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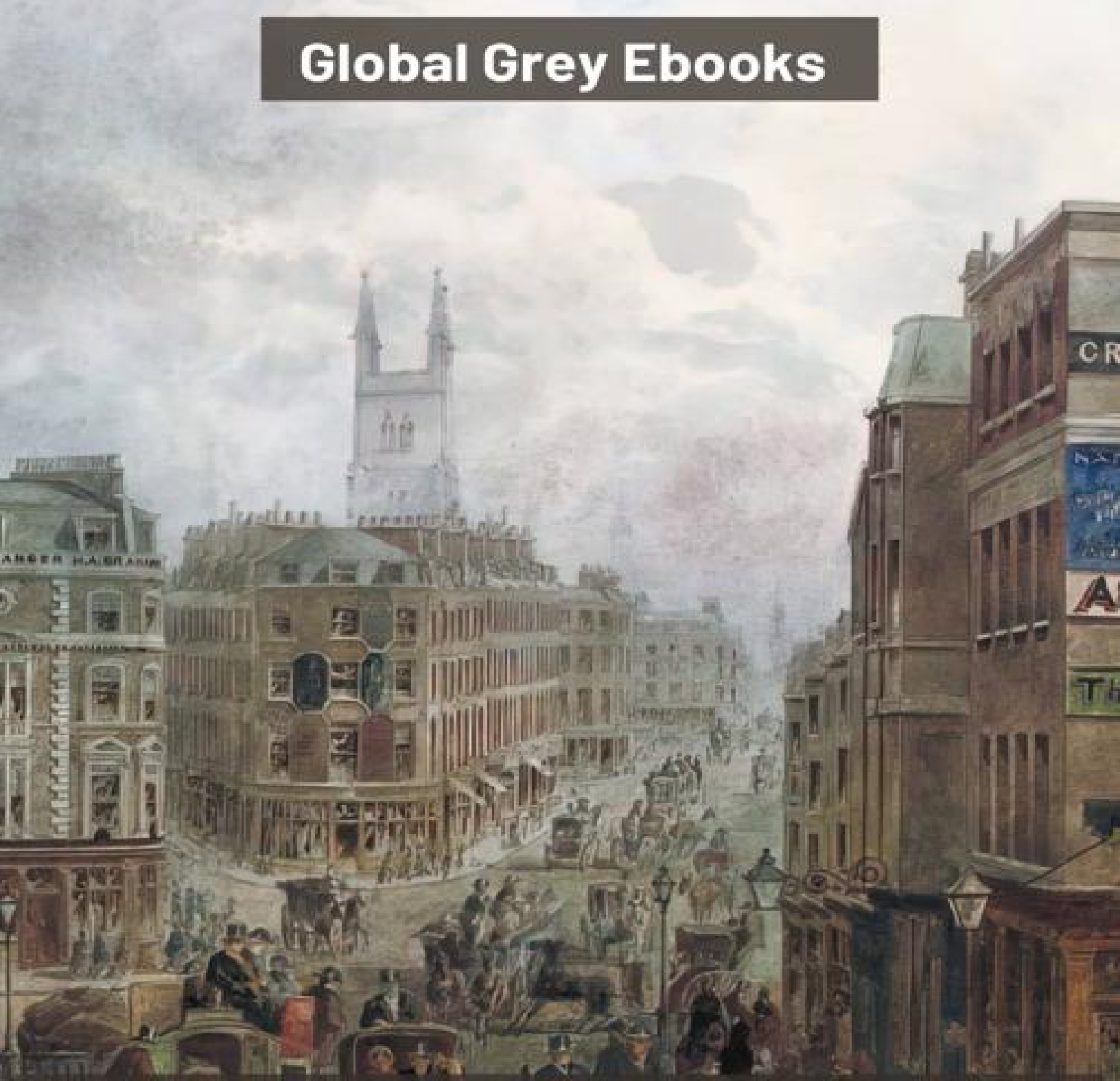

AGAIN THE THREE JUST MEN

EDGAR WALLACE

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Again the Three Just Men
by Edgar Wallace

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1. The Rebus

As The Megaphone once said, in its most pessimistic and wondering mood, recording rather than condemning the strangeness of the time:

“Even The Four Just Men have become a respectable institution. Not more than fifteen years ago we spoke of them as ‘a criminal organization’; rewards were offered for their arrest…today you may turn into Curzon Street and find a silver triangle affixed to the sedate door which marks their professional headquarters…The hunted and reviled have become a most exclusive detective agency…We can only hope that their somewhat drastic methods of other times have been considerably modified.”

It is sometimes a dangerous thing to watch a possible watcher.

‘What is Mr Lewis Lethersohn afraid of?’ asked Manfred, as he cracked an egg at breakfast. His handsome, clean–shaven face was tanned a teak–brown, for he was newly back from the sun and snows of Switzerland.

Leon Gonsalez sat opposite, absorbed in The Times; at the end of the table was Raymond Poiccart, heavy–featured and saturnine. Other pens than mine have described his qualities and his passion for growing vegetables.

He raised his eyes to Gonsalez.

‘Is he the gentleman who has had this house watched for the past month?’ he asked.

A smile quivered on Leon’s lips as he folded the newspaper neatly.

‘He is the gentleman—I’m interviewing him this morning,’ he said. ‘In the meantime, the sleuth hounds have been withdrawn—they were employed by the Ottis Detective Agency.’

‘If he is watching us, he has a bad conscience,’ said Poiccart, nodding slowly. ‘I shall be interested to hear all about this.’

Mr Lewis Lethersohn lived in Lower Berkeley Street—a very large and expensive house. The footman who opened the door to Leon was arrayed in a uniform common enough in historical films but rather out of the picture in Lower Berkeley Street. Mulberry and gold and knee breeches…Leon gazed at him with awe.

‘Mr Lethersohn will see you in the library,’ said the man—he seemed; thought Leon, rather conscious of his own magnificence.

A gorgeous house this, with costly furnishings and lavish decorations. As he mounted the wide stairs he had a glimpse of a beautiful woman passing across the landing. One disdainful glance she threw in his direction and passed, leaving behind her the faint fragrance of some exotic perfume.

The room into which he was shown might have been mistaken for a bedroom, with its bric–a–brac and its beauty of appointments.

Mr Lethersohn rose from behind the Empire writing table and offered a white hand. He was thin, rather bald, and there was a suggestion of the scholar in his lined face.

‘Mr Gonsalez?’ His voice was thin and not particularly pleasant. ‘Won’t you sit down? I had your inquiry—there seems to be some mistake.’

He had resumed his own seat. Though he might endeavour, to cover up his uneasiness by this cold attitude of his, he could not quite hide his perturbation.

‘I know you, of course—but it is ridiculous that I should set men to watch your house. Why?’

Gonsalez was watching him intently.

‘That is what I have come to learn,’ he said, ‘and I think it would be fairest to tell you that there is no doubt that you are watching us. We know the agency you employed—we know the fees you have paid and the instructions you have given. The only question is, why?’

Mr Lethersohn moved uncomfortably and smiled. ‘Really…I suppose there is no wisdom in denying that I did employ detectives. The truth is, the Four Just Men is rather a formidable organization—and—er—Well, I am a rich man….’

He was at a loss how to go on.

The interview ended lamely with polite assurances on either side. Leon Gonsalez went back to Curzon Street a very thoughtful man.

‘He’s afraid of somebody consulting us, and the detective people have been employed to head off that somebody. Now who?’

The next evening brought the answer.

It was a grey April night, chill and moist. The woman who walked slowly down Curzon Street, examining the numbers on the doors, was an object of suspicion to the policeman standing on Claridge's corner. She was in the region of thirty, rather slim, under the worn and soddened coat. Her face was faded and a little pinched. 'Pretty once,' mused Leon Gonsalez, observing her from behind the net curtain that covered the window. 'A working woman without a thought beyond keeping her body and soul together.'

He had time enough to observe her, since she stood for a long time by the kerb, looking up and down the street hopelessly.

'Notice the absence of any kind of luring finery—and this is the hour when even the poorest find a scarf or a pair of gloves.'

Manfred rose from the table where he had been taking his frugal meal and joined the keen–faced observer.

'Provincial, I think,' said Leon thoughtfully. 'Obviously a stranger to the West End—she's coming here!'

As he was speaking, the woman had turned, made a brief scrutiny of the front door…They heard the bell ring.

'I was mistaken—she hadn't lost her way; she was plucking up courage to ring—and if she isn't Lethersohn's bete noire I'm a Dutchman!'

He heard Poiccart's heavy tread in the passage—Poiccart played butler quite naturally. Presently he came in and closed the door behind him.

'You will be surprised,' he said in his grave way. That was peculiarly Poiccart—to say mysterious things gravely.

'About the lady? I refuse to be surprised.' Leon was vehement. 'She has lost something—a husband, a watch, something. She has the "lost" look—an atmosphere of vague helplessness surrounds her. The symptoms are unmistakable!'

'Ask her to come in,' said Manfred, and Poiccart retired.

A second later Alma Stamford was ushered into the room.

That was her name. She came from Edgware and she was a widow…Long before she came to the end of preliminaries Poiccart's promised surprise had been sprung, for this woman, wearing clothes that a charwoman would

have despised, had a voice which was soft and educated. Her vocabulary was extensive and she spoke of conditions which could only be familiar to one who had lived in surroundings of wealth.

She was the widow of a man who—they gathered—had not been in his lifetime the best of husbands. Rich beyond the ordinary meaning of the term, with estates in Yorkshire and Somerset, a fearless rider to hounds, he had met his death in the hunting field.

'My husband had a peculiar upbringing,' she said. 'His parents died at an early age and he was brought up by his uncle. He was a terrible old man who drank heavily, was coarse to the last degree, and was jealous of outside interference. Mark saw practically nobody until, in the last year or the old man's life, he brought in a Mr Lethersohn, a young man a little older than Mark, to act as tutor—for Mark's education was terribly backward. My husband was twenty–one when his uncle died, but he retained a gentleman to act for him as companion and secretary.'

'Mr Lewis Lethersohn,' said Leon promptly, and she gasped.

'I can't guess how you know, but that is the name. Although we weren't particularly happy,' she went on, 'my husband's death was a terrible shock. But almost as great a shock was his will. In this he left one half of his fortune to Lethersohn, the other half to me at the expiration of five years from his death, provided that I carried out the conditions of the will. I was not to marry during that period, I was to live at a house in Harlow and never to leave the Harlow district. Mr Lethersohn was given absolute power as sole executor to dispose of property for my benefit. I have lived in Harlow until this morning.'

'Mr Lethersohn is of course married?' said Leon, his bright eyes fixed on the lady.

'Yes—you know him?'

Leon shook his head.

'I only know that he is married and very much in love with his wife.'

She was astounded at this.

'You must know him. Yes, he married just before Mark was killed. A very beautiful Hungarian girl—he is half Hungarian and I believe he adores her. I heard that she was very extravagant—I only saw her once.'

‘What has happened at Harlow?’ It was the silent, watchful Poiccart who asked the question.

He saw the woman’s lips tremble.

‘It has been a nightmare,’ she said with a break in her voice. ‘The house was a beautiful little place—miles from Harlow really, and off the main road. There I have been for two years practically a prisoner. My letters have been opened, I have been locked in my room every night by one of the two women Mr Lethersohn sent to look after me, and men have been patrolling the grounds day and night.’

‘The suggestion is that you are not quite right in your head?’ asked Manfred.

She looked startled at this.

‘You don’t think so?’ she asked quickly, and, when he shook his head: ‘Thank God for that! Yes, that was the story they told. I wasn’t supposed to see newspapers, though I had all the books I wanted. One day I found a scrap of paper with the account of a bank fraud which you gentlemen had detected, and there was a brief account of your past. I treasured that because it had your address in the paragraph. To escape seemed impossible—I had no money, it was impossible to leave the grounds. But they had a woman who came to do the rough work twice a week. I think she came from the village. I managed to enlist her sympathy, and yesterday she brought me these clothes. Early this morning I changed, dropped out of my bedroom window and passed the guard. Now I come to my real mystery.’

She put her hand into the pocket of her wet coat and took out a small package. This she unwrapped.

‘My husband was taken to the cottage hospital after his accident; he died early the next morning. He must have recovered consciousness unknown to the nurses, for the top of the sheet was covered with little drawings. He had made them with an indelible pencil attached to his temperature chart and hanging above his head—he must have reached up for it and broken it off.’

She spread out the square of soiled linen on the table.

[The book here includes a drawing: three irregular shapes at the left with a car and a motorbike below them, a three–storey building in the centre, and

to the right of it twenty small circles, a line, the shape of a pear with a long stem, and a flower with four short strokes above it.]

‘Poor Mark was very fond of drawing the figures that children and idle people who have no real knowledge of art love to scribble.’

‘How did you get this?’ asked Leon.

‘The matron cut it off for me.’

Manfred frowned. ‘The sort of things a man might draw in his delirium,’ he said.

‘On the contrary,’ said Leon coolly, ‘it is as clear as daylight to me. Where were you married?’

‘At the Westminster Registry Office.’

Leon nodded.

‘Take your mind back: was there anything remarkable about the marriage—did your husband have a private interview with the registrar?’

She opened her big blue eyes at this.

‘Yes—Mr Lethersohn and my husband interviewed him in his private office.’

Leon chuckled, but was serious again instantly.

‘One more question. Who drew up the will? A lawyer?’

She shook her head.

‘My husband—it was written in his own hand from start to finish. He wrote rather a nice hand, very easily distinguishable from any other.’

‘Were there any other conditions imposed upon you in your husband’s will?’

She hesitated, and the watchers saw a dark flush pass over her face.

‘Yes…it was so insulting that I did not tell you. It was this—and this was the main condition—that I should not at any time attempt to establish the fact that I was legally married to Mark. That was to me inexplicable—I can’t believe that he was ever married before, but his early life was so remarkable that anything may have happened.’

Leon was smiling delightedly. In such moments he was as a child who had received a new and entrancing toy.

‘I can relieve your mind,’ he said, to her amazement. ‘Your husband was never married before!’

Poiccart was studying the drawings.

‘Can you get the plans of your husband’s estates?’ he asked, and Leon chuckled again.

‘That man knows everything, George!’ he exclaimed. ‘Poiccart, mon vieux, you are superb!’ He turned quickly to Mrs Stamford. ‘Madam, you need rest, a change of clothing, and—protection. The first and the last are in this house, if you dare be our guest. The second I will procure for you in an hour —together with a temporary maid.’

She looked at him, a little bewildered…Five minutes later, an embarrassed Poiccart was showing her to her room, and a nurse of Leon’s acquaintance was hurrying to Curzon Street with a bulging suitcase—Leon had a weakness for nurses, and knew at least a hundred by name.

Late as was the hour, he made several calls—one as far as Strawberry Hill, where a certain assistant registrar of marriages lived.

It was eleven o’clock that night when he rang the bell at the handsome house in Upper Berkeley Street. Another footman admitted him.

‘Are you Mr Gonsalez? Mr Lethersohn has not returned from the theatre, but he telephoned asking you to wait in the library.’

‘Thank you,’ said Leon gratefully, though there was no need for gratitude, for he it was who had telephoned.

He was bowed into the ornate sanctum and left alone.

The footman had hardly left the room before Leon was at the Empire desk, turning over the papers rapidly. But he found what he sought on the blotting–pad, face downwards.

A letter addressed to a firm of wine merchants complaining of some deficiency in a consignment of champagne. He read this through rapidly—it was only half finished—folded the paper and put it into his pocket.

Carefully and rapidly he examined the drawers of the table: two were locked—the middle drawer was, however, without fastening. What he

found interested him and gave him some little occupation. He had hardly finished before he heard a car stop before the house and, looking through the curtains, saw a man and woman alight.

Dark as it was, he recognized his unconscious host, and he was sitting demurely on the edge of a chair when Lethersohn burst into the room, his face white with fury.

‘What the hell is the meaning of this?’ he demanded as he slammed the door behind him. ‘By God, I’ll have you arrested for impersonating me—’

‘You guessed that I had telephoned—that was almost intelligent,’ smiled Leon Gonsalez.

The man swallowed.

‘Why are you here—I suppose it concerns the poor woman who escaped from a mental hospital today—I only just heard before I went out….’

‘So we gathered from the fact that your watchers have been on duty again tonight,’ said Leon, ‘but they were a little too late.’

The man’s face went a shade paler.

‘You’ve seen her?’ he asked jerkily. ‘And I suppose she told you a cock and bull story about me?’

Leon took from his pocket a piece of discoloured linen and held it up.

‘You’ve not seen this?’ he asked. ‘When Mark Stamford died, this drawing was found on his sheet. He could draw these strange little things, you know that?’

Lewis Lethersohn did not answer.

‘Shall I tell you what this is—it is his last will.

‘That’s a lie!’ croaked the other.

‘His last will,’ nodded Leon sternly. ‘Those three queer rhomboids are rough plans of his three estates. That house is a pretty fair picture of the Southern Bank premises and the little circles are money.’

Lethersohn was staring at the drawing.

‘No court would accept that foolery,’ he managed to say.

Leon showed his teeth in a mirthless grin..

‘Nor the “awl” which means “all,” nor the four strokes which stand as “for,” nor the “Margaret,” nor the final “Mark”? be asked.

With an effort Lethersohn recovered his composure. ‘My dear man, the idea is fantastical—he wrote a will with his own hand—’

Leon stood with his head thrust forward. So far Lethersohn got, when:

‘He couldn’t write!’ he said softly, and Lethersohn turned pale. ‘He could draw these pictures but he couldn’t write his own name. If Mrs Stamford had seen the registrar’s certificate she would have seen that it was signed with a cross—that is why you put in the little bit about her not attempting to prove her marriage—why you kept her prisoner at Harlow in case she made independent inquiries.’

Suddenly Lethersohn flew to his desk and jerked open a drawer. In a second an automatic appeared in his hand. Running back to the door, he flung it open.

‘Help…murder!’ he shouted.

He swung round on the motionless Gonsalez and, levelling his gun, pulled the trigger. A click—and no more.

‘I emptied the magazine,’ said Leon coolly, ‘so the little tragedy you so carefully staged has become a farce. Shall I telephone to the police or will you?’

Scotland Yard men arrested Lewis Lethersohn as he was stepping on to the boat at Dover.

‘There may be some difficulty in proving the will,’ said Manfred, reading the account in the evening newspapers; ‘but the jury will not take long to put friend Lewis in his proper place….’

Later, when they questioned Leon—Poiccart was all for pinning down his psychology—he condescended to explain.

‘The rebus told me he could not write—the fact that the will did not instruct Mrs Stamford to marry Lewis showed me that he was married and loved his wife. The rest was ridiculously easy.’

2. The Happy Travellers

OF THE THREE men who had their headquarters in Curzon Street, George Manfred was by far the best looking. His were the features and poise of an aristocrat. In a crowd he stood out by himself, not alone because of his height, but the imponderable something which distinguishes breeding.

‘George looks like a racehorse in a herd of Shetland ponies!’ said the enthusiastic Leon Gonsalez on one occasion. Which was very nearly true.

Yet it was Leon who attracted the average woman, and even women above the average. It was fatal to send him to deal with a case in which women were concerned, not because he himself was given to philandering, but because it was as certain as anything could be that he would come back leaving at least one sighing maiden to bombard him with letters ten pages long.

Which really made him rather unhappy.

‘I’m old enough to be their father,’ he wailed on one occasion, ‘and as I live I said no more than “Good morning” to the wench. Had I held her hand or chanted a canto or two into her pink ear, I would stand condemned. But, George, I swear—’

But George was helpless with laughter.

Yet Leon could act the perfect lover. Once in Cordova he paid court to a certain senorita—three knife scars on his right breast testify to the success of his wooing. As to the two men who attacked him, they are dead, for by his courting he lured into the open the man for whom the police of Spain and France were searching.

And he was especially effusive one spring morning to a slim and beautiful dark–eyed lady whom he met in Hyde Park. He was on foot, when he saw her walking past slowly and unattended. A graceful woman of thirty with a faultless skin and grey eyes that were almost black.

It was by no accident that they met, for Leon had been studying her movements for weeks.

‘This is an answer to prayer, beautiful lady,’ he said, and his extravagance was the more facile since he spoke in Italian.

She laughed softly, gave him one swift, quizzical glance from under the long lashes, and signalled him to replace the hat that was now in his hand.

‘Good morning, Signor Carrelli,’ she smiled, and gave him a small gloved hand. She was simply but expensively dressed. The only jewels she wore were the string of pearls about her white throat.

‘I see you everywhere,’ she said. ‘You were dining at the Carlton on Monday night, and before that I saw you in a box at a theatre, and yesterday afternoon I met you!’

Leon showed his white teeth in a delighted smile.

‘That is true, illustrious lady,’ he said, ‘but you make no reference to my searching London to find somebody who would introduce me. Nor do you pity my despair as I followed you, feasting my eyes upon your beauty, or my sleepless nights—’

All this he said with the fervour of a love–sick youth, and she listened without giving evidence of disapproval.

‘You shall walk with me,’ she said, in the manner of a queen conveying an immense privilege..

They strolled away from the crowd towards the open spaces of the park, and they talked of Rome and the hunting season, of runs on Campagna and the parties of Princess Leipnitz–Savalo—Leon read the society columns of the Roman press with great assiduity and remembered all that he read.

They came at last to a place of trees and comfortable garden chairs. Leon paid the watchful attendant, and, after he had strolled away:

‘How beautiful it is to sit alone with divinity!’ he began ecstatically. ‘For I tell you this, signorita…’

‘Tell me something else, Mr Leon Gonsalez,’ said the lady, and this time she spoke in English and her voice had the qualities of steel and ice. ‘Why are you shadowing me?’

If she expected to confound him it was because she did not know her Leon.

‘Because you are an extremely dangerous lady, Madame Koskina,’ he said coolly, ‘and all the more dangerous because the Lord has given you kissable

lips and a graceful body. How many impressionable young attaches of embassies have discovered these charms in you!'

She laughed at this and was seemingly well pleased.

'You have been reading,' she said. 'No, my dear Mr Gonsalez, I am out of politics—they bore me. Poor Ivan is in Russia struggling with the work of the Economic Commission and living in dread because of his well–known Liberal views, and I am in London, which is delightfully capitalistic and comfortable! Believe me, Leningrad is no place for a lady!'

Isola Koskina had been Isola Caprevetti before she married a dashing young Russian attache. She had been a revolutionary from birth; and now she had developed a zeal for revolution that amounted to fanaticism.

Leon smiled.

'There are worse places for a lady even than Leningrad. I should be grieved indeed, my dear Isola, to see you making coarse shirts in Aylesbury convict establishment.'

She looked at him steadily, insolently.

'That is a threat, and threats bore me. In Italy I have been threatened with… all sorts of dreadful things if I ever showed myself on the wrong side of the Simplon Pass. And really I am the most inoffensive person in the world, Monsieur Gonsalez. You are, or course, employed by the Government—how eminently respectable! Which Government?'

Leon grinned, but was serious again in a second.

'The Italian frontiers are practically closed since the last attempt,' he said. 'You and your friends are causing everybody an immense amount of trouble. Naturally the Government are concerned. They do not wish to wake up one morning and find that they are implicated, and that some successful assassin made a jump from—England, shall we say?'

The lady shrugged her pretty shoulders. 'How very dramatic! And therefore poor Isola Koskina must be watched by detectives and reformed murderers —I suppose you and your precious comrades are reformed?'

The smile on the thin face of Leon Gonsalez widened. 'If we were not, signorita, what would happen? Should I be sitting here talking pretty–pretty talk with you? Would you not be picked out of the Thames at Limehouse all

cold and clammy some morning, and lie on the slab till a coroner's jury returned a verdict of "Found drowned"?'

He saw the colour leave her face: fear came to her eyes. 'You had better threaten Ivan—' she began.

'I will cable him: he is not in Leningrad but living in Berlin under the name of Petersohn—Martin Lutherstrasse 904. How easy it would be if we were not reformed! A dead man in a gutter and a policeman searching his pockets for a card of identity—'

She rose hurriedly; her very lips were bloodless.

'You do not amuse me,' she said and, turning from him, walked quickly away.

Leon made no attempt to follow her. It was two days after this encounter that the letter came. Many people wrote to the Just Men, a few abusively, quite a number fatuously. But now and again there could be extracted from the morning correspondence quite a pretty little problem. And the dingy letter with its finger–marks and creases was quite worth the amount that the postman charged them—for it came unstamped. The address was:

Four Just Men, Curzon Street, May Fair,

West End, London.

The writing was that of an illiterate, and the letter went:

DEAR SIR,

You are surposed to go in for misteries well hear is a mistery. I was a boiler makers mate in Hollingses but now out of work and one Sunday I was photoed by a foren lady she come in front of me with a camra and took me. There was a lot of chaps in the park but she only took me. Then she ast me my name and address and ast me if I knew a clergyman. And when I said yes she wrote down the name of the Rev J. Crewe, and then she said shed send me a picture dear sir she didn't send me a pictur but ast me to joyne the Happy Travlers to go to Swizzleland Rome, etc. and nothing to pay all expences payed also loss of time (Ten £) and soots of close everything done in stile. Well dear sir I got ready and she did everything close ten £ etc. also she got tickets etc. But now the lady says I got to go to Devonshire not that I mind. Now dear sir thats a mistery because I just met a gentleman from Leeds and has had his photo took and joyned the Happy Travlers and hes

going to Cornwall and this lady who took the picture of him ast him if he knew a clergyman and wrote it down. Now what is the mistery is it something to do with religion? Yours Sincerely, T. B A R G E R.

George Manfred read the ill–spelt scrawl and threw the letter across the breakfast table to Leon Gonsalez.

‘Read me that riddle, Leon,’ he said.

Leon read and frowned.

‘“Happy Travellers,” eh? That’s odd.’

The letter went to Raymond, who studied it with an expressionless face.

‘Eh, Raymond?’ Leon asked, his eyes alight.

‘I think so,’ said Raymond, nodding slowly.

‘Will you let me into your “mistery”?’ asked Manfred.

Leon chuckled.

‘No mystery at all, my dear George. I will see this T. Barger, whose name is surely “Thomas” and will learn certain particulars as, for example, the colour of his eyes and the testimonial he has received from the Foreign Secretary.’

‘Mistery on mistery,’ murmured George Manfred as he sipped his coffee—though in truth the matter was no longer a mystery to him. The reference to the Foreign Secretary was very illuminating.

‘As to the lady—’ said Leon, and shook his head.

His big Bentley created a mild sensation in the street where T. Barger lived. It was situated near the East India Dock, and T. Barger—whose front name was surprisingly Theophilus—proved to be a tall, dark man of thirty with a small black moustache and rather heavy black eyebrows. He was obviously wearing his new ‘soot’ and had expended at least a portion of his ‘ten £’ on alcoholic refreshment, for he was in a loud and confident mood.

‘I’m leavin’ tomorrow,’ he said thickly, ‘for Torquay—everything paid. Travellin’ like a swell…first class. You one of them Justers!’

Leon induced him to go into the house.

‘It’s a myst’ry to me,’ said Mr Barger, ‘why she done it. Happy Trav’ler—that’s what I am. She might have took me abroad—I’d like to have seen

them mountains, but she says if I don't speak the Swiss language I'd be out of it. Anyway, what's the matter with Torquay?'

'The other man is going to Cornwall?'

Mr Barger nodded solemnly. 'An' his mate's goin' to Somerset—funny meetin' him at all….' He explained the coincidence, which had to do with a public–house where Mr Barger had called for a drink.

'What was his name?'

'Rigson—Harry Rigson. I told him mine, he told me his. The other man? Harry's pal? I call him Harry—we're like pals—now let me think, mister….'

Leon let him think.

Tunny name…Coke…no, Soke…Lokely! That's it—Joe Lokely.'

Leon asked a few more questions which were seemingly irrelevant but were not.

'Of course I had to be passed by the committee,' said the communicative Theophilus. 'Accordin' to Harry, this lady photoed a friend of his but he didn't pass.'

'I see,' said Leon. 'What time do you leave for Devonshire?'

'Tomorrow mornin'—seven o'clock. Bit early, ain't it? But this lady says that Happy Travellers must be early risers. Harry's goin' by the same train but in another coach….'

Leon went back to Curzon Street well satisfied. The question he had to decide was: was Isola an early riser too?

'I hardly think so,' said Raymond Poiccart. 'She would not take the risk—especially if she knows that she is watched.'

That night Scotland Yard was a very hive of industry, and Leon Gonsalez did without sleep. Fortunately Isola had been under police observation, and the Yard knew every district in England she had visited for the past month. By midnight two thousand ministers of religion had been awakened from their sleep by local police and asked to furnish certain particulars.

Isola went to a dinner and dance that night and her partner was a very nice young man, tall and dark of face. She chose the L'Orient, which is the most

exclusive and plutocratic of night clubs. Men and women turned to admire or criticize her beauty as she entered, a radiant figure in a scarlet dress with a dull gold stole. The colours set off the glories of her lovely face, and there was sinuous grace in every movement.

They had reached the dessert when suddenly she laid two fingers on the table–cloth.

‘Who is it?’ asked her companion carelessly as he saw the danger signal.

‘The man I told you about—he is at the table immediately opposite.’

Presently the dark young man looked.

‘So that is the famous Gonsalez! A wisp of a man that I could break—’

‘A wisp of a man who has broken giants, Emilo,’ she interrupted. ‘Have you heard of Saccoriva—was he not a giant? That man killed him—shot him down in his own headquarters when there was a guard of revolutionary brethren within call—and escaped!’

‘He is anti–revolutionary?’ Emilo was impressed.

She shook her head. ‘Comrade Saccoriva was very foolish—with women. It was over some girl he had taken—and left. He is looking this way: I will call him over.’

Leon rose lazily at the signal and came across the crowded dance floor.

‘Signorita, you will never forgive me!’ he said in despair. ‘Here am I watching you again! And yet I only came here because I was bored.’

‘Bore me also,’ she said with her sweetest smile, and then, remembering her companion: ‘This is Heir Halz from Leipzig.’

Leon’s eyes twinkled.

‘Your friends change their nationalities as often as they change their names,’ he said. ‘I remember Herr Halz of Leipzig when he was Emilo Cassini of Turin!’

Emilo shifted uncomfortably, but Isola was amused.

‘This man is omniscient! Dance with me, Senor Gonsalez, and promise that you will not murder me!’

They went twice round the dance floor before Leon spoke. ‘If I had your face and figure and youth, I should have a good time and not bother with

politics,' he said.

'And if I had your wisdom and cunning I should remove tyrants from their high positions,' she retorted, her voice quivering.

That was all that was said. Going out into the vestibule, Leon discovered the girl and her escort waiting. It was raining heavily and Isola's car could not be found.

'May I drop you, gracious lady?' Leon's smile was most entrancing. 'I have a poor car but it is at your disposition.'

Isola hesitated.

'Thank you,' she said.

Leon, ever the soul of politeness, insisted on taking one of the seats that put his back to the driver. It was not his own car. Usually he was very nervous about other drivers, but tonight he did not mind.

They crossed Trafalgar Square.

'The man is taking the wrong turning,' said Isola with quick vehemence.

'This is the right road to Scotland Yard,' said Leon. 'We call this the Way of the Happy Traveller—keep your hand away from your pocket, Emilo. I have killed men on less provocation, and I have been covering you ever since we left the club!'

In the early hours of the morning telegrams were despatched to police headquarters at Folkestone and Dover:

'Arrest and detain Theophilus Barger, Joseph Lokely, Harry Rigson'—here followed five other names—'travelling to the Continent by boat either today or tomorrow.'

There was no need to give instructions about Isola. For a perfect lady, her behaviour was indefensible.

'She blotted her copybook,' said Leon sadly. 'I've never seen a Happy Traveller less happy when we got her to Scotland Yard.'

Considering the matter at the morning conference which was part of the daily routine in Curzon Street, Manfred was inclined to regard the plot as elementary.

‘If you speak disparagingly of my genius and power of deduction I shall burst into tears,’ said Leon. ‘Raymond thinks I was clever—I will not have that verdict challenged. George, you’re getting old and grouchy.’

‘The detection was clever,’ Manfred hastened to placate his smiling friend.

‘And the scheme was clever,’ insisted Leon, ‘and terribly like Isola. One of these days she’ll do something awfully original and be shot. Obviously, what she set out to do was to collect seven men who bore some resemblance to the members of her murder gang. When she had found them, she made them get passports—that of course is why she asked if they knew a clergyman, for a padre’s signature on the photograph and application form is as good as a lawyer’s. Seven poor innocent men with passports which she handed over to her friends while the happy travellers were sent into out–of–the–way places. She was heading the gang into Italy —all the passports were visaed for that country.’

‘Tell me,’ said Manfred, ‘did they arrest the spurious T. Barger at Dover?’

Leon shook his head.

‘The man who was to have travelled with T. Barger’s passport was one Emilo Casbini—I spotted the likeness immediately. Isola was very abusive —but I quietened her by suggesting that her husband might like to know something about her friendship with Emilo…I have been watching Isola for a long time and I have seen things.’

3. The Abductor

IT WAS A year since Lord Geydrew invoked the aid of the Just Men who lived at the sign of the Triangle in Curzon Street. He was a narrow–headed man; the first time they met with him, Poiccart hazarded the opinion that he was constitutionally mean. The last time they met it was not so much an opinion as stark knowledge, for his lordship had most boldly repudiated the bill of expenses that Poiccart had rendered—even though Manfred and Gonsalez had risked their lives to recover the lost Geydrew diamond.

The Three did not take him to court. Not one of them had need of money. Manfred was satisfied with the experience; Poiccart was cock–a–hoop because a theory of his had worked home; Gonsalez found his consolation in the shape of the client's head.

'The most interesting recession of the parietal and malformation of the occiput I have ever seen,' he said enthusiastically.

The Just Men shared one extraordinary gift—a prodigious memory for faces and an extraordinary facility for attaching those faces to disreputable names. There was, however, no credit due for remembering the head of his lordship.

Manfred was sitting in his small room overlooking Curzon Street one night in spring, and he was in his most thoughtful mood when Poiccart—who invariably undertook the job of butler—came hobbling in to announce Lord Geydrew.

'Not the Geydrew of Gallat Towers?' Manfred could be massively ironical. 'Has he come to pay his bill?'

'God knows,' said Poiccart piously. 'Do peers of the realm pay their bills? For the moment I am less concerned about the peerage than I am about my ankle—really, Leon is a careless devil. I had to take a taxi….'

Manfred chuckled. 'He will be penitent and interesting,' he said, 'as for his lordship. Show him up.'

Lord Geydrew came in a little nervously, blinking at the bright light that burnt on Manfred's table. Evidently he was unusually agitated. The weak

mouth was tremulous, he opened and closed his eyes with a rapidity for which the bright light was not wholly responsible. His long, lined face was twitching spasmodically; from time to time he thrust his fingers through the scanty, reddish–grey hair.

‘I hope, Mr Manfred, there is no—um—er—’

He fumbled in his pocket, produced an oblong slip of paper and pushed it across the desk. Manfred looked and wondered. Poiccart, forgetful of his role as butler, watched interestedly. Besides, there was no need to pretend that he was anything but what he was.

Lord Geydrew looked from one to the other.

‘I was hoping your friend—um—’

‘Mr Gonsalez is out: he will be back later in the evening,’ said Manfred, wondering what was coming.

Then his lordship collapsed with a groan, and let his head fall upon the arms that lay on the desk.

‘Oh, my God!’ he wailed…’The most terrible thing…It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

Manfred waited patiently. Presently the older man looked up.

‘I must tell you the story from the beginning, Mr Manfred,’ he said. ‘My daughter Angela—you may have met her?’

Manfred shook his head.

‘She was married this morning. To Mr Guntheimer, a very wealthy Australian banker and an immensely nice fellow.’ He shook his head and dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief.

Light was beginning to dawn on Manfred.

‘Mr Guntheimer is considerably older than my daughter,’ his lordship went on, ‘and I will not conceal from you the fact that Angela has certain objections to the match. In fact, she had very stupidly arrived at some sort of understanding with young Sidworth—good family and all that, but not a penny in the world…It would have been madness.’

Manfred now understood quite clearly.

‘We had to hurry the marriage, since Guntheimer is leaving for Australia much earlier than he expected. Happily my daughter gave way to my legitimate wishes and they were married this morning at a registrar’s office and were due to leave for the Isle of Wight by the three o’clock train.

‘We did not go to see her off, and the only account I have of the occurrence was from the mouth of my son–in–law. He said that he was walking up to his reserved compartment, when suddenly he missed my daughter from his side. He looked round, retraced his steps, but could see nothing of her. Thinking that she might have gone ahead, he returned to the compartment, but it was empty. He then went back beyond the barrier: she was not in sight, but a porter whom he had engaged to carry his luggage and who followed him, said that he had seen her in earnest conversation with an elderly man and that they walked into the booking hall together and disappeared. Another porter on duty in the courtyard of the station saw them get into a car and drive off.’

Manfred was jotting down his notes on his blotting–pad. Poiccart never lifted his eyes from the visitor.

‘The story the porter tells—the outside porter, I mean, went on his lordship, ‘is that my daughter seemed reluctant to go, and that she was almost thrust into the car, which had to pass him. As the car came abreast, the man was pulling down the blinds, and the porter says that he has no doubt that my daughter was struggling with him.’

‘With the elderly man?’ said Manfred.

Lord Geydrew nodded.

‘Mr Manfred’—his voice was a wail—’I am not a rich man, and perhaps I would be wise to leave this matter in the hands of the police. But I have such extraordinary faith in your intelligence and acumen—I think you will find that cheque right—and in spite of your exorbitant charges I wish to engage you. She is my only daughter….’ His voice broke.

‘Did the porter take the number of the car?’

Lord Geydrew shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Naturally I wish to keep this out of the press—’

‘I’m afraid you’ve failed,’ said Manfred, and took a paper from a basket that was at his side, pointing out a paragraph in the stop press.

“REPORTED ABDUCTION OF BRIDE

“It is reported that a bride, just before leaving Waterloo on her honeymoon trip, was forcibly abducted by an elderly man. Scotland Yard have been notified.”

‘Porters will talk,’ said Manfred, leaning back in his chair. ‘Have the police a theory?’

‘None,’ snapped his lordship.

‘Has Mr Sidworth been interviewed?’

Lord Geydrew shook his head vigorously.

‘Naturally that was the first thought I had. Sidworth, I thought, has persuaded this unfortunate girl—’

‘Is he an elderly man?’ asked Manfred, with a twinkle in his eye which only Poiccart understood.

‘Of course he isn’t,’ snapped his lordship. ‘I told you he was young. At the present moment he’s staying with some very dear friends of mine at Newbury—I think he took the marriage rather badly. At any rate, my friend says that he has not left Kingshott Manor all day, and that he has not once used the telephone.’

Manfred rubbed his shapely nose thoughtfully.

‘And Mr Guntheimer—?’

‘Naturally he’s distracted. I have never known a man so upset. He’s almost mad with grief. Can you gentlemen give me any hope?’

He looked from one to the other, and his lean face brightened at Manfred’s nod.

‘Where is Mr Guntheimer staying?’ asked Poiccart, breaking his silence.

‘At the Gayborough Hotel,’ said Lord Geydrew.

‘Another point—what was his present to the bride?’ asked Manfred.

His visitor looked surprised, and then: ‘A hundred thousand pounds,’ he said impressively. ‘Mr Guntheimer doesn’t believe in our old method of settlement. I may say that his cheque for that amount is in my pocket now.’

‘And your present to the bride?’ asked Manfred.

Lord Geydrew showed some signs of impatience.

‘My dear fellow, you’re on the wrong track. Angela was not spirited away for purposes of property. The jewel case containing her diamonds was carried by Guntheimer. She had nothing of value in her possession except for a few odd pounds in her handbag.’

Manfred rose.

‘I think that is all I want to ask you, Lord Geydrew. Unless I’m greatly mistaken, your daughter will come back to you in twenty–four hours.’

Poiccart showed the comforted man to his car, and returned to find Manfred reading the sporting column in an evening newspaper.

‘Well?’ asked Poiccart.

‘A curious case and one in which my soul revels.’ He put down the paper and stretched himself. ‘If Leon comes in, will you ask him to wait my return unless there is something urgent takes him elsewhere?’ He lifted his head. ‘I think that is him,’ he said, at the sound of squealing brakes.

Poiccart shook his head.

‘Leon is more noiseless,’ he said, and went down to admit an agitated young man.

Mr Harry Sidworth was that type of youth for which Manfred had a very soft spot. Lank of body, healthy of face, he had all the incoherence of his age.

‘I say, are you Mr Manfred?’ he began, almost before he got into the room. ‘I’ve been to that old devil’s house and his secretary told me to come here, though for the Lord’s sake don’t tell anybody he said so!’

‘You’re Mr Sidworth, of course?’

The young man nodded vigorously. His face was anxious, his air wild; he was too young to hide his evident distress.

‘Isn’t it too terrible for words—’ he began.

‘Mr Sidworth’—Manfred fixed him with a kindly eye—’you’ve come to ask me about your Angela, and I’m telling you, as I told Lord Geydrew, that I’m perfectly certain that she will come back to you unharmed. There’s one thing I might ask—how long has she known her husband?’

The young man made a wry face.

‘That’s a hateful word to me,’ he groaned. ‘Guntheimer? About three months. He isn’t a bad fellow. I’ve nothing against him, except that he got Angela. Old Geydrew thought I’d taken her away. He rang up the people I was staying with, and that was the first news I had that she’d disappeared. It’s the most ghastly thing that’s ever happened to me.’

‘Have you heard from her lately?’ asked Manfred.

Sidworth nodded.

‘Yes, this morning,’ he said dolefully. ‘Just a little note thanking me for my wedding present. I gave her a jewel case—’

‘A what?’ asked Manfred sharply, and the young man, surprised at his vehemence, stared at him.

‘A jewel case—my sister bought one about a month ago, and Angela was so taken with it that I had an exact copy made.’

Manfred was looking at him absently.

‘Your sister?’ he said slowly. ‘Where does your sister live?’

‘Why, she’s at Maidenhead,’ said the young man, surprised.

Manfred looked at his watch.

‘Eight o’clock,’ he said. ‘This is going to be rather an amusing evening.’

The clocks were striking the half–hour after ten when the telephone in Mr Guntheimer’s private suite buzzed softly. Guntheimer ceased his restless pacing and went to the instrument.

‘I can’t see anybody,’ he said. ‘Who?’ He frowned. ‘All right, I’ll see him.’

It had been raining heavily and Manfred apologized for his wet raincoat and waited for an invitation to remove it. But apparently Mr Guntheimer was too preoccupied with his unhappy thoughts to be greatly concerned about his duties as host.

He was a tall, good–looking man, rather haggard of face now, and the hand that stroked the iron–grey moustache trembled a little.

‘Geydrew told me he was going to see you—what is your explanation of this extraordinary happening, Mr Manfred?’

Manfred smiled.

‘The solution is a very simple one, Mr Guntheimer,’ he said. ‘It is to be found in the pink diamond.’

‘In the what?’ asked the other, startled.

‘Your wife has a rather nice diamond brooch,’ said Manfred. ‘Unless I am misinformed, the third from the end of the bar is of a distinctly pinkish hue. It is, or was, the property of the Rajah of Komitar, and on its topmost facet you will find an Arabic word, meaning “Happiness.”‘

Guntheimer was gazing at him open–mouthed.

‘What has that to do with it?’

Again Manfred smiled.

‘If there is a pink diamond and it is inscribed as I say, I can find your wife, not in twenty–four but in six hours.’

Guntheimer fingered his chin thoughtfully.

‘That matter’s easily settled,’ he said. ‘My wife’s jewels are in the hotel safe. Just wait.’

He was gone five minutes and returned carrying a small scarlet box. He put this on the table and opened it with a key which he took from his pocket. Lifting the lid, he took out a pad of wash–leather and revealed a trayful of glittering jewels.

‘There’s no brooch there,’ he said after a search; he pulled out the tray and examined the padded bottom of the box.

There were brooches and bars of all kinds. Manfred pointed to one, and this was inspected—but there was no pink diamond; nor was there in any other brooch.

‘Is that the best you can do in the way of detective work?’ demanded Mr Guntheimer as he closed and locked the box. ‘I thought that tale was a little fantastic…’

Crash! A stone came hurtling through the window, smashing the glass, and fell on the carpet. With an oath Guntheimer spun round.

‘What was that?’

He grabbed the jewel box that was on the table and ran to the window. Outside the window was a small balcony which ran the length of the building.

‘Somebody standing on the balcony must have thrown that,’ said Guntheimer.

The sound of smashing glass had been heard in the Corridor, and two hotel servants came in and examined the damage without, however, offering a solution to the mystery.

Manfred waited until the distracted bridegroom had locked away the jewel box in a strong trunk, and by this time Guntheimer was in a better humour.

‘I’ve heard about you fellows,’ he said, ‘and I know you’re pretty clever; otherwise, I should have thought that story of the pink diamond was all bunkum. Perhaps you will tell me what the Rajah of Who–was–it has to do with Angela’s disappearance?’

Manfred was biting his lip thoughtfully.

‘I don’t wish to alarm you,’ he said slowly. ‘But has it occurred to you, Mr Guntheimer, that you may share her fate?’

Again that quick turn and look of apprehension.

‘I don’t quite understand you.’

‘I wondered if you would,’ said Manfred and, holding out his hand, he left his astonished host staring after him.

When he got to Curzon Street he found Gonsalez, his head in one deep armchair, his feet on another. Apparently Poiccart, who had reached home first, had told him of the callers, for he was holding forth on women.

‘They are wilful, they are unreasonable,’ he said bitterly. ‘You remember, George, that woman at Cordova, how we saved her life from her lover and how we barely saved our own at her infuriated hands—there should be a law prohibiting women from possessing firearms. Here is a case in point. Tomorrow the newspapers will tell you the harrowing story of a bride torn from the arms of her handsome bridegroom. The old ladies of Bayswater will shed tears over the tragedy, knowing nothing of the aching heart of Mr Harry Sidworth or the great inconvenience to which this strange and tragic

happening has put George Manfred, Raymond Poiccart, and Leon Gonsalez.'

Manfred opened the safe in a corner of the room and put into it something he had taken from his pocket. Characteristically, Gonsalez asked no questions, and it was remarkable and significant that nobody discussed the pink diamond.

The following morning passed uneventfully, save that Leon had much to say about the hardness of the drawing–room sofa, where he had spent the night, and the three men had finished lunch and were sitting smoking over their coffee, when a ring of the bell took Poiccart into the hall.

'Geydrew, full of bad tidings,' said George Manfred, as the sound of a voice came to them.

Lord Geydrew it was, shrill with his tremendous information.

'Have you heard the news?…Guntheimer has disappeared! The waiter went to his room this morning, could get no answer, opened the door with his key and walked in. The bed had not been slept in…all his luggage was there, and on the floor—'

'Let me guess,' said Manfred, and held his forehead. 'The jewel case was smashed to smithereens, without a single jewel in it! Or was it—'

But Lord Geydrew's face told him that his first guess was accurate.

'How did you know?' he gasped. 'It wasn't in the papers—my God, this is awful!'

In his agitation, he did not notice that Leon Gonsalez had slipped from the room, and only missed him when he turned to find the one man in whom, for some extraordinary reason, he had faith.

('Geydrew never did trust you or me,' said George afterwards.)

'I'm ashamed to confess it,' smiled Manfred. 'That was sheer guesswork. The jewel case had the appearance of being jumped on—I don't wonder!'

'But—but—' stammered the nobleman, and at that minute the door opened and he stood amazed.

A smiling girl was there, and in another instant was in his arms.

‘Here’s your Angela,’ said Leon, with great coolness, ‘and with all due respect to everybody, I shan’t be sorry to sleep in my own bed tonight. George, that sofa must be sent back to the brigands who supplied it.’

But George was at the safe, lifting out a red leather jewel case.

It was a long time before Geydrew was calm enough to hear the story.

‘My friend Leon Gonsalez,’ said Manfred, ‘has a wonderful memory for faces—so have we all, for the matter of that. But Leon is specially gifted. He was waiting at Waterloo to drive friend Poiccart home. Raymond had been to Winchester to see a surgeon friend of ours over a matter of a sprained leg. Whilst Leon was waiting he saw Guntheimer and your daughter and instantly recognized Guntheimer whose other name is Lanstry, or Smith, or Malikin. Guntheimer’s graft is bigamy, and Leon happens to know him rather well. A few inquiries made of the porter, and he discovered, not the identity of your daughter, but that this man had married that day. He approached Angela with a cock and bull story that some mysterious body was waiting to see her outside the station. I will not say that she imagined that mysterious body was Harry Sidworth, but at any rate she went very willingly. She showed some little fight when friend Leon pushed her into the car and drove away with her—’

‘Anybody who has tried to drive a car and control an infuriated and terrified lady will sympathize with me,’ broke in Leon.

‘By the time Miss Angela Geydrew reached Curzon Street she was in full possession of the facts as Leon knew them,’ Manfred went on. ‘Leon’s one object was to postpone the honeymoon until he could get somebody to identify Guntheimer. The young lady told us nothing about her jewel case, but we all guessed the hundred–thousand–pound cheque, presented too late to be banked; before it could be cleared, Guntheimer would be well out of the country with any loot he was able to gather—in this case the family diamonds—and of course it would have been pretty easy to arrest him last night. When your lordship called yesterday Leon was out finishing his investigations. Before he returned, I learnt where I could get a duplicate jewel box, and with Poiccart made a call on friend bigamist. Poiccart was on the balcony, listening, and at an agreed word signal he smashed the window, which gave me just the opportunity I wanted to change the jewel

boxes. Later, I presume, Mr Guntheimer opened the box, found it was empty, realized the game was up and fled.'

'But how did you induce him to show you the jewel box?' asked Lord Geydrew.

Manfred smiled cryptically. The tale of the pink diamond was too crude to be repeated.

4. The Third Coincidence

LEON GONSALEZ, like the famous scientist, had an unholy knack of collecting coincidences. He had, too, strange faiths, and believed that if a man saw a pink cow with one horn in the morning, he must, by the common workings of a certain esoteric law, meet another pink cow with one horn later in the day.

‘Coincidences, my dear George,’ he said, ‘are inevitabilities—not accidents.’

Manfred murmured something in reply—he was studying the dossier of one William Yape, of whom something may be told at a later period.

‘Now here is a coincidence.’ Leon was in no sense abashed, for it was after dinner, the hour of the day when he was most confident. ‘This morning I took the car for a run to Windsor—she was a trifle sticky yesterday—and at Langley what did I find? A gentleman sitting before an inn, very drunk. He was, I imagined, an agricultural labourer in his best Sunday suit, and it was remarkable that he wore a diamond ring worth five hundred pounds. He had, he told me, been to Canada, and had stayed at the Chateau Fronteuse—which is an expensive hotel.’

Poiccart was interested.

‘And the coincidence?’

‘If George will listen.’ Manfred looked up with a groan. ‘Thank you. Hardly had I begun questioning this inebriated son of the soil when a Rolls drove up, and there stepped down a rather nice–looking gentleman who also wore a diamond ring on his little finger.’

‘Sensation,’ said George Manfred, and went back to his dossier.

‘I shall be offended if you do not listen. Imagine the agriculturist suddenly jumping to his feet as if he had seen a ghost. “Ambrose!” he gasped. I tell you his face was the colour of milk. Ambrose—if he will pardon the liberty—could not have heard him, and passed into the inn. The labourer went stumbling away—it is remarkable that one’s head sobers so much more quickly than one’s legs—as though the devil was after him.

‘I went into the inn and found Ambrose drinking tea—a man who drinks tea at eleven o’clock in the morning has lived either in South Africa or Australia. It proved to be South Africa. An alluvial diamond digger, an ex–soldier and a most gentlemanly person, though not very communicative. After he had gone I went in search of the labourer—overtook him as he entered a most flamboyant villa.’

‘Which, with your peculiar disregard for the sacredness of the Englishman’s home, you entered.’

Leon nodded.

‘Truth is in you,’ he said. ‘Imagine, my dear George, a suburban villa so filled with useless furniture that you could hardly find a place to sit. Satin–covered settees, pseudo–Chinese cabinets, whatnots and wherefores crowding space. Ridiculous oil paintings, painted by the yard, in heavy gold frames, simpering enlargements of photographs covering hideous wallpaper—and two ladies, expensively dressed, bediamonded but without an “h” between them; common as the dirt on my shoes, shrill, ugly, coarse.

‘As I entered the hall on the trail of the labourer I heard him say: “He wasn’t killed—he’s back,” and a woman say:

“Oh, my God!” And then the second woman said: “He must be killed—it was in the list on New Year’s Day!”—after which I was so busy explaining my presence that further enlightenment was out of the question.’

George Manfred had tied his dossier neatly with a strip of red tape, and now he leaned back in his chair.

‘You took the number of the Ambrose car, of course?’

Leon nodded.

‘And he wore a diamond ring?’

‘A lady’s—it was on his little finger. A not very magnificent affair. It was the sort of dress ring that a girl would wear.’

Poiccart chuckled.

‘Now we sit down and wait for the third coincidence,’ he said. ‘It is inevitable.’

A few minutes later Leon was on his way to Fleet Street, for he was a man whose curiosity was insatiable. For two hours, in the office of a friendly

newspaper, he pored over the casualty lists that were published on four New Year's Days, looking for a soldier whose first name was 'Ambrose'.

'The Three Just Men,' said the Assistant Commissioner cheerfully, 'are now so eminently respectable that we give them police protection.'

You must allow for the fact that this was after dinner, when even an Assistant Commissioner grows a little expansive, especially when he is host in his nice house in Belgravia. You must also allow for the more interesting fact that one of the famous organization had been seen outside Colonel Yenford's house that very night.

'They are strange devils—why they should be watching this place beats me; if I'd known I should have asked the fellow in!'

Lady Irene Belvinne looked at one of the portraits on the wall: she seemed scarcely interested in the Three Just Men. Yet every word Colonel Yenford spoke was eagerly stored in her memory.

A beautiful woman of thirty–five, the widow of a man who had held Cabinet rank, she might claim to be especially favoured. She had been the wife of a many–times millionaire who had left her his entire fortune; she had the lineless face and serene poise of one who had never known care….

'I don't exactly know what they do?' Her voice was a soft drawl. 'Are they detectives? Of course, I know what they were.'

Who did not know what that ruthless trio were in the days when every hand was against them? When swift death followed their threat, when a whole world of secret lawbreakers trembled at their names.

'They're tame enough now,' said somebody. 'They wouldn't have played their monkey tricks today, eh, Yenford?'

Colonel Yenford was not so confident.

'It's strange,' mused Irene. 'I didn't think of them.'

She was so wholly absorbed in her thoughts that she did not realize she was speaking aloud.

'Why on earth should you think about them?' demanded Yenford, a little astonished.

She started at this and changed the subject.

It was past midnight when she reached her beautiful flat in Piccadilly, and all the staff except her maid had gone to bed. At the sound of a key turning in the lock the maid came flying into the hall, and with a sinking of heart Irene Belvinne knew that something was wrong.

‘She’s been waiting since nine, m’lady,’ said the girl in a low voice.

Irene nodded.

‘Where is she?’ she asked.

‘I put her in the study, madam.’

Handing her coat to the maid, the woman walked up the broad passage, opened a door and entered the library. The woman who had been sitting on the hide–covered settee rose awkwardly at the sight of the radiant woman who entered. The visitor was poorly dressed, had a long, not too clean face, and a mouth that drooped pathetically. She looked up slyly from under her lowered lids, and though her tone was humble it also held a suggestion of menace.

‘He’s terribly bad again tonight, m’lady,’ she said. ‘We had all our work cut out to keep him in bed. He wanted to come here, he said, him being delirious. The doctor says that we ought to get him away to—’ her eyes rose quickly and fell again ‘—South Africa.’

‘It was Canada last time,’ said Irene steadily. ‘That was rather an expensive trip, Mrs Dennis.’

The woman mumbled something, rubbing her hands still more nervously.

‘I’m sure I’m worried to death about the whole business, me being his aunt, and I’m sure I can’t afford no five thousand pounds to take him to South Africa—’

Five thousand pounds! Irene was aghast at the demand. The Canadian trip had cost three thousand, but the original request was for one.

‘I should like to see him myself,’ she said with sudden determination.

Again that swift, sly look.

‘I wouldn’t let you come and see him, me lady, unless you brought a gentleman. I’d say your ‘usband, but I know he’s no more. I wouldn’t take the responsibility, I wouldn’t indeed. That’s why I never tell you where

we're living, in case you was tempted, me lady. He'd think no more of cutting your throat than he would of looking at you!'

A smile of contempt hardened the beautiful face.

'I am not so sure that really terrifies me,' said Irene quietly. 'You want five thousand pounds—when do you sail?'

'Next Saturday, me lady,' said the woman eagerly. 'And Jim say you was to pay the money in notes.'

Irene nodded.

'Very well,' she said. 'But you mustn't come here again unless I send for you.'

'Where shall I get the money, me lady?'

'Here at twelve o'clock tomorrow. And won't you please make yourself a little more presentable when you call?'

The woman grinned.

'I ain't got your looks or your clothes, me lady,' she sneered. 'Every penny piece I earn goes on poor Jim, a–trying to save his life, when if he had his rights he'd have millions.'

Irene walked to the door and opened it, waited in the passage until the maid had shut out the unprepossessing visitor.

'Open the windows and air the room,' said Irene.

She went upstairs and sat down before her dressing table, eyeing her reflection thoughtfully.

Then, of a sudden, she got up and crossed the room to the telephone. She lifted the receiver and then realized that she did not know the number. A search of the book gave her the information she wanted. The Triangle Detective Agency had their headquarters in Curzon Street. But they would be in bed by now, she thought; and even if the members of this extraordinary confederation were not, would they be likely to interest themselves at this late hour?

She had hardly given the number before she was through. She heard the rattle of the receiver as it was raised, and the distinctive tinkle of a guitar; then an eager voice asked her who she was.

‘Lady Irene Belvinne,’ she said. ‘You don’t know me, but—’

‘I know you very well. Lady Irene.’ She could almost detect the unknown smiling as he answered. ‘You dined at Colonel Yenford’s tonight and left the house at twelve minutes to twelve. You told your chauffeur to go back by way of Hyde Park….’

The guitar had ceased. She heard a distant voice say: ‘Listen to Leon: he’s being all Sherlock Holmes.’ And then a laugh. She smiled in sympathy.

‘Do you want to see me?’ This was Leon Gonsalez speaking, then.

‘When can I?’ she asked.

‘Now. I’ll come right away, if you’re in any serious trouble—I have an idea that you are.’

She hesitated. An immediate decision was called for and she set her teeth.

‘Very well. Will you come? I’ll wait up for you.’

In her nervousness she dropped the receiver down while he was answering her.

Five minutes later the maid admitted a slim, good–looking man. He wore a dark suit, and was strangely like a Chancery barrister she knew. On her part the greeting was awkward, for the interval had been too short for her to make up her mind what she should tell him, and how she should begin.

It was in the library tainted, to her sensitive nostrils, with her late frowsy visitor, that she made her confession, and he listened with an expressionless face.

‘…I was very young—that is my only excuse; and he was a very handsome, very attractive young man…and a chauffeur isn’t a servant…I mean, one can be quite good friends with him, as one couldn’t be with—well, with other servants.’

He nodded.

‘It was an act of lunacy, and nasty, and everything you can say. When my father sent him away I thought my heart would break.’

‘Your father knew?’ asked Gonsalez gravely.

She shook her head.

‘No. Father was rather quick–tempered, and he bullied Jim for some fault that was not his—that was the end of it. I had one letter and then I heard no more until two or three years after I was married, when I got a letter from this woman, saying that her nephew was consumptive and she knew what—good friends we’d been.’

To her surprise her visitor was smiling, and at first she was hurt.

‘You have told me only what I’ve guessed,’ he said to her amazement.

‘You guessed…but you didn’t know—’

He interrupted her brusquely.

‘Was your second marriage happy, Lady Irene? I am not being impertinent.’

She hesitated.

‘It was quite happy. My husband was nearly thirty years older than I—why do you ask?’

Leon smiled again.

‘I am a sentimentalist—which is a shocking confession for one who boasts of his scientific mind. I am a devourer of love stories, both in fiction and in life. This Jim was not unpleasant?’

She shook her head.

‘No,’ she said, and then added simply: I loved him—I love him still. That is the ghastly part of it. It is dreadful to think of him lying ill with this dreadful aunt looking after him—’

‘Landlady,’ broke in Leon calmly. ‘He had no relations.’

She was on her feet now, staring at him.

‘What do you know?’

He had a gesture which was almost mesmeric in its calming effect.

‘I went to Colonel Yenford’s house tonight—I happened to learn that you were his guest and I wanted to see your mouth. I’m sorry if I am being mysterious, but I judge women by their mouths—the test is infallible. That is why I knew the hour you left.’

Irene Belvinne was frowning at him.

‘I don’t understand, Mr Gonzalez,’ she began. ‘What has my mouth to do with the matter?’

He nodded slowly.

‘If you had a certain type of mouth I should not have been interested—as it is…’

She waited, and presently he spoke.

‘You will find James Ambrose Clynes in his suite at the Piccadilly Hotel. The dress ring you gave him is on his little finger, and your photograph is the only one in his room.’

He put out his hand and steadied her as, white and shaking, she sank into a chair.

‘He’s a very rich man and a very nice man…and a very stupid man, or he would have come to see you.’

A car drew up before an ornate villa in the village of Langley and a poorly–dressed woman got down. The door was opened by a thickset man and the two passed into the over–furnished parlour. On the face of Mrs Dennis was a smile of satisfaction.

‘It’s all right—she’ll part,’ she said, throwing off her old coat.

The coarse–looking man with the diamond ring turned to his other sister.

‘As soon as we get the money it’s Canada for us,’ he said ominously. ‘I won’t have another fright like I had on Tuesday—why were you so late, Maria?’

‘A tyre burst on the Great West Road,’ she said, rubbing her hands at the fire. ‘What are you worrying about, Saul? We’ve done nothing. It ain’t as though we ever threatened her. That’d be crime. Just askin’ her to help a poor feller who’s ill, that ain’t crime.’

They discussed the pros and cons of this for nearly an hour. Then came the knock at the door.

It was the man who went out to interview the visitor….

‘If I don’t come in,’ said Leon Gonsalez pleasantly, ‘the police will. There will be a warrant issued tomorrow morning and you will be held on a charge of conspiring to defraud.’

A few seconds later he was questioning a trembling audience….

Poiccart and George Manfred were waiting up for him when he returned in the early hours of the morning.

‘Rather a unique case,’ said Leon, glancing through his notes. ‘Our Ambrose, a well–educated man, had a love affair with the Earl of Carslake’s daughter. He loses his job—because he loves the girl he decides not to communicate with her. He goes into the Army and, before he is sent overseas, he writes to his landlady, asks her to take out a sealed envelope, full of letters from Irene and burn them. By the time she gets these instructions, Ambrose is reported killed. The landlady, Mrs Dennis, with the inquisitiveness of her class, opens the envelope and learns enough to be able to blackmail this unfortunate girl. But Ambrose isn’t dead—he is discharged from the army on account of wounds and, accepting the invitation of a South African soldier, goes to the Cape, where he makes good.

‘In the meantime the Dennises wax rich. They pretend that “Jim”, as they called him, is desperately ill, trusting that Irene has not heard of his death. By this means, and on the threat of telling her husband, they extract nearly twenty thousand pounds.’

‘What shall we do to them?’ asked Poiccart.

Leon took something from his pocket—a glittering diamond ring. ‘I took this as payment for my advice,’ he said.

George smiled.

‘And your advice, Leon?’

‘Was to get out of the country before Ambrose found them,’ said Leon.

5. The Slane Mystery

THE KILLING OF Bernard Slane was one of those mysteries which delight the Press and worry the police. Mr Slane was a rich stockbroker, a bachelor and a good fellow. He had dined at a Pall Mall club and, his car being in the garage for repairs, he took a taxi and ordered the driver to take him to his flat in Albert Palace Mansions. The porter of the mansions had taken the elevator to the fifth floor at the time Mr Slane arrived.

The first intimation that there was anything wrong was when the porter came down to find the taxi–driver standing in the hall, and asked him what he wanted.

‘I’ve just brought a gentleman here—Mr Slane, who lives at Number Seven,’ said the driver. ‘He hadn’t got any change so he’s gone in to get it.’

This was quite likely, because Slane lived on the first floor and invariably used the stairs. They chatted together, the porter and the driver, for some five minutes, and then the porter undertook to go up and collect the money for the fare.

Albert Palace Mansions differed from every other apartment–house of its kind in that, on the first and the most expensive floor, there was one small flat consisting of four rooms, which was occupied by Slane.

A light showed through the transom, but then it had been burning all the evening. The porter rang the bell and waited, rang it again, knocked—without, however, getting an answer. He returned to the driver.

‘He must have gone to sleep—how was he?’ he asked.

By his question he meant to inquire whether the stockbroker was quite sober. It is a fact that Slane drank rather heavily, and had come home more than once in a condition which necessitated the help of the night porter to get him to bed.

The driver, whose name was Reynolds, admitted his passenger had had as much as, and probably more than, was good for him. Again the porter attempted to get a reply from the flat and, when this failed, he paid the driver out of his own pocket, four shillings and sixpence.

The porter was on duty all night, and made several journeys up and down his shaft. Through the open grille on the first floor he commanded a view of No 7. His statement was that he saw nothing of Mr Slane that night, that it was impossible for the stockbroker to have left the building without his seeing him.

At half past five the next morning a policeman patrolling Green Park saw a man sitting huddled up on a garden chair. He wore a dinner jacket and, his attitude was so suspicious that the policeman stepped over the rails and crossed the stretch of grass which intervened between the pathway and the chair which was placed near a clump of rhododendrons. He came up to the man, to find his fears justified. The man was dead; he had been terribly battered with some blunt instrument, and a search of the pockets revealed his identity as Bernard Slane.

Near the spot was an iron gateway set in the rails leading to the Mall, and the lock of this was discovered to be smashed. Detectives from Scotland Yard were at once on the spot; the porter of Albert Palace Mansions was questioned; and a call was sent round, asking the driver Reynolds to call at the Yard. He was there by twelve o'clock, but could throw no light on the mystery.

Reynolds was a respectable man without any record against him, and was a widower who lived over a garage near Dorset Square, Baker Street.

'A most amusing crime,' said Leon Gonsalez, his elbows on the breakfast table, his head between his hands.

'Why amusing?' asked George.

Leon read on, his lips moving, a trick of his, as he devoured every printed line. After a while he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

'It is amusing,' he said, 'because of the hotel bill that was found in the dead man's pocket.'

He put his finger on a paragraph and Manfred drew the paper towards him and read:

'The police discovered in the right hand pocket of the murdered man's overcoat a bloodstained paper which proved to be an hotel bill, issued by the Plage Hotel, Ostend, five years ago. The bill was made out in the name of Mr and Mrs Wilbraham and was for 7,500 francs.'

Manfred pushed the paper back.

‘Isn’t the mystery why this half–drunken man left his flat and went back to Green Park, some considerable distance from Albert Palace Mansions?’ he asked.

Leon, who was staring blankly at the farther wall, shook his head slowly; and then, in his characteristic way, went off at a tangent:

‘There’s a lot to be said for the law which prohibited the publication of certain details in divorce cases,’ he said, ‘but I believe that the circumstances which surrounded the visit of Mr and Mrs Wilbraham to the Plage would have been given the fullest publicity if the case had come into court.’

‘Do you suspect a murder of revenge?’ Leon shrugged his shoulders and changed the subject. George Manfred used to say that Leon had the most amazing pigeon–hole of a mind that it had been his fortune to meet with. Very seldom indeed did he have to consult the voluminous notes and data he had collected during his life, and which made one room in that little house uninhabitable.

There was a man at Scotland Yard, Inspector Meadows, who was on the friendliest terms with the Three. It was his practice to smoke a pipe, indeed many pipes, of evenings in the little Curzon Street house. He came that night, rather full of the Slane mystery.

‘Slane was a pretty rapid sort,’ he said. ‘From the evidence that was found in his house, it is clear that he was the one man in London who ought not to be a bachelor if about two dozen women had their rights! By the way, we’ve traced Mr and Mrs Wilbraham. Wilbraham was of course Slane. The lady isn’t so easy to find; one of his pick–ups, I suppose—’

‘And yet the only girl he was willing to marry,’ said Gonsalez.

‘How did you know that?’ asked the startled detective.

Leon chuckled.

‘The bill was obviously sent to give the husband evidence. The husband, either because he was willing to give his wife another chance or because he was a Roman Catholic, did not divorce her. Now tell me’—he leaned forward over the table and beamed on the detective—’when the taxi drew

up before the door of Albert Palace Mansions, did Slane immediately alight?—I can tell you he didn't.'

'You've been making inquiries,' said the other suspiciously. 'No, he waited there. The driver, being a tactful individual, thought it best to keep him inside until the people who were in the hall had gone up in the lift—which is visible from the door.'

'Exactly. Was it the driver's idea or Slane's'?

'The driver's,' said Meadows. 'Slane was half asleep when the man pulled him out.'

'One more question: when the elevator man took this party to the fifth floor, did he come down immediately?'

The Inspector shook his head.

'No, he stayed up there talking to the tenants. He heard Slane's door slam, and that was the first intimation he had that somebody had come in.'

Leon jerked back into his chair, a delighted smile on his face.

'What do you think, Raymond?' He addressed the saturnine Poiccart.

'What do you think?' said the other.

Meadows looked from Poiccart to Gonsalez.

'Have you any theory as to why Slane went out again?'

'He didn't go out again,' said the two men in unison.

Meadows caught George Manfred's smiling eyes.

'They're trying to mystify you. Meadows, but what they say is true. Obviously he didn't go out again.'

He rose and stretched himself.

'I'm going to bed; and I'd like to bet you fifty pounds that Leon finds the murderer tomorrow, though I won't swear that he will hand him over to Scotland Yard.'

At eight o'clock next morning, when, with a cigarette in his mouth, Reynolds, the taxi–driver, was making a final inspection of his cab before taking it out for the day, Leon Gonsalez walked into the mews.

Reynolds was a man of forty, a quiet, good–looking fellow. He had a soft voice and was courteous in a particularly pleasing way.

‘You’re not another detective, are you?’ he asked, smiling ruefully. ‘I’ve answered as many foolish questions as I care to answer.’

‘Is this your own cab?’ Leon nodded to the shining vehicle.

‘Yes, that’s mine,’ said the driver. ‘Cab–owning is not the gold mine some people think it is. And if you happen to get mixed up in a case like this, your takings fall fifty per cent.’

Very briefly Leon explained his position.

‘The Triangle Agency—oh, yes, I remember: you’re the Four Just Men, aren’t you? Good Lord! Scotland Yard haven’t put you on the job?’

‘I’m on the job for my own amusement,’ said Leon, giving smile for smile. ‘There are one or two matters which weren’t quite clear to me, and I wondered if you would mind telling me something that the police don’t seem to know.’

The man hesitated, and then: ‘Come up to my room,’ he said, and led the way up the narrow stairs.

The room was surprisingly well furnished. There were one or two old pieces, Leon noticed, which must have been worth a lot of money. On a gate–legged table in the centre of the room was a suitcase and near the table a trunk. The driver must have noticed his eyes rest on these, for he said quickly: ‘They belong to a customer of mine. I’m taking them to the station.’

From where he stood, Leon could see they were addressed to the Tetley cloak room to be called for; he made no comment on this, but his observation evidently disconcerted his host for his manner changed.

‘Now, Mr Gonsalez, I’m a working man, so I’m afraid I can’t give you very much time. What is it you want to know?’

‘I particularly wish to know,’ said Leon, ‘whether the day you brought Slane to his house had been a very busy one for you?’

‘It was fairly profitable,’ said the other. ‘I’ve already given the police an account of my fares, including the hospital case—but I suppose you know that.’

‘Which hospital case was this?’

The man hesitated.

‘I don’t want you to think I’m boasting about doing a thing like that—it was just humanity. A woman was knocked down by a bus in Baker Street: I picked her up and took her to the hospital.’

‘Was she badly hurt?’

‘She died.’ His voice was curt.

Leon looked at him thoughtfully. Again his eyes roved to the trunk.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Will you come to Curzon Street tonight at nine o’clock? Here’s my address.’ He took a card from his pocket.

‘Why?’ There was a note of defiance in the voice.

‘Because I want to ask you something that I think you’ll be glad to answer,’ said Leon.

His big car was waiting at the end of the mews, and he set it flying in the direction of the Walmer Street hospital. He learnt there no more than he expected, and returned to Curzon Street, a very silent and uninformative man.

At nine o’clock that night came Reynolds, and for an hour he and Leon Gonsalez were closeted together in the little room downstairs.

Happily, Meadows did not consider it necessary to call. It was not until a week afterwards that he came with a piece of information that surprised only himself.

‘It was rather a rum thing—that driver who took Slane back to his flat has disappeared—sold his taxi and cleared out. There’s nothing to associate him with the murder or I should get a warrant for him. He has been straightforward from the very first.’

Manfred politely agreed.

Poiccart was staringly vacant.

Leon Gonsalez yawned and was frankly bored with all mysteries.

‘It’s very curious,’ said Gonsalez, when he condescended to tell the full story, ‘that the police never troubled to investigate Slane’s life at Tetley. He had a big house there for some years. If they had, they couldn’t have failed

to hear the story of young Doctor Grain and his beautiful wife, who ran away from him. She and Slane disappeared together; and of course he was passionately fond of her and was ready to marry her. But then, Slane was the type who was passionately fond of people for about three months, and unless the marriage could be arranged instantly the unfortunate girl had very little chance of becoming his wife.

‘The doctor offered to take his wife back, but she refused, and disappeared out of his life. He gave up the practice of medicine, came to London, invested his savings in a small garage, went broke, as all garage proprietors do unless they’re backed with good capital, and having to decide whether he’d go back to the practice of medicine and pick up all that he’d lost in the years he’d been trying to forget his wife, he chose what to him was the less strenuous profession of cab–driver. I know another man who did exactly the same thing: I will tell you about him one of these days.

‘He never saw his wife again, though he frequently saw Slane. Reynolds, or Grain, as I will call him, had shaved off his moustache and generally altered his appearance, and Slane never recognized him. It became an obsession of Grain’s to follow his enemy about, to learn of his movements, his habits. The one habit he did discover, and which proved to be Slane’s undoing, was his practice of dining at the Real Club in Pall Mall every Wednesday evening and of leaving the club at eleven–thirty on those occasions.

‘He put his discovery to no use, nor did he expect he would, until the night of the murder. He was driving somewhere in the north–west district when he saw a woman knocked down by a bus and he himself nearly ran over the prostrate figure. Stopping his cab, he jumped down and, to his horror, as he picked her up, he found himself gazing into the emaciated face of his wife. He lifted her into the cab, drove full pelt to the nearest hospital. It was while they were in the waiting–room, before the house surgeon’s arrival, that the dying woman told him, in a few broken, half–delirious words, the story of her downward progress…She was dead before they got her on to the operating table—mercifully, as it proved.

‘I knew all this before I went to the hospital and found that some unknown person had decided that she should be buried at Tetley and had made the most lavish arrangements for her removal. I guessed it before I saw Grain’s suitcase packed ready for that tragedy. He left the hospital, a man mad with hate. It was raining heavily. He crawled down Pall Mall, and luck was with

him, for just as the porter came out to find an empty taxi, Grain pulled up before the door.

‘On the pretext of a tyre burst he stopped in the Mall, forced open one of the gates that led to the park, and waited until no pedestrian was in sight before he dragged the half–drunken man into the gardens…He was sober enough before Grain finished his story. Grain swears that he gave him the chance of his life, but Slane pulled a gun on him, and he had to kill him in self–defence. That may or may not be true.

‘He never lost his nerve. Reaching his cab without observation, he drove to Albert Palace Mansions, waited until the lift had risen, and then ran up the stairs. He had taken Slane’s bunch of keys, and on the way had selected that which he knew would open the door. His first intention was to search the flat for everything that betrayed the man’s association with his wife; but he heard the porter up above saying good night and, slamming the door, raced downstairs in time to be there when the man reached the ground floor.’

‘We’re not telling the police of this, of course?’ said Manfred gravely.

Poiccart at the other end of the table burst into a loud guffaw.

‘It’s so good a story that the police would never believe it,’ he said.

6. The Marked Cheque

THE MAN WHO called at the little house in Curzon Street was in a rage, and anxious to say something that would hurt his late employer.

He had also a personal grievance against Mr Jens, the butler.

‘Mr Storn took me on as a second footman, and it looked like being a good job, but I couldn’t hit it off with the rest of the staff. But was it fair to chuck me out without a minute’s warning because I happened to let drop a word in Arabic—?’

‘Arabic?’ asked Leon Gonsalez in surprise. ‘Do you speak Arabic?’

Tenley, the dismissed footman, grinned.

‘About a dozen words: I was with the Army in Egypt after the war, and I picked up a few phrases. I was polishing the silver salver in the hall, and I happened to say “That’s good” in Arabic; and I heard Mr Storn’s voice behind me.

‘“You clear out,” he said, and before I knew what had happened, I was walking away from the house with a month’s salary.’

Gonsalez nodded.

‘Very interesting,’ he said, ‘but why have you come to us?’

He had asked the same question many times of inconsequential people who had come to the House of the Silver Triangle, with their trifling grievances.

‘Because there’s a mystery there,’ said the man vaguely. Perhaps he had cooled down a little by now, and was feeling rather uncomfortable. ‘Why was I fired for my Arabic? What’s the meaning of the picture in Storn’s private room—the men being hung?’

Leon sat upright. ‘Men being hanged? What is that?’

‘It’s a photograph. You can’t get it, because it’s in the panelling and you have to open one of the panels. But I went in one day and he’d left the panel ajar…Three men hanging from a sort of gibbet an’ a lot of Turks looking on. That’s a funny thing for a gentleman to have in his house.’

Leon was silent for a while.

‘I don’t know that that is an offence. It is certainly odd. Is there anything I can do for you?’

Apparently nothing. The man left a little sheepishly, and Leon carried the news to his partner. He remembered afterwards that he had heard nothing of the grievance against the butler.

‘The only thing I learnt about Storn is that he is extraordinarily mean, that he runs his house in Park Lane with a minimum number of staff, that he pays those the smallest wages possible. He is of Armenian origin and made his money out of oilfields which he acquired by very dubious means.

‘As to the three hanged men, that is rather gruesome, but it might be worse. I have seen photographs in the house of the idle rich that would make your hair stand on end, my dear Poiccart. At any rate, the morbid interest of a millionaire in a Turkish execution is not extraordinary.’

‘If I were an Armenian,’ said Manfred, ‘they would be my chief hobby; I should have a whole gallery of ‘em!’

And there ended the matter of the morbid millionaire who lived meanly and underpaid his servants.

Early in April, Leon read in the newspaper that Mr Storn had gone to Egypt for a short holiday.

By every test, Ferdinand Storn was a desirable acquaintance. He was immensely rich; he was personally attractive in a dark, long–nosed way; and to such people as met him intimately—and they were few—he could talk Art and Finance with equal facility. So far as was known, he had no enemies. He lived at Burson House, Park Lane, a small, handsome residence which he had purchased from the owner, Lord Burson, for £150,000. He spent most of his time either there or at Felfry Park, his beautiful country house in Sussex. The Persian and Oriental Oil Trust, of which he was the head, had its offices in a magnificent building in Moorgate Street, and here he was usually to be found between ten o’clock in the morning and three o’clock in the afternoon.

This Trust, despite its titled board, was a one–man affair, and conducted, amongst other things, the business of bankers. Storn held most of the shares, and was popularly supposed to derive an income of something like a quarter of a million a year. He had few personal friends, and was a bachelor.

It was just short of a month after Leon had read the news that a big car drew up at the door of the Triangle, and a stout, prosperous–looking man got out and rang the bell. He was a stranger to Leon, who interviewed him, and was apparently loth to state his business, for he hummed and hawed and questioned until Leon, a little impatiently, asked him point–blank who he was and what was his object.

‘Well, I’ll tell you, Mr Gonsalez,’ said the stout man. ‘I am the General Manager of the Persian and Oriental Oil—’

‘Storn’s company?’ asked Leon, his interest awakened.

‘Storn’s company. I suppose I really ought to go to the police with my suspicions, but a friend of mine has such faith in you and what he calls the Three Just Men, that I thought I had better see you first.’

‘Is it about Mr Storn?’ asked Leon.

The gentleman, who proved to be Mr Hubert Grey, the Managing Director of the Trust, nodded.

‘You see, Mr Gonsalez, I am in rather a peculiar position. Mr Storn is a very difficult man, and I should lose my job if I made him look ridiculous.’

‘He’s abroad, isn’t he?’ asked Leon.

‘He’s abroad,’ agreed the other soberly. ‘He went abroad, as a matter of fact, quite unexpectedly; that is to say, it was unexpected by the office. In fact he had an important Board meeting the day he left, which he should have attended, but on that morning I got a letter from him saying that he had to go to Egypt on a matter which affected his personal honour. He asked me not to communicate with him, or even to announce the fact that he had left London. Unfortunately, one of my clerks very foolishly told a reporter who had called that day that Mr Storn had left,

‘A week after he had gone, he sent us a letter from an hotel in Rome, enclosing a cheque for eighty–three thousand pounds, and arranging that this cheque should be honoured when a gentleman called, which he did the next day.’

‘An Englishman?’ asked Leon.

Mr Grey shook his head. ‘No, he was a foreigner of some kind; a rather dark–looking man. The money was paid over to him.

‘A few days later we had another letter from Mr Storn, written from the Hotel de Russie, Rome. This letter told us that a further cheque had been sent to Mr Kraman, which was to be honoured. This was for one hundred and seven thousand pounds and a few odd shillings. He gave us instructions as to how the money was to be paid, and asked us to telegraph to him at an hotel in Alexandria the moment the cheque was honoured. This I did. The very next day there came a second letter written from the Hotel Mediterraneo in Naples—I will let you have copies of all these—telling us that a third cheque was to be paid without fail, but to a different man, a Mr Rezzio, who would call at the office. This was for one hundred and twelve thousand pounds, which very nearly exhausted Mr Storn’s cash balance, although of course he has large reserves at the bank. I might say that Mr Storn is a man who is rather eccentric in the matter of large deposit reserves. Very little of his money is locked up in shares. Look here’—he took a note–case from his pocket and produced a cheque form—’this money has been paid, but I’ve brought you along the cheque to see.’

Leon took it in his hand. It was written in characteristic writing, and he examined the signature.

‘There is no question of this being a forgery?’

‘None whatever,’ said Grey emphatically. ‘The letter, too, was in his own handwriting. But what puzzled me about the cheque were the queer marks on the back.’

They were indistinguishable to Leon until he took them to the window, and then saw a line of faint pencil marks which ran along the bottom of the cheque.

‘I suppose I can’t keep this cheque for a day or two?’ asked Leon.

‘Certainly. The signature, as you see, has been cancelled out, and the money has been paid.’

Leon examined the cheque again. It was drawn on the Ottoman Oil Bank, which was apparently a private concern of Storn’s.

‘What do you imagine has happened?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know, but I’m worried.’

Grey’s troubled frown showed the extent of that worry.

‘I don’t know why I should be, but I’ve got an uncomfortable feeling at the back of my mind that there is a swindle somewhere.’

‘Have you cabled to Alexandria?’

Mr Grey smiled. ‘Naturally; and I have had a reply. It struck me that you might have agents in Egypt, in which case it might be a simple matter for you to discover whether there is anything wrong. The main point is that I don’t wish Mr Storn to know that I’ve been making inquiries. I’ll pay any reasonable expenditure you incur, and I’m quite sure that Mr Storn will agree that I have done the right thing.’

After the departure of his visitor, Leon interviewed Manfred.

‘It may, of course, be a case of blackmail,’ said George softly. ‘But you will have to start at Storn’s beginnings if you want to get under whatever mystery there is.’

‘So I think,’ said Gonsalez; and a few minutes afterwards went out of the house.

He did not return till midnight. He brought back an amazing amount of information about Mr Storn.

‘About twelve years ago he was an operator in the service of the Turco Telegraph Company. He speaks eight Oriental languages, and was well–known in Istanbul. Does that tell you anything, George?’

Manfred shook his head.

‘It tells me nothing yet, but I am waiting to be thrilled.’

‘He was mixed up with the revolutionary crowd, the under–strappers who pulled the strings in the days of Abdul Ahmid, and there is no doubt that he got his Concession through these fellows.’

‘What Concession?’ asked Manfred.

‘Oil land, large tracts of it. When the new Government came into power, the Concession was formed, though I suspect our friend paid heavily for the privilege. His five partners, however, were less fortunate. Three of them were accused of treason against the Government, and were hanged.’

‘The photograph,’ nodded Manfred. ‘What happened to the other two?’

‘The other two were Italians, and they were sent to prison in Asia Minor for the rest of their lives. When Storn came to London, it was as sole proprietor of the Concession, which he floated with a profit of three million pounds.’

The next morning Leon left the house early, and at ten o’clock was ringing the bell at Burson House.

The heavy–jowled butler who opened the door regarded him with suspicion, but was otherwise deferential.

‘Mr Storn is abroad, and won’t be back for some weeks, sir.’

‘May I see Mr Stem’s secretary?’ asked Leon in his blandest manner.

‘Mr Storn never has a secretary at his house; you will find the young lady at the offices of the Persian Oil Trust.’

Leon felt in his pocket and produced a card.

‘I am one of the Bursons,’ he said, ‘and as a matter of fact my father was born here. Some months ago when I was in London I asked Mr Storn if he would give me permission to look over the house.’

The card contained a scribbled line, signed ‘Ferdinand Storn,’ giving permission to the bearer to see the house at any hour ‘when I am out of town.’ It had taken Leon the greater part of an hour to forge that permit.

‘I am afraid I cannot let you in, sir,’ said the butler, barring the passage. ‘Mr Storn told me before he went that I was to admit no strangers.’

‘What is today?’ asked Leon suddenly.

‘Thursday, sir,’ said the man.

Leon nodded. ‘Cheese day,’ he said.

Only for the fraction of a second was the man confused.

‘I don’t know what you mean, sir,’ he said gruffly, and almost shut the door in the face of the caller.

Gonsalez made a circuit of the house. It stood with another upon an island site.

When he had finished, he went home, an amused and almost excited man, to give instructions to Raymond Poiccart who, amongst his other qualifications, had a very wide circle of criminal friends. There was not a big gangster in London that he did not know. He was acquainted with the

public house in London where the confidence men and the safe smashers met: he could at any moment gather the gossip of the prisons, and was probably better acquainted with the secret news of the underworld than any man at Scotland Yard. Him Leon sent on a news–gathering mission, and in a small public house off Lambeth Walk, Poiccart learned of the dark philanthropist who had found employment for at least three ex–convicts.

Leon was sitting alone when he returned, examining with a powerful lens the odd marks on the back of the cheque.

Before Poiccart could retail his news, Leon reached for a telephone directory.

‘Grey, of course, has left his office, but unless I am mistaken this is his private address,’ he said, as his fingers stopped on one of the pages. A maid answered his call. Yes, Mr Grey was at home. Presently the Managing Director’s voice came through.

‘Mr Grey—who would handle the cheques which you have received from Storn; I mean who is the official?’

‘The accountant,’ was the reply.

‘Who gave the accountant his job—you?’

A pause.

‘No—Mr Storn. He used to be in the Eastern Telegraph Company—Mr Storn met him abroad.’

‘And where is the accountant to be found?’ asked Leon eagerly.

‘He’s on his holidays. He left before the last cheque came. But I can get him.’

Leon’s laugh was one of sheer delight.

‘You needn’t worry—I knew he wasn’t at the office,’ he said, and hung up on the astonished manager.

‘Now, my dear Poiccart, what did you find?’

He listened intently till his friend had finished, and then: ‘Let us go to Park Lane—and bring a gun with you,’ he said. ‘We will call at Scotland Yard en route.’

It was ten o'clock when the butler opened the door. Before he could frame a question, a big detective gripped him and pulled him into the street.

The four plain–clothes officers who accompanied Leon flocked into the hall. A surly–faced footman was arrested before he could shout a warning. At the very top of the house, in a small windowless apartment that had once been used as a box–room, they found an emaciated man whom even his Managing Director, hastily summoned to the scene, failed to identify as the millionaire. The two Italians who kept guard on him and watched him through a hole broken through the wall from an adjoining room gave no trouble.

One of them, he who had carefully planted Burson House full of ex–convict servants, was very explicit.

'This man betrayed us, and we should have hanged like Hatim Effendi and Al Shiri and Maropulos the Greek, only we bribed witnesses,' he said. 'We were partners in the oilfields, and to rob us he manufactured evidence that we were conspiring against the Government. My friend and I broke prison and came back to London. I was determined he should pay us the money he owed us, and I knew that we could never get it from a Court of Law.'

'It was a very simple matter, and I really am ashamed of myself that I did not understand those marks at the back of the cheque at first glance,' explained Leon over the supper–table that night. 'Our Italian friend was one of the crowd that got the Concession: he had lived for years in London, and possibly it will be proved that he had criminal associates. At any rate, he had no difficulty in collecting a houseful of servants, playing as he did on his knowledge of Storn's character. All these men offered to serve Storn for sums at which the average servant would have turned up his nose. It has taken the better part of a year to fill our friend's establishment with these ex–convicts. You remember that the footman who came to us a few months ago said that he had been employed, not by the butler but by Storn himself. They would have taken the first opportunity of getting rid of him, only inadvertently he used an Arabic expression, and Storn, who was suspicious of spies and probably expected the men whom he had betrayed to return, sent him packing.

'On the day Storn was supposed to leave for Egypt, he was seized by the two Italians, locked up in a room and compelled to write such letters and

sign such cheques as they dictated. But he remembered, rather late in the day, that the accountant was an old telegraphist, and so he put on the back of the cheque, in pencil marks, a Morse message in the old symbols which were employed when the needle machine was most commonly used.'

He produced the cheque and laid it on the table, running his finger along the pencil mark:

SOSPRSNRPRKLN

'In other words, "Prisoner in Park Lane." The accountant was on his holiday, so he did not read the message.'

Manfred took up the cheque, turned it and examined it.

'What handsome fee will this millionaire send you?' he asked ironically.

The answer did not come till a few days after the Old Bailey trial. It took the form of a cheque—for five guineas.

'Game to the last!' murmured Leon admiringly.

7. Mr Levingrou's Daughter

MR LEVINGROU took his long cigar from his mouth and shook his head sorrowfully. He was a fat man, thick–necked and heavy–cheeked, and he could not afford to spoil a good cigar.

'That is awful…that is brutal! Tch! It makes me seek…poor Jose!'

His companion snorted in sympathy.

For Jose Silva had fallen. An unemotional judge, who spoke rather precociously, had told Jose that certain crimes were very heinous in the eyes of the law. For example, women were held in special esteem, and to trade on their follies was regarded as being so dreadful that nothing but a very long term of imprisonment could vindicate the law's outraged majesty.

And Jose had offended beyond forgiveness. He ran the Latin–American Artists Agency to give young and pretty aspirants to the stage a quick and profitable engagement on South American stages. They went away full of joy and they never came back. Letters came from them to their relations, very correctly worded, nicely spelt. They were, they said, happy. They all wrote the same in almost identical language. You might imagine that they wrote to dictation, as indeed they did.

But the vice squad had got on Jose's tail. A pretty girl applied for a job and went to Buenos Aires, accompanied by her father and brother—they were both Scotland Yard men, and when they learnt all that they had to learn they came back with the girl, a rather shrewd detective herself, and Jose was arrested. And then they learnt more things about him, and the prison sentence was inevitable.

Nobody arrested Jules Levingrou and haled him from his beautiful little bijou house in Knightsbridge and sent him to a cold bleak prison. And nobody arrested Heinrich Luss, who was his partner. They had financed Jose and many other Joses, but they were clever.

'Jose was careless,' sighed Jules as he sucked at his cigar.

Heinrich sighed, too. He was as fat as, but looked fatter than, his companion, because he was a shorter man.

Jules looked round the pretty saloon with its cream and gold decorations, and presently his eyes stopped roving and fixed on a framed photograph that was on the mantelpiece. His big face creased in a smile as he rose with a grunt and, waddling across to the fireplace, took the frame in his hand. The picture was of an extremely pretty girl.

'You see?'

Heinrich took the picture and mumbled ecstatic praise.

'Not goot enough,' he said.

Mr Levingrou agreed. He had never yet seen a picture that quite did justice to the delicate beauty of this only daughter of his. He was a widower; his wife had died when Valerie was a baby. She would never know how many hearts were broken, how many souls destroyed, that she might be brought up in the luxury which surrounded her. This aspect of her upbringing never occurred to Mr Levingrou. He prided himself that he had no sentiment.

He was part proprietor of twenty–three cabarets and dance halls scattered up and down the Argentine and Brazil, and drew large profits from what he regarded as a perfectly legitimate business.

He put down the photograph and came back to the deep arm–chair.

'It is unfortunate about Jose; but these men come and go. This new man may or may not be good.'

'What is his name?' asked Heinrich.

Jules searched breathlessly in his pockets, found a letter and opened it, his thick fingers glittering in the light from the crystal chandelier, for he was a lover of rings.

'Leon Gonsalez—herr Gott!'

Heinrich was sitting upright in his chair, white as a sheet.

'Name of a pipe! What is the matter with you, Heinrich?'

'Leon Gonsalez!' repeated the other huskily. 'You think he is an applicant for the post…you do not know him?'

Jules shook his huge head.

'Why in God's name should I know him—he is a Spaniard, that is good enough for me. This is always the way, Heinrich. No sooner does one of our

men make a fool of himself and get caught than another arises. Tomorrow I shall have twenty, thirty, fifty applicants—not to me but through the usual channel.'

Heinrich was looking at him hollow–eyed, and now in his agitation he spoke in German—that brand of German which is heard more frequently in Poland.

'Let me see the letter.' He took it in his hand and read it carefully.

'He asks for an appointment, that is all.'

'Have you ever heard of the Four Just Men?'

Jules frowned.

'They are dead, eh? I read something years ago.'

'They are alive,' said the other grimly; 'pardoned by the English Government. They have a bureau in Curzon Street.'

Rapidly he sketched the history of that strange organization which for years had terrorized the evil–doers who by their natural cunning had evaded the just processes of the law; and, as he spoke, the face of Jules Levingrou lengthened.

'But that—is preposterous!' he spluttered at last. 'How could these men know of me and of you…Besides, they dare not.'

Before Heinrich could reply there was a gentle knock at the door and a footman came in. There was a card on the salver he carried in his hand. Jules took it, adjusted his glasses and read, meditated a second, and then:

'Show him up,' he said.

'Leon Gonsalez,' almost whispered Heinrich as the door closed on the servant. 'Do you see a little silver triangle at the corner of the card? That is on the door of their house. It is he!'

'Pshaw!' scoffed his companion. 'He has come—why? To offer his services. You shall see!'

Leon Gonsalez, grey–haired and dapper, swung into the room, his keen, ascetic face tense, his fine eyes alive. A ready smiler was Leon. He was smiling now as he looked from one man to the other.

'You!' he said, and pointed to Jules.

Monsieur Levingrou started. There was almost an accusation in that finger thrust.

‘You wish to see me?’ He tried to recover some of his lost dignity.

‘I did,’ said Leon calmly. ‘It is my misfortune that I have never seen you before. My friend Manfred, of whom you have heard, knows you very well by sight, and my very dear comrade Poiccart is so well acquainted with you that he could draw you feature by feature—and indeed did upon the table–cloth at dinner last night, much to the annoyance of our thrifty housekeeper!’

Levingrou was on his guard; there was something of the cold devil in those smiling eyes.

‘To what am I indebted—’ he began.

‘I come in a perfectly friendly spirit,’ Leon’s smile broadened, his eyes were twinkling, as with suppressed laughter. ‘You will forgive that lie. Monsieur Levingrou, for lie it is. I have come to warn you that your wicked little business must be destroyed, or you will be made very unhappy. The police do not know of the Cafe Espagnol and its peculiar attractions.’

He dived into his overcoat pocket and, with the quick, jerky motion which was characteristic of him, produced a sheet of notepaper and unfolded it.

‘I have here a list of thirty–two girls who have gone to one or another of your establishments during the past two years,’ he said. ‘You may read it’—and thrust the paper into Jules’ hand—’for I have a copy. You will be interested to know that that sheet of paper represents six months’ inquiries.’

Jules did not so much as read a name. Instead, he shrugged, pushed the paper back to his visitor and, when Leon did not take it, dropped it on the floor.

‘I am entirely in the dark,’ he said. ‘If you have no business with me you had better go—goodnight.’

‘My friend’—Leon’s voice was a little lower, and those eyes of his were piercing the very soul of the man who squatted like an ill–shaped toad in the luxurious deeps of silk and down—’you will send cables to your managers, ordering the release of those girls, the payment of adequate compensation, and first–class return ticket to London.’

Levingrou shrugged.

‘I really don’t know what you mean, my friend. It seems to me you’ve come upon a cock and bull story, that you have been deceived.’

M. Jules Levingrou reached out deliberately and pressed an ivory bell–push.

‘I think you are mad, therefore I will take a very charitable view of what you say. Now, my friend, we have no more time to give to you.’

But Leon Gonsalez was unperturbed.

‘I can only imagine that you have no imagination. Monsieur Levingrou,’ he said, a little curtly. ‘That you do not realize the torture, the sorrow, the ghastly degradation into which you throw these sisters of ours.’

A gentle tap at the door and the footman entered. Mr Levingrou indicated his visitor with a wave of his hand.

‘Show this gentleman to the door.’

If he expected an outburst he was pleasantly disappointed. Leon looked from one man to the other, that mocking smile of his still playing about the corners of his sensitive mouth then, without a word, turned, and the door closed on him.

‘You heard—you heard?’ Heinrich’s voice was quivering with terror, his face the colour of dirty chalk. ‘Herr Gott! you don’t understand, Jules! I know of these men. A friend of mine…’

He told a story that would have impressed most men; but Levingrou smiled.

‘You are scared, my poor friend. You have not my experience of threats. Let him prove what he can and go to the police.’

‘You fool!’ Heinrich almost howled the words. ‘The police! Do I not tell you they want no proof? They punished—’

‘Hush!’ growled Jules.

He had heard the girl’s step in the hall. She was going to the theatre, she said—her explanation stopped short at the sight of Heinrich’s white face.

‘Daddy,’ she said reproachfully, ‘you’ve been quarrelling with Uncle Heinrich.’

She stooped and kissed the forehead of her father and pulled his ear gently. The stout man imprisoned her in both his arms and chuckled.

‘No quarrel, my darling. Heinrich is scared of a business deal. You wouldn’t imagine he could be such a baby.’

A minute later she stood in front of the fireplace, using a lipstick skilfully. She paused in the operation to tell him an item of news.

‘I met such a nice man today, Daddy, at Lady Athery’s, a Mr Gordon—do you know him?’

‘I know many Mr Gordons,’ smiled Jules. And then, in sudden alarm: ‘He didn’t make love to you, did he?’

She laughed at this.

‘My dear, he’s almost as old as you. And he’s a great artist and very amusing.’

Jules walked with her to the door and saw her go down the steps, cross the little flagged garden, and stood there until her Rolls had passed out of sight. Then he came back to his pretty saloon to argue out this matter of the Four Just Men.

It was a gay party of young people about her own age that Valerie joined. The box was crowded, and was hot and thick, for the theatre was one where smoking was allowed. She was relieved when an attendant tapped her on the shoulder and beckoned her out.

‘A gentleman to see you, miss.’

‘To see me?’ she said in wonder, and came into the vestibule to find a handsome, middle–aged man in evening dress.

‘Mr Gordon!’ she exclaimed. ‘I had no idea you were here!’

He seemed unusually grave.

‘I have some rather bad news for you, Miss Levingrou,’ he said, and she went pale.

‘Not about Father?’

‘In a sense it is. I am afraid that he is in rather bad trouble.’

She frowned at this.

‘Trouble? What kind of trouble?’

‘I can’t explain here. Will you come with me to the police station?’

She stared at him incredulously, her mouth open.

‘The police station?’

Gordon summoned a waiting attendant.

‘Get Miss Levingrou’s coat from the box,’ he said authoritatively.

A few minutes later they passed out of the theatre together and into a waiting car.

Twelve o’clock was striking when Mr Levingrou rose from his chair stiffly and stretched himself. Heinrich had been gone nearly three hours. He had, indeed, left the house in time to catch the last train for the Continent, whither he fled without even packing so much as a pocket–handkerchief. Unaware of this desertion, Mr Levingrou was on the point of mounting the stairs to bed when a thundering rat–tat shook the house. He turned to the footman.

‘See who that is,’ he growled, and waited curiously.

When the door was opened he saw the stocky figure of a police inspector.

‘Levingrou?’ asked the visitor.

Mr Levingrou came forward.

‘That is my name,’ he said.

The inspector strolled into the hall.

‘I want you to come with me to the police station.’ His manner was brusque, indeed rude, and Levingrou felt for the first time in his life a qualm of fear.

‘The police station? Why?’

‘I’ll explain that to you when you get there.

‘But this is monstrous!’ exploded the stout man. I will telephone to my lawyers—’

‘Are you going quietly?’

There was such a threat in the tone that Jules became instantly tractable.

‘Very good, inspector, I will come. I think you have made a very great mistake and…’

He was hustled out of the hall, down the steps and into the waiting car.

It was not an ordinary taxi. The blinds were pulled down. Moreover, he discovered as soon as he entered the interior that it was well occupied. Two men sat on seats facing him, the inspector took his place by the prisoner’s side.

He could not see where the car was going. Five minutes, ten minutes passed…there should be a police station somewhere nearer than that. He put a question.

‘I can relieve your mind,’ said a calm voice. ‘You’re not going to a police station.’

‘Then where am I being taken?’

‘That you will discover,’ was the unsatisfactory answer.

Nearly an hour passed before the car drew up before a dark house and the authoritative ‘inspector’ ordered him curtly to alight. The house had the appearance of being untenanted; the hall was littered with refuse and dust. They led him down a flight of stone stairs to the cellar, unlocked a steel door and pushed him inside.

He had hardly entered before an electric light in the wall glowed dimly, and he saw that he was in what looked to be a concrete chamber, furnished with a bed. At the farther end was a small open doorway, innocent of door, which he was informed led to a washing place. But the revelation which came to Mr Levingrou, and which struck terror to his soul, was the fact that the two men who had brought him were heavily masked—the inspector had disappeared and, try as he did, Jules could not remember what he looked like.

‘You will stay here and keep quiet, and you need not be afraid that anybody will be alarmed by your disappearance.’

‘But…my daughter!’ stammered Levingrou in terror.

‘Your daughter? Your daughter leaves for the Argentine with a Mr Gordon tomorrow morning—as other men’s daughters have left.’

Levingrou stared, took one step forward and fell fainting to the floor.

Sixteen days passed; sixteen days of unadulterated hell for the shrieking, half–demented man who paced the length of his cell for hours on end till, exhausted, he dropped almost lifeless on his bed. And every morning came a masked man to tell him of plans that had been made, to describe in detail the establishment in Antofagasta which was to be the destination of Valerie Levingrou; of a certain piestro…they showed him his photograph…who was the master of that hell broth.

'You devils! You devils!' shrieked Levingrou, striking wildly out, but the other caught him and flung him back on the bed.

'You mustn't blame Gordon,' he mocked. 'He has his living to earn…he is merely the agent of the man who owns the cabaret.'

Then one morning, the eighteenth, they came and told him, three masked men, that Valerie had arrived and was being initiated into her duties as a dancing girl….

Jules Levingrou spent the night shivering in a corner of his cell. They came to him at three in the morning and pricked him with a hypodermic needle. When he woke, he thought he was dreaming, for he was sitting in his own saloon, where these masked men had carried him in the dead of night.

A footman came in, and dropped the tray at the sight of him.

'Good God, sir!' he gasped. 'Where did you come from?'

Levingrou could not speak: he could only shake his head.

'We thought you was in Germany, sir.'

And then, clearing his dry throat, Jules asked harshly:

'Is there any news…Miss Valerie…?'

'Miss Valerie, sir?' The footman was astonished. 'Why, yes sir, she's upstairs asleep. She was a bit worried the night she came back and found you weren't here, and then of course she got your letter saying you'd been called abroad.'

The footman was staring at him, an uncomfortable wonder in his gaze. Something peculiar had happened. Jules rose unsteadily to his feet and caught a glance of his face in the mirror. His hair and his beard were white.

He staggered rather than walked to his writing–table, jerked open a drawer and took out an overseas cable form. 'Ring for a messenger.' His voice was

hoarse and quavering. ‘I want to send fourteen cablegrams to South America.’

8. The Share Pusher

THE MAN WHOM Raymond Poiccart ushered into the presence of Manfred was to all appearances a smart, military looking gentleman approaching the sixties. He was faultlessly dressed and had the carriage and presence of a soldier. A retired general, thought Manfred; but he saw something more than the outward personation of manner revealed. This man was broken. There was a certain imponderable expression in his face, a tense anguish which this, the shrewdest of the Three Just Men, instantly interpreted.

‘My name is Pole—Major–General Sir Charles Pole,’ said the visitor, as Poiccart placed a chair for him and discreetly withdrew.

‘And you have come to see me about Mr Bonsor True,’ said Manfred instantly, and when the other started nervously he laughed. ‘No, I am not being very clever,’ said Manfred gently. ‘So many people have seen me about Mr Bonsor True. And I think I can anticipate your story. You have been investing in one of his oil concerns and you have lost a considerable sum of money. Was it oil?’

‘Tin,’ said the other. ‘Inter–Nigerian Tin. You have heard about my misfortune?’

Manfred shook his head.

‘I have heard about the misfortunes of so many people who have trusted Mr True. How much have you lost?’

The old man drew a long breath.

‘Twenty–five thousand pounds,’ he said, ‘every penny I possess. I have consulted the police, but they say there is nothing they can do. The tin mine actually existed, and no misrepresentation was made by True in any letter he sent to me.’

Manfred nodded.

Yours is a typical case, General,’ he said. ‘True never brings himself within the reach of the law. All his misrepresentations are made over a luncheon table, when there is no other witness, and I presume that in his letters to you

he pointed out the speculative nature of your investment and warned you that you were not putting your money into gilt–edged securities.'

'It was at dinner,' said the General. 'I had some doubt on the matter and he asked me to dine with him at the Walkley Hotel. He told me that immense quantities of tin were in sight, and that while he could not, in justice to his partners, broadcast the exact amount of profit the company would make, he assured me that my money would be doubled in six months. I wouldn't mind so much,' the old man went on, as he raised his trembling hand to his lips, 'but, Mr Manfred, I have a daughter, a brilliant young girl who has, in my opinion, a wonderful future. If she had been a man she would have been a strategist. I hoped to have left her amply provided for, but this means ruin —ruin! Can nothing be done to bring this criminal to justice?'

Manfred did not reply immediately.

'I wonder if you realize. General, that you are the twelfth person who has come to us in the past three months. Mr True is so well protected by the law and by his letters that it is almost impossible to catch him. There was a time'—he smiled faintly—'when my friends and I would have taken the most dramatic steps to deal with the gentleman, and I think our method would have been effective; but now'—he shrugged his shoulders—'we are a little restricted. Who introduced you to this gentleman?'

'Mrs Calford Creen. I met the lady at a dinner of a mutual friend, and she asked me to dine with her at her flat in Hanover Mansions.'

Manfred nodded again. He was not at all surprised by this intelligence.

'I am afraid I can promise you very little,' he said. 'The only thing I would ask is that you should keep in touch with me. Where are you living?'

His visitor was at the moment living in a little house near Truro. Manfred noted the address, and a few minutes later was standing by the window watching the weary old man walking slowly down Curzon Street.

Poiccart came in.

'I know nothing of this gentleman's business,' he said, 'but I have a feeling that it concerns our friend True. George, we ought to be able to catch that man. Leon was saying at breakfast this morning that there is a deep pond in the New Forest, where a man suitably anchored by chains and weights

might lie without discovery for a hundred years. Personally, I am never in favour of drowning—'

George Manfred laughed.

''Ware the law, my good friend,' he said. 'There will be no killing, though a man who has systematically robbed the new poor deserves something with boiling lead in it.'

Nor could Leon Gonsalez offer any solution when he was consulted that afternoon.

'The curious thing is that True has no monies in this country. He runs two bank accounts and is generally overdrawn on both. I should not be surprised if he had a cache somewhere, in which case the matter would be simple—I've been watching him for the greater part of a year, and he never goes abroad, and I have searched his modest Westminster flat so often that I could go blindfolded to the place where he keeps his dress ties.'

All this had occurred in the previous year and no further complaints came about this fraudulent share pusher. The Three were no nearer to a solution of their problem when came the rather remarkable disappearance of Margaret Lein.

Margaret Lein was not a very important person: she was by all social standards as unimportant a person as one would be likely to meet in a stroll through the West End of London. She occupied the position of maid to the Hon Mrs Calford Creen, and she had gone out one evening to the chemist to buy a bottle of smelling salts for her mistress, and had never come back.

She was pretty; her age was nineteen; she had no friends in London, being —so she said—an orphan; and, so far as was known, she had no attachments in the accepted sense of the word. But, as the police pointed out, it was extremely unlikely that a rather pretty maid, well spoken and with charming manners, in addition to her physical perfections, could spend a year in London without having acquired something in the shape of a 'follower.'

Mrs Calford Creen, not satisfied with the police inquiries, had called the Three Just Men to her aid. It was a week after the disappearance of Margaret Lein that a well–known lawyer crossed the polished dancing floor

of the Leiter Club to greet the man who sat aloof and alone at a very small table near the floor's edge.

'Why, Mr Gonsalez!' he beamed. 'This is the last place in the world I should have expected to find you! In Limehouse, yes, prowling in the haunts of the underworld, yes, but at Letter's Club…Really, I have mistaken your character.'

Leon smiled faintly, poured a little more Rhine wine into his long–stemmed glass and sipped it.

'My dear Mr Thurles,' he drawled, 'this is my underworld. That fat gentleman puffing gallantly with that stout lady is Bill Sikes. It is true he does not break into houses nor carry a life–preserver, but he sells dud shares to thrifty and gullible widows, and has grown fat on the proceeds. Some day I shall take that gentleman and break his heart.'

The red–faced Thurles chuckled as he sat down by the other's side.

'That will be difficult. Mr Bonsor True is too rich a man to pull down, however much a blackguard he may be.'

Leon fixed a cigarette in a long amber tube and seemed wholly absorbed in the operation, which he performed with great care.

'Perhaps I oughtn't to have made that horrific threat,' he said. 'True is a friend of your client's, isn't he?'

'Mrs Creen?' Thurles was genuinely surprised. 'I wasn't aware of the fact.'

'I must have been mistaken,' said Leon, and changed the subject.

He knew right well that he was not mistaken. That stout share plugger had been the tete–a–tete guest of Mrs Creen on the night Margaret Lein had disappeared from human ken; and the curious circumstance was that neither to the police nor to the Triangle had Mrs Creen mentioned this interesting fact.

She lived in a modest flat near Hanover Court: a rather pretty, hard–faced young widow, whose source of income was believed to be a legacy left by her late husband. Leon, a very inquisitive man, had made the most careful inquiries without discovering either that she had had a husband or that he had died. All he knew of her was that she took frequent trips abroad, sometimes to out–of–the–way places like Roumania; that she was

invariably accompanied by the missing Margaret; that she spent money, not freely but lavishly, gave magnificent entertainments in Paris, Rome, and once in Brussels, and seemed quite content to return from a life which must have cost her at least seven hundred and fifty pounds a week to the modest establishment near Hanover Court where her rent was seven hundred and fifty pounds per annum and her household bills did not exceed twenty pounds a week.

Leon watched the dancing for a little longer, beckoned a waiter and paid his bill. The lawyer had gone back to his party. He saw Mr Bonsor True, the centre of a gay table, and smiled to himself, and wondered whether the share plugger would be as cheerful if he knew that in the right hand inside pocket of Leon Gonsalez' coat was a copy of a marriage certificate that he had dug out that morning.

It had been an inspiration that had led Leon Gonsalez to Somerset House.

He glanced at his watch: late as the hour was, there was still a hope of finding Mrs Creen. His car was waiting in the park in Wellington Place, and ten minutes later he had stopped before the doors of Hanover Mansions. A lift carried him to the third floor. He pressed the bell of No 109. A light showed in the fanlight, and it was Mrs Creen herself who opened the door to him. Evidently she expected somebody else, for she was momentarily taken back.

'Oh, Mr Gonsalez!' And then, quickly: 'Have you had news of Margaret?'

'I am not quite sure whether I have or not,' said Leon. 'May I see you for a few minutes?'

Something in his tone must have warned her.

'It's rather late, isn't it?'

'It will save me a journey in the morning,' he almost pleaded and with some reluctance she admitted him.

It was not the first visit he had paid to her flat, and he had duly noted that, although her method of living was fairly humble, the flat itself was furnished regardless of expense.

She offered him a whisky and soda, which he accepted but did not drink.

‘I want to ask you,’ he said, when she had settled down, ‘how long you have had Margaret in your employ?’

‘Over a year,’ she replied.

‘A nice girl?’

‘Very. But I told you about her. It has been a great shock to me.’

‘Would you call her accomplished? Did she speak any foreign languages?’

Mrs Creen nodded.

‘French and German perfectly—that was why she was such a treasure. She had been brought up with a family in Alsace, and was, I believe, half French.’

‘Why did you send her out to the chemist for smelling salts?’

The woman moved impatiently.

‘I have already told you, as I told the police, that I had a very bad headache, and Margaret herself suggested she should go to the chemist.’

‘For no other reason? Couldn’t Mr True have gone?’

She nearly jumped at this.

‘Mr True? I don’t know what you mean.’

‘True was with you that night; you had been dining tete–a–tete. In fact, you were dining as one would expect a husband and wife to dine.’

The woman went white, was momentarily bereft of speech.

‘I don’t know why you’re making such a mystery of your marriage, Mrs Creen, but I know that for five years past you have not only been married to True, but you have been his partner, in the sense that you have assisted him in his—er—financial operations. Now, Mrs True, I want you to put your cards on the table. When you went abroad you took this girl with you?’

She nodded dumbly.

‘What was your object in going to Paris, Rome and Brussels? Had you any other object than to enjoy yourself? Was there any business reason for your move?’

He saw her lick her dry lips, but she did not reply.

‘Let me put it more plainly. Have you in any of those cities a private safe at any of the banking corporations or safe deposits?’

She sprang to her feet, her mouth open in surprise.

‘Who told you?’ she asked quickly. ‘What business is that of yours, anyway?’

As she spoke, came the gentle tinkle of a bell, and she half turned.

‘Let me open it for you,’ said Leon, and before she could move he was down the passage and had flung open the door.

An astonished financier was standing on the doormat. At the sight of Leon he gaped.

‘Come inside, Mr True,’ said Leon gently. ‘I think I have some interesting news for you.’

‘Who—who are you?’ stammered the older man, peering at the visitor, and then of a sudden he recognized him. ‘My God! One of the Four Just Men, eh? Well, have you found that girl?’

He realized at that moment that the question in itself was a blunder. He was not supposed to be interested in the missing maid.

‘I haven’t found her, and I think she’s going to be rather difficult for any of us to find,’ said Leon.

By this time Mrs Creen had recovered her self–possession.

‘I’m awfully glad you came, Mr True. This gentleman has been making the most extraordinary statements about us. He is under the impression we are married. Did you ever hear anything so ridiculous?’

Leon did not attempt to refute the absurdity of his suggestion until they were back in the little drawing–room.

‘Now, sir,’ said Mr Bonsor True, his pompous self, ‘whatever do you mean by making—’

Leon cut him short.

‘I will tell you briefly what I have already told your wife,’ he said; ‘and as to your marriage, that is so indisputable a fact that I will not attempt to show you the marriage certificate which is in my pocket. I’m not here to reproach you, True, or this lady. The question of your treatment of the

unfortunate people who have invested money with you is a matter for your own conscience. What I do wish to know is, whether it is a fact that in certain continental cities you have safes or deposits where you keep your wealth?'

The significance of the question was not lost upon the stout Mr True.

'There are certain deposits of mine on the Continent,' he said, 'but I don't quite understand—'

'Will you be perfectly frank with me, Mr True?' There was a hint of impatience in Leon's tone. 'Are there in Paris, Rome or Brussels safes of yours, and are you in the habit of carrying the keys of those safes?'

Mr Bonsor True smiled.

'No, sir; I have places of deposit, and they are in fact safes. But they have combinations—'

'Ah ha!' Leon's face lit. 'And do you by any chance carry the combination words in your pocket?'

For a second True hesitated, and then he took from his waistcoat pocket, fastened to a platinum chain, a small golden book about the size of a postage stamp.

'Yes, I carry them here—and why on earth I should be discussing my private business—'

'That's all I wanted to know.'

He stared at the visitor. Leon was laughing softly but heartily, rubbing his hands as at the best joke in the world.

'Now I think I understand,' he said. 'I also know why you sent Miss Margaret Lein to the chemist to get a little smelling salts. It was you they were for!'—his accusing finger pointed at the financier.

True's jaw dropped.

'That's true: I was taken suddenly ill.'

'Mr True fainted,' Mrs. Creen broke in. 'I sent Margaret up to my room to get some smelling salts, but they weren't there. It was she who volunteered to buy them from the chemist.'

Leon wiped his eyes.

‘That’s a great joke,’ he said; ‘and now I can reconstruct the whole story. What time did you call on Mrs Creen that evening?’

True thought.

‘About seven.’

‘Are you in the habit of drinking cocktails, and are they usually waiting for you in the dining–room?’

‘In the drawing–room,’ corrected Mrs Creen.

‘You took a cocktail,’ Leon went on, ‘and then you suddenly went out. In other words, somebody had doctored your drink with a knock–out drop. Mrs Creen was not, of course, in the room. When you fell, Margaret Lein examined your book and got the combination words she wanted. She had been abroad with Mrs Creen, so she knew this playful little method of yours of caching your ill–gotten gains.’

True’s face went from livid red to ashy white.

‘The combination word?’ he said huskily. ‘She got the combination word? Oh, my God!’

Without another word he flew from the room and they heard the front door thunder as he slammed it.

Leon went at greater leisure, but he arrived, in Curzon Street in time for supper.

‘I’m not going to investigate any further,’ he said, ‘but it’s any odds that those safes in Paris and Rome are empty by now, and that a very clever girl, who is certainly the daughter of one of Mr True’s deluded clients, is now in a position to help her parents.’

‘How do you know that she has parents?’ asked Manfred.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Leon frankly. ‘But I am certain she had a father—I wired to General Pole last week to discover if his clever daughter was staying with him, and he wired back that ‘Margaret had been abroad finishing her education for the past year. And I suppose that acting as maid to the partner of a share crook is an education.’

9. The Man Who Sang in Church

To LEON GONSALEZ went most of the cases of blackmail which came the way of the Three Just Men.

And yet, from the views he had so consistently expressed, he was the last man in the world to whom such problems should have gone, for in that famous article of his entitled ‘Justification,’ which put up the sales of a quarterly magazine by some thousand per cent, he offered the following opinion:

‘…as to blackmail, I see no adequate punishment but death in the case of habitual offenders. You cannot parley with the type of criminal who specialises in this loathsome form of livelihood. Obviously there can be no side of him to which appeal can be made: no system of reformation can effect him. He is dehumanised, and may be classified with the secret poisoner, the drug pusher and…’

He mentioned a trade as degrading.

Leon found less drastic means of dealing with these pests; yet we may suppose that the more violent means which distinguished the case of Miss Brown and the man who sang in church had his heartiest approval.

There are so many types of beauty that even Leon Gonsalez, who had a passion for classification, gave up at the eighteenth sub–division of the thirty–third category of brunettes. By which time he had filled two large quarto notebooks.

If he had not wearied of his task before he met Miss Brown, he would assuredly have recognized its hopelessness, for she fell into no category, nor had he her peculiar attractions catalogued in any of his sub–sections. She was dark and slim and elegant. Leon hated the word, but he was compelled to admit this characteristic. The impression she left was one of delicate fragrance. Leon called her the Lavender Girl. She called herself Brown, which was obviously not her name; also, in the matter of simulations, she wore a closely–fitting hat which came down over her eyes and would make subsequent identification extremely difficult.

She timed her visit for the half–light of dusk—the cigarette hour that follows a good dinner, when men are inclined rather to think than to talk, and to doze than either.

Others had come at this hour to the little house in Curzon Street, where the silver triangle on the door marked the habitation of the Three Just Men, and when the bell rang George Manfred looked up at the clock.

‘See who it is, Raymond: and before you go, I will tell you. It is a young lady in black, rather graceful of carriage, very nervous and in bad trouble.’

Leon grinned as Poiccart rose heavily from his chair and went out.

‘Clairvoyance rather than deduction,’ he said, ‘and observation rather than either: from where you sit you can see the street. Why mystify our dear friend?’

George Manfred sent a ring of smoke to the ceiling. ‘He is not mystified,’ he said lazily. ‘He has seen her also. If you hadn’t been so absorbed in your newspaper you would have seen her, too. She has passed up and down the street three times on the other side. And on each occasion she has glanced toward this door. She is rather typical, and I have been wondering exactly what variety of blackmail has been practised on her.’

Here Raymond Poiccart came back.

‘She wishes to see one of you,’ he said. ‘Her name is Miss Brown—but she doesn’t look like a Miss Brown!’

Manfred nodded to Leon. ‘It had better be you,’ he said.

Gonsalez went to the little front drawing–room, and found the girl standing with her back to the window, her face in shadow. ‘I would rather you didn’t put on the light, please,’ she said, in a calm, steady voice. ‘I don’t want to be recognized if you meet me again.’

Leon smiled.

I had no intention of touching the switch,’ he said. ‘You see, Miss—’ He waited expectantly.

‘Brown,’ she replied, so definitely that he would have known she desired anonymity even if she had not made her request in regard to the light. ‘I told your friend my name.’

‘You see, Miss Brown,’ he went on, ‘we have quite a number of callers who are particularly anxious not to be recognized when we meet them again. Will you sit down? I know that you have not much time, and that you are anxious to catch a train out of town.’

She was puzzled.

‘How did you know that?’ she asked.

Leon made one of his superb gestures.

‘Otherwise you would have waited until it was quite dark before you made your appointment. You have, in point of fact, left it just as late as you could.’

She pulled a chair to the table and sat down slowly, turning her back to the window.

‘Of course that is so,’ she nodded. ‘Yes, I have to leave in time, and I have cut it fine. Are you Mr Manfred?’

‘Gonsalez,’ he corrected her.

‘I want your advice,’ she said.

She spoke in an even, unemotional voice, her hands lightly clasped before her on the table. Even in the dark, and unfavourably placed as she was for observation, he could see that she was beautiful. He guessed from the maturity of her voice that she was in the region of twenty–four.

‘I am being blackmailed. I suppose you will tell me I should go to the police, but I am afraid the police would be of no assistance, even if I were willing to risk an appearance in Court, which I am not. My father’—she hesitated—’is a Government official. It would break his heart if he knew. What a fool I’ve been!’

‘Letters?’ asked Leon, sympathetically.

‘Letters and other things,’ she said. ‘About six years ago I was a medical student at St John’s Hospital. I didn’t take my final exam for reasons which you will understand. My surgical knowledge has not been of very much use to me, except…well, I once saved a man’s life, though I doubt if it was worth saving. He seems to think it was, but that has nothing to do with the case. When I was at St John’s I got to know a fellow–student, a man whose name will not interest you and, as girls of my age sometimes do, I fell

desperately in love with him. I didn't know that he was married, although he told me this before our friendship reached a climax.

'For all that followed I was to blame. There were the usual letters—'

'And these are the basis of the blackmail?' asked Leon.

She nodded. 'I was worried ill about the…affair. I gave up my work and returned home; but that doesn't interest you, either.'

'Who is blackmailing you?' asked Leon.

She hesitated. 'The man. It's horrible isn't it? But he has gone down and down. I have money of my own—my mother left me two thousand pounds a year—and of course I've paid.'

'When did you see this man last?'

She was thinking of something else, and she did not answer him. As he repeated the question, she looked up quickly.

'Last Christmas Day—only for a moment. He wasn't staying with us—I mean it was at the end of…'

She had become suddenly panic–stricken, confused, and was almost breathless as she went on:

'I saw him by accident. Of course he didn't see me, but it was a great shock…It was his voice. He always had a wonderful tenor voice.'

'He was singing?' suggested Leon, when she paused, as he guessed, in an effort to recover her self–possession.

'Yes, in church,' she said desperately. 'That is where I saw him.'

She went on speaking with great rapidity, as though she were anxious not only to dismiss from her mind that chance encounter, but to make Leon also forget.

'It was two months after this that he wrote to me—he wrote to our old address in London. He said he was in desperate need of money, and wanted five hundred pounds. I'd already given him more than one thousand pounds, but I was sane enough to write and tell him I intended to do no more. It was then that he horrified me by sending a photograph of the letter —one of the letters—I had sent him. Mr Gonsalez, I have met another man, and…well, John had read the news of my engagement.'

‘Your fiance knows nothing about this earlier affair?’

She shook her head.

‘No, nothing, and he mustn’t know. Otherwise everything would be simple. Do you imagine I would allow myself to be blackmailed any further but for that?’

Leon took a slip of paper from one pocket and a pencil from another.

‘Will you tell me the name of this man? John—?’

‘John Letheritt, 27, Lion Row, Whitechurch Street. It’s a little room that he has rented, as an office, and a sleeping–place. I’ve already had inquiries made.’

Leon waited.

‘What is the crisis—why have you come now?’ he asked.

She took from her bag a letter, and he noted that it was in a clean envelope; evidently she had no intention that her real name and address should be known.

He read it, and found it a typical communication. The letter demanded £3,000 by the third of the month, failing which the writer intended putting ‘papers’ in ‘certain hands.’ There was just that little touch of melodrama which for some curious reason the average blackmailer adopts in his communiques.

‘I’ll see what I can do—how am I to get in touch with you?’ asked Leon. ‘I presume that you don’t wish that either your real name or your address should be known even to me.’

She did not answer until she had taken from her bag a number of banknotes, which she laid on the table.

Leon smiled. ‘I think we’ll discuss the question of payment when we have succeeded. What is it you want me to do?’

‘I want you to get the letters and, if it is possible, I want you so to frighten this man that he won’t trouble me again. As to the money, I shall feel so much happier if you will let me pay you now!’

‘It is against the rules of the firm!’ said Leon cheerfully.

She gave him a street and a number which he guessed was an accommodation address.

‘Please don’t see me to the door,’ she said, with a half–glance at the watch on her wrist.

He waited till the door closed behind her, and then went upstairs to his companions.

‘I know so much about this lady that I could write a monograph on the subject,’ he said.

‘Tell us a little,’ suggested Manfred. But Leon shook his head.

That evening he called at Whitechurch Street. Lion Row was a tiny, miserable thoroughfare, more like an alley than anything, and hardly deserved its grand designation. In one of those ancient houses which must have seen the decline of Alsatia, at the top of three rickety flights of stairs, he found a door, on which had been recently painted: ‘J. LETHERITT, EXPORTER.’

His knock produced no response.

He knocked again more heavily, and heard the creaking of a bed, and a harsh voice on the other side asking who was there. It took some time before he could persuade the man to open the door, and then Leon found himself in a very long, narrow room, lighted by a shadeless electric table–lamp. The furniture consisted of a bed, an old washstand and a dingy desk piled high with unopened circulars.

He guessed the man who confronted him, dressed in a soiled shirt and trousers, to be somewhere in the region of thirty–five; he certainly looked older. His face was unshaven and there was in the room an acrid stink of opium.

‘What do you want?’ growled John Letheritt, glaring suspiciously at the visitor.

With one glance Leon had taken in the man—a weakling, he guessed—one who had found and would always take the easiest way. The little pipe on the table by the bed was a direction post not to be mistaken.

Before he could answer, Letheritt went on: ‘If you have come for letters you won’t find them here, my friend.’ He shook a trembling hand in Leon’s

face. ‘You can go back to dear Gwenda and tell her that you are no more successful than the last gentleman she sent!’

‘A blackmailer, eh? You are the dirtiest little blackmailer I ever met,’ mused Leon. ‘I suppose you know the young lady intends to prosecute you?’

‘Let her prosecute. Let her get a warrant and have me pinched! It won’t be the first time I’ve been inside! Maybe she can get a search warrant, then she’ll be able to have her letters read in Court. I’m saving you a lot of trouble. I’ll save Gwenda trouble, too! Engaged, eh? You’re not the prospective bridegroom?’ he sneered.

‘If I were, I should be wringing your neck,’ said Leon calmly. ‘If you are a wise man—’

‘I’m not wise,’ snarled the other. ‘Do you think I’d be living in this pigsty if I were? Me…a man with a medical degree?’

Then, with a sudden rage, he pushed his visitor towards the door.

‘Get out and stay out!’

Leon was so surprised by this onslaught that he was listening to the door being locked and bolted against him before he had realized what had happened.

From the man’s manner, he was certain that the letters were in that room—there were a dozen places where they might be hidden: he could have overcome the degenerate with the greatest ease, bound him to the bed and searched the room, but in these days the Three Just Men were very law–abiding people.

Instead he came back to his friends late that night with the story of his partial failure.

‘If he left the house occasionally, it would be easy—but he never goes out. I even think that Raymond and I could, without the slightest trouble, make a very thorough search of the place. Letheritt has a bottle of milk left every morning, and it shouldn’t be difficult to put him to sleep if we reached the house a little after the milkman.’

Manfred shook his head.

‘You’ll have to find another way; it’s hardly worth while antagonizing the police,’ he said.

‘Which is putting it mildly,’ murmured Poiccart. ‘Who’s the lady?’

Leon repeated almost word for word the conversation he had had with Miss Brown.

‘There are certain remarkable facts in her statement, and I am pretty sure they were facts, and that she was not trying to deceive me,’ he said. ‘Curious item Number One is that the lady heard this man singing in church last Christmas Day. Is Mr Letheritt the kind of person one would expect to hear exercising his vocal organs on Christmas carols? My brief acquaintance with him leads me to suppose that he isn’t. Curious item Number Two was the words: “He wasn’t staying with us,” or something of that sort; and he was “nearing the end”—of what? Those three items are really remarkable!’

‘Not particularly remarkable to me,’ growled Poiccart. ‘He was obviously a member of a house–party somewhere, and she didn’t know he was staying in the neighbourhood, until she saw him in church. It was near the end of his visit.’

Leon shook his head.

‘Letheritt has been falling for years. He hasn’t reached his present state since Christmas; therefore he must have been as bad—or nearly as bad—nine months ago. I really have taken a violent dislike to him, and I must get those letters.’

Manfred looked at him thoughtfully.

‘They would hardly be at his bankers, because he wouldn’t have a banker; or at his lawyers, because I should imagine that he is the kind of person whose acquaintance with law begins and ends in the Criminal Courts. I think you are right, Leon; the papers are in his room.’

Leon lost no time. Early the next morning he was in Whitechurch Street, and watched the milkman ascend to the garret where Letheritt had his foul habitation. He waited till the milkman had come out and disappeared but, sharp as he was, he was hardly quick enough. By the time he had reached the top floor, the milk had been taken in, and the little phial of colourless fluid which might have acted as a preservative to the milk was unused.

The next morning he tried again, and again he failed.

On the fourth night, between the hours of one and two, he managed to gain an entry into the house, and crept noiselessly up the stairs. The door was locked from the inside, but he could reach the end of the key with a pair of narrow pliers he carried.

There was no sound from within, when he snapped back the lock and turned the handle softly. He had forgotten the bolts.

The next day he came again, and surveyed the house from the outside. It was possible to reach the window of the room, but he would need a very long ladder, and after a brief consultation with Manfred, he decided against the method.

Manfred made a suggestion.

'Why not send him a wire, asking him to meet your Miss Brown at Liverpool Street Station? You know her Christian name?'

Leon sighed wearily.

'I tried that on the second day, my dear chap, and had little Lew Leveson on hand to "whizz" him the moment he came into the street in case he was carrying the letters on him.'

'By "whizz" you mean to pick his pocket? I can't keep track of modern thief slang,' said Manfred. 'In the days when I was actively interested, we used to call it "dip".'

'You are out of date, George; "whizz" is the word. But of course the beggar didn't come out. If he owed rent I could get the brokers put in; but he does not owe rent. He is breaking no laws, and is living a fairly blameless life—except, of course, one could catch him for being in possession of opium. But that wouldn't be much use, because the police are rather chary of allowing us to work with them.' He shook his head. 'I'm afraid I shall have to give Miss Brown a very bad report.'

It was not until a few days later that he actually wrote to the agreed address, having first discovered that it was, as he suspected, a small stationer's shop where letters could be called for.

A week later Superintendent Meadows, who was friendly with the Three, came down to consult Manfred on a matter of a forged Spanish passport, and since Manfred was an authority on passport forgeries and had a fund of

stories about Spanish criminals, it was long after midnight when the conference broke up.

Leon, who needed exercise, walked to Regent Street with Meadows, and the conversation turned to Mr John Letheritt.

‘Oh, yes, I know him well. I took him two years ago on a false pretence charge, and got him eighteen months at the London Assizes. A real bad egg, that fellow, and a bit of a squeaker, too. He’s the man who put away Joe Benthall, the cleverest cat burglar we’ve had for a generation. Joe got ten years, and I shouldn’t like to be this fellow when he comes out!’

Suddenly Leon asked a question about Letheritt’s imprisonment, and when the other had answered, his companion stood stock–still in the middle of the deserted Hanover Square and doubled up with silent laughter.

‘I don’t see the joke.’

‘But I do,’ chuckled Leon. ‘What a fool I’ve been! And I thought I understood the case!’

‘Do you want Letheritt for anything? I know where he lives,’ said Meadows.

Leon shook his head.

‘No, I don’t want him: but I should very much like to have ten minutes in his room!’

Meadows looked serious.

‘He’s blackmailing, eh? I wondered where he was getting his money from.’

But Leon did not enlighten him. He went back to Curzon Street and began searching certain works of reference, and followed this by an inspection of a large scale map of the Home Counties. He was the last to go to bed, and the first to waken, for he slept in the front of the house and heard the knocking at the door.

It was raining heavily as he pulled up the window and looked out; and in the dim light of dawn he thought he recognized Superintendent Meadows. A second later he was sure of his visitor’s identity.

‘Will you come down? I want to see you.’

Gonsalez slipped into his dressing–gown, ran downstairs and opened the door to the Superintendent.

‘You remember we were talking about Letheritt last night?’ said Meadows as Leon ushered him into the little waiting–room.

The superintendent’s voice was distinctly unfriendly, and he was eyeing Leon keenly.

‘Yes—I remember.’

‘You didn’t by any chance go out again last night?’

‘No. Why?’

Again that look of suspicion.

‘Only Letheritt was murdered at half past one this morning, and his room ransacked.’

Leon stared at him.

‘Murdered? Have you got the murderer?’ he asked at last.

‘No, but we shall get him all right. He was seen coming down the rainpipe by a City policeman. Evidently he had got into Letheritt’s room through the window, and it was this discovery by the constable which led to a search of the house. The City Police had to break in the door, and they found Letheritt dead on the bed. He had evidently been hit on the head with a jemmy, and ordinarily that injury would not have killed him, according to the police doctor; but in his state of health it was quite enough to put him out. A policeman went round the house to intercept the burglar, but somehow he must have escaped into one of the little alleys that abound in this part of the city, and he was next seen by a constable in Fleet Street, driving a small car, the number–plate of which had been covered with mud.’

‘Was the man recognized?’

‘He hasn’t been—yet. What he did was to leave three fingerprints on the window, and as he was obviously an old hand at the game, that is as good as a direct identification. The City Detective Force called us in, but we haven’t been able to help them except to give them particulars of Letheritt’s past life. Incidentally, I supplied them with a copy of your fingerprints. I hope you don’t mind.’

Leon grinned.

‘Delighted!’ he said.

After the officer had left, Leon went upstairs to give the news to his two friends.

But the most startling intelligence was to come when they were sitting at breakfast. Meadows arrived. They saw his car draw up and Poiccart went out to open the door to him. He strode into the little room, his eyes bulging with excitement.

‘Here’s a mystery which even you fellows will never be able to solve,’ he said. ‘Do you know that this is a day of great tragedy for Scotland Yard and for the identification system? It means the destruction of a method that has been laboriously built up…’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Manfred quickly.

‘The fingerprint system,’ said Meadows, and Poiccart, to whom the fingerprint method was something God–like, gaped at him. ‘We’ve found a duplicate,’ said Meadows. ‘The prints on the glass were undoubtedly the prints of Joe Benthall—and Joe Benthall is in Wilford County Gaol serving the first part of a ten years’ sentence!’

Something made Manfred turn his head toward his friend. Leon’s eyes were blazing, his thin face wreathed in one joyous smile.

‘The man who sang in church!’ he said softly. ‘This is the prettiest case that I have ever dealt with. Now sit down, my dear Meadows, and eat! No, no: sit down. I want to hear about Benthall—is it possible for me to see him?’

Meadows stared at him.

‘What use would that be? I tell you this is the biggest blow we’ve ever had. And what is more, when we showed the City policeman a photograph of Benthall, he recognized him as the man he had seen coming down the rainpipe! I thought Benthall had escaped, and phoned the prison. But he’s there all right.’

‘Can I see Benthall?’

Meadows hesitated.

‘Yes—I think it could be managed. The Home Office is rather friendly with you, isn’t it?’

Friendly enough, apparently. By noon, Leon Gonsalez was on his way to Wilford Prison and, to his satisfaction, he went alone.

Wilford Gaol is one of the smaller convict establishments, and was brought into use to house long–time convicts of good character who were acquainted with the bookbinding and printing trade. There are several 'trade' prisons in England—Maidstone is the 'printing' prison, Shepton Mallet the 'dyeing' prison—where prisoners may exercise their trades.

The chief warder, whom Leon interviewed, told him that Wilford was to be closed soon, and its inmates transferred to Maidstone. He spoke regretfully of this change.

'We've got a good lot of men here—they give us no trouble, and they have an easy time. We've had no cases of indiscipline for years. We only have one officer on night–duty—that will give you an idea how quiet we are.'

'Who was the officer last night?' asked Leon, and the unexpectedness of the question took the chief warder by surprise.

'Mr Bennett,' he said, 'he's gone sick today by the way—a bilious attack. Curious thing you should ask the question: I've just been to see him. We had an inquiry about the man you've come to visit. Poor old Bennett is in bed with a terrible headache.'

'Can I see the Governor?' asked Leon.

The chief warder shook his head.

'He's gone to Dover with Miss Folian—his daughter. She's gone off to the Continent.'

'Miss Gwenda Folian?' and when the chief warder nodded: 'Is she the lady who was training to be a doctor?'

'She is a doctor,' said the other emphatically. 'Why, when Benthall nearly died from a heart attack, she saved his life—he works in the Governor's house, and I believe he'd cut off his right hand to serve the young lady. There's a lot of good in some of these fellows!'

They were standing in the main prison hall. Leon gazed along the grim vista of steel balconies and little doors.

'This is where the night–warder sits, I suppose?' he asked, as he laid his hand on the high desk near where they were standing: 'and the door leads

—?’

‘To the Governor’s quarters.’

‘And Miss Gwenda often slips through there with a cup of coffee and a sandwich for the night man, I suppose?’ he added carelessly.

The chief warder was evasive.

‘It would be against regulations if she did,’ he said. ‘Now you want to see Benthall?’

Leon shook his head.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said quietly.

Where could a blackguard like Letheritt be singing in church on Christmas Day?’ asked Leon when he was giving the intimate history of the case to his companions. ‘In only one place—a prison. Obviously our Miss Brown was in that prison: the Governor and his family invariably attend church. Letheritt was “not staying”—it was the end of his sentence, and he had been sent to Wilford for discharge. Poor Meadows! With all his faith in fingerprints gone astray because a released convict was true to his word and went out to get the letters that I missed, whilst the doped Mr Bennett slept at his desk and Miss Gwenda Folian took his place!’

10. The Lady From Brazil

THE JOURNEY had begun in a storm of rain and had continued in mist. There was a bumpiness over the land which was rather trying to airsick passengers. The pilot struck the Channel and dropped to less than two hundred feet.

Then came the steward with news that he bawled above the thunder of engines.

‘We’re landin’ at Lympne…thick fog in London…coaches will take you to London….’

Manfred leaned forward to the lady who was sitting on the other side of the narrow gangway.

‘Fortunate for you,’ he said, tuning his voice so that it reached no other ear.

The Honourable Mrs Peversey raised her glasses and surveyed him cold–bloodedly.

‘I beg your pardon?’

They made a perfect landing soon after, and as Manfred descended the steps leading from the Paris plane he offered his hand to assist the charming lady to alight.

‘You were saying—?’

The slim, pretty woman regarded him with cold and open–eyed insolence.

‘I was saying that it was rather fortunate for you that we landed here,’ said Manfred. ‘Your name is Kathleen Zieling, but you are known better as “Claro” May, and there are two detectives waiting for you in London to question you on the matter of a pearl necklace that was lost in London three months ago. I happen to understand French very well and I heard two gentlemen of the Surete discussing your future just before we left Le Bourget.’

The stare was no longer insolent, but it was not concerned. Apparently her scrutiny of the man who offered such alarming information satisfied her in the matter of his sincerity.

‘Thank you,’ she said easily, ‘but I am not at all worried. Fenniker and Edmonds are the two men. I’ll wire them to meet me at my hotel. You don’t look like a “bull” but I suppose you are?’

‘Not exactly,’ smiled Manfred.

She looked at him oddly.

‘You certainly look too honest for a copper. I’m OK, but thank you all the same.’

This was a dismissal, but Manfred stood his ground.

‘If you get into any kind of trouble I’d be glad if you’d call me up.’ He handed the woman a card, at which she did not even glance. ‘And if you wonder why I am interested, I only want to tell you that a year ago a very dear friend of mine would have been killed by the Fouret gang which caught him unprepared on Montmartre, only you very kindly helped him.’

Now, with a start of surprise, she read the card and, reading, changed colour.

‘Oh!’ she said awkwardly. ‘I didn’t know that you were one of that bunch—Four Just Men? You folks give me the creeps! Leon something—a dago name….’

‘Gonsalez,’ suggested Manfred, and she nodded.

That’s right!’

She was looking at him now with a new interest.

‘Honest there’s no trouble coming about the pearls. And as to your friend, he saved me. He wouldn’t have got into the gang fight, only he came out of the cabaret to help me.’

‘Where are you staying in London?’

She told him her address, and at that moment came a Customs officer to break the conversation. Manfred did not see her again—she was not in the closed coach that carried him to London.

In truth he had no great wish to meet her again. Curiosity and a desire to assist one who had given great help to Leon Gonsalez—it was the occasion of Leon’s spectacular unravelling of the Lyons forgeries—were behind his action.

Manfred neither sympathized with nor detested criminals. He knew May to be an international swindler on the grand scale, and was fairly well satisfied that she would be well looked after by the English police.

It was on the journey to London that he regretted that he had not asked her for information about Garry, though in all probability they had never met.

George Manfred, by common understanding the leading spirit of the Four Just Men, had in the course of his life removed three–and–twenty social excrescences from all human activities.

The war brought him and his companions a pardon for offences known and offences suspected. But in return the pardoning authorities had exacted from him a promise that he should keep the law in letter and in spirit, and this he had made, not only on his own behalf but on behalf of his companions. Only once did he express regret for having made this covenant, and that was when Garry Lexfield came under his observation.

Garry lived on the outer edge of the law. He was a man of thirty, tall, frank of face, rather good looking. Women found him fascinating, to their cost, for he was of the ruthless kind; quite nice people invited him to their homes —he even reached the board of a well–known West End Company.

Manfred's first encounter with Garry was over a stupidly insignificant matter. Mr Lexfield was engaged in an argument at the corner of Curzon Street, where he had his flat. Manfred, returning late, saw a man and a woman talking, the man violently, the woman a little timidly. He passed them, thinking that it was one of those quarrels in which wise men are not interested, and then he heard the sound of a blow and a faint scream. He turned to see the woman crouching by the area railings of the house. Quickly he came back.

'Did you hit that woman?' he asked.

'It's none of your dam' business—'

Manfred swung him from his feet and dropped him over the area railings. When he looked round the woman had vanished.

'I might have killed him,' said Manfred penitently, and the spectacle of a penitent Manfred was too much for Leon Gonsalez.

'But you didn't—what happened?'

‘When I saw him get up on his feet and knew nothing was broken I bolted,’ confessed Manfred. ‘I really must guard against these impulses. It must be my advancing years that has spoilt my judgment.’

If Poiccart had a very complete knowledge of the sordid underworld, Manfred was a living encyclopaedia on the swell mob; but for some reason Mr Lexfield was outside his knowledge. Leon made investigations and reported.

‘He has been thrown out of India and Australia. He is only “wanted” in New Zealand if he attempts to go back there. His speciality is bigamous marriages into families which are too important to risk a scandal. The swell mob in London only know of him by hearsay. He has a real wife who has followed him to London and was probably the lady who was responsible for his visit to the area.’

Mr Garry Lexfield had ‘touched’ royally, and luck had been with him, since, unostentatiously and in an assumed name, he had stepped on to the Monrovia at Sydney. He had the charm and the attraction which are three–quarters of the good thief’s assets. Certainly he charmed the greater part of three thousand pounds out of the pockets of two wealthy Australian land–owners, and attracted to himself the daughter of one who at any rate had the appearance of being another.

When he landed he was an engaged man: happily and mercifully, his bride–to–be was taken ill on the day of her arrival with a prosaic attack of appendicitis. Before she had left her nursing home, he learned that that bluff squatter, her father, so far from being a millionaire, was in very considerable financial difficulties.

But the luck held: a visit to Monte Carlo produced yet another small fortune —which was not gained at the public tables. Here he met and wooed Elsa Monarty, convent–trained and easily fascinated. A sister, her one relative, had sent her to San Remo—oddly enough, she also was convalescing from an illness—and, straying across the frontier, she met the handsome Mr Lexfield—which was not his name—in the big vestibule of the rooms. She wanted a ticket of admission—the gallant Garry was most obliging. She told him about her sister, who was the manager and part owner of a big dress–making establishment in the Rue de la Paix. Giving confidence for

confidence, Garry told her of his rich and titled parents, and described a life which was equally mythical.

He came back to London alone and found himself most inconveniently dogged by the one woman in the world who was entitled to bear his name, which was Jackson—a pertinacious if handsome woman who had no particular affection for him, but was anxious to recover for the benefit of his two neglected children a little of the fortune he had dissipated.

And most pertinacious at a moment when, but for his inherent meanness, he would have gladly paid good money to be rid of her.

It was a week after he had had the shocking experience of finding himself hurled across fairly high railings into a providentially shallow area, and he was still inclined to limp, when Leon Gonsalez, who was investigating his case, came with the full story of the man's misdeeds.

'I would have dropped him a little more heavily if I had known,' said Manfred regretfully. 'The strange thing is that the moment I lifted him—it's a trick you have never quite succeeded in acquiring, Leon—I knew he was something pestilential. We shall have to keep an unfriendly eye on Mr Garry Lexfield. Where does he stay?'

'He has a sumptuous flat in Jermyn Street,' said Leon. 'Before you tell me that there are no sumptuous flats in Jermyn Street, I would like to say that it has the appearance of sumptuousness. I was so interested in this gentleman that I went round to the Yard and had a chat with Meadows. Meadows knows all about him, but he has no evidence to convict. The man's got plenty of money—has an account at the London and Southern, and bought a car this afternoon.'

Manfred nodded thoughtfully.

'A pretty bad man,' he said. 'Is there any chance of finding his wife? I suppose the unfortunate lady who was with him—'

'She lives in Little Titchfield Street—calls herself Mrs Jackson, which is probably our friend's name. Meadows is certain that it is.'

Mr Garry Lexfield was too wise a man not to be aware of the fact that he was under observation; but his was the type of crime which almost defies detection. His pleasant manner and his car, plus a well–organized accident to his punt on one of the upper reaches of the Thames, secured him

introductions and honorary membership of a very exclusive river club; and from there was but a step to homes which ordinarily would have been barred to him.

He spent a profitable month initiating two wealthy stockbrokers into the mysteries of bushman poker, at which he was consistently unlucky for five successive nights, losing some £600 to his apologetic hosts. There was no necessity for their apologies as it turned out: on the sixth and seventh days, incredible as it may seem, he cleared the greater part of £5,000 and left his hosts with the impression of his regret that he had been the medium of their loss.

‘Very interesting,’ said Manfred when this was reported to him.

Then, one night when he was dining at the Ritz–Carlton with a young man to whom he had gained one of his quick introductions, he saw his supreme fortune.

‘Do you know her?’ he asked in an undertone of his companion.

‘That lady? Oh, Lord, yes! I’ve known her for years. She used to stay with my people in Somerset—Madame Velasquez. She’s the widow of a terribly rich chap, a Brazilian.’

Mr Lexfield looked again at the dark, beautiful woman at the next table. She was perhaps a little over–jewelled to please the fastidious. Swathes of diamond bracelets encircled her arm from the wrist up; an immense emerald glittered in a diamond setting on her breast. She was exquisitely dressed and her poise was regal.

‘She’s terribly rich,’ prattled on his informant. ‘My colonel, who knows her much better than I, told me her husband had left her six million pounds—it’s wicked that people should have so much money.’

It was wicked, thought Garry Lexfield, that anybody should have so much money if he could not ‘cut’ his share.

‘I’d like to meet her,’ he said, and a minute later the introduction was made and Garry forgot his arrangement to trim the young guardsman that night in the thrill of confronting a bigger quarry.

He found her a remarkably attractive woman. Her English, though slightly broken, was good. She was obviously pleased to meet him. He danced with

her a dozen times and asked to be allowed to call in the morning. But she was leaving for her country place in Seaton Deverel.

‘That’s rather strange,’ he said, with his most dazzling smile. ‘I’m driving through Seaton Deverel next Saturday.’

To his joy she bit the bait. At noon on the Saturday his car shot up the long drive to Hanford House.

A week later came Loon with startling news.

‘This fellow’s got himself engaged to a rich South American widow, George. We can’t allow that to go any further. Let us have an orgy of lawlessness—kidnap the brigand and put him on a cattle boat. There’s a man in the East India Dock Road who would do it for fifty pounds.’

Manfred shook his head.

‘I’ll see Meadows,’ he said. ‘I have an idea that we may catch this fellow.’

Mr Garry Lexfield was not in that seventh heaven of delight to which accepted lovers are supposed to ascend; but he was eminently satisfied with himself as he watched the final touches being made to the dinner table in his flat.

Madame Velasquez had taken a great deal of persuading, had shown an extraordinary suspicion, and asked him to introduce her to those parents of his who were at the moment conveniently attending to their large estates in Canada.

‘It is a very serious step I take, Garry dear,’ she said, shaking her pretty head dubiously. ‘I love you very dearly, of course, but I am so fearful of men who desire only money and not love.’

‘Darling, I don’t want money,’ he said vehemently. ‘I have shown you my passbook: I have nine thousand pounds in the bank, apart from my estates.’

She shrugged this off. Madame was a lady of peculiar temperament, never in the same mood for longer than an hour.

She came to dinner and, to his annoyance, brought a chaperon—a girl who spoke no word of English. Mr Lexfield was a very patient man and concealed his anger.

She brought news that made him forget the inconvenience of a chaperon. It was while they were sipping coffee in his over–decorated little drawing–

room that she told him:

‘Such a nice man I meet today. He came to my house in the country.’

‘He was not only nice, but lucky,’ smiled Garry, who was really not feeling terribly happy.

‘And he spoke about you,’ she smiled.

Garry Lexfield became instantly attentive. Nobody in England knew him well enough to make him the subject of conversation. If they did, then the discussion had not been greatly to his advantage.

‘Who was this?’ he asked.

‘He spoke such perfect Spanish, and he has a smile the most delightful! And he said so many funny things that I laughed.’

‘A Brazilian?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘In Brazil we speak Portuguese,’ she said. ‘No, Senor Gonsalez—’

‘Gonsalez?’ he said quickly. ‘Not Leon Gonsalez? One of those swi—men…the Three Just Men?’

She raised her eyebrows.

‘Do you know them?’

He laughed.

I have heard about them. Blackguards that should have been hanged years ago. They are murderers and thieves. They’ve got a nerve to come and see you. I suppose he said something pretty bad about me? The truth is, I’ve been an enemy of theirs for years…’

He went on to tell an imaginary story of an earlier encounter he had had with the Three, and she listened intently.

‘How interesting!’ she said at last. ‘No, they simply said of you that you were a bad man, and that you wanted my money; that you had a bad—what is the word?—record. I was very angry really, especially when they told me that you had a wife, which I know is not true, because you would not deceive me. Tomorrow he comes again, this Senor Gonsalez—he really did amuse me when I was not angry. Shall I lunch with you and tell you what he said?’

Garry was annoyed: he was thoroughly alarmed. It had not been difficult to locate and identify the man who had taken such summary action with him; and, once located, he had decided to give a wide berth to the men who lived behind the Silver Triangle. He had sense enough to know they were not to be antagonized, and he had hoped most sincerely that they had been less acute in tracing him than he had been in identifying them.

He changed the conversation and became, in spite of the witness, the most ardent and tender of lovers. All his art and experience was called into play; for here was a prize which had been beyond his dreams.

His immediate objective was some £20,000 which had come to the lady in the shape of dividends. She had displayed a pretty helplessness in the matter of money, though he suspected her of being shrewd enough. Garry Lexfield could talk very glibly and fluently on the subject of the market. It was his pet study; it was likewise his continuous undoing. There never was a thief who did not pride himself on his shrewdness in money matters, and Garry had come in and out of the market from time to time in his short and discreditable life with disastrous results to himself.

He saw her and her silent companion to the car and went back, and in the solitude of his flat turned over the new and alarming threat represented by the interest which the Three Just Men were showing in his activities.

He rose late, as was his practice, and was in his pyjamas when the telephone–bell rang. The voice of the porter informed him that there was a trunk call for him and trunk calls these days meant the lovely Velasquez.

‘I have seen Gonsalez,’ said her urgent voice. ‘He came when I was at breakfast. Tomorrow, he says, they will arrest you because of something you did in Australia. Also today he applies to stop your money coming from the bank.’

‘Holding up my account?’ said Garry quickly. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Certain I am sure! They will go to a judge in his rooms and get a paper. Shall I come to lunch?’

‘Of course—one o’clock,’ he said quickly. He glanced at the little clock on the mantelshelf: it was half–past eleven.

‘And about your investments: I think I can fix everything today. Bring your cheque–book.’

He was impatient for her to finish the conversation, and at last rather abruptly he brought it to a termination, dashed down the receiver, and, flying into his bedroom, began to dress.

His bank was in Fleet Street, and the journey seemed interminable. Fleet Street was much too close to the Law Courts for his liking. The judge's order might already be effective.

He pushed his cheque under the brass grille of the tellers' counter and held his breath while the slip of paper was handed to the accountant for verification. And then, to his overwhelming relief, the teller opened his drawer, took out a pad of notes and counted out the amount written on the cheque.

'This leaves only a few pounds to your credit, Mr Lexfield,' he said.

'I know,' said Garry. 'I'm bringing in rather a big cheque after lunch, and I want you to get a special clearance.'

It was then he realized that by that time the judge's order would be in operation. He must find another way of dealing with Madame Velasquez's cheque.

The relief was so great that he could hardly speak calmly. With something short of £9,000 he hurried back to Jermyn Street and arrived simultaneously with Madame Velasquez.

'How funny that caballero was, to be sure!' she said in her staccato way. 'I thought I should have laughed in his face. He told me you would not be here tomorrow, which is so absurd!'

'It's blackmail,' said Garry easily. 'Don't you worry about Gonsalez. I have just been to Scotland Yard to report him. Now about these shares—'

They had ten minutes to wait before lunch was ready, and those ten minutes were occupied with many arguments. She had brought her cheque–book, but she was a little fearful. Perhaps, he thought, the visit of Gonsalez had really aroused her suspicions. She was not prepared to invest the whole of her £20,000. He produced the papers and balance sheets that he had intended showing her on the previous night and explained, as he could very readily explain, the sound financial position of the company—one of the most solid on the Rand—in which he wished her to invest.

These shares,' he said impressively, 'will rise in the next twenty–four hours by at least ten per cent. in value. I've got a block held for you, but I must get them this afternoon. My idea is that immediately after lunch you should bring me an open cheque; I'll buy the shares and bring them back to you.'

'But why could not I go?' she asked innocently.

'This is a personal matter,' said Garry with great gravity. 'Sir John is allowing me to buy this stock as a great personal favour.'

To his joy she accepted this assurance—she actually wrote a cheque for £12,500 at the luncheon table, and he could scarcely summon patience to sit through the meal.

The proprietors of the flats in which he had his brief habitation did not cater on a generous scale, but the short time which elapsed before the dessert stage of the lunch arrived was a period of agony. She returned once to the question of her investment, seemed in doubt, referred again to Gonsalez and his warning.

'Perhaps I had better wait for a day—yes?'

'My dear girl, how absurd!' said Garry. 'I really believe you are being frightened by this fellow who called on you this morning! I'll make him sorry!'

He half rose from the table, but she put her hand on his arm.

'Please don't hurry,' she begged, and reluctantly he agreed. The bank did not close until three; there would be time to reach Dover by car and catch the five o'clock boat.

But the bank was situated in the City, and he must not cut his time too fine. He excused himself for a moment, went out in search of the valet he had acquired and gave him a few simple but urgent instructions. When he returned she was reading the balance sheet.

'I am so foolish about these matters,' she said, and suddenly lifted her head. 'What was that?' she asked, as the door slammed.

'My valet—I have sent him out on a little errand.

She laughed nervously.

'I am what you call on the jump,' she said, as she pushed his coffee towards him. 'Now tell me again, Garry, dear, what does ex–dividend mean?'

He explained at length, and she listened attentively. She was still listening when, with a sudden little choke of alarm, he half rose from his feet, only to fall back on the chair and thence to roll helplessly to the floor. Madame Velasquez took his half–empty cup of coffee, carried it at her leisure into the kitchen and emptied the contents into the sink. When he sent his valet out, Mr Garry Lexfield had saved her a great deal of trouble.

She rolled the unconscious man on to his back, and searched quickly and with a dexterous hand pocket after pocket until she found the fat envelope wherein Garry had placed his banknotes.

There was a knock at the outer door. Without hesitation she went out and opened it to the young guardsman who had so kindly introduced Mr Lexfield to her.

‘It’s all right, the servant’s gone,’ she said. ‘Here’s your two hundred, Tony, and thank you very much.’

Tony grinned.

‘The grudge I’ve got against him is that he took me for a sucker. These Australian crooks—’

‘Don’t talk—get,’ she said tersely.

She went back to the dining–room, removed Carry’s collar and tie and, putting a pillow under his head, opened the window. In twenty minutes he would be more or less conscious, by which time his valet would have returned.

She found the cheque she had given to him, burnt it in the empty grate, and with a last look round took her departure.

Outside the airport a tall man was waiting. She saw him signal to the driver of the car to pull up.

‘I got your message,’ said Manfred sardonically. ‘I trust you’ve had a good killing? I owe you five hundred pounds.’

She shook her head with a laugh. She was still the brown, beautiful Brazilian—it would take weeks before the stain would be removed.

‘No, thank you, Mr Manfred. It was a labour of love, and I have been pretty well paid. And the furnished house I took in the country was really not a very expensive proposition—oh, very well, then.’ She took the notes he

handed to her and put them in her bag, one eye on the waiting plane. ‘You see, Mr Manfred, Garry is an old acquaintance of mine—by hearsay. I sent my sister down to Monte Carlo for her health. She also found Garry.’

Manfred understood. He waited till the plane had passed through the haze out of sight, and then he went back to Curzon Street, well satisfied.

The evening newspapers had no account of the Jermyn Street robbery, which was easily understood. Mr Garry Lexfield had a sense of pride.

11. The Typist Who Saw Things

ABOUT EVERY six months Raymond Poiccart grew restless, and began prodding about in strange corners, opening deed boxes and trunks, and sorting over old documents. It was a few days before the incident of the Curzon Street ‘murder’ that he appeared in the dining room with an armful of old papers, and placed them on that portion of the table which had not been laid for dinner.

Leon Gonsalez looked and groaned.

George Manfred did not even smile, though he was laughing internally.

‘I am indeed sorry to distress you, my dear friends,’ said Poiccart apologetically; ‘but these papers must be put in order. I have found a bundle of letters that go back five years, to the time when the agency was a child.’

‘Burn ‘em,’ suggested Leon, returning to his book. ‘You never do anything with them, anyway!’

Poiccart said nothing. He went religiously from paper to paper, read them in his short–sighted way, and put them aside so that as one pile diminished another pile grew.

‘And I suppose when you’ve finished you’ll put them back where you found them?’ said Leon.

Poiccart did not answer. He was reading a letter.

‘A strange communication, I don’t remember reading this before,’ he said.

‘What is it, Raymond?’ asked George Manfred. Raymond read:

‘To the Silver Triangle. Private.

‘Gentlemen:

‘I have seen your names mentioned in a case as being reliable agents who can be trusted to work of a confidential character. I would be glad if you would make inquiries and find out for me the prospects of the Persian Oil Fields; also if you could negociate the sale of 967 shares held by me. The reason I do not approach an ordinary share–broker is because there are so

many sharks in this profeccion. Also could you tell me whether there is a sale for Okama Biscuit shares (American)? Please let me know this.

‘Yours faithfully,

‘J Rock.’

‘I recall that letter,’ said Leon promptly. ‘“Negotiate” and “profession” were spelt with c’s. Don’t you remember, George, I suggested this fellow had stolen some shares and was anxious to make us the means by which he disposed of his stolen property?’

Manfred nodded.

‘Rock,’ said Leon softly. No, I have never met Mr Rock. He wrote from Melbourne, didn’t he, and gave a box number and a telegraphic address? Did we hear again from him? I think not.’

None of the three could recollect any further communication: the letter passed with the others and might have remained eternally buried, but for Leon’s uncanny memory for numbers and spelling errors.

And then one night:

A police whistle squealed in Curzon Street. Gonsalez, who slept in the front of the house, heard the sound in his dreams, and was standing by the open window before he was awake. Again the whistle sounded, and then Gonsalez heard the sound of flying feet. A girl was racing along the sidewalk. She passed the house, stopped, and ran back, and again came to a standstill.

Leon went down the narrow stairs two at a time, unlocked the front door and flung it open. The fugitive stood immediately before him.

‘In here—quickly!’ said Leon.

She hesitated only a second; stepping backward through the doorway, she waited. Leon gripped her by the arm and pulled her into the passage.

‘You needn’t be frightened of me or my friends,’ he said.

But he felt the arm in his hand strain for release. ‘Let me go, please—I don’t want to stay here!’

Leon pushed her into the back room and switched on the light.

‘You saw a policeman running up toward you, that’s why you came back,’ he said, in his quiet, conversational way. ‘Sit down and rest—you look all in!’

‘I’m innocent…!’ she began, in a trembling voice.

He patted her shoulder.

‘Of course you are. I, on the contrary, am guilty, for whether you’re innocent or not, I am undoubtedly helping a fugitive from justice.’

She was very young—scarcely more than a child. The pale, drawn face was pretty. She was well, but not expensively, dressed, and it struck Leon as a significant circumstance that on one finger was an emerald ring, which, if the stone were real, must have been worth hundreds of pounds. He glanced at the clock. A few minutes after two. There came to them the sound of heavy, hurrying feet.

‘Did anybody see me come in?’ she asked, fearfully.

‘Nobody was in sight. Now what is the trouble?’ Danger and fear had held her tense, almost capable. The reaction had come now: she was shaking. Shoulders, hands, body quivered pitiably. She was crying noiselessly, her lips trembled; for the time being she was inarticulate. Leon poured water into a glass and held it to her chattering teeth. If the others had heard him, they had no intention of coming down to investigate. The curiosity of Leon Gonsalez was a household proverb. Any midnight brawl would bring him out of bed and into the street.

After a while, she was calm enough to tell her story, and it was not the story he expected.

‘My name is Farrer—Eileen Farrer. I am a typist attached to Miss Lewley’s All–Night Typing Agenda. Usually there are two girls on duty, one a senior; but Miss Leah went home early. We call ourselves an all–night agency, but really we close down about one o’clock. Most of our work is theatrical. Often, after a first–night performance, certain changes have to be made in a script—and sometimes new contracts are arranged over supper, and we prepare the rough drafts. At other times it is just letter–work. I know all the big managers, and I’ve often gone to their offices quite late to do work for them. We never, of course, go to strange people and at the offices we have a porter who is also a messenger, to see that we are not annoyed. At twelve

o’clock I had a phone message from Mr Grasleigh, of the Orpheum, asking me if I would do two letters for him. He sent his car for me, and I went to his flat in Curzon Street. We’re not allowed to go to the private houses of our clients, but I knew Mr Grasleigh was a client, though I had never met him before.’

Leon Gonsalez had often seen Mr Jesse Grasleigh’s bright yellow car. That eminent theatrical manager lived in some exclusive flats in Curzon Street, occupying the first floor, and paying—as Leon, who was insatiably curious, discovered—£3,000 a year. He had dawned on London three years before, had acquired the lease of the Orpheum, and had been interested in half a dozen productions, most of which had been failures.

‘What time was this?’ he asked.

‘A quarter to one,’ said the girl. ‘I reached Curzon Street at about a quarter after. I had several things to do at the office before I left, besides which he told me there was no immediate hurry. I knocked at the door and Mr Grasleigh admitted me. He was in evening dress, and looked as if he had come from a party. He had a big white flower in the buttonhole of his tail coat. I saw no servants, and I know now there were none in the flat. He showed me into his study, which was a large room, and pulled up a chair to a little table by his desk. I don’t know exactly what happened. I remember sitting down and taking my notebook out of my attache case and opening it, and I was stooping to find a pencil in the case when I heard a groan, and, looking up, I saw Mr Grasleigh lying back in his chair with a red mark on his white shirt–front—it was horrible!’

‘You heard no other sound, no shot?’ asked Leon.

She shook her head.

‘I was so horrified I couldn’t move. And then I heard somebody scream and, looking round, I saw a lady, very beautifully dressed, standing in the doorway. “What have you done to him?” she said. “You horrible woman, you’ve killed him!” I was so terrified that I couldn’t speak, and then I must have got into a panic, for I ran past her and out of the front door—’

‘It was open?’ suggested Leon.

She frowned.

‘Yes, it was open. I think the lady must have left it open. I heard somebody blow a police whistle, but I can’t remember how I got down the stairs or into the street. You’re not going to give me up, are you?’ she asked wildly.

He leaned over and patted her hand.

‘My young friend,’ he said, gently, ‘you have nothing whatever to fear. Stay down here while I dress, and then you and I will go down, to Scotland Yard and you will tell them all you know.’

‘But I can’t. They’ll arrest me!’

She was on the verge of hysteria, and it was perhaps a mistake to attempt to argue with her.

‘Oh, it’s horrible. I hate London…I wish I’d never left Australia…First the dogs and then the black man and now this….’

Leon was startled, but this was not a moment to question her. The thing to do was to bring her to a calm understanding of the situation.

‘Don’t you realize that they won’t blame you, and that your story is such that no police officer in the world would dream of suspecting it?’

‘But I ran away—’ she began.

‘Of course you ran away,’ he said soothingly. ‘I should probably have run away too. Just wait here.’

He was half–way through dressing when he heard the front door slam and, running down the stairs, found that the girl had disappeared.

Manfred was awake when he went into his room and told him the story.

‘No, I don’t think it’s a pity that you didn’t call me earlier,’ he interrupted Leon’s apology. ‘We couldn’t very well have detained her in any circumstances. You know where she is employed. See if you can get Lewley’s Agency on the telephone.’

Leon found the number in the book, but had no answer from his call.

When he was dressed he went into the street and made his way to Curzon House. To his surprise he found no policeman on guard at the door, though he saw one at the corner of the street, nor was there any evidence that there had been a tragedy. The front door of the flat was fastened, but inserted in the wall were a number of small bell–pushes, each evidently

communicating with one of the flats, and after a while he discovered that which bore the name Grasleigh and was on the point of ringing when the policeman he had seen came silently across from the other side of the road. He evidently knew Leon.

‘Good evening, Mr Gonsalez,’ he said. It wasn’t you blowing that police whistle, was it?’

‘No—I heard it, though.’

‘So did I and three or four of my mates,’ said the policeman. ‘We’ve been flying round these streets for a quarter of an hour, but we haven’t found the man who blew it.’

‘Probably I’ll be able to help you.’

It was at that moment that he heard the door unlocked, and nearly dropped, for the man who opened the door to him he recognized as Grasleigh himself. He was in a dressing–gown; the half of a cigar was in the corner of his mouth.

‘Hullo!’ he said in surprise. ‘What’s the trouble?’

‘Can I see you for a few minutes?’ said Leon when he had recovered from his surprise.

‘Certainly,’ said the ‘dead man’, ‘though it’s hardly the time I like to receive callers. Come up.’

Wonderingly Leon followed him up the stairs to the first floor. He saw no servants, but there was not the slightest evidence to associate this place with the dramatic scene which the girl had described. Once they were in the big study, Leon told his story. When he had finished, Grasleigh shook his head.

‘The girl’s mad! It’s perfectly true that I did telephone for her, and as a matter of fact I thought it was her when you rang the bell. I assure you she hasn’t been here tonight…Yes, I heard the police whistle blow, but I never mix myself up in these midnight troubles.’ He was looking at Leon keenly. ‘You’re one of the Triangle people, aren’t you, Mr Gonsalez? What was this girl like?’

Leon described her, and again the theatrical manager shook his head.

‘I’ve never heard of her,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid you’ve been the victim of a hoax, Mr Gonsalez.’

Leon went back to join his two friends, a very bewildered man.

The next morning he called at Lewles Agency, which he knew by repute as a well–conducted establishment of its kind, and interviewed its good–natured spinster–proprietress. He had to exercise a certain amount of caution: he was most anxious not to get the girl into trouble. Fortunately, he knew an important client of Miss Lewley's and he was able to use this unconscious man as a lever to extract the information he required.

'Miss Farrer is doing night duty this week, and she will not be in until this evening,' she explained. 'She has been with us about a month.'

'How long has Mr Grasleigh been a client of yours?'

'Exactly the same time,' she said with a smile. 'I rather think he likes Miss Farrer's work, because previous to that he sent all his work to Danton's Agency, where she was employed, and the moment she came to us he changed his agency.'

'Do you know anything about her?'

The woman hesitated.

'She is an Australian. I believe at one time her family were very wealthy. She's never told me anything about her troubles, but I have an idea that she will be entitled to a lot of money some day. One of the partners of Colgate's, the lawyers, came to see her once.'

Leon managed to get the girl's address, and then went on to the City to find Messrs. Colgate. Luck was with him, for Colgate's had employed the Three on several occasions, and at least one of their commissions had been of a most delicate character.

It was one of those old–fashioned firms that had its offices in the region of Bedford Row, and though it was generally known as 'Colgate's,' it consisted of seven partners, the names of all of whom were inscribed on the brass plate before the office.

Mr Colgate himself was a man of sixty, and at first rather uncommunicative. It was an inspiration for Leon to tell him of what had happened the night before. To his amazement, he saw the lawyer's face drop.

‘That’s very bad,’ he said, ‘very bad indeed. But I’m afraid I can tell you nothing more than you know.’

‘Why is it so very bad?’ asked Leon.

The lawyer pursed his lips thoughtfully.

‘You understand that she is not our client, although we represent a firm of Melbourne solicitors who are acting for this young lady. Her father died in a mental home and left his affairs rather involved. During the past three years, however, some of his property has become very valuable, and there is no reason why this young lady should work at all, except, as I suspect, that she wishes to get away from the scene of this family trouble and has to work to occupy her mind. I happen to know that the taint of madness is a cause of real distress to the girl, and I believe it was on the advice of her only relative that she came to England, in the hope that the change of scene would put out of her mind this misfortune which has overshadowed her.’

‘But she has been to see you?’

The lawyer shook his head.

‘One of my clients called on her. Some property in Sydney which was overlooked in the settlement of her father’s estate came into the market. He had a tenth share, it seems. We tried to get in touch with the executor, Mr Flane, but we were unsuccessful—he’s travelling in the East—so we got the girl’s signature to the transfer.’

‘Flane?’

Mr Colgate was a busy man; he had intimated as much. He was now a little impatient.

‘A cousin of the late Joseph Farrer—the only other relative. As a matter of fact, Farrer was staying in Western Australia on his cousin’s station just before he went mad.’

Leon was blessed with an imagination, but even this, vivid as it was, could not quite bridge the gaps in what he suspected was an unusual story.

‘My own impression,’ said the lawyer, ‘and I tell you this in the strictest confidence, is that the girl is not quite…’ He tapped his forehead. ‘She told my clerk, a man who is skilled in gaining the confidence of young people, that she had been followed about for weeks by a black man, on another

occasion had been followed about by a black retriever. Apparently, whenever she takes her Saturday stroll, this retriever has appeared and never leaves her. So far as I can discover, nobody else has seen either the black man or the dog. You don't need to be a doctor to know that this delusion of being followed is one of the commonest signs of an unbalanced mind.'

Leon knew something more than the average about police work. He knew that discovery is not a thing of a dramatic moment, but patiently accrued evidence, and he followed the same line of inquiry that a detective from Scotland Yard would follow.

Eileen Farrer lived in Landsbury Road, Clapham, and No 209 proved to be a house in a respectable terrace. The motherly–looking landlady who interviewed him in the hall was palpably relieved to see him when he stated the object of his visit.

'I'm so glad you've come,' she said. 'Are you a relation?'

Leon disclaimed that association.

'She's a very peculiar young lady,' the landlady went on, 'and I don't know what to make of her. She's been up all night walking about her room—she sleeps in the room above me—and this morning she's taken no breakfast. I can't help feeling that there's something wrong—she's so strange.'

'You mean that she's not quite right in her head?' asked Leon brutally.

'Yes, that's what I mean. I thought of sending for my doctor, but she wouldn't hear of it. She told me she'd had a great shock. Do you know her?'

'I've met her,' said Leon. 'May I go upstairs?'

The landlady hesitated.

'I think I'd better tell her you're here. What name?'

'I think it would be better if I saw her without being announced,' said Leon, 'if you will show me the door. Where is she?'

Eileen Farrer was, he learnt, in her sitting–room—she could afford the luxury of an extra apartment Leon tapped at the door and a startled voice asked: 'Who is it?'

He did not answer but, turning the knob, entered the room. The girl was standing by the window, staring out; apparently the taxi that brought Leon had excited her apprehension.

‘Oh!’ she said in dismay, as she saw her visitor. ‘You’re the man…you haven’t come to arrest me?’

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the floor was strewn with papers. Evidently she had bought every available newspaper to discover tidings of the crime.

‘No, I haven’t come to arrest you,’ said Leon in an even tone. ‘I don’t exactly know what you could be arrested for—Mr Grasleigh is not dead. He’s not even hurt.’

She stared at him, wide–eyed.

‘Not even hurt?’ she repeated slowly.

‘He was quite well when I saw him last night.’

She passed her hand over her eyes.

‘I don’t understand. I saw him—oh, it’s terrible!’

‘You saw him, as you thought, very badly hurt. I had the pleasure of meeting him a few minutes afterwards and he was quite uninjured; and, what is more’—he was watching her as he spoke—’he said that he had never seen you.’

Wonder, incredulity, terror were in her eyes.

‘Now won’t you sit down, Miss Farrer, and tell me all about yourself. You see, I know quite a lot. I know, for example, that your father died in an institution.’

She was staring at him as though unable to grasp his words. Leon became instantly practical.

‘Now I want you to tell me. Miss Farrer, why your father went mad. Was there any other history of insanity in the family?’

Leon’s calmness was of the dominant kind: under its influence she had recovered something of her self–possession.

‘No, the cause was a fall from a horse; the full effect of it wasn’t known for years afterwards.’

He nodded and smiled.

‘I thought not. Where were you when he was taken away?’

‘I was at school in Melbourne,’ she said, ‘or rather, just outside of Melbourne. I never saw my father from the time I was seven. He was a long time in that horrible place, and they wouldn’t let me see him.’

‘Now tell me this: who is Mr Flane? Do you know him?’

She shook her head.

‘He was my father’s cousin. The only thing I know about him is that Daddy used to lend him money, and he was staying on the farm when he became ill. I’ve had several letters from him about money. He paid my fare to England. It was he who suggested I should go home and try to forget all the troubles I’d had.’

‘You never saw him?’

‘Never,’ she said. ‘He came once to school, but I was away on a picnic.’

‘You don’t know what money your father left?’

She shook her head again.

‘No, I’ve no idea.’

‘Now tell me, Miss Farrer, about the Negro you have seen following you, and the dog.’

She had very little to tell except the bare fact. The persecution had begun two years before, and her doctor had once called to inquire the cause. Here Leon stopped her quickly.

‘Did you send for the doctor?’

‘No,’ she said in surprise, ‘but he must have heard from somebody, though who I can’t think, because I told very few people.’

‘Can you show me any of the letters that Mr Flane sent you?’

These she had in a drawer, and Leon examined them carefully. Their tone was rather unusual, not the tone one would have expected from a guardian or from one who had control of her destinies. In the main they were protestations of the difficulties the writer found in providing for her schooling, for her clothes, and eventually for the trip to England, and each letter insisted on the fact that her father had left very little money.

‘And that was true,’ she said. ‘Poor Daddy was rather eccentric about money. He never kept his stocks at the bank but always carried them about with him in a big iron box. In fact, he was terribly secretive, and nobody knew exactly what money he had. I thought he was very rich, because he was a little’—she hesitated—’ “near” is the word. I hate saying anything disparaging about the poor darling, but he was never generous with money, and when I found that he had only left a few hundred pounds and a very few shares, and those not of any particular value, I was astonished. And so, of course, was everybody in Melbourne—everybody who knew us, I mean. In fact, I always regarded myself as poor until a few months ago. We then discovered that father had a large interest in the West Australian Gold Mine, which nobody knew anything about. It came to light by accident. If all they say is true, I shall be very rich. The lawyers have been trying to get into touch with Mr Flane, but they have only had a letter or two, one posted from China addressed to me, and another posted I think in Japan.’

‘Have you got the letter addressed to you?’

She produced it. It was written on thick paper. Leon held it up to the light and saw the watermark.

‘What shares did your father leave? I mean, what shares was he known to leave?’

She puzzled over this question.

‘There were some absolutely valueless, I know. I remember them because of the number—967. What’s the matter?’

Leon was laughing.

‘I think I can promise you freedom from any further persecution, Miss Farrer, and my advice to you is that you get immediately in touch with the best firm of lawyers in London. I think I can give you their address. There’s one thing I want to tell you’—there was a very kindly smile in Leon Gonsalez’s eyes—’and it is that you are not mad, that you haven’t imagined you were followed by Negroes and by black dogs and that you didn’t imagine you saw Mr Grasleigh murdered. There’s one more question I want to ask you, and it’s about Mr Flane. Do you know what he did for a living?’

‘He had a small station—farm, you would call it,’ she said. ‘I think Daddy bought it for him and his wife. Before that I think he had the lease of a

theatre in Adelaide, and he lost a lot of money.'

'Thank you,' said Leon. That is all I want to know.'

He drove straight back to the flats in Curzon Street, and met Mr Grasleigh as he was leaving his flat.

'Hullo! You've not come to tell me about another murder?' said that jovial man with a loud laugh.

'Worse than murder,' said Leon, and something in his tone struck the smile from Mr Grasleigh's lips.

Leon followed him into the study and himself closed the door.

'Mr Flane, I understand?' he said, and saw the colour fade from the man's face.

'I don't know what you mean,' blustered Grasleigh. 'My name is—'

'Your name is Flane,' said Leon very gently. 'A few years ago you got an inkling that the man you had robbed—Eileen Farrer's father—was richer than you thought, and you evolved a rather clumsy, and certainly a diabolical scheme to retain possession of Eileen Farrer's property. A shallow–brained man as you are, I have no doubt, would imagine that because the father was mad the daughter could also be driven into a mental asylum. I don't know where you got your Negro from or where you found your trained dog, but I know where you got the money to take the lease of the Orpheum. And, Mr Flane, I want to tell you something more, and you might pass the information on to your wife, who is, I gather, a fellow conspirator. "Negotiate" is spelt with a "t" and "profession" with an "s". Both words occur in the letters you wrote to Miss Farrer.'

The man was breathing loudly through his nose, and the hand that went up to take out the dead stump of his cigar was shaking.

'You've got to prove all this,' he blustered.

'Unfortunately I have,' said Leon sadly. 'In the old days when the Four Just Men were not quite so legally minded as they are today, you would not have been taken into a court of law: I rather imagine that my friends and I would have opened a manhole in Curzon Street and dropped you through.'

12. The Mystery of Mr Drake

ALL EVENTS GO in threes—that was the considered opinion of Leon Gonsalez. This, for example, was his second meeting with Cornelius Malan. The last time Mr Roos Malan, the bearded brother of Cornelius, had been a third party, but now Roos was dead—though of this fact Leon was at the moment unaware.

This alert and bright–eyed man had never had a driving accident. The fact that he was alive proved this, for he was never quite happy if the needle of the speedometer on his big sports car fell below the seventy mark. By an odd chance it was well below thirty when he skidded on the slush and snow of a lonely Oxford road and slithered a back wheel into a four–foot ditch. That the car did not overturn was a miracle.

Leon climbed out and looked round. The squat farmstead beyond the stone wall which flanked the road had a familiar appearance. He grinned as he leapt the wall and made his way across the rough surface of an uncultivated field towards the building. A dog barked gruffly, but he saw no human creature. And when he knocked at the door there was no answer. Leon was not surprised. Cornelius kept few servants, even in the summer—he was unlikely to have his house well staffed in the unprofitable days of late autumn.

He made a tour of the house, passed through an untidy and weed–grown garden, and still could find no sign of life. And then from the ground, not a dozen yards away, arose a big, broad–shouldered giant of a man. He came veritably from the ground. For a moment the observer was staggered, and then he realized that the man had come out of a well. The back of Cornelius Malan was turned to his uninvited guest. Leon saw him stoop, heard the clang of steel and the click of a lock fastened. Presently the big man dusted his knees and stretched himself and, turning, came straight towards where Leon was standing. At the sight of a stranger, the broad, red face of Cornelius went a shade redder.

‘Hi, you!’ he began wrathfully, and then recognized his visitor. ‘Ah!’ he said. ‘The detective!’

He spoke with scarcely a trace of accent, unlike his dead brother, who could hardly speak English.

‘What do you want, eh? Do more people think that poor Roos has swindled them? Well, he is dead, so you get nothing out of him.’

Leon was looking past him, and the man must have divined what was in his mind, for he said quickly: ‘There is a bad well here, full of gas. I must have it filled up—’

‘In the meantime you’ve had it sensibly fastened,’ smiled Leon. ‘I’m sorry to barge in upon your Arcadian pursuits, Mr Malan, but the fact is my car has ditched itself, and I wanted help to get it up.’

There had been a strange look of apprehension on the man’s face, and this cleared away as Leon explained the object of his visit.

‘I myself could pick a car out of any ditch,’ he boasted. ‘You shall see.’

As he walked across the field with Leon he was almost affable.

‘I do not like you people from London, and you especially, Mr What’s–your–name. You are like the lawyer who swindled me and my poor brother by Potchefstroom, so many years ago that I forget his name. Poor Roos! You and such people as you have hounded him into his grave! Inspectors of taxes and God knows what. And we are both poor men and have nothing to say to them.’

When they got to the car, he found that his strength was hardly sufficient, and they returned to the farm and from some mysterious place gathered two hungry–looking labourers, who, with planks and ropes, succeeded in hauling the Bentley to road level. By this time, Cornelius Malan was his old self.

‘That will cost you one pound, my friend,’ he said. I cannot afford to pay these men for extra work. I am poor, and now that Roos is dead, who knows that I may not have to take that lazy wench of our sister’s….’

Very solemnly Leon produced a pound note, and handed it to the old miser.

When he got back to Curzon Street he related his experience.

‘I’ll bet you we’re going to meet for the third time,’ he said. ‘It is odd, but it’s a fact. One of these days I am going to write a book on the Law of Coincidence—I’ve any amount of data.’

‘Add this,’ said Poiccart briefly, as he tossed a letter across the table.

Leon smoothed it out: the first thing he read was an Oxfordshire address. He turned quickly to the end of the letter, and saw it was signed, ‘Leonora Malan.’

Manfred was watching him with a smile in his eyes.

‘There’s a job after your own heart, Leon,’ he said.

Leon read the letter.

‘DEAR SIRS,

‘Some time ago you came into town to see my uncle, who has now, I am sorry to say, passed over. Will you please grant me an interview on Wednesday morning in regard to my late uncle’s money? I don’t suppose you can help me, but there is just a chance.’

It was signed ‘Leonora Malan,’ and there was a postscript.

‘Please do not let my Uncle Cornelius know I have written.’

Leon scratched his chin.

‘Leon and Leonora,’ murmured Manfred. ‘That alone is sufficient basis for a chapter on coincidences.’

On Wednesday morning, rainy and gusty, Miss Malan called, and with her was the young man who was to be the fourth and the greatest coincidence of all.

A scrawny man of thirty, with irregular features and eyes that were never still, she introduced him as Mr Jones, the late manager of her dead uncle.

Leonora Malan was astonishingly pretty. That was the first impression Leon had of his visitor. He had expected something dumpy and plain—Leonora was a name to shy at. Malan was obviously Cape Dutch. He would have known this even if he had not been aware, from personal experience, of the nationality of her two uncles. He had had an encounter with the notorious Jappy, and the no less objectionable Roos—less objectionable now, since he had been gathered to his fathers. And he was agreeably surprised, for this slim, bright–eyed girl with the peach and rose complexion was a very happy upsetting of preconceived ideas.

She came with him into the bright little drawing–room which was also the office of the Three, and sat down in the chair which Poiccart pushed forward for her before, in his role of butler, he glided out, closing the door respectfully and noiselessly behind him.

She looked up at Leon, her eyes twinkling, and smiled.

‘You can do nothing for me, Mr Gonsalez, but Mr Jones thought I ought to see you,’ she said, with a trustful glance at her ill–favoured companion which appalled Gonsalez. ‘That isn’t a very promising beginning, is it? I suppose you’ll wonder why I’m wasting your time if I believe that? But just now I’m clutching at straws, and—’

‘I am a very substantial straw,’ laughed Leon.

Mr Jones spoke. His voice was harsh and coarse.

‘It’s like this. Leonora is entitled to about eighty thousand pounds. I know it was there before the old boy died. Got the will, Leonora?’

She nodded quickly and sighed, half–opened her little hand–bag, reached mechanically for a battered silver case, but quickly withdrew her hand and snapped the bag tight. Leon reached for the cigarette box and passed it to her.

‘You know my uncle?’ she said, as she took a cigarette. ‘Poor Uncle Roos often spoke about you—’

‘Very uncomplimentarily, I am sure,’ said Leon.

She nodded.

‘Yes, he didn’t like you. He was rather afraid of you, and you cost him money.’

Roos Malan had figured in one of Leon’s more humdrum cases. Roos and his brother Cornelius had been prosperous farmers in South Africa. And then gold was discovered on their farm, and they became, of a sudden, very rich men; both came to England and settled on two desolate farms in Oxfordshire. It was Roos who had adopted his dead sister’s baby with much grumbling and complaining for, like his brother, he was that rarest of misers who grudges every farthing spent even on himself. Yet both brothers were shrewd speculators; too shrewd sometimes. It was a case in which their cupidity had overrun their discretion, that had brought Leon into their orbit.

‘Uncle Roos,’ said the girl, ‘was not so bad as you think. Of course, he was terribly mean about money, and even about the food that was eaten on the farm; and life was a little difficult with him. Sometimes he was kindness itself, and I feel a pig that I am bothering about his wretched money.’

‘Don’t worry about him,’ began Jones impatiently.

‘You find that there is no wretched money?’ interrupted Leon, glancing again at the letter she had sent him.

She shook her head.

‘I can’t understand it,’ she said.

‘Show him the will,’ Jones snapped.

She opened her bag again and took out a folded paper.

‘Here is a copy.’

Leon took the paper and opened it. It was a short, hand–written document in Dutch. Beneath was the English translation. In a few lines the late Roos Malan had left ‘all the property I possess to my niece Leonora Mary Malan.’

‘Every penny,’ said Jones, with satisfaction that he did not attempt to conceal. ‘Leonora and I were going into business in London. Her money, my brains. See what I mean?’

Leon saw very clearly.

‘When did he die?’ he asked.

‘Six months ago.’ Leonora frowned as at an unpleasant memory. ‘You’ll think I am heartless, but really I had no love for him, though at times I was very fond of him.’

‘And the property?’ said Leon.

She frowned.

‘All that is left seems to be the farm and the furniture. The valuers say that it’s worth five thousand pounds, and it’s mortgaged for four thousand. Uncle Cornelius holds the mortgage. Yet Roos Malan must have been very rich; he drew royalties from his property in South Africa, and I’ve seen the money in the house; it came every quarter and was always paid in banknotes.’

‘I could explain the mortgage,’ said Jones. ‘Those two mean old skunks exchanged mortgages to protect one another in case the authorities ever tried to play tricks on ‘em! The money’s gone, mister—I’ve searched the house from top to bottom. There’s a strongroom built in a corner of the cellar—we’ve had that door opened, but there’s not a penny to be found. They’re great for strongrooms, the Malans. I know where Cornelius keeps his too. He doesn’t know it, but by God, if he doesn’t play fair with this kid…!’

The girl seemed a little embarrassed by the championship of the man. The friendship was a little one–sided, he thought, and had the impression that Mr Jones’ glib plans for ‘going into business’ were particularly his own.

Jones gave him one piece of news. Neither of the brothers had banking accounts. Though they speculated heavily and wisely in South African stocks, their dividends were paid or their stock was bought with ready money, and invariably cash payments were made in the same medium.

‘Both these old blighters objected to paying taxation, and they used all sorts of dirty tricks to avoid payment. They suspected all banks, because they believed that banks tell the Government their clients’ business.’

Leonora shook her head again despairingly.

‘I don’t think you can do anything, Mr Gonsalez, and I almost wish I hadn’t written. The money isn’t there; there’s no record that it ever was there. I really don’t mind very much, because I can work. Happily I took typing lessons and improved my speed at the farm: I did most of Uncle’s correspondence.’

‘During the last illness was Cornelius at the farm?’

She nodded.

‘All the time?’

She nodded again.

And he left—?’

‘Immediately after poor Roos’ death. I haven’t seen him again, and the only communication I’ve had from him was a letter in which he told me that I ought to earn my living and that I couldn’t depend on him. Now what can I do?’

Leon considered this problem for a long time.

‘I’ll be perfectly frank with you, Mr Gonsalez,’ she went on. ‘I am sure Uncle Cornelius collected what money there was in the house before he left. Mr Jones thinks that too.’

‘Think it—I know it!’ The hatchet–faced man was very emphatic. ‘I saw him coming out of the cellar with a big Gladstone bag. Old Roos was in the habit of keeping his key of the strongroom under his pillow; when he died it wasn’t there—I found it on the kitchen mantelpiece!’

When the man and the girl were leaving, Leon so manoeuvred the departure that she was the last to go.

‘Who is Jones?’ he asked, dropping his voice.

She was a little uncomfortable.

‘He was Uncle’s farm manager—he’s been very nice…a little too nice.’

Leon nodded, and as he heard Mr Jones returning, asked her immediate plans. She was, she said, staying the week in London, making preparations to earn her own livelihood. After he had taken down her address and seen the party to the door, he walked thoughtfully back to the common room where his two companions were playing chess—an immoral occupation for eleven o’clock in the forenoon.

‘She is very pretty,’ said Poiccart, not looking up from the piece he was fingering, ‘and she has come about her inheritance. And the man with her is no good.’

‘You were listening at the door,’ accused Leon.

‘I have read the local newspapers and I know that Mr Roos Malan died penniless—not sufficient to meet the demands of the Inspector of Taxes,’ said Poiccart as he checked Manfred’s king. ‘Both men were terrible misers, both are enormously rich, and both men have got Somerset House tearing their hair.’

‘And naturally,’ George Manfred went on, ‘she came to you to recover her property. What did the man want?’

He sat back in his chair and sighed.

‘We’re fearfully respectable, aren’t we? It was so easy ten, fifteen years ago. I know so many ways of making Cornelius disgorge.’

‘And I know one,’ interrupted Leon promptly. ‘And if all my theories and views are correct—and I cannot imagine them being anything else—Mr Drake will make the recovery.’

‘Mr Who?’ Poiccart looked up with a heavy frown.

‘Mr Drake,’ said Leon glibly; ‘an old enemy of mine. We have been at daggers drawn for ten years. He knows one of my most precious secrets, and I have lived in mortal terror of him, so much so that I contemplate removing him from his present sphere of activity.’

George looked at him thoughtfully; then a light dawned in his face.

‘Oh, I think I know your mysterious Mr Drake. We used him before, didn’t we?’

‘We used him before,’ agreed Leon gravely. ‘But this time he dies the death of a dog!’

‘Who is this Jones?’ asked Poiccart. ‘I’ve seen him at the Old Bailey—and he has a Dartmoor manner. You remember, George—an unpleasant case, eight–ten years ago. Not a fit companion for the pretty Leonora.’

Leon’s car took him the next morning to a famous market town, ten miles from Mr Malan’s farm. Here he sought and had an interview with the local inspector of taxes, producing the brief authorization which he had suggested Leonora should sign. The harassed official was both willing and anxious to give Leon all the information he required.

‘I have the devil of a job with these people. We know their main income, which arrives from South Africa every quarter, but they’ve got a score of other South African interests which we’re unable to trace. We knew that they are in the habit of receiving their money in cash. Both men have obviously been cheating the Revenue for years, but we could get no evidence against them. If Mr Malan keeps books, he also keeps them well out of sight! A few months ago we put a detective on to watch Cornelius, and we found his hiding place. It lies about twenty feet down a half–filled–in well in his garden.’

Leon nodded.

‘And it’s a solid rock chamber approached by a steel door. It sound like a fairy tale, doesn’t it? It’s one of the many in which Charles II was reputedly hidden, and the existence of the rock chamber has been known for

centuries. Cornelius had the steel door fitted, and as the well is right under his window and is fastened by an iron trapdoor and is, moreover, visible from the road, it's much more secure than any safe he could have in his house.'

'Then why not search the strong–room?' asked Leon.

The inspector shook his head.

'We've no authority to do that—the most difficult thing in the world to secure is a search warrant, and our department, unless it institutes criminal proceedings, has never applied for such an authority.'

Leon smiled broadly.

'Mr Drake will have to get it for you,' he said cryptically.

The puzzled official frowned.

'I don't quite get that.'

'You will get more than that,' said the mysterious Leon.

As Leon walked up the muddy cart–track, he became aware of the sound of voices, one deep and bellowing, one high and shrill. Their words, incoherent in themselves, were indistinguishable. He turned the corner of an untidy clump of bushes, and saw the two: Cornelius the giant, and the rat–faced Mr Jones, who was white with passion.

'I'm going to get you, you damned Dutch thief!' he cried shrilly. 'Robbing the orphan—that's what you're doing. You haven't heard the last of me.'

What Cornelius said was impossible to understand, for in his rage he had relapsed into Cape Dutch, which is one of the most expressive mediums of vituperation. He caught sight of Leon, and came striding towards him.

'You're a detective: take that man from here. He's a thief, a gaolbird. My brother gave him a job because he could get no other.'

The thin lips of Mr Jones curled in a sneer.

'A hell of a job! A stable to sleep in and stuff to eat that Dartmoor would turn up its nose at—not that I know anything about Dartmoor,' he added hastily. 'All that this man says is lies. He's a thief; he took the money from old Roos' safe—'

‘And you come and say “Give me ten thousand and I’ll tell Leonora not to trouble about the rest,” eh?’ snarled Cornelius.

Leon knew it was not the moment to tell the story of Mr Drake. That must come later. He made an excuse for his calling and then accompanied the man Jones back to the road.

‘Don’t you take any notice of what he said, mister, I mean about my trying to doublecross Leonora. She’s a good girl; she trusts me, she does, and I’m going to do the right thing by her…Old Roos led her the life of a dog.’

Leon wondered what kind of life this ex–convict would lead Leonora Malan and was quite satisfied that, whatever happened, the girl should be saved from such an association.

‘And when he says I was a convict—’ began Jones again.

‘I can save you a lot of trouble,’ said Leon. ‘I saw you sentenced.’

He mentioned the offence, and the man went red and then white.

‘Now you can go back to London, and I’m warning you not to go near Miss Leonora Malan. If you do, there is going to be trouble.’

Jones opened his mouth as if to say something, changed his mind and lurched up the road. It was later in the evening when Leon returned to tell the story of Mr Drake.

He reached the farm of Mr Cornelius Malan at nine o’clock. It was pitch dark; rain and sleet were falling, and the house offered no promise that his discomfort would be relieved, for not so much as a candle gleam illuminated the dark windows. He knocked for some time, but had no reply. Then he heard the sound of laboured breathing: somebody was walking towards him in the darkness, and he spun round.

‘Mr Cornelius Malan?’ he asked, and heard the man grunt, and then: ‘Who is it?’

‘An old friend,’ said Leon coolly, and though Cornelius could not see his face, he must have recognized him.

‘What do you want?’ His voice was shrill with anxiety.

‘I want to see you. It’s rather an important matter,’ said Leon.

The man pushed past him, unlocked the door and led the way into the darkness. Leon waited in the doorway until he saw the yellow flame of a match and heard the tinkle of a lamp chimney being lifted.

The room was big and bare. Only the glow of a wood fire burnt in the hearth, yet this apparently was the farmer's livings and sleeping room, for his untidy bed was in one corner of the room. In the centre was a bare deal table, and on this Leon sat uninvited. The man stood at the far end of the table, scowling down at him; his face was pale and haggard. 'What do you want?' he asked again.

'It's about John Drake,' said Leon deliberately. 'He's an old enemy of mine; we have chased one another across three continents before now, and tonight, for the first time in ten years, we met.'

The man was puzzled, bewildered. 'What's this to do with me?'

Leon shrugged. 'Only tonight I killed him.'

He saw the man's jaw drop. 'Killed him?'—incredulously.

Leon nodded. 'I stabbed him with a long knife,' he said, with some relish. 'You've probably heard about the Three Just Men: they do such things. And I've concealed the body on your farm. For the first time in my life I am conscious that I have acted unfairly, and it is my intention to give myself up to the police.'

Cornelius looked down at him.

'On my farm?' he said dully. 'Where did you put the body?'

Not a muscle of Leon's face moved.

'I dropped it down the well.'

'That's a lie!' stormed the other. 'It is impossible that it was you who opened the cover!…'

Leon shrugged his shoulders.

'That you must tell the police. They at any rate will learn from me that I dropped him down that well. At the bottom I found a door which I succeeded in opening with a skeleton key, and inside that door is my unhappy victim.'

Malan's lips were quivering.

Suddenly he turned and rushed from the room.

Leon heard the shot and ran through the door into the night…the next second he sprawled over the dead body of Cornelius Roos.

Later, when the police came and forced the cover of the well, they found another dead man huddled at the bottom of the well, where Cornelius had thrown him.

‘Jones must have been detected in the act of forcing the well, and been shot,’ said Leon. ‘Weird, isn’t it…after my yam about having buried a man there? I expected no more than that Cornelius would pay up rather than have the well searched.’

‘Very weird,’ said Manfred drily, ‘and the weirdest thing is Jones’ real name.’

‘What is it?’

‘Drake,’ said Manfred. ‘The police phoned it through half–an–hour before you came in.’

13. ‘The Englishman Konnor’

THETHREE JUST Men sat longer over dinner than usual. Poiccart had been unusually talkative—and serious.

‘The truth is, my dear George,’ he appealed to the silent Manfred, ‘we are fiddling with things. There are still offences for which the law does not touch a man; for which death is the only and logical punishment. We do a certain amount of good—yes. We right certain wrongs—yes. But could not any honest detective agency do as much?’

‘Poiccart is a lawless man,’ murmured Leon Gonsalez; ‘he is going fantee—there is a murderous light in his eyes!’

Poiccart smiled good–humouredly.

‘We know this is true, all of us. There are three men I know, every one of them worthy of destruction. They have wrecked lives, and are within the pale of the law…Now, my view is…’

They let him talk and talk, and to the eyes of Manfred came a vision of Merrell, the Fourth of the Four Just Men—he who died in Bordeaux and, in dying completed his purpose. Some day the story of Merrell the Fourth may be told. Manfred remembered a warm, still night, when Poiccart had spoken in just this strain. They were younger then: eager for justice, terribly swift to strike….

‘We are respectable citizens,’ said Leon, getting up, ‘and you are trying to corrupt us, my friend. I refuse to be corrupted!’

Poiccart looked up at him from under his heavy eyelids.

‘Who shall be the first to break back to the old way?’ he asked significantly.

Leon did not answer.

This was a month before the appearance of the tablet. It came into the possession of the Four in a peculiar way. Poiccart was in Berlin, looking for a man who called himself Lefevre. One sunny afternoon, when he was lounging through Charlonenburg, he called in at an antique shop to buy some old Turkish pottery that was exhibited for sale. Two large blue vases

were his purchase, and these he had packed and sent to the House with the Silver Triangle, in Curzon Street.

It was Manfred who found the gold badge. He had odd moments of domesticity, and one day decided to wash the pottery. There were all sorts of oddments at the bottom of the vases: one was stuffed with old pieces of Syrian newspaper for half its depth, and it needed a great deal of patience and groping with pieces of wire to bring these to light. Nearing the end of his task, he heard a metallic tinkle and, as he turned the jar upside down, there dropped into the kitchen sink a gold chain bracelet that held an oblong gold tablet, inscribed on both sides with minute Arabic writing.

Now it so happened that Mr Dorian of the Evening Herald was in the kitchen when this interesting find was made, and Mr Dorian, as everybody knows, is the greatest gossip–writer that ever went into Fleet Street. He is a youngish man of forty–something who looks twenty–something. You meet him at first nights and very select functions, at the unveiling of war memorials—he was a very good artilleryman during the war. Sometimes he called and stayed to dinner to talk over the old days on the Megaphone, but never before had he made professional profit out of his visits. ‘Poiccart will be indifferent—but Leon will be delighted,’ said Manfred as he examined the bracelet link by link. ‘Gold, of course. Leon loves mysteries and usually makes his own. This will go into his little story box.’

The little story box was Leon’s especial eccentricity. Disdaining safes and strong rooms, that battered steel deed–box reposed beneath his bed. It is true that it contained nothing of great value intrinsically: a jumble of odds and ends, from the torn tickets of bookmakers to two inches of the rope that should have hanged Manfred, each inconsiderable object had its attachment in the shape of a story.

The imagination of the journalist was fired. He took the bracelet in his hand and examined it.

‘What is it?’ he asked curiously.

Manfred was examining the inscription.

‘Leon understands Arabic better than I—it rather looks like the identification disc of a Turkish officer. He must be, or must have been, rather an exquisite.’

Curious, mused Dorian aloud. Here in smoky London a jar or vase bought in Berlin, and out of it tumbles something of Eastern romance. He asked it he might muse in print to the same purpose, and George Manfred had no objection.

Leon came back that evening: he had been asked by the American Government to secure exact information about a certain general cargo which was being shipped from lighters in the port of London.

‘Certain raw materials,’ he reported, ‘which could have caused a great deal of trouble for our friends in America.’

Manfred told him of his find.

‘Dorian was here—I told him he could write about this if he liked.’

‘H’m!’ said Leon, reading the inscription. ‘Did you tell him what this writing stood for? But you’re not a whale at Arabic, are you? There’s one word in Roman characters “Konnor”—did you see that? “Konnor?” Now what is “Konnor”?’ He looked up at the ceiling. ‘“The Englishman Konnor”—that was the owner of this interesting exhibit. Konnor? I’ve got it —”Connor”!’

The next evening, under ‘The Man in Town,’ Mr Dorian’s daily column, Leon read of the find, and was just a little irritated to discover that the thorough Mr Dorian had referred to the story box. If the truth be told, Leon was not proud of this little box of his; it stood for romance and sentiment, two qualities which he was pleased to believe were absent from his spiritual make–up.

‘George, you’re becoming a vulgar publicity agent,’ he complained. ‘The next thing that will happen will be that I shall receive fabulous offers from a Sunday newspaper for a series of ten articles on “Stories from my Story Box,” and if I do I shall sulk for three days.’

Nevertheless, into the black box went the bracelet. What the writing was all about, and where ‘the Englishman Konnor’ came into it, Leon refused to say.

Yet it was clear to his two companions that Leon was pursuing some new inquiry in the days that followed. He haunted Fleet Street and Whitehall, and even paid a visit to Dublin. Once Manfred questioned him and Leon smiled amiably.

‘The whole thing is rather amusing. Connor isn’t even Irish. Probably isn’t Connor, though it is certain that he bore that name. I found it on the roll of a very fine Irish regiment. He is most likely a Levantine. Stewarts, the Dublin photographers, have a picture of him in a regimental group. That is what I went to Ireland to see. There’s a big bookmaker in Dublin who was an officer in the same regiment, and he says “Connor” spoke with a foreign accent.’

‘But who is Connor?’ asked Manfred.

Leon showed his even white teeth in a grin of delight.

‘He is my story,’ was all that he would say.

Three weeks later Leon Gonsalez found adventure.

He had something of the qualities of a cat; he slept noiselessly; the keenest ear must strain to hear him breathing; he woke noiselessly. He could pass from complete oblivion to complete wakefulness in a flash. As a cat opens her eyes and is instantly and cold–bloodedly alert, so was Leon.

He had the rare power of looking back into sleep and rediscovering causes, and he knew without remembering that what had wakened him was not the tap–tap of the blind cords for, the night being windy, this had been a normal accompaniment to sleep, but rather the sound of human movement.

His room was a large one for so small a house, but there could never be enough ventilation for Leon, so that, in addition to windows, the door was wedged open…He snuffled picturesquely, like a man in heavy sleep, grumbled drowsily, and turned in the bed; but when he had finished turning, his feet were on the floor and he was standing upright, tightening the cord of his pyjamas.

Manfred and Poiccart were away for the weekend, and he was alone in the house—a satisfactory state of affairs, since Leon preferred to deal with such situations as these single–handed.

Waiting, his head bent, he heard the sound again. It came at the end of a whining gust of wind that should have drowned the noise—a distinct creak. Now the stairs gave seven distinct creakings. This one came from the second tread. He lifted his dressing–gown and drew it on as his bare feet groped for his slippers. Then he slipped out on to the landing, and switched on the light.

There was a man on the landing; his yellow, uncleanly face was upraised to Leon's. Fear, surprise, hateful resentment were there.

'Keep your hand out of your pocket, or I'll shoot you through the stomach,' said Leon calmly. 'It will take you four days to die, and you'll regret every minute of it.'

The second man, half–way up the stairs, stood stock–still, paralysed with fright. He was small and slim. Leon waved the barrel of his Browning in his direction, and the smaller figure shrank against the wall and screamed.

Leon smiled. He had not met a lady burglar for years.

'Turn about, both of you, and walk downstairs,' he ordered; 'don't try to run —that would be fatal.'

They obeyed him, the man sullenly, the girl, he guessed, rather weak in the knees.

Presently they came to the ground floor.

'To the left,' said Leon.

He stepped swiftly up to the man, dropped the Browning against his spine, and put his hand into the jacket pocket. He took out a short–barrelled revolver, and slipped it into the pocket of his dressing–gown.

'Through the doorway—the light switch is on the left, turn it.' Following them into the little dining–room, he closed the door behind him. 'Now sit down—both of you.'

The man he could place: a typical prison man; irregular features, bad–complexioned: a creature of low mentality, who spent his short periods of liberty qualifying for further imprisonment.

His companion had not spoken, and until she spoke Leon could not place her into a category.

'I'm very sorry—I am entirely to blame.'

So she spoke, and Leon was enlightened.

It was an educated voice—the voice you might hear in Bond Street ordering the chauffeur to drive to the Ritz.

She was pretty, but then, most women were pretty to Leon; he had that amount of charity in his soul. Dark eyes, fine arches of eyebrows, rather

full, red lips. The nervous fingers that twined in and out of one another were white, shapely, rather over–manicured. There was a small purple spot on the back of one finger, where a big ring had been.

‘This man is not responsible,’ she said, in a low voice. ‘I hired him. A—a friend of mine used to help him, and he came to the house one night last week; and I asked him to do this for me. That’s really true.’

‘Asked him to burgle my house?’

She nodded. ‘I wish you’d let him go—I could talk to you then…and feel more comfortable. It really isn’t his fault. I’m entirely to blame.’

Leon pulled open the drawer of a small writing–table, and took out a sheet of paper and an inkpad. He put them on the table before the girl’s unshaven companion.

‘Put your finger and thumb on the pad—press ‘em.’

‘Whaffor?’ The man was husky and suspicious.

‘I want your finger–prints in case I have to come after you. Be slippy!’

Reluctantly, the burglar obeyed—first one hand and then the other. Leon examined the prints on the paper, and was satisfied.

‘Step this way.’

He pushed his visitor to the street door, opened it, and walked out after him.

‘You must not carry a gun,’ he said. As he spoke his fist shot up and caught the man under the jaw, and the man went sprawling to the ground.

He got up whimpering.

‘She made me carry it,’ he whined.

‘Then she earned you a punch on the jaw,’ said Leon brightly, and closed the door on one who called himself, rather unimaginatively, ‘John Smith.’

When he returned to the dining–room, the girl had loosened the heavy coat she wore, and was sitting back in her chair, rather white of face but perfectly calm.

‘Has he gone? I’m so glad! You hit him, didn’t you? I thought I heard you. What do you think of me?’

‘I wouldn’t have missed tonight for a thousand pounds!’ said Leon, and he was telling the truth.

Only for a fraction of a second did she smile.

‘Why do you think I did this mad, stupid thing?’ she asked quietly. Leon shook his head.

‘That is exactly what I can’t think: we’ve no very important case on hand; the mysterious documents which figure in all sensation stories are entirely missing. I can only suppose that we’ve been rather unkind to some friend of yours—a lover, a father, a brother—’

He saw the ghost of a smile appear and disappear.

‘No; it isn’t revenge. You’ve done me no harm, directly or indirectly. And there are no secret documents.’

‘Then it’s not revenge and it’s not robbery; I confess that I am beaten!’

Leon’s smile was dazzling, and this time she responded without reservation.

‘I suppose I’d better tell you everything,’ she said, ‘and I’d best start by telling you that my name is Lois Martin, my father is Sir Charles Martin, the surgeon, and I shall be married in three weeks’ time to Major John Rutland, of the Cape Police. And that is why I burgled your house.’

Leon was amused.

‘You were—er—looking for a wedding—present?’ he asked, mildly sarcastic.

To his surprise, she nodded.

‘That is just what I came for,’ she said. ‘I’ve been very silly. If I’d known you better, I should have come to you and asked for it.’

Her steady eyes were fixed upon Leon.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘What is this interesting object?’

She spoke very slowly.

‘A gold chain bangle, with an identification disc….’

Leon was not surprised, except that she was speaking the truth. He jotted down the names she had given him. A gold bracelet,’ he repeated, ‘the property of—?’

She hesitated.

‘I suppose you’ve got to know the whole story—I’m rather in your hands.’

He nodded.

‘Very much in my hands,’ he said pleasantly. ‘It seems to me that you will get less discomfort in telling me now than in explaining the matter to a police magistrate.’

He was geniality itself yet she, womanlike, could detect a hardness in his tone that made her shiver a little.

‘Major Rutland knows nothing about my coming here—he would be horrified if he knew I had taken this risk,’ she began.

She told him, haltingly at first, how her older brother had been killed in Africa during the War.

‘That’s how I come to know Jack,’ she said. ‘He was in the desert, too. He wrote to me two years ago from Paris—said he had some papers belonging to poor Frank. He had taken them from his—from his body, after he was killed. Naturally, Daddy asked him to come over, and we became good friends, although Daddy isn’t very keen on—our marriage.’

She was silent for a little while, and then went on quickly:

‘Father doesn’t like the marriage at all, and really the fact that we are getting married is a secret. You see, Mr Gonsalez, I am a comparatively rich woman: my mother left me a large sum of money. And John will be rich, too. During the War, when he was a prisoner, he located a big gold mine in Syria, and that is what the inscription is all about. John saved the life of an Arab, and in his gratitude he revealed to him where the mine was located, and had it all inscribed on a little gold tablet, in Arabic. John lost it at the end of the War, and he’d heard nothing more of it until he read in the Evening Herald about your discovery. Poor John was naturally terribly upset at the thought that he might be forestalled by somebody who could decipher the tablet, so I suggested he should call and see you and ask for the bracelet back; but he wouldn’t hear of this. Instead, he’s been getting more and more worried and upset and nervous, and at last I thought of this mad scheme. Jack has quite a number of acquaintances amongst the criminal classes—being a police officer he very naturally can deal with them; and he’s done a lot to help them to keep straight. This man who came tonight

was one of them. It was I who saw him, and suggested this idea of getting into the house and taking the bracelet. We knew that you kept it under your bed—'

'Are you sure it was you and not Major John Rutland who thought out this burglary?'

Again she hesitated.

'I think he did in fun suggest that the house should be burgled.'

'And that you should do the burgling?' asked Leon blandly.

She avoided his eyes.

'In fun…yes. He said nobody would hurt me, and I could always pretend it was a practical joke. It was very stupid, I know, Mr Gonsalez; if my father knew…'

'Exactly,' said Leon brusquely. 'You needn't tell me any more—about the burglary. How much money have you at the bank?'

She looked at him in surprise.

'Nearly forty thousand pounds,' she said. 'I've sold a lot of securities lately —they were not very productive—'

Leon smiled.

'And you've heard of a better investment?'

She was quick to see what he meant.

'You're altogether wrong, Mr Gonsalez,' she said coldly. 'John is only allowing me to put a thousand pounds into his exploration syndicate—he isn't quite sure whether it is a thousand or eight hundred he will require. He won't let me invest a penny more. He's going to Paris tomorrow night, to start these people on their way; and then he is coming back, and we are to be married and follow them.'

Leon looked at her thoughtfully.

'Tomorrow night—do you mean tonight?'

She glanced quickly at the clock, and laughed.

'Of course, tonight.'

Then she leaned across the table and spoke earnestly.

‘Mr Gonsalez, I’ve heard so much about you and your friends, and I’m sure you wouldn’t betray our secret. If I’d any sense I should have come to you yesterday and asked you for the tablet—I would even pay a good sum to relieve John’s anxiety. Is it too late now?’

Leon nodded.

‘Much too late. I am keeping that as a memento. The enterprising gentleman who wrote the paragraph told you that it is part of my story collection—and I never part with stories. By the way, when do you give your cheque?’

Her lips twitched at this.

‘You still think John is a wicked swindler? I gave him the cheque yesterday.’

‘A thousand or eight hundred?’

‘That is for him to decide,’ she said.

Leon nodded, and rose.

‘I will not trouble you any further. Burglary, Miss Martin, is evidently not your speciality, and I should advise you to avoid that profession in the future.’

‘You’re not giving me in charge?’ she smiled.

‘Not yet,’ said Leon.

He opened the door for her, and stood in his dressing–gown, watching her. He saw her cross the road to the taxi rank, and take the last vehicle available. Then he bolted the door and went back to bed.

His alarm clock called him at seven, and he arose cheerfully, having before him work which was after his own heart. In the morning he called at a tourist agency and bought a ticket to Paris—it seemed a waste of time to go to the office of the High Commissioner for South Africa and examine the available records of the Cape Police; but he was a conscientious man. The afternoon he spent idling near the Northern and Southern Bank in Threadneedle Street, and at a quarter to three his vigil was rewarded, for he saw Major John Rutland descend from a cab, go into the bank, and emerge a few minutes before the big doors closed. The Major looked very pleased

with himself—a handsome fellow, rather slim, with a short–cropped military moustache.

Manfred came back in the afternoon, but Leon told him nothing of the burglary. After dinner he went up to his own room, took from a drawer an automatic, laid a few spots of oil in the sliding jacket, and loaded it carefully. From a small box he took a silencer, which he fixed to the muzzle. He put the apparatus into his overcoat pocket, found his suitcase, and came downstairs. George was standing in the hallway.

'Going out, Leon?'

'I shall be away a couple of days,' said Leon, and Manfred, who never asked questions, opened the door for him.

Leon was hunched up in a corner of a first–class carriage when he saw Major Rutland and the girl pass. Behind them, an unwanted third, was a tall, thin–faced man with grey hair, obviously the surgeon. Leon saw them from the corner of his eye, and as the train pulled out had another glimpse of the girl waving her hand to her departing lover.

It was a dark, gusty night; the weather conditions chalked on a board at the railway station promised an unpleasant crossing, and when he stepped on to the boat at midnight he found it rolling uneasily, even in the comparatively calm waters of the harbour.

He made a quick scrutiny of the purser's list. Major Rutland had taken a cabin and this, after the boat began to move out of harbour, he located. It was the aft cabin de luxe, not a beautiful apartment, for the ship was an old one.

He waited till the assistant purser came along to collect his ticket, and then: 'I'm afraid I've lost my ticket,' he said, and paid.

His ticket from Dover to Calais was in his pocket, but Major Rutland had not taken the Calais but the Ostend boat. He watched the assistant purser go into the cabin de luxe, and peered through the window. The Major was lying on a sofa, his cap pulled down over his eyes.

After the assistant purser had taken his ticket and departed, Leon waited for another half–hour; then he saw the cabin go dark. He wandered round the ship: the last light of England showed glitteringly on the south–western horizon. There were no passengers on deck: the few that the ship carried

had gone below, for she was tossing and rolling diabolically. Another quarter of an hour passed, and then Leon turned the handle of the stateroom door, stepped into the cabin and sent the light of his small torch round the room. Evidently the Major was travelling without a great deal of luggage: there were two small suitcases and nothing more.

These Leon took out on to the deck and, walking to the rail, dropped them into the water. The man's hat went the same way. He put the torch back into his pocket and, returning for the second time to the cabin, gently shook the sleeper.

'I want to speak to you, Konnor,' he said, in a voice little above a whisper.

The man was instantly awake. 'Who are you?'

'Come outside: I want to talk to you.'

'Major Rutland' followed on to the dim deck.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

The aft of the ship was reserved for second–class passengers, and this, too, was deserted. They made their way to the rail above the stern. They were in complete darkness.

'You know who I am?'

'Haven't the slightest idea,' was the cool reply.

'My name is Gonsalez. Yours, of course, is Eugene Konnor—or Bergstoft,' said Leon. 'You were at one time an officer in the—' He mentioned the regiment. 'In the desert you went over to the enemy by arrangements made through an agency in Cairo. You were reported killed, but in reality you were employed by the enemy as a spy. You were responsible for the disaster at El Masjid—don't try to draw that gun or your life will be shorter.'

'Well,' said the man, a little breathlessly, 'what do you want?'

'I want first of all the money you drew from the bank this afternoon. I've an idea that Miss Martin gave you a blank cheque, and I've a stronger idea that you filled that almost to the limit of her balance, as she will discover tomorrow morning.'

'A hold–up, eh?' Konnor laughed harshly.

'That money, and quick!' said Leon, between his teeth.

Konnor felt the point of the gun against his stomach, and obeyed. Leon took the thick pad of notes from the man, and slipped it into his pocket.

‘I suppose you realize, Mr Leon Gonsalez, that you’re going to get into very serious trouble?’ began Konnor. ‘I thought you’d probably decipher the pass —’

‘I deciphered the pass without any trouble at all, if you’re referring to the gold tablet,’ said Leon. ‘It said that “the Englishman Konnor is permitted to enter our lines at any moment of the day or night and is to be afforded every assistance,” and it was signed by the Commander of the Third Army. Yes, I know all about that.’

‘When I get back to England—’ began the man.

‘You’ve no intention of going back to England. You’re married. You were married in Dublin—and that was probably not your first bigamy. How much money is there here?’

‘Thirty or forty thousand—you needn’t think that Miss Martin will prosecute me.’

‘Nobody is going to prosecute you,’ said Leon, in a low voice.

He took one quick glance around: the decks were empty.

‘You’re a traitor to your country—if you have a country; a man who has sent thousands of the men who were his comrades to their death. That is all.’

There was a flash of fire from his hand, a guttural ‘plop!’ Konnor’s knees went under him, but before he reached the ground Leon Gonsalez caught him under the arms, threw the pistol into the water, lifted the man without an effort and heaved him into the dark sea….

When Ostend harbour came into sight, and the steward went to collect Major Rutland’s luggage, he found it had gone, and with it the owner. Passengers are very often mean, and carry their own luggage on to the deck in order to save porterage. The steward shrugged his shoulders and thought no more of the matter.

As for Leon Gonsalez, he stayed in Brussels one day, posted without comment the £34,000 in notes to Miss Lois Martin, caught the train to

Calais and was back in London that night. Manfred glanced up as his friend strode into the dining–room.

‘Had a good time, Leon?’ he asked.

‘Most interesting,’ said Leon.

THE END