

Hanshew Thomas W.

Cleek, the Master Detective



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Thomas W. Hanshew Cleek, the Master Detective

CHAPTER I THE AFFAIR OF THE MAN WHO CALLED HIMSELF HAMILTON CLEEK

I

The thing wouldn't have happened if any other constable than Collins had been put on point duty at Blackfriars Bridge that morning. For Collins was young, good-looking, and knew it. Nature had gifted him with a susceptible heart and a fond eye for the beauties of femininity. So when he looked round and saw the woman threading her way through the maze of vehicles at "Dead Man's Corner," with her skirt held up just enough to show two twinkling little feet in French shoes, and over them a graceful, willowy figure, and over that an enchanting, if rather too highly tinted, face, with almond eyes and a fluff of shining hair under the screen of a big Parisian hat – that did for him on the spot.

He saw at a glance that she was French – exceedingly French – and he preferred English beauty, as a rule. But, French or English, beauty is beauty, and here undeniably was a perfect type, so he unhesitatingly sprang to her assistance and piloted her safely to the kerb, revelling in her voluble thanks and tingling as she clung timidly but rather firmly to him.

"Sair, I have to give you much gratitude," she said in a pretty, wistful sort of way, as they stepped on to the pavement. Then she dropped her hand from his sleeve, looked up at him, and shyly drooped her head, as if overcome with confusion and surprise at the youth and good looks of him. "Ah, it is nowhere in the world but Londres one finds these delicate attentions, these splendid sergeants de ville," she added, with a sort of sigh. "You are wonnerful, you are mos' wonnerful, you Anglais poliss. Sair, I am a stranger; I know not ze ways of this city of amazement, and if monsieur would so kindly direct me where to find the Abbey of the Ves'minster –"

Before P. C. Collins could tell her that if that were her destination, she was a good deal out of her latitude, indeed, even before she concluded what she was saying, over the rumble of the traffic there rose a thin, shrill, piping sound, which to ears trained to its call possessed a startling significance.

It was the shrilling of a police whistle far off down the Embankment.

"Hullo! That's a call to the man on point," exclaimed Collins, all alert at once. "Excuse me, mum. See you presently. Something's up. One of my mates is a-signalling me."

"Mates, monsieur? Mates? Signalling? I shall not unnerstand the vords. But yes, vat shall that mean – eh?"

"Good Lord, don't bother me now! I – I mean, wait a bit. That's the call to 'head off' some one, and – By George! there he is now, coming head on, the hound, and running like the wind!"

For of a sudden, through a break in the traffic, a scudding figure had sprung into sight. It was the figure of a man in a gray frock-coat and a shining "topper," a well-groomed, well-set-up man, with a small, turned-up moustache and hair of a peculiar reddish shade. As he swung into sight, the distant whistle shrilled again; far off in the distance voices sent up cries of "Head him off!" "Stop that man!" etcetera; then those on the pavement near to the fugitive took up the cry, joined in

pursuit, and in a twinkling, what with cabmen, tram-men, draymen, and pedestrians all shouting, there was hubbub enough for Hades.

"A swell pickpocket, I'll lay my life," commented Collins, as he squared himself for an encounter and made ready to leap on the man when he came within gripping distance. "Here! get out of the way, madmazelly. Business before pleasure. And, besides, you're like to get bowled over in the rush. Here, chauffeur!" – this to the driver of a big, black motor-car which swept round the angle of the bridge at that moment, and made as though to scud down the Embankment into the thick of the chase – "pull that thing up sharp! Stop where you are! Dead still! At once, at once, do you hear? We don't want you getting in the way. Now, then" – nodding his head in the direction of the running man – "come on, you bounder; I'm ready for you!"

And, as if he really heard that invitation, and really were eager to accept it, the red-headed man did "come on" with a vengeance. And all the time, "madmazelly," unheeding Collins's advice, stood calmly and silently waiting.

Onward came the runner, with the whole roaring pack in his wake, dodging in and out among the vehicles, "flooring" people who got in his way, scudding, dodging, leaping, like a fox hard pressed by the hounds, until, all of a moment, he spied a break in the traffic, leapt through it, and – then there was mischief. For Collins sprang at him like a cat, gripped two big, strong-as-iron hands on his shoulders, and had him tight and fast.

"Got you, you ass!" snapped he, with a short, crisp, self-satisfied laugh. "None of your blessed squirming now. Keep still. You'll get out of your coffin, you bounder, as soon as out of my grip. Got you, got you! Do you understand?"

The response to this fairly took the wind out of him.

"Of course I do," said the captive gaily; "it's part of the programme that you should get me. Only, for Heaven's sake, don't spoil the film by remaining inactive, you goat! Struggle with me, handle me roughly, throw me about. Make it look real; make it look as though I actually did get away from you, not as though you let me. You chaps behind there, don't get in the way of the camera – it's in one of those cabs. Now, then, Bobby, don't be wooden! Struggle, struggle, you goat, and save the film!"

"Save the what?" gasped Collins. "Here! Good Lord! Do you mean to say – ?"

"Struggle – struggle – struggle!" cut in the man impatiently. "Can't you grasp the situation? It's a put-up thing: the taking of a cinematograph film, a living picture, for the Alhambra to-night! Heavens above, Marguerite, didn't you tell him?"

"Non, non! There was not ze time. You come so quick, I could not. And he – ah, le bon Dieu! – he gif me no chance. Officair, I beg, I entreat of you, make it real! Struggle, fight, keep on ze constant move. Zere!" – something tinkled on the pavement with the unmistakable sound of gold – "zere, monsieur, zere is de half-sovereign to pay you for ze trouble, only, for ze lof of goodness, do not pick it up while the instrument, ze camera, he is going. It is ze cinematograph, and you would spoil everything!"

The chop-fallen cry that Collins gave was lost in a roar of laughter from the pursuing crowd.

"Struggle, struggle! Don't you hear, you idiot?" broke in the red-headed man irritably. "You are being devilishly well paid for it, so for goodness' sake make it look real. That's it! Bully boy! Now, once more to the right, then loosen your grip so that I can push you away and make a feint of punching you off. All ready there, Marguerite? Keep a clear space about her, gentlemen. Ready with the motor, chauffeur? All right. Now, then, Bobby, fall back, and mind your eye when I hit out, old chap. One, two, three – here goes!"

With that he pushed the crest-fallen Collins from him, made a feint of punching his head as he reeled back, then sprang toward the spot where the Frenchwoman stood, and gave a finish to the adventure that was highly dramatic and decidedly theatrical. For "mademoiselle," seeing him approach her, struck a pose, threw out her arms, gathered him into them, to the exceeding

enjoyment of the laughing throng, then both looked back and behaved as people do on the stage when "pursued," gesticulated extravagantly, and rushing to the waiting motor, jumped into it.

"Many thanks, Bobby; many thanks, everybody!" sang out the red-headed man. "Let her go, chauffeur. The camera men will pick us up again at Whitehall in a few minutes' time."

"Right you are, sir," responded the chauffeur gaily. Then "toot-toot" went the motor-horn as the gentleman in gray closed the door upon himself and his companion, and the vehicle, darting forward, sped down the Embankment in the exact direction whence the man himself had originally come, and, passing directly through that belated portion of the hurrying crowd to whom the end of the adventure was not yet known, flew on and – vanished.

And Collins, stooping to pick up the half-sovereign that had been thrown him, felt that after all it was a poor price to receive for all the jeers and gibes of the assembled onlookers.

"Smart capture, Bobby, wasn't it?" sang out a deriding voice that set the crowd jeering anew. "You'll git promoted, you will! See it in all the evenin' papers – oh, yus! "Orrible hand-to-hand struggle with a desperado. Brave constable has 'arf a quid's worth out of an infuriated ruffian!" My hat! won't your missis be proud when you take her to see that bloomin' film?"

"Move on, now, move on!" said Collins, recovering his dignity and asserting it with a vim. "Look here, cabby, I don't take it kind of you to laugh like that; they had you just as bad as they had me. Blow that Frenchy! She might have tipped me off before I made such an ass of myself. I don't say that I'd have done it so natural if I had known, but – Hullo! What's that? Blowed if it ain't that blessed whistle again, and another crowd a-pelting this way; and – no! – yes, by Jupiter! a couple of Scotland Yard chaps with 'em. My hat! what do you suppose that means?"

He knew in the next moment. Panting and puffing, a crowd at their heels, and people from all sides stringing out from the pavement and trooping after them, the two "plain-clothes" men came racing through the grinning gathering and bore down on P. C. Collins.

"Hullo, Smathers, you in this, too?" began he, his feelings softened by the knowledge that other arms of the law would figure on that film with him at the Alhambra to-night. "Now, what are you after, you goat? That French lady, or the red-headed party in the gray suit?"

"Yes, yes, of course I am. You heard me signal you to head him off, didn't you?" replied Smathers, looking round and growing suddenly excited when he realized that Collins was empty-handed and that the red-headed man was not there. "Heavens! you never let him get away, did you? You grabbed him, didn't you – eh?"

"Of course I grabbed him. Come out of it. What are you giving me, you josser?" said Collins, with a wink and a grin. "Ain't you found out even yet, you silly? Why, it was only a faked-up thing, the taking of a kinematograph picture for the Alhambra. You and Petrie ought to have been here sooner and got your wages, you goats. I got half a quid for my share when I let him go."

Smathers and Petrie lifted up their voices in one despairing howl.

"When you what?" fairly yelled Smathers. "You fool! You don't mean to tell me that you let them take you in like that – those two? You don't mean to tell me that you had him, had him in your hands, and then let him go? You did? Oh, you seventy-seven kinds of a double-barrelled ass! Had him – think of it! – had him, and let him go! Did yourself out of a share in a reward of two hundred quid when you'd only to shut your hands and hold on to it!"

"Two hundred quid? Two hun – W – what are you talking about? Wasn't it true? Wasn't it a kinematograph picture, after all?"

"No, you fool, no!" howled Smathers, fairly dancing with despair. "Oh, you blithering idiot! You ninety-seven varieties of a fool! Do you know who you had in your hands? Do you know who you let go? It was that devil 'Forty Faces,' the 'Vanishing Cracksman,' 'The Man Who Calls Himself Hamilton Cleek'; and the woman was his pal, his confederate, his blessed stool pigeon, 'Margot, the Queen of the Apaches'; and she came over from Paris to help him in that clean scoop of Lady Dresmer's jewels last week!"

"Heavens!" gulped Collins, too far gone to say anything else, too deeply dejected to think of anything but that he had had the man for whom Scotland Yard had been groping for a year; the man over whom all England, all France, all Germany wondered, close shut in the grip of his hands and then had let him go. He was the biggest and the boldest criminal the police had ever had to cope with, the almost supernatural genius of crime, who defied all systems, laughed at all laws, mocked at all the Vidocqs, and Lupins, and Sherlock Holmeses, whether amateur or professional, French or English, German or American, that ever had or ever could be pitted against him, and who, for sheer devilry, for diabolical ingenuity, and for colossal impudence, as well as for a nature-bestowed power that was simply amazing, had not his match in all the universe.

Who or what he really was, whence he came, whether he was English, Irish, French, German, Yankee, Canadian, Italian, or Dutchman, no man knew and no man might ever hope to know unless he himself chose to reveal it. In his many encounters with the police he had assumed the speech, the characteristics, and, indeed, the facial attributes of each in turn, and assumed them with an ease and a perfection that were simply marvellous and had gained for him the sobriquet of "Forty Faces" among the police and of the "Vanishing Cracksman" among the scribes and reporters of newspaperdom. That he came in time to possess another name than these was due to his own whim and caprice, his own bald, unblushing impudence; for, of a sudden, whilst London was in a fever of excitement and all the newspapers up in arms over one of his most daring and successful coups, he chose to write boldly to both editors and police complaining that the title given him by each was both vulgar and cheap.

"You would not think of calling a great violinist like Paganini a 'fiddler,'" he wrote; "why, then, should you degrade me with the coarse term of 'cracksman'? I claim to be as much an artist in my profession as Paganini was in his, and I claim also a like courtesy from you. So, then, if in the future it becomes necessary to allude to me, and I fear it often will, I shall be obliged if you do so as 'The Man Who Calls Himself Hamilton Cleek.' In return for the courtesy, gentlemen, I promise to alter my mode of procedure, to turn over a new leaf, as it were, to give you at all times hereafter distinct information, in advance, of such places as I select for the field of my operations, and of the time when I shall pay my respects to them, and, on the morning after each such visit, to bestow some small portion of the loot upon Scotland Yard as a souvenir of the event."

And to that remarkable programme he rigidly adhered from that time forth, always giving the police twelve hours' notice, always evading their traps and snares, always carrying out his plans in spite of them, and always, on the morning after, sending some trinket or trifle to Superintendent Narkom at Scotland Yard. This trifle would be in a little pink cardboard box, tied up with rose-coloured ribbon, and marked, "With the compliments of The Man Who Calls Himself Hamilton Cleek."

The detectives of the United Kingdom, the detectives of the Continent, the detectives of America – each and all had measured swords with him, tried wits with him, spread snares and laid traps for him, and each and all had retired from the field vanquished.

And this was the man that he, Police Constable Samuel James Collins, had actually had in his hands, nay, in his very arms, and then had given up for half a sovereign and let go!

"Oh, so help me! You make my head swim, Smathers, that you do!" he managed to say at last. "I had him – I had the Vanishing Cracksman in my blessed paws and then went and let that French hussy – But look here; I say, now, how do you know it was him? Nobody can go by his looks; so how do you know?"

"Know, you footler!" growled Smathers disgustedly. "Why shouldn't I know when I've been after him ever since he left Scotland Yard half an hour ago?"

"Left what? My hat! You ain't a-going to tell me that he's been there? When? Why? What for?"

"To leave one of his blessed notices, the dare-devil. What a detective he'd 'a' made, wouldn't he, if he'd only a-turned his attention that way, and been on the side of the law instead of against it? He walked in bold as brass, sat down and talked with the superintendent over some cock-and-bull yarn about a 'Black Hand' letter that he said had been sent to him, and asked if he couldn't have police protection whilst he was in town. It wasn't until after he'd left that the superintendent he sees a note on the chair where the blighter had been sitting, and when he opened it, there it was in black and white, something like this:

"The list of presents that have been sent for the wedding to-morrow of Sir Horace Wyvern's eldest daughter make interesting reading, particularly that part which describes the jewels sent – no doubt as a tribute to her father's position as the greatest brain specialist in the world – from the Austrian Court and the Continental principalities. The care of such gems is too great a responsibility for the bride. I propose, therefore, to relieve her of it to-night, and to send you the customary souvenir of the event to-morrow morning. Yours faithfully,
"The Man Who Calls Himself Hamilton Cleek.

"That's how I know, dash you! Superintendent sent me out after him, hot foot; and after a bit I picked him up in the Strand, toddling along with that French hussy as cool as you please. But, blow him! he must have eyes all round his head, for he saw me just as soon as I saw him, and he and Frenchy separated like a shot. She hopped into a taxi and flew off in one direction; he dived into the crowd and bolted in another, and before you could say Jack Robinson he was doubling and twisting, jumping into cabs and jumping out again – all to gain time, of course, for the woman to do what he'd put her up to doing – and leading me the devil's own chase through the devil's own tangles till he was ready to bunk for the Embankment. And you let him go, you blooming footler! Had him and let him go, and chucked away a third of £200 for the price of half a quid!"

And long after Smathers and Petrie had left him, the wondering crowd had dispersed, and point duty at "Dead Man's Corner" was just point duty again and nothing more, P. C. Collins stood there, chewing the cud of bitter reflection over those words and trying to reckon up just how many pounds and how much glory had been lost to him.

II

"But, damme, sir, the thing's an outrage! I don't mince my words, Mr. Narkom. I say plump and plain the thing's an outrage, a disgrace to the police, an indignity upon the community at large; and for Scotland Yard to permit itself to be defied, bamboozled, mocked at in this appalling fashion by a paltry burglar – "

"Uncle, dear, pray don't excite yourself in this manner. I am quite sure that if Mr. Narkom could prevent the things – "

"Hold your tongue, Ailsa. I will not be interfered with! It's time that somebody spoke out plainly and let this establishment know what the public has a right to expect of it. What do I pay my rates and taxes for – and devilish high ones they are, too, b'gad – if it's not to maintain law and order and the proper protection of property? And to have the whole blessed country terrorized, the police defied, and people's houses invaded with impunity by a gutter-bred brute of a cracksman is nothing short of a scandal and a shame! Call this sort of tomfoolery being protected by the police? God bless my soul! one might as well be in the charge of a parcel of doddering old women and be done with it!"

It was an hour and a half after that exciting affair at "Dead Man's Corner." The scene was Superintendent Narkom's private room at headquarters, the dramatis personæ, Mr. Maverick Narkom himself, Sir Horace Wyvern, and Miss Ailsa Lorne, his niece, a slight, fair-haired, extremely attractive girl of twenty. She was the only and orphaned daughter of a much-loved sister, who, up till a year ago, had known nothing more exciting in the way of "life" than that which is to be found in a small village in Suffolk and falls to the lot of an underpaid vicar's only child. A railway accident had suddenly deprived her of both parents, throwing her wholly upon her own resources without a penny in the world. Sir Horace had gracefully come to the rescue and given her a home and a refuge, being doubly repaid for it by the affection and care she gave him and the manner in which she assumed control of a household which, hitherto, had been left wholly to the attention of servants. Lady Wyvern had long been dead, and her two daughters were of that type which devotes itself entirely to the pleasures of society and the demands of the world. A regular pepperbox of a man, testy, short-tempered, exacting, Sir Horace had flown headlong to Superintendent Narkom's office as soon as that gentleman's note, telling him of The Vanishing Cracksman's latest threat, had been delivered, and, on Miss Lorne's advice, had withheld all news of it from the members of his household, and brought her with him.

"I tell you that Scotland Yard must do something – must! must! must!" stormed he as Narkom, resenting that stigma upon the institution, puckered up his lips and looked savage. "That fellow has always kept his word, always, in spite of your precious band of muffs, and if you let him keep it this time, when there's upward of £40,000 worth of jewels in the house, it will be nothing less than a national disgrace, and you and your wretched collection of bunglers will be covered with deserved ridicule."

Narkom swung round, smarting under these continued taunts, these "flings" at the efficiency of his prided department, his nostrils dilated, his temper strained to the breaking-point.

"Well, he won't keep it this time – I promise you that!" he rapped out sharply. "Sooner or later every criminal, no matter how clever, meets his Waterloo, and this shall be his! I'll take this affair in hand myself, Sir Horace. I'll not only send the pick of my men to guard the jewels, but I'll go with them; and if that fellow crosses the threshold of Wyvern House to-night, by the Lord, I'll have him. He will have to be the devil himself to get away from me! Miss Lorne," recollecting himself and bowing apologetically, "I ask your pardon for this strong language – my temper got the better of my manners."

"It does not matter, Mr. Narkom, so that you preserve my cousin's wedding gifts from that appalling man," she answered, with a gentle inclination of the head and with a smile that made the superintendent think she must certainly be the most beautiful creature in all the world, it so irradiated her face and added to the magic of her glorious eyes. "It does not matter what you say, what you do, so long as you accomplish that."

"And I will accomplish it, as I'm a living man, I will! You may go home feeling assured of that. Look for my men some time before dusk, Sir Horace. I will arrive later. They will come in one at a time. See that they are admitted by the area door, and that, once in, not one of them leaves the house again before I put in an appearance. I'll look them over when I arrive to be sure that there's no wolf in sheep's clothing amongst them. With a fellow like that, a diabolical rascal with a diabolical gift for impersonation, one can't be too careful. Meantime, it is just as well not to have confided this news to your daughters, who, naturally, would be nervous and upset; but I assume that you have taken some one of the servants into your confidence, in order that nobody may pass them and enter the house under any pretext whatsoever?"

"No, I have not. Miss Lorne advised against it, and, as I am always guided by her, I said nothing of the matter to anybody."

"Was that wrong, do you think, Mr. Narkom?" queried Ailsa anxiously. "I feared that if they knew they might lose their heads, and that my cousins, who are intensely nervous and highly emotional, might hear of it, and add to our difficulties by becoming hysterical and demanding our attention at a time when we ought to be giving every moment to watching for the possible arrival of that man. And as he has always lived up to the strict letter of his dreadful promises heretofore, I knew that he was not to be expected before nightfall. Besides, the jewels are locked up in the safe in Sir Horace's consulting-room, and his assistant, Mr. Merfroy, has promised not to leave the room for one instant before we return."

"Oh, well, that's all right, then. I dare say there is very little likelihood of our man getting in whilst you and Sir Horace are here, and taking such a risk as stopping in the house until nightfall to begin his operations. Still, it was hardly wise, and I should advise hurrying back as fast as possible and taking at least one servant – the one you feel least likely to lose his head – into your confidence, Sir Horace, and putting him on the watch for my men. Otherwise, keep the matter as quiet as you have done, and look for me about nine o'clock. And rely upon this as a certainty: The Vanishing Cracksman will never get away with even one of those jewels if he enters that house to-night, and never get out of it unshackled!"

With that, he suavely bowed his visitors out and rang up the pick of his men without an instant's delay.

Promptly at nine o'clock he arrived, as he had promised, at Wyvern House, and was shown into Sir Horace's consulting-room, where Sir Horace himself and Miss Lorne were awaiting him and keeping close watch before the locked door of a communicating apartment in which sat the six men who had preceded him. He went in and put them all and severally through a rigid examination in quest of any trace of "make-up" or disguise of any sort, examining their badges and the marks on the handcuffs they carried with them to make sure that they bore the sign which he himself had scratched upon them in the privacy of his own room a couple of hours ago.

"No mistake about this lot," he announced, with a smile. "Has anybody else entered or attempted to enter the house?"

"Not a soul," replied Miss Lorne. "I didn't trust anybody to do the watching, Mr. Narkom. I watched myself."

"Good. Where are the jewels? In that safe?"

"No," replied Sir Horace. "They are to be exhibited in the picture gallery for the benefit of the guests at the wedding breakfast to-morrow, and as Miss Wyvern wished to superintend the arrangement of them herself, and there would be no time for that in the morning, she and her sister

are in there laying them out at this moment. As I could not prevent that without telling them what we have to dread, I did not protest against it; but if you think it will be safer to return them to the safe after my daughters have gone to bed, Mr. Narkom – "

"Not at all necessary. If our man gets in, their lying there in full view like that will prove a tempting bait, and – well, he'll find there's a hook behind it. I shall be there waiting for him. Now go and join the ladies, you and Miss Lorne, and act as though nothing out of the common was in the wind. My men and I will stop here, and you had better put out the light and lock us in, so that there's no danger of anybody finding out that we are here. No doubt Miss Wyvern and her sister will go to bed earlier than usual on this particular occasion. Let them do so. Send the servants to bed, too. You and Miss Lorne go to your beds at the same time as the others – or, at least, let them think that you have done so; then come down and let us out."

To this Sir Horace assented, and, taking Miss Lorne with him, went at once to the picture gallery and joined his daughters, with whom they remained until eleven o'clock. Promptly at that hour, however, the house was locked up, the bride-elect and her sister went to bed, the servants having already gone to theirs, and stillness settled down over the darkened house. At the end of a dozen minutes, however, it was faintly disturbed by the sound of slippered feet coming along the passage outside the consulting-room, then a key slipped into the lock, the door was opened, the light switched on, and Sir Horace and Miss Lorne appeared before the eager watchers.

"Now, then, lively, my men, look sharp!" whispered Narkom. "A man to each window and each staircase, so that nobody may go up or down or in or out without dropping into the arms of one of you. Confine your attention to this particular floor, and if you hear anybody coming, lay low until he's within reach, and you can drop on him before he bolts. Is this the door of the picture gallery, Sir Horace?"

"Yes," answered Sir Horace, as he fitted a key to the lock. "But surely you will need more men than you have brought, Mr. Narkom, if it is your intention to guard every window individually, for there are four to this room – see!"

With that he swung open the door, switched on the electric light, and Narkom fairly blinked at the dazzling sight that confronted him. Three long tables, laden with crystal and silver, cut glass and jewels, and running the full length of the room, flashed and scintillated under the glare of the electric bulbs which encircled the cornice of the gallery and clustered in luminous splendour in the crystal and frosted silver of a huge central chandelier. Spread out on the middle one of these, a dazzle of splintered rainbows, a very plain of living light, lay caskets and cases, boxes and trays, containing those royal gifts of which the newspapers had made so much and the Vanishing Cracksman had sworn to make so few.

Mr. Narkom went over and stood beside the glittering mass, resting his hand against the table and feasting his eyes upon all that opulent splendour.

"God bless my soul! it's superb, it's amazing," he commented. "No wonder the fellow is willing to take risks for a prize like this. You are a splendid temptation, a gorgeous bait, you beauties; but the fish that snaps at you will find that there's a nasty hook underneath in the shape of Maverick Narkom. Never mind the many windows, Sir Horace. Let him come in by them, if that's his plan. I'll never leave these things for one instant between now and the morning. Good-night, Miss Lorne. Go to bed and to sleep. You do the same, Sir Horace. My 'lay' is here!"

With that he stooped and, lifting the long drapery which covered the table and swept down in heavy folds to the floor, crept out of sight under it, and let it drop back into place again.

"Switch off the light and go," he called to them in a low-sunk voice. "Don't worry yourselves, either of you. Go to bed, and to sleep if you can."

"As if we could," answered Miss Lorne agitatedly. "I shan't be able to close an eyelid. I'll try, of course, but I know I shall not succeed. Come, uncle, come! Oh, do be careful, Mr. Narkom; and if that horrible man does come – "

"I'll have him, so help me God!" he vowed. "Switch off the light, and shut the door as you go out. This is 'Forty Faces.' Waterloo at last."

And in another moment the light snicked out, the door closed, and he was alone in the silent room.

For ten or a dozen minutes not even the bare suggestion of a noise disturbed the absolute stillness; then, of a sudden, his trained ear caught a faint sound that made him suck in his breath and rise on his elbow, the better to listen. The sound came, not from without the house, but from within, from the dark hall where he had stationed his men. As he listened he was conscious that some living creature had approached the door, touched the handle, and by the swift, low rustle and the sound of hard breathing, that it had been pounced upon and seized. He scrambled out from beneath the table, snicked on the light, whirled open the door, and was in time to hear the irritable voice of Sir Horace say, testily, "Don't make an ass of yourself by your over-zealousness. I've only come down to have a word with Mr. Narkom," and to see him standing on the threshold, grotesque in a baggy suit of striped pyjamas, with one wrist enclosed as in a steel band by the gripped fingers of Petrie.

"Why didn't you say it was you, sir?" exclaimed that crestfallen individual, as the flashing light made manifest his mistake. "When I heard you first, and see you come up out of that back passage, I made sure it was him; and if you'd a-struggled, I'd have bashed your head as sure as eggs."

"Thank you for nothing," he responded testily. "You might have remembered, however, that the man's first got to get into the place before he can come downstairs. Mr. Narkom," turning to the superintendent, "I was just getting into bed when I thought of something I'd neglected to tell you; and as my niece is sitting in her room with the door open, and I wasn't anxious to parade myself before her in my night clothes, I came down by the back staircase. I don't know how in the world I came to overlook it, but I think you ought to know that there's a way of getting into the picture gallery without using either the windows or the stairs, and that way ought to be both searched and guarded."

"Where is it? What is it? Why in the world didn't you tell me in the first place?" exclaimed Narkom irritably, as he glanced round the place searchingly. "Is it a panel? a secret door? or what? This is an old house, and old houses are sometimes a very nest of such things."

"Happily, this one isn't. It's a modern innovation, not an ancient relic, that offers the means of entrance in this case. A Yankee occupied this house before I bought it from him, one of those blessed shivery individuals his country breeds, who can't stand a breath of cold air indoors after the passing of the autumn. The wretched man put one of those wretched American inflictions, a hot-air furnace, in the cellar, with huge pipes running to every room in the house, great tin monstrosities bigger round than a man's body, ending in openings in the wall, with what they call 'registers' to let the heat in or shut it out as they please. I didn't have the wretched contrivance removed or those blessed 'registers' plastered up. I simply had them papered over when the rooms were done up (there's one over there near that settee), and if a man got into this house, he could get into that furnace thing and hide in one of those flues until he got ready to crawl up it as easily as not. It struck me that perhaps it would be as well for you to examine that furnace and those flues before matters go any further."

"Of course it would. Great Scott! Sir Horace, why didn't you think to tell me of this thing before?" said Narkom excitedly. "The fellow may be in it at this minute. Come, show me the wretched thing."

"It's in the cellar. We shall have to go down the kitchen stairs, and I haven't a light."

"Here's one," said Petrie, unhitching a bull's-eye from his belt and putting it into Narkom's hand. "Better go with Sir Horace at once, sir. Leave the door of the gallery open and the light on. Fish and me will stand guard over the stuff till you come back, so in case the man is in one of them flues and tries to bolt out at this end, we can nab him before he can get to the windows."

"A good idea," commented Narkom. "Come on, Sir Horace. Is this the way?"

"Yes, but you'll have to tread carefully, and mind you don't fall over anything. A good deal of my paraphernalia – bottles, retorts, and the like – is stored in the little recess at the foot of the staircase, and my assistant is careless and leaves things lying about."

Evidently the caution was necessary, for a minute or so after they had disappeared behind the door leading to the kitchen stairway, Petrie and his colleagues heard a sound as of something being overturned and smashed, and laughed softly to themselves. Evidently, too, the danger of the furnace had been grossly exaggerated by Sir Horace, for when, a few minutes later, the door opened and closed, and Narkom's men, glancing toward it, saw the figure of their chief reappear, it was plain that he was in no good temper. His features were knotted up into a scowl, and he swore audibly as he snapped the shutter over the bull's-eye and handed it back to Petrie.

"Nothing worth looking into, superintendent?"

"No, not a thing!" he replied. "The silly old josser! pulling me down there amongst the coals and rubbish for an insane idea like that! Why, the flues wouldn't admit the passage of a child; and, even then, there's a bend, an abrupt 'elbow,' that nothing but a cat could crawl up. And that's a man who's an authority on the human brain! I sent the old silly back to bed by the way he came, and if –"

There he stopped, stopped short, and sucked in his breath with a sharp, wheezing sound. For, of a sudden, a swift pattering footfall and a glimmer of moving light had sprung into being and drawn his eyes upward. There, overhead, was Miss Lorne coming down the stairs from the upper floor in a state of nervous excitement, with a bedroom candle in her shaking hand, a loose gown flung on over her nightdress, and her hair streaming over her shoulders in glorious disarray.

He stood and looked at her, with ever-quickenning breath, with ever-widening eyes, as though the beauty of her had wakened some dormant sense whose existence he had never suspected, as though, until now, he had never known how fair it was possible for a woman to be, how much to be desired. And whilst he was so looking she reached the foot of the staircase and came pantingly toward him.

"Oh, Mr. Narkom, what was it – that noise I heard?" she said in a tone of deepest agitation. "It sounded like a struggle, like the noise of something breaking, and I dressed as hastily as I could and came down. Did he come? Has he been here? Have you caught him? Oh! why don't you answer me, instead of staring at me like this? Can't you see how nervous, how frightened I am? Dear Heaven! will no one tell me what has happened?"

"Nothing has happened, Miss," answered Petrie, catching her eye as she flashed round on him. "You'd better go back to bed. Nobody's been here but Sir Horace. The noise you heard was me a-grabbing of him, and he and Mr. Narkom a-tumbling over something as they went down to look at the furnace."

"Furnace? What furnace? What are you talking about?" she cried agitatedly. "What do you mean by saying that Sir Horace came down?"

"Only what the superintendent himself will tell you, Miss, if you ask him. Sir Horace came downstairs in his pyjamas a few minutes ago to say as he'd recollected about the flues of the furnace in the cellar being big enough to hold a man, and then him and Mr. Narkom went below to have a look at it."

She gave a sharp and sudden cry, and her face went as pale as a dead face.

"Sir Horace came down?" she repeated, moving back a step and leaning heavily against the banister. "Sir Horace came down to look at the furnace? We have no furnace!"

"What?"

"We have no furnace, I tell you, and Sir Horace did not come down. He is up there still. I know, because I feared for his safety, and when he went to his room I locked him in!"

"Superintendent!" The word was voiced by every man present and six pairs of eyes turned toward Narkom with a look of despairing comprehension.

"Get to the cellar. Head the man off! It's he, the Cracksman!" he shouted out. "Find him! Get him! Nab him, if you have to turn the house upside down!"

They needed no second bidding, for each man grasped the situation instantly, and in a twinkling there was a veritable pandemonium. Shouting and scrambling like a band of madmen, they lurched to the door, whirled it open, and went flying down the staircase to the kitchen and so to a discovery which none might have foreseen. For almost as they entered they saw lying on the floor a suit of striped pyjamas, and close to it, gagged, bound, helpless, trussed up like a goose that was ready for the oven, gyves on his wrists, gyves on his ankles, their chief, their superintendent, Mr. Maverick Narkom, in a state of collapse and with all his outer clothing gone!

"After him! After that devil, and a thousand pounds to the man that gets him!" he managed to gasp as they rushed to him and ripped loose the gag. "He was here when we came! He has been in the house for hours. Get him! get him! get him!"

They surged from the room and up the stairs like a pack of stampeded animals; they raced through the hall and bore down on the picture gallery in a body, and, whirling open the now closed door, went tumbling headlong in.

The light was still burning. At the far end of the room a window was wide open, and the curtains of it fluttered in the wind. A collection of empty cases and caskets lay on the middle table, but man and jewels were alike gone! Once again the Vanishing Cracksman had lived up to his promise, up to his reputation, up to the very letter of his name, and for all Mr. Maverick Narkom's care and shrewdness, "Forty Faces" had "turned the trick," and Scotland Yard was "done!"

III

Through all the night its best men sought him, its dragnets fished for him, its tentacles groped into every hole and corner of London in quest of him, but sought and fished and groped in vain. They might as well have hoped to find last summer's partridges or last winter's snow as any trace of him. He had vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared, and no royal jewels graced the display of Miss Wyvern's wedding gifts on the morrow.

But it was fruitful of other "gifts," fruitful of an even greater surprise, that "morrow." For the first time since the day he had given his promise, no "souvenir" from "The Man Who Called Himself Hamilton Cleek," no part of last night's loot came to Scotland Yard; and it was while the evening papers were making screaming "copy" and glaring headlines out of this that the surprise in question came to pass.

Miss Wyvern's wedding was over, the day and the bride had gone, and it was half-past ten at night, when Sir Horace, answering a hurry call from headquarters, drove post haste to Superintendent Narkom's private room, and, passing in under a red-and-green lamp which burned over the doorway, met that "surprise."

Maverick Narkom was there alone, standing beside his desk. The curtains of his window were drawn and pinned together, and at his elbow was an unlighted lamp of violet-coloured glass. Narkom turned as his visitor entered and made an open-handed gesture toward something which lay before him.

"Look here," he said laconically, "what do you think of this?"

Sir Horace moved forward and looked; then stopped and gave a sort of wondering cry. The electric bulbs overhead struck a glare of light on the surface of the desk, and there, spread out on the shining oak, lay a part of the royal jewels that had been stolen from Wyvern House last night.

"Narkom! You got him then, got him after all?"

"No, I did not get him. I doubt if any man could, if he chose not to be found," said Narkom bitterly. "I did not recover these jewels by any act of my own. He sent them to me; gave them up voluntarily."

"Gave them up? After he had risked so much to get them? God bless my soul, what a man! Why, there must be quite half here of what he took."

"There is half – an even half. He sent them to-night, and with them this letter. Look at it, and you will understand why I sent for you and asked you to come alone."

Sir Horace read:

There's some good in even the devil, I suppose, if one but knows how to reach it and stir it up.

I have lived a life of crime from my very boyhood because I couldn't help it, because it appealed to me, because I glory in risks and revel in dangers. I never knew, I never thought, never cared, where it would lead me, but I looked into the gateway of heaven last night, and I can't go down the path to hell any longer. Here is an even half of Miss Wyvern's jewels. If you and her father would have me hand over the other half to you, and would have The Vanishing Cracksman disappear forever, and a useless life converted into a useful one, you have only to say so to make it an accomplished thing. All I ask in return is your word of honour (to be given to me by signal) that you will send for Sir Horace Wyvern to be at your office at eleven o'clock to-night, and that you and he will grant me a private interview unknown to any other living being. A red-and-green lantern hung over the doorway leading to your office will be the signal that you agree, and a violet light in your window will be the pledge of Sir Horace Wyvern. When these two

signals, these two pledges, are given, I shall come in and hand over the remainder of the jewels, and you will have looked for the first time in your life upon the real face of The Man Who Calls Himself Hamilton Cleek.

"God bless my soul! what an amazing creature, what an astounding request!" exclaimed Sir Horace, as he laid the letter down. "Willing to give up £20,000 worth of jewels for the mere sake of a private interview! What on earth can be his object? And why should he include me?"

"I don't know," said Narkom in reply. "It's worth something, at all events, to be rid of 'The Vanishing Cracksman' for good and all; and he says that it rests with us to do that. It's close to eleven now. Shall we give him the pledge he asks, Sir Horace? My signal is already hung out; shall we agree to the conditions and give him yours?"

"Yes, yes, by all means," Sir Horace made answer. And, lighting the violet lamp, Narkom flicked open the pinned curtains and set it in the window.

For ten minutes nothing came of it, and the two men, talking in whispers while they waited, began to grow nervous. Then somewhere in the distance a clock started striking eleven, and, without so much as a warning sound, the door flashed open, flashed shut again, a voice that was undeniably the voice of breeding and refinement said quietly, "Gentlemen, my compliments. Here are the diamonds and here am I!" and the figure of a man, faultlessly dressed, faultlessly mannered, and with the clear-cut features of the born aristocrat, stood in the room.

His age might lie anywhere between twenty-five and thirty-five, his eyes were straight looking and clear, his fresh, clean-shaven face was undeniably handsome, and, whatever his origin, whatever his history, there was something about him, in look, in speech, in bearing, that mutely stood sponsor for the thing called "birth."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Sir Horace, amazed and appalled to find the reality so widely different from the image he had drawn. "What monstrous juggle is this? Why, man alive, you're a gentleman! Who are you? What's driven you to a dog's life like this?"

"A natural bent, perhaps; a supernatural gift, certainly, Sir Horace," he made reply. "Look here. Could any man resist the temptation to use it when he was endowed by Nature with the power to do this?" His features seemed to writhe and knot and assume in as many moments a dozen different aspects. "I've had the knack of doing that since the hour I could breathe. Could any man 'go straight' with a fateful gift like that if the laws of Nature said that he should not?"

"And do they say that?"

"That's what I want you to tell me. That's why I have requested this interview. I want you to examine me, Sir Horace, to put me through those tests you use to determine the state of mind of the mentally fit and mentally unfit. I want to know if it is my fault that I am what I am, and if it is myself I have to fight in future or the devil that lives within me. I'm tired of wallowing in the mire. A woman's eyes have lit the way to heaven for me. I want to climb up to her, to win her, be worthy of her, and to stand beside her in the light."

"Her? What 'her'?"

"That's my business, Mr. Narkom, and I'll take no man into my confidence regarding that."

"Yes, my friend, but 'Margot'?"

"I'm done with her! We broke last night, when I returned, and she learned – Never mind what she learned! I'm done with her, done with the lot of them. My life is changed forever."

"In the name of Heaven, man, who and what are you?"

"Cleck – just Cleck: let it go at that," he made reply. "Whether it's my name or not is no man's business; who I am, what I am, whence I came, is no man's business, either. Cleck will do, Cleck of the Forty Faces. Never mind the past; my fight is with the future, and so – Examine me, Sir Horace, and let me know if I or Fate's to blame for what I am."

"Absolutely Fate," Sir Horace said, when, after a long examination, the man put the question to him again. "It is the criminal brain fully developed, horribly pronounced. God help you, my poor

fellow; but a man simply could not be other than a thief and a criminal with an organ like that. There's no hope for you to escape your natural bent except by death. You can't be honest. You can't rise. You never will rise: it's useless to fight against it!"

"I will fight against it! I will rise! I will! I will! I will!" he cried out vehemently. "There is a way to put such craft and cunning to account; a way to fight the devil with his own weapons and crush him under the weight of his own gifts, and that way I'll take!"

"Mr. Narkom" – he whirled and walked toward the superintendent, his hand outstretched, his eager face aglow – "Mr. Narkom, help me! Take me under your wing. Give me a start, give me a chance, give me a lift on the way up!"

"Good heaven, man, you – you don't mean – ?"

"I do. I do. So help me Heaven, I do. All my life I've fought against the law, now let me switch over and fight with it. I'm tired of being Cleek, the thief; Cleek, the burglar. Make me Cleek, the detective, and let us work together, hand in hand, for a common cause and for the public good. Will you, Mr. Narkom? Will you?"

"Will I? Won't I!" said Narkom, springing forward and gripping his hand. "Jove! what a detective you will make. Bully boy! Bully boy!"

"It's a compact, then?"

"It's a compact – Cleek."

"Thank you," he said in a choked voice. "You've given me my chance; now watch me live up to it. The Vanishing Cracksman has vanished forever, Mr. Narkom, and it's Cleek, the detective – Cleek of the Forty Faces from this time on. Now, give me your riddles, I'll solve them one by one."

CHAPTER II

THE PROBLEM OF THE RED CRAWL

I

It was half-past two o'clock in the morning of July 25, when the constable on duty at the head of Clarges Street, Piccadilly, was startled to see a red limousine swing into that quiet thoroughfare from the Curzon Street end, come to an abrupt halt, and a man who had every appearance of a sailor alight therefrom, fish a key from his pocket, and admit himself to a certain house. This house for more than a year had been known to be occupied only by one Captain Burbage, a retired seaman of advanced years, his elderly housekeeper, a deaf and dumb maid-of-all-work, and a snub-nosed, ginger-haired young chap of about nineteen – as pure a specimen of the genus Cockney as you could pick up anywhere from Bow Church to the Guildhall – who acted as a sort of body servant to the aged captain, and was known by the expressive name of "Dollops."

"Don't like the goings-on at that house at all," commented the policeman in a sort of growl. "All sorts of parties coming and going at all hours of the night. Reported it more than once, I have; and yet Superintendent Narkom says there's nothing in it and it needn't be watched. I wonder why?"

He wouldn't have wondered any longer could he have looked into the hall of the house at that moment; for the man who had just entered had no sooner closed the lower door than one above flashed open, a stream of light gushed down the stairs, and a calm, well-modulated voice said serenely: "Come right up, Mr. Narkom. I knew it would be you before your motor turned the corner. I'd know the purr of your machine among a thousand."

"Fancy that!" said Narkom, as he removed the hot wig and beard he wore, and went up the stairs two at a time. "My dear Cleek, what an abnormal animal you are! Had you" – entering the room where his now famous ally (divested of the disguise which served for the rôle of "Captain Burbage") stood leaning against the mantelpiece and calmly smoking a cigarette – "had you by any chance a fox among your forbears?"

"Oh, no. The night is very still, the back window is open, and there's a trifling irregularity in the operations of your detonator: that's all. But tell me, you've got something else for me; something important enough to bring you racing here at top speed in the middle of the night, so to speak?"

"Yes. An amazing something. It's a letter. It arrived at headquarters by the nine o'clock post to-night – or, rather, it's last night now. Merton, of course, forwarded it to my home; but I was away – did not return until after one, or I should have been here sooner. It's not an affair for 'the Yard' this time, Cleek; and I tell you frankly I do not like it."

"Why?"

"Well, it's from Paris. If you were to accept it, you – well, you know what dangers Paris would have for you above all men. There's that she-devil you broke with, that woman Margot. You know what she swore, what she wrote back when you sent her that letter telling her that you were done with her and her lot, and warning her never to set foot on English soil again? If you were to run foul of her; if she were ever to get any hint to your real identity – "

"She can't. She knows no more of my real history than you do; no more than I actually know of hers. Our knowledge of each other began when we started to 'pal' together; it ended when we split, eighteen months ago. But about this letter? What is it? Why do you say that you don't like it?"

"Well, to begin with, I'm afraid it is some trap of hers to decoy you over there, get you into some unknown place – "

"There are no 'unknown places' in Paris so far as I am concerned. I know every hole and corner of it, from the sewers on. I know it as well as I know London, as well as I know Berlin – New York – Vienna – Edinburgh – Rome. You couldn't lose me or trap me in any one of them. Is that the letter in your hand? Good – then read it, please."

Narkom, obeying the request, read:

"To the Superintendent of Police, Scotland Yard,

"Distinguished Monsieur:

"Of your grace and pity, I implore you to listen to the prayer of an unhappy man whose honour, whose reason, whose very life are in deadly peril, not alone of 'The Red Crawl,' but of things he may not even name, dare not commit to writing, lest this letter should go astray. It shall happen, monsieur, that the whole world shall hear with amazement of that most marvellous 'Cleck' – that great reader of riddles and unmasker of evildoers who, in the past year, has made the police department of England the envy of all nations; and it shall happen also that I who dare not appeal to the police of France appeal to the mercy, the humanity, of this great man, as it is my only hope. Monsieur, you have his ear, you have his confidence, you have the means at your command. Ah! ask him, pray him, implore him for the love of God, and the sake of a fellow-man, to come alone to the top floor of the house number 7 of the Rue Toison d'Or, Paris, at nine hours of the night of Friday, the 26th inst., to enter into the darkness and say but the one word 'Cleck' as a signal it is he, and I may come forward and throw myself upon his mercy. Oh, save me, Monsieur Cleck – save me! save me!

"There, that's the lot, and there's no signature," said Narkom, laying down the letter. "What do you make of it, Cleck?"

"A very real, a very moving thing, Mr. Narkom. The cry of a human heart in deep distress; the agonized appeal of a man so wrought up by the horrors of his position that he forgets to offer a temptation in the way of reward, and speaks of outlandish things as though they must be understood of all. As witness his allusion to something which he calls 'The Red Crawl,' without attempting to explain the meaningless phrase. Whatever it is, it is so real to him that it seems as if everybody must understand."

"You think, then, that the thing is genuine?"

"So genuine that I shall answer its call, Mr. Narkom, and be alone in the dark on the top floor of No. 7, Rue Toison d'Or to-morrow night as surely as the clock strikes nine."

And that was how the few persons who happened to be in the quiet upper reaches of the Rue Bienfaisance at half-past eight o'clock the next evening came to see a fat, fussy, red-faced Englishman in a gray frock-coat, white spats, and a shining topper, followed by a liveried servant with a hat-box in one hand and a portmanteau in the other, so conspicuous, the pair of them, that they couldn't have any desire to conceal themselves, cross over the square before the Church of St. Augustine, fare forth into the darker side passages, and move in the direction of the street of the Golden Fleece.

They were, of course, Cleck and his devoted henchman Dollops – a youth he had picked up out of the streets of London and given a home, and whose especial virtues were a dog-like devotion to his employer, a facility for eating without ever seeming to get filled, and fighting without ever seeming to get tired.

"Lumme, guv'ner," whispered he, as they turned at last into the utter darkness and desertion of the narrow Rue Toison d'Or, "if this is wot yer calls Gay Paree, this precious black slit between two rows of houses, I'll take a slice of the Old Kent Road with thanks. Not even so much as a winkle-stall in sight, and me that empty my shirt-bosom's a-chafing my blessed shoulder-blades!"

"You'll see plenty of life before the game's over, I warrant you, Dollops. Now, then, my lad, here's a safe spot. Sit down on the hat-box and wait. That's No. 7, that empty house with the open door, just across the way. Keep your eye on it. I don't know how long I'll be, but if anybody comes out before I do, mind you don't let him get away."

"No fear!" said Dollops sententiously. "I'll be after him as if he was a ham sandwich, sir. Look out for my patent 'Tickle Tootsies' when you come out, guv'ner. I'll sneak over and put 'em round the door as soon as you've gone in." For Dollops, who was of an inventive turn of mind, had an especial "man-trap" of his own, which consisted of heavy brown paper, cut into squares, and thickly smeared over with a viscid, varnish-like substance that adhered to the feet of anybody incautiously stepping upon it, and so interfered with flight that it was an absolute necessity to stop and tear the papers away before running with any sort of ease and swiftness was possible. More than once this novel method of hampering for a brief period the movement of a fugitive had stood him and his master in good stead, and Dollops, who was rather proud of his achievement, never travelled without a full supply of ready-cut papers and a big collapsible tube of the viscid, ropy, varnish-like glue.

Meantime Cleek, having left the boy sitting on the hat-box in the darkness, crossed the narrow street to the open doorway of No. 7, and, without hesitation, stepped in. The place was as black as a pocket, and had that peculiar smell which belongs to houses that have long stood vacant. The house, nevertheless, was a respectable one, and, like all the others, fronted on another street. The dark Toison d'Or was merely a back passage used principally by the tradespeople for the delivery of supplies. Feeling his way to the first of the three flights of stairs which led upward into the stillness and gloom above, Cleek mounted steadily until he found himself at length in a sort of attic – quite windowless, and lit only by a skylight through which shone the ineffectual light of the stars. It was the top at last. Bracing his back against the wall, so that nobody could get behind him, and holding himself ready for any emergency, he called out in a clear, calm voice: "Cleck!"

Almost simultaneously there was a sharp metallic "snick," an electric bulb hanging from the ceiling flamed out luminously, a cupboard door flashed open, a voice cried out in joyous, perfect English: "Thank God for a man!" And, switching round with a cry of amazement, he found himself looking into the face and eyes of a woman.

And of all women in the world – Ailsa Lorne!

He sucked in his breath and his heart began to hammer.

"Miss Lorne!" he exclaimed, so carried out of himself that he scarcely knew what he did. "Good heavens above! – Miss Lorne!"

"Oh!" she ejaculated, with a little startled cry, looking up, but finding no trace of features that she knew in the round, red face of the fat gray man before her. "You know me, then? How can you? But I forget! You are English; you are that great and mysterious man Cleek; and he – ah, he must surely know everything!"

"I know you, at least," he replied, shaking with mingled embarrassment and delight at the knowledge that at last he was permitted to speak to her, to have her speak to him. "I have seen you often in London; and to find you here, like this? It fairly takes away my breath."

"The explanation is very simple, Mr. Cleek. I suppose you know that my uncle, Sir Horace Wyvern, married again last spring? The new Lady Wyvern soon let me know that I was a superfluous person in the household. I left it, of course. Sir Horace would have pensioned me off if I had let him. I couldn't bring myself to eat the bread of charity, however, and when a former schoolmate offered me a post as her companion, I gratefully accepted it. So for the past three months I have been living here in Paris with Athalie and her father, the Baron de Carjorac."

"Baron de Carjorac? Do you mean the French Minister of the Interior, the President of the Board of National Defences, Miss Lorne, that enthusiastic old patriot, that rabid old spitfire whose

one dream is the wresting back of Alsace-Lorraine, the driving of the hated Germans into the sea? Do you mean that ripping old firebrand?"

"Yes. But you'd not call him that if you could see the wreck, the broken and despairing wreck, that six weeks of the Château Larouge, six weeks of that horrible 'Red Crawl' have made of him."

"The Red Crawl"? Good heavens! then that letter, that appeal for help – "

"Came from him!" she finished excitedly. "It was he who was to have met you here to-night, Mr. Cleek. This house is one he owns; he thought he might with safety risk coming here, but – he can't! he can't! He knows now that there is danger for him everywhere; that his every step is tracked; that the snare which is about him has been about him, unsuspected, for almost a year; that he dare not, absolutely dare not, appeal to the French police, and that if it were known he had appealed to you, he would be a dead man inside of twenty-four hours, and not only dead, but – disgraced. Oh, Mr. Cleek," she stretched out two shaking hands and laid them on his arm, lifted a white, imploring face to his, "save him! save that dear broken old man! Ah, think! think! They are our friends, our dear country's friends, these French people. Their welfare is our welfare, ours is theirs! Oh, help him, save him, Mr. Cleek – for his own sake – for mine – for France! Save him, and win my gratitude forever!"

"That is a temptation that would carry me to the ends of the earth, Miss Lorne. Tell me what the work is, and I will carry it through. What is this incomprehensible thing of which both you and Baron de Carjorac have spoken, this thing you allude to as 'The Red Crawl'?"

She gave a little shuddering cry and fell back a step, covering her face with both hands.

"Oh!" she said, with a shiver of repulsion. "It is horrible – it is necromancy beyond belief! Why, oh, why were we ever driven to that horrible Château Larouge? Why could not fate have spared the Villa de Carjorac? It could not have happened then!"

"Villa de Carjorac? That was the name of the baron's residence, I believe. I remember reading in the newspapers some five or six weeks ago that it was destroyed by fire, which originated – nobody knew how – in the apartments of the late baroness in the very dead of the night. I thought at the time it read suspiciously like the work of an incendiary, although nobody hinted at such a thing. The Château Larouge I also have a distinct memory of, as an old historic property in the neighbourhood of St. Cloud. Speaking from past experience, I know that, although it is in such a state of decay, and supposed to be uninhabitable, it has, in fact, often been occupied at a period when the police and the public believed it to be quite empty. Gentlemen of the Apache persuasion have frequently made it a place of retreat. There is also an underground passage, executed by those same individuals, which connects with the Paris sewers. That, too, the police are unaware of. What can the ruined Château Larouge possibly have to do with the affairs of the Baron de Carjorac, Miss Lorne, that you connect them like this?"

"They have everything to do with them. The Château is no longer a ruin, however. It was purchased, rebuilt, refitted by the Comtesse Susanne de la Tour, Mr. Cleek, and she and her brother live there. So do we, Athalie, Baron de Carjorac, and I. So, also, does the creature – the thing – the abominable horror known as 'The Red Crawl.'"

"My dear Miss Lorne, what are you saying?"

"The truth, nothing but the truth!" she answered hysterically. "Oh, let me begin at the beginning. You'll never understand unless I do. I'll tell you in as few words as possible, as quickly as I can. It all began last winter, when Athalie and her father were at Monte Carlo. There they met Madame la Comtesse de la Tour and her brother, Monsieur Gaston Merode. The baron has position but he has not wealth, Mr. Cleek. Athalie is ambitious. She loves luxury, riches, a life of fashion, all the things that boundless money can give; and when Monsieur Merode – who is young, handsome, and said to be fabulously wealthy – showed a distinct preference for her over all the other marriageable girls he met, she was flattered out of her silly wits. Before they left Monte Carlo for Paris everybody could see that he had only to ask her hand, to have it bestowed upon

him. For although the baron never has cared for the man, Athalie rules him, and her every caprice is humoured.

"But, for all he was so ardent a lover, Monsieur Merode was slow in coming to the important point. Perhaps his plans were not matured. At any rate, he did not propose to Athalie at Monte Carlo; and, although he and his sister returned to Paris at the same time as the baron and his daughter, he still deferred the proposal."

"Has he not made it yet?"

"Yes, Mr. Cleek. He made it six weeks ago, to be exact, two nights before the Villa de Carjorac was fired."

"You think it was fired, then?"

"I do now, although I had no suspicion of it at the time. Athalie received her proposal on the Saturday, the baron gave his consent on the Sunday, and on Monday night the villa was mysteriously burnt, leaving all three of us without an immediate refuge. In the meantime, Madame la Comtesse had purchased the ruin of the Château Larouge, and during the period of her brother's deferred proposal was engaged in fitting it up as an abode for herself and him. On the very day it was finished, Monsieur Merode asked for Athalie's hand."

"Oho!" said Cleek, with a strong rising inflection. "I think I begin to smell the toasting of the cheese. Of course, when the villa was burnt out, Madame la Comtesse insisted that, as the fiancée of her brother, Mademoiselle de Carjorac must make her home at the Château until the necessary repairs could be completed; and, of course, the baron had to go with her?"

"Yes," admitted Ailsa. "The baron accepted – Athalie would not have allowed him to decline had he wished to – so we all three went there and have been residing there ever since. On the night after our arrival an alarming, a horrifying, thing occurred. It was while we were at dinner that the conversation turned upon the supernatural, upon houses and places that were reputed to be haunted, and then Madame la Comtesse made a remarkable statement. She laughingly asserted that she had just learned that, in purchasing the Château Larouge, she had also become the possessor of a sort of family ghost. She said that she had only just heard, from an outside source, that there was a horrible legend connected with the place; in short, that for centuries it had been reputed to be under a sort of spell of evil and to be cursed by a dreadful visitant known as 'The Red Crawl' – a hideous and loathsome creature. It was neither spider nor octopus, but horribly resembled both and was supposed to 'appear' at intervals in the middle of the night and, like the fabled giants of fairy tales, carry off 'lovely maidens and devour them.'"

"Who is responsible for that ridiculous assertion, I wonder? I think I may say that I know as much about the Château Larouge and its history as anybody, Miss Lorne, but I never heard of this supposed 'legend' before in all my life."

"So the baron, too, declared, laughing as derisively as any of us over the story, although it is well known that he has a natural antipathy to all crawling things, an abhorrence inherited from his mother, and has been known to run like a frightened child from the appearance of a mere garden spider."

"Oho!" said Cleek again. "I see! I see! The toasted cheese smells stronger, and there's a distinct suggestion of the Rhine about it this time. There's something decidedly German about that fabulous 'monster' and that haunted Château, Miss Lorne. They are clever and careful schemers, those German Johnnies. Of course, this amazing 'Red Crawl' was proved to have an absolute foundation in fact, and equally, of course, it 'appeared' to the Baron de Carjorac?"

"Yes – that very night. After we had all gone to bed, the house was roused by his screams. Everybody rushed to his chamber, only to find him lying on the floor in a state of collapse. The thing had been in his room, he said. He had seen it, it had even touched him – a horrible, hideous red reptile, with squirming tentacles, a huge, glowing body, and eyes like flame. It had crept upon him out of the darkness, he knew not from where. It had seized him, resisted all his wild efforts to tear

loose from it, and when he finally sank, overcome and fainting, upon the floor, his last conscious recollection was of the loathsome thing settling down upon his breast and running its squirming 'feelers' up and down his body."

"Of course! Of course! That was part of the game. It was after something. Something of the utmost importance to German interests. That's why the Château Larouge was refitted, why the Villa de Carjorac was burnt down, and why this Monsieur Gaston Merode became engaged to Mademoiselle Athalie."

"Oh, how could you know that, Mr. Cleek? Nobody ever suspected. The baron never confessed to any living soul until he did so to me, to-day, and then only because he had to tell somebody, in order that the appointment with you might be kept. How, then, could you guess?"

"By putting two and two together, Miss Lorne, and discovering that they do not make five. The inference is very clear: Baron de Carjorac is President of the Board of National Defences; Germany, in spite of its public assurances to the contrary, is known by those who are 'on the inside' to harbour a very determined intention of making a secret attack, an unwarned invasion, upon England. France is the key to the situation. If, without the warning that must come through the delay of picking a quarrel and entering into an open war with the Republic, the German army can swoop down in the night, cross the frontier, and gain immediate possession of the ports of France, in five hours' time it can be across the English Channel, and its hordes pouring down upon a sleeping people. To carry out this programme, the first step would, of course, be to secure knowledge of the number, location, manner of the secret defences of France, the plans of fortification, the maps of the 'danger zone,' the documentary evidence of her strongest and weakest points. And who so likely to be the guardian of these as the Baron de Carjorac? That is how I know that 'The Red Crawl' was after something of vital importance to German interests, Miss Lorne. That he got it, I know from the fact that the baron, while hinting at disgrace and speaking of peril to his own life, dared not confide in the French authorities and ask the assistance of the French police. Moreover, if 'The Red Crawl' had failed to secure anything, the baron, with his congenital loathing of all crawling things, would have left the Château Larouge immediately."

"Oh, to think that you guessed it so easily, and it was all such a puzzle to me. I could not think, Mr. Cleek, why he did remain; why he would not be persuaded to go, although every night was adding to the horror of the thing and it seemed clear to me that he was going mad. Of course, Madame la Comtesse and her brother tried to reason him out of what he declared, tried to make him believe that it was all fancy, that he did not really see the fearful thing; it was equally in vain that I myself tried to persuade him to leave the place before his reason became unsettled. Last night" – she paused, shuddered, put both hands over her face, and drew in a deep breath – "last night, I, too, saw 'The Red Crawl,' Mr. Cleek – I, too! I, too!"

"You, Miss Lorne?"

"Yes. I made up my mind that I would – that, if it existed, I would have absolute proof of it. The countess and her brother had scoffed so frequently, had promised the baron so often that they would set a servant on guard in the corridor to watch, and then had said so often to poor, foolish, easily persuaded Athalie that it was useless doing anything so silly, as it was absolutely certain that her father only imagined the thing, that I determined to take the step myself, unknown to any of them. After everybody had gone to bed, I threw on a loose, dark gown, crept into the corridor, and hid in a niche from which I could see the door of the baron's room. I waited until after midnight – long after – and then – and then –"

"Calm yourself, Miss Lorne. Then the thing appeared, I suppose?"

"Yes; but not before something equally terrible had happened. I saw the door of the countess's room open; I saw the countess herself come out, accompanied by the man who up till then I had believed, like everybody else, was her brother."

"And who is not her brother, after all?"

"No, he is not. Theirs is a closer tie. I saw her kiss him. I saw her go with him to an angle of the corridor, lift a rug, and raise a trap in the floor."

"Hullo! Hullo!" ejaculated Cleek. "Then she, too, knows of the passage which leads to the sewers. Clearly, then, this Countess de la Tour is not what she seems, when she knows secrets that are known only to the followers of – Well, never mind. Go on, Miss Lorne, go on. You saw her lift that trap; and what then?"

"Then there came up out of it the most loathsome-looking creature I have ever seen: a huge, crawling, red shape that was like a blood-red spider, with the eyes, the hooked beak, and the writhing tentacles of an octopus. It made no sound, but it seemed to know her, to understand her, for when she waved her hand toward the open door of her own room, obeying that gesture, it dragged its huge bulk over the threshold, and passed from sight. Then the man she called her brother kissed her again, and as he descended into the darkness below the trap I heard her say quite distinctly: 'Tell Marise that I will come as soon as I can; but not to delay the revel. If I am compelled to forego it to-night, there shall be a wilder one to-morrow, when Clodoche arrives.'"

"Clodoche? By Jupiter!" Cleek almost jumped as he spoke. "Now I know the 'lay'! No; don't ask me anything yet. Go on with the story, please. What then, Miss Lorne, what then?"

"Then the man below said something which I could not hear and she answered in these words: 'No, no; there is no danger. I will guard it safely, and it shall go into no hands but Clodoche's. He and Count von Hetzler will be there about midnight to-morrow to complete the deal and pay over the money. Clodoche will want the fragment, of course, to show to the count as a proof that it is the right one, as "an earnest" of what the remainder is worth. And you must bring me that "remainder" without fail, Gaston – you hear me? – without fail! I shall be there, at the rendezvous, awaiting you, and the thing must be in our hands when Von Hetzler comes. The work must be finished to-morrow night, even if you and Serpice have to throw all caution to the winds and throttle the old fool.' Then, as if answering a further question, she laughingly added: 'Oh, get that fear out of your head. I'm not a bat, to be caught napping. I'll give it to no one but Clodoche, and not even to him until he gives the secret sign.' And then, Mr. Cleek, as she closed the trap I heard the man call back to her 'Good-night' and give her a name I had not heard before. We had always supposed that she had been christened 'Suzanne,' but as that man left he called her – "

"I know before you tell me – 'Margot'!" interjected Cleek. "I guessed the identity of this 'Countess de la Tour' from the moment you spoke of Clodoche and that secret trap. Her knowledge of those two betrayed her to me. Clodoche is a renegade Alsatian, a spy in the pay of the German Government, and an old habitu   of 'The Inn of the Twisted Arm,' where the Queen of the Apaches and her pals hold their frequent revels. I can guess the remainder of your story now. You carried this news to the Baron de Carjorac, and he, breaking down, confessed to you that he had lost something."

"Yes, yes – a dreadful 'something,' Mr. Cleek: the horrible thing that has been making life an agony to him ever since. On the night when that abominable 'Red Crawl' first overcame him there was upon his person a most important document. It was a rough draft of the maps of fortification and the plan of the secret defences of France, the identical document from which was afterward transcribed the parchment now deposited in the secret archives of the Republic. When Baron de Carjorac recovered his senses after his horrifying experience – "

"That document was gone?"

"Part of it, Mr. Cleek, thank God, only a part! If it had been the parchment itself, no such merciful thing could possibly have happened. But the paper was old, much folding and handling had worn the creases through, and when, in his haste, the secret robber grabbed it, whilst that loathsome creature held the old man down, it parted directly down the middle, and he got only a vertical section of each of its many pages."

"Victoria! 'And the fool hath said in his heart There is no God,'" quoted Cleek. "So, then, the hirelings of the enemy have only got half what they are after; and, as no single sentence can be

complete upon a paper torn like that, nothing can be made of it until the other half is secured, and our German friends are still 'up a gum-tree.' I know now why the baron stayed on at the Château Larouge and why 'The Red Crawl' is preparing to pay him another visit to-night: He hoped, poor chap, to find a clue to the whereabouts of the fragment he had lost; and that thing is after the fragment he still retains. Well, it will be a long, long day before either of those two fragments falls into German hands."

"Oh, Mr. Cleek, you think you can get the stolen paper back? You believe you can outwit those dreadful people and save the Baron de Carjorac's honour and his life?"

"Miss Lorne" – he took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips – "Miss Lorne, I thank you for giving me the chance! If you will do what I ask you, be where I ask you in two hours' time, so surely as we two stand here this minute, I will put back the German calendar by ten years at least. They drink 'To the day,' those German Johnnies, but by to-morrow morning the English hand you are holding will have given them reason to groan over the night!"

II

It was half-past eleven o'clock. Madame la Comtesse, answering a reputed call to the bedside of a dying friend, had departed early, and was not to be expected back, she said, until to-morrow noon. The servants – given permission by the gentleman known in the house as Monsieur Gaston Merode, and who had graciously provided a huge char-à-banc for the purpose – had gone in a body to a fair over in the neighbourhood of Sevres, and darkness and stillness filled the long, broad corridor of the Château Larouge. Of a sudden, however, a mere thread of sound wavered through the silence, and from the direction of Miss Lorne's room a figure in black, with feet muffled in thick woollen stockings, padded to an angle of the passage, lifted a trap carefully hidden beneath a huge tiger-skin rug, and almost immediately Cleek's head rose up out of the gap.

"Thank God you managed to do it. I was horribly afraid you would not," said Ailsa in a palpitating whisper.

"You need not have been," he answered. "I know a dozen places besides 'The Inn of the Twisted Arm' from which one can get into the sewers. I've screwed a bolt and socket on the inner side of this trap in case of an emergency, and I've carried a few things into the passage for 'afterward.' I suppose that fellow Merode, as he calls himself, is in his room, waiting?"

"Yes; and, although he pretends to be alone to-night, he has other men with him, hideous, ruffianly looking creatures, whom I saw him admit after the servants had gone. The countess has left the house and gone I don't know where."

"I do, then. Make certain that she's at 'The Twisted Arm,' waiting, first, for the coming of Clodoche, and, second, for the arrival of this precious 'Merode' with the remaining half of the document. I've sent Dollops there to carry out his part of the programme, and when once I get the password Margot requires before she will hand over the paper, the game will be in my hands entirely. They are desperate to-night, Miss Lorne, and will stop at nothing – not even murder. There! the rug's replaced. Quick! lead me to the baron's room, there's not a minute to waste."

She took his hand and led him tiptoe through the darkness, and in another moment he was in the Baron de Carjorac's presence.

"Oh, monsieur, God forever bless you!" exclaimed the broken old man, throwing himself on his knees before Cleek.

"Out with the light – out with the light!" exclaimed he, ducking down suddenly. "Were you mad to keep it burning till I came, with that," pointing to a huge bay window opening upon a balcony, "uncurtained and the grounds, no doubt, alive with spies?"

Miss Lorne sprang to the table where the baron's reading-lamp stood, jerked the cord of the extinguisher, and darkness enveloped the room, darkness tempered only by the faint gleams of the moon streaming over the balcony and through the panes of the uncurtained window.

Cleek, on his knees beside the kneeling baron, whipped a tiny electric torch from his pocket and, shielding its flare with his scooped hands, flashed it upon the old man's face.

"Simple as rolling off a log – exactly like your pictures," he commented. "I'll 'do' you as easily as I 'do' Clodoche and I could 'do' him in the dark from memory. Quick," snicking off the light of the electric torch and rising to his feet, "into your dressing-room, baron. I want that suit of clothes; I want that ribbon, that cross – and I want them at once. You're a bit thicker set than me, but I've got my Clodoche rig on underneath this, and it will fill out your coat admirably and make us as like as two peas. Give me five minutes, Miss Lorne, and I promise you a surprise."

He flashed out of sight with the baron as he ceased speaking; and Ailsa, creeping to the window and peering cautiously out, was startled presently by a voice at her elbow saying, in a tone of extreme agitation, "Oh, mademoiselle, I fear, even yet I fear, that this Anglais monsieur attempts too much, and that the papier he is gone forever."

"Oh, no, baron, no!" she said soothingly, as she laid a solicitous hand upon his arm. "Do believe in him; do have faith in him. Ah, if you only knew – "

"Thanks. I reckon I shall pass muster!" interposed Cleek's voice; and it was only then she realized. "You'll find the baron in the other room, Miss Lorne, looking a little grotesque in that gray suit of mine. In with you, quickly; go with him through the other door, and get below before those fellows begin to stir. Get out of the house as quietly and as expeditiously as you can. With God's help, I'll meet you at the Hotel Louvre in the morning, and put the missing fragment in the baron's hands."

"And may God give you that help!" she answered fervently, as she moved toward the dressing-room door. "Ah, what a man! What a man!"

Then in a twinkling she was gone, and Cleek stood alone in the silent room. Giving her and the baron time to get clear of the other one, he went in on tiptoe, locked the door through which they had passed, put the key in his pocket, and returned. Going to the door which led from the main room into the corridor, he took the key from the lock of that, too, replacing it upon the outer side, and leaving the door itself slightly ajar.

"Now then for you, Mr. 'The Red Crawl,'" he said, as he walked to the baron's table, and, sinking down into a deep chair beside it, leaned back with his eyes closed as if in sleep, the faint light of the moon half-revealing his face. "I want that password, and I'll get it, if I have to choke it out of your devil's throat! And she said that she would be grateful to me all the rest of her life! Only 'grateful,' I wonder? Is nothing else possible? What a good, good thing a real woman is!"

* * * * *

How long was it that he had been reclining there waiting before his strained ears caught the sound of something like the rustling of silk shivering through the stillness, and he knew that at last it was coming? It might have been ten minutes, it might have been twenty – he had no means of determining – when he caught that first movement, and, peering through the slit of a partly opened eye, saw the appalling thing drag its huge bulk along the balcony and, with tentacles writhing, slide over the low sill of the window, and settle down in a glowing red heap upon the floor. Fake though he knew it to be, Cleek could not repress a swift rush and prickle of "goose-flesh" at sight of it.

For a few seconds it lay dormant; then one red feeler shot out, then another, and another, and it began to edge its way across the carpet to the chair. Cleek lay still and waited, his heavy breathing sounding regularly, his head thrown back, his limp hands lying loosely, palms upward. Nearer and nearer crept the loathsome, red, glowing thing.

It crawled to his feet, and still he was quiet; it slid first one tentacle and then another over his knees and up toward his breast, and still he made no movement; then, as it rose until its hideous beaked countenance was close to his own, his hands flashed upward and clamped together like a vise – clamped on a palpitating human throat. In the twinkling of an eye the tentacles were wrapped about him, and he and "The Red Crawl" were rolling over and over on the floor and battling together.

"Serpice, you low-bred hound, I know you!" he whispered, as they struggled. "You can't utter a cry. You shan't utter a cry to bring help. I'll throttle you, you beastly renegade, that's willing to sell his own country – throttle you, do you hear? – before you shall bring any of your mates to the rescue. Oh, you've not got a weak old man to fight with this time! Do you know me? It's the 'Cracksman,' the 'Cracksman' who went over to the police. If you doubt it, now that we're in the moonlight, look up and see my face. Oho! you recognize me, I see. Well, you will die looking at me, you dog, if you deny me what I'm after. I'll loosen my grip enough for you to whisper, and no more. Now what's the password that Clodoche must give to Margot to-night at 'The Twisted Arm'? Tell me what it is; if you want your life, tell me what it is?"

"I'll see you dead first!" came in a whisper from beneath the hideous mask. Then, as Cleek's fingers clamped tight again, and the battle began anew, one long, thin arm shot out from amongst the writhing tentacles, one clutching hand gripped the leg of the table and, with a wrench and a twist, brought it crashing to the floor with a sound that a deaf man might have heard.

And in an instant there was pandemonium.

A door flew open, and, clashing heavily against the wall, sent an echo reeling along the corridor; then came a clatter of rustling feet, a voice cried out excitedly: "Come on! come on! He's had to kill the old fool to get it!" and Cleek had just time to tear loose from the shape with which he was battling, and dodge out of the way when the man Merode lurched into the room, with half a dozen Apaches tumbling in at his heels.

"Serpice!" he cried, rushing forward, as he saw the gasping red shape upon the floor; "Serpice! Mon Dieu! what is it?"

"The Cracksman!" he gulped. "Cleek! – the Cracksman who went against us! Catch him! stop him!"

"The Cracksman!" howled out Merode, twisting round in the darkness and reaching blindly for the haft of his dirk. "Nom de Dieu! Where?"

And almost before the last word was uttered a fist like a sledge-hammer shot out, caught him full in the face, and he went down with a whole smithy of sparks flashing and hissing before his eyes.

"There!" answered Cleek, as he bowled him over. "Gentlemen of the sewers, my compliments. You'll make no short cut to 'The Twisted Arm' to-night!"

Then, like something shot from a catapult, he sprang to the door, whisked through it, banged it behind him, turned the key, and went racing down the corridor like a hare.

"It must be sheer luck now!" he panted, as he reached the angle and, kicking aside the rug, pulled up the trap. "They'll have that door down in a brace of shakes, and be after me like a pack of ravening wolves. The race is to the swift this time, gentlemen, and you'll have to take a long way round if you mean to head me off."

Then he passed down into the darkness, closed the trap-door after him, shot into its socket the bolt he had screwed there, flashed up the light of his electric torch, and, *without* the password, turned toward the sewers, and ran, and ran, and ran!

III

It lacked but a minute of the stroke of twelve, and the revels at "The Twisted Arm" – wild at all times, but wilder to-night than ever – were at their noisiest and most exciting pitch. And why not? It was not often that Margot could spend a whole night with her rascal crew, and she had been here since early evening and was to remain here until the dawn broke gray over the housetops and the murmurs of the workaday world awoke anew in the streets of the populous city. It was not often that each man and each abandoned woman present knew to a certainty that he or she would go home through the mists of the gray morning with a fistful of gold that had been won without labour or the taking of any personal risk; and to-night the half of four hundred thousand francs was to be divided among them.

No wonder they had made a carnival of it, and tricked themselves out in gala attire; no wonder they had brought a paste tiara and crowned Margot. Margot, was in flaming red to-night, and looked a devil's daughter indeed, with her fire-like sequins and her red ankles twinkling as she threw herself into the thick of the dance and kicked, and whirled, and flung her bare arms about to the lilt of the music and the fluting of her own happy laughter.

"Per Baccho! The devil's in her to-night!" grinned old Marise, the innkeeper, from her place behind the bar, where the lid of the sewer-trap opened. "She has not been like it since the Cracksman broke with her, Toinette. But that was before your time, ma fille. Mother of the heavens! but there was a man for you! There was a king that was worthy of such a queen. Name of disaster! that she could not hold him, that the curse of virtue sapped such a splendid tree, and that she could take up with another after him!"

"Why not?" cried Toinette, as she tossed down the last half of her absinthe and twitched her flower-crowned head. "A kingdom must have a king, ma mere; and Dieu! but he is handsome, this Monsieur Gaston Merode! And if he carries out his part of the work to-night he will be worthy of the homage of all."

"If he carries it out – 'if!' exclaimed Marise, with a lurch of the shoulders and a flirt of her pudgy hand. "Soul of me! that's where the difference lies. Had it been the Cracksman, there would have been no 'if.' It were done as surely as he attempted it. Name of misfortune! I had gone into a nunnery had I lost such a man. But she – "

The voice of Margot shrilled out and cut into her words.

"Absinthe, Marise, absinthe for them all and set the score down to me!" she cried. "Drink up, my bonny boys; drink up, my loyal maids. Drink – drink till your skins will hold no more. No one pays to-night but me!"

They broke into a cheer, and bearing down in a body upon Marise, threw her into a fever of haste to serve them.

"To Margot!" they shouted, catching up the glasses and lifting them high. "Vive la Reine des Apaches! Vive la compagnie! To Margot! to Margot!"

She swept them a merry bow, threw them a laughing salute, and drank the toast with them.

"Messieurs, my love – mesdames et mademoiselles, my admiration," she cried, with a ripple of joy-mad laughter. "To the success of the Apaches, to the glory of four hundred thousand francs, and to the quick arrival of Serpice and Gaston." Then, her upward glance catching sight of the musicians sipping their absinthe in the little gallery above, she flung her empty glass against the wall behind them, and shook with laughter as they started in alarm and spilled the green poison when they dodged aside. "Another dance, you dawdlers!" she cried. "Does Marise pay you to sit there like mourners? Strike up, you mummies, or you pay yourselves for what you drink to-night. Soul of desires!" – as the musicians grabbed up their instruments, and a leaping, lilting, quick-

beating air went rollicking out over the hubbub – "a quadrille, you angels of inspiration! Partners, gentlemen! Partners, ladies! A quadrille! A quadrille!"

They set up a many-throated cheer, flocked out with her upon the floor, and in one instant feet were flying, skirts were whirling, laughter and jest mingling with waving arms and kicking toes, and the whole place was in one mad riot of delirious joy.

And in the midst of this there rolled up suddenly a voice crying, as from the bowels of the earth, "Hola! Hola! La! la! loi!" the cry of the Apache to his kind.

"Mother of delights! It is one of us, and it comes from the sewer passage!" shrilled out Marise, as the dancers halted and Margot ran, with fleet steps, toward the bar. "Listen! listen! They come to you, Margot – Serpice and Gaston. The work is done."

"And before even Clodoche or Von Hetzler have arrived!" she replied excitedly. "Give them light, give them welcome. Be quick!"

Marise ducked down, loosened the fastenings of the trap-door, flung it back, and, leaning over the gap with a light in her hand, called down into the darkness, "Hola! Hola! La! la! loi! Come on, comrades, come on!"

The caller obeyed instantly. A hand reached up and gripped the edge of the flooring, and out of the darkness into the light emerged the figure of a man in a leather cap and the blue blouse of a mechanic. He was a pale, fox-faced, fox-eyed fellow, with lank, fair hair, a brush of ragged yellow beard, and the look and air of the sneak and spy indelibly branded upon him.

It was Cleek.

"Clodoche!" exclaimed Marise, falling back in surprise.

"Clodoche!" echoed Margot. "Clodoche – and from the sewers?"

"Yes – why not?" he answered, his tongue thick-burred with the accent of Alsace, his shifting eyes flashing toward the huge window behind the bar, where, in the moonlight, the narrow passage leading down to the door of "The Twisted Arm" gaped evilly between double rows of scowling, thief-sheltering houses. "Name of the fiend! Is this the welcome you give the bringer of fortune, Margot?"

"But from the sewer?" she repeated. "It is incomprehensible, cher ami. You were to pilot Von Hetzler over from the Café Dupin to the square beyond there" – pointing to the window – "to leave him waiting a moment while you came on to see if it were safe for him to enter; and now you come from the sewer, from the opposite direction entirely!"

"Mother of misfortunes! You had done the same yourself – you, Lantier; you, Clopin; you Cadarousse; any of you, had you been in my boots," he made answer. "I stole a leaf from your own book, earlier in the evening. Garrotted a fellow with jewels on him, in the Rue Noir, near the Market Place, and nearly got into 'the stone bottle' for doing it. He was a decoy, set there by the police for some of you fellows, and there was a sergeant de ville after me like a whirlwind. I was not fool enough to turn the chase in this direction, so I doubled and twisted until it was safe to dive into the tavern of Fouchard, and lay in hiding there. Fouchard let his son carry a message to the count for me, and will guide him to the square. When it grew near the time to come, Fouchard let me down into the sewer passage from there. Get on with your dance, silence is always suspicious. An absinthe, Marise! Have Gaston and Serpice arrived yet with the rest of the document, Margot la reine?"

"Not yet," she answered. "But one may expect them at any minute."

"Where is the fragment we already possess?"

"Here," tapping her bodice and laughing, "tenderly shielded, mon ami; and why not? Who would not mother a thing that is to bring one four hundred thousand francs?"

"Let me see it? It must be shown to the count, remember. He will take no risks, come not one step beyond the square, until he is certain that it is the paper his Government requires. Let me have it. Let me take it to him – quick!"

She waved aside airily the hand he stretched toward her, and danced into the thick of the resumed quadrille.

"Ah, non! non! non!" she laughed, as he came after her. "The conditions were of your own making, cher ami; we break no rules even among ourselves."

"Soul of a fool! But if the count comes to the square – he is due there now, mignonne – and I am not there to show him the thing – Margot, for the love of God, let me have the paper!"

"Let me have the sign, the password!"

Cleek snapped at a desperate chance because there was nothing else to do, because he knew that at any moment now the end might come.

"When the purse will not open, slit it!" he hazarded, desperately – choosing, on the off-chance of its correctness, the password of the Apache.

"It is not the right one! It is by no means the right one!" she made reply, backing away from him suddenly, her absinthe-brightened eyes deriding him, her absinthe-sharpened laughter mocking him. "Your thoughts are in the Bois, cher ami. What is the password of the brotherhood to the cause of Germany, stupid? It is not right, non! non! It is not right!"

The cause of Germany! At the words the truth rushed like a flash of inspiration across Cleek's mind. The cause of Germany! what a dolt he was not to have thought of that before! There was but one phrase ever used for that among the Kaiser's people, and that phrase —

"To the day!" he said, with a burst of sudden laughter. "My wits are in the moon to-night, la reine. 'To the day,' of course – 'To the day!'" And even before she replied to him, he knew that he had guessed aright.

"Bravo!" she said, with a little hiccough, for the absinthe, of which she had imbibed so freely to-night, was beginning to take hold of her. "A pretty conspirator to forget how to open the door he himself locked! It is well I know thee; it is well it was our word in the beginning, or I had been suspicious, silly! Wait but a moment" – putting her hand to her breast and beginning to unfasten her bodice – "wait but a moment, Monsieur Twitching-Fingers, and the thing shall be in your hand."

The strain, the relief, were all too great for even such nerves as Cleek's, and if he had not laughed aloud, he knew that he must have cheered.

"Oho! you grin because one's fingers blunder with eagerness," hiccoughed Margot, thinking his laughter was for the trouble she had in getting the fastenings of her bodice undone. "Peste, monsieur! may not a lady well be modestly careful when – Name of the devil! what's that?"

It was the note of a whistle shrilling down the narrow passage without – the passage where Dollops, in Apache garb, had been set on watch; and, hearing it, Cleek clamped his jaws together and breathed hard. A single whistle, short and sharp, such as this, was the signal agreed upon that the real Clodoche was coming, and that he and Count von Hetzler had already appeared in the square beyond.

"Soul of a sloth! will not that hurry you, la reine?" he said excitedly, in reply to Margot's startled question. "It is the signal Fouchard's son was to give when he and Von Hetzler arrived at the place where I am to meet them. Give me the paper quick! Tear the fastenings, if they will not come undone else. One cannot keep a Von Hetzler waiting like a lackey for a scrap of ribbon and a bit of lace."

"Pardieu! they have kept better men than he waiting many an hour before this," she made reply. "But you shall have the thing in a twinkling now. There! but one more knot, and then it is in your hands."

And, had the fates not decreed otherwise, so, indeed, it would have been. But then, just then, when another second would have brought the paper into view, another moment seen it shut tight in the grip of his itching fingers, disaster came and blotted out his hopes!

Without hint or warning, without sign or sound to lessen the shock of it, the trap-door behind the bar flew up and backward with a crash that sent Marise and her assistants darting away from it

in shrieking alarm; a babel of excited voices sounded, rushing feet scuffled and flashed along the shaking floor, and Merode and his followers tumbled helter-skelter into the room.

Cleek, counting on the bolt which kept them from entering the passage from the corridor of the Château Larouge and thus forcing them to take a long, roundabout journey to "The Twisted Arm," had not counted on their shortening that journey by entering the passage from Fouchard's tavern, doing, in fact, the very thing which he had declared to Margot he himself had done. And lo! here they were, howling and crowding about him, dirks in their hands and devils in their eyes and hearts – and the paper not his yet!

A clamour rose as they poured in; the dancers ceased to dance; the music ceased to play; and Margot, shutting a tight clutch on the loosened part of her half-unfastened bodice, swung away from Cleek's side, and flew in a panic to Merode.

"Gaston!" she cried, knowing from his wild look and the string of oaths and curses his followers were blurting out that something had gone amiss. "Gaston, mon cœur! Name of disaster! what is wrong?"

"Everything is wrong!" he flung back excitedly. "That devil, that renegade, that fury, Cleek, the Cracksman, is here. He came to the rescue out of the very skies and all but killed Serpice!"

"Cleek!" Fifty shrill voices joined Margot's in that screaming cry; fifty more dirks flashed into view. "Cleek in France? Cleek? Where is he? Which way did he go? Where's the narker – where – where?"

"Here, if anywhere!"

"Here?"

"Yes, unless you've been fooled, and let him get away! He knows about the paper, and is after it, Margot; and if any one has come up from the sewers within the past twenty minutes – "

They knew instantly and a roar of excited voices yelled out: "Clodoche! Clodoche! Clodoche!" as, snarling and howling like a pack of wolves, they bore down with a rush on the blue-bloused figure that was creeping toward the door.

But as they sprang it sprang also! It was neck or nothing now. Cleek realized it, and, throwing himself headlong over the bar, clutched frantically at the lever which he knew controlled the flow of gas, jammed it down with all his strength, shut off the light, and, grabbing up a chair, sent it crashing through the window.

The crowd surged on toward the wrecked bar with a yell, surged from all directions, and then abruptly stopped. For the sudden darkness within had made more prominent the moonlighted passage without; and there, scuttling away in alarm from this sudden uproar and the outward flying of that hurled chair, a figure which but a moment before had come skulking to the window could now be seen.

"There he goes – there! there!" shrilled out a chorus of excited voices, as the yellow-bearded, blue-bloused figure came into view. "After him! Catch him! Knife him!"

In an instant they were at the door, tumbling out into the darkness, pouring up the passage in hot pursuit. And it was at that moment the balance changed again. Those who were in the front rank of the pursuers were in time to see a lithe, thin figure, dressed as one of their own kind, spring up in the path of that other figure, jump on it, grip it, clap a huge square of sticky brown paper over the howling mouth of it, and bear it, struggling and kicking, to the ground.

In another second they, too, were upon it, swarming over it like rats, digging and hacking at it with their dirks. And so they were still hacking at it – although it had long since ceased to move or to make any sound – when Merode came up and called them to a halt.

"Drag it inside; let Margot have a thrust at it. It is her right. Pull off the dog's disguise, and bring me the plucky one that captured him. He shall have absinthe enough to swim in, the little king! Off with it all, Lanchere. First, the plaster, that's right. Now, the wig and beard, and after that

– What's that you say? The beard is real? The hair is real? They will not come off? Name of the devil! what are you saying?"

"The truth, mon roi – the truth! Mother of disasters! It is not the Cracksman – it is the real Clodoche we have killed!"

For one moment a sort of panic held them, swayed them, and befogged their brains; then of a sudden Merode howled out "Get back! Get back! The fellow's in there still!" and led a blind race down the passage to the bar where they had seen Cleek last. It was still in darkness; but an eager hand, gripping the lever, turned on the gas again and matches everywhere were lifted to the jets.

And when the light flamed out and the room was again ablaze they knew that they might as well hope to call back yesterday as dream of finding Cleek again. For there on the floor, her limp hands turned palms upward, a chloroformed cloth folded over her mouth and nose, lay the figure of Margot, her bodice torn wide open and the paper forever gone!

* * * * *

It was five minutes later when the Count von Hetzler, crouching back in the shadow of the square and waiting for the return of Clodoche, heard a dull, whirring sound that was unmistakably the purr of a motor throb through the stillness, and, leaning forward, saw a limousine whirl up out of the darkness, cut across the square, and like a flash dash off westward. Yet in the brief instant it took to go past the place where he waited there was time for him to catch the sharp click of a lowered window, see the clear outlines of a man's face looking out, and to hear a voice from within the vehicle speak.

"Herr Count," it said in clear, incisive tones. "A positively infallible recipe for the invasion of England: Wait until the Channel freezes and then skate over. Good-night!"

CHAPTER III

THE RIDDLE OF THE SACRED SON

I

Had I followed my own inclination in the matter, I think I should have elected to call this particular adventure "The Riddle of the Amazing Demi-God," but as it is set down under the above title in the private note-book of Superintendent Narkom – to which volume I am under obligation for the details regarding the life and work of this most marvellous man – it follows that I must adhere closely to the recorded facts of each of his adventures, even to the most minute particular, if I am to prove myself worthy of the favour Mr. Narkom has shown me. I may freely confess, however, that I have not at all times adhered to the chronological sequence of those adventures, but have picked and chosen here and there from the record of his amazing career such cases as I have fancied most likely to appeal to the public at large, without regard to their natural order of succession or the many others that have intervened.

As Superintendent Narkom's records cover a number of years and embrace upward of three hundred adventures, obviously some must, of necessity, be omitted from these chronicles. Such omission sometimes – as in the present instance – renders it compulsory to record a few after facts connected with the adventure last detailed, in order that the reader may not be confused by the reappearance of certain persons under circumstances and in places widely separated from those in which they were left.

More than a year had passed since the affair of "The Red Crawl," when the events now to be told occurred, and while that year was fruitful of many stirring things so far as Cleek himself was concerned, but little record is obtainable of the movements of Margot and the man Merode, the two foremost figures in the Apache band with whom Cleek came to grips, for they chose to vanish suddenly from their Parisian haunts immediately after that tragical night at "The Inn of the Twisted Arm." It is certain, however, that they proceeded in due time to the East, for they were seen in both India and Ceylon several months after their disappearance from Paris. Indeed, they were obliged to fly from the latter place to escape arrest when the confession of a drunken native exposed, before its fulfilment, a plan to loot the repository of the Pearl Fisheries Company at a time when it contained several thousand pounds' worth of gems. From that point there is no record of their movements for many, many months.

Of course, after such a terrifying experience in the French capital, and not knowing when the Apache band might, knowing her part in the affair, avenge themselves upon her for the failure of the snare of "The Red Crawl," residence in France became a bugbear to Ailsa Lorne. Despite the pleadings of Athalie and the baron, whom she had served so well in giving help to Cleek, she was steadfast in her determination to leave it and to return to her native land. She therefore packed up her belongings, journeyed back to London, and set about finding some other position whereby she could earn her living.

Circumstances had so shaped themselves that Cleek had seen next to nothing of her since her return to England, much and deeply as he longed to do so. Beyond one delightful call at the modest little boarding-place where she was stopping, whilst waiting for an answer to her advertisement for a post as governess or companion, an answer which speedily came and was as speedily accepted, he had not met her at all since their parting in Paris, and, as their friendship was not sufficiently close to warrant the interchange of letters, she seemed as far away from him as ever.

Imagine, then, his surprise and delight, on returning to the house in Clarges Street late one afternoon, in company with the redoubtable Dollops, to find lying upon his table a note containing these words:

My Dear Cleek:

Kindly refrain from going out this evening. I shall call about nine o'clock, bringing with me Miss Ailsa Lorne, whom you doubtless remember, and her present patron, Angela, Countess Chepstow, the young widow of that ripping old war-horse who, as you may recall, quelled that dangerous and fanatical rising of the Cingalese at Trincomalee. These ladies wish to see you with reference to a most extraordinary case, an inexplicable mystery, which both they and I believe no man but yourself can satisfactorily probe.

Yours in haste,

Maverick Narkom.

So, then, he was to see her again, to touch her hand, hear her voice, look into the eyes that had lighted him back from the path to destruction! Cleek's heart began to hammer and his pulses to drum. Needless to say, he took extraordinary care with his toilet that evening, with the result that when the ladies arrived there was nothing even vaguely suggestive of the detective about him.

"Oh, Mr. Cleek, do help us!" implored Ailsa, after the first greetings were over. "Lady Chepstow is almost beside herself with dread and anxiety over the inexplicable thing, and I have persuaded her that if anybody on earth can solve the mystery of it, avert the new and appalling danger of it, it is you! Oh, say that you will take the case, say that you will solve it, say that you will save little Lord Chepstow and put an end to this maddening mystery!"

"Little Lord Chepstow?" repeated Cleek, glancing over at the countess, who stood, a very Niobe in her grief and despair, holding out two imploring hands in silent supplication. "That is your ladyship's son, is it not?"

"Yes," she answered, with a sort of wail; "my only son – my only child. All that I have to love, all that I have to live for in this world."

"And you think the little fellow is in peril?"

"Yes – in deadly peril."

"From what source? From whose hand?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" she answered distractedly. "Sometimes I am wild enough to suspect even Captain Hawksley, unjust and unkind as it seems."

"Captain Hawksley? Who is he?"

"My late husband's cousin; heir, after my little son, to the title and estates. He is very poor, deeply in debt, and the inheritance would put an end to all his difficulties. But he is fond of my son; they seem almost to worship each other. I, too, am fond of him. But, for all that, I have to remember that he and he alone would benefit by Cedric's death, and – and – wicked as it seems – Oh, Mr. Cleek, help me! Direct me! Sometimes I doubt him. Sometimes I doubt everybody. Sometimes I think of those other days, that other mystery, that land which reeks of them; and then – and then – Oh, that horrible Ceylon! I wish I had never set foot in it in all my life!"

Her agitation and distress were so great as to make her utterances only half coherent; and Ailsa, realizing that this sort of thing must only perplex Cleek, and leave him in the dark regarding the matter upon which they had come to consult him, gently interposed.

"Do try to calm yourself and to tell the story as briefly as possible, dear Lady Chepstow," she advised. Then, taking the initiative, added quietly, "it begins, Mr. Cleek, at a period when the little boy, whose governess I am at present, was but two years old, and at Trincomalee, where his late father was stationed with his regiment four years ago. Somebody, for some absurd reason, had set afoot a ridiculous rumour that the English had received orders from the Throne to stamp out every

religion but their own. It was said if British were not exterminated, dreadful desecrations would occur, as they were determined – "

"To loot all the temples erected to Buddha, destroy the images, and make a bonfire of all the sacred relics," finished Cleek himself. "I rarely forget history, Miss Lorne, especially when it is such recent history as that memorable Buddhist rising at Trincomalee. It began upon an utterly unfounded, ridiculous rumour; it terminated, if my memory serves me correctly, in something akin to the very thing it was supposed to avert. That is to say, during the outburst of fanaticism, that most sacred of all relics – the holy tooth of Buddha – disappeared mysteriously from the temple of Dambool, and in spite of the fact that many lacs of rupees were offered for its recovery, it has never, I believe, been found, or even traced, although a huge fortune awaits the restorer, and, with it, overpowering honours from the native princes. Those must have been trying times, Lady Chepstow, for the commandant's wife, the mother of the commandant's only child?"

"Horrible! horrible!" she answered, with a shudder, forgetting for an instant the dangers of the present in the recollection of the tragical past. "For a period our lives were not safe: murder hid behind every bush, skulked in the shadow of every rock and tree, and we knew not at what minute the little garrison might be rushed under cover of the darkness and every soul slaughtered before the relief force could come to our assistance. I died a hundred deaths a day in my anxiety for husband and child. And once the very zealotry of our comrades almost brought about the horror I feared. Oh!" – with a shudder of horrified recollections she covered her eyes, as if to shut out the memory of it – "Oh! that night – that horrible night! Unknown to any of us, my baby, rising from the bed where I had left him sleeping, whilst I went outside to stand by Lord Chepstow, wandered beyond the line of defence, and, before anybody realized it, was out in the open, alone and unprotected.

"Ferralt, the cook, saw him first; saw, too, the crouching figure of a native, armed with a gun, in the shadow of the undergrowth. Without hesitation the brave fellow rushed out, fell upon the native before he could dart away, wrenched the gun from him, and brained him with the butt. A cry of the utmost horror rang out upon the air, and, uttering it, another native bounded out from a hiding-place close to where the first had been killed, and flew zig-zagging across the open where Cedric was. Evidently he had no intention of molesting the little fellow, for he fled straight on past him, still shrieking after the accident occurred; but to Ferralt it seemed as if his intention were to murder the boy, and, clapping the gun to his shoulder, in a panic of excitement, he fired. If it had been one of the soldiers, who understood marksmanship and was not likely to be in a nervous quake over the circumstances, the thing could not have happened, although the fugitive was careering along in a direct line with my precious little one. But, with Ferralt – Oh, Mr. Cleek, can you imagine my horror when I saw the flash of that shot, heard a shrill cry of pain, and saw my child drop to the ground?"

"Good heaven!" exclaimed Cleek, agitated in spite of himself. "Then the blunderer shot the child instead of the native?"

"Yes; and was so horrified by the mishap that, without waiting to learn the result, he rushed blindly to the brink of a deep ravine, and threw himself headlong to death. But the injury to Cedric was only a trifling one, after all. The bullet seemed merely to have grazed him in passing, and, beyond a ragged gash in the fleshy part of the thigh, he was not harmed at all. This I myself dressed and bandaged, and in a couple of weeks it was quite healed. But it taught me a lesson, that night of horror, and I never let my baby out of my sight for one instant from that time until the rising was entirely quelled.

"As suddenly as it had started, the trouble subsided. Native priests came under a flag of truce to Lord Chepstow, and confessed their error, acknowledged that they had never any right to suspect the British of any design upon their gods, for the loot of the temple had actually taken place in the midst of the rising, and they knew that it could not have come from the hands of the soldiers,

for they had had them under surveillance all the time, and not one person of the race had ventured within a mile of the temple.

"Yet the tooth of Buddha had been taken, the sacred tooth which is more holy to Buddhists than the statue of Gautama Buddha itself. Their remorse was very real, and after that, to the day of his death from fever, eighteen months afterward, they could never show enough honour to Lord Chepstow. And even then their favour continued. They transferred to the little son the homage they had done the father, but in a far, far greater degree. If he had been a king's son they could have shown him no greater honour. Native princes showered him with rich gifts; if he walked out, his path was strewn with flowers by bowing maidens; if he went into the market-place, the people prostrated themselves before him.

"When I questioned Buddhist women of this amazing homage to Cedric, they gave me a full explanation. My son was sacred, they said. Buddha had withdrawn his favour from his people because of the evil they had done in suspecting the father and of the innocent life – Ferralt's – which had been sacrificed, and they had been commanded of the priests to do homage to the child and thereby appease the offended god, who, doubtless, had himself spirited away the holy tooth, and would not restore it until full recompense was made to the sacred son of the sacred dead.

"When it became known that I had decided to return to England with my boy, native princes offered me fabulous sums to remain, and when they found that I could not be tempted to stay, the populace turned out in every town and village through which we passed on our way to the ship, and bowing multitudes followed us to the very last. Nor did it cease with that, for in all the years that have followed, even here in London, the homage and worship have continued. My son can go nowhere but that he is followed by Cingalese; can see no man or woman of the race but he or she prostrates herself before him and murmurs, 'Holy, most holy!' And daily, almost hourly, rich gifts are showered upon him from unknown hands, and he is watched over and guarded constantly. I tell you all this, Mr. Cleek, that you may the better understand how appalling is the horror which now assails us, how frightful is the knowledge that some one now seeks his life, and is using every means to take it."

"In other words, my dear Cleek," put in Narkom, as Lady Chepstow, overcome with emotion, broke down suddenly, "there appears to be a sudden and inexplicable change of front on the part of these fanatics, and they now seem as anxious to bring evil to the little lad as they formerly were to protect and cherish him. At any rate, some one of their order has, upon three separate occasions within the last month, endeavoured to kidnap him, and, in one instance, even attempted to murder him."

"Is that a fact?" queried Cleek sharply, glancing over at Miss Lorne. "You are certain it is not a fancy, but an absolute fact?"

"Yes; oh, yes!" she made answer agitatedly. "Twice when I have gone into the Park with him, attempts have been made to separate us, to get him away from me; and once they did get him away, so swiftly, so adroitly, that he had vanished before I could turn round. But, although a bag had been thrown over his head to stifle his cries, he managed to make a very little one. I plunged screaming into the undergrowth from which that cry had come, and was just in time to save him. He was lying on the ground all bundled up in the bag, and his assailant, who must have heard me coming, had gone as if by magic. He, however, was able to tell me that the man was a Cingalese, and that he had 'tried to cut him with a knife.'"

"Cut him with a knife?" repeated Cleek in a reflective tone, and blew out a long, low whistle.

"Oh, but that is not the worst, Mr. Cleek," went on Ailsa. "Three days ago a woman, very beautiful and distinguished-looking, called to see Lady Chepstow regarding the reference of a former servant, one Jane Catherboys, who used to be her ladyship's maid. After the caller left, a box of sugared violets was found lying temptingly open on a table in the main hall. Little Cedric is passionately fond of sugared violets, and, had he happened to pass that way before the box was

discovered, he surely would have yielded to the temptation and eaten some. In removing the box the parlour maid accidentally upset it, and before she could gather all the violets up her ladyship's little pomeranian dog snapped up one and ate it. It was dead in six minutes' time! The sweets were simply loaded with prussic acid. When we came to inquire into the matter in the hope of tracing the mysterious caller, we found that Jane Catherboys was no longer in need of a position; that she had been married for eight months; that she knew nothing whatever of the woman, and had sent no one to inquire into her references."

"All of which shows, my dear Cleek," put in Narkom significantly, "that, whatever hand is directing these attempts, it belongs to one who knows more than a mere outsider possibly could. In short, to one who is aware of the little boy's excessive fondness for sugared violets, and is aware that Lady Chepstow once did have a maid named Jane Catherboys."

"If," said Cleek, "you mean to suggest by that that this points suspiciously in Captain Hawksley's direction, Mr. Narkom, permit me to say that it does not necessarily follow. The clever people of the under-world do nothing by halves nor without careful inquiry beforehand; that is what makes the difference between the common pickpocket and the brilliant swindler." He turned to Ailsa. "Is that all, Miss Lorne, or am I right in supposing that there is even worse to come?"

"Oh, much worse, Mr. Cleek! The knowledge that these would-be murderers, whoever they are, whatever may be their mysterious motive, have grown desperate enough to invade the house itself has driven Lady Chepstow well-nigh frantic. Of course, orders were immediately given to the servants that no stranger, no matter how well dressed, how well seeming, nor what the plea, was, from that moment, to be allowed past the threshold. We felt secure in that, knowing that no servant of the household would betray his trust, and that all would be on the constant watch for any further attempt. The unknown enemy must have found out about these precautions, for no stranger came again to the door. But last night a thing we had never counted upon happened. In the dead of the night the unknown broke into the house, into the very nursery itself, and but that Lady Chepstow, impelled she does not know by what, rose and carried the sleeping child into her own bed, he would assuredly have been murdered. The nurse, awakened by a horrible suffocating sensation, opened her eyes to find a man bending over her with a chloroform-soaked cloth, which he was about to lay over her face. She shrieked and fainted, but not before she saw the man spring to the little bed on the other side of her own, hack furiously at it with a long, murderous knife, then dart to the window and vanish. In the darkness he had not, of course, been able to see that the child's bed was empty, for its position kept it in deep shadow, and hearing the household stir at the sound of the nurse's shriek, he struck out blindly and flew to save himself from detection. The nurse states that he was undoubtedly a foreigner – a dark-skinned Asiatic – and her description of him tallies with that Cedric gave of the man who attempted to kill him that day in the Park. There, Mr. Cleek," she concluded, "that's the whole story. Can't you do something to help us; something to lift this constant state of dread and to remove this terrible danger from little Lord Chepstow's life?"

"I'll try, Miss Lorne; but it is a most extraordinary case. Where is the boy now?"

"At home, closely guarded. We appealed to Mr. Narkom, and he generously appointed two detective officers to sit with him and keep constant watch over him whilst we are away."

"And in the meantime," added Mr. Narkom, "I've issued orders for a general rounding-up of all the Cingalese who can be traced or are known to be in town. Petrie and Hammond have that part of the job in hand, and if they hit upon any Asiatic who answers to the description of this murderous rascal –"

"I don't believe they will," interposed Cleek; "or, if they do, I don't for a moment believe he will turn out to be the guilty party. In other words, I have an idea that the fellow will prove to be a European."

"But, my dear fellow, both the boy and the nurse saw the man, and, as you have heard, they both agree that he was dark-skinned and quite Oriental in appearance."

"One of the easiest possible disguises, Mr. Narkom. A wig, a stick of grease-paint, a threepenny twist of crepe hair, and there you are! No, I do not believe that the man is a Cingalese at all; and, far from his having any connection with what you were pleased to term just now a change of front on the part of the Buddhists who have so long held the little chap as something sacred, I don't believe that they know anything about him. I base that upon the fact that the child is still treated with homage whenever he goes out, according to what Miss Lorne says, and that, with the single exception of that one woman who tried to poison him, nobody but one man – this particular one man – has ever made any attempt to harm the boy. Fanatics, like those Cingalese, cleave to an idea to the end, Mr. Narkom; they don't cast it aside and go off at another tangent. You have heard what Lady Chepstow says the native women told her: the boy was sacred; their priests had commanded them to appease Buddha by doing homage to him until the tooth was found, and the tooth has not been found up to the present day! That means that nothing on earth could change their attitude toward him, that not one of the Buddhist sect would harm a solitary hair of his head for a king's ransom; so you may eliminate the Cingalese from the case entirely so far as the attempts upon the child's life are concerned. Whoever is making the attempts is doing so without their knowledge and for a purely personal reason."

"Then, in that case, this Captain Hawksley – "

"I'll have a look at that gentleman before I tumble into bed to-night, and you shall have my views upon that point to-morrow morning, Mr. Narkom. Frankly, things point rather suspiciously in the captain's direction, since he is apparently the only person likely to be benefited by the boy's death, and if a motive cannot be traced to some other person – " He stopped abruptly and held up his hand. Outside in the dim halls of the house a sudden noise had sprung into being, the noise of some one running upstairs in great haste, and, stepping quickly to the door, Cleek drew it sharply open. As he did so, Dollops came puffing up out of the lower gloom, a sheep's trotter in one hand and a letter in the other.

"Law, guv'ner!" groaned he, from midway on the staircase, "I don't believe as I'm ever goin' to be let get a square tuck-in this side of the buryin' ground! Jist finished wot was left of that there steak and kidney puddin', sir, and started on my seckint trotter, when I sees a pair o' legs nip parst the area railin's to the front door, and then nip off again like greased lightnin', and when I ups and does a flyin' leap up the kitchen stairs, there was this here envellup in the letter-box and them there blessed legs nowheres in sight. I say, sir," agitatedly, "look wot's wrote on the envellup, will yer? And us always keepin' of it so dark."

Cleek plucked the letter from his extended hand, glanced at it, and puckered up his lips; then, with a gesture, he sent Dollops back below stairs, and, returning to the room, closed the door behind him.

"The enemy evidently knows all Lady Chepstow's movements, Mr. Narkom," he said. "I expect she and Miss Lorne have been under surveillance all day and have been followed here. Look at that!" He flung the letter down on a table as he spoke, and Narkom, glancing at it, saw printed in rude, illiterate letters upon the envelope the one word "Cleek." The identity of "Captain Burbage" was known to some one, and the secret of the house in Clarges Street was a secret no longer!

"Purposely disguised, you see. No one, not even a little child, would make such a botch of copying the alphabet as that," Cleek said, as he took the letter up and opened it. The sheet it contained was lettered in the same uncouth manner and bore these words:

"Cleek, take a fool's advice and don't accept the Chepstow case. Be warned. If you interfere, somebody you care about will pay the price. You'll find it more satisfactory to buy a wedding bouquet than a funeral wreath!"

"Oh!" shuddered the two ladies in one breath. "How horrible! How cowardly!" And then, feeling that her last hope had gone, Lady Chepstow broke into a fit of violent weeping and laid her head on Ailsa's shoulder.

"Oh, my baby! My darling baby boy!" she sobbed. "And now they are threatening somebody that you, too, love. Of course, Mr. Cleek, I can't expect you to risk the sacrifice of your own dear ones for the sake of me and mine, and so – and so – Oh, take me away, Miss Lorne! Let me go back to my baby and have him while I may."

"Good-night, Mr. Cleek," said Ailsa, stretching out a shaking hand to him. "Thank you so much for what you would have done but for this. And you were our last hope, too!"

"Why give it up then, Miss Lorne?" he said, holding her hand and looking into her eyes. "Why not go on letting me be your last hope – your only hope?"

"Yes, but they – they spoke of a funeral wreath."

"And they also spoke of a wedding bouquet! I am going to take the case, Miss Lorne – take it, and solve it, as I'm a living man. Thank you!" as her brimming eyes uplifted in deep thankfulness and her shaking hand returned the pressure of his. "Now, just give me five minutes' time in the next room – it's my laboratory, Lady Chepstow – and I'll tell you whether I shall begin with Captain Hawksley or eliminate him from the case entirely. You might go in ahead, Mr. Narkom, and get the acid bath and the powder ready for me. We'll see what the finger-prints of our gentle correspondent have to tell, and, if they are not in the records of Scotland Yard or down in my own private little book, we'll get a sample of Captain Hawksley's in the morning."

Then, excusing himself to the ladies, he passed into the inner room in company with Narkom, and carried the letter with him. When he returned it was still in his hand, but there were grayish smudges all over it.

"There's not a finger-print in the lot that is worth anything as a means of identification, Miss Lorne," he said. "But you and Lady Chepstow may accept my assurance that Captain Hawksley is not the man. The writer of this letter belongs to the criminal classes; he is on his guard against the danger of finger-prints, and he wore rubber gloves when he penned this message. When I find him, rest assured I shall find a man who has had dealings with the police before and whose finger-prints are on their records. I don't know what his game is nor what he's after yet, but I will inside of a week. I've an idea; but it's so wild a thing I'm almost afraid to trust myself to believe it possible until I stumble over something that points the same way. Now, go home with Lady Chepstow, and begin the work of helping me."

"Helping you? Oh, Mr. Cleek, can we? Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Yes. When you leave the house, act as though you are in the utmost state of dejection, and keep that up indefinitely. Make it appear, for I am certain you will be followed and spied upon, as if I had declined the case. But don't have any fear about the boy. The two constables will sleep in the room with him to-night and every night until the thing is cleared up and the danger past. Tomorrow about dusk, however, you, personally, take him for a walk near the Park, and if, among the other Cingalese you may meet, you should see one dressed as an Englishman, and wearing a scarlet flower in his buttonhole, take no notice of how often you see him nor of what he may do."

"It will be you, Mr. Cleek?"

"Yes. Now go, please; and don't forget to act as if you and her ladyship were utterly broken-hearted. Also" – his voice dropped lower, his hand met her hand, and in the darkness of the hall a little silver-plated revolver was slipped into her palm – "also, take this. Keep it always with you, never be without it night or day, and if any living creature offers you violence, shoot him down as you would a mad dog. Good-night, and – remember!"

And long after she and Lady Chepstow had gone down and passed out into the night he stood there, looking the situation straight in the face and thinking his own troubled thoughts.

"A wedding bouquet! A threat against her, and the mention of a wedding bouquet!" he said, as he went back into the room and sat down to figure the puzzle out. "Only one creature in the world knows of my feelings in that direction, and only one creature in the world would be capable of that threat – Margot! But what interest could she or any of her tribe have in the death of Lady

Chepstow's little son? Her game is always money. If she were after a ransom she would try to abduct the child, not to kill him, and if – " A sudden thought came and wrenched away his voice. He sat a moment twisting his fingers one through the other and frowning at the floor; then, of a sudden, he gave a cry and jumped to his feet. "Five lacs of rupees – a fortune! By George, I've got it!" he fairly shouted. "The wild guess was a correct one, I'll stake my life upon it. Now, then, to put it to the test."

II

The summer twilight was deepening into the summer dusk when Ailsa, acting upon Cleek's advice, set forth with little Lord Chepstow the following evening, and turned her steps in the direction of the Park. Although, on her way there, she observed more than once that a swarthy-skinned man in European dress, who wore a scarlet flower in his coat, and was so perfect a type of the Asiatic that he would have passed muster for one even among a gathering of Cingalese, kept appearing and disappearing at irregular intervals, it spoke well for the powers of imitation and self-effacement possessed by Dollops that she never once thought of associating that young man with the dawdling messenger boy who strolled leisurely along with a package under his arm and patronized every bun-shop, winkle stall, and pork-pie purveyor on the line of march.

For upward of an hour this sort of thing went on without any interruption and Ailsa strolled along leisurely, with the boy's hand in hers, his innocent prattle running on ceaselessly; then, of a sudden, whilst they were moving along close to the Park railings and in the shadow of the overhanging trees, the figure of an undersized man in semi-European costume, but wearing on his head the twisted turban of a Cingalese, issued from one of the gates and well-nigh collided with them.

He drew back, murmuring an apology in pidgin-English, then, seeing the child, he salaamed profoundly and murmured in a voice of deep reverence, "Holy, most holy!" and prostrated himself, with his forehead touching the ground, until Ailsa and the child had passed on. But barely had they taken five steps before Cleek appeared upon the scene, and did exactly the same thing as the Cingalese.

"All right. You may go home now. I've got my man," he whispered, as Ailsa and the boy passed by. "Look for me at Chepstow House some time to-night." Then rose, as she walked on, and went after the man who first had prostrated himself before the child.

He had risen and gone on his way, but not before witnessing Cleek's obeisance, and flashing upon him a sharp, searching look. Cleek quickened his steps and shortened the distance between them. Now or never was the time to put to the test that wild thought which last night had hammered on his brain, for it was certain that this man was in very truth a genuine Cingalese, and, as such, must know! He stretched forth his hand and touched the man, who drew back sharply, half indignantly, but changed his attitude entirely when Cleek, who knew Hindustani more than well, spoke to him in the native tongue.

"Unto thee, oh, brother!" Cleek said. "Thou, too, art of us, for thou, too, dost acknowledge the sacred shrine. These eyes have beheld thee."

All his hopes rested on the slim pillar of that one word, "shrine," and his heart almost ceased to beat as he watched to see how it was received. It broke, however, into a very tumult of disturbance in the next instant, for the man positively beamed as he gave reply.

"Sacred be the shrine!" he answered in Hindustani. "Clearly thou art of us – not of those others."

"Others? What others? I am but newly come to this country."

"Walk with me, then, to my abode, sup with me, eat of my salt, and I will tell thee then, oh, brother. But I forget: thou hast no knowledge of me. Listen, then. I am Arjeeb Noosrut, father of the High Priest Seydama, and it is among the people of my house that the gun is yet preserved. Nor has the blood of Seydama been ever washed from the wood of it! Come."

All in a moment a light seemed to break over Cleek's brain. The missing link had been supplied – the one thing that could make possible the wild thought which had come to him last night had been given into his hands. Here at last was the key to the amazing mystery! He turned without a word and went with Arjeeb Noosrut.

"What an ass!" he said to himself in the soundless words of thought. "What an ass never to have suspected it when it is all so clear!"

Meantime Ailsa and the boy, dismissed from any further need of service, walked on through the deepening dusk and turned their faces homeward. But they had not gone twenty yards from the spot where Cleek had seen them last when the little boy set up a joyful cry and pointed excitedly to a claret-coloured limousine which at that moment swung in from the middle of the roadway and slowed down as it neared the kerb.

"Oh, look, Miss Lorne; here's mummie's motor-car; and I do believe that's Bimbi peeping out of it!" exclaimed the child – "Bimbi" being his pet name for Captain Hawksley – then broke, in wild excitement, from Ailsa's detaining hand and fled to a tall, military-looking man with a fair beard and moustache who had just that moment alighted from the vehicle. "It is Bimbi – it is! – it is!" he shouted as he ran. "Oh, Bimbi, I *am* glad!"

"Ceddie, dear, you mustn't be so boisterous!" chided Ailsa, coming up with him at the kerb. "How fond he is of you to be sure, Captain Hawksley. You've come for us, I suppose? Ceddie recognized the car at once."

"Yes; jump in," he answered. "Lady Chepstow sent me after you. She's nervous, poor soul, every moment the boy's away from her. Jump in, old chap! Better take the back seat, Miss Lorne; it's more comfortable. Quite settled, both of you? That's good. All right, chauffeur – Home!"

Then he jumped in after them, closed the door, dropped into a seat, and the motor, making a wide curve out into the road, pelted away into the fast-gathering darkness.

"Bimbi says maybe he's going to be my daddy one day – didn't you, Bimbi?" said his little lordship, climbing up on to "Bimbi's" knee and snuggling close to him.

"I say, you know, you mustn't tell secrets, old chap!" was the laughing response. "Miss Lorne will hand you over to Nursie with orders to put you to bed if you do, I know. Won't you, Miss Lorne?"

"He ought to be in bed, anyhow," responded Ailsa gaily; and then, this giving the conversation a merry turn, they talked and laughed and kept up such a chatter that three-quarters of an hour went like magic and nobody seemed aware of it. But suddenly Ailsa thought, and then put her thoughts into words.

"What a long time we are in getting home," she said, and bent forward so that the light from the window might fall upon the dial of her wrist watch, then gave a little startled cry and half rose from her seat. For the darkness was now tempered by moonlight and she could see that they were no longer in the populous districts of the town, but were speeding along past woodlands and open fields in the very depths of the country. "Good gracious! Johnston must have lost his senses!" she exclaimed agitatedly. "Look where we are, Captain Hawksley! – out in the country with only a farmhouse or two in sight. Johnston! Johnston!" She bent forward and rapped wildly on the glass panel. "Johnston, stop! – turn round! – are you out of your head? Captain Hawksley, stop him – stop him, for pity's sake!"

"Sit down, Miss Lorne." He made reply in a low, level voice, a voice in which there was something that made her pluck the child to her and hold him tight to her breast. "You are not going home to-night. You are going for a ride with me; and if – Oh, that's your little game, is it?" lurching forward as she made a frantic clutch at the handle of the door. "Sit down, do you hear me? – or it will be worse for you! There!" – the cold bore of a revolver barrel touched her temple and wrung a quaking gasp of terror from her – "Do you feel that? Now you sit down and be quiet! If you make a single move, utter a single cry, I'll blow your brains out before you've half finished it! Look here, do you know who you're dealing with now? See!"

His hand reached up and twitched away the fair beard and moustache; he bent forward so that the moonlight through the glass could fall on his face. It had changed as his voice had now

changed, and she saw that she was looking at the man who in those other days of stress and trial had posed as "Gaston Merode," brother to the fictitious "Countess de la Tour."

"You!" she said in a bleak voice of desolation and fright. "Dear heaven, that horrible Margot's confederate, the King of the Apaches!"

"Yes!" he rapped out. "You and that fellow Cleek came between us in one promising game, but I'm hanged if you shall do it in this one! I want this boy, and – I've got him. Now, you call off Cleek and tell him to drop this case, to make no effort to follow us or to come between us and the kid, or I'll slit your throat after I've done with his little lordship here. Lanisterre!" – to the chauffeur – "Lanisterre, do you hear?"

"Oui, monsieur."

"Give her her head and get to the mill as fast as you can. Margot will be with us in another two hours' time."

III

Through the ever-deepening dusk Cleek and Arjeeb Noosrut moved onward together; and onward behind them moved, too, the same dilatory messenger boy who had loitered about in the neighbourhood of the Park, squandering his halfpence now as then, leaving a small trail of winkle shells and trotter bones to mark the record of his passage, and never seeming to lose one iota of his appetite, eat as much and as often as he would.

The walk led down into the depths of Soho, that refuge of the foreign element in London; but long before they halted at the narrow doorway of a narrow house in a narrow side street that seemed to have gone to sleep in an atmosphere of gloom and smells Cleek had adroitly "pumped" Arjeeb Noosrut dry, and the riddle of the sacred son was a riddle to him no longer. He was now only anxious to part from the man and return with the news to Lady Chepstow, and was casting round in his mind for some excuse to avoid going indoors with him to waste precious time in breaking bread and eating salt. Suddenly there lurched out of an adjoining doorway an ungainly figure in turban and sandals and the full flower of that grotesque regalia which passes muster at cheap theatres and masquerade balls for the costume of a Cingalese. The fellow had bent forward out of the deeper darkness of the house-passage into the murk and gloom of the ill-lit street, and was straining his eyes as if in search for some one long expected.

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