

THE STOLEN MARCH



DORNFORD
YATES



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THE BROTHER OF DAPHNE
THE COURTS OF IDLENESS
AND FIVE WERE FOOLISH
AS OTHER MEN ARE
THE STOLEN MARCH
MAIDEN STAKES
BLIND CORNER
PERISHABLE GOODS
BLOOD ROYAL
FIRE BELOW
SAFE CUSTODY
STORM MUSIC
SHE FELL AMONG THIEVES
SHE PAINTED HER FACE
THIS PUBLICAN
GALE WARNING
SHOAL WATER
PERIOD STUFF
AN EYE FOR A TOOTH

THE STOLEN MARCH

BY
DORNFORD YATES

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TO
MY DOG

*WHOSE PLACE WILL ALWAYS BE
EMPTY
BECAUSE
HE MADE AND HELD IT AFTER HIS
OWN HEART
AND
THE LOVELY SECRET DIED WITH
HIM.*

PREFACE

I HAVE always held that the old duke of Shakespeare's *AS YOU LIKE IT* had the best of it. Certainly, Jaques' deer did not speak; but times have changed, and Etchechuria is more secure than was the Forest of Arden. And that brings me to my point. Who, if he could, would not visit that country sidelights upon whose history may be found in the Nursery Rhymes? Who would not have a drink with a King that wore his crown all the time, photograph The House that Jack built, and accept a bag full of wool from Black Sheep himself? I am told that this is an original idea. I beg leave to differ. It is as old as the hills; but, once we come to years of discretion, we are taught to put it out of our heads. Why? The child, that goes to Paris remembers little but the colour of the taxis, the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli and, if somebody rich enough is dead, the Madeleine swathed in crape. Yet there are other things in Paris, as he will find when he comes to man's estate. All, then, that I have done is to revisit Etchechuria—and that, in the company of Pomfret Tudor, who, if ever there was one, is a man of the world. That he enjoyed his adventure there can be no doubt. It is my great hope that such as set their feet in his footprints will do the same.

DORNFORD YATES.

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THE STOLEN MARCH

CHAPTER I

THE OPEN ROAD

“IF you simply must know,” said Patricia, “I sold my rings.”

Simon lay back on his pillows and closed his eyes.

His wife put up a hand and touched his hair.

“I sold my rings,” she said gently, “to save your life. Was that such a great thing to do? My husband . . . my man . . . the only thing in my world was terribly ill. If he was to live, he must have the very best that money could buy. The doctors said so. And we hadn’t the money to buy the very best. Was I to fold my hands and let you die—see my world go west for a couple of rings?”

“Oh, no,” said Simon wearily. “If it was me or the rings, the rings were bound to go. But you had so few nice things—because you would marry me. And the thought that I’ve pouched——”

The cool hand slid over his mouth.

“Is there one law for you and another for me? Once, before we were married, when I was engaged to be married to somebody else, I seem to remember you paid ten thous——”

“Hush,” said Simon, avoiding the little palm. “Between friends . . .”

“Aren’t we still friends, my darling?”

Simon lifted his head, and husband and wife looked each other in the eyes. And there, I suppose, each found something which was above rubies, for presently they smiled very tenderly, and Patricia rose and kissed him upon the lips.

Mr. and Mrs. Beaulieu had been married for just six months. Of these the first four had been most happy. With marriage had come a poverty such as the girl had not dreamed of and Simon had never known, but the two had seen it coming and laughed it to scorn. This derision was sound. ‘Out of the eater came forth meat.’ Their love, being proof against the assault of indigence, began to wax fat upon the discipline which it imposed. Their little

flat at Chartres, the earnings of Simon's pen, the ritual of housekeeping, their humble extravagances, the prospective possession of a baby car, above all, the absence of any company except their own—these things and others drew the two closer together than could have any stalled ox. Each found the married state a privy pleasure, happily walled against a staggering world.

So for four months.

Then Simon had fallen sick of typhoid fever.

Not until he was seriously ill had the disease been recognized. Instantly Patricia, steady-eyed as ever, but actually frightened to death, had wired for an ambulance and taken him straight to a Paris nursing-home. But for her action the wife must have been a widow. The fever was followed by inflammation of the lungs. . . .

But now all that was over. Death had slunk back to his kennel, and, if the weather held, Simon was to drive out in two days' time.

"To-morrow," announced Patricia, seating herself on the bed, "to-morrow I go to Chartres. Only for the day, of course. But there's work to be done."

Her husband opened his eyes.

"What work, my lady?"

Patricia regarded her beautiful finger-nails.

"This morning," she said, "I had a talk with Durand."

Simon frowned.

"What did he say?"

"He said that you had the finest constitution of any man or woman he'd ever seen, but he added that such an illness must leave its mark." Simon shifted uneasily. "He says there's no reason on earth, if we do as he says, why in a year's time you shouldn't be stronger than before, but—but one of your lungs is touched, dear, and we've got to go South." Simon groaned. "Southern, mountainous air and an outdoor life—that's his prescription."

"On three hundred pounds a year?"

"I didn't go into details, but he volunteered that the nearer we got to Nature the better we'd be. His words were, 'The age is against you, because it's a luxurious age. If you could live like the gipsies . . .' He stopped there and threw his hands up in the air. I made him go on. 'What if we could?' I

said. He drew himself up and bowed. ‘Madam,’ he said, ‘for you the world would become the Garden of Eden, and all who saw you would think you were Adam and Eve.’ ”

Simon fingered his chin, with a light in his eyes.

“‘Under the greenwood tree,’ ” he murmured. “‘Viewed from this luxurious apartment, it’s an attractive idea.’ ”

“I may as well say,” said Patricia, “that I’m simply crazy to try.” Her tone was vibrant. “I’ve thought it all out, Simon. A tiny car and a tent and the open road. South by easy stages—go as you please. Spring’s here and Summer is coming, and the Winter’s far enough off to look out for itself. Besides, by then—who knows? And we’d live more cheaply like that than any way I know.”

“I agree,” said Simon, “once we’ve got the car. But there goes a hundred at least, if we don’t want junk.”

“If we could let the flat. . . .”

“We ought to do that on our heads, but we shan’t get a hundred down. Never mind. A car’s not essential. We don’t want to rush. But I don’t think we ought to ramble into the blue. I know Winter’s six months off, but——”

“Supposing we aimed for—for Etchechuria.”

“Etchechuria?” said Simon. “What do you know of Etchechuria?”

“Nothing, my dear,” said Patricia, “except that it’s mountainous and south. That’s why I want to go.” Her voice began to tremble and she laid a hand on his knee. “I believe it’s wonderful, Simon. I met a man once who’d been there. He was very quiet about it, but he said he was going back. And when I said ‘Why?’ he laughed. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘I’ve a weakness for fairy-tales.’ ”

“I can’t equal that,” said Simon, with his eyes on the eager face. “But I’ve heard of it vaguely, you know. I always had an idea it was really only a name, the ancient name of a tract between France and Spain that was once a No Man’s Land, but was swallowed up years ago by one or the other or both.”

Patricia shook her head.

“He said he’d been there,” she insisted. “And he wasn’t pulling my leg. And he said there weren’t any railways or even roads. But, I tell you, he wouldn’t talk, and I never saw him again.”

"That's good enough," said Simon. "When can we start?"

"You like the idea?"—anxiously.

"My darling, the germ of adventure is in my blood. It only wants waking up. And now you've done it. I'm all agog an' stampin' to take the road."

Before the girl could reply, came a knock on the door.

"Durand," said Simon.

Patricia slid down from the bed. . . .

"Ah, doctor," said Simon, "come in. How soon shall I be well?"

The doctor smiled. Then he turned to Patricia.

"You have told him what I recommend?"

"I have told him everything."

"Good," said Durand, sitting down by the side of the bed. "And how do you like my orders?"

"Sleepin' out?" said Simon. "It'll suit me down to the ground. Can I go forth to-morrow? We want to choose a tent."

"No," said Durand. "You may not. And when you do you are not going to choose any tent. If you did, you would be choosing your tomb. The summer is coming. Oh, yes. And supposing it rains. When you put up your tent in the rain you do not dry the earth."

"Then how——"

"Listen. It is this very thing that I have come for. Well, now, if you like; I have a friend. He is a rich American, and I will tell you what he has got. I know because I have seen it. A caravan. It has a kitchen and a bathroom, and you drag it behind a car. He will never use it, of course. He bought it for a whim. Now, if you like, I shall ask him to lend it to you. You see, you must 'ave the air, but still you must care for yourself until you are strong. And I do not want you to go to any hotel. They are all full of germs and steam-heat. And a tent is the devil for a man in your state."

The Beaulieus regarded each other.

"It's awfully kind of you, doctor," said Patricia slowly. "Most awfully kind, but just at the moment I'm afraid we haven't a car."

"But——"

“Or a chauffeur,” said Simon swiftly. “An’ with me on light duty a chauffeur ‘d be a necessity. Besides, you’d want the deuce of a powerful car.”

“But there is a car to the van,” cried Durand. “But of course, it is specially made, with great cushions behind—*tampons* and very low gears. And it makes a bed for the chauffeur. You never saw such comfort. I tell you it is *de luxe*. And my friend would send a chauffeur certainly. He has ten or twelve. I should not ask him without, because to be responsible for such an elephant would spoil everything.”

Again the Beaulieus sought each other’s eyes.

At length—

“Well,” said Simon, “if you really think he’d be inclined to befriend two complete strangers to this amazing extent——”

“I have only to ask him.”

“—for perhaps a month. . . .”

“A month? A year if you please. He will never use it. Then that is a good thing settled. And it is a fine time of year to take the road. You must make South, of course.”

“That’s right,” said Patricia. “We thought of going to Etchechuria.”

The doctor sat up.

“Etchechuria?” he said, and laughed. “An ideal place—if you can find it. I have certainly seen it printed on a very old map, but I am afraid it does not exist anywhere else. In France we call it ‘The Lost Country.’ Still, it was well situated, and while you are looking for it your husband will become well. And the longer you look, the better he will be.”

“I believe it is to be found,” said Patricia stoutly. “I once met an Englishman who said he’d been there.”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“I know,” he said, “there are tales. But—I do not want to dash your hopes—but I think it is fabulous. You cannot hide five thousand square kilometres in Southern Europe to-day. It is unthinkable.”

“No harm in looking,” said Simon doggedly.

“On the contrary, a great deal of good. The air down there is the best for you in the world, and if you are looking for countries, you must be out of

doors.”

Patricia laughed.

“Doctor Durand,” she said, “don’t shatter our dreams. Admit there’s a shred of mystery still clinging to the name.”

The doctor removed his pince-nez and weighed them upon his palm.

“Listen,” he said. “I am a practical man and I do not believe that Etchechuria exists. It existed once, of course: that can be proved. It was once a little country between France and Spain: but, instead of being conquered, it gradually lost its—its individuality. Its people intermarried with the Spaniards and the French: its boundaries began to disappear: France gradually advanced from the North and Spain from the South until at last they met, and Etchechuria was gone. That is my belief. . . . Still, there is one strange thing.” He hesitated. Then he sat back and crossed his legs. “You ask for a shred of mystery. Well, here it is. In England you have no frontiers, but it is different with us. Now, when a survey of France has been made, the officials who have surveyed the frontier exchange their conclusions with those who have surveyed the frontier from the opposite side, to see that their measurements shall agree at the border-line. That is easy to understand. Very well. Now, this I know—that our surveyors and the Spaniards’ cannot agree. I know that at one point in the mountains there is a long discrepancy between the two surveys for which nobody can account. Each set, of course, says it is the other’s fault. Each says the other has looked at the wrong peaks or something. Yet neither are fools, and, except at this one place, their conclusions agree.”

There was a silence.

Presently—

“That’s very strange,” said Simon. “Why don’t they go to the spot and fight it out?”

Durand shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

Then he rose to his feet.

“I cannot tell,” he said. “I can only suppose. Listen. If a tradesman sends you a bill, and when you read it you see that he has added badly and made a mistake in your favour, what do you do?”

“I point it out—like a fool.”

“Exactly,” said Doctor Durand, with his hand on the door. “But then you are not a patriotic surveyor about his country’s business.”

The next moment he was gone.

Simon stared at the door. Then he turned to Patricia with a bewildered air.

“Now, what on earth,” he said, “does he mean by that?”

“He must mean,” said Patricia, “that each country thinks that the other has made a mistake against itself. If it was the other way round, they’d raise Cain. But, as it is, each is perfectly happy to let the matter drop. What I can’t see is how any mistake in surveying can be for or against either side.”

With a far-away look in his eyes, Simon fingered his chin.

Suddenly his hand shot out.

“I’ve got it,” he cried. “Of course!”

“What?”

“Oh, hold me,” cried Simon. “It’s too wonderful. I can’t think how I’m so wise.”

Patricia was laughing and hanging on to his arm.

“Tell me, tell me.”

“Look here,” said Simon excitedly. “If France thought the Spanish surveyors had made a mistake about the frontier-line—set it too far from Madrid, France ‘d go off the deep end, wouldn’t she? And if Spain thought the French surveyors had set it too far South, Spain ‘d go up in smoke. But if France is perfectly satisfied that *Spain’s set it too far South* and if Spain is equally sure that *France has set it too far North*, each bein’ convinced that the other is doin’ his own crowd down, each of them laughs in his sleeve an’ says ‘*Tant mieux.*’ ”

“Yes, I see that. Go on.”

“Well, my lady, don’t scream, but *supposing they’re both of them right.*”

Patricia put a hand to her head.

“You mean . . .”

Simon leaned forward.

“If Spain is right in drawing the frontier-line five miles South of where France thinks it should be, and France is right in putting it five miles North

of where Spain thinks it should be, it follows that *there must exist five miles of No Man's Land.*"

Patricia clapped hands to her mouth and ceased to breathe.

"Oh, Simon," she whispered at length, "d'you think it's true?"

"My dear," said Simon, "I don't know. But as soon as ever I'm fit I'm—going—to—see."



Six weeks had gone by, and Mr. and Mrs. Beaulieu were on the open road.

June was in, after a weeping May, and the countryside was stuffed so full of time-honoured scents as to burst the fine green jacket she had of Spring.

If Simon was yet unsound, only a stethoscope could have perceived the fact. He lived and moved and looked as they did in the Eclogues.

Beaulieu was tall and well made, bearing himself upright yet easily, a notable figure of a man. He had a curious dignity of movement, going smoothly about his business with something of the calm confidence of the Persian cat. His thick hair was dark and carefully brushed: his eyes were clear and grey, and his voice pleasing: a very charming expression distinguished his clean-cut face. He was a man of principle and looked it: his courage was high and his manners were naturally handsome. He could be grave, much preferred to be gay, was frank with all the world and found unexpectedly childlike by those who knew him well. Yet it was hard to deceive him, for he walked with his eyes open and his ears pricked, and he had a trick of looking you full in the face with a steady, level gaze, which took some facing.

For all their eagerness to search for 'The Lost Country,' the two kept their fair heads. Etchecuria might be their goal, but, if the way there was rosy, to show impatience to arrive would be the act of a fool. Herrick knew.

They wandered along securely, making the most of their fortune and getting the best out of life.

The caravan had proved worthy of the astounding *ménage* at Chantilly from which it came. Built to accommodate four sybarites, its comfort and capacity had to be seen to be believed. Its squire, a steam car, not only drew it along the roads, but found it in light and heat, filled its cistern from

streams, cooled its larder and kept it free from dust. The van itself was complete to tea-napkins and a hot towel-rail.

The chauffeur detailed to play conductor knew his car inside out, and was a merry-eyed fellow to whom the country appealed. He was also susceptible to charm and, before their first day was over, had become Simon's very good servant and Mrs. Beaulieu's slave.

This was easy to understand.

Patricia was twenty-four and of great beauty. Tall, dark, slim, with the shape of a nymph and the style of a thoroughbred, she would have done Praxiteles infinite credit. There was about her a natural elegance which nothing could embarrass. Standing, walking, sleeping—always she looked her best. Her face, as was just, was full of character. She gave the impression of having herself in hand and so of some brave emotion which, if she had let it slip, would have come leaping. This was eagerness. Patricia was never bored. For her, life was most manifestly a great adventure. She loved it openly. She was appreciative. The slightest thing would light the stars in her eyes and make the ready smile flash to her lips. This made her most attractive. A fine, fearless nature, proud yet generous, tender-hearted yet strong, brought her respect: and a little way she had of raising her straight eyebrows and tilting her exquisite chin would have given the most confirmed misogynist a sleepless night.

The flat at Chartres had been let—let very well. But, sauntering South, by one consent the Beaulieus had avoided the town. One day they would go back and tread the familiar streets, kneel in the shadowy splendour of their parish church, buy cigarettes from the shop in the *Rue du Grand Cerf*, visit the market and chatter to smiling Thérèse—one day, when Remembrance was cold. For better or worse that page in their life had been turned, and now—Mr. and Mrs. Beaulieu were on the open road.

Literally so, this tenth day of June.

Where a convenient lane bellied into the press of bracken through which it drove, by the side of a lisping brook, in the midst of a little close in the arms of a wood, Patricia looked down from a window and Simon looked up from a bank, with a pipe in his mouth.

"If," said the latter, "you feel you must be clean, now is the time to plunge. If Yves gets a lift both ways, he won't be back for at least two hours and a half."

“Then I shall do it,” said Patricia. “It’s a frightening prospect, of course. But that’s your fault. If it was short, it would take about five minutes and I could do it every day.”

“I’ll dry it for you,” said Simon apologetically.

Patricia shook her head.

“The sun’ll do that,” she said. “Better than any husband. Why did I swear to obey?”

“Instinctively,” said Simon cheerfully. “The sight of me all virile in a perspiration and a gardenia——”

“I was *distracte*,” bubbled Patricia. “You know it. One of my garters was misfiring, and I wasn’t at all certain that I could get home on three. And now I’d better get down to it. If I want you I’ll blow the whistle. You go and see the world.”

She blew him a kiss, and Simon pulled his forelock. Then he rose and turned in the direction of the main highway.

This lay three hundred yards distant and, being in fine condition and as straight as a church’s aisle, was somewhat naturally exploited by such cars as happened to pass that way. Prone on a convenient knoll, Simon could see them coming for a mile and a half each way, and it amused him to death to lie there and smoke and watch them making a mock of Time.

As he was approaching his observatory, the snarl of a powerful engine came to his ears. Simon quickened his steps. . . .

The car was all out, doing ninety or thereabouts, travelling North. Its approach was much like that of a car on the screen. It flashed rather than sped into the foreground. The snarl swept into a roar. . . .

Then, thirty paces away, a tire burst.

The car swung to the right, but the driver straightened her up and, after a rugged passage, brought her to rest perhaps a furlong away. The next instant, to Simon’s surprise, he was backing like one possessed.

With gears storming, the car, a grey two-seater, flung backwards up the road as far as the turning which led to the caravan. There it stopped dead. Then the gears crashed, and it lifted out of the highway and into the little lane.

Mildly astonished, partly of curiosity and partly because Patricia was not on view, Simon left his post and began to retrace his steps, but before he had

taken six paces he heard the engine stop.

Simon bore to the right, walking delicately.

The driver, no doubt, was proposing to change his wheel. But that operation can be done on a *route nationale*. And why was he so frantic to leave the course? It looked as if he wanted to work undisturbed . . . as if he had reason to think——

Here Simon surmounted a hummock to see the car in the lane ten paces away. And between the car and the high-road lay a little bend. . . .

If further proof were needed of a desire to escape attention, that was supplied by the demeanour of the driver herself.

Sitting still as death in her seat, head up and slightly to one side, she was listening intently.

Instinctively Simon began to listen too.

Only the busy hum of insects, the twitter of birds, the scuttle of running water, troubled the silence.

So for perhaps thirty seconds. Then the faintest mutter stole into earshot. . . .

The mutter slid into a drone, the drone into a snarl.

Another car was coming, travelling North.

The storm swept up to and over the crest of uproar and began to sink to a snarl. As the snarl fell to a drone, the girl put up her hands and stretched luxuriously. Then she unfastened her leather flying-cap and, taking this off, shook her magnificent hair more or less into place.

She was remarkably pretty. Her features were fine, and her colouring was superb, an unusually white skin enhancing that exquisite flush which only belongs to those who have auburn hair. Her nose was small and straight, and her eyes grey and fearless, while the curve of her mouth alone would have redeemed the meanest countenance.

After a moment's reflection Simon withdrew as he had come. Then he turned to the right and, walking rapidly, very soon entered the lane beyond the second bend. There he paused for a moment to relight his pipe. Then he put his hands in his pockets and sauntered towards the main road.

As he rounded the bend, with a flash of silk stockings the girl slid out of the car and, turning her back towards him, stooped to the tool-box. A

moment later she must have heard his step, for she stood up and looked round sharply with a jack in her hand.

Simon continued to approach, and after a swift scrutiny she turned again to the car.

As he came alongside, she nodded and smiled.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” said Simon quietly, and took off his hat. “If you’ll sit down on the bank, I’ll change the wheel.”

The girl hesitated.

“I didn’t accost you for that,” she said. “I didn’t really.”

Simon laughed.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” he said. “They don’t do it that way. Have you come far?” he continued, taking the jack.

“From Bordeaux,” said the girl simply.

Simon stared.

From Bordeaux to where they stood was two hundred and thirty miles. And it was ten o’clock.

“Not to-day?”

“Yes, I have. I’m going to Paris. I wanted to get there quick, but I don’t care now. How many miles have you come?”

“About a furlong,” said Simon. “We live just up the road.”

Eulalie raised her eyebrows.

Then she looked up and around.

“It’s very peaceful here,” she said wistfully.

Simon picked up a spanner and got to work.

Eulalie watched him thoughtfully.

When the change had been made—

“Thanks very much,” she said. “I’m very grateful. And now just tell me one thing. What made you come and help? You knew I was here, of course.” She jerked her head at the hummock where Simon had stood. “I saw you

over there. Was it out of curiosity? Or because I'm rather good-looking? Or why? I mean, your—er—entrance was studied, wasn't it?"

Beneath the keen, grey gaze Simon grew slowly red.

"I saw your tire go," he said. "Then for no obvious reason you seemed extremely anxious to take this lane. Well, I naturally thought you were a man, and my wife's up there alone. As a matter of fact, she's washing her pretty brown hair. So if, for instance, you'd wanted to ask the way——"

"That's right," said the girl. "Go on."

"Then your engine stopped, and I came to see why."

"And found out," said Eulalie. "Yes?"

Simon picked up a rubber and wiped his hands.

"The rest," he said calmly, "was due to benevolence. That you're so pretty is my good fortune—that's all. Unless you'd been truly poisonous I should have done the same."

Eulalie pointed to the hummock.

"Why didn't you speak from there?"

"For your sake, of course," said Simon. "Nobody likes being caught doing eccentric things." He tossed the cloth into the box and shut the lid. Then he raised his hat. "Good-bye," he said, and turned.

"Stop," said the girl quickly. "I didn't mean to be rude. Only . . ."

"Only what?" said Simon over his shoulder.

"To be frank, I was puzzled. You look so very honest, but—well, I've been watched before." And with that she laughed rather bitterly.

Simon turned back at once.

"Won't you come and see our home? The car will be all right here. And you must have raised a thirst between here and Bordeaux."

Eulalie shook her head.

"No, thanks. I'm going to lie down here and go to sleep."

"Patricia won't hear of that," said Simon, smiling. "When she knows _____"

"Don't tell her."

Simon stared.

“Why on earth not?” he said.

“Because I don’t want her to know.”

Simon took out tobacco and started to fill his pipe.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “to have to refuse your request.”

Eulalie inspired audibly.

“Why are men such fools?” she breathed. “Must I tell you right out that I don’t want to meet your wife?”

“She’s much nicer than me,” said Simon.

“That I can well believe,” flashed Eulalie. “Must I put it more plainly still?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m not fit to meet her, you fool.”

For a long moment the two looked each other in the eyes.

Then—

“That,” said Simon quietly, “I refuse to credit.”

Patricia’s voice came floating.

“*Si-mon*.”

“Here I am,” shouted Simon.

“Where?”

“In the lane.”

Eulalie turned on her heel and sat down by the side of the road.



Eulalie looked at her wrist-watch and rose to her feet.

“Half-past three,” she said, “and about a hundred and twenty miles to go. It’s time I was moving.”

“Not yet,” said Patricia. “Besides, you must have some tea.”

The girl shook her head.

“I don’t want any tea,” she said. “Thanks very much. Besides, you’ve been kind enough. It’s—it’s the happiest day I’ve spent for years and years.”

She let her eyes wander round, as though to make sure of remembering everything. "I wonder whether you two know how lucky you are."

"We're very content," said Patricia.

Eulalie laughed.

"Content? So should I be. Look at my life. Always floating about from pillar to post. Hotel after hotel after hotel. Loathed by other women, often pestered by men. No friends, no peace, no prospects."

"We haven't any friends," said Patricia. "Or prospects."

"What about Etchechuria? I'd almost sell my soul for a prospect like that—at least, if I'd one to sell. As for friends—well, you've got each other, haven't you? From what I've seen, I should think that was good enough."

"Well, you've got us," said Patricia, "for what we're worth."

"That's right," said Simon.

For a moment it seemed that the girl must burst into tears. Then she sat down in her deck-chair and took out a cigarette.

"I—I haven't got you," she said uncertainly. "In a minute I'll tell you why. But give me this credit before you show me out." She turned to Simon. "I let you change my wheel, but I didn't try to make friends."

"You did not," said Simon heartily.

"And I told you I wasn't fit to meet your wife."

"You certainly used those words."

"That," said Patricia gravely, "was a contradiction in terms."

Eulalie raised her eyebrows.

Then—

"You've been very kind to-day," she said, "to a common or garden thief. I've stuff worth fifty thousand on me now. Pounds, not francs." She rose to her feet. "Good-bye. Don't trouble to see me back. I can find my way."

"One moment," said Mrs. Beaulieu. "You say it's a rotten life. Why don't you turn it down?"

"How can I? I've got to live. And I've never done anything else. I never had any parents—I don't even know my name. For all I know, I was kidnapped when I was a child. I often think I was. But that's by the way. And I'll tell you another reason why I can't turn it down. I'm not on my

own, you know; and our crowd doesn't believe in reformation. You've got to 'go on or go under'—because you know too much."

"Turn it down here and now," said Patricia steadily. "Now's your chance. You say you envy our lot. Well, make it yours. We've no money, and this caravan isn't ours, but there's plenty of room for three, and if we find Etchechuria I shouldn't imagine your crowd would worry you there."

Eulalie stared and stared.

At length—

"You must be out of your mind," she said shortly. "D'you realize you're suggesting that you should travel a thief?"

Patricia shook her head.

"I'm not like your crowd," she said. "I rather believe in reformation."

Eulalie turned to Simon.

"Do you hear what she says?"

"She speaks for me," said Simon.

The girl took a deep breath.

"It's quixotically handsome of both of you. And amazingly attractive. But I couldn't dream of letting you——"

"That," said Simon quietly, "is our affair. We'd be happy to have you if you'd care to come."

"Care!" Eulalie let out a laugh. "You offer me heaven and ask if I'd care to leave hell."

"Then come," said Patricia.

"And bring with me battle and murder and sudden death. You would thank me to-morrow, or as soon as they'd picked up my tracks. There'd be three lots after me then, instead of two. The police were sitting up when I left Toulouse—they didn't know me, but they'd been to look at the car. The gents I fooled this morning were rival crooks. Our crowd got in before them, and they're out for blood. A man called Auntie Emma was there himself—in that car you heard go by. He's exactly like the curates you see on the stage, with a village-idiot stare and a falsetto laugh. And a brain like Napoleon, an' just about as tough. They got at my chauffeur—I was afraid they might. I never liked the fellow, but my own was taken last year. Well, that's two followers. But if I were to disappear, my gang would begin to think. You

see, I don't do the actual stealing. I only pass the goods. But they don't trust anyone an inch. They don't even trust themselves—and quite right, too. And if I was four hours late they'd come to look. Besides, I shouldn't like them to think I'd let them down. The stuff means nothing to me and never has. They pay my expenses and give me what money I want. But I don't spend much on myself, and I've never pinched so much as a cracked seed-pearl. Thieves' honour, you know. They call me 'The Bank of England,' and, to be perfectly truthful, I'm rather proud of the name. Hullo. Who's this?"

A short, thick-set figure in blue had emerged from the belt of woodland and was approaching.

"That," said Patricia, "is Yves, our chauffeur."

Eulalie frowned.

"I ought to have gone before," she said, as though addressing herself. "Never mind."

"What shall I do?" said Simon, suddenly conscious that the girl was no ordinary guest.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter. He doesn't know what you do. But I wasn't thinking of myself."

Instinctively she turned and began to stroll down the lane with Patricia by her side.

Simon advanced to meet Yves.

"Can't we persuade you?" said Patricia. "Go through with this job if you must: but then chuck in your hand and come with us."

"No," said the other. "No. It can't be done. I'm not going to foul your nest. To-morrow when I've disappeared you'll see that I'm right. My case squeals for salvation, and your impulse is to save. But it can't be done. I'm very fond of animals, and whenever I see some poor dog, wretched and thin as a rail, my impulse is to adopt it and make it well. But unless you've a proper Dogs' Home you can't do that sort of thing. I've tried and I know."

"The case is quite different," said Patricia. "There's no charity here. You would be independent. Simon and I are pilgrims, and you'd make a third. If _____"

Simon's voice interrupted.

"Keep on walking," he said, "but listen to me." He drew abreast of them. "Yves is just back from Vendôme. There's a chain across the road there and

they're stopping all cars." Eulalie started, and Patricia caught her breath. "It's the same at Tours and Chartres and every town."

There was a deathly silence. Patricia felt rather sick. Then—

"How does he know?" said Eulalie.

"From people coming through."

Eulalie stared at the sky.

"This is Toulouse," she said. "I wonder—— Never mind. Have you got a map?"

"Not of this part."

"Well, I must clear out from here—quick. Can your chauffeur see us still?"

"As far as the bend."

"Right. The trouble is how to make Paris. I'm hopeless at finding my way, and every time you ask you blaze your trail. I've always had a chauffeur. I can manage the main road, but——"

"Can you get to a station?" said Patricia shakily.

"Trains aren't healthy," said the girl. "If you want to get out, you can't, and a station's half a gaol. As for a terminus . . ."

"You must lose the car and lie low," said Simon sharply.

"You can't lie low in the country."

"You could in a caravan."

Eulalie laughed.

"You're very sporting," she said. "And but for the stuff I'm wearing I might accept. As it is, I can't—it wouldn't be neighbourly. Besides, the sooner I pass it, the better for me."

"I wish you'd chuck it away," said Patricia wildly.

"And lose my name," said the girl, "the only thing I've got. No, thanks, my dear. And that's why I must get through. It's got to be in by midnight, and somehow or other——"

"But you *can't*," cried Simon. "You haven't an earthly. Think. The main road's barred, you've no map, you daren't ask, you're bad at finding your way, Paris is——"

“Needs must,” said Eulalie shortly, as they rounded the bend.

Then she glanced over her shoulder. The next moment she was running like a hare.

The two pelted after her. . . .

The car stood as they had left it, and the girl, with Simon beside her, was almost there when she trod on the lip of a rut and went flying.

The man gave her his hands and lifted her up.

“Hurt?” he asked.

“Yes—no. Nothing. A rut. I turned my foot.” She limped to the car and clung to the door piteously. “I’ll be all right in a moment,” she added between her teeth.

Her forehead went down to her hands. She was plainly in agony.

“Oh, my dear,” cried Patricia, panting.

The girl, dead-white in the face, lifted her head boldly and tried to smile. Then she drooped, swayed, put a hand to her temples and fainted.

Simon caught her and carried her to the bank by the side of the road.

“She’s done,” he said to Patricia. “Look at that foot.” The slight left ankle was visibly bigger than the right. He slid the foot from its slipper. “I’ll get some water. Can you get her stocking down?”

When he returned with a dripping handkerchief, Eulalie was sitting up, regarding a small bare foot, which, already considerably swollen, was turning purple.

“Strap me up,” she said, “and put me into the car.”

“Not on your life,” said Simon, applying the rag. “And now listen to me. You’re beat. You’re out of the running. You’ve lost your horse. *If you’ll chuck the business to-night and come with us, I’ll deliver the goods.* I know the roads—we used them a week ago. And when I’m near enough I can take the train. I may be robbing Peter, but I’ve a whim to pay Paul. And so I’ll do it.”

“By God, you’re white,” said the girl. She turned to Patricia. “Aren’t you proud of him?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes returned to Simon.

“Supposing you’re stopped.”

“I shan’t be—the way I go. There aren’t any police. And you’d better let me. I mean, we can’t very well abandon you now, can we? And as long as you’ve got your parcel you’ll be rather a ticklish guest.”

Eulalie touched Patricia upon the arm.

“D’you want him to go?”

“Yes.”

The girl glanced up and down the lane. Then she twitched her skirt to her knee. Under her right hock, held in place by four straps, was a wallet the length of a cheque-book six inches wide. She had it loose in a second. . . .

Simon slid it into his pocket.

“Where?” he said.

“Montmartre—*The Red Nose*. That’s a *café*. When you leave your coat at the cloakroom—there’s a coat in the car—leave that wallet in the pocket and ask the attendant the time. When he tells you, ask him the date. Then go inside. You’ll see an old fellow there with a smile and a glass in his eye. English. Sit down beside him and talk. Presently take out your case and ask him to smoke. You must have only two cigarettes—don’t forget. One at each end of the slide. If he says ‘Quality, I see. Not quantity,’ that’s your man. Then you say ‘I’ve got a case at home which holds fifteen’ or ‘ten’ or ‘sixty’—whatever the number of your cloakroom ticket may be. And let him go before you do. That’s all. If you like to add that you’ve heard that the Bank of England is going to be closed for repairs, you can. You’ve no money on you, of course. There’s my bag on the step. Take all there is. There’s about five thousand francs. And take my case as well.”

Simon did her bidding and then slipped into the car.

Patricia stepped on to the running-board.

“I’m coming with you,” she said, “to the end of the lane.”

As the car pulled backwards—

“Tell Yves I’ve gone for a doctor. I’ll be back at noon to-morrow, and then I can spin some yarn. Pretend to get anxious, you know, when I don’t roll up.”

“That’ll be easy, Simon.” She hesitated. “Why are we doing this?”

“I’m damned if I know.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Patricia. “*Noblesse oblige.*”

The high road was very close now, so Simon applied the brake and held out the clutch.

“My lady,” he said. “My darling,” and put up his mouth.

Patricia kissed him. Then she put her arms round his neck and held his head to her breast. . . .

As she stepped down—

“I’ll see if the road’s clear,” she said quietly.

A moment later she waved, and the car slid back and then round till it was facing North.

“So long, my darling.”

Patricia did not speak, but she smiled very gently and put up a little hand. . . .

The next moment he was gone.



The Master, whom nothing could perturb, was ill at ease.

The Red Nose was hardly exclusive: no one had ever been known to be turned away: all sorts and conditions of men and women, in all sorts and conditions of dress and mind and body, could use or abuse its shelter, its rubbed plush seats and its band, provided they ordered a reasonable quantity of liquor and paid on delivery.

All this went to make the *café* an excellent rendezvous. Indeed, could The Master have been prevailed upon to compile a list of ‘reception rooms’ for the guidance of those about to ‘receive,’ there is little doubt that *The Red Nose* would have been accorded the dignity of two stars.

To-night, however, its peculiar virtue had been abominably violated.

That two tables away should be sitting an English gentleman who had personally paid The Master ten thousand pounds to save a lady’s name some ten months before did not particularly please him. He had treated the gentleman, who was little more than half his age, as an equal: and the gentleman, who had no sense of decency, had rewarded his condescension by treating him like dirt. The memory of such an occasion was enough to make anyone frown.

But that was nothing.

Upon the opposite side of the room sat Auntie Emma. . . .

This in itself was nothing either. The two had often sat vis-à-vis before. *What made it so very inconvenient was that The Bank of England was due . . . that The Bank of England was coming whether he stayed or not.*

The Master hated unpleasantness.

If he waited for The Bank of England, unpleasantness would follow of a very unpleasant sort. If he did not wait for The Bank of England, then Auntie Emma would. And The Bank of England was worth just fifty thousand pounds.

The Master, whose supernatural ability to choose the right evil more swiftly than any man alive had kept him at the head of his profession for fifteen years, found himself wondering what to do.

The band began to render *Chili Bom Bom*. . . .

Suddenly the Englishman rose, crossed to The Master's table and sat down with his back to the room.

"Good evening," he said stiffly. "We meet again."

Instinctively The Master cleared for action and felt the better for the change.

All his good temper returned.

"How nice," he said smoothly, "of you to remember me."

"It is," said the other curtly, producing his case. "Have a cigarette?"

The Master stared at the case as though it were unreal.

Then he removed his eye-glass, wiped this and put it back.

There was no doubt about it. The case contained two cigarettes, one at each end of the slide.

For a moment his great brain lurched between amazement and hope.

Then he put his head on one side.

"Ah," he said slowly. "Quality, I see. Not quantity."

Then he took one of the two and held his breath.

"I've got a case at home," said Simon casually. . . .

The Master let his breath go and closed his eyes.

His smile became positively seraphic.

‘How beautiful upon the mountains. . . .’

“Yes?” he murmured.

“A case that’ll hold”—Simon hesitated. Then—“quite a lot,” he added.

The other’s eyelids flickered.

“Have you, now?” he purred. “What a very curious thing. And you of all people. . . . How many does it hold?”

Simon took and lighted his last cigarette.

“The Bank of England,” he said, “is closed for repairs.”

The Master sat very still. This was not according to plan. Moreover, he detested evasion.

The beauty of Simon’s feet became less striking.

When he spoke again his tone was velvety.

“So,” he said, “I surmised. How many——”

“She will never re-open,” said Simon. “I hope no pressure will ever be put upon her to change her mind.”

The Master, in whose eyes evasion when compared with presumption became a virtue, decided to apply the lash.

He raised his eyebrows.

“May I suggest——”

“No. You may listen to what I have to say and then you may take your choice.”

In a silence quick with an emotion which sends the blood to the head, The Master smiled very tenderly upon his finger-tips and, conscious that a tinge of colour had stolen into his cheeks, thought with great acerbity upon the line which he would have taken if only Auntie Emma had not been there.

Simon was speaking.

“This isn’t exactly a writing-room, but, as you undoubtedly noticed, I managed to write a letter during the last half-hour. Just look it through, will you?”

He tossed an envelope across.

This was stamped and addressed

*Simon Beaulieu, Esq.,
c/o The Westminster Bank,
St. James's Street,
London, S.W.*

to Await Collection.

The Master hesitated. Then he drew out its sheet.

*12, Clock Lane,
Crutched Friars.
June 12, 1926.*

*RECEIVED at The Red Nose, Montmartre, of Simon Beaulieu, Esq.,
stolen property to the approximate value of fifty thousand pounds.*

"Once it is posted," said Simon slowly, "that letter will lie unopened—*until The Bank of England is approached again.*" He inhaled luxuriously. "A very good way of signing is with the finger-tips. If, for example, the top of a table is damp and you've got a cigarette, you just drop the ash. . . ."

"Quite," said The Master gently. "Quite. And if one doesn't fancy that way, or indeed any way, I suppose you will be unable to recollect how many cigarettes your case at home holds. My child, go home and play with girls of your own size."

"And outlook," said Simon. "I will in a minute. But you've got the bit about my memory wrong. If one doesn't fancy signing, I'm going to cross the floor. I think perhaps Auntie Emma would like to know . . . how many cigarettes . . . my case at home holds. . . ."

The Master sat as though frozen. He did not appear to breathe. Only his eyes showed any life at all: and these roved to and fro like caged beasts seeking a way out and finding none.

At last—

"Supposing," he drawled, "supposing . . . one signed."

"Then," said Simon cheerfully, "I shall call that little boy there and send him to post the letter."

"And then?"

"When he comes back and says he has posted it—if I believe him I shall give him two francs."

The Master moistened his lips.

“And then?”

“Then I shall tell you how many cigarettes my case at home holds. And now look sharp and choose. I want to get to bed.”

The Master lifted his head and looked about him.

From a corner the furious rout of Rhythm stumbled and swung and crashed: upon the diminutive floor a shifting mass of couples passed through the stages of agglomeration and disintegration apparently oblivious of time and space: the broad girdle of tables was fully occupied. An uproarious party in fancy dress elbowed three students absorbed in a discussion of art: with tears running down their cheeks, two English undergraduates applauded the efforts of a third to serve Terpsichore: hoist upon the shoulders of two American squires, who were singing the words of the tune, a girl in a pierrot's dress was belabouring with a bladder such dancers as she could reach, and laughingly disregarding the fire of red and white pellets which sang through and into her curls: over the receipt of custom was presiding a fair-haired siren of outrageous proportions and uncertain age who appeared to have been poured into a dress several sizes too small and then set up like an image upon heels several sizes too high: leaning comfortably against the opposite wall, Auntie Emma was smoking a fat cigar and laughing at the heated argument which two ladies were conducting across his chest. . . .

“Why,” said The Master, moistening some cigarette ash, “why should I trust you?”

Simon did not deign to reply.

At length—

“I asked a question,” said The Master blandly. “Perhaps the band——”

“I heard you,” said Simon. “If you repeat it I shall cross the floor.”

For the first and last time The Master looked him full in the eyes.

Then—

“Well, well,” he said gently. “Well, well. To-day to you. To-morrow. . . .”

He drummed with his fingers upon the table, then laid their tips squarely upon the sheet.



“And there you are,” said Simon, some twelve hours later. “My recognizing Auntie Emma was a streak of pure good luck. The moment I saw him I knew if I played my cards right I had The Master cold.”

With a foot on a second deck-chair, Eulalie stared at the woodland with half-closed eyes.

“What beats me by lengths,” she said, “is his letting you tie him up. He’s supposed to be able to bluff an automatic.”

“I think,” said Simon, “it was a question of pride. It was hellish to lose to me—even more hellish than to lose to Auntie Emma: but for Auntie Emma to know that I had put it across him was just a shade too thick.”

Eulalie lifted her head to look at the clear blue sky.

“I can’t get over it,” she murmured. “It’s too much like a dream. The impression that I’m bound to wake up is overwhelming. Yesterday, right up against it: to-day, a place in the sun and a share in a fairy-tale. What have you done it for?”

Patricia looked at Simon and smiled.

“I really don’t know,” she said. “It seemed such a pity not to—that’s all I can say.”

Eulalie turned to Simon.

“Yesterday afternoon you said you’d a whim to pay Paul. Well, you’ve indulged your whim. God knows what it might have cost you, but you didn’t appear to bother to take that into account. Any way, you’ve paid him—or paid his debts. He’s worth rather less than a hair of your darling’s head, but you’ve paid them. He—he can’t pay you back, you know, but—he—won’t—forget.”

“If you must thank some one,” said Simon, “poor Peter’s the man. He put up the wherewithal.”

“He’s safe in the arms of Lloyd’s—don’t weep for him. I say you paid, and you did. Well, there’s my debt to you. As for Patricia, I’m even deeper in. Feet—miles deeper. If I saved her life ten times it wouldn’t do any good.” She whipped her foot from the chair and stood upright. “He won’t understand that,” she said with a dazzling smile. “And yet he ought to know. Will you put him wise? I’m going to look for violets. It sounds elementary, but I’ve never had time before.”

She limped into the bracken and presently out of sight.

“What did she mean?” said Simon.

Patricia came to his side, fell on her knees and laid her cheek against his.

“This,” she said. “Women don’t like lending men. However many they’ve got and however cheap they are, they don’t like lending them. But I lent her . . . you.”

CHAPTER II

ENTER POMFRET

THE forest lies south of Marmande and west of Agen, and that is near enough for our purpose. As for the Beaulieus and Eulalie, that it lay south of Marmande was enough for them. They had no eyes for the East nor yet for the West. The mountains lay South—due South: a few more miles, and the range would be within sight.

Still, the forest was very pleasant, and since July was full and the weather was hot the three delighted to linger in its green naves and chancels, forget the burden of the day strolling its cool cloisters, and welcome the whisper of the evening breeze picking its fanciful way between the tufted pinnacles and spires.

Eulalie had fallen into step with Patricia and Simon as though she had walked beside them for twenty years. I suppose their personalities exactly agreed. Certainly the spirit of adventure went far to key them to the same pitch. Again, the three were from the same stable, to wit, that flashing world whose tenants are commonly styled ‘The Idle Rich’—a gross misnomer, since many are anything but idle and more than half are poor. Be that as it may, their stable days were over, and, while the Beaulieus were more than content, Eulalie was happier than she had ever been.

Patricia had visited Paris on her behalf and had fetched a trunkful of things, but the girl who had adorned Longchamps year after year wore tennis-shoes day after day and a hat which she bought at a stall for seven francs.

If the present was sweet, the future was big with promise.

Etchechuria—‘The Lost Country.’

Night after night the three pored over their maps, discussing, speculating what manner of mystery it was they were about to explore. That somewhere up in the mountains lay this land the three were convinced. Etchechuria was fabulous only because it could not be found. And it was never found because it was believed to be fabulous. After all. . . . Then they would remind one another that it was 1930 and that slices of Europe are not easily hid. But always their downright evidence lifted up its head. Durand, most practical of

men, had frankly admitted a mystery he could not fathom: and Patricia's man had said that he was going back . . . *back*. . . .

So it came that while Simon and Eulalie were fetching eggs and milk from Saint's Day Farm and Yves was down stream, optimistically seeking trout whom he might tickle into another world, Patricia sat at the foot of a mighty oak, dreaming of Etchechuria and watching the sunlit road somewhere west of Agen and south of Marmande.

A car slid by, containing Porus Bureau, once of a suburb of Rouen, but since the decease of his uncle, who had made both ends overlap in Cincinnati and had died intestate and single, of the fashionable world.

Patricia hardly noticed the car and, had she been told of its contents, would have been none the wiser. She had never heard of Porus Bureau. Nor he of her. But he saw her frock as he passed, and that was quite enough for Porus Bureau.

A toss-pot had once rallied Porus in public for an inveterate gallant. It was a bow at a venture. The toss-pot had nothing to go on, but, since for years he had been dependent for his liquor upon the benevolence of others, he had become something of a judge of character. He had his reward. Porus never forgot the calumny, and the toss-pot drank upon his cost whenever the two were in the same town. But since the deepest gratitude may wear thin with age, the toss-pot was careful from time to time to repeat the delicious slander until his patron actually began to acquire the reputation of being the devil of a fellow where women were concerned. Reflecting uneasily upon the penalty of fame, Porus, who could be as gallant as anyone where no gallantry was required, began to pull up his socks. Greatness had been thrust upon him. Unless he wished to be dishonoured, he must shoulder the load. So he grew what moustache he could, greased his dirty red hair every day and generally got down to it. . . .

Why he was never assaulted I cannot tell. His power of discrimination was that of a child of two. But he survived and, getting into his stride, presently pestered women to whom once he would not have dared to raise his watery eyes. It is good to think that he had many failures, but anything which could be interpreted as a success at once intoxicated and inspired.

And so in the course of years it came about that the idle word of a toss-pot, uttered in the hope of refreshment, became a great and noble truth to which many could testify. Porus Bureau had become a thorough-paced pest.

Porus vacated his car and stole back the way he had come. Porus believed the frock to be unaccompanied, but it was as well to make sure. Besides, perhaps its wearer was not worth powder and shot.

He saw Patricia again before she saw him and, looking upon her, decided that she was meet to be kissed and taken for a short drive and possibly upon some future occasion publicly entertained.

After a long look he passed behind a bush, wiped his unpleasant face, adjusted an arresting tie and cocked his hat. Then he put his hands in his pockets and sauntered forward.

“Ah, *pardon*,” he said and uncovered. “I do not suppose you shall know, but I ‘ave lose my way.”

The steady brown eyes rested for a moment on his face. Then they travelled slowly to his feet and back again.

“Yes?”

Porus covered his head.

“I say I ‘ave lose my way, an’ now——”

“Where do you want to go to?”

Bureau put his head on one side.

“Ah, now,” he said playfully. “What a question for you to ask.” He bowed. “Bud of course I was there, my dear, where every one was wanting to get.”

Patricia stared.

“You’re wasting your time,” she said. “There’s nothing doing here—nothing at all.”

The man wagged his head.

“‘Ark,” he said. “There was a little bird ‘as say——”

“I’m afraid,” said Patricia, “that you’ve been badly brought up. I don’t blame you for coming to see if you could get off, because you look that sort, but I should have thought you knew that when a man sees or is told that there’s nothing doing, it’s up to him to withdraw.”

Porus grinned and began to shake his shoulders.

“When a girl shall ‘ave say ‘No,’ she ‘as mean ‘Per’aps’: when she shall ‘ave say——”

"I see," said Patricia slowly. "I suppose the idea is to kiss me—even against my will."

Porus replied with a leer.

Patricia's slight left hand went up to her throat. She had never yet blown her whistle, but it looked as though now——

The ribbon was not there.

To-day for the first time she had forgotten to put it on.

"Why then you are married!" said Porus swiftly. "An' oll the time I 'ave thought I 'ave been speaking to an *ingénue*." He began to advance delicately. "Well, now I am sure your 'usban' is a fine fellow, but 'e mus' nod be zelvish. No. An' I do nod think 'e will miss one or two kisses, especially if——"

Patricia rose.

"Listen," she said. "If you try to touch me my husband will break your neck. He won't like doing it because it'll involve touching you and he's rather particular about his hands. But, all the same, he'll do it."

Threat and insult alike slithered off Porus' back.

The husband was not within earshot—obviously: his own car, however, lay a stone's throw away. As for the insult, his hide, which had never been thin, had been rendered callous. "Now, now," he said coyly, "she mus' nod be voolish, my beautivul girl of the woods. Jus' because——"

"If you only knew," said Patricia, trying to gain time, "how you're letting your country down." The undergrowth was so thick, and Porus was between her and the road. "But then you're the type that does. Less than a week ago I walked with a *poilu* for a couple of miles in a place as lonely as this. He actually came up and said might he stay near me because he thought it unwise for me to be all alone. But he was a gentleman, while you . . ."

"Yes?" said Bureau, grinning. "What am I, *mignon*?"

With an eye on Porus' hand, Patricia shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, it hardly seems possible," she said, "but you seem to be as dirty as you look."

As she spoke, she jumped. . . .

It must be confessed that Porus was not at all pleased.

His skin may have been thick, but the lady's last sentence had been delivered in French and had lost nothing by being so rendered. Indeed, it would have stung anyone to action. The action, however, which he had taken had been nugatory, and the wrist which he should have been holding was out of sight. Indeed, all he could see of Patricia was four finger-tips so poised upon the bark of the oak as to suggest her readiness to revolve about its trunk as and when it seemed expedient to do so.

With an ugly look in his eyes, Porus settled his hat on his head.

Patricia's clear voice rang out.

"Yves! Yves! A moi. A moi. Vite."

Porus waited.

The woods gave back the echo, but there was no response.



The wayfarer trudged forward, heavy laden with a suit-case in either hand.

He was a pleasant-looking man of perhaps forty years and a habit of body which was not so much corpulent as suggestive of corpulence to come—a suggestion which the condition to which the sun, the suit-cases and his mode of progression had combined to reduce him went far to contradict. Indeed, he larded the dusty road at every step. For all that, he marched steadily forward, looking neither to right nor left, but now and again raising his blue eyes to heaven and assuming an expression of such profound resignation that whoever had chanced to meet him could not have forborne to smile.

Once upon a time Pomfret Tudor had been a very rich man. He had lived in The Albany, belonged to five Clubs, travelled, collected especially rare silver and taken a mild interest in architectural archæology. Then one day his money, which was in Russia, had disappeared, and, when his debts had been paid, Tudor was left with a second lieutenant's pay, a good many more clothes than he needed, seven christening-cups and five porringers. The pay, which had become that of a Staff Captain, ceased with the War, and Pomfret, like many another, found himself at a very loose end. This had not mattered once, but now. . .

Tudor was not the man to go about seeking work and finding none. After satisfying himself that no one was prepared to pay for his knowledge of

silver, he entered the somewhat dreary arena of architectural archæology—rather, I fancy, with the idea of going down with colours flying than of making a livelihood. He rose, if he did not prosper. After two years he accepted the Honorary Secretaryship of a prominent Society and began to draw his expenses. At the end of five he had contributed many most readable papers to annals which were never read, delivered a dozen lectures, sold six christening-cups and become a welcome authority in the musty world which he adorned. By the time the sixth year was over he had come to loathe his profession as the prisoner for life loathes the colour of the walls of his cell, and had been unanimously entrusted with the task of compiling a book which was to be published in two volumes, to be entitled *The Saracen in France* and to bring him a knighthood. Tudor had accepted the charge with bulging eyes. . . .

Five months later he sold his last porringer but one, and, cursing the sages who had delighted to honour him with a deep and bitter curse, laid fresh hold of the plough and sailed for France—with the disastrous result that in the month of July, 1930, he was larding a dusty road somewhere west of Agen and south of Marmande.

The murmur of voices came to his ears, floating down the road.

A girl was speaking somewhere quite close at hand and quietly—not as most Frenchwomen speak.

Suddenly a man replied.

The greasy caress of ‘*mignon*’ and its violent rebuff told their own tale.

Pomfret set down his cases and quickened his steps.

As the bushes revealed the oak, Patricia’s clear voice rang out. . . .

After waiting for the echo to die, Pomfret lifted up his voice.

“*A votre service, Madame.*”

Porus Bureau started as though he had been suddenly burnt. Then he wheeled round and stood swallowing.

Patricia stepped out and past him to where the newcomer stood.

“Please will you stay with me until my husband comes?”

“I will indeed,” said Tudor. He nodded at Porus Bureau. “Has that—touched you?”

Patricia, who was upon the edge of tears, shook her head.

“Shall I keep him for your husband? Or shall I, er, organize his removal?”

Porus, who did not understand what ‘organize’ meant, but disliked the sound of the word, started forward excitedly.

“*Pardon, Monsieur*, I do not know ‘oo you are, but it is ride you shall know that I ‘ave ornly stob to ask sis lady se way an’ then laigue a vool because she mus’ flird with me——”

Here he was felled by a blow upon the mouth such as he had never dreamed of. He was then assisted to his feet and immediately felled again by a blow upon the nose and right eye compared with which the blow upon the mouth was the flick of a handkerchief. Beside himself with shock and agony, mad with rage at the perfidy of his assailant, yelling with fright, he staggered instinctively to his feet, whether with some idea of flight or retaliation or protest will never be known. Ere he could think, violent hands were laid upon his sacred neck, he was reversed, kicked into the road, wrenched to the right and kicked again. He was kicked until he could not stand, and when he sank whooping to his knees he was kicked until he rose. Finally he was shown a car and asked if it was his. He could only nod. Then the door was opened and he was kicked inside.

“And now go,” said Tudor.

Porus, weeping bitterly, was understood to say that he was physically incapable of going.

Tudor regarded his watch.

“If,” he said, “you are not out of sight in one minute, I shall open the door and . . .”

Assuming a sitting posture, but avoiding the seat, Porus felt feverishly for the self-starter.

“And if,” added Tudor, “I ever see you again, I shall——”

The threat was lost in the raving of first speed.

Thirty seconds later Porus was out of sight.

Pomfret wiped his hands upon a tussock of grass and turned towards the oak, whistling the stave of a song.

As he approached, a violent flurry of French suggested that reinforcements, presumably in the shape of Yves, had now arrived and, upon learning what they had missed, were refusing to be comforted.

This was a fact.

His arms, bare and dripping, flung skywards, his face contorted with passion, the chauffeur was delivering a series of agonized apodoses all relative to the dilapidation of Porus Bureau, while Patricia, with her back to the road, was telling him not to be silly and assuring him that Porus' condition left nothing to be desired.

Pomfret appeared.

The next moment it was all over.

In the twinkling of an eye the ravening Yves had screamed, pointed an accusing finger, bellowed '*C'est lui*' and, hurling himself upon his unsuspecting and unready prey, borne him heavily to the ground. . . .

"*Idiot! Madman!*" shrieked Patricia, seizing him by the collar and endeavouring to drag him away. "*You are murdering the wrong man.*"

"*Mais c'est lui qui——*"

"No, *no*, NO! Do I not know my assailant? Is this one's hair red? Get up at once and let this gentleman alone."

"*Mais——*"

"*Frightening imbecile!*" screamed Patricia, shaking the chauffeur furiously. "WILL YOU DO AS I SAY?"

"Don't interrupt him," said Pomfret faintly. "He wants to say something. Perhaps he's some reason for murder which we don't know."

"If you do not rise, assassin," said Patricia shakily, "before I count six, when Monsieur comes back, I shall ask him to send you away. One—two . . ."

Reluctantly releasing his victim, the chauffeur rose to his feet.

"And go back to the caravan, idiot," continued his mistress fiercely. "And don't ever dare to disobey me again." She turned to Pomfret and fell upon her knees by his side. "I can't tell you," she said tremulously, "how frightfully sorry——"

"He is a nice, bright lad, isn't he?" said Pomfret, sitting up in the road. "And before we go any further, have you got any dogs? You know. Nice, faithful, blundering brutes, with fangs."

Patricia sat back on her heels, covered her face and bowed before a tempest of laughter.

"I'm most frightfully sorry," she wailed. "And it is so awful of me to laugh, but it's so—so . . ."

"Side-splitting," said Pomfret. "That's the word. Side-splitting. Oh, I can see that. But then treachery always is. If somebody's earned a fish and you hand him a serpent, it's enough to make a mute scream, especially if the serpent bites him."

"Be quiet," sobbed Patricia. "I mean—you know I didn't do it on purpose. And you were so wonderful." She rose unsteadily. "And now do please get up. We've a caravan just through there, and Yves—the chauffeur can brush you and——"

"Thanks," said Pomfret, rising, "but I'd rather not. At the moment I'm off Yves, armed or unarmed. I dare say my unaccountable aversion will pass, but——"

"I'll brush you," said Patricia tearfully. "And of course you must have a drink. Aren't you thirsty?"

Pomfret laughed wildly.

"Well, I suppose you would call it 'thirsty,'" he said. "My tongue's swollen, the roof of my mouth's cracked, my gullet's choked with superfluous *route nationale*, while as for my uvula—well, I shouldn't think it'd ever be the same again. It was a most beautiful uvula, too," he added miserably. "Never mind. What about a large gall and wormwood?"

So soon as Patricia could speak—

"We can't rise to that and we haven't a very big choice, but——"

"My dear," said Pomfret brokenly, "if you'll give me a drink of anything that can be made to splash, I'll—I'll let Yves brush me."

"Then come along."

Pomfret collected his suit-cases and they passed into the forest. Presently they came to a little glade.

"There's the caravan," said Patricia, pointing, "but as it's so hot we keep the drinks in the brook. Simon, my husband, has made a little cage, and ——"

"Simon the Cellarer," said Pomfret. "Yes. 'A cage' you were saying. Go on."

“We’ve lime-juice,” bubbled Patricia, “and rather a nice white wine and beer. And then, of course, there’s any amount of brook.”

Pomfret blinked very fast and moistened his lips.

“If,” he said uncertainly, “you could spare a small portion of the, er, malt liquor . . . I mean, you’ll hardly believe me, but I haven’t tasted any beer for nearly three hours.”



Eulalie strolled beside Simon with her head in the air.

What conversation they had was made by the man, and, though, when he spoke, she answered sweetly enough, her replies were slow in coming, like those of one whose brain is about higher business which it is loth to lay aside.

At length—

“The lady,” said Simon, “is *distracte*. Would it be indiscreet to ask why?”

“No,” said the girl, “it wouldn’t. But you won’t like the reason at all.”

The man raised his eyebrows.

“Let’s see.”

“Right,” said Eulalie, addressing the tops of the trees. “Simon Beaulieu, Esquire, I’m going back on my word.”

Simon opened his eyes.

“That’s not like you,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“From your beautiful face,” said Simon. “People with faces like yours don’t go back on their word.”

Eulalie pointed to a beech.

“If we sat down there for ten minutes we could have a little argument. Not that I want one, but I’m afraid you’ll insist. It’s really waste of time, because I’ve made up my mind, and when I’ve made up my mind—well, the wise and prudent usually change the subject. But I suppose that doesn’t weigh with you.”

“Not a blinkin’ grain,” said Simon cheerfully. “Gently with the hen’s eggs.”

“Who dropped the butter in the brook?” said Eulalie scornfully, laying her netful of eggs tenderly upon the sward. “And don’t put the milk on a slope—it’s bad for my heart. Thank you.” She sat down demurely enough with her hands in her lap. “I suppose you haven’t got a cigarette.”

Simon passed her his case and matches and took out a pipe. . . .

“I’m not going to Etchechuria,” said the girl. “I said—I promised I would, but I’ve changed my mind. At the next place we come to I’m going to kiss Patricia and probably you, and then ask the way to the station and get into a train.”

Simon was imperturbable.

“I see,” he said slowly, filling his pipe. “You know, I was always afraid of this. Your life’s been so exciting, so full of movement and smart that to wander along like a child in a Nursery Rhyme in search of a fairy-tale. . . .” He broke off and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, it’s like a small milk and soda when you’re used to champagne.”

Eulalie took off her hat. Then she laced her fingers, set them behind her head and let her lithe body sink backwards till she was flat on the ground. Finally she crossed her ankles.

“You can leave out the soda,” she said. “Sweet, rich milk, warm from the cow—Nursery Rhyme liquor. But, as you justly remark, I’m used to champagne. Was Patricia afraid, too?”

“She hasn’t said so.”

“Well, I expect she was. In fact, I hope she was. If down in the bottom of your heart you suspect that somebody’s a wash-out, it isn’t such a shock when they run up the waster’s flag. And there you are. You two gave me a chance to get out of the world, and I fairly jumped at it. And now I’ve been out a month I want to get back. Don’t think I haven’t been happy or that I’m ungrateful, but I’m of the world worldly and back to my muck-heap I must go.”

Simon recovered his matches and lighted his pipe.

“Your occupation,” he said, “is gone. How will you live?”

Eulalie shrugged her shoulders.

“My face,” she said, “is my fortune. If I can’t marry some fool with money to burn before my credit gives out, I ought to be shot.”

“You ought indeed,” said Simon heartily. “In fact, I should think the difficulty would be which of the fools to choose. What shall we give you for a wedding-present? A copy of the Sale of Goods Act?”

Eulalie laughed.

“You’re very clever this morning, aren’t you?”

“I wish I was,” said Simon. “Then I should beat you to your knees. As it is, I can only whimper at your pretty pink heels, like a dog that wants his mistress to go the opposite way. What do you miss the most? Night life?”

“‘Night life’!” said Eulalie contemptuously. “D’you think I’m that sort of girl? D’you think my day isn’t complete without hearing an overfed nigger squirt grunts from a saxophone? No. I miss the whole thing—the people, the rush, the movement, the high lights. It’s a vicious taste, but, you see, I’ve had them too long. And now my palate’s ruined, and I can’t taste the milk.”

“In a word, you’re bored?”

Eulalie nodded.

“Not with you and Patricia. You mustn’t think that. But I’m too tough to follow the simple life. I can see the books in the brooks, but when I’ve waded through one, that’s enough for me. I want to get back to Things. They’ll hurt, of course, and I shall have my bad times. But I shan’t be bored.”

With half-closed eyes, Simon gazed into the greenwood.

“I see,” he said slowly. “I see. . . . Look at that dragon-fly there. Isn’t he superb? Solomon in all his wardrobe never had a waistcoat like that. Never mind. My dear, why tell me you’re bored when you know it’s untrue?”

If Simon was imperturbable, so was Eulalie. She continued to smoke placidly.

Presently she raised her eyebrows.

“You put the words into my mouth,” she said carelessly.

“I know. I thought perhaps you were bored and I wanted to see. It was very unscrupulous. And now I’ll tell you why you propose to go.”

Eulalie laughed.

“I’m not at all sure that I want to hear,” she said. “There’s no reason on earth why I should argue with you. I am my own mistress.”

“I made you that,” said Simon.

There was a silence.

“I see,” said Eulalie. “You think that gives you the right to put pressure on me to stay against my will.”

Simon shook his head.

“Oh, no,” he said. “Not against your will. If you wanted to go, that would be different. But I don’t think you want to go.”

Eulalie played her last card.

“My good Simon,” she said, “don’t overreach yourself. Say you want me to stay, if you like, but don’t vivisect my mind and tell me that my list of its contents is wrong. I can’t bear it.”

“Have a heart,” said Simon. “I know I’m on ice that’s cracking: don’t push me in. In fact, as you know you can trust me, why don’t you help me out? Oh, and I’ll tell you why you’re going. Because you think you’re *de trop*.”

The girl threw away her cigarette and clapped her hands to her face.

After a little—

“You might have spared me,” she said.

The man touched her on the shoulder.

“I couldn’t, old lady,” he said. “There’s too much at stake. You see, we don’t want you to go—Patricia and I.”

Eulalie swallowed.

“Do you want to make me cry?”

“My dear. . . .”

“Then don’t say things like that or touch me again. I thought I had no heart till I met you two. But—but I was wrong. Somewhere inside I’ve got one—a soppy little fellow with a highly sensitive tail. The tail is connected with the eyes. Twist it and you get the tears. It’s very ridiculous. And now don’t speak until I do.”

Simon obeyed, smoking steadily and letting his eyes wander over the delicate labyrinth of galleries which seemed to have been driven through the living leaves. Surely such bowers and terraces never were seen, at once so brave and dainty, so majestic and so snug. William the Baptist had named

them ‘choirs’—a perfect name. The only name, of course. ‘In Quires and Places where they sing. . . .’

“One man to two women is wrong,” said Eulalie quietly. “Once it was right enough, but it won’t do to-day. That’s half what’s the matter with the world. I’m a surplus woman, my dear. But even if I was a man I should still be a third party. And there’s the rub. You can add a man to some unions and improve them out of all knowledge. I’ve seen it done. But not to yours. As for a woman . . .”

“Isn’t that a matter for us? If Pat and I are happy——”

“No,” said Eulalie. “I know you’re happy to have me, but I’m not content to stay.” She sat up and touched her ankle. “When the devil was sick, the devil would interlope. Now that he’s well . . . Simon dear, I’m not lonely. I don’t feel left. You two are just wonderful. Pat’s even better than you. She ought to be with you now. She would be with you now if I wasn’t here. Does she let me feel that? No. Yet it sticks out. You’re all she’s got and yet she shares you with me as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And it’s about the most unnatural—you can take my word for that. Well, I can’t let that go on.”

“‘Yet it sticks out,’” said Simon. “‘Why do the people imagine a vain thing?’ Of course, you feel supernumerary.”

“I don’t,” said Eulalie fiercely. “I never have. I don’t know how you’ve done it, but between you you’ve managed that. If I didn’t know I was surplusage——”

“I hate that word,” said Simon.

“Not half as much as I do. And that’s why I’m going.”

Simon smacked the turf with his palm.

“You are not—surplusage.”

“My dear, you aren’t qualified to judge. I’ve studied you two for a month. A day was enough, but that’s neither here nor there. You’re not unsocial or lovesick, but—well, you’re Pat’s natural element and Pat’s yours and there’s an end of it. I’m not going to——”

“You promised,” said Simon.

“I know. And I loathe going back on my word. But not to go back would be worse. You see, you and Pat together are just perfect: and any addition to

your *ménage*, however decorative, automatically becomes surplusage. I say ‘you see,’ but you can’t. You never could. But every one else can.”

Simon sighed.

“It sounds,” he said, “as though we had the Oxford manner. Never mind. I like your first point best—that I’m overwhelmed.”

“I never said that. I said that one man to two women was wrong, and so it is. It isn’t dignified. A girl can have one man or six, or none at all. But she can’t have a fraction of a man. Not that I care—I don’t. I don’t want a man at all. But it cheapens Patricia so.”

“D’you really think she cares?”

“I don’t care whether she cares or whether she doesn’t,” said Eulalie. “My butting in like this cheapens your wife. If you like, it cheapens me too. And I don’t like that at all. Besides, it’s bad for you. Extremely bad. At present you’re quite all right, but you’d soon get spoiled. You’re awfully lucky, you know, to have Pat all to yourself—astoundingly lucky. If you lived a normal life you’d have to share her, my friend. As it is—well, to have a monopoly of Pat is enough to turn most men’s heads, but to have me hanging round too, ready to smile and be talked to, to be petted and squired and generally appropriated—oh, you’d get spoiled to death. I can’t quite imagine you spoiled, but it’s a law of Nature.”

“No one could ever,” said Simon, “appropriate you. You’re too independent and—and elusive. And there’s the answer to your little complaint. We often talk you over—that’s natural; and we always thank our stars because you’re like Euclid’s point. Although you have position, you have no magnitude. Your company’s most refreshing, yet it leaves us alone. You don’t hold aloof, yet you don’t intervene. Now, Yves, who is part of the car, gets in the way. He has no position, but only magnitude. Again, you and Pat and I have a common denominator.”

“The difference,” said Eulalie, “between Yves and me is very simple to define. Yves is a necessary evil, and I’m an unnecessary evil. And that is why, despite your most handsome eulogy, your loving little friend is going to push quietly off.” With that, she picked up the eggs and rose to her feet. “I’m sorry—awfully sorry. But since we’ve a common denominator—I think that’s true—I’m sure you’ll understand. If I thought that either of you, similarly placed, would stay on, I swear I’d do the same. But nothing will ever convince me that you would.”

Simon rose, frowning, and picked up his *cruche*.

“I didn’t want to beat up a fourth,” he said. “I wanted him to roll up natural-like. But rather than let you go . . .”

Eulalie laughed.

“‘In vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird.’ Simon, that thrust was unworthy of you. It wasn’t a thrust at all. It was a hack.”

“Not so fast,” said Simon, “and I’ll tell you a secret. Ever since you arrived I’ve had an eye out for a fourth. A man. I’ll tell you why. Because, when we get to the hills and we drop the caravan, to shoulder you both will be too much for me.”

“The answer to that,” said the girl, “is too obvious.”

“One might think so, mightn’t one? But don’t rush in m’dear, like ‘Arold ‘Otstuff. Listen to uncle instead. When Yves has gone with the van and we’re legging it in the mountains, how can I ever leave Patricia alone? We’re about to campaign, aren’t we? Well, think what that means. You can’t campaign arm in arm. If the milk’s three miles away and she’s too tired to walk, what’ll I do? Go about smiting rocks?” Standing quite still, delicate finger to lip, Eulalie stared on the ground. “So now you see why it is that *I must have another man*. And as you’re so dead against three, perhaps you’ll stay.”

“If I hadn’t blown in—what then? You started off without any idea of reinforcements.”

“I know. I admit it. It hadn’t occurred to me then how essential they were. But it’s pretty obvious now. One lives and learns quite a lot on the open road.”

After a little space—

“Whoever called you ‘Simon,’ ” said Eulalie, “made the mistake of their lives. You’re as slim as they make ’em. So slim that you seem quite simple. How do you do it?”

“I don’t,” said Simon. “Any fool can bluff who holds five aces.”

“I’ll see you,” said Eulalie. “Beat up your fourth—your man—within the week, and I’ll go to Etchechuria.”

“That’s a good girl. And now I’m tired of the Habeas Corpus Act. Tell me another tale of ‘The Bank of England,’ or repeat the one about ‘Red Violets,’ and how Boy Pleydell refused to give you away. As I told you, I’ve known him for years. And why didn’t you like Adèle? She’s the best ever.”

Twenty minutes later they were approaching the camp when a shriek of laughter rose and fell upon their ears.

The two stared at one another blankly.

“Pat!” breathed Eulalie, and began to run like a deer.

Simon set down his *cruche*. . . .

He was in the glade first and, as she came pelting after, slowed up and put out a hand.

“What is it?” panted the girl.

Simon pointed ahead.

Patricia was holding on to the caravan as though for support, while two or three paces away a fair-haired man was carefully brushing a coat and venting an audible soliloquy upon the vanity of human achievement.

“I told you I wasn’t bluffing,” said Simon quietly.



Luncheon was over, and the four were at ease on the sward.

“You see,” said Pomfret, “it was like this. After ten days at Poitiers it became expedient that I should visit certain neighbouring towns in the hope of obtaining information which could never be of the slightest interest or value to any living soul, and could therefore hardly be with decency omitted from the volumes upon which I am engaged. That’s the motif of architectural archæology, you know. Abject and utter uselessness. If you can demonstrate that the mind of a fool who built a drain which disappeared six hundred years ago was affected by the memory of the wall he pulled down to save himself the trouble of carting some new bricks, you’ve struck a blow for architectural archæology. But that’s by the way. I had to visit these towns.

“The first was sixteen miles distant. I went by train. Except that the degree of heat prevailing in the coaches was considerably above that at which I had always believed mammalian life to become extinct, my actual mode of progression calls for no printable comment. It took me three hours to go and nearly four to come back. I had forty minutes there and the station was a mile from the town. . . .

“When late that night I felt sufficiently restored to review the day’s work, I was confronted with the inspiring fact that I had missed my

breakfast, spent seven hours in great torment and run two miles in the burden and heat of the day in order to purchase and consume two bottles of beer of a brand which compared unfavourably with that of Poitiers. . . . Well, I don't mind preaching archæology, but the practice of the art of uselessness has a reflex action which is bad for my heart. Indeed, the very prospect, not only of proceeding South, but of scouring the country by means of the French railway system moved me so much that upon slight reflection I repaired to a neighbouring garage and purchased an automobile. . . .

"Looking back, I fancy the air at Poitiers must have suited the car. So long as I stayed in the town and returned at night, the brute went perfectly. Then one day I packed up and started for Angoulême.

"When I was halfway there the exhaust-pipe broke immediately beneath my feet—at least, it subsequently transpired that such was the case. Knowing nothing of these technicalities, but finding myself suddenly enveloped in offensive smoke, I not unnaturally assumed that the car was on fire, and, only waiting to remove my large trunk and two suit-cases, withdrew to a neighbouring eminence to view the holocaust. This, however, did not mature, and after a quarter of an hour I was forced to the conclusion that the car was an ectype of the famous bush which, if you remember, burned but was not consumed. I was still wondering what Moses would have done, when help arrived.

"When I say 'help,' I mean 'illumination'. . . .

"The driver of a passing car stopped, alighted, made a cursory examination and, bidding me look beneath the step, showed me the broken pipe. Then he took out the carpet, prised up the floor-boards, threw them into the road and showed it me again. Then he opened the throttle wide, and, when the smoke had lifted, pointed to the breach and insisted that it had escaped at that point. Then he said that it was not serious, and that all I had to do was to fit a new pipe. He added that, as it was a foreign car, I should not find one in France. Then he said that he feared that until a new pipe was fitted I should find the smoke and fumes disagreeable, adding that the floor-boards and carpet would be a great comfort and protection, but that to replace them would be foolish, as they would certainly catch fire. Then he accelerated again for me to see the flames. He was in the act of explaining that the only reason why these were not plainly visible was because the sun was too bright, when he saw the look in my eye. This, I fear, was most obvious. I like to remember that he faltered, went backward, tried not to run to his car and drove hurriedly away. . . .

“Well, it seemed best to go on.

“It was when I was five miles from Angoulême that I discovered that I had not replaced my luggage. . . .

“After a short but violent brainstorm I returned somehow to find that my trunk had disappeared. I suppose whoever took it suspected that it was of more value than the suit-cases. In this he was right. Had it been insured, I should have recovered about two hundred and fifty pounds. When I regained consciousness I emerged from the thicket or coppice to which I had retired, and turned the car once more in the direction of Angoulême. It was getting dark now, so a tire burst. It took me exactly one hour to change the wheel and one hour and ten seconds to observe that the new tire was flat. As I’ve told you, the practice of the art of uselessness is bad for my heart, and for one long moment I feared for my reason. However, I was spared to put on another wheel, split my skull upon the near head-lamp and leave my jack in the road.

“It really only remained for my lights to fail. This they did about three miles later. . . .

“After a short stroll in a quarry to collect my thoughts, I proceeded by the light of the stars at a walking pace. Indeed, I presently alighted and walked by the side of the car, steering her from without, for in this way my feet and legs were not burned and I found the fumes less stifling.

“Angoulême was won at a quarter to twelve.

“I spent the next two days in bed. Then, the car having been repaired, I made bold to visit a townlet nine miles away. On the way there the car was seized with some intestinal trouble and was unable to move. I spent six hours by the roadside and was then towed back to Angoulême.

“Three days later I tried again. All went well until I was starting for home. Then in a crowded street the accelerator stuck, and, before I knew where I was, I had transferred the contents of a gig, which was full of women, to a float, which was full of calves, mounted the pavement and forced an entrance into a small *épicerie*. . . .

“I can’t talk about the next two hours. Enough that they were both crammed with every circumstance of insult, peril and extortion. The condition of the car alone was like some terrible dream. Olives all over the steps, dates on the windscreen, one wheel clogged with herrings, the other hub deep in jam and broken glass, drifts of coffee on the wings, rice in the engine-shield and the ruin of a dozen of oil on the front or driver’s seat. . . .

“I didn’t go out for a week—not until I left Angoulême. From there to Marmande life was one long nightmare. First, the battery broke: it didn’t fail, it blinkin’ well broke and discharged corrosive fluid all over the place. Then the gears got overwrought and had a nervous breakdown. The remaining parts began to exchange functions. The clutch, which should have seized, slipped: the valves, which should have slipped, stuck: the brakes, which should have come off, seized, and any number of bolts and nuts, which ought to have stuck, came off. Of course, by now I was beginning to come unbuttoned. My nerve was going. I was almost afraid to ask for petrol, and if anyone stared at the car I felt like bursting into tears.

“Then, three days ago, just after passing Marmande, the exhaust-pipe broke again. . . . Same place, same smoke, same hellish heat, same stench, same everything. . . .

“Well, I went mad.

“I drove up a cart-track, took out my suit-cases and left the car in a wood. Then I walked back to the Garonne—just outside Marmande. There was a good head of water, and a careful survey of the bridge satisfied me that it would serve my purpose. I then went into the town, with a suit-case in either hand, dined ostentatiously and announced that I was walking to Spain. Then I returned to the wood. I hid my luggage and such trifles as I had left, and just about midnight I drove the car to the bridge. . . .

“One minute later it was done. The swine went over, raving like a posse of fiends, and three hours later I was ten miles away.

“And there we are.

“I’m expecting to be arrested any moment for wilful damage to a bridge and attempted suicide, because, after all my trouble to cover my tracks, I left a plate on the dash bearing both my name and my address. You see? The art of uselessness again. I’m doomed to take infinite pains to achieve futility. I’ve carried those blasted wallets thirty-five brown-baked miles. The right one’s the heaviest, and I haven’t unlocked it for weeks. If you were to open it now and show me that it was full of poor quality manure I shouldn’t even express surprise. It is inconceivable that I should have been overburdened for *something*. But if for one calendar month I have been manhandling about a hundred-weight of inferior fertilizer—lifting it in and out of cars, lugging it up and down stairs, locking my door upon it lest it should be stolen, and finally bearing it to my wounding for thirty-five miles—that would be consonant with the fortune I have enjoyed ever since Poitiers.

“And now I must go. It’s another ten kilometres to St. Justin, and you’ve no idea how guano makes your arm ache.”

Patricia looked tearfully at Eulalie and then at Simon. Then she turned to Pomfret.

“Why invite trouble?” she said. “We have a spare bedroom here.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” said Tudor. “You’re awfully kind to ask me, but _____”

“Please do,” said Eulalie. “And then you can come with us to Etchechuria.”

Pomfret Tudor sat up, with a hand to his lips. For a moment he sat thinking. Then the light in his eyes died.

He laughed shortly.

“I’d love to,” he said. “I can’t think of anything I’d enjoy more. You three are congenial: I love adventure and the open air; and I want to step out of the world. . . . My race is nearly over, and between you and me I’ve lost. The world doesn’t think so, but then the world doesn’t know. The idea was not to come down—you know, become shabby-genteel. So I put up a show. I had a vague idea of carrying my bat. But I’m bad at finance or something, and so I’ve lost. Not yet, though, and that’s my trouble. *I must finish my race*. With luck I’ll just about do it—if I don’t buy any more cars. And then I’ll draw my bay-leaves and fade away.”

“They don’t give losers bay-leaves,” said Mrs. Beaulieu.

“Don’t they?” said Tudor quietly. “Look at *The Times*. Watch that little paragraph called *Wills and Bequests*. See what men who have mattered—not that I’m one: archæologists don’t matter—possess in the hour of death. Then think what their lives have been . . . Labour, recognition and penury. Orders glowing upon a threadbare coat. Frayed linen, bus-fares, general servants—those things don’t belong to people who’ve won their race. You see, you get your chaplet, or you don’t, according to the way you ride. Where you finish doesn’t count—with the world. But it counts with you all right, because you’re human. Man has a weakness for finishing at least no worse off than he should be—for keeping at least the recognized style of his kind—for enjoying the dignity and comfort which belong to his class. Well, I’ve always lived—well, decently. . . . That’s why your invitation attracts me so. You’re living decently: yet you’ve faded away. No doubt that’s of choice, but you have. And I shall have to—very soon. But I can’t just yet. . . . And so I must let this great opportunity go. As I’ve already hinted, I’m writing a

blear-eyed book. I've been officially entrusted to compile the balderdash and so I can't throw it up. It's painfully puerile, but there you are. If you like to throw in your lot with a lot of crabbed buffoons, that's your look-out: buffoons or burglars, you've shared their mouldy counsels and you can't let them down."

There was a silence.

"How long will it take?" said Eulalie.

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders.

"About twelve months. Never mind. You must send me a card from Etchechuria—something encouraging, you know. A photograph of the gas-works by moonlight, for instance, or the Boy Scouts by gas-light. It doesn't really matter, so long as it suggests utility. And now I must go."

He rose to his feet.

"Look here," said Simon. "I'm not going to urge you to let the book care for itself, because that's a matter for you, but, as we're all going South and I don't imagine you're particularly pressed for time, why don't you join our pilgrimage? You can break away when you must, but till then—well, at least you won't have to carry your scrips."

Pomfret hesitated.

"You're awfully kind," he said, "but you've done enough. St. Justin _____"

"Is ten kilometres," said Patricia. "And the beds will be occupied."

Pomfret stared at the caravan.

"From what you said," he murmured, "I gather it was built to take four. But I couldn't think of presuming upon a designer's optimism. If I may sleep in the curtilage—so that I can call if I'm frightened—clean my teeth not less than one furlong below the beer, and reappear in time to smear over the boots and serve breakfast . . ."

"We'll give you a bed," said Patricia, "and then you can sleep where you like. If you think it's too cramped inside, the bed takes out and can go wherever you please. And when I've had my bath I'll whistle and you can come and have yours. Simon will lend you a dressing-gown."

"Mayn't I wear mine?" said Pomfret brokenly. "It's the only thing I really look nice in. It's got scenes from Æsop's Fables all down the back and

the mark the hair-wash made on the left breast, and it's frogged. And it's never had an audience since the War."

"It was obviously made for Etchechuria," said Eulalie. "Can't you postpone the book?"

"Don't try to beguile me," said Pomfret. "It isn't fair. If you three were looking for a by-pass to Hell, I should certainly join in the search. The job doesn't matter: it's the company you do it in. But I'm not at liberty: I'm engaged—sworn to light such a candle of utter futility as no fool will ever take the trouble to put out, and nothing but death itself can release me from that. But if you're not being humorous, I'll hang about for a week. Don't bother about me at all. If you feel like giving me food, put some scraps under that bush: and if you should feel you must see me, talk audibly about beer."

With that, he picked up his suit-cases.

"Don't be absurd," said Eulalie. She pointed to Simon and Patricia. "There's the original firm. I blew in at Vendôme"—she hesitated—"at Vendôme, and two became three. Now three are becoming four."

"That's right," said Simon and Patricia.

"If," continued Eulalie, "if you really want your food put under that bush, we'll do it. We'll even strew it about the road, if you like. But it'd save us all trouble if you could eat it with us, and—and I think you might be Mess President and keep the accounts. Simon's no earthly."

"'Strew it about the road'?" said Pomfret weakly, setting his luggage down. "That's what I get for being humble. 'Strew it . . .' Oh, you disgusting child. And now I will be Mess President. Whether I shall eat with you I don't know. I think perhaps if you went to bed early to-night——"

"Neither do I," said Eulalie. "Listen. I don't do it now, but a month ago I was handling stolen jewels. In fact, if you called me a thief, I couldn't say you were wrong. And I didn't do it just once because I'd got stuck. It was my profession. That's how I lived and moved for thirteen years. . . . I don't expect you to pick up your stuff right now and go stamping away. I'm not so silly as that. But *I* like to know who I'm sitting down with, and I've no doubt you're the same. Because then one knows where one is and can look ahead."

Pomfret Tudor uncovered.

Then he stepped to the girl and took her small hand in his.

“Almost thou persuadest me to go to Etchechuria,” he said.



Patricia looked up from the map.

“Mont-de-Marsan,” she said, “is exactly six miles.”

There was a profound silence.

“I think,” continued Patricia, “that Pomfret’s the best one to go.”

“My dear,” said Pomfret, “nothing would prevent me, only I’ve earmarked to-morrow for meditation. Only yesterday——”

“I don’t think,” said Eulalie, “you should meditate in your sleep. I’m sure it’s bad for the brain. I was watching you this morning—after breakfast.”

“That wasn’t sleep,” said Pomfret. “That was a trance. It’s very wonderful. Sometimes it takes me a little while to go off, but once I’m off I become oblivious of everything except my work. By the way, never disturb me if you see me like that. It’s dangerous.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry,” said Eulalie. “I’d not the slightest idea. You ought to have told me when I woke you for lunch. But I won’t to-morrow.”

“No, don’t,” said Pomfret. “Just put something aside for me. Nothing much. More of a snack. A little cold duck and cheese and a few raspberries and some cake. And mind you cover it up because of the flies. They’re a very irreverent lot about here. Which reminds me. Whoever goes to Mont-de-Marsan to-morrow must get some muslin.”

“It’s no good,” said Patricia, laughing. “You’re for the high jump. Besides, six miles will do you a lot of good. And you can meditate as you go.”

“Six?” cried Pomfret excitedly. “What do you mean? It’s twelve. And I’m not allowed to——”

A gasp from Simon, who was reading *The Times*, cut short the sentence.

For a moment he stared at the paper.

Then he started to his feet.

“Listen,” he cried. “Listen to this.

It now seems unhappily certain that Mr. Pomfret Tudor, the eminent architectural archæologist, has perished. As previously reported in our columns, his car was discovered in the River Garonne on Monday last immediately beneath the bridge at Marmande, a small town in the Department of Lot-et-Garonne, which the unfortunate gentleman is known to have been investigating. It is believed that, while crossing the bridge, which is narrow, on Sunday night, either his steering-gear jammed or something caused him to swerve, with the result that before he could stop it the car had dashed through the parapet. In spite of dragging operations his body has not been recovered, but this is not surprising, for the current is strong, and it may well have been swept down stream, while there is a grim local tradition that the Garonne never gives up its dead.

A memoir appears upon page 14."

In the midst of an electric silence.

"Read the memoir," said Eulalie.

"No," said Pomfret. "I protest. I'm sure you'll respect my wishes. No flowers by request."

Simon began to read, and Pomfret rose and strolled out of earshot.

When it was over Patricia raised her voice.

"Come back, you great man," she said. "I've something to tell you."

As he came up—

"What?" said Pomfret.

"Three things," said Patricia, rising and taking his arm. "The first is that we're rather prouder to know you than we were before. The second is that Mr. Wasley Crossgarter, whoever he may be, has been entrusted with the task of completing and editing *The Saracen in France*. And the third, that you can't possibly go back, because no man could ever live up to such a eulogy again."

Pomfret frowned.

"I wonder," he said. "And now I've got a new riddle. When is a threepenny newspaper worth seven shillings and sixpence? If you can guess it, I'll walk to Mont-de-Marsan."

“I know,” shrieked Eulalie. “I know. *When it’s a passport to Etchechuria.*”

“A-a-ah,” screamed Pomfret. “She’s done it on me.”

The three, however, took no notice at all.

They had already joined hands and were dancing about him like fauns.

For a moment Pomfret regarded them.

Then he began to recite *The Inchcape Rock*.

CHAPTER III

BLIND COUNTRY

E STEPPEMAZAN has a consequence of which it is justly proud.

It is a pocket village, sunk in a trough of the mountains, with two inns and a miniature church and, right in its midst, a troubled, pelting stream and an aged bridge. And the bridge is the pride of little Esteppemazan, for it has soldiers about it and a guard-room on either side, and if you will saunter across it there will come a moment during your lazy passage when you have one foot in France and the other in Spain.

The better inn stands up above the village upon a shelf of rock: the narrow road passes before it, and there is just room for a row of plane trees to shade a terrace beyond. Then comes a sixty-foot drop to the torrent below. This roars gently, like Bottom's sucking-dove, and if you will sit to a table under the planes when the summer day is over and Esteppemazan lies like a sombre cushion stuck with points of light, and the open doors of the guard-rooms cut sharp twin rectangles out of the darkness, and if you have ears to hear, you may find in its music the dignified speech of mountains, of valleys, of forests and the clouds that wait upon these, the parlance of highland pastures and dews and frosts and, if you are very much favoured, even the crisp rustle of the alb of Dawn climbing the staircase of the firmament.

The four had dined on the terrace in great contentment. True a string of mules had gone jingling by while Jeanne was waiting with an omelet in the doorway of the inn, but the strip of road was well watered and, as Pomfret had said at the time, an opportunity of studying one's future fare *en route* may be hard on the salivary glands, but, as our forefathers knew, is the prince of appetizers. And now that the meal was over they still sat around the oak table, silent and smoking and listening to the torrent below. . . .

At length—

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Simon, "but there's work to be done."

"That's right," said Eulalie. "Maps forward and, Pomfret, turn on the light."

There was a naked lamp above them, hung from the trees, and Pomfret put up a hand and felt for the switch. . . .

“Finish the fairy-tale,” said Patricia, blinking. “Never mind. Simon, show us where we are.”

Her husband unfolded a map and, after a short scrutiny, took out a pencil and set its point on the linen.

“That’s where we’re sitting,” he said. The pencil began to move. “There’s the water and there’s Estepemazan. There’s the line we follow—practically due East—and there’s our first camp. There’s the bridle-path we use: happily it’s fairly direct, so we can keep more or less together, but it leaves the line here and there—there, for instance, and that’s where I shall break away. Then I rejoin you here. As far as possible I want to stick to that line, tread every foot of it, learn it by heart, make it our main—main——”

“Sewer?” suggested Pomfret.

“Our trunk-line,” said Simon, disregarding the interjection. “Once we’ve got that we can branch, run parallel and do all sorts of stunts, but we’ll always know where we are. We ought all to know it really, but the mules must stick to the path, so that counts at least one out. I think Pomfret had better take the mules.”

There was a pregnant silence.

Then—

“Yes, that was a foregone conclusion, wasn’t it?” said Pomfret. “I may say I realized that when the brutes were bought. You’ve none of you said so, of course. It’s always been ‘we.’ ‘We must look after the mules.’ ‘We must tie the mules up.’ Sometimes it’s been the passive voice. ‘The mules will have to be groomed.’” He laughed wildly. “If you remember, I objected from the first. They may be picturesque, but they can’t compare with a good perambulator for what we want.”

“My dear,” wailed Patricia, “you can’t push a pram over mountains.”

“You can drag it and lift it and, if necessary, you can drop it. In a word, you can control it. You’re arbiter of its fate. Not so the mules. If the mules don’t feel like being dragged, they blinkin’ well won’t be dragged. And you can’t get behind and shove. It’s too—too exciting.”

“But you won’t have to drag them,” purred Eulalie. “You coax them. And, besides, a perambulator would never have held enough.”

“Well, a barrow, then,” said Pomfret. “A sledge. Anything inanimate. But the introduction of live-stock——”

“——was inevitable,” said Simon uncertainly. “A car would have been the thing, but it’d never get there. Mules are used to this country.”

“No doubt,” said Pomfret. “My point is that we—I am not used to mules. I can precede them: should they withdraw I can follow them: if they permit me I suppose I can groom them (I shan’t do them underneath the first day: that, I think, would be presumptuous): but I can’t control them. Besides, mules have a crude sense of humour. Some people call it treachery.”

Patricia and Eulalie fought to restrain their mirth.

“There now,” said Simon. “I knew we should forget something. We haven’t a hoofpick. Perhaps Pierre will sell us one.”

Pomfret regarded his finger-nails.

“‘Hoofpick,’ ” he said reflectively. “Oh, I see. Analogous to toothpick, only lower down. Yes. I think perhaps ‘we’ can do without a hoofpick. I don’t suppose they’ll get any stones in their——”

“It isn’t only for stones,” said Simon. “After they’ve done their work you always clean out their feet. You see, they pick up dirt and stuff as they go along, and it’s unhealthy.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Pomfret. “I suppose you do it after they’ve fed, so as not to spoil their appetite.” He laughed bitterly. “Well, there’s no harm in buying one, is there? They needn’t know we’ve got it. And we’d better have a thermometer. Then I can keep an eye on their temperature.”

When order had been restored—

“Seriously,” said Simon shakily. “I anticipate no trouble. They’re fit and amiable, and I imagine they’ll do their job. If they do, after the first day the girls can take them on; and you and I’ll groom one each. I wish we could do without them, but we’ve too much stuff to carry and a truck would be hell.”

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders.

“Let us pray,” he said piously, “that it will not be for long. You talk of establishing a trunk-line and then really getting to work. But if we don’t strike something in the next ten days, I shall become suspicious. If Etchechuria’s anywhere it’s on the frontier line.”

“That’s right,” said Eulalie, lighting a cigarette. “Be depressing at the outset. And if you’d ever paid the slightest attention when we were

discussing our route, you'd know that we weren't going to follow the frontier line."

"I did hear some mouth-wash of that sort," admitted Pomfret, "but I imagined the insanity had passed. You don't seriously suggest we ignore the one sign-post we've got?"

Simon sat back in his chair.

"I was waiting for this," he said. "Now listen. The frontier doesn't run straight—it winds and curls like a stream. To follow it faithfully would almost double our trek. But, what's more important than that, our very case is that the frontier line is false. Well, it seems waste of time to take our cue from a line which we're trying to prove is wrong. So we're going to steer by compass. Now and again, of course, we shall cross the line. . . ."

"We shall probably get shot for smuggling," said Pomfret. "If Balaam's in Spain and he sees some thistles in France, he won't worry about any frontier line. Balak will follow, and all our stuff 'll be in balk. And whenever we cross on purpose the packs 'll have to come down."

"I don't care," said Simon doggedly. "I don't pretend it's ideal, but it's the only thing to do. Besides, the frontier isn't marked with a crease, whereas with a compass-bearing you can't go wrong."

"I could," said Pomfret. "Easily. I'd rather go by night and star by the steers."

"You ought to have listened," said Patricia. "Then you could have objected before. Not that it would have made any difference, but as it is it's too late. What time do we start?"

Finding the question momentous, Pomfret deferred his protest pending Simon's reply.

"At five," said that gentleman shortly. "Jeanne has orders to call us at half-past three. You and Eulalie needn't get up till four, but Pomfret and I have got to pack the mules." Pomfret groaned. "Then with luck we ought to get in by three."

"Of course," said Pomfret, "I should hate to interrupt, but let's just translate 'get in by three.' 'Get in.' What you really mean is 'arrive.' You can't get into a mountain-side. You can arrive on it, and if you're fool enough you can spend the night on it—as we purpose to do—but without a blasting charge you can't get into it. Very well, 'Arrive by three.' Why? It

won't be dark till nine. Why add six hours to our martyrdom? More. Why subtract six hours from our rest? If we're called at half-past nine——”

“The answers,” said Simon, “are two. The first is that in practice we shan't ‘arrive by three.’ The second, that if you want to pitch a camp by starlight, I don't.”

“Well, that's succinct, isn't it? At once rude and succinct. However, I've done some good. We're getting down to the truth. ‘In practice we shan't arrive . . .’ All I can say is I wish you'd give up talking theoretically. Then we shall know where we are. When shall we arrive—in fact?”

“To be perfectly frank,” said Simon, “it all depends upon you. If you monkey about with the mules——”

“I protest,” said Pomfret, with warmth, “I do hereby protest. It is not my habit to ‘monkey’—much less ‘monkey about’—with beasts of burden. If you mean they may prove unruly and so delay us, that, if you remember, was the fear I ventured to express and you to deride a moment ago. But there you are. I see what's coming. Whatever the swine do wrong will be attributed to my incompetence. That's why I want a perambulator.”

With a mischievous light in her eyes, Eulalie made a fresh cast.

“So long as you coax them——”

“If anyone employs that verb again,” said Pomfret violently, “I won't be responsible for what I say. Used of an importunate schoolgirl slobbering over her infatuate sire, it may be appropriate—if inclined to make the gorge rise: but in the present connection it's insulting, indecent, and idiotic. ‘Coax!’ What does it mean? ‘Persuade by blandishment.’ Jacob's Ramp! We're not dealing with the Babes in the Wood. How the devil can you coax five horse-power of roach-backed vice if it doesn't like the look of the road? Promise to tell it a story? Or swear there's a fairy pub at the top of the hill? You know, I'm not going to change hats with the swine. We're not going to be on those sort of terms. If they behave themselves, I'll—I'll let them follow me. I'll also prepare their food and perform their filthy toilet. But if they try to put it across me—well, that's where little ‘Erbert gets off. I'm not going to bicker with a mule. I've had enough of the Art of Uselessness. Besides, it's dangerous. I'm rather particular about my abdominal wall—I don't want it bent.”

“Now, don't look for trouble,” said Patricia, wiping her eyes. “Balak and Balaam are as quiet as lambs. I can't say I'll take them to-morrow, because I want to help Simon, but it's nothing to do.”

“Pat,” said Eulalie, laughing, “don’t sympathize with him. If we’d told him to carry the compass, he’d ‘ve said we were asking his death. If we’d said we had no job for him, he’d ‘ve clamoured for something to do. He is contrary—for the love of the thing.”

“Yet he’s an asset,” said Simon, folding his map. “He’s obstructive, subversive, and he’s wasted our last half-hour. Yet we aren’t angry. Why is it?”

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders and waved a hand.

“Personality,” he said. “That indefinable charm, which all envy and so few possess. But don’t be downhearted. We can’t all have it. And now what about a final beer before we flirt with Sleep? As a precaution, I mean.”

He rose and strolled to the doorway, calling for Jeanne.

“This morning,” said Simon, “Pomfret walked twelve miles and loathed them. He walked to Bethune and back. D’you know what he went for?”

“He said,” said Patricia, “he wanted some cigarettes.”

Simon nodded.

“I know. But he could have bought them in Esteppemazan. No. He went for a couple of eye-fringes. You know. Things you put on a brow-band to keep the flies away. They make quite a lot of difference to the comfort of any horse—or mule.”



If you must search for a country, I imagine Simon’s plan was as good as any other.

The four moved slowly, covering thirty miles in the week. Three days out of seven they marched, and rested on four. When it was necessary they camped, but more often than not they spent the night at an inn. This was convenient—gave body and soul a chance. The four grabbed at it. . . . So the men were always spruce, and the girls dainty. The latter might have worn breeches and let their finger-nails go. They found it unnecessary to do either. They dressed as they had dressed to play golf, and could have passed through a lounge at any hour without exciting anything but admiration. They were, of course, essentially feminine: but, if they looked at themselves in mountain pools, they also bathed in them. Little wonder that their natural beauty came to be that of the wild. Yet they were least of all savage: clean linen went on to their backs every day. Murillo and other villages had to

return their washing in thirty-six hours. While protesting that this was impossible, they did it in twenty-four and exhibited it privately for twelve as one exhibits to one's neighbours transient miracles not ever likely again to pass their way.

Simon directed the reconnaissance and indeed conducted most of it himself, with Patricia for A.D.C. He carried the compass and wore the binocular, mapping the country as he went. His wife worked with her husband, with shining eyes. Pomfret victualled the party and controlled the transport, contentedly marching before his beloved mules and cross-examining such natives as he met regarding the lie of the land. He was seldom in sight of the Beaulieus: sometimes they and he were a good two miles apart. This necessitated liaison, which Eulalie delighted to maintain with considerable skill.

As the days went by, experience came to teach them a hundred tricks. A code of emergency signals by flag or whistle was evolved: Pomfret found a new way of loading the mules: Simon learned how to make the most of a brook: in a week they could pitch a camp in half an hour.

Gay and keen and careless, I fancy the sight of them gladdened many an eye.

To take them at random one day in August at noon—a glorious summer day, when the sun is high in the heaven and that is without a cloud, when the mountains are flaunting their exquisite grey-green livery of the colour of churchyard oak and a haze, a tremulous haze conjures the world below into a kingdom of dreams. Her broad-brimmed hat by her side, Eulalie is lying prone on a slice of turf: her pert chin is cupped in her palms and the outline of her slight figure is plainly visible—a lithe and supple business, with a natural waist and, below, such a pair of silk-stockinged legs as Amaryllis herself might have been proud to display. Under the brave sunshine her wonderful red-gold hair has turned into a muster of tones of unbelievable beauty. The ground falls before her in one tremendous leap to just such another aerie a crow's mile away. There sits Simon, with his elbows planted on his knees and his glasses up to his eyes. His shirt is open at the throat, his sleeves are rolled to the elbow, and his soft hat is tilted to the back of his head. His lips are moving as he describes with great particularity a peak that shall serve as a landmark next time they pass this way. Cross-legged by his side, his wife takes down his words in a soldier's note-book and, when he stops speaking, raises her lovely head to follow his gaze across the gorges. Then Simon lowers his glasses, and the two sit like statues, with their heads up, steady-eyed, looking unto the hills. Boy and girl, man and woman, god

and goddess. . . . Sitting thus on a throne of Nature's above the world, they are neither the one nor the other, I think, but an alloy of all three. About the third figure which Eulalie can see there is no such doubt. He is of the good red earth earthy. At the moment he is beside a bridle-path three hundred feet below and half a mile to the left, and he is addressing two mules who stare stolidly upon him and blink and occasionally turn their heads to send a fly packing. His hat, like Simon's, is on the back of his head, and he is seated upon a great stone, with one hand raised to decorate a period and the other holding a beer-bottle, as a marshal should hold his baton, against his thigh. And from time to time he begs the mules to excuse him and puts the bottle to his lips. . . . Five minutes later they are gone, all four, and the landscape is the poorer.

Their camps were peaceful.

They never forgot their fifth—the fairest of all. They found a fold of the mountains where a spring rose out of a thicket and meadows on either side sloped to the sky. The place might have been a crater which Time had begged of the gods, when he was a child, to plant a garden there.

The *toile* tents went up upon natural terraces, one on each side of the burn: a fireplace was built on the bank, a fire was kindled and the mule lines laid out thirty paces or so down stream: then stones were moved and packed to make a pool, and the canvas bath was sunk to 'tile' its floor; a ground-sheet, spread on the bank and hanging down like a table-cloth into the water, completed the *salle des bains*.

Close to Nature that night, they slept like the dead. That their quarters were close did not concern them at all. They were of the same kind. This was as well, for Eulalie's curls were brushing Patricia's arm, thrusting out of its hammock, and Pomfret, who lay on the ground, had Simon suspended above him twelve inches away. The tents were open and full of the mountain breeze, a winking huddle of ash showed where the fire had been, away in the shadows the mules were lying down. There was rest in the place—they had never done that before.

The men were up at dawn. By arrangement, they were free of the bathroom till six o'clock; then they awakened the girls and withdrew to watch the approaches to the dingle, so that Patricia and Eulalie could bathe and dress undisturbed—idyllic rites fit for the brush of a Watteau, redolent of the whimper of the hounds of Actæon. Presently came breakfast and, since they were not to push on until the following day, leisure for all. The mules were suffered to graze, Pomfret to sleep, Simon to climb to the lip of

the cup that held them, lazily rake the country and pick up his points. Patricia and Eulalie compared their bygone days, discussing men and manners as women will.

So for one summer's day and another night.

Then the tents were struck, the bath came out of the pool, and half an hour later the little column wound out of its pretty fastness and began to head East by North.

And of such was their life.

The weather was set fair, they and their beasts were in the best of health, the stepping-stones which Simon indicated never gave way. There was always room in the inn and always brushwood and water by the camp. They never were far behind time and they met with no misadventure.

All things considered, their luck was remarkable.

When he was alone with his mules, Pomfret looked down his nose. He had seen this good fortune before.



"Now, that's a landmark if you like," said Simon, "of the once-seen-never-forgotten type. The pity is it won't be the slightest use—for our next lap, any way. We'll be on the other side of those." He pointed to a long ridge of frowning crags. "Never mind. Shove it down. You never know. *Hill like a leaning churn—waterfall leaping from summit gives exact impression of being poured out. Bearing . . .*" He stooped to peer at the compass. "*Absolutely plumb North.*"

"Right," said Patricia. "Isn't there anything you can get on the other side?"

"Nothing," said Simon, putting his glasses to his eyes. "*Series of ridges*, if you like, but there's nothing to choose. It's nondescript chaos and, I rather imagine, wicked country to cross. But that's to be seen. Never mind. Landmarks are only a convenience. If you hold your compass tight you can't go wrong."

He put his glasses away and rose to his feet.

Down in the valley below Eulalie rose also.

Simon lifted his hat and waited for her to do the same: but the slim white figure stood still.

“Hallo,” said Patricia. “What’s up?”

Simon repeated his signal two or three times.

Eulalie never moved.

Simon replaced his hat.

Out went Eulalie’s hand with a wisp of white in its fingers.

“*Trouble with the mules,*” said Simon. “Hell.” The wisp fluttered to the ground. “*Need you.* Well, we must count ourselves lucky not to have had it before.” He repeated the signal and turned. “Come on, my darling.”

But Patricia was already descending.

“This way,” she cried over her shoulder.

To get to where Eulalie stood proved less simple than it had seemed. Right at the beginning of their descent the girl had been lost to view, and the two were continually balked by short but sheer drops which had to be circumvented, with the result that, when at last they were down, they were not in the valley at all, but standing on a patch of greensward, with the rough of the mountains on three sides and a wood on the fourth. For a moment they were uncertain which way to turn: then they got their direction and bore to the left. . . .

Twenty minutes later they were back upon the patch of greensward.

When they had exchanged irritation—

“My dear,” said Simon, “there’s only one thing to do, and that is to go back to the top and start again. It’s my own fool’s fault for not looking where I was going when I was coming down.”

“Well, I’m not exactly blameless,” rejoined his wife. “I went first nearly the whole of the way. However . . .”

The ascent took them nearly an hour.

Eulalie was no longer to be seen, but that was hardly surprising: she had probably joined Pomfret. The two could see where she had stood and the way to get there.

After noting the line to follow with meticulous care, they made their second descent, pointing out to each other where they had gone wrong before. Presently they came to a wood and five minutes later they emerged upon the patch of greensward.

Patricia recoiled, and Simon put a hand to his head.

Then with one accord they began to laugh.

“My dear, your face,” sobbed Patricia. “Your face when you recognized it. . . .”

She slid an arm round his neck and clung to him helplessly.

“It’s so silly,” said Simon weakly. “Sweatin’ right up to the top jus’ to retrace our steps. . . . An’ Pomfret in straits with the mules, cursing us neck an’ crop for being so long.” He glanced at his watch. “An’ a quarter past two, as I live. M’ dear, we must break away somehow.”

“But we’ve tried every way,” said Patricia.

This was true. The greensward lay four-square in a little dell, and they had entered or left it by each of its definite sides.

“We must steer by compass,” said Simon. “It’ll be a tedious business because we’re so much enclosed. But we’ve got to get out.”

It was more than tedious, and when, after scrambling and halting alternately for three-quarters of an hour, they passed behind a boulder to see the patch of greensward lying, quiet and reposeful, some twenty-five feet below, Simon took off his hat and mopped his face.

“Place is bewitched,” he said. “I know I’ve been steering badly, but I’ve kept between North and North-east all the time. How d’you reconcile that?”

“I can’t,” said Patricia. “I don’t think anyone could. As you say, the place is bewitched. And now we’re reduced to the duffer’s exit—going back by the way we’ve come. We’re bound to get out like that because I’ve got the bearings written down.”

“That’s right,” said Simon resignedly. “It’s rather like sealing an envelope with Portland cement, but if everything else gives way . . . But oh, my pretty lady, you will be so tired.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said his wife. “That bath this morning nearly killed me—I could have cried with pain—but I can’t shake off its effect.”

“Great heart,” said Simon, and kissed her.

Then they retraced their steps to the top of the hill. . . .

Two hours later they struck the bridle-path and, following this for a mile, came upon the scene of disorder which Eulalie had reported.

Sullen, bored, ignoring the toothsome herbage a yard from their heads, Balak and Balaam were standing across the path, pictures of wintry discontent. Their packs were gone, and the kit which had composed them was piled by the side of the way. With the leading rein round his wrist, Pomfret was lying on his back on a strip of turf, while Eulalie was seated on a tent with her back to a shoulder of rock, smoking a cigarette.

As the Beaulieus approached she started to her feet.

“My dears,” she cried, “where on all this earth have you been?”

Pomfret rose to a sitting posture.

“Are you whole?” he said. “Got all your feet and everything?”

“We are complete and intact,” said Simon.

Pomfret inspired.

“Well, don’t rush about so,” he said. “Half a mile down hill in five hours is bad for the heart—my heart. In fact, I shouldn’t come next time. Let me be kicked to death.”

“We lost our way,” said Patricia. “I’ll leave it there for the moment, because it’s too mad a tale. And, besides, you’d only argue, and we’re quite late enough.”

“But, Pat,” said Eulalie, “I’ve been all over the place, whistling and calling till at last my mouth wouldn’t work. I’ve been up to where I saw you and——”

“You haven’t!” cried the two in a breath.

“I have indeed. I stood on the cairn you made——”

“We never made a cairn there,” cried Simon. “Nor’s anyone else. There is no cairn. You’ve been up on the wrong hill.”

Eulalie stared.

“But, my dear, I stood——”

“There was no cairn,” said Patricia.

“That’s right,” said Pomfret. “Argue about a rotten heap of stones. Dispute as to who should have the palm for idiocy. Nice lot of broken reeds you are. Talk about an eye to country. Why, you can’t walk straight. That’s your trouble. Half a blinkin’ mile in five hours, an’ the other swarms up the wrong hill. Ugh! You’re only fit to play musical chairs.”

This unmerited outburst provoked a storm of indignation. Pomfret was reviled and menaced and unfavourably compared and reviled again.

Finally—

“And now what’s the matter?” concluded Simon. “We haven’t loafed fifteen miles out of our way to be abused. If you hadn’t messed things up and had to signal——”

“Remove that man,” said Pomfret excitedly. “Take him out of earshot and let him find his own way back. That’ll give me time to recover.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Patricia, laughing. “And don’t let’s curse one another any more. No one’s to blame. It’s just bad luck. When Pomfret’s heard our story——”

“Sweetheart,” said Pomfret, rising, “I can’t wait till then. If a child nearly gets run over, its mother will knock it about. Why? To teach it to be more careful? No. *Because she loves it.* By jeopardizing her happiness the brat has scared her stiff: she retorts by assault. Her intense relief at its safety has to be served.” He put her hand to his lips. “So you must forgive me. I’ve had my heart in my mouth most of the day. That beautiful red-haired child absented herself for two hours.”

“When I came back you threw stones at me,” said Eulalie. “But you never kissed my hand.”

“Yes, but you’re unrepentant,” said Pomfret. “Besides, you threw them back.”

“And now,” said Simon, “what about getting on? It’s a quarter past five, and we should have been at Stelthe by three. What’s the matter with the mules?”

“God knows,” said Pomfret bitterly. “I think the brutes are bewitched. The trouble began a couple of furlongs back. All of a sudden the leading rein left my hand. Well, I thought I’d dropped it, but when I turned round to pick it up, the swine were standing still. I stared at them for a moment, and they stared back—with the funniest look in their eyes. Then they swung round.

“I just got the rein in time. . . .

“To describe the engagement in detail would take too long. Enough that the Queensberry Rules were ignored in the most barefaced manner, that the best part of a cubit has been added to each of my arms, that my dismemberment was attempted and that if I had not leapt for safety on to

Balak's neck we shouldn't be as far as we are. He whipped up here in an effort to get me off, with Balaam hammering behind. Well, I was just wondering whether it wouldn't have been wiser to be dismembered instead of halved when the peach stopped dead. So did I—about twenty yards further on. Upon reflection, I'm not at all certain I didn't die while I was in the air. All the symptoms of death were present during my passage, which seemed interminable. Besides, I fell into yon bramble-bush, and intimacy with that luxuriant shrub would resurrect a mummy. It was really quite interesting. I've never been so placed. To lie still was unthinkable because my weight was being taken by about five thousand thorns: yet the slightest motion meant mutilation. All the time between my screams I could hear the mules laughing. . . .”

He stopped to wipe his forehead.

“But for the snakes,” he continued, “I should have been there now. Apparently it was their bush. Of course, I didn't know that. I certainly heard the hissing, but I couldn't think what it was. Yes, it is funny, isn't it? Never mind. At last I saw one and left . . . simultaneously . . . all in one movement. It's wonderful what a shock will do. That's what you call a triumph of mind over body. Then Eulalie appeared just in time to see Balaam roll. . . . The pack rather cramped his style, but he persevered, and after a while the picnic-basket went. The rest was easy. He just got up and shook himself, and the stuff fell off him in lumps.

“Well, there was nothing to be done. I sent Eulalie for you and sat down and prayed for death. Suddenly I heard the sound of cloth being torn. I looked up to see Balaam with a bit of tent in his mouth.” He threw up despairing hands. “I tell you, the swine are possessed. That wall-eyed skunk”—he pointed a shaking finger—“was deliberately attempting to off-load Balak. . . . That was too much, so I interfered with a hammock-stand. The net result of my interference was that I fell over the picnic-basket, suffered an excruciating abrasion of the tibia or shin-bone, let Balaam go and lost the hammock-stand by throwing in a ravine. When I got back, Balak's pack was off and he was going through the linen-bag. I imagine he was searching for my underwear. Well, there you are. I've tried to repack them, but you might as well try to drench a rogue-elephant with a soup-plate. Eulalie 'll bear me out.”

“It's perfectly true,” said that lady weakly. “He tried for two solid hours while I held them. I don't think I ever laughed so much in all my life.” She covered her eyes and began to shake helplessly. “He was really wonderful,” she wailed. “When Balak stood on his foot he didn't shout or anything. He

just touched the brute on the shoulder and when it looked round—which it did—pointed to its hoof. I thought I should die. . . . And then Balaam kicked him when he was bending down. . . . All he said was ‘No vulgarity, please.’ I tell you, I nearly died.”

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders.

“It was reaction,” he said. “I’m past swearing. And now shall we all four try? Or would you rather watch me do the goat-walk? It’s very funny. I just lift up a pack-saddle and stagger about after a mule with it. When I can’t carry it any more I put it down and the mule stops.”

“First,” said Simon, “let me apologize. There isn’t one man in ten thousand who would have hung on, and I take my hat right off. I’ve had some.”

“Thank you,” said Pomfret, “thank you. But you’re quite wrong. You haven’t had any at all. This is the real thing. And now shall we prove that?” He turned to Eulalie. “My dear, hold Balak, will you? Just as a matter of form. And Pat ‘ll hold dear Balaam while Simon and I just pop his saddle on.” He approached his nose to that of the last-named mule. “And if you so much as lift your cloven hoof, you loose-lipped, goose-rumped swab-b-b, I’ll put a quart of pebbles to every pint of corn and you shan’t have any rock-salt.”

Possibly the threat weighed with him, for Balaam suffered himself to be laden without active protest, although he watched the operation with the tail of an eye which was bright with suspicion, frequently laid back his ears and occasionally switched his tail with the air of one who is hard put to it to restrain his impatience of a hostile act.

Balak submitted likewise, only once lifting a leg, when he was immediately discouraged by such a burst of minatory invective from his loaders that, after half-heartedly addressing Pomfret’s whereabouts, he restored it to the ground and fell to endeavouring to disengage his mouth from the bit—an essay which was patently futile and so within the law, but involved facial contortion of a repulsive kind.

It was now six o’clock, and Stelthe was three miles away.

“At least, I believe it is,” said Simon. “But I can’t swear to that and I’m not too sure of the way. You see, I expected to go on steering up above. But that’s out of the question.”

“Well, we’ve got to stick to the path,” said Eulalie.

"I know," said Simon. "What bothers me is that it bears so much to the left." He pulled out the compass and set it down on the ground. "No. That's all right. East with a taste of North. Funny how one loses one's sense of direction sometimes." He put the compass away and rose to his feet. "All ready?" he said.

As if in answer, Balaam went backward, taking Patricia with him. . . .

Stelthe was won at half-past eleven o'clock in blinding rain.

There was no difficulty at all about finding the village: the bridle-path led them right into its ill-smelling street: neither was the way steep nor the going severe: and the distance was less than three miles. But the mules disputed every blistering yard. . . .

Of course, Stelthe was asleep, and since there were no lamps, it took them a quarter of an hour to find the inn. When found, this proved inhospitable. They were actually asked to go away. This they refused to do, and in the end, because of their importunity, a slattern opened the door and let them inside. Asked where the stable was, she professed not to know. They bribed her desperately to learn that it was two streets away.

Simon and Pomfret found it and roused a man who insisted from a first-floor window first that there was no stable, then that it was not in his charge and finally that there was no room. When they offered him five francs, he demanded ten. There was nothing to do but comply, whereupon he left the loft and opened the door. By the time the mules had been wisped, watered, fed and bedded down it was one o'clock.

At the inn misery reigned. There were only two bedrooms, the beds were damp, food, firing and liquor had all been declared unavailable. This was too much—a saint would have seen red. . . .

Pomfret forced the cellar while Simon contrived to kindle the kitchen fire. From then on conditions improved. The men got up fuel and food, a bottle of decent brandy and a bucket of milk. Wet clothes were changed for dry, a meal was prepared, a table was drawn to the blaze, and the four made a mighty breakfast rounded with a bowl of punch. Finally, when the bedding had been aired, the Beaulieus and Eulalie retired, leaving Pomfret stretched luxuriously before the hearth.

So for three hours.

Then the host and hostess came down.

It took quite a long time to wake Pomfret, and when at last he was roused he was not at all pleased. This was but natural. He could have slept the clock round. Acidly he demanded what was required of him. He was immediately and excitedly informed that he would have to pay for a new door to the cellar, that firewood cost eighty francs a metre, that five bottles of brandy were missing, that two frying-pans had been destroyed, that to replace these would cost at least seventy francs, that help, for which he must pay, would be necessary to clean the kitchen, and finally that he must instantly arise, discharge his just debt and go.

“Very good,” said Pomfret. “That’s a most interesting statement. I wouldn’t have missed it for worlds. And now I’m going to sleep. The next person who wakes me had better get to his knees, for as there’s a God in heaven I’ll break his neck.”

With that he lay down and instantly fell asleep.

Amazed, enraged, but undisguisedly daunted, his hearers withdrew to the yard to consult in furious whispers and command the sympathy of neighbours who, upon the advice of the slattern, were beginning to arrive. During a lull in the indignation some one suggested that the baker, who owned most of the village and was therefore generally disliked, should be attracted to the scene, kept in ignorance of the facts and then dared to disturb the stranger before the fire, but the sudden appearance of the baker, who was of small stature and had been standing behind the speaker, rendered the suggestion impracticable. The idea of rousing one of the other guests and desiring him or her to rouse Pomfret was better received. Accordingly the host and hostess and rather more of their friends than could conveniently do so repaired *en masse* to the passage on the first floor. They began with the single room, which was occupied by Eulalie. When he had knocked for five minutes the host essayed to enter, but the door was fastened. After further consultation they turned to the other door, but, before they could knock, this was opened, and Simon passed out and closed it behind him.

For a moment he regarded the posse with a cold and glassy eye. Then—

“Good morning,” he said. “I don’t remember giving orders that I was to be called at six.”

There was an embarrassed silence.

At length the hostess gave tongue.

“Monsieur’s friend is below. He is asleep before the fire. One cannot approach at all. It is most inconvenient.”

“Then wake him.”

“Monsieur, we have tried, but in vain. Perhaps if he was touched . . . But it was not for us to touch the gentleman. If Monsieur will descend. . . .”

“I see,” said Simon shortly. “Anything else?”

The woman swallowed violently.

The trouble was she could have spared her audience. She had sworn publicly to reduce Simon, and Simon was publicly reducing her.

Something had to be done.

“Monsieur will excuse me,” she mouthed, “but these rooms are taken, and——”

“I know,” said Simon. “I’ve taken them. What about it?”

The hag boggled.

“But certainly. It is true—for last night. But to-day at noon. . . . I am extremely sorry, but if Monsieur could make other arrangements. . . .”

Simon leaned against the door.

“Listen,” he said. “This bedroom is above the kitchen, of which the ceiling is thin. I heard you rouse my friend and I heard what he said, and let me assure you he is a man of his word. So also am I. And now listen very carefully, for I shall not repeat myself. In an hour’s time you will send to your stable to water and feed my two mules: at midday you will come to this room with four cans of very hot water and four of cold and knock on the door. At one you will serve dinner for four—an omelet, two ducks, cheese, butter, bread and fruit and plenty of beer. If you disobey in the slightest particular, I shall report to the Customs at Rouge that *under the wood in your cellar I counted five bales of boots.*”

There was an awful silence.

Spanish boots find high favour in France, but the duty is quite prohibitive. Of course, if . . .

Simon raised his eyebrows.

“It is understood?” he said.

At the third attempt—

“It is understood, Monsieur,” said his hostess.

Simon nodded and re-entered his room.



If Fate is against you it is an excellent thing to take the sweep by the throat. But if you cannot soon choke him into submission, after a while your fingers will begin to ache.

It was not so much that things continued to go wrong. They were wrong.

Stelthe was a poisonous village—drab at its best, and at its worst squalid. The people were surly and malevolent, the children filthy and ill-mannered, the beasts vicious. As for the atmosphere of the inn, that became hourly more detestable: hatred, malice and all uncharitableness mowed and gibbered in the sanbenito of fear.

Yet the four dared not go.

For one thing, it rained steadily, and any sort of a roof was better than none: for another, the mules were sick. They ate their head-ropes listlessly, but they would touch little else. Pomfret dosed them, let no one feed them but himself, watered them patiently, exercised them with a devotion only comparable with that of an infatuate spinster to a moribund pug, and was kicked and struck and bitten for his pains. The brutes were mentally and physically sick.

Plug, the next village which lay on their route, was fourteen miles distant from Stelthe. Simon walked there and back in the day and confirmed the general suspicion that they could not at present proceed in that direction.

“It’s twenty-two miles by road, there’s no bridle-path, and the going is wicked. No mule could ever get there—except by road. The village is frightening—fifty times worse than this. There’s only one pub and that has no bedrooms or stabling, and doesn’t even sell food. It’s simply a tenth-rate bar. There are two or three places where we could camp all right, but we’d never get the mules to one of them. Half the time you’d be glad of an ice-axe. I think we’d better turn South.”

He did so the following day, taking Patricia with him.

For the first three miles the way was easy enough, though the country was blind and steering a difficult business. In vain they sought for some point they had made a landmark, but though Simon digressed two miles to win the top of a ridge, even The Leaning Churn defied detection. As if to mock them, a new unforgettable form loomed on their right—a mass shaped like a beehive, with a mighty head of water welling out of its side. Indeed, its resemblance to a skep was supernatural: there was no flaw in its

symmetry, and the cavern from which the waterfall seemed to emerge could not have been more appropriately situated if it had been an entrance for gigantic bees. For what it was worth the two made a note of its lay, but the country around was big, and it seemed unlikely that it would prove of any more value as a landmark than had The Leaning Churn. As they went on, the line began to grow worse, and it soon became painfully clear that to bring the mules this way was out of the question. In desperation they sought for a bridle-path, but there was none to be found. They laboured on for four miles, casting to right and left, before they turned, but it was now quite evident that they had entered the same bleak, heart-breaking tract which had so much discouraged Simon the day before, and apparently lay in a crescent East and South of Stelthe.

That night in the larger bedroom another council was held.

To turn North seemed idle. That way led to a rail-head in ten short miles by road. If Etchechuria was anywhere, it was clearly not North of Stelthe.

“Well, let’s go back,” said Pomfret. “I’m sure we’ve come wrong. Ever since Esteppezan the beer’s got steadily worse. It wasn’t too good at Murillo: here it makes me feel sick; and at Plug there isn’t any.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Simon. “Not because of the beer, but because, to tell you the truth, I don’t know what else to do. But we can’t start off right away. For one thing, look at the mules.”

“I know that isn’t a literal exhortation,” said Pomfret, “but oblige me next time by using some other phrase. Say ‘Consider the mules, how they blow,’ or ‘The mules are indisposed,’ or ‘To carry the mules would be beyond our power.’ Anything but ‘Look at the mules.’ This is now the end or terminus of the third fly-blown day upon which I have spent the whole of my waking hours looking at the mules. I’ve looked at them from every angle. I’ve looked at them from above, I’ve looked underneath them and I’ve tried to look inside them. I know every blemish—and there are millions—upon their evil-smelling hides. I should think their vile image is indelibly stamped upon the retinas of my eyes. In fact, I believe I’m beginning to absorb some of their characteristics. I was on the edge of biting Eulalie at lunch—only she looked round.”

“Secondly,” said Simon, laughing, “I want to go over those last few miles again. We got here all right, but rather by accident. If it hadn’t been for the path——”

“You used the compass,” said Patricia. “Don’t you remember?”

“I know. But I’d like to do that bit again—over the hills. It’s only about three miles, and it’ll complete our line. And then perhaps we could find a better camp. Our last wasn’t anything wonderful. And from there we might turn South. Any way, I want to make a reconnaissance if only to regain my prestige.”

“You’ve never lost it,” said Eulalie.

“You’re very lenient,” said Simon. “Let me say ‘self-respect.’ That bit of country beat me all ends up. I thought I had a sense of direction. I thought if you showed me a girl standing three hundred feet from where I stood and told me to join her, and that in country about as difficult as St. James’s Park—well, to be honest, I thought I could do it. Finally, if I wanted to avoid a lawn about the size of a tennis-court and you gave me the whole of Europe to miss it in— well, I believed that also to be within my powers. So I propose to go back and either confirm or refute the suspicion of gross incompetence which lies heavy upon my soul.”

“I’m going with you,” said Eulalie. “I thought if you showed me a hill fifty paces away and asked me to climb it to the exclusion of other hills—well, I thought I could comply with the request. Are you certain there wasn’t a cairn?”

“I know there wasn’t,” said Patricia. “Besides, if you could get up, how was it we couldn’t get down? And of course I’m coming too. If you must walk into a maze—well, three stand a better chance of emerging alive.”

“Attractive as it sounds,” said Pomfret, “I’m afraid I can’t come. You see, I must, er, look at the mules. More. I beg you won’t start before nine. I’ve sent for a vet.—a local wallah who is credited, most probably in error, with an ability to diagnose, if not to cure, the various diseases which mules are heir to. And he’s going to, er, look at the mules at half-past eight. Well, rich as is my vocabulary, I fear that possibly some of the medical terms may momentarily confuse my ear, and as, in my humble opinion, no effort should be spared, not only to put the swine on their legs, but also to encourage them to beat down Satan under their feet, perhaps one of you three will attend. And here and now let me say that I quite agree with Patricia about the maze, and I think it’s asking for trouble to dodder round there again. There’s something the matter with that vicinity. It’s been a battle-field or a place where lunatics are interred or something. I went all gooseflesh two or three times. And then—if you must have it—look at the mules. Their little brainstorm burst a stone’s throw away. I tell you, there’s something in the air about that spot. It’s been over-manured or something. And what about that

hill like a churn? That was enough to frighten any God-fearing man. Why, you could almost read the name of the dairy on it. . . . As for your sense of direction, that's as sound as a bell in a bucket of bran: it's your sense of proportion that's warped. You can't have a bright blue sky every day in the year or a marble hall to dwell in every night."

"But the compass betrays me," said Simon. "The day we got here, I thought I was heading East: well, I was nearer South. To-day again I thought I was facing South, and I looked at the compass to find I was past South-West."

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders.

"There may be iron about. You never know. And that would deflect the needle. Any way . . ."

Sitting back in the shadow, Simon repressed a start and, after hearing further discussion in which he took no part, rose to his feet and drove the others to bed.

When Patricia was asleep he switched on the light and got out paper and pencil and compass and notes and maps. . . .

Half an hour later he knelt by the side of the bed and kissed his wife out of a dream.

Patricia started up.

"What is it?" she breathed.

Simon was speaking in a curiously vibrant tone.

"I've a secret," he said, "and it's rather too hot to hold. But you mustn't tell the others—just yet."

"Simon! You don't mean . . .?"

"I think so. Supposing The Leaning Churn and The Skep were tremendous lodestones—giant magnets. . . . What then? Get the wrong side of them and they'll throw any compass out—pull your holy needle all over the shop. My dear, I may be wrong, but *I think they've done it twice . . . once the day we got here and again to-day*. And now let me put it this way. Madeira's an island, isn't it? All alone in the midst of the sea? Well, if you stuck lodestones all round it and did your job well, until some sailor or other tumbled to what you'd done, Madeira'd be off the map. No ship could ever make it. *In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if it came to be called 'The Lost Island.'* You can steer by the sun and the stars, but I'm washing them out

because, if you come to think, we haven't seen the sky since we sighted The Leaning Churn."



The vet. was pleasant, if downright.

The moment he saw his patients he threw up his hands.

"I trust," he said, "that you have not paid much for these mules."

"Quite enough," said Pomfret. "Why?"

"Because no one in this part of the world would have paid anything at all. This particular breed has only one fault, Monsieur: but that fault is a fatal fault—in a mule. You cannot be sure of them for a quarter of an hour. You may buy them at two o'clock and at ten minutes past two they will be useless. So long as they are well there is no other kind to touch them for strength and good temper. But when they go wrong they are finished. One can do nothing—*nothing*. They will never recover. It is believed to be an affection of the brain. I am sorry, Messieurs and Mesdames, but I cannot help you at all. I am sure they were excellent once. But now they are not worth their halters. If you take my advice you will drag them out of the village and let them go. They are called Etchechurian mules."

"ETCHECHURIAN!"

"That's right. There is a legend that originally they came from Etchechuria—"The Lost Country.' But that is all nonsense, of course."

Trying to keep her voice steady—

"Is it cruelty to use them?" said Patricia.

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not cruelty, Madame, if they will let you. You mean you want to get away? Well, if you are leaving this morning I can give them each an injection before you start. That may enable you to load them, but . . ." He turned to Pomfret. "Has Monsieur far to go?"

"No," said Simon uncertainly. "*Only about three miles.*"

CHAPTER IV

LOVE AMONG THE MOUNTAINS

“WELL, I hope you’re right,” said Pomfret, with his eyes on Eulalie’s back. “Personally, I should be loth to take my direction from a mule—especially if my compass was offering other advice. But then I’m funny like that.”

“But the compass isn’t any good,” said Patricia, following his gaze. “It’s being upset.”

“That,” said Pomfret, “is a convenient assumption which nobody can begin to prove. All you can honestly say is that we don’t happen to fancy the way it tells us to go. And there I’m with you. I defy anyone born of woman to produce a more poisonous travesty of board and lodging than that afforded by the village we have just evacuated. I’d rather stay at a sewage-farm. And will somebody just look back and say if we can still smell it? I want to turn round.”

“It looks ravishing from here,” said Simon, with his chin on his shoulder. “The beams of that burned-down house stand out so well, and——”

“What, not the one commanding the deserted midden?” said Pomfret brokenly.

“That’s right,” said Simon. “And there’s an advertisement flapping on that hoarding you wanted to sketch. It’s really . . .”

Here the bridle-path swerved to avoid the spur of a haggard mountain, and a moment later Stelthe and its loathsome bulwarks had disappeared.

Pomfret took off his hat and gave his head to the breeze.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” he said. “Let’s try to do it, shall we? Let’s expunge Stelthe and all its works from the mental register. And now, where was I? Oh, I know. Why, because we dislike trekking East by North, must we throw ourselves to the mules? If we retrace our steps as far as——”

“We all know,” said Eulalie, over her shoulder, “what’s at the back of your mind. And that’s that the mules won’t necessarily head for the nearest beer-engine.”

“Beer-engines to you,” said Pomfret shortly. “And many of them. All I’m trying to do is to lodge a feeble protest against running up the colours of congenital insanity. I fear it’s hopeless, but as I’m getting tired of being asked why I didn’t ‘say so at the time,’ I may as well burst that airball and here and now formally demur. Hang it all, if your brains haven’t seized, consider the blinkin’ facts. . . . We are looking for Etchechuria—a country which does not appear on the maps, but which we are trying to believe is somewhere in this vicinity. We take care not to ask the way, because we don’t want to be removed or followed about, so we’re reduced to systematically scouring the neighbourhood. Well, a system may be tedious, but at least it has its points. One of these is that the chances of death by exposure are more remote. Among others are the possibilities of obtaining food, dry clothes, imitation rest and other little luxuries which an over-civilization has taught us to value. Now it is suddenly proposed to abandon all system, bury the compass and, turning the mules loose, follow their ugly footprints into the blue.”

“Not into the blue,” said Patricia. “Straight to Etchechuria. You see. I’ve never been more certain. Why did they jib? Till Thursday they’d been like lambs. Then, all of a sudden——”

“Yes, you can leave it there,” said Pomfret heavily. “Then, all of a sudden, they shed that admirable similitude.”

“Exactly,” said Patricia. “Why? *Because we weren’t going their way.* They’re Etchechurian mules, and they want to go home. If you want any further evidence, look at them now.”

The difference in Balak and Balaam was certainly amazing.

Heads up, ears pricked, eager-eyed, they were moving fast and well and showing no trace whatever of the distemper of mind and body with which they had been ridden two hours before.

“That’s the injection,” said Pomfret. “If you’d had half a pint of strychnine pumped into your veins, you’d be getting a move on.”

Simon looked over his shoulder.

“What will you bet me,” he said, “that when we come to the spot where they stuck in their toes, if we let them go, they don’t turn sharp to the left?”

“That’s almost a certainty,” said Pomfret. “There were some very ugly gorges that side, full of thorn bushes. The offal they’ve smelt is probably a gorge or two away. As soon as they’ve found it they’ll want a good healthy roll. We’d better take their packs off when the smell gets very powerful. It’ll

save every one trouble, and they'll be able to get down to it better and work it right into their coats."

"There's The Leaning Churn," said Eulalie, laughing. "We're not far now."

"And there's the sun," said Patricia. "For the very first time since Thursday there's the sun. And that fat man with the mules tells us we're wrong."

Pomfret protruded his tongue.

The strange-looking hill was certainly bathed in sunshine, and, though the four were actually still in shadow, half a mile further on the path they were treading ran into a patch of light.

There was no doubt about it. Rightly or wrongly, Nature was plainly suggesting that four days ago they had strayed from the proper path, and even Pomfret, who would still have preferred to refit at the village at which they had rested before they proceeded to Stelthe, made no pretence of attempting to conceal his excitement.

Presently they came to the spot where the mules had discharged their burdens, and a moment later they passed into the sunshine.

"Another furlong," breathed Pomfret. "As soon as we're round this shoulder we'll be able to see the place. And Simon had better take Balak. If they're going to dart across country, I'd rather dart with one than with two. I love being extended—it's a glorious feeling. But to be extended in more than one direction at the same time is too advanced for me—especially if one of them passes anything on the wrong side."

With a smile, Simon turned and took Balak's rein.

"I don't imagine," he said, "they're going off like crackers. I think they'll nose round a bit first. Have a pull at the grass, you know, and——"

"You see that fountain?" said Pomfret, pointing ahead. "That gush of water just by the side of the path?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is the actual spot where I dropped the rein. I didn't think I'd be able to be so precise, but now that I see it I remember it perfectly. It's only a piece of piping stuck into the mountain-side, but the water's good and cold, and during the altercation Balaam backed straight into it and got the shock of his life. It was the one bit of luck I had."

Simon touched his wife on the arm.

“Women and children to the rear,” he said gently. “Don’t give our friends a lead.” The girls fell back. “But if they seem doubtful we might do a halt at the spring just to give them a chance.”

Except for the slap of hoofs, the cavalcade proceeded in absolute silence. As it approached the fountain the excitement became intense.

The two muleteers went forward with such nonchalance as they could command. Immediately behind them, looking neither to the right nor to the left, Balak and Balaam were plodding briskly ahead. Hardly daring to breathe, Patricia Beaulieu and Eulalie brought up the rear.

The fountain was ten paces away—seven—four—two . . . The men were abreast of it . . . past . . . Pomfret was slowing up. . . .

Suddenly the mules stopped dead.

Without a word, Simon and Pomfret turned.

For one long moment the mules stared them in the face: then, as though their heads were controlled by a single lever, they turned and looked past the fountain into the hills. . . .

Pomfret was speaking.

“All right,” he said quietly. “Go on. Five no trumps, it is. Make ’em.”

As if in answer, the mules appeared to consult. Then Balak advanced to the fountain and, thrusting his nose into the rough rock basin, drank long and deep. When he had finished, Balaam did the same.

For a moment or two they stood staring over the rill into a short steep valley. Then they went for the bank. . . .

Their packs rocking, by dint of kicking and scrambling, somehow they fought their way up, while their respective captains, determined neither to let them go nor to embarrass their ascent, clambered alongside.

Viewed from the bridle-path, the spectacle of fourfold endeavour was ludicrous in the extreme, and when Pomfret, who was being beaten by Balaam, found it impossible to avoid a welter of bramble and, with an anticipant yell, slammed his way through, Eulalie and Patricia clasped each other in an agony of mirth.

The valley, however, was easy enough to traverse, and when the leading-reins had been lengthened so that Pomfret and Simon could walk behind

their charges, it was possible to maintain a reasonable order of march.

From there onward they moved in single file. Indeed, for the most part the going permitted no other order. Sometimes Balak went first, with Simon behind: at other times Balaam and Pomfret would lead the way. The girls followed after.

Without hesitation the mules went steadily forward—up out of the valley, over a mountain's breast, down a break-neck slope into a hollow, along the edge of a gorge, then to the water below and up through hanging woods to the heights again. There was no path that human eye could follow, but now and again it seemed as though they were treading an ancient trail which Time and Nature had demolished in their immemorial way.

The pace was severe, but Simon was hard as nails, while the girls, not being roped to a strenuous pioneer, could go as they pleased. Pomfret, however, who alone of the four was accustomed to a leisurely progress upon a tolerable road, suffered an inconvenience of mind and body such as he had never dreamed of. With the minimum of time to consider the circumvention of obstacles, the negotiation of broken ground, the navigation of streams, he found himself compelled to conform to a steady three miles an hour—a state of things from which, though monstrous, there was no appeal, for while he was consumed with indignation, yet he dared not by word or deed protest lest he should rout the spirit of leadership which had apparently descended upon the mules.

So, with an occasional halt, the astounding march went on—by wood and water, by valley and mountain-side, in and out of the sunshine under a gay blue sky.

Simon did what he could to mark their course, but the pace was against him, and after an hour and a half it was perfectly plain not only that they were hopelessly lost, but that any attempt to recover the way they had come would be nothing but waste of time.

Discussion was out of the question. Even during the halts hardly a word was exchanged. For one thing, excitement was running too high for talk—already they were knee-deep in Mystery: soon they would be standing on the shore of Adventure itself. For another, the rests were short and too welcome to be abused.

When they stopped, the mules were made much of, their packs were straightened and their feet examined for stones: then the girls would take the reins and sit down where they could: thus relieved, Pomfret would lie on his

back and close his eyes, while Simon would look about him and, strolling this way and that, endeavour to get his direction and reckon how far they had come. So for ten minutes or so. Then Balak would lift his head and blink at Balaam, and Balaam would blink back. Then, plainly with one consent, they would turn to resume the march.

It was nearly three o'clock when the six emerged from a thicket upon an admirable lawn of about an acre in size and so remarkably shaped and situated as for a moment to bewilder the sight.

It was a great oval of grass, one end of which appeared to protrude into space, while on all other sides it was walled with seemingly impenetrable foliage. Right in the middle a brook of clear water was flowing down all its length and feeding an oval-shaped pool which lay close to the open end. The sides of the lawn sloped gently to the water, and the general impression conveyed was that of a gigantic dish of which the pool at the end was the gravy-well.

The open end of the sward was, in fact, the edge of a precipice, and might well have been expected to afford a magnificent view, but a silver haze was drifting a hundred feet down, and though this seemed too airy and elusive seriously to embarrass the eye, in fact it effectually obscured whatever lay beneath.

An overflow from the pool passed through a natural culvert beneath the lip of the lawn and, leaping clear of the crag, plunged into the haze. Though upon the lawn there was no wind, a steady breeze was blowing across the face of the cliff, stiff enough to carry the fall considerably out of plumb: yet, so far as could be seen, the latter kept its shape to hang like a shining rope that has been hitched to one side.

To judge from the sun, the sward faced directly South—roughly half of it was in shadow and invitingly cool: its grass was fine and dry and its turf smooth: if men or beasts had been there they had left no trace, and the pleasant murmur of the brook alone disturbed that majesty of silence which is the prerogative of high places.

Balaam, who was leading, slowed up till Balak had drawn alongside. Then the two passed slowly across the pleasance till they stood upon the edge of the cliff. For a while they stood quietly together, staring down upon the haze: then they turned away and began to graze. . . .

Pomfret lay down.

“D’you think we’re to stop here?” breathed Patricia.

"I hope so," said Simon. "It's quite good enough for me. But, hang it all, did you ever see such a thing?"

As was to be expected, the question released a torrent of fervid commentary to which Pomfret alone did not contribute.

At length—

"Are you frightfully done?" said Eulalie, sitting down by his side.

"My dear," said Pomfret, "I'm moribund. I'm accustomed to a good broad path and a gentlemanly pace—with frequent rests. Moreover, to be perfectly frank, my rate of consumption is about eight miles to the gallon. And not water, either. I don't suppose you knew that, because up to now I've generally travelled alone. But, for those two blunt-nosed lepers"—he indicated the mules—"there's no excuse. What did they want to burst along for? They've never done it before. They know my rate of progress. And I've never hustled them."

"They probably had some reason," said Patricia.

"What reason?" said Pomfret, sitting up. "If we aren't to stop here, we might have: if we are—well, it's only just three . . . I know it's all very marvellous and dream-like and incredible and all the other verbal garlands you've been hanging about its neck, but if one's got to be disembowelled to see a miracle, much as one enjoys it, one's apt to think for a moment before yelling 'Encore.' They may be leading us to Etchechuria—judging from our present surroundings, I should think we were nearly there. You don't find places like this in any ordinary world—but I don't see any reason for calling them lovely names. We happen to be here because we've held on to the reins, but all they've bothered about is to make their blinkin' way home. No emotions of gratitude or respect, no——"

"Offal," said a voice.

Every one started, Eulalie leapt to her feet and Pomfret looked slowly round.

"Which of you's being funny?" he said at length.

"Don't—don't be silly," said Simon. "It's none of us."

Slowly Pomfret rose.

"Now, don't let's get windy," he said, stepping to Eulalie's side. "Let's keep our bullet heads. Somebody said 'Offal.' Just like that. 'Offal.' Am I right?"

“Yes,” quavered the girls.

“Well, it looks,” said Pomfret, fingering his chin, “it looks as if they were referring to a casual remark I made about five hours ago.”

“It does,” said Simon. “And let me say here and now that I hope you won’t make any more. You’ve obviously offended some one.”

“I agree,” said Eulalie. “I don’t believe in spirits, but——”

“I refuse to be terrorized,” said Pomfret. “If I meet a man with a remarkable nose, I reserve to myself the right of audible comment upon the organ, provided its owner is out of earshot. And that brings me back to where I was. Whoever said ‘Offal’ just now must have *heard and resented* my remark.”

Balak looked up, munching.

“O-o-oh,” cried Patricia, catching at Simon’s arm. “*It was him*. Look at his face.”

Balak emptied his mouth and wrinkled his nose.

“Will you take my pack off?” he said. “Or doesn’t it matter? You see, as that mountebank said, ‘I want a good healthy roll.’ ”

Balaam began to shake with laughter.



“I don’t care,” said Pomfret. “I’m not going to be called a mountebank by a mule for anyone. It’s not decent.”

“Do be quiet,” said Patricia. “They’ll hear you.”

“I hope they do,” said Pomfret, “the lop-eared slow bellies. ‘Mountebank.’ And to think that I’ve——”

“Brother,” said Simon, “calm yourself. After all, mules will be mules. I confess it’s disconcerting to have them bursting into speech, but, once you’re over that stile, I don’t know what else you’d expect. Besides, perhaps they don’t suffer fools gladly. . . . What about looking for a country for over six weeks only to walk bang past its portals and, ignoring their expostulation, lug our guides with us? As soon as my mouth ‘d work I don’t think I should stop at ‘mountebank.’ ”

“I can quite believe that,” said Pomfret acidly. “But I always thought dumb animals were different. I thought they remembered kindness. Look at

Androcles and the lion.”

“If it came to that,” said Eulalie, “I daresay they’d spare your life. In fact, they’re probably as fond of you as you are of them—if that’s possible.”

“All I really want,” said Pomfret shakily, “is a chance to die for them.”

“But you both believe in abuse,” continued Eulalie. “And now, since they’re able to talk, if you’ve really finished eating, let’s ask them where we are. And other things. I mean—there they are, full of perfectly good information. Why shouldn’t we broach the cask?”

“Why not?” said Simon, rising.

“If we do,” said Patricia, “for Heaven’s sake, Pomfret, don’t be rude. We don’t want to put their backs up.”

“I shall say nothing at all,” said Pomfret, with dignity. “I shall not converse with them. If you like to hobnob with a couple of pin-toed hybrids and be treated like dirt for your pains, that’s your affair. If they apologize, I’ll strap them and give them water and food. But I shan’t address them, and I trust they won’t address me. ‘Mountebank.’ . . .”

The mules had been pegged out as usual, and Simon crossed the sward to where they were.

As he approached they regarded him.

“Er, I’m just going to untie you,” he said self-consciously, “and bring you over to our pitch. Mrs. Beaulieu——”

“Who’s Mrs. Beaulieu?” said Balaam.

In spite of himself, Simon started.

“My wife,” he said, pointing. “That girl sitting——”

“I thought you called her ‘Patricia.’ ”

“So I do,” said Simon hastily. He swallowed. “‘Mrs. Beaulieu’ ‘s another of her names. Well, Patricia and Eulalie want to ask you some questions.”

Balaam regarded Balak.

“What about it?” he said. “Shall we go?”

Balak nodded.

With the apologetic air of a warder who is pinioning a king, Simon unfastened the ropes and proceeded to rejoin the others with the mules in his

wake. . . .

“Good—good evening,” said Patricia. “What a beautiful spot you’ve brought us to.”

“It is an improvement on Stelthe, isn’t it?” said Balak pleasantly.

“D’you mind not mentioning that place?” said Balaam. “I dislike its memory.”

“It’s a paradise to Plug,” said Balak.

“Pomfret would have liked Plug,” said Balaam, “wouldn’t he? No beer, no pig’s feet, no nothing.”

The two laughed heartily.

Nature will out.

Before Pomfret had recaptured the power of speech, the short struggle was over, decency had been thrown to the winds, and Simon, Patricia and Eulalie were bowing before a tempest of outrageous mirth.

Grimly Pomfret surveyed them.

When the storm had at length subsided, he addressed the mules.

“Speaking as a mere mountebank, I can’t tell you how glad I am—in fact, we all seem to be—to know that the contemplation of my discomfort has entertained you. I only wish I’d realized it before. Then I could have assaulted myself or shown you my bedroom at Stelthe or something. It is also delicious to appreciate that you have remarked my partiality to certain kinds of refreshment, although, to be honest, I cannot remember ever regaling myself upon the luscious repast which your friends’ feet, if they are at all like yours, must inevitably afford. But what really takes my fancy by the throat is your delicacy of thought. Indeed, the reflection that beneath your, er, outward shape, the beauty of which is so subtle as to be sometimes almost elusive, there is raging a susceptibility to consideration seldom encountered in this unkind world is so edifying as to be almost spiritual. And now I shall wait upon you—dry-clean your dear bodies? Or would you rather discuss the way I blow my nose?”

His words were received with every circumstance of delight.

Balak laughed till the tears rolled down his jowl, while Balaam squealed and cow-kicked his companion in an ecstasy of mirth.

“You know,” said the former weakly, “I could listen to Pomfret all night. He’s so—so responsive. Pull his shapeless leg, and it comes away in your hand.”

So soon as he could speak—

“Lead me out of earshot,” said Pomfret faintly. “I’ve always had a high blood-pressure, and I don’t think one ought to die so soon after food. . . . And I’ve groomed the playful darlings for seven soul-shaking weeks. . . . And—and tried not to hurt them. . . .”

He laughed wildly.

“That’s why you’re here,” said Balaam solemnly.

The four stared at him.

“That’s right,” said Balak. “We could have gone last Thursday over and over again and left you to it. But you—especially Pomfret—have done us extremely well, and, speaking as a mere beast of burden, we’ve appreciated your attention.”

“And now,” said Balaam, “listen. We don’t want to be cross-questioned, but we’ll tell you one or two things. To-morrow, at noon, we should be within The Pail.”

“Sometimes called ‘Etchechuria,’ ” said Balak, swinging his head towards the depths. “But its proper name is The Pail. It’s surrounded by a couple of tracts called ‘Velvet’ and ‘Balk.’ Velvet’s nothing but a mountain—we’re on it now: and we’ve just come out of Balk. This actual spot is The Dish, and directly below us is The Clock.”

“It’s a wonderful clock,” said Balaam. “The only one in the world by Wind and Water. They made it and they keep it going. It’s always running down, but it never stops.”

“The Leaning Churn and The Skep,” continued Balak, “are two of The Overthrows which stand at intervals round Balk. There are about fifty in all, and they’re warranted to overthrow any instrument made by man. Hence ‘The Lost Country.’ It was rather clever of Simon to tumble to that. But they’re not the only bulwarks. What about Rome?”

“Rome,” explained Balaam, “is in Balk. It’s that little patch of greensward that Patricia and Simon found. Once you’re within its radius, all roads lead there. Whichever way you go you always come back. Rome’s a stinker. Then there are the Shadows. It was a Shadow that Eulalie climbed and found the cairn on—a shadow hill. It looked just like its original, but it

was only a copy. All the Shadows are beautifully made—correct to an inch: but I don't understand that cairn. We shall have to report that."

"The way we've come," said Balak, "is the only way into The Pail. Once you're on Velvet, of course, you're practically there. To-morrow we shall go down The Aisle and through The Lid."

"The Lid," said Balaam, "is the haze—and a beautiful piece of work. It's obvious enough from above, as you can testify, but from below you can't see it."

"And now," said Balak, "for the moment we'll leave it there. Talking with these sort of mouths is rather a strain. Don't bother to tie us up—we're not going to go. And you needn't groom us to-day: it—it isn't worth while. And we'll water and feed ourselves."

"One thing more," said Balaam. "I fear we came rather fast. I may be wrong, but I thought I saw Pomfret perspiring, and I know that's against his rules. But we rather wanted to put in an appearance to-day, and The Office closes at three. Happily we were just in time."

"Incidentally," said Balak, "unless you feel you must, I shouldn't put up those tents. You won't catch cold on Velvet, and as for Convention—well, the ancient name of The Dish is The Robing Room. From an hour before sunset to an hour after dawn, the old veil will be in place. Shove the girls on the other side of that brook, and as long as you don't cross it between those hours you won't see them and they won't see you. You can hear one another all right, but the eyes won't work."

"That's right," said Balaam. "You see."

"Don't be a fool," said Balak, lifting a leg. "That's just what they can't do."

"You shut your face," said Balaam, working into position. "And don't waste your air upon things which you don't understand. I was referring to mental perception—the action of the b-b-brain, brother. A grey thing, like a sponge. You must have heard of it." With that, he kicked Balak well and truly upon the stifle.

That his victim should squeal with pain was natural enough, but Balaam squealed just as loudly and then fell to licking Balak upon the neck.

"Oh, you poisonous ass," cried the latter between his teeth. "And we've done so well up to now. An' only ten hours to go."

"I know, I know," wailed Balaam. "Don't rub it in. Oh, I could kick myself."

"Well, don't, for God's sake," shrieked Balak. "I can't bear it." He turned to the four. "This isn't loving-kindness," he added brokenly. "I'd like to crack his ribs. But it's no good spoiling my stomach to spite his paunch. You'll see what I mean to-morrow." He turned upon Balaam. "And now stop licking, you fool. D'you want to have a sore neck?"

For a moment it looked as though active hostilities must be renewed. Balaam stopped licking to regard his stable-companion with the tail of a glassy eye. Obviously ready to counter, Balak stared wickedly back. . . . Then Balaam expired with great violence and turned away.

"We shall start to-morrow," he said, "at nine o'clock. I trust that Brother Pomfret will be in time. And here, at the risk of irrelevance, let me say that the beer they keep in The Pail has to be consumed to be believed." He paused significantly. Pomfret averted his head. "It's a very comfortable liquor."

"Fine old ale," nodded Balak. "Straight from The House. Why, he'll be outside a gallon before he knows it."

Simon's shoulders began to shake, but Patricia leaned forward. "'The House'?" she breathed. "Not . . ."

"That's right," said Balaam, turning. "The House that Jack built."



Dawn was touching the heaven when Simon awoke.

For a moment his eyes wandered: then he sat up and looked about him.

The Dish looked as peaceful as ever, its lip outlined sharply against a golden sky. Three paces away Pomfret lay fast asleep. Beyond the brook the lawn might have been empty, but that was because of the veil, which in no way obscured the landscape, but only concealed its tenants and all that was theirs. The girls had been there last night, and were presumably still in occupation. Of the mules there was no sign at all.

For a moment Simon fingered the cord about his arm, the end of which seemed to be trailing in the water, but was, in fact, fastened to Patricia's wrist: then he rose and, taking care to keep the cord slack, put on a pair of tennis-shoes and stepped gently across the stream.

Eulalie and Patricia were sleeping peacefully, their belongings scattered about them in feminine disarray, but the mules were not to be seen.

After a little hesitation Simon recrossed the water and unfastened the cord. . . .

Patricia awoke.

For a minute or two she lay still, lazily surveying the sky, listening to the song of the brook and drawing deep breaths of the cool, fragrant air with infinite satisfaction. Then she sat up and, propping herself on her arms, regarded Eulalie.

The latter looked curiously childish. Her head was thrown back, her little lips were parted and her glorious curls tumbled about a glowing face. This was eager and careless, suggesting an acquaintance with nothing but the sweet of the world and an open, beating heart, free of the pretty garden of innocent desires.

Patricia sighed.

“If only,” she murmured, “Pomfret could see you like that, he’d go temporarily insane and—and it’d be all over. As it is, heaven knows when he’ll speak—if ever. I never saw any one so scared. And of course you push him away . . .” She threw up her head and shook her thick, dark hair more or less into place. “The whole of Sunday you had to bring it off in: but, except that he nearly bit you, you’re no further at all. And,” she added gravely, “it would be so very convenient.”

For a while she sat, nursing her tender grievance: then after carefully listening, she unfastened the cord and, throwing aside her blankets, stole to the edge of the cliff. . . .

The sun was up and over the edge of Velvet, playing upon the mists that masked The Pail. These were in ferment, swirling and sweeping and wreathing as though possessed—a raging grandeur of iridescence, slow and graceful of movement as the clouds above, yet rising and falling and drifting all ways at once till the eye seemed to have assumed the ear’s office and to be gazing upon some stately evolution of a thousand harmonies.

Unaware that her husband was standing spellbound twenty paces away, Patricia determined to rouse him that he might see the wonder. She therefore returned to where she had left the cord and, picking this up, pulled gently upon it, with the result that a moment later, somewhat to her consternation, the rope lay entire at her feet.

Meanwhile, Simon had decided to wake his wife.

The two crossed the stream simultaneously. . . .

“‘A little slumber,’” protested Pomfret drowsily, “‘a little folding of the hands——’”

“Where’s Simon?” cried Patricia, shaking him.

“Jus’ over there,” murmured Pomfret.

“He isn’t. He’s gone.”

“Can’ be helped,” said Pomfret, turning over. “An’ don’ shake me like that. I’ve had a mos’ tryin’ dream. I dreamed the mules were——”

“Will you wake up?” screamed Patricia. “I tell you, Simon’s disappeared.”

Pomfret sat up, blinking.

After a prolonged scrutiny of Simon’s blankets—

“So he has,” he said, yawning. He turned to Patricia. “I dreamed—— Oh, how dare you? Go back to the women’s quarters at once. Why, you’re improperly dressed.”

“What does that matter? Get up at once, you idiot, and help me look.”

“Not in that night-gown,” said Pomfret, averting his eyes. “The mules ‘d tear me in pieces. Put on my dressing-gown.”

Impatiently Patricia obeyed, while Pomfret emerged from his blankets and stood peering about him.

“Hullo, where’s Eulalie?” he said sharply.

“She’s all right,” said Patricia, girding her loins. “Come on. Let’s try the wood.”

“What d’you mean—‘all right’?” cried Pomfret. “She mayn’t be all right at all. Supposing——”

“*Pat!*” shouted Simon. “*Pat!*”

“Hullo!” shouted Patricia. “Where are you?”

“Here,” shouted Simon.

There was a moment’s silence.

Then—

“He sounds quite close,” said Pomfret, staring across the lawn. “What an extraordinary thing. I could have sworn . . .”

He approached the brook, wholly oblivious of the veil and entirely obsessed by the seeming phenomenon.

It was, of course, pure misfortune, first, that Simon and Pomfret should have sought to cross the stream at the same time and place, and secondly, that each should have leapt instead of stridden.

As it was, they met with great force in mid-air and, violently repulsing each other, rebounded to subside anyhow upon their respective banks.

“Whatever’s the matter?” cried Patricia.

“Matter?” said Pomfret dazedly, holding his nose. “I’m damned near dead—that’s all.”

“But what have you done?” cried Patricia.

“I haven’t done anything,” yelled Pomfret, with his feet in the flood. “I simply——” He stopped short and started. “Yes, I have. I remember now. I’ve fouled the veil. That’s what I’ve done. And where’s the ugly serpent that called it a veil? It’s a blasted rock-garden. That’s right. I’ve jumped bung into a wall. Isn’t that funny?”

“Wall be damned,” said Simon painfully. “You’ve jumped into me. I wish to God you’d be more careful.”

“Yes, I wonder what the right answer to that is,” said Pomfret brokenly. “Several suggest themselves, but they’re all of them rather crude. And next time look where you’re going, will you? Never mind if you can’t see. The great thing is to have looked. The physical pain will be the same, but at least you’ll have a clear conscience. Is Eulalie all right?”

“I’m sorry,” said Simon, laughing and limping into view. “I admit I was on my wrong side. Yes, Eulalie’s all right.”

“You should have given audible warning of your approach,” said Pomfret. “I confess I forgot the veil. An almost total abstainer, I’m not accustomed to optical illusions. Besides, I’m only just up, and my faculties are slightly viscous. This woman aroused me to say that you weren’t in sight. As most of her was, I out-sainted Martin and gave her the whole of my dressing-gown.” He turned to Patricia. “And now if you’re satisfied, you witch, you’d better withdraw to your covert and throw my property back. And if it goes in the water, I’ll——”

“But I’m not,” said Patricia. “I want you to look at the haze. That’s what I tried to find Simon for.”

“And I you,” said her husband. “It’s the most amazing sight I’ve ever seen. Come along.”

“Can’t I imagine it?” said Pomfret. “I hate that beastly cliff. I’ve never seen anything so high. Besides, if it’s anything like the veil—well, I don’t want to brush against a bear or anything. It’s—it’s too early.”

“I insist,” said Patricia. “Simon, you take him along. I’ll go and wake Eulalie.”

Pomfret was led off protesting, and Eulalie was roused. . . .

The exquisite travail of the haze had been witnessed, a preliminary search for the mules had been conducted without success, and the four, decently disposed upon their respective sides of the veil, were proceeding to a leisurely toilet, talking as they went.

“And now,” said Pomfret, “I should like you all to kneel down. I’m going to clean my teeth.”

“Well, don’t let them go,” said Eulalie, climbing out of her side of the pool. “Supposing they were swep’ over.”

“They’re too long,” said Simon. “They’d jam in the culvert.”

“Of course,” said Pomfret, “it’s no more than I deserve. If I like to clean my pearls before swine——”

“Simon,” said Patricia, “I’m going to wear my hair down my back.”

“So’m I,” said Pomfret. “I think it’ll do better in the shade. And I’m going to change my legs over. I’ve always wanted to be splay-footed.”

“I shouldn’t,” said Simon. “You’ve been bow-legged too long. Besides, Nature has a reason for everything.”

“In a moment,” said Eulalie, bubbling, “I shall want my shoe-horn.”

“Can’t you button them?” said Pomfret. “Simon hasn’t scratched himself yet. Besides, you had it last and, secondly, we’ve lost it. Patricia.”

“Yes.”

“You can get up now, darling. I’ve changed my mind about my teeth. I’m going to b-b-bathe my b-b-body first.”

“Oh, I am glad,” said Mrs. Beaulieu. “But don’t stay in too long—it’s weakening.”

Standing stripped upon the brink of the pool, Pomfret shuddered.

“It—it can’t be as cold as it was at Bluebell.”

“Colder,” shrieked the others in hideous chorus.

“Oh, hell,” said Pomfret and dived. . . .

That all four should have forgotten that the film which divided The Dish was a transient convenience is easy to understand. There was much to occupy their minds. Be that as it may, as Pomfret entered the water the veil’s lease expired without so much as a premonitory flicker, revealing Simon in a shirt and an elegant pair of half-hose, Patricia, hair-brush in hand, in most of her glory, Eulalie in much less of hers, and Pomfret in the flesh and six feet six of water whose temperature was about forty degrees Fahrenheit.

It was a case for immediate action.

Every one, except Pomfret, seized and put on the garment or substitute for clothing nearest to hand, while the exception was unanimously and continually commanded to face East and remain where he was until further notice.

Turning indignantly to demand the reason, the latter perceived Eulalie apparently clothed in a face-towel, held as a tabard, and a pair of stockings, and with an unearthly shriek vanished under water.

As he rose—

“Go away,” he yelled. “Turn round. Anything. I’m——”

“To turn round,” observed Eulalie, “is the last thing I shall do. Obviously. Can’t you hold your breath and lie down?”

“Begone,” screamed Pomfret, frantically treading water. “My heart ‘ll give out in a second. This isn’t mulled claret, you know. Back into the wood or something.” He turned upon Simon. “Give me my towel, you body-snatcher. Yes, it looks very nice as a kilt, but I’m short of a bathing-machine.”

“He needn’t lie down,” said Patricia. “As long as he looks at Simon he can keep his head out.”

“I think he’d better be totally submerged,” said Eulalie. “Just for the look of the thing. Besides, we shan’t be long, and he might look for pearls

while he's waiting. Or do oysters have to have cold water?"

"I'll give you two vixens ten seconds," said Pomfret violently. "At the end of that time, come Grief, I'm going to get out. And I'm going to face where I please. In fact, if you're still in sight, I'll chase you. One—two . . ."

The enumeration had an immediate effect.

Without wasting time upon protests which seemed certain to be unavailing, the girls withdrew to the shelter of the thicket which surrounded The Dish in 'most admired disorder' and at a pace seldom employed outside the running-track, while Simon, weak with laughter, ungirded his loins and advanced upon Pomfret with his towel.

"Nine—ten," said Pomfret, heaving himself on to the bank. "Thank you." He wrapped the towel around him and faced about. "Ah. All to ourselves. How nice. And now we needn't hurry. You know, I have a feeling that I'm going to be dressed before them, after all."

He was quite right.

Remembering his recent immersion, in spite of an indignant fire of abuse from the thicket, he completed his toilet *ad unguem*—facing West.

The shriek of fury, however, which went up when he was seen to be dissatisfied with the set of his tie and to select another was most arresting, and, after a prolonged stare in the direction from which it came, Pomfret crossed the water and advanced upon the screen of foliage.

"Did anyone speak?" he demanded. "Or was it cats?"

Patricia began to shake with laughter, and Eulalie set her white teeth.

"Will you soon be ready, Pomfret dear?" purred the former uncertainly.

"I hope so," said Pomfret. "But I'm having trouble with my naughty neck-joy, darling. And then I've got to do my hands. Where shall I find your banana-sticks?"

"Oh, my dear," wailed Patricia, "we've been punished enough."

There was a silence.

Then—

"Do you love and respect me?" said Pomfret.

"Yes, yes, we do," cried Patricia.

There was another silence.

At length—

“Golden Locks,” said Pomfret.

“Yes,” said Eulalie.

“Do you love and——”

“No, I don’t,” said Eulalie fiercely. “I hate you. And I’m perfectly happy here. I wouldn’t come out if I’d fifty thousand fur-coats and a set of oilskins.”

Pomfret fingered his chin.

Then he turned on his heel and strolled back the way he had come.

As he joined Simon—

“My son,” he said, “I am going to look for the mules. Don’t wait for breakfast.”



“Ime the mules,” said the stranger.

“‘Ime the mules,’ ” repeated Pomfret thoughtfully. “I see. ‘Ime.’ Forgive me, but is that an exhortation or a curse? I don’t know the word.”

The stranger laughed.

“You asked if I’d seen the mules. Well, I tell you—ime the mules.”

Pomfret regarded the fellow.

He was a merry-looking man, round and red in the face, thick-set, fat, short-legged, with bright brown eyes and an engaging laugh. His dress was curious. A crimson cotchardie surmounted his tight-fitting hose, of which one leg was crimson and the other apple-green: a hood of the same gay green covered his head and shoulders, while a liripipe five feet long was trailing behind him: soft grey leather shoes, long-toed and buttoned at the sides, completed his attire.

“‘Ime,’ ” said Pomfret. “‘Ime.’ I suppose that’s Etchechurian for something hasty. Never mind. Why——”

The stranger slapped his thigh and laughed again.

Then he rose to his feet and made a most excellent leg.

“I,” he said, “am the mules. I am. *I’m*. Silly, isn’t it? Never mind. *I’m* also above grammar. I’m the mules, and the mules are me—at your service,” and, with that, he straightened his back and cut a caper or two.

Pomfret put a hand to his head.

“I don’t think you quite understand,” he said, moistening his lips. “I am seeking two valuable, if impudent, beasts of burden. I don’t expect you to believe me when I say that they can talk, but it’s an unpleasant truth. Yesterday evening——”

“Oh, the doubting Thomas,” said the stranger. “And I’ve eaten out of his hand all the way from Estepemazan. And tried not to bite him. Pomfret, this is unfriendly.”

Pomfret started violently. Then he looked dazedly round.

“I retire,” he said brokenly. “I can’t compete any more. D’you mean to say I’ve groomed you for seven weeks?”

“That’s right,” said the other, leaping into the air. “I was transformed. You must have heard of it.”

“Oh, I’m familiar with the word,” said Pomfret. “It’s the deed that bothers me. Never mind. It must have been very inconvenient being plural.”

“Inconvenient?” cried the stranger. “Why, most of the time I was beside myself. . . . And all because I got my precedence wrong. They’re very hot on precedence within The Pail. In fact, you can’t be too careful. And there are stacks of Royalties. You see, I gave a small blind and, forgetting he was a King’s son, I put an old enchanter beneath his dignity. Well, I met him in the morning, and he metamorphosed me in the afternoon. . . . Still, it might have been worse, and at least it’s over now.” He broke off to dance a few steps. “I’ve purged my Contempt. How’s Eulalie?”

Pomfret stared.

“All right,” he said shortly. “Why?”

“B-bless my b-brain,” said the stranger. “Don’t say it’s off. A week ago you asked me whether you should compare her to a summer’s day.”

“Good God,” said Pomfret. “Don’t say you——”

“Now, don’t get jumpy,” said the other. “You happen to have done the right thing. I’m a matchmaker. I’m ‘Our Mr. Gog,’ of Gog and Goosegog, Matchmakers. And as I’m very deep in your debt——”

“Stop,” screamed Pomfret. “Stop. I mean, look here.” He swallowed violently. “As it were fortuitously, certain highly delicate information has come into your possession.”

“That,” said Gog, twirling his liripipe, “is one way of putting it. Another would be to say that you had conveyed it to me with every circumstance of verbosity and repetition,” and, with that, he leaned backwards till his face appeared between his legs.

Pomfret took off his hat and wiped his face.

“The point is,” he said shakily, “that you’ve got it. Believing that I was addressing two beasts of burden, at once inapprehensive and dumb, I indicated that I had formed an attachment.”

“I don’t remember your using that phrase,” said Gog thoughtfully, “but I certainly gathered that you were lovesick.” With a jerk he flung up his feet and turned a somersault. “Why, you gave the whole of one morning to the way she walked.”

“Did I indeed?” said Pomfret furiously. “Well, if you’re not very careful I’ll give the best part of a week to the way you sit down, my friend. And —”

“Hush,” said Gog, laughing. “I won’t give you away. And I quite agree about her walk. She moves beautifully. In fact, she’s a perfect darling. Where were we?”

“I don’t know where we were,” said Pomfret desperately. “I’m—I’m all hot and bothered, I am. But for God’s sake understand this. I flatly forbid you——”

“That’s right,” said Gog, darting to pick a flower. “Refuse all offers of assistance and then tear everything up. Pomfret, you make me tired. You know, Eulalie wants handling. She’s very fond of you, but she’s—well, highly feminine. Another little flurry like this morning’s, and you’ll do yourself in.”

“I know,” said Pomfret wildly. “I know. How do you?”

“From your face, of course,” said Gog, side-stepping. “You look as if you’d lost half a kingdom. Never mind. Let’s talk about something else. What about b-b-botany?”

“Not—not botany,” said Pomfret weakly. “Something more simple. And I wish you wouldn’t jump about like that. Between surprise and agitation I’m ready to scream, any way. Oh, and why these garments?”

“Why not?” said Gog, regarding himself. “They’re out of Date. Why, here she is.” He made a low bow. “Good morning, my lady. We were just talking of you. I’m the mules.”

Pomfret swung on his heel to see Eulalie standing still five paces away.

“The mules?” she said, knitting her brows.

“It—it is d-difficult, isn’t it?” stammered Pomfret. “But there’s no doubt about it. He knows everything that’s happened since Esteppemazan. It seems he annoyed a magician, who thereupon altered him to Balak and Balaam. And now he’s come back.”

For a moment Eulalie stared.

Then—

“I see,” she said slowly. “That’s why, when Balaam kicked Balak——”

“Don’t,” cried Gog. “That was the awful part of it. Internal dissension. You know what mules are. I was always getting in my way or doing myself down over a bunch of clover or something, and the instinct to retort by violence was most insidious. Excuse me.” He took a short run and jumped over a blade of grass. “How did you sleep?”

“Perfectly, thanks,” said Eulalie. She turned to Pomfret. “Why did you call me?”

Pomfret leaned against a tree and covered his eyes.

“I didn’t know I did call you,” he said brokenly. “I’m not going to say I didn’t because it’s quite possible I did. I’m—I’m irresponsible. Five minutes’ communion with this damned kaleidoscope is enough to derange a sage. Tell him to go away.”

“He’s gone,” said the girl, watching the green and crimson flash between the trees. “I don’t know why. Perhaps I drove him away. So I’ve done some good, after all. And next time you call——”

“You came,” said Pomfret quietly. “I put it across you this morning—yet, when I called, you came.”

Eulalie looked him in the face.

“I please myself,” she said. “It amused me to come—to-day. To-morrow . . .”

Pomfret took off his hat.

“The day I saw you,” he said, “I fell in love with you. That was most natural. I think most men that saw you would do the same. For your sake I said nothing—I’ve tried to give no sign for more than two months. You see, I felt it would be awkward. Girls like you aren’t made to marry, er, mountebanks. . . . And—well, it would have been awkward in so small a mess. But now I’m telling you—throwing my poor cards down because I’m human. I can’t cover up any more. I’ve tried to seem indifferent, but now I’ve got to be rotten if I’m to hide the truth. . . . Well, if I’m to be rotten to you, you must know the reason why. That much I owe my heart. It’s rather comic to think I’ve got a heart, isn’t it? Never mind. Simon and Pat won’t know, and I shan’t tell. But if I seem surly or rough, you’ll understand, my dear, that Pomfret Tudor, Buffoon, is covering up.”

There was a long silence.

At length—

“I’m glad you told me,” said Eulalie quietly. “It’s a great thing to clear the air. Why d’you think I came when you called just now?”

“Because you’re great-hearted,” said Pomfret. “It would have been beneath the dignity of anyone else, but you’re so royal that you can afford to be direct, downright, handsome. No one could ever misconstrue anything you do, because it never even occurs to you that anyone ever could. Why did the dirtiest row of scoundrels that ever blackmailed a woman call you ‘The Bank of England’? Because they’d seen the look in your eyes.”

“Highly flattering,” said Eulalie, “but beside the point. Guess again. Why did I come when you called?”

“You said . . . it amused you to come.”

“I withdraw that. I wanted to come. I was glad when you called—it gave me an opportunity. I wanted to say I was sorry——”

“Eulalie!”

“—and—and—well, you see, I knew you loved me, and I thought perhaps if I came you’d tell me so.”

She was in Pomfret’s arms, laughing and rosy.

“But child—queen—darling, you don’t mean to say . . .”

“That’s right,” breathed Eulalie, slipping her arms round his neck, “I—love—you . . . very much.”

“But——”

“Love me, my dear, love me. Don’t cover up any more. I want you to love me. I want you to kiss me and pick me up in your arms. I want to lay my head against yours. I want to say ‘That’s my man.’ I want to sign myself ‘Tudor.’ I want to——”

“But I’m a mountebank.”

“You’re not. You’re a king—with a flat cap on and his crown in a drawer. Don’t you think *I* understand? Don’t you think *my* eyes can see? I know you love your motley. You find it ‘the only wear.’ But that doesn’t make you a fool. Simon Beaulieu’s a prince: but you’re a king.”

“You’ve crowned me,” said Pomfret Tudor, lifting his head, “my beautiful, peerless darling, that came when I called.”

“You never called,” whispered Eulalie. “I came on my own. I—had—to.”

“That’s right,” said an unctuous voice. “I willed her. I tell you, I’m ‘Our Mr. Gog,’ of Gog and Goosegog, Matchmakers.”

The next moment the speaker was streaking across The Dish, with his liripipe flying and Pomfret hard on his heels. As he took off for the brook, his pursuer’s fingers closed upon the end of his liripipe, and, with an apprehensive bellow, ‘Our Mr. Gog’ passed from the vertical into the horizontal position and then fell heavily into two feet of water.

“So perish all traitors,” said Pomfret grimly, and, with that, he returned to his lady, who had emerged from the thicket and was stricken helpless with laughter upon the edge of the lawn.

As the two met—

“And I never even kissed your beautiful mouth.”

“Quick! Now!” said Eulalie, putting up her face. “Pat and Simon are fully engaged with Gog.”

This was the truth.

They were still similarly engrossed when the two rejoined them. A dripping but genial Gog was telling his tale.

“. . . Well, when I got back, she was in his arms. It was very beautiful—quite Theocritean. You know. The nymph and the swineherd. . . .”

It was clear that Gog was incorrigible.

CHAPTER V

BLOOD ROYAL

THE four travellers stared at the castle, and the castle loomed back. Odd lights were burning on the battlements, and here and there a window was faintly illumined as though the room it served was lighted but the curtains were drawn. Such sounds as might be expected of a great establishment came floating out of the pile—shouts, the neigh of a horse, laughter, the clang of a powerful gong and, once, a chorus of voices singing a stave. The steady plash of water falling upon water suggested the presence of a fountain or else the gush of some spring which fed the moat.

Presently Pomfret sighed.

“Lost,” he said quietly. “That’s what we are. Lost. Not lost in Ken Wood or Gascony or any civilized state, but blinkin’ well lost in Etchechuria, which from what I’ve seen of it to-day seems to be a sort of magnified New Forest without any roads—or inns. I don’t wonder they call it ‘The Lost Country,’ ” he added bitterly. “Twenty soul-shaking miles on a draught of crystal water. . . . I wish I could lose it myself. And I suppose that if I were to suggest that our guide (*sic*) was a more perfect specimen of the complete wash-out than anyone I’ve ever had the misfortune to encounter, much less rely upon, I should be reviled.”

Simon let the bundle he was bearing slide to the ground.

“I don’t know that I should put it as high as that,” he said, “but, considering I was careful to ask him if we could possibly miss the way and got a back answer for my pains, I must confess to feeling rather murderous.”

“Are you sure we have missed the way?” said Patricia. “Perhaps this is where we’re to stay.”

“I never heard of a castle called *The Crumpled Horn*,” said Pomfret. “Or of an inn that looked like Windsor about three times life-size.”

“He never actually used the word ‘inn,’ ” said Eulalie.

“Well, he said he was going to see the landlord and insist that our rooms faced South. If that doesn’t suggest an inn, I don’t know what does.”

“He also volunteered,” said Simon, “that it was spotlessly clean. You don’t talk like that of a castle. Oh, we’ve come wrong all right.”

“Wrong?” said Pomfret. “We must be miles out. Nothing was said about even discerning a castle in the middle distance, much less finding Mont-St.-Michel in the middle of the road. However, here we are and here, if we can bluff the owner, we’d better dine and sleep.”

“That’s right,” said Simon. “We must say we’re benighted—I think that’s the proper term—and hope for the best. Of course, this is just where Gog would have been rather useful.”

“The really inspiring reflection,” said Pomfret shakily, “is that that treacherous hunk of Heaven is carrying my clothes. . . . Of course I know it’s foolish to b-bother about the b-body—the soul’s the thing. But I hate sleeping in the shirt I’ve worn all day almost as much as I loathe wearing the shirt I’ve hated sleeping in all night. Then again a toothbrush has its points. . . .”

“I’ve got a new one,” said Eulalie. “‘The bride’s presents to the bridegroom included a bone-handled toothbrush and a foot of floss-silk.’ ”

“Oh, you darling,” said Pomfret. “I suppose you couldn’t run to a nightgown. Or would that be familiar?”

“We’re not there yet,” said Simon, swinging his bundle. “Let’s try and find a drawbridge.”

“Well, keep well away from that moat,” said Pomfret. “We shouldn’t be able to reach you, and I don’t want to hear you drown.”

“I like to think,” said Simon, “that you would follow me in.”

“Yes, I like to think so too,” said Pomfret. “Let’s indulge ourselves with the thought, shall we? It can’t do any harm. Oh, and what about this fardel? It only weighs about a hundred-weight, so it’s not worth talking about really, but if we left it here the servants could——”

“Not on your life,” said Eulalie. “When I’m travelling light I like to keep my things with me—till I know the hotel. And Pat’s probably the same.”

“‘Travelling light,’ ” said Pomfret brokenly, heaving a bale of clothes on to his shoulders. “Never mind. ‘If *labour* be the food of love, *carry* on.’ ”

They proceeded to compass the moat in single file.

Almost at once a light leaped into vision. This was low down and clearly without the moat, and, as the four approached, they could see that it came from a lantern apparently suspended in mid-air—an illusion which was due to the darkness, for when they were standing beneath it they could see that it

hung from a small wrought-iron gibbet which was planted close to the moat and almost opposite the drawbridge. This was raised, and, though the great gateway was lighted, its mouth was shut by the timbers so that only thin streaks of light were escaping on either side to flash and quiver upon the water below.

On the shaft of the gibbet was a hook suspending a serpent-shaped trumpet which seemed to be of silver and was polished until it shone again: four or five feet of silver chain connected it to the ironwork, so that while it could be lifted from the hook upon which it hung, it could not be taken away.

Above the trumpet was a notice.

WARNING.

One of the least valuable possessions of the Castle is an ear. This originally belonged to a visitor who, after using this horn, failed to restore it to its hook and threw it down upon the ground.

“Well, that’s very much to the point, isn’t it?” said Simon.

“It’s most illuminating,” said Pomfret. “I wonder what happens if you forget to wipe your feet. Half an hour with the bears, I suppose.”

“‘Spotlessly clean,’” said Eulalie uncertainly. “Pat, when are they going to see it?”

“And those two sages,” said Patricia, “had the nerve to jump upon me.”

“And on me,” bubbled Eulalie. “The wiseacres.”

After a prolonged stare, Pomfret turned to Simon.

“Deranged,” he said shortly. “How shocking. They’re abusing their dear ones. Should they become violent——”

“I said,” said Eulalie, fixing her eyes upon the trumpet, “that he never used the word ‘inn.’ All he said was that if we went straight ahead we should come to . . .”

She left the sentence there, and the men turned, frowning and puzzled, to follow her gaze.

Then—

“Moses’ boots!” cried Simon. “*The Crumpled Horn.*”

There was an electric silence.

“Produce the landlord,” said Pomfret, “and I’ll——”

“Don’t you dare,” said a voice. “I won’t be produced. Besides, my person is sacred.”

The four swung about to see a queer-looking man some fifty years old. His hair was grey, his face was red as fire, and he was immensely fat. His stare, his expression, and the lift of his generous chin were clearly intended to embody a fierce and compelling haughtiness, but geniality had inhabited his eyes and his mouth too long, while the absurd angle at which he wore his headgear was inconsistent with anything but the most affable humour. The headgear was a crown of plain gold, lightly and beautifully fashioned about a cap of scarlet silk and somewhat resembling the coronet of an earl without the strawberry leaves. A voluminous scarlet gown fell almost to his feet: its skirt was edged with ermine and slit upon either side to the middle of his thigh, while enormous bell-shaped sleeves enveloped his arms. His black silk hose were gartered below the knee with golden garters, and on his feet was a pair of scarlet velvet shoes, the points of which were stuffed and projected for quite eight inches beyond his toes.

“So you see,” continued the King, “any such attempt would be of the nature of sacrilege as well as assault. And that’s that. Who and how are you?”

“Strangers and full of beans,” said Pomfret promptly. “And you?”

“Bursting, thanks,” said the King. “Let’s go in, shall we? Does every one like venison?”

“What, not cold stuffed venison?” said Pomfret brokenly.

“The same, gossip,” cried the King, slamming him on the back. “And goose-pasty and gooseberry-pie and beer.”

“Brother Simon,” said Pomfret, swallowing, “operate the bassoon.”

“That’s right,” said the King, taking his arm. “Blow a fanfare. Blow several fanfares.” He turned to Patricia and Eulalie. “My dears, how lovely you are. Sunset will dote upon you. And why’s the young noble called ‘Simon’? He doesn’t look simple at all.”

“He isn’t a noble,” said Patricia, “but——”

“Then he should be,” said the King. “I shall elevate him to-morrow.” He turned upon Simon, who had taken the trumpet down. “Can you blow ‘Hot and Cold,’ cousin? Or don’t you know it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t, sir,” said Simon, who in the old days had been able to wake a post-horn to melodious activity. “I used to play ‘Buy a Broom,’ but——”

“Blow that old call you used to blow at Breathless,” said Patricia. “You know. The seventeenth-century one.”

“I’ll try,” said Simon, putting the trumpet to his lips.

It was a long call, slow and stately, full of the breath of kings. Simon sounded it royally and purely enough to make its forgotten composer smile in his long sleep. Might, majesty and dominion nodded upon its cadences: the pomp and circumstance of pageantry came swelling out of its refrain. . . .

As the last long note went floating into the darkness, the others crowded about him, crying applause.

“It’s rich,” declared the King. “And notable.”

“That’s right,” said Pomfret. “They’ll expect about eight emperors and a couple of army corps.”

“It sounds so expensive,” said the King. “That’s what I like about it.” He patted Simon upon the shoulder. “Consider yourself a Companion of the Order of the Broken Biscuit and teach it to my trumpeters to-morrow.”

Here a head was thrust out of a window beside the gateway, and a hoarse voice demanded the countersign.

The King bawled back.

“Let down the bridge.”

“Advance one,” insisted the voice, “and give the countersign.”

The King stepped to the moat.

“Let down the bridge,” he roared. “I’m the King.”

“Countersign, please.”

“If you don’t let down that bridge,” said the King shakily, “I’ll——”

“His Majesty’s orders——”

“Oh, you bottle-nosed fool,” mouthed the King, beginning to dance. “Haven’t I said I’m the King? Damn it, as the landlord, I set the blinkin’ countersign. If it wasn’t for me you wouldn’t be able to ask it.”

“Then give it,” said the voice.

“But I’ve forgotten it,” screamed the King.

“It’s a very easy one,” said the voice. “Very simple. Now, last night’s was a smeller.”

“Of course, you know you’re asking for it,” said the King, breathing through his nose. “‘Smeller.’ It was a very beautiful phrase. Sunset chose it.”

“I say, are you really the King?” said the voice anxiously.

The King laughed hysterically.

“Oh, no,” he said wildly. “Not—not really. I look like him and I talk like him and I’ve got his clothes on. But I’m not really. And just call the Torturer, will you? I want to arrange about your death.”

“Not here yet?” said another voice. “They’re very late. I wonder——”

“Gog,” shrieked Patricia. “Gog!”

“Hallo, my lady,” shouted Gog. “Half a minute and we’ll——”

“What’s the countersign?”

“*Forget-me-not*,” shouted Gog. . . .

When the drawbridge was down, the King was still feeling rather faint, so Pomfret and Simon supported him and helped him across.

His appearance was the signal for frantic activity.

Orders were yelled, a gong was beaten furiously, the guard turned out, liveried servants began to lay a carpet, and six breathless trumpeters, gorgeously appalled, fought and elbowed their way into a well-liking line.

From the other side of the portcullis grimly the King surveyed the preparations. As the Officers of the Household arrived—

“Are you all ready?” he shouted.

“Yes,” roared every one.

“Then give way.”

With a crash the trumpets sounded, arms were presented, and the portcullis was hauled up.

In silence the King passed in, and the four with him.

“Welcome,” said the Master of the Horse, wiping his mouth. “Welcome home, sir. We were getting quite anxious about you.”

“Yes, you look rather drawn,” said the King acidly. “Where were you getting anxious? In the buttery?”

“You can be anxious in a buttery,” said the Master of the Horse.

“You can be anxious anywhere,” said the King shortly. “In a bear-pit, for instance, you can be worried to death.”

Here the other Officers laughed very loudly as if in the hope of appeasing the royal ire.

The King turned upon them.

“Yes, I don’t remember seeing you on the battlements,” he said. “Supposing I’d forgotten the countersign.”

“We should have felt your presence,” said the Comptroller piously. “We don’t have to see you to know you have need of us. ‘Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage.’ ”

“I see,” said the King. “Well, what about a forty-foot moat? Is that any good?”

“None whatever,” said the Comptroller. “Your personality——”

“Splendid,” said the King. “Have a word with the gate-sentry, will you? After all, what is death? Bearward.”

“Sir,” said a deep voice.

“Starve the bears for two days. Steward.”

“Sir,” said another voice.

“Is the bath-water hot?”

“Boiling, my lord.”

“Good. Gold Stick.”

“Sir,” said a third voice.

“Conduct these ladies to their apartments and then tell Sunset they’re here.”

As Patricia and Eulalie moved off in the wake of Gold Stick, the King turned to his supporters.

“It is my practice,” he said, “to visit the buttery-hatch and stay myself with a small flagon of ale before preparing for dinner. Could you bear to abet me?”

“Well, I’m almost a total abstainer,” said Pomfret, “like—like the Master of the Horse, but of course if you make it a command . . .”

The bare idea of associating the Master of the Horse with abstemiousness threw the King into a paroxysm of mirth.

So soon as he could speak—

“I oughtn’t to laugh like that,” he said, wiping his eyes, “it’s dangerous. How dare you?”

“Sir,” said Simon swiftly, “Laughter is the head of Life.”

“Write that down, some one,” cried the King. “Write that down. ‘Beer is the heart of Life.’ That’s a very beautiful thought. I’ll have it carved somewhere. Where was I?”

Every one was either dictating or inscribing or defending his version of one or other of the saws, so Pomfret filled in the gap.

“You were so kind as to suggest, sir, that my friend and I should subscribe to your, er, restoration at the buttery-hatch.”

“So I was,” cried the King. “Well, what about it?”

“Sir,” said Pomfret, “I’ve a thirst like a wagon of cracknels.”

“Then that’s settled,” said the King. “We’ll have a quart apiece. And whichever of you two finds a noble at the bottom of his cup shall marry Sunset.”

For a moment there was dead silence.

Then came the thud of timber against the wall, and a moment later the portcullis crashed into place.



“And there you are,” concluded Pomfret gloomily. “Gog tried to explain that we weren’t eligible, and got handed over to that earnest-looking wallah, the Bearward, for his pains. In view of his comparative failure it seemed foolish to pursue the matter, so we proceeded to the buttery-hatch, listening to an eulogy of the kingdom to half of which one of us will shortly become entitled. I don’t think I ever enjoyed a quart of beer less. . . . As there was a rose-noble in each of our pots, Simon and I have got to have it out tomorrow in the lists. The loser is to be interred with military honours, and the

survivor will marry Sunset on Thursday morning. Now you see why we only toyed with the venison.”

His words were succeeded by a profound silence.

Seated upon the great bed, her little hands gripping the crimson coverlet, Patricia, tight-lipped and wide-eyed, stared upon the floor. One hand to her temples, Eulalie, who was sitting on a skin before the fire, gazed open-mouthed at her *fiancé* as though he had lost his wits. His arms folded, Simon was leaning against the arras, frowning at the opposite wall; while Pomfret, sunk in the depths of a gigantic chair, cupped his chin in his palm and regarded a mighty coffer with great malignity.

Eulalie moistened her lips.

“But he seems so kindly,” she said.

“I think he is,” said Pomfret. “I think if you asked for his boots, he’d press them upon you. But if you obstruct his will—well, that’s where the bears come in. He can’t help it—it’s second nature. If you knew his beer was poisoned, and he was thirsty and you tried to stop him drinking, the net result of your interference would be that he’d predecease you by about twenty-four hours. And that’s the devil of it. We’ve an excellent case which I’m sure would command his sympathy, but to attempt to state it is to commit suicide.”

Patricia looked up from the bed.

“The thing to do,” she said, “is to get hold of Sunset. She seems a very nice girl. If she says she won’t marry either of you, the whole thing’s off.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said Simon. “If Sunset’s feelings counted, she’d at least have been given her choice.”

“She may be able to gain time,” said Eulalie.

“For the survivor,” said Simon. “But somebody’s got to be buried to-morrow night.”

“Pat’s right,” said Pomfret. “Sunset’s our only hope. We must put her wise at once and——”

Somebody drummed with their fingers upon the door.

Pomfret rose to his feet, and Simon slipped to the door and drew the latch.

“It’s me,” said a girl’s voice.

Simon opened the door, and the Princess came in.

She was a tall, handsome girl, with a very short upper lip and curiously bright blue eyes. Masses of golden hair hung freely over her shoulders, while a plain golden circlet rested upon her brows. Her dress was of emerald green, cut low and square at the neck, tight-fitting as far as the waist and sweeping the ground. Her sleeves, which were tight and buttoned from elbow to wrist, overran her beautiful hands beyond the knuckles. But for the crown, a heavily jewelled girdle was her only ornament.

“Just so,” she said, looking round. “I rather thought that I should disturb a council.” She smiled at Simon and Pomfret. “I realize now why your appetites were so thin. And, first of all, let me apologize for the King. But he’s very conservative. He killed a giant and four princes to marry my mother, and, though she was in love with the Almoner, it turned out extremely well. So he always counts me out. Then we’ve had very bad luck. For years we were never troubled: then at last a two-headed ogre got busy, and we thought we were off. The usual notice went out—my hand and half the kingdom to whoever did in the ogre. There was a great rush at first, but after three or four weeks the ogre’s price got so short that people began to lose interest. To put the lid on, a sexton with a false nose pushed him into a well, and when father refused to pay up sued him for Breach of Promise. Naturally the sexton died before the case came on, but it was a great nuisance. Then I was betrothed to one of the Charmings, but he got across a witch and was altered to an egg. We marked him ‘Not to be boiled,’ and kept him in a nest on the terrace. Then one day we changed housekeepers and forgot to mention him. We’re never quite sure what happened, but we think he was poached. So you see . . .”

There was a pregnant silence.

Then—

“Poached,” murmured Pomfret, wiping his brow. “What a thought. I do hope he ate well.”

“Do sit down,” said Patricia, patting the coverlet. “And of course we see, my dear. But what’s to be done? I don’t suppose you’d be seen dead with either of them—even if they were available.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Sunset, sinking on to the bed. “They’re a nice upstanding pair. But I should like to see them in hose.” She glanced from Simon to Pomfret and back again. “I should think Simon’s got the best legs. . . . Still, that’s really beside the point, because, though the King

doesn't know it, I'm not available either. I'm engaged to the Master of the Horse." There was a general sigh of relief. "But it's no good telling him that," continued the girl. "That would only benefit the bears. And it wouldn't really benefit them. Too much meat doesn't suit them. They like it, of course, but carrots are much better for them. Besides, it makes them smell."

"Poor—poor dears," said Pomfret shakily.

"The only thing I have done is to get the fight washed out. I reminded him of the Charming business, and said it was childish to go and eliminate one starter before the other had finished. He saw the force of that almost at once. So now I've got to choose. And until I'm safely married the one I don't choose will be spare man."

"Well, that's better than being buried," said Simon. "What's the next move?"

"It's up to you," said Sunset. "I warn you, my brain's in rags. Besides, it's your turn. I've saved you both a very strenuous day and I've added several years to one of your lives."

"For which," said Pomfret, bowing, "we are truly thankful. And please don't think that because we aren't anxious to fly at each other's throats we don't admire you. Personally, I think you're a most lovely sight. And I'm not at all surprised there was a rush on the ogre. If I'd been here and available I should have had a dart at him myself."

"They say there's another coming," said Sunset eagerly.

Pomfret started.

"But not with two heads?" he said.

"No. One head this time."

"Ah, then I shouldn't look at him," said Pomfret loftily. "Unless they've two heads they—they don't interest me."

Eulalie took up the running.

"When have you got to decide by, Princess?"

"To-morrow morning," said Sunset. "And the Abbot's been warned for Thursday, so we haven't much time."

"I suppose," said Simon suddenly, "I couldn't have a word with Gog."

"Is that your courier?" Patricia nodded. "Well, he should be outside your door."

“I know,” said Patricia. “But there was a misunderstanding. The King . . .”

“That’s right,” said Pomfret. “He’s for the bears.”

Sunset leaped to her feet.

“You don’t mean this?” she cried.

“It’s the naked truth,” said Simon solemnly.

The Princess stamped her foot.

“This is outrageous,” she said. “First the gate-sentry, then the Comptroller, and now your servant. You know, I believe he’s trying to kill them.”

“Well, I don’t want to be disrespectful,” said Pomfret, “but it does look like it, doesn’t it?”

“It’s rank cruelty,” cried Sunset. “If they had plenty of exercise it’d be different, but the pit’s no bigger than this room. Besides, they’ll smell to glory. We shan’t be able to sleep.”

Pomfret put a hand to his head.

“Nor—nor we shall,” he faltered.

For a moment Sunset regarded him, tapping her strong white teeth. Then she turned to Simon.

“If you want ten minutes with Gog, be at the apiary to-morrow at ten o’clock. He’ll be there with the Bearward.” She wrested a button from her sleeve and pitched it across. “Show the Bearward that button and he’ll let you both out of earshot.”

Wondering why they would be at the apiary—

“Thanks very much,” said Simon. “I don’t know what we should do without you, Princess.”

“I do,” said that lady. “Without me you’d——”

“I’ve got an idea,” cried Patricia. “Listen. If the Master of the Horse wanted to marry, would the King mind?”

“Not that I know of,” said Sunset, “provided I wasn’t the bride.”

“Well, tell him to propose to Eulalie at once. You can choose Pomfret, and the two weddings can take place on Thursday. I take it the bride’s veiled.”

“Heavily. But how——”

“You just change over. You wear her wedding-dress, and she wears yours.”

“What about the banquet?” said Sunset. “You can’t eat and drink in a veil.”

“You change back again for that. And the four of you leave the Castle in the afternoon. Of course this is very rough and rather desperate, but something’s got to be done, and we haven’t much time.”

“It’s certainly rough, my dear,” said Sunset slowly. “Still, I suppose it’s possible. I could wear my hair in a caul, and we’re about the same height.” Eulalie rose, and the two stood back to back. “But it wants a lot of working out.”

“There’s nothing between you,” said Simon. The two fell away. “I agree it’s a desperate plan, but if you can trust your women, it might easily come off. And when it’s blown over . . .”

“Exactly,” said Sunset. “When.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Whenever you marry him,” said Eulalie, “it’ll have to blow over.”

“That’s true,” said Sunset thoughtfully, glancing at herself in a mirror. “All right,” she added suddenly. “We’ll settle on that. To-morrow I’ll say I’ve chosen Pomfret, and you must go all out with Albert. I’ll explain things to him, of course. You haven’t met him yet, have you?”

“Not—not yet,” quavered Eulalie.

“You will have to go, won’t you? Never mind. He’s very quick in the uptake. After all”—she turned to Pomfret with a dazzling smile—“we shall have to move too, shan’t we? I think we’d better ride together to-morrow morning. Is eight too early?”

“Er, er, no,” said Pomfret uneasily. “Eight—eight o’clock.”

“Then that’s settled,” said Sunset with a comfortable sigh. “We’ll ride towards Hay Hill. They said the ogre had been seen in that quarter.” She turned to Eulalie. “You know, my dear, I should have chosen him any way. I worship bravery. Besides, he’s so fond of animals. I only wish Albert was, but he simply hates the bears.” She returned to Pomfret and stretched out a royal arm. “You may kiss my hand, sir.”

With goggling eyes, Pomfret obeyed the command.

Then—

“Give you good night,” she said.

The next moment she was gone.

The four stared at one another in dismay.

“Well, that’s bent it,” said Simon. “Pomfret’s got off.”

Pomfret wiped the sweat from his face.

“It does look as if I was going to have a busy day to-morrow, doesn’t it? At eight o’clock—the ogre.” He paused. “I’d better take a safety razor, I suppose. I don’t want to be entirely unarmed, and we left the hammock-stands in The Dish.”

Eulalie crossed to his side and put her arms round his neck.

“You must say you’ve sprained your wrist, dear. I’ll bind it up for you. And then she’ll probably take you another way.”

“My darling,” said Pomfret, “I’m between about seven stools. If we don’t run into the ogre, that she-devil’s going to molest me till I can’t think straight. If I protest, she either goes to the King or she goes to the Master of the Horse. If she goes to the King—well, the bears ‘ll smell worse than ever. If she goes to the Master of the Horse, it’s battle for two and murder for one in the lists. I haven’t got an earthly.”

“I think we can wash out the ogre,” said Simon. “To-morrow’s only a reconnaissance. Even if you were to sight him she can’t expect you to take him on unarmed.”

“Yes, and supposing he sights us,” said Pomfret. “He won’t know it’s only a reconnaissance. Oh, no, I’d better take the razor. If I can’t cut him, I may be able to square him with it. Wonder what sort of a horse I shall have,” he added musingly. “I haven’t been across one for seven years. Some haughty barb, I expect, that they’re afraid to feed.”

“Old fellow,” said Eulalie, “I’m going to bind up your wrist. You must play that up for every cent you’re worth. Say it’s an old wound that occasionally gives you trouble. As for the lady, you must manage as best you can. If you keep the barb moving she can’t do very much. But don’t put her nose out of joint.”

“I won’t promise not to,” said Pomfret, “because I’ve only one brain—and that’s inundated. Still, I’ll do what I can. If I feel very strong to-morrow, I might try to put her off me. You know. Speak callously of rogue-elephants, or make her suspect that Albert’s the better man. Then——”

“My dear,” said Patricia, “that’s not the slightest good. She’s fallen to you—flat. If you ran away from a dwarf, she’d have an excuse for your conduct before you had.”

“That’s right,” said Eulalie. “Sunset’s no fool. She knows what she wants when she wants it, and she’s as hard as nails. If only we all could go riding I’d suggest that we cleared and chanced it, but they’d never let you and Simon outside the walls at the same time. Besides, we couldn’t leave Gog.”

Simon held up the button which Sunset had torn from her dress.

“At least,” he said, “we’ve got this. What it can do besides getting me speech with Gog remains to be seen, but if it weighs with the Bearward it should weigh with others too.” He slid the button into a pocket. “Besides, ten minutes with Gog may save us all.”

“Let’s hope and pray that she doesn’t ask for it back,” said Patricia. “If it can overrule orders it may occur to her that it’s better to have it on her sleeve.”

“It may also occur to her,” said Pomfret, “that Simon’s ten minutes with Gog won’t help her case.”

“I entirely agree,” said Simon. “And if you can manage it, brother, without imperilling your life, will you try to keep her out riding till half-past ten?”

“Provided the ogre’s not working, I’ll do my best. But I’m only human, and I’m not going to hang about any lairs for anyone. It’s too—too unsettling: I should lose the thread of my discourse.”

“Incidentally,” said Eulalie, stooping, “here’s another of her buttons. I suppose it was loose and she dropped it.”

“So much the better,” said Simon, putting out his hand. “Yes, it’s exactly the same. And now——”

Here came a knock on the door.

Simon was there in an instant and drawing the latch. . . .

From the threshold a pale-faced woman regarded him.

“Your lordship has a button, I think. The Princess has told me to ask for it. She has already instructed the Bearward, so that you need it no more, and I am to sew it back upon her dress.”

“Why, certainly,” said Simon. A button passed. “To tell you the truth, I was afraid of losing it.”

The woman smiled faintly.

“Good night, my lord,” she said and was gone.

Simon closed the door and set his back against the oak.

Three pairs of eyes met his in eloquent silence.



The Comptroller, the gate-sentry and Gog were standing, roped together, in a row at the end of the lines of hives, each with a bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other, listlessly eating honey and looking extremely miserable. Six paces away the Bee-master was conversing with the Bearward, who was leaning upon a club the head of which bristled with spikes about two inches long.

As Simon came up, Gog’s eyes lighted, and the Bearward bowed.

“Good morning,” said Simon carelessly. “I want a few words with my courier. Will you untie him?”

“Nothing doing,” said the Bearward. “I’m responsible for his body, and in the absence of special instructions——”

Simon produced the button.

“Good enough,” said the Bearward, uncovering. He stepped to loosen the bonds. “You’ll keep round about, won’t you?”

“Certainly,” said Simon. “We’ll walk round the apiary.”

Before they had been round once Gog was in possession of the facts, and before they had been round twice his plans were laid.

“Listen,” he said. “Most castles don’t have apiaries. Sixty beehives inside your walls are no joke—if the bees get peevish. But they have one here because they’ve an antidote. You see that cistern there? Well, that’s full of it.”

“Full of what?” said Simon.

“Full of the antidote. Wet your eyelids with that, and for the next two days you can’t be stung. No bee will look at you. Very well. That pipe there leads to a basin in the courtyard: if ever the bees get mad the Bee-master bangs that gong and opens the cock: every one beats it for the basin for all they’re worth, and by the time the bees arrive nine out of ten are invulnerable. Well, that’s all right except for the Bee-master. He hasn’t time to get to the basin—obviously. In fact, the last two died in the attempt. So now that tap’s been fitted. You’ll observe that it’s two full inches below the cock. Very good. Just open it, will you? That’s right. And now soak your handkerchief. . . . Splendid. And now let’s stroll round again.”

Slowly they sauntered into and out of earshot, while Gog explained lugubriously that condemned prisoners were fed exclusively upon honey in order that their reception by the bears might be as favourable as possible.

As they passed behind a riot of honey-suckle—

“Just wet my eyelids,” said Gog. Simon did so. “And now your own. . . . That’s right. Now, all you’ve got to do is to find the girls and Pomfret, wet their eyelids, go to the stables, wet the eyelids of the best five horses you see, and chuck your handkerchief down the nearest drain. Have you got a knife? Thank you. You see, I must be able to sever my bonds.”

Here they came to the cistern. The stream which had gushed from the tap had sunk to a thread of silver.

“Ah, that’s splendid,” said Gog. “In another ten minutes it’ll be dry, and the ground also. Nothing like a sandy soil and a hot sun. Now all we’ve got to settle is where to meet. There won’t be any hurry—for us. I think perhaps the stables would be convenient. Shall we do one more lap?”

With that, he assumed an air of the utmost despondency and began to descant upon the discomforts of the condemned cell, explaining with great bitterness that it was really an annex to the bear-pit and so situated that the occupants of the several dungeons could see and smell one another with the acme of ease, while nothing but a stout grating prevented the bears from anticipating their meal.

As they passed out of earshot—

“And now for the time,” said Gog. “I see the cistern’s just dripping, but in another ten minutes it’ll be dry. Well, it won’t take you ten minutes to do your bit.”

“What about Pomfret?” said Simon. “We must wait for him.”

“The moment he comes get hold of him and wet his eyes. I shall know when he’s back because they’ll blow a fanfare for Sunset. Five minutes after the fanfare I shall start in. You’ll know when I’ve started in because—well, for one thing, you’ll hear the gong. Directly you hear it get out of doors—anywhere. You’ll have to leave your clothes.”

“But if Pomfret isn’t there?”

“Then he can’t be stung,” said Gog shortly. “And now I think that’s all. Mind you destroy that handkerchief. What’s twenty-five thousand by sixty?”

After a rapid calculation—

“Fifteen hundred thousand,” said Simon.

“Thank you,” said Gog. “Just wet my eyelids again, will you? I don’t want there to be a mistake. If a million and a half of bees rage together for a day and a half, how long will they ask us to stay next time we come? Never mind. I’m sorry your first hours within The Pail should have been so exciting, but I’d never have brought you to Black Pepper in a thousand years if I’d known that Sunset was here. When I left she was going to be married to one of the Charmings. You know, she always was a snorter. Anyone she liked the look of had practically to be wired in. And now, so long.” He began to weep uproariously. “What did you come for?” he howled. “If you can’t obtain a reprieve, why did you come? And it’s no good saying you’ll wave to me on Friday. I don’t want to be waved to . . .”

Simon shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

When he looked back, the Bearward was roping Gog to the Comptroller, while the Bee-master was replenishing the gate-sentry’s bowl.

Ten minutes went by. . . .

As Simon emerged from the stables there was a sudden flourish, and Sunset and Pomfret came riding into the yard.

The Princess was laughing, but Pomfret was wearing a quiet, strained smile, while the set of his powerful jaw was full of purpose.

As he looked round he saw Simon, and the men’s eyes met. . . .

Pomfret freed his feet from the irons, cocked his leg over the withers of his mount and slid to the ground. Then he stepped to Sunset and handed her down.

“In an hour’s time, lady.”

"In half an hour," said Sunset archly, "I shall be walking in the rose-garden."

Pomfret bowed, and the lady swept under an archway and out of sight.

Pomfret turned to the stables.

"Come inside," said Simon. "There's a horse I want you to see."

As they passed into a stall—

"This can't go on," said Pomfret thickly.

"It's not going on," said Simon. "Close your eyes."



Seated in the counting-house, with his crown on the back of his head, the King was staring upon a map and savaging his thumb. By his side stood the Chancellor, the picture of injured indignation.

"What do I pay you for?" said the King suddenly.

"I don't know," said the Chancellor. "I've often wondered."

"There must be some reason," said the King.

"You may search me," said the Chancellor. "I've never been given any duties. I certainly feed the fowls, but that's because I like the birds. There's a cuckoo-dorking called Gwendoline——"

"Oh, go on," said the King. "I mean, how dare you?"

"I don't," said the Chancellor. "That's my great failing. Now, Gwendoline——"

"If you're not very careful," said the King explosively, "your office will fall vacant. I sent for you to help me divide the kingdom—not to retail excerpts from Boccaccio." Here he swallowed with great violence and dabbed at the map. "If this scale is three square eighths of an inch to a rood and a half, what's sixty-nine perches?"

"Unheard of," said the Chancellor shortly. "That's what it is. Why, I've fished——"

"In your spare moments, I suppose," said the King with an hysterical laugh. "You're quite accomplished, aren't you? You can feed fowls and fish and you're a raconteur. D'you sketch at all?"

"I don't feed fish," said the Chancellor. "I——"

“Ah, but you’re going to,” said the King, rubbing his hands. “I shall have you distributed about——”

The sentence was never finished.

The note of a high-pitched gong, frenziedly slammed into utterance, rose in a frantic whine of exhortation which compelled the ear.

For an instant the King and the Chancellor stared each other in the face. Then they evacuated the counting-house with great rapidity and resolution. . . .

It was always the same.

After every bee alarm fresh and more stringent orders were drafted, directing that when the alarm was raised the personnel of Black Pepper would ‘proceed to assemble composedly in the courtyard, where they will then make use of the antidote in order of precedence,’ insisting that haste was foolish, undignified and futile, and adding that the slightest contravention would entail quartering. These commands were settled, issued and received with pomp and reverence, and from time to time rehearsals had been conducted with complete success. But Nature will out. The knowledge that several hundred thousand bees had suddenly become hostile always suggested so forcibly the expedience of immediate inoculation without let or hindrance of any sort that every one, high and low, always repaired to the courtyard at a speed which was convenient neither to himself nor to such as he encountered, while, as for honouring the rules of precedence, the possibility of future dismemberment was unanimously and savagely preferred to the certainty of being stung by an enemy whose approach was by this time hideously audible.

Since, however, the administration of the antidote took but a moment to accomplish, the panic was always soon over and the confusion, though indescribably hellish while it lasted, short-lived. The King, who had run as fast and fought as bitterly as anyone, said it was a disgraceful scene, declared that bees never stung those who had not personally irritated them, asked several provocative and unanswerable questions in a loud voice, and, after announcing his intention to enlarge the bear-pit, withdrew with such dignity as a profuse perspiration enabled him to command, while his subjects, secure in the knowledge that the bees with which the courtyard was by this time quite overshadowed could do them no injury, listened cheerfully to his denunciation and then went jovially about their business.

Upon this occasion, however, the procedure which had become almost traditional was rudely violated.

Since there was, in fact, no antidote, to leave the comparative security of interiors for the open air was to deliver oneself into the enemy's hands, but the Bee-master had beaten the gong before turning the tap, and to correct the deep-seated impression that every one who failed to repair to the basin deserved to be stung was beyond his powers. Not that he made the attempt: indeed, he was inside the water-butt before the King and the Chancellor had reached the courtyard, while his dupes, like the Gadarene swine, rushed violently upon their doom.

The scene in the courtyard beggars description.

Nobody who could not see the basin would believe that the antidote had failed to arrive, interpreting the furious assurances of those who were better placed as malignant endeavours to avoid being crushed and appropriately resenting them, while those who were ocularly aware of the truth were torn between reluctance to abandon what might any second become a valuable station and an impulse to seek second-rate but unquestionable shelter within doors. Some of the latter sought to blow up the pipe in a wild endeavour to dislodge some possible obstruction: others urged all within earshot to run up to the apiary and see what was wrong—advice which was felt to be unhealthy and so ignored or transferred. All the time the ranks of the former were becoming more and more congested, and the emotions of impatience and disbelief, super-charged with an apprehension which was every second growing more intense, found expression in determined and aggravated assault. This injustice was bitterly resented by its victims, and such vials of misunderstanding as had not already been emptied were soon in flinders. Screams and threats and bellows of pain and rage, mingled with frenzied commands and exhortations, arose on all sides. The King could be heard yelling incoherent rulings, from which the words ‘precedence’ and ‘bears’ continually emerged. Sunset's voice was rampant, demanding way and furiously enjoining her helpless and heedless adherents ‘not to push,’ while a deep, steady hum, not unlike that of a squadron of aeroplanes in flight, argued that if the antidote was failing to arrive, to impute any such omission to the bees would be, to say the least, premature.

The first to decide to withdraw were, not unnaturally, those nearest to the basin, but the welter and press had now become so dense that it was almost impossible for them to move, while those who were upon the skirts of the throng and had only to step into the house, saw in the attempt to emerge evidence that the antidote had at last been made use of, and flung themselves

in the direction of the basin with renewed vigour. Indeed, there almost immediately arose two schools—one whose objective was the basin and the other whose sole idea was to take cover. Which of these the King adorned is not clear, for he was by this time in that state of mind which marches with Insanity itself, and was describing in a loud voice the intensive training to which the regiment of gorillas which he proposed to raise would be subjected. Indeed, but for the actual arrival of the bees, it would have been impossible to believe that confusion could be worse confounded.

Suddenly several people, including His Majesty, were stung. That this was no fiction was obvious even to the most sceptical, first, because the howls of the victims left no room for doubt, and, secondly, because a swirling river of bees was already pouring into the courtyard, and a unanimous move was made in the direction of the buildings. Such concurrence, however, proved unsatisfactory, first, because humanity in bulk, though commonly reputed to be able, if sufficiently alarmed, to represent a torrent with great realism, cannot in fact adapt itself, as can water, to the negotiation of narrows, and, secondly, because the seven doorways which served the courtyard were of but ordinary dimensions. These, indeed, became choked almost at once—a circumstance which, though manifest, many of those present appeared to ignore, to the great inconvenience of the several obstructions, whose protests must have been heard for miles. Others, sick of being stung in the hinder parts, hurled themselves out of the gate, over the drawbridge and across country or else leaped into the moat to escape their tormentors. The King himself was among those who sought the countryside, and ran well and straight into the forest, accompanied by a small but devoted halo of bees, which was clearly impatient of his activity and only waiting to settle, the moment his pace permitted the selection of a landing, while the Chancellor, who was similarly decorated and had chosen the moat, was surprising his escort and himself by an unexpected ability to remain under water for a period which both knew was not indefinite but was excitingly protracted. Meanwhile, that the mass disorder should continue was, of course, unthinkable. Before the onslaught of the bees, the expedience of movement somewhither became so painfully manifest that at length even the most stiff-necked abandoned all competition for the doorways and flung wildly in any direction which seemed to offer egress. . . .

“Admirable,” said Gog, stepping into the deserted courtyard. “I like bees. They’re so efficient.” He nodded to Simon and Pomfret, who were sitting in the mouth of a loft. “Where’s the King?”

“About five furlongs away,” said Simon. “At least, he is if he can stay. And the Bearward?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Gog. “His first idea was the water-butt, but that had already occurred to the Bee-master, and there wasn’t really room. They did try, but it would have meant standing up, and the Bee-master didn’t want to do that. So the Bearward got out again. He’s bad at climbing, and I was very much afraid he’d spoil the butt. So was the Bee-master: he said so quite openly. And now will you saddle the horses and get the girls. I’m going to the buttery to draw some rations, and if I should see some beer I might try to wash my mouth out.”



“To be perfectly frank,” said Pomfret some four hours later, “I thought that the ogre was a myth. I thought that if he had really been seen six statute miles from the Castle his presence would have been accorded the dignity of numerous and uncomplimentary references, not to say execrations, by everyone with whom we came in contact. But there I was wrong. Apparently Etchechurians say ‘I wonder if we shall meet an ogre’ in much the same spirit as we say ‘I shouldn’t be surprised if it rained.’ However, I didn’t know that. Consequently, when, upon fording a small stream, the Princess triumphantly indicated the print of naked feet about the size of a large Chesterfield upon the opposite side, my emotions included that of surprise. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, I damned near fell off the barb, while the impression that I had been recently eviscerated was most compelling. . . . Well, something had to be done. I pulled myself together, moistened the lips, rode out of the stream, dismounted and, trying not to tremble, carefully examined the spoor, which was alarmingly fresh. That brute of a woman watched me with bulging eyes. I frowned, shook my head and did some measuring—all with my heart in my mouth. Finally I announced that the tracks were, as I had feared, those of a single-headed ogre, and—what was worse—of one no longer in his prime. I added that he was lame, short-sighted and suffering from Bright’s disease, and that, since, in view of my reputation for slaying none but the most full-blooded and strapping giants, I had recently accepted the Vice-Presidency of the Homeless Ogres’ Aid and Adoption Society, I felt it would be improper for me to kill him or even shock him by riding as if in pursuit. To my intense relief Sunset, who was immensely impressed, agreed out of hand, and we were just about to ride off in all directions when a voice like a fog-horn announced that it was a funny thing, but it could have sworn that it smelt

horses . . . Of course the obvious thing to do was to sit down and ride like hell and a bit over, but, if you'll believe me, I couldn't do it. For only one thing, my legs wouldn't work. I just sat still on that horse, with what I imagine would be called a frozen grin, looking like a bishop who has been caught shop-lifting, feeling like a bladder of warm lard and wondering whether I should be eaten raw or seethed. . . . Suddenly Sunset whimpered 'I'm going to swoon.' . . . That saved us both. I was just in time to catch her as-catch-can before she fell. Then I hauled her aboard somehow and stuck in my heels. . . .

"She's no feather-weight—Sunset, but that old horse didn't care. We just streaked down the glades, with her blue roan flicking along behind. I didn't know where we were going, and, what's more, I didn't care. The one and only idea was to get out of range. I confess it wasn't sporting, but there are moments in my life, and always will be, when the craze for big game becomes subordinate to the will to live—and this was one of them. I wouldn't have drawn rein for fifty million pounds. However, after about four miles the barb seemed to think he'd done enough, so I let him ease up, and asked my luggage how she felt. Her reply, if disconcertingly irrelevant, was brutally illuminating. In a word, she compared my eyes to those of a gazelle which has decided to defend its young, said that my nose reminded her of poor Charming's, and added that she believed in bull necks. With that, she surrounded me with her arms, called me her 'oak-apple,' and playfully bit my ear."

Here a roar of laughter from Gog interrupted the narrative. After bestowing a freezing look upon the author of this indecency, Pomfret proceeded with every circumstance of dignity.

"Repressing a scream of agony, I thought very fast. To reject such determined addresses seemed injudicious. At the same time, so far as I could judge, it was only a quarter past nine, and if I was to be wooed for one hour—cumulatively, it seemed certain that before the Castle was won I should be torn in pieces. I therefore smiled dotingly, compared her mouth to a vineyard, called her 'my hogshhead' and, snatching a lock of her hair, tore it out by the roots. . . .

"There's no doubt about it. Etchechurians are hard as nails. Most girls would have smiled rather wanly and asked to be allowed to descend and back their own horse. But she only laughed, called me 'a fervent rogue,' and, seizing my nose, wrung it till I could have roared with pain. Wondering whether there is any real distinction between great love and aggravated

assault, I braced myself for a supreme effort, dropped the reins and clasped her to my chest. . . .

“That did it. I fancy we were both rather blue about the gills before she gave in. I know she was. Her smile was still there, but it was a shade forced, and a timely attack of hiccoughs relieved her of the necessity of composing an appreciation of my ardour which I could well have spared. Indeed, the girl looked so shaken as I put her back upon her horse that I suddenly felt an unmitigated blackguard and asked her pardon for holding her so tight. Her reply was soul-shaking.

“‘Tight be damned,’ she said shortly. ‘I didn’t feel it. But won’t—won’t your mouth work?’

“I kissed her then. I admit it. I thought she’d earned it. And she—she kissed me back. . . . Well, I suppose I’d earned it too. It was like the kick of a horse with rubber boots on. However, she seemed very pleased, and followed it up with a chuck under the chin that made my head ache. Of course I don’t wonder Charming succumbed. I imagine betrothal to Sunset’s rather like a street fight that never stops. To cope with that woman’s dalliance you want a skin of rubber, ferro-concrete bones and the constitution of a lion. However . . . Except that in the circumstances to maintain the conversational pace which she set was rather a strain on my mental energy, the worst was overpast. She certainly approached me once or twice with a funny sort of glint in her eyes, but I kept the barb simmering and she sheered off again. I’m rather hazy about what we settled on the way home, but I know we cleared up a good deal. Eulalie and Albert were to be banished after lunch, my bathroom was to be hung in buck-nigger, and, pending the decease of the King, we were to lead the simple life. The simple life, as interpreted by Sunset, was indeed simplicity itself. In the morning I was to seek and/or slay ogres; at noon she would meet me with garlands and a light lunch: in the afternoon I should dispatch a few knights, and in the evening, whilst I gorged, she was to dress my wounds and set my prowess to the harpsichord. I agreed blindly. There was nothing else to be done. If she’d suggested sleeping in the bear-pit, I should have jumped at it. I wasn’t in a condition to argue, much less oppose. In fact, we got on swimmingly, with the result that by the time we were back at the Castle I was her ‘poppet’ and she was my ‘jelloid,’ and if Gog hadn’t subverted those beehives as and when he did, I tremble to think of the terms upon which I should shortly have been with a lady of the B-B-Blood Royal. Incidentally, I know you keep on saying we’re safe now, but are you sure?”

“Positive,” said Gog, laughing. “Even if the bees had died down, we’re outside the three-mile limit, and they couldn’t touch us. As a matter of fact, we’re outside the kingdom too, but three miles from the Castle’s enough. A landlord has jurisdiction for three miles from where he lives, but that’s all. We’re on the high lands now.”

“Perhaps,” said Simon, “we’re within some one else’s jurisdiction.”

“I don’t think so,” said Gog. “It’s possible, of course, but I doubt it. Besides, if we were it wouldn’t matter. Everybody’s most friendly here, unless you do them right down. That’s what’s so sickening about Black Pepper. But for Sunset——” He stopped short there, threw up his head and snuffed. “There’s a priest about somewhere. I can smell an odour of sanctity.”

The four looked round, but there was no one in sight.

A mile away lay the forest through which they had come, and all about them was stretching a rolling moor, quilted with purple heather, and studded with clumps of oaks. Stripped of their gear, the horses which they had ridden were slowly making the forest, grazing as they went. Fifty paces away a spring, schooled into a fountain, was playing beneath an oak: two deer were drinking at the basin, and a sleepy-eyed ox was standing, waiting his turn.

“There’s a priest somewhere,” said Gog. “And that’s as it should be. There’s always a priest about at half-past two.” He turned to Eulalie. “Would you like to be married?”

“What, here?” said the girl.

“Why not?” said Gog. “We’ve half an hour to spare, and it’s holy ground.”

“Why is it holy?” said Patricia.

“Because there’s a priest about. A priest will hallow the earth wherever he goes.”

Pomfret turned to his lady and took her hands in his.

“It can do us no harm,” he said. “And if their form of marriage is not what you like—why, then, my blessed lady, it won’t count with me.”

“All right, dear,” said Eulalie, looking up into his eyes.

As she spoke, the faintest scent of incense came stealing upon the air, and the note of a miniature bell floated into audience. . . .

From the East, a furlong away, three figures were slowly approaching, moving in single file over the sunlit moor. First came two little boys, with short white surplices and scarlet cassocks beneath. Their flaxen hair was clubbed and their blue eyes were full of a childish dignity and pride of office. The first bore the bell, which he tolled slowly and evenly, picking his way between the hassocks of heather with tiny, decent steps: the second was swinging a censer, which moved with the easy measure of a pendulum, and exactly following his fellow, though his small head was uplifted and his gaze fixed upon the hills. Behind them walked a silver-haired prelate with a gentle face, wearing vestments of green and gold. His hands were folded, and his lips moved as he went, as though in prayer.

As the procession drew near, the sunlight began to fade and the air to grow cool, while the perfume of incense waxed and the voice of the bell was assuming a louder and deeper note. This seemed no longer to spring from the acolyte's presence, but from some belfry above, that could not be seen. The sun, too, was changing into a circular polychrome, immensely enlarged, and the air—the air was still as death and cold as stone.

The procession advanced. . . .

The deer and the ox had fallen in behind the prelate, and the world was dim: great shafts of light streamed from a huge rose-window, badging the moor with glory, the place was full of incense and the bell was booming overhead. . . .

‘Holy ground, holy ground.’

The four got to their knees.

The acolytes parted, the one passing to the right and the other to the left. Only the priest held on, with the ox and the deer behind. The cold, heavy-laden air quivered with each stroke of the bell.

The priest had stopped.

Pomfret and Eulalie rose and stood before him, while the ox and the deer passed on till they came—the ox to Pomfret's and the deer to Eulalie's side. Then they turned.

As the bell stopped booming—

“What is love?” said the priest.

“Love,” said the ox, “is understanding. Love lifteth up the heart and casteth out fear. Love is patient and kind and a foul-weather friend.”

“What are riches?” said the priest.

The deer responded.

“There are no riches save love. But love is wealth that neither moth nor rust can corrupt nor thieves can steal: and man can take love with him out of this world, when he must leave his gold.”

“What is life?” said the priest.

“Life is of love,” said the ox and the deer together. “And without love there is no light nor life, but only darkness and weariness of soul.”

The priest lifted his head.

“Who giveth this man?”

“I,” said the ox. “I give him.”

“Who giveth this maid?”

“We,” said the deer. “We give her.”

“Then are they mine,” said the priest, “for me to do with them what I will. And I am pleased to give the one to the other and the other to the one, so that henceforth the man shall belong to the maid and the maid to the man, and each shall suffer this livery with a faithful heart.”

“So be it,” said the ox and the deer. And then again, “So be it.”

The priest lifted his hands, and the bell began to boom. . . .

The flaxen-haired acolytes took up their old positions, and a moment later the three were proceeding on their way. The ox returned to the fountain, and the deer bounded out of sight. The sunlight began to return, and the air to lose its chill, while the booming of the great bell became less resonant. . . .

As the three figures dwindled, the scent of the incense sank to a memory, and the sound of the bell to a tinkle too slight for an ear to hold. Then at last they died, and the dots were swallowed by the shimmer upon the rolling moor. . . .

Patricia put her arms about Eulalie, Simon took Pomfret’s hand.

“Any complaints?” said Gog, wiping his eyes.

“I can’t think of any,” said Pomfret. “It would have been nice to have had Sunset here—under restraint. She could have chosen some hymns

—‘Where the bee sucks,’ for instance, and thrown rice. But otherwise it was perfect.”

“And you, my lady?” said Gog, turning to Eulalie.

“It was like a lily of the field,” said Eulalie Tudor gravely; “above criticism.”

“Good,” said Gog, turning a cartwheel with great deliberation. “And now let’s stroll on our way. I want to get to Date in good time, because you must have some clothes.”

“Not only garments,” said Simon. “When I think of the personal property we’ve left in those rooms at the Castle I could burst into tears.”

“Date,” said Gog, “is an excellent place to refit. You’ll find everything there from a trunk to a toothpick.”

“But how can we pay?” said Patricia. “We’ve a certain amount of French money—not very much, but will they take that?”

“You won’t have to pay,” said Gog. “Within The Pail no stranger may ever pay. It’s a law of the land. We only get about ten in a hundred years, so we make the most of them.”

“D’you mean to say,” said Pomfret, “that if I trip into a vestry and ask for a still lemonade——”

“They’ll throw it at you,” said Gog, “disguised as beer. You see. I tell you, but for Sunset, Black Pepper would have done us a treat. After all, before you’d been there three minutes half the kingdom was yours for the picking up,” and, with that, he sat down by the simple expedient of leaping into the air and protruding his feet.

“That’s all very well,” said Pomfret. “But when I’ve tottered into the same chapter-house twice daily for eighteen months, the excitement of being hospitable will begin to wear off.”

“Long before that,” said Gog, rising, “you’ll be on the Civil List.” With that he turned on his heel and began to saunter Southward across the moor.

As he took not the slightest notice of the requests to return or wait which were preferred by his patrons, but rather increased his pace, there was nothing for it but to follow or let him go, so Pomfret was hounded to his feet and the march was resumed.

After another two miles the moor came to a sudden and precipitous end, and the four found themselves on the edge of a yellow bluff, regarding a

landscape more lovely than any they had ever seen.

Before them lay a park which man must have leased of Nature for four or five hundred years. For centuries landlord and tenant had slaved together at the countryside till at last their several labour had produced one exquisite flourish, due credit for which the most practised eye could not attempt to apportion.

For mile after mile the vivid turf stretched, fine and smooth as that of a bowling-green, up hill, down dale, by water and under trees, half-counterpane, half-jacket with a velvet pile that fitted earth so tight as to disclose each swell and ripple of her comeliness: with this for underlay, cool groves and avenues and terraces and dizzy belvederes couched and stood up and hung and peered, each in itself a monument of beauty: streams wandered in and out of sun and shadow, impatient falls leaped from the edge of crags, and here and there a pool rendered the elegance that hung above it. Cedar and cypress and cryptomeria grew in magnificent profusion: here was an avenue of poplars that dwarfed the world: a stalwart company of palms feathered that sunlit furlong, and a distant splash of purple spoke for a copper beech: gigantic solitary oaks spilled maps of shade upon the green: here was a pomp of chestnuts, and there a quire of elms: sweet-smelling limes filled up a sudden valley and a watch of grey-green firs steepled a hill, while an occasional birch, all delicate lace and silver limbs below, plainly declared the grace of its divine inhabitant.

Greatly astonished, the four would have questioned their guide, but the latter was already at the foot of the bluff and signalling to them to follow him down. By the time they had descended he was a hundred yards ahead, and since, when they quickened their steps, he did the same, it became apparent that he had guessed their intention and was resolved to defeat it.

As in a dream they passed into the pleasance, and, presently bearing to the left, began to follow a stream which by gradually absorbing other waters slowly attained the dignity of a river and at length recognition of its state in the form of an aged bridge. This the four crossed in the wake of their guide, who then left the water and turned to a long slope flanked with parades of maples in all their glory.

At the top of the rise Gog halted and, as the others came up, pointed ahead.

Three miles away below them lay a little walled town, red and white and pert as a puppy-dog and looking just like a toy in the midst of a lawn. It was clearly astride the river which they had been following, for a streak of silver

went winking under its walls, and no other stream of importance was anywhere to be seen.

“Date,” said Gog laconically. “No one about, of course. There never is. All work and no play in Date. Labour’s their god. And they turn out some lovely goods—it’s a manufacturing town. All the best stuff’s out of Date. River transport, of course—they never use anything else. Out of the shop, into the barge and down stream. The Mayor’s a most charming man.”

“Quite so,” said Pomfret. “Quite so. Has he, er, any daughters?”

“Never a one,” said Gog, laughing. “He’s a bachelor. Let’s go and tell him what we want for dinner.”

“What, just like that?” said Simon.

“Just like that,” said Gog. “He’ll fall over himself to sew us up. It’s The Pail to a postmark he’s in our rooms now, arranging the flowers.”

“But how can he know?” said Eulalie.

“Rumour, my lady,” said Gog. “Rumour goes like the wind on a dirty night. Besides . . .”

“But if he does know,” said Pomfret, “I don’t see why he should have the carpet down. We’re travelling incognito. If I’d confessed that I was the Baron Buggins of Blowitout, I should have expected to find the bath ready and the piano tuned, but as it is . . .”

Gog grinned.

“Don’t forget,” he said, “that you are within The Pail,” and, with that, he bounded forward towards the town. . . .

As they passed in at the gate, a man in a plum-coloured habit was pinning a skin of parchment on to a wooden frame which was swinging from the arm of a post as the signboard of an inn.

“There’s The Hearsay,” said Gog. “Let’s hear what it says.”

The copper-plate writing was a little ragged, but very easy to read.

COURT.

At Black Pepper the bees are out, and, since four-fifths of the personnel, including the landlord, have been stung all over, it is feared that the famous swarms may become extinct. The King and most of the Court have left the Castle, while the Princess is

confined to a powder-closet. But for his vocation, the condition of the Bearward would give rise to anxiety.

PERSONAL.

This afternoon on the high lands Sir Pomfret and the Lady Eulalie were married by the passing priest. It was a love-match and solemnized as such. The bride, who looked the darling she is, was supported by two red deer. The groom, who was seen to be slightly over at the knees, was appropriately supported by an ox. It is understood that he will choose as his device a quart pot reversed. Sir Simon and the beautiful Lady Patricia were interested spectators, while an air was given to the proceedings by the presence of Lord Gog.

“There now,” said Gog unctuously, adjusting his liripipe. “D’you know I thought I saw a magpie sitting up in an oak. Just above the fountain. What a very intelligent bird.”

CHAPTER VI

PUBLICAN AND SINNER

POMFRET overlaid a piece of toast with honey and then surcharged the morsel with clotted cream.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” he said, “but the truth is I’m rather fond of my body. That may surprise you, but I’ve had it for forty years and we understand one another. Of course I can dress it up to look like Puss-in-Spats or A Bookie in the time of Wat Tyler—I’ve got the power, but . . .”

He shrugged his shoulders and proceeded to reduce his confection with a mournful air.

“What exactly,” said his wife, “do you object to? The colours?”

“No. Only the form. I’ll wear a crimson lounge suit with a Willow-pattern Homburg and lilac shoes if you like. But I’m not going to turn out in tights or have the toes of my boots chained up to my knees for any woman.”

Eulalie frowned.

“The respondent,” she said, “addressed the petitioner in public in a cruel and heartless way and with his mouth full.”

“The petitioner’s demands,” said Pomfret, “were unconscionable and subversive of the dignity of man.”

Patricia raised her white arms and, interlacing her fingers, set them behind her head.

“We’re in Etchechuria,” she said. “So we should do as Etchechuria does. Look at Eulalie and me.”

“Willingly,” said Simon, raising his face from a mighty jar of tobacco, the quality of which he had been carefully considering. “In fact, it requires quite an effort to look anywhere else. You’re right in the fairy-tale.”

This was true.

The simple one-piece frocks, sleeveless and open at the neck, laced to the hips and flowing to the knee, could not have been more becoming or more admirably exposed. They were made of a silk softer and heavier than the girls had ever seen, and the exquisite tones of their colours—old rose

and powder blue—argued some dyer’s secret which only The Pail possessed. With her thick dark hair about her shoulders, Patricia Beaulieu might have sat to an Old Master and had the ages at her feet; while Eulalie seemed to have recaptured the careless glory of childhood and so to be unconsciously overruling Nature’s most golden rule. Anyone would have known that they were King’s daughters.

“All the same,” continued Simon, filling a pipe, “if you’re going to cite yourselves as an instance of conformity to local fashion, there’s nothing doing.”

“Why?” said his wife.

“Because, in the first place, a woman’s raiment is always a fancy-dress.”

“That’s right,” said Pomfret, replenishing his plate with a quarter of a honeycomb. “Man’s dress covers, woman’s discovers. I wear a pair of trousers to keep my legs warm: you wear a kilt and silk stockings to attract the male.”

A burst of indignation succeeded this blunt impeachment.

“All right,” said Pomfret coolly, cutting a slice of brown bread. “What do you wear them for? To keep your legs warm?”

“Would you like to see me in trousers?” demanded Eulalie.

Her husband frowned.

“Don’t be blasphemous,” he said. “It’s unmatronly.”

“In the second place,” said Simon, “you’re no more conforming to Etchechurian fashions than we are. You’ve both of you shortened those models by about three feet and taken out the sleeves.”

There was a guilty silence.

“But, my dear,” purred Eulalie, “we couldn’t ‘ve worn them as they were.”

“They were worn like that in the twelfth century.”

“But this isn’t the twelfth century.”

“Exactly,” said Simon. “That’s why they’re getting busy on a couple of nice lounge suits and——”

“As a matter of fact,” said Gog, entering the room on his hands, “it’s all over.” He lowered his feet to the ground and stood upright. “You’ll both

have six of everything by midday.”

The girls stared.

“But when were they measured?” said Patricia.

“While they slept, my lady,” said Gog. “I took their clothes last night. From collar to socks everything’s been taken to pieces, measured, matched and remade. The hats are done now, and the shoes ‘ll be ready to-night.” He turned to Pomfret. “The only thing is they can’t fade your shirts in the time, so I said it didn’t matter.”

“Quite right,” said Pomfret, helping himself to cream. “I’ll—I’ll overlook that.”

“Good,” said Gog. “And you seem to have sat in something at some time or other. The Master-Chemist thought it was tar, so, rather than wake you, I said that tar would do.”

So soon as he could speak—

“Oh, you did, did you?” said Pomfret shakily. “But what judgment.” He pushed away his plate and covered his eyes. “Of course I’d trust you with anything. Six brand-new loose-covers done in before delivery. . . . And I’ve been trying to get rid of that keepsake for the last two months. That’s why I walk so fast.”

“Don’t stop eating,” said Gog, shuddering; “it doesn’t look right. Incidentally, your words were ‘Exactly the same.’ Of course, if you——”

“I know,” said Pomfret wearily, “I know. You don’t mind my looking at you, do you? You don’t often get a close-up of an all-red fool with the lid off. And I do hope you noticed that my south-east brace-button——”

“Its melancholy condition,” said Gog gravely, “did not escape us. However, after deep thought I ventured to qualify your orders by adding ‘Fair wear and tear and damage by tar excepted,’ so we’ll hope for the best. And now do have some cream, or——”

A blare of trumpets without cut short the solicitude, and even Pomfret repaired to the oriel to see what was afoot.

Below stood a coach-and-six of great magnificence. This was so bulky and the street so small that none could have said that the equipage had stopped before the doorway of The Mayor’s Lodging rather than before that of The Guest-House, which was directly opposite, but the press of

trumpeters and footmen about the former left no doubt as to the focus of the attention.

“A State Visit,” said Gog. “His Worship is going to call.”

As he spoke another fanfare was blown, and the Mayor emerged. He was a little, cheerful-faced man, with an eager, birdlike air, and wore his insignia jauntily, with his hat on the back of his head. Immediately behind him came one in the scarlet robes of a Judge and a full-bottomed wig, and behind him again a very precise-looking man, clad in black silk, with a garter of cut steel below his knee and point-device to the hems of his white lawn cuffs.

“Law and Order,” whispered Gog.

The three entered the coach with dignity, the door was shut, the footmen ascended the tail-board, the grooms stood back from the horses and the trumpeters formed two deep and marched away.

“What are they waiting for?” breathed Eulalie.

The courier rubbed his nose.

“Either,” he said, “they’re giving the trumpeters a start—you see, they’ve got to get there before the Mayor—or else His Worship is going to call upon you.”

“Upon us?” cried Patricia. “But . . .”

Here the trumpeters turned, crossed the street, turned again and marched along the pavement up to The Guest-House door.

A moment later a third fanfare rang out.

At once the footmen leaped down and ran to the door of the coach, the grooms stood to their horses, and the Mayor sat up on his seat and prepared to descend.

“Into the parlour,” said Gog, pointing. “I’ll go and usher him up.”

He slipped from the room, and the four withdrew feverishly to the adjoining chamber.

Like everything else in Date, the rooms were miniature. The apartment in which breakfast had been served was the size of a railway-carriage, while the parlour was half as big again, but the proportions of all were perfect and their appointments were superb. Walls, ceilings, floors—the house was lined with oak, much of it beautifully carved. The furniture was plain but finely made, and the chairs and settles were fitted with deep loose cushions

covered with heavy silk and stuffed with down. All the plate and vessels were of silver, as were the candlesticks. These were massive and generally fixed to the walls to bear the short, thick beeswax candles which, when it was dark, afforded a steady light. To each pair of tiny bedrooms were annexed a dressing-room, a wardrobe, and a bath of crystal, sunk in a marble floor. Silent, respectful servitors, clad all in blue and silver, waited at table and stood without the doors by day and night, while two majestic bedels, wearing the same livery and bearing silver staves, patrolled the pavement, ready to precede Date's guests whenever they walked abroad.

"Simon's spokesman," said Pomfret, adjusting his tie. "I'll stand in a row and grin. Just touch on the weather and don't forget to thank him for the beer. Oh, and ask if we can have that pie up again: it was——"

"I refuse," said Simon. "It's obviously your job. I can't. Besides, there's nothing to say. We had an hour with him last night."

"Don't be silly," said Pomfret. "That was unofficial. This morning's quite different. He'll probably read the address and then give it you in a casket. Don't try to drink out of it."

"Simon, dear," said Patricia, "you'd better take it on. You see the mood he's in, and if——"

Here the door was flung open, and Gog backed into the room. . . .

"Good morning," cried the Mayor cheerily. "And many of them. How did you sleep?"

"You needn't answer if you don't want to," said Law, looking down his nose. "And if you do he must accept your reply."

"Er, is that so?" said Simon, not liking to ignore the interjection.

"Certainly," said Law. "How you slept is your business. It follows that such a question is of the nature of a personal remark, and, while the spirit of the inquiry may be laudable, we regard with the utmost jealousy any spoken words which may tend to constitute or even invite a violation of privacy."

"I see," said Simon, and bowed. Law bowed in return, and Simon turned to the Mayor. "Thanks to the excellence of your attention, we slept very well. Indeed, I can never tell you how grateful we are. You've done us slap up, sir."

"Good," said the Mayor. "Good. You must stay for some years. The city's at your service, you know, and proud to be there. Oh, and pray use The Garden whenever you feel inclined. What are we standing for?"

“In other and better words,” said Law, “we desire you to use and enjoy all that township, situate within The Pail and known as Date, and the precincts thereof, together with its streets, squares, drains——”

“If you don’t shut up,” said the Mayor, breathing through his nose, “you shall only have two hours for lunch.”

“I can produce the affidavits,” said Law, “of two or more medical men to the effect that any curtailment of my luncheon-tide recess would almost certainly shorten my life.”

“That,” said the Mayor, “would be the object of my action. Sit down.”

There was nothing to hand but a coffin-stool, but since, the door being shut, there was no room to move, Law, who was tall and portly, proceeded to obliterate this seat with his presence and compose himself to sleep.

The Mayor turned to the girls.

“Our great fear is,” he said, “that you will find us dull. Now at Black Pepper——”

“We—we much prefer this,” said Patricia.

“Yes,” said Pomfret. “Black Pepper was too—too stimulating. In fact, to tell you the truth, I don’t mind if I never see it again.”

“I know what you mean,” said the Mayor. “They’ve old-fashioned ideas at Black Pepper. That bear-pit, for instance, is most insanitary. Never mind. How’s your aunt?”

Pomfret swallowed.

“Well, at the moment,” he said, “I’m auntless. I used to have a very good one, but since she fell off the roundabout. . . .”

“My aunt,” said the Mayor, “has a most beautiful collection of slop-pails. She’s quite a connoisseur. Do they interest you at all?”

“Very much,” said Pomfret, passing a hand across his temples. “I—I like a good slop-pail.”

“Do you, now?” said the Mayor, rubbing his hands. “Well, that’s splendid. She’s been looking for some one like you for years and years. Nobody here can bear the sight of them, and she’s got about sixty thousand. You and she must get together at once.” He turned again to the girls. “My dears, if you must wash in wine, what wine would you wish to wash in?”

“In other and better words,” said Law, opening his eyes. . . .

“I—I really don’t know,” said Patricia hastily. “Perhaps champagne _____”

“Champagne be it,” said the Mayor. “You see, to-morrow’s a festival, and all the taps in the city must run with wine.”

“A very pretty idea,” murmured Pomfret. “D’you have any fireworks at night? Or is every one too tired?”

“Oh, it’s only a festival in name,” said the Mayor heavily. “We don’t observe it at all. Nobody gets binged.”

“I concur,” said Law mournfully. “Despite the just opportunity afforded, nobody ventures so to indulge himself as to act in a manner which is inconsistent with the utmost discretion, or fail, if desired, to enunciate with painful clarity the most inconvenient shibboleths.”

“Let us groan,” intoned Order in a miserable voice.

The three groaned long and violently.

“You see,” said the Mayor, “the Standards are out of Date, and until _____”

“If ever,” said Law.

“—they are back, we can keep no holidays. Till then it’s all work and no play—that’s why I’m so afraid you may find us dull. We’ve none of us been outside the city walls for over ten years.”

“Ten years, four months, five days and an hour and a half, summer time,” said Order, looking at his watch.

There was an awkward silence, broken only by the gentle snores of Law, who had fallen asleep again.

“When you say ‘standards,’ ” said Eulalie, “do you mean ‘banners’?”

The Mayor shook his head.

“Weights and measures,” he said. “The golden yard, the golden pint and the golden pound were stolen away——”

“Feloniously and wilfully,” said Law.

“—one morning ten years ago, and we’ve been in mourning ever since. Heaven knows what it’s cost us in cash, to say nothing of blood and tears.”

“But how did it happen?” said Patricia.

“My dear,” said the Mayor, “it was like this. By a stroke of bad luck we got across a dwarf whose name is Sunstroke.”

“A vile and malignant being,” said Law, “with but one eye—*cui lumen ademptum*.”

“He runs a small pub,” said the Mayor, “about ten miles away called *The Baby Bunting*. Sunstroke and a giant had each ordered a pair of hose, and the orders got mixed: the giant took it very well, but the dwarf thought we were being funny and swore revenge.”

“A most unwarrantable assumption,” said Law, “such as only a gross mentality would harbour.”

“Well, ten days later,” said the Mayor, “we held a festival. We held it well and truly and a bit over, because it was Measurement Eve, that is to say, the day before every measure in the town was to be checked with the Standards. Every one brought his yard, pint or pound to the Great Hall and left them there all ready for the following day, and during the afternoon the golden Standards were brought to the hall in state and laid on the high table. After that we gave way . . .

“We were rather late the next morning, because Sunstroke had got busy with the cisterns and the wine in the pipes was doped.”

“The nature and quality,” said Law warmly, “of the abominable agony in the head resultant to all who partook however sparingly of the liquor were almost incredible. To continue, during the general stupor or swoon to which we had been so foully committed the Standards were removed. Nor was this all. Although the fact did not immediately emerge, every yard in the hall had been shortened, every pound reduced, and the capacity of every pint diminished by the addition to the floor of every pot of a film of molten lead.”

“‘Did not immediately emerge,’” said the Mayor scornfully. “But for The Hearsay we shouldn’t ‘ve known now.” With a snort he returned to his audience. “*For three solid months we gave short measure to The Pail*. Of course, we’d not the faintest idea. Then all at once complaints began to come in. We swore by the good name of Date that all was well, but the complaints went on. Then it got into The Hearsay, and at last we had to admit that our Standards were gone.

“Of course such a howl went up as never was heard, and some of the letters we got were meant to be rude.”

“To style them defamatory,” said Law, “conveys nothing at all. Their matter was often irrelevant, generally ribald and invariably unfounded.”

“Still we never dreamed,” said the Mayor. “One doesn’t, you know. We were quite confident. We actually offered a thousand nobles to anyone who could prove that one of our measures was wrong.” He sighed memorially. “That little stunt alone cost us over two million.

“Then Sunstroke, who had been in the background all the time, stepped into the light. He announced publicly that he had ‘found’ our Standards and offered to restore them forthwith on one condition. That was that if we should find that we had been giving short measure we should return him the Standards and confine ourselves to the city until we got them back. It was very slim, wasn’t it? You see, we couldn’t possibly kick. We couldn’t refuse to back our honour to win.”

“That,” said Law, “I believe to be a wagering metaphor derived from the unlawful practice of staking money or money’s worth upon the result of a horse-race.”

“Yes, I was afraid it must be,” said Pomfret. “I remember a gentleman at Epsom——”

“This Sunstroke business,” said Simon hastily, “is simply wicked. Of course, what happened is obvious. His terms were accepted, the comparison was made, and you went down all round.”

“Precisely,” said the Mayor. “It’s very trying, isn’t it? And we’re quite mad about The Garden. We still keep it up, as you’ve seen—I don’t know why. Pride of possession, I suppose—like my aunt and her slop-pails.” He turned to Pomfret. “When can you go and see them?”

“But can’t something be done?” said Pomfret, deliberately ignoring the query. “Can’t some one drop Sunspot a hint—in the shape of a thick ear or a kidney punch? I mean, all’s fair in love, isn’t it?”

“We, er, we’ve thought of that,” said the Mayor uneasily, “but he hasn’t got any ears.”

“Well, he must have some kidneys,” said Pomfret. “If he hadn’t got any kidneys he wouldn’t work.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

At length—

“We, er, should have added,” said Law, “that he takes an interest in snakes. I believe he has quite a number in the curtilage of the inn.”

“Has he indeed?” said Pomfret, shuddering. “What a very popular house of call *The Baby Bunting* must be. We’d better run out for the week-end.”

“Well, if you must, you must,” said the Mayor, “mustn’t you? After all, I dare say it’s not true about the coffins. Besides, a snake in the yard’s worth two in the grass. Still, you must meet my aunt first, in case, er—— Well, supposing, for instance, you were detained. Then it would be too late, wouldn’t it? Shall we say to-morrow at noon?”

Pomfret looked uneasily round.

Something had to be done.

“Look here, Mr. Mayor,” he said. “I should hate you to misunderstand me. When I said just now——”

“It is my duty,” said Law, “to inform you that no one in Date may plead The Gaming Act. His Worship’s aunt will be expecting you and you may not disappoint her.”

“Oh, damn the ewers,” said Pomfret. “I’m talking of Sunshade.”

“The same rule applies,” said Law.

The Mayor and Order solemnly nodded assent.

“I forgot to say,” said the former, “that when Sunstroke lifted the Standards he also took with him something which we prized even more.”

“To wit,” said Law, “our Sense of Humour.”

“Let us groan,” intoned Order dismally.

Again the three Officers of Date delivered a bitter groan.

“But surely,” said Patricia gently, “if Sunstroke never knows that we thought of coming, he can’t very well be disappointed if we don’t turn up.”

“I’m afraid we can’t admit that,” said Law. “It’s not evidence.”

Here the serjeant-footman opened the door.

“May it please your Worship,” he said.

“Every time,” said the Mayor.

“One of the creams has lain down.”

“D’you mean it’s asleep?”

“I think it’s just dropping off, sir.”

“Then what are you shouting for?” roared the Mayor. “D’you want to wake the brute? Go to at once. Oh, and tell the trumpeters to take their boots off before they blow.”

The man withdrew, and the Mayor turned to the four.

“You must excuse me,” he whispered. “But you know what servants are.”

“We can’t have that,” said Law. “Unless you’re prepared to prove that their opportunities of remarking the shortcomings of menials have been such as might reasonably——”

The rest of the sentence was lost, for the Mayor was already on the stairs, and Order stepped behind Law and urged him firmly out of the chamber.

When the trumpets were sounded for His Worship, the cream not unnaturally rose, and every one seemed greatly relieved. The trumpeters replaced their boots, the coach was entered, closed, manned, opened and duly evacuated, and the visit was concluded with the same pomp and circumstance as had garnished its outset.

As the door of The Mayor’s Lodging closed—

“You see,” said Gog, “Date’s very proud of its creams, but as they’re all six thoroughbreds—that is to say, princes transformed—you’ve got to be very careful. Wake one up when it doesn’t feel like it, and instead of your off wheeler you’ve got an exasperated Royalty who’d look much better in clothes than harness, who’s bound to take precedence of every one in Date, and who, if he isn’t bought off, will set the city by the ears worse than Sunstroke. That’s why they get so hot and bothered when one of them misfires. And now, Brother Pomfret having as usual waltzed right into the muck—over all our knees, will some one kindly explain how we’re going to get out?”



“I defy anyone,” said Pomfret that same afternoon, “to deny that this place is wearing. I’m not saying I don’t like it, because its sense of hospitality, for instance, is positively Olympian, but when you encounter whole boroughs whose sense of humour is kept in a chest of drawers outside the Mayor’s Parlour and is as portable as a box of bricks, if you’re to

commune with the burghers and get away with it, you want the cerebral agility of a successful politician, the memory of a good bridge-player and the outlook of a mental nurse.” He raised his eyes to heaven. “Sixty thousand slop-pails. That’s what I get for trying to be polite.”

“You shouldn’t have tried,” said Patricia, looking up from a violet chain. “You should have——”

“I see,” said Pomfret. “And the next place we come to they’ll ask if I care for lug-worms; and if I say ‘No,’ I shall be forcibly fed. I know.”

“The truth is,” said Simon, laughing, “you talk too much.”

“That isn’t my fault,” said Pomfret. “Somebody’s got to say something, and none of you others ever open your mouths. When a man’s doing you as you would be done, you can’t ignore his small talk. No. The truth is, chivalry will out. None of us know where we are, but I’m the only one to get a move on. I’ve a sort of careless gallantry that must be served.”

“I know what you mean,” said Eulalie, dreamily regarding the sky. “I’ve noticed it at meals.”

“Nothing is easier,” said her husband, inspecting a large cigar, “than to be profane. But then I expect nothing else. Derision is the portion of saints: the stained glass windows come later. If they ask your opinion, I should like to be portrayed in a violet bust-bodice, considering a bunch of asparagus and resisting an invitation to be translated.” He lighted his cigar and lay back upon the sward. “And now let’s enjoy The Garden, shall we? They made a great point of it, so let’s be unselfish and try.”

“Here’s Gog,” said Patricia, pointing across the lawns. “I wonder if he’s had any luck.”

As the courier drew near he was seen to be encumbered by an enormous sheet of parchment which was not rolled tightly enough to lie under his arm and seemed to resent being carried anywhere else.

As he came up—

“I’m glad you brought the screen,” said Pomfret. “And don’t throw it down like that—it may be a friend of mine who’s had an accident.”

The parchment unrolled itself and lay on its back.

“You’ll thank me to-morrow,” said Gog, wiping his face. “That’s the map that’s going to get you to the Mayor’s Aunt’s House. I may add that His Worship is adamant and the visits will have to be paid. So there’s only one

thing to be done. While Pomfret's getting on with the slop-pails, we must go and find Goosegog and ask his help. He simply loathes Sunstroke."

"I should have thought that was almost a local custom," said Simon, "loathing Sunstroke. Is Goosegog especially strong?"

"He's a tower of strength," said Gog. "Hence his name. All the Gogs are invaluable. When he hears that we're after Sunstroke he'll fairly hug himself."

"But we're not after Sunstroke," said Patricia. "By some misunderstanding we've got to stay at his inn, and all we want to do is to get out alive."

"I know," said Gog. "That's where Goosegog comes in. To get out alive one must delete Sunstroke. Never mind. Let's look at the map."

This was a remarkable document.

In its midst was a representation of a little walled town: this was surrounded by drawings of men and beasts, scattered over the sheet, by elegant etchings of mountains and glimpses of rivers and woods, while here and there a building had been delicately delineated. Each sketch was accompanied by its particular legend. A miniature avenue was labelled *This is the way the ladies ride*: a coppice, *Bears only*: a clump of broom, *Here are silver and gold*: a two-headed-monster, *No gentleman*: a meadow, *Trespassers will be transformed*: a dragon, *Very difficult*: a half-timbered mansion, *This is The House*: a posse of men, *R was a robber* and a pride of lions, *No flowers*. There was neither top nor bottom to the sheet, which could be studied equally conveniently from any angle, and since not even the course of the river which ran through Date was marked, it was impossible for a stranger to get his bearings.

"It's a wonderful bit of work, isn't it?" said Gog. "It doesn't show the Mayor's Aunt's House, but that doesn't matter because you'll see it tomorrow."

"Exactly," said Pomfret in a shaking voice. "Besides, I can guess where it is—between the lions and robbers and just after you've passed the bears."

"Where's *The Baby Bunting*?" said Eulalie.

"That wouldn't appear," said Gog. "Sunstroke was struck off the Rolls ages ago."

"I see," said Pomfret. "And Goosegog Hall? I suppose that's too obvious."

“Quite right,” said Gog. “It’s a landmark.” He tapped the parchment authoritatively. “No landmarks are shown here because if they were you’d be able to find your way instead of following the map.”

Pomfret loosened his collar before replying.

“I see,” he said, steadily regarding the map with starting eyes. “I wonder what it’d do if you showed it a compass. Form fours? Or go over to the Church of Rome? And may I really take it to-morrow? Or won’t the Mayor want it to get to the bathroom?”

Gog bent backwards till his head was between his legs. Then he stretched out an arm and patted the skin.

“Follow this map,” he said, solemnly, nodding his head, “and you can’t go wrong. I’ll show you what I mean in a moment.”

Pomfret lay back on the turf and covered his eyes.

“Of course,” he said slowly, “I must be losing my mind. Three months ago I was an architectural archæologist: now I’m discussing the merits of a map from which every feature which could possibly be suspected of smacking of topography has been deliberately omitted or expunged, with a view to employing it to-morrow to guide me across country to a lot of slop-pails on which I shall be expected to rhapsodize.”

“No, you won’t,” said Gog. “I was going to warn you of that. Whatever you do, don’t say how much you like them. If you do, she’ll give them to you, and then we shall have to drag them about wherever we go.”

“But I thought she valued them,” said Eulalie, finger to lip.

“My lady,” said Gog, “she’s old, and, while they’ve amused her quite a lot, she doesn’t want to be seen dead with them. Besides, she’s out to avoid the Death Duties. So, for that matter, is Date. You see, they’re very high—a hundred and fifty per cent. So, if she died, the city’d have to take the collection and buy another thirty thousand slop-pails to square their accounts. It’s very hard, isn’t it?”

“Cruel,” said Pomfret. “I suppose it doesn’t occur to them to alter the law.”

“They’re mad to,” said Gog. “But they can’t without Law’s consent: and he won’t give his consent because, if the law’s altered, he’ll be changed into a vane, and he’s so afraid they wouldn’t keep him greased.”

Simon rose to his feet and knocked out his pipe.

“I can’t compete,” he said shortly.

“Who wants to?” said Patricia, laughing. “Life’s very nice without Logic.”

“You really think so?” cried Gog eagerly. “Well, that’s splendid.” Exuberantly he flung up his feet and sat down as a tailor does. “And once again, my lady, you’ve welted the nail. Listen.”

The courier’s tone was always sprightly, but there was now a brilliance about his voice which was remarkable. Pomfret sat up as though pricked, and after a moment’s hesitation Simon sat down.

“Years and years ago, when the hills were out of order and no river had made its bed, The Pail or Etchechuria was done. Nobody knows who did it, or how or why. Some say that God had been hunting upon the earth and that one of His hounds was lost. And when night fell and the hound was all alone he curled himself up in a forest and went to sleep. But before he lay down he went round and round and round, as a good dog should, to make his form. He slept all night and rose at break of day, and, finding his way to Heaven, rejoined the pack: and only his form was left to show where he had lain. And that is the only time that a hound of Heaven has lain the night upon earth. But God was glad to see His hound again, and He blessed the place that had kept him, saved him from wind and weather and let him sleep. So the place was blessed. . . . Well, that may or may not be so, but the fact remains that from time immemorial The Pail’s been a privileged place.

“Well, one day Logic was issued to all the world whether they would or no: and when it was issued Magic was taken away. The issue took some time, but at last those who were issuing came to The Pail. Our fathers met them. They weren’t at all certain that they wanted to have Logic, but they were perfectly sure that they wouldn’t let Magic go. ‘That be damned,’ said the Issuers, for the way was long and their tempers were short. ‘You must do as you’re bid.’ Our fathers pointed out that they were within The Pail. . . . Well, after a lot of argument the Issuers turned away. ‘Here, not so fast,’ said our fathers. ‘Where’s our Logic?’ ‘No Magic, no Logic,’ said the Issuers. ‘No one may have them both: they don’t agree together.’ And with that they went over the mountains. Logic and all, and our fathers, to my way of thinking, had the best of the day. Any way, Magic we have and of Logic we’ve none, and when you can get hold of that The Pail’s at your sweet pretty feet.” He rose to his own. “And now let’s stroll back to Date. Shall we follow the map?”

“It might be good practice,” said Eulalie.

“Right,” said the courier. Then he addressed the roll. “Be so good as to take us to Date.”

Instantly the parchment began to flop across the turf, floundering along like a starched garment that is driven by the wind, moving in short rushes and always waiting where it lay until its train had come up.

“You see,” said Gog, “it mayn’t be easy to read, but you do get there.”



“That’s a good-looking suit,” said a voice.

Pomfret, who had covered six miles and was fortifying his flesh with repose before proceeding, opened his eyes and propped himself on an arm.

Three paces away lay the map, awaiting his pleasure to advance, and immediately opposite, seated upon a boulder, was a squat, thick-set man in a sugar-loaf hat. He was singularly ill-favoured. Though he was plainly less than four feet high, his breadth would have suited a man of twice his stature, and his mighty hands and feet were out of all proportion to the crooked limbs which they adorned. His face was unpleasing, and even the substitution of two eyes for the large green orb which glinted from above his nose could not have redeemed the cunning of his gross mouth or the menace of his underhung jaw. As is happily often the way of such as are conspicuously unprepossessing, he plainly fancied himself, for his air was jaunty and he was overdressed. He was, in fact, a study in apricot. His doublet was bellied and slashed, his trunks were swollen and his hose clocked, while a double linen collar girdled his monstrous neck. He had rings on his fingers and roses upon his shoes, his hat-band was a ruffle of lace and his doublet was buttoned with opals of a notable size.

Pomfret lay very still, hoping very hard that one-eyed dwarfs were not uncommon near Date, and wondering whether the stranger had any ears. Here the latter tilted his hat, the better to scratch his head, thus revealing the fact that he had but one ear, if that, and Pomfret moistened his lips.

“Did you hear what I said?” said Sunstroke, stroking his chin.

“No,” said Pomfret boldly. “I was asleep.”

“Why?” said Sunstroke.

Pomfret frowned.

“Such,” he said, “is the magnitude of my brain that my physicians have ordered me to sleep at least twice in the day. Would you venture to question their wisdom?”

The dwarf shook his head.

“Certainly not,” he replied. “They’ve got to live. If they told you you were a fool they’d lose a patient.”

Pomfret rose to his feet and took off his hat.

“Good morning,” he said stiffly. “I have a great admiration for your profession, but I detest irreverence.”

Sunstroke opened his eye.

“What’s my profession?” he demanded.

“Pardon me if I am wrong,” said Pomfret, “but I took you for a publican.” The dwarf started. “And now I must go. I’m on my way to inspect a very beautiful collection of *objets d’art*, and though it can wait I can see no reason why it should.”

“Er, one moment,” said Sunstroke, rising. “I——”

“Sunstroke,” said Pomfret solemnly, “for I perceive that to be your name”—the dwarf recoiled—“you have interrupted my slumber and derided a sage. If therefore before the day is out anyone should take you for a herd of three-legged swine, don’t be too hasty with them. They’ll have quite a lot to go on.”

Sunstroke, who had not felt uneasy for many a year, began to perspire.

“I trust,” he said hurriedly, “that if I have said anything equivocal——”

“I can make it goats,” said Pomfret, “if that’s what you want. But, personally, I always think that as a flock of goats one would soon tire of one’s personality. Except in a whole gale one would never get away from oneself, would one?”

The dwarf swallowed.

“The—the truth is,” he stammered, “I’m—I’m not quite myself this morning.”

Pomfret raised his eyebrows.

“A previous conviction?” he said.

“No, no. I don’t mean that. But my boots are giving me hell.”

This was true. The weather was hot, and every blood-vessel in Sunstroke's feet was lodging a hideous protest against the vanity of man.

"What, not b-b-blue hell?" said Pomfret, who was beginning to enjoy himself.

"I—I think it must be," said Sunstroke, who had not thought of torment as coloured, but was anxious to say the right thing.

"Dear me," said Pomfret, leaning against a tree and regarding his *vis-à-vis* feet. "This is most interesting. Now, my boots—well, I mightn't have any on. I go to bed in them sometimes, just for the fun of the thing. But then, of course, yours are too large."

"Too large?" screamed the dwarf, to whom the bare idea of further compressing his feet was insupportable.

"Give a foot an inch," said Pomfret, wagging a forefinger, "and it'll give you hell. Now, look at my shoes. They were bequeathed to me by Suburb The Sordid out of gratitude for my acquaintance. Not that I knew him at all, but I once let him give me his seat, if I remember: so it was really presumption. However, the man was dead, so I let it go. Well, these are excellent. They fit anyone. If the feet are too large, they very soon bring them down. And now I must go."

"I suppose," said Sunstroke, staring, "you—you wouldn't sell them. I mean. . . ."

"I would as soon," said Pomfret, "sell the superb collection to which I am on my way. And Heaven only knows what that's worth."

A hungry gleam slid into the monstrous eye.

"I didn't understand it was yours," said Sunstroke.

"It's mine for the asking," said Pomfret airily. "Sixty thousand articles of vertu if I like to say the word. But I doubt if I shall. Worldly possessions don't really interest me."

"Quite so," said the dwarf, who believed in the acquisition of property with or without its owner's encouragement. "Quite so. Still, people are often so sticky about parting with a gewgaw or two that when one gets the offer of a—a King's ransom. . . . But no doubt you know best."

"No doubt," said Pomfret cheerfully.

There was a silence.

At length—

“Er, just supposing,” said Sunstroke laboriously, “supposing you turned it down—I mean, I also am a collector, and——”

“I’m afraid,” said Pomfret, “that the option was given to me—because of my brain, you know. Besides, you wouldn’t enjoy it, and after a couple of days it’d be unrecognizable. You know what swine are. Why, they’d do in The Dead Sea if you gave them a chance.”

“I don’t want to be a herd of swine,” said Sunstroke sullenly.

“Goats be it,” said Pomfret shortly. “I think you’re unwise, but——”

“Or goats,” snarled the dwarf.

Pomfret stared at the fellow as though he had lost his wits.

At length—

“Of course,” he said, “there’s something the matter with you. First, you want my boots, then you want my collection of *objets d’art*, and now you don’t want to be transformed. I suppose you won’t want to have been foaled presently, or whatever the process was. Aren’t you well?”

“Not very,” said the dwarf, wiping his brow.

“I thought so,” said Pomfret. “Typhoid. Have your snakes been tested lately?”

At this fresh revelation of the stranger’s ghostly insight into his manners, Sunstroke felt rather faint.

“Not—not that I know of,” he said.

“Then one or more are stopped up,” said Pomfret. “You’d better blow through them all as soon as you get back. And yet I don’t know that I should bother. What you really need is a complete change, and you’ll get that about five. Why, you won’t know yourself, you’ll all of you feel so fit.”

Feeling that something must be done, Sunstroke contorted his features into a frightful grin, slapped his thigh and vented a hollow guffaw.

“You know, sir,” he croaked, “I’ve taken quite a liking to you.”

“Have you, indeed?” said his tormentor. “Well, never mind. It’ll soon wear off. And tell me next time you’re going to have a seizure, and I’ll go behind a tree. I hate to see anyone in pain.”

Subduing a desire to burst—

“I should like to commemorate this little meeting,” said the dwarf. “I don’t know whether you’ll agree, but there’s a pretty custom hereabouts by which gifts are exchanged, or, er, arrangements made between friends to signalize——”

“Their pride in one another’s company,” said Pomfret. “What a perfectly sweet idea. Well, if you like to give me an heirloom, I don’t mind carving a spleen on the bark of a tree.”

Sunstroke swallowed.

“I’m afraid I put it badly,” he said. “The idea is that, er, both should contribute.”

“You blasphemous dog,” said Pomfret. The dwarf blenched. “Besides, my hands are empty.”

“But not your brain,” flashed Sunstroke. “Give me of that.”

“Yes, that’s easy,” said Pomfret, withdrawing a cigar from his case. “I can release you from the spell so shortly to become operative, but in that case how would you salve my *amour propre*?”

“With a hundred nobles,” cried Sunstroke, lugging a purse from his pouch.

“Now I shall turn you into a flerd of swoats,” said Pomfret. “If you don’t know what that is, in view of our recent discussion the merest dip into the pool of etymology should put you wise,” and, with that, he turned to the map. “Lead on,” he commanded, with a lordly wave of his hand.

Thus adjured, the map flopped forward, and Pomfret proceeded to stalk majestically behind, to the consternation of Sunstroke, who was now convinced that he had provoked an enchanter of the first water.

Indeed, he was so much confounded as at first to be unable to move, but, observing that the stranger had paused to light his cigar, he started to limp after him, begging his pardon and, when he proceeded, imploring him to slacken his speed.

“I’ll give you anything,” he wailed, “if only——”

“Foul swab,” retorted Pomfret, increasing his pace, “you have nothing to give. What is dross to a sage? Besides, I’ve got everything. Men have gone mad from trying to think what to give me at Yule-tide.”

“Have a heart,” howled Sunstroke, breaking into a run.

"I've got one," said Pomfret. "I tell you, you've nothing to give. If you had a sense of humour——"

Sunstroke let out a screech.

"I have, I have."

"Liar," said Pomfret.

"I swear I have," shrieked Sunstroke. "At home, tied up in a bag."

Pomfret appeared to hesitate. Then he stopped and, after a long look at the dwarf, turned his gaze skyward and passed his hand before his eyes.

At length——

"Strange as it may seem," he announced, "you seem to be speaking the truth. Be here at three with the bag, and I'll take off the spell. To do that, I shall require some ingredients—a square yard of dough, a pint of porter, and a pound of soft soap. You'd better bring weights and measures, as I must measure the quantities myself, and beware they're exact to a hair. A fraction too much or too little—and the balloon will go up."

"My lord," said Sunstroke excitedly, "it shall be done."

"That," said Pomfret coldly, "remains to be seen. The proof of the blanchmange is in the loathing. And now begone. If I'm not here at three, don't wait after five, because I'm never more than an hour late."

With that, he turned again to the map and a moment later was surmounting a stile which admitted to a hayfield.

Sunstroke watched his going with an emotion too deep for words.



A cursory inspection of about two miles of slop-pails had been rounded by a magnificent luncheon, and Pomfret was seated upon a pleasant terrace overlooking a sunlit park. By his side sat his hostess, a bustling old lady, dressed in a bright chintz gown and wearing a chatelaine from which were depending so many and such accessories that one who had not seen her in motion would have sworn she could hardly move. A great bunch of keys, two buckets, a lanthorn, spits, scoops, three scuttles and a watering-pot swung and sprawled about her voluminous skirts in the utmost disorder and continually caused her an inconvenience of which she seemed to be completely unconscious. The dame, however, was as sprightly as her

remarks were erratic, and Pomfret was as grateful for her momentary repose as for the silence which had lasted for nearly five minutes.

“And how,” said the lady suddenly, “do you like my treasure?”

Determined to take no risks, Pomfret steeled his heart.

“Madam,” he said, “since you ask me, I think it’s the most damned awful thing I’ve ever seen.”

The Mayor’s Aunt sighed.

“You’re no fool, are you?” she said. “Now, my nephew is a fool. My brother was a prize fool—I’ve still got some of his cups—and nobody but a fool would have married him. So my nephew’s a born fool.”

“He’s a host in a million,” said Pomfret. “But it’s easy to see where he gets that from.”

“Not at all,” said his hostess. “Have another meal.”

“I couldn’t really,” said Pomfret. “Not that I shouldn’t like to, but my accommodation is limited. Besides, I’ve got an appointment.”

“How dreadful,” said the Mayor’s Aunt. “Why don’t you have it removed?”

“I prefer to keep it,” said Pomfret.

“As you please,” said his hostess. “D’you mind lending me an ear?”

“Metaphorically, with pleasure.”

“Good,” said the Mayor’s Aunt, rising and turning to stroll. “And an arm. . . . That’s right. Now, I’m going to seek your counsel. I doubt if it’ll be worth having, and I know I shan’t take it. It may even enrage me. Still, one never knows but it pours, does it?”

With her first movement, the lady’s battery of utensils had come into action, so that not only were the legs of her unfortunate squire mercilessly hammered, but the incessant and lively din made it extremely difficult to concentrate or to make oneself heard.

“I said ‘Does it?’ ” shouted the Mayor’s Aunt, as a coal-scuttle met a bucket with a distracting crash.

“I know,” roared Pomfret. “I heard you. But I’m not ready yet. I haven’t parsed——” Here his obstruction of a pail which was following through

evoked a screech of pain. "Excuse me, madam, but if you could discourage that bucket . . ."

"I don't agree with you," screamed the lady. "Which one?"

"That big brute, there," yelled Pomfret, nursing his shin. "And the water-cart."

"Now, listen to me," shouted his hostess, suddenly stopping short. "If you had a collection like mine and the thought of it made you tired, what would you do?"

"Madam," said Pomfret painfully, "about five o'clock this evening I should haunt that delectable avenue which leads to your door, and when an overdressed, one-eyed, misshapen mammal approached me, walking delicately, I should ask him whether he was proposing to visit my collection and, if so, whether he admired it. If he said 'Yes,' I take it the trick would be done."

"Tied up and posted," said the Mayor's Aunt. "He'd have to remove the lot within seven days."

"Then that," said Pomfret firmly, "is what I should do. Mark you, he might not come, but—well, one never knows but it pours, do they?"

The lady drew off a ring and pushed it into his hand.

"If ever you're up against it, rub that ring. Nothing whatever will happen, but it keeps the bezel bright. And now look into it."

Pomfret peered at the gem. As he did so the stone faded and a miniature scene took its place. This was a glade of the forest: on the turf lay a sack, from whose mouth came the flash of gold, and by its side sat Sunstroke, his eye fixed upon a neighbouring stile, gnawing his fingers in a frenzy of impatience and apprehension.

As Pomfret looked up—

"Anything doing?" said the dame, with her eyes on his face.

"Quite a lot," said Pomfret. "In fact, everything seems to be going extremely well. The sheep's in the shambles: 'All's right with the world.' Am I really to keep this ring?"

"I've not the faintest idea," said the Mayor's Aunt. "Are you interested in lug-worms?"

"N-not particularly," said Pomfret, with his heart in his mouth.

“Neither am I,” said the lady. “I never met anyone that was. It’s very peculiar. Would you like a cigar?”

“Thanks very much,” said Pomfret, withdrawing his case. “But I’ve got one here.”

“That’s no answer,” said his hostess.

“I beg your pardon,” said Pomfret, putting up his case. “I should like one immensely.”

“Good,” said the other. “I like a man to know his own mind. Have another meal.”

“You’re very kind,” said Pomfret, wiping his brow, “but I really don’t think I will. Besides, I must be going.”

“Cuff,” bawled the lady.

A fat man-servant appeared.

“The stirrup-cup,” said his mistress.

The man bowed and withdrew, and hostess and guest made their way to the front of the house.

“Well, so long,” said the former, putting out her hand. “The more, the merrier.”

Pomfret uncovered and put her hand to his lips.

“I’ve enjoyed myself immensely,” he said.

“Not at all,” said the Mayor’s Aunt.

Here the servant reappeared, bearing a salver on which was a quart pot of ale. This he presented to his mistress. The latter accepted the flagon, raised it to her lips and drank long and deep.

As she lowered the vessel—

“There’s nothing like beer, is there?” she said comfortably.

Pomfret swallowed.

“Nothing,” he said.

His hostess returned to the pot.

When it was quite empty she turned it upside down before replacing it upon the tray.

"I always think," she said, wiping her mouth, "that that is a most beautiful custom. However boring the guest, the thought of the stirrup-cup almost always enables you to resist the temptation to kill. Which, of course, is why it was instituted."

Here the map, which had been lying at the foot of the steps, began to flounder down the avenue, and, since, as a visitor, he felt unequal to framing or enunciating any convenient comment upon so remarkable a usage, Pomfret bowed with great dignity and, putting his hat on his head, set his face to the way he had come.

As he passed down the steps—

"Come again," said the Mayor's Aunt.

"With pleasure," said Pomfret mechanically.

"Liar," said the dame. "Never mind. It's a great thing not to be a fool."

Half-way down the avenue, Pomfret remembered the ring. He turned and, raising his hat, waved it vigorously. After a moment's hesitation, the Mayor's Aunt snatched up the flagon and waved back. When Pomfret last saw her she was attaching the vessel to her chatelaine.



It was, perhaps, four hours later that Eulalie entered The Guest-House, darted upstairs to the parlour and flung her arms round his neck.

"I'm glad you're alive," she said, with her cheek against his. "And not transformed, or anything. Most awfully glad. I've been so worried all day."

"My darling," said Pomfret, kissing her, "I've had the time of my life. Nice, gentle exercise all day, a Jacobean lunch, and now—bathed, beered and beloved, what more can a man desire?"

"We must hear everything," said Patricia, coming into the room, "but first let me tell you that Goosegog's done the trick."

"Give me magic," said her husband over her shoulder. "Our week-end at *The Baby* 'll be a joy-ride. We're the only people who know where it is."

"I see," said Pomfret thoughtfully. "'We're the only . . .' Of course, I don't want to embarrass you, but my brain's a shade frail this eventide. The Mayor's Aunt is not exactly exhausting, but—well, an hour with her chatelaine is quite crowded. You live all the time. And the answers to some of her questions are not at all obvious. So if you could be explicit . . ."

“Brother,” said Simon. “*The Baby Bunting* has been moved. Three hours ago it stood on the top of a hill: now it’s in the heart of a wood about ten miles away. The cellars and the curtilage, complete with snakes, are still upon the hill. The snakes seemed very much surprised, and I don’t blame them. I was almost astonished myself. Happily, the licensee was absent. Otherwise . . .”

“Goosegog’s a marvel,” said Patricia. “He simply——”

“All the Gogs,” said a voice, “are quite exceptional. If you remember, I hinted that that was so. And now, pray silence for Sir Pomfret. I can tell from the veins in his nose that he’s suffering from suppressed emotion. They always go a pastel blue.”

The three turned upon Pomfret, who fingered his chin.

“I can’t bear it,” said Patricia. “Pomfret, what have you done?”

In silence Pomfret sat down and put up his feet. Then he leaned back at his ease and suffered his eyes to wander about the diminutive room. Presently they rested upon the mantelpiece.

There lay a bag marked ‘HUMOUR’ and the golden Standards of Date.

Gog was the first to see them and let out a yell.

The next moment all was confusion.

Pomfret was overthrown, helped up, shaken, kissed, clutched and otherwise assaulted, and the treasures were seized and examined in feverish incoherence.

Finally order was restored, and the tale was told.

Towards the end the teller pulled out a ring—a gigantic emerald, well-nigh invisibly set, and amid a gasp of admiration slid it on to Eulalie’s finger.

“And there’s the ring, my lady. I give it to you. It won’t adorn your hand, because no gaud in the world could ever do that: but it’s a true crown-jewel, so it won’t dishonour you.”

The slight fingers held his for an instant before they slipped away.

“Go on, dear.”

“That’s practically all. Sunstroke was waiting, of course, and making a noise like a kettle upon a hob. He’d brought a great slab of dough, so I flattened it out on the grass and measured it up. Then I added the soft soap

and porter, and made him work it into a kind of paste. It didn't look very tasty, and when I explained that we'd been preparing his food I thought he'd 've had a stroke. However, I pointed out that, as swine were notoriously careless of the nature and quality of their cheer, if he didn't eat it at once, he'd almost certainly eat it at five o'clock, so he made a short rattling noise, took an extremely deep breath, and then with a bulging eye, as they say in the Army, got down to it. While he dined, one spoke of the collection. One said it was unique and priceless, and one wondered what it would fetch when broken up. One said that some of the pieces had tempted one more than one could say—that was strictly true. Once or twice I felt actively sick—but that it was a question of all or none, and that one had decided with the deepest regret to turn it down. Well, the rest was easy. I gave him my shoes and the option in exchange for the Standards of Date. I said it was quite ridiculous—as it was—but he wouldn't have that. I told him to let the shoes cool before slipping them on, and added that, should the induction of his feet present momentary difficulty, the Mayor's Aunt would lend him a scoop. He perspired a little at that, so I rammed home a proverb or two, and inquired how the foot-gear could fit him unless he put it on. He got that at last, but he didn't seem to like it much better than he'd liked his food, so I handed him back the Standards, asked for my shoes, and said that the deal was off. That did it. When I saw him last he had just failed to negotiate the stile at speed, with the foot-joy under his arm. All things considered, he's had a trying day, and by the time he's done a few miles in Suburb's shoes to find his home's from home, I should think——”

A long peal of laughter, floating up from the street below, cut short the sentence. Ere it was spent came three more explosions of mirth, and within two minutes the length of the thoroughfare was quaking with convulsions of uproarious merriment which their labouring subjects made no attempt to control.

Masters leaned out of windows, with tears running down their cheeks; apprentices lay against walls, clasping their sides; dames were obstructing doorways, sobbing and heedless; servants squirmed on the pavements, fighting for breath; aldermen crowed and gurgled; maidens drooped against pillars, emitting tremulous wails; swains were bent double, and even The Watch was so far betraying its charge as to cling for support to a link-stand and cover its streaming eyes.

“They've seen The Hearsay,” said Gog. “That's what it is.”

“Is it always so funny on Fridays?” said Simon, who was laughing in spite of himself.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Gog, with a grin. “The Hearsay’s told them that they’ve a sense of humour.”

Herein he was right, for immediately the door opened, and a footman, who was manifestly maintaining his composure by the skin of his teeth, entered with a skin of parchment upon a silver tray. This he offered to Patricia and then withdrew from the chamber with shaking shoulders.

Delicate fingers to temple, the girl stared at the skin. Then she raised her voice and read its message aloud.

TOWN.

The Standards are back in Date, whose Sense of Humour has also been recovered. Sir Pomfret is to receive the freedom of the City, and The Garden will be enjoyed.

COUNTRY.

Sunstroke has ‘bought’ the Mayor’s Aunt’s collection of slop-pails and is some miles from his home. There he is likely to remain, first, because his feet will not work, and, secondly, because The Baby Bunting has been translated and now stands in a direction other than that in which he is attempting to crawl. He appears to have eaten something which he would have been wiser to reject in the first instance.

As she came to the end of the matter, The Guest-House resounded with a burst of merriment, and a moment later a knocking fell upon the door.

“Enter,” cried Simon.

At once the door was thrown open, and, supported by Law and Order, the Mayor tottered into the room.

Order alone of the three was for the moment able to speak for mirth, so, after a glance at his comrades, he twisted his features into some semblance of sobriety and bowed to the four.

Then he turned to Pomfret.

“My lord,” he said, “speaking on behalf of the City, I beg you to believe that, so far as you are concerned, from to-day for so long as you live *it will always be up to Date.*”

“Every time,” whimpered the Mayor, “every time. Now you’re a freeman of the City. D’you feel any different?”

“Yes,” said Pomfret, “I do. I feel very honoured.”

“Good,” said the Mayor. “Good. There are no end of privileges, of course. If anyone owes you money or runs you down, they can’t sue you, you’re entitled to be charged double for everything you buy, and every five years a fountain will be erected at your expense.”

“My brother,” said Law uncertainly, wiping his eyes, “has but touched the fringe of the honourable robe with which you are now invested. Indeed, so many and diverse are your dignities that to attempt to recite them before dinner would be out of all order and convenience. One of the cream horses, for instance, will be named after you, and in the event of its death its carcase will revert to you absolutely to do with it as you will.”

“D-d’you mean it’ll be my very own?” said Pomfret brokenly.

“All except the hide,” said the Mayor.

The girls and Simon began to shake with laughter, and Pomfret took a deep breath.

“You—you overwhelm me,” he said.

At that the three officers fairly exploded with mirth, clinging helplessly to one another and stamping upon the floor in a delicious agony of exultation.

As the seizure died down, Pomfret pointed to the mantelpiece.

“D’you want those baubles?” he said. “Or shall we chuck them away? I mean, as they’re apparently priceless, and I only risked my life to get them, it seems silly to keep them, doesn’t it?”

The paroxysm of laughter which his words provoked directly concluded the interview, for Law was understood to submit that if his life was valued he must be taken away, and the Mayor and Order, blinded with tears and bloated with exertion, were wholly incapable of contributing to any coherent conversation.

As the four watched them stumbling across the street—

“Of course,” said Pomfret musingly, “the thing to do is to become an outlaw. I can see that. Then you get a Government grant and a tanner a week for every child you haven’t got. And now, what about another bath?”

“Another one?” said his wife.

“Yes, dear. The hot tap ‘s a wash-out, but if you let the cold one run a bit—well, its burden wouldn’t make history, but I’ve tasted worse.”

CHAPTER VII

THE CLOVEN HOOF

“**I** AM credibly informed,” said the courier, “that the barge will be ready on Saturday afternoon. When would you like to embark?”

“A week from to-day,” said Patricia firmly.

“May I protest?” said Pomfret.

“No,” said every one.

“Very well,” said Pomfret resignedly. “Go your ways. Evacuate the Garden of Eden—voluntarily, and then, when you’re well outside, turn and abuse me because you can’t get back. Upon my soul,” he added violently, “I’d rather associate with a bunch of blue-based baboons. They mayn’t have much sense, but they have got instinct.”

“Soon get tired of baboons,” murmured Simon sleepily. “Snatch your food away.”

Before Pomfret could reply Eulalie lifted her head.

“We’re very good for you,” she said. “But for us you’d stagnate. Oh, look at that falling star.”

“I want to stagnate,” said her husband, ignoring the interjection. “I can’t imagine anything more desirable than stagnating in a bed of roses.”

“More beds to come,” murmured Simon. “You see. Gog says——”

“Yes, I know what Gog says,” said Pomfret, “but I’m a man of simple tastes, and to be in occupation of a spacious apartment in Paradise is good enough for me. This is no ordinary country: some of it’s very charming and some of it’s damned dangerous. It’s all very well to call the barge pretty names and talk about gliding down stream. What about the riparian owners? Supposing one of them’s a giant who’s off barges.”

“Brother,” said Gog gravely, “barges are used to convey all the produce of Date, and ninety per cent. fetch up as right as rain.”

There was a pregnant silence.

“Well, of course, that clinches it,” said Pomfret shakily. “Not to go now would be idiotic. What—what happens to the other ten?”

The courier shrugged his shoulders.

“You can’t make an omelet,” he said, “without breaking eggs.”

“Don’t be original,” said Pomfret. “What happens to the other ten?”

“They just fail to arrive,” said Gog, rising. “But that’s usually because they never start. You see, they’re non-existent. It’s an old custom, you know. In fact, ‘the bargee’s ten’ is rather like ‘the baker’s dozen,’ only the other way round. Sleep well.”

The next moment he was gone—amid silvery laughter.

So soon as he could speak—

“Of course I can do that,” said Pomfret. “Easily. Think of a number, perform any arithmetical rites you like upon it, add the size you take in gum-boots and the answer’s nineteen. If it isn’t, it’s because you thought of the wrong number.”

“My dear,” gurgled Patricia, “you and Gog are the best sword and buckler I know. Between you two no riparian owner would stand an earthly. And now let’s wake up Simon and go to bed.”

“Curfew,” said Eulalie, nodding. “Date’s closing down.”

It was true. The exquisite night was as dark as a night can be: there was no moon, and all the company of heaven seemed to be hoarding its brilliance. Only, low down, what had been a punnet of stars was rapidly dwindling to a curve of fairy lights, that is to say the lanthorns upon the walls, which except for those at street corners which could not be seen, alone were left burning, till Dawn came to sketch the city once more into the picture of the universe.

Lingering upon the beauty of their environment, the four got to their beds.

The Mayor and City of Date had proved a most handsome host. For all their charm, it had been recognized that the apartments at The Guest-House were inconveniently small, so, since the weather was set fair, a site had been chosen on a hill three miles from the city walls, and there a camp had been pitched for the use of the visitors alone. This was royally appointed. The top of the eminence was smooth and flat, and here had been erected a pavilion some thirty feet square, in front of which stretched an awning of the same magnitude. This faced due South and commanded a magnificent view, for the ground fell down by terraces to a most noble park, with the little town in the distance and mountains beyond. Upon either side of the tent rose two

others almost as large, facing East and West. These stood for bedrooms, upon each of which two satellite tents, serving as bathroom and wardrobe, waited respectfully ten or twelve paces away.

A natural semi-circle of firs screened the encampment to the North, and below the trees the slope of the hill swooped into a broad platform which accommodated admirably the kitchens, stores and stables as well as the quarters of the swarm of servants and grooms who had been detailed to anticipate the visitors' desires.

The substance and luxury of the pavilions, which were thickly carpeted with skins and hung with silk, the massive furniture in which they were found, the excellence of the fare and the quiet dignity of the constant service lent the establishment an air of permanent magnificence, which, with the privacy the place afforded and the absence of any worldly cares, suggested the occupation of his summer palace by a monarch who is off duty, though it is doubtful whether any sovereign was ever more agreeably maintained.

The weeks passed swiftly enough. The Garden was a pleasure of inexhaustible beauty, and the country about was full of interest. Upon most days the four rode and bathed, upon some they fished, upon others they visited Date to be shown the arts and mysteries for which the city was famed. Fifty square miles of country, wild and natural as the dawn, yet without the blemish of a weed, or a dead bough, or even a flower or a leaf that was past its prime, was an everlasting wonder, but expeditions which took them beyond The Garden made them acquainted with fresh marvels of which they had not dreamed.

One day they rode to a wood clipped into the faithful shape of a minster church. Towers, flying buttresses, clerestory—all were rendered with the precision of masonry that has been piled by a master's hand, while the great wheel-windows, triforium and chancel stalls, fashioned entirely from the living green, chanted of a patience, labour and devotion that made the senses reel.

Gog dismissed the miracle lightly enough.

"Of course the wood was planted with this idea, and then, you see, it's taken about six hundred years to build. And Nature's a wonderful workman. Still, it's a fine piece of work, and they keep it very well."

Another day he brought them to The House, a mellow feast of brick-nogging and grey old oak, with fire-places like chambers, a kitchen like a chapter-house and for precincts the comfortable smell of brewing, refreshing

the summer day for half a mile. Behind the manor stood the brewery, surprisingly simple to have achieved such fame, with a staff of a hundred brewers, busy as bees about their business, and fifty porters to handle the sacks of malt and the barrels of beer.

Ten master-brewers dwelt in The House itself, with the Clerk who bought and sold and kept the score. He it was who entertained the strangers in a cool low-pitched hall, humbly begging their pardon for the homely fare, naïvely explaining that he and his company were old-fashioned, and perspiring with pleasure before Pomfret's incoherent hosannahs.

Before they left they were given a fine silver-rimmed black-jack, "so-called," explained Gog, "after the founder of The House, whose ways were as handsome as his eyes and his hair were black. Though he saw old age he had never one grey hair, and was as hale and hearty at eighty as are most men of thirty-five, which speaks very well for brewing and the beer which he brewed, for he never drank anything else from dawn to sunset, at which hour he regularly retired, to sleep the sun back into the sky."

In this way and the like six weeks had drifted by—weeks so rich and careless, that there was much to be said for Pomfret's argument. Save for the presence of The Clock there might have been no time, but that great reckoner was always there, miles to the north, ten thousand feet above The Pail. Face there was none—only a row of figures set on the steep of a crag. To these a shining hand, seemingly suspended from above, pointed in turn, imperceptibly swinging from West to East and taking exactly twelve hours to run its course. Precisely at noon and midnight the hand swung from East to West with the sweep of a sword, thence to begin again its sober journey. This was the only timepiece in all the land, and, since it overtopped all obstacles and was visible by day and night, there was no need of any other. Still, The Clock told only the hours, and, but for forty odd notches which Simon had carefully cut on the stem of a pipe, no one of the four would have known how they stood with the calendar. Not that that mattered in a way: yet they were not of the breed that can let the world slip for long. They were young, and there was health in them. Even Pomfret believed in action. The latter detested rising and invariably postponed the process, but he never breakfasted in bed. That they should desire to move was therefore natural, and, when it had learned their decision, Date had at once made ready to speed its guests. A lordly barge had been built in the space of three days and was now being fitted with as much extravagance and zeal as is lavished by a coach-builder upon an exhibition car. The four were in good hands. Labour, materials, craft—everything out of Date was superfine. If milk so rich could

be said to render cream, that was offered by Date to the strangers without her gates.

When seven days later the four were drifting down stream Simon observed several spiders clinging to the silk of the awning above the poop. At once he put a hand to the ceiling, shaking it gently to disperse the brutes before they should fall to the deck. The spiders never budged. This was because they were painted upon the silk.

In response to his exclamation of amazement at this supreme imposture

“No, it isn’t a joke,” said Gog. “The idea is that you shan’t be troubled with flies.”

Pomfret covered his face.

“Don’t find anything else,” he said. “To consider such hospitality upon an empty stomach is more than I can bear. Possibly after luncheon . . .”



“It’s too easy,” said Gog. He pointed to a track that rose between stout yew walls from the river’s bank, climbed the slant of a meadow and stole into a tall beechwood.

“That’s The Short Lane. The river’s just going to curve in a horseshoe bend, and The Short Lane will take you across the heel. It’s fifteen miles by water and four by land, so if you want a stroll . . .”

“Are you perfectly certain,” said Simon, “that we can make no mistake?”

“All things are possible,” replied the courier; “but from what I’ve seen of you I don’t think you’re qualified to bring it off. A blind idiot who had been carefully misdirected might possibly miss the way, but as you can all see . . .”

“Thank you,” said Pomfret. “That’s very prettily put. And if ever you want a reference, just let me know. It’ll be no trouble at all.”

“I don’t imagine,” said Gog, “that I shall ever leave you. I like fat men. Never mind. It’s now two, and the barge’ll be round by five. Can you do four miles in three hours?”

In dignified silence Pomfret descended the gang-board to join Patricia and Eulalie, who were already ashore. Simon followed, and the four strolled up the lane. As they came to the beechwood they turned, to see the barge

under way and Gog standing rigidly on the figure-head with one leg and presenting arms with the other.

“Now; not too fast,” said Pomfret. “For once in our lives we’ve a reasonable distance to go in a reasonable time: don’t let’s abuse the opportunity.”

“Will a mile an hour do?” said Patricia, stooping to stroke a rabbit which had stopped in the middle of a meal to watch their passage.

Pomfret shook his head.

“I couldn’t bear to keep Gog waiting. No. The best thing to do is to cover the first two miles at a steady two miles an hour. Then, having broken the back of the business, we can take an hour off. After that we can go as we please.”

“Why not rest first?” said Simon. “We’ve only been sitting still for twenty-six hours, so a sleep would freshen us up.”

“Why not recall the barge?” said Eulalie. “And say we’ve changed our minds? I wish it was fourteen miles instead of four.”

“If my legs fail,” said Pomfret, “you must build a litter of boughs.”

“Let’s hope they won’t,” said Simon. “I haven’t wattled for years.”

“I will direct you,” said Pomfret. “If you haven’t a knife you just break or b-bite off the branches, and then, proceeding to the other end of the alphabet, weave the warp and w-woof which you have won into a web. Oh, and who called this woodwork a lane? It’s more like the Hindenburg line.”

There was something to be said for the comparison.

Sunk either between walls of yew, which must have been ten feet thick, or between curtains of foliage so impenetrable that the tree-trunks themselves were seldom visible, the lane twisted, curled and doubled so persistently that progress began to consist of rounding a series of bends, and two people who were no more than twenty paces apart might have walked the same way for miles without becoming aware of each other’s propinquity.

It follows that Simon, who was strolling ahead and moving rather faster than the others, was almost at once out of sight—a fact to which Patricia was on the point of demurring, when his voice was heard calling them in a tone which suggested that he had made a discovery of unusual interest.

The three quickened their pace.

Simon was standing in the fairway staring upon his right foot. This was no longer shod with leather, but enshrined in a shoe of metal, glowing and rich to look at and yellow as the midday sun. In all other respects the shoe resembled its fellow, and might have been one of a pair of which the left had been fashioned of leather and the right of gold.

“Pure gold,” said Simon simply.

“But what—how—why . . .?”

“I haven’t done anything,” said Simon. “All of a sudden my foot seemed rather heavy, and I glanced down to see why it was. . . . Then I saw this.”

“You must have stepped in something,” said Pomfret.

“Don’t be absurd,” said Eulalie, bubbling. “When did it happen, Simon?”

“I really don’t know,” said Simon, “but it can’t have been very far back. As a matter of fact, I was rather busy with the lane, trying to discover why it’s been made like a maze, and, though I was conscious that there was something wrong, for a moment or two I didn’t get it. Then, as I say, I looked down.”

“Can you walk?” said Patricia.

“Oh, yes,” said her husband. “It’s heavy, but comfortable enough. It’s my shoe all right, you know, just turned into gold. But I don’t suppose I’ll be able to go very fast.”

“Thank God for that,” said Pomfret heartily. “Of course, this is a judgment. I told you it was indecent to go bursting along, and now Nature has put it across you for defying her laws.”

“Just so,” said Simon, knocking out his pipe upon a shining heel and slightly denting the metal with every tap. “Still, when we feel like a run I can always take it off, can’t I? I rather like being shoeless, and the going’s perfect.”

“True,” said Pomfret gravely. “And a golden calf would be most becoming, wouldn’t it? And then we can worship you. And now I’m going to lead,” he added, turning to resume the advance. “Should my trousers turn into lapis-lazuli, one of you might draw my attention to the matter.” Here an overhanging bough dipped, and a squirrel alighted upon his shoulder. “Why, here’s Douglas.” He put up a hand to caress his pretty tenant. “I must warn you, my fellow, that while I am prepared to convey you for an indefinite distance in the direction in which I wish to go, that’s on the distinct

understanding that you leave my shoulder in at least as good condition as _____”

Amid a shriek from the girls the rest of the sentence was lost.

But caution and laughter alike meant nothing to Douglas, who, with a forepaw on Pomfret’s hat, was peering under its brim and into his ear. Of the suitability of this member as a cache he was at length apparently satisfied, for to the inexpressible content of Patricia, Eulalie and Simon he presently took a nut from his cheek and proceeded with a brisk movement to stuff the dainty into his improvised repository.

The next moments were full of action.

With the roar of a wounded bull Pomfret leaped into the air, Douglas, considerably astonished, sprang for safety on to a neighbouring bough, and the three lookers-on released that true explosion of mirth which only a drollery which one has seen coming can ever provoke.

With his eyes on the living roof, Pomfret was talking to himself.

“Thank you very much. . . . No, there’s nothing to see, but the drum is entirely destroyed. . . . Yes, it was great agony, but I don’t suffer as I did. . . . Well, to be frank, it was a squirrel: I was befriending the little animal and it did in my drum. . . . Well, just damned well did it in—before my wife’s eyes. . . . Oh, it was terrible for her. Such a shock. Even to-day she can’t speak of it without laughing. . . .”

“How very dreadful,” said a voice.

Pomfret started, and the others stood up and looked about them, wiping their eyes.

“You know,” continued the speaker, mincing from behind a tree, “I am distressed beyond measure by this most lamentable history.” Here he paused, swallowed and blinked long and violently as though to convey that he was unable to proceed for emotion.

He was a thin, unpleasant-looking man, with watery eyes and a retreating forehead, the line of which was produced into a long, red nose, suggesting great vacancy of mind. His red hair was long and bushed behind, and the crown of his tall, black hat was banded with gold. His short sky-blue tunic was tightly belted to the waist and cut low at the neck, revealing a yellow silk shirt: his hose were of blue and yellow, and his black pointed shoes were split upon either side and peaked before and behind.

“You must know,” continued the stranger, “that a few weeks back I lost a harp in somewhat similar circumstances. I had been playing to the fowls of the air when a bear approached and, perceiving me upon the opposite side of the strings, assumed that I was in a cage from which it was his mission to deliver me. At least, from the frenzy with which, when I last saw him, the dear fellow was reducing the instrument, I have always supposed that to be the case. Was it a bass drum, brother?”

“No, a lyric soprano,” said Pomfret shortly, “with semi-comfort tires and a spot-light. I’ve never driven a more responsive tumbrel—I mean timbrel. But never mind. Was yours an Æolian harp? Or used you to blow it?”

“Mine was a harpsichord,” sighed the stranger, “done in dove-grey picked out with bird’s-egg green. I used to pluck at its strings and gather melody with both my hands. Was your drum decorative?”

“No,” said Pomfret. “It was inlaid with aunt of pearl, but otherwise quite plain. Almost severe. I used to scratch myself against it. There was a fox-trot in every bite.”

“This is most fortunate,” said the stranger, beaming. “My name is Pouch,” he added suddenly, with a bow and a sweep of his hat. “You can’t have heard of me.”

“How d’you do,” said everyone.

“Not at all,” said Pouch pleasantly. “To continue, you can’t have heard of me, because I’m unheard of. Are you going down The Lane?”

“That’s the idea,” said Simon. “Our barge has gone round by water, and we’re going to pick it up at the other end.”

“The other end of the barge?” said Pouch.

“Of The Lane,” said Simon.

“You can’t pick up a barge,” said Pouch. “It’s too heavy.”

“I meant ‘rejoin it,’ ” said Simon.

“But I thought you said it had gone round.”

“So it has,” said Simon. “By water.”

“Never heard of the place,” said Pouch. “Where did you see it last?”

“Listen,” said Patricia. “We left the barge at the end of The Short Lane. While we’re walking down the lane, it’s going to follow the river——”

“Don’t be silly,” said Pomfret. “The lane can’t follow the river.” He turned to Pouch. “It’s quite simple. Both we and the barge are aiming for the same spot. Never mind how or why. We just are. There’s the spot.” He marked the turf with his heel. “Well, the barge is going this way”—he stooped to trace the course with his finger—“and we’re going that.”

“Go on,” said Pouch attentively.

“That’s all,” said Pomfret.

“All what?” said Pouch.

“All,” cried Pomfret. “A double L.”

Eulalie’s shoulders began to shake, and Pouch pushed back his hat.

“I thought you said,” he said, “that you were going to rejoin it.”

“So we are,” shouted Pomfret. “That was the motif of my demonstration.”

Pouch looked round.

“No barge,” he said, “will ever get round these curves. In fact, unless it’s very narrow——”

“You know,” said Pomfret grimly, “I don’t think you’re trying.”

Simon bit his lip, and Patricia covered her face.

“You said,” said Pouch, “that the barge was going this way.”

Pomfret expired.

“I said,” he said shakily, “that it was going *that* way.” He squatted down and viciously scratched at the turf. “Not that actual way. This is only a map. It’s going to float round this wood—that’s the wood—on a lot of wet stuff. Some people call it water. Well, it’s going to float round the wood as far as *THAT*.” He dabbed at the indenture he had made with his heel. “Not that actual spot, but the place that spot represents. Meanwhile we shall walk—on dry land. That’s The Short Lane cutting across this—this protuberance, and _____”

“What’s a protuberance?” said Pouch.

Pomfret put a hand to his head.

“I wish you wouldn’t argue,” he said. “Besides, we’re doing geography, not grammar. *This* is a protuberance. If it hadn’t been, I shouldn’t have said it was. And now I’ve lost my place. . . . Oh, I know. Well, we’re going down

The Lane *also* as far as THAT. Very well. By the time we're across the barge'll be round."

"I thought you said it had an end," said Pouch.

"Well, I didn't," said Pomfret, "but it has. Two of them."

"And now it's going to be round," said Pouch. "Why, you won't recognize it, will you?"

"Take me away," said Pomfret violently. "Take me away and test me to see if I'm sane. Oh, and try and find the bear that did in his rotten harp. Let's see if he meant to release him."

"Be quiet," wailed Patricia, clinging to one of his arms, while Eulalie, helpless with laughter, clung to the other. "Do remember you're in Etchechuria."

"‘Remember’?" screamed Pomfret. "D'you think I'm likely to forget? D'you think any other country could breed such a septic ass? Damn it, the man can't construe. And look at the earth in my nails. . . ."

They calmed him somehow, and presently the five proceeded, for Pouch seemed delighted with his company, and announced that he dwelt at Fiddle, a village through which they must pass.

"Gog never mentioned a village," said Eulalie.

"It's on The Lane," said Pouch. "In fact, The Lane acts as its streets. It's very convenient. Now, The Long Lane would have been useless. That has no turning at all. Very remarkable, but most uninteresting. Here's a milestone."

"Where?" said Eulalie.

"There," said Pouch, pointing to a huge hornbook, the handle of which was planted in the ground. "Three hornbooks or six samplers go to a mile, so if you can add you always know where you are."

"I don't understand," said Simon. "We're more than a third of a mile from the river bank."

"Possibly," said Pouch. "A milestone only indicates that you've still got some way to go. There are never more than nine hornbooks to any league. They may be all together in the first hundred yards, but until you've done your league you won't see the tenth." Here they rounded a corner to see seven mighty samplers hanging like arras upon the hedge. "There you are. Now, when you've seen five more hornbooks you'll know that you've done three miles. Or ten samplers."

“In other words,” said Pomfret, “an exceptionally fine mathematician with a phenomenal memory can always tell where he is to within six miles. I see. And what a good idea to call them milestones. . . .” He swallowed deliberately. “If you’re making for Fiddle, I suppose that’s how you know when you get there.”

“That’s right,” said Pouch excitedly. “You’ve got it. It’s a great safeguard.”

“Oh, godsend,” corrected Pomfret. “Godsend.”

“It is indeed,” insisted Pouch. “The moment you see Fiddle, you add up the samplers you’ve passed and divide them by eighteen. If the answer’s the same as the number of leagues you’ve come, that shows that Fiddle can’t be more than twelve miles off: and as it’s the only village for twenty miles it must be it.”

“Always presuming,” said Pomfret, “you know where you started from. I see. Personally, I always walk by square measure as the crow flies. When I’ve done four antimacassars and seven chained bibles, then I know I’m out of my mind. And now let’s discuss philately, or don’t you believe in ghosts?”

“One moment,” said Pouch. “Let me lend you a handkerchief.”

Pomfret stared. Then he turned to his wife.

“Is there any foundation for this solicitude? That you can perceive, I mean?”

“None whatever,” breathed Eulalie.

Pomfret returned to Pouch.

“Thanks very much,” he said. “But it appears that I don’t need it. Incidentally, I have one.”

“But I must insist,” said Pouch, producing a red and green wonder from a wallet by his side. “I couldn’t think of refusing.”

“I’m sure of that,” said Pomfret, “but the question doesn’t arise. It’s I who decline the, er, honour—with many thanks.”

“Granted,” said Pouch irrelevantly, “but it’s a matter of principle. If I don’t lend I lose interest. I’ve got a most lovely punch-bowl, but, you know, I’ve never lent it and now I don’t care about it. It’s such a beauty, too. It’s porous.”

“Ah, I expected it’d have some virtue,” said Pomfret, raising his eyes to heaven. “A porous punch-bowl. Did you have it specially made?”

“The idea is,” said Pouch, “that you can’t overfill it. So, you see, not to borrow this handkerchief would be almost brutal.”

“Perhaps you’d better,” said Patricia in a low voice. “There may be some custom. . . .”

With an awful look Pomfret stretched out his hand and the handkerchief passed.

The transfer took some time, for the article proved to be some thirty feet long, and towards the end of the operation the reluctant borrower’s face was presenting so striking a picture of astonishment and speechless indignation that it was only with the greatest difficulty that his companions could maintain their gravity.

“And that’s that,” said Pouch cheerfully, as the end of the silk disappeared. “D’you know you remind me of a sexton I used to know? He was a bigamist.”

Pomfret removed his hat.

“Somebody else,” he said, “can converse with this gentleman. I’ve taken up enough of his time—as well as his laundry.” With that, glancing at his bulging pocket with eyes that protruded as though in sympathy, he stalked majestically ahead, while Pouch, apparently oblivious of his displeasure, began to discourse to Patricia upon a movement in which he was interested towards the education of bats to abandon night-life and pursue their calling by day.

In this manner they came to Fiddle, a tiny town through which, as Pouch had intimated, The Short Lane wound and writhed so persistently that it served the back and front of every house in the place. There seemed to be no one about, for which the four were grateful, for it seemed possible, if not likely, that Pouch’s neighbours would prove to be as peculiar as himself, and they had no mind to extend their acquaintance with a fellowship, intercourse with which was so embarrassing. Moreover, the town itself was so remarkable that a chance of observing it freely and of being able to stare without seeming to pry was most refreshing.

The houses, though small, were of great age and beauty, while their condition and the meticulous care with which they were manifestly kept, suggested that wind and weather either had no footing in Fiddle or had been bought off. Wrought iron gleamed like silver, brick and stone were as fresh

and clean as snow, and all the woodwork, of which there was a great quantity, was entirely devoid of any paint or varnish, but highly polished by hand. Link-extinguishers, casements, beams, barge-boards, patently burnished faithfully for many years, had every one acquired a natural sheen which immeasurably enhanced its quality and set the shady streets aglow with that subdued brilliance which wood and iron can shed, but is seldom to be seen outside some favourite closet in a show house.

Dumb before the evidence of such bewildering industry, the four were gaping at their surroundings, when the demeanour of their remarkable companion began to compel their attention.

On entering Fiddle, Pouch had fallen silent, and before they had traversed two streets seemed strangely perturbed. He muttered and whimpered to himself, shaking his head and raising his watery eyes as though in distress, and when presently Simon inquired what was the matter, emitted a hollow groan. As they proceeded, his concern became more pronounced, while his actions began to suggest that he had lost a valuable. He peered within his wallet, felt his tunic all over and shook his sleeves, expressing his dismay so vigorously that windows began to be opened and heads thrust out.

“For heaven’s sake,” said Eulalie, “what have you lost?”

Pouch, however, seemed too overwrought to reply and, as they emerged into a tiny square, let out a bellow of complaint. Indeed, he began to roar like any infant, with his mouth wide open and tears streaming down his cheeks, standing quite still with his arms hanging down by his sides, and making no attempt, however instinctive or feeble, to suppress or disguise his emotion.

As soon as he could speak—

“Egg-bound,” said Pomfret. “Must be. Or else he’s seen himself in one of those doors. Never mind. We’d better be moving on. There’ll be a crowd in a minute.”

The words, however, were hardly out of his mouth when the doors of the houses and buildings upon the square began to open and their occupants to emerge, while the two mouths of The Lane began to disgorge two fast-swelling streams of neighbours, all of them running to learn the truth of the trouble.

“Too late,” said Simon, pointing. “We can’t breast a tide like that. Besides, it’d look funny—strolling away from the row. Still, we may as well

stand in the shade.”

With a glance at Pomfret, he stepped to a mighty chestnut. The others followed, Pomfret nodding abstractedly, while the girls regarded the scene with the keenest interest.

“Oh, look at the beadles,” cried Patricia. “And there’s a sedan-chair.”

“The whole town’s out,” said Eulalie. “And I don’t blame them. Just listen to that note. I wouldn’t have believed one man could make such a noise.”

“He’ll burst a blood-vessel in a minute,” said Simon.

“I should regard such a casualty,” said Pomfret, “with mixed feelings. Only just mixed. In fact, the percentage of sorrow would be almost negligible.”

“I must confess,” said his wife, “I’m curious to know his trouble. I suppose he’s lost something valueless.”

“Well, stand by,” said Simon. “The darling’s going to explain.”

This was evident.

Neighbours were now about Pouch, asking him this and that, and from the welter of sobbing responses began to emerge. These, however, were mostly in the negative, for his questioners seemed to assume that he was in pain, and attempted by a process of exhaustion to locate the agony. Finally, however, it was established that what pain he was suffering was mental, and then, the ground having been prepared, the victim relapsed into speech.

“Robbed,” he yelled. “I’ve been robbed.”

“‘Robbed’?” cried everyone.

“Robbed,” screamed Pouch. “*By a fat fair man in loose hose, with a dent in his hat.*”

Pomfret raised his voice.

“Let’s be clear about this. I don’t suppose you mean me, but——”

“*That’s him,*” shrieked Pouch, starting forward. “*He’s stolen my handkerchief.*”

There was a moment’s silence. Then—

“You abominable liar,” said Eulalie.

“That,” said a musical voice, “remains to be proved.” Here the door of the sedan-chair opened and a little man in Court Dress, with a black satin tie to his wig, stepped on to the ground. “Officers,” he added, nodding in the beadles’ direction, “kindly arrest the four—three as vagabonds and the fourth as a rogue. I’ll try them at once.”



“To begin with,” said Pomfret, “the Court isn’t competent. Secondly, I don’t understand the procedure. Thirdly, if anyone here present thinks that anyone but a broken-down draper in his second childhood and subject to hallucinations could have the slightest use for a dozen yards of fourth-rate muslin, hitherto employed by an idiot to wipe his rotten nose, all I can say is they ought to be watched.”

“I quite agree,” said the Magistrate. “Does anyone here think that? If so, let him stand forth.”

No one stood up or replied, so after a little while the Magistrate said “Admitted,” and the Clerk wrote it down.

“And now go on,” said the Magistrate. “I’m more than interested.”

In his failure to follow the procedure Pomfret was not alone. Nobody present understood it, and the confusion and disputes which had arisen suggested that Fiddle’s experience of the administration of justice was of the most elementary kind.

The setting itself was eccentric.

The open-air court stood in a corner of the square and was shaded by four great oaks, two of which rose like pillars upon either side. In addition to the Bench, the dock and the witness-box, its features included a minstrels’ gallery, a well of water and a pound—the last two right in the middle, and since all three accessories were used throughout the hearing for those purposes for which they are usually employed, concentration upon the issues was a matter of considerable difficulty. Of the three the well appeared to be held the most important, for a man who was blindfold and clad entirely in white continually hauled up water which was carefully scrutinized by apothecaries before being poured back into the depths, but no little fuss had been made about filling the others before the proceedings began.

Four fat musicians had been empanelled in the gallery, and a magnificent jackass inducted into the pound, and when at last the Magistrate took his

seat the burst of melody which greeted him was, to judge from his reception of it, extremely gratifying and quite unexceptionable.

Then the trouble had begun.

First, there had been a dispute as to who should enter the dock. The Magistrate had declared that that was where Pouch should stand, while the Clerk had stubbornly maintained that Pomfret if not all the strangers were meriting the reproach. Finally, one of the beadles was so rash as to back up the Clerk, whereupon he was instantly ordered to enter the dock himself, while Pouch was put in the pound and Pomfret and his friends were accorded seats on the Bench. The Magistrate seemed highly pleased with this arrangement, and insisted that the girls should sit, the one on his right and the other on his left, and after complimenting them upon their beauty, formally dismissed the charge of vagrancy and said that it should never have been brought.

Then came the question of witnesses.

The Clerk had produced a list and called out a dozen names, to each one of which some spectator or other had responded. These had then been commanded to enter the witness-box, but several had protested that they had given evidence before and so were exempt from service. This had aroused great discussion, in which the minstrels joined, but at length the Magistrate repealed the law of exemption and ordered the objectors to obey. A further demurrer that the box had been built to hold but one at a time was denounced as trivial, and the unfortunate twelve were crammed within its walls.

Then summonses were issued for the attendance of Pomfret and Pouch, and each was solemnly served. A bench-warrant was issued for the arrest of the beadle in the dock, and a search-warrant was handed to his colleague with instructions to search the witnesses without delay. This charge the latter deputed to his victims, who all searched one another as best they could. After that the spectators were sworn, the minstrels were formally cautioned, and Pouch was given five nobles out of the poor-box.

Finally Pomfret had been called upon and politely asked if he knew of any reason why the Court should not give him judgment.

"I said 'Go on,' " said the Magistrate.

"D'you mean," said Pomfret, "you want me to tell my tale?"

"Any tale," said the Magistrate. "Why did you steal the handkerchief?"

“I didn’t,” said Pomfret.

“Then why didn’t you?” said the Magistrate.

Pomfret frowned.

“Because,” he said, “I am neither a thief nor a fool.”

“That’s a very serious statement to make,” said the Magistrate. “Did you hear what you said?”

“Well, only just,” said Pomfret. “I find the band rather selfish. And I suppose Arthur couldn’t stop cranking that well. I shall begin to go round myself in a minute. I mean, I should hate to deflect the course of Justice, but what’s the use of lugging the water up and then chucking it back? Why doesn’t he drink it, or wash in it, or go and put it under a bridge?”

“He’s trying to get at the truth,” said the Magistrate. “He may extract it any minute. I’ve sat on this Bench for over fifty years and I’ve never seen it yet, but”—here he lowered his voice—“I believe it to be nude. That’s why the wheelman’s blindfold. As for the band, people will talk in Court, so the music’s to drown the conversation.”

“And why the ass?” said Patricia.

“That’s The Law,” said the Magistrate. “Look at his points. Haven’t you heard of ‘pound-foolish’?”

Before Patricia could reply—

“Are you going to grant bail?” said the Clerk.

“That’s a most impertinent question,” said the Magistrate. “I’ve a great mind to commit you.” He raised his voice and smote upon the desk before him. “If anyone interrupts again I shall bind him over. Right over.” After looking furiously about him, he turned to Pomfret. “Which of the witnesses do you wish to call?”

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve really no choice,” he said. “To my knowledge none of them saw anything, so they’re all equally valuable. Now, my friends here can bear out my tale.”

“Yes, but they were present,” said the Magistrate, with the triumph of one who indicates a palpably fatal flaw in his opponent’s contention. “And now do state your case. I’m longing to hear it.”

Here the orchestra let out a gust of frightfulness which made everyone present jump almost out of his skin and The Law shy against Pouch and crush him against the wall. Between his yells, and the angry shouts of the witnesses, who had no room to start and had consequently hurt themselves in the attempt, and the efforts of the musicians to drown these several protests, such order as there had been was rudely deposed, and it was quite five minutes before any condition worthy of the name was presently restored.

So soon as he could make himself heard—

“I refuse,” said Pomfret warmly, “to say another word unless you stop that band. I’ve never talked against a bassoon yet, and I’m not going to try now. It’s—it’s undignified.”

“So it is,” said the Magistrate. “You voice my own thoughts, sir. I’m very pleased to have met you.” He rose and glared at the minstrels. “Either,” he said, “you have not practised what you have been playing or you have not played what you have been practising—conduct for which, as all thinking men and women will agree, there is no shadow of excuse. Unfortunately my dead cats are at home, and I have come out without a rotten egg, otherwise I should have not had the slightest hesitation in discharging some of both these tokens of disapproval consecutively in your direction. And now leave your weapons where they are and go into the pound.”

Looking very glum, the four musicians descended from the gallery and joined Pouch and The Law, who, after regarding their arrival with manifest suspicion, turned his back upon them and laid back his ears in a way which left little doubt as to his opinion of their deserts. Perceiving and mistrusting this contempt, the unhappy artists sought to outflank the danger by a turning movement in which, as the pound was small, Pouch was immediately involved. This conspiracy, however, to defeat the ends of Justice was unsuccessful, for The Law perceived the movement and began to revolve with the five, who were soon treading one upon the heels of the other in an endeavour to respect the danger zone. Indeed, when once they had all got going, a bird’s-eye view of the pound would have conveyed the impression that it contained a Catherine-wheel which moved occasionally jerkily, but on the whole at a steady three miles an hour, and gave no indication of coming to rest.

“So perish all wasters,” said the Magistrate. He put on a pair of horn spectacles and turned to Pomfret. “For the third and last time, have you anything whatever to say?”

Before Pomfret could reply—

“If you ask me,” said the Clerk, “he’s mute of malice.”

This was too much.

“The trouble with you,” said Pomfret violently, “is that you don’t know your job.”

“Can you prove that?” said the Magistrate.

“Well, not what you’d call ‘prove,’ ” said Pomfret. “I can demonstrate that he’s grossly ignorant of his duties and better qualified to dispense pig-wash than justice, but . . .”

“Ah, that’s very different,” said the Magistrate. “Never mind. What is your version of this distressing affair?”

Pomfret cleared his throat and rose to his feet.

“I was accosted by the being whose name I understand to be Pouch about two hours ago. At that time I was in The Short Lane about a mile from this town. He appeared without warning from behind a tree and engaged me in conversation upon the subject of musical instruments, particularly deploring the fact that his harp had been demolished by a bear—a creature, I may say, with whom I feel I should have much in common. I was rather short with him, because I’m rather particular about the company I keep, and, while I can suffer a fool, a poisonous fool tends to elevate my gorge. However, it soon became obvious that nothing short of violence would drive him away, and as I’m of a peaceable nature I resigned myself to my fate. After some discussion regarding our movements, in the course of which he demonstrated that he is a congenital idiot of the first water, he announced his intention of proceeding with us to Fiddle. This he accordingly did. At first he did nothing but offer us information which was incredibly obscure and utterly worthless: then, without any warning, he begged to be allowed to lend me the beastly chattel which is the subject of the present dispute. I declined. Pouch, however, was importunate, insisting that I should be doing him a service by consenting to receive his property, and in the end I agreed. Had I known its dimensions, nothing would have induced me to house the rag, but these only became apparent after I had consented to accommodate it, so against my better judgment—which was, I may say, to ram the material down its owner’s throat—I suffered the set of my coat to be irretrievably ruined. This out of sheer good nature, which he almost immediately rewarded by a most offensive remark. We then went on our way. Hardly had we entered this town when Pouch began to display symptoms of

restlessness, and to search his vile body as though some animal had secreted itself about his person. We inquired what was the matter, but he made no reply, merely continuing to advertise his disgust with life, until upon entering the square his advertisement could no longer be ignored by anyone within earshot.

“Well, there are the plain facts. I dare say he’ll deny them, but I can’t help that. I can only say, first, that I am not accustomed to associate with, much less pilfer from vulgar imbeciles: secondly, that I have always understood that the first principle of theft was that the object to be stolen should not be entirely valueless; and thirdly, that a treacherous and malignant maniac who makes it his practice to molest strangers, saddle them with his filthy belongings, and then accuse them of felony, ought to be officially immured at his own expense.”

When Pomfret sat down there was a great deal of applause, in which Pouch joined heartily, while the Clerk turned round and insisted on shaking the speaker’s hand, stating that he never remembered hearing a plea of guilty more sympathetically presented.

“And now,” said the Magistrate, “have you any objection to being cross-examined? If so, I must overrule it.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” said Pomfret, “but I’ve none whatever.”

“It can’t be helped,” said the Magistrate. “Let the plaintiff take the chair.”

At that the wheelman stopped working, and the bucket, which he was about to lower, was detached from the rope. In its place a chair was made fast: to this Pouch was conducted, and when he had taken his seat, the chair and its burden were swung out over the depths, and then suffered to descend until to those upon the Bench only the complainant’s head was visible.

“Now he’ll be well advised,” whispered the Magistrate to Eulalie. “We always do that. And if they get above themselves we just, er, abase them.”

Here the Clerk, who had produced a huge skin of parchment shaped like a roller-towel, lighted a fat candle and picked up a stick of sealing-wax.

“I must warn you,” he said, holding the wax to the flame, “that everything you say will be taken down and used against you.” And with that he scrawled ‘FIRST QUESTION’ upon the sheet, making a great business of the labour, lowering his face to the table and protruding his tongue as though his life were depending upon his formation of the words.

“What were you doing,” said Pouch, “in The Short Lane?”

Pomfret frowned.

“I was living, moving and having my being there,” he said.

“Do I understand you to say,” said Pouch, wagging a finger in a highly professional way, “that you were living there?”

“Since you ask me,” said Pomfret, “I don’t think you can understand anything. To my mind, your gifts do not include the faculty of comprehension.”

“Ah, I thought we should get at something in a minute,” said Pouch, rubbing his hands. “A little bird told me. Now listen to me. You say I assaulted you.”

“As a matter of fact, I said ‘accosted,’ but it’s the same thing. To be addressed by you is to be mentally assaulted.”

“Exactly,” said Pouch, with the air of one who has secured the very answer he desires. “And if that is so, how came I to appear without warning?”

Pomfret shrugged his shoulders.

“I should think the answer’s a bunch of carrots,” he said. “I can’t think of anything else.”

“His point is,” said the Magistrate, “that you must always give audible warning of an assault, and his suggestion is that you failed to do so.”

“Now, let’s be clear about this,” said Pouch, tapping the side of the well. “You spoke of a protuberance.”

“Unhappily I did.”

“Was that before or after you had failed to appear?”

“Neither,” said Pomfret. “It was underneath. If you remember, I sang a song without words. ‘Protuberance’ was one of them.”

“Do you produce it?” said the Clerk.

“The song or the words?” said Pomfret.

“The protuberance, stupid,” said the Magistrate.

“No,” said Pomfret, “I don’t. It’s too big. Besides, it’s got a forest on it, and I should disturb the resident mammals.”

“Then why,” said Pouch, “did you surround me?”

“I did not surround you,” said Pomfret. “I remember denying myself. The temptation to play ‘Here we surround The Gooseberry Fool’ was awful, but I trod it under.”

“Under what?” said the Magistrate.

“Great provocation,” said Pomfret. “But then I’m like that.”

“Just so, just so,” said the Magistrate, as though Pomfret had evoked a mutual understanding to which they alone had been admitted. “Have you nearly finished?” he added, turning to Pouch.

“Very nearly,” said Pouch. “I just want to test his memory. How were you dressed when you assaulted me?”

“I’ll tell you to-morrow,” said Pomfret. “The gift of prophecy is not among my powers.”

Pouch raised his eyebrows.

“You prophesied about your harp,” he said. “You said it was going to be round.”

“I never heard of a round harp,” said the Clerk.

“He’s mixing his consonants,” said Pomfret wearily. “What I said was that the *barge* was going to be round.”

“Or a round barge,” said the Clerk.

“I didn’t mean ‘circular,’ ” said Pomfret. “I meant—— Well, when I said that it’d be round——”

“What would be round?” said the Magistrate.

“The harp,” said Pomfret. “I mean the barge. When I said that the barge’d be round I meant that it would have finished going round. When you’ve finished going round a thing, you’re round, aren’t you?”

“I’m not,” said the Magistrate.

“Well, I am,” said Pomfret.

“D’you mean you’re circular?” said the Magistrate.

“No, oval,” said Pomfret shortly. “And you can have the point. I don’t care.”

“You said,” said Pouch, “that the harp——”

"I never mentioned the blasted dulcimer."

"Yes, you did," shrieked Pouch. "You asked me to lend it to you."

"You said that a bear had done it in," said Pomfret.

"Done what in?" said the Magistrate. "The barge?"

"No," cried Pomfret. "The harp."

"Well, what if it did?" said the Magistrate. "Bears do do in harps."

"Do do they? I mean, I don't know. He just stated the rotten fact."

"But what's the point?" said the Magistrate.

"Don't be silly," said Pomfret. "There isn't one. He says I asked him to lend me his harp."

"And what do you say?"

"I say I didn't because, for one thing, it was already within my knowledge that he hadn't got a harp to lend."

"Quite so," said the Magistrate. "Besides, you had a harp."

"No, I hadn't," said Pomfret. "Neither of us had a harp."

"Then how could you lend him one?"

"Look here," said Pomfret violently, "the answer is in the unmentionable negative. I never saw, heard, possessed, borrowed, or lent any harps, bears, or other musical instruments. It's against my principles."

"You said," said Pouch, "that——"

"If you say 'you said' again," said Pomfret, "I shall cause you grievous bodily harm. Why the devil can't you say something *I* said—I mean, *you* said?"

"He mustn't repeat himself," said the Magistrate. "That's why."

"Do you deny," said Pouch, "that you passed a milestone?"

"You gave it that name," said Pomfret.

"Come, come," said the Magistrate. "A milestone's a milestone."

"Well, this one wasn't," said Pomfret. "It was a hornbook."

"Did you or did you not pass it?" said Pouch.

"Of course I passed it," said Pomfret. "We all passed it."

“Was that on your way to Fiddle?”

“It was.”

“Then the milestone would have been on your right.”

“I don’t know where it would have been,” said Pomfret. “In fact, it was on our left.”

“That depends which way you were facing,” said the Clerk. “If you’d been walking backwards——”

“I wasn’t walking backwards,” said Pomfret.

“Then you should have said so,” said the Magistrate.

“Will you take it from me,” said Pouch, “that that milestone is the only one for several miles?”

“That,” said Pomfret, “from what I’ve seen of this district, I can well believe.”

“Then it follows,” said Pouch in a voice quivering with triumph, “that if you passed that milestone you must have been in The Short Lane.”

“Of course you must have second sight,” said Pomfret. “That’s quite obvious.” He sighed. “Give the gentleman a bag of nuts, some one. With full instructions.”

Here everybody applauded very loudly, and the Clerk stood up and waved the skin of parchment, the circuit of which had almost been completed.

The Magistrate turned to Patricia.

“A very skilful piece of work,” he said. “You see, he’s been arguing in a circle, and now the circle’s complete. His next question would naturally be, ‘What were you doing in The Lane?’ and that, if you remember, was his first.”

“I see,” said Patricia politely. “What do we do now?”

“Now we identify the prisoner, and after that we pass sentence.” He turned to Pomfret. “Just stand over there in a row, will you?”

“I’d know him anywhere,” said Pouch. “He’s got a dent——”

“Abase that man,” said the Magistrate. “He’s defying the Court.”

“I shan’t,” screamed Pouch. “I’m a——”

What he was, however, was not disclosed, for the chair was let down with a run, and a continuous but not unpleasant booming noise was all that was left to declare the complainant's existence.

The band was then commanded to join Pomfret, and the five were drawn up in line.

Considering that his companions were clad in apple-green doublets and scarlet hose, that Pomfret was the tallest of the five by at least eight inches, and that no one of the four bore the slightest physical resemblance to the prisoner or could have been reasonably mistaken for anyone but himself except upon the darkest of nights, the odds, if any were offered upon the result of the identification, must have been unattractive.

For what it was worth, however, Pomfret removed his hat—as it proved, a valuable precaution, for when Pouch had been hauled to the surface, and confronted with his task, he stared upon the five in a bewildered way. Indeed, it soon became manifest that he was not at all certain whom to touch, for he began to prowl to and fro before the parade, plucking at his chin and muttering after the manner of those who are mentally embarrassed. At this every one present began to laugh, and soon every hesitation of the complainant was greeted with ironical cheers, which the Clerk led, in which the Magistrate joined. Flustered by these attentions, Pouch began to dance up and down, wringing his hands in a perfect agony of indecision—behaviour which immediately provoked roars of delight and a swelling storm of gibes and abusive exhortation. Indeed, to crown his discomfiture it only remained for the fellow to pick the wrong man, and this he eventually did, selecting the bass viol after a final paroxysm of vacillation.

The bellow of derision which properly greeted his action must have been heard for miles and entirely obliterated the orders which the Magistrate was shouting for Pouch to be apprehended and put in The Pillory at once. The Clerk, however, transmitted this horrid command by alternately assuming the traditional attitude of those thus punished and hurling imaginary missiles into the air, to the delight of the bass viol, who instantly informed the crowd and kicked Pouch in the stomach out of sheer exuberance. The latter was then borne off by the way he had come, the Clerk, the Magistrate and the Beadles all assisting vigorously at his translation, while The Law, who had emerged from the pound, followed the rout after the manner of a rearguard, occasionally squealing and kicking as though to proclaim his approval.

So instant was every one present that the sentence should be carried out that the witnesses were forgotten, and even their howl of execration, which

greeted this selfish oversight, was disregarded. Simon, however, wrenched the panel away, receiving a shower of blessings for this kind act, after which the captives turned and ran like so many stags in the direction of the promising disorder.

Pomfret watched the crowd out of sight.

“There are times,” he said, “when Retribution is painfully slow, but—well, she does get there. You know, that was a most beautiful kick. All among the digestive organs. Brother Pouch’ll be on slops for a month. That is if he survives. I asked the bass viol to call an egg after me, and he swore he’d shout, ‘A present from Pomfret’ with *the first two dozen he threw*. It appears that attached to The Pillory is a munition factory in the shape of a poultry farm: and all the eggs are stored against happy afternoons. Such a comfortable thought.”



“A quarter past nine,” said Simon with his eyes on The Clock. “If she doesn’t fetch up soon . . .”

“I refuse,” said Pomfret, “to return to Fiddle—for private reasons. Or to allow my woman to retrace her steps.”

“I was going to suggest,” said Simon, “that I went out on patrol. If I swam up stream for a while——”

“Thanks very much,” said Patricia, “but as you’re my only husband I’d rather have you under my eye. This isn’t a country to take any liberties with.”

“To say nothing of the fact,” added Eulalie, “that there’s something wrong with the water. That we know.”

“It’s all right here,” said Simon, who was lying flat on his face with an arm in the flood. “If I swam——”

“Nothing doing,” said his wife.

“I agree,” said Pomfret. “We don’t exactly love you, but we’re used to seeing you about. And now let’s pretend that we’re better without food. It’s a most exciting game. The one who pretends best is eaten last.”

“Be quiet,” said Eulalie. “I think I hear the oars.”

Every one listened intently, but the distant cry of an owl and the stealthy thrust of some creature in the thick of the woods were all that rewarded their

ears.

They had reached the end of The Lane soon after six, fully expecting to find the gang-board down and Gog a little uneasy on their behalf, but the barge was not at the meeting-place, and the lovely reach was empty except for the shining fish which whipped to and fro in the brown water and occasionally leapt like harlequins into the lazy air.

It was not like Gog to be behind his time, and when half an hour had gone by and there was still no sign of the barge, it seemed certain that some misadventure must have befallen it.

Suddenly Eulalie had thought of regarding her ring. . . .

At first they had seen nothing. Then out of the great emerald a miniature picture had grown, full of life and colour and astonishingly brilliant and clear-cut, so that even the smallest detail could be observed without difficulty. There was the barge in mid-stream, and beyond it a rising meadow, where an open order of haycocks stood up to the sinking sun. The oars had been shipped and the oarsmen were poling the barge with all their might. That the work was heavy was plain, for the lackeys and even the cooks had been pressed into service, while Gog and the Barge-Master were sharing the largest pole and thrusting as though possessed. When a pole was drawn out it seemed to be covered with slime, and a waterman right in the bows was continually heaving the lead and turning to cry his report to his labouring governor. From behind a haycock on the bank a head occasionally appeared, as though there was somebody watching who had no mind to be seen, for it was protruded with evident caution and withdrawn in a flash if any one of the toilers seemed likely to turn that way.

Then the picture had faded and the four were left to digest the emerald's tale.

That the barge had encountered a mud-bank seemed fairly obvious, but whereabouts in the fifteen miles of river the mishap had occurred no one could tell. The barge might be one mile off or it might be ten. Still, however far it might be, it was in the horseshoe bend, and anyone following the stream would be bound to meet it.

To follow the river, however, by using the bank was none too easy, and might well have proved unprofitable. For the last half mile the ground had been falling fast till The Lane had sunk from a combe into a veritable gorge, with cliffs upon either side two hundred feet high. These were not to be scaled, and as they fell down sheer into the river itself, the only way to

surmount them would have been to retrace one's steps. The heights were densely wooded, and though, by following the gorge, to strike the river would have been simple enough, to accomplish this would have taken half an hour, and since there was nothing to show how soon the cliffs gave way to lower ground or even how close one could safely keep to the edge, all idea of walking to meet the barge was soon abandoned.

There was nothing to be done but wait.

The four had peered at the emerald till it was too dark to see, but, if the gem held them, it resolutely declined to disclose any further secrets.

And now three hours had gone by, and Night had stolen upon her heritage. . . .

"I firmly believe," said Patricia, "that that man behind the haycock is mixed up in this." She laid back a beautiful head to stare at the crescent moon. "Why didn't he want to be seen?"

"You may be right," said Simon, with his eyes on the river's bend. "But unless he's another Goosegog he can't have created the shoal."

"Why," said Eulalie, lacing her delicate fingers about a shapely knee, "why should he want to do us down?"

"I can't imagine," said Patricia, "but he gave me the clear impression of somebody who's set a trap and is watching it work. And then look at Pouch."

"What about Pouch?" said Simon. "You don't suggest——"

"That he was anything more than a mischievous fool? Well, I'm not so sure—as I was."

"In other words," said Pomfret, "my lady's suggesting a plot. An enemy in the background, and Pouch and 'Enery 'Aycock two of his myrmidons. Well, that may or may not be so. But if it is, all I can say is that if his agents are all as good as Pouch, we've nothing to fear. Secondly, who in his senses would employ Pouch upon any mission more delicate than that of a caretaker to a disused swinery? Thirdly, if some one really wanted to put it across us, how singularly simple it would be. We're alone and unarmed and we've no idea where we are. No questions would be asked, and if they were, the blame could always be awarded to a nomadic ogre. Nobody'd try and find him to question him."

"You forget," said Patricia, "that Logic's unknown within The Pail. Their plan of action's certain to be absurd."

"In that case," said Eulalie, "we can ignore it."

"As far," said her husband, "as our safety's concerned I'm with you. But as for our convenience, if we've got to thank some wallah for hanging up the barge—well, I'd like to meet him. That's all. I shouldn't use any eggs. I should just enlarge his nose. I should——"

"Here we are," said Simon, as the steady light of lanthorns swam into view up stream.

"Thank Heaven for that," said Patricia fervently. "And now I'll admit that I was getting anxious."

"So," said her husband, "was I."

"Never again," said Pomfret. He got to his feet and lifted his wife to hers. "In future, if I must have a walk, I'll walk by the side of the barge—within reach of the necessities of life. You know, I'm like Nature. I abhor a vacuum."

Eulalie said nothing until Gog had answered Simon's hail and the oars were being shipped for the barge to glide alongside. Then she raised her clear voice.

"And now I may tell you," she said, "that we were followed from Fiddle and that somebody has been watching us ever since."



"It was treacle," said Gog. "Not mud. Over a mile of it—opposite Boy Blue Farm. It took us five hours to get through. I'd give something to know who did it. I rather thought the idea was to keep me out of the way. That was what worried me so. If I'd got stuck and Pouch had won his case, it might have been awkward. And it's perfectly clear that some one is out for blood. What was he like—that fellow behind the hay?"

The four described the suspect as well as they could, but the courier only frowned and shook his head.

"Never mind," he said. "Whoever we're up against has lost his match. His only chance was to get us before we were wise." He pointed to Simon's shoe. "And now just tell me as near as ever you can where you became so valuable. It's most important."

Simon did so.

“It’s a very good thing,” said Gog, “that it happened before you met Pouch. And no one in Fiddle referred to it?”

“No one,” said Simon Beaulieu. “They probably thought it was a fashion.”

“I doubt it,” said Gog. “‘Leave the pudding and eat the bag’ is Fiddle’s motto, and they live up to it. It’s the silliest village within The Pail. Simple Simon was born there. They always rest their brains between two and five, or I’d never have let you go.”

Here the barge, which had been going very slowly, came definitely to rest, and anchors were let down.

The courier rose to his feet.

“I’m going to leave you,” he said. “But not for long. I shall be back by dawn. You see, there’s only one Sovereign Touchstone in all the world, and that was lost twenty-five years ago. And now since Simon’s found it, it seems a pity not to bring it along. It may be useful.”

CHAPTER VIII

GATHERING CLOUDS

“YES,” said Gog. “That little round, grey stone has wrought more trouble than I could tell you of in a month of Saturday nights. The life of the man who had it (and it’s passed through many hands) wasn’t worth living—while it lasted, of course: for he never had to live it very long. The possessor elect saw to that. But we’re going to do much better.” He rubbed his hands. “Nobody’s going to know that we possess it. That’s why I sank Simon’s shoe in three fathoms of the best. The only thing that worries me is that in two or three days’ time we shall reach The Verge.”

“What’s The Verge?” said Eulalie.

“The Verge of The High Court. You’re going to be presented, you know. Well, we shall have to pass The Customs when we get to The Verge, and we don’t want that bauble found.”

“Shall we be searched?” said Patricia.

“Certainly not,” said the courier. “But the barge will be. When we come to The Verge, we shall all get off and a squad of The Winebibbers will get on. While we’re passing The Customs they’ll go over the barge and all on board.”

“Then the obvious thing to do is to keep the bauble with us.”

Gog shook his head.

“I said we shouldn’t be searched,” he said. “And nor we shall, unless we stay aboard. But they’ve a very keen sense of smell at The Custom House—remarkably keen. They’re chosen for that, you know, and specially trained. If you went through in the dark they could smell how you were dressed and even whether your stockings were clocked or plain. But that’s nothing. They can smell the dates on the coins in a miser’s purse.”

“If you’re going to talk like this,” said Pomfret, “you must get out and walk. It’s very unlucky for anyone to be struck dead on board ship.”

The courier put up a foot to brush a fly from his ear.

“The trouble with you,” he said, “is that you’re not acclimatized. You haven’t yet learned to swallow—figuratively, I mean. Etchechuria’s a law

unto itself, brother. Never mind. You'll see in a day or two. Being smelt is believing."

"But what's the idea?" said Simon. "D'you have to pay some duty on certain things?"

Gog shook his head.

"No. But when you go to The High Court, instead of your observing the customs—which would be inconvenient because you don't know them—The Customs observe you. It's a very old custom. And if there's anything about you which they think you won't need at Court, such as a stiletto or a bag of poison, they report it to the authorities. Well, I don't say they'll report The Sovereign Touchstone, but they'll certainly smell it, and—well, it doesn't do anyone any good to get excited, does it?"

There was a silence.

"If," said Pomfret, "the observation of The Customs is half as close as you say I don't see how we can hope to smuggle his highness, unless some one swallows him. And then they'd be very self-conscious, wouldn't they? Fancy being lined with gold."

"The only possible way," said Gog, "is to avoid The Custom House. And the only way to avoid The Custom House is to stay on the barge—unseen. And there's only one way to do that."

Her chin cupped in a palm, Eulalie regarded the courier with steady eyes.

"I have always wanted," she said, "to wear an invisible cloak."

Gog spun into the air.

"Great brains have the same wave," he cried. "And so you shall, my lady, this very night."

He leapt to the taffrail and pointed to an upstanding hill which looked like nothing so much as a gigantic hog's head, the bung of which had been withdrawn, for, while its conformation was perfect, a head of water was spurting out of a hole in its side to disappear into the forest which lay about it.

"At the foot of that hill is an inn called *The Peck of Pepper*. It's just about six miles off and it's kept by a fellow called Zigzag. Now Zigzag used to be Goosegog's body servant and as such he had the reversion of Goosegog's clothes. Now I happen to know that Goosegog's rather

extravagant—never wears his things out, you know. So while Zigzag was with him, he must have done very well. In fact, it's The Pail to a pigsty that he's got two or three invisible cloaks, and all in good condition."

"But will he part with one?" said Patricia.

"Not to me," said Gog. "Zigzag and I are not upon speaking terms. We quarrelled years ago. He asked me if I knew a word of eleven letters which meant 'beautiful,' and I suggested 'colmondeley.' Well, I never thought he'd send it in, but he did and got fined a hundred nobles for *lèse-majesté* or bringing The King's English into contempt. Still, if you go and ask him nicely he'll give one to you."

"I don't quite see why he should," said Simon.

"Neither do I," said Pomfret. "But what's much more to the point, to get to *The Peck of Pepper* we should have to withdraw from the barge: and in view of the enchanting adventures we had in The Short Lane I feel that again to leave harbour would be to apply for trouble of an unpleasant kind."

"Possibly," said Gog. "But it couldn't be half so unpleasant as that which The Sovereign Touchstone can induce. Of course, we can throw the latter away—but a billion a week might be rather useful one day. You never can tell."

"I'm all for lunching at *The Peck of Pepper*," said Eulalie. "I'm not so mad about The Touchstone, but I'd love an invisible cloak."

"That's right," said Gog excitedly. "I'll come with you until we can see the inn. Then I'll get up in a tree and go to sleep. So long as she's moored, the barge'll be all right," and, with that, he darted forward to give instructions.

In another moment the oarsmen were shipping their oars, and the lordly vessel was edging towards the bank.

"Here, what are you doing?" cried Pomfret. "Stop the tram. I—I've not given my consent. I'm against the manœuvre. I——"

"My dear," said Patricia, laughing, "we can't throw away a fortune."

Pomfret rose to his feet.

"It cannot be too widely known," he announced, "that I decline to be rushed. I've a were-wolf—I mean, a child-wife, and I'm sure the Prudential would say that an ogre was an 'act of God.' And if you want another reason, I'm not at all sure that a twelve-mile walk would be good for me. I have to

be very careful on Fridays. And now let's think this over. . . . To suggest discarding a fortune which is not only inexhaustible but can be carried in the vest or waistcoat-pocket without inconvenience is to be profane. At the same time I'm more than ready to believe that to declare our possession would be to court an interest—not altogether wholesome and possibly even sordid—in our general health and well-being."

"Full stop," said Gog, who had returned to the poop.

"If, therefore," continued Pomfret, turning a glassy eye upon the speaker, "it is essential that we should go to Court—and, as there can be no reason why we should, I've no doubt you'll maintain that it is—and if The Customs are as hot as you represent, it's fairly obvious that The Sovereign Touchstone has got to be smuggled through or across or under or whatever the adverb may be. Very good. Are you going to tell me that without an invisible cloak that can't be done? Why can't you stay aboard and suck it?"

"Because whoever stays aboard is going to be searched. If I had a mouth like—well, like one we all know, possibly they wouldn't notice——"

"Thank you," said Pomfret. "Then why not sink The Touchstone in a good six inches of beer and keep the pot in your hand?"

"Because," said the courier, "satisfactorily to account to the sergeant-footman first for the sudden loss of a pot of solid silver and then for the sudden acquisition of a pot of solid gold is beyond my powers," and, with that, he leaned backwards and placing his palms upon his insteps proceeded to roll to and fro after the manner of a hoop.

"You see," said Simon to Pomfret, "it's not as easy as it looks."

"I don't think it even looks easy," said Pomfret, following the revolutions of the hoop with the uncomfortable gaze of one who watches against his will. "The bare idea of emulation makes the pores of my palms function."

"I was referring," said Simon, "to the practice of the art of bluff."

"Of course you were," said Pomfret, averting his eyes. "Stupid of me, but excusable. I hate acrobats. They make me go all gooseflesh. Go on."

"Listen," said Simon. "I'm entirely with you about leaving the barge and I shan't have an easy moment until we're back. But if we're to keep The Touchstone, I don't see what else we can do. There must be some way, of course, but I can't think of one." He turned to Gog. "What about fastening it

to a float and dropping it into the stream. If we make the line four feet long and sink it in five, no one——”

“I should have explained,” said Gog, “that The Custom House is served by two quays a quarter of a mile apart. You’ll leave the barge at the first, pass through The Customs and join it again at the second. Of course we could go back, but it would look funny.”

Pomfret rubbed his nose.

“Supposing,” he said, “supposing we get this cloak. What’s your plan of campaign?”

The courier straightened his back.

“We all get off,” he said, “at the first quay. Then whoever’s got The Touchstone puts on the cloak, turns back, follows The Winebibbers on board and takes up his or her position on some conspicuously empty, but somewhat inaccessible spot—the figure-head, for instance. At the second quay, they follow The Winebibbers off, join the others, doff the invisible cloak—and there you are.”

Simon fingered his chin.

“I must confess,” he said, “that the deeper one goes the tougher the job becomes. To conceal a thing which continually broadcasts its presence is never easy, but publicly to push that thing through a hair-sieve without disclosing that you’ve got it—well, without one of Goosegog’s ulsters I don’t see how it can be done. Of course, complete with ulster, you can’t very well go wrong.”

Eulalie rose and, coming behind her husband, put her arms about his neck.

“And now, having tested every bar in every loop-hole and found them all as sturdy as Gog declared, let’s walk out by the door and go for a stroll. I know an awfully good way. And you shall have your first experience of choosing your wife a cloak.”

“Why is it,” said her husband, taking her hands in his, “that a woman always fancies what suits her worst? Now many would look their best in an invisible cloak. But it won’t become you at all.”



Patricia sat upon the turf sideways, propping herself with a pretty brown arm and looking like an enlargement of a beautiful child. Her shining head was bare, and two great plaits of dark hair, each tipped with a little case of cloth of gold, fell down over her breast as far as her lap. Indeed, it was apparent that The Sovereign Touchstone had already been most happily employed, for her white silk frock, which was short as a frock should be, was girt with a broad gold belt with a hanging tongue, her careless pose was betraying a golden garter, to whose efficiency the shape of a slim silk leg bore elegant witness, and little heelless shoes of soft gold added, if that were possible, to the beauty of her feet.

The look in her great brown eyes, however, showed that her thoughts were far away.

“How long,” she murmured, “how long is all this going on?”

Lying flat on the sward by her side, her husband shrugged his shoulders.

“My pretty lady,” he said, “how can I tell?”

“You can’t, of course,” said Patricia, touching his hair. “I was really thinking aloud.” She hesitated. “But it’s bound to end sometime, Simon. All dreams do.”

“But this isn’t a dream, darling.”

“Are you sure of that? I sometimes think . . .”

“It’s a difficult thing to prove a negative, Pat. But if you put a hand in my pocket you’ll find my note-case there. I think its contents will help. I don’t mind admitting I’ve glanced at them once or twice—just to be sure.”

Patricia drew out the case. . . .

Its contents were real enough.

Two cheque-books—one of the Westminster Bank and the other of *La Banque de France*—whose counterfoils recorded payments to familiar names: a letter from Berry Pleydell written from Brooks’s Club: Yves’ address: a receipted bill, headed *Hôtel de l’Univers, Esteppebazan*: a sheet of *papier timbré* on which was typewritten an agreement to rent the flat at Chartres: and, finally, two official acknowledgments ‘*de demande de carte d’identité*,’ with Simon’s photograph affixed to one and Patricia’s to the other, and each of them bearing the stamp of a French *Mairie*.

Patricia put up the papers and slid the case into her husband’s pocket.

"I withdraw," she said. "It's a very good imitation, but it isn't a dream. And now let's begin again, dear. How long is all this going on? Don't think I want it to end—because I don't. I'm frightfully happy here, but it can't go on, Simon. Don't you feel that?"

"Yes," said her husband, "I do. If you ask me why it shouldn't, I can't tell you. But . . . Well, I can't see myself growing old within The Pail. I can't see us having children here and generally settling down. There's no reason why we shouldn't—no reason on earth, but . . ."

"Exactly," said Patricia. "'But . . .'" To go back to the world seems madness—almost sacrilege, but down in the bottom of my heart I know we shall. But I can't tell when or why. If we were a fashionable crowd who simply lived for all the fun of the fair, it would be because we were homesick. But we're not. None of us cares a damn for 'getting together.' In fact, we dislike it very much. We all want the simple life. . . . Well, here it is—the original 'simple life'—the genuine article, untouched."

"True," said Simon, sitting up. "Yet we can't live it, my lady. And that's why one day we shall withdraw. The simple life is like ale—sweet, home-brewed liquor: and if you really like it you don't care for anything else. Well, that's our case. . . . But life in Etchecuria is audit ale—a concentrated essence of simple life. And as such we can't cope with it indefinitely. It's a liqueur—an event. And you can't turn an event into life any more than you can quench your thirst with audit ale."

The far-away look stole back into Patricia's eyes.

"I wonder," she said. "I——"

A vigorous oath and the sound of a heavy fall cut short the sentence. As the two started to their feet, Eulalie's voice could be heard on the other side of a knoll.

"Oh, my dear," she cried. "Have you hurt yourself?"

"'Bid me discourse,'" said Pomfret shakily, "'I will enchant thine ear, Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green.' Shakespeare knew his world, didn't he? Oh, and do laugh, beloved. Let it come with the breath. That's right." A wail of merriment argued that his wife had succumbed. "You know you're to blame really. If I'd been watching my step instead of considering your mouth——"

"The great thing," said Gog, "when walking, is to lift up the feet. Shuffling's all very well, but——"

“Yes, I thought you’d say something helpful,” said Pomfret. “Why don’t you walk in front and flag the men-trap?”

The courier, however, was down on his knees, carefully examining the impediment. After a moment he looked up.

“No wonder you fell,” he said. “Pride’s just ahead of us. He’s very heavy you know, and if the soil’s at all soft he creates a considerable impression. Now I wonder what he’s doing here.”

There was no doubt about the footprint, which, when the bracken had been parted, was seen to be two inches deep and only an hour or two old.

“Perhaps he’s making for the inn,” said Patricia, who had returned to the scene of the mishap.

“Well, let’s go and sting him for a drink,” said Pomfret. “If he likes to leave his footfalls lying about, the least he can do is to revive his prey.”

“I’m afraid he’ll expect to be treated,” said Gog, springing to his feet. “He’s very pompous. Still, as you won’t have to pay, it doesn’t matter. And now—*en avant*. We’ve only another mile.”

That this was true was evident, for the thunder of the fall from The Hogshead was plainly audible, and the hill itself seemed but a stone’s throw away.

The five proceeded leisurely.

The forest was here consisting of a mighty congress of oaks, magnificently grown, plainly of immense antiquity, and rising from the golden flood of bracken like so many Earls Marshal gathered together to decide the order of Nature for the coming year. The view ahead was therefore considerably obscured, and it was not surprising that, after covering another two furlongs, Simon, who was leading the way, should have found himself abreast of a little smooth-shaven lawn before he was aware of its existence.

After a long look, Simon beckoned to the others to approach as gently as they could. . . .

Upon the plot stood a man in a short orange-coloured cotehardie and bright green hose. The cape of his hood was jagged, and the head-piece was off his head and lying upon his shoulders, while from his folded arms were hanging two silken tippets, embroidered the one with mice and the other with humble-bees. He was short and stout and extremely red in the face,

though whether such suffusion was chronic or had been induced by emotion it was impossible to say.

In front of him upon the lawn lay twelve large squares of wood upon each of which was painted some letter of the alphabet. These had been set out in line and so arranged as to read

ZIGZAG IS A MUG.

With this legend, however, the stranger seemed anything but content, for after staring upon the combination with great malevolence he flung himself upon the last six letters and began to shuffle them furiously, snorting and blowing the while as though in contempt and indignation and plainly seeking to extract some other apophthegm.

He was in the midst of this endeavour when he happened to turn his head and so to perceive that he was no longer alone.

For a moment he stared at the intruders.

Then he straightened his back.

“Good for you,” he said gravely. “What do you know?”

Somewhat disconcerted, the four turned instinctively to Gog to carry the situation, but to their horror the latter was not to be seen.

After one long, red moment Patricia stepped into the breach.

“How d’you do,” she said sweetly. “We were just going to ask you the way to *The Peck of Pepper*.”

“And a very good way too,” said the stranger brusquely. “It’s a fruit of an inn. But I shouldn’t touch the brandy. The beer won’t hurt you—it’s watered: but the brandy’s sudden death.”

“Thanks very much,” said Pomfret. “What about the still lemonade? Is that at all nourishing?”

“I can’t recommend it,” snapped the other. “In fact, if you take my advice you’ll drink water and pay the corkage.”

“I see,” said Pomfret. “It is a—‘a fruit of an inn,’ isn’t it? And the food? Is that equally appetising? Or d’you have to be inoculated before you see it?”

The stranger shrugged his shoulders.

“‘One man’s meat,’ ” he said, “ ‘is another man’s poison.’ I’ve had that printed and hung on the parlour’s wall—for my protection. Then if they

don't feel well after having a couple of helpings of Beggar's Delight, they've only themselves to thank."

So soon as he could speak—

"I think it's somebody else's turn," said Pomfret weakly. "I'm going to take a short walk to compose my thoughts. They say music's very healing. I suppose nobody's got a concertina."

Simon took up the reins.

"From what you say," he said, "I think you must be Zigzag."

"That's right," said the stranger shortly. "Host of *The Peck of Pepper*. And now I must do this puzzle." He returned to his occupation. "I'd sell my soul to get the swine right," he added savagely. "It's one of the 'True Sayings' series. I've spent over six weeks trying and this is the last day. That's why I'm out of humour," and, with that, he got to his knees and began to rearrange the letters with unnecessary violence.

There was something rather pathetic about the fellow, for his nerves were plainly ragged, and he gave the impression of a naturally jovial personality which has been devilled into assuming a petulance of the impropriety of which it is painfully conscious.

"I don't suppose we can help you," said Eulalie.

"Neither do I," said Zigzag over his shoulder. "But you might try. I've got the first half right, but the last six letters won't go. Have you heard of a word called GUSIAM?"

"I—I don't think so," said Eulalie, staring.

"Neither have I," said Zigzag. "I don't think there is one. And SUGMIA's no earthly. AMUSIG might do, but I haven't got a cold. I warn you, I've tried everything."

"What about GUN-SHY?" said Pomfret. "Oh no. You haven't got an H, have you? I mean, an N. Still, if you'd had a few drinks——"

"You know, you don't listen," snarled Zigzag. "This is the 'True Sayings' series. I'm not *GUN-SHY*."

"Of course not," said every one hurriedly.

The position was painfully clear and highly delicate.

Zigzag was not in the mood to grant a favour—least of all to his present company. For six long weeks he had flogged his unlucky wits to avert

ignominy and had taken the precaution of pursuing his labours in the forest, lest eyes other than his own should behold his shame. Now, not only was his failure plainly but a matter of hours, but four complete strangers had stumbled upon his secret, for the undoubtedly accurate, if offensive, solution of the problem was distressingly obvious to anyone who could spell. Indeed, unless an innocent, not to say flattering anagram of IS A MUG was very shortly forthcoming, it seemed certain that for any one of the four to broach the loan of an invisible cloak would tend to condense, if not ignite, an atmosphere which was already so charged with electricity as to be most uncomfortable.

The four stared upon the letters, desperately racking their brains, while Zigzag squatted like a toad before his bugbear, slamming the blocks to and fro and forming combinations whose futility was quite painful.

Suddenly—

“I’ve got it,” said Simon quietly.

“You *haven’t*!” screeched Zigzag.

“Yes, I have. It’s Latin. Look here.” He stepped to the other’s side and began to arrange the letters in a new formation. “And this isn’t an I: it’s a hyphen. You see, they’ve hyphenated your name. It’s rather a compliment.”

He clapped the I into place and stood back to view his achievement.

ZIG-ZAG MAGUS

“B-but what’s M-MAGUS mean?” stammered Zigzag.

“A wizard or learned man. It’s a slogan, obviously. A good translation would be ZIG-ZAG THE SAGE.”

For a moment nobody breathed.

Then with a seraphic smile Zigzag began to dance.



“But I insist,” said Zigzag. “I’ve three invisible cloaks and I never wear one. You shall have whichever you like. One’s of fur, another’s of silk and the third is of stuff. I don’t know what colour they are because I’ve never seen them, but they’re all in working order and nice condition.”

“It’s awfully kind of you,” said Eulalie.

“Tush,” said Zigzag, “I’m giving myself a treat. Are you sure you all like hare pie?”

“Certain,” said Pomfret swallowing. “In fact we’re quite bigoted about it.”

“Good,” said Zigzag. “I always get on with people who like hare pie. We always have it on my birthday.”

“Oh, is this your birthday?” said Patricia.

“No,” said Zigzag. “That’s why we shan’t have it.”

The untoward announcement took everyone by surprise, and Pomfret walked for some moments like a man in a dream, alternately staring upon Zigzag and putting a hand to his head, until one of the letter-blocks which he was bearing recalled him to a sense of his duties by falling upon his foot.

That he should cry out was natural, for the slab was of oak and must have weighed three or four pounds, but before his howl of anguish had died away, Zigzag was by his side and patting him on the back.

“Now don’t be upset,” said the latter. “It isn’t broken.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Pomfret, painfully stroking his instep. “It’s only meant for light articles.”

“It’d take more than that to break it,” said Zigzag, examining the block. “Why, it isn’t even scratched. Besides, if it was it wouldn’t matter. So why worry, gossip? After all, what is a block of wood?”

Looking as if he could define one at some length, the gossip took out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

“Is—is it far now?” said Eulalie tremulously.

“*The Peck of Pepper?*” said Zigzag. “Oh, about eight hundred links.”

“Can’t you tell us in bushels?” said Pomfret. “I mean, furlongs. I’ve forgotten my golf measure.”

“Brother,” said Zigzag as they rounded a monster oak, “I’ll let you judge for yourself. It’s just about as far as that.”

As he spoke he pointed to a long flash of white between the trees, and a moment later the five stepped into a broad natural close, full in the middle of which stood a low house, whose walls were as white as snow and quite dazzling in the hot sunshine. The dwelling was straightly timbered with coal-black beams and roofed with a pelt of brown thatch out of which old

brick chimneys thrust up their jolly stacks. The tiny windows were open, revealing the promise of the cool within, and leaning over the doorway was an aged hatchment, which served as the signboard of the inn. On this was richly painted a black leather measure, piled and overflowing with a puckered, scarlet fruit, so admirably presented that the vessel and its gay burden seemed to be in relief, while the impulse to follow the fall of a berry which was about to tumble was irresistible. All about the tavern was a brilliant company of flowers, and a luxuriant wistaria was streaming across the façade, tiring the black and white with gorgeous rags and fringing the sturdy eaves with purple tatters.

The door of the house was open, but the doorway was filled by the figure of a man of great corpulence, magnificently habited in gold and crimson, who seemed at first sight to be in the act of entering the inn, for his head was inside and one leg was across the threshold; but a moment's consideration showed that he was not so much entering as endeavouring to force an entrance, for in spite of obvious endeavour he made no progress at all and only advanced one leg to retire the other.

"Bless my soul," cried Zigzag. "He's done it at last," and, with that, he dropped his letters and let out a roar of laughter. "That's Pride," he crowed, addressing his guests. "He's so puffed up that at last he's stuck in the door."

That this was a fact was almost immediately confirmed by Pride himself, for so soon as he judged that the five were within earshot he lifted an arrogant voice.

"I desire to enter this beer-house: my presence, however, is so notable that I am unable to do so under my own power: pray induct me and then withdraw as I wish to be alone."

"Come, come, sir," said Zigzag, grinning. "You're addressing two ladies here."

"I am not concerned," said Pride, "with the sex of my audience. Besides, some women are commendably strong. And now get down to it—in silence. I dislike your voice."

"Is he always like this?" said Pomfret. "I mean, isn't he ever assaulted, or——"

Zigzag shook his head.

"It's just his way," he said. "He can't help it. And now I'll go in by the back and get hold of his belt, and when I say 'Go,' you shove."

With that, he disappeared, while Pride announced that he was not in the habit of being kept waiting and spoke of the indignity of being handled by the lower orders and especially by strangers, whose habits as likely as not were none too clean.

“Can anyone,” said Pomfret, whose temper was beginning to rise, “suggest any earthly or heavenly reason why we should assist a beastly and impudent glutton to prejudice our lunch?”

Before the others could reply—

“I warn you,” said Pride, “whoever you may happen to be, that I am happily unable to appreciate a disregard of my known desires, while disapproval of my outlook but argues the vileness of your own.”

“Of course, you ought to be removed,” said Pomfret.

“I hope to be,” said Pride. “Almost at once.”

“In a furniture van,” said Pomfret. “To the nearest blasted heath, and then wired in. You—you cumber the earth.”

“Foul slime,” said Pride, screwing round an enormous face in a vain endeavour to view his aweless opponent, “so soon as you have urged me within and washed my feet——”

“What you really need,” said Pomfret shakily, “is a good death and burial. What are you doing to-morrow?”

“A what?” said Pride, pricking up his ears.

“A death and burial,” said Pomfret.

“I don’t know the beverage,” said Pride. “Is it, er, comfortable?”

“It’s very soothing,” said Pomfret. “Cures indigestion once for all.”

“Dear me,” said Pride. “I had no idea you were so knowledgeable. I trust that after luncheon you will favour me with the receipt.”

“There are standing behind you,” said Pomfret, “two ladies of high degree. If you’ll beg their gracious pardon and that of their squires, first, for obstructing their ingress and then for behaving like a cesspool in spate, I’ll do as you desire.”

“Oh, blasphemy!” wailed Pride. “Never mind. I forgive the four of you. And now do effect my entry.”

Here Zigzag was heard to arrive, and since the likelihood of obtaining any better reparation or of teaching the monster the error of his ways seemed faint indeed, Simon and Pomfret responded to the host's entreaties and, putting their shoulders to the reverse of Pride, strove to heave his bulk forward, while Zigzag himself laboured like a straining horse to hale his graceless guest into the parlour. While they were so engaged Pride began to order his luncheon, specifying with a loud voice the various dishes which he should require and detailing the manner in which they must be served with as much deliberation and indifference to his surroundings as if he were lying in bed, to the great indignation of Pomfret, who constantly threatened to withdraw his support from what seemed a hopeless cause. Indeed, it was not until Patricia and Eulalie had added what weight they had that the refractory flesh at length abruptly yielded, and the six were precipitated in a heap on to a sanded floor.

The girls and their squires were uppermost, and so no more than shaken, but that Zigzag must have taken some hurt seemed certain, for Pride fell like a landslide directly upon him, making no effort at all to save himself or his host, and merely remarking in the most preoccupied tone that "a capon should be basted with butter and presently powdered with flour." The landlord, however, was up before anyone else, shaking with laughter and praying the others to rise and come to table as luncheon was about to be served.

"In that case," said Pride, getting up with astonishing agility, "the repast which I have just indicated had better be served to-night. Shall you be here?" he added, turning to Eulalie.

"I'm afraid we shan't," said that lady.

"Good," said Pride. "I don't like sitting down six: it's five too many." With that, he proceeded to his place, which there could be no mistaking, for it was nothing less than a slice of the trunk of a tree, set at the head of the table, which was laid for six.

To sit down with such a glutton seemed to be tempting Providence, but there was no other table and Zigzag was beginning to fuss, so the four took their seats in some uneasiness. To their relief, however, Pride's manners at table proved to be above reproach, and while he ate heartily he in no sense attacked his food, consuming it rather with a decency not always displayed by those whose stomachs are plainly their first consideration. Moreover, under the influence of the cheer he became quite genial, actually complimenting Pomfret upon his girth and declaring that had he begun

younger he might with care have attained proportions which would have compared with his own.

“That’s a very beautiful thought,” said Pomfret. “Very beautiful. And now let’s discuss politics.”

“That’s right,” said Zigzag. “I’ll begin. What’s the difference between a load of hay at sundown and a brinded cat on hot bricks?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Patricia, after thinking very hard.

“Let me help you,” said Zigzag, piling her plate with green-geese pie. “Now can you do it?”

Patricia shook her head.

“Well, one’s much bigger for one thing,” said Zigzag, filling Eulalie’s cup.

“Exactly,” said Pride. “Or you can do it another way. If a swarm of bees in May is worth a load of hay, what’s the face value of a cat on hot bricks?”

“I shouldn’t think that way was very popular,” said Simon. “Possibly a veterinary surgeon, with a flair for higher mathematics——”

“Not at all,” said Pride. “Any fool can divide a load, and cats multiply like anything.”

“Then what’s the answer?” said Eulalie.

“There isn’t one,” said Pride. “It’s what’s called an oratorical problem. D’you mind passing the claret cup?”

“I know a better one than that,” said Pomfret, accepting a slice of boar’s head which would have made a giant think. “Why is a bunch of copper-bottomed bustards like a bucket of goosegrease on a foggy night?”

There was a moment’s silence.

Then—

“Chestnut!” cried Zigzag. “Chestnut! That’s as old as the hills.”

“Yes,” said Pride. “I remember asking that before I was born.”

“Well, I’d love to know the answer,” said Pomfret.

“‘To keep his head warm,’ ” said Pride shortly. “Do you remember the great fog of 1760?”

“Only just,” said Pomfret swallowing. “I’m older than I look.”

“Older in sin?” said Pride.

“No, wood,” said Pomfret.

“What was it like?” said Eulalie, bubbling.

“I don’t know,” said Pride. “I’ve often wondered.”

“I don’t believe there was one,” said Zigzag. “Not in 1670.”

“But he remembers it,” said Pride, nodding at Pomfret.

“Very indistinctly,” said Pomfret. “You see, it was so foggy you couldn’t even see the fog, so my memory’s naturally hazy.”

“Did you say ‘fog’ or ‘frog’?” said Zigzag.

“Fog,” said Pomfret. “R mute.”

“Then the frogs were visible?” said Pride. “Fancy a fog full of frogs. You know you must have been drink-dreaming.”

“What’s the difference,” said Zigzag, “between a foggy frog and a froggy fog?”

“When it’s ajar,” said Pomfret promptly.

“Wrong,” said Zigzag. “Never mind. The great thing is to try and not mind making a fool of yourself. And now do have some more wood-cock. You know, you’re eating nothing.”

Wondering whether outrage, insult, solicitude and inaccuracy had ever been compressed into so short an utterance, Pomfret stared dazedly about him and then, his eyes lighting upon his flagon, took a deep breath and drank several draughts with great deliberation.

Pride addressed himself to Eulalie.

“I cannot tell you,” he said cordially, “how very greatly I enjoy a little philosophical intercourse. It brings out the best in me.”

“I’m sure that’s very easy,” said Eulalie politely.

“Naturally,” said Pride. “Naturally. Still, directing a high-brow conversation does it quicker than anything else. And what an accomplished liar your husband is. You must be very proud of him.”

Eulalie raised her eyebrows.

“He can keep his end up,” she said.

“Can he indeed?” said Pride. “What with?”

"Farceurs," said Eulalie shortly. And, with that, she returned to the host, who from his earnest demeanour seemed about to deliver himself of a matter of grave importance.

"Supposing," said Zigzag, "you'd stolen an ogre's pig: and supposing the very next day, while you were taking the pig for a walk, you met the ogre—would you cut him? Or would you stop and ask after his wife?"

"It all depends," said Pride, "on whether he's got a wife."

"Assume he's a widower," said Zigzag.

"Then I should cut him," said Pride. "He'd almost certainly work the conversation round to pigs, whatever you started with. Don't you agree, Sir Simon?"

"I should think he'd be more than likely to drag them in," said Simon.

"That," said Zigzag, "would be highly embarrassing. But surely to cut him would arouse his suspicions."

"If you ask me," said Pomfret, "the question would never arise."

"What did he say?" said Pride. "I missed that."

"He said," said Patricia, "that the question would never arise."

"Because," said Pomfret, who had been waiting to get his own back, "if you knew your Plato, you would appreciate that the asportation of live-stock, which automatically communicates to its master any attempt upon his ownership, must of necessity so neutralize itself as not only to become abortive but to render its author incapable of recognizing, or indeed of being recognized, until such time as his physiognomy has regained its normal proportions."

There was a long silence.

At length—

"That's just what I was going to say," said Zigzag.

"And I," said Pride. "He took the words out of my mouth."

So soon as he could speak—

"D'you fish at all?" said Pomfret. "I mean, if you don't you ought to. Some of your catches would be simply fabulous."

"D'you really think so?" said Zigzag.

"I'm sure of it," said Pomfret. "You've got the true fisherman's sense."

“I once caught a rainbow trout,” said Pride.

“That’s right,” said Pomfret. “Go on. I suppose it had a crock of gold at each end.”

“That,” said Pride, “did not appear. But you’ll never guess what it died of.”

“German measles,” said Pomfret.

“No, laughter,” said Pride. “You see I’d been tickling it, and——”

The sudden and something uproarious entrance of two strangers cut short the anecdote, for one was laughing very freely over some jest and clapping his fellow on the back as if in mock reproof of some witticism, while the other was groaning very loudly and wearing an expression of piety so fervent as to be quite repulsive. Upon, however, perceiving the company, they pulled themselves up and uncovered and bowed to the girls before taking their seats upon a settle and calling for wine.

“Good day, gentlemen,” said Zigzag, rising. “I’ve some excellent malmsey.”

“I suppose it had better be malmsey,” said the taller in a miserable voice. “Vile as it is, the body’s got to be sustained.”

“Well, I’ll have the malmsey,” said his fellow, “and you have a pitcher of milk.”

“No, no,” said the other, shuddering. “I—I must deny myself. It’s very hard,” he added gloomily. “Milk is my favourite drink.”

He was a lean-fleshed man, clad all in pepper and salt, with a Puritan’s wide white collar and a broad-brimmed hat. His hair was red, his nose was hooked and his eyes were continually raised as though in deprecation of sin, while the colour of his face suggested that if milk was in fact his favourite beverage he had denied himself with great consistency and resolution for many years.

In the eyes of the four, however, the other was still more unprepossessing, for, although, except for a shifty pair of eyes and an everlasting grin, he was not unpleasant to look upon and was cheerfully dressed, they had seen his face before. In a word, his was the head which had been protruded with such caution from behind the haycock in the meadow of Boy Blue Farm. . . .

Zigzag had returned from the cellar and was whispering in Eulalie’s ear.

“Customers, like Youth, must be served, my lady, even if they’re as foul as you are fair. In fact, you must find all fair in love and war and the bar-parlour. And now I’m going to give you some clouted cream. It’s straight from the cool-room.”

“No, thanks very much,” said the girl in a low voice. “In fact, it’s time we were going. And so, if you meant what you said, will you take me to choose that wrap?”

“Every time,” said the host warmly. He rose to his feet. “You and the Lady Patricia come with me, and within two minutes of time she won’t see you.”

As the girls rose Simon touched Zigzag upon the arm.

“Who are those gentry?” he said in an undertone.

“The tall one’s Snuffle,” whispered Zigzag, “and the short one is known as Bulb. I haven’t much use for either. They always know your business but you never know theirs: and I don’t like that sort of game—it’s too one-sided. They’re supposed to hunt together,” he added darkly, “but I don’t know what they hunt.”



“Yes,” said Snuffle. “These little restrictions are very trying. But be of good cheer, dear brethren, I shall use my good offices in your behalf.”

“But I don’t understand,” said Pomfret. “What have we done?”

“It is alleged,” said Snuffle, casting up his eyes, “—I trust without foundation—that you or one of you spoke slanderously at the end of The Short Lane, declaring in so many words that you were being furtively watched,—a very calumnious and hurtful statement—to the great damage, scandal and disgrace of this most blessed land.”

“This rather looks,” said Simon, “as if that statement was true. Who’s the informant? And if he wasn’t listening how did he happen to hear?”

“The greater the truth, the greater the libel,” said Snuffle. “But there—I mustn’t anticipate the finding of the Court. And above all things trust me, dear brethren. I shall stand by your side, a veritable shield and buckler—whatever it costs.”

With that, he groaned very loudly and after praying into his hat buried his face in his pot with the expression of one who finds the wickedness of

man too dolorous for words.

“You must therefore,” said Bulb haughtily, “await The Steward of The Walks. He and his men will be here any moment now. He’ll hold a Pypowder Court and give you judgment.”

“You seem very well informed,” said Pomfret. “And who the devil are you to give us orders?”

“For threatening a witness,” said Bulb, retreating behind the settle, “you can be pressed to death.”

“I see,” said Pomfret shortly. He turned to Snuffle. “You’re another ‘witness,’ I suppose. Or are you the informant?”

“Brother,” wailed Snuffle. “My heart bleeds for you, but would you have me tell a lie? With these ears I heard you threaten him.”

“I should wait for The Steward,” said Pride, “and plead guilty. It’s a purely technical offence. And all he’ll do is to outlaw you for twenty-four hours.”

“Yes, that’s all,” said Snuffle, waving a dirty hand. “And then you’ll go on your way as free as air.”

“I see,” said Simon. “Only—outlaws.”

“That’s only a form of speech,” said Bulb hastily.

“That’s right,” said Pride. “You’ve got no enemies.”

“What if we had?” said Simon.

“But you haven’t,” cried Snuffle. “Not in the wide, wicked world. Besides, I’m going to——”

“If you had,” said Pride, “the following twenty-four hours would be their chance—obviously.”

“I protest,” said Bulb excitedly, “against this irrelevance. I forbid the banns. I——”

“SILENCE,” said Pomfret.

“Tell me,” said Simon to Pride, “is outlawry a common punishment within The Pail?”

“It’s practically the only one,” said Pride. “It saves the expense of a gaol and it’s a great deterrent. To offend the community or to undo a neighbour may be amusing or convenient, but if, as a result, the community (including

the neighbour and his friends and any enemy you may happen to have) is to have a day, or a week, in which to offend you, the convenience is apt to wither and the amusement to lose its charm.”

“Quite so,” said Simon. “Is outlawry ever given for theft?”

“Invariably,” said Pride. “Why?”

“Ask these two gentlemen,” said Pomfret, turning up the cuffs of his coat. “Not now. They’re going to be engaged—for some time. To-morrow evening, perhaps . . .”

“Read The Riot Act,” said Snuffle, rising. “I don’t like the look in his eye.”

“I read it before we came,” said Bulb. “Just in case of accidents.”

“Then hit him,” said Snuffle, edging as far from Pomfret as the angle made by the junction of the wall and the settle would allow. “Hit him before he hits me.”

“Let’s—let’s wait for The Steward,” faltered Bulb. “I—I don’t want to shed his blood.”

“I’ll absolve you,” piped Snuffle, regarding Pomfret’s preparations with starting eyes. “And when you’ve stunned him, I’ll kick him in the face.”

“Get hold of the girls,” said Pomfret, “and beat it for where we left Gog. As soon as you’re clear, I’ll——”

“But you mustn’t go,” screamed Bulb. “You’ve got to wait for The Steward. I said so just now.”

“—mop up and follow you out.”

“But you can’t,” screamed Snuffle. “It’s not according to plan.”

“Neither will be your dilapidation,” was the grim reply.

“Why the devil don’t you hit him?” howled Snuffle. “It’ll be too late in a moment.”

“We’d b-better let him start,” quavered Bulb. “Then he’ll put himself in the wrong.”

This prudent counsel, however, found no favour with Snuffle, who, realizing that he was not to be saved, instantly let out a perfect screech of dismay after which he called Heaven to witness that while he was a man of peace and in love and charity with all others Pomfret was a ranging lion and

Bulb a white-livered skunk, adding with incredible rapidity of diction, after the manner of one who is talking against Time, that while he personally was not afraid of death, but would rather welcome such a translation, it was indecent to deprive mankind of such a benefactor, that his labours were not yet finished, that he felt far from well and that if Pride did not pick up a knife and stab Pomfret in the back without delay he should take it as a personal affront. These sentiments he then proceeded hysterically to paraphrase, while Bulb, who had got to his knees behind the settle, continually commanded the strangers to stay where they were, yelling that unless they did so they would throw everything out, and calling vociferously upon “all present to arrest and detain one another during His Majesty’s pleasure upon pain of imprisonment and without benefit of clergy.”

The uproar was increased by Zigzag, who could be heard demanding to be told what was afoot, and, finally, by the clear, metallic voice of one accustomed to command in the open air, ordering some one to withdraw and allow him to enter the inn.

“Steward,” shrieked Bulb and Snuffle in frantic unison. “Steward, we’re being murdered.”

This was Snuffle’s last utterance, for Pomfret felled him with a blow like the kick of a horse and was only prevented from extricating Bulb by the seat of his hose by Simon, who caught his arm.

“No good,” said the latter. “We’re trapped. Pride’s stemming the tide in front, but they’re trying the back. We must speak The Steward fair and see what happens.”

“Meanwhile you’ll be for it,” said Eulalie. “Oh, my dear, why did you knock him down? Here, get into this, quick.”

“Into what?” said Pomfret.

“This,” said Eulalie, thrusting him into a garment he could not see. “Put the hood on your head, and——”

“But . . .”

The protest emerged from thin air, for Pomfret had disappeared.

“Splendid,” cried Simon. “Splendid. Now make yourself scarce, and think. Between that vest and your wits you ought to be able to pull us all out of the fire.”

As he spoke, there was a crash of timber, and a moment later Zigzag backed into the parlour, followed by a press of foresters in Lincoln Green.

As they entered, Pride fell back from the doorway with a helpless look, Simon thrust Patricia and Eulalie into an ingle-nook, after a careful reconnaissance Bulb rose to his feet behind the settle, and a powerful voice cried—

“Silence for The Steward of The Walks.”

The next moment a fiery little man, extravagantly dressed in green and silver, with a horn in his belt and a plume to his velvet cap, flounced into the room.

“What does this mean?” he demanded.

“My lord,” cried Bulb excitedly, “the very murderous villain, whom your lordship will remember, I particularly commended to your——”

Here a gigantic pasty rose from the table, turned upon its side, hovered for an instant above the cheese and then sped like a quarrel through the air, to catch the speaker full upon the side of the head and send him sprawling into the corner which he had just vacated.

At the third attempt—

“Good God,” said The Steward weakly. “What was that?”

For a moment there was no answer.

Then a deep voice boomed in reply:

London calling, it said. Good evening, everybody. Here is the weather forecast. A deep depression is moving towards The Pail, where local thunderstorms of more than usual intensity may be expected. Further outlook, unfavourable.

The Steward’s jaw dropped, one of the foresters began to fumble for his beads, Zigzag crossed himself, and Simon put up a hand to cover his mouth.

The voice continued:

Here is the first general news bulletin,—copyright by Reuter, Press Association, Exchange Telegraph and Central News.

A DARING BURGLARY

This afternoon, during the absence of The Steward of The Walks, who it is believed had been hoaxed by two of the gang into visiting The Peck of Pepper to investigate a fictitious charge, his lordship’s house was entered by robbers who, not content with

seizing everything of value, plundering the cellar and stables, violently removing the women, arraying themselves from his lordship's extensive wardrobe and wantonly destroying such goods and chattels as they could not actually transport, are now about to set fire to the mansion.

WARRANTS ISSUED

On the application of the Mayor of Date, the Petty Sessional Court of Fiddle this afternoon issued warrants for the arrest of two plausible villains, known as Snuffle and Bulb, who are wanted for a number of crimes and misdemeanours including those of burglary, arson, blackmail and murder. A reward of five thousand nobles is offered for their capture alive or dead—preferably dead.

THE PEACE CONFERENCE

It is stated on good authority . . .

When The Steward had been assisted into the open air and given a rummer of brandy he was able to issue orders which could be understood.

The definite style of his commands showed that, when sane, he was a man who knew his own mind.

“The sergeant and six men will mount and convey the prisoners to Fiddle with all dispatch: in view of the terms of the reward the prisoners will proceed on foot. The remainder of the posse will come with me, and every man who reaches The Steward's Lodge before I do myself will receive ten nobles. And now, for the love of Heaven, BRING MY HORSE.”



Zigzag and Pride strolled with the four as far as the edge of the close.

“It's been a rare pleasure,” said the former, “a very rare pleasure to meet you. But I do wish Sir Pomfret had heard that voice. It was most remarkable. ‘London calling’ it said . . . You know. The town the old songs sing of. London. . . . And then ‘The Hearsay.’ That's what it was, you know. It usually takes three days to get to the inn. . . . Oh, and that pasty—that would have done you good. Why, it shook up Bulb as you shake up a fly with a maul. I don't know when I've enjoyed my food so much.”

“Farewell, my good friends,” said Pride. “It's been a most instructive afternoon. What I enjoyed most was our little colloquy at lunch. You know.

‘The feast of reason and the flow of soul.’ What followed was of a lighter quality—most entertaining, but lighter. Besides, there were too many present. I dislike a crowd.”

“All the same,” said Zigzag, clasping Pomfret’s hand. “I do wish you’d been there. Where did you get to?”

“He didn’t miss much,” said Pride.

With one accord, the four glanced at the speaker.

For an instant the ghost of a smile hung on the heavy lips. . . .

Then—

“What is the difference,” he said, “between a laughing trout and a daring burglary?”

“I’ve never thanked you,” said Pomfret hurriedly, “for holding the door against The Steward of The Walks. It was very handsome of you.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Pride. “For a moment I was afraid it was beneath my dignity.” He turned to Zigzag. “We must be returning,” he added. “I wish to assure myself that the cooks are basting that capon with yolk of egg.”

“You said ‘butter,’ ” said Zigzag.

“Dog,” said Pride, “what does it matter what I said? It is for you to divine my needs, so that I may be spared the menial function of taking thought.”

“Come, come,” said Zigzag, laughing, “if you can’t divine your own needs how can I bring it off?”

“Happily for you,” said Pride, “my ears are so constructed as to be unable to receive any saying which does not reflect the splendour of my mentality. At the same time . . .”

When the four saw them last they were still disputing under the shadow of the oaks upon the edge of the sward, the figure in green and orange appearing almost slight beside the mountainous proportions of its fellow in gold and crimson.



Five hours had gone by, and the barge was drifting down stream, looking like a golden property which Art had lent to Nature for the matchless

pageant of the setting sun.

“I feel,” said Pomfret, “that I should have enjoyed assembling with The Steward of The Walks. I like a man who gets a move on. And it went against the grain to put it across him. However, needs must when the devil holds four aces. Besides, his relief at finding his home intact will set him up for a month. Incidentally, in the absence of, er, wireless or any other telegraphy, I fear that the release of Snuffle and Co. will not be effected with quite that admirable dispatch which characterized their arrest. In fact, from what I’ve seen of Fiddle I should think they’d lie in gaol until the reward is paid. All the same, I hope the next person who suggests vacating the barge will be put in irons. Or perhaps a strait-waistcoat would be more appropriate.”

“I’m with you,” said everyone.

CHAPTER IX

KING, QUEEN AND KNAVE

THE barge had not been moored for more than a quarter of an hour when the call of a silver trumpet blazoned the evening air with delicate pride.

As the four came on deck, Gog was descending the gang-board to greet a personage of some importance.

The latter was magnificently apparelled in a tabard of great beauty, mounted upon a superb black horse and accompanied only by the trumpeter who had sounded the call.

After a short conversation, Gog louted and the other raised his peaked cap, and then, turning his horse on its haunches, galloped away with the trumpeter at his heels.

Thoughtfully the courier made his way to the poop.

“My friends,” he announced, “we’re off. That was Unicorn—one of the five Heralds. You’re to be at The Palace this evening at ten o’clock.”

“This is rather sudden,” said Simon.

“I half expected it,” said Gog. “And now if you’ll sit at my feet I’ll put you wise.”

With that, he placed his hands upon the edge of a ‘gate’ table and, turning a somersault with great deliberation, assumed the pose of a tailor in the centre of the board.

The four sank into chairs.

“About your visit to-night,” said the courier, “there is to be no ceremony. Unicorn emphasized that. He also said you weren’t to come if you were tired. But I saw no object in saying you were when you weren’t, so I asked if he’d send a pinnacle at half-past nine.”

“Is The Palace on the river?” said Patricia.

“On a tributary,” said Gog. “Just about two miles off. The Verge is thirty miles round by ten across and lies full in the middle of The Pail, and The Palace—or rather The Park in which it stands—lies full in the middle of The

Verge. Both The Park and The Verge have four gates. Those of The Park are called after the four winds, and those of The Verge are called Ancestry—by which we came in—Pedigree, Lineage and Descent. Incidentally, The Verge is sanctuary, so we shan't be troubled by gentry of Snuffle's ilk. When——”

“One moment,” said Pomfret. “Are there any unmarried Princesses adorning The Court? Because, if so, I shall be unavoidably prevented from obeying His Majesty's commands.”

“Their Majesties’,” corrected Gog. “Yes! There are no Sultanas,” he added gravely. “The royal succession is not hereditary, so Their Majesties' children, if any, take no unusual precedence and do not appear.”

“Then Their Majesties are elected?” said Eulalie.

The courier nodded.

“By their predecessors, as the three living beings best qualified to maintain the traditions of The Pail.”

“Three?”

“Three. The King of Arms, the Queen of Hearts and the Knave of Wits. As soon as they're chosen, they're royalized by letters-patent; and royal they are from then until they retire—which their motto, *Noblesse Oblige*, compels them to do in due season. They're appointed together, they rule together and they retire together. They're all three equal, and they and their supporters compose The High Court of Maintenance within The Pail.

“You see, Etchechuria, as you call it, is founded upon Tradition. Tradition has made it what it is. Tradition has kept it secure through all the ages, and Tradition alone can save it from going the way of the world. Well, The Court of Maintenance maintains the traditions of The Pail.

“Now the maintenance of traditions requires considerable skill. It's rather like the work of a master-forester. If the wood of tradition is to flourish, this custom must be lopped, this nursed, this dunged, this propped, this moved, this encouraged to grow and this cut down. Then, again, the soil must be kept pure. . . . To do all this you need a fine head, a gracious sympathy and a firm hand. Well, the Knave has the first, the Queen has the second and the King the third. . . .

“I said they were all equal, and so they are. They each have their own quarters, and the State Apartments are so many Common Rooms in which every table is round. The King is supported by Heralds, the Queen by Maids of Honour and the Knave by Pursuivants. The Palace is their headquarters,

but they move about quite a lot, for although their work comes to them they often return its call. Sometimes three of the Supporters go in their stead.”

“I should love to be a Herald,” said Patricia. “Did you ever see anything so lovely as Unicorn’s dress?”

“It was very good-looking,” said Gog, “but they all wear tabards at Court. From Their Majesties downwards. The blazonry’s different, of course: but the tabard’s the Court Dress.”

“The women too?”

“Certainly. At work or at play the Court is a beautiful sight. I once saw it *passant* in the sunshine—I tell you, it hurt my eyes. The King of Arms goes always in cloth of gold, the Knave in silver and the Queen in crimson, violet or green. Their chief supporters—Lion, Domesday and Garter—wear cloth of gold and the others respectively silver, crimson, violet and green. And coat armour over all. The King and the Heralds ride black horses, the Queen and her Maids bright chestnuts, and the Knave and the Pursuivants blue roans.” He rose and stepped down from the table as though he were passing down stairs. “And now I think I’ll tell them to serve dinner at eight. Then you can——”

“But you haven’t said what we’re to wear,” cried the girls in unison.

“What you please,” said the courier. “I’ve never yet seen either of you look anything but your best, so——”

“I shall wear my seal-coney sock-suspenders,” said Pomfret. “I look quite ravishing in them.”

“Wait a minute,” said Simon. “What about the Court etiquette?”

“There is none—for you,” said Gog.

“Now then,” said Pomfret. “Pull yourself together and think. There must be millions of things we mustn’t do. It’s no good telling me to-morrow that I oughtn’t to have blown my nose before midnight or that if I was going to take off my boots I ought to have faced North. I don’t want to have to be pardoned on the scaffold: I want to enjoy myself.”

“So you shall,” said the courier.



The pinnacle slipped through the water at a high speed, past the silence of mead and forest under a yellow moon.

Presently the stream curled, and as the craft took the bend the four saw a rampart ahead like a city wall. In the midst of this was a tremendous gateway, which admitted the river like a road, but a huge portcullis was down and its bars were fretting the glare of torches within. As the pinnacle drew near, its master put a horn to his lips and sounded a hunting call, before whose notes had faded the ponderous barrier had begun to lift. As this rose clear of the flood, the water that fell from it made a silver fringe, through which the scarlet and blue of household troops turning out could be distinguished. The next moment the craft was in the gateway, which proved to be of great depth, with stairs that ran into the water on either side, a fine vaulted roof and a second portcullis barring its inner mouth. When the guard had made sure of the pinnacle, the first portcullis was lowered and the second raised, and an instant later the boat passed through a belt of maples into a scene of almost fantastic loveliness.

The moon was shining full on a sleeping landscape through which the river stole like a silver vagabond about his mystery. To the right lay a deer-park, wearing the immemorial grace of long entail, sublime in its security against the hand of man. To the left stood an old grey mansion on rising ground. The house was long and low, of two storeys, built in the Tudor style—a place of mullioned casements and chiselled coats of arms, of finials and tracery and stony ‘breath of kings,’ naturalized long ago by kiss of sun and cousin german to the rookery of aged elms that stood beside it.

At one end the panes of a great oriel, which bespoke the hall, blazed like a giant ephod, badging the night with unimaginable splendour: in the midst, set back in a fair courtyard, two low flights of steps met on a common terrace before a proud doorway, of which the huge door was open so that a sash of light streamed out over the flagstones and soon down a broad stairway, whose steps were of living turf: to the left, an exquisite tower rose out of the pile, lending the whole an air of high matters and turning the seat of a nobleman to that of a Constable.

As the four gazed upon the mansion, a slant of melody rich and gay and plainly many-tongued, came floating out of doorway and window to set the prospect smiling in its sleep and nod like a lovely plume over the casque of silence.

The pinnacle passed slowly to the stairs which served a balustered terrace upon the bank of the stream and so into the sash of light which streamed from the great doorway. There the craft stopped in mid-stream, and ropes from bow and stern were cast to the liveried watermen who were waiting with a broad gang-board at the head of the stairs.

Suddenly a fanfare rang out. . . .

Then figures appeared, moving in the great doorway, and a moment later a little company was descending the path of light. At first, it was hard to distinguish more than the outline of man, but as the pinnacle was berthed the door of the house was shut, leaving the moonlight mistress of the lovely field.

The picture was worthy of its frame.

Eighteen heralds upon a stairway of living green, walking in no sort of order, but coming down as they pleased, with an easy grace of manner and jests on their lips. One—a soprano—was lifting a beautiful voice, singing ‘Under the Greenwood Tree,’ with exquisite abandon—the time-honoured summons floating up into the night like a sweet-smelling savour.

All were handsome and shapely and wore their gorgeous habiliments with a complete artlessness, which, with their debonair air and the absence of any pomp, argued a familiarity with magnificence which was most impressive, while the splendour of the coat-armour, thus casually displayed, beggared description.

Three only were covered: and they wore Caps of Maintenance. All wore their hair cut short, shaped to the head behind and falling about their ears, and all were wearing tabards rich and glorious as the wimple of the setting sun.

As they approached, it was easy to discern the Queen of Hearts and her Maids, for while the men’s tabards were voluminous and stiff upon them, those of the women, though of the same length, that is to say knee-long, were supple and more slightly built and indeed vastly becoming to their beautiful wearers.

When Gog alighted, the retinue fell back to let Their Majesties advance, and as the four disembarked the King of Arms came forward with the Queen on his right hand and the Knave on his left.

“We’re very pleased to see you,” he said, stretching out his arms.

“More than pleased,” said the Queen, in a musical voice.

“Charmed—and relieved,” said the Knave.

Before the four could make any decent reply—

“These are my Heralds,” said the King. “Lion, Unicorn, Leopard, Barbican and Mail.”

“And these my Maids,” said the Queen. “Garter, Girdle, Surcoat, Mantle and Dorelet.”

“And these my Pursuivants,” said the Knave. “Domesday, Chancery, Title, Chequers and Chose.”

At every name some one either curtsied or bowed, but as the four never knew from which quarter to expect the gesture they bowed and smiled indiscriminately till the recitals were over, while Pomfret put up his hand and continually said “Nunc, nunc.”

“And now that we all know one another,” said the Queen, turning to ascend the steps, “let us go in and dance.”

“Because,” said the King of Arms, “friendships are found in the parlour.”

“And lost,” said the Knave of Wits, “in the counting-house.”

At this there was much laughter in which the King joined, although the amusement aroused was plainly at his expense.

“*Touché*,” cried the Queen, bubbling. She turned to the four. “You don’t understand that, cousins, but the Knave’s private apartments are officially known as ‘The Parlour,’ mine as ‘My Lady’s Chamber,’ and the King’s as ‘The Counting-House.’ . . . But we’re not always so clever. As I think you know, we’ve no Logic within The Pail, and as one can’t rule without it we import it as best we can. That’s not at all easy to do and the consequence is that we husband what we have most jealously.”

“But we each had a ration to-night,” said the King of Arms. “In honour of your arrival.”

“Moreover,” said the Knave, “we’re confidently looking to you to replenish our slender stock.”

“Er, anything we can do,” said Pomfret. “I mean, er . . .”

“I’m sure that you will,” said the Queen, gently.

“You can work wonders,” said the King. “See what you’ve done with Gog.”

“We haven’t done anything,” said Patricia. “Gog was always——”

“Assimilation,” said the Knave. “It’s simply through being with you. His instinct has always been outstanding, but one finds that now and again.

Sunset, The Mayor's Aunt and Pride have three of the finest instincts within The Pail."

"I don't know about her instinct," murmured Pomfret, "but Sunset's very good at assimilation. She very nearly absorbed me."

At this there was a roar of laughter, and the Knave lifted his head and carolled lustily,

*"I'll be your blotting—blotting paper;
You be the ink"*

—a saying, which justly occasioned a further explosion of mirth.

As they came to the flagged courtyard the great door was opened by men-at-arms, and the music which had fallen to a murmur swelled into the lovesick measure of an exquisite valse.

"We dance in the hall," said the Queen, leading the way within. "I can't tell you why," she added, putting a hand to her temples and knitting her pretty brows. "There's probably some good reason, but I can't think what it is."

"It's the obvious place," said the Knave.

"Of course," said the Queen. "How stupid." She turned to a Maid of Honour. "Garter, go get me that phial from the great chamber."

As the Maid turned to do her bidding—

"That's right," said the King of Arms, frowning. "I can do with another draught. I laughed very loudly just now, but to tell you the honest truth, I can't think why."

They passed down a stately gallery, past steel-clad bodyguards and so through double doors into a mighty hall, so beautiful in all particulars that for one long moment the four could hardly believe their eyes.

From hammer-beam roof to floor it was panelled with black old oak, which rendered the light, dispensed by six vast candelabra, with the peculiar dignity of polished wood: at one end rose a huge oak screen, magnificently pilastered and carved, in which there were two doorways, each shut with crimson curtains and sentried by men in mail, and above the screen was a gallery, whose forty occupants in crimson livery were making the music of which the place was full: at the other end a daïs led to the great oriel—its panes now heavily curtained with crimson and its deep window-seat laden with cushions of the same colour: upon either side of the hall was yawning an immense fireplace of chiselled stone, with a slow wood fire slumbering

upon its hearth, and, above, a crimson arras, plainly veiling a clerestory, was running the length of the chamber: below this upon the panelling hung two rows of shields, whose faded quarterings told of traditions and their maintenance in bygone days, while upon either hand of the oriel two aged standards, stiff with majesty, professed such faith as honours its defenders: built into the panelling on either side from screen to fireplace and fireplace to oriel was a row of chancel stalls, heavily carved and furnished each with a cushion of crimson velvet, while if there had been tables, these had been withdrawn, leaving the white flagged floor, which was wonderfully smooth and polished, without encumbrance.

Garter was speaking. . . .

“Madam,” she said, offering a small blue bottle of curious glass, “the phial of Logic is empty.”

“Empty?” cried the King and Queen.

For a moment there was a dead silence. Then:

“I’m afraid,” said the Knave, “I’m afraid that’s my fault. I was the last to have it, you know, and I rather think that the present vacancy was, er, occasioned during my tenure.”

“Don’t dress it up in speech we can’t understand,” said the King, putting a hand to his head. “You have the advantage of us. D’you mean to say you drained it?”

“I think I must have,” said the Knave, stroking his chin.

The King and Queen raised their eyes to heaven in protest too profound for words.

At length—

“Well, all I can say,” said the latter, “is that our good cousins’ visit is more than timely.”

“There I’m with you,” said the King heartily. He turned to bow to Eulalie. “And now,” he added, taking the girl in his arms, “my cousins, lords and ladies—on with the dance!”



“Now here,” said the Knave, looking up from a sheet of parchment, “is a very nice point. Some months ago an ogre, called Bagpipes, settled in a cavern five miles from the village of Grey Cock. From time immemorial it’s

always been the custom to engage an ogre single-handed, and single-handed to dispatch him or not as the case may be.”

“A very good rule,” said the King. “It keeps up the standard of chivalry and it puts the ogre in his place. To be killed by a man who could almost lose his way in one of your boots is most humiliating.”

“Quite so,” said the Knave. “The trouble in this case is that no one has yet come forward to take Bagpipes on. Meanwhile the death-rate in Grey Cock is rising by leaps and bounds, while the condition of the curtilage of Bagpipes’ cavern is daily becoming more insanitary.”

“Of course,” said Pomfret, “I’m beginning to understand why The Pail is not overpopulated. A good healthy ogre who’s not afraid of his food is worth half a dozen colonies.”

“There,” said the Knave, “you’re touching a very big question. That The Pail should overflow is not to be thought of, so a census is taken every month, and—and the returns most carefully considered. The watched pot never boils, you know. . . . But to return to the point. It’s time that Bagpipes was reduced. Yet to send a troop to reduce him would be to create a most lamentable precedent.”

“Grey Cock,” said the Queen firmly, “has suffered more than enough. Only yesterday two more children failed to return. As they were last seen playing ‘Last Across the Mouth’ of Bagpipes’ cave, the gravest fears for their safety are entertained.”

“All the same,” said the King, “an ogre is a one-man job. I’ve never killed one myself: but then that sort of thing never interested me. If we send a troop, the removal of ogres will cease to be a knightly enterprise.”

“And that,” said the Knave, “is unthinkable.”

“If I were you,” said Simon, “I should treat him like an ordinary individual and summon him for ‘Nuisance’ forthwith. I mean, you’ve ample grounds, haven’t you? Quite apart from the condition of his lair? I shouldn’t word the summons too politely. Require him ‘to show cause why he shouldn’t abate himself,’ or something equally downright. Then send some one who is superfluous—Snuffle, for instance—to serve the summons. . . .”

“Yes,” said the King. “Go on.”

“Well, the proof of the service is in the eating. If he serves the summons he won’t come back.”

“That’s certain,” said the Knave.

“Very well. When he fails to return, you send and obliterate Bagpipes for Contempt of Court. That won’t be creating a precedent. It’ll simply mean that you’re upholding the dignity of the Court.”

There was a moment’s silence.

Then:

“What did I say?” said the King, looking round. “Solved in a moment. And we’ve been racking our brains for more than two months.”

The Queen’s eyes were sparkling.

“It’s a brilliant idea,” she said.

“Simplicity itself,” said the Knave, annotating the parchment. “Chancery can attend to the preliminaries, and”—he turned to the King—“who will you send to mop up?”

“Mail,” said the King. He turned to Pomfret. “He’s very good at extermination. By the time he’s finished you won’t be able to guess where Bagpipes has been interred.”

“And now,” said the Queen, “tell them about Tell-Tale.”

“That’s a hard case,” said the Knave, picking up another skin. “Tell-Tale’s the name of a ford five miles South of Strong Box. When you use it you have to pay toll to The Farrier’s Daughter. A commoner pays a tester, but a lord’s above such niggling and just flings her his purse.”

“A *beau geste*,” said the King nodding. “It’s very good for the lord and better still for The Farrier’s Daughter.”

“Well, one day,” said the Knave, “there was a justing. Lists had been set up at Strong Box, and several lords attended and knocked one another about. When it was over they feasted, and when the banquet was over one of the lords suggested that they should go to the fair.”

“A very proper proposal,” said the King. “‘None but the brave deserves the fair.’”

“Quite so,” said the Knave. “Well, it was a very good fair. There was a clown and a puppet-show and a strange fish, and ten of the lords enjoyed themselves very much. The other ten didn’t. They hung about, watching the others enter and leave the booths, listening to their applause, having the clown’s drolleries indifferently retailed to them by their comrades and, what was worse, seeing their own servants spending their pence like water and having the time of their lives. And this was all because they lived South of

Tell-Tale, while the others lived North, or, to put it more plainly, because on his way to the justing each had flung his purse to The Farrier's Daughter, so that he hadn't so much as a penny to see the strange fish with, while the clown, who was much more expensive, was out of the question. . . .

"Well, once bitten, twice shy. The next time there was a justing at Strong Box, those ten lords went round by Black Sheep Bridge. . . .

"You can't exactly blame them, especially as before the next fair was held the clown died of a quinsy and the other ten were always saying how splendid he'd been and that no one could ever take his place. But the trouble is that their action set up a precedent. Lords, great and small, who were wanting to cross the water began to display a preference for Black Sheep Bridge. At first they made excuse, fearing that the river might be swollen or maintaining that the other was the prettier way, but after a while any lord who went by Tell-Tale came to be considered to have more money than brains."

"A very sordid conclusion," said the King, blowing through his nose.

"And a most ungallant one," said the Queen. "The Farrier's Daughter is a most charming girl."

"Indeed," continued the Knave, "things have come to such a pass that 'to go by Tell-Tale' is in danger of becoming a proverbial saying equivalent to 'to lose one's mind,' while it is the practice of mischievous children in the vicinity so to direct or, I regret to say, actually misdirect strange lords that they pass by the ford to their subsequent derision."

"Well, there are the facts. If you can suggest any way of correcting the disorder and of restoring the venerable tradition that where his pocket is concerned a lord is above mental arithmetic, you'll be doing the Court a great service, while as for The Farrier's Daughter, I should think she'd eat out of your hand for the rest of her life."

Pomfret fingered his chin.

"I suppose," he said, "you couldn't destroy the bridge."

"That's an idea," said the King warmly. "I like that. That'd cramp their style—the niggards."

"Against their will," said Eulalie. "And that's no earthly."

"Besides," said the Queen, gently, "what about all the poor people who use the bridge?"

"I must confess," said Patricia, "I'm rather sorry for the lords—the original ten, I mean. It was very hard to have to miss the clown."

The King shrugged his shoulders.

"*Noblesse oblige*," he said. "You mustn't sell your birthright for—for — What do they sell birthrights for?"

"A pot of message," said Pomfret. "I mean, a mess of pottage."

"That's right," said the King. "Well, you mustn't do it, you know. It's—it's unthinkable."

"If I were you," said Simon slowly, "I'd put up some finger-posts."

Their Majesties stared.

"Where?" said the Knave.

"Several," said Simon, "scattered about for some miles, so that no one who's approaching the bridge can very well miss one. Could that be done?"

"Easily," said the Knave. "Go on."

"Well, then you put on the posts

THIS WAY TO BLACK SHEEP BRIDGE

and underneath

NOTE. ONLY THOSE LORDS WHO CAN AFFORD IT SHOULD CROSS THE RIVER AT TELL-TALE.

I don't say it's ideal," added Simon, leaning back in his chair, "but from what I know of human nature I think it would divert quite a lot of the traffic concerned: and after a year or two I fancy the old tradition would be re-established."

This admirable solution of the difficulty was deservedly received with acclamation by the Queen and the Knave, while the King called for wine and drank to Simon with great circumstance.

"Not that I follow you," he said gravely, setting down his cup, "because I don't. Everyone knows the way to Black Sheep Bridge. Besides, if they need direction at all, they need it to Tell-Tale. Still, understanding, as you probably know, is not my forte, and if the Queen and the Knave approve your plan I'm proud to endorse their opinion and honour a master wit."

"You see," said the Queen to Eulalie, "that's how we always decide. If we're at all divided on any point, one always gives way to two. We're very seldom divided because, though we work together, our duties are really distinct. Broadly, the Knave administers, the King executes, and I temper the

wind: but such duties are bound to overlap, and though the King makes light of his understanding he's really the biggest power within The Pail. I consider that Bagpipes ought to be reduced and the Knave will see that he's summoned, but it's the King that's going to put him where he belongs."

"And that," said the Knave, throwing down his pen, "with the minimum of effort and the maximum of effect. But his outstanding virtue as a fellow-councillor is that he always knows to a hair whether the game we propose is worth the candle."

"Come, come," said the King, rising. "I refuse to be overrated. Besides, we've sat long enough. To-morrow's the first of Autumn, so let's make the most of to-day. But, before we rise, explain why we don't interfere when our friends are waylaid. It's beyond me."

The Knave cleared his throat.

"The King is right," he said. "You must find it strange that we seemed so glad to see you and yet, but for your own wit, for all our puissance you might have fallen by the way. But we are not Justices of the Peace, and with right and wrong beyond The Verge we have nothing to do. For better or for worse The Pail is ruled by Tradition, and for us to use our power otherwise than in its maintenance would be unprecedented."

"I do hope you understand," said the Queen earnestly. "I'm not at all sure I do."

"Of course, we do," said Patricia. "Perfectly."

"Besides," said Pomfret, "I bought what trouble we've had, and that's been negligible. Our reception has been—well, words fail me. Look at last night."

"Look at this morning," cried the King, clapping him on the back. "And now come and see the stables. We're rather proud of our nags."

So ended the first of many councils to which the four subscribed. Indeed, they drifted naturally into the *rôle* of assessors, sitting in The Council Chamber three days out of five, exploring the voluminous patchwork of Customs in which The Pail was swaddled and making the Court of Maintenance free of such judgment as they had. It was a fascinating exercise and one which was never dull, and may be likened to that of ordering a treasury of gems, each precious one of which has been so fashioned as to tell its own curious tale.

As well it might, the Court made much of its guests.

The barge was towed into The Park and moored before The Palace at the foot of the steps, the stables were put at their disposal and they dined and danced at Court whenever they pleased.

The Heralds, Maids and Pursuivants took the four to their hearts and would, if encouraged, have sat at their feet all day, while the King, the Queen and the Knave plainly delighted in their company and stood upon no sort of ceremony so far as they were concerned. The supporters were eager, simple, pleasant-minded and plainly of high degree and seemed each to take after the Royalty to whom he or she was officially attached. Their Majesties themselves set a standard of chivalry, not perfect perhaps, but, considering their natural shortcomings, above all reasonable criticism.

It was clear that the Queen of Hearts and the Knave of Wits considered the King of Arms to be greater than they: of this regard the King of Arms himself did not appear to be conscious, and since he plainly considered the Queen of Hearts and the Knave to be his peers, things other than greatness were added unto him. His was, indeed, a most attractive character—merry, downright, and unearthly strong, at once most unassuming and wearing majesty as naturally as a woman her wedding-ring, and by these pleasant qualities immeasurably adorning the office which he filled.

Physically, he was a fine-looking man: his blue eyes were fearless and his hair was fair: of much the same height as the Knave but more stoutly built, he showed a great breadth of shoulder and carried his head high: indeed, his general appearance and demeanour accorded with the title he bore, and, handsome as was his company, his presence alone would have betrayed him as the first gentleman of this strange realm.

The Queen of Hearts, as was fitting, was of singular beauty and possessed great personal charm. Her wit was quicker than that of the King of Arms, but though there were times when she could compare with the Knave, on the whole her reasoning powers were much slighter than his and though she could, so to speak, float upon the tide of argument, any attempt to strike out generally showed that she was out of her depth. Her eyes were large and grey and full of that gaiety which springs straight from the heart, unschooled by the mind into an artful flourish: there was an exquisite bloom upon her delicate skin, her hair was shining and her form the very pink of elegance. That her dignity was not so outstanding as that which distinguished the King was due to his presence alone, for she bore herself as can only a great lady—with the attractive self-possession of a little child.

The Knave of Wits was in some ways the most striking of the three. Now curiously solemn, now brilliantly debonair, at times exuberant in speech, at times silent and dreaming, of admirable address and astonishingly clear-headed for one so handicapped, he was by no means simple to measure as were his fellows and gave the impression of a strange, dark jewel, which is flashing one moment and sombre the next, whose depths baffle inspection, which is not like other stones, although wherein it is different you cannot tell.

It was he, especially, who considered the convenience of the strangers, seeing to it that their privacy was never violated and that they always felt free to come and go as they pleased, arranging with Gog that the latter should suggest diversions, lest his direct suggestion should wear the air of a command, and actually forming a habit of calling for and drinking ale in the midst of a Council that Pomfret might thus unashamedly enjoy his favourite beverage.

The four began to find their heritage even more goodly than it had seemed without Date. . . .

So for five glorious weeks, while Autumn—for there was no Winter within The Pail—waxed under rain by night and sun by day, dressing the countryside in gold and crimson till all The Verge was one great Herald's College and every sprig and spray was bearing arms.

Then came a day when the Court rode to Shepherds' Clocks, a village beyond The Verge, and the four with them.



Pudding-String was away. Of that there was no doubt at all. Leopard had warned Pomfret on no account to allow him to take the lead, and Pomfret, exulting in the perfect movement of the magnificent horse, had forgotten the Herald's advice. And now—Pudding-String was away and leaving the cavalcade as a racing car leaves a bevy of limousines.

Had the country been open Pomfret, who was quite a good horseman, might well have pulled the black up, but, since they were in the forest, to attempt to do anything but steer his mount clear of the trees and their branches and roots would have been suicidal. Indeed, he was in constant danger of being struck out of the saddle, if not killed by overhanging boughs, for there were oaks in plenty and Pudding-String was going like the wind: by dint, however, of keeping extremely cool, lying low on his horse's

neck and never ceasing to ride for all he was worth, after eight or ten minutes the rider had his reward, for the ground began to rise in a steady climb, and a sudden clearing gave him the chance he required. The clearing was none too large and the ground was beginning to fall, but Pomfret had made up his mind to go no further and, by alternately pulling and easing the runaway's mouth, convinced the latter of his determination with about thirty paces to spare.

"And that," said Pomfret, "is that." He turned the horse round. "You know you're too impetuous. That's what's the matter with you. Rushing about like that." He took out a handkerchief and started to mop his face. "And if I said 'Stop' once, I said it a hundred times. . . . And now supposing, my fellow, you found your own way back." He threw the reins on Pudding-String's neck. "I couldn't retrace your steps for a hundred yards, and we must have done close on four miles."

As if in answer the horse stopped to snuff the air: then he looked round about him and, finding himself lonely, whinnied lustily.

"That's the style," said Pomfret. "Do it again."

But Pudding-String's efforts to regain touch were over. He certainly looked round again, but that was only to make sure that the clover upon his left front was locally unrivalled, while as for lifting up his voice or advancing unimpelled in any direction other than that of green food, such ideas did not seem to occur to him and nothing that Pomfret could do could get them into his head.

At last—

"Well, if you think I'm going to sit here and watch you gorge," said the latter violently, "you're simply miles out," and, with that, he picked up the reins and kicked the cause of his troubles into a canter.

At the edge of the clearing he stopped and, after trying in vain to be sure of the way he had come, struck at a walk into the greenwood. . . .

He could not know that he was bearing too much to the East or that the cavalcade—led in hot chase by the King, Simon and Leopard, with Chose and Eulalie as connecting files—was bearing too much to the West. But when, after more than an hour of advancing, shouting, listening and casting about, he had seen no sign of the others, Pomfret dismounted, off-saddled, wiped his betrayer with bracken and, so fastening him that he could feed without undue inconvenience, laid himself down on the turf and went to sleep.

This was typical of the man. To visit his displeasure upon Pudding-String would not have occurred to him in a thousand years. Pudding-String was an animal and so his very good friend. If the animal had erred, that was because he knew no better and offered no reason why he should be denied ordinary consideration. As for going to sleep, repose was good. It was also better than continuing an unprofitable search, and refreshed brain and body for further endeavours. Finally, the hour, the place and the circumstances were inviting slumber, and to decline such an invitation would have been contrary to Pomfret's faith. The future could go hang—and very nearly did.

Pomfret awoke for no reason that he could specify, but with that indefinable feeling that there was something wrong. At first, he saw nothing to account for this intuition, but, glancing at Pudding-String, he observed that the horse had stopped feeding and was eyeing a neighbouring ash. As Pomfret followed his gaze, a yellow chaperon, prodigiously twisted and coiled into a very turban, was protruded from behind the trunk, to be immediately succeeded by a face which was lean and sallow and saucer-eyed, whose lips were pursed upon a whistle some six inches long.

When the eyes found Pomfret awake, they started out of their sockets, while the cheeks became distended as though to blow, but as Pomfret sat perfectly still, returning the stranger's gaze, after a moment or two the latter took the whistle from his mouth and moistened his lips.

"I'm—I'm looking for a noble," he faltered. "A very distinguished man. Some—some friends of mine want to make him a little present, to—to mark their appreciation of his ways." His eyes began to goggle as he sought for words. "A sack of gold, I think. And—and two or three barrels of beer."

"How nice for him," said Pomfret steadily.

"Y-yes, isn't it?" stammered the other. "But then he's a charming man. They simply worship him, you know." He hesitated. "I—I suppose you haven't seen him by any chance. His name's—*Pomfret*."

"Not that I know of," said Pomfret, stifling a yawn. "What's he like?"

The stranger stared harder than ever.

At length he swallowed.

"They—they only want to reward him," he said uneasily. "They wouldn't hurt a hair of his head."

"Quite so," said Pomfret, watching the whistle descend with the tail of his eye. "What is he like?"

“He’s tall and broad,” said the other, “and, er, well-liking. And he wears loose hose and stiff shoes and a broad-brimmed hat. They only want to reward him,” he added hastily.

“He must be rather like me,” said Pomfret comfortably. He touched his jodhpurs. “I don’t know that you’d call these loose, but . . . What did you say his name was—‘Lamprey?’”

“No,” said the stranger. “‘Pomfret.’”

“He’s a lucky fellow,” said Pomfret. “Fancy a sack full of gold. The beer doesn’t interest me—I never touch it: but a sack of gold. . . . What did you say his name was—‘Turnspit?’”

“‘Pomfret,’” said the other, putting up his whistle and advancing from behind the ash. “And now that I see you’re not he, I can put you wise. You must forgive me, brother, but for a moment or two I thought you were the villain himself.”

“‘Villain?’” cried Pomfret. “I thought you said——”

The stranger wagged his head.

“That was a wile,” he said. “A little stratagem. That was, in case you were he, to make you deliver yourself into my hand.” Not appearing to notice the horse, he sat down by Pomfret’s side and tapped his knee. “It’s a very good thing for you that you’re not he. He’s not going to get any gold. Or beer either. He’s going to be transformed.”

“Is he indeed?” said Pomfret, wondering whether the cavalcade was really trying to find him or having lunch. “How—how very interesting. Er, what shape is he to be inducted into?”

“That of a skewbald baboon,” said the other, “of vulgar habits, with a fleshy proboscis or trunk and a weakness for fried fish. It’s all been worked out. The idea is to make him repugnant.”

So soon as he could speak—

“I see,” said Pomfret. “They do seem to have thought of everything, don’t they? I mean, when you’d got used to his trunk there’d always be the fried fish, wouldn’t there? And even if you plugged your nose—exactly. Yes.” He wiped the sweat from his brow. “I like the ‘vulgar habits’ very much. That’s a beautiful touch. I—I wonder who thought of that.”

“I believe,” said the other, “that was Sunset’s idea.” Pomfret started. “‘A woman scorned,’ you know. Pomfret trifled with her in the morning and

married another girl in the afternoon. But the ‘skewbald baboon’ was Sunstroke’s. He’s as mad as a hamper of hornets in a North-East wind. They say that Pomfret sold him some magic boots and that the only magic thing about them was that once you’d got them on—and that took some doing—you couldn’t get them off. Any way he’s still as lame as a tree and more than testy if you come too close to his feet.”

“This is most interesting,” said Pomfret.

“Yes, isn’t it?” said the other cordially. “Quite a little drama—with Pomfret doubling the parts of villain and clown. The beautiful thing is he doesn’t know he’s going to play the clown,” and, with that, he threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

The fellow was greasy and looked as though he had often slept in his clothes, which were not so much shabby as ill kept, while his person was ill cared for and argued an aversion to bathing, thus sharing with that of Snuffle the unenviable distinction of affording the only evidence which any of the four had encountered of uncleanness within The Pail.

Pomfret rose to his feet.

“Well, well,” he said. “Sow the zephyr and reap the blast. What did you say his name was—‘Crumpet’?”

“No, ‘Pomfret,’ ” said the other, rising. “What’s yours?”

“Spotlight,” said Pomfret shortly. “By Search out of Swivel. And yours?”

“Groat,” said the latter. “I’m very pleased to have met you. Very pleased.”

“Every time,” said Pomfret, “every time. And——”

“In fact, my dear Doorstep,” said Groat, laying a hand on his shoulder, “I don’t know what I should have done without you.”

“Oh, try and think,” said Pomfret, edging away. “And my name——”

“Which way are you going, dear Doorstep?” said Groat, detaining him.

“Look here,” said Pomfret. “I told you my name was Staircase—I mean, Spotlight. Why abuse the information?”

“Don’t mention it,” said Groat. “Which way are you going?”

“I really don’t know,” said Pomfret warily. “If I was thereabouts I might have a look at The Verge. I’m told the view from, er, Lineage is lovely.”

“So it is,” said Groat eagerly. “So it is. You mustn’t miss it. Besides, that’s my way too.” He looked round cautiously before proceeding. Then he approached his mouth to Pomfret’s ear. “You see, between you and me, Pomfret—our quarry—’s lost. He’s beyond The Verge and he’s lost—on a Herald’s horse. And it’s a puncheon of rum to a rock cake that he’ll try to make Lineage. He left The Verge by that entrance and it’s the only one he knows. So entirely between you and me *we’re closing in.*” And, with that, he drew back and rubbed his hands as one who has communicated tidings which cannot fail to provoke unqualified approval.

“Are—are you indeed?” said Pomfret, involuntarily wondering simultaneously whether to add vulgarity to a baboon was not to perform a work of supererogation and what his companion would say when he noticed Pudding-String. “I mean—splendid. Er, who’s ‘we’?”

“Sunstroke and—and others,” said Groat. “So if you come with me, you’ll be in at the transformation. Have you ever seen one, Doorlight?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Pomfret, wondering in which direction Pedigree lay. “And what’s more I, don’t think I’d better. I’m—I’m on a diet, you know, and—and any undue excitement is very bad for me. Besides, I’ve just lost my memory and that’s enough for one day. I suppose you haven’t seen one lying about?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t,” said Groat. “When did you have it last?”

“I can’t remember,” said Pomfret. “That’s the devil of it. It’s like looking for a pair of spectacles when you need them to find them with. I tell you, Snoak, I can remember nothing. What was that fellow’s name—‘Sponge-bag’?”

“No, ‘Pomfret,’ ” said the other. “You know, my dear Spotstep, I’ve thought once or twice that your memory must be rather defective. If you remember——”

“But I don’t,” said Pomfret. “I tell you, the inconvenience is frightening. I believe I’m making for Pedigree, but—you’ll hardly believe me, but I can’t remember the way. And it’s no good your telling me because I should forget it at once.”

“No, you won’t,” said Groat warmly. He pointed East. “The Long Lane’s a mile over there. No one could miss it if he tried. And The Long Lane leads to Pedigree as straight as a die. What are you going there for?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Pomfret, picking up his saddle and setting it on Pudding-String’s back. “I know I had an object, when I set out, but heaven

only knows what it was.”

“I should go home,” said Groat, staring.

“I can’t,” snapped Pomfret, reaching for the girths. “I don’t know where I came from. I tell you, Bloat, it’s most embarrassing.”

“One moment,” said Groat suddenly. “How did you come by that horse?”

“I’ve no idea,” said Pomfret, biting Pudding-String up. “I’m not at all sure that it’s mine. Isn’t it awful?”

“D’you think you found it?” said Groat. “I mean—Pomfret was last seen riding a Herald’s horse, and—and——”

“Who’s Pomfret?” said Pomfret, mounting.

The other recoiled.

“‘Pomfret?’” he cried. “Why Pomfret’s the man I’ve been saying——”

“Oh, you mean Sunstroke,” said Pomfret, “the baboon of vulgar habits that Staircase is going to transform into a pair of boots. Well, what about him?”

Groat put a hand to his head.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he said weakly. “What I said was that——”

“Stoat,” said Pomfret gravely, “you’re talking through the seat of your hose—a confusing and inelegant practice which I fear you must have caught from the baboon. And now I must leave you. Should you meet a man called Spotlight—an eventuality which I feel to be improbable—be good enough to thank him for me for the loan of his personality and say that I found it almost as engaging as you did and much more serviceable. Give the baboon my love and tell him, if he feels he must see me again, to be at The Water-Gate of The Palace to-morrow at noon—with the usual ingredients. You can come too, if you like, because, though you mean anything but well and your toilet leaves much to be desired, your value as an information bureau can hardly be over-estimated. So come. And while the baboon is lunching we’ll talk through the portcullis. But—at the risk of sounding ungallant—one stipulation I must make, and that is—‘*Don’t bring Lulu.*’ ”

With that, he touched Pudding-String’s flanks and cantered away. . . .

Groat’s brain worked slowly.

In fact, it was nearly three minutes before a frenzied whistling suggested that he had ‘arrived.’ And by that time Pomfret had sighted the stout box ramparts which were flanking The Long Lane.

A moment later he was flicking along the ride at a hand-gallop. . . .

A quarter of an hour later he was within The Verge.



Twenty-four hours had gone by.

“If we had to choose between them,” said the King of Arms’ voice, “it would be extremely difficult. They’re both exquisite.”

“I agree,” said that of the Knave. “And equally dignified. But mercifully we don’t have to.”

“I’m sorry for Simon,” said the Queen. “I’m afraid——”

“Tush,” said the King of Arms. “After a week . . .”

His deep voice faded, and Pomfret, who had been peacefully dozing under a convenient chestnut, lay still as death. Presently he rolled over cautiously and, raising himself by inches, peered over the golden sea of bracken at the retreating figures. These were now some sixty paces away, strolling unattended in the deer-park with their heads in the air. For a long time Pomfret regarded them, open-mouthed. Then he assumed a sitting posture, took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

Patricia. Something had been decided to her injury. Some fatal lot had fallen upon her. She was to be taken . . . sacrificed . . . married to the Knave or something. Her and Simon’s happiness was to be ripped from them to honour some barbarous usage, which because it was old was sacred—had to be served . . . And it was all decided. Word had gone forth. . . . Patricia . . .

Gog. Gog would know. He must get hold of Gog at once.

The barge was between Pomfret and The Palace, and the King and the Queen and the Knave were between Pomfret and the barge. To stay still, however, was unthinkable, so Pomfret struck through the bracken towards The Water-Gate, now crawling, now stooping as he ran, until he had gone so far from his couch beneath the chestnut that any who might observe him strolling towards the barge must assume that he had come from quite another direction.

As he approached, the King, the Queen and the Knave were ferried across the water while Gog watched them from the poop of the barge, standing stiffly to attention upon his head to the great amusement of Their Majesties who were laughing heartily.

As they began to ascend the green staircase Pomfret slipped up the gang-board and on to the poop.

“What’s the matter?” said Gog before he could open his mouth.

“Breakers,” said Pomfret shortly, drawing him down on to a bench.

“Beyond The Verge—yes,” said Gog. “I’ve some rather ugly news.”

“What?”

“‘Sunstroke—and others.’ Well, the others include The Steward of the Walks. He’s out to attach your body for Contempt of his rotten Court. He swears he’ll outlaw you if it takes him twenty years. As he’s five hundred foresters under his horn, he’s a pretty formidable proposition—beyond The Verge. I can’t think how he missed you yesterday. But he won’t make another mistake. What’s worse, if he can’t get you he’ll take one of the others instead and do a deal—your body in return for their health. The Royal Presence is sanctuary, so you’re all of you safe when you go out with one of Their Majesties. But to omit that precaution would be extremely foolish. Some people might call it rash.”

“That,” said Pomfret, “is annoying, because we must omit it to-night.”

Gog opened his eyes.

Then he frowned.

“What,” he said, “do you know?”

“This,” said Pomfret. “A quarter of an hour ago——”

“*Tr-r-oop*,” rang out Simon’s voice. “*Right WHEEL-L-L!*”

Pomfret stifled an oath and rose to his feet, as, with riding-whips at the slope, the light-hearted line which had cantered silently alongside executed an admirable turn, riding knee to knee in the most approved fashion.

“*Tr-r-oop . . . HA-ALT!*”

The parade halted.

“*Car-ry—SWORDS!*”

The whips came to the carry, and Simon rode forward and saluted as an officer should.

Gravely Pomfret put a finger to the brim of his hat.

“Very fair, Mr. Beaulieu,” he said. “Very fair. But I should like to see a little more zip. Oh, and Number Three’s sword”—Number Three was Eulalie—“is about as much out of plumb as Number One’s.” Number One was Barbican. “Never forget,” continued Pomfret, “that those are the little things that matter. They won’t win battles, but they’ll make the General glad. When I was the mascot of the Fortieth Foot and Mouth, commonly known as The Try-Hards, our slogan used to be, ‘Bottle-wash, mouth-wash and eye-wash—and the greatest of these is eye-wash.’ ”

Here the parade broke up amid laughter and ironical cheers, and when the girls and Simon had dismounted Barbican and Title took their horses and cantered away with Girdle in the direction of the bridge.

“I can’t tell you now,” said Pomfret, returning to Gog. “As soon as they go down to change . . .”

That the girls should change seemed shameful—they were so admirably dressed.

The Queen and her maids rode a-cock-horse, and since their ordinary Court Dress would not have been convenient for such a seat, a special riding-habit had been devised. Copies of this array had been made for Patricia and Eulalie and suited them to perfection.

Soft doeskin boots, thigh-high, were held up by straps to some belt you could not see. Above this a kilt of green or crimson, heavily pleated behind, swayed as they walked and stayed in place as they rode, while a simple white silk shirt, long-sleeved and open at the neck, made an effective setting for a little coat, short, square-cut, wide open and fairly ablaze with quarterings both before and behind.

As they came to the poop—

“The King of Arms,” said Gog, “is tickled to death with this drill. He saw you doing it yesterday and he’s talked of nothing else since. He wants Simon to teach the Heralds and the Heralds to teach the troops. I said it was an innovation and as such should be condemned, but he only threw a roll at me and told me to stick to my last, and, when I asked what that was, the Knave said ‘Ask The Court Troop-leader. He’s just been created.’ ”

“The trouble is,” said Simon, helping himself to ale, “that I’m a bit rusty myself. If I had——”

Three trumpets blared at close quarters—a crisp, high-pitched call that brought Gog to his feet and made Pomfret choke over his tankard.

For an instant the courier peered at the farther bank.

Then he gave a great cry and fell upon his knees.

The four rose, staring.

Upon the bank three trumpeters were standing, like breathless images. Behind them nine men-at-arms made up a solid square of blue and steel and scarlet, motionless as death. And, descending the lowest steps of the staircase of turf were Lion, Garter and Domesday, each bearing a roll of parchment and wearing their peaked caps. And that was all. Above them the house lay silent and rosy under the setting sun: its terrace was empty and its door was shut. Only the standard, hanging limp against its mast above the tower, gave any sign of occupation. The park was vacant. Barbican, Girdle and Title were out of sight. The very breeze had fallen and the whole world was still.

Herald, Maid and Pursuivant passed up the gang-board of the barge and on to the poop.

When they were up they stood for a moment in line. Then they uncovered, and at once a fanfare rang out.

It was a long stately call, and ere it was over Pomfret, Eulalie and Simon had each been touched with a roll upon the shoulder and then had the parchment given into their hand.

As the call faded, the three executors covered their heads and turned, and a moment later they were ashore again and mounting the cool green steps.

Once more the trumpets blared. . . .

Gog, crouched like a dog, was clinging to Patricia’s ankles, pressing his face against her insteps and wailing brokenly.

“My lady, my lady, my queen, what will you do? If only your hair had been fair—your beautiful hair. . . . But the Queen has to be fair . . .”

Patricia stood very still, smiling a little and looking extremely noble and well content.

“Come, Gog,” she said gently. “If three’s to go into four, there must be one over.”

“Oh, my lady, my queen . . .”

Pomfret tore open his parchment.

TO OUR RIGHT TRUSTY AND RIGHT ENTIRELY BELOVED COUSIN
POMFRET GREETING WHEREAS BY VIRTUE OF OUR GREAT OFFICES
THERE IS VESTED IN US AND US ALONE THE POWER OF APPOINTMENT
AND WHEREAS IT HATH SEEMED GOOD TO US TO EXERCISE THE SAME
IN YOUR FAVOUR BE IT KNOWN UNTO YOU BY THESE PRESENTS THAT
IN ACCORDANCE WITH CUSTOM WHEREOF THE MEMORY OF MAN
RUNNETH NOT TO THE CONTRARY WE THE KING OF ARMS THE
QUEEN OF HEARTS AND THE KNAVE OF WITS DO HEREBY CALL AND
SUMMON YOU TO THE MOST HONOURABLE OFFICE AND DIGNITY OF
KING OF ARMS LORD HIGH CONSTABLE OF TRADITIONS WITHIN
THE PAIL AND THAT IT IS OUR PLEASURE THAT YOU PRESENT
YOURSELF AT NOON TO-MORROW AT THE GREAT HALL OF THE
PALACE THERE TO TAKE THE OATHS OF RENUNCIATION AND
MAINTENANCE TO BE INSTALLED AFTER THE IMMEMORIAL USAGE AND
TO RECEIVE THE PATENT OF ROYALTY.

GIVEN UNDER OUR HAND AT THE HIGH COURT OF
MAINTENANCE WITHIN THE PAIL UPON THIS LAST DAY
OF AUTUMN ONE THOUSAND NINE HUNDRED AND
THIRTY.

Le Roy le Veut
La Reine le Veut
Le Chevalier le Veut

Eulalie’s and Simon’s were to the same effect, appointing them Queen of Hearts and Knave of Wits.

With one consent they let them fall to the deck.

“Nothing doing,” said Pomfret.

“The answer,” said Simon, “is in the negative.”

“‘Eyes have they, and see not,’” said Eulalie, shaking her head. “Well, well. When we get home I shall tell everybody I meet, and no one will ever believe me.”

Gog was sitting back on his heels with starting eyes.

“You—you can’t . . . *refuse*,” he breathed, as though he were afraid of the word.

“Don’t be silly,” said Pomfret. “We don’t happen to care for the game.”

The courier looked round wildly.

Then he caught up one of the rolls and got to his feet.

“Sirs,” he said earnestly, “I assure you this is no game. You are within The Pail. This is a Writ of Summons, and, as such, must be obeyed.”

“And if,” said Pomfret calmly, “if it is disobeyed . . .”

“Then, sir,” said Gog, “*it will become a Death-Warrant.*”

CHAPTER X

HUE AND CRY

THE sun was resting upon the rim of The Pail—a blood-red business in a welter of grey and crimson, glaring upon a helpless world. As the four gazed, it sank behind Velvet, leaving an angry stain upon the sky, against which the mountain stood up like a crag of ebony, clear-cut and menacing.

The glint of mail came from the tower of The Palace, and the next instant the royal standard was hauled down.

“Behold, the night cometh,” said Pomfret quietly. Then he turned. “Supposing we went below. I know they say walls have ears, but, personally, if I’m to conspire I’d rather do it in a state-room than on the quarter-deck.”

“Come, then,” said Patricia, and led the way from the poop. . . .

When the door was shut, Pomfret turned to the courier and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

“Gog, my fellow,” he said, “you made a statement just now which interested me very much. You said that, should I decline to obey the command I have just received, I shall be condemned to death.”

The courier inclined his head.

“What makes you think that?” said Pomfret.

Gog spread out his hands.

“My lord,” he cried, “it is the custom. From time immemorial——”

“It is said to be the custom,” said Pomfret. “But as no one has ever declined to——”

“I saw it observed,” said Gog, “five years ago.”

There was a deathly silence.

At length——

“Tell us,” said Eulalie.

The courier moistened his lips.

“There came a stranger to The Pail—a man of England. He came not as you did, but by chance. He lost his way in the mountains and, stumbling through Balk, was found by a Ranger upon Velvet half dead of hunger and fatigue. He was a nice man and gentle, and found favour within The Pail. The Court liked him well, and he often assisted its councils as you have done.

“Then one day he left The Pail. . . .

“Upon what conditions he was allowed to go I do not know, but one promise they made him give—and that was that he would come back. I believe he gave this freely, for he was happy here.”

In a voice trembling with excitement—

“What was his name?” breathed Patricia. “I believe I met him once—but I can’t remember his name. If I heard it . . .”

“His name was Marlowe.”

“‘*Marlowe!*’ ” cried Patricia. “That’s it. Marlowe! That was the man who said he was ‘going back.’ ”

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then—

“Go on, Gog,” said Simon.

“He returned,” said Gog, “with a maid. That was why he went, I think—to marry a wife. She was very young and gentle, and I think she was very wise. But—her hair, too, was dark. . . .

“For a while they were very happy. And then one day a Writ of Summons was served . . . calling him to be the Knave of Wits. . . .”

He paused there for a moment and covered his eyes.

“I was there when he came to The Presence, with the Writ in his hand. . . . And he smiled as he spoke of the honour that he had been done and told how it went to his heart to have to decline. . . .

“Lion cut him down in the Hall. I saw it done. . . .

“His wife died in childbed next day. . . .”

There was a long silence.

At length—

“Knowing this thing,” said Simon, “why did you bring us here?”

Gog looked round wildly.

The anguish in his big brown eyes was a pathetic sight.

“I never thought,” he cried. “I never dreamed. It seems so plain now, but until I heard the trumpets it never entered my head. You see, I’ve no Logic. . . .”

“Blame me if you like,” said Patricia. “The whole thing was my idea. But I won’t hear a word against Gog.” She stepped to the courier’s side and laid a slight hand on his arm. “No one could have been more faithful.”

“And so say all of us,” said Pomfret, taking the courier’s hand.

Simon and Eulalie cried aloud their assent.

“I spoke without thinking,” said the former. “Gog, I take it back.”

Two big tears welled out of the courier’s eyes and rolled down his jolly cheeks.

“When I was at your mercy,” he faltered, drooping his head, “you were gentle and very kind. . . . You gave me good and I have returned—evil. . . .”

Pomfret stepped to a side-board and poured out wine. Then he gave the cup to Patricia. When she had drunk he gave it to Eulalie. When Simon also had drunk Pomfret put the cup to his lips. Then he gave it to Gog with a steady smile.

“If that were so we shouldn’t do this,” he said.

The courier stared upon the chalice.

Then, without moving his eyes, very slowly he turned his head.

The four followed his gaze.

On a table where he had put them lay the three Writs. . . .

Le Roy . . . La Reine . . . Le Chevalier le veut.

“Quite right,” said Simon gently. “We understand. As an Etchechurian, you mustn’t drink of this cup.” He turned to the others. “We ought to have thought of this. Even if he would, Gog’s too good a friend to involve.”

“True,” said Pomfret, stretching out his hand for the vessel. “My fellow, you can thank your jolly white self for the finest compliment that ever a man was paid. *We actually forgot that you were not one of us.* And if that doesn’t show you what we think of you, I don’t know what will.”

Gog’s eyes returned to the chalice. . . .

Then he lifted his head.

“My lord,” he said gravely, “no man can serve two masters—not even an Etchechurian.” He whipped the vessel to his lips and drained it dry. “And now for one more jest,” he cried, sending the cup spinning and catching it on his nose. “A very nonsuch of drollery that shall set the ages in a roar and turn a fool into a statesman.” He cut a caper and spun into the air. “The die is cast,” he continued in a strange exultant tone, “and if you’ll listen to me I’ll save us all—I, Gog, who can do anything because anything I do is nothing, who am almighty because of no account, who take precedence of the world because I have no place.”

The four stared open-mouthed.

“What on earth d’you mean?” breathed Eulalie. “Who—who are you?”

“My lady,” said Gog, “I have awaited that question for fifteen weeks.” He made a low bow. “My lords, ladies and good friends, I am The Court Jester.”



The King of Arms was always abroad betimes, but for once his guests were before him. Indeed, it was not yet eight o’clock when he reined up his horse in the ride which at this hour he always frequented and, after peering for a moment into a neighbouring dell, fell into a fit of suppressed laughter at once so convulsive and prolonged that Leopard, who was in attendance, became quite alarmed for his well-being.

Mounted, girt with a gigantic two-handed sword, surrounded by a vast French horn, buttressed by a pair of kettle-drums, wearing the plumed steel helmet of a Captain of the Household Troops and eating a banana, Gog was instructing a section, composed of Pomfret, Patricia, Eulalie and Simon, in the art of warfare and particularly the use of the sword.

“Now before we go out on patrol I want you all to master Simple Division. It’s a very beautiful exercise. On the command ‘One’ you offer up a short prayer, step lightly upon the saddle—thus, and, wrapping the digits of the right hand about the hilt, draw the sword or sabre from its scabbard, sheath, socket or sacking as the case may be. On the command ‘Two’ you smartly resume your seat—thus, moisten the lips and raise the sword or sabre with a sharp semi-circular movement over the right shoulder until the file on your left says ‘What about it?’ or otherwise indicates his aversion to sudden death. On the command ‘Three’ you give one cheer and a half and

serweep the sword or sabre forward after the manner of a ferlail, thus dividing any opponent who may happen to be in its path,” and, with that, suiting the action to the word with all his might, the instructor flew out of the saddle in the wake of his blade to dive into a clump of rhododendrons, from which his legs protruded like two substantial staves each of which was hoisting the private pennon of Buffoonery itself.

Before the laughter had died, however, he was again upon his feet, still eating his banana and folding up his sword after the manner of a two-feet rule. He then threw a somersault on to his charger’s back, begged Pomfret, who was leaning forward, if he had brought his seat with him to sit upon it forthwith and shame the devil, recommended Patricia not to squeak in a deer-park during the autumn months, desired Eulalie not to infringe the prerogative of a blancmange, reminded Simon, who was talking, that the mothers’ meeting had been postponed to four o’clock and plunged into a dissertation upon the art of taking cover.

“And now,” he concluded, “if you aren’t super-charged for all emergencies, that’s your funeral. I’m sorry we can’t make a day of it, but I understand that three of you have a somewhat important engagement at twelve o’clock. Still, if you’ve all got your brass rations we ought to be able to get through some good practical field-work in four hours. *Half sections—right. TR-R-R-ROT.*”

With that, he blew upon his trumpet, cantered to the head of the column and then fell upon his kettle-drums like a demoniac, producing an astonishing volume of most admirable music, executing a perfect hurricane of flourishes and finally leaping upon his saddle, bending backwards and continuing to drum like a madman, with his shoulders between his legs. . . .

Not until they were beyond The Verge was the mask of Comedy dropped.

Then in a leafy bottom a mile from Descent a halt was made.

So far all had gone well.

They were six miles from The Palace and beyond The Verge. No suspicions had been aroused, and the guards at Descent could, if necessary, testify to the heat of the dispute between Pomfret and his commanding officer regarding the wisdom of the latter’s decision to operate out of sanctuary. With his own ears the King of Arms himself had overheard their plans—to parody tactics all the morning and be at The Palace by noon. Finally, no man in his senses who was anxious to reach The Dish, which lay

due North, would leave The Verge by Descent and thus clap fifteen miles on to his journey.

They could, therefore, safely reckon that until eleven or later not even the Knave of Wits would find in their absence any cause for surprise and that even when they continued to fail to appear nothing but an accident would be suspected and at first inquiries and search would be made to the South and not to the North.

They were all superbly mounted, the girls on chestnuts, Pomfret and Gog on blacks and Simon on a hot blue roan.

And now it was nine o'clock, and the foot of The Aisle was thirty-five miles away.

Preparations for swifter progress were made in feverish haste.

The helmet, the French horn and the kettle-drums were bestowed amid the branches of a neighbouring tree, the girls put on peaked caps such as Surcoat and Dorelet would officially wear, Pomfret wrapped himself in The Invisible Cloak, and Gog produced The Sovereign Touchstone from a little soft gold bag which was fastened beneath his apparel about his neck. A moment later, down to its stirrup-irons and girths, Pomfret's magnificent black was caparisoned with gold.

"Splendid," said the Jester, standing back to survey his work. "Now mount again, will you? . . . Very good. I'm afraid you must quit your stirrups. . . . That's better. And keep your hands very low. Hitch the reins over the pommel. . . . Oh, very good. If every one we meet doesn't think that the King of Arms has taken the toss of his life it'll be because he's half-witted."

The idea was valuable.

Pomfret, for whom five hundred foresters were watching, was out of sight, while the empty saddle of the King of Arms himself not only would probably protect Simon but would, if carefully exploited, divert all attention from the cavalcade. Apart from this, the presence of Surcoat and Dorelet, officially covered, while concealing that of Patricia and Eulalie, would suggest that the party was abroad upon some matter of state and assist it to ride roughshod over any inclination to interference.

The Jester then restored The Touchstone to its bag and gave the latter to Simon to bind about his neck. This done he inquired if Pomfret had the map and, receiving an affirmative answer, vaulted on to his charger and seized the golden bridle of the seemingly spare horse.

“In case of accidents,” he said, “don’t forget that we’re making for Sacradown. From there we go to Redbreast and so by Crooked Thighs to the foot of The Aisle. Crooked Thighs is out of our way, but I must see Goosegog. Still, at the very latest we should make The Aisle in four hours. The climb won’t be funny but it’s got to be done—quick. Directly they guess you’re escaping, they’ll toll The Great Bell of Misfeasance, and that’ll alarm The Pail. Once The Pail’s alarmed it’s the instant duty of every inhabitant to arrest anyone who shows haste whoever he may be.

“Once you’re in Balk they can’t touch you, but until you’re there you mustn’t so much as sit down. And now, *en avant*—in absolute silence, please. And if anyone tries to stop us, take your cue from me.”

For half an hour nothing happened and the steady canter was maintained with scarcely a hesitation for nearly six miles. Then, as the five eased up for a sharp ascent, three men in Lincoln Green rose out of a covert on the crest and, darting into the ride, held up their bows and cried to the comers to ‘hold.’

“‘Hold’?” howled Gog in reply, pointing to the riderless horse. “With the King of Arms unseated and as like as not on his back with a broken leg?”

“The King of Arms?” cried the foresters, doffing their caps.

“Or worse,” shrieked Gog. “Has Unicorn been this way?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then, forward,” cried Gog, to his company. “And, you three, scour the forest to East and West. If you find His Majesty sound your ‘rally’ forthwith. Five hundred nobles to the man who finds the King.”

With that, he was gone, with the others thundering behind. . . .

The heather of Sacradown was a purple memory, the flaming maples of Redbreast were overpast, Crooked Thighs was ten miles distant, and it was eleven o’clock.

The five had forded a stream and were crossing a little lawn, when the blacks, who were leading, recoiled from a sinister figure which stepped from behind a rock.

Sunstroke.

To thrust by was hopeless—the horses would have refused. And the ground upon either hand was strewn with boulders and laden with fern-clad

rocks.

As Simon and the girls drew rein—

“Well met,” said Sunstroke, taking a horn from his belt. “Whither away?”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Gog. “Have you seen the King of Arms?”

Sunstroke stared very hard at the riderless horse. Then his eye shifted to Patricia and Eulalie. Twice his hand went up as though to remove his hat and twice stopped halfway to his head. Finally he uncovered.

“That’s better,” said Gog grimly. “I was beginning to think that sacrilege was to be numbered among your crimes. But I can’t waste time upon you. Have you seen His Majesty?”

The great eye blinked.

“If he’s been thrown,” said Sunstroke, “he——”

“He has,” snapped Gog. “We found his horse a mile back by Raven’s Wing.”

“Then you are coming wrong. I’ve been here for half an hour and that horse didn’t pass this way.”

“Then, out of the path!” cried Gog, touching his horse with the spur. “We must join Leopard at Rainbow and tell him as much.”

“Why not go back?” said Sunstroke.

“Because, you fool, he’s to wait there until we come.”

“I should wait here,” said Sunstroke. “When you don’t appear, Leopard will——”

“Meanwhile the King lies bleeding.” Gog rose in his stirrups and turned. “I call you to witness, Mesdames, that here is Contempt of Court. This vile and malignant reptile——”

“No, no,” cried Sunstroke, backing. “I don’t want to stand in your way. But I can’t let that gentleman pass. I mean—you can hardly contend that this is The Royal Presence.”

“Indeed,” said the Jester coldly. “Well, I should urge that in mitigation. Not that it will help your case, but it’ll interest Mail.”

The mention of the dread avenger had a lightning effect.

Sunstroke let out a howl and danced to one side.

“No, no, I meant no ill. I was only seeking to——”

“Begone, filth,” cried Gog, “and if you see His Majesty sound your horn. Only some signal service can save your life.”

He set the blacks at the gap and a moment later they were up and out of the hollow and flying over the turf at a hand-gallop.

Fifty-five minutes later they drew rein at Crooked Thighs. . . .

The house was sunk in a circular grove of cryptomerias, a mile and a half about, and the property wore a more sombre aspect than the sage’s summer residence, with which Simon and the girls were familiar. Indeed, there was something unearthly about this solid circle of dark red feathery towers, each casting the same blunt shadow and all inclining as one to every chuck of the breeze, while the glimpse of black and gold, which betrayed the enchanter’s house, and the dark flash of a pool thickened the odour of sorcery with which the air was charged.

Fifty paces from the mansion Gog stopped and slid from his horse.

“I shan’t be ten minutes,” he said, “but all the same, I shouldn’t dismount. Fancy meeting Sunstroke,” he added, handing his reins to Pomfret. “You must have itched to ask if he had a spare pair of boots he didn’t want.”

Pomfret said nothing at all, nor did he take the reins.

And when Eulalie, deathly pale, thrust her horse alongside and stretched out a small brown hand, this encountered nothing.

In a word, the great black horse was riderless indeed.



Pomfret lay on his back and looked at the sky.

The last thing he could clearly remember was crossing a ford. Then he had turned in his saddle to look at his wife. As he did so, the blacks had reared. . . . Not square in the saddle, with his feet out of the irons, with the reins hitched over one finger, he hadn’t a chance. . . .

He had a vague recollection of falling backwards. . . .

His head was aching and he felt rather sick.

He rose and lurched to the stream. . . .

He drank gratefully and then sluiced the cold brown water over his head and neck.

This refreshed body and mind, and, finding a lump like a purse on the back of his head, he made for a tiny fall and let the water play upon the hurt. . . .

Five minutes later he felt as sound as a bell.

He left the stream for a rise and looked about him.

There was no one in sight. But The Clock told that it was a quarter past eleven, so, wondering very much how long he had lain unconscious and whether his absence had been yet remarked, without more ado he lugged the map from its fastness within his coat and, laying it down on the ground, desired to be conducted to Crooked Thighs.

At once the map flopped forward. . . .

He had covered more than two miles as fast as he could, when a sudden shadow danced, and he became aware that he was not alone.

Pomfret was too old a soldier to stop in his tracks, but he slightly slackened his pace, and, comforting himself with the reflection that he could not be seen, stared very hard at the quarter from which the shadow had come.

As he looked, a familiar figure limped from behind a tree, threw a hasty glance at the map and then put another trunk between Pomfret and himself.

Pomfret quickened his pace and the map conformed.

So did Sunstroke, moving parallel to his quarry about thirty paces away. . . .

Apart from the bodily pain which his progress obviously entailed, the dwarf was plainly beside himself with perplexity and agitation, for his eye was bulging and peering all ways at once, and he gave the impression of one who has flushed his prey, but is at his wit's end for the way to effect its capture.

So for a while they proceeded on parallel lines, but after a gruelling furlong Sunstroke began to incline towards the map until he was rather too close for Pomfret's liking. In fact the latter was on the point of breaking into a run when the map flopped into a beechwood.

Till now, they had been upon turf, but the wood was strewn with leaves, upon which the noise of footfalls would be unmistakable.

Pomfret hesitated, and the map at once slowed down.

Not so Sunstroke, and a moment later the dwarf was between Pomfret and the precious parchment.

Pomfret wondered what to do.

Not to proceed was unthinkable: to proceed was to be heard.

After a moment he went forward, picking his way.

Twice Sunstroke stopped and listened, and twice Pomfret stood still with his heart in his mouth. Twice the dwarf essayed to pick up the map, but each time Pomfret spurted and the parchment flopped out of his reach.

Pomfret began to shake with laughter.

They were out of the beechwood, and Sunstroke, who had just missed the map for the seventh time, was raising his fists to heaven in an eloquent paroxysm of exasperation, when Pomfret, unsteady with mirth, caught his foot in the bracken and fell to the ground.

The next moment it was all over.

Sunstroke had the map, and, though Pomfret approached as close as ever he dared, the spell was apparently broken, for the parchment never fluttered, but suffered its hideous captor to do with it what he would.

Pomfret glanced at The Clock.

Five minutes past twelve.

Cursing himself for his folly, he instantly got to his feet and, fetching a cautious compass until he was out of hearing of the dwarf, did what he could to pick up and continue the line which would bring him to Crooked Thighs.

After ten minutes, however, he decided to retrace his steps. The others would come back for him and, Sunstroke or not, they were certain to pass the beechwood on their way to the ford, while, if he was going wrong . . .

Cursing himself for moving, he turned about.

He sought the beechwood until it was half-past twelve and then, realizing that he was not only utterly lost but wasting invaluable time, turned his face to The Clock and fervently prayed that the others would presently do the same.

When later the thought seized him that they would ride back and back, past the ford and Redbreast, past the purple heather of Sacradown, he gave a

terrible cry and flung himself face downward upon the earth.



That, on finding her husband gone, Eulalie should sway in her saddle was natural enough.

Simon caught her and lifted her down to the turf.

“Cordial,” said Gog, shortly, thrusting a flask of leather into Patricia’s hand. . . .

Then Simon came back to the horses and the two men stood together, watching the dragon-flies dart and thinking desperately. . . .

A long flash from the North announced that it was midday.

“No time to lose,” muttered the Jester. He stood on his toes and looked over a horse’s back. Eulalie was sitting up dazedly with Patricia’s arm about her, propping herself with one hand and regarding the flask in the other with sightless eyes. “Take these two horses,” he added, giving the reins to Simon, “and see that she drinks again. She’ll be fit to ride in ten minutes, and I shall be back in five. But before we start we must water—now. I shouldn’t talk or whisper. The greenwood is full of ears.”

The next moment he was gone.

“Buck up,” murmured Patricia. “Buck up, darling, buck up.”

“Get up,” breathed Simon to the roan, hauling his head from the turf. And then again, “Get up.”

Eulalie sat and listened to the two commands, to the chink of steel upon steel, to the gurgle of running water, to the steady hum of insects about their business. These seemed to be the sounds of a play which she was watching, into which she had been suddenly plunged, out of the black—with a flask in her hand and a strong sweet taste in her mouth.

Then with a rush the mists parted, and with a stifled cry she got to her feet.

Patricia was speaking.

“Sit down, dear, sit down. We must wait a moment for Gog. Then we shall ride back at once and pick him up. And please drink this. If you don’t you may faint again and let us down.”

Eulalie sat down obediently and put the flask to her lips.

Presently—

“Has Gog any idea where we lost him?”

“No, but he’s got the map. So we’re bound to meet him. It’s only a question of time. And he’s perfectly safe—he’s got The Invisible Cloak.”

Eulalie nodded.

Five silent minutes crawled by.

Then, with a sudden gasp, Eulalie tore off her glove.

“Of course,” breathed Patricia. “The emerald!”

Together, they peered at the stone. . . .

At first this was cloudy, and then a picture grew—a silver birch in the foreground and, beyond, a reach of sunlit bracken with a beechwood behind. Of Pomfret there was no sign, but under the birch stood Sunstroke—with the map in his hand.

As the picture faded—

“At least,” said the Jester’s voice above their heads, “he’s somewhere this side of the ford. There weren’t any stepping-stones, and Sunstroke’s feet were dry.”

“But he wasn’t there,” cried Patricia.

“You couldn’t see him,” said the Jester, “because of The Cloak. Neither could Sunstroke. And now to water.”

Between them, he and Simon watered the horses at a rill. As they were biting up—

“We mustn’t go too fast,” murmured Simon. “I mean, when you can’t see a man . . .”

“I know,” said Gog, musingly, “and yet . . .”

“Yet what?” said Simon.

“We’ve got to move,” said the Jester. “For several reasons. You see, before very long they’ll raise the alarm, and I happen to know that *The Cloak won’t weather The Bell*.” Before Simon could reply, he had twitched a pouch from his shoulder and flung the thong that held it over the other’s head. “You’ll be cold in Balk,” he continued, “and in that you’ll find some wear. And down at the bottom you’ll find a Rolling Stone. I had to fight to

get it, but I pledged your word to Goosegog that when it had brought you to the fountain you'd let it go."

"But you'll be with us," cried Simon. "We can't leave you behind. Of course, you're——"

"That will depend," said the Jester, averting his head.

"On what?"

"Seeing's not always believing," said Gog, sadly. For a moment he stooped to the water and, after peering for a moment, flicked a fly from the edge of his hood. Then he straightened his back. "And now for Pomfret."

One minute later they and the girls were mounted and flying the way they had come. . . .

The ford lay ten miles South of Crooked Thighs.

When to go forward is to make good an escape, it is hard to go back for mile after pelting mile and greet again the landscapes you were so glad to leave. These seem to stare, as though you were out of your mind. Familiar stocks and stones jab at your memory. A patch of broom you had marked laughs in your face. And all the time the grim fact that for every league you labour, instead of gaining three miles, *you are losing six*, whispers its ugly message into your ear. . . .

In such case it is hard to go back—resolutely.

But the Jester's courage was high and his purpose shining. The man never wavered or swerved, but galloped steadily back, his ears pricked to gather the faintest sound, his eyes watching for a birch and a sunlit reach of bracken with a beechwood beyond.

And the three behind him.



There was no mistaking The Bell.

That a tone so bass could have been educed by human agency was in itself a moving thought. The roar of the very water under the earth, deep calling unto deep, could not have been more abysmal. And with the depth came resonance—an iron reverberation that entered into the soul. Sunlight, air and soil shuddered before its frown, a thousand hills, like timid scholars, repeated its fearful word, Doom, Death and Burial rode on its breath.

Before each shattering stroke all Nature winced like a hound under the lash. . . .

Exactly at a quarter to one The Great Bell of Misfeasance began to knoll, and thereafter once a minute to repeat its summons with an awful, deadly precision which alone plucked at the nerves.

Little wonder that before such a hue and cry five stout hearts stood still.

The hunt was up.

As the echoes of the first dread crash beat like frantic moths against the sides of The Pail, three things happened.

Pomfret leaped to his feet and began to stumble North towards The Aisle.

A mile away, his eye bulging with excitement, Sunstroke clapped a horn to his lips and wound a high-pitched call.

And Gog, who was galloping South, pulled his horse on to its haunches and, putting his head on one side, listened for all he was worth. . . .

Again the call rang out.

“There’s the birch,” cried Gog, pointing. “With the beechwood beyond. And now—About turn and keep twenty paces in rear. *Sunstroke shall play cat’s-paw, and when he’s plucked our needle out of the hay——*”

The thunderous shock of The Bell smashed the rest of the sentence.



An hour and a quarter passed before Pomfret was caught.

He might have escaped then, had he but dreamed that he was visible.

As it was, when he saw three foresters, who, with their backs towards him, were beating the undergrowth, instead of falling flat in the bracken, he continued openly to advance, merely making a slight detour in case his footsteps were heard.

Even then—such are the uses of audacity—he almost plodded out of his peril, for, when they had seen him, the fellows could hardly credit that one so careless of concealment could be the man they sought.

Indeed, when they ran towards him, and Pomfret, after surveying them, merely stood still, they could scarcely believe their eyes, and when, as they

drew still nearer, he calmly walked to a tree and swinging himself on to a branch, took out a handkerchief and started to mop his face with the obvious detachment of one who has made himself safe, the three began to think that he had lost his wits.

Then Pomfret caught the eye of the leader and nearly fainted.

In fact, out of sheer surprise he fell down from the bough, and a minute later it was all over.

He fought like a lion—too late.

After a little they got him on to his face and, while two held him down, the third lashed his arms to his sides.

Gog, who had been stalking Sunstroke for over an hour, heard the birdlike call—and sighed with relief. . . .

The delay had fed upon the Jester's nerves and, though he did not show it, had done itself very well.

As for the girls and Simon, Hope and Gog had come to be synonyms. If he had bade them dismount and play at Bridge they would have done so.

At least, their tedious progress had excited no remark, as haste, since The Bell was tolling, must have done, for the greenwood was alive with men in Lincoln Green, excitedly scouring the forest in response to the note of the horn. Moreover, their mounts had been saved. Thoroughbred as they were, the horses had begun to flag, and the enforced easy, punctuated by frequent halts, had greatly revived them.

And now—Pomfret was caught.

Sunstroke had broken into a lumbering run, and Gog gave the signal to trot. . . .

Every quarter of a minute came the birdlike call.

When it was very loud, Gog threw his reins to Simon and went forward on foot.

Ahead the ground fell sharply, and Sunstroke had disappeared.

The call was discontinued.

From behind a stalwart oak, the Jester laid his plans.

The gaol was a hollow, and within a wide circle of gaolers the prisoner stood. Before him stood Sunstroke with his hands on his monstrous hips.

Men were swelling the circle, one and two at a time, coming in out of the greenwood—to be in at the kill.

The Jester started at the thought.

Then he turned and ran as though for his life. . . .

Sixty seconds went by—while Sunstroke spoke of footwear, of pains and penalties and fools and lastly of the qualities of simian life.

Then, looking neither to right nor left, Surcoat and Dorelet cantered lightly into the hollow, with Simon, leading a black, riding behind. For them the hungry circle, fifty paces away, might not have been.

Every one turned to stare, and most of the foresters louted, while a few went down on their knees.

Pomfret saw them, and Sunstroke—*phial in hand*.

The former never moved, but the latter tried to cry out, and the words stuck in his throat. His eye was goggling. . . .

A rustle, and the Jester was down ‘like a wolf on the fold.’

They turned to see him upon them—a splash of green and crimson on a rack of black and gold.

The circle was shattered long before it could break: Sunstroke—phial in hand—was sent sprawling on to his back: Pomfret was lifted like a child and swung to the saddle-bow, and—the storm swept on.

As it came up with the others, they adopted its pace and an instant later the five were out of sight.

But not for long.

Within thirty seconds, from the higher branches of a magnificent chestnut a skewbald baboon was regarding their fast-diminishing figures with an emotion too deep for words.

* * * * *

As they came to The Aisle, a wandering breath of incense argued The Passing Priest.

* * * * *

Patricia fell.

Gog picked her up in his arms and staggered on.

The ascent was awful—six miles of one in three.

Up, up, up, over the close-set cobbles, by rock and hanging garden and the gush of a thousand springs.

Now the path was a staircase, and now a ramp, and often a union of both—a smooth-faced flight of steps with low sloping treads some six feet long that lured you into misprision of their hostility.

To and fro toiled the zigzag, back and forth—hairpin turn to the right and then to the left—an endless, narrow shelf, cut on the face of Velvet and climbing up to the stars.

Up, up, up . . . staircase and ramp and steps . . . to and fro. . .

There were moments when death seemed better than the hell of going on.

Ordinarily, the way was latent, and neither from above nor below could the eye discern its track. But now it was a writhing serpent already five miles long—a snake of blue and scarlet and steel and Lincoln Green, of crimson and violet, with a tongue of gold and silver, worming its way up Velvet, instant to avenge the honour of The Pail.

Up, up, up . . . staircase and ramp and steps . . . back and forth, till the heart slammed as a madman upon his walls, till the taking of breath was one long burst of sobbing and the sweat ran into the eyes and blurred the vision.

The sun was going down.

All The Pail was flushed with its gentle light. Woodland and mead and water, manor and hamlet, peeping turret and mill—miniature, yet conspicuous—that matchless, magic diaper, which Nature and Naïveté had wrought, was all rose-red.

Up, up, up . . .

They were passing the Clock now, and the steady East wind that held its shining hand was stinging their strained faces and snatching their hard-won breath.

Eulalie stumbled, and Simon caught her wrist.

Behind came Pomfret. . . .

Four hearts broke that evening. Chequers fell dead, and Bulb and two of the men-at-arms.

Up, up, up . . . to and fro . . . under the setting sun and the scorn of the steady East wind. . . .

Eulalie stumbled again and nearly brought Simon down. The Jester's knees were sagging. A trembling which he could not control in Pomfret's limbs presaged revolt.

Lion, with the Knave on his heels, was seventy paces behind. For all his stature the man climbed like a cat.

Gog stumbled, saved himself somehow and staggered on. Pomfret was swaying from side to side of The Aisle, like a drunken man. . . .

The Dish was hard by, but the end of Tether was at hand. The steps slid into a ramp and the ramp changed to a staircase that curled in a hairpin bend.

Lion and the Knave were a bare ten paces away.

Pomfret rounded the turning, caught at the root of a sapling and lay back against the wall. As Lion swung round he hit him on the point of the jaw. The blow was lifeless, but Pomfret had the ground. The Herald tottered, tried to throw himself forward, failed and fell back upon the Knave. As the two crashed to the cobbles, Pomfret heaved himself up and into The Dish.

The length of this had to be traversed and the thicket beyond.

Gog set down Patricia and shambled over the turf. Pomfret and Simon had Eulalie by the wrists. The girl's feet were trailing. . . .

"Balk . . . fine air," gasped the Jester. "Know when you feel the cold. . . . Don' forget put on coats. . . ."

Two foresters were leading, running like lean wolves. The Knave of Wits was behind them with Leopard and Domesday at his heels. The foresters were leaving the others and gaining fast.

The fugitives made the thicket with ten yards to spare.

"Strai' through," gasped the Jester, pointing, and turned in behind a tree.

As the leading forester passed him he caught his foot in a twinkling and brought the man down, but the other leapt over his fellow and ran straight on.

With a roar, the Jester was up and hurling himself in pursuit.

The fellow was five yards from Pomfret and Gog was ten yards behind. The thicket was thinning. You could see the world beyond. Patricia was out, and Simon, with Eulalie across his shoulders, was staggering clear. Pomfret

was running so slowly he seemed to be marking time. His legs were wobbling like wheels that are out of truth. Patricia began to run back. . . .

As the forester's hand shot out Gog landed upon his shoulders like a stone from a sling. . . .

As the Knave of Wits came up, Pomfret crawled out of the thicket on hands and knees.

Not seeming to notice the four, the Knave glanced at the body in Lincoln Green. Then he looked sharply about him.

The Jester had disappeared.



The cold was intense.

Four great fleeces, however, each roughly fashioned into the form of a coat with a hood, kept the wind at bay, and the leather flask of cordial had worked wonders.

Slowly the four tramped after the Rolling Stone—a tiny, barrel-shaped pebble which rolled faithfully forward up hill and down dale, shedding a glow-worm's light.

Save that they were all stiff, hungry and heartily sick of their clothes, after sleeping like the dead for twelve hours nobody seemed to feel one penny the worse. And now—very soon the sun would be up. Already the Eastern sky was growing pale.

They moved in silence and, as often before, in single file. Simon went first: then the girls: Pomfret brought up the rear. But he had no rein in his hand. . . .

The sun was up now, touching the peaks about them. Soon it would be flooding their path with its old splendour. And they were alive to see it—thanks to the greatest heart that ever stared Misfortune out of countenance.

As before, no sign of life was given them, save once, when a cream-coloured bear came lurching out of a cave on the flank of a combe, to fling himself down in the sunshine and take his ease.

The four tramped on. . . .

Presently they halted down in a dell they knew. For a little they sat in silence. Then Pomfret started to his feet.

“It’s all been a dream,” he cried. “It must have. Damn it, the thing’s impossible. We’ve been asleep or something. We’ve dreamed of Kings and Jesters and Invisible Cloaks. We’ve walked with spirits—our minds have been possessed. There’s something queer about this piece of country—we knew that before we left Stelthe. We were overwrought when we left there and we had Etchechuria on the brain. And then . . .”

“And then?” said Simon.

Pomfret put a hand to his head.

“I don’t care,” he said doggedly. “I’ll not believe it. We’ve seen a vision or something. We’ve——”

“Look,” said Eulalie.

The girl had thrown back her hood and opened her fleece.

She still wore the peaked cap of Dorelet, and, though her white silk shirt was soiled and rumpled, the delicate blazonry upon the little coat glowed and flamed in the sunshine till her rich green kilt looked shabby and her boots workaday things.

Pomfret covered his face. . . .

After a while—

“He saved all our lives,” he said brokenly. “And mine three several times.”

There was a long silence.

Patricia turned to Simon.

“Tell me again,” she whispered. “What were his actual words?”

“‘That will depend,’” said Simon. “I said ‘We can’t leave you,’ and he said ‘That will depend.’ And when I said ‘What on?’, he shook his head and said ‘Seeing’s not always believing.’ Then he turned away and bent down and looked into the stream. He stared so hard that I thought there was something there, but I couldn’t see anything and I came to the conclusion that he was looking at himself.”

There was another silence.

“‘That will depend,’” sobbed Eulalie. “On us, of course. Something depended on us—and now it’s too late. . . .”

Simon rose to his feet.

“We’d better get on,” he said hoarsely.

Two hours later they came to a sudden valley and face to face with a dog.

“People,” said Simon, turning, “we’d better button these coats. As it is, they’ll think we’re mad.”

If there were people, however, they did not appear. The dog, a rough-haired Sealyham, seemed to be on his own. He stared at the four curiously, as well he might.

“Hallo, old chap,” said Simon, advancing with outstretched hand.

The terrier hesitated for an instant. Then he backed round and away.

“Wonder whose he is,” said Simon. “Nice-looking dog.”

“He’s a beauty,” said Eulalie, stooping and putting out a hand.

This was true.

The dog was beautifully marked, his coat shone like silver, and the most unpractised eye must have found him thoroughbred. His fine, deep chest and carriage alone bespoke his blood.

He had quality.

Standing there in the gay sunshine, his soft ears pricked, tail up and little forefeet together, he was the very picture of vitality, but most of all striking was the eager, expectant light in the bright brown eyes, to which all the sweet of his nature seemed to have repaired.

“No collar,” said Pomfret, going forward and putting out a hand. “Come on, my fellow. . . . There’s a good dog. . . .”

The tail moved ever so slightly. Then the dog backed away.

“Now then,” said Pomfret, stooping. “I always get on with dogs. Come and make friends.”

Again the tail moved, but that was all.

After a long look the light in the eyes seemed to fade, and the terrier turned away.

Patricia went down on her knees and stretched out her arms.

“I knew you,” she said simply. And then, “Come, Gog.”

The rush of the terrier’s greeting almost knocked her down. . . .

Five minutes later a peasant, who was riding a donkey from Stelthe, witnessed a strange sight.

On the turf at the back of a fountain four beings, fantastically robed in sheepskin, were dancing with joined hands about a small white dog, who was wagging his tail like mad and barking uproariously.

After watching them for some moments the peasant proceeded to the market for which he was bound.

Before leaving Murillo that evening he went to the pharmacy.

After listening to what he had seen the chemist sold him a phial of liver pills.

CHAPTER XI

DOLORES

“**I**N fact,” said Pomfret, limping to the fireplace to set a log flaming, “he seems to have behaved like a hired bully of the Middle Ages, that is to say, a sort of private Bolshevik, whose job was to force a tavern quarrel on somebody his employer wished to efface.”

“I can’t imagine a better simile,” said Patricia, looking up from the lazy business of brushing Gog, who was lying on his back before the hearth with his legs in the air. “‘Offensive’ conveys nothing at all.”

“Simon,” said Eulalie, “was marvellous. Pat and I were boiling, but Simon got suaver and suaver and kept on handing the brute the tambourine as if he were the most gracious monarch that ever was foaled.”

“Good,” said Pomfret. “He’s probably saved the game. I’m quite glad I wasn’t there. My temper isn’t what it used to be, and, to be perfectly honest, it never was. And you really think that it was because he found you shabby that dear Lionel got so cross?”

“I’m sure of it,” said Patricia.

“But you’re not shabby,” said Pomfret.

“We’ve no pearls,” said Eulalie. “Or furs. And our coats and shoes look nearly as cheap as they were. And Simon *is* shabby. Then again a pre-war taxi makes a bad private car.”

“It was perfectly obvious,” said Patricia, “that we were not his idea of what the prospective purchaser of his estate should look like, and, all things considered, I don’t know that I blame him. But he might have said so, instead of asking Simon where he found his shoes.”

“He didn’t”—incredulously.

“It’s a cold fact,” said Eulalie. “And Simon laughed to glory and said that he liked old things and couldn’t bring himself to throw them away.”

Pomfret expired. Then he returned to his sofa, sat down and put up a leg.

“It’s a very good thing I couldn’t go,” he said. “And Simon, as usual, is playing the only game. We hate dear Lionel very much, but we want what he’s got far more.”

“That’s right,” said Patricia. “It rained like fury while we were there to-day, but it didn’t do any harm. Some places are above bad weather—very few, of course. But Dolores is one of them.”

“Tell me again,” said Pomfret, “what Simon arranged.”

“Forty thousand for the place as it stands, the Agreement to be signed and four thousand paid on account a week from to-day. Bosch said ‘Why not to-morrow?’ ‘Because I must sell out,’ said Simon. ‘To-morrow I shall leave for London to see my broker.’ Bosch couldn’t very well kick at that.”

Pomfret reckoned upon his fingers.

“Three days in Town,” he said. “And by leaving to-day he’s got four. . . . Four days in which to dispose of a King’s Ransom which no one on earth will buy. It isn’t too long, is it?”

“Don’t be depressing,” said his wife, picking up a note from the floor. “Hullo. Who’s your lady friend?”

“Gertie the Godsend,” said Pomfret. “Such a sweet girl. And the most simple tastes. To give Gertie lunch was a revelation. A crab and a bottle of stout was all she asked. And a bag of gooseberries about four.”

Eulalie’s grey eyes ran swiftly over the sheet.

“Well, that’s very civil,” she said. “Listen, Pat.”

THE CARLTON HOTEL;
BIARRITZ.

DEAR MR. TUDOR,

Only the fact that I am confined to my room with acute bronchitis has prevented me from calling upon you before now to express to you my heartfelt gratitude for what you did yesterday afternoon.

My chauffeur tells me that he was powerless and that but for your most brave intervention the runaway must have struck the car amidships with results which might easily have proved fatal to the little girl within. She is my only child.

I understand that your foot was hurt and that, though you made light of the injury, you could hardly walk. In case you may not have your car with you, my chauffeur has instructions (which, believe me, he is only too happy to obey) to call at your hotel for orders every morning until further notice. Since I cannot use the

car and am too shaken to let my daughter use it again just yet, it is wholly at your service.

I trust you will not leave the neighbourhood before I have sufficiently recovered to come and thank you in person for a service which I can never repay.

*Yours very sincerely,
JOHN COURTHOPE.*

— TUDOR, ESQ.
HÔTEL DU CHEVAL D'OR,
BAYONNE.

“Much ado about nothing,” said Pomfret. “And if only I’d done it the day before you would have had the car to splurge with this afternoon. Still, it’s quite nice to meet a gentleman, isn’t it? Now Lionel, when he heard my address, would have sent me a cheque. . . .”

Patricia nodded.

“I’m afraid he would have,” she said. “He’s the complete cad.”

This was true. More. Mr. Lionel Bosch’s bad form was so arrogant that even his immense wealth could not support the strain. And that is saying a great deal.

A man who could boast more than one malefactor in the short pedigree which his birth-certificate disclosed, he had fought his way up the ladder of success with a brute force which would have been almost admirable but for the ruthlessness and lack of scruple with which his record was stained. Still, if they become rich and know how to entertain ‘the evil that men do’ may predecease them . . . may . . .

Having tried England and failed, Mr. Bosch decided to try the South of France.

He bought an estate of many acres and great beauty a few miles South of Biarritz and North of Spain and, when a London firm had turned the aged château into a palace of ease, opened all gates and doors and ascended his self-made throne.

Be sure the courtiers came—once. But that was all. The wine was all right and the bands were above reproach, but, unlike the frogs in the fable, they wanted no king. . . . Mr. Bosch found them lacking in respect for his throne—silence, for instance, was not observed when he opened his mouth: and the courtiers for their part, while regretting the wine and the music,

found Mr. Bosch's price just a little too high. And so the arrangement had fallen through, and Mr. Lionel Bosch, more savage than any bear robbed of its whelps, was out to sell Dolores for what he could get.

The property was attractive—a pocket duchy, with farms and streams and pastures, a water-mill and a chapel, vineyards and park and forest and no less than four lodge-gates. A slice of glorious country had been enclosed, and, though for lack of money the farms were hang-dog and the vineyards had lost their smile, the timber had not been cut and the natural beauty of the estate was as paramount as ever. The château stood high, surveying Spain and the Atlantic and, to the North, a plain that might have been Lilliput itself: from the house a crinoline of woodland went sloping every way, masking the vineyards and pastures and veiling the château from the neighbourhood. Indeed, the house was embowered, yet seemed to command earth, sea and sky at once—a coign so rare and notable that only the eye of one who had dreamed of such a thing could at first sight seize its significance. Here, with its bulwarks and satellites, its abundance of sun and air, its tiled bathrooms and private electric plant, was a veritable King's pleasance, fifteen miles from Biarritz, twelve hours from Paris and eighteen from London Town.

The four had heard of it while they were once again at Estepemazan. Jeanne's brother was a scullion at Dolores and in view of the coming removal had been given notice. The four, who were wondering what on earth they should do and were more than a little reluctant to return even temporarily to a world which after their glittering adventure seemed curiously sordid, had pricked up their ears. Dolores sounded as though it would suit them well. . . . Simon had been deputed to spy out the land. His report proving favourable beyond belief, three days later Mr. Bosch had been formally approached, and the four and Gog had left the mountains for a tiny hotel at Bayonne.

Their circumstances were peculiar.

The Sovereign Touchstone, which had lost none of its virtue and was worth considerably more than all the gold mines in the world, was almost their sole asset. Eulalie had not a penny, nor had Patricia. Pomfret's few worldly goods had already been divided between his next of kin. Simon's pass-book showed a balance of one hundred and sixty pounds.

That The Touchstone must itself be converted into legal tender had been recognized from the first. Otherwise it would soon become a *damnosa hereditas* and breed more disaster than ever it had done within The Pail.

That the conversion, however, would be a difficult and delicate business was manifest. The four had decided to go very gingerly. . . .

Then came Dolores.

The four had visited the property, seen and been beaten to their knees.

They wanted the estate wildly.

In half an hour it had leapt from a name to an ideal.

What was so serious was that they were not first in the field. At the moment when negotiations were opened Mr. Bosch had been upon the point of accepting a firm offer of thirty-five thousand pounds for the place as it stood.

To beat this was easy—on paper or by word of mouth. But the money had to be produced.

So Simon had left for London, with The Touchstone about his neck, to seek the fortune of them all.

He had ninety-six fleeting hours in which to find it. . . .

Eulalie laid back her head and closed her eyes.

It had been a full day.

In the morning she and Pomfret had been remarried.

A cold rain was falling, and the cathedral was a dim tomb, splashed here and there with the light of guttering candles, its chill breath laden with the sloughs of prayers. The priest was young and well-meaning, but he had not the makings of a prelate, and the hearts of the four threw back to another service when the sun had been a wheel-window and a church had grown out of the cool of the day.

Then Gog had been lost for ten minutes and had frightened them all to death.

Afterwards Dolores had been visited, and its truculent owner endured.

Finally, by a superhuman effort, to which even Pomfret had contributed, Simon had caught his train with two minutes to spare.

The abrupt change in their condition must have affected the steadiest temperament. Compared with that of The Pail, at the moment the climate was foul: their present quarters were mean, the fare very rough: in a flash they had fallen from an estate, high and shining as a dream, to that of the

least of the tourists that visit a side-show place when other folk are at home. Over all, the inevitable reaction hung like a thunder-cloud. The great adventure was over, the stupendous march they had stolen on all the world was a thing of the past, a sense of flatness like a mist was blotting out the future. Only the turrets of Dolores, faint and illusive as a moonbeam, distant as any star, stood up unearthly and glistening to show there was still a sun.

A knock fell upon the door.

Then a filthy *chasseur* entered with a note in his hand.

This was addressed to 'Mr. Beaulieu.'

Saturday.

Mr. Beaulieu.

Upon reflection I can see no reason why, if you possess securities to the value of the deposit you say you are going to pay, you should not telegraph to your Bank or brokers and so save valuable time. I am not the man to be mucked about and people who are in a position to purchase estates like mine don't have to ask for time to raise a tenth of the price. Unless, therefore, you are at my notary's office on Wednesday at half-past two I shall sell the property.

I may say I shall only accept spot cash or a banker's draft.

LIONEL BOSCH.

When Patricia had read it aloud, she turned her head to the fire and sat very still.

After a moment, mistrusting the liquid look of her big brown eyes, Gog put his paws upon her shoulders and anxiously licked her face.

* * * * *

Before noon on the following day several things had been done.

Eulalie's emerald had been pledged: with the proceeds—three hundred pounds—an account had been opened at Biarritz: Pomfret had taken a room at the *Hôtel du Palais*, and Mr. Courthope's Rolls-Royce had been ordered for two o'clock.

Purchases, too, had been made—a myrtle-green velour Homburg, a pair of cloth-topped patent-leather boots, a malacca cane, banded with onyx set

with diamonds, a large ‘cultured’ pearl pin and a box of Corona Coronas about which there was no deception.

Finally one hundred pounds had been deliberately expended upon a ‘gent’s fur coat,’ a garment of questionable style but indisputable magnificence.

Pomfret, who alone of the four had never met Mr. Bosch, was intending to do what he could.

Luck seemed to be with him.

The sky had cleared, a steady breeze had supplanted the blustering wind and, as the Rolls swam up the last sunlit reach of a great avenue, Mr. Lionel Bosch, violently equipped for riding, emerged from the main door of the château with a cowed-looking dog at his heels.

Pomfret let himself out of the car and advanced with open arms.

“My dear good sir, how are you? No need to ask who you are. My name’s Tudor—one of the Harrowby Tudors of Somerset. My brother, the extra Equerry—damn this foot! Excuse me. I wouldn’t confess it to every one, but I’ve a touch of the gout, Mr. Bosch. When old Ned Hampshire died, the Countess gave me a bin of his ‘34 port. Molten gold, you know. ‘Don’t drink it all at once,’ she said, and I’ve tried not to. But it takes its revenge. We must crack a bottle one day—just you and me. We won’t ask anyone else: we’ll just——”

“Er, won’t you come in?” stammered Bosch, whom the delicious wave of well-bred geniality had swept off his feet.

“No, my dear fellow, no. I only arrived this morning and I’ve got to go back to-night. So I can’t waste this glorious air. But I’m keeping my rooms at the *Palais* because I shall be back in ten days. And then I shall put my feet up. And that brings me to business, my dear Bosch.” He slid an arm through the other’s and made for the terrace steps. “It’s a sin to talk business on a beautiful day like this, and I’m keeping you from your ride.”

“Not at all,” said Bosch, who was none too fond of saddle-exercise, but knew it was ‘done.’ “Not at all.”

“Now why,” said Pomfret, suddenly stopping and regarding the harness upon his companion’s legs—“why can’t Stoop make me some leggings like those?”

“I—I can’t think,” said Bosch feebly.

“Neither can I,” said Pomfret. “I’ve tried and tried and I’ve almost given up hope. The last pair he made me—I sent for him to come up and see them on. ‘Why dress me like a farmer?’ I said. ‘I’m ready to pay. I haven’t looked at your bills for twenty years. And this is my reward.’ He looked very sheepish. . . . But these—these have got style. They’re a gentleman’s wear.”

“They’re not too bad,” said Bosch, colouring with pleasure. “I—I got them at Crane’s.”

“I know,” said Pomfret. “I know. I shall go there directly I get back. May I mention your name?”

“Of—of course,” stammered Bosch, striving to take his place. “Er, only too pleased—my dear Tudor.”

“That’s splendid,” said Pomfret, resuming his walk. “And now I’ve a confession to make. More than a confession—an apology. In fact I shouldn’t be surprised if you ordered me off the place.”

The bare suggestion seemed so fantastic that Mr. Bosch laughed heartily. And Pomfret with him.

As the amicable paroxysm subsided, Pomfret produced his cigar-case and wiped his eyes.

“Now these won’t hurt you,” he piped. “I mayn’t tell you where they came from, but my brother got them for me: and now you can think what you like and I won’t stop you.”

Mr. Bosch took a cigar with bulging eyes. . . .

As they mounted the terrace—

“And now,” said Pomfret, “to business.” Mr. Bosch inclined his head. “I used to know the old Marquise from whom you bought this place. As a matter of fact, she was a connection of mine. I never stayed here, because the house wasn’t fit. She used to ask me, of course, but I always refused. Not that I mind poverty—people can’t help being poor. But they mustn’t expect to inflict it upon their friends. Don’t you agree?”

Mr. Bosch agreed heartily.

“I knew you would,” said Pomfret, “but then you and I have a certain instinct. One doesn’t talk about these things as a rule, because nowadays you never know where you are, but between gentlemen . . . Exactly. Well, she’d lost that instinct. Possibly she never had it. And there you are. . . . Poverty in its place I can stand, but on its hind legs—well, it becomes sordid. I assure

you, Bosch, I used to come out of this mansion and go back to Biarritz and have a bath. I felt morally contaminated.”

“I can quite believe you,” said Bosch.

“I’m sure you do, my dear fellow, but how few would! Our school—the old, sensitive school is dying out. I well remember when my father received a letter from the Lord-Lieutenant asking him to subscribe to some public baths. The letter was headed *Cleanliness is next to Godliness*. My father struck out the words, wrote instead *Vulgarity is next to Poverty*, and sent it back. ‘Ask me for money,’ he said, ‘and you shall have it; but don’t offend my senses by exposing the sores of pauperism.’ ”

“Splendid,” cried Mr. Bosch, carefully memorizing an anecdote which illustrated his own sentiments at once faithfully and with the style of an eighteenth-century print. “I’ll bet that made the Lord-Lieutenant sit up.”

“By Jove, it did,” said Pomfret, slapping him on the back. “He still rode to hounds, but he always kept a field behind my father to the day of his death. But that’s by the way. I knew the Marquise very well and I always said to her, ‘If and when you’re going to sell this property, let me know.’ ” Mr. Bosch’s eyelids flickered. “You’ll think it strange that I should have left it there, but although, when I saw it, I used to find it desirable—as, indeed, I think anyone would: it’s a gentleman’s place, Mr. Bosch—when I was gone I used to say to myself, ‘Don’t be a fool, Pomfret Tudor, you don’t need it and it’s another place to keep up,’ and so I used to let the idea go. She never told me before she sold it to you, but I doubt if I should have bought it if she had. One can’t see ahead, you know, Bosch. . . . If you’d told me three months ago that before the old year was out I should be gone in the wind, I’d ‘ve laughed in your face. . . . Well, the doctor’s orders are clear: you can bet I’ve had ’em confirmed—at five guineas a time. But it’s always the same cry. ‘Winter abroad, winter abroad, winter abroad.’ ”

“Well, I naturally thought of this place. I’m not a hotel hack, and The Riviera’s rather too full of—well, you’ll understand what I mean when I call them ‘The New School.’ ”

Mr. Bosch understood.

“Well, the young Duke of Padua told me you wanted to sell. I don’t know how he knew—you probably told him yourself. He was out here this summer. Quite a nice boy, but you may not have caught his name. Wants me to put him up for The Marlborough, but I really don’t know. What d’you think?”

Mr. Bosch thought.

After a moment—

“No harm in putting him up,” he said portentously. “I mean, you could always arrange that he didn’t get in, couldn’t you?”

“So I could,” said Pomfret. “Bosch, my dear chap, that’s a very good idea. It obviates the awkwardness of refusing, and the very fact that I have proposed him will divert his suspicion from me as blackballer. In fact, I shall be the last person anyone will suspect. God bless the secret ballot.”

The two laughed heartily.

“Oh, dear me,” croaked Pomfret, “what fun we do ‘ave! Never mind. Where was I? Well, the moment I heard that you were wanting to sell I told my man to pack, intending to leave for Biarritz the following day. That was a week ago. That night my brother had a stroke. Well, it was the first one he’d had and there was the devil to pay. He couldn’t go on duty, and I had to go down and explain, and between the doctors and his wife and the general resultant confusion it became most painfully clear that I couldn’t possibly leave until he was out of the wood.”

“Naturally,” said Mr. Bosch, “naturally. I—I hope——”

“He’s better,” said Pomfret. “Much better, thanks very much. That’s why I’m here. And in another ten days I’m assured that he’ll be about again. Then I shall be free. Till then—well, you see, I could hardly refuse, could I? I mean, in the circumstances. . . .”

“Of course not,” said Mr. Bosch, who was, if possible, less certain than was Pomfret of the nature of the embarrassment to which the latter referred. “Of course, you couldn’t.”

“I knew you’d say that, my dear fellow. I knew you’d say that. Well, there you are. I didn’t know what to do. Suddenly I thought of my man. He’d been a very good servant and he seemed to have a head. I’ve only had him six months, but he’s done quite well. I believe he was a temporary gentleman during the war—commanded a tank or something. So I sent for him and gave him his orders that night. . . . These were quite clear. I told him to report to you, give you my compliments and say that I was prevented from coming myself. I told him to inquire what you wanted and, if it was forty thousand or under, to ask for immediate possession and close on my behalf. Then I made a mistake. I blame myself very much, but I hardly knew where I was. *I mentioned a Power of Attorney*. I said that if things got worse

and I couldn't get out I might send a Power of Attorney for him to sign the deed."

Mr. Bosch put a hand to his head.

"D'you mean to say that that fellow——"

"I regret," said Pomfret, drooping his head, "my dear Mr. Bosch, I infinitely regret to tell you that *until this morning* Beaulieu was in my employ. And now if you like to ask me to leave your grounds, I shall understand how you feel."

"But what—I don't understand."

"My dear Bosch," said Pomfret, "through my carelessness—because at a moment of great mental stress I reposed undue—I say it, advisedly—outrageously undue confidence in a servant—a common man, with no sense of responsibility beyond the pressing of trousers and the blacking of boots—because in a rash moment I elevated a varlet to the position of a secretary, you and I have been the victims of a clumsy, fumbling, puerile attempt to defraud."

He broke off there and stamped about the terrace, raising his fists to heaven as though in a frenzy of inarticulate rage.

Suddenly he turned to the other and took off his hat.

"And now good-bye, my dear fellow. I don't like to use the word apology, but—well, I *had* to come and tell you. My impulse was to go back without letting you know, for he admitted this morning that he had never even mentioned my name. Then I said to myself, 'No, a Tudor must take his gruel.' And so I came. And now, good-bye."

Mr. Bosch stared at the outstretched hand.

"But I don't understand——"

Pomfret produced the letter which Patricia had opened at Bayonne the night before.

"That put the wind up him," he said. "You must have suspected something. My coming out was an accident—which he didn't expect. But you broke his nerve last night."

Mr. Bosch swallowed.

"I certainly thought," he said, "that he didn't look the sort of individual to purchase a gentleman's place. But——"

“Bosch, my dear chap, the whole thing was a blasted plant. *He meant to buy your estate with my money, sell it again to the fellow you mention in this letter and then clear out.* Last night he wired to me for a banker’s draft and a Power of Attorney which he never intended to use. He wouldn’t have got either, you know. I’m not quite such a baby-child. But the Power of Attorney did it. When I said ‘Power of Attorney’ he thought he’d got me cold. And now I must go.” Once more he put out his hand. “I must catch the five o’clock and, as I’ve no servant now, I must pack my things. It’s been a great pleasure to meet you and you’ve made my task easier than I dared to hope it could be. But there you are, my dear Bosch. Between gentlemen. . . .”

Mr. Bosch expanded.

“Now don’t you worry,” he said, waving aside the hand. “I don’t pretend I enjoyed that young blackguard’s company and when I think of his airs I could break his dirty neck. But that wasn’t your fault, Tudor. Did he tell you he brought two girls?”

“*Two girls!*”

“Two girls,” repeated Mr. Bosch. “Cheap as himself.”

“Impossible,” said Pomfret. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. “My dear Bosch, you horrify me. That you should have been subjected to the insult of association with——”

“Come, come,” said Bosch genially. “All’s well that ends well, Tudor. I fancy you spoiled his lunch.”

“I give you my word,” said Pomfret solemnly, “that he left with a flea in each ear. And no ordinary insects. He’s a third-class fare to England and a note, which I doubt if he’ll use, to the nearest Labour Exchange. From the look on his face I rather fancy he’ll try to emigrate before I get back. I don’t think he liked the weather forecast in my eye. ‘Further outlook, unsettled,’ you know.”

Mr. Bosch laughed fatly.

“I’m only sorry,” he said, “you didn’t bring him here. I’d ‘ve skinned him. Never mind. And now, we know where we are, when d’you want possession?”

Pomfret stared.

“You—you’ll still sell to me?” he ejaculated. “I mean, after all this, Bosch, you’re willing to deal with me?”

“Why not?” was the generous reply.

That Pomfret was deeply affected was perfectly plain.

In eloquent silence he wrung Mr. Bosch’s hand.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “you overwhelm me. But, if you’re still willing, of course I’ll take the place. I’ve not even a cheque-book with me, but——”

“My dear Tudor,” said Mr. Bosch, “between gentlemen. . . .”

Pomfret sighed.

Then he raised his eyes.

“Thank God,” he said piously, “that the old school is not yet extinct.” He paused dramatically. Then—“I shall be back in ten days. Will you have the deed prepared? I’ll sign the day I get back and give you a banker’s draft. As to possession——”

“You can walk right in,” said Mr. Bosch. “We can sign the deed here at two, and I’ll catch the evening train. Do you want the slaveys? Or shall I give them notice?”

“I’ll take them over,” said Pomfret. “If they know your ways they know mine. Are you sure you mean this, Bosch? I mean, I came to apologize—not to try to impose upon your good nature. I shouldn’t like you to think——”

Mr. Bosch wagged a stubby forefinger.

“Now then, Tudor,” he said. “Between gentlemen. . . .”

The slogan had gone very well.

Pomfret clasped his arm and the two passed down from the terrace and into the drive. . . .

As the Rolls slid down the avenue they waved to each other like schoolboys.



“You are a very persistent young man, Mr. Beaulieu. What do you want?”

The tone was abrupt, but the steady, appraising gaze was not unkindly and the mouth had a humorous twist.

Simon, who had rehearsed this interview fifty times, moistened his lips.

"I want five minutes of your time, sir," and, with that, he unfastened his collar and, getting hold of the cord which was round his neck, pulled this over his head.

The next instant a soft, gold bag lay in his palm.

Without opening the pouch, he felt for and gripped its contents between finger and thumb: then he opened the mouth of the bag and peeled this over The Touchstone till the latter was partly exposed.

The statesman watched his actions with a faintly increasing frown.

"Is this an invention?" he said. "Because if it is . . ."

Simon shook his head.

"It's not an invention, sir. It's a discovery. Walking on the continent not very long ago, I trod upon this stone."

"And your shoe turned to gold?" said the statesman, with a whimsical smile.

"Yes," said Simon, "it did."

The other sighed. Then his hand went out to a bell-push.

"I won't say I don't believe you, Mr. Beaulieu, because whether I do or do not is beside the point. *But this is not my job.* To be perfectly frank, nothing ever is—in the first instance. A man of your education should have known that. I am not an expert. I occupy a certain position, but the least of those below me is more of a specialist than I. If I had to give you a dog-licence I should have to ask a post-office clerk how to fill up the form."

"Sir," said Simon quietly. "I beg you not to ring that bell."

The extraordinary earnestness of his tone would have made a hangman pause.

"Well?"

"Supposing, sir—just supposing that this fantastic nonsense were a hard fact. Supposing that this grey pebble was The Philosopher's Stone."

"Well?"

"Whoever possessed it could wreck the finances of the world in twenty-four hours. Supposing it fell into the hands of a European Power—a Power which was not too scrupulous. Supposing to-morrow some Power could turn out gold with a tenth of the labour that it can turn out smoke. . . ."

“Mr. Beaulieu,” said the statesman, “you’ve come to the wrong street. You want to sell your discovery. Very well. I’m not a company promoter.”

Again his hand sought the bell.

“One moment,” said Simon, shakily. “I knew you wouldn’t believe. No one would. What shall I turn to gold?”

The other raised his eyebrows.

“What about this table?” he said rather wearily.

Simon hesitated.

“I don’t think you’ll thank me if I do, sir. A golden table will be very hard to explain.”

The other frowned.

“What d’you mean—‘hard to explain’?”

“I mean,” said Simon, “that a table’s too big to hide. The secretaries, the servants must see it, and within two hours the Press——”

The statesman rose.

“Mr. Beaulieu, I have been very patient. Few men I think would have seen you: fewer still when they heard your business would have been as lenient as I. You come to me with a tale which I should hesitate to offer to a child of four. Instead of disputing its probability I ask you to prove what you say. Instantly, you make excuse.”

“Allow me to ring, sir,” said Simon, stretching out his hand.

For a moment the other stared.

Then he raised his eyebrows and gave a short laugh.

“If you please,” he said.

The bell lay upon the table—an ordinary wooden case about a button of bone. Simon pressed the button with The Touchstone and a bell stammered outside. Then he stood up and away. . . .

The statesman looked at the bell: his look slid into a stare, the stare into a frown. . . . With a sharp movement he sought Simon’s eyes. These looked steadily back. After a moment his own returned to the bell. . . . Then he sat down and, approaching his face to the button, surveyed it from every side. As once again he lifted his eyes to Simon’s, came the wheeze of an outer door.

Simon's hand slid into a pocket, and the other picked up a sheet of blotting-paper and tossed it over the bell.

"It's all right. I rang by mistake."

The door closed.

"Mr. Beaulieu, is this a trick?"

"No, sir. I'll go to The Mint with you any hour that you please. But if you'll forgive my saying so, I'm terribly pressed for time. If it could be this afternoon. . . ."

"Sit down," said the other, unscrewing the bell-push case. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you, but I'm not quite sure I do yet. When I *am* sure. . . ."

Simon's hand left his pocket.

"Anything small, sir," he said, "which you can conceal . . ."

Half an hour later the statesman fingered his chin.

"There's only one thing," he said, "which we haven't arranged. And that is—what the devil are we to do with this bell-push?"

At once Simon got to his feet.

"I'll go to The Stores, sir," he said, "and buy another right away."

"Good," said the other. "Don't be long. I don't want to have to stay here indefinitely. But, I say, what a mercy you didn't, er, touch this table."

Simon smiled.

"It was a very near thing," he said. "In fact, if you hadn't let me ring, it would have been 'touch or go.'"

The rest was easy.

At The Mint with the utmost secrecy, the virtue of The Touchstone was proved. Task after task was set it, test after test was applied: but Chemists and Assayers alike could find no flaw in its produce. All was golden fish that came to its net, and after two days the small, grey pebble changed hands for the last time.

That the thing must be purchased and destroyed had, as Simon had foreseen, been instantly recognized, and, since its owner was ready to sell and The Touchstone was able to furnish whatever price he desired, the matter was concluded with the least possible delay.

An account at The Bank of England sprang into being: a destroyer slipped down The Sound with sealed orders. And that was all.

On Saturday Simon left London with a banker's draft in his case, and late that night a lead casket, believed to contain the ashes of some notable unknown, was solemnly committed to the depths of the Bay of Biscay.



Dolores was sold.

The deed had been executed, the notary had left to lodge it at the Register Office and Mr. Lionel Bosch, with his back to a fireplace which was no longer his own, was insulting his *maître d'hôtel* for the last time.

As was his habit when addressing a foreigner, he blared—in deference to a curious conceit that by shouting he could improve the other's imperfect acquaintance with the English tongue. Also, fortified by the knowledge that the foreigner knew no better, he gave his grammar a rest.

“An’ I’ve told ‘im what you’re fit for. ‘E’s got your number all right. So if you want to stay you’ll ‘ave to be born again. Mr. Tudor’s a gentleman, the same as I am. An’ you won’t find no flies on ‘im. ‘E’ll be back any minute now, an’ as soon as ‘e’s ‘ere I’m off. ‘Ave you filled my flask?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is the car at the door?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, what are you standing there for? Go an’——”

“That’s Fuenterrabia,” cried Patricia, “and—and—Simon, what’s the name of that headland?”

The clear voice came floating in at a window, and a moment later Patricia and Eulalie appeared upon the terrace outside.

“I can’t remember,” said Simon, strolling into view.

His face a rich plum colour, his eyes bulging, Mr. Bosch made a rattling noise and clawed at the air. Then he hurled himself at the plate-glass doors and, wrenching their fastening open, erupted violently from the room.

For a moment he swayed upon the terrace, waving his arms.

Then—

“Get to hell out of this,” he raved.

Steadily the three regarded him.

“Why?” said Simon.

“*Why?*” howled Bosch. “*Why?* You impudent blackguard! You clumsy
_____”

“Don’t you think you’d better go?” said Simon, folding his arms and leaning against the balustrade. “I mean, ‘immediate possession’ was one of the conditions of sale, wasn’t it?”

Mr. Bosch appeared to have lost the power of speech.

His eyes were demoniac, his mouth worked uncontrollably, froth began to form upon his lips.

Patricia and Eulalie averted their eyes.

“You see,” said Simon, beginning to fill a pipe, “I am the new owner.” Mr. Bosch recoiled. “The two interviews I had with you were about as much as I could bear, so then my servant took over and saw the deal through.” He raised his voice. “Tudor!”

“Sir,” said Pomfret, appearing upon the steps.

“Is Mr. Bosch’s car at the door?”

“It is, sir,” said Pomfret.

Simon returned to Mr. Bosch.

“Your car’s at the door,” he said.

It is doubtful if the man heard him. Pomfret’s appearance and demeanour were searing his brain.

Wearing a pair of black boots which were much more useful than lovely, a blue serge suit which had plainly seen better days, a stiff white dog-collar and a decent black bow tie, bowler hat in hand, Pomfret stood there before him—the embodiment of deferential impassivity, as plainly oblivious of all but his duty to Simon as were the flagstones beneath him careless of whom they bore.

Mr. Bosch stared and stared, while his world rocked and tottered and a leering memory hiccupped its mocking burden into his ear.

Between gentlemen. . . .

Presently he turned and lunged uncertainly within. . . .

Two minutes later the four heard an engine start.

Then the door of a car was slammed.

At once came the whine of gears rising, and then—silence.

Mr. Bosch had passed. . . .

It was twenty minutes later that his wife laid a firm, slim hand upon Pomfret's arm.

"Come down to the lawn," she said. "And look at the house from there."

The two passed down the steps. . . .

Standing upon the turf, they surveyed the great façade.

"If I tell you something," said Eulalie, "will you swear to keep it to yourself?"

Pomfret regarded his lady in mild surprise.

After a little—

"I will," he said.

"And however much it may surprise you, to take no action?"

"I will."

"Good," said Eulalie. She raised a hand and pointed to the second floor. "You see those last three windows—the two at the end and the one in the turret beyond?"

"Yes."

"Well, we've never seen those rooms—Patricia and I. I believe Simon saw them—just as a matter of form."

"Well, what about it?" said Pomfret.

"This," said Eulalie. "*I can tell you what they're like.*" Pomfret started, and after a little pause the girl proceeded. "The turret-room leads out of the other—you go up two little steps: the fireplace in the first room is on the left of the steps: it's of white marble and there's a wreath carved in the middle with a vein running right across it from side to side: if you look at the windows I think you'll find that once upon a time they were barred, and under the first there's a locker—a window-seat with a locker, *where a child—might have—kept—her—toys.* . . ."

Ten days later the missing half of the puzzle was clapped into place.

THE CARLTON HOTEL,
BIARRITZ.

DEAR MR. TUDOR,

It was easier to accept your kind invitation to lunch with you at your new home than to decline, because that would have necessitated explanations which would have been out of place in the lounge of an hotel.

I know Dolores only too well.

More than twenty years ago I rented the place from the Marquise de Quigny. We were very happy there for some time, and then one day our little girl (not the one you know—she was then unborn) disappeared. She was only four years old. The shock killed my wife—not at once, you know, but she was never the same again and died when Madrigal was born. Time is very merciful and has gone far to lay the ghost, but you will understand that, much as I should like to come, to revisit Dolores would be to call up memories which are better undisturbed.

I am afraid this means that I shall not see you again before we go, but I am counting upon a visit from you both the next time you come to England, and rely upon you to consider that an engagement which you may not break.

It was a great pleasure to meet Mrs. Tudor, of whom, I think, you must be very proud. I have only once before seen such very beautiful hair.

Yours very sincerely,
JOHN COURTHOPE.

But Eulalie steadfastly refused to take her place, and nothing that Pomfret could say would induce her to share her secret with anyone else.

“You’re my husband,” she said, “and I’m awfully glad you know, because it was so nice of you to marry a thief. But what on earth’s the point of telling anyone else? Pat and Simon would feel that this was more my home than theirs—which is the last thing we want: and as for—for my father . . . well, now he’s got Madrigal, and I can’t believe it’d amuse him to know that his elder daughter spent thirteen years of her life as a first-class crook. If I wasn’t provided for, it’d be another matter. As it is—well, Miss Courthope and ‘The Bank of England’ are a couple of sleeping dogs, and,

since we can't wake one without waking them both, we may as well let them lie. After all, *you* know, and that's good enough for me. . . ."

"So be it," said Pomfret, and sighed. "It's very hard, you know. This is the second time. First, The Steward of the Walks and then my own father-in-law. . . . And I should have got on with either."



It is June now, and Dolores is in all her glory. The estate seems not unlike a fragment of Etchechuria. There is the same beauty, the same abundance, the same simplicity of life: there is the same good fellowship between Nature and Man.

Pomfret and Simon and Gog have spent the day in the fields and Boy Blue Meadow now boasts a parade of haycocks which to-morrow four gentle-eyed oxen will contentedly carry to be stacked by Black Sheep Farm. This has been carefully restored: the buildings are white as snow and the garden is gay with flowers: the dairy, stables and byres are the pride of the ex-Service men who keep them, and an English forge is to be added in the fall.

The homestead among the vineyards is known as Strong Box and has been well named. Its miniature windows, bluff gateway and squat, thick-set walls give it the air of a sconce: and a sconce it was once—when Time was young. It is older than its proud mistress by many many years and was used to squire a castle of which no trace is left. And Strong Box, like Black Sheep Farm, has come again. Masons and joiners and painters have done their work, and the spruce black and white fastness now makes a model vintry of which its cheerful constables are justly proud.

But the favourite of all is Sacradown.

This is a toy grange and lies snug in a valley by the edge of a stream. Here is the mill that, full of new wood and iron, utters again its comfortable news: here are the paddocks and sick lines, and here the foals and calves find the great world a good place: here are the orchards and beehives, and here a baby brewery is beginning to lift up its head: very soon its honest perfume will mellow the evening air. But there is a scent here already which is more valuable. The gables and dormer-windows of Sacradown, its timbers and thatch and brick-nogging, the very oaks and chestnuts that crowd about it smell strong of England, and the veterinary surgeon, the bailiff and the forester who live there, who know nothing of Etchechuria, continually allege

that when the good days left England Dolores is where they went. Be that as it may, the place is big with a treasure you cannot buy. . . .

The long car was out after tea, and the five sailed into Biarritz to leave a note for the Pomeroy's, who are arriving to-morrow, and to watch the blossoming *plage* for half an hour.

And so home—at least, as far as a lodge. There three horses are waiting, and, while Patricia floats off with Gog, who is very gentle with her these days, to spend an hour with the roses and plan herbaceous borders for seasons to come, Eulalie, Simon and Pomfret are streaming across the park at a hand-gallop over the long, sharp shadows which the trees are making, to prove that the lot is fallen unto them in a fair ground and that they have a goodly heritage.

And now dinner is over, and the sun has not long gone down. But, since the moon is up, to-night there will be no darkness, and the firmament will only change its lovely golden habit for one of silver. Already the magical relief is taking place.

From a *chaise longue* upon the terrace Eulalie is watching the miracle and thinking that the lights of Fuenterrabia look strangely like those of Date. By her side sits Patricia, with the old eager look in her eyes: the regular wink of a beacon has these in thrall, and each time the slow flash comes she remembers The Clock and how they would wait until midnight to watch the sweep of its hand. On the broad balustrade sits Simon, a pipe between his white teeth: his eyes are upon the lawn which falls away from the mansion, and he is thinking of the broad green staircase that shall blow there next year and wondering if Time will make it as lovely as another he knows. His feet upon an oak table, Pomfret is taking his ease. His eyes are closed, but he is not asleep, for from time to time his left hand rises to set his cigar for a moment between his lips. He is listening subconsciously, as are the others, to *Pomp and Circumstance*, which is being most excellently rendered by the Band of the Coldstream Guards, but, the sudden reflection that it is nearly ten o'clock, has whipped his thoughts back to the heat of a summer's day and the cool of a sanded parlour and the speechless amazement on the face of a little man, handsomely clothed in silver and Lincoln Green . . . *Lincoln Green*. Harlequin-like, his memory has pounced upon the colour and leapt to an imprisoning circle and Sunstroke with a phial in his hand, and thence to a splash of green and crimson on a rack of black and gold. . . .

Gog.

This is the hour which Gog loves best of all.

Sitting there at the head of the flight of broad stone steps, that lead from the terrace into a mystery of black and silver, he is the very pink of vigilance. No rustle, no whisper, no breath of slumbering Nature escapes his ear. A swift turn of his head, and he has caught that sigh, faint and elusive as the flicker of a dream. . . . In a flash he is down the steps and across the lawn, and after a moment or two his deep, challenging bark comes from the greenwood. He is in touch—with what? With whom? No one can tell. It is his secret. . . . And presently, a sturdy little shape will bob up the broad stone steps, and a touch on Patricia's ankle will tell her that Gog is there.

A pause and six dots. . . .

Greenwich is making Dolores free of her time.

Pomfret lifts up his voice, assuming the musical delivery of the Watchman of Date.

The canticle goes booming.

Ten o'clock of a fine, moonlit night . . . and all's well. . . .

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Stolen March* by Cecil William Mercer (as Dornford Yates)]