Till the Clock Stops

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TILL THE CLOCK STOPS

BY J. J. BELL

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1917

THE PROLOGUE

On a certain brilliant Spring morning in London's City the seed of the Story was lightly sown. Within the directors' room of the Aasvogel Syndicate, Manchester House, New Broad Street, was done and hidden away a deed, simple and commonplace, which in due season was fated to yield a weighty crop of consequences complex and extraordinary.

At the table, pen in hand, sat a young man, slight of build, but of fresh complexion, and attractive, eager countenance, neither definitely fair nor definitely dark. He was silently reading over a document engrossed on bluish hand-made folio; not a lengthy document--nineteen lines, to be precise. And he was reading very slowly and carefully, chiefly to oblige the man standing behind his chair.

This man, whose age might have been anything between forty and fifty, and whose colouring was dark and a trifle florid, would probably have evoked the epithet of "handsome" on the operatic stage, and in any city but London that of "distinguished." In London, however, you could hardly fail to find his like in one or other of the west-end restaurants about 8 p.m.

Francis Bullard, standing erect in the sunshine, a shade over-fed looking, but perfectly groomed in his regulation city garb, an enigmatic smile under his neat black moustache as he watched the reader, suggested nothing ugly or mean, nothing worse, indeed, than worldly prosperity and a frank enjoyment thereof. His well-kept fingers toyed with a little gold nugget depending from his watch chain--his only ornament.

The third man was seated in a capacious leather-covered, easy chair by the hearth. Leaning forward, he held his palms to the fire, though not near enough for them to have derived much warmth. He was extremely tall and thin. The head was long and rather narrow, the oval countenance had singularly refined features. The hair, once reddish, now almost grey, was parted in the middle and very smoothly brushed; the beard was clipped close to the cheeks and trimmed to a point. Bluish-grey eyes, deepset, gave an impression of weariness and sadness; indeed the whole face hinted at melancholy. Its attractive kindliness was marred by a certain furtiveness. He was as stylishly dressed as his co-director, Bullard, but in light grey tweed; and he wore a pearl of price on his tie and a fine diamond on his little finger. His name was Robert Lancaster, and no man ever started life with loftier ideals and cleaner intentions.

At last the young man at the table, with a brisk motion, dipped his pen.

"One moment, Alan," said Bullard, and touched a bell-button.

A couple of clerks entered.

"Rose and Ferguson, you will witness Mr. Alan Craig's signature. All right now, Alan!"

The young man dashed down his name and got up smiling.

Never was last will and testament more eagerly, more cheerfully signed. The clerks performed their parts and retired.

Alan Craig seized Bullard's hand. "I'm more than obliged to you," he said heartily, "and to you, too, Mr. Lancaster." He darted over to the hearth.

The oldish man seemed to rouse himself for the handshake. "Of course, it's merely a matter of form, Alan," he said, and cleared his throat; "merely a matter of form. In ordinary times you would have been welcome to the money without--a--anything of the sort, but at present it so happens--"

"Alan quite understands," Bullard interrupted genially, "that in present circumstances it was not possible for us to advance even a trifle like three thousand without something in the way of security--merely as a matter of form, as you have put it. We might have asked him to sign a bill or bond; but that method would have been repugnant to you, Lancaster, as it was to me. As we have arranged it, Alan can start for the Arctic without feeling a penny in debt--"

"Hardly that," the young man quickly put in. "But I shall go without feeling I must meet grasping creditors the moment I return. Upon my word, you have treated me magnificently. When the chance came, so unexpectedly, of taking over Garnet's share and place in the expedition, and when my Uncle Christopher flatly refused to advance the money, I felt hopelessly knocked out, for such a trip had been the ambition of my life. Why, I had studied for it, on the off-chance, for years! I didn't go into a geographical publisher's business just to deal in maps, you know. And then you both came to the rescue--why I can't think, unless it was just because you knew my poor father in South Africa. Well, I wish he and my mother were alive to add their thanks--"

"Don't say another word, old chap," said Bullard.

"I will say just this much: if I don't come back, I honestly hope that will of mine may some day bring you the fortune I've been told I shall inherit, though, candidly, I don't believe in it."

"But the will is only a matter of--" began Lancaster.

Bullard interposed. "You will repay us from the profits of the big book you are going to write. I must say your publisher mentioned pretty decent terms. However, let's finish the business and go to lunch. Here you are, Alan!--our cheques for L1500 each."

Alan took the slips of tinted paper with a gesture in place of uttered thanks. He was intensely grateful to these two men, who had made possible the desire of years. The expedition was no great national affair; simply the adventure of a few enthusiasts whose main object was to prove or disprove the existence of land which a famous explorer had believed his eyes had seen in the far distance. But the expedition would find much that it did not seek for, and its success would mean reputation for its members, and reputation would, sooner or later, mean money, which this

young man was by no means above desiring, especially as the money would mean independence and--well, he was not yet absolutely sure of himself with respect to matrimony.

He regretfully declined Bullard's invitation to lunch. There were so many things to be done, for the expedition was to start only eight days later, and he had promised to take a bite with his friend Teddy France.

"Then you will dine with us to-night," Lancaster said, rising. "You must give us all the time you can possibly spare before you go. My wife and Doris bade me say so."

"I will come with pleasure," he replied, flushing slightly. Of late he had had passages bordering on the tender with Doris Lancaster, and but for the sudden filling of his mind with thoughts of this great adventure in the Arctic he might have slipped into the folly of a declaration. Folly, indeed!--for well he was aware that he was outside any plans which Mrs. Lancaster may have had for her charming and very loveable daughter. And yet the mention of her name, the prospect of seeing her, stirred him at the moment when the great adventure was looming its largest. Well, he was only four-and-twenty, and who can follow to their origins the tangling dreams of youth? One excitement begets another. Romance calls to romance. He was going to the Arctic in spite of all sorts of difficulties, therefore he would surely win through to other desires--however remote, however guarded. As a matter of fact, he wanted to be in love with Doris, if only to suffer all manner of pains for her sake, and gain her in the end.

He shook hands again with his benefactors.

"You'll be going to Scotland to see your uncle before you start, I suppose?" said Lancaster.

"Yes; I'll travel on Sunday night, and spend Monday at Grey House. You must not think that he and I have quarrelled," Alan said, with a smile. "It takes two to make a quarrel, you know, and I owe him far too much to be one of them. I'd have given in to his wishes had it been anything but an Arctic Expedition. But we shall part good friends, you may be sure."

"It's understood," Bullard remarked, "that he is not to be told of this little business of ours. As you know, Lancaster and I are his oldest friends, and he might not regard the business as we should like him to regard it."

"You may count on my discretion," returned the young man, "and I fancy Uncle Christopher will be too proud to ask questions. Well, I must really go."

When the door had closed, Bullard took up the document, folded it, and placed it in a long envelope.

"Lancaster!"

Lancaster did not seem to hear. He had dropped back into the easy-chair, his hands to the fire.

Bullard went over and tapped him on the shoulder, and he started.

"What's the matter, Lancaster?"

"Oh, nothing--nothing!" Lancaster sat up. "I feel a bit fagged to-day. I--I'm rather glad that bit of business is over. I didn't like it, though it was only a matter of--"

"Perhaps nothing; perhaps half a million--"

"'Sh, Bullard! We must not think of such a thing. Christopher may live for many years, and--"

"He won't do that! The attacks are becoming more frequent."

"--And with all my heart I hope the boy will return safely."

"And so say we all of us!" returned Bullard. "Only I like to be prepared for emergencies. After all, we can't be positive that Christopher will do the friendly to us when the time comes, and Alan being the only relative is certain to benefit, more or less. Our own prospects are not so bright as they were. Of course, you've run through a pile--at least, Mrs. Lancaster has done it for you--"

"If you please, Bullard--"

"Come in!"

A clerk entered, handed a telegram to Lancaster, and withdrew.

Bullard lounged over to one of the windows, and lit a cigarette. Presently a queer sound caused him to turn sharply. Lancaster was lying back, his face chalky.

"Fainted, good Lord!" muttered Bullard, and took a step towards a cabinet in the corner. He checked himself, came back and picked up the message. He read:

"Just arrived with valuable goods to sell. Shall I give first offer to Christopher or to you and Bullard? Reply c/o P.O., Tilbury. Edwin Marvel."

"Damnation!" said Bullard.

CHAPTER I

Despite its handsome and costly old furnishings, the room gave one a sense of space and comfort; its agreeable warmth was too equable to have been derived solely from the cheerful blaze in the veritable Adam's fireplace, which seemed to have provided the keynote to the general scheme of decoration. The great bay-window overlooked a long, gently sloping lawn, bounded on either side by shrubbery, trees, and hedges, terminated by shrubbery and hedges alone, the trees originally there having been long since removed to admit of a clear view of the loch, the Argyllshire hills, and the stretch of Firth of Clyde right down to Bute and the Lesser Cumbrae. Even in summer the garden, while scrupulously tidy, would have offered but little colour display; its few flower beds were as stiff in form and conventional in arrangement as a jobbing

gardener on contract to an uninterested proprietor could make them. And on this autumn afternoon, when the sun seemed to rejoice coldly over the havoc of yesterday's gale and the passing of things spared to die a natural death, the eye was fain to look beyond to the beauty of the eternal waters and the glory of the everlasting hills.

Turning from the window, one noticed that the brown walls harboured but four pictures, a couple of Bone etchings and a couple by Laguilermie after Orchardson. There were three doors, that in the left wall being the entrance; the other two, in the right and back walls, near the angle, suggested presses, being without handles. In the middle of the back wall, a yard's distance from the floor, was a niche, four feet in height by one in breadth by the latter in depth, a plain oblong, at present unoccupied. Close inspection would have revealed signs of its recent construction.

Near the centre of the room a writing-table stood at such an angle that the man seated at it, in the invalid's wheeled chair, could look from the window to the fire with the least possible movement of the head. You would have called him an old man, though his age was barely sixty. Hair and short beard were white. He was thin to fragility, yet his hand, fingering some documents, was steady, and his eyes, while sunken, were astonishingly bright. His mobile pale lips hinted at a nature kindly, if not positively tender, yet they could smile grimly, bitterly, in secret. Such was Christopher Craig, a person of no importance publicly or socially, yet the man who, to the knowledge of those two individuals now sitting at his hearth, had left the Cape, five years ago, with a moderate fortune in cash and shares, and half a million pounds in diamonds. And he had just told those two, his favoured friends and trusted associates of the old South African days, that he was about to die.

Robert Lancaster and Francis Bullard, summoned by telegraph from London the previous afternoon, had not been unprepared for such an announcement. As a matter of fact, they had been anticipating the end itself for months--long, weary months, one may venture to say. Yet Lancaster, who had been unfortunate in getting the easy-chair which compelled its occupant to face the strong, clear light, suffered an emotion that constricted his throat and brought tears to his eyes. But Lancaster had ever been half-hearted, whether for good or evil. He looked less unhealthy than on that spring morning, eighteen months ago, but the furtiveness had increased so much that a stranger would have pitied him as a man with nerves. To his host's calmly delivered intimation he had no response ready.

Bullard, on the other hand, was at no loss for words, though he allowed a few seconds--a decent interval, as they say--to elapse ere he uttered them. He was not the sort of fool who tosses a light protest in the face of a grave statement. If his dark face showed no more feeling than usual, his voice was kind, sympathetic, sincere.

"My dear Christopher," he said, "you have hit us hard, for you never were a man to make idle assertions, and we know you have suffered much these last few years. Nevertheless, for our own sakes as well as your own, we must take leave to hope that your medical man is mistaken. For one thing, your eyes are not those of a man who is done with life."

Christopher Craig smiled faintly. "Unfortunately, Bullard, life is done--or nearly done--with me."

Said Lancaster, as if forced--"Have you seen a specialist?"

The host's hand made a slightly impatient movement. "Let us not discuss the point further. I did not bring you both from London to listen to medical details. By the way, I must thank you for coming so promptly."

"We could not have done otherwise," said Bullard, fingering his cigar. "It is nearly two years since we saw you--but, as you know, that has been hardly our fault."

"Indeed no," Lancaster murmured.

"Go on smoking," said the host. "Yes; I'm afraid I became a bit of a recluse latterly. I had to take such confounded care of myself. Well, I didn't want to go out of the world before I could help it, and I was enjoying the quiet here after the strenuous years in Africa--Africa South, East, West. What years they were!" He sighed. "Only the luck came too late to save my brother." He was gazing at the loch, and could hardly have noticed Lancaster's wince which called up Bullard's frown.

Bullard threw his cold cigar into the fire and lit a fresh one with care. With smoke coming from his lips he said softly, "Your brother was devilishly badly treated in that land deal, Christopher. Lancaster and I would have helped him out, had it been possible--wouldn't we, Lancaster?"

Lancaster cleared his throat. "Oh, surely!"

"Thanks," said Christopher. "Of course we've gone over all that before, and I'd thought I had spoken of it for the last time. Only now I feel I'd die a bit happier if I could bring to book the man or men who ruined him. But that cannot be, so let us change the subject with these words, 'They shall have their reward.'"

"Amen!" said Bullard, in clear tones.

Lancaster took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Still gazing at the loch, Christopher continued--

"I will speak of the living--my nephew, Alan." He lifted his hand as though to check a contradiction. "I am well aware that you believe him dead, and I cannot get away from the fact that the wretched twopence-ha'penny expedition came home without him. But no member could assert that he was dead--only that he was lost, missing; and though I shall not live to see it, I will die in the firm belief of his return within a year."

For once Bullard seemed to have nothing to say, and doubtless he was surprised to hear his colleague's voice stammer--

"If you could give me any grounds for your belief, Christopher--"

"Men have been lost in the Arctic before now, and have not died."

"But Alan, poor fellow, was alone."

"He had his gun and some food. As you know, he was hunting with a man named Flitch when they got separated in a sudden fog."

"And all search proved vain," said Bullard.

"True. But there was an Eskimo encampment within a day's march," retorted Christopher, mildly.

"It had been broken up--"

"Yes; by the time the search party reached it. I may tell you that I have seen and questioned every member of the expedition excepting the man Flitch, who seems to have disappeared, and several admitted the possibility which is my belief." The pale cheeks had flushed, the calm voice had risen.

Bullard gave Lancaster a warning glance, and there was a pause.

"I must not excite myself," resumed Christopher, his pallor back again. "But the boy grew dear to me when, like other happenings in my life, it was too late. I was angry when he went, though I had done little enough to attach him to myself, and I cursed whomever it was that supplied him with the necessary funds. He had friends, I suppose, whom I did not know of. Served me right! But once he was gone my feelings changed. He had a right to make his own life. He had as much right to his ambitions as I"--a faint smile--"to my diamonds. Well, I'm always thankful for the few hours he spent here before his departure. The Arctic was not mentioned, but we parted in peace."

The speaker halted to measure five drops from a tiny phial into a wine-glass of water ready on his desk.

"You're overtaxing yourself," said Bullard compassionately.

"I'll rest presently."

With a grimace at the bitterness of the draught, Christopher Craig proceeded: "The day after he went I signed a deed of gift by which Alan became possessed of this house and all I possess"--he paused, turning towards his visitors--"in the way of cash and securities, less a small sum reserved for my own use. I wanted the boy to know my feeling towards him in a way that a mere will could not show them. However, it is no great fortune--a matter of fifty thousand pounds."

"Much may be done with fifty thousand pounds," remarked Bullard, as if rousing himself. "It is a generous gift, Christopher," he went on. "With the house, I presume you include all it contains." Bullard knew that his voice was growing eager in spite of him. "Naturally," he said, with a frank laugh, "we are curious to know what is going to become of the diamonds--eh, Lancaster?"

The man addressed smiled in sickly fashion.

"In what, I still trust, is the distant future," Bullard quickly added.

"Ah, the diamonds!" said Christopher tenderly. "I shall be sorry to leave them. A man who is not a brute must worship beauty in some form, and I have worshipped diamonds." He leaned over to the right, opened a deep drawer, and brought up an oval steel box enamelled olive green. It was fifteen inches long, twelve across, and nine deep. He laid it before him and opened it with an odd-looking key. It contained shallow trays, divided into compartments, each a blaze of light.

Bullard half rose and sat down again; Lancaster shivered slightly.

"In times of pain and depression I have found distraction in these vain things," said Christopher. "Give me a few sheets of wax and a handful of these, and time ceases while I evolve my jewel schemes. You may say the recreation costs me a good income. Well, I have preferred the recreation. At the same time, diamonds have risen in price since I collected mine." He shut the lid softly, locked it, and added impressively, "Six hundred thousand pounds would not purchase them to-day."

"Great Heavens!" escaped Lancaster; Bullard ran his tongue over dry lips.

"With one exception, you are the first to see them, to hear me mention them, since they left South Africa," said Christopher. "No, not even my nephew knows of their existence. My servant, Caw, is the exception, but he is ignorant of their value."

"Very handsome of you to trust us, I'm sure," Bullard said with well-feigned lightness. "I, for one, had never guessed the greatness of your fortune."

"I have trusted you with much in the past; why not now? And I grant that your interest in the ultimate destination of my diamonds is the most natural thing in the world. Incidentally, your friendship shall not go unrewarded." He waved aside Bullard's quick protest. "But I have grown whimsical in my old age, and you must bear with me." He smiled gently and became grave. "Ultimately my diamonds will be divided into three portions. But--and I emphasise this--nothing shall be done, nor will the diamonds be available for division, till the clock stops--in, I pray God, the presence of my nephew, Alan."

"Till the clock stops?" exclaimed Lancaster stupidly.

"The saying shall be made clear to you before long, Lancaster. And now I must make an end or I shall be giving my doctor more trouble."

With a sigh he pressed one of three white buttons under the ledge of the table. "You will forgive my handing you over to a servant. Caw will see you to your car. Farewell, Lancaster; my regards to your wife, my love to Doris. Farewell, Bullard; yet there are better things even than diamonds."

The door was opened. A middle-aged man in black, with clean shaven ascetic face, and hair the colour of rust, and of remarkably wiry bodily appearance stood at attention.

There was something in Christopher's sad smile that forbade further words, and the visitors departed. Lancaster's countenance working, Bullard's a mask.

The door was shut noiselessly. Christopher's hand fell clenched on the green box. His pallid lips moved.

"Traitors, hypocrites, money maniacs! Verily, they shall have their reward!" He reopened the box, took out all the five trays, and gazed awhile at the massed brilliance. And his smile was exceeding grim.

CHAPTER II

Within a few minutes the servant returned.

"The gentlemen have gone, sir, and Monsoor Guidet is ready," he said, then looked hard at his master.

The master appeared to rouse himself. "Tell Guidet to go ahead. He'll require your assistance, I expect. Stay!" He pointed to the diamonds. "Put them in the box, Caw."

The man restored the glittering trays to their places with as much emotion as if they had contained samples of bird-seed. When he had let down the lid--

"Your pardon, Mr. Craig, but won't you allow me to ring for Dr. Handyside now?"

"Confound you, Caw, do what you're told!"

"Very good, sir," said Caw sadly, moving off.

"And look here, Caw; if I'm crusty, you know why. And I shan't be bullying you for long. That's all."

Caw bowed his head and went out. On the landing he threw up his hands. "My God!" he said under his breath, "can nothing be done to save him?" For here was a man who loved his master better than himself. One wonders if Caw had ever forgot for an hour in all those twenty years that Christopher Craig had lifted him from the gutter and given him the chance which the world seemed to have denied him.

Shortly afterwards he entered the room with Monsieur Guidet. The two moved slowly, cautiously, for between them they carried a heavy and seemingly fragile object.

"Go ahead," said Christopher, "and let me know when it is finished." He closed his eyes.

Nearly an hour passed before he opened them in response to his servant's voice.

"Monsieur has now finished, sir."

He sat up at once. From a drawer he took a large stout envelope already addressed and sealed with wax.

"Caw, get on your cycle and take this to the post. Have it registered. And put a chair for Monsieur Guidet--there--no, nearer--that's right. Order a cab to take Monsieur to the steamer. He and I will have a chat till you return.... Monsieur, come and sit down."

As Caw left the room the Frenchman turned from his completed handiwork to accept his patron's invitation. He was a dapper, stout little man, merry of eye, despite the fact that a couple of months ago he and his family had been in bitter poverty. He smiled very happily as he took the chair beside the writing table. He was about to receive the balance of his

account, amounting, according to agreement, to two hundred pounds.

The work done was embodied in the clock and case which now filled, fitting to a nicety, the niche in the back wall. Outwardly there was nothing very unusual about the clock itself. A gilt box enclosing the mechanism and carrying the plain white face, the hands at twelve, occupied the topmost third of the case, which was of thick plate-glass bound and backed with gilt metal. There was no apparent means of opening the case. From what one could see, however, the workmanship was perfect, exquisite. The compensating pendulum alone was ornamented--with a conventional sun in diamonds, and one could imagine the effect when it swung in brilliant light. At present it was at rest, held up to the right wall of the case by a loop of fine silk passed through a minute hole in the glass, brought round to the front, and secured to a tiny nail at the edge of the niche; a snip--the thread withdrawn--and the clock would start on the work it had been designed to perform. The only really odd things about the whole affair were that the lowest third of the case was filled with a liquid, thickish and emerald green and possessing a curious iridescence, and that just beneath the niche was fixed a strip of ebony tilted upwards and bearing in distinct opal lettering the word:

DANGEROUS

"Well, monsieur," said Christopher Craig, opening cheque-book, "I suppose I can trust your clock to perform all that we bargained for. You will give me your word for that?"

"Mr. Craik, I give you my word of honour that the clock will go for one year and one day; that he will stop on the day appointed, within two hours, on the one side or the other, of the hour he was to start at; that he will make alarum forty-eight precise hours before he stop; that he will strike only at noon and at midnight; and that, when the end arrive, he will--"

"Thank you, monsieur."

"But more! I give you more than my word; the credit of the work is so much to me. I beg to take only one-half of the money now--the other half when you have seen with your own eyes--"

"Enough. I am in your hands, Monsieur Guidet, for the clock shall not be started until I am gone."

"Gone?" The little man looked blank.

"Your clock is there to carry out the wishes of a dead man."

"Ah!" Guidet understood at last. All the happiness vanished from his face. He regarded this man, who had chosen him from a number of applicants responding to an advertisement, as his benefactor, his saviour. "But not soon, not soon!" he cried with emotion.

Christopher was touched. The little man seemed to care, though their acquaintance was not three months old. Still, they had met almost daily in the room assigned to Guidet for his work, and the patron had taken an interest in the man as well as his genius.

"I cannot tell how soon, my friend," he said, "but we need not talk of it. Now tell me, Guidet, how much do I owe you?"

Guidet wiped his eyes. "One hundred and thirty pounds," he murmured, "and I give you a thousand thanks, Mr. Craik."

"A hundred and thirty--that is the balance due on the clock itself?" inquired Christopher, filling in the date.

The other looked puzzled. "On everything, Mr. Craik."

"Don't you charge for your time?"

Guidet smiled and spread his hands. "Ah, you are not so unwell when you can make the jokes! Two hundred pounds was the price, and I have received seventy of it and the grandest, best holiday--"

"Your wife and children have had no holiday," said Christopher, continuing his writing.

"They have been happy that I am no longer a failure. They shall have a little holiday now, my best of friends, and then I take the small share in the business I told you about. Oh, it is all well with us, all rosy as a--a rose! But you!" His voice trailed off in a sigh.

"I am only sorry I shall not be your first customer, Guidet." Christopher blotted the cheque and handed it across the table. "So you must oblige me by accepting instead what I have written there."

The little man read the words--the figures--and gulped. Then his arms went out as if to embrace the man who sat smiling so very wearily. "It is too much--too much!" he cried, almost weeping. "You are rich, but why--why do you give me five hundred pounds?"

"Perhaps," said Christopher sadly, "that you may remember me kindly." His hand, now shaky, went up to check the other's flow of gratitude. "I'm afraid I must ask you to go now. I must rest--you understand?"

Guidet rose. "So long as we live," he said solemnly, "my family and I will not forget. And if it would give you longer life, Mr. Craik, I swear I would put this"--he held up the cheque--"into the fire."

"I thank you," said Christopher gravely, and just then Caw came in. "And now farewell."

CHAPTER III

It was dusky in the room when Caw brought tea to his master. Fitful gleams from the fire touched the latter's face, which had grown haggard. The Green Box was open again.

"Never mind the lights for the present," he said, as the servant's hand went to the switch. "Give me a cup of tea--nothing more--and sit down." He pointed to the chair recently occupied by the Frenchman. "I have something to say to you, Caw."

As he placed the tea on the table Caw winced slightly. "Mr. Craig," he

said imploringly, "won't you have the doctor now?"

"Sit down," said Christopher a trifle irritably, "and pay attention to what I am about to say. Dr. Handyside," he proceeded, "cannot help me, and you can. In the first place, you have already given me your word to remain in my service for a year and a day after I am gone from here--in other words, until the clock stops."

"Yes, sir," said Caw in a low voice.

"And it is perfectly clear to you how and when you are to set the clock going?"

"By carefully cutting and removing the thread at the first hour of twelve following your--oh, sir, need you talk about it now?"

Christopher took a sip and set the cup down with a little clatter. "And in the event of my nephew, Mr. Alan Craig, returning within the year, you will serve him also as you would me, giving him all assistance and information in your power."

"Yes, sir."

"I have recommended you to him in a letter left with Mr. Harvie, the lawyer in Glasgow, to whom you registered the packet this afternoon. Mr. Harvie is acquainted with certain of my affairs, but not by any means all. It is not necessary that he should know all that you know or will know. I am leaving much to your discretion, Caw. You will find your instructions in this envelope.... Among other things, it is not my wish that you should live alone in this house, and until my nephew returns I have arranged that you shall have quarters in Dr. Handyside's house, and I do not doubt that you will make yourself useful there, helping him with his car and so on. If expedient, you may trust the doctor, but do not trouble him without grave cause. The passage will remain available, and you will make inspections of this house at intervals."

He paused for a moment, took another sip, and resumed. "Things may happen in this house, Caw; but you are not to think of that as more than a mere possibility, nor are you to consider yourself tied to the place. As a matter of fact, I would as soon have certain things happen as not, and, short of murder itself, I count on your avoiding or preventing any police interference. By the way, your own future is provided for."

Caw made an attempt to speak, but his master proceeded--

"There are two men whom it seems necessary to warn you against--the two who were here to-day."

"Sir," said Caw with sudden strength and warmth of voice, "I have long wished I might warn you against Mr. Bullard. Only a sort of instinct, sir, on my part, but I never could trust that man. As for Lancaster--"

"Your instinct was right. Lancaster is chiefly a fool, but Bullard is utterly rotten. You remember my younger brother, Caw?"

"Yes, sir"--rather awkwardly.

"Those two, particularly Bullard, brought him to ruin. They cheated him--legitimately of course! Mr. Alan is ignorant of the tragedy

surrounding the end of his father--his mother, too--and I hope he may remain so."

Surprise as well as indignation was in the servant's expression. "But, sir, you were quite friendly--"

"You shall see! You remember Marvel coming here three months ago?"

"Yes, I do--and I wondered at his impudence, the dirty--"

"He brought me the truth, anyway. I suspect his silence had already been bought by Bullard, but that would be nothing to Marvel's conscience. Well, he sold himself and certain papers to me. They proved that Bullard deliberately ruined my brother for his own profit, and Lancaster assisted, probably in ignorance."

"And--those two don't know that you know!" cried Caw. "Your pardon, sir, but it's a bit--exciting."

"They do not know. They do not suspect. While they were here to-day they could think of nothing but those diamonds. They are still thinking of diamonds--of that I am sure; and for the next year they will think of nothing else. And they were my trusted friends!"

"Do you mean the diamonds--there, in that box, sir?"

"Just so."

"They are of great value, no doubt."

"My diamonds are worth over half a million sterling."

Caw drew a long breath. "That box would be safer in the bank, sir," he said respectfully, at last.

"I daresay. But it is going to remain in this drawer." Christopher reached out, closed the lid, locked it, and handed the key to Caw. "Listen! Immediately you have set the clock going, you will go down to the shore and throw that key far into the loch. A duplicate key will be available when the clock stops. Now place the box in the drawer and shut the drawer, and then sit down again."

With a resigned expression Caw obeyed.

"Burglars," he muttered, as if to himself, resuming his seat.

"Yes; they may try it--after I am gone. But mark this, Caw, you are not responsible in this particular matter, and even should you be aware that the persons whom I have named are attempting burglary, you must not violently interfere in any way."

"Not interfere! Good God, sir, half a million and not interfere!" Caw peered at his master in the firelight "Why, Mr. Craig, you could not trust me to obey that order!"

"If I can trust you with the diamonds--and I tell you that no one knows of their existence here excepting those two men and yourself--I can surely trust you to obey--not a master's order, but a dying man's request. Later on you will understand everything. Give me your word that

you will do nothing violent to secure what you may consider the safety of that Green Box. ... Come, Caw."

"Will the diamonds--excuse the question--belong to Mr. Alan?"

"That is a question that shall be answered when the clock stops. Your word?"

"I am bound to trust to your wisdom, sir," said Caw, slowly. "I promise, sir. But if Mr. Bullard gives me a chance apart from diamonds, I hope--"

"I hope nothing may happen to Mr. Bullard before the clock stops," said Christopher firmly. "And now I think that is all. Other details you will find in your written instructions. Give me some of that medicine--five drops--quickly!"

Caw sprang up, ran to the door and switched on the shaded light over the table, ran back and administered the dose. Then with something like a sob he cried: "Mr. Craig, oh, my dear master, I can't stand it any longer," and pressed one of the white buttons.

"All right, Caw, all right," said Christopher kindly--and the glass fell from his fingers. He did not appear to notice the mishap. "I'm afraid Handyside will be annoyed, but I had to get the whole business finished."

"Don't exhaust yourself, sir. Just try to think that everything will be done as you wish."

"One thing more--failing the doctor, you may trust Miss Marjorie Handyside in an emergency. And, Caw, don't forget--"

The door in the back wall opened noiselessly; and a tall bearded man in tweeds, with the complexion of an outdoor worker, entered. Closing the door he came quickly to the table.

"Sorry to trouble you, Handyside," said Christopher with a faltering smile, "but the interfering Caw insisted."

The newcomer glanced a question at the servant.

"No, sir," said Caw. "No attack, but--"

"Have his bed made ready," interrupted the doctor, softly, and Caw left the room.

"I've been overdoing it a little," the invalid said, apologetically, "but it was in doing things that had to be done. I'll be all right presently, my friend.... I say, Handyside, I want you and your daughter to come along and take supper with me to-night. I haven't seen Marjorie for more than a week."

"She has been away at her sister's for a few days. Only came home an hour ago." Handyside let go his patient's wrist and moved over to the hearth.

As he stared into the fire his face betrayed disappointment and grave concern, but when he turned it was cheerful enough.

"Yes, Craig, you've overdone it to-day. However, I'll try to forgive you. Only I'd like you to see Carslaw again--to-morrow."

"He can't do anything more for me--anything you can't do."

"Possibly not. Still, we must remember that I've been out of harness for five years."

"I remember only that you have virtually kept me alive for the last two."

"Your constitution did that," the doctor replied untruthfully. "And you've been a good patient, you know, except once in a while."

"You've been a good friend, Handyside, though we met for the first time only five years ago. Yes; I'll see Carslaw to please you. Now there are several things I want to say to you--"

"They must keep," Handyside said firmly. "You are going to bed now."

"But I've asked you to fetch Marjorie--"

"That pleasure for her must keep also."

"Bed?" muttered Christopher. Then he looked straight at his friend, a question at his lips.

At that moment Caw reappeared.

"I'm ready," said his master. "I say, Handyside, what do you think of my new clock?" he asked as he was being wheeled to the door.

"I'll have a look at it later, Craig. It's not going yet."

"No"--gently--"not yet. Stop, Caw! Take me over to the window and put out the lights."

Caw looked towards the doctor, who nodded as one who should say, "What after all, can it matter now?"

At the window, for the space of five minutes, Christopher sat silent. A full moon shone clear on the still waters and calm hills. From across the loch twinkled little yellow homely lights. The evening steamer exhibited what seemed a string of pale gems and a solitary emerald.

"Almost as beautiful," he murmured at last, "as diamonds." He chuckled softly, then sighed. "Bed, Caw."

Within the hour he had a bad heart attack, and it was the forerunner of worse.

Precisely at midnight Caw stole into the sitting-room and released the pendulum. Thereafter he went down to the shore.

"Hard orders, dear master," he sighed, "but I'll carry them out to the letter."

CHAPTER IV

In his home at Earl's Gate, Kensington, Mr. Lancaster had made an indifferent meal of an excellently cooked and temptingly served breakfast. He was feeling dejected, limp, and generally "seedy" after the two nights in the train. He and Bullard had occupied a double sleeping berth, and Bullard had persisted in discussing many things, and thereafter slumber had proved no match against a host of assaulting thoughts. Perhaps he might have made a better meal had he been left to himself, but ever since the moment of his arrival--save in the brief seclusion of his bath--Mrs. Lancaster had harried his wearied mind with questions.

Mrs. Lancaster had learned several important things since wealth began to come to her husband, about ten years ago. She had learned to dress well, no less so than expensively; she had acquired the art of entertaining with an amount of display that just escaped vulgarity; and she had even learned to hold her tongue in company. (Possibly that was why Mr. Lancaster got so much of it.) She was a big, handsome creature, with a clear, dusky complexion and brown eyes that either shone with a hard eagerness or smouldered sullenly. And it may be well to state at once that she had no "past" worth mentioning, and no relatives, as far as one knows, to mention it. Lancaster had wooed her in a boarding-house in Durban, Natal. Always ambitious, though never so keenly so as when money began to become more abundant, she had never yet attained to the satisfaction of having as much money as she desired, or imagined she needed. As for social prominence, she spent recklessly on its purchase. But she was an unreasoning woman in other ways. She was proud of her daughter one day, jealous of her the next; it seemed as though she could not forgive Doris for growing up, and yet when Doris was barely eighteen she displayed the girl on all occasions and strove hard to force her into the arms of a horrible little middle-aged baronet. She still craved a title for Doris, no matter what moral and physical blemishes that title might decorate. More than once she had hinted to Bullard that he might purchase a "handle." And glancing sidelong at Doris, Bullard had more than once reflected that she would be worth the money--if only he had it to spare. For Bullard's wealth was not quite so unlimited as many supposed.

Mrs. Lancaster's eyes were now smouldering.

"Once more," she was saying, "you seem to have made a pretty mess of it."

With a slight gesture of weariness her husband replied: "Bullard was in charge, and I suppose he did his best."

"I am beginning to lose faith in Mr. Bullard. You and he had a great opportunity yesterday of learning definitely Christopher Craig's intentions regarding his diamonds, and now you come home with a rambling story about a crazy clock that's going to stop goodness knows when."

"Get Bullard to explain it to you, Carlotta. I'm dead beat. Two nights running in the train--"

Cutting him short, she continued--"You tell me that old Christopher is in a weak state physically and, you suspect, mentally. In these circumstances you ought surely to have been able to do two things--convince him of his nephew's death and--"

"He is wholly convinced that Alan will yet turn up. I can't understand--"

"Alan Craig will never turn up! Can't you take Mr. Bullard's word for that?"

"Bullard was not with the Expedition--"

She made a movement of impatience. "Well you ought to have gained Christopher's confidence as to the other matter. Why on earth didn't you find out what your share is going to be?"

"As I have already told you, Carlotta, he mentioned that the diamonds would be divided into three portions."

"Equal?"

"I assumed so. And he said Bullard and I would not be forgotten--'Reward' was the word he used."

"He may leave you a diamond to make a pin of! Aren't you sure of anything, Robert?"

"I felt sure at the time, but during the journey I began to have doubts. So had Bullard. I tell you I simply could not tackle the dying man about his affairs."

"He may live for a long time yet." She drew a breath of exasperation. "But the moment he dies you and Mr. Bullard must act on Alan's will. It simplifies matters, I should imagine, that the old man made a gift of that property instead of willing it. Unfortunately it may mean only L25,000 for us."

Lancaster sat up stiffly and looked at his wife.

"It means not a penny for us. That debt to the Syndicate must be paid with the first large sum I can lay hold of. You must clearly understand that, Carlotta. I have said the same thing before."

"You have! May I ask whether the Syndicate has asked you to pay the debt?"

He looked away, then downwards. "The Syndicate," he said slowly, "has not asked me to pay the debt, for the simple reason that the Syndicate does not know of it--yet." His breath caught, and he added huskily, "I have wanted to tell you this for some time, Carlotta."

"You mean--?" But she knew what he meant, had suspected it for months. Also, she knew why he had borrowed, or made free, with the money. Simply to give her what she asked for in cars, furs, and jewels. The thing had been done at a time when a certain mine was promising brilliantly. The mine was still promising, but not so brilliantly.

The incident, along with Lancaster's mental suffering and futile efforts to right himself, would make a story by itself.

"You are shocked, Carlotta?" he murmured shamefacedly, appealingly.

"Naturally!" But anger was the emotion she strove to suppress.

"I have paid bitterly in worry," he said, and there was a pause.

"You can hold on yet awhile?" she asked at last.

"Oh, yes, I think so. The danger is always there, but I'm not greatly pressed for money otherwise." Not "greatly" pressed, poor soul! "It's a case of conscience, you know," he stammered. "The thought of discovery is always with me, too."

"No thought, I presume, of your wife and daughter!"

"Carlotta!"

"Oh, Robert, what a blind fool you are! Why not have asked Christopher for the money, even if it had involved a confession? He would not see us ruined--Doris, at all events."

"No; I don't think he would. He sent his love to Doris. But Bullard was there yesterday, all the time, and I would not have _him_ guess--"

"You may be sure Mr. Bullard has guessed long ago."

"My God! do you think so?"

"Well, it doesn't much matter, does it? But I am certain if you had told Christopher and made the debt a hundred thousand you would have got the money."

"I don't know," he sighed, shaking his head. "Christopher was different yesterday, kind enough but different from the man I used to know--"

"Of course he was different. He's dying, isn't he?"

"Don't be so heartless."

"Don't be silly, my dear man!" Mrs. Lancaster said sharply. "Now, look here, Robert," she went on, "there is only one thing to be done. Say nothing to Mr. Bullard, but take the Scotch express to-night and go and see Christopher privately. I don't care what you tell him, but a public scandal--public disgrace--I will not have! Get the horrid thing settled, and let us go on as if nothing had happened until some of your shares go up and put you safely on your feet again."

He sat up as if trying to shake off the horror. "Carlotta," he said, "can't we contrive to--to live on less?" It was no new question.

"No, we can't," she answered in a tone of finality. "You will go to-night? Fortunately the people coming to dinner are a set of crocks. No bridge, and leave early. You can easily catch the midnight train."

"I will go," he said at last, "for your sake and Doris's."

"Good man!" she returned with sudden good humour, her eyes bright. "It will all come right--you'll see! Tell old Christopher that his little sweetheart of the old days--Doris, I mean; he never loved _me!_--is in danger of the workhouse and so forth, and ask for fifty thousand at least."

"It will end any chance we have of a share in the di--"

"'Sh!"

Doris came in. She was a tall girl with something of her mother's darkness, but she had the blue-grey eyes of her father and his finely-cut features. Of late a sadness foreign to youth had dwelt in her eyes, and her smile had seemed dutiful rather than voluntary. Otherwise she had not betrayed her sorry heart and uneasy mind. She carried herself splendidly, and she had good right to be called lovely.

"Mother," she exclaimed, and kissed her father, "why didn't you tell me he was to be home for breakfast?"

"Because I did not know, my dear"--which was untrue--"and, besides, you were very late last night. Better to have your rest out." Mrs. Lancaster rose. "Persuade your father to have a fresh cup of coffee while you take your own breakfast, I must 'phone Wilders about the flowers for to-night." She left the room.

Doris poured the coffee and milk and placed the cup at his hand, saying--

"You must be tired, dear, after two nights in the train."

"A little, Doris," he answered, endeavouring to make his voice sound cheerful.

"And worried, I'm afraid," she added tenderly.

"A little that way, too, perhaps. But one must hope that there's a good time coming, my dear."

The girl hesitated before she returned: "I want to say something, and it's difficult. I've wanted to say it for a long time." She paused.

"Say on," he said. "A horrid bill--eh?" He knew it was not. Doris had never asked him for money beyond her big allowance.

"Don't! It's just this: Is there anything in the world I could do, father, just to make it a little easier for you?"

It was unexpected, and yet it was like Doris. Tears came into his eyes.

"Forgive me," she went on quickly, "but sometimes I can't bear to see you suffering. I'd give up anything--"

Mrs. Lancaster entered quickly.

"Robert, Mr. Bullard is in the library--"

"Bullard!--now?"

"He must see you at once. He has been to the office, and there was a wire--"

Lancaster, who had risen, caught at the back of his chair. "Alan Craig--safe?" he said in a husky whisper.

Neither noticed the girl's sudden pallor, the light in her eyes.

"Nonsense!" the woman rapped out. "Christopher Craig--died last night!"

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Lancaster would have accompanied her husband to the library, but for once, and despite the shock he had just suffered, he showed some firmness.

"I will see Bullard alone," he said, and left her in the hall.

He entered the library, closed and locked the door, and drew the heavy curtain across it. But there his spirit failed him, and he seemed to grope his way to his familiar chair.

Without a word Bullard put the telegram into his hands. It had been sent off at 8 a.m., the hour of opening for the local post office. It was addressed to both men, and was brief:

Mr. Craig died nine last night. Funeral private.--Caw.

"Caw must have had instructions," remarked Bullard presently. "One wonders how much Caw knows about his master's affairs."

Possibly Lancaster did not hear. He kept on staring at the message that had closed the door on his last hope. Carlotta's suggestion, or rather command, had been far from grateful to his inclinations, yet it had forced him towards the less of two evils, and for a few minutes he had imagined himself with Christopher's cheque in his pocket, immediate salvation and peace assured whatever it might cost him eventually. And now this telegram!

Impatiently Bullard touched him on the arm.

"Look here, Lancaster!--there is a train from St. Pancras at eleven, and it's now past ten. Pull yourself together."

"St. Pancras--eleven? To-night?" Lancaster checked himself.

"No, this morning! We shall be in Glasgow at eight, and a good car will run us down under a couple of hours.... Lancaster, for Heaven's sake, wake up! Can't you take in the situation? Listen! Point one: We saw the diamonds yesterday. Point two: Christopher died suddenly, sooner than even he expected, and the diamonds, in all probability, have not left the house--if he ever intended to send them elsewhere. They may even be still on the table or in the drawer! Point three: The sooner we discover their whereabouts the better, for if they are in the house we must act on Alan's will at once, though I'd have avoided that if possible. Alan knew nothing about the diamonds. Christopher distinctly stated that no one knows about them excepting ourselves and his servant. Well, if necessary, we must manage Caw, somehow. Now--"

"But--the clock--"

"Oh, damn the clock--mere tomfoolery! As for Alan's return, if you persist in doubting what I have already told you"--Bullard lowered his voice--"I shall be forced to introduce to you the man who--who saw Alan

Craig die."

"Die!"

"Don't get hysterical. At this moment the one thing that matters is that we locate or lay hands on that green box."

"But I--I can't think to go prowling into Christopher's house, and he--"

"Don't think; I'll do all that's necessary in that way, and we shall have plenty of time for talk in the train. Now I want your cheque--open--for five hundred pounds. I'm going to draw the same amount on my own. We may have to buy things--Caw, for instance. Don't argue. We've got to catch that train, and I've got to go to the bank first."

Lancaster sat up. "Bullard," he said hoarsely, "I won't have anything to do with this beastly business."

Bullard smiled. "Very well, Lancaster," he said pleasantly; "I'll take your cheque for twenty-four thousand and seventy-five pounds."

"My God!" It was the sum he owed the Syndicate.

Moments passed, and then with a white face he got up and went feebly to the writing table.

* * * * *

In the last hour of the journey they dined. Bullard ordered champagne, and saw to it that his companion's glass was kept charged. He was not a little afraid of a general collapse on Lancaster's part, but if such were imminent, the wine averted it. The physician, however, took little of his prescribed medicine.

A car, ordered by telegraph, awaited them at the Glasgow terminus. Bullard, who was known to the hirers, dismissed the chauffeur and took the driving seat. He glanced up at the big clock, and remarked to Lancaster, clambering in beside him, that they ought to reach their destination by ten.

The car rolled out of the station down the declivity into the Square, thence into Glasgow's longest street, then swarming with pedestrians and traffic.

"Damn it!" exclaimed Bullard, "the air's frosty. We'll meet with fog presently."

He was right. They met it before they were clear of the city, and over the twenty miles that followed it lay thick, blanketing the river and countryside. Bullard was a seasoned but not a reckless driver; besides he was no more than acquainted with the road. He drove cautiously, his impatience escaping now and then in curses. They were nearing Helensburgh when they came almost abruptly into clear weather. The sky was cloudless, starry.

"This is better," said Bullard, "but I'm afraid it'll be a case of routing the estimable Caw from his virtuous couch."

Lancaster struggled out of his stupor of weariness. "Are we nearly

there?"

"Hardly, but we can let her go now. I say, don't sleep; or you'll be too stiff for anything. Think over what I told you in the train; don't talk."

Five minutes later they were speeding up the Gareloch; still later, down the west side; then through the village of Roseneath, over the hill into Kilcreggan; then round the point and up Loch Long side....

At the last, as it seemed, of the houses Bullard slowed down.

"Aren't we going too far?" Lancaster inquired in a voice unnecessarily low.

"You are no observer," the other returned pleasantly, "or you would have remembered that there are here first a small wood and then a biggish field, alter which we come to a couple of solitary houses, the further and larger being Christopher's. The other belongs to a doctor--retired, though I believe he has attended our old friend. As it may not be advisable to advertise our call more than we can help, we are going to run the car into the wood--there's a sort of track--and make our approach on foot. We can do with the exercise."

Within five minutes they started briskly along the deserted road.

"No need to walk on tiptoe," said Bullard with a laugh. "Hardly any one living here at this time of year. Don't let your nerves get the upper hand. We're not going to do anything sensational, you know. Cold, isn't it? We shall begin by requesting the amiable Caw to serve drinks."

"Don't jest, Bullard. I'm honestly hoping that the Green Box was somehow put away into safety."

"If not, we must rectify the error."

Lancaster sighed. "If the box is there, do you mean to--to--"

"'Pinch' is possibly the word you are hunting for. Expressive if not pretty. Well, it will all depend on circumstances."

"Bullard, I wish to say that I refuse to take more of the diamonds than will just pay my debts."

"A thousand thanks, old chap, but I really cannot accept such generosity." Bullard threw out his hand. "Yonder are the houses, and you will perceive that the doctor has not yet retired--to bed. Christopher's, however, looks less hospitable. Never mind! We can take turns at pushing the button."

"Bullard, for Heaven's sake, let us respect the--the dead."

"And let us refrain from hypocrisies. Come along, man!"

In silence they came to the gates, where Bullard spoke--

"Now remember, all you've got to do is to follow my lead, and not take fright at anything. Caw may not be alone in the house. It is even possible that he may have the company of some wretched lawyer fellow who has been nosing around all day. Come, buck up! You'll feel fitter after a

drink. Allons!"

Taking Lancaster by the elbow, he led him up the gravel path, leaves rustling about their feet. They mounted the three broad steps to the closed outer door, and, with a muttered "Here's luck!" Bullard rung the electric bell.

"Good!" he exclaimed a few seconds later, as a flood of light poured from the fan-light.

They heard the inner door being opened; then with the minimum of noise, a large key was turned, and half of the outer door swung inwards. The late Mr. Craig's servant, in his customary black lounge suit, stood there regarding them quite calmly.

Bullard had expected at least a word of astonishment, so that there was a little pause until his own words arrived.

"Good evening, Caw," he said gravely. "We very much regret to disturb you at this hour, and at this tragic time, but our business is of the utmost importance. May we have a word with you?"

Still silent, the servant stood aside, and they entered.

Said Bullard--"I need not say that we were both greatly shocked by your wire this morning. I trust our old friend did not suffer much."

"Too much, sir," answered Caw quietly, turning from closing the door. His countenance had a bleak look; his eyes were heavy. He stepped past them and opened a door on the right, switching on the lights inside. "This way, if you please, gentlemen."

Lancaster showed a momentary hesitation, or confusion, but Bullard touched his arm and he accepted the invitation.

Caw followed them a couple of paces into the room and stood &t attention. The two visitors remained standing, their hats in their hands.

Bullard had foreseen a hundred difficulties, but strangely enough, he had never thought of not being admitted to the right room. Nevertheless, his chagrin was not apparent.

"A few words will explain our unseasonable call," he said pleasantly. "Our visit yesterday afternoon was partly of a business nature, and we brought for Mr. Craig's inspection a number of documents which, after perusal, he returned to us--as it seemed at the time. But in the train, late at night, we discovered we were one short. And that document is of such vital importance that we left London again this morning, and have regretfully disturbed you now. As a matter of fact, it was a pale green share certificate in our joint names--Mr. Lancaster's and mine--and as we have sold the shares and have to deliver them two days hence, you will probably understand the necessity of recovering it immediately. Possibly you have come across such a document in the room upstairs?"

"No, sir."

"Ah! I suppose Mr. Craig's legal man was here today?"

"No, sir."

"Then nothing has been disturbed?"

"No, sir."

"You will, I hope, excuse these questions, Caw? We are considerably harassed about the matter. Will you tell us whether there were many loose papers on Mr. Craig's table last night?"

"None, sir."

"Then he must have tidied up after we left?"

"Yes, sir."

Bullard gave a tiny cough and glanced at Lancaster, who immediately said in a somewhat recitative fashion:

"I stick to my theory, Bullard, that Mr. Craig, in placing some of his own papers in a green metal box, placed ours along with them."

Bullard turned to the servant with a frank look of appeal. "A green metal box. Can you help us, Caw?"

It was on Caw's tongue to reply "No, sir." But in that moment, as it does with most of us at times, vanity pushed aside discretion. "Yes, sir," he answered. "I was the last to see inside that box, closing it at Mr. Craig's request, and I can assure you there were no papers in it."

"Wrong again, Lancaster!" Bullard lightly remarked. Then gravely--"The matter is so serious, Caw, that I must ask you who has charge of the papers and so on upstairs?"

"I, sir."

"And to whom are you responsible?"

"My master and Mr. Alan Craig--till the clock stops, sir."

After a moment's pause Bullard said--"Yes, of course, we are aware that all here was gifted to Mr. Alan; also Mr. Craig mentioned the clock. But now, would you have any objections to taking us upstairs, on the chance that our document is lying about where we were sitting?"

Caw considered quickly. To his mind, their story had been damned by the mention of the Green Box; at the same time, he was quite aware that they had only to persist in their story to obtain legal authority to search the room upstairs, and his master had commanded "no police interference." He felt pretty confident, too, that they would hardly attempt to play the burglar game in his presence, but he was curious to see how far they would go, and he was not unarmed.

"Be so good as to follow me, gentlemen," he said in his stiff way, and led them in the desired direction.

The master's room, though fireless, was warm. In silence they entered, their footfalls soundless on the heavy carpet.

Bullard halted in front of the clock with its flashing pendulum. "Is this

what he spoke of," he enquired softly, "and when does it stop?"

The servant cleared his throat. "A year to-night, sir."

"Ah! ... And why this--and this?" He pointed first to the ebony slip, then to the green fluid.

"To prevent its being interfered with; also, no doubt to protect the jewels in the pendulum."

"Is it the liquid that is dangerous?"

"So I understand, sir."

"Poison?--explosive?"

"I could not say, sir."

Bullard turned to Lancaster, who had sunk into a chair, then back to the servant.

"I say, Caw," he said, "could you possibly get Mr. Lancaster something to drink? He's knocked up with the travelling, and it's a bitter night outside. I could do with something myself."

"Very good, sir," came the reply, without hesitation, and Caw went out, closing the door behind him.

"Now," whispered Bullard, and made straight for the writing table, taking from his pocket an instrument of shining steel.

But it was not needed. The deep drawer opened obediently, sweetly.

"Lancaster, we've got it first time!" He lifted out and placed the Green Box on the table. "The diamonds!" Lancaster got up with a jerk and shudder. "Quick! Look in the other drawers for the keys."

All the other drawers were locked.

"Then we must take the whole thing."

"Good Heavens! We can't do that! How can--"

Bullard darted to the door and listened. After a moment he turned the handle gingerly. Then he grinned.

"I'm hanged," said he, "but the artful Caw has locked us in!"

"He suspects us!"

"Can't help it." Bullard sped to the bay window and drew aside one of the heavy curtains.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed.

Christopher Craig had had a craze for things that worked silently and easily. Bullard lifted the heavy sash with scarce a sound.

"Switch off the lights and come here!" he ordered. "Don't fall over

things and make a row."

When Lancaster joined him Bullard was leaning half out of the window, directing the ray from an electric torch on the ground below. An incessant murmuring came from the loch, filling their ears.

"Lancaster, could you drop that height?"

"Oh, God, no!"

"There's a great heap of gathered leaves there--see! Think! Six hundred thousand pounds!"

"No, no! If one of us got hurt--"

"Perhaps you're right. There nothing for it but to drop the box and collect it when we get out. 'Sh! did you hear something just now?"

Lancaster started and caught his head a stunning blow on the sash. At the same time he inadvertently knocked the torch from the fingers of Bullard, who was going to flash it into the darkness behind them.

"Idiot!" muttered Billiard. "Don't move till I fetch the box." He stole across the floor, feeling his way.

Lancaster, nursing his head, waited--waited until a gasped expletive reached his ears--

"Damnation!" Then--"Quick! Close the window, draw the curtain!" The speaker blundered to the electric switch.

Fumblingly, Lancaster obeyed, then turned to face a blaze of light, Bullard, white with fury and dismay, and the writing table with nothing on it.

CHAPTER VI

Next moment, his wits in action again, Bullard made for the table, closed the deep drawer, and threw himself on an easy chair, hissing at the gaping Lancaster, "Sit down, you fool!"

Lancaster collapsed on the couch as Caw, bearing a salver with decanters, a syphon, and glasses, entered the room.

"Your doors open quietly enough," remarked Bullard.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Craig disliked unnecessary noise." He presented the salver to Lancaster, who mixed himself a brandy and soda with considerable splutter.

While he was doing so, Bullard produced from his breast pocket a pale-green folded paper--a hotel bill, as a matter of fact--and gaily waved it, crying--"You see, we have found it, Caw, without much trouble!"

"In your pocket, sir?"

"On this chair, which I was sitting on yesterday."

"Indeed, sir! Then you are quite satisfied, sir?"

"Perfectly. By the way, Caw--no, I'll take whiskey--are you aware that the stones in that pendulum over there are worth a couple of thousand pounds?"

"If you say so, sir."

"Are you interested in diamonds, Caw?"

"Very much, sir--from an artistic point of view, sir."

"Their value does not interest you?"

"It does not excite me, sir."

"A capital answer! You have seen Mr. Craig's collection?"

"Frequently, sir."

Bullard took a bundle of notes from his pocket. "I offer you ten pounds to guess correctly the value of the collection."

"Six hundred thousand pounds, sir.... Thank you, sir." With supreme stolidity Caw presented the salver as a waiter might do for his tip.

Though taken aback, the loser laughed. He took a long drink, and laughed again.

"Excuse me, sir," said Caw, "but my master is still in the house."

Lancaster started, and took a hasty gulp, spilling a little.

"I beg your pardon--and his," said Bullard gravely. "But I am not often 'had.' Now, look here, Caw; I have still nine hundred and ninety pounds here. They are yours, if you can tell me where the collection is at the present moment."

The topmost thought in Caw's mind then was that the brutes might have had the decency to have waited until his master was laid in the grave. He felt helpless, powerless. He could not doubt that Bullard was playing with him. And in view of the promise to his master he could do nothing to prevent the crime, the desecration as he felt it to be. He could do nothing but look on in silence while they searched, until they found--But stay! he might as well despoil the spoilers when he had the chance.

"I will take your money, sir," he said, in an odd voice. "Look in the bottom right-hand drawer in the writing table."

Bullard's eyebrows rose. Then he got up and, with his eyes on the servant, opened the empty drawer.

Caw was within an ace of dropping the salver. After a moment he carried it to a side table and set it down with a small crash. Turning, he looked searchingly round the room. His gaze stopped at the curtain; he thought he understood. They had had an accomplice outside! ... He seemed to glide

across to Bullard, and Bullard found himself looking into the barrel of a stout revolver.

"Out o' the house, the pair o' ye," he ordered hoarsely, "or, by God, I'll forget the holy dead!"

"But look here--"

"Not a word! Take your hats and go! You've got what you came for--"

"Listen, you madman!" Bullard held up a hand, the one with the notes in it.

"Thanks!" With a flash-like movement Caw nipped away the notes. "You've got to pay something!"

Springing round behind Bullard, he shoved the cold steel into the nape of his neck. "March! and you, too, Mr. Lancaster. Take your friend's hat!"

Ignoring his colleague's gaze, which had moved suggestively from himself to the fire-irons, Lancaster obeyed and made for the door.

"You'll be devilish sorry," began Bullard, beside himself--

"Another word, and you'll lose one ear--to begin with. March!"

Sullenly Bullard moved forward. Not until he was in the garden did he attempt speech, and then his voice was thick, though fairly under control.

"Well, my man," he said, "you've got yourself into a nasty hole. Robbery, with a revolver in your hand, is rather seriously regarded by the law. But as you have acted on impulse and misapprehension, I am disposed to give you a chance. Restore those notes--"

"Looks like being a wet night," said Caw, and shut the outer door.

When he had made it fast he switched off the lights in the hall and went upstairs. In his master's room he wavered, and his eyes rested longingly on the decanters, for he was feeling the reaction. But he was a good servant still, and it would be "hardly the thing" to take a dram there and then. Yet he forgot the conventions of service when, a moment later, he sank upon a chair and bowed his head on his master's table, sick at heart, sore in pride. He had been so easily tricked! And yet what difference would it have made if they had walked out of the room with the Green Box in their possession? But he was very sure they would not have dared so greatly, unless, perhaps, with force of arms--in which case, despite all promises, he knew he would have resisted. It never occurred to Caw to doubt his master's sanity, but now he began to wonder what had possessed Mr. Craig in regard to the Green Box. Six hundred thousand pounds! He seemed to see his master seated at the table, calmly naming the stupendous sum--and in the same instant he realised that he himself was sitting in his master's place. He sprang up, and almost fell over the open drawer. He stooped to close it, straightened up with an exclamation, only to drop to his knees, staring, staring at--the Green Box! Suddenly he gave a short chuckle, rose, and made for the door in the back wall.

Ere he reached it, it opened. A girl came in.

He was taken aback, and she was first to speak.

"Would you mind shaking hands?" said she.

"Miss Handyside, was it you?" he cried, taking her hand with diffidence.

She nodded. "At least, I suppose so, for it all happened so quickly that I'm still in a state of wonder."

"It was splendid, miss! I shall never be able to thank you."

"I couldn't help doing it, though I'm not used to adventures. It was all done on an impulse."

"Woman's wit, miss, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"Well, I was in the dark in more senses than one, but the proceedings of those two gentlemen were so peculiar, to say the least of it, that I felt justified in playing the spy."

"When did you arrive on the scene, miss?" Caw enquired, removing his admiring glance. For several years he had adored the doctor's daughter--from a strictly artistic point of view, as he would have explained it--and undoubtedly Marjorie had her attractions, though it would be difficult to analyse and tabulate them. A Scot with more perception than descriptive powers would have called her bonny. To go into brief detail, she had nut-brown hair, eyes of unqualified grey, a complexion suggesting sea-air, splendid teeth in a humorously inclined mouth, and a nicely rounded chin. Very few people have beautiful noses; on the other hand, not the most beautiful nose will redeem an otherwise unattractive countenance, whereas an ordinary nondescript nose in a charming face simply becomes part of it. Marjorie's was nondescript, but did not turn up or droop excessively. Without being guilty of stoutness, she lacked the poorly nourished look of so many young women of the day.

"I must explain why I arrived at all," she said, in answer to Caw's question. "I came with a message from the doctor--he twisted his ankle in the dark--not seriously, but quite badly enough to prevent his coming along himself. Well, when I reached the door I noticed from a thread of light that it was not absolutely shut--"

"My fault, miss. I was just about to come along for the night when the ring came."

"Then I heard voices--faintly--but clearly enough for me to judge they were those of strangers, and I was going to go back when I heard a voice say 'Lancaster, we've got it first time!' I'm ashamed to say my curiosity was too much for me--"

"Thank God for female curiosity, miss, if you'll excuse my saying so."

She checked a laugh. "You know how quietly the door works, I switched off the light behind me and opened it slightly--all trembles, I assure you--and looked in. The younger man was lifting a greenish box from a drawer to the writing-table, and the other man seemed half-paralysed with nervousness." She proceeded to relate what the reader already knows up to the episode of the window. "Then, with my heart in my mouth, I opened the door wide and stole in. The faint light from the water guided me to the table, but I almost lost my way going back with the box. I

think they did hear something, but I was in safety by the time they could have turned their light into the room. But now I had closed the door tight, and could hear no more except indistinct voices, among which I fancied I heard yours. You were talking angrily, I think. And after a while there was a silence, and I waited and waited until I could wait no longer. Is it true," she asked abruptly, "that there are sixty thousand pounds' worth--"

"Six hundred thousand pounds, miss."

"Oh! ... But why was it not in a safe place? And who were those men? And what--"

"It will be necessary," said Caw, as one coming to a decision, "to tell you all about it, Miss Handyside. My master said I might trust you. It's too much," he added, "for me to carry alone. And if you think the doctor--"

"Goodness!" she exclaimed; "he'll be wondering what has come over me--and I've forgotten to give you his message! It was just to tell that he thought it was time you were leaving here for your new quarters."

"Very good, miss. I'll come now."

"But are you going to leave the box there?"

"Got to--master's orders."

"Extraordinary! It's locked, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss; and last night, or, rather, this morning, at 12:15 by the clock, I threw the key into the loch--master's orders."

"You are sure the diamonds are in it now?"

"I was the last to see them and shut them in--master's orders."

"Oh, I can't take in any more! Let us consult the doctor at once."

Presently they passed out by the way the girl had entered, closing the door behind them. They were at the top of a narrow and rather steep staircase of many steps covered with rubber. Descending they were in a tunnel seven feet high and four in width, so long that in the distance the sides seemed to come together. Roof and walls were white; light was supplied from bulbs overhead. The atmosphere was fresh, though the means of ventilation were not visible. Here again they trod on rubber. Christopher Craig had caused the tunnel to be constructed as soon as he realised the truth about his malady; but it was primarily the outcome of a joking remark by Handyside after a midnight summons in mid-winter. It should be said here that at first Handyside had demurred becoming his neighbour's physician, but growing friendship with the lonely man had gradually eliminated his scruples. The tunnel had been a costly undertaking, the more so owing to the hurrying of its construction, but Christopher would have told you that its existence had saved his life on more than one occasion. The secret of the doors, by the way, was known only to himself and Caw, Dr. Handyside and Marjorie.

CHAPTER VII

A week later Doris Lancaster was sitting alone by the drawing-room fire, a book on her lap. It was not so often that she had an evening to spend in quietness; one of her mother's great aims in life was to have "something on" at least six nights out of the seven. At the present moment Mrs. Lancaster was in her boudoir, accepting and sending out invitations for comparatively distant dates.

Sweetly the clock on the mantel struck nine, and Doris told herself that now no one was likely to call. She lay back in the chair, a graceful figure in pale green, stretched her pretty ankles to the glow, and sought to escape certain gnawing thoughts in the pages of a novel which had won from the reviewers such adjectives as "entrancing," "compelling," "intensely interesting."

And just then a servant announced "Mr. France."

Well, after all, she was not sorry to see Mr. France--or Teddy, as she had called him for a good many years. He was a frequent visitor, despite the fact that Mrs. Lancaster suffered him only because everybody else seemed to like him. He was fair, tall, and lanky, and so pleasant of countenance that it would not be worth while enumerating his defective features.

Mrs. Lancaster disapproved of him for three reasons: first, he had only two hundred a year plus a pittance from the insurance company that put up, as he expressed it, with his services; second, he had been Alan Craig's close friend; third, she suspected that he saw through her affectations. That he had been openly in love with Doris since the days of pigtails and short frocks troubled her not at all: he was too hopelessly ineligible. And it had not troubled Doris for a long time--not since Alan Craig had gone away. Since then Teddy had seemed to become more of a friend and less of an admirer than ever.

"This is great luck," he remarked, seating himself in the opposite easy chair with an enforced extension of immaculate pumps and silken sox. (People often wondered how Teddy "did it" on the money.) "It's so seldom one can find you alone nowadays. Well, how's things generally?"

"Pretty much the same, Teddy," she answered, with the smile that hurt him. "Mother's busy as usual--"

"Out?"

"No; writing, I think."

"How's your father? I haven't seen him for an age."

"I wish he were fitter. He has had to stay in bed for a few days--he came down for dinner to-night for the first time. Last week he had three nights and a day in the train--with Mr. Bullard."

"Oh, I say! Bad enough without Bullard, but--"

"Oh, I'm so glad," she cried softly. "You don't like Mr. Bullard, Teddy. I'm beginning to abhor the man."

"Keep on abhorring!"

Swiftly she looked at him. "You know something?"

He shook his head. "Not a thing, Doris. Merely my instinctive dislike. I'm a sort of bow-wow, you know. Still, your mother approves of him, and he is your father's friend."

"I sometimes feel it has been an unlucky friendship for father," she said in a low voice, "and yet I have nothing to go on. I suppose I'm horribly unjust, but I'd give anything to learn something positive against the man."

"And yet," said the young man slowly and heavily, "sooner or later Mr. Francis Bullard will ask you to marry him."

Doris threw up her head. "I'd sooner marry--" She paused.

"Me, for instance?"

"Don't be absurd, Teddy." She flushed slightly.

"Absurd, but serious," he quietly returned. "Doris, I came to-night to ask you. It wouldn't keep any longer. One moment, please. Two things happened yesterday. My father won the big law suit that has been our nightmare for years; and I got a move-up in the office. Never was more shocked in all my life. Mighty little to offer you, Doris--"

"Oh, don't speak about it."

"Well, I'll cut that bit out; but please let me finish. You know I've been in love with you for ages, though I did my best to get it under when a better man appeared; and I think you'll admit I haven't worried you much since. And I'm perfectly aware that you can't give me what you gave him.... Still, Doris, I'm not a bad fellow, and you could make me a finer one, and--well, I'd hope not to bore you with my devotion and all that, but, of course, you'd have to take that risk as well as your parents' disapproval. Perhaps I ought to have waited longer, dear, but I didn't imagine my chances would be any greater a year hence, and it has seemed to me lately that--that you needed some one who would care for you before and above everything else.... Doris, remembering how long I've loved you, can't you trust me and take me for--for want of a better?"

His words had moved her, and moments passed before she could answer. "Dear Teddy, it is true that I want to be cared for--no need to deny it to you--but it wouldn't be right to take all you could give and give nothing."

"You would give much without knowing it," he pleaded. "And you were not made to be sorry all your life."

"I'm not going to make you sorry, Teddy."

"You're doing it as hard as you can!"

She smiled in spite of herself. "No," she said presently, "I've no intention of shunning all joys and abandoning all hopes, but I can't do what you ask, Teddy. I will tell you just one thing that you may not

know. Almost at the last moment before Alan went away I promised him I would wait."

Teddy cleared his throat. "I didn't know, though I may have guessed.... But I do know, Doris--I felt it on my way here to-night--that Alan, if he could look into my heart now, would give me his blessing. I'm not asking to fill his place, you know."

"Oh, you make it very hard for me! You--you've been such a faithful friend."

"Give in, Doris, give in to me!" He rose and stood looking down on her bowed head. "Dear, I'd bring Alan back to you if I could. Don't you believe that?"

"Oh, yes!"

"With all your heart?"

"With all my heart, Teddy."

"Then--" He stopped and took her hand. "Doris!" ...

He straightened up sharply. The door was opening. The servant announced--

"Mr. Bullard."

It was an awkward enough situation, but neither the girl nor the young man was heavy-witted. Doris rose slowly, languidly, it seemed, and though aware that her eyes must betray her, turned and greeted Billiard in cool, even tones. The two men exchanged perfunctory nods.

"Thanks, but I won't sit down," said Bullard. "I called to enquire for your father, and to see him, if at all possible. Is he feeling better to-night?"

"I think he is in the library at present," she replied, "but he has not yet got over his fatigue."

"Yes," he replied sympathetically, "he and I had too much trailing last week, but business must not be shirked, Miss Doris."

She was a little startled by hearing her name from his lips; until now he had addressed her with full formality. She was not to know that the sight of her eyes when she had turned to meet him had informed him of something unlooked for, and had put a period to his long-lived irresolution regarding her. Francis Bullard, in fact, had suddenly realised that if he wished to secure a wife in the only woman of whom he had ever thought twice in that respect, he would have to act promptly, not to say firmly. Accordingly, as though forgetting the stated purpose of his visit, he dropped into a chair and chatted entertainingly enough until Mrs. Lancaster made her appearance.

She offered to conduct him to her husband, and he allowed her to do so as far as the hall. There he halted and said--

"You will do me a great favour by getting rid of Mr. France and remaining with Miss Doris in the drawing-room until I return." In response to her look of enquiry he added--"Then you will do me a further favour by

retiring."

"Really, Mr. Bullard, I must ask you to explain!"

"Your daughter is not going to marry a title--to begin with, at any rate." He smiled and passed on.

She overtook him. "Have you something unpleasant to say to my husband?" she demanded.

"I am going to return him some money he thought lost."

"How much?"

"Five hundred pounds."

"Is that all?"

"Patience!" he answered, and made his escape.

Lancaster, pencil in hand, was seated at his writing-table. On his retiral from his business in South Africa he had indulged dreams of a quiet room at home and the peaceful companionship of books, and he had got the length of providing the nucleus of a library. But his income, though large, had never been equal to the varied demands upon it, and the room had become simply a chamber wherein he escaped the irritations of society only to suffer the torments of secret anxieties, building up futile schemes for his salvation, striving to extract hope from vain calculations.

At the entrance of Bullard he lifted his head with a start, and into his eyes came the question--"What new terror are you going to spring upon me now?"

"Glad to see you are better," Bullard remarked, drawing a chair to the table and seating himself. "I didn't intend to trouble you to-night, but something arrived by the late afternoon delivery which I thought would interest you. No need to be nervy. It's nothing to upset you." He threw a bundle of notes and a registered envelope on the table. "Your five hundred comes back to you, after all."

Lancaster eyed the notes, then took up the envelope and drew out a sheet of paper of poor quality, bearing a few lines in a school-boyish hand.

"GREY HOUSE, LOCH LONG.

"3/11/13.

"_Sir,_--Herewith the sum of L990 which I accepted from you the other night owing to a misunderstanding. Without apologies for doubting your honesty--Yours truly,

"J. CAW."

Lancaster drew a long breath. "So he was fooling us, Bullard."

"Not at all! Some one was fooling him!--only he has managed--I'm convinced of that--to regain possession of the green box. As I impressed

on you just after the fiasco, there was some one in one of the presses, and now it is evident that Caw captured that person after we had left. Unfortunately, it means that a fourth person has knowledge of the diamonds. Still, my friend, we have another chance."

"What? You don't mean to say--"

"Certainly, we shall try again,--we must! And the sooner the better! That is, unless we find we can settle amicably with the invaluable Caw. His note suggests that possibility, doesn't it? His impertinence gives me encouragement."

"It is the letter," said Lancaster heavily, "of an honest man--"

"Up to the tune of a thousand pounds. A wise man, if you like, who foresaw the possibility of the notes being stopped."

"You would not have dared do that."

"I had already written off my share as a bad debt," said Bullard, with a smile, "but Caw was not to know that."

The older man rested his head upon his hand. "You cannot be certain," he said slowly, "that the green box is still in the house."

"True. Otherwise I'd be tempted to produce Alan Craig's will and finish the business. All the nonsense about the clock and the postponed division could not prevent our taking possession of the house and everything in it. Why, even that absurdly costly clock would be ours.... And yet there's always the risk of--"

"Bullard, let us produce the will and dare the risk of losing the diamonds. From the bottom of my heart I tell you, I will be content with L25,000."

"So you think at the moment. But apart from your own feelings--not to mention mine--what about Mrs. Lancaster's?"

"I--I have already told her we cannot go on living as we are doing."

"Yes? And her reply?"

Lancaster was mute.

"Have you, by any chance, mentioned to her the matter of the!--a--debt to the--"

"For God's sake, don't torture!"

"I have no wish to do that," said Bullard quietly. "Let us change the subject, which is not really urgent at present, for one which, I trust, may be less disagreeable to you."

The host wiped his forehead. "What is it about?" he asked wearily.

"Your daughter."

CHAPTER VIII

Teddy was not afraid of Mrs. Lancaster, but he soon gathered that she had come to stay, and as the situation seemed to him difficult for Doris, he took his leave with assumed cheerfulness. In bidding the girl good-night he dropped in a whispered "to-morrow," which was, perhaps, more of a comfort to Doris than she would have admitted to herself. Immediately after his departure she expressed her intention of going to bed.

"Just for a moment, Doris. Do sit down again. We must settle what you are going to wear at the Thurstans' on the seventeenth." And Mrs. Lancaster plunged into a long discussion on frocks with numerous side issues.

A few weeks ago she would certainly have hesitated over Bullard as a son-in-law. Now she was prepared to accept him as such, not, it should be said, with joy and thanksgiving, yet not, on the other hand, with hopeless resignation. After all, he was richer than any of the men she knew, and in view of her husband's deplorable confession it would be well, if not vital, to have him on her side. Far better to abandon the idea of a title than to risk all continuing its pursuit. She would see to it that she did not have to abandon her other ambitions.

When Bullard made his appearance, however, she betrayed no unusual interest in the man.

"Was Robert not thinking of going to bed?" she casually enquired.

"He ought to be there now, Mrs. Lancaster. If I were you--"

"I shan't be a minute," she said, rising, "but I really must look after him."

Bullard closed the door, and came back to the hearth.

"I am glad of this opportunity, Miss Doris," he said, "to tell you something that has been in my mind to say for a very long time. Don't be alarmed."

She rose, but made no attempt to go from him. Perhaps instinct told her that there could be no ultimate escape.

"I don't wear my heart on my sleeve," he went on evenly, "but I dare say you have at least suspected my feelings for you. I have never flattered myself that you have regarded me as more than a friend of the house--a good friend, I hope--and you have known me so long that you may have come to consider me an old friend in more senses than one. Yet here I am, Doris, asking you to marry me--"

"Please, Mr. Bullard--" The whisper came from pale lips.

He proceeded gently, steadily--"At present you would say that you cannot give me the affection I desire, yet I would ask to be allowed to try to earn it. I can give you many things besides a whole-hearted admiration, Doris. You are the only woman I have ever thought of as wife. With me you would be secure from worldly hardships, and I venture to believe that you would never regret marrying me. One word more. You have been sad of late. No business of mine, perhaps, but if there is anything I can do, you may

command me. Doris, will you marry me?"

Perhaps she liked him better at that moment than ever she had done; certainly better than ever she would like him again. For he broke the long silence with these words--

"I have your father's permission, your mother's approval."

"My father's permission!" she said faintly. For support she laid her arm on the mantel. Her mind was in a turmoil. At last--"I cannot marry you, Mr. Bullard."

"With all respect," he quietly answered, "I cannot take your words as final."

She was not indignant, only afraid. "You speak of my father's 'permission,'" she managed to say. "Does that include his 'approval'? You will forgive me, but--"

"I will forgive you anything but a refusal."

"Then please excuse my leaving you. I will come back."

She went quickly to the library. From the table Mr. Lancaster raised a face whose haggard aspect almost made her cry out--so aged it was, so stricken with trouble. She closed the door, went over to the table, and halted opposite him.

"Father, do you really wish me to marry Mr. Bullard?"

"My child, life--everything--is uncertain, and so--and so I would see you provided for."

"I am not afraid of poverty--compared with some things." She nerved herself. "Father, you and I used to be frank with each other. Will it--help you if I marry Mr. Billiard?"

The man writhed. "Yes, Doris," he whispered at last.

"In what way?" Again she had to wait for his reply.

"It--it would save me..."

"Save you?"

"...from a grave difficulty..."

"Difficulty?"

"...disgrace." His head drooped. And suddenly all that mattered to heart was swamped by a wave of loving pity. She ran round to him and clasped him, and kissed him. "Oh, my dear," she sighed, "it was never, never your fault."

Then she went back to the drawing-room. She looked straight at Bullard as he stood by the fire, well-dressed, well-groomed, and just rather well-fed. And there and then she made up her mind.

"Mr. Bullard," she said calmly, "I promise to marry you, if you still

wish it, a year hence; but I will not be engaged to you formally or openly. That is all I can say--all I can offer you."

He frowned slightly at her tone rather than her words. The least trustworthy people are not the least trusting, and he did not doubt, knowing her as he did, that she would redeem any promise she made, nor was he particularly anxious for marriage within a year. But he had his vanity.

"Do you mean," he asked with increased suavity, "that you would wish to ignore my existence until the year is up?"

"Not your existence, Mr. Bullard--we should meet as before, I suppose--but--well, I think you must see what I mean."

He bowed. "It shall be as you will, Doris. Enough that I have your word for a year hence. Or"--he smiled--"let us say, when the clock stops, which your father will tell you is practically the same thing. Don't look so puzzled! Will you give me your hand on it?" The man was not without dignity; he made no attempt to detain her hand.

"Thank you and good-night," he said. "I will pay my respects to Mrs. Lancaster to-morrow afternoon."

He went out with the step of success. He had not only secured a wife to be proud of, but had, he believed, disarmed a possible enemy. For some time he had had vaguely uneasy moments with regard to Teddy France.

When the door had closed Doris dropped her face in her hands, but her eyes remained dry. Five minutes later, Mrs. Lancaster, coming in, received the calm and brief announcement that her daughter had promised to marry Mr. Bullard a year hence; that until then he was to be regarded as an ordinary acquaintance, and that he would call upon Mrs. Lancaster on the following afternoon.

The mother was not heartless. "You are doing this to help your father, Doris. I know all about it. It is--it is noble of you!"

The girl looked at her, and the question rushed to her lips--"Oh, why have _you_, his wife, never done anything to help him?" But it remained unuttered. "Good-night, mother," she said, and hastened to the refuge of her room.

She wrote a few lines to Teddy, stating simply what she had done. After that she gave way.

* * * * *

About the same hour, in Dr. Handyside's study, four hundred miles away, a conference of three people was drawing to a close. Earlier in the day Caw had received a belated visit from Mr. Harvie, the Glasgow lawyer, who, owing to illness, had been unable to attend to business since his client's death. Beyond the information that Caw had been left the sum of L5,000 free of duty, the old housekeeper an annuity, and the doctor L1,000, Mr. Harvie had little to say. The rest of his late client's fortune, the house and its contents, were already Alan's--if the young man were still alive, and Mr. Harvie, whatever his own ideas might be, was under an obligation to assume as much until--a slight grimace of disapproval--"the clock stopped." "I have other instructions," he added,

"but they are not to be acted on at present." He had returned to town by the last steamer.

"So we have come back to where we started," Dr. Handyside was saying. "The sum total of our discoveries is that we can do next to nothing. If I hadn't become so intimate with your master's character--not his affairs, you understand, Caw--I should have had very little respect for his methods. As for his motives, they are no business of ours."

"If I may say so," returned Caw, who would have been happier standing at attention than sitting in Miss Handyside's company, "you take a lofty view of the matter, sir, and you put it in a nutshell when you say that his motives are none of our business. I am sorry to have brought you and Miss Handyside into the trouble--"

"I rather think I came in," observed Miss Handyside with a smile.

"Which is a fact, miss. And very welcome, too, if I may say so. Also, Mr. Craig trusted you both."

"Wherefore it is up to us to trust his wisdom and respect his wishes," said Handyside. "The green box must remain where it is and take its chance."

"If you hadn't told us," said Marjorie to Caw, "that you were the last to see inside the box, I should be imagining all sorts of things. And those two men were his friends!"

Caw's expression resumed its usual stolidity. To have replied that they had ceased to be his master's friends would have involved explanations which he did not feel at liberty to impart even to those trustworthy people.

"Do you think they will try again, Caw?" the girl pursued. "I wish you had not sent back the money--"

"Don't be absurd, Marjorie!" said her father. "Caw had no choice."

"Well, sir, I was sorely tempted to stick to it as a bit of revenge, but I asked myself what my master would have done--and then, as you say, sir, there was no choice. As to your question, miss, I answer 'Yes.' A man like Mr. Bullard--I'm not so sure of the other--would not give up trying for such a prize. You see, I learned his ways out there in the old days. All his successes were made by bold methods. He feared nothing, cared for nobody. Oh, yes, he is bound to have another try, though I don't fancy it will be to-morrow or the next day."

"One would almost imagine," remarked the doctor, easing his injured foot on the supporting chair, "that the beggars guessed you were powerless in the matter."

Caw shook his head. "Hardly that, sir. They had a sight of my revolver--though, of course, that was after I had made sure they had got the box, and was only a miserable attempt to give them a shake-up. But they were not to know that. Their strong point is this, sir. They have the knowledge that the existence of the diamonds is practically a secret. Even Mr. Alan, even the lawyer has never heard of them. Only Bullard, Lancaster, and Caw knew of them; and Caw is in the minority. And they say to themselves--'Once we get the box, we have only to swear that it

contained papers belonging to us, that Mr. Craig had the loan of it, and so forth.' Then how is Caw going to disprove their words? they ask themselves. 'Can't be done! If Caw begins to talk of half-a-million in diamonds left in a writing-table drawer, he'll only get laughed at, and if we've nothing better to do, we can get up an action for slander.' There you are, sir! That's what I fancy I see at the back of their heads, and I'm sure I'm right."

"I believe you are, Caw!" cried Marjorie. "What do you say, father?"

"I am inclined to accept the diagnosis," replied the doctor, smiling at her eagerness. "Well, Caw, just one question more. What is your position, supposing those two gentlemen made an attempt by deputy?"

At that Caw smiled for the first time. "If I may say so, sir, I think your services would be required for the deputy!" Becoming grave, he added--"I have taken the liberty of running a new wire along the passage, sir. The opening of the door of my master's room will cause a bell to ring--not too loudly--in the quarters you have kindly provided for me in this house."

"Capital!" said the doctor.

"And if you, sir, would be good enough to give your housekeeper some explanation that would satisfy her without giving away things--"

"That will be all right, Caw," Miss Handyside assured him. "When you get to know Mrs. Butters, you will realise that she is not as others are, being a woman absolutely without curiosity."

"Thank you, miss." Caw smiled faintly and got up. "Unless there is anything more, sir--" he began.

"Nothing at all," said the doctor kindly.

"Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir. Good-night, miss."

"Trustworthy chap," Handyside remarked when the door had closed. "The legacy seems to have made no difference, though it upset him for the moment. And he knows all that's worth knowing about cars and electric lighting," he added rather irrelevantly. "I believe we'll be able to give him enough to do, after all."

"Between ourselves, father," said Marjorie suddenly, "have you the slightest hope of Alan Craig's return?"

"Not the slightest, my dear. He was a fine lad. I wish you had met him, but you were always gadding somewhere when he visited his uncle."

"I shan't be doing much gadding in the near future," she remarked thoughtfully.

"Why this sudden change from years of neglecting your only father?"

"I'm going to be on the spot in case anything happens next door."

"Indeed!" said the doctor drily.

CHAPTER IX

When Teddy France, bidding Doris a formal goodnight, whispered "to-morrow" he had in mind a certain reception at the house of a mutual acquaintance, and he went home looking forward to meeting her there with hopes irrepressible. He felt that the girl he had loved for years was--if not with her whole heart--on the verge of surrender; would have been his by now but for the untimely entrance of Bullard and the succeeding intervention of Mrs. Lancaster; and he lived most of the night and the following day in a state of exaltation.

Thus Doris's note, received in the evening, was a blow that seemed to crash to the centre of his soul. At first he imagined wicked, unreasonable things. Then, his wrath failing, he realised that only one thing could have made Doris act as she had done. She had been driven by a sudden overpowering pressure. Who had exerted it? Teddy did not doubt the mother's ability for coercion any more than her vaunting ambition, and he shrunk from blaming the father; yet he feared that Mr. Lancaster, beset by financial troubles of which he had long had an inkling, had sought a way out through the sacrifice of his daughter. Well, there was nothing to be done, he decided in his misery; interference on his part would be worse than vain, and would only cause Doris to suffer a little more.

At rather a late hour the craving for a glimpse of her drew him, after all, to the reception.

She was dancing when he entered the room, and, with a pang of angry pain, he discovered that she was lovelier than ever. Her face gave no hint of the heart-sickness she endured; she nodded to him in the old friendly way, and the easy recognition brought home to him the cool truth that, after all, the wild hopes of the previous night had been of his own making, not hers. Yet why had she written and so quickly, to inform him of her bargain with Bullard? Was her note just an uncontrollable cry for pity, sympathy?

It was after midnight when he led her to a corner in the deserted supper-room.

"Shall I congratulate you, Doris?" he asked gently.

"Why, yes, I think you had better," she answered with a bitter little smile, "on having done my duty. Don't look so shocked, Teddy," she went on, "I had to say it, and you are the only person besides father and mother who knows what I have done. And now I'm going to ask a great favour."

"Yes, Doris?"

"It is that you will prove your friendship to me--prove it once more, Teddy--by never, after to-night, referring to the matter. I'm going to try hard not to let it poison my life--for a year, at any rate."

"Very well.... But I must ask at least one question."

"Ask."

"Could _I_ have done anything to prevent this?"

"No one," she answered sadly, "could have done anything, excepting one man, and he died last week--Christopher Craig."

"Christopher Craig--dead? No wonder your father has been upset. Of course I know of their long friendship in South Africa, and once I was Mr. Craig's guest in Scotland along with Alan. The old man had a tremendous admiration for you, Doris."

"I loved him, though I did not see him for several years before the end. Well, I have answered your question. Have I your promise?"

He put his hand tenderly over hers. "I will give you two promises, Doris," he said deliberately; "the one you ask for and another. I promise you that Bullard shall never call you his wife!"

"Oh!" she cried, pale. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I mean it--and it is all I have to say." He laughed shortly. "But I am going to lay myself out to confound Mr. Bullard within the year, and I will do it. Now tell me this, Doris; are you and I to continue being friends--openly, I mean?"

"Why not? I must have one friend."

He bent and kissed her hand, and rose abruptly. "Let us go back to the dancing before I lose my head," he said, with a twisted smile. "And I must not do that when at last I've got something to do that's worth doing!"

Teddy was a creature of impulses and instincts not by any means infallible. They had led him into blunders and scrapes before now. On the other hand, they had protected him from mistakes no less serious. Had he been a matter-of-fact person he would have said to himself: "What can I do? I know of nothing positive against Bullard. Being a poor man, I cannot, by a stroke of the pen, make Lancaster independent of him, and I need not waste my wits in plotting to confound him by some great financial operation such as I've read of in novels," But what Teddy said to himself was something to this effect: "I suspect that Bullard is not quite straight, and if one watches such a man for twelve months as though one's life depended on the watching, one is likely to learn something. The only question at present is where to begin."

It is not to be assumed that Teddy went home from the reception in a light-hearted, hopeful condition. On the contrary he was extremely harassed, and wished he had kept to himself the brave prophecy made to Doris. Nevertheless, dawn found him unshaken in his determination to make good that prophecy. If, instead of spending the whole morning in doing his duty to the insurance company, he had been able to spend an early part of it in a state of invisibility within Bullard's private office, he would have justified himself beyond his highest expectations.

Bullard on entering the outer office, about nine-thirty, received from the chief clerk a curious signal which was equivalent to the words "Undesirable waiting to see you. Bolt for private room." But either Bullard was slower than usual this morning, or the "Undesirable" too alert. Ere the former's hand left the open door the latter stepped round

it, saying--

"How are you, Mr. Bullard? Been waiting--"

"Get out of this," said Bullard crisply, and stood away from the door.

"Really," said the visitor with an absurdly pained look, "this is a very unkind reception." He was a small individual of dark complexion, leering eyes and vulgar mouth. His clothing was respectable, if not fashionable; he displayed a considerable amount of starched linen of indifferent lustre.

"Get out!"

"Give me five minutes." The tone was servile, yet not wholly so. "Worth your while, Mr. Bullard."

Bullard looked him up and down. "Very well," he said abruptly. "Close that door and follow me." He said no more until they were in his room, himself seated at his desk, the other standing a little way off and turning his bowler hat between his hands.

"Now, Marvel, what the devil do you want?"

The visitor smiled deprecatingly into his revolving hat. "What do most of us want, Mr. Bullard?"

"I'll tell you what most of us do not want--the attentions of the police."

"Tut, tut, Mr. Bullard. Of course _we_ don't want that, nor do _we_ need it--do _we?_" The impudence of the fellow's manner was exquisite.

Bullard, toying with the nugget on his chain, affected not to notice it. Harshly he said: "Eighteen months ago--"

"In this very room, Mr. Bullard--"

"--I handed you five hundred pounds on the express condition that you used the ticket for Montreal, which I supplied, and never approached me again."

"I am sorry to say," the other said after a moment, "that Canada did not agree with my health, and I assure you that I made the five hundred go as far as possible."

"All that may be very interesting to yourself and friends--if you have any."

"You, Mr. Bullard, are my sole friend."

Bullard grinned. "If you imagine I'm going to be a friend in need, you are mightily mistaken!"

"Please don't be nasty, Mr. Bullard--"

"Leave my name alone, and clear out. Time's up." Bullard turned to a pile of letters.

"This is a blow," murmured Marvel, "a sad blow. But I would remind you that the five hundred was not a gift, but a payment for certain documents."

"Quite so. And it closed our acquaintance. Go!"

"I wonder if it did. One moment. I desire to return once more to South Africa. Things are looking up there again. With five hundred pounds--"

"That's enough. I'm busy."

"Just another moment. Touching those documents relating to the affair of Christopher Craig's brother--"

"Shut up!"

"--it is one of the strangest inadvertencies you ever heard of, Mr. Bullard, but the fact remains that, eighteen months ago, I delivered to you--not the originals but copies--"

Bullard wheeled round. "Don't try that game, Marvel. You are quite capable of forgery, but I made certain that they were originals before I burned them."

"Ah, you burned them! What a pity! So you can't compare them with the documents I hold--in a very safe place, Mr. Bullard."

"I should not take the trouble in any case. Now will you clear out or be thrown?"

"You make it very hard for me. Do you wish me to take the originals to Mr. Christopher Craig?"

"Pray do. He's dead."

"Dead!" Mr. Marvel took a step backward. "Dear, dear!" He raised his hat to his face as though to screen his emotion and smiled into it. "When did it happen?"

"A few days ago. Now, once and for all--"

"Then nothing remains to me but to offer the papers to his brother's son, an undoubtedly interested party, Mr. Alan--"

"Alan Craig is also dead."

Mr. Marvel's hat fell to the floor, and lay neglected. Mr. Marvel began to laugh softly while Bullard wondered whether the man's sanity, always suspect, had given way.

"Come, come, Mr. Bullard," Marvel coughed at last; "come, come!"

"Young Craig," said Bullard, restraining himself, "was lost on an Arctic expedition, a year ago."

"Then he must have been found again."

"... What do you say?"

"Why, I saw him--let me see--just fourteen days ago."

"Rot!"

"I'd know Frank Craig's son anywhere, Mr. Bullard; and there he was on the quay at Montreal, the day I left. What's the matter?"

With a supreme effort Bullard controlled himself.

"Marvel," he said, "what do you expect to gain by bringing me a lie like that?"

"It is no lie," the other returned with a fairly straight glance. "I was as near to him as I am to you at this moment. He was in a labourer's clothes--"

"Nonsense!"

"--working with a gang on the quay."

"You were mistaken. The search party gave up in despair."

"I know nothing of that, Mr. Bullard, but I'm prepared to take oath--"

"There is no need for Alan Craig, if it were he, to be working as a quay labourer. I tell you--"

"I am so sure of what I say, Mr. Bullard, that failing to get my price from you, I will cross the Atlantic again, working my passage if need be, to place the documents in the hands of that quay labourer. Since his uncle old Christopher is dead, there must be something pretty solid awaiting him." Marvel, stooping leisurely, picked up his hat and carefully eliminated the dent.

"Look here," said Bullard, breaking a silence. "Did you or did you not swindle me with those papers?"

"An inadvertence on my part, if you please, Mr. Bullard."

"Oh, go to the devil! You can't blackmail me. Go and work your passage, if you like."

The other took a step forward. "Do you think I had better see Mr. Lancaster? I could explain to him that he is less guilty in the matter of Christopher's brother than he imagines himself to be. I could even prove--"

"Lancaster is unwell--"

"My disclosures might make him feel better--eh?"

Bullard felt himself being cornered. He reflected for a moment; then--"How are you going to satisfy me that the papers you say you hold are the originals?"

"I'm afraid you must take my word for it."

"Your word--ugh! Will you bring them here at nine o'clock to-night?"

"Will you bring L500 in five-pound notes?"

It seemed that they had reached a deadlock. Bullard was thinking furiously.

At last he spoke. "No; I will bring one hundred pounds, and I will tell you how you may earn--earn mind--the remaining four. If you accept the job--not a difficult one--you will give me the papers in exchange for the hundred."

"But--"

"Not another word. Take my offer or leave it." Bullard turned to his desk. "And don't dare to lie to me again. Also, ask yourself what chance your word would have against mine in a court of law?"

At the end of twenty seconds the other said quickly: "I will be here at nine," and turned towards the door.

"By the way," Bullard called over his shoulder, "you had better come prepared for a night journey. And, I say! as you go out now try to look as if you had been damned badly treated. Further, before you come back, do what you can to alter that face of yours."

The door closed; Bullard's expression relaxed. For the first time in his life he had been within an ace of admitting--to himself--defeat. But all was not lost, even if he accepted Marvel's story, which he was very far from doing, his intelligence revolting no less at the bare idea of Alan Craig's existence than at that of the young man's supporting it as a quay labourer. Furthermore, were it proved to him that Alan had actually come from the Arctic, he would still not despair. He would have to act at high speed, but he was used to crises. As to Mr. Marvel, well, that clever person was going to be made useful to begin with; afterwards....

Bullard broke away from the clutches of thought to attend to the more urgent letters. He had just finished when his colleague came in.

"Hullo, Lancaster," he cried cheerfully, "I fancied your doctor had commanded rest. Glad to see you all the same. As a matter of fact, I was coming to look you up shortly."

"Couldn't rest at home," returned Lancaster, seating himself at the fire. "I say, Bullard," he said abruptly, "you'll be good to my girl--won't you?"

Bullard's eyebrows went up, but his voice was kindly. "Do you doubt it, Lancaster?"

"N-no. But you can surely understand my feelings--my anxiety. She--she has been a good daughter."

Bullard nodded. "It won't be my fault," he said quietly, "if Doris regrets marrying me."

"Thank you, Bullard." As though ashamed of his emotion the older man immediately changed the subject. "Anything fresh this morning?"

The other smiled. "One moment." He got up, went to a cabinet and came back with a glass containing a little brandy. "The journey to the City

has tired you. Drink up!"

"Thanks; you are thoughtful." Lancaster took a few sips, and went white. "Bullard, have you something bad to tell me?"

"Finish your brandy. ... Well, it might have been worse. Steady! Don't get excited, or I shan't tell you."

After a moment--"Go on," said Lancaster.

"Marvel has come back from Canada."

"Ah! ... But I always feared he would. More money, I suppose?"

"Precisely. Only he brought a piece of news which I have so far refused to credit, though doubtless stranger things have happened. Pull yourself together. Marvel declares that, a fortnight ago, he saw Alan Craig in the flesh."

"Alan Craig!" Lancaster fell back in the big chair. "Thank God," he murmured, "thank God!" Tears rushed to his eyes.

"Better let me give you details, few as they are, before you give further thanks," Bullard said. "Bear in mind what manner of man Marvel is; also, that his story was part of a threat to extort money."

A minute later Lancaster was eagerly asking: "But don't you think it may be true, Bullard?"

"For the present," was the cool reply, "we are going to act as though it were true, as though the will were waste paper--not that I ever considered it as anything but a last resource, for its production would involve sundry unattractive formalities."

"And yet," said Lancaster uneasily, "you told me once of a man who had seen Alan die."

"Leave that out for the present. I shall deal with Flitch presently, and God help him if he has played a game of his own! Meantime, the one object in view must be the Green Box at Grey House."

"For Heaven's sake be cautious! You spoke of bribing the man Caw, but the more I have thought of it--"

"That's past. There is no time for delicate negotiations. If the box is still in the house, we must find and take it; if elsewhere, we must make other plans. But I'm pretty sure it has not gone to a bank or safe deposit. Christopher meant it to remain in the house, so that it should be part of his gift to Alan."

"Caw will be on the alert."

"He will not expect a second attempt all at once. Hang it, man, we must take risks! L600,000! I'm not going to let any chance slip." Bullard went over to his desk and picked up a cablegram. "The Iris mine is flooded again. That means at least a couple of thousand less for each of us this year."

Lancaster groaned helplessly. "Trouble upon trouble! But I cannot face

another visit to Christopher's house--"

"Be easy. You shall be spared that. I think I had better tell you nothing for the present--except that I may take a run over to Paris within the next few days."

"Paris!"

"You can say I'm there if any one asks."

Lancaster drew his hand across his brow. "Sometimes," he said slowly, "I wish I were at peace--in jail."

"Don't be a fool! You'll feel differently when we open the Green Box."

The other shook his head. "There's another point that has worried me horribly. We have thought we were the only persons outside of Grey House who knew of the diamonds; but who was the person who took the box that night? Whoever he was he must have seen us and heard something of our talk."

"Yes," said Bullard, with a short laugh, "it seems very dreadful and mysterious, doesn't it?--especially as Caw recovered the diamonds so speedily. I've thought it out, Lancaster, and I've struck only one reasonable conclusion. There was no fourth person present that night. Caw was fooling us all the time. The cupboard is really a passage to another room, made for old Christopher's convenience, no doubt. How's that?"

"Caw acted well, if he were acting. And why should he have suspected us at all?"

"Simply because he happened to know what was in the box. Who would trust a fellow creature alone with L600,000 in a portable form? And Caw was probably in the position of guardian. Have you a better theory?"

Lancaster leaned forward, staring at the carpet. "It came into my mind last night," he said in a queerly hushed voice, "that it might have been ... Christopher himself."

"Good God, man, positively you must have a change of air! Do you doubt that Christopher is dead?"

A pause.

"Bullard, what you and I, his friends, were doing that night was enough to--to make him rise--oh, no, I don't mean that--though the diamonds were so much to him. It was a crazy thought. I must get rid of it."

"I should say so." Bullard forced a laugh. "Meantime, you may comfort your soul with the assurance that you'll have nothing to do with this fresh attempt, except to share in the spoil. If I were you, I'd go home now and get Doris to join you in a long run into the country. Let the wind blow away those absurd fears and fancies. I'm calling on your wife this afternoon, you know."

The other rose obediently. "Your news has upset me. I don't know what to think. Marvel was always such a liar. I--I suppose nothing I can say or do will move you from your present course?"

"Nothing, Lancaster."

Lancaster sighed and with shoulders bowed went out.

CHAPTER X

The same night Teddy France started on his quest, wishing with all his heart that it were cleaner work. Still a beginning had to be made. He had not the flimsiest clue to direct him, but the thought occurred to him that it might be worth while to attempt to learn in what manner Bullard spent some of his evenings. Bullard, he was aware, had of late been living at Bright's Hotel, a select and expensive establishment situated within hail of Bond Street.

About eight o'clock Teddy sauntered across the lounge of Bright's, as though looking for a friend, and glanced through the glass doors of the dining-room. To his satisfaction, he saw the man he wanted, seated at a table, alone, and not in his customary evening dress. Teddy retired, left the hotel, and at the opposite pavement engaged a taxicab. He got inside, after instructing the man to be on the alert. He lit a cigarette, telling himself that, by a thousand to one, he had embarked on a futile, idiotic errand. However, within half-an-hour, Bullard appeared in the hotel doorway, and spoke to a braided personage who promptly whistled for a cab. By the time he was on board, the motor of Teddy's cab was running, the chauffeur in his seat. Presently the two cabs rolled away from their respective pavements.

Five minutes later Teddy let out a grunt of disgust. Bullard was evidently making for the City, presumably for his office. "Drop it!" said common sense; "go on!" said instinct ... and Teddy went on.

It was nearing nine o'clock when Bullard's cab drew up at the magnificent entrance to Manchester House in New Broad Street, at that hour a well-nigh deserted thoroughfare. As Teddy was driven past he saw Bullard run up the steps. Twenty yards further on he got out, settled with his man, and strolled back. Entering the huge headquarters of several hundred mining and finance companies, and noting that the lift was closed for the night, he proceeded to search the oaken boards which formed a sort of directory of the tenants inscribed in gilt lettering. He learned that Bullard's office was on the fourth of the nine floors; at the same time he memorised the name of a firm on the fifth floor. Then he ascended leisurely. Care-takers and cleaners were about, but apparently they had finished their tasks above the fourth floor. He spoke to one of them, an elderly man.

"Can you tell me if Mr. Stern of Stern & Lynoch has returned?"

"No, sir. I've just left their office on the fifth floor. Nobody there."

Teddy consulted his watch. "I'm a little before my time; guess I'd better go up and wait."

The man nodded as one who didn't care whether the enquirer died or lived, and went about his business.

There was an indifferent light left on the fifth landing and the stair leading to it. Teddy found a point of vantage whence through the wire walls of the shaft he could obtain a view, not of Bullard's office itself, but of the corridor leading thereto. On the way up he had noted that the Aasvogel Syndicate's door was just round the corner and that it was the only one showing a light.

Calling himself a fool for his pains, he settled down to the wretched game of spying. He had not long to wait--much to his combined astonishment and gratification. "This must be my lucky night," he reflected. A man appeared on the landing--a foreign-looking person with a heavy dark moustache under an oddly shaped nose, wearing eyeglasses, and carrying a suit case--and made for the corridor. Ere he turned the corner he cast an anxious glance over his shoulder, which glance was more cheering to Teddy than a pint of champagne would have been just then. And next moment the gentle opening and closing of a door further delighted and excited him. Without a doubt the man had gone into Bullard's office!

Within the minute Teddy was again calling himself names. Ass! Was there anything even mildly extraordinary in the visitor or the visit? After a while he decided that he could not lose much if he transferred his espionage to the outside of Manchester House. Fortunately it was a fine night, for, as it came to pass, he had nearly two hours to kick his heels.

Then the Aasvogel's visitor came forth alone, and in haste, and turned in the direction of Liverpool Street. Shortly afterwards he boarded a King's Cross bus, mounting to the top. Teddy took a seat inside, still calling himself names, yet unable to abandon the absurd chase.

At King's Cross the man, along with a dozen passengers, got out and made for the main-line station. Teddy followed at a discreet distance till within the booking hall, when he put on speed and contrived to be close to his quarry as the latter stopped at a ticket window--first class--to Teddy's amaze. He heard him book "return Glasgow."

Now the Glasgow portion of this particular night train, usually an exceedingly long one, is next to the engine. Perhaps that is why the Great Northern Company has kindly placed a little refreshment saloon towards the extremity of the platform. The traveller, after a glance at the train, entered the saloon. The weary sleuth resisted the desire for a drink and proceeded to stroll up and down the Glasgow portion. Five minutes before the train was due to start the traveller reappeared wiping his mouth, and got into a vacant compartment. He placed his suit case on a seat and went out into the corridor.

"Well," Teddy said to himself, "that jolly well ends it. The old story--suspect a Johnny because he doesn't look a handsome gentleman! Serves me right!" All the same, he lingered, a few paces from the carriage. Four minutes passed and the traveller was still absent. Thirty seconds left ... fifteen ... five ... the starting signal ... the first, almost imperceptible movement of the prodigious train.

Just then the traveller reappeared in the compartment, picked up the suit case, sat down and opened at. But--Teddy sprang forward open-mouthed--it wasn't the same man! The train was gathering speed. Teddy ran alongside and stared in. The traveller glanced over his shoulder, just as that man had done on the office landing, then turned away. But again Teddy had caught a glimpse of a profile including an oddly shaped nose. Why, good

Lord! it _was_ the same man--only the beggar had lost his eyeglasses and moustache! ... Our sleuth had made a discovery, indeed, but how on earth was it going to profit him? Disregarding expense--no new failing on his part, to be sure--he took a cab back to Manchester House.

The Aasvogel office was in darkness. The surmise might easily be wrong, Teddy admitted to himself, yet it did look confoundedly as though Bullard had returned to the City that night with the particular object of meeting the quick-change gentleman now on his way to Glasgow. At all events the affair was interesting enough to spoil another night's rest for Teddy France.

Two mornings later Bullard received the following brief note, which was undated and unsigned, in an envelope postmarked Glasgow:

"No one on premises at night. Probably tomorrow night."

Bullard informed the chief clerk and telephoned to Lancaster that he was leaving for Paris by the night train. Apparently he reached there safely, for next morning the office received a telegram relating to some company business, not, perhaps, of the first importance, handed in at the Gare du Nord office and signed Bullard. And Teddy, calling at the Lancasters' house in the evening, just to obtain a glimpse of his beloved, who alas! was with a dinner and theatre party, learned from Mr. Lancaster, who was always glad to see the young man, that Mr. Bullard had run over to Paris. Which was naturally rather astounding news to Teddy, whose own eyes had seen Mr. Bullard enter the Glasgow sleeping car at Euston, about twenty-four hours earlier.

CHAPTER XI

Dr. Handyside was too fond of his easy-going seaside existence to be readily induced to leave home. At the same time, he had not severed all ties with Glasgow, which ties included a select coterie of kindred spirits who dined together once a month during the winter in a somewhat old-fashioned restaurant; and he would have been exceedingly loth to miss one of their cosy gatherings. But he insisted on sleeping in his own bed, and accordingly, there being no steamer connection at so late an hour, it was his custom to return by train to Helensburgh and thence complete the journey in his car which he drove himself, reaching home shortly after midnight.

To-night's dinner, however, had seemed hopelessly beyond his reach, owing to his injured foot, which as yet merely allowed him to hobble a few yards, and which would have been worse than useless in driving. But we are never too old to worry over trifles, and in the course of the morning, while in the garage, he blurted out the difficulty to Caw. It was really an appeal, and at any other time Caw would have been mildly amused. Now he was embarrassed, for while anxious to oblige the doctor, he had no intention of losing all connection with Grey House for several hours in the middle of the night.

He shook his head. "I only wish I could drive you home to-night, sir," he said, "but you see--"

"All right, Caw," said Handyside, looking ashamed of himself, and hobbled off, still hankering, however.

An hour later Caw came to him in the study, and presented an open telegram. "Will you be pleased to look at this, sir?"

The doctor read:--

"Registered letter received. Best policy.

"BULLARD."

"God bless me, Caw!--the man's in Paris!"

"Quite so, sir. I shall be glad to have your instructions for this evening, sir. Very thoughtful of Mr. Bullard, if I may say so--damn him!"--the last inaudible.

"I've been wondering whether he would acknowledge the notes," said Handyside, brightening up and hobbling to the door. "Marjorie," he called, "for Heaven's sake see if I've got a decent tie for to-night!"

* * * * *

And now it was midnight. The southerly gale which had broken out late in the afternoon was booming up the loch, bombarding the house, and gusts of bitter rain were thrashing the exposed windows.

Marjorie flung a couple of logs on the study fire and returned to her book. She had prepared sundry comforts for her father and was awaiting, not without anxiety, his arrival. She was thankful he had Caw with him. A large portion of the journey was being made in the very teeth of the tempest.

A tap on the door brought her round with a start. It was only Mrs. Butters, the housekeeper, or, to be precise, the head and shoulders of that estimable but slow-witted female, heavily swathed in a couple of grey shawls.

"What on earth is the matter?" exclaimed Marjorie. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"Please, miss, do you think I might do something to stop the alarum clock of that Mr. Caw?" Mrs. Butters was not yet at all sure of Caw. "It's been ringin' for close on an hour, and I can't--"

The girl was up like a shot--her face set, her hands clenched. What was she to do? It would take an age to explain to the housekeeper, who, when she did understand, would in all probability simply howl helplessly.

"Close on an hour," she said to herself. "Oh, Heavens, the thing must have been done long ago!" Still, she could not be absolutely sure. She glanced at the clock. No, her father and Caw were not even due yet.... "Mrs. Butters," she managed to say in a fairly steady voice, "please go back to bed. I--I'll attend to the alarum immediately. Go at once or you'll catch your death of cold."

Left alone, she grew pale, but within the moment she had crossed to a bureau--her own--and was taking out a purchase made in Glasgow the

previous day. "Oh, why didn't I practise in the wood this morning, as I said I would?" she sighed, fumbling with a little ivory-handled revolver. She shuddered. "Oh, I can't ... I daren't ... I _must_!" And ran from the room.

Marjorie will never forget that journey through the passage, her light a flickering taper, for the electric illumination was no longer in operation. At the end of it she had literally to force her limbs to mount the narrow stairs. At the top, with her ear to the closed door, she could hear nothing save her pounding heart. There was no keyhole, no crevice whereby she might know whether it was light or dark on the other side. Caw had spoken that morning of making a peep-hole in the door. She would have given much for one now. And the taper was burning fast.

"They must have gone," she thought, "yet how can I be sure? On such a night they might be tempted to stay awhile from the storm." Hand with revolver pressed to breast, she listened again. Not a sound. But the silence might be explained by the presence of a solitary man, she told herself, not necessarily one of the two she had seen that other night. A rough brute, perhaps, who would stick at nothing in that empty house. Yet the very thought pricked her courage even at the moment when the descending flame stung her finger. Unlike Caw she was under no obligation to his late master. If a thief was there, she would shoot before she would let the Green Box go.

She dropped the taper, trod on it, and gasped to find herself in utter darkness. Once more she laid her ear against the panel, and this time, surely, a sound reached the straining nerves--a faint noise of something solid though not ponderous falling upon something less resonant than wood, less dulling than carpet. She felt like collapsing. But her will, her pride, came to the rescue. "If I don't open that door," she said to herself, "I'll be ashamed of myself for the rest of my days."

Her finger fluttered on the spring-button and pressed; her hand pushed. As the door gave she perceived that the room _was_ lighted, though not brilliantly; she heard nothing but a howling of wind and a rattling of rain. A whiff of smoky coal met her nostrils. The silent moving door was now half open. She took a couple of steps inwards and halted, her left hand clinging to the door's edge, her right clutching the pretty weapon. And she all but screamed....

Under the lights of two candles on the mantel, in an easy-chair drawn up to the recently kindled fire, reclined a man, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. His legs were outstretched, his boots on the hearth, steaming, one of them in dangerous proximity to a large coal evidently newly fallen. On another chair lay a drenched greatcoat and cap.

The man was young, somewhat slight of build, of fresh and pleasing countenance, clean shaven, of indeterminate colouring. His crisp hair was so trim in spite of its dampness as to suggest the attentions of a barber within the last twelve hours. His hands were rough and bore traces of scars; the fingers, though slender for a man, might have belonged to a labourer's; the first and second of the left hand resting on the chair-arm held a cigarette--unlighted. The expression of his countenance was happy--contentedly so.

"Oh!" thought Marjorie, "he _couldn't_ steal!" and in the same breath perceived that he was not asleep. He moved slightly, with a lazy grunt.

His hand wandered to a pocket, felt within, came out empty, and wandered to another, with like result. "Hang it!" he muttered, and opening his eyes, tried, absurdly enough, to see what might be on the mantel without the trouble of rising.

Neither bold nor fearful now, simply fascinated and wondering whether he would get up or do without matches, Marjorie watched him. And the next thing she knew was that his eyes were staring into hers. Then fear, suspicion and sense of duty returned with a rush. The men who had already attempted to steal the Green Box had been just as well dressed--better, indeed. She was taking no chances. With firm determination, but also with a wavering hand, she raised the revolver.

"Great Heaven!" shouted the young man, "be carefull or you'll hurt yourself!" He wriggled up and sprang to his feet.

"Who--who are you?" Marjorie demanded with a regrettable quaver. "Have you come after the Green Box? Because, if so--"

"Would you mind," he said very gently, "putting down your pistol? Those things are so apt to go off unexpectedly, and at the moment you appear to be aiming at my uncle's best beloved Bone--"

The revolver fell softly on the thick carpet. Marjorie felt like falling after it.

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "You have mentioned a Green Box, but having brought no luggage, I don't seem to grasp--"

"Your uncle!" she whispered.

"Mr. Christopher Craig." He regarded her for a moment and his expression changed. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "is it possible that he is no longer tenant of the house? You see, I arrived late, and deciding not to disturb any one, just proceeded to make myself comfortable for the night, and--"

Marjorie pulled herself together. "You are not--"

At that instant Caw, breathing hard, sprang from the darkness, then stopped as if shot.

"Well, Caw," said the young man, "I'm jolly glad to see you."

"Oh, my good God!" gasped Caw, "it's Mr. Alan!" He began to shake where he stood.

"Confound me!" said the young man under his breath, "I clean forgot I was supposed to be dead a year." He strode over to the servant. "Shake hands, Caw, just to make sure I'm of ordinary flesh and blood. I'm sorry to have upset you like this," He turned to the girl. "And to you I make my apology for having alarmed--"

"You didn't!"

"--for imagining I had alarmed you," he corrected himself with a bow and twinkling eyes.

The latter drew her smile despite her still jangling nerves. "I suppose I have to apologise, too," she said, "for taking you for a--a burglar."

"Not at all, because--I may as well confess it at once--no burglar can be more anxious to avoid discovery than I am--or was."

Caw found his speech. "Mr. Alan, sir, I--I haven't words to express my feelings at seeing you alive and well--I really haven't." He turned away with a heave of his shoulders as Dr. Handyside, limping painfully, appeared in the doorway.

It was his turn to be astounded, but his welcome when it came was of the heartiest. "I take it," he went on, "that Marjorie, my daughter, and you have already made each other's acquaintance."

"If Miss Handyside will have it so," said Alan, repressing a smile as Marjorie, with a decided return of colour, stooped and secured the revolver which had escaped her parent's eye. "Naturally Miss Handyside was a little surprised to find me here until I explained who I was." His gaze travelled to the servant who stood apart in meditative regard of the clock. "Caw, how is my uncle?"

Handyside prevented a pause. "There is so much to tell you, Mr. Craig, that I propose an adjournment to my study where we shall find some refreshment which I fancy you can do with. You are not aware, I believe, that your uncle had a private passage built between our two houses, which not only explains our appearance here, but provides a short route to food and warmth."

"Then my uncle--" began Alan, evidently a little puzzled.

"Your pardon, Mr. Alan," said Caw, coming forward, "but it is necessary to ask you one question. How did you get into the house?"

The young man laughed. "I suppose you don't think it worth while locking doors in these unsophisticated parts. After I had rung twice, and was wondering what was going to happen to me, I found that the outer door was unfastened and that the inner door was not locked. So I came in and made myself at home, unwilling to disturb--What's the matter. Caw? And you, doctor? Why, Miss Handyside, what have I said?"

But none of the gravely concerned faces was looking in his direction.

With a heavy sigh Caw went over to the writing table, stopped and drew out the deep drawer on the right.

For a moment or two there was no sound save that of the storm. Then, with a gesture of hopelessness, Caw slowly raised himself.

"Yes," he said, in a small, bitter voice, "it is gone!"

CHAPTER XII

Alan Craig, as he afterwards stated, had entered Grey House at a quarter before midnight; the clock had attracted his attention as soon as he lit the candles. The candles, he had noticed, had been used not long previously, for the wicks were softish, and he had been aware of an odour

of tobacco, not stale, in the atmosphere of the study. These two little discoveries had been sufficient to end the incipient idea induced by the stillness and chilliness that the house might be temporarily uninhabited.

Less than half an hour prior to Alan's arrival, the man Marvel left by unbolting the outer door. He had entered by cutting through a lightly barred window at the back, and would have retired by the same way but for the fact that he had wounded one of his hands rather severely, and could not risk disturbing his rough and hasty bandage.

But though injured and drenched to the skin, and facing a long tramp in the vilest of weather, he turned from the gates of Grey House in a fairly cheerful temper. He had done the job and done it easily. The Green Box reposed in his suit case, and would fetch four hundred pounds on delivery. Only four hundred pounds? Well, Mr. Bullard had named that sum, but perhaps--and Mr. Marvel grinned against the gale--Mr. Bullard was not going to get off quite so cheaply. To Marvel's sort, possession is not just a miserable nine points of the law: it is all the law and as much of the profits as trickery can extract.

No, no!--he stumbled in the almost pitch darkness, and cursed briefly--Mr. Bullard was not going to handle his Green Box for much less than a thousand pounds! If only the key had been available, reflected this choice specimen of humanity, he would have had a look at the contents. Papers, Mr. Bullard had said--more incriminating documents, no doubt! Mr. Bullard was a very nice man, he was, but he could not always have it his own way. Mr. Bullard ...

A sound in, but not of, the storm, muttered in Marvel's ears. Peering ahead, he descried a small light. He was passing a wood at the time, and the windy tumult as well as the roaring from the loch made confusion for his hearing; but presently he recognised the intruding sound as the throbbing of a motor. "Some silly fool got a breakdown," he was thinking sympathetically, when a terrific gust caught and fairly staggered him. Ere he fully recovered balance and breath something cold and clammy fell upon his face, was dragged down over his shoulders and arms, blinding, pinioning him. The suit case was rudely wrenched from his hand; he was violently pushed and tripped; and with a stifled yell he fell heavily on the footpath and rolled into the brimming gutter.... By the time he regained footing, the use of eyes and ears, there was no light visible, no sound save that of wrathful nature.

* * * * *

In the doctor's study it was the host who undertook the duty of breaking to Alan the news of his uncle's death; it was Caw who informed him of the old man's thought for him during the last year of life, on the very last day of it.

"You must understand, sir," the servant added, "that from the day after you went away my master was living not in his own house, but in yours. It pleased him to think of it that way, sir. 'I am not leaving my nephew anything,' he used to say to me; 'I have given him what I had to give.' He always believed in your safe return, though to others it seemed so impossible. There are many things to be told--you have already witnessed something that must have puzzled you, sir--but with your permission I will say no more till tomorrow, when I have got my wits together again, as it were."

"I think I can keep my curiosity under till then, Caw," said the young man, "and, to tell the truth, I don't feel equal to talking about my Uncle Christopher's affairs just yet. But if Dr. Handyside isn't too tired, I'd like to explain without delay why I made a secret of my existence, also why I came home--well, like a thief in the night." He glanced a little quizzingly at Marjorie, who blushed and retorted good-humouredly--

"Don't you think you owe me--us--the explanation, Mr. Craig?"

"Mr. Craig owes us nothing," Handyside said; "and I ought to remind him that while we were his uncle's friends--his most intimate friends, I might say, these five years--we are now, in a sense, intruders who have no claim whatever on Mr. Craig's confidence. Further"--the doctor's tone became rueful--"I fear I am greatly to blame--"

Alan interposed, "I want you to accept my confidence. I came home expecting to find myself as poor as when I went to the Arctic, and now I find my good uncle has altered all that, and in my new circumstances I may decide to change certain plans I had made. But I must first put myself right with my uncle's friends as well as his trusted servant. I'll make a short story of it--just the bare facts."

"As you will," said the doctor. "Caw, take a chair."

"If I may say so, sir, I prefer to stand."

"Caw," said Miss Handyside, "take a chair."

"Very good, miss," said Caw, and seated himself near the door.

"As I learned by consulting old newspapers on the other side," said Alan, "the expedition returned home safely at the time appointed; but I was reported lost--lost while out hunting. I'll start from that hunting episode, though trifling incidents had happened before then, which ought, perhaps, to have put me on the alert. One of the best shots, if not the best, in the expedition was a man named Flitch. Like myself, he joined in place of another man, almost at the last moment. He was a rough character, and his position was merely that of an odd-job man, but I must say he did most things well, especially in the mechanical line. He and I had frequently made hunting excursions together, but always with one or two other members of the party. And now, for the first time, we went out from the camp alone."

"Oh!" murmured Marjorie.

"We tramped an unusually long way from the camp--at Flitch's instigation, as I recognised afterwards; but in the end we were rewarded by coming on a fine bear. 'You take first shot,' said Flitch, in his curt, sullen fashion. I did, and was lucky. But the gun was not down from my shoulder when Flitch deliberately shot me in the back--not with his gun, but with a revolver he had never shown before--"

"The dirty hound!" growled Caw.

"I fell, feeling horribly sick, and as I lay I saw him toss the revolver into a seal hole. Then, as he stood staring at me, I must have fainted."

"The beast!" cried Marjorie.

"When I came to myself--how long I remained unconscious, I never learned exactly--I was on a sort of bed, and an aged Eskimo was bending over me. I had been picked up by a couple of his party out after seals. I must have lain there for weeks under the care of that queer old medicine man who, somehow, contrived to doctor or bewitch me back from the grave, for the wound was rather a bad one. The Eskimos treated me very decently, and it was not till I was convalescent that I realised I was their prisoner. I rather think they must have fled with me from the search party mentioned in the newspapers. The tribe, as far as I could gather, had a grudge against white men in general, though not against any person in particular. Well, I practically became one of them for the winter that followed. In time I grew fit and ready for anything, but they had annexed my gun and other belongings, which left me pretty helpless. However, I had the luck to save one of the young men during a tussle with a bear, and he was absurdly grateful. Eventually he planned a way of escape and guided me, after a good many mishaps, to an American whaler that had been compelled to winter in the ice. I told the skipper most of my story, but begged him to keep it quiet from the others, and between us we invented a plausible enough tale for the crew. The ship came out of the ice all right, but was wrecked, by running ashore, on the homeward trip. Some of us got to land and found our way into British Columbia. I had enough money to take me across Canada, but when I got to Montreal I was penniless. I took any jobs that offered until I had scraped together enough for a steerage ticket home--"

"But my master would have sent anything you had asked for!" exclaimed Caw.

"I did not doubt it. Only, you see, I was desperately afraid of my existence getting known, and--"

"But why?"--from the impulsive Marjorie.

"An obsession, if you like," said Alan with a grave smile. "During all the time of my convalescence, and in all the periods of leisure that followed, I kept wondering what on earth had made Flitch want to kill me. We had never had anything like a quarrel, and what had he to gain by my death? He had robbed me of nothing. It's a great big 'Why,' and I've got to find the answer to it. But I'm keeping you from bed."

"Go ahead," said Handyside. "Have you no suspicions?"

"I have; but they seem a bit far-fetched, especially now that I'm home. At any rate, I dare not mention them yet.... I arrived in Glasgow this afternoon, and got made as civilised-looking as was possible in a couple of hours. I had intended coming on here by rail and steamer, but an out-of-date time-table deceived me, and too late I found that the winter service just started gave no train after five. At the hotel they suggested motoring, and after a meal I started on what seemed a first rate car. But we had a breakdown lasting an hour, a dozen miles out of Glasgow, and then, running down Garelochside in the face of the storm, we smashed into the ditch. After making sure that the car was hopeless, I left the man at a wayside cottage and tramped the rest of the way. Hence my late arrival, and you know the rest."

"May I ask," said Caw, "if you met anybody on the road--near home, I mean?"

"I passed a person who seemed to be intoxicated, if judged by his violent language, but in the darkness and the rain we must have been practically invisible to each other."

"If he was using bad language, sir," said Caw, rising, "he was certainly not the party I am thinking of. May I retire, gentlemen?" he inquired, glancing towards Miss Handyside.

"Yes, Caw. You will have much to tell Mr. Craig to-morrow," said the doctor. "I leave it to you to explain why you were absent to-night. I doubt I shall never get over it."

Caw made a stiff little inclination, saying, "My fault alone, sir," and went out.

"There goes a good and faithful servant," remarked Handyside; "and a good chauffeur, too," he added with a heavy sigh.

"Mr. Craig," said Marjorie, breaking a silence, "do you wish us to regard you as non-existent--I mean to say, do you wish your return to be kept a secret?"

"I'm going to sleep on that question, Miss Handyside," he replied.

"I can keep a secret rather well, and I believe father can, too," she said. "Won't you tell us whom you sus--"

"Marjorie," the doctor interposed, "the lateness of the hour is telling on your discretion."

"I'm afraid it is." She got up, went to her bureau, scribbled something on a half sheet of paper, folded it neatly, and presented it to Alan. "Don't look at it till you are in your room," she said softly. "Good night, and sleep well."

Ten minutes later, in the guest's bedroom, Alan opened the paper and read the words--

"Mr. Bullard?"

CHAPTER XIII

By ten o'clock next morning Caw, who had risen at five, had Grey House in a fair state of comfort for the reception of its new master, if not its new owner. The producers of warmth and electricity were at work again; the elderly housekeeper, who in Christopher's time had never been upstairs, was recalled from a near village just when she was beginning to wonder whether, after all, perfect happiness was included in retirement with an ample annuity, in the garden a man was already reducing the more apparent ravages of the gale. Caw himself quietly repaired the moderate damage done by the thief of the Green Box. Following the instructions written by his late master, he had sent a telegram to the Glasgow lawyer. He was in the study dusting the thick glass protecting the clock when, about ten thirty, Alan arrived via the passage.

"An odd place for a clock," the young man remarked. "I had a look at it last night. But why 'dangerous,' and what's that green stuff?"

"Mr. Craig intended that the clock should not be interfered with before it stopped--nearly a year hence, sir. I understand the liquid is something stronger than water, but whether explosive or poisonous, I could not say, sir."

"Curious notion!" Alan pointed to the pendulum flashing gloriously in the sunlight now breaking through the racing clouds. "Are they diamonds?"

"Yes, sir. Worth, I have heard, about two thousand pounds."

"Then, of course, they would account for the precautions."

"Very likely, sir. Only I have a feeling that this clock has a meaning which we shall not learn until it stops. The maker constructed it in a locked room in this house, of which my master had the key, and I think my master knew even more about it than Monsoor Guidet did. Is the temperature here agreeable to you, sir?"

"A trifle warm, don't you think?"

"It shall be regulated to suit you, sir. Mr. Craig was sensitive to a degree, one way or the other."

Alan turned abruptly from the clock which, somehow, he was finding fascinating. "Well, now, Caw," he said, dropping into an easy chair by the fire, "hadn't you better begin to explain things?"

"At once, if you wish it, sir. But I'm hoping that Mr. Craig's lawyer from Glasgow, Mr. Harvie, will be here at noon, and as he may have fuller information than I can give, I was wondering if you would not care to hear him first. Indeed, Mr. Alan, I think it would be worth your while to wait, I could tell you a good deal, but my master did not tell me everything, though I have sometimes thought he meant to tell me more--"

"Very well, Caw. I'll ask only one question for the present. Did my uncle see anything of Mr. Bullard within the last few months of his life?"

Caw let fall the duster and recovered it before he answered: "Yes, sir. On the afternoon of the day of his death Mr. Bullard and Mr. Lancaster sat in this room with him."

"Mr. Lancaster, too!"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks; that will do for the present. Now I have a letter to write. By the bye, do you remember my friend, Mr. France, being here once? I am going to send for him."

"I remember Mr. France very well indeed, sir, and I will do my best to make him comfortable. I think you will find everything here," Caw moved the chair at the desk.

Alan got up, then hesitated. "Do you know, Caw, I can hardly bring myself to take possession in this cool fashion right away."

"My master would have wished for nothing better. You will remember, sir, that all has been yours for the last eighteen months." Caw made the stiff little bow that betokened retiral.

"A moment. Caw," said the young man. "I take it that you would have done anything for my uncle."

"That is so," was the quiet reply, "and, if I may say so, Mr. Alan, I am here to do anything for you."

He was gone, leaving Alan perplexed and not a little touched, for he could not doubt the man's sincerity. Presently he sat down and wrote to Teddy France, disguising his writing as much as possible.

"My dear Teddy:

"Before you go further, get a grip on yourself, then turn the page very slowly and look at the signature. Have you done so? You see, I want firstly to avoid giving you a sudden scare, and I hope it has been at least modified, old man; secondly, though I'm very much alive, I'm not advertising the fact at present and trust you to help me in keeping it dark. My story is too long to put on paper, but you shall have it all as soon as you can come to listen. Is it possible for you to get leave at once and come here for a couple of days? I badly want to see you again and ask your help and advice. Wire me on receipt of this. Relying on your secrecy,

"Yours as ever,

"ALAN CRAIG.

"P.S.: I'd like Doris to know, but only if you can find a way to tell her secretly. Ask her to trust me for a little while."

The visit of Mr. Harvie, the lawyer, who arrived at noon, meant little but disappointment for Alan. After a few polite words of congratulation, the lawyer dived into business, explaining Alan's position as the result of his uncle's deed of gift, and reciting a short list of securities mixed up with money figures.

"All very simple and satisfactory so far as it goes, Mr. Craig," he said, "and, of course, I am always at your service should you think I can be of the slightest help. Your uncle's will provided only for a legacy and an annuity to the male and female servants, also a thousand pounds to Dr. Handyside, the residue, about four thousand pounds, falling to yourself. My duty for the present ends with the delivery of this"--he handed an envelope to Alan--"though my responsibilities do not cease until the clock stops."

"I wish you would explain the clock, Mr. Harvie."

Mr. Harvie wagged his head. "My knowledge concerning the clock is confined to written instructions of my late client, whereby I shall be present when it stops, but my duties then will depend on circumstances. The significance of the clock itself I do not yet comprehend. All I know it that the clock will run a year from the date of my client's death, and that, at least twenty-four hours prior to the stoppage, I shall be warned and informed of the hour at which I must be present." He paused to purse

his lips and continued: "I do not think you will resent my remarking, Mr. Craig, that for as sane a business man as ever I met, your uncle had some of the oddest ideas--which, nevertheless, you and I are bound to respect. Possibly a chat with Mr. Caw may dispel some of the fog you have stepped into on your otherwise fortunate and happy return home. I feel that Mr. Caw knows a great deal more than I, but in this case, at any rate"--Mr. Harvie permitted himself to smile--"what I do not know is none of my business."

"You can assure me that absolutely everything in this house belongs to me?" said Alan after a short silence. "You know of nothing which my uncle intended to make over to friends?"

"Nothing whatever. Mr. Craig was absolutely clear on that point when I drew up the Deed of Gift. Still, as I have said, in any new difficulty I am at your service. I liked your uncle, Mr. Craig. I once mentioned a sad case of unmerited poverty to him, and his generosity astonished, nay, shamed me. You have a good man's place to fill."

Mr. Harvie stayed to lunch--Caw performed wonders in the circumstances--and caught the two o'clock steamer. As soon as he was gone, Alan opened the envelope. If he had looked for revelations within, he was bound to be once more disappointed. The enclosure consisted simply of a letter, and not a lengthy one at that.

"GREY HOUSE,

"26th October, 1913.

"My dear Alan:

"It is written that we shall not meet again. My malady grows daily worse, and the end may come at any moment. But I am of good cheer because of my faith in your ultimate return. Whence comes that faith I cannot tell--but whence comes any great and steadfast faith? When you come into this house and the little fortune that has been yours since you left for the Arctic, you may meet with some puzzling things; you may even be tempted to say, or think, that the old man must have been a little 'cracked.' But one must amuse oneself, especially when thought gnaws and time hangs heavy; and if there happens to be a way of attaining one's chief desires which is not altogether a tiresome and conventional way, why not choose it, as I have done? Should my whims cost you trouble or annoyance, forgive me. Let things take their course, if at all possible, till the Clock stops. Trust Caw, who knows as much as I care for any one to know; Lawyer Harvie, who knows next to nothing; Handyside and his daughter who may, or may not, know anything. In my latter days my trust in human nature has been shaken, though not destroyed; yet I say to you: Rather a host of declared enemies than one doubtful friend. Farewell, Alan, and may God send you happiness. A man can make pleasure for himself.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"CHRISTOPHER CRAIG."

* * * * *

After a little while Alan rang for Caw.

The servant's eyes held a glimmer of anticipation induced by the lawyer's

visit. Surely Mr. Harvie had been able to divulge something that would render his coming task a little easier, for Caw had still to tell of the Green Box and at the same time conceal the fact that Christopher Craig had died at bitter enmity with his two old friends--or at all events, the grounds of that enmity. As though Christopher had wished to lay particular stress on his desire for such concealment, Caw had found among his written instructions the following words: "At all costs, my nephew is to be spared the tragedy of his parents' ruin."

At Alan's first remark the glimmer went out.

"No, Caw, I'm no wiser than I was this morning. Mr. Harvie knows nothing except that he is to be present when the clock stops, and a letter written to me by my uncle, which he gave me, leaves me as much in the dark as ever. My uncle's letter says, however, that I am to trust you, and that you know more than any one."

Caw made a slight inclination. "May I ask if the letter makes mention of Dr. Handyside and Miss Handyside, sir?"

"I am to trust them also," Alan replied, with a smile, "as well as Mr. Harvie."

"Thank you, sir. As you have seen, sir, I have ventured to trust Dr. Handyside and Miss Handyside a bit of my own; in fact I was forced into so doing; and, though I had my master's word for it, if necessary, I am glad to hear it again from you, sir. As for Mr. Harvie, I take leave to hope we shall not require to trust him."

"Why on earth--?"

"Well, sir, he's a lawyer--"

"Good lord, Caw! What are you driving at? My uncle trusted him, and his letter--"

"If you'll excuse me, sir, you have just been telling me that Mr. Harvie knows next to nothing. Mr. Harvie, I beg to say, is a very nice gentleman, and as honest as any lawyer need hope for to be; but a lawyer is the last sort of human being we want to have in this business, sir."

"I'm afraid I don't quite grasp--" began Alan, amused by the other's earnestness.

"Well, sir, did you ever go to a lawyer to ask a question?"

"I can't say I have, that I remember."

"Then, sir, I have. I once asked a lawyer one question, and before he could, or would, answer it, sir, he asked me fifty, and then his answer was rot--beg pardon, sir--unsatisfactory. But what I mean is just this, sir. With all due deference to Mr. Harvie, we don't want outsiders asking questions. My master himself would have been against it, and I'm hoping you will understand why before very long, sir."

Alan sat up. "Before we go any further," he said, "will you tell me what you were looking for last night when you opened a drawer in that writing-table and--well, go ahead."

Caw took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. "A green box, sir, that had been there a few hours earlier."

"The contents?"

"Diamonds, sir."

"What?"

"Diamonds, sir."

"I didn't know there were diamonds--except in that pendulum."

The other gave a faint sigh.

"Were those in the box of any great value?"

Caw moistened his lips. "Six hundred thousand pounds--"

"Oh, nonsense!"

"My master's words, sir."

"Then--why should they have been left lying there?"

"My master's orders, sir."

Alan opened his mouth, but found no speech. Said Caw: "You find it difficult to believe, sir, but there are other things just as difficult. For instance, I was forbidden to use any violence to prevent the box being taken away--that is, taken away by certain parties. A horrid position for me, sir."

"Yes," assented Alan, absently. Presently he went on: "Don't imagine that I doubt anything you have said, Caw--except that the diamonds, whose value there must surely be some extraordinary mistake about, were in the box."

"But, Mr. Alan, I can swear they were! It was I who closed and put the box in the drawer for the last time, at my master's request. He had been admiring them, as he often did--"

"Who were the parties who were to be allowed to take the box?"

After a moment's hesitation,--"Mr. Bullard, sir, and Mr. Lancaster. They were the only persons besides myself who knew about the diamonds. I should tell you that my master showed them the diamonds that afternoon."

"Good God!" said Alan under his breath. Aloud: "Are you telling me that you suspect those two gentlemen of st--taking the box?"

"They came here late on the night after my master's death, with that object, sir."

"But the box was taken last night."

"I can't swear that it was they who were here last night, but I can swear they would have had the box on the night I have named, sir, but for Miss Handyside."

"Miss Handyside! ... Sit down, man, and tell your story. I'll try not to interrupt."

"Thank you, sir." Caw drew a chair from the wall; for once he was glad to be seated. He told his story in a crisp, straightforward fashion, avoiding side issues, and his listener heard him out in silence.

There was a pause before the latter spoke.

"You've given me something to think about, Caw," he said gravely. "Meantime I'll ask only three questions. Have you any doubt that the box and its contents belonged entirely to my uncle?"

"None at all, sir. I remember his getting the box made--twelve years ago, I should say. Also, I knew he had made a great deal of money and was putting it into diamonds."

"He hadn't a duplicate box?"

"If he had, sir, I should have seen it. For the last two years of his life, I had to look after everything for him, even open his safe."

"I see. Now tell me: Did my uncle and Messrs. Bullard and Lancaster part on good terms that afternoon?"

Caw could have smiled with relief at the form in which the enquiry was put. "Why, sir," he said, with ill-suppressed eagerness, "they shook hands, and my master bade them a kind farewell. Mr. Lancaster was visibly affected."

"And they were back the next night!"

"Six hundred thousand pounds is a lot of money, sir."

Alan got up, strode to the window, and looked out for a minute's space.

"What would you say, Caw," he asked, turning abruptly, "if I told you that for the last eighteen months I have regarded Mr. Bullard and Mr. Lancaster as my best friends?"

The servant, who had risen also, replied respectfully: "I would say I was very sorry, sir."

"Indeed!--And if I told you that they had helped me with a large sum of money--what then?"

"I should take the liberty, sir, of wondering what you gave them for it."

"Good Heavens!" the young man exclaimed, "the thing is impossible!" Controlling himself--"Thanks, Caw, I'll not trouble you more for the present."

"Very good, sir. When will you take tea?"

"I'm taking tea with Dr. Handyside."

"Very good, sir. I had better show you how the door works from this side."

* * * * *

It was a much worried young man whom Caw presently left alone. Until last night, when he had looked at Marjorie Handyside's note, it had never occurred to him to connect the crime in the Arctic wastes with the will he had signed in the Aasvogel Syndicate office, on that fine spring morning, eighteen months ago. His only suspicion, which in nine thoughts out of ten he had almost rejected for its absurdity, was against the man Garnet whose place he had filled in the Expedition. Garnet, who was an author and a vile-tempered fellow even in good health, had gone half crazy because the Expedition was not postponed for a year on his account. He had cursed Alan as a scheming interloper, and so forth, and had actually expressed the wish that he might leave his bones "up there." And last night, the girl's note had given his mind nothing more than a nasty jar. Bullard?--why, that idea, he had thought, was still more absurd than the other!

But now what was he to believe? Caw's revelation seemed to leave him no choice. And yet the thing appeared preposterous. Bullard and Lancaster were rich men, and while his acquaintance with the former had been comparatively slight, memories of the latter's frequent kindnesses and hospitality had warmed his heart many a time during his exile in the Arctic. Lancaster a trafficker in murder?--Lancaster the delicate, gentle father of the girl who had promised to wait for him? No, by Heaven, he would not believe it! As for Bullard--

The sinking sun shot a ray against the clock, and the glitter of diamonds roused him from his brooding. It was the Handysides' tea hour. He must try to get a quiet word with his hostess. He had met her at breakfast, but the doctor had been present. There were several things he wanted to say--must say--to her. She was brave--much braver than he had given her credit for a few hours ago--as well as bonny. As he descended to the passage he thought of how she had outwitted Bullard. Fortune was with him; he found her alone in the drawing-room.

"I always give father ten minutes grace when he's cleaning his car, and it's pretty messy after last night, while he has got to be careful with his foot," she explained. "By the way, Mr. Craig, I have to apologise for my curiosity of last night, but I'm not used to stories like yours."

"My apology is about a more serious matter," he replied. "I've just been hearing from Caw of how you rescued the Green Box at the first attempt to remove it. It was the pluckiest thing I ever heard of, and I'm under a tremendous obligation to you."

"Oh, please don't!" she said, with a laugh and a blush. "You must understand that I hadn't a pistol that night. The pistol was an awful failure, wasn't it? You weren't a bit afraid--for yourself, anyway--and I was terrified. I'd have been far more effective if I'd just opened the door an inch and called 'boo!'"

"I fancy that would have finished me, Miss Handyside! But do you want to learn to shoot? If so, and you'd allow me, I'd give you a lesson or two, with pleasure."

"Would you?--But you mustn't tell father. Luckily he didn't notice the horrid thing last night. Now, I think I'd better give him a hail to come to tea."

"One moment, please," said Allan. "Would you mind telling me why you wrote down that name last night?"

She became grave at once. "Was it the wrong one, Mr. Craig?"

"I can only hope so. But what made you think it a possible one? Had you ever seen the man before that night?"

"No." She paused, then said slowly: "Mr. Craig, if he wanted your uncle's diamonds that night, it is likely that he wanted them long before then, and it must have occurred to him that your life stood in his way of ever getting them as a gift or legacy." She halted, and then asked: "Well?"

"This is for your ears alone, Miss Handyside," he said on an impulse. "When I wanted very much to go to the Arctic and could not find the necessary money, Mr. Bullard and--and another man advanced it, and I made a will in their favour."

"Oh, how horrible!"

"And yet all that proves nothing with regard to the man Flitch."

"No more does this," she quickly rejoined. "But when I saw that Bullard man's face as he laid the Green Box on the table, I felt that there was a being who would stick at nothing. I'll never forget his expression. It was as if the humanness had fallen from a face. It was--devilish.... That was what made me write down his name last night." She held up her hand. "Hush!"

Dr. Handyside hobbled in, looking far from happy. "Has Caw told you how he came to be absent from his charge last night, Mr. Craig?" he asked.

"In the same circumstances I'd have been absent myself," said Alan.

Marjorie gave him a grateful glance. "Poor father feels as if he owed you over half a million," she said.

The guest laughed. "Well, he can easily feel that he has paid the debt--by taking the Green Box as seriously as I do!"

"In other words as a joke?" said Handyside sadly. "That's very generous of you, Alan, if I may say so,--to quote Caw--but the Green Box is too hard and cold a fact to jest about."

"Then let us ignore it, if you please. My uncle's letter, which his lawyer handed me to-day, requests me to let things take their course, if at all possible, until the Clock stops; and that's what I'm going to do so far, at least, as that blessed Green Box is concerned. As a matter of fact, the Clock interests me far more than the box."

"Why?" said Marjorie.

"I don't know, but there it is!"

"Have you any hope," asked Handyside, "that there is any chance of recovering the box or, rather, its contents? Forgive my harping on the subject?"

"No," answered Alan, thinking of Doris Lancaster. "And pray believe me, doctor, when I say that I care as little as I hope."

For which saying Marjorie could have kissed him.

CHAPTER XIV

The unspeakable Marvel reached London shortly after seven p.m.,--nearly an hour late. A sleet storm had descended on the Metropolis. He took a four-wheeler to the City. It crawled, but he was glad of the time to rehearse once more the part he had decided to play, during the latter hours of the railway journey. Here was a desperate idea inspired by a desperate situation. A hundred other ideas had offered themselves only to be rejected. He shivered with more than cold, fingered the flask in his pocket, but refrained from seeking its perfidious comfort. There must be no slackening wits in view of what was coming.

At last the cab stopped at his destination. With stiffened limbs he ascended the weary flights of stairs, paused on the fourth landing to blow into his hands and flap his arms. Then, after a glance round, he turned into the corridor on the left. The door of the Aasvogel Syndicate offices was still unlocked, by arrangement. He opened it quietly, stepped in, and as quietly closed it, turning the key. With a fairly firm and confident step he advanced to the lighted room at the end of the passage. His old foolish, ingratiating smile was on his face when he entered.

Bullard swung round from his desk.

"Hullo!" he cried genially. "Got back! Beastly weather, isn't it? Just returned from Paris an hour ago. Sit down and warm yourself."

"Thanks, Mr. Bullard." Marvel took a chair at the fire and proceeded to chafe his hands. "Paris, did you say? Coldish there, I suppose?"

"Felt like snow this morning. By the way, I didn't get your note till my arrival here to-night."

Marvel began to feel that things were shaping nicely. "I sent it as soon as I could, Mr. Bullard. Awful weather up there last night--something ghastly. Wouldn't take on the job again for ten, times the money."

"Well, it's over, and I take it that you were quite successful."

"Oh, that part of it was easy, Mr. Bullard."

"Good!" With that Mr. Bullard's geniality vanished. "I say, where's the Green Box?"

Mr. Marvel grinned pleasantly. "Always in such a hurry, Mr. Bullard! But don't be alarmed; the Green Box is all right--very much all right."

"Look here, Marvel. I'm not in the humour for any humbug. I want that box--now!"

"And I want that four hundred pounds before I produce the box--"

"Well, the money's ready."

"--and another five hundred when you touch the box--"

"You impudent swine!" cried Bullard viciously. "So that's your game!"

"Well, Mr. Bullard, when I came to think it over in that ghastly blizzard, I saw you had inadvertently underestimated the value of my services, and considering that I had already parted with those valuable papers of mine for one--"

"Oh, shut it, man! Do you take me for a fool?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Bullard! You want that box badly, and an extra five hundred is neither here nor there to you."

Bullard's expression was so ugly then that the pretender wavered. "Where is the Green Box? Answer!"

"Give me the four hundred, and I'll take you to it."

"Take me to it? I think not!"

"Oh, Mr. Bullard, surely you don't distrust me."

Bullard appeared to reflect, and said harshly: "One more chance. Bring the box here at ten to-morrow morning, and I'll give you two hundred extra, you dirty little thief!"

"Five hundred, Mr. Bullard," said Marvel gently. He could have hugged himself.

Again Bullard appeared to be lost in thought, his fingers toyed with the nugget on his chain. At last he said sullenly: "I might have known you would try it on, you scoundrel. But I must have the box first thing in the morning. It's awkward enough not to have it tonight." He turned to his desk and picked up an envelope with a typewritten address. He sat staring at it as though he had forgotten Marvel's presence.

Suddenly he wheeled and spoke. "You shall have five hundred in the morning--"

"And four hundred to-night, Mr. Bullard."

"Yes--an hour hence. Do you know the Victoria Docks?--Of course you do. Well, the street named here"--he tapped the envelope--"is close to them. Deliver this letter and bring me back an answer--and the four hundred are yours. Hold your tongue! The thing is too private for an ordinary messenger. It's entirely owing to your vile behaviour that this letter must be delivered to-night. Will you take it, or must I take it myself? Mind, if I do, you can go to the devil for your four hundred, ay, and the five hundred to boot. I've stood the limit from you, Marvel, and I'm quite equal to locking you up in our strong-room here till you're ready and eager to give up the box for nothing!"

"Come, come, Mr. Bullard," said Marvel, rising, "there's no need for all this--this roughness. I'll take the letter with pleasure if you'll give me a couple of hundred to go on with."

Bullard tossed the letter back on the desk, and proceeded to light a cigar.

Marvel took a step forward. "I was only joking, Mr. Bullard. I'll take your message, and trust you."

"Very well," growled the other, handing it over. "Take care of it. You ought to be back in an hour. You'll find me here."

"Eight you are!" said Marvel, and went jauntily from the room.

Bullard sank back in his chair. "The blind fool!" he murmured, and grinned.

An hour later he was dining in the Savoy restaurant.

About ten o'clock he was shown into Lancaster's library. He was in evening dress. He carried a suit case bearing, in the midst of many old labels, his own initials. The moment the door was shut he said--

"Where's Mrs. Lancaster? Didn't she get my note?"

Lancaster, his weary eyes blinking in the sudden rousing from a troubled nap, replied: "Yes, it caught her as she was about to leave the house with Doris. Is anything the matter?"

"Did Doris go alone?"

"Yes, but--"

"I wish you would tell Mrs. Lancaster--"

At that moment the lady entered, gloriously attired, her eyes smouldering.

"What's the matter, Mr. Bullard?"

"Thanks for staying at home in response to my request," he said suavely. "I have hopes that you won't find it a wasted evening. By the way, can you get rid of the attentions of your servants at so early an hour?"

Her sullen eyes brightened with curiosity. "I daresay I can, Mr. Bullard, but may I ask--"

"Please add the favour to the one already granted, and rejoin us here as soon as possible."

When she had gone, Bullard laid the suitcase on a chair, opened it, and took out the Green Box which he placed on the table. Then deliberately, and with a steady hand, he helped himself to a cigarette from his host's silver box, and lit it carefully.

"Well, Lancaster," he said, after exhaling a long whiff, "how's that?"

"Great Heavens!" Lancaster stopped staring and sat down feebly. "How did you get it? Where? Surely not in the same place as before!"

"That I can't tell you. The point that interests me is that it is here

now. My story will keep--it's quite good enough for that. By the bye, where are your congratulations?"

Lancaster stretched out a shaking hand. "Take it away, for God's sake," he said. "Don't--don't let my wife see those stones. I tell you again, Bullard--I swear it--I don't want one more than will clear me of that one debt."

"Don't talk rot," was the light retort. "Mrs. Lancaster is going to choose one or two for luck. Between ourselves, as her prospective son-in-law I naturally desire to win her favour, as well as her entire confidence in my ability to provide suitably for her daughter. Besides, you must see that for your own sake it is better that she should be invol--pardon--interested. Why groan, my friend? Your troubles are over."

Mrs. Lancaster came in, gazed, and pounced. "What is it? What's wrong with Robert? What is all the mystery about?"

"This little box," said Bullard, patting it, "contains what I may call the Christopher Collection. No more questions now, if you please. Pray be seated. Are the servants--?"

"Yes, yes! Open it! I must see--"

"Unfortunately we lack the key. However, my expert tin-opener ought now to be waiting outside. I'll fetch him in, apologising for his uncouthness, which he can't help. He might like a little whisky, Lancaster. Ah, I see it is already provided. Better have some yourself, old man."

With these words, Bullard left the room to return a minute later with a rough-looking man in garb that might have been termed semi-sea-faring. There was nothing particularly sinister about his reddish-bearded face, but his eyes were full of fears and suspicions, and the ordinary person would have shrunk from his contact. His conductor having locked the door, said--

"This is Mr. Flitch, who--"

"Damn ye!" muttered the man with a start and a scowl.

"Or, rather, Mr. Dunning, who is going to open the box for us. But you will please excuse me while I first ask him one or two personal questions. Well, Dunning, you got my note?"

"Ain't I here?"

"You attended to the messenger?"

A mere grunt of assent.

"Under lock and key?"

A nod.

"Any papers?"

"Not a scrap."

"Money?"

"Never you mind about that. I done what ye wanted. He's safe enough. Come to business!"

For an instant Bullard looked like striking the fellow, but he laughed, saying: "Well, it wasn't my money. Now you can go ahead. That's your job on the table. Want a refreshment first?"

"No," growled Flitch, alias Dunning, with a suspicious look at Mrs. Lancaster. He slouched over to the table and seated himself. From a big pocket he brought a cloth bundle, unrolled it on the table, and disclosed an array of steel implements of curious and varied shapes. His fingers were coarse and filthy, but his touch was exquisite; it was something worth seeing, the way he manipulated his tools in the lock of the Green Box. In a little while he seemed to forget the existence of the spectators. He even smiled in the absorption of his work. There was no forcing or wrenching: all was done in coaxing, persuasive fashion. But it was no simple task, and thirty minutes went past.

Bullard, seated by the table, rarely shifted his gaze from the busy fingers. Mrs. Lancaster, on the couch, a little way off, devoured the casket with brilliant, greedy stare. As for Lancaster, in his chair by the hearth, he had turned his face from the scene of operations, and sat motionless, one hand gripping the chair-arm, the other shading his eyes.

At last the worker paused, drew a long breath, and made to raise the lid. But Bullard's hand shot out and held it.

"That will do, my man."

The worker let go with a shrug of his shoulders, and proceeded to bundle up his tools.

"I could do wi' a drink now," he grumbled. "Neat."

Bullard turned to the small table at his elbow, and poured out half a tumbler of whisky. The other, having stuffed the bundle into his pocket, rose, seized the glass, and gulped the contents. He set the glass on the table and held out his hand. Bullard laid a heap of sovereigns in it, and it closed as if automatically.

"Report when he's really hungry," said Bullard in an undertone, and the man nodded. "Mr. Lancaster," he said aloud, "would you mind showing this man to the door? I'll do nothing till you come back."

"Eh--what's that?" quavered Lancaster, exposing a dazed-looking countenance.

"Oh, I'll do it," said his wife, rising impatiently. "This way, my man."

He slouched out after her. There was silence in the room till she returned.

"What a loathsome creature," she remarked. "Flitch, you called him. Is not that the name of the man who went out hunting with Alan Craig, Mr. Bullard? No wonder--"

"Look here!" said Bullard, and lifted the lid.

The woman's breath went in with a hiss. Unable to resist, her husband crept from his place and stood peering over her shoulder.

Bullard lifted out the shallow trays and laid them side by side. The room seemed to be filled with a new light.

"Six hundred thousand pounds," Bullard murmured.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Lancaster in a reverential whisper. Then she started violently. "Nothing--nothing," she added quickly, and went on gazing. She had remembered that she had not re-locked the door, though she had drawn the heavy curtain. But she could not tear herself yet awhile from that delicious spectacle of wealth.

They were all three fascinated.

After a while Bullard moved slightly. "May I choose a lucky one for you, Mrs. Lancaster?" he asked, and picked out a fairly large stone.

He dropped it as though it had stung.

"What's this?"

He took up another and paused--paused while his face grew old.... A third he took from another tray and touched it to his tongue.... A fourth from the third tray.... A fifth....

Then his fist flew up and fell on the edges of two trays so that the contents shot up like a spray in sunshine and scattered over the room. In a strangled voice he yelled--

"Paste, by God! We're tricked!"

The door opened; the curtain was drawn aside.

"Father! Who was that dreadful man who--"

In the stifling silence, Doris, home hours before her time, stood there in dance gown and white cloak, a latch-key in her hand, her eyes wide with wonder--wonder that gave place to horror.

CHAPTER XV

It would have been beyond Teddy France to describe clearly his own feelings as he waited in the Lancasters' drawing-room late on the following afternoon. His dearest friend was alive; his dearest hope was dead. Yet how could he be otherwise than glad, if only on Doris's account? Early in the day he had sent her a note, express, begging her to be at home at five. This meant questionings and reproaches from Mrs. Lancaster, for she and her daughter had what she deemed a most important social engagement; but the girl was firm, and eventually the mother went off alone in a sullen temper.

In any case, Doris would have revolted from tea and tattle that

afternoon. She had suffered a great shock the previous night. And since Teddy's note had suggested something most urgent, but told her nothing, she entered the drawing-room to meet him with foreboding added to a consuming fear. At the sight of him, so honest and kindly, she could have gone to his arms out of sheer longing for peace and comforting.

Teddy thought he had himself well in hand for his delicate task, but he was pale, and she noticed it.

"What is it?" she asked, all apprehension.

"Something good, Doris, but I can't tell you until you sit down."

"Good!" She forced a smile. She would not hurt his feelings, though apparently he had nothing very important to tell her after all. Poor Doris! all the big things in her life nowadays were of the evil sort. "Well, why don't you tell me, Teddy?"

"Because it's so tremendously good.'"

"Oh!" There was no mistaking his earnestness. Her mind turned quickly to Bullard. Had Teddy found out something?

"Doris, if you were given one wish, what would you wish for? You know, you can say anything to me."

She did not hesitate. "I'd wish that father were free from a great and terrible trouble."

"Well, we may hope for that, I'm sure. But if--if the wish would bring about something that--that you had believed past hoping for--what then?" He did not wait for her answer. "Doris," he said gently, "somebody has come home, safe and sound.... I had a letter from Alan Craig this morning. He is at Grey House now." He paused, puzzled. She was taking it so much more calmly than he had expected. The room was dusky and the fire-light deceptive, so he could hardly read her face. But presently he descried the glint of tears, and next moment she drooped and hid her eyes in her hands.

He spoke again. "For a reason which I don't yet know, Alan has come home secretly. He asks me to beg you to trust him for a little while. He must have a very strong reason for the secrecy. He wants my advice and help, so I'm leaving for Scotland to-night. If you have any message, please give me it now, Doris, and I'll leave you. You must want to be alone."

He waited, leaning against the mantel, watching her bowed head, torn betwixt loyalty and longing. Minutes passed before she uncovered her eyes and sat up. "Teddy," she said, "please sit down. There are things I must tell you before you go to Scotland." She wiped her eyes and put away the handkerchief as if for good. "You must be thinking me a very strange and heartless girl. You must be asking yourself why I am not overjoyed at the wonderful news. Don't speak. I suppose I don't properly realise it yet. Alan is alive and well!--I never was so glad of anything; I'll never cease to be glad of it. And just for a moment nothing else in the world seemed to matter. But--but I can't escape--I am like a prisoner told of a great joy which she can never look upon--"

"Doris, what are you saying? You don't for a moment imagine that Bullard--"

"Let me go on while I can. It's not easy to make my story coherent, so be patient... Something most awful happened last night. You know I was at the Lesters' dance, but I only stayed an hour--I got so worried about father. I pleaded a headache, and they got a taxi for me. It would be nearly eleven when I left. The fog was lifting. Just as the cab was reaching home I looked out and saw a dreadful-looking man coming from our door. He stared at me so horribly, so suspiciously, that I waited in the cab till he was well away. I had a latch-key and let myself in quietly. I went into the drawing-room. The lights were on, but the fire was low and no one was there. Mother had spoken of going early to bed, and I thought she must have done so. I went along to the library. There was no sound, but as I opened the door I heard a hoarse voice, though what it said I did not catch. It was followed by a smash. I drew back the curtain--you know how it hangs across the corner--and I saw--"

"Doris," the young man cried, "you're distressing yourself--"

"I must tell you, or go mad. Mr. Bullard was sitting at the table with his back to me. Father and mother were standing on the other side. They were just ghastly. On the table was a dark green roundish box, open, and some trays of diamonds. There were diamonds on the floor, too." Doris paused and wet her lips. "When I was a young girl," she continued, "before we came home, you know, Christopher Craig took me into his house one afternoon to give me some sweets, as he often did, and after bidding me not tell anybody, he showed me a dark green box, and in it were trays of diamonds. I never forgot it."

"But my dear girl--"

"Almost at once mother ordered me to go away. I went up to my room, and thought till I began to understand. I asked myself questions. What were those sudden journeys to Scotland for? Why was father so nervous afterwards? Who was the dreadful-looking man I saw? What made father and mother look so--so awful when I found them in the library?"

A heartsick feeling possessed Teddy, while he said: "But, Doris, all those apparently ugly things may be capable of explanation."

"Wait! ... Of course I could not sleep. I didn't know what to do with myself. At three in the morning I went down to the library for a book, though I knew I should never read it.... And before the cold fire he--father was sitting alone, like a--a broken man. Oh, Teddy, you always liked father, didn't you?" Ere lie could reply she proceeded: "He was so lonely, poor father! I loved him better than ever I had done.... And after a while he told me things--things I can't tell even to you. But the box of diamonds was Christopher Craig's--now Alan's. Father would not blame Mr. Bullard more than himself--but _I_ know.... And now here is a strange thing: all those diamonds are false, and of little value compared with the real. And, do you know, father was glad of that, though it means ruin. Father supposes it was a trick of Caw's--Caw was Mr. Craig's servant--I used to like him--and he was really very fond of me when I was a little girl--and so I thought of a plan." She sighed.

"Am I to hear your plan, Doris?"

"Oh, it can never be carried out now. It was just this: I would make a journey to Scotland, with the box in my dressing-case--it's there

now; but let me go on. Then I would hire a car for a day's run round the coast, and I would call at Mr. Craig's house--quite casually, of course--just to see how my old acquaintance, Caw, was getting on. That would be--or would have been--the most natural thing in the world. Of course Caw would ask me into the house, and would offer to get me tea. And while he was getting it--well, I know where the box used to be kept--"

"You brave little soul!"

"Oh, I'd risk anything for father," she said simply. "Once the box was back in its place, he would be safe from one horror, at any rate. The stones, though they are imitation, are worth several thousand pounds. Even if Caw found me out, I don't think he'd do anything terrible."

"But why should Caw suspect your--"

"He doesn't suspect--he _knows_! There are things about it I can't understand, but this morning my plan seemed the best possible. Before we went to bed father and I got slips of wood and jammed the box so tightly shut that you would have said it was locked--there was no key, you understand. Then--it was my idea--I got a little earth from a plant in the dining-room and made a few dirty marks on the carpet and window-sill. And I took the decanter and poured a lot of the whiskey out of the window, which I left open; and I put a soiled tumbler on the floor. And we broke the door of the cabinet where the box had been, and then we went up to bed, and I took the box with me."

Teddy stood up. "You perfect brick!" he cried; "I feel like cheering!"

She smiled the ghost of a smile. "And now you've guessed that there was a fuss about burglars in the morning, and Father 'phoned Mr. Bullard that the box was gone--which was not quite true, but as true as Mr. Bullard deserved--and Mr. Bullard came furious to the house, and left vowing vengeance on the dreadful-looking man who had unlocked the box the night before. So you see my poor little plan worked so far--only so far."

"What you mean," said the young man softly, "is that Alan must not know--"

"Caw is bound to tell Alan, has probably told him already. Don't you see how hideous the situation has become for father--and Alan, too?"

"I do see it. But now--you know there's not a bigger-hearted chap in the world than Alan Craig--suppose your father were simply to tell him everything--"

"Oh, never!" she exclaimed. "That would mean betraying Mr. Bullard, and father is--no, I can't tell you more. And I'm terrified that Mr. Bullard may yet discover that the box was not stolen last night after all--he's so horribly clever."

Teddy considered for a moment. "If the box were back in its old place," he said slowly, "that would end the matter in one way--"

"In every way, for Alan and I would never meet again--"

"You know Alan better than that, Doris. It is possible that Alan is not yet aware of the--the loss; even possible that Caw has not

discovered it."

"Oh! if I could only hope for that!--not that I could ever face Alan again. But, Teddy--"

"Well," he said deliberately, "it might be worth while to act on the possibility. If you think so, I'm your man, Doris."

"You--you would take the box?" Her suddenly shining eyes gazed up at his face in such gratitude and admiration that he turned slightly away. "You would risk your friendship with Alan--"

"Nonsense! Don't put it that way, Doris; and don't talk of never facing Alan again. All this will pass. The thing we want to do now is to make it pass as quickly as possible. Give me the box and the necessary directions, and I'll do my best."

"Oh, you are good! I confess I thought of your doing it, but the idea came all of a sudden and I hated it. I still hate it. It's making you do an underhand thing; it's cheating Alan in a way."

"It's returning his property, anyway," said Teddy, not too easily. "But the more I think of it, the more necessary it seems. For we do not know that the box belongs to Alan alone; and supposing others were interested in the diamonds, false though they are, Alan might be forced to--to act. So let me have it now, and I'll clear out, for I can tell you I'm pretty funky about meeting Mrs. Lancaster with it in my hand. And, Doris, it's plain to me that your father is somehow bound to Mr. Bullard. If you can, find out how much--excuse my bluntness--it would take to free him. I'm a poor devil, yet I might be able to do something in some way--"

"Oh, Teddy, Teddy, what am I to say to you?"

"Not another word, Doris, or we'll be caught!" He laughed shortly, strode to a switch and flooded the room with light. There was a limit even to his loyalty.

Five minutes later he left the house with a tidy brown-paper parcel under his arm.

In her room Doris fell on her knees, and when thanksgiving and petitions were ended remained in that position, thinking. And one of her thoughts was rather a strange question: "Why am I not more glad--madly glad--that Alan is alive?" And she remembered that she had sent no message.

CHAPTER XVI

About four o'clock Bullard came into his private office full of ill-suppressed wrath. Lancaster, who had been waiting for him in fear and trembling, looked a mute enquiry.

"Yes," said Bullard harshly, "I found the beast after losing all those precious hours, and I may tell you at once, he had nothing whatever to do with the disappearance of the Green Box from your cabinet. He accounted for all his doings after leaving Earl's Gate, and I was able to verify

his story. He went straight to a filthy gambling hell, lost a lot of money and got dead drunk. He's not decently sober yet."

"Then who could have done it?" Lancaster forced himself to say.

"Spare me idiotic questions! What I want to know is why on earth you did not take better care of the box."

"I daresay I ought to have put it in my safe," the other stammered, "but you left it with me as if it was nothing to you, and it--it really had become of so little value--comparatively--"

"Of little value! Why, its value to us might have been immense. The stones are paste, but what does that prove? Simply that Christopher's real stones are elsewhere. Christopher wasn't such a fool after all, and Caw has not tricked us wittingly. Caw imagines we've got the real stones right enough. At first I thought it might be otherwise, but my new theory is the one to hold water. The stones we saw that afternoon in Grey House were the stones we looked on last night--"

"Then--oh, my God!--Christopher was suspecting us, playing with us, all the time!"

"Keep calm. Remember, Christopher told us we should have our reward--"

"And this is it!" Lancaster groaned.

For the moment Bullard's self-confidence was shaken--but only for the moment. "Listen, Lancaster," he said steadily. "Christopher trusted no man absolutely--and who would, with half a million involved? He may even have doubted Caw. But Christopher was as friendly as ever, and he did not tell us, without meaning something, that the diamonds would be divided into three portions when his cursed clock had stopped. And so I believe that we shall yet get our shares--on a certain condition.--Are you following me?"

Lancaster nodded in vague fashion. "But the condition ..."

"Oh, Lord! hasn't it dawned? Why, the shares shall be ours when the clock stops, provided the Green Box, its contents intact, is then in its place in Christopher's study. Doesn't that hold water up to the brim?"

Lancaster turned away his face. He could have cried out.

"And now," said Bullard bitterly, "you've let the Green Box slip through your fingers!"

"Why didn't you tell me all that last night?" cried the ill-starred Lancaster. He dared not tell Bullard that the Green Box was safe in his house. Bullard would never, however great the compensation, forgive trickery against himself; and Bullard's theory remained to be proved. Lancaster's soul now seized on its last hope: that Doris would be able to carry out her plan of conveying the box to Grey House. "Why didn't you tell me last night?" he repeated.

"Is that all you've got to say?" Bullard asked, a sort of snarl in his voice: "And I suppose you still expect me to put you right over that twenty-five thousand pounds!"

"My God, Bullard, but you _promised_! Oh, surely, you don't mean to fail me!"

Bullard threw himself into the chair at his desk. While he chose a cigar he regained something of his customary control. "I beg your pardon, Lancaster," he said presently. "I ought not to have said that, seeing that I have your daughter's promise, and do not doubt it. But the thing has hit me--both of us--hard.... Now don't you think you had better go home? Don't work yourself into an illness again. The Green Box is gone--for good, I fear. We can't call in the police, you know. But there are still things to be done--for instance, find out whether the real diamonds are in Grey House--and, mark you, I think they are! If I were only certain, I'd act on the will at once. That beast Flitch has been restless lately. Wants to leave the country. His evidence might be necessary in proving the loss of Craig. But we'll talk it out to-morrow. Are you going?"

Without a word Lancaster went out; but he sat in his own private office for several hours.

"What prevents me," asked Bullard of himself, "from throwing the worthless fool overboard and letting him sink?" And the only answer was "Doris. I believe he'd sell his rights in the will for--"

The telephone on his desk buzzed. Next moment he was listening to the voice of Mrs. Lancaster.

"I'm just going out," it said, "and I thought I ought to let you know about Doris. She had an express letter from young France this morning, and insists on staying at home now to receive him. You asked me to keep an eye on him. Any news? ... Why don't you answer?"

"Pardon, my dear lady. No; there is no news, except that I've been on the wrong track and have small hope of getting upon the right one. Thank you for letting me know; at the same time, I must keep to my bargain with Doris--no interference, you understand. By the way, has Doris referred to last night?"

"Not with a single word."

"Ah! ... I may call to-morrow. When does Mr. France arrive?"

"Five. But what's to be done about--?"

"To-morrow, please, to-morrow. Look after your husband, will you? Good-bye."

The woman's soul was still seething with resentment against the man on account of the diamond fiasco, as she called it; at the same time, she was acutely sensible of the fact that now more than ever his friendship was essential to her interests.

Bullard lay back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully. Odd that Doris had made no reference to her glimpse of the scene in the library last night. Odd, too, that she should be receiving France at such an hour. And there were other things that struck him as odd. Lancaster's manner during their recent talk, for instance.... Francis Bullard had made the bulk of his fortune through unlikely happenings; it had become a habit with him to deal, as it were, in "off chances." At all events, he felt he would like

to secure a sight of young France's face as the latter came from the house. It might tell him something. Before long he left the office and the City. Rain was beginning to fall.

It was falling heavily when Teddy came down the steps of 13 Earl's Gate. He was wondering which way would take him the more speedily to a cab, when a taxi appeared moving slowly towards him out of the streaming gloom. He whistled, and the chauffeur replied, "Right, sir," steering towards the pavement. The cab came to rest midway between two lamps. The man reached back and threw the door open. Teddy gave his address, and got in. At the same moment the opposite door was torn open; the parcel was snatched from his possession; the door banged. The cab started. Teddy had a mere glimpse of some one muffled to the mouth, hat brim drawn low. He turned and sprang out, staggered badly, almost fell, recovered his balance, and beheld a figure leaving the step for the interior of the retreating cab. He ran after it with a shout,--and remembered the dangers in publicity. Still, he continued to run, seeking to make out the number which had got plastered with mud. Hopeless! Travelling now at a high speed the cab disappeared round a corner, and Mr. Bullard had secured considerably more than he had come for.

At that moment the most wretched young man in London was Teddy France. What was he to do? He could not go North without informing Doris of the calamity. He could not trust the information to a letter. There he stood in the rain, cursing himself and imagining the cruel blow it would be to the girl. Suddenly he realised that no time must be lost. To wait until later in the evening would doom his chances of seeing Doris alone. He must return to the house at once--and as he took the first step, a car purred softly up to No. 13, and deposited Mrs. Lancaster. It was all up! To call now for the second time would rouse all manner of suspicions.

An hour later, drenched and in despair, he entered a post office and telegraphed to Alan, postponing his visit for twenty-four hours. Then he went home, and after worrying his mother by making a miserable dinner, went forth again, and, having changed his mind, returned to Earl's Gate. Mrs. and Miss Lancaster, the servant informed him, had gone out for the evening. Thereupon he determined to resume his shadowing of Bullard, whom he could not help connecting, directly or indirectly, with his late assailant. On this occasion he went about the business with some boldness. At Bright's Hotel he made enquiry at the office, after assuring himself that Bullard was not in the lounge or its vicinity.

"Mr. Bullard has gone to Paris for a couple of days," the clerk told him. "Left here twenty minutes ago."

Teddy had his doubts. He visited a number of stations and spent a good deal of money on cab fares, but failed to obtain the smallest satisfaction. He finished up at the midnight train from King's Cross. Had he been able to be in two places at the same time, he would have got what he wanted at St. Pancras.

In another part of the Midland train that carried Bullard North, sat the man Flitch, alias Dunning. Once more Bullard had need of his skill. He was decently clothed in ready-mades and almost recovered, roughly speaking, from his bout of the previous night. But he was full of melancholy. Bullard's fee for the opening of the Green Box, not to mention the small fortune annexed from Mr. Marvel, was all gone. What he had not lost over the cards had been stolen while he lay fuddled. Thus he had been ready enough for another job from his patron. The hapless

Marvel, by the way, had been left secure in a dungeon-like cellar, with enough bread and water to keep body and soul together for a couple of days. Bullard had not had time to decide what to do with the creature.

In the seclusion of his sleeping berth Bullard examined the Green Box, forcing it open with a bright little tool. He would get a new key for it in Glasgow on the morrow. He cursed his luck and Lancaster. It would have gone hard indeed with Lancaster but for the existence of Doris. But Bullard was an optimist in his way. He was far from being beaten. Before the train was twenty miles on its journey his head was on the pillow; two minutes later the busy, plotting brain was at rest--recovering energy and keenness for the next act.

CHAPTER XVII

The night was fine but still very dark. An hour or so hence the moon at its full would make many things visible, and chiefly for that reason but also because he desired to return to London the same night, Bullard with his unsavoury companion, had arrived thus early at the gates of Grey House. Yet now it looked as though his programme would have to be abandoned, or, at any rate, drastically altered. For the house, as was plain to see, was occupied. There was no great display of lights, but a ruddy glow shone through the glazed inner door, and a thin white shaft fell from a slit between the drawn curtains of the familiar upper room.

"Caw taking a look round, no doubt," remarked Bullard, recovering from his first annoyance. "Wonder where the beggar has his lodgings and how long he is likely to hang about.

"Is the game up, mister?" asked the man at his elbow. "Cause if so, I'll just remind ye that I got to get paid, results or no results. Ye brought me here to open a door for ye, and 'tisn't my fault if the door's open already."

"Shut up till I've thought a bit." After a pause, Bullard began: "Pay attention, Flitch--"

"Not that name, damn ye!"

"Idiot, then. I was going to say that I could have done with an hour or two in that house, but that a couple of minutes would be better than nothing--"

"Couple o' minutes? That's easy--if ye don't mind a little risk."

"I'm used to risks," said Bullard, shifting the Green Box to his other arm. "But it is vital that I go in and out without being seen."

"Can't guarantee anything in this blasted rotten world," said Flitch, "but I think I can do the trick for you."

"How?"

"By bringin' whoever's in the house out at the back door while you slips in at the front."

"Do you mean that you will knock at the back--"

"Cheese it, mister! It's your turn to listen now. I've got in my pocket here a couple o' useful little articles which I never travels without when engaged on a job o' this sort--as I was pretty sure it was goin' to be. Them little articles is noisy, but ye can't have everything, even in Heaven, and as things has turned out now, they're just _it_." Mr. Flitch, at last in his element, paused to chuckle hoarsely.

"Oh, hurry up. You're talking of explosives."

"Go up one! Well, now, mister, suppose I sneaks up round to the back premises and fixes the pretty things all serene and comfortable to one of the outhouses, then lights the fuses and retires. In a little while--bang! bang! What price that for fetchin' yer friend out at the back door just to see if something hasn't maybe dropped off the clothes-line?"

"I believe you've hit it," said Bullard after consideration. "How long do the fuses burn?"

"Two minutes to a sec. The moment I've seen 'em go off proper I'll come back and wait for ye here, unless there's a chase, when I'll bolt for the car. Meanwhile you'll ha' crept up to near the house, ready to do yer bit as soon's ye hear yer friend movin'. It's chancey of course, but that's the sort o' trade it is. Better take this"--Flitch brought something from his breast-pocket--"in case the key's turned in that front door."

"Thanks; I've got one. Now say it all again so that we have no misunderstandings."

A few minutes later Bullard was crouching at the side of the steps beyond reach of the rosy light, his nerves taut, his whole being waiting for the signal. Smartly it came, and the stillness of the winter night was shattered.... Again!

The sound of some one running downstairs reached his ears; next it came from the oak-floored hall, diminishing; then a door--possibly one with a spring--went shut with a smash. Silence for a brief space, then noise from the back of the house. It was now or never.

Up the steps he bounded, yet halted to clean his boots on the mat. At that moment he thought he heard a cry, but nothing could stay him now. The shining tool in his clutch was unnecessary: the handle turned, the door opened. He sped across the hall and upstairs. Lights were burning in Christopher's old room; the pendulum of the clock scintillated as it swung. The fire burned cheerfully. There was a smell of Turkish tobacco. A book lay open on the writing table. Bullard noticed all these things and for an instant wavered and wondered. Without further pause, however, he placed the Green Box in its old refuge, carefully closed the drawer, and rose to go. Just for a moment the clock held him. Then he shook his fist at it and bolted. Closing the front door noiselessly after him, he went softly down the steps and across the gravel till he stepped upon the grass border, when he made swiftly, recklessly, for the gates.

A yard from them he all but fell over Flitch. That gentleman was lying face downwards, in a perfect agony of terror, scrabbling the gravel, mumbling to the Almighty to save him.

Bullard shook him, whispering savagely: "Get up, you fool! It's all right; we've done the trick--"

"O God, don't let his ghost get me! He was the first I ever killed, O God, and I wanted the money bad--"

"Curse you, Flitch! What the devil's the matter? If you won't come now, I must leave you to get caught--and that's the end of _you_!" Bullard gripped him by the collar and dragged him to his knees.

And now Caw's voice was heard calling: "Mr. Alan, Mr. Alan, wait till I get another lamp."

At that on Bullard's face the sweat broke thickly. With a gasp he let Flitch drop like a heavy sack, and started to run.

Not far beyond the gates Flitch overtook him.

Between thick sobs Flitch was moaning: "I heard his voice. 'Twas clear and strong. He's alive! ... I didn't kill him after all. Oh, God, I'm that thankful. I heard his voice. He's alive...."

Bullard swung his hand backwards and smote the babbling mouth. "Idiot! Do you think there's no punishment for attempted murder?"

"I'll confess--I'll confess to himself--and he'll forgive--"

"Will you! Is attempted murder your only crime? Shut your crazy mouth now, or it will be the worse for you."

And so, panting with exertion and passion, the fearful twain came to the car hidden in the wood. But Bullard was already recovering.

* * * * *

"No damage that I can see, except to the door of the garage," said Caw at last. "The car's all right."

"We'd better take a turn round the house," answered Alan, "though it's a search-light that's wanted tonight."

"Be careful, sir!"

"Oh, nonsense! Whoever it was has cleared out long ago." He moved off in advance, and was turning the corner, flashing his torch into the shrubbery, when a pale figure flew out of the darkness.

"You're safe!" cried a voice in tones of supreme relief. "Oh, but I was terrified for you!"

"Miss Handyside!" A flash had shown him a white-face, wide eyes, parted lips--also a hand gripping a pretty revolver. His finger left the electric button. Impulsively he softly exclaimed: "Does it matter to you, my safety?"

Darkness and a hush for the space of a long breath, and something happened to those two young people. Then Caw joined them.

"What was it?" the girl enquired, almost coldly. "We heard shots, and I ran through the passage--father is following--and I came out by the front door, and--"

"Weren't you afraid, miss?" Caw asked on a note of admiration.

"Yes, but--" s

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