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DAVID HUME



COLLINS
FORTY-EIGHT PALL MALL, LONDON

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CHAPTER I

A CROOKED DEAL

THE man grew pale when he turned up the ace of spades. He might well. He knew that he had lost his life! It seemed a pity. Twenty-three is no age at which to shuffle off this mortal coil with a bullet through the heart. Yet the sight of the slumping corpse did not seem to make very much difference to the man who pulled the trigger. With exaggerated care, he blew down the barrel of the gun, wiped the butt with a silk handkerchief, and slid the weapon into his side pocket. After that he sipped the drink standing on the table at his elbow, picked up the pack of cards, shuffled them with steady hands and commenced to play solitaire. The two men facing him across the table watched him, and smiled tolerantly. The Boss certainly had his odd moments, and his curious mannerisms!

"Don't you think we'd better start moving the stiff for you, Boss?" inquired one of the men. "It ain't very nice playing a quiet game of cards when you've got a corpse sprawled on the floor. So what?"

For a full minute the man stared at the cards on the table. Then he frowned as though trivially annoyed, said casually:

"Pity we've got to bother about it. But it'd better be moved. Know that girl friend of his—the little blondie with the righteous air? Well, take the stiff round to her place and leave it on the doorstep. I promised her a present one day. So long."

He continued with his game. The two men yanked the body from the floor as though handling a sack of coal, nodded cheerfully to the Boss, and moved out through a side door. Ten minutes later the little blondie with the righteous air had received her present. Her mother spent an hour trying to bring her round. The kid knew her way around, but she wasn't used to corpses.

All this happened on a Saturday night in January. Actually, it was the fourteenth. The girl knew the date well enough. There was every reason why she should. If the young man had been murdered three days later she would have been a widow.

Still, the youngster had a swell funeral. The flowers were admired by all. And, of course, the biggest wreath was laid on the grave by the man who had shot him. That was one

thing about the Boss that was well known to his followers—he didn't like doing things in a small way. When he started to do a job of work there were no half measures about it. He selected the gigantic wreath with the same fastidious care, the same particular regard for detail, the same surety, as he showed when he chose the exact spot over the heart when he decided to create the corpse. Naturally, he became a little distressed when the body was lowered into the grave. It was not that he was emotional. Rather could the display be attributed to the fact that four detectives were standing round the graveside watching the faces of all the mourners. And the Boss made as good a job of being a successful mourner as he made of everything else. Quite a number of the crowd felt sorry for him. They knew that the youngster had meant a lot to him during the few years while he had lived.

After the funeral the Boss made a gesture that endeared him to many. He called upon the youngster's mother, informed her that as a father himself he knew what her feelings must be, expressed his inconsolable grief that the chief breadwinner in the family had been taken from her in such tragic circumstances, and placed a cheque for a hundred pounds into her trembling hand. As he said at the time :

" This is the very least that I can do, my dear. Money does not mean much in such times, but it may help you along the way. Nothing I can do will put the breath of life back into your dear boy, but if you want any help you know where to find me. Now I must leave you with your grief. Believe me, madam, my heart bleeds for you."

And having said his piece he bent slowly over her hand as he kissed it. The tears were welling in his eyes as he walked out of the house. But the tears didn't stay there for long. He had other things to think about. There was another man strolling round the town who had had the misfortune to develop ambitions. Now the Boss admired people with ambitions. He liked mixing with those who had an urge to advance themselves. But he didn't appreciate their aims and objects if they happened to be in his line of business. So they crowned their ambitions by achieving a first-class funeral instead of attaining fame. That was not what had caused the youngster to be rubbed out. The kid was too childish in his outlook to know what an ambition was. He was, in fact, so childish that he had spoken once too often. After that he never had the chance to grow up and learn what discretion means. The Boss had developed the idea that the lad might get absent-minded a second time, and maybe say a few words to the wrong person, at the wrong time, and about the wrong thing.

When the Boss was born, his mother, with no vision of things to come, and a regard for romantic names, had fastened upon her offspring the monica of Horace. She thought it blended well with the surname of Mellery. During his formative years the boy decided that since he did not like the name, and since he was precocious and ambitious, it would be better for people to call him "Boss." It wasn't long before those who forgot his peculiar desire in that direction paid for their sin of forgetfulness rather more than expensively. And after a time he heard the name "Horace" so rarely that he forgot he ever owned it.

He had been hovering about aimlessly for a couple of years after leaving school before he decided that only fools work for a living. And if one conviction rested in his brain more than any other it was that he was no fool. So he adopted crime as a profession. After that the sun shone upon him, and he developed grandiose ideas about his own value. Curiously enough, other people began to agree with him, were quite anxious to genuflect before him, to steal light from his reflected glory. Occasionally, he handed them a smile as a reward. But that did not happen often. The Boss handled smiles as a miser uses money.

When he committed his first murder the circumstances were somewhat odd. Mellery knew quite an amount about crime.

Still, there were a few sidelines about which he had very little knowledge. His conceit would never permit him to admit that anything was missing in his store of knowledge, and the ignorance he masked so cautiously brought him to bring his first victim to the grave.

Mellery had collected more money than was good for him when he was heading for the twenties. A couple of experts travelling with the cards invited him to chance his luck. Mellery knew very little about the "deracs," and his contacts with crime had never included the broad mob. He thought he had found a couple of suckers who'd be easy to take up the garden path for a hundred or two. At the end of an hour he found that he had walked into a party of men who could do everything with cards except play tunes on them. And the only reason why they couldn't do that was because they had no ear for any music other than the quiet rustle of pound notes.

They were playing pontoon. Had the Boss been told that he was being fleeced at *vingt-et-un* he wouldn't have known what his informant was talking about. After he had been courteously deprived of nearly four hundred pounds Horace Mellery became warm beneath his neckband. He knew, of course, that with cards one needs luck. He knew that the luck was not with him. But he couldn't quite understand

why the men playing in the school were not merely lucky, why it was that luck was coming their way in such quantities that miracles began to appear trivial, why it happened that any useful card only came his way when the banker held a better one. He had reached his last ten pounds when he remonstrated in the mildest manner he could assume :

" Are these cards being placed under the pack each time ? "

He was assured that such honourable men as those with whom he played would never contemplate handling cards in any other manner. Mostly, that assurance caused the Boss to commit his first murder. Because a couple of hands later the unforgivable happened. Horace Mellery was handed the ace of spades. And he had been dealt that card two or three minutes before. The banker was still smiling when the Boss stretched out a gentle fist, snatched the pack of cards from his hand. The silence as Horace examined the pack could have been cut into slices and served up as souvenirs from the Arctic.

The banker moved his chair slightly backwards, and his right hand drifted towards his pocket. That was about as far as it got. The Boss smiled in a wan and distant manner as he said :

" Don't move that hand too deeply into that pocket, I might get peeved. I haven't got a head for figures, but something tells me that you and your friend have got about four hundred pounds belonging to me. I don't want to appear mean, but I'd like that money placed in my hand. And I'm waiting for it. And I'll never mention again about your right hand: I'll just let you have it. I don't mind either way. Hand over the dough."

" What'n hell is wrong with you ? " asked the man. " You played and you lost. So why squeal ? Is it just that you can't take it ? "

" This," said Mellery quietly, " is not going to be an argument. I want that money. I am very young. I may seem stupid. Maybe I am. But I'm old enough, and clever enough, to know when I've had a couple of sharps working on me. Do I draw the money, or do you take it ? "

" Believe me," said the man, " I can pull a gat pretty slick."

" Then why the hell don't you make a start ? " asked Horace. " I'm sitting here waiting for you or your money. I'd just as soon take the money from you dead as I would when you're alive. Don't be nervous. I won't hit you through the heart. You know why ? Because you've got my four hundred in your breast pocket, and I don't want to get any blood on it. Well ? "

"You're crackers, sonny. We haven't been twicing you at all."

"Be your age." It was odd to notice the silken softness of the man's voice as he spoke. The words flowed forth as though he were correcting a recalcitrant child. His attitude seemed even sympathetic.

"What on earth has made you go all haywire?" asked the banker.

"I haven't developed any tendency that way as yet. And I'm not likely to start. But I do know that there are fifty-two cards in a pack. I do know that when you're playing pontoon the cards must be placed beneath the pack after each hand. I do know that not more than twenty cards have been dealt since I last had the ace of spades. And now I've got it again. That just can't happen in a straight game. So hand over the money or take it. I'd just as soon collect the four hundred from a corpse as I would from a living person. I'm waiting. But not for long."

The banker twisted slightly in his seat, stared at his friend. Maybe he wanted a reassuring smile from his ally. He didn't get it. The man was no mean judge of character, had been regarding Mellery with care, had realised that the quietly spoken man was not sprucing. So he winked at his partner, grinned as he said:

"Better hand it over. I don't want any trouble. You're a bad loser, lad, and I wouldn't have played if I'd have thought that you couldn't take it. Here's my share of the dough, and I hope it chokes you."

Mellery picked up the money with his left hand, turned to the banker.

"Your friend seems to have more sense than you've got. Or perhaps he has a greater regard for his health. I'm not waiting any longer."

The banker's hand flashed down to his pocket. He was fractionally too late. The Boss only shot once. The bullet ploughed through the man's forehead. He was dead before he started to fall. Mellery looked at the corpse for an instant before he rose from the table. He covered the other man as he moved. But he knew that there was a slim chance of trouble arising from that quarter. The man's face was bathed in sweat, and his whole body was quivering. Stretching down his left hand the Boss took the money from the corpse's breast pocket. As he was backing towards the door he laughed, retraced his steps, and picked up the ace of spades from the table. He slid it into his pocket, remarked:

"I'll keep this as a souvenir. The next person I hand an ace of spades to will know what's going to happen to him. If

you want to live I'd advice you to cultivate a bad memory. Otherwise you'll open a letter one morning to find an ace of spades inside the envelope. Just treat it as a visiting card. I'll be calling. I have played my last game of cards with strangers. In future I'll play alone. I don't like playing when there are five aces in the pack. Be good, be sensible. Good-bye."

Horace Mellery vanished into the night. He was humming as he walked along the street. Now he knew that committing murder was easy, that it made no difference to one's outlook on life, that his hands were as steady as they had been before he pulled that trigger. He held the ace of spades in his hand, and smiled again. People, he thought, would begin to know that card by the time he was through.

For a couple of months the Boss moved around. He was waiting for the heat to die down. Really, the heat was never very intense. The murdered man was well known to the police. They didn't have to make two guesses when it came to working out why he had been murdered. And since he was always working on strangers they couldn't discover who had last been with him. It wasn't that the thought of being hanged worried Mellery. Rather was it that the idea of such a thing happening had never for an instant occurred to him.

It was characteristic of the man that he adhered firmly to the statement he had made when he left the man with the corpse. He never again played cards with any one. But for hours on end he sat alone playing solitaire. People began to realise that whatever faults the Boss had, loose talking was not one of them. What he said, he meant.

For years after that eventful night Horace Mellery advanced up the rungs of the crime ladder, adding a few murders to his collection en route. By the time he was thirty he had established an empire of his own. And mostly he had stepped over corpses on the way.

There was another manner in which he adhered to his word. From time to time he would decide, with a burst of generosity, that he would warn a person instead of killing them. With a smile on his face, with his voice lowered and kindly, he would remark :

"So far I've treated you well. You're lucky to be alive. Remember that if I have any more trouble from you there'll be an ace of spades resting in your hand. Now, go away, and be a good boy in future."

Mostly the men never waited to hear anything further. Along that odd grapevine running through the underworld that comment about the ace of spades was fabulously famous. Those outside the pale of the law had known too many men

who had died with the card in their hand. Mellery had another peculiarity, one in which he took a childish delight. He could never forget the night the two sharpers took him up the path for a sucker. So he would look at the corpse from time to time and inform his supporters that the poor man had "died of the fifth ace."

The men at New Scotland Yard were very much interested in the Boss. They had been for years. They knew that he was the kingpin of organised crime, knew that he had his finger on the pulse of the underworld more firmly than any other person in London. But that knowledge wasn't very much use to them. You can't charge a man when you have no evidence, and you can't produce evidence without witnesses. Twice they had landed him in the dock. Twice he laughed at them as he walked out. All the police witnesses discovered at the last moment that they had no idea why they were placed in the witness-box. They knew nothing. They were dumb. The detectives knew only too well what had happened. What they did not know was that Mellery's lieutenants had been strolling around explaining to people what it meant when the Boss posted an ace of spades to them. The police, of course, offered them protection. The offer was not much use. They had been told too many stories about other people who thought they were being protected, about what elegant corpses they made, about what swell funerals they had.

Horace Mellery called from time to time at the Yard. Mostly he arrived there when he had decided to give them information. Naturally, he only put in the squeal when some one was in his way. If he thought they were too unimportant to warrant murdering he railroaded them into gaol. And they took it like lambs. They never squealed in return. There was a chance that they would live for a time when they came out of prison. There was no hope for them if they told stories out of school about the Boss.

So Mellery beamed upon every constable he met, bought drinks for odd detectives, and informed the world at large that he could never tolerate people who were not straight, that he had a supreme contempt for the despicable people who broke the law.

And all went well until he dispatched the ace of spades to the wrong person. But that is relating the history of the affair disjointedly. . . .

CHAPTER II

CRIME TOUR

Two men faced each other across a desk in a Henrietta Street office, and yawned. The older man filled his pipe with slow deliberation, flicked a lighter with exaggerated concentration. He was nearer sixty than fifty, but the figure was sturdily firm, and life had not written much upon his face. The young man was unmistakably the son. The same clear-cut features, the breadth of shoulder, the impression of great reserve power, the curious air of concentrated calm, stamped them more than obviously. That was only to be expected since the brass plate on the outside door bore the inscription, "Cardby and Son, Private Detectives."

"I think, Dad," said Mick Cardby, "that crime must be taking something of a holiday. For the first time in five years this is the first occasion when our order book has been entirely empty. Have you been scaring all of 'em out of the country, or is it that they're retired to their country estates. I'm beginning to feel like a baby without a rattle to shake. I wish to the high heavens that something would start."

"Don't let your nerves run away with you, laddie. A rest won't do either of us any harm. We've had a tough time, and I'm getting old."

"Another week like this and I'll be an acute case of senile decay. Why don't you get outside and start something? I'm beginning to lose my touch, and I'd hate to commence bringing my knitting to the office."

"Don't make me laugh, Mick. It hurts my stomach. May be this is only the lull before the storm. That's been my experience of the way in which things run. Before I ambled out of the Yard on pension I used to hate these quiet moments. They always meant that trouble in large bundles was on its way. I'm betting that's what will happen now."

"Let's hope you're right, Dad. I think I'll amble around our small crime belt and find out what is moving in the alley. Sitting here staring at you and your mountains of smoke will make me blow the top."

The youngster rose to his feet, stretched out a hand for his hat.

"Wait a minute, sonny," said his father. "I've meant

to whisper a few words into your ear for quite a while back. I don't like the way in which you mix with the mobs. They know you too well, and there must be scores of lads who'd reckon they were national heroes if they bought you a small plot of ground and elevated some decorative masonry over it. I know that so far you've chanced your arm a hundred times, and got away with it. The luck won't run hand in hand with you for ever, Mick. One day you'll be collecting an ace of spades. And you only get those cards once. I'm not trying to give you the jitters. I'm only talking sense."

"That ace of spades story is beginning to sound to me like a small child's nightmare. I know the Boss is tough. So do all the men at the Yard. But I don't think he's got any cards in his private pack strong enough to make me scuttle for shelter. After all, Dad, we built up our name because we knew something about drawing the right cards at the right moment."

"Mick, remember what I've told you before—never let your feet wait to see your body get hurt. That's what you'll do one day if you don't curb that tempestuous spirit that you got from your mother. All I can tell you is that whenever I've known a bloke receive that card from the man who hands them out they've played their next game of solo with asbestos cards. The Boss may mean nothing in your small life, but that's no reason why you should crash into trouble. After all, we're not looking for him, and so long as we lay off he won't be looking for us. For myself, I'd rather post him the queen of hearts and call it a day."

"If I didn't know you as a person who didn't give a damn for anybody, Dad, I'd be inclined to think that the Boss was giving you a trembling sensation along the spine. I've heard more than enough about the man, but I haven't heard enough yet to start me genuflecting as soon as his name is mentioned. The bloke interests me. In a way I can even say that he amuses me. But I can't go beyond that. Know what will pull him down?"

"They'd like to hear the answer to that one at the Yard, Mick."

"I'm conceited—so I think I can tell you here and now. The Boss does not trust anybody. All his right-hand men know that he'd as soon see them washed up on the cemetery dump as he would anybody else. One day, Dad, he's going to pay for playing that lonely hand. They tell me that he never joins in a game of cards because he's afraid of being twisted. That's why he has a mania for solitaire. And he runs his own life along the same lines. I'm only a babe in arms, Cardby Senior, but one day the Boss is going to

pay heavily for that curious characteristic of his. I'm away."

"For the love of Mike try to keep out of trouble. Where do I find you if anything happens and we've got a client who wants to employ a nitwit?"

"Send him along to the Boss for some advice. He might be able to offer adequate accommodation without any effort. I'll be seeing you at home about ten to-night. Ask Mother if she can leave some meat and potato pie for me. I don't know what the augury may be, but I've been dreaming about it."

"You young fool! Keep away from the Boss and his boy friends. Find some sweet lady, and escort her to a cinema. You'll find it a healthier pastime."

"There are even possibilities about that, Dad. In the meantime, don't drink too much beer, lay off the pipe for a while, see that the office is locked before you leave, keep away from the wild women yourself, remember your tablets before you have a meal, be moderate in all things—good-bye."

As Mick passed through the outer office he paused for an instant before the desk occupied by the firm's secretary. She was blonde, blue eyed, calmly confident and attractive. She stared at the youngster without expression.

"Angelic," he said, "if any desirable women call here to see me tell them that I have a date with a delectable brunette, but I am free to-morrow."

"I am not employed in this office to arrange your unfortunate mistakes."

"Miss Constance Wheeler, how could you sit there and declaim such evil words? Has your mother told you nothing about the nicer side of life?"

The frigid stare melted away from the girl's face as the door shut. She was smiling as she renewed her attack on the typewriter. For five years she had been with Cardby and Son, and for the same length of time the "Son" part of the firm had mystified her. She could never understand why such an apparently irresponsible young fool could be so tough, so competent.

During the next three hours Mick Cardby made his leisurely way through the West End crime track. He thought it wise to renew old connections from time to time. Oddly enough, as he talked to con. men, street women, safe crackers, second story specialists, card sharpers, and others among his acquaintances his mind remained mostly on the vision of things to come—the meat and potato pie awaiting him at home!

It was shortly before nine o'clock when he strolled into Curly's Club. Naturally, the dive was almost empty. That

was not in any way surprising. Most of their regular customers were just getting out of bed. They looked upon the sunlight as something specially designed to prevent them from earning a living. The man behind the bar waved a cheery hand. Mick pushed a two-shilling piece across the counter, said quietly :

"Two lagers, Phil, and I don't want both of 'em. Any of the boys about?"

"Stroll in after twelve, mister, and you'd have better luck. How's things?"

"Rotten, thanks. I was looking for a lad you know quite well—Smasher Stacey. He used to hang around in this place quite a lot at one time."

The barman winced, wiped a glass with unnecessary care. For a time he was dumb. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper as he mentioned to Cardby :

"Smasher hasn't been in here for best part of a month, mister. I know it ain't for me to hear these things, but I'm told that somebody decided that the next time Stacey played cards he might find an ace of spades a bit useful. So they sent him one. I haven't seen Smasher since. And, mister, I haven't heard of anybody else who has lamped him either. So if you want him I'll leave you to work out where he might be found. Good health."

The two men drank silently. Cardby had a twisted smile playing round his mouth. The news did not break upon him with undue force. He'd had an idea for quite a while that Stacey was aiming a trifle too high, was talking a shade too loudly, was even speaking out of his turn. That was why he had wanted to meet the man. He shrugged his shoulders. The inevitable was bound to happen. It had. And Mick did not believe in corpses who handed out any sort of information. So why worry? He lit a cigarette. Two more men walked into the small room. Cardby eyed them casually. One of them he knew, not the other. The leader was a small, dapper person. His coat was affectedly wasp-waisted, the long nose had once been straight, the thin lips spread out in a thin line, the nondescript eyes were shadowed by heavy lids. As he sighted Cardby he raised his hands in the air with the surprise of one viewing a miracle. Some seconds passed before he leered, and said loudly :

"Well, if it isn't the great Mick Cardby in person. I thought you had been killed months and months ago. How d'you manage to stay alive, mister?"

"By being the principal mourner at other people's funerals," replied the youngster, with grim sarcasm. The comment was not lost upon either of the men. Nor was the

effect decreased when Mick remarked to the small man : " Do you still peddle the bad smash for the old mob, or have you got a new job ? "

" One day, Carby, " replied the man, " you're going to talk about counterfeit money out of your turn. This time I'll try to overlook what you said. "

" Since when did the illustrious Cash Mason become self-conscious ? I'd have thought that you grew out of the habit years and years ago. It doesn't do in your line of business to become too sensitive. What'll you have ? "

" Double whisky for both of us, and let's forget the rest of it, or I'm going to cause trouble, Mick Cardby—this is my friend, Fred Carter. "

The youngster shook the man's hand, and was not impressed. It seemed to him that Carter must be the strong arm man of the party. The face was sulky and brutal, gave no signs of any real intelligence. But the massive body told a story of more than ordinary power. The wide shoulders, barrel chest, slender waist, spatulate hands, indicated extraordinary strength. The man gripped Cardby's hand as though intending to crush it into a pulp. And as he squeezed he stared into the youngster's eyes. There was no change of expression on the face of the detective as he moved slightly forward to rest on the ball of his right foot, as his fingers closed in like a vice. Cash Mason stood back with an amused smile. He knew only too well what was happening. So, also, did the man behind the bar.

" I am most delighted to meet you, " said Mick, increasing the pressure. The newcomer became somewhat red in the face, licked his dry lips. The youngster released his grip with unexpected suddenness, remarked casually : " You have quite an amount of strength in your hand. I hope that you never use it. "

Fred Carter muttered softly, moved away to a high stool. The barman was filling the drinks when Mason decided to ease the tension a little, said :

" You're not supposed to be much of a weakling yourself, Cardby, are you ? "

" Much depends upon the standard of comparison, " said Mick, as he paid for the drinks. " I'd rather work above the neck than below the wrists. Maybe I am eccentric. Good health to all of you. May you never take the long drop. "

Carter and Mason replaced their glasses on the bar with one quick action.

" What'n hell made you say that, Cardby ? " asked Cash. " Blokes like us never do anything that'd take us to the gallows. What exactly do you aim at ? "

"Nothing exactly. It just occurred to me as a friendly toast. Accidents can happen even to strong men like your friend, and intelligent men like you. Don't stare at me as though you can see the noose already. Any one might get the wrong impression and start thinking that the pair of you were walking round with guilty consciences. And that would never do."

The trio drank for five minutes without another word. The barman looked at them from time to time. He had been in his line of business for many years, had seen enough trouble in his time to smell it long before it arrived. And it seemed to him that the atmosphere in the bar could be cut into slices, and served on bread as a sandwich. He was not at ease.

"What's eating into you blokes?" asked Cardby. "From the dumb way in which you're knocking back the drink, and the way you're glancing my way, any one would think that I'm a cross between typhoid and cholera. What is it?"

Cash Mason slid down from his stool, walked slowly over to Cardby, and prodded a finger into his chest. There was menace in his voice as he said:

"Just listen to me. One day you'll make one crack too many. You've got away with it so often that you're thinking you're ace high. Well, Cardby, I'm telling you that no man can pull lines like that on me, and get away with it. Remember that you're not the only person in this small village who can get tough. If you want to live, just bear that in your mind."

"Sweet of you to hand out the word of advice. Would you mind if I took the liberty of whispering a few words into your cauliflower ear? I'll be quite brief. Since you used my name a few months ago to unload fifty quids worth of bad smash on a friend of mine I haven't counted you as being among my closest friends. I'd hate to see you get hurt. That being so, I'd advise you to say nothing that might aggravate me. I'm very sensitive."

Fred Carter balled his fists and moved over to stand by Mason's side.

"All right, Hercules," said Cardby, "you can take things quite easily. I don't intend to start any sort of a song and dance unless either of you start it. I'm merely laying down a few fundamental health regulations."

"But you were talking about us taking the long drop," said Carter.

"Was I? I'm sorry. Your big trouble is that you allow your conscience to run away with your imagination. You should restrain yourself, laddie. One day you might meet

someone who won't realise that you're prompted by an artistic temperament. There are many unkind folk about. So be careful."

"Let's get going," said Cash Mason, heading towards the swing doors. Fred Carter spat angrily on the floor, and then followed the smaller man with the obedience of a well-trained dog. Cardby sipped his lager.

"You certainly take chances, Mr. Cardby," said Phil. "When I looked at the pair of them I thought this place was going to be smashed up in another couple of minutes. Gosh! It made me sweat to stand here and watch you."

"Then try another iced lager and calm yourself. Have those two birds been using this place a lot lately, Phil? I'm just a bit curious."

"Then I can tell you something that's even more curious than anything you might want to know, something that'll make even you take notice."

"I'll lend you my ears. Go right ahead with the evil record. So what?"

"The last time"—the barman looked round the empty room as though afraid that eavesdroppers were hanging from the walls. Then he started again: "The last time Smasher Stacey was seen by me, or by anybody else I have spoken to, he was in this bar with those two blokes! I was thinking of that when you mentioned the long drop, and the bar was full of roars of silence. A bit off colour, mister, when you come to think about it, eh?"

"Are you telling me?" Cardby lodged an elbow on the bar, twisted his glass round and round in his hand. The youngster had lost his bantering mood. Years seemed to have crowded upon him within the space of seconds. May be if Constance Wheeler, the firm's secretary, had seen him then she would have solved most of her mystery. Phil watched him closely, said:

"And one more thing, mister, I can tell you. I'm only saying this because Smasher was a dead wrong'un but he always played straight with me. Some bloke in here I'd never seen before picked up his glass as the three of 'em walked out, raised it a foot above the bar, and said, 'Sleep in peace.' And from that night until this moment I haven't set my peepers on that cove either. Now start adding that lot together and see where you finish."

"Most likely on a mortuary slab, Phil. Have you pointed out these very curious facts to anybody else, or have they rested under the old bonnet?"

"You can't hold down a job like this, mister, if you start spreading the royal. I'm just telling you because I can

trust you. Believe me, I wouldn't mention it to anybody else. Why, when the splits came round I was the best gilded innocent this world has ever lamped. I'd seen nothing, heard nothing and knew nothing. You understand, don't you, mister? You know what my job is."

"Surely, Phil. Maybe if I'd stood in your shoes I'd have made the Sphinx sound like a loud speaker. How long has Cash Mason been drifting round with that new side-kick? I hadn't set eyes on the man before to-night."

"I saw him for the first time on the night they were with Smasher Stacey, and since then I've never seen Mason without the other bloke."

"Most interesting. Any idea what line of the crime racket Carter is in?"

"Doesn't seem to me to have sense enough to be in anything serious. I'd got the idea that Cash Mason walked him around as a bodyguard. Cash, you know, was always a bit nervous in case somebody took a dislike to him."

"Sure, he's yellow straight through. I'd bet that you're right. Since the night they first came in here together, do they seem to have been in the market? I know that you're too old in the head to take any bad smash from them. I want to know whether they were well fixed with the genuine scratch."

"Plenty of it. I've never seen Mason with so much good stuff before."

"Thanks, Phil. I like to gather these odd bits of information. You never know when they might fit into a picture you're trying to form. Well, I see it's almost quarter to ten so I'll be on my way. Keep an eye on those lads for me, Phil. You know that my mouth is not an ever open door. So long."

Cardby slid a pound note over the bar, flicked a hand, and vanished through the swing doors. He had plenty about which to think as he mounted the stone steps leading to the street. A taxi was waiting almost outside the entrance to the dive. He walked over to it. Before he had time to give an address, even as his hand rested on the door handle, he became aware of the two men standing on either side of him. He looked at Cash Mason and Fred Carter. The smaller man grinned with twisted lips as he said:

"We want you to come along with us for a short ride, Cardby. All right?"

"Afraid not," said the youngster. "I've got a most important date with a large portion of meat and potato pie. Some other time, boys."

"Some other time be damned!" snapped Cash Mason.

" Know why you're coming along with us, Cardby? Because the Boss has decided he wants to meet you! "

" The Boss? Tell him I'll see him to-morrow with pleasure."

" You're seeing him to-night, brother," said Mason. Mick Cardby felt the prod of guns in his ribs on both sides!

CHAPTER III

WAITING FOR DEATH

CARDBY looked up and down the dark street. It was almost empty. He cast a glance towards the taxi driver. It was then he realised fully that the dice were all loaded against him. The jehu was smiling viciously. Cardby had walked into the trap like a lamb heading for the slaughter. He cursed under his breath before turning to Cash Mason with a smile, saying :

" I must say that the Boss is very inconsiderate. I wonder whether he realises that he is wasting my favourite meal for me? It's all too bad."

" It will be—for you!—if you don't quit stalling for time, and do a dive into this cab. I'm getting tired of waiting, and I know the Boss hates people who don't arrive on time. If I were in your place I wouldn't upset him more than you have done already. He might get really annoyed."

" That would break my heart," remarked Mick, as he climbed into the taxi. The men clambered in on either side of him. Immediately the cab started to move Cash Mason pushed Mick against the back of the taxi. The youngster knew what was coming. He was not mistaken. A minute later adhesive tape was fastened over his eyes. For a short while nothing was said. Mason was the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

" I told you, Cardby," he said, " that one day you would speak out of your turn. I thought you might have gone one step too far to-night. So I told the Boss. He was so interested about my version of the affair that he said we had to collect you. Seems that he's got an ambition to meet the great Mick Cardby. He doesn't often meet people—twice!"

Both men laughed loudly as the last word came out with a venomous bite.

" Am I supposed to feel terrifically honoured?" asked Mick. He was still wondering why the men didn't rifle

his pockets. They seemed to be taking more than a bare chance of him carrying other articles than a handkerchief. He tried for a time to work out their route from the turnings they took, from the sounds he heard as the taxi plodded along. He abandoned the effort as useless. It was a waste of time. Instead he commenced to work out some plan of campaign. In his right-hand trouser pocket he had a Steyr automatic, but he doubted whether he would retain that for long.

"Tell me," he said, "why the Boss is so anxious to meet me. I didn't think he ever wasted his time on nonentities, and I had no idea that I'd ever attained such peaks of importance. But there must be some reason."

"You bet there is!" exclaimed Cash. "The Boss has never done anything without a damned good reason lying at the back of it from the day he left the cradle until now. But don't waste your time asking me silly questions. If blokes like me knew what was at the back of his mind every time he made a move I don't reckon he'd be sitting on top of the dump now."

"Dump of what? Dynamite, or manure?" Cardby wasn't feeling unduly nervous.

"I'd like you to say things like that to the Boss while I was in the room," said Mason. "I'd just love to see what would happen to you, Cardby."

"You're putting ideas into my head, little one. Maybe I'll stage a show specially for your benefit so that we can see whether your supreme Boss can take it as well as he can give it. So don't encourage me further."

"Don't make me smile, Cardby," sneered Mason. "I know you think you're tough. So can any guy be tough when everything is running his way. But I'll bet you're not such a miracle when things start running against you. After all, you've made your reputation handling a few third-rate punks. Now you can meet a really big shot for the first time. I've got an idea that very soon you're going to start changing your views about quite a lot of things. Maybe you might even squeal to be left alive. You never know."

"No? You've forgotten I don't work for the Boss. So I don't squeal!"

Again the silence fell. The journey, to Cardby, seemed interminably long. He guessed that they must be at least three or four miles outside the West End. It was almost with a sense of relief that he heard the brakes applied, felt Cash Mason clutch his arm, heard him say:

"This, Mr. Clever Devil, is where you meet somebody who can, and will, tell you where you get off. Step right out,

and have the pleasure of meeting the Boss. But I'm not going to promise you that it'll be any picnic party."

"Don't prophesy, little one," remarked Mick. "You might even find that we have a lot in common—even to the extent of agreeing that you're a bit too dumb to handle any job of work that might be important. And the same goes for the lump of bone and muscle you take around as a mascot."

Fred Carter grunted as though displeased. Mick had the idea that Carter could get no nearer to being articulate than that. Although the prospect of meeting the Boss was not his vision of beautiful things to come, Cardby felt some sense of relief as he was assisted out of the taxi. He noticed that his feet scrunched on gravel, that when they moved away from the cab they were walking up a slight incline, that after a few yards they took a right-hand turn. Such details were worth storing in the memory. Before long—if he lived until then—they might be useful.

"Four steps here," announced Cash Mason. Mick was grateful for the information, noticed that Mason pressed a button for the bell, listened to the tone of the ring. He heard approaching footsteps, knew at once that the passage leading to the door was not carpeted. He could hear heels clicking on what he assumed to be a tiled floor. Then came the slight rattle of a chain being withdrawn, a trivial whine as the door was swung back. The youngster was pushed forward, led a few paces along the passage, left standing against a wall while Mason vanished. Fred Carter held his arm as though intending to make his fingers meet through it.

It was not long before Mason returned, gripped Cardby's hand, led him away along the passage. A door opened, and Mick strained hard to prevent his face contorting with pain as the adhesive tape was torn away from his eyes. When he first opened the lids he could see nothing. The light in the room had blinded him. He closed them again, heard Cash Mason's retreating footsteps, heard the door close softly behind him. Twice he had to open his eyes before he could discern anything. The light was stabbing at his eyes, shooting arrows of pain into them. Then he heard a strange voice:

"I am in no hurry, Mr. Cardby. Just take your own time."

The tones were curiously low, could have been softly musical had it not been for the slight menace behind them. Cardby blinked a couple of times, rubbed his eyes for an instant, and then found that he could see normally. He was in a large, ornately furnished room. Everything around him spoke rather of wealth than of good taste. The carpet was thick and luxurious, the period furniture extravagantly elegant—

except that there was too much of it—and the embroidered panels hanging on the walls brought a vivid blaze of colour into the room. A man sat at a small table not more than three yards away from the youngster. Cardby stared at him intently.

His compulsory host was, he guessed, midway between thirty and forty. The figure was slender, but gave no impression of weakness. The long, white hands looked almost effeminate. But Mick gave these things a mere casual glance. It was the face which fascinated him. Never before in his wide and long trail of experience had the youngster seen features which so shrieked of contradictions. The brow was perfectly modelled. The swerve of the curve, the unusual height, the slight rise of the bone structure immediately above the eyes indicated no mean mentality. That forehead could have belonged to a great artist, to any genius. Yet the first argument against the possessor of that brow belonging to any such category came as soon as Mick looked into the man's eyes. They were a weird colour, more of an electric blue than a violet blue. The pupils seemed distended, and each time the heavy lashes flickered the eyes were almost invisible. The nose was sharply aquiline, the upper lip unusually shallow, and the small mouth was pursed so tightly that it seemed the aperture was non-existent. The chin was so pointed that the line from the massive brow to the point of the jaw reminded Mick of an inverted pear.

On the table before the man lay a spread-out pack of cards. Mick did not need to glance at them a second time. The Boss had been playing solitaire. During the seconds while he scrutinised the man, Horace Mellery was eyeing Mick Cardby with an equally expert appraisal. Some seconds passed before the Boss waved his hand towards a chair on the opposite side of the table. Cardby was becoming bewildered. He still had the automatic in his pocket, could feel the comfort of its touch as he moved. Why hadn't the gun been taken from him? Surely the Boss had not made a fearsome name by taking such blind chances, such unnecessary and tremendous risks? Mick sat down, decided to take the bull by the horns, and force the pace. He said:

"When you invite guests to pay you a visit, do you usually engage an escort for them in this manner? Seems to me you have a social code all of your own."

"Many people have told me that I am somewhat eccentric," replied the Boss. "You should be flattered that I was so anxious to meet you, so anxious that I would not take the risk of you refusing my invitation. Mr. Cardby, I think you should look upon my action as a most signal honour."

"I prefer to be left the liberty of rejecting offers, Mr. Mellery."

The man elevated his eyebrows, flicked a playing card with his thumb.

"It seems that you have quite a knowledge, Mr. Cardby. Why the name?"

"What else can I call you? I know of no other name. Isn't it usual, then?"

"Most definitely, it is not, Mr. Cardby. Have you never heard me referred to as the Boss? It is a name I very much prefer to the one you used."

"My apologies. I will call you the Boss on every occasion we meet upon the strict understanding that upon all such occasions you refer to me as "sir," and never as Mr. Cardby. In that manner I imagine that both vanities will be satisfied. Will such an arrangement suit you quite well?"

Mick struggled to conceal his smile as he saw the blood mounting into the man's neck. The Boss could certainly hand it out better than he could take it. Cardby watched him lick his dry lips, finger the cards restlessly.

"The offer is so stupid that I wouldn't waste my time considering it," he said. "And may I remind you that you're hardly in this room under circumstances which justify you in being insolent? Bear that in mind."

"Most certainly, Mr. Mellery. Now tell me why I have been summoned here."

"Don't hurry the proceedings, Mr. Cardby. I had you brought here because I think we have much in common and there are one or two matters I wished to discuss. Will you take a cigarette, or are you wise and refrain?"

"I do smoke—but not now, thanks. At the moment I have only one ambition, and that is to get along home for some meat and potato pie. With your gigantic interests in life you wouldn't understand the simpler pleasures. Would you mind enlightening me a little further? You are a busy man, and I have no intention of wasting your time. I am a hungry man, and cold pie is distasteful to me. Don't be nervous that you might offend me in any manner by being a little abrupt. I regard brevity as being essential at times."

"But this is not one of those times, Mr. Cardby. This interview is not one through which we can race without doing a great disservice to both of us."

"I had no idea that I'd attained a level of such importance, Mr. Mellery."

"I loathe sarcasm. You'll find that when I am about it does not pay people to attempt it. And I would rather attempt finesse than direct methods."

" Mr. Mellery," said Mick quietly, " is your latter statement absolutely and entirely accurate? Unless anything and everything I have ever heard about you is hopelessly inaccurate there have been many, many occasions when your methods—to express it mildly—have been rather more than direct. Still, so much depends upon the manner in which you would define finesse."

" I imagine that you have heard more than is good for your health. When people attain some rank in this life there are always those who wish to slander them. That must have been your experience as a successful man."

" You have, I believe, misunderstood me. The stories I heard would not in any way form the basis for a slander suit. Unless they were entirely untrue the issue would be the gravest possible form of criminal libel."

" Mr. Cardby, you have trodden many times on dangerous ground. So far you have got away with it. You might find that I don't allow you or any one else to get away with it. Unless you curb your tongue you might very easily find yourself waiting for death. And for one so young, for one with such a future, that would not be a very pleasant outlook." The Boss pushed the cards away from him, bent forward in his chair, lowered his voice, and said: " Mr. Cardby, I had you brought here to-night because I do not want you to die. I brought you here because there are ways in which that major misfortune could be avoided. Surely such a cause is worth a visit? "

" You think I am likely to be stricken down with a deadly disease unless I accept your unrivalled experience and knowledge as a specialist? "

" That is a delicate manner of expressing precisely what is in my mind. I fancy there are deadly diseases which even Harley Street has never heard of. They are diseases which neither medicine nor operation can cure."

" Bullets through the heart and that sort of thing," remarked Mick, almost casually. " I've been told that the recovery rate is very low indeed."

" How rapidly you jump to conclusions! But let us quit bantering in this childish manner. Mr. Cardby, in the West End I employ quite a number of men in my line of business. That fact is well within your knowledge. Is it not? "

" Yes, but I am not certain about the exact line of business, Mr. Mellery."

" That matter can rest, Mr. Cardby. It has been brought to my notice that during recent months you've taken an interest in my employees which I can only look upon as undesirable from my point of view, and unhealthy from your

point of view. Am I making myself quite clear, Mr. Cardby ? "

" You know quite well what *my* line of business is. With that knowledge in your possession the rest of the story should be self-explanatory."

" Hardly. If a client had engaged you to investigate a case in which I was involved it might explain your interest although, from my point of view, it would not excuse it. But in so far as I have been able to discover you have not been called upon to undertake such a case. That makes the entire position very, very much worse. I don't think, Mr. Cardby, that you are in any way rendering a service to yourself or your father by poking in your nose where angels fear to tread. I have done nothing in my life which could conceivably interfere with your private affairs. You have done enough to indicate to me that your interest is prompted by personal curiosity rather than by commercial reasons. That, I cannot tolerate. I am quite clear, eh ? "

" I imagine so. In other words, Mr. Mellery, you are telling me as a minor representative of the firm of Cardby and Son to lay off anything at all which might involve you. As an alternative you are suggesting that my health might be permanently impaired. Or am I making a blind guess ? "

" Oddly enough, Mr. Cardby, I could think of no better manner in which to express what is in my mind. I'm glad for both our sakes that you have taken what I consider to be the sensible view. It will save a lot of trouble."

" Really ? Mr. Mellery, so far I have taken views somewhat opposed to those you've construed into my words. I fear that you're somewhat hasty in arriving at conclusions. Let me make things perfectly plain by saying here and now that as a firm we cannot permit ourselves to be intimidated by you or by any one else. That is not a threat. Merely a simple warning. You can take it whichever way you like. I am merely stating a bald fact."

Horace Mellery linked his hands together, bent again over the table, said :

" You are very impetuous, Mr. Cardby, and in a way I admire you. Bear in mind that I don't warn people twice. If you come across my path, if you start probing into any matter that concerns me, you can only thank yourself for all that might be coming to you. I admire guts when I see it. You've got plenty. But I'd advise you very strongly to temper your courage with a reasonable amount of common sense. Then you might go a long way instead of taking a short cut which would deprive your firm of the junior partner. To-night, I am being tolerant. The same tolerance will not be very noticeable if I meet you under more aggravating

circumstances. Do you know what would happen to you if I became really annoyed and lost my temper ? ”

“ Of course I do. When I came in you were playing patience, Mr. Mellery. For an instant I glanced at the cards. I saw that you ran up to the three with hearts, to the five with diamonds, to the four with clubs. You were needing the ace of spades very badly ! I mention this in a casual manner, but I'd be careful were I in your place to see that you don't turn up that ace of spades for yourself at a time when you don't want it. Am I quite clear ? ”

The veins at the sides of the man's forehead were pulsing heavily. For a time he stared at Cardby venomously. His thin fingers rapped the table.

“ I think,” he said, with measured slowness, “ that we are beginning to know quite a lot about each other. Mr. Cardby, one day you might find that card waiting in an envelope in your hall. You have only yourself to blame if it arrives at your home. Keep away from my affairs, and you've got a chance to live. Dive into any concern of mine, interfere with me in any way, and I'll promise you that there are other things I can do with cards besides playing solitaire with them. Your day is young. Don't force a sunset on it.”

“ Quite poetic, Mr. Mellery. You know something about cards, don't you ? Well, have you ever heard of an ace of spades being trumped ? I have. Many times. And that which has happened once can always occur again. At the moment, I have no ambitions whatever with regard to you or your affairs. If the day arrives when I have you can post that card to me with pleasure. It might even happen that I'll pick it up from the doormat without developing the jitters. It might even happen that I've got a few trumps up my sleeve at the time you bounce that card on the baize. Who can say ? Is there anything you wish to add before I head forth for a bed, and a sleepy night in which cards play no part ? I am, so to speak, at your compulsory service.”

“ Mr. Cardby, I will push the bell and see that you are escorted back to the West End. Before you go I want to repeat one thing : Keep away from my affairs and you can live, as far as I am concerned. Dabble with anything in which I have a real interest, and you'll find that the ace of spades—when it is handed out by me—cannot very often be trumped. Remember that.”

Mick rose to his feet, bowed low with mock solemnity as he remarked :

“ Mr. Mellery, you have given me an incentive to live. There is no better urge to exist than the knowledge that you are waiting for death. For the enthusiasm you've bred within

me, I must thank you. For your courtesy as a host, I thank you again. But as a prospective mourner when my weary bones are laid to rest, I feel sorry for you. Mr. Mellery, you're an optimist ! ”

CHAPTER IV

DIVIDED PARTNERS

SINCE the commencement of the firm of Cardby and Son there had been one fixed rule from which the partners never deviated. Business discussion in any form was taboo at home. For that reason the senior member of the firm heard nothing of the events of the night until shortly after ten o'clock on the following morning. The father waited, listening carefully as Mick reached the end of his story. He had made no attempt whatever to interrupt. The youngster arrived at the conclusion without emotion, without emphasis.

“ So they smacked the tape on my eyes again, led me out to the taxi, drove me into the West End without saying a word. I did my best to draw them out, but it was no use. Either they were stricken dumb or they were dead scared. A few minutes before the cab stopped they tore the stuff away from my eyes. I was dumped at the corner of Rupert Street. And, except that the meat and potato pie was unconscionably cold when I arrived home, that is the end of the story as far as I am concerned. Now work that lot out, Dad.”

“ I can, Mick. And very easily. You seem to treat the whole affair as a joke. Well, I don't. If there is anybody in this world who knows you it ought to be me. That's what worries me about you. Even when you're walking along a heap of nitroglycerine you seem to take no notice. Your flippancy, sonny, may be very admirable in its way, but I'm scared stiff about where you'll finish with it. The Boss wouldn't have taken the trouble to talk to you at all if he hadn't thought that you were dangerous. And he's a great believer in removing dangerous people. I'm more than surprised that he gave you a warning instead of a permanent black-out. I didn't think that he had that amount of charity in him. For that, Mick, you can thank your lucky stars, or whatever it may be that's kept you out of the cemetery for the past few years. Mick, the Boss gave you some advice. So I'll give you some. Remember what the Boss said to you, and don't run your head into a brick wall. Take my tip, laddie, and see that you don't dabble with any case in which he's one

of the central figures. I'm no coward, but I know enough to realise that this is one of the moments when you should keep on walking—the other way."

"Lordy, Dad, are you rearing me as a first-class quitter, or what?"

"Neither. I'd rather have a son than a corpse. So would your mother, Mick."

"And I'd rather have flowers on top of me than be scared of a puss-faced scab like Horace Mellery! I am not looking for him at the moment. Before last night my interest, shall we say, was purely academic. And it will stay that way until I have good cause to take a more intense personal interest. I'm telling you now, Dad, that if that day arrives I'm not going to run away like a whipped cur. He can produce his ace of spades. It won't be the first time I'll have stared at death and thought that after all it was not very terrifying. I'd just love to see whether that death's head can hand it out and take it at the same time. I've got all the money in my bank to say that he can't, and one day I'll prove it to you. That's all."

The father looked at Mick with some surprise, began to think that even after almost thirty years he might not know his own son. The youngster was pacing the office floor, his fists balled, his lips set in a straight line, his shoulders thrown back, his face more coloured than usual.

"Don't be foolish, Mick," said his father. "I know how you feel. It isn't nice to have an ultimatum delivered on your doorstep like that. But you have to take these things as they come. There's plenty of trouble about in this world without anybody walking out to search for it. Maybe we'll never have any cause to cross swords with the man. That'll be all to the good."

"We'll see. I'm not taking your view about the lay-out of things at all. I'm not being conceited, Dad, but I reckon I know Mellery better than you do. That's what makes me so certain that the man did not collect me last night in order to hand out a general warning. Mellery is not the sort of person who gets sudden ideas in his head along such lines, Dad."

"Just what have you got at the back of your mind, sonny?"

"Plenty. I am certain that Mellery has pulled a stroke, and that a little bird has whispered in his ear that the case will be handed over to us. I am positive that he would never have collected me otherwise. True, he gave me the warning in a general manner, he dealt with nothing specific, and did not mention any individual matter. But Mellery would never have said what he did to me unless he had been certain

that the time had arrived for him to say his piece. Now are you following me quite clearly, Dad ? ”

“ I think so, Mick, and that makes the whole programme much worse. If a client arrives and wants us to handle a case in which Mellery is mixed up I think we'd qualify for an asylum by offering to take it.”

“ My view is exactly the opposite, Dad. If we did not take it I'd be so ashamed of being a partner in the firm of Cardby and Son that I'd have no alternative other than to resign. Now you know the strength of my feelings. And I hate to say that. Still, every word of it stands.”

The father pursed his lips. He hadn't met his son in this mood before. He commenced to speak, took another look at Mick, decided that it was useless to prolong the argument. So, being both a diplomat and philosopher, he lit his pipe, bent back in the chair, sighed heavily, and said :

“ All right, sonny. I'll leave you to carry the can back. But bear in your mind all the time that I gave you due warning. Some blokes are born to die out of bed. You happen to be one of 'em. I'm saying nothing more about it except that you want to fix the fee at a helluva figure if you intend to handle any case which might finish with you or the Boss in the grave. One doesn't qualify for the grave for small money.”

“ That I can well realise. In the same way, Dad, you don't lose your self-respect without making a fight for it. So, for the moment, we'll let sleeping dogs lie. Maybe I'll never be facing Mellery across an open grave, but if that day does arrive you won't discover me hiding behind the hearse. I'll either be the principal mourner, or Mellery will be dropping a wreath to my memory. We'll wait until things happen.”

“ I'm still certain that you're all wrong, but I'll leave it with you.”

Mick relaxed, grinned cheerfully, walked through to the outer office.

“ Tell me, Sunshine,” he said to Miss Constance Wheeler, “ do you think you could tear yourself away from the office and take a coffee with me ? ”

The girl looked up from her notebook. She was striving to present a frigid front. The effort was not an unqualified success.

“ I am not employed by the firm to take morning coffee with a partner.”

“ Hard-hearted Hannah ! Going to leave me alone in this seductive world, or is it that your boy friend has raised many objections ? ”

“ My father never criticises my actions. He knows me well enough.”

"Well, you gave him a chance, but I haven't seen any possibility of me ranking alongside your father. What about this coffee. I have spoken to my boy friend, and he thinks that you can look after me quite adequately."

"I am surprised that your father should encourage you. You don't need it from the little I have seen and heard of you since I came here."

"Well, if you want to become really personal I should say——."

Whatever Mick had in his mind remained unsaid. The outer door opened, a gentleman entered, and Cardby scurried back to his own office. He sat for a few minutes with his feet across the desk, wondering in what manner time could be passed without exertion. He hadn't solved the problem when his office door opened, and Miss Wheeler entered, a professional smile flickering on her face. There were times when she could be politely nice.

"Your father, sir, desires you to join him in his office at once."

"Thanks. Marvellous. I am on my way. The coffee will have to wait. Sorry."

His father was facing the visitor who had just arrived as Mick was inveigling the girl from the building. The newcomer was in the middle forties. His clothes, general demeanour indicated an amount of wealth. The florid face bespoke an appetite for the good things of life. The paunch gave evidence that he made no effort to stint himself.

"Mr. Angus Forbes, this is my son—Mick Cardby. Mick, this gentleman has come to us to unburden one of his worries. After hearing a little I came to the conclusion that it would save time for all concerned if you were present to hear what Mr. Forbes has to say. Naturally, Mr. Forbes, you may speak in front of my son with the most complete confidence."

Their prospective client did not appear impressed. Maybe he first formed the view that the son appeared too young to have experience. Mick had met with that difficulty before. But it always wore away in time.

"Perhaps," said the father, "it would be advisable if you commenced once again, Mr. Forbes. That seems to be the simplest manner of saving time."

Their caller lit a cigar, hitched one leg over the other, stared at the ceiling as though seeking inspiration, and then commenced to speak. Mick was amused. Forbes enunciated his words as though passing through an elocution test. His manner was pompous, his diction stilted, his phrasing so precise that after a time it sounded hopelessly stilted.

"It is about my wife," he said. "I am afraid that she is

causing me very considerable anxiety. Until recently I believed that I could cope with the situation myself. Now I realise that the matter is entirely beyond me. It is essential that I should engage the services of outside parties to come to my assistance. I have been recommended to come to your firm, having been told that you act in a most discreet manner."

He paused to cough, looked from father to son. Mick rapidly interrupted :

"Forgive me for butting in, but am I to take it that this matter has nothing whatever to do with divorce proceedings? As a firm we have made it a fixed rule that we cannot undertake any matrimonial cases."

"It has nothing whatsoever to do with any such matter," announced Angus Forbes. He spoke as though reciting a final judgment. "The details are, of course, most painful to me. I will try to be brief. If I wander from the main issues, please check me. I live at 'The Drive,' Connaught Avenue, Ealing. I have been married for almost twenty years. My wife's name is Clara. Those matters, although trivial, are relevant. We have no children. Until a year ago we were most happy. I then observed that my wife was spending much more time than usual away from her own home. At the same time the expenses commenced to mount up in the most alarming manner. I had been in the habit of paying her an allowance each month. For nineteen years she found that allowance most adequate. But some nine months ago she commenced to discover that it would not last her for a single week."

Again he paused melodramatically. Mick pushed an ash tray towards him.

"I questioned her many times, endeavoured to ascertain wherein lay the root of the sudden change. I could obtain no satisfaction whatever. After the commencement of this period she seemed more than happy for two or three months. That happiness faded away, and I discovered that she was at times the subject of violent attacks of melancholia. I arrived home on many occasions to discover her weeping, to find that she was verging on an hysterical collapse. Over and over again I tried to discover in which direction the trouble lay. I could not. Each time I questioned her I had to cease without attaining any degree of success. Her nerves could not sustain her, and I feared the consequences if I persevered with my questioning. That was the position until a month ago."

He pulled at his cigar, stared at the partners, and proceeded slowly :

"What follows is much more serious. My wife had a

quantity of valuable jewellery. She also owned quite a substantial sum in negotiable securities. Imagine my amazement when I discovered that she had been withdrawing one piece of jewellery after another from the safe deposit in which they were placed. Picture my bewilderment when I found out that during a matter of about three months she had realised all her securities. I should say that during that period she must have realised in all a sum in the region of fifteen thousand pounds! Yet I could discern no manner whatever in which her expenditure had risen, no sign of any undue extravagance. If anything, gentlemen, she was living much more economically than had been the case during the preceding years. I take it that you are both following me without the slightest difficulty?"

"We are," said Mick, "and it sounds to me as though the word blackmail is written all over the affair in screaming capital letters."

"Exactly what I at first thought," agreed Angus Forbes. "But I don't think so now. I hope I am wrong, but I fear that the cause lies in some crime infinitely worse than blackmail. As I proceed you will see my reason for stating that, however alarming it may sound to gentlemen of your experience. Once I threatened my wife that I would inform the police in order that they could undertake an investigation. As a result of me making that statement she was in bed for a week with a complete nervous collapse. I asked her point blank if she were being blackmailed. Without hesitation she denied it. I told her that if she had done something very foolish the best course would be for us to discuss the matter. My offer she refused without an instant's hesitation. At night I could hear her tossing and turning in the bed, muttering to herself, sitting erect in a state of entire panic, throwing off the bedclothes. But in spite of all my endeavours I was unable to discover wherein lay the cause of all the trouble. So now we come to the two turning points in the affair which have caused me to bring my troubles along to you two gentlemen."

"Some four days ago my wife, obviously in a most pathetic state, came to me with a request for five thousand pounds. I told her that such a request was quite mad, that I would do nothing in the matter. I, naturally, asked her why she wanted the money. For five minutes she declaimed in an hysterical manner, refused to tell me, insisted that I should pass that sum along to her, and ask no questions. When I told her that my reply was final, that having regard to the events of recent months I would never contemplate advancing such a sum for such an unknown cause, she sobbed violently,

told me that I was sending her to her death, and hastened out of the room. I hurried after her, beseeched her to tell me what she meant by saying that I was sending her to her death. Her only reply was that by not letting her have the money I was murdering her.

"The local doctor who has treated her for years came along and gave her a sedative. He, also, tried to discover the cause of the trouble. In spite of the fact that she had treated the doctor as a confidant for many years she completely refused to discuss the matter with him at all. We talked it over together, and it was the doctor who made the suggestion that if matters did not take a decided turn for the better it would be most advisable for me to call upon you gentlemen, place the facts before you, and seek your aid. I agreed that his suggestion should be adopted. I had not then decided which course I would take. It is naturally more than repulsive that one should involve one's wife in any unpleasant publicity, but, at the same time, I could not tolerate the continuance of such conditions. So I made up my mind to wait for one further move, and then call upon you. I might mention that apart from the remarks made to me by the doctor I had quite a knowledge of your joint prowess myself. I am a stockbroker in the City, and have learnt much about various phases of your work. But that is entirely by the way."

Father and son became more concentrated in their attention and interest. This certainly did not sound like an ordinary case.

"And now we come," said Angus Forbes, "to the culminating point, the last matter to convince me that things were terribly wrong, to drive me to this office to seek your assistance. Yesterday afternoon, only a few minutes after I arrived at my home the postman arrived with the last delivery of the day. I had noticed that from the moment I entered the house my wife would not move out of the hall. When she was not pacing to and fro like a demented persons she was peering through one of the windows along the drive towards the gate. Naturally, I was suspicious.

"I asked her on two or three occasions why she was showing such anxiety, asked her why she did not enter the drawing-room and take tea with me. My wife was so distraught that I could obtain no sensible reply. It really seemed to me that she had broken the last thin line dividing her from insanity and sanity. Unfortunately, the more I questioned her the more distraught she became. At moments I feared that she was about to suffer a major collapse. It was not until I saw the postman walking up the drive that my muddled

brain pieced two and two together, and I appreciated why my wife was waiting in such a state of apprehension.

"On the spur of the moment I decided to do something I have never done before in my life. I decided to intercept the postman, and open any mail which might be addressed to my wife. It seemed to me that since I had tried to solve the mystery for almost a year I now had a chance to clear up all her troubles. So I opened the drawing-room window, beckoned to the postman, and took the mail from him. Immediately my wife flung open the front door of the house, dashed into the drive, and started to create a most awful scene. The servants assisted me in getting her back into the house. But once she was in the drawing-room the scene was too awful, too dreadful to bear remembering. She fought like a wild animal, clawed at me, cursed me, threw things at me. I was certain then that the last fragment of her sanity had gone. She was quite mad."

Forbes waited to wipe a handkerchief across his damp forehead.

"She was screaming for me to give her the post," he continued, "and I refused. I told one of the servants to telephone for the doctor. He came immediately, compelled her to take a shot of morphia. That quietened her for a short time, and she was put to bed with two of the maids looking after her. It was not until then that I searched through the mail. I found one letter which seemed unusual to me. The name and address of my wife were printed in block letters. The hand seemed illiterate. I opened the envelope. Gentlemen, the opening of that envelope has brought me to this office. The first thing I found inside was this brief note."

Father and son bent over the desk as Forbes laid down the single sheet of paper. The few words were also printed in block letters. They read:

"Pay within seven days or you'll get one of the enclosed."

"And," announced Angus Forbes, "this gentlemen, is what I found inside the envelope. Now I place myself in your hands."

Father and son stared at the article on the desk. Mick smiled grimly.

For Angus Forbes had flung down a playing card—the ace of spades!

CHAPTER V

THE CHASE COMMENCES

"FOR crying out loud!" exclaimed Cardby Senior. The son said nothing. His mouth was still twisted in a smile, and he stared at the card as though fascinated. Angus Forbes looked quickly from one to the other. It was apparent that the stockbroker was fast drifting out of his depth. He blew out an immense cloud of smoke, and then inquired:

"From the expressions on your faces I'd say that this card means something to both of you. To me it means nothing except the possibility of something sinister. Since I've enlisted your support perhaps you would make a start by telling me just what it does mean."

Neither partner spoke. Mick still stared at the card. His father pulled out his pipe, proceeded to pack it. Their prospective client repeated:

"I'm asking you—just what does this ace of spades mean to you? After all, I've engaged your services. I'm entitled to some information."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry," said the father. "You called at this office to ascertain whether we would undertake an inquiry. We have not yet accepted. So please don't proceed on the assumption that you are already our client. I am not at all certain that this is a case which we can undertake on your behalf. What do you say about it, Mick?"

The youngster looked at his father, saw what amounted to a pleading expression in his eyes. The older man was shaking his head slowly. Mick frowned for an instant before he resumed his seat, said to Forbes:

"You have not yet finished your story. I take it that you must have mentioned the matter to your wife. What was her reaction, her version of the affair? What explanation did she offer you? Did you show her the note and the card? As I said, we haven't yet completed the story, Mr. Forbes."

"I can very soon do that, Mr. Cardby. As soon as I saw what was in the envelope I telephoned the doctor and asked him to see me immediately. I would like you to understand that for years I have treated him as a friend as well as a medical adviser. After some consideration he stated definitely that having regard to my wife's nervous condition the result might be absolutely catastrophic if I divulged to her the contents of the envelope. He told me that if she inquired

about it I should state that no such envelope had arrived for her. Over and above that he told me to take no steps whatever until I had had a consultation with your firm. That advice seemed sound to me, and I have followed it implicitly."

"So that as far as your wife is concerned all is as it was?"

"Exactly. And the doctor does not think that she will be in a fit state to use her brain effectively for quite a long time to come. That being so, I am afraid that no information can be obtained from her. Gentlemen, already I am almost demented myself, so please don't keep me in suspense any longer than is absolutely necessary. Please let me know whether or not you will undertake this inquiry on my behalf."

"Perhaps," said the father, "you would come this way and sit in the waiting-room while I discuss the case with my son. We will let you know as soon as we have arrived at a decision one way or the other."

A moment later the father returned. His face was grim as he sat down, rapped on the desk with a stubby forefinger, and said to Mick:

"Sonny, I'm no coward. You know that. We've taken some of the toughest cases any one could handle. We both know that. But I am telling you here and now, Mick, that I want our firm to have nothing whatever to do with this case. It may be bad luck for Forbes, but I don't aim to stage a suicide for him or anybody else. And that's what this set-up looks like to me. Be a bit tolerant, Mick, and use your dome. Why wait for an ace?"

"And what would you feel like, Dad, if you heard later that Mrs. Clara Forbes had been murdered? Wouldn't you have the unhappy idea in your mind that you could have prevented it? Because I would! And what would you feel like if the news went round that the firm of Cardby and Son had turned down a case because the risk involved had given father and son the jitters? And how would you like to go to bed at night reflecting upon the fact that Horace Mellery was laughing like hell at your expense? Just a few thoughts like that might make you change your mind. Think it over."

The father laid his pipe on the desk, sighed heavily, shrugged his massive shoulders, and rose from his seat. He turned to Mick, said:

"Sonny, you'll be the death of me. I'll tell Forbes to come in now."

The stockbroker walked into the office with an expectant look. Before he could speak Mick held up a restraining hand, beckoned to a seat, said:

"Mr. Forbes, I don't want to say very much, but we know

enough about this case to realise that any investigators working upon it would be taking tremendous chances, and would be open to enormous risks. We are not in the business as private detectives for the love of our health, but we have a wholesome regard for our bodies. To put it vulgarly, they mean money to us. If, as in this case, we have to risk our lives, we want paying upon a proportionate basis. What financial terms do you suggest if we undertake the inquiry ? ”

“ I am not a wealthy man, but you would not find me parsimonious when such vital issues are at stake. What do you suggest, gentlemen ? ”

“ Let us start with this as a basis,” said Mick. “ I can assure you that the threat contained in that brief note is not an idle one. If your wife does not produce that five thousand she wanted within seven days she would not be a mental case—she would be a corpse ! I am not saying this to frighten you. I really mean it. And even that payment would only be the first of many. You would find demands arriving in an unceasing stream. You follow my reasoning ? Well, I am not intending to be entirely mercenary, but I would not undertake the case on behalf of the firm except on these terms : You pay us five hundred pounds to undertake the investigation of the case. If we remove all your wife’s troubles within seven days, ensure that she will be harassed no further, you pay us an additional thousand. How does that proposition sound to you ? ”

“ Eminently fair, very fair indeed.” Before either father or son could say anything further Angus Forbes had his cheque book in one hand, a fountain pen in the other. Their acceptance, their offer, seemed to have relieved the man’s mind in a remarkable manner. As he handed over the cheque to the father he pointed to the card on the desk, and asked : “ Now tell me just what that ace of spades really does mean.”

The father shook his head. So also did Mick. They had been in their line for long enough to appreciate the need for secrecy. Mick explained :

“ You will receive no information of any kind, no reports of any kind, from our firm. We are resolutely opposed to what you might term an interim statement. It is most dangerous, most prejudicial, to the vital interests of both the firm and the client. We are certain to require much information from you, and from your wife. But you will receive no sort of information from us. So please don’t get in touch with us in any way, and don’t disclose to any person the fact that we are employed by you. If that news got around it would make our task quite impossible.”

“ I fully understand, gentlemen, and I place myself

unreservedly in your hands. Is there anything else you want to know before I leave?"

"Yes, one matter of the first importance. Before you go home to-day I want you to visit your local doctor. Tell him to see your wife this afternoon, ask him to inform her that he has decided that in her own interest it is essential that he should obtain a second opinion, that he should engage a specialist to visit her. To prevent any form of argument I want him to inform her that all the arrangements have already been made, that Mr. Ernest Welling, the famous neurologist, will be calling to see her to-night at eight o'clock. When you get home you can tell her that the doctor passed along that news to you. Impress upon her that it is a very wise step, that you have heard a lot about Mr. Welling, that he is a superlative nerve specialist, and that she can have every confidence in him. By both playing your parts properly you can help me a lot."

"And where does the Mr. Ernest Welling fit into this picture, Mr. Cardby?"

"That's me!" announced Mick. "I'm a very versatile sort of person. Just lay the foundation stone really well, and leave the rest to me. By the way, tell the doctor to give you a suitable sedative. I'll hand it to your wife before I leave. That will help to create an impression."

"Seems most odd to me, gentlemen, but, as I said, I can do nothing other than leave myself entirely in your hands. I will see you, then, Mr. Cardby, at eight o'clock this evening. Do I leave this note and card with you?"

"Most certainly—and the envelope, please. They don't look very useful, but odd things occur in our line of business. We will do the best we can for you, Mr. Forbes. Just have confidence in us, keep your mouth shut as tightly as a clam, and leave us with an open course. At the moment, that is all the assistance we will be requiring from you. Many thanks."

Mick escorted their new client to the door, returned to his father. Cardby Senior gazed gloomily at the desk, muttered under his breath:

"A great neurologist! Sez you! A helluva fine mess you've landed the pair of us into, Mick. Do I go round to the house with you dressed as a nurse, or don't you mental specialists travel around with nurses? Hell! I give it up. I'll end up by going to one of those blokes myself!"

"Hold your breath for a moment, Pop; I haven't finished yet. I've already arranged your job. Mind if I take over the case as a personal matter?"

"Not a bit. You can have it—with my love and

sympathy. And what's the particular form of death that you've so kindly fixed for me, Mick?"

"You're throwing at the wrong coconut. All I want to achieve is your safety. I can arrange that by killing two birds with one stone. When I see Mrs. Forbes I'm going to tell her that a rest in the quiet countryside is vitally necessary for her. And I'm going to lend you to her as an escort. That will mean that both of you will be well out of the line of fire while I get along with the job here. How does that sound to you?"

"Not so good. I don't think the Boss and his boy friends constitute a one-man job for you to handle in town. I'd better stay with you, Mick. I've got an idea that before long you'll be needing all the help you can get. Somebody else can act as an escort for the lady. I'll stay right here."

"That won't do at all, Dad. Your job would be more important than mine. Maybe I'm unduly pessimistic, but I think the first thing Mellery will do when he learns that we are handling the case will be to find Mrs. Forbes and rub her out. That would be a typical move on his part—just to demonstrate to us that we can't afford protection to people if he's decided that they've got to go. For that reason I'd want somebody with her who could understand the full danger of the position, and who would not get the jitters as a consequence. Sorry, Dad, but I'm afraid you'll have to head into the country air. It won't do you a bit of harm."

"All right, lad. I'm not going to argue any more. I didn't want the case in any event, so I might just as well leave you to it. What exactly do you intend to do as your first move? I don't want to be left in the dark."

"That's simple. I've got a lot of friends among the West End taxi men. I am going to amble round among them until I've found out the name and address of the driver who took me to see the Boss last night. Seems to me that that is a logical start. I can't do much in any direction until I find out where Mellery lives. Don't you think that's sensible, Dad?"

"Entirely, but I've got the idea in my head that you could save yourself quite an amount of trouble. Move along to the Yard, get hold of Inspector Gribble, and unless I'm very much mistaken he'll be able to give you the address. After all, Gribble has worked on the man for nearly three years."

"There's something in that. I don't think Mellery is the type to hide himself. He is full of confidence, quite certain that he's too clever to be caught, and seems fond of a small spot of limelight. I'll make that Yard call before I do anything else. I'll be back before lunch. Be good."

Less than ten minutes later Mick was seated in Inspector Gribble's office. The Yard man, lean lantern-jawed, melancholic, listened to the youngster as though hearing his own death sentence being passed. He shook his head dismally every few seconds, seemed almost ready to sob.

"Don't do anything about it, Mick," he said. "The Boss would murder you with the same enthusiasm with which he'd eat his lunch. And you needn't think that he is an easy man to beat. Every time I've had the thought in my head that I've had him well pinned down he's wriggled out like an eel. That bloke has got more unbreakable alibis than you've got hairs on your head. And you'll never find a person who'll put in a squeal. One or two people I've collected seemed very anxious to talk—for a very short time. Then they lost their memories in the most remarkable manner. He is rank poison, Mick, and I'm telling you now that if you go on with this case I don't think that you'll ever handle another one. So forget it."

"Now, now, Sunshine, don't get too despondent. I've been looking for men before who were reckoned to be the tops when it came to toughness, and I am still sitting up and taking nourishment. I want to know where that man lives, and you're the one person who can tell me. Please spill the beans."

"I'd feel as though I were sending you to your death, Mick, and I would not like to have that on my conscience. Still, you've always shown a great partiality for seeking a sudden exit. So here you are, 'Kelway,' Finch's Lane, Hampstead. You'll find the place on a side road on the west of the heath. And keep as far away from it as you can. I've only been there once and I'm not at all anxious to repeat the visit."

"Thanks so much. Before I go, would you mind passing along any real information about the Boss and his boy friends you think might help me?"

"I can't tell you very much about the mob working with him. It always seemed to me that they're like the flowers in spring. I know about a score of them, but I've thought for a long time that I've never been in contact with the men at the top. I don't know who they are, but they certainly know how to stay under cover. Those I do know are small punks, and the Boss uses them just as you would use matches—he throws 'em away when they've done their job. And I've got the fixed idea in my head that some of them he has thrown away permanently. At any rate, one or two of them I've never set my eyes on since he was through with them. You can't work out just what his crime racket is, Mick. I've investigated cases of murder, forgery, blackmail, safe-breaking,

share pushing, and other oddments when I've been quite sure that he was at the back of the whole outfit. It's the bloke's versatility that makes him so damned dangerous."

"Obviously, he doesn't intend leaving too many eggs in one basket. All right, Sunshine, I'll be on my way. Oh, before I go—what do you know, if anything, about two West End small-timers named Cash Mason and Carter?"

"They're in the picture somewhere with Mellery, but I'm positive that they mean nothing. One day they'll vanish from the scene."

"That's the impression I had got. Well, give my love to your daughter."

Mick flagged a taxi in Whitehall, told the driver to drop him at the corner of Frith Street. He walked from there into Dean Street, mounted two flights of murky stairs, and knocked on a bedroom door. A moment later he was sitting on the edge of a bed talking to Phil, the barman.

"Whenever Mason or Carter drift into your bar, Phil, keep your ear flaps well pinned back. I'm more than anxious to hear what those men talk about. It doesn't matter how trivial it may seem to you, it might be of real use to me. And if any of their friends start gossiping, remember that I'm very interested. I'll see that you don't do it for nothing."

"That's all right, Mr. Cardby. You know I'd do anything for you after the good turns you've done for me. Anything else you want from me?"

"Tell me, Phil, does the Boss ever use your bar?"

"He's been in once. That's when he heard that some bloke had been talking out of his turn. I haven't seen the Boss or that man since!"

"Right. Be particularly careful to recall anything they may say about me. I've got an idea that you might hear my name quite a lot. All clear?"

"O.K. Now I'll close the other eye. I didn't bed down until after six."

"So long. I may call in to-night. I'd like to meet those two boys again."

Mick strolled round to the cab rank in Shaftesbury Avenue, looked along the line of taxis until he suddenly crossed over to the fourth cab in the line. The driver waved his hand cheerily, opened the door.

"I know they don't like you pulling out of the rank when it's not your turn," said Mick, "but the boys know me, Sammy, and they won't mind. I want to go to the office, but stop at a quiet pub *en route*. I want to have a word with you. Don't stop smack on top of my office. Any other will do."

The driver led Mick into a small public house tucked away

in a side street off the Strand. They were alone in the tiny saloon bar.

"Last night," said Cardby, without any preamble, "I was taken in a taxi to meet the Boss. The driver was about forty-five, stout, red faced, had watery blue eyes, bad set of false teeth in the top, wanted a shave badly, had a scar above the right eye, another on his left hand. Know him?"

"H'm. Sounds to me, Mr. Cardby, as though you're describing Bill Moss."

"Do you know Moss as a man who works at times for the Boss?"

"He's that sort. A real tough bird. He knocks around a lot with Cash Mason, and that doesn't give any bloke very much of a testimonial."

"That's the man all right. Listen, Sammy, I want his name and address in detail, and in secrecy, and I want any other information you can gather about him. I'll see you on the rank some time to-morrow. Don't come to the office about any information. I'll drop along to see you. Now go."

Mick Cardby strode into the office with a cheerful smile. He felt satisfied with the foundation he had laid. At any rate, the chase had begun. The youngster knew quite well that it would not finish until either he and the Boss had reached life's terminus, but that thought was not depressing him. As he walked through the outer office Miss Wheeler called to him, handed him an envelope. With official severity she said: "A gentleman left this note for you about half an hour ago, sir."

Mick opened the envelope. The smile did not fade away as he read the few scribbled words on a cheap, tawdry paper:

"You'll get one of these if you don't lay off. It's a last warning."

It was scarcely necessary for him to search further inside the envelope. He was still smiling when he pulled out the ace of spades!

"Take this to your next whist drive, darling," he said to the girl. "I am told on the best authority that they bring you all sorts of luck."

She was still staring at it when he walked through the room, whistling.

CHAPTER VI

HEADING INTO DANGER

It was exactly five minutes to eight when Mick Cardby pulled his car to a stop outside the home of the Forbes at Ealing. His father sat beside him. And the older man looked by no means happy! As the youngster clambered out of the car his father sniffed derisively, remarked: "Famous neurologist! Sez you!"

"Take it easy, little one," said Mick. "In your days as an official split at the Yard you pretended to be all sorts of things, didn't you? Sit tight and watch to see whether anybody hangs around while I'm inside."

Mick found Angus Forbes waiting for him in the hall. By his side stood an austere man of middle age and a pronounced professional manner.

"Meet Dr. William Conway—Mr. Michael Cardby," said Forbes. The man seemed nervy. The doctor bowed with exaggerated stiffness. Mick grabbed his hand, shook it as though to thrust the man from his pedestal.

"I take it," said the youngster "that Mr. Forbes has explained the whole of the proposed procedure to you?"

"Yes, he has. It is most irregular, and I don't see how I can agree."

"Forget that part of it, doctor. The whole business is rather more than an irregularity. Have you the sedative for me to give Mrs. Forbes?"

"Yes, here is one. Am I supposed to say that I called you in?"

"Certainly. One more thing before you introduce me to Mrs. Forbes. It is vitally important that she should be removed to the country for at least a week. Providing she has medical attention while away I take it that there is no real reason why she should not be moved?"

"I don't think it wise to take her away from surroundings to which she is so well used. Her nerves are in a very bad state, Mr. Cardby."

"Mr. Ernest Welling is the name, and I fancy that the lady will suffer from something infinitely more incurable than bad nerves if she is to remain in this house. It would not be dangerous for the lady to be taken away providing she had an escort and remained under constant medical surveillance? That is really all that I want to know, doctor."

"It would be unwise, but I can't say that it would be dangerous."

"Very well. Mr. Forbes, are you content to leave the matter with me?"

"Definitely, Mr. Cardby. I have every confidence in your judgment."

"That's all I want to know. Perhaps, Doctor Conway, you will now lead me to Mrs. Forbes. I would prefer that after you have smoothed my path for me you should leave the two of us to talk in private. Rest assured that I will not do, or say, anything which might upset Mrs. Forbes. Ready?"

They mounted the stairs without speaking another word. Conway made no attempt to disguise the fact that he was far from pleased. A weak voice summoned them after Conway rapped on a bedroom door. Cardby walked into the room with a cautious tread, hoping fearfully that he had achieved something of a professional mien. He examined his client's wife rapidly. Clara Forbes had been very much of a beauty in her day. Even the drawn and haggard face revealed traces of what she had been. The dark brown eyes were lustrously expressive, the features were well modelled, the hair abundant and rich in colour. She smiled wanly as they entered, bowed her head weakly as the necessary introduction was effected. Mick drew a chair from the side of the room, sat down beside the bed, held one of her hands.

"I'm not really a fearsome person at all, Mrs. Forbes," he said. "All we want to do is to put some life back into those eyes of yours. And I don't think it will be very long before we succeed in doing that. Perhaps the doctor would leave us so that we can have a brief and comfortable chat?"

Conway stared at Cardby as though he'd have had great pleasure in prescribing for him a strong dose of prussic acid. Then he walked out.

Mrs. Forbes shook her head sadly. Tears welled in her eyes. Cardby took her hand, pressed it gently. He knew only too well that he was going to have no easy task, wondered which would be the best opening gambit.

"We all have our troubles, Mrs. Forbes," he said, "and they're always easier to face when other people are helping you with them. So let us discover what we can do in your case. Would you mind giving me your age, please?"

"Forty, Mr. Welling. I am not prepared to answer questions. My nerves are so bad that any more worry would drive me into an asylum."

"We will forget that part of it, madame. After all, it is my task in life to remove troubles from people's minds. And I'm not being conceited when I say that I have had great

success. That being so there is no need to start with the idea that I will not be able to help you. I am certain that I have handled cases infinitely more serious than your own. So trust me."

"I know that you're wasting your time. My trouble is one that must be beyond the assistance of a medical man—or any other man. That's all."

"Wait for a moment, Mrs. Forbes, before you become despondent. You are doing yourself no sort of service by regarding as inevitable something which may easily respond to treatment. When did this fear first fall upon you? I'd like to know whether your nerves have been distraught for long."

"For almost a year. I have almost forgotten what time means."

"And for thirty-nine years of your life you had no trouble with nerves?"

"That is so. Until then I didn't realise what nerves were. Don't tire me."

"I will not. Had your physical health been good until that time?" Cardby was sparring for an opening. The patient was becoming restless.

"Except for childish complaints I have never had an illness. But I wish that you would refrain from asking these questions. I am quite convinced that there is nothing you can do for me. It is a sheer waste of time."

"And with that remark, Mrs. Forbes, I can in no way agree. I told you that I have treated more difficult cases with every success. So there's no reason why I should find your troubles beyond solution. Let us talk this matter over quietly. I know a little about the facts in your case. That being so I am certain that your nervous condition is not due in any way to impaired physical health, I know that you had until recently a most happy domestic life so we can wipe out any suspicion that matrimonial matters could have affected you adversely, and I know enough to state most definitely that you are not what I would term a neurotic type. Once we have established all those facts it leaves us with one conclusion, Mrs. Forbes. The events leading to your present mental state must have had their foundation in matters which occurred outside the ordinary run of your life, certainly in events which had not passed through your life during the previous thirty-nine years. If I can remove the worry of those incidents from your mind I would be able to effect a cure immediately. So suppose we start to work along that basis? Then you'll discover, I am sure, that whatever the burden of fear upon you may be I will be able to do something about it. Just place your confidence in me, Mrs. Forbes."

"It is useless," said the woman with sudden emphasis. "I have no thought in my mind of discussing my troubles with you, Mr. Welling. They are entirely private, and I desire to retain my own secrets. So please leave me alone."

Mick was on a tough spot, and he knew it. The woman closed her eyes, her head sank back on the pillow. The youngster's brain shot into top gear. The position appeared hopeless. He bit his lower lip, decided that desperate circumstances call for desperate remedies, decided to make one startling bid, to gamble the result of the whole case on one drastic throw. Again he took the woman by the hand, waited until she opened her eyes, then said :

"I can see, Mrs. Forbes, that you are not going to trust me. That being so I must say things to you which I had no intention of divulging when first I entered this room. My remarks may startle you, may give you very much of a shock. For that reason I must ask you to remain as calm as possible, to hold tightly on to your self-control. Mrs. Forbes, I have heard about the note and the contents of the envelope sent to you yesterday. I know very, very much more about your troubles than you would ever expect me to know."

The woman's eyes distended, she clutched the bedclothes until the knuckles shone whitely under the skin. Her lips were quivering. She said :

"Mr. Welling, I don't think I in any way understand you."

"And I am quite certain that you understand my meaning very well. Now I must be even more blunt. It is for your own good that I am speaking in this manner. Shall I tell you exactly what your trouble is, precisely what has thrown you into this pathetic nervous condition? Or would you rather confide in me, and save me the embarrassment of explaining to you?"

The woman sat erect in the bed, pulled a dressing jacket round her.

"I cannot believe what you are saying to me, Mr. Welling. My troubles are entirely private, and it would be entirely impossible for you to have any knowledge of them. Please don't try to frighten me into talking."

"Very well, Mrs. Forbes, you think that, to use a vulgar phrase, I am pulling a bluff, and trying to trick you into speech. If I demonstrate to you in a few brief sentences that I am not bluffing, if I prove to you beyond any doubt that I understand your case, will you be prepared to confide in me? Surely, if I am content to accept the onus of establishing the truth of what I say you will have no further cause to remain silent?"

"It isn't possible, Mr. Welling. You cannot deceive me in that way."

" There is no deception, madame. You are forcing me into a most awkward position, but I will have to hurt you in order to cure you. As soon as you are entirely satisfied that your troubles are no secret as far I am concerned I want you to stop me. Then I can hear the facts from you. It is not really that I need them—except that I would like to check them with the information I have already got. Make yourself comfortable, and remember that there is no cause for you to become distraught. Ready? "

Mrs. Forbes licked her dry lips, nodded her head. She grew paler.

" Until about a year ago you lived a normal, happy, contented life. But about that time you established a contact outside this house, outside the circle of your relatives and friends. For a time you thought that your new association was harmless and pleasant. Then you discovered the claws of the tiger beneath the velvet hand. Your—shall we say unfortunate association?—assumed totally different hues from those you had had every cause to visualise. That was when you started parting with money in large quantities. In other words, you were being screwed down by a vicious plan of blackmail. Your liquid reserves vanished, your securities had to be realised, even your jewellery had to be sold to meet the ever recurrent demands of the fiend holding out the threats over you.

" You had the idea in your mind that when all your resources had been exhausted, that when you reached the end of your financial tether the fears hanging over you would vanish. But you had underestimated the mentality, the fiendish cruelty, of those to whom you had paid. It was pointed out to you that your husband was a wealthy man, that you could purchase some peace by obtaining money from him. The thought that you should approach your husband, knowing that you could not explain the details of the demand, shattered your nerves. But that was not the end of the matter. Those who held you so firmly in their clutches began to scare you into a state of collapse by threatening extreme violence if the money was not forthcoming. Take a drink of water."

The woman's hand was shaking. Cardby held the glass to her lips. Oddly enough, it seemed to Cardby that some of the fear had vanished from her eyes. Even though distended, they hadn't the same haunted agony in them.

" And now I'll go on, Mrs. Forbes. Your final breakdown came from a wicked combination of two causes. In the first place, you did not dare to lay the whole set of facts before your husband. In the second place you feared that if you did not raise the money you would pay for the failure with your life.

It is not surprising that your nerves began to crumple under such an intolerable strain. I have come to relieve you from that strain, to see that your nerves are fully restored. And, believe me, Mrs. Forbes, I am certain that I can achieve that object. Are you satisfied that your troubles are no secret from me, or would you like me to mention one or two further facts? I am anxious that you should be entirely satisfied."

"Go on talking for a little while," she whispered. "Don't be frightened that I will raise a scene. I will try hard to remain just as I am."

"That's brave of you, madame, and that makes matters very much easier for both of us. I have not much more to say. But what little I do intend telling you will prove beyond a semblance of doubt that I know all there is to be known. There is a man—if you could use that word in connection with such a callous brute—living in London who lies behind all your troubles. He was born with the name of Horace Mellery. But that name is never used. To all the criminals working for him, to the hundreds of people whom he has victimised, he is known as the Boss. Surely it should not be necessary for me to continue any further?"

"My God!" exclaimed Mrs. Forbes, and she shielded her face with her hands. Cardby sat still and silent. There was nothing to be gained in any way by forcing the pace. When next the woman looked at him there was more resolution in her manner, more light in her eyes.

"It should make things very much better for you to know that you have not got the terrible burden of carrying that secret alone. I am only too ready and anxious to do anything possible to assist you. Put your entire faith in me, Mrs. Forbes, and I don't think you will ever have cause to regret it. I will let you into a small secret of my own, a piece of real information likely to give you much more confidence. It is this: I am no stranger as far as the Boss is concerned, and I believe that he will listen to me. It would not be the first time, madame, that we have met. And so far he has never succeeded in making me feel at all nervous."

"Oh!" The woman's eyelids flickered spasmodically. "You really have met and spoken to him, Mr. Welling? I can hardly believe that."

"Have you discovered so far that I have been lying to you?"

"No, no, no you have not. I am in a daze. I don't know what has happened. It seems that my world is spinning round in circles. How on earth did you come to know about my troubles? Who told you about them?"

"In my profession, Mrs. Forbes, curious information comes

along to us which never reaches the ordinary person. I am a complete repository for all kinds of news. Really you would be surprised to know the extent of my knowledge about quite a number of matters which most people regard as closely kept secrets. You can take my sincere word for that."

Cardby was smiling. He certainly meant what he said. He had never spoken more truthfully in his life. Odd information *did* come his way!

"Since you seem to know everything about me I don't see that I can tell you anything further, Mr. Welling. What exactly do you intend doing?"

"Listening to your version of what happened. When I've heard that I will decide precisely which course I can best take in your interests. You will find me a most sympathetic listener. Don't hurry, We have all the evening."

"All right," said Mrs. Forbes, "since you've told me all you know I can't see any reason why I shouldn't be quite honest with you. I can take it that you won't repeat to anyone what I am going to say to you?"

"Certainly. I didn't make any name at all as a human loudspeaker."

"Very well. There isn't much for me to say. A year ago I went to a tea dance at the Cosway Hotel. I met a man there. He was most attentive, most attractive. For a couple of months I was constantly in his company. There was an hotel bill . . . I don't want to say too much about it. Since then I have paid out almost fifteen thousand pounds. I think you know the rest."

"Not quite. I want the name of the man, his address, the manner in which the first demand was made, the names of the parties you have met, the full details about how you knew that the Boss was at the back of the affair."

"I don't want to conceal anything from you. The man was Edward Mailey, and he lives at Kerne House, Brunswick Square. He told me at first that he was being blackmailed by a third party, urged me to help him in order to prevent my husband hearing about his association with me. I did. That's how it started. After he had bled me white I was introduced by him to the Boss as the man who had obtained the money from him. The Boss told me that he was acting on behalf of another man. He, so to speak, kept twisting the screw tighter and tighter. There's nothing else to add, except that I feel better now I know that you've discovered the truth."

"There is something of the first importance to add. When your life was threatened you would never have developed nerves to such an extent if you had not had some good cause to

believe that the people threatening you were likely to prove that it was no idle threat they were making."

"That is the most terrible part of it. That is what upset me more than anything. One night I was told that another person had been given the same alternatives—to pay up or die. They informed me that the man had refused to pay. So they took me along to have a look at him. I was forced to go with them. They took me down into some place in Essex. I don't know just where it was because I was in a car with the blinds drawn. Well, they showed me the man. Ugh! He was dead! And his body was terribly slashed."

"Try to describe that man to me, Mrs. Forbes. It might help a lot."

"He was about forty, and rather stout. He had red hair, and blue eyes."

"Thanks," said Mick. The woman had given all that was required as a description of Smasher Stacey! The picture was too complete to be false. "Now, madame, I will give you half an hour in which to dress, and pack your bags. While I arrange matters in London I want you to rest in the quiet of the country. I have a car outside, and a gentleman who will act as an escort, guide, companion and nurse. You will be in safe hands, and I will be able to achieve much more if I know that you are in a place of perfect safety. I will be ready for you in half an hour. After speaking to your husband, and to Dr. Conway there will be nothing left for you to explain."

She opened her lips to speak. Cardby smiled, walked quickly from the room. He found Forbes and the doctor pacing the hall. Both men seemed more than apprehensive. For ten minutes Mick tried to explain the urgent necessity of removing Mrs. Forbes to some country sanctuary. He was still fighting the stubborn opposition from the doctor when a maid entered the hall.

"Mr. Mick Cardby is wanted on the telephone," she said. The youngster frowned, followed her into a side room. He raised the receiver, called out:

"Mick Cardby speaking. Who is that, and what's the big trouble?"

"You should know the voice," said Horace Mellery. "I'm just doing a friendly act, Cardby, and telling you that you're heading into danger. If you want that ace of spades delivered on your doormat you are doing your best to get it. Lay off this case and you might live. That's all. Good-bye."

CHAPTER VII

CURIOUS INTERVIEW

IMMEDIATELY he replaced the receiver Cardby hastened past the two men in the hall, pulled back the front door, walked over to the waiting car. His father was resting against a cushion, puffing placidly at his pipe.

"Anything the matter, sonny?" he asked. "Or is the party in full swing?"

"I came out to make sure that you were all right, Dad. That's all that was worrying me. Don't get out of this car, and keep your eyes peeled."

"Don't worry about me, Mick. I can stand this job for hours yet."

"Maybe you can. But I've just had a telephone call from the Boss and that's what brought me out. One of his boys must have been keeping tabs on the pair of us. At any rate, Mellery knew that I was in the house, and that could only mean that some guy followed us here, and a man was planted here before we arrived to cop sets on the house. That is why I wanted to know if the world was going well with you. If you see anybody prowling around grab him—but don't take any chances. Seems that when you're running in harness against the Boss you can't afford to take chances."

"All right, Mick. I'll take a look around in a minute. Any real news?"

"H'm, here and there. I've fixed for you to take Mrs. Forbes into the country. But since I know that we're being watched I don't think it would be safe for you to move her in this car. Leave it parked here for me, move along into Ealing, and grab an ambulance. See that it arrives here in about half an hour. I will not come out of the house with the woman. And once she is inside the ambulance I will leave the rest of it to you."

"But where on earth am I supposed to take the dame? I'm no hand at trips like this. After all, I've got a wife at home, Mick!"

"I'll square things with mother, and you can pick any spot in England where you're sure you and the woman would be safe. I don't want to know where you're going to, and I don't want to hear from you unless the matter is absolutely vital. After all, if I don't know where to find you I can't very well spill the beans to anybody. Keep your eye on the

Daily Wire, and as soon as things are straightened out, as soon as the coast is clear, I will insert an advertisement in the personal column saying: 'Dad. The harvest has been a great success.—Susie.' Then you can pack your bags, and get back to town. Is that all clear? I don't want to stay here any longer than I can help. Remember, for the love of Mike, that my name is Ernest Welling, that I am a neurologist. I'll leave you to pick any name you like. So long as it isn't Rudolph. I've never liked that. Best of luck, Dad."

"And I reckon you'll be needing your share of that. Sure you don't want me to stay with you? Handling the Boss and his party is no one-man job."

"Forget it! Your part of the work is much more important than mine. I am leaving you to see that the Boss and his side-kicks get nowhere near that woman. Wherever you are, Dad, start taking a second glance at the postman, the milkman, the waiter, the local police. Don't trust any of 'em."

"I'm going to have a happy time. Well, I reckon I have to pay the extreme penalty for having an impetuous son. Happy hunting, Mick. You'll need it."

"Don't worry yourself about me. If I was certain that you can give that woman complete protection until my end of the case has broken wide open I'd feel very much happier. Remember, Dad, that if you see any person hanging around these grounds I want you to crown him first, and talk afterwards. When your ambulance leaves here keep a close eye on the road behind it. Whatever else happens you must make certain that you are not being followed. If a tail fastens on you the whole outfit will be devilled up, completely wrecked. Got a gun with you, and all the gear you want?"

"Everything except my powder compact, and a hair net. Adios, Mick."

The youngster found Dr. Conway somewhat aggressive when he re-entered the house. So he turned abruptly to Angus Forbes as he remarked:

"Either you employ me, or you don't. Take it or leave it, but if you want me to handle this case I travel along my own path, or not at all. I am going to make one suggestion which might well be accepted. Instead of pushing up barriers against the removal of Mrs. Forbes I think Dr. Conway would be much better employed if he spent five minutes writing down a brief history of the case, indicating the course of treatment which he has been prescribing. The gentleman escorting Mrs. Forbes can then hand over the communication to the doctor he selects wherever he and the lady might decide

to stay. Surely, such a move would be more valuable than the reiteration of complaints and objections which I have already heard *ad infinitum*? The matter rests with you, Mr. Forbes."

"I can do nothing other than to accept all you have to say, Mr. Cardby. I appreciate that although my wife must receive skilled medical attention the whole issue must remain with one in your profession rather than with a doctor. I leave the whole matter in your hands."

"I appreciate your confidence in me. Dr. Conway, perhaps you would pen the necessary letter to the doctor? Mr. Forbes, I would like you to find out how much longer your wife is likely to be before she is ready to leave. For reasons of my own I have ordered an ambulance for her. That should be outside the door in a matter of minutes. It is not that her state of health necessitates the use of an ambulance. It is rather that I'd much prefer not to use a private car, particularly my own car. All the necessary arrangements have been made. All we have to do now is to wait for the vehicle—and for Mrs. Forbes. When both are ready I would like you to escort your wife to the ambulance. I have no desire to appear on the scene when she is leaving the house. Thanks."

It was shortly before ten o'clock when Mick Cardby finally left the house. His last half-hour had been rather more embarrassing. Forbes had fired a stream of questions concerning Mick's conversation with his wife, had seemed displeased when Cardby insisted that he never divulged information to a client while working on a case. The stockbroker had accepted the refusal with some show of annoyance, giving Mick the idea that he feared he was not getting value for the money expended. Cardby drove to his own home, explained that his father had left for the country on business. His mother never asked questions. She had not been married to a detective for rather more than thirty years without learning that odd jobs came his way. Mick ate a hurried meal, slumped behind the steering wheel again, and headed for the West End.

His first call was at a public house in Marylebone High Street. For a time he sat at a side table, facing a young, snub-nosed man. They did not speak, sipped their drinks without glancing towards each other. When closing time was called Mick stretched out for his hat, said casually:

"I'll be in my corner in Beaumont Street in five minutes. I've got the car with me. Don't keep me waiting. And don't follow me out just yet."

The appointment was duly kept. The young man said nothing as he opened the door, sat beside Mick in the car.

Cardby drove in the direction of the Outer Circle, talking as he travelled. His companion said nothing.

"I've got a job to do a bit later, Archie, that might turn out to be a two-handed business. That's why I came round to collect you. It might turn out to be fairly longdrawn, but I take it that you're doing nothing? So I'll give you a general idea of what's going to happen. There is a man named Mailey living at Kerne House, Brunswick Square. He knows plenty that I want to know. But I don't want anyone to know that I am paying him a visit. That would spoil everything. And I don't want the man to get to a telephone after I've seen him. I don't think, Archie, that this bird will want to talk. So I'm going to be tough with him. When the party is over there's going to be a small kidnapping job—and that's where you bounce into the arena. I dare not let the man loose after I've made him talk. We've got to find a comfortable spot where he can stay until I give the all-clear. Don't worry about the police end of the case.

"This man, Archie, wouldn't go near the police even if you'd attempted to murder him. So you're taking no risks in that way. Mind looking after him when I've finished? I'll see that you get full protection, and from your point of view I'd say that the job was easy money. Take it?"

"Surely," said Archie. He spoke with the ease of one accepting a smoke. "I know that you wouldn't land me into the mire, Mick, and the money end of the business doesn't worry me a hoot. I've done plenty of small jobs for you, and I've never yet had any cause to complain. Where do you suggest I should tuck this bloke Mailey when you're through with him?"

"Somewhere dead safe. I dare not take the chance of him giving you the slip. I know you've got a few hang-outs. Which one do you suggest?"

"Would he be the sort of bloke who'd raise a real song and dance?"

"Search me! I've never set eyes on him in my life. Still, if he starts to raise a complete merry hell you can always crown him. Don't let it upset your conscience if he happens to get somewhat hurt. It'll be O.K. with me!

"I understand, Mick." Archie smiled almost gleefully. He hadn't collected the snubbed and flattened nose, the split across his top lip, the scars on his knuckles by playing dominoes, or sitting knitting by the fireside.

"Do you happen to know this place, Kerne House?" inquired Mick. "I don't!"

"I know it from the outside. It's flats."

"H'm. That might make things easier for us. I don't intend to press the door bell, and I'd hate a floor waiter to announce me. This party is going to be a genuine surprise for little Mailey. I hope he likes it. Suppose we get round to your place, take a drink, and decide where we'll dump him. From what little I know of him I doubt whether you'd find him in his flat before midnight. Will that suit you, Archie?"

"Why not? I may be a damned bad host, but there's some beer in the place and I've got a bob to put in the gas meter. Let's be moving that way."

It was a quarter past twelve when Mick and Archie arrived at the corner of Brunswick Square. The pavements were deserted. Archie ambled by Cardby's side until he nodded his head towards the far corner of the street. Mick looked at the towering modern building with interest.

"The first job is to find out on which floor, in which suite, Mailey hangs out; the second job is to get to his room without the night porter informing him that we are on our way up. We'll need more than a slice of luck to manage it, but I'll chance anything once. Try to be casual."

Cardby pushed back the heavy swing door, strolled into the dimly lit hall as though he didn't know whether to buy Kerne House or whether to sell it. There was no porter in sight. Archie walked over towards the lift while Mick glanced hurriedly down the wooden board on the near wall. It seemed to him that the building must be riddled with flats. Some seconds passed before he saw what he wanted: "Sixth Floor. Mrs. Cartwright. Mr. Wheeler. Mr. Mailey. Miss Warren."

He pushed back the lift gate, pressed the button for the sixth floor. As they emerged they had difficulty for a moment in discovering their way along the scantily lit passage. Cardby was not distressed by the lack of light. The semi-darkness suited quite well. As they walked along he flashed a pencil point of light from a masked torch. Near the end of the corridor he found that for which he sought. In a small metal frame on the door was a visiting card, announcing baldly: Edward Mailey.

The youngster crouched down, tried to peer through the keyhole. He could see nothing. And no light showed beneath the slight aperture at the bottom of the door. He handed the torch to Archie, whispered softly:

"I don't think he is in. I'm going to use a twirl on this lock, and then we can wait for him inside. Keep an eye on the passage while I fix things. I don't want a waiter to drift into the party while I'm doing my stuff on that lock. It might take quite an amount of explaining."

He need not have worried. No sound was heard as he worked for a minute with the skeleton key. The door swung back silently. Instantly both men moved into the flat, closed the door behind them. For a time they stood immobile, straining their ears to pick up any sound of movement, of breathing. And they heard nothing. Mick decided that chances had to be taken. He pressed his thumb on the torch, pricked the room with a slight glim. They were in a small lounge. It was furnished uncomfortably in what passed for a modernistic style. Silently, Mick paced over the carpet, leaving Archie to hold the fort near the door. Cardby had no desire to find himself without some form of rapid and easy exit.

The bedroom he entered was empty. But one quick glance told Cardby quite an amount. A dressing gown was stretched over the end of the bed. A lounge suit was spread over a chair, together with a shirt and underclothes. He walked over to the wardrobe, threw back the doors, took a look at the contents. Then he examined the bathroom before returning to Archie. The youngster seemed quite pleased with the state of affairs.

"I think we're sitting on clover," he said. "Mailey took a bath, and changed into his glad rags. All we've got to do is to settle down with some patience until he returns from his festive evening. Things are running our way. Let's hope that they finish just as cheerfully. I want you to stand by that door, and let me know if you hear a sound of any sort in the corridor. I'm going to take a look through Mailey's clothes and odd belongings. But I don't think a man in his line of business would be likely to leave anything incriminating hanging about. But we'll try."

At the end of twenty minutes Mick had abandoned the search. He had just rifled the last pocket when Archie snapped his fingers slightly. Instantly, Mick beckoned to him. They entered the bedroom together, closed the door—but not entirely. They were only just in time. They heard the tongue of the lock click back, heard the snap as the electric light was switched on, then the tread of a light footstep. Cardby placed his hands on his hips, waited eagerly for the next move. Archie stood by his side with his fists balled. They did not have to wait for long. Footsteps sounded again, a hand slid through the opening door, pressed down on the switch, and a man walked into the bedroom. Immediately he was inside the room Mick extended a foot, pushed the door. He heard the man gasp.

"Good-evening, Mr. Mailey," said Cardby. "I've waited quite a while to see you. Step right into the office, and make yourself at home."

"Who are you?" asked the man, his voice high-pitched with fear. "What in hell d'you reckon you're doing here in my flat. Get out at once."

"Not after the trouble I've taken in getting in. Don't move towards that service bell, and keep away from the telephone. I don't want to hurt you—at the moment! You may take off your hat and overcoat. But don't be foolish, and dive into any of your pockets. My nerves are easily shaken, and I might do things hurriedly that you'd never know enough about to regret. Archie, help him off with his clothes. And if he makes a bad move let him have it. Mailey, be your age, and you'll live."

Archie tugged at the man's overcoat after he had flung the hat into the corner of the bedroom. Mailey gasped again, struggled for an instant to reach the bell. He winced as his arms were twisted, ceased to struggle when he saw the automatic in Cardby's hand. Archie ran experienced hands over the man's pockets, looked at the youngster, and shook his head.

"Sit down on that bed," said Mick "and get ready to do some talking."

For the first time he scrutinised the man. He was a typical gigolo. It amazed Cardby that a woman like Mrs. Forbes could have fallen for him. He had wavy hair, effeminate features, a dandified manner, mostly everything except what it needs to make a man. And the general effect, the sum total of his assets in the appearance line, were not enhanced by the fact that his face was pallid, his teeth were rattling, his limbs trembled, sweat beaded on his forehead, and he slumped on the bed like a sack of meal.

"Do you by any chance happen to know who I am?" asked Mick Cardby.

"I don't. Get out of my flat." The words were weak and wavering. "I don't know you, and I don't want to know you. You have no right to be in here."

"Maybe not. I'm not sure that you have either. I've come along to talk to you about a lady friend of yours, Mailey. You've got so many that you may have difficulty in remembering individuals, but this flame of yours will be easy to remember. I doubt whether you could forget her after the shakedown you took her for. I mean Mrs. Clara Forbes, of Ealing."

The man jerked back his head as though he had been struck. The pale face became more blanched, the quivering even more pronounced.

"Don't sit there as though you're an exhibit from Tussauds. You took that lady on a blackmailing ride that gave her a

year of hell. Well, Mr. Mailey, you arranged the shakedown. I have come here to arrange the pay off. I don't think you'll find much in common between the two. Make a start, and tell me just how you stand with the Boss. And don't try making any dummy passes, because I won't stand for them. Start with the whole history from the cradle to the grave, and don't cut the corners. I think I know all there is to be known so you'll stall or lie at your own risk."

"But you can't force me into anything like that. I don't know you from Adam, and I don't know the woman you're talking about. Now please go."

"Mailey, I know your end of the stick, and I know how you are fixed with Horace Mellery—the Boss if you prefer to fasten that name on him. I'm giving you due warning here and now. I have been very patient with you. I can't give you any more rope. Either you tell me all I want to know, or I'll tear your guts out of your lousy body. You won't find that as easy as putting the 'black' on frail women, and splitting the proceeds with the Boss. Do I get all the information I want—or do I collect you?"

Mailey stared at the youngster. He didn't like the ominously calm way in which the words were uttered, nor the placid expression on the face.

Cardby moved over towards the bed, slid the gun into his pocket, took Mailey by the shoulder with a grip that made the man wince with pain.

"I am not waiting any longer, Mailey. Do you talk, or do you take all that's coming to you? Because you've got to decide very, very quickly."

"But—what's the idea? I don't understand. Who are you in any case?"

"The name may be one that you have come across at some time or another. I am not exactly unknown to the man who employs you. It is Mick Cardby."

"Mick Cardby?" The man stifled a sob, whined: "Oh, my God! Mick Cardby!"

The youngster saw the man raise his head, saw the expression change. And Mick started to turn too late. Before he had moved more than a matter of inches he heard a cold feminine voice behind him exclaim caustically:

"So at last I've met the great, the one and only Mick Cardby. What a pleasure! And how pathetic for you. Elevate those hands, Mister Clever Cardby! I've got the drop on you and your boy friend, and I don't in the least object to giving the works to both of you!"

CHAPTER VIII

SUDDEN SURPRISES

EDWARD MAILEY looked at Cardby with mixed bewilderment, admiration and astonishment. The youngster's expression had not changed in the slightest, there was not the slightest tremor discernible, and as he raised his hands his lips parted and he smiled. Archie seemed to be accepting the entire episode as one would take a piece of cake.

"The voice," said Mick, "sounds a trifle hard and unmusical, but maybe the face in some measure compensates for those defects. Is it against the rules of the game if I take a look at it? Or are you so ashamed that you fear the shock might give me a permanent affliction?"

"Cardby, I've heard a lot about you," said the woman, "and I can tell you here and now that you're trying your favourite song and dance on the wrong person. When people tell you that you're tough I expect they're trying to touch you for some money. Teddy, don't sit on that bed like a corpse. Put a jerk into things, grab some wire, some rope, some string—anything in that line, and fix these two. I'm not trusting either of 'em."

"And from what I know of your Teddy," remarked Cardby, "I would not conscientiously advise you to trust him a helluva long way."

"I don't want advice from you, or from your dumb boy friend. All I'm planning on your behalf is a permanent black-out, a long, long silence."

"It is nice to meet a lady with ambitions. You should get quite a long way in this life—if you live. Unfortunately, there are serious doubts about that. May I turn round and take an eyeful of your staggering beauty or have you got ambitions along that line also? Don't think the apparition will startle me. In my business you get quite used to viewing the most astonishing things. And my dumb boy friend can take it on the chin, too."

"I don't mind you turning round so long as those arms don't start descending. If you move 'em you'll never move anything else except wings, if you're lucky enough to have them handed out to you!"

Mick turned slowly, looked at the woman in the doorway with insolent eyes, his glance starting at the hair, descended

to her feet. She bit her lips angrily as she followed the line of his gaze, snapped out :

"What d'you think I am—a prize exhibit in the show ring, or what?"

For a time the youngster said nothing. The girl was worth looking at. The Titian red hair glowed with a dull sheen, the green eyes were vivid, the features somewhat angular, but distinctive in their way, and the whole poise of the slender body spoke of confidence, and some breeding.

"I am no expert, sister," said Mick, "but I'd like to make a couple of suggestions. In the first place, a girl with your colouring should never wear a dress fashioned in coral pink. You should affect something more vivid. In the second place, I would strongly urge you to buy some new shoes. The brocade has worn heavily on those you have on, and it makes the whole outfit look a trifle cheap and untidy. Apart from those small items, I must confess that I can look at you without feeling sick."

"Thanks for the compliment. Teddy, don't fool about any longer. I'm not going to stay here all night. If you hadn't been such a damned fool you would never have walked into this tangle. If the Boss heard about it he'd put you in a place where you couldn't make any more mistakes."

"He certainly would," said Mick. "I thought myself that it was a most clumsy and amateurish affair. Poor little Teddy, I am afraid he was never meant to be one of the big shots in the crime racket. He's more at home steering fat matrons round a dance floor."

"And I won't take that line of talk from you or anybody else," snarled Mailey. The vision of the gun in the girl's hand had given him some new courage. Her lips curled derisively as she listened to his words.

"Boy," said Cardby, "I bet your mother would be proud of that speech. It would give her the news for the first time that she had bred a hero. The main trouble seems to be that whatever high opinion your mother might hold about you the girl friend of the moment doesn't share it. Take a look at the lady's face, and then you'll know just where you've missed the boat. Beautiful, stare at your boy friend, and sob. Every time I look at that gun wavering in your hand I appreciate that neither of you should ever have started in this racket. Just take a look at that oddly quivering hand, and then try to impress me that you're a tough dame."

The girl glanced once. And it was once too often! Before she could raise her glance to see the hand streaking towards her, the gun was on the floor. Mailey had crashed down on the carpet after taking a crushing right uppercut from Archie,

and she found her brilliant eyes looking into the small aperture of an automatic which showed no sign of wavering. Cardby smiled as he remarked :

“ Sister, you mean well, but you’re walking around with the wrong crowd. A smart kid like yourself should bear two things in mind. One, that when you chose your companions they should be able to take all that’s coming to them. Two, that when you try to look tough you only succeed in looking damned silly. Apart from those trivial facts, I think you’re grand. Archie, sit on Mailey’s bonce until he moves. Then crease him. Wonderful, take a first row stall on the bed. And remember that I’d hate to see your face mixed up with that mess that the hairdresser has fastened on you. Now, I think, we can talk with some degree of comfort. Take it easy, lady.”

The woman showed that in one direction she had some sense. She realised when the cards were stacked against her, knew when you can’t break down concrete walls with balloons. She drifted over to the bed with some show of elegance, settled herself down with an exhibition of comfort and neutrality. Then she turned a smile on Cardby that looked more like a searchlight. It grieved her to discover that the requisite effect was not obtained. The youngster took the smile as one draws pennies on empty bottles. It came the same to him. Since his mother had smiled over his cradle he’d always mistrusted that feminine lure.

“ Sister,” said Mick, “ don’t you think the time has arrived when you can say your piece without your boy friend dashing with his usual high speed to beat you to it? It might save you quite a lot of trouble if you became absent-minded and told the truth.”

“ You’re talking to the wrong person, young man. I’ve got a million and one faults, but squealing doesn’t happen to be one of them.”

“ You’re making an unpleasant bed for yourself. When little Horace Mellery wants people to talk he has his own way of handling them. In that respect he is not alone. The fact that you’re a woman makes no difference to me. You lost anything your sex might give you by way of protection the day you started running in harness with the Boss. I don’t in the least mind proving to you that the Boss is not the only person who can be tough. Do you talk, or are you waiting for me to start work on you ?

“ Cardby, I’m not at all worried. I’ve got no room for your sort, but I have heard enough about you to know that you wouldn’t manhandle any woman. So as far as I am concerned you’re talking to the air.”

"Don't be too confident. Archie, in a few minutes we'll take the pair of 'em for a short ride. Lady, for a few days you are going to have the distinguished honour of being my guest. Archie here will see that you don't feel too lonely. And, of course, you'll have your boy friend with you. By the way, where do you live when you're at home?"

"In the flat next door. Why? Thinking of providing an escort for me?"

"Yes, but not to lead you to that flat, Miss Warren."

"Eh? Who gave you my name? Has Mailey been shouting the odds?"

"No. But you plastered your name on the board downstairs, and I'm not entirely blind. Your man is starting to move, Archie. Throw some cold water over his face. I'm anxious to start moving before any waiter or porter starts breaking into the party."

Mailey came round with a shiver when the glass of water was poured over his face. Archie hoisted him to his feet, shook him like a terrier shaking a rat. The girl was smiling grimly. Mailey's discomfort seemed to be pleasing her. But the smile soon vanished when Mick gripped her arm, nodded towards the door, said to her:

"I want you to take me by the arm as we leave this place. Try to look a bit affectionate. And if we pass anybody on the way out and you speak to them you'll start something you'll regret for years. The same goes for you, Mailey. I'm not standing for anything like that. We'll go."

He jerked the woman's arm. She stared at him for an instant, then spat.

Cardby wiped his face with elaborate care, smiled as he said:

"I had appreciated long ago that you are a perfect little lady. Sister, your attempt to destroy that impression has meant nothing in my small life. Try it on the Boss, and maybe you'd find that he'd fall for it. He seems to me the sort of person who isn't used to mixing with human beings. Archie, we're ready. If that derelict hanging on your elbow makes any sort of a quick pass let him have it. I don't mind if he doesn't come round for a day or two. It's all the same to me."

Cardby switched off the light with exaggerated care, took the girl's handbag from her, remarking casually:

"Maybe I was born with a suspicious mind, but I don't think you're the sort who'd go around with nothing more harmful than a tube of lipstick and a powder compact in that bag. I'll give you a receipt for it later. Come along, little one. Rest on my manly arm and look pleasant."

Their exit was uneventful. They met nobody. Ten minutes later Cardby crossed Euston Road, turned left-handed

into Drummond Street, pulled up outside a dismal boarding house, waited for Archie to make a move.

"If this is your idea of a hang-out," said the girl, "I can't say that I've got much regard for your choice. I couldn't possibly stay here."

"I'm not leaving you to take a choice, sister," said Mick. "After all, the Boss doesn't treat people with every kindness. You know that."

"I know that he treats only persons who matter with kindness."

"You seem to have no mean idea about your own status, lady. Congrats."

"I am speaking of my sister, not myself." The woman sounded frigid. Mick watched Archie opening the door, thought for a few seconds about the woman's comment, decided that a little expansion on that piece of odd information might be useful, took another glance at her, and made up his mind that it was not wise to rush matters. He helped her from the car, followed Archie and Mailey up the well-worn steps, through the gloomy hall, and on through the murky darkness to the second floor.

Archie slid his hand into his pocket, pulled out a key, opened a back bedroom door, and turned on the light. Immediately they were inside the room Cardby pushed out the bolt on the door, waved towards the iron bedstead.

Mailey and Miss Warren sat side by side. He was disconsolate; she arrogant. Cardby walked over to the fireplace, lit a cigarette, stared at the pair for a moment before remarking with disarming ingenuousness:

"Maybe this place isn't quite so much the 'tops' as the one the Boss provides for your sister but you'll have to put up with it for the time being. Maybe you'll sleep with a better conscience than she has."

"There's never been a moment when she had cause to feel ashamed of her husband. After all, he is a man. And I can't say that about you."

Cardby struggled to retain his composure. He knew that he had struck a pay load. In the recesses of his memory he recalled an occasion when he had been told that Mellery idolised his wife.

"Surely," he thought, "there must be some way in which I can make use of this woman."

Blowing smoke into the air he remarked as though entirely unconcerned:

"Since he pretends to be fond of your sister I'd have imagined that he'd have provided her with a better place than the dump she's got."

The girl swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker. Colour flushed her face as she rose from the bed, smacked her hands on her hips, said :

"If you saw her place in Finch's Lane you wouldn't say that, Cardby."

"I've seen it, and I am still saying that it's a complete refuse dump."

Mick knew when the moment had arrived to quit. He ignored Mailey and the woman, turned to Archie said with emphatic intensioness :

"I'll leave the two birds with you, lad. Don't go to sleep, and look after 'em as though they're more precious than the Crown jewels. Early in the morning I'll send around somebody to relieve you. Until then, my friend, adios. And remember that if either develops ambitions about walking out you can let them have all you've got. Good-bye, people."

"To hell with you, Cardby!" snapped the woman. "I hope you get killed."

"Always the complete little lady. Angel, it breaks my heart to go."

"It is a happy moment for me. I hope you never see me again. Beat it!"

Mick bowed lowly, walked out of the room. Ten minutes later he walked into Curly's Club, nodded to Phil, smiled when he noticed Cash Mason and Fred Carter sitting at a corner table. They welcomed him with scowls.

"A pint of bitter," said Mick, winking at the barman. Then he turned to Mason, smiled affably, invited him to have a drink. Cash stared at the youngster, looked at his companion, remarked in a loud, acid-laden voice :

"I'd rather drink poison with a friend than the best drink with you."

"Very well said, if I may say so. From my slight knowledge of your many friends I'd imagine that poison would be the only drink they'd ever offer you. But I don't think you were ever meant to die that way."

"Cardby," said Mason, rising to his feet, moving towards the youngster, "I've had a word with the Boss about you. All I'm going to say is that you won't be troubling anybody for much longer. Enjoy your drink while you can. There aren't many more coming your way. Good health—you need it! Any certain kind of flowers you like, or aren't you particular?"

"Very particular, sonny. I'd like lilies for purity, violets for some unfortunate remembrances, the whole wreath to be crowned with a bottle of beer rampant. Give my love to the Boss when you see him, and tell him that whenever he wants

to plant that ace of spades on my doorstep it will be O.K. with me. You might remind him, at the same time, that I've been told that story many times before, and most of the people who developed sudden ideas along those lines finished up in a prison graveyard. Of course, he knows that's where he'll come to a final full stop, but a friendly reminder won't do him any harm at all. Good health."

Mason started to laugh. Carter joined in the small amusement. Said Cash :

" Listen to him handing out a line of complete baloney. Don't make me laugh too much. When the Boss hears what you said he'll split his sides."

" I'd rather have a split side than a broken neck. Well, give him my love, and tell Mrs. Mellery that she'll be hearing from me."

" Mrs. Mellery ? Watch your step, Cardby. The Boss is daft about the dame."

" So am I. One night I'll take her out for a while. It'll be a change for her to be with a man for a time. And you can tell that to the Boss."

Cardby drifted out of the club. He had achieved his purpose, had sown the small seed, and was content for it to spread. Mick had come to the conclusion that with a man like the Boss attack was unquestionably the most effective form of defence. The man wasn't used to having his hand forced, had played solitaire for so long that he'd forgotten what it was like to find an opponent holding a few aces. Mick drove rapidly to his office, having decided that it was scarcely worth while to go home.

He had the key in his hand, was stretching out towards the lock when a curious thought flashed through his mind. A few times before Mick had played " hunches." This time he decided that he'd rather enter the office by the side door in the passage way. Immediately he entered he walked through to the front door, pressed his thumb on a torch. A second later he was blessing the " hunch " that had saved his life. A small copper wire ran from the inner handle of the door to the wall at the side. The end of the wire ran down to meet a metal box resting on the floor at the foot of the door. Without taking another glance Cardby knew what he had missed. Anybody opening that door would have blown the building sky high ! And if any further proof were needed it rested grimly on the top of the box—just a single ace of spades ! The Boss was becoming serious !

For fully five minutes Cardby stared at the wire, the door, the box. A thousand thoughts were flooding through his brain. With a set face, with great deliberation, he walked

into his private office, dialled his home number. He waited for an appreciable time before his mother spoke.

"Listen, dear," said the youngster, "I telephoned you because I don't want you to get worried. Our office is going to blow up in a few minutes time, and I am going to perform a vanishing act. When you read the news in the papers don't start thinking that I'm hurt. I'll be all right. And don't expect to hear from me. If Dad talks to you tell him just what I said to you. I'm sorry, my dear, that I couldn't get back to that meat and potato pie while it was warm, but there are plenty of days to come."

"But, Mick, what on earth are you talking about? Are you really hurt?"

"Not a scratch. And nor has Dad. We are both in the clear. But just bear in your mind, dear, when you receive the news that both of us have probably passed out in the explosion. I rang you so that you'd have no cause to feel worried. Now be a good girl, and go to sleep. And while you sleep try to forget that I telephoned to you at all. And the rest is easy, darling."

"But, Mick, you haven't been in those offices for more than three months."

"We'll soon find some more, my dear. Now nestle into bed, and, whatever you do, forget that I telephoned. Dad is ace high, and so am I. But don't say that to anybody who starts making any inquiries. As far as you know we were in the office at the time when it soared into Covent Garden. Sleep well."

Mrs. Cardby smacked down the receiver with a heavy sigh, and a partial smile. There were times when it was trying to have a husband and son who performed the more acrobatic feats of life. But she was becoming used to it. She sighed again, retired to bed, certain that all would end well. That was the only way!

Ten minutes later the offices of Cardby and Son received a shock from which no offices would ever recover. Mick Cardby stood in a doorway, watched the building vanish, smiled without mirth as the bricks and glass flew round near him, and passed round the corner towards Southampton Row before the police or fire brigade appeared on the scene. As he walked he could hear the raucous bell of the brigade, wondered whether they would find the place in such ruins that even a tough guy couldn't be in any way recognised. Then he flagged a late cab, told the driver:

"Drop me on the west side of Hampstead Heath. There's no hurry."

He lit a smoke with a steady hand as they moved away.

CHAPTER IX

DANGEROUS ESCAPE

"AND what part of the Heath d'you want, Mister?" asked the cabby. "D'you know that it stretches a helluva long way at this time of the night?"

"Same distance in the morning, sonny! Just stop half-way up Haverstock Hill on the way, and I'll direct you from there. I'll rap on the window when I want you to stop—if the bus doesn't pass out under you before we get there. Frightened about your fare, lad? Grab this half bar."

Cardby handed over a ten shilling note, sat back, tried to plan out some form of campaign. By the time he was nearing Belsize Park Tube Station ideas were formulating. He rapped on the window of the taxi, called to the driver, told him, to the astonishment of the jehu, that the trip was over. Thankful that he had dismissed a lunatic from the cab the driver kissed the ten shilling note, swung round the taxi, and retreated gratefully.

Mick paced for a short time along the dark pavement, staring towards the uniform gateways as he walked. Then he sighted one with an unusual inscription on the top bar of the gate. It read:

"A. Lomas. No telephone."

The youngster mounted the stone steps, eyed the cards on the side of the door, pressed a button indicating the third floor. He had only to wait for a few seconds before a red-haired young man swung back the door, swathed his dressing-gown with him with a show of dignity, demanded haughtily:

"And who calls at this time? Have you the wrong address? Who is it?"

"The Queen of Sheba, and I've left Solomon outside," said Mick. "After which is there anybody with you because I want a solitary word in your pearly ear? In other words, Lomey, how are you, and how's your small world?"

"Step into the office, sir," said the man with the tousled hair. "I had no idea that they'd just called another meeting of the Cabinet."

"Nor me—until a few minutes ago. Let's get into the warm for a while."

"Lomey" led the way up the worm stairs into a bedraggled sitting-room. Oddly enough, once the door was closed the curious mannerisms fell away from him as water is supposed

to flee from a raincoat. He slumped into a seat on a divan that had been good many years before, pulled the dressing-gown closer to him, looked at Cardby, stared at the ceiling, said casually :

"Murdered somebody, Mick, or what sort of mess are you in this time ?"

"Nothing much to trouble about, lad. On a few insane occasions you've done me a good turn. D'you mind repeating the performance ?"

"Mick, don't insult me. Anything you say, anything you suggest, anywhere you want me to go—spill the beans, and I'll get dressed. What is it ?"

"Something that you've never tried before, Lomey. I am slipping my head into a place where Daniel would never chance his arm—or his dome. It so happens that it won't be a one-man job. I know that you'll try anything once. So I called to see you. Ever developed a great and overmastering ambition to get yourself seen off ? Because that's about the strength of the proposition I've come along to you with. Take it easy, and reflect upon whether you'd like to live or die. That's about the general lay-out."

"There's one thing I've always admired about you, Mick. Whenever you make a social call it means that either you're going to stop something, or you expect me to walk into a party. This time, I take it, you're so bursting with generosity that we can enjoy things together. Is that so ?"

"Roughly, Lomey. When you were at the Yard you'd try anything once. When that uncle of yours left you a packet of money the Yard lost one of the best lads they ever had. And you've been pining for excitement ever since. Well, Lomey, I've given you a few packets of thrills, but to-night I'm going to offer you one tied up with a cerise ribbon as a first prize."

"Hell, Mick ! And me not dressed ! Where is your sense of decency ?"

"I've wondered that for years, Lomey. Ever heard of the Boss—Mellery ?"

The red-haired man jerked back his head, looked towards his friend as though he'd thrown a stick of dynamite. Then he lit a cigarette, said :

"Even in my own dump I don't want to say too much about that bloke. You know, Mick, that I've never had the jitters, but handling anything that interests the Boss doesn't amuse me. I reckon that lighting a smoke with gelignite would be a pleasant way of passing the time away. Don't you ?"

"Sure, Lomey. That's all right with me. I'd just developed an ambition, and I had an idea that you might like to be in on it. Sorry to trouble you."

Cardby rose to his feet, patted Lomas on the shoulder, had got half-way towards the door when his host, grabbed him, remarked impatiently :

"And for the love of everything, Mick, what's the bee in your bonnet?"

"Not a bee little one. Just a wasp. I'm going to snatch his wife now!"

From the effect the words had on Lomas one would have thought Cardby had mentioned nothing about bees, wasps, scorpions, adders, or anything less trivial than a hamadryad. He shook his head mournfully, patted Cardby on the shoulder, opened the door for him, said as though reciting a dirge :

"I've heard about her, lad. I've heard about what the Boss thinks as far as she is concerned. I know what he's like to handle. I've got an idea that he's an angel with sprouting wings. I've got more than an idea that any person touching his wife would be a cross between a corpse and a fool."

"Then I'll take the middle course, and be both of 'em. Can I borrow your car, Lomey? That's all I want for the moment? And remember, by the way, that I'm dead. The office went up a few minutes ago, and I'm supposed to be in it. Stow that under your bonnet, and let it stay there. Now, will you give me your garage key, and I'll take your tank for an airing?"

Lomas fingered the cord on his dressing gown, looked round the roughly furnished room, stared appreciatively at the fire, took a second glance at Mick Cardby, and then swore softly as he said :

"Mick, you're a damned fool. You haven't got a chance. Why not shoot your brains out here in front of a comfortable fire? It's so much easier."

The youngster stood with his hand grasping the door handle.

"Lomey," he said, "I heard what you said the first time. That'll be all right with me. I want to borrow your car. Keep the rest under your hat. Just tell me where I find the garage key, let me have the ignition key, and the rest is easy. I won't be troubling you any more. Make it snappy. Lomey, I'm away."

"I'll get 'em both for you," said Lomas. "Hang on for a moment or two."

The red-haired man passed through to another room. For four or five minutes Cardby waited impatiently. He was stirring the dying embers in the fireplace with his shoe when the door swung back, Lomas reappeared. Mick's lips parted, and a slight frown creased his forehead. Lomas was wearing a suit. A scarf was loosely knotted round

his neck. In his hand he held two keys. Mick stretched out a hand to take them. Lomas smiled, said :

"Don't be daft, Mick! I know what the job's like that you're taking on. I am ready as soon as you are. When do you aim to start for this place?"

They stared at each other for many seconds without speaking. Cardby licked his lips, looked towards the ceiling, said with curious softness :

"Better stay here, Lomey. I get mad ideas, and I don't want to drag you or anybody else into 'em. Let's have those keys, and we'll call it a day."

"Be your age, Mick! I was a prize example of something white livered to say what I did. Want me to drive, or do you tell me the programme before we leave? Comes all the same to me so long as I know before we start."

Cardby licked his lips again, shook the man's hand gently as he said :

"I didn't think the Lomey I knew would let that man scare him. I was a fool to call. I've changed my mind. The bird is mine. My apologies, laddy."

"In that case," said Lomas evenly, "you don't have the keys, and you don't borrow my car. Either I join the song and dance, or we call it a day, Mick."

The youngster looked at Lomas with an odd smile on his face. Then he said :

"All right, Lomey. I want you to act as an unpaid chauffeur. Cut off your engine fifty yards before we get to that place in Finch's Lane, park the tank outside, and wait for Mrs. Boss and yours truly. All you've got to do then is beat it like hell in whatever direction you like. All clear?"

"And what happens to you when you get inside the place? Take it from me, Mick, that's no single-handed stroke for anybody to pull. I'd better bust in with you, and we'll leave the car to look after both of us. So what?"

"So nothing, Lomey! If you do your stuff as I want you to I'll only have to hand it to you as the bloke I've always known—just as a real lad of the village. I can handle the rest of it very easily. The only thing that worries me is to know that the getaway car is ready and waiting for me."

"You mean the hearse? I've never tried handling one yet, but I'll have a smack at it if that would amuse you. I don't reckon my small tub is big enough to take coffins. And that's what you're qualifying for, Mick."

"I seem to have heard that story before somewhere—even in the days when you were about with me. Well, I'm all set. If you're ready we're off."

"I didn't ask you, Mick, but I'm sure this is to be a spot of work right out of the ordinary. Otherwise you'd never try a stunt like this one."

"You're dead right, Lomey. This is a case that's become a personal affair. It means that either the big shot has got to throw in his hand, or I have. Since I'd rather be on a mortuary slab than throw in my hand to anybody I'm going to see which of us finishes on the dump. Understand me, Lomey?"

"Sure, I do, Mick. Let's just add that I'd do the same myself. We're off."

Nothing was said as they made their way to the garage in the mews. Both had plenty about which to think. Lomas was wondering whether he'd live long enough to keep his lunch appointment with the brunette from round the corner. Mick was thinking that he was still far removed from the hot meat and potato pie. They were in the car ascending the hill when Cardby started to explain where "Kelway," Mellery's house, was to be found.

"Don't bother about passing on the info.," said Lomas. "I know that place well enough. I could find the dump with my eyes shut. Whereabouts do you want me to leave the car? And which way are you thinking of cracking the house? We may as well know before we make a start."

"I want you to turn off your lights when you're about forty or fifty yards from the house, and coast along until you're about ten yards away. There's no need to advertise the fact that we're arriving. I don't quite know which way I'm going to bust the joint, but so long as you keep the car outside, and you're ready to make a start at a second's notice, that will suit me. I've got an idea that we may have to leave the scene of action in something of a considerable hurry, and I'd hate to find that your engine was stalling, or that you'd got a flat tyre."

"Needn't bother your head about such trifles, laddy. But I'm doubtful as to whether you'll leave in such a hurry. The dame isn't likely to run at your side as though you're a fond, eloping couple, and if you've got to carry her I don't think you'd be entering any sprint events. We're not far from the place now, Mick, so start to watch your horses. For the love of everything don't try taking any chances in that house. You can bet your bottom dollar that every burglar alarm, guard, night-watchman, and the like will be there. The Boss wouldn't sleep so soundly at night unless he was certain that nobody could disturb his beauty sleep. Any idea how to find the lady when you've cracked the crib, or are you trusting to luck?"

A wan moon was scudding through the clouds. Lomas

pulled the car to a silent stop. Throughout the mile drive they had not sighted a single person. Mick looked at the vague outline of the house, pressed his lips together. He knew that the crack "Kelway" was about the toughest job he had ever handled. As he opened the door of the car Lomas extended his arm, gripped Cardby by the shoulder with firm pressure, whispered :

"Best of luck to you, laddy. If I hear anything that sounds like a spot of trouble you'll be finding me on the doorstep. Be careful, Mick."

The youngster nodded his head, walked across the narrow pavement, spent a moment or two staring at the heavy gates of "Kelway." Then he walked along the pavement examining the wall. He had a shrewd idea that the gates might be wired with burglar alarms. The wall presented no sort of difficulty, and a moment later he vaulted over it, arrived between two massive shrubs. As he edged his way towards the house he looked for some sign of life. There was none. It was impossible to see any of the windows. His feet scrunched lightly on the gravel as he reached the drive. Now his memory of the earlier visit was guiding him. After a few yards he took a turn to the right, found himself near enough to the front door to see the dull outline of it. But that was not his objective. Trailing his hand along the wall he moved forward with slow, silent steps, fingering each window as he passed it. He could tell from the silence of his footfalls that he was no longer on the gravel drive, guessed that he was walking along a flower bed bordering the house. He passed round the front of the house, turned to the right, made his way towards the back.

After a second's deliberation he drew a miniature torch from his coat pocket. The glass was shaded down to a pencil point of light. Mick had learned from the real artists in crime how to make a "glim." The slight beam threw a prick of light on a window. Cardby examined the frame for a full minute. He was in no hurry. Many men, he knew, have died through trying to force the pace. It was fortunate for him that his scrutiny was slow and cautious. In the bottom left hand corner of the window frame he saw a loose fragment of wire jutting through a hole in the wood. Mick drew a length of adhesive tape from his pocket, tore off three lengths of about two inches each, moistened them with his breath, fastened them to the glass in the form of a crescent. Then he pulled a cutter from his pocket. An "old friend" had passed it on to him years before. The iridium tip on the cutter went through the glass like a knife passing through butter.

Mick cut a circle no larger than a tea plate, leaving the tapes at the top. Then he pressed gently against the glass. With a trivial crack it gave way, swung back on the adhesive tape as though acting on well-oiled hinges. Cardby slid the cutter into his pocket, held the torch with his left hand while he thrust his right hand through the aperture. He felt for the catch, and smiled again. His fingers were on the connecting wire to the alarm fixed at the base of the window. Almost as though acting after a complete rehearsal he withdrew his hand, pulled a small pair of clippers from his pocket, cut the wire, and then slid back the catch.

So far the going had been easy, the luck with him. Mick was wondering how long the fates were going to play the game on his side. He'd had enough experience of life to know that the gods don't remain permanently at one's side! He had no difficulty in raising the window, breathed a word of thanks to the man who had so well oiled the runners on the frame. Horace Mellery, the youngster knew, was a stickler for efficiency, and hadn't realised that extreme competence in a house can cut two ways. The youngster slid a foot over the sill. A moment later he stood inside the room, pulled out the torch again, and held his breath as he pressed the button. His shoulders were braced, his body tensed. Inside a house like "Kelway" one never knew what to expect, or from what quarter it might arrive! He found that he was standing in what might have been a morning room—except that one oak desk was the only piece of furniture to be seen. The youngster stifled his ambition to ransack the desk, paced over to the door, examined it with great care. He could see nothing which could give cause for fear. The handle twisted slowly in his grasp, the door came towards him without even the most trivial whine. He stepped out into a narrow passage; waited for an appreciable time for sound of movement. There was none. The place might have been completely uninhabited. Cardby was not too pleased with the silence. It seemed too good to be true, too silent to be natural.

Inch by inch he moved along the passage, heading towards the front of the house. Finally, his groping fingers found a balustrade. Now he was on much more certain ground. And still he could not understand why he had heard no sound on the ground floor. It did not seem reasonable that a man like Mellery, living constantly on top of a dynamite dump, should take so little precaution within his own house. Cardby started to ascend the stairs. He dare not use the torch, was trusting to instinct to guide him. On the first landing he stopped. The darkness was intense. Mick was wondering

in which direction to make his next move. Obviously, whichever way he took, he would have to chance his arm more than a little.

He made a sudden decision, calculated that his best plan would be to reach the second floor, bet on the fact that the domestic staff would be sleeping there, prod one of them in the ribs with a gun, and make them lead him to Mrs. Mellery's bedroom. He made the ascent slowly, gripped the banister rail the whole way. And still the silence was heavy, seemed to fill the house. He risked one quick flash from his torch, decided to take the nearest door. As he moved towards it a sound came to his ears with such force, with such a shock, that it threw him back on his heels.

There was a screech of brakes as a motor car pulled to a stop outside!

Cardby bit his lips. He was in a tough spot—and he knew it. For an instant he remained motionless. Then he paced along the corridor towards the front of the house, stopped before the window at the end of the passage, drew back the curtain. He had not been mistaken. He could see the headlights in the road below. Cardby felt a wave of hate rise under his collar as he thought of Lomas. What had happened to him? The gate outside crashed back, and a bell jangled through "Kelway." Then he heard feet scrunching on the gravel drive.

A door on the first floor opened. Cardby crouched against the wall. The front door bell pealed through the house. Somebody was moving in a room very close to Mick. The youngster plunged a hand into his pocket, pulled out an automatic. He had an idea that he'd be needing it before long. An oblong of light showed across the passage as a door opened. A man stepped out of the room not more than ten feet away from Cardby. Mick held his breath. But the man didn't glance his way, just raced down the stairs.

Cardby heard excited voices on the ground floor. He looked round for a spot in which to hide himself, decided that his best move would be to get into a bedroom. He was moving towards one of the doors when he heard something which stopped him in the middle of his stride.

"Well," shouted a man, "you'll have to do something about it damned soon. We're sitting on a hot spot, and I don't like it."

Cardby recognised the voice. The speaker was Edward Mailey, the man who should have been safely bedded down in Drummond Street! Cardby swore!

CHAPTER X

HECTIC MOMENTS

THOUGHTS careered through Cardby's head with sickening speed. What on earth had happened to Archie? How did Mailey come to be in Hampstead? Was his girl friend with him? The last question was soon answered when he heard the Warren woman raise her voice as she said:

"And I can tell you that I don't like this set-up either. We've handled a good many folk for you, but they don't usually come as tough as this Cardby bloke. The less I see of him the better it will suit me."

Mick moved nearer to the head of the stairs. The move was risky—but so was anything he did. The low, penetrating voice of the Boss sounded:

"Don't start getting worried about nothing, my dear. I don't think that Cardby is going to worry anybody after to-night. I arranged a small party for him. And if he attended it he won't cause a moment's anxiety to you again. I reckon he'll be telling his tale to the angels now."

"You mean—you mean that you've really rubbed him out?" The woman's voice was wavering. It sounded to Mick as though she were verging on the border of hysteria. And that did not fit in with his view of the woman.

"I don't know," said the Boss, "whether he's departed yet, but I've an idea that he has. I satisfy yourself, my dear, use this telephone, and see if you can get in touch with his office. I imagine that you might get a little surprise. Carry on. Don't stand there as though you're something that's been stuffed. I'll hear your tale of woe when you've made the call."

Mick heard the slight ring as the receiver was raised, wondered how the woman came to know his office number so well that she did not have to consult the directory. A smile creased his face a moment later when he heard the girl smack down the receiver, announce to the Boss:

"What the hell has happened? The operator says the line is dead, and there's been an accident at the place. What's it all about?"

"I imagine," said the Boss, "that we won't hear very much more about the great Mick Cardby. Well, he ran his own head into the trouble. I warned him that he was playing with something bigger than he could handle if he butted

into one of my parties. Now, I reckon, he's playing a harp, and feeling sorry that he didn't take my advice while the going was good."

"I can't understand at all," said Mailey. "He was with us an hour or two ago, and you can take it from me that there wasn't very much wrong with him then. I got the idea that if you threw a bomb at him it would bounce off. You really mean that he has been rubbed out for good, Boss?"

"I'd be ready to bet that way. And what's caused your state of panic?"

"Plenty. Cardby knows everything there is to be known about the Forbes affair, and from what I gathered the heat is on all of us more than it's ever been before. I feel inclined to scam until things cool down."

"Is that so?" The Boss sounded icily cold. "You, Mailey, will do just what I want done when I hand out orders. If you have got ambitions . . . 'ying you know that I'd be only too ready to lend y . . . ing hand."

"Wait a minute," said . . . "I don't think you realise just how things are fixed. ~~you~~ may have rubbed out Mick Cardby, but you can be sure that he wasn't the only one with some knowledge of the Forbes racket. His father is, at any rate, bound to know plenty since they always worked hand in glove. And when the old man finds out that his beloved offspring has got a cemetery ticket he'll be more anxious than ever to put the skids under all of us. I agree with Mailey. The time ha . . . come to scam, Boss."

"That's what you . . . ing to do. I want your sister to hang out in my pl . . . Hove until I've fixed everything at this end. There is no need for you or my wife to wait here for the fireworks. And there's no need to make any plans. I'll tell Ella to be ready in a quarter of an hour."

"And what about me going with the pair of 'em as a sort of bodyguard?" asked Mailey. "You can't leave Phil and Ella to go alone. It wouldn't be safe for them if old man Cardby really starts on the warpath."

"And I can't say that your presence with them would give me a helluva lot of confidence. Why, Mailey, you can't even look after yourself. Help yourselves to a drink, and I'll tell Ella to get ready. By the way, whose car did you use to get along here? I don't want one that's hot."

"We raised it outside Euston Station," said Mailey. "While you're seeing that Ella gets ready I reckon the best move would be for Phil to take one of your cars, follow me,

and pick me up after I've dumped the bus outside. I agree that it isn't very nice outside your place, Boss."

"That won't do, Mailey. I don't want you to go to Hove with the girls. That being so I think you'd better park the car somewhere a few miles away from here, and then get along to some hide-out. You can give me a ring later on, but be careful what you say. We can't take any risks. Phil, you can explain to me what has happened while Ella is getting ready. I'll be down with you in a minute or two. Mailey, you start on your way."

Mick heard the light tread of feet as Mellery started up the stairs. He couldn't work out the next move, found himself wondering what his father would do, puzzling over what had happened to Lomas. At any moment he expected the man who had departed from the second floor to return. Cardby heard a door open and close below him. That meant that the Boss was safely in the bedroom. Mick hesitated no longer, hurried to the window at the end of the passage, took a quick glance to see whether the frame was wired. It was not. He unfastened the catch, raised the window, looked at the walls on either side. The luck still ran with him. About four feet to the left of the window was a drain-pipe. The distance was too great to be stretched. It meant a jump from the sill, a sudden grasp for the pipe that might, or might not, succeed. And if he didn't grip the pipe it would be just too bad. Below the window was a sheer drop of nearly thirty feet!

But there was no time in which to hesitate. Cardby flung a leg over the sill, eased his way through the window, remained poised for an instant as he tried to judge the exact distance away of the dim drainpipe. Then he flung himself forward, teeth clenched, body taut, both hands outstretched. The right hand fastened on a staunchion, the left slid round the pipe. Mick winced with pain as one hand commenced to slide, and the flesh burnt from the friction of the metal. He dug his knees into the pipe, tried to prevent the downward slide from increasing in force. He slid for a couple of yards before he was able to gain a real check. His forehead felt a little damp. Without pausing as he reached the ground he cut round the corner of the house, headed speedily towards the wall. Suddenly he dived behind a shrub. He heard the whine of a car engine starting. That, he guessed, meant that the nervous Edward Mailey was on his way with the stolen car. He could see the headlights as the car moved. Then he waited no longer, raced across the garden, jumped the wall, looked both ways for Lomas and the car. For a moment he couldn't distinguish anything—until he saw the

faint blur of darkness some twenty-five yards away. Cautiously he moved towards it, and as he advanced he recognised the car.

"All right, Lomey," he whispered. "This is Mick. How'd you miss that car?"

Lomas opened the door for Mick to enter, smiled as he said softly:

"I'm a quick worker, laddy. I smelt trouble when I heard that car coming. So I made a fast effort, backed the car to the edge of the heath, and hoped for the best. I didn't use the lights, and I reckon the folk in the other bus were too excited to notice me. I dare not drive back to stand outside the house so I pulled down here. I knew that you'd find me all right. But what'n hell is all the big song and dance about? A crazy gang?"

"Not likely, Lomey. They're a damned sight too sensible to suit me. Now we've got to do some quick thinking, and fast stepping. I garnered enough hot news inside that dump to last me for a long time. An hour or two back I collected a couple of Mellery's right-hand assistants. I left them with a pal of mine at a place in Drummond Street, Euston, told him to hold them until I came back. Lord alone knows what's happened to the poor lad, but his prisoners were the ones who just arrived in that car. They must have creased him, but the kid knew most of the answers, and I can't see how they would manage to get away with it. I'm worried to hell about him, Lomey. I know the kid is no quitter, and they'd never square him."

"Sounds as though we'd better find out what's happened to him, Mick."

"My trouble is that I can't make a move that way, lad. I'll give you the dope, and then you can see the fix I'm in. The Boss is sending his wife and her sister right away to some spot he's got in Hove. I want to tail after them until I can pull a fast stroke. So I daren't leave here, and I need your car since they're travelling by road. Any bright suggestions?"

"H'm, it doesn't sound like everything that opens and shuts. If you know the address at Hove we could attend to your pal first, and then beat along to Hove as soon as we have seen the right things done to him."

"That would have been like falling off a roof. But I don't know the address, and I dare not take the chance of missing the two women when they make a move. Wait a minute, Lomey. My head is beginning to get back into gear. Turn on the light on your instrument board. I want to write a brief note. As soon as you see a policeman while

we're tailing the car from here slow down for a moment, and I'll see he gets the note."

Cardby pulled out a pencil and paper, printed in block letters :

" WOUNDED MAN IN SECOND FLOOR BEDROOM DALY'S BOARDING HOUSE DRUMMOND STREET EUSTON. PLEASE NOTIFY EUSTON POLICE IMMEDIATELY."

" Unless the copper is a complete nitwit that note should fix things," he said. Carefully he opened the door of the car, picked up a large piece of stone from the gravel path, wrapped the note round it, placed it in the pocket facing him. Mick smiled again, seemed more contented as he said :

" And I think our best move, Lomey, is to back this car on to the Heath about fifty yards farther down the road. Take it so far back that their headlamps won't beam upon us as they pass. After that I'll put faith in you as a driver to see that we don't lose them. Don't get too close. I don't want them to get panic-stricken, and turn back. Are you fixed ?"

" Surely. I see the general idea. But I can't see where you're going to finish with this outfit. What d'you mean to do en route, Mick ?"

" I can't really tell you, lad, until I've got some idea of who is in the car with him. Somehow I can't see the Boss sending them on a sixty mile journey without a pretty adequate escort. But I mean to get hold of his missus. Once I have my mitts on her I can talk terms and conditions. The Boss might be left with an ace of spades in his hand, but I'll be sitting with the other three aces. And that'll be some sort of weapon."

" H'm, think Mellery would be so fond of anybody as that, Mick ? I' don't."

" From what I've heard I'm sure I'm right. With the Boss I reckon his affection for his wife is a form of mania, or may be playful conceit."

" Well, it's your party after all, Mick. I'm only the unpaid chauffeur. As far as I'm concerned I'll follow 'em from here to Inverness—or until the petrol runs out. I've lost my night's sleep in any case."

" Which reminds me—how are you fixed for petrol, Lomey ? I've been caught that way once or twice myself in the painful past."

" I've got six gallons in the tank. That will do for a hundred miles."

" Splendid. We won't want more than that. Move the

tank along, Lomey, and let's start this vanishing act. They might be out of the place at any minute now. Keep your eyes peeled for a ditch at the side of the road."

A couple of minutes later they were standing well back on the Heath.

"While we're waiting," said Mick, "I'll tell you what happened in the last twenty-four hours, and then you'll be able to see the exact lay. It might help me for you to have the dope because if anything has happened to my pal Archie at Euston I am the only living person with the genuine information. Now the whole business really started in this way. . . ."

Five minutes later Mick concluded by remarking: "That's a very rough and brief outline but it's enough to give you the general idea. Have you got it clearly bedded down in your dome, or have I mystified you?"

"No, I think that we're all at attention and taking notice. Hold your horses, Mick somebody has just turned on the porch light at the house. Looks as though the procession is about to begin. Stand easy."

Lomas was right. Shortly afterwards the waiting couple saw the beam of light rising above the wall surrounding "Kelway" as motor car headlamps were turned on. Then they heard the rising purr of a powerful motor. The youngster listened to the engine note, and frowned slightly as he said:

"That's a real tank they've got, Lomey. I hope to the lord that the man at the wheel doesn't smack down his foot, and leave us standing."

The former Yard man threw back his head and laughed.

"I'll chance that without worrying a single grey hair into my head," he said. "The night is dark, the road is a bit slippery, and I can do ninety with this car. If the driver can beat me under those circumstances I will raise my hat, wish him luck, and call him a driving miracle, regard the car as something never built by human hand. I should worry about it, Mick!"

"You've slobbered a bibful Lomey. I'm content. Here they come! Don't move until they've passed us. And leave off the lights until we reach the edge of the Heath or are on the road. If they saw a glim burning on the Heath that would throw a complete spanner into the works."

The car swung slowly through the gate of "Kelway," turned immediately for the south. Using sidelights only, Lomas was about fifty yards behind when the leading car turned into High Street. Neither man spoke. Both were tensed. So much was at stake. Some time afterwards they

were nearing Vauxhall Bridge when Mick touched Lomas on the elbow, said to him :

“ Take it easy, lad. There’s a policeman on the corner.”

The constable stared at the car with sudden surprise as the stone and note struck him on the leg. By the time he had recovered his breath, and was ready to remonstrate, the mysterious car was at the far side of the bridge. Cardby’s effort was not in vain. Less than three minutes afterwards the Euston police had received news of the odd note, and immediately a detective was heading for the house in Drummond Street.

The driver of the leading car was in no hurry. The pace was steadily maintained at around twenty miles an hour. Mick was feeling relieved as they passed through Redhill. There had been no indication that their “ tailing ” had been noticed, and a third of the journey had been covered.

“ This,” remarked Lomey, “ is a bit too good to be true, Mick. I don’t think I could drive for nearly thirty miles without knowing that I was being followed—particularly since the roads are empty.”

“ Maybe not, lad, but you’ve got to remember that we’re on the Brighton road, and it isn’t unusual for people to head this way at curious hours. So don’t start developing attacks of pessimistic apprehension. I’m still worried about poor Archie at Euston. If anything serious has happened to him somebody has got to go through the loop. He was a straight kid, and always played the game with me. Tell me, Lomey, have you ever had anything to do with this mob ? I mean apart from having a slight knowledge of ‘em ?”

“ Nothing, Mick, and I can’t say that I’ve ever developed any ambitions along those lines. Any particular reason for asking, or is it curiosity ?”

“ Not quite. I have an idea the moment might arrive when the fact that they don’t know you could be quite useful. After all, I’ve got no desire to crash into the limelight unless I am certain that the snatch will be a complete success. There’s no point, Lomey, in kidding people that you’re dead if they can get away to spread the royal that you’re still very much alive. I wonder how the old man will take it when he learns that his beloved office has taken a trip skywards.”

“ Knowing him as I do, Mick, I imagine that you’re going to walk into a hot family discussion. What about all your files, your documents ?”

“ They won’t come to any harm. I smacked them into the safe before I blew the place up. I knew the explosion wouldn’t open the safe, and I knew that fire couldn’t injure

the contents. So I've got no worries on that score. Wait a minute, Lomey. I think that man in front is beginning to realise that he is being followed."

There was every reason why Mick should make the comment. As they entered Handcross the driver of the first car turned off the Brighton road, steering left handed into the minor road leading to Balcombe.

"What do we do now, Mick?" asked Lomas, "You can bet the bloke has pulled that one to see whether we'll follow him off the main road."

"We'll have to take the chance. I thought the luck had been with me for too long. Just plod along behind him, and we'll wait for the showdown to arrive. I don't think it'll be postponed for much longer."

But they passed uneventfully through Balcombe. The car made the turn for Haywards Heath, and it was a mile farther along the road when the unexpected happened. Cardby and Lomas heard a loud report. Instinctively, both men ducked their heads, certain that a bullet was winging towards them. Mick watched the car ahead, saw it swerve and wobble on the road.

"They've blown a tyre," he announced. "Hell, now they've got to stop."

"And what in hell do I do now?" asked Lomas, pressing his foot on the brake. "I can't stay miles behind 'em when they're stationary, can I?"

"No," said Cardby abruptly. As he spoke he rose from his seat, forced himself into the back of the car. There he crouched on the floor as he instructed hurriedly: "They don't know you, Lomey, and this might be the big break that I'm waiting for. Go along to their car, and ask them if you can help them at all. Tell them you're alone, and are on your way to Brighton. Then you can find out just who is in that car. I'll keep an eye on the proceedings, and will cover things for you. Try to appear very casual, but don't let any of them get near this car. Good-luck."

"My oath!" exclaimed Lomas. "I'm thinking, Mick, that I'll be needing plenty of it. Don't move from the back unless some really serious trouble starts. I can usually look after myself fairly well."

The youngster pulled the automatic from his pocket, peered over the top of the seats to look at the car twenty yards away. Lomas opened the door, placed his hands in his pockets, strolled slowly along the road as though utterly unconcerned. Cardby saw someone clamber out of the first car, start moving forward to meet Lomas. The man had a torch in his hand, flashed it upon Lomas. Mick could hear the distant mutter

of voices. He pointed the automatic to cover the man with the torch, licked his dry lips and waited. He expected all hell to break loose at any moment!

CHAPTER XI

MORE TROUBLE

THE time seemed to pass with interminable slowness as Cardby watched the scene through narrowed eyes. It consoled him to notice that Lomas still held his hands in his pockets. There are moments when such trivial matters can achieve dimensions of real importance. But Mick's gun hand did not waver, nor did his gaze move far from the man facing him. At last Lomas turned slowly, walked back towards the car. As he passed the window he remarked casually, and in a whisper that could not have carried:

"Two women and two men in the car. The driver makes five all told. I'm lending him a jack for a moment. I think they're suspicious. Watch your step, Mick, and see that the bloke doesn't pull a fast one on me."

He had struck a match as he was talking, lit a cigarette, and strolled round to the tool kit at the back of the car. Seconds later he walked down the road with the jack in his hand. Cardby was becoming troubled. Who were the other two men in the car? Had the Boss decided to take the journey as a personal escort? The thought was not pleasing. Mellery's presence would make things more awkward. No other person moved from the car as Lomas and the man worked on the spare wheel. One other fact was obtruding itself on Cardby's mind. The car ahead was a luxury model must have cost the best part of two thousand pounds. Was it conceivable that a chauffeur driven vehicle of such character should be abroad at night without a jack? Mick thought the answer was not far to seek.

He was grateful when Lomas straightened up, took the jack, started to walk back to his own car. He had not travelled far when the other men called him back, spoke a few words. Cardby saw his friend shrug his broad shoulders before he moved away again. Lomas seated himself behind the wheel, muttered as he pressed the self-starter:

"Keep well bedded down, Mick. I am going to pass that car, and I don't want you to be seen. Pull that rug over yourself, and stay dumb."

The youngster crouched on the floor, dragged the rug over

his body. He had known Lomas for years, could trust implicitly in the man's judgment. They were not more than a hundred yards beyond the car when Lomas said :

"They asked me if anybody was in the car with me. I said I was alone. I don't think the story went down well. At any rate, the man gave me more than a pointed tip. He said he hated people driving behind him at night, and would I mind travelling on as there were one or two small matters he had to attend to before he continued the journey. I couldn't argue without blowing the lid off the whole issue. So here I am. I think I'd stay in the back for a little longer, lad. Take a peep through that back window, and see if they are following us. I don't think they will."

Cardby took one look and then emitted a low whistle of astonishment.

"You'd be backing the wrong horse, Lomey," he said. "They are not more than a couple of hundred yards behind and I reckon the man has got his foot down. He seems to be overhauling us. I wonder what the big idea is?"

"Why ask me? I'm only here to do as you say, Mick. So what is the verdict?"

"Keep travelling at the same pace. Treat everything as though it means nothing in your small life. If they get much nearer to us they're bound to show their hand one way or another. And after that we won't be buying a pig in a poke any more. If the bloke gets too near, if he tries to double bank us, I'll dip down low and you bellow out to ask why the hell he's getting so near since he isn't the only one who dislikes being followed. Don't mind cursing a little. It might give an air of truth."

"I can do that without any effort whatever. How far are they from us?"

"A little more than a hundred yards. Stick to the same pace, Lomey. Don't let 'em think that your nerves are shaking under you. If they imagine that you've got the jitters they'll do more than smell a rat. They'll start hunting one instead of scenting it. Sing as you go, and we'll wait."

"I know you never developed nerves, Mick, but has it occurred to you that one of the blokes might start popping a pea-shooter from the back?"

"I've been expecting that for the last half-mile, Lomey. If they try it I'll burst one of their front tyres just to show them that tyres can quite easily burst fore and aft. I'm not at all sure that the driver of the car isn't under the impression that you put a bullet into that tyre a mile or so back. They're not more than fifty yards away now. I'll tell you what we'll do. When you get into Ditchling look out for a petrol filling

station. It doesn't matter whether it is closed or not. Just stop there and we'll wait to see what game our boy friends intend to play".

" Snooker with bullets, Mick. I get premonitions at times. This is one."

" I've never been seriously hurt yet by a premonition so I don't very much bother about 'em. You can tell me something much more important than this business about auguries, and beware the Ides of March stuff, Lomey. I reckon you must have seen photographs of the Boss many times. Did you get near enough to that car to see whether he was one of the passengers?"

" I couldn't see very clearly, Mick, and I dare not scrutinise the folk without starting a row, but I'd say that he was not among those present."

" I hope you're right. His absence would simplify things a bit. I don't want to meet him until I'm ready for a final round-up, a last showdown."

" Or until he decides that he is ready for one or the other of 'em, eh?"

" You're a nice, cheerful little fellow to have around the place. Put your foot on the gas for a while, Lomey. I have an idea that they might try crowding us before we can reach Ditchling. And that wouldn't suit me."

" Nor me. I like plenty of scope when I'm driving. So here we go, lad."

The car jumped forward, and as the pace increased the car behind burst into a flow of speed. Mick smiled grimly. It began to look as though the gloves would be taken off any minute. The youngster was not unduly concerned. Playing possum for prolonged periods was not his idea of work or amusement. When they arrived on the outskirts of Ditchling not more than ten yards separated the two cars. Cardby issued another request, said:

" Give the people behind a real shock, Lomey. Let them get nearer to us. Then wait until you see some petrol pumps, smack out your hand, and pull your brake. If they hit you I'll pay for the damage. In any event, it'll give you plenty to say about their damned bad driving if they happen to stop. Don't be afraid that your back bumper might get dented. Worse things happen at sea, and we're not even at sea yet. There are the pumps. Ready?"

Mick held on to the door handle as he crouched lower in the back of the car. An instant later the car shuddered as the foot and handbrake were applied. At that moment the car rocked again as it was struck from the rear. Instantly, Lomas flung back the door, jumped out, shouted loudly:

"What the hell d'you reckon you're doing? Want all the road, or have you gone mad? I thought you wanted to be alone. Well, get to hell out of here, and see that I'm left alone, or you're walking into trouble in large bundles. You lousy piece of work! Call yourself a driver? And this is what you do to me after I've given you a helping hand. Go and shoot yourself!"

Cardby grinned appreciatively. Lomas was no novice when the time came to stage an act. He thought the final effort—"Go and shoot yourself"—was an ironical comment at its best, mostly because Lomas was expecting a bullet to come along with his name and address on it at the moment he spoke! Cardby bent ready for a sudden spring. He had no idea which way the cat was going to jump. He heard the other car slam, heard an oddly even voice remark with bitter venom:

"Don't talk too loudly out of your turn, brother. I am not the sort who can take that line of bull without getting a bit peeved. And when I get annoyed it ain't like upsetting an ordinary person. Why did you stop?"

"Because I wanted to pick daisies by moonlight. I get gripped by whimsy at times. But remember that in those moments I'm very emotional, and am apt to do things I'd never do at any normal time in my life. The doctors always said that in such moments I have marked homicidal tendencies."

Mick was enjoying himself. Lomas certainly knew how to say his piece!

"I wanted to know why you stopped, and I'm not standing for any rubbish like the tack you're trying to hand out. Well? You heard me the first time."

"I'll hear the other side of the record if that's how you're feeling about life in general. What's wrong? Have your passengers been troubling you, or is it that you are missing your mother very badly?"

"Listen, punk, and learn something that might do you a bit of good. You are kidding yourself that you're talking to some sort of sap. For the good of your own health get that idea out of your brainbox. When I ask questions I either get answers, or the other bloke gets a one-way piece of paper. The next questions he has fired at him, don't come from human beings. And then he can stall with the answers if he wants to. Follow?"

"Surely," said Lomas, with calculated insolence, "you mean that you make a mess of his car, and then give him the money to take a single fare on the railway. I'd have to be a mug if I didn't understand your meaning."

The silence became uncomfortable. Mick tightened the grip of his index finger round the trigger. He didn't think the silence would last long.

"Brother," said the man with the menacing voice. "Don't try to load me with a line like that. I wasn't born yesterday, and I know that you're not so dumb. Just what is the big idea festering in your brain? Tell me that, and then I'll decide what I'm going to do with you. Make it snappy."

"Go to hell, and take your moth-eaten chariot with you. The next time you're on the road you might meet a bloke who doesn't like you."

Lomas stepped back a couple of paces, rang the night bell on the garage door. The move seemed to take the other man by surprise. He stared, said nothing as Lomas walked back to face him. There was nothing nervous about the man's movements. He gave an unconceited impression of confidence.

"And why do you want the garage man at this time in the morning, sonny?"

"Because, my babe in arms, that is what garages were first built for. Why did you want that jack away back down the road? Because you were feeling lonely, and wanted to see a friendly face? Fade out into the night, lad."

"I will when I'm ready. All I've got to say to you is this: Follow on my heels any more, and I won't be arguing. There'll be an untidy corpse strewn somewhere on the road between here and Brighton. It'll be you!"

"Nice amiable little fellow! Do you behave with the same degree of courteous consideration when you're at home, or are you just producing your party manners at the moment? It is a pity that your mother can't see you and listen to you when you're at your best. She'd love it!"

The door of the house at the side of the garage opened. A sleepy-eyed man with tousled hair poked his head out. Lomas turned to the other man:

"Would you like to have a talk with the garage man in case you decide that he's another person you don't like, or would you rather find someone a bit bigger to handle? If you'll forgive my intolerable rudeness I'll have a word with him while you push off on your way. I'd hate to detain you, and I don't think you've impressed your passengers as a hero. 'Bye."

"What d'you reckon you want?" called the man standing in the doorway.

"Civility from the gentleman just getting into his car, and a small spot of service from you," said Lomas. "Sorry

to yank you out of bed, mate. I couldn't help it, but I've run into a small amount of bother."

Mick heard the gears engaged on the other car, heard the slight whir of the wheels as the motor moved away. Then he sat more erect so that he could take a look around. Lomas smiled cheerfully, beckoned to the man in the doorway. He shuffled forward with no real show of enthusiasm, asked :

"Don't you know what you want when you pull a bloke out of bed?"

"I do. I want to use your telephone for a moment, and I'll give you half a dollar for the privilege of using it. Ain't that worth jumping out of kip for? I've dreamt for years about collecting money that way."

"Suits me," said the man. "Come along, and I'll hand it over to you. And let's be seeing that half dollar before we get any farther. On this road, mister, you meet some curious coves. I'm not saying that you're one of them. But you never know, and I've made a few mistakes before to-day."

"What's the big idea?" asked Mick, clambering out of the car. "Why the sudden desire to have an early morning chat with the girl friend, Lomey?"

"That's easy, Mick." Lomas lowered his voice as they followed the man into the garage. "We dare not follow them now without causing a real basin of trouble. If they sight us again all the good we might have done will be blown up to the high heavens. I've got a description of the car, the registration number, and a description of the driver. What's more, much more, important is that I know the police at Brighton well. If I have a word with them, tell them that I'm more than interested, they might do us a good turn by tailing that car when it reaches Brighton. That should be in about half an hour. They can be very discreet about it. There's no need for them to advertise that they've got any interest in the cab at all."

"Lomey, I raise my hat, and likewise genuflect. Go right ahead, lad. I'm grateful that there is somebody on this trip with something other in the head than blood and dandruff. I'll sit in the car and await the verdict."

It was not long before Lomas returned. He was rubbing his hands as though well pleased with life, sank behind the wheel with a sigh, said :

"All clear, Mick. We can take our time over the trip. It'd be much better if we didn't arrive for another hour. So we'll stop down the road, and have a gentle smoke. I've fixed things at Brighton. They told me that at this time in the morning, with the details I gave, they'd have no trouble at all in keeping tabs on it. I said that the most important

thing was that their surveillance should not be noticed. But those boys know their stuff and you can leave them to it. In any case, there was nothing else for us to do. So that's that. I've squared the garage man so we'll do a drift."

A quarter of a mile farther along the road Lomas drew to a stop, and both lit cigarettes. Mick tapped the other man's shoulder affectionately.

"I must say, Lomey," he remarked, "that I enjoyed your performance along the way more than I would a good meal—and I could do with one of those at the moment! You may be a retired man of leisure these days, but you haven't lost anything of the stuff it needs to make a good split. Pity you were ever left that money, lad. It would have been better for the Yard if that relative had thrown the lot into the dust-bin. Oh, well, we can't have everything, and I suppose you get some happiness out of it all."

"Honestly, Mick, I'm not so sure. There are times when I walk round my flat in circles and wonder what the hell I am doing there. A life like yours would suit me a lot better than being an independent bloke."

"I shouldn't worry yourself about that angle of life, Lomey. There is a seat in our office for you whenever you want to lay both your mitts on an odd spot of excitement, and draw some cash at the same time. Remember that."

"I will, Mick, and thanks very much. Stupid thing for one man to say to another, but I've always envied the way you've gone through life, taking things in your stride, and living every minute of it. I've admired it, too."

"Trying to stage a sob sister act, lad? It isn't like you at all. If you see a stall on the way to the police station I am prepared to pay for hot dogs, ham sandwiches, or what have you. I think it would be better for us to arrive at the place after the people have bedded down for the night. They are certain to stay up for a time in case you are following them."

"Believe me, Mick, I am quite positive that one of 'em will stay up all night whether they think they're being followed or not. People like that don't like to doss down for the night unless they've got a boy friend prowling somewhere about the premises. I reckon that if the Brighton police can give us that address our trouble is only just starting."

"You're not alone with that thought. When we get into Brighton I am going to put through a call to the police at Euston in case that copper telephoned after my note had shaken him. I'm still very worried about young Archie. They ought to have plenty of news about him by now."

They finished their smokes, moved slowly along the road

to the coast. Both were silent for a considerable time. They had plenty about which to think. Occasionally, Lomas glanced at Cardby from the corner of his eye, and each time he shivered slightly. He had known Mick for years, and his mind was flooded with many thoughts as he looked at the firm set of the jaw, the compressed lips, the slight frown on the forehead, the narrowed eyes. All those things told Lomas one thing. Somebody was heading for genuine trouble in rather more than generous quantities. And he smiled at the thought that somewhere in the picture he would be a central figure. Life began to seem well worth living!

"Here's a stall," said Mick, as they ran down towards the clock tower. He was right. The man behind the counter did a good trade for nearly ten minutes. He wondered whether his sudden callers had had a meal earlier in the week, doubted whether they had ever been fed before at all. But the men walked over to the car with satisfied smiles. They felt more cheerful.

"And now," said Mick, "do we telephone Euston, or do we call the local police station first? I'd rather make that London call, Lomey."

Lomas nodded his head, Mick collected a few odd coins from the man with the coffee stall, passed over to a telephone box. He was not away for long. But when he returned Lomas had too much sense to inquire about the news. He bought a cup of black coffee, watched Cardby as he stared at the star-ridden sky. There was an understanding between them which exceeded the demands of polite speech. Lomas chewed another sausage, awaited events. It seemed ages of time rolled into a few minutes before Mick threw the remains of the coffee down his throat, said with ominous quiet:

"Lomey, I think it would be better if you took the car, and beat off back to London. I've never left a pall in a mess yet, and you'll be in a beauty if you stay with me. Start going, lad, while the going's good. I'll get a car to drive, and I'll look after the rest of the party myself."

"Get a hand on yourself, Mick. Coffee doesn't usually take you that way. I started when the first whistle blew. I'll stay to the finish."

"Nice of you, Lomey, but you don't stay with me. Sorry. I shouldn't have called you in when I did. It wasn't fair. I'm sorry. Take the car, Lomey."

"But you are sure to want a helping hand, Mick, and I'm here. That's all."

"Lomey, what I'm going to do is more than outside the law, and I don't want anybody else to be tucked up in the trouble that's bound to come."

"Forget that part of it, Mick. Tell me what we do and I'm with you."

"Not this time, Lomey. I'm heading for the long drop before the night is over, and I'd never ask a friend to join me on the gallows. So long."

"Good God! You don't mean that, Mick? Pull yourself together, laddie."

"I have," said Mick bitterly. "I'll only say this, Lomey, that lad at Euston was murdered! I thought a lot of him. They say that the old law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth is bad. Maybe. This is where I start doing a bit of collecting. But I want more than eyes and teeth!"

Lomas looked at his friend again and shivered down his spine.

CHAPTER XII

AND PLENTY HAPPENS

"LET'S move a yard or two down the street," said Mick. His friend said nothing, followed down the slight incline to West Street. Cardby ducked into a shop porch, remarked as casually as he could: "Lomey, I'm going to stay here. I want you to find out where the party in that car has bedded down for the night. The rest of the picnic I'll look after myself. Don't think I'm not thanking you for what you've done. You ought to know me by now. Let me lay my cards on the table, lad. I told you before that it was very much of a personal affair between Mellery and me. Well, now that they have escorted Archie to the refuse dump it is more of a personal affair than ever. I know that's your game, I know that you'd take anything in your stride, but if anything serious happens to-night I don't want you to be in the middle of the dock with me. That's all, Lomey. Thanks so much."

"Mick, I'm not ringing the police or anybody else unless I run in harness with you for the next few hours. Whatever you have got coming to you is no concern of mine. Except for one fact. There were three men in that car. You can bet there will be one or two more in the place they have headed for. I don't get nervous when you talk about the gallows, but I'm not going to let a friend of mine break that joint alone. Say what you like, do what you like. I either stay with you, or you get no more information from me. Take it or leave it, Mick. I don't mind being a partner in a murder job, but I do strongly object to seeing you commit

suicide while I eat a hot sausage, and trail the car back to town."

"Ring the police, Lomey, and I'll wait for you at the coffee stall. When we've heard the news we'll know what the next move is to be. I'll be waiting for you. But remember that all I want from you is the address."

"And I'll talk the terms upon which I'll give it to you. See you. Adios."

Lomas vanished along the dark street. Mick paced the pavements for a while. The words he had heard from Euston were still pealing like bells at a graveside through his ears. He had been told :

"All we can say is that the man concerned at that address is dead. We want your name and address. It is essential that we should get in touch with you immediately. Kindly report to the nearest police station."

Cardby had not waited to hear anything further. It is difficult to speak coherently over the telephone wire when a lump is contracting the throat, when the tongue seems to have swollen so that it fills the mouth. It seemed ages of time to the youngster before Lomas returned. It came as a shock to him to feel the reassuring grip of a hand on his shoulder.

"Mick," said Lomas, without preamble, "I have got the information we want, but I'm saying nothing unless you take me along with you. I have never been famous for my precise speech. This time you've had some of it."

Cardby shook his head wearily, turned to his friend, said pathetically :

"Lad, I know the sort of stuff that you're made of, I know that you'd do anything for me. I appreciate it. But this is no ordinary job. It won't be a matter of somebody getting a bit hurt. It won't be a question of whether people want adhesive tape, or crepe bandages. It'll be a simple issue of whether they want cremation or a funeral. And I've got no ambition to see you in the middle of a party with wreaths at one end of it, and the gallows at the other. That's all I can say, Lomey."

"Maybe, Mick, but it isn't all that I can say by a long way. You've been proud of your father's name for a long time. And so was I. After all, lad, I worked with him at the Yard. You didn't. I know the sort of name you've made for yourself. And more power to your elbow. But you can't stand the racket all the time on your own heels. This is one of the odd moments, Mick, when you're facing more than you can take. I know you'd say I was being damned silly. I know the confidence you've got in yourself. I admire you for it. But I'd be no kind of a friend if I sat tight, and let you run your

head into that packet. So don't argue any more, and we'll get on our way. Will that scheme of things suit you all right, lad ? ”

“ Have it your own way, Lomey. I'm not going to continue any sort of argument. Now, tell me, where are these people hanging out ? What d'you know ? ”

“ They're in a house in Royal Avenue on the Hove sea front. I think we'd better have a longer talk with the police before we make a move. Quite unofficially they might be able to tell us an amount about those houses, how many rooms they've got, where they're placed, what the stairs are like, and that sort of thing. We've got nothing to lose by asking them.”

“ Hold your horses for a moment. I've been thinking of something for a while back that I don't think has occurred to you at all. And it places me in a very difficult position. Do you realise that one of the women in that house is wanted for murder ? Do you realise that I can't snatch the woman I want without taking the Warren girl ? Do you realise what my position would be if I abducted a person wanted for wilful murder ? Think it over, Lomey.”

“ Hell ! I hadn't thought of that angle at all, Mick. Of course, since she was with Mailey, and one of 'em killed your friend the police are bound to charge both of them. So what do you propose doing about it ? ”

“ I think I'd better get along to the house alone. I'll try to pull the snatch on Ella Mellery, and if I can get away with it you can tell the Hove police about the Warren woman. Her arrest, at the moment, does not concern me very much, although I'd like to see her swing. How is that ? ”

“ No, Mick, you're only coming back to the old argument about whether you do the job by yourself or not. I'll give you a helping hand first, see you on your way with the woman, and then pass on the info. to the local police.”

“ All right, have it your own way. But it's going to be damned awkward for me if we have to take the two of them. I'm ready. We'd better not make that call at the police station. Then, if anything happens, we can always act like injured innocents. You know just how to find this house, Lomey ? ”

“ We'll be there within five minutes.” Lomas was right. They drove along the deserted front, turned to the right, parked a few yards along Royal Avenue. Fifty feet farther along Lomas pointed a finger, whispered to Mick :

“ According to the police they're all in that place, Mick. Look at it.”

The house was massive, almost cumbersome, fashioned in

the early Georgian style. An area descended to the basement, and above were four floors. Not a light was showing. The two men examined the place with expert scrutiny.

"And what strikes you as the best plan of campaign?" asked Lomas.

"One of two ways, and I can't be sure which would be the better. Either we force a way in through the basement window, or we scramble off that pipe on the left of the house, and get from there to the top of the big bay window. From there we could force a way into that front bedroom on the first floor. You pay your money, and you take your choice. What is it?"

"If you try that bedroom you might walk into trouble. After all, Mick, it is certain to be the star bedroom of the house. So who do you find?"

"That's why I thought of doing a bust there. I should expect to find Ella Mellery in that room. After all, she is the hostess. Suppose we split forces. You take the basement. I'll try that first floor. Suit you, Lomey?"

"You've forgotten that I haven't got any gear with me. I'd better pad along with you. At least I might cover a retreat for you. Let's move."

"Just a minute. Take off your shoes and slip your socks over them. I'm not thinking that it will be much quieter. What's in my mind is that we'll be able to grip that pipe more firmly with a rough surface on our feet."

It was not long before the men walked into the narrow passage at the side of the house. Mick stood on the garden wall, gripped the pipe, started on his way. Not until he had reached the top of the bay window did Lomas follow him. It was not the first time by many a score that both men had done some first floor work. As they stood, recovering their poise, their breath, they could hear the sea rumbling across the beach. Mick took a handkerchief from his breast pocket, signalled to Lomas to follow suit. They draped their faces with care. Cardby had no intention to waste time. At any moment a patrol constable might walk round that way, might see them, might become more than suspicious of the parked car.

It was obvious that the entry would cause no trouble. One of the windows had been considerably left a foot open. Cardby nodded his head as he pulled out the gun and the torch. Lomas levered the window, Mick climbed into the room. As his foot lowered he cursed. There was a crash of sound. Instantly he flashed on his torch. Two things he saw within a second. In the first place he had knocked a powder bowl from the corner of a dressing table. In the second place, a woman

was rising in a bed facing him, her eyes distended, her lips parted, all set to raise a scream that would mount to the high heavens. Cardby dropped into the room, stepped quickly to the bedside, held the automatic in front of the torch so that the woman could see it plainly. Then he snapped out :

" Take it easy, sister. One shout from you, and I'll let you have it."

The woman placed the back of her hand across her mouth and shivered. There was no need for Mick to wonder who she was. The likeness between she and her sister was unmistakable. Lomas arrived at his side, picked up a bed jacket from a chair, laid it round the woman's shoulders.

" What's the matter ? " she asked tremulously. " Who are you ? What is it ? "

" Don't get excited," said the youngster. " If you get hurt it will be your own fault. This, my dear Mrs. Mellery, is a snatch. Your husband has done so many of them that I thought we might as well try one. Lomey, will you look around for the lady's dressing gown, please ? "

" Why pick on me ? " asked the woman. " I've done nothing to hurt you." She had soon recovered her composure. Cardby was not surprised. After one had lived with a man like the Boss for years shocks were bound to become part of the daily routine. Lomas gave the dressing gown to Mrs. Mellery. As she swathed it round herself both men were listening anxiously for any sound of movement in the house. But all was quiet. Mick placed the gun in his pocket for a moment, pulled out a rubber, shot-laden truncheon, passed it to Lomas without a sound, and took the gun in his hand again. Then he spoke snappily to the woman :

" I told you that if you got hurt the fault will lie with you. I have got a car outside, and we are taking you to it. If any person in this house makes any attempt to stop us they will get badly damaged, and I don't think a beauty specialist would be able to do you very much good. If you're sensible you'll do all you can to help us make a quiet exit. And the sooner we start the better. I am going to take you by the arm, and you are going to lead the way. Lomey, you hold the torch, and walk immediately behind us. Mrs. Mellery, we're ready. Come along. I want no stalling, and don't try to pull anything fast. I've warned you."

" Do you know what my husband will do to you when he hears of this ? "

" I've heard of many things he's done to people at odd moments. This time he can chance his arm if he wants to. I'm not very worried, lady."

" I don't think you realise whose wife you're talking to.

If you did you would never dare to do this. My husband will kill you for it."

"Nice to have something to which to look forward. Start moving, sister."

She offered no further opposition, slid from the bed, moved over to the door. Lomas was not more than a yard behind them. Cardby prodded the gun into her ribs as she gripped the door handle, gave a final warning :

"Remember what I said. One shout, and you'll get the entire works."

They passed through to a broad landing. Even as he looked round at the other doors Mick could see that Mellery had provided an elegant and luxurious establishment. They reached the head of the stairs without any accident, but as they turned to descend a door creaked open, a voice said :

"Is that you, Ella ? Are you all right, dear ?"

The snub nose of the gun stuck into her body. Lomas turned off the torch, drew nearer to them. For a second there was silence. Then she said :

"Yes, Phil, I'm quite all right. Get back to bed, dear, and don't worry."

They arrived at the foot of the stairs. And there the opposition was much more formidable. There was a scurry of movement, and a man raced into the hall from the back of the house. In the dim light he seemed huge. He raised his voice with a bellowing shout :

"Charlie, Arthur, come on. Somebody's got the missus."

As he called he made a dive for Cardby. Footsteps seemed to sound all over the house. Mick lashed out with his foot as the man plunged. The toe connected with the pit of the stomach. The youngster knew that the man would trouble them no further for a time. The wind tore from his body with a whine like a syren, and he crumpled on the hall floor. The woman started a dash for the back of the premises. Mick threw her roughly against the wall near the front, whipped round to shout to Lomas :

"Bend down, Lomey." The advice was taken a split second too late. Mick had seen the figure of a man hurtling down the stairs. He and Lomas arrived in the hall with such impetus that they were carried ten or twelve feet beyond the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Mellery struggled to pull herself away from Cardby. Again he pushed her against the wall. Another dim shape showed in the hall. But this time Mick did not hesitate. For the newcomer had a gun in his hand, and was raising his arm as he came.

It was impossible to take aim with any certainty. The torch had gone when Lomas crashed. Mick did not even

know positively that the man had a gun. All he saw was the arm lifting. He pulled the trigger, heard a shriek and a moan, then the thud of a body falling to the ground.

"You've shot him," screamed Ella. "You've murdered him."

"And that's what I'll do to anybody else who comes into this hall," shouted Mick. He could hear footsteps on the stairs, called out: "Whoever that is coming into this hall will stop lead if they don't stay where they are. That's not a threat. It's a promise. Lomey, how are you going?"

There was no reply. Cardby knew why. He could hear the heavy breathing, the thud of blows, the clatter of feet on the hall floor, the soft crash as bodies twisted and turned on the floor. Lomas was having a tough time. Cardby decided that a final risk would have to be taken if he was to give Lomas any help. Jerking Ella by the arm he dragged her to the door.

"Open that door, and make it snappy," he said. "I want some light."

He shook her a second time, heard a chain withdraw, felt Ella bend for a bottom bolt, heard the click of the lock. The door swung back. A faint light seeped into the hall. It showed Mick that Lomas had the matter well in hand. Even as he looked the rubber truncheon fell without a sound, caught the man at the side of the ear. That was "lights out" for him. He lay as though stricken by lightning. Lomas scrambled to his feet. And at that instant Cardby heard a slight pop, and glass crashed by his side. That could only mean one thing. Some person on the stairs was firing at him with a silenced revolver. The bullet hadn't missed him by more than six inches. As Lomas reached his side Mick raised his own gun, fired blindly towards the stairs. Again the unseen person pulled the trigger. This time Cardby whistled softly. The bullet singed the side of his face. He realised that he was silhouetted in the open doorway.

"Come on, Lomey," he shouted, "let's get to hell out of this joint. It's getting a bit too hot."

He winced with pain, felt warm blood trickling down the side of his face. Ella had clawed him. He gripped her arm more firmly, pushed her through the door, planted the gun in Lomas's hand as he said:

"Keep out of the line of fire, but hold the fort until I can get to the car. As soon as I pull up outside make a run for it, and slam the door behind you. Don't get too much light behind you, Lomey. Come on, Ella dear, and run whether you want to or not. Don't be afraid that you'll lose your breath—because if you don't run you'll lose something a damned sight worse than that."

There was another crash of glass as Mick raced down the steps. That person on the stairs was beginning to get range— or their eyes were becoming acclimatised to the dark. It was one or the other. Cardby was uncertain about his next move when he reached the car. But he did not hesitate for long. Pushing Ella into the back he grabbed a pair of fine mesh handcuffs from his pocket, fastened one on her left wrist, clipped the other end on the inside handle of the car door. Then he swung into the driving seat, switched the engine into life, shot the car along to the house. The front door slammed with a bang, Lomas came through the gateway with a crash, jumped into the back of the car, shouted to Mick :

"All clear, lad, step on it, and don't spare the horses." Even as he spoke the door of the house opened again. There was a ripping tear as a bullet ploughed into the fabric near the roof. Before a second shot could be fired they were well out of range. Ella Mellery might have had some pretensions about her social status, but her flow of language for the next couple of minutes would have made a Thames bargee sound trivial and innocuous. Cardby headed back for Brighton, called to Lomas :

"What about me dropping you so that you can get along to the police?"

Before the man could reply Ella burst out laughing, asked sarcastically :

"Is that so that you can report this kidnapping to them? What nerve!"

"That'll be all right, Mick," said Lomas, ignoring the woman. "Drop me near the Clock Tower, and I'll look after the rest of it. But for the love of everything, Mick, take that handkerchief off your face. If any one sees you with that mask on you'll be in plenty of trouble."

Cardby grinned as he whipped it off. He had forgotten it entirely. His stop at the Clock Tower lasted for seconds only. Lomas asked as he left :

"Where do I get in touch with you, lad, when I'm through down here?"

The youngster thought for a little while, remembering the woman at the back.

"Telephone Lucy as soon as you get back. I'll let her know where I am."

"That'll suit me. Pleasant journey. Give my love to the Smoke."

Cardby did not drive on far before he was puzzling about another small problem. He was not comfortable, felt none too secure, with Ella sitting at the back of him. So far as he knew she carried no weapon, and could not slip the bracelets. Still—

curious things happened at times. He applied the brakes, jumped out, unfastened the handcuffs, told the woman to sit in front with him. He had just remembered another fact which didn't give him much pleasure. Lomas had walked away with both the gun and the truncheon. Cardby decided that the sooner he collected some more gear the better it would be for his health. He pressed down with his foot. Mile after mile was covered in silence. Suddenly the woman said :

" I'm getting damnably cold and stiff sitting here, mister."

She stretched her arms above her head. Cardby drove on. After that things happened with blurred speed. As her hands descended she grasped the steering wheel, swung it round with one savage pull. The youngster never had a chance. The car lurched on the camber, threatened to overturn, hit a grass bank, careered off it, crossed the narrow road, dipped the front wheels in a ditch, and the back wheels circled into the air !

CHAPTER XIII

NEXT DOOR TO DEATH

MICK swore as he felt the car going into a somersault, wrestled to open the door, found that he could not. The woman laughed hysterically. The car crashed through a low hedge, bounced in a field. Cardby's head hit the roof with terrific force. He was dazed. All he knew was that the car no longer moved. It was lying on its back. Cardby did not know where he was lying. He groped with his hand, found the woman lying almost on top of him. Mick wondered what had happened. His head had not cleared. But less than a second later it was as clear as it had ever been. And there was every reason why a cloudy brain was of no use to him.

The car was on fire ! At first he doubted it, thought the pungent smell was a figment of fancy, due to the crack on his head. But the yellow flames not more than a yard from him, the increasing heat in the car, the terrific smell of burning rubber, left him in no doubt. He shook Ella Mellery violently, shrieked into her ear :

" Get out of here, you damned fool. The car is blazing. Get out."

His heart missed a couple of beats. He had received no answer, shook the woman again. She was unconscious ! Again, Cardby wrestled with the door. He could not move it. The sudden impact had jammed the lock or the frame. He tried to push the woman away from him, could not. The

heat became more intense. The youngster felt that he was suffocating, fought for breath, coughed as the acrid fumes bit into his lungs. His outstretched hand found a side window. For seconds he fought with the catch. A sound came from him as he felt the window move, it was a cross between a sigh and a sob. But the feeling of gratitude soon vanished. By opening the window he had started a draught, and as the air rushed into the car the flames rose with a roaring rush, turned the inside of the car into a veritable inferno. Cardby felt the perspiration rolling down his face in rolls, and the fumes were biting into his lungs with acrid pungency.

Ella Mellery made no move. She was "out to the wide." With an effort Cardby twisted her out of the huddled position in which she lay, tried to force her through the window. Seconds turned into seeming hours as he wrestled with the still form. At each instant Cardby expected the rear petrol tank to explode. The lapping flames were drawing nearer to him, hissing and spluttering as they danced. The back of the car was blazing when he finally thrust the woman through into the field.

He felt himself weakening each moment as he tried to force his way through. Only by drawing in his shoulders, driving downwards with his feet, stretching out his arm before him, could he scramble to the field and safety. There for a time he lay on the sodden grass, gasping as he tried to pump fresh air into his lungs. It was not long before he drew himself to his feet, seized the woman by the shoulders, and dragged her farther away from the car. The flames were throwing heat over a wide area. Cardby looked at the burning wreck, and cursed again. The light from that bonfire would be visible for miles round that quiet countryside at such an early hour in the morning. Ella lay without making a move. She might as well have been dead. Mick commenced to slap her face, to rub her hands. Minutes passed before her eyelids fluttered, and then she gazed at him for some time before her memory returned. When she recognised Cardby she looked beyond him to the towering mass of flame. The realisation of what had happened came back to her. She cupped her hands over her face, sobbed violently as her whole body quivered. She knew that she had been next door to death, but couldn't understand just what had happened.

"We're going to scam, sister," said Mick sternly. He knew that a gentle, persuasive tone would be of no avail. She was bordering on an hysterical attack. "Get to your feet, and put your arm round my neck. We'll get out of this dump before all the Sussex Constabulary descend on us. I don't think either of us want to do any explaining. Pull yourself

together and thank your lucky stars that you're still alive. Come along."

"But I feel so dizzy. I don't think that I'll be able to stand."

"That's how I felt, but I managed it. After all, you only took a crack on the head like I did. People don't die with an odd tap like that. Start!"

He took the woman by the wrists, pulled her to her feet, slung an arm over his shoulder, round his neck, and started through the semi-darkness to search for a gate. He soon found one. Together they started to stumble along the lonely road. Cardby was in something more than a fix—and he knew it. If a policeman met them it would be difficult to explain why they were on that road in the early hours of the morning when the woman wore only a nightdress and dressing gown, why both had blackened faces, why Cardby's face was smeared with blood, why the woman staggered as she walked, why she had to be assisted, whether they had noticed the flame from the burning car, did the car belong to them, who were they . . . Mick ceased to think of the possibilities. They gave him a worse headache than he had before. And that was plenty! They had trailed along for some half a mile when Cardby heard the sound of a car behind them. He decided to take a real chance. After all, he was in such an entire and complete fix that matters could not become worse. So he stood in the centre of the road, raised his hand, and hoped for the best as he whispered to the woman:

"For the love of Mike keep your mouth shut, sister. Leave me to stage this party. If anything goes wrong we're both in the mire up to our necks. Hold your horses, the bloke is slowing down. Be ill, stay dumb."

The car pulled to a stop a few feet away from them. A man poked his head through the open window, gaped as he looked at the curious pair.

Two or three times he blinked his eyes. Then he exclaimed unbelievably:

"What the hell is this, mister? I can't think that I'm seeing straight."

Mick pulled Ella closer to him. She rested her head on his shoulder.

"I am sorry to say that you are seeing straight," replied Cardby. "There has just been a most unfortunate accident along the road."

"I'll say there has!" commented the motorist. He was staring at the folds of the nightdress showing beneath the dressing gown. "Anything I can do for you? The lady looks all in to me. Is she very ill?"

"If you are going towards London I would be deeply indebted to you for a lift—if you have room. Your surmise was right. The lady is very ill, and I do not want to expose her to this dank air any more than I can possibly help. If you could assist I can quite easily explain to you as we travel along the road. Of course, I will see that you are fully compensated. One doesn't expect people to perform such acts——"

"Forget that part of it, and dive into the back of the car. I am on the straight run to London, and there's plenty of room. Any particular place in town where you would like to be dropped?"

"Would it trouble you greatly to drop us at the corner of Mitcham Lane in Streatham? That would be most admirable for my wife and for me."

Ella Mellery drew in her breath with a startled sob. This young man was certainly a fast worker. They clambered into the car. The driver pointed out a rug to them. Mick swathed it over their knees. The journey started. He felt better now. He had had a breathing space in which to work out a story likely to fit in with all the indisputable facts. And that was very, very far from being an easy task—particularly for one just recovering from a heavy crack on the head!

"And what on earth placed you in this astonishing fix?" asked the man.

"Just sheer bad luck. I took my wife down to Brighton. We only arrived there a few hours ago. She—I don't like mentioning this in front of her—has been under treatment for some months for a singular mental affliction. Really I was taking her away for a sort of convalescence."

Ella stiffened by his side. Mick looked through the mirror to discover whether the driver could see them. He could. So Cardby pulled the wrap closer round the woman, drew her nearer to him, slid an arm round her, pressed her head down on his shoulder, said sympathetically:

"Now dear, just try to remain as calm as you can. You are quite all right now, and you've got nothing at all about which to worry."

She could not very well answer. His hand was placed over her mouth!

"I still don't understand what happened," said the driver. "All I can say is that I feel very sorry for both of you. Are you warm enough?"

"Plenty, thanks. I was going to say—the trip to the coast had exactly the opposite effect to that which the specialist and myself had hoped for. We had not been in Brighton for very long when my wife had a bad recurrence of her old attacks.

I was in more than a quandary. We had no nurse with us, and for a while I didn't know quite what to do. All I could think of was that she needed expert attention, and I decided to place her back in the care of those who had been looking after us before. She was so bad that I didn't have much time in which to think. I knew that at such an hour I could not hope to get a train. In any case, I had my car with me. So I hurriedly placed my wife in the car, and started to make a quick run to London. If all had been well the idea was good—"

"Seems about the only thing for you to do under the circumstances."

"That's precisely what was in my mind. But the trouble, when it did come, came from a totally unexpected quarter. My wife was sitting by my side. Suddenly she had another bad attack, and seized my arm with some violence, such violence that the steering wheel was wrenched round. The car shot across the road, turned turtle, finished upside down in a field. Just before you saw us did you notice that flame on the right of the road? I imagine that it was strong enough for you to see it a mile away."

"Sure, I saw it. I wondered what on earth had been happening."

"Well," said Mick, with solemn simplicity, "that was our car. I had a struggle to get my wife and myself clear. We were, so to speak, staggering away from the wreck when we heard your car coming along the road. That was the first piece of luck I have had for weeks and weeks. You've no idea how grateful I feel. Your action was more than kind."

There was silence for a while. Cardby had the unhappy feeling that his improvised narrative had not gone down with any triumphant fanfare of trumpets. He waited for the driver's next remark. And when it came the youngster was taken by surprise, hadn't expected such a question:

"Excuse me for asking, but I'm a very curious man. How did it come about that you were fully dressed and your wife was not if you left Brighton in such a hurry? I can't see that at all. Excuse me asking."

"Damn the man!" thought Cardby. Aloud he said: "I am sure that under the circumstances the same thought would have crossed my mind. The explanation is, unfortunately for us, only too simple. My wife was not dressed because I dare not let her have her clothes. The specialist warned me that with one in her nervous state I dare not take the risk of her leaving the house. I, on the other hand, was dressed because I did not know when some article, some help might be wanted.

I just sat at the side of the bed, and was dozing in a chair. It would not have been fair to do otherwise."

Mick thought it was a pretty bright effort. The driver remarked :

"Quite. I see." Yet somehow there was no conviction about the man's tone. He didn't give the impression that he had swallowed the story with any genuine belief. "Is the specialist at Streatham? Forgive me for asking."

"No, he is at Harley Street, but one of the nurses who used to look after my wife lives very near to Mitcham Lane. She can attend to my wife while I carry on to see the specialist and discover what is to be done."

"I'm running into the West End if you'd rather that I took you there."

"That's more than kind of you, but I think the sooner my wife is in the hands of the nurse the better it will be for all concerned. After all, she handled the case for weeks under the guidance of the doctor, and I don't think there can be much she doesn't know about it. In any case, I have no desire to impose on your generosity any more than I can help."

"It is no trouble. What particular form of nervous complaint was your wife afflicted by? I hope that it is not too serious a matter."

"This bloke," thought Mick, "is a walking question mark." Aloud he said: "Forgive me if I don't answer you. In the first place, I know very little other than what the specialist told me, and I can't profess to understand his statement fully. In the second place, I feel that it would be most unwise to discuss the matter before my wife. She is naturally very sensitive, and I feel that it would be an injudicious thing to do."

"Quite. I was wondering what the effect of the shock following that accident would have upon her. Take a look at this for a moment."

A cold shiver cut through Cardby's stomach as he stretched out his hand. He'd heard of premonitions before, had experienced one when he laid his hand on the handle of the office door. And now he'd collected another one of them. He felt unhappy as he grasped the small card, felt more than unhappy when in the dim light within the car he read :

ROBERT L. WATERS, M.D.
167 Guildford Street, W.

He tried to bring some moisture into his mouth as he said easily :

"Well, what a most astonishing thing that we should have

stopped your car, doctor. Seems that the fates are on our side all the time."

Ella Mellery had not seen the card. But she heard the youngster's comment, and commenced to laugh. Cardby nudged his elbow into her ribs.

"Oddly enough," said Waters, "I had the idea that for one with such a nervous complaint as to call for her to be brought from bed in the middle of the night she survived the shock of that accident inordinately well. That's what made me curious as to the specific nature of the disorder. We medical men are naturally curious when we come across cases which seem to produce such contradictions. Your wife must be suffering from some ailment which is beyond my knowledge."

There was no longer anything to be gained by overlooking one fact—the doctor was no longer sceptical. His attempt at heavy sarcasm showed plainly that he disbelieved Cardby's story entirely! Mick wondered which way to jump. It seemed that he had plunged from the frying pan into the fire. Before he could speak Waters fired a disconcerting question, and this time he was not talking to Mick, but to Ella Mellery:

"Madame, I have my case with me. Do you feel that I could be of any assistance to you? Or are you feeling a little better by now?"

Again Mick's elbow bedded down in the woman's ribs. She looked at the youngster for an appreciable time, saw the set of his face, answered:

"I will be all right soon, doctor, thank you. The shock unnerved me."

"But weren't you unnerved before the shock arrived, madame? I understand from your husband that you were very ill before the accident occurred."

"Well, all I can say, doctor, is that at the moment I feel as though——"

She got no further. Cardby could see the red light glowing brightly.

"Reaction, I expect," he announced, as though delivering a final judgment. "You must have come across such things in many cases, doctor."

"Oddly enough, I have not." There was a bite in the words. "Having regard to your statement concerning your wife's condition would you permit me to leave her at one of the hospitals en route, and then I can drive you directly into London? That, surely, would be in the best interests of your wife, and would save her the fatigue of a longer journey. I would say, as a doctor, that the sooner she is seen into bed the better it would be for her, and I know of two or three hospitals we pass where she would receive most adequate attention.

Wouldn't that plan suit you since your great desire must be to see that all necessary is done for your wife ? ”

“ I certainly feel too unwell to travel,” said Ella before Cardby could stop her. The youngster's elbow moved a second too late.

“ I take it then that I am to stop at an hospital ? I think it best.”

Cardby started thinking in top gear. They were not more than a couple of miles outside Purley. That meant, for a certainty, that Waters would halt at a local hospital there—and that all Mick's work would have been done for nothing. He knew only too well what would happen once the doors of the hospital closed on the woman. There would be a telephone call for Horace Mellery, and . . . The youngster closed his eyes, tried to forget that he owned a blinding headache. Then he made a last attempt :

“ Forgive me, doctor, I appreciate that you have spoken out of kindness, and as an experienced medical man. But there are reasons, entirely private reasons, apart from the matter of my wife's complaint, which make it imperative that we should continue as I suggested. Don't think that I am not grateful for your advice. I am indeed. But it would be more than unwise to place my wife in an ordinary hospital. I would not feel at all satisfied, and I am certain that the specialist would not agree.”

“ Give me the name of the specialist, and I will telephone the details to him, ask what course he feels should be taken. That would, at any rate, take the burden of responsibility off your mind, and leave you feeling that you had done everything in your power. Shall we stop at the next telephone kiosk so that I can make the call ? Perhaps I would be able to explain the present condition of the patient better than you could.”

There was a biting irony in the last sentence. The words came out of the man's mouth like spots of vitriol. Cardby did not hesitate. The woman by his side was chuckling softly. Mick's tone was emphatic when he said :

“ With that course, I agree entirely, doctor. It would take a lot off my mind, and would satisfy me that I was doing the right thing. Whatever the specialist advises I am content to abide by his judgment.”

“ I think you are acting very wisely. Would you mind giving me the name, and address, and telephone number of the specialist.”

“ Most certainly, doctor. It is Mr. Horace Mellery, Warren House, Harley Street, and the number is Welbeck 96834. I trust he will be in.”

Ella stiffened again, pressed against the back of the seat. The young man had enough nerve to help a battalion of men on their way.

"And your name, please. I must give him the name of the patient."

"Obviously. My name is Edward Mailey, of Kerne House, Brunswick Square, and my wife's Christian name is Ella. After all the trouble he has had with the case he will remember it without an effort. I will write down that telephone number for you. . . Here it is, doctor. So many thanks."

A short distance farther along they sighted a telephone kiosk. Waters braked to a stop. Cardby handed him a few coppers, explained to him :

"Tell him I will be along very shortly whatever advice he gives now."

Doctor Waters jumped out of the car, entered the telephone kiosk. Then things started to happen with such speed that Ella Mellery was dazed. The youngster took a forward plunge, arrived in a second behind the wheel, engaged the gear, took off the brake, slammed down his foot, and waved.

"You'll get your car back," he called. "Good-bye for the moment, doctor."

Waters dashed outside the kiosk in time to see his car vanishing.

CHAPTER XIV

MOVING AROUND

"You clever swine!" shrieked Ella, and she dived from the back of the car, clasped her arms round Cardby's throat with a stifling grip. The car swerved and rolled as the youngster fought with the wheel. For an instant the pressure was released. Mick was not in a mood to consider matters of manners or etiquette. He bent his head, bit the back of Ella's hand. She shrieked, dragged her arms away. Cardby shouted to her :

"Try anything like that again, and I'll put you to sleep for an hour or two. Sit still, you Jezebel, or take what's coming to you. I'm not going to play pretty-pretty any more with you or with any one else. The next person, whether it's a man or a woman, who butts her head into this party isn't going to take an interest in anything for a helluva long time."

She was no coward, but neither was she any fool. She slumped into the back of the car. Mick chanced the police

as he raced through Purley. He knew that he could not get far with that "hot" car. And Waters had been too near that telephone when it was snatched to miss the chance of telling the police right away. Cardby knew that even at that moment a wireless message was probably going out, that all the boys "on the drag" would be looking for him. At Beddington Lane he swung away from the main road. He could find plenty of trouble without making any desperate search for it. Then he began to grope his way through the side roads, heading all the time for a back way into Streatham. At any moment he expected to hear the syren sound behind him, to learn that he had been spotted. And he knew he'd never get out of the drag-net once the men on patrol with the squad had picked up his trail. So he drove on, twisting, turning, and hoping. Ella Mellery continued to scream.

And she was the possessor of no mean pair of lungs. Cardby breathed more freely when he found that his sense of direction was right. A couple of minutes later he stopped the car, looked both ways along the deserted avenue. Dawn was breaking. He had to move quickly. Without undue ceremony he grabbed the woman by the arm, led her from the car, hastened along the pavement, glancing round with apprehension as he walked. Three turnings farther down the road he twisted to the left, opened the gate leading to a small villa. Crowding Ella into the tiny porch he pressed the bell continuously for a minute. The woman struggled for a time. His hand was biting into her arm. Then they heard the shuffle of feet within the house. The door swung back. The girl in the doorway parted her lips, and gasped slightly before she pulled the dressing gown more tightly around her. Cardby said nothing as he pushed Ella into the hall, closed the door behind him. Then he said:

"Forgive the unconventional hour for the call, my dear Miss Wheeler, but I've got a very important job for you to do. Don't look startled, darling, this is going to be very easy for you. Would you start by making a pot of tea for we three, and then I'll explain what I want you to do."

The girl might have been staggered by the abrupt arrival and entrance. But she had been well trained during her years with Cardby and Son, knew only too well that anything could happen with that firm. She hastened out towards the rear of the premises. Mick propelled the woman into a small drawing-room, pushed her into a chair, remarked easily:

"Don't bother about me. Just settle down, and make yourself at home."

Ella did not look as though she'd settle anywhere for long. Her eyes were flaming with temper, her pale hands were

moving incessantly. Mick lit a cigarette, fumbled through his pockets for quite a while before he turned to the woman, looked from her to the key in the door, said :

" Sit tight. I'm going to get a match. Move, and you're for trouble."

As he walked out he turned the key in the door. A moment later he came back with the box of matches in his hand. A little later Constance Wheeler entered with three cups of tea on a tray, gave one to Ella.

" Thanks," said Mrs. Mellery, staring at Cardby, " this is the first thing you've given me except a pain in the neck. May you die soon."

" A sweet thought. Good health. May you enjoy your future life. And to you, my dearest Miss Wheeler. I trust that you'll get on well together."

Constance was looking at him curiously. It seemed strange that one with dried blood on the face, with slight burns searing the skin, with eyes heavy for want of sleep, should be flippant. But she knew Mick Cardby well !

" Think I'm going to stay in a place like this ? " asked Ella. " You've got another thought coming to you, big boy. I wouldn't be seen dead here."

" No ? And you'll never be seen alive again if you make a try to break."

" Sez you ! I'm telling you here and now that you can't do this sort——"

Ella Mellery paused for an instant, and her eyes closed. When she opened them again they appeared slightly glazed. She rose to her feet, swaying slightly, lurched forward towards the youngster, said thickly :

" Blast you, Cardby, you put something into that tea I had. What was it ? "

" Think I'd go out for a match when I had a lighter that works in my pocket ? Your doctor friend thought you should have some sort of a sedative. I thought his advice was good. So I gave you one. Now, sit down."

He took hold of her wrists, pressed her back into the chair. All her resistance had gone. It was not long before her breathing became more and more stertorous. And then she passed out entirely. Cardby looked at her with a satisfied smile as he remarked to Constance Wheeler :

" I thought that stuff would fix her for an hour or two. I'm glad that you didn't make a mistake, and put it into the wrong cup. That would have been just too bad. And now we'll get down to brass tacks, my dear. For the next few days there is no need for you to go near the office. In any case, you'll be glad to know that you can't go there again.

I wouldn't expect you or any other decent girl to work amid the shambles of a ruin. And your employers have vanished from the scene. I am dead! My father is missing! So all the way round a happy time is being had by all. I don't need to tell you much about the job we're working on. That part of it doesn't really matter to you. What does matter is that you must guard this woman as though the Crown jewels were baubles compared with her."

"Who is she? What on earth am I supposed to do with her, sir?"

"The name is Mick, angelic, and her name doesn't matter two hoots. All that you need to know is that we'll never break our case wide open if this woman gets away from you before I want her to. She is tough. I don't think for an instant that you would be able to hold her by yourself. For that reason I'm going to get a man to help you along with the good work. You can hold her hand while he holds a gun. But I don't want her to stay here for long. Where would you suggest taking her so that you'd be quite certain that she would not be found? Just think it over for a while, dear."

"I'll have to, sir. After all, I'm only a secretary, and I don't reckon to be any sort of an expert with this kind of work. I'm not like you. You see I have never had the experience. And I'm not sure that I ever wanted it."

"Forget that end of the story, Constance darling. This house is too hot because some people must know that you are employed by Cardby and Son, and they must know your address. Think of some quiet spot where you can fade away with security and comfort for a short while. You must know some."

"Well, my sister and her husband are away from their house, and I've got the key just to keep an eye on the place until they come back."

"That sounds just what the doctor ordered—oh, to hell with what doctors order! Sorry, darling, my mind was running back for a few minutes. Where is this delectable domicile, and what is it like?"

"It is just a flat in Gloucester Terrace, near Royal Oak tube station."

"How many flats are there in the building. On which floor is it?"

"I think there are five flats in the place. This is the third floor."

"Nothing can suit me better than that. Can I use your telephone now?"

"You can hardly refuse your boss, can you?" she asked.
"Certainly, use it."

Mick dialled a Temple Bar number, had to wait for some time. Then he heard the voice at the other end of the wire, wasted no words as he said :

" Hello, Lucy. This is Mick. Very soon Lomey will be ringing you. Tell him that all being well I will be at your place about eleven this morning. Mention that I've got a most important job for him to do. No, it doesn't matter about the details. Just give him my message as I've given it to you. Remember I want him at your place at eleven o'clock. I'll see you."

" This seems to be a most mysterious affair," said Constance. No smile passed her face as she spoke. Apparently the call had not pleased her.

" It is, my dear, most mysterious. Now, about six months ago, I left a packed suitcase here with you in case I ever wanted any clothes and gear without going to the office, or to my home. Could I have that suitcase, and the use of your bathroom for about half an hour, please? I won't make too much of a mess. When I've made myself look a trifle more human I'll come back and have a talk to you. There are a few more oddments I must explain before I leave the fair damsel with you. Don't leave this room while I am away. Remember, sweet one, that the lady isn't quite what she might look. If you take any chances with her you might wake up to discover that the most startling things have been happening to you. Now, if you'll give me the case and indicate the bathroom I'd be intensely grateful. But come straight back to this room. I wouldn't trust her as far as I can see her, and at moments I'm apt to be fairly short-sighted. Ready, angel? "

It was almost half an hour before Mick returned to the drawing-room. In that space of time he had achieved a few minor miracles. A neatly cut brown suit replaced the dusty, creased and greasy grey one he had worn before. His ruffled hair had smoothed down under brilliantine. A shave had taken much of the roughness from his face, and a smattering of talcum powder on a basis of cream had moved most of the battle marks from his face. He strode into the room as though rejuvenated. Apart from the dark lines beneath his eyes it was difficult to tell that he'd had an exciting and sleepless night. Constance looked at him with some admiration. What she did not know was that another transformation had taken place. In his pockets he had a new equipment of " gear." Ella Mellery lay with the quiet stillness of a corpse. Cardby took one look at her, was well satisfied.

" I don't think, my dear," he said, " that she will come round for another couple of hours. I've used the stuff before

and it usually means a three hour sleep. But I'd rather that you got her into that flat before she comes round. Then she'll have no chance of knowing where you've parked her. But once she is there make certain that she cannot get near a phone. Later in the morning I expect that Lomas will be calling on you. Recall him? He used to be with the Yard. It is all right for him to be with you because I am sending him, but under no consideration allow any other person to enter the place. Will you please get dressed as quickly as you can while I look after this woman? Then I'll hang around outside while you push her into any spare clothes you have which you think might make a reasonable fit. I daren't take the risk of her leaving here like that."

"But how on earth do I take her to Gloucester Terrace as she is?"

"That's easy. We get a taxi. You can telephone for one as soon as you are ready. Then we soak some whisky on her clothes, force some down her mouth, and explain to the taxi driver that she passed out after a heavy drinking bout, and you're trying to get her back quietly to her flat before any of her relatives can discover the terrible state she is in."

"I see." Constance Wheeler smiled, remarked: "I reckon, since you were talking about them, that if anybody found you with the Crown jewels in your hand you'd persuade them that you were merely removing them into safe custody. It must be quite a gift in its way, Mr. Cardby."

"Hurry along, Constance, I have a lot of work to do, and I want to see you both on your way. I dare not take any chances with this woman."

"And before I go would you mind telling me her name? It is awkward when you take a person along to a place as a guest, and you don't know them."

"If you call her Ella I think she'd consider that sufficiently nice."

Cardby lit a cigarette, sat down to wait. Things had moved so quickly that he had had no time to fashion a plan of campaign. But a picture began slowly to form in his mind. And it looked as though there was plenty of work and excitement in the offing. It was almost eight o'clock when Mick was recalled to the room, stared at Mrs. Mellery. Considering that an unconscious person is never easy to handle Constance had made a fair job. At any rate, whether the clothes fitted or suited, they were much better for a daylight trip than a nightdress and dressing gown. At his suggestion, Constance Wheeler rang for a taxi. While they waited he told the girl again and again the story she had to tell to the driver. He

was sure that she was word perfect by the time the hooter sounded outside the door. Cardby picked up his overcoat, turned up the collar round his face, nodded a head in the direction of the door, seized Ella under the armpits, and half carried her from the room. Constance held the door of the taxi open for him, and he laid the unconscious woman inside. His secretary had already said a few words to the driver, and he handed Mick a broad wink. The youngster shrugged his shoulders wearily as he said :

" I dunno why the blazes these women get themselves into this state."

Constance waved to him to indicate that all was clear. The cab faded away down the avenue. Mick closed the front door of the house, walked rapidly towards Streatham High Road. He was lucky, picked up a stray taxi near the library. Obviously, the driver was returning from the night beat in the West End. Cardby asked to be dropped at the corner of Windmill Street. They were passing Streatham Hill Station when Cardby first saw the posters. They made him smile as he read them :

COVENT GARDEN EXPLOSION
DETECTIVES' OFFICES BLOWN UP
LONDON BUILDING BLOWN UP
MYSTERIOUS LONDON EXPLOSION

It would certainly be worth the money to get a paper, he thought, but not until he had placed some space between himself and Streatham. The doctor might have given the police a too good description of the man who had stolen his motor car. Mick paid off the driver, walked round casually and indirectly until he arrived at Sammy's lodgings. He was more than anxious to hear something about the clients for whom Bill Moss drove. He mounted the stairs, frowned when he found that the bedroom door would not yield to his pressure. He tried again. The door was locked. That seemed odd. He knew Sammy's times fairly well, thought the man should have been in bed. Mick descended the stairs, started to search for the landlady. He found her in a filthy kitchen. She glared at him venomously, spat out :

" What'n hell d'you want running round my place like this, eh ? "

" I came in to see my friend, Sammy, the cab driver. Know where he is ? "

" So you want Sammy, do you? What do you know about all this trouble ? "

"Sorry, lady, but I've no idea what you're talking about. What trouble?"

"You've come here to see him, and you tell me that you ain't heard?"

"That is what I said, and it is precisely what I mean. Go right ahead."

"If you want any news I reckon you'd better get along to Charing Cross Hospital. They can tell you a lot more than folks like me knows about."

"Charing Cross Hospital? What's Sammy doing there, lady?"

"Best place to take blokes, ain't it, when they've had their heads bashed in? What do you reckon they do with men who've been crowned?"

"Oh, I see. When did this happen? I'd like to know something about it."

"Well, you can't hear much from me. All I know is that they found this address in his pocket and a copper came round to see me. Somebody pulled Sammy out of his cab in New Street last night and bashed his head in."

"Thanks very much, lady," said Mick. He felt slightly sick. He knew only too well what had happened. Sammy had worked too energetically in his search for information, and either Bill Moss or one of the boys had fallen wise to the game, and had caught up with him. For a moment Cardby wondered whether to pay a visit to the Hospital, decided that by doing that he would throw his own neck into the noose. The Boss and his men would expect Mick to pay a visit. For a certainty the hospital would be watched. He turned away, retraced his steps, held out his hand, said: "Here is a quid, lady, buy a few bits of fruit and a bunch of flowers, and take them along to Sammy for me. Tell him that if there is anything wanted he knows a gentleman who'll buy the bill without moaning."

Outside, the youngster was raising a hand for a taxi when he changed his mind, entered a public call-box instead. He dialled for the Euston police station. The man at the desk didn't appreciate the mystery of the caller's request when Mick said he wished to speak privately to the D.D.I.

"Our Divisional Detective Inspector doesn't talk to everybody," he said.

"Maybe not. Just tell your D.D.I. that I want to talk to him about that murder in Drummond Street that took place at about midnight. That's all."

He had not long to wait before the D.D.I. was on the line. Said Cardby:

"I don't want to say too much over the wire. The name

doesn't matter. In ten minutes I'll be having an early morning coffee in Bell's Café, Frith Street. I am wearing a brown suit, and can tell you plenty. Shall I see you there?"

"I don't like it at all, but I'll be along. I hope this is straight."

"You've never had a straighter piece of info. in your years as a split."

Mick had not been in the café for more than a minute when a burly man slid into a chair by his side, ordered a coffee, asked conversationally:

"Are you in the habit of telephoning strangers early in the morning?"

"That's me. Have you heard anything from the Brighton police about the angle on that Euston murder they collected a few hours ago?"

"Yes. And the dame had flown. What do you know about this set-up, eh?"

"Plenty. If it hadn't been for me there wouldn't have been a murder at all. The dead man was holding the man and woman for me when he was killed. I reckon I'm entitled to say that I know quite a bit about it."

"Is that so?" drawled the Inspector. "And who d'you reckon you are?"

"Maybe you've heard the name. The boys at the Yard know me. Mick Cardby."

The Inspector pushed back his chair a little, tilted his hat back, said:

"Don't try to pull anything like that on me. Why, man, the news is in all the papers this morning that you were killed when the offices blew up in Covent Garden! So why hand me out that sort of a line."

"That's a long story that doesn't matter at the moment. All I am saying at present is that I can give you the names of the people who——"

Cardby ceased speaking, grabbed the Inspector by the arm, threw him down on the café floor. Without hesitation he drew his automatic, fired at the man in the doorway. As he pulled the trigger a bullet smacked into the wall behind the Inspector's chair. Cardby fired again. The man in the doorway grasped his stomach, groaned, pitched face downwards.

"Well, Cash Mason," remarked Cardby, "you had it coming to you."

The few patrons in the café were squealing with fear.

CHAPTER XV

MORE MYSTERY

THE Inspector scrambled to his feet, made a dive for Cardby. Mick held him off roughly, pointed to the man lying on the doorway, at the gun on the floor. The man from Euston wiped the sweat from his forehead, said :

" Well—what—well—eh—eh ? Murder, eh ? What's it all mean, eh ? What ? "

" Nothing much except that the man on the floor worked hand in glove with the two who committed your Euston murder. Maybe he thought I was going to put in a squeal. At any rate he came in with that gun in his mitt, and you don't stand on ceremony with blokes like that. Why, man, if I had not knocked you down you'd have been dead by now. Look where the bullet plugged into that wall. I'm going to get out of here, pronto. I'll tell you what I'll do. Get in touch with the divisional police, and make a statement to the Inspector. Don't, whatever you do, mention to any one else that I shot the man. Tell the others that it was self-defence, and that you can find the man who did it. Just tell the truth to the Inspector. He knows me well. Say that for the best reasons in the world I don't want it to be known for a while that I am alive. Say that I will make a full statement at the first possible moment, but I dare not take the risk of any publicity now. I will see you in half an hour in the long bar on the main line platform at Euston Station. Don't make any mistakes. Now I'll leave you with this man. His name, by the way, is Cash Mason. He is a small timer working for the biggest crook there is in Europe. Now get busy."

Before the astonished Inspector could say anything Mick had pushed his way through the gathering crowd and vanished. As he hurried away he was cursing himself for being such an entire nitwit. Since they had crowned Sammy for his effort they must have known that he was working for Cardby. And, that being so, it was a certainty that they left Cash Mason to keep an eye on Sammy's digs in case Mick turned up. The papers might have been announcing that Mick Cardby was a corpse amid the ruins, but the Boss was taking no chances. The youngster wondered even as he walked if any one was tailing him, was even nervous about hailing a cab in case he engaged one of Bill Moss' boy friends as his jehu. He twisted back on his tracks through the Soho maze,

headed east again, cutting and twisting through side streets. All the time he kept his grip on the gun in his coat pocket. He cut through into Long Acre, walked along for a time, took another look round to make certain that he was not being followed, and then dived round the corner into Endell Street.

He took out his cigarette case, opened it, held it at a height near his shoulder, took a look behind through the mirror inset on the side of the case. He was not being followed. His steps became more decisive, his pace quickened. When he was abreast a doorway half-way along the street he wheeled round on his heels, vanished from sight into the dark interior. Grasping the rickety stair rail he hastened up the steps, taking them two at a time. On the second floor he rapped sharply on a door. It opened almost instantly. A girl stood facing him. Her face was pale. She smiled, walked into the room behind her. Cardby followed, threw his hat down on a settee, sat down beside it. The girl stood with her hands on her hips. She had been more than ordinarily pretty, but the wear and tear of London night life had taken its toll, and only traces of the beauty remained. She sat on the edge of a table, stared at the youngster oddly.

"Well, Mick," she said, "who are you running away from this time, eh?"

"Half the population of London, Lucy. Have you heard anything from our friend, Lomey, or hasn't he come through on the blower yet?"

"Sure he has. I had a word with him less than half an hour ago. I gave him the message, and he said that he was on his way and would be here by eleven. Anything you want me to do besides entertaining your guest?"

"Not at the moment, except to make me a cup of tea, and give me a bite of food. I don't want to stay here for long, Lucy. You've been a very good pal to me in the past, and I don't want it to be known that I've ever seen you. At the moment, little one, I happen to be too hot to touch."

The girl put a kettle on a gas-ring as she was asking Cardby:

"Mean that you're on the spot again, Mick? I reckon you've got so used to it now that you're uncomfortable when you can walk around in comfort."

"It's a bit different this time, Lucy. I am aiming for such big game that a hundred blokes in London are searching for me. I reckon it'd be worth a cool thou. to any one of 'em who rubbed me out. That being so I don't think I'll come back here to meet Lomey. I want you to give him a message from me. And, for God's sake, don't let the note get out of

your hand until he has it. Give me a sheet of paper and a pencil, please dear."

Cardby sat at the table, scribbled down the name and address at Gloucester Terrace, made no other comment on the note, placed it in an envelope, handed it to Lucy with another warning. The girl laughed, said :

"Lordy, are you getting nerves? I'm ashamed of you, Mick. I thought you were born without them. Or is it that you don't trust your little Lucy?"

"You know it isn't that, kid. I'd trust you with anything—as I have done many times before. But this time I'm running after a different sort of bird, and I've got to watch my step with two pairs of eyes."

"You've handled plenty of tough birds before to-day, Mick, and lived."

"That's true, and I'm just hoping that I'll be doing the same again. But I want you to fade right out of the picture as soon as you've delivered this note. Tell Lomey that he will understand what I want him to do."

Cardby sat on the settee again, drank the tea, smiled when the girl handed him a couple of cold sausages. He knew where she'd been in the early hours of the morning!

"And now," he said, "I'd like you to get me a taxi. It is most important that you should get it with care. I can't trust drivers very far to-day. Just let me know when it is waiting outside. Don't ring for one. They might send you a man you don't know, and that wouldn't suit me at all."

The girl smacked a jaunty hat on her head, walked out of the room. If Lucy had no distinguished moral attributes she had at least the ability to take things in her stride. Within five minutes she returned.

"I got my pal Charlie. You'll find him a real jewel, Mick. Anything you want done he'll do for you. And he's been around places enough to know how to fasten his trap, and see that it stays closed. And they're rare." *

"Thanks so much, kid. Grab this. You may want some more face powder soon. Give my love to Lomey, hand him the note, tell him he will understand what I want done, and mention that there is a bare chance that he will be seeing me later in the day. But at the moment I'm not very certain where I am going or what I am going to do. Adios, little one. Be seeing you."

Mick crossed the pavement in two quick strides, dived into the cab even before giving any directions to the driver. Then, he rapped on the window.

"I want Euston main line, and don't be too long getting there. I'm late."

The Inspector must also have thought that Cardby was late. When the youngster arrived he was handling some coffee as though he didn't know whether to take a drink or chew the cup. Mick bought a milk, and sat down at the table with the man—but not before he had taken a concentrated look round the buffet. As far as he could judge the coast was clear. "Did you give my message to the Inspector about the Mason job?" he asked. "And what did he say when you said the few words to him?"

"He told me that there was always trouble wherever you seemed to put in an appearance, but he seemed quite satisfied to take your word about things for the time being. I can't say that I would have taken it quite so cushily. But never mind that Soho affair. After all, that's got nothing to do with me. What I want is the real low-down on the murder of my own bloke. Who did shoot Archie Watson? Why did that call come from Brighton?"

"I haven't got the time to go into the details now. They'll have to wait until another day. I'm working on something that's a thousand times bigger than your small murder, or that Soho shooting. I'll just tell you this: While I was working on my own job it became necessary for me to see that two people were held for a while. I know you official police can't work as I do, but there's no red tape fastening me down. I picked on Archie Watson to hold them for me because I've used him before, and have always found him straight, full of guts, and thorough."

"I've made inquiries, and I heard that he was far from being straight."

"We're not using the word in the same sense, Inspector. When I left the three of them everything was all right. In some way one of them got hold of a gun—and that was the end of Archie. Now I can't tell you how it was done, or just what occurred. That you'll have to find out later for yourself. But I can pass along information that's very much more to the point, infinitely more valuable. I can tell you the two people I left with him, and they are the pair you want for murder. You can't charge just one of them. Legally, it doesn't matter a hoot which one fired the shot. So you want them both."

"I'll say I do! Let me lay my hands on them. That's all I want."

"I know, and I've got an idea that you won't find it so easy even after I've told you their names and addresses. The man they work for is the most cunning devil in Europe, and he wouldn't employ fools. The people you want are Edward Mailey, and Phyllis Warren. There is nothing

to be gained by going there now, but their address until last night was Kerne House, Brunswick Square. There, they both had flats. That is where I first collected them, and it was from there that Archie and I escorted them to his place in Drummond Street. For reasons which don't concern you I followed Phyllis Warren down to Brighton. At that time I was more than interested in the woman who travelled with her. That being so I asked a friend assisting me to give the tip-off to the Brighton police about the Warren girl after I had collected the other one. From what you tell me, he handed over the information, and the bird had flown."

"Why didn't you let me know about this before you started travelling down to Brighton after this Warren woman? I can't understand that."

"I can. The reason is very simple. I did not then know that anything had happened to Archie Watson, had no idea whatever that he'd been murdered."

"Oh, that explains things. And have you no idea where I can find this Mailey bloke, and the woman now? If you've been tailing them you ought to know plenty. So where do I start looking for the pair of 'em?"

"Search me! And I wouldn't advise you to look for a pair. You can bet they'll keep as far apart as they can while the heat is on. Perhaps if you went through all the stuff they've left behind at Kerne House you might come across a line. I took them away from their flats in such a hurry that they had no time to start collecting oddments. At any rate, you've got nothing to lose by trying it. I can't help you further."

"You can, Cardby. Since you know all there is to be known about it I want you to come round to Kerne House with me. I'm thinking that you can help me quite a lot. I'm ready to move when you are."

"You may be—but I'm not going with you. There's been one shooting already this morning. For a certainty there'll be another if I put a foot near those flats. And the next time I may not be quite so lucky."

"And suppose I insist that you should come along with me. What then?"

"Nothing, except that I'd refuse point blank, and you could do what the hell you liked. After all, Inspector, I've done your job for you, told you the names of the people you want. What else do you expect. I don't aim to give you a pair of murderers on a gold plate. I've got my own work to do, and it's a damned sight tougher job than you've ever had."

"But it is vitally important that I should get hold of

you whenever I want you. So how do you suggest I'm going to manage that, Cardby?"

"To start with, dim down on the name part of the speech. I am dead for the time being, and unless the news of that shooting has travelled round the Soho grapevine I intend to stay dead. Don't worry about me. I have got no intention whatever of walking out on you. And remember, Inspector, that you are not alone in your small moment of anxiety. There are another hundred in London who're more anxious to know where I am than you'd ever be. You're looking for murderers. I'm running away from murderers. In that there lies a lot of difference. It isn't that I am very nervous. It is only that I'll be lucky if I'm not rubbed out before lunch time."

"My God! It doesn't sound possible. Are you trying to pull my leg?"

"Use your dome! Do I look as though I'm sprucing? Was that guy in Frith Street sprucing when he fired that shot? Because if he was I'd say that he's got no knowledge whatever as to what constitutes a practical joke." Cardby rose to his feet, pulled his coat round him, glanced round the buffet again. It seemed that the coast was still clear.

"Wait just one moment," said the Inspector. "Before you go, just let me know where I can find you in case anything really urgent turns up, and I want your help. I can't start looking for you as well as the others."

"And have you thought that later in the morning the people looking for me might put a tail on you in case you contact me? Do you want to join in the burial party when it arrives—because you can have my share."

"But I know your offices have gone skyward, and apart from that I've no idea where to get hold of you."

"If you want me very, very urgently call at Scotland Yard, and ask for Inspector Gribble. But don't make that move unless you're forced to."

"The Yard? Inspector Gribble? What on earth will you be doing there?"

"Doing something that I consider really important. But don't make any telephone call, and refuse to speak to any person other than Gribble. Now I'll be on my way. And I wish you a successful day's hunting. So long."

Mick left the Inspector scratching his head. The youngster was not very surprised. He was beginning to feel somewhat dazed himself. He arrived at the Yard shortly after ten o'clock, saw Gribble's face sag as he was shown into the office. The Yard man grasped Cardby's shoulders.

"Don't worry," said Mick. "It is me, and I am alive. Sit down, Misery."

"But what the hell's all this story about—why, I've been trying to get in touch with you or your father for the last hour. I understood that you had gone up with the building. Is this a joke of some sort?"

"You splits have an odd sense of humour. No, Gribby, I framed the death to give myself a breather. I didn't want the man who had planned it so carefully to know that his best laid scheme had gone wrong. So don't say anything to anybody about the fact that I am here. The only caller—and I hope he keeps miles away—will be a D.D.I. from Euston. And he won't come unless it is vitally important. Now do you mind if I use your blower for a moment. I want to make a couple of local calls. All right?"

Gribble pushed the instrument over to him. Mick gave the name and address of Constance Wheeler's sister to the switchboard operator, asked for the number. He had not long to wait before he heard the girl's voice.

"First of all, Beautiful," said the youngster, "be more careful how you use this telephone. I recognised your voice immediately. I gave a ring to inquire whether all was well, or whether there'd been any bother."

"Not so far. Your friend is still very tired. I have the impression that she will rest for quite a while yet. Anything you want done, sir?"

"No, I have arranged for you to have another guest. You know him. He will arrive, I should say, at about half-past eleven. Don't under any sort of circumstance let any one else get into that flat. And be careful how you lift that receiver. Let the other person speak first. If you don't get my voice drop the receiver, and call it a day. That's all, angel. Good-bye."

Inspector Gribble listened to the one-sided conversation, frowned deeply. "This is getting me right out of my depths, Mick. Are we all mad?"

"Have been for years. I'll get this other number." This time he had no need to ask for it. Very shortly he was speaking again: "Lucy, you know who this is. Has that gentleman friend of yours arrived as yet?"

"Came through the door not more than a minute ago. Hold on, will you."

"Hello, Lomey," said Mick, "did you get that note all right?"

"Surely, I've got it in my hand now. Is that the place to which you dispatched the parcel we were talking about earlier on to-day?"

"Exactly. Take a good look at that note, memorise the details on it, and then burn it right away. I didn't intend that anybody should carry it in their pocket. I have just telephoned, and discovered that the parcel came to hand quite safely so you have nothing to do except to take it into safe custody. I will give you a ring later, but watch your step. A bloke shot at me a couple of hours ago. Maybe they don't like you either. 'Bye."

"A bloke shot at you, Mick?" asked Gribble. "Lord, this is a real asylum."

"Not a bit, Sunshine. Just a few people strolling round with ambitions about turning it into a charnel house. Now I'll come to the main cause of my visit. I am on the spot, Gribby, and I'm as tired as a man can be. I haven't been to bed since the night before last. I dare not risk staying for an hour in any place without a guard, and I can't remain in any one spot for more than an hour. So I was wondering if you'd let me settle down on the chair in the corner of your office. If nobody comes please wake me up in about an hour. I'll try hard not to snore. D'you mind?"

"Mick, I'll look after you like a guardian angel. I know what it is to miss a night's kip, and it's nearly shortened my life. Get down to it."

The youngster needed no second invitation. He took off his overcoat, laid it over the back of the chair. Then he took the automatic from the pocket, and placed it in the side pocket of his lounge suit. Gribble said:

"My oath! What d'you think things are coming to, Mick, when you can't sleep at the Yard in daylight without a gun near your hand? Have you blown the top?"

"Almost. I will completely if I don't have a little spot of shut eye."

Mick had scarcely closed his eyes when he had passed out into a heavy sleep. Gribble looked at him sympathetically. He had known Cardby since he was a babe in arms, had been a constable on the beat with his father. The rest was not destined to last for long. Cardby had been slumbering for about twenty minutes when the telephone bell jangled on Gribble's desk. The Inspector stared at Mick, and cursed as he lifted the receiver.

"All right," he said petulantly, "better tell him that I'll see him."

He walked over to Cardby, shook his shoulder gently. The youngster sprang from the chair with such violence that he knocked Gribble down! At that moment there came a knock on the door. Cardby's hand slid towards his pocket, and he looked towards the man on the floor inquiringly. Before

Gribble could speak the door was flung open, and the D.D.I. from Euston burst into the office like a tornado. His face was flushed.

"Hell!" exclaimed Cardby. "Couldn't you leave me in peace for a time?"

"Peace be damned!" shouted the Inspector. "I've found one of your two murderers. It was quite easy. I went to Kerne House. Edward Mailey was lying on the floor in his flat with a bullet through his heart!"

The clock in the room seemed to tick with inordinate strength.

CHAPTER XVI

AND MORE WORRIES

"TELL me," said Gribble wearily, "is there anything in London at the moment except corpses? This place must be like a cemetery, Mick."

Cardby helped the Inspector to his feet before he turned to the D.D.I.

"I'll take a bet with you that Mailey was never shot in that flat," he said. The two detectives stared at the youngster blankly. Maybe they had the thought that his mind had finally cracked under the strain.

"But I was the first to find the body on the floor there," said the Euston Inspector. "Are you suggesting that I carried it into the place?"

"I'm not, but I'll bet you that somebody else did. Did you happen to notice whether there was any blood on the carpet under him, near him?"

"I left one of my men to watch the flat, called the police surgeon, and came straight along here. You've got a lot of explaining to do."

"Maybe. And you've got some hard thinking to do—even if it hurts you. Tell them to be careful with that bullet when it's taken out. That's all the advice I can give you at the moment. And you'd better beat back to that flat and talk to the porters, chambermaids, floor waiters. Whoever carried that corpse into the place must have made a noise. Get them to go over the lifts and the staircases with magnifying glasses. Tell them that they're looking for bloodstains. And I'll be staggered if they don't find some. Well, this is your job. So why hang around here?"

"Because I'm not quite satisfied that you're not holding an

amount of stuff up your sleeve. You can't play those games with me, sonny."

"Don't talk to him like that," said Gribble irritably. "I know Cardby as well as any one does. If you knew him at all you'd be only too pleased to take advice from him. I've been thankful for it many a time."

Mick bowed low, and lit a cigarette. He was smiling slightly. The D.D.I. developed an increasing frown. This was getting beyond him.

"What makes you so certain that the man wasn't killed in his own home? He wouldn't be the first to die there, and it doesn't seem at all odd to me that a man should be murdered on his own carpet."

"Inspector, don't trouble me too much. Edward Mailey, I am sure, was not murdered in his own flat because he was afraid to return to it. You've got to remember that, apart from anything else, he had just committed one murder or had been a party to it. And you've got to remember that his boss wouldn't permit him to go back to his own flat. Be sensible."

"I am. And who the hell is this boss you're talking about? Believe me, Cardby, I'm more than a bit anxious to see that man whoever he is."

Cardby, for the first time for a while, threw back his head, laughed.

"Then take my advice—don't. You're not used to people like him. Just leave me to handle that end of the case for you. Now please go, and leave me to my troubles. I've got plenty of 'em, and I want to be alone."

"I'll be wanting more than this theoretical talk from you before many hours have gone by. Where do I find you then? I must know that, Cardby."

"You'll probably find me on the office floor in the place usually tenanted by the Commissioner for Police. There will be a bullet in my heart, and you can charge the Commissioner if you want to. I don't mind."

The Inspector looked at Cardby as though he'd have loved the chance to provide London with yet another corpse. Then he marched out.

"Are we in on this lot, Mick, or is the stuff still being handled by the divisional men?" I'd like to have a crack at it myself."

"Then get along to Kerne House, Brunswick Square, and give that Euston man a helping hand in the flat lately tenanted by Edward Mailey. You'll find the case rather more than interesting. Don't forget to remember—being Irish myself—that you haven't set eyes on me since the offices took their first flight. I've got plenty to do, but I'll find time to

telephone you, or to call in. I think I'll walk out by the front entrance."

Mick was sliding into his overcoat when the telephone bell rang again. Gribble answered the call, frowned as he listened, nodded his head once or twice, and then asked one question somewhat abruptly :

" At what time, and from where ? "

When he replaced the receiver he turned to Mick with a serious face.

" Sonny," he said, " it isn't often that I pry into your private affairs, but this time I can't help it. Tell me, what case are you working on ? "

" That's too long a story," said Cardby. " Why ? Is there some more trouble ? "

" I don't know. But the call I just had gave me a message from your father, and I must confess that I can't make head or tail of it."

" From my father ? Surely you got the message wrong, Gribby ? "

" I did not. The call came through from the Maidstone police. Maybe you can understand it. I don't profess to. What case are you working on ? "

" Oh, forget that, Gribby, and let me hear something about that message."

" Your father called in the police station half an hour ago. He asked them to get in touch with me, and give me a message. I didn't take a note of it because there wasn't very much. Here it is *verbatim* : 'Read news in morning paper. Cannot understand at all. Am coming to London at once.' And that was the whole of the message, Mick. So what does it all mean ? "

The youngster plonked down weakly in a chair, passed a hand through his hair, and looked at Gribble mournfully as he remarked :

" It only means that the entire spanner has been thrown into the works, that hell is going to start popping very shortly, that the lid has blown off everything ! I can't for the life of me—Let me have that telephone for a moment. I think I am beginning to see daylight."

" I'll be damned if I am, and it'd need more than a telephone to teach me anything about this lay-out. The whole affair is out of Bedlam."

Mick dialled his home number. Even under the talcum powder he had demonstrably grown paler. Gribble watched him, reflected that it was the first time he had seen Cardby's hand quivering. The youngster waited until he heard his mother's voice, then called to her :

"Mother, dear, this is Mick speaking. I am perfectly all right. You will remember what I asked you to tell Dad when I rang up about midnight. Well, did you manage to give him that message, dear?"

"No," said Mrs. Cardby. "He did not telephone, and I've heard nothing from him. Why, is there something you want him to do?"

"Plenty, dear, but don't bother yourself. I'll be seeing him soon." Mick was not joking. There were two things he was more than anxious for his father to do. The first was to stay out of London, the second to get back to Mrs. Forbes as quickly as he could. He turned to Gribble, said: "Did you get any idea of where he would call when he arrived in London?"

"None, but I don't think you need think about that for an instant, Mick. Since he has just got the news he is bound to make his first call at Henrietta Street to find out what has happened to you and the offices."

Cardby groaned slightly, wiped some cold sweat from his face. Then he pulled on his overcoat, grabbed his hat, and started towards the door.

"Where are you heading for, Mick?" asked Gribble. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes, work out whereabouts on the run from Maidstone my father will be now, and telephone the police along that line asking them to stop him. He must not get anywhere near those offices, Gribby!"

"My God! It isn't like you to be in such a state of nerves, lad."

"No, nothing like this has happened to me before. Did the message say whether my father was travelling alone, or had he a companion?"

"I have told you all that was said. Does it make such a difference?"

"Just a difference between one corpse and two! I'm away, Gribby. Adios."

Mick Cardby did not walk far. As he headed north up Whitehall he called at a pub he had been introduced to by his father years before, asked if he could use the telephone. The manager nodded his head with such joy that the youngster felt inclined to borrow money from him. He dialled Lucy's number, knew that around that hour she would be certain to be at home. He was right. She was. Cardby's words were few and explicit:

"You knew my offices, kid. Get round there and look for my father. I am not sure that he'll arrive, but if he does give him a stiff prod in the ribs, and take him out for lunch to the

most crowded place you can find. When you've got him away from the cops and firemen, the salvage men and the assessors at my place tell him that you're doing it by my special request. I can't say more at this moment, but if you can get him away from the place before he gets hurt I'll hand you twenty quid so long as you dump him in a place that's dead safe, and where I can take a word with him in an hour or two. If you collect him, and you can fix things, get back to your flat, and I'll tinkle the bell in about two hours."

"I think I understand just what you want, sir. I will do my best to see that the order is carried out. I don't say anything when I meet him, other than to take him for a walk—is that the rough idea?"

"Yes, and make him look as much like a pick-up as you can. He'll know what's happening. It shouldn't be a very difficult job. All fixed, sister?"

"Sure, for eight to-morrow night, and the date seems good to me, boy."

"Lady, it looks more than pleasant to me. When you meet the old bloke you might ask him where his cargo is—because she might object."

"A nasty piece of work, eh? I'll look after her all right, Peter. Your little Joan never forgot how to remember that two and two make five."

"Sounds as though we've known each other for a long time. Thanks."

Lucy laid down the receiver. That Cardby boy was certainly fast on the uptake. She wondered how long he would stay that way before the rubbing out party came drifting along his way. Still, he was a swell guy while he lasted, and Lucy's view of men seemed to add to one total—that there were not many of 'em about. She sighed, returned to her bottled coffee.

Mick dickered about for a while after leaving the telephone. He was scared for about the second time in his life. And, as usual, he found that his nerves had not developed the jitters because of himself. He was troubled about his father's visit; was certain that their offices were "cased," that whichever one of the partners placed a foot within a hundred yards of the premises was going to remember it for a long time, or forget it for ever! Mick was mostly noted for his impetuosity. This time he wished he had some reckless person by his side, wished that he had only himself about whom to think.

A hundred different thoughts were crowding through his head in an uncomfortable procession. Mostly, he was wondering what had happened to Mrs. Forbes, what move the Boss would make since he was certain to have heard that his beloved

Ella had been "lifted." The youngster could not imagine Mellery holding his hand for long. The man hadn't built up his fearsome name by dwelling in thought for long when action was needed. More than anything, Mick wanted advice. And he could imagine no quarter towards which he could turn. Abruptly, he changed his mind about the immediate programme, telephoned Lucy again. He was lucky, found her as she was leaving the flat, said to her :

"I've changed my mind, angel. I must see the old man before very long. So don't take him on a long prowl. Make certain that you are not being tailed, and then head for that little tea-house, I've taken you to a few times in Southampton Row. I will be waiting. But tell my father that I'm sure he'll be followed, and I want him to throw off the tail before he makes any contact with me. That's a matter of life and death."

"Splendid, little one. I'll be seeing you on the mortuary slab. S'long."

Mick wandered northwards by a devious route, knew that he was "on the spot," felt that each passer-by might be likely to take a crack at him. If only his father had telephoned home ! The youngster's brain was racing through a hundred schemes, each of which only convinced him that he was fixed between the devil and the deep sea. It was almost two hours later when he turned into Southampton Row. His movements became more cautious. So far he had seen no sign of a "tail." Certainly he had no desire to discover one now that he had reached the end of his rambling trail. Lucy was waiting in the tea-shop—and Cardby Senior was with her. The father's face was drawn and pale. He looked as though he'd been parted from his bed for a long time. He rose wearily as Mick walked in, bowed with mock solemnity as he said :

"Thanks for looking after the offices so well, lad. I knew I could trust you to see that everything was all right. How well you worked !"

"Heavy sarcasm, Pop, was never your strong line. Would you mind beating it now, Lucy, so that the firm can enter the conference hall ? Thanks for what you've done, and I'll be round to settle things up with you as soon as the air has cleared a bit. You arranged things very neatly."

"Thank you, sir, for the testimonials. I learned my job in a good, hard school. Any time things are awkward, and you reckon you're right out of your depth, just pass on the news to little Lucy, and I'll use my dome on your behalf. Anything else you want done at the moment, Mick ?"

"Not just now, sister, but I'd like you to hang around your flat in case I do want you. You see, at the moment I'm not

certain which way I'm going to jump. I might be glad to have you holding my hand later."

"The mitt is ready to be hired whenever you want to borrow it."

The girl winked broadly, marched out of the shop as though she'd just bought it. Cardby ordered a cup of tea, lit a smoke, looked at his father:

"And what the hell is the big idea about staging this return of the native act, Dad? It couldn't have been done at a worse moment."

"All right, Mick. Don't look at me as though I'm something that the cat has just brought in. What d'you expect me to do when I hear that our offices have been blown sky high, and I read a hint that you probably went with them? Am I supposed to go on with my knitting like a good boy?"

"I certainly didn't want you to leave that woman's side until you heard from me. Now I'm landed into the cart with a sudden thud."

"Let's cut out the cackle, Mick. What I want to know first of all is what happened to our offices. Did the Boss decide to stage a show?"

"Yes—and no. He made all the arrangements, but I blew up the joint."

"Eh? Stop me and buy one! You say you smashed our place up, lad?"

"I did. I was getting a bit tired of it in any case. I'll tell you just what happened, explain why I made the move, and then you can judge for yourself whether I was right or wrong. After I left you . . ."

Ten minutes passed before Mick ceased speaking. His father dragged slowly on his pipe, made no attempt to interrupt. But the lines on his forehead grew deeper as he listened. The youngster concluded by explaining the events of the morning, said finally:

"And that ends the concert. Now what does the brain of the firm say?"

"Nothing much. I never wanted to touch this job from the start. I'm more than sorry now that you persuaded me into it. I knew we'd bitten off more than is good for a normal digestion. You imagine the Boss really thinks that you went up with the building? Is that your idea, Mick?"

"It was—but it isn't now. You see that Warren woman must have got in touch with him from Brighton to tell him about the snatch, and she would not be under any delusion about the person responsible for it. On top of that he must have gathered the news by now that I put a slug into Cash Mason, and corpses don't go around shooting people. What's

troubling me, Dad, is that man's next move. You can bet your last penny that he won't sit back and take things steadily. I'd give a lot to know what his next move is likely to be. Are you anything of a thought reader?"

"Not to that extent, lad. I might take a blind guess and say that his first ambition will be to repair the omission in the matter of you living after that explosion. I don't think you've ever been on a tougher spot."

"Somehow, Dad, I don't think that you are right. It is a certainty that he wants me rubbed out. But he daren't play that game at the moment."

"And why not? He isn't the sort to have any scruples, Mick."

"Don't I know it! That isn't what's in my mind. I know that the Boss is haywire about his wife. D'you think he'd risk laying me out until he has his wife back with him? Because I don't. He'd be too afraid that there'd be a slight reprisal coming his way. Knowing the man's mind as I do I am sure he'd walk round with the fixed idea that if he rubbed me out it would be curtains for his wife. Don't you agree?"

"There's something in it, Mick. But the Boss is such a weird bird that you can't attempt to follow his line of thought with any certainty. After all that you've told me have you got any definite ideas in your mind about the next move? We dare not hold our hands for too long. Even if he doesn't collect you I expect the police will. I know that you shot Mason in self-defence, and I know that you have the D.D.I. as a witness, but that won't stop the police from hounding you in the near future. And if you get the Boss and the police both looking for you I wouldn't imagine that you'd be a lot of good to anybody. You'll have to move very, very quickly—or not at all. That's how I see the lay of things."

"There's quite an amount I want to know before I decide one way or another. You haven't yet told me your end of the story. I mean about Mrs. Forbes. After all, Dad, she is our ace in the hole. Without her, we're sunk."

"I think you'd be safer if you concentrated on Mrs. Mellery. The Boss doesn't give a damn whether the Forbes woman lives or dies."

"All of which doesn't help me a bit. I want to know what has happened to Mrs. Forbes, where she is now, who is with her, what arrangements you made before you left her. I don't like running round blindfolded."

"I can soon explain everything, Mick, and then you'll realise that I've staged the whole programme very neatly. I took her down to a little Kentish village called Headcorn. I've got a pal down there. He's a retired copper. When

I learnt the news about the office, I left him to take charge of her, but I thought I'd better play the cards two ways so I fixed up for an additional guard. Surely, two people can look after her, Mick?"

"I'm not so certain. A lot depends on the second person you enlisted."

The father smiled slightly and lit his pipe again before he said:

"I don't think you need worry on that score. The other person is absolutely reliable. Before I left Headcorn I sent a wire to Constance Wheeler asking her to go to Headcorn immediately, and I left the other man to explain the position to her when she arrived. I've got a brain, lad."

"You certainly have," remarked the youngster weakly. "Of course, you had to put the address on that telegram?" Mick rose to his feet, passed a hand over his forehead and reached for his hat.

"Naturally, I did. What's the matter. Where are you heading for, lad?"

"For the nearest telephone, Dad. I am going to ring up Mrs. Wheeler."

"Isn't that a bit risky, Mick? I think you're taking too many chances."

"And I've got a lead weight in the pit of my stomach before I make that call to Mrs. Wheeler! Sit down until I come back with the bad news. And I'd advise you to order some strong tea while you're waiting. I'm told it acts as a restorative at times when the heart is missing on five cylinders."

His father blinked his eyes as Mick hurried out of the tea-shop.

CHAPTER XVII

DIZZY MOMENTS

NOR more than five minutes elapsed before the youngster returned. One glance at his face was enough to demonstrate to his father that all was far from being well. Cardby was biting his nether lip, and his hands were tightly clenched as he sat down at the table.

"Well, Mick, I can see that you're not pleased with the set-up. So what?"

"Pleased? Like hell I am! I've been on the line to Mrs. Wheeler, and all that's wrong is tied in a packet and left on her doorstep. The local Post Office people have been

round, have been telephoning. They want to know what has happened to the telegraph boy who left the office nearly two hours ago to deliver a wire to her. The boy has not returned, and she, of course, has received no telegram! That means that the Boss, by now, will have his mitts on Mrs. Forbes again. It might mean, also that your boy friend at Headcorn won't be drawing any more of his pension."

"But why on earth should that have happened?" asked the startled father. "I thought that I was playing for complete safety when I made the move."

"I know, Pop. You meant well. But it so happens that Constance Wheeler is looking after Mrs. Mellery for me! And you can add to that the fact that the Boss would have somebody watching that house as soon as he knew that his wife had been snatched. I can understand only too well why the boy never arrived with that telegram. This is a damned fine kettle of fish!"

"You said it! Seems that I've messed the whole affair up. I reckon, Mick, that I'd better get along to Headcorn as soon as I can. What d'you say?"

"I think you'd be wasting your time. The man who collected that wire from the boy wouldn't let any grass grow under his feet before he made a move. I'll bet he arrived in Headcorn nearly an hour ago. I reckon your best move would be to telephone the police at Headcorn, and suggest in a tactful manner that they might do you a good turn by ambling round to your friend's place just to see that all is well. Tell them that you will ring again in half an hour to hear if there is any news."

"What are you going to do while I get along with that job, sonny?"

"Nothing. There's no point in me making any move until I know what has happened to that woman. I'll take you along to Lucy's place, and you can use her telephone. I can sit there in a state of misery, and wait for the answer. We'd better not travel together. You go first, and I'll follow in a few minutes. Keep your eyes peeled for a tail. There must be hundreds of 'em looking for us, and I'd rather be a free agent for the next few hours."

The father sighed heavily as he rose to his feet, walked out of the shop. Ten minutes later Mick followed him. The youngster was more than unhappy. He could see the entire edifice crashing round his ears, could guess that the Boss was smiling somewhat at the sudden turn of events. Mick was walking slowly along Bury Street when he first noticed that a man who had paced behind him down Bedford Place was still clinging to his heels. The youngster knew that accidents

often happen. But he was taking no chances. As he turned into Hart Street he saw a constable a few yards away, strolled over to him, smiled as he said :

" There is a man walking behind me, constable, wearing a dark brown suit, and carrying an umbrella. For the last five minutes I have been watching him accosting women, and some of them were most annoyed. I thought of having a word with him, and then I thought it would have more effect if you spoke to him. This is the bloke just coming round the corner. Were I in your place I'd advise him to keep his eyes on the pavement, and dim down on his ambitions as a Lothario. It isn't fair to the women."

Cardby grinned as he cut across Holborn, turned his head in time to see the constable talking to the man in the brown suit, and then hastened his step as he cut through the side roads off Kingsway. He walked past Lucy's place a couple of times before he dived through the doorway. He found his father pacing the small room. He had some right to be disconsolate.

" I've made the call," he said, " and now I'm waiting for the answer. I only hope that your bet is a mile adrift, Mick, but I've got the unhappy feeling that you're a good guesser. Every damned thing has gone wrong with this case since we made a start. Now we're worse off than ever. Blimey, I'd rather be padding the hoof again than walking into a party like this."

" Like a cup of tea, darling ?" asked Lucy. " Since you both look like a pair of stuffed corpses I reckon you can do with a spot of something."

" Sounds a bright idea to me," said Mick. " I'll use your telephone if you don't mind, sister. Send the bill along to me I'm a universal provider."

He dialled the number of the flat in Gloucester Terrace, was relieved when he recognised Lomas's voice over the wire, asked anxiously :

" Is everything all right at your end, Lomey ? I'm a bit worried."

" So am I. Your cargo has come to life, and a happy time is being had by all. Would you like me to save trouble by throttling it—or what ?"

" Just hold the fort, and see that no chances are taken. You are quite sure that everything is on the square ? I don't want any slip-up, Lomey."

" Leave your uncle to look after things. I'll see that there are no accidents of any sort. I hope that your health remains good."

" At the time of going to press, but I've got a few doubts

about the future. I'll either be along within a couple of hours or I'll be ringing you. Tell my girl friend that she must make no outside calls."

"I am entertaining both of 'em very adequately. This is the sort of job I used to lie in bed and dream about. I'm in heaven."

"That's where you'll end the day with a bit of luck if your conscience is clear. Remember, Lomey, take no chances, and don't trust anybody. Good-bye."

"Any real news from the other end of the wire?" asked his father.

"Seems to be the only place in England where things are all right. Thanks for the tea, Lucy. One day I'll take you out to a real party."

"From the bit I've seen of them, brother, I don't think I like your idea of a party. I've never found sudden death very amusing. Want me to leave?"

"Not at the moment, darling. Just sit down and make yourself at home."

They sat for a while in silence. The father was the first to speak:

"I don't think we'll be able to get along with this job at all, Mick, unless we call in the Yard. It seems to me essential that we should have some official backing. And we certainly want more men than we've got."

"I was going to suggest that you should have a word with Gribble about the general set-up. He wants the Boss very badly, and might be able to give you a helping hand. But I'd rather plough a lonely furrow. Maybe my methods wouldn't be met with any enthusiastic burst of approval by the Yard."

"What does that matter so long as you're safe and sound, sonny?"

"I'll tell you more about it when you've heard from Headcorn, Dad. Until then I'm hoping for the best and expecting the worst. Another cup, Lucy?"

Mick did not have to wait for very long. He tensed when the telephone bell jangled. His father gripped the receiver as though afraid that he might burn himself. He gave his name, and for a couple of minutes played the part of an ardent listener. Then he shouted over the wire:

"I'll ring you again in five minutes when I've thought things over."

He slammed down the receiver, slumped into his chair, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his face. Mick eyed him sympathetically, said: "And another of my hunches has come home to roost, Pop?"

"Very much so. The sergeant went along to my friend's place. They found the man unconscious on the dining-room floor. He had been crowned. And they found nobody else in the house. The neighbours informed him that nearly an hour ago a car pulled up outside the place and a man called at the house. The bloke left five minutes later with a woman. Of course, that was Mrs. Forbes. They wanted to know what I intended doing. You heard what I said. So now the question is a simple one—what do I do?"

"Go to the Yard and see Gribble. There is no point in careering off to Headcorn now that the bird has flown. Lay all your cards on the table and see what advice, what help, he can offer. I'm not very optimistic, but you can tell him that unless things move very quickly he'll find a corpse filled London. Just one matter of importance I want you to bear in your mind. I don't want him, or any of the boys from the Yard, to start visiting the Boss. They'd be a lot more use to us if they started on their job via the back door by pinning the odd murders they've got on hand on Mellery. I imagine that Cash Mason would squeal if they worked on him properly, and there must be a line somewhere on the rubbing out of Mailey. And I'd like them to throw out the dragnet for Phil Warren, and for Fred Carter. I don't think that they'll find her, but if they can lay their mitts on him he should be easy to crack. But I want them to lay off the Boss. All clear?"

"Clear as mud! Why shouldn't they start by collecting Mellery? There's any amount that they'd like to ask him, and I'd like to fire a few odd questions myself. This time he wouldn't be able to find so many of those remarkable alibis and his witnesses wouldn't be rushing forward as volunteers."

"I know what's in your mind, but I would rather make some purely personal arrangements about the Boss. All I want from the Yard is some dope that will pin at least one murder rap on him. The rest should be easy. Tell the boys to give Cash Mason all they've got, and be damned to the fact that he has been shot. After all, he asked for it—and he got it."

"You're making me dizzy, Mick. When I arrive at the Yard with the story you've given me they'll think I've entirely blown the top. Gribble is no fool, and he'll know the road along which you aim to travel."

"So long as he understands that I am travelling alone that fact won't bother me a bit. I'm going to play the cards so that the ace of spades doesn't fall into my lap. And that's all I'm saying at the moment."

"You obstinate little devil! Any other message you want me to hand out?"

" Only one more. Maybe it is the most important one of the lot. Tell your friend Gribble that I will be telephoning the Yard every hour from now onwards. If my call does not come through regularly he can cancel all I have said, and collect Mellery immediately. Tell him to leave a man at his desk throughout the day, because I will be making the call for Gribble personally, and I don't want to take the risk of mistakes being made."

" H'm. Now I'm beginning to see daylight. I think that you're chancing your arm a bit too much, Mick. I'd better amble along by your side."

" Forget that part of it, Dad. You've got plenty to do, and not a lot of time in which to do it. You've got to remember that everything we've built up as a firm rests on this case. After all, Pop, we were employed to protect Mrs. Forbes, and we've sat back while she was snatched. The only possible way in which we can stay in business is by seeing that she is returned to her husband in a state of good health, and to see that all her troubles are removed. I wouldn't be able to raise my head again if anything serious happened to Mrs. Forbes. We landed her into this mess, and we've got to get her out of it. Now I'm on my way. Watch your step, Dad, and don't take too many chances. And keep away from what used to be our offices. I'm away."

The father made no attempt to argue any further. He knew his son only too well, remarked to Lucy as the youngster hurried from the room :

" And what on earth would you do if you had a lad like that, Lucy ?"

The hard expression faded away from the girl's face as she said softly :

" I'd just keep on loving him, and hoping for the best. He deserves it."

" H'm." The father coughed self-consciously, tapped the girl's shoulder as he remarked : " And I'm not at all sure that you wouldn't be doing what I've been trying to do for years. You're a nice kid, Lucy. We'll remember you."

The girl turned away abruptly. It didn't do for a tough denizen of the West End to be seen with tears in her eyes. As Lucy told herself many times afterwards : " I'm a sister to a helluva lot of blokes, but I ain't no sissy." After which she had another cup of tea.

There was no hesitancy about Cardby's movements when he left the girl's flat. Nor did he trouble to glance round for a " tail." But his course zigzagged as he took a taxi, a tube, a bus, walked, took another taxi, walked again, and arrived at his own home. At the gate he paused to look both ways

along the road. It was deserted. His mother met him in the hall, asked :

"What on earth has been happening, Mick? Where's your father? Is this all true about the offices being blown up? Is any one hurt? I'm so worried."

"My dear, everything is ace high, and there's no need for you to have any trouble on your mind. I've just left Dad. He looks as though he's been on a holiday. Of course, he's busy, but he'll be along soon. I came back because there are a few oddments in my bedroom that I want to gather together."

His stay did not last for more than ten minutes. But had his mother seen the oddments he assembled she would have had cause to worry! Mick kissed her on the cheek as he was leaving, remarked quite casually :

"There is only one matter, darling, upon which you must concentrate. When I come in to-night I want a warm meat and potato pie. And I'll have been smacking my lips and looking forward to it for hours. Remember that, dear."

"Of course I will. You're still a big baby, Michael, aren't you?"

"Very much so, my dear. Now I'm doing a drift. See that it's kept warm."

And as he walked along the pavement he was questioning seriously whether he would ever touch meat and potato pie again. The thought of it had passed from his mind by the time he arrived at the station. He was in no hurry to reach Gloucester Terrace, bobbing and weaving his way until he was satisfied that no person was following him. Then he ascended to the flat with uncommon speed, knocked twice on the door, and then rang the bell. He heard footsteps within, recognised Lomas's voice as he asked :

"We don't want anything to-day, thank you. Don't disturb us any more."

"Right, Lomey," whispered Mick. "Just open the door. I can't walk through wood, and I'm finding this passage a wee bit on the draughty side."

A moment later he was inside the room. The scene amused him. Mrs. Mellery was lying on a divan. Her right wrist was handcuffed to one of the legs. The glance she threw in Cardby's direction should have knocked an ordinary man back on his heels. He bowed with undue deference. Constance Wheeler sat near the window, holding a book in her hands. It was a pose. At first glance Mick realised that she had not been reading. Still, he thought, the fault lay with him. He had impressed upon her so many times the vital importance of putting on a front. She had learnt the lesson well.

"Quite a nice family party," he remarked. "Is the patient giving you any trouble, folks, or is she just sitting up and taking nourishment quietly?"

"When d'you reckon I'm going to leave this dump?" asked Ella. "You're going to pay for this lot before you've finished. The Boss will tear you into ribbons when he hears what you've done to me. And I hope I'll be there to enjoy the performance. It'll be a change to see you squirming."

"I'll see that you have a front row stall. Take that mitten off her wrist, Lomey, I've got a small job of work for her to do. Constance, my own beloved, do you happen to know where the pen, ink and paper might be hiding out in this establishment? I want our guest to do a little writing."

Miss Wheeler rose without a word, crossed over to a bureau. Lomas took off the handcuff, sat down beside the woman. Mick pushed over a small table so that it faced her. He spoke in soothing tones as he said:

"I am going to dictate a brief note for you to send to your adoring husband. As I dictate it you will see that it is all in your favour that the note should be written. Tell me when you're ready to make a start."

Ella threw back her head, sneered as she stared at Cardby and remarked:

"I'll please myself whether I write it or not. You can't force me."

"No? We'll see. Grab hold of that pen, and I'll dictate to you. I don't think I'll have gone far before you change your mind about writing it."

Constance and Lomas watched the scene with interest. They knew the woman was as tough as they make 'em, wondered whether Cardby was playing the game with aces up his sleeve. Even they were astonished when the youngster started to dictate in slow, easy tones:

"I am compelled by Mick Cardby to write this note. He says that you'll never recognise me if I refuse. And I am sure that he means all he says."

The silence in the room was uncomfortable. Ella Mellery turned pale and the pen in her hand was shaking. She licked her lips, looked at Cardby, said:

"You mean you've got the nerve to send a note like that to the Boss?"

"Exactly. But you haven't made a start yet, and I'm very impatient. Want me to repeat the sentences, or can you remember them? Because, if you can't remember them, you'll very soon be forgetting quite a lot more. Start now!"

Constance Wheeler looked at him and shivered. This

man was a far cry from the bantering youngster of Henrietta Street. Ella Mellery commenced to write. From time to time she stared at Cardby, and her hand was none too steady. Mick looked over her shoulder, read what she had written, continued :

"If you have any regard for my safety, for my life, please listen to him. I am sure that unless matters are arranged on his terms you will never see me again. Do not treat this note lightly. The manner in which you act means all the difference between life and death to me.—Love, Ella."

Cardby lit a cigarette, waited until the woman had finished. Then he read the note, pushed over an envelope towards her, remarking :

"Just address it to Horace Mellery, Esq. Then he'll know he's not the Boss."

"And you'll live to regret that you ever made me write this note, Cardby; you've signed your own death warrant. So don't start blaming me."

"I won't be able to blame you. Because, when I die, you'll go with me. My friends here are going to give you a one-way ride if I don't get back to this flat quite safely. Before I go, there's one other thing you can tell me. Where do I find your sister, the attractive Phyllis? I want to see her."

"Deliver this note to my husband, and I reckon you'll find her with him. By the time he's finished with you I don't think that you'll be able to recognise either of them. But that's your funeral, not mine."

"Quite right, lady. Your *cortège* precedes mine. Lomey, I'll leave you now to look after your charming guest. See that she has all she wants—except her freedom. Whether she ever regains that depends on her little Horace."

Lomas followed Mick to the door. Immediately Constance Wheeler stood by Ella's side. They were taking no chances.

"What on earth are you meaning to do, Mick?" asked Lomas. "Can't I leave the dame here with Miss Wheeler and fall in at the back of you? There's no sense in walking into the lion's den single-handed, is there?"

"Don't you worry about little things like that, Lomey. Your job is to see that everything here is all right. And a damned important job it is too! If that woman is sprung from here I'm in the grave, and the whole case is blown to the four winds. I dare not leave her with that girl. Forget it."

"All right, Firebrand. And what's the next item on the gigantic programme?"

"Very, very simple. I am heading along to Mellery's house at Hampstead. I have an idea that we have quite a lot to discuss. If I telephone to you be careful to watch your

answers, and to listen carefully. I may not be giving a ring because I want to. The Boss might be standing at my side."

"So long, Mick, in case I don't see you again. You're asking for it."

"Surely, and I hope I get what I'll be asking for. Cheerio."

CHAPTER XVIII

PERILOUS INTERLUDE

CARDBY made one stop on the way to the train. Then he telephoned the Yard and gave the all-clear signal. As he left the booth he glanced at his watch. He had no intention of forgetting those hourly calls! It was almost half an hour later when he took a taxi from the Hamstead Tube station, told the driver to drop him at "Kelway." The youngster was feeling more exhilarated. Danger and excitement always took him that way. He plunged a hand into his pocket as the taxi stopped, suddenly changed his mind, said:

"I will be in this house for about half an hour. I want you to wait for me. Here is half your fare as evidence of good faith. I'll see that you don't lose by waiting. If I am not out in half an hour, telephone Whitehall 1212, ask for Inspector Gribble, and tell him that I have not yet left this house. Will you remember to do that? It is very, very important."

The jehu puffed out his cheeks, gasped as he asked hoarsely:

"Sounds like a funny business, doesn't it, mister? Is everything straight?"

"So far, but don't forget what I told you. And if any one wants you to walk inside that house, don't go. Just sit tight, and keep your eye on the clock. Remember, the number is Whitehall 1212 and the name is Gribble."

The driver was shaking his head mournfully when Mick opened the gate and strode up the drive. The youngster was making no effort to hide his arrival, strolled firmly to the front door, pressed down on the bell. His hand was scarcely removed from the bell when the door opened. A man with the face of a pugilistic criminal and the attire of a butler stared, said:

"And what is it that you are wanting? There is nobody at home."

"Is that so? Would you mind telling the Boss that Mick Cardby is here?"

The man hesitated for an instant, left Cardby standing on the doorstep as he retreated down the passage. Mick stepped

through into the hall, laid his hat on a side table, was humming a tune when the butler returned.

"The gentleman says that he will see you immediately, sir," he said. "Will you come this way with me?" Mick followed him along the passage to a room at the back of the house, waited while the door was thrown back. Then he walked into the room with something of an insolent swagger. The Boss stood with his back to an open fireplace. In his right hand he held an automatic. Fred Carter stood near the window. Phyllis Warren was seated on a settee. The youngster smiled, bowed towards the trio. The butler closed the door.

"I thought," remarked Cardby, "that the fitting time had arrived for we two to meet again, Mr. Mellery. I take it that you were expecting me to call?"

For an appreciable time the man made no attempt to speak. His stare was intense and prolonged. Phil shuffled her feet angrily. Carter remained like an imbecile mute. Cardby sat down on the edge of a table, said easily:

"It occurred to me that as a courtesy gesture I could save you the trouble of looking for me. Sorry that Cash Mason collected his packet this morning. You should have sent a man to handle me who had something above the neck except brillianine and a set of very inferior teeth."

The silence continued. Mick decided to plunge into an offensive:

"Mind telling me where Mrs. Forbes is to be found at the moment? I came here because I'm most anxious to escort her to her home. Any objections?"

"Cardby," said Mellery softly, "where is my wife? Answer me, or take it."

"Your wife? Oh, yes, I was forgetting for a moment that I have a note here from her. She wanted me to hand it to you. It is all yours."

Mick flung the note on the table, backed away slightly. The Boss placed the gun in his pocket, picked up the envelope. Fred Carter moved nearer to Cardby, watched him closely while Mellery read the note. The colour drained away from the man's face. But his hand was as steady as a rock when he folded the note, replaced it in the envelope. His eyes had narrowed, his nostrils distended as he lowered his voice to a whisper, said:

"Cardby, I have my wife back in this house immediately, or you die."

"And so does she! And, for the matter of that, so do you!" Cardby eyed the cards on the side table, picked up the pack, fingered through them with aggravating slowness

until he pulled out the ace of spades, threw it down on the carpet at Mellery's feet as he remarked: "You've handed out quite a few of these cards. How would you like me to give one to your wife, and then produce the fifth ace from the pack to place in your hand?"

"No person living can talk to me like that," said the Boss. "I am going to call your bluff, Cardby. I know that you dare not damage my wife."

"Believe me, Mellery, if anything happens to me she'll be just as dead as Edward Mailey ever was—and that is saying plenty."

"Edward Mailey!" screamed Phyllis Warren. "What are you talking about?"

Mick breathed more freely. A break had come from an unexpected quarter.

"I didn't expect that you'd have heard the news," remarked the youngster. "Your charming brother-in-law doesn't study other people's feelings, my dear. The fact that you were in love meant nothing to him. It just happened that he looked upon your boy friend as being a little dangerous. So he rubbed him out without even observing the formality of giving him an ace of spades. Your little Edward is now lying on a mortuary slab."

The woman wheeled round to face Mellery. Her eyes glared as she said:

"Is Cardby speaking the truth? Did you murder Edward Mailey? Tell me."

"I want to know where I can find your sister. That's all at the moment."

"It isn't all as far as I'm concerned. Did you murder Edward Mailey?"

"I certainly did, my dear. I thought I had better protect all of us."

The girl became livid as she walked over to the Boss, placed her face close to his, snarled as she spat out:

"Then it may be my own sister, but I hope you never see Ella alive again. You conceited fool, you scab. So you murdered my husband, eh?"

"Your husband? What'n hell are you trying to tell me, Phil?"

"The truth you blundering fool. We've been married for months past. I'll see that you pay for this lot by the time I am through. Believe me, I will."

Cardby smiled tolerantly. This was a piece of luck that he had not in any way expected. It seemed almost too good to be true. And there was no doubt about the woman's feelings. Rage was oozing out of her. She quivered.

"You can stow that line of talk," said Mellery. "I am the boss here, and I please myself what I do. If you don't curb your tongue, and watch your step you'll be joining your Edward very soon. You'd better stay dumb."

"Wait a minute," said Cardby. He was anxious to add a little fuel to the fire. "Why should you bother so much about your wife when you think that Phil's husband doesn't matter a hoot? Maybe he meant as much to her as your Ella does to you. If I were in her place I'd rip you apart."

"You're talking out of your turn, Cardby, and before many minutes——"

"He isn't talking out of his turn at all," said Phil, "and I agree with everything he's said. Mellery, I've followed you for years like a lamb. Now I am through. Whether you are the Boss or whatever you are, I'm not going to let you murder my husband and get away with it. You'll remember that."

"I saved the hangman a job," remarked the Boss casually. "After all, your husband would only have taken the long drop for rubbing out that man at Euston—and you'd have followed him to the scaffold. Bear that in mind."

"I will. I'll be remembering half a dozen murders I can pin on you. I don't think, Mellery, that I should start talking about people taking the long drop. That's where you'll finish by the time I'm through with you."

"Very well said, sister," observed Mick. "I couldn't have done it better."

"Phil," said the Boss, "somehow I don't think that you're going to send anyone to the gallows. I shot your husband because I thought he might turn yellow, and set in a squeal. I can do the same with you just as easily. Now that Ella is missing I don't mind taking a few chances."

"Your Ella is going to be missing permanently," said Mick, "if you don't listen to me for a while. You can tuck that gun in your pocket. I am not in the least scared of you. But before I start talking I want to use your telephone. Don't tell me I can't, because it all means the same to me."

Mellery made no move as Mick seized the instrument, but his eyebrows elevated as he heard the brief conversation over the wire.

"Is that New Scotland Yard? Put me through to Inspector Gribble, please."

There was a moment's wait before Cardby spoke again:

"This is Mick Cardby. I am still quite all right, and will be telephoning again in an hour. If you don't hear from me you know exactly what to do."

He replaced the receiver, smiled tolerantly towards the Boss.

"What game is this that you are playing, Cardby. Are you bearing in mind that no person yet has pulled a fast one on me, and got away with it?"

"Everybody, my friend, has got to make a start. This is your big moment. I'd better tell you that what you heard me say is child's play. The men from the Yard collect you, and about twenty of your boys, if they don't hear from me every hour. And they've got enough fastened on you now to see that you take that early breakfast and the long drop. But that is child's play. There are other people who have their instructions if they do not hear from me according to arrangements. Only in their case they will not be looking for you. Their instructions are to plant a bullet through your Ella's heart if I don't report to them. And, believe me, they will do what I told them."

The Boss was shaken. Phyllis Warren threw back her head and laughed.

"You're not feeling so clever now, are you?" she asked with a sneer. "One day I dreamt that this would happen to you. Go ahead, Cardby, I'm enjoying this party. Just help yourself to all the fun you want. I'm sure the Boss is having the time of his life—knowing that Ella is drawing near to the time of her death. Mellery, looks as though your day has come."

The Boss placed the gun in his pocket, picked up the pack of cards from the table, shuffled them absent-mindedly. The trio watched him closely. Then Mellery stared directly at Cardby as he asked:

"For the first time in my life, Cardby, I have had terms dictated to me. I am not saying for a moment that I will accept them. But what are they?"

"They are very simple and somewhat rigorous. You accompany me here and now to Scotland Yard. You make a statement to the police dealing with the matter of Mrs. Forbes, of Ealing. What else you want to tell them I will leave to you. Mrs. Forbes must be handed over into my care immediately I leave the Yard. Not until then will I release your wife. I will have satisfied two ambitions if you accept those terms. I will have smashed you for ever, and I will have safeguarded my client. What do you say?"

"What can you expect me to say, Cardby? If I make such a statement it means automatically that I go to gaol for a long stretch. Do you think for a moment that I would accept such conditions? You must be quite mad."

"You're wrong. There is something of real importance that you seem to have overlooked. I am giving you the chance of taking five or seven years for blackmail. If I

wanted to I could hand you over for murder. By the offer I have made I'm giving you a damned sight better break than you deserve. Whether you swing or not depends on what you tell the men at the Yard, on what information they already have about you. If you refuse my offer it means two things for a certainty—one, that your wife will die; two, that you will walk to the gallows. I'm in no hurry for a moment. Just think it over. D'you think I'm being fair, Phyllis?"

"Too fair for a scab like him. Let him take the long drop. He's asked for it for years. And you can do what the hell you like with Ella."

"Do you mean," asked the Boss, "that you would take the stand if I landed in the dock? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"That's about the best guess you ever made in your life, Mellery."

"Is that so?" Then you can go to join your little Edward. Take it!"

His hand whipped from his pocket with lightning speed. Two shots crashed out simultaneously. The girl spun round as she groaned, clutched her side. The Boss winced as the automatic flew from his hand, landed in the fireplace with a clatter. He shook his numbed hand, stared at it unbelievably. Then he looked at the gun in Cardby's hand. The youngster smiled as he said:

"You don't seem to be very fond of your relatives, do you? I was anxious to see the speed of your famous draw. Not quite fast enough, eh?"

The Boss scowled as he cursed, moved over towards the gun. Cardby snapped out an abrupt order: "Stand away from that fireplace, or I'll show you how to hit something—and it won't be your side. Carter, pick up that woman, and lay her on the settee. Don't jolt her when you raise her."

Carter saw the flicker pass over the Boss's eyelids, and an instant later he plunged towards Cardby with his head down. Mick swerved as the body came through the air. Then his right foot came up in a vicious arc. Carter caught the full impact flush in the throat. His face was flooded with blood when he squirmed on the floor, clutching his neck, struggling for breath. The youngster looked at him quickly, saw that the man would soon recover, drew a truncheon from his pocket with great deliberation, struck Carter behind the ear. The massive body shook once, then lay still. The Boss had moved nearer to the fireplace. Cardby paced over to him, murmured:

"Mellery, I'm tired, thoroughly tired, of being a perfect little gentleman. If you cause any trouble I'll show you

what rough stuff really means. Get away from that gun or you'll never walk again. And please me by stepping away from that bell beside the fire. I don't want any more guests."

"You'll never get out of this house alive, Cardby, so you'd better make the most of what time you've got left. It won't be for long."

"I don't think you're in any position to tell me what's coming to me. Phil, are you well enough to scramble over to that settee? Try to make it."

The woman tried to smile. Blood was seeping through her fingers as she clutched her side. She struggled slowly towards the settee, said softly:

"Why don't you let him have it, Cardby? Give him the works, the scab."

"Wait one moment, sister. There's something you can tell me. Where do I find Mrs. Forbes? Mellery has done you a lousy trick. So here's your chance to get some of your own back. Don't be afraid of him. He can't do anything."

"If she talks I'll murder her," said the Boss, "and I mean it, Cardby."

"And if you say very much more I'll murder you, Mellery. Well, Phil?"

"Sure, I'll tell you, Cardby. Mrs. Forbes is in this house right now!"

"Eh?" Cardby threw back his head. This sounded too good to be true. "Are you trying to spruce me, kid? I wouldn't like to be in your place if you're trying something fast. I've taken about as much as I can stand."

"I tell you that she was brought straight here from Head-corn. Hell, I ought to know. I was in the hall when she was brought in. She's in one of the bedrooms upstairs. There are a couple of men up there with her."

"You bitch!" snarled Mellery, taking a pace towards her. Mick pointed the gun towards the man's heart. The Boss remained still. Cardby turned to the girl again. Something was worrying him considerably as he asked:

"Sister, two shots were fired in this room a couple of minutes ago. There are plenty of people in the house but nobody has put in an appearance. Can you tell me why a shooting is taken so calmly? I'm very curious."

"The answer is easy," replied the girl, with a groan. "I reckon all those in the house knew that you had called. They'd been waiting to hear that shot ever since you put your foot inside the house. And they don't start interfering when the Boss has done a job of work. They're just certain that your lights have gone out. They wouldn't come into this room

now in case they were interrupting. Besides, Cardby, it isn't the first time they've heard shots fired in this room—not by a long way. Let him have it!”

“Not just yet. I want a few pieces of information from him before I do anything drastic. Mellery, turn your head towards that wall for a moment.”

The Boss was ready to protest, decided that Cardby was in no mood to be taken up the garden path. As he turned his head he heard a sudden swish. The youngster's aim was true. The rubber truncheon did not make much noise as it smacked against Mellery's ear. The man folded like a concertina, fell to the floor without a murmur. Mick took one look at him, and then turned to the girl. She was bordering on the verge of a collapse.

“Poor kid,” he said. “Never mind, I'll soon get you out of here, and see that you're looked after. You still say that you'll take the stand when Mellery takes his proper place in the dock? Is that a promise?”

“Surely. I'd do it with the greatest pleasure in the world. Rely on me.”

“I will. One thing more for you to remember. Your Edward has gone, so you can't do him any harm. When the police start asking questions about the death of that lad at Euston frame your answers so that the burden falls on Edward and leaves you in the clear. Think you can manage to do that?”

“Sure I can. I never saw him shot. It was his own fault. He was so sure of himself that he left the gun on the table while he walked over the room for a light from the fire. Edward shot him before I could turn round.”

“Right, sister. Stay with that story, and I'll see what I can do for you. Now I want to grab Mrs. Forbes before I start moving from this house. Can you tell me where I find her, and what might be in my way while I am prowling around? It is in your own interest to tell the truth to me.”

“I know that better than you do. She is in the second bedroom on the right on the first floor. There is one man sitting on the landing, and a couple more in the room with her. And they are as tough as they come.”

“So am I. Hold your pecker in the air. I'll soon be back with you.”

Mick took a last glance at Carter, and at Mellery. They lay like statues. He took a carafe of water from a side table, handed it to the girl, picked up the telephone, was soon through to the Yard. His message was brief:

“I want Inspector Gribble and a few picked men to travel like hell to Horace Mellery's house in Finch's Lane, Hampstead. It's an urgent call.”

Phyllis Warren heard the few words, smiled happily, passed out as the carafe crashed on the floor. Cardby did not wait any longer, hurried to the door, flung it back, and started up the stairs. Suddenly a man loomed above him. In his hand he held a snub-nosed gun. Cardby's right hand flashed through the air, his trigger finger jerked back. The man spun round as the bullet ploughed into his right shoulder, dropped the gun, collapsed in a heap on the landing. As Cardby reached the head of the stairs a door slammed back, another man dashed into the passage. His gun barked, a slug missed Cardby by a trifle, smacked into the wall on a level with his neck. Mick fired as he paced forward, heard the grunt of pain, watched the man's face contort as he crumpled to the floor. The youngster knew that no more trouble would come from that quarter. The bullet had taken the man in the thigh. Before Cardby could reach the door through which the man had come a third man rushed into the passage. He had no time to raise his gun. Mick swung the truncheon in his left hand, struck the man across the bridge of the nose, hit him at the base of the skull as he folded up.

Without hesitating he raced through the open door. Mrs. Forbes, her eyes wide with fright, was sitting erect in the bed. Her face was ghastly. He had reached her side, was parting his lips to speak when an agonised scream rang through the house, a yell that seemed laden with terror :

"Cardby! Cardby! Be quick! For God's sake, be quick! Cardby! Cardby!"

The youngster grew pale. Phyllis Warren sounded half demented!

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE CHASE

CARDBY never knew how many stairs there were in the flight at "Kelway," but he seemed to arrive in the hall with four strides. He raced into the room at the back, wondering what new horror he would find. Phyllis Warren was struggling with the Boss on the floor. They were half under a desk in the corner of the room. Breathlessly, she continued to scream :

"Stop him, Cardby, stop him! Pull him away! Don't let him touch it!"

For an instant the youngster was bewildered, had no idea what was wrong, what had flooded the girl's mind with terror.

far end of the room there was a gap in the wall. The remains of what had been a window lay on the floor. And through that open space Cardby could see the garden at the back of the house. He lurched towards it, breathing heavily, half asphyxiated by the fumes, borne down by the overpowering heat. It was with relief that he stumbled into the open air. His father held his arm as Mick looked wildly about at the mass of masonry surrounding the house. He said to his father:

"Mellery! I want him. He must be in this garden somewhere. I want him."

"Don't be mad," snapped his father. "Sit down here in the air. I'll find him for you. Sit down, I said, and I mean it. Mick, stay here!"

"To hell with that for a tale," said Mick thickly. "I started this job, and I'm going to finish it. I want Mellery, and I'm going to get him! Damn him and his ace of spades. I told him I'd hold five aces one day. Don't hold my arm, Dad. I want Mellery. I am going to get Mellery. He says he is the Boss. We'll see about that. Loose my arm. I want Horace Mellery!"

The father took his hand away. It seemed to him that the impossible had happened, that Mick was bordering on hysteria. The youngster headed across the lawn. As he stumbled forward he pulled a gun from his inside jacket pocket. As he looked at it he was mumbling to himself:

"This is my fifth ace. He thought I'd only have one. This is better than any ace of spades. He didn't know I had this, Dad."

The father looked at Mick's bruised and blackened face, listened to his incoherent talk, and shivered. He drew a gun from his own pocket, drew slightly in front of Mick. The youngster spotted the move, pulled his father back, increased the length of his own faltering stride. At the end of the lawn Mick sighted a summer house. A brick wall surrounded the garden. The youngster forced his brain into some semblance of coherent thought. It was no mean effort. But it was worth it. He drew nearer to his father, said:

"The Boss was hurt too much to get over that wall, and I can't see any door. He must be in that summer house. He can't be anywhere else, Dad. I'm going to get him out of there. This is where either the Boss or me takes a one-way ticket. We'll soon see who is holding that ace of spades."

"Wait a minute," said his father. "Don't walk towards the front of the place. That will be asking for trouble, lad. There's no cover here, and he's bound to have a gun. Remember his day is done, and risks mean nothing to him now. That man, Mick, would die with pleasure if he could take you with

him. Get round to the left of the summer house, and I'll keep to the wall on the right. We can take him that way with a chance of not being hit."

Mick nodded his weary head. He deployed to one side of the lawn—until his father had left him. Then, with a grim smile on his face, he shot a hand into a side pocket. He was thankful that he had called at his home for a few "oddmments." He stared at the glass cylinder in his hand for a second, and then advanced until he was not more than ten yards from the summer house. His father waved to him frantically, urged him to retreat. Mick smiled as he raised his arm, took deliberate aim, flung the cylinder through the open door of the summer house, heard the crash as the glass broke. He dropped to one knee, took careful aim, held a bead directly on the doorway. Then he called out in a voice of surprising strength:

"Come out, Mellery, and have the ace of spades delivered to you."

There was no answer. An instant later the youngster smiled. He heard a raucous cough, knew that he would not have to wait for very much longer. A loud report sounded. Mick fell flat on the lawn. But the direction of the gun didn't vary as he dropped. Again he heard the crack of a gun. He looked up, could see the partly open window through which the Boss was firing. Mick smiled again, and waited. He was in no hurry. The barking cough became more and more persistent. Cardby yelled out again:

"Come out of there, you yellow cur, and let's see what you can do with your famous ace of spades. I've got one in my hand to trump it."

The grass kicked up a couple of feet to Cardby's left as a bullet ploughed into the lawn. Still Mick held his fire, knew that he had nothing to gain by forcing matters. Again he heard that hacking cough, again he smiled cheerfully. The cough sounded to the youngster like sweet music.

And that which he had waited happened. He heard stumbling feet inside the summer house, and Mellery plunged through the doorway, his gun spewing lead. Cardby waited with cold deliberation for a split second before he lowered his gun. He had held the drop on spot smack between the Boss's eyes. A bullet threw soil into his face as he lowered his gun, smiled gleefully as he pulled the trigger and called out:

"Try this for an ace you haven't got!"

The Boss raised a shout to the high heavens as he dropped his gun on the grass, twisted round slightly. Then his hands dropped to his thigh. A bullet had smashed the bone. Before he could squirm once Mick arrived by his side, raised the gur

by the barrel, brought the butt down on the Boss's head with a resounding crash. The man shivered once. Then he was still.

Cardby straightened himself, dropped his own gun on the floor, stared at the still figure. He laughed almost hysterically, shouted to his dad :

"Come and look at the big noise. Take an eyeful of the Boss who sent the ace of spades to the wrong party. Dad, you won't see much more of him. I reckon he's living now on borrowed time. Good-bye, Mr. Mellery."

The father shook Mick's shoulder, sniffed the air, asked curiously :

"What the hell drove him out of that place, laddie, when he was safe ? "

"Very simple. Just ammonia. Call Gribble and tell him to take over the famous Mellery. I don't want to set eyes on him again until he faces the black cap. Then I can sit back at the Old Bailey and smile."

The father called for the Yard man, led Mick over to a seat at the edge of the lawn. Gribble hastened over to them. The youngster pointed to the unconscious form, sighed wearily, said to Gribble :

"Listen to me for a minute or two before you take this has-been away. I don't want to tell you twice how things are fixed. You have got this man well bedded down on a murder rap—on a dozen of 'em, if you want that number. His sister-in-law, Phyllis Warren, has promised to get into the witness-box and put in a squeal that'll stretch from here to Honolulu. Tell them at the hospital that she must be treated with great care. She is anxious to see Mellery swing, and she can see to it that your job is child's play. That's one end of the picture.

"When you're talking to Mellery, don't bother about the Mrs. Forbes angle. I don't want him charged with blackmail, and I don't want that woman's name mentioned in court. After all, Gribby, her husband is our client, and we've got to protect her from publicity. In any case, you don't want to mess about with anything trifling like blackmail. Round up all the men you can find who ever worked for the Boss. In the morning I will call at the Yard to give you a few more names. By then a taxi driver friend of mine will have recovered consciousness, and he can talk plenty. Don't let any one press a murder charge of any sort against the Warren woman. If you try that game she might refuse to talk. In any case, her husband did the only rubbing out with which she was concerned."

"And what about Mrs. Mellery? Where is she in this picture, Mick ? "

" I'm calling at the Hampstead Police Station on my way back to town. I will see that Lomas brings her to your office in less than an hour. I fancy her sister will spill the beans about her. Let's be on our way, Dad. I've had all I can take for one day. I'll leave you to look after all the odds and ends, Gribby. If you're at a loss don't bother me. I'll be in your office in the morning, and then I can play the whole record. If any of the people in the house are alive, they're wanted."

Father and son walked slowly across the lawn. Mick said as he walked :

" I want to ring Lomas and tell him to deliver the dame to Gribble. I want a wash and brush up and a change of clothes. And then I want to get on the line to Mother. It is a most important matter, Dad."

" You mean to tell her that we are both quite well, Mick ?"

" Like hell it is ! I am telephoning to tell Mother that in an hour's time I'll be on my way home for that hot meat and potato pie she promised me. Come along ! "

THE END

