, of another caliber than the first; timid fingers brushed his, and a hand, warm and fragile, closed upon his own in a passion of relief and gratitude.

"Oh, I am so g-glad!" It was Dorothy Calendar's voice, beyond mistake.

"I--I didn't know what t-to t-think.... When the light struck your face I was sure it was you, but when I called, you answered in a voice so strange,--not like yours at all! ... Tell me," she pleaded, with palpable effort to steady herself; "what has happened?"

"I think, perhaps," said Kirkwood uneasily, again troubled by his racing pulses, "perhaps you can do that better than I."

"Oh!" said the voice guiltily; her fingers trembled on his, and were gently withdrawn. "I was so frightened," she confessed after a little pause, "so frightened that I hardly understand ... But you? How did you--?"

"I worried about you," he replied, in a tone absurdly apologetic. "Somehow it didn't seem right. It was none of my business, of course, but ... I couldn't help coming back. This fellow, whoever he is--don't worry; he's unconscious--slipped into the house in a manner that seemed to me suspicious. I hardly know why I followed, except that he left the door an open invitation to interference ..."

"I can't be thankful enough," she told him warmly, "that you did interfere. You have indeed saved me from ..."

"Yes?"

"I don't know what. If I knew the man--"

"You don't _know_ him?"

"I can't even guess. The light--?"

She paused inquiringly. Kirkwood fumbled with the lamp, but, whether its rude handling had impaired some vital part of the mechanism, or whether the batteries through much use were worn out, he was able to elicit only one feeble glow, which was instantly smothered by the darkness.

"It's no use," he confessed. "The thing's gone wrong."

"Have you a match?"

"I used my last before I got hold of this."

"Oh," she commented, discouraged. "Have you any notion what he looks like?"

Kirkwood thought briefly. "Raffles," he replied with a chuckle. "He looks like an amateurish and very callow Raffles. He's in dress clothes, you know."

"I wonder!" There was a nuance of profound bewilderment in her exclamation. Then: "He knocked against something in the hall--a chair, I presume; at all events, I heard that and put out the light. I was ... in the room above the drawing-room, you see. I stole down to this floor--was there, in the corner by the stairs when he passed within six inches, and never guessed it. Then, when he got on the next floor, I started on; but you came in. I slipped into the drawing-room and crouched behind a chair. You went on, but I dared not move until ... And then I heard some one cry out, and you fell down the stairs together. I hope you were not hurt--?"

"Nothing worth mention; but _he_ must have got a pretty stiff knock, to lay him out so completely." Kirkwood stirred the body with his toe, but the man made no sign. "Dead to the world ... And now, Miss Calendar?"

If she answered, he did not hear; for on the heels of his query banged the knocker down below; and thereafter crash followed crash, brewing a deep and sullen thundering to rouse the echoes and send them rolling, like voices of enraged ghosts, through the lonely rooms.

V

THE MYSTERY OF A FOUR-WHEELER

"What's that?" At the first alarm the girl had caught convulsively at Kirkwood's arm. Now, when a pause came in the growling of the knocker, she made him hear her voice; and it was broken and vibrant with a threat of hysteria. "Oh, what can it mean?"

"I don't know." He laid a hand reassuringly over that which trembled on his forearm. "The police, possibly."

"Police!" she iterated, aghast. "What makes you think--?"

"A man tried to stop me at the door," he answered quickly. "I got in before he could. When he tried the knocker, a bobby came along and stopped him. The latter may have been watching the house since then,--it'd be only his duty to keep an eye on it; and Heaven knows we raised a racket, coming head-first down those stairs! Now we are up against it," he added brightly.

But the girl was tugging at his hand. "Come!" she begged breathlessly. "Come! There is a way! Before they break in--"

"But this man--?" Kirkwood hung back, troubled.

"They--the police are sure to find and care for him."

"So they will." He chuckled, "And serve him right! He'd have choked me to death, with all the good will in the world!"

"Oh, do hurry!"

Turning, she sped light-footed down the staircase to the lower hall, he at her elbow. Here the uproar was loudest--deep enough to drown whatever sounds might have been made by two pairs of flying feet. For all that they fled on tiptoe, stealthily, guilty shadows in the night; and at the newel-post swung back into the unbroken blackness which shrouded the fastnesses backward of the dwelling. A sudden access of fury on the part of the alarmist at the knocker, spurred them on with quaking hearts. In half a dozen strides, Kirkwood, guided only by instinct and the *frou-frou* of the girl's skirts as she ran invisible before him, stumbled on the uppermost steps of a steep staircase; only a hand-rail saved him, and that at the last moment. He stopped short, shocked into caution. From below came a contrite whisper: "I'm so sorry! I should have warned you."

He pulled himself together, glaring wildly at nothing. "It's all right--"

"You're not hurt, truly? Oh, do come quickly."

She waited for him at the bottom of the flight;--happily for him, for he was all at sea.

"Here--your hand--let me guide you. This darkness is dreadful ..."

He found her hand, somehow, and tucked his into it, confidently, and not without an uncertain thrill of satisfaction.

"Come!" she panted. "Come! If they break in--"

Stifled by apprehension, her voice failed her.

They went forward, now less impetuously, for it was very black; and the knocker had fallen still.

"No fear of that," he remarked after a time. "They wouldn't dare break in."

A fluttering whisper answered him: "I don't know. We dare risk nothing."

They seemed to explore, to penetrate acres of labyrinthine chambers and passages, delving deep into the bowels of the earth, like rabbits burrowing in a warren, hounded by beagles.

Above stairs the hush continued unbroken; as if the dumb Genius of the Place had cast a spell of silence on the knocker, or else, outraged, had smitten the noisy disturber with a palsy.

The girl seemed to know her way; whether guided by familiarity or by intuition, she led on without hesitation, Kirkwood blundering in her wake, between confusion of impression, and dawning dismay conscious of but one tangible thing, to which he clung as to his hope of salvation: those firm, friendly fingers that clasped his own.

It was as if they wandered on for an hour; probably from start to finish their flight took up three minutes, no more. Eventually the girl stopped, releasing his hand. He could hear her syncopated breathing before him, and gathered that something was wrong. He took a step forward.

"What is it?"

Her full voice broke out of the obscurity startlingly close, in his very ear.

"The door--the bolts--I can't budge them."

"Let me ..."

He pressed forward, brushing her shoulder. She did not draw away, but

willingly yielded place to his hands at the fastenings; and what had proved impossible to her, to his strong fingers was a matter of comparative ease. Yet, not entirely consciously, he was not quick. As he tugged at the bolts he was poignantly sensitive to the subtle warmth of her at his side; he could hear her soft dry sobs of excitement and suspense, punctuating the quiet; and was frightened, absolutely, by an impulse, too strong for ridicule, to take her in his arms and comfort her with the assurance that, whatever her trouble, he would stand by her and protect her.... It were futile to try to laugh it off; he gave over the endeavor. Even at this critical moment he found himself repeating over and over to his heart the question: "Can this be love? Can this be love? ..."

Could it be love at an hour's acquaintance? Absurd! But he could not laugh--nor render himself insensible to the suggestion.

He found that he had drawn the bolts. The girl tugged and rattled at the knob. Reluctantly the door opened inwards. Beyond its threshold stretched ten feet or more of covered passageway, whose entrance framed an oblong glimmering with light. A draught of fresh air smote their faces. Behind them a door banged.

"Where does this open?"

"On the mews," she informed him.

"The mews!" He stared in consternation at the pallid oval that stood for her face. "The mews! But you, in your evening gown, and I--"

"There's no other way. We must chance it. Are you afraid?"

Afraid? ... He stepped aside. She slipped by him and on. He closed the door, carefully removing the key and locking it on the outside; then joined the girl at the entrance to the mews, where they paused perforce, she as much disconcerted as he, his primary objection momentarily waxing in force as they surveyed the conditions circumscribing their escape.

Quadrant Mews was busily engaged in enjoying itself. Night had fallen sultry and humid, and the walls and doorsteps were well fringed and clustered with representatives of that class of London's population which infests mews through habit, taste, or force of circumstance.

On the stoops men sprawled at easy length, discussing short, foul cutties loaded with that rank and odoriferous compound which, under the name and in the fame of tobacco, is widely retailed at tuppence the ounce. Their women-folk more commonly squatted on the thresholds, cheerfully squabbling; from opposing second-story windows, two leaned perilously forth, slanging one another across the square briskly in the purest billingsgate; and were impartially applauded from below by an audience whose appreciation seemed faintly tinged with envy. Squawking and yelling children swarmed over the flags and rude cobblestones that paved the ways. Like incense, heavy and pungent, the rich effluvia of stable-yards swirled in air made visible by its faint burden of mist.

Over against the entrance wherein Kirkwood and the girl lurked, confounded by the problem of escaping undetected through this vivacious scene, a stable-door stood wide, exposing a dimly illumined interior. Before it waited a four-wheeler, horse already hitched in between the shafts, while its driver, a man of leisurely turn of mind, made lingering inspection of straps and buckles, and, while Kirkwood watched him, turned attention to the carriage lamps.

The match which he raked spiritedly down his thigh, flared ruddily; the succeeding paler glow of the lamp threw into relief a heavy beefy mask, with shining bosses for cheeks and nose and chin; through narrow slits two cunning eyes glittered like dull gems. Kirkwood appraised him with attention, as one in whose gross carcass was embodied their only hope of unannoyed return to the streets and normal surroundings of their world. The difficulty lay in attracting the man's attention and engaging him without arousing his suspicions or bringing the population about their ears. Though he hesitated long, no favorable opportunity presented itself; and in time the Jehu approached the box with the ostensible purpose of mounting and driving off. In this critical situation the American, forced to recognize that boldness must mark his course, took the girl's fate and his own in his hands, and with a quick word to his companion, stepped out of hiding.

The cabby had a foot upon the step when Kirkwood tapped his shoulder.

"My man--"

"Lor, lumme!" cried the fellow in amaze, pivoting on his heel. Cupidity and quick understanding enlivened the eyes which in two glances looked Kirkwood up and down, comprehending at once both his badly rumpled hat and patent-leather shoes. "S'help me, "--thickly, "--where'd you drop from, guvner?"

"That's my affair," said Kirkwood briskly. "Are you engaged?"

"If you mykes yerself my fare," returned the cabby shrewdly, "I _ham_."

"Ten shillings, then, if you get us out of here in one minute and to--say--Hyde Park Corner in fifteen."

"Us?" demanded the fellow aggressively.

Kirkwood motioned toward the passageway. "There's a lady with me--there. Quick now!"

Still the man did not move. "Ten bob," he bargained; "an' you runnin' awye with th' stuffy ol' gent's fair darter? Come now, guvner, is it gen'rous? Myke it a quid an'--"

"A pound then. _Will_ you hurry?"

By way of answer the fellow scrambled hastily up to the box and snatched at the reins. "_Ck_! Gee-e hup!" he cried sonorously.

By now the mews had wakened to the fact of the presence of a "toff" in its midst. His light topcoat and silk hat-rendered him as conspicuous as a red Indian in war-paint would have been on Rotten Row. A cry of surprise was raised, and drowned in a volley of ribald inquiry and chaff.

Fortunately, the cabby was instant to rein in skilfully before the passageway, and Kirkwood had the door open before the four-wheeler stopped. The girl, hugging her cloak about her, broke cover (whereat the hue and cry redoubled), and sprang into the body of the vehicle. Kirkwood followed, shutting the door. As the cab lurched forward he leaned over and drew down the window-shade, shielding the girl from half a hundred prying eyes. At the same time they gathered momentum, banging swiftly, if loudly out of the mews.

An urchin, leaping on the step to spy in Kirkwood's window, fell off, yelping, as the driver's whiplash curled about his shanks.

The gloom of the tunnel inclosed them briefly ere the lights of the Hog-in-the-Pound flashed by and the wheels began to roll more easily. Kirkwood drew back with a sigh of relief.

"Thank God!" he said softly.

The girl had no words.

Worried by her silence, solicitous lest, the strain ended, she might be on the point of fainting, he let up the shade and lowered the window at her side.

She seemed to have collapsed in her corner. Against the dark upholstery her hair shone like pale gold in the half-light; her eyes were closed and she held a handkerchief to her lips; the other hand lay limp.

"Miss Calendar?"

She started, and something bulky fell from the seat and thumped heavily on the floor. Kirkwood bent to pick it up, and so for the first time was made aware that she had brought with her a small black gladstone bag of considerable weight. As he placed it on the forward seat their eyes met.

"I didn't know--" he began.

"It was to get that," she hastened to explain, "that my father sent me ..."

"Yes," he assented in a tone indicating his complete comprehension. "I trust ..." he added vaguely, and neglected to complete the observation, losing himself in a maze of conjecture not wholly agreeable. This was a new phase of the adventure. He eyed the bag uneasily. What did it contain? How did he know ...?

Hastily he abandoned that line of thought. He had no right to infer anything whatever, who had thrust himself uninvited into her concerns--uninvited, that was to say, in the second instance, having

been once definitely given his congØ. Inevitably, however, a thousand unanswerable questions pestered him; just as, at each fresh facet of mystery disclosed by the sequence of the adventure, his bewilderment deepened.

The girl stirred restlessly. "I have been thinking," she volunteered in a troubled tone, "that there is absolutely no way I know of, to thank you properly."

"It is enough if I've been useful," he rose in gallantry to the emergency.

"That," she commented, "was very prettily said. But then I have never known any one more kind and courteous and--and considerate, than you." There was no savor of flattery in the simple and direct statement; indeed, she was looking away from him, out of the window, and her face was serious with thought; she seemed to be speaking of, rather than to, Kirkwood. "And I have been wondering," she continued with unaffected candor, "what you must be thinking of me."

"I? ... What should I think of you, Miss Calendar?"

With the air of a weary child she laid her head against the cushions again, face to him, and watched him through lowered lashes, unsmiling.

"You might be thinking that an explanation is due you. Even the way we were brought together was extraordinary, Mr. Kirkwood. You must be very generous, as generous as you have shown yourself brave, not to require some sort of an explanation of me."

"I don't see it that way."

"I do ... You have made me like you very much, Mr. Kirkwood."

He shot her a covert glance--causelessly, for her _naivetØ_ was flawless. With a feeling of some slight awe he understood this--a sensation of sincere reverence for the unspoiled, candid, child's heart and mind that were hers. "I'm glad," he said simply; "very glad, if that's the case, and presupposing I deserve it. Personally," he laughed, "I seem to myself to have been rather forward."

"No; only kind and a gentleman."

"But--please!" he protested.

"Oh, but I mean it, every word! Why shouldn't I? In a little while, ten minutes, half an hour, we shall have seen the last of each other. Why should I not tell you how I appreciate all that you have unselfishly done for me?"

"If you put it that way,--I'm sure I don't know; beyond that it embarrasses me horribly to have you overestimate me so. If any courage has been shown this night, it is yours ... But I'm forgetting again." He thought to divert her. "Where shall I tell the cabby to go this time, Miss Calendar?"

"Craven Street, please," said the girl, and added a house number. "I am to meet my father there, with this,"--indicating the gladstone bag.

Kirkwood thrust head and shoulders out the window and instructed the cabby accordingly; but his ruse had been ineffectual, as he found when he sat back again. Quite composedly the girl took up the thread of conversation where it had been broken off.

"It's rather hard to keep silence, when you've been so good. I don't want you to think me less generous than yourself, but, truly, I can tell you nothing." She sighed a trace resentfully; or so he thought. "There is little enough in this--this wretched affair, that I understand myself; and that little, I may not tell ... I want you to know that."

"I understand, Miss Calendar."

"There's one thing I may say, however. I have done nothing wrong to-night, I believe," she added quickly.

"I've never for an instant questioned that," he returned with a qualm of shame; for what he said was not true.

"Thank you ..."

The four-wheeler swung out of Oxford Street into Charing Cross Road. Kirkwood noted the fact with a feeling of some relief that their ride was to be so short; like many of his fellow-sufferers from "the artistic temperament," he was acutely disconcerted by spoken words of praise and gratitude; Miss Calendar, unintentionally enough, had succeeded only in rendering him self-conscious and ill at ease.

Nor had she fully relieved her mind, nor voiced all that perturbed her.

"There's one thing more," she said presently: "my father. I--I hope you will think charitably of him."

"Indeed, I've no reason or right to think otherwise."

"I was afraid--afraid his actions might have seemed peculiar, to-night ..."

"There are lots of things I don't understand, Miss Calendar. Some day, perhaps, it will all clear up,--this trouble of yours. At least, one supposes it is trouble, of some sort. And then you will tell me the whole story.... Won't you?" Kirkwood insisted.

"I'm afraid not," she said, with a smile of shadowed sadness. "We are to say good night in a moment or two, and--it will be good-by as well. It's unlikely that we shall ever meet again."

"I refuse positively to take such a gloomy view of the case!"

She shook her head, laughing with him, but with shy regret. "It's so, none the less. We are leaving London this very night, my father and I--leaving

England, for that matter."

"Leaving England?" he echoed. "You're not by any chance bound for America, are you?"

"I ... can't tell you."

"But you can tell me this: are you booked on the _Minneapolis_?"

"No--o; it is a--quite another boat."

"Of course!" he commented savagely. "It wouldn't be me to have _any_ sort of luck!"

She made no reply beyond a low laugh. He stared gloomily out of his window, noting indifferently that they were passing the National Gallery. On their left Trafalgar Square stretched, broad and bare, a wilderness of sooty stone with an air of mutely tolerating its incongruous fountains. Through Charing Cross roared a tide-rip of motor-busses and hackney carriages.

Glumly the young man foresaw the passing of his abbreviated romance; their destination was near at hand. Brentwick had been right, to some extent, at least; it was quite true that the curtain had been rung up that very night, upon Kirkwood's Romance; unhappily, as Brentwick had not foreseen, it was immediately to be rung down.

The cab rolled soberly into the Strand.

"Since we are to say good-by so very soon," suggested Kirkwood, "may I ask a parting favor, Miss Calendar?"

She regarded him with friendly eyes. "You have every right," she affirmed gently.

"Then please to tell me frankly: are you going into any further danger?"

"And is that the only boon you crave at my hands, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Without impertinence ..."

For a little time, waiting for him to conclude his vague phrase, she watched him in an expectant silence. But the man was diffident to a degree--At length, somewhat unconsciously, "I think not," she answered. "No; there will be no danger awaiting me at Mrs. Hallam's. You need not fear for me any more--Thank you."

He lifted his brows at the unfamiliar name. "Mrs. Hallam--?"

"I am going to her house in Craven Street."

"Your father is to meet you there?"--persistently.

"He promised to."

"But if he shouldn't?"

"Why--" Her eyes clouded; she pursed her lips over the conjectural annoyance. "Why, in that event, I suppose--It would be very embarrassing. You see, I don't know Mrs. Hallam; I don't know that she expects me, unless my father is already there. They are old friends--I could drive round for a while and come back, I suppose."

But she made it plain that the prospect did not please her.

"Won't you let me ask if Mr. Calender is there, before you get out, then? I don't like to be dismissed," he laughed; "and, you know, you shouldn't go wandering round all alone."

The cab drew up. Kirkwood put a hand on the door and awaited her will.

"It--it would be very kind ... I hate to impose upon you."

He turned the knob and got out. "If you'll wait one moment," he said superfluously, as he closed the door.

Pausing only to verify the number, he sprang up the steps and found the bell-button.

It was a modest little residence, in nothing more remarkable than its neighbors, unless it was for a certain air of extra grooming: the area railing was sleek with fresh black paint; the doorstep looked the better for vigorous stoning; the door itself was immaculate, its brasses shining lustrous against red-lacquered woodwork. A soft glow filled the fanlight. Overhead the drawing-room windows shone with a cozy, warm radiance.

The door opened, framing the figure of a maid sketched broadly in masses of somber black and dead white.

"Can you tell me, is Mr. Calendar here?"

The servant's eyes left his face, looked past him at the waiting cab, and returned.

"I'm not sure, sir. If you will please step in."

Kirkwood hesitated briefly, then acceded. The maid closed the door.

"What name shall I say, sir?"

"Mr. Kirkwood."

"If you will please to wait one moment, sir--"

He was left in the entry hall, the servant hurrying to the staircase and up. Three minutes elapsed; he was on the point of returning to the girl, when the maid reappeared.

"Mrs. Hallam says, will you kindly step up-stairs, sir."

Disgruntled, he followed her; at the head of the stairs she bowed him into the drawing-room and again left him to his own resources.

Nervous, annoyed, he paced the floor from wall to wall, his footfalls silenced by heavy rugs. As the delay was prolonged he began to fume with impatience, wondering, half regretting that he had left the girl outside, definitely sorry that he had failed to name his errand more explicitly to the maid. At another time, in another mood, he might have accorded more appreciation to the charm of the apartment, which, betraying the feminine touch in every detail of arrangement and furnishing, was very handsome in an unconventional way. But he was quite heedless of externals.

Wearied, he deposited himself sulkily in an armchair by the hearth.

From a boudoir on the same floor there came murmurs of two voices, a man's and a woman's. The latter laughed prettily.

"Oh, any time!" snorted the American. "Any time you're through with your confounded flirtation, Mr. George B. Calendar!"

The voices rose, approaching. "Good night," said the woman gaily; "farewell and--good luck go with you!"

"Thank you. Good night," replied the man more conservatively.

Kirkwood rose, expectant.

There was a swish of draperies, and a moment later he was acknowledging the totally unlooked-for entrance of the mistress of the house. He had thought to see Calendar, presuming him to be the man closeted with Mrs. Hallam; but, whoever that had been, he did not accompany the woman. Indeed, as she advanced from the doorway, Kirkwood could hear the man's footsteps on the stairs.

"This is Mr. Kirkwood?" The note of inquiry in the well-trained voice--a very alluring voice and one pleasant to listen to, he thought--made it seem as though she had asked, point-blank, "Who is Mr. Kirkwood?"

He bowed, discovering himself in the presence of an extraordinarily handsome and interesting woman; a woman of years which as yet had not told upon her, of experience that had not availed to harden her, at least in so far as her exterior charm of personality was involved; a woman, in brief, who bore close inspection well, despite an elusive effect of maturity, not without its attraction for men. Kirkwood was impressed that it would be very easy to learn to like Mrs. Hallam more than well--with her approval.

Although he had not anticipated it, he was not at all surprised to recognize in her the woman who, if he were not mistaken, had slipped to Calendar that warning in the dining-room of the Pless. Kirkwood's state of mind had come to be such, through his experiences of the past few

hours, that he would have accepted anything, however preposterous, as a commonplace happening. But for that matter there was nothing particularly astonishing in this _rencontre_.

"I am Mrs. Hallam. You were asking for Mr. Calendar?"

"He was to have been here at this hour, I believe," said Kirkwood.

"Yes?" There was just the right inflection of surprise in her carefully controlled tone.

He became aware of an undercurrent of feeling; that the woman was estimating him shrewdly with her fine direct eyes. He returned her regard with admiring interest; they were gray-green eyes, deep-set but large, a little shallow, a little changeable, calling to mind the sea on a windy, cloudy day.

Below stairs a door slammed.

"I am not a detective, Mrs. Hallam," announced the young man suddenly. "Mr. Calendar required a service of me this evening; I am here in natural consequence. If it was Mr. Calendar who left this house just now, I am wasting time."

"It was not Mr. Calendar." The fine-lined brows arched in surprise, real or pretended, at his first blurted words, and relaxed; amused, the woman laughed deliciously. "But I am expecting him any moment; he was to have been here half an hour since.... Won't you wait?"

She indicated, with a gracious gesture, a chair, and took for herself one end of a davenport. "I'm sure he won't be long, now."

"Thank you, I will return, if I may." Kirkwood moved toward the door.

"But there's no necessity--" She seemed insistent on detaining him, possibly because she questioned his motive, possibly for her own diversion.

Kirkwood deprecated his refusal with a smile. "The truth is, Miss Calendar is waiting in a cab, outside. I--"

"Dorothy Calendar!" Mrs. Hallam rose alertly. "But why should she wait there? To be sure, we've never met; but I have known her father for many years." Her eyes held steadfast to his face; shallow, flawed by her every thought, like the sea by a cat's-paw he found them altogether inscrutable; yet received an impression that their owner was now unable to account for him.

She swung about quickly, preceding him to the door and down the stairs. "I am sure Dorothy will come in to wait, if I ask her," she told Kirkwood in a high sweet voice. "I'm so anxious to know her. It's quite absurd, really, of her--to stand on ceremony with me, when her father made an appointment here. I'll run out and ask--"

Mrs. Hallam's slim white fingers turned latch and knob, opening the street door, and her voice died away as she stepped out into the night. For a moment, to Kirkwood, tagging after her with an uncomfortable sense of having somehow done the wrong thing, her figure--full fair shoulders and arms rising out of the glittering dinner gown--cut a gorgeous silhouette against the darkness. Then, with a sudden, imperative gesture, she half turned towards him.

"But," she exclaimed, perplexed, gazing to right and left, "but the cab, Mr. Kirkwood?"

He was on the stoop a second later. Standing beside her, he stared blankly.

To the left the Strand roared, the stream of its night-life in high spate; on the right lay the Embankment, comparatively silent and deserted, if brilliant with its high-swung lights. Between the two, quiet Craven Street ran, short and narrow, and wholly innocent of any form of equipage.

VI

"BELOW BRIDGE"

In silence Mrs. Hallam turned to Kirkwood, her pose in itself a question and a peremptory one. Her eyes had narrowed; between their lashes the green showed, a thin edge like jade, cold and calculating. The firm lines of her mouth and chin had hardened.

Temporarily dumb with consternation, he returned her stare as silently.

"_Well_, Mr.--Kirkwood?"

"Mrs. Hallam," he stammered, "I--"

She lifted her shoulders impatiently and with a quick movement stepped back across the threshold, where she paused, a rounded arm barring the entrance, one hand grasping the door-knob, as if to shut him out at any moment.

"I'm awaiting your explanation," she said coldly.

[Illustration: "I'm waiting your explanation," she said coldly.]

He grinned with nervousness, striving to penetrate the mental processes of this handsome Mrs. Hallam. She seemed to regard him with a suspicion which he thought inexcusable. Did she suppose he had spirited Dorothy Calendar away and then called to apprise her of the fact? Or that he was some sort of an adventurer, who had manufactured a plausible yarn to gain him access to her home? Or--harking back to her original theory--that he was an emissary from Scotland Yard? ... Probably she distrusted him on the latter

hypothesis. The reflection left him more at ease.

"I am quite as mystified as you, Mrs. Hallam," he began. "Miss Calendar was here, at this door, in a four-wheeler, not ten minutes ago, and--"

"Then where is she now?"

"Tell me where Calendar is," he retorted, inspired, "and I'll try to answer you!"

But her eyes were blank. "You mean--?"

"That Calendar was in this house when I came; that he left, found his daughter in the cab, and drove off with her. It's clear enough."

"You are quite mistaken," she said thoughtfully. "George Calendar has not been here this night."

He wondered that she did not seem to resent his imputation. "I think not--"

"Listen!" she cried, raising a warning hand; and relaxing her vigilant attitude, moved forward once more, to peer down toward the Embankment.

A cab had cut in from that direction and was bearing down upon them with a brisk rumble of hoofs. As it approached, Kirkwood's heart, that had lightened, was weighed upon again by disappointment. It was no four-wheeler, but a hansom, and the open wings of the apron, disclosing a white triangle of linen surmounted by a glowing spot of fire, betrayed the sex of the fare too plainly to allow of further hope that it might be the girl returning.

At the door, the cab pulled up sharply and a man tumbled hastily out upon the sidewalk.

"Here!" he cried throatily, tossing the cabby his fare, and turned toward the pair upon the doorstep, evidently surmising that something was amiss. For he was Calendar in proper person, and a sight to upset in a twinkling Kirkwood's ingeniously builded castle of suspicion.

"Mrs. Hallam!" he cried, out of breath. "'S my daughter here?" And then, catching sight of Kirkwood's countenance: "Why, hello, Kirkwood!" he saluted him with a dubious air.

The woman interrupted hastily. "Please come in, Mr. Calendar. This gentleman has been inquiring for you, with an astonishing tale about your daughter."

"Dorothy!" Calendar's moon-like visage was momentarily divested of any trace of color. "What of her?"

"You had better come in," advised Mrs. Hallam brusquely.

The fat adventurer hopped hurriedly across the threshold, Kirkwood

following. The woman shut the door, and turned with back to it, nodding significantly at Kirkwood as her eyes met Calendar's.

"Well, well?" snapped the latter impatiently, turning to the young man.

But Kirkwood was thinking quickly. For the present he contented himself with a deliberate statement of fact: "Miss Calendar has disappeared." It gave him an instant's time ... "There's something damned fishy!" he told himself. "These two are playing at cross-purposes. Calendar's no fool; he's evidently a crook, to boot. As for the woman, she's had her eyes open for a number of years. The main thing's Dorothy. She didn't vanish of her own initiative. And Mrs. Hallam knows, or suspects, more than she's going to tell. I don't think she wants Dorothy found. Calendar does. So do I. Ergo: I'm for Calendar."

"Disappeared?" Calendar was barking at him. "How? When? Where?"

"Within ten minutes," said Kirkwood. "Here, let's get it straight.... With her permission I brought her here in a four-wheeler." He was carefully suppressing all mention of Frognall Street, and in Calendar's glance read approval of the elision. "She didn't want to get out, unless you were here. I asked for you. The maid showed me up-stairs. I left your daughter in the cab--and by the way, I hadn't paid the driver. That's funny, too! Perhaps six or seven minutes after I came in Mrs. Hallam found out that Miss Calendar was with me and wanted to ask her in. When we got to the door--no cab. There you have it all."

"Thanks--it's plenty," said Calendar dryly. He bent his head in thought for an instant, then looked up and fixed Mrs. Hallam with an unprejudiced eye, "I say!" he demanded explosively. "There wasn't any one here that knew--eh?"

Her fine eyes wavered and fell before his; and Kirkwood remarked that her under lip was curiously drawn in.

"I heard a man leave as Mrs. Hallam joined me," he volunteered helpfully, and with a suspicion of malice. "And after that--I paid no attention at the time--it seems to me I did hear a cab in the street--"

"Ow?" interjected Calendar, eying the woman steadfastly and employing an exclamation of combined illumination and inquiry more typically British than anything Kirkwood had yet heard from the man.

For her part, the look she gave Kirkwood was sharp with fury. It was more; it was a mistake, a flaw in her diplomacy; for Calendar intercepted it. Unceremoniously he grasped her bare arm with his fat hand.

"Tell me who it was," he demanded in an ugly tone.

She freed herself with a twist, and stepped back, a higher color in her cheeks, a flash of anger in her eyes.

"Mr. Mulready," she retorted defiantly. "What of that?"

"I wish I was sure," declared the fat adventurer, exasperated. "As it is, I bet a dollar you've put your foot in it, my lady. I warned you of that blackguard.... There! The mischief's done; we won't row over it. One moment." He begged it with a wave of his hand; stood pondering briefly, fumbled for his watch, found and consulted it. "It's the barest chance," he muttered. "Perhaps we can make it."

"What are you going to do?" asked the woman.

"Give _Mister_ Mulready a run for his money. Come along, Kirkwood; we haven't a minute. Mrs. Hallam, permit us...." She stepped aside and he brushed past her to the door. "Come, Kirkwood!"

He seemed to take Kirkwood's company for granted; and the young man was not inclined to argue the point. Meekly enough he fell in with Calendar on the sidewalk. Mrs. Hallam followed them out. "You won't forget?" she called tentatively.

"I'll 'phone you if we find out anything." Calendar jerked the words unceremoniously over his shoulder as, linking arms with Kirkwood, he drew him swiftly along. They heard her shut the door; instantly Calendar stopped. "Look here, did Dorothy have a--a small parcel with her?"

"She had a gladstone bag."

"Oh, the devil, the devil!" Calendar started on again, muttering distractedly. As they reached the corner he disengaged his arm. "We've a minute and a half to reach Charing Cross Pier; and I think it's the last boat. You set the pace, will you? But remember I'm an oldish man and--and fat."

They began to run, the one easily, the other lumbering after like an old-fashioned square-rigged ship paced by a liner.

Beneath the railway bridge, in front of the Underground station, the cab-rank cried them on with sardonic view-halloos; and a bobby remarked them with suspicion, turning to watch as they plunged round the corner and across the wide Embankment.

The Thames appeared before them, a river of ink on whose burnished surface lights swam in long winding streaks and oily blobs. By the floating pier a County Council steamboat strained its hawsers, snoring huskily. Bells were jingling in her engine-room as the two gained the head of the sloping gangway.

Kirkwood slapped a shilling down on the ticket-window ledge. "Where to?" he cried back to Calendar.

"Cherry Gardens Pier," rasped the winded man. He stumbled after Kirkwood, groaning with exhaustion. Only the tolerance of the pier employees gained them their end; the steamer was held some seconds for them; as Calendar staggered to its deck, the gangway was jerked in, the last hawser cast off.

The boat sheered wide out on the river, then shot in, arrow-like, to the pier beneath Waterloo Bridge.

The deck was crowded and additional passengers embarked at every stop. In the circumstances conversation, save on the most impersonal topics, was impossible; and even had it been necessary or advisable to discuss the affair which occupied their minds, where so many ears could hear, Calendar had breath enough neither to answer nor to catechize Kirkwood. They found seats on the forward deck and rested there in grim silence, both fretting under the enforced restraint, while the boat darted, like some illuminated and exceptionally active water insect, from pier to pier.

As it snorted beneath London Bridge, Calendar's impatience drove him from his seat back to the gangway. "Next stop," he told Kirkwood curtly; and rested his heavy bulk against the paddle-box, brooding morosely, until, after an uninterrupted run of more than a mile, the steamer swept in, side-wheels backing water furiously against the ebbing tide, to Cherry Gardens landing.

Sweet name for a locality unsavory beyond credence! ... As they emerged on the street level and turned west on Bermondsey Wall, Kirkwood was fain to tug his top-coat over his chest and button it tight, to hide his linen. In a guarded tone he counseled his companion to do likewise; and Calendar, after a moment's blank, uncomprehending stare, acknowledged the wisdom of the advice with a grunt.

The very air they breathed was rank with fetid odors bred of the gaunt dark warehouses that lined their way; the lights were few; beneath the looming buildings the shadows were many and dense. Here and there dreary and cheerless public houses appeared, with lighted windows conspicuous in a lightless waste. From time to time, as they hurried on, they encountered, and made wide detours to escape contact with knots of wayfarers--men debased and begrimed, with dreary and slatternly women, arm in arm, zigzagging widely across the sidewalks, chorusing with sodden voices the burden of some popularized ballad. The cheapened, sentimental refrains echoed sadly between benighted walls....

Kirkwood shuddered, sticking close to Calendar's side. Life's naked brutalities had theretofore been largely out of his ken. He had heard of slums, had even ventured to mouth politely moral platitudes on the subject of overcrowding in great centers of population, but in the darkest flights of imagination had never pictured to himself anything so unspeakably foul and hopeless as this.... And they were come hither seeking--Dorothy Calendar! He was unable to conceive what manner of villainy could be directed against her, that she must be looked for in such surroundings.

After some ten minutes' steady walking, Calendar turned aside with a muttered word, and dived down a covered, dark and evil-smelling passageway that seemed to lead toward the river.

Mastering his involuntary qualms, Kirkwood followed.

Some ten or twelve paces from its entrance the passageway swerved at a

right angle, continuing three yards or so to end in a blank wall, wherefrom a flickering, inadequate gas-lamp jutted. At this point a stone platform, perhaps four feet square, was discovered, from the edge of which a flight of worn and slimy stone steps led down to a permanent boat-landing, where another gas-light flared gustily despite the protection of its frame of begrimed glass.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the young man. "What, in Heaven's name, Calendar--?"

"Bermondsey Old Stairs. Come on."

They descended to the landing-stage. Beneath them the Pool slept, a sheet of polished ebony, whispering to itself, lapping with small stealthy gurgles angles of masonry and ancient piles. On the farther bank tall warehouses reared square old-time heads, their uncompromising, rugged profile relieved here and there by tapering mastheads. A few, scattering, feeble lights were visible. Nothing moved save the river and the wind.

The landing itself they found quite deserted; something which the adventurer comprehended with a nod which, like its accompanying, inarticulate ejaculation, might have been taken to indicate either satisfaction or disgust. He ignored Kirkwood altogether, for the time being, and presently produced a small, bright object, which, applied to his lips, proved to be a boatswain's whistle. He sounded two blasts, one long, one brief.

There fell a lull, Kirkwood watching the other and wondering what next would happen. Calendar paced restlessly to and fro upon the narrow landing, now stopping to incline an ear to catch some anticipated sound, now searching with sweeping glances the black reaches of the Pool.

Finally, consulting his watch, "Almost ten," he announced.

"We're in time?"

"Can't say.... Damn! ... If that infernal boat would only show up--"

He was lifting the whistle to sound a second summons when a rowboat rounded a projecting angle formed by the next warehouse down stream, and with clanking oar-locks swung in toward the landing. On her thwarts two figures, dipping and rising, labored with the sweeps. As they drew in, the man forward shipped his blades, and rising, scrambled to the bows in order to grasp an iron mooring-ring set in the wall. The other awkwardly took in his oars and, as the current swung the stern downstream, placed a hand palm downward upon the bottom step to hold the boat steady.

Calendar waddled to the brink of the stage, grunting with relief.

"The other man?" he asked brusquely. "Has he gone aboard? Or is this the first trip to-night?"

One of the watermen nodded assent to the latter question, adding gruffly: "Seen nawthin' of 'im, sir."

"Very good," said Calendar, as if he doubted whether it were very good or bad. "We'll wait a bit."

"Right-o!" agreed the waterman civilly.

Calendar turned back, his small eyes glimmering with satisfaction. Fumbling in one coat pocket he brought to light a cigar-case. "Have a smoke?" he suggested with a show of friendliness. "By Heaven, I was beginnin' to get worried!"

"As to what?" inquired Kirkwood pointedly, selecting a cigar.

He got no immediate reply, but felt Calendar's sharp eyes upon him while he manoeuvred with matches for a light.

"That's so," it came at length. "You don't know. I kind of forgot for a minute; somehow you seemed on the inside."

Kirkwood laughed lightly. "I've experienced something of the same sensation in the past few hours."

"Don't doubt it." Calendar was watching him narrowly. "I suppose," he put it to him abruptly, "you haven't changed your mind?"

"Changed my mind?"

"About coming in with me."

"My dear sir, I can have no mind to change until a plain proposition is laid before me."

"Hmm!" Calendar puffed vigorously until it occurred to him to change the subject. "You won't mind telling me what happened to you and Dorothy?"

"Certainly not."

Calendar drew nearer and Kirkwood, lowering his voice, narrated briefly the events since he had left the Pless in Dorothy's company.

Her father followed him intently, interrupting now and again with exclamation or pertinent question; as, Had Kirkwood been able to see the face of the man in No. 9, Frognall Street? The negative answer seemed to disconcert him.

"Youngster, you say? Blam' if I can lay my mind to _him_! Now if that Mulready--"

"It would have been impossible for Mulready--whoever he is--to recover and get to Craven Street before we did," Kirkwood pointed out.

"Well--go on." But when the tale was told, "It's that scoundrel, Mulready!" the man affirmed with heat. "It's his hand--I know him. I might have had

sense enough to see he'd take the first chance to hand me the double-cross. Well, this does for _him_, all right!" Calendar lowered viciously at the river. "You've been blame' useful," he told Kirkwood assertively. "If it hadn't been for you, I don't know where _I'd_ be now,--nor Dorothy, either,--an obvious afterthought. "There's no particular way I can show my appreciation, I suppose? Money--?"

"I've got enough to last me till I reach New York, thank you."

"Well, if the time ever comes, just shout for George B. I won't be wanting.... I only wish you were with us; but that's out of the question."

"Doubtless ..."

"No two ways about it. I bet anything you've got a conscience concealed about your person. What? You're an honest man, eh?"

"I don't want to sound immodest," returned Kirkwood, amused.

"You don't need to worry about that.... But an honest man's got no business in _my_ line." He glanced again at his watch. "Damn that Mulready! I wonder if he was 'cute enough to take another way? Or did he think ... The fool!"

He cut off abruptly, seeming depressed by the thought that he might have been outwitted; and, clasping hands behind his back, chewed savagely on his cigar, watching the river. Kirkwood found himself somewhat wearied; the uselessness of his presence there struck him with added force. He bethought him of his boat-train, scheduled to leave a station miles distant, in an hour and a half. If he missed it, he would be stranded in a foreign land, penniless and practically without friends--Brentwick being away and all the rest of his circle of acquaintances on the other side of the Channel. Yet he lingered, in poor company, daring fate that he might see the end of the affair. Why?

There was only one honest answer to that question. He stayed on because of his interest in a girl whom he had known for a matter of three hours, at most. It was insensate folly on his part, ridiculous from any point of view. But he made no move to go.

The slow minutes lengthened monotonously.

There came a sound from the street level. Calendar held up a hand of warning. "Here they come! Steady!" he said tensely. Kirkwood, listening intently, interpreted the noise as a clash of hoofs upon cobbles.

Calendar turned to the boat.

"Sheer off," he ordered. "Drop out of sight. I'll whistle when I want you."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The boat slipped noiselessly away with the current and in an instant was lost to sight. Calendar plucked at Kirkwood's sleeve, drawing him into the

shadow of the steps. "E-easy," he whispered; "and, I say, lend me a hand, will you, if Mulready turns ugly?"

"Oh, yes," assented Kirkwood, with a nonchalance not entirely unassumed.

The racket drew nearer and ceased; the hush that fell thereafter seemed only accentuated by the purling of the river. It was ended by footsteps echoing in the covered passageway. Calendar craned his thick neck round the shoulder of stone, reconnoitering the landing and stairway.

"Thank God!" he said under his breath. "I was right, after all!"

A man's deep tones broke out above. "This way. Mind the steps; they're a bit slippery, Miss Dorothy."

"But my father--?" came the girl's voice, attuned to doubt.

"Oh, he'll be along--if he isn't waiting now, in the boat."

They descended, the man leading. At the foot, without a glance to right or left, he advanced to the edge of the stage, leaning out over the rail as if endeavoring to locate the rowboat. At once the girl appeared, moving to his side.

"But, Mr. Mulready--"

The girl's words were drowned by a prolonged blast on the boatswain's whistle at her companion's lips; the shorter one followed in due course. Calendar edged forward from Kirkwood's side.

"But what shall we do if my father isn't here? Wait?"

"No; best not to; best to get on the Alethea as soon as possible, Miss Calendar. We can send the boat back."

"Once aboard the lugger the girl is mine'--eh, Mulready?--to say nothing of the loot!"

If Calendar's words were jocular, his tone conveyed a different impression entirely. Both man and girl wheeled right about to face him, the one with a strangled oath, the other with a low cry.

"The devil!" exclaimed this Mr. Mulready.

"Oh! My father!" the girl voiced her recognition of him.

"Not precisely one and the same person," commented Calendar suavely.

"But--er--thanks, just as much.... You see, Mulready, when I make an appointment, I keep it."

"We'd begun to get a bit anxious about you--" Mulready began defensively.

"So I surmised, from what Mrs. Hallam and Mr. Kirkwood told me.... Well?"

The man found no ready answer. He fell back a pace to the railing, his features working with his deep chagrin. The murky flare of the gas-lamp overhead fell across a face handsome beyond the ordinary but marred by a sullen humor and seamed with indulgence: a face that seemed hauntingly familiar until Kirkwood in a flash of visual memory reconstructed the portrait of a man who lingered over a dining-table, with two empty chairs for company. This, then, was he whom Mrs. Hallam had left at the Pless; a tall, strong man, very heavy about the chest and shoulders....

"Why, my dear friend," Calendar was taunting him, "you don't seem overjoyed to see me, for all your wild anxiety! 'Pon my word, you act as if you hadn't expected me--and our engagement so clearly understood, at that! ... Why, you fool!"--here the mask of irony was cast. "Did you think for a moment I'd let myself be nabbed by that yap from Scotland Yard? Were you banking on that? I give you my faith I ambled out under his very nose! ... Dorothy, my dear," turning impatiently from Mulready, "where's that bag?"

The girl withdrew a puzzled gaze from Mulready's face, (it was apparent to Kirkwood that this phase of the affair was no more enigmatic to him than to her), and drew aside a corner of her cloak, disclosing the gladstone bag, securely grasped in one gloved hand.

"I have it, thanks to Mr. Kirkwood," she said quietly.

Kirkwood chose that moment to advance from the shadow. Mulready started and fixed him with a troubled and unfriendly stare. The girl greeted him with a note of sincere pleasure in her surprise.

"Why, Mr. Kirkwood! ... But I left you at Mrs. Hallam's!"

Kirkwood bowed, smiling openly at Mulready's discomfiture.

"By your father's grace, I came with him," he said. "You ran away without saying good night, you know, and I'm a jealous creditor."

She laughed excitedly, turning to Calendar. "But you were to meet me at Mrs. Hallam's?"

"Mulready was good enough to try to save me the trouble, my dear. He's an unselfish soul, Mulready. Fortunately it happened that I came along not five minutes after he'd carried you off. How was that, Dorothy?"

Her glance wavered uneasily between the two, Mulready and her father. The former, shrugging to declare his indifference, turned his back squarely upon them. She frowned.

"He came out of Mrs. Hallam's and got into the four-wheeler, saying you had sent him to take your place, and would join us on the Alethea."

"So-o! How about it, Mulready?"

The man swung back slowly. "What you choose to think," he said after a

deliberate pause.

"Well, never mind! We'll go over the matter at our leisure on the _Alethea_."

There was in the adventurer's tone a menace, bitter and not to be ignored; which Mulready saw fit to challenge.

"I think not," he declared; "I think not. I'm weary of your addle-pated suspicions. It'd be plain to any one but a fool that I acted for the best interests of all concerned in this matter. If you're not content to see it in that light, I'm done."

"Oh, if you want to put it that way, I'm _not_ content, Mr. Mulready," retorted Calendar dangerously.

"Please yourself. I bid you good evening and--good-by." The man took a step toward the stairs.

Calendar dropped his right hand into his top-coat pocket. "Just a minute," he said sweetly, and Mulready stopped. Abruptly the fat adventurer's smoldering resentment leaped in flame. "That'll be about all, Mr. Mulready! 'Bout face, you hound, and get into that boat! D'you think I'll temporize with you till Doomsday? Then forget it. You're wrong, dead wrong. Your bluff's called, and"--with an evil chuckle--"I hold a full house, Mulready,--every chamber taken." He lifted meaningly the hand in the coat pocket. "Now, in with you."

With a grin and a swagger of pure bravado Mulready turned and obeyed. Unnoticed of any, save perhaps Calendar himself, the boat had drawn in at the stage a moment earlier. Mulready dropped into it and threw himself sullenly upon the midships thwart.

"Now, Dorothy, in you go, my dear," continued Calendar, with a self-satisfied wag of his head.

Half dazed, to all seeming, she moved toward the boat. With clumsy and assertive gallantry her father stepped before her, offering his hand,--his hand which she did not touch; for, in the act of descending, she remembered and swung impulsively back to Kirkwood.

"Good night, Mr. Kirkwood; good night,--I shan't forget."

He took her hand and bowed above it; but when his head was lifted, he still retained her fingers in a lingering clasp.

"Good night," he said reluctantly.

The crass incongruity of her in that setting smote him with renewed force. Young, beautiful, dainty, brilliant and graceful in her pretty evening gown, she figured strangely against the gloomy background of the river, in those dull and mean surroundings of dank stone and rusted iron. She was like (he thought extravagantly) a whiff of flower-fragrance lost in the

miasmatic vapors of a slough.

The innocent appeal and allure of her face, upturned to his beneath the gas-light, wrought compassionately upon his sensitive and generous heart. He was aware of a little surge of blind rage against the conditions that had brought her to that spot, and against those whom he held responsible for those conditions.

In a sudden flush of daring he turned and nodded coolly to Calendar. "With your permission," he said negligently; and drew the girl aside to the angle of the stairway.

"Miss Calendar--" he began; but was interrupted.

"Here--I say!"

Calendar had started toward him angrily.

Kirkwood calmly waved him back. "I want a word in private with your daughter, Mr. Calendar," he announced with quiet dignity. "I don't think you'll deny me? I've saved you some slight trouble to-night."

Disgruntled, the adventurer paused. "Oh--_all_ right," he grumbled. "I don't see what ..." He returned to the boat.

"Forgive me, Miss Calendar," continued Kirkwood nervously. "I know I've no right to interfere, but--"

"Yes, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"--but hasn't this gone far enough?" he floundered unhappily. "I can't like the look of things. Are you sure--sure that it's all right--with you, I mean?"

She did not answer at once; but her eyes were kind and sympathetic. He plucked heart of their tolerance.

"It isn't too late, yet," he argued. "Let me take you to your friends,--you must have friends in the city. But this--this midnight flight down the Thames, this atmosphere of stealth and suspicion, this--"

"But my place is with my father, Mr. Kirkwood," she interposed. "I daren't doubt him--dare I?"

"I ... suppose not."

"So I must go with him.... I'm glad--thank you for caring, dear Mr. Kirkwood. And again, good night."

"Good luck attend you," he muttered, following her to the boat.

Calendar helped her in and turned back to Kirkwood with a look of arch triumph; Kirkwood wondered if he had overheard. Whether or no, he could

afford to be magnanimous. Seizing Kirkwood's hand, he pumped it vigorously.

"My dear boy, you've been an angel in disguise! And I guess you think me the devil in masquerade." He chuckled, in high conceit with himself over the turn of affairs. "Good night and--and fare thee well!" He dropped into the boat, seating himself to face the recalcitrant Mulready. "Cast off, there!"

The boat dropped away, the oars lifting and falling. With a weariful sense of loneliness and disappointment, Kirkwood hung over the rail to watch them out of sight.

A dozen feet of water lay between the stage and the boat. The girl's dress remained a spot of cheerful color; her face was a blur. As the watermen swung the bows down-stream, she looked back, lifting an arm spectral in its white sheath. Kirkwood raised his hat.

The boat gathered impetus, momentarily diminishing in the night's illusory perspective; presently it was little more than a fugitive blot, gliding swiftly in midstream. And then, it was gone entirely, engulfed by the obliterating darkness.

[Illustration: The boat gathered impetus.]

Somewhat wearily the young man released the railing and ascended the stairs. "And that is the end!" he told himself, struggling with an acute sense of personal injury. He had been hardly used. For a few hours his life had been lightened by the ineffable glamor of Romance; mystery and adventure had engaged him, exorcising for the time the Shade of Care; he had served a fair woman and been associated with men whose ways, however questionable, were the ways of courage, hedged thickly about with perils.

All that was at an end. Prosaic and workaday to-morrows confronted him in endless and dreary perspective; and he felt again upon his shoulder the bony hand of his familiar, Care....

He sighed: "Ah, well!"

Disconsolate and aggrieved, he gained the street. He was miles from St. Pancras, foot-weary, to all intents and purposes lost.

In this extremity, Chance smiled upon him. The cabby who, at his initial instance, had traveled this weary way from Quadrant Mews, after the manner of his kind, ere turning back, had sought surcease of fatigue at the nearest public; from afar Kirkwood saw the four-wheeler at the curb, and made all haste toward it.

Entering the gin-mill he found the cabby, soothed him with bitter, and, instructing him for St. Pancras with all speed, dropped, limp and listless with fatigue, into the conveyance.

As it moved, he closed his eyes; the face of Dorothy Calendar shone out from the blank wall of his consciousness, like an illuminated picture cast

upon a screen. She smiled upon him, her head high, her eyes tender and trustful. And he thought that her scarlet lips were sweet with promise and her glance a-brim with such a light as he had never dreamed to know.

And now that he knew it and desired it, it was too late; an hour gone he might, by a nod of his head, have cast his fortunes with hers for weal or woe. But now ...

Alas and alackaday, that Romance was no more!

VII

DIVERSIONS OF A RUINED GENTLEMAN--RESUMED

From the commanding elevation of the box, "Three 'n' six," enunciated the cabby, his tone that of a man prepared for trouble, acquainted with trouble, inclined to give trouble a welcome. His bloodshot eyes blinked truculently at his alighted fare. "Three 'n' six," he iterated aggressively.

An adjacent but theretofore abstracted policeman pricked up his ears and assumed an intelligent expression.

"Bermondsey Ol' Stairs to Sain' Pancras," argued the cabby assertively; "seven mile by th' radius; three 'n' six!"

Kirkwood stood on the outer station platform, near the entrance to third-class waiting-rooms. Continuing to fumble through his pockets for an elusive sovereign purse, he looked up mildly at the man.

"All right, cabby," he said, with pacific purpose; "you'll get your fare in half a shake."

"Three 'n' six!" croaked the cabby, like a blowsy and vindictive parrot.

The bobby strolled nearer.

"Yes?" said Kirkwood, mildly diverted. "Why not sing it, cabby?"

"Lor' lumme!" The cabby exploded with indignation, continuing to give a lifelike imitation of a rumped parrot. "I 'ad trouble enough wif you at Bermondsey Ol' Stairs, hover that quid you promised, didn't I? Sing it! My heye!"

"Quid, cabby?" And then, remembering that he had promised the fellow a sovereign for fast driving from Quadrant Mews, Kirkwood grinned broadly, eyes twinkling; for Mulready must have fallen heir to that covenant. "But you got the sovereign? You got it, didn't you, cabby?"

The driver affirmed the fact with unnecessary heat and profanity and an amendment to the effect that he would have spoiled his fare's sanguinary conk had the outcome been less satisfactory.

The information proved so amusing that Kirkwood, chuckling, forbore to resent the manner of its delivery, and, abandoning until a more favorable time the chase of the coy sovereign purse, extracted from one trouser pocket half a handful of large English small change.

"Three shillings, six-pence," he counted the coins into the cabby's grimy and bloated paw; and added quietly: "The exact distance is rather less than, four miles, my man; your fare, precisely two shillings. You may keep the extra eighteen pence, for being such a conscientious blackguard,--or talk it over with the officer here. Please yourself."

He nodded to the bobby, who, favorably impressed by the silk hat which Kirkwood, by diligent application of his sleeve during the cross-town ride, had managed to restore to a state somewhat approximating its erstwhile luster, smiled at the cabby a cold, hard smile. Whereupon the latter, smirking in unabashed triumph, spat on the pavement at Kirkwood's feet, gathered up the reins, and wheeled out.

"A 'ard lot, sir," commented the policeman, jerking his helmeted head towards the vanishing four-wheeler.

"Right you are," agreed Kirkwood amiably, still tickled by the knowledge that Mulready had been obliged to pay three times over for the ride that ended in his utter discomfiture. Somehow, Kirkwood had conceived no liking whatever for the man; Calendar he could, at a pinch, tolerate for his sense of humor, but Mulready--! "A surly dog," he thought him.

Acknowledging the policeman's salute and restoring two shillings and a few fat copper pennies to his pocket, he entered the vast and echoing train-shed. In the act, his attention was attracted and immediately riveted by the spectacle of a burly luggage navvy in a blue jumper in the act of making off with a large, folding sign-board, of which the surface was lettered expansively with the advice, in red against a white background:

BOAT-TRAIN LEAVES ON TRACK 3

Incredulous yet aghast the young man gave instant chase to the navvy, overhauling him with no great difficulty. For your horny-handed British working-man is apparently born with two golden aphorisms in his mouth: "Look before you leap," and "Haste makes waste." He looks continually, seldom, if ever, leaps, and never is prodigal of his leisure.

Excitedly Kirkwood touched the man's arm with a detaining hand.

"Boat-train?" he gasped, pointing at the board.

"Left ten minutes ago, thank you, sir."

"Wel-I, but...! Of course I can get another train at Tilbury?"

"For yer boat? No, sir, thank you, sir. Won't be another tryne till mornin', sir."

"Oh-h!..."

Aimlessly Kirkwood drifted away, his mind a blank.

Sometime later he found himself on the steps outside the station, trying to stare out of countenance a glaring electric mineral-water advertisement on the farther side of the Euston Road.

He was stranded....

Beyond the spiked iron fence that enhedges the incurving drive, the roar of traffic, human, wheel and hoof, rose high for all the lateness of the hour: sidewalks groaning with the restless contact of hundreds of ill-shod feet; the roadway thundering--hansoms, four-wheelers, motor-cars, dwarfed coster-mongers' donkey-carts and ponderous, rumbling, C.-P. motor-vans, struggling for place and progress. For St. Pancras never sleeps.

The misty air swam luminous with the light of electric signs as with the radiance of some lurid and sinister moon. The voice of London sounded in Kirkwood's ears, like the ominous purring of a somnolent brute beast, resting, gorged and satiated, ere rising again to devour. To devour--

Stranded!...

Distracted, he searched pocket after pocket, locating his watch, cigar- and cigarette-cases, match-box, penknife--all the minutiae of pocket-hardware affected by civilized man; with old letters, a card-case, a square envelope containing his steamer ticket; but no sovereign purse. His small-change pocket held less than three shillings--two and eight, to be exact--and a brass key, which he failed to recognize as one of his belongings.

And that was all. At sometime during the night he had lost (or been cunningly bereft of?) that little purse of chamois-skin containing the three golden sovereigns which he had been husbanding to pay his steamer expenses, and which, if only he had them now, would stand between him and starvation and a night in the streets.

And, searching his heart, he found it brimming with gratitude to Mulready, for having relieved him of the necessity of settling with the cabby.

"Vagabond?" said Kirkwood musingly. "Vagabond?" He repeated the word softly a number of times, to get the exact flavor of it, and found it little to his taste. And yet...

He thrust both hands deep in his trouser pockets and stared purposelessly into space, twisting his eyebrows out of alignment and crookedly protruding his lower lip.

If Brentwick were only in town--But he wasn't, and wouldn't be, within the week.

"No good waiting here," he concluded. Composing his face, he reentered the station. There were his trunks, of course. He couldn't leave them standing on the station platform for ever.

He found the luggage-room and interviewed a mechanically courteous attendant, who, as the result of profound deliberation, advised him to try his luck at the lost-luggage room, across the station. He accepted the advice; it was a foregone conclusion that his effects had not been conveyed to the Tilbury dock; they could not have been loaded into the luggage van without his personal supervision. Still, anything was liable to happen when his unlucky star was in the ascendant.

He found them in the lost-luggage room.

A clerk helped him identify the articles and ultimately clucked with a perfunctory note: "Sixpence each, please."

"I--ah--pardon?"

"Sixpence each, the fixed charge, sir. For every twenty-four hours or fraction thereof, sixpence per parcel."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Kirkwood sweetly. "I will call to-morrow."

"Very good, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Five times sixpence is two-and-six," Kirkwood computed, making his way hastily out of the station, lest a worse thing befall him. "No, bless your heart!--not while two and eight represents the sum total of my fortune."

He wandered out into the night; he could not linger round the station till dawn; and what profit to him if he did? Even were he to ransom his trunks, one can scarcely change one's clothing in a public waiting-room.

Somewhere in the distance a great clock chimed a single stroke, freighted sore with melancholy. It knelled the passing of the half-hour after midnight; a witching hour, when every public shuts up tight, and gentlemen in top-hats and evening dress are doomed to pace the pave till day (barring they have homes or visible means of support)--till day, when pawnshops open and such personal effects as watches and hammered silver cigar-cases may be hypothecated.

Sable garments fluttering, Care fell into step with Philip Kirkwood; Care the inexorable slipped a skeleton arm through his and would not be denied; Care the jade clung affectionately to his side, refusing to be jilted.

"Ah, you thought you would forget me?" chuckled the fleshless lips by his ear. "But no, my boy; I'm with you now, for ever and a day. 'Misery loves company,' and it wouldn't be pretty of me to desert you in this extremity, would it? Come, let us beguile the hours till dawn with conversation. Here's a sprightly subject: What are you going to do, Mr. Kirkwood? _What are you going to do?_"

But Kirkwood merely shook a stubborn head and gazed straight before him, walking fast through ways he did not recognize, and pretending not to hear. None the less the sense of Care's solicitous query struck like a pain into his consciousness. What was he to do?

An hour passed.

Denied the opportunity to satisfy its beast hunger and thirst, humanity goes off to its beds. In that hour London quieted wonderfully; the streets achieved an effect of deeper darkness, the skies, lowering, looked down with a blush less vivid for the shamelessness of man; cab ranks lengthened; solitary footsteps added unto themselves loud, alarming, offensive echoes; policemen, strolling with lamps blazing on their breasts, became as lightships in a trackless sea; each new-found street unfolded its perspective like a canyon of mystery, and yet teeming with a hundred masked hazards; the air acquired a smell more clear and clean, an effect more volatile; and the night-mist thickened until it studded one's attire with myriads of tiny buttons, bright as diamond dust.

Through this long hour Kirkwood walked without a pause.

Another clock, somewhere, clanged resonantly twice.

The world was very still....

And so, wandering foot-loose in a wilderness of ways, turning aimlessly, now right, now left, he found himself in a street he knew, yet seemed not to know: a silent, black street one brief block in length, walled with dead and lightless dwellings, haunted by his errant memory; a street whose atmosphere was heavy with impalpable essence of desuetude; in two words, Frognall Street.

Kirkwood identified it with a start and a guilty tremor. He stopped stock-still, in an unreasoning state of semi-panic, arrested by a silly impulse to turn and fly; as if the bobby, whom he descried approaching him with measured stride, pausing now and again to try a door or flash his bull's-eye down an area, were to be expected to identify the man responsible for that damnable racket raised ere midnight in vacant Number 9!

Oddly enough, the shock of recognition brought him to his senses,--temporarily. He was even able to indulge himself in a quiet, sobering grin at his own folly. He passed the policeman with a nod and a cool word in response to the man's good-natured, "Good-night, sir." Number 9 was on the other side of the street; and he favored its blank and dreary elevation with a prolonged and frank stare--that profited him nothing, by the way. For a crazy notion popped incontinently into his head, and would not be cast forth.

At the corner he swerved and crossed, still possessed of his devil of inspiration. It would be unfair to him to say that he did not struggle to resist it, for he did, because it was fairly and egregiously asinine; yet

struggling, his feet trod the path to which it tempted him.

"Why," he expostulated feebly, "I might's well turn back and beat that bobby over the head with my cane!..."

But at the moment his hand was in his change pocket, feeling over that same brass door-key which earlier he had been unable to account for, and he was informing himself how very easy it would have been for the sovereign purse to have dropped from his waistcoat pocket while he was sliding on his ear down the dark staircase. To recover it meant, at the least, shelter for the night, followed by a decent, comfortable and sustaining morning meal. Fortified by both he could redeem his luggage, change to clothing more suitable for daylight traveling, pawn his valuables, and enter into negotiations with the steamship company for permission to exchange his passage, with a sum to boot, for transportation on another liner. A most feasible project! A temptation all but irresistible!

But then--the risk.... Supposing (for the sake of argument) the customary night-watchman to have taken up a transient residence in Number 9; supposing the police to have entered with him and found the stunned man on the second floor: would the watchman not be vigilant for another nocturnal marauder? would not the police now, more than ever, be keeping a wary eye on that house of suspicious happenings?

Decidedly, to re^enter it would be to incur a deadly risk. And yet, undoubtedly, beyond question! his sovereign purse was waiting for him somewhere on the second flight of stairs; while as his means of clandestine entry lay warm in his fingers--the key to the dark entry, which he had by force of habit pocketed after locking the door.

He came to the Hog-in-the-Pound. Its windows were dim with low-turned gas-lights. Down the covered alleyway, Quadrant Mews slept in a dusk but fitfully relieved by a lamp or two round which the friendly mist clung close and thick.

There would be none to see....

Skulking, throat swollen with fear, heart beating like a snare-drum, Kirkwood took his chance. Buttoning his overcoat collar up to his chin and cursing the fact that his hat must stand out like a chimney-pot on a detached house, he sped on tiptoe down the cobbled way and close beneath the house-walls of Quadrant Mews. But, half-way in, he stopped, confounded by an unforeseen difficulty. How was he to identify the narrow entry of Number 9, whose counterparts doubtless communicated with the mews from every residence on four sides of the city block?

The low inner tenements were yet high enough to hide the rear elevations of Frognall Street houses, and the mist was heavy besides; otherwise he had made shift to locate Number 9 by ticking off the dwellings from the corner. If he went on, hit or miss, the odds were anything-you-please to one that he would blunder into the servant's quarters of some inhabited house, and--be promptly and righteously sat upon by the service-staff, while the bobby was summoned.

Be that as it might--he almost lost his head when he realized this--escape was already cut off by the way he had come. Some one, or, rather, some two men were entering the alley. He could hear the tramping and shuffle of clumsy feet, and voices that muttered indistinctly. One seemed to trip over something, and cursed. The other laughed; the voices grew more loud. They were coming his way. He dared no longer vacillate.

But--which passage should he choose?

He moved on with more haste than discretion. One heel slipped on a cobble time-worn to glassy smoothness; he lurched, caught himself up in time to save a fall, lost his hat, recovered it, and was discovered. A voice, maudlin with drink, hailed and called upon him to stand and give an account of himself, "like a goo' feller." Another tempted him with offers of drink and sociable confabulation. He yielded not; adamant to the seductive lure, he picked up his heels and ran. Those behind him, remarking with resentment the amazing fact that an intimate of the mews should run away from liquor, cursed and made after him, veering, staggering, howling like ravening animals.

For all their burden of intoxication, they knew the ground by instinct and from long association. They gained on him. Across the way a window-sash went up with a bang, and a woman screamed. Through the only other entrance to the mews a belated cab was homing; its driver, getting wind of the unusual, pulled up, blocking the way, and added his advice to the uproar.

Caught thus between two fires, and with his persecutors hard upon him, Kirkwood dived into the nearest black hole of a passageway and in sheer desperation flung himself, key in hand, against the door at the end. Mark how his luck served him who had forsworn her! He found a keyhole and inserted the key. It turned. So did the knob. The door gave inward. He fell in with it, slammed it, shot the bolts, and, panting, leaned against its panels, in a pit of everlasting night but--saved!--for the time being, at all events.

Outside somebody brushed against one wall, cannoned to the other, brought up with a crash against the door, and, perforce at a standstill, swore from his heart.

"Gorblimy!" he declared feelingly. "I'd 'a' took my oath I sore'm run in 'ere!" And then, in answer to an inaudible question: "No, 'e ain't. Gorn an' let the fool go to 'ell. 'Oo wants 'im to share goo' liker? Not I!..."

Joining his companion he departed, leaving behind him a trail of sulphur-tainted air. The mews quieted gradually.

Indoors Kirkwood faced unhappily the enigma of fortuity, wondering: Was this by any possibility Number 9?

The key had fitted; the bolts had been drawn on the inside; and while the key had been one of ordinary pattern and would no doubt have proven effectual with any one of a hundred common locks, the finger of probability

seemed to indicate that his luck had brought him back to Number 9.

In spite of all this, he was sensible of little confidence; though this were truly Number 9, his freedom still lay on the knees of the gods, his very life, belike, was poised, tottering, on a pinnacle of chance.

In the end, taking heart of desperation, he stooped and removed his shoes; a precaution which later appealed to his sense of the ridiculous, in view of the racket he had raised in entering, but which at the moment seemed most natural and in accordance with common sense. Then rising, he held his breath, staring and listening. About him the pitch darkness was punctuated with fading points of fire, and in his ears was a noise of strange whisperings, very creepy--until, gritting his teeth, he controlled his nerves and gradually realized that he was alone, the silence undisturbed.

He went forward gingerly, feeling his way like a blind man on strange ground. Ere long he stumbled over a door-sill and found that the walls of the passage had fallen away; he had entered a room, a black cavern of indeterminate dimensions. Across this he struck at random, walked himself flat against a wall, felt his way along to an open door, and passed through to another apartment as dark as the first.

Here, endeavoring to make a circuit of the walls, he succeeded in throwing himself bodily across a bed, which creaked horribly; and for a full minute lay as he had fallen, scarce daring to think. But nothing followed, and he got up and found a shut door which let him into yet a third room, wherein he barked both shins on a chair; and escaped to a fourth whose atmosphere was highly flavored with reluctant odors of bygone cookery, stale water and damp plumbing--probably the kitchen. Thence progressing over complaining floors through what may have been the servants' hall, a large room with a table in the middle and a number of promiscuous chairs (witness his tortured shins!), he finally blundered into the basement hallway.

By now a little calmer, he felt assured that this was really Number 9, Froggall Street, and a little happier about it all, though not even momentarily forgetful of the potential police and night-watchman.

However, he mounted the steps to the ground floor without adventure and found himself at last in the same dim and ghostly hall which he had entered some six hours before; the mockery of dusk admitted by the fan-light was just strong enough to enable him to identify the general lay of the land and arrangement of furniture.

More confidently with each uncontested step, he continued his quest. Elation was stirring his spirit when he gained the first floor and moved toward the foot of the second flight, approaching the spot whereat he was to begin the search for the missing purse. The knowledge that he lacked means of obtaining illumination deterred him nothing; he had some hope of finding matches in one of the adjacent rooms, but, failing that, was prepared to ascend the stairs on all fours, feeling every inch of their surface, if it took hours. Ever an optimistic soul, instinctively inclined to father faith with a hope, he felt supremely confident that his search would not prove fruitless, that he would win early release from his

temporary straits.

And thus it fell out that, at the instant he was thinking it time to begin to crawl and hunt, his stockinged feet came into contact with something heavy, yielding, warm--something that moved, moaned, and caused his hair to bristle and his flesh to creep.

We will make allowances for him; all along he had gone on the assumption that his antagonist of the dark stairway would have recovered and made off with all expedition, in the course of ten or twenty minutes, at most, from the time of his accident. To find him still there was something entirely outside of Kirkwood's reckoning: he would as soon have thought to encounter say, Calendar,--would have preferred the latter, indeed. But this fellow whose disability was due to his own interference, who was reasonably to be counted upon to raise the very deuce and all of a row!

The initial shock, however shattering to his equanimity, soon, lost effect. The man evidently remained unconscious, in fact had barely moved; while the moan that Kirkwood heard, had been distressingly faint.

"Poor devil!" murmured the young man. "He must be in a pretty bad way, for sure!" He knelt, compassion gentling his heart, and put one hand to the insentient face. A warm sweat moistened his fingers; his palm was fanned by steady respiration.

Immeasurably perplexed, the American rose, slipped on his shoes and buttoned them, thinking hard the while. What ought he to do? Obviously flight suggested itself,--incontinent flight, anticipating the man's recovery. On the other hand, indubitably the latter had sustained such injury that consciousness, when it came to him, would hardly be reinforced by much aggressive power. Moreover, it was to be remembered that the one was in that house with quite as much warrant as the other, unless Kirkwood had drawn a rash inference from the incident of the ragged sentry. The two of them were mutual, if antagonistic, trespassers; neither would dare bring about the arrest of the other. And then--and this was not the least consideration to influence Kirkwood--perhaps the fellow would die if he got no attention.

Kirkwood shut his teeth grimly. "I'm no assassin," he informed himself, "to strike and run. If I've maimed this poor devil and there are consequences, I'll stand 'em. The Lord knows it doesn't matter a damn to anybody, not even to me, what happens to me; while he may be valuable."

Light upon the subject, actual as well as figurative, seemed to be the first essential; his mind composed, Kirkwood set himself in search of it. The floor he was on, however, afforded him no assistance; the mantels were guiltless of candles and he discovered no matches, either in the wide and silent drawing-room, with its ghastly furniture, like mummies in their linen swathings, or in the small boudoir at the back. He was to look either above or below, it seemed.

After some momentary hesitation, he went up-stairs, his ascent marked by a single and grateful accident; half-way to the top he trod on an object that

clinked underfoot, and, stooping, retrieved the lost purse. Thus was he justified of his temerity; the day was saved--that is, to-morrow was.

The rooms of the second-floor were bedchambers, broad, deep, stately, inhabited by seven devils of loneliness. In one, on a dresser, Kirkwood found a stump of candle in a china candlestick; the two charred ends of matches at its base were only an irritating discovery, however--evidence that real matches had been the mode in Number 9, at some remote date. Disgusted and oppressed by cumulative inquisitiveness, he took the candle-end back to the hall; he would have given much for the time and means to make a more detailed investigation into the secret of the house.

Perhaps it was mostly his hope of chancing on some clue to the mystery of Dorothy Calender--bewitching riddle that she was!--that fascinated his imagination so completely. Aside from her altogether, the great house that stood untenanted, yet in such complete order, so self-contained in its darkened quiet, intrigued him equally with the train of inexplicable events that had brought him within its walls. Now--since his latest entrance--his vision had adjusted itself to cope with the obscurity to some extent; and the street lights, meagerly reflected through the windows from the bosom of a sullen pall of cloud, low-swung above the city, had helped him to piece together many a detail of decoration and furnishing, alike somber and richly dignified. Kirkwood told himself that the owner, whoever he might be, was a man of wealth and taste inherited from another age; he had found little of meretricious to-day in the dwelling, much that was solid and sedate and homely, and--Victorian.... He could have wished for more; a box of early Victorian vestas had been highly acceptable.

Making his way down-stairs to the stricken man--who was quite as he had been--Kirkwood bent over and thrust rifling fingers into his pockets, regardless of the wretched sense of guilt and sneakishness imparted by the action, stubbornly heedless of the possibility of the man's awakening to find himself being searched and robbed.

In the last place he sought, which should (he realized) have been the first, to wit, the fob pocket of the white waistcoat, he found a small gold matchbox, packed tight with wax vestas; and, berating himself for crass stupidity--he had saved a deal of time and trouble by thinking of this before--lighted the candle.

As its golden flame shot up with scarce a tremor, preyed upon by a perfectly excusable concern, he bent to examine the man's countenance.... The arm which had partly hidden it had fallen back into a natural position. It was a young face that gleamed pallid in the candlelight--a face unlined, a little vapid and insignificant, with features regular and neat, betraying few characteristics other than the purely negative attributes of a character as yet unformed, possibly unformable; much the sort of a face that he might have expected to see, remembering those thin and pouting lips that before had impressed him. Its owner was probably little more than twenty. In his attire there was a suspicion of a fop's preciseness, aside from its accidental disarray; the cut of his waistcoat was the extreme of the then fashion, the white tie (twisted beneath one ear) an exaggerated "butterfly," his collar nearly an inch too tall; and he was shod with pumps

suitable only for the dancing-floor,--a whim of the young-bloods of London of that year.

"I can't make him out at all!" declared Kirkwood. "The son of a gentleman too weak to believe that cubs need licking into shape? Reared to man's estate, so sheltered from the wicked world that he never grew a bark?... The sort that never had a quarrel in his life, 'cept with his tailor?... Now what the devil is this thing doing in this midnight mischief?... Damn!"

It was most exasperating, the incongruity of the boy's appearance assorted with his double rôle of persecutor of distressed damsels and nocturnal house-breaker!

Kirkwood bent closer above the motionless head, with puzzled eyes striving to pin down some elusive resemblance that he thought to trace in those vacuous features--a resemblance to some one he had seen, or known, at some past time, somewhere, somehow.

"I give it up. Guess I'm mistaken. Anyhow, five young Englishmen out of every ten of his class are just as blond and foolish. Now let's see how bad he's hurt."

With hands strong and gentle, he turned the round, light head. Then, "Ah!" he commented in the accent of comprehension. For there was an angry looking bump at the base of the skull; and, the skin having been broken, possibly in collision with the sharp-edged newel-post, a little blood had stained and matted the straw-colored hair.

Kirkwood let the head down and took thought. Recalling a bath-room on the floor above, thither he went, unselfishly forgetful of his predicament if discovered, and, turning on the water, sopped his handkerchief until it dripped. Then, returning, he took the boy's head on his knees, washed the wound, purloined another handkerchief (of silk, with a giddy border) from the other's pocket, and of this manufactured a rude but serviceable bandage.

Toward the conclusion of his attentions, the sufferer began to show signs of returning animation. He stirred restlessly, whimpered a little, and sighed. And Kirkwood, in consternation, got up.

"So!" he commented ruefully. "I guess I am an ass, all right--taking all that trouble for you, my friend. If I've got a grain of sense left, this is my cue to leave you alone in your glory."

He was lingering only to restore to the boy's pockets such articles as he had removed in the search for matches,--the match-box, a few silver coins, a bulky sovereign purse, a handsome, plain gold watch, and so forth. But ere he concluded he was aware that the boy was conscious, that his eyes, open and blinking in the candlelight, were upon him.

They were blue eyes, blue and shallow as a doll's, and edged with long, fine lashes. Intelligence, of a certain degree, was rapidly informing them.

Kirkwood returned their questioning glance, transfixed in indecision, his primal impulse to cut-and-run for it was gone; he had nothing to fear from this child who could not prevent his going whenever he chose to go; while by remaining he might perchance worm from him something about the girl.

"You're feeling better?" He was almost surprised to hear his own voice put the query.

"I--I think so. Ow, my head!... I say, you chap, whoever you are, what's happened?... I want to get up." The boy added peevishly: "Help a fellow, can't you?"

"You've had a nasty fall," Kirkwood observed evenly, passing an arm beneath the boy's shoulder and helping him to a sitting position. "Do you remember?"

The other snuffled childishly and scrubbed across the floor to rest his back against the wall.

"Why-y ... I remember fallin'; and then ... I woke up and it was all dark and my head achin' fit to split. I presume I went to sleep again ... I say, what're you, doing here?"

Instead of replying, Kirkwood lifted a warning finger.

"Hush!" he said tensely, alarmed by noises in the street. "You don't suppose--?"

He had been conscious of a carriage rolling up from the corner, as well as that it had drawn up (presumably) before a near-by dwelling. Now the rattle of a key in the hall-door was startlingly audible. Before he could move, the door itself opened with a slam.

Kirkwood moved toward the stair-head, and drew back with a cry of disgust. "Too late!" he told himself bitterly; his escape was cut off. He could run up-stairs and hide, of course, but the boy would inform against him and....

He buttoned up his coat, settled his hat on his head, and moved near the candle, where it rested on the floor. One glimpse would suffice to show him the force of the intruders, and one move of his foot put out the light; then--_perhaps--he might be able to rush them.

Below, a brief pause had followed the noise of the door, as if those entering were standing, irresolute, undecided which way to turn; but abruptly enough the glimmer of candlelight must have been noticed. Kirkwood heard a hushed exclamation, a quick clatter of high heels on the parquet, pattering feet on the stairs, all but drowned by swish and ripple of silken skirts; and a woman stood at the head of the flight--to the American an apparition profoundly amazing as she paused, the light from the floor casting odd, theatric shadows beneath her eyes and over her brows, edging her eyes themselves with brilliant light beneath their dark lashes, showing her lips straight and drawn, and shimmering upon the spangles of an evening gown, visible beneath the dark cloak which had fallen back from her white,

beautiful shoulders.

VIII

MADAME L'INTRIGANTE

"Mrs. Hallam!" cried Kirkwood, beneath his breath.

The woman ignored his existence. Moving swiftly forward, she dropped on both knees by the side of the boy, and caught up one of his hands, clasping it passionately in her own.

"Fred!" she cried, a curious break in her tone. "My little Freddie! Oh, what has happened, dearie?"

"Oh, hello, Mamma," grunted that young man, submitting listlessly to her caresses and betraying no overwhelming surprise at her appearance there. Indeed he seemed more concerned as to what Kirkwood, an older man, would be thinking, to see him so endeared and fondled, than moved by any other emotion. Kirkwood could see his shamefaced, sidelong glances; and despised him properly for them.

But without attending to his response, Mrs. Hallam rattled on in the uneven accents of excitement. "I waited until I couldn't wait any longer, Freddie dear. I had to know--had to come. Eccles came home about nine and said that you had told him to wait outside, that some one had followed you in here, and that a bobby had told him to move on. I didn't know what--"

"What's o'clock now?" her son interrupted.

"It's about three, I think ... Have you hurt yourself, dear? Oh, why _didn't_ you come home? You must've known I was dying of anxiety!"

"Oh, I say! Can't you see I'm hurt? 'Had a nasty fall and must've been asleep ever since."

"My precious one! How--?"

"Can't say, hardly ... I say, don't paw a chap so, Mamma ... I brought Eccles along and told him to wait because--well, because I didn't feel so much like shuttin' myself up in this beastly old tomb. So I left the door ajar, and told him not to let anybody come in. Then I came up-stairs. There must've been somebody already in the house; I know I _thought_ there was. It made me feel creepy, rather. At any rate, I heard voices down below, and the door banged, and somebody began hammerin' like fun on the knocker."

The boy paused, rolling an embarrassed eye up at the stranger.

"Yes, yes, dear!" Mrs. Hallam urged him on.

"Why, I--I made up my mind to cut my stick--let whoever it was pass me on the stairs, you know. But he followed me and struck me, and then I jumped at him, and we both fell down the whole flight. And that's all. Besides, my head's achin' like everything."

"But this man--?"

Mrs. Hallam looked up at Kirkwood, who bowed silently, struggling to hide both his amusement and perplexity. More than ever, now, the case presented a front inscrutable to his wits; try as he might, he failed to fit an explanation to any incident in which he had figured, while this last development--that his antagonist of the dark stairway had been Mrs. Hallam's son!--seemed the most astounding of all, baffling elucidation completely.

He had abandoned all thought of flight and escape. It was too late; in the brisk idiom of his mother-tongue, he was "caught with the goods on." "May as well face the music," he counseled himself, in resignation. From what he had seen and surmised of Mrs. Hallam, he shrewdly suspected that the tune would prove an exceedingly lively one; she seemed a woman of imagination, originality, and an able-bodied temper.

"_You_, Mr. Kirkwood!"

Again he bowed, grinning awry.

She rose suddenly. "You will be good enough to explain your presence here," she informed him with dangerous serenity.

"To be frank with you--"

"I advise that course, Mr. Kirkwood."

"Thanks, awf'ly.... I came here, half an hour ago, looking for a lost purse full--well, not _quite_ full of sovereigns. It was my purse, by the way."

Suspicion glinted like foxfire in the cold green eyes beneath her puckered brows. "I do not understand," she said slowly and in level tones.

"I didn't expect you to," returned Kirkwood; "no more do I.... But, anyway, it must be clear to you that I've done my best for this gentleman here." He paused with an interrogative lift of his eyebrows.

"This gentleman' is my son, Frederick Hallam.... But you will explain--"

"Pardon me, Mrs. Hallam; I shall explain nothing, at present. Permit me to point out that your position here--like mine--is, to say the least, anomalous." The random stroke told, as he could tell by the instant contraction of her eyes of a cat. "It would be best to defer explanations till a more convenient time--don't you think? Then, if you like, we can chant confidences in an antiphonal chorus. Just now your--er--son is not enjoying himself apparently, and ... the attention of the police had best

not be called to this house too often in one night."

His levity seemed to displease and perturb the woman; she turned from him with an impatient movement of her shoulders.

"Freddie, dear, do you feel able to walk?"

"Eh? Oh, I dare say--I don't know. Wonder would your friend--ah--Mr. Kirkwood, lend me an arm?"

"Charmed," Kirkwood declared suavely. "If you'll take the candle, Mrs. Hallam--"

He helped the boy to his feet and, while the latter hung upon him and complained querulously, stood waiting for the woman to lead the way with the light; something which, however, she seemed in no haste to do. The pause at length puzzled Kirkwood, and he turned, to find Mrs. Hallam holding the candlestick and regarding him steadily, with much the same expression of furtive mistrust as that with which she had favored him on her own door-stoop.

[Illustration: He helped the boy to his feet, and stood waiting.]

"One moment," she interposed in confusion; "I won't keep you waiting...;" and, passing with an averted face, ran quickly up-stairs to the second floor, taking the light with her. Its glow faded from the walls above and Kirkwood surmised that she had entered the front bedchamber. For some moments he could hear her moving about; once, something scraped and bumped on the floor, as if a heavy bit of furniture had been moved; again there was a resounding thud that defied speculation; and this was presently followed by a dull clang of metal.

His fugitive speculations afforded him little enlightenment; and, meantime, young Hallam, leaning partly against the wall and quite heavily on Kirkwood's arm, filled his ears with puerile oaths and lamentations; so that, but for the excuse of his really severe shaking-up, Kirkwood had been strongly tempted to take the youngster by the shoulders and kick him heartily, for the health of his soul.

But eventually--it was not really long--there came the quick rush of Mrs. Hallam's feet along the upper hall, and the woman reappeared, one hand holding her skirts clear of her pretty feet as she descended in a rush that caused the candle's flame to flicker perilously.

Half-way down, "Mr. Kirkwood!" she called tempestuously.

"Didn't you find it?" he countered blandly.

She stopped jerkily at the bottom, and, after a moment of confusion. "Find what, sir?" she asked.

"What you sought, Mrs. Hallam."

Smiling, he bore unflinching the prolonged inspection of her eyes, at once somber with doubt of him and flashing with indignation because of his impudence.

"You knew I wouldn't find it, then!... Didn't you?"

"I may have suspected you wouldn't."

Now he was sure that she had been searching for the gladstone bag. That, evidently, was the bone of contention. Calendar had sent his daughter for it, Mrs. Hallam her son; Dorothy had been successful ... But, on the other hand, Calendar and Mrs. Hallam were unquestionably allies. Why, then--?

"Where is it, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Madam, have you the right to know?"

Through another lengthening pause, while they faced each other, he marked again the curious contraction of her under lip.

"I have the right," she declared steadily. "Where is it?"

"How can I be sure?"

"Then you don't know--!"

"Indeed," he interrupted, "I would be glad to feel that I ought to tell you what I know."

"_What_ you know!"

The exclamation, low-spoken, more an echo of her thoughts than intended for Kirkwood, was accompanied by a little shake of the woman's head, mute evidence to the fact that she was bewildered by his finesse. And this delighted the young man beyond measure, making him feel himself master of a difficult situation. Mysteries had been woven before his eyes so persistently, of late, that it was a real pleasure to be able to do a little mystifying on his own account. By adopting this reticent and non-committal attitude, he was forcing the hand of a woman old enough to be his mother and most evidently a past-mistress in the art of misleading. All of which seemed very fascinating to the amateur in adventure.

The woman would have led again, but young Hallam cut in, none too courteously.

"I say, Mamma, it's no good standing here, palaverin' like a lot of flats. Besides, I'm awf'ly knocked up. Let's get home and have it out there."

Instantly his mother softened. "My poor boy!... Of course we'll go."

Without further demur she swept past and down the stairway before them--slowly, for their progress was of necessity slow, and the light most needed. Once they were in the main hall, however, she extinguished the

candle, placed it on a side table, and passed out through the door.

It had been left open, as before; and Kirkwood was not at all surprised to see a man waiting on the threshold,--the versatile Eccles, if he erred not. He had little chance to identify him, as it happened, for at a word from Mrs. Hallam the man bowed and, following her across the sidewalk, opened the door of a four-wheeler which, with lamps alight and liveried driver on the box, had been waiting at the carriage-block.

As they passed out, Kirkwood shut the door; and at the same moment the little party was brought up standing by a gruff and authoritative summons.

"Just a minute, please, you there!"

"Aha!" said Kirkwood to himself. "I thought so." And he halted, in unfeigned respect for the burly and impressive figure, garbed in blue and brass, helmeted and truncheoned, bull's-eye shining on breast like the Law's unblinking and sleepless eye, barring the way to the carriage.

Mrs. Hallam showed less deference for the obstructionist. The assumed hauteur and impatience of her pose was artfully reflected in her voice as she rounded upon the bobby, with an indignant demand: "What is the meaning of this, officer?"

"Precisely what I wants to know, ma'am," returned the man, unyielding beneath his respectful attitude. "I'm obliged to ask you to tell me what you were doing in that 'ouse.... And what's the matter with this 'ere gentleman?" he added, with a dubious stare at young Hallam's bandaged head and rumpled clothing.

"Perhaps you don't understand," admitted Mrs. Hallam sweetly. "Of course--I see--it's perfectly natural. The house has been shut up for some time and--"

"Thank you, ma'am; that's just it. There was something wrong going on early in the evening, and I was told to keep an eye on the premises. It's duty, ma'am; I've got my report to make."

"The house," said Mrs. Hallam, with the long-suffering patience of one elucidating a perfectly plain proposition to a being of a lower order of intelligence, "is the property of my son, Arthur Frederick Burgoyne Hallam, of Cornwall. This is--"

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but I was told Colonel George Burgoyne, of Cornwall--"

"Colonel Burgoyne died some time ago. My son is his heir. This is my son. He came to the house this evening to get some property he desired, and--it seems--tripped on the stairs and fell unconscious. I became worried about him and drove over, accompanied by my friend, Mr. Kirkwood."

The policeman looked his troubled state of mind, and wagged a doubtful head over the case. There was his duty, and there was, opposed to it, the fact that all three were garbed in the livery of the well-to-do.

At length, turning to the driver, he demanded, received, and noted in his memorandum-book, the license number of the equipage.

"It's a very unusual case, ma'am," he apologized; "I hope you won't hold it against me. I'm only trying to do my duty--"

"And safeguard our property. You are perfectly justified, officer."

"Thank you, ma'am. And would you mind giving me your cards, please, all of you?"

"Certainly not." Without hesitation the woman took a little hand-bag from the seat of the carriage and produced a card; her son likewise found his case and handed the officer an oblong slip.

"I've no cards with me," the American told the policeman; "my name, however, is Philip Kirkwood, and I'm staying at the Pless."

"Very good, sir; thank you." The man penciled the information in his little book. "Thank you, ma'am, and Mr. Hallam, sir. Sorry to have detained you. Good morning."

Kirkwood helped young Hallam into the carriage, gave Mrs. Hallam his hand, and followed her. The man Eccles shut the door, mounting the box beside the driver. Immediately they were in motion.

The American got a final glimpse of the bobby, standing in front of Number 9, Frognall Street, and watching them with an air of profound uncertainty. He had Kirkwood's sympathy, therein; but he had little time to feel with him, for Mrs. Hallam turned upon him very suddenly.

"Mr. Kirkwood, will you be good enough to tell me who and what you are?"

The young man smiled his homely, candid smile. "I'll be only too glad, Mrs. Hallam, when I feel sure you'll do as much for yourself."

She gave him no answer; it, was as if she were choosing words. Kirkwood braced himself to meet the storm; but none ensued. There was rather a lull, which strung itself out indefinitely, to the monotonous music of hoofs and rubber tires.

Young Hallam was resting his empty blond head against the cushions, and had closed his eyes. He seemed to doze; but, as the carriage rolled past the frequent street-lights, Kirkwood could see that the eyes of Mrs. Hallam were steadily directed to his face.

His outward composure was tempered by some amusement, by more admiration; the woman's eyes were very handsome, even when hardest and most cold. It was not easy to conceive of her as being the mother of a son so immaturely mature. Why, she must have been at least thirty-eight or -nine! One wondered; she did not look it...

The carriage stopped before a house with lighted windows. Eccles jumped down from the box and scurried to open the front door. The radiance of a hall-lamp was streaming out into the misty night when he returned to release his employers.

They were returned to Craven Street! "One more lap round the track!" mused Kirkwood. "Wonder will the next take me back to Bermondsey Old Stairs."

At Mrs. Hallam's direction, Eccles ushered him into the smoking-room, on the ground floor in the rear of the dwelling, there to wait while she helped her son up-stairs and to bed. He sighed with pleasure at first glimpse of its luxurious but informal comforts, and threw himself carelessly into a heavily padded lounging-chair, dropping one knee over the other and lighting the last of his expensive cigars, with a sensation of undiluted gratitude; as one coming to rest in the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Over his shoulder a home-like illumination was cast by an electric reading-lamp shaded with red silk. At his feet brass fire-dogs winked sleepily in the fluttering blaze of a well-tended stove. The walls were hung with deep red, the doors and divans upholstered in the same restful shade. In one corner an old clock ticked soberly. The atmosphere would have proved a potent invitation to reverie, if not to sleep--he was very sleepy--but for the confusion in the house.

In its chambers, through the halls, on the stairs, there were hurryings and scurryings of feet and skirts, confused with murmuring voices. Presently, in an adjoining room, Philip Kirkwood heard a maid-servant wrestling hopefully with that most exasperating of modern time-saving devices, the telephone as countenanced by our English cousins. Her patience and determination won his approval, but availed nothing for her purpose; in the outcome the telephone triumphed and the maid gave up the unequal contest.

Later, a butler entered the room; a short and sturdy fellow, extremely ill at ease. Drawing a small taboret to the side of Kirkwood's chair, he placed thereon a tray, deferentially imparting the information that "Missis 'Allam 'ad thought 'ow as Mister Kirkwood might care for a bit of supper."

"Please thank Mrs. Hallam for me." Kirkwood's gratified eyes ranged the laden tray. There were sandwiches, biscuit, cheese, and a pot of black coffee, with sugar and cream. "It was very kindly thought of," he added.

"Very good, sir, thank you, sir."

The man turned to go, shuffling soundlessly. Kirkwood was suddenly impressed with his evasiveness; ever since he had entered the room, his countenance had seemed turned from the guest.

"Eccles!" he called sharply, at a venture.

The butler halted, thunderstruck. "Ye-es, s-sir?"

[Illustration: Eccles]

"Turn round, Eccles; I want a look at you."

Eccles faced him unwillingly, with a stolid front but shifty eyes. Kirkwood glanced him up and down, grinning.

"Thank you, Eccles; I'll remember you now. You'll remember me, too, won't you? You're a bad actor, aren't you, Eccles?"

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir," mumbled the man unhappily; and took instant advantage of the implied permission to go.

Intensely diverted by the recollection of Eccles' abortive attempt to stop him at the door of Number 9, and wondering--now that he came to think of it--why, precisely, young Hallam had deemed it necessary to travel with a body-guard and adopt such furtive methods to enter into as well as to obtain what was asserted to be his own property, Kirkwood turned active attention to the lunch.

Thoughtfully he poured himself a cup of coffee, swallowing it hot and black as it came from the silver pot; then munched the sandwiches.

It was kindly thought of, this early morning repast; Mrs. Hallam seemed more and more a remarkable woman with each phase of her character that she chose to disclose. At odds with him, she yet took time to think of his creature needs!

What could be her motive,--not in feeding him, but in involving her name and fortune in an affair so strangely flavored?... This opened up a desert waste of barren speculation. "What's anybody's motive, who figures in this thundering dime-novel?" demanded the American, almost contemptuously. And--for the hundredth time--gave it up; the day should declare it, if so hap he lived to see that day: a distant one, he made no doubt. The only clear fact in his befogged and bemused mentality was that he was at once "broke" and in this business up to his ears. Well, he'd see it through; he'd nothing better to do, and--there was the girl:

Dorothy, whose eyes and lips he had but to close his own eyes to see again as vividly as though she stood before him; Dorothy, whose unspoiled sweetness stood out in vivid relief against this moil and toil of conspiracy, like a star of evening shining clear in a stormy sky.

"Poetic simile: I'm going fast," conceded Kirkwood; but he did not smile. It was becoming quite too serious a matter for laughter. For her sake, he was in the game "for keeps"; especially in view of the fact that everything--his own heart's inclination included--seemed to conspire to keep him in it. Of course he hoped for nothing in return; a pauper who turns squire-of-dames with matrimonial intent is open to the designation, "penniless adventurer." No; whatever service he might be to the girl would be ample recompense to him for his labors. And afterwards, he'd go his way in peace; she'd soon forget him--if she hadn't already. Women (he propounded gravely) are queer: there's no telling anything about them!

One of the most unreadable specimens of the sex on which he pronounced this highly original dictum, entered the room just then; and he found himself at once out of his chair and his dream, bowing.

"Mrs. Hallam."

The woman nodded and smiled graciously. "Eccles has attended to your needs, I hope? Please don't stop smoking." She sank into an arm-chair on the other side of the hearth and, probably by accident, out of the radius of illumination from the lamp; sitting sidewise, one knee above the other, her white arms immaculate against the somber background of shadowed crimson.

She was very handsome indeed, just then; though a keener light might have proved less flattering.

"Now, Mr. Kirkwood?" she opened briskly, with a second intimate and friendly nod; and paused, her pose receptive.

Kirkwood sat down again, smiling good-natured appreciation of her unprejudiced attitude.

"Your son, Mrs. Hallam--?"

"Oh, Freddie's doing well enough.... Freddie," she explained, "has a delicate constitution and has seen little of the world. Such melodrama as to-night's is apt to shock him severely. We must make allowances, Mr. Kirkwood."

Kirkwood grinned again, a trace unsympathetically; he was unable to simulate any enthusiasm on the subject of poor Freddie, whom he had sized up with passable acumen as a spoiled and coddled child completely under the thumb of an extremely clever mother.

"Yes," he responded vaguely; "he'll be quite fit after a night's sleep, I dare say."

The woman was watching him keenly, beneath her lowered lashes. "I think," she said deliberately, "that it is time we came to an understanding."

Kirkwood agreed--"Yes?" affably.

"I purpose being perfectly straightforward. To begin with, I don't place you, Mr. Kirkwood. You are an unknown quantity, a new factor. Won't you please tell me what you are and.... Are you a friend of Mr. Calendar's?"

"I think I may lay claim to that honor, though"--to Kirkwood's way of seeing things some little frankness on his own part would be essential if they were to get on--"I hardly know him, Mrs. Hallam. I had the pleasure of meeting him only this afternoon."

She knitted her brows over this statement.

"That, I assure you, is the truth," he laughed.

"But ... I really don't understand."

"Nor I, Mrs. Hallam. Calendar aside, I am Philip Kirkwood, American, resident abroad for some years, a native of San Francisco, of a certain age, unmarried, by profession a poor painter."

"And--?"

"Beyond that? I presume I must tell you, though I confess I'm in doubt...."
He hesitated, weighing candor in the balance with discretion.

"But who are you for? Are you in George Calendar's pay?"

"Heaven forfend!"--piously. "My sole interest at the present moment is to unravel a most entrancing mystery--"

"Entitled 'Dorothy Calendar'? Of course. You've known her long?"

"Eight hours, I believe," he admitted gravely; "less than that, in fact."

"Miss Calendar's interests will not suffer through anything you may tell me."

"Whether they will or no, I see I must swing a looser tongue, or you'll be showing me the door."

The woman shook her head, amused, "Not until," she told him significantly.

"Very well, then." And he launched into an abridged narrative of the night's events, as he understood them, touching lightly on his own circumstances, the real poverty which had brought him back to Craven Street by way of Froggnall. "And there you have it all, Mrs. Hallam."

She sat in silent musing. Now and again he caught the glint of her eyes and knew that he was being appraised with such trained acumen as only long knowledge of men can give to women. He wondered if he were found wanting.... Her dark head bended, elbow on knee, chin resting lightly in the cradle of her slender, parted fingers, the woman thought profoundly, her reverie ending with a brief, curt laugh, musical and mirthless as the sound of breaking glass.

"It is so like Calendar!" she exclaimed: "so like him that one sees how foolish it was to trust--no, not to trust, but to believe that he could ever be thrown off the scent, once he got nose to ground. So, if we suffer, my son and I, I shall have only myself to thank!"

Kirkwood waited in patient attention till she chose to continue. When she did "Now for my side of the case!" cried Mrs. Hallam; and rising, began to pace the room, her slender and rounded figure swaying gracefully, the while she talked.

"George Calendar is a scoundrel," she said: "a swindler, gambler,--what I

believe you Americans call a confidence-man. He is also my late husband's first cousin. Some years since he found it convenient to leave England, likewise his wife and daughter. Mrs. Calendar, a country-woman of yours, by the bye, died shortly afterwards. Dorothy, by the merest accident, obtained a situation as private secretary in the household of the late Colonel Burgoyne, of The Cliffs, Cornwall. You follow me?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Colonel Burgoyne died, leaving his estates to my son, some time ago. Shortly afterwards Dorothy Calendar disappeared. We know now that her father took her away, but then the disappearance seemed inexplicable, especially since with her vanished a great deal of valuable information. She alone knew of the location of certain of the old colonel's personal effects."

"He was an eccentric. One of his peculiarities involved the secreting of valuables in odd places; he had no faith in banks. Among these valuables were the Burgoyne family jewels--quite a treasure, believe me, Mr. Kirkwood. We found no note of them among the colonel's papers, and without Dorothy were powerless to pursue a search for them. We advertised and employed detectives, with no result. It seems that father and daughter were at Monte Carlo at the time."

"Beautifully circumstantial, my dear lady," commented Kirkwood--to his inner consciousness. Outwardly he maintained consistently a pose of impassive gullibility.

"This afternoon, for the first time, we received news of the Calendars. Calendar himself called upon me, to beg a loan. I explained our difficulty and he promised that Dorothy should send us the information by the morning's post. When I insisted, he agreed to bring it himself, after dinner, this evening.... I make it quite clear?" she interrupted, a little anxious.

"Quite clear, I assure you," he assented encouragingly.

"Strangely enough, he had not been gone ten minutes when my son came in from a conference with our solicitors, informing me that at last a memorandum had turned up, indicating that the heirlooms would be found in a safe secreted behind a dresser in Colonel Burgoyne's bedroom."

"At Number 9, Froggnall Street."

"Yes.... I proposed going there at once, but it was late and we were dining at the Pless with an acquaintance, a Mr. Mulready, whom I now recall as a former intimate of George Calendar. To our surprise we saw Calendar and his daughter at a table not far from ours. Mr. Mulready betrayed some agitation at the sight of Calendar, and told me that Scotland Yard had a man out with a warrant for Calendar's arrest, on old charges. For old sake's sake, Mr. Mulready begged me to give Calendar a word of warning. I did so--foolishly, it seems: Calendar was at that moment planning to rob us, Mulready aiding and abetting him."

The woman paused before Kirkwood, looking down upon him. "And so," she concluded, "we have been tricked and swindled. I can scarcely believe it of Dorothy Calendar."

"I, for one, don't believe it." Kirkwood spoke quietly, rising. "Whatever the culpability of Calendar and Mulready, Dorothy was only their hoodwinked tool."

"But, Mr. Kirkwood, she must have known the jewels were not hers."

"Yes," he assented passively, but wholly unconvinced.

"And what," she demanded with a gesture of exasperation, "what would you advise?"

"Scotland Yard," he told her bluntly.

"But it's a family secret! It must not appear in the papers. Don't you understand--George Calendar is my husband's cousin!"

"I can think of nothing else, unless you pursue them in person."

"But--whither?"

"That remains to be discovered; I can tell you nothing more than I have.... May I thank you for your hospitality, express my regrets that I should unwittingly have been made the agent of this disaster, and wish you good night--or, rather, good morning, Mrs. Hallam?"

For a moment she held him under a calculating glance which he withstood with graceless fortitude. Then, realizing that he was determined not by any means to be won to her cause, she gave him her hand, with a commonplace wish that he might find his affairs in better order than seemed probable; and rang for Eccles.

The butler showed him out.

He took away with him two strong impressions; the one visual, of a strikingly handsome woman in a wonderful gown, standing under the red glow of a reading-lamp, in an attitude of intense mental concentration, her expression plainly indicative of a train of thought not guiltless of vindictiveness; the other, more mental but as real, he presently voiced to the huge bronze lions brooding over desolate Trafalgar Square.

"Well," appreciated Mr. Kirkwood with gusto, "_she's_ got Ananias and Sapphira talked to a standstill, all right!" He ruminated over this for a moment. "Calendar can lie some, too; but hardly with her picturesque touch.... Uncommon ingenious, _I_ call it. All the same, there were only about a dozen bits of tiling that didn't fit into her mosaic a little bit.... I think they're all tarred with the same stick--all but the girl. And there's something afoot a long sight more devilish and crafty than that shilling-shocker of madam's.... Dorothy Calendar's got about as much active

part in it as I have. I'm only from California, but they've got to show me, before I'll believe a word against her. Those infernal scoundrels!...Somebody's got to be on the girl's side and I seem to have drawn the lucky straw.... Good Heavens! is it possible for a grown man to fall heels over head in love in two short hours? I don't believe it. It's just interest--nothing more.... And I'll have to have a change of clothes before I can do anything further."

He bowed gratefully to the lions, in view of their tolerant interest in his soliloquy, and set off very suddenly round the square and up St. Martin's Lane, striking across town as directly as might be for St. Pancras Station. It would undoubtedly be a long walk, but cabs were prohibited by his straitened means, and the busses were all abed and wouldn't be astir for hours.

He strode along rapidly, finding his way more through intuition than by observation or familiarity with London's geography--indeed, was scarce aware of his surroundings; for his brain was big with fine imagery, rapt in a glowing dream of knighterrantry and chivalric deeds.

Thus is it ever and alway with those who in the purity of young hearts rush in where angels fear to tread; if these, Kirkwood and his ilk, be fools, thank God for them, for with such foolishness is life savored and made sweet and sound! To Kirkwood the warp of the world and the woof of it was Romance, and it wrapped him round, a magic mantle to set him apart from all things mean and sordid and render him impregnable and invisible to the haunting Shade of Care.

Which, by the same token, presently lost track of him entirely, and wandered off to find and bedevil some other poor devil. And Kirkwood, his eyes like his spirit elevated, saw that the clouds of night were breaking, the skies clearing, that the East pulsed ever more strongly with the dim golden promise of the day to come. And this he chose to take for an omen--prematurely, it may be.

IX

AGAIN "BELOW BRIDGE"; AND BEYOND

Kirkwood wasted little time, who had not much to waste, were he to do that upon whose doing he had set his heart. It irked him sore to have to lose the invaluable moments demanded by certain imperative arrangements, but his haste was such that all was consummated within an hour.

Within the period of a single hour, then, he had ransomed his luggage at St. Pancras, caused it to be loaded upon a four-wheeler and transferred to a neighboring hotel of evil flavor but moderate tariff, where he engaged a room for a week, ordered an immediate breakfast, and retired with his belongings to his room; he had shaved and changed his clothes, selecting

a serviceable suit of heavy tweeds, stout shoes, a fore-and-aft cap and a negligè shirt of a deep shade calculated at least to seem clean for a long time; finally, he had devoured his bacon and eggs, gulped down his coffee and burned his mouth, and, armed with a stout stick, set off hotfoot in the still dim glimmering of early day.

By this time his cash capital had dwindled to the sum of two pounds, ten shillings, eight-pence, and would have been much less had he paid for his lodging in advance. But he considered his trunks ample security for the bill, and dared not wait the hour when shopkeepers begin to take down shutters and it becomes possible to realize upon one's jewelry. Besides which, he had never before been called upon to consider the advisability of raising money by pledging personal property, and was in considerable doubt as to the right course of procedure in such emergency.

At King's Cross Station on the Underground an acute disappointment awaited him; there, likewise, he learned something about London. A sympathetic bobby informed him that no trains would be running until after five-thirty, and that, furthermore, no busses would begin to ply until half after seven.

"It's tramp it or cab it, then," mused the young man mournfully, his longing gaze seeking a nearby cab-rank--just then occupied by a solitary hansom, driver somnolent on the box. "Officer," he again addressed the policeman, mindful of the English axiom: "When in doubt, ask a bobby."--"Officer, when's high-tide this morning?"

The bobby produced a well-worn pocket-almanac, moistened a massive thumb, and rippled the pages.

"London Bridge, 'igh tide twenty minutes arfter six, sir," he announced with a glow of satisfaction wholly pardonable in one who combines the functions of perambulating almanac, guide-book, encyclopedia, and conservator of the peace.

Kirkwood said something beneath his breath--a word in itself a comfortable mouthful and wholesome and emphatic. He glanced again at the cab and groaned: "O Lord, I just dassent!" With which, thanking the bureau of information, he set off at a quick step down Grey's Inn Road.

The day had closed down in brilliance upon the city--and the voice of the milkman was to be heard in the land--when he trudged, still briskly if a trifle wearily, into Holborn, and held on eastward across the Viaduct and down Newgate Street; the while addling his weary wits with heart-sickening computations of minutes, all going hopelessly to prove that he would be late, far too late even presupposing the unlikely. The unlikely, be it known, was that the Alethea would not attempt to sail before the turn of the tide.

For this was his mission, to find the Alethea before she sailed. Incredible as it may appear, at five o'clock, or maybe earlier, on the morning of the twenty-second of April, 1906, A.D., Philip Kirkwood, normally a commonplace but likable young American in full possession of his senses, might have been seen (and by some was seen) plodding manfully

through Cheapside, London, England, engaged upon a quest as mad, forlorn, and gallant as any whose chronicle ever inspired the pen of a Malory or a Froissart. In brief he proposed to lend his arm and courage to be the shield and buckler of one who might or might not be a damsel in distress; according as to whether Mrs. Hallam had spoken soothly of Dorothy Calendar, or Kirkwood's own admirable faith in the girl were justified of itself.

Proceeding upon the working hypothesis that Mrs. Hallam was a polished liar in most respects, but had told the truth, so far as concerned her statement to the effect that the gladstone bag contained valuable real property (whose ownership remained a moot question, though Kirkwood was definitely committed to the belief that it was none of Mrs. Hallam's or her son's): he reasoned that the two adventurers, with Dorothy and their booty, would attempt to leave London by a water route, in the ship, *_Alethea_*, whose name had fallen from their lips at Bermondsey Old Stairs.

Kirkwood's initial task, then, would be to find the needle in the haystack--the metaphor is poor: more properly, to sort out from the hundreds of vessels, of all descriptions, at anchor in midstream, moored to the wharves of 'long-shore warehouses, or in the gigantic docks that line the Thames, that one called *_Alethea_*; of which he was so deeply mired in ignorance that he could not say whether she were tramp-steamer, coastwise passenger boat, one of the liners that ply between Tilbury and all the world, Channel ferry-boat, private yacht (steam or sail), schooner, four-master, square-rigger, barque or brigantine.

A task to stagger the optimism of any but one equipped with the sublime impudence of Youth! Even Kirkwood was disturbed by some little awe when he contemplated the vast proportions of his undertaking. None the less doggedly he plugged ahead, and tried to keep his mind from vain surmises as to what would be his portion when eventually he should find himself a passenger, uninvited and unwelcome, upon the *_Alethea_*....

London had turned over once or twice, and was pulling the bedclothes over its head and grumbling about getting up, but the city was still sound asleep when at length he paused for a minute's rest in front of the Mansion House, and realized with a pang of despair that he was completely tuckered out. There was a dull, vague throbbing in his head; weights pressed upon his eyeballs until they ached; his mouth was hot and tasted of yesterday's tobacco; his feet were numb and heavy; his joints were stiff; he yawned frequently.

With a sigh he surrendered to the flesh's frailty. An early cabby, cruising up from Cannon Street station on the off-chance of finding some one astir in the city, aside from the doves and sparrows, suffered the surprise of his life when Kirkwood hailed him. His face was blank with amazement when he reined in, and his eyes bulged when the prospective fare, on impulse, explained his urgent needs. Happily he turned out a fair representative of his class, an intelligent and unfuddled cabby.

"Jump in, sir," he told Kirkwood cheerfully, as soon as he had assimilated the latter's demands. "I knows precisely wotcher wants. Leave it all to me."

The admonition was all but superfluous; Kirkwood was unable, for the time being, to do aught else than resign his fate into another's guidance. Once in the cab he slipped insensibly into a nap, and slept soundly on, as reckless of the cab's swift pace and continuous jouncing as of the sunlight glaring full in his tired young face.

He may have slept twenty minutes; he awoke faint with drowsiness, tingling from head to toe from fatigue, and in distress of a queer qualm in the pit of his stomach, to find the hansom at rest and the driver on the step, shaking his fare with kindly determination. "Oh, a' right," he assented surlily, and by sheer force of will made himself climb out to the sidewalk; where, having rubbed his eyes, stretched enormously and yawned discourteously in the face of the East End, he was once more himself and a hundred times refreshed into the bargain. Contentedly he counted three shillings into the cabby's palm--the fare named being one-and-six.

"The shilling over and above the tip's for finding me the waterman and boat," he stipulated.

"Right-o. You'll mind the 'orse a minute, sir?"

Kirkwood nodded. The man touched his hat and disappeared inexplicably. Kirkwood, needlessly attaching himself to the reins near the animal's head, pried his sense of observation open and became alive to the fact that he stood in a quarter of London as strange to him as had been Bermondsey Wall.

To this day he can not put a name to it; he surmises that it was Wapping.

Ramshackle tenements with sharp gable roofs lined either side of the way. Frowsy women draped themselves over the window-sills. Pallid and wasted parodies on childhood contested the middle of the street with great, slow drays, drawn by enormous horses. On the sidewalks twin streams of masculine humanity flowed without rest, both bound in the same direction: dock laborers going to their day's work. Men of every nationality known to the world (he thought) passed him in his short five-minute wait by the horse's head; Britons, brown East Indians, blacks from Jamaica, swart Italians, Polaks, Russian Jews, wire-drawn Yankees, Spaniards, Portuguese, Greeks, even a Nubian or two: uniform in these things only, that their backs were bent with toil, bowed beyond mending, and their faces stamped with the blurred type-stamp of the dumb laboring brute. A strangely hideous procession, they shambled on, for the most part silent, all uncouth and unreal in the clear morning glow.

The outlander was sensible of some relief when his cabby popped hurriedly out of the entrance to a tenement, a dull-visaged, broad-shouldered waterman ambling more slowly after.

"Nevvy of mine, sir," announced the cabby; "and a fust-ryte waterman; knows the river like a book, he do."

The nephew touched his forelock sheepishly.

"Thank you," said Kirkwood; and, turning to the man, "Your boat?" he asked with the brevity of weariness.

"This wye, sir."

At his guide's heels Kirkwood threaded the crowd and, entering the tenement, stumbled through a gloomy and unsavory passage, to come out at last upon a scanty, unrailed veranda overlooking the river. Ten feet below, perhaps, foul waters purred and eddied round the piles supporting the rear of the building. On one hand a ladder-like flight of rickety steps descended to a floating stage to which a heavy rowboat lay moored. In the latter a second waterman was seated bailing out bilge with a rusty can.

"Ere we are, sir," said the cabman's nephew, pausing at the head of the steps. "Now, where's it to be?"

The American explained tersely that he had a message to deliver a friend, who had shipped aboard a vessel known as the *Alethea*, scheduled to sail at floodtide; further than which deponent averred naught.

The waterman scratched his head. "A 'ard job, sir; not knowin' wot kind of a boat she are mykes it 'arder." He waited hopefully.

"Ten shillings," volunteered Kirkwood promptly; "ten shillings if you get me aboard her before she weighs anchor; fifteen if I keep you out more than an hour, and still you put me aboard. After that we'll make other terms."

The man promptly turned his back to hail his mate. "Arf a quid, Bob, if we puts this gent aboard a wessel name o' *Allytheer* afore she syles at turn o' tide."

In the boat the man with the bailing can turned up an impassive countenance. "Coom down," he clenched the bargain; and set about shipping the sweeps.

Kirkwood crept down the shaky ladder and deposited himself in the stern of the boat; the younger boatman settled himself on the midship thwart.

"Ready?"

"Ready," assented old Bob from the bows. He cast off the painter, placed one sweep against the edge of the stage, and with a vigorous thrust pushed off; then took his seat.

Bows swinging down-stream, the boat shot out from the shore.

"How's the tide?" demanded Kirkwood, his impatience growing.

"On th' turn, sir," he was told.

For a long moment broadside to the current, the boat responded to the sturdy pulling of the port sweeps. Another moment, and it was in full swing, the watermen bending lustily to their task. Under their unceasing

urge, the broad-beamed, heavy craft, aided by the ebbing tide, surged more and more rapidly through the water; the banks, grim and unsightly with their towering, impassive warehouses broken by toppling wooden tenements, slipped swiftly up-stream. Ship after ship was passed, sailing vessels in the majority, swinging sluggishly at anchor, drifting slowly with the river, or made fast to the goods-stages of the shore; and in keen anxiety lest he should overlook the right one, Kirkwood searched their bows and sterns for names, which in more than one case proved hardly legible.

The Alethea was not of their number.

In the course of some ten minutes, the watermen drove the boat sharply inshore, bringing her up alongside another floating stage, in the shadow of another tenement.--both so like those from which they had embarked that Kirkwood would have been unable to distinguish one from another.

In the bows old Bob lifted up a stentorian voice, summoning one William.

Recognizing that there was some design in this, the passenger subdued his disapproval of the delay, and sat quiet.

In answer to the third ear-racking hail, a man, clothed simply in dirty shirt and disreputable trousers, showed himself in the doorway above, rubbing the sleep out of a red, bloated countenance with a mighty and grimy fist.

"Ello," he said surlily. "Wot's th' row?"

"Oo," interrogated old Bob, holding the boat steady by grasping the stage, "was th' party wot engyged yer larst night, Bill?"

"Party name o' Allytheer," growled the drowsy one. "W'y?"

"Party 'ere's lookin' for 'im. Where'll I find this Allytheer?"

"Best look sharp 'r yer won't find 'im," retorted the one above. "E was at anchor off Bow Creek larst night."

Kirkwood's heart leaped in hope. "What sort of a vessel was she?" he asked, half rising in his eagerness.

"Brigantine, sir."

"Thank--you!" replied Kirkwood explosively, resuming his seat with uncalculated haste as old Bob, deaf to the amenities of social intercourse in an emergency involving as much as ten-bob, shoved off again.

And again the boat was flying down in midstream, the leaden waters, shot with gold of the morning sun, parting sullenly beneath its bows.

The air was still, heavy and tepid; the least exertion brought out beaded moisture on face and hands. In the east hung a turgid sky, dull with haze, through which the mounting sun swam like a plaque of brass; overhead it

was clear and cloudless, but besmirched as if the polished mirror of the heavens had been fouled by the breath of departing night.

On the right, ahead, Greenwich Naval College loomed up, the great gray-stone buildings beyond the embankment impressively dominating the scene, in happy relief against the wearisome monotony of the river-banks; it came abreast; and ebbed into the backwards of the scene.

The watermen straining at the sweeps, the boat sped into Blackwall Reach, Bugsby Marshes a splash of lurid green to port, dreary Cubitt Town and the West India Docks to starboard. Here the river ran thick with shipping.

"Are we near?" Kirkwood would know; and by way of reply had a grunt of the younger waterman.

Again, "Will we make it?" he asked.

The identical grunt answered him; he was free to interpret it as he would; young William--as old Bob named him--had no breath for idle words. Kirkwood subsided, controlling his impatience to the best of his ability; the men, he told himself again and again, were earning their pay, whether or not they gained the goal of his desire.... Their labors were titanic; on their temples and foreheads the knotted veins stood out like discolored whip-cord; their faces were the shade of raw beef, steaming with sweat; their eyes protruded with the strain that set their jaws like vises; their chests heaved and shrank like bellows; their backs curved, straightened, and bent again in rhythmic unison as tiring to the eye as the swinging of a pendulum.

Hugging the marshy shore, they rounded the Blackwall Point. Young William looked to Kirkwood, caught his eye, and nodded.

"Here?"

Kirkwood rose, balancing himself against the leap and sway of the boat.

"Sumwhere's ... 'long ... o' 'ere."

From right to left his eager glance swept the river's widening reach. Vessels were there in abundance, odd, unwieldy, blunt-bowed craft with huge, rakish, tawny sails; long strings of flat barges, pyramidal mounds of coal on each, lashed to another and convoyed by panting tugs; steam cargo boats, battered, worn, rusted sore through their age-old paint; a steel leviathan of the deep seas, half cargo, half passenger boat, warping reluctantly into the mouth of the Victoria Dock tidal basin,--but no brigantine, no sailing vessel of any type.

The young man's lips checked a cry that was half a sob of bitter disappointment. He had entered into the spirit of the chase heart and soul, with an enthusiasm that was strange to him, when he came to look back upon the time; and to fail, even though failure had been discounted a hundredfold since the inception of his mad adventure, seemed hard, very hard.

He sat down suddenly. "She's gone!" he cried in a hollow gasp.

The boatmen eased upon their oars, and old Bob stood up in the bows, scanning the river-scape with keen eyes shielded by a level palm. Young William drooped forward suddenly, head upon knees, and breathed convulsively. The boat drifted listlessly with the current.

Old Bob panted: "'Dawn't--see--nawthin'--o' 'er." He resumed his seat.

"There's no hope, I suppose?"

The elder waterman shook his head. "'Carn't sye.... Might be round--nex' bend--might be--passin' Purfleet.... 'Point is--me an' young Wilyum 'ere--carn't do no more--'n we 'as. We be wore out."

"Yes," Kirkwood assented, disconsolate, "You've certainly earned your pay." Then hope revived; he was very young in heart, you know. "Can't you suggest something? I've _got_ to catch that ship!"

Old Bob wagged his head in slow negation; young William lifted his.

"There's a rylewey runs by Woolwich," he ventured. "Yer might tyke tryne an' go to Sheerness, sir. Yer'd be positive o' passin' 'er if she didn't syle afore 'igh-tide. 'Ire a boat at Sheerness an' put out an' look for 'er."

"How far's Woolwich?" Kirkwood demanded instantly.

"Mile," said the elder man. "Tyke yer for five-bob extry."

"Done!"

Young William dashed the sweat from his eyes, wiped his palms on his hips, and fitted the sweeps again to the wooden tholes. Old Bob was as ready. With an inarticulate cry they gave way.

X

DESPERATE MEASURES

Old Bob seemed something inclined toward optimism, when the boat lay alongside a landing-stage at Woolwich, and Kirkwood had clambered ashore.

"Yer'll mebbe myke it," the waterman told him with a weatherwise survey of the skies. "Wind's freshenin' from the east'rds, an' that'll 'old 'er back a bit, sir."

"Arsk th' weye to th' Dorkyard Styshun," young William volunteered. "'Tis

th' shortest walk, sir. I 'opes yer catches 'er.... Thanky, sir."

He caught dextrously the sovereign which Kirkwood, in ungrudging liberality, spared them of his store of two. The American nodded acknowledgments and adieux, with a faded smile deprecating his chances of winning the race, sorely handicapped as he was. He was very, very tired, and in his heart suspected that he would fail. But, if he did, he would at least be able to comfort himself that it was not for lack of trying. He set his teeth on that covenant, in grim determination; either there was a strain of the bulldog latent in the Kirkwood breed or else his infatuation gripped him more strongly than he guessed.

Yet he suspected something of its power; he knew that this was altogether an insane proceeding, and that the lure that led him on was Dorothy Calendar. A strange dull light glowed in his weary eyes, on the thought of her. He'd go through fire and water in her service. She was costing him dear, perhaps was to cost him dearer still; and perhaps there'd be for his guerdon no more than a "Thank you, Mr. Kirkwood!" at the end of the passage. But that would be no less than his deserts; he was not to forget that he was interfering unwarrantably; the girl was in her father's hands, surely safe enough there--to the casual mind. If her partnership in her parent's fortunes were distasteful, she endured it passively, without complaint.

He decided that it was his duty to remind himself, from time to time, that his main interest must be in the game itself, in the solution of the riddle; whatever should befall, he must look for no reward for his gratuitous and self-appointed part. Indeed he was all but successful in persuading himself that it was the fascination of adventure alone that drew him on.

Whatever the lure, it was inexorable; instead of doing as a sensible person would have done--returning to London for a long rest in his hotel room, ere striving to retrieve his shattered fortunes--Philip Kirkwood turned up the village street, intent only to find the railway station and catch the first available train for Sheerness, were that an early one or a late.

A hapchance native whom he presently encountered, furnished minute directions for reaching the Dockyard Station of the Southeastern and Chatham Rail-way, adding comfortable information to the effect that the next east-bound train would pass through in ten minutes; if Kirkwood would mend his pace he could make it easily, with time to spare.

Kirkwood mended his pace accordingly, but, contrary to the prediction, had no time to spare at all. Even as he stormed the ticket-grating, the train was thundering in at the platform. Therefore a nervous ticket agent passed him out a first-class ticket instead of the third-class he had asked for; and there was no time wherein to have the mistake rectified. Kirkwood planked down the fare, swore, and sprinted for the carriages.

The first compartment whose door he jerked violently open, proved to be occupied, and was, moreover, not a smoking-car. He received a fleeting impression of a woman's startled eyes, staring into his own through a thin

mesh of veiling, fell off the running-board, slammed the door, and hurled himself to-wards the next compartment. Here happier fortune attended upon his desire; the box-like section was untenanted, and a notice blown upon the window-glass announced that it was "2nd Class Smoking." Kirkwood promptly tumbled in; and when he turned to shut the door the coaches were moving.

A pipe helped him to bear up while the train was making its two other stops in the Borough of Woolwich: a circumstance so maddening to a man in a hurry, that it set Kirkwood's teeth on edge with sheer impatience, and made him long fervently for the land of his birth, where they do things differently--where the Board of Directors of a railway company doesn't erect three substantial passenger depôts in the course of a mile and a half of overgrown village. It consoled him little that none disputed with him his lonely possession of the compartment, that he had caught the Sheerness train, or that he was really losing no time; a sense of deep dejection had settled down upon his consciousness, with a realization of how completely a fool's errand was this of his. He felt foredoomed to failure; he was never to see Dorothy Calendar again; and his brain seemed numb with disappointment.

Rattling and swaying, the train left the town behind.

Presently he put aside his pipe and stared blankly out at a reeling landscape, the pleasant, homely, smiling countryside of Kent. A deeper melancholy tinted his mind: Dorothy Calendar was for ever lost to him.

The trucks drummed it out persistently--he thought, vindictively:
"_Lost!... Lost!... For ever lost!..._"

And he had made--was then making--a damned fool of himself. The trucks had no need to din that into his thick skull by their ceaseless iteration; he knew it, would not deny it...

And it was all his own fault. He'd had his chance, Calendar had offered him it. If only he had closed with the fat adventurer!...

Before his eyes field and coppice, hedge and homestead, stream and flowing highway, all blurred and ran streakily into one another, like a highly impressionistic water-color. He could make neither head nor tail of the flying views, and so far as coherent thought was concerned, he could not put two ideas together. Without understanding distinctly, he presently did a more wise and wholesome thing: which was to topple limply over on the cushions and fall fast asleep.

* * * * *

After a long time he seemed to realize rather hazily that the carriage-door had been opened to admit somebody. Its smart closing bang shocked him awake. He sat up, blinking in confusion, hardly conscious of more, to begin with, than that the train had paused and was again in full flight. Then, his senses clearing, he became aware that his solitary companion, just entered, was a woman. She was seated over across from him, her back to the

engine, in an attitude which somehow suggested a highly nonchalant frame of mind. She laughed, and immediately her speaking voice was high and sweet in his hearing.

"Really, you know, Mr. Kirkwood, I simply couldn't contain my impatience another instant."

Kirkwood gasped and tried to re-collect his wits.

"Beg pardon--I've been asleep," he said stupidly.

"Yes. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, but, you know, you must make allowances for a woman's nerves."

Beneath his breath the bewildered man said: "The deuce!" and above it, in a stupefied tone: "Mrs. Hallam!"

She nodded in a not unfriendly fashion, smiling brightly. "Myself, Mr. Kirkwood! Really, our predestined paths are badly tangled, just now; aren't they? Were you surprised to find me in here, with you? Come now, confess you were!"

He remarked the smooth, girlish freshness of her cheeks, the sense and humor of her mouth, the veiled gleam of excitement in her eyes of the changing sea; and saw, as well, that she was dressed for traveling, sensibly but with an air, and had brought a small hand-bag with her.

"Surprised and delighted," he replied, recovering, with mendacity so intentional and obvious that the woman laughed aloud.

"I knew you'd be!... You see, I had the carriage ahead, the one you didn't take. I was so disappointed when you flung up to the door and away again! You didn't see me hanging half out the window, to watch where you went, did you? That's how I discovered that your discourtesy was unintentional, that you hadn't recognized me,--by the fact that you took this compartment, right behind my own."

She paused invitingly, but Kirkwood, grown wary, contented himself with picking up his pipe and carefully knocking out the dottle on the window-ledge.

"I was glad to see _you_," she affirmed; "but only partly because you were you, Mr. Kirkwood. The other and major part was because sight of you confirmed my own secret intuition. You see, I'm quite old enough and wise enough to question even my own intuitions."

"A woman wise enough for that is an adult prodigy," he ventured cautiously.

"It's experience and age. I insist upon the age; I the mother of a grown-up boy! So I deliberately ran after you, changing when we stopped at Newington. You might've escaped me if I had waited until We got to Queensborough."

Again she paused in open expectancy. Kirkwood, perplexed, put the pipe in his pocket, and assumed a factitious look of resignation, regarding her askance with that whimsical twist of his eyebrows.

"For you are going to Queensborough, aren't you, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Queensborough?" he echoed blankly; and, in fact, he was at a loss to follow her drift. "No, Mrs. Hallam; I'm not bound there."

Her surprise was apparent; she made no effort to conceal it. "But," she faltered, "if not there--"

"Give you my word, Mrs. Hallam, I have no intention whatever of going to Queensborough," Kirkwood protested.

"I don't understand." The nervous drumming of a patent-leather covered toe, visible beneath the hem of her dress, alone betrayed a rising tide of impatience. "Then my intuition was at fault!"

"In this instance, if it was at all concerned with my insignificant affairs, yes--most decidedly at fault."

She shook her head, regarding him with grave suspicion. "I hardly know: whether to believe you. I think...."

Kirkwood's countenance displayed an added shade of red. After a moment, "I mean no discourtesy," he began stiffly, "but--"

"But you don't care a farthing whether I believe you or not?"

He caught her laughing eye, and smiled, the flush subsiding.

"Very well, then! Now let us see: Where are you bound?"

Kirkwood looked out of the window.

"I'm convinced it's a rendezvous...?"

Kirkwood smiled patiently at the landscape.

"Is Dorothy Calendar so very, very beautiful, Mr. Kirkwood?"--with a trace of malice.

Ostentatiously Kirkwood read the South Eastern and Chatham's framed card of warning, posted just above Mrs. Hallam's head, to all such incurable lunatics as are possessed of a desire to travel on the running-boards of railway carriages.

"You are going to meet her, aren't you?"

He gracefully concealed a yawn.

The woman's plan of attack took another form. "Last night, when you told me

your story, I believed you."

He devoted himself to suppressing the temptingly obvious retort, and succeeded; but though he left it unspoken, the humor of it twitched the corners of his mouth; and Mrs. Hallam was observant. So that her next attempt to draw him out was edged with temper.

"I believed you an American but a gentleman; it appears that, if you ever were the latter, you've fallen so low that you willingly cast your lot with thieves."

Having exhausted his repertoire of rudenesses, Kirkwood took to twiddling his thumbs.

"I want to ask you if you think it fair to me or my son, to leave us in ignorance of the place where you are to meet the thieves who stole our--my son's jewels?"

"Mrs. Hallam," he said soberly, "if I am going to meet Mr. Calendar or Mr. Mulready, I have no assurance of that fact."

There was only the briefest of pauses, during which she analyzed this; then, quickly, "But you hope to?" she snapped.

He felt that the only adequate retort to this would be a shrug of his shoulders; doubted his ability to carry one off; and again took refuge in silence.

The woman abandoned a second plan of siege, with a readiness that did credit to her knowledge of mankind. She thought out the next very carefully, before opening with a masked battery.

"Mr. Kirkwood, can't we be friends--this aside?"

"Nothing could please me more, Mrs. Hallam!"

"I'm sorry if I've annoyed you--"

"And I, too, have been rude."

"Last night, when you cut away so suddenly, you prevented my making you a proposal, a sort of a business proposition...."

"Yes--?"

"To come over to our side--"

"I thought so. That was why I went."

"Yes; I understood. But this morning, when you've had time to think it over--?"

"I have no choice in the matter, Mrs. Hallam." The green eyes darkened

ominously. "You mean--I am to understand, then, that you're against us, that you prefer to side with swindlers and scoundrels, all because of a--"

She discovered him eying her with a smile of such inscrutable and sardonic intelligence, that the words died on her lips, and she crimsoned, treasonably to herself. For he saw it; and the belief he had conceived while attending to her tissue of fabrication, earlier that morning, was strengthened to the point of conviction that, if anything had been stolen by anybody, Mrs. Hallam and her son owned it as little as Calendar.

As for the woman, she felt she had steadily lost, rather than gained, ground; and the flash of anger that had colored her cheeks, lit twin beacons in her eyes, which she resolutely fought down until they faded to mere gleams of resentment and determination. But she forgot to control her lips; and they are the truest indices to a woman's character and temperament; and Kirkwood did not overlook the circumstance that their specious sweetness had vanished, leaving them straight, set and hard, quite the reverse of attractive.

"So," she said slowly, after a silent time, "you are not for Queensborough! The corollary of that _admission_, Mr. Kirkwood, is that you are for Sheerness."

"I believe," he replied wearily, "that there are no other stations on this line, after Newington."

"It follows, then, that--that I follow." And in answer to his perturbed glance, she added: "Oh, I'll grant that intuition is sometimes a poor guide. But if you meet George Calendar, so shall I. Nothing can prevent that. You can't hinder me."

Considerably amused, he chuckled. "Let us talk of other things, Mrs. Hallam," he suggested pleasantly. "How is your son?"

At this juncture the brakes began to shriek and grind upon the wheels. The train slowed; it stopped; and the voice of a guard could be heard admonishing passengers for Queensborough Pier to alight and take the branch line. In the noise the woman's response was drowned, and Kirkwood was hardly enough concerned for poor Freddie to repeat his question.

When, after a little, the train pulled out of the junction, neither found reason to resume the conversation. During the brief balance of the journey Mrs. Hallam presumably had food for thought; she frowned, pursed her lips, and with one daintily gloved forefinger followed a seam of her tailored skirt; while Kirkwood sat watching and wondering how to rid himself of her, if she proved really as troublesome as she threatened to be.

Also, he wondered continually what it was all about. Why did Mrs. Hallam suspect him of designing to meet Calendar at Queensborough? Had she any tangible ground for believing that Calendar could be found in Queensborough? Presumably she had, since she was avowedly in pursuit of that gentleman, and, Kirkwood inferred, had booked for Queensborough. Was he, then, running away from Calendar and his daughter to chase a

will-o'-the-wisp of his credulous fancy, off Sheerness shore?

Disturbing reflection. He scowled over it, then considered the other side of the face. Presuming Mrs. Hallam to have had reasonably dependable assurance that Calendar would stop in Queensborough, would she so readily have abandoned her design to catch him there, on the mere supposition that Kirkwood might be looking for him in Sheerness? That did not seem likely to one who esteemed Mrs. Hallam's acumen as highly as Kirkwood did. He brightened up, forgot that his was a fool's errand, and began again to project strategic plans into a problematic future.

A sudden jolt interrupted this pastime, and the warning screech of the brakes informed that he had no time to scheme, but had best continue on the plan of action that had brought him thus far--that is, trust to his star and accept what should befall without repining.

He rose, opened the door, and holding it so, turned.

"I regret, Mrs. Hallam," he announced, smiling his crooked smile, "that a pressing engagement is about to prohibit my 'squiring you through the ticket-gates. You understand, I'm sure."

His irrepressible humor proved infectious; and Mrs. Hallam's spirit ran as high as his own. She was smiling cheerfully when she, too, rose.

"I also am in some haste," she averred demurely, gathering up her hand-bag and umbrella.

A raised platform shot in beside the carriage, and the speed was so sensibly moderated that the train seemed to be creeping rather than running. Kirkwood flung the door wide open and lowered himself to the running-board. The end of the track was in sight and--a man who has been trained to board San Francisco cable-cars fears to alight from no moving vehicle. He swung off, got his balance, and ran swiftly down the platform.

A cry from a bystander caused him to glance over his shoulder; Mrs. Hallam was then in the act of alighting. As he looked the flurry of skirts subsided and she fell into stride, pursuing.

Sleepy Sheerness must have been scandalized, that day, and its gossips have acquired ground for many, an uncharitable surmise.

Kirkwood, however, was so fortunate as to gain the wicket before the employee there awoke to the situation. Otherwise, such is the temper of British petty officialdom, he might have detained the fugitive. As it was, Kirkwood surrendered his ticket and ran out into the street with his luck still a dominant factor in the race. For, looking back, he saw that Mrs. Hallam had been held up at the gate, another victim of British red-tape; her ticket read for Queensborough, she was attempting to alight one station farther down the line, and while undoubtedly she was anxious to pay the excess fare, Heaven alone knew when she would succeed in allaying the suspicions and resentment of the ticket-taker.

"That's good for ten minutes' start!" Kirkwood crowed. "And it never occurred to me--!"

Before the station he found two hacks in waiting, with little to choose between them; neither was of a type that did not seem to advertise its pre-Victorian fashioning, and to neither was harnessed an animal that deserved anything but the epithet of screw. Kirkwood took the nearest for no other reason than because it was the nearest, and all but startled the driver off his box by offering double-fare for a brisk pace and a simple service at the end of the ride. Succinctly he set forth his wants, jumped into the antiquated four-wheeler, and threw himself down upon musty, dusty cushions to hug himself over the joke and bless whatever English board of railway, directors it was that first ordained that tickets should be taken up at the end instead of the outset of a journey.

It was promptly made manifest that he had further cause for gratulation. The cabby, recovering from his amazement, was plying an indefatigable whip and thereby eliciting a degree of speed from his superannuated nag, that his fare had by no means hoped for, much less anticipated. The cab rocked and racketed through Sheerness' streets at a pace which is believed to be unprecedented and unrivaled; its passenger, dashed from side to side, had all he could do to keep from battering the vehicle to pieces with his head; while it was entirely out of the question to attempt to determine whether or not he was being pursued. He enjoyed it all hugely.

In a period of time surprisingly short, he saw, from fleeting glimpses of the scenery to be obtained through the reeling windows, that they were threading the outskirts of the town; synchronously, whether by design or through actual inability to maintain it, the speed was moderated. And in the course of a few more minutes the cab stopped definitely.

Kirkwood clambered painfully out, shook himself together and the bruises out of his bones, and looked fearfully back.

Aside from a slowly settling cloud of dust, the road ran clear as far as he could see--to the point, in fact, where the town closed in about it.

He had won; at all events in so much as to win meant eluding the persevering Mrs. Hallam. But to what end?

Abstractedly he tendered his lonely sovereign to the driver, and without even looking at it, crammed the heavy weight of change into his pocket; an oversight which not only won him the awe-struck admiration of the cabby, but entailed consequences (it may be) he little apprehended. It was with an absentminded nod that he acquiesced in the man's announcement that he might arrange about the boat for him. Accordingly the cabby disappeared; and Kirkwood continued to stare about him, eagerly, hopefully.

He stood on the brink of the Thames estuary, there a possible five miles from shore to shore; from his feet, almost, a broad shingle beach sloped gently to the water.

On one hand a dilapidated picket-fence enclosed the door-yard of a

fisherman's cottage, or, better, hovel,--if it need be accurately described--at the door of which the cabby was knocking.

The morning was now well-advanced. The sun rode high, a sphere of tarnished flame in a void of silver-gray, its thin cold radiance striking pallid sparks from the leaping crests of wind-whipped waves. In the east a wall of vapor, dull and lusterless, had taken body since the dawn, masking the skies and shutting down upon the sea like some vast curtain; and out of the heart of this a bitter and vicious wind played like a sword.

To the north, Shoeburyness loomed vaguely, like a low-drifted bank of cloud. Off to the right the Nore Lightship danced, a tiny fleck of warm crimson in a wilderness of slatey-blue waters, plumed with a myriad of vanishing white-caps.

Up the shelving shore, small, puny wavelets dashed in impotent fury, and the shingle sang unceasingly its dreary, syncopated monotone. High and dry, a few dingy boats lay canted wearily upon their broad, swelling sides,--a couple of dories, apparently in daily use; a small sloop yacht, dismantled and plainly beyond repair; and an oyster-smack also out of commission. About them the beach was strewn with a litter of miscellany,--nets, oars, cork buoys, bits of wreckage and driftwood, a few fish too long forgotten and (one assumed) responsible in part for the foreign wealth of the atmosphere.

Some little distance offshore a fishing-boat, catrigged and not more than twenty-feet over all, swung bobbing at her mooring, keen nose searching into the wind; at sight of which Kirkwood gave thanks, for his adventitious guide had served him well, if that boat were to be hired by any manner of persuasion.

But it was to the farther reaches of the estuary that he gave more prolonged and most anxious heed, scanning narrowly what shipping was there to be seen. Far beyond the lightship a liner was riding the waves with serene contempt, making for the river's mouth and Tilbury Dock. Nearer in, a cargo boat was standing out upon the long trail, the white of riven waters showing clearly against her unclean freeboard. Out to east a little covey of fishing-smacks, red sails well reefed, were scudding before the wind like strange affrighted water-fowl, and bearing down past a heavy-laden river barge. The latter, with tarpaulin battened snugly down over the cockpit and the seas dashing over her wash-board until she seemed under water half the time, was forging stodgily Londonwards, her bargee at the tiller smoking a placid pipe.

But a single sailing vessel of any notable tonnage was in sight; and when he saw her Kirkwood's heart became buoyant with hope, and he began to tremble with nervous eagerness. For he believed her to be the Alethea.

There's no mistaking a ship brigantine-rigged for any other style of craft that sails the seas.

From her position when first he saw her, Kirkwood could have fancied she was tacking out of the mouth of the Medway; but he judged that, leaving the

Thames' mouth, she had tacked to starboard until well-nigh within hail of Sheerness. Now, having presumably, gone about, she was standing out toward the Nore, boring doggedly into the wind. He would have given a deal for glasses wherewith to read the name upon her bows, but was sensible of no hampering doubts; nor, had he harbored any, would they have deterred him. He had set his heart upon the winning of his venture, had come too far, risked far too much, to suffer anything now to stay his hand and stand between him and Dorothy Calendar. Whatever the further risks and hazards, though he should take his life in his hands to win to her side, he would struggle on. He recked nothing of personal danger; a less selfish passion ran molten in his veins, moving him to madness.

Fascinated, he fixed his gaze upon the reeling brigantine, and for a space it was as if by longing he had projected his spirit to her slanting deck, and were there, pleading his case with the mistress of his heart....

Voices approaching brought him back to shore. He turned, resuming his mask of sanity, the better to confer with the owner of the cottage and boats--a heavy, keen-eyed fellow, ungracious and truculent of habit, and chary of his words; as he promptly demonstrated.

"I'll hire your boat," Kirkwood told him, "to put me aboard that brigantine, off to leeward. We ought to start at once."

The fisherman shifted his quid of tobacco from cheek to cheek, grunted inarticulately, and swung deliberately on his heel, displaying a bull neck above a pair of heavy shoulders.

"Dirty weather," he croaked, facing back from his survey of the eastern skies before the American found out whether or not he should resent his insolence.

"How much?" Kirkwood demanded curtly, annoyed.

The man hesitated, scowling blackly at the heeling vessel, momentarily increasing her distance from shore. Then with a crafty smile, "Two pound'," he declared.

The American nodded. "Very well," he agreed simply. "Get out your boat."

The fisherman turned away to shamle noisily over the shingle, huge booted heels crunching, toward one of the dories. To this he set his shoulder, shoving it steadily down the beach until only the stern was dry.

Kirkwood looked back, for the last time, up the road to Sheerness. Nothing moved upon it. He was rid of Mrs. Hallam, if face to face with a sterner problem. He had a few pence over ten shillings in his pocket, and had promised to pay the man four times as much. He would have agreed to ten times the sum demanded; for the boat he must and would have. But he had neglected to conclude his bargain, to come to an understanding as to the method of payment; and he felt more than a little dubious as to the reception the fisherman would give his proposition, sound as he, Kirkwood, knew it to be.

In the background the cabby loitered, gnawed by insatiable curiosity.

The fisherman turned, calling over his shoulder: "If ye'd catch yon vessel, come!"

With one final twinge of doubt--the task of placating this surly dog was anything but inviting--the American strode to the boat and climbed in, taking the stern seat. The fisherman shoved off, wading out thigh-deep in the spiteful waves, then threw himself in over the gunwales and shipped the oars. Bows swinging offshore, rocking and dancing, the dory began to forge slowly toward the anchored boat. In their faces the wind beat gustily, and small, slapping waves, breaking against the sides, showered them with fine spray....

In time the dory lay alongside the cat-boat, the fisherman with a gnarled hand grasping the latter's gunwale to hold the two together. With some difficulty Kirkwood transhipped himself, landing asprawl in the cockpit, amid a tangle of cordage slippery with scales. The skipper followed, with clumsy expertness bringing the dory's painter with him and hitching it to a ring-bolt abaft the rudder-head. Then, pausing an instant to stare into the East with somber eyes, he shipped the tiller and bent to the halyards. As the sail rattled up, flapping wildly, Kirkwood marked with relief--for it meant so much time saved--that it was already close reefed.

But when at least the boom was thrashing overhead and the halyards had been made fast to their cleats, the fisherman again stood erect, peering distrustfully at the distant wall of cloud.

Then, in two breaths: "Can't do it," he decided; "not at the price."

"Why?" Kirkwood stared despairingly after the brigantine, that was already drawn far ahead.

"Danger," growled the fellow, "--wind."

At a loss completely, Kirkwood found no words. He dropped his head, considering.

"Not at the price," the sullen voice iterated; and he looked up to find the cunning gaze upon him.

"How much, then?"

"Five poun' I'll have--no less, for riskin' my life this day."

"Impossible. I haven't got it."

In silence the man unshipped the tiller and moved toward the cleats.

"Hold on a minute."

Kirkwood unbuttoned his coat and, freeing the chain from his waistcoat

buttonholes, removed his watch.... As well abandon them altogether; he had designed to leave them as security for the two pounds, and had delayed stating the terms only for fear lest they be refused. Now, too late as ever, he recognized his error. But surely, he thought, it should be apparent even to that low intelligence that the timepiece alone was worth more than the boat itself.

"Will you take these?" he offered. "Take and keep them--only set me aboard that ship!"

Deliberately the fisherman weighed the watch and chain in his broad, hard palm, eyes narrowing to mere slits in his bronzed mask.

"How much?" he asked slowly.

"Eighty pounds, together; the chain alone cost me twenty."

The shifty, covetous eyes ranged from the treasure in his hand to the threatening east. A puff of wind caught the sail and sent the boom athwartships, like a mighty flail. Both men ducked instinctively, to escape a braining.

"How do I know?" objected the skipper.

"I'm telling you. If you've got eyes, you can see," retorted Kirkwood savagely, seeing that he had erred in telling the truth; the amount he had named was too great to be grasped at once by this crude, cupidous brain.

"How do I know?" the man repeated. Nevertheless he dropped watch and chain into his pocket, then with a meaning grimace extended again his horny, greedy palm.

"What...?"

"Hand over th' two pound' and we'll go."

"I'll see you damned first!"

A flush of rage blinded the young man. The knowledge that the Alethea was minute by minute slipping beyond his reach seemed to madden him. White-lipped and ominously quiet he rose from his seat on the combing, as, without answer, the fisherman, crawling out on the overhand, began to haul in the dory.

"Ashore ye go," he pronounced his ultimatum, motioning Kirkwood to enter the boat.

The American turned, looking for the Alethea, or for the vessel that he believed bore that name. She was nearing the light-ship when he found her, and as he looked a squall blurred the air between them, blotting the brigantine out with a smudge of rain. The effect was as if she had vanished, as if she were for ever snatched from his grasp; and with Dorothy aboard her--Heaven alone knew in what need of him!

Mute and blind with despair and wrath, he turned upon the man and caught him by the collar, forcing him out over the lip of the overhang. They were unevenly matched, Kirkwood far the slighter, but strength came to him in the crisis, physical strength and address such as he had not dreamed was at his command. And the surprise of his onslaught proved an ally of unguessed potency. Before he himself knew it he was standing on the overhang and had shifted his hold to seize the fellow about the waist; then, lifting him clear of the deck, and aided by a lurch of the cat-boat, he cast him bodily into the dory. The man, falling, struck his head against one of the thwarts, a glancing blow that stunned him temporarily. Kirkwood himself dropped as if shot, a trailing reef-point slapping his cheek until it stung as the boom thrashed overhead. It was as close a call as he had known; the knowledge sickened him a little.

Without rising he worked the painter loose and cast the dory adrift; then crawled back into the cockpit. No pang of compassion disturbed him as he abandoned the fisherman to the mercy of the sea; though the fellow lay still, uncouthly distorted, in the bottom of the dory, he was in no danger; the wind and waves together would carry the boat ashore.... For that matter, the man was even then recovering, struggling to sit up.

Crouching to avoid the boom, Kirkwood went forward to the bows, and, grasping the mooring cable, drew it in, slipping back into the cockpit to get a stronger purchase with his feet. It was a struggle; the boat pulled sluggishly against the wind, the cable inching in jealously. And behind him he could hear a voice bellowing inarticulate menaces, and knew that in another moment the fisherman would be at his oars.

Frantically he tugged and tore at the slimy rope, hauling with a will and a prayer. It gave more readily, towards the end, but he seemed to have fought with it for ages when at last the anchor tripped and he got it in.

Immediately he leaped back to the stern, fitted in the tiller, and seizing the mainsheet, drew the boom in till the wind should catch in the canvas. In the dory the skipper, bending at his oars, was not two yards astern.

He was hard aboard when, the sail filling with a bang, Kirkwood pulled the tiller up; and the cat-boat slid away, a dozen feet separating them in a breath.

A yell of rage boomed down the wind, but he paid no heed. Careless alike of the dangers he had passed and those that yawned before him, he trimmed the sheet and stood away on the port tack, heading directly for the Nore Lightship.

Kirkwood's anger cooled apace; at worst it had been a flare of passion--incandescent. It was seldom more. His brain clearing, the temperature of his judgment quickly regained its mean, and he saw his chances without distortion, weighed them without exaggeration.

Leaning against the combing, feet braced upon the slippery and treacherous deck, he clung to tiller and mainsheet and peered ahead with anxious eyes, a pucker of daring graven deep between his brows.

A mile to westward, three or more ahead, he could see the brigantine standing close in under the Essex shore. At times she was invisible; again he could catch merely the glint of her canvas, white against the dark loom of the littoral, toned by a mist of flying spindrift. He strained his eyes, watching for the chance which would take place in the rake of her masts and sails, when she should come about.

For the longer that manoeuver was deferred, the better was his chance of attaining his object. It was a forlorn hope. But in time the brigantine, to escape Maplin Sands, would be forced to tack and stand out past the lightship, the wind off her port bows. Then their courses would intersect. It remained to be demonstrated whether the cat-boat was speedy enough to arrive at this point of contact in advance of, or simultaneously with, the larger vessel. Every minute that the putative *Alethea* put off coming about brought the cat-boat nearer that goal, but Kirkwood could do no more than hope and try to trust in the fisherman's implied admission that it could be done. It was all in the boat and the way she handled.

He watched her anxiously, quick to approve her merits as she displayed them. He had sailed small craft before--frail center-board cat-boats, handy and swift, built to serve in summer winds and protected waters: never such an one as this. Yet he liked her.

Deep bosomed she was, with no center-board, dependent on her draught and heavy keel to hold her on the wind; stanch and seaworthy, sheathed with stout plank and ribbed with seasoned timber, designed to keep afloat in the wickedest weather brewed by the foul-tempered German Ocean. Withal her lines were fine and clean; for all her beam she was calculated to nose narrowly into the wind and make a pretty pace as well. A good boat: he had the grace to give the credit to his luck.

Her disposition was more fully disclosed as they drew away from the beach. Inshore with shoaling water, the waves had been choppy and spiteful but lacking force of weight. Farther out, as the bottom fell away, the rollers became more uniform and powerful; heavy sweeping seas met the cat-boat, from their hollows looming mountainous to the man in the tiny cockpit; who was nevertheless aware that to a steamer they would be negligible.

His boat breasted them gallantly, toiling sturdily up the steep acclivities, poising breathlessly on foam-crested summits for dizzy instants, then plunging headlong down the deep green swales; and left a boiling wake behind her,--urging ever onward, hugging the wind in her wisp of blood-red sail, and boring into it, pulling at the tiller with the

mettle of a race-horse slugging at the bit.

Offshore, too, the wind stormed with added strength, or, possibly, had freshened. For minutes on end the leeward gunwales would run green, and now and again the screaming, pelting squalls that scoured the estuary would heel her over until the water cascaded in over the lee combing, and the rudder, lifted clear, would hang idle until, smitten by some racing billow, the tiller would be all but torn from Kirkwood's hands. Again and again this happened; and those were times of trembling. But always the cat-boat righted, shaking the clinging waters from her and swinging her stem into the wind again; and there would follow an abbreviated breathing spell, during which Kirkwood was at liberty to dash the salt spray from his eyes and search the wind-harried waste for the brigantine. Sometimes he found her, sometimes not.

Long after he had expected her to, she went about and they began to close in upon each other. He could see that even with shortened canvas she was staggering drunkenly under the fierce impacts of the wind. For himself, it was nip-and-tuck, now, and no man in his normal sense would have risked a sixpence on the boat's chance to live until she crossed the brigantine's bows.

Time out of reckoning he was forced to kneel in the swimming cockpit, steering with one hand, using the bailing-dish with the other, and keeping his eyes religiously turned to the bellying patch of sail. It was heartbreaking toil; he began reluctantly to concede that it could not last much longer. And if he missed the brigantine he would be lost; mortal strength was not enough to stand the unending strain upon every bone, muscle and sinew, required to keep the boat upon her course; though for a time it might cope with and solve the problems presented by each new, malignant billow and each furious, howling squall, the end inevitably must be failure. To struggle on would be but to postpone the certain end ... save and except the possibility of his gaining the brigantine within the period of time strictly and briefly limited by his powers of endurance.

Long since he had become numb with cold from incessant drenchings of icy spray, that piled in over the windward counter, keeping the bottom ankle-deep regardless of his laborious but intermittent efforts with the bailing dish. And the two, brigantine and cockle-shell, were drawing together with appalling deliberation.

A dozen times he was on the point of surrender, as often plucked up hope; as the minutes wore on and he kept above water, he began to believe that if he could stick it out his judgment and seamanship would be justified ... though human ingenuity backed by generosity could by no means contrive adequate excuse for his foolhardiness.

But that was aside, something irreparable. Wan and grim, he fought it out.

But that his voice stuck in his parched throat, he could have shouted in his elation, when eventually he gained the point of intersection an eighth of a mile ahead of the brigantine and got sight of her windward freeboard as, most slowly, the cat-boat forged across her course.

For all that, the moment of his actual triumph was not yet; he had still to carry off successfully a scheme that for sheer audacity of conception and contempt for danger, transcended all that had gone before.

Holding the cat-boat on for a time, he brought her about handsomely a little way beyond the brigantine's course, and hung in the eye of the wind, the leach flapping and tightening with reports like rifle-shots, and the water sloshing about his calves--bailing-dish now altogether out of mind--while he watched the oncoming vessel, his eyes glistening with anticipation.

She was footing it smartly, the brigantine--lying down to it and snoring into the wind. Beneath her stem waves broke in snow-white showers, whiter than the canvas of her bulging jib--broke and, gnashing their teeth in impotent fury, swirled and eddied down her sleek dark flanks. Bobbing, courtesying, she plunged onward, shortening the interval with mighty, leaping bounds. On her bows, with each instant, the golden letters of her name grew larger and more legible until--_Alethea_!--he could read it plain beyond dispute.

Joy welled in his heart. He forgot all that he had undergone in the prospect of what he proposed still to do in the name of the only woman the world held for him. Unquestioning he had come thus far in her service; unquestioning, by her side, he was prepared to go still farther, though all humanity should single her out with accusing fingers....

They were watching him, aboard the brigantine; he could see a line of heads above her windward rail. Perhaps _she_ was of their number. He waved an audacious hand. Some one replied, a great shout shattering itself unintelligibly against the gale. He neither understood nor attempted to reply; his every faculty was concentrated on the supreme moment now at hand.

Calculating the instant to a nicety, he paid off the sheet and pulled up the tiller. The cat-boat pivoted on her heel; with a crack her sail flapped full and rigid; then, with the untempered might of the wind behind her, she shot like an arrow under the brigantine's bows, so close that the bowsprit of the latter first threatened to impale the sail, next, the bows plunging, crashed down a bare two feet behind the cat-boat's stern.

Working in a frenzy of haste, Kirkwood jammed the tiller hard alee, bringing the cat about, and, trimming the mainsheet as best he might, found himself racing under the brigantine's leeward quarter,--water pouring in generously over the cat's.

Luffing, he edged nearer, handling his craft as though intending to ram the larger vessel, foot by foot shortening the little interval. When it was four feet, he would risk the jump; he crawled out on the overhang, crouching on his toes, one hand light upon the tiller, the other touching the deck, ready ... ready....

Abruptly the _Alethea_ shut off the wind; the sail flattened and the cat

dropped back. In a second the distance had doubled. In anguish Kirkwood uttered an exceeding bitter cry. Already he was falling far off her counter....

A shout reached him. He was dimly conscious of a dark object hurtling through the air. Into the cockpit, splashing, something dropped--a coil of rope. He fell forward upon it, into water eighteen inches deep; and for the first time realized that, but for that line, he had gone to his drowning in another minute. The cat was sinking.

As he scrambled to his feet, clutching the life-line, a heavy wave washed over the water-logged craft and left it all but submerged; and a smart tug on the rope added point to the advice which, reaching his ears in a bellow like a bull's, penetrated the panic of his wits.

"Jump! _Jump, you fool_!"

In an instant of coherence he saw that the brigantine was luffing; none the less much of the line had already been paid out, and there was no reckoning when the end would be reached. Without time to make it fast, he hitched it twice round his waist and chest, once round an arm, and, grasping it above his head to ease its constriction when the tug should come, leaped on the combing and overboard. A green roaring avalanche swept down upon him and the luckless cat-boat, overwhelming both simultaneously.

The agony that was his during the next few minutes can by no means be exaggerated. With such crises the human mind is not fitted adequately to cope; it retains no record of the supreme moment beyond a vague and incoherent impression of poignant, soul-racking suffering. Kirkwood underwent a prolonged interval of semi-sentience, his mind dominated and oppressed by a deathly fear of drowning and a deadening sense of suffocation, with attendant tortures as of being broken on the wheel--limb rending from limb; of compression of his ribs that threatened momentarily to crush in his chest; of a world a-welter with dim swirling green half-lights alternating with flashes of blinding white; of thunderings in his ears like salvos from a thousand cannon....

And his senses were blotted out in blackness....

Then he was breathing once more, the keen clean air stabbing his lungs, the while he swam unsupported in an ethereal void of brilliance. His mouth was full of something that burned, a liquid hot, acrid, and stinging. He gulped, swallowed, slobbered, choked, coughed, attempted to sit up, was aware that he was the focal center of a ring of glaring, burning eyes, like eyes of ravening beasts; and fainted.

His next conscious impression was of standing up, supported by friendly arms on either side, while somebody was asking him if he could walk a step or two.

He lifted his head and let it fall in token of assent, mumbling a yes; and looked round him with eyes wherein the light of intelligence burned more clear with every second. By degrees he catalogued and comprehended his

weirdly altered circumstances and surroundings.

He was partly seated, partly held up, on the edge of the cabin sky-light, an object of interest to some half-dozen men, seafaring fellows all, by their habit, clustered round between him and the windward rail. Of their number one stood directly before him, dwarfing his companions as much by his air of command as by his uncommon height: tall, thin-faced and sallow, with hollow weather-worn cheeks, a mouth like a crooked gash from ear to ear, and eyes like dying coals, with which he looked the rescued up and down in one grim, semi-humorous, semi-speculative glance. In hands both huge and red he fondled tenderly a squat brandy flask whose contents had apparently been employed as a first aid to the drowning.

As Kirkwood's gaze encountered his, the man smiled sourly, jerking his head to one side with a singularly derisive air.

"Hi, matey!" he blustered. "'Ow goes it now? Feelin' 'appier, eigh?"

[Illustration: "Hi, matey!" he blustered. "'Ow goes it now?"]

"Some, thank you ... more like a drowned rat." Kirkwood eyed him sheepishly. "I suppose you're the man who threw me that line? I'll have to wait till my head clears up before I can thank you properly."

"Don't mention it." He of the lantern jaws stowed the bottle away with jealous care in one of his immense coat pockets, and seized Kirkwood's hand in a grasp that made the young man wince. "You're syfe enough now. My nyme's Stryker, Capt'n Wilyum Stryker.... Wot's the row? Lookin' for a friend?" he demanded suddenly, as Kirkwood's attention wandered.

For the memory of the errand that had brought him into the hands of Captain William Stryker had come to the young man very suddenly; and his eager eyes were swiftly roving not along the decks but the wide world besides, for sight or sign of his heart's desire.

After luffing to pick him up, the brigantine had been again pulled off on the port tack. The fury of the gale seemed rather to have waxed than waned, and the *Alethea* was bending low under the relentless fury of its blasts, driving hard, with leeward channels awash. Under her port counter, a mile away, the crimson light-ship wallowed in a riot of breaking combers. Sheerness lay abeam, five miles or more. Ahead the northeast headland of the Isle of Sheppey was bulking large and near. The cat-boat had vanished....

More important still, no one aboard the brigantine resembled in the remotest degree either of the Calendars, father or daughter, or even Mulready, the black-avised.

"I sye, 're you lookin' for some one you know?"

"Yes--your passengers. I presume they're below--?"

"Passengers!"

A hush fell upon the group, during which Kirkwood sought Stryker's eye in pitiful pleading; and Stryker looked round him blankly.

"Where's Miss Calendar?" the young man demanded sharply. "I must see her at once!"

The keen and deep-set eyes of the skipper clouded as they returned to Kirkwood's perturbed countenance. "Wot're you talking about?" he demanded brusquely.

"I must see Miss Calendar, or Calendar himself, or Mulready." Kirkwood paused, and, getting no reply, grew restive under Stryker's inscrutable regard.

"That's why I came aboard," he amended, blind to the absurdity of the statement; "to see--er--Calendar."

"Well ... I'm damned!"

Stryker managed to infuse into his tone a deal of suspicious contempt.

"Why?" insisted Kirkwood, nettled but still uncomprehending.

"D'you mean to tell me you came off from--wherever in 'ell you did come from--intendin' to board this wessel and find a party nymed Calendar?"

"Certainly I did. Why--?"

"Well!" cried Mr. Stryker, rubbing his hands together with an air oppressively obsequious, "I'm sorry to _hin_-form you you've come to the wrong shop, sir; we don't stock no Calendars. We're in the 'ardware line, we are. You might try next door, or I dessay you'll find what you want at the stytioner's, round the corner."

A giggle from his audience stimulated him. "If," he continued acidly, "I'd a-guessed you was such a damn' fool, blimmy if I wouldn't've let you drown!"

Staggered, Kirkwood bore his sarcastic truculence without resentment.

"Calendar," he stammered, trying to explain, "Calendar _said_--"

"I can't 'elp wot Calendar said. Mebbe 'e _did_ myke an engyement with you, an' you've gone and went an' forgot the dyte. Mebbe it's larst year's calendar you're thinkin' of. You Johnny" (to a lout of a boy in the group of seamen), "you run an' fetch this gentleman Whitaker's for Nineteen-six. Look sharp, now!"

"But--!" With an effort Kirkwood mustered up a show of dignity. "Am I to understand," he said, as calmly as he could, "that you deny knowing George B. Calendar and his daughter Dorothy and--"

"I don't 'ave to. Listen to me, young man." For the time the fellow discarded his clumsy facetiousness. "I'm Wilyum Stryker, Capt'n Stryker, marster and 'arf-owner of this wessel, and wot I says 'ere is law. We don't carry no passengers. D'ye understand me?"--aggressively. "There ain't no pusson nymed Calendar aboard the _Allytheer_, an' never was, an' never will be!"

"What name did you say?" Kirkwood inquired.

"This ship? The _Allytheer_; registered from Liverpool; bound from London to Hantwerp, in cargo. Anythink else?"

Kirkwood shook his head, turning to scan the seascape with a gloomy gaze. As he did so, and remarked how close upon the Sheppey headland the brigantine had drawn, the order was given to go about. For the moment he was left alone, wretchedly wet, shivering, wan and shrunken visibly with the knowledge that he had dared greatly for nothing. But for the necessity of keeping up before Stryker and his crew, the young man felt that he could gladly have broken down and wept for sheer vexation and disappointment.

Smartly the brigantine luffed and wore about, heeling deep as she spun away on the starboard tack.

Kirkwood staggered round the skylight to the windward rail. From this position, looking forward, he could see that they were heading for the open sea, Foulness low over the port quarter, naught before them but a brawling waste of leaden-green and dirty white. Far out one of the sidewheel boats of the Queensborough-Antwerp line was heading directly into the wind and making heavy weather of it.

Some little while later, Stryker again approached him, perhaps swayed by an unaccustomed impulse of compassion; which, however, he artfully concealed. Blandly ironic, returning to his impersonation of the shopkeeper, "Nothink else we can show you, sir?" he inquired.

"I presume you couldn't put me ashore?" Kirkwood replied ingenuously.

In supreme disgust the captain showed him his back. "'Ere, you!" he called to one of the crew. "Tyke this awye--tyke 'im below and put 'im to bed; give 'im a drink and dry 'is clo's. Mebbe 'e'll be better when 'e wykes up. 'E don't talk sense now, that's sure. If you arsk me, I sye 'e's balmy and no 'ope for 'im."

XII

PICARESQUE PASSAGES

Contradictory to the hopeful prognosis of Captain Stryker, his unaccredited passenger was not "better" when, after a period of oblivious rest

indefinite in duration, he awoke. His subsequent assumption of listless resignation, of pacific acquiescence in the dictates of his destiny, was purely deceptive--thin ice of despair over profound depths of exasperated rebellion.

Blank darkness enveloped him when first he opened eyes to wonder. Then gradually as he stared, piecing together unassorted memories and striving to quicken drowsy wits, he became aware of a glimmer that waxed and waned, a bar of pale bluish light striking across the gloom above his couch; and by dint of puzzling divined that this had access by a port. Turning his head upon a stiff and unyielding pillow, he could discern a streak of saffron light lining the sill of a doorway, near by his side. The one phenomenon taken with the other confirmed a theretofore somewhat hazy impression that his dreams were dignified by a foundation of fact; that, in brief, he was occupying a cabin-bunk aboard the good ship Alethea.

Overhead, on the deck, a heavy thumping of hurrying feet awoke him to keener perceptiveness.

Judging from the incessant rolling and pitching of the brigantine, the crashing thunder of seas upon her sides, the eldritch shrieking of the gale, as well as from the chorused groans and plaints of each individual bolt and timber in the frail fabric that housed his fortunes, the wind had strengthened materially during his hours of forgetfulness--however many the latter might have been.

He believed, however, that he had slept long, deeply and exhaustively. He felt now a little emaciated mentally and somewhat absent-bodied--so he put it to himself. A numb languor, not unpleasant, held him passively supine, the while he gave himself over to speculative thought.

A wild night, certainly; probably, by that time, the little vessel was in the middle of the North Sea ... bound for Antwerp!

"Oh-h," said Kirkwood vindictively, "hell!"

So he was bound for Antwerp! The first color of resentment ebbing from his thoughts left him rather interested than excited by the prospect. He found that he was neither pleased nor displeased. He presumed that it would be no more difficult to raise money on personal belongings in Antwerp than anywhere else; it has been observed that the first flower of civilization is the rum-blossom, the next, the conventionalized fleur-de-lis of the money-lender. There would be pawnshops, then, in Antwerp; and Kirkwood was confident that the sale or pledge of his signet-ring, scarf-pin, match-box and cigar-case, would provide him with money enough for a return to London, by third-class, at the worst. There ... well, all events were on the knees of the gods; he'd squirm out of his troubles, somehow. As for the other matter, the Calendar affair, he presumed he was well rid of it,--with a sigh of regret. It had been a most enticing mystery, you know; and the woman in the case was extraordinary, to say the least.

The memory of Dorothy Calendar made him sigh again, this time more violently: a sigh that was own brother to (or at any rate descended in

a direct line from) the furnace sigh of the lover described by, the melancholy Jaques. And he sat up, bumped his head, groped round until his hand fell upon a doorknob, opened the door, and looked out into the blowsy emptiness of the ship's cabin proper, whose gloomy confines were made visible only by the rays of a dingy and smoky lamp swinging violently in gimbals from a deck-beam.

Kirkwood's clothing, now rough-dried and warped wretchedly out of shape, had been thrown carelessly on a transom near the door. He got up, collected them, and returning to his berth, dressed at leisure, thinking heavily, disgruntled--in a humor as evil as the after-taste of bad brandy in his mouth.

When dressed he went out into the cabin, closing the door upon his berth, and for lack of anything better to do, seated himself on the thwartships transom, against the forward bulkhead, behind the table. Above his head a chronometer ticked steadily and loudly, and, being consulted, told him that the time of day was twenty minutes to four; which meant that he had slept away some eighteen or twenty hours. That was a solid spell of a rest, when he came to think of it, even allowing that he had been unusually and pardonably fatigued when conducted to his berth. He felt stronger now, and bright enough--and enormously hungry into the bargain.

Abstractedly, heedless of the fact that his tobacco would be water-soaked and ruined, he fumbled in his pockets for pipe and pouch, thinking to soothe the pangs of hunger against breakfast-time; which was probably two hours and a quarter ahead. But his pockets were empty--every one of them. He assimilated this discovery in patience and cast an eye about the room, to locate, if possible, the missing property. But naught of his was visible. So he rose and began a more painstaking search.

The cabin was at once tiny, low-ceiled, and depressingly gloomy. Its furniture consisted entirely in a chair or two, supplementing the transoms and lockers as resting-places, and a center-table covered with a cloth of turkey-red, whose original aggressiveness had been darkly moderated by libations of liquids, principally black coffee, and burnt offerings of grease and tobacco-ash. Aside from the companion-way to the deck, four doors opened into the room, two probably giving upon the captain's and the mate's quarters, the others on pseudo state-rooms--one of which he had just vacated--closets large enough to contain a small bunk and naught beside. The bulkheads and partitions were badly broken out with a rash of pictures from illustrated papers, mostly offensive. Kirkwood was interested to read a half-column clipping from a New York yellow journal, descriptive of the antics of a drunken British sailor who had somehow found his way to the bar-room of the Fifth Avenue Hotel; the paragraph exploiting the fact that it had required four policemen in addition to the corps of porters to subdue him, was strongly underscored in red ink; and the news-story wound up with the information that in police court the man had given his name as William Stranger and cheerfully had paid a fine of ten dollars, alleging his entertainment to have been cheap at the price.

While Kirkwood was employed in perusing this illuminating anecdote, eight bells sounded, and, from the commotion overhead, the watch changed. A

little later the companion-way door slammed open and shut, and Captain Stryker--or Stranger; whichever you please--fell down, rather than descended, the steps.

Without attention to the American he rolled into the mate's room and roused that personage. Kirkwood heard that the name of the second-in-command was 'Obbs, as well as that he occupied the starboard state-room aft. After a brief exchange of comment and instruction, Mr. 'Obbs appeared in the shape of a walking pillar of oil-skins capped by a sou'wester, and went on deck; Stryker, following him out of the state-room, shed his own oilers in a clammy heap upon the floor, opened a locker from which he brought forth a bottle and a dirty glass, and, turning toward the table, for the first time became sensible of Kirkwood's presence.

"Ow, there you are, eigh, little bright-eyes!" he exclaimed with surprised animation.

"Good morning, Captain Stryker," said Kirkwood, rising. "I want to tell you--"

But Stryker waved one great red paw impatiently, with the effect of sweeping aside and casting into the discard Kirkwood's intended speech of thanks; nor would he hear him further.

"Did you 'ave a nice little nap?" he interrupted. "Come up bright and smilin', eigh? Now I guess"--the emphasis made it clear that the captain believed himself to be employing an Americanism; and so successful was he in his own esteem that he could not resist the temptation to improve upon the imitation--"Na-ow I guess yeou're ababout right ready, ben't ye, to hev a drink, sonny?"

"No, thank you," said Kirkwood, smiling tolerantly. "I've got any amount of appetite..."

"'Ave you, now?" Stryker dropped his mimicry and glanced at the clock. "Breakfast," he announced, "will be served in the myne dinin' saloon at eyght a. m. Passingers is requested not to be lyte at tyble."

Depositing the bottle on the said table, the captain searched until he found another glass for Kirkwood, and sat down.

"Do you good," he insinuated, pushing the bottle gently over.

"No, thank you," reiterated Kirkwood shortly, a little annoyed.

Stryker seized his own glass, poured out a strong man's dose of the fiery concoction, gulped it down, and sighed. Then, with a glance at the American's woebegone countenance (Kirkwood was contemplating a four-hour wait for breakfast, and, consequently, looking as if he had lost his last friend), the captain bent over, placing both hands palm down before him and wagging his head earnestly.

"Please," he implored,--"Please don't let me hinterrupt;" and filled his

pipe, pretending a pensive detachment from his company.

The fumes of burning shag sharpened the tooth of desire. Kirkwood stood it as long as he could, then surrendered with an: "If you've got any more of that tobacco, Captain, I'd be glad of a pipe."

An intensely contemplative expression crept into the captain's small blue eyes.

"I only got one other pyper of this 'ere 'baccy," he announced at length, "and I can't get no more till I gets 'ome. I simply couldn't part with it hunder 'arf a quid."

Kirkwood settled back with a hopeless lift of his shoulders. Abstractedly Stryker puffed the smoke his way until he could endure the deprivation no longer.

"I had about ten shillings in my pocket when I came aboard, captain, and ... a few other articles."

"Ow, yes; so you 'ad, now you mention it."

Stryker rose, ambled into his room, and returned with Kirkwood's possessions and a fresh paper of shag. While the young man was hastily filling, lighting, and inhaling the first strangling but delectable whiff, the captain solemnly counted into his own palm all the loose change except three large pennies. The latter he shoved over to Kirkwood in company with a miscellaneous assortment of articles, which the American picked up piece by piece and began to bestow about his clothing. When through, he sat back, troubled and disgusted. Stryker met his regard blandly.

"Anything I can do?" he inquired, in suave concern.

"Why ... there _was_ a black pearl scarfpin--"

"W'y, don't you remember? You gave that to me, 'count of me 'avin syved yer life. 'Twas me throwed you that line, you know."

"Oh," commented Kirkwood briefly. The pin had been among the most valuable and cherished of his belongings.

"Yes," nodded the captain in reminiscence. "You don't remember? Likely 'twas the brandy singing in yer 'ead. You pushes it into my 'ands,--almost weepin', you was,--and sez, sez you, 'Stryker,' you sez, 'tyke this in triflin' toking of my gratichood; I wouldn't hinsult you,' you sez, 'by hofferin' you money, but this I can insist on yer acceptin', and no refusal,' says you."

"Oh," repeated Kirkwood.

"If I for a ninstant thought you wasn't sober when you done it.... But no; you're a gent if there ever was one, and I'm not the man to offend you."

"Oh, indeed."

The captain let the implication pass, perhaps on the consideration that he could afford to ignore it; and said no more. The pause held for several minutes, Kirkwood having fallen into a mood of grave distraction. Finally Captain Stryker thoughtfully measured out a second drink, limited only by the capacity of the tumbler, engulfed it noisily, and got up.

"Guess I'll be turnin' in," he volunteered affably, yawning and stretching.

"I was about to ask you to do me a service...." began Kirkwood.

"Yes?"--with the rising inflection of mockery.

Kirkwood quietly produced his cigar-case, a gold match-box, gold card-case, and slipped a signet ring from his finger. "Will you buy these?" he asked. "Or will you lend me five pounds and hold them as security?"

Stryker examined the collection with exaggerated interest strongly tinged with mistrust. "I'll buy 'em," he offered eventually, looking up.

"That's kind of you--"

"Ow, they ain't much use to me, but Bill Stryker's allus willin' to accommodate a friend.... Four quid, you said?"

"Five...."

"They ain't wuth over four to me."

"Very well; make it four," Kirkwood assented contemptuously.

The captain swept the articles into one capacious fist, pivoted on one heel at the peril of his neck, and lumbered unsteadily off to his room. Pausing at the door he turned back in inquiry.

"I sye, 'ow did you come to get the impression there was a party named Almanack aboard this wessel?"

"Calendar--"

"Ave it yer own wye," Stryker conceded gracefully.

"There isn't, is there?"

"You 'eard me."

"Then," said Kirkwood sweetly, "I'm sure you wouldn't be interested."

The captain pondered this at leisure. "You seemed pretty keen abaht seein' 'im," he remarked conclusively.

"I was."

"Seems to me I did 'ear the nyme sumw'eres afore." The captain appeared to wrestle with an obdurate memory. "Ow!" he triumphed. "I know. 'E was a chap up Manchester wye. Keeper in a loonatic asylum, 'e was. 'That yer party?"

"No," said Kirkwood wearily.

"I didn't know but mebbe 'twas. Excuse me. 'Thought as 'ow mebbe you'd escyded from 'is tender care, but, findin' the world cold, chynged yer mind and wanted to go back."

Without waiting for a reply he lurched into his room and banged the door to. Kirkwood, divided between amusement and irritation, heard him stumbling about for some time; and then a hush fell, grateful enough while it lasted; which was not long. For no sooner did the captain sleep than a penetrating snore added itself unto the cacophony of waves and wind and tortured ship.

Kirkwood, comforted at first by the blessed tobacco, lapsed insensibly into dreary meditations. Coming after the swift movement and sustained excitement of the eighteen hours preceding his long sleep, the monotony of shipboard confinement seemed irksome to a maddening degree. There was absolutely nothing he could discover to occupy his mind. If there were books aboard, none was in evidence; beyond the report of Mr. Stranger's Manhattan night's entertainment the walls were devoid of reading matter; and a round of the picture gallery proved a diversion weariful enough when not purely revolting.

Wherefore Mr. Kirkwood stretched himself out on the transom and smoked and reviewed his adventures in detail and seriatim, and was by turns indignant, sore, anxious on his own account as well as on Dorothy's, and out of all patience with himself. Mystified he remained throughout, and the edge of his curiosity held as keen as ever, you may believe.

Consistently the affair presented itself to his fancy in the guise of a puzzle-picture, which, though you study it never so diligently, remains incomprehensible, until by chance you view it from an unexpected angle, when it reveals itself intelligibly. It had not yet been his good fortune to see it from the right viewpoint. To hold the metaphor, he walked endless circles round it, patiently seeking, but ever failing to find the proper perspective.... Each incident, however insignificant, in connection with it, he handled over and over, examining its every facet, bright or dull, as an expert might inspect a clever imitation of a diamond; and like a perfect imitation it defied analysis.

Of one or two things he was convinced; for one, that Stryker was a liar worthy of classification with Calendar and Mrs. Hallam. Kirkwood had not only the testimony of his sense to assure him that the ship's name, Alethea (not a common one, by the bye), had been mentioned by both Calendar and Mulready during their altercation on Bermondsey Old Stairs, but he had the confirmatory testimony of the sleepy waterman, William, who had directed Old Bob and Young William to the anchorage off Bow Creek. That there should have been two vessels of the same unusual name at one and the same time in the Port of London, was a coincidence too preposterous

altogether to find place in his calculations.

His second impregnable conclusion was that those whom he sought had boarded the *Alethea*, but had left her before she tripped her anchor. That they were not stowed away aboard her seemed unquestionable. The brigantine was hardly large enough for the presence of three persons aboard her to be long kept a secret from an inquisitive fourth,--unless, indeed, they lay in hiding in the hold; for which, once the ship got under way, there could be scant excuse. And Kirkwood did not believe himself a person of sufficient importance in Calendar's eyes, to make that worthy endure the discomforts of a'tween-decks imprisonment throughout the voyage, even to escape recognition.

With every second, then, he was traveling farther from her to whose aid he had rushed, impelled by motives so hot-headed, so innately, chivalric, so unthinkingly gallant, so exceptionally idiotic!

Idiot! Kirkwood groaned with despair of his inability to fathom the abyss of his self-contempt. There seemed to be positively no excuse for *him*. Stryker had befriended him indeed, had he permitted him to drown. Yet he had acted for the best, as he saw it. The fault lay in himself: an admirable fault, that of harboring and nurturing generous and compassionate instincts. But, of course, Kirkwood couldn't see it that way.

"What else could I do?" he defended himself against the indictment of common sense. "I couldn't leave her to the mercies of that set of rogues!... And Heaven knows I was given every reason to believe she would be aboard this ship! Why, she herself told me that she was sailing ...!"

Heaven knew, too, that this folly of his had cost him a pretty penny, first and last. His watch was gone beyond recovery, his homeward passage forfeited; he no longer harbored illusions as to the steamship company presenting him with another berth in lieu of that called for by that water-soaked slip of paper then in his pocket--courtesy of Stryker. He had sold for a pittance, a tithe of its value, his personal jewelry, and had spent every penny he could call his own. With the money Stryker was to give him he would be able to get back to London and his third-rate hostelry, but not with enough over to pay that one week's room-rent, or ...

"Oh, the devil!" he groaned, head in hands.

The future loomed wrapped in unspeakable darkness, lightened by no least ray of hope. It had been bad enough to lose a comfortable living through a gigantic convulsion of Nature; but to think that he had lost all else through his own egregious folly, to find himself reduced to the kennels--!

So Care found him again in those weary hours,--came and sat by his side, slipping a grisly hand in his and tightening its grip until he could have cried out with the torment of it; the while whispering insidiously subtle, evil things in his ear. And he had not even Hope to comfort him; at any previous stage he had been able to distil a sort of bitter-sweet satisfaction from the thought that he was suffering for the love of his life. But now--now Dorothy was lost, gone like the glamour of Romance in

the searching light of day.

Stryker, emerging from his room for breakfast, found the passenger with a hostile look in his eye and a jaw set in ugly fashion. His eyes, too, were the abiding-place of smoldering devils; and the captain, recognizing them, considerably forbore to stir them up with any untimely pleasantries. To be sure, he was autocrat in his own ship, and Kirkwood's standing aboard was _nil_; but then there was just enough yellow in the complexion of Stryker's soul to incline him to sidestep trouble whenever feasible. And besides, he entertained dark suspicions of his guest--suspicions he scarce dared voice even to his inmost heart.

The morning meal, therefore, passed off in constrained silence. The captain ate voraciously and vociferously, pushed back his chair, and went on deck to relieve the mate. The latter, a stunted little Cockney with a wizened countenance and a mind as foul as his tongue, got small change of his attempts to engage the passenger in conversation on topics that he considered fit for discussion. After the sixth or eighth snubbing he rose in dudgeon, discharged a poisonous bit of insolence, and retired to his berth, leaving Kirkwood to finish his breakfast in peace; which the latter did literally, to the last visible scrap of food and the ultimate drop of coffee, poor as both were in quality.

To the tune of a moderating wind, the morning wearied away. Kirkwood went on deck once, for distraction from the intolerable monotony of it all, got a sound drenching of spray, with a glimpse of a dark line on the eastern horizon, which he understood to be the low littoral of Holland, and was glad to dodge below once more and dry himself.

He had the pleasure of the mate's company at dinner, the captain remaining on deck until Hobbs had finished and gone up to relieve him; and by that time Kirkwood likewise was through.

Stryker blew down with a blustery show of cheer. "Well, well, my little man!" (It happened that he topped Kirkwood's stature by at least five inches.) "Enj'yin' yer sea trip?"

"About as much as you'd expect," snapped Kirkwood.

"Ow?" The captain began to shovel food into his face. (The author regrets he has at his command no more delicate expression that is literal and illustrative.) Kirkwood watched him, fascinated with suspense; it seemed impossible that the man could continue so to employ his knife without cutting his throat from the inside. But years of such manipulation had made him expert, and his guest, keenly disappointed, at length ceased to hope.

Between gobbles Stryker eyed him furtively.

"Treat you all right?" he demanded abruptly.

Kirkwood started out of a brown study. "What? Who? Why, I suppose I ought to be--indeed, I _am_ grateful," he asserted. "Certainly you saved my life, and--"

"Ow, I don't mean that." Stryker gathered the imputation into his paw and flung it disdainfully to the four winds of Heaven. "Bless yer 'art, you're welcome; I wouldn't let no dorg drown, 'f I could 'elp it. No," he declared, "nor a loonatic, neither."

He thrust his plate away and shifted sidewise in his chair. "I 'uz just wonderin'," he pursued, picking his teeth meditatively with a pen-knife, "'ow they feeds you in them _as_-ylums. 'Avin' never been inside one, myself, it's on'y natural I'd be cur'us.... There was one of them institootions near where I was borned--Birming'am, that is. I used to see the loonies playin' in the grounds. I remember _just_ as well!... One of 'em and me struck up quite an acquaintance--"

"Naturally he'd take to you on sight."

"Ow? Strynge 'ow _we_ 'it it off, eigh?... You myke me think of 'im. Young chap, 'e was, the livin' spi't-'n-himage of you. It don't happen, does it, you're the same man?"

"Oh, go to the devil!"

"Naughty!" said the captain serenely, wagging a reproving forefinger. "Bad, naughty word. You'll be sorry when you find out wot it means.... Only 'e was allus plannin' to run awye and drown 'is-self."...

He wore the joke threadbare, even to his own taste, and in the end got heavily to his feet, starting for the companionway. "Land you this arternoon," he remarked casually, "come three o'clock or thereabahts. Per'aps later. I don't know, though, as I 'ad ought to let you loose."

Kirkwood made no answer. Chuckling, Stryker went on deck.

In the course of an hour the American followed him.

Wind and sea alike had gone down wonderfully since daybreak--a circumstance undoubtedly in great part due to the fact that they had won in under the lee of the mainland and were traversing shallower waters. On either hand, like mist upon the horizon, lay a streak of gray, a shade darker than the gray of the waters. The _Alethea_ was within the wide jaws of the Western Scheldt. As for the wind, it had shifted several points to the northwards; the brigantine had it abeam and was lying down to it and racing to port with slanting deck and singing cordage.

Kirkwood approached the captain, who, acting as his own pilot, was standing by the wheel and barking sharp orders to the helmsman.

"Have you a Bradshaw on board?" asked the young man.

"Steady!" This to the man at the wheel; then to Kirkwood: "Wot's that, me lud?"

Kirkwood repeated his question. Stryker eyed him suspiciously for a

thought.

"Wot d'you want it for?"

"I want to see when I can get a boat back to England."

"Hmm.... Yes, you'll find a Bradshaw in the port-locker, near the for'ard bulk'ead. Run along now and pl'y--and mind you don't go tearin' out the pyges to myke pyper boatses to go sylin' in."

Kirkwood went below. Like its adjacent rooms, the cabin was untenanted; the watch was the mate's, and Stryker a martinet. Kirkwood found the designated locker and, opening it, saw first to his hand the familiar bulky red volume with its red garter. Taking it out he carried it to a chair near the companionway, for a better reading light: the skylight being still battened down.

The strap removed, the book opened easily, as if by force of habit, at the precise table he had wished to consult; some previous client had left a marker between the pages,--and not an ordinary book-mark, by any manner of means. Kirkwood gave utterance to a little gasp of amazement, and instinctively glanced up at the companionway, to see if he were observed.

He was not, but for safety's sake he moved farther back into the cabin and out of the range of vision of any one on deck; a precaution which was almost immediately justified by the clumping of heavy feet upon the steps as Stryker descended in pursuit of the ever-essential drink.

"Find it?" he demanded, staring blindly--with eyes not yet focused to the change from light to gloom--at the young man, who was sitting with the guide open on his knees, a tightly clenched fist resting on the transom at either side of him.

In reply he received a monosyllabic affirmative; Kirkwood did not look up.

"You must be a howl," commented the captain, making for the seductive locker.

"A--what?"

"A howl, readin' that fine print there in the dark. W'y don't you go over to the light?... I'll 'ave to 'ave them shutters tyken off the winders."

This was Stryker's amiable figure of speech, frequently employed to indicate the coverings of the skylight.

"I'm all right." Kirkwood went on studying the book.

Stryker swigged off his rum and wiped his lips with the back of a red paw, hesitating a moment to watch his guest.

"Mykes it seem more 'ome-like for you, I expect," he observed.

"What do you mean?"

"W'y, Bradshaw's first-cousin to a halmanack, ain't 'e? Can't get one, take t'other--next best thing. Sorry I didn't think of it sooner; like my passengers to feel comfy.... Now don't you go trapsein' off to gay Paree and squanderin' wot money you got left. You 'ear?"

"By the way, Captain!" Kirkwood looked up at this, but Stryker was already half-way up the companion.

Cautiously the American opened his right fist and held to the light that which had been concealed, close wadded in his grasp,--a square of sheer linen edged with lace, crumpled but spotless, and diffusing in the unwholesome den a faint, intangible fragrance, the veriest wraith of that elusive perfume which he would never again inhale without instantly recalling that night ride through London in the intimacy of a cab.

He closed his eyes and saw her again, as clearly as though she stood before him,--hair of gold massed above the forehead of snow, curling in adorable tendrils at the nape of her neck, lips like scarlet splashed upon the immaculate whiteness of her skin, head poised audaciously in its spirited, youthful allure, dark eyes smiling the least trace sadly beneath the level brows.

Unquestionably the handkerchief was hers; if proof other than the assurance of his heart were requisite, he had it in the initial delicately embroidered in one corner: a D, for Dorothy!... He looked again, to make sure; then hastily folded up the treasure-trove and slipped it into a breast pocket of his coat.

No; I am not sure that it was not the left-hand pocket.

Quivering with excitement he bent again over the book and studied it intently. After all, he had not been wrong! He could assert now, without fear of refutation, that Stryker had lied.

Some one had wielded an industrious pencil on the page. It was, taken as a whole, fruitful of clues. Its very heading was illuminating:

LONDON to VLISSINGEN (FLUSHING) AND BREDA;

which happened to be the quickest and most direct route between London and Antwerp. Beneath it, in the second column from the right, the pencil had put a check-mark against:

QUEENSBOROUGH ... DEP ... 11A10.

And now he saw it clearly--dolt that he had been not to have divined it ere this! The Alethea had run in to Queensborough, landing her passengers there, that they might make connection with the eleven-ten morning boat for Flushing,--the very side-wheel steamer, doubtless, which he had noticed beating out in the teeth of the gale just after the brigantine had picked him up. Had he not received the passing impression that the Alethea, when first he caught sight of her, might have been coming out of the Medway, on

whose eastern shore is situate Queensborough Pier? Had not Mrs. Hallam, going upon he knew not what information or belief, been bound for Queensborough, with design there to intercept the fugitives?

Kirkwood chuckled to recall how, all unwittingly, he had been the means of diverting from her chosen course that acute and resourceful lady; then again turned his attention to the tables.

A third check had been placed against the train for Amsterdam scheduled to leave Antwerp at 6:32 p. m. Momentarily his heart misgave him, when he saw this, in fear lest Calendar and Dorothy should have gone on from Antwerp the previous evening; but then he rallied, discovering that the boat-train from Flushing did not arrive at Antwerp till after ten at night; and there was no later train thence for Amsterdam. Were the latter truly their purposed destination, they would have stayed overnight and be leaving that very evening on the 6:32. On the other hand, why should they wait for the latest train, rather than proceed by the first available in the morning? Why but because Calendar and Mulready were to wait for Stryker to join them on the Alethea?

Very well, then; if the wind held and Stryker knew his business, there would be another passenger on that train, in addition to the Calendar party.

Making mental note of the fact that the boat-train for Flushing and London was scheduled to leave Antwerp daily at 8:21 p. m., Kirkwood rustled the leaves to find out whether or not other tours had been planned, found evidences of none, and carefully restored the guide to the locker, lest inadvertently the captain should pick it up and see what Kirkwood had seen.

An hour later he went on deck. The skies had blown clear and the brigantine was well in land-bound waters and still footing a rattling pace. The river-banks had narrowed until, beyond the dikes to right and left, the country-side stretched wide and flat, a plain of living green embroidered with winding roads and quaint Old-World hamlets whose red roofs shone like dull fire between the dark green foliage of dwarfed firs.

Down with the Scheldt's gray shimmering flood were drifting little companies of barges, sturdy and snug both fore and aft, tough tanned sails burning in the afternoon sunlight. A long string of canal-boats, potted plants flowering saucily in their neatly curtained windows, proprietors expansively smoking on deck, in the bosoms of their very large families, was being mothered up-stream by two funny, clucking tugs. Behind the brigantine a travel-worn Atlantic liner was scolding itself hoarse about the right of way. Outward bound, empty cattle boats, rough and rusty, were swaggering down to the sea, with the careless, independent thumbs-in-armholes air of so many navvies off the job.

And then lifting suddenly above the level far-off sky-line, there appeared a very miracle of beauty; the delicate tracery of the great Cathedral's spire of frozen lace, glowing like a thing of spun gold, set against the sapphire velvet of the horizon.

Antwerp was in sight.

A troublesome care stirring in his mind, Kirkwood looked round the deck; but Stryker was very busy, entirely too preoccupied with the handling of his ship to be interrupted with impunity. Besides, there was plenty of time.

More slowly now, the wind falling, the brigantine crept up the river, her crew alert with sheets and halyards as the devious windings of the stream rendered it necessary to trim the canvas at varying angles to catch the wind.

Slowly, too, in the shadow of that Mechlin spire, the horizon grew rough and elevated, taking shape in the serrated profile of a thousand gables and a hundred towers and cross-crowned steeples.

Once or twice, more and more annoyed as the time of their association seemed to grow more brief, Kirkwood approached the captain; but Stryker continued to be exhaustively absorbed in the performance of his duties.

Up past the dockyards, where spidery masts stood in dense groves about painted funnels, and men swarmed over huge wharves like ants over a crust of bread; up and round the final, great sweeping bend of the river, the *Alethea* made her sober way, ever with greater slowness; until at length, in the rose glow of a flawless evening, her windlass began to clank like a mad thing and her anchor bit the riverbed, near the left bank, between old Forts Isabelle and *Tœte de Flandre*, frowned upon from the right by the grim pile of the age-old Steen castle.

And again Kirkwood sought Stryker, his carking query ready on his lips. But the captain impatiently waved him aside.

"Don't you bother me now, me lud juke! Wyte until I gets done with the custom hofficer."

Kirkwood acceded, perforce; and bided his time with what tolerance he could muster.

A pluttering customs launch bustled up to the *Alethea's* side, discharged a fussy inspector on the brigantine's deck, and panted impatiently until he, the examination concluded without delay, was again aboard.

Stryker, smirking benignly and massaging his lips with the back of his hand, followed the official on deck, nodded to Kirkwood an intimation that he was prepared to accord him an audience, and strolled forward to the waist. The American, mastering his resentment, meekly followed; one can not well afford to be haughty when one is asking favors.

Advancing to the rail, the captain whistled in one of the river-boats; then, while the waterman waited, faced his passenger.

"Now, yer r'yal 'ighness, wot can I do for you afore you goes ashore?"

"I think you must have forgotten," said Kirkwood quietly. "I hate to trouble you, but--there's that matter of four pounds."

Stryker's face was expressive only of mystified vacuity. "Four quid? I dunno _as_ I know just wot you means."

"You agreed to advance me four pounds on those things of mine...."

"Ow-w!" Illumination overspread the hollow-jowled countenance. Stryker smiled cheerfully. "Garn with you!" he chuckled. "You will 'ave yer little joke, won't you now? I declare I never see a loony with such affectsh'nit, pl'yful wyes!"

Kirkwood's eyes narrowed. "Stryker," he said steadily, "give me the four pounds and let's have no more nonsense; or else hand over my things at once."

"Daffy," Stryker told vacancy, with conviction. "Lor' luv me if I sees 'ow he ever 'ad sense enough to escyep. W'y, yer majesty!" and he bowed, ironic. "I ' _ave_ given you yer quid."

"Just about as much as I gave you that pearl pin," retorted Kirkwood hotly. "What the devil do you mean--"

"W'y, yer ludship, four pounds jus pyes yer passyge; I thought you understood."

"My passage! But I can come across by steamer for thirty shillings, first-class--"

"Aw, but them steamers! Tricky, they is, and unsyfe ... No, yer gryce, the W. Stryker Packet Line Lim'ted, London to Antwerp, charges four pounds per passyge and no reduction for return fare."

Stunned by his effrontery, Kirkwood stared in silence.

"Any complynts," continued the captain, looking over Kirkwood's head, "must be lyde afore the Board of Directors in writin' not more'n thirty dyes arfter--"

"You damned scoundrell!" interpolated Kirkwood thoughtfully.

Stryker's mouth closed with a snap; his features froze in a cast of wrath; cold rage glinted in his small blue eyes. "W'y," he bellowed, "you bloomin' loonatic, d'ye think you can sye that to Bill Stryker on 'is own wessel!"

He hesitated a moment, then launched a heavy fist at Kirkwood's face. Unsurprised, the young man side-stepped, caught the hard, bony wrist as the captain lurched by, following his wasted blow, and with a dexterous twist laid him flat on his back, with a sounding thump upon the deck. And as the infuriated scamp rose--which he did with a bound that placed him on his feet and in defensive posture; as though the deck had been a spring-board--Kirkwood leaped back, seized a capstan-bar, and faced him

with a challenge.

"Stand clear, Stryker!" he warned the man tensely, himself livid with rage. "If you move a step closer I swear I'll knock the head off your shoulders! Not another inch, you contemptible whelp, or I'll brain you!... That's better," he continued as the captain, caving, dropped his fists and moved uneasily back. "Now give that boatman money for taking me ashore. Yes, I'm going--and if we ever meet again, take the other side of the way, Stryker!"

Without response, a grim smile wreathing his thin, hard lips, Stryker thrust one hand into his pocket, and withdrawing a coin, tossed it to the waiting waterman. Whereupon Kirkwood backed warily to the rail, abandoned the capstan-bar and dropped over the side.

Nodding to the boatman, "The Steen landing--quickly," he said in French.

Stryker, recovering, advanced to the rail and waved him a derisive *_bon voyage_*.

"By-by, yer hexcellency. I 'opes it may soon be my pleasure to meet you again. You've been a real privilege to know; I've henjoyed yer comp'ny somethin' immense. Don't know as I ever met such a rippin', Ay Number One, all-round, entertynin' ass, afore!"

He fumbled nervously about his clothing, brought to light a rag of cotton, much the worse for service, and ostentatiously wiped from the corner of each eye tears of grief at parting. Then, as the boat swung toward the farther shore, Kirkwood's back was to the brigantine, and he was little tempted to turn and invite fresh shafts of ridicule.

Rapidly, as he was ferried across the busy Scheldt, the white blaze of his passion cooled; but the biting irony of his estate ate, corrosive, into his soul. Hollow-eyed he glared vacantly into space, pale lips unmoving, his features wasted with despair.

They came to the landing-stage and swung broad-side on. Mechanically the American got up and disembarked. As heedless of time and place he moved up the Quai to the gangway and so gained the esplanade; where pausing he thrust a trembling hand into his trouser pocket.

The hand reappeared, displaying in its outspread palm three big, round, brown, British pennies. Staring down at them, Kirkwood's lips moved.

"Bed rock!" he whispered huskily.

XIII

A PRIMER OF PROGRESSIVE CRIME

Without warning or presage the still evening air was smitten and made softly musical by the pealing of a distant chime, calling vespers to its brothers in Antwerp's hundred belfries; and one by one, far and near, the responses broke out, until it seemed as if the world must be vibrant with silver and brazen melody; until at the last the great bells in the Cathedral spire stirred and grumbled drowsily, then woke to such ringing resonance as dwarfed all the rest and made it seem as nothing.

Like the beating of a mighty heart heard through the rushing clamor of the pulses, a single deep-throated bell boomed solemnly six heavy, rumbling strokes.

Six o'clock! Kirkwood roused out of his dour brooding. The Amsterdam express would leave at 6:32, and he knew not from what station.

Striding swiftly across the promenade, he entered a small tobacco shop and made inquiry of the proprietress. His command of French was tolerable; he experienced no difficulty in comprehending the good woman's instructions.

Trains for Amsterdam, she said, left from the Gare Centrale, a mile or so across the city. M'sieur had plenty of time, and to spare. There was the tram line, if m'sieur did not care to take a fiacre. If he would go by way of the Vielle Bourse he would discover the tram cars of the Rue Kipdorp. M'sieur was most welcome....

Monsieur departed with the more haste since he was unable to repay this courtesy with the most trifling purchase; such slight matters annoyed Kirkwood intensely. Perhaps it was well for him that he had the long walk to help him work off the fit of nervous exasperation into which he was plunged every time his thoughts harked back to that jovial black-guard, Stryker.... He was quite calm when, after a brisk walk of some fifteen minutes, he reached the station.

A public clock reassured him with the information that he had the quarter of an hour's leeway; it was only seventeen minutes past eighteen o'clock (Belgian railway time, always confusing). Inquiring his way to the Amsterdam train, which was already waiting at the platform, he paced its length, peering brazenly in at the coach windows, now warm with hope, now shivering with disappointment, realizing as he could not but realize that, all else aside, his only chance of rehabilitation lay in meeting Calendar. But in none of the coaches or carriages did he discover any one even remotely resembling the fat adventurer, his daughter, or Mulready.

Satisfied that they had not yet boarded the train, he stood aside, tortured with forebodings, while anxiously scrutinizing each individual of the throng of intending travelers.... Perhaps they had been delayed--by the _Alethea's_ lateness in making port very likely; perhaps they purposed taking not this but a later train; perhaps they had already left the city by an earlier, or had returned to England.

On time, the bell clanged its warning; the guards bawled theirs; doors were hastily opened and slammed; the trucks began to groan, couplings jolting as the engine chafed in constraint. The train and Kirkwood moved

simultaneously out of opposite ends of the station, the one to rattle and hammer round the eastern boundaries of the city and straighten out at top speed on the northern route for the Belgian line, the other to stroll moodily away, idle hands in empty pockets, bound aimlessly anywhere--it didn't matter!

Nothing whatever mattered in the smallest degree. Ere now the outlook had been dark; but this he felt to be the absolute nadir of his misfortunes. Presently--after a while--as soon as he could bring himself to it--he would ask the way and go to the American Consulate. But just now, low as the tide of chance had ebbed, leaving him stranded on the flats of vagabondage, low as showed the measure of his self-esteem, he could not tolerate the prospect of begging for assistance--help which would in all likelihood be refused, since his story was quite too preposterous to gain credence in official ears that daily are filled with the lamentations of those whose motives do not bear investigation. And if he chose to eliminate the strange chain of events which had landed him in Antwerp, to base his plea solely on the fact that he was a victim of the San Francisco disaster ... he himself was able to smile, if sourly, anticipating the incredulous consular smile with which he would be shown the door.

No; that he would reserve as a last resort. True, he had already come to the Jumping-off Place; to the Court of the Last Resort alone could he now appeal. But ... not yet; after a while he could make his petition, after he had made a familiar of the thought that he must armor himself with callous indifference to rebuff, to say naught of the waves of burning shame that would overwhelm him when he came to the point of asking charity.

He found himself, neither knowing nor caring how he had won thither, in the Place Verte, the vast venerable pile of the Cathedral rising on his right, hotels and quaint Old-World dwellings with peaked roofs and gables and dormer windows, inclosing the other sides of the square. The chimes (he could hear none but those of the Cathedral) were heralding the hour of seven. Listless and preoccupied in contemplation of his wretched case he wandered purposelessly half round the square, then dropped into a bench on its outskirts.

It was some time later that he noticed, with a casual, indifferent eye, a porter running out of the Hâel de Flandre, directly opposite, and calling a fiacre in to the carriage block.

As languidly he watched a woman, very becomingly dressed, follow the porter down to the curb.

The fiacre swung in, and the woman dismissed the porter before entering the vehicle; a proceeding so unusual that it fixed the onlooker's interest. He sat rigid with attention; the woman seemed to be giving explicit and lengthy directions to the driver, who nodded and gesticulated his comprehension.

The woman was Mrs. Hallam.

The first blush of recognition passed, leaving Kirkwood without any

amazement. It was an easy matter to account for her being where she was. Thrown off the scent by Kirkwood at Sheerness, the previous morning, she had missed the day boat, the same which had ferried over those whom she pursued. Returning from Sheerness to Queensborough, however, she had taken the night boat for Flushing and Antwerp,--and not without her plan, who was not a woman to waste her strength aimlessly; Kirkwood believed that she had had from the first a very definite campaign in view. In that campaign Queensborough Pier had been the first strategic move; the journey to Antwerp, apparently, the second; and the American was impressed that he was witnessing the inception of the third decided step.... The conclusion of this process of reasoning was inevitable: Madam would bear watching.

Thus was a magical transformation brought about. Instantaneously lassitude and vain repinings were replaced by hopefulness and energy. In a twinkling the young man was on his feet, every nerve a-thrill with excitement.

Mrs. Hallam, blissfully ignorant of this surveillance over her movements, took her place in the fiacre. The driver clucked to his horse, cracked his whip, and started off at a slow trot: a pace which Kirkwood imitated, keeping himself at a discreet distance to the rear of the cab, but prepared to break into a run whenever it should prove necessary.

Such exertion, however, was not required of him. Evidently Mrs. Hallam was in no great haste to reach her destination; the speed of the fiacre remained extremely moderate; Kirkwood found a long, brisk stride fast enough to keep it well in sight.

Round the green square, under the beautiful walls of Notre Dame d'Anvers, through Grande Place and past the Hôtel de Ville, the cab proceeded, dogged by what might plausibly be asserted the most persistent and infatuated soul that ever crossed the water; and so on into the Quai Van Dyck, turning to the left at the old Steen dungeon and, slowing to a walk, moving soberly up the drive.

Beyond the lip of the embankment, the Scheldt flowed, its broad shining surface oily, smooth and dark, a mirror for the incandescent glory of the skies. Over on the western bank old Tœte de Flandre lifted up its grim curtains and bastions, sable against the crimson, rampart and parapet edged with fire. Busy little side-wheeled ferry steamers spanked the waters noisily and smudged the sunset with dark drifting trails of smoke; and ever and anon a rowboat would slip out of shadow to glide languidly with the current. Otherwise the life of the river was gone; and at their moorings the ships swung in great quietness, riding lights glimmering like low wan stars.

In the company of the latter the young man marked down the Alethea; a sight which made him unconsciously clench both fists and teeth, reminding him of that rare wag, Stryker....

To his way of thinking the behavior of the fiacre was quite unaccountable. Hardly had the horse paced off the length of two blocks on the Quai ere it was guided to the edge of the promenade and brought to a stop. And the driver twisted the reins round his whip, thrust the latter in its socket,

turned sidewise on the box, and began to smoke and swing his heels, surveying the panorama of river and sunset with complacency--a cabby, one would venture, without a care in the world and serene in the assurance of a generous _pour-boire_ when he lost his fare. But as for the latter, she made no move; the door of the cab remained closed,--like its occupant's mind, a mystery to the watcher.

Twilight shadows lengthened, darkling, over the land; street-lights flashed up in long, radiant ranks. Across the promenade hotels and shops were lighted up; people began to gather round the tables beneath the awnings of an open-air caf . In the distance, somewhere, a band swung into the dreamy rhythm of a haunting waltz. Scattered couples moved slowly, arm in arm, along the riverside walk, drinking in the fragrance of the night. Overhead stars popped out in brilliance and dropped their reflections to swim lazily on spellbound waters.... And still the fiacre lingered in inaction, still the driver lorded it aloft, in care-free abandon.

In the course of time this inertia, where he had looked for action, this dull suspense when he had forecast interesting developments, wore upon the watcher's nerves and made him at once impatient and suspicious. Now that he had begun to doubt, he conceived it as quite possible that Mrs. Hallam (who was capable of anything) should have stolen out of the cab by the other and, to him, invisible door. To resolve the matter, finally, he took advantage of the darkness, turned up his coat collar, hunched up his shoulders, hid his hands in pockets, pulled the visor of his cap well forward over his eyes, and slouched past the fiacre.

Mrs. Hallam sat within. He could see her profile clearly silhouetted against the light; she was bending forward and staring fixedly out of the window, across the driveway. Mentally he calculated the direction of her gaze, then, moved away and followed it with his own eyes; and found himself staring at the faade of a third-rate hotel. Above its roof the gilded letters of a sign, catching the illumination from below, spelled out the title of "H el du Commerce."

Mrs. Hallam was interested in the H el du Commerce?

Thoughtfully Kirkwood fell back to his former point of observation, now the richer by another object of suspicion, the hostelry. Mrs. Hallam was waiting and watching for some one to enter or to leave that establishment. It seemed a reasonable inference to draw. Well, then, so was Kirkwood, no less than the lady; he deemed it quite conceivable that their objects were identical.

He started to beguile the time by wondering what she would do, if...

Of a sudden he abandoned this line of speculation, and catching his breath, held it, almost afraid to credit the truth that for once his anticipations were being realized under his very eyes.

Against the lighted doorway of the H el du Commerce, the figures of two men were momentarily sketched, as they came hurriedly forth; and of the two, one was short and stout, and even at a distance seemed to bear himself

with an accent of assertiveness, while the other was tall and heavy of shoulder.

Side by side they marched in step across the embankment to the head of the Quai gangway, descending without pause to the landing-stage. Kirkwood, hanging breathlessly over the guard-rail, could hear their footfalls ringing in hollow rhythm on the planks of the inclined way,--could even discern Calendar's unlovely profile in dim relief beneath one of the waterside lights; and he recognized unmistakably Mulready's deep voice, grumbling inarticulately.

At the outset he had set after them, with intent to accost Calendar; but their pace had been swift and his irresolute. He hung fire on the issue, dreading to reveal himself, unable to decide which were the better course, to pursue the men, or to wait and discover what Mrs. Hallam was about. In the end he waited; and had his disappointment for recompense.

For Mrs. Hallam did nothing intelligible. Had she driven over to the hotel, hard upon the departure of the men, he would have believed that she was seeking Dorothy, and would, furthermore, have elected to crowd their interview, if she succeeded in obtaining one with the girl. But she did nothing of the sort. For a time the fiacre remained as it had been ever since stopping; then, evidently admonished by his fare, the driver straightened up, knocked out his pipe, disentangled reins and whip, and wheeled the equipage back on the way it had come, disappearing in a dark side street leading eastward from the embankment.

Kirkwood was, then, to believe that Mrs. Hallam, having taken all that trouble and having waited for the two adventurers to appear, had been content with sight of them? He could hardly believe that of the woman; it wasn't like her.

He started across the driveway, after the fiacre, but it was lost in a tangle of side streets before he could make up his mind whether it was worth while chasing or not; and, pondering the woman's singular action, he retraced his steps to the promenade rail.

Presently he told himself he understood. Dorothy was no longer of her father's party; he had a suspicion that Mulready's attitude had made it seem advisable to Calendar either to leave the girl behind, in England, or to segregate her from his associates in Antwerp. If not lodged in another quarter of the city, or left behind, she was probably traveling on ahead, to a destination which he could by no means guess. And Mrs. Hallam was looking for the girl; if there were really jewels in that gladstone bag, Calendar would naturally have had no hesitation about intrusting them to his daughter's care; and Mrs. Hallam avowedly sought nothing else. How the woman had found out that such was the case, Kirkwood did not stop to reckon; unless he explained it on the proposition that she was a person of remarkable address. It made no matter, one way or the other; he had lost Mrs. Hallam; but Calendar and Mulready he could put his finger on; they had undoubtedly gone off to the Alethea to confer again with Stryker,--that was, unless they proposed sailing on the brigantine, possibly at turn of tide that night.

Panic gripped his soul and shook it, as a terrier shakes a rat, when he conceived this frightful proposition.

In his confusion of mind he evolved spontaneously an entirely new hypothesis: Dorothy had already been spirited aboard the vessel; Calendar and his confederate, delaying to join her from enigmatic motives, were now aboard; and presently the word would be, Up-anchor and away!

Were they again to elude him? Not, he swore, if he had to swim for it. And he had no wish to swim. The clothes he stood in, with what was left of his self-respect, were all that he could call his own on that side of the North Sea. Not a boatman on the Scheldt would so much as consider accepting three English pennies in exchange for boat-hire. In brief, it began to look as if he were either to swim or ... to steal a boat.

Upon such slender threads of circumstance depends our boasted moral health. In one fleeting minute Kirkwood's conception of the law of *_meum et tuum_*, its foundations already insidiously undermined by a series of cumulative misfortunes, toppled crashing to its fall; and was not.

He was wholly unconscious of the change. Beneath him, in a space between the quays bridged by the gangway, a number of rowboats, a putative score, lay moored for the night and gently rubbing against each other with the soundless lift and fall of the river. For all that Kirkwood could determine to the contrary, the lot lay at the mercy of the public; nowhere about was he able to discern a figure in anything resembling a watchman.

Without a quiver of hesitation--moments were invaluable, if what he feared were true--he strode to the gangway, passed down, and with absolute nonchalance dropped into the nearest boat, stepping from one to another until he had gained the outermost. To his joy he found a pair of oars stowed beneath the thwarts.

If he had paused to moralize--which he didn't--upon the discovery, he would have laid it all at the door of his lucky star; and would have been wrong. We who have never stooped to petty larceny know that the oars had been placed there at the direction of his evil genius bent upon facilitating his descent into the avernus of crime. Let us, then, pity the poor young man without condoning his offense.

Unhitching the painter he set one oar against the gunwale of the next boat, and with a powerful thrust sent his own (let us so call it for convenience) stern-first out upon the river; then sat him composedly down, fitted the oars to their locks, and began to pull straight across-stream, trusting to the current to carry him down to the *_Alethea_*. He had already marked down that vessel's riding-light; and that not without a glow of gratitude to see it still aloft and in proper juxtaposition to the river-bank; proof that it had not moved.

He pulled a good oar, reckoned his distance prettily, and shipping the blades at just the right moment, brought the little boat in under the brigantine's counter with scarce a jar. An element of surprise he held

essential to the success of his plan, whatever that might turn out to be.

Standing up, he caught the brigantine's after-rail with both hands, one of which held the painter of the purloined boat, and lifted his head above the deck line. A short survey of the deserted after-deck gave him further assurance. The anchor-watch was not in sight; he may have been keeping well forward by Stryker's instructions, or he may have crept off for forty winks. Whatever the reason for his absence from the post of duty, Kirkwood was relieved not to have him to deal with; and drawing himself gently in over the rail, made the painter fast, and stepped noiselessly over toward the lighted oblong of the companionway. A murmur of voices from below comforted him with the knowledge that he had not miscalculated, this time; at last he stood within striking distance of his quarry.

The syllables of his surname ringing clearly in his ears and followed by Stryker's fleeting laugh, brought him to a pause. He flushed hotly in the darkness; the captain was retailing with relish some of his most successful witticisms at Kirkwood's expense.... "You'd ought to've seed the wye'e looked at me!" concluded the _raconteur_ in a gale of mirth.

Mulready laughed with him, if a little uncertainly. Calendar's chuckle was not audible, but he broke the pause that followed.

"I don't know," he said with doubting emphasis. "You say you landed him without a penny in his pocket? I don't call that a good plan at all. Of course, he ain't a factor, but ... Well, it might've been as well to give him his fare home. He might make trouble for us, somehow.... I don't mind telling you, Cap'n, that you're an ass."

The tensivity of certain situations numbs the sensibilities. Kirkwood had never in his weirdest dreams thought of himself as an eavesdropper; he did not think of himself as such in the present instance; he merely listened, edging nearer the skylight, of which the wings were slightly raised, and keeping as far as possible in shadow.

"Ow, I sye!" the captain was remonstrating, aggrieved. "'Ow was I to know 'e didn't 'ave it in for you? First off, when 'e comes on board (I'll sye this for 'im, 'e's as plucky as they myke 'em), I thought 'e was from the Yard. Then, when I see wot a bally hinnocent 'e was, I mykes up my mind 'e's just some one you've been ply in' one of your little gymes on, and 'oo was lookin' to square 'is account. So I did 'im proper."

"Evidently," assented Calendar dryly. "You're a bit of a heavy-handed brute, Stryker. Personally I'm kind of sorry for the boy; he wasn't a bad sort, as his kind runs, and he was no fool, from what little I saw of him.... I wonder what he wanted."

"Possibly," Mulready chimed in suavely, "you can explain what you wanted of him, in the first place. How did you come to drag him into _this_ business?"

"Oh, that!" Calendar laughed shortly. "That was partly accident, partly inspiration. I happened to see his name on the Pless register; he'd put

himself down as from 'Frisco. I figured it out that he would be next door to broke and getting desperate, ready to do anything to get home; and thought we might utilize him; to smuggle some of the stuff into the States. Once before, if you'll remember--no; that was before we got together, Mulready--I picked up a fellow-countryman on the Strand. He was down and out, jumped at the job, and we made a neat little wad on it."

"The more fool you, to take outsiders into your confidence," grumbled Mulready.

"Ow?" interrogated Calendar, mimicking Stryker's accent inimitably. "Well, you've got a heap to learn about this game, Mul; about the first thing is that you must trust Old Man Know-it-all, which is me. I've run more diamonds into the States, in one way or another, in my time, than you ever pinched out of the shirt-front of a toff on the Empire Prom., before they made the graft too hot for you and you came to take lessons from me in the gentle art of living easy."

"Oh, cut that, cawn't you?"

"Delighted, dear boy.... One of the first principles, next to profiting by the admirable example I set you, is to make the fellows in your own line trust you. Now, if this boy had taken on with me, I could have got a bunch of the sparklers on my mere say-so, from old Morganthau up on Finsbury Pavement. He does a steady business hoodwinking the Customs for the benefit of his American clients--and himself. And I'd've made a neat little profit besides: something to fall back on, if this fell through. I don't mind having two strings to my bow."

"Yes," argued Mulready; "but suppose this Kirkwood had taken on with you and then peached?"

"That's another secret; you've got to know your man, be able to size him up. I called on this chap for that very purpose; but I saw at a glance he wasn't our man. He smelt a nigger in the woodpile and most politely told me to go to the devil. But if he had come in, he'd've died before he squealed. I know the breed; there's honor among gentlemen that knocks the honor of thieves higher'n a kite, the old saw to the contrary--nothing doing.... You understand me, I'm sure, Mulready?" he concluded with envenomed sweetness.

"I don't see yet how Kirkwood got anything to do with Dorothy."

"Miss Calendar to you, Mister Mulready!" snapped Calendar. "There, there, now! Don't get excited.... It was when the Hallam passed me word that a man from the Yard was waiting on the altar steps for me, that Kirkwood came in. He was dining close by; I went over and worked on his feelings until he agreed to take Dorothy off my hands. If I had attempted to leave the place with her, they'd've spotted me for sure.... My compliments to you, Dick Mulready."

There came the noise of chair legs scraped harshly on the cabin deck. Apparently Mulready had leaped to his feet in a rage.

"I've told you--" he began in a voice thick with passion.

"Oh, sit down!" Calendar cut in contemptuously. "Sit down, d'you hear? That's all over and done with. We understand each other now, and you won't try any more monkey-shines. It's a square deal and a square divide, so far's I'm concerned; if we stick together there'll be profit enough for all concerned. Sit down, Mul, and have another slug of the captain's bum rum."

Although Mulready consented to be pacified, Kirkwood got the impression that the man was far gone in drink. A moment later he heard him growl "Chin-chin!" antiphonal to the captain's "Cheer-o!"

"Now, then," Calendar proposed, "Mr. Kirkwood aside--peace be with him!--let's get down to cases."

"Wot's the row?" asked the captain.

"The row, Cap'n, is the Hallam female, who has unexpectedly shown up in Antwerp, we have reason to believe with malicious intent and a private detective to add to the gaiety of nations."

"Wot's the odds? She can't 'urt us without lyin' up trouble for 'erself."

"Damn little consolation to us when we're working it out in Dartmoor."

"Speak for yourself," grunted Mulready surlily.

"I do," returned Calendar easily; "we're both in the shadow of Dartmoor, Mul, my boy; since you choose to take the reference as personal. Sing Sing, however, yawns for me alone; it's going to keep on yawning, too, unless I miss my guess. I love my native land most to death, _but_ ..."

"Ow, blow that!" interrupted the captain irritably. "Let's 'ear about the 'Allam. Wot're you afryd of?"

"'Fraid she'll set up a yell when she finds out we're planting the loot, Cap'n. She's just that vindictive; you'd think she'd be satisfied with her end of the stick, but you don't know the Hallam. That milk-and-water offspring of hers is the apple of her eye, and Freddie's going to collar the whole shooting-match or madam will kick over the traces."

"Well?"

"Well, she's queered us here. We can't do anything if my lady is going to camp on our trail and tell everybody we're shady customers, can we? The question now before the board is: Where now,--and how?"

"Amsterdam," Mulready chimed in. "I told you that in the beginning."

"But how?" argued Calendar. "The Lord knows I'm willing but ... we can't go by rail, thanks to the Hallam. We've got to lose her first of all."

"But wot I'm arskin' is, wot's the matter with--"

"The _Alethea_, Cap'n? Nothing, so far as Dick and I are concerned. But my dutiful daughter is prejudiced; she's been so long without proper paternal discipline," Calendar laughed, "that she's rather high-spirited. Of course I might overcome her objections, but the girl's no fool, and every ounce of pressure I bring to bear just now only helps make her more restless and suspicious."

"You leave her to me," Mulready interposed, with a brutal laugh. "I'll guarantee to get her aboard, or..."

"Drop it, Dick!" Calendar advised quietly. "And go a bit easy with that bottle for five minutes, can't you?"

"Well, then," Stryker resumed, apparently concurring in Calendar's attitude, "w'y don't one of you tyke the stuff, go off quiet and dispose of it to a proper fence, and come back to divide. I don't see w'y that--"

"Naturally you wouldn't," chuckled Calendar. "Few people besides the two of us understand the depth of affection existing between Dick, here, and me. We just can't bear to get out of sight of each other. We're sure inseparable--since night before last. Odd, isn't it?"

"You drop it!" snarled Mulready, in accents so ugly that the listener was startled. "Enough's enough and--"

"There, there, Dick! All right; I'll behave," Calendar soothed him. "We'll forget and say no more about it."

"Well, see you don't."

"But 'as either of you a plan?" persisted Stryker.

"I have," replied Mulready; "and it's the simplest and best, if you could only make this long-lost parent here see it."

"Wot is it?"

Mulready seemed to ignore Calendar and address himself to the captain. He articulated with some difficulty, slurring his words to the point of indistinctness at times.

"Simple enough," he propounded solemnly. "We've got the gladstone bag here; Miss Dolly's at the hotel--that's her papa's bright notion; he thinks she's to be trusted ... Now then, what's the matter with weighing anchor and slipping quietly out to sea?"

"Leavin' the dootiful darter?"

"Cert'n'y. She's only a drag any way. 'Better off without her.... Then we can wait our time and get highest market prices--"

"You forget, Dick," Calendar put it, "that there's a thousand in it for each of us if she's kept out of England for six weeks. A thousand's five thousand in the land I hail from; I can use five thousand in my business."

"Why can't you be content with what you've got?" demanded Mulready wrathfully.

"Because I'm a seventh son of a seventh son; I can see an inch or two beyond my nose. If Dorothy ever finds her way back to England she'll spoil one of the finest fields of legitimate graft I ever licked my lips to look at. The trouble with you, Mul, is you're too high-toned. You want to play the swell mobs-man from post to finish. A quick touch and a clean getaway for yours. Now, that's all right; that has its good points, but you don't want to underestimate the advantages of a good blackmailing connection.... If I can keep Dorothy quiet long enough, I look to the Hallam and precious Freddie to be a great comfort to me in my old age."

"Then, for God's sake," cried Mulready, "go to the hotel, get your brat by the scruff of her pretty neck and drag her aboard. Let's get out of this."

"I won't," returned Calendar inflexibly.

The dispute continued, but the listener had heard enough. He had to get away and think, could no longer listen; indeed, the voices of the three blackguards below came but indistinctly to his ears, as if from a distance. He was sick at heart and ablaze with indignation by turns. Unconsciously he was trembling violently in every limb; swept by alternate waves of heat and cold, feverish one minute, shivering the next. All of which phenomena were due solely to the rage that welled inside his heart.

Stealthily he crept away to the rail, to stand grasping it and staring across the water with unseeing eyes at the gay old city twinkling back with her thousand eyes of light. The cool night breeze, sweeping down unhindered over the level Netherlands from the bleak North Sea, was comforting to his throbbing temples. By degrees his head cleared, his rioting pulses subsided, he could think; and he did.

Over there, across the water, in the dingy and disreputable H[^]tel du Commerce, Dorothy waited in her room, doubtless the prey of unnumbered nameless terrors, while aboard the brigantine her fate was being decided by a council of three unspeakable scoundrels, one of whom, professing himself her father, openly declared his intention of using her to further his selfish and criminal ends.

His first and natural thought, to steal away to her and induce her to accompany him back to England, Kirkwood perforce discarded. He could have wept over the realization of his unqualified impotency. He had no money,--not even cab-fare from the hotel to the railway station. Something subtler, more crafty, had to be contrived to meet the emergency. And there was one way, one only; he could see none other. Temporarily he must make himself one of the company of her enemies, force himself upon them, ingratiate himself into their good graces, gain their confidence, then, when opportunity offered, betray them. And the power to make them tolerate

him, if not receive him as a fellow, the knowledge of them and their plans that they had unwittingly given him, was his.

And Dorothy, was waiting....

He swung round and without attempting to muffle his footfalls strode toward the companionway. He must pretend he had just come aboard.

Subconsciously he had been aware, during his time of pondering, that the voices in the cabin had been steadily gaining in volume, rising louder and yet more loud, Mulready's ominous, drink-blurred accents dominating the others. There was a quarrel afoot; as soon as he gave it heed, Kirkwood understood that Mulready, in the madness of his inflamed brain, was forcing the issue while Calendar sought vainly to calm and soothe him.

The American arrived at the head of the companionway at a critical juncture. As he moved to descend some low, cool-toned retort of Calendar's seemed to enrage his confederate beyond reason. He yelped aloud with wrath, sprang to his feet, knocking over a chair, and leaping back toward the foot of the steps, flashed an adroit hand behind him and found his revolver.

"I've stood enough from you!" he screamed, his voice oddly clear in that moment of insanity. "You've played with me as long as you will, you hulking American hog! And now I'm going to show--"

As he held his fire to permit his denunciation to bite home, Kirkwood, appalled to find himself standing on the threshold of a tragedy, gathered himself together and launched through the air, straight for the madman's shoulders.

As they went down together, sprawling, Mulready's head struck against a transom and the revolver fell from his limp fingers.

XIV

STRATAGEMS AND SPOILS

Prepared as he had been for the shock, Kirkwood was able to pick himself up quickly, uninjured, Mulready's revolver in his grasp.

On his feet, straddling Mulready's insentient body, he confronted Calendar and Stryker. The face of the latter was a sickly green, the gift of his fright. The former seemed coldly composed, already recovering from his surprise and bringing his wits to bear upon the new factor which had been so unceremoniously injected into the situation.

[Illustration: Straddling Mulready's body, he confronted Calendar and Stryker.]

Standing, but leaning heavily upon a hand that rested flat on the table, in the other he likewise held a revolver, which he had apparently drawn in self-defense, at the crisis of Mulready's frenzy. Its muzzle was deflected. He looked Kirkwood over with a cool gray eye, the color gradually returning to his fat, clean-shaven cheeks, replacing the pardonable pallor which had momentarily rested thereon.

As for Kirkwood, he had covered the fat adventurer before he knew it. Stryker, who had been standing immediately in the rear of Calendar, immediately cowered and cringed to find himself in the line of fire.

Of the three conscious men in the brigantine's cabin, Calendar was probably the least confused or excited. Stryker was palpably unmanned. Kirkwood was tingling with a sense of mastery, but collected and rapidly revolving the combinations for the reversed conditions which had been brought about by Mulready's drunken folly. His elation was apparent in his shining, boyish eyes, as well as in the bright color that glowed in his cheeks. When he decided to speak it was with rapid enunciation, but clearly and concisely.

"Calendar," he began, "if a single shot is fired about this vessel the river police will be buzzing round your ears in a brace of shakes."

The fat adventurer nodded assent, his eyes contracting.

"Very well!" continued Kirkwood brusquely. "You must know that I have personally nothing to fear from the police; if arrested, I wouldn't be detained a day. On the other hand, you ... Hand me that pistol, Calendar, butt first, please. Look sharp, my man! If you don't..."

He left the ellipsis to be filled in by the corpulent blackguard's intelligence. The latter, gray eyes still intent on the younger man's face, wavered, plainly impressed, but still wondering.

"Quick! I'm not patient to-night..."

No longer was Calendar of two minds. In the face of Kirkwood's attitude there was but one course to be followed: that of obedience. Calendar surrendered an untenable position as gracefully as could be wished.

"I guess you know what you mean by this," he said, tendering the weapon as per instructions; "I'm doggoned if I do.... You'll allow a certain latitude in consideration of my relief; I can't say we were anticipating this--ah--Heaven-sent visitation."

Accepting the revolver with his left hand and settling his forefinger on the trigger, Kirkwood beamed with pure enjoyment. He found the deference of the older man, tempered though it was by his indomitable swagger, refreshing in the extreme.

"A little appreciation isn't exactly out of place, come to think of it," he commented, adding, with an eye for the captain: "Stryker, you bold, bad butterfly, have you got a gun concealed about your unclean person?"

The captain shook visibly with contrition. "No, Mr. Kirkwood," he managed to reply in a voice singularly lacking in his wonted bluster.

"Say 'sir!'" suggested Kirkwood.

"No, Mr. Kirkwood, sir," amended Stryker eagerly.

"Now come round here and let's have a look at you. Please stay where you are, Calendar.... Why, Captain, you're shivering from head to foot! Not ill are you, you wag? Step over to the table there, Stryker, and turn out your pockets; turn 'em inside out and let's see what you carry in the way of offensive artillery. And, Stryker, don't be rash; don't do anything you'd be sorry for afterwards."

"No fear of that," mumbled the captain, meekly shambling toward the table, and, in his anxiety to give no cause for unpleasantness, beginning to empty his pockets on the way.

"Don't forget the 'sir,' Stryker. And, Stryker, if you happen to think of anything in the line of one of your merry quips or jests, don't strain yourself holding in; get it right off your chest, and you'll feel better."

Kirkwood chuckled, in high conceit with himself, watching Calendar out of the corner of his eye, but with his attention centered on the infinitely diverting spectacle afforded by Stryker, whose predacious hands were trembling violently as, one by one, they brought to light the articles of which he had despoiled his erstwhile victim.

"Come, come, Stryker! Surely you can think of something witty, surely you haven't exhausted the possibilities of that almanac joke! Couldn't you ring another variation on the lunatic wheeze? Don't hesitate out of consideration for me, Captain; I'm joke proof--perhaps you've noticed?"

Stryker turned upon him an expression at once ludicrous, piteous and hateful. "That's all, sir," he snarled, displaying his empty palms in token of his absolute tractability.

"Good enough. Now right about face--quick! Your back's prettier than your face, and besides, I want to know whether your hip-pockets are empty. I've heard it's the habit of you gentry to pack guns in your clothes.... None? That's all right, then. Now roost on the transom, over there in the corner, Stryker, and don't move. Don't let me hear a word from you. Understand?"

Submissively the captain retired to the indicated spot. Kirkwood turned to Calendar; of whose attitude, however, he had not been for an instant unmindful.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Calendar?" he suggested pleasantly. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting."

For his own part, as the adventurer dropped passively into his chair, Kirkwood stepped over Mulready and advanced to the middle of the cabin, at the same time thrusting Calendar's revolver into his own coat pocket. The

other, Mulready's, he nursed significantly with both hands, while he stood temporarily quiet, surveying the fleshy face of the prime factor in the intrigue.

A quaint, grim smile played about the American's lips, a smile a little contemptuous, more than a little inscrutable. In its light Calendar grew restive and lost something of his assurance. His feet shifted uneasily beneath the table and his dark eyes wavered, evading Kirkwood's. At length he seemed to find the suspense unendurable.

"Well?" he demanded testily. "What d'you want of me?"

"I was just wondering at you, Calendar. In the last few days you've given me enough cause to wonder, as you'll admit."

The adventurer plucked up spirit, deluded by Kirkwood's pacific tone. "I wonder at you, Mr. Kirkwood," he retorted. "It was good of you to save my life and--"

"I'm not so sure of that! Perhaps it had been more humane--"

Calendar owned the touch with a wry grimace. "But I'm damned if I understand this high-handed attitude of yours!" he concluded heatedly.

"Don't you?" Kirkwood's humor became less apparent, the smile sobering. "You will," he told the man, adding abruptly: "Calendar, where's your daughter?"

The restless eyes sought the companionway.

"Dorothy," the man lied spontaneously, without a tremor, "is with friends in England. Why? Did you want to see her?"

"I rather expected to."

"Well, I thought it best to leave her home, after all."

"I'm glad to hear she's in safe hands," commented Kirkwood.

The adventurer's glance analyzed his face. "Ah," he said slowly, "I see. You followed me on Dorothy's account, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Partly; partly on my own. Let me put it to you fairly. When you forced yourself upon me, back there in London, you offered me some sort of employment; when I rejected it, you used me to your advantage for the furtherance of your purposes (which I confess I don't understand), and made me miss my steamer. Naturally, when I found myself penniless and friendless in a strange country, I thought again of your offer; and tried to find you, to accept it."

"Despite the fact that you're an honest man, Kirkwood?" The fat lips twitched with premature enjoyment.

"I'm a desperate man to-night, whatever I may have been yesterday." The young man's tone was both earnest and convincing. "I think I've shown that by my pertinacity in hunting you down."

"Well--yes." Calendar's thick fingers caressed his lips, trying to hide the dawning smile.

"Is that offer still open?"

His nonchalance completely restored by the very naïveté of the proposition, Calendar laughed openly and with a trace of irony. The episode seemed to be turning out better than he had anticipated. Gently his mottled fat fingers played about his mouth and chins as he looked Kirkwood up and down.

"I'm sorry," he replied, "that it isn't--now. You're too late, Kirkwood; I've made other arrangements."

"Too bad." Kirkwood's eyes narrowed. "You force me to harsher measures, Calendar."

Genuinely diverted, the adventurer laughed a second time, tipping back in his chair, his huge frame shaking with ponderous enjoyment. "Don't do anything you'd be sorry for," he parroted, sarcastical, the young man's recent admonition to the captain.

"No fear, Calendar. I'm just going to use my advantage, which you won't dispute,"--the pistol described an eloquent circle, gleaming in the lamplight--"to levy on you a little legitimate blackmail. Don't be alarmed; I shan't hit you any harder than I have to."

"What?" stammered Calendar, astonished. "What in hell _are_ you driving at?"

"Recompense for my time and trouble. You've cost me a pretty penny, first and last, with your nasty little conspiracy--whatever it's all about. Now, needing the money, I purpose getting some of it back. I shan't precisely rob you, but this is a hold-up, all right.... Stryker," reproachfully, "I don't see my pearl pin."

"I got it 'ere," responded the sailor hastily, fumbling with his tie.

"Give it me, then." Kirkwood held out his hand and received the trinket. Then, moving over to the table, the young man, while abating nothing of his watchfulness, sorted out his belongings from the mass of odds and ends Stryker had disgorged. The tale of them was complete; the captain had obeyed him faithfully. Kirkwood looked up, pleased.

"Now see here, Calendar; this collection of truck that I was robbed of by this resurrected Joe Miller here, cost me upwards of a hundred and fifty. I'm going to sell it to you at a bargain--say fifty dollars, two hundred and fifty francs."

"The juice you are!" Calendar's eyes opened wide, partly in admiration.

"D'you realize that this is next door to highway robbery, my young friend?"

"High-seas piracy, if you prefer," assented Kirkwood with entire equanimity. "I'm going to have the money, and you're going to give it up. The transaction by any name would smell no sweeter, Calendar. Come--fork over!"

"And if I refuse?"

"I wouldn't refuse, if I were you."

"Why not?"

"The consequences would be too painful."

"You mean you'd puncture me with that gun?"

"Not unless you attack or attempt to follow me. I mean to say that the Belgian police are notoriously a most efficient body, and that I'll make it my duty and pleasure to introduce 'em to you, if you refuse. But you won't," Kirkwood added soothingly, "will you, Calendar?"

"No." The adventurer had become suddenly thoughtful. "No, I won't. 'Glad to oblige you."

He tilted his chair still farther back, straightening out his elephantine legs, inserted one fat hand into his trouser pocket and with some difficulty extracted a combined bill-fold and coin-purse, at once heavy with gold and bulky with notes. Moistening thumb and forefinger, "How'll you have it?" he inquired with a lift of his cunning eyes; and when Kirkwood had advised him, slowly counted out four fifty-franc notes, placed them near the edge of the table, and weighted them with five ten-franc pieces. And, "'That all?" he asked, replacing the pocket-book.

"That will be about all. I leave you presently to your unholy devices, you and that gay dog, over there." The captain squirmed, reddening. "Just by way of precaution, however, I'll ask you to wait in here till I'm off." Kirkwood stepped backwards to the door of the captain's room, opened it and removed the key from the inside. "Please take Mulready in with you," he continued. "By the time you get out, I'll be clear of Antwerp. Please don't think of refusing me,--I really mean it!"

The latter clause came sharply as Calendar seemed to hesitate, his weary, wary eyes glimmering with doubt. Kirkwood, watching him as a cat her prey, intercepted a lightning-swift sidelong glance that shifted from his face to the port lockers, forward. But the fat adventurer was evidently to a considerable degree deluded by the very child-like simplicity of Kirkwood's attitude. If the possibility that his altercation with Mulready had been overheard, crossed his mind, Calendar had little choice other than to accept the chance. Either way he moved, the risk was great; if he refused to be locked in the captain's room, there was the danger of the police, to which Kirkwood had convincingly drawn attention; if he accepted the temporary imprisonment, he took a risk with the gladstone bag. On the other

hand, he had estimated Kirkwood's honesty as thorough-going, from their first interview; he had appraised him as a gentleman and a man of honor. And he did not believe the young man knew, after all ... Perplexed, at length he chose the smoother way, and with an indulgent lifting of eyebrows and fat shoulders, rose and waddled over to Mulready.

"Oh, all right," he conceded with deep toleration in his tone for the idiosyncrasies of youth. "It's all the same to me, beau." He laughed a nervous laugh. "Come along and lend us a hand, Stryker."

The latter glanced timidly at Kirkwood, his eyes pleading for leave to move; which Kirkwood accorded with an imperative nod and a fine flourish of the revolver. Promptly the captain, sprang to Calendar's assistance; and between the two of them, the one taking Mulready's head, the other his feet, they lugged him quickly into the stuffy little state-room. Kirkwood, watching and following to the threshold, inserted the key.

"One word more," he counseled, a hand on the knob. "Don't forget I've warned you what'll happen if you try to break even with me."

"Never fear, little one!" Calendar's laugh was nervously cheerful. "The Lord knows you're welcome."

"Thank you 'most to death," responded Kirkwood politely. "Good-by--and good-by to you, Stryker. 'Glad to have humored your desire to meet me soon again."

Kirkwood, turning the key in the lock, withdrew it and dropped it on the cabin table; at the same time he swept into his pocket the money he had extorted of Calendar. Then he paused an instant, listening; from the captain's room came a sound of murmurs and scuffling. He debated what they were about in there--but time pressed. Not improbably they, were crowding for place at the keyhole, he reflected, as he crossed to the port locker forward.

He had its lid up in a twinkling, and in another had lifted out the well-remembered black gladstone bag.

This seems to have been his first compound larceny.

As if stimulated by some such reflection he sprang for the companionway, dropping the lid of the locker with a bang which must have been excruciatingly edifying to the men in the captain's room. Whatever their emotions, the bang was mocked by a mighty kick, shaking the door; which, Kirkwood reflected, opened outward and was held only by the frailest kind of a lock: it would not hold long.

Spurred onward by a storm of curses, Stryker's voice chanting infuriated cacophony with Calendar's, Kirkwood leapt up the companionway even as the second tremendous kick threatened to shatter the panels. Heart in mouth, a chill shiver of guilt running up and down his spine, he gained the deck, cast loose the painter, drew in his rowboat, and dropped over the side; then, the gladstone bag nestling between his feet, sat down and bent to the

oars.

And doubts assailed him, pressing close upon the ebb of his excitement--doubts and fears innumerable.

There was no longer a distinction to be drawn between himself and Calendar; no more could he esteem himself a better and more honest man than that accomplished swindler. He was not advised as to the Belgian code, but English law, he understood, made no allowance for the good intent of those caught in possession of stolen property; though he was acting with the most honorable motives in the world, the law, if he came within its cognizance, would undoubtedly place him on Calendar's plane and judge him by the same standard. To all intents and purposes he was a thief, and thief he would remain until the gladstone bag with its contents should be restored to its rightful owner.

Voluntarily, then, he had stepped from the ranks of the hunters to those of the hunted. He now feared police interference as abjectly as did Calendar and his set of rogues; and Kirkwood felt wholly warranted in assuming that the adventurer, with his keen intelligence, would not handicap himself by ignoring this point. Indeed, if he were to be judged by what Kirkwood had inferred of his character, Calendar would let nothing whatever hinder him, neither fear of bodily hurt nor danger of apprehension at the hands of the police, from making a determined and savage play to regain possession of his booty.

Well! (Kirkwood set his mouth savagely) Calendar should have a run for his money!

For the present he could compliment himself with the knowledge that he had outwitted the rogues, had lifted the jewels and probably two-thirds of their armament; he had also the start, the knowledge of their criminal guilt and intent, and his own plans, to comfort him. As for the latter, he did not believe that Calendar would immediately fathom them; so he took heart of grace and tugged at the oars with a will, pulling directly for the city and permitting the current to drift him down-stream at its pleasure. There could be no more inexcusable folly than to return to the Quai Steen landing and (possibly) the arms of the despoiled boat-owner.

At first he could hear crash after splintering crash sounding dully muffled from the cabin of the Alethea: a veritable devil's tattoo beaten out by the feet of the prisoners. Evidently the fastening was serving him better than he had dared hope. But as the black rushing waters widened between boat and brigantine, the clamor aboard the latter subsided, indicating that Calendar and Stryker had broken out or been released by the crew. In ignorance as to whether he were seen or being pursued, Kirkwood pulled on, winning in under the shadow of the quais and permitting the boat to drift down to a lonely landing on the edge of the dockyard quarter of Antwerp.

Here alighting, he made the boat fast and, soothing his conscience with a surmise that its owner would find it there in the morning, strode swiftly over to the train line that runs along the embankment, swung aboard an adventitious car and broke his first ten-franc piece in order to pay his

fare.

The car made a leisurely progress up past the old Steen castle and the Quai landing, Kirkwood sitting quietly, the gladstone bag under his hand, a searching gaze sweeping the waterside. No sign of the adventurers rewarded him, but it was now all chance, all hazard. He had no more heart for confidence.

They passed the Hâtel du Commerce. Kirkwood stared up at its windows, wondering....

A little farther on, a disengaged fiacre, its driver alert for possible fares, turned a corner into the esplanade. At sight of it Kirkwood, inspired, hopped nimbly off the tram-car and signaled the cabby. The latter pulled up and Kirkwood started to charge him with instructions; something which he did haltingly, hampered by a slight haziness of purpose. While thus engaged, and at rest in the stark glare of the street-lamps, with no chance of concealing himself, he was aware of a rising tumult in the direction of the landing, and glancing round, discovered a number of people running toward him. With no time to wonder whether or no he was really the object of the hue-and-cry, he tossed the driver three silver francs.

"Gare Centrale!" he cried. "And drive like the devil!"

Diving into the fiacre he shut the door and stuck his head out of the window, taking observations. A ragged fringe of silly rabble was bearing down upon them, with one or two gendarmes in the forefront, and a giant, who might or might not be Stryker, a close second. Furthermore, another cab seemed to have been requisitioned for the chase. His heart misgave him momentarily; but his driver had taken him at his word and generosity, and in a breath the fiacre had turned the corner on two wheels, and the glittering reaches of the embankment, drive and promenade, were blotted out, as if smudged with lamp-black, by the obscurity of a narrow and tortuous side street.

He drew in his head the better to preserve his brains against further emergencies.

After a block or two Kirkwood picked up the gladstone bag, gently opened the door, and put a foot on the step, pausing to look back. The other cab was pelting after him with all the enthusiasm of a hound on a fresh trail. He reflected that this mad progress through the thoroughfares of a civilized city would not long endure without police intervention. So he waited, watching his opportunity. The fiacre hurtled onward, the driver leaning forward from his box to urge the horse with lash of whip and tongue, entirely unconscious of his fare's intentions.

Between two streets the mouth of a narrow and darksome byway flashed into view. Kirkwood threw wide the door, and leaped, trusting to the night to hide his stratagem, to luck to save his limbs. Neither failed him; in a twinkling he was on all fours in the mouth of the alley, and as he picked himself up, the second fiacre passed, Calendar himself poking a round bald poll out of the window to incite his driver's cupidity with promises of

redoubled fare.

Kirkwood mopped his dripping forehead and whistled low with dismay; it seemed that from that instant on it was to be a vendetta with a vengeance. Calendar, as he had foreseen, was stopping at nothing.

At a dog trot he sped down the alley to the next street, on which he turned back--more sedately--toward the river, debouching on the esplanade just one block from the H^âtel du Commerce. As he swung past the serried tables of a caf[ ], whatever fears he had harbored were banished by the discovery that the excitement occasioned by the chase had already subsided. Beneath the garish awnings the crowd was laughing and chattering, eating and sipping its bock with complete unconcern, heedless altogether of the haggard and shabby young man carrying a black hand-bag, with the black Shade of Care for company and a blacker threat of disaster dogging his footsteps. Without attracting any attention whatever, indeed, he mingled with the strolling crowds, making his way toward the H^âtel du Commerce. Yet he was not at all at ease; his uneasy conscience invested the gladstone bag with a magnetic attraction for the public eye. To carry it unconcealed in his hand furnished him with a sensation as disturbing as though its worn black sides had been stenciled STOLEN! in letters of flame. He felt it rendered him a cynosure of public interest, an object of suspicion to the wide cold world, that the gaze which lit upon the bag traveled to his face only to espy thereon the brand of guilt.

For ease of mind, presently, he turned into a convenient shop and spent ten invaluable francs for a hand satchel big enough to hold the gladstone bag.

With more courage, now that he had the hateful thing under cover, he found and entered the H^âtel du Commerce.

In the little closet which served for an office, over a desk visibly groaning with the weight of an enormous and grimy registry book, a sleepy, fat, bland and good-natured woman of the Belgian bourgeoisie presided, a benign and drowsy divinity of even-tempered courtesy. To his misleading inquiry for Monsieur Calendar she returned a cheerful permission to seek that gentleman for himself.

"Three flights, M'sieu', in the front; suite seventeen it is. M'sieu' does not mind walking up?" she inquired.

M'sieu' did not in the least, though by no strain of the imagination could it, be truthfully said that he walked up those steep and redolent stairways of the H^âtel du Commerce d'Anvers. More literally, he flew with winged feet, spurning each third padded step with a force that raised a tiny cloud of fine white dust from the carpeting.

Breathless, at last he paused at the top of the third flight. His heart was hammering, his pulses drumming like wild things; there was a queer constriction in his throat, a fire of hope in his heart alternating with the ice of doubt. Suppose she were not there! What if he were mistaken, what if he had misunderstood, what if Mulready and Calendar had referred to another lodging-house?

Pausing, he gripped the balustrade fiercely, forcing his self-control, forcing himself to reflect that the girl (presuming, for the sake of argument, he were presently to find her) could not be expected to understand how ardently he had discounted this moment of meeting, or how strangely it affected him. Indeed, he himself was more than a little disturbed by the latter phenomenon, though he was no longer blind to its cause. But he was not to let her see the evidences of his agitation, lest she be frightened.

Slowly schooling himself to assume a masque of illuding self-possession and composure, he passed down the corridor to the door whose panels wore the painted legend, 17; and there knocked.

Believing that he overheard from within a sudden startled exclamation, he smiled patiently, tolerant of her surprise.

Burning with impatience as with a fever, he endured a long minute's wait.

Misgivings were prompting him to knock again and summon her by name, when he heard footfalls on the other side of the door, followed by a click of the lock. The door was opened grudgingly, a bare six inches.

Of the alarmed expression in the eyes that stared into his, he took no account. His face lengthened a little as he stood there, dumb, panting, staring; and his heart sank, down, deep down into a gulf of disappointment, weighted sorely with chagrin.

Then, of the two the first to recover countenance, he doffed his cap and bowed.

"Good evening, Mrs. Hallam," he said with a rueful smile.

XV

REFUGEES

Now, if Kirkwood's emotion was poignant, Mrs. Hallam's astonishment paralleled, and her relief transcended it. In order to understand this it must be remembered that while Mr. Kirkwood was aware of the lady's presence in Antwerp, on her part she had known nothing of him since he had so ungallantly fled her company in Sheerness. She seemed to anticipate that either Calendar or one of his fellows would be discovered at the door,--to have surmised it without any excessive degree of pleasure.

Only briefly she hesitated, while her surprise swayed her; then with a hardening of the eyes and a curt little nod, "I'm sorry," she said with decision, "but I am busy and can't see you now, Mr. Kirkwood"; and attempted to shut the door in his face.

Deftly Kirkwood forestalled her intention by inserting both a foot and a corner of the newly purchased hand-bag between the door and the jamb. He had dared too greatly to be thus dismissed. "Pardon me," he countered, unabashed, "but I wish to speak with Miss Calendar."

"Dorothy," returned the lady with spirit, "is engaged...."

She compressed her lips, knitted her brows, and with disconcerting suddenness thrust one knee against the obstructing hand-bag; Kirkwood, happily, anticipated the movement just in time to reinforce the bag with his own knee; it remained in place, the door standing open.

The woman flushed angrily; their glances crossed, her eyes flashing with indignation; but Kirkwood's held them with a level and unyielding stare.

"I intend," he told her quietly, "to see Miss Calendar. It's useless your trying to hinder me. We may as well understand each other, Madam, and I'll tell you now that if you wish to avoid a scene--"

"Dorothy!" the woman called over her shoulder; "ring for the porter."

"By all means," assented Kirkwood agreeably. "I'll send him for a gendarme."

"You insolent puppy!"

"Madam, your wit disarms me--"

"What is the matter, Mrs. Hallam?" interrupted a voice from the other side of the door. "Who is it?"

"Miss Calendar!" cried Kirkwood hastily, raising his voice.

"Mr. Kirkwood!" the reply came on the instant. She knew his voice! "Please, Mrs. Hallam, I will see Mr. Kirkwood."

"You have no time to waste with him, Dorothy," said the woman coldly. "I must insist--"

"But you don't seem to understand; it is Mr. Kirkwood!" argued the girl,--as if he were ample excuse for any imprudence!

Kirkwood's scant store of patience was by this time rapidly becoming exhausted. "I should advise you not to interfere any further, Mrs. Hallam," he told her in a tone low, but charged with meaning.

How much did he know? She eyed him an instant longer, in sullen suspicion, then swung open the door, yielding with what grace she could. "Won't you come in, Mr. Kirkwood?" she inquired with acidulated courtesy.

"If you press me," he returned winningly, "how can I refuse? You are too good!"

His impertinence disconcerted even himself; he wondered that she did not slap him as he passed her, entering the room; and felt that he deserved it, despite her attitude. But such thoughts could not long trouble one whose eyes were enchanted by the sight of Dorothy, confronting him in the middle of the dingy room, her hands, bristling dangerously with hat pins, busy with the adjustment of a small gray toque atop the wonder that was her hair. So vivacious and charming she seemed, so spirited and bright her welcoming smile, so foreign was she altogether to the picture of her, worn and distraught, that he had mentally conjured up, that he stopped in an extreme of disconcertion; and dropped the hand-bag, smiling sheepishly enough under her ready laugh--mirth irresistibly incited by the plainly-read play of expression on his mobile countenance.

"You must forgive the unconventionally, Mr. Kirkwood," she apologized, needlessly enough, but to cover his embarrassment. "I am on the point of going out with Mrs. Hallam--and of course you are the last person on earth I expected to meet here!"

"It's good to see you, Miss Calendar," he said simply, remarking with much satisfaction that her trim walking costume bore witness to her statement that she was prepared for the street.

The girl glanced into a mirror, patted the small, bewitching hat an infinitesimal fraction of an inch to one side, and turned to him again, her hands free. One of them, small but cordial, rested in his grasp for an instant all too brief, the while he gazed earnestly into her face, noting with concern what the first glance had not shown him,--the almost imperceptible shadows beneath her eyes and cheek-bones, pathetic records of the hours the girl had spent, since last he had seen her, in company with his own grim familiar, Care.

Not a little of care and distress of mind had seasoned her portion in those two weary days. He saw and knew it; and his throat tightened inexplicably, again, as it had out there in the corridor. Possibly the change in her had passed unchallenged by any eyes other than his, but even in the little time that he had spent in her society, the image of her had become fixed so indelibly on his memory, that he could not now be deceived. She was changed--a little, but changed; she had suffered, and was suffering and, forced by suffering, her nascent womanhood was stirring in the bud. The child that he had met in London, in Antwerp he found grown to woman's stature and slowly coming to comprehension of the nature of the change in herself,--the wonder of it glowing softly in her eyes....

The clear understanding of mankind that is an appanage of woman's estate, was now added to the intuitions of a girl's untroubled heart. She could not be blind to the mute adoration of his gaze; nor could she resent it. Beneath it she colored and lowered her lashes.

"I was about to go out," she repeated in confusion. "I--it's pleasant to see you, too."

"Thank you," he stammered ineptly; "I--I--"

"If Mr. Kirkwood will excuse us, Dorothy," Mrs. Hallam's sharp tones struck in discordantly, "we shall be glad to see him when we return to London."

"I am infinitely complimented, Mrs. Hallam," Kirkwood assured her; and of the girl quickly: "You're going back home?" he asked.

She nodded, with a faint, puzzled smile that included the woman. "After a little--not immediately. Mrs. Hallam is so kind--"

"Pardon me," he interrupted; "but tell me one thing, please: have you any one in England to whom you can go without invitation and be welcomed and cared for--any friends or relations?"

"Dorothy will be with me," Mrs. Hallam answered for her, with cold defiance.

Deliberately insolent, Kirkwood turned his back to the woman. "Miss Calendar, will you answer my question for yourself?" he asked the girl pointedly.

"Why--yes; several friends; none in London, but--"

"Dorothy--"

"One moment, Mrs. Hallam," Kirkwood flung crisply over his shoulder. "I'm going to ask you something rather odd, Miss Calendar," he continued, seeking the girl's eyes. "I hope--"

"Dorothy, I--"

"If you please, Mrs. Hallam," suggested the girl, with just the right shade of independence. "I wish to listen to Mr. Kirkwood. He has been very kind to me and has every right...." She turned to him again, leaving the woman breathless and speechless with anger.

"You told me once," Kirkwood continued quickly, and, he felt, brazenly, "that you considered me kind, thoughtful and considerate. You know me no better to-day than you did then, but I want to beg you to trust me a little. Can you trust yourself to my protection until we reach your friends in England?"

"Why, I--" the girl faltered, taken by surprise.

"Mr. Kirkwood!" cried Mrs. Hallam angrily, finding her voice.

Kirkwood turned to meet her onslaught with a mien grave, determined, unflinching. "Please do not interfere, Madam," he said quietly.

"You are impertinent, sir! Dorothy, I forbid you to listen to this person!"

The girl flushed, lifting her chin a trifle. "Forbid?" she repeated wonderingly.

Kirkwood was quick to take advantage of her resentment. "Mrs. Hallam is not fitted to advise you," he insisted, "nor can she control your actions. It must already have occurred to you that you're rather out of place in the present circumstances. The men who have brought you hither, I believe you already see through, to some extent. Forgive my speaking plainly ... But that is why you have accepted Mrs. Hallam's offer of protection. Will you take my word for it, when I tell you she has not your right interests at heart, but the reverse? I happen to know, Miss Calendar, and I--"

"How dare you, sir?"

Flaming with rage, Mrs. Hallam put herself bodily between them, confronting Kirkwood in white-lipped desperation, her small, gloved hands clenched and quivering at her sides, her green eyes dangerous.

But Kirkwood could silence her; and he did. "Do you wish me to speak frankly, Madam? Do you wish me to tell what I know--and all I know--," with rising emphasis,--"of your social status and your relations with Calendar and Mulready? I promise you that if you wish it, or force me to it...."

But he had need to say nothing further; the woman's eyes wavered before his and a little sob of terror forced itself between her shut teeth. Kirkwood smiled grimly, with a face of brass, impenetrable, inflexible. And suddenly she turned from him with indifferent bravado.

"As Mr. Kirkwood says, Dorothy," she said in her high, metallic voice, "I have no authority over you. But if you're silly enough to consider for a moment this fellow's insulting suggestion, if you're fool enough to go with him, unchaperoned through Europe and imperil your--"

"Mrs. Hallam!" Kirkwood cut her short with a menacing tone.

"Why, then, I wash my hands of you," concluded the woman defiantly. "Make your choice, my child," she added with a meaning laugh and moved away, humming a snatch from a French *chanson* which brought the hot blood to Kirkwood's face.

But the girl did not understand; and he was glad of that. "You may judge between us," he appealed to her directly, once more. "I can only offer you my word of honor as an American gentleman that you shall be landed in England, safe and sound, by the first available steamer--"

"There's no need to say more, Mr. Kirkwood," Dorothy informed him quietly. "I have already decided. I think I begin to understand some things clearly, now.... If you're ready, we will go."

From the window, where she stood, holding the curtains back and staring out, Mrs. Hallam turned with a curling lip.

[Illustration: From the window, Mrs. Hallam turned with a curling lip.]

"The honor of an American gentleman," she quoted with a stinging sneer;

"I'm sure I wish you comfort of it, child!"

"We must make haste, Miss Calendar," said Kirkwood, ignoring the implication. "Have you a traveling-bag?"

She silently indicated a small valise, closed and strapped, on a table by the bed, and immediately passed out into the hall. Kirkwood took the case containing the gladstone bag in one hand, the girl's valise in the other, and followed.

As he turned the head of the stairs he looked back. Mrs. Hallam was still at the window, her back turned. From her very passiveness he received an impression of something ominous and forbidding; if she had lost a trick or two of the game she played, she still held cards, was not at the end of her resources. She stuck in his imagination for many an hour as a force to be reckoned with.

For the present he understood that she was waiting to apprise Calendar and Mulready of their flight. With the more haste, then, he followed Dorothy down the three flights, through the tiny office, where Madam sat sound asleep at her over-burdened desk, and out.

Opposite the door they were fortunate enough to find a fiacre drawn up in waiting at the curb. Kirkwood opened the door for the girl to enter.

"Gare du Sud," he directed the driver. "Drive your fastest--double fare for quick time!"

The driver awoke with a start from profound reverie, looked Kirkwood over, and bowed with gesticulative palms.

"M'sieu', I am desolated, but engaged!" he protested.

"Precisely." Kirkwood deposited the two bags on the forward seat of the conveyance, and stood back to convince the man. "Precisely," said he, undismayed. "The lady who engaged you is remaining for a time; I will settle her bill."

"Very well, M'sieu'!" The driver disclaimed responsibility and accepted the favor of the gods with a speaking shrug. "M'sieu' said the Gare du Sud? _En voiture_!"

Kirkwood jumped in and shut the door; the vehicle drew slowly away from the curb, then with gratifying speed hammered up-stream on the embankment. Bending forward, elbows on knees, Kirkwood watched the sidewalks narrowly, partly to cover the girl's constraint, due to Mrs. Hallam's attitude, partly on the lookout for Calendar and his confederates. In a few moments they passed a public clock.

"We've missed the Flushing boat," he announced. "I'm making a try for the Hoek van Holland line. We may possibly make it. I know that it leaves by the Sud Quai, and that's all I do know," he concluded with an apologetic laugh.

"And if we miss that?" asked the girl, breaking silence for the first time since they had left the hotel.

"We'll take the first train out of Antwerp."

"Where to?"

"Wherever the first train goes, Miss Calendar.... The main point is to get away to-night. That we must do, no matter where we land, or how we get there. To-morrow we can plan with more certainty."

"Yes..." Her assent was more a sigh than a word.

The cab, dashing down the Rue Leopold de Wael, swung into the Place du Sud, before the station. Kirkwood, acutely watchful, suddenly thrust head and shoulders out of his window (fortunately it was the one away from the depot), and called up to the driver.

"Don't stop! Gare Centrale now--and treble fare!"

"_Oui, M'sieu'! Allons!_"

The whip cracked and the horse swerved sharply round the corner into the Avenue du Sud. The young man, with a hushed exclamation, turned in his seat, lifting the flap over the little peephole in the back of the carriage.

He had not been mistaken. Calendar was standing in front of the station; and it was plain to be seen, from his pose, that the madly careering fiacre interested him more than slightly. Irresolute, perturbed, the man took a step or two after it, changed his mind, and returned to his post of observation.

Kirkwood dropped the flap and turned back to find the girl's wide eyes searching his face. He said nothing.

"What was that?" she asked after a patient moment.

"Your father, Miss Calendar," he returned uncomfortably.

There fell a short pause; then: "Why--will you tell me--is it necessary to run away from my father, Mr. Kirkwood?" she demanded, with a moving little break in her voice.

Kirkwood hesitated. It were unfeeling to tell her why; yet it was essential that she should know, however painful the knowledge might prove to her.

And she was insistent; he might not dodge the issue. "Why?" she repeated as he paused.

"I wish you wouldn't press me for an answer just now, Miss Calendar."

"Don't you think I had better know?"

Instinctively he inclined his head in assent.

"Then why--?"

Kirkwood bent forward and patted the flank of the satchel that held the gladstone bag.

"What does that mean, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"That I have the jewels," he told her tersely, looking straight ahead.

At his shoulder he heard a low gasp of amazement and incredulity commingled.

"But--! How did you get them? My father deposited them in bank this morning?"

"He must have taken them out again.... I got them on board the Alethea, where your father was conferring with Mulready and Captain Stryker."

"The Alethea!"

"Yes."

"You took them from those men?--you!... But didn't my father--?"

"I had to persuade him," said Kirkwood simply.

"But there were three of them against you!"

"Mulready wasn't--ah--feeling very well, and Stryker's a coward. They gave me no trouble. I locked them in Stryker's room, lifted the bag of jewels, and came away.... I ought to tell you that they were discussing the advisability of sailing away without you--leaving you here, friendless and without means. That's why I considered it my duty to take a hand.... I don't like to tell you this so brutally, but you ought to know, and I can't see how to tone it down," he concluded awkwardly.

"I understand...."

But for some moments she did not speak. He avoided looking at her.

The fiacre, rolling at top speed but smoothly on the broad avenues that encircle the ancient city, turned into the Avenue de Keyser, bringing into sight the Gare Centrale.

"You don't--k-know--" began the girl without warning, in a voice gusty with sobs.

"Steady on!" said Kirkwood gently. "I do know, but don't let's talk about it now. We'll be at the station in a minute, and I'll get out and see

what's to be done about a train, if neither Mulready or Stryker are about. You stay in the carriage.... No!" He changed his mind suddenly. "I'll not risk losing you again. It's a risk we'll have to run in company."

"Please!" she agreed brokenly.

The fiacre slowed up and stopped.

"Are you all right, Miss Calendar?" Kirkwood asked.

The girl sat up, lifting her head proudly. "I am quite ready," she said, steadying her voice.

Kirkwood reconnoitered through the window, while the driver was descending.

"Gare Centrale, M'sieu'," he said, opening the door.

"No one in sight," Kirkwood told the girl. "Come, please."

He got out and gave her his hand, then paid the driver, picked up the two bags, and hurried with Dorothy into the station, to find in waiting a string of cars into which people were moving at leisurely rate. His inquiries at the ticket-window developed the fact that it was the 22:26 for Brussels, the last train leaving the Gare Centrale that night, and due to start in ten minutes.

The information settled their plans for once and all; Kirkwood promptly secured through tickets, also purchasing "Reserve" supplementary tickets which entitled them to the use of those modern corridor coaches which take the place of first-class compartments on the Belgian state railways.

"It's a pleasure," said Kirkwood lightly, as he followed the girl into one of these, "to find one's self in a common-sense sort of a train again. 'Feels like home.'" He put their luggage in one of the racks and sat down beside her, chattering with simulated cheerfulness in a vain endeavor to lighten her evident depression of spirit. "I always feel like a traveling anachronism in one of your English trains," he said. "You can't appreciate--"

The girl smiled bravely.... "And after Brussels?" she inquired.

"First train for the coast," he said promptly. "Dover, Ostend, Boulogne,--whichever proves handiest, no matter which, so long as it gets us on English soil without undue delay."

She said "Yes" abstractedly, resting an elbow on the window-sill and her chin in her palm, to stare with serious, sweet brown eyes out into the arc-smitten night that hung beneath the echoing roof.

Kirkwood fidgeted in despite of the constraint he placed himself under, to be still and not disturb her needlessly. Impatience and apprehension of misfortune obsessed his mental processes in equal degree. The ten minutes seemed interminable that elapsed ere the grinding couplings advertised the

imminence of their start.

The guards began to bawl, the doors to slam, belated travelers to dash madly for the coaches. The train gave a preliminary lurch ere settling down to its league-long inland dash.

Kirkwood, in a fever of hope and an ague of fear, saw a man sprint furiously across the platform and throw himself on the forward steps of their coach, on the very instant of the start.

Presently he entered by the forward door and walked slowly through, narrowly inspecting the various passengers. As he approached the seats occupied by Kirkwood and Dorothy Calendar, his eyes encountered the young man's, and he leered evilly. Kirkwood met the look with one that was like a kick, and the fellow passed with some haste into the car behind.

"Who was that?" demanded the girl, without moving her head.

"How did you know?" he asked, astonished. "You didn't look--"

"I saw your knuckles whiten beneath the skin.... Who was it?"

"Hobbs," he acknowledged bitterly; "the mate of the Alethea."

"I know.... And you think--?"

"Yes. He must have been ashore when I was on board the brigantine; he certainly wasn't in the cabin. Evidently they hunted him up, or ran across him, and pressed him into service.... You see, they're watching every outlet.... But we'll win through, never fear!"

XVI

TRAVELS WITH A CHAPERON

The train, escaping the outskirts of the city, remarked the event with an exultant shriek, then settled down, droning steadily, to night-devouring flight. In the corridor-car the few passengers disposed themselves to drowse away the coming hour--the short hour's ride that, in these piping days of frantic traveling, separates Antwerp from the capital city of Belgium.

A guard, slamming gustily in through the front door, reeled unsteadily down the aisle. Kirkwood, rousing from a profound reverie, detained him with a gesture and began to interrogate him in French. When he departed presently it transpired that the girl was unacquainted with that tongue.

"I didn't understand, you know," she told him with a slow, shy smile.

"I was merely questioning him about the trains from Brussels to-night. We daren't stop, you see; we must go on,--keep Hobbs on the jump and lose him, if possible. There's where our advantage lies--in having only Hobbs to deal with. He's not particularly intellectual; and we've two heads to his one, besides. If we can prevent him from guessing our destination and wiring back to Antwerp, we may win away. You understand?"

"Perfectly," she said, brightening. "And what do you purpose doing now?"

"I can't tell yet. The guard's gone to get me some information about the night trains on other lines. In the meantime, don't fret about Hobbs; I'll answer for Hobbs."

"I shan't be worried," she said simply, "with you here...."

Whatever answer he would have made he was obliged to postpone because of the return of the guard, with a handful of time-tables; and when, rewarded with a modest gratuity, the man had gone his way, and Kirkwood turned again to the girl, she had withdrawn her attention for the time.

Unconscious of his bold regard, she was dreaming, her thoughts at loose-ends, her eyes studying the incalculable depths of blue-black night that swirled and eddied beyond the window-glass. The most shadowy of smiles touched her lips, the faintest shade of deepened color rested on her cheeks.... She was thinking of--him? As long as he dared, the young man, his heart in his own eyes, watched her greedily, taking a miser's joy of her youthful beauty, striving with all his soul to analyze the enigma of that most inscrutable smile.

It baffled him. He could not say of what she thought; and told himself bitterly that it was not for him, a pauper, to presume a place in her meditations. He must not forget his circumstances, nor let her tolerance render him oblivious to his place, which must be a servant's, not a lover's.

The better to convince himself of this, he plunged desperately into a forlorn attempt to make head or tail of Belgian railway schedule, complicated as these of necessity are by the alternation from normal time notation to the abnormal system sanctioned by the government, and _vice-versa_, with every train that crosses a boundary line of the state.

So preoccupied did he become in this pursuit that he was subconsciously impressed that the girl had spoken twice, ere he could detach his interest from the exasperatingly inconclusive and incoherent cohorts of ranked figures.

"Can't you find out anything?" Dorothy was asking.

"Precious little," he grumbled. "I'd give my head for a Bradshaw! Only it wouldn't be a fair exchange.... There seems to be an express for Bruges leaving the Gare du Nord, Brussels, at fifty-five minutes after twenty-three o'clock; and if I'm not mistaken, that's the latest train out of Brussels and the earliest we can catch,... if we _can_ catch it. I've

never been in Brussels, and Heaven only knows how long it would take us to cab it from the Gare du Midi to the Nord."

In this statement, however, Mr. Kirkwood was fortunately mistaken; not only Heaven, it appeared, had cognizance of the distance between the two stations. While Kirkwood was still debating the question, with pessimistic tendencies, the friendly guard had occasion to pass through the coach; and, being tapped, yielded the desired information with entire tractability.

It would be a cab-ride of perhaps ten minutes. Monsieur, however, would serve himself well if he offered the driver an advance tip as an incentive to speedy driving. Why? Why because (here the guard consulted his watch; and Kirkwood very keenly regretted the loss of his own)--because this train, announced to arrive in Brussels some twenty minutes prior to the departure of that other, was already late. But yes--a matter of some ten minutes. Could that not be made up? Ah, Monsieur, but who should say?

The guard departed, doubtless with private views as to the madness of all English-speaking travelers.

"And there we are!" commented Kirkwood in factitious resignation. "If we're obliged to stop overnight in Brussels, our friends will be on our back before we can get out in the morning, if they have to come by motor-car." He reflected bitterly on the fact that with but a little more money at his disposal, he too could hire a motor-car and cry defiance to their persecutors. "However," he amended, with rising spirits, "so much the better our chance of losing Mr. Hobbs. We must be ready to drop off the instant the train stops."

He began to unfold another time-table, threatening again to lose himself completely; and was thrown into the utmost confusion by the touch of the girl's hand, in appeal placed lightly on his own. And had she been observant, she might have seen a second time his knuckles whiten beneath the skin as he asserted his self-control--though this time not over his temper.

His eyes, dumbly eloquent, turned to meet hers. She was smiling.

"Please!" she iterated, with the least imperative pressure on his hand, pushing the folder aside.

"I beg pardon?" he muttered blankly.

"Is it quite necessary, now, to study those schedules? Haven't you decided to try for the Bruges express?"

"Why yes, but--"

"Then please don't leave me to my thoughts all the time, Mr. Kirkwood." There was a tremor of laughter in her voice, but her eyes were grave and earnest. "I'm very weary of thinking round in a circle--and that," she concluded, with a nervous little laugh, "is all I've had to do for days!"

"I'm afraid I'm very stupid," he humored her. "This is the second time, you know, in the course of a very brief acquaintance, that you have found it necessary to remind me to talk to you."

"Oh-h!" She brightened. "That night, at the Pless? But that was _ages_ ago!"

"It seems so," he admitted.

"So much has happened!"

"Yes," he assented vaguely.

She watched him, a little piqued by his absent-minded mood, for a moment; then, and not without a trace of malice: "Must I tell you again what to talk about?" she asked.

"Forgive me. I was thinking about, if not talking to, you.... I've been wondering just why it was that you left the _Alethea_ at Queensborough, to go on by steamer."

And immediately he was sorry that his tactless query had swung the conversation to bear upon her father, the thought of whom could not but prove painful to her. But it was too late to mend matters; already her evanescent flush of amusement had given place to remembrance.

"It was on my father's account," she told him in a steady voice, but with averted eyes; "he is a very poor sailor, and the promise of a rough passage terrified him. I believe there was a difference of opinion about it, he disputing with Mr. Mulready and Captain Stryker. That was just after we had left the anchorage. They both insisted that it was safer to continue by the _Alethea_, but he wouldn't listen to them, and in the end had his way. Captain Stryker ran the brigantine into the mouth of the Medway and put us ashore just in time to catch the steamer."

"Were you sorry for the change?"

"I?" She shuddered slightly. "Hardly! I think I hated the ship from the moment I set foot on board her. It was a dreadful place; it was all night-marish, that night, but it seemed most terrible on the _Alethea_ with Captain Stryker and that abominable Mr. Hobbs. I think that my unhappiness had as much to do with my father's insistence on the change, as anything. He ... he was very thoughtful, most of the time."

Kirkwood shut his teeth on what he knew of the blackguard.

"I don't know why," she continued, wholly without affectation, "but I was wretched from the moment you left me in the cab, to wait while you went in to see Mrs. Hallam. And when we left you, at Bermondsey Old Stairs, after what you had said to me, I felt--I hardly know what to say--abandoned, in a way."

"But you were with your father, in his care--"

"I know, but I was getting confused. Until then the excitement had kept me from thinking. But you made me think. I began to wonder, to question ... But what could I do?" She signified her helplessness with a quick and dainty movement of her hands. "He is my father; and I'm not yet of age, you know."

"I thought so," he confessed, troubled. "It's very inconsiderate of you, you must admit."

"I don't understand..."

"Because of the legal complication. I've no doubt your father can 'have the law on me'"--Kirkwood laughed uneasily--"for taking you from his protection."

"Protection!" she echoed warmly. "If you call it that!"

"Kidnapping," he said thoughtfully: "I presume that'd be the charge."

"Oh!" She laughed the notion to scorn. "Besides, they must catch us first, mustn't they?"

"Of course; and"--with a simulation of confidence sadly deceitful--"they shan't, Mr. Hobbs to the contrary notwithstanding."

"You make me share your confidence, against my better judgment."

"I wish your better judgment would counsel you to share your confidence with me," he caught her up. "If you would only tell me what it's all about, as far as you know, I'd be better able to figure out what we ought to do."

Briefly the girl sat silent, staring before her with sweet somber eyes. Then, "In the very beginning," she told him with a conscious laugh,--"this sounds very story-bookish, I know--in the very beginning, George Burgoyne Calendar, an American, married his cousin a dozen times removed, and an Englishwoman, Alice Burgoyne Hallam."

"Hallam!"

"Wait, please." She sat up, bending forward and frowning down upon her interlacing, gloved fingers; she was finding it difficult to say what she must. Kirkwood, watching hungrily the fair drooping head, the flawless profile clear and radiant against the night-blackened window, saw hot signals of shame burning on her cheek and throat and forehead.

"But never mind," he began awkwardly.

"No," she told him with decision. "Please let me go on...." She continued, stumbling, trusting to his sympathy to bridge the gaps in her narrative. "My father ... There was trouble of some sort.... At all events, he disappeared when I was a baby. My mother ... died. I was brought up in the home of my great-uncle, Colonel George Burgoyne, of the Indian

Army--retired. My mother had been his favorite niece, they say; I presume that was why he cared for me. I grew up in his home in Cornwall; it was my home, just as he was my father in everything but fact.

"A year ago he died, leaving me everything,--the town house in Frognall Street, his estate in Cornwall: everything was willed to me on condition that I must never live with my father, nor in any way contribute to his support. If I disobeyed, the entire estate without reserve was to go to his nearest of kin.... Colonel Burgoyne was unmarried and had no children."

The girl paused, lifting to Kirkwood's face her eyes, clear, fearless, truthful. "I never was given to understand that there was anybody who might have inherited, other than myself," she declared.

"I see..."

"Last week I received a letter, signed with my father's name, begging me to appoint an interview with him in London. I did so,--guess how gladly! I was alone in the world, and he, my father, whom I had never thought to see.... We met at his hotel, the Pless. He wanted me to come and live with him,--said that he was growing old and lonely and needed a daughter's love and care. He told me that he had made a fortune in America and was amply able to provide for us both. As for my inheritance, he persuaded me that it was by rights the property of Frederick Hallam, Mrs. Hallam's son."

"I have met the young gentleman," interpolated Kirkwood.

"His name was new to me, but my father assured me that he was the next of kin mentioned in Colonel Burgoyne's will, and convinced me that I had no real right to the property.... After all, he was my father; I agreed; I could not bear the thought of wronging anybody. I was to give up everything but my mother's jewels. It seems,--my father said,--I don't--I can't believe it now--"

She choked on a little, dry sob. It was some time before she seemed able to continue.

"I was told that my great-uncle's collection of jewels had been my mother's property. He had in life a passion for collecting jewels, and it had been his whim to carry them with him, wherever he went. When he died in Frognall Street, they were in the safe by the head of his bed. I, in my grief, at first forgot them, and then afterwards carelessly put off removing them.

"To come back to my father: Night before last we were to call on Mrs. Hallam. It was to be our last night in England; we were to sail for the Continent on the private yacht of a friend of my father's, the next morning.... This is what I was told--and believed, you understand.

"That night Mrs. Hallam was dining at another table at the Pless, it seems. I did not then know her. When leaving, she put a note on our table, by my father's elbow. I was astonished beyond words.... He seemed much agitated, told me that he was called away on urgent business, a matter of life and death, and begged me to go alone to Frognall Street, get the jewels and

meet him at Mrs. Hallam's later.... I wasn't altogether a fool, for I began dimly to suspect, then, that something was wrong; but I was a fool, for I consented to do as he desired. You understand--you know--?"

"I do, indeed," replied Kirkwood grimly. "I understand a lot of things now that I didn't five minutes ago. Please let me think..."

But the time he took for deliberation was short. He had hoped to find a way to spare her, by sparing Calendar; but momentarily he was becoming more impressed with the futility of dealing with her save in terms of candor, merciful though they might seem harsh.

"I must tell you," he said, "that you have been outrageously misled, swindled and deceived. I have heard from your father's own lips that Mrs. Hallam was to pay him two thousand pounds for keeping you out of England and losing you your inheritance. I'm inclined to question, furthermore, the assertion that these jewels were your mother's. Frederick Hallam was the man who followed you into the Frognall Street house and attacked me on the stairs; Mrs. Hallam admits that he went there to get the jewels. But he didn't want anybody to know it."

"But that doesn't prove--"

"Just a minute." Rapidly and concisely Kirkwood recounted the events wherein he had played a part, subsequent to the adventure of Bermondsey Old Stairs. He was guilty of but one evasion; on one point only did he slur the truth: he conceived it his honorable duty to keep the girl in ignorance of his straitened circumstances; she was not to be distressed by knowledge of his distress, nor could he tolerate the suggestion of seeming to play for her sympathy. It was necessary, then, to invent a motive to excuse his return to 9, Frognall Street. I believe he chose to exaggerate the inquisitiveness of his nature and threw in for good measure a desire to recover a prized trinket of no particular moment, esteemed for its associations, and so forth. But whatever the fabrication, it passed muster; to the girl his motives seemed less important than the discoveries that resulted from them.

"I am afraid," he concluded the summary of the confabulation he had overheard at the skylight of the Alethea's cabin, "you'd best make up your mind that your father--"

"Yes," whispered the girl huskily; and turned her face to the window, a quivering muscle in the firm young throat alone betraying her emotion.

"It's a bad business," he pursued relentlessly: "bad all round. Mulready, in your father's pay, tries to have him arrested, the better to rob him. Mrs. Hallam, to secure your property for that precious pet, Freddie, connives at, if she doesn't instigate, a kidnapping. Your father takes her money to deprive you of yours,--which could profit him nothing so long as you remained in lawful possession of it; and at the same time he conspires to rob, through you, the rightful owners--if they are rightful owners. And if they are, why does Freddie Hallam go like a thief in the night to secure property that's his beyond dispute?... I don't really think you owe your

father any further consideration."

He waited patiently. Eventually, "No-o," the girl sobbed assent.

"It's this way: Calendar, counting on your sparing him in the end, is going to hound us. He's doing it now: there's Hobbs in the next car, for proof. Until these jewels are returned, whether to Frognall Street or to young Hallam, we're both in danger, both thieves in the sight of the law. And your father knows that, too. There's no profit to be had by discounting the temper of these people; they're as desperate a gang of swindlers as ever lived. They'll have those jewels if they have to go as far as murder--"

"Mr. Kirkwood!" she deprecated, in horror.

He wagged his head stubbornly, ominously. "I've seen them in the raw. They're hot on our trail now; ten to one, they'll be on our backs before we can get across the Channel. Once in England we will be comparatively safe. Until then ... But I'm a brute--I'm frightening you!"

"You are, dreadfully," she confessed in a tremulous voice.

"Forgive me. If you look at the dark side first, the other seems all the brighter. Please don't worry; we'll pull through with flying colors, or my name's not Philip Kirkwood!"

"I have every faith in you," she informed him, flawlessly sincere. "When I think of all you've done and dared for me, on the mere suspicion that I needed your help--"

"We'd best be getting ready," he interrupted hastily. "Here's Brussels."

It was so. Lights, in little clusters and long, wheeling lines, were leaping out of the darkness and flashing back as the train rumbled through the suburbs of the little Paris of the North. Already the other passengers were bestirring themselves, gathering together wraps and hand luggage, and preparing for the journey's end.

Rising, Kirkwood took down their two satchels from the overhead rack, and waited, in grim abstraction planning and counterplanning against the machinations in whose wiles they two had become so perilously entangled.

Primarily, there was Hobbs to be dealt with; no easy task, for Kirkwood dared not resort to violence nor in any way invite the attention of the authorities; and threats would be an idle waste of breath, in the case of that corrupt and malignant, little cockney, himself as keen as any needle, adept in all the artful resources of the underworld whence he had sprung, and further primed for action by that master rogue, Calendar.

The train was pulling slowly into the station when he reluctantly abandoned his latest unfeasible scheme for shaking off the little Englishman, and concluded that their salvation was only to be worked out through everlasting vigilance, incessant movement, and the favor of the blind goddess, Fortune. There was comfort of a sort in the reflection that

the divinity of chance is at least blind; her favors are impartially distributed; the swing of the wheel of the world is not always to the advantage of the wrongdoer and the scamp.

He saw nothing of Hobbs as they alighted and hastened from the station, and hardly had time to waste looking for him, since their train had failed to make up the precious ten minutes. Consequently he dismissed the fellow from his thoughts until--with Brussels lingering in their memories a garish vision of brilliant streets and glowing caf s, glimpsed furtively from their cab windows during its wild dash over the broad mid-city, boulevards--at midnight they settled themselves in a carriage of the Bruges express. They were speeding along through the open country with a noisy clatter; then a minute's investigation sufficed to discover the mate of the _Alethea_ serenely ensconced in the coach behind.

The little man seemed rarely complacent, and impudently greeted Kirkwood's scowling visage, as the latter peered through the window in the coach-door, with a smirk and a waggish wave of his hand. The American by main strength of will-power mastered an impulse to enter and wring his neck, and returned to the girl, more disturbed than he cared to let her know.

There resulted from his review of the case but one plan for outwitting Mr. Hobbs, and that lay in trusting to his confidence that Kirkwood and Dorothy Calendar would proceed as far toward Ostend as the train would take them--namely, to the limit of the run, Bruges.

Thus inspired, Kirkwood took counsel with the girl, and when the train paused at Ghent, they made an unostentatious exit from their coach, finding themselves, when the express had rolled on into the west, upon a station platform in a foreign city at nine minutes past one o'clock in the morning--but at length without their shadow. Mr. Hobbs had gone on to Bruges.

Kirkwood sped his journeyings with an unspoken malediction, and collected himself to cope with a situation which was to prove hardly more happy for them than the espionage they had just eluded. The primal flush of triumph which had saturated the American's humor on this signal success, proved but fictive and transitory when inquiry of the station attendants educed the information that the two earliest trains to be obtained were the 5:09 for Dunkerque and the 5:37 for Ostend. A minimum delay of four hours was to be endured in the face of many contingent features singularly unpleasant to contemplate. The station waiting-room was on the point of closing for the night, and Kirkwood, already alarmed by the rapid ebb of the money he had had of Calendar, dared not subject his finances to the strain of a night's lodging at one of Ghent's hotels. He found himself forced to be cruel to be kind to the girl, and Dorothy's cheerful acquiescence to their sole alternative of tramping the street until daybreak did nothing to alleviate Kirkwood's exasperation.

It was permitted them to occupy a bench outside the station. There the girl, her head pillowed on the treasure bag, napped uneasily, while Kirkwood plodded restlessly to and fro, up and down the platform, communing with the Shade of Care and addling his poor, weary wits with the problem

of the future,--not so much his own as the future of the unhappy child for whose welfare he had assumed responsibility. Dark for both of them, in his understanding To-morrow loomed darkest for her.

Not until the gray, formless light of the dawn-dusk was wavering over the land, did he cease his perambulations. Then a gradual stir of life in the city streets, together with the appearance of a station porter or two, opening the waiting-rooms and preparing them against the traffic of the day, warned him that he must rouse his charge. He paused and stood over her, reluctant to disturb her rest, such as it was, his heart torn with compassion for her, his soul embittered by the cruel irony of their estate.

If what he understood were true, a king's ransom was secreted within the cheap, imitation-leather satchel which served her for a pillow. But it availed her nothing for her comfort. If what he believed were true, she was absolute mistress of that treasure of jewels; yet that night she had been forced to sleep on a hard, uncushioned bench, in the open air, and this morning he must waken her to the life of a hunted thing. A week ago she had had at her command every luxury known to the civilized world; to-day she was friendless, but for his inefficient, worthless self, and in a strange land. A week ago,--had he known her then,--he had been free to tell her of his love, to offer her the protection of his name as well as his devotion; to-day he was an all but penniless vagabond, and there could be no dishonor deeper than to let her know the nature of his heart's desire.

Was ever lover hedged from a declaration to his mistress by circumstances so hateful, so untoward! He could have raged and railed against his fate like any madman. For he desired her greatly, and she was very lovely in his sight. If her night's rest had been broken and but a mockery, she showed few signs of it; the faint, wan complexion of fatigue seemed only to enhance the beauty of her maidenhood; her lips were as fresh and desirous as the dewy petals of a crimson rose; beneath her eyes soft shadows lurked where her lashes lay tremulous upon her cheeks of satin.... She was to him of all created things the most wonderful, the most desirable.

The temptation of his longing seemed more than he could long withstand. But resist he must, or part for ever with any title to her consideration--or his own. He shut his teeth and knotted his brows in a transport of desire to touch, if only with his finger-tips, the woven wonder of her hair.

And thus she saw him, when, without warning, she awoke.

Bewilderment at first informed the wide brown eyes; then, as their drowsiness vanished, a little laughter, a little tender mirth.

"Good morning, Sir Knight of the Sombre Countenance!" she cried, standing up. "Am I so utterly disreputable that you find it necessary to frown on me so darkly?"

He shook his head, smiling.

"I know I'm a fright," she asserted vigorously, shaking out the folds of her pleated skirt. "And as for my hat, it will never be on straight--but

then _you_ wouldn't know."

"It seems all right," he replied vacantly.

"Then please to try to look a little happier, since you find me quite presentable."

"I do..."

Without lifting her bended head, she looked up, laughing, not ill-pleased. "_You'd_ say so... really?"

Commonplace enough, this banter, this pitiful endeavor to be oblivious of their common misery; but like the look she gave him, her words rang in his head like potent fumes of wine. He turned away, utterly disconcerted for the time, knowing only that he must overcome his weakness.

Far down the railway tracks there rose a murmuring, that waxed to a rumbling roar. A passing porter answered Kirkwood's inquiry: it was the night boat-train from Ostend. He picked up their bags and drew the girl into the waiting-room, troubled by a sickening foreboding.

Through the window they watched the train roll in and stop.

Among others, alighted, smirking, the unspeakable Hobbs.

He lifted his hat and bowed jauntily to the waiting-room window, making it plain that his keen eyes had discovered them instantly.

Kirkwood's heart sank with the hopelessness of it all. If the railway directorates of Europe conspired against them, what chance had they? If the night boat-train from Ostend had only had the decency to be twenty-five minutes late, instead of arriving promptly on the minute of 4:45 they two might have escaped by the 5:09 for Dunkerque and Calais.

There remained but a single untried ruse in his bag of tricks; mercifully it might suffice.

"Miss Calendar," said Kirkwood from his heart, "just as soon as I get you home, safe and sound, I am going to take a day off, hunt up that little villain, and flay him alive. In the meantime, I forgot to dine last night, and am reminded that we had better forage for breakfast."

Hobbs dogged them at a safe distance while they sallied forth and in a neighboring street discovered an early-bird bakery. Here they were able to purchase rolls steaming from the oven, fresh pats of golden butter wrapped in clean lettuce leaves, and milk in twin bottles; all of which they prosaically carried with them back to the station, lacking leisure as they did to partake of the food before train-time.

Without attempting concealment (Hobbs, he knew, was eavesdropping round the corner of the door) Kirkwood purchased at the ticket-window passages on the Dunkerque train. Mr. Hobbs promptly flattered him by imitation; and

so jealous of his luck was Kirkwood by this time grown, through continual disappointment, that he did not even let the girl into his plans until they were aboard the 5:09, in a compartment all to themselves. Then, having with his own eyes seen Mr. Hobbs dodge into the third compartment in the rear of the same carriage, Kirkwood astonished the girl by requesting her to follow him; and together they left by the door opposite that by which they had entered.

The engine was running up and down a scale of staccato snorts, in preparation for the race, and the cars were on the edge of moving, couplings clanking, wheels a-groan, ere Mr. Hobbs condescended to join them between the tracks.

Wearily, disheartened, Kirkwood reopened the door, flung the bags in, and helped the girl back into their despised compartment; the quicker route to England via Ostend was now out of the question. As for himself, he waited for a brace of seconds, eying wickedly the ubiquitous Hobbs, who had popped back into his compartment, but stood ready to pop out again on the least encouragement. In the meantime he was pleased to shake a friendly foot at Mr. Kirkwood, thrusting that member out through the half-open door.

Only the timely departure of the train, compelling him to rejoin Dorothy at once, if at all, prevented the American from adding murder to the already noteworthy catalogue of his high crimes and misdemeanors.

Their simple meal, consumed to the ultimate drop and crumb while the Dunkerque train meandered serenely through a sunny, smiling Flemish countryside, somewhat revived their jaded spirits. After all, they were young, enviably dowered with youth's exuberant elasticity of mood; the world was bright in the dawning, the night had fled leaving naught but an evil memory; best of all things, they were together: tacitly they were agreed that somehow the future would take care of itself and all be well with them.

For a time they laughed and chattered, pretending that the present held no cares or troubles; but soon the girl, nestling her head in a corner of the dingy cushions, was smiling ever more drowsily on Kirkwood; and presently she slept in good earnest, the warm blood ebbing and flowing beneath the exquisite texture of her cheeks, the ghost of an unconscious smile quivering about the sensitive scarlet mouth, the breeze through the open window at her side wantoning at will in the sunlit witchery of her hair. And Kirkwood, worn with sleepless watching, dwelt in longing upon the dear innocent allure of her until the ache in his heart had grown well-nigh insupportable; then instinctively turned his gaze upwards, searching his heart, reading the faith and desire of it, so that at length knowledge and understanding came to him, of his weakness and strength and the clean love that he bore for her, and gladdened he sat dreaming in waking the same clear dreams that modeled her unconscious lips secretly for laughter and the joy of living.

When Dunkerque halted their progress, they were obliged to alight and change cars,--Hobbs a discreetly sinister shadow at the end of the platform.

By schedule they were to arrive in Calais about the middle of the forenoon, with a wait of three hours to be bridged before the departure of the Dover packet. That would be an anxious time; the prospect of it rendered both Dorothy and Kirkwood doubly anxious throughout this final stage of their flight. In three hours anything could happen, or be brought about. Neither could forget that it was quite within the bounds of possibilities for Calendar to be awaiting them in Calais. Presuming that Hobbs had been acute enough to guess their plans and advise his employer by telegraph, the latter could readily have anticipated their arrival, whether by sea in the brigantine, or by land, taking the direct route via Brussels and Lille. If such proved to be the case, it were scarcely sensible to count upon the arch-adventurer contenting himself with a waiting rôle like Hobbs'.

With such unhappy apprehensions for a stimulant, between them the man and the girl contrived a make-shift counter-stratagem; or it were more accurate to say that Kirkwood proposed it, while Dorothy rejected, disputed, and at length accepted it, albeit with sad misgivings. For it involved a separation that might not prove temporary.

Together they could never escape the surveillance of Mr. Hobbs; parted, he would be obliged to follow one or the other. The task of misleading the _Alethea's_ mate, Kirkwood undertook, delegating to the girl the duty of escaping when he could provide her the opportunity, of keeping under cover until the hour of sailing, and then proceeding to England, with the gladstone bag, alone if Kirkwood was unable, or thought it inadvisable, to join her on the boat.

In furtherance of this design, a majority of the girl's belongings were transferred from her traveling bag to Kirkwood's, the gladstone taking their place; and the young man provided her with voluminous instructions, a revolver which she did not know how to handle and declared she would never use for any consideration, and enough money to pay for her accommodation at the Terminus Hôtel, near the pier, and for two passages to London. It was agreed that she should secure the steamer booking, lest Kirkwood be delayed until the last moment.

These arrangements concluded, the pair of blessed idiots sat steeped in melancholy silence, avoiding each other's eyes, until the train drew in at the Gare Centrale, Calais.

In profound silence, too, they left their compartment and passed through the station, into the quiet, sun-drenched streets of the seaport,--Hobbs hovering solicitously in the offing.

Without comment or visible relief of mind they were aware that their fears had been without apparent foundation; they saw no sign of Calendar, Stryker or Mulready. The circumstance, however, counted for nothing; one or all of the adventurers might arrive in Calais at any minute.

Momentarily more miserable as the time of parting drew nearer, dumb with unhappiness, they turned aside from the main thoroughfares of the city, leaving the business section, and gained the sleepier side streets,

bordered by the residences of the proletariat, where for blocks none but children were to be seen, and of them but few--quaint, sober little bodies playing almost noiselessly in their dooryards.

At length Kirkwood spoke.

"Let's make it the corner," he said, without looking at the girl. "It's a short block to the next street. You hurry to the Terminus and lock yourself in your room. Have the management book both passages; don't run the risk of going to the pier yourself. I'll make things interesting for Mr. Hobbs, and join you as soon as I can, _if_ I can."

"You must," replied the girl. "I shan't go without you."

"But, Dor--Miss Calendar!" he exclaimed, aghast.

"I don't care--I know I agreed," she declared mutinously. "But I won't--I can't. Remember I shall wait for you."

"But--but perhaps--"

"If you have to stay, it will be because there's danger--won't it? And what would you think of me if I deserted you then, af--after all y--you've done?... Please don't waste time arguing. Whether you come at one to-day, to-morrow, or a week from to-morrow, I shall be waiting.... You may be sure. Good-by."

They had turned the corner, walking slowly, side by side; Hobbs, for the first time caught off his guard, had dropped behind more than half a long block. But now Kirkwood's quick sidelong glance discovered the mate in the act of taking alarm and quickening his pace. None the less the American was at the time barely conscious of anything other than a wholly unexpected furtive pressure of the girl's gloved fingers on his own.

"Good-by," she whispered.

He caught at her hand, protesting. "Dorothy--!"

"Good-by," she repeated breathlessly, with a queer little catch in her voice. "God be with you, Philip, and--and send you safely back to me...."

And she was running away.

Dumfounded with dismay, seeing in a flash how all his plans might be set at naught by this her unforeseen insubordination, he took a step or two after her; but she was fleet of foot, and, remembering Hobbs, he halted.

By this time the mate, too, was running; Kirkwood could hear the heavy pounding of his clumsy feet. Already Dorothy had almost gained the farther corner; as she whisked round it with a flutter of skirts, Kirkwood dodged hastily behind a gate-post. A thought later, Hobbs appeared, head down, chest out, eyes straining for sight of his quarry, pelting along for dear life.

As, rounding the corner, he stretched out in swifter stride, Kirkwood was inspired to put a spoke in his wheel; and a foot thrust suddenly out from behind the gate-post accomplished his purpose with more success than he had dared anticipate. Stumbling, the mate plunged headlong, arms and legs a-sprawl; and the momentum of his pace, though checked, carried him along the sidewalk, face downwards, a full yard ere he could stay himself.

Kirkwood stepped out of the gateway and sheered off as Hobbs picked himself up; something which he did rather slowly, as if in a daze, without comprehension of the cause of his misfortune. And for a moment he stood pulling his wits together and swaying as though on the point of resuming his rudely interrupted chase; when the noise of Kirkwood's heels brought him about face in a twinkling.

"Ow, it's you, eh!" he snarled in a temper as vicious as his countenance; and both of these were much the worse for wear and tear.

"Myself," admitted Kirkwood fairly; and then, in a gleam of humor: "Weren't you looking for me?"

His rage seemed to take the little Cockney and shake him by the throat; he trembled from head to foot, his face shockingly congested, and spat out dust and fragments of lurid blasphemy like an infuriated cat.

Of a sudden, "W'ere's the gel?" he sputtered thickly as his quick shifting eyes for the first time noted Dorothy's absence.

"Miss Calendar has other business--none with you. I've taken the liberty of stopping you because I have a word or two--"

"Ow, you 'ave, 'ave you? Gawd strike me blind, but I've a word for you, too!... 'And over that bag--and look nippy, or I'll myke you pye for w'at you've done to me ... I'll myke you pye!" he iterated hoarsely, edging closer. "'And it over or--"

"You've got another guess--" Kirkwood began, but saved his breath in deference to an imperative demand on him for instant defensive action.

To some extent he had underestimated the brute courage of the fellow, the violent, desperate courage that is distilled of anger in men of his kind. Despising him, deeming him incapable of any overt act of villainy, Kirkwood had been a little less wary than he would have been with Calendar or Mulready. Hobbs had seemed more of the craven type which Stryker graced so conspicuously. But now the American was to be taught discrimination, to learn that if Stryker's nature was like a snake's for low cunning and deviousness, Hobbs' soul was the soul of a viper.

Almost imperceptibly he had advanced upon Kirkwood; almost insensibly his right hand had moved toward his chest; now, with a movement marvelously deft, it had slipped in and out of his breast pocket. And a six-inch blade of tarnished steel was winging toward Kirkwood's throat with the speed of light.

Instinctively he stepped back; as instinctively he guarded with his right forearm, lifting the hand that held the satchel. The knife, catching in his sleeve, scratched the arm beneath painfully, and simultaneously was twisted from the mate's grasp, while in his surprise Kirkwood's grip on the bag-handle relaxed. It was torn forcibly from his fingers just as he received a heavy blow on his chest from the mate's fist. He staggered back.

By the time he had recovered from the shock, Hobbs was a score of feet away, the satchel tucked under his arm, his body bent almost double, running like a jack-rabbit. Ere Kirkwood could get under way, in pursuit, the mate had dodged out of sight round the corner. When the American caught sight of him again, he was far down the block, and bettering his pace with every jump.

He was approaching, also, some six or eight good citizens of Calais, men of the laboring class, at a guess. Their attention attracted by his frantic flight, they stopped to wonder. One or two moved as though to intercept him, and he doubled out into the middle of the street with the quickness of thought; an instant later he shot round another corner and disappeared, the natives streaming after in hot chase, electrified by the inspiring strains of "Stop, thief!"--or its French equivalent.

Kirkwood, cheering them on with the same wild cry, followed to the farther street; and there paused, so winded and weak with laughter that he was fain to catch at a fence picket for support. Standing thus he saw other denizens of Calais spring as if from the ground miraculously to swell the hue and cry; and a dumpling of a gendarme materialized from nowhere at all, to fall in behind the rabble, waving his sword above his head and screaming at the top of his lungs, the while his fat legs twinkled for all the world like thick sausage links marvelously animated.

The mob straggled round yet another corner and was gone; its clamor diminished on the still Spring air; and Kirkwood, recovering, abandoned Mr. Hobbs to the justice of the high gods and the French system of jurisprudence (at least, he hoped the latter would take an interest in the case, if haply Hobbs were laid by the heels), and went his way rejoicing.

As for the scratch on his arm, it was nothing, as he presently demonstrated to his complete satisfaction in the seclusion of a chance-sent fiacre. Kirkwood, commissioning it to drive him to the American Consulate, made his diagnosis *_en route_*; wound a handkerchief round the negligible wound, rolled down his sleeve, and forgot it altogether in the joys of picturing to himself Hobbs in the act of opening the satchel in expectation of finding therein the gladstone bag.

At the consulate door he paid off the driver and dismissed him; the fiacre had served his purpose, and he could find his way to the Terminus Hâel at infinitely less expense. He had a considerably harder task before him as he ascended the steps to the consular doorway, knocked and made known the nature of his errand.

No malicious destiny could have timed the hour of his call more appositely;

the consul was at home and at the disposal of his fellow-citizens--within bounds.

In the course of thirty minutes or so Kirkwood emerged with dignity from the consulate, his face crimson to the hair, his soul smarting with shame and humiliation; and left an amused official representative of his country's government with the impression of having been entertained to the point of ennui by an exceptionally clumsy but pertinacious liar.

For the better part of the succeeding hour Kirkwood circumnavigated the neighborhood of the steamer pier and the Terminus Hôtel, striving to render himself as inconspicuous as he felt insignificant, and keenly on the alert for any sign or news of Hobbs. In this pursuit he was pleasantly disappointed.

At noon precisely, his suspense grown too onerous for his strength of will, throwing caution and their understanding to the winds, he walked boldly into the Terminus, and inquired for Miss Calendar.

The assurance he received that she was in safety under its roof did not deter him from sending up his name and asking her to receive him in the public lounge; he required the testimony of his senses to convince him that no harm had come to her in the long hour and a half that had elapsed since their separation.

Woman-like, she kept him waiting. Alone in the public rooms of the hotel, he suffered excruciating torments. How was he to know that Calendar had not arrived and found his way to her?

When at length she appeared on the threshold of the apartment, bringing with her the traveling bag and looking wonderfully the better for her ninety minutes of complete repose and privacy, the relief he experienced was so intense that he remained transfixed in the middle of the floor, momentarily able neither to speak nor to move.

On her part, so fagged and distraught did he seem, that at sight of his care-worn countenance she hurried to him with outstretched, compassionate hands and a low pitiful cry of concern, forgetful entirely of that which he himself had forgotten--the emotion she had betrayed on parting.

"Oh, nothing wrong," he hastened to reassure her, with a sorry ghost of his familiar grin; "only I have lost Hobbs and the satchel with your things; and there's no sign yet of Mr. Calendar. We can feel pretty comfortable now, and--and I thought it time we had something like a meal."

The narrative of his adventure which he delivered over their *døjeuner à la fourchette* contained no mention either of his rebuff at the American Consulate or the scratch he had sustained during Hobbs' murderous assault; the one could not concern her, the other would seem but a bid for her sympathy. He counted it a fortunate thing that the mate's knife had been keen enough to penetrate the cloth of his sleeve without tearing it; the slit it had left was barely noticeable. And he purposely diverted the girl with flashes of humorous description, so that they discussed both meal and

episode in a mood of wholesome merriment.

It was concluded, all too soon for the taste of either, by the waiter's announcement that the steamer was on the point of sailing.

Outwardly composed, inwardly quaking, they boarded the packet, meeting with no misadventure whatever--if we are to except the circumstance that, when the restaurant bill was settled and the girl had punctiliously surrendered his change with the tickets, Kirkwood found himself in possession of precisely one franc and twenty centimes.

He groaned in spirit to think how differently he might have been fixed, had he not in his infatuated spirit of honesty been so anxious to give Calendar more than ample value for his money!

An inexorable anxiety held them both near the gangway until it was cast off and the boat began to draw away from the pier. Then, and not till then, did an unimpressive, small figure of a man detach itself from the shield of a pile of luggage and advance to the pier-head. No second glance was needed to identify Mr. Hobbs; and until the perspective dwarfed him indistinguishably, he was to be seen, alternately waving Kirkwood ironic farewell and blowing violent kisses to Miss Calendar from the tips of his soiled fingers.

So he had escaped arrest....

At first by turns indignant and relieved to realize that thereafter they were to move in scenes in which his hateful shadow would not form an essentially component part, subsequently Kirkwood fell a prey to prophetic terrors. It was not alone fear of retribution that had induced Hobbs to relinquish his persecution--or so Kirkwood became convinced; if the mate's calculation had allowed for them the least fraction of a chance to escape apprehension on the farther shores of the Channel, nor fears nor threats would have prevented him from sailing with the fugitives.... Far from having left danger behind them on the Continent, Kirkwood believed in his secret heart that they were but flying to encounter it beneath the smoky pall of London.

XVII

ROGUES AND VAGABONDS

A westering sun striking down through the drab exhalations of ten-thousand sooty chimney-pots, tinted the atmosphere with the hue of copper. The glance that wandered purposelessly out through the carriage windows, recoiled, repelled by the endless dreary vista of the Surrey Side's unnumbered roofs; or, probing instantaneously the hopeless depths of some grim narrow thoroughfare fleetingly disclosed, as the evening boat-train from Dover swung on toward Charing Cross, its trucks level with the eaves

of Southwark's dwellings, was saddened by the thought that in all the world squalor such as this should obtain and flourish unrelieved.

For perhaps the tenth time in the course of the journey Kirkwood withdrew his gaze from the window and turned to the girl, a question ready framed upon his lips.

"Are you quite sure--" he began; and then, alive to the clear and penetrating perception in the brown eyes that smiled into his from under their level brows, he stammered and left the query uncompleted.

Continuing to regard him steadily and smilingly, Dorothy shook her head in playful denial and protest. "Do you know," she commented, "that this is about the fifth repetition of that identical question within the last quarter-hour?"

"How do you know what I meant to say?" he demanded, staring.

"I can see it in your eyes. Besides, you've talked and thought of nothing else since we left the boat. Won't you believe me, please, when I say there's absolutely not a soul in London to whom I could go and ask for shelter? I don't think it's very nice of you to be so openly anxious to get rid of me."

This latter was so essentially undeserved and so artlessly insincere, that he must needs, of course, treat it with all seriousness.

"That isn't fair, Miss Calendar. Really it's not."

"What am I to think? I've told you any number of times that it's only an hour's ride on to Chiltern, where the Pyrfords will be glad to take me in. You may depend upon it,--by eight to-night, at the latest, you'll have me off your hands,--the drag and worry that I've been ever since--"

"Don't!" he pleaded vehemently. "Please!... You _know_ it isn't that. I _don't_ want you off my hands, ever.... That is to say, I--ah--" Here he was smitten with a dumbness, and sat, aghast at the enormity of his blunder, entreating her forgiveness with eyes that, very likely, pleaded his cause more eloquently than he guessed.

"I mean," he floundered on presently, in the fatuous belief that he would this time be able to control both mind and tongue, "_what_ I mean is I'd be glad to go on serving you in any way I might, to the end of time, if you'd give me...."

He left the declaration inconclusive--a stroke of diplomacy that would have graced an infinitely more adept wooer. But he used it all unconsciously. "O Lord!" he groaned in spirit. "Worse and more of it! Why in thunder can't I say the right thing _right_?"

Egotistically absorbed by the problem thus formulated, he was heedless of her failure to respond, and remained pensively preoccupied until roused by the grinding and jolting of the train, as it slowed to a halt preparatory

to crossing the bridge.

Then he sought to read his answer in the eyes of Dorothy. But she was looking away, staring thoughtfully out over the billowing sea of roofs that merged illusively into the haze long ere it reached the horizon; and Kirkwood could see the pulsing of the warm blood in her throat and cheeks; and the glamorous light that leaped and waned in her eyes, as the ruddy evening sunlight warmed them, was something any man might be glad to live for and die for.... And he saw that she had understood, had grasped the thread of meaning that ran through the clumsy fabric of his halting speech and his sudden silences.

She had understood without resentment!

While, incredulous, he wrestled with the wonder of this fond discovery, she grew conscious of his gaze, and turned her head to meet it with one fearless and sweet, if troubled.

"Dear Mr. Kirkwood," she said gently, bending forward as if to read between the lines anxiety had graven on his countenance, "won't you tell me, please, what it can be that so worries you? Is it possible that you still have a fear of my father? But don't you know that he can do nothing now--now that we're safe? We have only to take a cab to Paddington Station, and then--"

"You mustn't underestimate the resource and ability of Mr. Calendar," he told her gloomily; "we've got a chance--no more. It wasn't...." He shut his teeth on his unruly tongue--too late.

Woman-quick she caught him up. "It wasn't that? Then what was it that worried you? If it's something that affects me, is it kind and right of you not to tell me?"

"It--it affects us both," he conceded drearily. "I--I don't--"

The wretched embarrassment of the confession befogged his wits; he felt unable to frame the words. He appealed speechlessly for tolerance, with a face utterly woebegone and eyes piteous.

The train began to move slowly across the Thames to Charing Cross.

Mercilessly the girl persisted. "We've only a minute more. Surely you can trust me...."

In exasperation he interrupted almost rudely. "It's only this: I--I'm strapped."

"Strapped?" She knitted her brows over this fresh specimen of American slang.

"Flat strapped--busted--broke--on my uppers--down and out," he reeled off synonyms without a smile. "I haven't enough money to pay cab-fare across the town--"

"Oh!" she interpolated, enlightened.

"--to say nothing of taking us to Chiltern. I couldn't buy you a glass of water if you were thirsty. There isn't a soul on earth, within hail, who would trust me with a quarter--I mean a shilling--across London Bridge. I'm the original Luckless Wonder and the only genuine Jonah extant."

With a face the hue of fire, he cocked his eyebrows askew and attempted to laugh unconcernedly to hide his bitter shame. "I've led you out of the fryingpan into the fire, and I don't know what to do! Please call me names."

And in a single instant all that he had consistently tried to avoid doing, had been irretrievably done; if, with dawning comprehension, dismay flickered in her eyes--such dismay as such a confession can rouse only in one who, like Dorothy Calendar, has never known the want of a penny--it was swiftly driven out to make place for the truest and most gracious and unselfish solicitude.

"Oh, poor Mr. Kirkwood! And it's all because of me! You've beggared yourself--"

"Not precisely; I was beggared to begin with." He hastened to disclaim the extravagant generosity of which she accused him. "I had only three or four pounds to my name that night we met.... I haven't told you--I--"

"You've told me nothing, nothing whatever about yourself," she said reproachfully.

"I didn't want to bother you with my troubles; I tried not to talk about myself.... You knew I was an American, but I'm worse than that; I'm a Californian--from San Francisco." He tried unsuccessfully to make light of it. "I told you I was the Luckless Wonder; if I'd ever had any luck I would have stored a little money away. As it was, I lived on my income, left my principal in 'Frisco; and when the earthquake came, it wiped me out completely."

"And you were going home that night we made you miss your steamer!"

"It was my own fault, and I'm glad this blessed minute that I did miss it. Nice sort I'd have been, to go off and leave you at the mercy--"

"Please! I want to think, I'm trying to remember how much you've gone through--"

"Precisely what I don't want you to do. Anyway, I did nothing more than any other fellow would've! Please don't give me credit that I don't deserve."

But she was not listening; and a pause fell, while the train crawled warily over the trestle, as if in fear of the foul, muddy flood below.

"And there's no way I can repay you...."

"There's nothing to be repaid," he contended stoutly.

She clasped her hands and let them fall gently in her lap. "I've not a farthing in the world!... I never dreamed.... I'm so sorry, Mr. Kirkwood--terribly, terribly sorry!... But what can we do? I can't consent to be a burden--"

"But you're not! You're the one thing that ..." He swerved sharply, at an abrupt tangent. "There's one thing we can do, of course."

She looked up inquiringly.

"Craven Street is just round the corner."

"Yes?"--wonderingly.

"I mean we must go to Mrs. Hallam's house, first off.... It's too late now,--after five, else we could deposit the jewels in some bank. Since--since they are no longer yours, the only thing, and the proper thing to do is to place them in safety or in the hands of their owner. If you take them directly to young Hallam, your hands will be clear.... And--I never did such a thing in my life, Miss Calendar; but if he's got a spark of gratitude in his make-up, I ought to be able to--er--to borrow a pound or so of him."

"Do you think so?" She shook her head in doubt. "I don't know; I know so little of such things.... You are right; we must take him the jewels, but..." Her voice trailed off into a sigh of profound perturbation.

He dared not meet her look.

Beneath his wandering gaze a County Council steam-boat darted swiftly down-stream from Charing Cross pier, in the shadow of the railway bridge. It seemed curious to reflect that from that very floating pier he had started first upon his quest of the girl beside him, only--he had to count--three nights ago! Three days and three nights! Altogether incredible seemed the transformation they had wrought in the complexion of the world. Yet nothing material was changed.... He lifted his eyes.

Beyond the river rose the Embankment, crawling with traffic, backed by the green of the gardens and the shimmering walls of glass and stone of the great hotels, their windows glowing weirdly golden in the late sunlight. A little down-stream Cleopatra's Needle rose, sadly the worse for London smoke, flanked by its couchant sphinxes, wearing a nimbus of circling, sweeping, swooping, wheeling gulls. Farther down, from the foot of that magnificent pile, Somerset House, Waterloo Bridge sprang over-stream in its graceful arch.... All as of yesterday; yet all changed. Why? Because a woman had entered into his life; because he had learned the lesson of love and had looked into the bright face of Romance....

With a jar the train started and began to move more swiftly.

Kirkwood lifted the traveling bag to his knees.

"Don't forget," he said with some difficulty, "you're to stick by me, whatever happens. You mustn't desert me."

"You _know_," the girl reproved him.

"I know; but there must be no misunderstanding.... Don't worry; we'll win out yet, I've a plan."

Splendide mendax! He had not the glimmering of a plan.

The engine panting, the train drew in beneath the vast sounding dome of the station, to an accompaniment of dull thunderings; and stopped finally.

Kirkwood got out, not without a qualm of regret at leaving the compartment; therein, at least, they had some title to consideration, by virtue of their tickets; now they were utterly vagabondish, penniless adventurers.

The girl joined him. Slowly, elbow to elbow, the treasure bag between them, they made their way down toward the gates, atoms in a tide-rip of humanity,--two streams of passengers meeting on the narrow strip of platform, the one making for the streets, the other for the suburbs.

Hurried and jostled, the girl clinging tightly to his arm lest they be separated in the crush, they came to the ticket-wicket; beyond the barrier surged a sea of hats--shining "toppers," dignified and upstanding, the outward and visible manifestation of the sturdy, stodgy British spirit of respectability; "bowlers" round and sleek and humble; shapeless caps with cloth visors, manufactured of outrageous plaids; flower-like miracles of millinery from Bond Street; strangely plumed monstrosities from Petticoat Lane and Mile End Road. Beneath any one of these might lurk the maleficent brain, the spying eyes of Calendar or one of his creatures; beneath all of them that he encountered, Kirkwood peered in fearful inquiry.

Yet, when they had passed unhindered the ordeal of the wickets, had run the gantlet of those thousand eyes without lighting in any pair a spark of recognition, he began to bear himself with more assurance, to be sensible to a grateful glow of hope. Perhaps Hobbs' telegram had not reached its destination, for unquestionably the mate would have wired his chief; perhaps some accident had befallen the conspirators; perhaps the police had apprehended them.... No matter how, one hoped against hope that they had been thrown off the trail.

And indeed it seemed as if they must have been misguided in some providential manner. On the other hand, it would be the crassest of indiscretions to linger about the place an instant longer than absolutely necessary.

Outside the building, however, they paused perforce, undergoing the cross-fire of the congregated cabbies. It being the first time that he had ever felt called upon to leave the station afoot, Kirkwood cast about irresolutely, seeking the sidewalk leading to the Strand.

Abruptly he caught the girl by the arm and unceremoniously hurried her toward a waiting hansom.

"Quick!" he begged her. "Jump right in--not an instant to spare.--"

She nodded brightly, lips firm with courage, eyes shining.

"My father?"

"Yes." Kirkwood glanced back over his shoulder. "He hasn't seen us yet. They've just driven up. Stryker's with him. They're getting down." And to himself, "Oh, the devil!" cried the panic-stricken young man.

He drew back to let the girl precede him into the cab; at the same time he kept an eye on Calendar, whose conveyance stood half the length of the station-front away.

The fat adventurer had finished paying off the driver, standing on the deck of the hansom. Stryker was already out, towering above the mass of people, and glaring about him with his hawk-keen vision. Calendar had started to alight, his foot was leaving the step when Stryker's glance singled out their quarry. Instantly he turned and spoke to his confederate. Calendar wheeled like a flash, peering eagerly in the direction indicated by the captain's index finger, then, snapping instructions to his driver, threw himself heavily back on the seat. Stryker, awkward on his land-legs, stumbled and fell in an ill-calculated attempt to hoist himself hastily back into the vehicle.

To the delay thus occasioned alone Kirkwood and Dorothy owed a respite of freedom. Their hansom was already swinging down toward the great gates of the yard, the American standing to make the driver comprehend the necessity for using the utmost speed in reaching the Craven Street address. The man proved both intelligent and obliging; Kirkwood had barely time to drop down beside the girl, ere the cab was swinging out into the Strand, to the peril of the toes belonging to a number of righteously indignant pedestrians.

"Good boy!" commented Kirkwood cheerfully. "That's the greatest comfort of all London, the surprising intellectual strength the average cabby displays when you promise him a tip.... Great Heavens!" he cried, reading the girl's dismayed expression. "A tip! I never thought--!" His face lengthened dismally, his eyebrows working awry. "Now we are in for it!"

Dorothy said nothing.

He turned in the seat, twisting his neck to peep through the small rear window. "I don't see their cab," he announced. "But of course they're after us. However, Craven Street's just round the corner; if we get there first, I don't fancy Freddie Hallam will have a cordial reception for our pursuers. They must've been on watch at Cannon Street, and finding we were not coming in that way--of course they were expecting us because of Hobbs' wire--they took cab for Charing Cross. Lucky for us.... Or is it lucky?" he added doubtfully, to himself.

The hansom whipped round the corner into Craven Street. Kirkwood sprang up, grasping the treasure bag, ready to jump the instant they pulled in toward Mrs. Hallam's dwelling. But as they drew near upon the address he drew back with an exclamation of amazement.

The house was closed, showing a blank face to the street--blinds drawn close down in the windows, area gate padlocked, an estate-agent's board projecting from above the doorway, advertising the property "To be let, furnished."

Kirkwood looked back, craning his neck round the side of the cab. At the moment another hansom was breaking through the rank of humanity on the Strand crossing. He saw one or two figures leap desperately from beneath the horse's hoofs. Then the cab shot out swiftly down the street.

The American stood up again, catching the cabby's eye.

"Drive on!" he cried excitedly. "Don't stop--drive as fast as you dare!"

"Where to, sir?"

"See that cab behind? Don't let it catch us--shake it off, lose it somehow, but for the love of Heaven don't let it catch us! I'll make it worth your while. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" The driver looked briefly over his shoulder and lifted his whip. "Don't worry, sir," he cried, entering into the spirit of the game with gratifying zest. "Shan't let 'em over'aul you, sir. Mind your 'ead!"

And as Kirkwood ducked, the whip-lash shot out over the roof with a crack like the report of a pistol. Startled, the horse leaped indignantly forward. Momentarily the cab seemed to leave the ground, then settled down to a pace that carried them round the Avenue Theatre and across Northumberland Avenue into Whitehall Place apparently on a single wheel.

A glance behind showed Kirkwood that already they had gained, the pursuing hansom having lost ground through greater caution in crossing the main-traveled thoroughfare.

"Good little horse!" he applauded.

A moment later he was indorsing without reserve the generalship of their cabby; the quick westward turn that took them into Whitehall, over across from the Horse Guards, likewise placed them in a pocket of traffic; a practically impregnable press of vehicles closed in behind them ere Calendar's conveyance could follow out of the side street.

That the same conditions, but slightly modified, hemmed them in ahead, went for nothing in Kirkwood's estimation.

"Good driver!" he approved heartily. "He's got a head on his shoulders!"

The girl found her voice. "How," she demanded in a breath, face blank with consternation, "how did you dare?"

"Dare?" he echoed exultantly; and in his veins excitement was running like liquid fire. "What wouldn't I dare for you, Dorothy?"

"What have you not?" she amended softly, adding with a shade of timidity: "Philip..."

The long lashes swept up from her cheeks, like clouds revealing stars, unmasking eyes radiant and brave to meet his own; then they fell, even as her lips drooped with disappointment. And she sighed.... For he was not looking. Man-like, hot with the ardor of the chase, he was deaf and blind to all else.

She saw that he had not even heard. Twice within the day she had forgotten herself, had overstepped the rigid bounds of her breeding in using his Christian name. And twice he had been oblivious to that token of their maturing understanding. So she sighed, and sighing, smiled again; resting an elbow on the window-sill and flattening one small gloved hand against the frame for a brace against the jouncing of the hansom. It swept on with unabated speed, up-stream beside the tawny reaches of the river; and for a time there was no speech between them, the while the girl lost consciousness of self and her most imminent peril, surrendering her being to the lingering sweetness of her long, dear thoughts....

"I've got a scheme!" Kirkwood declared so explosively that she caught her breath with the surprise of it. "There's the Pless; they know me there, and my credit's good. When we shake them off, we can have the cabby take us to the hotel. I'll register and borrow from the management enough to pay our way to Chiltern and the tolls for a cable to New York. I've a friend or two over home who wouldn't let me want for a few miserable pounds.... So you see," he explained boyishly, "we're at the end of our troubles already!"

She said something inaudible, holding her face averted. He bent nearer to her, wondering. "I didn't understand," he suggested.

Still looking from him, "I said you were very good to me," she said in a quavering whisper.

"Dorothy!" Without his knowledge or intention before the fact, as instinctively as he made use of her given name, intimately, his strong fingers dropped and closed upon the little hand that lay beside him. "What is the matter, dear?" He leaned still farther forward to peer into her face, till glance met glance in the ending and his racing pulses tightened with sheer delight of the humid happiness in her glistening eyes. "Dorothy, child, don't worry so. No harm shall come to you. It's all working out--all working out right. Only have a little faith in me, and I'll make everything work out right, Dorothy."

Gently she freed her fingers. "I wasn't," she told him in a voice that quivered between laughter and tears, "I wasn't worrying. I was ... You wouldn't understand. Don't be afraid I shall break down or--or anything."

"I shan't," he reassured her; "I know you're not that sort. Besides, you'd have no excuse. We're moving along famously. That cabby knows his business."

In fact that gentleman was minute by minute demonstrating his peculiar fitness for the task he had so cheerfully undertaken. The superior horsemanship of the London hackney cabman needs no exploitation, and he in whose hands rested the fate of the Calendar treasure was peer of his compeers. He was instant to advantage himself of every opening to forward his pliant craft, quick to foresee the fortunes of the way and govern himself accordingly.

Estimating with practised eye the precise moment when the police supervisor of traffic at the junction of Parliament and Bridge Streets, would see fit to declare a temporary blockade, he so managed that his was the last vehicle to pass ere the official wand, to ignore which involves a forfeited license, was lifted; and indeed, so close was his calculation that he escaped only with a scowl and word of warning from the bobby. A matter of no importance whatever, since his end was gained and the pursuing cab had been shut off by the blockade.

In Calendar's driver, however, he had an adversary of abilities by no means to be despised. Precisely how the man contrived it, is a question; that he made a detour by way of Derby Street is not improbable, unpleasant as it may have been for Stryker and Calendar to find themselves in such close proximity to "the Yard." At all events, he evaded the block, and hardly had the chase swung across Bridge Street, than the pursuer was nimbly clattering in its wake.

Past the Houses of Parliament, through Old Palace Yard, with the Abbey on their left, they swung away into Abingdon Street, whence suddenly they dived into the maze of backways, great and mean, which lies to the south of Victoria. Doubling and twisting, now this way, now that, the driver toiled them through the intricate heart of this labyrinth, leading the pursuers a dance that Kirkwood thought calculated to dishearten and shake off the pursuit in the first five minutes. Yet always, peering back through the little peephole, he saw Calendar's cab pelting doggedly in their rear--a hundred yards behind, no more, no less, hanging on with indomitable grit and determination.

By degrees they drew westwards, threading Pimlico, into Chelsea--once dashing briefly down the Grosvenor Road, the Thames a tawny flood beyond the river wall.

Children cheered them on, and policemen turned to stare, doubting whether they should interfere. Minutes rolled into tens, measuring out an hour; and still they hammered on, hunted and hunters, playing their game of hare-and-hounds through the highways and byways of those staid and aged quarters.

In the leading cab there were few words spoken. Kirkwood and Dorothy alike sat spellbound with the fascination of the game; if it is conceivable

that the fox enjoys his part in the day's sport, then they were enjoying themselves. Now one spoke, now another--chiefly in the clipped phraseology, of excitement. As--

"We're gaining?"

"Yes--think so."

Or, "We'll tire them out?"

"Sure-ly."

"They can't catch us, can they, Philip?"

"Never in the world."

But he spoke with a confidence that he himself did not feel, for hope as he would he could never see that the distance between the two had been materially lessened or increased. Their horses seemed most evenly matched.

The sun was very low behind the houses of the Surrey Side when Kirkwood became aware that their horse was flagging, though (as comparison determined) no more so than the one behind.

In grave concern the young man raised his hand, thrusting open the trap in the roof. Immediately the square of darkling sky was eclipsed by the cabby's face.

"Yessir?"

"You had better drive as directly as you can to the Hotel Pless," Kirkwood called up. "I'm afraid it's no use pushing your horse like this."

"I'm sure of it, sir. 'E's a good 'oss, 'e is, but 'e can't keep goin' for hever, you know, sir."

"I know. You've done very well; you've done your best."

"Very good, sir. The Pless, you said, sir? Right."

The trap closed.

Two blocks farther, and their pace had so sensibly moderated that Kirkwood was genuinely alarmed. The pursuing cabby was lashing his animal without mercy, while, "It aren't no use my w'ippin' 'im, sir," dropped through the trap. "'E's doing orl 'e can."

"I understand."

Despondent recklessness tightened Kirkwood's lips and kindled an unpleasant light in his eyes. He touched his side pocket; Calendar's revolver was still there.... Dorothy should win away clear, if--if he swung for it.

He bent forward with the traveling bag in his hands.

"What are you going to do?" The girl's voice was very tremulous.

"Stand a chance, take a losing hazard. Can you run? You're not too tired?"

"I can run--perhaps not far--a little way, at least."

"And will you do as I say?"

Her eyes met his, unwavering, bespeaking her implicit faith.

"Promise!"

"I promise."

"We'll have to drop off in a minute. The horse won't last.... They're in the same box. Well, I undertake to stand 'em off for a bit; you take the bag and run for it. Just as soon as I can convince them, I'll follow, but if there's any delay, you call the first cab you see and drive to the Pless. I'll join you there."

He stood up, surveying the neighborhood. Behind him the girl lifted her voice in protest.

"No, Philip, no!"

"You've promised," he said sternly, eyes ranging the street.

"I don't care; I won't leave you."

He shook his head in silent contradiction, frowning; but not frowning because of the girl's mutiny. He was a little puzzled by a vague impression, and was striving to pin it down for recognition; but was so thoroughly bemused with fatigue and despair that only with great difficulty could he force his faculties to logical reasoning, his memory to respond to his call upon it.

The hansom was traversing a street in Old Brompton--a quaint, prim by-way lined with dwellings singularly Old-Worldish, even for London. He seemed to know it subjectively, to have retained a memory of it from another existence: as the stage setting of a vivid dream, all forgotten, will sometimes recur with peculiar and exasperating intensity, in broad daylight. The houses, with their sloping, red-tiled roofs, unexpected gables, spontaneous dormer windows, glass panes set in leaded frames, red brick façades trimmed with green shutters and doorsteps of white stone, each sitting back, sedate and self-sufficient, in its trim dooryard fenced off from the public thoroughfare: all wore an aspect hauntingly familiar, and yet strange.

A corner sign, remarked in passing, had named the spot "Aspen Villas"; though he felt he knew the sound of those syllables as well as he did the name of the Pless, strive as he might he failed to make them convey

anything tangible to his intelligence. When had he heard of it? At what time had his errant footsteps taken him through this curious survival of Eighteenth Century London?

Not that it mattered when. It could have no possible bearing on the emergency. He really gave it little thought; the mental processes recounted were mostly subconscious, if none the less real. His objective attention was wholly preoccupied with the knowledge that Calendar's cab was drawing perilously near. And he was debating whether or not they should alight at once and try to make a better pace afoot, when the decision was taken wholly out of his hands.

Blindly staggering on, wilted with weariness, the horse stumbled in the shafts and plunged forward on its knees. Quick as the driver was to pull it up, with a cruel jerk of the bits, Kirkwood was caught unprepared; lurching against the dashboard, he lost his footing, grasped frantically at the unstable air, and went over, bringing up in a sitting position in the gutter, with a solid shock that jarred his very teeth.

For a moment dazed he sat there blinking; by the time he got to his feet, the girl stood beside him, questioning him with keen solicitude.

"No," he gasped; "not hurt--only surprised. Wait..."

Their cab had come to a complete standstill; Calendar's was no more than twenty yards behind, and as Kirkwood caught sight of him the fat adventurer was in the act of lifting himself ponderously out of the seat.

Incontinently the young man turned to the girl and forced the traveling-bag into her hands.

"Run for it!" he begged her. "Don't stop to argue. You promised--run! I'll come..."

"Philip!" she pleaded.

"Dorothy!" he cried in torment.

Perhaps it was his unquestionable distress that weakened her. Suddenly she yielded--with whatever reason. He was only hazily aware of the swish of her skirts behind him; he had no time to look round and see that she got away safely. He had only eyes and thoughts for Calendar and Stryker.

They were both afoot, now, and running toward him, the one as awkward as the other, but neither yielding a jot of their malignant purpose. He held the picture of it oddly graphic in his memory for many a day thereafter: Calendar making directly, for him, his heavy-featured face a dull red with the exertion, his fat head dropped forward as if too heavy for his neck of a bull, his small eyes bright with anger; Stryker shying off at a discreet angle, evidently with the intention of devoting himself to the capture of the girl; the two cabs with their dejected screws, at rest in the middle of the quiet, twilit street. He seemed even to see himself, standing stockily prepared, hands in his coat pockets, his own head inclined with a

suggestion of pugnacity.

To this mental photograph another succeeds, of the same scene an instant later; all as it had been before, their relative positions unchanged, save that Stryker and Calendar had come to a dead stop, and that Kirkwood's right arm was lifted and extended, pointing at the captain.

So forgetful of self was he, that it required a moment's thought to convince him that he was really responsible for the abrupt transformation. Incredulously he realized that he had drawn Calendar's revolver and pulled Stryker up short, in mid-stride, by the mute menace of it, as much as by his hoarse cry of warning:

"Stryker--not another foot--"

With this there chimed in Dorothy's voice, ringing bell-clear from a little distance:

"Philip!"

Like a flash he wheeled, to add yet another picture to his mental gallery.

Perhaps two-score feet up the sidewalk a gate stood open; just outside it a man of tall and slender figure, rigged out in a bizarre costume consisting mainly of a flowered dressing-gown and slippers, was waiting in an attitude of singular impassivity; within it, pausing with a foot lifted to the doorstep, bag in hand, her head turned as she looked back, was Dorothy.

[Illustration: A costume consisting mainly of a flowered dressing-gown and slippers.]

As he comprehended these essential details of the composition, the man in the flowered dressing-gown raised a hand, beckoning to him in a manner as imperative as his accompanying words.

"Kirkwood!" he saluted the young man in a clear and vibrant voice, "put up that revolver and stop this foolishness." And, with a jerk of his head towards the doorway, in which Dorothy now waited, hesitant: "Come, sir--quickly!"

Kirkwood choked on a laugh that was half a sob. "Brentwick!" he cried, restoring the weapon to his pocket and running toward his friend. "Of all happy accidents!"

"You may call it that," retorted the elder man with a fleeting smile as Kirkwood slipped inside the dooryard. "Come," he said; "let's get into the house."

"But you said--I thought you went to Munich," stammered Kirkwood; and so thoroughly impregnated was his mind with this understanding that it was hard for him to adjust his perceptions to the truth.

"I was detained--by business," responded Brentwick briefly. His gaze, weary

and wistful behind his glasses, rested on the face of the girl on the threshold of his home; and the faint, sensitive flush of her face deepened. He stopped and honored her with a bow that, for all his fantastical attire, would have graced a beau of an earlier decade. "Will you be pleased to enter?" he suggested punctiliously. "My house, such as it is, is quite at your disposal. And," he added, with a glance over his shoulder, "I fancy that a word or two may presently be passed which you would hardly care to hear."

Dorothy's hesitation was but transitory; Kirkwood was reassuring her with a smile more like his wonted boyish grin than anything he had succeeded in conjuring up throughout the day. Her own smile answered it, and with a murmured word of gratitude and a little, half timid, half distant bow for Brentwick, she passed on into the hallway.

Kirkwood lingered with his friend upon the door-stoop. Calendar, recovered from his temporary consternation, was already at the gate, bending over it, fat fingers fumbling with the latch, his round red face, lifted to the house, darkly working with chagrin.

From his threshold, watching him with a slight contraction of the eyes, Brentwick hailed him in tones of cloying courtesy.

"Do you wish to see me, sir?"

The fat adventurer faltered just within the gateway; then, with a truculent swagger, "I want my daughter," he declared vociferously.

Brentwick peered mildly over his glasses, first at Calendar, then at Kirkwood. His glance lingered a moment on the young man's honest eyes, and swung back to Calendar.

"My good man," he said with sublime tolerance, "will you be pleased to take yourself off--to the devil if you like? Or shall I take the trouble to interest the police?"

He removed one fine and fragile hand from a pocket of the flowered dressing-gown, long enough to jerk it significantly toward the nearer street-corner.

Thunderstruck, Calendar glanced hastily in the indicated direction. A blue-coated bobby was to be seen approaching with measured stride, diffusing upon the still evening air an impression of ineffably capable self-contentment.

Calendar's fleshy lips parted and closed without a sound. They quivered. Beneath them quivered his assortment of graduated chins. His heavy and pendulous cheeks quivered, slowly empurpling with the dark tide of his apoplectic wrath. The close-clipped thatch of his iron gray mustache, even, seemed to bristle like hairs upon the neck of a maddened dog. Beneath him his fat legs trembled, and indeed his whole huge carcass shook visibly, in the stress of his restrained wrath.

Suddenly, overwhelmed, he banged the gate behind him and waddled off to join the captain; who already, with praiseworthy native prudence, had fallen back upon their cab.

From his coign of strategic advantage, the comfortable elevation of his box, Kirkwood's cabby, whose huge enjoyment of the adventurers' discomfiture had throughout been noisily demonstrative, entreated Calendar with lifted forefinger, bland affability, and expressions of heartfelt sympathy.

"Keb-sir? 'Ave a keb-sir, do! Try a ride be'ind a real 'orse, sir; don't you go on wastin' time on 'im." A jerk of a derisive thumb singled out the other cabman. "'E aren't pl'yin' you fair, sir; I knows 'im,--'e's a hartful g'y deceiver, 'e is. Look at 'is 'orse,--w'ich it aren't; it's a snyle, that's w'at it is. Tyke a father's hadvice, sir, and next time yer fairest darter runs awye with the dook in disguise, chyse 'em in a real keb-sir, not a cheap imitashin.... Keb-sir?... Garn, you 'ard-'arted--"

Here he swooped upwards in a dizzy flight of vituperation best unrecorded. Calendar, beyond an absent-minded flirt of one hand by his ear, as who should shoo away a buzzing insect, ignored him utterly.

Sullenly extracting money from his pocket, he paid off his driver, and in company with Stryker, trudged in morose silence down the street.

Brentwick touched Kirkwood's arm and drew him into the house.

XVIII

ADVENTURERS' LUCK

As the door closed, Kirkwood swung impulsively to Brentwick, with the brief, uneven laugh of fine-drawn nerves.

"Good God, sir!" he cried. "You don't know--"

"I can surmise," interrupted the elder man shrewdly.

"You turned up in the nick of time, for all the world like--"

"Harlequin popping through a stage trap?"

"No!--an incarnation of the Providence that watches over children and fools."

Brentwick dropped a calming hand upon his shoulder. "Your simile seems singularly happy, Philip. Permit me to suggest that you join the child in my study." He laughed quietly, with a slight nod toward an open door at the end of the hallway. "For myself, I'll be with you in one moment."

A faint, indulgent smile lurking in the shadow of his white mustache, he watched the young man wheel and dart through the doorway. "Young hearts!" he commented inaudibly--and a trace sadly. "Youth!..."

Beyond the threshold of the study, Kirkwood paused, eager eyes searching its somber shadows for a sign of Dorothy.

A long room and deep, it was lighted only by the circumscribed disk of illumination thrown on the central desk by a shaded reading-lamp, and the flickering glow of a grate-fire set beneath the mantel of a side-wall. At the back, heavy velvet portières cloaked the recesses of two long windows, closed jealously even against the twilight. Aside from the windows, doors and chimney-piece, every foot of wall space was occupied by towering bookcases or by shelves crowded to the limit of their capacity with an amazing miscellany of objects of art, the fruit of years of patient and discriminating collecting. An exotic and heady atmosphere, compounded of the faint and intangible exhalations of these insentient things, fragrance of sandalwood, myrrh and musk, reminiscent whiffs of half-forgotten incense, seemed to intensify the impression of gloomy richness and repose...

By the fireplace, a little to one side, stood Dorothy, one small foot resting on the brass fender, her figure merging into the dusky background, her delicate beauty gaining an effect of elusive and ethereal mystery in the waning and waxing ruddy glow upflung from the bedded coals.

"Oh, Philip!" She turned swiftly to Kirkwood with extended hands and a low, broken cry. "I'm _so_ glad...."

A trace of hysteria in her manner warned him, and he checked himself upon the verge of a too dangerous tenderness. "There!" he said soothingly, letting her hands rest gently in his palms while he led her to a chair. "We can make ourselves easy now." She sat down and he released her hands with a reluctance less evident than actual. "If ever I say another word against my luck--"

"Who," inquired the girl, lowering her voice, "who is the gentleman in the flowered dressing-gown?"

"Brentwick--George Silvester Brentwick: an old friend. I've known him for years,--ever since I came abroad. Curiously enough, however, this is the first time I've ever been here. I called once, but he wasn't in,--a few days ago,--the day we met. I thought the place looked familiar. Stupid of me!"

"Philip," said the girl with a grave face but a shaking voice, "it was." She laughed provokingly.... "It was so funny, Philip. I don't know why I ran, when you told me to, but I did; and while I ran, I was conscious of the front door, here, opening, and this tall man in the flowered dressing-gown coming down to the gate as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for him to stroll out, dressed that way, in the evening. And he opened the gate, and bowed, and said, ever so pleasantly, 'Won't you

come in, Miss Calendar?'"

"He did!" exclaimed Kirkwood. "But how--?"

"How can I say?" she expostulated. "At all events, he seemed to know me; and when he added something about calling you in, too--he said 'Mr. Kirkwood '--I didn't hesitate."

"It's strange enough, surely--and fortunate. Bless his heart!" said Kirkwood.

And, "Hum!" said Mr. Brentwick considerately, entering the study. He had discarded the dressing-gown and was now in evening dress.

The girl rose. Kirkwood turned. "Mr. Brentwick--" he began.

But Brentwick begged his patience with an eloquent gesture. "Sir," he said, somewhat austerely, "permit me to put a single question: Have you by any chance paid your cabby?"

"Why--" faltered the younger man, with a flaming face. "I--why, no--that is--"

The other quietly put his hand upon a bell-pull. A faint jingling sound was at once audible, emanating from the basement.

"How much should you say you owe him?"

"I--I haven't a penny in the world!"

The shrewd eyes flashed their amusement into Kirkwood's. "Tut, tut!" Brentwick chuckled. "Between gentlemen, my dear boy! Dear me! you are slow to learn."

"I'll never be contented to sponge on my friends," explained Kirkwood in deepest misery. "I can't tell when--"

"Tut, tut! How much did you say?"

"Ten shillings--or say twelve, would be about right," stammered the American, swayed by conflicting emotions of gratitude and profound embarrassment.

A soft-footed butler, impassive as Fate, materialized mysteriously in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?" he interrupted frigidly.

"I rang, Wotton." His master selected a sovereign from his purse and handed it to the servant. "For the cabby, Wotton."

"Yes sir." The butler swung automatically, on one heel.

"And Wotton!"

"Sir?"

"If any one should ask for me, I'm not at home."

"Very good, sir."

"And if you should see a pair of disreputable scoundrels skulking, in the neighborhood, one short and stout, the other tall and evidently a seafaring man, let me know."

"Thank you, sir." A moment later the front door was heard to close.

Brentwick turned with a little bow to the girl. "My dear Miss Calendar," he said, rubbing his thin, fine hands,--"I am old enough, I trust, to call you such without offense,--please be seated."

Complying, the girl rewarded him with a radiant smile. Whereupon, striding to the fireplace, their host turned his back to it, clasped his hands behind him, and glowered benignly upon the two. "Ah!" he observed in accents of extreme personal satisfaction. "Romance! Romance!"

"Would you mind telling us how you knew--" began Kirkwood anxiously.

"Not in the least, my dear Philip. It is simple enough: I possess an imagination. From my bedroom window, on the floor above, I happen to behold two cabs racing down the street, the one doggedly pursuing the other. The foremost stops, perforce of a fagged horse. There alights a young gentleman looking, if you'll pardon me, uncommonly seedy; he is followed by a young lady, if she will pardon me," with another little bow, "uncommonly pretty. With these two old eyes I observe that the gentleman does not pay his cabby. Ergo--I intelligently deduce--he is short of money. Eh?"

"You were right," affirmed Kirkwood, with a rueful and crooked smile.

"But--"

"So! so!" pursued Brentwick, rising on his toes and dropping back again; "so this world of ours wags on to the old, old tune!... And I, who in my younger days pursued adventure without success, in dotage find myself dragged into a romance by my two ears, whether I will or no! Eh? And now you are going to tell me all about it, Philip. There is a chair.... Well, Wotton?"

The butler had again appeared noiselessly in the doorway.

"Beg pardon, sir; they're waiting, sir."

"The caitiffs, Wotton?"

"Yessir."

"Where waiting?"

"One at each end of the street, sir."

"Thank you. You may bring us sherry and biscuit, Wotton."

"Thank you, sir."

The servant vanished.

Brentwick removed his glasses, rubbed them, and blinked thoughtfully at the girl. "My dear," he said suddenly, with a peculiar tremor in his voice, "you resemble your mother remarkably. Tut--I should know! Time was when I was one of her most ardent admirers."

"You--y-you knew my mother?" cried Dorothy, profoundly moved.

"Did I not know you at sight? My dear, you are your mother reincarnate, for the good of an unworthy world. She was a very beautiful woman, my dear."

Wotton entered with a silver serving tray, offering it in turn to Dorothy, Kirkwood and his employer. While he was present the three held silent--the girl trembling slightly, but with her face aglow; Kirkwood half stupefied between his ease from care and his growing astonishment, as Brentwick continued to reveal unexpected phases of his personality; Brentwick himself outwardly imperturbable and complacent, for all that his hand shook as he lifted his wine glass.

"You may go, Wotton--or, wait. Don't you feel the need of a breath of fresh air, Wotton?"

"Yessir, thank you, sir."

"Then change your coat, Wotton, light your pipe, and stroll out for half an hour. You need not leave the street, but if either the tall thin blackguard with the seafaring habit, or the short stout rascal with the air of mystery should accost you, treat them with all courtesy, Wotton. You will be careful not to tell either of them anything in particular, although I don't mind your telling them that Mr. Brentwick lives here, if they ask. I am mostly concerned to discover if they purpose becoming fixtures on the street-corners, Wotton."

"Quite so, sir."

"Now you may go.... Wotton," continued his employer as the butler took himself off as softly as a cat, "grows daily a more valuable mechanism. He is by no means human in any respect, but I find him extremely handy to have round the house.... And now, my dear," turning to Dorothy, "with your permission I desire to drink to the memory of your beautiful mother and to the happiness of her beautiful daughter."

"But you will tell me--"

"A number of interesting things, Miss Calendar, if you'll be good enough to

let me choose the time. I beg you to be patient with the idiosyncrasies of an old man, who means no harm, who has a reputation as an eccentric to sustain before his servants.... And now," said Brentwick, setting aside his glass, "now, my dear boy, for the adventure."

Kirkwood chuckled, infected by his host's genial humor. "How do you know--"

"How can it be otherwise?" countered Brentwick with a trace of asperity. "Am I to be denied my adventure? Sir, I refuse without equivocation. Your very bearing breathes of Romance. There must be an adventure forthcoming, Philip; otherwise my disappointment will be so acute that I shall be regretfully obliged seriously to consider my right, as a householder, to show you the door."

"But Mr. Brentwick--!"

"Sit down, sir!" commanded Brentwick with such a peremptory note that the young man, who had risen, obeyed out of sheer surprise. Upon which his host advanced, indicting him with a long white forefinger. "Would you, sir," he demanded, "again expose this little lady to the machinations of that corpulent scoundrel, whom I have just had the pleasure of shooing off my premises, because you choose to resent an old man's raillery?"

"I apologize," Kirkwood humored him.

"I accept the apology in the spirit in which it is offered.... I repeat, now for the adventure, Philip. If the story's long, epitomize. We can consider details more at our leisure."

Kirkwood's eyes consulted the girl's face; almost imperceptibly she nodded him permission to proceed.

"Briefly, then," he began haltingly, "the man who followed us to the door here, is Miss Calendar's father."

"Oh? His name, please?"

"George Burgoyne Calendar."

"Ah! An American; I remember, now. Continue, please."

"He is hounding us, sir, with the intention of stealing some property, which he caused to be stolen, which we--to put it bluntly--stole from him, to which he has no shadow of a title, and which, finally, we're endeavoring to return to its owners."

"My dear!" interpolated Brentwick gently, looking down at the girl's flushed face and drooping head.

"He ran us to the last ditch," Kirkwood continued; "I've spent my last farthing trying to lose him."

"But why have you not caused his arrest?" Brentwick inquired.

Kirkwood nodded meaningly toward the girl. Brentwick made a sound indicating comprehension, a click of the tongue behind closed teeth.

"We came to your door by the merest accident--it might as well have been another. I understood you were in Munich, and it never entered my head that we'd find you home."

"A communication from my solicitors detained me," explained Brentwick. "And now, what do you intend to do?"

"Trespass as far on your kindness as you'll permit. In the first place, I--I want the use of a few pounds with which to cable some friends in New York, for money; on receipt of which I can repay you."

"Philip," observed Brentwood, "you are a most irritating child. But I forgive you the faults of youth. You may proceed, bearing in mind, if you please, that I am your friend equally with any you may own in America."

"You're one of the best men in the world," said Kirkwood.

"Tut, tut! Will you get on?"

"Secondly, I want you to help us to escape Calendar to-night. It is necessary that Miss Calendar should go to Chiltern this evening, where she has friends who will receive and protect her."

"Mm-mm," grumbled their host, meditative. "My faith!" he commented, with brightening eyes. "It sounds almost too good to be true! And I've been growing afraid that the world was getting to be a most humdrum and uninteresting planet!... Miss Calendar, I am a widower of so many years standing that I had almost forgotten I had ever been anything but a bachelor. I fear my house contains little that will be of service to a young lady. Yet a room is at your disposal; the parlor-maid shall show you the way. And Philip, between you and me, I venture to remark that hot water and cold steel would add to the attractiveness of your personal appearance; my valet will attend you in my room. Dinner," concluded Brentwick with anticipative relish, "will be served in precisely thirty minutes. I shall expect you to entertain me with a full and itemized account of every phase of your astonishing adventure. Later, we will find a way to Chiltern."

Again he put a hand upon the bell-pull. Simultaneously Dorothy and Kirkwood rose.

"Mr. Brentwick," said the girl, her eyes starred with tears of gratitude, "I don't, I really don't know how--"

"My dear," said the old gentleman, "you will thank me most appropriately by continuing, to the best of your ability, to resemble your mother more remarkably every minute."

"But I," began Kirkwood----.

"You, my dear Philip, can thank me best by permitting me to enjoy myself; which I am doing thoroughly at the present moment. My pleasure in being invited to interfere in your young affairs is more keen than you can well surmise. Moreover," said Mr. Brentwick, "so long have I been an amateur adventurer that I esteem it the rarest privilege to find myself thus on the point of graduating into professional ranks." He rubbed his hands, beaming upon them. "And," he added, as a maid appeared at the door, "I have already schemed me a scheme for the discomfiture of our friends the enemy: a scheme which we will discuss with our dinner, while the heathen rage and imagine a vain thing, in the outer darkness."

Kirkwood would have lingered, but of such inflexible temper was his host that he bowed him into the hands of a man servant without permitting him another word.

"Not a syllable," he insisted. "I protest I am devoured with curiosity, my dear boy, but I have also bowels of compassion. When we are well on with our meal, when you are strengthened with food and drink, then you may begin. But now--Dickie," to the valet, "do your duty!"

Kirkwood, laughing with exasperation, retired at discretion, leaving Brentwick the master of the situation: a charming gentleman with a will of his own and a way that went with it.

He heard the young man's footsteps diminish on the stairway; and again he smiled the indulgent, melancholy smile of mellow years. "Youth!" he whispered softly. "Romance!... And now," with a brisk change of tone as he closed the study door, "now we are ready for this interesting Mr. Calendar."

Sitting down at his desk, he found and consulted a telephone directory; but its leaves, at first rustling briskly at the touch of the slender and delicate fingers, were presently permitted to lie unturned--the book resting open on his knees the while he stared wistfully into the fire.

A suspicion of moisture glimmered in his eyes. "Dorothy!" he whispered huskily. And a little later, rising, he proceeded to the telephone....

An hour and a half later Kirkwood, his self-respect something restored by a bath, a shave, and a resumption of clothes which had been hastily but thoroughly cleansed and pressed by Brentwick's valet; his confidence and courage mounting high under the combined influence of generous wine, substantial food, the presence of his heart's mistress and the admiration--which was unconcealed--of his friend, concluded at the dinner-table, his narration.

"And that," he said, looking up from his savory, "is about all."

"Bravo!" applauded Brentwick; eyes shining with delight.

"All," interposed Dorothy in warm reproach, "but what he hasn't told--"

"Which, my dear, is to be accounted for wholly by a very creditable

modesty, rarely encountered in the young men of the present day. It was, of course, altogether different with those of my younger years. Yes, Wotton?"

Brentwick sat back in his chair, inclining an attentive ear to a communication murmured by the butler.

Kirkwood's gaze met Dorothy's across the expanse of shining cloth; he deprecated her interruption with a whimsical twist of his eyebrows. "Really, you shouldn't," he assured her in an undertone. "I've done nothing to deserve..." But under the spell of her serious sweet eyes, he fell silent, and presently looked down, strangely abashed; and contemplated the vast enormity of his unworthiness.

Coffee was set before them by Wotton, the impassive, Brentwick refusing it with a little sigh. "It is one of the things, as Philip knows," he explained to the girl, "denied me by the physician who makes his life happy by making mine a waste. I am allowed but three luxuries; cigars, travel in moderation, and the privilege of imposing on my friends. The first I propose presently, to enjoy, by your indulgence; and the second I shall this evening undertake by virtue of the third, of which I have just availed myself."

Smiling at the involution, he rested his head against the back of the chair, eyes roving from the girl's face to Kirkwood's. "Inspiration to do which," he proceeded gravely, "came to me from the seafaring picaroon (Stryker did you name him?) via the excellent Wotton. While you were preparing for dinner, Wotton returned from his constitutional with the news that, leaving the corpulent person on watch at the corner, Captain Stryker had temporarily, made himself scarce. However, we need feel no anxiety concerning his whereabouts, for he reappeared in good time and a motor-car. From which it becomes evident that you have not overrated their pertinacity; the fiasco of the cab-chase is not to be re^onacted."

Resolutely the girl repressed a gasp of dismay. Kirkwood stared moodily into his cup.

"These men bore me fearfully," he commented at last.

"And so," continued Brentwick, "I bethought me of a counter-stroke. It is my good fortune to have a friend whose whim it is to support a touring-car, chiefly in innocuous idleness. Accordingly I have telephoned him and commandeered the use of this machine--mechanician, too.... Though not a betting man, I am willing to risk recklessly a few pence in support of my contention, that of the two, Captain Stryker's car and ours, the latter will prove considerably the most speedy...."

"In short, I suggest," he concluded, thoughtfully lacing his long white fingers, "that, avoiding the hazards of cab and railway carriage, we motor to Chiltern: the night being fine and the road, I am told, exceptionally good. Miss Dorothy, what do you think?"

Instinctively the girl looked to Kirkwood; then shifted her glance to their host. "I think you are wonderfully thoughtful and kind," she said simply.

"And you, Philip?"

"It's an inspiration," the younger man declared. "I can't think of anything better calculated to throw them off, than to distance them by motor-car. It would be always possible to trace our journey by rail."

"Then," announced Brentwick, making as if to rise, "we had best go. If neither my hearing nor Captain Stryker's car deceives me, our fiery chariot is panting at the door."

A little sobered from the confident spirit of quiet gaiety in which they had dined, they left the table. Not that, in their hearts, either greatly questioned their ultimate triumph; but they were allowing for the element of error so apt to set at naught human calculations. Calendar himself had already been proved fallible. Within the bounds of possibility, their turn to stumble might now be imminent.

When he let himself dwell upon it, their utter helplessness to give Calendar pause by commonplace methods, maddened Kirkwood. With another scoundrel it had been so simple a matter to put a period to his activities by a word to the police. But he was her father; for that reason he must continually be spared ... Even though, in desperate extremity, she should give consent to the arrest of the adventurers, retaliation would follow, swift and sure. For they might not overlook nor gloze the fact that hers had been the hands responsible for the theft of the jewels; innocent though she had been in committing that larceny, a cat's-paw guided by an intelligence unscrupulous and malign, the law would not hold her guiltless were she once brought within its cognizance. Nor, possibly, would the Hallams, mother and son.

Upon their knowledge and their fear of this, undoubtedly Calendar was reckoning: witness the barefaced effrontery with which he operated against them. His fear of the police might be genuine enough, but he was never for an instant disturbed by any doubt lest his daughter should turn against him. She would never dare that.

Before they left the house, while Dorothy was above stairs resuming her hat and coat, Kirkwood and Brentwick reconnoitered from the drawing-room windows, themselves screened from observation by the absence of light in the room behind.

Before the door a motor-car waited, engines humming impatiently, mechanic ready in his seat, an uncouth shape in goggles and leather garments that shone like oilskins under the street lights.

At one corner another and a smaller car stood in waiting, its lamps like baleful eyes glaring through the night.

In the shadows across the way, a lengthy shadow lurked: Stryker, beyond reasonable question. Otherwise the street was deserted. Not even that adventitious bobby of the early evening was now in evidence.

Dorothy presently joining them, Brentwick led the way to the door.

Wotton, apparently nerveless beneath his absolute immobility, let them out--and slammed the door behind them with such promptitude as to give cause for the suspicion that he was a fraud, a sham, beneath his icy exterior desperately afraid lest the house be stormed by the adventurers.

Kirkwood to the right, Brentwick to the left of Dorothy, the former carrying the treasure bag, they hastened down the walk and through the gate to the car.

The watcher across the way was moved to whistle shrilly; the other car lunged forward nervously.

Brentwick taking the front seat, beside the mechanic, left the tonneau to Kirkwood and Dorothy. As the American slammed the door, the car swept smoothly out into the middle of the way, while the pursuing car swerved in to the other curb, slowing down to let Stryker jump aboard.

Kirkwood put himself in the seat by the girl's side and for a few moments was occupied with the arrangement of the robes. Then, sitting back, he found her eyes fixed upon him, pools of inscrutable night in the shadow of her hat.

"You aren't afraid, Dorothy?"

She answered quietly: "I am with you, Philip."

Beneath the robe their hands met...

Exalted, excited, he turned and looked back. A hundred yards to the rear four unwinking eyes trailed them, like some modern Nemesis in monstrous guise.

XIX

I----THE UXBRIDGE ROAD

At a steady gait, now and again checked in deference to the street traffic, Brentwick's motor-car rolled, with resonant humming of the engine, down the Cromwell Road, swerved into Warwick Road and swung northward through Kensington to Shepherd's Bush. Behind it Calendar's car clung as if towed by an invisible cable, never gaining, never losing, mutely testifying to the adventurer's unrelenting, grim determination to leave them no instant's freedom from surveillance, to keep for ever at their shoulders, watching his chance, biding his time with sinister patience until the moment when, wearied, their vigilance should relax....

To some extent he reckoned without his motor-car. As long as they traveled within the metropolitan limits, constrained to observe a decorous pace

in view of the prejudices of the County Council, it was a matter of no difficulty whatever to maintain his distance. But once they had won through Shepherd's Bush and, paced by huge doubledeck trolley trams, were flying through Hammersmith on the Uxbridge Road; once they had run through Acton, and knew beyond dispute that now they were without the city boundaries, then the complexion of the business was suddenly changed.

Not too soon for honest sport; Calendar was to have (Kirkwood would have said in lurid American idiom) a run for his money. The scattered lights of Southall were winking out behind them before Brentwick chose to give the word to the mechanician.

Quietly the latter threw in the clutch for the third speed--and the fourth. The car leaped forward like a startled race-horse. The motor lilted merrily into its deep-throated song of the open road, its contented, silken humming passing into a sonorous and sustained purr.

Kirkwood and the girl were first jarred violently forward, then thrown together. She caught his arm to steady herself; it seemed the most natural thing imaginable that he should take her hand and pass it beneath his arm, holding her so, his fingers closed above her own. Before they had recovered, or had time to catch their breath, a mile of Middlesex had dropped to the rear.

Not quite so far had they distanced Calendar's trailing Nemesis of the four glaring eyes; the pursuers put forth a gallant effort to hold their place. At intervals during the first few minutes a heavy roaring and crashing could be heard behind them; gradually it subsided, dying on the wings of the free rushing wind that buffeted their faces as mile after mile was reeled off and the wide, darkling English countryside opened out before them, sweet and wonderful.

Once Kirkwood looked back; in the winking of an eye he saw four faded disks of light, pallid with despair, top a distant rise and glide down into darkness. When he turned, Dorothy was interrogating him with eyes whose melting, shadowed loveliness, revealed to him in the light of the far, still stars, seemed to incite him to that madness which he had bade himself resist with all his strength.

He shook his head, as if to say: They can not catch us.

His hour was not yet; time enough to think of love and marriage (as if he were capable of consecutive thought on any other subject!)--time enough to think of them when he had gone back to his place, or rather when he should have found it, in the ranks of bread-winners, and so have proved his right to mortal happiness; time enough then to lay whatever he might have to offer at her feet. Now he could conceive of no baser treachery to his soul's-desire than to advantage himself of her gratitude.

Resolutely he turned his face forward, striving with all his will and might to forget the temptation of her lips, weary as they were and petulant with waiting; and so sat rigid in his time of trial, clinging with what strength he could to the standards of his honor, and trying to lose his dream

in dreaming of the bitter struggle that seemed likely to be his future portion.

Perhaps she guessed a little of the fortunes of the battle that was being waged within him. Perhaps not. Whatever the trend of her thoughts, she did not draw away from him.... Perhaps the breath of night, fresh and clean and fragrant with the odor of the fields and hedges, sweeping into her face with velvety caress, rendered her drowsy. Presently the silken lashes drooped, fluttering upon her cheeks, the tired and happy smile hovered about her lips....

In something less than half an hour of this wild driving, Kirkwood roused out of his reverie sufficiently to become sensible that the speed was slackening. Incoherent snatches of sentences, fragments of words and phrases spoken by Brentwick and the mechanic, were flung back past his ears by the rushing wind. Shielding his eyes he could see dimly that the mechanic was tinkering (apparently) with the driving gear. Then, their pace continuing steadily to abate, he heard Brentwick fling at the man a sharp-toned and querulously impatient question: What was the trouble? His reply came in a single word, not distinguishable.

The girl sat up, opening her eyes, disengaging her arm.

Kirkwood bent forward and touched Brentwick on the shoulder; the latter turned to him a face lined with deep concern.

"Trouble," he announced superfluously. "I fear we have blundered."

"What is it?" asked Dorothy in a troubled voice.

"Petrol seems to be running low. Charles here" (he referred to the mechanic) "says the tank must be leaking. We'll go on as best we can and try to find an inn. Fortunately, most of the inns nowadays keep supplies of petrol for just such emergencies."

"Are we--? Do you think--?"

"Oh, no; not a bit of danger of that," returned Brentwick hastily. "They'll not catch up with us this night. That is a very inferior car they have,--so Charles says, at least; nothing to compare with this. If I'm not in error, there's the Crown and Mitre just ahead; we'll make it, fill our tanks, and be off again before they can make up half their loss."

Dorothy looked anxiously to Kirkwood, her lips forming an unuttered query: What did he think?

"Don't worry; we'll have no trouble," he assured her stoutly; "the chauffeur knows, undoubtedly."

None the less he was moved to stand up in the tonneau, conscious of the presence of the traveling bag, snug between his feet, as well as of the weight of Calendar's revolver in his pocket, while he stared back along the road.

There was nothing to be seen of their persecutors.

The car continued to crawl. Five minutes dragged out tediously. Gradually they, drew abreast a tavern standing back a distance from the road, embowered in a grove of trees between whose ancient boles the tap-room windows shone enticingly, aglow with comfortable light. A creaking sign-board, much worn by weather and age, swinging from a roadside post, confirmed the accuracy of Brentwick's surmise, announcing that here stood the Crown and Mitre, house of entertainment for man and beast.

Sluggishly the car rolled up before it and came to a dead and silent halt. Charles, the mechanic, jumping out, ran hastily up the path towards the inn. In the car Brentwick turned again, his eyes curiously bright in the starlight, his forehead quaintly furrowed, his voice apologetic.

"It may take a few minutes," he said undecidedly, plainly endeavoring to cover up his own dark doubts. "My dear," to the girl, "if I have brought trouble upon you in this wise, I shall never earn my own forgiveness."

Kirkwood stood up again, watchful, attentive to the sounds of night; but the voice of the pursuing motor-car was not of their company. "I hear nothing," he announced.

"You will forgive me,--won't you, my dear?--for causing you these few moments of needless anxiety?" pleaded the old gentleman, his tone tremulous.

"As if you could be blamed!" protested the girl. "You mustn't think of it that way. Fancy, what should we have done without you!"

"I'm afraid I have been very clumsy," sighed Brentwick, "clumsy and impulsive ... Kirkwood, do you hear anything?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Perhaps," suggested Brentwick a little later, "perhaps we had better alight and go up to the inn. It would be more cosy there, especially if the petrol proves hard to obtain, and we have long to wait."

"I should like that," assented the girl decidedly.

Kirkwood nodded his approval, opened the door and jumped out to assist her; then picked up the bag and followed the pair,--Brentwick leading the way with Dorothy on his arm.

At the doorway of the Crown and Mitre, Charles met them evidently seriously disturbed. "No petrol to be had here, sir," he announced reluctantly; "but the landlord will send to the next inn, a mile up the road, for some. You will have to be patient, I'm afraid, sir."

"Very well. Get some one to help you push the car in from the road," ordered Brentwick; "we will be waiting in one of the private parlors."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir." The mechanic touched the visor of his cap and hurried off.

"Come, Kirkwood." Gently Brentwick drew the girl in with him.

Kirkwood lingered momentarily on the doorstep, to listen acutely. But the wind was blowing into that quarter whence they had come, and he could hear naught save the sighing in the trees, together with an occasional burst of rude rustic laughter from the tap-room. Lifting his shoulders in dumb dismay, and endeavoring to compose his features, he entered the tavern.

II----THE CROWN AND MITRE

A rosy-cheeked and beaming landlady met him in the corridor and, all bows and smiles, ushered him into a private parlor reserved for the party, immediately bustling off in a desperate flurry, to secure refreshments desired by Brentwick.

The girl had seated herself on one end of an extremely comfortless lounge and was making a palpable effort to seem at ease. Brentwick stood at one of the windows, shoulders rounded and head bent, hands clasped behind his back as he peered out into the night. Kirkwood dropped the traveling bag beneath a chair the farthest removed from the doorway, and took to pacing the floor.

In a corner of the room a tall grandfather's clock ticked off ten interminable minutes. For some reason unconscionably delaying, the landlady did not reappear. Brentwick, abruptly turning from the window, remarked the fact querulously, then drew a chair up to a marble-topped table in the middle of the floor.

"My dear," he requested the girl, "will you oblige me by sitting over here? And Philip, bring up a chair, if you will. We must not permit ourselves to worry, and I have something here which may, perhaps, engage your interest for a while."

To humor him and alleviate his evident distress of mind, they acceded. Kirkwood found himself seated opposite Dorothy, Brentwick between them. After some hesitation, made the more notable by an air of uneasiness which sat oddly on his shoulders, whose composure and confident mien had theretofore been so complete and so reassuring, the elder gentleman fumbled in an inner coat-pocket and brought to light a small black leather wallet. He seemed to be on the point of opening it when hurried footfalls sounded in the hallway. Brentwick placed the wallet, still with its secret intact, on the table before him, as Charles burst unceremoniously in, leaving the door wide open.

"Mr. Brentwick, sir!" he cried gustily. "That other car--"

With a smothered ejaculation Kirkwood leaped to his feet, tugging at the weapon in his pocket. In another instant he had the revolver exposed. The girl's cry of alarm, interrupting the machinist, fixed Brentwick's attention on the young man. He, too, stood up, reaching over very quickly, to clamp strong supple fingers round Kirkwood's wrist, while with the other hand he laid hold of the revolver and by a single twist wrenched it away.

Kirkwood turned upon him in fury. "So!" he cried, shaking with passion. "This is what your hospitality meant! You're going to--"

"My dear young friend," interrupted Brentwick with a flash of impatience, "remember that if I had designed to betray you, I could have asked no better opportunity than when you were my guest under my own roof."

"But--hang it all, Brentwick!" expostulated Kirkwood, ashamed and contrite, but worked upon by desperate apprehension; "I didn't mean that, but--"

"Would you have bullets flying when she is near?" demanded Brentwick scathingly. Hastily he slipped the revolver upon a little shelf beneath the table-top. "Sir!" he informed Kirkwood with some heat, "I love you as my own son, but you're a young fool!... as I have been, in my time ... and as I would to Heaven I might be again! Be advised, Philip,--be calm. Can't you see it's the only way to save your treasure?"

"Hang the jewels!" retorted Kirkwood warmly. "What--"

"Sir, who said anything about the jewels?"

As Brentwick spoke, Calendar's corpulent figure filled the doorway; Stryker's weather-worn features loomed over his shoulder, distorted in a cheerful leer.

"As to the jewels," announced the fat adventurer, "I've got a word to say, if you put it to me that way."

He paused on the threshold, partly for dramatic effect, partly for his own satisfaction, his quick eyes darting from face to face of the four people whom he had caught so unexpectedly. A shade of complacency colored his expression, and he smiled evilly beneath the coarse short thatch of his gray mustache. In his hand a revolver appeared, poised for immediate use if there were need.

There was none. Brentwick, at his primal appearance, had dropped a peremptory hand on Kirkwood's shoulder, forcing the young man back to his seat; at the same time he resumed his own. The girl had not stirred from hers since the first alarm; she sat as if transfixed with terror, leaning forward with her elbows on the table, her hands tightly clasped, her face, a little blanched, turned to the door. But her scarlet lips were set and firm with inflexible purpose, and her brown eyes met Calendar's with a look level and unflinching. Beyond this she gave no sign of recognition.

Nearest of the four to the adventurers was Charles, the mechanic, paused in affrighted astonishment at sight of the revolver. Calendar, choosing to

advance suddenly, poked the muzzle of the weapon jocularly in the man's ribs. "Beat it, Four-eyes!" he snapped. "This is your cue to duck! Get out of my way."

The mechanic jumped as if shot, then hastily, retreated to the table, his sallow features working beneath the goggle-mask which had excited the fat adventurer's scorn.

"Come right in, Cap'n," Calendar threw over one shoulder; "come in, shut the door and lock it. Let's all be sociable, and have a nice quiet time."

Stryker obeyed, with a derisive grimace for Kirkwood.

Calendar, advancing jauntily to a point within a yard of the table, stopped, smiling affably down upon his prospective victims, and airily twirling his revolver.

"_Good_ evening, all!" he saluted them blandly. "Dorothy, my child," with assumed concern, "you're looking a trifle upset; I'm afraid you've been keeping late hours. Little girls must be careful, you know, or they lose the bloom of roses in their cheeks.... Mr. Kirkwood, it's a pleasure to meet you again! Permit me to paraphrase your most sound advice, and remind you that pistol-shots are apt to attract undesirable attention. It wouldn't be wise for _you_ to bring the police about our ears. I believe that in substance such was your sapient counsel to me in the cabin of the _Alethea_; was it not?... And you, sir!"--fixing Brentwick with a cold unfriendly eye. "You animated fossil, what d'you mean by telling me to go to the devil?... But let that pass; I hold no grudge. What might your name be?"

[Illustration: "_Good_ evening, all!" he saluted them blandly.]

"It might be Brentwick," said that gentleman placidly.

"Brentwick, eh? Well, I like a man of spirit. But permit me to advise you--"

"Gladly," nodded Brentwick.

"Eh?... Don't come a second time between father and daughter; another man might not be as patient as I, Mister Brentwick. There's a law in the land, if you don't happen to know it."

"I congratulate you on your success in evading it," observed Brentwick, undisturbed. "And it was considerate of you not to employ it in this instance." Then, with a sharp change of tone, "Come, sir!" he demanded. "You have unwarrantably intruded in this room, which I have engaged for my private use. Get through with your business and be off with you."

"All in my good time, my antediluvian friend. When I've wound up my business here I'll go--not before. But, just to oblige you, we'll get down to it.... Kirkwood, you have a revolver of mine. Be good enough to return it."

"I have it here,--under the table," interrupted Brentwick suavely. "Shall I hand it to you?"

"By the muzzle, if you please. Be very careful; this one's loaded, too--apt to explode any minute."

To Kirkwood's intense disgust Brentwick quietly slipped one hand beneath the table and, placing the revolver on its top, delicately with his finger-tips shoved it toward the farther edge. With a grunt of approval, Calendar swept the weapon up and into his pocket.

"Any more ordnance?" he inquired briskly, eyes moving alertly from face to face. "No matter; you wouldn't dare use 'em anyway. And I'm about done. Dorothy, my dear, it's high time you returned to your father's protection. Where's that gladstone bag?"

"In my traveling bag," the girl told him in a toneless voice.

"Then you may bring it along. You may also say good night to the kind gentlemen."

Dorothy did not move; her pallor grew more intense and Kirkwood saw her knuckles tighten beneath the gloves. Otherwise her mouth seemed to grow more straight and hard.

"Dorothy!" cried the adventurer with a touch of displeasure. "You heard me?"

"I heard you," she replied a little wearily, more than a little contemptuously. "Don't mind him, please, Mr. Kirkwood!"--with an appealing gesture, as Kirkwood, unable to contain himself, moved restlessly in his chair, threatening to rise. "Don't say anything. I have no intention whatever of going with this man."

Calendar's features twitched nervously; he chewed a corner of his mustache, fixing the girl with a black stare. "I presume," he remarked after a moment, with slow deliberation, "you're aware that, as your father, I am in a position to compel you to accompany me."

"I shall not go with you," iterated Dorothy in a level tone. "You may threaten me, but--I shall not go. Mr. Brentwick and Mr. Kirkwood are taking me to--friends, who will give me a home until I can find a way to take care of myself. That is all I have to say to you."

"Bravo, my dear!" cried Brentwick encouragingly.

"Mind your business, sir!" thundered Calendar, his face darkening. Then, to Dorothy, "You understand, I trust, what this means?" he demanded. "I offer you a home--and a good one. Refuse, and you work for your living, my girl! You've forfeited your legacy--"

"I know, I know," she told him in cold disdain. "I am content. Won't you be

kind enough to leave me alone?"

For a breath, Calendar glowered over her; then, "I presume," he observed, "that all these heroics are inspired by that whipper-snapper, Kirkwood. Do you know that he hasn't a brass farthing to bless himself with?"

"What has that--?" cried the girl indignantly.

"Why, it has everything to do with me, my child. As your doting parent, I can't consent to your marrying nothing-a-year.... For I surmise you intend to marry this Mr. Kirkwood, don't you?"

There followed a little interval of silence, while the warm blood flamed in the girl's face and the red lips trembled as she faced her tormentor. Then, with a quaver that escaped her control, "If Mr. Kirkwood asks me, I shall," she stated very simply.

"That," interposed Kirkwood, "is completely understood." His gaze sought her eyes, but she looked away.

"You forget that I am your father," sneered Calendar; "and that you are a minor. I can refuse my consent."

"But you won't," Kirkwood told him with assurance.

The adventurer stared. "No," he agreed, after slight hesitation; "no, I shan't interfere. Take her, my boy, if you want her--and a father's blessing into the bargain. The Lord knows I've troubles enough; a parent's lot is not what it's cracked up to be." He paused, leering, ironic.

"But,"--deliberately, "there's still this other matter of the gladstone bag. I don't mind abandoning my parental authority, when my child's happiness is concerned, but as for my property--"

"It is not your property," interrupted the girl.

"It was your mother's, dear child. It's now mine."

"I dispute that assertion," Kirkwood put in.

"You may dispute it till the cows come home, my boy: the fact will remain that I intend to take my property with me when I leave this room, whether you like it or not. Now are you disposed to continue the argument, or may I count on your being sensible?"

"You may put away your revolver, if that's what you mean," said Kirkwood. "We certainly shan't oppose you with violence, but I warn you that Scotland Yard--"

"Oh, that be blowed!" the adventurer snorted in disgust. "I can sail circles round any tec. that ever blew out of Scotland Yard! Give me an hour's start, and you're free to do all the funny business you've a mind to, with--Scotland Yard!"

"Then you admit," queried Brentwick civilly, "that you've no legal title to the jewels in dispute?"

"Look here, my friend," chuckled Calendar, "when you catch me admitting anything, you write it down in your little book and tell the bobby on the corner. Just at present I've got other business than to stand round admitting anything about anything.... Cap'n, let's have that bag of my dutiful daughter's."

"Ere you are." Stryker spoke for the first time since entering the room, taking the valise from beneath the chair and depositing it on the table.

"Well, we shan't take anything that doesn't belong to us," laughed Calendar, fumbling with the catch; "not even so small a matter as my own child's traveling bag. A small--heavy--gladstone bag," he grunted, opening the valise and plunging in one greedy hand, "will--just--about--do for mine!" With which he produced the article mentioned. "This for the discard, Cap'n," he laughed contentedly, pushing the girl's valise aside; and, rumbling with stentorian mirth, stood beaming benignantly over the assembled company.

"Why," he exclaimed, "this moment is worth all it cost me! My children, I forgive you freely. Mr. Kirkwood, I felicitate you cordially on having secured a most expensive wife. Really--d'you know?--I feel as if I ought to do a little something for you both." Gurgling with delight he smote his fat palms together. "I just tell you what," he resumed, "no one yet ever called Georgie Calendar a tight-wad. I just believe I'm going to make you kids a handsome wedding present.... The good Lord knows there's enough of this for a fellow to be a little generous and never miss it!"

The thick mottled fingers tore nervously at the catch; eventually he got the bag open. Those about the table bent forward, all quickened by the prospect of for the first time beholding the treasure over which they had fought, for which they had suffered, so long....

A heady and luscious fragrance pervaded the atmosphere, exhaling from the open mouth of the bag. A silence, indefinitely sustained, impressed itself upon the little audience,--a breathless pause ended eventually by a sharp snap of Calendar's teeth. "_Mmm_!" grunted the adventurer in bewilderment. He began to pant.

Abruptly his heavy hands delved into the contents of the bag, like the paws of a terrier digging in earth. To Kirkwood the air seemed temporarily thick with flying objects. Beneath his astonished eyes a towel fell upon the table--a crumpled, soiled towel, bearing on its dingy hem the inscription in indelible ink: "_Hôtel du Commerce, Anvers_." A tooth-mug of substantial earthenware dropped to the floor with a crash. A slimy soap-dish of the same manufacture slid across the table and into Brentwick's lap. A battered alarm clock with never a tick left in its abused carcass rang vacuously as it fell by the open bag.... The remainder was--oranges: a dozen or more small, round, golden globes of ripe fruit, perhaps a shade overripe, therefore the more aromatic.

The adventurer ripped out an oath. "Mulready, by the living God!" he raged in fury. "Done up, I swear! Done by that infernal sneak--me, blind as a bat!"

He fell suddenly silent, the blood congesting in his face; as suddenly broke forth again, haranguing the company.

"That's why he went out and bought those damned oranges, is it? Think of it--me sitting in the hotel in Antwerp and him lugging in oranges by the bagful because he was fond of fruit! When did he do it? How do I know? If I knew, would I be here and him the devil knows where, this minute? When my back was turned, of course, the damned snake! That's why he was so hot about picking a fight on the boat, hey? Wanted to get thrown off and take to the woods--leaving me with _this_! And that's why he felt so awful done up he wouldn't take a hand at hunting you two down, hey? Well--by--the--Eternal! I'll camp on his trail for the rest of his natural-born days! I'll have his eye-teeth for this, I'll--"

He swayed, gibbering with rage, his countenance frightfully contorted, his fat hands shaking as he struggled for expression.

And then, while yet their own astonishment held Dorothy, Kirkwood, Brentwick and Stryker speechless, Charles, the mechanic, moved suddenly upon the adventurer.

There followed two metallic clicks. Calendar's ravings were abrupted as if his tongue had been paralyzed. He fell back a pace, flabby jowls pale and shaking, ponderous jaw dropping on his breast, mouth wide and eyes crazed as he shook violently before him his thick fleshy wrists--securely handcuffed.

Simultaneously the mechanic whirled about, bounded eagerly across the floor, and caught Stryker at the door, his dexterous fingers twisting in the captain's collar as he jerked him back and tripped him.

"Mr. Kirkwood!" he cried. "Here, please--one moment. Take this man's gun, from him, will you?"

Kirkwood sprang to his assistance, and without encountering much trouble, succeeded in wresting a Webley from Stryker's limp, flaccid fingers.

Roughly the mechanic shook the man, dragging him to his feet. "Now," he ordered sternly, "you march to that corner, stick your nose in it, and be good! You can't get away if you try. I've got other men outside, waiting for you to come out. Understand?"

Trembling like a whipped cur, Stryker meekly obeyed his instructions to the letter.

The mechanic, with a contemptuous laugh leaving him, strode back to Calendar, meanwhile whipping off his goggles; and clapped a hearty hand upon the adventurer's quaking shoulders.

"Well!" he cried. "And are you still sailing circles round the men from Scotland Yard, Simmons, or Bellows, or Sanderson, or Calendar, or Crumbstone, or whatever name you prefer to sail under?"

Calendar glared at him aghast; then heaved a profound sigh, shrugged his fat shoulders, and bent his head in thought. An instant later he looked up. "You can't do it," he informed the detective vehemently; "you haven't got a shred of evidence against me! What's there? A pile of oranges and a peck of trash! What of it?... Besides," he threatened, "if you pinch me, you'll have to take the girl in, too. I swear that whatever stealing was done, she did it. I'll not be trapped this way by her and let her off without a squeal. Take me--take her; d'you hear?"

"I think," put in the clear, bland accents of Brentwick, "we can consider that matter settled. I have here, my man,"--nodding to the adventurer as he took up the black leather wallet,--"I have here a little matter which may clear up any lingering doubts as to your standing, which you may be disposed at present to entertain."

He extracted a slip of cardboard and, at arm's length, laid it on the table-edge beneath the adventurer's eyes. The latter, bewildered, bent over it for a moment, breathing heavily; then straightened back, shook himself, laughed shortly with a mirthless note, and faced the detective.

"It's come with you now, I guess?" he suggested very quietly.

"The Bannister warrant is still out for you," returned the man. "That'll be enough to hold you on till extradition papers arrive from the States."

"Oh, I'll waive those; and I won't give you any trouble, either.... I reckon," mused the adventurer, jingling his manacles thoughtfully, "I'm a back-number, anyway. When a half-grown girl, a half-baked boy, a flub like Mulready--damn his eyes!--and a club-footed snipe from Scotland Yard can put it all over me this way,... why, I guess it's up to me to go home and retire to my country-place up the Hudson." He sighed wearily.

"Yep; time to cut it out. But I would like to be free long enough to get in one good lick at that mutt, Mulready. My friend, you get your hands on him, and I'll squeal on him till I'm blue in the face. That's a promise."

"You'll have the chance before long," replied the detective. "We received a telegram from the Amsterdam police late this afternoon, saying they'd picked up Mr. Mulready with a woman named Hallam, and were holding them on suspicion. It seems,"--turning to Brentwick,--"they were opening negotiations for the sale of a lot of stones, and seemed in such a precious hurry that the diamond merchant's suspicions were roused. We're sending over for them, Miss Calendar, so you can make your mind easy about your jewels; you'll have them back in a few days."

"Thank you," said the girl with an effort.

"Well," the adventurer delivered his peroration, "I certainly am blame' glad to hear it. 'Twouldn't 've been a square deal, any other way."

He paused, looking his erstwhile dupes over with a melancholy eye; then, with an uncertain nod comprehending the girl, Kirkwood and Brentwick, "So long!" he said thickly; and turned, with the detective's hand under his arm and, accompanied by the thoroughly cowed Stryker, waddled out of the room.

III----THE JOURNEY'S END

Kirkwood, following the exodus, closed the door with elaborate care and slowly, deep in thought, returned to the table.

Dorothy seemed not to have moved, save to place her elbows on the marble slab, and rest her cheeks between hands that remained clenched, as they had been in the greatest stress of her emotion. The color had returned to her face, with a slightly enhanced depth of hue to the credit of her excitement. Her cheeks were hot, her eyes starlike beneath the woven, massy sunlight of her hair. Temporarily unconscious of her surroundings she stared steadfastly before her, thoughts astray in the iridescent glamour of the dreams that were to come....

Brentwick had slipped down in his chair, resting his silvered head upon its back, and was smiling serenely up at the low yellow ceiling. Before him on the table his long white fingers were drumming an inaudible tune. Presently rousing, he caught Kirkwood's eye and smiled sheepishly, like a child caught in innocent mischief.

The younger man grinned broadly. "And you were responsible for all that!" he commented, infinitely amused.

Brentwick nodded, twinkling self-satisfaction. "I contrived it all," he said; "neat, I call it, too." His old eyes brightened with reminiscent enjoyment. "Inspiration!" he crowed softly. "Inspiration, pure and simple. I'd been worrying my wits for fully five minutes before Wotton settled the matter by telling me about the captain's hiring of the motor-car. Then, in a flash, I had it.... I talked with Charles by telephone,--his name is really Charles, by, the bye,--overcame his conscientious scruples about playing his fish when they were already all but landed, and settled the artistic details."

He chuckled delightedly. "It's the instinct," he declared emphatically, "the instinct for adventure. I knew it was in me, latent somewhere, but never till this day did it get the opportunity to assert itself. A born adventurer--that's what I am!... You see, it was essential that they should believe we were frightened and running from them; that way, they would be sure to run after us. Why, we might have baited a dozen traps and failed to lure them into my house, after that stout scoundrel knew you'd had the chance to tell me the whole yarn... Odd!"

"Weren't you taking chances, you and Charles?" asked Kirkwood curiously.

"Precious few. There was another motor from Scotland Yard trailing Captain Stryker's. If they had run past, or turned aside, they would have been overhauled in short order."

He relapsed into his whimsical reverie; the wistful look returned to his eyes, replacing the glow of triumph and pleasure. And he sighed a little regretfully.

"What I don't understand," contended Kirkwood, "is how you convinced Calendar that he couldn't get revenge by pressing his charge against Miss Calendar--Dorothy."

"Oh-h?" Mr. Brentwick elevated his fine white eyebrows and sat up briskly. "My dear boy, that was the most delectable dish on the entire menu. I have been reserving it, I don't mind owning, that I might better enjoy the full relish of it.... I may answer you best, perhaps, by asking you to scan what I offered to the fat scoundrel's respectful consideration, my dear sir."

He leveled a forefinger at the card.

At first glance it conveyed nothing to the younger man's benighted intelligence. He puzzled over it, twisting his brows out of alignment. An ordinary oblong slip of thin white cardboard, it was engraved in fine script as follows:

MR. GEORGE BURGOYNE CALENDAR

81, ASPEN VILLAS, S. W.

"Oh!" exclaimed Kirkwood at length, standing up, his face bright with understanding. "_You_--!"

"I," laconically assented the elder man.

Impulsively Kirkwood leaned across the table. "Dorothy," he said tenderly; and when the girl's happy eyes met his, quietly drew her attention to the card.

Then he rose hastily, and went over to stand by the window, staring mistily into the blank face of night beyond its unseen panes.

Behind him there was a confusion of little noises; the sound of a chair pushed hurriedly aside, a rustle of skirts, a happy sob or two, low voices intermingling; sighs.... Out of it finally came the father's accents.

"There, there, my dear! My dearest dear!" protested the old gentleman. "Positively I don't deserve a tithe of this. I--" The young old voice quavered and broke, in a happy laugh.... "You must understand," he continued more soberly, "that no consideration of any sort is due me. When we married, I was too old for your mother, child; we both knew it, both believed it would never matter. But it did. By her wish, I went back to America; we were to see what separation would do to heal the wounds dissension had caused. It was a very foolish experiment. Your mother died before I could return...."

There fell a silence, again broken by the father. "After that I was in

no haste to return. But some years ago, I came to London to live. I communicated with the old colonel, asking permission to see you. It was refused in a manner which precluded the subject being reopened by me: I was informed that if I persisted in attempting to see you, you would be disinherited.... He was very angry with me--justly, I admit.... One must grow old before one can see how unforgivably one was wrong in youth.... So I settled down to a quiet old age, determined not to disturb you in your happiness.... Ah--Kirkwood!"

The old gentleman was standing, his arm around his daughter's shoulders, when Kirkwood turned.

"Come here, Philip; I'm explaining to Dorothy, but you should hear.... The evening I called on you, dear boy, at the Pless, returning home I received a message from my solicitors, whom I had instructed to keep an eye on Dorothy's welfare. They informed me that she had disappeared. Naturally I canceled my plans to go to Munich, and stayed, employing detectives. One of the first things they discovered was that Dorothy had run off with an elderly person calling himself George Burgoyne Calendar--the name I had discarded when I found that to acknowledge me would imperil my daughter's fortune.... The investigations went deeper; Charles--let us continue to call him--had been to see me only this afternoon, to inform me of the plot they had discovered. This Hallam woman and her son--it seems that they were legitimately in the line of inheritance, Dorothy out of the way. But the woman was--ah--a bad lot. Somehow she got into communication with this fat rogue and together they plotted it out. Charles doesn't believe that the Hallam woman expected to enjoy the Burgoyne estates for very many days. Her plan was to step in when Dorothy stepped out, gather up what she could, realize on it, and decamp. That is why there was so much excitement about the jewels: naturally the most valuable item on her list, the most easy to convert into cash.... The man Mulready we do not place; he seems to have been a shady character the fat rogue picked up somewhere. The latter's ordinary line of business was diamond smuggling, though he would condescend to almost anything in order to turn a dishonest penny....

"That seems to exhaust the subject. But one word more.... Dorothy, I am old enough and have suffered enough to know the wisdom of seizing one's happiness when one may. My dear, a little while ago, you did a very brave deed. Under fire you said a most courageous, womanly, creditable thing. And Philip's rejoinder was only second in nobility to yours.... I do hope to goodness that you two blessed youngsters won't let any addleheaded scruples stand between yourselves and--the prize of Romance, your inalienable inheritance!"

Abruptly Brentwick, who was no longer Brentwick, but the actual Calendar, released the girl from his embrace and hopped nimbly toward the door.

"Really, I must see about that petrol!" he cried. "While it's perfectly true that Charles lied about it's running out, we must be getting on. I'll call you when we're ready to start."

And the door crashed to behind him....

Between them was the table. Beyond it the girl stood with head erect, dim

tears glimmering on the lashes of those eyes with which she met Philip's steady gaze so fearlessly.

Singing about them, the silence deepened. Fascinated, though his heart was faint with longing, Kirkwood faltered on the threshold of his kingdom.

"Dorothy!... You did mean it, dear?"

She laughed, a little, low, sobbing laugh that had its source deep in the hidden sanctuary of her heart of a child.

"I meant it, my dearest.... If you'll have a girl so bold and forward, who can't wait till she's asked but throws herself into the arms of the man she loves--Philip, I meant it, every word!..."

And as he went to her swiftly, round the table, she turned to meet him, arms uplifted, her scarlet lips a-tremble, the brown and bewitching lashes drooping over her wondrously lighted eyes....

After a time Philip Kirkwood laughed aloud.

And there was that quality in the ring of his laughter that caused the Shade of Care, which had for the past ten minutes been uneasily luffing and filling in the offing and, on the whole, steadily diminishing and becoming more pale and wan and emaciated and indistinct--there was that in the laughter of Philip Kirkwood, I say, which caused the Shade of Care to utter a hollow croak of despair as, incontinently, it vanished out of his life.

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