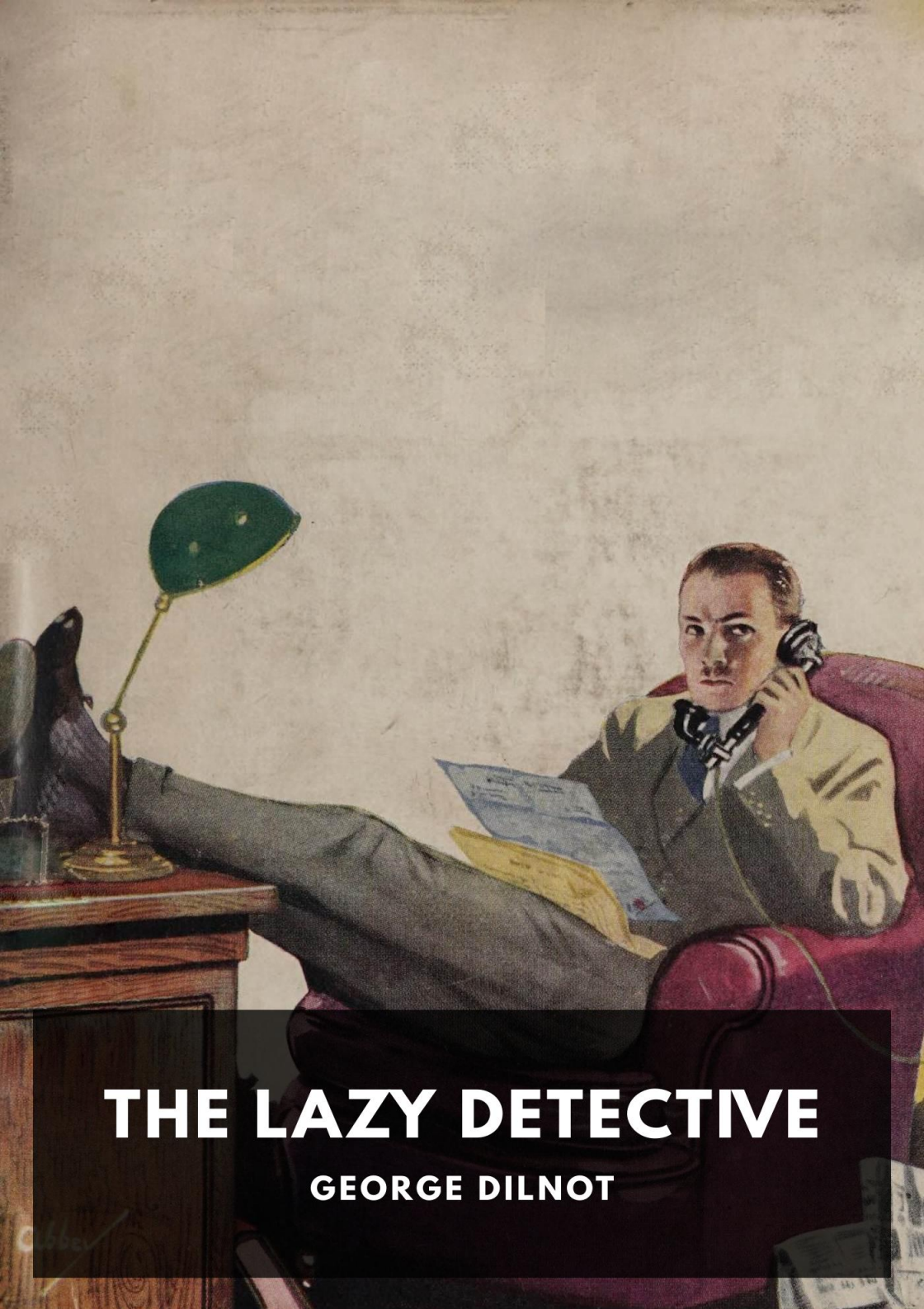


THE LAZY DETECTIVE

GEORGE DILNOT

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I

"And remember, Labar, you don't bluff me." The Chief Constable, who had been through the game himself, tapped the string of figures that lay upon his desk with an aggressive forefinger. "You're lazy—damned lazy. If things don't clear up in your division in the next month or so you can count on something happening. That's all. Think it over."

"Thank you, sir," said the other, with the smooth suavity of a man who had received a compliment, and swung on velvet toes from the room.

After all, what was the use of arguing? Divisional Detective Inspector Labar was under no illusions about himself. He *was* lazy. All Scotland Yard knew it. Particularly did Winter, Chief Constable of the Criminal Investigation Department know it, for in some sort Labar was a protégé of his. Yet that shrewd old veteran reckoned that even the quality of indolence had its uses. It could make a brilliant man concentrate fiercely on his work, in order to save time for his own purposes. The amount of time taken by a detective on an individual job is largely a matter on which his superiors must accept his word. Some men slog laboriously, while others get their results quickly. In minor positions there is always someone around to see that the work is done.

All this, however, does not apply in the same degree to a detective inspector. Such a one gives, more often than he receives, orders. As an executive Labar felt himself a failure. Well, well, a man must have a little time for golf.

A heavy hand fell with mathematical accuracy between his shoulder blades, and he flung round with a delicate shudder.

"One of these days, Moreland, someone's going to slap you hard on the wrist, slog you on the jaw, and kick you where it hurts most. You're too boisterous for the society of gentlemen."

Moreland, of the Flying Squad, grinned cheerfully. "Behold the infant phenomenon of Grape Street, as the apostle of gloom," he said, walking round Labar with mock awe. "Behold his shiny boots and well-creased trousers, and mark his creased forehead and frowning countenance. No, don't speak. Let me apply my well-known powers of deduction." He put his hand to his brow. "He has—yes he has been on the carpet."

A slow rueful smile broke on Labar's face. "You guessed it," he said. "If you want promotion there's the job of divisional inspector at Grape Street liable to be vacant some time. Better write out your application."

Moreland's levity vanished. "The old man's bitten you as bad as that? Cheer up, and pull yourself together. Come and tell papa all about it." He pulled Labar into an adjoining room, adjusted himself on a tall stool and lit a pipe. "Shoot," he ordered.

Harry Labar shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing to it," he declared. "Winter says things are too loose in the division. I've got to tighten them up, or—"

"The shelf, eh?" Moreland eyed his friend whimsically. "That'll be a new record for you. The youngest man to be promoted divisional inspector, and the youngest divisional inspector to retire. Well, why don't you tighten them up?"

"Blah, all blah. Easy talk. Look here, Moreland, my percentages of unsolved crime are up—but you know why. Curse it all, Winter knows as well as I do that Larry Hughes is operating in my district. No one, not even the old man himself, has ever pinned anything to Larry. I'm to be the goat. Why didn't they give me an easy division when they promoted me, instead of the wealthiest in London, infested by all the slickest crooks in the world? What right has the old man to be sore at me?"

Moreland slid from his stool and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Listen to me, Harry. They gave you the job because they thought you could do it. To blazes with your golf handicap. Now you go and take a pill and get on with it." He pushed the other gently from the room.

To few other men than Moreland would Labar have confided his troubles. He passed swiftly out of the little back door from the C.I.D. headquarters, dodging the Assistant Commissioner with some skill, for he felt that that official might be no less emphatic, if more urbane, than the Chief Constable on the state of crime in the West End.

His mind was focused upon Larry Hughes. Larry was a gentleman who had never been in a criminal court in his life—a sleek, cultivated man about town, with a taste in literature and art, and enough money to run his own steam yacht and a racing stud. His life was apparently open to the world, his character to all seeming flawless, impeccable. Any headstrong police officer who had ventured to put a public slur on Larry's character, by hauling him to a dungeon cell, would have very promptly found himself with a suit for heavy damages on his hands.

Yet to Labar, as to many men in the police circles of the world, it was certain knowledge that Larry Hughes was the most adroit and intelligent crime organiser in London, or for the matter of that anywhere. It was certain but utterly unprovable.

There are half a dozen men in London, another half a dozen in New York, three in Paris, a couple in Amsterdam, and a few more knocking about other capitals of the world, who run crime on the principles of big business. Through many intermediaries there filters to them much knowledge which they have the means to turn to profit. These are eclectic in their enterprises, but in general they are receivers. They will organise and finance a burglary, a forgery, or a holdup, but they keep well in the background. The casual thief has never heard of them; even the big professional crook frequently has only a dim conception of their identity. The loot never reaches them in any tangible and identifiable shape. They have their agents, and their tools, and many of them die in an atmosphere of eminent respectability.

Among this class the most audacious, the most ingenious, was Larry Hughes. Labar had little doubt that, if one really got to the bottom of things in his division, half the professional crime would have shown Larry's finger in the pie. Either Larry must lay off of his own volition—an unlikely event—or some method must be found of putting a spoke in his wheel. Harry Labar did not avoid the feeling that the task was likely to prove a man's size job.

He had reached Cockspur Street when the thing happened. Even if his mind had been less preoccupied, it is likely that he would have failed to notice the big touring car that edged itself through the traffic towards him. Not until it had swept close to the kerb, and he saw the girl leaning from the near side, did he realise that it held any significance for him. A wisp of fair hair had fallen over her forehead, and she brushed it back with a slim gloved hand. Harry Labar, although his colleagues held him doomed to bachelordom, had an eye for a pretty girl and he noticed her with subconscious approval as the car drew near.

Almost mechanically it dawned on him that her hand was stretched to him from the now slowly moving car.

"For you," said the girl, and a letter waved on a level with his eyes. As he reached to take it, the car leapt away like a living thing, with a rapidity that told of perfect acceleration and steel nerves at the wheel.

"Hey!"

The detective was aroused from his reverie on the instant. He sprang forward with a command to stop, that, even as he uttered it, he knew to be futile. The car was well away. It was vain to hope to stop it, and the speed at which it was moving showed it improbable that any taxi could overtake it, even had there been one near.

With a habit ingrained by years of training he took a pencil from his pocket and made a note of the number. Then, with a philosophic shrug of his shoulders, he slit the blank envelope that he held, and glanced at its contents. A Bank of England note for a hundred pounds lay in his hand. He inspected the envelope again, and threw an eye around to make sure that nothing had been dropped. There was nothing. Just a hundred pound note in a blank envelope.

"Well I'm damned," determined Detective Inspector Labar.

The method rather than the event had startled him. Although one hundred pound notes do not descend on detective inspectors every day of the week, there are philanthropists who attempt at times to impose money on police officers. It was a bribe of course. But the touch of melodrama was amateurish and clumsy. The most illiterate crook in London should have known that a hundred pound note was ridiculously easy to trace. The whole thing was raw. It was just possible that the car had a false number, but leaving that aside he would remember the girl. Yes, decidedly he would remember the girl.

He felt reasonably certain that in the normal course of events he would know more about it during the day. Without undue speculation, therefore, he betook himself to Grape Street, where, in the stiffly furnished room that formed the headquarters of the divisional detective force, he summoned one of his satellites and passed the note on.

"Find out what hands that note has been in," he ordered. "And while you're about it, m'lad, slip down and discover who owns a car numbered X20008. Take a note of that number. If I'm not here when you're through, leave a message for me."

With that off his mind, he shed his coat, and was about to immerse himself in the official routine correspondence that was the bane of his life, when there was a jangle of telephone bells, and a hearty-looking, ruddy-cheeked man engaged in converse that brought a fresher purple sheen to his face. He put down the receiver with an oath.

"Wish you wouldn't swear, Bill," said Labar, petulantly. "It jars on me."

It was at such a time that Detective Sergeant Malone, presuming on many years association, was wont to observe that he was no kid glove John. But at the moment he was too moved for remonstrance.

"We've struck it, guv'nor," he declared huskily. "This has put the tin hat on it this has."

Labar lit a cigarette wearily. "Tell me the worst," he said.

"They've made a clean sweep of Streetly House. Old Gertstein's foaming at the mouth. Quarter of a million of pounds worth of jewels and curios melted away as clean as a conjuring trick. I could smell Larry Hughes a thousand miles off in this." His tone was gloomy, for he knew something of Labar's troubles. "Nice lookout for us, an' the Yard not throwing any flowers our way as it is."

"You said it, Bill," agreed Labar, rising, and pulling down his shirt sleeves. "It's get on or get out, for me at any rate, this time. Get your hat on and tell 'em to ring through to the Chief. We're liable to have some work to do."

II

Anyone who could afford to live in Streetly House, that imposing and historic residence just off Park Lane, must by that fact alone, be known in some degree to the public. Mr. Solly Gertstein had added claims to a certain amount of limelight. He had been—was still to some extent—a financial power. He had interests in gold, in diamonds, in oil, but of late years he had relinquished the reins of his enterprises to brothers and cousins, while he concentrated on his ambition to get together a unique, and fabulously costly, collection of gems, and what the dealers call objets d'art.

He was not an artistic object in himself. A rotund little man, with a gait that somehow suggested a milk can rolled by a railway porter, and with a tendency to pomposity in his speech and manner, he yet contrived to hold some poise of dignity. He was unquestionably excited when Labar introduced himself.

"So you 'ave come." In moments of stress he was apt to lose his usual meticulous command of the English language. "You 'ave come at last."

"It is less than ten minutes since I got your message," observed the inspector.

"Ach!" Mr. Gertstein flung his hands wide in an expressive gesture, as of one who accepts an excuse in which there is no body. He rotated round the room, buzzing like an agitated wasp. "An hour. Dis is what I pay for," he proclaimed. "For dis I pay my thousands a year to the rates for police salaries. What protection do I get for it? None." He waved a podgy hand. "All the work of the finest craftsmen in the world stripped from me. You will get it back, eh?"

Labar felt that it was only the vulgarity of the expression that prevented Gertstein from adding, "I don't think." He lifted his eyebrows.

"You are insured?"

The other gave an impatient snort. "Insured! What is insurance to me? Do you think that I—Gertstein—want the money? That—poof—a fleabite. The insurance companies will pay, but will that help me to get back all my beautiful things? Years and years of work gone like dat." He snapped his fingers viciously.

"We'll do our best," said Labar, mildly. "Perhaps you will walk round with me and tell me all you know."

In his mind he felt small hope. The very magnitude of the crime showed it to be the work of men who thoroughly understood their business. Jewels would be dismounted and cut up, gold melted down, and other things rendered unrecognisable in the swiftest and most efficient fashion.

Other of the C.I.D. men from Labar's division were in the house by this time, and under his supervision a systematic and thorough search of the premises proceeded. It was a big rambling place, and it was obvious that the thieves, once they had obtained entrance, would have had no difficulty in secreting themselves till such time as they

could work unobserved. As Labar expected, every burglar alarm in the place had been cut or put out of action in some way. The thieves must have gained precise information beforehand.

On the first floor two magnificent rooms had been given up to the display of Gertstein's treasures. The chastely-designed glass cases still stood in their imposing splendour, but alas, they were mere cenotaphs with their treasures vanished. At a superficial glance, indeed, it was difficult to realise that they had been tampered with, so delicate had been the skill with which they had been opened.

As Gertstein pointed out with some bitterness, the marauders had selected their spoil with the most consummate judgment. It was obvious that the raid had been carried through to clean-cut specifications. There were many dainty bits of artistry left, but they were such things as enamels, ivory carvings and the like, which had value only for their craftsmanship, and would be difficult to dispose of intact.

Nor was there evident any indication of the manner in which entry to the house had been gained, or the method by which the thieves had left. The windows and doors were unmarked. Not a bolt or lock had been forced. Throughout the night no suspicious noises had been heard, and it was only when in the course of ordinary routine that a maid had entered one of the exhibition rooms, at eleven o'clock in the morning, that the robbery had been discovered.

"Not so much as a blighting fingerprint," Bill Malone observed, and at the finish of a meticulous examination of the windows, added that it was the smoothest bust that he had ever run across in the course of his carmined career.

But a mystery may be too mysterious, too faultily faultless. Any defect, any lapse on the part of the thieves might have left the police even more in the air. As it was, there remained little doubt in the minds of the detectives that their first surmise was right—that they could breathe in a word the name of the supreme culprit—but much doubt as to the possibility of acquiring evidence to run him down. The men who could plan or carry out such an undertaking were few.

Malone put it into words. "This has got the hallmark of Larry, guv'nor."

Labar crinkled his brows, and nodded absently. The man who tackled this job would have in front of him a spasm of tough work, that in all probability would end in defeat by running his head against a brick wall. "Yes," he agreed. "It's got all that. Our friend Larry is certainly indicated, but we must not let ourselves be hypnotised about him. There's a bet you've overlooked, Bill."

"An inside job."

"It might be either—or both," said Labar, and turned with imperturbable face, that masked more than slight worry, to confront the shrewd beady eyes of Mr. Gertstein.

"What do you think now?" demanded the millionaire.

The inspector smoothed his chin. "I hate to make up my mind right away, Mr. Gertstein, but I'd be willing to make one guess at the man who knows all about this."

"So!" Gertstein rubbed his hands. "Then you have found out something. You have a clue. I'm a generous man, Inspector. If you get back those things I will treat you well. It will be worth—what—a thousand pounds to you."

"That's handsome of you, sir. But even if I was allowed to take a reward—which I couldn't do without the consent of the Yard—I wouldn't be too sure of getting it. As I

say, I could give a guess about this business, but guesses don't carry us far. There isn't a shred of proof yet, and I tell you frankly I wouldn't gamble a halfpenny on getting the men or getting the stuff."

"But you—you're a detective." Gertstein tugged impatiently at his little beard. "If you know what you say it should be easy."

"Easy, sir. Yes, it should be easy." Labar permitted a sardonic note to creep into his voice. "About as easy as taking treacle from a bear's mouth. I'm a detective, not a miracle worker."

Detectives after all, are very like other human beings. Labar was concerned at the back of his mind with the reaction this robbery might have upon his own personal affairs. He was not in good odour with his chiefs. True, he was the divisional inspector, and the burglary had taken place on his ground, but it was odds that some of the mandarins at the Yard would take the investigation out of his hands and place it in those of a chief inspector from headquarters. That, in the ordinary course of events would not be any slight, and Labar, with his constitutional indolence would have been glad to be relieved of any responsibility.

But in present circumstances it would wear an ominous air. He was young for the post he had reached, and there were many years in front of him before he would be eligible for a pension. He had attained a stage where all violent ambition had vanished, but still it would be galling to be put on the shelf.

His agitation of mind was disclosed by the fact that he had betrayed his hopelessness to Gertstein—a breach of professional etiquette as rank as that of a doctor who tells a patient that he is dying. He tried to efface the impression he had created by a laugh.

"We find it best to be a little pessimistic in our business, Mr. Gertstein. Then if things come off we get a bit more credit. Don't you worry. We'll do our best if only for our own sakes."

"You'd better," said Gertstein, grimly. "Don't forget that I can use a pull if I like, that would make the entire Metropolitan Police sit up."

Labar smiled serenely as though the threat had no meaning for him. Yet he did not believe it altogether an empty one. Gertstein, with his money and his affiliations, could probably do wicked damage to an obscure detective inspector if he chose to pull strings. That momentary tactlessness looked as if it might bring retribution.

The arrival of the Assistant Commissioner and the Chief Constable of the C.I.D., accompanied by Labar's immediate superior, Detective Superintendent Marlow—one of that select company the newspapers loved to refer to as the "Big Four"—broke into the conversation.

Gertstein shook hands with the three. "I hope you won't agree with your inspector that the case is hopeless—that I shall never see any of my beautiful things back," he said sourly.

Winter shot a swift glance at Labar, who straightened his back with a brave attempt at nonchalance. It was the Assistant Commissioner who answered.

"Nothing is ever hopeless, Mr. Gertstein. I am sure that you have misapprehended Mr. Labar's views."

The millionaire made a gesture of dissent. "I am not so big a fool as that," he retorted.

Now the head of the Criminal Investigation Department could see as far through a brick wall as most people. He would always assert that he was not a detective—that he had men on his staff who knew the game, and he was content to leave detective work to them. But he did know men. It was said that he could charm a bird from a tree.

He linked his arm through Gertstein's and drew him aside. "I would like to have a little talk with you alone. Perhaps I can straighten out things. You people go and have a look round."

As Labar led the other two away Winter turned fiercely upon him. "What have you said to the old boy?" he demanded.

"He got it pretty nearly straight, sir," admitted the inspector. "I told him that it was long odds against getting the stuff back."

"You ought to be in the infant class," snorted Winter. "Now what about—"

The conference usual in such circumstances began. Presently the Assistant Commissioner rejoined them. As they moved about the house the inspector imparted to them such facts as he knew, and, though his face showed nothing, he waited with the eagerness of a boy for some hint as to whether he was to be left to deal with the affair. But his superiors did not commit themselves, and he was relieved when they took their departure.

He got down to the work in hand. There was plenty to occupy him, for every person in the house had to be interviewed. As Winter dryly observed to his companions on his way back to the Yard, Labar could work like a fiend when he had some incentive.

III

Lacking any more definite line at the moment, Labar felt impelled to the theory that there had been collusion between the thieves and someone in the house. That at least furnished a working hypothesis which might be abandoned according to circumstances. It was for this reason that he doggedly set himself to interview all and sundry instead of leaving his assistants to weed them out.

With the shrewd suavity of an Old Bailey lawyer he examined and cross-examined, an obese shorthand writer at his elbow, until he had a complete surface knowledge, at any rate, of the movements of everyone in the house for the last twenty-four hours, and much information of their antecedents and habits. Superficially, he had to admit, as he stretched himself with a yawn some hours later, there was no one he could suspect. Perhaps, in the future, when the statements had been checked up, some hint might develop. But he did not bank on that. Frequently this kind of tedious work resulted in nothing, although it was always possible that some vitally important fact might arise.

Then the last person on his list entered the room. She was described as Miss Penelope Noelson, companion to Mrs. Gertstein.

She was a girl of perhaps twenty-two, not tall, but exquisitely proportioned. Fair hair surmounted a vivacious face, which was relieved of the insipidity of mere beauty by a determined chin, a humorous touch that lurked about the corners of her mouth, and a nose very slightly inclined to what her friends described as *retroussé*, but which she herself bluntly declared to be snub. On the whole she was such a girl as might make a man turn to take another look—a girl not so much beautiful as piquantly pretty.

At the instant of her entrance Labar was engaged with his well-fed stenographer. She had reached the table he was using, and one hand rested lightly upon it, ere he was able to give her any attention.

"Won't you sit down? Excuse me for one moment, will you?" he said, without lifting his eyes from the paper he was scrutinising, as he leaned over the shorthand writer, his finger following a phrase. "That's it. 'Mr. Vintner, the butler and myself always look round the house the last thing at night to make sure that the fastenings are safe and the burglar alarms in order. We always do it even if we know that Mr. Gertstein or his secretary has—'"

She studied Labar with some interest. He bore no obvious trace of his profession—no good detective ever does. He was a clean-cut specimen of the ordinary business man. He was youngish-looking, perhaps thirty or thereabouts, and his voice was that of a cultivated man. In the neighbourhood of six feet tall, his well-tailored suit could not conceal the broad shoulders and lean flanks of a man used to athletic exercises.

There was a suspicion of aggression in his chin she thought. He looked efficient and he had poise.

Then he glanced up and his eyes met hers squarely. A flicker, it might have been of astonishment, crossed his face, only to be instantly suppressed. She met his look with sedate indifference, and two little vertical lines wrinkled his brow as he studied her. Suddenly his face cleared. He smiled—the frank, open smile of a boy.

"I'll take any statement from this lady, myself, Green," he said. "You get back to the station and get on with your transcription. I want that all through by tonight."

The fat stenographer collected his papers and left. Labar's fingers fiddled idly on the table. "You are Miss Noelson?" he asked.

She nodded. "That is my name."

"I understand that you have been away to Hampshire with Mrs. Gertstein, and only returned this morning."

In his formal wearied tone she was quick to catch something—it might have been imagination, or again it might have been intuition—the slightest inflection of menace. "I got back by car this morning—yes. There were certain shopping errands that Mrs. Gertstein wished me to do."

"Huh. So it is not likely that you can help us much with this?"

The girl spread her hands in an eloquent gesture of dissent. He noticed that she wore no rings. "It is an absolute mystery to me—a mystery and a very great shock."

"Yes, of course. It would be a shock," he returned as one engaging in polite conversation only to pass the time. "How long have you been with Mrs. Gertstein?"

"About six or seven months."

"That all? Did you know the Gertstein people well before?"

"As a matter of fact I have known Mrs. Gertstein all my life. She is a sort of distant relative of mine and very much younger than her husband. We were at school together. I can see what you're driving at, Mr. Labar," she proceeded. "My father, who was a civil servant, died just over a year ago, leaving me a small, a very small, income. My mother has been dead for many years. I struggled along for some months, but I am afraid that I am one of those persons who need something more than a bread and butter existence. So when Adèle—that's Mrs. Gertstein—offered me this position, I took it. I'm well paid for the little I do and live in a style that I could not otherwise afford."

"Thank you. Do you mind if I smoke?" He lit a cigarette with elaborate care and leaned one elbow casually on the table. "I suppose you know that you are a very pretty girl." A whimsical smile overspread his face, and he held out a protesting hand as she half rose from her seat. "Don't misunderstand me, please. It is an unfortunate necessity of my business to ask delicate questions sometimes. You are not engaged I see. But is there anyone—?" He raised his eyebrows ever so little.

Penelope dropped back into her chair with a laugh. "I feared for a moment you were trying to flirt with me. That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? No, Mr. Labar, I assure you that I have no interest in any man or men that way."

"I can conceive that men might be interested in you," he smiled. "Now one more personal question. Like most ladies you have little personal extravagances that you like to indulge, eh?"

She flushed and pouted a little. "I don't know that I'm so enormously extravagant. I'm fond of pretty things, and I have them within my means."

"Always?" He leaned forward, and spoke the word very quietly. "You don't—ah—run into debt?"

She swept angrily to her feet. "You are insulting," she declared. "I can't misunderstand you. You suggest that I am mixed up in this robbery."

"Sit down!" he ordered, sternly. There was no mistaking the menace in his voice now. The girl ignored the command and remained with set face, her gaze meeting his in angry defiance. For a matter of seconds they remained thus, their wills clashing for supremacy. With deliberation he rose, and towering over her, pointed to her chair. "Sit down," he repeated sternly, and as though under some dominating spell, she slowly obeyed.

He remained on his feet. "I have made no accusation against you, Miss Noelson, and you can answer me or not as you please. It will simplify my work if you answer, but bear in mind that I have other means of getting information."

He noted that the wave of angry colour, which had suffused her face, had died down, leaving her with a touch of pallor. But she was holding herself steadily in hand, and had all her self-possession.

"In that event," she returned, icily, "you had better apply to those other sources of information."

Labar was studying her with a cold scrutiny, weighing her words and her demeanour with infinite calculation. He was alight with suspicion, but somehow he felt reluctant to press this dainty little creature with the cold official catechism that was in his mind. This was the man whom of all others, in spite of certain mild flirtations, Scotland Yard would have held immune from feminine influence. He pulled himself together. The work had to be done.

"Let's be sensible," he urged. "Now tell me, have you ever heard of a man called Larry Hughes?"

That was a shot in the dark. He had little doubt what the answer would be.

Penelope Noelson's lips came together in a thin, obstinate line. "No," she snapped.

The detective gave no sign that he had heard her. He moved aimlessly to the small table he had been using and bent over a paper. She stood up with a little petulant shrug of her shoulders, and was halfway to the door before he spoke again.

"Oh, by the way, there is another small matter. Why did you give me a hundred pound note this morning?"

Her eyes widened, and as she wheeled to face him her hands groped for the support of a chair.

"I gave you a hundred pound note? Why, I never saw you before in my life."

He leaned grimly towards her. "You're very nearly a convincing little liar. I recognised you the instant you came in the room. I'm calling your bluff, my girl. Now then. Suppose you come clean."

For a second she stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then she slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

IV

Labar was a little uncertain of the value of his hand. Therefore, he hesitated to disclose his cards fully to Solly Gertstein, the more so as that gentleman at almost the first word declared his implicit faith in Miss Noelson. It was at that moment that the detective came almost near to liking the pompous little man.

All that the millionaire knew was that Labar had become suspicious while questioning the girl, and that she had fainted when the interrogation was closely pressed. Gertstein did not conceal his opinion that only a fool could suspect her. It was unthinkable that she could have anything to do with the robbery. She was as straight as a die.

Now, although the divisional inspector liked this attitude on the part of Gertstein, it failed utterly to convince him. In fact, his own view of the situation might have been deduced from the fact that when he had summoned a maid to help Penelope to her room, he had also given private instructions to one of his staff to keep as close an eye upon her as circumstances would permit. There was no telling what she might do if she was really frightened.

Of one thing Labar was sure. Momentary though his glimpse of the girl in the car had been, he had no doubt that it was Penelope Noelson. He did not make that kind of mistake. Of course, coincidences do happen. But those trained in the school of Scotland Yard are sceptical about coincidence. It was asking too much to suppose that the singular episode of the morning was entirely unassociated with the raid. It was but a question of how deeply the girl was involved. Was she an accomplice or merely a tool? She was not a professional thief. That much was certain. Why had she tried to bribe him? If Larry Hughes was at the bottom of the business—and he felt as certain of that as that the sun would rise and set—in what way were the girl and he associated?

With these questions stirring in his mind, he decided that it would be unwise to make any hasty move. There was, in fact, nothing very definite to act upon. He had debated with himself whether he ought to detain Penelope. He had small fear that she would get away from the surveillance he had placed upon her, but she might gum up the trail a bit. To hold her in present circumstances would, perhaps, be considered a little bit arbitrary, and anyway, Gertstein might kick up a fuss. It was quite simple to keep an eye upon her until the ground under foot was a little more solid.

So he made his way back to Grape Street. His emissaries were scouring London, and their reports had to be collated—whether for his own use or for the man who might be detached from headquarters, was on the lap of the gods.

He considered as he puffed at his cigarette. These reports now—why should he worry unduly about them if another man was to handle the case? If it was his own

work, of course he would have to do it. But why worry until he was certain. He put a call through to Scotland Yard. Winter was more genial than he had been at the early morning interview.

"That you, Labar? How are things making out? You'll have to hump yourself on this job, my mannie."

That was all right, then. For the time being at any rate he was not to be superseded on the investigation. That had looked a probability when the heads had left him to it at Streetly House. This, however, made certain. He answered cheerfully.

"I'll do my best, sir; I've got hopes."

"Hopes won't carry you far. I've seen hopes land a man in a ditch."

"Oh, I'm not running ahead of myself. As you saw, it's a slick cleanup, but I've got an idea that if Larry's in it he's made a break this time."

"H'm. Other men have thought that," grunted the telephone, sceptically. "If there's a hole in this it's not like friend Larry. So don't go running away with any hasty impressions, my boy. And listen, I don't want to know too much—especially over the phone. You and I will have a talk some time. G'bye."

"The cunning old fox," murmured Labar, with almost affectionate admiration, as he replaced the receiver. "He doesn't want to know too much. That means I'm to be the goat if things don't pan out."

He ripped open a letter that lay upon his desk.

> "SIR—In accordance with your instructions, I made inquiries at the Bank of England, and was informed that the note No. K002947 was one of a series issued to the Midland Bank a week ago. From the Midland Bank I learn that this was one of ten notes numbered consecutively K002946 to K002955, paid to honour a cheque drawn by Mr. S. Gertstein, of Streetly House, W., three days ago. On inquiry at the London County Council Record Department I was informed that the registration number, X20008, is that of a car belonging to the same person.
>
> "Yours faithfully,
> "J. S. BYRON."

He laid down the note absently. "I was afraid so. A nice girl, too. Well, nice girls do go wrong. Let's see what Gertstein has to say about it."

He reached for the telephone and got put through to Streetly House. A matter of minutes elapsed before he was in touch with the millionaire, and he drummed impatiently on his desk. At last an irritable voice reached him.

Labar spoke silkily. "Sorry to bother you again, Mr. Gertstein. This is Labar speaking—Detective Inspector Labar. In the list of stuff stolen there is no mention of cash. Is there any money missing?"

"If there had been I should have told you, Inspector," snapped Gertstein.

"This is important. You have not lost any bank notes?"

"I've told you, no. I never keep enough cash in the house to bother about."

A smothered exclamation escaped Labar. "But," he urged, "you changed a cheque for a thousand pounds a day or two ago."

"I did nothing of the sort," snorted Gertstein. "What thing are you dreaming about now? I haven't had a thousand pounds in cash for my own personal use for years."

"Ah, well," said Labar, mildly. "Perhaps I've made a mistake. I'll hope to see you in the morning and explain. Goodbye."

Detectives of Scotland Yard have more use for bowler hats than for halos. Whatever the writers may make of them they have few illusions about themselves. They are very much of the same clay as human beings in less glamorous callings. Labar was no conjuror, and an odd sequence of facts bore to him just as great an appearance of mystery as it would to any other professional man. He swore crisply between his teeth, as Mr. Thingumbob, the eminent collar merchant, might have sworn had he found a competitor selling neckwear below the cost of production. For in these cases the problem that confronts the detective and the ordinary business man is in essence the same. They each have to ask themselves why. And if they get the correct answer they have scored a point. If they are wrong the business man is hit in the bank balance, and the newspapers attend to Scotland Yard. The bank believed that it had let Gertstein have ten one hundred pound notes, and one of these had reached Labar through a member of Gertstein's household. Yet the millionaire denied that he had had that cheque cashed. It was entirely improbable that he could have any motive for lying. On the face of it someone had forged his signature, and so introduced the complication of an additional crime.

It was certainly necessary to have a talk with the bank manager. Labar summoned Malone and gave him a rough outline of the situation. The bank would be closed, of course, but somehow the manager's private address would have to be found. The big detective sergeant nodded comprehendingly, and set forth on his mission.

That round of golf which Labar had reckoned upon in the morning was far away. But his inclination to relaxation had vanished. An investigation such as he had upon his hands leaves the man in charge with all he can think about. He was fiercely energetic and his men were being driven hard. Every few minutes the telephone bells were whirring, and men were rushing in from various avenues of inquiry with verbal reports.

The net was being cast wide. The usual routine precautions had, of course, been seen to. Lists of the stolen property had been sent out to jewellers, pawnbrokers and others, and published broadcast in the evening papers. That was a ten million to one chance. The goods in this crime would be got rid of through obscure underground channels.

Labar had thrown two men to shadow Larry Hughes, not hopefully, but as a matter of precaution. Others were trying to discover if Larry had been in touch with any of the greater artists in burglary of late. Then, again on general principles, the movements of every crook who was big enough in his profession to be possibly involved had to be checked. Any one of these possessed of sudden funds, anyone absent from his usual haunts, might be a link in the chain that Labar was trying to establish. Nothing could be taken for granted. Even Gertstein himself—this would have annoyed him—was having some of his private habits pried into, and his associates looked up.

The Yard does not despise scientific methods; but here were no bloodstains, no fingerprints, no trivialities from which a high-domed scientist in an easy chair might de-

duce the name and address of the main culprit. It was a thief taking enterprise in the good old way of the Bow Street runners, differing only by the use of a more complex and more perfect organisation. For a young detective inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department who was under suspicion of slackness it was decidedly not a day for golf.

Midnight was very near ere Malone returned to Grape Street. After tracking the manager of the bank to his lair in Golder's Green, he had dragged him back to the bank, and searched out the thousand pound cheque, together with two others unquestionably genuine, for the sake of comparison.

"This fellow knows nothing of the circumstances in which it was changed," said Malone. "Suppose we'll have to look up the cashier in the morning on that point."

Labar thrust his hand into a desk drawer and pulled out a magnifying glass. Placing the suspected cheque and another in front of him he studied them intently for a few minutes.

"Did he hold any views on whether it was a forgery or not, Bill?" he asked without looking up.

The other shook his head. "He's a cautious Scot. You see if it is a forgery the bank will be liable. Didn't want me to bring away the cheques at first. Someone had been telephoning him to send back all cancelled cheques to Gertstein early in the morning."

Labar abruptly laid down his magnifying glass and stared at his aide-de-camp. "Who was that?" he demanded.

A slow grin broke over the usual inexpressive features of Malone. He had an impish delight in sometimes startling his superior. "I thought it would interest you, guv'nor," he said. "He didn't know. The voice was that of a woman, and she said that she was telephoning on behalf of Gertstein."

"A woman's voice," repeated the inspector, thoughtfully. He uncoiled his six feet from his chair, and stretched himself. "I'm all in, Bill," he announced. "Let's put up the shutters for the night. Nine o'clock sharp in the morning."

The thing for a man who has spent many hours within four walls, Labar decided, was a good brisk walk. He parted from Malone under the blue lamp at the entrance to the police station, and paused to light a cigarette. He nodded amiably to the constable on reserve duty at the doorway, and setting his face towards Chelsea where his modest bachelor apartments were located, swung off briskly down the little courtyard that leads from Grape Street to Piccadilly.

He had taken not more than a score of strides when some sixth sense impelled him to whirl upon his heels. In that fraction of a second he had an impression of a dark figure hurling itself upon him from a doorway. An instant earlier and he had saved himself. As it was, he flung up an arm, almost by instinct, and broke the impact of a sandbag. Nevertheless, he went down half-stunned and feebly grappling with his opponent.

His bewildered senses were dimly conscious of the dark figure bending over him, and fingers groping about his pockets. Then the assailant was gone, and he staggered uncertainly to his feet, supporting himself against the wall. He felt his head gingerly where the half-broken blow had taken effect. But his mind was not on his injuries.

"A woman again," he muttered. "What a nerve. Practically on the doorstep of the police station. She certainly wanted something badly." He stood for a moment to re-

gain his shaken faculties. “I wonder if it could have been a cheque?” he asked aloud.

He walked unsteadily back to the station where the brandy retained for emergencies was called into requisition, and a hasty hue and cry—which he knew to be hopeless—organised. But all trace of his assailant had been lost. Nor, for some reason which he could not have satisfactorily accounted for to himself, did he suggest that the pursuers should take the direction of Streetly House.

V

In silken pyjamas, and propped up on his pillows, Mr. Larry Hughes toyed with coffee and toast, the while he lazily scanned the *Daily Mail* with its account of the Streetly House robbery. A soft-footed valet was busy in an adjoining dressing-room.

"A light-grey suit, if you please, Tom. And tell Williams to have the Rolls ready not a minute later than twelve."

"Very good, sir. Will you be in to lunch?"

"I'm doubtful. There's racing on at Kempton, and I may run down." Hughes pushed aside the tray and sprang lightly out of bed. "Bath ready?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"All right. Be back in ten minutes."

It was at this moment that Detective Inspector Labar rang the bell at the solid Georgian doorway of Mr. Larry Hughes' Hampstead home. With suave candour the footman who opened the door, informed him of the exact position. Mr. Hughes was in his bath. If the gentleman would care to wait he would find out in due course whether Mr. Hughes would see him. Was the gentleman a friend, or if not was his business of extreme urgency? Mr. Hughes, he knew, had several important engagements.

Labar thrust a card into the man's hand. "Tell him I shall be glad if he will spare me a few minutes of his time. It is of importance."

A little doubtfully the servant took the card. So the detective found himself in a big leather chair in a spacious and well-lighted library. All the surroundings spoke of money lavished recklessly, but with scrupulous taste. The lines of books were broken by etchings and occasional paintings that Labar recognised as the finest of their kind. But as he slowly and methodically studied the room, his attention became rivetted on a small photograph that stood obscurely on a mantelpiece. He moved towards it and picked it up for closer scrutiny. Then he did a thing which a C.I.D. man should have realised was pure and simple theft. He placed it carefully in an inside pocket.

Hughes found him in the big leather chair, idly nursing his hat and stick, and came forward with outstretched hand.

"It's Mr. Labar, isn't it. Pleased to meet you. I'm not often honoured by visits from detective inspectors. What can I do for you?"

He drew up another divan chair and faced Labar idly attentive. He was Mr. Larry Hughes, gentleman of means, and Labar was a mere policeman in plain clothes. The suggestion was subtle but plain.

Both men knew how artificial the situation was. It was clear to Larry that the other had come to look him over, but whatever the detective inspector suspected he dare not yet shatter the pose. Labar knew that he was a crook, and Hughes knew that he knew.

Yet the latter was supremely confident that no one dare breathe the word. What proof could there be?

Labar for the time was quite willing to play the part the other had allotted to him. "I'm not quite sure, Mr. Hughes," he said with a hint of deference in his tone. "I've come to see you because I believe you have some acquaintance with Mr. Gertstein. You will have seen in the papers that there has been a robbery at his place."

Larry raised his eyebrows and struggled with well-manicured fingers to affix a cigarette in a long amber holder. "I'm afraid you've come to the wrong shop, Mr. Labar. I know the old boy by sight but I've scarcely spoken to him. True, I believe I was introduced to Mrs. Gertstein once—I think it was at Ascot—but that's the limit of my knowledge of the family."

"I'm looking up everyone who might by some remote chance throw some light on the affair," explained Labar.

"Quite." Hughes was listlessly polite.

"You are not acquainted with anyone associated with the Gertsteins? A Miss Noelson, for instance?"

However a man may use himself to mask his emotions, there is usually some point, as experienced poker players know, at which he betrays himself. Not infrequently, though his face may be immobile, some nervous twitch of the hands, some apparently small mannerism, will reveal itself to the one competent to read.

Larry showed nothing in his face, but his right toe tapped nervously on the soft carpet. Labar marked that movement.

"I've never heard of the lady," said Larry easily, and rising, strolled to the mantel, and placed one arm upon it. His equanimity was to all seeming undisturbed.

Labar smiled, grimly. "Don't waste your time standing. It was an oversight to leave the photograph there, if you meant to deny that you knew this lady. I have the portrait in my pocket."

The right toe tapped a quick tattoo, and Larry eyed the other whimsically. He thrust up his hands. "Kamerad," he cried. "I have heard of the efficiency of Scotland Yard. Now I see it. The merest little white lie, and you pounce, Mr. Labar. I do know Miss Noelson—slightly. I hope to know her better. There's an admission for you. Can you build something on that? Do you think that she stole the jewels, or did I?"

He smiled superciliously down on the detective, with an indescribable air of polite contempt. Labar, spite of his resolution to hold himself with restraint, was a little stung by the other man's audacity. Larry had the impudence to play with him.

"If you want it point blank," he said, quite gently, but with jaw jutting out a trifle, "I'll tell you that you ran the show. This is quite unofficial, of course, but you know that I know, so what's the use of keeping up this farce? How deep the girl is in it I am not sure, yet. But I'll have enough on you in a week to put you where you belong."

Larry Hughes flung back his head and laughed till exhaustion caused him to desist. "That's real funny. You don't look it I'll admit, but you must be one of those comic sleuths. Shall I do some thought reading, Mr. Labar? You come across a big jewel robbery and your well-known grey matter gets to work. 'Ah, ah,' you say. 'Here is the obvious handiwork of that famous gentleman crook, Mr. Hughes. Let's go on a fishing expedition, and see what we can bluff out of Mr. Hughes.' Am I right, sir?"

He leaned forward with hand outstretched in burlesque imitation of a vaudeville lightning calculator.

Beneath his ironic tone there was something more serious. His alert mind had hit upon the very reason of Labar's visit. The inspector had taken a chance, partly because he wished to see what Larry was like in person, partly to try and scare the man into some hasty and incautious step. The bigger men at the Yard would scarcely have approved of the attempt, but Labar had not consulted them. He had acted upon an impulse, and he had realised that he was courting failure—though his mind had not turned to the grotesque and humiliating failure that now seemed probable. After all, failure in this point was to have been expected. He had seen for himself what type of man Larry was. That at least was something gained. Nor could it matter in the least that Larry now knew definitely that he was suspected. That he would know in any event, and the interview could make no difference.

He felt himself a little nearer to probing the relationship between this sleek, gibing crook, and Penelope, but still he was far away from anything definite.

"You're like all the rest of them," he said. "You know it all." He levelled a forefinger. "You've got away with it so far, Larry Hughes. I'll not deny that you've got brains. But you've got vanity, and that's where you'll come a cropper. You may swizzle me, as you have others, but in the end it isn't me you're up against. It's Scotland Yard, it's Mulberry Street, it's the Sûreté. It's every police officer you may pass from here to Timbuktu. You can't fight men, money and organisation all the time. Think a bit."

There lurked a humorous twitch at the corner of Larry Hughes' lips, and there was less cynicism there. "Tell me, did you ever hear of a foxhunter giving up because he might break his neck? If I were a criminal, it's just conceivable that I might like the game for its own sake."

"Then I hope you break your neck," retorted Labar with asperity. "I'll give you a case in point. When you let amateurs into this bust you slipped a cog. I've had Penelope Noelson under observation for the last eighteen hours, and today, she'll be placed under detention. And I rather fancy she'll talk."

The smiling nonchalance of Larry Hughes vanished. He flung cigarette and amber holder with an impatient gesture into the grate, and advanced a step, with clenched hands.

"Don't be a damned fool, man," he snarled. "That girl has no more concern with the robbery than the man in the moon. She's white. The whole thing is pure silliness. What have you got against her?"

"Not a thing. She only tried to bribe me yesterday. She only changed a forged cheque on the Midland Bank. She only tried to sandbag me last night. She only denied that she had ever heard of you, and now I find her photograph in your private room. Oh, I've not a thing to hold her on."

There was a little bead of perspiration on the smooth forehead of the crook. "I don't believe you are lying to me," he said earnestly, "but you're all wrong somehow. That girl has not the faintest strain of crookedness in her. Supposing that all you've heard about me is true. Have you known me to do a dirty thing?"

"That's a large question. They say you keep faith with your confederates."

"I do more than that. I play the game as I see it. And I give you my word, Mr. Labar, that Penelope Noelson had no hand directly or indirectly in this crime."

"That won't help her," said Labar, grimly.

"Meaning that you want to get at me through her. Well, go ahead and prove something on me, Mr. Inspector. We're absolutely alone here. Stand very still if you please."

The blue barrel of an automatic stared at Labar, and Hughes' finger was tensed on the trigger. "I hate to pull a gun," he went on, "and I'd hate still more to use it. But you leave me no option. There's a man of yours out there watching the house, and I don't want him butting in. So make one single move to your whistle and I'll blow you full of holes."

"What's the game?" demanded Labar, placidly.

"I'll show you." Hughes came nearer, and still keeping the detective covered, thrust his left hand into the other's breast pocket. He withdrew the photograph. "This is my property. See here." He replaced the automatic in his pocket, and tore the portrait to strips. "That's that. Just one little bit of evidence against Miss Noelson gone. Now you may go, too."

Labar took it all gracefully. "Thank you," he said. "I'll be back."

"Oh, no you won't," disagreed Hughes. "If you try it I'll have the servants throw you out. Goodbye, Mr. Labar."

He accompanied the detective inspector to the front door, and as soon as it had closed behind him, returned and summoned a servant.

"Tom," he demanded, "did you ever read Bacon?"

"I don't know that I have, sir."

"No, I scarcely expected it. He's not a popular novelist. He says that in preparation it is good to realise dangers, and in action wisest to disregard them. So I shan't go to Kempton Park today. I'm wanting the car at once, and you'll come with me. We're going to disregard a danger."

VI

It was with the conviction that Penelope Noelson was the key to the mystery that Labar made his way back to town. The hint that she would be detained would scarcely have stirred Larry Hughes as it had, unless she was in the plot. True, Labar was not as certain as he might have wished. He had not been entirely candid with Larry Hughes. She had not been identified as changing the forged cheque, although Malone had that morning reported that so far as the cashier recollected it had been a woman who passed it over the counter. And according to the man he had left to keep observation upon her, she had not gone from Streetly House the previous night. If that was so she could not be the lady of the sandbag. There remained the episode of the hundred pound note—the only definite thing that he could prove against her.

He looked in at Grape Street before proceeding to Streetly House, to pick up such fresh threads as might have been collected during his absence. There was the inevitable string of reports, some entirely valueless, some which might become of importance or futile in the light of future events. He sifted them through rapidly. Here was the statement that Malone had taken from the bank cashier. Here was a plan drawn by a police surveyor of Streetly House. Here was the report—very sketchy—of Larry Hughes' movements for the last week. Here were other reports of the recent doings of certain notabilities of the underworld. Not only had the C.I.D. men been busy, but their jackals, the "informants," had been whipped up in force. The dragnet had been cast over London, and here on Labar's desk was the result.

He paused over two things. One was an abrupt note from Winter. "Have you noticed this? It is from Monday's *Times*."

Pasted on a sheet of paper was a cutting from the personal column.

> "Panjandrum. Urgent. All fixed for tonight. Keep Walloper straight, and inform. Have not seen him. Piccadilly Tube. Same time."

Now, it was on Monday night that the theft had occurred, and the personal column is a simple means of communication between those who do not care to risk the mails or a direct interview. Of course, the advertisement might have been inserted by an entirely innocent person outside the affair. On the other hand it was likely enough to have some bearing on the crime.

The other document that interested Labar was a report from a smart young detective sergeant who was in charge of an outlying station. It told of one, Gold Dust Teddy, who had left his little suburban house on the Monday, and had been absent all night. Teddy was one of the few men who had the craftsmanship to execute a great burglary. He was not a great thief for two reasons. Apart from an uncanny mechanical skill he

had no other asset for his career—no imagination, no finesse. And he had periodical drinking bouts. These two things had brought him to grief on occasion. The hallmark of his failure was that his fingerprints were on record at Scotland Yard.

Teddy, it appeared—one may observe the use of the informant in the detective sergeant's report—had been on the water-wagon for some time. But a week ago he had broken out. For two or three days he had drunk steadily, and finished up by breaking the jaw of one of his boon companions who had refused to lend him money. Then he had laid up to recover as was his habit. On Tuesday he had gone on a drinking bout again, and that seemed likely to continue indefinitely. During his absence the sergeant had talked with his wife, who would give nothing away. But he had rescued from the grate of a room during the conversation a half-burnt scrap of paper which he enclosed.

"All ready. Cut out b—— put you in the mud. Meet—"

Labar considered matters thoughtfully. This was too good to be true. If he was able to add two and two together correctly it might lead anywhere. It looked reasonably certain that Gold Dust Teddy was one of Larry's tools. All the same, to rope in a drunken burglar did not of necessity mean that he would be any nearer to getting Larry Hughes. It was on record that Larry had contrived to slip from the meshes on similar occasions.

He sent for one of his men. "Go out and see Simmons. Tell him that you're to help him bring in Gold Dust Teddy. If Teddy wants to know why he's pinched you haven't got any idea. Follow that. Just bring him in. Take a pair of cuffs with you. He may be rough to handle."

The theory that a Scotland Yard man carries handcuffs habitually in his pocket dies hard. They are heavy things, and he takes them only when he needs them, which is seldom.

A ragged shrill whistle which remotely resembled a tune heralded the entrance of Malone. "You here, guv'nor. There's a lady asking to see you downstairs. Passed her on the way up."

"Can't see anyone this morning, Bill. It's my busy day. Somebody whose cook has got away with the fish knives I expect. You go and have a word with her."

"I think you'll see this one," said Malone. "She's Miss Penelope Noelson."

The girl was pale, but her voice was firm as she returned Labar's formal greeting.

"I was on my way to see you," he said.

"I expected you earlier," she returned a trifle wearily. "As you didn't come I thought it well—"

"I hope you let me have the full story," he interrupted. "You have had time to sleep over it, and perhaps you will see the wisdom of being absolutely frank. But understand you are not compelled to say anything. I shall conceivably have to use it against you."

"It has been a nightmare since yesterday," she confessed, speaking slowly, as with effort. "If you intend to arrest me you will have to. I know—what you think—I don't blame you." She choked back something very like a sob. "I can only tell you I am almost innocent. I can see how black things must look to you; but that is the truth. There are others—I cannot tell you all."

There is a wholesome rule that a police officer must not question a person whom he knows he will in all probability have to arrest. It is a rule which strictly applied would leave many mysteries unexplained, and detectives have at times to walk warily round it, taking a certain amount of risk.

"You are *almost* innocent," he repeated. "What does that mean, exactly? There are other people you are shielding? Come, Miss Noelson, there is nothing to be gained by hanging back. Do you know what this mistaken chivalry may mean? It will save no one. It may mean disgrace—ruin—the prison taint—for you. Why take the chance—the almost certainty?"

He was leaning across the table with folded arms, his eyes fixed on her face. She avoided his gaze, and her hands tortured a small handkerchief. Clearly she was moved almost beyond endurance.

"Oh, leave me alone," she cried. "Can't you understand, Mr. Labar. You are a decent man. I don't know what is the right thing to do. I can only tell you that I gave you that note for—for someone else. I never knew—I never realised what it all meant. I came to tell you that. You mustn't ask me anything else."

He came towards her and rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. "You poor child," he said, and there was genuine sympathy in his tone. "If I were your elder brother, my dear girl, I should give you the same advice that I'm offering you now. Get this off your mind. Tell me everything."

"You can lock me up," she said, faintly. "It will make no difference."

"But," he urged, "do you know who this man is that you are trying to protect, this notorious crook, this—"

She looked at him, eyes wide open in amazement. He stopped abruptly.

"I am not trying to shield any notorious criminal," she declared.

"You may not know it, but Larry Hughes is one of the most dangerous men in London."

She looked him straight in the eyes now. "That is the man you mentioned yesterday. When I said I did not know him I was confused. I have met him twice, or perhaps three times. He is no friend of mine—merely an acquaintance."

"He is the man who engineered the burglary. He is not worth an ache of your little finger."

"It is all so dreadfully mixed up," she exclaimed. "You must believe me, Mr. Labar, I hardly know him."

He saw that it was scarcely worth pushing the harassed girl further for the time, and bit his lips as he tried to consider the next move. His duty, which he had seen clearly before this interview, was no less plain now. The girl should be held if only on her own admission that she was an accessory in the crime. But somehow he could not bring himself to issue the order. He tried unsuccessfully to tell himself that he was a fool to let himself be hypnotised by her. It was no use.

"Well, if you won't talk, you won't," he said with a shade of gruffness in his tone. "That will do for now, Miss Noelson. I don't profess to understand you."

"You mean—I can go?" she asked, hesitatingly.

"You can go," he agreed.

She held out a slim hand. "I want to thank you," she said simply.

"Better go now," he said, "before I change my mind."

He held the door open for her and stood for a while in thought watching her as she descended the stairs. Another door opened, and a man casually followed her. The mechanics of investigation have to be obeyed, and Labar had no intention of calling off her shadow.

He returned to his desk, and picked up a document. But his agility of mind had deserted him. He saw nothing but a pair of grey eyes—eyes plaintive, protesting, pleading. For ten minutes he sat thus, lost to the world. A sharp, imperative knock at the door, followed by the swift entrance of one of his men, recalled him to himself.

"I'm sorry, sir," gasped the intruder, "Miss Noelson, Miss Noelson—"

Labar was at his side and shook him roughly by the shoulder. "Don't stand there stammering, you fool. What's happened to Miss Noelson?"

"She's gone, sir. Just outside Streetly House it was. A gentleman stopped to speak to her. I was thirty yards away. They walked a few paces. Suddenly he lifted her into a big car that was standing at the kerb. She shouted, but before I could reach them they were gone. That's all, sir."

"You lump of mud. You condemned camel. What else did you do besides gaping after them like a codfish? Did you get the car number? What was the man like?"

Labar shook the man feverishly. The other pulled himself away unresentfully. "It was a big Rolls, number K9362. The man was of medium size, very well dressed in a light-grey suit—"

"Larry Hughes, by thunder!" ejaculated Labar.

VII

The incidence of crime among fifty million people affects the average individual very seldom. Any ordinary man who has his pocket picked or the domestic silver stolen, has the feeling that he has been unfairly selected as the victim of a phenomenon. Why should such a singular misfortune happen to him?

So it was with Penelope Noelson. A very much worried person was that girl as she left the precincts of the Grape Street police station. She felt a sense of injustice that she should have become caught in a coil from which she saw no way of extricating herself. If only things would work out so that she would not be involved. A selfish attitude no doubt, but one which she would have been something more than human to avoid.

Quite illogically, there was a touch of exasperation in her mind with Labar. She had felt grateful to him as she left the station, but now she reflected that like many men he was blind in one eye. How dare he assume that her silence was due to an affection for Mr. Hughes? Why, he had even hinted that—that—. She flushed hotly at the implication that she realised might have lain behind his guarded words. For Penelope, although a modern and sophisticated maiden, had a quite sufficient self-respect.

She had to carry on the fight alone. There was no one, neither relation nor intimate friend, to whom she might turn for counsel or sympathy. And beyond it all lay the shadow of the gaol. If there had only been something she could do, some active step that she might take, it would have been easier. She thought of flight. That would, however, be taken as an admission of guilt. Besides, she had little money, and her common sense told her that Labar had probably foreseen and guarded against that very contingency. Any attempt of that kind might very well be the signal for her arrest.

It was with her thoughts thus occupied that she did not observe Larry Hughes until he was within a couple of paces. He raised his hat and dropped into step by her side.

"Miss Noelson. The very person I was hoping to see. May I have a word with you?"

She turned an embarrassed face to him. "You! The police—" She struggled for words.

"Please don't fear for me," he said smilingly. "I am in no imminent danger of arrest. That is what you are afraid of, I guess. I gather that you have just left my humorous young friend, Detective Inspector Labar. No doubt he spent a pleasant quarter of an hour blackening my character. An ambitious young man is Mr. Labar. He believes that I am some sort of a gilt-edged criminal, and that you are my accomplice. Funny, isn't it?"

The airy jocularity of his tone did not deceive her. Her intuition told her more than he meant to betray. "What do you want?" she demanded. "If things are as you say,

then for us to be seen together will look even more suspicious."

"You are being shadowed," he said. "There is a gentleman loitering a little aimlessly down the road, who I judge is interested in you. I have had a couple of detectives behind me whenever I have taken a walk. Fortunately, motor cars are a little difficult for eavesdroppers. I have mine at hand. A ride for ten minutes will allow me to make many things clear. Will you come?"

She shook her head with decision. Whatever lay behind all this, it was likely that it could bring her nothing but harm, in view of the suspicions that already focused upon her and Hughes.

"There is no need to make things clear to me," she said. "If you know anything about this crime, Mr. Hughes, you should go to the police."

He gripped her by the arm, and she felt his fingers tighten. "You are not afraid?" he demanded. "This is absurd, I must see you."

The shadower was standing some distance away, surveying with apparently idle interest a couple of men engaged on road repairs. But Larry guessed that in a few moments he would saunter down towards them. There was no time to take chances. His grip tightened roughly and he almost shook her.

"Let me go," she cried. "You're hurting my arm."

"Then you'll come?"

"No."

"You obstinate little fool," he snarled, and she found his arms encircling her, as she was lifted from the ground.

A cry for help escaped her, and she saw in a quick glance that the detective had lost interest in the road repairers and was running towards them. She fought with all the strength of her lithe, young body to tear herself away. One arm she managed to wrench free and Larry ripped out an oath as her fist caught him on the jaw.

With a supreme effort he hurled her through the door of the car which someone within held open, and tumbled in on top of her. She felt other hands clutching at her and a cloth was drawn tightly about her face, smothering her screams. She heard the door slam and felt the car drawn fiercely into motion. Still she maintained her struggles until at last the two men—she knew there were two now—had pinned her to her seat, and she could move neither hand nor foot.

So they held her, it seemed for hours, though at a later stage she knew that it was for less than an hour, while they were running out of London.

The noise of traffic died down, and the soft not unmusical voice of Larry Hughes came to her ear. "Sorry to be rough, but you rather forced it on us. You had better accept things as they are, and we shall all be more comfortable. Promise that you have finished with this tiger-cat business, and we'll let you travel like a civilised being."

She was exhausted, and in any case she could not hope to make any further effective resistance. The cloth about her head prevented her speaking, but she nodded and she felt the hands that pressed her down cautiously withdrawn. The cloth was taken from about her face. Larry Hughes, however, still retained a grip of her wrist.

"That's better," he announced. "Tom, stop the car for a moment and get in front with Williams. Miss Noelson and I have a few private things to discuss."

She remained silent, collecting her thoughts, till the car had started again. Then she spoke angrily.

"This is an outrage."

"I agree," he said, coolly. "What would you expect? I had to do this, since you would not let me persuade you. I have saved you from a very awkward position."

"You have placed me in a worse one," she retorted. "What do you intend to do with me now?"

He freed her wrist and regarded her speculatively, with a cold smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. "That depends," he said. "I have, thanks to Mr. Labar, had to push things rather in a hurry. How much of what he told me about you was true? Not all, I'm sure, or you wouldn't have been allowed to walk out of the police station this morning."

He had contrived to startle the girl out of her attitude of cold resentment. She pulled herself round till she was half-facing him.

"What did he say? What does he know?"

"I can't tell you what he knows, but what he asserted that he knew was that you had committed forgery, and that you tried first to bribe him, and then to knock him out. The case as he presented it was pretty ugly. There was only one thing left for me to do as a friend of yours. That was to get you out of the way."

Penelope's face darkened as she listened. Was Labar trying some subtle underhand game of bluff? If he had thus lied about her to Hughes, might he not equally have lied to her when he declared that Larry Hughes was a criminal? What could he hope to gain by it? Her hands opened and closed nervously as she considered. Had she misjudged Hughes merely on the strength of this man's word whom she had only met yesterday?

"That is a string of lies," she said scornfully.

"Not altogether, I think," he said thoughtfully, his dark piercing eyes fixed unwaveringly on her, as though he would read her thoughts. "There is truth in it somewhere. How much? How much has Adèle told you?" He thrust his face even closer towards her. "I know there is a reason for your actions. I am your friend and hers. I am taking a heavy risk to help you whether you appreciate it or not. We are all in the same boat—all suspect. Let us clear the air."

His voice was low and persuasive, and his hand sought and found hers. She hastily tore hers away from his touch. For once Larry Hughes had overplayed his part. Penelope had got a clue to things that had been dark to her, and some at least of her doubts of the man who sat by her side were resolved.

"Adèle—and you," she murmured, softly, more to herself than to the man. "I begin to understand."

"Well, tell me," he said.

"You," she said holding away from him as from some abhorrent thing, "you are the blackmailer. You are the man she has been buying silence from. You are the man who wrecked her life, who has driven her to forgery, and worse. I believe you are the most contemptible creature on God's earth."

Not a muscle of the man's face moved as he listened. "Like you, I begin to see," he declared, his tone smooth as before. "Well, it doesn't matter a whole lot. Adèle has been putting her foot in it, possibly getting out of her depth at the races, and she has hinted to you that she is being blackmailed. Anyhow, she has done some foolish things, and you are standing between her and trouble. That's what it amounts to. No,

Miss Noelson, I am not a blackmailer. There was something between Adèle and me many years ago, before her marriage, and possibly a crook has got some foolish letters of ours."

Mentally he cursed himself for a fool. So sure had he been that the charges Labar had made against this girl could only be explained by one reason—that she was fully in Adèle Gertstein's confidence—that he had let slip enough to enable her to make a guess somewhere near the truth. It was not Larry Hughes' habit to talk loosely. However, it could not be helped. He had acted on the assumption that the knowledge she had might make disclosures from her dangerous. He realised that he had been wrong. He might have left her alone and all Labar's efforts to extract anything from her that would have inculpated Larry would have been vain. But now by his own act he had made her the very menace he had feared. The guard that he had ever maintained upon himself had been incautiously relaxed. At least it was not irretrievable. He was where he had thought himself to be. Scotland Yard would have a long way to go ere it would be able to bring any crime against him.

The girl shrank as far from him as the limits of the car would allow. "But why this?" she demanded. "Why are you carrying me away, and where are you taking me?"

He made an impatient little gesture. "I am taking you away because you are not safe in London. You need have no fear. You will be well looked after."

Penelope did not miss the sinister construction that might have been put upon his words. She felt herself shudder inwardly. But to the man she presented a brave front.

"Why?" she demanded again. "I am nothing to you. I insist that you put me down."

"And let Labar twist you as he will. I am not raving mad." With a sudden movement he possessed himself of her hands. "Penelope, you are something to me. Can't you understand, child? You are everything to me."

"No," she protested. "Do not touch me."

He paid no heed. "I want you, child. I have wanted you ever since I met you. Listen. You have no one to consider but yourself. I am rich—richer than you could imagine. I can give you everything that the world holds. You and I together. Will you marry me?"

"No," she declared, vehemently. "Marry a thief—a blackmailer—God knows what—no!"

He flung her roughly from him. He had heard harder words in his life and had met them sneering and unmoved. But somehow to hear them from her stung him.

"You think you won't—now," he said viciously. "But you will, my girl. If you think you can set your silly obstinacy against my will, my dear, and win, you are booked for trouble. I have given you your chance and I don't permit man nor woman to stand in my way. Bigger people than you have learnt that."

She returned no answer. The car turned from the smooth road, and slowed as it took a rough track through a windswept marshland. In a little it came to a halt.

"Here we are," said Larry Hughes.

VIII

Although it would have pleased Harry Labar to tumble into the fastest motor car he could find and engage in swift and melodramatic chase of Larry Hughes and Penelope, he was deterred by many considerations. Chief among them was the fact that they had a start that made pursuit in such a manner impracticable. Then, again, the whole thing might prove a wild goose chase. It might be just a pleasant comedy staged by Larry for reasons of his own.

Labar forced himself to reason coldly on the matter, although there was a tinge of apprehension in his mind so far as Penelope was concerned. But he dare not take his own personal feelings into account. He was surprised, but then Larry had a habit of doing the unexpected thing. Larry would appreciate the construction that must be put upon the episode—that Penelope's evidence was of such importance, that he was compelled to this seemingly reckless method of ensuring her silence. But he must realise that he could not hold her indefinitely.

Do not imagine that the detective inspector sat idle while he balanced these things in his mind. He had to adjust the machinery to meet the case. As soon as he was perfectly clear on the facts, he had begun to work.

"All station" messages to the two hundred or so police stations in London were being sent out over the private wires. To those county and borough forces that held sway over certain strategic points on the roads leading from the metropolis, requests were broadcast to "stop and detain" Larry's car and its passengers. Thus thousands of men would be on the look out for the fugitives, although Labar feared it would be too late. Before instructions could reach the men on their patrols the car would in all likelihood be far away. But there was more than a chance that the route would be picked up, although Labar was too old a hand to rely confidently even upon this.

Men were on their way to Larry's house at Hampstead, and Malone was even then swearing out a search warrant. All this was more or less an ordinary adaptation of the Scotland Yard organisation to meet an emergency. Labar considered the advisability of getting on to the Yard and obtaining permission to use the newspapers. It was a resort of which the authorities were not too fond, for there is still a certain suspicion of the Press at Scotland Yard. The inspector resolved that the step might well wait till all else failed.

As his grip on the work before him tightened, a flash of inspiration came to Labar. He nodded grimly in confirmation of his own reasoning. There was only one way in which Larry Hughes could make certain that Penelope could be forever prevented from giving evidence. A married woman, so the law runs, cannot be compelled to give evidence against her husband.

He turned cold at the thought. Would Larry dare? Was there after all anything he would not dare? But even so no marriage could take place without the consent of the girl. Was she likely to succumb to Larry's persuasions—or threats?

He stood at the door of his room and shouted a name. "Here, you! Tumble down to Somerset House—Registrar-General's Department. I want to know what steps have to be taken to get a special marriage licence. If any application comes in with regard to a couple called Hughes and Noelson, I want to know at once. Get off right away."

There was nothing more he could do for the present in regard to the abduction. He glanced at his watch. He ought to go down to Streetly House, but at any moment they might bring in Gold Dust Teddy, and he wanted to be at hand to see that gentleman. He decided to wait. Throwing himself back in his chair he put his feet on the desk and closing his eyes indulged in the luxury of a nap.

Half-an-hour passed before he was roused by the information that Teddy was downstairs in the charge-room awaiting his pleasure.

"Have much trouble?" he asked the officer who brought him the news.

"Not what you might call a lot, sir. Found him in his favourite pub and jumped him before he had a chance to get ugly. He was half-lit up, and gave Down a black eye before we got the bracelets on him. But he's sobered up a lot now, though he's still talking big."

"Right oh. Put him in the detention-room. I'll be down to see him in a minute."

Gold Dust Teddy greeted Labar with a sort of surly amiability some five minutes later. There is no overt enmity between the ordinary professional rogue and the police. He recognises that the detectives are merely doing a job in bringing him to justice, and, though he will do anything to keep out of their clutches, once there he accepts matters as they are with a sort of philosophy. Now and again there is an officer against whom he nourishes some bitter grievance, and he will talk with venom and contempt of the "Johns" and the "bodies" among his intimates. But face to face detective and crook meet on those terms of intimacy that might exist between members of opposing teams.

Teddy did not look a Bill Sikes. He would have passed any normal scrutiny as a respectable middle-class citizen. He wore a collar and tie, and there were distinct traces of a crease in his trousers. His cleanshaven face was hard, but not in the least forbidding, except that the puffy eyes betrayed something of sottishness. You might set him down as a hard case perhaps, but you would not condemn him on his looks.

"I been wanting to see you, Mr. Labar," he said aggressively. "It's a bit tough on a bloke that's trying to run straight to have your fellers come and rough house him without giving him a chance. Wouldn't even tell me what it was for. It's illegal, that's what it is."

"Just wanted a little talk with you, Teddy," observed Labar quietly. "Nothing to get excited about."

"Excited. You should tell them birds not to get excited. On my back like a pair of ravening wolves they was. And I'm telling you, Mr. Labar, there ain't anything against me. Not a thing. I've got a clean sheet, I have, since I did that last lot."

"Glad to hear that, Teddy. Got enough money to retire on, have you? Or have you got a job? Let's see. It's nine months since you came out of stir. What have you been doing, besides drink?"

Well aware that Labar knew a great deal about him, Teddy shrugged his shoulders. "I've had a glass now and again," he said defiantly. "Why shouldn't I? You know how hard it is for a bloke like me, guv'nor. Tried hard I have. What chance is there for a bloke like me?"

"Where was your last job? Have you got any references?"

"Fat hope. The wife had a bit of money by her and that's kept us going."

"Uh-huh. Getting pretty well up against it last week, weren't you? Or did your wife have a new dividend in on Monday?"

The detective had not raised his voice, but Teddy winced as though the question had been shouted at him. "'Struth, guv'nor, you don't think I was in that Gertstein job, do you? I can prove where I was all that night. I can bring witnesses."

"Sure you can?" Labar's voice was soothing, velvety. "What kind of witnesses?" He did not doubt that the other had taken some kind of steps to establish an alibi. "I wonder if a jury would believe 'em against the story I might have to tell. Mind you, Teddy, I like you. I'd hate to have to push all I know." The hint, half threat, half promise, was delicately conveyed. "Much better for you to give me the full strength of the yarn."

Teddy blinked. "You're bluffing," he asserted, doggedly. "I had nothing to do with it. You can't lay anything over me."

"Bluffing, am I? Don't you believe it, son. I know all about Larry and the others. You think that Larry will help you out of this mess. He won't. He's on his way out of London, and he's leaving you and the others to hold the baby. Here." His voice changed and he fixed his eyes sternly upon the burglar. "How do you account for this?" He fished a piece of paper from his waistcoat pocket. "This was found in your house, and it's a message from Larry to you. 'All ready. Cut out the booze or I'll put you in the mud. Meet tonight at—'" The inspector mumbled something incoherently and thrust the paper in his pocket. "You thought that you'd burnt that, Teddy, but you hadn't. You've botched it, Teddy. Now are you going to help me or are you going to be a fool? Make up your mind."

Teddy's face had visibly paled while he listened. His first impression that Labar had been bluffing was right. But the inspector on his slender materials had managed to weaken the burglar's opinion. He was determined to break Teddy down, and since the Third Degree is frowned upon by British law, there was only this way open to him. It might be questioned by a pedant whether even so he was within the narrow confines of legality. That troubled him little. The strict interpretation of the law in the letter and the spirit would paralyse half the activities of Scotland Yard.

There is possibly honour among thieves in a few exceptional cases. Here and there one may find a "straight crook" who will loyally stand by his associates, but as a general principle known to every police force in the world, there is scarcely a thief who will not give away another thief if pressed, either to curry favour or in the hope of some measure of protection for himself.

This time, however, Labar realised that it might be more difficult. Among those who knew him Larry Hughes was recognised to have a long arm. He gave rewards lavishly, but he held stern discipline. There were tales in the underworld, even among those who would not have recognised Larry Hughes if they saw him, of certain, if sometimes long delayed, vengeance on those who had talked too much. Larry

never forgot, and never failed to repay. It was an element in his own methods of ensuring safety.

Teddy hesitated. He was in a police station and Labar was the more immediate danger. Against that, not even Labar could hold him immune from a long term of imprisonment if he admitted complicity in the robbery. The most he could do would be to refrain from pressing the case too heavily. Supposing he thus saved a year or two of his sentence, there were still Larry and Larry's friends to be reckoned with. He had heard of men being "framed" by Larry for crimes they had not committed, men against whom the police had found convincing evidence to their hands. There were others, cripples for life, who dare not tell in what strange encounter they received their injuries. There were still others who had dropped out of all human knowledge, with only the possibility of a grim guess at their fate. All of these had in some degree failed to keep faith with Larry Hughes.

"I don't know any Larry." He met the gaze of the inspector with a fixed stare. "I ain't had no message from no one. You didn't find that paper in my place, and if you did it don't prove anything. You won't get me spilling anything, Mr. Labar, so you may as well save your breath. If you're going to keep me here I want to see a mouthpiece. I know my rights."

"We're good friends, Teddy."

"You don't blarney me any more than you can bluff me," said the other, dourly. "I know my rights."

"That's all right then. Better be careful." Labar was as mild as ever, and perhaps a shade more genial. "Run along now and be a good boy. Don't get into any more mischief."

Teddy scowled uneasily and shifted to his feet twirling his soft hat in his hands. He did not know what to make of this dismissal, but he was more than a little suspicious. In his experience divisional detective inspectors did not give up in this way.

"You're through?" he asked.

"Through for now. I may have to see you again, I hope. Look after yourself."

Sufficient for the day are the troubles thereof. That was part of Gold Dust Teddy's philosophy. He did not for an instant suppose that Labar was as generous as he appeared to be—there was certainly something behind this move. But the immediate fact was that he was out of a hole. Whatever happened thereafter could be met from outside a cell.

With a cheerful salute he passed through the door which the inspector unlocked for his benefit, and so through a few odd uniformed police and one or two detectives at whom he leered triumphantly out of the entrance to the station.

Labar thrust an arm through that of a frowning young detective sergeant whose discoloured eye told Teddy's prowess and led him upstairs.

"You've helped a whole lot on this job, Down," he said. "Don't you worry about Teddy. We'll get our hooks on him when we want. I'm using him as bait. What I want you to do is to watch when the big fish bites."

He expounded at greater length when he was back at his desk. "This joker's in the game up to the neck, but you can bet Larry's only trusted him as far as he had to. How much he knows I can't say. He's scared to death to say anything, now. But it's odds, now that we're on to him, that he'll try to give the office to Larry either direct, or

through someone else. You've got to tail him closer than a brother. Take Heath to help you—he doesn't know Heath. And be particularly careful when he's stewed. He may drop something that we'd like to know. See if you can get a line through what channels his money comes, though Larry's likely to have seen that you don't get back to him that way. If you do get hold of anything burn the wires in getting it to me."

Down jerked his head in comprehension. "I'll attend to it, sir. Heath will be on the job when I have to stay under cover."

"Get to it then. I'm relying on you not to fall down."

The divisional detective inspector turned to other matters.

IX

A couple of days passed, and although the newspapermen still pestered Labar, and other potential sources of information at Scotland Yard, the space allotted to the hue and cry in the news dwindled. Labar was thankful. There are times when an energetic and persevering journalist may stumble on something that will aid the police, but in a case of this kind reporters were an embarrassment. There were no innocuous morsels that one might feed them on, and such facts as Labar had up his sleeve he was anxious to keep to himself. Larry no doubt would be scanning the morning and evening journals with assiduity.

The investigation marked time. Gertstein had been able to throw no light on the forgery, save that a cheque form was missing from his book, and in one or two interviews Labar found him more prickly than at first. He seemed gloomily to revel in giving up hope that any result would be achieved by the matter of fact methods of the police. The strange disappearance of Miss Noelson he put down entirely to the heavy-handed tactlessness of Labar. The latter had not thought it worth while to tell everything.

"She has been terrified," declared Gertstein. "You made a big blunder in letting her see that you suspected her. That poor girl has been driven away, and you are responsible because you told her she was the thief."

"She'll be back, all right," said Labar with a calmness that the little man felt bordered on callousness. "We'll find her."

There Gertstein with a disbelieving grunt left the matter, although he mentally decided that if Penelope was not traced quickly he would enlist the aid of some other machinery than that of Scotland Yard.

The burglarious Gold Dust Teddy was leading an apparently normal, half-drunken existence, with Down and Heath, both ambitious young officers, camping on his trail. So far he had afforded them no chance of getting nearer to proof against Larry. They had devised means—what they were Labar did not inquire, though he might make a close guess—of studying all the correspondence, both inward and outward, of his household. They had even used tests recommended to them by a Government chemist calculated to reveal the most obdurate sympathetic ink. And Heath patronising Teddy's favourite pub had stood the latter sundry drinks the while he conveyed that he himself was a screwsman much wanted, who was quite ready to take a hand in any exploit that might perchance lead to profit. Beyond this Down had his small coterie of informants on the qui vive. All this had hitherto gone for nothing.

A very effective turn over of Larry's Hampstead house, under the powers of the search warrant that Malone had obtained, had been futile. It is to be doubted if the most inexperienced of the officers engaged seriously expected that anything incrimin-

ating would be found. Amid all the sumptuous equipment of the residence there was nothing that had not been honestly bought and paid for. It was the house of a very wealthy, very tasteful man. There were no dramatic secret doors or hiding places. The few servants about the place had antecedents that placed them beyond suspicion. They only knew that Mr. Hughes was a generous, if somewhat erratic, master, given to sudden comings and goings, in which he was usually attended by his valet, and his chauffeur. About these two men little could be learnt. Letters were found—tradesmen's bills and other quite innocent missives—that helped not at all.

Yet in a way Labar was enjoying himself. The throwbacks, the lines of inquiry that led nowhere, were in normal sequence for this type of investigation and but stiffened his resolution to see the matter through. He had regained the interest that he had lost in his work. No one knew better than he the value of persistency. Somehow he would get his fingers on that end of the string that would unravel the entire tangle. It might be obtained by dogged perseverance; it might drop unexpectedly from the blue skies as clues have not infrequently been known to do.

He had a theory that he was wont to expand upon in moments of leisure with his colleagues. "With enough men, enough money, enough brains and a little time there is no mystery that cannot be explained."

Something of this sort he reiterated to Moreland, his Flying Squad intimate, while they discussed the matter in the privacy of the latter's room at Scotland Yard.

"You've been reading a detective novel," observed Moreland. "What if you have men, money and brains up against you? Can't they foresee what moves you are likely to make? Isn't that what Larry Hughes has done up to now?"

"Yes. And don't we know something about Larry? With all that we know him for a big crook. There's no mystery there. We can't prove it under form of law, that's all."

Moreland levelled a forefinger. "Go easy with the grey matter, Harry. You bewilder me. Let's get down to the practical. We know Larry is a crook. We are paid to put crooks in prison—you and I. Yet Larry is a gentleman at large."

Labar shook his head smilingly. "He can't beat the game all the time."

"Meaning that you propose to get your teeth in him. I wish you luck. But where have you got so far? Just the off-chance of a charge of abduction, and the lady may let you down there, after all, by saying she went of her own free will. Don't kid yourself, Harry. It's dangerous."

"A fine little old Job's comforter you make. I wonder if there is anyone in the Yard who does not think I'm playing a losing hand against Larry."

Moreland beat a pencil in an erratic tattoo on his blotting pad, and shot an appraising sidelong glance at his friend. "Got to keep you from getting too smug," he said. "You've got a temperament. A day or two ago you had your tail between your legs—and now you talk as if it's all over bar the shouting. I'm sure you've been reading a book. Next thing you know you'll be reciting your methods to me à la Sherlock Holmes. Or is it"—he straightened himself up—"that you have something up your sleeve?"

"I've a hunch—"

"For the love of Mike bury it. Facts are what you want."

"As I was saying," went on Labar, placidly, "I have a hunch that something is about to open up. Amid all the free advice and admonitions from some millions of newspa-

per readers—"

"Only millions?"

"Don't interrupt. It seems like millions anyway. But among the letters sent to me was one that seems to me to show interesting possibilities. It was anonymous, of course." He pulled an envelope out of his pocket. "Postmarked EC4. That doesn't help much. One of the busiest postal districts in the city. Typewritten on cheap paper. 'If you want to get to the bottom of the job you're on, ask Mrs. G. if she has managed to pay her bookmaker's accounts yet.' What do you think of that, Moreland? 'Mrs. G.' is Mrs. Gertstein I suppose. She's a lady I haven't seen yet. Been away, country house visiting or something."

The anonymous letter is not infrequently a factor in detective work, however inconsiderable its value may be in the ordinary commerce of society. Men and women—particularly women—will betray secretly from many motives. What those motives may be it is seldom worth while to inquire.

Moreland fingered the letter. "Somebody willing to knife the lady in the back. May be nothing in it."

"May be. I'm not saying till I've looked into it. But, on the face of it, it fits in. This girl—Penelope Noelson—is holding something back. She's a friend of the Gertstein woman. If Mrs. Gertstein has outrun the constable, and daren't let her husband know, why shouldn't she scrawl a cheque in his name? Then she gets scared and tries first to bribe me through Miss Noelson, and then to lay me out. She's supposed to be out of London, and naturally I shouldn't think of her as being in the shemozzle."

The Flying Squad man shook his head dubiously. "Sounds fair. But she may be up against it with the bookies, and still outside this. Why couldn't this be a plant on the part of Miss Noelson? That seems more likely to me. Just a ruse to throw you off her track for a while. Don't get too subtle. Stick to what's in front of your face."

"The old safety first plan, eh? That comes well from a man who's got a bullet wound and a knife mark through interfering too closely with race gangs. No, old chap, if I'm to come out top in this fight with Larry Hughes, I've got to do some guessing, right or wrong. I've seen Penelope Noelson. You haven't. If she's a real crook she's darned clever. But—"

"'But—'" mimicked Moreland. "Oh la-la. No, I've not seen her, but she's too good looking and sweet and innocent to be a crook. Oh, Harry. Here, ease up!" Labar had his strong sinewy fingers round the back of his friend's neck and was grinding his nose to the blotting pad. "I take it all back. Let go, you long slob. You're a great man. You're right. You've got us all skinned!" The other released his hold and Moreland explored the nape of his neck gingerly. "You're a heavy-handed son of a gun," he complained. "Can't you take a joke?"

"Why, yes. Couldn't you hear me laugh?" said Labar.

"I half believe—" Moreland stopped as he saw the gleam in Labar's eye. "Never mind that," he went on hastily. "What I was going to say was this, old lad. You're going against a man who hasn't got to stick to rules and regulations. He'll fight all in—nothing barred. You can't do that. But if you ever do corner him—look out. Until then you are reasonably safe. All the same if I were you while you are on this hunt I'd carry a gun. You may not need it, but if you do you'll want it badly."

"A gun! Why I've never carried one in my life."

"Well, you pack one at the back of your pocket now. It will be a whole lot healthier. If you can't use it you can bluff with it. Take my advice."

"You have gleams of inspiration," said Labar. "I believe I will."

He swung off whistling softly. That evening he contrived to find one who was willing to take him as a guest to one of the two great bookmakers' clubs in London. The racecourse in some degree impinges on the work of all detectives, because it is a sport in which many of their clients are interested. Consequently, there were several of the men present who knew the detective, and he was able to hold unostentatious converse with some of the bigger operators—men he knew who would answer his questions and keep their own counsel.

The inspector's methods of approach varied with his man. Now he would plunge into a question point blank, and again he would lead up to his point through side issues. But mostly he drew blank.

He slid into a seat fronting a billiard table by a blue jowled, plump man with a frosty eye, who enveloped his hand in a leg of mutton fist.

"How are ye, Mr. Labar? Just looking round or are ye here to do a bit of business? I'll lay ten to one that you want to know sommat. What are ye takin'?"

"A small tonic will do me, thank you, Mr. Dickinson."

The big north-countryman (known to every racecourse frequenter in the country from royalty downwards as "Dickie," and reputed to have acquired a colossal fortune on the turf) protested at the mildness of the drink. Labar, however, was firm and the other gave the order.

"Now I know ye're after ferreting sommat out of me, lad. Spit it out. What dost want to know?"

He turned his moon of a face to the detective and his cold eyes narrowed. "Dickie" never beat about the bush.

Labar was equally blunt. "Has a Mrs. Gertstein an account with you?"

"That hellcat. She's in my ribs for a thousand or two."

"Passing up settling day lately, I suppose?"

"She is and all. There's been no settling day for her for a month or two. See you, I don't mind a bit of rope, but, when a skirt plays this 'heads I win, tails you lose' game too often, it isn't good enough for Dickie. That's the worst of betting with women."

"Ah. You've wanted to see the colour of her money?"

"Aye. Not that I've been dunning her. Maybe Tony, my clerk, has dropped a hint. She's got a rich husband; though they're not always the best payers. I don't argue with that sort. 'Well, mem,' I says, when she comes up to me at Kempton, all jam and honey. 'I got seven small children to keep in boot leather. I can't lay them boots to nothin'. When that hole which you've bitten in my pocketbook is filled up, I'll maybe consider makin' a bet with you. I don't want to offend you, mem,' I says, 'but this ain't business. Nowt for nowt is my motto,' I says, and with that she tosses her head and went off in a huff."

"So she stung you. Any others?"

"Yes. She got under the guard of one or two of 'em. Howsumever we reckons to get our bit when the time comes. The old 'un has got the dough, and she'll wheedle it out of him. She ain't so much crooked as flippity—and she's a reg'ler little spitfire when she can't get her own way."

Refusing another drink, Labar edged away, leaving Dickie to pass caustic comments on the merits of the billiard players. He had learned enough to verify the writer of the anonymous letter. Mrs. Gertstein was certainly in debt to the bookmakers. That fact was, as Moreland had pointed out, in itself of no importance. But it was of significance taken in conjunction with other things. He began mentally to elaborate a theory.

X

Through the gate of a high wall set about a low-built house the car containing Penelope Noelson and Larry Hughes passed. A ground mist as high as a man's waist was rising; but as far as the girl could see there was nothing within view of the place but a desolate and dreary tract of marshland. She shivered as though the spot chilled her.

Larry helped her to descend. "This is my country home," he said, "a place I picked up cheap because it is eight miles from a railway station, and five from anything resembling a road. Tricky business, too, for a stranger to find a way about these marshes."

She did not miss the hint. "You think you are going to hold me as a sort of prisoner here? Don't forget, Mr. Hughes, that I have friends."

He patted her on the shoulder. "Nothing so melodramatic as that, I assure you. You are my guest. I'm afraid you will find the accommodation a little rough, but I assure you we will do our best to make you comfortable till I have time to make other arrangements. As for your friends—including Inspector Labar—they will not worry us. For your own sake it will be well to make yourself at home. I don't want you to get lost, so it will be better for you to keep within the walls of the grounds."

Pushing an arm through hers he led her up a stoneflagged pathway into the house. A big-boned, pleasant-looking woman was standing on the threshold.

"This is Mrs. Lengholm," he said. "We call her Sophie. She will look after you. Did you get my wire, Sophie?"

"Yes, sir. Everything is ready. There's a fire in the lady's room, and, as you said she had to leave hurriedly, I got a few clothes and other necessaries for her."

"Thank you. Then she may like you to show her to her room." He turned to Penelope. "If there is anything you would like, just tell Sophie. And I hope you will not waste your time trying to bribe or threaten her. We have known each other a long time, Sophie and I."

If other matters had not been teeming in Penelope's mind she might have viewed with some surprise the furnishings of the room to which she was ushered. The dingy aspect of the outside of the house had promised nothing of this kind. It might have been the boudoir of some princess. Luxurious carpets, chaste and delicate silken hangings, a bed and chairs made by artists of long ago and matching the small bookcase and writing-desk that seemed designed for the niches into which they fitted, and two or three dainty water colours that in themselves must have cost a small fortune, completed a room that would have sent a professional decorator into ecstasy. On that small room money and thought had been lavished.

"You see it's a kind of sitting-room as well as a bedroom?" explained Sophie. "I have laid out some things for you on the bed. I had only a general idea of your size but I think they will fit. Would you like me to help you try them on?"

"Oh, no, no. Not now," said Penelope. She caught the other by the arm. "Where is this place, Mrs. Lengholm?"

Sophie shook her head. "I'm to do anything for you except answer questions, miss."

"I know I'm somewhere on the Kent or Sussex coast," said the girl. "The signposts coming down told me that."

Sophie maintained an inflexible silence. Penelope considered her for a moment.

"Perhaps you don't know that I have been brought down here by force," she ventured. "If you could post a letter for me—to let my friends know. I could make it worth your while—"

A slow ironic smile broke over the elder woman's face. Penelope saw what the answer must be before she spoke. "Didn't you hear what Mr. Hughes said? You can't bribe me." She moved towards the door. "If you want anything more, will you please ring."

Down in one of the morning rooms Larry Hughes smoked a thoughtful cigarette and nursed his right knee between his hands. He straightened up as Sophie entered soft footed.

"Well," he demanded, "everything all right?"

"She offered me money to post a letter."

"Didn't you take it?" he replied carelessly. "More fool you."

He did not even look at her, and the glowering eyes of the woman were lost to him. "What are you going to do with her?" she asked.

He flicked the ash from his cigarette, and turned curiously to her. "You're growing inquisitive in your old age, Sophie," he said with a slight rising inflection in his voice. "All you've got to do is to look after her while I tell you."

"There's some things I won't do, Larry Hughes," she retorted steadily.

He got to his feet and with darkened face took a step towards her. "What's that you say, woman? Don't I pay you enough?"

She met his eyes stubbornly. "The pay's all right. I'm not complaining of that. You've always done generously by me in that way. And I've been useful to you. I may be a crook, but I'm not that sort of woman."

"What's biting you?" he asked threateningly. "Do you know where you would be in a couple of days if I passed the word? In gaol with your husband and seven or ten years staring you in the face. Tread on the soft pedal, Sophie—and don't Larry Hughes me. Sir, from you, and don't you forget it."

She placed her hands on her hips. "I know. All the same I won't be dragged into this kind of dirtiness."

His frown faded. Comprehension showed in his face. "I see," he smiled. "I didn't know that you were that kind of puritan. You can relieve yourself of any scruples. I intend to marry the lady."

"If that's the case—" She hesitated in doubt.

"Oh, it's all true enough," he insisted. "She knows too much for my health. If ever I go down, Sophie, it's going to be bad for a lot of us. So I'm going to shut her mouth

by marrying her. I think I'd have married her anyway. Now you've got the strength of the whole thing, Sophie."

He resumed the attitude he had held on her entrance, and accepting this as a dismissal she withdrew. Larry grinned to himself with some cynicism over this touch of human nature. Here was old Sophie Lengholm, daughter of criminal parents, married to a man even now in prison for an attack on a police officer that was only just short of murder, and herself a not inconsiderable ally in all sorts of wickedness for years, turning squeamish over what she thought was an affair of morals. Women were queer cattle. Well, anyway, she could be relied upon now that he had put matters straight for her. Quite apart from all considerations of money she would risk too much if she played any monkey business with him. He trusted none over whom he could not crack a whip.

Meantime, alone in her room Penelope was trying to decide upon some course of action. Her head ached with the effort to see some solution. She had no doubt that Larry Hughes had meant what he said when he declared his intention to marry her. The very audacity by which he had trapped her showed that there was no length to which he was not prepared to go. She was afraid, but she told herself that she must not let her faculties become paralysed. He could not force her to marry him. Such things were not done these days. At all costs she must try to get some word to London. The construction that would be put upon her absence was appallingly plain to her. But how? Her baffled mind beat wildly about the problem.

Gradually she became more collected. If an opportunity was to come for a way out she must look for it. She wondered if it would be possible to throw Larry off his guard. Could he be duped by an apparent acceptance of the situation on her part until such time as she found an avenue of escape? If he could be lulled into relaxing his precautions she might at the worst get some word to the local police or perhaps even to Labar.

She doubted if she had the nerve to hold her emotions and her fears in control to that extent, but even while she reflected she was fingering one of the dresses on the bed. And scarcely conscious of what she was doing she changed and wandered out down the old oaken staircase.

An uneasy feeling that hidden eyes were watching her every movement possessed her, but that she put down to her shaken nerves. A gloomy quiet brooded over the house. Once she gently opened one of the massive doors and peeped into a sombre panelled room furnished as a study. A dog growled and she had a glimpse of a big Alsatian wolfhound rising menacingly from the hearth. She hurriedly closed the door. Apart from that she heard no sound of life about the place.

Avoiding the morning-room which she had seen Hughes enter on their arrival, she strolled with an appearance of nonchalance that cost her an effort to maintain into the grounds. They had a derelict and unkempt appearance. Indeed, viewed from the outside the whole house and its domain afforded a singular contrast from the well-kept if gloomy interior.

Ragged and untrimmed shrubs, overgrown flowerbeds, lank grass and ill-kept gravel paths all told of neglect that, she noted, must have been deliberately intended to convey an impression to any visitor straying in the vicinity. The tall weather-beaten concrete wall, however, showed no sign of deterioration. She followed it round till she

came to the wrought iron gates of the drive. They were closed and a steel chain secured by an efficient modern padlock held them.

Penelope glanced around. Then she shook the gates. They were immovable. A wild notion had come to her and she thoughtfully examined the spikes on the top. They were not so formidable. An active person with a little care might scale the gates without injury.

She set a foot on one of the twirls of the iron and gripping the bars pulled herself up. Her hand had reached the topmost spikes and she was seeking farther foothold when she heard a discreet cough. Tom, the valet, who had accompanied Hughes, was standing a few yards back chewing a straw and regarding her speculatively. With as much dignity as she could muster she lowered herself to the grounds.

"I shouldn't try that again if I were you, miss," he said respectfully. "You might hurt yourself. Besides, all those things are wired to alarms in the house."

The girl stooped to brush herself. When she arose she flashed an ingenuous smile towards the man.

"I just wanted a look round," she explained, "I wasn't trying to run away. I want to know where I am."

Tom shifted his straw to another angle, and before answering flung it to the ground. "There's miles of marshes round this place, miss. Acres and acres with big dykes crisscrossing them and no roads to speak of. I'd be afraid of trying to cross a maze like that."

"But, Tom—your name is Tom, isn't it?—I can feel the sea."

"Yes, miss. The sea's away about a mile over there." He waved an arm vaguely to the right. "Difficult to get to and a lonely waste of shingle if you do."

"I see. Then if there's no chance of my getting away why are you watching me?"

The glimmer of an appreciative smile showed on the immobile face of the valet. "I'm not exactly spying on you, miss. Mr. Hughes was afraid that as you didn't know the district you might get into trouble—fall into one of the dykes perhaps. So one of us will be always keeping an eye on you."

She bit her lip. "Very considerate of Mr. Hughes. Do you suppose he means to starve me as well as keep me a prisoner?"

"I was to tell you, miss, that Mr. Hughes is waiting for you in the dining-room."

It would be doing an injustice to the imperturbability of the well-trained Tom, to suggest that he had shown in any manner that he was prepared for certain contingencies. But Penelope was not lacking in observation and reason. These qualities were perhaps sharpened by the emergency with which she was faced. It had not escaped her that the well-fitting jacket of the valet sagged a little on the right hand side as though something heavy reposed in his pocket.

She moved closer to him. "You might as well show me the way," she said and fell into step by his right hand.

They had not moved a couple of yards when she acted. Before he could be aware of her purpose her hand had dropped swiftly to his pocket and had closed over the butt of a small automatic pistol. Her surmise had been right.

He sprang silently towards her but recoiled as he heard the click of the safety catch and the blue barrel was thrust into his face.

"Now then. Open that gate," she demanded.

"I haven't got the key," he declared, his eyes searching her face for the slightest sign of hesitation, of distraction. Give him one fraction of a second start, he told himself, and he would have that gun away from her.

But Penelope was keyed for anything. "If you don't open that gate in ten seconds," she said, with some surprise at the steadiness of her own voice, "I shall shoot."

Sullenly he began to search his pockets. "One," she counted, "two—three—four—five—six—seven—"

A key rattled on the ground in front of her. She made no move to touch it. His intention was evident to her. "Pick that up," she ordered, "and open the gate. Quick. Eight—nine."

His face still a mask he reluctantly obeyed. Tense she waited for the faintest suspicious movement. The key slipped into the lock.

A hand stole from behind her and struck her wrist a sharp blow. The pistol dropped from her grip. The soft voice of Larry Hughes was in her ears as she saw him stoop to recover the weapon.

"Don't you think we've had enough of this nonsense, Penelope?" he asked.

XI

To one approaching casually Adèle Gertstein might have seemed asleep. She reclined with a sort of feline luxuriousness in a deck chair on one of the wide terraces of "Maid's Retreat," and beneath her the green sweep of the park, and the rolling woodlands and cornfields of Hampshire, smiled lazily back at the sun.

But her eyes were wide open, fixed unseeingly on the splendours of the country. She was trying to think, a process somewhat difficult to one whose actions were habitually guided by impulse. The effort always exasperated her, and only the most formidable and immediate necessity drove her to it.

She roused herself and crumpled the sheet of paper that had lain in her lap with a venomous hand. "Five thousand pounds," she murmured. "How the devil am I to find five thousand pounds?"

To the wife of a millionaire such a sum perhaps ought not to seem impossible. But there were reasons why Adèle Gertstein dare not appeal to her husband. There were limits to his devotion, and he might well inquire why £12,000 a year was not sufficient for her needs.

Yet five thousand pounds she had to have. Of course she could get it on Bonnie Chevalier for the Stewards Cup, if those idiot bookmakers had not restricted her credit. Just as if she didn't mean to pay. Anyway, there were other bookmakers.

She tapped a gold pencil between her teeth as she strolled back to the house and seated herself at her desk. There was only one thing for it. Why should the woman always suffer? She drew a sheet of notepaper towards her and began to write:

> "My dear Larry—Things are driving me to distraction. This man—you know whom—now wants me to find five thousand for him within the next week, or he will go to Solly. He has drained me dry and I simply do not know where to turn. For the sake of old times you might let me have this money. It means very little to you, and I will most certainly pay it back very soon. I simply must have it, or I am ruined. Perhaps I have been a fool, but I am sure this man means business, and it would be awkward for you, too, if things became public. So please do, like a dear man, lend me this money. Bring it if you can—'Maid's Retreat' is only three hours out of London by road.
>
> "I am practically all alone here. You, of course, have seen by the newspapers what has happened at Streetly House. I have not been back because there is nothing I can do. Solly calls me up twice a day and wails, and, although I am very fond of Solly, I don't believe my nerves at present could stand being all day in the same house with him.

"Penelope has disappeared. She went up to town for me the morning after the robbery and has dropped out without a word. You would think that at least she would have written to me. Solly says that some clumsy policeman suspected her of being the burglar, and that she has been frightened into running away. It does seem ridiculous. Really, if I weren't so concerned with my own tragedies I should be worried to death about her. But I expect that she is all right.

"Now for Heaven's sake don't disappoint me. Bring or send that money. I am desperate.—A."

She read the letter over twice, and added fresh underlines to many that she had already made. Then she sealed and stamped it, and carried it herself to the post bag in the hall.

That was over and done with. To the fluffy mind of Adèle Gertstein the situation was met. There were other and more special immediate interests to engage her. There was, for instance, her toilet for Goodwood. An hour before she had cancelled all her arrangements for the race meeting. Who could be thrilled by such an event with black tragedy lurking in the imminent background? She had done with all the foibles and vanities of this life. Her maid, with the suspicion of a wink, had conveyed her decision to those concerned, and preparations had gone forward without a hitch, for her servants knew Mrs. Gertstein.

So she conferred with her maid with the deliberation and hesitancy that the momentous decision of what to wear demanded. In something less than an hour she was adorned with a gossamer creation of cream with delicate touches of pale blue, that, as the maid assured her, set off her beauty to perfection.

For her closest feminine friend could not have denied Adèle Gertstein's beauty. Still something under thirty, she was tall and supple as a boy. A complexion of roses and cream called for little in the way of artificial preservation, although that little she saw was supplied. Melting blue eyes, a mouth that was inclined to waver a little uncertainly, or a little plaintively or a little piquantly—it depended which way you regarded it—and a delicate chin that she could tilt with charming defiance on occasion, made her a picture on which a man's eye's might dwell restfully.

"You think it will do, Rena?" she asked, as she studied herself from a series of angles in the tall mirror.

The maid threw up her hands in an eloquent gesture of admiration. "It is simply perfect, madam," she declared.

"Then I will go."

It was a run of a mere twenty miles from "Maid's Retreat" to Goodwood, and, although Mrs. Gertstein was half-an-hour behind the time she had fixed for her departure her car, in the skilled hands of an immaculate chauffeur, easily made the distance in time for her to join the group of acquaintances with whom she had arranged to lunch.

There is no more beautiful racecourse in the world than this arena set in the wooded Sussex hills. On a perfect July day, with its sense of spaciousness, of movement, and colour it may woo the most gloomy of mortals to a sense of rapturous delight in life. The more particularly will it affect a woman, if she is conscious that all the gay and

elaborate display of summer "creations" worn by others of her sex only emphasise the triumph of her own dressmaker. Adèle Gertstein felt that both in herself and her frock she held her own among the fairest of the aristocracy and plutocracy of Britain.

She strolled in the paddock sunning herself and exchanging greetings with her friends. She half-hoped that Larry Hughes might be there, although there were none of his horses running. It might be easier to deal with him face to face. It was possible that her letter had not been emphatic enough. Larry could be a hard man. She shook off a tremor of apprehension, and waved a hand lightly to an earl who was a director of one of Solly Gertstein's companies.

The serious business of the day demanded attention, and she moved over towards the bookmakers. "Dickie" puckered his face as he saw her approach and whispered something under his breath to his clerk. But she passed him by with her head tilted in the air. She smiled winningly on another of the princes of the ring, who hesitated for the fraction of a second and then accepted her bet.

So she made her rounds. There were men, perhaps not so blunt as "Dickie," who would have told her that their books were full on the horses she fancied. She did not risk these snubs. There were others who were quite willing to have the wealthy Mrs. Gertstein as a client, the more so as on the first race she was content with tens and twenties, instead of the hundreds with which she had plunged before those other men had become shy.

She lost on the first race. The second, a selling plate, she increased her stakes with the idea of still showing a profit if Laburnham won. But Laburnham, a short-priced favourite, came in fourth and she was so far three hundred pounds down on the day. That hurt, but, after all, three hundred pounds was a trifle. There was no question but that Bonnie Chevalier would win the Stewards' Cup. The three-year-old, carrying but eight stone, was one of the biggest certainties of the day. There was nothing that could touch it.

Curiously enough she was almost alone in her opinion among her friends. Those who had any pretensions to knowledge of racing shrugged their shoulders when she mentioned the horse's name. But she held doggedly to her opinion. True he was an outsider at twenty to one, but then outsiders did sometimes win in face of all the experts. She did a mental calculation. At twenty to one she would stand to win six thousand with an outlay of three hundred pounds. If she could get five hundred pounds on it would be ten thousand. She need not have written to Larry Hughes after all. Why, she would be several thousands in hand. She had that optimistic confidence which delights the soul of the bookmaker, when he beholds it in a rich punter.

The price had shortened to fifteens before she had laid out her full five hundred, but she felt satisfied. She had by her own wit and shrewdness got out of her financial dilemma. It only wanted the formality of running the race.

Someone touched her on the shoulder. She looked round quickly. A beefy man in a morning coat, that did not fit so exquisitely as others round about, raised his hat.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

She bowed and passed on. Detective sergeant Malone lifted his eyebrows interrogatively to the man by his side. "Is that the woman who passed the stumer cheque?" he asked.

The other shook his head dubiously. “I couldn’t swear to it. She’s like her but I wouldn’t care to be certain.”

All unaware that she had been under the scrutiny of a cashier of the Midland Bank, Mrs. Gertstein made her way back to the grand stand. In a few minutes the race would start and the runners were already taking their places at the gate. She focused her glasses and tried to make out Bonnie Chevalier. The draw for places was likely to have an important bearing on the race.

Her heart moved a beat quicker as she picked out the blue, white and gold that marked Bonnie Chevalier’s rider. The starters danced round in a colourful welter as they were coaxed to their order. But she had only eyes for one. She gave a sigh of relief as she noted that he had drawn an inside place.

The score or so of colours shifted again with a sudden plunge. They were off. A muffled roar came to her ears, growing in intensity as the race drew towards her. Bonnie Chevalier had shot to the front with a cloud of rivals pressing him hard. Her hands tightened on the glasses. The field began to space out. She lowered her glasses, which she found difficulty in keeping steady, and leaned forward in tense eagerness. One of the leaders stumbled and went down, with lashing hoofs and writhing body. There was a little confusion, and she uttered an exclamation of dismay, as the favourite stealing out of the tangle began to draw alongside Bonnie Chevalier.

Her breath was coming fast. Inch by inch the favourite drew level and there were others at his shoulder. They must have done three furlongs when the favourite got his head in front. Another furlong and Bonnie Chevalier was half a length behind the first three, and still losing ground. Her face grew hard and stony, but she refused to realise defeat. There was still a hope. But in the next few seconds it was dissipated. Bonnie Chevalier’s jockey knew when he was beaten and eased up his mount. The race was over for him.

Through her ashen lips Mrs. Gertstein ripped out an unfeminine oath. Someone spoke to her and she snarled fiercely in reply. The man, an inoffensive acquaintance who had been among the party with whom she had lunched, opened his eyes in well-bred surprise, and with an effort she composed herself.

“I really beg your pardon,” she said.

“Not at all,” he replied with mechanical politeness. “I hope that you haven’t been hard hit.”

“Oh, it’s nothing—nothing at all,” she said with an attempt at lightness. “The money doesn’t matter, but I hate to feel I’ve been a fool.”

She rose to go and refusing an offer of escort, made her way back to her car. There were two more races, but she felt no longer in the mood to tempt fortune. With one of those quick revulsions to which she was prone she had given way to a blackness of spirit, in which she saw herself the stricken plaything of an unjust fate. It was hopeless, she told herself, to hope that her luck would change. Still there was Larry Hughes. She would wire to him to emphasise her letter. And if that failed she would go to see him.

XII

It was a blow to Labar that Malone's journey to Goodwood in company with the bank cashier should have been wasted. He had fully made up his mind that Mrs. Gertstein was the author of the forgery, and her identification would have been an important link in the evidence.

His view was based upon something more solid than the lady's misadventures with the bookmakers. The bogus cheque had been under much examination. A negative enlarged in the big magic lantern at Scotland Yard showed by the marks of the pen that the signature had most certainly been traced. That betrayed the amateur. No expert would have committed an imitation by such a method. The inspector had made diligent search for an original signature that would fit exactly over the forgery, which would have demonstrated the crime beyond all doubt, for no one ever writes his signature twice in precisely the same manner. He had failed in that, but he had managed to procure one or two letters of Mrs. Gertstein's written from "Maid's Retreat," and these, with the cheque, he had submitted to the scrutiny of a distinguished analyst who held a retainer from the Home Office.

"No question about it being a forgery," that gentleman told him. "You've seen that for yourself. But to suppose that from a mere examination of the writing one can pin it down to a particular person is asking too much. This sort of thing is not an exact science. But I can tell you this. The person who wrote these letters used the same kind of ink as the person who wrote the forged cheque. That ink is chemically different from that used in the genuine cheques. It is a fountain pen ink and I should say that it was used on a broad nib."

Which view, taken in conjunction with other matters, carried conviction to Labar, although he knew that he could not formulate a case that would be satisfactory in a court of law. By and by, no doubt, some of the other notes for which the cheque had been changed would come back to the Bank of England, and the chances were that it would be possible to trace them back through the various hands in which they had been. That, however, was likely to be a matter of weeks.

What Gertstein's attitude would be in the event of this crime being brought home to his wife had been a matter of speculation with Labar. The little man had insisted on the matter being probed to the bottom, though, of course, he had no suspicion where it would end. The inspector thought it probable that he would refuse to prosecute—perhaps, if his hand was forced, he would declare that there had been no forgery, and that the signature on the cheque was genuine. As matters stood there was no purpose in giving a hint to the millionaire. Labar felt that he would be quite content to ignore the forgery if he could lay Larry Hughes by the heels. He had an idea, not very clearly

defined, that he might induce Mrs. Gertstein to clear up many points that troubled him if he could use some weapon to hold over her.

Luck favoured him. For the letter that Mrs. Gertstein had written to Larry went to the latter's Hampstead home. Now the Post Office is jealous of the sanctity of the mail—even that of a crook—and there could be no tampering with correspondence under official cognizance. There are more ways of killing a cat than one, however. Some of Labar's men engaged on the task of watching the house had made themselves on good terms with the postmen. And so it was that a delivery bag was left unguarded for two minutes at a certain garden gate. Mrs. Gertstein's letter was included in the next delivery at Larry's house, but meanwhile Labar had become possessed of a copy of it.

He whistled a little jig air as he read. Here was a flood of light. Here also—to vary the simile—were muddy waters which it behoved him to stir carefully. Before he made any move it would be well to guard himself.

He went to see Marlow, the detective superintendent, who was his immediate chief. Marlow read the letter with impassive face.

"Well, Harry? What do you want me to do?"

He looked over his steel spectacles inquiringly at the inspector and Labar fancied that he could detect the glimmer of a smile.

"This affects Gertstein, sir."

"Well, he's not the only man whose wife has been blackmailed."

"No. But he might make it difficult, when he sees how a big scandal may come home to him."

"Ah." The superintendent polished his spectacles, and readjusted them. "You think Gertstein might deliberately try to gum up things to hush up the scandal."

Labar nodded. Both these men understood something which neither of them said. "I take it that it's Larry we want, sir."

Marlow leaned back with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets and studied the inspector. "Out with it, Harry. Is it that you want me to handle this? Losing your nerve?"

The other lifted his shoulders without reply. This, win or lose, was a big and delicate affair. It was such a case as usually fell to the lot of one of the Big Four. Marlow had every right to deal with it himself if he wished.

"Don't get worried," went on the superintendent. "I've got enough business of my own to attend to." He got up and laid a hand on Labar's shoulder. "The old man asked me to stand down to give you a chance. I'm not going to interfere now unless you ask me to. Carry on in your own way—and at your own risk. Only get Larry and you can go as far as you like."

"I'm grateful—"

"Nothing to be grateful about. I've had thirty-three years of the game and next year I hope to be in the country raising chickens." He chuckled. "Don't forget you may find yourself in a mess. I'd just as soon be out of it."

He lied, and Labar knew he lied. If there was trouble the superintendent of the area could not altogether evade responsibility. The inspector was a thoughtful man as he took his leave.

The immediate thing was to see Mrs. Gertstein. His future action depended in some degree on what developed from that interview. He had no desire to arrest her—just now. That would only happen if his hand were forced. But as an instrument to lead him to his greater quarry she was likely to be useful.

Five hours later he and Malone were walking through the lodge gates and up the avenue of chestnuts that led to "Maid's Retreat." He had decided against a cab from the station, preferring to take the three mile walk. One never knew what information might be picked up on the way.

The old Elizabethan, half-timbered house nestled sleepily in the sunshine as they plodded up the drive. A figure rose languidly from a veranda and made its way into the house. They found no need to ring as they reached the door. A trim maid awaited them.

Labar presented his card. The girl looked at it doubtfully. "I'm sorry. Mrs. Gertstein is out."

"That's all right. We'll wait," said Labar serenely.

The maid shuffled her feet uneasily. "I'm afraid that she won't be back today. She's gone to town."

"Well that is unfortunate," lamented the inspector. "After we've come all the way to see her, too. When do you expect her back?"

"I'm—I'm not sure."

"You've carried out your instructions, my girl," said Labar, with stern suavity. "Now you take that card straight in to your mistress and tell her that we intend to see her. She was on the veranda five minutes ago. You hear me."

This was utter guess work. Labar, so far as he knew, had never seen Mrs. Gertstein in his life. But the figure that had vanished and the maid waiting for them by the open door had given him an impression. The maid flushed and stepped back. Labar gave a jerk of his head to Malone, who stood his ground while the inspector followed the maid. She halted as she saw his purpose.

"Go on," he ordered. A little uncertainly she led the way. She tapped at a door and at a summons to enter pushed it open.

"Well, Rena," said a soft voice. "Have they gone?"

Labar pushed by the maid into the room. "No, Mrs. Gertstein," he replied. "We are still here."

The woman lounging in a big divan chair regarded him dumbly. He laid down his hat and stick and nodded to the maid. "You may go," he said.

With wondering eyes she withdrew. As the door closed the woman on the chair drew herself up stiffly. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"It means that your maid is a bad liar," he said. "Need I introduce myself? I fancy you know me. I am Detective Inspector Labar."

Her fingers clutched tightly on the elbows of the chair, and her eyes roamed wildly about the room to come to rest at last on his impassive figure. "You have no right—" she began furiously.

He smiled tranquilly down at her. "I suggest that you calm yourself, madam. I shall not bite you."

She rose. "If you think I will suffer this impertinence you are mistaken."

Labar soberly adjusted his tall figure to a settee. It was bad manners, but he intended it simply as a gesture to this woman who, half-afraid and half-angry, was wondering as to the purport of his visit. He was confident that her curiosity would for the time hold her.

"I beg your pardon. If I tell you that I have in my possession the letter you wrote to Larry Hughes yesterday, it may afford you some reason for my insistence."

There were many things that Adèle Gertstein had feared, but this was not one of them. Her jaw dropped. She tried to say something but words would not come. She slumped back into her chair trying vainly to recall what was in the letter beyond the appeal for money. She heard his voice as from far away.

"I want to know who is blackmailing you."

"I am not being blackmailed."

She regained some command of herself and sat up so that she could see his face. But Labar was too experienced to allow anything to show there that he did not wish to be seen.

"Then I will tell you," he said picking his words with some deliberation. "It is the man to whom you appealed for aid. It is Larry Hughes himself who has been bleeding you. I want to know who he has been using as a go between?"

She stared at him with white face. "Larry? How do you know that? I don't believe you."

In point of fact Labar did not know. But he was pretty sure that the assumption was right. "You may take it from me. Now to whom have you been handing over the money?"

The woman's mind was clouded by a haze of emotions. She was thunderstruck at the accusation that her sometime lover was the real blackmailer, but beyond that she wondered if this point alone was the real object of the cool nonchalant man who was watching her with serious eyes. She must guard herself. Suppose he was seeking to entrap her.

"I shan't tell you," she exclaimed between clenched teeth.

"Oh, yes you will," he retorted. "Perhaps you don't understand. Shall I tell you a little story, Mrs. Gertstein? It deals with a woman like you who had the misfortune to be in a similar position. This lady was married to a rich husband. She committed an indiscretion—we will call it that—which gave a blackmailer a hold upon her. His demands grew more and more insatiable, and although she had a comfortable allowance from her husband she felt the strain upon her income. She became involved in other directions, particularly with bookmakers, and it may be that on one pretext and another she got still more money from her husband, until it became difficult to find plausible explanations. But the blackmailer continued to bleed her, and she continued to run into debt in various directions. Certain bills cropped up that had to be paid almost at once. Do you know what that lady did, Mrs. Gertstein?"

An incoherent word came from the woman. Labar went on:

"She forged her husband's name to a cheque—a silly thing to do because the forgery was bound to become known. I can understand a distracted woman in a moment of folly giving way to an impulse. But she did an even more foolish thing. She found out who was the divisional detective inspector and tried to bribe him with one of the hundred pound notes that were part of the proceeds of her fraud. On that same day an

even more serious crime took place at her husband's house. I don't believe that she had any direct concern in that, but as soon as the news reached her by telephone, and she learned that the man she had tried to bribe was there, in charge of the investigation, she lost her head completely. That night she drove secretly to London and tried to murder the detective. Forgery is nasty, madam, but attempted murder is an even uglier thing."

The detective flattered himself that he had filled in the gaps in his recital neatly. He had watched every change in the weak pretty face of the woman from anger and astonishment to fear.

She got unsteadily to her feet, tottered to a writing-desk and buried her face in her hands. "Does Solly—does my husband—have you told him?" she asked.

"He knows nothing—yet."

Labar felt some urge of sympathy for her. She was a broken creature. But his resolve to extract from her the uttermost that might help clear his path did not weaken. He felt that he had got her entirely under his sway, ready to answer tamely any questions with which he might ply her. He had cause to realise that no man could safely diagnose the reactions of Mrs. Gertstein a second later.

Like a tiger-cat she sprang at him, and there was the glitter of steel in her hand. On the desk upon which she had feigned to give way there had lain an ornamental dagger kept as a paperknife. This was the weapon with which she now thrust fiercely and silently at him. He was taken almost entirely off his guard, and had but half-risen to meet the assault, when he felt the bite of the steel in his side.

He clutched at her wrist but she avoided him, and he swung a half-arm blow at her face as she swung away. This was no time for any chivalrous methods of fighting. She meant murder.

She held off for a second, her face flushed, her hair dishevelled, her breath coming in quick, sharp gusts. She watched him warily and as he cautiously swayed towards her she leapt at him again. This time, however, he was ready. He parried the vicious blow that she aimed at his heart with his arm, and catching her by the waist flung her with all his force backwards to the floor.

Almost simultaneously he hurled himself at her, and this time he succeeded in seizing the wrist that held the dagger. Harry Labar was reckoned a strong man, but the woman fought with dynamic, maniacal strength. He felt her body writhe and twist beneath him, and a little ornamental table crashed as she tried to pull herself away. Once she snapped at him with her teeth like some maddened animal. He found a grip for his other hand and pinned her down till her hysterical strength should have waned. Her fingers relaxed and the dagger dropped to the soft carpet. He felt the tension of her resistance dwindle till at length she was a limp figure in his hold. Slowly and cautiously he got to his feet and picked up the dagger.

Not a word had come from either of them during the struggle. Indeed the whole affair had been but a matter of seconds.

She continued prostrate on the floor, but her wide open and alert eyes belied any idea that she had fainted. Watching her warily meanwhile he removed his coat and waistcoat and examined his wound. There was a deal of blood but as far as he could see the hurt itself was superficial. He wedged a handkerchief in his clothing as a temporary expedient, and resumed his garments. The woman had not moved.

“Get up,” he ordered, grimly.
Slowly she rose.

XIII

"What are you going to do now?" she asked in a strained unnatural voice.

The inspector pressed his hand to his side, and his stern gaze dwelt upon her thoughtfully. "That depends," he answered. "My plain duty is to arrest you."

"It doesn't matter," she said wearily. "Nothing can matter now. Give me five minutes and I will be ready to go with you."

The inspector read her purpose as an open book. He shook his head. Five minutes—one minute—alone, and such a woman in such a state of mind was ripe for any desperate act. He had no mind to add a suicide to the other complications of his position.

"I want to ask you a few questions before I decide what course I shall take. You are not bound to answer them. But I don't suppose that the whole truth can make your position any worse than it is now."

If it had been simply a question of any crime that Mrs. Gertstein had committed Labar would have arrested her there and then, without consideration of his sympathies, for or against, in the case. That, as he had said, was his obvious duty. He was in a sense violating his oath as a police officer in not doing so. And in attempting to question her on a matter which in some measure bore upon the charges that he knew should be brought against her, he was flagrantly outside the law. Any one of his Majesty's judges would have commented sternly on such a procedure. Yet, long since, Labar had made up his mind to take the chance. Adèle Gertstein might be mad or vicious or both, but she was a less dangerous person to the community than Larry Hughes. Morally he was justified. All the same, although his course would not have been condemned by his Scotland Yard superiors, or by the Public Prosecutor himself, nothing could save him if any disclosure of this thing should come about.

The woman looked up eagerly, snatching at the slightest straw of hope. "Do you mean that if I tell you the truth you will do nothing to me—that no one else will know?"

"I can make no promises," he said.

She considered with sombre face. "You seem to know most of it," she said at last. "What else is it that you want to know?"

"Tell me everything from the time you became acquainted with Larry Hughes in your own words. I will ask you if any points arise on which I am not clear."

He had to lean forward to catch her opening sentences. In low tones, and sometimes incoherent sequence, punctuated by occasional questions from him, she told her story. It was much what he expected to hear.

She had been married to Gertstein for seven years. Two years before their marriage she had been introduced to Larry Hughes. She believed him then to be, as she had be-

lieved up to that day, a wealthy man about town, and nothing worse. She had been fascinated, infatuated, by him, and there had been an affair—she insisted that it had been nothing but a sort of glorified flirtation, but, though Labar drew his own conclusions, in which love letters of the most ardent description had been exchanged. The episode drew to a close when he went abroad some eighteen months later. She had married Gertstein and she had seen no more of Hughes until it might have been eighteen months or two years ago, when she met him accidentally at a race meeting.

"Did you meet on the old footing?" asked Labar, bluntly.

"Oh, no, no," she protested with some slight symptom of colour in her pale cheeks. "We were simply old friends."

"And it was after this that the blackmail started?"

She assented. It had begun with a simple demand for a hundred pounds, which was accompanied by one of her long-ago letters to Larry Hughes, and the intimation that the rest of the correspondence was in the possession of the writer, and that failing her compliance it would be sent to her husband.

"You did not go to your husband or take any advice about it?"

"I dare not. I thought the man would be satisfied with his hundred, and that would be the end of it."

Labar grunted. She went on with her recital. The money was sent to "James Smith," at what was, as she had taken the trouble to find out, an accommodation address at Kennington. After she had conceded the first demand, others came with growing frequency and for increasing amounts. Always they had to be paid in cash, and always they were sent to varying addresses and varying names. At first she had been able to satisfy the blackmailer without great inconvenience to herself, but the time came when she was put to considerable stress. She sold her personal jewels, and replaced them with paste. She had dabbled with moneylenders. She had plunged on race meetings.

"What about Hughes?" broke in Labar at this point. "Didn't you say anything about this to him?"

"Yes. He urged me to refuse, and to go to the police or my husband. I have asked him to help me out once or twice, but he made difficulties. However, I have had about a couple of thousands out of him."

"I see. You didn't know that most of that was going back into his own pocket. Tell me of this forgery."

"There were a lot of small things falling due, and I knew that I hadn't the means to meet them. One day I saw my husband's chequebook lying on a desk and the thought of taking money from his account came to me. So I traced his writing. I must have been mad, but it all happened before I realised what I was doing. Then I changed the cheque and became frightened as I saw the trouble I was likely to land into. I came down here, but the more I thought of it the more frightened I became. I knew of you, and had had you pointed out to me at one or two places. I thought that if I gave you one of the hundred pound notes, and you used it, if it ever came to you to handle an investigation into the business you would understand that you had part of the money and wouldn't push it too far."

"Half a second," he interrupted. "This extraordinary way you used to pass me the money. Do I understand that you intended that I shouldn't know from whom it came,

until I was brought into the case? Then I should find out from the numbers of the notes that I had become implicated, and should have my hands tied."

"That was my idea. I did not want to give myself away to you unless the forgery was discovered. I hoped it might pass unnoticed."

"A sanguine, not to say naive scheme," he commented dryly. "Where does Miss Noelson come in?"

"She knew I was in trouble, but naturally she did not know all the details. I couldn't trust anyone. But I told her I had special reasons for wanting to deliver a note to a man I would point out, and she agreed to help me. I had a chauffeur's uniform made to fit me and drove up to town with her. She was to deny that I had left 'Maid's Retreat' if anyone questioned her. I sent her to do some shopping after we arrived in town while I hung about Grape Street till you came out. I followed you to Scotland Yard, and while you were there I went back and met Penelope and the car. I guessed that you would return to Grape Street by the same route and we waited for you. After that I went back to Hampshire and she stayed in town."

"Still another point that I am not quite clear about," he said. "Why did you come back that evening and lay in wait for me with a sandbag?"

"The news of the burglary had been telephoned down to me. I had talked with my husband after he saw you. I had talked with Penelope. You had recognised her and I was alarmed at what you might find out. I saw that I had made a mistake. I had been told that all police officers would take money if they could do it safely."

"Thank you," he said ironically. "It is an impression that some other people have."

There fell a silence for a while. He was thinking, with a puzzled little frown on his forehead, and the woman with burning eyes studied him as though to read what was passing in his mind. Presently he spoke again.

"Has Larry Hughes ever been in Streetly House?"

"Not so far as I know. I have never taken him there."

"You have discussed the place with him—talked over your husband's collection?"

"At times. They have been quite casual conversations."

Labar racked his brain. This seemed to be leading nowhere. Yet if Larry Hughes was at the bottom of the burglary it was inconceivable that he should not have used his acquaintance with Mrs. Gertstein to further his projects. No doubt those "casual conversations" had told him more than the woman dreamt. A point flashed to his mind.

"Have you found positions at Streetly House for any persons in whom Hughes was interested?"

She reflected. "I can't quite remember. I believe there was someone—ah! yes—an odd-job man. I can't remember his name, but it was someone with an excellent record whom Mr. Hughes was trying to help. He asked me to speak to the butler about him, and I think he was engaged."

"You don't remember his name? Was it Law—or Jones—or Lane—or Wright?" he recited such names as he could recall of the big staff at Streetly House, and she shook her head at each one. He wondered if someone had evaded his questioning when he had examined the servants. "Had this man been engaged in Hughes' service?"

She passed a hand with a weary gesture over her forehead. "No, I am sure that he had never been with Mr. Hughes. I believe he came from some big restaurant that was

reducing its staff. I've got it. His name was Stebbins."

Offhand Labar could not place the name among those he had interviewed. But, of course, it would be easy to get hold of the man now. Here at least there would be one link if he played his cards well that would lead to the conviction of Larry Hughes.

A shadow darkened the French windows and Labar sprang to his feet. A cold voice addressed him.

"Keep your hands down if you please and don't make any hasty move. I'm afraid that I'm a little late."

Larry Hughes holding an automatic in front of him stepped into the room.

XIV

Hughes leaned his back to the wall near the window and his gaze wandered from one to the other while the pistol dangled in his hand. He could not fail to observe the signs of the struggle.

"I seem to have interrupted a tête-à-tête," he said sardonically. "What's the tiff about?"

Labar measured his distance. A flicker of amusement passed over Larry's face, and he lifted his weapon a little. The detective dropped back in his chair.

"This is a surprise, Larry," he said amiably. "What's brought you here?"

The other showed his white teeth in a grin. "Like the chivalrous idiot that I am, I have flown to the aid of beauty in distress." He bowed to Mrs. Gertstein. "I feel compunctuous that circumstances held me from being earlier."

"So you got my letter?" The woman flashed a furious glance to Labar. "This man said that he had intercepted it."

Larry flung up a deprecating hand. "Leave this to me, Adèle. Our Mr. Labar is a truthful man." He broke into a snatch of song. "'He always tries to utter lies and every time he fails.' Mr. Labar did me the honour to tamper with my correspondence. Unfortunately his minions, who should have known better, resealed the letter rather hastily. A suspicious man like myself applied the lessons of Scotland Yard and dusted the note with graphite. That developed a man's thumb mark. I felt sure, my dear Adèle, that you would not have shown so intimate a letter to any person, and, my dear Watson"—he smiled triumphantly at the inspector—"I drew the conclusion that Mr. Labar would hotfoot it down here. And I followed."

The detective laughed. "Better drop that thing and chuck up the sponge like a good boy, hadn't you, Larry? I always felt that you were too clever. I'm disappointed in you."

"Crazy with the heat," observed Hughes to Mrs. Gertstein. "I don't quite get the joke, Labar. Won't you elucidate?"

"The answer will be apparent quite soon," retorted the detective. "I knew you had audacity, but I didn't think you were quite so childish. When you went to pick up that letter there would be plenty of my men about, and I had taken the precaution of keeping a police car where they could get at it handily. Do you suppose they've not been busy? I'll bet that they've been right on top of you all the way down. You're a gone coon, Larry. You're in a trap."

The other laughed. "Still raving," he gibed. "Why, my simple Sherlock, I knew exactly what you would do. A telephone message to my house to send my correspondence to a certain place, and a discreet messenger were all that were needed to get inside your guard."

Labar lifted his shoulders. "You're a hell of a fellow," he sneered. "What are you going to do about it now? Seems to me that you've got hold of the tiger's tail. You don't know whether to hang on or leave go. You daren't shoot me. What else can you do?"

"I don't know that I daren't. Might be a businesslike way out," mused Larry. "But I'd hate to do it, Labar. You're amusing without being vulgar. I should miss you."

Mrs. Gertstein who had followed the exchange with puzzled face whirled swiftly on Larry. "Don't be a fool, man. Can't you see that he is playing with you. He's trying to gain time. Kill him now. No one will know. Shoot him." Her face was blazing vindictively. "Put him out of the way. He's dangerous."

The outburst which was not entirely unexpected to Labar, seemed to annoy Larry Hughes. "Keep quiet, you! When I want your advice I'll ask for it." He snarled fiercely at the woman as though she were a petulant child. "Listen, Mr. Labar," he went on in lighter tone. "If you're reckoning on friend Malone butting in on this séance, or sneaking away to get help, you've got another guess coming. Mr. Malone is chewing the cud under some sacks in an outhouse and a length of line wrapped well and truly round him to prevent him straying. There's no one else likely to interrupt us."

The detective folded his arms. As Mrs. Gertstein said he had been playing for time, and Larry had put his finger on the reason. There was no perceptible change in his face. He still held an attitude of contemptuous indifference. He knew that he was in a tight fix. That the woman would not hesitate at murder he had proof. Of Larry he was not so sure. That gentleman would not run the risk of putting his neck in a noose at the dictate of panic. If he killed it would be after calculation, and because there was no other way that would ensure his safety.

He was sure that Larry was not alone, but he could not guess how many were with him. Even if Malone was a prisoner there was no harm in continuing to stall for time. All the servants of the house could not be accomplices, and in time they must become aware of the queerness of what was going on. He could not know that six of them were penned in the servants' hall, with Tom the thin-faced valet, keeping guard, armed like Larry with a wicked little automatic.

"I'm in no hurry," he said serenely. "I hope that you haven't hurt Malone much, for the sake of ensuring this private conversation. By the way, what are you leading up to? You've got something else in view beyond amusing yourself with light and airy persiflage at my expense."

Larry nodded. "You are an embarrassment, Mr. Labar. I had a faint hope that I might reach here in front of you, in which case I might have avoided having to deal with you—somehow." He laid grim stress on the last word. "I gather that Adèle here, has talked. That may be singularly unfortunate for both of us."

"For you," amended Labar grimly. He could not resist a little touch of brag although he knew it was dangerous. "I have got the ends in my hand, Larry, and when I have followed them up it will be difficult for you to wriggle out. You've had to come out in the open, and you know what that means in the long run. Why don't you use your brains, man? Take your medicine now and get it over. You might perhaps, get away with seven years, if you helped us to get back the Gertstein things."

"Thank you. Suppose we talk seriously. I said I looked on you as an embarrassment. You seem to think that you are a menace." He shook his head, reprovingly. "I'll tell you. From something Adèle has said you imagine that you can get hold of people who might testify against me. If you had any vision you would understand that I shall see that those people are out of your reach. You'll never get evidence against me that would hang a cat. I hate to see you wasting your time, for, although you may not believe it, I've developed a kind of liking for you. Now here's a little proposition for you to think over. I'm going out of the game—going to settle down and get married. Oh, you may sneer, but I mean it. I've made all the money I want and I'm going to enjoy myself. I might get out of the country and snap my fingers at the lot of you. But I don't want any petty annoyances cropping up. I'll buy you off at your own figure. What do you say?"

His tone was that of a business man putting a case to another business man. Labar burst into laughter. "More comic stuff?"

The other lit a cigarette, a little awkwardly because of the pistol, of which he retained a wary hold, and viewed the detective through half-closed eyes.

"Don't rush yourself. What's the pay of a divisional detective inspector? A few hundreds a year. If you hang on and you're lucky you may be a superintendent and get a bit more. A man with your ability and some capital could go far in some other line. Or you need not work at all if you don't wish. I'll give you fifteen thousand pounds and call it quits."

It was a tremendous offer, far beyond any sum that a police officer whatever his position might hope to attain by legitimate means. Labar was astonished at its magnitude. It did not tempt him in the least, but he affected to reflect. He believed that if he agreed Larry would sincerely keep his word and pay the money. As to the crook retiring he was sceptical. That type of man was an organiser of criminal enterprise as much for the love of the thing as for what he could make out of it. No, Larry, whatever he said, would never retire of his own accord. It occurred to Labar that the other could not hold him so lightly as he pretended if he was willing to give such an amount to ensure his inactivity.

In any transaction with a crook, Labar, like many detectives, had his own code of ethics. This was a case where stringent honesty would have been foolish. He temporised.

"That's a lot of money," he said, slowly, "but where would I be if anything leaked out?" He glanced significantly at Mrs. Gertstein.

"I—" began the woman.

Larry silenced her with a minatory wave of the hand. "She daren't let anything be known for her own sake. Your common sense should tell you that."

"Perhaps you're right," mused the detective. "But it's too big a risk. You'll have to raise the ante, Larry."

There was a gleam of triumph in Larry Hughes' face. "I'll make it twenty thousand," he said. "That ought to satisfy you."

Labar still looked doubtful. He shifted the hand which he had been pressing to the hurt in his side, and Larry, if he noticed the motion, paid no attention. He felt that danger was no longer to be anticipated from the detective.

"I'll think it over," said the latter.

"No, no." Larry was smiling confidently. "Make up your mind now."

Labar held his hand in front of him. The blood had soaked through and stained his fingers. "I'm—a—little—dizzy," he ejaculated faintly. "Got it worse than I thought."

Larry lifted an inquiring eyebrow at Mrs. Gertstein. "I—I hurt him," she said, and her eyes rested on the bloodstained dagger which Labar had placed on the mantel. The crook nodded comprehendingly and advanced towards the detective.

"Let's see what we can do," he said.

For the first time during the interview he was off his guard. In that instant the detective acted.

He had followed Moreland's advice and a pistol reposed in his coat pocket. As he pulled it, a little clumsily maybe, Larry levelled his own weapon. The reports followed hard upon each other and Mrs. Gertstein's scream rang through the house.

Labar was no marksman even at that distance, and the other's aim had been hurried. The detective felt a bullet whistle over his shoulder and heard it crash into the wall. He had no doubt that his own shot had missed.

The detective drove forward on the instant and saw the ugly muzzle of Larry's weapon within a yard of his face. He swerved and swung his own weapon like a club straight at the distorted face of his antagonist. Larry went down like a poleaxed ox.

Above the hysterical screams of Mrs. Gertstein Labar could hear the sound of hurrying feet. They might be those of friends or enemies. He could not afford to risk it.

He slipped through the open French windows and ran, as he had not run since he was a boy, for the shelter of a shrubbery.

XV

From the cover of a group of lilacs the detective inspector glanced swiftly back at the house a hundred yards away. A man was standing by the window scanning the shrubbery. Apparently obeying some summons from within he disappeared, only to return almost at once, accompanied by a couple of other men. Labar thought that he could recognise one of them, even at that distance, as a notorious race-gang tough who was known to be the leader of a group of violent and reckless men which the police had of late broken up. Billy Bungey had only escaped by the narrowest margin from a conviction for murder.

The three separated to approach the shrubbery from different angles. Labar hastily took stock of his position. He could not hope to cope singlehanded with three armed and resolute men. Nor, if he remained where he was, could there be any hope that he would ultimately escape discovery. He took the undignified but sensible course of resuming his flight.

Cautiously he pushed his way at a trot through the shrubbery. It gave way suddenly to a piece of park land. A little to his left but some three hundred yards away, was a belt of coppices. If he could reach them he stood a chance of dodging his pursuers. To do so, however, he must swerve obliquely towards the men and lose ground somewhat. To take any other line meant that it would be a chase in the open, in which he realised the likely possibility of being run down. He determined to take the chance of the trees.

Keeping the pistol, that he had more or less unconsciously retained, poised ready in his hand he made the dash. As he broke cover there was a shout, and the sharp report of an automatic. That for the instant did not worry him. He knew that he was out of range. The man who had fired was now running madly to cut Labar off from his objective. At the very best before the detective could reach the shelter of the trees he would be well within shot, and he feared that these men, heated by the chase, would think little of the consequences if they brought him down.

Once he stumbled over a rut in the ground and the nearest man gained several yards. Another shot rang out and this time he heard it snarl angrily over his head. There was fifty yards to go. In ordinary circumstances he could have made it, but the loss of blood from his wound had weakened him, and he knew that it would be but a matter of a few yards at the finish between him and the foremost of his pursuers—point blank range.

He halted abruptly and swinging in his tracks fired blindly at the nearest man. He took no conscious aim, for he knew himself for a rotten shot. He intended it only as a demonstration to check pursuit. But luck was with him. He saw the first man stop in

his stride, and seat himself abruptly on the ground, nursing his ankle while he cursed venomously and loudly.

Labar did not stop to admire his fluke. Breathing hard, he made the shelter of the wood, and plunged on for thirty yards or so till he was satisfied that he was out of sight. Then, copying a famous historical example, he climbed into the sheltering branches of an ancient oak, and rested with fluttering breath, while behind he could hear the crackling of twigs as his two unhurt pursuers, who had abandoned their companion for the while, beat about from the point at which he had entered. He had little fear that they would discover him now, but he quietly examined his weapon as their steps drew near, then receded, then drew closer again.

At last he could distinguish their voices. "Like looking for a needle in a haystack," complained one. "The bloke's made a clean getaway, Billy."

"Can't have got far," retorted Billy Bungey. "He's hiding out somewhere close handy. If we don't stop his mouth we're for it. I know the swab and I'd be glad to make him a present of a handful of lead for old time's sake. He's as artful as a wagon load of monkeys."

"Poor ol' Jim winged out there," said the other voice. "Hadn't we better get back to him?"

Billy consigned Jim to the pit, with full-bodied adjectives. "Jim can look after himself. We gotta find this John if it takes a month. Didn't you hear what Larry said? We got to stop his mouth one way or the other. He's got it on Larry—which means the rest of us. I guess he's got me taped anyway. He must have recognised me."

"But, Billy, this is a dam fool's game. He may be well away and getting help. We ought to make tracks. If he gets help—"

"Aw—shut up. You make me sick. Whatja think he's going to do? Bring the village rozzer out by aeroplane, or what? There ain't any police that he can get here for hours. Got an attack of the funks, ain't you?"

"All the same I'm chuckin' it," returned the other, sullenly. "I'm goin' to move out of this district swift and sharp and sudden. It won't be none too healthy if they picket the roads. I guess Larry'll agree. If you want to picnic in these woods you can do it on your own."

He turned away with decision, and Billy reviling him for a yellow dog followed. Labar waited till their voices had died away. Then he got to the ground and began to pick his way at leisure through the copse. He came at length to a ride, such as is cut in these places for the convenience of sportsmen, and this rendered his progress easier. So, following this, he reached another strip of the park, and climbing a fence, found his way into a wheatfield.

He had but the remotest idea of the way in which he was travelling. But sooner or later he must come to a road of some sort, and, thus to the resources of civilisation, which were represented in his mind at the moment by one thing—a telephone. If he could get to a telephone much might be done before the day was out.

So at last he reached a country lane and, turning by pure guess work to his right, was brought at last to a superior road two minutes before a light car came speeding from the distance. He stepped to the centre of the road with arms outstretched, and as the car drew up a big-shouldered young man with a square chin peered suspiciously at him.

Labar remembered that he could not look a reassuring object. He was hatless, dishevelled and dirty, and a bramble had caught his face in the wood making a sinister scratch across it.

"What is it?" demanded the square-chinned young man.

"I want a lift to the nearest telephone, and then to a doctor's," explained the inspector.

"What's wrong? I'm a doctor."

Labar fumbled in his pockets and found his warrant card, and his ordinary official card. He passed them over to the motorist. "I'm a police officer, as these will show you. There are just two things you can do for me. One is to send a telephone message. The other is to patch me up and not bother me with questions till some later time."

The other descended from his car. "Right you are, Mr. Labar," he said briskly. "Since I'm here and the telephone is two or three miles away, we'll do the patching up first. Now let's have a look at you."

By the side of the car Labar stripped to the waist, and the doctor with swift gentle skill examined his wound. "Nothing for a man of your physique to worry about," he declared. "A superficial cut. Chief trouble is that you've been losing blood. We'll soon put that right. Lucky for you that I'm a country practitioner, and carry my supplies about with me." He rummaged in the car. "Reminds me of the old army days. Here, drink this, while I tie you up."

He passed a flask to the inspector and busied himself with lint and bandages. Labar, who had been nearer to exhaustion than he had permitted himself to think, felt a wave of new life in him. He began to reconsider his plans.

"Doctor," he asked, "would it disarrange your affairs much, if I asked your help for three or four hours?"

"Well," said the doctor, "I can't say that any of my patients would be likely to die in that time."

"How fast is your car?"

"I suppose she could do seventy at a push."

"That's good. She can keep up with anything on the road?"

The doctor nodded. "Sure thing."

"Then I'm going to ask you to take me along to a place called 'Maid's Retreat'—or rather to the road outside the lodge gates. There will be a Rolls Royce somewhere in the vicinity, and I want to follow that wherever it goes—if possible without giving the people in it an indication that we are trailing them. What is your name?"

"Ware. I'm one of the local medicos."

"You won't need me to tell you, Dr. Ware, after what you've seen of me that there may be trouble. Can you use a gun—an automatic pistol?"

"It's some years since I handled one, but I don't think that I've forgotten all that I once knew."

"Take this then. I can't shoot for toffee. Don't use it unless I give you the office. Now let's go."

Labar's original plan had been to get in touch with the nearest considerable town where there was any reasonable reserve of police, and have assistance sent out, while he would have also asked for steps to be taken to notify all the police forces within a big area to keep a lookout for Larry or any of his gang. That would have taken time,

and it was big odds that the net would have been drawn vainly. But with a competent man, such as Dr. Ware seemed to be, at his elbow it might be possible to regain and keep touch with the gang, until an opportune moment for dealing with them arrived. They would assume, as Billy Bungey had said, that Labar would be long in getting assistance, and hampered as they were with one wounded man, if not two—for the inspector was not sure how much he had injured Larry—they would not be able to hurry unduly. He suspected that they had not brought their car into the park. That would mean a long walk down to the lodge gates. He did not see how they could have got away yet.

Something of what had happened he told the doctor. That gentleman was smiling happily as he listened. Labar diagnosed him as a fighter by temperament, who would enjoy a rough and tumble struggle far more than he enjoyed administering pills.

They passed a side turning, and the doctor nudged Labar with his elbow. "There's your Rolls," he said. "Your men are evidently still here. The lodge gates are quarter of a mile up. What do I do?"

"Drive right by them till we are out of sight," said Labar. He had turned up his coat collar and was leaning well back in the car. "Then I'll get out and take a look round. They won't be expecting me back."

Ware obeyed his instructions. At a bend in the road some distance beyond the lodge he pulled up. Labar got down and scribbling hastily in his notebook tore out a page. "If anyone comes along give 'em that," he said. "Ask 'em to telephone it as quickly as possible. It's a message to the local police."

He moved warily along a dry ditch, till through the tall hedge he could view the drive leading to "Maid's Retreat." The doctor turned the car round, lit a cigarette and lifted the bonnet. That had been Labar's suggestion. A motorist fiddling with the insides of his car was not likely to arouse suspicion if perchance one of the gang caught sight of him.

A full five minutes had gone when the inspector saw a single figure hastening along the drive. As it came nearer he recognised the second of the men who had pursued him. He considered whether he should call the doctor and arrest the man as he came out of the lodge gates. After a moment's thought he dismissed the idea. The man must be a messenger sent to bring the car up to the house. To take him would be but to give Larry the alarm. The detective resolved to wait.

At the entrance the man took a comprehensive glance up and down the road, and then went his way. In a little the big saloon turned into the gates and disappeared up the avenue towards the house.

Labar sighed for half a dozen of the stalwarts of his staff. With them he would have had the whole lot in a trap. But it was hopeless to think that he and the doctor could do much more than wait and see, and it would be folly to take the risk. If he could find the haunt where these men were lurking the rest would be easy. The thing now was to pin them down. Burglary or no burglary, Larry Hughes had been associated in an attempt to murder him. That was enough to arrest him on. If he could once get Larry between the four walls of a cell, he promised himself that he would now get at the evidence that would convict. Better to wait. Besides, there was Penelope. He was sure now that she was being held somewhere under coercion by Larry.

He had a glimpse of the Rolls Royce coming back, and signalled to Ware. The doctor closed the bonnet and took his seat at the wheel. The inspector slipped into the place by his side and as he made himself as inconspicuous as possible, the little two seater slid into motion. There was a doubt as to which way the big car would turn at the gates. That had to be risked. The idea was to saunter by close upon it as it emerged, as though on affairs that had no concern with its occupants and thereafter to hold it in sight. Of course if it took the contrary direction to that in which they were headed there would be delay. But the doctor was confident that in any case he could overhaul it.

Fortunately they had guessed right. Barely fifty yards in front of them the big car took the turn out of the gates to the left. It was moving with deceptive speed, and Ware pushed down the accelerator. In five minutes the two seater was swaying over the not too good road like a boat at sea.

"It will make the speed," said the doctor, clinging grimly to the wheel, "but you can't expect a light car to hold the road like a Rolls."

"Hang on to 'em. That's all I ask," said Labar.

The doctor pressed his hat more firmly on his head and nodded. Hedges and trees were speeding by them in a wild goggling procession. The speed indicator was touching fifty. It crept up to fifty-five, wavered, and went on to sixty. Once they made a wild lurch as they swerved to avoid a light farmer's trap, and Labar thought that they were over. But by some miracle the doctor recovered. They took turnings on two wheels, and swept across a main road in defiance of the warning hand of an Automobile Association scout, to escape by half an inch crashing into a big touring car.

"That's the Worthing Road," exclaimed Ware. "They're keeping to the byroads."

"Moving east near enough," said Labar. "I wonder if they've spotted us yet."

"Have a chance if they'd get on to a frequented part," declared the other. "If they keep to these lanes they're bound to know that we're following."

The way bent and twisted and it was now only at occasional intervals that they caught glimpses of their quarry. Suddenly Ware jammed on the brakes. The car skidded on and came to a halt a yard from an unopened gate, through which the road took a right angled abrupt bend and ended peremptorily at a farmhouse. A second's inattention on the part of the driver and they had crashed through the gate and into a pond beyond.

"Damn 'em. They've switched," exclaimed Ware.

"There was a turning a quarter of a mile back," said Labar. "I'm afraid we've lost the scent, but we may as well go back and try."

XVI

They had been outwitted. The conclusion was forced decisively upon them as they returned to the road at which Larry and the others had evaded them.

"There are two turnings. They might have gone right or left," said Labar gloomily. He descended to examine the tracks. "They've done neither," he added. "Look here. They pulled up under the shelter of these trees till we had gone past. Then they backed out and doubled on their tracks. We've wasted ten minutes. They're miles away by now."

"Got any idea of the place for which they might be making," suggested the doctor, hopefully. "We might cut 'em off."

"Not a million to one chance, I'm afraid," said the detective. "No. We're done. I'm much obliged to you, doctor, for your help. It isn't your fault that they slipped us. We may as well get back to 'Maid's Retreat' and find out what has happened to the servants and one of my men."

They took the return journey at an easier pace, and it was something more than an hour before they were halted at the lodge gates of "Maid's Retreat" by a uniformed constable of the county police, who demanded to know their business.

Labar swore under his breath, as he made a guess at what had happened. He had no animus against the local police—indeed he had been prepared to ask for their assistance—but he would have preferred that for the time as few people as possible should know of the dramatic occurrences of which the house had been the centre.

His fears were confirmed when he made known his identity to the policeman. "The super's looking for you, sir. Seems to have been a regular holdup. They found one of your chaps trussed up in a tool shed."

"How did you people come to know about this business?" demanded the inspector.

"The butler phoned through to the officer at the village, and he got through to the super. We came along by car."

They left him and drove up to the house. Before the car had stopped Malone was running alongside with outstretched hand, and a broad smile of relief on his face.

"Thank God you're all right, sir. I was worried."

"Oh there's nothing much wrong with me. They made a clean getaway, that's all. How about you?"

Malone rubbed his head, ruefully. "My hat won't fit for a few days, I guess. Got a lump like an ostrich egg on my head. Last thing I was thinking of was that sort of trouble. I was leaning against a tree smoking a pipe and keeping a quiet eye on the house when an earthquake hit me. Oh, someone laid me out good and proper. When I came to I was in the dark and tied up so that I couldn't wink. That's all I knew till

some of the local police found me half an hour ago. I heard shots while I was lying there and I got the wind up when we found you were missing."

The local superintendent of the County Constabulary welcomed Labar eagerly. Episodes of this kind were rare among the placid routine of work in a country district. He was a lean, tall, not unintelligent man, with mild watery eyes, and a gruff voice. Although nominally his rank was superior, the advent of a chief detective inspector from Scotland Yard was something of an event.

He gripped Labar's hand sturdily. "Glad to meet you. Perhaps we'll be able to twist some sense out of this nightmare now. You don't know what's happened to Mrs. Gertstein, I suppose?"

"She's gone?" exclaimed the inspector. "Well, I might have expected it."

"Well, you know more about it than we do," said the local man. "Mr. Malone tells me that you were on some inquiries about the Streetly House robbery when these people butted in. Do you think they have done any harm to Mrs. Gertstein?"

"I don't think that likely," said Labar. He pushed his hand through the other's arm and led him aside. "Look here," he said. "This woman will be wanted for a crime which has no direct connection with the Streetly House burglary. She's probably absconded of her own free will. Now this business is bound to be the talk of the countryside, what with the servants and the men you have brought here. I want it to be regarded outside, as merely a daring raid by armed bandits, whose motives are as much a mystery to us as to anyone else. Can you give your men that impression?"

"Easiest thing in the world. Since I do not know anything myself, it ought to be simple to pretend that I'm bewildered."

"Thank you. I'll try and handle the servants. There's some things I am still in the dark about, myself."

But the flustered group of five or six men and women whom he interviewed later was able to add little to his stock of information. All they could speak of was the sudden apparition of two or three men who, armed with pistols, had rounded them up one by one, and left them under guard in the servants' hall breathing dire and fearful threats of what might happen if they attempted any resistance. There they had been held, a panic-stricken group, until with a final warning not to move for ten minutes, a thin-faced man who had taken chief control of them, had slipped away. The descriptions they gave of the men, as usual where the ordinary person is called upon for a test of observation, varied in immense degree. That did not so much matter as Labar imagined that he had himself seen most of the principals in the raid.

"We'll have a look through the house, in case they've left anything behind," observed the detective inspector to Malone. "They may have hurried a little too much."

But the search, minute and detailed as the circumstances allowed, brought small result. In Mrs. Gertstein's room there was evidence that she had hurriedly packed a couple of bags, and downstairs in the room where Labar had been received by Mrs. Gertstein and where Hughes had interrupted them, there was a pile of burnt papers in the grate.

"I evidently did not knock all the wits out of Larry," said Labar. "Mrs. Gertstein would not have thought of that by herself. She has been destroying her correspondence."

He bent to examine the ashes, and shook his head. There are methods of piecing together and preserving even burnt papers if they are not too far gone. But these had apparently been stirred again and again with a poker till they were little but impalpable ash. The detective again discerned the hand of Larry. It was this kind of forethought that had aided to give that crook immunity for so long.

On a little writing-table was a note heavily sealed with red wax, and addressed to "Harry Labar, Esq." The inspector tore it open.

"My Dear Labar," it began, "Your hurried departure prevented me from putting to you an angle of our discussion that you will perhaps have not considered sufficiently. There is a person in whom if I guess aright you have an interest. This person is under my charge and control, and you will understand that some of your activities might result in prejudicing her welfare. No one would regret that more than myself, but if you persist I may be too occupied to protect her as I should like. One of your alert intelligence will appreciate the awkwardness of my position. I tell you this freely and frankly, because I know that your personal feelings are so engaged that you will make no official use of this letter. If you feel inclined to accept the offer I have made just advertise the word 'Yes' in the personal column of *The Times*. The goods I spoke of will then reach you without fail by channels I have thought of. But I strongly advise you not to try any tricks in this matter. We are scarcely likely to meet again."

The letter was unsigned. Labar smoothed his chin thoughtfully and read it over twice. It was clever, and he appreciated all its unwritten significance as Larry knew he would, yet the construction he put upon it could not have been substantiated if after all he did try to use it as a piece of evidence in a court of law. Penelope was to become a hostage, and she would be in danger unless Labar accepted the bribe to smother the case. While he might go on at any risk to himself, he might well hesitate to expose her to the vengeance of Larry Hughes. The thing was possibly a supreme attempt to bluff, but the inspector felt uneasiness. Larry had the reputation of using any instrument ruthlessly to serve his ends.

Labar thrust the letter with a sudden and abrupt movement into his pocket vouchsafing no hint or comment on its contents to Malone or the superintendent. On that point at least Larry had guessed right. He would not drag Penelope's name into the case any more than could be avoided.

"When's the next train?" he demanded. "I don't think we can do any more here for now."

Malone found him a morose and silent companion on the way to town. The inspector in fact could not get Penelope out of his mind. He bent his mind doggedly to consideration of the next steps that should be taken. He would have to see Gertstein immediately upon his arrival in town. For in any case Mrs. Gertstein was now a fugitive from justice. She had tried to murder him. She would have to be run down for that, and whatever her husband's attitude was, she would certainly have to be charged with forgery, although Labar could foresee trouble about that, when he came to tell of the circumstances of her admission to him. A dour smile broke upon his features as he reflected that this woman was likely to be an even greater embarrassment to Larry Hughes than she was to him.

"I guess Larry will find her a difficult proposition to handle," he said aloud.

"Who? What?" demanded Malone, who had been dozing in a corner of the compartment, after his vain attempts to lure his chief into conversation.

"I was saying that Larry Hughes may find Mrs. Gertstein liable to shy over the traces."

"He certainly ought to be easier to find while she's pinned to his coat tails," agreed Malone.

"He'll try to get her out of the way," said Labar. "It's a hundred to one that he tries to slip her abroad. If he goes himself the gang will take different routes to different places. First thing we must do is to let the ports have photographs of the lady and descriptions of the other people. Yes, it's a sure thing they'll split up. Larry won't make it any easier for us than he can help."

"Then it's time for us to come out in the open, guv'nor. Let the newspapers have the story. With millions of pairs of eyes looking for that lot they're not all going to get through."

"Not quite ripe enough for that yet, Bill," dissented the other. "There's people we're not sure about in this game. We want to rope them in, and a splurge in the papers would give them warning."

"What you say goes, guv'nor. Only here's our big chance to put Larry behind the bars. Whether it's for the Streetly House burglary or for something else, doesn't matter."

Labar clapped a fist into the palm of the other hand. "Take it from me, Bill, if we can get our hooks on that man on any pretext we'll keep him. But although we've got him on the run I don't want to go off at half-cock. Another day or two and I think we'll have enough proof against him, so that even the wiliest barrister living won't be able to wriggle him out of a sentence that will keep him out of the way till we've got long white beards and are out of the service. I aim to make the case watertight. Though mind you," he added, a little wistfully, "if I knew where to find him now I'd give half a year's pay."

XVII

No one can tell with certainty how a great disaster will affect a man. Gertstein, chewing a cold cigar, and with hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, strode with rolling gait about the room while Labar told in carefully selected phrases the truth about his wife. The little man, whose interviews with the inspector hitherto had been marked by temperamental outbursts, was now as cold as ice. Labar had expected either a breakdown or a vast explosion of passion. This frigid acceptance of a great blow surprised him. He mentally contrasted the emotion that the financier had shown when the robbery had taken place.

"You tell me that Adèle has gone away with this lover of hers—this crook?" said Gertstein, as indifferently as though he was discussing the weather.

"I am afraid there is no doubt of it," agreed Labar. He was wondering whether the indifference was real or assumed. For the life of him he could not come to a decision.

"And that she has forged my name and attempted to kill you."

"I have told you the circumstances as I know them, Mr. Gertstein. Your wife has brought herself within the scope of the criminal law. Whether she has still kept up a liaison with Larry Hughes it is beyond my province to decide. Personally I think her late actions have been caused by pure unreasoning panic."

"That side of it is my affair. She is my wife," declared the millionaire sternly. "Now we come to your side." He dragged a chequebook from his pocket, and seating himself at a writing-table, poised a pen. "How much is it?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Labar, with suave interrogation.

"How much?" repeated Gertstein, impatiently.

The inspector felt his patience oozing away. It was one thing for Larry Hughes to try to buy him off. For Gertstein to assume, in this matter of fact way, that it was only a question of price annoyed him. After he had tried to save the little man's feelings, too.

"I am not to be bought," he announced gruffly.

The other applied a match to his cigar with cold deliberation. "I have been long enough in this world to know that every man is to be bought if the price can be paid," he said.

"You have still something to learn," retorted Labar acidly.

"As you like."

Gertstein fell again to pacing up and down the room. He had taken two turns when he came again to a halt. "As one gentleman to another," he said, "I want you to give me your advice. I can see that I have done you an injustice, and I apologise."

Labar noted the change of tone. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gertstein," he said with sincerity, "but I'm the wrong person to give advice. So much depends upon your own feelings

about your wife."

"Yes. I see. An old fool and a young woman. Well you can leave my feelings about Adèle out of the question. I've kept my eyes shut—wilfully shut. If she broke her neck tomorrow I wouldn't care. You could shut her up in prison for life and it would not hurt me." He spoke with level and dispassionate evenness. "But my name is my concern, and my wish is that it shall not be dragged in the dirt. I have been a nobody, Mr. Labar. I was born in Petticoat Lane, and my father was an old clothes dealer. What I am now I have made myself. I have friends among the highest in this and other lands. The name of Gertstein might have been among the peers of the realm had I wished. I have built it up. And it is because that woman bears my name that I will not fold my hands and watch it become the sport of every muck rake in the world. I would sooner see her dead at my feet." His bitterness appeared the more strange and deadly to Labar, because he seemed to have complete control of himself. It was as though he was speaking on behalf of some other person. The inspector shook his head slowly.

"I can do nothing," he said. "I must do my best to arrest her, and if that happens she must be tried."

"I suppose so," said Gertstein, thoughtfully. He muttered something to himself in Yiddish which Labar did not catch. "There is no way out. But if it could be, Mr. Labar, that she should not be tried? She might"—his voice dropped—"she might die. If for instance, she was arrested and the opportunity presented itself, she might prefer to die. I could write her a letter—"

The inspector held up a protesting hand. The millionaire had made his meaning sufficiently obvious, and hardened though he was, Labar was repelled by the suggestion.

"In plain words you wish me to allow her to commit suicide if she should fall into my hands."

"You are a hard man," protested Gertstein. "Cannot you see that so justice would be done? You will have done all that is consistent with your duty. You will have saved her and me the degradation of the gaol. You will have made a friend who could do much for you."

"Again, I am sorry. All this is futile, Mr. Gertstein," said Labar, and his lips set in a hard line. "I cannot swerve from my duty as I see it. You may rely upon me to save you as much as I can. But while I take my pay I do my job."

"Very well. You will let me know what happens."

With relief Labar saw that he had reached the end of the matter for the time. He rose. "Of course. Believe me, I hate this. There is one more thing. I suppose you don't recall a man in your service named Stebbins?"

Gertstein's small beady eyes fixed themselves steadily on the detective's face. "I don't know the names of half my servants," he observed.

"Ah, then I must find out from the butler or the housekeeper or someone."

The millionaire shook his head. "That is not fair, Mr. Labar. You can scarcely expect me to lift a finger to help you now. I cannot permit you to interview any of my servants, or rather I shall forbid them to answer any questions."

This was an unexpected twist, although at the bottom of his heart Labar saw logic in the other's attitude. "But this is childish," he protested.

Gertstein rolled the butt of his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Childish it may be," he agreed. "For my part I refuse to have anything more to do with your investigations. I am not going to help in dragging my own name in the mud."

It was clear that he was in no mood to alter his decision, through any argument that might be advanced. Labar took his leave without further pressure. There might be some trifling inconvenience from the ban, but he could not see that it was likely to interfere seriously with his plans. What, however, might prove embarrassing, was the fact that Gertstein himself now had an object in frustrating the work of the Criminal Investigation Department. Labar wondered how far he would go. There was something about the little man's manner that made the detective sure that he would not content himself with folding his hands and accepting whatever occurred.

This sort of speculation, however, could wait. There were other things that couldn't. One of these was Mr. Stebbins, the odd-job man who had been engaged at Streetly House on the recommendation of Hughes. Labar was a very weary man, but, if as he suspected, Stebbins was one of the keys to the mystery, it was of importance that he should be looked up before the inspector would be able to call it a day. Larry would no doubt learn of Mrs. Gertstein's disclosure and he was likely to act fast to get the fellow out of the way.

Malone had gone home when the inspector reached Grape Street. So it was to another sergeant that Labar gave the mission of seeking out Stebbins, while he himself spent half an hour going through the statements that had been collected from the Streetly House servants, to see whether, after all, his memory was at fault, and that he had seen the man. But there was nothing at all in the records. Labar yawned drowsily. This kind of thing had to be done, but its tedium bored him. He could put up with fatigue and hardship while it was a matter of action. But pinned to a desk, poring futilely over papers was silly. He let his hands drop to his arms on the desk and fell sound asleep.

It was after midnight that he was awakened by a discreet plucking at his sleeve. He yawned and brought his feet to the floor with a crash. Moreland, the Flying Squad inspector, was at his elbow.

"What's the trouble?" grunted Labar. "Hello, Moreland. Why aren't you tucked up in your little bed like all the other loafers?"

"Cut it out, Harry," snapped Moreland. "Pull yourself together. There's a bit of a row on. Lucky I was on hand, or you'd have had one of your people croaked."

The divisional detective inspector listened with grave face, as Moreland recited some of the evening's happenings.

The Flying Squad man, with a couple of his subordinates, had happened, in the course of another case on which he was engaged, to be in the dining-room of a little Soho restaurant, when the sergeant who had been sent out to find Stebbins, entered with a man who was unknown to Moreland. They had sat down at a table where a third man was already eating, and Moreland saw the sergeant introduced. Without hesitation the hand of the diner immediately sought a water carafe and aimed a terrific blow at Labar's sergeant. The blow had missed, but in a second the place was in an uproar and the two were rolling across an overturned table grappling with each other.

Moreland had dashed across the room in time to knock up a pistol, which exploded. To add to the confusion, an agitated Italian waiter had switched the light off. Only such light as could penetrate through the windows from the street illuminations reached the room. There was a chaos of struggling men for a while, and ultimately one wriggled free. Revolver in hand he gained the doorway with the detective in close pursuit. Firing wildly, he fled through a small by-street and through the open door of a house which let cheap rooms. At the top of the narrow stairs he paused, and defied the detectives, who by this time were reinforced by many uniformed police, to come nearer. Moreland had taken charge of affairs and, deciding that it was inadvisable to risk lives by a frontal attack, had left the house with a cordon drawn around it, and after a word with Labar's man had decided to fetch the divisional inspector himself.

Most of this he related hurriedly while they were racing towards the scene of the affray as fast as a taxicab could take them. Labar had no difficulty in surmising with fair accuracy the blanks in the story.

Their cab was halted at the entrance to a narrow street where a belt of uniformed men held back a thin crowd. They descended and pushed their way through, and the detective sergeant who had brought about the episode joined them.

"Well, Marr?" said Labar. "I suppose that's Stebbins up there?" He jerked his head to the dismal three-storeyed house where most of the eyes were focused.

"That's the man, sir."

"How did you locate him?"

In a few quick succinct sentences Marr told how he had tried to gain some information at Streetly House, and been told in the most polite manner that no questions would be answered. Then he had waylaid the servants' entrance and made himself friendly with such of the servants as passed in or out. He learned that on the day of the robbery Stebbins had complained of illness and had gone home. Since then he had not resumed his job at Streetly House, but he was known to be occasionally meeting one of the maids. Marr pressed his inquiries until he found one footman who had been on friendly footing with Stebbins, and who on occasion had been with him to eat at a Soho restaurant which the other frequented. Taking a long chance Marr had induced the footman to accompany him to the restaurant, where as luck would have it they found their man.

"Lucky for you that Mr. Moreland was there," commented Labar.

"He was fighting drunk, sir," explained the sergeant.

"Drunk or sober, we can't wait here all night," declared the inspector. "Find out if there's a skylight to the place. If so, two or three men had better try to get through other houses and take him from the rear. I'm going to see whether he's in a mood to talk to. We can't have one man hold us up like this."

"You're not going up those stairs, Harry," said Moreland. "It's sheer suicide."

"Oh, I'll be careful," said the other. "If he's drunk and in the dark it's odds against him touching me. Besides, I may persuade him to see reason."

"You're a headstrong fool," asserted Moreland with emphasis. "I guess I'll have to come along too, and dry-nurse you."

"No, you don't. You stay here and watch points. One man is quite enough. No sense in doubling the target."

The Flying Squad man grumblingly saw common sense in this. All the same as Labar quietly stole up to the narrow doorway and crept within, he collected two or three men and with them posted himself, so that a swift and sudden rush could be made after his friend if necessary.

It was almost pitch-black within. Labar felt his way along the wall till he came to the foot of the stairs and then paused to listen. He could detect no sound in the house. He dropped to his hands and knees and stealthily ascended the first step, registering a mental oath as it creaked under him. He remembered that he had failed to retrieve the pistol that he had lent to Dr. Ware. Well, that would not matter much. He was not relying on gunplay.

Inch by inch he crawled to the first landing and moved up the second flight. Not till he had reached the third flight, however, could he detect the sound of a man's hurried, irregular breathing. He flattened himself as closely as he could to the outline of the stair and waited, listening, for a second or two. Then he raised his voice sharply.

"Now then, my man, if you've had enough of this tomfoolery we'll finish the business. You don't want to be hung for murder, do you?"

He could in imagination visualise the figure at the top craning forward with ready weapon striving to pierce the darkness below. He instinctively braced himself for a shot.

A thick voice answered him. "You go away. Don't drive me too far. I don't want to do anybody any harm, but I won't be took."

It was something gained, at any rate, that the other had hesitated to shoot. That lonely vigil at the top of the darkened stairs had either sobered him or shaken his nerve. The inspector slowly wormed himself a step higher.

"Don't be a silly ass, Stebbins. It won't do you any good to kill me. Think what you'd feel like when they came to pinion you in the condemned cell." He crawled cautiously to a further step. "Think of the hangman adjusting the straps, and the parson reading the burial service."

"I can hear you moving," said the voice above, and Labar fancied that there was irresolution in the tone. "Don't you try no monkey business now."

"You'll have a white cap over your face," went on Labar, "and they'll take you out in a little procession—"

"Shut up," said the voice ferociously. "You can't frighten me."

"I don't want to frighten you," said Labar. "I don't think you're the kind of man to be frightened. You've got sense—not like some of those other fellows. Suppose you give me that gun and let me look after you. You'll trust me, won't you?"

There was no obvious reason why Stebbins should trust a detective who was trying to arrest him, but Labar did not feel that this was a time at which the other would consider the point deeply. He was concerned chiefly to hold the man in talk till such time as he was near enough to make a dash. If he could tackle the fellow round the knees, the steep flight of stairs would do the rest.

"And who the blazes are you?" demanded Stebbins.

The inspector mounted another stair. "I'm Divisional Detective Inspector Labar," he said. "I'm anxious to do the fair thing by you."

"What do you want me for?"

“I’ll tell you all about that later on.” Labar’s voice was coaxing. “Come on now. You throw me down that gun and we’ll have a talk.”

There was a pause. Labar was sure that he was almost within reach of his man, but his eyes could tell him nothing. It might be fatal to make a miscalculation.

Something fell behind him and clattered down the stairs. “There you are,” said the voice. “I’ll give in.”

The detective pulled himself to his feet, and groping forward felt an ankle. He moved up two or three steps and thrust his arm through the other’s arm. “I knew that you had common sense,” he declared amiably. “Half a moment till I strike a match. It’s as dark as the pit in here. We don’t want to break our necks.”

Together they emerged from the front door just as Moreland was thinking of organising a rescue party of one, and as the crash of glass behind them told of a smashed skylight.

XVIII

There was no charge made against Stebbins that night, and inquiries from the newspapers which were anxious to know more of the cause of the affray were met with a stubborn silence. Labar, in fact, had gone home after searching Stebbins carefully with his own hands. The rest he felt could wait till he had some reasonable time for sleep. A night's detention would do Stebbins no harm, and might put him in a frame of mind to answer some questions that Labar had decided to defer till his own mind was fresh.

With eight hours sleep, a bath, and a little medical attention to his hurt, the inspector felt almost as spruce as he looked, when he arrived at Grape Street in the morning. He cleared up a few odds and ends and had Stebbins brought to his room. In the cold light of day that man answered imperfectly to any conception of a desperate gunman. He was a loose, tall man with a thin sallow face and weak chin. He had neither shaved nor brushed his hair, and his shifty eyes were sunk in deep circles. He eyed Labar nervously, as the detective motioned away his escort, and placed a seat where the light from the window would fall on the detained man's face.

"Sit down," said the detective pleasantly. "Have a cigarette. You look pretty jagged this morning."

In silence Stebbins took the cigarette and seated himself with hunched shoulders on the chair that was indicated. Labar leaned forward and gave him a light.

"Had time to have a good think about things, haven't you? What made you fly off the handle last night? Bit jumpy, weren't you?"

"I can't remember anything about last night," said Stebbins. "Must have been drunk."

"Well, I wouldn't altogether say that." Labar's tone was that of friendly disagreement. He stirred a little paper package that lay on the edge of his desk with a long forefinger. "I guess you'd had a shot too much, but it wasn't drink, eh?"

"Right oh," agreed the other languidly. "I was doped."

"Want me to have that written down?" asked Labar. "You know I may have to use any statement you may make as evidence?"

"You've got me. I may as well shoot the whole works." He stretched out a shaking hand and Labar gently removed the package of heroin beyond reach. "Give me just a nip of that and I'll tell you where I got it."

"No. You must ask the doctor presently. Now tell me why you didn't skip as you were advised to?"

"Advised to?" Stebbins shook his head blankly.

Labar held a dirty piece of paper in front of him and read. "The point is full of the greatest possible interest to me. I shall be glad to see you at some time and discuss it

in detail. You will of course let me know when you are coming. These things can be settled so much more easily by word of mouth."

There was a gleam of intelligence in Stebbins' eyes that swiftly faded to be replaced by a sullen mask of bewilderment. "That's Greek to me," he declared.

"I thought you were going to come clean," observed Labar mildly. "Let me remind you of one or two things. I don't know what you've been doing this past eight or nine years, but if you've been going straight you'll get the credit, if you don't try to fool me. Now last night I sent your fingerprints to the Yard and had you looked up. You came out from a three years sentence nine years ago. Before that you had done terms in the States and one or two sentences of hard labour here. All of these are on record. Now this letter." He tapped the paper beneath his hand. "I don't know whether you've forgotten the properties of gum arabic, or whether you were too fuddled yesterday to make use of your knowledge."

He breathed on the paper and crossing to the grate scraped up some dust with his fingers and sprinkled it over the letter. Irregular block letters appeared between the lines and he thrust the slip beneath the face of the man.

"See that. 'Panjandrum says get out at once. Splits know of your business. Get under cover right away.' Now who sent you that? Who is Panjandrum?"

Stebbins puffed hard at his cigarette and his eyebrows drew together in an attempt at concentration. "Guess that was sent to me," he said slowly. "Perhaps someone slipped it to me. I dunno. I must have forgot it. If I'd read it I would have been where you wouldn't have found me."

"Who is Panjandrum?" repeated Labar.

"Panjandrum. Why! that'll be the boss. I don't know who he is. I've never seen him."

The inspector thought that quite likely. It was impossible that Larry had had any dealings direct with this drug-sodden crook. "Who put you up to this Streetly House business?" he demanded. "Tell me how you got into that."

"That," Stebbins reflected. "Oh, it was Billy Bungey who gave me the tip that I could get a job there. He got me some references and all. Say, there's a nice little bird at that place. She's a peach. You ought—"

"Did she have anything to do with this business?"

A languid gesture of denial met the question. "Oh, no. Not in that way. 'Course I learned a few things from her."

"Never mind about her for the moment then. Tell me how Billy came to ask you to bear a hand. What did you have to do, and how much did you get out of it?"

In stumbling and random phrases Stebbins told what the inspector believed to be a truthful story of his association with the robbery. It was difficult always to keep him to the point, and Malone who was laboriously writing down his statement in longhand clicked his tongue impatiently at times, as he waited with poised pen, until a few incisive questions from Labar had unravelled the tangle.

Stebbins was a type of a shiftless cunning species of crook which is well known to the Criminal Investigation Department. He was a drifter, weak and unscrupulous, lacking the imagination or skill of more successful rogues. Without leadership it was inevitable that any of his clumsy crimes, from smashing a jeweller's window to petty thefts in the suburbs, should bring him straight into the hands of the police. In this

manner had the terms of imprisonment which had been ferreted out from the records been brought to him. He had dodged hopelessly to the United States where he had also been harried, until the lapse of years had brought him back to this country, where as a minor thief he was nearly forgotten, to act when occasion offered as jackal to bolder and more enterprising spirits.

Billy Bungey, it appeared, had stumbled across him by accident at some race meeting, and learned that Stebbins—which of course was not his real name—was making a more or less precarious existence by washing windows at the Palatial Restaurant. There had been one or two small pilferings and Stebbins confided that he expected at any moment to lose his job.

With the spacious condescension of a race-gang leader to an inferior being Billy had hinted that he might find Stebbins profitable work. A meeting had been arranged to take place later at a public-house a few hundred yards from Blackfriars Bridge, and there it had been suggested to him that he might get an appointment as odd-job man at Streetly House. Billy even had his references all in order. Stebbins was to apply to the butler and to say that he was the man that Mr. Hughes had spoken about.

"You go and get this job, first," said Billy Bungey. "Then we'll talk about what we want you to do."

Stebbins told Labar that, up to that time, he had never even heard of the Gertstein collection—which was quite likely, since he moved in circles that would never dream of such a coup. However, he was accepted at Streetly House, and then Billy unfolded the plan to him in some part. He was to study the lay of the house particularly, to find out what steps were taken to protect the jewels, and in fact to learn every detail that could possibly assist in a raid. This he was to communicate to a Mr. Blake at the poste restante at Bruges.

"You'll get a tenner a week," explained Billy, "and five hundred pounds if the job is pulled off clean."

No hint was then given as to the time or method of the robbery. All instructions would reach Stebbins either by letter addressed to him at an accommodation address, or through Billy Bungey. It was pointed out to him that he must on no account seek out the latter unless sent for.

After a few days, a man whom Stebbins did not know, was introduced to him and he was given some instructions on the art of taking wax impressions of keys. He was to use his ingenuity to get an impression of every key that he could lay his hands upon, particularly of one of a small back door that was rarely used. He succeeded in this, and keys which were made from the impressions were sent to him to try. In one or two cases they had to be returned to be tinkered with afresh. At last all was ready and Stebbins was warned to throw up his job on the plea of illness. But the attraction of one of the maids had caused him to delay doing so. He was astonished to read of the burglary on the day that followed his retirement. The day after that he had been handed a parcel containing five hundred one pound treasury notes. These had reached him by a district messenger and there was no indication from whom they came. Nor, as he frankly said, was there any reason for him to make inquiries.

"And," demanded Labar, "you never saw anyone except Billy Bungey, and this fellow who talked to you about the keys?"

The prisoner made a jerky gesture of assent. "That's all I know."

The inspector took the statement from Malone and slowly read it aloud, now and again pressing home a fresh question to elucidate a point. Stebbins listened stolidly, and answered with ready frankness. Labar's face was inscrutable as he finished.

"This is a voluntary statement you understand," he said. "You are willing to sign it?"

"Absolutely," agreed Stebbins. "It's all true."

He affixed his signature and was taken below for the formality of the charge. He listened apathetically to the set official words in which he was accused. Then he was hurried away to Marlborough Street Police Court while Labar spent a few minutes on the telephone with Winter at Scotland Yard.

The Chief Constable was affable. "Yes, I heard that you had had a busy day. Not seriously hurt, I hope. That's all right. I'll be away down and see you in court. I suppose this man has got to be charged today. You know what that means? You'll have a horde of newspaper men on your tail. There's the usual gang here now playing solo whist, I believe, and waiting for something to turn up. Cheerio. See you some time in the next half hour."

Labar had hoped, but scarcely expected, more than he had got from Stebbins. There was certainly nothing in what Stebbins had said that could implicate Larry Hughes directly. Larry as usual had been remote, aloof from his lesser helpers. It was characteristic of his methods that he should have used this drug-sodden crook as a blind tool. He must have foreseen the possibility of Stebbins being traced, although he had taken every precaution against it. True, Stebbins knew that Billy Bungey was in the business, but Billy had not been known as an associate of the master criminal. If it had not been for the episode at "Maid's Retreat," Labar would never have considered the two together. There was no likelihood that inquiries which would have to be undertaken about the "Mr. Blake" of the Bruges poste restante would lead anywhere. No, the trail that might have led from Stebbins to Larry Hughes had been cleverly smothered. But for the coincidence of the intervention of Penelope Noelson and Mrs. Gertstein, the C.I.D. men might well have come to the conclusion that there was no hope of linking Hughes with the crime.

However, from that angle of the case the hunt was up with a vengeance. Labar bit his lips as he reflected that it was necessary to act swiftly if he was to lay Larry Hughes by the heels. The other would be moving. If there was any precaution that he had failed to take beforehand to neutralise evidence against him, he would of a surety be looking into it now. The trouble was that there was nothing which could lead to immediate action.

It is conceivable that this would have been a matter of less concern to the inspector had it not been for Penelope Noelson. Spite of himself, spite of his attempts at strict concentration on the immediate aspects of the case, he was alarmed for her. It should have been no concern of his to view her other than as an item in the sum of the case. His business lay in bringing home a crime to those responsible. The possible peril of one or another of the people involved in the matter should not be allowed to affect the main issue. Human nature, however, being much the same at Scotland Yard as at other places, his judgment was swayed to some extent.

He betook himself to Marlborough Street where he had to give formal evidence of the arrest of Stebbins and asked for a remand. The thing was over in five minutes and

he returned to the police station with Winter to have what the latter described as a heart to heart talk over the situation.

XIX

The days moved with leaden feet for Penelope Noelson. She had come to know every inch of space in the walled garden, and although she gazed wistfully through the iron bars of the gate again and again, no one ever came in sight. Always she felt that certain, if unobtrusive, surveillance over her every movement. The care with which she was watched was brought home to her when she took to dropping notes over the wall in the hope that they would be picked up by some stray wayfarer. Within half an hour they had been returned to her by Sophie Lengholm, with a veiled hint that she might be kept locked in her room if she persisted in trying to communicate with the outside world.

At night the great Alsatian wolfhound, of which she had caught a glimpse on the day of her arrival, patrolled the grounds. Not that that made any difference, for she knew that a key was turned in her lock every evening, although she did not know that Sophie Lengholm for reasons of her own, held the key.

Apart from these restrictions she had little to complain of but her loss of liberty. She saw strange men about the place on occasion and knew they had long interviews with Larry Hughes, but they never interfered with her. The servants were always courteous, but firmly reticent when she attempted to pump them.

Larry Hughes himself treated her with punctilious politeness on the whole, although there were passages in which the mask was lifted and she clashed with his savage and indomitable will. These episodes usually followed a repulsed attempt on his part to make love to her, and she had learned to meet them with a dignified retirement to her room.

She tried to meet her situation gracefully, but there were moments when horror had her by the throat. She was sickened by her own impotence to meet the march of an unknown destiny. Were the police seeking her as a fugitive thief? What was at the back of Larry Hughes' mind in regard to her? One thing was certain. She could not be held indefinitely as a prisoner in this spot. She contemplated the future with dizzy apprehension.

There came a day when no man moved about the house or grounds. Sophie Lengholm met her inquiries with the grim assurance that they would be back in a little. Penelope knew that she lied. She twisted her brains for some method of using the situation to her advantage. It was a case of woman to woman only. They were alone together, save only for the big Alsatian.

Other things being equal, Penelope knew that in a hand to hand encounter she would have no chance with the elder woman. She moved with apparent aimlessness about the house and grounds seeking for something that might serve as a weapon. At last her eye fell on a short and heavy poker in the dining-room, and she tested its bal-

ance and weight critically, although with a little shudder. She knew that if she permitted herself to think she would not have resolution enough to go on with the thing that was in her mind. But it was either that, or an unresisting acquiescence in anything that might befall.

She found Mrs. Lengholm in the kitchen, and making no attempt to conceal the poker which she carried, came straight to the point.

"I want the key of the wall gate," she said resolutely.

Sophie abandoned the table on which she was kneading dough, and brushed her fingers calmly.

"Why are you carrying that thing?" she asked imperturbably and nodded her head towards the poker which the girl was clutching with tightened fingers.

"You will let me out of this place," declared Penelope. "I don't want to hurt you, Mrs. Lengholm, but if you make me use force—" She moved a step towards the other woman.

Sophie's face set, and she made an angry gesture. "Don't be an idiot," she remonstrated. The girl with white face and tightened lips drew another step forward. She was afraid that her resolution might weaken. It was not that she lacked courage, but to strike the other in this way seemed to her like murder. But she told herself that she had to go through with it now.

The older woman retreated, and her lips puckered in a shrill and prolonged whistle. There was the sound of something pounding fiercely along the corridor and Penelope realised her oversight. She had forgotten the dog.

She wheeled abruptly to face the snarling animal and she heard a low chuckle from Mrs. Lengholm. The thing gathered itself for a leap and Penelope flung up her arm to ward off the attack, and instinctively closed her eyes. A sharp command from Sophie checked the dog, and it squatted on its haunches regarding the girl with fierce yellow eyes.

"I don't blame you," said Sophie, easily, as moving back to the table she resumed kneading the dough. "In your place I would probably have tried something of the same kind. If I were you I'd go and put that thing back, and settle down. It'll be easier for you if you are a good girl."

Penelope's fingers loosened, and the poker fell with a thud to the floor. There were tears of chagrin in her eyes.

"You go and lie down, and have a nice sleep, now," went on Sophie with motherly complacency. "You haven't so much to worry about, anyhow. No need to try and murder the only person about the place of your own sex. If I was gone, things might be so very much worse for you."

She spoke, as it might be, to a self-willed child. There was no suspicion of resentment in her tone, but rather a tolerant assumption that any outburst by the girl was foredoomed to failure. Penelope dropped into a chair, and her grave grey eyes scrutinised the other with deliberation.

"Where is this going to end?" she asked.

Mrs. Lengholm administered a final punch to the dough before replying. "I don't know," she confessed mildly. "Why don't you ask Mr. Hughes?"

"That snake! Ugh!" Penelope grimaced with conviction.

"He's got his faults," admitted Sophie, "but he has a great admiration for you. You could twist him round your little finger if you agreed to marry him. He's rich, he's good looking, he's got culture. You'd be better off than many a princess. I know the man, miss. If he sets his mind on a thing he gets it. He gets it by fair means if he can, but he gets it anyway. I have never known him fail in anything that he set his heart upon. It would be better for you to be dead than to hope to thwart him."

"I would rather die," asserted Penelope.

"You think you would. That's what the girls say in the novels. This is the real thing. You are dealing with a man who will stand at nothing. Believe me or not, Miss Noelson, I have tried to protect you. I can only go so far. If Larry Hughes takes the bit between his teeth—and he will sooner or later—there is nothing that can stop him. Take an older woman's advice, my dear. Marry him."

Penelope tilted her head defiantly. She had tried again and again to reach some point of intimate converse with this woman only to be met by polite formulas. Sophie Lengholm had adopted something of the neutral attitude of a warder towards a prisoner. She had confined herself to making the girl comfortable, and to seeing that she did not escape. Now, however, Penelope thought that she had penetrated her reserve.

"We are both women, Mrs. Lengholm. I don't know what hold this man has on you, but you wouldn't allow—"

Sophie wiped her hands on her apron. "It isn't what I would or would not allow, my dear. I can go so far; but there might come a point when Larry Hughes would crush me without a thought, if I stood in his way. No one can help you but yourself. The easy way out is to marry him. That isn't so terrible a thing as you fancy—unless there is someone else."

A faint blush stained Penelope's cheeks, which did not escape the quick eyes of the older woman. "There is no one else," she said hurriedly, "no one at all. But you must know how I feel. Now, if you are afraid of this man, why don't you go away? Why not come with me, now? I can't pay you anything, but I have friends who would protect you." She clutched impulsively at the skirts of the other who now stood near her. "Dear Mrs. Lengholm—"

Sophie shook her off, with a sudden change of manner. "I am not a sentimental child. Don't waste any of that kind of stuff on me. Here I am, and here I stay. You'd better go and find something to amuse yourself. I'm busy."

She turned abruptly away, and Penelope saw that further pleading would be futile. She accepted her dismissal with such philosophy as she could summon.

Most of the rest of that day she spent in her own room, Sophie without any request being made, bringing her her meals on a tray. It was towards evening that she took a stroll in the grounds, and the dullness of her thoughts was distracted by the hooting of a car at the gates. Sophie Lengholm heard it too, and moved swiftly out with the key in her hand. A minute more and Larry Hughes' Rolls Royce had drawn within.

Hughes himself was the first to descend. There was a blood stained contusion on his face that lent it an uncommonly sinister appearance. He seemed about to say something to her, but checked himself, and turned to the others who were pouring out of the car in grim silence. He grouped himself with others to assist one man down, and Penelope saw that bloodstained handkerchiefs enwrapped one of the feet of this

individual. He was assisted into the house by two of his companions, and then a woman appeared in the doorway of the car. Penelope gave a little gasp.

"Adèle!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Gertstein gave a sharp start. The next moment, half laughing and half crying, she had flung herself into the arms of the girl.

"Oh, Pen," she cried, and relapsed into dry sobs.

Larry Hughes turned a sour face upon them. "Take her into the house," he ordered. "Here, Sophie, we've another guest for you. Give Miss Noelson a hand. And get out some brandy. We can all do with a drink."

Penelope's curiosity was all aflame, but for the moment she dared not ask questions. She walked with Adèle Gertstein and Sophie Lengholm into the morning-room, and there Sophie left them, returning in a little with a small glass which she forced into Mrs. Gertstein's hands. Then again she disappeared, apparently to carry refreshments to the men in an adjoining room.

Mrs. Gertstein sipped silently, while Penelope waited till she should have somewhat recovered herself. What crisis had brought her friend to that place in Larry's company, was a question on which she could not but hazard mental speculation. From what she knew and guessed, the notion that at last the police had hit on something near the truth occurred to her as a wild probability. Or it might be that Adèle had been abducted in much the same way as herself, as a measure of precaution by Hughes. That was the more likely. She tried to think how it might affect her own case. Did it bode good or evil for her?

As she finished the brandy, Mrs. Gertstein's drooping shoulders straightened up, and her dull eyes brightened. She slipped off her coat and hat and threw them nonchalantly to the floor.

"Have you a cigarette, Pen?" she asked. "I've had the very devil of a time."

XX

"Allow me, madam."

Larry Hughes stood beside them, a gold cigarette case open in his hand. He had entered so silently that neither of them had heard him. Mrs. Gertstein delicately selected a cigarette, and he offered the case to Penelope who shook her head. He showed his white teeth in a smile.

"We three should have no secrets from each other," he said blandly. "We are now allies in a common cause—our own safety. The harsh and brutal methods of your friend Mr. Labar, Miss Noelson, have resulted in my offering harbourage to this lady here. I am sure that you will be as delighted as I am to have her company on our travels."

"Travels?"

"Where are—"

Both women spoke simultaneously. He held up a slim white hand. "Don't be alarmed. We are safe enough for the moment. I doubt if Scotland Yard knows where we are within fifty miles. But I have enough respect for them to suppose that they will some time or other find out. In plain words they are likely to make the place too hot for me—for us. So we shall leave this place within the next day or two, as soon as I am able to make arrangements.

"I must let Solly know that I am safe," said Mrs. Gertstein.

His smile contorted into a contemptuous sneer. "Your amiable and anxious husband has no doubt had a story told him by Labar by this time," he said. "He will be under no great concern as to your safety. He will believe that you have eloped with me."

Adèle Gertstein started to her feet and her eyebrows drew together. "You beast," she said.

He waved his hand impatiently. "My dear girl," he said, "I have always been tempted to admire your beauty rather than your brains. I am stating a fact. You elected to come away with me. What can your estimable Gertstein think?"

"I don't care what he thinks. I shall write to him this minute," she retorted.

"If I didn't know you so well, I might think that you were in love with your husband," he declared. "Upon my soul I am beginning to be sorry I cluttered myself up with you." He menaced her fiercely with a forefinger. "How long do you think it would be after you had written to him, before Labar would have you in the dock? What is it that the police want you for? Attempted murder! Forgery! Do you think that the detectives will not be watching to get a line on you? You poor fool! From now on you will not lift a finger without my permission, or I will throw you to the police." He banged his fist fiercely on to a table and glared at her. "Do you get that? Ten,

perhaps fifteen years in Aylesbury. That's what is waiting for you if you start any funny business."

She flung up an arm as though she feared a physical assault, and indeed during his tirade it seemed as though he was restraining himself from striking her only by an effort. "I didn't understand, Larry," she said, shrinking from him. "Of course you are right. I will do whatever you say."

"I think you will," he returned grimly. "I think you will eat out of my hand before I am finished with you."

He turned with an abrupt change of manner to Penelope. "I am sorry to have inflicted this scene upon you, Miss Noelson. It is necessary that people who deal with me should know where they stand."

There was an inflection in his tone that told her she might apply the lesson to herself. She met the hint scornfully.

"I have had some examples of your methods," she retorted.

"Then I hope that they have not been lost on you," he replied, and thrusting his hands deep in his pockets walked from the room.

It was a minute or two before either woman spoke. Then Mrs. Gertstein flung the stub of her cigarette through the open window. "What a devil that man is," she observed. "How did you come to get here, Pen?"

"Never mind about that," said Penelope. "He may be back at any moment. Tell me, is it true what he said? Are you escaping from the police?"

The eyes of Mrs. Gertstein avoided her. "In a way—yes," she confessed in a low voice. "I've got into a mess, Pen."

"And it is for attempted murder as well as for the forgery of that cheque?"

"I didn't mean anything, Pen. Don't look at me like that. Honestly I didn't. Things just happened. I was mad. Oh, Pen, if you knew what I've gone through."

Adèle Gertstein felt sincerely sorry for herself. She turned an appealing face to Penelope. The other girl regarded her inquiringly.

"Who was it that you tried to kill?" she asked.

"A detective man. He had found out about—about the cheque I cashed. I was out of my mind. I didn't know what I was doing."

"Detective Inspector Labar—the man you got me to pass a note to?"

The other's attitude underwent a swift transition. "Don't you question me in that tone, Penelope Noelson," she exclaimed with sudden asperity. "What right have you to judge me? I employed you out of charity and now that things are going against me, you think that you can bully me." She stamped her foot. "I won't have it. Who are you to put on airs and graces with me?"

It was as though she had not spoken. Penelope's eyes were fixed upon her, but they seemed to look right through her. She got to her feet with an air of calm detachment that hid an intensity of feeling, and gripped Mrs. Gertstein's arm.

"Is he dangerously hurt?" she asked. "Tell me the truth." Her fingers bit deep in the soft flesh of the other woman. "You have done enough harm as it is. Now tell me."

Their eyes fought for domination for an instant. The grip on Mrs. Gertstein's arm tightened, and she saw that in Penelope's face that she had not seen before.

"It was an accident," she said slowly as though the words were dragged from her. "I never meant it. I had a knife in my hands and he—"

"Is he dangerously hurt?" persisted Penelope.

"No. It was nothing, Penelope. Just a small cut. I swear it. Why, an hour later he was chasing us in a car. I am sure that he was not hurt."

Penelope released her arm. "That is all right, then," she said steadily. "There is only one thing for you to do. At the first chance you must give yourself up. I don't know how it is to be managed, but you must do it."

The other woman recoiled from her, her face showing her emotion. "No," she declared. "I should be mad to do a thing like that. You are mad to suggest it."

"And if you don't," cried Penelope, something of her restraint falling from her, "in what kind of a position will you be? You will be a hunted woman—the slave of every whim and caprice of this man, Larry Hughes. Do you think that you will not be caught sooner or later, and what construction will be put on your flight? Even if the police do not get you, what kind of a life will be yours? Do you believe that Larry Hughes will save you at any risk to himself? Much better to face it all out now than put yourself farther in the wrong."

Mrs. Gertstein shuddered. "I know," she exclaimed. "But, Pen, can't you see I dare not? I should have to go to prison. It would be too terrible." She wrung her hands. "I would rather die. They would have taken me to gaol then, if I hadn't come away with Larry. He is my only chance. I must stick by him. After all, the police don't catch everybody. If I could get abroad—to South America or somewhere. I could live quietly there, until it was all forgotten about."

Penelope dropped the discussion abruptly. It was no use trying to present the stern logic of facts to this frightened and harebrained woman. She was sickened, but she had some sympathy with the panic in which Mrs. Gertstein was caught. It might be as she said that there was a real chance of escape for her, although the girl viewing the position with a detached and more clear sighted appreciation of the facts, thought it a tenuous one.

She felt that her own plight had become more delicate in some ways. Her sense of loyalty to Mrs. Gertstein had been shaken, but it was not absolutely shattered. It was one thing to advise her to give herself up; it was quite another actively to betray her either voluntarily or under pressure. Penelope knew that, if she did at any time manage to escape, that questions would be put to her by the police—questions designed so that the answers should lead them not only to Larry Hughes but to Mrs. Gertstein. She had suffered much already in trying to protect the other woman, but she could not bring herself to contemplate aiding to bring her to justice. Yet the only alternative was to stay by her. That, if they were to submit to Larry Hughes' will, was still more unthinkable.

"Well, Adèle," she said, quietly, "we will talk about it later on. You are not yourself now. I wonder if Mrs. Lengholm has got a room for you? You will need a rest."

She pressed a bell, and Sophie, whose face was a little less serene than usual, stalked into the room. Penelope put a question.

"If you don't mind," said Sophie, "we'll have to put an extra bed in your room, Miss Noelson. You see our accommodation is rather limited."

"Then we shall be together. That will be fine," said Mrs. Gertstein and allowed Sophie to lead her away.

Penelope picked up a book, although she was in little mood for reading. But she was apparently engrossed in its pages when Larry Hughes put his head in ten minutes later. He nodded without saying a word and stole quietly away.

An idea had taken root in his mind, and he was not the man to waste time in putting any project into execution. Mrs. Gertstein had barely had time to begin to repair the ravages of her toilet with the help of Sophie Lengholm ere he sent for her. She came into the room he called his study, a little defiantly, a little frightened. He motioned her to a chair.

"We're too old friends to quarrel, Adèle," he began in his silken modulated voice. "I want to apologise for the way in which I spoke to you just now. It was unforgivable."

She stretched out a small shoe and contemplated it with a smile. One could almost have said that she was purring. "That's all right, Larry. I was an ungrateful little fool. I was a little strung up."

She looked sideways at him, and he stroked his lip with his hand to hide a smile. Even at this juncture in her affairs she could not resist the opportunity to attempt to flirt.

"That's all right, then. So long as we're friends again." He leaned back in his chair. "The fact is, Adèle, that I've come to the point at which I want the advice and help of a woman of the world."

"So." She smiled languorously at him. "That's a compliment. And yet you said a little while ago that you always admired my beauty rather than my brains."

There was no sting in the reproof. He laughed lightly. "Did I say that? The brandy must have made me peevish. You don't realise how highly I regard you in a thousand ways."

"Did you call me down to make love to me?" she countered. "I thought you had got over that long ago." Her face suddenly hardened. "At least you turned our affair to your financial advantage, didn't you?"

A little puzzled frown appeared on his forehead. Larry Hughes would have made a great actor. "Financial advantage? I don't get you, my dear girl."

She stiffened a fraction. "According to that detective person, you were behind the man who was blackmailing me."

"And you believed that? Good Lord!" He contrived to inflect into his voice just the right mixture of amusement and astonishment at her credulity. "If I were that kind of dirty skunk, why should I try to shelter behind someone else? Did I ever strike you, Adèle, as a man who would be afraid of coming out into the open in a case like that?"

"Do you mean that he invented that story?"

"Invented it. That's one of the oldest tricks of the police detective. He wanted to embitter you against me. I give you my word of honour, Adèle. You'll believe me, won't you?"

"Do you know it never struck me in that way," she said reflectively. She thrust out a hand towards him which he affected not to see. "Of course I believe you, Larry."

"I am glad of that." He gave a convincing sigh of relief. "Now, Adèle, I want you to help me. It's about Penelope Noelson."

"You've not fallen in love with her, have you?" she asked with a little laugh. "By the way, what is she doing here?"

He looked at her thoughtfully before replying. “Couldn’t you guess that?” he said steadily. “She is here because I intend to marry her.”

Adèle Gertstein drew herself bolt upright. “Marry her,” she repeated harshly. “You say she is going to marry you?”

“The same thing. I am going to marry her.”

Her face betrayed the complexities of emotions that were in her mind. A quarter of an hour before she would have dismissed from her mind as an absurdity the idea that she was still in love with Larry Hughes. But now her vanity was touched at his airy assumption that she would calmly accept the defection of the man she had once made a conquest. Had she lost all her attraction?

She burst into laughter—ironical bitter laughter. “That grey mouse,” she said. “You want to marry her! It is comic.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it possible,” he said gravely. “I believe you are doing me the honour to be jealous.”

“Of that doll,” she exclaimed. “Me jealous of Penelope Noelson. It struck me as funny, but otherwise it is a matter of complete indifference to me.”

Larry tried to follow the trend of her mind. He could not determine whether she was moved by pique, or whether she was actually a jealous woman. None knew better than he how difficult it was to probe the fluky and irresponsible motives which swayed her with every passing mood. If he was to enlist her for his purposes he must by some means or other overcome this unexpected antagonism.

He laughed easily. “I was joking, of course, Adèle. If you were a free woman—but it is no good thinking about that. To tell you the truth, Adèle, I am forced to this. Your safety as well as mine depends on closing the mouth of this girl. There are two ways. The one is marriage.”

She thrust forward a strained face. “And the other?”

“The other—” He beat his foot on the floor in a nervous tattoo. “I won’t consider the other, Adèle, till I have tried all other means. That will have to be the last thing. If I can induce her to marry me she cannot, even if she would, give evidence against us. As for falling in love with her”—he made a quick gesture of scorn—“that is the last thing on earth that I am likely to do. There has only been one woman with whom I have ever been in love. In any case this will be a marriage only in name.”

As he watched her he congratulated himself that he had struck the right note. Mrs. Gertstein sat with chin cupped in her hand thinking, or rather trying to think. It was a few moments before she spoke.

“Is Penelope willing to marry you?”

Larry smiled wrily. “I doubt it. But I think with a little persuasion you will be able to overcome her scruples. She will see that there is nothing else for it in time.”

“I don’t see why I should go out of my way to help you in this,” she said. “It’s your own business, Larry.”

There was indecision in her voice. The man shook his head as though with amused tolerance at the slow comprehension of a dull child. “My dear woman, it is the business of all of us—of you particularly. She knows much too much. Where will you be, if I am landed in the dock? We have all got to hang together or hang separately. I am not asking you to do me a favour. I am asking you to help save yourself. The prison doors are not far away from you, Adèle. You can take your choice.”

That threat clinched the matter as Larry Hughes expected it would. With all her futility of brain Mrs. Gertstein had a strong instinct for self-preservation. That alone would smother any lesser feelings she might have, even her hurt vanity or her sense of friendship for the girl who had been loyal to her. Her course was straight in front of her, and in taking it she reckoned nothing of the consequences to anyone but herself.

"You are right, Larry," she said. "I'll do all that I can to make her see reason."

"Good girl." He stood over her and patted her on the shoulder. "We'll pull things off together yet. You had better go and find her and see what you can do."

He laughed quietly to himself as she left the room. She was tied to him too closely now to deliberately play him false. And, he reflected, once he had safely steered his way out of danger from Scotland Yard there might be fat pickings to be made from old Gertstein if he played his cards aright.

XXI

Although perhaps the most spectacular, in reality the most simple of the problems that arise at Scotland Yard is the pursuit of a known man for a known crime. A criminal may escape if there is nothing to link him with an offence, but once a link is established it is long odds that, hide where he may, pursuit will catch up with him at last. The whole world is aroused to the hue and cry. He may disguise himself, he may flee to the ends of the earth, but even if persistent methodical search fails to reveal him, some chance will almost to a certainty lead to his betrayal.

Harry Labar's perspective, from his closeness to affairs, was not quite so clear in this matter as Winter's. That veteran did not conceal his satisfaction at the manner in which the investigation was developing.

"You've got Larry Hughes out into the open at last, my boy," he said. "All you have to do now is to worry him. Keep him on the run. Things are coming your way. Don't let any slack fit come along and spoil it all."

"Yes, sir." Labar received the compliment with meekness. It was something anyway to get a compliment out of the Chief Constable. "But we haven't got anything yet that will associate him with the robbery. Stebbins may help us to get at Billy Bungey. There is Mrs. Gertstein. There is Gold Dust Teddy. So far we're to the good. But we haven't got the solid evidence yet that will lead to a conviction of the main guy. He's slippery as an eel and you know it, sir."

Winter chuckled. "Don't come that on me, Labar. Trying to establish an alibi in case things go wrong, are you? Going to get all the little fish and let the big one slip through the net? Same old story about Larry. Well, it doesn't go down with me. You've got to get Larry. See if you can't get him for the Gertstein job, hook him up for the 'Maid's Retreat' trouble. Only get him."

"I'm going to get him, sir," returned the inspector, with an inflection in his voice that caused Winter to glance at him shrewdly through his spectacles. "I've just a little personal feeling in this matter, and I'm going through with it."

Winter was looking idly at the ceiling. "Nice girl that Miss Noelson, they tell me," he said absently. "Doesn't always do to mix sentiment up with our business, though, Labar."

A slight tinge of colour crept under the tinge of Labar's tan. He wondered how the other had got to learn of something that he felt was a secret rigorously locked in his own breast. Perhaps the Chief was only guessing. "I don't know much about the young lady," he returned. "She's a nice girl, as you say. But you can rely that nothing will interfere with my duty."

The thin relic of a smile still loitered about the Chief Constable's lips as he nodded. "Don't mind an old hand giving you a hint, do you? There's another thing. When does

Myson get back from his holidays?"

Myson was a detective inspector who had not yet reached divisional rank, who was the senior of the C.I.D. men in Labar's division. Labar consulted a pad.

"Ought to be back in a week's time," he said. "He offered to come back when this thing broke, but I didn't think it was worth while bothering him."

"He's got a pretty sound idea of how things are in your division I take it?"

"I think so."

"Right. Wire him to come back at once. He'll have to take charge of all matters here. After this you'll play a lone hand on this job. You'll want your mind free of everything else if you're going to play the game out with Larry."

The divisional inspector looked a little doubtfully at his chief. "I hope you don't think that—"

"That you can't run the division, and handle this case too. I do think so. I don't want you to fall between two stools. You want your mind free for this business now it's got so far. You're still the divisional inspector here, but Myson will act until you want to take the reins. Go and find where Larry's hideout is and it won't matter whether you are away a week or a month."

"That certainly ought to make it simpler," said Labar, and with a curt and not unfriendly nod the Chief Constable was gone.

Labar drew up the copy for a double crown poster headed with the sinister big black letters affected by the police for bills of this kind—"WANTED."

Then with such skill in portraiture as he possessed, added to the scientific formula for these matters, he drew a word picture of Billy Bungey, and sent the resulting composition along to the Criminal Record Office with the request that any amendments might be made and a photograph added if possible, before it was sent to the printing department which is one of the subsidiary departments of the Yard.

He dictated a wire to Myson, and began clearing his desk with a mind from which a weight had been lifted. For there was no denying, as Winter had said, that the Larry Hughes business was one that ought to demand his full attention. In the normal way it would have gone to a chief inspector, who would have had no other duties to distract his mind while the case lasted.

That done Labar sat down to study a large scale map of the southeastern corner of England. He had sound reasons for supposing that Hughes was somewhere in that angle formed by Kent and Sussex. The Rolls Royce car in which Penelope Noelson had been abducted, had been traced for many miles along the Hastings road. Larry's dash to London and to "Maid's Retreat" convinced the detective that the hiding place wherever it might be was within a hundred miles from London. He explored the map with his forefinger. There were dozens of places along remote roads where concealment might be effective. But Labar washed out a great many of these as improbable. He had already circularised the police forces of the area in which he felt that the fugitives might be located. Larry had been using his car, and a Rolls Royce in a country lane would be even more conspicuous to a village constable, than the same car on one of the main roads. Labar had a list of every Rolls Royce that had been seen about the area he was searching since Larry's flight. Those of which the numbers had been taken had for the most part been identified, and wiped out. There remained several which might or might not have been Larry's.

There had been five such cars seen on the Folkestone—Rye road. One constable reported that a shepherd on the Romney Marshes had told him of a big car—which the police officer believed might have been a Rolls Royce—seen twice on a derelict stretch of road leading into the marshland.

Labar bent his mind to this point. It seemed the most promising of all to start from, although it might, as so often happens in these cases where a man is acting more or less on guess work, prove nothing but a mare's nest. But if a man wanted to keep out of the way what better place of refuge could he find than these same desolate Romney Marshes.

With Myson in charge at Grape Street, other ends of the investigation in London could for the while be left to themselves. Labar decided that with two men he could rake the district as effectively and more quietly than if he had a dozen. If his guess was right, it would not do to disturb Larry.

That evening, with a suitcase and a bag of golf clubs, he descended on the medieval town of Rye. A golfer or an artist would find himself entirely without question at the ancient Cinque Port Town. For his own purposes Harry Labar was a naturalist as well as a golfer, and he proposed to examine the flora and fauna of the marshes with some precision ere he returned to town.

He did not go to one of the old hostelries where visitors might have become curious and friendly. He took humble lodgings at the house of a retired Metropolitan police constable who might be relied upon to keep his mouth shut in any circumstances. Also it is regrettable to record that Labar's first night in town was spent in the cheaper kind of four ale bars in the society of local shop assistants, shepherds, and watermen. They found the gentleman from London, whose name it was disclosed was James May, an hospitable and genial person with a thirst for information about the districts that lie northeast of Rye which was not easily assuaged.

It was six o'clock the next morning when an unshaven man clad in a rough old suit of Harris tweeds, who might have been a tramp or a naturalist set out through the old town gate in the general direction of Folkestone. A burly man in a decrepit Ford car passed him just outside the Ypres Tower. It was Malone also setting out on the search for a needle in a haystack. No sign of recognition passed between the two men. Labar trudged on and in the course of the next hour was overtaken by an early charabanc on its way to Folkestone. He stopped it and bought a lift for half a dozen miles or so.

He had no fixed plan. If anything came of this excursion luck would have to be with him. Away on his right he could see mile after mile of flat country cut into patterns by a complicated series of dykes, and save for a rare farmhouse or cottage almost void of any indication of human inhabitants.

At a point which he had marked on a small pocket map he descended. He was some few miles from Lydd, but across the wide stretches of marsh and cornland there was only one low and inconspicuous building which a weather-beaten sign announced as an inn, "Licensed to sell by retail wines, spirits, beer and tobacco." How it might find sufficient customers to support it in that forsaken region Labar did not stop to inquire. He had already had breakfast, but that was two hours agone and an able-bodied detective can always support two breakfasts in the course of his duty. Anyway it was too early in the day for any other pretext to serve.

An old, old man pottering about the garden was very dubious. The inn did not lay itself out much for early meals. However if mister could put up with tea and eggs he would consult his wife as to what might be done.

Tea and eggs it appeared were the very things for which the wayfarer had an inordinate craving. He was afforded a seat in the one bare public room that the inn boasted, while an old lady with crinkled cheeks began to fussily spread a somewhat stained cloth, and to issue instructions to the old man who was boiling the eggs in the adjoining room.

"A lonely neighbourhood this," observed the inspector idly.

"There be worse," said the woman. "Mind ye, John, to keep an eye on the clock. Them eggs should be on not a mite longer than two and a half minutes. Yes, there be more lonely places than this. Out there on the marsh"—she jerked a thumb backwards over her shoulder—"there be places where you won't see a human soul week in and week out. Here we get plenty of company, what with the lookers and the traffic on the road. We've lived here nigh on forty years and we ain't got no complaint. Leastways its bad for the rheumatics sometimes, and my old man there he has a touch of ague."

She bustled out with the remark that she couldn't trust that durned old fool to look at the clock, and continued the conversation through the open door.

"Reckon you'll be making for Folkestone. 'Tis a tidy walk."

"No. I'm staying at Rye. I've come out to have a walk over the marshes."

She loomed out a bulky figure framed in the doorway. "Then you baint lookin' for work? You be a visitor? A gentleman?"

"I'm what they call a naturalist. I want to have a look at the plants and birds and things round about. I thought of walking across towards Dungeness."

She cocked her hands on her hips. "I know what a naturalist is," she said nodding wisely. "You pick slimy things out of the dicks and keep 'em in little bottles. We've had gentlemen out here before like that. Lor-a-mussy, John, them eggs will be as hard as bricks."

In a panic she flung back into the kitchen, and presently she set his meal before him.

"You baint thinkin' of trying to walk straight across, be you?" she asked. "You'll be in a turble tangle if you do. Like as not, you'll lose yourself. Looks clear enough, but, when you get out in it, you'll find dicks and sluices and whatnot, all ravelling you up like. Then as you get out near the Ness you'll find the walking not too good."

Labar swallowed a mouthful of hard-boiled egg. "I can find a road, I suppose."

She shook her head. "They baint what you might call proper roads. Rough tracks most of 'em."

"Not good enough for a motor car, eh?"

She considered doubtfully. "I've knowd cars use some of 'em. But they do tell me as they shake the innards all up."

He led her to a discussion on the topography of the marshes in which the old man came and joined. By the time his breakfast was finished he had extracted much information that might be indirectly useful in his quest, but nothing bearing directly upon it. The only point that they were unanimous upon was that it was a foolhardy thing for a stranger to explore the marshes without a guide. It was odds that if he persisted he would have to spend a night in the "hand-cold" and mist-sodden atmosphere.

Laughingly he waved aside their warnings and since one road was like another for his purpose set off across the nearest marsh track in the general direction of Dungeness. An hour's walking on the lonely wastes convinced him that the old folk knew what they were talking about. His map and pocket compass helped him only vaguely, for as he branched into deeper recesses there were twists and tangles, tracks that came to an abrupt nothingness, and unexpected watercourses that barred his way. Once or twice he located himself by the aid of occasional "lookers," as the shepherds of the district are locally known. After all, it did not much matter whether he went in one direction or another. He wished there were more shepherds. If there had been a big motor car traversing these rough tracts one or the other of them would surely have seen it.

Many hours went by, however, and all his inquiries met with negative result. He was by now completely lost. An hour had gone since he had seen a living soul and he sat down to eat a sandwich, with which he had had the forethought to provide himself, and to consider the position.

He was tired and the sun was hot. He stretched himself for a short nap after his frugal repast. When he awoke he glanced at his watch and swore to himself as he realised that he had slept for over two hours.

He stood up and stretched himself, and then suddenly dropped at full length in the coarse grass and stared intently across the marsh about which a slight haze was already beginning to rise.

Something less than a mile away a car was slowly making its way. The distance was too great for him to discern anything more than that it was a big saloon, but he had not the slightest doubt that it was the very car that he was seeking. It was utterly improbable that any other would be risking its springs in this desolate region.

He lay very still till the motor disappeared from sight. Then he took a compass bearing to the point at which he had seen it. He stuck his stick in the ground and tied a handkerchief to it, to afford him a very necessary point from which to work, for by now he knew that it might cost him three miles of roundabout walking to make his way to the spot even though it was under a mile away in a straight line. Then he set off.

Again and again he had to retrace his steps, to find some way of crossing the many dykes, and he was duly thankful that he had had the intelligence to make an improvised flag which afforded him a definite clue to his starting point in the dreary sameness of the marsh. Something over an hour of tedious walking it took him to cover the distance. At last a hazardous journey over a slimy plank brought him to a narrow and almost imperceptible roadway. And there imprinted on the turf were the slight but unmistakeable tyre marks of a big motor car.

Labar whistled cheerfully as he bent to examine them.

XXII

The conveniences of civilisation are rarely noticed until they are missed. Harry Labar would have given much to have had a telephone within convenient access just then. He regretted that he had not hunted in company with Malone instead of separating to widen the search. He had little doubt that if he followed the car tracks back he must come sooner or later upon the retreat of Larry Hughes and his followers. But what then? What chance would he stand if he essayed any step singlehanded against this gang of armed and desperate men?

His common sense told him to go back to obtain reinforcements from the Kent Constabulary or even to wire to Scotland Yard. But he had no idea how long it would take him to walk out of the marsh, let alone to get in touch with aid. Many hours at the best was certain. Meantime Larry and his friends might slip out of the trap—for all he knew, they might have done so already. Every minute might be valuable.

He felt that he was behaving like an impetuous and foolish youngster as he bent his head to follow the tyre tracks in the direction from which the car had come.

The mist grew thicker as he trudged on. A damp seafog was sweeping up from the channel and he shivered beneath his old tweeds. But for the track he must have inevitably become lost for it soon became impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. Once he paused to do a queer thing. He walked deliberately in the muddy slime of a dyke till his boots were covered with mud. He twisted his slouch hat into a ball and trod on it. With his penknife he started little holes in his jacket and trousers, and tore at them with his fingers till the already shabby suit had become even more dilapidated. A handful of dirt applied to edges of the rents added to their verisimilitude. One of the best dressed men at Scotland Yard had become a perfect specimen of a down-at-heels tramp.

He reasoned that should any unexpected encounter take place in the fog with any of Larry's people he might thus elude recognition. It might be a superfluous precaution, but it was as well to be prepared.

So he moved on, slowly, because it was necessary to watch the trail closely. He reckoned that he had been following the tyre tracks for an hour and a half when a shadowy outline ahead told him that he was within a few yards of some building. His pulse moved a beat quicker as he discerned a yard or two in front of him ghostly tall iron gates. They were solid enough as he reached out to touch them and a second's investigation told him of the padlock with which they were secured.

As he stood considering his next move there was a quick yelp. Then a huge form magnified by the mist to gigantic dimensions, hurled itself with a low snarl at the bars. Lucky, too, it was for Labar that the gate stood between him and the Alsatian. The gate shook with the impact, and swiftly and silently as a shadow Labar leapt away.

He groped his way round the wall that surrounded the grounds while the dog whimpered and snarled. His wits were moving fast. He had recognised a breed of dog much favoured for police purposes, and he knew that unless he took precautions right away his discovery was inevitable.

He made a right angled swerve away from the house. He blessed the dykes that had bewildered him during the day. There must be one somewhere at hand. He must find it before the house was aroused and they turned the dog loose. He tripped over a knot of tufted grass and came down on hands and knees into six inches of water. Recovering himself he pushed forward through mud and weeds into the ditch. It passed through his mind that some of these dykes had water ten feet deep, and that the weeds could baffle the most accomplished swimmer. That was a risk which there was no time to consider. He pushed forward and the mud dragged at his ankles.

Behind him he could hear the mutter of men's voices and someone speaking to the dog. In the strange way in which fog sometimes carries sound he heard the snap of the gate padlock and the whimper of the dog as it thudded through in eager pursuit. He was up to his waist by now, and he turned and waded along the stream for a few yards. The wolfhound drew nearer, and Labar nerving himself dropped to his knees and wondered if it became necessary how long he might be able to keep his head below water.

The dog reached the edge of the dyke, and came to a halt whining anxiously. A man's figure loomed up beside him and a moment later two more.

"Whoever it was has got across," said a voice that the detective did not recognise. "No use going any farther in this fog."

"That damn dog's seeing things," grumbled another voice, and this time Labar identified the tone of Billy Bungey. "If there was anything at all it was a sheep. Who's likely to get out here in a peasoup like this. Call your tripe hound off and let's get inside. I'd got three aces, and I looked like winnin' a pot for the first time for an hour."

"Oh, curse your poker," cut in the third voice brusquely. "That dog doesn't make mistakes. Listen."

They waited breathing heavily. One of them moved along the dyke in an opposite direction to Labar and looked into its depths. A bullock came out of the fog and peered at him.

"There's your ghost," he said mockingly.

"And how did he get across the dyke?" questioned another.

"Anyway, whoever it was won't come back," said Billy Bungey. "Come on, let's chuck it."

The little group moved away, one of them holding the restless hound, and Labar waiting till he heard the gate clang, dragged himself, sodden to the skin, from the ditch. The presence of the Alsatian at the house had complicated matters. If he was to achieve anything on this excursion it had to be dealt with. While it held its vigil within the precincts of the house he could scarcely hope to approach unnoticed.

Nevertheless he determined to have another try. It would be maddening to get so far and have to return with nothing done. He strode stealthily in what he imagined to be the direction of the house. The fog had stiffened even more, and now it was scarcely possible to see a foot-pace in front of him. Something stirred a pace or two to his right hand and halting in his tracks he turned his face in that direction and peered into the

mist. He thought he could see an indistinct mass low on the ground. Could it be that after all the pursuit had not been given up? On the instant he sprang at whoever or whatever it was.

A frightened half-muffled scream and he was grappling with some unresisting and yielding body. Then he half-understood and abandoned his grip with a shock of surprise.

"Good heavens, a woman! Miss Noelson! You!"

"Mr. Labar!" She stared at him, as though at some apparition.

A sudden clamour broke out at the house. She was on her feet now, and clutched wildly at his hand.

"They have found out that I have gone. They were holding me there a prisoner. When the dog gave the alarm just now they left the gate open and I slipped out. You mustn't let them catch me again. Come." She dragged at his hand. "We must get away."

It was no time for full explanations. Hand in hand they turned and fled heedlessly into the white blanket of the fog. The dyke that had served Labar so well barred their progress. He swung the girl in his powerful grip on to his shoulders and carried her across. A gun shot echoed suddenly, and he laughed.

"Firing at a bullock I should imagine. That ought to keep them occupied. Keep on going. You're perfectly safe now. They'll never get us if we keep on."

He felt the girl's pace slacken, and linked his arm in hers to help her to maintain the pace. Thrice he had to lift her over dykes, and ever she became slower and slower while her breath came with difficulty. Then he felt her pause and sink in his grip.

"It's no use. I can't do it," she gasped. "Leave me here. I shall be all right. You go on."

He let her sink to the damp grass, and stood for a moment poised in fierce concentration. Dimly in the distance he could hear the muffled sounds made by the pursuit.

"I think we are safe enough for the time," he said. "It would be a million to one chance if they lit on us in this. We might as well stay here for a while."

"Couldn't you leave me and go and get help?" she asked.

He laughed grimly. "I wouldn't leave you in any event," he said, "but, if I wanted to, I couldn't. We are completely lost."

XXIII

He took off his old tweed coat and, in spite of her protests, made her put it on to protect her from the clammy cold of the fog. Making her as comfortable as possible on the damp earth, he lit a cigarette and paced meditatively to and fro in short staccato strides, ever and again throwing a thoughtful glance upon the girl.

She lay passive and silent for a while, intent on regaining her strength, and her eyes followed him contentedly. As for Labar, he felt a sense of elation that he had at least got her from the clutches of Larry Hughes, though he chafed to think that he was held from any farther action till the night was out. He had a shrewd idea that when the pursuit proved hopeless things would happen swiftly at the house on the marshes. He could scarcely expect that Larry's people would calmly await the return of Penelope or himself some time the next day with a posse of police. The only chance was that the fog which seemed likely to confine the girl and himself to the marsh for the night, would also delay any active measures of escape that the others might initiate.

"You are shivering," said Penelope. "I wish you would take your coat. I feel quite warm. I really don't need it."

He smiled down at her. "I am perfectly all right while I move about. You rest yourself for the while. Presently we will move on, although I am afraid we shall get nowhere. Do you happen to have any idea where we are?"

She shook her head. "Beyond the fact that we are on the Romney Marshes I haven't the faintest idea. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "It looks as if we may have to spend the night in the open. It will be a bit of an ordeal for you, I am afraid."

The girl gave a little shiver, but she smiled at the same time. "I don't mind that. At any rate I am out of the hands of Larry Hughes. I think I could stand anything better than the dread of what might have happened."

He stopped abruptly in his walk, and his face became stern and set. "Did Hughes—has anyone—" He felt some difficulty in framing the question that was in his mind. "Have you been badly treated?"

"Not physically. There have been hints—threats." She pulled herself to a sitting posture and spread an arm in an expressive gesture. "I have been on the edge of terror and despair for days. Oh, it was worse than anything that you can imagine."

He came and sat down on the grass beside her. She made no resistance when he caught one of her hands in his own. "Not altogether," he said. "I think that I can realise something of what you have gone through. Now I want you to tell me—not, if you will allow me to say so, as a police official but as a friend—what has happened since you were taken away from London."

"As a friend," she repeated.

"As something more than a friend if you will, Penelope," he said, and his voice sounded in his own ears as a hoarse whisper. "As a man who would do anything in the world to be more than your friend. It is presumption—I am only a police inspector—you scarcely know me—but if—"

He paused aghast at his own incoherent ineptitude. The girl pulled her hand away from him and sat silent staring into the fog. Labar mentally cursed himself as something worse than an imbecile. How could it be supposed that this girl could have any interest in him in that way? If he had waited?

Penelope made an impetuous movement. He felt the rough sleeve of his old tweed coat about his neck. A cold face was near his own. He flung his arms about the girl and half laughing, half crying, she settled there in passive content. How long they remained thus he never knew. Night was adding a more sombre tinge to the fog, when she gently freed herself.

"I can't believe it," he whispered. "You the wife of just an ordinary policeman."

She put her hand in front of his mouth. "A very extraordinary policeman," she corrected with a laugh. "I won't have you call yourself names."

He bent and kissed her, and then got to his feet. "Shall we move?" he asked. "You will be getting chilled."

Hand in hand like two children, they strolled leisurely into the night and the fog. Although it was a summer night the cold was bitter. There was no possibility of finding a way out of the marsh till daylight or at least till the fog waned, but even a purposeless tramp was better than catching a cold.

As they walked they talked of many things, but at last the conversation drifted to the abduction of the girl. Although Harry Labar was a lover, he could not forget that he was also a police officer with an object to achieve.

There were many obscure points which he felt that she could make plain, and she spoke without reserve of the events that had brought her into the case. He interrupted seldom, letting her tell the things in her own way until she was finished.

"I must have seemed a brute to you," he said. "I know now—I was perhaps able to guess a little even then—that you were shielding someone. I thought—God forgive me—that you might even be in love with Larry Hughes. I had found your photograph in his room, and like a mad fool I jumped to conclusions."

"You weren't," she retorted with a faint pressure of his hand. "I can't reproach you with anything. You had to do your duty and you acted like a chivalrous gentleman. My dear, I felt the meanest creature on earth when you would not lock me up. As for the photograph I haven't the faintest doubt that he stole it, or perhaps he got it from Mrs. Gertstein. Now there are one or two things I want to ask you, if you will tell me."

Against all the traditions of the Criminal Investigation Department, Harry Labar allowed himself to be pumped by this slip of a girl until she knew as much as he did of the progress of the case. She shuddered and drew closer to him as he told of the fight at "Maid's Retreat," and now and again she elucidated some point that still remained obscure.

"And now," he said when he had finished his narration, "there still remains something in the way of cross-examination."

"As long as you are not too ferocious," she agreed. "What does my lord wish to know? I shall obey the court in every particular. Who is going to question me—the divisional detective inspector of Grape Street or Harry Labar?"

"The divisional detective inspector," he retorted. "What I am anxious to know is what your attitude may be to Adèle Gertstein now? You have run big risks to protect her. Do you still think that she is worth it?"

She stiffened a fraction. "She was my friend," she said.

"Is she still your friend?" he asked quietly. "You have said as little as possible even now about her—little that I do not know of my own knowledge. And things being as they are, Penelope, if she is still your friend there is only one thing that I can do."

"That is?"

"To resign from the service, and find some other profession that will enable me to support a wife."

Both had come to a halt and she now lifted her grey eyes to his. "I see," she said. Then after a pause: "You mean that as a police officer you will have to go on and arrest her?"

"I mean more than that, my dear. I mean that I cannot suppress what I believe to be the important evidence of a vital witness."

"However much I begged you?"

He put his arm about her. "I am not going to try to persuade you, Penelope, whatever I may think of your scruples. My resignation will go in the moment we get back to London."

"Suppose," she asked, softly, "suppose I told you that I felt freed from every obligation to this woman who was my friend? Suppose I told you that I had found her to be as treacherous as a snake, and that I would stamp on her as readily as I would upon a snake? What would you say then?"

"I should say that Donna Quixote Penelope had some very good reason. But honestly, dear, I don't want to put you in the witness box unless you wish."

She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him. "Thank you. I hate the thought. Still if I am to be a detective's wife I don't want to begin by crossing my husband-to-be. But it will be difficult for me."

"I know that. Trust me as far as you can."

"That is all the way," she replied. "But if Adèle even at the last had acted in a different way, I might still have hesitated. After all, she is a woman you cannot judge by ordinary standards. She is an impulsive, self-willed child."

Labar checked the interruption that there were many criminals like that, and the girl went on.

"When she came with Hughes to this place I felt sorry for her, until I knew that she had tried to kill you. I felt sorry for her but relieved to think that I had someone with me to whom I might talk freely. But she was mad with panic. When I suggested that she might give herself up she would not hear of it. She had some wild idea of escaping to South America."

"With Larry Hughes?"

"I suppose so. Well, it was decided that we should sleep in the same room. That evening when we were alone together she used every artifice and argument that was possible to persuade me to agree to marry him. I haven't the faintest doubt that some

of the reasons she tried to urge on me were supplied by Hughes himself. She would not have thought of them by herself. The more I resisted the more vehement she became. She pointed out how much I owed to her and her husband. It was the only chance of safety she had. If I did not marry him, he would most likely abandon her to the chances of the law. If I had the faintest shred of gratitude or friendship for her I ought to do this thing. Why should I hesitate to help her? He was a wealthy man. You can probably imagine the kind of persuasion that she would use."

"I can," said Labar, grimly. "Go on."

"She lost all control over herself at last. She swore like a fishwife, and ended by taking an oath that if I did not agree she would accuse me of being her confederate in the forgery of her husband's cheque, and the person who attempted to kill you near Grape Street police station. No one would believe, she said, that I was not mixed up in the crime. In a frenzy she fetched Larry Hughes who, smiling and sardonic, promised that he also would manufacture proof that I was concerned in the Streetly House robbery."

"You poor kid," murmured Labar. "And what did you say?"

"I told them that I did not care what happened to me. There was nothing on earth that would induce me to agree. Larry laughed and went away. Adèle reviled me like a mad thing for ten minutes or more, and to escape the vituperation I went to bed and pretended to go to sleep. She cooled down at last and I actually did go to sleep. I woke sometime in the middle of the night and found her bending over me. She said I had been moaning and muttering in my sleep and that she had got up to see if there was anything that she could do—but, Harry, there was a knife in her hand. I could swear to that. I feigned to accept her explanation, but I slept no more. In fact, since then I have had very little sleep except at odd hours. I have been afraid."

"Ah." Labar's face was stern. "That was the only direct attempt on your life that you know of?"

"That was all. She was as friendly as possible in the morning, although both she and Hughes were persistent in trying to persuade me to alter my decision. But I was spared much from him because he has been busy making arrangements to get away."

"Yes. I am going to talk to you about that. Tell me now what would you have done had not the chance presented itself for you to escape?"

She looked down at her feet and shook her head doubtfully. "I don't know. If I could summon up courage I had made up my mind to kill myself. But I am afraid that if it came to the point I shouldn't have had enough nerve."

The fog had lessened considerably while they walked. A watery moon made itself dimly perceptible. Labar stole a glance at the girl's firm moulded chin and resolute grey eyes. "I am glad I came when I did," he said. "I am afraid that you would have found the nerve."

They walked steadily on ever and again having to divert their course on meeting one of the numerous dykes. And while they walked he questioned her, and made mental notes. For Penelope had much to tell. During her sojourn as a prisoner she had used both her eyes and her ears, and where she had been unable to draw conclusions the detective was able to make something in the nature of guesses. He believed that he was on the verge of a discovery that would simplify, if not the question of Larry's capture, at least the difficulty of establishing his complicity in the Gertstein robbery.

The early dawn broke on a weary couple, but almost as the sun rose they struck a track which followed for a mile or two brought them to a made road. A little later they met an early rising shepherd, who, though he eyed with curiosity the shirt-sleeved and dirty man who was escorting a pretty girl, gave them directions that would carry them back to Rye.

That picturesque town was beginning to stir as they passed through the Ypres Tower almost to the minute twenty-four hours after Labar had left it.

XXIV

Labar's first business was to interview the wife of his temporary landlord, the retired constable. Into her hands he confided Penelope, with instructions that the girl was to be fed and then allowed to rest.

"And what are you going to do?" cried the girl.

He grinned. "Have a bath and a shave and put on some decent clothes."

"And then?"

He pressed her hand. "Then I have to attend to Mr. Larry Hughes. I am a lazy man. If I don't get on with the business while it's in front of me I'm apt not to do it at all."

Her eyes clouded, and she clung to his hand as though reluctant to let him go. "But surely you are going to have a rest, too? Can't you leave this to someone else? You have some of your men down here?"

Labar disengaged himself. "There is nothing at all to worry about, my dear. I shall take good care of myself now, I assure you. There will be no more danger than if I was engaged on a rat hunt."

"Trapped rats sometimes bite."

"I propose to do all the biting this time," he laughed. "Be a good child, and I'll promise to keep well out of any trouble. If they start shooting, I'll hide behind Malone. He's big enough."

Blowing her a kiss he retired to his own room. His mask of nonchalance dropped from him as soon as he was away from her sight, to be replaced by determined thought. It was not likely that what remained to be done would be so simple as he would have her believe. Spite of everything, he had no notion within some miles of the house where Larry and his gang were located—and, if he found the place, it was nothing more than an assumption that they would still be there. He had first to find them and, supposing that to be successful, he had somehow to recruit a sufficient force to deal with them. That would take time.

He was his usual neat self when he emerged to seek Malone. The sergeant was standing at the door of one of the less fashionable inns puffing at a disreputable briar pipe, and making non-helpful suggestions to a lad who was perspiring over the bonnet of an old Ford car.

Malone moved along the cobbled street to meet the inspector. "Bit late last night, weren't you, guv'nor? I waited till twelve o'clock for you and then turned in. Just thinking about another start when Barney there has coaxed the old Lizzie into a reasonable frame of mind. The places I took her over yesterday were worse than a toothache."

Labar caught him by the arm. "Let's walk a little way, Bill. I want you to go to the local police station with me. You can do some talking while I get on to the phone to

the Yard."

Briefly he narrated the happenings of the day and night. "What I propose to do is this," he added. "We must stop every bolt hole in sight. All the ports must be notified, and particularly those seaside towns on the southeast coast. I expect Larry has seen to passports, but, even if he hasn't, it is simple to leave on some of these day excursions to France without them. We must borrow as many men from the local forces as we can, and throw a dragnet over the marsh. I am going to ask the Yard to send down a dozen or so Flying Squad men by car. They ought to get here in a couple of hours with luck. There's just an off-chance that we may find our birds still in their nest. Larry was away yesterday, and the fog no doubt prevented him from getting back. He'll have a lot to do, when he does arrive."

Malone quickened his step. "You know something else, guv'nor," he commented. "You're keeping something up your sleeve."

The inspector nodded and glanced over his shoulder. "You've hit it," he agreed. "It's only a guess, mind you, but some facts told me by Miss Noelson rather bear it out. The sea is, she told me, about a mile away from the house. Larry as you know has his own yacht. I'm not much of a sailor, but if it was possible to bring that yacht reasonably near inshore, it would explain how a lot of the stuff that has passed through Larry's hands got out of the country without our people getting a smell of it."

"You mean that the house is a depot for stolen goods."

"Exactly."

"Then why shouldn't Larry use the yacht to get away?"

"Because he probably guessed that steps were being taken to keep an eye on the boat. We knew of the yacht. We didn't know of this hide out. It might have been risky from his point of view to bring the boat over while we were on the alert. It might give away his cache without helping him. But with the events of the past few days, while things have been getting warm for him, he has probably been taking steps to have it at hand for his getaway. That's all guesswork. If we weren't rushed this morning I could probably confirm it. I'll bet you that he has been sending wires abroad. Anyway, on the off-chance I am going to ask the Yard to get in touch with the Admiralty, and have a destroyer off the coast until we clear up. And if there's a fast motor boat somewhere handy, we might find a use for it."

Malone nodded appreciatively. "I get you, guv'nor."

There were a few complications in getting the search organised, for no less than three police forces were concerned—the Metropolitan Police, the Kent Constabulary, and the Sussex Police. In spite of the risk of a fiasco that might make him a laughing stock, Labar urged that as many as possible of the local men who took part in the search should be armed with shotguns. He was confident that the gunmen who formed part of Larry's retinue would not be taken without a fight. In the hands of men who were unused to firearms shotguns would probably be more effective than any deadlier weapons, although the Scotland Yard authorities assured him that the Flying Squad men would be armed with automatic pistols.

Once he had put things in train he hired a car, and with Malone and a couple of local officers he started for the marsh, having arranged a rendezvous for the larger part of his forces at the inn where he had breakfasted the preceding day. Guides had been promised from various sources and it was anticipated that from the description that

had been furnished by Penelope it would not be a matter of great difficulty to locate the house where she had been held. A body of police were to start from Lydd to patrol the shore as far as Dungeness. On every road over which a car might pass from the district, armed patrols of Kent police were to be established.

Labar's scheme was to make a wide sweep over the marsh and if Larry was still in the trap he had little doubt of success. But it was some little time before the police, who had to be collected from a wide area of country, could be brought together to put his full plan into operation.

From somewhere the local inspector who accompanied him, routed out a constable who was said to know the district, and a farmer and a shepherd picked up on the way volunteered their services. Both these latter agreed that the house for which search was being made could be none other that Mope's Bottom, which stood far away on the marsh, and which had been rented many years ago by a gentleman from London. It had borne many years before a local reputation as a haunted house, and was still avoided after dusk by many of those whose avocations might take them to the vicinity.

As yet, including Labar and Malone, there were not more than a dozen men gathered for the expedition. Labar looked at his watch. It would be an hour at least, and probably longer, before the complete forces would be gathered.

"Reckon I'll take this shepherd and go and have a look, see," he said to Malone. "You can explain my ideas if we're not back, Bill, and then carry on. I'm sure to meet you." He turned to the looker whom he had decided to take as guide. "How long do you think it will take us to get to this place? We might go part of the way by car."

"An hour and a half, walking," said the looker. "Maybe twenty minutes by car—I don't know."

"I suppose they'd see a car coming for miles over this place," said the detective inspector. "It's as flat as the palm of your hand. And I'd bet something that they'll be keeping a good lookout today."

"If you're bent on going, guv'nor," said Malone, and his tone conveyed that he thought it a totally unnecessary venture, "why not take the car as far as you think wise and walk the rest. There won't be any cover for you though. Why not wait?"

"No, I'll go and have a scout round. You can be easy, Bill. I won't take any risks I can help. Let's go."

For a mile or so they pushed the car along one of the rough tracks of the marsh. As the looker explained, the detour was even more extensive than if they had gone on foot, and the roughness of the going made the driver wary of anything in the nature of speed. The detective and his guide descended when the latter observed that within the next mile they would come within sight of Mope's Bottom. They made their way over the pastures and dykes on foot by a more direct, but still devious route.

Presently they were within view of the dark mass of the house. They lay on the edge of a dyke and studied it for a while. Through his glasses Labar could see nothing that gave the slightest indication of life. There was not even a wisp of smoke from the chimneys, and the windows were tight-closed. From where they were the angle of the wall hid a distinct view of the gate, but the detective rapped out an oath as he tried to confirm an impression that it was open. Could it be that after all he was too late?

There had always been that possibility, but Labar at the back of his mind had refused to recognise it as likely. There had been but the most slender margin of time in which his quarry could have safely got away. It would be the most uncanny luck if he had succeeded.

He rose to his feet, and with the looker by his side strode on to where he could get a closer view of the place. This time there was no doubt. The big wall gates were open.

Labar snapped the glasses into their case and turned to the looker. "You can get back, my lad. Tell Mr. Malone, or whoever you meet, that I think our birds have made their getaway. Anyway I'm going on to see what has happened. Get some of my men to come on the moment they are ready. Now which is my nearest way to the house?"

He strode on reckless of everything now. He was convinced that the house was empty. Certain it was that neither Larry nor any of his associates would have permitted any carelessness at this time. There could only be one explanation of the outer defences of the place remaining unguarded when they must know that the forces of the law would be upon them at any minute.

As he drew nearer his conviction became more certain. But as he reached the gates some instinct of caution made him step more warily. They might have left the Alsatian. He pulled out an automatic which he had procured at Rye, though he had little faith in his ability to use it effectively, and passed between the gates with his senses vividly on the alert.

Once within he halted for a second or two and listened with strained intentness. There was not a sound. Moving on velvet feet, ready to shoot at the instant, he tried the door of the house. It was fastened, and he turned his attention to the windows. But whoever had forgotten the gates the house was tight-sealed. A swift examination showed him that none of the simple devices by which the fastenings of an ordinary house might be overcome would suffice here.

With a grim smile he recalled that he had neglected to obtain a search warrant. He had not even had the warrant for Larry's arrest endorsed by a local magistrate. But the strict formalities of the law have at times to be ignored or many rogues would escape. Time enough to put himself right on these technicalities later. He reversed his pistol and smashed with the butt through the glass of the morning-room window. Thrusting his hand carefully through the jagged pane he undid the fastening and entered the room. It was meticulously neat and tidy. No sign of any hurried departure here.

Completely satisfied that no living person remained in the house he pushed his pistol back into his pocket and lit a cigarette. There was nothing to hurry about now. He would have to wait till his men arrived in any event.

He moved about the house taking for the moment a superficial if methodical survey. But as he entered room after room to find each in applepie order, with nothing that could in any manner be construed to fit with his theory that the house was a depot for stolen goods, he puffed more fiercely at his cigarette and his eyebrows drew more closely together.

"If Larry's had the stuff here he's made a clean sweep or he's hidden it pretty tight," he muttered. "But he can't have got away with it. It isn't possible."

Something that Penelope Noelson had said recurred to him, and he made his way back to the panelled room that he judged to have been Larry's study. Taking a pencil from his pocket he proceeded to tap methodically inch by inch upon the walls. A

quarter of an hour passed in this manner and he was stooping to make a fresh start from the bottom of the wall when he became aware of some slight sound behind him. He gave no sign that he had heard and continued the tap tap of his pencil as nonchalantly as ever, considering with strained calculation what his next move should be.

The even voice of Larry Hughes broke on his ear. "No use trying to deceive the astute Mr. Labar. You've guessed right. There is a secret panel in this room. But as you see you started at the wrong end. And rather than wait the arrival of your friends we have decided to show you everything ourselves. Keep very still, please. My friend Mr. Bungey is a hasty man. He would never forgive himself if anything happened to you."

Still stooping the detective permitted his gaze to swing slowly round. Before an open panel in the woodwork stood Larry Hughes and Billy Bungey each with a levelled pistol in his hand.

XXV

Harry Labar had been in many tight corners in his life, but now he knew himself in the tightest of them all. He had fallen into an ambush. He was certain that at the first false move he made neither of the men who confronted him would hesitate to shoot him down. They were in a situation where nothing—not even murder—could make matters much worse for them. Unless they escaped the net that was closing round them they knew as well as he did that practically the remainder of their lives would be spent in prison.

He smiled sweetly upon the two. "Do you mind if I raise myself a little?" he asked. "This attitude is somewhat cramping."

"First of all I think that you had better drop your gun on the floor," said Larry. "That's a sensible man," as Labar dragged out his weapon and tossed it on the carpet. "Now you may stand up while Billy attends to you. But," he made a menacing gesture with his own pistol—"don't do anything foolish."

It was far from Labar's intention to do anything foolish. He knew in what jeopardy he stood. So he remained perfectly still while Billy Bungey skilfully lashed his arms to his side, and as he finished surveyed the trussed detective with some satisfaction.

"What about a gag?" he asked taking out a handkerchief and considering it speculatively. "We shan't want him kicking up an uproar when his pals arrive."

"He'll do as he is," declared Larry. "I want to have a chat with him." He moved into the room and put a hand at Labar's elbow. "Come on, Mr. Inspector. For your own sake you had better not play any tricks. If your men get on to us I assure you that the first man who is put out will be yourself. Get that."

"I appreciate the compliment," agreed the inspector.

As he was led through the open panel, with Larry and Billy Bungey on each side of him, one of them slid it into place behind. For a second they were in impenetrable blackness. Then someone switched on an electric torch and Labar gathered that he was in a narrow tunnel which widened as they advanced. They had gone a hundred yards or so when they were halted. Labar turned to see a steel door slide across the tunnel.

"A little modern addition of my own to an old smugglers tunnel," said Larry. "Nothing short of dynamite will shift that."

"I half-suspected that you would have a bolthole," said Labar with the indifferent air of one making conversation. "This is where you stowed your stuff, I suppose. Where does it lead to?"

"Shut up," ordered Larry. "You can talk when I ask you to. Let's get along."

As near as the detective could estimate they had traversed another quarter of a mile when there was a gleam of light ahead. In a little they had reached a widening of sev-

eral yards in the tunnel, which formed a sort of room, dimly lit by an oil lamp. Lounging on suitcases and other baggage about this space were several spectral figures whom Labar rightly assumed to be the rest of Larry's party.

"You may sit down," said Hughes. "I don't think that the formality of an introduction is necessary to most of these ladies and gentlemen. You know them. They have been waiting your arrival."

"You expected me then?" asked Labar in a tone of mild surprise.

"We guessed there would be an early arrival this morning, and we hoped that it might be you," said Larry. "We left the outer gates open as a bait in case you came snooping around."

Although he was feeling very far from laughter Labar managed to enunciate a convincing chuckle. "Well, you have got me," he said. "I may be very dense, Larry, but I fail to see how that is going to help you. What are you going to do with me?"

"There are many things that we might do," said Larry significantly. "Indeed I cannot say what we shall do if you don't behave reasonably. There's an old proverb you know."

"'Dead men tell no tales.' That's what you are trying to hint?"

"You have a quick mind, my dear Labar. Use it a little farther and guess why we want you."

Labar thought for a moment before replying. "That shouldn't be difficult," he said slowly. "You are in a hole and want to know what steps I have taken to dig you out. Suppose I don't tell you."

Larry thrust his face, sinister and threatening, close to that of the prisoner. "Oh, yes you will," he said menacingly.

The detective laughed. "Well, you will know soon enough. I gather that you have been disappointed in the arrival of your yacht. This tunnel probably leads out somewhere by the shore and you hope to slip away tonight by sea, while the police are watching the ports. But there are a hundred armed men on the marsh and the shore is patrolled. There is a fast motor boat just off the beach and beyond that a destroyer. You've only just got to show your nose above ground and you're gone coons, Larry. Now you know just where you stand. I hope you like it."

"You're a liar," snarled Billy Bungey.

"Leave this to me, Billy," ordered Larry peremptorily. He addressed Labar. "I think you are lying myself. If you are not you can depend upon it that they'll never get me alive. Who will be in charge when they fail to find you?"

The detective shook his head. "That I can't tell you. I don't know who will be down from the Yard. But if you think you can bluff them out of this district you'll be disappointed. They'll stick. Better make the best of a bad job, Larry."

"Make no mistake, Labar. You will never live to give evidence against any of us."

"Then you'll hang," retorted the other amiably. "Not only you, Larry, but all of those here." He raised his voice. "Do you hear me, you people. Some of you may get away with light sentences as it is. But if you let this man—"

A hand was clapped roughly about his mouth and he was forced to his knees. But he had said what he wanted. Desperate though many of those under the sway of Larry Hughes were, not all of them would face with composure the probability of being

hanged for murder. There were subdued mutterings and he could distinguish the voices of Mrs. Gertstein and Sophie Lengholm. It was the latter who came forward.

"Don't be a fool, Larry. The man's right. It can't do us any good to kill him. If we're in the cart, we're in it."

Larry swore fiercely at her. "When I want your advice I'll ask for it."

The man who held the detective broke in. "He's got the whole business in hand. Let me do him in. Who's to know? Whatever they think we can put him somewhere where they'll never find him. Likely as not things will break down without him. I'm for taking the chance."

"Sophie's got the strength of it," said another voice. "Time enough to croak him if we're forced to it. As it is we can afford to wait and see what happens. No good risking our necks until we have to."

"I won't have any of you swine telling me what to do or what not to do," declared Larry with cold fury. "I'm the big noise here. If anyone's got any different ideas about it now's the time to have it out." He paused for a moment as if waiting for someone to take up his challenge. It was met with a dead silence. He had reasserted his ascendency. He made a gesture of ineffable contempt. "Huh, you squealing lot of rats. Let that split up, Bill. If he opens his mouth again fetch him one across the jaw."

As Labar got awkwardly to his feet Larry wheeled upon him. "And you, you big spawn, I mean what I say. All the chance that you've got is that we get clear away. So put your thinking cap on."

"That's the stuff," ejaculated Bill Bungey, "I'm with you." He poked a forefinger stiffly into Labar's ribs. "O-u-t spells out and out you go."

Larry's burst of temper cooled down. He was in perfect possession of himself when next he spoke. "I'm going to call your bluff, Labar. I'm going to see if your people have blocked every way out. You'd better hope for your own sake that they haven't. Come on Tom—and you Billy. The rest of you keep an eye on this man."

He crept away accompanied by the two men he had designated farther along the tunnel. By straining his ears Labar heard another steel door creak back. Apparently the tunnel towards its seaward end was also guarded.

Larry and his two companions guided by the gleam of an electric torch moved swiftly along the damp tunnel. The leader was thoughtful.

"Billy," he said, "I'm not sure that we haven't overplayed our hand. If that fellow's telling the truth we're booked for trouble."

"I begin to wish we hadn't snaffled him," said Billy. "He might not have run across that panel. If he'd overlooked it we were OK. We'd simply have had to wait till they made up their minds we had cleared off."

"I know the breed," retorted Larry with a shake of his head. "Once he got the idea in his head he was bound to go on with it. Some of these Johns may not have any brains, but they stick to an idea. He'd have pulled the house down to make sure. We may not be out of the wood, but we've got a breathing spell."

Billy grunted uncertainly and Larry emitted a sharp order for quiet beneath his breath. The tunnel was rising at a sharp angle and narrowed so rapidly that they were compelled to take single file and crawl. Rough timbers supported the top for the last twenty yards or so and then for about the length of a man the way finished in an acute angle of about forty-five degrees. Larry, who was leading, stretched himself at full

length and, stealthily withdrawing some bolts, raised a trapdoor of about two feet square a matter of inches, and peered without. Satisfied with his preliminary scrutiny he pushed the trap higher and crawled to the outer air.

He emerged into a depression in a waste of shingle sheltered by a high bank which shut off the sea. Stooping low he clambered up the bank, and laying on his stomach scrutinised the surroundings. A couple of hundred yards away the sea lapped monotonously on a lonely shore. Far out at sea there were one or two ships obviously on their lawful occasions. Nearer in there was a fleet of fishing boats. On the dim horizon something that had been at first obscured by the sail of one of the smacks came into Larry's angle of vision. He uttered a low curse as he recognised the silhouette of a destroyer. If Labar had been speaking the truth in that particular he might have done so in others.

His gaze swung to the beach. Far as he could see that was open. There was no sign of the motor boat of which Labar had spoken. In point of fact, although Larry could not know, it was labouring on the other side of Dungeness with engine trouble. But the beach itself was deserted.

Billy Bungey had crawled up beside him and pointed out the destroyer.

"I know," said Larry petulantly. "God, I've got eyes, haven't I?"

He turned over to scan the marshes. In the distance he could see Mope's Bottom, but around it and as far as he could see there was no sign of life.

"Not a soul, Billy," he observed. "All the same I don't like it. It is early yet and if Labar wasn't bluffing we'll be in a hole—in every sense."

"We could take a chance and bolt for it now," said the other. "No use waiting till it's too late."

The eyes of the two men met. There was a significance in Billy Bungey's words that Larry did not fail to appreciate. He remained silent and thoughtful, and the rougher scoundrel slid back to the trapdoor.

"You there, Tom?" he asked. "Get back to the boys, will you? It looks reasonably clear here, but the boss and I are going to take a bit of a look round. We'll be along presently."

He came back to where Larry was lying on the shingle. "That's got rid of him. There might be a chance for two of us. There wouldn't be any for a crowd. What do you say?"

For once in his life Larry Hughes was irresolute. In his career there were few codes that he had not broken. But always he had made it a practice to keep faith with those who had come under his sway. He could say, outlaw though he was, that he had never betrayed a friend nor forgiven an enemy. It was a rigid part of his policy to enforce honour among thieves to himself as to his associates. He could neither afford to forgive a man who had let him down nor to abandon those who had worked with him. That was the reason for the strength that he had acquired in the underworld. Once that policy was abandoned the prestige that had been so profitable to him would be gone.

Those people who were back in the tunnel would not understand that if they were in a trap his return could do no good to them. They would think that he had deliberately planned to make them scapegoats. There was the risk, too, that their loyalty—always a frail thing—would not stand the strain of his leaving them. They would talk. And if they began talking to the police, Larry knew that his escape would have

to be made good, for the evidence that would be accumulated against him would be overwhelming.

He shrugged his shoulders in contempt at his own lack of decision. What did it matter? There was enough against him as it was. Nothing that they could say or do could make any difference. Why should he worry? In cases like this it was each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost.

He rose cautiously to his feet. “Come along, Billy. We’ll take the chance.”

XXVI

In the underground chamber where the little group awaited the return of Larry time passed slowly. Labar could hear the ticking of his watch above the whispered conversation that passed among the others. He was not of a morbid cast of mind but he could not help reflecting on the possibility that his life hung upon a hair.

Once finally convinced that they were cornered the views of the more desperate of the gang that he was better out of the way were likely to prevail. He had to face that probability, and he liked it the less the more that he thought of it. He considered the situation from another angle. It was just on the cards that the tunnel might remain undiscovered by the men who were following him. In that case his dilemma would be worse. His captors were scarcely likely to leave him alive to take up the trail after them once more. Men of the habit of thought of Billy Bungey would be liable to take a simple method of ridding themselves of an embarrassment. Larry, the most dangerous of them all, would not lift a finger to stay his sacrifice unless policy dictated that he should remain alive. There would be little to hope for from that direction. If he was to get clear of the predicament into which he had fallen his own wit must save him.

No one now remained near him. The man who had hitherto been at his elbow had moved over to the group to take part in the conversation. It was a reasonable assumption that the detective, tied as he was, and with all egress from the tunnel barred, could do no harm. Labar himself realised his impotence, and with no conscious thought in his mind moved quietly a pace or two so that he might place his back against the wall. There he remained in the blackest of the shadows cast by the feeble oil lamp.

A figure detached itself from the cluster and moved casually over to him as though to assure herself of his security. If any of the others noticed they showed no sign. He had no difficulty in recognising Sophie Lengholm. She stood by him for a second saying no word and then he felt her hand thrust something into his. It was a small open penknife.

Unhurriedly she returned to the others, and the astonished officer remained stone still. It was no time to probe into motives. Whatever had actuated her the fact was that he had in his hand the means of comparative freedom. If the worst came to the worst now he need not be butchered without some sort of a fight.

Very silently, very cautiously he set himself with much straining of the wrist, and with some danger of gashing himself, to cut the lower strand of the rope that held him. It was a slow and awkward business, but at last he felt it fall apart. Thus far he had not thought what the following move was to be. He paused, making no attempt to release himself fully for the moment. He could scarcely hope to overpower all the company with nothing for a weapon save a penknife. If he could lay his hands on a re-

volver—but the only method of doing so was so wildly desperate that he paused to consider before putting it into execution. At that moment he heard the creak of the outer sliding door. It was, he imagined, the return of Larry and there would be three more men to reckon with.

The others also had heard and they were on their feet when Tom entered. A volley of questions was fired at him. The valet shook his head.

"Don't eat a man. It's all right. Everything looks clear, but Mr. Hughes and Bungey are scouting round to make sure. They'll be back in a jiffy."

Labar judged that it might be time to create a diversion. A half-suspicion had come into his mind, but he scarcely believed it himself.

"Looks to me as though he had left the rest of you to hold the baby," he announced in level tones. "While you're monkeying about here like a lot of sapheads Larry and Billy are on their way. They've played you for a gang of suckers."

Tom wheeled upon him on the instant. "So you say," he retorted. "That's one of the things the boss does not do. I've known him as long as anyone and he always plays square with the boys. Mr. Hughes is a square grafter."

"Huh!" said the detective. "Wait and see."

"It looks fishy to me," said someone, and Labar knew that he had succeeded in instilling doubt into at least one mind.

"Tom's right," said Sophie Lengholm. "Larry has his little ways but he doesn't snitch and he isn't a coward."

"But if he *has* gone?" wailed a tearful voice, in which Labar recognised the accents of Mrs. Gertstein. "What shall we do?"

"Don't snivel till you're hurt," snarled a gruff voice. "Gone or not we're no worse off. No one can touch us here yet."

"We can't stay here and starve and if we go out they'll put us in prison." Adèle Gertstein was becoming hysterical. "Oh, can't we do something?"

Tom moved softly across to her and spoke low voiced. "If you can't keep quiet we'll find a way that will settle you," he said. "Make yourself a nuisance and someone will be sticking a bit of steel into you as likely as not." He gripped her shoulder and shook her fiercely. "Now that will be all from you."

She made some inarticulate protest and then fell cowed and silent.

Tom addressed the gang. "I'm going back now to wait for the boss. If anyone likes to come along there's no reason against it."

One man volunteered, and with a final warning to the others to wait in patience Tom moved off. With the aid of his knife the detective set himself to dispose of the remainder of his bonds. He dropped them at last noiselessly to his side, and marked one of Billy Bungey's associates as the first object of attack.

Inch by inch holding to the shadows as far as possible he edged towards his man. Speed was of the essence of his plan. If he guessed wrong he knew himself as good as dead.

Suddenly he leapt. The full weight of his heavy body was behind his fist which caught his man full on the point. The fellow fell like a sack and almost simultaneously Labar was by the unconscious body feeling feverishly in the right hand jacket pocket for the weapon he believed to be there. His judgment was right and as he pulled himself upright a heavy automatic was in his hand. He squeezed the trigger and a spurt of

flame and a heavy report which reverberated lengthily in the confined space, told the others almost before they knew what had happened that he was armed.

"Keep away from me," he ordered. "I'll shoot among you if anyone moves."

The answer was a shot which buried itself in the wall behind him, missing him by a yard. He brought his own weapon to a level and fired blindly. Someone screamed and there was a heavy fall. Unfamiliar as he was with firearms it had been impossible to miss at that distance, and with the target presented by a number of people.

"Do you want any more?" demanded the detective grimly.

There was no answer. Only the breathing of the group, and the muffled sobs of Mrs. Gertstein broke the stillness that had descended on the scene. Labar waited tensely alert for any menacing move. He was glad for several reasons that no one of his opponents had had presence of mind enough to put out the light. In the darkness it was highly probable that someone would get killed.

"Some of you have electric torches," said Labar. "Throw one out here. Quick's the word. I'm liable to get impatient." He flourished his weapon significantly.

A man stepped a little forward and a torch thudded at the detective's feet. Keeping a wary eye upon the group he picked it up with his left hand and switched the beam upon them.

"Now boys," he said, "I don't want to hurt anyone, but if I do you'll only have yourselves to blame. Throw any pistols or other weapons that you have into the centre of the room. Don't try to hold anything out on me or it will be the worse for you."

There were men facing him who would not have hesitated to fly at his throat in many circumstances. So far the element of surprise had served him well. He dominated them for the time, but he knew that it needed only the slightest initiative on the part of one of them, and he would have the whole mob about his ears. There was a perceptible hesitation in complying with his last order. His trigger finger twitched. Reluctant though he was to shoot he was resolved to do so rather than run the risk of a combined attack.

"I'm going to count three," he said. "If those pistols aren't on the floor by then I shoot. One—two—"

A weapon clattered to the ground and a second followed.

"Any more?" he asked.

A third pistol followed the others and, although he was convinced of the probability that there were still more weapons on some of the men, there was no way of making sure. He had to take a chance.

"I'm going to take you people back to Mope's Bottom," he said. "You will keep well in front of me and if anyone looks back he will be turned into something deader than a pillar of salt. Now march."

"What about Jim?" asked one of the prisoners, indicating the motionless form of the man who had been shot.

Labar reflected. For all he knew time might be precious. If Tom or Larry or Billy returned, as they might at any moment, he could hope for nothing better than a fight to the death. He shook his head.

"I'll see that he's looked after later," he said. "Come. Get a move on."

He marshalled them into the dark tunnel, and with a stern order that they were not to pass beyond the rays of his torch carried them to the interior steel door. There they

came to a halt.

Two of the men fiddled with the catch meeting with some apparent difficulty. “It won’t open,” one of them declared. “Only Larry and Tom know the secret.”

Here was a predicament. It flashed across Labar’s mind that these men were scarcely likely to have submitted to be shut in the tunnel during the absence of those who held the key to their release and at the risk of accident unless they themselves knew the secret. He switched his light off and fired at the floor of the tunnel.

“That will be unlucky for you,” he declared ominously. “If that door isn’t opened in a matter of seconds I’ll shoot my way through it—and you.”

Adèle Gertstein who had never ceased her subdued wailing now gave a sharp cry of terror. And then the door creaked back.

There was no further attempt to evade the instructions of Labar. He had convinced them, for the time, that he would stand at nothing, and in that confined space even a bad shot could not fail to wreck deadly execution. Yet until he had reached the open he felt far from secure. There was a thrill down his spine, and once or twice he felt tempted to look round. He had an uneasy feeling that he was being stalked from behind. It would be the simplest thing in the world to follow along that narrow passage and shoot him in the back.

So they came to the entrance to Larry’s private room. At a touch the panel slid aside and daylight illumined the opening. From the other side came a sharp cry of surprise and a quick order. Bill Malone had his wits about him.

“Reach for the ceiling, you.”

One by one with their hands above their heads the prisoners filed into the room. Labar stepped in behind them. At the far side of the room stood Bill Malone and Detective Inspector Moreland with revolvers in their hands.

“Criminy, if it ain’t the guv’nor,” ejaculated Bill.

XXVII

Explanations were deferred till such time as the prisoners could be dealt with. Half a dozen stalwart constables, each armed with a shot gun, took charge of the captives who were subjected to a swift search. There was one, who as Labar had suspected, had still a pistol about him. If he had really intended to use it he had failed to find an opportunity, or his courage had failed. The gang were escorted into another room for the time and Moreland cocked an eye at Labar.

"Nice fellow you are. Call out the whole lot of us, horse, foot and artillery and then try to do the job on your little own. Where's Larry?"

The other made a gesture towards the open mouth of the tunnel. "That's his bolthole, but I doubt that he's still in there. How long you folk been here?"

"Perhaps ten minutes," said Malone. "We had to wait for some of our people."

"Any chance of men slipping through out there?" He swept a hand vaguely to the marsh.

"A rat might do it. The place is alive with our men."

"But half an hour ago? If you've only just got here—" He left the sentence uncompleted.

"There might have been some sort of an opportunity then," admitted Malone.

"What are you driving at?" asked Moreland.

"Larry. That tunnel leads somewhere out towards the coast. It's a full half hour or more since he slipped out there. If—"

They stared at each other, in something like consternation. The retired military officer who was the head of the Kent County Constabulary entered in haste.

"What's this I hear? You've rounded them up? Are you Mr. Labar?"

"I'm Labar. Not altogether. We haven't got our fingers on the man we really want yet. Do you know whether the men from Lydd have got to this part of the coast yet?"

"They should have linked up before now, but I don't know. It's a long way and rough going."

"Where are your lads?" demanded Labar turning to Moreland.

"Two or three of them still searching the house. The rest are outside knocking around."

"Send some of them with a guide down to the shore. You and I and Bill, with a couple more will slip along the tunnel in case they've doubled back. I'd be grateful to you, sir"—he addressed the Chief Constable—"if you would go down to the shore, too. If any of our birds have been met there will be a fight going on about now."

He slipped the automatic into his pocket and borrowed a shot gun from one of the uniformed men. He felt more confidence in his ability to manipulate it. There were

two or three torches which had been taken from the prisoners and with these his companions provided themselves.

Labar started to lead the way when with an exclamation he came to an abrupt halt.

"Lord! I nearly forgot."

"Forgot what?" asked Moreland.

"There's a man I shot laying along in here somewhere. He may be dead for all that I know. Just as well to have a couple of constables along to fetch him out."

"Losing your memory I should say," commented the irrepressible Moreland. "A little matter like a dead man and you all but forgot him!"

"And I reckon we'll take along one of the gang as a matter of precaution," said Labar. "There's every modern convenience in this tunnel, including steel doors which may be awkward to open."

A man was selected from the prisoners and the little band of armed police officers started on their tour of exploration. Bill Malone elected to take the prisoner in his own charge and poking him with the muzzle of a pistol gave expression to prophesies of sudden and horrid calamity in the event of any monkey business.

As they arrived at the first barrier Labar swung his torch and a sharp oath slipped from between his lips. That door he was confident had been left open. Now it was closed.

The white-faced prisoner under the persuasion of a dig in the ribs from Malone's pistol point was called upon to open it. But it resisted all his efforts.

"No good, sir," he said. "It's locked on the inside."

"Here's a nice game," observed Malone.

"Looks as if Larry had come back," said Moreland.

"Or Tom and his pal," said Labar. "We may have to do some digging out." He put his face close to the metal and raised his voice. "You inside there. Can you hear me? Be good boys now and come out. You'll do yourselves no good by this foolishness."

There was no answer. Labar turned to the prisoner. "Show me how this is supposed to work," he ordered.

With docility the man indicated an unobtrusive knob at the side of the wall. "Push it in and then turn it first to the right and then to the left."

The detective obeyed, but still the blank sheet of steel remained unmoved. He fiddled impatiently with the knob and suddenly the slab glided back. In an instant the officers had crouched back to the side of the wall with weapons ready and their torches searching the darkness, half expecting a shower of bullets from the interior.

For a space they waited thus. Then Labar stirred and reaching over to the prisoner gripped his shoulder so that he squirmed. "Trying to put something over on us," he said sternly. "Just one more break of that kind and I'll find a way that will make you squeal. We're bad men to play with just now."

"It was an accident, guv'nor," pleaded the man. "You must have handled it wrong."

"Another accident like that may be fatal to you, my boy," said Malone ferociously.

"All the same it's funny about that door," said Labar. "That has been closed since I was here. Let's get on."

Cautiously they pushed forward. They came to the place in which the man who had been shot had lain. The oil lamp still burned and the detectives cast their torches

about. There was a crimson stain on the floor but otherwise no sign of a man either wounded or dead.

"What do you know about that?" demanded Moreland.

"Don't ask conundrums," retorted Labar. "Either he's pulled himself together or someone has moved him."

Certain now that there was someone of the gang in the tunnel they advanced with weapons poised. The outer door was also shut but with a little manipulation that also was dealt with. The narrowing of the tunnel warned them that if they were approaching an ambush here was where it might be looked for. Only one man could advance at a time, and a determined opponent could hold any number at bay indefinitely. Labar crawled first followed by Moreland and the two Flying Squad men. Then came Malone. The prisoner was for the time left behind in charge of the two constables.

Seemingly from a great distance there came the sound of a muffled report. Labar stiffened as a wedge of daylight showed some thirty or forty yards in front of him. Another report, this time louder, came to his ears and the wedge of light broadened. The head and shoulders of a man crawling towards him showed in the passage. Labar levelled his gun and saw Moreland thrust a pistol forward. For a moment they faced each other thus and the jaw of the man dropped in a consternation that would have been ludicrous at any other time.

"Back you go," ordered Labar.

"Don't shoot for the love of heaven," cried the man. "I can't go back. There are others behind me."

Labar felt his heart quicken a beat. Was it possible that after all, Larry had been rounded up into a trap?

"How many of you are there?" he demanded.

It was the voice of Tom the valet speaking from behind the leading man that answered. "There are three of us, Mr. Labar. We can't go back. The police are outside and they would shoot us down as we went out. We daren't go back."

With a little disappointment Labar recognised that Larry was not there. The three would be Tom, and his companion, and the man he had shot. He had, too, an idea of the dilemma in which they were placed. Clearly there had been some sort of an encounter with the police outside, and excited men were not likely to be too nice if a head showed itself outside the tunnel. He had no wish to cause needless bloodshed.

"We'll give you three minutes," he said. "They'll have cooled down a little by then." He pushed his way nearer to them along the corridor.

"We've a wounded man here," protested the first figure. "It will be murder if you turn us out."

"We'll risk it," said Labar.

The thought of retreating back along the tunnel and allowing Tom and his confederates to follow up he had dismissed at the moment it had arisen. These ruffians would have a point of vantage as soon as the tunnel opened out and might conceivably do much damage if they then determined to resist arrest. He was not going to abandon the strength of his position. It was no occasion for scruples, although he felt that the fears of the trapped men might have some foundation.

The knot was cut at the sound of a deep voice echoing from the trapdoor. "Heigh! You down below there!"

"That's Whitehead," said Moreland, naming one of his sergeants. He raised his voice to a shout. "It's all right, Whitehead. This is Moreland. Stand by and your friends will come up like little gentlemen."

"Right you are, sir," agreed the sergeant. "We'll be waiting."

"Now then. Out you go," said Labar, and slowly the men backed with the two inspectors and their aides following them closely.

As Labar and Moreland pulled themselves out of the tunnel they were confronted by a bunch of plainclothes men and uniformed police with three dejected prisoners in their midst. The Chief Constable who had gone from Mope's Bottom with the Flying Squad men was mopping his brow with a silk handkerchief.

"You were right," he greeted Labar. "We were just in time for a bit of a scrap."

"What happened?" asked Labar.

"Some of our people found these men"—he jerked his head towards the prisoners—"skulking in a dyke. They were challenged and opened fire. A running fight took place for a while, and we were just in time to take a hand in the last part of it before they went to ground."

"Might as well find out what they know," whispered Moreland, and Labar nodded.

Moreland gave an order to one of his men and Tom was detached from his companions and brought forward well out of earshot. The Yard men knew better than to question the three together.

"You're the man who posed as Larry's valet?" said Labar.

"I was Mr. Hughes' body servant, sir," corrected Tom, mildly.

"Where is he now?"

The valet shook his head. "I know no more than you do, sir. He has vanished."

"So it seems. He's put you in the cart, anyway—you and your pals. What are you going to do about it? He's doubled-crossed you. I suppose you realise that?"

Tom shook his head stolidly. "I don't know that, sir. In these emergencies accidents are likely to happen beyond one's control. I should say that Mr. Hughes has found it impossible to communicate with us. I remember that you suggested something of the sort down below. You will forgive me if I take the liberty of suggesting that you are mistaken."

"You play the part well," said Labar, with a half-sneer. "I suppose that it's got into your blood. But I warn you. You can't play with us. Larry Hughes has let you down. You may save yourself trouble if you talk plain English. Give us the whole truth."

"I am quite willing to tell you as much as I know," said the valet.

"We'll see," said the inspector, sternly. "Go on."

But Tom was neither to be coaxed nor threatened. Whether he had any part in the escape of Larry and Billy Bungey, Labar found it hard to decide. His mask of a face showed as little beneath the surface as his soft, carefully chosen words.

With an air of complete frankness he told of his excursion to the mouth of the tunnel, with his chief and Billy Bungey, and how he had been ordered to return while the two explored the immediate neighbourhood. He had, as Labar knew, gone back with one man but Larry had disappeared. Once more he had gone back to the tunnel. There he had found the man wounded by Labar, who had just recovered consciousness, and had given him rough first-aid. Meantime his other companion had been sent on to close the interior door of the tunnel. Then it was that the three had determined to

make a bolt for it. Tom admitted indirectly that Labar's coup and Larry's absence had inclined them to panic. They had determined to get away from the place at all costs. Thus it was that they had encountered one of the patrols of police who had by then reached the neighbourhood of the exit, and had strove to regain their refuge in the tunnel.

All of this was exactly as might have been surmised by the detective. There was nothing that carried them any farther in the search for Larry Hughes. The other two men each examined separately told the same story, and Labar was forced to conclude that they knew no more than he did of the whereabouts of the master rogue.

The prisoners were sent back to Mope's Bottom and a hurried council of war was held.

XXVIII

The immediate question to be solved was whether Larry Hughes was still hiding on the marsh, or whether he had eluded the network of police and got safely away. So far as the detectives could tell every one of the gang who had been at Mope's Bottom, except Larry and Billy Bungey, was safely in custody. Messengers were hurriedly despatched in various directions, and a fresh and combined sweep of the marshes begun. Meantime motor cars were sent for from various points by which the prisoners already gathered in might be escorted to Lydd, where they were to remain for the time guarded by a strong force of police.

Labar had enough respect for Larry to think that, for the time, he had again eluded them. He did not believe that Larry would be found on the marsh, and the events of the next couple of hours proved that he was right. The master crook had somehow got through the cordon or had hidden himself and his companion with supreme cunning. But the odds were now with justice. It could only be a matter of time. Even if he managed to get out of the country—a matter of considerable doubt—it would be an unprecedented thing if he held himself secure from the police machine of the world.

Word reached Labar at the end of the search that a suspicious yacht had been picked up by H.M. destroyer *Hawk* off Dungeness and had been escorted to Dover. Everything had been found in order aboard her, but that her owner's name was given as Hughes. The crew were remaining on board under guard, until such time as someone from Scotland Yard should look them over. This was a business in which he promptly enlisted the services of Moreland, who departed with one of his sergeants in a motor car with a promise to return at the earliest possible moment. The news that the motor boat which had put out from Camber had broken down ere it reached its destination was now of trifling interest.

Satisfied, after a couple of hours, that the likelihood of picking up Larry immediately was remote, Labar returned to Mope's Bottom with Malone and two or three more men from the Yard to make a systematic and complete rummage of the tunnel.

He was not altogether surprised to find that the Assistant Commissioner in charge of the Criminal Investigation Department, and Winter the Chief Constable, were there to greet him. They had run down by car—a little too late for the fair as Winter expressed it.

They listened as he gave a short account of the events of the day, and Winter chuckled as Labar told how he had fallen into Larry's trap and extricated himself.

"You came close to making a hash of it, young feller. You wouldn't have any sympathy from me if you were a corpse right now. You're too darned impetuous. I've told you so before. Besides, what business had you running things on your own? You're an outsider in this district. You might have paid the local officers the compliment of con-

sulting them before you dashed off on this stunt. You didn't even have the excuse that Miss Noelson was still here."

"I agree, sir," said Labar with the complacency of a man who felt that results had justified him. "I was wrong."

"Well, don't let it happen again, that's all. Running round bossing everybody just as if you were Home Secretary, instead of a chief detective inspector."

Labar lifted his eyebrows. "I beg your pardon, sir."

The Assistant Commissioner broke in. "That's Winter's way of keeping you humble, Mr. Labar. It's quite true that you are promoted. It will be in orders this week."

"Can't trust you in a division," snorted Winter. "Want to have you under my own eye at the Yard. I'll see that you work." He broke off abruptly with a comment on the escape of Larry Hughes and thus sidetracked any attempt at thanks on the part of Labar and brought him back to the business in hand.

The two Yard chiefs elected to take a hand in the search of the tunnel. "How did it come about that you thought of a back door?" asked the Assistant Commissioner.

"Just put two and two together. Miss Noelson told me that there were times when one or more of the gang would disappear from the house and she was sure that they had not gone out by the gate. Looked a possible explanation of many things, especially the way that stolen goods were got out of the country. So I made up my mind to look for a tunnel—particularly one that led from Larry's private room."

Inch by inch with the help of torches they went over the tunnel. It was clear that it had been enlarged and shored up since the old days of the smugglers. Once admitting the possibility of getting material, it was simple to understand that Larry would be in no difficulty in obtaining labour. He himself had a reputation as a craftsman, and there were several among those who were under his sway who were skilled in many directions. The steel sliding doors were examined by Winter with an expert eye. They were miracles of ingenuity, although they had failed in their evident purpose as a safeguard in cases of emergency.

The walls of the tunnel room were lined with strong steel boxes, the majority of which were unlocked. These had clearly been used for the temporary disposal of stolen property, until it could be embarked on Larry's yacht. Suitcases and handbags of various types were standing about and an investigation of these showed that these had been packed with the most portable and valuable of the goods from the lockers.

The Assistant Commissioner applied a match to his pipe. "As a small boy one of my most determined dreams was to see an Aladdin's cave some day. Now I know what it would look like."

"There were forty thieves in that business," said Winter. "Larry seems to have resurrected the whole gang."

They carried the loot back into the house where a more precise examination of the contents of the bags could be made, and a detailed list written out. A very few minutes sufficed to show that they had retrieved, not only practically the whole of the stuff stolen from Streetly House, but articles which were part of the proceeds of many other robberies. The detectives had at hand no descriptions, but their memories aided them to identify many things with certainty. Here was thrown light on many affairs

that had been brought off in Labar's division, and which had caused him many uneasy moments.

"There's pretty well all the evidence you want," said Winter. "All that you need now is to lay hands on Larry. It's an open-and-shut case against him and his people."

Labar glanced at his watch. "We'll need an expert with proper tools to open up the other locked steel boxes," he said. "Apart from that Mr. Malone might take charge here now. I want to get away to Lydd to see about getting some of these people sorted out and sent up to London. Those I don't know anything about I propose to charge for the moment with being concerned in the Streetly House job. What do you think, sir?"

The Assistant Commissioner nodded. "I suppose you agree, Winter?"

The Chief Constable was prepared to accept Labar's suggestion.

"The Public Prosecutor will want to have a word on the subject of the charges you propose to make. Wish we could get hold of Larry and finish up the whole thing at one fell swoop. You'll have plenty to do, Labar. I'll take what I can off your shoulders, but there's a lot of things that will need your attention in person."

Labar nodded. The cleanup promised, so far as he could see, to keep him busy indefinitely. For each individual case among the prisoners was certain to involve a multitude of inquiries, to say nothing of a ream of dockets and other correspondence. The time likely to be spent in court was not inconsiderable, but that would be the least of his troubles. Meanwhile he had a wish as a point of personal pride to be the man who should effect the arrest of Larry Hughes—a thing which he began to fear would be unlikely. Scotland Yard, in looking for results, cares very little whether Smith, Brown or Robinson brings off the final coup. If there were other matters to occupy Labar he would have to stand aside. Nor could he rid himself of an undercurrent of feeling that Penelope was not to be regarded as safe until Larry was under lock and key.

Something of what was passing in his mind he managed to indicate. "It's going to be hard luck on me if I don't get a chance to go and get Larry," he observed.

"Man, but you're a hog," ejaculated Winter. "You want to wind up like the detectives in the story books. Leave a bit of the limelight for someone else. Maybe Larry will be pulled up, in the end, by some country constable. What the blazes does it matter who actually arrests him? Don't you know that we're all pieces of a machine? Stick to your knitting, Labar."

The two heads of the C.I.D. accompanied Labar to Lydd where a list of the prisoners by name had been made out. Arrangements had already been made for a motor "Black Maria" to be available in case it was decided to send them to London.

A room was placed at Labar's disposal in the little local police station, and one by one the prisoners were brought before him, for he was anxious to make a final attempt to find out if among them there was anyone who might throw light on Larry's plans. In each case it was a solitary interview. There were reasons for this. It is a trait of human nature—particularly criminal human nature—to be more disposed to confidence where there are not too many witnesses. Labar felt, also, that there might arise occasions for questioning that a strict interpretation of the law would not permit. Every Scotland Yard man must on occasion put a blind eye to the telescope. The laws and regulations made to protect the public if carried out to the letter would make the detection of crime almost impossible.

But since Larry's flight was only a spur of the moment impulse, Labar gained nothing that would help him to any extent in that matter. Hints of other associates, suggestions of possible hiding places, came from some of the more weak-kneed brethren who saw the fall of the heavens in this wholesale capture. These things the detective made note of for future use. In one or two cases he realised that some of those he had rounded up were more dupes than knaves. Most of them, of course, would have him believe that they were innocent victims of circumstance. One or two such as Tom the valet, were defiantly dumb. On the whole, however, Labar felt that he had put in a good hour's work before he came to the last of the list, the two women, Sophie Lengholm and Mrs. Gertstein.

Sophie, her head held high, her determined jaw set, showed no sign of friendliness as Labar set out a chair for her. Labar was a little puzzled how to deal with her for the moment.

"I believe you saved my life, today," he said. "In any case you saved me from a very awkward position. Why did you do it?"

"I am certain I saved your life," she answered, coldly. "Don't think that it was because of any liking that I have for you or anyone else from Scotland Yard. Whatever I am, whatever I have been, I have never had a hand in murder. That was all there was to it."

He shook his head. "I want to tell you that I'm grateful, not only for that, but for some things in which I have a guess that you stood between Miss Noelson and trouble."

"Oh, that." She made an impatient gesture. "Larry wanted to go too far. Anyone would have stopped him."

"You're a little before my time," he said as though thinking aloud. "I can't quite place you without looking you up. What have we got against you?"

The woman laughed without merriment. "As if I should say that you have anything against me."

"Take it from me, Sophie, I am not thinking of trapping you. I am more concerned to find some way to let you down lightly. I don't want something from the back of beyond to crop up against you if there is any way of getting you out of the present mess. Whether you think me sincere or not, I am anxious to stand your friend."

Sophie Lengholm had been born and bred to an ingrained distrust and contempt of all police officers. But she was a woman of the world and Labar's words and manner had an effect. Not that her instinctive feelings were entirely dissipated. "Do you want me to squeal?" she asked. "Because if so you needn't waste any more breath."

"That's just as you feel about it," he replied. "I should judge that you don't owe very much to Larry or his friends, but if you want to stand by them well and good. But can't you trust me about yourself? Give me some line on which I can act without prejudice to my duty."

Her face softened. "I believe that you are straight. Mind you, it is understood that nothing I say goes out of this room as an admission from me."

"This is between you and me, Sophie," he agreed.

"My real name is Cummings," she said. "I am the wife of Dave Cummings. I can see that you remember now."

"About twelve or fifteen years ago," he said. "Wasn't he the man who got a lifer for shooting at a policeman in Manchester?"

"That's the case. It was a jeweller's shop and I was dogging outside when the constable became suspicious. I gave Dave the office and we started to move off. Dave never went armed on these things—in case. But I carried a pistol and when we were pressed hard I passed it on to Dave. He used it, and perhaps you remember it was touch and go whether the officer lived. Dave and I separated after the shot was fired, and he got caught. For some reason it was supposed that he was alone. The policeman was a little excited I guess, and when he recovered spoke of only one person. So Dave went down and I got away."

"That's a long while ago," said the detective. "Unless you admit your complicity there is no evidence against you."

"Half a minute. Larry had put up that job for us, and naturally, he saw that everything was done for Dave that could be done. Of course Dave told him everything. In any case he knew that I was there. Apart from that there were others in the business who knew and whom he undertook to keep quiet. When Dave was sentenced Larry undertook to look after me. I was useful in many ways. It was only when he found that I was trying to get out of the game that he cracked the whip over me by threatening to have me put away. He would have done it, too. Larry has never made a threat that he hasn't been prepared to carry out."

"But you haven't been at Mope's Bottom all this time?"

"Oh, Lord, no. There were other ways in which I was useful. Larry has not often dealt direct with crooks. I have been down here for the last few years."

"Looking after the embarkation of stolen property?"

She shot a fierce glance at him from under her eyelashes, and Labar though convinced that his shot was right felt as though he had taken an unfair advantage. He gnawed at the end of a pencil. "I'm sorry. I should not have said that. I suppose that it is not the least use asking you to come out with everything that you know of Larry?"

"Not the least," she agreed with decision. "I'll tell you all you like about myself, but I won't implicate other people. I'm a thief, the daughter of thieves, and the wife of a thief. You won't find very much about me except what I've told you. If you can keep that out of it, I'll be obliged."

He rose and offered his hand. "Thank you, Sophie. You can be sure that I remember what I owe you. Rest easy about the old business. But this is different. You'll have to go through as an accomplice of Larry's you know."

"That's all right with me, Mr. Labar," she said. "You've got your job to do."

She gripped his hand and with a nod and a smile passed out of the room.

XXIX

Limp, hysterical, and half-paralysed by her own emotions, Mrs. Gertstein took the place of Sophie Lengholm. It was an interview that did not last long, for she literally flung herself before the detective in a burst of piteous appeals for mercy. There was no possibility of extracting information from her in her present state, and Labar gave instructions that she should have the attention of a doctor.

Moreland came by motor to Lydd from Dover. So far as any fresh results were concerned his journey had been fruitless. The members of the crew of Larry's boat were utterly unknown to him. But his arrival back at Lydd was opportune, for he was able to take charge of the arrangements for getting the prisoners up to London.

Labar himself was to follow, but he was wishful to run over to Rye to escort Penelope to town, and he determined to have a final look round before leaving the district. It was still within the bounds of possibility that some clue would arise in regard to the movements of Larry. Winter and the Assistant Commissioner also were anxious to get back to their desks in town, but decided to stay overnight in case of any fresh development.

The three motored over to Rye together in the gathering dusk, making a casual detour towards Mope's Bottom at the request of Labar to pick up a report from Malone. But Malone was not there. Indeed, there were but a couple of C.I.D. men left in the house, and two uniformed constables of the Kentish force on duty outside. One of the C.I.D. men observed that a messenger had been sent on to Lydd—whom they must have missed—telling of two men believed to be Larry and Billy Bungey lurking in the buildings of a farm on the outskirts of Rye. Malone had at once set off to investigate, taking with him a dozen men roped in from Mope's Bottom and its vicinity.

"Who brought this story?" asked Winter.

The officer questioned jerked his head outside, where by now, spite of the loneliness of the place, something like a small crowd had gathered about the house which had seen such strange doings during the day.

"It wasn't an officer, sir. Someone picked it up as gossip outside. Malone questioned the man who started it, and decided that there might be something in it. He judged that it was his duty to go and have a look into it."

"Quite right," agreed the Chief Constable. He turned to Labar. "It's likely enough to be a mare's nest. You know how these yarns spread about at these times. Doesn't sound like Larry to me. All the same we'd better go and see. It's on our way."

With this vague destination—for no one knew anything more concrete—they set off, the Metropolitan constable, who drove, taking the marsh road cautiously under the advice of the local policeman who sat by him as a guide.

On the main road into Rye, Labar had his attention drawn to an antiquated Ford which he thought that he recognised. As he suspected, it contained Malone. The big sergeant was out and at the doorway of the Assistant Commissioner's car in a trice.

"I was hoping to catch you, sir," he said addressing Labar.

"A stumer, I suppose?" questioned Winter.

"No, it was the straight tip. We were too late to do anything ourselves, but one of the Kent men has pretty well blown Billy Bungey's head off with a shot gun. Billy's as dead a man as ever you saw."

"And Larry?" interjected Labar.

"Larry was in the shemozzle, but there were only two constables and he plugged the one who laid Billy out. The other gave him both barrels but he doubts if he so much as winged him. Larry held him and the farmer at bay with his automatic, and backed into a field of standing corn. Neither of them cared to follow him without more help. By the time that arrived there was nothing to find except his tracks through the corn which came out on this road. I've sent men the other way and we were seeing if we could pick up any trace in this direction."

A few quick questions made the matter clear. A couple of men detailed to patrol the road had received information from a farmhand of two strangers moving about the outbuildings of a farm. Their movements had, in light of the mysterious police doings information of which had spread over the marsh, struck him as suspicious.

The two policemen, without waiting for more, had rushed to search the place. Rounding a haystack one of them had come face to face with Billy Bungey. They were perhaps a couple of yards apart. As the gunman raised his automatic the policeman fired. Billy dropped forward half his head shot away, and it was then that Larry Hughes came into view round the haystack and shot the policeman through the shoulder. The other had been held at bay until Larry could make good his escape. Then the wounded man had been assisted into the farmhouse, and in the queer way that rumour spreads, news of the adventure had reached Malone.

"Carry on, Malone," ordered Winter. "We can get into Rye in ten minutes and send out help. We'll keep an eye in this direction."

It was necessary to get to Rye also to assume direction of the telegraphic and telephonic communications of the hunt. Assured that Larry was still within close reach, Labar ached to take some physical part in the hunt. Had he been alone it was probable that he would have dropped all other considerations to do so. But the presence of his two superiors deterred him from any such suggestion.

After all, there was little that he could do in Rye beyond sending out a few more men to help beat the surroundings of the farm, and send messages to all concerned of this new development. So far as human foresight went all the boltholes had already been stopped. But once in the town and this done, his thoughts moved to Penelope. He determined to reassure her of his safety before turning out on the pursuit once more.

He walked from the police station a little pleased with himself. It was the first time he had permitted himself to relax for many long hours, and calm consideration told him that he had done well. The thing was nearly over. To scour out any of Larry's associates who had so far escaped would call for nothing more formidable than ordinary

routine and detail work, now that the mastermind was a fugitive who would of a certainty be caught at any minute. It was a pity about Larry but still—

He raised the knocker at the door of his lodgings. His matronly landlady received him with warmth.

"Glad to see you back, sir. There have been all sorts of funny stories round the town of things that have been happening. Don't know how you came to miss Miss Noelson. She—"

Labar was wiping his boots on the map. "She's out, is she? Where has she gone?"

The landlady's face dropped. "Why, she went to meet you. Didn't you send her a note to meet you at the railway station?"

The detective gripped her by the shoulder and a wave of apprehension swept over him. "I sent no note. How long ago was this?"

"A quarter of an hour. I—"

But Labar had flung away from her. He was running at the top of his speed in the direction of the railway station. He was, perhaps for the first time in his life, conscious of deadly fear. Instinctively he knew that such a note could have only come from one person. How Larry Hughes could have known where Penelope was, why he should take the heavy risk of being in Rye at all were matters on which the detective did not stay to reason. Enough it was to know that the girl was in danger.

He stayed only to fling an abrupt question to the porter guarding the platform. "Has any train gone out in this last ten minutes?"

"No, sir. There's one on the other side just going out for London. Heigh, you can't go through without a ticket."

But Labar thrust him aside and took the shortcut over the rails without troubling the bridge. Another porter roused by the shout of his colleague rushed to stop him. Labar gave him a push in the chest which sent him headlong.

"I'm a police officer," he cried. "Let me alone."

Normally he would have cried to the officials to stop the train, but his mind was obsessed with the one idea, and for the moment incapable of coherent reasoning. As he swept by the line of carriages he caught a second's view of the guard with his flag raised and his whistle at his lips.

The train began to move very slowly, but he was for the moment gaining upon it, his eyes fixed upon the panorama of the carriage windows. One glimpse he caught of a face that he knew, and jumped for the door of a first-class carriage. In the corner of the compartment farthest from him Larry Hughes was holding back Penelope with one hand while he faced about with a snarl of rage at the intruder. The door stuck and Labar wrestled fiercely to pull it open.

Abandoning the girl for the moment Larry leapt forward and aimed a blow at the officer which had it reached him would probably have dashed him from his precarious hold. Then like a wild cat the girl took a hand. So vehement was her attack that Larry was pulled from his balance and fell backwards on top of her. Before he could recover Labar was in the carriage.

He had pulled his automatic but he dared not use it lest he should hit Penelope. Dropping it upon the seat he dashed at the other man with his naked hands. Larry was taken at a disadvantage, but, powerful though the detective was, he was unable for a while to gain the mastery. Pinned for the time beneath the two writhing, struggling

men the girl could do nothing. Indeed she stood in considerable danger of injury for Labar dared not relax the fight that she might free herself.

Larry was not so big a man as Labar, but some dynamic power seemed to keep him going. A passing fear came to Labar that the door would give and precipitate the three of them on the line. He exerted all his force to pin his antagonist to the floor, but Larry was as slippery as an eel.

The detective took the risk of suddenly releasing his man and stood half upright. As Larry, too, tried to regain his feet Labar with careful calculation swung at him. There was one hundred and eighty pounds of muscular manhood behind the blow, and Larry dropped as if he was shot. Labar dragged his body off the half-fainting girl and helped her to a seat.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

She smiled faintly upon him. "A bit bruised and breathless but otherwise all right," she gasped.

Satisfied that she had suffered no material harm he turned his attention to Larry Hughes. The girl was pale as she observed him examine the victim of the knockout.

"Is he dead?" she said.

Labar laughed. "No, he's alive enough. He'll be as full of beans as ever in five minutes' time. Let's see what we can do." He lifted the unconscious man to a more convenient position. "Now if you can help me. Hold his hands while I make sure of him."

She obeyed his instructions while Labar for want of anything better—like most detectives he never carried handcuffs except for some definite purpose—knotted his own handkerchief, and one taken from Larry's breast pocket, about the prisoner's wrists so that his hands were firmly lashed behind him.

"That's that," he observed, propping Larry up in a corner. "He'll do till we reach a station. Now tell me how all this came about."

Careless whether Larry returned to consciousness or not he placed one arm about her and bent his face to hers.

"I had a note," she explained, "signed with your initials telling me that all was well and asking me to meet you at this train as it was necessary that you should go to London immediately."

"Who brought the note?"

"Some boy. Probably a messenger picked up in the street. Of course I went to the station at once, but could see no sign of you, nor of anyone that I knew till the train was about to start. That was just a little before you came. Then suddenly Larry Hughes was beside me. I was startled, of course, but the audacity of the thing somehow prevented any sense of alarm for the instant.

"'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Labar?'

"'What are you doing here?' I cried. 'Where is Mr. Labar?' I was so worried about you that I was unable to think clearly.

"'I am on parole till the train starts,' he declared. 'You will be pleased to learn that I have surrendered, that I am a prisoner.'"

Labar interrupted her story. "My dear child. Don't tell me that you were ingenuous enough to swallow that—to believe that I would let a prisoner—especially Larry—move about on his own?"

"It does sound silly. I was off my balance I suppose. I did not altogether believe it or disbelieve it. It sounded a little strange, but then so many strange things have happened to me. I could not account for his presence in Rye unless he had surrendered. He declared that you were treating him as a gentleman, and that you had gone to send a telegram and would be back in a minute. Malone was already in the train.

"We walked along the train to find the compartment in which Malone was supposed to be. All at once he gave me a quick push and thrust me into the train. Instantly he followed, pinning me down to the seat with some kind of jiujitsu hold, and with one hand over my mouth, but seating himself so that it would be difficult for anyone passing along the platform to notice what he was doing. Then you came."

In the other corner of the carriage Larry Hughes opened his eyes.

"A fool for luck, Labar," he said sardonically. "Things have come your way with a vengeance."

XXX

Penelope impulsively gripped more tightly on Labar's arm, but the detective could afford to take his antagonist's sneer with a certain amount of equanimity.

"I told you that you couldn't go on bucking against the machine forever, Larry," he said. "And talking of fools, what made you mad enough to go to Rye?"

Hughes fidgeted a little to get his bound hands in a more comfortable position. "My dear Sherlock, if you had more brains and less luck, you wouldn't ask me that question. Where is the last place that you expected to find me today? Where are your people still looking for me now? Not in Rye. Nor would they have looked very hard in London. They're clustering round the ports interfering with innocent trippers. Where would a hunted man with only ten pounds in his pocket make for in the circumstances? I ask you. If he had any sense he'd go in the direction that would be least obvious. He'd make for a place where he could get funds and lay quiet till he could get snugly out of the country."

"Sorry to have had to truss you up so tight," said Labar, as the other writhed a little impatiently. "I wouldn't trouble to attempt to loosen your hands." He left his seat and came over by Larry in obvious readiness to deal with any contingency. "This is the finish, Larry. You may as well take it easily."

Hughes sat quiet for a while. Then a bitter smile flickered about his lips. "Machine or no machine, do you know what's thrown me down, Labar? You and some of the dolts from Scotland Yard may preen yourselves, but there's only one thing in it. Do you know Latin? *Quos Deus vult perdere prius dementat*. In other words I made a fool of myself over a woman." His glance rested for a moment on Penelope's face. "I mixed love with my business. If I had left Miss Noelson alone would you have known anything about Mope's Bottom? You'd have had the devil's own job to bring anything home to me. Even now I'd have been travelling up to town, and left you and your gang running round in circles, if I hadn't taken a desperate chance of snatching her at the last moment. Yes, Miss Noelson, if it's any satisfaction to you it's you who have finished me and not Scotland Yard."

"Go as far as you like," observed Labar. "The big fact is that here you are and here I am. As a matter of curiosity how did you know where Miss Noelson was today?"

"Easy," said Larry, contemptuously. "By the time I got to the town every soul in it knew that there were happenings on the marsh. The police knew, and the tradesmen knew, that a detective down from London had started the affair. Rye isn't a big place and I know one or two of the tradesfolk, although, of course, they didn't know I was the man all the bother was about. I used my wits, Labar. Now let me ask how things went at Mope's Bottom after I left."

"We made a cleanup," explained the detective. "Nobody hurt very seriously, but we've got the whole of the gang, and we've raided your cache. You'll have to explain a lot of things."

Larry lifted his shoulders indifferently. "Oh, I'll take what's coming to me. Let the boys down as light as you can. There's some white men amongst them."

The detective made no reply and Larry subsided into a moody silence.

At the first stop Labar confided to Penelope a couple of wires to hand from the window. He had no intention of taking his eyes from Larry. One could never tell.

Thus it was that at Charing Cross a couple of men from Grape Street were available as an escort for Larry, leaving Labar free to see the girl safely settled at an hotel till some more permanent arrangement could be made for her. Thence he made his way to Scotland Yard where the omnipotent Commissioner of Police himself, was waiting to receive some account of the affair and to offer his congratulations. By the time Labar reached Grape Street the remainder of the prisoners had been brought up from Lydd and Moreland was there to wring his hand and perform a little war dance.

"So you've hooked Larry after all. Good for you, old bean. Let's go and have a drink, and you can tell me all about it. Gad, I wouldn't wonder if they made you an Assistant Commissioner after this."

Labar hooked his fingers in the lapels of his friend's waistcoat and held him at arm's length. "Don't you be so mighty familiar with me, Inspector Moreland. Remember that you are talking to your superior officer."

"Gosh, they haven't?" Moreland opened his eyes in a wide stare. "Boy, there's some live people at the Yard still whatever the papers say. Chief Inspector Labar, if you'll leave off throttling me for a second, I'll take off my hat to you. How an idle blighter like you got away with it is beyond me. Now a real industrious, hardworking fellow like myself never gets a chance."

Arm in arm the two departed for the threatened libation to Labar's promotion. As they stood in the little snuggery of a bar, known to a select few in one of the alleys off Piccadilly, Moreland paused with his glass in his hand.

"There's something about you that I can't account for at the minute, Harry," he said. "There's a smug complacency which makes me feel that success isn't going to agree with you if—if it isn't due to something else. Tell me has the wedding day been fixed?"

Labar came as near a blush as his tanned countenance would allow. He grinned a little shamefacedly. "One or two things to think of first," he explained. "For instance there's the question of a best man. If I could find some fellow who wouldn't let me down by playing the clown I might be inclined to persuade her—the lady—to settle it as soon as possible."

"You want a serious-minded, good-looking fellow, a man of distinction and presence. I am flattered by your offer. If I have no more pressing engagement on that day I'll be at the ringside. Now I'll pay for one more drink and we must be on our way."

The two friends parted, for there was much to do on the morrow, and Labar, at least, felt the need of a night's rest.

He was astir early in the morning, but as he propped the *Daily Mail* up by his eggs and bacon he forgot a healthy appetite as his eyes scanned the page which was prac-

tically all devoted to the roundup and captures of the preceding day. The final column of the "story" was headed:

TRAGIC DEATH OF MR. SOLLY GERTSTEIN.
Great Financier Dies of Heart Failure on Learning of his Wife's Arrest.

"A tragic episode was added to this great feat of Scotland Yard on the receipt of the news in London last night. Some account of the affair was published in the last editions of the evening papers, and in the stop press column the name of Mrs. Adèle Gertstein was given in the list of persons who were detained by the police.

"Late last evening Mr. Gertstein was found by one of his servants sitting fully dressed in his room with a copy of an evening paper clutched in his hand. A doctor was summoned but his assistance was of no avail. Mr. Gertstein was dead…."

There followed a biographical sketch of the dead man's activities, and some speculation as to what might happen to the fortune he had left.

Labar tossed the paper aside. "Poor old chap," he murmured. He turned thoughtfully to his breakfast. He was sorry in a way for the fate that had overtaken the little millionaire, but that was no reason why he should go hungry. It was a tragedy, of course, but he did not feel any personal responsibility. In charging Mrs. Gertstein he had acted merely as an agent of the law. He wondered what Penelope would have to say about it.

Nothing could alter what had happened. What was the use of worrying. He finished his breakfast with zest, and pausing on his way out to glance in a mirror in the hall to assure himself that he was scrupulously dressed he set off for Grape Street.

Both Marlow, the detective superintendent, and Moreland were already there, as well as a bunch of the divisional C.I.D. men. The inspector who had taken charge of the division during Labar's absence, slid out from his seat at the desk.

"Just about your last day as a divisional detective inspector," smiled Marlow. "Slip into it, my lad. In an hour and a half you'll have to be in court."

Labar flung himself on the pile of papers with desperate energy. He perceived that Moreland had taken many matters of detail into his own hands, for there were statements, signed by officers under the control of the latter, among the mass of documents.

Now and then something arose on which he would seek the comment of his two confrères. Then it would happen that one of the waiting divisional staff would be despatched on some inquiry or other mission by which a point might be made clear.

Although so many of the gang had been swept into the meshes of the net with Larry there still remained—as was inevitable in such a wide spread organisation—a number of associates whom it was essential to run down. There was still more work in planning a course of campaign among those merely suspected to be associates. In one or two cases it was decided to make arrests with the reasonable certainty that evidence to justify them would arise at a later stage. Now that Larry's reign was over the detect-

ives anticipated no difficulty with a class of informant which had been rather shy while he remained at liberty.

Among those who were to be arrested and definitely charged was Gold Dust Teddy. Detective Sergeant Down to whom was entrusted the execution of this mission, received his orders with satisfaction. The absence of Teddy was likely to make a difference in the statistics of crime.

"That's the lot," said Labar, at last. "We'll be able to use Stebbins as King's evidence if the Public Prosecutor agrees. Not that the evidence isn't clear enough without him. I suppose that I'll have to see him now."

Marlow looked at his watch. "Not till after the court proceedings you won't. Moreland had a chat with him some time after midnight. All clear cut on the general matter. Everyone will be charged today with stealing and receiving the Gertstein stuff. It's only formal today and other charges can be added at the next hearing."

"There's Mrs. Gertstein. I'm sure she was not in the robbery."

"No," said Moreland. "Do you think that I'm an ass. The case against her is attempted murder and forgery."

"Plain sailing as far as things go at present," said Marlow. "But Larry won't go down without a struggle. Take it from me that if there is anything money can do it will be done. If there is any weakness in the case it will be pulled to pieces at the Old Bailey."

To this proposition neither of the inspectors deemed it worth while to reply. Indeed, it was self-evident. It would be doing Labar an injustice to say that he did not care what happened at the trial. Theoretically, of course, he should be as impartial as the jury. It was his business—theoretically—to apprehend rogues on reasonable suspicion, and to leave the question of their guilt or innocence to the court.

In actual fact though prepared to present his case with fairness he was determined to strain every nerve to ensure a conviction. He had covered every possible point where evidence might be gathered according to his own abilities, but he was certain that the distinguished counsel who occupied the post of Public Prosecutor would point out other weaknesses and ask him to follow up certain lines to strengthen the case. Human nature is human nature even in the police force.

As Marlow had foreseen the biggest men at the criminal bar had been retained for the prisoners. But the first hearing at the police court was purely a formal affair, and Labar betook himself to the Home Office to consult with the Public Prosecutor, whose cold trained legal brain had already got a plan of campaign mapped out. The Solicitor-General was to lead for the prosecution, and every legal resource at the disposal of the Government was to be put at his disposition.

For only one person did Labar put in a plea for such leniency as could be afforded. That was Sophie Lengholm.

"H'm." The Public Prosecutor frowned. "She's in the same class as several of the others. We might tell the judge she saved your life. Is there anything up against her besides the present case?" He rummaged among his papers. "I have nothing here."

"I know of no other charge which we have any chance of substantiating," declared Labar.

"Then leave it as it is. We'll do what we can."

The weeks passed with long, drawn-out hearings at the police court, and the preliminary skirmishes of counsel. Almost every other day Labar found the tangle which he was unravelling lead to the arrest of someone or the other of the criminals who formed the aristocracy of crookdom in the metropolis. Even he was surprised at the ramifications of Larry's interests.

As a receiver on a wholesale scale Larry seemed to have dealt directly or indirectly with half the rogues in London. As is the way in these matters one thing led to another. The unearthing of a small receiver who was in the habit of passing on his biggest loot to Larry Hughes, would bring about the discovery of a nest of smaller crooks who had scarcely heard of Larry.

"There'll be no work left for the C.I.D. if things go on like this," lamented Winter.

Labar had forgotten about golf although his handicap would be seriously in danger. There were other things for him, which circumstances would not allow him to neglect. He was no longer driving a machine; he was part of a machine and willy-nilly he had to go forward.

It must not be supposed that he did not have his occasional hours of leisure. Penelope, however, had a mortgage upon these, and she did not play golf, although she promised at a later stage to take it up.

"You see you're constitutionally a lazy man, Harry," she explained. "I can't allow you to have any other interests but your work—and myself. You'll soon have a wife to support."

"That's a point," he agreed. "But I'm not so sure that I want to marry you after all. You see—"

She looked at him with perturbed eyes and pouting lips. "If—" she began.

"I saw poor old Gertstein's solicitors today," he interrupted. "They know how things stand between you and me, and they confided something to me. It may make a difference."

"How?"

"It's his will. He's left the bulk of his fortune to nephews and other distant relatives. Mrs. Gertstein is to get two thousand pounds a year, and a similar sum has been left to you. The will was made a few days before his death. So in a way you're an heiress, you see. And I'm only a chief detective inspector getting a few hundreds a year."

She smiled and put her arms round his neck. "That all. Then I'll tell you what we'll do. As soon as this case is over we'll get married—ever so quietly—and you shall retire and play golf all day long if you want to."

"I won't deny the first part of that proposition," he said. "On the other I'm afraid I can't agree. I'm going on with my job. I'm not going to live on my wife."

She kissed him. "Do you know that in some ways you're delightfully early Victorian? But I love you for it. Go on being a policeman until you are a thousand if you like."

"I'm afraid that they won't stand me that long," he reflected, with half-whimsical seriousness. "They were finding me out before this case began. I suppose I am an indolent man. It's a notorious fact. I hate to be bored. When I joined the service I had funny ideas about detectives, I thought of the excitement and not of the monotony. Now action stirs me up. There's not a deal of fun in finding out a man who has pilfered a hundredweight of coals out of a station yard, nor in sifting and making out

dry official papers day after day. That sends me into a kind of stupor and my brain will not act. They'll certainly find out that I'm a four-flusher one of these days."

"I think Mr. Winter knows more about you than you do yourself," she protested.

"Yes. Winter's a downy bird. He knows that I've got a conscience. It really used to hurt me to play golf sometimes," he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and his face turned a bright scarlet. "Say, dear—"

"Well?"

"Do you know I've forgotten—that is I haven't had time—I mean I meant to—perhaps you've been wondering—well it comes to this—" He made a desperate plunge. "The long and short of it is that I've been meaning to get you a ring and—and—"

Her clear laughter rang through the room. "You've been too lazy to get it."

"Not exactly that," he protested.

She shook her head reprovingly. "Don't stumble any more. You'll only get in deeper. Have you any money on you?"

He displayed a well-filled wallet.

"That's all right. Stay right where you are. I'm going to put on my things, and we're going out now, immediately. You're not going to escape me, Harry Labar. I'm taking no risks. You buy me an engagement ring in this next half hour and I'm going to stand over you and see that you do it."

Thus Labar's betrothal was ratified. In spite of his gibes at himself he settled down to his new job at Scotland Yard with some prospect of success, partly because Winter had his eye on him, partly because the work that came his way was of a congenial type.

The day came when Larry and his friends were brought up for trial at the Old Bailey. Labar took his stand in the witness box for examination at the hands of Treasury Counsel. His evidence began with that master piece of condensation evolved by some long dead and gone police official, "From evidence received—"

The reader of these pages will know more closely than most of those who heard the trial how the information was acquired that led to the imposition of a sentence of twenty years penal servitude upon Larry Hughes, and terms varying from ten years downwards upon the rest of his gang. Mrs. Gertstein, a broken woman, was sent to prison for five years, while Sophie Lengholm, on the plea of counsel for the Crown was given eighteen months hard labour.

Larry, self-possessed as ever, bowed to the judge with courtesy, and waved his hand gaily to Labar in the well of the court.

"It's a long time, Labar," he cried. "But one of these times we shall meet again. Give my love to—"

The warders hustled him out of the dock.

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