

THE
AMAZING
PARTNER-
SHIP
E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

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Cassell

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THE AMAZING PARTNERSHIP

By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



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THE AMAZING PARTNERSHIP

CHAPTER I PRYDE'S FIRST COMMISSION

Mr. Stephen Pryde having finished a somewhat protracted lunch leaned back in his chair and, under cover of a sheltering newspaper, carefully felt in each one of his pockets and counted the coins which were the result of his search. His worldly wealth apparently amounted to six shillings and fourpence halfpenny; the bill for his luncheon to three shillings. He called the waiter.

“Charles,” he said, “the luncheon was unusually good this morning.”

Charles stood in an attitude of pleased attention.

“I trust, sir,” he replied, “that it will be the same always.”

Mr. Stephen Pryde sighed. “Alas! henceforth it will be others who will realize that the Café de Lugano is the best restaurant of its sort for the poor man in London. You may let my table when you will, Charles. This afternoon I depart.”

The smile faded from the smooth white face of the attentive waiter. He was three parts a fraud, of course, but Stephen Pryde was certainly his favourite customer. “I am indeed sorry, sir,” he said gravely. “It will be but for a short time, I hope, that monsieur leaves us?”

Stephen Pryde shook his head gloomily. He was as a rule a particularly cheerful-looking young man, which made his gesture the more significant. “Alas!” he declared, “it may be that I shall eat no more of these excellent lunches. I go a long way away. My meals for the last few weeks, if you only knew it, Charles, have been precarious affairs. There is one question I would ask you, Charles, before we shake hands. You know every one of your regular customers. Tell me, who is the young lady who sits always in the opposite corner there?”

Charles half turned his head. The lady in question was sipping her coffee, apparently absorbed in the newspaper propped up before her. She was dressed with extreme simplicity in sombre black. Her cheeks were pale; her brown eyes were large and soft, and distinctly her most noticeable feature. She was a young woman of negative personality. She might almost have occupied any station in life.

“The young lady, sir,” Charles repeated, “in the corner? She is like monsieur, a regular client, but I do not know who she is. She never speaks except to order her luncheon or dinner; nor does she ever look about her.”

“That’s where you are not quite right, Charles,” Stephen Pryde objected. “The young lady has been watching me over the top of her newspaper.”

Charles smiled a little doubtfully.

“Mademoiselle has indeed a charming appearance and beautiful eyes,” he agreed, “but——” He held out his hands expressively.

Pryde laughed shortly. “Oh! I am not flattering myself particularly,” he remarked. “She has rooms in the same block of buildings as myself, so I have had opportunities of observing her. She is assuredly not of the type who seek adventures. Yet when she looks at one, one feels that she sees a good deal. Do you understand that, Charles?”

Charles seemed a little doubtful. His assent, too, was more polite than spirited.

“Not the type of person, I perceive,” Stephen Pryde continued, “likely to inspire you, Charles, with even curiosity. Nevertheless, I must confess that it would give me a certain satisfaction to discover the calling of that young lady. She does something in life—I am convinced of it. I am equally convinced that she is not a manicurist, or a milliner, or an actress. . . . The affair, after all, is of no consequence. There are three shillings for my bill, Charles, which you will have stamped at the desk and bring me back receipted. We will speak of the other little matter afterward.”

Charles retreated with a bow and stood awaiting his turn at the desk. Stephen Pryde glanced for a moment in the mirror at his right hand. Over the top of her paper the girl was watching him through half-closed eyes. He turned his head suddenly, but not suddenly enough. She had disappeared behind the newspaper.

“For some reason or other,” he murmured to himself, “she seems to take a certain interest in me. I wonder if she guesses.”

For a moment or two the faintly quizzical smile passed from the corners of his lips. He stared at the plate in front of him. His face had assumed an unusual gravity. For those few seconds it seemed to him that he was inspired with something very much like second sight. He saw into a dark world, and he shivered.

Stephen Pryde emerged from Soho into New Oxford Street, and, taking a turn to the left, proceeded a little way down a side street and entered a block of tall buildings. For one moment, as he entered, he turned round and glanced down the busy street which he had left. There was a certain significance in the moving traffic, the restless crowds of people, the panorama of living, which he had perhaps never wholly appreciated before.

Then, with a little shrug of the shoulders, he began to mount the stairs. Arrived at the fifth floor, he took out a key and let himself into the single room which had been his abode for the last few weeks. He hung up his hat and seated himself in the only chair before a small desk.

He was not in the habit of talking to himself, but the day was an unusual one with him. His little sitting-room, stripped bare during the last few weeks of every ornament and most of its furniture, certainly contained neither living person nor inanimate object likely to inspire conversation. Even his desk was devoid of its ordinary accessories. The luncheon from which he had just returned had been paid for with the proceeds of a silver-mounted ink-stand. Its place was taken now by a somewhat cumbersome-looking revolver of ancient pattern, yet with grim suggestions of efficiency in its very ugliness. Stephen Pryde looked at it intently.

"I fear," he exclaimed softly, "that you must be my final choice! All my life I have been an obvious and commonplace person. I am forced now into an obvious and commonplace end. Not that it really matters—not that anything really matters."

A knock at the door disturbed his meditations. With a little sigh he thrust the revolver into a drawer.

"Everything happening wrongly," he murmured as he rose to his feet. "Even this interruption is stereotyped. Enter beautiful stranger with a pocketful of bank-notes. For choice, let her be the girl at the restaurant. Come in."

The door was at once opened. The beautiful stranger was a myth. A fat and irritable-looking man of middle age, with exceedingly red face and exceedingly white hair, entered. Stephen Pryde glanced at him curiously, then gave a little sigh of relief.

"Neither philanthropist nor fairy princess," he muttered under his breath. "Come in, sir, and shut the door," he added in a louder key; "that is, if you think it worth while. First, though, let me warn you that, whatever you want, I haven't got it."

The new-comer stood without moving. In the podgy fingers of one hand he held the handle of the door, with the other he beckoned to Stephen Pryde.

"Young man," he said, "come here."

Stephen Pryde did not move. "Why should I?" he expostulated. "In the first place, I am not a young man. I am thirty-four years of age—thirty-five next month. In the second place——"

"D——n the second place!" the old gentleman interrupted fiercely. "Come here."

Stephen Pryde was almost taken aback. The new-comer seemed suddenly to have become furiously and almost dangerously angry. The veins

on his forehead stood out in unpleasant fashion. The very hairs upon his head seemed to bristle. He appeared to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

“Since you insist,” Pryde murmured, rising to his feet. “Calm yourself, I beg of you.”

He crossed the room and joined his visitor upon the threshold. The latter pointed with shaking finger to a plain visiting-card pinned upon the panel of the door.

“Your card, sir?” he demanded.

Stephen Pryde stared at it a little blankly. It was, without doubt, his own visiting-card. Its inscription was unmistakable:

MR. STEPHEN PRYDE,
32A COLMAYNE COURT.

And in the corner:

St. Botolph Club.

“That,” he admitted, “is my card.”

“Of course it is,” the old gentleman replied testily. “Now, then, where do I sit?”

Stephen Pryde closed the door with one last puzzled glance at the card. “I am not sufficiently acquainted with your habits, sir, to answer that question definitely,” he remarked; “but, if you intend to sit down here, it must be either on my one chair or on the floor.”

The old gentleman snorted. “Who do you think I am?” he demanded.

Stephen Pryde shook his head gently.

“You are not a fairy princess,” he murmured. “You have no appearance of being a benevolent stranger. I think that you must be my uncle from India. Your complexion would seem——”

“D——n my complexion, sir!” the old gentleman shouted.

“By all means,” Stephen Pryde agreed. “Powder it, if you like. In fact, you can do what you jolly well please with it. Of course I don’t possess an uncle in India or anywhere else; so who are you? Make a clean breast of it.”

“I am John Picardo,” the visitor announced.

“I ought to have known it,” Stephen Pryde declared. “I congratulate you, Mr. Picardo. I congratulate you most heartily.”

The old gentleman regarded him dubiously.

“What on?” he demanded.

“Your name, sir,” Stephen Pryde answered glibly. “It suits you. It is unique. I am proud to know you, Mr. John Picardo.”

“Young man,” his visitor asked, “are you a humorist?”

“How can I tell?” Stephen Pryde replied. “No one has ever accused me of it. I may have unconscious gifts.”

“You don’t know who I am?”

“Not from Adam.”

“I am a possible client,” Mr. John Picardo announced.

For one moment Stephen Pryde was staggered.

“I am very busy,” he murmured.

“Busy! Rubbish!”

“You may be right,” the puzzled young man admitted. “You probably are. You have the air of a man who is generally right.”

Mr. Picardo glanced at his watch.

“Let us talk business,” he insisted.

“At once,” his companion agreed. “My next appointment——”

“Never mind your next appointment,” Mr. John Picardo interrupted. “Listen to me. I am wealthy. I am not a mean man. I shall offer you an enterprise which will appeal to your imagination. Name your price for your exclusive services for twenty-four hours.”

Mr. Stephen Pryde blinked for a moment. Then he rose to his feet—he had been sitting on the edge of the desk. “Excuse me for one moment,” he begged.

He left the room and stole out on to the landing, studying intently the visiting-card upon the door.

“If only there had been the slightest indication as to my profession!” he sighed. “I may be a dentist or a clairvoyant, a phrenologist, or a pedicurist!”

He returned to the room. His face wore an expression of relief. “It is arranged,” he declared. “For the period of time you name I am at your service.”

Mr. Picardo betrayed a satisfaction which was in itself puzzling. “There remains only to name your fee.”

Stephen Pryde opened his mouth and closed it again. “It depends, of course, upon the nature of the—er——”

“Say a hundred guineas,” Mr. Picardo interrupted, his hand travelling towards his pocket; “one hundred guineas, and your expenses, of course.”

“My expenses, naturally,” Stephen Pryde murmured.

Mr. John Picardo produced a capacious pocket-book and counted out ten ten-pound notes. “One can never tell,” he said, dropping his voice a little. “I pay you these in advance. Spare nothing.”

He passed the notes across the table with one hand, and with the other he produced a copy of the *Daily Times* from his pocket.

“Look here.”

Stephen Pryde leaned over the table. His visitor’s fat forefinger was upon a certain line in the advertisement column:

Rita must be met Dover 8.45 to-night.

“Rita must be met,” Stephen Pryde repeated.

“And you,” Mr. John Picardo announced firmly, “are to meet her.”

Stephen Pryde breathed a sigh of relief. His new profession was still a little mythical, but it did not seem impossible to meet Rita.

“At 8.45 to-night,” he repeated.

Mr. Picardo glanced at his watch. “You will travel down,” he said, “by the six o’clock train.”

“And how,” Stephen Pryde inquired, “shall I recognise Rita when I see her?”

John Picardo stood upright for a moment. He was still florid of visage, his hair and beard were still white and stubbly, but his whole expression had changed. He had the air of one who moves amongst the tragedies. “You are accustomed to risks, Mr. Pryde?” he asked.

“Without a doubt,” Stephen Pryde answered promptly.

“I have been given to understand,” his visitor continued, “that you are to be relied upon in an emergency—that you have, in short, courage.”

Stephen Pryde smiled as he glanced at the closed drawer.

“Courage,” he remarked, “is of many sorts. I do not value my life.”

Mr. John Picardo nodded approvingly. “No man,” he assented, “in your profession should.”

“In my profession,” Stephen Pryde repeated thoughtfully.

“We come now to details,” Mr. John Picardo continued. “So far, you have shown an admirable discretion. You have asked no question.”

“It is not my custom,” the younger man declared.

“I have no doubt but that your methods are excellent,” Mr. John Picardo remarked. “This time you will have nothing to do but to keep a silent tongue, to watch for your opportunity, to strike if needs be, to obey orders literally. Listen. On the Dover boat from Calais to-night are travelling a woman and two men. The woman is Rita. I shall give you no other name, but if you read the illustrated papers you may recognise her. If you do, forget it. It is best that you know her only as Rita.”

“And how,” Stephen Pryde asked, “shall I recognise her?”

“She will wear a brown, fur-trimmed coat, a brown hat, with a bunch of violets, Neapolitan and English mixed, at her bosom. Your task will be to detach her from her companions and get her into a motor-car which will be waiting outside Dover town station.”

“May I ask what is the peculiar difficulty in the case?” Stephen Pryde demanded.

Mr. John Picardo fingered the watch-chain which stretched across his capacious stomach. "The woman is not in custody," he said. "You need not be afraid of that. Neither the police of this country nor of any other have the slightest reason to interfere. The men who are with her represent other things and other powers, things we do not speak of. It is possible that in the course of your experience you may have come across them. It is possible that, if you have studied in any way the political history of the southern countries of Europe during the last few months, the situation may become clear to you. You observe that now and then, when I am excited, I speak with the accent of a country which is at present in the throes of anarchy and revolution. If you succeed to-night, it may be that brighter days may dawn for her—if not in this generation, at least in the next."

Stephen Pryde listened with immovable face. There was no doubting the earnestness of his visitor. "To return once more to practical details," he said slowly, "where am I to conduct this lady?"

"The man who drives the car will know," Mr. Picardo replied slowly. "If it should happen that you do succeed——"

"I shall succeed," Stephen Pryde interrupted.

Mr. John Picardo was no longer a stout and choleric gentleman of somewhat past middle age. On his face played for a moment the fire of the enthusiast. "In that case," he remarked, taking up his hat, "we shall meet again."

Stephen Pryde had the true adventurer's disposition. He first of all went in search of the liftman and asked him several questions. Afterwards he went out, changed one of his notes, bought a box of most expensive cigarettes and a large bunch of roses. With the latter in his hand he returned to the block of buildings in which his rooms were situated and knocked at the door of a suite of apartments on the third floor. A clear but very soft voice invited him to enter. He found himself in a sitting-room, plainly, almost severely furnished. A girl looked up from the typewriter before which she was working. He recognised her at once.

"I do not intrude, I hope?" he said.

She looked at him with a very faint smile. "Not in the least," she answered. "Pray come in. You are Mr. Stephen Pryde, are you not? My name is Grace Burton."

"You will permit me?" he begged, offering the roses.

She shook her head reprovingly, but she held out her hands for the flowers, and breaking off one of the blossoms, fastened it in her plain grey gown.

"I am afraid," she said, "that you are a very extravagant person, Mr. Pryde. Will you tell me now why you have come to see me, and why you are

looking so much more cheerful than you did in the restaurant?"

"I have embraced a new profession," he declared, coming a little nearer to her. "I do not know what it is exactly, but I am very busy."

"A new profession?"

He nodded. "Before I go on," he said, "I must ask you a question. Had you anything to do with pinning my card to the outside of my door this afternoon, and sending a purple and choleric old gentleman named Picardo in to see me?"

The little lines at the corners of her eyes deepened. "Yes," she admitted, "I sent him. Confess, now, that my little scheme was good?"

"It was good, beyond a doubt," he agreed, "but exceedingly puzzling. Mr. John Picardo found me penniless, hopeless, and on the point—well, never mind. He left me with more money than I have seen for a very long time, a delightful little flutter of excitement, and a career. But if you can, Miss Burton, will you not explain? I am uneasy about that career. Apparently I may be anything, from a rose fancier to a criminal."

The girl looked at him steadily. At close quarters he wondered less than ever at the curiosity with which she had inspired him. Although her appearance was in one sense of the word childish, her skin fresh and smooth, her eyes brown and innocent, her fair hair so youthful, there was yet a sort of quiet placidity of features and expression which gave to her an air of strength and a capacity utterly at variance with her physical appearance. She looked at him without the slightest embarrassment.

"Yes," she said, "I will explain. As you see, I do a little typewriting, but it is for myself. I am alone in the world, and I have a very little money—barely enough to keep me. I have been alone so long that I have learnt a great deal of the world and its ways. Once, not so long ago, a friend was in trouble. I helped her. It was not a difficult matter, but one had to think. Later on the same thing happened. Then a few more people came to me. They say that I have a capacity for seeing the truth through a tangled mass of issues. Mr. John Picardo came to me for advice not long ago. I helped him. He came again to-day. He spoke of many things. I shook my head. This time, I told him, it must be a man whom he employed. 'But where shall I find him?' Mr. John Picardo asked. 'He must be brave, a man of resource, a man willing to take risks.' 'Wait,' I replied. I slipped out. Only to-day after luncheon your waiter gave me your card. I was curious about you. I knew that you had lost the whole of your fortune not a month ago in the collapse of that great insurance company. So I took that card from my purse, I pinned it to the door of your room above. Then I returned. 'Mr. Picardo,' I said, 'I know of a man who will do your bidding.'"

“My dear young lady,” Stephen Pryde exclaimed, “I thank you most heartily.”

“You need not,” she interrupted, a little coldly. “There was nothing personal in my choice.”

“Cannot you tell me a little more?” he asked, a little eagerly. “Mr. John Picardo, for instance—what is he? A merchant? A politician?”

She shook her head. “This is one of those affairs, Mr. Pryde, in which you might easily know too much. Take my advice: ask few questions. Simply do your best to follow out instructions exactly. If the woman whom you meet to-night can be taken away from those men, even for a few short hours, the history of her country may be differently written.”

Pryde rose to his feet. “May I come and report to you when I return, Miss Burton?”

She nodded gravely. “Certainly,” she replied. “I shall expect you to do so.”

He lingered for a moment, but her eyes had fallen upon the sheet of paper stretched out before her. She looked almost like a child bending over her lessons. Pryde turned and left the room.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERIOUS RESCUE AT DOVER

“For you, sir.”

The train was already moving out of Charing Cross Station when a man suddenly thrust his arm in at the carriage window and threw a piece of folded paper on to Pryde’s knee. He was gone in a moment, undistinguishable in the crowd. The message consisted only of a few lines:

The escort of the lady will travel under the name of Mr. de Paton.

The information was useful. Two hours later the boat-train was backed into the harbour station. Pryde sat on a seat and watched. Presently a guard came along with a little handful of labels. When he had finished his task, Pryde strolled along the platform inspecting them. There was a compartment reserved, as he had expected, for Mr. de Paton. It was still half an hour before the boat was due, and there were very few people about. Pryde looked into the carriage and tried the door. It was locked. The guard came by a moment or two later.

“That carriage is engaged, sir,” he remarked. “Plenty of room, if you are going on. Shall I find you a seat, sir?”

Pryde nodded.

“I should like one in the next carriage to this,” he said. “By the by, have you locked the door on the other side of this engaged compartment?”

The guard glanced at his questioner curiously. Pryde slipped five shillings into his hand.

“Don’t!” he begged. “An affair of a young lady. I may get in at the town station.”

The man smiled and touched his hat. “I’ll see to it, sir,” he promised.

Pryde, leaning over the rails a few yards away from the quay, watched the lights of the approaching steamer. There was a strong wind blowing and a little drizzling rain, a flavour of salt in the air, a sense of excitement, stimulating, mysterious. Nearer and nearer the steamer came. The ropes were thrown, she was gradually drawn in to the side of the dock. The gangway was lowered, the little stream of people began to disembark. Pryde stood apart amongst the shadows at the end of the train. He had only the

vaguest idea as to what he was to do. He was to abduct a lady forcibly from an escort of two men, probably prepared, possibly even armed. It was useless to make plans; to trust to chance and his quick wits seemed his only alternative. The first thing was to discover her. The boat was crowded, and for some time Pryde was kept on the alert. When, however, they did come off, amongst the last to leave the boat, the little party was easily distinguishable. The woman in brown walked in the middle. A tall, slim man, unmistakably foreign, black-haired, wearing an eye-glass, walked on one side; a shorter, thick-set man in a fur overcoat, with his hands in his pockets, on the other. The woman was closely veiled.

They came into the illumination of a little shaft of light. The thick-set man swung round. His features, coarse, dominant, remarkable, were suddenly disclosed. Pryde was conscious of a catch in his throat, a strange dizziness. The man's heavy face seemed to be grinning at him through the gloom—Feldemay!

Pryde, a moment later, was perfectly cool. His mind was centred upon his present enterprise. There was Feldemay to outwit—Feldemay, apparently unconscious that an enemy was watching him from there amongst the shadows. The little party of three passed on and stood in a line before the long counter where small baggage was being examined. Nothing was looked at. Once more they moved, this time towards the train. Pryde's heart was beating fast as he followed. Then the woman dropped the bag which she was carrying. Feldemay walked stolidly on. Her other companion, too, seemed unconscious of what had happened. Pryde slipped into the latter's place.

"Sit on the right-hand side of the train," he whispered. "Allow me," he went on, in a louder tone, stooping and restoring the bag.

Both of her companions swung round, but Pryde had already disappeared. He watched them from the window of his compartment, into which he had slipped unobserved. They all three stood talking upon the platform, Feldemay gesticulating excitedly, the woman immovable, the other man nervous. Pryde sat back in his corner and held a newspaper in front of his face. There was nothing more to be done for the moment.

The train left at last; Pryde rose to his feet as they jolted out of the station. He was alone in the compartment. He stood up. He had preparations to make. Everything depended upon his luck. The train came to a standstill at the town station. He alighted at once and stood waiting. He selected his moment with great care. The train was on the point of starting again, the whistle was already in the guard's lips. Suddenly Pryde threw open the door of the compartment in which the woman and her two companions were travelling. His accusing finger shot out. He had the appearance of a man beside himself with anger.

“At last!” he shouted. “Feldemay, you blackguard!”

The woman was seated nearest to the window, Feldemay opposite her, the other man on the opposite side of the carriage. Feldemay seemed absolutely paralysed. He cowered back in his place. The woman edged to her feet. She was bewildered, but she kept her eyes fixed upon Pryde.

“I’ve found you at last!” Pryde exclaimed, making as though he would enter the carriage. “You robber!”

Feldemay was slowly coming to himself. The train was moving. The guard was running up from behind.

“Stand away, there!”

Pryde’s hand was upon the woman’s wrist. She jumped just as Feldemay made a grab for her. Pryde banged the door and locked it with a key which he had kept secreted in his pocket. A moment or two later he was surrounded by a little group of porters, a policeman, and the station-master. The train was gliding away from the platform. Two furious men, leaning out of the window, were shouting and gesticulating. Pryde shook his fist at them and addressed the station-master.

“I am sorry to cause any disturbance,” he said calmly. “This is entirely a family matter. The young lady is my sister. I am taking her home.”

They turned to her. She was closely veiled, but she was obviously of an age to speak for herself.

“It is quite true,” she murmured in a low tone. “I am sorry to have given so much trouble. It was not altogether my fault.”

The station-master took down Pryde’s name and address. Pryde, with his hand upon the woman’s arm, hurried away, a few moments later, towards the exit. A hundred yards or so outside the station the train was slowly drawing to a standstill, the alarm signal ringing violently.

“Where are we?” the woman murmured. “What are we going to do?”

“There should be a motor-car here,” Pryde answered quickly. “I hope to Heaven it’s ready!”

They were in the yard. A big car stood only a few yards from the principal entrance, its engine already purring. Pryde almost pushed his companion in. Already there was another disturbance upon the platform. The arrested train was still in sight, a serpent of lights come to a standstill along the line. They could see men running down the bank.

“Quick! Get her started!” Pryde shouted. “Quick!”

It was an admonition entirely unnecessary. The car seemed to slip away into fourth speed almost at a touch. They flew through the town; the streets flashed by. Pryde leaned back in his place with a little breath of relief.

“By Jove, we’ve done it!” he exclaimed.

They were climbing the hill and out of the town. The country loomed up before them, a dim patchwork of fields starred here and there with lights. The woman raised her veil for the first time. She had a quantity of dark brown hair, regular features, and the quality of her voice was delightful. But the frozen look of fear lay like a mask upon her face.

“Can’t we go faster,” she murmured—“much faster? Look behind.”

Pryde obeyed her, but drew in his head again almost immediately. “We are going over thirty miles an hour,” he said, “and we have a start. Nothing will catch us.”

She shivered. “How can one tell? How far is it?”

“To where?”

“To where we are going—to where he waits.”

“I do not know,” he replied.

She looked at him fixedly. “Who are you?”

“No one you ever heard of before,” he assured her. “My name is Pryde. I am only an instrument in this affair.”

“But you know Feldemay! He is the worst of them all. He is the Robespierre of my country!”

“I met him by chance,” Pryde answered. “He robbed me once. It was in the days before he touched politics.”

They rushed on through the darkness, for a time, in silence. The woman leaned back as though weary, her eyes closed. Then the car seemed to jolt and slacken speed. She sprang up, terrified. They had stopped in the road. The chauffeur, on his way to the back of the car, thrust his head for a moment through the open window. He kept his face turned away, although he was entirely unrecognisable through his motor-glasses and cap.

“A puncture,” he announced shortly. “I can fix a wheel in a matter of three minutes.”

“Oh! hurry—please hurry!” the woman prayed.

The man stepped backwards with a low and respectful bow. For several minutes he worked silently. The woman all the time was peering out. The rain had ceased and some faint glimmerings of moonlight lay upon the immediate landscape. The shapes of the hedges were defined, the lights from a distant farmhouse were dimly visible. Suddenly she started.

“Listen!”

The sound of a motor-car driven beyond its proper speed was distinctly audible. The woman gripped the side of the window. “Tell him to go on—to go on, anyhow,” she begged. “Don’t let them catch us!”

The chauffeur was working with furious haste at the side of the car. Pryde sprang out and made his way to the bend of the road round which they had come. The pursuing car, recklessly driven, was close at hand. They

could even hear the knocking of its engine. Pryde thrust his hand into his overcoat pocket and drew out the revolver which he had destined to so different a use only a few hours ago. The twin lights of the approaching motor-car were now within twenty paces of him. He took steady aim and fired. There was a crashing of glass, a shout of anger, the jarring of brakes, and then a bump as the car, missing the bend, caught the ditch with its near wheel. His own chauffeur was now blowing his horn furiously. Pryde ran lightly back and sprang into his seat. The woman clutched his arm.

“What have you done?” she cried.

“Shot out their lights,” Pryde answered coolly. “They missed the turn and ran into the hedge. I don’t think any of them are badly hurt. In any case, it had to be done. It’s better than having a scrimmage in the road.”

The woman glanced at him approvingly. Her thin lips quivered, her eyes were soft.

“They chose well when they sent you,” she murmured.

Once more his companion sat back in her place, her hands clasped together, her eyes half closed. Pryde watched the road, glancing occasionally behind. At last came signs that they were approaching the end of their journey. They had turned off the main road and seemed to be making their way through a park. On either side of the open road were rolling slopes, with here and there a gigantic oak-tree. They passed over a bridge, through a wood, and along another winding stretch of avenue. Suddenly a bank of clouds passed away from the face of the moon. They were rapidly approaching a great mansion, from many of the windows of which, notwithstanding the hour, lights were shining.

“We seem to have arrived somewhere,” Pryde said softly.

Her hand touched his shoulder. Then he knew that she had not really been resting. He could feel the fever of her finger-tips.

“Courage,” she whispered, her voice shaking with emotion. “There is history to be made here, if only the fates are kind.”

The car came to a standstill. The door was thrown open long before their approach. A servant in black livery hurried out to receive them. Two others were in the background. On the threshold Mr. John Picardo, with a very strange expression on his face, stood waiting. The woman gave him her hand, which he raised reverently to his lips.

“It is a miracle,” he murmured.

She answered him only with a little gesture of the hand towards Pryde. Then Picardo turned to lead the way. Not a word was spoken. The butler had preceded them up a splendid staircase; their footsteps were noiseless. A curious but an apparent desire for silence was noticeable in all their movements. Arrived on the first floor, they passed along a spacious corridor

and entered a dimly lit room. There was a murmur of voices. Someone turned on a flood of electric light. Pryde could scarcely resist a little gasp of amazement. It was like a tableau. There was something unreal and dreamlike about the grouping. Supported on either side by attendants, a middle-aged man had staggered up from a low chair to greet them. His forehead was bandaged, one arm was in a sling. He leaned heavily upon a crutch. By his side was a grey-haired woman in the garb of a Sister of Mercy. A few yards away an English clergyman was sitting with a black bag on his knees. Everyone seemed to be watching the meeting between the man and the woman.

“Mary!” he cried. “My wife!”

His arm was round her. They spoke together a few brief, excited sentences in a tongue which was strange to Pryde.

“Quickly!” the woman sobbed. “Oh, quickly!”

The man spoke to the clergyman, who at once picked up his bag. They turned towards the door. At a gesture from Picardo, Pryde followed.

They descended the stairs and hurried across the hall and along the corridor. The man, whose head and arm were bandaged, and who seemed to be suffering from the result of some terrible accident, moved with difficulty. More than once a sob of pain, half choked, broke from his lips. Once he clutched at the air and seemed about to fall. They would have stopped for his sake, but he only shook his head.

“On!” he ordered. “I can bear it.”

They reached an iron-studded door, which the servant in front unlocked, and passed into a small church, lit by some swinging lamps. Picardo turned the lock after them and took up his stand like a sentry, with his hand in the loose pocket of his coat. The clergyman hurried into the vestry, returning, a moment or two later, surpliced. Picardo beckoned to Pryde.

“Watch the window,” he muttered. “To-night you are our man.”

Pryde nodded and stood in the shadows of the church, his hand closed upon the butt of his revolver. The spirit of the adventurer was upon him. He was for his side. All the time he could hear a faint mumble from the chancel, nothing distinct, no names, nothing but the position of the people to indicate that it was a wedding ceremony.

The dreaded interruption never came. It was all over. The little party came down the aisle. Picardo unlocked the door. The bridegroom was looking ghastly ill and swaying upon his feet. Yet more than once he tried to force a smile. They passed along the corridor and came once more to the hall. A rush of cold wind met them. The front door was open. Feldemay, splashed with mud from head to foot, had just entered. There were others behind him. Picardo stepped promptly forward.

“Feldemay,” he said, “you can go back to those who sent you and tell them what you have seen. You are too late.”

“Too late for what?” Feldemay roared.

The man who seemed to be fighting for his life shook himself free on one side from his attendants. His hand shot out towards Feldemay. He had the air of a king.

“Baron Feldemay,” he said, “you come in time to hear the truth from my lips. You may go back and tell those who sent you what you have seen. The English Church has spoken, and the child of Mary, my wife, shall reign over my kingdom, even though your assassins complete their work upon me.”

Feldemay presented the spectacle of a man livid with passion, speechless with rage. “It is illegal!” he shouted.

“You lie,” Picardo answered. “The ceremony has taken place by special licence. This clergyman is an ordained priest. No Act of Parliament your friends can frame can unhallow a marriage sanctioned now by both Churches.”

Feldemay turned with sudden fierceness towards Pryde. “So you are the pawn whom they have chosen to rob a country of its freedom! It is well that I know you. It is very well indeed!”

The little procession passed on. At the foot of the stairs the woman turned to Pryde.

“You have done more to-night than you understand, sir,” she said. “Some day I hope that a nation may be moved to thank you—as I do now.” She slipped a ring from the finger of the hand which she had offered him to kiss, and gave it to Pryde as she turned away. Picardo hurried him towards the door, where the car was still waiting.

“To London,” he exclaimed, “as fast as you can! You have nothing to fear. Only keep a still tongue in your head. The history which you have seen made to-night is the history of which one does not speak.” He thrust a substantial-looking pocket-book into Pryde’s hands. “The little woman spoke the truth,” he continued in a lower tone. “You were the man we needed.”

“I may not ask——” Pryde began.

Picardo stamped his foot. With both hands he almost pushed his questioner into the car. He stood there bare-headed, his cheeks flushed with excitement, his outstretched hand pointing northward.

“Away with you,” he ordered, “to London.”

Dawn broke, grey and misty, before they reached London. It was half-past eight when Pryde paused for a moment outside the door of the room on the third floor. He knocked. A voice bade him enter. Miss Grace Burton was

seated before a round table drawn up near the fire, helping herself to coffee. She saw him enter without the slightest change of countenance.

“You are just in time,” she said composedly, “I will make some more coffee.”

He closed the door behind him and came into the room. It was as though she had been expecting him.

“You succeeded?” she asked calmly.

“I succeeded,” he replied.

She stopped for a moment with the coffee-pot in her hand, and turned slowly round. “The marriage?” she asked.

“Took place last night.”

She nodded gravely. “You must be tired,” she remarked.

“There is one thing greater than my fatigue,” he said, as he took the chair which she pointed out, “and that is my curiosity.”

She shook her head gently. “Curiosity,” she murmured, “leads us so often into trouble.”

“But at least,” he protested, “you could tell me just a little, couldn’t you?”

She poured out his coffee. “You recognised some of the characters in your little adventure, I suppose?” she asked.

“Naturally,” he replied.

“You and all Europe know of the troubles of those two unfortunate people,” she went on. “The king will die. His wound is mortal. He may die at any moment. They would never have allowed him to escape from the country if they had not been assured of it. Last week their Parliament declared that the marriage between the king and the queen, having only been celebrated in the Roman Church, was illegal. There will be a child. It was the scheme of Feldemay to render it illegitimate.”

Pryde drank his coffee and thought he had never tasted anything more delicious. “I have a pocketful of notes,” he remarked, “half of which belong to you.”

She shook her head. “You will please not suggest such a thing,” she said firmly. “But, if you choose, listen to what I have to propose. There are many who seek my help in affairs impossible for me. I have the gift of sometimes seeing into the heart of a mystery, but I cannot always act, because I am a woman, and because there is no man whom I trust. If you care to become my partner——”

Pryde leaned across the table and took her hand. She snatched it away. There seemed to be no change in her face, but her tone was ominous.

“Perhaps it is as well that you should have done that,” she declared. “The arrangement which I am proposing is purely a business one. If you do

not feel that you can make up your mind to forget my sex completely, to remember only that we are partners—nothing more or less—in these various issues that may present themselves, then leave me this morning and forget what I have said.”

Pryde was silent for a moment. She sat looking at him, very still, very cold, very fascinating in her queer, childish way. She pushed the fair hair back from her forehead. It was a curiously feminine gesture, but her expression never changed.

“I accept your terms,” Pryde announced.

She nodded graciously. “Then I will give you another cup of coffee. I think you are very wise to accept my offer. The world, even in this little corner of it, even looking at it as we do, is a very wonderful place if only one keeps one’s eyes open. Have you ever wondered how many people you see in the course of an ordinary day?”

Stephen Pryde shook his head. “Never thought of it,” he admitted.

“But, after all,” she went on thoughtfully, “why should you? Numbers do not count for much. Take only my little seat in the restaurant where I so often lunch and dine. There are enough people in that room to make up a human problem. I wonder how many would be content to turn their lives inside out and show us everything. . . . Am I talking rubbish, I wonder?” she went on, slowly stirring her coffee. “Yet I should like you to remember this. Interest in your fellow-creatures is a sentiment which, if you only minister to it, may become almost a passion. Our career almost demands that it becomes a passion. It is because I am always looking at people, and placing them in their lives, and wondering, that I think I have gained a little insight.”

“I will be your pupil,” he murmured.

She looked at him doubtfully. His expression, however, was perfectly grave.

“The little I know you will doubtless soon acquire,” she said. “What is chiefly necessary in our partnership, though, is your sex. In an affair like last night’s I should have been useless. There are times when I must plan and you must execute.”

“The rest of my life,” he assured her gravely, “is at your service.”

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERIOUS IDOL

Stephen Pryde, with five hundred pounds in the bank, started life afresh. He began by returning to his regular routine, temporarily interfered with by the loss of his money. He played golf on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, fenced on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and played auction bridge during those afternoons at his club. On Saturdays he took a holiday. After about a month, however, he became conscious of a distinct slackening of interest in these pursuits. His late plunge into the more adventurous life had unsettled him. He began to hang about the police courts, to scrape acquaintance with the smaller fry amongst the detectives. He developed theories of his own about criminology. He visited prisons and talked with suspected men. He became a voluminous reader of a certain type of literature. He even haunted the neighbourhood in which famous crimes had been committed. He began also about the same time to haunt Grace Burton's rooms, but on the third occasion of his presenting himself there uninvited she spoke to him very firmly and very plainly.

"I have no work to suggest to you just now, Mr. Pryde. I am engaged myself on a purely feminine and unimportant investigation. When anything turns up, I shall send for you at once."

"But I am bored to death," Pryde protested. "I am sick of golf and cricket and bridge. I can't settle down to anything."

"That," she answered composedly, "is without doubt the price which you must pay for having led an idle life."

"Come and dine with me somewhere this evening and do a theatre," he begged.

She looked at him with the faintest possible uplifting of her smooth young forehead. The brown eyes, too, seemed a little surprised.

"Thank you, no," she replied coldly.

"Why not?" he persisted.

"Mr. Pryde," she said, "to be perfectly frank with you, you must not expect that sort of companionship from me."

Pryde felt unreasonably disappointed. He looked at her for a moment steadfastly. She had pushed her chair a little away from the desk, and was leaning back in it. Her simple black dress was not even fashionably made. Her fluffy hair was brushed severely back. Her feet—and she had, without

doubt, pretty feet—were encased in too thick shoes. There was not a bow or ribbon anywhere about her.

“I don’t see why you choose to keep to yourself so much,” he continued, a little doggedly.

“You must let my wishes be sufficient reason,” she declared. “I am accustomed to going about by myself. I prefer it.”

“At any moment,” he pointed out, “we might be working together. It would be an advantage to both of us to be better acquainted.”

“That may come by degrees,” she replied. “You will excuse me now, please. I am busy.”

Pryde went away, dissatisfied, and walked into the arms of adventure. He had barely issued from the doorway of the building in which he and Grace Burton both lived before he was conscious that the street was in some sort of commotion. From out of sight round the corner of New Oxford Street he could hear the blowing of whistles, a hoarse tumult of voices. Along the main thoroughfare traffic had stopped. Everyone seemed to have come to a standstill in their places, watching. A taxicab driver had sprung from his cab and was running forward as though to intercept someone. Pryde saw him sent head over heels into the gutter by an unseen hand. Then round the corner appeared a man, running. He had left the more crowded thoroughfare, with a sudden turn, and he came straight towards Pryde.

The man ran as one who runs for his life. He was about fifty yards away when he turned the corner, and he approached with incredible swiftness. As he drew nearer, Pryde gained a vivid but lightning-like impression of his appearance. His face was long, his cheeks lean and narrow, his eyes protuberant. His mouth was open; the breath was coming in short, quick gasps between his teeth. He was hatless, but otherwise his attire seemed to be like that of a clerk or some person in a moderate position. Foremost amongst his pursuers, and gaining upon him rapidly, was a tall, fair-haired man. He, too, was hatless, and he had apparently thrown away his coat during the chase. A thin stream of blood was trickling down his face from a wound upon his forehead. His cheeks were deathly pale, his eyes were blazing. He had outstripped the policeman by several yards, and already his hand was stealing out as though to make a spring towards his quarry. Pryde had a matter of ten seconds during which to make up his mind as to his course of action. He was something of an athlete and it would have been perfectly easy for him to have tripped or held up the flying man. To do so was his first impulse. He changed his mind through some inexplicable instinct. He stepped backwards and the man fled past him. They were so close that the man’s coat brushed his as he flashed by. Suddenly he was conscious that something heavy had been dropped into his overcoat pocket.

It was all over in a moment. The chase was ended. Pursuer and pursued lay together upon the pavement. A dozen yards farther on a man in a dark overcoat and bowler hat was looking, not at the tragedy at his feet, but at Pryde.

A crowd collected almost at once. Pryde, with his fingers clasped around something cold and strange and heavy in his pocket, remained upon the outskirts. The tall, fair man was with difficulty induced to release his clutch from the other's throat. He was dragged away like a dog. The man upon whom he had sprung lay white and still. A policeman was kneeling by his side.

"Who are they? What's it all about?" Pryde asked a loiterer who was elbowing his way towards the front.

"Big jewellery robbery this afternoon in Hatton Garden," the man replied. "They say this is one of the Human Four gang. The chap who caught him was robbed of fifteen thousand pounds' worth of jewels last year by them."

The figure on the pavement remained motionless. There was a little murmur. Soon an ambulance arrived. A whisper went round that he was dead. Pryde slowly backed out from the throng and re-entered the block of buildings from which he had just issued. A man who had been standing within a few paces of him followed. Pryde made his way up three flights of stairs and knocked at the door of Grace Burton's rooms. She moved away from the window as she saw him upon the threshold.

"You have been looking out, then?" he exclaimed. "You saw?"

She nodded.

"I saw everything."

"Who are the Human Four?" he asked. "I've never heard of them."

"Just a gang of murderers," she told him. "They have terrorised half London by their melodramatic tricks. Was this man downstairs really one of them?"

"No one seemed to know for certain," Pryde replied. "They spoke of a big jewel robbery in Hatton Garden."

The girl listened for a moment. She held out her finger. Then with swift footsteps she crossed the room and softly turned the key in the lock.

"What is it?" he asked.

She came up to his side before she answered.

"I think," she whispered, "that someone followed you up the stairs. I think that there is someone outside now. Tell me, what was it that that man slipped into your overcoat pocket as you stood down there?"

He started. "You saw that?"

"I was at the window," she assented. "I heard the policemen's whistles."

He drew the object from his overcoat pocket.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “Look! Look at it!”

The girl was silent. It seemed to be a little idol which he held for a moment in his hand and then set down on the table opposite to them. It was the image of a man squatting upon the ground—a man with long, low forehead, small features, and great eyes. His lips were parted in a hideous smile. There was a strange leer upon the chiselled features.

“What a hateful-looking object!” Pryde muttered.

The girl’s eyes were fixed steadily upon it. There was little expression in her face, but he could see that she was interested.

“Look at its hand,” she murmured. “See how he holds it out, four fingers in front of his face—the Human Four!”

“You think it has something to do with those fellows?” he exclaimed.

“I am sure of it,” she answered. “Listen.”

They both turned their heads towards the door. She held up her finger. From outside came the sound of soft footsteps passing backwards and forwards. Each time they passed the door they hesitated.

“Step outside and see who is there,” she whispered.

He obeyed. This block of flats in which both of them had chanced to have taken up their temporary abode was entirely unpretentious in character. The stairs and landing were of cemented stone, the balustrade of iron. Pryde stood upon the threshold and looked out. There were four doors opposite to him, all closed; three doors on the same side, also closed. He listened. There was no sound of departing footsteps above or below. A little uneasily he closed the door and came back into the room.

“There is no one in sight,” he announced.

She beckoned him closer to her. Her finger was upon a column in the newspaper which she had been studying. He looked over her shoulder and read:

“There are many extraordinary rumours concerning a fetish in the shape of a genuine West African Jujū, which these men are supposed to regard with wonderful reverence. It was brought by one of the gang, who is believed to be a Portuguese, from the west coast of Africa.”

She glanced up at him.

“Your idol,” she remarked, “without a doubt.”

Pryde nodded a little doubtfully.

“I think, perhaps,” he said, “the best thing I can do is to get rid of it. What do you say if I put it in my pocket and walk round to the nearest police

station?”

She shook her head. Stretching out her hand, she took the idol up and held it at arm's length. Pryde shivered.

“Beastly thing!” he muttered. “I never saw anything so repulsive.”

Grace made no reply. She seemed, indeed, oblivious to his words. She was holding the idol as far as possible from her face, her eyes fixed upon it. Pryde was suddenly conscious of a vague, smouldering excitement in her manner. Her lips had parted, her brown eyes were glowing, a slight flush of colour had stolen through the transparency of her skin.

“This is their mascot,” she whispered. “Can't you understand it? Criminals—men who plan crimes on a great scale—are nearly always superstitious.”

“Then the sooner we get rid of the thing the better,” Pryde decided.

She looked unwillingly away from the idol. Her lips had curled a little; there was a shade of contempt in her tone.

“Get rid of the thing, indeed!” she repeated scornfully. “Can't you see that this is the chance of our lives? We will keep the idol and wait. They will find out where it is. They will try to get it back again. Don't you know that the police have been months searching for these men? We will succeed where they have failed. We have the lure here. Depend upon it, they will come.”

Pryde made no effort to affect an enthusiasm which at that time he certainly did not feel.

“Frankly,” he said, “I cannot conceive that the coming of any one of these gentlemen could possibly be an occasion for rejoicing. In the last six weeks alone they have committed four murders. All their exploits are conducted in the same manner. The moment they are in the slightest danger they shoot to kill.”

“Are you afraid?” she asked him calmly.

“Without going so far as that,” he replied, “I scarcely see how we can look forward to a series of visits of this nature with altogether pleasurable anticipations.”

She pointed to the door.

“Our partnership,” she declared, “is at an end.”

He shook his head.

“Not on your life!” he exclaimed. “If you want to invite these gentlemen to visit us, I am not going to object. I was only just pointing out the possible result. Don't you value your own life?”

“I suppose I do,” she replied, “but, on the other hand, I have never known what fear is. I believe that I am what is called a fatalist. In the seeking of adventures fear is at all times a terrible handicap, a most

unworthy consideration. If we are to be successful, my partner must share my ideas.”

Pryde for a moment hesitated. No one had ever doubted his courage, but, after all, he was human. The taste for life had crept back to him during the last few days. Then he looked into the eyes of the girl who was standing patiently by his side, and he suddenly yielded. He knew that if indeed he passed outside the door this new thing which was making life so desirable would be left behind.

“Very well,” he decided, “we will try and take these fellows ourselves, one by one, if you think that it is possible.”

“I do,” she admitted. “Somehow or other I think you will find that the risk is not quite so great as it seems. Of course, my whole idea may be wrong. They may not come at all. On the other hand, I was looking out of the window, and I saw at least three men who were watching from different points. I believe that they all know that the idol is here. I have an idea that they will risk everything to regain possession of it.”

Pryde thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at the copper image. Even he could not get away from the idea of menace in that wicked face.

“If I had it,” he declared heartily, “I should either beat it to pieces with a poker or take it out and throw it into the Serpentine. For sheer and brutal, vicious ugliness, I never in my whole life——”

She laid her hand upon his arm. They both of them turned quickly around.

There was a soft but insistent knocking upon the outside door which led directly into the apartment.

“Already!” she murmured. “Open the door.”

Pryde, with the faintest possible shrug of the shoulders, turned away. The girl watched him as he crossed the room. He walked unfalteringly, and her eyes filled with an approbation which it would have done him good to have seen. He opened the door. Standing there was the man whom he had seen a short time ago in the street below, an inoffensive-looking person, with pale, rather narrow face, a fair moustache, and hair turning grey at the extremities. He wore a black bowler hat and a long overcoat. He remained for a moment without speech.

“What do you want?” Pryde inquired.

“A word with you, sir, if you please,” the stranger replied.

He came inside without waiting for an invitation. Pryde ushered him a little farther into the room. Grace, who had been standing by the desk, went softly past them to the door. She tried the catch, and, finding it secure, returned to her place.

“What can I do for you?” Pryde asked.

The new-comer did not answer for a moment. His eyes were fixed upon the little idol. His lips were parted. He seemed to have forgotten for a moment where he was. He pointed towards it.

“Where did you get that?” he demanded.

“I brought it home from Africa,” Pryde asserted coolly. “I collect curios of that sort.”

The man never withdrew his eyes from their intent gaze.

“I, too, am a collector,” he said. “Is that image for sale?”

Pryde shook his head.

“I never sell my curios.”

There was a brief silence. The new-comer looked away at last from the object which seemed to have so greatly fascinated him. His eyes fell upon Grace. She had moved and was sitting before her typewriter, with her shoulder turned towards the two men.

“The young lady is to be trusted?” he asked quietly.

“Without a doubt,” Pryde assured him. “May I add that it is almost time that you explained the real object of your visit?”

“I am prepared to do so,” the new-comer declared. “I was standing below when I saw the man who has just been picked up dead thrust something into your overcoat pocket. I have no doubt that his eyesight was blurred. He failed to recognize you. There were several of his friends about, I amongst others. He mistook you for me. That idol is my property.”

“Then who are you?” Pryde asked.

“It is a foolish question,” the other replied. “If you knew who I was _____”

He stopped short.

“We waste time,” he continued. “I recognize the rights of possession. I will give you two hundred pounds for that little figure.”

Pryde shook his head.

“Three!—five!”

Pryde continued to shake his head.

“Five hundred pounds,” his visitor said slowly, “is all the money I have with me. You naturally would not trust me, and I wish to take the idol away. Five hundred pounds, therefore, is my last offer.”

“The idol,” Pryde declared, “is not for sale.”

There was a curious light in the man’s eyes.

“Do not be foolish,” he advised softly. “Believe me, I have not risked my life for nothing. I have the money here—five hundred pounds. You can take it safely. No one but I and my friends will know that you have had the image in your possession.”

“The idol is not for sale,” Pryde repeated.

A sudden fierceness blazed in the man's face, trembled in his tone.

"Then I shall take it!" he cried. "You have brought this upon yourself."

His hand went into the pocket of his overcoat. Pryde, who was unarmed, was already poised on his left foot, ready to spring. Then they heard Grace Burton's voice from her seat before the typewriter. She had swung round in her chair.

"You need not trouble to feel in your overcoat pocket," she said calmly. "I took your pistol away as you entered. It was spoiling the fit of your coat."

The man turned sharply round. He looked into the barrel of his own pistol, held with remarkably steady fingers by Miss Grace Burton.

"We are much obliged to you," she remarked, "for giving us an idea of the value of this little curiosity. Have you anything more to say about it?"

The man glanced from one to the other. His face had become whiter, his eyes shone.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he demanded fiercely. "Who are you both? What do you want?"

"Neither you nor your money," Grace replied. "You can go as soon as you please."

The man hesitated. He looked at the idol, and again he hesitated. The girl's finger remained upon the trigger.

"If you do not go," she said softly, "if you make a single movement towards the image, you will see that I am in earnest."

He looked around him with the air of a hunted man. His sense of uneasiness was growing.

"Is it a trap, this?" he muttered.

"You may find it one," she answered, "if you stay here any longer."

He swung round and strode across the room. Without a backward glance he opened and closed the door behind him. They heard his footsteps as he ran lightly down the stone stairs. Pryde crossed the room to where the girl was sitting. The telephone bell was ringing softly on her desk. She took up the receiver in her left hand and held it to her ear. Her right hand still clasped the handle of the pistol.

"Are you there?" she said. "Yes, you can have the first folio at once. I believe that the others will come later. . . . Good-bye!"

She replaced the receiver and turned round to Pryde with a curious expression in her face.

"Shall I follow him?" he asked quickly. "He must be one of the gang."

She shook her head.

"It is not necessary. He will be arrested within a few moments or so, as soon as he is safely out of sight of this building."

Pryde gasped. He glanced towards the telephone. She nodded.

“Oh, I am not quite mad!” she assured him. “Nor are we either of us running such a terrible risk as you think. My telephoning was a code, of course.”

“To the police?”

“To the police,” she admitted calmly. “The man who put that image into your pocket down in the street below was one of the Human Four without a doubt. The man who has just left us is another. For him, too, it is over. There are two more. The man who will be arrested below will not return to them. They will think that he has made off with the idol. Then I think that one of them will come here to make sure. The other——”

“What about the other?” Pryde demanded.

She shook her head.

“I do not know,” she said quietly. “He is the man whom they call the professor, the man who has done nearly all the killing, the man whom the police are wild to get hold of. I do not think that he will come at all.”

Pryde was still a little bewildered.

“Are there any more questions you wish to ask me?” she inquired.

“I thought,” he said, “that you were simply looking out for adventures on your own account, the sort of person who liked to help women out of small troubles. In any case, I thought that you acted independently.”

“I started like that,” she told him. “Then I came to be useful to the police. There are some of those in authority who have confidence in me. I have been concerned in one or two important matters. I had not meant to tell you so much just yet, but it is you who have stumbled into this affair to-day, so we move forward a little more rapidly than I had thought. I have a private code and a private wire from here to a certain police-station. I have also an alarm bell under my foot which rings into a single room on the ground floor where the men are waiting who will follow our last visitor. I can summon help by means of it, if necessary. You see, I am not so foolhardy as you thought. All the same, I am glad that you were not afraid.”

He looked at her in wonder. Her tone had been perfectly matter-of-fact. She had taken him into her confidence very much as she might have confessed to a secret liking for golf, or any other wholly harmless pursuit. At that moment she was inspecting the mechanism of the pistol which she had taken from their visitor’s pocket. Her face was exactly like the face of a child examining a new toy.

“Do you see what a beautiful piece of work this is?” she exclaimed, with the enthusiasm of a critic. “I have others here, but nothing so perfectly finished.”

She opened a drawer on her right. There were four pistols there and an open box of cartridges. She slipped her latest acquisition in by their side.

“I always have these where my fingers can reach them in a moment,” she explained, “although I have never used one in my life. It is not a woman’s place to fight. There are other and more delicate methods.”

He shivered. Her face for a moment had been positively cruel.

“I think,” she continued, “that you had better spend the rest of the day with me. It may be interesting. Only I am afraid that you will not be able to go as far, even, as the Café de Lugano for luncheon. Don’t you think that you had better get some cigarettes, and a book, if you want one, from your rooms, and order some luncheon to be sent in here from somewhere?”

Pryde was feeling a little like a man in a dream. He glanced at his watch; it was past one o’clock.

“Yes, I will do that,” he assented. “I wonder, though, if it is safe to leave you?”

“Quite,” she assured him. “They will wait for some time, at any rate, for their friend, who has just left us, to return. When they find that he does not, they will be suspicious, beyond a doubt; but it is my belief that they will risk everything for the sake of that little image.”

He turned and looked at it. Again the same uneasy fascination possessed him. He stretched out his hand, but she stopped him.

“Let it alone,” she begged. “I believe I am superstitious about it myself. When you come back we will examine it together. Somehow, I can’t help fancying that it means something more to these men than as yet we have rightly understood.”

CHAPTER IV

THE HUMAN FOUR

It was nearly five o'clock before their second visitor arrived. Grace and her partner were having tea together when they heard a sharp and somewhat insistent knocking upon the door, followed by the ringing of the bell. Grace rose at once and glided into her place before the typewriter. Pryde walked to the door and threw it open. A very resplendent person stood there, sleek, black-haired, dressed in the height of fashion, Semitic. He smiled at them reassuringly; they were not to be overcome!

"My name," he announced, removing his shiny silk hat, "is Nathan—Mr. Richard Nathan. I called, with your permission, to make a few inquiries."

"Come in, Mr. Nathan," Pryde replied quietly. "My name is Pryde. Is it I whom you want to see?"

The man's eyes were everywhere. Suddenly he saw what he sought. The smile faded from his thick lips, the oily suaveness left him. He stared at the image upon the table. The hand which held his hat shook. He was, without doubt, agitated.

"It is you I want to talk to, my dear Mithter Pryde," he began. "Just a few words; most important bithneth—most important indeed; good bithneth for you."

"Really?" Pryde remarked politely.

"Who is the young lady?" the newcomer demanded. "Introduce me, if you please."

"This is Miss Grace Burton, who is good enough to do some typewriting for me," Pryde explained. "These are really her rooms, and I don't understand how it is that you should have come to look for me here."

"Never mind that," Mr. Nathan declared impressively—"never mind that. I have come to do you a good turn. I have come on a matter of most important bithneth."

"Would you like me to go away?" Grace asked.

Mr. Nathan nodded his head with satisfaction.

"It will be a shame to lose you, my dear," he said, "but the bithneth is of a private nature."

"Pray do not move, Miss Burton," Pryde intervened. "I can have no business with a perfect stranger which is of any great importance so far as I

am concerned. You can say anything you like to me before Miss Burton," he went on, "and the sooner you tell me exactly what it is that has brought you here, the better I shall be pleased."

Mr. Nathan pointed with the shining knob of his stick towards the idol. The knob quivered a little in the air.

"Very well, then," he said. "Just as you please. Where did you get that?"

Pryde, too, glanced towards the image. Was it his fancy, or was there indeed, at that moment, a red and threatening light in the deep-set eyes?

"That," Pryde answered, "is not mine. I am keeping it on trust."

Mr. Nathan held out his hand.

"Shake hands, sir," he insisted. "You are an honest young man. You shall not lose by it. Listen. I am the owner of that little curio."

"Indeed!" Pryde replied dryly.

"Tell me at once," Mr. Nathan begged, "why do you look at me so doubtfully? Hath anyone else been here to claim it?"

"There was a man came in," Pryde admitted, "only a few hours ago, who said very much the same as you are saying. He could not prove his ownership, however, and he grew rather offensive. In the end we were obliged to get rid of him hurriedly."

The face of Mr. Richard Nathan became a study. He was at the same time suspicious, alarmed, and surprised.

"Went away without it," he repeated, half to himself. "Came here and went away without it! You are sure he took it?"

"Oh! the person I am speaking of saw it all right," Pryde declared. "I don't see what that has to do with it. Now, please, get on with what you have to say."

Mr. Nathan nodded. A possible explanation had suggested itself to him. He kept edging a little nearer to the idol.

"I should like to examine the image for a few minutes, just to be sure that it is mine," Mr. Nathan said. "There are so many imitations about."

Pryde took it up and placed it in his visitor's hands. For a single second Mr. Nathan looked like making a bolt. Grace had opened the drawer on her right-hand side and Pryde was standing on the alert. Mr. Nathan glanced from one to the other and sighed. With obvious reluctance he set the idol down.

"Ugly thing, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Shocking!" Pryde agreed.

"Dear me! Dear me!" Mr. Nathan went on. "And this person who was here before me took this little image too; but you were not able to come to terms, so he went away and left it, eh?"

“Precisely,” Pryde assented quietly. “Just in the same way that within a few minutes you also will, I fear, have to tear yourself away and leave the idol here.”

Nathan opened his lips and closed them again. He looked at Pryde and he looked at Grace. Then he set down his hat and cane on a chair.

“Look here,” he said, “for all our thakes I will not wathte time. I have come here for this idol. What ith it worth to you?”

Pryde shrugged his shoulders. He took the image into his fingers and held it out at arm’s length.

“It isn’t much to look at,” he remarked thoughtfully.

“It ithn’t much to look at,” Mr. Nathan agreed, “and you know very well that you have no right to it at all. It was thruth into your possession by a man in his latht momenth. He was half blinded, and he mithtook you for one of uth.”

Pryde nodded.

“That is exactly the position.”

“You want to make thomething by the mithtake,” Mr. Nathan then continued. “It ith natural. I will not beat about the buth. I will not tell you any lieth. I am not a curio dealer. That idol representh more to me than to anyone else in life. I want it. I mutht have it. It ith in your possession by chanthe—an evil chanthe for me. Very well, I will pay. Look here.”

He tore his coat open and drew out a thick bundle of bank-notes. He threw them upon the table.

“Count them! Count them!” he cried. “I am treating you like a printhe. There’th eight hundred pounds there of the betht. Count them! That ought to pay you, oughtn’t it? Eight hundred poundth for a copper idol. Good God!”

Pryde’s grip upon the image in his hand had perhaps changed a little. His forefinger had pressed more tightly upon a projection of the backbone. The head flew sharply back. Pryde started, lowered his hand, and a wonderful stream seemed suddenly to flow on to the carpet, a stream of liquid fire—of ruby fire, of green fire, of white, brilliant iridescence. Grace and Pryde were themselves almost stupefied. Then Nathan, with a howl, threw himself upon his knees and began to grope about desperately. Pryde caught him by the collar and dragged him away.

“So this is what you are trying to buy for eight hundred pounds, is it, my friend?” he exclaimed. “No, let them lie there! They’re safe enough. I’ll collect them afterwards.”

For a moment the man seemed about to throw himself upon Pryde. He was trembling in every limb. His face was convulsed. The passion of greed was making him almost courageous.

“You have no claim to the jewelth!” he snarled. “They belong to uth!”

"That, my friend," Pryde remarked dryly, "I should be inclined to doubt."

Nathan staggered to his feet. The telephone bell was ringing. He turned sharply towards it.

"What' th that?"

"Only one of my clients," Grace answered calmly. "Are you there?" she went on. "Yes, the second lot of folios will be ready in a very few moments now; the third lot probably to-night. . . . Yes! . . . Yes! . . . Quite, thank you. . . . Good-bye!"

Mr. Nathan wiped his forehead. He was not a very pleasant sight.

"Look here," he said to Pryde, "we don't need to quarrel. It' th an infernal piece of luck, but you' ve thumbled into this. There' th enough for all of uth. Turn them out upon the table. We' ll share them up, you and I; half for me, half between you two. That' th fair, ithn' t it? Only let' s do the job quickly and let me get off. There' s sixty thousand poundth' worth of jewelth there. You' re made for life, and if you take my advithe, you' ll clear out. I can give you an addreth or two in Amtherdam where you can get rid of them, if you want to know."

Pryde shook his head.

"Mr. Nathan," he declared, "you are wasting your time. Neither this young lady nor I myself have the slightest idea of benefiting by the possession of these jewels. We have grave doubts," he went on, with a faint smile at the corners of his lips, "as to how they may have come into your possession. We shall run no risk in the matter. We shall seal the idol up, and if no one comes here to lay claim to it with better credentials than you and your friend during the next twenty-four hours, we shall send it to Scotland Yard."

Nathan glared at them. He was half suspicious, half stupefied.

"You mean that you are on the straight?" he demanded fiercely.

"Absolutely," Pryde assured him. "I must admit that I had some sympathy for that poor fellow when I saw him being chivied, and I meant to keep possession of the little idol until some authenticated person came to claim it. Now, of course, it is a different thing. I shall keep it only for another twenty-four hours."

Mr. Nathan opened his mouth and closed it again. He looked at the carpet, he looked at the idol, he looked at Grace, and he looked at Pryde.

"God bless my thoul!" he spluttered. "Are you mad, both of you? Don' t you want money? Don' t you know what money ith?"

"We want it very badly sometimes," Pryde replied, "but, you see, there is always the risk that these jewels may not have been honestly come by."

Mr. Nathan tried to speak and failed. He had no words. Very slowly he took up his hat, brushed it with his coat sleeve, and turned towards the door.

“If I hear that the poor fellow hath left any written inthtructionth,” he promised, “I will let you know. I understand you to thay that you will keep the jewels for at leaht twenty-four hours?”

Pryde nodded. Mr. Nathan turned away to hide a somewhat curious expression at the corners of his lips.

“Very well,” he said, “I wish you good afternoon. You are very honetht, both of you. I hope you will find that honethty will pay.”

He walked out, slamming the door a little behind him. They heard his retreating footsteps. Grace touched the bell at her feet and raised the telephone receiver once more to her ear.

“Our visitor,” she announced softly, “has just left. Please do not let anything important happen just round here. There is one more to come. . . . Yes, quite all right, thank you. . . . Good-bye!”

She laid the receiver down.

“After all,” Pryde remarked, “our friend Mr. Nathan was not one of the fighting sort. Somehow or other I fancy that our last visitor, if he comes, may be different.”

That night, for the first time, Pryde dined with his partner. Their meal, sent in from a neighbouring restaurant, was by no means an elaborate one, nor did Grace unbend in the least. Nevertheless, Pryde began to feel more cheerful. The living together through these few thrilling moments of adventure could scarcely fail, at any rate, to foster the spirit of comradeship. She trusted him, too—had confidence in him. It was impossible, he told himself, that she was really so cold and sexless as she appeared. The evening wore on. Occasionally they heard the lift pass up; oftener still there were footsteps on the stairs. Their expected visitor, however, did not arrive. Towards ten o’clock was always a quiet time in the flats. There were very few people coming or going. With the silence Pryde became conscious of a curious feeling of uneasiness. He found himself watching the door every moment.

“I wonder,” he said, half to himself, “what devilish scheme this man who calls himself the professor will invent?”

Grace looked up from the book which she had been reading. There was not the slightest sign of excitement in her face. Her hair was primly arranged, drawn back tightly with the obvious intent to nullify its natural fluffiness. Her plain black dress was unrelieved by even a touch of white at the neck. Her cheeks were as pale as ever.

“You must bear in mind,” she reminded him, “that neither Mr. Nathan nor his predecessor will have had an opportunity of communicating with

him. If they had any plans for meeting formed, he may have become suspicious. On the other hand, he may believe that they have gone off with the jewels, very much as Mr. Nathan believed that the first man was trying to do. He will probably come quite harmlessly, and with very much the same sort of offers. Listen!”

Pryde could hear nothing, but Grace crossed the room swiftly and seated herself before her typewriter. The green-shaded lamp was already in position, a half-finished sheet of manuscript in the machine. She began to work. With one hand she opened the drawer on her right-hand side.

“Be careful,” she whispered. “Someone is fitting a key into the latch.”

Almost as she spoke the door was noiselessly opened. A hand flashed through the crack and touched the knob which controlled the electric lights. The room was in darkness except for the lamp by Grace’s side. A man slipped quickly in and closed the door behind him.

“The lamp,” he remarked, “is unfortunate.”

He was a man of about middle height, of most ordinary appearance. A black overcoat, which fitted him none too well, hung about his spare form. He had a pronounced stoop, gold-rimmed spectacles, and white, untidy hair rather long at the back. He wore a bowler hat with a broad brim. He stood a few yards inside the room, both hands concealed in his overcoat pockets.

“Young lady,” he said calmly, “and you, sir, you may be expecting me—you may not. There is a little mystery concerned with this room and its occupants which I have not yet solved, but in case my suspicions of you both are correct, let me warn you that however quickly your hands may go to your pockets, they would not go quickly enough, for I am holding a pistol in either hand, and I learned to shoot through my pockets a good many years ago. You see?”

Grace looked at him, unmoved, from over the top of her typewriter.

“You are quite sure, sir, that you are not making a mistake?” she asked.

“I am making no mistake,” the new-comer assured them grimly. “I have come to recover a piece of property which you may or may not know about. There it stands upon the table—ugly, grinning monstrosity. Now, I’ll buy it from you or fight for it, whichever you like; but I have come for my idol, and I am not used to paying visits in vain.”

He came a little closer to them. It was quite clear that he had been speaking the truth. The outline of the pistols was there, showing from inside his overcoat pockets. One was directed towards Pryde, one towards Grace. Suddenly the telephone bell rang.

“If you answer that,” the professor said softly, “I shall shoot. You may be honest fools, you may be criminals yourselves, you may be creatures of the police. I am taking no risks. Dead men and women are the safest witnesses.”

He spoke in a slow, almost monotonous tone but with a manner curiously impressive. Somehow or other they both of them felt that he was a being of a different order from either Nathan or his predecessor. The Master was there. Grace knew perfectly well that if she even stretched out her hand towards the receiver of the telephone he would keep his word.

“Thank you,” she faltered. “I am terrified to death. I can assure you that I shall let the telephone ring.”

Their visitor moved a step or two nearer still. He was now within a few feet of them.

“You are not terrified to death,” he said coldly. “That is what alarms me. I will confess to you that I have the feeling that I am in a trap, but in case you are deriving any satisfaction from that fact, let me assure you that if I am, you both of you will answer for it with your lives. You know who I am? I am Helski, chief of the Human Four. I have killed a dozen men this year. I believe in killing; it has become an art with me. If it were not for the noise, I think I should kill you both, just as a precaution. Young lady,” he added, a peremptory note in his tone, “get up. Into that corner, if you please. I don’t like the way your hand is prowling around that drawer. Quick!”

She hesitated only for a single moment. Then she rose.

“Back! And you too!” the professor ordered, turning suddenly to Pryde. “No nonsense! I could shoot your teeth away one by one if I chose. Back, both of you!”

They obeyed. He looked into the drawer. From the drawer he looked back again into their faces, and there was something terrible in his silence. He drew his hands from his pockets. He held a repeating pistol in either hand.

“Bring me that idol,” he directed Pryde. “Bring it here and place it on the table before me.”

Pryde walked slowly to the other end of the room, took up the image and brought it towards the table. He was within about a yard of his destination when the door was suddenly opened. The professor turned like lightning. The doorway was full of men. An inspector in peaked cap and uniform was foremost; a detective in plain clothes by his side. The professor’s arm shot out, and Pryde, without hesitation, threw himself bodily upon him, jerking his arm towards the ceiling. The next second he himself was thrown half-way across the room. With amazing ease his assailant had freed himself. He dropped on his knees behind the writing-table. The dull metal of his pistol gleamed wickedly in the light of the green-shaded lamp. His left hand, also clasping a pistol, was stretched out behind him.

“Ah!” he muttered. “I see some friends. Mr. Detective Simmons, I think; Inspector Johnson. Not a step nearer, please. Remember, I have nothing to

lose by killing a few more of you. These are my last moments. I want to think.”

There was a queer, breathless silence. Pryde was still lying where he had been thrown, and had the air of being unconscious. Grace had advanced towards him, but had suddenly stopped and retreated. She was sheltered now behind an easy chair. Then the inspector spoke.

“Better give yourself up, Helski. There’s no hope for you. We’ve other men upon the stairs.”

“You are right,” the professor admitted. “I have fought too many battles not to know when the end has come; but don’t any of you flatter yourselves that I walked blindfolded into this trap. I knew very well that the odds were ten to one against me, but I have never learnt the trick of poverty. If I could have got away with our little friend here, you’d never have been troubled with me any more.”

“Put up your hands, Helski,” the inspector ordered. “I am coming to take you.”

The man’s pistol never wavered. Only for one second he glanced around and back again. Pryde was lying quite still; Grace was out of sight.

“I am not quite ready yet, Inspector,” he said softly. “I have no grudge against you. Stay where you are. I have a matter of twelve lives here. I don’t think it will pay you to rush me. You know I don’t often miss. Sergeant Cresswell found that out in Swan Alley. One or two others discovered it in their time, too. I shouldn’t advise you to try any tricks. Where’s the girl?”

There was no reply.

“I have a sort of fancy,” the professor went on, speaking almost as though to himself, “that she is the brains of this enterprise. I have a sort of fancy,” he repeated, “that she is the person I ought to reckon with. I wonder!”

Once more he turned his head, looking back again instantly.

“Ah!” he proceeded, “behind that easy chair! A very insufficient shelter, an easy chair. I think I can do a little damage through that. Mr. Inspector, I congratulate you. You will probably effect my capture without the loss of a single one of your force. It’s the girl I’ll settle accounts with this time.”

His pistol covered them no longer. He swung round, turning towards the easy chair. Then Pryde, who had been creeping gradually closer, gathered himself up and sprang at him. The attack was so unexpected that for a moment Pryde had the advantage. From the first he knew that he was struggling with a stronger man, but it was a matter of seconds only. He went for the hands which held the pistols, forcing them towards the floor. For the first few seconds he was successful. Then slowly his arms, inch by inch, were forced back. The right hand with the pistol in it came travelling round

towards the easy chair. Pryde's strength was almost exhausted, but it lasted long enough. The affair, after all, was only one of seconds. The inspector and policemen were swarming around. With a blow of his truncheon the former knocked the weapon out of the hand of the professor, and a policeman, stooping down, kicked the other one from the man's doubled-up left arm. Even then the struggle was not over. With a cry of rage the trapped man flung himself, unarmed as he was, upon them all. One of the policemen went over like a ninepin. For a moment it seemed as though he would break through them. Then the inspector seized him from behind, a policeman tripped him. It was several moments before they could handcuff him. They got him out of the room at last. The inspector lingered behind.

"Young lady," he said to Grace, "this is the best day's work you've ever done. We've got the lot."

"Keep me out of it," she begged.

"We'll keep you out of everything except the reward," the inspector replied, holding out his hand to Pryde. "That was a brave tackle of yours, sir," he declared. "We should have had to shoot if you hadn't been there, and we mightn't have been in time. Good night!"

He hurried off. Pryde turned, with a little shiver, to the girl who was standing by his side. She was absolutely unruffled. Even her hair was still perfectly tidy. She was looking towards the wall by the side of the door, with a slight frown upon her face.

"I must have that switch moved to-morrow," she said.

CHAPTER V

THE UNPUBLISHED TRAGEDY OF MRS. DELAMOIR

Stephen Pryde was conscious of a variety of most disquieting sensations. In the first place he had completely lost his appetite. Furthermore, he was furiously and unreasonably angry. Charles hung around him continually, aware that all was not well with his favourite client, sympathetic but helpless.

"It is not one of monsieur's regular days for luncheon here," he ventured.

Pryde was scowling across the room toward the small table against the wall at which Grace and a companion were seated.

"It isn't," he admitted. "That accounts for it."

"Accounts for it, monsieur? But for what?"

Charles glanced wonderingly across the room and understood. The perplexity upon his face disappeared.

"Monsieur perceives that the young lady in whom he was interested has found a companion," he remarked confidentially. "They sit together to-day for the third time. On Tuesday evening he dined with mademoiselle."

"The devil he did!" Pryde muttered.

"One notices these things," the waiter continued, glancing around to be sure that his services were not required elsewhere. "For so many months the young lady has been so retired, so lonely. It was monsieur who first spoke of her. Always she sits alone; she is reserved; she avoids notice. It is not until one looks carefully that one realizes that mademoiselle has an appearance. The gentleman who is with her now," Charles went on, leaning a little closer towards Pryde and dropping his voice, "he asked about her one day last week, very much as monsieur did."

Pryde muttered something between his teeth and poured himself a glass of wine. The affair grew worse!

"The young lady would probably object to our discussing her," he remarked grimly. "You can fetch me my coffee. And this afternoon I will take a liqueur—the old brandy."

"Monsieur shall be served," Charles murmured, and hastened away. It was not until he had served the coffee and generously filled the liqueur glass above the line with the deep-brown brandy that he spoke again. He leaned forward confidentially.

“It is for monsieur’s private ear, this,” he whispered. “We do not, as a rule, speak of such things. The gentleman who is with her now, he wrote a little note to mademoiselle, here in the restaurant at luncheon one day. Mademoiselle replied, and he took his coffee at her table.”

Pryde waved the man away impatiently.

“That will do, Charles,” he said. “There is probably some explanation. It certainly is not our business.”

Pryde lit his cigarette, and while he smoked he looked across the room. The man was apparently a little less than middle-aged, dark, with small black moustache, well groomed, well dressed. He would, without doubt, rank as good-looking. His manner indicated an interest in his companion, which, to some extent at any rate, she seemed inclined to return. Grace was certainly more animated than usual. The pallor of her cheeks was undisturbed, but her eyes were exceptionally bright, and she was listening with obvious interest to all that her companion had to say. Beyond the faint uplifting of her eyebrows and the grave nod with which she had acknowledged his greeting upon his entrance, she had taken no further notice of Pryde, nor had she even once glanced in his direction. That no familiar intercourse should take place between them in public was a condition to which she still rigidly adhered. Pryde hated it and obeyed. Today he was more than ever a rebel.

Presently he paid his bill and went. Grace, although without doubt she saw his preparations for his departure, took not the slightest notice of him. She was talking all the time, and her manner, for her, toward this new acquaintance was positively friendly. Pryde jammed his hat upon his head and walked round to the club.

“Bridge!” he muttered to himself. “A debauch at bridge, and the Lord help my partner!”

The morning had been hopelessly wet, which was the reason Pryde was not playing golf. There was plenty of bridge, there were also billiards and other sane amusements to be found at the club. Pryde passed the time away as well as he could, but he found it a task of some difficulty. His usual cheerfulness seemed to have deserted him. He revoked at bridge, lost two games of billiards, and contradicted a member of the committee; altogether a disastrous afternoon.

About five o’clock, just after he had sent his tea away for the second time, a boy from the hall below came in search of him.

“Wanted on the telephone, sir,” he announced.

Pryde rose promptly.

“Any name?” he asked.

“There was no name, sir,” the boy replied. “The gentleman is waiting on the line now.”

Pryde hurried downstairs, passed into the telephone box, and took up the receiver.

“This is Pryde,” he said. “Who are you?”

“I am Inspector Simmons,” the voice answered, “I am speaking from Miss Burton’s rooms.”

“Is Miss Burton there?” Pryde asked.

“She is not here at present,” the man replied. “I rang up to ask whether it would be quite convenient for you to step round here.”

“Of course I will,” Pryde assented. “There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

The voice hesitated for a moment.

“Not that I know of. Perhaps it would be as well if you came round.”

Pryde rang off, put on his hat and coat, caught a taxicab, and in a few minutes’ time presented himself in Grace’s rooms. To his surprise the inspector, who admitted him, was still alone there.

“Where is Miss Burton?” Pryde demanded.

“That’s exactly what I’m not sure about,” the inspector explained. “I had an appointment with her here this afternoon at three o’clock. I arrived quite punctually, rang the bell, and, as there was no answer, I went away. I came again half an hour ago, and, as there was still no one here, I took the liberty of entering. Miss Burton, as a rule, is very particular about her appointments.”

“She was lunching with a friend to-day,” Pryde remarked gloomily.

“Where? What sort of a friend?” the inspector asked.

Pryde hesitated. The inspector’s tone was eager, almost impatient.

“It was a man whom I think she met at the Café Lugano—just a restaurant acquaintance.”

“Was he dark, with a small black moustache, brown, freckled complexion, well dressed, looked like a military man?” the inspector asked quickly.

“That is an exact description of him,” Pryde admitted. “Who is he? What do you know about him?”

The inspector glanced at the clock.

“What time did you say they were lunching?” he asked.

“Between half-past one and two,” Pryde replied. “I left them there.”

“That confirms my information,” the inspector said, half to himself. “It is now past five o’clock. Please excuse me for a minute.” He went to the telephone and gave a few rapid orders. Then he turned round to Pryde.

“You’ve heard of the Glen Terrace tragedy, Mr. Pryde?” he asked.

“Of course. What about it?”

“The man whom you saw lunching with Miss Burton is the man we are shadowing for it,” the inspector declared. “We can’t arrest him at the moment because there isn’t sufficient evidence. All that we can do is simply to watch and see that he doesn’t get off. I’m as confident that he did it as that I’m standing here at this moment, but if we put our hands on him too quickly and he once gets away he is safe for life. Miss Burton took the matter up entirely on her own responsibility. She had an idea that she could get the evidence we are lacking. I told her it wasn’t a proper case for her to mix herself up in. She only smiled at me. She is a determined young lady, as I dare say you know. Anyway, she has been meeting this man for the last few days, and she told me to be here at three o’clock. She expected, I believe, to have something definite to say. I don’t mind confessing that I’m a little worried about it. It seems——”

“You say your men are shadowing him?” Pryde interrupted quickly. “Can’t we find out exactly where he is?”

“They lost him after leaving the restaurant,” the inspector replied. “It seems he went in by the hotel entrance and must have come out by that of the restaurant. We could have had our hand upon his shoulder at any time during the last three months, and there isn’t the least chance of his being able to escape out of the country. But where he is at this precise moment I must admit that I don’t know.”

“Shall I go to the restaurant,” Pryde asked, “and find out if anyone remembers their leaving?”

“I have gone as far as that myself,” the inspector remarked. “What I was told bears out what you say. Miss Burton and Delamoire left the Café Lugano together in a taxi at five minutes to two.”

Pryde glanced at the clock.

“My God!” he muttered, “that was more than three hours ago.”

The sun was shining between the showers, and the sky was unexpectedly blue when Grace and the man with whom she had been lunching left the little restaurant in Old Compton Street. They stood for a moment upon the pavement, and Grace, with a farewell nod, prepared to turn away.

“Good morning, Mr. Harold,” she said. “We must have another talk some day about these fancies of yours.”

“Why not this afternoon?” he asked. “Don’t you see how beautiful it is just now? Couldn’t you spare, say, one hour? Do you know what I was going to do? I was going to take a taxicab and drive about alone. Come with me.”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. Her hesitation made him the more insistent.

“Do come,” he begged. “You know how nervous and broken down I am. To have anyone near as calm and self-centred as you are is like a sedative. Please come, just for one hour.”

“I will come,” she agreed.

He called a taxi and handed her in.

“Is there anywhere you wish to go particularly?” he inquired.

She shook her head.

“I have no choice,” she replied; “only we must not be longer than an hour.”

“To Putney,” he told the driver. “I will direct you again.”

He took his place by her side. In this clear sunlight there were things to be noticed about him not easily apparent in the dimmer light of the restaurant. He was dressed in mourning, with a black tie, and a black band around his hat. There were lines upon his face, and a strange restlessness in his deep-set eyes. Every now and then his lips twitched. He looked about him all the time with little abrupt movements of the head.

“If I were you,” Grace suggested, “I should see a doctor. Overwork should never make anyone quite as nervous as you seem to be. It is so easy to cure oneself if one has the will.”

“It is not only overwork,” he muttered. “Let us forget it for a few minutes. How wonderful to be so calm and collected as you are always! Do you never feel emotions, little lady?”

She turned her head and looked at him.

“My name,” she said, “is Miss Burton.”

“Can’t you forget, just for a little time, to be formal?” he begged. “I am so lonely. Just a little sympathy, a very little kindness——”

He took her hand. She drew it quietly but firmly away.

“Mr. Harold,” she said, “if you are expecting that sort of thing from me, please stop the cab and let me get out. I am sorry for you, because you seem to me to be unnecessarily ill, but I have what you would perhaps call peculiar views as to these small intimacies. I do not permit anyone to hold my hand. If you are expecting, because I have promised to drive with you for an hour, that I am to be flirted with, you had better let me go at once.”

“I beg your pardon,” he exclaimed quickly. “It shall be just as you say. I will sit here. You shall talk to me or let me talk. I will not touch your fingers again, I promise. Only, somehow or other, I have been feeling so lonely, and you are such a strange, quiet little person. You have such a gift of making one talk and of listening.”

She smiled.

“If you will keep your part of the bargain,” she promised, “I will stay with you; not unless.”

“I will keep it,” he agreed.

They were passing through St. James’s Park toward Buckingham Palace. Now that they had left the more crowded streets behind he seemed a little more at his ease.

“Let me advise you seriously,” she begged, “to go and see a nerve specialist. There is a man in Harley Street—I could give you his address—to whom ever so many barristers go, and members of Parliament.”

He laughed curiously.

“You think it is overwork only,” he groaned. “I wish—oh, I only wish I dared tell you!”

She looked steadily ahead. There was so little about him that she did not know—one thing only.

“Why don’t you?” she murmured.

“You are so sensible,” he muttered. “You would not go into hysterics.”

“I am certainly not given to that sort of thing,” she assured him.

“You are a woman, too,” he went on; “very different from her, but still a woman. In a way you would understand. Promise not to jump out of the taxicab?”

“I promise you that under no circumstances will I attempt anything of the sort,” she replied.

“My name is not Harold,” he confessed, gripping the strap by his side and shaking as he spoke. “My name is Richard Harold Delamoire—Delamoire, you know!”

She turned her head.

“I seem to have heard the name lately,” she murmured.

“Heard it!” he exclaimed. “Haven’t you heard it at every street corner, seen it on every newspaper placard?”

“Of course,” she assented. “You are the Richard Delamoire whose wife was found poisoned in your house at Putney.”

He looked at her, his lips parted, his eyes blinking rapidly.

“You don’t mind?” he cried. “You are not terrified?”

“Not in the least,” she assured him calmly. “Why should I be?”

He drew a long sigh. Then he leaned back among the cushions.

“If there were only more people like you in the world!” he muttered. “Do you know that it was only a fortnight ago?”

“I read all about it,” she answered.

“You don’t know the worst,” he went on. “The police are watching me all the time. They think I did it. They think I murdered her. Everybody thinks so. The ’bus drivers, the tradespeople, the children in the street—they all stare at me curiously as I go by—the man who poisoned his wife! The

women look at me from behind the curtains. The men hurry when they pass. It's worse than overwork, this, Miss Burton."

"Yes," she admitted, "it is worse than overwork."

"There isn't a soul," he continued, "except the doctor, whom I've dared to speak with about it. I haven't been near my club, I've had to leave my favourite restaurants alone—that's why I turned up at the Lugano, where I first met you. I thought the doctor might have talked to me now and then. We used to be quite friendly once. I went to see him the other night—just dropped in to have a pipe, as I used to. He only said a few words, but it was the way he looked at me. I understood. I remembered his evidence at the inquest. Did you read the report of the inquest, Miss Burton?"

"I did," she assented. "It rather interested me."

"Ah!" he groaned. "They say that after the doctor's evidence it was a toss-up whether I was arrested or not! Do you know why I wasn't? Do you know why I am free now? They are waiting to get a little more evidence. They are afraid they might try me and I might get off, and then they'd find out too late. Evidence! I could give them all the evidence they wanted."

"Then why don't you?" she asked.

He laughed harshly.

"Why should I? Is it my business? Let us talk about something else, Miss Burton. I want to get away from it for a little time. You know the worst now. I've nothing to hide from you. You know that I am Richard Delamoir."

She watched him without flinching.

"Is it true," she asked, "that you have inherited a large sum of money by your wife's death?"

"Quite true," he answered; "quite true. Oh, I am rich! I hadn't much before I married her, but she left me everything. I thought of stealing out of the country, but they are so clever, these detectives. They'd think I was running away. I should feel a hand on my shoulder just as I was getting into the train. Ugh! If only there was someone to go with me! If only I could get away from this infernal solitude!"

He looked at her eagerly. There was very little encouragement in her emotionless face.

"Have you no friends or relatives at all?" she asked.

"No relatives—not one," he replied. "I was born in Australia. Most of my friends over here were my wife's friends, and——"

His voice seemed to leave him for a moment. He tried to speak and failed.

"They keep out of my way," he went on, after a moment's pause. "I don't know why. Can you think? They can't believe—not all of them——"

Let us talk about something else. Have you ever been a nurse, Miss Burton?"

"Certainly not," she answered. "Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know, except that you are so restful and so strong," he declared. "You make me feel almost like a child. That's because my nerve is gone, of course. Are you very well off, I wonder?"

"I am not at all well off," she told him. "I am a typist."

"If I were to give you a large sum of money," he went on eagerly, "would you go abroad with me—just as my nurse," he explained hurriedly, "just to be with me and keep me from being frightened always? You could have plenty of money, beautiful dresses. Dresses would make such a difference to you—dresses and hats. You are queer looking, you know. You look old-fashioned and dowdy, and your face is so still and quiet that one forgets that you have really beautiful eyes. It would change you tremendously to be well dressed."

Her eyes were half closed with silent laughter. There was something about the laugh a little cruel. It checked his enthusiasm at once.

"You are afraid of me."

"Who—I?" she asked. "I afraid?"

"I didn't mean that," he exclaimed. "I mean that you are afraid I should want to make love to you. Do you know, sometimes I think that I shall never want to make love to another woman."

"How old are you?" she inquired.

"Thirty-nine," he replied. "I was twenty-six years old when I married Maggie. She hadn't her money then. She was just a chorus girl."

"Is it true that you used always to quarrel?"

"We used to quarrel a good deal," he admitted. "I am afraid I was a little jealous. Maggie was always having flirtations. She was crazy for admiration."

Grace sighed as she looked away. After all, there were all the commonplace elements of tragedy here.

"You really wish to talk about something else?" she asked. "Come, I will try. You shall tell me about your life in Australia. I think you said that you were born there?"

"It isn't any use," he said. "I want to talk about something else and I can't. It always comes back."

"Then, if you won't talk about anything else," she said, "tell me what you meant when you said that you could give the police the evidence they needed."

He shook his head.

"No," he muttered, "I couldn't trust anybody with that, not even you!"

She was silent. He sat by her side, and his manner gradually became calmer.

“It is odd,” he went on, half to himself, “how much I have told you, really; you—just a little stranger whom I spoke to in a restaurant. Why did you let me speak to you?”

“You looked lonely,” she answered. “I am never afraid to speak to anyone. I can take care of myself.”

“Yes,” he admitted, “I should say that that was true. You can very well take care of yourself. Would nothing terrify you, Miss Burton? Would nothing shake your nerves?”

She smiled.

“I have no opportunity for judging. My life is a very uneventful one.”

“Try them this afternoon,” he begged eagerly. “You see where we are? We are close to Putney. The third turn to the left, then another turn, and the fourth house is where I live. Not a soul has crossed the threshold since that day. Come in with me. Sit with me for a little time. Perhaps it will help. Perhaps after that I shall not be so terrified. If only I can feel another human being breathing the same air in that sitting-room where we used to be! Will you come?”

She did not hesitate. She had no fear. She felt easily his master.

“If it is any satisfaction to you,” she assented, “I will come.”

His eyes flashed. He gave a direction to the driver, who looked at him curiously. In a few moments they turned off the main street. In less than five minutes the taxicab was pulled up outside one of a little row of villas. As they stepped out, Grace was half conscious of people peering from behind the windows. Some women opposite, who had been pointing out the place to a stranger, stared open-mouthed. Grace followed her companion composedly into the house, the door of which he opened with a latchkey. He closed it behind them.

“Why have you sent away the taxicab?” she asked.

“You won’t hurry?” he pleaded. “Why should I keep it there? People always gather round if they think I am here. They stare so. Come.”

He opened the door of a little drawing-room, a queer apartment, half Oriental, with a tented divan in one corner, and a curious smell of incense. The wallpaper was of bright yellow, and the curtains black. There were withered flowers in the vases and cigarette ash upon the carpet. The atmosphere was almost unbearable.

“Do you mind opening a window?” Grace begged. “I couldn’t possibly sit here like this.”

He nodded and threw up one of the side windows.

“I have only just put my head in here since,” he explained hoarsely. “I couldn’t bear it. This is where we used to sit. Maggie had such queer tastes. I don’t think,” he went on, “that she had a really healthy nature. She liked everything exotic and unnatural. Poor woman! You see the black curtains and the black carpet. She thought they went with the bright yellow walls, and that they helped her complexion. She was older than I am, you know, and she used to fancy sometimes that she was losing her looks. Yes, I can breathe now there is someone in the room with me. Sit just where you are, please, Miss Burton. She used to sit over in that corner, and often she would lie down on the divan there. I couldn’t bear all the stuffy hangings, but she loved them. Now shall we change the—talk about something else?”

She shook her head.

“You know very well, Mr. Delamoir,” she said, “that, however hard you were to try, you couldn’t talk about anything except——”

“Of course you are right,” he interrupted. “It isn’t any use. I can no more talk about anything else than I can think about anything else. If you want to see her picture, there it is on the corner of the mantelpiece. I can’t look, I don’t know why I can’t.”

He had turned his back upon her. Grace moved to the mantelpiece and took up the picture. It gave her, at first, almost a shock. It was the picture of a woman, haggard, painted, with darkened eyebrows, false hair, in a ball dress cut absurdly low, and a satin skirt absurdly tight. She remembered the words Inspector Simmons had used in speaking to her of the case: “A woman any man would be glad to be rid of!”

He drew the curtain a little.

“There are some boys outside!” he exclaimed irritably. “And those women—their eyes seem never off the place. Do you mind the blind being down?”

She shook her head. There was still a long shaft of sunlight piercing the gloom of the room. Presently he came and sat opposite her.

“If there were any way,” he said, “of ending this——”

“What way could there be?” she interrupted. “You must travel soon, and try to forget.”

“Forget!” he repeated. “Would you forget, I wonder? Could you carry about with you the horrible knowledge I have locked in my heart and forget? No one could.”

“Well, then, why not tell the truth?” she asked calmly.

“If only I could!” he moaned. “If only——” He stopped short.

“Stay where you are, Miss Burton,” he implored. “Stay just where you are. Don’t move. I shall be back in a moment.”

He left the room. Grace heard him climb the stairs. She remained where she was, looking about her. It seemed to her that in all the adventures of her life she had never found herself in such an atmosphere. She looked at the picture of the woman, worthy presiding genius of such an apartment. And yet there was something in the eyes—was it terror or despair?—something piteous shining out from the midst of the wreck, just in the same way that, on a table only a few feet away, a little marble statuette of exquisite design struck a strange note in the midst of the flamboyant furniture and vulgar gewgaws which littered the place.

She heard his footsteps descending the stairs. He entered the room. There was a new look in his face, white and strained. He carried in his hand a little volume, bound in violent purple and tied up with ribbon. He held it out to her.

“The evidence,” he muttered, “I spoke of—the evidence! Only a page or two, mind. You can read, then you will understand. You will be the only person in the world, except myself, who understands. Don’t begin at the beginning, that’s all rubbish. Begin there—there!”

His forefinger showed her the place. She began to read. The entries were sprawled all about the book in a loose, untidy handwriting.

“Began to-day worse than ever. I got up at twelve, and passed the looking-glass on my way to the bath. I almost shrieked. I can’t be like it! I had forgotten my hair! I dressed very quickly. Such beautiful things I put on. Then for a long time I could not make up my mind. I put on my lilac dress and my ermine, with a new hat that came last night, and a thick veil. I spent quite an hour with Madame in her parlour. Then I walked slowly away down Bond Street. At first no one looked at me at all. Then a man and a woman passed, and I heard the man laugh! I looked in at a shop window, perhaps my front was a little crooked. I went down to the theatre. I thought to-day, perhaps, there might be a chance. Madame had taken a lot of pains. The stage doorkeeper smiled when he told me that Bunsome was out. Liar! Bunsome came down the passage just a minute later. I told him what I wanted. He looked at me in a queer sort of way. ‘Can’t see whom I’m talking to,’ he muttered. ‘Take off your veil.’ I took it off. Perhaps my fingers trembled, perhaps I took it off clumsily. He turned away. I could have sworn that he was laughing! ‘My good woman,’ he said, ‘we want girls!’ I got out somehow, and crossed the road. I went into a public-house. I had two glasses of port—filthy stuff—but they won’t sell me drugs in quantities big enough. Never mind, when I got home I forgot!”

Grace looked up. He was still standing looking down at her.
“Go on!” he ordered. “Turn on to the next page. Turn on quickly.”
She obeyed him.

“Last night I cried myself to sleep. It doesn’t matter crying in the night-time. I was in the West End all day, and I wore my new tailor-made gown, the patent shoes with the grey suède tops, and grey stockings. I met Peter face to face. It doesn’t seem long ago since he used to beg me to go out to luncheon with him. He hurried on. I tried to stop him, but he muttered something about an appointment, looked at me as though there was something wrong about my appearance, and kept glancing around nervously as though he was afraid that someone would see us. I went into Madame’s and looked at myself in the glass. Glasses are such liars. I know I don’t look like that. Every woman has to use a little rouge and a little false hair nowadays to keep in the fashion. I hate looking-glasses!

“I lunched at Prince’s; got rid of Dick. No one ever takes notice of a woman if she’s with a man younger than herself. I am going to write the truth. I can’t bear it! I don’t think I will ever lunch there alone again. The men glanced at me as they came in, and then looked away. There wasn’t one who had that expression in his face I used to see always when I lunched alone and men passed. It frightened me. I couldn’t eat anything. I went into the ladies’ room afterwards, and I ventured to look in the glass. It was Madame’s fault. She had put too much rouge on my left cheek. Yes, it must have been Madame’s fault. I shall try again.”

Grace put the book away from her. Her voice was unsteady.

“I don’t want to read any more,” she said.

“One more page,” he insisted. “One more, please. You are beginning to understand. One human person in this world understands besides myself. I think that I shall go about with a lighter heart.”

She turned over.

“To-day I feel will be different. Laroche has sent me home the most wonderful white velveteen gown. I have rested until twelve o’clock. Now I have just put it on. It fits me divinely. One would say that I had the figure of a girl. It is marvellous. I have put on my big black hat with the feathers, and a thinner veil. Yes, I am going to risk a thinner veil! I shall go to Madame for an hour, and then I will take all my courage in my hands. I will go once more to Prince’s. I know that Stephen will be there. I will stop him as he passes my table, and I will watch him. I shall see. He used to love me in

white. Somehow or other, I feel younger to-day. As to being old, it is absurd. I am not old. I have sent Susan for a taxi, and I have made Richard go away for the day. He bothers me so, wanting to go about with me. What admiration can a woman have who has a young husband with her? He doesn't seem to understand. I don't know why I feel so excited to-day. I think it is the white velveteen gown. It is a little daring, perhaps, but Stephen loves white. Now I am going. I don't think, after all, I shall ever need to use that little packet!"

The writing sprawled down to the end of the page. Grace looked up. Delamoire's eyes were upon her.

"Turn over," he ordered.

She obeyed.

"I can scarcely hold my pen. My God! I have seen the truth! It is the end! Madame called in little Emilie to look at me before I left. 'Madame,' she declared, 'is *ravissante!*' I paid her and went out. Just as I reached the door I fancied that I heard a laugh. At the time I thought that it must be fancy. Now I am not so sure. I went to Prince's; I got my table just inside; I waited. Every one who passed seemed to be in such a hurry. Bunsome came in, and Elliman, and Captain Jenks. I thought it was the position of my table, but they none of them appeared to see me. And then Stephen! He saw me and he was alone, but he was going to pass. I held out my hand, and I smiled at him. 'Stephen,' I said, 'won't you stop and speak to me?' He seemed quite awkward about it, but he stopped. I looked at the place by my side. 'Are you alone?' I asked very softly. He muttered something about having to join a party. I looked at him intently; he used to say that he liked me to look at him like that. 'Why are you in such a hurry?' I asked him. 'Can't you stay for a little time and talk?' He shook his head. Then I felt suddenly queer and giddy. Something came into my heart, and I held him when he wanted to get away. I said: 'Stephen, tell me the truth. Why do you avoid me? Why do those others hurry by? You men used to crowd around me, not so very many years ago. Why is it?' He hesitated for a moment, then he looked me straight in the face. 'Since you've asked me that question, Maggie,' he said, 'I'll tell you, as much for your husband's sake as your own. It's because you are close upon sixty years of age, and you dress up to make yourself look like a girl, and sit about and expect men to behave as though you were still attractive. And you're not. You're an old woman, and you know you are. Leave off painting yourself and wearing clothes thirty years too young for you, and we'd all be glad to see you now and then and talk to you. But no

man likes to be seen talking to a guy. I don't mean to be unkind,' he went on, for I suppose I was looking at him in a queer sort of way. 'I've just told you this from myself and the others for Richard's sake as well as your own. Now, be a sensible woman and give it up.' I think that he went away then. I am not quite sure what happened to me. I found myself in a taxi-cab, and here I am—here I am! Fortunately, I didn't have to buy anything. I've had the stuff with me for years. I am leaving this in case there should be any trouble. Whoever reads this, if it shouldn't be Richard, please tell him there's a letter for the coroner on the next page. I don't know what it's going to be like on my next page, but it won't be worse than to-day. I'm going to turn over!"

He took the book from her fingers. Grace suddenly felt cold.

"I loved her," he muttered hoarsely. "Don't you understand that I shall have to hang before I can show that book?"

She gave him both her hands.

"Yes," she said, "I understand."

Grace walked into her rooms at a few minutes past six. Pryde and Inspector Simmons were on the point of leaving. She looked at them in some surprise.

"May I ask what you are doing in my apartments?" she inquired.

"You forget that you had an appointment with me here at three o'clock," Simmons remarked.

"Quite right," Grace admitted. "I had forgotten it."

"And as we had information," Pryde continued, "that at five minutes to two this afternoon you left the Café Lugano with a certain notorious person called Delamoir, you may understand that we were becoming a little uneasy."

Grace sank into her easy chair.

"Something has happened," exclaimed Pryde.

Grace drew a little brown paper parcel from her pocket.

"Mr. Simmons," she said, "I started out this afternoon to try to entrap a man into a confession of his guilt. I have, instead, succeeded in becoming acquainted with his innocence. The proofs are here."

Simmons moved swiftly forward, but Grace retained possession of the parcel.

"This," she went on quietly, "is his wife's diary. It is my belief that Delamoir would have gone to the gallows sooner than have given it up. I have talked to him for some time, and he has let me have it for two hours, on

one condition. You are to read it and your chief. Beyond that, no other person. Not a word of it is to be breathed to the Press. Sooner than have had a single line appear in any newspaper, Delamoire would have hanged. There is no doubt," she continued, "about its being his wife's diary. You will find inside some of her letters, in her own handwriting, and there is also one addressed to the coroner, which is in itself conclusive. If, however, you have any remaining doubts as to the genuineness of this diary, you have only to go down to the Hilarity Theatre and interview some of the young women who are mentioned in the earlier pages. Remember, however, that I part with the book only on the terms I have mentioned."

Simmons accepted the parcel.

"Queer," he remarked. "I know quite a lot of people who never believed in Delamoire's guilt; who even declared that he had an odd sort of affection for his wife, weird creature though she was."

Grace's eyes suddenly shone. For a moment she was beautiful.

"There are many strange ways," she said, "in which a man may love a woman."

CHAPTER VI

A NEW DEPARTURE

Pryde holed out his last putt from the edge of the green, commiserated with his defeated opponent in the tactful fashion of a practised golfer, and led the way to the smoking-room of the golf club. He was feeling, even for him, in particularly cheerful spirits. He had met a very agreeable new acquaintance, and played excellent golf. Over a whisky and soda he broached the question of a return match.

“Can you take me on again soon?” he asked. “I was a bit above my form this afternoon, as you’ll probably find out.”

His opponent made a little grimace. He was a tall, middle-aged man, with shrewd, pleasant face and humorous eyes. His name was Hutchinson, and his occupation that of a merchant. Pryde had been introduced to him only that morning by the secretary of the club.

“I am afraid, from the look of things at present,” Mr. Hutchinson remarked, “I am going to have plenty of spare time for a good many weeks to come. Any day that suits you—Wednesday, if you like.”

“Wednesday is one of my regular days,” Pryde announced, entering the appointment in his diary. “I’m afraid I’m rather an idler nowadays—too much time on my hands. You might let me know your address, though. I always like to know where to send word to, in case of accidents.”

Mr. Hutchinson handed him a card.

“17 Basinghall Street,” he said.

Pryde returned the civility.

“32A Colmayne Court, just off Bloomsbury Street,” he pointed out. “I’ve no telephone, I am sorry to say.”

“No chance of my wanting to put you off, I’m afraid.” Mr. Hutchinson sighed ruefully. “I’m in the unfortunate position of having concentrated nearly all my business upon one country, where things aren’t quite at their best just now. Try one of these cigarettes,” he added, handing over his case. “I brought them home from Constantinople last month.”

Pryde accepted one and recognised its quality.

“One of the few European cities I’ve never visited,” he remarked.

“One of the few I’ve visited too often,” Mr. Hutchinson replied, with a sigh. “I have always had a great idea of the future of Turkey, and since the

revolution I've concentrated my business there. We were doing fairly well, too, until this wretched war came."

Pryde nodded sympathetically.

"I had an idea," he observed, "that it wasn't making so much difference so far as Turkey itself was concerned."

"In a sense that is true," Mr. Hutchinson admitted. "Unfortunately, however, there is the future. Turkey will have to pay for the good offices of someone. She can only pay with trade, and I'm afraid we are not the people who will be paid. . . . By the by, how long has your handicap been at four? I suppose you realise that you were round in eighty or eighty-one at the outside this afternoon?"

Pryde smiled at the compliment, and recognised the desire to change the conversation. They talked golf casually for another quarter of an hour. Then, just as they were preparing to depart, a servant brought a telegram to Mr. Hutchinson, which the latter opened at once with nervous haste. Pryde slipped away while he read it, and made his farewells. Mr. Hutchinson was sitting with the telegram crumpled up in his hand, a black frown on his forehead, staring out of the window at nothing. Pryde walked quietly away and left him there.

They met again, however, in the train on their way up to London. Mr. Hutchinson purposely selected the carriage in which Pryde was travelling, and alluded casually to the telegram which he had received.

"I'm afraid I'm in rather a nervous state just now," he explained apologetically. "You see, all my interests are concentrated in Turkey. I've been foolish enough, in a sense, to put all my eggs in one basket. I have studied the tariffs very carefully, and though it's slow work, there's a great business to be built up in Turkey itself and Asia Minor. I export boots and hosiery chiefly, and any number of smaller articles, and I buy back produce of every description. If Turkey is left alone, the future of my business is a certainty. On the other hand, if she is driven to make peace and to pay for it in the obvious manner, I shall be ruined. . . . There, that's enough of my affairs. Tell me, do you follow any occupation at all?"

"Not at present, I am sorry to say," Pryde replied. "I was in the diplomatic service once for a year or two, but I had rather bad luck, and I was obliged to give that up. I never took to anything else wholeheartedly."

Mr. Hutchinson nodded.

"I wonder," he remarked, "did you ever meet or hear of a man named Feldemay?"

The cigarette slipped from between Pryde's fingers. He was staring at his companion in genuine amazement.

"Why, what on earth made you ask that question?" he exclaimed.

Mr. Hutchinson's surprise at the effect of his question was obviously sincere.

"I really don't know why I asked you," he replied, drawing the crumpled-up telegram from his waistcoat pocket, "except that the fellow's name is mentioned here. I know years ago he was concerned in some sort of shabby deal for a certain European country. Then he turned up as leader of the revolutionaries in Portugal. Lately, I believe, they kicked him out. Now he is mentioned in this telegram I have just had—the same fellow, I suppose."

Pryde read the dispatch which his companion had smoothed out upon his knee:

"Senn reaches London to-night. Will stay Milan. Prepared make certain proposals inimical our interests. Feldemay in Vienna; joins him end of week."

"It was through Feldemay," Pryde said slowly, "that I had to leave the diplomatic service. I've met him once since, and thank goodness I got a little of my own back!"

"You know more about him than I do, evidently," Mr. Hutchinson remarked. "Till Wednesday, then. I get out here."

He alighted unexpectedly at Clapham Junction, and Pryde completed his journey and made his way back to his rooms. As he entered the door of the building he nearly ran into Mr. Simmons. He noted with displeasure that the inspector was carrying a large bunch of violets.

"Do you happen to know whether Miss Burton is in?" Simmons asked as they climbed the stairs together.

"She generally is at this time," Pryde replied, staring hard at the violets.

"There is a little matter," Mr. Simmons continued, "which I wish to speak to her about. Perhaps it would be as well, if you could spare a moment, for you to come in too."

The inspector's last suggestion had been accompanied with a somewhat contemptuous glance at the golf clubs which Pryde was carrying.

"I have nothing in the world to do," Pryde assured him airily. "I will come in with pleasure."

Grace was seated at her typewriter, and welcomed them both with equable civility. She accepted the violets, which Simmons somewhat clumsily offered to her, without enthusiasm or any particular show of gratitude. She had discouraged Pryde so often in making these little offerings that he was almost inclined to resent the fact of her accepting them at all.

“Saw them as I came along, Miss Burton,” Simmons said, “and I couldn’t help thinking how nice they’d look in your room.”

“Thank you very much,” Grace replied. “I do not, as a rule, care for flowers about me. For once, however,” she added, with a slight emphasis on the second word, “I will change my habits.”

She put them in water and glanced at the clock.

“If you would like some tea——” she suggested.

“Nothing in the world I should like so much,” Mr. Simmons interrupted.

“Nothing so good after a hard day’s work on the golf links,” Pryde echoed, with a glance at Simmons.

The inspector stroked his moustache.

“Takes a lot out of you, that game, I should think,” he remarked.

“It is rather a strain on the nerves,” Pryde confessed.

Mr. Simmons coughed. He was still trying to think of a suitable rejoinder when Grace intervened.

“The tea is quite ready, if you will sit down,” she said. “I am very pleased to see you both, but I am rather busy. You perhaps had some business to discuss, Mr. Simmons?”

Mr. Simmons stirred his tea.

“Business,” he admitted, “of a most delicate and important character.”

Grace was occupied in pushing back a little wisp of fair hair which insisted upon breaking into a curl. As she pushed it back, she caught Pryde’s eyes fixed upon her. The hair was undoubtedly pretty, and the fingers were very soft and shapely. The realisation of these facts was written in Pryde’s admiring gaze. Grace frowned slightly and turned to Mr. Simmons.

“It sounds very interesting,” she murmured. “Please go on.”

“If I were speaking,” the inspector began, “to anyone else in the world, I should lay the greatest possible stress upon the absolute necessity for secrecy in what I am going to say.”

“So far as Mr. Pryde and myself are concerned,” Grace assured him, “you can take that for granted.”

“This morning,” Mr. Simmons continued, “the chief had a visit from a member of the Government. They met to discuss a certain matter unofficially. The matter is this. There arrives to-day in London a messenger from the Turkish Government, who has powers to treat on behalf of his country for peace. His visit to London is believed to be a bluff. The English Government is, some people think, almost too anxious to proclaim the impossibility of any intervention. It is believed that this emissary from Turkey is here to treat with representatives of a foreign Power. For certain reasons it would have been indiscreet for him to have visited the capital of that country. London is a safe meeting-place. London, therefore, has been

chosen. The English Government is very much interested in these suggested negotiations. The emissary from Turkey will probably be accompanied by a man who is an old hand at the game. Every one of the men or women employed at different times by the Government in Secret Service work is known to him. Therefore this visit to my chief. It was suggested that some person might be found, not being an official, who might ascertain the nature of the negotiations proposed by this emissary from Constantinople.”

Grace nodded approvingly.

“I have seldom heard a case put more clearly, Mr. Simmons,” she declared.

Mr. Simmons was obviously pleased.

“We have extraordinarily little information to give you,” he proceeded. “I do not believe that the person who visited us this morning even knows what country it is with whom this emissary is prepared to deal. I cannot tell you the name of the emissary; I do not know for certain when he arrives or where he is going to stay. All that I can tell you is the name of the man who has him in charge—the go-between. His name is Feldemay.”

This time Pryde remained absolutely unmoved. Grace, who had glanced towards him at the sound of the name, smiled her approbation.

“Do you mean to say,” she asked, “that this is absolutely the only information you are able to give us?”

“Every shred,” the inspector declared. “Furthermore, if you get into any trouble we cannot lift our little finger to help you. You will have to undertake this as a private affair altogether. You have no principals to look to, nor any direct hope of reward. All the same, I think that success would mean a good deal to you.”

“I am afraid it’s rather out of my way,” Grace said thoughtfully. “I shall have to rely upon Mr. Pryde altogether.”

The inspector said nothing, but he appeared to regard the fact as unfortunate.

“The information which would be most appreciated,” he remarked, “is this. First of all, whom will this person approach? Secondly, what terms will be offered? Thirdly, is any agreement likely or possible? I am afraid you will find it rather a forlorn hope, any way, but Miss Burton has always been so anxious to be interested in something of the sort.”

“I adore diplomacy,” Grace murmured.

Mr. Simmons smiled and took his leave with a gallant bow. Pryde, after the door had been closed, went over to the violets and sniffed them disparagingly.

“I am not altogether sure,” he said, “that I like that young man.”

“You have such peculiar tastes,” Grace observed.

“I have no doubt,” Pryde continued, “that in his profession he finds such qualities useful. At the same time, I should be inclined to call him a little pushing.”

Grace untied the violets and calmly began to fasten some in the bosom of her gown. Pryde turned towards the door.

“I see you are busy. I’ll come in and chat over this little affair some other time.”

Grace’s fingers paused in their task.

“Have you anything to say about it?”

“A good deal,” Pryde answered. “I object to any man——”

“I mean with reference to that little affair of business,” Grace interrupted severely.

Pryde came slowly back again.

“Nothing much,” he said, “except that that young man seems to have rather a poor opinion of our abilities.”

Grace looked at him with a faint smile.

“The affair, then, seems to you to be easy?”

“The commencement of it, at any rate,” Pryde replied. “The emissary’s name is Senn. He arrives in London at seven o’clock to-night, and he will stay at the Milan Hotel.”

“Amazing person!” Grace murmured. “How did you discover all this?”

Pryde shrugged his shoulders.

“I had a Scotch nurse,” he answered. “She always declared that I had second sight. I am going to dine in the grill-room of the Milan. If it were not that I am beginning to learn the fate of such invitations——”

“I shall be ready in an hour,” Grace declared.

Grace scrutinised the prices on the menu severely.

“On the whole,” she decided, laying the card down, “I think we shall find diplomacy expensive.”

“A little outlay,” Pryde answered, as he gave the order for asparagus, “is often returned a hundredfold.”

“You are treating me rather like a child,” Grace reminded him. “I haven’t the least idea what we are doing here.”

“Within an hour,” Pryde told her, “I shall obtain an introduction to this emissary. If it were not for your unfortunate susceptibility, I might also be able to include you. I understand that Monsieur Senn has French manners.”

“Rather fancying yourself to-night, aren’t you?” Grace remarked, helping herself to *hors d’œuvre*. “I suppose the arrival of this mysterious person was in all the papers?”

Pryde smiled but made no rejoinder. His eyes were fixed upon Mr. Hutchinson, who had just entered the room, and was advancing slowly down the restaurant. He was met by a *maitre d'hôtel*, with whom he talked for a few moments, obviously ordering dinner. He was on the point of turning away when Pryde rose from his seat and touched him on the shoulder.

"Mr. Hutchinson," he said, "can I have just a word with you?"

Mr. Hutchinson turned round quickly. At first he seemed scarcely to recognise Pryde. Then he smiled.

"Why, my golfing friend, of course," he declared. "Is this one of your haunts?"

"Not as a rule," Pryde answered. "I came here to-night for a special purpose. Part of that purpose was to see you."

Mr. Hutchinson frowned.

"Why, I hadn't told a soul that I was coming here!"

"No; but you knew that Monsieur Senn was arriving at seven," Pryde replied. "Don't think I am mad or impertinent, Mr. Hutchinson. Will you listen to me for a moment?"

"With pleasure," Mr. Hutchinson assented, still completely mystified.

Pryde drew him a little on one side.

"Look here," he said, "Monsieur Senn arrives at this hotel to-night upon a mission the nature of which is known to both of us. If either of us could discover the exact means by which he proposes to obtain his end, we should be in a position to frustrate it. You represent English trade, and for the moment I represent English politics. We neither of us want Senn to make a bargain over here inimical to our interests."

"Who the dickens are you?" Mr. Hutchinson asked.

"Never mind," Pryde went on. "I just want you to understand that we are on the same side. Have you seen Senn?"

Mr. Hutchinson nodded a little gloomily.

"I met him at the station," he replied. "We were once great friends, but he would have avoided me if he could. I drove here with him, though, and he is going to dine with me in a few minutes. He has already as good as told me, however, that he is not prepared to discuss politics."

"Quite so," Pryde remarked. "That just confirms my own ideas. Now listen. Will you order your dinner to be served at the next table to mine, in the corner there? Towards the end of dinner you can find an opportunity for introducing us. That is all I ask of you. My only object is to discover from Senn exactly what you want to discover. If either of us succeeds, I think that we can frustrate his mission. I have been an irregular correspondent of one of the London weeklies. I should like to be introduced as a newspaper man."

"And the young lady?"

“The young lady is my companion for the evening,” Pryde explained. “She is, by profession, a typist.”

Mr. Hutchinson hesitated for a moment. He looked from Grace to Pryde and he smiled.

“Well,” he said, “I feel I can trust you, and in any case I haven’t much to lose by doing so. It shall be as you suggest.”

Pryde returned to his place, and Mr. Hutchinson left the restaurant. A few minutes later he re-entered, followed by his guest. Pryde held out his hand as they passed the table, and greeted him with the air of an old acquaintance. Mr. Hutchinson paused and was introduced to Miss Burton. The two men then took their places at the adjoining table. Monsieur Senn was a man apparently of about thirty-five years of age, slim, sallow, and with large dark eyes and black hair. He had the air of a Frenchman, and he was dressed with extreme care. His nails were wonderfully manicured, his linen irreproachable, his jewellery tasteful but unusual. He had the air of being a little bored with his companion, and more than once he glanced towards Grace.

The service of dinner proceeded, and Pryde became conscious of a change in his companion, very subtle and very gradual, which filled him alternately with admiration and irritation. To begin with, she was wearing clothes of a much more fashionable cut than any he had ever seen her in. She seemed to be altering her deportment to fit them. The coldness and reserve with which she had always kept Pryde at such a distance had departed. Her mouth was softer, her eyes were full and bright. She was no longer severe, almost Quakerish, in her demeanour and tone. She moved about continually, sometimes leaning across the table to laugh up into his face; sometimes sitting back in her chair as though momentarily bored, and glancing around the room for distraction. At such times she nearly always met the direct gaze of the young man at the next table. Once Pryde could have sworn that there was the very faintest smile upon her lips as she looked away from him.

“This is all very well,” he said softly, “but where is it going to end? I don’t want to have to break that fellow’s head before I’ve discovered his secrets.”

She laughed gaily.

“After all, my very superior friend,” she replied, “I think that it will be my affair. We shall see.”

Towards the end of dinner Mr. Hutchinson leaned across and addressed them. It was quite obvious that his companion had been making inquiries as to Grace’s identity. Pryde turned his chair a little as they chatted about golf.

“Won’t you come and have your coffee with us,” he suggested, “and bring your friend—if you will?”

The young man rose promptly to his feet, even before his host could glance towards him. The chairs were moved and introductions effected. Monsieur Senn sat next to Grace.

“You, too,” he asked her, “play this wonderful game of which they talk all the time—this golf?”

She shook her head and made a little grimace.

“I am not so fortunate as Mr. Pryde,” she said. “I am a typist, and I have to work most of the day.”

“Typist?” he repeated. “Do you mean that, mademoiselle?”

“Indeed I do,” she answered. “I work sometimes eight hours a day. Fortunately, I know French, so I get quite a good deal of work. To-night is a holiday for me.”

He spoke at once in French.

“But it is delightful, this!” he exclaimed. “I express myself always so badly in English.”

“There are so many ways of expression,” she laughed, looking up at him.

“There is the universal language,” he murmured, “of which mademoiselle, I fear, knows everything that is to be known.”

“On the contrary,” she replied, “I am, alas! English. It is only in France that one learns those arts.”

Pryde, who was beginning to talk nonsense, could bear it no longer, and abandoned his conversation with Mr. Hutchinson. Grace, however, was rising to her feet.

“I am going to take Monsieur Senn into the foyer,” she said. “We want to listen to the music. You can come there when you have paid the bill.”

Monsieur Senn rose with alacrity, and they passed out together. Mr. Hutchinson and Pryde both watched them.

“A very entertaining young lady,” Mr. Hutchinson remarked, just a little dryly.

“When she chooses,” Pryde assented, with a slight frown. “Tell me, how have you got on with your guest?”

“Not at all,” Mr. Hutchinson replied. “I can see quite clearly all the time that he is ill at ease with me. I haven’t the slightest doubt that, whatever his mission over here may be, it is going to be disastrous for us. He would not even talk of the war, and did you see how eager he was to break up our *tête-à-tête*? Shall we go down and find them?”

“We will give them a few minutes longer, I think,” Pryde suggested.

Mr. Hutchinson glanced at him curiously.

“The young lady——” he began.

“Oh, the young lady is in it, too,” Pryde assured him.

Mr. Hutchinson suddenly sat down in his chair and laughed.

“We will have another liqueur!” he exclaimed. “We will drink to our success! Would anyone believe that such interesting episodes were to be met with in our dull, commercial city? I drink to the good health of Miss Grace Burton, and may she twist our friend around her little finger! . . .”

Grace certainly seemed to be succeeding fairly well. She was sitting in a corner with Monsieur Senn, and the music did not appear to be claiming their undivided attention. She looked up a little demurely as they approached. There was a twinkle in her eyes which Pryde, at least, appreciated.

“Monsieur Senn insists upon taking us to a music-hall,” she announced.

“It will be a treat for me,” Monsieur Senn declared. “Except for Mr. Hutchinson, I have no friends in England. My agent, whom I expected to meet, will not be here for two days.”

No one made any objections. They spent the remainder of the evening at one of the Leicester Square music-halls, and Monsieur Senn took unusual pains to monopolise Grace as far as possible. When they parted, he talked to her for a few moments in an undertone. He was obviously anxious to see her home, but Pryde had already ordered a taxicab, and stood waiting with the door open.

“It will be au revoir only,” he insisted, as they separated. “Till tomorrow, then, mademoiselle.”

“Until to-morrow,” she echoed, as she took her place in the cab.

They drove for a short distance in silence.

“I congratulate you,” Pryde said at last, “on the possession of gifts which you seem to have been able to keep pretty well to yourself.”

“My dear Mr. Pryde,” she retorted, “you do not half know me yet.”

“I find it easy to believe you,” he assented. “If, however,” he went on, “I could myself be treated to a few of those delightful glances, if I might even be allowed to whisper in your ear——”

“There is not the slightest necessity for anything of the sort,” she interrupted, drawing a little away. “My attitude towards Monsieur Senn was dictated entirely by policy.”

“Can’t you imagine,” he begged, “that I, too, have a secret? I have, really, if you’d only let me tell it you.”

Grace laughed at him mockingly.

“I want you to remember the terms of our partnership,” she said.

“When are you going to see the fellow again, anyhow?” he asked.

“He is going to bring me some typing at eleven o’clock to-morrow morning,” she replied.

“I am afraid you are right,” he confessed. “I am afraid this is going to be your affair.”

CHAPTER VII

THE ETERNAL WEAKNESS

Monsieur Senn was punctual to the moment on the following morning. Grace sighed as she saw the big bunch of pink roses which he was carrying.

“Mademoiselle permits this slight token of my devotion,” he murmured, as he handed them to her.

“Mademoiselle,” she replied quietly, “is this morning a typist. Have you brought me any work?”

“I have scarcely gone far enough with my business,” Monsieur Senn explained. “Presently, without a doubt, I shall be able to offer mademoiselle all that she can undertake.”

Grace looked at him reproachfully.

“And you promised to bring me some this morning!” she declared. “Why, I refused a very good engagement for the whole day.”

He put his hand to his pocket, and drew it away again.

“Do you understand German, mademoiselle?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Alas, not one word!”

“Are you perfectly certain of that?”

“Absolutely,” she sighed. “I am not proud of it, I can assure you. I know that I ought to have learnt German.”

He drew an envelope from his pocket.

“I have a letter here which I should like to have copied,” he said. “I received it this morning, and I should like to send away a copy this afternoon to Constantinople.”

She took it from his fingers and looked at it.

“It will be awfully hard to copy,” she confessed. “Won’t you translate it to me?”

He shook his head.

“I could not do that,” he said. “It concerns a rather important matter in which I am interested just now. Do you think you could copy it just as it is?”

She placed it on the rest by her side, and put some paper in her machine.

“Will you call again, monsieur,” she asked, “or will you sit in my easy chair while I work?”

“The latter, by all means, if I may,” he begged. “It is delightful to have the privilege of watching you.”

It seemed to be the sole privilege Monsieur Senn was likely to enjoy, for Grace, when she had stuck the paper into the machine, took no further notice of him. Very slowly and very painstakingly she finished her copy.

“I hope there are no mistakes,” she said, looking it through with her pencil in her hand. “It’s all like Greek to me, and knowing the sense of a thing helps one so much.”

He smiled.

“Now if you’ll write just one letter home for me,” he suggested, “to an address which I will give you, I can enclose this copy, and then perhaps I might induce you to come for a little lunch. I have one call to make first.”

She shook her head.

“Not to-day, I am afraid, Monsieur Senn.”

“Ah! but you are not going to be unkind to me?” he begged. “Come with me to Regent Street or Bond Street. We will find a jeweller’s shop, and I will buy you something to repay you for this little labour.”

“The charge for that,” she said, “will be five shillings. I never wear jewellery.”

He laughed outright.

“But you are droll, mademoiselle,” he declared. “If I offer jewellery to a lady, it is not, I can assure you, of the value of five shillings.”

“That,” she replied quietly, “is all you owe me, and I never accept more than I am owed.”

He made a little grimace.

“Well,” he said, counting out the money upon the table, “can I persuade you to come a little way with me—drive in the Park for a short time, and sit in the car while I make my call afterwards?”

She looked out of the window wistfully.

“It would be delightful,” she murmured. “Yes, I think I will!”

“Capital! We will speak about lunch afterwards.”

She crossed the room towards the door of the inner apartment.

“You will wait for me here, Monsieur Senn,” she said, turning round upon the threshold. “I shall not be long.”

He looked after her doubtfully. Then he shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette.

“A queer little creature,” he muttered to himself. “Sometimes she puzzles me.”

He had a car waiting below, and they drove for a time in the Park. Then they turned out into Park Lane, and drew up before a fine house in Portman Square.

“I may leave you for ten minutes?” he asked.

“Certainly,” she replied.

She remained inside the motor-car. It was fully half an hour before he reappeared. He came down the steps walking blithely.

“Come,” he insisted, “we must take luncheon together. I have been in luck this morning. After all, I think that things will go well with me.”

“But I thought you were in business,” she remarked. “You cannot do business in palaces.”

He smiled.

“Ah! dear mademoiselle,” he murmured, “there are many kinds of business. Why should I keep it a secret from you that part of my mission in this country is to bring relief to my suffering country-people?”

“You are really, then,” she said, “a politician? Yet I thought that Mr. Pryde told me that the gentleman you were with last night was a merchant.”

He nodded.

“Politics and commerce, you know, go hand in hand. I have a great esteem for Mr. Hutchinson, but, alas! he is an Englishman, and up to the present English people have shown scant sympathy with us.”

“Perhaps it was a little your own fault,” she pointed out. “I don’t think that Servia or Bulgaria, for instance, has ever found you a very amiable neighbour.”

“You speak as one of the civilized West,” he remarked. “Western methods are not suitable for such countries.”

“Perhaps not,” she answered lightly. “In any case, what does it matter? I know so little about these things.”

“Quite wisely,” he declared. “That is another peculiarity of ours in the East. We do not like our womenkind to worry too much about the serious affairs of life. Now, mademoiselle, we are at Prince’s. You cannot refuse me.”

“But indeed I must,” she assured him, smiling. “I have an appointment at one o’clock which I must keep. You said nothing about luncheon yesterday, you know. If to-morrow——”

He sighed. “Mademoiselle, to-morrow I present myself again.”

“You will have some work?” she asked.

“Without a doubt,” he promised. “I shall order my man to take you home. And to-night—must I dine alone? Ah, mademoiselle, you will not be so unkind!”

She shook her head smilingly. “Until to-morrow!” she cried, waving her hand.

Grace lunched at the Café Lugano, where, as usual, Pryde sat at a table at the other end of the room. She left when he did, and joined him at the door.

“Will you walk back with me?” she invited.

“You have news?”

She nodded.

“Monsieur Senn came this morning. He had forgotten to bring any work, but when he saw how disappointed I was he brought out a long German letter. Before he would give it me to copy, he asked me whether I knew German. I told him ‘no.’”

“But you speak German like a native!” he exclaimed.

“I did not like to parade my accomplishments before Monsieur Senn,” she said, smiling. “He gave me the letter to copy. It was from the Austrian Embassy. It contained an appointment for three o’clock to-morrow afternoon, and a specific statement, signed by the Ambassador himself.”

“So far it is quite interesting,” Pryde decided thoughtfully. “The situation is clear enough. Unfortunately, it all hinges upon this interview at three o’clock. I am afraid that neither you nor I have much chance of being present at that.”

“He is coming again to-morrow,” she announced. “I told him that he must bring me some work.”

Pryde shook his head.

“You will never be able to turn his head so completely that he will give you the terms of a secret understanding to copy!”

“He believes that I do not understand a word of German,” she remarked. “I think, too, that he will be glad of any excuse to come.”

“I am not at all sure,” Pryde said deliberately, “that I am glad we took this affair up.”

She sighed contentedly.

“I am,” she declared. “I feel that it gives me scope. Tell me, what have you been doing this morning?”

“I have been down to see my friend Mr. Hutchinson,” Pryde answered. “He has been giving me quite a lot of useful information. We have had a little political discussion, too. His idea is that England ought to stop the war. Egypt already is in a state of ferment. The unrest will reach India before long. In the meantime, are you going to see Monsieur Senn again to-day?”

“He has asked me to dine with him,” Grace remarked demurely.

Pryde stopped short in the middle of the pavement. Grace laughed at him.

“Please don’t be silly, Mr. Pryde,” she said. “You have not the slightest right to mind whether I dine with him or not. Besides, this is a matter of business.”

“I don’t like the fellow,” Pryde declared. “You don’t know the type.”

“I am so well able to take care of myself,” Grace replied, “that, if I had thought it politic, I should certainly have dined with him. As it is, I have

imagined an engagement. If he brings me the typing I expect to-morrow
_____”

“Well?”

“I shall have no engagement.”

It was twenty minutes to four when Monsieur Senn presented himself at Grace’s rooms on the following afternoon. This time he brought no roses. He entered in haste. He was pale and obviously agitated. He sank almost at once into a chair, but a moment later he had dragged it up to her side.

“Mademoiselle,” he begged, “permit that I lock your door. I have been watched—I am sure of it. I fear that I may be followed here.”

“You may lock the door if you wish,” Grace assented.

He rose and turned the key. When he came back, he at once resumed his place by her side.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “I have a short dispatch to give you. Also, I would like you to type me a cable. If I spell the words, you can take down in German?”

“Certainly!”

“I must get this off my mind,” he went on. “Until then I may not even look into your charming eyes.”

“I am quite ready,” Grace told him.

For an hour or more he dictated. Grace took down all that was given to her with expressionless face. She gave at no time the slightest indication that she understood the sense of the words which he was dictating. When it was finished, he threw himself back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

“Mademoiselle,” he declared, “I am exhausted.”

“You have been very busy,” she murmured.

“Busy indeed,” he replied. “I have had a conference of great importance. I have had to deal with a man. But even to you it is better that I do not talk of these things. I will go now and send that cable and post the dispatch. Forgive me if I address it myself. It is better that you know nothing. Afterwards, alas! I must dine formally at the Aust——at my friend’s. To-morrow night—you will dine with me to-morrow night?”

“If you really wish it.”

“Until then I may kiss the fingers of mademoiselle?” he pleaded. “If I hasten now, it is because to-day is for duty. To-morrow, if all goes well, I shall indeed be happy.”

Pryde came in a few minutes later. Grace answered his eager look of inquiry with a little nod.

“Your poor friend Mr. Hutchinson!” she said, glancing down at some figures before her. “I don’t understand much about tariffs, but look here.

Austria, too, is to have a protectorate over—but see for yourself.”

Pryde glanced over her shoulder.

“Get on your hat quickly,” he begged. “Simmons is waiting downstairs to take us to Downing Street.”

Monsieur Senn was becoming dangerous. Three-quarters of the bottle of champagne which stood in a pail by their side had already disappeared. He leaned over the little pink-shaded table, discreetly chosen in a quiet corner of the restaurant. His eyes were very eloquent.

“Dear mademoiselle,” he murmured, “I have found in this dull city of yours something I never dreamed of, something I cannot bear to leave behind. To-morrow or the next day I go. Constantinople is a very beautiful city. Life there can be as agreeable and as gay, even, as Paris. Must I go back alone?”

She was sitting very upright in her chair, wearing a plain black dinner gown, from which emerged only a very little of her white neck and shoulders. She was, indeed, what he had already called her—*piquant*, *ravissante*.

“But, monsieur,” she replied, with a queer little gleam in her eyes, “how, indeed, can I make your travelling arrangements for you?”

“You laugh at me all the time,” he went on, “but in your heart, dear mademoiselle, you know—you must know. I have seen no one else like you. No longer shall you type dull letters in your gloomy room.”

“They aren’t all dull,” she assured him.

He waved his hand impatiently.

“Typewriters—they are for the others. It is for you to come out and see how beautiful life may be. It is for you——”

He stopped suddenly. The ardent expression seemed suspended in his face. He frowned slightly.

“There is your friend Mr. Pryde, with Hutchinson, only a few tables away,” he muttered.

She received the information with indifference.

“Mr. Pryde is often here,” she remarked carelessly.

For the first time a vague shadow of uneasiness crept into his face. He had accepted this young woman so entirely for what she seemed to be. Yet, blinded though he had been, it was impossible to escape from a certain feeling of anxiety. If she had understood only a word or two and let it fall before Pryde! It was an awkward moment. Grace went quietly on with her dinner, but she knew quite well what was in his mind. It was at this precise juncture that Feldemay appeared. He entered hurriedly, still wearing his

travelling coat and carrying his hat in his hand. A *maître d'hôtel* brought him to the table. Senn rose to meet him.

"My friend," he exclaimed in that tongue, "speak in German!"

Feldemay nodded.

"I am from Vienna," he said quickly. "All is agreed. If necessary, mobilization will commence next week. And you?"

"Success!" Monsieur Senn declared with satisfaction. "Everything was cabled to Constantinople twenty-eight hours ago. I wait every instant for the last confirmation. A glass of wine, my friend!"

Feldemay gave up his hat and coat. He glanced towards Grace and shook his head.

"The eternal weakness, my friend!" he murmured.

Monsieur Senn smiled. It was at this precise moment that a boy from the office put a telegram into his hand. He tore it open. Feldemay leaned over his shoulder. The faces of the two became a strange and marvellous study. The cheeks of Monsieur Senn were ashen pale. Feldemay, on the other hand, seemed on the verge of an apoplectic fit. He laid his thick forefinger upon the telegram:

"Russian and British Ambassadors already acquainted proposed arrangement. Have left formal protests in nature of ultimatum. Ratification impossible. Negotiations useless. Return at once."

Pryde, from his seat a little distance away, saw the storm breaking. He came quietly over and stood by Grace's side. Feldemay recognized him and took a quick step backwards.

"You again!" he muttered.

"Once more, my friend Feldemay," Pryde replied quietly. "You drove me out from the service of my country some years ago. To-day you may perhaps wish that you had left me in it."

Monsieur Senn turned almost piteously to Grace.

"And the young lady?" he exclaimed.

"The young lady," Pryde answered, "is my partner—my partner for _____"

"For this occasion only," she interrupted hastily.

Monsieur Senn rose abruptly to his feet. He was still very white, but he retained his self-possession.

"Mademoiselle will excuse me," he murmured, turning away.

Pryde seated himself in the vacant place. He drew a little sigh of relief.

"Coffee and liqueurs for three," he ordered.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILENT PEOPLE

On the first Sunday in May, there occurred in the heart of London a tragedy simple enough in itself, yet with a strange and sinister meaning for those who cared to study life a little way beneath its exterior crust. Amongst the well-dressed crowd of London's fashionable people swarming the park between midday and one o'clock on Sunday, a woman, whose rags were only partially concealed by a rusty black shawl, was seen suddenly to reel and fall. She was picked up dead. Upon the bosom of her threadbare gown were pinned a few words of writing, which afforded to the smug Press of the country an opportunity for many rhetorical flourishes during the next few days. They led, too, to other and more serious things, for there were those who accepted them as a message. These were the words:

“I am thirty years old. I am going to die. I am tired out. There is no hope in this world for the poor. I have done my best. I have a husband and four children. My husband earns twenty-one shillings a week. I cannot feed him, myself, and four children on twenty-one shillings a week. I have tried. My children are thin and hungry. My husband never smiles. He, too, is losing his strength. I myself am the withered remnant of a woman. I have no hope. I know that there is a life, but, for some reason, I am not asked to share in it. This morning, for once, I go to see the sunshine. I go to see the other women. Perhaps I shall understand what it is they have done and I have not done to deserve life. And then I shall rest.”

When the papers had finished with their vapourings, and a satisfactory fund had been raised for the children of the dead woman, things began to happen. A millionaire employer of labour, who had closed his yards and turned seventeen hundred people into the streets because one of the commodities used by him had reached a price which he declared made his business unprofitable, was shot dead as he crossed the pavement from his house in Park Lane to step into his motor-car. His murderer turned out to be one of his unemployed workpeople, who defended himself from the dock with a rough eloquence which paralysed even the law. Within a few days

other events happened which pointed to some systematic effort. Four factories in different parts of the country, whose owners were deservedly unpopular, were destroyed either by dynamite or fire. A trade union official, who was reported to have accepted a bribe from a federation of employers to prohibit a strike, even though he was in possession of large funds subscribed by the workpeople, was missed for several days and discovered with a cord around his neck in the Thames. Then a leading daily paper published a mysterious document which had been dropped into its letter-box by an unknown hand. It was headed:

“A WARNING TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF
ENGLAND!

“There are millions who have been waiting for a sign. Eleven days ago a woman died in the Park, and the message found pinned to the rags which covered her withered body has been accepted as that sign. England is governed by laws, laws ill-made by man for his kind. The old laws are hard to break; the new laws are difficult to frame. From our place amongst the wilderness, we who send this message have spent many weary hours pondering over the great subject—how and in what fashion shall we make heard the voice of the sufferers? A short time ago hundreds of women, nourished in comfortable homes, educated, civilized, apparently respectable, called attention to a grievance from which they imagined themselves to be suffering by great and wanton destruction of property. Their grievance is to ours as the light of a candle to the burning of the sun. There are those who have approved their methods. They have taught us a lesson. Cause and effect shall be dissociated in our minds. Until you listen to us we will kill, burn and destroy. When the moment has come, we will point to you the way to freedom.

“To-morrow the King drives through the City to the Mansion House. The King to-morrow will be safe. But between Ludgate Circus and St. Paul’s Cathedral one of the horses drawing his coach will be destroyed.

“THE SILENT PEOPLE.”

This document was scoffed at by nearly everyone who read it. Even the editor of the paper was derided for publishing an anonymous hoax. That morning, however, half-way up Ludgate Hill, a spectator was seen to break through the little line and, taking a deliberate aim, to shoot one of the horses

of the King's coach through the head. He was at once arrested—in fact, he made no effort to escape. He made no reply to the charge and remained absolutely dumb, both at the time and subsequently. He was committed to prison during the King's pleasure, a fate to which he submitted with the utmost indifference. On the following day the letter-box of the *Daily Observer* was watched by the cleverest detectives in London. The sub-editor, however, discovered in the morning another communication amongst the rest of his correspondence. This communication was headed in the same way:

“TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF ENGLAND!

“We have a thousand men like William Clarke, ready to do our bidding; ready to kill, burn or destroy, as we choose. We are tired of our Labour members and our magazine-writing Socialists. The people speak now for themselves. We adopt the tactics of a more educated class.

“On Thursday one of the masterpieces in the National Gallery will be destroyed.

“THE SILENT PEOPLE.”

This time, short of closing the National Gallery, every possible precaution was taken, but about three o'clock in the afternoon the “Madonna” of Giotto was discovered cut into strips. The perpetrator of the deed was easily arrested. His name was Johnson. He was a weaver by trade, out of work, and poorly dressed. He made no reply to the charge, no reply in the police court, and, refusing to answer the simplest questions, he was committed to prison indefinitely.

On the third day another communication was received and published in the *Daily Observer*:

“We of the people have been accused always of ranting, of shouting our wrongs from the house-tops. Let us hope that our new tactics will be approved. We have left off words. We have come to deeds, and those who do our bidding have learnt silence. To-morrow there will be wrecked the house of one whose name is held by us as the name of an enemy.

“THE SILENT PEOPLE.”

Throughout London a certain thrill of anticipation seemed to quiver in the air from hour to hour. Who was there who could be called an enemy of the people?

In great black headlines the evening papers told the story. In a suburb of London, the house of a member of the Government who had risen from the ranks, and to whom such measures for the relief of the poor which a temporising Government had devised had been entrusted during the last few years, was completely wrecked. The man himself had escaped, but his house was in ruins. He stood branded as an enemy of the people. On this occasion the thrower of the bomb remained undiscovered. The house was one of those which had been left unwatched.

It was about this time that Pryde made a thrilling and amazing discovery, which at first threatened seriously to alter his relations with his partner. He arrived home unexpectedly early one night to find a note asking him to call in and report. He found the door of her flat unfastened, and the door of the inner room wide open. Hearing a step, she called out:

“Please come here at once.”

After a moment’s hesitation he obeyed. He advanced even to the inner room, and for the first time saw inside. He stood quite still, transfixed with surprise. Every detail of her sitting-room was always rigidly reminiscent of Grace herself. Even the easy chairs were a little severe, and the furniture, which she had added from time to time, was of a sombre and decorous type. Her colour scheme was grey; the pictures which hung upon the walls were nearly all landscapes; her whole environment always seemed so thoroughly in keeping with her clothes, her manner of speech itself, of prim, almost Quakerish simplicity. He had pictured her own room as something like this: a simple bedstead, a few prints, an apartment clean and bare and chaste. He looked instead into a chamber utterly unlike anything he could have imagined. The walls were coloured a faint rose pink, and on the floor there was a carpet of almost the same colour. The bedstead was of white, with a top of hooded muslin tied up with ribbons. There was an easy chair and a large divan, chintz covered, luxurious; a dressing-table covered with dainty trifles; and on the bed, by the side of an empty basket, a little heap of garments which seemed to him like a sea of lace and muslin. Everything was spotless, exquisitely dainty. It might well have been the sleeping apartment of a princess.

Pryde stood rooted to the spot. His final shock of amazement came when he realised that Grace herself was wearing a dressing-gown of white muslin, that she seemed like a bewildering vision of fluffiness and laces and ribbons. He was absolutely incapable of any form of speech. He simply stood and stared whilst her face grew darker.

“How dare you!” she exclaimed, advancing rapidly towards the door.

“You called me,” he declared. “I got your note and hurried down. When I came inside you called me.”

“I thought it was Susan, you idiot!” she retorted, slamming the door in his face.

He walked slowly away. The maid whom Grace had recently engaged for several hours a day entered hurriedly, almost at the same moment, from the outside door. She smiled at Pryde as she passed.

“I am afraid that Miss Burton will think I have been gone a long time, sir,” she remarked. “I could not find the shop.”

She disappeared, closing the door silently behind her.

Pryde threw himself into an easy chair. So there was another Grace, after all, a Grace who loved the things a woman should love, a Grace who was as dainty and sweet as anything he could have conceived in his most sentimental moments. He felt his heart beating with the pleasure of it. Her life, then, was to some extent a pose. At heart she was like other girls. He sat with half-closed eyes, dwelling upon those few seconds, seconds full of exquisite imaginings. It seemed to him that he had never in his life looked upon anything more beautiful than that little chamber and its contents. Even Grace, when she at last appeared, could not dispel his dreams. She was dressed as usual in severe black, unrelieved even at the neck. A vision he seemed to have had of silk stockings was dissipated by the sight of her square-toed shoes. She came towards him in an absolutely matter-of-fact way. He rose, a little embarrassed.

“If I was rude just now,” she said calmly, “I am sorry. The fault, I suppose, was mine.”

“I certainly,” he explained, “would not have dreamed of——”

“That will do,” she interrupted. “We will not discuss that subject again, ever. I hope you will humour me so far as to forget the occurrence. I sent for you because I wanted to talk.”

He nodded.

“It is three weeks since we did anything.”

“I have nothing definite to propose now,” she went on. “I wanted to speak about the Silent People.”

“There is a reward of a thousand pounds offered this morning,” Pryde remarked.

“They are doing all they can to break the thing up,” she said. “People are getting uneasy. The question is whether, supposing we were successful where others have failed, we could take that thousand pounds reward with a clear conscience.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean that I am not at all sure,” she continued, “that my sympathies are not with the Silent People.”

Pryde, whose habits of mind were conventional even though his views were broad, shook his head.

“One may see weak points in our laws, in our whole social system,” he observed, “but the attacks made upon it must be legitimate. I say that it is the duty of everyone to uphold the law.”

“Yours,” she replied, “is the point of view of the man in the street. I will not tell you exactly what I think. Only this: if you join with me in a certain scheme which I am about to propose, it must be on this one condition only, that in the event of success, the claiming of that reward—that is to say, the denouncing of these people—must rest with me.”

“I do not mind that,” he assented.

“You understand,” she repeated. “Even if we are successful, supposing we find out who it is who writes these notices and who has planned these outrages, if I decide that the knowledge is to be forgotten, it must be so.”

“I agree,” he said. “I think that your instinct will be too strong for your humanitarianism.”

“We shall see,” she rejoined. “There are a good many threads hanging loose, a good many which have been tried already and thrown on one side. Now tell me, you have done what I asked you this afternoon?”

He nodded.

“I was at the House of Commons at four o’clock. I heard Cammerley bring in his Bill.”

“What did you think of him?”

Pryde hesitated.

“At first,” he said thoughtfully, “I was disappointed. Then he began to impress me. He is rather a curious personality. Nothing about him suggests in any way a leader of the people. He has a thin frame, he stoops, and he wears gold-rimmed spectacles. He spoke almost without gestures, and his voice at times was quite low. It was not until he had been speaking for some time that one realised that he was, after all, in his way an orator. He had no notes, he spoke with perfect assurance, and he said some startling things. But he didn’t attempt to make the points that these Labour men nearly always do. There wasn’t a touch of rhetoric in anything he said. He simply spoke of the coming of the people as though it were written.”

“He believes that,” she murmured.

“On the whole,” Pryde concluded, “I should put him down as a dangerous man.”

“Why dangerous?”

“He is a revolutionary. One could almost imagine him a Robespierre.”

“Even that,” she remarked, “may come.”

“And now,” he asked, “tell me exactly why you wanted me to hear him? You had some reason?”

“I had,” she admitted. “I think that if you could see inside his brain you wouldn’t have much trouble in earning that thousand pounds.”

“He is one of the Silent People?” Pryde exclaimed.

Grace did not speak for a moment.

“You know,” she said presently, “that I am a member of the Forward Club?”

“You told me so the other night,” he replied. “I remember how surprised I was.”

“There is nothing for you to be surprised at,” she continued calmly. “Anyhow, I was there the other afternoon. Cammerley was having tea with a woman at the next table. They were talking together earnestly. You know how acute my hearing is. I overheard a single sentence. It was enough.”

Pryde was obviously interested.

“If Cammerley is really mixed up with these people,” he said, “it would cause a sensation if it were known. He has been getting quite a little following of his own lately. The other side have rather taken him up.”

“Why not? He is a strong man. In a few years’ time, unless accidents happen, the country will have to reckon with him.”

“Accidents?”

“I mean, if he does not come to grief,” she explained. “It is his pose at present to be a moderate man. They say that at heart he is a red-hot anarchist, ready to sacrifice the country, the lives of millions, if necessary, to his principles. That is why I wonder whether we should not be doing good rather than harm if we were to take that thousand pounds.”

“You will have to get your proofs first,” he reminded her.

“We might fail,” she admitted; “on the other hand, we might succeed. What I cannot make up my mind about is whether we might not do more harm by succeeding.”

“But you are not a Socialist yourself?”

“I am not so sure about that,” she answered.

He shrugged his shoulders. It was certainly not the place or the time for arguments.

“In any case,” he begged, “tell me just what you have in your mind?”

“You are still in touch with the *Daily Observer* people,” she said. “Well, go and interview Mr. Cammerley on their behalf. Talk to him in his own house. See if anything occurs to you.”

“No hints?”

“None. I am not keeping anything from you. I simply heard a sentence pass between him and a woman whom I knew very well by repute. Go and

see what you think of him.”

Pryde glanced at the clock.

“I’ll go to-morrow,” he promised, “but in the meantime——”

“I am going to dine at my club to-night,” she interrupted, a little ruthlessly. “I shall be leaving in a few minutes.”

“You wouldn’t like to take me with you, I suppose?” he suggested.

“I should dislike it very much indeed,” she replied. “I don’t see the slightest reason why I should pay for your dinner.”

“It’s only eighteenpence,” he ventured hopefully.

“The amount is not so serious, perhaps,” she admitted. “It is the principle. Besides, I want to make a few inquiries there about Mr. Cammerley’s friends. I shall be better alone.”

“Grace,” he began, suddenly inspired by a recollection of that little room.

Her eyes flashed a warning.

“I consider the use of my Christian name a liberty, Mr. Pryde!”

He turned on his heel and went out. It was not until he had left the room that her lips relaxed in the least. Then she smiled.

CHAPTER IX

BACK IN BERMONDSEY

Pryde presented himself at two o'clock the next day at a large and gloomy-looking house in Bermondsey, a house which had once belonged to a manufacturer of leather who had chosen to live near his works, but which stood now in almost pitiful isolation, with a tan-yard at the back of it, and a row of small shops on either side. A woman admitted him, a woman who was neatly dressed, but who wore no cap and had not the manners of a servant. He passed along a bare hall and was shown into a large, untidy-looking study. Mr. Cammerley looked up from his desk as Pryde approached, but did not offer his hand or attempt any form of conventional greeting. He pointed, however, to a plain deal chair close at hand.

"I do not understand," he said, "why you have come to see me. Your card says that you are a journalist. One paper has already turned me inside out and indulged in a photographic representation of the person I am not, and given a faithful description of the things I did not say and the views which I do not hold. Surely one is enough?"

"These are curious days," Pryde remarked, setting his hat upon the table. "The whole reading public is crazy for personalities."

The man behind the desk looked at him steadfastly. It seemed to Pryde that those light-coloured eyes were growing larger behind his spectacles.

"What is the name of your paper?" he asked.

"I am a reporter on the *Daily Observer*," Pryde told him.

"You are also a liar," Mr. Cammerley said calmly. "Your name is Pryde, and, with a certain young lady as your partner, you have been teaching Scotland Yard their business for the last few months. Now, sir, what the devil do you mean by coming to see me under false pretences? Is there any mystery connected with me or my life? Is there anything you wish to discover?"

Pryde shut up his notebook. He had the curious sense of being in the presence of a man who could read his innermost thoughts.

"To tell you the truth," he confessed, "I was wondering whether you could not give me some information with regard to the Silent People?"

Mr. Cammerley continued to look steadily at him.

"Supposing I could," he asked, "why should I? You are a stranger to me. There is a thousand pounds reward offered for information of these people.

Why should you associate me with them?"

"You are a Socialist," Pryde reminded him. "You speak with wonderful restraint, but that very restraint is impressive. I heard you yesterday afternoon in the House of Commons. I may be wrong, but to me you seemed to represent the type of man who would go to any lengths if he considered himself justified by his principles."

"For an inquiry agent," Mr. Cammerley declared, "you certainly do seem to be possessed of a certain amount of perception as regards elementary facts. How much of this interview is going in your paper?"

"Not a word," Pryde replied.

"So I imagined," Mr. Cammerley remarked dryly. "Then listen. You are right. I am an anarchist, if you like to use the word. That is to say, I would, if I had the power, rend this country from north to south that the better days might dawn. I would do evil that good may come."

"It is a dangerous doctrine."

Mr. Cammerley raised his eyebrows.

"A surgeon cuts off your leg that he may save your life."

"He obeys fixed laws," Pryde retorted, "and the disease is a matter of fact, not principle."

Mr. Cammerley smiled indulgently. He glanced at the papers before him.

"Mr. Pryde," he said, "you are wasting my time. I have no desire to make a convert of you."

"Tell me something about the Silent People," Pryde persisted, "and I will go."

Cammerley rose slowly from his place and moved to the door. He held it open and turned his face towards the stairs.

"Lucy!" he called.

An answer came from above. Cammerley remained with the door open. In a few moments a woman appeared, a woman broadly built, with a dark, square face, a slight down upon the upper lip, and beautiful eyes—the eyes of an enthusiast. Her hair was parted simply in the middle. It was black and shiny, and there were large quantities of it. Her dress was plain in the extreme. She looked from Cammerley to Pryde.

"It is a young man," Cammerley explained softly, "who has come here in the guise of a reporter to know if I can tell him anything about the Silent People."

Not a muscle of her face changed, only a sudden light shone in her eyes. Pryde, who was glancing at her, shivered. For some mysterious reason he felt that he was in danger.

"This visitor of ours," Cammerley continued, looking at Pryde dispassionately, "has been associated with a young lady in various

investigations during the last few months. He would call himself, I suppose, a private inquiry agent, or something of the sort. He has become interested in the craze of the moment. He is exceedingly curious about the Silent People.”

The woman sighed. When she spoke it was with a slight foreign accent.

“What is it that one hears about them?” she murmured. “There have been others who have sought to discover their identity—others who are themselves silent now for ever.”

“The young man,” Cammerley said thoughtfully, “is of a harmless type.”

Pryde, as he stood there, was conscious of soft footsteps in the hall, footsteps which seemed to gather volume all the time, not the footsteps of one or two people, but the footsteps of dozens.

“You were looking for adventures, perhaps, my young friend,” Cammerley continued. “You have been successful. Someone who visited me once remarked that this might well be a house of mysteries, so strangely situated in such a neighbourhood. Perhaps it is. Look!”

He pushed the door a little farther open. The hall seemed filled with men, men who were waiting patiently, men who exchanged not a syllable, pale-faced most of them, dressed in the garb of operatives, with something curious about them which, although he did not understand it, made Pryde shiver. Cammerley closed the door again.

“As I think that you knew before you came,” he said quietly, “you are in the presence of the Silent People—Lucy Fragade and I, myself. Those outside have also learnt the gift of silence. They are some of those who do our bidding.”

Pryde stared at the woman. The name was well enough known to him—Lucy Fragade, who had been expelled from Russia, imprisoned in America, imprisoned again in Germany, and forced to escape from France; the daughter of an anarchist, a woman who preached force and bloodshed with an eloquence which no man of her cause had ever approached. He recognised her from her portraits. She was gazing at him fixedly.

“There is a room at the back of this house,” Cammerley continued, “into which others have been invited who have come as you have come, and the world has seen no more of them. The river flows within forty yards of my back door, and the tanyard is empty at night. I am afraid, Mr. Pryde, that the public will have to wait a little time for that interview with me which you proposed writing.”

Pryde looked from one to the other. Up to the present moment, at any rate, he had felt no fear. Yet there was something a little disquieting in the expression with which they regarded him; something ominous, too, in that sense of men waiting without. He remembered several disappearances lately.

He knew suddenly that murder had been done in this place. Yet he was still without fear. Perhaps he was to some extent a fatalist. Death seemed to him always a thing so unlikely.

“I shall be missed,” he remarked affably. “Miss Burton knows that I have come to see you.”

Cammerley nodded.

“The young lady who overheard our conversation at the Forward Club,” he explained to Lucy. “It is a pity that she did not accompany you, sir.”

“Perhaps,” Pryde replied, “she is better where she is!”

The telephone bell rang. Cammerley held the receiver to his ear.

“This is Mr. Cammerley speaking,” he declared. “What can I do for you? Yes, Mr. Pryde is here. You are Miss Grace Burton.”

Pryde made a movement towards the telephone, but stopped.

“No, I am afraid that I cannot say,” Cammerley continued, “what time Mr. Pryde will return. He will leave this room in a few minutes. As for the rest, it is difficult. Yes, I understand.”

He listened for some time. His face showed no change of expression. He glanced towards the clock.

“Very well,” he said, “the course you suggest will be quite agreeable to me. It would give me great pleasure to meet you. Yes, pray come. As you say, it is only an affair of ten minutes in a taxicab.”

Pryde sprang towards the telephone.

“She shall not come!” he shouted.

Mr. Cammerley handed him the receiver.

“Really,” he said, “you people are wasting a lot of our time this afternoon. Tell her yourself to keep away, then.”

Pryde snatched the receiver.

“Miss Burton!” he called out, “Grace, are you there? Grace!”

“Miss Burton is here,” was the calm reply.

“You are not to come to this man’s house,” Pryde exclaimed. “If you do, don’t come alone. You understand?”

“Quite well. There is probably a slight misunderstanding. Au revoir!”

“Listen!” Pryde begged.

The connection was gone. Cammerley removed the instrument out of reach with a little sigh.

“My dear Mr. Pryde,” he said, “the young lady is evidently accustomed to having her own way. Who can blame her? Miss Fragade is a little like that, too. Now how shall we spend the time until Miss Burton arrives? Would you like to see round the place? Would you care to stroll through the tanyard down to the river? There is a room here which Lucy calls our chamber of horrors. Perhaps you would like to see that? Or would you like

to make the acquaintance of our bodyguard—fifty strange-looking men? Most of them now, I suppose, have gone back to their posts, but there will be a few remaining.”

He swung open the door. There were a dozen men still in the hall, standing against the wall almost like statues. Their eyes were fixed upon Mr. Cammerley. They seemed ready to obey his slightest gesture. Pryde glanced for a moment at the front door, but Cammerley smiled.

“The only modern thing about the place,” he remarked. “A double lock of really wonderful pattern. Would you like to see some of my books? Or would it amuse you to hear Lucy talk of her Continental experiences?”

The telephone bell rang again. Cammerley spoke, apparently to a whip in the House of Commons.

“I shall be in my place at four o’clock,” Pryde heard him say. “The division, I suppose, is not likely to come on before dinner-time? Thank you. An interesting thing, the telephone,” he continued, replacing the receiver and turning to Pryde. “It seems to bring one so into touch with the outside world from the most impossible places, doesn’t it? I sometimes wonder whether these people who ring me up from the House of Commons know what my home is really like. Ah, the taxicab! Stay here, please, Mr. Pryde. Miss Burton will be properly received without a doubt.”

Grace was ushered into the room a moment later by the grey-haired woman who had admitted Pryde himself. She was, as usual, exceedingly quiet in her manner and very self-composed.

“It is Mr. Cammerley, is it not?” she inquired, holding out her hand. “And I am sure that this is Lucy Fragade? It is very interesting to meet you both.”

Cammerley smiled.

“Without flattery,” he remarked, “I may say that there have been many who have found it interesting.”

Grace was standing between Lucy Fragade and Cammerley. She seemed very small.

“I have come,” she announced, “to take Mr. Pryde back with me.”

Lucy Fragade looked at her curiously. Cammerley smiled.

“Mr. Pryde was a little lonely,” he said. “I have no doubt that he will find your coming of benefit to him.”

“Ours must be only a flying visit,” Grace continued quietly. “Before I go there is a question I have wanted to ask Mr. Cammerley ever since I knew of his existence. This will probably be my only chance. Should I be too exacting if I begged for—say, thirty seconds in which to ask it?”

“I have no secrets,” Cammerley replied. “Pray ask your question.”

Grace looked at him intently. She said nothing. Her face was, in a sense, inexpressive. Yet Cammerley's eyebrows came a little closer together.

"It was a question," she murmured, "which occurred to me first when I heard that Blanche Fragade was indeed——"

"Lucy Fragade," the woman interrupted.

Grace accepted, the correction, but she did not at once continue. She was looking steadfastly at Cammerley. There was perhaps no one else in the room who noticed any change in him. Yet Pryde, who was nearest, and who found the temperature of the apartment on the cold side, was suddenly surprised to see two little drops of perspiration standing out on the man's forehead. Cammerley looked towards the woman and said something to her in a strange tongue which neither Pryde nor Grace understood. She nodded and left the room. Cammerley leaned a little towards Grace as she passed out.

"Go on," he said.

"Is there any need?" Grace asked calmly. "I have a friend in Cyril Mansions. The letter is ready for the post—if we do not return."

Cammerley's face was for a moment like the face of a skeleton. His eyes shone large behind his spectacles. His lips had parted.

"Your terms?" he whispered.

"This is not our affair," Grace said softly. "I was wrong to send him here," she added, motioning towards Pryde. "I, too, am of the people. So long as it is not life you take, he and I are silent."

Cammerley asked for no pledge. He understood. For a moment he listened. Then he led the way towards the door. In the hall several shadowy figures came stealing towards them. He waved them back and opened the front door.

"You will find a taxicab at the corner," he said.

At the corner of the street they stopped to look around them. Pryde glanced back at the house which they had left. Behind it was the tanyard, and a little farther away they could see the masts of shipping in the river.

"A queer place," Grace observed composedly. "They say that he is a real philanthropist. His house is filled with all sorts of outcasts from the streets, to whom he gives temporary shelter. That is the reason he lives there."

"Is it?" Pryde replied dryly. "There is nothing would please me better than to go over it with half a dozen policemen at my back."

She shook her head.

"It is forbidden. I think those two people, mistaken though they may be, represent things with which we do better not to interfere."

"At least," Pryde asked, "I may inquire who Blanche is?"

“But for Blanche,” Grace told him, “I should never have suffered you to go to that man’s house, because I know that they are suspicious of you and of me. Blanche is Lucy Fragade’s sister. She left her home mysteriously some years ago. Lucy does not know where she is. Philip Cammerley does. There are only two things in life greater than that woman’s devotion to her cause. One was her love for her sister; the other her passion for Cammerley. I should say that he was a man who feared but one thing in the world. When I spoke he saw the possibility of it.”

Pryde sighed as he handed her into a taxicab.

“There seems to be a weak spot in the life of every strong man,” he remarked, “and that weak spot is always a woman. Even with myself——”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” she interrupted.

CHAPTER X

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MONSIEUR DUPOY

“What we want,” Pryde declared, from the arm of an easy chair, “is a holiday—a proper summer holiday.”

“What you may want,” Grace asserted with emphasis, “has nothing to do with me. What I want is to finish this typing.”

He glanced at the machine contemptuously.

“I cannot understand,” he exclaimed, “why you go on grinding away at that wretched copying. You get ninepence a thousand words for it. It isn’t in the least worth your while.”

“Perhaps not,” she admitted, “and yet I fancy that I know my own business best. I have explained to you before that it is not the money that it brings me in so much as the fact that it gives me a definite station in life. If any inquiries are made about me, I can easily prove that I am a professional typist, with work coming in all the time. It would be very much better for you if you had some corresponding occupation.”

Pryde evaded the point.

“Will you come out for a drive this afternoon?”

“I will not,” she replied calmly. “You ought to have gone down and played golf. As you did not, I wish you would go round to your club or somewhere. You distract me.”

He shrugged his shoulders and left her. He found Grace sometimes almost unendurable. Her resolution, her indomitable front towards all his attempts to alter in any way their relations, was beginning to tell upon him. But for that little glimpse he had recently had of her more feminine self and tastes, he would have felt inclined to give up the struggle. It was impossible, however, to believe that she was not like other girls. There had even been moments when he had fancied that she had looked at him more kindly, moments when he had certainly permitted himself to hope. Only it was a long time! Their partnership had lasted for six months, and personally he felt as far away from her now as on that first day. She had commenced by piquing his curiosity. His vanity had been a little ruffled by her calm resistance of his advances. Then the other things had come—not all at once, but gradually. To-day he knew that there could never be any other woman in the world for him.

At the club he was distraught. He wandered from the card-room, which bored him, abandoned the billiard-room without an effort to play, and finally found himself in the library, the most deserted room in the club. Its only other occupant laid down his paper at his approach and welcomed him.

“Mr. Pryde,” he said, “your coming is rather a coincidence. I was on the point of ringing the bell to ask whether you were in the club.”

Pryde looked at the speaker in surprise.

“I didn’t even know that you remembered me, Sir James,” he remarked, a little dryly.

Sir James Downson smiled as he drew up his chair. He was a tall, grey-bearded man, well groomed, his beard trimmed Vandyke fashion, a single eyeglass in his left eye. He held an official position under the Government, and was quite a distinguished member of the club.

“On the contrary, I remember you very well, Pryde,” he declared. “I was mixed up, as you can scarcely have forgotten, in that little trouble of yours at Vienna. I don’t know that there is any harm in telling you that if it had rested with me you would have been asked to stay on.”

“I am sure you are very kind,” Pryde murmured.

Sir James glanced around the room as though to make sure that they were alone.

“I have heard of you once or twice lately,” he announced, “through a friend of mine whom I need not name—you and a young lady, Miss Grace Burton, I think.”

Pryde sat quite still.

“I am told that in one or two cases,” Sir James continued, “you have shown, between you, an unusual amount of determination and ingenuity. I have a commission to offer you. Are you prepared to take it?”

“Without a doubt,” Pryde answered.

“It doesn’t seem, on the face of it, a very interesting affair,” Sir James went on. “One cannot tell, however, what it might lead to. These are the facts. About a fortnight ago, a Monsieur Dupoy came over to this country, indirectly on behalf of the French Government. I may say that we have received from them, within the course of the last few months, a strong protest against our neglect in the matter of war balloons and aeroplanes generally. Dupoy was sent here to attend some experiments at Aldershot, and to be entrusted by us with a complete scheme of our proposed reorganisation. He was to have received this at the War Office at twelve o’clock last Friday week. He presented himself at the appointed place at that time, but a few of the papers were not quite ready, and we asked him to call again the next day. Dupoy was perfectly willing. I happened to be there myself, and I invited him to dine with me that night, an invitation which he

accepted at once. Since then nothing whatever has been seen of Monsieur Dupoy.”

“He disappeared?”

“Absolutely!”

“Are you sure that he did not return home?”

“Quite,” Sir James replied. “We have communicated with the French Government, and through them with his relations. No one has seen or heard anything of him since he left here last Friday week.”

“I haven’t noticed anything about it in the papers,” Pryde remarked.

Sir James smiled.

“The disappearance of Monsieur Dupoy,” he said softly, “is not one of those cases which are advertised in the Press. It may, of course, have been due to an accident in the ordinary way. The hospitals, however, have been thoroughly searched, and no trace discovered of him. It is a significant fact that, so far as anybody knew, he left the War Office a week ago last Friday with some of our proposals and scheme in his pocket.

“Where was he staying?” Pryde asked.

“At Delacher’s Hotel, on the Embankment,” Sir James replied.

“Some inquiries have been made there?”

“Naturally. Dupoy was reported to have paid his bill on the Friday morning, to have ordered his bag to be brought down, and to have gone out for half an hour to buy, he told the hotel clerk, a present for his wife. Since then he has not been heard of.”

“Do you suspect anyone?” Pryde inquired.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders. He had risen to his feet and was lighting a cigarette from a case which he passed over to Pryde.

“Not with any reason,” he answered. “Curiously enough, however, this is the third disappearance from Delacher’s Hotel within the last six weeks. It is possible that something may have happened to Dupoy quite apart from the fact that he was supposed to be carrying with him very important political documents. I don’t know whether the affair appeals to you. If it does, my department will pay exceedingly well for any satisfactory elucidation of the mystery, and will, in any case, be responsible for your expenses if you care to have a look round.”

“I am awfully obliged to you, sir,” Pryde replied. “Perhaps in a day or two I may have something to report.”

Pryde sought no longer to distract himself at bridge or billiards. He took a taxicab and drove back to his rooms, calling on his way to see Grace. She looked up at him ominously as he entered, but he only smiled.

“This,” he declared, “is no idle call. Work! Do you know anything about Delacher’s Hotel?”

She nodded.

“I know that a few weeks ago there was a diamond merchant from Hamburg who disappeared from there; and a little time before that a mysterious young woman from St. Petersburg, who had come over to look for a situation as a teacher of languages, went out one morning and never returned.”

“Good!” Pryde exclaimed. “There has been a third disappearance—a Frenchman this time.”

“How did you hear of it?” she asked quickly.

Pryde gave his small brown moustache an upward curl.

“A former chief of mine,” he explained, “a member of the Government now, has placed the affair in my hands.”

“He has probably heard of you,” she remarked quietly, “as my assistant.”

“He will hear of me some day as your——” Pryde began.

“Don’t be rash,” she interrupted. “What are you going to do?”

“I am going to stay at Delacher’s Hotel,” Pryde replied. “And you?”

“I am going to finish this typing. Tell me, before you go, about this man who has disappeared.”

Pryde imparted to her in a few words all the information he had gained from Sir James. She listened thoughtfully. When he had finished she turned back to her work.

“I wish you luck. Don’t get into trouble,” she advised him.

Pryde opened his lips, but the click of the typewriter drowned his words. He moved slowly away. At the door he looked back. Grace was absorbed in her work. He could see only the top of her light brown hair and the flashing of her fingers. With a muttered word he went up to his room.

An hour later he made his way to Charing Cross and, waiting until the arrival of the Continental train, mingled with the little stream of alighting passengers and took a taxicab to Delacher’s Hotel. A tall porter received his bag, and ushered him into the office. Pryde, whose French was perfect, asked for a room in the name of Monsieur Dupoy. The clerk stared at him for a moment. The head porter, who was a tall, olive-skinned person of great height, with a black moustache, also leaned forward with interest.

“Monsieur Dupoy!” the clerk repeated, with his pen in his hand.

Pryde nodded and glanced around as though to make sure that no one else was within hearing.

“To tell you the truth,” he announced, “I come here on behalf of the family. Only the week before last a cousin of mine was staying in this same hotel. He was to have returned to Paris last Friday week. He did not arrive. We have sent him many messages and letters. There has been no reply. It was arranged that I should come over to make inquiries.”

“But we have already written,” the clerk remarked, “informing Madame Dupoy that her husband left here on the Friday morning for the purpose, he said, of buying her a present. He did not return. He had so little luggage that we imagined he had been kept until the last moment, and then had taken the train without it sooner than be delayed. He had, in fact, merely a change of clothes and a couple of shirts with him.”

Pryde nodded.

“Up till last night,” he declared with a little gesture, “my cousin had not returned. Therefore I am here. Give me a room. I do not know what I can do, but we shall see. One must try the police.”

The clerk handed him a ticket.

“You can have the room which your cousin occupied, Monsieur Dupoy,” he said. “Number 387, on the third floor. As to the police, it is, of course, your affair, but I trust you are satisfied that nothing happened to Monsieur Dupoy under this roof?”

“Entirely,” Pryde replied. “All the evidence goes to show that he left here, as you have told me, to buy this present.”

Pryde was ushered to the lift. Until he disappeared he noticed that the head porter was watching him with ill-concealed curiosity. He was shown into an ordinary hotel bedroom on the third floor, with an outlook on to the Thames. The furniture was of the plainest, and there was no communicating door into any other room. He opened his bag, took out his clothes and glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to eight. He decided to dine in the restaurant downstairs without changing, and accordingly rang the bell and ordered some hot water. The chambermaid wished him good evening pleasantly. He slipped a half-crown into her hand.

“I may leave at any moment,” he explained. “I give you this now.”

She grabbed the money and beamed at him.

“The gentleman is very gracious,” she declared with a strong German accent.

Pryde broke into fluent German.

“You knew the occupant of this room,” he inquired, “who was here the week before last—Monsieur Dupoy?”

She nodded.

“He left his bag behind him,” she said. “He departed in a great hurry.”

“You didn’t happen to see him before he started, I suppose?” Pryde asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “Yes. He came in and washed his hands. It was the middle of the morning. He went out to eat. I know, because he said to me, ‘The food downstairs,’ he said, ‘it is good, but the room is dull. I will go

somewhere more lively.’ He said that to me while I poured out his hot water.”

“Nothing about buying a present for his wife?” Pryde inquired.

The girl shook her head.

“Not to me did he speak of such a person.”

Pryde whistled softly as he went downstairs. As he crossed the hall he heard the sound of voices raised in altercation. The head porter was speaking angrily to a subordinate, who had apparently come late to relieve him. Pryde bought a paper and went into the restaurant.

He dined fairly well, but his surroundings were certainly depressing. A band, not of the first order, was playing. There were only a few diners, and these were obviously foreigners of the commercial type. One or two of the men seemed to be talking business. There were barely half a dozen women in the room. As soon as he had finished his meal, he strolled out into the hall. The man who had relieved the head porter was standing on the doorstep. Pryde strolled up to him and lit a cigarette.

“Disagreeable-looking fellow your head porter,” he observed.

“It is a wonder,” the man grumbled, “that any of us stay here with him. If the management only knew——”

He hurried off to procure a taxi for a departing guest. Pryde awaited his return.

“Queer-looking fellow altogether,” he said softly. “He looks more like a head waiter than anything.”

“He was a waiter before he took on this job,” the porter remarked. “He has got a restaurant of his own now, they say. Shouldn’t care to go to it myself.”

“Why not?” Pryde inquired.

The man hesitated. He looked more closely at his questioner.

“No particular reason, sir. I don’t like Paul, that’s all. You’ll excuse me, sir?”

He walked off to attend to some alighting passengers. Pryde noticed that he seemed rather to avoid returning. When he was disengaged, however, Pryde called softly to him.

“Tell me, what is your name?” he asked.

“My name is Fritz, sir.”

“Do you happen to know mine?” Pryde continued.

“No, sir.”

“My name is Dupoy.”

“Indeed, sir? We had a Monsieur Dupoy here quite lately.”

“My cousin,” Pryde declared. “He was to have returned to Paris last Friday week. He never came, and we have been very anxious. That is why I

am here.”

The porter edged a little away.

“I should go to the police, sir, and make inquiries,” he suggested.

“There are certain reasons,” Pryde said slowly, “why I would rather not do that. I thought I might be able to pick up some information here. I am willing to pay for it.”

The man smiled in somewhat mysterious fashion.

“If I were you, sir,” he whispered confidentially, “I should ask——”

“Whom?” Pryde demanded.

“Paul!”

Again he went about his business, and again Pryde waited. When he came back, however, he was uncommunicative. He kept looking behind towards the office.

“You will forgive me if I speak plainly, sir,” he said. “My first instructions when I got the job here were to keep my mouth shut. I’ve got a wife and children, and I can’t afford to run any risks. If they see you here with me and know you’re making inquiries, they’ll think I’m gassing.”

Pryde slipped a sovereign into his hand.

“What time does Paul come on duty?”

“Not for another hour, sir,” the man replied. “He is having his dinner.”

Pryde strolled back into the hotel and inquired for the manager, Mr. Delacher, who turned out to be a very polite but somewhat sombre-looking personage. Pryde introduced himself as a cousin of Monsieur Dupoy.

“I don’t know,” he said, “whether you remember my cousin? He stayed here for a day or two, and then, on the day when he should have returned home, he absolutely disappeared.”

“I remember Monsieur Dupoy perfectly,” the manager admitted. “It is true that he did not return, but, as he had paid his bill and said that he was going by the two-twenty, we concluded that he would send for his luggage afterwards.”

“You cannot help me in any way, then?” Pryde asked. “He has a wife who is altogether in despair at his absence.”

Mr. Delacher was only mildly sympathetic.

“My guests,” he explained, “come and go. Of their doings I keep no count. How Monsieur Dupoy spent his time I cannot tell. All that I know is that he paid his bill, which seems to prove that he meant to depart. You will probably find, sir, that he will return presently. He is, perhaps, at home by now.”

“I thank you very much,” Pryde said. “By the by, the face of your head porter seemed to me so familiar. Have I seen him at any of the hotels on the Continent, I wonder?”

Mr. Delacher shook his head.

“Paul has been with me for twelve years. Before that, he was at the Savoy, in Berlin. He is a very valuable servant.”

“Without a doubt,” Pryde assented. “I suppose then, you would advise me to apply to the police?”

Mr. Delacher shrugged his shoulders.

“I can see no other course, monsieur.”

Pryde strolled out along the Embankment for half an hour. When he returned, Paul was on duty—tall, austere, magnificent. He saluted Pryde in a dignified manner, but he watched him all the time as one who was scarcely satisfied. Pryde came to a standstill.

“Paul,” he said, “it is a saying in Paris that the chief porter at a London hotel can tell you anything in the world you may want to know.”

“It is an exaggeration, monsieur,” the man replied.

“It may be,” Pryde admitted. “Who can say? I search everywhere for my cousin, Eugène Dupoy. It is you who saw him last. You cannot even tell me where it was that he intended to lunch before he returned for his bag?”

Paul regarded his questioner in melancholy fashion.

“I cannot tell monsieur that,” he admitted.

“You did not know, even, how he spent his time here?”

Paul shook his head.

“He seemed to be occupied with affairs,” he announced. “On the morning of his departure he left in a state of some excitement. He had an important engagement, he said, at twelve o’clock.”

Pryde nodded.

“That is so,” he said confidentially. “The appointment, however, was postponed.”

Paul turned slowly round. His manner, in a sense, was changing.

“Some papers which my cousin was expecting were not completed,” Pryde continued. “A little affair of business. I myself am to fetch them tomorrow from the same place. That, however, is beside the point.”

There was no doubt but that Paul was an altered man. His frigidity of demeanour had departed. He apparently took the liveliest interest in his questioner.

“I am very sorry indeed, sir,” he said, “that I cannot help you. Monsieur Dupoy was a charming guest. He will, I am sure, return home safely. Monsieur remains with us long?”

Pryde shrugged his shoulders.

“What is the good?” he demanded. “Where am I to look for my dear cousin? I cannot tell. I shall finish the little matter of business which he was

obliged to leave undone, and return to Paris. I have pressing business of my own which must be attended to.”

“You are not anxious, then, about your relation, sir?” Paul asked.

Pryde shook his head.

“This,” he declared, “is London. Things do not happen here. It may be an affair of a letter, ill-directed or missing. Eugène may have gone on the Continent. Who can tell?”

Paul was standing with his hands behind him. It was between nine and ten o’clock, and there was nothing whatever doing.

“It seems strange, monsieur,” he remarked, “that your cousin did not finish his business here, after all.”

“It is nothing,” Pryde answered. “Certain papers were not ready. I myself take possession of them at eleven o’clock to-morrow. I think that I shall do exactly what Eugène would have done—pay my bill when I leave here in the morning, return for my bag, and catch the two-twenty.”

“I will give orders, sir,” Paul said. “You will lunch here, sir?”

“Probably,” Pryde replied. “It is not amusing, but, although I speak English so well, I am almost a stranger in London.”

“If I might venture,” Paul suggested slowly, “there is a little restaurant in a street leading off Shaftesbury Avenue—I could give monsieur the address—where the cooking is altogether French. A most interesting place! Monsieur might see there a great singer, a dancer, an artist. The French ladies who have succeeded in London, they go there at midday. It is worth a visit.”

“The place for me, Paul!” Pryde exclaimed. “Write it down on a piece of paper.”

Paul obeyed promptly.

“It is called the Café Suprême, monsieur,” he said, handing over the card. “There are two floors. You go downstairs and ask for Jean Marchand. You will, I think, be exceedingly well served.”

“I’ll try, at all events,” Pryde decided. “I suppose I shall have plenty of time to return here and catch the two-twenty?”

“It would be advisable, monsieur,” Paul proposed, “if your bag were sent to the station to meet you. The account could be paid before you leave in the morning.”

“It is excellent,” Pryde declared. “Good night, Paul!”

“Good night, monsieur.”

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTERY OF THE CAFÉ SUPRÊME

Pryde slept well, was called at a reasonable hour in the morning, visited the hairdresser after his breakfast, and at eleven o'clock strolled out to the front and instructed Paul to procure him a taxicab.

"I shall do as you suggested, Paul," he remarked. "I have paid my bill. After I have finished my business, I shall call at Scotland Yard and inquire about my cousin."

The man assented gravely.

"I trust, monsieur," he said, "that you will receive good news. Also that you will like my little restaurant. *Bon jour et bon voyage*, monsieur!"

Pryde was driven in a taxi to the War Office. Sir James, who happened to be in the building and disengaged, received him at once.

"Any news?" he asked laconically.

"Not yet," Pryde replied. "So far, it has been an affair of routine. I am supposed to be here to receive a document from you—drawings, and all that sort of thing. Can I have a bundle made up?"

Sir James nodded and gave a few instructions.

"When one comes to think of it," he said thoughtfully, "it is rather a serious thing that this fellow Dupoy should have disappeared in the heart of London. Where are you going when you leave here?"

"I am going exactly where Dupoy went. I am going to lunch in a little restaurant off Shaftesbury Avenue, strongly recommended to me by a person whom I suspect was interested in Dupoy's disappearance. I expect there to obtain, at any rate, a hint."

Sir James nodded in an interested manner.

"You fellows do get some fun out of life," he remarked, a little enviously. "I should rather like to lunch with you."

Pryde shook his head.

"I wouldn't, Sir James," he advised. "If I am on a clue at all, it is a very thin one, and these sort of people are easily put off. I think I had better go alone."

"Anyhow," Sir James suggested, "you'd better let me know the name of the restaurant, in case you do the disappearance trick, or anything of that sort."

Pryde scribbled it down upon a piece of paper. Then, with a sealed packet in his hand which he had the air of endeavouring to conceal as much as possible, he left the building and re-entered his taxi-cab. He drove first to Scotland Yard, where, for the sake of appearances, he made a few inquiries. At a quarter to one he was set down outside the Café Suprême. He entered the place, and looked around him for a minute. Although it was early, a great many of the tables were occupied, nearly all apparently by foreigners. There was a small orchestra playing from somewhere below, a large desk, at which an elderly woman was busy making out accounts, mirrored walls, muslin curtains not absolutely clean, the usual appurtenances of a restaurant on the borders of Soho. A little dark man came hurrying up towards him, his face wreathed in smiles.

“Jean Marchand?” Pryde asked.

“But certainly, monsieur,” the little man replied. “It is Monsieur Paul who has sent you here?”

“Paul of Delacher’s Hotel,” Pryde admitted.

Jean glanced around the room.

“Up here, monsieur,” he confided, “it is at all times a little noisy—not entirely *comme il faut*. I recommend to monsieur my favourite table below. This way.”

Pryde followed his guide down the stairs into a large and somewhat empty apartment, in which were set a few tables only. At the bottom of the stairs an orchestra of three musicians was playing. At the farther end of the room was a long table covered with bottles, watched over by a *maître d’hôtel*. There were only one or two people lunching.

“It is not yet one,” Jean explained. “Between one and half-past this room will be crowded. There are celebrities who come here. I myself will point them out to monsieur. I recommend this table—the one in the corner.”

“But it is already occupied,” Pryde remarked, glancing with a slightly puzzled air at the girl in the corner, who seemed on the point of raising her veil.

“The adjoining table, then, monsieur,” Jean begged. “Monsieur may make himself comfortable. I myself will return to take his order for luncheon.”

Jean retreated with smooth haste. Pryde advanced slowly towards the corner of the room indicated. Then he stopped short. The girl had raised her veil and was staring at him.

“Grace!” he exclaimed.

“You!” she echoed.

Pryde came and took a seat opposite to her.

“What on earth does it mean?” he cried.

She tore open a letter which lay on the table by her side. She glanced through the few lines and passed it across to him.

“A man called upon me this morning,” she explained. “He asked for my aid in a certain private matter. The first step was that I should lunch here at a table which should be pointed out by a *maitre d’hôtel* named Jean Marchand, and that I should open this letter if a neighbour should take the adjoining place. Read.”

Pryde snatched at the half-sheet of notepaper. Across it was written in ink and in a bold, sprawling hand:

“Good fortune and good appetite to Monsieur Dupoy from Paris, and mademoiselle, his charming partner!”

Pryde looked up at Grace and met her eyes steadily fixed upon his.

“This means?” he said slowly.

The wrinkles began to form around her eyes. She laughed quietly. She leaned back in her chair.

“It means that you have run up against someone even cleverer than we are,” she declared.

“A philosophical attitude,” Pryde insisted, “is our best rôle. We came here to lunch—we *will* lunch.”

Certainly there was nothing to be complained of in the cooking at the Café Suprême. The service was a little slow, and there was a queer sense of emptiness in the room. All the time there was a great tumult of voices and footsteps upstairs, but Jean’s prophecy as to the filling up of this particular room was in no way carried out. As though by mutual consent neither Grace nor Pryde talked of the disappearance of Dupoy. It was only over their coffee during the last few moments, that the subject was mentioned.

“I made a mistake, of course,” Pryde confessed. “It was foolish of me even to show myself at Delacher’s Hotel.”

She nodded. Soon afterwards they rose and, Pryde having paid the bill, they ascended the stairs and walked out into the street, without having seen anything further of Jean Marchand. As they passed along Shaftesbury Avenue, Grace whispered:

“We are being followed. A man who stood on the other side of the street as we came out is following us now.”

“What is he like?” Pryde asked with a sudden hope.

“He looks like a porter of some sort at an hotel or club,” Grace answered. “He has on dark blue trousers, an ordinary coat, and a cap. He is rather florid——”

Pryde gently guided her down a narrow street.

“It is the man I wanted to see,” he declared softly. “Is he still following us?”

She nodded. Almost directly he stepped up.

“You want to speak to me, Fritz?” Pryde inquired.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied, “but not here. If you please!”

He plunged through the door of a public-house. Pryde and Grace, without hesitation, followed him. It was an ordinary little place, half café, half public-house, almost empty. They sat at a small table, and Pryde ordered something to drink. Fritz leaned forward.

“This morning,” he announced, “after you left, I was dismissed. I was turned away. That man Paul, he thinks that all are fools. He thinks that one sees nothing. He is wrong. Monsieur Dupoy, I am here to speak of your cousin.”

“It is good,” Pryde said.

“I am a poor man,” Fritz continued. “I had a good place until one day Paul he took a dislike to me. Now I am dismissed. Places are hard to get. I have a wife and children. I must do the best I can. It is for that reason that I said to myself: ‘Why should I not profit by the things I have observed?’ ”

Pryde brought out his pocket-book.

“You are an exceedingly sensible fellow, Fritz,” he declared. “Now tell me what information you have to offer, and we will talk business.”

“Directly,” said Fritz, “but first, monsieur, what were you doing so long in the Café Suprême?”

“I had lunch there,” said Pryde.

The face of Fritz seemed suddenly blanched.

“Monsieur lunched there!” he repeated. “Downstairs?”

“Downstairs,” Pryde admitted.

Fritz took the glass of brandy which was offered, and drank it off.

“You have the good fortune, monsieur,” he muttered. “It was not so with your cousin when he lunched there downstairs.”

“What happened to him?” Pryde asked quickly.

Fritz shook his head.

“There are things,” he declared, “which, if I knew, I would not dare to speak of. Indeed, I do not know. This is my offer to monsieur. For twenty pounds I will take him to his cousin.”

Pryde placed the money without hesitation upon the counter. Fritz put it in his pocket and rose.

“Understand, monsieur,” he said in the doorway, “that when I point to the house where you will find Monsieur Dupoy, I have finished. If you seek for me, it will be useless. I shall be dumb. I know nothing. I keep my bargain when I show you the house which shelters Monsieur Dupoy.”

“It is agreed,” Pryde assured him.

They walked out into the street. Fritz kept about a dozen yards ahead. They crossed Shaftesbury Avenue, traversed another narrow street for a short distance, and then turned abruptly to the right. There was a newsagent’s shop, with a notice in the window: “Rooms to let for single gentlemen.” Fritz pointed to it.

“There, monsieur!”

Almost as he uttered the words he stepped aside to avoid a passing dray. When it had gone, Fritz, too, had disappeared. Pryde and Grace entered the shop. A Frenchwoman was behind the counter, stout, untidy, with black hair all over her face. Pryde took off his hat.

“Have you, madame,” he asked, “a lodger here of the name of Dupoy?”

She stretched out her hands.

“But, monsieur,” she said, “I have a lodger here whom I do not know. His name is as likely to be Dupoy as anything else. Monsieur would like to see him?”

Pryde followed her up the crazy stairs. Grace came behind. They were ushered into a tiny bed-chamber. A man, partly dressed, lay upon a sofa, his head propped up by two or three pillows. He stared at them eagerly as they came in, and his lips moved, but he said nothing. His clothes hung about him shapelessly. He had a beard of a week or so’s growth upon his chin. His head was tied up with a bandage.

“Dupoy?” Pryde exclaimed.

The man stared at him but remained speechless. Madame shook her head.

“He talks only nonsense,” she declared. “All the time he asks who he is. But listen, it is the doctor who comes. You shall speak with him yourself.”

The doctor knocked at the door and entered. He bowed with a little flourish to Grace.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “it is perhaps the friends of the unfortunate monsieur?”

“Tell me what has happened to him?” Pryde asked.

The Frenchman stretched out his hands.

“Madame can tell you as much as I,” he said. “Last Friday week he tottered into the shop, very much as he is now. Madame fancies that an unseen hand propelled him. That may or may not be so. His pockets were cut open as though he had been searched. She brought him upstairs and sent for me. Since then I have attended him every day. He was suffering from a terrible blow on the head, which has unfortunately produced, as you see, a complete loss of memory.”

“If his head was bound up, he had already been treated for the blow when he came in?” Pryde remarked. “It was not an accident, then, which had happened in the street?”

The doctor shook his head.

“Monsieur,” he said, “almost I felt it my duty to communicate with the police. The wound, when I examined it—it is beginning to heal now—gave me the impression of having been made by a surgeon’s knife. It takes a certain course. Its effect has been this loss of memory and apprehension. The poor fellow knows nothing. The wound is healing, but for the rest who can tell?”

“He had money?” Pryde asked.

The woman’s eyes were suddenly covetous. She exchanged a rapid glance with the doctor, who coughed and looked away.

“He had money,” she admitted slowly. “There is little left now, though. We have taken for his board, and the doctor has taken for his bills. There is little left now.”

Again there was silence. The doctor was affecting to examine his patient. Pryde walked to the window—dusty, and smothered with a filthy muslin blind. He looked across the house-tops for a moment. The instinct of the detective was suddenly crushed by a strong feeling—a passionate sympathy with this poor stricken creature, an angry craving for revenge. The woman had sidled out of the room. Pryde turned back to Grace.

“We have found Dupoy,” he said, “after all; but there are other things to be done.”

Within a week several things happened. Dupoy was formally identified and died without having recovered his memory. The body of Fritz was discovered floating in the Thames. Paul was so much upset by these and other happenings that he was confined to his room for a fortnight with a severe nervous breakdown.

CHAPTER XII

THE SPIDER'S PARLOUR

Pryde missed the sound of the typewriter as he entered her room, but, to his immense relief, Grace was there. She was sitting back in her easy chair, her eyes were half closed, she seemed pale and tired. The windows were wide open, but the air of the little room was stifling.

“Grace!” he exclaimed; “I beg your pardon, Miss Burton—you see, I am back again.”

She seemed suddenly to pull herself together. The lines were still under her eyes, but she held herself upright and she spoke briskly.

“So I observe,” she remarked. “I am sorry——”

She hesitated, looking at his dark clothes and black tie. He drew a chair near her.

“I am not going to try and be a hypocrite,” he said. “It was an uncle whom I have only seen half a dozen times in my life, and he has left me a little money. He was eighty-one years old. Why on earth should I be sorry?”

“No reason at all that I can see,” she admitted, smiling. “I suppose you have come to tell me, then, that our partnership is at an end?”

“On the contrary,” he answered swiftly, “I have come to beg for a new one.”

She was conscious almost as soon as she had spoken of the opportunity which her words had given him. She shrank a little away, but he caught at her hands and held them boldly.

“Grace,” he said, “you’ve known all the time, of course. You’re horrid to me, and I haven’t cared to say much before because, after all, I had only what I could earn with you and through you. I’ve a reserve fund to fall back upon now. Will you marry me, please, dear?”

She drew her hands firmly away.

“Most certainly and decidedly not,” she declared.

Pryde sighed.

“It sounds a little uncompromising,” he remarked.

“It is exactly how I feel,” she assured him. “I have not the slightest desire to marry you or anyone. What I’ve seen of married life,” she went on, a little sadly, “has been quite enough to prevent my ever thinking about it for myself as long as I live.”

“But surely,” he pleaded, “you do not allow yourself to be influenced by one or even two unfortunate marriages?”

She shook her head.

“I cannot discuss it,” she said. “Fortunately for me, I am one of those people who are able to take care of themselves, who can live alone and not feel the want of anyone’s society. You see, I am not at all the sort of girl men like. I am a little hard, a little bitter. There have been things in my life which have made me so. The world is full of girls, Mr. Pryde, who would make you excellent wives, and who are only waiting for the opportunity. Please put away all such thoughts in connection with me.”

He sat in silence for a few moments.

“I wonder,” he remarked, “if there is really anything in your life which accounts for your unnatural attitude towards matrimony?”

She sighed.

“Some day,” she answered, “I may tell you; certainly not at present. Now, please, get all these foolish ideas out of your head. There is some business to talk about.”

“I will talk business in five minutes,” Pryde said. “Before I do so, I insist upon knowing what has happened in this room.”

He looked around him wonderingly. Grace sat quite still, but her lips were quivering.

“I have got rid of a few articles of furniture which I did not require,” she declared. “Nothing else has happened to it that I know of.”

“Your little water-colours have gone,” he pointed out, “your two bronzes, all the china from your cabinet, all the silver from that little whatnot. Were you thinking of moving, or——”

“Or what?”

“Have you sold them?”

“I do not consider, Mr. Pryde,” she said, “that this matter concerns you at all.”

“We are partners,” he objected.

“We are partners inasmuch as we divide the profits of certain of our undertakings,” she replied.

“We have done that, and there is an end of it.”

“If we are partners in good fortune,” he insisted doggedly, “we are also partners in ill-fortune.”

“I am not prepared to grant anything of the sort,” she said. “Since you are so ill-bred as to be inquisitive, I will admit that I have sold some of my things. I had a pressing claim, and I had to satisfy it.”

“But why on earth couldn’t you telegraph me?” he exclaimed. “You knew where I was.”

“Why on earth should I?” she replied.

“You know very well that what I have——”

“What you have has nothing to do with me,” Grace declared firmly. “I have a burden to carry through life and I mean to carry it myself. What it is I have no idea of telling you—at any rate, for the present. If you find out, it will be against my will. Sometimes it keeps me poor. At other times it is no trouble at all. Whatever it is, it is my affair and mine alone. Now, will you please sit quite still? I want to talk to you about something else.”

Pryde kept silent with an effort.

“Very well,” he muttered. “For the present, then—only for the present. You can go on.”

“I suppose,” Grace began, “I have been wasting my time the whole of the fortnight you have been away. I couldn’t help it. I am going to make a confession. That downstairs room in the Café Suprême has fascinated me. I haven’t been able to keep away from it. I think what makes it the more attractive really is that they hate the sight of me there.”

“The place has been thoroughly searched, hasn’t it?” he interposed.

“From cellar to attic. Directly the manager was spoken to, and it was hinted to him that suspicions had been aroused concerning the restaurant, he placed all his keys at the disposal of Mr. Simmons, and he insisted upon their searching every room and cross-questioning whomever they chose. Not a single suspicious circumstance came to light, not a single thing to connect the place with Paul of Delacher’s Hotel, or with any other person. Mr. Simmons himself told me that he was sure there had been some mistake. I told him about Fritz, the man whose dead body was found in the Thames. I told him how genuinely terrified he was when he heard that we had lunched there. Mr. Simmons only shook his head. You know how obstinate he is. He had made up his mind. Very well, I said no more. But since then the Café Lugano has seen little of me. I have lunched in that gloomy room downstairs nearly every day. Sometimes I have dined there as well. They keep on charging me more and more. They bring me indifferent things to eat. They keep me waiting an unconscionable time. I say to myself, ‘Never again will I set foot inside this place,’ and in a few hours I am back again.”

“This isn’t like you,” he remarked wonderingly.

“Not a bit,” she admitted. “I have never believed in presentiments. I haven’t cared about anything but direct methods. Yet I am going to tell you something. I know perfectly well that there are many things connected with the Café Suprême which have never been discovered. Do you know what I call it myself?—the Spider’s Parlour! There are things go on there which no one has any idea of.”

“But in what part of the place?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered; “only I feel quite sure that there is something mysterious about that half-underground room, with just those few tables and the three musicians. They are turning people away all the time upstairs. It would be perfectly easy to add fifty more tables downstairs, instead of which they keep it empty. The few people who are there seem either to have drifted in by accident, or to have some special interest in the place. However, there is something more to tell you.”

She glanced at the clock, which was just striking four.

“To-day,” she said, “as I came out, I stopped to give something to the musicians. The man who plays the piano was the only one there. The other two had turned away for a minute. I wonder whether you remember him? He was a strange, dark-looking creature, with queer eyes.”

Pryde nodded.

“I remember him perfectly.”

“He seemed to have a sudden idea when I spoke to him,” she went on. “There was no one within hearing. He asked me in an undertone for my address.”

“The infernal cheek——” Pryde began.

Grace shook her head.

“Don’t be absurd,” she said quietly. “He did not ask in that sort of way. The only other two words he said were ‘Four o’clock.’ Now suppose you go to the door and open it.”

There was a sound of knocking outside. Pryde obeyed. It was indeed the musician who stood there. He wore a long black overcoat, notwithstanding the heat of the day, and he carried a soft black hat in his hand. He stared at Pryde with one eye, and blinked rapidly with the other.

“She is here,” Pryde replied. “Come in.”

The man came into the room. Grace rose to her feet.

“This gentleman,” she said, pointing to Pryde, “is a friend of mine. You need not hesitate to speak before him. What is it that you wish to say?”

The man laid his hat upon the table.

“Young lady,” he began. “I do not quite know why I spoke to you. I was beside myself this morning. They have dismissed me, those people at that rat-hole. I sat there thinking when you passed. You too, have been in that place often, and I wondered, as the others wonder, for what purpose. I said to myself that we would speak with one another. Who can tell what may come of it?”

“I have nothing whatever to conceal,” Grace told him. “I have been so often into that wretched little room at the Café Suprême because the place seems to me so mysterious, and because I am interested in unravelling queer

things and visiting strange places. I have always a fancy that there are secrets almost within reach of one's hands there."

The man leaned forward. He was English enough, and yet there was a strain of some foreign blood in him. His gestures were theatrical but natural.

"It is the truth!" he exclaimed. "There are things go on there which no one knows of. There are certain visitors who are brought with much ceremony to the little room downstairs, and on those nights we are sent away early. What happens—who knows? But that visitor never comes again. He is never seen again. You," he went on, pointing to Pryde, "were brought down there one day and the young lady. Nothing happened. The young lady has been often since. Yet, believe me or not, as you choose, never do I remember anyone else escorted down those stairs by Jean whose face I have ever seen again!"

"But there are always a few customers there," Grace objected.

"Dummies!" the musician declared. "They are creatures of the restaurant. There is barely a single genuine customer. Why should they come? The place is nearly empty. Only one or two tables are set there, it is cold and draughty, the service is slow. Mademoiselle is the only one from the outside world who has been there often, and I have seen them watch her—watch her from upstairs, watch her from the other places. Sometimes I have had it in my mind to speak to her."

"Tell me," Pryde asked, "you seem to have been suspicious of this place for some time. Have you discovered anything?"

"A trifle which may not be a trifle," the musician answered. "It was only yesterday. There was a wine merchant who called. Jean complained bitterly of some wine. We could hear them upon the stairs. It was arranged that Jean should go into the cellars, and bring up several bottles at hazard. Jean passed us, went behind the bar, opened a trapdoor and stepped down. I saw him disappear with my own eyes. In a moment or two the wine merchant came down the stairs. He inquired for Monsieur Jean. I pointed to the open trapdoor. 'Ah!' he exclaimed, 'he has gone to fetch the wine. I will help him.' He hurried across the room and began to descend the steps. Presently he returned. 'There is no one there,' he declared. It was in the intervals of playing. I myself descended with him. The cellar was empty. We searched everywhere. Then we both ascended. While we spoke of this thing we heard footsteps. Jean appeared with the bottles. I turned away. I heard Jean explain that he had been behind one of the bins in the corner, but I know better. Jean was not in the cellar at all."

"But surely it is not impossible," Pryde interposed, "that there should be another way out of the cellar?"

“There is a way for letting cases down from the street,” the man replied, “but that is almost perpendicular, and Jean could not have been hidden there or gone out that way. I know a short time ago there came men who searched those cellars, searched them carefully, yard by yard. They found no other exit. It was for that they were looking. To-day I know that they were wrong. There is another exit. That is all I have to say.”

“I do not quite understand, after all,” Grace remarked, “why you have come to me. You have realized that I was interested in the restaurant, but is that all?”

The man took up his hat slowly.

“I know,” he declared, “that you are an enemy of the place. I have seen Jean’s face grow black when you have entered. I have heard orders given that you were to be served slowly and badly. I know that for some reason they are afraid of you there. Therefore, it seemed to me that, hating the place as you do, you were the person to whom I might bring the little information I have.”

Pryde put his hand in his pocket.

“If a trifling loan,” he suggested, “while you are out of work——”

“I shall accept it with pleasure, sir,” the man replied. “And if anything should come of this——”

He wrote down his address upon a piece of paper.

“There may be other questions,” he continued, “matters which have seemed to me unimportant.”

“There is just one thing I should like to ask you,” Grace said, as he turned to go. “Besides myself, there seems to be one habitué of the place from the general public—a little man with gold glasses who is always reading a paper. They treat him almost as rudely as they do me.”

The musician nodded.

“He is a doctor, miss,” he told her, “who has a surgery near. That is all I know. I have seen them look at him, also, as though they wished him somewhere else. He comes in, I think, because it is near his place. They serve him, too, badly, but he takes no notice. He reads always more than he eats. Good day, miss! Good day, sir!”

“Entirely as a matter of business,” Pryde proposed, as the door closed behind their visitor, “I suggest that we dine to-night at the Café Suprême.”

“It would, perhaps, be advisable,” Grace assented stiffly.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MARVELLOUS ESCAPE OF MR. HASLEM

They were met at the head of the stairs by Jean, who hurried along the crowded room towards them.

“If I could only persuade mademoiselle,” he begged, “to dine here, I will arrange a round table for two. Downstairs, it is so *triste* and damp.”

“Another time, Jean,” Pryde declared. “I have been away, and we have a little matter to talk over, mademoiselle and I. We like the quiet down there.”

Jean shrugged his shoulders. It was unaccountable. However, it must be as mademoiselle preferred. He escorted them down the stairs himself.

“We are having plans made,” he confided to them, “for turning this into a large grill-room. It is only the kitchen accommodation which is difficult. Mademoiselle will like her accustomed seat?”

They decided to move farther into the corner, however, and found themselves at the next table to the little gentleman with the gold spectacles, who favoured them with a bland, but benevolent stare. He called Jean to him.

“Waiter,” he said, in a smooth, cultivated voice, “I have dined here for two months and I have never made a complaint.”

“I am glad that monsieur has been so well served,” Jean remarked.

“I have been abominably served,” was the indignant reply. “I care little for my food. I come here only because it is quiet and because I may read and because it is near my work. But even a worm will turn. I desire to inform you that your food is the worst I have ever tasted, that it reaches me half cold, that your service is abominable and your charges exorbitant. After to-night I shall look for another restaurant. It is all.”

The natural instinct of the *maître d’hôtel* seemed for the moment to triumph in Jean. He began to apologize, but the little man waved him away.

“It is my first complaint,” he declared; “it is my last.”

Jean departed. The little man was settling down again to his papers. He glanced for a moment, however, at Grace.

“I trust,” he said, “that I have not made myself objectionable? You, madam, also, have been, I believe, an habituée here. I must confess that I wonder at it.”

Grace smiled.

“I certainly have not come here to dine well or cheaply,” she asserted. “I think, really, I have come because I am fond of the unusual, and because there is something about the place which rather mystifies me.”

“In what way?” the little gentleman asked.

Grace shook her head.

“Just an idea.”

The little gentleman drew his newspaper closer to him.

“Madam,” he said, “I have no faith in ideas. I am a physician. Science is at once my mistress and my hobby. It provides me with all the mysteries I require. As for this place, it is nothing but a draughty, ill-managed hole. I have finished with it. Pardon me.”

He plunged into his paper with the air of one who has concluded a conversation. There were only two other diners in the room—one, a powerful, sunburnt man in tweed clothes, who sat with a bottle of wine in front of him and a newspaper propped up against it, dining, apparently, entirely to his satisfaction; the other had the appearance of being one of the staff. The dinner was a little better than usual, and, curiously enough, it was served almost precipitately.

“One would imagine,” Pryde remarked, “that they wanted to get rid of us.”

Grace looked around the room. The tablecloths had been removed from the other tables, and there were no signs of any other diners being expected.

“What about our friend there?” she inquired, inclining her head slightly towards the sunburnt man.

“A countryman or colonial,” Pryde decided; “wandered in here by accident. Probably didn’t care for it upstairs because of his clothes and thick boots.”

“He looks like that,” Grace admitted.

They finished their dinner presently. There seemed to be nothing to wait for. The little doctor had lit a pipe and was reading over his coffee. The sunburnt man was leaning back in his chair, apparently thoroughly satisfied with his dinner. As they passed out, Pryde obeyed a sudden impulse and spoke to him.

“Do you mind if I take one of your matches?” he asked.

The man pushed them to him without a word. Pryde made some difficulty about striking one.

“Everything down here seems damp,” he remarked. “Gives one the feeling of being half underground, doesn’t it?”

The sunburnt man looked up at Pryde and frowned. Then he turned a little away, crossing his legs, and took up his paper again.

“Hadn’t noticed it,” he declared shortly.

Pryde caught Grace up, smiling.

"Your friend with the red cheeks," he told her, "has about the worst manners of any man I ever knew. He seemed afraid of being spoken to."

She laughed.

"I noticed that he didn't seem to take to you," she remarked. "At any rate, he seems very well able to take care of himself."

They passed Jean descending the stairs with a bottle of old brandy in his hand. Pryde left the place almost reluctantly.

"Well?" Grace asked.

"I suppose that fellow's all right," Pryde said thoughtfully. "The little doctor was just getting up to go as we came away. He will be the last one."

"I never saw anyone who looked better able to take care of himself," Grace murmured.

The night was hot, the streets were light as day. As though by common consent they walked. At the corner of Piccadilly Circus Pryde halted.

"What do you say to a ride on the top of a motor omnibus?" he suggested.

"It would, perhaps, be pleasant," Grace assented.

"There's one at the corner there, for Hampstead," he said. "Come."

They were crossing the road when Grace felt a light touch on her arm. She turned quickly round, Mr. Simmons was walking by her side.

"Stroke of luck, seeing you, Miss Burton," he remarked.

"I am glad you think so," she answered, "You know Mr. Pryde, don't you?"

Mr. Simmons bit his lip.

"Of course I do. Sorry! I only caught sight of you that moment. Are you in a hurry, Miss Burton?"

"I am never in a hurry," she replied, "if there is anything to be done."

"Will you please both step into the Monico with me, then?" he begged. "We will have some coffee. I want to show you a letter."

"Certainly," Grace agreed.

Mr. Simmons escorted her politely to the door of the restaurant. Pryde looked a little regretfully at the top of the motor omnibus and followed. They found a small table against the wall, and Mr. Simmons ordered coffee. Then he drew from his pocket a letter, which he did not, however, at once open.

"I wonder," he said, "if you have, either of you, heard of the Eburian Copper Mine?"

"Of course," Pryde replied. "The annual meeting is to-morrow, isn't it? They say there's going to be an awful row."

“There probably will be,” Mr. Simmons assented. “I know we’ve orders to draft a hundred police down to the Cannon Street Hotel. Let me remind you of the facts. Miss Burton may not know them. There have been six hundred thousand pounds’ worth of shares issued and paid for on the strength of certain reports. A month ago there was a sensational article in a financial paper absolutely discrediting the mine. There was a fearful panic, of course, and the company sent out the greatest known mining expert—a man named Haslem—to make an independent report. He has not been allowed to send a telegram or a letter. He arrived in London secretly to-night. The meeting is to-morrow.”

Pryde and Grace were both interested now. Their coffee stood before them, neglected.

“To-night,” the detective continued, slowly unfolding the letter, “I was in my office when this was brought in, this with an enclosure. I will read the letter first. It seems to be from Haslem, and it is written from Delacher’s Hotel:

“‘DEAR SIR,—I received the enclosed letter on my arrival in London this evening. I am sending it on to you as a matter of form, for I think I can take care of myself. You may know me by name. I have to give evidence at the Cannon Street Hotel to-morrow with regard to the Eburian Mine.—Faithfully,

“‘JOHN HASLEM.’”

Pryde and Grace had exchanged swift glances.

“Delacher’s Hotel!” she murmured.

“Now for the enclosure,” Mr. Simmons continued. “Here it is—the usual sort of thing—plain paper, typewritten, and all the rest of it. Let me read it:

“‘MR. HASLEM.

“‘SIR,—To-morrow you are going to give evidence which will practically ruin half a dozen of the most unscrupulous company promoters in London. Read the advice of a friend. Take care of yourself to-night. London is not altogether the city of safety one is apt to believe.

“‘FROM ONE WHO KNOWS.’”

“What have you done about this?” Pryde asked quickly.

“I sent a new man, whom no one would recognize, to Delacher’s Hotel,” Mr. Simmons announced. “He did his work quite satisfactorily. Haslem arrived at about five o’clock, and must have sent that note off to me very

soon afterwards. He took a bedroom and asked Paul, the head porter, for some quiet place where he could dine without being noticed, as he didn't wish to be seen in London at all till next day. Paul directed him to—where do you think?"

Grace was sitting quite still. Her eyes seemed to have grown larger.

"To the Café Suprême!" she cried.

The inspector smiled a little indulgently.

"I know you have that place on the brain, Miss Burton," he said. "Personally, as I've searched it plank by plank, I don't exactly—why, what's the matter?"

Grace was already half-way towards the door. Pryde dragged him up.

"Haslem was at the Café Suprême when we left!" he exclaimed. "And, by God! he wasn't there for nothing! Quick! We'll explain on the way."

They hurried into a taxicab.

"Look here," Pryde said, "notwithstanding your search, Mr. Simmons, there's something wrong about that place. Paul sent Dupoy there, and you know what happened to him. Haslem is another man with enemies. I tell you he was sitting down there twenty minutes ago. They'd got him."

Mr. Simmons was an unprejudiced person. To a certain extent, he believed in Grace and he believed in Pryde.

"We'll fetch him out, then, at any rate," he declared. "Is there likely to be any trouble, I wonder?"

"If so, we can deal with it," Pryde replied. "Miss Burton can stay outside and bring in a policeman or two after us if we don't reappear."

"Miss Burton will do nothing of the sort," she retorted. "If this is anyone's affair, it's mine."

The taxicab pulled up at the corner. They all three hurried across the pavement. The upper room was still filled with a cheerful crowd. They hastened towards the staircase. A watchful waiter intercepted them.

"It is closed downstairs, monsieur," he announced.

Pryde flung him out of the way. They descended quickly. The band had ceased to play, half the lights were out, the doctor had left. Only Jean was there, standing by the table at which Haslem had been sitting. There was a broken glass upon the floor, the tablecloth seemed to have been dragged sideways. Jean himself was swiftly setting things to rights. He started round as he heard footsteps. His face was suddenly almost ghastly. He clutched the table and stared at them.

"Where is the man who was sitting at that table?" Pryde demanded.

"He has left, monsieur," Jean faltered, "five minutes ago. He had had too much to drink."

Pryde glanced towards the other vacant table.

“And the doctor?” he asked.

“He left at nine o’clock, as usual, sir,” Jean answered. “He never varies his time. He has patients to receive.”

For one second Pryde hesitated. His first impulse was to plunge down into the cellar. Then Grace seized him by the arm.

“Quick!” she almost sobbed into his ear. “Quick!”

She tore up the stairs and they followed her. She flashed through the restaurant, through the swing doors, out into the street and turned sharply down the narrow thoroughfare past the left hand side of the building. Pryde and Simmons were only a few yards behind. At the end of the restaurant premises was a narrow house, on the door of which was a brass plate. Outside in the street, an ambulance wagon was standing. Grace leaned with her finger upon the bell. The man looked over from the box seat of the wagon. He was half frightened, half angry.

“Don’t do that!” he cried. “There’s someone ill inside.”

They took no notice of him. They heard footsteps in the hall. The door was cautiously opened by a woman who was dressed like a hospital nurse. They broke past her, and Pryde threw open the door of the room on the left. Haslem was there, unconscious, breathing heavily, stretched out on what seemed to be an operating table. The little doctor with the gold spectacles, dressed now in a long linen smock, turned and faced them. Outside, they could hear the ambulance wagon galloping away.

“Drop that knife,” Pryde shouted, “or, by God, I’ll wring your neck!”

The knife slipped from the man’s fingers. For a moment there was a strange silence. A draught was blowing through the room. Pryde glanced away for a single second; a door in the wall stood a little ajar.

“Take that fellow, Simmons,” Pryde ordered. “We must get a doctor at once.”

The little man with the gold glasses beamed upon them.

“My friends from the Café Suprême!” he remarked. “After all, then, the young lady has wits. Pardon!”

His fingers flashed from his waistcoat pocket to his mouth. He waved Pryde away as he sank into an easy chair.

“Quite unnecessary,” he murmured. “I shall be dead within five minutes. Another martyr to the cause of science. I never could resist these little affairs. One learned so much.”

Mr. Haslem was able, after all, to give his evidence at the Cannon Street Hotel on the following day, but would-be lunchers at the Café Suprême were disappointed. The doors of the restaurant were closed, without any reason with which the public were ever made aware other than the painfully sudden

death of the proprietor and Jean—his chief *maître d'hôtel*. The disappearance of Paul was wrapped in mystery. He received a telephone message late in the evening, and strolled away from the hotel in his full uniform a few minutes later. When the police arrived he was not to be found. His escape was one of those episodes not mentioned by persons of tact before Inspector Simmons.

Pryde and Grace stood outside the restaurant the next morning and watched the locked doors with complete satisfaction.

“At last,” she sighed, “I can go back to my dear café. Already I am longing for one of Charles’s omelettes.”

“On this occasion only,” he pleaded.

“Very well,” she acceded; “you may come.”

CHAPTER XIV

“THE GIRLS OF LONDON”

Pryde and Grace Burton were having tea together in her sitting-room. Notwithstanding the drawn blinds and the open window, the room seemed to be full of the August dust and heat.

“Perhaps now,” Pryde remarked, as he drank his third cup of tea, “you’ll tell me why you have been so silent all the afternoon?”

She looked at him fixedly. “I was thinking,” she said, “about the kind friend who lends you his motor-car so often.”

Pryde opened his cigarette-case and tapped a cigarette leisurely against its side. “What does it matter?” he asked.

“Not much,” she admitted, “except that sometimes I have wondered whether you are being quite honest with me. Sometimes——”

She stopped short. Without any suggestion of a knock, the door had been suddenly thrown open. A woman stood upon the threshold. Pryde was conscious of a wave of perfume, a flutter of draperies, a strange, bewildering likeness—and yet, what a difference!

“My dearest Grace!” the new-comer exclaimed. “You sly little woman! And you never——”

She broke off, as though seeing Pryde for the first time. She turned smilingly towards him.

“Please forgive me,” she went on. “I am so used to finding Grace alone that it never occurred to me she might have a visitor.”

Grace had risen to her feet. She had the appearance of not being altogether pleased.

“This is my sister, Mr. Pryde,” she said. “Mrs. Laverington.”

Mrs. Laverington put out a delicately gloved hand and laughed up into Pryde’s face. He was still numb with the shock of the amazing likeness. It was another Grace, but how different! The young lady, whose deep brown eyes were seeking to hold his, was everything that a musical-comedy young lady should be.

“I have known Mr. Pryde—Sir Stephen now, isn’t it?—for quite a long time by sight,” Mrs. Laverington declared. “I do wish Grace wouldn’t introduce me by my married name. Everyone knows me so much better as Stella Forde. Now, you have heard of Miss Stella Forde, haven’t you, Sir Stephen, although I am sure you have never heard of Mrs. Laverington? And

if you are a friend of Grace, and she asks you here to tea, how is it she doesn't know that you are Mr. Pryde no longer?"

For the moment Pryde was altogether at a loss. He glanced almost timidly toward Grace. She was looking very cold and stern. "The fact is," he began—"well, to tell you the truth, I was rather afraid to tell your sister," he went on, turning to the young lady who preferred to be known as Miss Stella Forde. "She is good enough to let me help her every now and then in one or two little affairs that come our way, and I was afraid it might make a difference."

"It certainly would," Grace said quietly.

Miss Stella Forde threw back her head and laughed softly. Pryde watched her with fixed eyes. There was a queer, disturbing fascination about this likeness. In a vague sort of way it distressed him.

"If you're not the queerest, old-fashioned creature," Miss Stella Forde declared. "However, I'm not going to interfere in what isn't my business. Tell me what you think of our show, Sir Stephen? Don't dare to say that you haven't noticed me! And do you really like my grey costume in the second act?"

"I am sorry," Pryde told her, "but I haven't been to the Hilarity for over a year."

"You haven't seen *The Girls of London*?" Stella cried incredulously.

Pryde shook his head. "I am not very fond of musical comedy," he remarked coolly.

"Silly!" she exclaimed, laughing into his face. "Well, you'll have to come and see *The Girls of London* now. Promise, or I shan't let you go, and I can see that you're dying to get away."

"I shall certainly come very soon," Pryde promised. "If you should want me, Miss Burton," he added a little wistfully, "I shall be either in my rooms or round at the club."

"I don't think that I am likely to," she assured him.

Pryde spent an hour in his rooms and an hour at his club. London was almost a wilderness. Sir James was at Carlsbad; Inspector Simmons was taking a melancholy holiday at Margate. There was not a soul to talk to; not even a rubber of bridge worth cutting into. Finally he became sick of explaining why he was still in town, and went back to Grace's rooms.

She had dragged her table into the coolest corner of the apartment, and was bending over her work when he entered. A sort of resentment gave him courage. Instead of the apology which had been upon his lips, he came toward her with a frown.

"My partner," he declared, "this is absurd. You have no right to be doing this infernal work in this stuffy atmosphere."

“And why not?” she asked, looking up at him ominously.

“Because if you’ve frittered away your share of the money we’ve made together, I haven’t,” he said. “You don’t seem to realise what a partnership means. I’m in funds, and you’re not. We’ve nothing to do, there’s no sign of our having anything to do. Let me lend or give you the money to go to the seaside for a month. You can choose any rotten little hole you fancy, and I’ll go to the other end of the kingdom, if you like, or abroad. To stick here and slave your self to death is simply ridiculous.”

Grace leaned back in her chair. Although she would not have let him know it for the world, she was feeling just a little giddy. All the life seemed to have been sapped out of the air; there was a buzzing, for a moment, in her ears. She set her teeth, however, and answered him.

“Our partnership,” she asserted, “is a matter of business. We have divided the profits fairly, whenever there have been any to divide. If I have chosen to spend mine, or if I have them and choose to save them, that is my affair. It has nothing whatever to do with you.”

“Rubbish!” he answered bluntly. “I’m getting tired of talking reasonably to you, Grace. I’ve come into some money. I dared not tell you that it was more than a trifle because I was afraid you’d push me outside altogether. You know very well, whatever you say about it, I’m your man. I can’t look at another woman. I can’t spend a happy hour anywhere, anyhow, knowing that you are here like this. For Heaven’s sake, push aside this selfishness, this cursed, priggish selfishness! I’ve fifty pounds in this envelope. Take it and get away into the country somewhere. You needn’t give me your address unless you like. I’ll keep away, somehow or other. But I can’t have a moment’s peace so long as you remain here.”

“Will you tell me,” she asked, “what compulsion there is upon me to add to your comfort by accepting charity?”

“Charity be hanged!” Pryde cried viciously. “What have you done with your own money, anyway?”

“I might reply, That is my business, but I will not,” Grace said. “I have one relation in the world. You saw her a couple of hours ago. She is married to a dear, good fellow who has gone abroad to work hard and try to make money for her. He has a splendid post, and everybody says that he is sure of success. It only means another year or two. In the meantime, Stella is a sort of charge upon me.”

“A charge, indeed!” Pryde muttered. “She must be getting ten pounds a week at the Hilarity.”

Grace sighed. “I think she is getting nearly that,” she admitted, “but you must remember that it is a very expensive life. They have to find costumes, and they must always be nicely dressed. Then Stella is fond of amusement

and gaiety, and I'm afraid she is just a little easily led away. I don't know whether you quite understand what I mean, but I want her to have all those small luxuries which to her are almost necessities without her having to accept them from anyone else."

Pryde opened his lips and closed them again. Grace was looking at him steadfastly. The words which had trembled upon his lips died away, never to be uttered.

"You take too much upon yourself," he insisted. "Your life is made up of nothing but privations. Surely your sister could face a few for her husband's sake?"

"Stella is different," Grace explained. "It is not her fault. She has never learned to do without some things which do not seem in the least necessary to me. It is of no use comparing us. We are of different moulds. I know what my duty is, and I'm going to try to do it. I want—oh! I want so much to be able to look after Stella so that when her husband comes there will be nothing to mar the joy of their meeting."

Pryde turned away and walked to the window. Not for the world would he have told her the thoughts that were in his brain. He looked out over the tired, sunlit city, and there were tears in his eyes. "To revert," he remarked presently, without turning his head, "to my first suggestion."

"I do not wish to seem ungrateful," Grace said, and her voice was noticeably softer. "Life means something a little different to all of us. To me the most precious part of it is the absolute preservation of my independence. It may seem somewhat priggish to you. I cannot help it. I have not been used to accepting favours from anyone. The day I began to do so, life would be different. I wish," she went on, "I really wish that you would leave London for a time. Our little partnership has been very interesting, and it was useful to you when things weren't going very well. Now you have no need to run such risks. Stella tells me that you are a baronet, with five or six thousand a year. It is a great compliment you have paid me to have just stayed on here and gone on as though nothing had happened, but it is my real wish," she concluded, looking at him earnestly, "that you go. Things can't be quite the same, you see. Please!"

He came a little nearer to her. "Oh, Grace," he pleaded, "if only you would care just a little! You aren't made of ice and all the chill things of life, are you? Underneath it all you're a girl, like the rest. Close your eyes for a minute, throw away this hard workaday life. I want you, dear, so badly. Don't make me miserable and throw away a great chance of happiness yourself, just because of this—do you mind if I say it?—stubborn pride. It is a man's privilege to give to the woman he loves, and it isn't an unequal bargain if the woman gives herself."

Grace for a moment did not reply. Pryde had a sudden instinct of wild hope. Her lips were quivering, the faintest of flushes had stolen into her cheeks; the large, tired eyes had, without a doubt, grown softer. He caught at her hands. Perhaps he was premature, perhaps the sudden assertion of his physical strength repelled her. She shook her head.

“If you are kind,” she said, “you will leave me. My answer is already spoken, and I am a little tired, a little overwrought, this afternoon. Please!”

Pryde took up his hat and went. That night he sat in the stalls of the Hilarity Theatre, and was favoured with several very charming little glances and smiles from Miss Stella Forde. He gossiped with a few men whom he happened to know, and the next morning he sent her a little invitation, to which he received a charming reply—Stella Forde would be delighted to lunch with him at Prince’s at half-past one. She had seen him the night before. How horrid of him not to have come round! He must be very nice indeed if he hoped to be forgiven, and she was looking forward to seeing him ever so much, and she remained most sincerely his, Stella Forde.

The luncheon was quite a success. Stella was looking charming in white muslin, a great picture hat, the daintiest of shoes and white silk stockings. Pryde tried his best to make himself agreeable, and there seemed no limits at all to her amiability. And all the time, as he sat and looked into her face across the flower-laden table, Pryde was conscious of the most extraordinary mixture of revulsion and sentiment which he had ever known. It was Grace’s body and face and eyes which someone had stolen away and was misusing. Once, when she whispered a little challenge at him across the table, he could have taken her by the white throat and strangled her.

Luncheon was over before he spoke to her plainly. Then he drew his chair close to hers. “Miss Stella,” he said, “I am going to be very honest with you.”

“I hope that doesn’t mean,” she pouted, “that you’re going to be disagreeable.”

“I am in love with Grace,” he declared.

She made a grimace at him. “And I’m so much prettier,” she sighed. “Dear Grace is so good, but think how dowdy she is, and what a queer little person! I’m sure you’d find me more amusing. Besides, Grace is as cold as a fish. She doesn’t care for men a bit.”

“I am in love with Grace,” he repeated softly, “and I shall be in love with her all my life. She won’t have anything to say to me. All the same, I can’t alter. She is so tired and thin, and she wants a holiday terribly. She has spent all her savings—I think I know, Miss Stella, where they have gone to.”

Stella drew a little away. There was the pout of a spoiled child in her face. “I don’t see what business it is of yours——” she began.

“Don’t be foolish,” Pryde interposed, patting her hand. “Do you suppose I don’t know that you must have pretty things, and that life is expensive? Grace insists upon giving you her savings because she knows that, too, and because she doesn’t want you to accept presents from anyone else until your husband comes home. Don’t interrupt me, there’s a good girl! You’ll find I’m not such a disagreeable old thing, after all. Now listen. Be good-natured. I’ve come into money. It’s no use to me. Take it from me instead of Grace. Send back to Grace what you’ve had from her lately. I’ll make it up and more, and, upon my honour, I ask no more from you than your silence. You can look upon me, if you will, as your brother. That’s exactly what I want to be, you know.”

She played for a moment thoughtfully with a corner of her napkin. Then she looked up at him pleadingly. “Do you know you are a very disappointing person?” she sighed. “I was beginning to think you could be so nice, and brothers——”

“You see, Miss Stella,” he reminded her quietly, “I am in love with Grace.”

She rose abruptly and dropped her veil. “Very well,” she said, “drive me home, and I will give you a list of the money I have had from Grace lately, and tell you what she has promised to send me. I shall have to say that I have had a cheque from Harry. He has promised me one for a long time.”

They passed out together to the street. Pryde was so well satisfied with his success that he never glanced to the right or to the left. They entered his car and were driven off, and Grace, who had stopped short upon the pavement, clutching her parcel of manuscript under her arm, looked at them with eyes filled almost with horror and a queer pain at her heart. Perhaps that moment was a revelation to her. She looked around a little wildly. Suddenly she felt an arm through hers.

“Feeling faint, miss?” a policeman asked quickly. “Hold up a bit, and I’ll get an ambulance.”

For a moment the shops and the people seemed all mixed up together. She was conscious of a deadly sickness, a curious ringing in her ears. Then she set her teeth firmly. To faint, here in Piccadilly! Such a thing was not possible!

“I will take a taxi,” she told the policeman.

He called one, and helped her in. Already the faintness was passing. She went about her business.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAGEDY AT CHARLECOT MANSIONS

Pryde, with an effort, kept away from Grace's rooms for the rest of the day. He dined at his club, spent a wasted hour at a music-hall, where he bored himself to death, and finally returned to his rooms soon after eleven. He was reading, about half an hour later, when the telephone bell at his elbow rang. He caught up the receiver eagerly. His first surmise had been correct. It was Grace who spoke.

"Is that Mr. Pryde?"

"It is," he replied. "Good evening, Miss Burton."

"If you have not retired," she continued, "will you step down here for a moment?"

"With pleasure," he answered promptly.

He hastened downstairs. Grace had been sitting in an easy chair by the window, but she rose to receive him. She had an opened letter in her hand; her face was very white and cold.

"Mr. Pryde," she said, "or Sir Stephen, I want to ask you a question."

"You can ask me as many as you like," he declared. "What is it?"

She handed him the letter and a cheque. "Do you know anything about that?"

He read the letter word for word and glanced at the cheque. "What should I know about it?" he asked.

Grace half closed her eyes for a moment. "Please don't evade the point," she begged. "You see what Stella says—she has had a great deal of money arrive unexpectedly. I don't believe it can have come from her husband. It tortures me to say this, but I don't see how it is possible. It came from someone! I saw you both at Prince's—to-day—as I passed. Tell me, did it come from you?"

So his little scheme was to fail! He was found out already! "It did," he admitted.

Grace gripped for a moment at the table. "You!" she murmured. "You and Stella!"

"You are angry with me, of course," he said slowly, "yet I don't think you ought to be. I have observation, you know. I have seen your little room stripped of everything that was worth having. I see you here, working till your fingers must nearly drop off. You wear shabby clothes, you have taken

no holiday. And all this money has gone to be spent by Stella in idle luxuries; all this money has gone in the one wild, fervid hope of keeping her true to her husband. Very well. If money and an easy life can keep her as you would have her be, she shall be kept in the right way without your breaking your life about it. I lunched with your sister to-day. I told her a few words of truth. She was at least sensible.”

“She took your money!” Grace faltered. “I saw her step into your car with you.”

He looked a little puzzled. “I went with her to get a list of her debts and the money she had had from you,” he explained. “Then I wrote her a cheque. You can be as angry with me as you like. I did it because I cannot bear to see you as you are. Oh! Grace,” he wound up, “can’t you see that if it was clumsy and impertinent of me, I still did it because I love you, and because I can’t bear to see you denying yourself everything in life worth having for the sake of a poor frivolous creature like Stella Forde.”

Grace sank slowly back in her chair. She leaned her arms upon the table; her face for a moment disappeared. “Forgive me,” she whispered. “I had a strange idea, and it was like poison. I want to get rid of it. Don’t talk. Leave me alone, please.”

He stood before her, his heart aching. She seemed so frail and pitiful. Her light brown hair was beautifully brushed and neatly arranged, her linen collar was clean though frayed, her gown was rusty, and she wore not a single ornament. Her shoulders were shaking. Poor little woman!

There came at that moment an altogether unexpected interruption—the telephone bell began to ring. Grace raised her head and stared at the instrument. Pryde did the same. As though by common consent, they both glanced at the clock. It was just midnight.

“Who can it be?” she exclaimed. “I know no one who would ring me up at this time of night.” She caught hold of the receiver and raised it to her ear. “Who is it?”

The voice which reached her was half faint, half choked, more than a little incoherent. “Grace! Grace! Come to me—come to me at once! Bring someone. I am terrified to death! Come to me, please. Something has happened!”

“What is it?” Grace demanded. “Yes, yes, I’ll come at once; but what is it?”

“I can’t tell you,” the voice replied. “It is too terrible. Hurry!”

Grace laid down the receiver and rose quickly to her feet. “It is Stella,” she said. “Something has happened in her flat. I am going round. Will you come too?”

“Of course!”

“Go downstairs and get a taxi,” she directed.

“I shall be there in a moment.”

They arrived at their destination in less than ten minutes. The hall-porter took them up in the lift to the sixth floor, and Grace led the way across the landing. Almost immediately her finger had touched the bell the door was opened by Stella’s maid. The girl was still wearing her outdoor clothes; her cheeks were as white as chalk. She pointed across the hall to the door of the sitting-room. She seemed about to speak when it was suddenly opened and Stella appeared. She, too, was still in the clothes which she had worn home from the theatre. She, too, had the appearance of a woman beside herself with fear.

“Come in quickly!” she cried. “Shut the door, Esther.”

They passed into the sitting-room. A young man was leaning against the mantelpiece, his head buried in his arms. In the middle of the room a man was lying on his back, with his arms outstretched. His glassy eyes were upturned towards the ceiling. In the middle of his shirt-front was something thin and quivering, a little line of silver. Upon the table close to where he lay was an open telegram. The young man by the mantelpiece turned slowly around. He was as pale as the two women, and in his eyes was the fear of the coward. Pryde recognised him at once—a young man about town whom he knew slightly.

“What has happened, Dusanoy?” he demanded. “Quick!”

The young man trembled from head to foot. “I—don’t know,” he faltered.

“Don’t talk nonsense!” Pryde answered. “If anyone wants help here, we must have the truth, and quickly. Who is this?”

“I don’t know,” the young man repeated.

Pryde fell on his knees for a moment by the side of the prostrate figure. He rose again almost at once; there was no mistaking the look on that face. He turned to Stella, who stood clutching at the back of a chair.

“Who is this, Miss Forde?” he asked.

She opened her lips twice without uttering the slightest sound. When at last she spoke, it was in a sort of hysterical shriek. “I don’t know!” she sobbed.

Grace, who for a moment had been herself almost overcome, forced her sister into a chair. “Stella,” she said firmly, “don’t be absurd. Something terrible has happened. Tell us quickly what you can about it. It is the only way to help—can’t you see that?”

Stella pointed to the table. “Read that telegram,” she faltered.

Pryde moved quickly across. He read it out to Grace:

“Southampton. 10 o’clock. Just arrived. Starting for town immediately in motor-car. Splendid news. Shall come straight to Charlecot Mansions. Love.

“HARRY.”

Pryde put the telegram down. Stella pulled herself up a little in her chair. “Listen,” she said. “Eddy Dusanoy brought me home. We were going on to the Artists’ Ball. Esther was with us. When we got here and turned the light on, we saw that,” she went on with a little gulp, pointing toward the prostrate figure.

“There was no one else here?” Grace inquired.

“No!”

“No sign of anyone having been here?”

“No!”

“Where was the telegram?”

“On the table.”

“Opened or unopened?”

“Unopened.”

Grace glanced at the clock. “How long have you been here?” she inquired.

“About twenty minutes,” Stella replied. “I telephoned to you at once.”

Dusanoy suddenly burst into a little cry. He had turned round and was facing the figure upon the floor. “They’ll say I did it!” he gasped. “They were ragging me last night—said I was jealous of Stella.”

“Do you know who he is?” Pryde asked.

“It’s Bartlett, the new tenor,” Stella replied.

Pryde stooped and picked up the latchkey from the floor. “There was no one in the flat when he came,” he remarked. “He must have used this key. Show me yours, Miss Forde.”

Pryde compared the two. There was a slight difference in the shape.

“Walter Bartlett has never uttered a serious word to me in his life,” Stella moaned. “I had no idea whatever of his coming here.”

Pryde glanced once more at the clock. Then he drew Grace a little on one side. “Of course, the same thing has occurred to both of us,” he said. “Your brother-in-law has had time to reach London. He may have come up here and found this man waiting. What sort of a temperament has Laverington?”

“He is very passionate,” Grace admitted fearfully. “He is horribly jealous, too!”

“Your sister can’t be telling the whole truth,” Pryde decided. “She knows Bartlett. He is here in her rooms, dead. He must have come here to wait for

her.”

Stella rose to her feet. She stood there with her hands above her head. “If he did,” she cried, “I swear upon my soul that it is without my knowledge! I swear that no word of love-making or even flirtation has ever passed between us! Can’t someone do something—can’t something be done? Harry may come in at any moment, if—if—he hasn’t been——”

Her voice died away in a horrified whisper. She was white to the lips.

“That isn’t Harry’s work,” Grace declared calmly. “He might kill, but not in that fashion.”

“Who lives in the flat below?” Pryde asked suddenly.

“An elderly couple—a Mr. and Mrs. Anderson,” Stella answered.

“And above?”

“I don’t know,” Stella replied. “The flat above has only just been opened—yesterday, I think. They meant to keep it as an attic, but there has been such a run on the place that they have opened it up as a small flat.”

“Wait here for one moment, all of you,” Pryde directed. “Grace, don’t let them move.”

“I will see that they do not,” she promised.

Pryde passed out on to the landing and listened; there was no sound of anyone about. He looked at the lift-shaft. It went only as far as the floor upon which he was. Then he ran softly up the stairs until he came to the door of the flat immediately above the one which he had just left. Again he listened; there was still silence. Very softly he tried the key which he held in his hand. The door opened. He felt along the wall for the knobs of the electric lights and turned them on. He was in a tiny hall. Opposite him was a door corresponding with the door of Stella’s sitting-room. Again he listened; there was no sound. Very softly he opened it. The room was in darkness, but the moon was shining in through the wide-open windows. He looked swiftly around. It was a woman’s sitting-room. There was a great divan drawn up to the open windows. On the table were a tray and some supper laid for two, and a sheet of paper upon which a few words were written. He read them quickly:

“Shall not be back till one. Please wait.

“NETTA.”

Again he listened; the place was empty. He left all the doors open and ran softly down. When he entered the room the four people whom he had left there seemed scarcely to have moved. They were like pictures in a tableau, except that Grace was holding her sister’s hand and trying to make her talk.

“Listen, all of you,” Pryde said. “If you two have told the truth, I have a theory. Until yesterday this was the topmost flat. The room above has been known only as an attic. There is a sitting-room there, empty; a supper waiting for two; a note on the table in a woman’s handwriting, saying that she will be back at one. Wait. There is only one thing to be done. I propose,” he added, turning to Grace, “that we accept your sister’s story. If she and Dusanoy have spoken the truth, this tragedy does not belong here. It may belong upstairs. Let us take it there.”

They all looked at him as though failing to understand.

“It is a risk, of course,” Pryde went on coolly, “but we do no good here. If he is found in this room——”

“He can’t be found here!” Stella shrieked. “He can’t!”

Pryde glanced at the clock. “Come,” he ordered. “Dusanoy, be a man for a moment, if you can. I’ll take the shoulders, you take the feet. Esther, you must help.”

The procession started—a weird and horrible one. Step by step they mounted the stairs, passed in through the doors which Pryde had left open, laid their burden down by the side of the table. Then they turned and hurried out, closing the doors behind them.

“We’ve either saved your sister,” Pryde said softly to Grace, “or we’ve got ourselves into thundering trouble. Very soon we shall know. I am going to open the outside door. I want to hear the lift come up.”

He had scarcely done so when he called to Stella. He stood upon the threshold. The lift was coming creeping up.

“Stand here and talk to me as though I were an ordinary caller,” he directed. “Mind, we are running risks to help you. Be a woman for a minute. I want to see who this is.”

She did her best. Pryde covered her as much as possible. He held her hand in his. Then the lift stopped and out tripped a little dark-haired girl, singing softly to herself. She waved her hand to Stella.

“Hallo, Stella!” she cried. “You didn’t know I was a neighbour, did you? I’ve got a loft above you. Come up and see me sometimes.”

Stella murmured something. The little woman went singing up the stairs. They all drew closer together, listening. They heard her open the door, they heard it close behind her, they heard her shriek. By that time their senses seemed dulled to horrors. It was simply a signal for which they had been waiting. Pryde and Grace rushed up. The little girl was on her knees beside the prostrate figure. She held an open letter in her hand.

“He’s killed him! He’s killed him!” she moaned. “Walter!” She turned round as they entered. “Send for the police, please,” she begged. “Something has happened here—something terrible!”

“Who is that?” Pryde demanded, pointing to the figure by her side.

“It is Walter Bartlett,” she faltered. “That beast Jerome has killed him! He always swore that he would. See, I have his letter. Send for the police, please.”

“I will telephone at once,” Grace promised. “Let me stay with you.”

She shook her head. “Come up again soon,” she implored, “not now. Leave me alone for a few minutes.”

They descended the stairs and entered the little sitting-room below. Even Grace was shaking. Pryde was dazed.

“The tragedy belonged there,” he announced softly. “Who is she?”

“It’s little Netta Fawsitt,” Stella replied. “She’s in my company. Walter Bartlett was mad about her, and so was that great brute Jerome.”

Dusanoy helped himself to a whisky. “Thank God we’re out of it!” he said.

“You had better go home,” Pryde ordered; “go home and forget everything. Mind that you do forget.”

The young man caught up his hat and coat and almost staggered to the door. They heard it slam behind him, they heard his retreating footsteps on the stairs. Stella began to sob in Grace’s arms.

“Grace! Grace! I swear that I’ll never be the least bit foolish again—never! If Harry would only come and take me away! I’m sick of the stage—I’m sick of the whole life.”

Pryde was busy telephoning to a police station. Then there was a clamorous knocking at the door. Stella herself ran to open it. There was the sound of muffled voices. In a moment or two she reappeared, carried in the arms of a tall man. He held out both his hands to Grace.

“So you’ve taken care of her for me, dear!” he exclaimed heartily. “I couldn’t keep away a second longer. I’ve had all the luck in the world, made pots of money, and I’ve come home for Stella.”

Grace shook hands with him warmly.

“I am so glad you’ve come, Harry,” she said.

An hour afterwards Pryde and Grace found themselves on their homeward way. Pryde knew that for once in her life Grace was overwrought, and he said scarcely a word until they reached their destination. He opened her door for her, turned up the light, and put her in an easy chair. She leaned back with a little sigh of relief.

“Miss Burton—Grace,” he said quietly, “I am going to leave you now. If you need me for anything, the telephone will be by my side. To-night has been horrible, but remember that the tragedy which happened is outside our lives, and that all is well with Stella now. Good night!”

“Good night!” she whispered very softly.

CHAPTER XVI

A HOLIDAY BY THE SEA

Grace Burton was sitting on a grassy knoll of sand, looking out at the sea. She wore a soft shirt and collar, a flowing tie, no hat, and a white cotton skirt. Her cheeks had lost their pallor, she was even a little sunburned. Near her sat a young man, tall and slim, with sallow face and dreamy eyes.

“No,” Grace decided, “I cannot see the slightest reason why I should tell you my name.”

“It is usual,” he pleaded. “How am I to address you? Shall I say ‘fair stranger,’ or ‘little girl in the cotton skirt’? Or am I to call you after the colour of your eyes?”

“It is so like Margate,” she murmured.

He shivered. “I have never been there,” he declared. “As a matter of fact, I don’t believe you have.”

“There is no doubt at all,” Grace continued, “that we are much too promiscuous nowadays. Why, because you hit me in the middle of the back with your golf-ball and had the nerve to come and apologise, should I allow you to speak to me next time we meet?”

Her companion extended his hands. “It is the effect of the sun and the sea and the empty places. One has no time here to be small. You are a young lady of quiet but engaging appearance, apparently enjoying a fortnight’s holiday. I am a somewhat older person, a resident, a householder, an individual of proved respectability. I am also your landlord for those few yards of sand on which you have pitched your tent. I frankly confess that it gives me pleasure to talk and be listened to. Why should I not indulge myself?”

“At my expense!”

“Some day,” he remarked, “your tongue will get you into trouble.”

“I am not at all sure,” she retorted, “that your manners won’t place you in a similar predicament.”

He sighed. “I take off my hat when I see you and when I leave. I walk on the outside. I observe all the small courtesies of life. I even offer you my card.”

She took it from him and read it out: “‘Mr. Roland Dewis.’ Quite a nice name,” she admitted. “I should not, however,” she went on, “call it an informing card. No club, no address, no anything.”

He smiled. "The dawn of curiosity! A hopeful sign! I belong to the Savage Club, which, as you may have heard, is in itself a distinction. I have written verses and published them. I was brought up as a physician, I have ended by becoming a crank."

"And what is your peculiar mania?" she asked, with some show of interest.

"Collecting weird guests," he told her. "Some day you ought to come and have tea with me and see them."

"Thank you," she replied; "I would rather not."

"They are paying guests, you know," he went on. "That old house was left to me unexpectedly, and I couldn't possibly have kept it on without a little assistance."

"Do you read poetry to them or give them medicine?" Grace inquired.

Her companion coughed. "I am no great believer in physic," he asserted. "At the same time, I do give them a certain amount of medical attention."

Grace looked over her shoulder across a stretch of marshland, across a field, to where the ground suddenly took a dip, from the midst of which rose several tall Elizabethan chimneys.

"I shouldn't have thought your house was suitable for invalids," she remarked. "It is very picturesque, but it seems so unhealthful down in that hole."

"Quite a mistake," he assured her. "The air here is the finest in the world."

"What class of patient do you take?" Grace asked.

Her companion stroked his chin for a moment. He had a long, rather thin face, deep-set eyes a little too close together, and a powerful chin. "Well," he said, "you needn't be afraid if you meet any of them about, but they are all more or less mad. Not mad enough for an asylum, you know, or that sort of thing, but they are queer in their ways. I have a method of my own for dealing with those people. I give them lectures twice a day, and see that they read only the books I provide for them. I also make use to some slight extent of my suggestive powers. Have you read anything about telepathy and psychic phenomena?"

"On the whole," Grace remarked, "I think I am glad that I decided not to come and have tea with you."

He glanced along the beach towards a tent. "The invitation has been given," he reminded her. "I presume it never occurred to you that a return of civility might be in order?"

"Certainly not," Grace replied. "I have only one cup and saucer."

"I might," he suggested, "bring my own mug."

“Don’t be silly,” Grace said. “I suppose you think I am the most unconventional person breathing to come down here and set up a tent alone on a waste piece of beach. I shouldn’t have dared it but for those people in the caravan.”

“You seem to me,” he remarked, “to be a young lady very capable of taking care of yourself.”

“I am,” she assured him.

“Have you any profession?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“And what is it?”

“Minding my own business,” she answered promptly.

He looked away from her and watched a fishing-boat come nearer.

“After all,” he decided, “I am not sure that I like you.”

“If you do not,” she said, “you are very much in the minority. The real reason I came away was to escape from my admirers.”

“Let us talk seriously,” he begged.

She looked at him blankly.

“I should never have associated frivolity with our conversation,” she declared.

“You are rather good at phrases,” he went on. “I am not. I find you, all the same, rather interesting—shall I say stimulating? Would you like to come for a ride in my motor-car?”

“With you?”

“Certainly with me!”

“No,” she answered. “In any case, I don’t like motor-cars. Down here they would remind me of London, and taxicabs, and machinery, and noises. The only movement I can take any interest in is the rolling of those small sailing-boats.”

“Well, let’s go for a sail, then,” he suggested.

“I sail every morning myself,” she told him. “I have my own trusted fisherman here, whom I have tried to drown in sixteen different ways, and who takes the greatest interest in the operation. I couldn’t think of another passenger.”

She looked across the marshes once more towards that dip in the land and the chimneys from which the smoke was stealing upward. “I am not sure,” she said, “but I think that if you were to press me to inspect your house, I should come. It looks rather fascinating.”

For a moment he did not reply. She was watching him, carelessly enough to all appearances, yet closely.

“Why, of course,” he declared, “any afternoon you like—this moment, if you will.”

“Thanks, no!” she answered, getting up and shaking out her skirts. “You are too impetuous. I am going to make my own tea now. Run along, please. I have had enough of you for to-day.”

Her voice, as usual, carried conviction. She walked away lightly but briskly. The man stood and looked after her for several moments, a puzzled frown upon his face. Then he turned and walked slowly along the path which led across the marshes, a path which in places became the raised top of a dyke, on either side of which the tide flowed in. Grace went to her little tent, put her kettle on the stove, and sat down to write to Pryde.

Pryde came in with a gun under his arm from a morning’s rabbit-shooting. He had taken possession of his new quarters—a pleasant old house in one of the quietest of Norfolk villages, with a man and his wife to look after him, a charming old-world garden to sit about in, and a few hundred acres of rough shooting at his door. He would have been perfectly contented but for one thing. . . .

The letter was lying ready for him on a round table set in the middle of his hall. He bore it off at once into his little study and opened it eagerly:

“MY DEAR PARTNER,—

“Don’t start when you see the village from which I write. I had no idea, when I arranged to come here, that your new home was also in Norfolk. However, since it is so, I am not so sure that it may not be a good thing. For, listen: here, in the remotest of the little fishing hamlets on the very edge of the sea, living in a tent, absolutely alone, I rather believe that I can see an adventure looming. I was driven here from Wells in a farmer’s cart by a loquacious native. As we neared the village, he pointed out to me the queerest old Elizabethan house, set down almost in a pit. The place had been empty for fifteen years, he told me, but had recently been occupied by a gentleman from London, a gentleman whom he variously described as a doctor, a literary person, and a millionaire. According to my informant, this person, whose name is Roland Dewis, makes a speciality of collecting queer guests. I haven’t seen any of them, but I have met the proprietor. I got in the way of his golf-ball when he was practising iron shots a few days ago, and, although he did not know it, I encouraged him to talk to me. I think the real reason why I am a little interested in his mysterious household is the recollection of the last time I saw Mr. Roland Dewis. He stood then in the dock at the Old Bailey, and was sentenced to seven years’ penal servitude for blackmailing.

His hair has gone grey since then, he has changed his name and cultivated a limp, he wears an eyeglass, and he is clean shaven. He would not be easily recognised. I happen to have a good memory, though, and I am not mistaken. However, that isn't all I am going to tell you, although it is the most important part of it. His guests, who are supposed to be here for their health, never seem to move out of the grounds. He has a motor-pinnace and a very small steam yacht lying out in the harbour here, ready for sea. He has also a ninety horse-power six-cylinder motor-car. Somehow or other the appurtenances of his place do not seem to me in the least like the appurtenances of a sort of hospital. What do you think?

"I can see you sitting down and writing that you are on your way here. You please won't do anything of the sort. For one thing, you might be recognised; and another thing, there is no place for you to stay; and a third thing, the two of us together might easily suggest our identity to any observant person. There is a telegraph office close here, and I have hired a bicycle. Of course you may say that it is all rather idiotic; that I am so keen on work that I am imagining all sorts of things which don't exist. Perhaps so. Anyway, I thought I would tell you as much as I have told you, so that you will understand if I do send for you.

"I am enjoying my simple life immensely, and am feeling very much better. I heard from Stella yesterday. She and her husband are at the Italian lakes, and, I believe, perfectly happy. You read in the papers, of course, that Jerome was found dead in his rooms with a revolver by his side. He was mad about Netta Fawsitt, but the way he killed Bartlett was brutal.

"I hope you, too, are enjoying your country life. You can write me to the post office here, if you like. At present I have not made up my mind when to return to London, but I will let you know.—

"Sincerely yours,
"GRACE BURTON."

Pryde read this letter through, word by word. Then he folded it up, placed it in his pocket, made a hasty luncheon, and caught the afternoon train to London.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOUSE OF REST

In many respects Grace's was an ideal holiday. She spent her mornings sailing with a boatman from the village, her afternoons sometimes in the same way, at other times wandering about the great wilderness of sea-riven marshland. At nights she read for a time by her little oil lamp, and went to bed with the darkness. Beyond the making of tea and coffee, she attempted little cooking. Once or twice she had visited the village stores. For the most part she lived on the cold things she had brought down with her. The position she had chosen for her tent was entirely isolated save for the presence, about fifty yards off, of a family caravan. On the afternoon after the dispatch of her letter to Pryde, she returned from a sail to find the beach deserted. The caravan was drawn up at the end of the sandy road, on the point of departure. She went over to the little man and woman, with whom she had been in the habit of exchanging ordinary civilities.

"Why, I thought you were here for a fortnight Mr. Brown!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Brown, who was a small man of gingery complexion, seemed somewhat confused. "Had to change our plans," he explained. "The fact is, the agent was down this morning. Pitched into us like anything; turned us off, in fact."

Grace looked at him, perplexed. "But I thought you said that we had a perfect right here," she declared. "You were so strong upon that."

Mr. Brown was decidedly not at his ease. "So we have," he protested. "I didn't want to get into a row, though. We are going to move on a mile or two. Sorry to leave you, young lady. If you took my advice," he added deliberately, "I am not at all sure that you wouldn't come with us."

"Same here!" his wife declared, a little tartly. "It's no sort of life, this camping out, for young women alone!"

"I am very much obliged to you," Grace said, "but it isn't quite so easy for me to move on as it is for you. However, I dare say I shall be all right. I wish you'd told me that you were going, though."

"As a matter of fact," the little man confessed slowly, "I had no intention of moving. The agent made it worth my while. He seemed to want to get rid of me."

“So that was it,” Grace remarked quietly. “Thank you very much for telling me that. Good-bye, and good luck to you!”

The caravan rolled off. Grace went back to her boatman.

“Nichols,” she said, “I am left all alone here, you see; not that I mind it very much, but I don’t quite understand why those people have been turned off.”

The boatman looked across the marshes towards the spot where from those tall chimneys the smoke was curling up to the sky. “Nor me neither, miss,” he declared. “I don’t understand half the things that go on here nowadays. He’s a real queer fellow is our new landlord.”

“His agent has given those people money to go,” Grace continued thoughtfully.

Nichols shook his head. He was an elderly man, strong and stalwart, a widower for many years. “I don’t know, miss,” he said, “but what, if I were you, I’d come to the village and find a room somewhere. I ain’t no confidence in those people up yonder. It’s a queer lot they are altogether, to my way of thinking.”

Grace smiled. “Well,” she said, “couldn’t we, just for this once, compromise? It’s hot enough to sleep out of doors, isn’t it? Don’t you think you could sleep in the shed over there for one night, and then we could get up at sunrise and go out after the crab-pots?”

“I’m willing, miss,” he agreed. “I’ll get home and have my bit of supper, and sail the old boat down with the ebb tide. I’ll be here long before it’s dark.”

Grace thanked him, and a few minutes later he disappeared down the broad waterway, his brown sails catching the last gleams of sunlight as he passed away. Grace turned and, entering her tent, prepared her evening meal. Afterwards she sat outside and watched the shadows deepen, watched the lights fade from violet into grey, and from grey into obscurity. By and by a few little yellow lanterns from the tops of the fishing-boats dotted the horizon. Then all of a sudden, the small steam yacht, which she had missed all day, came round the point, a blaze of lights, and steamed up to its anchorage. She lay a little way back from her tent, upon a sandy mound, watching. The motor pinnacle had been lowered from the yacht, and soon she could hear the beating of its engine rapidly approaching. The landing-place was close to where she was. The boat was driven on to the beach and two men descended. One was Dewis; the other a man who was wrapped from head to foot in a light dust-coat, with a cap pulled over his eyes. They were scarcely more than thirty feet from her, but she herself was unseen. She noticed that Dewis’s eyes were fixed all the time upon her tent.

“It seems a lonely spot,” she heard the unknown man say, as he stood for a moment looking around him.

“There is no other place quite like it,” Dewis replied. “No one who lives here ever notices anything, ever thinks anything. Yet it is not so far out of the world that the comings and goings of any unknown person attract too much attention.”

The new-comer pointed to the tent.

“Trippers,” Dewis explained. “Quite harmless. I wouldn’t send for the motor. You won’t mind walking? It’s only a mile.”

They passed away, side by side. Grace caught a glimpse of the stranger’s face—a queer, heavily-lined face, with deep-set eyes which even in that solitude seemed to flash from side to side. He walked, too, like one in fear. She watched them disappear—a man in danger, surely! A man, too, who reminded her of someone. She sat puzzling until the darkness came, and with it Nichols. He bade her the shortest of good nights and rolled himself up in a deserted shed at the head of the beach.

“I’ll give you a shout at sunrise, miss,” he said. “I’m wishful to be off as soon after four as suits you. It’s a matter of the tide, you see.”

“I’ll be ready,” she promised him.

Punctually at four o’clock Nichols awakened her. For three hours they sailed about in the bay. They saw the sun rise, saw it pierce the faint white mists which hung around the chimneys of the Old House. Afterwards she slept through the latter part of the morning. Nichols returned about three o’clock in the afternoon.

“Shall I be up again to-night, miss?”

“If you don’t mind,” she replied.

“I’ll come out on the ebb,” he promised.

She sat watching him disappear. Then she brought out some books. She had scarcely settled down, however, before she heard the sound of a horse’s galloping hoofs. It was Dewis who came, riding along the narrow dyke path with loose rein and the careless seat of a man utterly reckless. He pulled up close to her, the sand flying into the air from his horse’s hoofs.

“Are you in a hurry?” she asked.

He pointed seaward, and she saw that the little white steam yacht, which had been missing again all day, had once more rounded the point and was coming to an anchor. “I saw her from my windows,” he said. “I scarcely expected her back so soon.”

“Is she bringing another guest?” Grace inquired.

Dewis did not answer. He was looking through his field-glasses at the boat which was being lowered. Suddenly a little exclamation broke from his lips. The hand which held the glasses shook.

“Yes,” he replied quietly, “it is another guest.”

“Your house must be getting quite interesting,” she sighed.

He turned towards her irresolutely. “Look here,” he said, “let me give you some good advice.”

He pointed to the road which led to the village. “You’ve been here long enough,” he declared. “I have taken a queer, foolish fancy to you, and I’m not the sort of person who should have any part in your life. Get away this afternoon. Get away before to-night.”

Grace shook her head quite decidedly. “You have a queer way of showing your preferences,” she laughed.

“What way would you prefer?”

“I think,” she replied, “for one thing, that you might offer to show me over your house. You have made me horribly curious.”

Something which had lightened his face a few minutes before had passed away. He leaned towards her. He was not quite so pleasant to look upon. “Come,” he said, “I will do better than ask you to tea. Do you see that boat?”

She followed his forefinger. The little launch from the yacht was fast approaching the beach.

“A lady!” she exclaimed.

Dewis nodded. “A chaperon for you,” he remarked. “Will you dine with me to-night?”

She hesitated. “I have no evening frock.”

“Come as you please,” he answered. “You may find it amusing. Afterwards——”

“Yes, I’ll come,” she decided. “I can’t keep away; I’m too curious.”

“Be there at eight o’clock,” he directed. “Do you mind going into your tent now? You will meet my latest guest to-night.”

Grace strolled away, and Dewis stepped down to the landing-place. He assisted the lady to alight and walked slowly with her up the shingles. She held her skirts in both hands, and she talked volubly in French. Grace watched them disappear. Then she pulled out her steamer trunk and began to examine its contents.

The approach to the Old House was of the simplest possible description. There was no lodge nor any gate. The drive wound its way through a pleasant meadow, rich in buttercups and celandines. There was a small brook crossed by a little bridge, and several cows were standing about, almost knee-deep in the long grass. A ring fence alone separated the meadows from the lawns of the house. There was an iron gate across the drive, propped hospitably open. Before the entrance was a circular patch of

lawn, and under the cedar trees were several basket-chairs. Grace made her way to the front and rang the bell. The door itself stood wide open, affording a view of a large white stone hall, cool and perfumed with flowers. For some few seconds after she had pulled the bell nothing happened. The silence of the place, its very homeliness, seemed to Grace somehow mysterious. She was filled with a curious sense of coming adventure. Then, through a swing door opposite to her came a dark, sallow-faced servant. He spoke with a strong French accent.

“Will you come into the drawing-room, madame!” he said.

She followed him across the hall and into a drawing-room furnished with faded Victorian furniture, a drawing-room with a faint, unused perfume of lavender, and darkened by closely-drawn blinds. Almost as she entered Dewis came in through the french windows.

“This is charming of you,” he said cordially. “I am so glad that you summoned up your courage.”

“I am afraid it didn’t need much summoning up,” she replied. “You know how curious I was to see your house.”

He led the way out into the hall. “You shall see as much as you like of it after dinner,” he declared. “At present doesn’t your fancy turn to one of those chairs under the cedar tree?”

They stepped out together and strolled across the lawn. He leaned towards her.

“Didn’t you get my message?” he asked quickly. “I sent a boy on a pony with a note an hour ago.”

She shook her head. “I saw him in the distance, then he took the wrong path across the marshes, and he had to turn towards Cley. There was a strong tide to-night. We came down the creek, and Nichols sailed me up just to the other side of the road. What was your message?”

“I told you not to come,” Dewis replied quietly. “It is too late now. We must make the best of it. There is just a little trouble among my guests, but it is nothing which should affect you.”

“I am sorry,” she said simply.

“By the by,” he continued, “I can’t very well introduce you as my little friend in the cotton frock, can I?”

“You may introduce me as Miss Smith,” she told him demurely.

She did not offer to go away. Two men were strolling across the lawn towards them. Dewis stretched out his hand.

“Miss Smith,” he said, “please let me introduce two of my guests, Mr. Barton and Mr. Leonard Wright.”

They were both men of quite unremarkable appearance. Wright was young, of athletic build, and sunburned. The other man was taller and older.

They were both clean shaven. They greeted Grace pleasantly, and talked for a few moments quite naturally.

“Dewis doesn’t often spoil us in this way, Miss Smith,” Wright declared. “A parson once a week and the doctor every now and then are the only visitors we’ve seen anything of. Do you live near here?”

“Only for a time,” Grace replied. “I am really here for a holiday.”

A third man came striding across from the house—a large, ungainly man, with a brown beard recently grown and as yet unsightly, high cheekbones, and gaunt face. He had the air of a man furiously angry. When he saw Grace, however, he seemed to check something which he had been about to say. Dewis looked at him quite coolly.

“Allison,” he said, “if anything is wrong, speak to me about it afterwards, please. We are honoured with a lady guest to-night. Miss Smith let me present Mr. Allison. He looks very angry now but he is really quite a good-natured person.”

The man bowed civilly enough to Grace, but he tried to draw Dewis on one side. Dewis, however only laughed and pointed to the servant who was standing at the edge of the lawn.

“Dinner is served,” he announced. “Come. We will not wait for Madame Floquet. It was her special request. Miss Smith, will you permit me?”

She took his arm. They crossed the lawn, which felt like velvet beneath their feet. The birds were singing all around them; the air was sweet with the perfume of roses and heliotrope. Grace looked around her and looked down the drive towards the road, towards the marshland, shimmering still in the sunlight. Before her was the interior of the house, with its cool restfulness, but also its vague air of mystery.

“I think,” she said, “that I shall run away. I am frightened of your guests.”

He only drew her arm a little closer through his, and they passed on. “Too late, my dear young lady,” he insisted. “I also had a presentiment, but it has passed.”

He led the way to a small dining-room at the back of the house. Dinner was somewhat elaborately laid at a round table in the middle of the apartment. There were a great many bottles of champagne upon the mahogany sideboard. Grace noticed, as she took her place between her host and Wright, that there was one vacant seat at the table.

“Madame Floquet will be down in a few moments, beyond a doubt,” Dewis remarked. “I am sure you will all be interested to meet her.”

Allison leaned across the table. He still had the appearance of a man nursing a grievance. “Look here, Dewis,” he said, “you’re avoiding the question all the time, and I am sorry to have to refer to the matter before

Miss Smith, but, all the same, when you accept another guest here, we have a right to know who she is. Who is Madame Floquet?"

Dewis looked across the table at his questioner. "My dear fellow," he answered coolly, "within a few moments you will see her. You will then know. Why should I not enjoy my little surprise?"

Wright leaned across to Grace. "Queer lot, aren't we, Miss Smith?" he remarked. "But, then, you must remember we are all half invalids. I've had a shocking nervous breakdown, and Allison has been ordered complete rest. We didn't anticipate any women here permanently. We are all a little down upon Dewis about it."

Dewis filled his glass with champagne. "My dear guests," he said, "Madame Floquet will be here in a moment to speak for herself. All I can tell you is that under no possible circumstances could I have refused her visit."

Almost as he spoke the door was opened. A woman, dressed in a black evening gown, with a collarette of pearls around her neck, came slowly into the room. She was very fair, she had strange eyes, and a mouth curiously firm. It parted in a smile, however, as she paused with her fingers upon the back of a chair and glanced around.

"Ah!" she declared, "it is like old times indeed. I congratulate you, my dear Mr. Dewis, upon this meeting of old friends. It is indeed delightful."

There was a moment's silence. The eyes of every one present were fixed upon the new-comer. Then Grace was conscious of something strange in the face of every man there. Allison seemed struck dumb with terror. Wright was sitting back in his chair, his head thrown back, his mouth open. Barton was clutching the tablecloth.

Allison was the first to find his voice. "My God!" he muttered. "It's Martha!"

Even Grace shivered at something in the man's tone. They all turned now towards Dewis. Their faces were full of fierce questioning. He sat quite still with his wine-glass in his hand.

"My friends," he said, "you disgust me. Such fear is imbecile. The lady who takes her place among us to-night, and whose name Allison had better have kept to himself, has a perfect right here. She has as much right to the shelter of this house as any of you. Your lack of restraint is appalling. Must I remind you that we have a stranger among us?"

Allison pointed suddenly to Grace. "My God!" he cried. "Why not put an advertisement in the local paper, give a garden-party, write to——"

"Hush!" Dewis interrupted sternly. "I will answer for this young lady's discretion. I will answer for it that she does not gossip. As for the rest, the *Iris* has steam up in the harbour, the cars are in the garage. If anyone has a

fancy that they will be more comfortable elsewhere, let him try it. Luigi, you may serve the fish.”

The butler, who had been standing motionless by the sideboard, touched a bell by his side. A couple of men entered at once. Dinner was served almost in silence. Conversation, such as it was, was furnished entirely by Dewis, Grace, and Leonard Wright. The meal was about half-way through when the door opened and a tall, dark man, also dressed in the livery of a butler, entered. He carried a note in his hand, and he came towards Dewis.

“If you will be so good, sir,” he whispered, “as to read this at once.”

Dewis nodded and turned to Grace. “You will excuse me?”

“Certainly!”

Dewis tore it open. There seemed to be only a few lines, but he read them twice over. Then he crumpled up the sheet of paper in his hand. He turned slowly towards Grace.

“What is it, Dewis?” Allison asked hoarsely.

Dewis seemed to collect himself with an effort. “It is nothing,” he answered quietly.

Allison leaned suddenly across the table. He gripped his host’s wrist and tore open his fingers, snatching the crumpled sheet of paper away.

“Look here,” he said, “if it’s nothing, I am not doing any harm. Keep off, Dewis.”

There was a moment’s intense silence. Everyone had stopped eating and drinking. They were all looking at Allison. He was breathing quickly.

“Look here,” he cried, “these are the few lines which Dewis has just read and told us are nothing! It is a message from Paul there. Listen:

“The young lady whom you have brought here this evening is a Miss Grace Burton. She is a well-known private detective, and a partner with a man named Pryde, whose name you must know.

“‘PAUL.’”

Allison looked up. There was a curious stillness in the room as the crumpled piece of paper slipped from his fingers.

“I did not communicate this message to you all,” Dewis said firmly, “because I am convinced that Paul is entirely mistaken. Miss Smith is simply taking a summer holiday here from her office in the City. I will answer for her myself.”

“Please do not do that, Mr. Dewis,” Grace interrupted. “Your butler has told the truth. I am Grace Burton. I did not come into this neighbourhood to spy upon you. I came here for a holiday. All the same, I am Grace Burton, and Stephen Pryde is my partner.”

There was a little sound like a low sob, a murmur of indrawn breaths. They were leaning towards her, and in their faces was something which reminded her of a pack of wolves.

“Most admirable host!” Allison hissed. “You open your doors to one for whom every corner of Europe is being ransacked. You destroy the security of us all, and now you entertain a young lady detective. What do you suppose we mean to do?”

Dewis did not at once reply. Madame Floquet drained her glass and spoke. To Grace’s amazement she spoke in a key altogether lower than before. It was the voice of a man.

“As for me,” she declared, “I have as much right here as any of you. I paid ten thousand francs to our host, and I had the right to security whenever I chose to avail myself of it. I was hard pressed in Vienna, but in London I stayed three days, and there was not a sign. I was at Cowes for two days, and again there was no sign. For a week I was on the sea before I changed into our host’s yacht in Lowestoft Harbour. There isn’t a soul who knows I am in the country. But”—she paused. They all followed the direction of her gesture; they all looked towards Grace—“that woman,” she said, “must not leave this house. I have no more confidence in Dewis. We must see to that ourselves.”

Pryde and Mr. Simmons descended a little stiffly from the dog-cart which had brought them from Wells.

“Another mile or two in that,” Pryde muttered.

“Don’t suggest such a thing——” Mr. Simmons interrupted. “Let’s have a drink, and then what about walking down to the shore?”

“I am afraid it’s too late to-night,” Pryde decided regretfully. “Miss Burton is just a little difficult sometimes. I am afraid she won’t altogether appreciate our coming down like this.”

“Couldn’t help it when I got your note,” Inspector Simmons declared. “There has been a rumour or two about this place before. If I could have got hold of the chief, I’d have brought a search-warrant with me. No getting a word in edgeways with him, though, at the shop this morning. There’s a report that Martha is in England.”

“Who is she?” Pryde asked, as they made their way into the little smoking-room.

“Martha is really a man called Jean Martier,” Simmons explained. “He seems to have started as an apache in Paris. You remember the motor-car robberies there? Anyway, he got away from France with about a million francs, and was supposed to have murdered something like seven or eight gendarmes. Half the time he lived disguised as a woman. The police lost

sight of him for a year. Then he turned up suddenly again in Paris, and robbed a bank messenger, whom he shot dead, of a hundred thousand francs. A few days ago we heard that he was in England—had come straight through from Vienna.”

Pryde nodded. “France is the country for real criminals,” he said. “Let’s walk down the street and get a breath of the sea, anyway.”

They strolled down to the little harbour and leaned against the rails, looking out across the marshland. It was late, and the place was almost deserted. One fisherman, who had just secured his boat, was making his way up the stone steps. Pryde spoke to him.

“Do you know,” he inquired, “if there are any people camping out on the sands there?”

Nichols eyed his questioner for a moment. “There’s only one young lady that I know of,” he replied slowly.

“Whereabouts is her tent?” Pryde asked.

“Do you happen to be a friend of hers?”

“I am a very great friend,” Pryde assured his questioner eagerly. “Why?”

“If you do be a very great friend of hers,” Nichols continued, “then I’m just as well pleased that you happened to ask me that question just now, for I’m not feeling as comfortable as I should like about the young lady.”

“What do you mean?” Pryde demanded, in a strained voice.

“To-night,” Nichols explained, “she got me to sail her up the creek to the Old House. She went there to dinner. She’s in these parts all alone like, and she asked me to call for her at half-past nine and bring her back. Up I went, and rang at the front-door bell. A man-servant came out. I asked for the young lady. He went away. When he came back he said, ‘The young lady is not returning to-night.’ I was taken all aback, and I started to come away, but before I’d gone more than a step or two I thought it over, and it seemed to me there must be some mistake, so I went back again. ‘Here,’ I said to the young man, ‘you tell the young lady that Matthew Nichols is here. I’ve got the boat top o’ creek, and we shall just get back.’ Blowed if he didn’t slam the door in my face! I rang again, and they wouldn’t answer the bell, so I come away. But I don’t like it.”

Pryde suddenly gripped at the railing. “My God!” he muttered. “Show us the way to the house, there’s a good fellow.”

“I don’t know as you’ll do much good there,” Nichols volunteered. “Howsomever, there the house stands, a hundred yards or so straight down the road, and you’ll see the turning to the left. The house is in the dip. She was a nice-spoken young lady, and I can’t see her staying alone up there, not anyhow. Will I come along, sir?”

Pryde was already well on his way, and Inspector Simmons by his side. Nichols plodded along, behind. They said very little to one another until they reached the entrance. Then they paused.

“Look here, Sir Stephen,” Simmons said, “I think we are both of one mind about this matter. We’ve no search-warrant, but I have my credentials in my pocket. I propose that we decline to move until we are allowed to see her.”

“The only credentials I’ve got,” Pryde answered, “are my revolver and my fist, but they don’t get me out of that house as long as I’ve consciousness.”

They had already turned into the avenue. Suddenly Simmons gripped his companion’s arm. He was looking over his right shoulder.

“Stop!” he cried softly. “What’s that?”

Along the straight road came two blazing lights—a motor-car, driven apparently at a furious speed. Behind it, another; some distance away, a third.

“Wait a moment,” Simmons whispered. “There’s something wrong here!”

They moved slowly back towards the road. Almost as soon as they had reached it, they saw the lights rounding the corner. Three motor-cars were pulled up within fifty yards of them. Several dark forms began to steal along the road.

“By Jove! they’re getting over the wall!” Pryde exclaimed. “They’re making for the house. Come on!”

They ran down the road. Two men were standing there, giving orders. Inspector Simmons gave a little ejaculation of surprise and touched his hat.

“Sir Philip!”

A grey-headed man turned suddenly round. “Simmons!” he cried. “Are you on it, too?”

“I am on nothing particular, sir,” Inspector Simmons replied, “except that there’s a young lady friend of Sir Stephen Pryde’s and mine has written about a suspicious house here, and we’ve just learned that she’s been detained there to-night. Sir Stephen here, sir, and myself were on the way up to see what we could do about it when we saw your lights.”

“You’d better come along now with us, then. Jump in.”

The four men got into one of the cars. It started at once and turned up the avenue.

“We may be in for a very bad time,” Sir Philip remarked gravely. “Are either of you armed?”

“I am, sir,” Pryde replied. “What is it?”

“The greatest scoundrel in Europe has been traced to that house,” Sir Philip answered. “I believe that it has been a hiding-place for criminals for some time.”

Pryde groaned. “And she’s been there alone all the evening!” he muttered.

“We only had our information a few hours ago,” the chief of the police continued. “I brought these men down in a special train from King’s Cross, and we’ve motored from Lynn. Here we are.”

An inspector crept out of the shadows.

“Are all your men posted?” the chief asked him.

“The house is completely surrounded, sir,” was the reply. “Shall I ring?”

Sir Philip nodded. The inspector pulled the bell. The summons was answered almost at once.

“Will you tell your master,” Sir Philip said, “that some gentlemen wish to speak to him?”

The butler’s expression of surprise seemed genuine enough. “Certainly, sir,” he replied, throwing open the door. “Will you take seats for a moment?”

He crossed the hall and disappeared into one of the back rooms. In a few seconds he reappeared, followed by Dewis. The latter had changed his dress-coat for a black velvet smoking-jacket, and was smoking a cigarette. He seemed perfectly at his ease.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” he asked.

The chief of the police answered him. “Mr. Dewis,” he announced, “we are here in the name of the law. Knowingly or unknowingly, we believe that you have under this roof certain persons for whose arrests we hold warrants. It is our duty to search your house, and I call upon you to render us any assistance we may require.”

Dewis knocked the ash from his cigarette. He seemed still perfectly cool. “My guests are in the dining-room,” he replied. “You can see them for yourselves. All I can say is that they came to me with excellent references.”

They crossed the hall, Dewis leading the way. He turned the handle of the dining-room door; it was locked. The chief looked around.

“You must have that door opened at once,” he ordered.

They were suddenly conscious of a sound of light approaching footsteps. Pryde gave a little cry. It was Grace, unruffled and quite calm, who was crossing the hall. She held a key in her hand.

“I believe,” she said, “that there is a reward of a thousand pounds for the arrest of Jean Martier. You will find him in that room.” She handed the key to Sir Philip.

“Be careful, sir,” one of the inspectors begged.

The door was already thrown open. They all crowded in. There were four people seated around the dining-table, and two vacant places. Of the four people, Barton was leaning with his arms upon the table and his head hidden; Madame Floquet was sitting back in her chair, her hand upon the carved arms, her lips parted, her eyes fixed upon the opposite wall; Leonard Wright was leaning over the side of his chair—his eyes were closed as though he had fallen asleep; the other man had his back to them, and they could only see that he was motionless. They were like figures in some strange and tragical tableau, only their immovability was unnatural. Not one of them turned his head or looked up at the opening of the door.

“My God, they’re dead!” Inspector Simmons muttered.

Even Grace’s composure almost gave way. Pryde led her out into the hall.

“They had a sealed decanter brought in,” she faltered, “just as Mr. Dewis hurried me away. They said they were going to drink to the House of Rest.”

“What about you?” Pryde demanded.

“Paul is here,” she whispered—“Paul, the head porter at Delacher’s. He is a sort of major-domo here. He saw me and told Mr. Dewis who I was. Mr. Dewis tried to keep it from the others, but they found out. For a moment I thought they were all going to fall upon both of us. Then the telephone began to ring. A man arrived on a motor-bicycle. They heard that you were on your way from Lynn. They seemed to forget all about me. Mr. Dewis took me by the arm and hurried me into the drawing-room. He pointed to the window. I could have escaped then, but I waited. Presently I stole out. There was no one in the hall. Mr. Dewis was in the library; I could see him through the open door, burning papers. I found the key in the door there and locked them in. Then you came.”

Sir Philip came out from the dining-room. He sat down for a moment on the settee by Grace’s side. He, too, seemed suffering from shock.

“I have never seen anything like it,” he muttered. “They are all dead—Martier, Cummins, Mayo, and the man who was wanted for that Hanger Hill murder. You’ve had a lucky escape, young lady.”

She pointed across the hall to where Dewis was standing, a plain-clothes policeman on either side of him.

“He saved me,” she remarked tersely.

“We’ll remember that,” Sir Philip promised.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SIMPLE LIFE IN BERMONDSEY

Pryde was enjoying a game of golf one afternoon with Mr. Hutchinson, who was now one of his regular opponents, when a man-servant in plain clothes approached him, removed his hat, and handed him a note.

"I took this to your rooms first, Sir Stephen," he said, "and then to the club. They told me that I might find you here."

Pryde tore open the envelope. He was already familiar with the handwriting:

"MY DEAR PRYDE,—If you have the leisure and inclination, I can offer you a commission, one in which I dare say the services of Miss Burton also would be useful. If you are open to accept it, I must see you within the course of an hour or so. Do not lose a second in coming to me on receipt of this note.—Ever yours,

"JAMES DOWNSON."

"Sir James sent his car down with me, sir," the man announced. "He thought we might save a little time."

Pryde turned to his opponent regretfully, but Mr. Hutchinson had already handed his driver to his caddy.

"Not a word of apology, Sir Stephen," he begged. "I fancy I've escaped a licking. Nasty trick I seem to have this morning of pulling my putts. I shall play the last three holes alone and see if I can get out of it."

Pryde was whirled up to London with such expedition as a six-cylinder car and an Italian chauffeur of venturesome disposition could command. Sir James was busy in his study with two secretaries, whom he instantly dismissed.

"I am glad Marvin found you," he remarked in a tone of satisfaction. "Now sit down here and listen. First of all, are you free? Plenty of time and inclination, eh?"

"Plenty of both," Pryde declared.

"And Miss Burton?"

"When I saw her yesterday she was praying that something would turn up," Pryde replied a little gloomily. "She's never happy unless she's working."

“Very well; now listen,” Sir James went on. “You may have read in the papers lately that a certain royal prince, the direct heir, failing one, to the throne of a great Continental country, was to be sent to Oxford to complete his education?”

Pryde nodded. “I think I saw it somewhere.”

“The notice appeared some eight months ago,” Sir James continued. “Since then there has been silence. As a matter of fact, the young prince in question arrived in this country within a few weeks of the publication of that notice, and went straight to Oxford. He was there for exactly two months.”

“What happened to him?”

“First of all, I must tell you that he is a young man of peculiar tastes,” Sir James explained. “He has been accustomed to think for himself, and he came over here imbued with some very broad ideas indeed. At Oxford he seems to have been fascinated by a little clique of advanced thinkers; I really don’t know what they call themselves—socialists, communists, anarchists—anything. Anyway, after a short time at Magdalen, the prince disappeared entirely. We lost sight of him altogether for almost a month.”

“Where is he now?”

“He is living now in a slum of London with one or two men whom he calls brothers, studying what he calls the new doctrines,” Sir James remarked. “He has let his hair grow, and he dresses like one of the people. He has given up his title, abandoned all luxuries, abjured his family and all their ways.”

“You have seen him, then?” Pryde inquired.

“I have,” Sir James admitted dryly. “I tried to reason with him—I tried everything, in fact, unsuccessfully. He is living in a sort of common house with a dozen or so others who call themselves students. There is a girl there, a sort of East-End Hypatia, who has him completely under her thumb. His father expects us to deport him. How the dickens can we? He is of age and living the life of a law-abiding citizen. We are really powerless in the matter. All the same, they are trying to make us responsible for the whole affair, and the situation is getting a little strained. We don’t want trouble with his country. What we want to do is to induce that young man to pack up and go home, or go anywhere, so long as he leaves London.”

“How can I get at him, I wonder?” Pryde asked thoughtfully.

“I can give you his address,” Sir James replied. “His great friend is Cammerley—The Socialist member.”

“The dickens!” Pryde said softly to himself. “And what about the girl?”

“Hedda Kleian.”

“A Jewess, isn’t she?”

Sir James nodded. "Makes it all the worse, of course," he remarked. "It sounds like rather a dull sort of affair for you and Miss Burton, but I have a fancy that it might turn out just a shade more interesting than it appears on the surface."

"We'll take it on," Pryde declared. "To tell the truth, there's one stroke of luck about it. I'm going to sit next Hedda Kleian at dinner to-night."

"At dinner?" Sir James repeated.

Pryde nodded. "She is going to be at the Wanderers'. I know because Honor, the secretary, showed me the plan of the tables yesterday, and asked me whom I'd like to sit next. I saw the girl act once, and she puzzled me. There was no one else there whom I knew particularly well, so I told him to put me next her."

"Well, I wish you luck," Sir James said, holding out his hand. "My regards to Miss Burton."

Pryde made his way directly to Grace's rooms. As he opened the door he heard the clicking of her typewriter, a sound which always irritated him intensely. She glanced up as he entered, and nodded.

"Thought you were playing golf?" she remarked.

"I was sent for in the middle of my match," Pryde told her. "Sir James has a job for us."

"Us?" she repeated.

He nodded. "Yes, you're in it, or rather, you can be. You could have started with me to-night if it hadn't been for your infernal obstinacy about never going out to dinner with me."

"Please explain," she begged.

Pryde repeated what Sir James had told him. Grace all the time made little pen-and-ink sketches on a piece of paper by her side.

"It sounds very dull," she observed, "except that I must admit Hedda Kleian is interesting enough."

"I am hoping to find her so," Pryde assented.

Grace looked across at him with the beginning of a smile upon her lips. "You mustn't lose your heart to her," she said. "Hedda Kleian is much too intense a person to have anything to do with a frivolous man of the world."

"You never can tell," Pryde answered gloomily. "Since the one girl to whom I should have thought that my personal attractions and disposition must inevitably appeal persists in maintaining an unreasonably cold and distant attitude towards me——"

Grace yawned openly and struck a few keys of her typewriter. "Don't be silly, dear partner," she begged lightly. "Try to make room for me in this affair if you can. I am a little tired of typewriting."

“And I’m sick of seeing you banging away at the beastly thing!” Pryde declared. “Why do I seem such an ogre to you, Grace? Why can’t you marry me?”

She looked across at him inscrutably. There was no smile upon her lips, no frown upon her forehead. The woman in her seemed hidden. It was the expression which he most hated. “What, a poor little typist,” she murmured, “without a penny in the world, marry a rich and noble gentleman like you? It really couldn’t be thought of!”

“You little idiot!” he cried. “Can’t you see more than a yard in front of you? You seem to live in a silly fog. Can’t you understand that if you give me yourself, you give me something more precious than every penny I have in the world, every possession that could ever come to me?”

She went on looking at him. To all appearances her expression was unchanged, and yet, somehow, her eyes seemed to grow larger and softer. “Ah!” she said, “if I believed that it was possible for me to give myself like that!”

Pryde found it a little difficult to make much headway with Hedda Kleian. She gave one look at him on taking her place, at his immaculate clothes, his brown moustache and fresh, open complexion, his carefully brushed hair and manicured nails, and seemed forthwith to banish him from her thoughts. She replied only vaguely to his attempts at polite conversation. Pryde had to content himself with watching her. She was certainly rather a striking figure. In a gathering where too many of the women were disposed to appear in dresses cut a little too low and of colours a shade too violent, and with coiffures much too professional, she struck a note of careless and natural simplicity which was, in its way, remarkably effective. Disdaining the conventions which required her to display a certain portion of her person, she wore a high-backed black dress. Her ornaments consisted simply of a long chain of blue and black beads. Her hair—great folds there were of silky black hair—was simply coiled around her head and allowed to droop a little behind in long, natural plaits, undecorated in any way. Her figure, although she chose to conceal it, was obviously magnificent. Her cheeks were pale, her lips full and red, her eyes long and of a peculiar shade of dark blue. She ate scarcely anything, and although she ordered wine, she only sipped it. She had looked round the room at first with much curiosity, which by degrees disappeared. It was obvious to Pryde that she was rapidly becoming bored.

“I wonder why you came?” he asked her suddenly, when they were half-way through dinner.

She turned her head a little lazily. "Why shouldn't I?" she retorted. "The Wanderers' Club is supposed to appeal to all of artistic and Bohemian tastes. I am, I believe, an artist. I am certainly a Bohemian. What are you?"

"Neither," he answered promptly. "I am one of those who have come to see the people who aren't here."

She looked at his name on the plan. "A title too!" she murmured.

"Quite a recent affair," Pryde assured her. "I am scarcely used to it myself yet."

"Well," she remarked, "I came here to meet new types. I try to live a broad life. It doesn't do to shut anything out, does it?"

He smiled as though amused. "They told me that I should find you intelligent, Miss Kleian," he said. "I am almost afraid they were right."

"Don't you like intelligent people?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Intelligence," he pronounced, "is nearly always self-conscious. I think if I could find an intelligent person who was ignorant of the fact, it might be interesting."

"Go on," she begged. "Amplify your remark."

"To tell you the truth," he continued. "I am rather sick of reading about you. Are you fond of advertisement? One reads everywhere that, notwithstanding your profession, which from a suburban point of view is still supposed to lead to free love and through the gates of hell, you eat nothing but bread and drink nothing but water. And you live among a little community who share everything they possess, who make war upon the rich, and pat the starving on the back. It sounds so very much like a pose."

For the first time her features lightened. Something that was a little repellent in the hard immobility of her face gave way altogether. She smiled, and Pryde knew that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"After all, I was wrong about you," she declared, looking at him critically. "You look much too perfect to be anything but dull."

"I am particular about my clothes and my person," he replied, "because it is part of my philosophy. What is your philosophy, Miss Kleian?"

"Come and have lessons," she suggested. "You look to me just the sort of person to embrace the primitive life."

"I do it once a year at Carlsbad," he sighed.

"It can be done just as easily in Bermondsey," she assured him.

He drew out his notebook. "Time and place, please, for my first lesson?" he begged.

She hesitated. Once more she turned her head slightly. "How do I know that you are in earnest?"

"How do you know that I exist?" he replied. "Nothing has ever been proved or is really apparent except that this is a bad dinner. That doesn't

trouble you much, I see. However, if you've any doubts about me, let me assure you that I am in earnest. I have been tired of the level ways for a long time. Show me a better system of life, and I will embrace it. They tell me that you have royal princes serving you like beggars and members of Parliament worshipping at your shrine. There ought to be a place for me."

"Will you wear the cap and bells?" she asked.

"If I may shake the bells and doff the cap for your pleasure," he answered.

"The first lesson you will have to learn," she said deliberately, "is that in all the highest forms of altruism, personal—that is to say, individual—feelings must be abnegated."

"That sounds difficult," Pryde admitted. "Do you mean that I am at liberty to feel only the same towards you as towards the old dowager opposite with the false front?"

She laughed softly. "You are applying a great principle to a ridiculous example," she declared. "Never mind, I see that there are hopes of you. We have the usual passion, you see, for converts. You can accompany me home this evening, if you like. I will show you the beginnings."

Pryde was careful not to show too much exultation, and a little later on they left the place together. She frowned when she saw his motor-car draw up before the door.

"I do not like private vehicles," she observed. "I should have preferred an omnibus."

"I don't happen to have one," Pryde rejoined. "Where shall I tell him to go?"

She gave him an address in Bermondsey. Pryde repeated it to the chauffeur and became for a moment thoughtful. She peered at him through half-closed eyes—a little way she had—as though, notwithstanding her wonderful eyes, she were shortsighted.

"You seem to recognise the address," she remarked.

"I went there once to call upon Mr. Cammerley."

"So you know Philip Cammerley—you!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know," she answered, with a little laugh. "Somehow or other, you seem to me to-night to represent so perfectly the other things."

"What is it that you represent, I wonder?" he demanded. "I have read a good deal of what the critics have said about you. Are you just a clever *poseuse*, an actress in a new rôle. Or are you really and absolutely sincere, an enthusiast—a prophetess, as one of the newspapers described you?"

"Whatever you may believe of me," she replied, "believe at least this—I am sincere. The stage has no glamour for me. I act in no play whose

teaching is not our teaching. I act for our cause and for our cause alone. There are many who can write. There are not so many who can reach the people just in the way that I reach them.”

“Are you married?” Pryde asked a little bluntly.

She peered at him again, laughing all the time. “I married! How foolish! I am a sister to all the men who are of our cause. Marriage is not for the toilers.”

Pryde scratched his chin for a moment thoughtfully. “Do you ever have any trouble with your—your brothers?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Naturally,” she replied. “We have so many converts, so many who are learning. See, we have arrived. Now I am going to keep you only a very few minutes to-night. I am going to show you just one or two rooms. If you want to learn more, you must come again, or attend some of our outside lectures.”

They had stopped outside the house in Denman Street. She unfastened the door with a key which she carried. Pryde saw at once that many changes had taken place inside. She passed down a broad and lofty passage, plainly furnished, and ushered him into a long room at the back of the house. There were two tables, covered with green baize, and with sufficient space to accommodate forty or fifty people sitting side by side. About a dozen people were there now, reading. Every chair was just the same. There was a queer monotony of furniture and appointments. The room had somehow a monastic air.

“This,” she explained, “is our common room. We each have our place at one of these tables, balloted for every week. We take our meals here, afterwards we bring down our books and read. The only private rooms in the place are our bedrooms. It is here that we spend our time. We do not believe in solitude.”

“Very interesting,” Pryde remarked. “Who are these people?”

There were seven or eight men, mostly youths, seated about, some reading, some writing. There were also four or five girls similarly engaged. They were all very plainly dressed, anæmic, and with the air of the enthusiast.

“These are some of the members of our little society,” Hedda Kleian said.

“Are they all English?” Pryde asked.

“Most of them,” she answered.

“The young man opposite to me, for instance,” Pryde remarked, motioning with his head towards a fair young man of stolid appearance, sitting a little apart from the others, with a pile of books before him, from

which he had looked up at their entrance. His eyes now were riveted upon Hedda Kleian. She smiled at him.

“That,” she whispered, “is one of our newest converts. No, he is not English.”

“What is his name?”

“It does not matter,” she answered softly. “We know one another here mostly by our Christian names. I call him Francis. We have a lecture-room at the back, where every night for half an hour one of us speaks. It is closed now.”

“But do you mean to say,” Pryde asked, “that you have only a bedroom besides this common room?”

“That is all.”

“But where do you study your parts?”

“In here,” she replied. “Why not? Company is good for us. It is good even for our work. There is nothing so bad as solitude.”

“It looks very interesting,” Pryde declared, “and sounds very interesting. I suppose you live for the good of one another?”

“We live for the good of the future race,” she told him. “That is the only way it is possible to live. The pathway to happiness is too long a one for us ever to reach the goal. We can only make the way a little easier for those who come afterwards.”

“At any cost?”

“At any cost.”

“May I come in to one of the lectures?” he asked, as they passed back into the hall.

She shook her head. “Those are only for the society,” she replied. “The lectures for those who wish to consider our doctrines are free to the public. I will give you a syllabus, if you like, before you go.”

The door of the room which Pryde had known as Mr. Cammerley’s study was suddenly opened. Mr. Cammerley himself stood on the threshold.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “I thought that I recognized the voice! Our friend Pryde, I think?”

Pryde nodded. “I never expected,” he remarked coolly, “to find myself once more under your hospitable roof. Miss Kleian, however, has been explaining to me some of your new theories.”

“Miss Kleian probably did not know much about her pupil,” Mr. Cammerley rejoined dryly. “Please to step inside for a moment; and you, too, Hedda.”

Pryde hesitated for a moment. The front door was conveniently close, and Mr. Cammerley’s invitation was scarcely an auspicious one. Nevertheless, he accepted it. Hedda Kleian followed the two men in.

“I am afraid, Hedda, that you have made a little mistake to-night,” Mr. Cammerley observed. “This man whom you have brought here is not the simple person he looks. I regret to tell you that Mr. Pryde is a journalist and a spy.”

She seemed suddenly to dilate. Her eyes blazed.

“Not only that,” Mr. Cammerley continued, “but I think I can tell you just what has brought him. Has he seen into the common room?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Then he has seen Francis,” Mr. Cammerley said quietly. “I have no doubt, then, that he has achieved the first part of his visit here. Is that not so, Mr. Pryde?”

Pryde shook his head. “My visit was merely one of curiosity,” he replied. “I sat next Miss Kleian at the Wanderers’ dinner. I accepted her invitation to come here.”

“And to-morrow, I presume,” Mr. Cammerley remarked, “we shall find a sensational article in the newspapers—‘A Royal Prince Turned Socialist!’”

“Have you a royal prince here?” Pryde asked calmly.

Mr. Cammerley kicked a footstool which was close to him. Then he took Pryde by the arm and led him to the front door. “You and I once made a little bargain,” he said. “We have both kept our words. Now let me give you a piece of advice. Keep outside these doors. If you make any attempt to communicate with any person resident here—I am not referring to Miss Kleian, of course—it will be the worse for you.”

“There can be no occasion,” Hedda Kleian pronounced slowly, “for Sir Stephen Pryde to communicate with me. As a commonplace young man of fashion, as I thought him at first, he failed to interest me. I gave him credit merely for an inquiring disposition. As a journalistic spy I have nothing but contempt for him.”

“Thanks so much,” Pryde murmured, as he stepped into the car. “Anyway, it has been a most delightful evening!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE PRINCE WHO RAN AWAY

For the next three nights Pryde and Grace occupied stalls in the Bijou Theatre, and came to the simultaneous decision that Hedda Kleian was at least a great actress. The audiences, however, were anything but large. The play which she was presenting was gloomy and pessimistic. Nothing but the art of the woman had saved it from being classed among the failures. On the third night, Pryde, discovered Francis in the back row of the stalls. He followed him upstairs into the refreshment-room after the first act, and addressed him as casually as possible.

“Saw you down at Bermondsey the other night, didn’t I?”

The young man looked at his questioner suspiciously. He was in the act of raising a glass of beer to his lips. “I do not remember that I did see you there,” he replied stiffly.

“Miss Kleian brought me in—Monday night it was. She also told me, or rather Mr. Cammerley did, who you were.”

The young man finished his beer. “Ah!” he said. It was obvious that he was disinclined to enter into conversation.

Pryde adopted bolder tactics. “My young friend,” he continued, “do you know that a commission of Socialists from your country are on their way here to make you a presentation, to shake you by the hand, and to beg you to return and live among them?”

The young man set down his empty glass. He was genuinely alarmed. “But,” he protested, “I do not wish to see them. It is here I have decided to live.”

“That’s all very well,” Pryde remarked, “but they are scarcely likely to let you alone, are they? Will you take another bottle of this excellent beer with me?”

“So!” the young man assented.

Pryde gave the order. A moment or two later the young man, after some hesitation, thrust his hand into his pocket, drew out a folded slip of paper, and passed it to Pryde.

“Perhaps,” he said, “you can tell me something about this.”

Pryde opened the slip of paper and read:

“If you wish to know something of the real life of Hedda Kleian, you should pay a visit, any afternoon between two and four, to Miss Grace Burton, number 32A Colmayne Court Mansions.”

Pryde read these few words without any show of surprise, although he recognized Grace’s handwriting at once. Then he handed it back to the young man.

“I should go,” he advised.

“I shall not go,” was the stubborn reply. “If anyone should speak things of her which were not beautiful to listen to, then I think that, whether it were a man or a woman, I should twist his neck. So I will not go. So!”

He disposed of the second glass of beer and rose. He quitted Pryde with a ceremonious bow.

“I return to my place,” he announced. “Good evening, sir!”

Pryde returned to his seat a few minutes later.

“Seen His Royal Highness?” Grace whispered.

Pryde nodded. “Also your note to him.”

“I thought he might show it to you.”

“Why this secrecy?” Pryde demanded.

“Just a little lesson to you,” she answered. “You were getting a trifle uppish about this affair, you know. So clever of you, wasn’t it, to go down to Bermondsey with her and see what she chose to show you?”

They watched the play for a few moments. Its interest, indeed, was compelling. Then Pryde turned once more to his companion.

“Do you mean to say that there is really something in her life, something which she keeps in the background?” he asked.

“Of course there is!” Grace assured him.

Pryde sighed. “Well,” he declared, “I must confess that I shouldn’t have believed it.”

“Tell me what he said about my message?” Grace asked abruptly.

“He showed it me and then tore it up,” Pryde replied. “I don’t think that anything would shake his faith in her.”

“He will not come, then?”

“He will not.”

They waited until the close of the performance. They saw Francis walking up and down outside the stage-door, waiting. A few minutes later, they saw Hedda Kleian come out, saw the brilliant smile with which she greeted him, saw her take his arm. They watched the two walk slowly up to the Strand together, and wait for an omnibus.

“I don’t understand this affair,” Pryde confessed. “Why he’s madly in earnest! She could do what she liked with him. See what he has given up, what he does for her sake! And they go home together in an omnibus! She must be honest!”

“Such a masculine point of view!” Grace murmured. “This just proves how excellent a thing a partnership is. You know, there is the man’s point of view and the woman’s point of view in every phase of life.”

Pryde met Mr. Philip Cammerley, M.P., the next day in Westminster. The meeting was an accidental one, although as a matter of fact Pryde had wasted a good deal of time in manœuvring for it. Mr. Cammerley, brought to a standstill, thrust his hands into the loose pockets of his coat, and from under his slouch hat frowned heavily.

“What do you want with me, sir?” he asked. “Any new schemes, eh?”

“Always full of them,” Pryde replied cheerfully. “Not quite so daring as some of yours, perhaps, but still full of interest.”

Mr. Cammerley’s thin lip curled. “Why do you stop me?” he demanded. “I don’t like you. You have made yourself on more than one occasion an unmitigated nuisance to me. I haven’t the least desire for any association with you or your friends.”

“You are unfair, Mr. Cammerley,” Pryde expostulated. “As a matter of fact, I stopped you to offer a little piece of information. Do you know that Breitmann and two others of the Socialist party of his country will be in England within forty-eight hours, here to visit you and to find out for themselves whether these rumours about your latest disciple are the truth?”

Cammerley frowned heavily. “I heard something of it,” he muttered. “I don’t know how it came to your ears.”

“That doesn’t matter much, does it?” Pryde continued. “Their object is plain enough. They want to take the young man back to his own country and make use of him there. Rather a loss for you that would be, wouldn’t it? I know they’ve stopped all the money they can, but there’s still enough coming in to run the show down at Bermondsey.”

Mr. Cammerley’s eyes flashed. “What the devil has all this to do with you, sir?” he demanded.

“Nothing in the world,” Pryde admitted. “The only thing is I thought I’d give you a tip. So long as you keep Hedda Kleian, you’ll keep the prince.”

“You call that a tip!” Cammerley growled. “Any fool can see that. And now, young man since you think yourself so clever, I’ll tell you something. They’d like to get him back again in his own country, a prince of the royal house. Very well. Supposing they succeeded, this is the truth. It isn’t only we poor sufferers fighting the masters of the world with nothing but our brains, fighting against the landlords, the millionaires, the aristocracy—it isn’t we

only who sometimes take the sheath from our knives and strike. I tell you that if he goes back to his country with these men, he will not live a month."

"Why not?" Pryde asked. "Who will hurt him?"

"The aristocrats," Cammerley declared bitterly, "the patriotic party. They wouldn't dare to face the possibility of a people's man coming to the throne. They wouldn't dare to face it. Oh, they've their creatures, hirelings, who kill for gold! When we kill, Sir Stephen Pryde, and we kill when we think it our duty to, we do it for the sake of our principles."

Mr. Cammerley passed on, and Pryde went thoughtfully towards his club. He happened to meet Sir James in Whitehall, and they stopped to talk for a few minutes.

"Any luck at all?" the latter asked anxiously.

Pryde nodded. "If I get him to the embassy with me," he said slowly, "his own embassy, that's enough, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," Sir James replied. "We tried to get him there in a good many ways before I spoke to you."

"There's just a chance," Pryde remarked. "I can't say much about it. It's Miss Burton's idea. Probably next Sunday."

Sir James's face brightened. "Look here, Pryde," he said. "I can quite understand that the financial side of this matter may have ceased to attract you. But there's Miss Burton to be considered, and, I can't tell, but if this should come off I might have something to suggest that even you would find interesting."

"Right, sir," Pryde answered cheerily. "I think we'll bring this off."

Nevertheless, it was not to be an easy task. Pryde was at the theatre again that night, and talked for some time with Francis without making much progress. The young man, indeed, was becoming suspicious.

"I do not understand," he said, "why you do come here so often. Is it that you also admire this wonderful lady?"

"I think her acting is marvellous," Pryde declared.

Francis called for more beer. "It is not her acting," he insisted. "It is herself. It is she who is so wonderful. All day she dreams and plans for the betterment of the world. Of herself she thinks nothing ever. She makes us all seem so weak, so selfish, and yet one must adore."

"One must," Pryde admitted. "By the by, did you know that that deputation of Socialists from your country was calling on you on Sunday?"

"I did not know," Francis replied. "I shall hide."

"Come and motor with me," Pryde suggested. "I'll take you away in the country."

The young man shook his head. "They tell me not to trust you," he remarked. "They all believe that you have some scheme of your own. They

think that you are trying to get me to return to my country. It is so foolish. Still, if it pleases you to waste your time, who should object? Only I will not go motoring with you on Sunday.”

“All right,” Pryde answered, “stay and meet Breitmann and the rest of them. They are going to prove to you that it is your plain and simple duty to return to your own country, and to make converts there.”

The young man moved uneasily in his chair. “I shall stay where I am,” he declared.

“Will you come with me a little way,” Pryde asked, “if I promise, on my word of honour—you understand, my honour?—to take you back to Bermondsey at any hour you choose during the afternoon?”

The young man hesitated. “Your word of honour?” he repeated.

“Absolutely,” Pryde assured him.

“Very well, I will come,” the young man assented. “I do not know why you do want me on those terms. Perhaps I shall find out. But to your word of honour I will trust.”

Pryde found his guest waiting for him by Guy’s Hospital on the following Sunday morning. The young man stopped the motor-car by holding out both hands, and clambering in rapidly.

“It will be well to turn round and go quickly,” he announced. “The deputation arrived just as I left. I did descend by the back window.”

Pryde turned, and they soon left Bermondsey behind them. “You do not mind a young lady joining us—a great friend of mine?” Pryde asked.

“It will be a pleasure,” the young man replied. “I am not unsociable. I like to welcome everyone.”

They picked up Grace at the flats, and struck out for the country. The prince enjoyed himself immensely.

“It is perhaps selfish of me, this,” he remarked once. “There was work to be done and a lecture, but it is a beautiful holiday. Sundays, too, are dreary days.”

“Hedda Kleian is not often there on a Sunday, is she?” Pryde asked.

The young man shook his head sorrowfully. “She goes to see an aged mother,” he announced, “who has, alas! no sympathy with the truth. Without her the whole place seems gloomy. The work palls. One even ventures sometimes to doubt. When she is there, the sun shines. Then one sees all things clearly.”

Pryde nodded. “Hers is a wonderful personality,” he declared.

The young man’s face glowed. “She is marvellous,” he said in an almost awed tone. “She is wonderful. She thinks of herself never. It is always for the great good of the world. She forgets herself. She seems sometimes to

have no real existence. Her eyes are fixed upwards. She soars always. One is happy to hold her fingers and be lifted with her. She is a prophetess.”

They came back to London about one o'clock.

“I am hungry,” the prince confessed frankly.

“We will lunch very soon,” Pryde told him. “Just for a moment we must call here.”

The car had pulled up at the corner of a street in an outlying suburb.

“We all descend here for a minute,” Pryde said. “Come along. Will you help Miss Burton, Mr. Francis?”

“Do I get out also?” the prince asked.

“For five minutes only,” Pryde begged. “I promise you it shall not be longer.”

The prince, who seemed to have gained confidence in his companions, obeyed. They proceeded a short distance down the street. Then Pryde pushed open the little wooden gate of one of the small houses, walked up the path, and turned the handle of the front door.

“Come this way,” he directed, leading the way down a narrow hall.

Both followed close on his heels. A servant, capless and hot, as though straight from the kitchen stared at them open-mouthed. Pryde pushed open the door of the dining-room. He gripped the prince by the arm.

“Prince,” he said, “you find it dull to spend your Sunday without a glimpse of Hedda Kleian. You see, I have taken pity on you. There are Hedda Kleian and Hedda Kleian's husband and Hedda Kleian's two children and Hedda Kleian's sister.”

There was a moment's silence. They were standing upon the threshold of a small dining-room, poorly furnished with a cheap mahogany suite which showed signs of wear. There was linoleum upon the floor in place of carpet, linoleum sparsely covered with a faded rug. At a table in the middle of the room was seated a man apparently about thirty-five years of age, a Jew, with black moustache and pale heavy face. Beside him was Hedda; on the other side were two children, sharp-featured, sallow, yet with wonderful eyes. Another woman, like Hedda, only stouter and coarser, made up the party. It was a very commonplace little gathering, sitting down to a very commonplace midday Sunday meal. Only, with the coming of these three people, a note of tragedy seemed to creep into the room. Hedda rose slowly from her place. The prince was shaking.

“You!” she exclaimed. “You!”

Even in those few seconds the prince seemed to have lost his colour. His lips and voice shook, he gripped at Pryde. His eyes were fixed upon Hedda Kleian.

“Your children?” he cried falteringly. “Your husband? Yours?”

She stood quite still. Then she looked from Pryde to Grace, and the truth seemed to dawn upon her. She came towards Francis.

“So they have dragged my little secret up to the light, dear brother!” she exclaimed. “Well, what does it matter? I can be still to you and to the others what I have always been.”

“Why have you made a mystery of this?” he asked hoarsely.

“You ask me that!” she replied. “Would you be in Bermondsey to-day if you had known the truth? Would those others listen to me and think me wonderful if they knew that I was married to a tailor, and that I had children? Yet these things do not alter me. They do not alter anything.”

One of the children began to cry. The man was frowning—the beef in front of him was getting cold.

“Come, come,” he said. “Hedda, cannot your friends choose another time to call? What does it all mean?”

The prince gripped Pryde by the arm. “Let us go,” he muttered hoarsely. “I must think.”

Hedda made no attempt to stop them.

Pryde directed his chauffeur to drive to the Carlton. “We will now lunch,” he said, “like civilised persons. Prince, if I have played a trick upon you, I have had justification. A moderate amount of those teachings is a splendid adjunct to our other thoughts. A great ruler is none the worse for having lived for a little time with the people. But extremes are bad.”

The young man said little. He was very depressed for some time. Only when they reached the Carlton he cheered up.

“I am hungry,” he remarked, with satisfaction.

They lunched at some length. After they had finished they found a comfortable corner in the palm-court. Then Pryde touched his companion on the arm. The prince was smoking an enormous cigar and drinking liqueurs freely.

“I am ready,” Pryde announced, “to keep my word and take you back to Bermondsey. Or, if you would like a change, why not call round at your own embassy? Wallenstein’s nephew is there. He is giving a little party to-night at the Savoy—a rather Bohemian affair, I am afraid, but I know they are looking for you. You had better make friends with your ambassador first. Your clothes are all there.”

The young man drew a long sigh. “Very well,” he declared. “I shall be a Socialist no longer. It is agreed.”

That night Grace and Pryde dined with Sir James at his great house in Portman Square. Afterwards they sat in his library for an hour. When the time came for them to say farewell he spoke seriously.

“Sir Stephen,” he said, “and you, Miss Burton, this is the third occasion on which you have both been of signal service to me. I see before us a time in which troubles may be frequent. Let me make a proposition to you.”

“To us both?” Pryde asked.

“To you both,” Sir James answered. “There is a little house in Pont Street belonging to the government, it has been occupied before by those who have been useful to us. It is vacant now. I need help which you two could give me. Why not give up your connection with Scotland Yard altogether? Let them see their way through their own troubles. Diplomacy may sometimes seem more trival, but in the end it is more fascinating. If—if one of you,” Sir James went on hesitatingly, “could set up housekeeping there, and the other one be a frequent visitor, perhaps it might be managed that way. I should want you always at my beck and call. The house and servants and three thousand a year. There, I say no more now. Let me know to-morrow.”

They drove home together. Grace took her place in the car with a curious little hesitation. She sat upright, looking very still and white. She kept her head turned away from Pryde. Yet when his fingers touched hers, almost by accident, she did not withdraw them.

“Grace!” he begged.

The streets were almost empty. A slight rain was falling, and Pryde pulled up all the windows. He leaned a little towards her. The hand which he still held, which he was holding for longer than he had held it before in his life, seemed very cold. For the first time it was passive. He leaned closer to her. She was trembling.

“Grace!” he said again.

She turned her head. Her eyes were full of tears, her lips were quivering. “Oh, I am so foolish!” she murmured. “I didn’t mean—you can’t want me really.”

His arms were around her, and her head dropped on his shoulder. “Little lady,” he whispered, “I have wanted you so badly that nothing else has seemed worth while. I have wanted you so badly that I haven’t enjoyed a day of my prosperity. I have done nothing but want you and think of you. Tell me that my time has come now?”

Her face was hidden. She attempted no reply; it scarcely seemed necessary.

“We will keep house together in Pont Street,” he concluded, “and we will teach the world to forget Machiavelli.”

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Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

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Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

2022 Feb. 13 added a missing double-quote and 'I here' should be 'There'.

[The end of *The Amazing Partnership* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]