

Le Queux William

The White Lie



William Le Queux

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CHAPTER I. IS MAINLY MYSTERIOUS

“A woman – perhaps?”

“Who knows! Poor Dick Harborne was certainly a man of secrets, and of many adventures.”

“Well, it certainly is a most mysterious affair. You, my dear Barclay, appear to be the last person to have spoken to him.”

“Apparently I was,” replied Lieutenant Noel Barclay, of the Naval Flying Corps, a tall, slim, good-looking, clean-shaven man in aviator’s garb, and wearing a thick woollen muffler and a brown leather cap with rolls at the ears, as he walked one August afternoon up the village street of Mundesley-on-Sea, in Norfolk, a quaint, old-world street swept by the fresh breeze of the North Sea. “Yesterday I flew over here from Yarmouth to see the cable-laying, and met Dick in the post-office. I hadn’t seen him for a couple of years. We were shipmates in the *Antrim* before he retired from the service and went abroad.”

“Came into money, I suppose?” remarked his companion, Francis Goring, a long-legged, middle-aged man, who, in a suit of well-worn tweeds, presented the ideal type of the English landowner, as indeed he was – owner of Keswick Hall, a fine place a few miles distant, and a Justice of the Peace for the county of Norfolk.

“No,” replied the aviator, unwinding his woollen scarf. “That’s just it. I don’t think he came into money. He simply retired, and next we heard was that he was living a wandering, adventurous life on the Continent. I ran up against him in town once or twice, and he always seemed amazingly prosperous. Yet there was some sort of a mystery about him – of that I have always felt certain.”

“That’s interesting,” declared the man at his side. “Anything suspicious – eh?”

“Well, I hardly know. Only, one night as I was walking from the Empire along to the Rag, I passed a man very seedy and down-at-heel. He recognised me in an instant, and hurried on towards Piccadilly Circus. It was Dick – of that I’m absolutely convinced. I had a cocktail with him in the club next day, but he never referred to the incident.”

“If he had retired from the Navy, then what was his business, do you suppose?”

“Haven’t the slightest idea,” Barclay replied. “I met him here with a motor-bike late yesterday afternoon. We had a drink together across at the Grand, against the sea, and I left him just after five o’clock. I had the hydroplane out and went up from opposite the coastguard station,” he said, pointing to the small, well-kept grass plot on the left, where stood the flagstaff and the white cottages of the coastguard. “He watched me get up, and then, I suppose, he started off on his bike for Norwich. What happened afterwards is entirely shrouded in mystery. He was seen to pass through the market-place of North Walsham, five miles away, and an hour and a quarter later he was found, only three miles farther on, at a lonely spot near the junction of the Norwich road and that leading up to Worstead Station, between Westwick and Fairstead. A carter found him lying in a ditch at the roadside, stabbed in the throat, while his motor-cycle was missing!”

“From the papers this morning it appears that your friend has been about this neighbourhood a good deal of late. For what reason nobody knows. He’s been living sometimes at the Royal at Norwich and the King’s Head at Beccles for the past month or so, they say.”

“He told me so himself. He promised to come over to me at the air-station at Yarmouth to-morrow and lunch with me, poor fellow.”

“I wonder what really happened?”

“Ah, I wonder!” remarked the slim, well-set-up, flying officer. “A mere tramp doesn’t kill a fellow of Dick Harborne’s hard stamp in order to rob him of his cycle.”

“No. There’s something much more behind the tragedy, without a doubt,” declared the local Justice of the Peace. “Let’s hope something will come out at the inquest. Personally, I’m inclined to think that it’s an act of revenge. Most probably a woman is at the bottom of it.”

Barclay shook his head. He did not incline to that opinion.

“I wonder with what motive he cycled so constantly over to this neighbourhood from Norwich or Beccles?” exclaimed Goring. “What could have been the attraction? There must have been one, for this is an out-of-the-world place.”

“Your theory is a woman. Mine isn’t,” declared the lieutenant, bluntly, offering his friend a cigarette and lighting one himself. “No, depend upon it, poor old Dick was a man of mystery. Many strange rumours were afloat concerning him. Yet, after all, he was a real fine fellow, and as smart an officer as ever trod a quarter-deck. He was a splendid linguist, and had fine prospects, for he has an uncle an admiral on the National Defence Committee. Yet he chucked it all and became a cosmopolitan wanderer, and – if there be any truth in the gossip I’ve heard – an adventurer.”

“An outsider – eh?”

“Well – no, not exactly. Dick Harborne was a gentleman, therefore he could never have been an outsider,” replied the naval officer quickly. “By adventurer I mean that he led a strange, unconventional life. He was met by men who knew him in all sorts of out-of-the-world corners of Europe, where he spent the greater part of his time idling at *cafés* and in a section of society which was not altogether reputable.”

“And you say he was not an adventurer?” remarked the staid British landowner – one of a class perhaps the most conservative and narrow-minded in all the world.

“My dear fellow, travel broadens a man’s mind,” exclaimed the naval officer. “A man may be a cosmopolitan without being an adventurer. Dick Harborne, though there were so many sinister whispers concerning him, was a gentleman – a shrewd, deep-thinking, patriotic Englishman. And his death is a mystery – one which I intend to solve. I’ve come over here again to-day to find out what I can.”

“Well,” exclaimed Goring, “I for one am hardly satisfied with his recent career. While he was in the Navy and afloat – gunnery-lieutenant of one of His Majesty’s first-class cruisers – there appears to have been nothing against his personal character. Only after his retirement these curious rumours arose.”

“True, and nobody has fathomed the mystery of his late life,” admitted Barclay, drawing hard at his cigarette and examining the lighted end. “I’ve heard of him being seen in Cairo, Assouan, Monte Carlo, Aix, Berlin, Rome – all over the Continent, and in Egypt he seems to have travelled, and with much more means at his disposal than ever he had in the ward-room.”

“There are strange mysteries in some men’s lives, my dear Barclay. Harborne was a man of secrets without a doubt. Some of those secrets may come out at the inquest.”

“I doubt it. Poor Dick!” he sighed. “He’s dead – killed by an unknown hand, and his secret, whatever it was, has, I believe, gone to the grave with him. Perhaps, after all, it is best.”

“The police are very busy, I understand.”

“Oh, of course! The Norfolk Constabulary will be very active over it all, but I somehow have an intuition that the crime was one of no ordinary character. Dick must have dismounted to speak to his assailant. If he had been overthrown his machine would most probably have been damaged. The assassin wanted the motor-cycle intact to get away upon. Besides,” he added, “the victim took over an hour to cover the three miles between North Walsham and the spot where he was found. Something unusual must have occurred in that time.”

“Well, it can only be left to the police to investigate,” replied the tall, country squire, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets.

“They won’t discover much – depend upon it,” remarked the naval officer, who, as he strolled at his friend’s side, presented the ideal type of the keen, British naval officer. “Dick has been the victim of a very carefully-prepared plot. That is my firm belief. I’ve been making some inquiries at the Grand Hotel, and learn that Dick came over from Norwich on his motor-cycle at nine o’clock yesterday morning for some purpose, and idled about Mundesley and the neighbourhood all the day. The head-waiter at the hotel knew him, for he had often lunched there. But yesterday he evidently came here with some fixed purpose, for he seemed to be eagerly expecting somebody, and at last, a little before two o’clock, a young lady arrived by the motor-bus from Cromer. They describe her as a neat, dark-haired, good-looking young person, rather well-dressed – and evidently a summer visitor. The pair walked about the village, and then went down to the beach and sat upon deck-chairs to chat. They returned to the hotel at half-past three and had tea together, *tête-à-tête*, in a small sitting-room. The waiter tells me that once, when he went in, suddenly, she was standing up, apparently urging him to act in opposition to his own inclinations. Her attitude, he says, was one of unusual force, it being evident that Dick was very reluctant to give some promise she was endeavouring to extract from him. She left again by the motor-bus for Cromer just after four.”

“Ah! There you are! The woman!” exclaimed the owner of Keswick Hall, with a smile. “I thought as much.”

“I don’t think she had anything to do with the affair,” said Barclay. “The police this morning obtained a detailed description of her – just as I have done – and they are now searching for her in Cromer, Runton, and Sheringham, believing her to be staying somewhere along this coast. She was dressed in a pale blue kit of a distinctly seaside cut, so the police are hoping to find her. Perhaps she doesn’t yet know of the tragic fate that has befallen poor Dick.”

“I wonder who the girl can be? No doubt she’d be able to make a very interesting statement – if they could only discover her.”

“I think she left Cromer last night,” Noel Barclay suggested to his companion.

“She would, if she were in any way implicated. Perhaps she has already gone!”

“No, I don’t agree. I believe she is still in ignorance.”

“What, I wonder, was the motive for their meeting here – in this quiet, out-of-the-world little place?” asked Goring. “If he wanted to see her, he might have motored to wherever she was staying, and not have brought her over here in a motor-bus. No, it was a secret meeting – that’s my opinion – and, as it was secret, it probably had some connection with the tragedy which afterwards occurred.”

The two men were now close to the “Gap,” or steep, inclined cart-road which ran down to the sands. On their right, a little way from the road, stood a small, shed-like building where the rocket life-saving apparatus of the Board of Trade was housed. In front, the roadway, and indeed all down the “Gap” and across the sands to where the waves lapped the shore, had been recently opened, for upon the previous day the shore end of the new German telegraph-cable connecting England with Nordeney had been laid. At that moment, while the cable-ship, on its return across the North Sea, was hourly paying out the cable, a German telegraph engineer was seated within the rocket-station, constantly making tests upon the submerged line between the shore and the ship.

Up from the trench beside the rocket-house came the cable – black, coiled, and snake-like, about three inches in thickness – its end disappearing within the small building.

“Been inside to-day?” asked Goring, just as they were passing.

“No. Let’s see how they are progressing,” the other said; and both turned into the little gate and asked permission to enter where the tests were being made.

Herr Strantz, the German engineer, a dark-haired, round-faced, middle-aged man, came forward, and, recognising the pair as visitors of the previous day, greeted them warmly in rather imperfect English, and bowed them into where, ranged on a long table, the whole length of the

left-hand wall, stood a great quantity of mysterious-looking electrical appliances with a tangle of connecting wires, while below the tables stood a row of fully fifty large batteries, such as are used in telegraph work.

On the table, amid that bewildering assortment of queer-looking instruments, all scrupulously clean and highly polished, were two small brass lamps burning behind a long, narrow strip of transparent celluloid whereon was marked a minute gauge. On the edge of the table, before these lamps, was a switch, with black ebonite handle.

As the two Englishmen entered, the German's eyes caught the small, round brass clock and noted that it was time to make the test – every five minutes, night and day, while the cable was in process of completion.

Therefore, without further word to his visitors, he carefully pulled over the long ebonite handle of the switch, and, at the same instant, a tiny spot of bright light showed upon the transparent gauge.

This the engineer examined to see its exact place upon the clearly-defined line, afterwards noting it in his book in cryptic figures, and then carefully switching off again, when the tell-tale light disappeared.

"Well?" asked Barclay. "How are you getting along? Not quite so much excitement in this place as yesterday – eh?"

"No," laughed the engineer. "Der people here never see a shore-end floated to land wiz bojes (buoys) before. Dey have already buried der line in der trench, as you see. Ach! Your English workmen are far smarter than ours, I confess," he added, with a pleasant accent.

"Is it being laid all right?" the airman asked.

"Ja, ja. Very good work. Der weather, he could not be better. We have laid just over one hundred mile in twenty-four hours. Gut – eh?"

As he spoke the Morse-sounder at the end of the green baize-covered table started clicking calling him.

In a moment his expert hand was upon the key, tapping a response.

The ship tapped rapidly, and then the engineer made an enquiry, and received a prompt reply.

Then tapped out the short-long-short-long and short, which meant "finish," when, turning to the pair, he said:

"Dey hope to get it am Ufer (ashore) at daybreak to-morrow. By noon there will be another through line between Berlin and London."

Lieutenant Barclay was silent. A sudden thought crossed his mind. At Bacton, a couple of miles farther down the coast, the two existing cables went out to the German shore. But this additional line would prove of immense value if ever the army of the great War Lord attempted an invasion of our island.

As a well-known naval aviator, and as chief of the whole chain of air-stations along the East Coast, the lieutenant's mind was naturally ever set upon the possibility of projected invasion, and of an adequate defence. That a danger really existed had at last been tardily admitted by the Government, and now with our Navy redistributed and centred in the North Sea, our destroyer-flotillas exercising nightly, and the establishment of the wireless at Felixstowe, Caister, Cleethorpes, Scarborough, and Hunstanton, as well as the construction of naval air-stations, with their aeroplanes and hydroplanes from the Nore up to Cromarty we were at last on the alert for any emergency.

When would "*Der Tag*" ("The Day") – as it was toasted every evening in the military messes of the German Empire – dawn? Aye, when? Who could say?

CHAPTER II. CONCERNS A PRETTY STRANGER

A short, puffy, red-faced man in grey flannels went past.

It was Sir Hubert Atherton, of Overstrand – that little place declared to be the richest village in all England – and Francis Goring, recognising him, bade a hurried farewell to his naval friend, and with a hasty word of thanks to the German, went out.

The naval airman and the German were left alone.

Again the round-faced cable engineer pulled over the double-throw switch, examined the tiny point of light upon the gauge, and registered its exact position.

“You remember, Herr Strantz, the gentleman who accompanied me here yesterday,” exclaimed Barclay, when the engineer had finished writing up his technical log.

“Certainly. Der gentleman who was a motor-cyclist?”

“Yes. He was found on the road last evening, murdered.”

“Zo!” gasped the German, staring at his visitor. “Killed!”

“Yes; stabbed to death fifteen miles from here, and his motor-cycle was missing. It is a mystery.”

“Astounding!” exclaimed Herr Strantz. “He took tea mit a lady over at the hotel. I saw them there when I went off duty at half-past three o’clock.”

“I know. The police are now searching for that lady.”

“Dey will not have much difficulty in finding her, I suppose – hein?” the engineer replied. “I myself know her by sight.”

“You know her!” cried the Englishman. “Why, I thought you only arrived here from Germany two days ago. Where have you met her?”

“In Bremen, at the Krone Hotel, about three months ago. She call herself Fräulein Montague, and vos awaiting her mother who vos on her way from New York.”

“Did she recognise you?”

“I think not. I never spoke to her in the hotel. She was always a very reserved but very shrewd young lady,” replied Herr Otto Strantz, slowly but grammatically. “I was surprised to meet her again.”

“Montague!” the airman repeated. “Do you know her Christian name?”

“Jean Montague,” was the German’s response as he busied himself carefully screwing down one of the terminals of an instrument.

Noel Barclay made a quick note of the name in a tiny memorandum-book which he always carried in his flying-jacket.

He offered the German one of his cigarettes – an excellent brand smoked in most of the ward-rooms of His Majesty’s Navy – and then endeavoured to obtain some further information concerning his dead shipmate’s visitor.

But Herr Strantz, whose sole attention seemed centred upon the shore-end of the new cable which was so soon to form yet another direct link between Berlin and London, was in ignorance of anything connected with the mysterious young person.

The statement that Harborne – the motor-cyclist who had spoken the German language so well when he had accompanied the pretty young girl the day before to watch the testing – was dead, seemed to cause the cable-engineer considerable reflection. He said nothing, but a close observer would have noticed that the report of the murder had had a distinct effect upon him. He was in possession of some fact, and this, as a stranger on that coast, and a foreigner to boot, it was not, after all, very difficult to hide.

Noel, however, did not notice it. His mind was chiefly occupied in considering the best and most diplomatic means by which the missing lady, who lived in Bremen as Miss Montague, could be traced.

The two men smoked their cigarettes; Strantz pulling over the switch every five minutes – always to the very tick of the round brass clock – examining the tiny point of light which resulted, and carefully registering the exact amount of current and the position of the ship engaged in paying out the black, insulated line into the bed of the German Ocean.

While Noel watched he also wondered whether, in the near future, that very cable across the sea would be used by England's enemy for the purposes of her destruction. True, we had our new wireless stations all along the coast, and at other places inland at Ipswich, Chelmsford, and elsewhere, yet if what was feared really came to pass, all those, together with the shore-ends of the cables, would be seized by advance parties of Germans already upon British soil – picked men, soldiers all, who were already living to-day in readiness upon the East Coast of England as hotel-servants, clerks or workers in other trades. Our shrewd, business-like friends across the grey, misty sea would take care to strike a blow on our shores by the wrecking of bridges, the disabling of railways, the destruction of telegraphs, and the like, simultaneous with their frantic dash upon our shore. Germany never does anything by halves, nor does she leave anything to chance.

Herr Strantz, having finished some calculations, and having tapped out a message to the ship, raised his head, and with a smile upon his broad, clean-shaven face, said, with his broad German accent:

"Ech! You are an officer. I suppose that, if the truth were told, England hardly welcomes another cable laid by Germany – hein?"

"Well," laughed the airman, pushing his big, round goggles higher upon his brow, "we sometimes wonder when your people are really coming."

"Who knows?" asked the other, smiling and elevating his shoulders. "Never – perhaps."

"Ah! Many there are in England who still regard invasion by the Kaiser's army as a bogey," Noel Barclay remarked. "But surely it is not impossible, or why should the British authorities suddenly awaken to the peril of the air?"

"All is possible to Germany – when the time is ripe. That is my private opinion as a Deutscher, and as one who has an opportunity of observing," the other frankly responded.

"I quite agree," was Noel's reply. "Dreams of ten years ago are to-day accomplished facts. Aeroplanes cross the Channel and the Alps, and fly from country to country in disregard of diplomatic frontiers, while your German airships – unfortunate as they may be – have actually crossed to us here, and returned without us being any the wiser. Had they been hostile they could have destroyed whole cities in a single night!"

"And your ever-watchful coastguards who actually saw them were disbelieved," the German laughed.

"Yes. I admit the air is conquered by your people – and Great Britain is now no longer an island. Wireless messages can be transmitted five thousand miles to-day, and who knows that it may not be possible to-morrow, by directing similar electric rays, to blow up explosives wherever they may be concealed – in the magazines of battleships or in land forts?"

"Ach, yes!" agreed the engineer. "Ten years ago war between England and Germany was more improbable than it is to-day, for each day, I fear, brings us nearer to hostilities – which we, in Germany, know to be inevitable."

"And when that day dawns we shall have to exert every force, every nerve, every muscle, if we are to repel you," remarked Noel, his clear-cut face unusually dark and serious.

"I fear that you will, sir," was the other's quiet response. "Individually we want to be friends mit England, but you, as a British officer, know quite well that one day the powder magazine will

explode and there must be der war. It will be forced suddenly and swiftly upon the Kaiser and upon the people.”

“Yes,” sighed the naval airman. “So all we can now do is to remain good friends as long as ever we can – eh? Forewarned is forearmed.”

“Exactly; but,” added the German, “I trust the openness of my remarks has given you no offence, sir. If it has, then I beg you to accept my most sincere apologies. You are an officer and serve your country. I, too, am an officer of reserve and serve mine.”

“Surely no apologies are needed, my dear Herr Strantz,” laughed the lieutenant, extending his hand frankly. “We have both exchanged our opinions. In most I agree with you, although, of course, I naturally believe in England’s invincible power on the sea.”

“That is but natural, my dear lieutenant. You are English,” was the engineer’s response, and while he turned again to pull over the testing-switch and bent to examine the point of light, Noel was puzzled as to his exact meaning.

Presently Noel Barclay, shaking Herr Strantz’s hand, humorously expressed a hope that they might never find themselves enemies, and that the cable might be successfully completed and inaugurated on the morrow; strode out into the village street, and down the “Gap” to that wide expanse of golden sands where a big Post Office gang were busily at work covering up the long black cable lying in its trench.

The engineer of the General Post Office who was in charge, recognising the airman, wished him good afternoon; but his thoughts were centred upon the mysterious death of the man about whom so many queer rumours had been afloat.

Rumours! Ah, how well he recollected one of them – a rumour that had gone around the Service – namely that he had retired with the money earned by selling to a foreign power a certain secret concerning “plotting.” For that reason, it was said, he had lived so constantly abroad. Though the offence had never been brought home to him by the Admiralty, yet the rumour had never been contradicted. Mud thrown, alas! always sticks.

Was it true, or was it a lie? his friend was wondering, as he stood looking out upon that calm blue summer sea, bathed in the warm light of that August afternoon, the sea in the deep bed of which lay the new link connecting Berlin with London.

What could Dick Harborne have been doing, motoring so constantly about that rural, out-of-the-world corner of England, that delightful little strip of the open Norfolk coast so aptly termed Poppyland? That he was not there as a summer visitor was quite certain. He had his headquarters in Norwich, twenty miles away, and his constant journeys over the roads between the Norfolk capital and the sea were certainly not without some definite motive.

That Strantz should have recognised Harborne’s fair companion was also remarkable. What could she have been doing in Bremen? he wondered.

Noel Barclay looked around him anxiously. The wind, which had risen for the past couple of hours while he had been in Mundesley, was now dropping. With the sunset he would have a nice flight back to the hangars standing on the shore beyond Yarmouth. The “old bus,” as the fine Bleriot monoplane was affectionately termed by the four flying-officers at the air station, had been running like a clock. Indeed he had flown her from Eastchurch two days previously, and intended, on the morrow, to make a flight to inspect the station up at Scarborough.

He lit another cigarette and sat down upon a boat to think, the white surf rolling almost to his feet.

During the time the naval aviator had been watching the testing of the cable, a tall, broad-shouldered, well-dressed, clean-shaven, broad-browed young man in a drab tweed golf suit and cap, a man whose great, dark, deep-set eyes wore a keen, intense look, and whose countenance was one which once seen would be easily remembered, lounged into the Old Ship Hotel. He was accompanied by a pretty, dark-haired girl in a summer gown of cream serge and wearing a neat

little hat of pale blue silk. The girl's skirt displayed small, well-shaped ankles, yet her shoes were stout and serviceable, and there was a cheapness about her dress and an independent air which stamped her as a girl accustomed to earn her own living.

Both were foreigners – French, apparently, for they spoke that language together. His clothes were English, evidently from a smart tailor, and he wore them with that easy nonchalance of the English golfer, while his pretty, dark-eyed companion, although her gown was of cheap material, it was nevertheless cut well, and both in figure and in gait she had all the *chic* of the true Parisienne.

"Yes, dearest," the young man exclaimed in French, as he rose and looked out into the village street, "this is a very interesting little place, I believe. We will have a stroll along the *plage* and see it after our tea. How quiet, how charming it is, after London – eh?"

"Ah! I always love the country, Ralph," was her reply in English, and as she sat composedly in her chair, after walking from Overstrand, where they had been to see that lonely, crumbling old church tower which the late Clement Scott has called "the Garden of Sleep," she gave him a look which was unmistakable – a look of true, passionate affection.

Indeed, upon her finger, now that she had removed her glove, was a diamond engagement ring, an ornament which meant so very much to her – as it does to all girls in all stations of life who are beloved.

The man turned from the window, his big, deep-set eyes upon her, and, bending, kissed her fondly. But the expression upon his hard, aquiline face as he turned away was a strange, unusual one, though, perhaps unfortunately for her, she was unable to see it. The look was not one of love – nay, rather of world-weariness and of deep anxiety.

"I wish my holiday was not yet at an end, Ralph," she sighed, wistfully, after a brief pause. "But father is inexorable, and says he must get back to business, while, as you know, I am due back at the Maison Collette on Monday morning. I've already had three days longer than the other girls – three delightful sunny days."

"Yes," sighed the young man. "I suppose, dearest, you will be compelled to go back for a time to your *modes* and your hat-making and your workroom friends. But only until November – until you become my wife." He spoke English with only a slight trace of accent.

"Ah! What supreme happiness!" cried the girl, in ecstasy, again speaking in French, as he bent until his lips touched hers. "I will remain patient, Ralph, till then, even though all the girls may envy me. They are all English, and just because I happen to be French, they are never too friendly."

The young man was silent for a few moments; then he sprang from her side as the waiter entered with the tea.

After he had swallowed a cup of tea he suddenly exclaimed in perfect French:

"Ah! I quite forgot, dearest. I wonder if you would excuse me if I leave you here for ten minutes or so? I want to send a telegram."

"*Certainement*," she laughed happily. "I shall be quite all right, Ralph. There are papers here to amuse me."

"Very well," he said; "I won't be a minute longer than possible," and, taking up his cap, he went out and closed the door behind him.

It was then about half-past five o'clock.

But the instant he had gone she sprang to her feet. Her face changed. A haunted, wild look shone in her dark, terrified eyes, and she stood rigid, her hands clenched, her face pale to the lips.

"*Dieu!*" she whispered aloud, to herself, startled at the sound of her own voice, and staring straight before her. "I was a fool – a great fool to return here to-day! Someone may recognise me, though it was to the other hotel I went with M. Harborne. Ah! No, I cannot – I dare not go down on the beach," she went on in French. "I must get away from this accursed place as soon as ever Ralph returns. What if he is suspected? Besides, the police may be looking for me, as it must now be known that I was here with him in Mundesley yesterday. Ah, yes! I was a fool to dare to return

like this, even in different clothes. As soon as Ralph comes back I must feign serious illness, and he will take me back to Cromer, and on to London to-morrow. What evil fate it was that he should bring me here – here, to the one place on all the earth that I desired never again in my life to see!”

And the girl sank back inertly into the horsehair arm-chair in the old-fashioned room, and sat, white-faced and breathlessly anxious, staring straight before her.

Meanwhile Ralph Ansell – who, although actually a Frenchman, bore an English name – walked quickly up the village street and out upon the high road towards Parton. From time to time he turned, as though he feared that he might be followed, but there being nobody in the vicinity, he suddenly, when about half a mile from the village, struggled through a hedge into a grass-field where, in the corner, sheltered from the wind, stood Noel Barclay’s naval monoplane, with its star-like Gnome engine and wide planes of pale yellow.

The spot was a lonely one. Before him stretched a wide heath covered with gorse, and the Norfolk Broads beyond. Nobody was nigh.

Bending, he crept swiftly along the high hedge, until he reached the machine. His attitude was that of an evil-doer. From his pocket he produced a small bolt of wood painted to resemble steel. He advanced to the left wing-spar of the monoplane and, apparently possessing expert knowledge of the point where it was the most vulnerable, he swiftly drew out a split pin, removed a small steel bolt at the end of the main-stay cable, and replaced it with the imitation bolt.

The dastardly, murderous action was only the work of a couple of minutes, when, placing the bolt in his pocket, he crept back again beneath the hedge, and ten minutes later reached the Old Ship unnoticed, having taken a certain route with which he seemed well acquainted.

As he approached the hotel he came face to face with Noel Barclay, who, cigarette in mouth, strode at an easy pace along the road towards the spot where he had left his machine. He passed the young foreigner without recognition. The man in the golf suit was a mere summer visitor, and to his knowledge he had never seen him before. Unsuspicious of what had been done, he went forward, eager to rise in the air again and return to his headquarters.

But when he had passed Ralph Ansell turned and, glancing covertly after him, an evil expression upon his strong, clean-shaven face, muttered a fierce imprecation in French beneath his breath.

The officer, however, strolled forward in ignorance of the stranger’s sinister glance or his malediction, while the foreigner, with a crafty smile of triumph, entered the hotel, to find, to his alarm, that Jean had been taken very unwell.

In a moment he expressed the greatest consternation, and at once rang and ordered a cab in which to drive her back to Cromer.

A quarter of an hour later Jean Libert – whose feigned illness had now almost passed – was seated happily at her lover’s side, slowly ascending the hill on the cliff-road leading towards Cromer, when, of a sudden, a loud whirr was heard in the air behind them.

“Why, look, there is an aeroplane!” cried the girl, enthusiastically, turning and watching with interest the naval monoplane rising beyond the village they had just left.

The driver pulled up, and the pair stood up in the vehicle to watch the splendid ascent of the dauntless aviator, who rose against the clear sky in a wide spiral higher and higher, twice passing over their heads, until he had reached an altitude of fully eight hundred feet. Then, after a final circle, he turned and made straight towards the yellow declining sun, speeding evenly and swiftly in the direction of Great Yarmouth.

Next second a loud, shrill shriek escaped the girl as she covered her face with her hands to shut out the appalling sight which met her gaze.

The machine, flying so beautifully, had, of a sudden, collapsed as though she had broken her wing, which rose at right angles, and then the machine, out of control, pitched forward and, nose first, fell straight to the ground like a stone.

CHAPTER III. DESCRIBES TWO INQUIRIES

The fatal accident to Lieutenant Noel Barclay caused a wave of sympathy throughout the country.

As a daring and experienced aviator he was well known. He had assisted in the foundation of the Naval Flying School at Eastchurch, and had been the first aviator to fly from land and greet the King on the occasion of a great review off Weymouth. Many splendid feats of airmanship had he accomplished, flying from Paris to London on three occasions, and going far out to sea and back, scouting on one or other of the Government hydroplanes.

Several important inventions were to his credit, and it had been due to his genius that certain of the aircraft had been fitted with wireless apparatus and experiments carried out with success. He had done excellent service during the naval manœuvres of the previous year, and his name had been written large in the annals of aviation.

But alas! the public had one morning opened their daily papers to find a tragic picture of his wrecked machine, and beneath was printed the news of his fatal fall from a distance of eight hundred feet.

The inquest had been held at the Old Ship Hotel at Mundesley, the day after the accident, and, in addition to representatives of the Admiralty, a number of aviation experts who had examined the wreckage had been present.

The inquiry was a searching one, for an important London newspaper had hinted that, owing to the parsimonious policy of the Admiralty, certain of their aeroplanes were not of the same stability as those owned by private individuals. Hence the authorities at Whitehall had set themselves to refute such damaging allegations.

To that quiet little fishing village had come some of the greatest aviation experts, world-famous pilots, and representatives of that select body whose dictum in all aviation is law – the Royal Aero Club. And all were there with one object – to decide as to the reason of the sudden collapse of the naval Bleriot.

The coroner sat in a stuffy little room, the windows of which were open. Nevertheless, with the place crowded the atmosphere was oppressively hot. The inquiry was long and tedious, for after evidence had been given as to the lieutenant's departure, and eyewitnesses had described his fall, there came a quantity of highly technical evidence put forward by the Admiralty with the object of proving that the machine had been in a perfectly satisfactory condition. The Gnome engine was of 80 horse-power, the monoplane had been thoroughly overhauled only four days previously, and the flights which Barclay had made in her from Eastchurch proved that there had been no defect which could have been detected.

Curious it was that that inquiry was being held in the same hotel where Ralph Ansell and Jean Libert had taken their tea.

One man alone knew the terrible truth – the man who, on that fatal evening, had crept under the hedge unseen, and substituted the small steel bolt with one of wood with such an expert, unerring hand – the man who had stood up in the cab and calmly watched the awful result of his evil handiwork without the slightest sign of pity or remorse.

He had hurled Noel Barclay to his death with as little compunction as he would have crushed a fly. And yet little Jean, with the neat figure and great, dark eyes, in her innocence and ignorance, loved him so dearly and so well. She never dreamed the truth, and therefore he was her ideal, while she was his affianced wife.

In that small, over-crowded room, clean-shaven experts stood up one after the other, each expressing a different theory as to the cause of the accident.

When poor Barclay had been found, the engine was lying upon his chest, his neck was broken, his face battered out of all recognition, and both arms were broken. So utterly wrecked was the machine that it presented the appearance of a mass of splintered wood, tangled wires, and torn strips of fabric flapping in the wind.

All had been examined carefully, piece by piece, after the mangled remains of the unfortunate pilot had been extricated. The bolt was missing and search failed to find it. A quantity of evidence was forthcoming, and many theories advanced, the conclusion arrived at being that the left wing collapsed owing to undue strain, and the machine, instantly out of control, fell to earth.

There was but one verdict which the twelve honest men of Mundesley could return.

Expert evidence agreed that the quick-release at the end of one of the stay-wires was faulty. The steel bolt holding the main-stay cable and secured by a split-pin could not be found. It had evidently broken and fallen out, so that the left wing, being thus unsupported, had collapsed in mid-air.

And in face of these facts the jury returned a verdict of "Accidental death."

This the public read next morning in their newspapers, together with expressions of deep sympathy and declarations that the air was, as yet, unconquered.

On the same day as the inquest was held upon the body of Lieutenant Barclay, a coroner's inquiry was held at the little market-town of North Walsham, which, though inland, is the relay for the telegraph-cables diverging to Northern Europe, into the discovery on the highway of the body of the motor-cyclist, Mr. Richard Harborne.

Held in a schoolroom near the railway station, public and witnesses sat upon the school benches, while the coroner occupied the headmaster's desk.

Again there was an array of witnesses, but from the first the crowd at the back of the room scented mystery.

A carter of the village of Worstead, speaking in his broad Norfolk brogue, described how he had discovered the body and had come into North Walsham and told a constable.

"I was a coomin' into North Walsham wi' a load o' hay what I'd got from Mr. Summers, o' Stalham, when just after I turned into the Norwich road I saw sawmthin' a-lyin' in the ditch," he said slowly, while the grey-haired deputy-coroner carefully wrote down his words.

"Well?" asked the official, looking up at the witness.

"Well, sir, I found it was 'im," the man replied.

"Who?"

"The gentleman what war killed."

"The deceased, you mean," said the coroner.

"Yes, sir. I went over and found 'im a-lyin' face downwards," was the reply. "I thought 'e wor drunk at first, but when I see blood on the road I knowed there'd been sawmthin' up. So I went over to 'im."

"In what position was the body when you discovered it?" the coroner asked.

"'E wor a-lyin' with 'is feet in the water an' 'is 'ead in the brambles like."

"As if he had fallen there?"

"No, sir. As if 'e'd been thrown into the side o' the road. There was blood – a lot of it all alon' the road."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I pulled 'im out, and saw a nasty cut in 'is throat. So I drove on to North Walsham and saw Mr. Bennet."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir, nawthin' else."

“Any juryman wish to ask a question?” inquired the coroner, looking across at the twelve local taxpayers.

The foreman, a stout farmer, said:

“I’d like, sir, to ask the witness if the gentleman was dead when he pulled him out of the ditch.”

“Dead as mutton,” was the witness’s prompt reply.

“You think he was dead? He may not have been,” the coroner remarked.

“Well, I put my ’and on ’is ’eart an’ it didn’t beat, sir.”

“Very well,” said the official holding the inquiry, “that will do.”

Superintendent Bennet, of the Norfolk Constabulary, stationed at North Walsham, gave evidence regarding the discovery. He described how the previous witness had called at the police-station, and how they went out in a light trap on the Norwich road together.

“I found deceased lying on the grass on the left side of the road close to a telegraph post,” he said, while a tall, grey-faced, well-dressed man of forty-five, of a somewhat military appearance, who was seated at the back of the room, leaned forward attentively to catch every word. “The thorn bushes beside the ditch were broken down by the body apparently being cast there. It was getting dusk when I arrived on the spot, but I could clearly see traces of blood for about forty feet from the ditch forward in the direction of Norwich.”

“Then the body must have been carried back from the spot where the blow was struck?”

“It was dragged back. A shower had fallen in the afternoon, and there were distinct marks on the damp road where the heels of the deceased had scraped along, and also the footmarks of the murderer.”

At these words those present in court held their breath.

“Have you taken any action in regard to those footmarks?”

“I have not, sir. But the detectives from Norwich have,” answered the officer.

“Could you see the track of deceased’s motor-cycle?”

“Quite plainly. The deceased apparently dismounted close to the spot where the first trace of blood appeared, for there were marks of a struggle. The gentleman must have been struck down and promptly flung into the ditch, after which his assailant mounted the cycle and rode off.”

“Towards Norwich?”

“Yes, sir – in that direction.”

The grey-faced man at the back of the room was now all attention. Upon his countenance was a curious, intense look. The coroner noticed him, and became puzzled, even suspicious. Nobody knew the man or why he was present. Yet to him the death of Richard Harborne was, without a doubt, of the very greatest concern.

More than once the coroner looked suddenly up from writing the depositions, regarding him with covert glances. Though he had all the appearance of a gentleman, yet there was about him a strange, almost imperceptible air of the adventurer. A close observer would have noticed that his clothes bore the cut of a foreign tailor – French or Italian – and his boots were too long and pointed to be English. His well-kept, white hands were the hands of a foreigner, long and pointed, with nails trimmed to points, and upon his left wrist, concealed by his round shirt-cuff secured by solitaires in place of links, he wore a gold bangle which inside bore an inscription.

At times his grey, hard face was impassive and sphinx-like, yet to the narrative of how Richard Harborne was discovered he listened with a rapt attention it was impossible to conceal.

Yes, the coroner himself decided that there was an air of mystery surrounding the stranger, and resolved to tell the police at the conclusion of the inquiry.

Superintendent Bennet, in answer to further questions put by the coroner, said:

“At Gordon’s Farm, to which we carried the body, I searched the dead man’s pockets. From the Foreign Office passport I found, I learned the name of the gentleman, and from some letters

addressed to him at the King's Head, at Beccles, I was soon able to ascertain by telephone that he had been stopping there for some little time. Most of the letters were private ones, but two of them were enclosed in double envelopes, and written on plain paper without any address or any signature. They were written in the dots and dashes of the Morse alphabet. A post-office telegraphist has seen them, and says that the letters are a jumble and form no words, therefore they must be secret correspondence in code."

And he handed the two letters in question to the coroner, who examined them with considerable curiosity, while the stranger at the back of the court folded his arms suddenly and looked entirely unconcerned.

"I also found this," the superintendent went on, handing a piece of tracing linen to the coroner. "As far as I can make out, it is a tracing of some plan or other. But its actual significance I have been unable to determine."

The coroner spread it out upon his writing-pad and looked at it with a puzzled expression.

"Anything else?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir; this," and the officer produced the torn half of a man's visiting-card.

"This is apparently part of one of the deceased's own cards," the coroner remarked, holding it before him, while the court saw that it had been torn across obliquely, leaving a jagged edge.

"He seems to have signed his name across the front of it, too, before it was torn," he added.

"The piece of card was carefully preserved in the inside pocket of his wallet," the inspector said. "On the back, sir, you will see it is numbered '213 G.'"

The coroner turned it over and saw on the back the number and letter as the police-officer had stated.

"There are three others, almost exactly similar," the inspector went on, producing them carefully from an envelope. "They are numbered '103 F,' '91 I,' and '321 G.'"

"Curious," remarked the coroner, taking them. "Very curious indeed. They are all signed across, yet only half the card is preserved. They have some secret significance without a doubt."

He glanced across at the stranger, but the face of the latter betrayed no sign of further interest. Indeed, just at that moment, when the whole court was on the tenterhooks of curiosity he looked as though bored by the entire procedure.

"The deceased carried a Smith-Wesson hammerless revolver fully loaded," the officer added; "but he was so suddenly attacked, it seems, that he had no time to draw it."

The detectives from Norwich who had the case in hand were not called to give evidence, for obvious reasons, but Dr. Dennan, of North Walsham, whom the police called, a short, white-haired, business-like little man, stepped forward, was sworn, and deposed that when he saw the body at Gordon's Farm, deceased had been dead nearly two hours.

"He was struck in the throat by some thin, sharp instrument – a deep wound. The artery was severed, and death must have occurred within a few minutes," he said. "Probably deceased could not speak. He certainly could not have uttered a cry. The blade of the instrument was, I should judge, only about half an inch wide, extremely keen, and tapered to a fine point. Whoever struck the blow was, I am inclined to think, possessed of some surgical knowledge. With Doctor Taylor, I made a post-mortem yesterday and found everything normal. There were some scratches and abrasions on the hands and face, but those were no doubt due to the deceased having been flung into the brambles."

Again the grey-faced stranger craned his thin neck, listening to every word as it fell from the doctor's lips.

And again the coroner noticed him – and wondered.

CHAPTER IV. DESCRIBES A TORN CARD

“The Norfolk Mystery,” as it was termed by the sensational journalists and Press-photographers, was but a nine days’ wonder, as, indeed, is every modern murder mystery.

It provided material for the sensational section of the Press for a full week; a hundred theories were advanced, and the police started out upon a dozen or more false scents, but all to no purpose. Therefore the public curiosity quickly died down, and within ten days or so the affair was forgotten amid the hundred and one other “sensations” of crime and politics, of war rumours, and financial booms, which hourly follow upon each other’s heels and which combine to make up the strenuous unrest of our daily life.

And so was the fatal accident to the naval aviator quickly forgotten by the public.

Many readers of these present lines no doubt saw reports of both affairs in the papers, but few, I expect, will recollect the actual facts, or if they do, they little dream of the remarkable romance of life of which those two unexplained tragedies formed the prologue.

On the night when the coroner’s jury returned in the case of Richard Harborne a verdict of “Wilful murder by some person unknown,” a girl sat in her small, plainly-furnished bedroom on the top floor of a house in New Oxford Street, in London, holding the evening paper in her thin, nerveless fingers.

It was Jean Libert.

She had been reading an account of the evidence given at the inquest, devouring it eagerly, with pale face and bated breath. And as she read her chest rose and fell quickly, her dark eyes were filled with horror, and her lips were ashen grey. The light had faded from her pretty face, her cheeks were sunken, her face haggard and drawn, and about her mouth were hard lines, an expression of bitter grief, remorse, despair.

A quarter of an hour ago, while in the small, cheap French restaurant below, kept by her father – a long, narrow place with red-plush seats along the white walls and small tables set before them – an urchin had passed, selling the “extra special.” On the contents bill he carried in front of him were the words, in bold type: “Norfolk Mystery – Verdict.”

She had rushed out into the street, bought a paper, and hastily concealing it, had ascended to her room, and there locked herself in.

Then she sank upon her bed and read it. Three times had she carefully read every word, for the report was a rather full one. Afterwards she sat, the paper still in her white hand, staring straight at the old mahogany chest of drawers before her.

“Poor Dick!” she murmured. “Ah! Heaven! Who could have done it? Why – why was he killed on that evening? If he had not gone to Mundesley to meet me he would not have lost his life. And yet – ”

She paused, startled at the sound of her own voice, so nervous had she now become.

She glanced at the mirror, and started at sight of her own white, drawn countenance.

She placed both hands upon her eyes, as though striving to recall something, and in that position she remained, bent and pensive, for some moments.

Her lips moved at last.

“I wonder,” she exclaimed, very faintly, speaking to herself, “I wonder whether Ralph will ever know that I met Dick? Ah! yes,” she sighed; “I was foolish – mad – to dare to go to Mundesley that afternoon. If only I could have foreseen the consequence of our secret meeting – ah! if only I had known what I know now!”

Again she was silent, her face pale, with a fixed, intense look, when at last she rose, unlocked one of the small top drawers of the chest, and, taking the drawer entirely out, extracted something that had been concealed beneath it.

She held it in her hand. There were two halves of one of Dick Harborne's visiting-cards – signed and torn across in a similar manner to those pieces which had been handed for the coroner's inspection. Each half bore a number on its back, while on the front, as she placed them together, was Harborne's name, both printed and written.

For a long time she had her eyes fixed upon it. Her brows narrowed, and in her eyes showed a distinct expression of terror.

"Yes," she whispered; "I was a fool – a great fool to have dared so much – to have listened, and to have consented to go across to Bremen. But no one knows, except Dick – and he, alas! – he's dead! Therefore who can possibly know? – no one."

She held the halves of the torn card between her fingers for some moments, looking at them. Then, sighing deeply, she rose with sudden impulse and, crossing the room, took up a box of matches. Striking one, she applied it to the corners of the half cards and held the latter until the blue flame crept upwards and consumed them.

Then she cast them from her into the grate.

It was the end of her romance with that man who had been struck that cowardly blow in secret – Richard Harborne.

She stood gazing upon the tiny piece of tinder in the fender, immovable as a statue. Her dark brows slowly narrowed, her white, even teeth were set, her small hands clenched, as, beneath her breath, she uttered a fierce vow – a hard, bitter vow of vengeance.

Before her arose the vision of her good-looking lover, the man with the dark, intense eyes – Ralph Ansell. And then the memory of the dead Dick Harborne instantly faded from her mind.

Her romance with Dick had been but a passing fancy. She had never really loved him. Indeed, he had never spoken to her of love. Yet he had fascinated her, and in his presence she had found herself impelled by his charm and his easy-going cosmopolitanism, so that she had listened to him and obeyed, even against her own will.

She recollected vividly that adventurous journey to Bremen – recalled it all as some half-forgotten, misty dream. She could feel now the crisp crackling of those Bank of England notes which she had carried secreted in her cheap little dressing-case with its electro-plated fittings. She remembered, too, the face of the stranger, the fat, sandy-haired German, whom she had met by appointment upon a flat country road a mile distant from the city towards Ottersberg – how he had given her, as credential, one of those pieces of visiting-card, together with a bulky letter, and how, in return, she had handed him the English bank-notes.

Then there was the mysterious packet she had subsequently given to Dick, when she had met him one evening and dined with him at the Trocadero. Then he had thanked her, and declared his great indebtedness.

From that night, until the day of the tragedy, she had not seen him. Indeed, she had made up her mind never to do so. Yet he had persuaded her to meet him at Mundesley, and she had consented, even though she knew what risk of detection by Ralph she must run.

Was it possible that Ralph knew?

The thought held her breathless.

Ralph Ansell loved her. He had sworn many times that no other man should love her. What if Dick's death had been due to Ralph's fierce jealousy!

The very suspicion staggered her.

Again she sank upon her little white bed, gripping the coverlet in her nervous fingers and burying her face in the pillow.

She examined her own heart, analysing her feelings as only a woman can analyse them.

Yes. She loved Ralph Ansell – loved him sincerely and well. Eighteen months ago he had casually entered the little restaurant one evening and ordered some supper from Pierre, the shabby, bald-headed waiter, who had been for so many years in her father's service. At that moment Jean – who was employed in the daytime at the Maison Collette, the well-known milliners in Conduit Street – happened to be in the cash-desk of her father's little establishment where one-and-sixpenny four-course luncheons and two-shilling six-course dinners were served.

From behind the brass grille she had gazed out upon the lonely, good-looking, well-dressed young fellow whom she saw was very nervous and agitated. Their eyes met, when he had instantly become calm, and had smiled at her.

He came the next night and the next, with eyes only for her, until he summed up courage to speak to her, with the result that they had become acquainted.

A young man of French birth, though his father had been an American domiciled in Paris, he was possessed of independent means, and lived in a cosy little bachelor flat half-way up Shaftesbury Avenue on the right-hand side. Far more French than English, in spite of his English name, he quickly introduced himself into the good graces of Jean's father – the short, dapper old *restaurateur*, Louis Libert, a Provençal from the remote little town of Aix, a Frenchman whom many years' residence in London had failed to anglicise.

For nearly twenty years old Louis Libert had kept the Restaurant Provence, in Oxford Street, yet Mme. Libert, on account of the English climate, had preferred to live with her mother in Paris, and for fully half the period had had her daughter Jean with her. In consequence, Jean, though she spoke English well, was, nevertheless, a true Parisienne.

Since her mother's death, four years previously, she had lived in London, and was at present engaged as modiste at the Maison Collette, where many of the "creations" of that world-famous house were due to her own artistic taste and originality.

At first, her father had looked askance at the well-dressed young stranger who so constantly had dinner or supper at the restaurant, but ere long, in consequence of secret inquiries he had made of the hall porter of the flats in Shaftesbury Avenue, he had accepted the young man, and had even been gratified by the proposal of marriage which Ralph had placed before him.

Thus the pair had become engaged, the wedding being fixed to take place in the middle of November. Even as Jean stood there, a faint tap was heard at the door, and the maid-of-all-work announced:

"Mr. Ansell is downstairs, miss."

Jean responded, and after washing her hands and patting her hair before the glass, put on her hat and descended to the rather dingy, old-fashioned drawing-room over the shop, where stood her lover alone at the open window, looking down upon the traffic in the broad, brilliantly-lit London thoroughfare.

Very neat and dainty she looked in her well-cut, dark skirt, and blouse of white crêpe de Chine, which she wore with a distinctly foreign *chic*, and as she entered, her pretty face was bright and happy: different, indeed, to the heavy, troubled expression upon it ten minutes before.

"Ah, Ralph!" she cried, in warm welcome, as she sprang into his ready arms, and he bent till his lips touched hers. "You are earlier than you expected," she added in French. "I hardly thought you would be able to get back from the country in time to-night."

"Well, you see, dearest, I made an effort, and here I am," replied the young man with the strong, clean-shaven features and the large, round, penetrating eyes. "I've been travelling ever since three o'clock, and it's now nearly ten."

Though he, too, spoke in French, his appearance was very English. No one would have taken him for anything else but an honest, upright, thorough-going young Englishman. He was of that strong, manly, well-set-up type, the kind of level-headed, steady young man, with whom no father would hesitate to entrust his daughter's future. As he stood in his smart, blue serge suit with well-

ironed trousers, and a fine diamond in his cravat, holding her in his arms and kissing her fondly, he looked the true lover, and assuredly their hearts beat in unison.

Jean Libert loved him with a great, all-consuming affection, a blind passion which obliterated any defects which she might have observed, and which endowed him in her eyes with all the qualities of a hero of romance.

They were, indeed, a handsome pair. Her dark head was resting upon his shoulder, while his strong right arm was about her slim waist.

Since her return, three days ago, from her summer holiday by the sea at Cromer they had not met. That morning, being Monday, she had resumed her daily labours in the big, long workroom of the Jewish firm who traded under the name of the Maison Collette, and she had, as is usual with girls, related to her friends many of the incidents of what she declared to be “a ripping holiday.”

As she stood with her white hand tenderly upon his shoulder, looking lovingly into his eyes, she was describing her return to business, and how she regretted that the long summer seaside days were no more, whereupon he said, cheerfully, in English:

“Never mind, darling; November will soon come, and you will then have no further need to go to business. You will be mine. Shall we go out for a walk?” he suggested, noticing that she already had her hat on.

To his suggestion she willingly assented, and, raising her full, red lips to his, she kissed him, and then they descended to the restaurant below, empty at that hour save for the seedy old waiter, Pierre, and her father, an elderly, grey, sad-looking man, whose business in later years had, alas! sadly declined on account of the many restaurants which had sprung up along Oxford Street during the past ten years. He had seen better times, but nowadays it was always a hard struggle to make both ends meet, to pay the landlord and to live.

Ralph and old Libert exchanged greetings in French, and then, with Jean upon his arm, young Ansell stepped out into Oxford Street.

The August night was dry, warm, and starlit. Few people were about as they strolled along, chatting and laughing merrily. Before the theatres discharge their chattering crowds, the main thoroughfares of central London are usually quiet and half-deserted, and as the pair walked in the direction of Regent Street, Jean’s heart beat gladly with supreme satisfaction that at last Ralph had returned to London.

November! Far off seemed that day of all days in her life when she would be Ralph’s bride.

Upon her finger was the engagement ring he had given her, one set with diamonds of such fine quality that old Libert had wondered. Indeed, a jeweller, whose habit it was to take his luncheon there each day, had noticed it upon Jean’s finger, and had valued it roughly at a hundred pounds. Therefore Ralph could certainly not be badly off!

They had turned the corner into Regent Street, but were too engrossed in each other’s conversation to notice that, in passing, a tall, grey-faced man, who wore a crush-hat, with a black coat over his evening clothes, had suddenly recognised Ansell.

For a few steps he strode on with apparent unconcern, then he paused and, having gazed for several moments after them still walking with linked arms, unconscious of being remarked, he turned on his heel, crossed the road, and strolled in the direction they were walking.

The watcher was the same grey-faced, keen-looking stranger who, earlier that day, had sat in the country schoolroom at North Walsham listening to the evidence given before the coroner concerning the mystery of the Norwich Road.

His thin lips curled in a smile – a smile of bitter triumph – as he went on with crafty footsteps behind the pair, watching them from across the road.

CHAPTER V. SECRETS OF STATE

The right honourable the Earl of Bracondale, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, crossed his big, business-like library at Bracondale Hall, near Torquay, and stood upon the Turkey hearthrug ready to receive his visitor.

Beneath the red-shaded lamplight he presented a handsome picture, a tall, well-built man of refined elegance, upon whom the cares of State weighed rather heavily. His age was about forty-three, though, in his well-cut evening clothes, he looked much younger; yet his face undoubtedly denoted strength and cleverness, a sharpened intellect ever on the alert to outwit foreign diplomacy, while the lines across his brow betokened deep thought and frequent nights of sleeplessness.

To Great Britain's Foreign Minister is entrusted the care of her good relations with both friends and enemies abroad, and surely no member of the Cabinet occupies such a position of grave responsibilities, for a false step upon his part, the revelation of a secret policy, of an unfriendly attitude maintained injudiciously, may at any moment cause the spark in the powder magazine of Europe.

To preserve peace, and yet be in a position to dictate to the Powers is what a British Foreign Minister must do, a task the magnitude and difficulty of which in these days can very easily be understood.

With his hands behind his back, his dark brow slightly contracted, his eyes were fixed blankly upon the big, littered writing-table before him; he was thinking deeply.

In profile his features were clean-cut, his forehead high and above the average intelligence; his hair, though a trifle scanty on top, was as yet untinged by grey, while he wore the ends of his carefully-trimmed moustache upturned, which gave him a slightly French appearance.

In his youthful days, long before he had succeeded to the title, he had been honorary attaché at the Embassy in Rome, and afterwards in Paris, to which was attributable the rather Continental style in which he wore both hair and moustache.

He drew his hand wearily across his brow, for ever since dinner he had never left his writing-table, so busy had he been with the great pile of documents which had been brought that afternoon by special messenger from the Foreign Office.

Suddenly Jenner, the grave old butler who had been fifty years in the service of his family, opened the door and announced:

"Mr. Darnborough, m'lord."

"Halloa, Darnborough!" cried the earl cheerily, as his visitor entered. "Where have you sprung from at this time of night?"

"From London," replied the other. "I wanted to see you urgently, so I ran down."

And the two men shook hands.

That the visitor was no stranger to the house was apparent, for, without invitation, he sank into an arm-chair, stretched out his legs, and looked very gravely up into the face of the Cabinet Minister before him.

He was dressed in a dark brown suit, and was none other than the grey-faced stranger who, four days before, had sat in the schoolroom at North Walsham and had aroused the curiosity of the coroner.

"Well, Darnborough, what's the matter?" asked the Earl, passing his visitor the cigar-box. "I can see there's trouble by your face. What's the latest problem – eh?"

The visitor selected a cigar, turned it over in his fingers critically, and then, rising suddenly, bit off the end viciously and crossed to the electric lighter near the fireplace.

“Well,” he answered, “there are several things. First, we know why poor Harborne was killed.”

“Good,” replied his lordship. “You Secret Service men always get to know all there is to know. You’re marvellous! Have you told them at Scotland Yard?”

“No, and I don’t mean to,” replied Hugh Darnborough, the chief of the British Secret Service, the clever, ingenious man whose fingers were upon the pulse of each of the Great Powers, and whose trusty agents were in every European capital. Long ago he had held a commission in the Tenth Hussars, but had resigned it to join the Secret Service, just as Dick Harborne had resigned from the Navy to become a cosmopolitan, and to be dubbed an adventurer by those in ignorance. That had been years ago, and now he held the position of being the most trusted man in any Government department, the confidant of each member of the Cabinet, and even of the Sovereign himself, who frequently received him in private audience.

“You have reasons for not telling them at Scotland Yard – eh?” asked the Foreign Minister.

“Strong ones,” replied the other, pulling hard at his cigar. “A woman who, I have ascertained, was on one occasion very useful to us, would be dragged into it – perhaps incriminated. And you know we are never anxious to court publicity.”

“Ah! A woman – eh?”

“Yes; a young, and rather pretty, woman.”

“And you’ve come all the way from London, and got here at eleven o’clock at night, to tell me this?”

“I have something else – of greater gravity.”

“Well, let’s hear the worst,” said the Earl with a sigh. “Every day brings its troubles. Look yonder!” and he pointed to the table. “Those are despatches from all the Embassies. The eternal Balkan trouble seems threatening to break out, unless we take strong action. Bulgaria is mobilising again, and Turkey is protesting.”

“There has been a leakage from the Admiralty. How, I cannot explain. A copy of the secret report upon our last naval manœuvres is in the hands of our friends in the Wilhelmstrasse.”

“What?” cried the Earl, starting, his face pale with alarm.

“I repeat that the report is known in Germany – every word of it!”

“And our weakness is thereby revealed?”

“The exact position is known.”

“But the confidential report has not yet come through to me!”

“And yet it has somehow leaked out from Whitehall,” Darnborough replied, drily.

“A full and drastic inquiry must be ordered. I will telephone at once to the First Lord.”

“He already knows. I saw him this afternoon,” was the quiet reply of the head of the Secret Service, a man whose coolness in great crises was always remarkable. When danger threatened he was always far more cool and collected than when all was plain sailing.

“But what are the main features of the report? Tell me, Darnborough. You always know everything.”

“The chief points of the secret report reached me from one of my agents in Berlin this morning. It was brought over by messenger,” replied the Earl’s visitor, seating himself and puffing thoughtfully at his cigar. “You will recollect that two fleets were engaged in the North Sea, Blue being the British Fleet, and Red representing the German.”

“How foolish of the Admiralty not to have issued a report for public consumption. They ought to have done so long ago, and issued the confidential report afterwards – as was done two years ago,” interrupted His Majesty’s Minister.

“Yes, that is what should have been done,” the other assented. “It is useless to tell the world the truth when national defence is in question. But to resume. Blue’s commander was given two

hundred and thirty ships to Red's one hundred and seventeen, or nearly two to one. Blue had twenty-eight battleships and battle-cruisers to Red's eighteen, or fifty-five per cent. more."

"An advantage far greater than we should possess in actual war, unless every British fighting ship was brought home from the Mediterranean."

"Exactly. War was declared on June 18th – earlier than is usual – and six days later a truce was suddenly ordered from Whitehall. War was resumed three days afterwards, but was stopped suddenly four days later."

"Well, and what did really happen? I mean, what facts have our friends in Berlin got hold of?" asked the Earl, with the greatest interest.

"Proofs undeniable that, under our present arrangements for home defence, a serious raid must entail a vital blow at the heart of the Empire," he replied slowly.

"How?" asked Lord Bracondale sharply.

"Because the enemy, notwithstanding all our efforts at defence, our destroyers, our scouting hydroplanes, and our look-outs along the coast, raided the Humber, landing thirty-six thousand men, and, on the following day, made raids on the Wear, Blyth, and Sunderland, putting twenty-four thousand men ashore. Thus, four of the most important ports and bases on the East Coast were captured within two days, together with the wireless stations at Cleethorpes, Hunstanton, and Caister, and sixty thousand men were ashore. Moreover, the supposed enemy inflicted very heavy losses upon us without sustaining any disasters, and, further, they sent a strong force of cruisers into the Atlantic to prey upon British trade."

"Bad," sighed the Earl, the corners of his mouth hardening. "Very bad, Darnborough. It is to be hoped that the Press won't get wind of this!"

The ubiquitous Chief of the Secret Service shrugged his shoulders.

"It may leak out to the Opposition journals, just as it has already leaked out to the Wilhelmstrasse. If the Admiralty had not ordered a sudden cessation of hostilities the enemy's admiral would next have been heard of in such a position that a panic would have been caused throughout the country. As it was, the enemy's submarines of the D and E classes, which were sent away to hunt on their own, established a reign of terror, getting to the entrance of Cromarty Harbour, which was our base, and torpedoing the ships which were guarding the Fleet inside. They also torpedoed the Dreadnoughts *St. Vincent* and *Collingwood*, while another section of the enemy's submarines inflicted very heavy loss on the British Fleet in the North Sea and seized the wireless at Cleethorpes."

The Earl was silent for a long time, thoughtfully stroking his moustache.

"But all this betrays our weakness to Germany!" he exclaimed at last. "It is astounding – incredible!"

"But it is, nevertheless, true," remarked Darnborough. "The security of the country is in gravest danger. Why, only a few days ago the Post Office allowed Germany to lay another cable across the North Sea from Mundesley, in Norfolk, to the Island of Nordeney."

"Mundesley?" repeated the Earl. "Why, that was where poor Harborne went on the day he lost his life."

"Yes. He had been in that neighbourhood for some time – upon a secret mission, poor fellow! – a mission which he had not lived to fulfil."

A silence fell between the two men.

"The situation is, I see, one of the utmost gravity. Steps must be taken at once to reassure the public in case rumours should be published regarding the truth. The Opposition will certainly not spare the Government the facts, and must, if disclosed, give an impetus to the campaign for universal service, which would be very inconvenient to us at the present time. And more than that – Germany now actually knows the rottenness of our defences!"

"That, unfortunately, is the case."

The Earl of Bracondale bit his under lip. A Cabinet Council had been summoned for the next afternoon, and he must place the true situation before it. All the clever diplomacy he had exercised with the Powers during the past five years had now been nullified, and England stood exposed in all her vulnerability. The inflated bubble of the strong, invincible British Navy had been pricked and burst.

Black days had, alas! fallen upon our nation, and a grave peril hourly threatened. Germany had hitherto hesitated to attack England because of the uncertainty regarding our true strength. Our land defences were known to Germany, even to the most minute detail, all reported accurately and methodically by the enemy's spies living amongst us. But our naval secrets had all been well preserved, so that the British Fleet had always been regarded as able to repel invasion and make reprisals.

Now, however, its failure to prevent an armed raid was known to our friends across the North Sea, and most certainly they would seek to take advantage of the valuable knowledge they had gained.

Suddenly the Earl, turning to where Darnborough stood, exclaimed:

"You spoke of poor Harborne. He was a smart agent, I believe?"

"The best I ever had. He was clever, ingenious, utterly fearless, and devoted to the service. You will recollect how he obtained the accurate clauses of the secret Japanese treaty, and how he brought to us news of the secret French agreement over the Morocco question."

"I recollect," replied the Foreign Minister. "When he told me I would not believe it. Yet his information proved correct."

"Harborne's death is to be deeply regretted," Darnborough said. "I attended the inquest. Of course, to the public, the motive is a mystery."

"Not to you – eh, Darnborough?"

"No. If Richard Harborne had lived, Germany would never have learnt the truth regarding the recent naval manœuvres," was the reply of the Chief of the Secret Service.

"You said something about a woman. Is she known?"

"No. I have suspicions that an indiscretion was committed – a grave indiscretion, which cost poor Harborne his life. Yet what is one man's life to his enemies when such a secret is at stake?"

"But who was the woman?"

"A friend of Harborne's. She had been, I believe, useful to him in certain negotiations regarding the purchase of copies of plans of the new Krupp aerial gun, and in several other matters."

"Any suspicion regarding her?" asked the Earl quickly.

"None. She is, of course, in ignorance of the truth, and probably unaware who killed the man with whom she was so friendly. I am endeavouring to trace her."

"Is she a lady?"

"No. A French milliner, I understand."

"A little romance of Harborne's which has ended fatally?"

"Yes – poor Harborne!" sighed the grey-faced man, in whose keeping were the secrets of the Empire, and who knew more of the political undercurrents of Europe than any other living person. "His loss is very great to us, for he was a fine specimen of the true-hearted, patriotic Englishman," he added, pulling hard at his cigar. "His place will be hard to fill – very hard."

"I know, Darnborough," remarked Lord Bracondale gravely. "To such a man the country ought to erect a monument, for he has laid down his life for his country. But, alas! our country recognises no heroes of the Secret Service!"

And as the Cabinet Minister spoke the telephone-bell rang. He crossed to his writing-table, took up the instrument, and responded to an urgent call from the House of Commons in London, where an important and heated debate regarding our foreign relations was in progress.

CHAPTER VI. THE SAFE-BREAKERS

The day had been hot and stifling in London – one of those blazing days when the tar on the roadway perfumes the air, the dry pavements reflect back the heat into one's face, and the straw-hatted Metropolis – or the portion of it that is still in town – gasps and longs for the country or the sea.

The warm weather was nearly at an end, and most holiday-makers were back again. London's workers had had their annual fortnight long ago, and had nearly forgotten it, and now only principals were away golfing, taking waters at Harrogate, Woodhall Spa, or in the Scotch hydros, or perhaps travelling on the Continent.

From the high-up windows in Shaftesbury Avenue, close to Piccadilly Circus, Ralph Ansell looked down upon the busy traffic of motor-buses, taxis, and cars, the dark-red after-glow shining full upon his keen, clean-shaven face.

He was already dressed to go out to dinner, and as he stood in his cosy bachelor rooms – a pleasant, artistic little place with soft crimson carpet, big, comfortable, leather arm-chairs, and a profusion of photographs, mostly of the fair sex, decorating mantelshelf and walls – his brows were narrowed and he blew big clouds of cigarette smoke from his lips.

Suddenly the door opened and a man, shorter and rather thick-set, also in evening clothes, entered. He was evidently French, and possessed neither the good looks nor the elegance of Ansell.

"Ah! my dear Adolphe!" Ralph cried in French, springing forward to welcome him. "I hardly expected you yet. Your train from Paris was not late – eh? Well, how goes it?"

"Infernally hard up – as usual," was his visitor's reply, as he tossed his black overcoat on to the couch, flung his soft felt hat after it, and then sank into a chair. "Why all this emergency – eh?"

The man who spoke was of low type, with black, rather curly hair, sharp, shrewd eyes like his friend's, ears that lay slightly away from his head, and a large, rather loose, clean-shaven mouth. Between his eyes were three straight lines, for his brow wore a constant look of care and anxiety. He did not possess that careless, easy, gentlemanly air of Ansell, but was of a coarser and commoner French type, the type one meets every day in the Montmartre, which was, indeed, the home of Adolphe Carlier.

Ansell walked to the door, opened it as if to ascertain there was no eavesdropper, and, closing and locking it, returned to his friend's side.

"I sent for you, my dear friend, because I want you," he said, in a low voice, gazing straight at him.

"Anything good?" asked the other, stretching out his legs and placing his clasped hands behind his head wearily.

"Yes, an easy job. The usual game."

"A jeweller's?"

Ansell nodded in the affirmative.

"Where?"

"Not far from here."

"Much stuff?"

"A lot of good stones."

"And the safe?"

"Easy enough with the jet," Ansell answered. "You've brought over all the things, I suppose?"

"Yes. But it was infernally risky. I was afraid the Customs might open them at Charing Cross," Carlier replied.

“You never need fear. They never open anything here. This is not like Calais or Boulogne.”

“I shan’t take them back.”

“You won’t require to, my dear Adolphe,” laughed Ansell, who, though in London he posed as a young man of means, was well known in a certain criminal set in Paris as “The American,” because of his daring exploits in burglary and robbery with violence.

A year before, this exemplary young man, together with Adolphe Carlier, known as “*Fil-en-Quatre*,” or “The Eel,” had been members of the famous Bonnemain gang, to whose credit stood some of the greatest and most daring jewel robberies in France. For several years the police had tried to bring their crimes home to them, but without avail, until the great robbery at Louis Verrier’s, in the Rue des Petit-Champs, when a clerk in the employ of the well-known diamond dealer was shot dead by Paul Bonnemain. The latter was arrested, tried for murder, and executed, the gang being afterwards broken up.

The malefactors had numbered eight, six of whom, including Bonnemain himself, had been arrested, the only ones escaping being Carlier, who had fled to Bordeaux, where he had worked at the docks till the affair had blown over, while Ansell, whose *dossier* showed a very bad record, had sought refuge in England.

The pair had not met since the memorable evening nine months before, when Ansell had been sitting in the Grand Café, and Carlier had slipped in to warn him that the police had arrested Bonnemain and the rest, and had already been to his lodgings. Two hours later, without baggage or any encumbrance, he had reached Melun in a hired motor-car, and had thence left it at midnight for Lyons, after which he doubled his tracks and travelled by way of Cherbourg across to Southampton, while Carlier had, on that same night, fled to Orleans.

Part of the proceeds of the robbery at the diamond merchants had been divided up by the gang prior to Bonnemain’s arrest – or rather the fifty thousand francs advanced by the Jew broker from Amsterdam to whom they always sold their booty. Therefore both men had been possessed of funds. Like others of their profession, they made large gains, but spent freely, and were continually short of money. Old Bonnemain, however, had brought burglary to a fine art, and from the proceeds of each *coup* he used to keep back a certain amount out of which to assist the needy among his accomplices.

Ansell, in addition, had a second source of revenue, inasmuch as he was on friendly terms with a certain Belgian Baron, who, though living in affluence in Paris, was nevertheless a high official of the German Secret Service. It was, indeed, his habit to undertake for the Baron certain disagreeable little duties which he did not care to perform himself, and for such services he was usually highly paid. Hence, when he fled to London, it was not long before a German secret agent called upon him and put before him a certain proposal, the acceptance of which had resulted in the death of Dick Harborne.

The young adventurer threw himself into the arm-chair opposite to where Adolphe Carlier was seated, and in the twilight unfolded his scheme for a *coup* at a well-known jeweller’s in Bond Street, at which he was already a customer and had thoroughly surveyed the premises.

“I expected that you had some new scheme in hand,” Carlier said at last, in French, after listening attentively to the details of the proposition, every one of which had been most carefully thought out by the pupil of the notorious Bonnemain. “On arrival this afternoon I put up at the Charing Cross Hotel – so as to be handy if we have to get out quickly.”

“Good. Probably we shall be compelled to move pretty slick,” Ansell said, in English. Then, after a few moments’ pause, he added: “Do you know, my dear Adolphe, I have some news for you.”

“News?”

“Yes. I’m going to be married in November.”

“Married!” echoed Carlier, staring at his friend. “Who’s the lucky girl?”

“She’s French; lives here in London; smart, sweet – a perfect peach,” was his answer. “She’ll be a lot of use to us in future.”

Carlier was silent for a few moments.

“Does she know anything?” he asked in a low, serious voice.

“Nothing.”

“What will she say when she knows?”

“What can she say?” asked Ansell, with a grin.

“She’s not one of us, I suppose?”

“One of us? Why, no, my dear fellow. I’ll introduce you to-morrow. You must dine with us – dine before we go out and do the job. But she must not suspect anything – you understand?”

“Of course,” replied the young Frenchman. “I’ll be delighted to meet her, Ralph, but – but I’m thinking it is rather dangerous for you to marry an honourable girl.”

“What?” cried the other, angry in an instant. “Do you insinuate that I’m not worthy to have a decent, well-brought-up girl for a wife?”

“Ah! you misunderstand me, *mon vieux*. I insinuate nothing,” replied Carlier. “I scent danger, that is all. She may turn from you when – well – when she knows what we really are.”

Ansell’s mouth hardened.

“When she knows she’ll have to grin and bear it,” was the answer.

“She might give us away.”

“No, she won’t do that, I can assure you. The little fool loves me too well.”

“Is that the way you speak of her?”

“Every girl who loves a man blindly is, in my estimation, a fool.”

“Then your estimation of woman is far poorer than I believed, Ralph,” responded Carlier. “If a girl loves a man truly and well, as apparently this young lady loves you, then surely she ought not to be sneered at. We have, all of us, loved at one time or other in our lives.”

“You’re always a sentimental fool where women are concerned, Adolphe,” laughed his companion.

“I may be,” answered the other. “And I can assure you that I would never dare to marry while leading the life I do.”

“And what better life can you ever hope to lead, pray? Do we not get excitement, adventure, money, pleasure – everything that makes life worth living? Neither you nor I could ever settle down to the humdrum existence of so-called respectability. But are these people who pose as being so highly respectable really any more honest than we are? No, my dear friend. The sharks on the Bourse and the sharp men of business are just as dishonest. They are thieves like ourselves under a more euphonious name.”

Carlier smiled at his friend’s philosophy. Yet he was thinking of the future of the girl with whom he was, as yet, unacquainted – the girl who had chosen to link her life with that of the merry, careless, but unscrupulous young fellow before him. They were bosom friends, it was true, yet he knew, alas! how utterly callous Ralph Ansell was where women were concerned, and he recollected certain ugly rumours he had heard, even in their own undesirable circle.

They spoke of Jean again, and Ralph told him her name.

“We will dine there to-morrow night,” he added. “Then we will come on here, and go forth to Bond Street at half-past eleven. I’ve watched the police for the past week, and know their exact beat. Better bring round the things you’ve brought from Paris in a taxi to-morrow morning.”

The “things” referred to were an oxy-acetylene gas-jet, and a number of the latest inventions of burglarious tools – indeed, all the equipment of the expert safe-breaker.

That night the pair went forth and dined at the Café Royal in Regent Street, and afterwards went to the Palace Theatre, finishing up at a night club in Wardour Street. Then, on the following

morning, Carlier returned, bringing with him the heavy but unsuspecting-looking travelling trunk he had conveyed from Paris.

In the evening Ralph and he went to the Provence Restaurant, but, to their disappointment, Jean was not there. She had been home, but had left half an hour later to go to Balham to visit one of her fellow-assistants at the Maison Collette who was dangerously ill. She had taken with her some fruit and flowers.

Annoyed at her absence, Ralph had suggested the Trocadero for dinner.

“It’s better than in this wretched little hole,” he added to Carlier, in an undertone. “And we’ll want a good dinner before we get to business,” he added, with a sinister grin.

So they had wished old Libert a merry *bon soir*, and were driven in a taxi along to the Trocadero grill-room, where, amid the clatter of plates, the chatter, and the accompanying orchestra, they found themselves in their own element.

At half-past ten they ascended to Ansell’s flat, and each had a stiff brandy-and-soda and a cigar.

Both men were expert thieves, therefore it was not surprising that, by half-past two o’clock next morning, wearing cotton gloves and dark spectacles to hide the glare from the jet, they stood together before the great safe at the back of Matheson and Wilson’s, the well-known jewellers, and while Ansell put up his hand and cleared shelf after shelf of magnificent ornaments, Adolphe expertly packed them away into the small black canvas bag he held open.

Those were breathless, exciting moments. The jet had done its work. It had gone through the hardened steel plates like a knife through butter, and the door, believed to be burglar-proof, stood open, displaying wonderful diamond tiaras in cases, ropes of pearls and paper packets containing uncut gems worth a huge amount.

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