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THE DARK SQUARE

by
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COLLINS
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CHAPTER I

ALTHOUGH it was an evening in early Spring and no colder than usual at such a time of year, what seemed to be half the trunk of a small tree blazed away in the huge and wasteful fireplace.

The stonework above was ornamented with coats of arms, and high up above again, reaching almost to the ceiling of the big hall, were heads of game, shot or chased in the mountains that surrounded the Schloss.

Close to the fire on one side stood a woman in tweeds. She was shorter than the average, but nobody noticed her lack of inches once they had been introduced to the Comtesse du Vallard. She had personality. She was never other than exquisitely turned out, and she presented to life that glittering brittle front which can only be achieved by a woman who is equally at home in any of the great capitals of the world.

Opposite her on the other side of the fireplace stood a young man magnificent in rather gaudy military uniform. You might possibly have said that his bright hair was a shade too perfectly brushed ; you might have taken a faint dislike to the gold-rimmed monocle that swung in his right hand ; you might have been ungenerously suspicious about the ultra-slimness of his waistline. But whatever you felt about these details you would have been forced to admit that Captain von Gerne looked the acme of smartness.

A manservant brought in a large tray of drinks which he put on a side table.

" I must go and get dressed," the Comtesse said, " or everybody will be in time for dinner but me." .

" The play without the Prince—or rather, the Princess."

Both smiled; but neither was thinking of the almost automatic compliment.

It was fifteen months since the young soldier had last seen the woman. For fifteen months the Schloss at Tarnsbrücke had been ungay ; unlighted ; dolefully quiet ; in the occupation only of the caretaker and his wife. Then as suddenly as she did most things in life the Comtesse had decided to shut up her house in the eastern plains and to come back to the Schloss, and immediately it had begun to hum with extravagant life. The whole of the hamlet of Tarnsbrücke rejoiced, for it depended largely on the Schloss for its economic life-blood ; and fifteen miles away in the capital city of Charneck there were rejoicings also among such, and they were many as would benefit by the Comtesse's famous hospitality.

Fifteen months ago a not always discreet flirtation had flourished between the young soldier of twenty-six and the woman who was twenty years his senior. But fifteen months is a long time. In it Captain von Gerne had been to many places, met many people, been busy about many things.

Now across the bright fireplace he watched his hostess—charming, of course, charming and sophisticated as ever, yet—she looked older, he decided. That was the solution of it. Fifteen months ago he had not thought of age in connection with the Comtesse, now he realised that she must be—what? Forty-six or seven, getting on for fifty. *Fifty!* . . .

"With such delightful tweeds as these it's a pity you have to change," he said.

The Comtesse smiled. But her thoughts were not smiling. "Fifteen months ago, my friend" (she thought), "you would not have been content with paying me a few stock compliments. I wonder if I have been away from the Schloss for too long?" Her scarlet-tipped fingers went automatically to her head. Only yesterday the mirror, the hateful mirror, had shown her a solitary grey hair. Solitary but undeniable. She glanced at the young soldier. She knew exactly how old he was, twenty-six. She hoped that he put her down at thirty-five. To stay at thirty-five. Never to hear the dreaded word "fifty" mentioned in her presence. Never to be besieged by the cold fear that younger, more vital, people, with the essential fires warmer and brighter within them were supplanting her . . .

"What have you been doing since you were last here, Eric?" she demanded.

"What but waiting for the Schloss to be reoccupied."

"And in the interim? Amusing yourself?"

"As best one could."

"Who is it this time—Fifi, Mimi, Tina?" the Comtesse asked brightly.

"You always think of me as something in comic opera."

"In opera bouffe rather—that is to say, life."

"You are too clever for me, Comtesse; but believe me, we are glad to see the Schloss open again."

"Really glad? You have missed me?"

"But naturally."

"You have not completely forgotten fifteen months ago, Eric?"

"Forgotten? But how could I?"

The Comtesse walked over to the side table where the drinks stood, and started to fill two glasses. She was angry. "*But naturally . . . forgotten?*" the very conventional form of the way in which they were uttered infuriated her.

Heaven only knows if that bright, brittle, sophisticated

woman had a heart. And if she had one it is quite certain that she had never seriously lost it to young Eric von Gerne. But that her authority should wane, that she should be passed over for somebody else, this she could not, and would not bear. She could not and would not allow that all the long patient hours spent before the mirror night and morning should be wasted.

"A drink, Eric?" she asked.

He took the glass and raised it towards her.

"To old times."

"No, to new ones."

He smiled at the correction and took a sip of the excellent sherry.

"Tell me who I shall meet at dinner."

"There are two lieutenants from the Brigade Barracks in Charneck."

"Hoist and Grover—yes, I know them."

"There is Anna."

"Anna must be growing up now."

"How tactful you are. My daughter is sixteen."

"Impossible."

"Not quite enough conviction in your voice, my dear. There are two American ladies to whom you can show your charms. Two sisters, Mary and Kathleen Keyling. You will find them hideously avid for every scrap of knowledge about Turbany and its history."

"Don't put me next to them."

"I shall put you between them—perhaps. Unless I reserve that place for Mr. Mawley."

"Mawley? From Charneck?"

"You don't know him? I have only met him a couple of times. He presented himself here the other day with a letter of introduction from Miss Featherstonhaugh. He lectures in English letters at her Academy."

"He is an Englishman?"

"He is that rare thing, an intellectual Englishman."

"It's a contradiction in terms. Is he old?"

"Why do you harp on age so much this evening? No, as a matter of fact he is young."

"He should be back in England fighting."

"I gather that he is a shade too intellectual to fight. The clever people have never liked your profession, Eric, except when it saves their skins. Now, I really must go and dress. If anybody comes down will you help them to drinks, please?"

Eric von Gerne watched her cross the room—that short, dark woman, so full of vitality, whose every movement towards and up the staircase was an education.

In a way he was almost sorry that he had come back to the

Schloss. He was expected evidently to blow into life the romantic little fires of yesterday, and somehow those ashes were so obstinately cold. Nor did the list of guests sound particularly promising. He sighed. He was a philosopher, as soldiers very often are. He crossed to the table and replenished his glass from the sherry decanter.

In the act of doing so something made him look up. He had not consciously heard any sound, yet he turned his head up quickly towards the staircase.

Audibly Captain Eric von Gerne caught his breath. He was looking at one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

She was tall and strikingly fair, and she owed very little indeed to tricks or artifices. She didn't need them, and very probably she would not have known how to apply them expertly. Youth, and youth's beauty, and youth's eager zest for life were crowded into every line of her.

When she saw that someone was in the hall she stopped for a moment on the broad staircase, and the light from the huge chandelier caught her bright hair and was complemented by it.

Slowly von Gerne fitted his monocle into his eye and smiled at her, and the girl liked neither the monocle nor the smile.

He waited till she reached the bottom of the staircase, following her all the way with over-attentive eyes. He was trying to fit her into the scheme of things as outlined by the Comtesse . . . this was not Anna, nor could he believe that she was either of the two American ladies.

He clicked his heels together and bowed.

"I am Captain von Gerne. I am dining with the Comtesse."

"Ob—I'm Marjorie Gillespie."

"But the Comtesse told me all her guests and never mentioned you! How could she possibly leave out any one so charming?"

Miss Gillespie coloured slightly. She didn't know who he was, and she didn't altogether like him, but it was impossible to be really annoyed when a man assures you that you are charming.

"Oh—she wouldn't count me as a guest," she explained. "I'm just a sort of governess-companion for Anna."

"You have been with the Comtesse long?"

"I came out from England just before war started, and now, of course, I can't get back."

Von Gerne nodded. He realised what had happened. This girl must have gone straight to the Comtesse's other house in the eastern plains. Now, with any luck, she was to be within fifteen miles of Charneck for months to come. He no longer regretted paying his return visit to the Schloss.

He poured out another glass of sherry.

"A drink, Miss Gillespie?"

"Oh, thank you very much."

Von Gerne raised his own glass.

"To the charming ladies of England."

Miss Gillespie looked a shade confused, and smiled and sipped her sherry. "Silly little monkey," she thought, and simultaneously she realised that the thought was unjustified. She disliked the monocle, the over-brushed hair, the waist which she suspected of being corseted; but all these things notwithstanding, she was impressed. She had to admit that the soldier had an air. She had to admit that it was rather fun to be toasted by men in bizarre uniforms in a part of the world which eighteen months before she had hardly known to exist.

Only ten people sat down to dinner, so that the long table was shorter by several leaves than its full length. The Comtesse sat at the head. Von Gerne was on her right, on her left the better looking of the two lieutenants of the Brigade. Behind her and lit by a cunningly concealed bulb was a huge Canaletto, and round the room ranged the rather gloomy portraits of previous du Vallards. Nobody quite knew what the Comtesse had done with the Comte du Vallard—whether she had buried him, divorced him, been separated from him, or merely mislaid him. However, she seemed to get on very well without him. Nor was any one quite certain of her nationality. A dash of French was overlaid by a streak of Italian, and no doubt there were half a dozen other influences there if only they could be sorted out. Certainly she was completely at home in at least four languages.

At first Marjorie Gillespie had found this polyglot conversation bewildering, but she was used to it by now, and when it got no more exotic than French, could hold her own in it fairly well. The talk on this particular evening was amusing, but no one was deceived by its apparent superficiality. There were depths in it. Jests had sharp edges to them and allusions were barbed. Nor could it be otherwise in Turbany at that time. The small but in some ways vitally important State of Turbany was neutral—"as neutral," as Adrian Mawley expressed it, "as a bone in a dog kennel." Ever since the beginning of the war there had been tension and fear in the country; fear of what might happen in a week's time, the next day, that very night. "We live in constant danger of being protected by somebody," was the way it was expressed; and that apprehension of what might happen at any moment was reflected in men's attitude and in their talk.

By now Marjorie was used to this atmosphere, yet it seemed to her that she had never sensed it more sharply than on that

particular evening. Inevitably the talk turned on the war, on what the big animals in the cage were doing and on how they were likely to fare. Adrian Mawley was mordantly cynical, especially when talking about his own country. "When the military history of the time comes to be written," he said, "there will be no more brilliantly written chapter than that on 'strategic withdrawals' by England."

"You can hardly blame your countrymen for Dunkirk," von Gerne suggested.

"I think the English are too stupid to be blamed. They just can't take it. Especially the military caste. We are still under the impression that you can fight a war with cricket bats and hunting horns. The only time any semblance of life flickered in the War Office was when a Jew was in charge of it, and red-tape plus horrified traditionalism soon smothered him."

"Possibly it would help if every Englishman of military age were to join up," Marjorie suggested acidly.

Adrian Mawley was unruffled by the sharpness of the remark. He only smiled and answered placidly :

"And quite possibly many Englishmen will be fools enough to rush home from comfortable posts to do so. But not I. Lecturing on literature to young ladies in Charneck seems to me so much more sensible than running bayonets into my fellow-men."

"A good job we don't all think so," Marjorie felt impelled to say.

The Comtesse intervened laughingly.

"'A house divided against itself'—isn't that the quotation? Come, Mr. Mawley, tell us some of your amusing stories about 'Feathers.'"

Adrian Mawley lectured at Miss Featherstonhaugh's Finishing Academy for Young Gentlewomen. The Academy, which stood on the outskirts of Charneck, was an institution in the city, and Miss Featherstonhaugh was even more so.

Everybody knew Feathers. Her tall, gaunt figure in its incredible clothes was pointed out as one of the sights. Everybody laughed at Feathers, yet everybody respected her. She was a character, and in spite of all manner of eccentricities she ran her Academy for sixteen young ladies (never more) so successfully that there was never any dearth of applicants willing to pay the outrageous fees she demanded. Adrian could always be relied upon for some amusing stories, faintly tinged with malice, about Feathers, and the doings of her young ladies. It was impossible to say how many of such stories were true, how many he invented. But it was equally impossible not to be amused by them.

The slightly salacious flavour which was wont to creep into the anecdotes was to-night modified in deference to the figure

at the bottom end of the table. Here sat the Comtesse's chaplain. She had explained him in a vivid aside in the drawing-room before dinner when waiting for him to appear. " I call him my chaplain, but actually he has nothing to do with me. It's one of the privileges of position that you can't even choose your own hangers-on. There's a chapel at the far end of the Schloss estate, you know, and when we are in residence we are supposed to give hospitality to whoever is in charge of it. They are always being changed. This one was appointed whilst I was away and when I came back, lo and behold, a brand new Father in God for me I "

It would have taken a very clever chaplain indeed to discover what the Comtesse's particular brand of religion was. In its day it had ranged the whole wide gamut from the ancient faith to Buddhism, with an interlude as a devout Irvingite. The Comtesse had fads and enthusiasms of the soul as of everything else.

It did not look likely that the new chaplain would make any great effort to keep abreast of them. He contributed singularly little to the conversation. His bald and rather massive head was usually bent over his plate in honest trencher-work. It is true that a pair of sharp eyes occasionally shot a glance at one or other of the gay speakers with somewhat disconcerting vividness, but he spoke seldom, and then only in answer to some direct question. From her end of the table the Comtesse regarded him with exasperated resignation; she liked her churchmen polished and suave. She realised that a certain number of courtesy invitations would have to be extended, but she decided there and then to restrict them to a minimum. Marjorie Gillespie noticed the chaplain only for one circumstance, that when he sneezed, which he did once in the middle of the meal, he gave an almost exact reproduction of her own father's sneezing, a curious subdued *chff-chff-chff-chfl* dying away in a diminuendo.

It made her think of her parents tucked away in a remote Wiltshire village, of how far she had travelled from that quiet spot in the last eighteen months, and of how much she had enjoyed it all. She was enjoying the dinner, every moment of it, now that Mr. Mawley had ceased his gibes at the English. On one side of her sat one of the lieutenants of the Brigade, and almost directly opposite, Eric von Gerne. The two American sisters, attracted by his uniform, kept up a constant verbal assault on young von Gerne, but he found time to say things with his lips, and occasionally his eyes, to Marjorie, which were by no means lost on that attractive looking young lady.

Nor on the Comtesse. She was far too astute to try to monopolise the young soldier, but she watched him. She

watched his eyes, she saw the slight flush that they could bring into Marjorie's cheeks ; and under her smiling gay front she was more than once cold with apprehension . . . *fifty*, baleful word . . . age, age, age, the one inexorable enemy . . . another ten years, perhaps only another five, and handsome young soldiers would no longer trouble to pay her even the perfunctory interest that von Gerne was displaying that evening. She smiled at him, and even as she smiled was furiously angry. That he should dare to act so. Having been privileged fifteen months before to bask in her favour, that he should dare now to show how completely the affair was finished. She hated him ; and she hated, too, the two and twenty years of the young English girl opposite him.

Von Gerne and Adrian Mawley crossed conversational swords occasionally, and when they did so there was always a hint of contest about their remarks, as though for some reason the seeds of antipathy were sown between the two men from the start. Von Gerne took infinite pains to achieve the dandified effect for which he was famous in Charneck's smart circles, and it annoyed him that the Englishman, who was dressed casually, almost untidily, managed to carry his negligence with an air of distinction. Of all improbable subjects it was that of tobacco which seemed most likely to cause a flare up between them. Mawley, still telling anecdotes about Feathers, relating, quite truthfully, how she thoroughly enjoyed a cigar every evening.

"Johnson might have applied his famous dictum to tobacco," he said, "'Cigarettes for boys, pipes for men, cigars for heroes.'"

"I've never smoked a pipe in my life," von Gerne said, fixing his monocle in his eye, "but I still take leave to be under the impression that I am a man."

Adrian Mawley smiled and said nothing. Nobody at table was quite sure how he did it, but he did undoubtedly give the impression that if he had made a reply it would have been, suavely, "*But then nobody else shares that impression with you, do they?*"

And in spite of the fact that these words were not said, everybody felt that they very nearly were and felt correspondingly uncomfortable. Mingled with Marjorie's uncomfortable feelings was a streak of amusement. Blissfully unaware of the emotions which she had aroused in her brilliant employer, she enjoyed every moment of the dinner. She longed to take down the cynical Mr. Mawley a peg or two, and yet in spite of his attitudinising she could not help liking him slightly. She responded tentatively to the glances which von Gerne shot across the table at her, and yet in spite of his evident admiration she could not entirely suppress a slight feeling of

dislike. She was not at all sure that she did not even feel a little bit afraid of the ardent young officer.

It is to be feared that she did not pay as much attention as she might have done to the political allusions which were frequently made in conversation, nor to the slight but unmistakable air of tension which invariably followed them. The young lady had an unshakable conviction that so long as the Royal Navy was afloat everything would eventually be all right.

"You English are very sure of yourselves," the Comtesse said once in exasperation.

Marjorie's lovely eyes opened wide in innocent surprise.

"Naturally. We always have won in the past."

Von Gerne laughed outright, and even the silent chaplain spared an instant from his plate to give a glance at the utterer of such a remark.

The younger of the two lieutenants said almost crossly :

"Maybe it's all right for you. The storm has broken as far as you are concerned. You know the worst. Here in Turbany we don't. Something is going to blow up here soon and we don't know what or when."

"Something is going to blow up here soon . . ." The Comtesse wished the awkward words had not been spoken. Truth has a habit of spoiling dinner parties. An uncomfortable pause followed the remark, and she did not like uncomfortable pauses at her table. The guests looked a little apprehensively at each other, and for a moment their smiles were forced.

After dinner there was dancing. With the Comtesse one either listened to good music, or one danced. Tonight one danced because that was her mood. It was necessary for her to prove to the world, and to herself, that she was as vital as ever, that young men were as anxious to dance with her as ever.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that towards the end of the evening, when the dreamiest of dreamy waltzes had just been played, Eric von Gerne and his partner, who had been dancing together, walked out into the moonlight for a breath of fresh air. And his partner was Marjorie Gillespie.

The soldier danced admirably. She was forced to admit **it**; she found that attitude towards him hardening in her. For some inexplicable reason she felt towards him a dislike, or a mistrust, she hardly knew which; yet, all the time, she **felt** herself forced to admire certain qualities about him—**his** looks, his talk at the dinner table, and now **his** dancing.

The grounds of the Schloss lay bathed in silver **moonlight**—peaceful, eerie, romantic.

A little way from the house stood the **famous** yews. One of them, an enormous bush, was completely **hollow** inside **so**

that there was literally a room within a tree. It formed a sort of summer arbour and von Gerne knew it of old as the ideal sitting-out place.

He led the way into the dark cavern with its living walls and roof and said laughingly.

"Rather unusual sort of place. This is what you are good at in England, old trees, isn't it?"

"Mr. Mawley wouldn't allow us to be good at anything."

"You mustn't pay any attention to him."

"I didn't—particularly."

"I'm glad of that."

A shaft of silver moonlight slanted through the entrance aperture and it contrasted vividly with the dark green, now all but black, of the yew. It was cool in that strange place after the heat of the dance room, and perhaps it was because of that that Marjorie gave an almost imperceptible shiver.

Almost, but not quite. Von Gerne noticed it, and the girl suddenly realised that he would notice any detail however small, any change of mood however subtle, about her that night.

"You are not cold?" he said.

She shook her head.

"I thought not." He laughed quietly. "I didn't think you were a cold person. Neither am I. But you English are very deceptive."

"Deceptive?"

"Intriguingly so. Has any one—no, that is a silly question. Let me put it another way: how many men have told you that you are beautiful?"

The girl felt the need, the desperate need, to keep the conversation silly and trivial.

"Oh, hundreds," she said flippantly, much more flippantly than she felt, for she could not now but be acutely aware that a man, and an ardent one, was standing close and very close beside her.

"You make a joke of everything, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"Or you try to. Is it perhaps nervousness?"

"N—nervousness? Why should I be nervous?"

"Why, indeed? Most girls would be only too delighted to be so desirable to men as you are, Miss Gillespie."

"Is that a very nice thing to say?"

"It's the nicest thing a man can say to a woman, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"Inside, at the dinner table, dancing, one has to pretend. We all understand—that. That is the civilised part of us. **But** out here, in the moonlight, and these dark shadows—**need one** pretend any more?"

Marjorie was not aware of his movement, yet whereas before he was a foot or two away from her now he was immediately against her, the stuff of his uniform pressing against her bare shoulder.

She did not attempt to move away.

His arm, again without any perceptible movement, slid round her and suddenly tightened across her shoulder. His Jjeart was thumping, but even now she made no effort to move. She was amazed at this docility of hers, and even more amazed at the clarity of her thoughts. She was thinking : *This man is horrible. And yet he is fascinating. He is horribly fascinating* He is an animal and he finds me desirable.*

A little spot of redness travelled through the darkness and fizzled out on the dewy grass. Eric von Gerne had tossed his cigarette away, and almost at the same instant a shadow fell across the moonlight.

Adrian Mawley's rather languid voice was heard.

" Anybody there ? Oh, I beg your pardon. So sorry to intrude but the Comtesse is looking everywhere for you, von Gerne. She charged me with the special mission of running you to earth."

Von Gerne moved easily away from the girl. His arm dropped down. He answered lightly but there was an edge to his voice.

" And how admirably you have fulfilled your mission. Shall we go in, Miss Gillespie ? "

Marjorie felt curiously relieved and irrationally annoyed.

" I should like to," she answered, and all three of them, the girl between the two men, started to walk back towards the house.

CHAPTER I I

MARJORIE GILLESPIE stood in the Great Square at Charneck and looked round her with delight.

She had never before been in that beautiful city, and Charneck on your first visit (and indeed on your hundredth visit) can take your breath away. It has its great streets, like the grands boulevards of Paris, and here the most cosmopolitan crowd in the world ebbs and flows all daylong and most of the night. You can hear fifty different languages and taste fifty different aperitifs at any of the famous cafes. Or there is Old Charneck, that huddle of narrow, twisting lanes; that mountainous heap of crazy houses with overhanging eaves; that sinister cluster of unlit alleys and sunless courts. All this lies like a network round the magnificent cathedral of Saint

Stephen, the patron saint of Turbany, and at the oilier end of the town stands the city's second show building, The Palace. For Charneck is a Royal City, and the scarlet and gold of the Queen's postillions and outriders make a dramatic splash of colour on its streets.

All this is fascinating enough; but perhaps the most fascinating feature of all is that constantly, from a hundred different vantage points in the city, you catch unexpected glimpses of the sea. You turn a corner between high buildings and suddenly your eyes are delighted with the brilliant blue of the harbour dotted with the white wings of a hundred yachts. The blue of Charneck harbour is world famous, nowhere is the sea richer in colour, on no other water does the sun sparkle so brilliantly.

This is the city where the melting pot of the Balkans comes to a seething head. Here, behind the gaily painted scenes, the wires run crossed and criss-crossed. The sinister, dark wires of influence and intrigue. Crooked politics and greedy finance. All day long there are whispers in Charneck for such ears as are attuned to catch them, dirty, dry-mouthed whispers that may end in the downfall of a royal mistress, the bankruptcy of a multi-millionaire, or the murder of some small nation. Every country in the world keeps its fingers on the pulse of Charneck, for out of that lovely untrustworthy city may come at any moment the spark which will start a mighty conflagration. Charneck is like a beautiful woman, with an exquisitely painted face—and behind that face a dark and evil mind.

But Marjorie Gillespie, at half-past two on a warm Spring day, was conscious only of the beauty of the city and of its fascinating kaleidoscope of colour. Almost the first thing she saw was a huge old-fashioned farm waggon dragged by two yoked oxen and piled high, and high again, with flowers. This cumbersome load of loveliness was followed impatiently by an enormous Rolls-Royce car, every inch of it burnished and gleaming. In front sat two liveried servants, and at the back, for all the world like a monkey in a plate-glass cage, was huddled a dyspeptic little figure in an ill-fitting grey overcoat.

" Good-afternoon, Miss Gillespie."

Marjorie started. She had not expected to meet anybody she knew. Adrian Mawley stood on the pavement beside her. He was bare headed and was wearing a sports jacket over grey flannel trousers. She liked him better, dressed thus, than in the formal evening clothes of the previous night.

" Admiring Charneck ? "

She detected at once, and resented, the slight tone of bantering criticism in his drawling voice.

" Yes, that is just exactly what I was doing. I haven't been here before."

" In that case there is a lot to see. Is the Comtesse in town ? "

" No. It is my half-day off. I'm free from midday until eleven to-night, so I caught the autobus at Tarnsbrucke and here I am."

" Ready for a strenuous round of sight-seeing ? "

" Why not ? "

" Let us improve our minds at all costs. That is what I frequently tell the young ladies at Feathers'."

" Do you know, Mr. Mawley, I'm rather glad somehow that I never went to Feathers'."

Adrian smiled and smiled charmingly.

" That is a sentiment with which you can hardly expect me to agree," he said. " Don't be cross with me, Miss Gillespie. I've got an unfortunate manner. To some extent I have cultivated it as a first line of defence. I'm not blasé or cynical at all really. I love Charneck, and I suppose I know it better than most Englishmen. I've got nothing to do till half-past four, and I should be delighted if you would let me play cicerone and show you round. Will you ? "

Marjorie gave a little laugh.

" Yes, of course. I should love it. It's all so completely new to me, I just don't know where to begin."

" You can begin anywhere in Charneck," Adrian said, and he proved it by beginning his tour there and then, in the Great Square, where they stood.

It was obvious that his boast about knowing the city well was justified. He had something interesting or amusing to say about almost every street, and most of what he said was barbed with faint laughter for the follies of mankind. Not a few of his anecdotes concerned the legendary Feathers, but if he laughed at her it was clear also that he admired her. When they came to the great Cathedral of Saint Stephen he pointed out, as few men could have done, its architectural glories, but his comment on its uses was typical.

" Here, every Sunday, the Germans in Charneck, and there are plenty of them, come and beg God to smite down the wicked English. And similarly the English come and ask Him to do the same to the barbarous Germans. Very bewildering for God."

" You speak almost as though you don't care which side wins."

" I'm a Turbanian, a neutral."

" Do you think Turbany will come in ? "

" Not if she can help it."

" Can she help it ? "

They had left the Cathedral now and were walking down the one good thoroughfare in its neighbourhood, the fine street of the Gardens, which runs from the great west door of the church into the heart of the new town.

" Can she help it ? " he caught up her question and laughed. " You must ask them in here (he nodded to a building on the right). No, not the place where the Union Jack is flying, that is where His Majesty's Britannic Consular representative earns some fabulous sum a year by sending home lengthy reports in code of things which were common gossip on the boulevards three weeks ago. That little hut affair, to one side of it. That's the place. That is the Headquarters of the British Secret Service system in the Balkans. Everybody knows it is (it was first pointed out to me by an obliging taxi-driver), including, of course, the Germans. And their Secret Service Headquarters is in the Street of Ten Churches at the other end of the town. I can't think why the two organisations don't get premises adjoining or opposite. Then they could keep watch on each other's goings and comings so easily and cheaply. But these Government departments never do consider the taxpayer. Ah, look, that is what makes Charneck so lovely——"

They had turned a corner and, with all the unexpectedness of a conjuring trick, before them in the distance glittered the blue bay and the white sails.

" There is a story about Feathers and the bay——" Adrian told it and it was amusing. He told a dozen other anecdotes about the streets they were in, the buildings they passed. Were they true ? Marjorie could not make up her mind. Nor did she care. She was in the mood to be entertained and she certainly could not complain that her companion was not entertaining. She had wished to see Charneck, and she was seeing it under the most favourable conditions. And all the time, underneath the easy, light talk, she could not but be aware of the fact that Adrian Mawley was a young man, and an attractive looking one at that. His manner towards her was unexceptionable. It was the manner of one cultured, worldly-wise person towards another. Yet every now and again there was a word, even only a half-word or an intonation, which delightfully suggested that culture and worldly wisdom did no more than lie on top of something more primitive.

" If I had a flirtation," Marjorie told herself, " I should like it to be a slight intensification of this sort of thing," and by the formulation of the thought she realised, partly to her amusement, partly to her astonishment, that she quite definitely and frankly wanted a flirtation. She was in the mood for it. She was not sure of the exact reason—the air of Charneck, the strong spring sunshine, the sights and sounds of a city after

her long exile in the eastern plains. Possibly it was a bit of all these things ; but whatever the cause, the fact remained that Marjorie Gillespie, aged twenty-two, was in the mood for adventure. She was therefore especially sorry when the young man who was escorting her so amusingly pulled out his watch and made a grimace.

" After four ! I say, how I have talked. You must be bored."

" Indeed, I am not."

He smiled at her.

" You have enjoyed it a little ? So have I—a lot. But, I'm frightfully sorry, I must go now. At half-past four sixteen young ladies will be all agog to know what I have to say about the Development of Character in the Tragedies of Shakespeare."

" What a learned person you are, Mr. Mawley."

" Terrifying, isn't it ? I suppose as you are staying at the Schloss that you will be coming into Charneck again soon ? "

" Or you coming up to dinner again soon ? "

" And blundering into yew bushes. Your soldier friend was annoyed with me, I think."

" Wouldn't you have been ? "

" Furious. May I ask what you are going to do now, Miss Gillespie ? "

Marjorie considered. The autobuses back to Tarnsbrucke were not frequent. There was one at half-past four, and then not another one until half-past seven. She had at one time thought of going to a cinema, but the sunshine seemed too lovely for that. To wander in Charneck alone after such an amusingly conducted tour would be an anti-climax, and she suddenly decided to catch the four-thirty autobus and to spend the rest of the afternoon in the woods and fields surrounding the Schloss. She explained this to Adrian, who said :

" The half-past four bus ? That will get to Transbrucke about a quarter-past five, I suppose. I say, if you really are going to do that I wonder if you would mind doing an errand for me ? "

" Of course not. A message for the Comtesse ? "

" Something much less exalted. Merely an order to a tobacconist. Turbany I like, Turbanian tobacco I abhor. Rude things are said about its origin which I wouldn't repeat to you, but which I firmly believe. Without my pipe and my **John Cotton** I am a lost man. And there is only one place **I have** discovered in this country where John Cotton mixture **direct (apparently) from England can be bought. The little tobacconist in that ramshackle old square at Tarnsbrucke stocks it and nobody else. He ought to send me a Supply every month, but the blighter forgot last time.. Would you**

think me very rude if I asked you—as you are actually getting out of the bus opposite his shop—to leave a note there ? ”

Marjorie put the envelope he gave her in her bag **and** said : “ I will do it in payment for the personally conducted **tour.** ”

“ **Then I am** overpaid. But don't forget, else I shall **be a** lost and unhappy man.”

Marjorie promised that the small errand should be done the moment that she alighted in Tarnsbrucke, and having escorted her to the Square of the Ships, where the autobus terminus was, Adrian Mawley took his leave of her and sauntered off towards Feathers' and his learned pursuits there.

The autobus was not yet in evidence and a small queue, mostly of country people who had come into the city for a morning's shopping, was already formed in the appropriate place. Marjorie took her stand with these folk, and amused herself by watching the strangely varied street life that flowed by her.

When the queue was getting so large that she began to wonder if they would all be able to get on the bus, a dark blue touring car of enormous length drew up alongside the pavement. At the driving wheel, in ultra-smart civilian clothes, sat Eric von Gerne.

He jumped out and greeted Marjorie with a formal little bow. The good country folk in the queue stared at the tall figure, heels together, bowing before the young foreign lady.

Marjorie could not suppress a little tremor of pleasure. In* romantic Charneck, to be greeted thus by a handsome young officer . . . She was sure that had she extended her hand he would have kissed it. No denying the good looks now in the sunshine and fresh air. She smiled, partly to greet him, and partly because she was suddenly aware of how extremely improbable all this would have seemed eighteen months ago.

“ Miss Gillespie.”

“ Good-afternoon, Captain von Gerne.”

“ You are surely not waiting here for the autobus ? ”

“ I **am** afraid I was. Does that disappoint you ? ”

“ On the contrary it is my very good luck because now I **can** offer **you a** lift. Are you in a hurry to get to the Schloss ? ”

“ No. As a matter of fact I don't mind whether I catch this **bus or the evening one.** ”

“ So ? ” the young man smiled delightedly. “ Then **why not join my bathing party ?** ”

“ A bathe ? That would be lovely.”

“ You would like to come ? ”

“ I should love it, **but——** ”

Von Gerne watched her, with an amused smile on his face. He knew, or thought he knew, what she was thinking.

"There are no yew bushes by the swimming pool, Miss Gillespie," he assured her.

Marjorie laughed.

"Were you afraid of that?"

"I certainly wasn't *afraid* of it," she answered.

"No. Of course not. It was the wrong word. I am sorry. I do not think that you would ever be afraid of anything. Look, there is to be quite a party and we shall all enjoy ourselves. I think you would enjoy it too, and later, whenever you wish it, I will motor you back to the Schloss. Will you come?"

"I — I should love to."

Von Gerne gave his formal little bow again.

"You have delighted me," he said quietly.

Followed by the patient and curious eyes of the waiting country folk, Marjorie climbed into the front seat of the car and was whisked away out of the Square of the Ships. Along the great Boulevard of Accord, towards the outskirts of the city and to the green country—and adventure—beyond.

CHAPTER III

"THIS IS my bit of a place," von Gerne said, swinging the car between stone gate pillars on to an immaculately tidy drive.

It was precisely the sort of establishment that Marjorie expected him to have—small but superbly appointed and kept up.

The door was open and an inscrutable-faced maid waiting by the time the car reached the house. Von Gerne said two quick sentences to her in an undertone, and then led his guest off towards the swimming pool.

This was one of the great features of the place, and obviously money had been spent on it lavishly. It was sunk on the southern slope of a hill, and one side of it was entirely protected with a tall plate-glass screen so that if there should be any cold winds they would be held at bay. On the opposite side was a range of gaily-coloured cubicles. The diving board stood at one end, and at the other small tables underneath huge striped umbrellas, and the inevitable cocktail bar. Half a dozen people were already there swimming; splashing each other; diving; lying in the sun; They raised a general shout to greet their host and the new arrival.

"They seem to be enjoying it," he said. "You like to join them? You are fond of swimming?"

"I simply love it. I — I haven't got any costume, or anything, of course."

Von Gerne smiled

"I dare say that can be arranged. In fact it has been arranged. Shall we just walk round and see everybody first?"

They walked slowly along the glassed-in side, and a series of informal introductions were made as they went along. Marjorie did not catch most of the names and remembered none of them, but this did not seem to matter. When they crossed the top of the pool and reached the cubicles, von Gerne pushed open the door of the nearest one.

"I fancy you will find everything you want in here," he said.

Marjorie had not noticed the maid come from the house, and yet the cubicle was elaborately prepared.

"Cubicle," as she realised at once, was a complete misnomer. The apartment was a very well-furnished small room with a full-length mirror, a dressing-table, two chairs, and a wardrobe.

On the dressing-table powder, perfume, brushes and manicure things were set out, the wardrobe was adequately stocked with hangers, two towels, and a choice of two differently coloured costumes and caps were on one of the chairs.

"Don't be long," von Gerne urged from the other side of the door. "I want to see how you can swim."

Marjorie laughed. If there was one thing that she could do well in life it was to swim. She loved to be in the water and was completely in her element in it.

She chose a green costume and cap, and six minutes after going into the cubicle she ran out of it again, climbed up on to the diving-board, and came down like a green arrow into the water.

Eric von Gerne appeared soon after, and as he stood on the side making up his mind to jump in, Marjorie realised that the slightly effeminate impression which his monocle and dandyfied appearance had created was a false one. His abbreviated costume showed brown and muscular limbs beneath it, and when he finally plunged in it was clear that he was a useful performer in the water.

But though there were good swimmers there the young Englishwoman was easily the pick of them, and before long she had an admiring audience for her dives and her rapid lengths up and down the pool.

It is even to be feared that she showed off a little, but then what expert, in any art, can resist that temptation? It is certain that she was completely happy. Von Gerne, who sat out in the sun as much as he bathed, watched her a good deal, and she could not but be aware sometimes of his approving glances at her straight and sturdy young body.

It was at these moments that she remembered him in his mood of the previous evening, and she would immediately seek to lose herself in some fresh and furious activity in the water.

Competitions were arranged, and whilst one of them, for diving, was in progress the amiable and more than competent host absented himself and strolled to the far side of the cubicles, where he was hidden by them from the pool and its noisy revellers.

He had caught sight of something which nobody else had noticed. Nobody else had been intended to notice it—it was a signal from somebody who wished to speak to him. She was waiting for him behind the range of cubicles, the same severely plain, spectacled, inscrutable maid who had opened the door of the house.

When she spoke it was very quietly and in a voice which impressed at once by its quality of unpleasant efficiency.

"I searched the young English lady's bag."

He shook his head and answered :

"You need not have done that."

"Didn't you give orders that it was to be so for every fresh visitor to the house ?"

He smiled.

"I did—but there are exceptions to every rule. This one is different."

"So ?" The voice was disillusioned and biting. "Then what of this ?"

He took the white envelope that she proffered and turned it over slowly.

"You found this in her bag ?" he asked.

"Would I have brought it here otherwise ?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"But this is nothing. Some private letter——"

She did not deign to answer in words, only reached out, turned the white envelope face upwards, and with a severely unpainted nail indicated the top right-hand corner. There, where the stamp in an ordinary letter would be fixed, was the only mark on the envelope.

Any casual eye would have dismissed it at once as a small and completely unmeaning smudge of ink. But Eric von Gerne's eye was not a casual one. He stared at the tiny squiggle incredulously.

At last he said, hardly above a whisper,

"I can't believe it."

"No ? But then you are apt to be like that about pretty women, aren't you ? It's a good job there is somebody in the household who remembers to obey orders," and without any further comment on the situation the maid left him and walked off towards the house.

Von Genie was left with the envelope, turning it over in his hand and staring at it. Again and again he came back to that apparently accidental squiggle of ink in the corner. Presently he slipped it in the pocket of the silk gown he had put on, and made his way back to the pool.

Marjorie, flushed and excited from triumph in the diving competition, was standing on the side surrounded by the others. She looked tall and supple, and, at that moment, supremely desirable to the man who watched her from a little distance.

In his pocket his fingers felt for the incriminating envelope as though to make certain that it existed.

"I would never have believed it," he said to himself quietly, and in his tone was a new quality, the quality of forced admiration for an opponent who may turn out to be unexpectedly formidable.

Marjorie caught sight of him and waved. He waved back and smiled a trifle thoughtfully, then, turning, he walked rapidly towards the house. He wanted to make sure.

Inside the house he went at once to the room known as his study. In one corner, by the side of a tall bookcase, was an object which looked precisely like an old-fashioned cumbersome camera.

He wheeled it out on its stand, plugged a flex into a wall socket, and disappeared with the envelope under a black cloth.

The machine he was operating had a faculty which he had found useful more than once in his profession. A curious red light glowed with a sort of phosphorescent quality behind the envelope, and by its aid he was able to see a good deal of what the letter inside contained. Not all, because the folding of the paper hindered him; but enough to make him give a long low whistle of surprise. What was written there was a message of some seven or eight words. The words had this peculiarity that they were all of equal length and that none of them would be found in any dictionary. Von Gerne recognised the code. He did not yet know the key to it, but he had come up against it before. He was intrigued to know what the message was about; he was even more intrigued to know why a seemingly carefree, harmless young lady should be carrying it in her bag. There and then he decided to lose no time in finding out. Indeed, there was no time to waste; he knew that well enough. He gave a sudden laugh. "These English are not all fools then," he said to himself, and there was not wanting unwilling admiration in his voice.

By five o'clock the sun had lost his power; by **half-past**

there were no more shouts in the swimming pool; the elaborate cubicles were empty; the tables beneath the coloured toadstools of umbrellas deserted. The whole party was back in the house, where there was a sumptuous tea, or cocktails, according to your choice.

Marjorie's easy pre-eminence in the swimming pool had made her popular and she was enjoying herself immensely. At the Schloss, however amiable the mood of the Comtesse might be for the moment, there was always the feeling of being an employee, of sitting at the family table only by courtesy. A nod and a significant look from your employer and you had to fade unobtrusively away to the region of nursery and school-room. But here she was a person in her own right again, and every moment of it was delightful. More than once she caught von Gerne's eyes resting on her in an interested sort of way, and if she looked quickly away and was even inclined to colour slightly she could not pretend to be altogether displeased.

Three Beethoven records were played on the superb radio-gram set, then some lighter music was produced and one of the men sang. At half-past six the party began to break up. It was dark already, with that sudden transition from dusk to early night which comes so quickly in Turbany. Already stars were showing faintly and it blew cold.

Two cars roared away down the well-kept drive, the shouted "good-nights" and the laughter audible even above the noise of the engines.

Marjorie was left in the hall alone with her host, and suddenly the house seemed very quiet.

He looked at her in a quizzical way that she did not quite understand. She thought: "Now that everybody else has gone he is going to ask me to stay on and have dinner here with him alone. And I won't. Of course I won't. I ought to get back to the Schloss. Although, actually, so long as I am there by eleven it will be all right . . ."

"I hope you haven't regretted coming here."

"I have simply loved it."

He smiled. He was admiring her acting.

"And now, I suppose, you will want to be getting back to the Schloss?"

For an instant Marjorie hesitated. An instant in which she had time to reflect on the waywardness of human beings: had he suggested *diner d deux* with him she would have felt **bound** to refuse, **and** even to refuse with some show of **indignation**, yet because **he gave no** signs of suggesting it she felt disappointed and even a little hurt.

"Yes. I shall have to get **back**. Is it very **far** from **here**?"

" It won't take long in the car. If it would suit you now we ought, possibly, to be starting."

" It is very good of you to run me back."

" There is only one thing—would you mind very much if my maid comes too ? She has a brother seriously ill at Arnesbut and I can take her on there after dropping you. Would you object ? "

" Of—of course not."

" Then I will get my coat and tell her to be ready."

They did not use the huge open car that had brought them there in the afternoon, but a smaller closed one, and when Marjorie got into the front seat the maid was already sitting silent in the back. The thick lenses of her spectacles glinted queerly in the glare of the porch light, and Marjorie felt a sudden and irrational dislike of her.

There had not even been a suggestion of *diner a deux* and now there was not even to be a drive *a deux* in the dark. Von Gerne (Marjorie reflected) was living nobly, perhaps a shade too nobly, up to his " no yew bushes " promise.

There were moods, and one of them had been on Marjorie all day and was now intensified, when large sheltering and shady yew bushes, and all the connotations of them are highly desirable.

She had no idea of what direction they were taking, nor did she worry about it. For all she knew the Schloss might equally well be north, south, east, or west. She loved motoring at night, especially motoring fast, and von Gerne travelled fast enough to satisfy any one. They seemed to be climbing a good deal, and the thought did strike her idly that the roads they were taking were singularly deserted and seemed to avoid towns and villages complete!').

Von Gerne scarcely spoke. He concentrated on the business of driving, and his hands never seemed likely to stray from the wheel.

" A different person," Marjorie thought, " from what he was last night. Evidently I am 'desirable' no longer." She sat by him in the darkness, a little piqued, and recalling, without being able to understand them, the several looks which he had given her during the afternoon's party.

The road, which **had** been climbing steadily, **suddenly** began to descend abruptly and apparently to deteriorate, for von Gerne drove much more carefully and slowly.

Marjorie was thinking that they must still be some way from the Schloss, for she could remember no road like that near to it, when the car was swung left handed, ran for a little way on the level and came to a stop in what seemed to be a sort of courtyard. Before the headlights were switched off

Marjorie got the vague impression of buildings running round her on all four sides.

Von Gerne said something which she did not catch over his shoulder to the woman sitting in the back seat, and then jumped out and opened the door.

"Would you get out, Miss Gillespie ? "

"But—is this the Schloss ? "

He gave a quiet laugh.

"No. Since you ask me the direct question I am bound to admit that it isn't"

"I—I don't understand."

But she did understand at once. And mixed with automatic indignation and even a little fear was a streak of genuine amusement—so she had completely misread the situation—she need not have been so fearful about her lack of "desirability"—and a maid brought along too, no doubt that was to see that they had dinner in comfort—and, of course, breakfast—it looked remarkably like seduction on an elaborate scale. It was the sort of situation in which she had sometimes imagined herself in day dreams, now here it was in reality, and she did not know what to do about it. . . .

"Would you care to get out, Miss Gillespie ? "

After a moment of hesitation Marjorie got out. There did not seem to be anything else to do.

She laughed, but it did not sound as convincing as she would have liked.

"You have not forgotten that you promised to take me to the Schloss ? " she asked.

"No. I have not forgotten. It is just possible even that I shall be able to take you to the Schloss yet—but we must have a little conversation first."

Anger was beginning to supplant Marjorie's other emotions.

"Do you realise that you are behaving in a very extraordinary manner, Captain von Gerne ? " she demanded. She had hardly finished speaking before the maid, who had got out of the car silently, stood by her side. Close to her. So close in fact that Marjorie made an instinctive movement away, only to find that von Gerne was standing similarly close on the other side. She was between the two of them, and on either side a hand lightly touched her arm.

"It is quite cold out here," von Gerne said. "I suggest that we go into the house and have a talk—shall we ? "

There was a slight pressure on either side of her and **the three** of them moved forward. The whole situation seemed so outrageous to Marjorie that she could hardly realise what was happening, or that what was happening was actually happening to her. Anger and astonishment prevented her **from** saying anything until they had traversed the **few** steps

necessary to take them into the dark house. When they were in what seemed to be the kitchen of a farmhouse von Gerne nodded to the maid.

"All right. You can leave us. I will send for you if I want you."

"Mind you do." Marjorie heard her voice for the first time and disliked it instinctively. "Mind you do. I can manage her sort better than you."

When the door closed and only the two of them were in the room Marjorie, now almost white with anger, turned on von Gerne.

"Do you usually bring ill mannered servants with you to help in your seductions?" she demanded.

Von Gerne put his monocle into his right eye.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked.

"No, I won't. I will leave here, in that car, with you driving, just as soon as you come to your senses."

"Do you know, Miss Gillespie, if that is your real name, which I very much doubt, I think that you must be one of the most consummate actresses I have ever known?"

"Are you going completely raving mad? You may be able to get away with this sort of thing in your country, but you will find it won't pay with an Englishwoman."

"No?" von Gerne laughed. "You are a long way from England now, my friend."

"Will you kindly take me back to the Comtesse at the Schloss at once, please?"

"Miss Gillespie, you haven't lost anything by any chance, have you?"

"Lost anything? What should I have lost? You seem to have lost both your manners and your wits."

"Yes, yes. I know the old rule: play your part to the end. But don't bother to keep it up any more, please. Not with me. Would you look in your bag?"

"In my bag?"

Marjorie did as she was bid merely because the whole situation had taken on the quality of a nightmare, and any action seemed as sane, or insane, as any other.

She examined her bag and looking up again demanded,

"And now what?"

Von Gerne shook his head slightly.

"You never, by any chance, had a white envelope in that bag, did you?"

Marjorie looked quickly in her bag again—*Adrian Mawley's note for the tobacconist*—the meeting with von Gerne in Charneck, and the bathing party had sent all memory of it completely out of her head—and now, remembering it, she **was**

even more bewildered **than ever**. **What on earth** could **Adrian** Mawley's order **for** English tobacco **have** to do with von Gerne, or with her present position ?

" What if I had ? " she asked.

Von Gerne smiled.

" Ah. That's better. Miss Gillespie, I've got that letter now." He produced it just far enough out of his inner pocket to prove his words and Marjorie went red with rage.

" How dare you take things out of my bag ? Or don't you understand in this country that gentlemen don't behave like that ? "

" I understand a good deal, Miss Gillespie, and I intend to understand a good deal more."

" As soon as I get in touch with the Comtesse du Vallard you will be made to understand, I hope, that it doesn't pay to act as you are doing."

" Yes, **yes**. Quite. But we can come to terms more amicably than that, you and I, Miss Gillespie. I think you realise that I find you exceedingly attractive——"

" Would you mind leaving all that out now, and just talking sense for once ? "

" I am willing to guarantee that you do not come to any harm, though now you will inevitably be put to some inconvenience, if you will just tell me, in strictest confidence, where you got that letter from and what you were going to do with it."

Marjorie stared at him. She was now furiously angry, so angry indeed that she did not yet feel afraid.

" Why should I tell you ? " she asked.

Von Gerne polished his monocle and did not answer that question.

" As a matter of fact I——" Marjorie was on the verge of saying how she came by the envelope and where she had undertaken to deliver it when something about the sleek self-satisfaction of von Gerne sitting there polishing his gold-rimmed monocle with a silk handkerchief infuriated her. Her handbag had been ransacked, she had all but been abducted. She felt that if there were to be any explanations they must come from von Gerne and not from herself. She was angry and obstinate.

" Perhaps you will tell me what right you had to look in my bag at all," she demanded.

The door opened and the maid looked in. She said a **word** to von Gerne which Marjorie could **not catch** and he **rose** at once and went out of the room.

He did not think that Marjorie **would move from where she was for the three or four minutes of his absence**; and in any case he **did not much mind if she did for he knew perfectly**

well that there was not the slightest chance of her getting away from the house.

But Marjorie Gillespie was a very angry young woman, moreover she did not realise what the realities of the situation were, and she had no knowledge, then, of how securely the doors and windows of that house were locked and barred each night.

She hesitated a moment and then ran to the door by which they had come into the room. It was locked and the fact did not reassure her. More slowly then she crossed to the door through which von Gerne had just disappeared. She found herself looking down a stone corridor insufficiently lit by a pendant light half way down its length. At the far end was a green baize door. She had no idea in her head now beyond getting away, and arguing that a corridor must lead somewhere she made up her mind and went on tiptoe along the stone flags to the green baize door at the end. She paused for an instant before it, undecided, then she pushed it open and gasped.

It gave on to a comfortable book lined room. On a table in the centre was spread a huge jigsaw puzzle three-quarters finished. Bent over this was a bald head. The slight noise of her entry had evidently been heard, for slowly that bald head lifted itself from the absorbing business of the puzzle, slowly the man's face turned up to meet hers.

She recognised him. He was the chaplain who had sat at one end of the Comtesse's dining table only the night before, but now his face was much more alive than it had been then. The mask had partially slipped off. The face was animated now, and there was amusement in it, and cruelty, and some sort of wild fanaticism.

He looked at her fully for a few seconds, smiled deliberately, and then as deliberately bent his head again over his puzzle. Marjorie Gillespie was suddenly cold and desperately afraid.

CHAPTER IV

"Is ALL this frightfully boring to you, Miss Evans?"

Adrian interrupted his lecture to put the polite enquiry to a short, red-haired girl sitting at the back of the classroom. Miss Evans smiled demurely. She had a "crush" on Adrian Mawley of which he was only too well aware.

"No. Not frightfully, Mr. Mawley," she answered.

"I'm glad of that. I should hate to interfere with the work of art on which you are engaged."

Miss Evans smiled a trifle sheepishly and sucked her pencil.

"By the way, might I see it?"

"I'd rather you didn't, Mr. Mawley."

"And I am correspondingly anxious to—aren't men obstinate?"

Eventually Miss Evans was persuaded to bring her sketch up to the lecturer's rostrum, where she stood half embarrassed by and half enjoying the publicity.

"You don't flatter me," Adrian said, after studying it.

"I hope I don't really look quite so sardonic. I think it is the nose you have got wrong, isn't it?"

He found a drawing pin on the desk and fixed the sketch to the blackboard, much to the diversion of the class.

"I don't think I was giving a very good lecture," he said, "so let's have a talk about pictures and painters instead."

The beginnings of this impromptu discussion were interrupted by the appearance at the door of no less a dignitary than Feathers herself.

Feathers was a person of loose ends. Her greying hair could never be contained - by any net or known device, but straggled and strayed most undutifully. Her clothes seemed to consist principally of scarves and similar flimsy chiffrony things that blew out behind her like banners as she walked. If she were carrying books, as she often was, odd pieces of paper invariably came fluttering from between the leaves, if she ever attempted to do up a parcel it disintegrated into a tangle of ends of string and unmanageable bits of paper.

Her mental outlook was characterised by a vagueness **rather on a par with these physical attributes; and if you only met her once, or never more than superficially, you might even be inclined to think her a fool.**

But the fact remained that single-handed she had established her school in Charneck, and succeeded in making it one of the most sought-after finishing academies on the Continent

and she ran it under her personal supervision as a highly successful business concern. When you got to know her a little better none of these things surprised you at all for, unless you were singularly foolish yourself, you realised that for all her chronic untidiness and delightful vagueness Miss Featherstonhaugh was a very long distance indeed from being a fool.

She entered the classroom and adjusting her glasses peered critically at the sketch pinned on the blackboard.

"Muriel Evans," she announced, "by the look of it. If you took the trouble to observe more accurately, Muriel, you might become quite good. If you don't observe things first you can't reproduce them. Mr. Mawley, a lady wishes to see you downstairs about something important. And as she is an important lady, or thinks she is, she won't wait. Whilst you see what she wants I will try to amuse the class and Muriel Evans shall make a sketch of me—I have no doubt she has done dozens already."

Downstairs, in what was always referred to as the parlour, Adrian found the Comtesse du Vallard waiting. She looked very smart and springlike in a tightfitting green suit and a ridiculous little green hat to match.

"Good-morning, Comtesse."

"Mr. Mawley, you were with Miss Gillespie yesterday afternoon, I think——"

"I was, but——"

"Don't think me rude. A friend happened to see you with her, that was how I came to know. Can you tell me anything about her movements?"

"Her movements? But why, Comtesse?"

"She has disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"She should have been back at the Schloss not later than eleven last night. She has not turned up yet, and there is no message or anything. I was wondering if you could help me."

Adrian was disconcerted by the news.

"But that is extraordinary," he said. "When I left her she was intending to catch the half-past four bus back to Tamsbrücke. In fact I left her in the Square of the Ships actually at the bus stop."

"She said nothing about going anywhere else?"

"Not a word. Indeed she didn't. I particularly asked if she were going straight back and she was quite positive of it."

"She didn't seem upset, or worried about anything—though heaven only knows what it should be."

"No. Nothing like that at all. We met by accident, I escorted her round the city, which she seemed to enjoy."

She said that she was going back on the half-past four bus. That's all there was to it."

The Comtesse shrugged her shoulders.

"What can one do? I have already spoken to the police, of course."

"Any help?"

"Not the slightest. Interminable descriptions and addresses, and completely unassuring assurances."

"She had friends in Charneck, perhaps?"

"Who knows what friends a young girl as good-looking as that has? But, as far as I know, none."

"You could find out from the autobus company who the conductor of that 4.30 bus was and ask him if she actually did go on it."

"Yes. That's quite true. That would be something. I will go to the Chief of Police and suggest it. I must say, it is all exceedingly worrying."

"Exceedingly," Adrian echoed thoughtfully as his distinguished visitor swept out to her car.

He reported all that had happened to Feathers, who agreed that he should do what he could to help trace the missing girl.

"I ought to go out to Tarnsbrucke."

^M Yes. I think you ought. You can cut your lecture this afternoon. I'll give them a talk on Ecclesiastical Architecture—it's as near as most of them will get to the inside of a church except for the orange blossom and lace business in Hanover Square."

It did not take Adrian long to reach Tarnsbrucke in his car, but instead of going up to the Schloss he stopped in the rather ramshackle little square, sleepy under the midday sun. He crossed the pavement and entered the establishment which was cafe, confectioner's, fruiterer's and tobacconist's all in one.

Three honest countrywomen, each armed with the enormous black string bag without which no good Turbanian housewife ever goes shopping, were in the shop disparaging the magnificent vegetables. Madame, buxom and high-breasted, waited tight-lipped on their pleasure. In a corner Monsieur communed mysteriously with the till.

He caught Adrian's eye and nodded good-day.

"I came to see about those English pipes," Adrian said loudly and cheerfully. "I hope you have managed to get them in. I want one particularly."

The proprietor smiled. "If Monsieur would be kind enough to come into the back room——"

"Oh, good," Adrian said, and presently the two men were in the small living-room at the back of the shop and each had satisfied himself separately that the door was securely shut. In the better light which shone here the proprietor

of the shop was seen to be an active, determined-looking little man with a pair of remarkably shiny black eyes.

"Did you get any message from me yesterday?" Adrian asked him quietly.

"* Yesterday? No, none."

"Do you know a young English girl at the Schloss, a sort of governess companion to the child?"

"I have heard there was such a one, but they have only recently taken up residence. Is she a—er—a friend of ours?"

"Listen——"

Adrian recounted exactly what had happened in so far as he knew it. The proprietor listened attentively, rolling himself a cigarette all the time between stumpy and rather greasy fingers.

"You should have brought the message yourself," was his first comment.

"Yes. Of course I should. Yet, again, I shouldn't. I don't want to be seen here too often, and the whole thing looked too easy. When this girl said she was catching the four-thirty bus back I knew she would alight just outside here. She couldn't possibly suspect a note to a tobacconist. Why should she? And I'm sure she didn't. She put the note in her bag and fully intended to deliver it here. What has happened to her?"

"My friend, you ask me!"

"What can have happened to her?"

"She is good-looking, pretty?"

"Exceedingly."

"And young?"

"Twenty-two or three."

The proprietor stuck out a startlingly white tongue to lick the hand-made cigarette, and when he had lit it and tossed the match away he snorted,

"And you ask me what can possibly have happened to such a one in Charneck I. When you are young and pretty in Charneck anything may happen to you. Somebody else young and good-looking, a man, has seen her. They have become friends, what do you call it, a pick-me-up. They are enjoying themselves together. What you gave her is still in her bag, completely forgotten."

"That's possible, but——"

"On the other hand—she has been foolish, this young and pretty one of yours. Someone too quick in the tongue and with too smart clothes has talked to her. They have tea together. There is a ride in a taxi cab. A prick of a needle in the arm. 'M'amselle has fainted, drive to my house at once,' and when M'amselle wakes up she is on the first step of the road to Buenos Aires."

" My God—"

" Or possibly, my friend, someone who was not meant to has got hold of that message of yours."

" I can't see why it should be so. She knew nobody in Charneck at all. A young Englishwoman employed by the Comtesse du Vallard, she simply could not be suspect. Why, she was the ideal person to get to take a message. Whatever happens I shall consider it was a good choice."

" Yes, yes. Probably you are right. Indeed, I think you were. It was a good idea, but it has gone wrong, and no amount of marvelling at the goodness of it will avail us now. *What was in that message, my friend ?* "

" It came from P. I. "

" Naturally."

" It said : '*He who is expected is known to have left.*' "

The proprietor had been leaning forward in his interest. He now drew back. His hand-made cigarette was out, but he did not notice this. The two men regarded one another in silence, but their eyes spoke eloquently.

" Ah," he said at length. "*He who is expected is known to have left, eh ?* So the hunt is up, my young friend, at last ! "

" Evidently."

" The message was dated ? "

" No."

" Probably it is a bit behindhand. P.I. is reliable, but apt to be slow. Well, we know where we are now."

" But do we?" Adrian expostulated. " Suppose that message has got into some hands it wasn't meant for ? "

" Unlikely. Pretty girls in Charneck are not picked up because they may possibly have code messages hidden in their handbags, but for very different reasons."

" That's true enough," Adrian agreed, and he did not know whether to be comforted or dismayed by the reflection.

He motored back to Charneck slowly, and by the time he reached the city he felt happier about things. Mischance might have befallen Marjorie Gillespie, indeed it seemed to have done so, but the odds looked long against mischance having befallen his message. At the worst it would come into hands where neither head nor tail could be made of it.

He left the car outside the Finishing Academy and knowing that Feathers would be in her room at that time went upstairs to report to her.

Feathers had a visitor; and Adrian Mawley was at first slightly astonished, and then relieved, to see that the visitor was Captain Eric von Genie.

Von Gerne had come, it appeared, to discuss with Feathers the possibility of sending a niece of his, aged sixteen, to the

Academy ; and Feathers in her charmingly unbusinesslike way, which yet seemed somehow to result in excellent business finally, was pointing out to him all the drawbacks of the place.

Von Gerne was a very good actor and he made a very convincing business of discussing the temperament, needs and capabilities of a spirited young niece who, in fact, did not exist. He had come there for the express purpose of studying Feathers herself and seeing what he could of her surroundings and establishment.

At the farmhouse in the mountain valley where Marjorie Gillespie was his prisoner, things had not gone to von Gerne's liking.

The more he saw of the young English girl the harder he found it to credit that she was actively implicated in the affairs that kept him busy—and yet there was the message ! The chaplain, on the other hand, was for some reason convinced from the beginning that the girl knew a great deal more than she would say, and he announced his genial intention, if she didn't rind her tongue in a day or two, of helping her to do so. That turned von Gerne cold. He had seen something once before of the other man's method of persuasion ; it was only a glimpse, but it had been more than enough. Devoted as he was to what he conceived to be his duty, he knew he would not be able to stomach watching such things, or even faint shadows of them, done to the young English girl.

It was partly, therefore, in her own interests that he had kept her up practically all night questioning her—prodding her again and again and again with the one unvarying and remorseless query—" *Where did you get that letter ?* "

The chaplain took no hand in this, but sat all the time at the back of the room busy with his jigsaw puzzle and only occasionally lifting up his cold frightening eyes to see what was going on. There was a waiting look in the eyes. " When you have failed," they seemed to say, " I'll try one or two little tricks that I know."

At first the questioning angered Marjorie and then even amused her—if they seriously thought that by repeating the same question to her time after time they could make her speak . . .

But when one hour had passed into two and two into three and she still sat there under the glaring electric light and the same words, never varied, still monotonously assailed her ears, " *Where did you get that letter ?* " she began to change her opinion.

At first she had given an occasional facetious answer but all that had long since gone out of her. She was tired now and cold, and not a little frightened. That sinister bald

head in the background bent over its endless jigsaw puzzle was intimidating enough.

Twice she begged von Gerne to stop, to let her off, to give her till to-morrow, and each time the eyes of the man at the back of the room were fixed on the young soldier to assure themselves that he did not make a fool of himself.

The harder pressed she was the more obstinate did Marjorie become. Yet she realised that she could not hold out for ever. What she needed, what she must have was a rest from the maddening monotony of the questioning. And then, surely, after an hour or two's sleep and with a fresh day, must come sanity; and, from somewhere, help.

It was after two in the morning that she decided to do something to gain the now imperatively needed respite.

"All right," she said, "I'll tell you. I can't stand this any more."

"Ah." Von Gerne leant back in his chair, and at the back of the room thumb and forefinger held a carved piece poised in mid-air.

"If you want to know who gave me the envelope it was Feathers."

"Feathers?"

"Miss Featherstonhaugh of the Academy."

The two men looked at one another, and then von Gerne turned to the girl again.

"I can't believe that."

"All right. Don't. I can only tell you what happened."

"When did she give it you?"

"This afternoon—yesterday afternoon I suppose it is by now. About three. I had a cup of tea with her at a cafe and when I told her I was going back on the afternoon bus to the Schloss she said would I mind taking that note. Halfway to Tarnsbrucke at some cross roads or other, I forget the name, a man was going to put his head in and ask if there was any message from the school. I was to hand him the note. That's all I had to do and that's all I ever knew about it."

"Why couldn't you tell us this before?" von Gerne asked,

"Why should I? It was none of your business."

"It's true—the whole truth?"

"It's all the truth you are going to get out of me."

The man at the back of the room spoke without looking up from his puzzle.

"Don't be so sure about that," he advised, with a soft but ugly laugh. "That will do for the present, Eric. Take her to her room."

The upshot of the night's activities was von Gerne's visit to Miss Featherstonhaugh's establishment next day.

Neither of the two men quite knew what to make of what

Marjorie Gillespie had told them. They each knew only too well that in the dangerous game that they pursued the fantastically improbable things were all too often true.

" Suppose danger has been coming all the time from a quarter we never even suspected," von Gerne said.

" Danger comes from every quarter, all ways, my friend. You must go and investigate."

" How ? "

" You are always better off if you have seen a person, studied him at close quarters on his own ground——"

" Admitted. But on what excuse ? "

" Can't you have an elder brother ? And wouldn't it be possible for him to have a daughter of school-going age, say sixteen or so ? Your brother has asked you to find out all about Miss Featherstonhaugh's establishment so naturally you wish to visit her, and to see all over it. And you can keep your eyes and ears open—form your own judgment, can't you ? "

" I see. Yes, that's not a bad idea."

" All right then. You must see to that. But do you know what I think ? " Von Gerne did not like the other man's tone of voice.

" What ? " he asked.

" I think that your charming young English girl has made a fool of us ; and if she has, God help her."

The two men looked at one another steadily, and then the younger one moved away without speaking.

In his rôle of prospecting uncle von Gerne conducted a long and rambling conversation with Feathers, and subsequently was taken on a tour of the house, during which two very sharp eyes were kept very wide open.

The opinion he formed of Miss Featherstonhaugh was that she was a vague unbusinesslike eccentric with a peculiar flair for running a school. On his tour round the establishment even his well-trained eyes, accustomed as they were to scan every half-sheet of paper in passing, to scour all sorts of odd corners, could find nothing suggestive or unusual.

He had hoped against hope that he would not have to go back thus empty-handed. His visit had come to its end when Adrian Mawley came into the room, and the two men went downstairs together and through the hall to the front door.

" You haven't heard or seen anything of our young friend Miss Gillespie, I suppose ? " Adrian asked suddenly.

Von Gerne looked surprised.

" Not since the other evening at the Schloss. Why ? "

" The Comtesse is worried about her. Apparently she hasn't turned up."

" Not turned up ? Do you mean she is lost ? "

" It looks like it. The Comtesse has been asking me, but I know nothing- I wondered if you had happened to see the girl at all yesterday."

Von Gerne shook his head.

" I'm afraid not. I'm sorry. If I should by any chance hear anything I would let you know, of course."

" Thanks. I daresay it will all turn out all right. Things usually do. Still, I should be very glad if you would let me know if you do hear anything. I suppose I could ring you up at your flat if I wanted to ? "

Von Gerne shook his head.

" Not to-night. I am staying in the country for a few days. But you can rely on my letting you know if I hear anything."

" Thanks. Good-bye."

Von Gerne saluted and ran down the steps to his waiting car and Adrian turned back again into the house.

" Mr. Mawley."

The voice was quiet but self-assured. It came from a doorway on Adrian's right and it had no business there at that time of day.

He turned.

" You are not making more sketches of me, Miss Evans, are you ? "

" No. No, I'm not," she laughed.

" And anyway, what are you doing in the front hall; isn't it against all rules and regulations ? "

" Mr. Mawley, why is it that all the rules and regulations are always against the things I want to do most ? "

" My subject is English Literature, Miss Evans, not ethics or moral philosophy."

" I do think you are funny, Mr. Mawley."

" I'm touched by the tribute to my humour——"

" Mr. Mawley, I want to know something."

" Why this sudden thirst for knowledge ? "

" Who was that who just went out with you ? "

" Now, why on earth do you want to know that ? "

The small but sophisticated face wrinkled in amusement.

" Because he bought me a box of chocolates yesterday."

Adrian's hands went up to his ears.

" Don't involve me in your affairs, for heaven's sake."

The young eyes opened wide.

" Mr. Mawley I It isn't an affair, honestly it isn't—yet. I had to go to the dentist yesterday and on the way back I got some biscuits from that pastry shop on the corner of Long Street—you know. I had only just come out of the shop and went to **run across the road when I was practically knocked down by a car. Anyway I had to jump back into the gutter**

and my bag of biscuits went flying. The next thing I knew a perfectly heavenly man with a monocle had got out and was helping me up. I didn't know whether I was hurt or not, and I thought I might as well take a bit of time finding out, especially as he was helping me. In the end he took me back into the pastry shop and bought me a huge box of chocolates to make up for the biscuits. When I saw him coming down the stairs with you I thought he must have found out who I was somehow and come here to inquire about me."

"Well, he hadn't. He came for something quite different. I don't expect he even remembers you now."

"You're not very romantic, Mr. Mawley, are you? As a matter of fact I wasn't counting on it very much because just after he had left me I saw him stop and pick up a girl at the bus stop."

It suddenly occurred to Adrian that Long Street led out of the Square of the Ships.

"What bus stop, Miss Evans?" he asked casually.

"Where that funny little green bus stops. The single decker. It runs out into the country somewhere."

"And what was the time of your romantic interlude with Captain von Gerne?"

"Oh, *that's* his name, is it? Captain? I simply adore men in uniform. About half-past four, I suppose. No, a bit earlier. I was out of the dentist's at four, I remember. What is he a Captain in, Mr. Mawley, what's his regiment?"

"You didn't happen to see the girl whom he picked up at the bus stop, did you?"

"Too far off. I thought she looked fairly smart, though! She had an awfully smash handbag, anyway, the new red colour. But perhaps you don't know about such things, Mr. Mawley."

"A red handbag? Would you describe it as a vivid red one, a large one?"

"Yes, I would. Mr. Mawley, she can't possibly be somebody you know, can she? Oh, how marvellously exciting if it was, we're always trying to find out something romantic about you."

"Don't be an idiot," Adrian begged. "All you girls have got romance on the brain. If the girl had a red handbag like you describe most likely she was Captain von Gerne's niece, the one he is thinking of sending here."

"Oh. How disappointing."

With that large and assuring lie Adrian brought the interview to a close and sent the irrepressible Miss Evans about her business. When she had gone he opened the front door again and looked thoughtfully up the street.

Marjorie Gillespie had been at that bus stop in the Square

of the Ships at that time yesterday. Moreover she had carried a vivid red handbag and in that handbag had been his note.

All the pieces of a puzzle were there but—von Gerne. He couldn't fit them together to make any sense—yet.

CHAPTER V

THE SQUARE of the Old Castle is the Quartier of Charneck. Here the narrow streets twist and wind up the steep hill like coiled serpents, and on top, massive and forbidding, frowns the black, square, squat hump of the mediaeval fortress, blotting out half the stars. Here lives the student-bohemian world of Charneck—poets, writers, artists, musicians ; fanatics without enough to eat, dilettantes without enough to do ; here in the tiny cafes menus are scrutinised to save, not milreps, but half and even quarter milreps, and talk is interminable. Here, as in every Quartier in every capital city, men dream and plot and scheme ; men are on fire for beauty and in despair for the misery of the world ; much cheap wine is drunk, and the all-potent verb " to love " is conjugated in all its forms.

It was fitting that somewhere near the heart of this district, in a large and comfortably appointed bedsitting room, should be lodged the lecturer in English Literature to Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy.

Adrian knew the Quartier well and loved it. He knew, few better, that underneath the veneer of picturesque Bohemianism which was all that the tourist visitor saw, life ran naked, raw and urgent. He liked that feeling of reality round him. Yet he had few friends in the Quartier and beyond the facts that he was an Englishman who lectured at Feathers' and that he paid his rent with gratifying regularity the Quartier knew very little about him.

On the evening of the day when he heard about the disappearance of Marjorie Gillespie he sat in his leather-covered chair, his slippers on the bed, a favourite old pipe pendant from his mouth, a pile of green-coloured exercise books on the floor by his side.

He was reading Miss Muriel Evans's reflections on his latest lecture at the Academy, and the bland way in which she completely ignored his lecture (because she had not listened to it) and launched out on to a perky series of philosophical animadversions of her own amused and exasperated him.

He made an undecipherable squiggle at the foot of the essay. This would serve to show that he had read it, but would not commit him to any estimate of its worth. Then he tossed the book away on top of the others and began to

tap his pipe stem slowly against strong white teeth. It was a favourite trick of his whilst thinking. Muriel Evans had set his mind running on the subject of von Gerne and it was a congenial topic. Adrian Mawley had devoted quite a lot of thought that late afternoon and evening to the smart Captain Eric von Gerne.

He flicked up the metal cover of his wrist-watch and glanced at the luminous figures. Nine o'clock. The hour when fashionable Charneck sits down to its dinner. An hour, Adrian reflected, which should suit him very well for the business in hand. He was a great believer in the value of the nine to ten period, none of your two in the morning touches for Adrian Mawley.

He yawned, stretched, put his beloved pipe away carefully on the mantelshelf and began his preparations. They were hardly the usual preparations of a gentleman going out for a social evening, but they were none the less interesting for all that.

He was wearing black corduroy velvet trousers, and his first action was to kick off his red slippers and draw on a pair of black suede shoes, next he threw a black silk scarf loosely round his neck and put a pair of black gloves into one side pocket. Then he unlocked a drawer labelled "*Manuscripts of Lectures*" and drew out from it a curious assortment of things : a torch no bigger than a fountain pen, a bunch of many weird-looking keys and a cylindrical piece of solid black rubber about eighteen inches in length. All these he slipped into his other capacious side pocket before looking round slowly to make sure that he was forgetting nothing. Then he took his black velour hat from its peg behind the door and went out with a smile on his face.

It was some time since he had been on a nocturnal excursion like this and he welcomed the undeniable little thrill which came with his preparations. It was not that he had the slightest fear of not being able to do what he wanted to do ; but always, and none knew it better than he, there was the chance of the unexpected, the occurrence of the unforeseeable.

The Telephone Directory had given him the address that he wanted, and he now made his way through the dark but noisy streets of the Quartier towards the even darker, but infinitely quieter, fashionable part.

Number Nineteen Rose Bay was his objective, and when he reached the beginning of the curve of the bay and looked across the dark water to the million lights of Charneck glittering and winking all round he could not help catching his breath for the beauty of the sight, familiar though it was.

In Rose Bay, and the small area immediately behind it, lived the *creme de la creme* of Charneck. This was the Mayfair

of the city. Rents were high and accommodation often enough cramped, but there were many Chameckians who would cheerfully put up with all sorts of discomforts for the privilege of heading their notepaper with the magic words "Rose Bay."

Number Nineteen turned out to be what Adrian had hoped—an old fashioned home of the aristocracy now converted into flats.

He walked slowly past the house twice ; and then, by means of a convenient mews, down the side of it so that he could view the back.

He saw nothing to cause him any misgivings ; and without any more preliminaries he walked lightly up the steps and through the open front door into the hall. An elegant board told him that Captain E. v. Gerne lived on the first floor. Beyond that notice board there was absolutely nothing in the hall except a chair, a large bowl filled with flowers, and, tucked into a corner, a minute passenger lift.

Adrian took himself up by the lift to the first floor, and on a door almost opposite the lift shaft read the neatly painted words, " Captain Eric v. Gerne."

He pressed the bell and hoped that there would be no answer. He did not expect one. He had von Gerne's own word for it that he was spending a few nights out of town, and he did not think it likely that the young officer had more than a daily help by way of staff.

Obligingly no answer came and Adrian's long thin fingers already began to play with the odd looking keys in his pocket. But he restrained himself and rang the bell a second, and then later a third time. There was no sign of life from the flat, nor from any other part of the building. The smart word that kept *d pied d terre* in Rose Bay was now at the dinner table, or the theatre. Whilst he had been ringing, and waiting for an answer to his rings, Adrian had not been altogether wasting his time. His lazy-looking but exceedingly sharp eyes had been studying the lock on the flat door. It was of the Yale type, though not actually a Yale. It was more than proof, Adrian did not doubt, against clumsy attempts made by any ordinary sort of key ; but the ring of keys in his pocket was far from ordinary. There were twenty-five of them, especially cut by an Englishman who did not care to go back to England and who was living in an attic near the Madeleine in Paris when Adrian met him. One hundred pounds those twenty-five keys had cost him, not one penny less ; and although he had not used them more than a dozen times in his life he had never regretted the bargain.

He drew the ring of keys out and, choosing one made of a curious pink substance somewhere between wax and rubber

in consistency, inserted it in the lock and turned it steadily and firmly- It moved a fraction of an inch. He kept up the steady pressure for a full minute, then relaxed it, and delicately withdrew the key. It's soft surface was faintly indented with pressure marks; and these, for number, individual size and relative position, he now compared one by one with the twenty-four master keys on his ring. He grinned. Captain von Gerne, like many another clever person, did not give much thought apparently to his lock. A lock was a lock, and that was the end of it.

Adrian did not think there was going to be much trouble over the entrance problem.

A superficial examination made him practically certain that the choice would lie in the early teens, somewhere between twelve and fifteen, and it was these keys that he started at once to try. He did so carefully, using his strong, long fingers with the sensitive attention of a surgeon or sculptor. There was always the danger of getting a jam which would mean delay, possibly fatal delay, and danger.

Indeed, number thirteen key very nearly did jam, and he had an anxious ten seconds coaxing it out. "Unlucky thirteen," he thought; but smilingly, for it had its corollary in "lucky fourteen." And so it proved. Key number fourteen opened the lock almost as sweetly as though it had been made specifically for it, and Adrian went into the dark flat and quickly closed the door behind him.

He felt for the light switch and snicked it down. He was standing in a tiny entrance hall tastefully decorated in pink. Adrian smiled. He had an idea, somehow, that von Gerne's tastes in interior decoration would run to the exotic. The drawing-room was mainly green and blue with half-a-dozen somewhat esoteric prints on the otherwise bare walls. But it was only a glance that Adrian spared for these details. It was to the writing table in one corner and the desk by it that he devoted his attention. It was some time since he had done a searching job—"a comb through"—but he had not forgotten much of what he had been taught on the subject. He worked extremely quickly and with the greatest method. And all the time his eyes aided his quick hands. When a thing was picked up and examined it was put down in its original place exactly.

A preliminary survey on these lines showed him nothing. The desk had two locked drawers which he decided to leave until later.

He next walked slowly round the room looking at mantel-shelf, bookcase, side tables and chairs. All the time he took care to keep a little distance away from the objects he was looking at. He knew the danger of being too close to a thing

to see it. 'There were two shallow china bowls (Ventz ware, he thought) on the mantelshelf on either side of a Cupid-supported Ormolu clock. These he looked at with more care, turning over the invitation cards that lay in them. He remembered his Poe well enough not to overlook the obvious.

Satisfied that the drawing-room was going to yield nothing to a preliminary search, even of a fairly thorough kind, he crossed it and went into the bedroom.

He smiled when he put on the light and surveyed the room. Somewhere, by some sardonic wit, he had heard the style described as "pure Metro-Gold wyn-Mayer" and the description seemed to fit admirably. What took his eye most at first was the even startling array of photographs round the walls. All of them were of women, and most of them were signed. Adrian thought that many of them were of actresses, there was a flamboyance in face and subscription which suggested the stage; and he could not suppress a feeling of amused admiration for young von Gerne's success in the Art.

It took Adrian a moment to realise himself what it was he was really searching that array of conquests for, then he knew that he was looking to see whether any likeness of Marjorie Gillespie had yet been added to it and he was glad to see that it had not.

A modern wardrobe of the hold-all and conceal-everything type and a row of half-a-dozen books by the bed head showed him nothing interesting and he went across the room and through the far door into the bathroom.

Here it was evident that a young gentleman of fashion in Charneck took very great pains with his toilet. The bathroom was small but luxurious. One wall was entirely faced with a mirror, the curtains were of vivid red oilsilk (the same vivid red, Adrian thought, as Marjorie Gillespie's handbag) and vivid red oilsilk hung round the shower in one corner. A glass shelf was loaded with a goodly selection of bath salts, oatmeal powders and the like.

"Nothing here," Adrian thought and on the instant froze stock still. Someone was coming into the flat. He heard the door open and automatically registered the fact that he did not hear it snap to again. He guessed why. Whoever was coming in was surprised to find the lights on. It was therefore somebody who expected von Gerne to be away, a porter probably. Adrian stayed where he was whilst the visitor was in the drawing-room; but when he could be heard in the bedroom Adrian moved and moved quickly.

He pulled the black glove off his left hand and wedged it between two bottles of bath salts on the glass shelf, then he stepped noiselessly under the shower ring and drew the full length red oilsilk curtain round him. He paid particular

attention to his feet. He had seen more than one attempt to hide behind a curtain made ludicrous by an obtruding pair of toecaps. There was a tiny crack where the oilsilk curtains should have met, through which he could see most of the small room. The door, which he had left ajar, was pulled open and a man came in. Von Gerne himself. Von Gerne dressed for the evening in a dark military overcoat and evidently in a bad temper. He was scowling and his right hand carried a small automatic.

Adrian had already silently pulled the length of solid black rubber from his pocket and he stood there with it in his hand waiting.

He was waiting for one of the most potent factors in human nature to come into operation—the factor of curiosity.

It worked infallibly. Von Gerne's quick eye caught sight of the black glove stuck up on the shelf, wedged between his bottle of violet-scented bath salts and the rose ones. He stepped up to it to examine it and the movement brought his elegant back immediately in front of the shower apparatus and not four feet away.

He never knew what hit him. Adrian disliked violence, but he believed in the principle of using it effectively if you have to use it at all. He came out of his hiding place like a piece of black lightning and the solid piece of rubber hit von Gerne at the base of his skull with a force that knocked him fathoms deep into unconsciousness.

For lack of anywhere more convenient to put him Adrian ultimately laid him out in the bath. Two small towels came in handy for tying his wrists and feet, and a third towel, combined with a face flannel, made an excellent gag.

Adrian was busy tying the last knot when *brrr-brrr brrr-brrr brrr-brrr* made him jerk up his head. The telephone was ringing in von Gerne's drawing-room.

He finished the knot, picked his glove from the shelf, shut the bathroom door behind him and went quickly through the bedroom. The telephone stood on the table by the desk. He crossed the room and picked up the receiver, glad to stop the persistent shrill ringing. He gave a sort of grunt which might have belonged to any language or been construed as almost any word.

"Is that Rose Bay 3.3663 ?" a faint voice inquired.

Adrian gave another grunt which was evidently taken as being confirmatory, for the faint and somewhat impatient voice went on, "Hold on, please. I've got a district call for you. Call out, Insfarne."

But Insfarne, whoever Insfarne might be, did not call out, and Adrian listening with interest and amusement could hear the operator's voice becoming more and more peevish.

" . . . Insfarne 52, are you still on the line. Call out, please, go ahead . . . "

But still there was no immediate response and Adrian never heard what Insfarne had to say, for at that instant the drawing-room door began to open slowly inwards.

Like many another good strategist, Adrian had a rooted objection to fighting on two fronts at once, and much as he would have liked to continue the telephone conversation he realised that he must deal with this fresh situation. He replaced the receiver and pulled the black silk scarf well up round his face, and the fingers of his right hand closed round the small hard butt of von Gerne's revolver.

The door had now swung open to its full extent.

" Hallo," said the visitor, " what are you doing here ? "

Then her eyes took in the black scarf and the little gleaming barrel of the revolver and she gasped.

Adrian smiled pleasantly.

" Don't be scared," he said. " Just keep quiet, very quiet, that's all."

She was a blonde with " theatre " stamped all over her. Probably her photograph was hanging up in the bedroom, Adrian thought.

" You were expecting to see Captain von Gerne ? " he asked.

" Yes—yes. What have you done with him ? "

Adrian laughed outright.

" What a suspicious young lady you are I Why should I have done anything to him ? I am here waiting his arrival, just as you are."

The girl, who looked tough and not the sort to be easily frightened, was recovering herself rapidly.

" Got quite a little reception committee ready for him, haven't you ? " she asked, nodding to the steadily held revolver. " Well, go ahead. Shoot him up. I don't mind. Only don't shoot me up by mistake. I'm not in on this act at all."

" I don't intend to shoot anybody up," Adrian assured her. " And on the whole I think I'll leave you to do the reception of Captain von Gerne—when he turns up. All things considered, I think the time is ripe for what I believe is described as ' a get-away ' : and ripeness, as a poet whom you possibly never heard of, once said, is all. Would you mind very much moving back to the wall behind you and standing there with your hands well above your head ? "

The girl did as she was bid with the comment,

" I get paid for this sort of thing in gangster films."

" Ah, but in gangster films the revolver isn't loaded," Adrian pointed out. " This one is. Goodnight."

He pocketed the revolver, slipped out into the little hall and out again on to the landing, jumped straight into the lift and was downstairs and out in the dark road all within two minutes.

" Taxi."

" Where to, sir ? " the man asked, drawing up to the kerb,

" The Cafe of the Universe," Adrian directed, taking care to keep his face well out of the light of the lamps.

He paid the cab off and sat down in the crowded cafe to drink black coffee and an old brandy.

His evening's excursion had amused him and he was in hopes that it had gained him a vital clue.

CHAPTER VI

" I'VE GOT rather a sore throat this morning," Adrian lied to his young ladies, " so you will be spared the customary boredom of a lecture " (appreciative titters). " On the other hand it will be an excellent opportunity for you to do some work instead of me " (grins and one barely suppressed groan). " Will you therefore please take up your pens and write quickly, as the scripture says. And your subject had better be ' The character in Shakespeare which most appeals to me, and why.' " (III disguised demonstration of dismay in the classroom.) " As a completely undeserved incentive I shall present a large box of chocolates to the writer of the best essay." (" Gosh " and a rustling of paper.)

" Please, Mr. Mawley——"

" Miss Evans, if you have forgotten either pen, paper or blotting paper ; if you have run out of ink or ideas, if your fountain pen won't work or your desk is broken, you must not expect me to assist you. I am not Harrods; merely a downtrodden lecturer in English literature."

" No. It isn't any of those things, Mr. Mawley."

" What fresh disaster have you managed to invent ? "

" It isn't anything like that, Mr. Mawley. I just wanted to know if we could write about a romantic character if we wish to ? "

Adrian's eyes rolled heavenwards.

" Romance, what crimes are committed in thy name," he said. " Write what you like, Miss Evans, and, if you appreciate good chocolates, write well. Any lady who addresses any further remark to me during the next hour will be automatically disqualified from the prize."

Sixteen young heads, dark, fair, golden, carrotty, bent over

their virgin sheets, and Adrian pulled in front of him and opened an enormous tome.

He had taken the precaution of covering it in brown paper so that his class might think it a lexicon, an encyclopaedia, a concordance, a learned treatise or heaven knows what, so long as they did not realise that it was only a telephone directory A-Z of Charneck and the surrounding district.

Adrian did not wish anybody to know that he was making inquiries about " *Insfarne* 52 " and he had decided on this laborious, but ultimately certain, method of search. It was not made any easier by the complicated and cumbersome method of grouping telephones in Turbany. There were no separate sections devoted to different districts, and he realised with a sigh that the only thing to do was to work patiently through all the numbers and examine each " *Insfarne* " entry. He might find what he wanted on page one, or on page one thousand ; but, provided that he didn't miss anything, he was bound to find it somewhere.

It took him almost exactly three-quarters of an hour, by which time he had worked his way laboriously through to the M's.

" Mountain Farm, *Insfarne*. *Insfarne* 52," was the entry.

Adrian was intrigued by the absence of any name, and he was more curious than ever to find out what friends the smart young officer had in the out of the way hamlet of *Insfarne*. He had reached the stage of thinking that the more he knew about von Gerne, however seemingly unimportant, the better.

Insfarne, an insignificant village, lies in the wild and mountainous country immediately to the north of Charneck. To get there you must take a desperately leisurely local train from the capital to Bruk, and then either await the haphazard pleasure of a carrier's motor van, or walk.

Adrian did the latter, for the distance from Bruk to *Insfarne*, as his map assured him, was only five miles, and to arrive there on foot would give colour to the part he had decided to play.

Insfarne is a typical hill village of that part of Turbany : small steadings ; the arable fields very few and far between ; the cumbersome carts drawn by yoked oxen ; wayside Calvays ; the peasants colourful in the picturesque traditional dress ; each small house accompanied by a stack of firewood almost as big as itself against the savage winter.

There was an establishment half-way between cate and shop where one could buy " wine open or shut," and noble great cheeses of the local sort ; or alternatively one could, with the exercise of great patience, conduct such primitive postal business as was practised in those parts.

It was here that Adrian applied for local knowledge. He had donned shorts and a haversack and was instantly recognised for what he was pretending to be. "Iker," the fat madame of the cafe" said to herself, using a word which is rapidly becoming as international as "taxi."

Adrian bought a quarter of a litre of wine, open, and whilst drinking the rough, rasping stuff put his innocent queries about the neighbourhood generally and Mountain Farm in particular.

He found out where it was and he gathered that its inhabitants were not too popular in the village. He did not care to press his questioning further, but decided to go and have a look for himself.

There was a long climb out of the village ; then a descent over a rough and even dangerous road and there, resting in a hollow in the hills and well hidden, was Mountain Farm.

The solitary telephone wire, on very home-made looking posts, ran down the drive ; and in the soft gravelly earth, still wet from the night's rain, Adrian noted car tracks, evidently made recently.

He stood for a moment at the entrance gateway, but the drive was too long and too winding for him to see anything from there ; and he decided to get a little nearer.

He was half-way along the drive when he was hailed.

"Hallo, Mawley. What brings you here ?"

For an instant Adrian was at a loss. He had hardly expected to come across von Gerne so soon, nor possibly, so openly.

Captain von Gerne came forward from behind some trees. Adrian caught a glimpse of a deck chair and surmised that the other had been sitting out in the Spring sunshine—quite possibly with a headache, he thought, not without a certain amount of inward amusement.

Von Gerne was as dandified as ever, but he looked pale, and evidently the effects of the crack on the back of his head had not worn off yet.

Adrian returned his salute and countered with,

"What on earth brings you here, away from Charneck ?"

"Only the circumstance that I own the place."

Adrian looked suitably surprised, as indeed he was, as much at the other man's candour as at anything else.

"You've turned farmer ?"

"Hardly. Not yet, anyway. Soldiers are still wanted in the world——"

"Unfortunately."

"You can hardly expect me to agree with that point of view. And even you pacifists would go out of business if it weren't for wars to rail against. No, I'm no farmer."

I've got a bailiff to do- that. I bought the place for somewhere quiet when I wanted quiet. Somewhere where nobody could run me to earth."

" And now I've done just that very thing."

" I was wondering why."

Adrian laughed easily.

" Completely unintentional, I assure you, my dear von Gerne. Not for the world would I disturb your—what is it, love-nest, peace-haven ? "

" Just my private property. There used to be a notice at the entrance to that effect."

" There still is. I saw it. But they assured me in the village that there was a footpath across here to Hurl Mountain——"

" No. No footpath. All this is private property."

" I'm sorry. If you could tell me how to reach the mountain——"

" My dear Mawley," von Gerne's attitude changed abruptly, and the dangerous edge which had been on his words disappeared, " my dear Mawley, don't think I mind, please. Sometimes the ordinary run of hiker is a nuisance, I am bound to admit, but naturally I am delighted to see you. Any friend of the Comtesse, or of Miss Gillespie——"

" You haven't seen anything of Miss Gillespie, I suppose ? "

" I ? No. Haven't you ? "

" Not a thing."

" You weren't by any chance roaming this wild part looking for her, were you ? "

Adrian joined his laughter with the other man's at the absurdity of the mere suggestion.

" No. I was taking a day off from my worries. We schoolmasters are introspective creatures, you know."

" What a lucky chance you should come here. I can't offer you English tea. It is one of the many English customs I have not been able to take to. But if you would care to come inside and have a whisky and soda and inspect my hermitage——"

" I should love to," Adrian said, perhaps just a shade too quickly.

The hermitage, as von Gerne described it, proved to be worth inspection. The giant barn, the cow-house and the stables formed three sides of a square. Von Gerne showed them off with pride and they were noble buildings with beams and roof timbers of heroic size.

" Farming seems to be slack," Adrian commented, noting the little used appearance of everything.

Von Gerne laughed. He was careful all the time not to get his immaculate clothes soiled.

"The bailiff farms, or not, pretty well as he likes," he confessed. "As long as he keeps an eye on the place for me that's all I care about really. Come inside and see the house."

The house was big and rambling but deceptive, for there were not many rooms in it.

"This used to be the farm-house kitchen; it still is, as far as that goes, though I use it for a dining-room as well when I'm here."

Adrian's sharp eyes travelled slowly and methodically round the room. Had there been so much as a dropped and forgotten hairpin lying on the floor he thought he would have noticed it.

"And down the corridor," von Gerne was saying, leading the way along a stone-flagged passage to a green baize door at the end, "is my living-room, my study. Den, don't you call it in English?"

Adrian surveyed the book-lined room, the comfortable armchair, the blazing fire.

"Very comfortable too," he said. "I didn't know you were a jig-saw enthusiast."

Von Gerne glanced easily at the table in the window with a jig-saw puzzle spread out on it.

"One has to do something to pass the time. Sit down, won't you? And what about that drink—a whisky and soda?"

"Thanks. I should like one."

Von Gerne pressed a bell button by the fireside.

"I suppose when you are not here the farmer occupies these rooms?" Adrian asked idly.

"Indeed he does not. No. I like my things to myself. As a matter of fact he doesn't come in the house, he lives in a cottage at the other end of the rick yard. No. I keep this for myself——"

The door opened and a maid came in.

Adrian looked at her with the same interest that he was showing for everything in that house. She wore thick rimmed glasses and her face was intelligent and yet strangely hard.

"—with Hilda here to chaperone me," von Gerne added.

She gave no sign of having heard the remark except that Adrian fancied that the staring eyes behind the thick glasses flickered angrily for an instant.

"Did you want anything?"

"Whisky, siphon, two glasses."

"I don't suppose you want to see over the rest of the house," von Gerne went on as the door shut. "Two or three rambling old bedrooms mostly empty, that's all upstairs."

Adrian would have liked to see all over the house very much,

but he did not think that there was any adequate excuse for saying so. He contented himself with remarking.

"You certainly have a nice retreat here."

"Pleasant after Charneck, isn't it? I like the contrast. The loneliness. That's why I put up that notice board at the gate——"

"Once again, I must apologise."

"My dear fellow, don't mention it. Now that you have found your way here you must come out again—isn't that the English thing to say? I'm sorry that you have had no news of Miss Gillespie. I expect you are worried about her——"

"She is a fellow countrywoman and one feels that one ought to do something."

The drinks had been brought in by now and von Gerne charged the two glasses and raised his.

"Well, here's to your success," he said, smiling blandly.

"Who was that?"

"A Mr. Adrian Mawley. An Englishman. He lectures in literature or some such subject at Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy."

"What did he come here for?"

Von Gerne lit a cigarette and blew a well satisfied cloud of smoke ceilingwards.

"I'm not altogether sure that I know."

"Did he come after *her*?"

"I wonder. When I first saw him in the drive I did have a suspicion for a moment. But I don't see how he could have traced her here. No. I'm inclined to think it was chance. These English are such fools, they are quite capable of clapping knapsacks on their backs and tramping about the hills for what they call fun."

"Had he anything to do with what happened at your flat last night?"

Von Gerne's eyes narrowed unpleasantly, and he ran his right hand very gingerly over the back of his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I hope not—for his sake. Someone is going to pay very dearly for that bit of fun."

"Is he interested in her?"

Von Gerne grinned.

"Perhaps he is a little, my dear Hilda. Or would like to be. But then so am I. And I have certain advantages now which he hasn't."

"You fancy yourself with women, don't you?"

Von Gerne polished his monocle and smiled, but did not bother to reply; and the woman who was acting as his maid watched him. She knew just what that gesture and that

sleek smile meant. She could read and assess at its exact value every gesture, every shade of expression of the man sitting there. She was eaten up with jealousy about him and every other woman in the world. Literally she would have been quite happy to die for him if it would have saved his life. And at times she did not know whether she hated or loved him most.

"We women must be fools," she said quietly, "or men like you would never get anywhere."

Von Gerne's smile increased. He thought he knew everything about Hilda. He was confident that he had her where he wanted her, that even if she showed a bit of temper occasionally she would never give him any serious trouble. He altered his smile so as to warm it a little and to spare some of it for her.

"Don't talk like that, Hilda. The important thing was to throw dust into the English fool's eyes, wasn't it? When all this business is over you and I can enjoy ourselves somewhere."

Yet the dust, the smoke screen, skilful though it had been, was not quite as perfect as von Gerne imagined.

Adrian, walking steadily back towards Insfarne, was wondering.

He had sharp eyes and a tenacious memory—indeed without these qualifications he would hardly have held his post. And both had served him well that day. In the room at the end of the stone-flagged corridor, the room which, according to von Gerne, was his own particular den where no one else was allowed to penetrate, Adrian had noticed something on a small shelf against the wall in the big recessed fireplace. What he had seen had not been startling; rather, it was a homely sight, nothing more than a wooden rack with four pipes in it, and a tin of tobacco by their side.

It was clear that a pipe lover liked to draw up by the fire and make himself comfortable there.

"*I have never smoked a pipe in my life,*" Adrian's tenacious memory drew the remark out of the verbal brush which had taken place between him and the immaculate young von Gerne at their first meeting at the Schloss.

Who then did keep pipes and tobacco so comfortably handy in the study at Mountain Farm? And why had von Gerne been so determinedly insistent that nobody else but himself lived there, or used that room?

This was the problem that Adrian pondered on his way back to Charneck. It was a small crack in the bland facade of von Gerne's confident explanations and assurances. Yet the crack was there, and Adrian wondered whether, in time, it might not be developed into something much larger and more revealing.

CHAPTER VII

ONE of the features of Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy which greatly commended it to a certain section of the population of Charneck was the fact that if you were down and out you could always get a hot meal there at tea-time.

The quality and quantity of the meal varied enormously in sympathy with the universal rule of vagueness which characterised all Feathers' concerns—it might be no more than a cup of tea and a piece of toast and dripping ; it might be soup and an Irish stew. But there was always something ; and consequently every day towards five o'clock, a little knot of people, three or four, sometimes as many as half-a-dozen, could be seen clustered round the kitchen door of the Academy for Young Ladies.

That there were never more than a few resulted from two circumstances : first, that Charneck is not an industrial city ; it has its garrets and its alleyways, it has its slums ; but it never had had the dreadful acre upon grey acre of sheer numbing poverty which lies like a blight on any great manufacturing city. Second, that you never quite knew what you were letting yourself in for. Sometimes you got your meal for nothing ; on other occasions Feathers would descend like a whirlwind on to her guests and impress one or more of them for urgent household jobs.

In theory a man who has nothing to eat should be only too glad to get a meal even at the price of an hour or two hours' work ; but in actual practice (and the fact is one of the worst problems that your social reformer has to contend with) most down and outs fight shy of a good meal if there is any danger of work attached to it.

On the afternoon of Adrian Mawley's exploratory visit to Mountain Farm these two deterrents acted as usual and there were no more than five hungry hangers-on waiting by the kitchen door.

At half-past five the door was opened and they were admitted into the building now set aside for the purpose and generally referred to by the young ladies of the establishment as Cadgers' Hall.

There they sat down and were served with their free meal. This ceremony took place, as usual, under the severely disapproving eye of Milling, the butler and man-of-all-work at Feathers'.

Feathers herself had brought Milling to Charneck. She boasted of him as one of her finds and in conversation usually

referred to him as " the Archdeacon." poking mild fun at his revered and dignified mien.

It was difficult to imagine anything disconcerting Milling, but any sort of upset or disturbance annoyed him.

He saw no reason, and frequently said so, why the kitchen quarters of an establishment for young ladies should be " messed about" (as he described it) by the riff-raff of Charneck.

There was nothing unusual about the five free guests. They wore the usual strange assortment of clothes, they had the usual furtive and yet apathetic look in their eyes, they boasted the usual black stubble on their chins. And as Milling observed with disfavour, they had the usual healthy appetites.

At six Feathers herself swept into the room and heads were cocked half in apprehension, half in amusement. The old hands knew what was coming and were resigned to what fate might have in store for them.

Feathers surveyed them much in the manner of a Roman matron surveying the slave market.

Her eye fell on a thin man at the end of the table.

" I think you had better give me a little help," she said. " I'm sure you'll be willing, won't you ? It's just a question of moving a bookcase up in my room. I shan't want any more help to-day." She beamed amiably at them all and four faces grinned back. " Touched lucky," they thought. The fifth man drained his tea cup and said with polite resignation,

" Anything you say, m'am." He followed Feathers out of the room and as they left Milling's archdeaconal tones rang out, " No smoking in here, *please*. You can wait till you get outside for that."

Feathers led the way through the labyrinth of two old houses knocked into one of which her Academy consisted. The impressed labourer followed her, and at him, over her shoulder, she kept up a running commentary on the proposed new decoration and furnishing scheme for her room.

Occasionally they passed a maid, or one of the sixteen Young Ladies who had difficulty in restraining her laughter at the familiar but always worth-while sight of Feathers in one of her mad moods.

. Feathers' own room was delightful; long, low ceilinged, many windowed. It had a pleasant disorder in it which exactly reproduced her character, and there were enough bookcases—all painted green—and enough books on them to justify any amount of help in moving them.

Yet when she got there, and the door was safely shut behind her visitor, all idea of moving bookcases seemed to

THE DAR

have left Feathers. Her lecturer in English was already there, sitting on the arm of a chair smoking, and Feathers' first words were,

" Well, Adrian, here he is at last."

The tramp grinned and said in a very untramlpke voice,

" Hallo, Adrian, how's literature ? "

" Dicky:"

The two men shook hands, the long firm grasp of men who have voyaged and adventured together and who are glad to see one another again. They looked in one another's eyes and smiled steadily. In the English way there was a great deal unsaid in that greeting.

What Adrian did say was,

" Dicky, you're a blinking marvel. I'd pass you in the street and chuck twopence at you any day of the week."

Dicky Horder grinned.

" You didn't, though. Not this morning. You passed me in the Avenue of the Lime Trees and there were no twopences flying about. You looked as though you were setting out on a walking tour." He turned to his hostess and said, " It's good to see you again, Feathers. My word, it's good."

" Have you had a bad time, Dicky ? "

He reached out for a cigarette and lit it, and his hand was none too steady.

" So-so," he said. " It hasn't been a picnic exactly."

A thin wiry man, this Dicky Horder, fined down by hard living and with nerves as taut as violin strings. When you looked at him narrowly, discounting the lack of recent washing, the ragged clothes, the four days' unshaved stubble, you realised how untramlpke the face really was, how square and determined the cleft chin, how vivid the dark eyes.

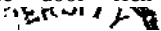
The door opened and Milling came into the room. Dicky Horder jumped to his feet quickly.

" Hallo, Dicky. Pleased to see you."

" Not as pleased as I am to get here. By God, sir, I nearly let out a yelp downstairs when you came in and started dishing out the tea. I'd no idea you were here,"

" Quite a number of people have no idea where I am. It's a useful asset in life."

Feathers pulled a cord overhanging her desk, this uncovered a notice outside door rich read,


" Engaged. Not to be disturbed on any account'

The best of butlding up a ing characteras aneccentric is that you can do eccentri things and nobody wonders. The whole establishment was used to Fathers' admonitory notice and knew quffile well that whilst it was exhibited any attempt

to violate her privacy would be punished by something worse than sudden death.

She sat down, took a small cigar from a box on the desk, lit it and said,

"Now, Dicky——"

Dicky told his story, prefacing it with the customary note of self depreciation, "Well, there isn't all that much to tell really——"

His listeners judged otherwise.

For four months he had been inside Germany living a hunted life. Footsteps on the stairs, a knock at the door, a man brushing against him in the street—he never knew when any of these things would mean that the game was up. And four months of that kind of living is apt to fray a man's nerves.

" . . . the machine's running marvellously. You would expect that, of course, from Germany. Efficiency above everything else. And yet——" he shook his head slightly.

"And yet what?"

"Difficult to explain exactly. But the feeling is there, even if one can't adduce precise facts to justify it. The feeling that none of it goes deep, that it is all blatant, glittering facade. That even a shallow crack will get through to the nothing behind. There's going to be almighty trouble in that country unless they can stage a diversion, and the diversion is coming this way."

"How do you know that?" the man masquerading as Milling asked quietly.

"P.I. told me. I met him in Hamburg. He told me my orders were to get out as soon as possible and make my way down to Feathers here."

"We had a message from him a few days ago."

"It's the last you'll get," Dicky told them sombrely, "he's dead."

"Dead?"

¹¹ As a doornail. In Hamburg. It put the wind up me, I can tell you. We were two southern Germans looking for work round the docks, and with all modesty I thought we looked the part pretty well. I know P.I. did. We slept in a common lodging-house side by side. The evening after I met him I went out to have a look-see round and left him sleeping. When I got back in the dark he was still sleeping, at least, I thought he was, till I trod in something between the two beds—a pool of blood. Somebody had struck a knife through his throat whilst he was asleep. It was still there, an ugly great curved thing with a bone handle. I can tell you I was mighty glad to get out of that lodging-house place alive. There were too many shadows about for

my liking. I did what P.I. told me and came here as fast as I could. And that wasn't any too fast for me. I did the last part of the trip down the Danube as engineer on one of the oil barges."

"What did P.I. tell you about diversion in this part of the world?" Milling asked.

"Well, sir, not all that much. He said the wind was blowing in this direction, and he said that you were the man to get hold of. 'God in High Heaven knows where the Colonel is,' he told me, 'but he's the man to get hold of. If you can find him you'll learn something. This damned game inside Germany is like groping about in a dark cupboard for a black cat that isn't there.' And then the first person I set eyes on when I get here to Feathers is you."

Colonel Baikie, alias Milling the butler, alias many other things in the course of an adventurous life, laughed, the short sharp bark of a laugh which was characteristic of him.

The three other people in that room had all managed to pack a certain amount of unexpected variety into their lives, but the adventures of all three of them added together couldn't come near to the Colonel's. They knew it; everybody in the game recognised, and gladly, the Colonel's pre-eminence.

Colonel Baikie had been in the queer and dangerous game of Secret Service for nobody but himself knew exactly how long. It had led him into many out of the way corners of the world, and it had shown him many queer, indeed, almost incredible sights. He knew the underworld: Limehouse; Yokohama; the alleyways round Circular Quay; the dark streets by the harbour in Marseilles; and indescribable haunts in Port Said, better, probably, than any other man alive. He knew his own country as no other Englishman did. With Baikie for guide you could lose yourself in what is called in the game Old England, that astounding network of old forgotten green roads, briar grown paths, hidden passages and goings by which a man, if he knows the way, can travel almost unseen from one end of England to the other. With Baikie you were made free of the marvellous organisation called The Road, which Baikie himself built.

The Road, a network all England over, its antennae stretching into most unexpected places. So that if you knew what chalk markings to look for on gate posts, what tune to whistle and what reply to make when you heard it, what to say if a stranger brushing accidentally against you should proffer for a moment a piece of broom—so that, if you knew, all these things, you could call on help, hiding, on food and shelter, in the most unexpected quarters.

With the magic keys in your hands and head you found

that chambermaids in hotels, newspaper sellers on street corners, painted mannequins at fashionable parties, plain efficient secretaries to Bishops, indolent apparently good-for-nothing young men about town were all at your service, ready and capable of giving you the help you wanted when most you wanted it.

You never paid them, of course, often you did not see them long enough even to thank them. It was unlikely that you would ever come across them again, but they were there at the critical moment, part of the unique thing called The Road, and many a hardpressed man has had cause to be grateful to them, and to the man who conceived the whole brilliant thing and who patiently hand-picked and tested all its parts.

That man was Baikie, who for some months now had very efficiently filled the part of butler and man-of-all-work at Feathers' Academy.

Feathers gave out to Charneck that her butler was one of her finds; but, of course, the exact opposite was really the case.

Ellen Featherstonhaugh, English spinster lady of uncertain age, vague and unpractical, artistic and idealistic, terrified of mice and liable to be sick at the sight of blood, was one of Baikie's most brilliant finds.

With all these vagaries and inconsistencies of character she had, deep down in her, immovable and enduring, the great quality that our forefathers called "bottom" and that we know as "guts." She was an Englishwoman, she was prepared to stick things. Allied to this obstinate tenacity she had also, what many spinsters have, an astounding streak of romanticism. She saw the world as a sort of perpetual theatre show and she enjoyed every moment of it. And underneath her apparently unpractical exterior was something very shrewd and businesslike.

For years Baikie had forsaken all the other shady back parts of Europe to concentrate on that ever-simmering cauldron of trouble known collectively as the Balkans. He had come to know the currents and cross-currents, the intrigues and involvements here as no other Englishman knew them, and before he had been there long he had seen the vital necessity of setting up there some machinery of his own.

It was true, therefore, that the building which Adrian Mawley had pointed out to Marjorie Gillespie during their tour round Charneck did indeed house the official British Secret Service Mission to these parts. It was also true—which made the situation all the more amusing—that the officials in that building were genuinely under the impression

that theirs was the only organisation of its kind in the country. But simultaneously it was also true that a far more efficient, far more wide-reaching ramification existed, from which there went back to a small dull room in Whitehall news which mattered and news which was not tampered with.

Baikie himself trained Feathers for the job he wanted her to do. He always hand-picked his main links and tested them himself. He taught her to use all that natural vagueness and inconsequentiality as a foil for the real things underneath. It was his brilliant idea that she should start her Academy in Charneck, and incidentally he found the money to tide it over its first difficult period.

That it was a success as a school was due to Feathers herself, and made it all the more valuable to Baikie.

A young Englishman lecturing to Miss Feathers' Ladies was not easily suspect, and the hospitable custom of providing free teas for down-and-outs made a wonderful blind for all sorts and conditions of people to keep in touch with each other and to transmit news.

When he had told Feathers to get rid of her existing butler and to engage one "James Milling" in his place, she knew that things in Charneck would soon be blowing up to a storm.

"James Milling," complete with authenticated passport and identification papers, duly arrived, was christened "The Archdeacon," and in a few months became one of the features of Feathers'.

A grizzled, rather grim person this Baikie. You might work with him for a twelvemonth and be hard put to it to know what he thought about religion, or love, or the whole queer business of living.

"P.I. was right about the diversion coming this way," he said. "Turbany is what the Nazis want and the Turbanian bauxite. No bauxite, no aluminium; no aluminium, no new aeroplanes, That's the logic of it. But they don't want to fight for it. They want Turbany without fighting, and somewhere tucked away up their cunning sleeves they've got the man who can get it for them. Of course they've built up an elaborate organisation here—all the old tricks of peaceful and not quite so peaceful penetration, the 'tourists' with too much luggage, and the business people with too little business. We know a good deal about that. One advantage of fighting the Bosch is that he is just a shade too efficient and methodical. He draws up a plan and sticks to it. By what has happened elsewhere we know almost for certain what will happen here. When the organisation is complete then the man who really matters will be sent along. The king-pin of the whole show. That's the way the Bosch works. He isn't an individualist,

he must have a leader, a Fuehrer. The Nazi mentality worships machinery, and if you can knock the main spring out of any piece of machinery the rest of it may shine and glitter and all fit beautifully in place, but it won't work.

"The trouble, from our point of view, is that they always seem capable of producing the man. They've got one for Turbany all right. And the queer part of it is that I've played blind-man's-buff with him across three countries for the past year, and I have no idea who he is. These last twelve months I have been increasingly conscious of an intelligence working against us in this part of the world well out of the ordinary. It has been like playing chess with an invisible opponent, and some mighty cunning moves he has made. Things that we have done have been cleverly* countered, things that we were thinking of doing have been forestalled by a week or two. Everywhere throughout Turbany there has been apparent the hand of a very formidable foe. We had sources inside Germany, of course—P.I. was one of them—who let us know that the Nazis had got a big card up their sleeves; but who he was and where, they couldn't tell us. All they did know was that when the time was ripe, when things in Turbany were ready, he would come here, and then we could look out for trouble, and plenty of it. With Turbany ablaze, the bauxite fields gone, and all the eastern end of the Mediterranean hostile, things would look very unpleasant for us in the Middle East.

"Now we know from P.I.'s message that this man, whoever he is, has left Germany and presumably has arrived here. Dicky you said something about looking in a dark cupboard for a black cat. We've got an even queerer problem here, for we know the inside of the cupboard well enough, but we've no idea of the sort of cat we are looking for. But I can tell you this, whoever this man the Nazis have got hold of is, he is formidable. Make no mistake about that. And he has somehow got a most almighty graft here in Turbany. Increasingly and increasingly, during the last twelve months, things have got more difficult, working against him.

"Until his influence came on the scene we had pretty well all the tricks in this part of the world. Now, it's fifty-fifty; and if we can't run him to earth and lay our hands on him before the explosion comes it will be grand slam, game and rubber to the other side."

Baikie stopped speaking abruptly, and helped himself to a pinch of snuff. It was seldom that he talked so much at once, but on this occasion, as on every other occasion of his loquacity, when he did speak his audience knew how the land lay; No circumlocutions woven round a non-existent

core for the Colonel; he would have made a bad politician,

"How did you get on this afternoon, Adrian?" he asked.

"I had the pleasure of a drink with Captain von Gerne. I can't help feeling, Colonel, that there is something fishy about that gentleman. Give me a few more days to ferret things out, and I may have something to tell you."

"Go to it. And you can have Dicky here to help you. Feathers, you had better engage Dicky as odd man, boots, knives, coal and all the rest of it. He can sleep in that room next to the boiler-house, and I'll curse him all day long just to keep up appearances. He's a lame dog who has caught your fancy, that's the way to play it."

Dicky Horder grinned in his disarming way.

"Suits me all right," he announced, "as long as I have plenty to eat. I had to punch three extra holes in my belt whilst I was in Germany."

Feathers nodded. She looked as pleasantly abstracted as ever. Ignorantly you might imagine that nothing of what had happened, or been said, had penetrated to the amiably wool-gathering brain, but actually she could have repeated to you verbatim every syllable that she had heard.

She reached up above her desk and pulled the cord back into position. The monitory notice outside her door was now covered. Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy for Young Ladies took up its normal routine again.

As the meeting broke up Adrian said to Dicky Horder,

"I wonder if this bird we're after smokes a pipe."

"Smokes a pipe? Haven't the vaguest, old man. Why?"

"I just wondered." Adrian murmured, "that was all."

CHAPTER VIII

ADRIAN went straight from the meeting in Feathers' room to the Schloss. The Comtesse was giving one of her famous early sherry parties, and, like the rest of Charneck, Adrian accepted any invitation he could get to drink wine at the Schloss.

When he arrived the big hall had a cheerful animated appearance, though its size rather tended to minimise the number of people there.

Adrian could not see his hostess at first, and contented himself with taking a glass of sherry from the buffet and attaching himself to the nearest group of people, several of whom he knew slightly.

As at any gathering in Charneck, there was a fair sprinkling of uniforms, for the Comtesse loved colour and vitality about

her, and the young officers of the Brigade in their finery supplied both.

Adrian's group broke up, shifted, changed its composition, and he found himself chatting to a very self-assured young lady with deep red nails and the most exiguous of pencilled eyebrows.

She was an English girl—he had forgotten her name—who had been to Feathers' Academy and who on leaving it had stayed on in Charneck with Turbanian friends. Although he could not remember her name, Adrian could recall with only too painful clarity the almost complete lack of comprehension which she had consistently displayed for two years in his class, but whereas he had previously been at liberty to comment on this, and had done so occasionally with a certain amount of frankness, he was now constrained to pay flattering attention to her as to a young lady of fashion in the town.

"Still teaching at Feathers', Mr. Mawley?" she asked.

Adrian assured her gravely that in spite of her departure the establishment just managed to carry on in much the normal manner.

"Isn't it funny to think that three years ago you were lecturing me on literature, or whatever it was."

"Still funnier to reflect that in three minutes' time you will probably be lecturing me on life."

The young and rather naughty eyes sparkled dangerously.

"But if you show any aptitude at all, I wouldn't dream of ploughing you in your exams."

Adrian laughed with genuine amusement and said, "You have matriculated already, I see."

"I was rather slow in literature, I'm afraid."

"I hope you are not going to complete the antithesis."

"I wouldn't know what that was. It sounds spectacle-ly and learned to me."

"What do you expect from a doddering old professor, my dear."

"My dear, Miss——"

Adrian looked a little blank.

"You have forgotten my name," she accused him, "and I used to think you looked so meaningfully towards the back of the classroom. You *have* forgotten it, haven't you?"

"It is perfectly true that, for the moment, I find some difficulty in——"

The girl interrupted him with a shriek of laughter.

"If you weren't such a clever person I should be desperately wounded."

Adrian thought he had been let off **lightly**, and **bowed himself away with.**

" And if you weren't so charming I should have been deservedly censured."

He had caught sight of his hostess at the far end of **the** room, and began a leisurely progress towards her.

The Comtesse was talking to Captain Eric von Gerne. Both of them had seen Adrian across the hall, but neither had commented on the fact. They were busy talking about their own affairs, the Comtesse attacking, von Gerne defending ; both feeling the awkwardness of the position.

The Comtesse's exceedingly well-schooled face wore the mask of a continual smile so that should any of her guests catch her eye she would be sure to welcome them. She had her reputation as the foremost hostess round Charneck to keep up, and she meant to do it. But no smile, only bitterness, informed her voice.

" So, it comes to this, Eric, that you no longer care."

" *Please*——"

" Oh, why say '*please*' in that agonised way ? Why not admit it ? "

" But, Comtesse, are you being quite fair to me ? "

" Fair ? " She laughed. " Is that what you are to me ? Not everybody has the chance of a—a friendship with the Comtesse du Vallard, you know."

" But, Comtesse, what is to hinder our delightful friendship——"

" Nothing, except the various affairs you carry on in town."

" If you listen to gossip——"

" I do listen to gossip. Why not ? What sensible woman wouldn't ? Gossip is simply the truth about men told by somebody other than themselves. You are becoming notorious, Eric."

" That isn't fair."

" Nothing is fair that upsets your comfortable estimation of yourself, is it ? "

" I have friends in Charneck, naturally——"

" Naturally. And picking up new ones, you drop the old. Is that it ? "

" Comtesse——"

" Well, then, prove that you don't by having dinner with me to-night. There will be nobody here, for Anna is out to a children's party and I shall be alone. Will you, Eric ?"

" Nothing would give me greater pleasure——"

The woman was watching his face and supplied the next word for him with some bitterness.

"——*but* . . ."

" But how can I, Comtesse ? I am already engaged for the evening."

" I didn't expect any other answer. One of your new friends, I suppose. My dear Eric, you may be good at making new friends, but take it from me, you are wonderfully good at making enemies."

" Good-evening, Comtesse."

The Comtesse beamed at Adrian as though she had not a care in the world.

" How nice of you to come, Mr. Mawley."

" Have you heard anything of Marjorie Gillespie ? " Adrian asked anxiously.

" Not a thing. I have had to telegraph to her people in England, and I am quite sure they will be distraught.. I can't begin to imagine what has happened to the girl. She was perfectly happy and contented as far as I knew. Well, you saw her that afternoon yourself. She didn't seem perturbed or upset in any way, did she ?"

" Did Mr. Mawley see Miss Gillespie on the very afternoon that she disappeared ? " von Gerne asked interestedly.

" He was the last person who did see her, apparently. You left her waiting for the Tarnsbrucke bus, Mr. Mawley, isn't that so ? "

Adrian inclined his head.

" I would have waited with her and seen her on to it, but I had to hurry back to a lecture."

" But this is very interesting," von Gerne said. " I had no idea that you were the last person she was with. You never told me that."

" I didn't know that you were particularly interested in what happened to Miss Gillespie."

" Oh, Captain von Gerne is interested in what happens to any pretty girl—for a time," the Comtesse said. " More sherry, Eric ? "

Von Gerne declined.

" Mr. Mawley and I have been drinking already."

" I don't call that complimentary to my party."

" Oh, it was earlier in the day. Mr. Mawley paid a visit to my mountain retreat."

" That's hardly right," Adrian laughed. " I was out in the country round Insfarne for a bit of exercise. I had no idea that you had a farmhouse there. How could I ? "

" Exactly. How could you ? " von Gerne murmured as though he would have liked to know the answer himself.

" But it was very pleasant to see you there, of course."

" I feel guilty at invading your hide-out."

" I expect places like that come in very handy, don't they, Eric ? " the Comtesse asked acidly.

" Any hiding-place comes in handy, Comtesse, when one is unfairly attacked."

She acknowledged the justice of the riposte with a little nod, and when she spoke again it was more pleasantly.

"Tell me about your robbery, Eric. Everybody is talking about it, and I have heard all sorts of fantastic rumours."

"Robbery?" Adrian demanded with interest. "Where was that?"

"At Eric's flat. Rose Bay. In one of the expensive parts, naturally."

Von Gerne flushed slightly and did not seem too pleased at being forced to speak about the occurrence.

"It really didn't amount to much," he said. "There may have been something stolen; but whoever did the job must have been a fool, for he took nothing of any value."

"Is it true that you got knocked out?" the Comtesse asked.

"There was a slight scuffle."

"But you weren't hurt?" Adrian inquired sympathetically.

"Not a bit."

"What a good liar you are," Adrian thought with admiration, and aloud he asked, "Any idea who it was?"

Von Gerne met his eye and smiled cryptically.

"Glimmerings," he said, "but hardly sufficient to go to the police with."

"I don't see Anna here," Adrian said, running his eyes round the hall.

"She is away at a party and won't be back until ten. Ten! When one's daughter stays out till ten, how can one pretend to remain young?"

"But in your case, dear Comtesse, pretence is completely unnecessary."

"Ah, Mr. Mawley, I sometimes wonder if literature is all that you lecture to those young ladies about."

"I lecture to them at Feathers' about literature, and later on, at such gatherings as these, they discourse to me about life. Not forgetting the capital. It's a very fair division, really."

"Not till ten will Anna be back and I shall be alone, completely alone, for dinner. In desperation I had even thought of ringing up my chaplain, but he has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

The Comtesse laughed.

"Oh, not like that. At least I'm afraid not. He has gone away on a holiday, or a visit to friends, or something of the sort. At any rate the presbytery is shut up, and if I want spiritual consolation I must seek it elsewhere."

Von Gerne managed to suppress a smile. He certainly had not been under the impression that it was consolation of a spiritual kind that the Comtesse had been seeking.

Adrian left the party early, whilst it was still in full swing, and his last memory of it was a glimpse of his erstwhile pupil (whose name he now remembered to be Audrey Tallon) chatting vivaciously with three young officers, accepting a cigarette from one, a light from the second, and a smile from the third.

As he motored slowly back to the capital Adrian turned over in his mind his encounter with von Gerne that evening. How much did von Gerne know about him, and how much did he know about von Gerne? He was not sure of the answer to either question.

When he reached the brow of the hill which overlooks Charneck, he exclaimed aloud at the familiar yet always surprising beauty of the spectacle spread out before him. Although she lived on the grim doorstep of war Turbany was too carefree to bother yet about any question of black-out, and Charneck was a city of glittering light. It looked as it always did by night, a place where a man might find adventure or romance; and possibly both.

—or possibly both . . . Adrian sped down towards the noisy maelstrom of the city idly wondering.

He garaged his car and walked the necessary quarter of a mile to the Square of the Old Castle. Here, as always, the city was dark. It was too old, here, to learn the new fangled tricks of decking itself out with electricity and fairy lamps. It remained its ancient grim self, silent, and rather forbidding.

Not that Adrian Mawley noticed anything forbidding about it. He liked the quietness and the dark of the Quartier. He had enjoyed his party and the day had provided him with plenty to think about. A meal at some cafe and then a pleasant evening in front of the fire would suit the case admirably, he thought.

When he reached the doorway to his rooms somebody moved in the darkness, and he was aware that a visitor was waiting on the step.

"Mr. Mawley?" she asked. "That's lucky. I was just coming to see you. You've saved me ringing."

She had turned now, and the faint light of a street lamp fell on her face.

Adrian recognised her at once, but he gave no sign of having done so. He was not at all sure that he was glad to see that particular visitor there; but in a non-committal voice he said,

"Come along in, if you want to see me."

CHAPTER IX

VON GERNE left the Comtesse's party very soon after Adrian's departure. He was glad to get away from the Schloss, for he was not enjoying himself there and he wished to get back to Mountain Farm before fulfilling his engagement for the evening.

Somewhat surprisingly his excuse to the Comtesse about a previous appointment was true, and it was an appointment to which he was not looking forward with any particular relish . . . Still, it might have its compensations, he thought, and even, possibly, its amusing moments; and he smiled in the darkness as he drove his car fast over the lonely roads towards Mountain Farm.

In that bleak and isolated house Marjorie Gillespie was sitting in the room in which she had been a prisoner since her arrival. It was a large square bedroom of the roomy old-fashioned farmhouse type; the decoration was, to put it euphemistically, uninspiring, the furniture massive; but she could not complain of discomfort. A fire was kept burning in the grate, and more than adequate meals were brought to her by the maid who had helped in her abduction. Every time that the woman came into the room Marjorie was aware of the intense dislike, and even hatred, that flared from her.

The window was barred, as a nursery window might be; and, as Marjorie knew only too well, the door was kept locked. She was a prisoner; she did not know where and she did not know why.

There had been plenty of time to turn over all sorts of fantastic explanations in her mind, and she had now almost reached the philosophic stage of observing her own reactions to the whole situation with a sort of detached interest. Almost—but not quite: there was present in the house too strong an undercurrent of human feeling to allow of that detachment altogether.

On the first evening, when von Gerne instead of motoring her back to the Schloss had brought her to this remote spot, her immediate reaction had been one of indignant but faintly amused anger.

That had passed into bewilderment when she realised that it was not her charms but the fact that she was carrying a certain letter in her handbag which had occasioned his curious behaviour.

She realised by now, of course, that the letter could not be merely the innocent message to his tobacconist that **Adrian**

had announced, and it was clear that completely unwittingly she had been used as a tool in some business in which von Gerne and Adrian were at loggerheads.

But even now she obstinately refused to say how she had come by the letter. It was partly obstinacy, and partly because she had taken an intense dislike to von Gerne as a result of closer acquaintance with him. And apart from these two reasons, she realised that even if she were to reveal who it was who had given her the letter it would not avail her much now. It was clear that von Gerne could not now restore her to her normal life at the Comtesse's without giving away all his own game, whatever that might be.

She did not know, could not imagine, how the chaplain came to be included in the affair, but she feared him now more than Eric von Gerne. And, although she did not care to admit it even to herself, in a way, and in spite of her fear, it was the older man in whom she was more interested.

At times for long hours together she would neither see nor hear anything of him. Nor would the rest of the household. He would be closeted in the room with the green baize door bent on his everlasting jig-saw puzzle and turning over in his mind fantastic dreams of power and dominion. But at intervals he would visit her in her room.

His manner at first had been suave but ugly with implications. He had to perfection the trick of never saying the dreadful thing which he yet infallibly conjured up in your mind, so that every now and again a cold sweat would break out on you at something only half said and at the dry chuckle that accompanied it.

Marjorie came to understand perfectly well in those first few interviews that there wasn't much unknown to him about the beastly art of persuading reluctant people to speak.

She was afraid of him, then, with the plain cold fear which every human being has of naked pain, and with the horror which every decent human being has of pain which is deliberately inflicted and gloated over.

Yet she knew that she was even more afraid of him now, when there did not seem so much likelihood of enduring pain at his hands.

The last three times that he had come to speak to her the atmosphere between them had changed. Marjorie was aware of it, and she knew that he was conscious of her awareness of it.

Whilst von Gerne was away at the sherry party at the Schloss she heard along the uncarpeted corridor the sound which she was getting to know too well, the tread, curiously light and cat-like for so heavily-built a man.

She swallowed hard, and without thinking what she was

doing, crossed to the cheap mirror by the washhandstand and looked at herself in it.

The key was turned in the door and then, after a pause, there was a knock.

" May I come in ? "

Marjorie turned from the mirror, advanced to the middle of the floor and stood there looking at the door. She did not speak.

The door was pushed open and the query repeated.

" May I come in ? "

" I can't stop you, so what is the point of asking ? "

He came in, shut the door behind him, and stood there leaning his back against it.

He looked at Marjorie, and although she wanted to look away she couldn't. She had known that this would happen to her, and it was this that she feared and even dreaded. Yet mixed in the fear and dread was some strange undeniable element of fascination. Those dark piercing eyes, now curiously clouded and dreamy, now frighteningly on fire, were fixed on her, and drew her own inescapably.

" You are not very gracious," he complained.

" Do you expect graciousness in your prisoners ? "

" You cannot forget that you are a prisoner."

Marjorie made a gesture that indicated the room, and was glad to do so for it enabled her to take her eyes away from his. She smiled faintly.

" Hardly," she said.

" Is it any good my saying that I wish you had never got mixed up in this affair ? "

" Would it be true ? "

He shook his head slowly, his eyes still fixed on her.

" No. After all it wouldn't be true. Except that one can be glad and sorry about a thing at the same time. You can hurt the thing you love, and somehow the fact that you love it forces you to want to make the hurt go deeper. But no. It isn't true, for then I should never have seen you."

" You saw me at the Schloss before—before you knew that I was mixed up, as you call it, with this."

He inclined his head.

" Yes. I did. That is to say we sat at the same table together. You laughing and noisy at one end, I silent at the other. I doubt if you were aware that I existed. That was not seeing one another—as this is."

Marjorie took a cigarette from a store provided for her and lit it. She was annoyed to see now much her hand shook.

" Won't you smoke ? " she asked, quite angrily.

" Not a cigarette."

Marjorie tossed the spent match into the fire. She was aware all the time of those eyes fixed on her.

"Beauty like yours is a very dangerous thing," he said suddenly.

Marjorie managed to laugh.

"That is a difficult remark for a woman to make any reply to."

"You are so young. You *can't* be on the side of the old things. Can't you all realise that a new world order is coming out of Central Europe?"

Marjorie paused for a moment and then, cocking her eyes at him, asked quietly,

"Out of Germany?"

"Yes, very well. Out of Germany."

"So that is the sort of thing I have got mixed up in?"

"You didn't know it? I wonder. I think it is quite possible that you didn't, that in some freak way you became involved for a moment in the business without knowing anything about it. Such things do happen. I hope it is so, because then it means that at any rate you are not against us."

Marjorie was trying to adjust this new aspect of affairs to what she knew of Adrian Mawley. She found the whole thing too puzzling, and in any case it did not seem to matter much now. What immediately concerned her were the realities, palpable and impalpable, facing her in that building and in that room.

She tried to put the argument off by saying,

"It isn't a question of being for you or against you."

"Splendid isolation? But it won't work. Even as a nation you English found that out. And you are young and beautiful. Youth and beauty can't be isolated from life."

"You seem to have isolated me here pretty well," Marjorie said, smiling at the verbal point.

"Not altogether," the man answered softly, and her smile vanished.

"For instance," he added quickly, "there is Eric von Genie."

"I am not interested in Captain von Gerne."

"But he is interested in you."

"He has the reputation, I believe, of being interested in many women."

"Possibly. I have not been interested in many women. A few in my life, and those intensely; but not many. I have had my dreams."

Marjorie felt stealing over her the sensation which from the beginning she had known would be her chief enemy, the sensation of fascination, of almost hypnotised fascination.

It was induced partly by the quiet but vibrantly strong voice, mostly by the strange eyes that never left hers for a second.

"Your dreams?" she asked.

"Queer, isn't it, for a man to feed himself, on dreams? But that is what I have done. You English dream, of course, but you are decadent. You are an old man sitting by the fire, his money bags stuffed away in the cupboard in the corner. Your dreams are all of the past. Nothing commands any respect with you unless it is fifty, even a hundred, years old. The old man dreaming of his glorious youth.

"We are young. Our dreams are of the future. It is fifty, a hundred years hence that we are dreaming of, building for, scheming for. We want wide straight roads, new houses, clean cities, the Imperium Germanicum from east of Europe to west, from north to south. That is our dream that so many of us are vowed to achieve." The fanatic in the man was speaking now, and his strange eyes blazed. Marjorie was convinced that for the moment he did not see her, was unaware perhaps that she was in the room.

"And all this by force?" she asked.

"By force? Naturally by force. How else? It is the greatest sign of your decadence that you have forgotten that the business of ruling can only be done by force. But then naturally you have forgotten it, it suits you to forget it, for your force has left you. Your ability and your desire to wield it have gone. With us both are growing. People must be purged for their good. People here in Turbany must be purged for their own good."

"That is your business here?"

"You could make it your business, too, if you chose the side youth, and lovely youth, should choose."

"or——?"

"Or——" his voice changed abruptly, for the moment he had finished with fanaticism. "Or you could forget for the time being that such things as schemes and dreams exist. God knows I tire of them at times. I'm a weary man. Mentally weary. I was when I came here, too weary, possibly, to complete my task. A man's mind can be stretched taut for so long, but for so long only, or it will snap. A man must come down sometimes out of the high places and remember that he is only a man again, born of a woman, inescapably bound to woman."

"Isn't it dangerous to remember that?"

He smiled.

"I do not think that with you anything is dangerous."

"That is hardly a compliment."

"Then I will pay you one. When I first caught sight of you at the Schloss that evening, I thought that I had never

seen more loveliness; more youth; more vital life. But there is danger here, make no mistake. When things happen as they are going to happen in Turbany it will be very dangerous indeed for all you English—unless you happen to be on the right side."

Marjorie laughed.

"I don't know any sides in the matter. You can't expect me to bother my head about politics."

"Why should you? We could find happiness without politics——"

A door slammed below them in the house, and von Gerne's voice could be heard calling for the maid.

"The energetic Captain von Gerne is back," the man said.

"He may want to speak to me. He has a habit of doing so when I am busy with something else. If you will excuse me I will leave you—for the present." He smiled at her and left the room.

Marjorie heard the key turn in the lock, and she listened to the light inescapable footsteps receding down the corridor.

She had managed to return his smile, but when she sat down on the bed she found that she was shaking all over.

Von Gerne had motored back in a hurry from the Schloss. As was likely enough in a man of this temperament, his mood towards the appointment of the evening had changed rapidly. At the Schloss the meeting he had to go to had seemed nothing but unpleasant, but now he was beginning to think that after all, as it was inescapable, he might as well get what fun he could out of it.

"Everything all right?" he asked the maid Hilda when she appeared at his side in the uncannily quiet way of being invisible one moment and brutting your elbow at the next.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

He jerked his head to indicate the room upstairs.

"She's safe and sound?"

"Unless she can open a locked door with her fingers, or break the half-dozen bars across the window."

"A nice amiable mood you are in, Hilda. Well, thank God I shan't have to endure it. I'm going out for the evening."

"I am sure you are. I hope she is pleasant company."

Von Gerne laughed.

"Curious how we think alike, isn't it?"

The woman kept silent for a while and then said bitterly,

"I don't believe you know what a fool you are, Eric."

"It isn't for lack of being told, is it?"

"Any little cheap slut of a chorus girl can make a fool of you."

"On the other hand it is just possible that I make a fool

of the little chorus girl—it depends on the point of view,"

"It is your precious little Polly that you are going to see then?"

"I never said so."

"You did. To her. On the telephone at half-past ten this morning."

Von Genie smiled and stretching out his hand pinched the lobe of her ear between forefinger and thumb. The gesture might have been a playful, even a caressing one, but the thumb nail was pressed so hard into the flesh that a thin line of blood showed.

"Those ears of yours hear too much, my dear. Mind your own business. Haven't I told you that before?"

"Eric, anything to do with you is my business. You know that. In God's name why can't you leave those other women alone. What good are they to you? What good?"

"They amuse me. Which is more than you do when you are like this. In an hour's time I shall be sitting down to a very pleasant little dinner *a deux* with Polly in my flat. And if you don't like to think about it, you've got to learn to put up with it, that's all."

The maid stared at him through her thick glasses and her cheeks went quite white, but without saying a word she watched him turn almost contemptuously on his heel and stride away from her.

Of this conversation downstairs, even of the sound of voices, Marjorie could hear nothing. Mountain Farm was built when an extra inch or two of timber in doors and floors was a matter of no consequence, and sounds did not travel easily in it. But through the window she did hear von Gerne's car leaving the farm again. She was a keen motorist herself and she was pretty certain that it was the same car in which he had picked her up at the bus stop in Charneck. During the long hours up in her prison-bedroom she had listened casually to all the outside noises and had amused herself learning what she could from them. She knew, for instance, that the garage must be underneath the window or very close by, and that there were at least two cars in it, the one which von Gerne had just taken out and a much smaller, lighter one.

She wondered idly if this second, lighter car was there now, standing in the garage. Half a dozen old illustrated papers had been put in the room for her to look at, and hitherto she had been glad to have them to turn to. Now she did not bother with them. The evening's interview had given her plenty to think about. Yet though there was plenty, she found it difficult to marshall her thoughts into any satisfactory

logical sequence. There were cross currents, and she was only too well aware of them. But whatever line she thought along she came now to the same decision. Hitherto she had been too bewildered to do more than accept things passively as they happened to her, now she knew that she must take action of some sort. And she had a feeling that the time had come to do it.

She sat on the end of the bed and reflected that this was exactly how she had felt the evening before her first day out with the hounds. She had desperately wanted the day's hunting and yet she had been scared stiff in anticipation. The only difference, and it was a big one, being that whereas all those years ago in remote Wiltshire she had known exactly what lay before her, now she had no idea. Then she had been a madcap girl only; now she was a woman, and somewhere in that dark house there was a man aware of her womanhood. Was it fair to stop there, she asked herself, and not to go on and admit that she was aware, too, of his manhood? Quite frankly she did not know the answer to that question. She did not know to what extent it was possible to be repulsed by a thing and fascinated by it at the same time; to find the same thing frightening and yet attractive. She sat on the end of the bed puzzling these things, slim and lovely, afraid and yet brave.

Presently, she knew from established routine, the maid would come with her evening meal on a tray. It was not a very encouraging prospect, for she could not flatter herself that she was a match physically for that stockily-built muscular figure. Even so she set herself to work trying to remember every detail that had happened when the meal had been brought up on previous evenings; how far the maid had come into the room, where she had put the tray down, and so on.

Then she looked slowly round the room. There was very little in it that looked as though it would be of any use to her. Either by accident or design everything that might have served as a handy weapon had been moved out.

She was even forced to laugh at finding herself in such a queer pass—locked in a room, looking round it for a weapon with which to attack another woman; and she was forced also to realise that her education and comfortable upbringing had done singularly little to instruct her how to act in such an emergency.

"The trouble is," she thought, "that half the time we don't live. Not at first hand. We're not really at grips with the business of living. We don't go hungry; or sleep hard; or catch our own food. We live once removed from hard facts and don't really know anything about them."

Yet one of those contingencies she was soon to experience, for the usual time for her evening meal came and went and there was no meal.

Marjorie was a healthy young person and she liked her food, and when mealtime was past by half an hour and even more she began to get very hungry.

In another half-hour she was ravenous, and the uncomfortable suspicion was beginning to dawn in her mind that something had gone wrong with the domestic works. It looked only too probable that the maid would not be paying her usual visit to the room, and Marjorie found it hard to decide whether the prospect dismayed her, because it meant lack of her evening meal; or relieved her, because it meant that none of her tentative half-formed theories of violence would have to be put to the test.

She lit a cigarette and pulled one of the illustrated papers on to her lap. It seemed, after all, as though inaction was going to be forced on her.

The lighting of the cigarette, the glancing at the paper, seemed to break the tension, and she was ashamed at the undeniable sense of relief which was present among all her other jumbled feelings.

Not very many minutes later (she had just looked at her wrist-watch and seen that it was nearly nine) she heard a sound.

She jerked her head up from the paper and listened. She was thankful for the lack of carpet on the corridor which gave her a few seconds' warning, a few seconds in which to think.

The sound she heard was by now familiar—the light footsteps coming steadily towards her room. Yet now it seemed to her that there was something different about them, something stealthy and threatening.

She had almost finished her cigarette and had been on the point of throwing the butt away; but now from nervousness more than anything else she reached out and took a fresh cigarette from the table at her side.

She lit this and started to get up. Then she changed her mind and settled down again, half sitting, half lying on the bed, the pillow pulled up behind her.

The footsteps had stopped now, outside the door. There was a second's pause and Marjorie felt her heart thumping wildly. This time no knock came, nor any polite inquiry, but the key turned, *click*, in the lock and the door itself began to open slowly inwards.

CHAPTER X

ADRIAN smiled at his visitor in a non-committal sort of way. Not that he felt like smiling much, but he did not yet know what line the attack would take, nor how best to meet it.

" Did you want to see me about something ? " he inquired politely.

By way of answer she went to the wall and stood against it with both arms raised above her head.

" Ever seen me like that before ? " she asked.

Adrian had. On the previous evening in von Gerne's flat. Although the chances were fading, he still hoped that there might be a possibility of bluffing his way out. He did his best to appear genuinely puzzled, and as he was doing so studied the girl. She was undeniably smart in a somewhat flashy way; she looked humorous and tough as though she could take hard knocks in life and give them, too. She looked (he hated the word, yet it summed her up) " sexy."

" What an extraordinary question," he parried.

She laughed, came back into the centre of the room and sat down uninvited.

" You ought to be on the stage, Professor Mawley," she said. " Not me. Mind if I smoke ? "

Adrian pushed the cigarette box towards her.

" Please. Help yourself. I wonder why you call me Professor."

" Do you ? Never heard of Miss Whatisit's Academy for Young Snobs, I expect ? "

Adrian shook his head slightly, but this was not in reply to her query but to an inward one which he had put to himself. He was asking himself, had she been at Feathers' whilst he was lecturing there ? *Could* she have been ? And he was perfectly certain on both counts that the answer was " no." How the devil then—?

She watched him, amused, smoking her cigarette in an almost insolently cocksure way. She gave every evidence of a person who held a fist full of trumps and who knew it.

" Perhaps you have heard of the Charneck Repertory Theatre then, Mr. Mawley ? "

" Is that where you work ? "

" That's the institution that has the benefit of my vast stage experience at the moment for about fourpence half-penny a week. Still, things might be worse. It's a job, anyway, and that's something these days. At home the West End didn't seem to want me, and the provinces were

lousy, so I and some other girls drifted out here. We were doing a dance act, getting engagements where we could. When this war business came along the others skedaddled back and I stayed on. They've a notion here that I can dance a bit. Well, if it comes to that I can. Especially tap. And I've got a queer sort of idea I can do something in the acting line some day, so I attached myself to their Dramatic School——"

Adrian nodded, partly to show that he was following her explanation; but partly also because he was beginning at last to see daylight. And he was not at all sure that he liked the look of it. Not many weeks ago, in a laudable endeavour to popularise things English in Charneck, he had delivered an address on the English Drama to the Dramatic School of the Charneck Repertory Theatre.

" Things beginning to make sense ? " she inquired.

" You'll have to do a lot more talking before they make sense to me."

" Sure. I'll do the talking. It's one of the things I'm good at. As soon as ever you spoke last night in Eric's flat I knew I had heard your voice before. I was positive certain of it. But I just couldn't think where at the moment. Like having a name on the tip of your tongue. For one thing I notice voices. Girls often do, especially girls like me. I can tell you more about a man when I've heard him talking for five minutes than you'd believe. Then you put that bit in at the end, that quotation bit ' ripeness is all ' or however it goes. Well, the only person I know that quotations come from is Shakespeare, and when I was lying in bed last night trying to figure the thing out that was what gave me the key to it—Shakespeare, the English Drama, and your voice lecturing to us about it.

" As soon as I got on to that line I knew I was right. Absolutely certain. And now I've heard you speak again I know for double sure. So what about it, Professor ? "

Adrian lit a cigarette and considered.

" Not that I mind you beating up Captain Eric blasted von Gerne," she assured him, " as far as that goes that's not a bad idea at all."

" What happened last night after—when you were alone ?

She grinned. " Now we're getting down to the eggs and bacon. What happened after your exit ? I ran to the telephone and called up the police."

" You did ? "

" I don't think. No, thank you. No police for Polly. It's people with a thousand a year and the rest salted away in gilt edged stuff that call up the police. I just took a stroll around the fiat and there was little Eric in the bathroom all

trussed up like a Christmas turkey. I undid him, and oh boy was he mad. But the funny part was he didn't ring up the police either."

" You surprise me."

" Yeah ? I wonder. Anyway, he didn't. He was hopping mad to know if I had seen any one in the flat. I told him that as I was coming up the stairs a man I had never seen before came down running past me like a whirlwind and that was all I knew about it."

Adrian smiled.

" You didn't tell him anything else ? "

" Why should I ? He doesn't tell me everything. And I've learnt that a bit of knowledge up your sleeve can come in very handy at times."

" You seem to have acquired a lot of worldly wisdom, if I may say so, Miss——"

" Hinder. Polly Linder. Polly Linder on the stage and Polly Linder off it, that's me. If it's good enough behind the footlights it's good enough in the flat, that's what I say."

" I take it you are a friend of Captain von Gerne's ? "

" Wasn't there a book or something called ' Eric or Little by Little ? ' Well, believe me, there's no little by little nonsense about our Eric. It's lot after lot with him. A girl's got to keep her hat on with one hand and a tight hold on her virtue with the other. Yes, in a way I am, was friendly with him. I fell for him, that's the plain truth of it. You'd have thought I had more sense, wouldn't you ? More what you call worldly wisdom. God knows I've seen enough of men since I started. And I fell for him with my eyes open. Half of me knew he was a little seducing monkey in uniform, and the other half sort of took a liking to him. Still, I'm through with that now. I'll play fair as long as any one plays fair with me, but if the raw deal business starts I reckon to give as bad as I look like getting."

" Naturally enough Eric got tired of me. I suppose some of his Savoy Grill ladies didn't like him tagging along in the Fish and Chips department. Funny how men act when they want to wriggle out of anything. They're all the same. Excuses, and telephoning instead of seeing you face to face; and messages by other people—all the usual sort of tricks; and then to end up with the grand finale when you get the air."

" That was all fixed for last night. I know that was why Eric had asked me round to his flat. And I could guess pretty well how it would be worked. He would have fixed things so that he wasn't going to sleep there and there would be an appointment waiting so that he couldn't stay long,

" Everything would be arranged so as to make me look

like a nuisance. Still, it didn't work out that way because for some reason or other you had a private *blitzkrieg* against him—just what was the trouble, by the way, had he been putting up his eyeglass at some girl of yours ? ”

” Something of the sort.”

” And it got him into trouble good and plenty. Well, he had it coming to him for a long time. But they never will learn, will they ? Boy, did I laugh when I saw him in the bath. There wasn't any giving me the air ceremonial last night, he was too busy getting over the headache you gave him to think of anything else. But I made him ask me round there again to-night. And I made him include a bit of dinner with the invite this time. If I'm going out on my ear I may as well have a meal first.”

” You are going to meet him in his flat to-night ? ”

” In less than an hour's time, Professor, so if we're going to talk we've got to get started.”

She paused, so Adrian said.

” Well, you seem to be pretty good at talking, carry on.”

” Yes. That's my trouble. Always has been. My mouth's too big for my head. That and my temperature. I reckon my blood must be about five degrees warmer than most people's. It lands you into all sorts of worries. Well, here it is, Professor, on the plate. As I see it you can't be too keen on Captain von Gerne finding out who it was who slapped him on the back of the head last night—or on the police finding out, can you ? It must be worth something to you.”

” I see. Blackmail ? ”

” No. I do you a good turn and you do one for me in exchange. That isn't blackmail, it's common sense. In fact, it's religion. ' One good turn deserves another,' isn't that in the Bible, or isn't it ? You ought to know.”

Adrian stretched over for the telephone.

” You know what I'm going to do now ? ”

” Not the foggiest.”

” Ring up the Chief of Police and ask him to send a couple of responsible officers round here.”

Polly grinned.

” O-kay. Go ahead. Suits me. This isn't the Metropolitan out here, you know, Professor. The Chief's an old pal of mine. I slept a couple of nights with him once.”

Adrian didn't know whether this was true. On the whole he was inclined to think not, but the cheerful insolence of it amused him. And in any case it had only been a bluff on his part to strengthen his hand a little. Probably nobody in the affair had less desire to see the police dragged in than **himself**.

"What's your definition of a good turn, Miss Linder?" he asked.

"Ten pounds," she replied promptly. "It makes out at about five thousand disasters, or whatever it is they use for money out here. But ten crisp English pound notes will do me nicely. It's what I owe for rent and it will get me out of a hole."

"One small point arises, Miss Linder——"

"Why not drop the Professor act and call me Polly since we're getting on so well together?"

"If I help you out with the ten pounds for your rent, Polly, what's to stop you telling von Gerne all you know just the same?"

"I thought you'd be a better judge of character than that, Mr. Mawley. There's nothing to stop me, only my word. And the funny part is that though I'm tough, I'm straight. Perhaps you don't understand how a girl like me can be straight? But she can. And it's my opinion that you stand a better chance of getting a straight deal from us than from half your expensive ladies. If I make a bargain I'll stick to it as long as the other party does. If he breaks faith then maybe I'll scratch his dear little eyes out, but I'll stick by my word as long as he does."

Adrian even felt slightly ashamed.

"Yes. I believe you would," he said.

"I'm twisting Eric's tail because he's twisting mine. That's tit for tat. He got what he wanted from me, now he sees something he likes better so I'm to be given the air. All right, that gives me a free hand. But this thing with-you is different. I want ten quid to help me out of a jam and if you give it me I'll take care that nobody else knows what I know. If you and little Eric have a quarrel over some dame that's your affair, not mine, and you can sock him on the head and stick him in the bath just as often as you like. **And** if you fill it with boiling water first I won't object."

"You're going to his flat this evening?"

"Right from here."

"And dining there?"

"I told him he wouldn't get away with it under a grilled chop and a bottle of champagne. Why, you weren't thinking of coming along there again to-night, were you?"

Adrian pulled out his pocket book and extracted **ten pound** notes. These he laid on the table.

"No," he said smiling. "As a matter of fact I was **thinking** of something quite different."

On top of the ten notes he then laid a crisp, clean fiver.

"If you're in a hole, Polly," he said, "I'd like to help you out of it properly. And I rely on you sticking to your word and playing the game by me."

Polly's active fingers swept the money up into her bag.
" You needn't worry, Professor," she assured him, " I know when I'm dealing with a gentleman."

CHAPTER XI

MARJORIE did not look at him when he came into the room. He shut the door quickly behind him and took up his usual position leaning against it. For three seconds there was an uncomfortable silence and then he said, and there was almost a mocking tone in his voice,

" Captain von Gerne has had to go out to an appointment."

" I heard him. A long time ago."

" Not so long, but time drags when you are lonely."

" I wasn't lonely. I don't mind being alone."

" As a rule I like it, but to-night—no."

She still kept her eyes away from him, though she could feel that his were fixed on her.

" A strange thing," he said, " that our lives should have crossed like this. A week ago we had no idea that each other existed, now we are bound up together. Does it frighten you sometimes to think that there is somebody behind us all the time manipulating the strings and getting fun out of it ?"

" Lots of things frighten me. But if I thought that, I should be angry more than anything else."

He smiled.

" That is because you are English: muddle-headed and obstinate"—and he added quietly, " but very beautiful."

Marjorie took a long pull at her cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke up towards the ceiling. She watched it eddy and change shape, assume for a moment a fantastic outline and dissolve into nothingness.

" What is going to happen to me ? " she asked quietly.

He paused for a long interval and then began to talk. He spoke slowly and the curiously vibrant quality of his voice invested all his words with a vivid and disconcerting intensity.

The girl half sat, half lay on the bed, smoking and listening. It was queer stuff that she listened to : some of it so childish that if laughter had not been a thousand miles away she could have laughed ; some of it the very substance of a man's dreams, wild and visionary yet somehow magnificently convincing. For here was a man dedicated to a purpose, who by reason of that dedication had forgotten his manhood. Now his manhood was on him again, crowding and urgent, and he sought to satisfy the two, the dream and the desire.

Never before had the girl come up against the spirit which animates the new Germany, now she saw it naked and at close quarters. She saw the child-like nature of it, and the bestiality. She heard with astonishment the passionate religious quality when talk turned on the new Gods : soulless efficiency and the machine. And through it all, like fire running through prairie grass, blazed the white-hot sincerity of fanaticism.

Yet all the time, under that glittering and frightening surface, she was conscious of deaths which were more frightening. Every now and again a phrase, a word, perhaps no more than an intonation gave her a glimpse of the beast which lay below and behind it all. The ugly beast which has its say in the concentration camp, in the openly-practised sadism, in the baitings ; which, where these more obvious forms are glossed over, leaves its dirty mark in a dozen other ways. And she knew that it was a fanaticism based on corruption, the corruption of the decent things, and she was more frightened than ever.

As he was talking she let her eyes turn on to his face to watch him. She knew what she was doing and in a way did not wish to do it, yet she could not help herself. When her eyes met his she felt a definite physical sensation as though someone had for an instant laid a dead cold hand on hers.

She had told herself : *"I must look at him just for a second to see what a man looks like who is talking like this, and the moment I have seen him I will look away again."*

But she didn't look away again. She couldn't. And all the time, at the back of her mind, she had known that she would not be able to.

There was a quality in those eyes, now glazed, now glittering, that held her own and compelled them. That somehow penetrated through the defence of her eyes, forced its way into her brain, laid siege to her will-power and threatened to lay hold of that and compel it, too.

She thought: *"You can't be hypnotised against your will. Everybody says so"* Yet the difficulty was to find her will, to find, to be aware of anything, save those two blazing eyes which now seemed to fill the whole field of her vision.

When his talk had stopped, when it had passed from fanaticism to passion, and to passion not troubling to hide itself, not wishing to hide itself but eager and glorying in its eagerness, she heard a small, flat, broken unrecognisable voice say out of the silence,

"You have talked like this to many women, I suppose ? "

And with the words, which she had difficulty in believing to be her own, she gave a start. She had forgotten that

she was smoking, had forgotten everything in fact except the presence of the man in the room which had seemed somehow to blot out commonplace realities entirely. Unnoticed her cigarette had burnt down between her fingers until it scorched her flesh and did something to jerk her out of the queer coma that had overtaken her. She felt like a person who has been staring long, and all but too long, over the edge of a height.

The man saw her predicament and smiled. Now he felt completely sure of himself and of the situation. He saw that there was an ash-tray standing on the table beneath the window and he left his vantage place by the door and crossed the room to get it for her.

Only two seconds before, the thought of escape had not been in the girl's mind. It had been driven out completely, as had every other sane and solid idea. Now, with this completely unexpected opportunity, it rushed back, urgent, and commanding.

She realised with overwhelming conviction that if she didn't take this chance she wouldn't get another. It was now or never.

Whilst the man was still moving towards the ash-tray on the table she leapt off the bed, threw the stub of her cigarette across the room and slipping out into the corridor slammed the door to behind her and turned the key.

She waited.

The man said something, a single word, she could not be sure what it was, and then he was quiet. He did not call out, or start a futile banging on the door.

Marjorie was breathless with excitement, but already triumphant. She had done something; she had moved, she had acted. And by that action, for the time being at any rate, she had saved herself. She knew now with complete certainty that had she stayed in that room for another five minutes she would never have found the will-power to make any sort of movement.

She felt suddenly more than a little sick at the nearness of her escape.

Then quickly and very quietly she began to tiptoe, half walking, half running, along the corridor.

She tried to gather her wits as she went, but for the first few seconds all she could think of was the old simile of her first day's hunting in Wiltshire. The hunt was up now, with a vengeance, and hounds were running, and though her heart was racing and her breath came a little short she could not but be aware of an undercurrent of something approaching pleasure now that she was doing something.

She knew that von Gerne was out of the house and as far

as she was aware the only opposition she might have to encounter would come from the maid, who should have brought up her supper to her and who had not done so. The human mind being the remarkable instrument that it is she had time to reflect that whereas, in what seemed the dim and distant ages of the evening, she had been ravenously hungry, now the thought of food almost nauseated her.

She ran down the stairs into the hall and stood still, listening. The old woodwork of the stairs had creaked alarmingly as she came down and to her overstrained ears the noise had sounded so loud that she felt quite certain the maid would come out of one of the many doors to investigate.

But the seconds went by and there was no sign of anybody stirring, nor indeed any sound at all except the thumping of her own heart, so she took courage again and crossed the hall into the old kitchen of the farmhouse, the room into which she had first of all been brought.

It was empty. Her first thought was " what a lovely fire " and she realised how cold she had become. She ran across the room to the door. It was locked and there was no key. This first setback dismayed her unreasonably and she wasted half a minute futilely trying a door which clearly nothing but the right key or a crowbar could open.

Then she ran out of the room again and down the stone flagged corridor towards the green baize door at its end.

She could not have explained exactly why she went there, except that it was the only other room in the house that she knew. She kept telling herself over and over again there must be *some* way out, there must be a way out.

This room again was empty. Under the central light stood a table half covered with the more or less completed outline of an enormous jig-saw puzzle. In the corner by a standard lamp was an open desk with two pieces of paper spread on it.

Some inexplicable curiosity sent the girl across the room to investigate. A sheet of paper and an envelope lay there. She thought she recognised the envelope as the one which Adrian Mawley had entrusted to her and which had somehow been the cause of all her troubles. Across the sheet of paper was written a sentence in some queer looking words which she did not understand (it is a measure of the mental excitement that had her in its grip that although she stared at the few words and read them she did not realise that they were in code). Underneath this odd sentence were half a dozen names and addresses written in pencil.

What all this was about she had no idea, nor whether it would be of any value to her; but to get back the letter which had been stolen from her seemed to be a definite score

against the enemy, and without thinking any further she snatched up the piece of paper and thrust it into the opening of her blouse.

Now she felt the need for immediate escape to be doubled. The fact of having stolen something had the curious psychological effect of making her desperately anxious to get away.

She did not know where the other doors of the house were and suddenly she was afraid to go and look for them. Inside the room, with the door shut, there was a false feeling of security which she knew would vanish instantly if she went out again into the house and started exploring. More and more she dreaded the prospect of suddenly coming face to face with the unpleasant maid.

The desk, from which she had taken the letter, stood by a curtained window. She drew back the curtain and looked out. Beyond the faint reflected replica of the lighted room she could see the brilliant silver of the moon and she thought, "that's lucky, I shall be able to see my way about."

She turned her attention to the window itself. There were no bars and the catch looked ordinary and simple enough. She snibbed this back and was startled at the noise it made. Foolishly she waited a couple of seconds to see what would happen. Nothing did happen. There was no sound from the house, nor any sign that she had been overheard as yet.

She seized hold of the bottom sash of the window and threw it up and was immediately startled by the result—the outside of the house was flooded with light.

Four strong electric bulbs, one at each corner of the building, were connected with all the windows at night so that the opening of a window anywhere, unless the circuit was first switched off, lit them up.

This sudden yellow brilliance completely disconcerted the girl. It frightened her as much by its conjuring trick effect as by anything else. But she kept enough sense to realise that there was no going back now, and after the first instant of surprised delay she stepped over the sill and out into the yard.

The betraying light was her ally to this extent that it helped her to locate the garage. Von Gerne had left one of the double doors open and she could see the radiator of a car gleaming in the dark interior.

She ran towards it as fast as she could, expecting every second to be stopped or challenged. She was actually inside the garage before she heard the shout. It was a man's voice and it sounded some way off, but for the instant it stopped her racing heart with apprehension.

"Pipped on the post," she thought bitterly, but she kept **her** head, realising that confusion now must spell disaster.

She pulled open the car door, searched for and found the switch for the interior light. She ran a swift expert eye over levers and switch board and was reassured by what she saw. It looked straightforward enough.

"Well, here goes," she thought and jumped in. What she had thought to be the starting button turned out to be the traffic indicator knob, but a second choice was luckier and the engine started without any trouble.

She had heard the man shout a second time, and nearer, but not too near. The gods were kind to her so far and pushing off the hand brake she jerked out rather clumsily into the yard.

The drive forced her to go carefully for it curved and its surface was none too good, but she reached the end of it without being challenged and her spirits began to rise.

On the instant they were back at zero.

The left hand driving wheel confused her a little and she made a sorry business of turning out of the drive gate. She fouled the gate post with the near running board and there was nothing for it but to stop and to reverse.

In her excitement she had forgotten to switch off the interior light, an oversight which she now blessed, for there was a diagram of the gear positions on top of the gear lever knob and she was able to get into reverse without much difficulty.

But it all took time. Seconds, hours they seemed to her, in which she felt certain that disaster would overtake her. She backed a dozen feet, got into bottom gear again and successfully negotiated the turn. Still she was not challenged or molested. The kindness of the gods was persisting and she breathed a prayer of gratitude for it in her heart. Perhaps not until that moment, when escape began to seem more of a possibility than a wild fantastic dream, perhaps not until then did she realise with what degree of fear she dreaded ever having to go back into that house again.

She was getting used to the feel of the car by now, but the road surface was so bad that it was impossible to get into top gear. She was not worrying about direction at all and for the present was perfectly content to be increasing the distance every second between herself and the hated house. She leant forward and switched off the interior light and was instantly aware of danger. The small oblong mirror fixed over the centre of the windscreen showed two ominous yellow pin-points—the lights of a following car.

Her heart thumped a little—escape was not going to be as simple as all that then—a T-junction with a wider road confronted her and she swung left handed and immediately found herself on a much better surface. She smiled again; she didn't mind the last minute nature of reprieves so long as

the reprieves existed. She accelerated, got into top gear and began to push the little car for all she was worth.

Whenever her eyes left the road for a fraction of a second they went first to the driving mirror, then to the speedometer. She was keeping the speedometer needle steadily round the fifty mark and had she dared to she would have sent it higher, for every now and again when there was anything like a long stretch of straight road those two yellow eyes, like those of a stalking hungry cat, she imagined, appeared in the mirror.

But she noticed that on the whole they got no brighter, and although she hardly dared to let herself think such a good thing it became more and more clear that she had the legs of her pursuer. At any rate he had not gained on her at the end of an hour and she made up her mind to risk the unknown roads and to squeeze the extra speed out of the little car which she felt certain it could give her.

The engine responded at once, as though it were a glad ally, and in the same instant she saw the bend. The road might have been an illogical English one by the way it suddenly took an almost right-angled turn. At the corner were some trees on a grassy verge. The girl's attention had been fixed on the driving mirror for a fraction of a second, anxious to see how her burst of speed had affected the pursuit, and she did not realise the danger quite in time to cope with it.

It was touch and go. She wrenched the wheel round and the car groaned and shrieked in its efforts to obey. She had time to hope that she would make it, to think that once again the gods would be good. Another half-ounce in the scales and they would have tipped in her favour, but the vital half-ounce was wanting. The straining wheels could not hold the road, the car slithered sideways across it, mounted the grassy edge, missed the trees by a whole series of miracles and turned a complete somersault into a shallow pit on the far side of them.

The gods had repented of their kindness.

Dicky Horder finished polishing his sixteenth pair of shoes and stepped back to admire his handiwork; Miss Featherstonhaugh's young ladies would go shod with shining leather on the morrow. Being essentially a simple soul Dicky rather enjoyed polishing leather, he found that it gave him time for reflection, and he had plenty to reflect about, principally his good luck at being in Charneck and out of Germany.

Charneck suited Dicky's cheerful disposition very well indeed. If there was work to do he would be only too glad to do it, and meanwhile whenever he fell to thinking of the hungry hours he had spent in Germany he could always slip **out** to a cafe and eat his fill.

His shoe cleaning operations finished his jobs for the evening at Feathers', " 'bout time too " he reflected ruefully, noticing that it was past nine already.

He put on a disreputable felt hat and slipped out of the back door. His tramp clothes had been discarded and from an apparently inexhaustible wardrobe Baikie had fitted him **out** with a suit of genteel shabbiness, such as a serving man might be expected to beg, borrow or steal from his master.

Wearing this Dicky now made his inconspicuous way through the streets of the gay city towards its Bohemian parts.

He had made up his mind to spend an evening with Adrian, yarning. " And if the old sinner has a bottle or two of beer to help the yarns along," thought Dicky, " why, so much the better."

The square of the Old Castle was as dark as ever and there were very few people about in it. Bohemian and artistic Charneck was out now enjoying itself and making love to its neighbour's wife at a hundred cafes, restaurants, halls and dance places.

Dicky found Adrian's house with some difficulty in the dark.

A flickering pin-point of gas shed the feeblest of light in the hall, very little of which spread to the staircase **and** none at all to the first landing.

" What a morbid lot these Professor chaps are," Dicky thought, " right opposite the head of the stairs he told me. Well, here goes."

True that there was a door exactly opposite the stairs and Dicky began to cross towards it, but something interrupted **him**.

His foot knocked against an object on the floor, and something about the feel of that contact took his eyes down quickly. **All** he could see at first was a mass slightly blacker than the general darkness, and then towards the edge of it was aware of a patch faintly white.

He bent and explored this with his hand and almost instantly shot up straight again with a startled exclamation. His **hand** was wet, **and** he did not **like** the feel of the wetness; his fingers had **a** tendency to stick together that slightly sickened him.

With his dry hand he felt inside **a** pocket for **a** box of **matches** and when he struck one and held it aloft **he** gave **a** **long low** whistle at what it showed him.

Half propped up against Adrian's door was **a** **body**. **It** seemed to have slipped **away** **a** **little** from its **original** sitting position as though resenting the tricks that had been played with what should be the dignity of death.

It was the body of a girl, a blonde. In the sudden light of

the match her face would have seemed startlingly good looking except for the ugly hole which a revolver bullet had made above the left ear.

Dicky's short-lived match wavered and went out. He cursed it softly. His sticky fingers felt stickier than ever. He wanted light and a lot of it.

"What the devil has Adrian been up to now?" he said wonderingly.

CHAPTER XII

ADRIAN pressed his foot on the accelerator pedal and the choking and spluttering began again at once. He swore concisely and conclusively. On the way out from Charneck to Mountain Farm the spluttering had shown signs of developing at high speed, but it had not been bad, and he had pushed on rather than risk the delay of a roadside investigation. He was pretty certain that it was due to an obstruction of some sort in the carburetor, probably a bit of dirt no bigger than a pin's head, but it was a pin's head that looked like queering his pitch.

All the same he didn't despair; so long as the car in front didn't greatly increase its speed he could hang on, he was still in the running.

His visit to Mountain Farm had been short and the incidents in it crowded and completely unexpected. Knowing that von Gerne was to be occupied with Polly Linder for at least some time he had hurried round to the garage, got out his car and set off for Insfarne straightaway.

In spite of an occasional splutter or two he had made good time, and he was feeling in high spirits for his visit of investigation when, with all lights carefully extinguished, he had drawn the car up under the black shadow of some trees a little distance from the entrance gate.

From there he had gone on foot. The moon was rising and it was not difficult to find his way. He kept to the grass so as to make as little noise as possible and his ears were cocked all the time in case a dog should bark, or any other warning be given. Everything was quiet, however, and presently, through the trees and shrubs that dotted the place, he could see the squat dark outline of the farmhouse.

When he sighted that he stopped and stood for a moment to make sure how the land lay and to plan his next moves. As he stood there, debating the best line of approach, he was startled by a sudden blaze of light. Someone, apparently, **had** switched on lights all round the outside of the house

and the abruptness of the illumination in that dark and lonely spot was disconcerting. His immediate thought was that he had not been as clever as he had imagined, and that somewhere, on his progress towards the house, he had unwittingly stumbled into a burglar alarm.

At that moment he was standing out in the open, and judging it would be as well to be under cover he ducked and ran half doubled up towards a clump of bushes between where he stood and the house.

But, half doubled though he was, he kept his eyes skinned. Experience dearly bought in many a desperate shift had taught him the value of doing that.

In a few seconds he was astounded to see the figure of a girl leaving one side of the house and running towards the outbuildings. He saw her plainly only for a moment, but in that moment she was practically underneath one of the lamps that had just been inexplicably switched on and he was quite certain of who she was. She was Marjorie Gillespie. She was bareheaded and without any overcoat, and she was running away from the house.

"My God," he thought, half-way between surprise and admiration, "the lights aren't for me. They're for her. She's escaping."

He had been so absorbed watching this scene, which with its queer lighting effects and its strange sense of remoteness was somehow like a fragment of a film, that he had neglected to look where he was going. He paid for it by catching his foot in a rabbit hole and all but coming a cropper. The half-fall shook him a little and by the time he was on his feet and in full possession of his wits again the girl was going into a shed. He could see now that it was the garage and that she was going for a car in it.

He stopped running, cupped his mouth with both hands and shouted,

"Miss Gillespie."

She was inside the garage already and his second shout was drowned by the sudden noise of a car engine.

He was still some way from her, and from the drive, which curved widely at that point. He had to make a decision and make it quickly. After only a second's thought he turned tail and went hell-for-leather straight as a die across the rough grass back to the spot in the roadway where he had left his car.

He reached it just as her red tail-light turned out of the gateway and began to recede into the darkness. Five seconds later his engine was running and he was in pursuit.

He remembered that the road was rough from walking **over it, but** how rough he had not realised until now when

he was trying to speed along it in a car whose springs had seen their best day long since.

A jolt which all but sent him through the windscreen convinced him of the folly of trying to hurry, and his one satisfaction was that the car in front could not be in any better plight.

He kept well within sight of its rear lamp until it swung to the left and was suddenly cut-off from view, and when he reached the turning he was devoutly thankful to feel a better road under him and still to be able to catch a glimpse of the red tail-light in front.

He settled down now to the business of overhauling it, and he soon realised that it was going to be a hard job. The car he was chasing was fast and was well-handled, he could keep on terms with it, but the moment he tried to go really fast the confounded spluttering started again in his carburettor, and instead of gaining ground he lost it. Still he was comforted by the reflection that he had plenty of petrol in the tank, and so long as he didn't lose touch completely he didn't care much how long the chase lasted.

He had no idea where they were heading for ; he supposed that Marjorie Gillespie had, but he couldn't be sure ; and though at first he was able to get an occasional glimpse of the stars, even this guide to direction was soon denied him as heavy dark clouds from the south-west began to roll across the sky, obscuring the moonlight and threatening rain, which soon began to fall in earnest.

It was a tantalising business continually chasing that elusive red light which as continually kept just beyond his grasp. Sometimes he would lose it for sixty seconds together, but whenever the road stretched straight again it would swing into view, now a little farther off, now a little nearer, always looking as though he ought to be able to overtake it in a minute or two, always eluding him.

Occasionally Adrian let his eyes wander to the speedometer. He was surprised to see how steadily it stayed in the region of fifty. He formed an intense respect for Marjorie Gillespie's capabilities as a driver. Over unknown roads and through a night which by now was as dark as a bag, to keep up an average of something very near fifty argued both guts and skill.

They must have been travelling for more than half-an-hour, when he suddenly became aware that the car in front was slowly but steadily beginning to draw away from him.

He increased his pressure on the accelerator pedal as much as he dared. Too much, for the dangerous spluttering started at once and he lost ground and cursed . . . if she was going to find an extra ten miles an hour from somewhere he would be beaten.

As sharply as though a black shutter had come **down** in front of it the red light vanished.

"Bend to the right," Adrian registered automatically, and in fifty seconds realised what an under-statement that was.

The road swung right-handed and all but doubled back on itself in an alarming way. Adrian's brakes squealed like an air-raid warning, and for one paralysing second he was quite certain that he would end up in some trees that stood just at the bend, but somehow or other, mostly on one wheel, he managed to scrape round.

"My God," he thought, "talk about Le Mans! Now where the devil has she got to, I wonder?"

There was no sign of the red lamp in front and Adrian realised that the time he had lost negotiating that hair-raising corner might be going to cost him dear. He got down to the business of keeping the engines as close as possible to the spluttering mark without actually reaching it, with the disturbing proviso darting about at the back of his mind, "*I suppose she did get round that bend all right——*"

Two miles farther on he was not so sure of it. Since the bad bend the road had run all but dead straight as though to make amends, and not a glimpse of the red tail-lamp had he caught. He was almost certain, but not quite, that **there** had been no turnings, right or left, since the corner, and he began to get alarmed.

Push on in the hope of catching up, or go back and investigate?

He could not make up his mind which to do, and like most men divided between two counsels he acted foolishly. Unconsciously almost he slackened speed, it was the growing conviction that he ought to turn back and explore pulling against the urge to push on as fast as possible.

In another mile his indecision was cut short. A red light showed up. Stationary. He pulled up beside it and discovered it to be the gleams of a charcoal fire by which an old man sat. Beyond him was the entrance to a narrow hump-backed bridge, and beyond that the twinkling lights of a mountain village. The bridge was under reconstruction, and half its already narrow width was closed, and presumably the ancient of days was stationed there as director of traffic (if any) and guardian of the builder's material.

He was a very old man, squatting gnome-like over his fire, and he seemed astonished at seeing a car at all at that time of night. He was also (as is the way with watchmen) exceedingly deaf, and Adrian spent an exasperating five minutes trying to establish any sort of contact with what there was of the old fellow's intellect.

At the end of a conversation which was mostly shouts and grunts Adrian believed, without being quite certain, that he had established the fact that no car had passed over the bridge for a couple of hours. He had to submit that there was quite a possibility that what he had really discovered was that two cars had gone over the bridge within the last hour; but in any case he had now lost so much time that pursuit would be quite hopeless, so he cursed the old watchman for a dullard and began to reverse his car.

To add to his delights the rain, which had been already falling hard, redoubled its efforts, and by the time he was back at the treacherous bend it was pouring down in torrents.

He left his car at the side of the road and got out to investigate with a hand-torch.

His first glimpses told him that he was right. Something had skidded and scraped over the soft grass at the apex of the bend very recently, and somehow those skid marks looked ugly and frightening to Adrian.

"My God, I hope she isn't hurt," he thought.

He followed the all too plain track of the car and let out a soft whistle of astonishment when he saw how it had missed the trees. He judged that by accurate driving with everything in your favour you might have scraped between those two solid trunks with possibly six inches to spare on either side, and the car, madly skidding and plunging as it must have been by then, had done it as clean as a whistle.

A few feet behind the trees the ground dropped suddenly into a hollow, and there his torch suddenly showed him the car, wheels upward, dark and deathly-looking.

It looked ugly.

"God Almighty," he said aloud, "she must be killed."

He scrambled down towards it. One tyre had been wrenched off completely, and the tyreless metal rim of the wheel was still spinning slowly. There was a smell of petrol hanging over everything, and Adrian realised how lucky it was there had been no fire. All the lights were out, of course, and when the bright circle of his torch found the door next to the driving seat with its open window he did not like to think what it was going to show him inside. The pit of his stomach felt uneasy, and he cursed irrationally at the pelting rain and the darkness.

He called her name and didn't get any answer. He had not expected any. "Here goes," he thought, and on all fours he all but crawled through the open window of the car and flashed his torch into the interior.

There was nobody there.

CHAPTER XIII

" IF EVER any of you happen to be stabbed in a tavern brawl, ladies, you may console yourselves, in your dying moments, by reflecting that the same thing happened to Kit Marlowe, one of the most talented and reprehensible characters of the Elizabethan drama. Gosh, what wouldn't I give for a few reprehensible characters round this place. Next——"

" If you would curb your passion for reprehensibility, Muriel Evans, leave the rostrum and go back to your own desk, I should be much obliged. Duller, no doubt, but more orthodox."

Muriel Evans, who had been occupying the rostrum in place of the Professor of English Drama and Literature (not yet arrived) deflated visibly. She had not expected Feathers to appear all unheralded in the doorway, and the sight disconcerted her.

" Mr. Mawley has been detained," Feathers explained to her young ladies, "and much as I regret having to interrupt Miss Evan's learned discourse I must ask you to pay attention for the next hour to Monsieur Joubelle (she stepped to one side and M. Joubelle, a frightened looking little man with an enormous drooping moustache, appeared like a rabbit out of a hat), who will lecture to you, in french on the great French dramatic authors. I have asked M. Joubelle to send along to me any young lady whose attention is found to be wandering to any marked degree, and I will have a word with her."

Feathers smiled ; and when she chose to make it so Feathers' smile could be an intimidating affair] There was complete silence in the class-room as M. Joubelle walked forward feeling a sudden striking sympathy with Daniel.

" *Mesdemoiselles*——" Feathers heard as she closed the door behind her. She hurried back towards her room ; she was upset, neither she nor Baikie knew yet what to make of the strange tale that Dicky Horder had brought back from Adrian's rooms.

Catching sight of Baikie on the landing looking more Archdeaconal than ever in his green baize apron, she called out to him.

" As soon as that good-for-nothing man comes back from the market bring him to me, will you, Milling ? "

" Very good, madam."

Dicky had been promoted to the position of buyer of

vegetables for the establishment, which gave him an excellent excuse to knock about the town pretty well whenever he wanted to, and admirable opportunities for keeping contact with various disreputable characters who were all part of Baikie's network.

Twenty minutes later the two men were talking with Feathers in her room, Dicky armed with an enormous pannier of vegetables to give colour to his part.

Late last night he had already acquainted them with his sensational discovery on Adrian's doorstep, and he had been back there again this morning in his capacity of interested idler to find out what he could.

"Any news of Adrian yet?" Baikie asked.

"Not a whisper. But he's the only one missing. That Square is fairly buzzing with people. The chief of police is there himself, looking more like an admiral of the Chinese Navy than you would think possible. He seems to be taking a personal interest in the affair, and rumour has it (I was only on the outskirts half the time) that he has sworn to get Adrian or burst."

"They've got to prove he did it when they do get him."

"True. But what the deuce has the silly goat run off for, and where to?"

"How the devil do I know?" Baikie growled bad temperedly. "Tell us all you heard."

"Frankly, it doesn't look too good," Dicky said. "The lodger on the floor higher up found the girl's body last night whilst I was back here telling you about it. He talks twenty to the dozen, so it isn't all that easy to follow all he says, but apparently he fainted, fell downstairs, and then fainted again. He tried to put in a bit about beating off half a dozen assassins, but nobody swallowed that. Unfortunately he had enough sense left to get hold of the police, and naturally that put the fat in the fire. On the edges of the crowd the identity of the girl is variously given as an ordinary street walker, Feathers herself, and something to do with the theatrical world."

"She wasn't one of us, anyway, or you would have recognised her."

"No. She can't be one of us."

"What the devil Adrian wants to get messed up with a girl for I can't think," Baikie growled. "I don't believe he shot her—yet. But you never know when women get dragged into it. And anyway it queers the pitch so—police and inquiries and infernal poking about."

"If he didn't shoot her, where is he?"

"If you ask me that again, young Horder," **Baikie said, "I shall darn well shoot you."**

" He went off in his car apparently, not long after eight. They've found that out from the garage where he keeps it. The garage proprietor didn't notice anything except that Adrian seemed in a bit of a hurry. "

" That's the sort of thing they always think they noticed— afterwards. Was there any body else who ' noticed ' anything ? "

" Unfortunately there was. Adrian had a ' char ' or ' bonne femme ' or whatever you call 'em in this part of the world to ' do ' for him. She had been out to a café for a quick one yesterday evening and was walking back to where she lives, which is quite close by. From what I could make out she was on the other side of the Square and noticed Adrian and this girl talking together on the doorstep. She didn't think anything of it at the time, except that she didn't often see Adrian with any girl, apparently, but they were standing together close to a street lamp and she happened to see them. "

" What time was this ? "

" Just about eight, or a few minutes earlier. "

Baikie made a face.

" Looks pleasant, doesn't it ? " was his comment. " I wonder if that lunatic has gone and got himself into a mess. If he has it looks like being an unholy awkward one. I should have thought he had more sense. Go on; what other bits of good news have you got to give me ? "

" That's pretty well all. Except that a very unpleasant customer turned up in the middle of the proceedings. Rather like a tailor's dummy with a monocle—— "

"—Sandy hair ? "

" That's the bird. "

" Von Gerne. The little pet. I wonder what he wanted there. Adrian was out to put a pinch of salt on that gentleman's tail. "

" I should think he could do with it. Apparently he just called on Adrian in a friendly way, and was startled to find all the schemozzle there. But he seemed to have some sort of a graft; the chief of police couldn't salute him smartly enough. "

" They all toady to army uniforms ; it's almost as bad as in Germany. What had Captain Eric von slippery Gerne got to say ? "

" He knew the girl. "

" The devil he did. And yet that's nothing to wonder at. Between them the officers of the Brigade have a very good try to seduce every presentable young woman in Charneck. "

" I don't doubt it from the look of von Gerne, or whatever

his name is. Unfortunately he had a yarn that the girl had been speaking to him only the day before and told him that she had an appointment with Adrian at eight o'clock—so it rather tallies with what the old char says she saw.*

Baikie sat silent for a minute digesting all this somewhat disturbing information; then he suddenly let out one of his short sharp barks of laughter.

"Damnation," he exclaimed, "but it's coming to something when the people working for you start committing murders of their own. You had better get back there at once, Dicky. Same gag, interested hanger-on poking about out of curiosity. Keep your ears open. The best of these Turbanians is that they can't help talking. If they had a little more intelligence they would make excellent monkeys. And if you get into a jam don't forget that every Charneckian policeman, from the chief downwards, is bribable."

When Dicky got back to the Square of the Old Castle he found that the unfortunate girl's body had just been removed in a police ambulance; but this circumstance in no way diminished, indeed it seemed rather to increase, the local interest in the affair.

The chief of police was still there; von Gerne had left; the latest rumour floating round the edges of the crowd was that the Englishman who had done the murder was famous for having innumerable nameless orgies in his room. For a considerable time nothing of any real significance happened. People contented themselves with admiring the chief of police's uniform and speculating ghoulishly on the precise nature of the dead girl's injuries. Then towards midday there was a sensation. A telegram for the chief arrived by a police messenger on a motor-bicycle. As soon as the message was read one of the dozen policemen hanging about was sent hot-foot to the garage. In a few minutes he was back again, followed by an excited garage proprietor, much enjoying the publicity and limelight.

How these things get about it is not easy to explain, but within only a short space of time the latest tidings were running freely all round the crowd "They've found the *Englishman's car*."

"The devil they have," thought Dicky without much enthusiasm; he also thought that it would be as well to get something like official confirmation of the news, so waiting until the garage proprietor had said (five or six times apparently) all that he had to say, and had at length been allowed to go back to his garage, Dicky followed him.

Dicky's clothes might look disreputable, but a brand new crisp bank-note for fifty milreps always has a convincing air.

" Press," Dicky lied laconically. " I must have some sort of a story. Know anything ? "

The milreps overcame a scrupulous hesitation.

" The police wanted to confirm the number of the Englishman's car, that was all,"

" They have found the car then ? "

" At a place called Troghen. Somewhere in the hills. I should never have thought him a murderer. One of my best customers. An Englishman, though. You can never trust these foreigners."

Dicky nodded and faded away . . . Troghen, somewhere in the hills . . . He knew that the Colonel would want the news and he felt certain that, having delivered it, he himself would very soon get his marching orders. He hurried back to Feathers' in eager expectation of them.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Adrian's torch showed him the empty driving seat of the overturned car his first reaction was relief. " She isn't dead, then," he thought. He imagined that the girl must have been able to crawl out, shaken, but by some miracle not killed, and that he would find her somewhere nearby.

He made an examination of the ground immediately round the smashed car and found nothing. He had thought that if any marks had been made by somebody crawling or dragging themselves along he might have found them, but the heavy rain made that hope fruitless.

Then he gave up searching for a while, and facing this way and that in turn called her name.

" *Miss Gillespie . . . Marjone Gillespie . . .*"

His voice died away unanswered on the dark night, and all he could hear was the rising wind and the driving rain.

He didn't like that . . . Suppose she had managed to crawl for a couple of hundred yards and had then fainted ? . . .

He switched his torch on again, and once more began to search, moving round and round the car in everincreasing circles as methodically as he could. He was not able to carry this plan out very well, for the ground was broken and full of obstacles, and twice he wasted the best part of ten minutes extricating himself from some barbed wire..

" What a damned fool I am," he thought all of a sudden. He had completely forgotten the help he could get from his **own** headlamps. He gave up searching and scrambled **back to the road**. It took him **some** minutes to **manœuvre**

his car off the road and as close up to the trees as was possible, and when he had done it he found that his trouble was largely wasted. Owing to the fact that the ground fell away so much behind the trees, all his headlamps could do was to throw twin beams across the dark countryside well above his head, and he soon realised that after all he would have to rely on his torch for what it was worth.

He thought it possible that there was a cottage nearby where the crash had been heard, and that Marjorie had been taken in there, but he could not see any lights twinkling anywhere, and whenever he stopped searching and shouted as he did at intervals he got no reply of any kind.

Thinking that she might have been dazed by the smash he went back to the car, crossed the road and looked and called out on the other side of it. The rain kept pelting down, increasing, in heaviness if anything, and the night was as dark as pitch, and long before he would admit it he realised that what he was doing was hopeless.

The truth was that in these conditions his tiny pocket torch was about as much use to him as a match, and his chance of finding any object, even one as large as a human body, was practically nil.

Nevertheless he struck at it, crossing and recrossing his tracks, now striking out on ever wider circles from the car, now coming back close to it to cover ground he might have missed. For more than two hours he continued there, until he was soaked to the skin and his torch gave no more light than a dull red glow of the filament.

Then he had to confess himself beaten. He had shouted himself hoarse in the howling wind without getting a vestige of a response, and the fear that was hardening at the back of his mind was that Marjorie Gillespie had managed to crawl away from the wreckage badly hurt and was now lying somewhere in the open fields quite possibly already dead.

Much as he hated admitting defeat and leaving the scene of the accident, he did not see how he could do any real good there until daylight came.

After a final despairing search and burst of calling, he splashed his way back towards the road and got into his own car soaking wet and tired out.

He drove back again towards the hump-backed bridge in a desperately unhappy frame of mind. The watchman by the bridge repairs was nodding over his fire, and Adrian did not think that any help would come from him. The village beyond the bridge was by now practically all shut up for the night, and Adrian's spirits were reaching zero when they were revived a little by the sight of a petrol pump outside a garage of sorts.

Not only was there a garage, but there was actually a garage proprietor in evidence, a morose individual with a badly misshapen club foot. Adrian spoke Turbanian well in Charneck, but he found it difficult to get the hang of the local patois. Eventually, however, he did manage to make himself understood.

... an accident? More than three miles away? Go and see if he could help at this time of night and in this weather? The garage man looked out expressively at the now really shocking night, and even his unpleasant face allowed itself a sardonic smile. He didn't even bother to say "No." He merely shrugged his shoulders as one might in dismissing a complete idiocy.

"Nor would you get any one from the village to turn out on a night like this," he added, "even if there really had been an accident."

"Are there any police in the place?" Adrian asked.

"Police? Why should you ask about the police?"

"To help me."

The man shook his head.

"No police here. This is a law-abiding village. The nearest policeman is at Troghen, six miles away in the mountains. Go to him, my friend, if you like, but I assure you that Joseph Franks will not get out of his warm bed at this time of night to look for anything. He will wait until the morning."

Adrian jerked his head in an angry nod, he was feeling beaten and tired out.

"Is there a hotel here?"

"No, no. No hotel here."

"Surely I can get a bed of some sort. There must be somewhere where I can get a few hours' sleep."

"Yes. You can sleep here, Herr Englishman. I let a room above the garage to motorists occasionally."

Adrian was relieved to hear it. He was rapidly coming to the conclusion that any bed, at all would be better than none, and when he saw the room in question his spirits rose a little. If there was not a great deal of comfort in it, at any rate it was clean.

"I charge five milreps," the man said, standing in the doorway, "for the room and for coffee and rolls in the morning. Gentlemen usually pay me in advance."

Adrian followed the usual custom of gentlemen, and when the garage proprietor's greasy hands closed round the money his expression actually took on some sort of degree of affability.

"No good making enemies," Adrian thought, and much as he had begun to dislike the fellow, he smiled at him and pressed a further two milreps into a very ready palm.

"Look here," he said, "there's something a bit wrong with my car and I want you to have a go at it." He explained as best he could the annoying symptoms and what he thought to be the cause of them, and the man listened intelligently. Clearly when it came to cars and their complaints, he was an easier person to deal with.

"And another thing" Adrian said. "I want to be called at six in the morning, sharp. I've got to get off early."

The man nodded as though he understood perfectly, and feeling that he could do no more that night Adrian started to take off his rain-sodden clothes, and within ten minutes was fast asleep.

When he awoke sunlight was streaming in through the window. Suspiciously bright sunlight, as he realised after the first few seconds of semi-consciousness. He flicked up the lid of his wrist-watch and let out a yell.

He jumped out of bed, washed hurriedly in the basin of cold water that stood in one corner, and drew on his still only semi-dry clothes.

"I'll murder that club-footed clown," he muttered as he ran downstairs.

The proprietor was just returning to the garage in an ancient car as he ran downstairs.

"Why the devil didn't you call me at six?" Adrian demanded.

The other man was quite unmoved by Adrian's display of temper and evidently saw no justification for it. He pointed out that at half-past five farmer Otto Klauster had called at the garage and hired him to do the milk round of the village, since the car in which the farmer usually did it had at last completely broken down.

"It was not time to call you then, Herr Englishman," the man said, "and I am not back until now." He shrugged his shoulders.

Adrian took a deep breath and managed to contain himself. "What about my car?" he asked.

"I shall begin to do that now. You could not expect me to refuse Otto Klauster and him my biggest client."

"Breakfast?"

"Give me ten minutes, Herr Englishman, and your coffee and rolls will be ready."

They were ready, piping hot, and Adrian found that he was ravenous. The meal made him feel better, and even the fact that his car was not ready when he was did not unduly depress him.

"Mind you get it done in the next half-hour," he counselled the garage proprietor, and he set off at a brisk pace along the road. In some ways he was glad of the walk,

for his damp clothes were making him feel cold again and he wanted exercise.

The storm had blown itself out in the night, and it was a magnificent morning with a clear sky and bright sunshine. Adrian was in the better spirits that a fresh day always brings to that marvellously elastic thing, the human temperament. When all was said and done (he told himself) Marjorie Gillespie could not have vanished. She would be found somewhere, in all probability at some nearby labourer's cottage, where his shouts on the stormy night had somehow failed to penetrate.

As he went over the bridge he noticed that the sleepy surly watchman had gone and that repairs, in the leisurely Turbanian fashion, were under way. He met nobody on the road except a band of hill gypsies with their two colourful wagons pulled by piebald horses. A rout of small dark children ran barefooted and indeed almost naked behind, and a young girl, lovely with a sort of untamed beauty looked out over the bottom half of the door. The gypsy himself, a swarthy thick-set fellow, was leading the first horse. Adrian stopped and asked him if he knew anything about the accident and had seen anything of an English lady. The Romany smiled and shook his head ; it was not, as Adrian realised, in answer to either query, but simply the blank smile and negation of a man who didn't understand.

" Doesn't know a word I'm saying to him," Adrian thought. " Oh, well, can't be helped. I'll have to rely on myself in these parts, that's clear."

He parted from the gypsy and pushed on, and when he reached the scene of the accident looked about expectantly. Once again he marvelled at the narrowness of the car's escape between the trees. He could see now that a thick bush had done something to break the severity of the car's fall, and he took fresh hope, thinking that the girl might not have been so badly hurt after all.

Five minutes made it clear, at any rate, that she was not lying out in the open anywhere, and then he spied the cottage. It was just what he might expect to find there, a tumbled-down affair belonging evidently to a farm labourer or charcoal burner. It stood half-hidden behind trees some three hundred yards from the smashed car, and he marvelled that he could have missed it in his searchings the night before.

He made his way now towards it quickly and hopefully. He did not doubt that Marjorie Gillespie was lying there feeling very sorry for herself and that she would be glad to see him. He realised, with some surprise for the warmth of his feelings in the matter, how very glad he would be to see her safe again.

But when he reached the place and saw it near to, some of his hopeful assurance began to evaporate.

The door was half off its hinges, most of the windows were broken, the chimney was mournfully smokeless, and altogether it gave singularly little evidence of being inhabited.

Three minutes inside were quite sufficient to convince him that it was not inhabited, and had not been for these many weeks.

It was a derelict shell of a place, and even if it had given shelter to Marjorie Gillespie last night, which he very much doubted, she was quite certainly not there now.

He went outside again and looked round. The rather bleak countryside stood bare and silent—and empty.

A feeling of bewilderment, and even of despair, began to take possession of him.

"But damn it all," he cried aloud, "she's *gone*. She's vanished into thin air. It just doesn't make sense."

He made his way back to the garage in a much less cheerful frame of mind. At the back of his mind there was still a feeling, more than a hope, that there must be some simple explanation of the apparent mystery, and that when it was found everything would be all right. But what that explanation could be and when it would come to light completely defeated him for the time being.

The garage proprietor had evidently finished attending to the car and was standing by it talking to a figure in the romantic green uniform of the Turbanian police.

Both men looked up quickly as Adrian came in.

"You have finished my car?" he asked. "Is it all right?"

"Yes, Herr Englishman."

"You are the owner of this car?" the policeman asked.

Adrian replied with warmth that he was, and thought "if they are going to try to pin any car-stealing business on to me they are in for a disappointment." He was not altogether sorry to see the policeman there. It was true that normally he did his best to avoid bringing the police into contact with any of the activities with which he was from time to time associated, but this business of a girl vanishing into thin air in a country side completely unknown to him was different. If the Turbanian police could help him to find Marjorie Gillespie he could attend to his own business with her later. But find her first he must.

"There has been an accident about three miles back——" he began, and gave a brief account of what had happened as far as he knew it.

The policeman listened without interrupting and nodded. Adrian's statement was a model of cautiousness. It

contained the essential relevant facts, but it gave nothing away unnecessarily.

At the end the policeman made no comment on it. Instead he asked,

" You could give me your name, Herr Englishman ? "

" Mawley. Adrian Mawley."

At the words he could have sworn that a look flickered between the two other men, but why this should be so and what the significance of it might be he could not guess.

" You live in Charneck ? "

" Yes, yes. I've told you that I do. I lecture at Feathers'—Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy."

" I see. I think if you could come to the station at Troghen and give me all the particulars that I might be able to help you."

Adrian groaned. Officialdom the world over did not vary much, he reflected, but if giving a repetition of all that he had already said was going to help in finding Marjorie Gillespie he did not mind. He said so.

" I'll come anywhere and do anything if you can help me to find that girl. Is the car fixed ? "

" Yes, Herr Englishman. It was what you thought, a choke in the carburettor. Perfectly clean, now. Three milreps."

Adrian handed over the money and jumped into the driving seat.

" If you get in," he said, " and tell me which way to go we won't lose any more time."

The policeman climbed into the rear seat and sat immediately behind Adrian.

" Turn to the right out of the garage, Herr Mawley," he said.

Adrian started off impatiently and the last thing he noticed about the garage was the half-sardonic, half-enigmatical smile on the face of the proprietor.

It did not take him long to reach Troghen, a typical Turbanian hill town with its huge mediaeval church, its gabled buildings crowding along the narrow winding main street and its square.

The police station was in the square and here, under the always courteous direction of the policeman, Adrian stopped the car.

" If you would come inside and give me all the particulars again, Herr Mawley——"

Adrian sighed resignedly and jumping out made his way into the building closely followed by the official figure in green.

" Station " he realised was rather a grand term for the

establishment, which turned out, after all, to be little more than the house where the single policeman lived.

There was a small entrance hall and Adrian hesitated there, undecided which way to go.

"If you would step into this room, Herr Mawley/" the policeman suggested, opening a door on the left.

Adrian walked briskly forward, anxious only to get all the tedious formalities over as soon as possible.

He heard the door close behind him with a suspicious click and swung round. The policeman had not followed him into the room.

"What the devil——" he exclaimed and took three quick steps to the door. It was locked. In the middle of one of the upper panels was a small square grating. The wood-work behind this was now pushed to one side and through the barred opening the policeman peered in. His face wore a smile of pure triumph.

"You are under arrest, Herr Mawley," he announced, "for the murder you committed in Charneck. I shall keep you here until I get orders what to do with you." He remained there a moment longer to look gloatingly on the captive of his wiliness and then slid the wooden panel back into position.

Adrian stared at the now blank door in comic bewilderment. Things were happening to him which he completely failed to understand.

"Has the whole damn place gone mad?" he demanded angrily.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Marjorie Gillespie's car screeched and slithered off the road and buckled between the trees to its final crash in the hollow beyond, it all but killed a man who was crouching there. If he had not been used to quick movement it would have killed him, but an agility almost like that of a wild animal was his saving, and death missed him by a few yards. The bank under the trees was a great place for rabbits and he had been setting snares, now he did not know what greater game might have fallen into his hands, and he went forward cautiously to investigate.

He was not used to the ways of motor cars and did not really appreciate the extraordinary nature of the accident that had taken place. The **car had** whizzed between the trees with only inches to spare **and had used** the edge of the hollow as **a sort of spring-board from which it had jumped**

forward, turning completely over and finally coming to earth with a crash which, but for one circumstance, must have been fatal.

The saving circumstance was an enormously thick bush of springy furze which broke the force of the final impact considerably.

The gypsy had hardly reached the scene of the accident and begun to investigate when a sound from the road made him lift his head—a second car?—at that time of night it was unusual for any car to be using the mountain road—two together constituted no less than an event. He realised that in all probability they were connected; and that, in that fact, lay danger for him. He must either give up any hope of making gain out of what had happened, or he must act quickly, and very quickly. He came of a tribe who, if they were acknowledged experts in ruthlessness and cruelty and avarice, could count at least one great virtue on the credit side—that of courage.

Not he, nor any of his sort, were likely to be turned from an enterprise by reason of any danger which it might entail. Twice before he had made money out of opportunities similar to the one that had fallen his way now and he did not hesitate. He was used to the night, and what was utter darkness to ordinary eyes was not a great deal worse than twilight to his. He could see that there was only one occupant of the car, a girl, and he investigated just sufficiently to find out that she was still alive. Whether she was injured at all, and if so how badly he did not stop to find out. He had not time. With hands which were strong and for all the innate cruelty of the man curiously delicate in their touch, he coaxed Marjorie Gillespie's limp body through the open window of the car, and getting it across his shoulders in a sort of fireman's hoist set off sure-footed and steady-gaited in the darkness. He went thus for almost a mile before coming to the edge of the copse. Here he halted long enough to give three short whistles twice repeated, and when these were answered he made his way into the wood.

Just inside there was a clearing and in the clearing stood two wagons. As he moved forward the dark forms of horses, standing patiently at their picketings in the rain, moved, and their heads were lifted to greet a known smell and to investigate a new one.

The door of one of the wagons stood open and the interior was lit by a dull glow from some primitive sort of stove. Sitting before this stove, her deeply furrowed face partly illuminated by it, partly in shadow, was an old woman.

"What have you got there?" she demanded.

The **gypsy** came up the three wooden steps of the wagon.

carefully negotiated the narrow entrance and laid his unconscious burden down on a bunk along the side.

"Shut the door," he ordered, "so they can't see us if they start searching, and light the lamp. She's not dead, only injured. Her car skidded off the road by the big coney bury."

The old woman was already doing as she was told about the door and the lamp, and when the soft yellow radiance of oil filled the wagon she came to the gypsy's side and looked down on the girl.

She made a curious clicking noise, a noise somewhere between sardonic amusement and grudging admiration.

"She's good-looking," she said. "You'll have trouble in the camp if you keep her in it."

The gypsy laughed.

"I'll attend to the trouble," he assured her, "and anyway I don't intend to keep her longer than necessary."

"You think someone will pay for her?"

"Twice before we have got money for people who got lost and whom we looked after, haven't we?"

The woman nodded; the gypsy had been cunning or fortunate, perhaps a bit of both, in his two previous ventures into brigandage.

"Is she bad?"

The gypsy was investigating; in the matter of the body and of what it needed to put its hurts right he was full of the traditional knowledge of his tribe, knowledge which many a qualified doctor might well envy.

Actually Marjorie had had an amazingly lucky escape. Her only injury had been inflicted by the steering wheel, from which she had received a very nasty blow across the forehead and face. This had knocked her completely unconscious and the result of it was already beginning to show as an ugly bruise.

The gypsy straightened up from his task of examination and drew his finger across his face.

"That's all," he said. "Her senses have gone. She will soon get over that."

As if in confirmation of his words the girl at that very moment began to stir and to mutter uneasily.

The wagon door opened and a dark devil-may-care swaggering young Romany came gracefully in.

"Hallo," he said. "What's up?"

When he saw the unconscious girl on the bunk he let out a whistle.

"Picked a nice one this time," was his comment.

"I hope somebody will pay me nice money for looking after her," the gypsy answered. "That's the only interest she has got for us here. Understand?"

The young Romany's dark eyes met his fearlessly.

"Yes. Naturally, I understand," he said, but his thick and sensual lips were lively with a mocking smile.

Marjorie was conscious for some time before realising it. Her dreams and imaginings had been so night-marish and wild that at first the slightly swinging oil lamp and the strange little world which it illuminated seemed like part of them. But gradually, as she struggled more and more into full consciousness, she began to be overwhelmingly aware of one thing—pain. That reality warned her that she was no longer dreaming, and she gave a groan and asked weakly,

"What's happened? Where's the car?"

Immediately somebody moved out of the shadows by her side, a lined and hag-like face was bent over hers and a cup was pressed to her lips.

"Drink this, dearie."

Marjorie had not the will-power to resist. She let the warm pungent stuff, rather like a bitter brew of tea, trickle into her mouth and down her throat, and within a few minutes she was sunk in unconsciousness again, but this time it was the unconsciousness of sleep, of the deep re-creating sleep which nature most needed to do her wonderful work of healing.

When she next woke she was better. She knew herself instantly to be better. The pain in her head was still there, and indeed the sharpness with which she felt it was a sure sign of the fullness with which her mind was back in control again.

She looked round her room in astonishment, astonishment mainly for the fact that it was evidently not a room at all properly speaking, but some sort of caravan, and it was moving. In the corner watching her with a malevolent smile, swaying grotesquely with every movement of the caravan, sat the old hag whose troll-like face she dimly remembered from the confused mists of the night.

Marjorie disliked and feared her instinctively, and whilst she was making up her mind to ask the witch-like old woman some questions the caravan jolted to a halt.

And then a very queer thing happened. What was at first hearing almost an incredible thing to Marjorie, From outside the caravan faint but quite unmistakable came the voice of Adrian Mawley.

Marjorie smiled. She had no idea how Adrian had got there (indeed she had only the most confused idea as to how she had got there herself) but she was supremely glad to hear him. Now things would be all right.

Adrian spoke a second time and then a third, and he did not seem to be any nearer. Marjorie thought she would

look through the window and let him know that she was there, but she had hardly started to move before the old hag from the corner was on top of her, pressing a greasy hot hand over her mouth and forcing her back on to her bunk.

Marjorie tried to struggle and very soon realised how desperately weak she still was. She all but fainted and by the time she had recovered the caravan was jolting on its way again and there was no longer any sound of Adrian's friendly and reassuring tones.

The gypsy walking by the side of his horse smiled in great content. Although Adrian's Turbanian was the speech of the cities he had understood pretty well all of it. Quite enough anyway for his purpose. The young English gentleman was looking for the young English lady. Good. Young gentleman looking for young ladies could very easily be persuaded to pay money for help in finding them.

Twice during the long day Marjorie was given a brew of herbs to drink, and once a little food. Towards evening she felt much better, and indeed except for a dull persistent headache she could almost have persuaded herself that she was well again.

They had travelled in true Romany fashion, leisurely but steadily, and had covered a matter of twelve miles during the day. By nightfall they reached a spot familiar to all the Romanys, a site in a hollow on the lee side of a wood close by a stream, and here they made camp, picketing the horses and lighting a fire in the open.

They were in wild remote country that the gypsy knew well and he did not think that there was much chance of their being disturbed, so Marjorie was brought out of the wagon and allowed to sit in the circle round the fire.

A wild young Romany beauty looked at her pallor and her town clothes with scornful envy, but there was nothing of scorn in the eyes of the Romany man who had come into the caravan the evening before.

Marjorie was not spoken to round the fire, but when she went back to the caravan the old gypsy followed her in and talked to her. His English was primitive but he could make himself understood well enough. He wanted to know the names and addresses of any of her friends who would be willing to pay him for the trouble of looking after her.

"Why didn't you tell the Englishman this morning that I was there?" Marjorie demanded.

He smiled at her and shook his head, and then repeated his query about names and addresses.

"As long as we know that we are going to be paid for our trouble you will be perfectly safe and comfortable,"

he said, "but if we didn't think that"—he shrugged his shoulders—"it might be different."

"Perhaps you will think it over during the night," he advised, and with an exaggerated bow he quitted the caravan and Marjorie was left with the old hag sitting huddled on guard in the corner and with her own thoughts.

CHAPTER XVI

IT WAS well past midday when the key was turned on Adrian and he heard that surprising sentence, "...you are under arrest for the murder you committed in Charneck."

"It will be nothing to the murder I'll commit here when I get hold of some of you incompetent monkeys in green," he swore aloud. He realised that some stupid mistake had been made, and it looked like costing him valuable time. How it was that he came to be mixed up in officialdom's errors he had no idea, and for the moment was too angry to speculate about it.

Very foolishly he lost his temper and wasted five minutes and a lot of energy in banging on the stout oak door with his fists and shouting.

He created such an uproar that presently the panel slid back and the policeman peered through the grating. He was still smiling broadly, and eyed his captive much as a successful hunter would eye some wild and dangerous animal he had trapped.

"What the devil's the game?" Adrian demanded furiously.

The policeman continued to smile.

"You let me out of here and start making some inquiries quickly, or you'll regret it."

The smile increased, and having satisfied himself that his prisoner could do no harm the policeman slid the panel back into position and withdrew.

Adrian was left more angry than ever.

"I'll wipe that smug smile off his silly face," he promised himself. "I'll get out of here if it kills me."

An excellent resolution—but when he cooled down a little and began to look round the room dispassionately he could not honestly see any very great chance of achieving it.

The room was small, with bare whitewashed walls. There was no movable furniture, the table and the solitary chair being screwed to the floor with iron brackets; there was a window which was protected by formidable iron bars some five inches apart. Short of possessing a hacksaw, or the ability of compressing his body into the necessary five inches, Adrian

did not see how the window was going to help him. There was no fireplace, nor any visible means of heating. Apparently in cold weather it would be just too bad for anybody in the lock-up at Troghen.

It was a discouraging terrain, and after examining it for ten minutes Adrian realised that he knew as much as mortal man could know about the inside of that unattractive whitewashed room and about the impossibility of breaking out of it.

A series of loud bangs from outside brought him to the window again, both in curiosity and in the vague hope that whatever was happening outside might possibly be of some help to him.

At any rate it was a relief to have something to look at, and the central square of Troghen, on to which the front windows of the policeman's house faced, was suddenly humming with activity.

The loud bangs came from a fanfare of fireworks, and these heralded the entry into the square of a procession. As with most festivities in that part of the world it seemed to have its roots fixed almost equally in religion and alcohol. There were numerous statues and saints, and plenty of evidence that the cafes of Troghen had done a roaring trade already.

Adrian knew his Turbany well enough to have learnt that when the people there set out to enjoy themselves they know how to do it. Any excuse will suffice ; one of the innumerable saint's days throughout the calendar, a royal birthday, the anniversary of some far-off forgotten victory, all are equally welcome as the occasion for a *fiesta*, which means dancing and music and flowers and laughter; long queues of tableaux staged on farm wagons drawn by patient oxen ; hundreds of grotesque masks ; processions of children in the superfine white lace of some stage in their religious development; a very great deal of drink; and when darkness comes and the drinking and dancing get wilder, the music less and less coherent, a notable amount of attention paid to the God of Love and his arts.

Adrian had seen plenty of such *fiestas* in Charneck, and now looking out on the square of Troghen he recognised all the signs of a good one. It looked like being Troghen's big day. The square was already a seething mass of people, no fewer than three brass bands were blaring out, five statues of the Virgin could be seen high above the excited crowd carried at all sorts of perilous angles, wagon after wagon was making its patient, ponderous way round the square, each bearing a tableau which was more loudly acclaimed than the last.

It was amusing to watch; and it served for a time at any rate to take Adrian's mind off the subject of his captivity. Occasionally, as he stood there at the window, he would hear behind him the click of the wooden panel and he would turn

round to see the well-satisfied eye of the policeman peering at him through the grating. Adrian was wise enough now not to waste any more breath on the man, but he found himself taking a very active and growing dislike to him.

"I'd like to dot him one in that inquisitive eye of his," he grumbled, as he turned once more, after one of the periodic inspections, to look out on the animation and bustle of the square.

Having got to the central square the procession was evidently loath to leave it, and Adrian got tired of counting how many times the oxen-drawn wagons with their colourful tableaux went round and round. Occasionally the whole slow round-about came to a halt whilst somebody, in an excess of religious zeal or alcoholic exuberance, jumped up and delivered an impromptu harangue. These extempore speeches were always popular and drew volleys of enthusiastic applause from people who, as Adrian was perfectly convinced, were far too distant to have heard a single word of them.

One of these halts brought a wagon to rest immediately opposite Adrian's window. Studying it raised in his mind a query which always occurred to him when watching a Turbanian *fiesta*—where on earth all the attractive girls were conjured from who took part in it. On this one wagon alone there were four girls, all of them, or so it seemed to Adrian, exceptionally pretty.

Whether they represented any particular episode in the life of the saint whose *fiesta* it was he couldn't tell; but if so, then it must have been an interlude from the saint's unregenerate days, for there was an absence of clothing and an abundance of displayed feminine charms which were vastly to the crowd's liking.

One of the four girls noticed Adrian's face behind the bars of the lock-up and laughed at him. It was a laugh which had blended in it sympathy, amusement, encouragement, indifference—all the philosophy of somebody used to the rough side of the cloth.

Adrian would have been prepared to bet that the girl herself had seen the lock-up from the inside, or at least had come near doing so. She was attractive, no doubt about that, but it was the cheap attractiveness of the *cocotte*. Yet there was character in her face, it had a sort of perkiness which was at once attractive and provocative.

She waved to Adrian and he waved back, then she pulled a rose out of her hair and threw it towards him. It hit the window-pane and fell on to the stone wall, and Adrian made a pantomime of being suitably touched. The girl nudged one of her companions to let her share the amusing spectacle of a man who was fool enough to be in the lock-up on the

day of the great *fiesta*, and both of them roared with laughter.

"Little minx," Adrian thought, but he could not help liking her pert face for all that.

Twice again he saw her as the procession wound its way round and round the square, and each time she smiled and waved.

When he had first established contact with her Adrian had entertained a vague hope that conceivably it might be possible to ally the girl with him in some attempt at escape, but that optimism soon faded away, and he realised that the incident was merely an amusing break in an otherwise singularly unamusing position.

After an hour and more he got tired of watching the procession and went to the window only intermittently. It was now long past lunch time, and he was beginning to feel hungry, but there was no sign that anybody had made allowance for the fact.

Three or four times whilst he was looking out of the window he had heard a telephone bell ring somewhere, and shortly after the latest of these occasions the panel clicked back once more and the policeman spoke to him through the grille.

"I have got my orders about you, Herr Mawley," he announced triumphantly. "You are to be taken back to Charneck by car this afternoon under escort."

"Like hell I am," thought Adrian, but all the same he didn't at the moment see any way out of it.

"When do I get anything to eat?" he demanded aloud.

"Possibly in Charneck. Possibly not. I was given no orders about that."

Adrian looked away and occupied himself trying to think of anybody else in his life to whom he had taken such an instant and violent dislike.

He was used enough to leisurely Turbanian methods not to be surprised that it was a full hour before anything else happened. By this time the feeling of active hunger had begun to pass off and had settled down to a mere uncomfortable disquiet at the pit of his stomach.

The *fiesta* was still going on in the square with more vigour than ever, and Adrian divided his time between watching it from the window and sitting on the fixed seat staring at a blank whitewashed wall in unutterable boredom.

It was an immense relief when a clatter outside the room told him that something was going to happen at last.

The key was turned, the door was pushed cautiously open, and there entered not the policeman but a villainous looking Turbanian soldier armed with a rifle and a long and savage-looking bayonet. This unpleasant gentleman took up his

position just inside the room, spat into a corner, and scowled at Adrian. He looked perfectly capable of using his bayonet without any provocation at all. When he was safely installed the door opened again and the policeman entered.

Adrian could not help being amused at these precautions. Evidently the Troghen policeman thought that he had exhibited quite enough courage that morning in his single-handed apprehension of a dangerous murderer, and in an admirable Turbanian fashion, he intended to let somebody else run the risks now.

The soldier was as different from the smart men of the Brigade whom one saw about the streets of Charneck as chalk is from good Cheddar cheese. The formality of a daily shave evidently did not appeal to him, and altogether he looked what he very probably was, a hill brigand who found it more profitable to murder people whilst wearing government uniform than on his own.

"If I got half a chance I could bribe him all right," Adrian thought. "I know his sort. He'd skin his maternal aunt for fourpence."

With three people in it the small room was now almost crowded, and Adrian thought that he ought to be able to wring some advantage from the fact. Something told him that it was now or never. Once they got him in a car and whisked him off to Charneck there would be precious little chance of keeping on Marjorie Gillespie's trail.

But although these thoughts were running through his head he gave no sign of animation, but simply sat there looking huddled up and dejected.

"I have orders to search you for arms, Herr Mawley," the policeman said. "Stand up, please."

Adrian saw the reason for the soldier now. The policeman had been so satisfied at trapping him that he had overlooked the question of a search, or had not cared to carry it out single-handed. Now, with a rifle and a bayonet as his allies, he approached the task quite cheerfully.

The only weapon Adrian had about him was his black rubber life-preserver in a side pocket, and he determined now to make this serve his purpose.

He gave no sign of having heard what the policeman said, and that official stared at him a little doubtfully, evidently not quite trusting his apathetic attitude.

Adrian was apparently looking at the floor, but out of the corner of his eye he was watching both the soldier by the door and the policeman.

The soldier was dividing his attention between **the** *fiesta* out in **the** square and what was happening in the room, the policeman, **after his first moment of hesitation, was moving**

forward. Adrian still sat there, the half-seconds seeming as long as minutes; then, when the policeman was almost standing over him, he acted.

His right hand flickered to his side pocket and flung the black life-preserver away into the corner of the room, and at the same time he jumped bolt upright from his seat and brought his left fist up under the policeman's chin with a vicious jab.

Quite a lot of things happened at once then. The policeman, who had stopped a really nasty jolt, staggered back, his green cap knocked askew over one eye, and the soldier did precisely what Adrian hoped he would do. Convinced that what had been thrown into the corner of the room must be some sort of weapon, probably a knife or a revolver, he grinned with the anticipation of the born looter, and without a second's hesitation bent down to retrieve it.

It was a very ill-advised move. Adrian was separated from the man by about two yards, and he covered the distance with one single jump, landing with both feet together smack in the middle of his ribs. Every puff of wind was knocked out of the wretched soldier and his rifle clattered to the stone floor. Adrian got his hands on it like a flash, whisked it in a savage half circle and brought the heavy butt of it down with a most almighty crack on top of the policeman's head.

The policeman, still discommoded by the jab under his chin, was making a creditable effort to come into the picture again, but the blow he got on top of his green-capped head would have put an ox down for the count, and he promptly ceased to have any further interest in the proceedings.

The whole mad whirlwind of action had taken barely fifteen seconds. Adrian let out a whoop of excited joy, jumped over the prostrate body of the soldier, now doing his best to be violently sick, and ran out of the room, through the office beyond, towards the door giving on to the street.

The primitive satisfaction of a successful fight was on him. "That's settled that little lot," he said with pleasure, "but, by all that's holy, I hope that dolt has got a thick skull or I really shall be a murderer."

He pulled open the door and clattered down the steps at top speed. The next thing he knew was that he was sitting down on the pavement seeing a bewildering array of stars. He had come out a shade too fast and had run full tilt into a reveller passing by.

The reveller had fared rather worse than Adrian. He had lost his balance, his wind, and his grotesque mask, which had rolled away across the pavement, and he gave every sign of losing his temper.

But Adrian didn't give him time to. With great presence of mind he grabbed the fallen mask, clapped it over his own face, and jumping to his feet dashed off into the crowd.

He found himself caught up with a mass of young men all cheering themselves hoarse about he had no idea what. Adrian cheered with the best, partly because he wanted to lose his identity in the mob, and partly because he felt strangely exalted by his successful *blitzkrieg* against his captors.

The crowd was dense, and when he had worked his way towards the middle of it he thought it would be perfectly safe to stay there for some minutes at any rate and keep an eye on developments at the police station.

Indeed it was not easy now to do anything else, for the cheering, laughing crowd was packed so tight that he had to surrender himself to its movement and go where it went.

In this way, laughing and shouting as loud as anybody, being pelted with flowers by girls on the various wagons and pelting them back again, he moved slowly round the square, half of his own volition, half carried by the crowd.

When he was half-way round, and so opposite the police station, but on the far side of the square, he saw an official car forcing its way to the station doorway. It was driven by a soldier and carried a second soldier as a passenger. When it halted this second one jumped out and ran up the station steps.

"This is where the band begins to play," Adrian told himself. "I think I'll give Troghen a miss for a bit."

By strenuous efforts he edged his way to the fringe of the crowd, and unnoticed by anybody in that noisy, happy throng, slipped away from it all down a narrow side street.

He was sorry not to be able to stay. If things went on hotting up at their present rate the Troghen *fiesta* gave every appearance of having a good evening. The anonymity of the huge crowd was so attractive that for a moment Adrian was tempted to stay there, but he realised that mere hiding for a few hours was not enough. He must get away and get something done. And he had already changed his mind about Charneck. Now that he was free again and under his own steam he meant to get back there as soon as possible. Although he kept reassuring himself with thoughts about thick skulls, he could not dispose of a very uncomfortable feeling at the back of his mind that the heavy rifle butt might have done its job a shade too effectively, and if he had got himself into that sort of a mess on top of everything else his only hope lay in getting back to Baikie.

Baikie, as everybody in the game knew, could hide a man so that no search found him and could pull wires which would suffice to move mountains.

"It's Baikie or bust for me," Adrian assured himself rather more soberly as he hurried down the side street.

All Troghen was congregated in the square for the *fiesta* and the side streets and alleyways were as deserted as though it was Sunday midnight. Adrian had no idea where he was heading, nor for the moment did he care, all he wanted to do was to get safely away from Troghen and find some means of reaching Charneck.

He tore off his mask and threw it away in the gutter as he hurried along. The excitement of his escape had made him forget his hunger, but the sight of a pastry-cook's re-awakened it and he felt that he would have given a fortune for a chance of sitting down to a square meal.

Troghen was not a big town, and he was soon on the outskirts of it. For all he knew the direction to Charneck might equally well be in any point of the compass, and when he came to choice of ways he turned at random.

Before long he was out of the town in the wild hill country that surrounded it, and he was beginning to realise that he must halt and make a definite plan when the track that he was following suddenly debouched on to what was by comparison a main road. After a moment's hesitation Adrian turned left along this, and then sat down by the roadside to smoke a cigarette and to think out his next moves. He did not know what had happened to his car, but he felt certain that it must be garaged somewhere at the rear of the Troghen police station, and the idea of going back to get it was tantalisingly attractive. But he had the sense to realise that it would be madness to run his head into the noose to that extent, and he sat there enjoying every puff of his cigarette, keeping a wary eye lifted along the road, and pondering on what his best method might be of getting back to Charneck. It had taken him some time to get thus far away from the centre of Troghen, and altogether it was now about an hour since his hectic half-minute in the police station. He did not want much more time to slip by before he had decided on a plan of action, and he was relieved when he saw a ramshackle lorry come rumbling along the road.

He halted it by the simple method of dancing up and down in the centre of the roadway until it was forced either to run over him or to stop.

The driver, an unpleasant, unshaved individual, scowled unamiably.

Adrian took one look at him and decided what line to adopt. Mercifully the fact that the policeman had not searched him when he should have done had left him his pocket-book and note-case.

He now pulled this out of his pocket and extracted

a clean, crisp fifty milrep-note. It was a large tip in any circumstances, and it made the villainous looking driver's eyes open and did something to soften his scowl.

"Where are you bound for?" Adrian asked him.

The driver answered with three words reluctantly spoken, apparently, but magical.

"South to Charneck."

Adrian smiled. Things looked like simplifying themselves a great deal. To the first fifty milrep-note he added another.

"I, too, want to get to Charneck," he said, "and I want to get there quickly. One of these notes is yours now," he pushed it through the window of the cab, "and I'll give you the other when we reach the capital."

A grimy hand swallowed up the piece of paper and something approaching a grin came over the unshaven face. If strangers were mad enough to scatter fifty milrep-notes about, the driver was very pleased to meet them.

"You can jump in," he said. "It's against the regulations, but we'll chance that."

"Regulations, my friend, are made to be broken, didn't you know that?" Adrian queried, as he swung up joyfully into his seat in the small cab beside the driver.

The driver grunted resumed the scowl which was apparently his normal expression, and ramming his gear lever into bottom with all the glorious disregard which a man has for machinery not his own, started off on his rattling journey.

Adrian sat back, and as far as the discomfort of his seat allowed him, relaxed. Things had certainly looked ugly in the Troghen lock-up, but now that he was on his way back to Baikie he felt happier. Once in Charneck, whatever fantastic misunderstandings had occurred about this business of a murder could surely be cleared up, and Baikie was always Baikie.

There were clouds, however, to mar this horizon of content. One was the uncomfortable memory of the force with which he had brought that rifle butt down on the policeman's head; the other was the realisation that the farther he got away from Troghen the farther he got from the scene of Marjorie Gillespie's mysterious disappearance and from any chance of solving it.

Rather surprisingly the saturnine lorry driver made one or two attempts to get into conversation. He asked some questions and was evidently curious to know who Adrian was and what brought him there. Against these queries Adrian naturally fought a defensive action, contenting himself with a non-committal grunt, as though he had hardly understood what was said. He did not really care how much

the man talked as long as he kept the lorry moving towards the capital.

They had been going for some twenty minutes when they slowed up to take a sharp bend, and were immediately confronted with something going on ahead of them.

Like those of any hunted man's Adrian's senses were super-sharp and it took him precious little time to realise what was happening. There was a rough and ready barricade blocking half the road, and a private car had been stopped at it by two soldiers who were questioning the occupants.

Adrian didn't like the look of it at all. It was evident that the soldiers he had seen going into the police station at Troghen had acted promptly. The hunt was up now. And he felt uncomfortably cold in his stomach for a moment when he realised that it might well be a hunt for a man who had killed a policeman.

By now the driver of the lorry had seen what was taking place and was evidently suspicious. He said something which Adrian couldn't catch and shot a sly grin at him. *

Adrian swore futilely under his breath. In another hundred yards their vehicle would be halted and searched.

"This anything to do with you?" the driver asked.

"Haven't the vaguest idea what you are talking about," Adrian replied, but even as he was saying the words his right hand was busy with the catch of the near side door.

The driver started some surly sentence about, "Don't get me into trouble, that's all—" but Adrian never heard more than the beginning of it. He knew that he could wait no longer. His hand tightened on the catch as he swung the door wide open and jumped for it, hoping for the best.

The best, as it turned out, was only second best, and, indeed, hardly that. He landed awkwardly, knocking a good deal of the wind out of himself, and when he staggered up and started to run his right foot hurt like the devil.

The first thing he heard was a shout from the unpleasant driver of the lorry, then there were more shouts, presumably from the soldiers, and then after a pause the crack of a rifle.

He heard the bullet whizz by him, uncomfortably close, and he set his teeth and forgot about the pain in his foot and ran hard. What saved him was the fact that the road was bordered by a wood. No more shots followed the solitary opening one, because as soon as Adrian reached the trees he was lost to sight. He realised this, but he kept going, **and** in spite of the pain in his foot he kept going fast. What **he had** seen of the soldier in the Troghen lock-up **was** enough **to** convince him that the method of procedure would be a **bullet in the small** of his back first, and questions **afterwards**.

In spite of the promptness of that first shot both the soldiers

had subsequently foolishly lost time in questioning the lorry driver, so that Adrian had gained a useful start. His pursuers, too, were handicapped by the long unhandy Turbanian rifles which they had to carry, and actually Adrian was increasing his lead right from the beginning. He hoped this was so, but he took no chances and forced himself to make the best time he could.

The wood was a large one, more than a mile in width, **and** when finally he emerged on the far side, the country in front of him was still heavily treed with plenty of possible cover.

He fixed a mark on the horizon straight ahead, a solitary tall fir tree, and made a bee-line for it as fast as he could go.

It was hard pounding, up and down work, for that part of Turbany is all small hills interspersed by steep-sided valleys, and by the end of half an hour he was absolutely blown.

He stopped in the lee of a hedge, his heart thumping cruelly, his lungs working overtime, his ears cocked for noises of pursuit. Five minutes passed and he did not hear any. He was still distressed, but less so now, and after a few more minutes he began to walk. He had long since passed his landmark of the fir tree, and the hill and valley nature of the country made it very difficult to keep any accurate sense of direction, but he was pretty certain that he had not done anything so foolish as to double back on his tracks. His sole object at the moment was to increase the distance between himself and the road where danger lay; other plans would have to be developed later.

Now that the urgency of the first flight had passed he began to be acutely aware of the pain in his foot. He also felt desperately empty inside, and it occurred to him that he had had nothing to eat since coffee and rolls for breakfast, and it was now well past middle afternoon. Altogether he did not feel in very good shape, and the first excitement of escape was rapidly giving way to something much more disconsolate as he limped along slowly over the wet turf. He felt worse in a few minutes, for when he topped the brow of the next hill and looked into the valley beyond he saw something that he did not like one bit. At the end of the valley was a large farmhouse with its attendant outbuildings. There was some sort of commotion going on there. Adrian could see men moving about, he thought one of them at least was in uniform, and there were dogs. He could hear the harsh baying blown up to him on the increasing wind. He thanked heaven that he was to leeward of the brutes, but he did not like the look of things. The farmhouse with its unpleasant activities was the best part of a mile away, **and in the late afternoon light Adrian could not see everything**

as clearly as he could have wished to. He lay there, *ventre d terre*, on the crest of the hill, watching, and was much relieved when he saw the whole commotion of dogs and men moving away from him up wind.

He could not be certain that they were looking for him, but he was not taking chances, and instead of pushing on his straight line he went back slightly and then turned down the slope of the hill into another valley.

His foot was now hurting so badly that he stopped in a hollow to examine it. He foolishly took off sock and shoe and found that the instep was badly bruised and swollen. He took heart from this for he was beginning to fear a sprained ankle, but his spirits soon sank again when he realised what a fool he had been to take his shoe off completely. Getting it on again was one of the most painful things he had ever done in his life, and at one time he did not think he would manage it. Eventually, by sheer brutal forcing, he pushed his foot back again, but the pain of it nearly made him faint. The final result was that he was all but crippled and he realised that any hope of running, should nearly danger threaten again, was completely out of the question.

In half an hour's time, when he had gained the edge of a wood and had entered it as cover against the rain which was beginning to fall, he was startled by shouting.

There was a single cry, and then, from a little distance on either side answering cries, as though (he thought pessimistically) men were strung out in a line beating the ground for something. Once again he could not tell whether he was the quarry, or whether it might not be some pursuit of ordinary game, but a man on the run finds it hard to believe that there is game other than himself afoot, and Adrian stood still in his tracks, listening and apprehensive.

The men were some distance away, perhaps even as much as half a mile, but it was impossible to tell what direction they were coming in, and with his bad foot Adrian did not fancy his chance of getting clear once they spotted him.

Instead of leaving the wood, therefore, he went a little farther into it, walking slowly and looking round him for a suitable tree. He found one at last, a good-sized oak with **branches** which were low enough to make climbing feasible.

With a good deal of pain from his foot he eventually **managed** to climb up to a height of some twenty feet, **where the fork of** a huge branch made a convenient and **not too uncomfortable** resting-place.

Here he decided to stay, comforting himself with the reflection that every Englishman has a good precedent for taking refuge in an oak tree, and keeping sharp watch with eyes and ears for any signs of danger.

Three times, at intervals, he heard the shouts of men who were evidently searching the wood for something. He did not doubt now that that something was himself, and he began to feel the pressure of the hunt in earnest.

Once he actually heard one of his pursuers breaking his way through the undergrowth, but the man did not come near enough to be seen and presently moved away again.

Adrian spent two hours altogether hiding in the oak tree.

He did not decide to come down until darkness had fallen and no noises of pursuit had been audible for a long time. He was so cramped with cold and stiffness that it was all he could do to reach the ground safely, and once he got there walking was agony. When he got clear of the wood rain was still falling and he was completely lost. He felt miserable and faint with hunger, and altogether he was a very different person from the man who had stepped out energetically from Troghen not so many hours ago in the morning sunshine with a good breakfast inside him. He did not see the remotest chance of getting to Charneck that evening, for he had no doubt that by now what few roads there were and the solitary railway line would be well watched. He kept moving slowly in spite of the pain of going so, because movement meant at least a little warmth and it served to give him the illusion of getting somewhere.

He kept up this melancholy progress, if progress it could be called for two hours before he came across any sign of habitation, and then in a hollow by a brook he saw a lighted window.

He had discovered the presence of the brook by the simple but highly uncomfortable accident of walking into it, so that whereas the rain had made him damp before he was now sopping wet up to his knees.

The lighted window belonged to a cottage, it was little better than a countryman's hovel really, but at that time and in those circumstances it looked as good as a palace to Adrian.

He realised that there must be some risk in making his presence known to anybody, but hunted men have to take risks, and in his present condition it was urgent that he should have food and shelter for the night. He knocked on the door, and after he had knocked again it was opened to him by a figure whose appearance gave him heart right from the beginning. It was an old man who held the door open and peered out at him, an old man with a patriarchal beard, and above it the dignified kindly face of the true peasant.

Adrian felt instinctively that there was no danger here

for him, and he launched out into a not very coherent story about having hurt his foot and being lost.

"Where are you making for?" the old man asked.

"Mountain Farm," Adrian answered glibly, because they were the first words that came into his head and because he felt that to give some definite goal and one not nearby was safer than to be vague, but he hurried on with a further jumble of explanations.

The old man listened in kindly patience, and then pushing the door open wider said,

"If you are lost and want shelter you are welcome to come in."

In his first anxiety Adrian had reinforced his plea by displaying a handful of notes to show that he was able and willing to pay, but the old man, peasant though he was, took no notice of these and Adrian feared that the action might have been a mistake.

His host bade him sit by the fire and dry himself and presently produced a bowl of hot goat's milk and a loaf of dark country bread.

Adrian made a ravenous meal off these and had by now sufficiently gathered his wits to put out a more circumstantial yarn explaining his appearance. He was careful to avoid overmuch detail, but the gist of it was that he had been on a week-day holiday from the capital exploring that part of the country on foot and had got lost in attempting to leave the roads and strike across the hills. His bruised foot he put down to a scramble down a steep hillside. Altogether the story hung together fairly well and the old peasant seemed perfectly satisfied.

"If you could let me sleep here for the night," Adrian concluded, "in a corner of the room, anywhere, I would be very grateful."

His host reflected silently for some time. Adrian began to fear a refusal and his spirits stopped soaring and were ready to take a dismal plunge to below zero again. Even with the hot food inside him the thought of spending the whole night out in the darkness and the rain was more than he cared to contemplate.

Presently, however, the old peasant led him to a sort of cubby hole under the stairs where there were some sacks and a pile of miscellaneous rubbish.

"If you could make yourself comfortable here——" he suggested doubtfully.

Adrian smiled, his spirits soaring again higher than ever. He was dog tired. What he wanted was a long night's sleep and after that he was prepared to face anew all his problems and any fresh complications that might arise.

The heap of coarse sacking looked a good deal more attractive to him than a luxury suite at the Ritz. He thanked the old peasant profusely and ten minutes after settling himself down he was fast asleep. His last conscious thoughts went back to Feathers' Academy and to his lectures there to sixteen young ladies.

Lear (his favourite of all the Plays) came into his mind and Kent's philosophical words when in desperate trouble, "Come Fortune, turn thy wheel again." It was Adrian Mawley's good-night prayer to whatsoever gods there be that look after hunted men.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GYPSY'S choice of a camping ground had been a good one. The site lay in wild country where no one was likely to penetrate for a long time, and yet it was sufficiently near Troghen for him to be able to keep in discreet touch with what was happening.

He was away from the camp for several hours in the early morning and did not get back until the middle of the forenoon. In Troghen itself he had seen indications, slight but amply sufficient for his sharp senses, which convinced him that there was unusual official activity afoot. It was **natural** for him to connect that activity with his own affairs, and doing so made him partly wary and partly optimistic. It made him think that the sooner he got rid of his prize the better it would be ; but it also made him hope that it would be possible to make a good bargain out of her.

He was not so pleased when he got back to the camp, for he found the old hag sitting in the morning sunlight outside the wagon and inside with the English girl was the young Romany.

Marjorie was beginning to be scared. The herbal brews which she had been given to drink at intervals had practically cured the pain in her head, but they had left her with an overwhelming feeling of lassitude and depression. Above everything else she wanted to get away from the gypsies. Every second that she spent with them, whether with the chief gypsy himself, with the old woman, or the dark **young Romany**, was full of latent danger. And the danger from the young Romany, though in a way it was the least **apparent**, she feared the most. He came into the wagon with a tort of barbaric grace and every movement of his small hands and feet was sinuous. He had not even the limited English of the older man (his father ? Marjorie wondered) but all

the time he kept his dark liquid eyes fixed on her. When he smiled the whiteness of his teeth was startling, only **one** degree less startling than the solid block of gold with which **a** broken tooth towards the front of his mouth had been capped.

If we were in London, at a cocktail party, Marjorie reflected, he would be dressed in an expensive suit, just a shade too tightly waisted, wearing excessively pointed shoes and quite **a** number of people would refer to him behind his back as **a** dago, probably I shouldn't even bother to speak to him. But they were not in London. Incredibly, and yet when looked at step by step, quite logically, they were in a gypsy wagon in the wild hill country of Turbany; and whatever he might have been at a mythical party in London, here the Romany was easy master of the situation.

He tried to talk, but she understood nothing of what he was saying except the one word "girl" frequently repeated. Once he stretched out his hand unexpectedly and touched her cheek and then laughed softly at her evident discomfiture.

She was glad when the old gypsy came back to the encampment and hoped that the quick sentences he shot at the younger man were full of venom as she herself could have made them.

The handsome young Romany did not seem unduly affected by them, venomous or not, he laughed easily and swaggered out of the wagon, shooting a parting look at the girl which somehow contrived to be hungry and contemptuous at once.

From a corner of the wagon the old gypsy produced a cheap writing pad (which looked exactly as though it came from Wool worth's, Marjorie reflected) and a pencil.

"You must tell your young English gentleman to come and pay us for looking after you," he said.

Marjorie held out her hand eagerly for the writing materials. Her one wish was to get back among friends. She did not know whether it was better to send for help to the Comtesse or to Adrian Mawley, but she was insular enough to feel that, on the whole, an Englishman was more likely **to** be able to get her out of her troubles.

She seized the pencil and after **a** moment's preliminary hesitation wrote rapidly, but when the gypsy laboriously conned what she had written **he** shook his head.

"This will frighten the young English gentleman," he said, "and there is no need for anybody to **be** frightened—**if they pay us.**"

He handed her back the pad, and partly at his dictation Marjorie wrote again.

Three times he shook his head in disapproval and three

times Marjorie had to recast the note before he was satisfied. The passage describing where a meeting could be effected caused more trouble than anything else and Marjorie almost despaired of getting down the name of the wood which he kept repeating to her.

When everything was finally done to his satisfaction he held the note up and asked,

"Where?"

Marjorie took the paper, folded it and wrote on the outside, "Mr. Adrian Mawley, at Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy, Charneck. Urgent."

The gypsy studied this address for some time, it took him exasperatingly long to assimilate the meaning of written English, and in any case the word "Academy" meant nothing to him. He thought it was the name of a house. The address did not look complete to him, there were no numbers in it, and he held it out and asked again.

"Where?"

Marjorie said "Charneck" angrily twice, and after a pause the man nodded. There were city Romanies in Charneck; when he got there he would have means of finding where this place might be. Once again, and taking an interminable time over it, he read through the short note. Greed and fear warred within him and made him unhappy. Had he told the girl to ask for too much money, or for too little? He could not be sure. It was the same sum that had been paid without demur by his last victim, and on the whole he thought it best to play for safety. Finally he nodded and smiled, satisfied, and put the note away in one of the many mysterious pockets hidden under his light blue Romany blouse.

"If the Englishman brings the money," he said, "nothing will happen to you," and he went out into the sunlight.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Adrian woke again he was the better by ten hours' solid sleep. The old peasant had already been up a long time, and he showed Adrian a pump at the back of the cottage and brought him a rough towel. Adrian stripped to the waist and felt invigorated by the sharp freshness of the cold water. He examined his foot and was relieved to find **the** swelling smaller. When he went inside again the **old** peasant was setting out breakfast—hot goats' milk and **black bread**. "Not **a** lot of variation in the **menu**," Adrian thought cheerfully, but he set to with a will. The

previous evening he had been so ravenous that the strong taste of the milk had gone unnoticed, now it offended his palate, and he knew that he was so much nearer to normal. But strong taste or not, the milk was hot, and he made a good meal; and when he rounded it off with a cigarette from a fast diminishing store he felt in shape to tackle his difficulties again.

Yet he did not know how best to start. He was both hunted and hunting; and with the fresh hope of a new day strong within him he was reluctant to leave the neighbourhood of Troghen without at least one more attempt to find out something about Marjorie Gillespie and her mysterious disappearance.

Clearly it would not be safe to go back into the town itself, and he could not persuade himself that the old peasant would be much of an emissary. Yet there did not seem to be any other chance, and he was making up his mind how best to approach the old man, who was out in a shed chopping wood, when the door opened and somebody came into the primitive kitchen.

Adrian was surprised, he had imagined himself and the old man alone in the place. His surprise turned to astonishment when he saw who the incomer was—none other than the rather brazenly pretty girl of the fiesta.

She was so evidently amazed to see him there that he was able to recover himself first, and to feel in command of the situation.

Her speech had less of the broad country patois than the old man's, and Adrian was able to understand her easily. It seemed that she was the old peasant's granddaughter and had come back to the cottage late at night after leaving the fiesta.

"And you?" she asked, sitting opposite him with her elbows on the table and her chin propped on her hands. Her manner was amused, impudent, and possibly a little cynical; but it did not seem to Adrian unfriendly.

Adrian replied with mock gallantry that he had enjoyed the fiesta as much as anybody, since a pretty girl had troubled to throw a rose to him.

Her eyes **twinkled**.

"Why **were you in there?**"

"A mistake. They thought **I was someone else.**"

She shrugged **her shoulders**.

"**What does one expect from the police? They are always making mistakes. They are all fools. Especially our Joseph Franks.**"

Adrian was quite prepared to believe that the young lady spoke about the police from more than merely impersonal

knowledge. If there were ladies of the town in Troghen she looked to him very much like one of them. He was glad of it; he thought she would be the more likely to have sympathy with him.

He spun a hotch-potch story about mistaken identity and over-zealous policemen and his own virtuous indignation culminating in his triumphal release. He hoped that it contained enough of truth, and gave away sufficiently little. At any rate it seemed to satisfy the girl for she nodded, laughed, and getting up began to prepare some coffee for herself over the fire.

"Why did you come to Troghen?" she asked casually.

"I was looking for somebody."

"In Troghen?"

"Is it a very big place?"

She laughed.

"I know everybody in it," and with the words she shot at him automatically the mechanical ogle of the professional minx.

"Naturally anybody as pretty as you would be popular," Adrian assured her. She shrugged her shoulders and said,

"Men like me." Her tone was indifferent, but she was not displeased by the compliment.

"If an English lady had come to Troghen in the last forty-eight hours would you have heard of it?"

"An English lady? Is that whom you are looking for?"

"She met with a motor accident and might be injured. Unconscious possibly. You have not heard anything of her?"

The girl lifted the saucepan of now boiling water and poured it on to the coarse coffee grains.

"I did not say that I had not heard anything," she answered.

"I do not meddle in the affairs of ladies, that is all."

Adrian digested this reply, and studied the girl in silence. He was beginning to hope that with careful handling she might be made into an extremely useful ally.

When her tall glass of coffee was made she brought it to the table and again sat down opposite him.

She smiled up at him and suddenly answered an earlier question of his.

"No. Troghen is not really a very big place."

"You have heard something of the young English lady who met with a motor accident?"

"I did not say that. But I know somebody in Troghen from whom I could find out. A woman."

Adrian considered. He had no wish to enlarge the number of people who knew about him and his quest unnecessarily. Yet one thing heartened him. He felt convinced that the

"woman" of this girl's acquaintance was a shady character (possibly the keeper of a Troghen brothel?) and experience had taught him one sure fact that there is less chance of being given away by shady characters than by respectable ones. The shady characters are enemies of the police already.

"This woman might be able to say something—if you were willing to pay her for her trouble," the girl added.

Adrian was delighted. The mention of money brought the whole affair down to a common sense, intelligible basis. Moreover he felt that it put the reins into his hands again. He produced his note case and displayed its still more than adequate stock of notes.

"Come back to me this afternoon," he said, "with news of where the young English lady is, or of what has happened to her, and there will be a hundred milrep note for you and one for the woman who gives you the information."

The girl nodded brightly.

"And——" Adrian added, opening his note case once more, "there will be a second hundred milreps for yourself if you have remembered not to say anything to anybody else about it all."

She laughed.

"Why should I talk? You only get into trouble through talking. I have learnt that much in life."

She left the cottage without saying anything more to Adrian, and if at first there was a vague dissatisfaction at the back of his mind about the inconclusiveness of the bargain he soon got rid of it by reflecting that it was vital for him to get news of Marjorie somehow, and experience had taught him that backstairs methods of getting news were nearly always the best in the long run.

The old peasant had seen the two of them talking in the kitchen and after the girl had gone he came in to discuss her.

She was his granddaughter; the worst granddaughter apparently, that any hard-working, self-respecting peasant was ever cursed with, hanging about the streets of Troghen all day with paint on her face and evil in her heart: She had not done a hand's turn of work since she was sixteen, he hoped she had not annoyed the English gentleman?

On the contrary, Adrian assured him. The old man crossed himself piously and remarked that the Blessed Virgin alone knew what was coming to women these days. Adrian did his best to look suitably impressed, but secretly he felt that he could forgive the impudent little charmer anything if only she came back that afternoon with the information he wanted.

"Froyla has not earned an honest milrep in her life,"

the old man grumbled. Adrian would have liked to cheer him up by the information that the girl looked like earning a couple of hundred milreps that very afternoon ; but he wisely refrained, and contented himself with adding his lament at the evil state the world had come to.

Knowing her grandfather as she did it is quite possible that Froyla could have made a very shrewd guess at the nature of the discussion that broke out about her as soon as she left the house, but it did not seem to depress her. On the contrary, when she reached Troghen, which for all its smallness was a metropolis to her, she was in the best of spirits. She smiled at acquaintances and automatically looked out of the corner of her lively eyes at prosperous looking strangers, but more than that she did not do ; she was trying to formulate a scheme in her head and she wanted time to think over it and see if it was all right. For this purpose she went to the *Cafe** of the Red Slipper and choosing a seat inside, well away from the window, ordered herself a *mayan*, the almost universal aperitif in Turbany, and settled down to consider things.

The grey-haired, flat-footed waiter who knew her of old considered her dispassionately, wondering why she had not chosen her usual seat well in the window.

" Tough little tart," was his verdict. " Up to some mischief, I'll be bound."

All unconsciously justifying this summing-up the girl was busy turning over in her sharp shrewd mind how best to manage things to her advantage—"advantage" was synonymous with Froyla with " money ." She hated the hard life of her grandfather as only a peasant who has gone away from the soil could hate it. She wanted now what she always wanted—money ; but she was long-sighted enough to plan ahead. The world over the professional lady of pleasure is faced with the always urgent problem of keeping on good terms with the police. Froyla had an idea that greed and caution might both be satisfied if she played her cards right, and having come to that decision she settled the bill for her *mayan*, leaving an unnecessarily large tip for the waiter to impress him with her importance, and left the *Cafe*.

Ten minutes later she walked into the police station so boldly and self-composedly that it would have been hard to guess how much she hated going into that particular building for any reason whatsoever.

The policeman knew her and had no desire to waste time talking to her. He scowled and very grumpily demanded what it was she wanted. Froyla smiled. She noticed the bruise on the policeman's chin, now assuming a ripe plum

colour, and wondered with amusement whether it had anything to do with the Englishman.

Joseph Franks was in a very bad temper. Even his exceptionally thick skull had not prevented the savage crack from a rifle butt from leaving him with a very nasty headache, and on top of such personal discomfort was the thought of what the superintendent in Charneck would have to say to him about letting a prisoner, and a murderer to boot, escape.

If a notorious hussy like Froyla, who had seen the inside of the lock-up a couple of times herself, was going to worry him with some story of a stolen handbag or the like she would get precious short shrift.

"What have you come bothering me about?" he inquired.

Froyla crossed her legs so that her skirt rode well above her knee.

The policeman's eye wavered, but all he said was,

"Don't try any of those tricks here. Keep them for outside. What is it you want?"

"If you have come in search of your virtue," he added, by way of grim pleasantry, "it is no concern of ours. We do not deal with anything lost more than a twelvemonth ago."

Froyla chalked this remark up in her mind as one to be paid for sooner or later, but she showed no sign of resentment in her voice as she answered,

"The foreigner. I saw him in here through the window bars yesterday during the fiesta."

The policeman looked at her for a moment in silence and then said,

"What of it?"

"He is still here?"

"Half the town knows he has escaped. What has it got to do with you?"

"Nothing."

"He spent the night with you, is that it?"

"Joseph Franks, I shall sue you for defamation of character."

The policeman laughed, but under cover of true laugh his somewhat cumbersome mind was working with unusual agility. This unaccustomed quickness was due to the urgency of his desire to get his hands on the Englishman again and so save his own reputation. The most energetic searchings and scourings of the town for the past eighteen hours had not given him the slightest clue as to Adrian's whereabouts. Now it looked as though what he wanted might be **going to fall into his lap**. He was **shrewd enough to realise that he must not scare it away**.

"Come, Froyla," he said, "we have been good friends in the past—"

" You have twice had me in here because I had a few drinks too many—was that very friendly ? "

" A mere formality. But I can promise you that if you help me in this matter of the Englishman nothing like that will happen again."

" We should be real friends in future ? "

" I promise *it*."

" Who is that ? "

Joseph turned in his chair to a freshly printed poster brought out from the head Police Station in Charneck by messenger that very morning.

" That is a picture of an Englishwoman who has disappeared in Charneck," he said impatiently. " We shall have plenty of time to deal with that later. I want to know about the man whom you saw in the lock-up room yesterday afternoon—have you seen him since ? "

" I ? Seen him ? How should I ? I don't go with foreigners."

The policeman smiled.

" But you know something of him ? " he asked.

" I think I know somebody who might know something of him."

" Where is he ?"

" It would cost me a lot of money to find that out."

Joseph Franks nodded and looked grave. But he did not feel grave in the slightest. On the contrary he felt jubilant. All his Turbanian upbringing assured him that when money was baldly mentioned then the core of the discussion was being reached. The principle, as it were, was conceded, it remained only to haggle ; and provided that Froyla was at all reasonable in her demands the policeman did not feel disposed to haggle too closely. It would be worth a great deal to him to be able to confront an irate superintendent from Charneck with a prisoner instead of an empty cell.

" How much money ? " he asked.

" Six hundred milreps," Froyla said. She had intended to say " a thousand milreps " but at the last second her essentially peasant lips could not bring themselves to pronounce the fantastic sum.

The policeman paused, mainly because he was wondering how much of the sum he intended to offer could be one way and another squeezed out of the annual expenses account. **Then** he unlocked a drawer, drew out four new notes, each **for** one hundred milreps, and placing them on **the table** near, **but** not too near, to the girl, leant across **and said** in **an urgent** whisper :

" Froyla, if you tell me **where** that **Englishman** is you

can have these four notes, and not one-tenth of a milrep more. And what's more you will make a good friend of me for life. If you don't tell me, I'll make things so unpleasant here for you in Troghen that you will have to go. Now then——"

CHAPTER XIX

Miss FEATHERSTONHAUGH made a pencil mark on a slip of paper and said,

"I am registering the number of times you yawn, Muriel Evans. Six not out, so far. If your score reaches ten I shall either give you a prize for persistence or a punishment for rudeness—I am not sure which."

"Sorry, Miss Featherstonhaugh."

"I am well aware that you would all enjoy the lecture much better if Mr. Mawley were giving it; but, as you know, Mr. Mawley is indisposed and I am afraid that you will have to put up with me as a poor substitute. Now, if it won't bore Muriel Evans too much, I will recapitulate the arguments for supposing Hamlet's madness to be feigned——"

"Indisposed" was the so far official, and indeed the only politic explanation which had been given out in the Academy to explain Adrian's absence. There was, after all, no reason why the professor of English literature at Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy should not be indisposed for a few days; yet, with the strange telepathy of which the human mind is capable, even among civilised people, hints had somehow seeped into the school from outside that mysterious and vaguely sinister events were being connected with Adrian's name, and the thirty-two ears of his sixteen young ladies were strained almost to breaking point to catch the slightest amplification of these rumours.

At the moment, however, since Feathers herself was taking the mid-afternoon lecture in Adrian's stead, those thirty-two pretty young ears were constrained to apply themselves to the immediate matter in hand, touching on the madness, or the non-madness, of one Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

But not for long. Reprieve came in the shape of Milling's discreet tap at the classroom door and Milling's sombre announcement that Miss Featherstonhaugh was "wanted."

Feathers set her young ladies the time-honoured task of committing to memory the first twelve lines of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, and added, from the doorway, "if anybody gives an impersonation of me whilst I am absent

let it be a good one. Bad art shows something vulgar in the purveyor of it, and is always to be deplored."

"Follow me," she commanded Milling majestically, and swept down the corridor.

At a convenient landing where there was no one to overhear them, she halted and raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"Von Gerne is downstairs," Baikie told her, speaking quietly. "Called, so he says, to know if we have heard anything of Adrian. Full of solicitude—ostensibly."

Feathers considered.

"I wonder why he has really come," she said.

"Probably he actually is anxious to get any news of Adrian. I don't trust our dandified little Eric. He's up to his ears in this job somehow, I'm convinced. But I don't quite know how—yet."

"Where is he?"

"I left him in the hall, he can't do any harm there; and I said I would go and see if you had any news. The best thing we can do is to take his query at its face value, I think; thank him very much for inquiring and say we don't know anything yet but hope it will all turn out all right."

"Which, incidentally, is true."

"I never shrink from telling the truth—if it can't be avoided," Baikie said as he turned and made his way downstairs again with the dignified, disciplined gait of a staid manservant.

"He can't do any harm there," Baikie had said, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred *it* would have been perfectly true. Ninety-nine times, and even more, out of a hundred Eric von Gerne would have cooled his heels in the somewhat depressing entrance hall of the Academy for Young Ladies and gone away not a whit wiser than he had come. But, just occasionally, at any game, the gods deal a freak hand.

Von Gerne had come to make his inquiry partly to keep up the role he was playing of sympathetically interested acquaintance; partly on the off chance, always worth trying, that he might pick up some stray hint or clue that would prove useful. He had hoped to be shown into a room whilst Milling went off to make inquiries, and in a room there is often a desk, a blotter, even a wastepaper basket which he might have culled for some carelessly thrown away tit-bit. But Milling left him in the bare hall and the elegant young soldier was bound to admit that there things looked singularly unpromising.

Yet even as he was formulating that thought in his head the letter flap in the front door rattled and something white fell on to the hall floor.

Von Gerne's quick eyes fastened on *it* at once. It was not an envelope, but a folded note of some sort and its superscription lay uppermost,

" Mr. Adrian Mawley,
at Miss Featherstonhaugh's Academy,
Charneck.

Urgent. '*

The writing was that of a woman and it was in pencil.

Von Gerne raised his head and for a cautious two seconds looked and listened. Then, quickly and silently, he bent down, picked up the note and slipped it into his pocket.

Three minutes later Milling was thanking him deferentially for his inquiry and hoping that all would eventually be well.

Captain Eric von Gerne echoed the optimistic hope and took his leave.

When he was safe from prying eyes he took the note out of his pocket and read it. When he had re-read it so slowly as to know it almost by heart, he let the monocle fall from his right eye and smiled a long, excited, triumphant smile. Just once or twice, he reflected, without any effort on your own part, the ripe fat plum falls right into your delighted hands—and when it does, it is up to you to make the most of it.

Froyla was back earlier than Adrian had expected her. The old peasant was in an outhouse at his interminable task of chopping wood and Adrian himself was whiling away the time as best he might, smoking and waiting.

Froyla came in and Adrian's spirits rose at once. He knew immediately that she had something to tell him.

" Did you find out anything ? " he asked.

She sat down in her favourite attitude—elbows on the table, chin cupped in her hands, and looked at him.

" Yes, I was able to find out something," she answered, and smiled triumphantly, as though inviting him to admit and admire her cleverness. " I was able to find out something about Miss——" she made such a hash of the next word that it took Adrian a second or two to realise that she really was trying to say " Gillespie."

He grinned broadly.

" Well done. Did you see her ? "

" Why not ? Didn't I tell you that I could find out anything I wanted to in Troghen ? "

" Is she all right ? "

" Why shouldn't she be ? "

" After the motor smash, I mean."

" She said nothing about the motor car smash to me."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'tell the Englishman—Darling, come to me at once, I want you, darling.'"

Adrian looked at her a little queerly for a couple of seconds and then asked,

"Anything else?"

"'Come to me at once,' " Froyla echoed, 'isn't that enough for a girl to a man? That's what she said, anyway.'"

Adrian nodded. "It's good enough for me," he said. "Where is she?"

"I can show you that."

"In Troghen?"

"No. Between here and there. Not very far away. We shall have to walk there. It might take us half an hour."

"And she is all right?"

"Only crying out to see you. I said we should go at once."

"Did you see anybody else in Troghen—I mean any police, for example?"

Froyla made an expressive grimace of disgust.

"Police? Why should I bother about the police? What good have they ever done me? No. I saw no police, thank you."

Adrian said that he would be ready to start as soon as he had thanked her grandfather, which elicited from the girl only a contemptuous "baryad"—that untranslatable Turbanian word which means something between "peasant" and "animal", combining all the least desirable qualities of both. She clearly did not consider the old man worth saying "good-bye" to, but Adrian went outside and found him in the shed which was piled high with firelogs of his patient chopping and sawing.

Adrian explained that he was going off with Froyla and the old man looked displeased.

"If you go with her you'll come to no good," he said.

"She is able to take me to somebody I want to see."

The old man sniffed and ran his thumb meditatively along his axe edge.

"Where are you going to with her?" he asked.

"Somewhere in the mountains," Adrian said vaguely, and added, "I must thank you for your true kindness and hospitality."

"It was nothing."

"It was everything. I should like to make some recompense to you for it."

"I do not want to be paid for giving a hungry man a cup of goat's milk, or a tired man a sack to sleep on."

Adrian's eyes, roaming the shed, whose several shelves were stacked with all the indescribable jumble of junk which your

peasant accumulates and can never bring himself to get rid of, lit on a bunch of half-a-dozen coloured scarves of a sort of Batik work which at one time was largely produced in the Turbanian country-side.

He thought that they would solve several problems for him.

"I accept your hospitality gladly," he said, "and there is no question of offering money for it, but would you let me buy some Turbanian things to take back with me when I go home—those scarves, for example?"

This was an entirely different matter, and the light of the born bargainer lit in the old man's eye as he reached up for the long neglected scarves and took them from their nail. When it was a question of buying and selling he could haggle as closely as any man and he proceeded to do so with gusto and enthusiasm.

Adrian let him have his head and eventually agreed on a price which was about three times the actual value of the scarves. The old man pocketed the money, and Adrian the scarves, with mutual satisfaction and regard.

"You were a long time in saying 'good-bye,'" Froyla remarked when he joined her again in the cottage.

"I like talking to your grandfather."

She made a face and dismissed the old man with a contemptuous,

"He goes to church every Sunday, what good has that done him?"

Adrian laughed.

"What about starting?" he suggested.

Froyla held out her hand.

"The money first," she said. Adrian produced his note case.

"Of course. I was forgetting."

He handed her a one hundred milrep note, but her hand remained outstretched.

"And for saying nothing to anybody, another one. You promised it me."

"So I did. There you are. That's for saying nothing to anybody. And now I suggest we start."

Froyla was all smiles now.

"It will be pleasant walking together," she said, "but don't go too fast or we shall get there too soon."

Adrian had established the fact that they were going to a rendezvous of some sort—he thought the word she used meant a barn but was not sure—and further than this he did not question her.

She was too relieved by his complete acceptance of all she told him to be at all suspicious of it and talked gaily as they went along, telling him what a happy time he would have

with his English lady and how they would enjoy themselves together in Troghen "that is if you don't go bruising any more chins," she added mischievously.

Adrian talked just enough to keep her flow of conversation going and was content to follow wherever she led him. As they went along he kept his eyes open a good deal more attentively than she imagined. The sun, now beginning to slope down the heavens, told him that they were going almost due north, and even in that sparsely populated countryside they seemed to be deliberately choosing lonely ways.

Twice Froyla remonstrated with him for hurrying, stressing the fact that it was no good reaching the rendezvous before the English girl did; but, if for a moment he seemed to slacken pace, Adrian kept pushing along at a fair speed. He had reasons for not wanting to be the last on the scene.

Presently they turned off the rough road they had been following for some time and began to make their way down a sort of primitive farm track. Adrian had an idea that they were getting near the end of their journey now and kept a particularly sharp lookout. The track curved and about a quarter of a mile further on was a large stone-built building. It looked like a cow-byre and barn in one and Adrian knew, even before the girl told him, that this was the place.

"We used to live nearer here," she explained, and added with a laugh, "I have met gentlemen here before now."

"I bet you have," Adrian thought; aloud he said, "It's almighty muddy on that road, let's get up on to the grass."

The farm track ran for some distance between banks three or four feet high and was pitted with rain-filled pot-holes. He scrambled up on one side and held out his hand to help the girl up.

She stretched out her hand, and clasping it he pulled her up beside him.

"Better up here," he said, smiling.

"Much," she agreed.

Still smiling he suddenly tightened his grip on her hand and with a lightning-like movement doubled her arm behind her back so that she was immediately in pain and would be in agony if she attempted to move.

"Now, you little liar," Adrian said with genial ferocity, "I want a word with you."

CHAPTER XX

THE GIRL'S astonished discomfiture was so complete that Adrian was forced to laugh ; but his laughter had an edge to it. He intended to deal pretty drastically with Miss Froyla. After the first few seconds of speechless fright she opened her reddened lips to scream and instantly Adrian doubled her arm back more tightly.

" One sound out of you, Froyla," he said in a savage whisper, " and I'll break this arm of yours like a twig."

She thought he meant it, and beyond giving an inarticulate little grunt of pain, said nothing, her terrified eyes staring at him wide with fright.

" You're a smart little devil and you'll go a long way," Adrian assured her in grim amiability, " but you've got a thing or two to learn first." Whilst he was talking he pulled the batik scarves out of his pocket and used one of them to make the girl's two wrists fast behind her back.

She was more frightened than ever now and stammered.

" What are you going to do with me ? "

" This," Adrian murmured cheerfully, rolling a second of the scarves into a ball and stuffing it forcibly into her mouth. She did her vicious best to bite him, but he managed to avoid her sharp little teeth, and tied the gag in place with a third scarf which he fastened round her head.

" Pity you don't like your grandfather better," he said. " You might have come out with me to say ' good-bye ' to him and wondered what I wanted these scarves for. Somehow I thought they would come in handy. There's just one left. I think I'll hobble you with that and then you can't give very much trouble." He tied the girl's ankles with the remaining scarf and then lit a cigarette and considered her.

" You're a naughty girl, Froyla, to tell such lies. If only you had been a little more careful I should have walked right into the trap and swallowed the cheese without a murmur. But when you began to make up what you thought Miss Gillespie would send by way of a message you put your foot in it badly. And if you really hadn't seen the policeman this morning in Troghen how did you know about my bruising any chins ? I suppose what really happened was that you went straight to the police station, told Joseph Franks that you knew where I was and agreed to hand me over to them for a consideration. Oh, and that reminds me——"

He opened the girl's cheaply ornate handbag and drew out the two one hundred milrep notes that he had given her.

" One was for taking me to Miss Gillespie and one for not talking to anybody—I don't think you have earned your money on either score. You ought to know, Froyla, in your profession, that if you don't deliver the goods you can't expect the money. Now, I wonder just what your little scheme was—hallo...."

His head was jerked up by something he had seen along the rough farm road. Two Turbanian policemen in smart green uniforms were pedalling towards him on bicycles. The cart track was bordered at intervals by stunted and straggling bushes, possibly the remnants of a hedge, and half pulling, half carrying the girl Adrian took cover behind one of these clumps of furze-like growth.

The policemen were progressing slowly because of the poor state of the track and for the same reason their attention was focussed on the ground in front of them. Safe behind his screening bush Adrian grinned hugely as they went by him completely unsuspecting, and he blessed the foresight which had prompted him to buy those scarves from the old peasant—if Froyla's pretty mouth were not now well and truly gagged he did not doubt that she would be screaming her head off.

After the policeman had gone by Adrian raised himself -cautiously, still in a kneeling position, to see what they were doing.

When they reached the building the two men dismounted and after a moment's consultation, left their bicycles together on the far side of a thick bush beyond the barn and so hidden from the sight of anyone approaching it the way they had themselves come. Then they went into the barn. " To form the reception committee," Adrian surmised, realising why Froyla had been anxious that he should not arrive there too soon. He ventured to stand up now and surveyed the terrain more thoroughly. He noticed that the rough farm track skirted the side of the barn and led away beyond it. He could not actually see the two bicycles now, but he could see the bush behind which they were hidden and he had a sudden feeling that a well-built, well-oiled official police bicycle would •suit his purpose very well indeed.

He looked down at Froyla who was lying on the grass at his feet, her eyes blazing with venomous anger. He laughed.

" Good job you can't get loose," he said, " or I should have a wild cat to deal with." Just to be on the safe side he inspected all his knots once again and, satisfied, left her with a friendly slap on her behind and a parting admonition not to try to double cross anybody in future.

Keeping on the grass he now went quickly in the direction of the barn with his eyes skinned all the time for the slightest sign of danger. He did not actually go right up to the building,

but skirted it and fetching a half-circle cautiously approached the bush behind which the two official bicycles were half propped, half lying. He did not bother to pick or choose between them, but seized the first one and pulled it upright. Until that moment his mind had not worried itself about more than one bicycle. To get hold of one machine and pedal away on it had seemed the acme of possible success ; but he suddenly remembered that a man riding a bicycle may at the same time steer another along, and he chuckled at the thought. To escape, and at the same time to leave the enemy without means of pursuit, was a neat little masterstroke of strategy and he immediately set about putting it into operation.

It was years since he had ridden a bicycle and he made a very shaky start; but for some mysterious reason though a man may forget the tenets of his childhood faith, or the name of his first mistress, he can never, once he has learnt it, entirely forget the extremely difficult art of balancing himself on two wheels, and although he wobbled badly, and was almost off more than once, he managed to keep upright and to keep going.

He did not go back the way he had come because he was not anxious to pass the entrance to the barn again ; instead, he kept it behind him and made his way along the as yet unexplored length of the rutted farm track beyond.

He had not gone two hundred yards when round a curve of the farm road came a country yokel—a sturdy ox of a fellow, as Adrian was glad to notice, with shoulders on him like Hercules. Adrian halted and balancing precariously with one foot on the bank called out.

" Are you going to the barn below ? "

The ox grinned and said why should he go to the barn when the cattle were no longer housed there; he was going home.

Adrian drew from his pocket one of the one hundred milrep notes which had already served its turn with Froyla.

" My friend," he said impressively, " I have a particular reason for wanting you to go into that barn. Never mind why. I am an Englishman, and as you know all Englishmen are mad. I am so mad that I am giving you this money—a hundred milreps—on condition that you go into the barn at once."

The grin on the ox-like face widened into a positive leer of bucolic delight. Probably (Adrian thought) the good fellow was trying to translate this almost unheard of sum into terms of wine at his local estaminet and gloriously failing to grasp the astronomical figures entailed. He folded the note carefully and put it away in a waistcoat pocket, then touched his cap respectfully.

"The Herr Englishman is generous," he said. "If it pleases him for me to go into the barn why, certainly I will go there."

Adrian noted with approval the ham-like appearance of his hands and with an encouraging.

"Stout fellow. Go to it, George," started off again on his not yet very steady journey.

Every yard that he went brought back the trick of bicycling more certainly and he was soon pushing along at quite a fan-pace.

Occasionally he shot, a hurried glance over his shoulder and when he saw that the countryman had reached the barn he pulled up again for a moment to listen.

For a second nothing seemed to happen and then, even at that distance, the mix-up was audible. The two policemen must have been waiting ready to spring the moment their prey came in. Spring no doubt they did, but the countryman's thick skull must have dodged or resisted their truncheons, and his ham-like hands must have begun to wreak flail-like damage to judge by the sounds that came floating out on the late afternoon air.

Adrian permitted himself one glorious burst of delighted laughter; and then, getting under way again, he settled down to the business of pushing the bicycles along in earnest. Every now and again he chuckled aloud at his thoughts, but when he rounded the last curve of the farm track he forgot all about chuckles and laughter and was jolted into seriousness again.

At the junction of the rough track and the road proper was a blob of green—a third Turbanian policeman standing on guard, his bicycle propped against the hedge at the road-side.

"Not such fools as I thought," Adrian reflected, and on the instant his spirits sank still lower, for the policeman was none other than his already once-discomfited Joseph Franks, and any vague hope Adrian had entertained of blurring his way out of it was thus completely shattered.

Luckily for Adrian the farm track ran down to the road in a steep declivity, and he was already travelling at a good pace when the policeman caught sight of him. Caught sight of him and grinned, for Joseph Franks had a score to pay off, and thought he saw his chance of paying it. Rather **cumber-somely he advanced to the middle of the road, where he took up his stance with arms outstretched.**

Adrian had been pedalling hard and was moving fast now, the spare bicycle bumping along at his side. The policeman looked formidably big blocking up the middle of the road, but Adrian still thought that there might be one chance and he meant to try it. He put every ounce of energy he had into

the pedals, and at the last split second, when he seemed to be heading for certain disaster, he swerved wildly to the left and shot the spare bicycle forward. The manoeuvre took the policeman by surprise and the loose bicycle did its part nobly. It caught Joseph Franks fairly amidships, and he went down in a tangle of legs and spinning wheels and handlebars.

Adrian heard a rich volley of Turbanian oaths ring out, but he was too busy correcting his mad swerve to appreciate them. Only a hairsbreadth separated him from disaster. He actually brushed the fence at the roadside and for an instant thought he was off, but by a miracle he managed to keep his balance, and five seconds later was pedalling like fury down the hill.

He would dearly have liked to look back and savour the sight of Joseph Franks sitting in the middle of the road extricating himself from an infuriated bicycle and swearing comprehensively all the while, but every particle of energy and attention was devoted to the business of getting away ; and if he missed the sight of his enemy's discomfiture at least he reaped the benefit of it, for it took the angry policeman the best part of four minutes to get clear of the entanglement, and in four minutes a man cycling as hard as he knows how, mostly downhill, can get a very long start.

Good though his start was Adrian kept going. He had no desire to see the inside of the lock-up at Troghen again. He took the first turning that presented itself and kept pedalling like fury, and presently was delighted to come to a fork in the road. He kept to the left, but it was at least an even chance that his pursuer would make the wrong choice, and Adrian began to feel more secure.

At first the countryside was wild and desolate, and he scarcely so much as caught sight of another human being, but when he had been pushing along steadily for more than forty minutes it was clear that he was coming into a more populous district. He had come down into the valley, and farms instead of being isolated and easily avoidable became much more frequent, and he twice found himself forced to go through villages where people looked at him curiously. The second time this happened Adrian began to get nervous, he had **no** wish to leave a trail behind him which could easily be picked up, and as the evening was now fast drawing on he decided to lie up until darkness came, and then if he could only **find out where he was, to attempt the whole journey back to Charneck.**

Accordingly he dismounted, and pushing his trusty cycle into a coppice that bordered the road, propped it there and himself sat down on a fallen tree trunk. He was glad of the rest, and his rump was so sore already that to think what it would be like when he finally reached Charneck was a painful piece of

imagining. He was beginning to feel desperately hungry again, and he reflected that though goat's milk and black bread might be excellent in their way, a large mixed grill with plenty of mashed potatoes would go a great deal further to meet his particular case.

Several times countrymen and women went trudging along the road; and Adrian, eyeing them from the sanctuary of his hiding-place, was glad he had taken refuge. He did not think that he would have to wait more than an hour for darkness to come, and he sat there philosophically, keeping an eye on the road, and consoling himself by smoking his last two cigarettes.

Darkness came more quickly than he had expected; and he was mighty glad of it, for the evening had turned chilly, and when he finally rose to his feet he was cold and stiff.

The night brought him an even greater blessing than cover, for the sky was clear and the stars showing so that he was able to get his bearings.

South must be the general direction of his trail, so much he knew, and he found that the road he had been on ran as due south as might be. He decided to follow it, therefore, keeping an eye on the stars until he got a chance of asking more detailed directions, and once more mounting his bicycle he set off.

After twenty minutes' pedalling he was warm again, and all his stiffness had gone, but the hunger had redoubled and he realised that if he was going to spend the best part of the night cycling he must get a meal first somewhere and somehow.

In one large village which he passed through a brilliantly lighted cafe sorely tempted him, but he decided to play for safety and to find somewhere less conspicuous. After the village there came a long hard climb for more than a mile, and when he had laboured to the top of this, and felt more in need than ever of a drink and some food, he found just what he wanted standing at a crossroads.

A creaking sign proclaimed it to be called the Estaminet of The Lonely Soldier, and indeed it looked lonely enough at its bleak crossroads.

Lights and a man's sudden gust of laughter showed that it was not too lonely for hospitality, and with a devout sigh of relief Adrian dismounted wearily from his stolen machine and wheeled it into the yard at the back of the estaminet.

His mind was occupied exclusively with images and thoughts of food; food in plenty, heaped, hot and steaming on big plates, succulent and odourful. The gastric juices were actually beginning to run in his mouth at this delightful prospect, when the back door of the estaminet opened and Adrian caught sight of something which made him draw back

quickly into the darkness of the shed where he had stored his cycle.

In the patch of yellow light a man stood outlined for a moment, a man with an over-smart figure and a dandified appearance, a man whom Adrian was exceedingly anxious to have news of—none other than Captain Eric von Gerne.

He stood there long enough to draw on his gloves, and then walked swiftly across the dark yard to the motor car that stood waiting for him.

CHAPTER XXI

ERIC VON GERNE sat in a private room at the Estaminet of The Lonely Soldier. The estaminet was well named, for it stood by itself at the crossroads without another house or building of any sort within a mile of it.

A drink stood on the table in front of von Gerne ; opposite him sat the woman Hilda ; he was reading (or re-reading, rather, for he knew' its contents almost by heart) a letter. Captain Eric von Gerne was very well pleased with himself, the cards were running his way, and he was a man who flourished greatly on success.

" It stresses particularly that whoever comes is to be alone," he said, " so you had better not be with me actually when I get the girl."

" What do you want me to do then ? "

Von Gerne read the letter again. " . . . on the hill road between Charneck and Troghen an estaminet called ' The Lonely Soldier ' stands at a crossroads. Two miles south of this, on the side road, on the left-hand side, is Sharnloss Wood, at the corner of which there is a burnt-out ruin of a lodge . . . " This was followed by particulars about the sum of money which would be acceptable for having looked after the English girl and by details as to be sure to come alone and the like, all of which he already knew.

" I shall take the car down the side road to this lodge place," he said, " and get the girl."

" Suppose she shows fight when she sees who it is ? "

" She won't. I will attend to that. Then I shall come back here and pick you up."

" Here ? At the estaminet ? "

' No. We won't take any risks. There will be other people here. As soon as I have left, you will go out too and walk about half a mile down the road to where it forks. Wait there until I come along with the girl."

Hilda nodded. She had had reason during the last forty-eight hours to appreciate von Gerne's quickness and decision.

"And then?"

"And then, my dear Hilda, we shall be in a fair way to repair the damage that your insane jealousy created.¹

The woman's face whitened slightly, but her voice was even as she asked,

"You think the other business in Charneck will be—all right?"

"Why not? More than all right. They are hunting that interfering English fool for murder, and when they get him he will have a hard job to talk his head out of a noose."

"So maybe what I did was for the best after all?"

"What you did was the act of a fool, and if I choose you will have to account for it in a quarter where foolish acts are not welcome. But now, to-night, things are too close on us, the stakes are too big, for us to squabble about what has happened. If we can get the girl back before she has done any damage nothing can stop the plan going forward. That is all that matters, nothing else."

There was a fanaticism in his voice which touched an answering chord in the woman.

"You can rely on me to do everything you order," she told him quietly.

"All right." He drained his glass, and folding the letter put it away in his pocket and rose to his feet. "All right. You had better wait here for ten minutes or so, and then walk down the road to the fork. I shall be there as soon as I can."

He left the room without saying any more; but three minutes later he was back again. The woman was surprised and looked up at him inquiringly.

"Anything wrong with the car?" she asked.

"No. But just as I got to it it struck me that we ought to be prepared for all eventualities. If anything should go wrong it's no good us both being caught."

"What can go wrong?"

"Nothing that I know of. But there are such things as traps. When I am coming towards you I shall give three short hoots on the horn if everything has gone all right. But if I give one long hoot you will know that something is wrong somewhere and you must look out. Understand?"

"Yes. Perfectly."

"All right, then. Three short hoots is the next you will hear from me, I hope and believe."

Once again he left the room, this time humming confidently under his breath.

Once she **had** written the letter to Adrian, Marjorie hea d

nothing more about it, she did not even know if it had been delivered successfully or not. The old gypsy was away from the encampment for a whole day and Marjorie feared that she would be worried by the young Romany. Feared it; and yet, such was her despondency and boredom, almost hoped for it. When she was sitting on the lowest step of the wagon near the fire of beech sticks, the handsome young Romany came and leant against the wagon by her side. He tried to talk to her, and laughed at their joint inability to understand one another, and just occasionally his brilliantly dark eyes lit up as he looked at her. But this was as far as he got for the Romany girl was sitting outside the second wagon not twenty yards away watching them. Marjorie might possibly have extracted some amusement out of the situation if she had not been so thoroughly scared and wretched.

For some reason or other she became convinced that her letter had not reached Adrian, and she felt that she would never get home again to England. A picture came into her mind of the tidy meadows, the winding stream, and the ivy-covered church surrounded by the contended cluster of houses which time out of mind men have agreed to call Little Disling. It was here, in this remote part of Wiltshire, that she had been born and reared, and she thought of it now with all an exile's longing. She could not get out of her mind the conviction that Adrian had not got her letter, and if he failed her she felt that she was lost indeed.

After dark the gypsy came back. The signal of three whistles heralded his approach, and when it was answered from the camp he came silently through the trees into the circle of flickering flame light. He came straight up to Marjorie and said,

" You are ready to go ? "

" Where to ? "

¹¹ The Englishman."

A wave of immense relief flooded the girl so that for a moment she actually felt faint. She heard herself saying almost incoherently,

" Yes, yes. I am ready. Now. Where is he ? Has he come for me ? "

The gypsy laughed, not altogether unkindly.

" I think he will come. Why not ? I only asked a little money for looking after you. Everything has to be paid for."

" You gave him the letter ? "

" That's why I went to Chaxneck. Come, or we shall be late."

Marjorie got up at once, and before she realised what was happening found that her wrists had been tied loosely behind her back. It was a precaution which the gypsy took more as

a matter of form than anything else ; he did not think he was going to have any trouble, but he did not mean to run a single unnecessary risk.

When they left the camp the night was pitch dark, except for the faint light of frosty stars. They hardly once touched a road and seemed nearly always to be in the cover of something—trees, bushes, hedges, the gypsy used them all instinctively. He walked fast so that Marjorie had difficulty in keeping up with him, and he never put a foot wrong. She stumbled frequently, not seeing the inequalities in the ground, or the stones or roots of trees ; but his eyes, apparently, were as useful in this Stygian stuff as at noonday.

When they had been walking thus for half an hour he laid his hand on her shoulder to motion her to halt. They had been moving through a wood for some time past, and as far as Marjorie could tell they were still in the middle of it, but the gypsy knew better. He knew that not many yards separated them now from where the burnt-out ruins of the old gamekeeper's lodge stood, and he waited with his eyes fixed between the dark boles of the trees.

Presently the black and silent night was outraged by the sound of a motor car and by the brightness of twin yellow headlights. The gypsy made an inarticulate sound of triumph and his fingers tightened for an instant on Marjorie's shoulder.

"Wait here," he said quietly, "whilst I go and get the money. If you move from here before I come back you will never see the Englishman, I will attend to that." With a final warning pressure of his fingers he left her and sidled off into the darkness. Marjorie stood stock still, straining her eyes at the two shafts of yellow light. The gypsy was gone much longer than she expected, for in her anxiety or simplicity she imagined that he would merely walk straight to the waiting car and back again. Naturally he did nothing of the sort. He was not a fool and had set too many traps for other animals to walk blindly into one himself.

He made a circling movement, and without its occupant being aware of the fact got close enough to the car to make a careful study of it before committing himself. Suspicious as his mind naturally was he saw nothing to frighten him. He could **not** distinguish the features of the one man in the car, **but** he was sure that there was only one, nor did there seem **to be any signs of** anything dangerous. He stood there absolutely still, every sense alert to the possibility **of** danger, like **a wily old fox** surveying **a** chicken run. There was **a** risk, **of course ; there must always be a risk.** He knew that. But there was also a prize. He made up his mind, and stepped out of the black shadows to the window of the car.

Marjorie suffered agonies of suspense waiting by herself

among the trees. She was desperately tempted to call out, even to run out towards the car, but she had more sense than to do so. She realised that the gypsy held all the cards and that the only thing she could do was to let him play the hand the way he wanted to.

But he had been away so long (or it seemed so long to her) and he came back so silently that she jumped when his hand was suddenly laid on her shoulder again.

He said nothing at first, but simply held something white close to her face. She realised that it was a bundle of notes and she hated the satisfied gloating in his voice as he said, "You may go to your Englishman now."

In the darkness the gypsy could not be sure, but he had not thought that the man in the car was the same one who had stopped and questioned him two days earlier. But that was the English girl's concern, not his. His only concern he held now tightly in his hand—the bundle of white notes. Not even his first two brigandages, successful though they had been, had gone quite so easily and smoothly as this one. No fuss, no protest, no danger. Obviously this was the way to make a living. He bore no grudge against his prisoner at all; rather did he admire her for being able to command such a ransom price so unhesitatingly paid. He took no pains to keep the satisfaction out of his voice when he told her,

"You may go to your Englishman now."

So strangely built is the human character that whereas Marjorie should have felt pure relief and nothing but relief, what she did actually feel first of all was intense annoyance that he should get away with it like that.

She would have given a lot to knock the bottom out of that self-satisfied smugness, but the gypsy's words were no sooner out of his mouth than he himself was out of her sight. He vanished back into the dark wood silently and completely. Possibly success would make him a fool in time, but he was not a fool yet—he went while the going was good.

Marjorie was left alone; and now relief and only relief flooded her whole being, mentally and physically, and she hurried through the fringe of trees to where the yellow car-lights blazed on the road.

She stumbled once and all but fell, and she was panting when finally she reached the road. As she approached, the near side door of the car was swung open and she could hear the controlled purring of the engine.

She found that she was between tears and laughter, and she did not know what to say. "Words to be addressed to a comparatively unknown young man on rescuing you from Turbanian hill gypsies" was a subject which had not been included in the curriculum at her school.

" Mr. Mawley—it's frightfully, frightfully good of you."

" Jump in."

It was hardly to be expected that, in the mental stress from which she was suffering, she should have realised that the two hurriedly-spoken words were not in Adrian's voice.

She jumped in, or tried to, apologising for her clumsiness, again almost with silly tears of relief in her voice, by saying,

" Sorry—it's my hands—they're tied."

Nothing was answered to this ; but as soon as she managed to *get* in somehow, a hand was reached across her, the door was slammed and the car jumped into motion.

How many senses are there beyond the normal five to apprise one of things, and how do they operate ? Marjorie gradually became aware that something was wrong. The inside of the big touring car was pitch dark and she strained to look at the man by her side.

" Mr. Mawley——" she began.

The quiet cynical chuckle disillusioned her

" Wrong, Miss Gillespie, I'm afraid. I'm doing the Sir Galahad act. Your young English friend wasn't quite smart enough. And he'll want to be very smart indeed to get out of a whole lot of trouble that's brewing for him in Charneck."

Marjorie all but fainted. Bitter disappointment and complete bewilderment seized on her, draining away her last ounce of resistance. Physically and mentally she was near the end of her tether.

Von Gerne sensed this and it pleased him. His quarry had given him a lot of trouble one way and another; now, he did not expect any more. And if things came right, as they looked like doing, in spite of all the insane risks that had been run, it would be his doing and his alone.

With this gratifying thought causing a smile on this thin face he began to look for the fork in the road where Hilda would be waiting.

He noticed a white heap of stones that stood near to the road fork, and immediately began to slacken speed.

Instantly something cold and hard and circular was pressed against the back of his neck and a level voice said,

" Keep going, von Gerne, or I'll blow the top of your head off."

CHAPTER X X I I

IT WAS a very great relief to Adrian to say those words and to put all the venom into them that he could. A relief mentally, for he disliked von Gerne intensely ; and a relief physically, for he had had a very uncomfortable time for the past half-hour.

When he had put his cycle in the shed at the back of " The Lonely Soldier " estaminet Adrian's one thought had been to get something to eat and drink, but the completely unexpected sight of von Gerne coming out of the back door of the place had driven all that from his mind.

Von Gerne had hesitated for a moment and then crossed quickly to his car; and Adrian did not know what to do about it. Trusty ally though his bicycle had been it was not of much use in chasing a forty horse-power car, and it looked as though he had caught sight of his enemy only to lose him again. It was a bitter realisation, for he had a strong hunch that where von Gerne was Marjorie Gillespie was likely to be, and in danger.

These thoughts and a dozen other futile " ifs " and " buts " flooded his mind during the few seconds which von Gerne took to reach the waiting car.

He jumped in, slammed the door, and started the engine.

And then the gods relented. They had been kind to von Gerne in the hall of Feathers' Academy in Charneck ; it pleased them now to show their impartiality.

To Adrian's astonishment the car did not start off into the darkness. Instead, the door opened again and von Gerne got out and went back into the estaminet.

" Forgotten something," Adrian whispered gleefully to himself, " by all that's holy, he's forgotten something." He waited until the dandified figure had disappeared into the estaminet and then streaked across the dark yard and peered into the back of the big car. It was empty, and on the floor in front of the rear seat was precisely what Adrian wanted to see—a dark mass of rugs. Two of them he discovered, when he climbed quietly in and crouched on the floor of the car, arranging the rugs in what he hoped was artistic confusion over him. He need not have bothered about the confusion, artistic or otherwise, of the rugs. He had hardly got settled before von Gerne came out again. He had gone back to make final arrangements with Hilda about the signals to be used between them; it seemed to him to be the crowning touch to a highly satisfactory scheme, and he came to the car

humming to himself and in high good humour. Had he cast an eye into the back of the car he would have seen nothing but the customary dark mass of rugs, but he never even did so much. That there could be danger lurking within three feet of him was the last thought likely to enter his head now. Still humming, he switched on the great headlights, let in the clutch, and steered the car out on to the dark road.

Adrian had an uncomfortable time physically, but he was quite happy. He did not fear that there was any chance of being discovered until they reached the journey's end, and he was intensely curious to see where that journey's end would be and who else would be found there.

At any rate, he reflected, he was being whirled away at a gratifying speed from all his dangers and complications in the Troghen area.

He was surprised that the car came to a halt so soon, and further surprised when they waited there, the engine running quietly and von Gerne apparently just sitting in the driving seat.

"Waiting for somebody," Adrian divined. "I wonder who."

When the stranger's voice came it meant nothing to him, but von Gerne's inquiry was full of meaning—and hope.

"Have you got the girl?"

"Have you got the money?" the strange voice asked in counter query.

Apparently von Gerne had got the money, and there was an interval whilst it was handed over and examined.

"Wait," the other said, "and I'll send her to you."

Again they waited. The sequence of events was beginning to make sense to Adrian, though what Marjorie Gillespie had been doing to be ransomed by von Gerne he could not imagine. The next words he heard made him start . . . "Mr. Mawley, it's frightfully, frightfully good of you."

"Jump in."

He was desperately afraid that she would not jump in, but, realising that the voice was not his, run off. It was clear to him now that von Gerne was doing an impersonation. "Clever devil," Adrian thought. "I wonder how he worked it."

"Sorry, it's my hands, **they're** tied."

(**Who** the devil **had** been tying **her** hands? Adrian wondered).

Nothing was answered to this, and within thirty seconds the car had started again.

What next? Adrian speculated, and before two minutes had passed he was aware, by some strange telepathy, that

Marjorie was beginning to sense danger. There was an acuteness in the atmosphere and her tentative " Mr. Mawley ——" caused the storm to break.

" ... your young English friend wasn't quite smart enough ... "

Under the hot stifling heap of rugs Adrian grinned and grinned grimly . . . maybe the young English fool was going to be a shade smarter than they had given him credit for after all . . . He wondered how long he could afford to hold his hand ; and when, within a few minutes, the car began to slow down, his question was answered for him. He knew that he could hold it no longer. It was no part of his plan that von Gerne should now call for reinforcements anywhere.

The mere thought of being able to move after having been hunched up in acute discomfort for half an hour was exquisite relief. He had a very good mind to get his hands round von Gerne's neck and squeeze the sneering, self-satisfied breath out of him ; but, on second thoughts, he decided for the moment at any rate to play a bluff. All he was anxious to do at the moment was to keep the car moving until they were well out of the danger zone.

Very cautiously he extricated himself from the smothering rugs, and taking his fountain-pen from his breast pocket he pressed the end of it hard behind von Gerne's ear.

And he put every ounce of concentrated savageness he possessed into his words when he whispered, " Keep going, von Gerne, or I'll blow the top of your head off."

Neither the man nor the girl sitting in front had ever heard more startling words, words which came apparently out of an empty black void behind them.

Nor was there any doubt about the tone of voice. It was the tone of voice of a man fully prepared to blow the top of anybody's head off. Von Gerne, a clever and a brave man, did not waste a split second in optimistic speculations about the thing being a bluff. He had been in tight corners before and recognised the symptoms. This corner looked like being unpleasantly tight, and he realised that it would need a lot of quick thinking to get him out of it.

It was a wonderful tribute to the speed of his mental processes that the car made no perceptible hesitation in its slowing down.

" If this car stops," Adrian reminded him grimly, " I fire." Von Gerne laughed.

" The ubiquitous Mr. Mawley, isn't it ? If you mean what you say, Mr. Mawley, you will have to fire, because I can't help the car stopping. I'm running out of petrol."

" I don't believe it."

" That's bad luck on me then."

" You wouldn't be such a fool as to come on a trip like this short of petrol."

" Thanks for the compliment. And incidentally you are quite right. I wouldn't. I've got lots of petrol, five gallons of it, in the reserve tank. But to switch on to the reserve tank I've got to stop the car and get out."

And at that moment the car stopped. It was a brave act of von Gerne's to bring the car to a halt. It was perhaps an even braver one which made him lean forward and, accidentally apparently, put his elbow on the horn switch.

" For God's sake get off that damned klaxon," Adrian growled.

Von Gerne obligingly did so with an easy,

" Sorry. You've made me rather nervous."

Adrian was in the sad position of the bluffer whose bluff has been called ; and even worse than that for he did not know whether his bluff had been called or not. He could not be sure that this petrol business was a fake. It was just possible that it was genuine. He did not like the incident of the klaxon at all, and he lowered the near window of the car and looked out. There were no buildings to be seen nor any lights. Nothing but the dark night and the lonely road. They had stopped, apparently in the middle of nowhere.

Adrian began to be slightly cheered.

" We'll wait like this for a couple of minutes," he said, " and see what happens."

Nothing happened, and at the end of the two minutes von Gerne assured him that nothing would happen until the reserve petrol tap was turned on and they could resume the journey.

Adrian nodded and decided to wait a further two minutes. Again he looked cautiously out. There was neither sign nor sound of anything stirring. He turned into the car and said,

" Miss Gillespie—Marjone."

There was no answer. Fainted, I suppose, Adrian thought, and swore unreasonably, thinking that he had got quite enough troubles to content with already, without girls fainting . . .

That question of Marjorie having fainted somehow decided him. They couldn't stay there all night. Something must be done, and he was by no means sure yet that his bluff had actually been called.

" Get out, von Gerne," he ordered, " and stand by the door, keeping it open. And don't forget that if you play any tricks you get a bullet in you."

Von Gerne did precisely as he was told and stood by the driving wheel door, holding it open.

Adrian got out of the rear door and stood by the other man in the dark doorway.

"Get to work on that reserve tap," he ordered, "and if it takes you more than a couple of minutes it will be just too bad for you."

"You are not very generous with your time allowances," von Gerne complained as he turned and bent over the bonnet.

Adrian watched that action with infinite relief; it began to look as though his bluff had held after all—a comforting thought which was blown sky high the next instant by something entirely quiet and completely unheralded.

Silently there slid over Adrian's right shoulder and so into his range of vision something which came to rest there under his right ear and half-way along his right cheek. It was black and cold and hard. It was not the end of a fountain-pen.

"I've used this revolver once," a woman's voice assured him gently, "and I'll use it again if you move."

Yet he did move—involuntarily. When that frightening cold thing began to push past his cheek he had turned his head and his eyes were no longer on von Gerne. He never saw, therefore, the spanner which hit him on the base of the skull and knocked all the sense out of him,

"Good work, Hilda," von Gerne said, and bent over the prostrate form to search it.

He was divided between disgust and amusement when he discovered the fountain-pen in the unconscious Adrian's right hand.

"My God—he was bluffing me," he said softly. "I didn't think he had it in him. Well, I've given him something on the back of his head that will stop him bluffing anybody for a bit. Lend a hand, Hilda, and get him in the back of the car. We must be moving."

CHAPTER XXIII

ADRIAN recovered consciousness in the back of the car, aided by a severe jolting over a particularly bad stretch of road.

He felt almighty groggy. Von Gerne had not been gentle with the spanner, and the knock-out blow coming at the end of many hours without adequate food had done Adrian no good at all. He felt wretchedly sick, and try as he might to pull himself together and size up the situation he found that he could not prevent his main preoccupation being whether in fact he was actually going to be sick or not.

He discovered himself slumped in a corner of the rear seat, the interior light was switched on, and at the other end of the seat the maid Hilda was sitting watchful and wary with the revolver held ready on her lap.

" Looks as though she would use it, too," Adrian thought, but in actual fact the question held only an academic interest for him. He was too weak to take a saucer of milk from a kitten, and he knew it.

They were travelling fast, much to Adrian's regret, for each bump they went over convinced him that the time to be violently ill had come at last.

When they finally came to a halt and von Gerne curtly ordered him out of the car, he had the greatest difficulty in standing, and was only too glad to slump down again into a seat the moment they got into the building.

Looking round he found that he knew the room that they were in—the living-room of Mountain Farm where, an interminable time ago as it now seemed, he had drunk with von Genie and crossed swords with him in the first rounds of their encounter.

An encounter, Adrian reflected, which gave every indication of having gone sadly awry, for certainly he was in no shape now to pull matters out of the fire.

He looked across the room to where Marjorie Gillespie, her hands still tied behind her, sat. She did her best to smile encouragingly at him and Adrian gave her a wan response.

" Sorry, Miss Gillespie," he said, " 'fraid I've made rather a hash of things. My knight errant act has turned out a flop."

Von Gerne laughed. Triumph, when disaster had seemed so close, had put him on great good terms with himself.

" I don't think you can blame yourself," he said. " You just happened to be up against something a little too big for you. It's constantly happening to you Britishers, you ought to be used to it by now."

" We are very stupid people," Adrian said.

Von Gerne beamed.

" You say that, not really believing it. But, of course, it is true. You yourself are so stupid that if you ever get back to Charneck alive, which is very unlikely, my friend, you will find yourself arrested for murder. And there's no old-fashioned nonsense here about being innocent until you are proved guilty. Once you are charged you have got to prove yourself innocent, and I don't think you would find it at all easy in front of a Turbanian jury."

Adrian's swimming, splitting head was beginning to clear sufficiently for him to take an interest in what was being said.

" I wonder just how you worked that," he said. " It must have been rather smart."

" It was smart. I had to be smart to get out of the jam that I found myself in. But it is always possible—what is your English phrase—to kill two birds with one stone. You

were beginning to be a nuisance, and it occurred to me if I could get myself out of a difficulty and get you into it at the same time it might be very convenient."

" Just the sort of thing that would occur to you," Adrian commented, " who was it who was murdered, by the way ? "

Von Gerne laughed.

" It's comical that you don't even know that. Your little blonde friend, *our* little blonde friend, perhaps I ought to say—Polly."

" Polly Linder ? "

" Miss Polly Linder. I didn't kill her. I don't believe in killing people until it's necessary. All I wanted was a pleasant evening with her, and I was just beginning to have one when Hilda turned up and lost her temper——"

The woman's face was white and set.

" If you would stop this posturing and crowing," she said, " there is work to do. You seem to forget that. Why doesn't he come ? "

Von Gerne glanced at his elegant wrist-watch.

" Because, my dear Hilda, it isn't time. It isn't what our English friends call the zero-hour yet. I told him that I should be back here at ten, and it wants ten minutes to the hour yet. Then things will begin to happen. God knows what he may be doing. Praying, most likely, or in some sort of ecstasy. You can't hurry people in ecstasies." He looked across to Adrian again and resumed his bantering tone. " Hilda is cross," he went on, " at being reminded of her jealousy. Beware of jealous women, Mawley—Oh, I was forgetting, it's not much use giving you advice, is it, if you are not going to have any opportunity of benefiting by it ? Hilda should have stayed here to look after your friend, our friend, Miss Gillespie. Instead of doing that, she was fool enough to follow me to my flat, and worse fool enough to work herself into a fit of insane jealousy when she found me there with Polly Linder. She whipped out her revolver and shot her before I could get a word in edgeways. I assure you, my dear Mawley, I was horrified. Quite horrified. I don't like shooting women until it becomes absolutely necessary. And this was not only unnecessary, it was damned dangerous. Of course, as soon as she had done it she went to pieces. Luckily there was nobody else in the flats at the time. They were all out dining, or at the theatre, or somewhere. I had to think quickly and act quickly, Mawley. In fact, I recommend what was done in the twenty minutes as a model of how to get out of an exceedingly difficult situation by acting boldly enough.

" Polly had had quite a bit to drink before Hilda turned up, enough, anyway, to make her tell me that she had already

been to see you that evening. I couldn't get out of her why she had gone, she wouldn't tell me that. I suppose you find ladies of the chorus as attractive as we all do—or was it, by any chance, anything else; I just wondered——?"

"You can go on just wondering," Adrian assured him.

"Quite so. Oh, I approve of the principle entirely. Don't give anything away, even when the game is up. Because it is up, you know."

** Is it? "

"Completely."

The worst of it was from Adrian's point of view that it looked as though von Gerne was right.

"Must you go on with all this talk?" the woman interrupted.

"Yes, I must. I'm telling our English friend how you got us into danger and how I got us out of it——"

Adrian, watching the man, reflected that he had never before seen anybody quite so drunk with success. And the curious part was that he did not despise von Gerne for it; indeed, he sympathised with him. He knew, from practical experience, the sort of life that the man must have been living for many months past—the fear of dark alleyways, of unlighted windows; the necessity for suspecting every new acquaintance and many old ones; the knowledge that every letter may have been tampered with, every conversation listened-in to, every action spied upon—Adrian knew only too well the strain that months of that sort of living put upon a man, and he could sympathise with von Gerne's feeling of exuberance now that the game was over, the tricks made and counted.

"It occurred to me," von Gerne went on, "that as Polly had visited you once that evening she might like to do so again. My car was downstairs and between us we helped her into it. Nobody saw us luckily. If they had done I was ready with a story that she had fainted and we were taking her to a doctor. When we got to where you live there were more people about and we had to wait our chance. But it came all right, and we got her upstairs and left her outside your door. I couldn't be sure how things would work out, of course, but I would rather you had a bit of trouble on your doorstep than I."

"Kind of you," Adrian said.

"Smart of me. Because even if you get back to Charaek—which incidentally you won't—you will be wanted for murder."

Adrian nodded. What disappointed him bitterly was the fact that he was getting no better. The blow on the back of his head had left him feeling very sick indeed, and he had an uncomfortable suspicion that if he tried to stand up again he would flop down in a faint. He glanced across at Marjorie

Gillespie and she smiled at him encouragingly. He had to pull his woolly wits together to realise how she came to be mixed up in the affair at all, and when he remembered that it was all his fault he felt desperately sorry.

"Can't you cut all this cackle," he asked, "and get on with the next act? I'm getting bored."

Von Gerne chuckled softly.

"You won't have much longer to be bored, my friend," he said.

"You are very cocksure."

Von Gerne leant forward, his face contorted with sudden rage, and for a moment Adrian thought that he was going to strike him. He hoped not, for his head had fires of savage pain in it already.

But von Gerne did not strike him. He spoke instead. His bantering, bombastical tone had vanished and in its place he used the passionate whispers of a man long fed on fanaticism.

"Yes I am, very cocksure," he agreed. "You mean it as an insult, of course. But I don't take it so. I can afford not to. It is only when the things you are cocksure about fail that you look a fool. We leave that to you Britishers. The things we plan do not fail. They have not done so in Western Europe, and they will not do so here. In forty-eight hours a spark is going to be kindled in this part of the world which will make a very unpleasant fire for England. It won't bother you personally, my friend. By that time you will be lying in some mountain stream or bog. If ever anybody finds you and troubles to make inquiries you will be written off as a murderer who ran away and committed suicide. You won't see the Balkans blazing with Nazi fire; but England will, and she will rue it."

Once again the woman interrupted impatiently.

"It is unlucky to talk like this," she said, "of what we are going to do and how we are going to succeed. We have run risks enough already. I am going to get him and tell him we are ready to start."

Von Gerne glanced at his watch and nodded his approval.

"All right. It's a waste of time talking to Englishmen anyway, they are too thick-headed to understand. Give me the gun, Hilda. We shall need it soon, in any case."

The woman handed him her revolver, and taking care to move at the back of his chair went towards the door.

Adrian caught Marjorie's eye and they managed to smile at one another, but each knew that there was little enough to smile about. As for Adrian he had seen enough of the game to know that when defeat comes it is no good worrying about, it. What was happening now was, after all, only what had

always been possible any time during the last ten years. It was part of the risk of his trade and he could afford to be philosophical about it; but he was shocked when he realised again, and now more fully than ever, that it was he and he alone who was responsible for involving Marjorie Gillespie in the disastrous affair.

"Von Genie," he said suddenly, and the woman stopped on her way to the door, arrested by the note of urgency in his voice. "Von Gerne, I'm not grumbling at how the thing has gone. You've won, and you have won hands down. I shall get what the loser deserves to get. But for Miss Gillespie here it is completely different. She has nothing to do with the business at all. It was completely accidental, as far as she was concerned, that she got mixed up in it. You must have realised that, by now, yourself."

Von Gerne smiled. He put his monocle into his eye and studied Marjorie critically.

"On the contrary," he said at length. "Miss Gillespie has quite a lot to do with the business, now. For one thing she has come to learn rather more about it than is healthy for us—or for her. And, then, you overlook the fact, my dear Mawley, or possibly you don't quite realise it, that there is somebody in this house who is very interested indeed in Miss Gillespie. When his hour of triumph is over and he wants relaxation she will be just the person to provide it for him. And if she refuses, you must take my word for it that she will be very foolish. These fanatics are touchy people—and devilish ingenious."

Marjorie felt a cold chill seize on her as she listened to those quietly spoken words. Up to this point, for some completely unjustifiable reason, she had still entertained a vague hope that the whole affair would dissolve suddenly like an evil nightmare. Now the nightmare had gone and only the evil remained, and with stark and terrifying abruptness the evil was real.

She shot a look at Adrian now and there was no smile either on her lips or in her eyes, but only naked terror.

Adrian was aware of her eyes, but did not meet them; he stared straight ahead of him and did not speak any more, and after waiting for thirty seconds of a fateful and final silence the woman Hilda turned and with a twisted smile of triumph on her thin mouth went towards the door.

She opened it and went out; a second later the three people inside were startled by a piercing scream....

CHAPTER XXIV

VON GERNE got to his feet simultaneously with the opening of the door. In the doorway stood Dicky Horder as cheerful and irrepressible as ever.

"Well, well, well," he said, looking round, "quite a little party."

But Adrian was watching von Gerne and the revolver in his right hand.

Dicky's hands were empty. If he was armed he was very cleverly concealing the fact. Von Gerne smiled when he saw those empty hands and his own right hand began to come slowly up to stomach height. He was going to run no risks at all and he took three quick steps across the room to bring him just as near to Dicky as he wanted to be.

It was a fatal mistake to try to make as sure as all that. Adrian, who quite certainly could not have fought one round against a semi-paralysed blind man, crammed all the strength that he had left into a single act. He shot out his right foot in a vicious sweeping kick. It caught von Gerne just above his ankle in the middle of his three quick steps forward and it brought him down a most almighty cropper. He stumbled forward, looked like knocking his eye out on a table edge and instinctively clutched at it with his right hand to save himself. The revolver clattered to the floor and skidded under the table. It was in no-man's-land now, ungettable by either man except after a scramble, and the two faced one another.

Dicky broke the silence with a laugh.

"All right," he said, "let the gun stay there. I haven't got one either. Let's mix it."

Pat on his words he danced into the middle of the room and proceeded to put them into effect. It was brilliant mixing. Von Gerne was no coward and he was prepared to fight, but he was up against something altogether out of his class. Dicky Horder was lean and hard, and had about as much waste tissue on him as a bundle of whipcord.

In some ways it was the most satisfactory fight that Adrian had ever watched and he had a first class ringside seat. At any instant almost he could have intervened again with a judiciously out-thrust leg, and at one moment, when Dicky stopped a beautiful short arm jab with his mouth and spat out a mouthful of blood as a result, he felt inclined to do it. But he didn't. He kept his legs tucked under his chair and watched, and in spite of the blood running freely down Dicky's chin, he began to feel sorry for von Gerne. He never stood a chance. He

was out-generalled, outgunned and out-fought from the start. In six minutes' time he had been given one of the most thorough pastings Adrian had ever seen any man get. Dicky went into action and thought of nothing but action with **all** the concentrated and terrifying single-mindedness of a destroyer in the Royal Navy.

It was classical stuff. His left arm kept coming out with the speed of a steel piston rod and apparently with much the same sort of strength, for whenever it caught von Gerne's face or body it marked him, or forced a tell-tale grunt out of him. And every now and again, to vary the proceedings, Dicky would bring his right across in a vicious swinging blow which looked like breaking the bone wherever it landed.

In what would have been the third round of a Queensberry contest the German got what was so very obviously coming to him. Dicky had forced him against the wall of the room and feinting suddenly so as to draw his guard he shot out a straight left that hit the man like a thunderbolt. It caught him in the vital spot, not quite on the point of the chin but about three-quarters of an inch to one side. The crack of bone against bone and the crack of von Gerne's skull against the wall behind him were almost simultaneous and von Gerne slid down to the floor as unconscious as a barn door.

Adrian felt like cheering. Dicky fished with finger and thumb in his mouth and pulled out a front tooth, examined it for a moment, and then flicked it into the fire.

"Quite a lively five minutes," he said.

Adrian laughed, possibly a little weakly, he was beginning to feel that the day had had its fill of incident.

"Good work, Dicky. What about the woman?"

"She's all right. Unless she's a contortionist. I was waiting in the passage with a bit of rope when she came out and sort of tied her up. I think it rather startled her."

"There should be somebody else in the house."

"Your friend with the pipes? He can wait for a bit. I've got him tied up in that room at the end of the passage."

"You seem to have had a busy evening."

"Fair. Who's the lady?"

"Oh, sorry. I was forgetting that you didn't know one another. This is Marjorie Gillespie and the *deus ex machina* is Dicky Horder."

Marjorie smiled and said,

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind untying my arms."

"I'm a wizard with bits of rope," Dicky said, and crossing the **room** undid the cord with which the gypsy had bound **the** girl's wrists.

"I think we'll make a job of it and tie up our friend here who seems to be coming round a bit," he said. Von **Gerne**

was making tentative efforts to get to a sitting position, but if a large-sized fly had settled on him it would almost certainly have knocked him flat again. Adrian watched him in grim sympathy.

" Poor devil. That's just how I felt an hour ago when he laid me out with a spanner. He won't be much good for a bit."

" Probably not," Dicky agreed, " but I'm taking no chances, just the same." He crossed the room and turning the German face downwards on the floor tied his wrists behind him. Then he searched for the revolver, picked it up, and slipped it into his pocket, " just in case," as he said.

" Do you think there is such a thing as one large drink in this establishment ? " he asked.

" I had drinks once, in this very room, with you Gerne," Adrian said, " but if I remember rightly they were brought in in style. Still, you might try that cupboard by the fireplace, it looks promising to me."

It was promising. It revealed a decanter of whisky, a siphon of soda, and some glasses, and Dicky joyfully got to work on them. Von Gerne's interest in the general proceedings was still so slight that the glass had to be held to his lips, and when he was ministered to the other three raised their glasses in a toast to one another.

" Here's to you, Dicky," Adrian said, " though how the devil you got here I'm not quite clear about."

Dicky grinned and answered cryptically,

" Damn good job you're a handsome looking bloke."

" You'll have to be a little more explicit than that, Dicky. My poor old head has still got a strong touch of spanneritis."

" By the way, you didn't shoot up that blonde in Charneck, did you ? Baikie's no end worried about it."

" No. I gave up shooting blondes a long time ago. The lady who did that is outside in the corridor—at least I hope she is still there."

" She's there all right," Dicky assured him, grinning. " Knots are my speciality. I wasn't a Boy Scout for nothing. The Charneck gendarmerie is pretty hot on the fact that it was you who did blondie in. They may yet take some convincing on the point. They were fairly buzzing round your flat all the next day. I was there too, in the role of undistinguished but interested spectator, and I managed to glean the fact that your car had been found in Troghen."

" So with Baikie's blessing off I went to Troghen hot-foot. I didn't get there much before evening and there was a species of a good-sized riot in progress."

" A fiesta."

" Is that what they call it ? It looked good to me. I shall

come back to Troghen another time when I've nothing on hand and can devote my attention to the thing. I soon found out that an Englishman, a dangerous murderer, had been in jug and had escaped, after killing half-a-dozen guards, as far as I could make out."

"A slight exaggeration, but a pleasing tribute to my bit of melodrama. Go on."

"What's more, I got hold of a cheerful little fairy who had been with three of her pals in one of those tableau things when one of them threw a rose at your ugly mug sticking out through the bars. I didn't find this out till the Lord knows what hour in the night and then she didn't know where this rose-throwing beauty lived; but she promised, if I was nice to her, to find out for me in the morning."

"Were you nice to her?"

"I found out the address. But not quite soon enough. When I got there you had gone, together with your girl friend, so the old boy in charge told me. At least, that's what I thought he told me, but I had the deuce of a job to understand him. Still, I plugged away at it trying to find out where you had vamoosed to. All I could get out of the old chap was that when you put up there for the night you were asking for a place called Mountain Farm. When I asked if he knew where it was he laughed and said that any farm thereabouts was a mountain farm as far as that went. That didn't seem to be very helpful until I suddenly remembered what you had told us in Feathers' room that day about having a look round von Genie's place called Mountain Farm near Insfarne. Then things began to look like coming together a bit. It was a long shot, but it was the only shot and I had to take it. It took me longer than I liked to find Insfarne and this place, and when I got here there didn't seem to be anybody about. I took the liberty of walking in and having a look round and I very soon ran the dog fox to earth——"

"Doing a jig-saw puzzle?" Marjorie put in.

"Quite right, Miss Gillespie, doing a jig-saw puzzle and, Adrian, smoking a pipe. I got a pleasant surprise. I had seen this jig-saw bird once before. In Germany. Only a glimpse, but I remembered him all right. It's not the sort of face you forget easily. And I remembered, too, what you had said about pipes, Adrian. A small point, but it all seemed to fit, and everything considered I thought, somehow, that I should be justified in tying him up until I saw what the next move was. He got quite peevish about it, but I managed to get him trussed all right——"

"You're a great hand at tying people up," Adrian said with a laugh.

"Always have been a believer in carrying a few lengths of

rope about with me. Shooting a man is so final, and if you have picked the wrong man it leads to all sorts of unpleasant consequences. Tie a man up for half-an-hour, he's no worse off at the end of it and it gives you time to look round and have a second think. I had hardly got the jig-saw expert neatly tucked away when I heard your car arriving. Naturally I didn't know who it was so I played canny for a bit. I could hear voices in here and I came along the passage to investigate. Then the door opened and out popped von Gerne's lady friend. I'm afraid she got rather a surprise——"

"Not half such a surprise as I got when you came in, you old sinner," Adrian said. "Well done, Dicky. You produced the ace of trumps out of the bag at the critical moment. What's the next move?"

"That's up to you."

"We must get back to Baikie."

"It won't be very healthy for you in Charneck."

"It's always healthier when Baikie is about than when he isn't^{*1}"

"What about these three birds here?"

"You must stop and look after them for the night." Dicky considered this for a moment and then asked,

"Are you fit to drive?"

"No. I don't think I am, but Marjorie can drive all right. Believe me, she can drive. *Experto crede.*"

"What's that mean?"

"It means that I tried to overtake her for the Lord alone knows how many miles, and if she hadn't driven like Kaye Don himself most of this would never have happened."

"You always were pretty good at chasing 'em," Dicky said cheerfully, and Marjorie blushed.

Eventually the three captives were brought together into the farmhouse living-room and Dicky mounted guard over them, revolver in hand. Von Gerne was fairly well recovered by now and his face was as black as thunder when he realised how thorough the roundup had been and how complete his disaster.

"Keep awake, Dicky, and don't lose the gun," was Adrian's final admonition.

"*Experto crede,*" Dicky answered, laughing, "and that means you can't catch an old bird with chaff. I'll keep 'em till Doomsday if need be."

"We'll be back before then," Adrian promised.

CHAPTER XXV

Miss FEATHERSTONHAUGH walked along the corridor off which lay the sixteen separate rooms of her sixteen young ladies. She had plunged the corridor into darkness because then she could more easily see what, according to the rules of the Academy, should not be there to be seen—an occasional thin streak of yellow light showing from underneath a door. She saw one under the very last door of all. She sighed. Number sixteen, Muriel Evans. She tapped lightly on the door and went in, just quickly enough to be aware of a scuffling scrambling movement.

Muriel Evans was in bed. A piece of string fantastically hooked round wheels and pulleys, in a Heath-Robinson-ish sort of way, showed that she did not intend to disturb herself overmuch when she decided to put out the light. Miss Featherstonhaugh's first thought was that young people didn't know how lucky they were to be able to go to bed for the night and still to continue to look as attractive as ever. When retiring for the night meant the taking out of teeth, the screwing up of scanty hair, the application of creams, lotions and unguents, and in general a close approximation to a scarecrow appearance, then Time definitely had his fingers on you.

She did not however say any of these things to the flushed and somewhat apprehensive Muriel. What she did say was, " You weren't by any chance reading in bed, Muriel, were you ? "

Muriel smiled and preserved a diplomatic silence.

" Beds are for sleeping in. What's the book ? "

Muriel produced from under the bedclothes the book which she had so hurriedly transferred there. It was a large-ish volume wrapped in a paper jacket, and the jacket bore the gratifyingly scholarly legend " The Complete Works of William Shakespeare."

" An estimable subject," Feathers said. " No doubt Mr. Mawley would be pleased."

Muriel's flush increased at the mention of Adrian Mawley's name and immediately afterwards deepened to the ripe beet-root of acute discomfort when Feathers added softly,

" I suppose, after all, that there is a Shakespeare inside that cover, isn't there ? "

" Please, Miss Featherstonhaugh, have you heard anything about Mr. Mawley ? "

Feathers refused the invitation to be led up to the top of a

digressive garden. She held out a rather gaunt hand for The Complete Works of Mr. William Shakespeare. Which, after a moment of hesitating embarrassment, was handed to her.

Feathers studied the book in silence for fifteen seconds and then volunteered the information that it was news to her to learn that William Shakespeare had written "Point-Counter-point." "Though, no doubt," she added, "Mr. Huxley would have been very glad to have written some of Shakespeare's things."

"Do you think he is a better writer than Huxley?" Muriel Evans, aged seventeen, asked. Feathers smiled and drew the book out of its paper cover with the remark.

"A sparrow in eagle's feathers. Don't read in bed, Muriel, it will spoil your beauty sleep—if you know what that is. You must keep your questions about the relative value of Shakespeare for Mr. Mawley—*when he comes*," but the last three words she said under her breath, outside the door and even then she felt that to use "when" instead of "if" might be optimistic.

The Academy was quiet; its activities were stilled for the day; all the component parts of its varied life were ready like well-oiled machinery to start functioning at the appointed time on the morrow. Feathers felt rather like the captain of a ship as she made her way back to her room. She found Milling waiting for her and after one glance at his eyes she let down the protective notice "*Not to be disturbed on any account*."

"Any news?" she asked.

"No, none," Baikie answered. "I don't like it, Feathers. I can't think what the devil Adrian has got up to. It is always just on the cards that he was hideously stupid enough to shoot that girl——"

Feathers shook her head.

"Not Adrian, surely. I can't think that."

"No. I don't think so, either, but it's an uncomfortable possibility. And, anyway, the police here will take a bit of persuading. They may not take such a flattering view of Adrian's character as we do. Although, if I could get him here safely I wouldn't bother about the police much; there are always ways and means of short-circuiting them—especially in Turbany. What I am afraid of is that something has gone wrong with this other business, and time is running short."

"How short?"

Baikie disliked being asked questions to which he did not know the answer.

"Short enough," he growled. "If we don't look out we shall have all this part of the world in flames and just when we least want it, too. Poor old England has got her plate

full enough already. I tell you, Feathers, I don't like it. I've an instinct in these matters and somehow I feel that the kettle is near the boil."

There was a light tap at the door and Baikie and Feathers looked at one another in surprise. That anybody should dare to disregard the sacrosanct Notice ! It took Baikie about five seconds to get out of his chair and transform himself once more into James Milling, the butler of every housewife's dream.

"Come in."

In answer to Feathers' invitation the door opened and a girl whom neither of them had seen before in their lives entered the room.

Just for a moment Feathers began to doubt her own sanity—could there be, she was forced to wonder, one of her sixteen young ladies whom she didn't recognise ?

Then the doorway was filled again and Adrian came in.

"Allow me to introduce Miss Gillespie," he said cheerfully, and realising Baikie's predicament added, "It's all right, Colonel, she knows as much about this business as any of us."

Baikie sat down again and fishing his pipe out of a side pocket inquired dryly,

"And does she happen to know that you are wanted by the police here for murder ?"

"Oh yes, we know all about that," Adrian assured him.

"I am not quite sure why you sound so confoundedly cheerful, young Mawley," Baikie grumbled. "As you know such a lot perhaps you can give us some idea of where Dicky Horder is."

"Just a rough outline, sir," Adrian said, smiling. "At this moment Dicky, armed with a revolver, is sitting on guard over three people trussed up like Christmas turkey cocks."

"What three people ?"

"Do you mind if I sit down, Colonel ? I have proved by practical experience to-day that my skull is not spanner-proof. Dicky's three birds are the immaculate von Gerne, that woman Hilda who masqueraded as his maid and——" he paused and Baikie prompted him with :

"And ?"

"And the king-pin of the whole lot, the big noise of the entire shooting match."

Baikie stared at him in silence for a moment. Impossible to tell from that impassive countenance what thoughts, sceptical, congratulatory, triumphant, derisive, were running through his brain. Slowly he began to fill his pipe.

"Hadn't you better tell us what you've been up to ?" he suggested.

Adrian laughed.

" I forget exactly what you last know about me for certain."

" The last thing we heard about you, young man, was that you had taken to shooting blondes and propping 'em up dead outside your door."

" Oh yes. Well, I didn't do that, of course. I was out of Charneck that night, at Mountain Farm——"

Adrian gave a faithful account of all that had happened since he chased Marjorie away from Mountain Farm.

Baikie listened in silence and at the end commented :

" You seem to have had a fairly crowded forty-eight hours, young man."

" Quite busy enough. And, incidentally, we know who shot Polly Linder."

" I'm not interested in Polly Linder," Baikie snapped.

" Polly Linder is an incident. I want to know about these three people Dicky has got locked up, whether we have been in time to stop them doing their mischief or not. But first of all we had better hear your version of things, Miss Gillespie."

Marjorie told her story from the moment when von Gerne picked her up in Charneck right up to the accident, and to finding herself kidnapped by the gypsies.

Baikie questioned her closely about what had happened in Mountain Farm, and Marjorie was inclined to shiver at recollecting the place.

" Von Gerne didn't frighten me," she said. " It was the other man."

" Did he tell you anything about himself ? "

" Quite enough."

" About his plans, I mean ? "

Marjorie considered.

" Only in a general way, that Germany was going to stage such an act here in the Balkans that England wouldn't stand a chance."

" You didn't by any chance see any maps or schedules, or anything like that ? "

Marjorie shook her head.

" Not a thing. I never got a chance. And anyway I should have been too scared to look at them."

Baikie nodded sympathetically.

" It would have been pleasant if you had caught sight of something," he said. " But you've done jolly well as it is, Miss Gillespie. What I suggest now is a——"

*' Oh, by the way," Marjorie interrupted, fumbling at the top of her blouse. " I was forgetting. I did get something. I got back Adrian's letter."

" My letter ? "

" The one you gave me to take to the tobacconist. The one that started all the troubles as far as I was concerned.

I found it on the desk just before I got out of that horrid place. It seemed a sort of poetic justice that we should get it back from them again."

She handed it to Baikie who took it without any marked enthusiasm. He knew the brief contents of the message only too well, and in any case they were now stale news and out of date.

He spread the note out on the desk under his hand and glanced at it perfunctorily, and then something happened to his eyes. If a man of Baikie's make-up and calibre could be hypnotised by anything in this world you would have said, watching him at that moment, that he was hypnotised by that piece of paper.

He seemed to read it through at least twenty times, then very slowly he took his pipe out of his mouth and laid it down on the desk. Then he clasped his hands behind his head, tip-tilted his chair backwards to a dangerous angle so that he was staring up at the ceiling and after maintaining that position for thirty seconds in silence broke out into his explosive bark of a laugh, three times repeated.

" Meaning ? " Feathers inquired as sharply as any one dare inquire anything from Baikie.

Baikie let his chair down with a bump and picking the note up in his hand addressed himself to Marjorie.

" Miss Gillespie, if you don't mind being classified for the moment as a babe or suckling, I am going to quote Scripture at you. Very seldom make a quotation, is my motto, but when you do, stick to Shakespeare or the Bible. ' Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast brought forth wisdom.' " He put the note on the desk and thumped it with his closed fist. " Ye gods. Much wisdom. Wisdom crammed down and running over. Do you know what this is—Adrian, do you know ? "

" I haven't seen it yet," Adrian complained a little tersely, " so how can I know ? "

Baikie turned over the piece of paper and Adrian studied the six names and addresses on it in silence for a minute and then raised his eyes to Baikie and said,

" These are the people we have been after, presumably ? "

" The whole bang lot. I know two of the names and have suspected them for some time. The others are completely new to me, but I don't doubt that they are the principal agents in Turbany for the Nazi scheme, I shall have a very busy time during the next forty-eight hours, but it will be worth it—much more than worth it. One way or another we shall be able to put most of these people somewhere where they won't be able to do any harm for a bit, and those we can't put away we can keep tabs on. In this game, when

you have found out where danger threatens you have won half the battle."

"What about Dicky's little lot?"

Baikie's right eye flickered for a moment in a wink.

"Something tells me that the Comtesse du Vailard is going to do without her chaplain for quite a long time," he said. "The other two don't matter. If you net the eagle you can afford to let the sparrows go free. You can leave all that to me. If you know the ropes, and have got the money, it is not difficult to make a man disappear in Charneck so that no amount of asking of questions will find him. It is you I am worried about, Adrian, you and Miss Gillespie. The police are after both of you, Miss Gillespie because she has been lost, and you, because they are convinced you shot that girl. And if there is one thing I don't want it's police interference or probing in any way. I should like you both out of Turbany as soon as possible. And anyway, Adrian, it's time you had some leave. What about you, Miss Gillespie, would you mind going back to England for a while?"

"Mind?" Marjorie gave a faint laugh. "No. I would not mind. I've had quite enough adventures for the present."

"Sensible girl. Well, there won't be any difficulty about you. You've got your passport, I suppose?"

"Yes. I always carry it on me."

"Good. I'll see that there is a seat reserved for you on the midday plane to Istanbul to-morrow and from there you can catch a boat home at your leisure through what the Italians so humorously call 'mare nostrum.'"

Marjorie flushed slightly.

"I'm afraid I — I haven't got much money," she said.

Baikie laughed.

"Don't worry about that. What's the good of the poor deluded taxpayer paying eight and sixpence in the pound unless somebody gets some benefit from it? And, anyway, Adrian here will look after you."

"And how do you propose to get me on the plane if all the stations and aerodromes are being watched for the murderer of Polly Linder?"

Baikie laughed again.

"That's precisely what is going to occupy my mind during the next twelve hours," he said.

Marjorie was put into the one spare bedroom at Feathers' establishment and she knew nothing more about events until half-past ten next morning.

Baikie woke her by bringing in breakfast on a tray.

"The aerodrome is some distance out of town," he said,

" and the car will be here in an hour's time. You will have to write to the Comtesse from England and arrange about your clothes and things being sent back. What I am anxious to do is to get you out of the place before you get into any more trouble."

At half-past eleven exactly Marjorie ran down the steps of Feathers' Academy and took a seat in the back of a closed car whose windows were discreetly covered. As she was whisked through the streets of Charneck, just beginning to be busy with the colourful, cosmopolitan life of the day, her thoughts were in a whirl. Too much had happened in the last few days, and she was too close to it all, for her to be able to see it in right perspective. It all had an air of fantastic unreality, and yet the same air of unreality somehow clouded any vision which she might try to conjure up of England. She seemed suspended between two unreal worlds; and even when she reached the airport and was faced with the bustle and urgency of practical details, she found it hard to persuade herself that it was not part of a vivid dream.

The midday plane for Istanbul was a huge all-metal four-engined Frema and when Marjorie reached it more than half the twenty-two seats were already occupied and porters in bright Charneckian uniforms were busy stowing hand baggage into the hold.

Baikie, naturally, had thought of everything, seat reservation, luggage slip, clearance form—all the formalities which civilised man has to undergo before he can move from one part of the earth to another, so that Marjorie had no difficulty and went straight to her metal seat in the plane by the side of the glass-like window.

She kept a sharp look-out for Adrian and as the minutes went by began to get nervous for him. All but four of the seats were occupied now and the plane was full of talk, already preparations were being made for the take-off and from the little crowd of sightseers outside on the ground floated up the usual fatuities—the " don't forget to write," the " you'll be off soon," the " are you sure you've got everything" which apparently is all man can think of by way of conversation when he is saying good-bye to his nearest and dearest and may not see them again for months.

A car dashed into the airport at the last minute and Marjorie craned forward eagerly only to see a Jewish family of four, seething with Yiddish excitement, get out. After much shouting and gesticulating they were eventually squeezed through the narrow doorway of the plane, which shut with a metallic clang after them. The last four seats were **now** full and with deafening abruptness the great engines roared into life.

For an instant Marjorie had a wild impulse to jump out of her place and cry that she could not go, but the "permission to take off" flag was already hoisted and the metal bird began to run forward.

Marjorie leant back in her seat and noticed that the woman by her side was eyeing her curiously. Suddenly she gave up worrying any more about the whole business, Adrian, after all, was Baikie's look-out, and in any case it was all his fault in the first place that she had been involved in the business at all; yet, when all these comforting conclusions were drawn and admitted, it still remained an obstinate fact, and she knew it, that she would have felt far happier if Adrian had been sitting next to her in the plane.

She looked out of the window and was surprised to see that they were already air-borne. They were circling in a huge sweep to gain height and below them, far enough away now to be seen as a whole, lay the magic city. Charneck lay there an entity; a jumble of man's making; a blot; an exciting, picturesque, fascinating blot maybe, but still a blot on the huge canvas of God's landscape. In the sunshine the harbour was a twinkling blue, and the sails of the yachts mere pin points of vivid white.

Very few people in the city lifted their eyes to look at the microcosm above them, the daily miracle of the midday plane to Istanbul, they were too busy about their own affairs—sitting at tables in front of cafes, drinking, pouring out drinks for others, tipping, receiving tips, ringing one another up on the telephone, making assignments, breaking them, lying, smiling, laughing, crying, hoping, despairing, beginning, ending—all the complicated complex life of Charneck.

Marjorie wondered which of all these activities was occupying Adrian at that precise moment and whether he would eventually get safely away.

"Are you taking luncheon, Madam?" a steward asked, and she withdrew her eyes from the disappearing city of Charneck and focused them on the luncheon menu.

The most extraordinary aspect of miracles is the very ordinariness of their manner of occurrence. The metal man* made machine, the thing which had no right in the air at all and yet which usurped that element so successfully, made a completely uneventful journey to Istanbul. You would have had more incidents and seem far more out of the windows during a bus journey to Ealing.

When they landed Marjorie found her steward waiting with her bag—the bag which she had borrowed from Feathers and which was full of the results of a raid on everybody's wardrobe in the famous Academy.

It did not strike Marjorie to consider whether this was

usual or not, it merely occurred to her that it was convenient—until she caught sight of the steward's face. Only a large-sized wink from Adrian prevented her calling out, and she realised with a shock how completely oblivious of the personality of the half-world that serves meals is the half that eats them.

"Taxi, madam?" he inquired solicitously.

She nodded.

"This way, madam' and when they were safely away from the crowd all busy about their own affairs, Adrian added, "well done. I thought you were going to give the show away. I'm coming in the taxi with you. Just go straight ahead as though it's all normal."/

Adrian told the driver where to go to, and put the two bags inside the cab; and once they had started he got busy with one of them.

By the time they pulled up outside the Hotel of the East all signs of the steward had disappeared into the bag and Marjorie's escort was an amiable looking English tourist in somewhat loud plus fours.

"We're staying here together," Adrian explained, "until the boat sails, which may be to-morrow or the day after."

If the driver was surprised at the metamorphosis of one of his fares he did not say so. In Istanbul high-spirited ladies have done worse things, and often, than elope with good-looking stewards, and anyway Adrian was careful to give him a tip which satisfied all his curiosity.

"How on earth——" Marjorie asked when they got into the lounge of the hotel, And Adrian told her

"Baikie. That man can wangle anything. It was pure graft, of course, and I suppose somebody at the Charneck airport is better off by a couple of thousand mireps to-night. Baikie always says that you can do anything in Turbany, if your bank roll is long enough."

"I never even looked at you when you brought *the* lunch."

Adrian grinned.

"I was hoping you wouldn't. The pilot of the plane was most romantic about it all. Baikie put the yarn about that we were eloping together. That's the sort of thing that will get you everybody's help in Charneck. It's a romantic sort of place, and on the whole rather an exciting one.

"Quite exciting enough for me," Marjorie assured him. "It will be a long time before I agree to act as transmitter of notes to tobacconists again."

Adrian's voice changed suddenly as he said,

"And it will be a long time before Baikie or I come across anybody half as game as you proved yourself to be Miss Gillespie."

Marjorie blushed and said,

"I would like you to show me round Istanbul—if you promise to have me back here safely by ten o'clock to-night."

Adrian not only did that, but a fortnight later he saw her safely on the 10.30 train from No. 1 Platform, Paddington. Even in wartime Paddington was its usual friendly, homely, commonplace, dependable self. There were no Charneckian frills about Paddington, no glamour or glitter ("thank heavens," Marjorie thought), but it stood there stolid, efficient, unperturbed by blitzes, English.

Adrian came to see her off. There had been a slightly embarrassed suggestion that he should go down to the west country with her and stay with her people for a while. Adrian had smiled, been duly grateful, and shaken his head.

"There's a philosophy about these things," he explained, and re-explained when waiting for the Paddington clock to reach the half-hour. "Boy meets girl: boy and girl have adventures: boy (if he is wise) says good-bye to girl."

"And girl, if she is grateful, says 'Thank you' to boy."

"That's kind of you. I shall always think more happily of Charneck because you were there."

"And what will you do next, Adrian?"

He laughed.

"It depends on Baikie. A rum bird, Baikie. He may turn up anywhere at any time. You never know with him. The only thing you can be certain of is that wherever Baikie is there will be excitement of some kind. He just can't help it. He's had more thrills in his life than all the rest of us put together and he will go on having them."

"More thrills and more risks."

"Baikie simply can't be bothered about the risks. It isn't that he doesn't see them, but he has a very liberal supply of the only virtue that counts ultimately—courage. Well, there's the green flag—"

"Adrian—I don't know what to say—thank you a thousand times—it just doesn't seem real somehow—"

"It was real enough," Adrian assured her, "whilst it lasted."

She hung out of the window until the train took the curve, and he was no longer a waving figure on the platform.

"A romantic farewell," her fellow-passengers thought, and they were right in the best sense, for no adventure is more perfect than that which knows when to say farewell, which leaves off before the bugle notes have died away or the bright colours have faded.

Even in peacetime the journey to Little Disling is a lengthy one, and it was dark before Marjorie paid off the ancient taxi

which had brought her the final four miles from the nearest station.

'A judiciously worded telegram from London had prepared the way for her arrival. A heaped log fire, a tea-tray set with massive Georgian silver and the appetising smell of toasting bread showed how good these preparations were.

Mrs. Gillespie was full of motherly anxiety and solicitude for the traveller, coupled with just a hint of scornful superiority for the ignoramus from a neutral country, uninstructed in the alarms and excursions of war.

"My dear," she exclaimed, "you've no idea how exciting it has been. Only last week, Wednesday it was, because that is the Institute day, we had a bomb three miles away in one of Captain Endover's fields. It didn't go off, but everybody's frightfully excited about it. You won't find it a bit dull down here now, I assure you."

Marjorie smiled, gratefully, wistfully, philosophically.

"The toast smells good," she said, "is tea ready? That was one thing you couldn't get in Turbany."

"Naturally," her mother agreed a trifle indignantly, "there's no place like England for tea."

THE END

