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THE YELLOW FACE

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Crimson Blind

The Corner House

The Weight of the Crown

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THE
YELLOW FACE

BY

FRED M. WHITE

Author of

"The Crimson Blind," "The Corner House"
"The Midnight Guest," etc.

R. F. FENNO & COMPANY
18 EAST SEVENTEENTH STREET, NEW YORK

F. V. WHITE & CO., - - LONDON

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THE YELLOW FACE

CHAPTER I

NOSTALGO

THE flickering firelight fell upon the girl's pretty, thoughtful face; her violet eyes looked like deep lakes in it. She stood with one small foot tapping the polished brass rail of the fender. Claire Helmsley was accounted fortunate by her friends, for she was pretty and rich, and as popular as she was good-looking.

The young man by her side, who stood looking moodily into the heart of the ship-log fire, was also popular and good-looking, but Jack Masefield was anything but rich. He had all the brain and all the daring ambition that makes for success, but he was poor and struggling yet, and the briefs that he dreamed of at the Bar had not come.

But he was not thinking of the Bar now as he stood by Claire Helmsley's side. They were both in evening dress, and obviously waiting for dinner. Jack's arm was around Claire's slender waist, and her head rested on his shoulder, so that by looking up she could just see the shadow on his clean-cut face. Though the pressure of his arm was strong and tender, he seemed as if he had forgotten all about the presence of the girl.

"Why so silent?" the girl said. "What are you thinking about, Jack?"

"Well, I was thinking about you, dearest," Jack replied. "About you and myself. Also of your guardian, Anstruther. I was wondering why he asks me so often and leaves us so much together when he has not the slightest intention of letting me marry you."

The girl colored slightly. The expression in her violet eyes was one of pain.

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"You have never asked my guardian," she said. "We have been engaged now for over six months, Jack, and at your request I have kept the thing a dead secret. Why should we keep the matter a secret? You are certain to get on in your profession, and you would do no worse if the world knew that you had a rich wife. My guardian is kindness itself. He has never thwarted me in a single wish. He would not be likely to try and cross my life's happiness."

Jack Masefield made no reply for a moment. It was perhaps a singular prejudice on his part, but he did not like the brilliant and volatile Dr. Spencer Anstruther, who was Claire's guardian. He would have found it impossible to account for this feeling, but there it was.

"My guardian has plenty of money of his own," Claire said, as if reading his thoughts.

"There you are mistaken," Jack replied. "This is a fine old house, filled with beautiful old things. Anstruther goes everywhere; he is a favorite in the best society. Men of letters say he is one of the finest talkers in the world. But I happen to know that he has very little money, for a lawyer told me so. That being so, the £2,000 a year you pay him till you marry or come of age is decidedly a thing to take care of. On the whole, dearest, we had better go on as we are."

Claire had a smile for her lover's prejudices. Personally she saw nothing amiss with her guardian. She crossed over to the window, the blinds of which had not yet been drawn, and looked out. She looked across the old-fashioned garden in front of the house to the street beyond, where a few passengers straggled along. On the far side of the road stood an electric standard holding a flaring lamp aloft. The house opposite was being refaced, so that it was masked in a high scaffold.

As was the custom in London, the scaffolding had been let out to some enterprising bill-posting company. It was a mass of gaudy sheets and placards puffing a variety of different kinds of wares. In the centre, bordered by a deep band of black, was one solitary yellow face with dark

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hair and starting eyes. At the base was the single word "Nostalgo."

An extraordinary vivid and striking piece of work for a poster. The face was strong and yet evil, the eyes were full of a devilish malignity, yet there was a kind of laugh in them too. Artists spoke freely of the Nostalgo poster as a work of positive genius, yet nobody could name the author of it. Nobody knew what it meant, what it foreshadowed. For two months now the thing had been one of the sensations of London. The cheap Press had built up legends round that diabolically clever poster; the head had been dragged into a story. The firm who posted Nostalgo professed to know nothing as to its inner meaning. It had become a catchword; actors on the variety stage made jokes about it. But still that devilish yellow face stared down at London with the malignant smile in the starting eyes.

"Jack, they have put up a fresh 'Nostalgo' poster on the hoarding opposite," Claire said. "I wish they hadn't. That face frightens me. It reminds me of somebody."

"So it does me," Jack replied, with sudden boldness. "It reminds me of your guardian."

Claire smiled at the suggestion. The guardian was a large, florid man, well-groomed and exquisitely clean. And yet as Jack spoke the yellow face opposite seemed to change, and in some way the illusion was complete. It was only for an instant, and then the starting eyes and the queer smile that London knew so well were back again.

"You make me shudder," Claire said in a half-frightened way. "I should never have thought of that. But as you spoke the face seemed to change. I could see my guardian dimly behind it. Jack, am I suddenly growing nervous or fanciful? The thing is absurd."

"Not a bit of it," Jack said stoutly. "The likeness is *there*. It may be a weird caricature, but I can see it quite plainly. Don't you recall how Anstruther breaks out into yellow patches when he is excited or angry? I tell you I hate that man. I may be nonsensical, but ——"

Jack paced up and down the room as if lost in thought.

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The light was shining on the face on the hoarding—it seemed to look at him with Spencer Anstruther's eyes.

"There is something wrong in this house," he said. "I feel it. You may laugh at me, you may say that I am talking nonsense, but there it is. The strange people who come here ——"

"Sent by the police mainly. Don't forget that my guardian is one of the greatest criminologists of our time. There is no man in London who can trace the motive of a crime quicker than Mr. Anstruther. There was that marvelous case of those missing children, for instance ——"

"Oh, I know," Jack said, with some suggestion of impatience in his voice. "And yet, if you don't mind, we will say nothing of our engagement at present."

Claire contested the point no longer. After all she was very happy as things stood. She had plenty of chances of meeting her lover, and Mr. Anstruther seemed to be altogether too wrapped up in his scientific studies to notice what was going on under his very eyes. He came into the room at the same moment humming a fragment of some popular opera.

There was nothing whatever about the man to justify Jack Masefield's opinions. Spencer Anstruther was calculated to attract attention anywhere. The man was tall and well set up, he had a fine commanding face softened by a tolerant and benign expression. People looked after him as he walked down the street and wondered which popular statesman he was. In society Anstruther was decidedly welcome, amongst men of learning he was a familiar figure. His scientific knowledge was great, certain publications of his were regarded in the light of text-books. Altogether he was a man to cultivate.

"I am afraid that I am late, young people," he said in a smooth, polished voice. "I hope you have been able to amuse yourselves together in my absence. You look moody, Jack. Don't those briefs come in as freely as you would like? Or have you been quarreling?"

"No, sir," Jack replied. "We never quarrel; we are

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too good friends for that. We have not the excuse in that way that lovers are supposed to possess."

"We have been studying that awful poster," Claire said. "I wish somebody would take it away. Jack is always seeing some likeness in it. He says that you ——"

The girl paused in some confusion. Anstruther smiled as he put up his glasses.

"It is a complex face," he said. "Whose features does it remind you of just now, Jack?"

"Yours," Jack said boldly. He flashed the word out suddenly. Half to himself he wondered why he always felt a wild desire to quarrel with this man. "I hope you won't be offended, sir, but I can see a grotesque likeness to you in the famous repellent Nostalgo."

Claire looked up in some alarm. She was wondering how her guardian would take it. The log fire in the grate shot up suddenly and illuminated Anstruther's face. Perhaps it was the quick flare that played a trick on Claire's fancy, for it seemed to her that suddenly Anstruther's face was convulsed with rage. The benign pink expression had gone, the features were dark with passion, the fine speaking eyes grew black with malignant hatred. Claire could see the hands of the man clenched so hard that the knuckles stood out white as chalk. And there with it all was the likeness to Nostalgo that Jack had so boldly alluded to. The fire dropped and spurted again, and when it rose for the second time the face of Spencer Anstruther was smooth and smiling.

Claire passed her handkerchief across her eyes to concentrate the picture of fiendish passion that she had seen. Was it possible that imagination had played some trick on her? And yet the picture was as vivid as a landscape picked out and fixed upon the retina by a flash of lightning on a dark night. The girl turned away and hid her white face.

"I should like to meet the artist who drew that face," Anstruther said, with a smile. "One thing I am quite certain of—it is not the work of an Englishman. Well, it has found London something to talk about, and the ad-

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vertisement is a very clever one. I dare say before long we shall discover that it is exploited in the interest of somebody's soap."

"I am inclined to favor the view that Nostalgo is something novel in the way of a thought-reader or a spiritualist," Jack said. "It seems to me ——"

The dining-room door was thrown open by a woman servant, who announced that dinner was served. They passed across the hall into a large dark-walled room, the solitary light of which was afforded by a pair of handsome candelabra on the table. There were not many flowers, but they were all blood red, with a background of shiny, metallic green. The woman who waited passed from one plate to another without making the slightest sign. As she came into the rays of the shaded candles from time to time Jack glanced at her curiously. She was dressed in sombre, lustreless black, with no white showing at all. There was no cap on her head—nothing but a tangle of raven-black hair. Her brows were black and hairy, her skin as dark, so that her faded eyes were in striking contrast to her swarthy appearance. Her hands were very strong and capable, the mouth firm to the verge of cruelty. And yet there was something subdued, something beaten about the woman, as if she had been taken in a wild state and tamed. Anstruther seldom addressed an order to her in words; a motion of the hand, the raising of an eyelid seemed to be sufficient for those pale, tired eyes, which somehow never for one instant relaxed their vigilance.

The woman was a mystery of the house; she seemed to be entirely dominated by her master's will. And yet there were strength and passion there, Jack felt certain. The fanatic only slumbered. A pansy fell from one of the flower vases, and Jack started out his hand to replace it.

"Did you ever see the evil face in the heart of a pansy blossom?" he asked, for there was a pause in the conversation. "It is a demon face—and familiar too. Miss Helmsley, whose face does this saffron heart of the pansy remind you of?"

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Claire took the pansy from Jack's hand and studied it with a frown on her pretty face.

"Why, of course," she cried. "I see what you mean. It is Nostalgo, the man with the yellow face."

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CHAPTER II

CLAIRE gave the desired assurance, and rose from the table. She would have Jack's coffee saved for him in the drawing-room, she said. Anstruther lit a cigarette, and began to talk of crime. Crime and criminals had a fine fascination for him. Scotland Yard offered valuable inspiration for his new book on the criminal instinct, and in return he had been in a position to give the officials yonder one or two useful hints. The case he had on hand just now was a most fascinating one, but, of course, his lips were sealed for the present. Jack forgot his dislike in the fascination of the present.

"Stay here and finish your cigar," Anstruther said as he rose and pitched his cigarette into the fire. "I'll go into my study and work this thing out with the aid of my violin. I may be an hour or so, or I may be longer. If I have finished before eleven o'clock I'll come up with my fiddle, and we'll get Claire to play. If you require any more claret you can ring the bell."

Jack sat there for a time smoking and thinking matters over. Presently, from the study beyond, came the sound of music. Really, Anstruther was a wonderful man—he seemed able to do anything. He was not perhaps a great performer on the violin—his playing was a little too mechanical, and seemed to lack soul—but the execution was brilliant enough.

Jack opened his cigarette case only to find that it was empty. There was a fresh supply in the pocket of his overcoat, which was hanging in the hall. He would be just in time for one more, and then he would join Claire in the drawing-room. The hall light had been turned low, so that, as Jack stood in the vestibule fumbling in his

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coat pocket, he was not visible, though he could see what was going on in the hall behind him.

There was a spot of light at the head of the staircase. Somebody was standing there looking down into the hall —somebody in a rough jacket buttoned to the throat and wearing a pair of rubber-soled shoes, for the intruder made not the slightest noise. Jack wondered if some impudent burglar was raiding the house at this hour. If so, he would get a warm reception presently. Jack stood there as the figure came down the stairs and turned along a corridor to the left of the drawing-room. But there was no challenge and no fight, for the simple reason that in the hall light, as the stranger passed, Jack recognized the face of Spencer Anstruther. There was no doubt about it; there was no possibility of a mistake here.

Inside the study the music once more began. Very gently Jack tried the handle of the door, but it was locked. Under ordinary circumstances this would have excited no suspicion; perhaps there was another way into the room by way of the corridor. But if so that did not explain why Anstruther was creeping about his own house in the semblance of a burglar, and wearing rubber-soled shoes.

There was something creepy about the whole business. Jack returned to the vestibule again, and from there he passed into the garden. The study was at the side of the house, and a belt of shrubs outside afforded a pretty good cover. There was the study under with the blinds down and a strong light inside. Jack noted that it was a French window, a window frequently used, because the stone step outside had been worn by the pressing of many feet.

The smooth melody of Chopin was playing on inside. Jack stooped down to where he could see the lace flowers on the blind, and looked into the room. There was a little slit in the blind where the sun had worn it, and by this slit the whole of the room could be seen. The music had softened down to a *piano* passage taken very slowly. But Jack was not thinking of the music now at all, though the strains were soothing and flowing enough.

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He rubbed his eyes to make sure that they did not deceive him. No, the room was plain enough, so was the sound of the music. And with it all *the room was absolutely empty !*

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CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF THE STRINGS

It was the most extraordinary thing in the world. Beyond question the room was absolutely empty. Jack could see to the far side; he noted the pictures and the flowers and the vases on the mantelpiece. His view was naturally narrowed by a small spyhole, but there was no portion of the room hidden from him, though he could not quite see the whole of it at one time.

The music was proceeding quite smoothly, though with pauses now and again. It was followed now and then by what sounded like subdued applause.

Jack stepped back from the window. He wanted to make certain that he had not mistaken the room. No, the sounds of music came from the study right enough. At the risk of being discovered he crept back into the house again and tried the study door. It was locked, and what was more, the key was in the lock, as the application of an eye testified.

And the music was proceeding quite swiftly again. The mystery was absolutely maddening. Jack wondered if there was some cabinet in the study hidden from view where the player had taken up his stand. At any rate somebody was playing Chopin's music—playing it very well. There was no magic about the thing.

The hall of the house was very quiet, nobody seemed to be about. Occasionally there came the sound of mirth from the servants' hall, but nothing more. Fully determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, Jack returned to the garden again. Once more his eye was glued to the slit in the blind. He could make nobody out in the room. There was little fear of his being detected, because a belt of shrubs hid the window from the road.

Without the slightest warning a figure appeared in the

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room. It was impossible to see where she came from, but of necessity she must have entered by the door. Jack was a little uncertain on that head, for his glance was not directed towards the door for the moment.

He saw the figure of a woman, young and exceedingly well dressed. She was wearing an evening gown of white satin that showed up the creamy pallor of her skin, for her neck and shoulders were bare. The neck was rather thin, Jack noted, and the shoulders more inclined to muscle than beauty. For a young girl it struck Jack that the upper part of her body looked old. But the face was dark and wholesome, and against the deep eyes and swarthy complexion the girl's hair was dazzling. It was beautiful, rippling hair, changing color as the light flashed upon it.

"Well, this is a bit of an adventure," the watcher told himself. "But where's the person in the room who let the young lady in? Somebody must have let her in, because the door was locked and the key on the inside. I saw it there, so I can swear to that fact. But who is she?"

There were many answers to the problem, for Spencer Anstruther was a man who had countless strange visitors. His vast knowledge of crime and the ramifications of human depravity brought him in contact with large numbers of people. Men and women in distress often came to him, and they came in increasing numbers since Anstruther had got the better of a gang of scoundrels in a recent famous blackmailing case. Sometimes these people came on their own initiative, sometimes they were sent by the police. But Anstruther never said anything about them. He looked upon himself as a confidential agent. Claire could have told of many curious visitors at all hours, though Anstruther never so much as alluded to them afterwards.

But this girl did not look in the least like anybody in trouble. Her dark features were almost expressionless; there was no display of violent emotions there. Her gaze slowly wandered round the room as if looking for some-

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thing; she had much the aspect of a pupil whose attention is called to a blackboard by a master. As Jack watched, it seemed to him that he had seen this girl before. He could not recollect anybody in the least like her; that contrast of dark skin and fair hair was striking enough to impress itself upon the most careless mind, and yet Jack could not give the face a name. He could not permit himself to believe that he had made a mistake. He knew perfectly well that the expressionless features were quite familiar to him.

The girl stood for some little time, as if waiting for her lesson. Jack's eyes were glued so closely upon her that he did not notice the coming of another person—a man this time. He was a young man, with sleek, well-brushed brown hair, and dark, well-groomed moustache turned up after the fashion affected by the German Emperor. The man was perfectly well appointed, his evening dress and white waistcoat were faultless. His face was strong, but it did not convey anything intellectual. There were scores of such men to be seen any day during the London season, all groomed the same, all apparently finished in the same machine.

The man bowed and smiled to the lady, and she bowed and smiled in return. It was rather a graceful bow; it seemed to Jack that she looked at her companion to see if it were quite correct. Then the two proceeded to talk in dumb show, partly by signs and partly by fingers. The mystery was getting deeper—one of these two was a deaf mute, perhaps both of them. Was this one of Anstruther's cases, or did it possess a far deeper significance?

The solution was beyond Jack Masefield. He might have been on the track of a mystery, and on the other hand he might merely be doing a little vulgar eavesdropping. If it was the latter, and Anstruther found him out, he need not hope to visit Claire at home any more. Anstruther was most particular about these things, as Jack knew; but he set his teeth together and decided to take the risk. He felt pretty sure that there was something here that touched the household deeply.

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He turned just for the moment, with an idea that somebody was behind him. But the strip of lawn was quite clear. Jack could see through the belt of trees to the street again beyond, with its great arc light flaring on the yellow face of the mysterious Nostalgo and his starting, half-laughing eyes. That weird face seemed to form a fitting background to the room mystery.

But Jack had his eyes to the slit in the blind again. Inside the pantomime in show was still going on. The girl seemed to be getting a lesson of some kind, and her tutor appeared to be pleased, for he smiled and clapped his hands from time to time. Then he took out his watch and consulted it with a frown. As he glanced up the girl crossed the room to the mantelpiece and opened the face of the clock. With a quick movement she put it back half-an-hour.

The man in the faultless evening dress nodded approval. There was a little pause before he approached the window and stood so that his shadow was picked out clean against the strong light of the room. Then he rapidly signaled with his arm. One arm went up, there was a noise of rings and a flutter of drapery, and then a heavy curtain was jerked over the window, and Jack could see no more. Try as he would, no ray of light could he make out. It was as if the lights had been switched off, leaving the room in utter darkness.

What on earth did it all mean? Beyond doubt the young man in evening dress had signaled to somebody outside when he stood close against the window and raised his arm. Jack congratulated himself on the fact that the slit in the blind was low down, so that he had not to stand against the light. He slipped into the belt of shrubs and watched for a moment, but no further sign came.

What were those people inside going to do? The solution flashed upon Jack instantly. They had not come there so perfectly dressed for the mere sake of seeing Spencer Anstruther. They had not been spending the evening anywhere, dining and that kind of thing beforehand, for they looked too spruce and fresh for that. The

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woman's toilette in particular had evidently been just donned, as if fresh from the hands of her maid. And she had put the clock back half-an-hour.

"They are going somewhere in half-an-hour," Jack decided. "Hang me if I don't follow them. By the right time it is half-past ten. Anstruther said he should not come up if he failed to get his business finished before eleven, at which time he will expect me to go. I'll go up to the drawing-room and talk to Claire for a little time just to avert suspicion."

He crept back into the house without being seen, he finished his claret, and dropped the stump of his cigarette on to his dessert plate. As he made his way up the stairs the music began again. That music was not the least maddening part of the mystery.

"What a time you have been," Claire said as she tossed her book aside. "All by yourself down there! Really, Jack, you modern young men are so cold-blooded that ——"

"I'm not so far as you are concerned, dearest," Jack said as he kissed the girl. "I had something to do; I was working out a case that puzzled me."

"A case in some way connected with the law, I suppose?" Claire asked.

"Well, yes," Jack replied. He quite believed that the case was connected with the law. "I begin to see my way to its solution. I suppose there is not the slightest chance of your guardian coming up to-night?"

Claire replied that it did not look like it. Evidently the solution of the music problem was not an easy one, for the violin was going again as if it had only just begun.

"It makes me feel creepy," Claire exclaimed. "Fancy the idea of tracking a criminal by means of divine melody like that! Jack, don't you notice something strange about it?"

"I should say that I do," Jack said. "Why, the whole thing—really, I beg your pardon, darling. I—I was thinking about something else. It was the case I alluded to just now."

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"My dear boy, you are very strange in your manner to-night," Claire said. "You look pale and distracted. Trust the eyes of love to see anything like that. You haven't bad news for me, Jack?"

Masefield forced a smile to his lips. It was hard work to maintain his ordinary manner in the face of the strange scene that he had witnessed that night.

"I have certainly heard no news since dinner time," he said. "What did you expect me to say?"

"I thought that perhaps you had mentioned me to my guardian; that you had changed your mind, and told him that you and I were going to be married some time."

"No, your name was never mentioned, dearest. Anstruther was full of his case and gave me no opportunity. He went off directly he had finished his tobacco. As a matter of fact, Claire, I am more resolved than ever to say nothing about our engagement to Mr. Anstruther."

"It is very strange that you mistrust him like that, Jack."

"Perhaps it is, little woman. Call it instinct, if you like. I know that women are supposed to hold the monopoly of that illogical faculty. They dislike a man or a woman without being able to say why, and in the course of time that man or woman turns out to be a villain. There is no denying the fact that I feel the same way towards your guardian. I am convinced that once he knows the truth you will be in danger. I said before that he is a poor man, and the enjoyment of your £2,000 during the time ——"

"My dear Jack, you are perfectly horrid," Claire murmured. "If I were a nervous girl you would frighten me. As it is, I feel certain that you are utterly wrong. My guardian is one of the most delightful of men. If he were not, plenty of clever people would have found it out. And, besides, why do so many unfortunate people come to him to advise them, which he does with great trouble to himself and no hope of reward?"

Jack admitted that perhaps he was wrong. And he had no desire either to frighten Claire. He had not the

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slightest intention of telling her what he had discovered that night.

"Let us be less personal," he said. "What was the strange thing that you noticed about your guardian's playing?"

"That it is so much better than usual," Claire said. "There seemed more passion and feeling in the music. My guardian is a brilliant violin player, but I have not hitherto noticed much feeling in his style. Now, listen to the thing that he is playing at present."

"Chopin's Fantasie in F," Jack muttered. "I know it very well indeed. It is a favorite of mine."

There was certainly plenty of expression and feeling in the music. Jack was bound to admit that. The fantasie came to an end with a crash of two chords, and Claire clapped her hands.

"Beautiful!" she cried. "I must really compliment my guardian on the improvement in his style. You are not going already, Jack? It's not quite eleven yet."

"I'm very sorry, dear, but I have that case to look into to-night," Jack said, with perfect truth. He saw that the hands of the big clock on the mantelpiece were creeping on to the hour. "Anstruther won't come up to-night; he said he should be here by eleven if he were. And he gave me a hint not to stay later. I shall see you at the Warings' to-morrow night. Good-night, darling."

Claire put up her red lips to be kissed. She would have seen Jack to the door, but he pointed out that the night was chilly and Claire's dress thin. Neither would he have the butler summoned. His coat and hat were in the hall, and he would get them himself. A moment or two later and he was standing in the garden behind the strip of shrubs. He was quite free to act now; he had nobody in the way. As he stood there, a distant church clock boomed the hour of eleven.

"Now we shall see what we shall see," Jack muttered. "I'm going to find whether there is a mystery of the house or whether these people are merely Anstruther's clients. Oh!"

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As he spoke the dark curtain over the study window was pulled back, and the figure of the young man in the evening dress was clean cut against the light. Then a black arm pulled for the catch of the window, and the young man, pushing the blind aside, came out. He was wearing an overcoat now, and a tall hat. He seemed to be waiting for somebody.

Then the figure of the dark-faced, fair-haired girl came out. She was cloaked from head to foot in a blue wrap trimmed with feathers; her fair hair was not covered. No word was spoken, but Jack could see that they were conversing still by signs.

The watcher wondered if he had time to get inside the room. But that little idea was dismissed at the outset, for the young man pushed the window to carefully and the latch clicked. It was quite evident that the long sash closed with a spring lock, which was a most unusual thing for French windows to do. As the strange pair went down the side path Jack stepped into the open. He wanted to assure himself as to the window being fastened. He pulled at it hard, but it did not yield. At the same moment from the window of the room came a strange, brilliant crash of music. Yet that room was absolutely empty, as Jack would have been prepared to swear in any court of England.

"I'll wake up either from a dream or in a lunatic asylum presently," he muttered. "And now for those other people. Good thing they had no idea of being followed."

Jack was in the road now, and taking his way through the quiet nest of squares between Bloomsbury and Regent's Park. He could see his quarry a hundred yards or so before him; there was nobody else, and there was not the slightest chance of those in front being lost. A horse's hoof clicked on the wood pavement as a well-appointed hansom passed the tracker. Then he saw the hansom pull up by the curb and the deaf mutes in front jump in, as if the whole thing had been arranged, and drive off.

The thing was so sudden and unexpected that Jack was nonplused for a moment. There was no chance of follow-

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ing these people, for there probably was not another hansom within half-a-mile of the spot. Jack stood hesitating in the silence of the road; he could hear the steady flick-flack of the horse's hoofs as the rubber-tired hansom hurried on, and then suddenly the horse's hoofs stopped. They had not died out in the distance; they had merely stopped.

Jack hurried forward; he had not given up all hope yet. He might overtake the hansom and by good luck meet an empty one going towards the Strand. As he turned a corner, he saw to his surprise the figure of the young man in evening dress come silently towards him on the other side of the road. Then the stranger crossed the road and turned down the far side of the square as if he were going to complete the circuit and join his cab again. As the man vanished Jack heard a thudding sound, followed by a sound like the tearing of stiff paper, like the rattle of peas on a drum, a queer stifled cry, and then silence. On the impulse of the moment, Jack turned and followed.

At the angle stood a row of houses, some of them being repaired. Jack heard somebody speak to somebody else a little way down the road. He looked across at the opposite houses to see that they were in scaffolding and that they were plastered with bills. A little way above the ground in front of the centre house being repaired was one of the repulsive, clever Nostalgo posters with the yellow face looking out.

But there was something else lying there at full length on the pavement, the body of a man with his face up to the stars. With a little cry Jack crossed the road. Almost instantly a policeman stood by his side.

"Drunk," he said. "A gentleman who's just gone down the road told me a man was lying drunk on the pavement. My word, sir, but he's got the complaint pretty bad."

"He has," Jack said, with a catch in his voice. "The man isn't drunk; he's dead. He's been murdered. Shot through the head and breast. Show your lantern here, officer."

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The officer flashed the strong, searching rays on the face of the dead man. As he did so he gave a cry, and pointed to the hoarding behind him with a finger that shook a little.

"Dead, sir, and murdered, beyond doubt," he said. "But that's not the strangest part of it. Look at his face and the expression of his eyes; look at the yellow face and ——"

"Good heaven!" Jack cried. "The yellow face, the face of the diabolical poster behind you. As I am a living man, we have found Nostalgo in the flesh."

The dead man grinned up, the poster grinned down. And the face of the dead and the face in the print were exactly the same!

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CHAPTER IV

THE SPEAKING LIKENESS

MASEFIELD looked at the figure on the pavement in a dazed kind of way. Beyond all question there lay the embodiment of the famous Nostalgo poster. London had been discussing the mystery of the poster for weeks already. The amazing hideous cleverness of it had struck the popular imagination, the artistic side of it had appealed to those of culture. Nobody had the least idea what it was intended to convey. Every daily paper promising a correct solution on a certain day would have added tremendously to its circulation.

Then there had been those who had declared that the poster was a portrait; they had held that no artist could imagine a face quite like that. And here was dread confirmation of the theory. Absolutely the poster and the dead man were identical. The same long, thin nose, the same starting eyes, the same suggestion of diabolical cunning in the smile.

In the poster Nostalgo wore a turn-down collar and a loosely-knotted red tie. It was the same with the dead man on the pavement. As to the rest, his dress was conventional enough—a frock coat and gray trousers, a tall silk hat which had rolled into the road.

"Don't you think that you had better search his pockets?" Jack suggested.

The constable replied that it was not a bad idea. But a close examination produced no definite result. There were no papers on the body, nothing beyond a handful of money—gold and silver and coppers all mixed up together in the trousers pocket. There was not even a watch.

"This game's beyond me," the officer muttered, as he blew his whistle. "We must get this poor chap conveyed to the police station. Foreigner, ain't he?"

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But Jack could not say. The sweeping, coarse black hair pushed back from the bulging forehead, and the yellow, guinea-colored face suggested the Orient. But the lips were thin like the nose, and these might have belonged to some Spanish hidalgo. It was impossible to decide.

"You were close by," the policeman said. "Didn't you see anything, sir?"

"Nothing whatever," said Jack. "I was just passing along on the side of the square at right angles with this spot. I certainly saw a young man come along, but I didn't notice him much. I expect he was the young man who told you that a 'drunk' awaited you here."

"I expect he was, sir; young man with his moustache turned up like the German Emperor's."

Jack started, but said nothing. It was not for him to say anything of the strange sight that he had seen in Spencer Anstruther's study. The young man in question had left his hansom; probably he had come back for something forgotten; therefore, on the whole, Jack felt that he could not in any way connect him with this mystery.

And yet Spencer Anstruther's young friend must have been close by at the very moment the murder was committed. It seemed impossible to believe that he had not heard that choking cry, and that strange noise like the tearing of calico or the scatter of peas on a tray. But, on the other hand, the murdered man had been shot, and shooting implies noise. Certainly Jack had heard nothing that, in any way would be connected with the firing of a revolver.

And yet there was that tearing sound, and the strange fact that the Nostalgo of the poster had tears in him in exactly the same place as the real man who had been wounded. There was a plot calculated to puzzle Spencer Anstruther himself, and Jack said so aloud.

"I don't think as even he'd guess this," the policeman said. "Friend of yours by any chance, sir?"

"I had not left his house five minutes before I found

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that body," Jack said. "If you like, I will go back and bring Mr. Spencer Anstruther here."

Here was a chance to get at the other business, the mystery of the strange music. It was a legitimate errand enough, but the policeman shook his head. He did not want to take anything so important upon his own shoulders, his inspector being "down on that kind of thing." Two constables with the ambulance came at length. They asked no questions, but hoisted the body up and turned immediately in the direction of Shannon Street police station.

"I think you had better come along, sir," the first policeman suggested to Jack. "It's just possible that the inspector may want to ask you a few questions."

Masefield followed. He smiled just a little as he noted the speaker's tone. If not exactly in custody, he was at least expected to give a good account of himself. To his great relief he found the inspector not in the least disposed to assume the official manner; on the contrary, he seemed rather a timid man, though his eyes were steady enough.

"I have told you everything, sir," Jack said at length. "I only wish it might have been more. If there is any further way in which I can be of assistance to you ——"

"You are very good, sir," the inspector said. "What we have to do now is to push the matter forward before the scent gets cold. It is very imperative that we discover who this man is. The first person to apply to is the firm of advertising contractors who posted those bills. Did anybody happen to notice the firm whose hoarding the deceased man was found against?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Jack said, as the officer shook his head. "Not that that is a sure find for you, Mr. Inspector, seeing that those bills appeared on the hoardings of all the bill-posting firms in London. Still, they may have emanated in the first place from one firm, and perhaps that firm was Freshcombe & Co."

"That being the name on the top of the hoarding we are speaking of?" the inspector asked. "You have a keen eye for detail, sir; it was very smart of you to notice that."

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"Not at all; it was almost an accident. The mere fact of finding the prototype of the famous Nostalgo poster was sufficiently startling to brace all one's faculties. In glancing at the hoarding I saw the name of Freshcombe & Co. on the top. The name was impressed upon my memory by the fact that quite recently I appeared for Freshcombe & Co. in an action they brought against a rival firm for damages. That is why I have the name so exact."

The inspector smiled with the air of a man who is well pleased with himself. In that case Mr. Masefield practically knew the head of Freshcombe & Co., and where he lived. In that event the inspector proposed to go direct to the gentleman in question and ask for a few particulars.

"There I can help you again," Jack said. "I had several interviews with Mr. Freshcombe through his solicitor, and one of them took place in Mr. Freshcombe's own house in Regent's Park Crescent."

The inspector waited to hear no more. One of his men would call a cab, and perhaps Mr. Masefield would be good enough to go as far as Regent's Park Crescent and smooth the way. It was getting late now, but Jack had no objection. He was keenly interested in this mystery, and he must get to the bottom of it if he could. He had a few questions to ask as the cab rolled away, but none of them struck the inspector as being to the point. But Jack knew better.

Fortunately Mr. Freshcombe had not gone to bed, though the house was in darkness. The stout little prosperous-looking man of business started as he caught sight of the inspector's uniform. Something in connection with burglary rose uppermost in his mind as he asked his visitors' business.

"I hope there is nothing wrong," he stammered. "Ah, how do you do, Mr. Masefield? Will you gentlemen be so good as to step inside. There is a fire in the dining-room. Anything in the way of a cigar, or ——"

But the inspector came to business at once. It was plain that his story interested the listener, for he followed

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with eyes of rounded astonishment. He punctuated the story with surprised grunts.

"Bless my soul!" he explained. "Whoever would have thought it? I never expected that there was anybody like that famous poster. I had two thousand of them through my hands in the way of business, and they struck me as clever, very clever indeed. Personally, I regarded them as theatrical bills."

"Then you can't tell us anything about them?" the inspector asked, with an air of chagrin.

"Nothing whatever," Freshcombe replied promptly. "As I said before, the posters came to us in the ordinary way of business. There was an air of secrecy about the whole thing."

"Which did not attract your attention? Did not appeal to your suspicions, I mean?"

"Not a bit of it. The advertiser wanted to create an air of mystery and sensation. How well that has been managed I leave you to guess. Being, moreover, exceedingly shrewd, the advertiser did not mean his name to leak out. I received a note one day asking my terms for displaying a thousand of those posters on all the hoardings in London, and my people sent in a quotation."

"That letter came from another business house, I presume, sir?" the inspector asked.

"No, it didn't. It was from a certain Mr. John Smith, and was written from the Hôtel Royale, and on the official paper of the hotel. Three days later the posters arrived per a firm of carriers, and the same afternoon a check drawn by John Smith on the City and Provincial Bank. We cashed the check and posted the bills. I may say that, in the usual course of business, I should not have known this; but I was a little struck by the posters and their mystery, so I made inquiries. I assure you that I have not time to go into these minor details as a rule."

"I am rather disappointed," the inspector said. "I hardly expected this. The mystery of the posters ——"

"Was part of the cleverness of the scheme," Freshcombe interrupted. "As a rule, these things leak out and

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spoil the game. Why, half-a-dozen newspaper men have been asking questions in my office."

"Then you don't even know who printed the posters?" Jack asked. "Have you any more left?"

"I fancy the posters were French," Freshcombe said. "They had evidently been repacked before they came to me. No, we have none left; they were all posted last week. I haven't even one as a specimen."

Mr. Freshcombe would have pushed his hospitality, but the others declined. The inspector was not going to give up the chase like this. Could Mr. Freshcombe find a London Directory, or in any way help him to ascertain the name and address of the manager of the City branch of the City and Provincial Bank? Mr. Freshcombe could supply both details. The bank manager in question was a large shareholder in the firm and enjoyed an important position. As to his residence, it was in Piccadilly, over the bank's branch there. Mr. Carrington was a man of fashion, so that, if he were at home, it was unlikely that he had gone to bed. A moment later and the cab was proceeding towards Piccadilly.

Mr. Carrington was not only at home, but he was entertaining friends. There were lights in all the windows of the handsome suite of rooms over the bank, and a chatter of voices assailed the ears of the callers as soon as the mahogany door was opened. Mr. Carrington was giving an evening party, the footman explained, and he did not like to be disturbed. But the sight of the inspector's uniform was not without its effect, and the intruders were ushered into a little room at the top of the stairs. The door was not quite closed, so that the strangers could see down a handsome corridor into a fine drawing-room beyond. Jack could recognize some of the guests, whereby he knew that Mr. Carrington kept very good company.

"I feel like an intruder," Jack said, as he stood looking out of the room. In his evening dress he might have passed for a guest himself. "If Mr. Carrington is in a position ——"

Jack paused suddenly. He was face to face with the

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third great surprise to-night. For there in the corridor, and coming towards him now, was the fair-haired, dark-skinned girl whom he had seen with the young man in Spencer Anstruther's study. There was no mistake here, no illusion. The girl walked along with her head down, making a sign from time to time to the man by her side. He was a perfect stranger to Jack, who dismissed him from the situation altogether as a mere vacuous man about town. If the woman was here, the youth with the imperial moustache was not far off, Jack thought.

"I think that you were going to say something, sir," the inspector ventured.

But Jack had quite recovered himself by this time. He made some commonplace remark, and then Mr. Carrington came into the room. He was polite, but not at all anxious for his visitors to remain. Would they be so good as to get to the point.

The inspector told his story with considerable brevity. Mr. Carrington was pleased to be interested. It was a strange and startling romance as it stood, but the bank manager did not see his way to afford any solution of this mystery.

"I haven't quite finished, sir," the inspector said quietly. "That bill-posting was paid for by a check drawn on your City branch, of which you are manager, by one John Smith. Now, this John Smith ——"

"Which John Smith?" Mr. Carrington asked, with a smile. "My good sir, do you know that we have some two thousand five hundred accounts at our City branch? Probably the name of John Smith is the commonest in the world. Without making any very definite statement, I should say that we have over two hundred accounts in the name of Smith, and probably a third of them John Smith. I can quite understand your anxiety to get on the track of the right man without delay, but that could not possibly be done to-night. I could not even get at the ledgers without two of the cashiers being present. But I will make it a point to be at the bank at ten o'clock to-morrow morning and meet you there. It is impossible to do any more to-night."

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The inspector nodded his head somewhat sadly. He quite saw the force of what Mr. Carrington was saying. He could do no more than make an appointment for the following day. He wished Carrington good-night and turned to go, followed by Masefield. In the corridor somebody called Jack by name. He turned to see a colleague of the junior Bar standing before him.

"Hullo!" the latter said, "where did you turn up from? I had an idea that you were a friend of Carrington's. Get your coat off and join us in a game of bridge."

The situation was just a little embarrassing, but Carrington came to the rescue. Masefield was dressed for the part, so to speak, and would he not remain? There would be dancing presently, and ——

But Jack decided promptly. He whispered the inspector to precede him and wait for him in the cab. Carrington passed on as Jack stood just a moment chatting with his old friend and school-fellow.

"I came here to-night on rather important business," he said. "There is no occasion to go into that now. But I want you to do something for me, my dear fellow. In hunting up one mystery I feel pretty sure that I have come on the track of another. There is a deaf and dumb girl here—there she is, with that Johnny chap in the resplendent white waistcoat. I want you to find out who she is and where she comes from."

"That's all right," Richard Rigby responded. "Nice-looking girl, with fair hair and dark eyes. Sort of striking theatrical get-up, don't you think?"

"Well, now you mention it, perhaps it is rather in that way. But that isn't all, Dick; unless I am greatly mistaken, the girl came here with a fair chap whose moustache is turned up after the fashion of the German Emperor. Find out all about him, too, and I'll look you up at your chambers the first thing in the morning. I must not keep my friend waiting. Good-night."

Jack passed along the corridor in the direction of the staircase. There were many palms and ferns there, with screens behind which people could sit and not be seen

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except by their partners. Jack paused with his foot on the thick pile of the carpet, for just in front of him was the girl with the southern face and fair hair. Her head was still bent low, her fingers were working. What her companion was like Jack could not quite make out, for his back was turned. The girl looked up at him with a flash of anger in her eyes, her lips moved, and sound certainly came from them. Jack could just catch the words.

"Don't drive me too far," she said. "Take care and not drive me too far, because ——"

The girl suddenly lapsed into silence again and her fingers began to work. The couple passed behind a screen of palms and ferns, and Jack could see them no more.

"Well, this has been a night and a half," he said. "Where is it going to end? I wonder if my friend the inspector will be disposed to accept my suggestion?"

The inspector gave Jack's suggestion the most careful attention. He had not thought of it before.

"We'll go back to the scene of the murder," Jack said. "There is a strong electric light in front of the hoarding, and the Nostalgo poster is only a few feet from the ground. Moreover, it has only recently been put up, and it is quite clean and fair. Depend upon it, there is some trade-mark upon the bill, even if it is only a cipher. Of course, you see the importance of finding out who posted that bill?"

"Of course, sir. How do you propose to get at the facts?"

"By examining the bill with the aid of a strong magnifying glass. I have no doubt that, being a detective, you have such a thing in your pocket at the present moment? Good. Then, all you have to do is to order the cab to drive to the corner of Panton Street and stop there."

The cab arrived at length and the occupants dismounted. They did not take the cab quite as far as the scene of the murder for obvious reasons, but walked on there alone. It was quite still now, and nobody was about save a passing policeman, who had orders to give notice if anybody was coming. It was just as well that the curiosity of passers-by should not be aroused.

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"Now for it," Jack said, breathing a little faster in his excitement. "Perhaps we had better have the assistance of your lantern as well. I thought that the poster was there. It was there. I'll swear that that is the very spot, just where that picture of the pretty girl taking the pills is. Good heavens, man, the poster has *gone!* It has been covered up since we were here before by that mustard advertisement. At the hour after midnight the thing has been done. But the right thing must be underneath. See! The poster is wet!"

Jack advanced to tear the poster down, but the inspector pulled him roughly aside.

"Don't touch it," he said hoarsely. "Whatever you do, don't touch it. *Wait!*"

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CHAPTER V

A VANISHED CLUE

JACK MASEFIELD paused for Inspector Bates to say more. Possibly the officer was possessed of some brilliant idea, but after the first glance at his face it was easy to see that he was as nonplused as Jack himself. It was only the professional caution that spoke; there was no illumination at the back of the policeman's brain.

"I had hoped that perhaps you had discerned something," Masefield said.

"Not quite that, sir," Bates admitted. "So far I am as much in the dark as you are yourself, but my experience is that nothing is to be gained by haste. What I mean is that a thoughtless movement often destroys a clue of the utmost value. I should like to stand here for a moment and consider my position."

Jack drily remarked that there could be no objection to the course proposed by Inspector Bates. It was very late now; there was nothing to be seen, so that the train of thought of the inspector was not likely to be interrupted. He stood facing the great boarded hoarding with its wealth of gaudy pictorial advertisements, but his face did not lighten, and the moody frown was still on his brow.

"Blessed if I can make anything of it," he said in vexed tones. "Here's a man found dead under the most amazing circumstances. There seems to be no motive for the crime; nothing has been removed from the body so far as we know; the man evidently died where he fell. That he was killed I dare say the medical examination will show."

"So far the crime is commonplace and vulgar enough," Jack Masefield suggested. "Scores of these things happen in London every year. Some are found out, but some

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remain mysteries to the end of time; but this particular crime seems to be peculiarly terrible. First of all, London for some time has been doubly attentive to the yellow-faced posters. No greater advertising circular has ever appealed to the public. Nostalgo is a personality about as great as some of our leading actors. Still, nobody has really regarded Nostalgo as a living force, and I find him dead on the pavement here right in front of one of his own posters. Is that coincidence or an amazing happening?"

"Both, I should say, sir," Bates replied. "An amazing happening in any case. But to find the man dead in front of one of his own posters may be no more than a coincidence. You see, there are so many Nostalgo posters about."

But Jack was loth to give up his point.

"I admit that," he said; "but the particular poster we find up is a fresh one. It was more or less shot-marked, as I pointed out to you; it was marked much as the body of the dead man was marked. If you remember, I suggested examining the poster by means of a magnifying glass, in the hope of finding some kind of printer's trade-mark, and we come back here for that purpose. We find the poster pasted over with a commonplace advertisement of somebody's mustard. Surely that is not coincidence. For some reason or other the poster was covered by design. It is not the habit of the bill-poster to go about the work at midnight."

"Ah, there you are not altogether correct, sir," Bates exclaimed. He felt that he was on pretty safe ground now. "The working bill-poster is not tied to time. He has a certain amount of work to do, and he does it pretty well when he pleases. Sometimes they have to work very late. For instance, a stock piece put up at a theatre may prove a draw, and the management desire to keep it going for a time. Then there is work late at night for some firm of the paste-pot."

"Quite so, inspector; but does that apply to the harmless, necessary mustard advertisement?"

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"Not directly, perhaps. But suppose there had been a sudden rush of new and urgent work, the routine would have fallen behind. Please understand that the bill-poster does not career round in a casual way, sticking up a poster just where it suits his fancy. All these hoardings are rented, and big advertisers contract to have so many sheets displayed every week; in fact, it is a most desultory business. Depend upon it, the bill-poster who so lately posted up that alluring mustard tin had nothing to do with the business."

It was all so logical and conclusive that Jack was compelled to drop further argument. At the same time, it seemed rather foolish to stand there doing nothing.

"Look here," he said, struck by a sudden idea; "why not pull that mustard poster down, and get at the real source of the truth. The paper is still wet, and I dare say we might find a ladder behind the hoarding. Let us pull it down, and take the whole thing to the police-station and examine it at our leisure."

There was no objection to this, at Bates was bound to admit. It was a very easy matter to find a way behind the hoarding and secure the firmest of many ladders. A short one was sufficient for the purpose, and very soon the great sheet that contained the mustard advertisement was pulled off the wooden hoarding and lay in a heap on the pavement. In the place of it, fresh and strong, was the yellow face of Nostalgo. Jack took the inspector's lamp and regarded the poster carefully by the magnifying glass. But there was no imprint to be seen, nothing to lead to the identity of the firm who printed the placard.

"I can make nothing whatever of it," Masefield was fain to admit at last. "There are the shot holes plainly marked, as if somebody had used an air-gun or a pea-rifle. Beyond that I can see absolutely nothing of the slightest significance. The best thing for us to do is to see the contractor who has the job in hand in the morning, and get him to saw the poster out of the wooden hoarding for you. The strong light of day may make a difference; but I am not as yet absolutely satisfied that that mustard

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poster was placed exactly on the top of the yellow face quite by accident."

Bates did not contest the point. He was getting tired and sleepy, and it was very late. "Very well," he said, "we will return to the police station in Shannon Street and have another look at the dead man. It is just possible we may find something there. At the same time, it may be just as well to be on the safe side. I'll get one of my men to come here and keep an eye on the hoarding to-night. It is on the cards that he may see something suspicious. I'll send a plain clothes man here to watch."

As Bates blew softly on his whistle a constable turned up and saluted. He was to stay where he was until relief came, Bates explained. Then he and Jack Masefield went off in the direction of Shannon Street station. The place was perfectly quiet; nobody had been brought in lately; there was no sign of the tragedy here. In a rack near the back, lighted by a skylight some six feet from the ground, lay the murdered body of the man with the yellow face. The malignant look had gone from his face; he seemed calm and placid. As Jack bent over him it seemed to him that there was a movement of the heart. He pointed this out to the inspector, who shook his head.

"People not accustomed to these things often make the same mistake," he said. "I have heard witnesses swear that the body of this or that man was not bereft of life, and in this belief they have been quite certain. Then a doctor comes along and proves beyond a doubt that death has taken place perhaps five or six hours before. Muscular action is what probably deceives people. That poor fellow is dead enough."

Masefield did not argue the matter. It was a sickening business, and he felt that he would gladly see the end of it. Not so Bates, who was inured to this kind of thing. Very rapidly and skilfully he went over the body in search of anything that might be likely to lead to the identification of the deceased. But the pockets were doubtless empty; there was no watch or chain, or purse, no marking on the linen.

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"Not even a laundry mark?" Jack suggested. "If my reasoning is correct, a laundry mark has frequently proved of the greatest assistance."

"No mark whatever," said Bates. "The shirt, for instance, is of ordinary make, the class of thing that one buys ready-made at a shop, and which has usually its maker's mark on. There has been a mark of some kind on the neck band, but it looks as if it had been blocked out with chemicals. See how much whiter and thinner the neck band is. We are simply wasting our time here."

Jack said nothing; he could only shake his head sadly. The more the mystery came to be probed the more maddening did it become. A close investigation of the clothing presented as little result; there was nothing even about the boots to prove where they had been made. If the man was a criminal, and his general air suggested that, he had taken the most amazing precaution to prevent identification in case of accidents. Jack looked at the clear, dark features. This was no man to take anybody into his confidence. Success or failure, or crime, must all be undertaken alike alone and unaided. This face would never have led anybody to rejoice with him in good fortune, or sympathize with him in failure.

"Well, I think I had better be getting back to my rooms," Masefield said. "I have given you my name and address. I'll come round to-morrow and see if you have made anything out of the poster in the daylight. One thing is pretty certain—there should be no difficulty, if a determined effort is made, to discover the people who printed the picture of the yellow face. There are not many firms in this country capable of such work."

"There is the Continent," Bates suggested. "I'm afraid that it will be very much like looking for a needle in a hayrick. Still ——"

What deep philosophical remark Bates was going to make Masefield was not destined to hear, for at the same moment there was the sound of a sudden disturbance in the office beyond. The hoarse voice of a sergeant was

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heard demanding to know what this little game meant, there was a groan, and the collapse of a heavy body on the floor. Bates strode into the office.

"What is all this row about?" he demanded.

"It's Gregory, sir," the sergeant replied. "Went off half-an-hour ago on some special work for you, or so he *said*, and here's he back as drunk as a lord; regularly collapsed on the floor, he did. It's not the first time, either."

A sudden suspicion burst upon Masefield. He knelt by the side of the plain clothes man and felt his heart. There was a peculiar red mark round the man's neck as if something had been pulled very tightly round it.

"The man is no more drunk than I am," Jack said. "He has been attacked, and his breath is wholly free from any suspicion of drink. Look at that mark round his neck."

Very slowly the prostrate man struggled to a sitting position. When the fact had once been ascertained that there was no suggestion of intoxication, brandy was administered to him. He had a strange story to tell. He was carrying out instructions when suddenly somebody came behind him and placed a rope round his neck. Before he could recover himself he was partially strangled; he lost consciousness and lay on the pavement. When he came to himself again he was quite alone. He had managed to struggle back to the station, and once there had collapsed on the floor. Robbery was not the motive, for he had lost nothing.

"It's all part of the same mystery," Jack decided. "Something was going on behind that hoarding, and the criminals did not want the policeman to see. I shall walk back to my rooms that way. No, you had better not come along, inspector, in case you are spotted. I shall just walk very coolly by and keep my eye on that hoarding. Good-night!"

There was nothing more to be done, so Masefield was allowed to depart. He had ample food for thought as he walked along the deserted streets. He came at length to

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the great hoarding where the poster had stood. He stopped just for a moment, almost too amazed to move; then he forced himself to go forward again.

For the striking Nostalgo poster was gone. It had been sawn neatly out of the boards of the hoarding, leaving a blank square eye in its place!

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CHAPTER VI

VANISHED !

IT was not to be supposed that this had happened without attracting the Argus eye of the Press. The night-birds of journalism had been hovering about, seeking their prey of sensational copy. They haunted the police station with a hope that something might turn up—the hope that every reporter has that sooner or later he may happen on a good thing that has in it the making of some columns of red-hot descriptive matter.

One of them, hungry and lynx-eyed, had seen the body of Nostalgo carried to Shannon Street station. There might have been a paragraph then; there might have been a column. At any rate, the chance was too good to be lost. The reporter was on the best of terms with the police for a square mile or so; indeed, his living more or less depended on the good fellowship of the local authorities. The sergeant had first of all set the ball rolling; the reporter had seen the body; he had no difficulty in recognizing the striking likeness between the dead man and the poster. Younger men would have rushed off at once and made a long paragraph of this, manifolded it, and sent it broadcast along Fleet Street.

But not so the old and cunning hand at the game; his instinct told him that there was more to come. There was more to come, probably in the shape of the shaken Gregory, who presently told the reporter his part of the story. This was a case when a cab was justified. Half-an-hour later the reporter was closeted with the chief sub-editor of the *Daily Planet*, a halfpenny morning paper dealing largely in sensations. The sub-editor's eye gleamed as he listened to the reporter's story. This was something after his own heart.

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"Write two columns of it," he said. "You can use Daly's room. Serve it up as hot as you can with plenty of scare heads. We'll give it the first place on page five. You had better have a stenographer, as time is pressing."

Therefore it came about that the half million or so of readers of the *Planet* had the shock at breakfast the following day. With its tally of many dazzling sensations, the *Planet* had never been more successful than in this. The thing was admirably done. The mystery was puzzling to a degree. Before ten o'clock the following morning London was talking of little else. It was discussed in the train, on the top of the omnibus, in City offices. The name of Nostalgo was on every lip.

The editor-in-chief and the chief shareholder in the *Planet* Company came down to the office very early in the forenoon, an action quite unusual with him. But his keen instinct scented a good thing for the *Planet* here. The thing was exclusively his own, and he meant to work it to the last ounce. The little man with the bald head and gold-rimmed monocle had created a pretty scheme by the time he had reached his office. Without loss of time he sent for Mr. Richard Rigby. Rigby came in response to the summons. He found journalism more remunerative than the Bar.

"This is the best thing we have ever had," Mr. Van Jens said in his staccato way. "I'm just going to show the British public what an American journalist can do with the thing. It's pretty clear to me that the police have blundered, as they always do, and that they have got right off the track of the truth. We're going to solve the mystery, Rigby, and you're the man I have picked out to do it. In the first place, you are a clever actor, and you have pluck. Go about it in your own way, and take your own time. Never mind the expense; spend £1,000 if necessary. Only get to the bottom of the thing, if it's merely to prove to the police that they can't do without the Press. By the way, isn't Masefield a friend of yours?"

Rigby admitted that such was the case. He did not pretend to follow the quick working of his chief's brain;

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few men were competent to do that. Van Jens was leaning over the *Planet* in order to read the report of the Nostalgo affair.

"I saw Masefield last night," Rigby said. He did not tell Van Jens that Jack had met him at Carrington's, for that was a matter concerning Masefield alone. "Do you think he is likely to be of any assistance to me?"

"It is just possible. You see it was Masefield who actually found the body of the man who we call Nostalgo. It is possible also that Masefield knows more than our reporter got to find out. You had better hint to Masefield that there is a chance of getting a commission from us to write a serial for one of our weekly journals—he is in the way of doing that kind of thing. Anyway, get him to regard it in a favorable light. If you handle the man properly, I feel quite sure that he will offer you valuable information."

Rigby nodded. He did not tell Van Jens that Jack Masefield was a close friend of his, for that point had nothing to do with Van Jens, who regarded Rigby as the typical smart unit of the smart paper, and none too scrupulous where men were concerned. As a matter of fact Rigby had his code of honor; possibly his chief would not have considered it. Come what might, Rigby was not likely to take any advantage of Masefield.

"All right," he said; "you may rely upon me to do all that I can. By the way, if I am to take this case in hand, I must not be tied as to time. I mean, that somebody else must be drafted out to do my regular work and—and to say nothing if I don't show up here regularly. I think that only fair."

"Only fair, it is," Van Jens replied. "I'll see to all that. And I'll leave instructions with the counting house that you are to draw on me to the extent of £1,000 if necessary. And now you had better go off to Masefield without delay."

It was not yet eleven o'clock, and Rigby felt pretty certain of finding Masefield at home. He was perfectly correct in his conclusions, for Jack was busy just putting

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the finishing touches to a short magazine story. The morning papers lay in a pile on the table, but as yet he had not had time to open them. Rigby helped himself to a cigarette.

"Hope I don't intrude," he said. "If I am in the way, kick me out at once."

"You are never in the way here, Dick," Masefield smiled. "As a matter of fact, I have just passed the last page of this story for the *Grasshopper*. It's always a pleasure to sit down and write a story when you have a fair commission for it."

"You will soon have plenty of them, my boy," Rigby said cheerfully, "especially now that you've got your name in the papers. Seen the *Planet* to-day? You haven't? Well, you are pretty prominent on page five, let me tell you. One of our men got hold of that sensational Nostalgo business, and then made a picture of it. Just run your eye along the report, and tell me what you think of it. Pretty hot, isn't it? Now can you tell me anything?"

"Anything fresh in regard to the affair you mean?"

"You've got it first time. As a matter of fact, Van Jens has placed the thing in my hands, and I'm to get to the bottom of it if it costs the paper £1,000. Van Jens suggested that I should come and see you and pump you. The bait to you is a commission for a big serial in one of our weeklies. But apart from all that, Jack, I'm quite sure that you will be ready to help me for old sake's sake."

"Of course I will," Masefield said heartily. "Really, there is very little to tell; your man seems to have got it down very fine. But I can tell you all about the shot marks and the missing poster, only you must not publish that."

"My dear fellow, you don't quite understand my position. I'm not sent as a mere scare writer in this business; I'm more of an amateur detective, with a pocket full of money. My task is to beat the police at their own game, and prove the superior intellectual force of the Press.

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Then I shall write the whole story, and the *Planet* circulation will go up to a million."

"Then I'll tell you all that there is to know," Jack replied. "When I have finished my story, I shall have a few questions to ask you. Get your note-book out."

Rigby had no cause for complaint on the score of Masefield's narrative. In the description of the shot marks and the subsequently missing poster he felt that he had conquered a fine point of the situation. He took another cigarette, and Jack did the same.

"Now I'm going to ask you a few questions," the latter said, "and I should not be surprised that in replying to my queries we throw some fresh light on the object of your search. You will recollect meeting me at Carrington's last night?"

"Of course I do. I took you for a fellow quite above that kind of thing—playing the amateur detective."

"Notably, as I was in evening dress. As a matter of fact I had been dining with Spencer Anstruther, and it was in leaving his house that I found the body of the man we had better call Nostalgo. Of course I recognized him by the likeness to the poster. Subsequently Inspector Bates and myself discovered the name of the firm who posted the creation. We went off to see the head of the firm, and he could tell us very little, except that the placards came from some John Smith, who had an account with the City and Provincial Bank. The latter fact accounts for my being at Carrington's last night."

"Exactly. And you asked me to keep my eye on a pretty girl, who was deaf, and who had for attendant cavalier a chap with a moustache like that of the German Emperor."

"I am coming to that," Masefield went on. "I told you that I had been dining with Anstruther. Now these two people left Anstruther's house, for I followed them. I will tell you a more striking thing about them later on, but I want to have my side of the affair cleared up first. Tell me what happened after I left Carrington's with Inspector Bates."

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"Well, I kept my eye on these people, as you asked me. I tried to get some information about the fair one from Carrington himself, but he didn't seem to like the subject. He seemed depressed and a little bit uneasy, I thought; said it was a sad case, sort of relation of his, and that the man with the moustache was a foreign count or something of that sort. I wouldn't press the matter, as it would have been in bad taste, you see. But, all the same, I did keep an eye on these people, as you asked me, and the end of it was that I followed them when they left the house. I don't know what made me do it."

"At any rate I'm glad you acted in that manner," Jack said. "Did they go back in the direction of Anstruther's house? Did they take a cab?"

"Not in the ordinary acceptance of the word," Rigby explained. "They walked as far as the top of Regent Circus, where a private growler was waiting. The cab was all black, the driver had a black livery. I could not see his face, as it was tied up with a silk handkerchief as if the fellow had toothache or something of that kind. The four-wheeler was evidently waiting for them, for they got in at once."

"Anybody else inside the cab?" Jack asked.

"By Jove, I was nearly forgetting that!" Rigby exclaimed. "I was just flush with the cab as it passed a lamp. There was another figure in the cab, a man, and as the light shone on his face I was about staggered by his resemblance to the poster of Nostalgo. I only saw the face just for an instant, but it is impressed upon my mind as if the man were standing before me at this very minute. Singular, was it not?"

Jack nodded dumbly. This was another new departure in the strange mystery. For the man seen by Rigby in the black four-wheeler could not possibly have been the same Nostalgo that Jack had found, seeing that the latter had been lying in Shannon Street some hour or two before the time that Rigby was speaking about.

"You did not follow them further, I suppose?" Masefield asked.

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"No; I didn't go as far as that. And at the moment I didn't think anything as to that Nostalgo business No. 1, so to speak. If I had, you may bet your bottom dollar that I should not have lost the opportunity. The cab drifted away without any direction being given; so I went along, without giving it more consideration, to my club. Eh, what?"

Inspector Bates had hurried into the room without ceremony. His face was pale and agitated.

"Something strange come out at the inquest?" Jack asked.

"No, sir," Bates gasped, "for the simple reason that there has been no inquest. You can't hold an inquest without a body. What do I mean? Why, that the body has vanished from the room, leaving not a hint of a clue behind!"

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CHAPTER VII

NO. 4, MONTROSE PLACE

THE inspector stood there with his hand on his heart, as if he had run far and fast. So far as Jack could see, Bates was suffering from some strong emotion. He flopped down in the chair indicated for him, and took Jack's proffered cigarette with a shaking hand. Although his feelings were not exactly under the control one would have expected from one of the leading lights of Scotland Yard, there was at the same time a certain suggestion of grim humor playing about the corners of his mouth. Jack looked across at Rigby and smiled significantly.

"Evidently a new development of the case," Jack said, glancing once more at his friend. "As a matter of fact, inspector, I have just been telling Mr. Rigby all about last night's ghastly business. By the way, you will recollect, of course, that Mr. Rigby is my friend whom we met at Mr. Carrington's last night. Not to make too long a story of it, there are sidelights of this business of which you are not at present aware—but all that is beside the point. What I want you to tell me is about this disappearance of the body of Nostalgo. Seriously, do you want my friend and me to believe that the body of a dead man has disappeared from Shannon Street police station right under the eyes of the authorities?"

"Well, that is about the size of it," Bates admitted ruefully. "Naturally enough, we look forward to important developments at the official inquiry. I had a chat late last night with the doctor, who seemed to be of the opinion that the dead man had been shot with something quite new in the way of a weapon."

"What, do you mean a new projectile or a new sort of small arm?" Masefield asked.

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"Well, not exactly that," the inspector replied; "but something quite new in the way of a missile. There were marks on the breast of our unfortunate friend which indicated the presence of a shot of some kind that did mortal damage without leaving traces of anything material behind."

"Oh, that is all very well, so far as it goes; but what I want to get at chiefly is the cause of the disappearance of the body," Rigby put in impatiently. "What is the good of trying to establish all sorts of new theories when you have not so much as a dead body of the deceased man before you? It seems incredible to me that this outrage could have been committed in a police station. Was no one about—was the whole place deserted, whereby some stranger could have coolly stepped in and walked off with the body of a powerful man?"

"Well, that is not so difficult as it might seem," Bates said eagerly. "As a matter of fact, our mortuary is merely an outside room which at one time had been used as a kitchen. Mr. Masefield will recollect last night noticing that the light of the room consisted entirely of a kind of skylight. The ceiling is exceedingly low, so that it would be quite possible for a tall man to lift the body through and carry it away without the least trouble, provided, of course, that he had sufficient strength. At any rate, there it is, and we have to make the best of it."

"I hope that you have managed to keep this matter from the public so far," Masefield said. "I don't think anything will be gained by allowing this new sensation to get into the papers. The best thing we can do is to come round to Shannon Street with you and see if we can lay our hands upon anything in the way of a clue. My friend Mr. Rigby has had a lot of experience in amateur detective work; I dare say you recollect his success in the matter of the Mortlake coiners, on behalf of the *Planet*."

Bates expressed his willingness to fall in with this arrangement. Not that he had any particular confidence in amateur detectives generally; but he was so bewildered and disheartened at present that anything was preferable to

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his own painful thoughts. The police station was reached at length, and a thorough search of the shabby little apartment at the back of the office made. But no amount of investigation served to throw any light on this new phase of the mystery. It was even as Bates had said: with the darkness of the night, and expecting no developments of this kind, a bold and unscrupulous character might easily have entered the room and taken away anything, however bulky, without much chance of detection.

Nothing daunted by the want of success attending his efforts, Rigby climbed on to the roof and looked around him. He was particularly struck by the deserted area at the back of the police station. It was some distance from his coign of vantage to the nearest house. No doubt at one time the open space had consisted of fertile gardens, but the same space was now given over to arid grass and a few stunted trees—a scene of desolation indeed. On the opposite side, some two hundred yards away, the backs of a terrace of large houses looked blankly on the scene. Rigby, with a new idea entirely in his mind, inquired the name of the terrace. Bates smiled with the superior air of the professional, and replied that it was Montrose Place.

"And what class of people live there?" Rigby asked.

"Well, rather mixed, I should say," Bates replied. "There was a time, not so many years ago, when Montrose Place was quite fashionable. Mind you, they're exceedingly good houses, quite good enough for any moneyed class; but I understand that the landlord is by no means a liberal man, and, as the houses have fallen out of repair, they have become void."

Any further information on this head was cut short by the sudden calling away of the inspector. It seemed to Masefield that Rigby was by no means disposed to mourn for the official's company. He stood with his brows bent frowning at the sombre row of houses in front of him, but, from the quick working of his hands, Masefield could see that his versatile friend's brain was busy.

"I see you have made a discovery," Masefield said quietly. "Would you mind telling me what it is?"

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Rigby pointed to the fourth house from the end of the terrace. Did Masefield notice anything about it peculiar? he asked. But Masefield did not see anything about the house at all ominous or suggestive, except that the windows were grimy and dirty, and that the erstwhile fashionable silk blinds were hanging in tatters like banners behind the smirky glass.

"But surely you see something?" asked Rigby impatiently. "For instance, take the third window on the left over the ledge, which probably is that of the bathroom. Don't appear to be looking, and, at the same time, keep your eye casually on the window."

With a quickening of his pulses, Masefield glanced up in a vague kind of way in the direction of the window. He felt instinctively that in some way the deserted house was involved in the disappearance of Nostalgo. There was not much time for speculation on this point. Very slowly and cautiously the blind was raised, and a haggard face peeped out. It was like a picture from some old print, this strange weird yellow face behind the grimy glass. So thick was the murky dust upon the casement that it was impossible at so short a distance to decide whether the features were those of a man or a woman. Anyway, the face, if it were that of a man, was clean-shaven, the pale head half hidden behind a tangle of thick black hair. It was only for a moment that this weird face presented itself to the eager eyes of the spectators below; an instant later and the whole phantom had vanished.

"Now, what do you think of that?" Rigby asked eagerly. "Don't you agree with me that this strange apparition has something to do with the story? Now, supposing you or I had some powerful inducement for getting hold of the missing body, could we find a better place to work from than that deserted house?"

"Provided always that it is deserted," Masefield said guardedly. "Don't let's go quite so fast. Surely your own experience must have taught you what strange creatures one often sees as caretakers in good houses?"

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"So much the better for me," Rigby replied. "If you are correct in your suggestion, it will make my task all the more easy; for, come what may, I am going to see the whole inside of that place before I sleep to-night."

Rigby walked back into the police station with the air of a man who has said his last word on the matter. It was no advantage to him, working as he was on behalf of his own newspaper, to mention his discovery to Bates. Possibly Masefield's common-sense view of the problem might have been the correct one, after all, in which case Bates would have had the laugh of his unprofessional ally. But Bates had evidently been called out on other business, so that there was no occasion to say anything to him at all. Declining to return to Masefield's rooms and there discuss the matter further over tea, Rigby went thoughtfully back to the office of the *Planet*. He dined alone at his club, lingering till about ten o'clock over the evening papers, and then proceeded on his way to Montrose Place by the somewhat circuitous route of Covent Garden.

But there was more method in Rigby's madness than met the eye. The sleek, well-groomed barrister and journalist who entered the shop of Jonas the costumier shortly after ten o'clock, emerged a little before eleven carefully and effectually disguised as a seller of newspapers. Then, with the fag-end of a cigarette of doubtful quality in his mouth, he slouched along towards his destination.

Montrose Place from a front view was considerably more prepossessing than the similar outlook that presented itself from the back. At least half the houses were tenanted by people of means, judging from the neatness of the blinds and the amount of light displayed in the various windows. Yet, at the same time, it was quite evident that Bates'estimate was fairly correct.

The first three houses in the terrace bore plates of highly polished brass, testifying to the fact that doctors were not lacking in the locality. No. 4, however, stood out in marked contrast to its neighbors. There was no chance of Rigby's presence there exciting undue suspicion, for there was not a soul to be seen in the terrace.

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Emboldened by this fact, Rigby had no hesitation in lighting a vesta and making a comprehensive examination of the door-steps. They were dirty enough in all conscience; no housemaid had knelt there for many months or even years past; but Rigby's sharp eyes did not fail to note the fact that some one more than once recently had left footprints on the grimy flags. They were not clearly indented footprints; indeed, there was a misty hesitation about them which at first puzzled the amateur detective exceedingly.

He struck another match after looking cautiously up and down the terrace. Nobody was in sight; the precaution was quite unnecessary; the blue flame picked out the misty footprints grimed into the filthy steps, and then Rigby understood. Whoever made those marks had been wearing rubber-soled shoes.

"And new shoes at that," Rigby muttered to himself. "I can see the pattern in the centre of the sole clearly indented now. And the prints go and come up and down the steps quite regularly. Now, the fact that somebody comes here and wears new rubber shoes makes it clear that the wearer has been here very recently. It is also evident that the wearer wears rubber-soled tennis shoes so as to make no noise. I feel pretty certain that I am going to learn something now."

But Rigby was a little too sanguine. In the first place, he had to gain admission to the house, the front door of which was locked. It was perhaps a significant fact that, though the lock of the door was green with rust, the edge of the rim of the hole where the latch-key indented was bright and clear at the edges.

"Evidently used regularly," Rigby went on. "Now, the ordinary caretaker does not usually sport a latch-key; he or she generally uses the area door. I should not wonder if the area window was open; I'll try it."

The area window was not open, but the loose catch had been carelessly pushed to. The blade of a stout penknife sufficed to prize the catch, and a moment later Rigby

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was in the housekeeper's room, safe from all outside observation.

There was no sign of life here; no vestige of it on the stairs leading to the big rooms overhead. Rigby could not but notice what a fine house it was; the last tenant had evidently been lavish in the way of decorations. With a match in his hand carefully shaded from the window, Rigby crept up the stairs. He could see in the dust lying there the constantly repeated footprint of the rubber shoe, indicating that the owner of that shoe was in the habit of spending a great deal of time there.

But now, so far as he could judge, the house was absolutely deserted. He tried door after door softly, and each yielded to his touch, revealing gloom and desolation and dirt by the faint light of the vesta. As each stump burned low Rigby carefully dropped the end of it in his pocket. He was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. Almost before he was fully cognizant of that feeling he paused in an attitude of rigid attention. Something like the sound of a smothered cough struck on his ear; it seemed to him that he could hear somebody approaching. The stair creaked, and Rigby drew back into a doorway.

He was not mistaken. Somebody was coming up the stairs.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE CHOPIN FANTASIE

It was nearly two hours later before Rigby crept cautiously down the steps and emerged by the way in which he had entered the house. The street as before was absolutely deserted; so far as Rigby could see he might have been in a city of the dead. Despite his disguise and the artistic make-up of his grimy face, an acute spectator would not have failed to notice the agitation of his features. He crept with trembling footsteps to the roadway, and clung to the railings with a swaying air of one who has seen things the tongue refuses to describe. Then his natural courage, fanned by the cool air of the evening and the sense of being no longer isolated, returned with virile force to him. Mechanically he fumbled in his rags and produced from a breast pocket a silver cigarette-case, that might have got him into serious trouble if a lynx-eyed policeman had been near at hand.

"Well, I have seen some queer things in my time, but, as the poet says, 'never aught like this,'" Rigby said, with teeth that chattered a little. "I really must have one of my own cigarettes."

Despite his excitement, Rigby was conscious that he ought to be just a little ashamed of himself. He had always prided himself upon the fact that his nerves were perfectly under control and that nothing ever put him out, otherwise he would not have occupied the position he did at the *Planet* office. He began to feel the effect of the cool night air, which braced him like a tonic. As he stood there waiting for something—though he would have found it difficult to say what—a policeman came slowly down the street. Rigby stooped and pretended to be busy with his stock of papers.

Some spirit of mischief moved him to chaff the represent-

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ative of the law, and at the same time test to the utmost the disguise that he was wearing.

"Paper, sir?" he asked. "All the winners—horrible murder in Grosvenor Square. Ain't you going to buy one?"

Apparently the officer was one of the good-tempered sort, for he only smiled, and in a more or less gruff voice ordered the news-vender to move on.

"Just waiting for my pal, sir," Rigby explained. "I have never come down this street before, an' I'll take good care never to come down here again. Why, half these houses seem to be empty. Look at that show opposite. 'Ow long since anybody has lived there?"

"Before I came on the beat, anyway," the policeman explained. "Do you want to take one?"

With a laugh at his own pleasantry the policeman stalked off down the street, leaving Rigby easier in his mind and quite satisfied that his disguise would stand any ordinary test.

He leaned against the area railings absolutely undecided as to what to do next. With a certain new caution almost amounting to cowardice—a feeling of which he would be ashamed at any other time—Rigby turned his back upon the man who was advancing down the street. At the same time, so full was he of the horrors that he had lately witnessed, the amateur detective quite forgot the fragrant cigarette so out of keeping with his character. The stranger pulled up and, crossing the pavement, tapped Rigby familiarly on the shoulder.

"You are not so clever as you think you are," the stranger remarked coolly. "You may be a very smart chap, Dick, and I may be a very dull one, but I have certainly sufficient brains to know that the average newspaper tout does not smoke Turkish cigarettes. Besides, after our conversation this morning, I felt pretty certain that you would make an attempt to get inside that house."

Rigby laughed in a way that suggested that his nerves were in a considerably frayed condition.

"So that's you, Jack," he said, with a sigh of relief.

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"Yes, you are quite right; in fact, I told you I should not rest to-night until I had seen the inside of that house."

"And did the expedition come up to expectations?" Masefield asked eagerly.

"My dear fellow, I have had some weird experiences in my time, but I would not go through the last hour again for the wealth of the Indies. In fact, if I tell you what I've seen, you would set me down for a doddering lunatic."

The look of self-satisfaction on Jack's face faded away. He shivered with a strange weird feeling, that strange presentiment of something dire about to happen. Again, why should he doubt the fact that something terribly out of the common had happened to Rigby after his own amazing experiences?

With his hand on the arm of his friend, he walked abstractedly the whole of the terrace. Here a great arc light threw a stream of pallid blue upon the motley coloring displayed upon a big hoarding. In the centre of the hoarding, well displayed, was the terrible placard disclosing the grinning features of Nostalgo.

"By Heaven!" Jack exclaimed, "there is no getting away from the features of that grinning devil. I know as well as if I had seen it down in black and white that the awful experiences which have so changed you lately have to do with that yellow face."

"I am not going to deny it," Rigby replied; "and, what is more, I am not going to tell you what I have seen in the last two hours—at least, not at present. And now tell me, to change the subject, what is your private opinion of Spencer Anstruther?"

To say that Jack was taken aback by the suddenness of the question would be a mistake. It will be remembered that on the occasion Masefield last dined with Anstruther he had pointed out to Claire the amazing likeness between Nostalgo and her guardian. Not that it was possible for anybody to notice this except when Anstruther was moved to great emotion; but the fact remained. And now to find that Rigby's mind was so

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strangely moved in the same train of thought was, to say the least of it, disturbing.

"What do you mean by asking that question?" Jack said guardedly.

"For goodness' sake do not let us have any of this unnecessary caution between friends like ourselves," Rigby said, with great feeling. "Believe me, my dear friend, I am not asking this question out of idle curiosity. As man to man, is he a magnificent genius or the greatest criminal the world has ever seen?"

Thus put to it, Jack had no hesitation; indeed, he could have had no hesitation in replying to such a direct question as this.

"I am going to speak quite candidly to you," he said. "As you are perfectly well aware, knowing the man quite as well as I do, he is, like most geniuses, an exceedingly poor man. At the same time, unlike most geniuses, he is as unscrupulous as he is clever. I have more than an idea that he could tell us all about this affair, but I prefer to pose as a person who has come into it by accident, and who is only languidly interested. I have had some hesitation in mentioning my estimate of Anstruther's character to his ward, but I feel very uneasy so far as Claire is concerned. I know for a fact that Anstruther is painfully hard up; really, there are times when his financial straits are absolutely desperate. This being so, it has occurred to me more than once that Claire's money must be a strong inducement to prevent her marrying, for instance, myself."

"That is by no means a remote contingency," Rigby suggested drily.

"My dear fellow, to be perfectly frank with you, Miss Helmsley and myself have been engaged for the past two years. Mind you, this is a dead secret. I have a presentiment, call it foolish if you like, that the announcement of this fact to Anstruther will be the first moment of real danger for Claire. But why do you so suddenly spring this question upon me?"

By way of reply Rigby drew his companion into the

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comparative shadow of a doorway. He had hardly done so before another figure came jauntily down the street—a tall, slim figure which seemed strangely familiar to Masefield.

"The whole place seems to reek of Anstruther to-night," Jack said, "or perhaps it is my disordered imagination. But if that is not Anstruther himself, my eyesight strangely deceives me."

"If you knew as much as I do, or you had learned what I have learned the last hour, you would not be surprised," Rigby said. "However, we will soon settle that. I'll just step across the road and try and sell him a paper."

Before Jack could lay a detaining hand on the arm of his friend, Rigby was half way across the street. In the approved raucous voice of the tribe, the amateur newsvender tendered Anstruther an *Echo*. He waved the offer aside, and made his way down the street with the air of one who has a definite object in view. With a whine artistically uttered, Rigby fell back upon the doorway in which Masefield was concealed.

"Anstruther beyond all shadow of doubt," Rigby said triumphantly. "Now, I am not a betting man, but I will lay you any odds in reason that our interesting friend enters No. 4. Ah, what did I tell you?"

Surely enough, Anstruther paused in his stride before the dilapidated door of No. 4. With one swift glance up and down the street to make certain that he was not observed, he drew a latch-key from his pocket and disappeared within the dingy portals. On the still night air the click of the latch-key and the muffled banging of the door could be heard all down the road. Rigby drew a sigh of relief.

"Well, I think that'll do for to-night," he said. "I reckon I have had just about as much as my nerves will stand. No, I am not going to tell you anything, and I have no stomach for further adventures this evening. I am going straight to bed, to sleep if I can. Come around and see me to-morrow afternoon."

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But curious as he was, and anxious also as he was, Jack was forced to decline the proffered invitation. Besides, he had promised to take Claire to a matinée concert at the Albert Hall, to hear a new violinist who so far had only performed twice before in England. Signor Padini had come to the metropolis with a marvelous reputation, but so far he had hardly fulfilled expectations. Still, it was not the habit of music-lovers like Claire and Masefield to accept a verdict of this kind at second-hand. Therefore they had determined to hear the new virtuoso for themselves.

Not that any thoughts of a harmonious and musical kind were running in Jack's mind as he walked home to-night. Try as he would, he could not dismiss the idea that some grave peril was impending, and that Claire was likely to be the central figure of the tragedy. But it is the blessed privilege of youth to throw off the haunting cares and doubts that assail their elders, and Jack suffered little on the ground of sleeplessness that night.

All the same, the haunting fears were with him again on waking in the morning.

But perhaps Claire noticed something of this, for she put the direct question to her lover when he called on her the next afternoon. Yet Jack had no intention of saying anything for the present. He began to speak somewhat hurriedly of the new violinist, Signor Padini, and so the conversation lasted till the Albert Hall was reached.

There was nothing particularly attractive in the concert generally, and both waited somewhat impatiently for the foreigner to appear. He came at length, tall, slim, and clean-shaven, and Claire noticed with an amused smile that for once she was in the presence of a master who eschewed long hair. She turned and whispered something to this effect to Jack, who did not appear to be listening.

"Now, where have I seen that fellow before?" he muttered. "Call me foolish if you like, say this man is an absolute stranger to England if you please; but I am

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absolutely prepared to swear that his face is quite familiar to me."

But perhaps it was merely a chance likeness, Claire suggested. She was far too interested in the musician to take much heed of what Jack said. Evidently this man knew his business to his finger-tips; the way in which he handled his bow would have proved that to any critic. Claire glanced down the programme; and no sooner did the wild sweeping music come streaming from the strings than the whole audience thrilled responsive to the master's touch. He was not, after all, playing the piece standing against his name on the programme, but the peculiar weird and mournful rhapsodie of Chopin's that Jack had heard Anstruther interpreting two nights before. He leaned back; his eyes were half closed with a strange sensation that he was listening to Anstruther now. He turned to suggest something of this to Claire, and to his surprise he noticed that her face was paler than his own.

"Does anything strike you?" he whispered. "Have you a feeling, like myself, of having gone through all this before?"

"Dreadful!" Claire shuddered. "I know exactly what you mean. It is the same, precisely the same, as if my guardian had crept inside the body of Padini —— There! Did you notice that particular slur, that strange half hesitation? I declare, I feel certain that this Padini was in my guardian's study the other night. Jack, you must get at the bottom of this; there is some mystery here which we must solve, and that without delay."

Jack rose from his seat and buttoned his coat firmly about him.

"Ay," he said, "a deeper mystery than you are aware of. Stay here while I go behind the stage. I am going to see Signor Padini, and get to the bottom of this business at any cost."

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CHAPTER IX

CLAIRE sat there, her mind half on her music and half on the extraordinary conduct of her lover. Not that she did not trust him implicitly; but, still, it seemed strange that he should have gone off without explaining the cause of his agitation.

Some one next to her touched her on the elbow and asked a question as to an item on the programme. The question was repeated twice before Claire realized that she would have to pull herself together. She replied quite at random; then she looked about her, and became cognizant of the fact that Padini was still on the stage, bowing his acknowledgments of the thunderous applause which had greeted his magnificent efforts.

Yet a closer glance did not serve to show Claire anything sinister in the artist's personality. He was pale and clean-shaven, palpably very nervous, and yet pleased with the warmth of his reception. Surely there could have been no mystery connected with a man like this.

On the other hand, the marvelous likeness between his playing and the execution in the same piece displayed by Anstruther two nights ago could not possibly be overlooked by any one professing to any musical knowledge at all. Claire hoped that the inevitable encore would produce a repetition of the same piece.

Surely enough, Padini came forward and struck the opening bars of the same rhapsodie. With eyes closed and mind eagerly concentrated on the music, Claire followed every passage with rapt attention. There was no longer any possibility of mistake. The Padini interpretation of the piece was exactly that of Anstruther. Was Anstruther, therefore, a consummate master of his art or a showy

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humbug or charlatan? Could it have been possible that this new artist had been concealed in the Panton Square library two nights before? But, on the face of it, this was absolutely impossible. Padini had only been in England a little over eight and forty hours, and his first appearance in London had been at a musical "at home" on the same night that Anstruther had played the Nocturne in Panton Square.

Claire was still debating this problem in her mind when Jack returned to his seat. He looked a little pale and shaky, but the grim smile on his face was determined enough.

"My dearest girl, I am going to ask you a little favor," Jack whispered. "I hope you won't think it the least rude of me, but I want you to excuse me going back with you. Can't you guess that there is something more than meets the eye here?"

"I should be very blind indeed if I did not," Claire replied. "Jack, what is the meaning of this strange mystery? Either Signor Padini was at our house the other night, or my guardian learned to play that rhapsodie after having had lessons from the man on the platform before us."

"I may be wrong, of course," Jack said, "but I feel pretty sure that I have guessed the problem. That is why I want you to go off by yourself, and leave me to play the detective so far as Padini is concerned. It is not altogether a pleasant job, but I am going to follow that fellow when he leaves the Hall."

So saying, Jack rose from his seat, and Claire obediently followed his example. Once outside, Jack called a cab, and gave the driver his instructions.

"I think that will be all right," he said. "You may expect me to come round after dinner, my darling girl. I hope you are not in the least annoyed with me; but there is danger ahead for you and me, and it is my duty to prevent it at all hazards. I declare if I had not almost forgotten one of the most important things I had to say to you. On no account are you to breathe a word of this

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afternoon's visit to your guardian. He is not to know that you have been with me or anybody else to the Albert Hall to-day."

Claire glanced at the pale, anxious face of her lover and gave the desired assurance. She felt perfectly safe in his hands; he would tell her all there was to be told in due course; and now for the first time she congratulated herself on the fact that her engagement had been kept a secret from Anstruther.

Meanwhile Jack had returned to the back of the Hall. So far as he could recollect, Padini was down on the programme for no further item that afternoon, therefore it was only a matter of waiting till the violinist emerged, and following him to his destination. But Jack had succeeded in consuming three cigarettes without any sign of the artist rewarding his patience. Taking half-a-crown from his pocket, he crossed the road and proceeded to interview the stage-door keeper.

"Oh, that foreign-looking chap, is it?" the stage-door guardian said. "Signor Somebody or other who plays the fiddle. Why, he's been gone the last ten minutes."

"Gone!" Jack exclaimed, with palpable dismay. "Why, I have been watching most carefully for him the last half-hour. Was he wrapped up or shawled in any way?"

Whilst Jack still stood arguing there a slim young man, with fair moustache turned upwards *à la* German Emperor, passed and repassed him hurriedly. The stranger passed into a smartly appointed hansom and vanished.

"Well, there's your man," the doorkeeper exclaimed. "He must have forgotten something and returned for it."

Jack muttered his thanks, parted with his half-crown, and went into the roadway thoroughly puzzled. He could not for a moment doubt the word of the doorkeeper, who was naturally an expert in a recognition of faces. As a matter of fact, the man with the turned-up moustache was the same individual who had been so mysteriously concealed in Panton Square, and who had afterwards accompanied the deaf-mute girl to Mr. Carrington's. On the

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stage Padini had appeared as a slight, slim man, whose face was absolutely devoid of hair.

Jack stood thoughtfully in the middle of the road, wondering what to do next. His first idea was to go at once and look up Rigby. He must have been standing there a great deal longer than he had imagined, for presently he saw the smart hansom return and take its place on the rank. Here was a slice of luck indeed. Jack crossed over and hailed the hansom.

"Here, I want you to drive me to the office of the *Planet*," he said. "I suppose you know where that is. Do you want to earn an extra half-sovereign?"

"That's the way I was educated," said the cabman, with a grin. "Oh, my last fare, is it? Well, I can easily answer that question. Gent with the cocked-up moustache. I have just driven him to 5, Panton Square."

Jack stepped into the hansom, feeling that luck was entirely on his side. He knew now that he was on the track of something more than mere coincidence. For 5, Panton Square was no less a place than the residence of Spencer Anstruther, Claire's guardian. Here was proof positive that Padini, the violinist, a perfect stranger to London, was at any rate on terms of friendship with Anstruther. There was nothing for it now but to seek out Rigby and tell him all that had happened without delay. Rigby was found in his room at the *Planet* office, mournfully drawing skeletons on a sheet of blotting-paper. He nodded thoughtfully as Jack came in; then, catching sight of the latter's eager face, asked what was in the wind.

"I have been making discoveries galore," Jack responded. "You would hardly expect me to do that through the medium of an afternoon concert; but there it is. You have heard of this new violinist, Signor Padini, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," Rigby said indifferently. "Well, a typical class of foreign boomster, I suppose."

"That is not the point," Jack proceeded to explain. "You will recollect what I told you about the empty study in Anstruther's house from which the music proceeded in

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that strange, unaccountable manner. Naturally, I thought the player was Anstruther himself—Anstruther wonderfully improved or inspired beyond all recognition; but now I know that such was not the case. Dick, there is something devilish in this strange business—the empty room, the unearthly music, the strange appearance of that young man with his deaf-mute companion, followed so closely by the death of Nostalgo. What does it all mean?"

"I will give a thousand pounds to know," Rigby responded.

"Well, I think I can tell you," Jack went on. "You will recollect the night before last, during our chance meeting at Carrington's, that I asked you to keep an eye on a young man with moustache turned up *à la* German Emperor. Would you be surprised to hear that this young man was no less a person than Signor Padini?"

"Impossible!" Rigby exclaimed. "How could you prove such a statement?"

"Well, I am going to prove it, anyway. Together with Miss Helmsley I went to hear Padini this afternoon. By some strange freak of fate he had chosen Chopin's Rhapsodie in F as his item on the programme. Directly he began to play my mind went back to that strange, weird music in Anstruther's study. It was not I alone who noticed this subtle resemblance; in fact, Claire recognized it as soon as I did. Mind you, every musician of note has his little tricks and fancies which are absolutely peculiar to himself. When I shut my eyes, I could literally hear Padini playing in Anstruther's house.

"I sent Claire home in a cab, and proceeded to wait till Padini left the Albert Hall. I missed him, of course, for Padini was a clean-shaven man on the stage. As a matter of fact, he must be a very conceited creature, seeing that in private life he wears a fair moustache. I got that from the doorkeeper; but, what is more to the point, the cabman who drove me here is the same man who half-an-hour ago dropped Padini at Anstruther's house. Now, I would like to know what you make of that."

Rigby listened thoughtfully to all that Jack had had to

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say. The significance of the revelations was not lost upon him.

"And yet, I dare say, Anstruther would deny any knowledge of Padini if you asked him," he said. "Still, we know a great deal, and, clever as Anstruther is, he cannot possibly conceive the fact that we are so closely acquainted with his movements. Let's go and call upon the beggar, shall we? Pretend that we want to consult him on some matter of business. Anything will do. Did you keep your cab?"

"Well, yes; it occurred to me that we might want him again, and, besides, the driver can prove that he left Padini at 5, Panton Square."

Panton Square was reached at length; the cabman had been discreetly dropped at the corner of the street. Jack rang the bell, which was answered by Serena. In the full light of the afternoon sunshine her strange, inscrutable face looked more haggard and strange than usual. There was the same furtive droop of her eyelids, the same pitiable shake of her hands, that suggested the beaten hound, that Jack had so often noticed before. He would have given much, as a writer of stories himself, to have known the secret history of this woman. Docile and tame as she appeared to be, she was still capable of passionate emotion, or the dilatation of her black pupils spoke falsely. Though she was meek and friendly enough, there was ever a suggestion that she was on her guard.

"Your master in?" Rigby asked breezily. "But we know that he is. Don't you trouble about us; we will go to the study ourselves."

Serena stood there as if something gripped her throat and choked her utterance.

"But my master is not at home," she protested. "He has not been at home all day; neither do I know what time to expect him to-night. I fancy he is out of town altogether."

"That's rather awkward," Rigby said. "We came here on business, expecting to meet a friend of ours. I

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suppose you have seen nothing of him—a tall, slim young man, with rather a fierce type of moustache?"

"There has been no visitor calling here to-day," Serena replied, with the air of one who repeats a well-learned lesson. "I am the only servant in the house at present, and should have known if anybody had called."

Jack did not dare to glance at his companion, feeling that those dark, interrogating eyes were fixed upon his face. A sudden impulse moved Jack; he decided upon trying the effect of a swift surprise. He tapped the woman familiarly on the shoulder.

"Come, come," he said, with a jocular ring in his voice. "Do you mean to tell me that you have not had a visit to-day from Signor Padini?"

A stifled cry broke from the woman; she clenched her hands in an attitude of pain.

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CHAPTER X

WHAT DID SHE KNOW?

NOTHING was said for a full minute. Serena stood there, gazing from one to the other as a child might do who finds herself in the presence of two harsh taskmasters. There was something pitiable about her hopelessness; the fighting glint had left her eyes; she stood there downcast and shaking as a slave might do.

"I am afraid I do not understand what you mean," the woman said.

In a way Jack was feeling very sorry for Serena. Ever since he had known Anstruther and been a friend of the household the woman had held a certain subtle fascination for him. Though Jack had not made as yet much progress in the paths of literature, he had all the quick dramatic feeling which is essential to the making of a successful novelist.

It had often occurred to him that so mysterious a figure as Serena would have made a splendid character for a strong novel. He watched the woman carefully now; he saw how her breast was heaving, and what a great fight she was making to keep her emotions under control.

"I am afraid I must press you for an answer," Jack said. "Signor Padini can be nothing to you, and yet you start and cry out when his name is mentioned as if I had struck you a blow. Now, tell me, was the man I speak of a visitor to this house last night? What time did he come?"

"My master's business is my master's business," Serena said sullenly. "He tells me nothing—he tells nobody anything. And who am I, a humble servant like me, to ask questions of my master?"

Rigby shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. He began to see that there was nothing to gain here. He nodded to

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Jack and half turned away. But Jack was not to be so easily suppressed.

"But, surely," he urged, "you would be doing no harm in telling us if a foreign gentleman called here last night?"

"I will tell you nothing," Serena cried. "Why do you come and bully a poor woman like this?"

And yet, at the same time, though Jack knew how faithful she was to her master, he could not but feel that she was not antagonistic to Claire and himself. With a sudden impulse he pushed his way into the hall, followed by Rigby.

"We all make mistakes sometimes," he said. "Now, are you quite sure you have made no mistake about your master? Mr. Anstruther is a law unto himself; he comes and goes as he likes, and it is just possible that he might have returned without you being aware of the fact. There is nothing to be frightened about; we are not here to murder him for the sake of his Apostle spoons."

As Jack ceased to speak he made a swift sign to Rigby behind the woman's back, and the latter understood. He would go off to the library and see for himself if Anstruther had returned. As the hall door closed behind him, Serena rushed impulsively forward and threw herself headlong at Jack's feet. Her attitude had entirely changed; she was no longer the half-dumb slave of circumstance, no longer a mere machine answering to the call of her master, but a living, palpitating woman. The change was so quick, so dramatic and unexpected, that Jack had no voice of protest left to him.

"For heaven's sake, do not do it!" Serena whispered hoarsely; "and, if not that, for your own sake I implore you to stay your hand. Oh, I am not so blind and foolish as you think—I am not the dull, stupid creature that my master takes me to be. You can deceive him where love and honor are concerned, but you cannot blind my eyes, because I have loved, alas! too well myself. Do not think that I pry and watch, for such is not my nature. And yet I know as well as if you had told me in so many words that

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Miss Claire and yourself are something more than friends. I cannot speak more plainly because I dare not ; but if you would save the girl you love from the terrible danger that hangs over her, you will be blind to all that goes on in this dreadful house."

The words which had begun so hoarsely and quietly came at the finish with the torrential force of a mountain stream. Surprised as he had been, Jack's self-possession had not quite deserted him. Hitherto he had regarded the silent Serena as an old woman, but now that her face was transformed and glowing with emotions he could see that she was still comparatively young. He could see also, and the fact gave him a vague sense of satisfaction, that this woman's sympathies were entirely with Claire and himself.

"Will you get up, please?" he said, and his own voice was just a little shaky. "It is not right for a woman to kneel to a man like that. Serena, you are not what you seem. You are not a servant in the ordinary acceptation of the word; you spoke just now like a refined and educated woman. You may say that is no business of mine, and, indeed, I do not wish to pry into your past, but you must see that this matter cannot possibly stop here. You denied just now that Signor Padini had been here at all. You denied the presence of your master, and yet I can hear his voice on the other side of the study door at this moment. You will perhaps also deny that you heard of No. 4, Montrose Place."

It was merely a bow drawn at a venture, but the shaft seemed to strike home to the feather. Serena had risen painfully and slowly to her knees; she staggered back against the table and contemplated Jack with dilated eyes.

"Oh, you have gone further than I dreamed," she moaned. "You are a strong, masterful man, and I see now that nothing I can say will turn you from your purpose."

"Since you have made up your mind to that," Jack said grimly, "perhaps you had better be candid with me and tell me all you know. For some time past I have felt

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a strong conviction that Anstruther is no better than a consummate scoundrel. Discreet as he is, I have come to the conclusion that this is no house for Miss Helmsley. I am quite certain that you would find both of us more sincere friends than the man you call your master. Why not, therefore, leave him and throw in your lot with us?"

The woman wrung her hands piteously; Jack could see the tears rolling down her face.

"Oh, if I only could—if I only dared," she whispered; "and yet I cannot, even if it were only for your sakes. If you only knew what was hanging over you—but I must say no more. When that man comes to me, when I stand before him with his eyes looking into mine, I am compelled to give him up the secrets of my very soul. I wish from the bottom of my heart that ——"

Serena clutched at her throat with a quivering hand, as if something choked her, and rushed impulsively from the room. She had said nothing, and yet she had said so much. Her very reticence, her hesitation to speak definitely against her master, had proved conclusively to Jack what a consummate scoundrel Anstruther was. He was still debating the matter in his mind when Rigby came back to him. The latter did not speak; instead of that, he took Jack by the arm and piloted him quietly and firmly to the front door. They were in the street before Jack could ask the meaning of this cautious conduct.

"One can't be too cautious in a case like this," Rigby explained. "It was just as I had expected. Anstruther was at home; he, indeed, had not been out all day, which fact was proved by his still being in dressing-gown and slippers. Our usually self-contained friend had either been dissipating last night or he has had disturbing news; at any rate, he was very pale and shaky, and did not seem in the least pleased to see me. Not that I think that he was in the least suspicious of my visit."

"Did you happen to see anything of Padini?" Jack asked eagerly.

"Well, I did and I did not," Rigby explained. "At any rate, the Italian was not in the study, though he had

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been there, from the simple fact that a music case and a rather jaunty-looking Homburg hat rested on a side table. Did you happen to notice if Padini was wearing a Homburg hat this afternoon?"

Jack was able to reassure his friend on that point, whereupon Rigby proceeded to ask if anything had happened during the time he was left alone with Serena. Rigby listened with interest to all that Jack had to say.

"That's a woman we ought to get hold of," he said thoughtfully. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, she can tell us all we want to know. As a matter of fact, she has told us a great deal, though perhaps without knowing it. At any rate, from what you say, she is quite aware of the fact that something uncanny is going on at 4, Montrose Place. I feel perfectly certain that the body of Nostalgo was smuggled away *via* that empty house; we know perfectly well that Anstruther is in the habit of going there, and we are equally sure that the very mention of the house filled Serena with terror. As we have plenty of time on our side, and there seems to be no immediate hurry, you and I are going to keep our eye on that place. You were very anxious last night to know what I had seen there. Well, you have plenty of pluck and courage of your own; you shall come with me presently and verify the thing for yourself."

"Do you mean to say we are going to keep a vigil there to-night?" Jack asked.

"That's about the size of it," Rigby answered coolly. "You had better come round to my rooms not a moment later than half-past ten. Mind you, we are not going there as ourselves, but you can leave a disguise quite safely to me. Don't bring a revolver or anything noisy of that kind; something in the way of a thick stick would be much safer. By the way, didn't you tell me that you were going to see Miss Helmsley to-night? Take my advice, call there and dine as if nothing had happened, and directly Anstruther makes an excuse to return to his study, slip away from the house without the formality of leave-taking and come to my place at once."

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It was not easy work for a straightforward fellow like Jack to sit with Anstruther on the other side of the table, discussing trivial topics as if there was nothing grim and terrible behind this picture of refined home life. Jack was conscious of carrying himself off fairly well, what time Anstruther rose from the table with an excuse that he had work to do.

"Please don't think I am avoiding your company," Anstruther said pleasantly, "and don't be annoyed if you hear the sound of my violin presently. As a matter of fact, my thoughts are always clearest when inspired by the sounds of music."

Jack muttered something suitable to the occasion, and exchanged glances with Claire directly Anstruther left the room.

Just as that genius had prophesied, the sweet strains of the violin stole from the study presently. Claire listened with an interest which was vivid and thrilling beyond words.

"Now, listen to that," she cried. "Did you ever hear anything like it? Did you ever hear Mr. Anstruther play in that style and manner before? Note the little slurs, the half hesitation, which is at once so dramatic and artistic. If you close your eyes, you might swear that you are listening to Padini himself."

"It really is amazing," Jack murmured. "Padini to the life; the Italian to a semitone. And yet we know perfectly well that it cannot be Padini, because at this very moment he is waiting to take his turn at the Queen's Hall concert. Claire, you must try to get to the bottom of this. I cannot possibly believe that this infernal juggling is conceived merely to satisfy the vanity of Anstruther, for, in the first place, we form so small an audience. There is something behind this much more serious than the soothing of a clever man's vanity. And now I must be off."

Claire pleaded with her lover to stay a little longer, but, mindful of Rigby's strict injunctions, he was fain to refuse. In the light of recent knowledge he had no

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occasion to feel sure that Anstruther was still on the premises, despite the fact of those exquisite strains of music emanating from the library. He had not forgotten the strange experience in that direction two nights before. Still, the sweet, melancholy melody could be distinctly heard by Jack as he crossed the road.

Rigby was impatiently awaiting his friend, and he had all the disguises sent up to his bedroom. He listened eagerly to all Jack had to say whilst artistically making himself up as a news-vender. A glance at himself in the glass reassured Jack; he felt pretty sure in his mind that no one could possibly recognize him attired as he was now.

"What's the programme?" he asked, completing the illusion with a short clap pipe. "Are we going straight away to Montrose Place?"

Rigby replied that that was the intention. It was getting near to eleven o'clock before the friends reached Montrose Place; so far as they could see they had the terrace entirely to themselves. A policeman strode majestically down the road, flashing his lantern here and there, and finally disappeared from sight.

"Now's our time," Rigby said eagerly; "no chance of being interrupted for the next ten minutes. You stand at the top of the steps whilst I sneak down and open the window. We shall have to fumble our way up-stairs, because it is by no means safe to use matches. Still, I have the geography of the house quite clear in my mind. Come along."

They were in the grim, dusty house at last. Jack was conscious only of the intense darkness and musty smell of the place. Carefully piloted by Rigby, he reached the second floor landing at length, and there Rigby grasped his arm significantly. There was no sound at first save the scratching of mice behind the panel or the flutter of some ragged blind swayed in the piercing draught. Then suddenly it seemed to Jack that a solemn footfall sounded in a room close by, a door opened with a pop like a pistol crack, and a long slit of light, dazzling in its brilliancy, fell like a lance upon the dusty floor. Somebody laughed

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somewhere, a laugh that sounded so near and yet so far away; then the door opened wider, and a partial view of the interior of the room could be seen.

Utterly taken by surprise, moved and horrified to the depths of his soul, Jack could have cried out, but for the hand clapped upon his mouth like a steel trap.

"Not a sound," Rigby whispered sternly. "For heaven's sake, restrain yourself, and look, look!"

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CHAPTER XI

THE SHADOW ON THE WALL

JACK needed no second bidding ; he was only too anxious and eager to follow the direction of Rigby's outstretched finger. He was by no means lacking in the nerve and pluck which generally go to a young man of fine physique and clean habit. But there was something about the whole of this affair, a creeping suggestion of diabolical crime, such as one only encounters in the wildest realms of fiction.

And yet it seemed to Jack that his reading of the daily press recalled things just as vile in every-day life. With teeth clenched firmly, with a stern resolution to do nothing very likely to precipitate what might have been a terrible catastrophe, Jack looked into the room before him. As the door was half open and the two friends were hidden in the blackish shadow, it was possible to watch without the slightest chance of being seen.

For an empty house, dusty and gloomy and deserted as it was, the room in front of our two adventurers presented a striking contrast to the rest of the place. There was no window, or at least, where the window ought to have been, something in the way of an iron shutter stood, and over this a great wealth of silken hangings was artistically arranged. As to the rest of the apartment, the furniture was directly in keeping with the abode of a millionaire. Jack did not fail to notice the rich Persian carpet, the luxurious chairs and settees of the First Empire period, the fine pictures on the walls. The walls, too, had been recently decorated, so that there was not a single jarring note to mar the harmonious whole. There were flowers, too, grouped in the corners of the room and piled cunningly around the electrolier standing on the centre table.

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"Now, that is a strange thing," Jack whispered. "So far as I could see, so far as I can see now, there is no sign whatever of the electric lighting in any other part of the house. Do you suppose that these people have taken this house in the ordinary way, or is it possible that ——"

"Not a bit of it," Rigby replied. "They're not the sort of people to do anything as foolish as that. Nor would there be any occasion to go to the expense. Depend upon it, they know all about the character of the owner of this property, and that it is not in the least likely to let unless put thoroughly in order."

"Then, what about the electric light?" Jack suggested. "That would have to be put in by somebody. These people could not tap the main, or anything of that kind."

"There's a much simpler way than that, my dear fellow. Dr. Adamson lives next door, and I know perfectly well that he has electric light. It does not require much technical knowledge to wire a house, and anybody with a small amount of common sense could easily drill a small hole through a partition and attach a wire to one of the main lines next door. I think that explains the problem."

Jack had no further question to ask for the moment. His full attention now was concentrated on the occupants of the room. There were three of them altogether, two being dressed like superior mechanics, and were evidently there for some purpose connected with machinery. The third man, superior in every way to his companions, had his back turned to the door, so that it was impossible to get a glimpse of his features. He had in front of him an ingenious-looking arrangement, not unlike a magic lantern or a contrivance for throwing cinematograph pictures on a screen. At a sign from him, one of the workmen drew back the silken draperies covering what ought to have been the window, and a white sheet stood confessed.

"Give me the third slide by your left hand," the operator commanded. "That will do. Now switch out the light."

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There was a click and a jerk, and immediately the whole room was plunged in darkness save for the fierce disc of blinding light that flashed upon the screen. Almost immediately a dazzling disc was transformed to the face of a man. Jack clutched at the arm of his companion.

"By heaven! do you see that?" he whispered. "It is nothing more nor less than the face of Nostalgo. Do you think this is merely a development of some novel form of advertisement, or is it possible that these fellows have hit upon some novel way of putting in posters?"

But Rigby had nothing to say. He was too deeply interested in the spectacle before him. It had occurred to him for the moment that there might have been something in what Jack suggested. It was just possible also that what he took to be a large sheet was no more than a wide stretch of paper.

At any rate, there was no hurry. There would be plenty of time to ascertain whether the supposed sheet on the wall was paper or not. Rigby had made no reply to Jack's cogent question, but he seemed to be quite as interested as his friend.

"Hang me if I know what to think of it," he said at length. "It seems to me as if these fellows were trying to work out something quite new in the way of lantern slides. Mind you, it is just possible that we are mistaken altogether in our assumption that Anstruther is carrying out some cunning rascality. These men may, after all, be no more or less than honest workmen."

"I can't quite see that point," Jack replied. "Honest workmen do not, as a rule, come in this furtive way to an empty house. Besides, look at them."

"That is all very well," Rigby argued. "But supposing that you were engaged upon some secret process which you did not want anybody to know anything about. And, besides, Anstruther is quite a genius in his way, and there is no reason why he should not be engaged upon inventing some new process of lithography."

"In that case," Jack said, "is it not a strange coincidence that they should be manufacturing these Nostalgo

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posters? I grant you that Anstruther is absolutely a genius, but his talents always take a sinister bent; in fact, I don't think the fellow could be honest if he tried. Still, we have plenty of time to find out."

"Do you really think that is paper?" Rigby asked. "It looks to me like it."

"It looks to me like it, too," Jack said; "but we shall have to possess our souls in patience."

"Hang me if I don't go and see," he said. "No, I don't see that there is any great danger unless they should happen to turn up the light again, and I do not suppose they will do that until the experiment is finished."

"For goodness' sake, do nothing rash," Jack implored. "From what we have already seen, we have to do with a gang who would not hesitate to cut our throats if it served their purpose."

The thing, after all, was not so hazardous as Jack had imagined. Just for an instant, as if by accident, one of the shaded electrics on the wall flashed out in a pin-point of diamond light.

"You clumsy fool!" growled the man behind the lantern. "What did you do that for? You might have spoilt all my work by your blundering folly."

The erring workman grunted out something in the way of an apology and a promise that he would be more careful in the future. Here, then, was Rigby's opportunity. He knew now that there was no likelihood of the light being turned on again for some time to come. All he had to do, therefore, was to creep cautiously, wriggling like a snake across the floor, until he could touch the huge screen and ascertain whether it were paper or cloth.

He took a penknife from his pocket and opened a small blade. So dense was the darkness of the room by contrast with the vivid lane of light thrown upon the screen that the journey was practically devoid of peril, so long as no one touched the switch of the electrics. Therefore Rigby crept along, his nerves braced to the highest tension and an exhilarating sense of danger strong upon him. He could see now that the white sheet extended

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from floor to ceiling, the edges of it seeming black and firm like an iron plate in contrast with the brilliant white centre.

He was close to it now, so close indeed that, with a cautious movement of his arm, he could touch the sheet. A single prick with a sharp point of his knife gave him all the information that he needed. It was a sheet of paper surely enough. A moment later Rigby was standing by Jack's side once more.

"Paper," he whispered. "Really, this adventure is likely to prove prosaic after all. Don't you think we are rather making a mountain out of a molehill? We know that Anstruther is a great rascal, but at the same time he is an exceedingly clever man, and, as you know, inclined to be secretive. Now, isn't it just possible that our friend has hit upon some new process of photo-lithography, and that we are witnessing an experiment to demonstrate the value of the new idea."

"I don't think so," Jack replied. "Indeed, since you have been away, I have made something in the way of a discovery also. Mark well the picture thrown upon the screen yonder. You know what it represents, of course?"

"Well, naturally. I have seen the diabolical face of Nostalgo on too many posters not to be absolutely familiar with his ugly mug. Depend upon it, those fellows are printing the famous poster in some way known to themselves. Maybe we shall see that self-same sheet on some hoarding to-morrow."

"But that is not what I meant at all," Jack proceeded to explain. "If you are as familiar with the poster as you say you are, you will notice a considerable difference in this one. In the first place, the face is a little more in profile, and surely you must notice the difference in the hands."

"Right you are," Rigby replied. "In the present instance the hands are half-extended, as if in the act of clutching something. Strange that I had not noticed that before. What do you make it out to be?"

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"Hush!" Jack whispered. "I think our ingenious friend behind the lantern will explain that for himself."

The leading operator in the room gave a short curt sign and the brilliant lights flashed up once more. The slide was also drawn from the lantern, but the sinister features of the dark, repulsive face upon the screen did not vanish as might have been expected. On the contrary, the grim face frowned down as if it had been brushwork from the pencil of some imaginative artist. One of the workmen approached the sheet and dragged it to the floor. Then the three men in the room bent over the poster and examined it critically.

"It seems to me that the hand is a little out of drawing," the leader of the trio remarked critically. "Give me the paints—the white paint, I mean."

The speaker took a brush heavily charged with some white pigment and proceeded to touch up the hand. He cut this portion from the sheet and placed it in the slide of the lantern. Then another large sheet of paper was erected in front of the window, and the lights turned out again. Almost immediately there appeared upon the disc the shadow of a huge, bony hand uplifting a dagger in a menacing attitude. A grunt of approval came from the man behind the lantern, and once more the lights were turned up.

"There, what did I tell you?" Jack asked eagerly. "I am sure the different attitudes of that man's hand are meant for signs."

"Indeed, it would seem so," Rigby was forced to admit. "We'd better stay here and await developments."

For the next hour or so the mysterious process of printing the posters continued. It was exactly as Jack's ingenious mind had forecast. In every instance, although the dark and sinister features remained the same, the attitude of the hand was different. It was a strange and most important discovery that the two friends had made; but, instead of making their task easier, the problem had become still more intricate. Was all this part of some

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cunning device for attracting public attention, something absolutely new in the way of advertisement, or did it signify a deeper and more sinister purpose?

Jack recollected now how frequently Anstruther had alluded in his hearing to the ramifications of secret societies. With his intimate knowledge of criminality, and having every assistance from the police always at his disposal, Anstruther's acquaintance with the seamy side of life was extensive and peculiar. But was he now helping the police as usual, or was he engaged himself upon some ingenious conspiracy for the aggrandizement of himself and his satellites?

It was difficult to say, it was still more difficult to prove anything, seeing that the work of printing was still proceeding in silence. If these men would only speak, if they would only utter some word which might give a clue to what they were doing, the spies would have been more satisfied. Their only hope was to watch and wait on the offchance of a careless word.

They were listening so eagerly indeed that they almost failed to notice the sound of a footstep which now echoed on the stairs. They were so close to the door that any one reaching their landing from below could hardly fail to make out the outline of their figures. Rigby had barely time to drag his companion back into the velvety darkness beyond before the newcomer was past them and had entered the room.

"How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags?" the newcomer cried. "How are you getting on? Nobody interrupting you—seen nothing of the police or anything of that kind?"

"No doubt as to who that is," Rigby whispered. "I should recognize Anstruther's voice anywhere. I told you he was at the bottom of this business."

Anstruther stood before them, tall and distinguished in his evening dress, and there was no sign about him that he was doing anything more than pursuing a quite normal occupation.

"Not at all a bad evening's work," he said. "Are we

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all here, or is Carrington late again? Confound that fellow! I begin to wish we hadn't taken him into the business at all. But I do not think he is at all likely to play me false; it will be a bad day's work for him if he does."

"Carrington, too," Jack muttered significantly; "that is your rich banker friend, Dick. The plot thickens apace. It seems impossible for anybody to come in contact with Anstruther and retain his respectability."

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CHAPTER XII

LOCKED IN!

QUITE unconscious that his most dangerous enemies were so near, Anstruther carefully selected a cigarette and lighted it. He proceeded then to make a careful examination of the pile of posters at his feet, and smiled his approval.

"Very good, very good indeed; those hands stand out beautifully. Within a week's time from now the message will have been carried from London to St. Petersburg and from Paris to Constantinople. The men I am after cannot get away from me. Whatever great capital they are in, that poster confronts their eyes like an avenging conscience. Then they realize their helplessness and bow to the inevitable. You may doubt me if you like; but I tell you that this scheme is absolutely sure and safe."

"Provided that we have the money to carry it out," the man behind the lantern grunted. "Don't forget that. Clever as you are, you can't make money by merely holding up your little finger. You promised us a thousand pounds when we had finished our part of the bargain, and that was completed a month ago. Of course, you have got the cash in your pocket?"

A frown of annoyance crossed Anstruther's face. There was a clenching of his hands not unlike that depicted by the poster of the mysterious Nostalgo; he made a half step forward; then he seemed to get himself in hand again, and smiled carelessly.

"As a matter of fact, I have not the money in my pocket. Things are not going quite as well lately as I could have wished, but it is only a matter of a day or two anyway; nay, it is only a matter of hours. Is the woman here?"

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The man behind the lantern sulkily declared that he knew nothing about the woman, and cared less. He asked pointedly whether they were to expect Mr. Carrington that evening, and, if so, whether his visit was likely to be attended with substantial results.

"I tell you I don't know," Anstruther said angrily. "I told him to be here at eleven o'clock, but I suppose he has funked it. But the woman is a very different matter. Jacob, go into the back room and bring her in here."

"Not I," the man addressed as Jacob replied. "I don't forget the last time we met. She may be milk and honey to you, but she is prussic acid as far as I am concerned."

Anstruther stepped to the doorway and whistled softly. It might have been a call given to a well-broken dog, so careless and contemptuous was it. Indeed, Anstruther did not wait to see the result of his summons, but returned to the room with the easy assurance of a man who knows that his lightest call will be obeyed.

Almost immediately the two watchers standing on the landing were conscious of a shadowy form passing close to them. They had no time to shrink back, they had not even time for surprise, when a light hand was laid on the arm of each and an eager voice began to whisper in their ears.

"Rash to the verge of madness," the melancholy voice said sadly. "I warned you not to come—I implored you not to take a hand in this business. I could have settled it all for you if you had left it all to me; but youth ever will be served. Won't you go away even now and leave it all to me?"

There was something so pitifully imploring in the speech that the listeners thrilled in sympathy. From the first word they had no difficulty in guessing the identity of the speaker. It was none other than Serena who was addressing them in those despairing accents.

"I am afraid you are too late, Serena," Jack said. "Besides, we have some one else to consider in the business. It is possible that your efforts may be successful as

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far as we are concerned; but we have discovered to-night that Anstruther is plotting against the happiness of many people who are as innocent as ourselves. I tell you, we must see this thing through now. But why stay here, why linger, when your tardiness is likely to increase our trouble?"

At this point Anstruther advanced towards the door and whistled again, this time more sharply. With a sigh of deep regret Serena walked forward and entered the room. In the bright light of the apartment her face looked paler and more dejected than usual. Though Jack had seen for himself the volcano of passion and emotion of which Serena was capable when not under the influence of her employer, he could not fail to notice how tame and frightened she appeared to be now. It was as if Anstruther possessed something like a power over her. Her dark eyes seemed mechanically to follow his every movement; he had only to raise his hand and her look followed it.

"So you have come at last," Anstruther said. "How long have you been in the house?"

"I came as soon as you told me, master," Serena murmured, like one who talks in her sleep. All will power seemed to have gone out of her for the moment. "What would you have of me to-night?"

Anstruther replied harshly that Serena must know perpectly well what was required of her. Nevertheless he proceeded to detail his instructions, which were still unfinished when another footstep was heard upon the stairs and a newcomer entered. The two watchers outside were not in the least surprised at the pale, somewhat conceited features of the violinist Padini; indeed, they were past all surprises now. Padini had bowed with an air of exaggerated politeness to Serena.

"Ha, ha, my coy fascinator," he cried, "so I am not to be deprived of the pleasure of your company. I am not likely to soon forget the enchanting evening we spent together *chez* Carrington. I am sorry to be late, Anstruther, but the fact is, your English audiences are not so cold as I had first imagined. Positively they would not

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let me off with less than four encores. *Ma foi*, you must have had the full value of your money in your chamber music to-night. A rare treat for Miss Helmsley; doubtless she has noticed the marvelous improvement made by her guardian in his playing of late."

The violinist chuckled as if in the enjoyment of an exquisite joke. Serena flashed him a glance of bitter hatred and contempt.

"I should like to know the meaning of this," Rigby whispered. "I suppose it refers in some way to the mysterious music which you told me about last night. Do you think it possible that Serena could enlighten us on this point as she appears to know all about it? If not, why does she look at Padini in that scornful way?"

Any further signs of enjoyment on the part of Padini were cut short by an impatient oath from Anstruther.

"That is mere child's play," he exclaimed. "Very clever and all that kind of thing, but an intelligent schoolboy might have done as well."

Jack intimated in a whisper to Rigby that he himself stood in the position of the said intelligent schoolboy. He had a pretty shrewd idea how the thing had been managed, and to what purpose; but there would be time enough to explain all that presently. What they had to do now was to stay as long as possible, and gather all they could from a careful study of the proceedings taking place in the room. It was Anstruther who first broke the silence.

"Are we going to stand fooling here all night?" he exclaimed angrily. "Padini, get that exaggerated fur coat of yours off, and make yourself up to look like an English gentleman as far as possible. You will find everything necessary in the room at the back of the house. The same remark applies to you, Serena. My word! To think that a woman so pale, so haggard, as you are now can make up to look like eighteen and possess the beauty of Diana! What a pity it was you ever left the stage!"

The woman's face flushed angrily. There was a nerv-

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ous tension about her to-night that Anstruther had never noticed before. Was she going to be defiant? he asked. Did she understand what she was doing when she proposed to measure her strength against his? But the flame still raged on Serena's hot cheeks, and her lips were still hard and mutinous.

"Take care you do not drive me too far," she whispered hoarsely. "A cat is a harmless creature enough, but I read once of a cat that turned upon a man and killed him. You dare to taunt me with my past. When I think of what that past might have been but for you, I declare that I could find it in my heart to kill you. I am so weak and timid, you are so strong and brave; and yet even you must sleep at times, and a man asleep is as harmless as a babe. A spot of gray powder, a drop of liquid no larger than a pin's point placed between your teeth, and the career of Spencer Anstruther is finished."

The words were uttered with such dramatic force and intensity that even Anstruther refrained from smiling. It seemed to the listeners outside that here was a great genius lost to the stage.

"I should not care to encounter that woman's hostility," Rigby murmured. "Look at the intense expression of her face. But, really, I hope she is not going to defy him to-night. If she does we are likely to have trouble for our pains."

But Serena's outbreak of passionate anger was over as swiftly as an April shower. She looked up in the face of her master as a dog might do that had been convicted of theft. Anstruther smiled with the air of a man who merely tolerates a passing anger of a fellow creature. It was as if he had caged this woman so that he could watch her passions and emotions as a naturalist studies the habits and ways of loathsome insects.

"I suppose you must give vent to your feelings sometimes," he said. "And now that you have had a little fling we had better get on with our business. You will go with Padini to-night to ——"

"No, no!" Serena cried. "I implore you to spare me

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that humiliation again. What have I done that I should have to endure all this—what can be possibly gained by it?"

For the first time Anstruther displayed real signs of anger.

"Now, listen to me," he said. "Once for all, I tell you not to speak to me like this again. Do you think I have studied you all these years for nothing? Do you suppose I do not know how disloyal you are in your heart towards me? There is one class of woman who has to be ruled by fear alone, and you are one of them. You will do to-night what I ask you, not merely to-night, but by months and years, in and out, it will be for me to order and you to obey. And, whilst we are on the subject you are to say nothing further than you have already said to Mr. Masefield. You understand what I mean?"

It was quite evident that Serena understood the full significance of Anstruther's speech. Pale as her face had been before, it turned now to a still more deathly pallor. She essayed to speak, but her lips refused the office.

"I don't quite follow you," she managed to stammer out at length. "If you accuse me of disloyalty ——"

Anstruther intimated that that was exactly what he did mean. It was rather an uncomfortable moment for Jack, listening there. He was beginning to fully realize the marvelous cunning of the man with whom he had to deal. He wondered how it was possible for Anstruther to discover the gist of his conversation with Serena that afternoon. He was saying something of this in a whisper to Rigby when Padini returned to the room. The violinist was dressed now exactly as he had been attired two nights before when Jack had seen him at Carrington's chambers. His jaunty air for the moment had vanished; he looked suspicious and uneasy. Anstruther's keen eye noticed this as it noticed everything.

"Now, what's the matter?" he asked. "Have you seen a ghost or something equally terrible?"

"No, I haven't," Padini replied sulkily. "But I am pretty sure there is somebody in the house. I am ready

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to swear that I saw the shadow of a man moving on the landing outside."

With a contemptuous smile Anstruther walked towards the door. There was perhaps no immediate danger for the listeners, seeing that Anstruther evidently attached no importance to Padini's statement; but it was just as well to be on the safe side. Rigby slipped quietly into a doorway leading to a bedroom and dragged Jack in after him. Then he closed the door very gently and waited for further developments. He had not long to wait, for almost immediately there was a click of the latch, and Anstruther's receding footsteps melted into silence.

"Well, that sets your mind at ease," Anstruther was heard to say. "If there are any birds here, I have them safely caged."

With a feeling of apprehension, Rigby laid his hand on the door-knob. His worst fears were absolutely realized.

He and Jack had been locked in the room.

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CHAPTER XIII

THERE was no help for it; they could only wait to see what circumstances had in store for them. It would have been just as well, however, to have known what was in Anstruther's mind when he locked the door. So far as the prisoners could judge, Anstruther had spoken with a kind of jocular contempt, and had apparently acted more to soothe Padini's nervous fears than as if he had moved on the spur of his own suspicions. Rigby had not failed to notice this, and Jack was inclined to agree with him as they discussed the matter in whispers. At any rate, a quarter of an hour passed without any signs without.

"Well, my friend," Rigby muttered, "you always were fond of adventures, even as a boy, and now you seem likely to get your fill of them."

"I don't call this an adventure at all," Jack replied; "not much chance of action here. The prospect of being locked up all night in this cell of a place is not at all alluring. Just try that door again."

But the attempt proved abortive. It was pitch dark there, a darkness like that of Egypt, which could be felt. The mere fact of the sense of sight being suspended seemed to increase the hearing of the prisoners, for they did not fail to note every word that was passing in that room across the corridor. It was plainly evident that the business arrangements which had brought those people here to-night were practically finished, for presently Anstruther could be heard walking down the stairs, shouting his final instructions as he went. A moment later the fine slit of light which gleamed like a thread under the door of the vacant house died away swiftly, therefore proving to Jack and Rigby that the house had been plunged into darkness.

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It was a proof also that the conspirators had left the premises.

"I think this is where we come in," Jack muttered; "we'll give them another five minutes or so, and then we will run the risk of striking a light. I suppose you have got some matches in your pocket?"

Rigby had purchased an extra-sized box of vestas as he came along, so that there was no trouble on that score. The liberal five minutes had expired before the scratching of a match, and a spurt of blue flame illuminated the room. It was by no means an inviting apartment, being absolutely devoid of furniture save for a tattered carpet on the floor. The carpet had obviously been a good one in its day, in spite of the dust which lay so thickly upon it; the decorations of the walls had evidently been an expensive business. At the same time, it was quite patent that the room had been used for the storage of valuables, seeing that the door fitted close and was lined on the inside with steel. The window, too, was barred heavily, though it was far enough from the ground.

"Well, we are in a nice mess," Jack muttered. "So far as I can see, we shall have to wait here till morning and then summon assistance by means of the window. In the meantime we can devote our energies to making up some ingenious story with a view to deceiving the police. So long as it is daylight, I don't think we have much to fear from Anstruther and Co. Do you think the light shows through the window?"

There appeared to be no fear of that, seeing that the curtain was a comparatively thick one. Over the mantelpiece were the pipe and bracket of a solitary gas-jet. In a fit of idle curiosity Rigby turned on the tap and applied a match to the burner. Much to his surprise, a blue fishtail flame spurted out bright and clear.

"Well, these people don't seem to have half done it," he exclaimed; "they've evidently tapped the gas much in the same way that they tap the electric light, but why they want both beats me."

"Doubtless for something like business purposes," Jack

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suggested. "It is pretty evident that these people have a lot of mechanical contrivances here, therefore something in the way of heaters would be necessary. My word, how close this room is!"

Rigby was emphatically of the same opinion. He turned off the roaring flame of gas and pulled back the curtain from the window. He successfully fumbled for the catch, and at length managed to raise the sash. The cool, sweet night breeze was grateful to a degree after the stifling atmosphere of the room.

There were no lights to be seen, for the simple reason that they were at the back of the house, and looking down into a dreary sort of forecourt formed by the houses on either side and a big building beyond. As their eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, it was possible to note the fact that the forecourt had at one time been carefully cultivated, for a broken fountain could be made out, and what appeared at one time to have been a well-tended rose garden.

"There's somebody down there," Rigby whispered. "Unless I am greatly mistaken the said somebody is smoking a most excellent cigar. Can't you smell it?"

"Of course I can," Jack responded. "These seem to be rather an aristocratic type of rascal. If you look across to the far corner, beyond that fountain place, you will see the tip of a cigar glowing like a star."

It was exactly as Jack had said. They could see the cigar glowing and fading as the smoker inhaled or exhaled the fragrant tobacco, and a moment later they saw something more. Out of the gloom there approached the figure of a woman, tall, slender, and bareheaded, her dress hidden by a long black cloak that reached to the ground. She spoke quickly and hurriedly, so quickly indeed that the two men at the window found it impossible to follow what she said. They could see pretty plainly, however, and did not fail to notice the fact that the strange woman appeared to be pleading for some favor. She stretched out her long, bare arms to her companion in an attitude of supplication; her long-cloak fell away from her shoulders, disclosing an

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evening dress of some pale, transparent material. There were diamonds, too, in her fair hair.

"What is the use of wasting my time like this?" the man with the cigar demanded. "You ought to have been at your destination long ago."

"But I couldn't go, I really couldn't, until I had seen you again. Besides, there is no place like this, and no better spot for an interview that one wants to keep a profound secret. For instance, it is hardly possible that any prying eyes are overlooking us. I can't imagine anybody being hidden in this old house. When Anstruther locked that bedroom door just now, do you really suppose he imagined there was anybody on the premises?"

The smoker responded with a contemptuous grunt; it was evident that he entertained no suspicions on that score.

"Perhaps I am unduly nervous and excited to-night," the woman went on. "But I could have almost imagined that there were spies following Anstruther to-night. If I were alone and had no more pressing thing to do, I would go back into the house and unlock that door. Imagine my feelings if I really did find two spies there."

"What confounded nonsense you are always talking!" the smoker burst out. "I suppose this comes of writing poetry. Who on earth do you suppose is in the house?"

"How can I possibly tell? The police, perhaps, or perhaps somebody who is interested in Anstruther's beautiful ward, Claire Helmsley. I am fond of Claire, and would suffer much so that she should escape injury. Really, I could make a story out of this, Richard. I would find Mr. Jack Masefield in that room, together with his friend Dick Rigby. I would whisper to them that it would be safer for them to stay where they were for the present, and that later on I would come back and release them. Oh, what nonsense I am talking, to be sure!"

The smoker affirmed this in a manner none too complimentary.

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"You are without exception the wildest sentimentalist I ever came across. You are trying my patience a bit too high. Why don't you go about your business and leave me to mine?"

The woman laughed softly to herself as if she was half amused by her own secret thoughts. She did not seem to notice, or perhaps she wanted to ignore, the brutal outspokenness of her companion. For some reason or other it occurred to the listeners that she was trying to gain time. At any rate, there was no longer room for doubt that she was doing her best to warn the listeners.

"Can you make nothing of her features?" Jack asked eagerly. "My eyes are pretty keen, as a rule, but I can discern no more than the shimmering outline of her dress. If fortune is on our side presently, we must follow her and ascertain where she lives."

"That wouldn't be at all a bad move," Rigby said. "She may be a sentimentalist, and a poet into the bargain, but that does not prevent her from being an exceedingly clever woman. She is deceiving that bullying fellow in a way that is worthy of the best diplomatist."

"She is going to speak again," Jack whispered. "What did she say? I quite failed to get that last sentence."

Rigby replied that he had failed to catch it, too, for the words were spoken in low tones which did not carry to the window above. The man laughed in the same brutal fashion, and begged the woman begone, as she was only a hindrance there.

"I am going," she said. "Take care of yourself, Richard, and don't imagine that Anstruther is likely to be of much use to you when the time of danger comes. He has ever been the blighting curse that hangs over us, and something tells me that he will be your curse as well as ours."

The man laughed scornfully. He did not seem to be afraid.

"Evidently that woman is a very great deal cleverer than my friend gives her credit for," said Rigby. "Don't you see that she was talking to us? Her speech was

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merely a kind of parable. I don't know who she is or whence she derived an inspiration, but one thing I am absolutely certain about—she knows perfectly well that the pair of us are locked in this room, and she is equally aware of the fact of our identity. All we have got to do now is to smoke a cigarette each and quietly wait till our fair friend comes and effects our release."

"Haven't you any idea who she is?" Jack asked. "At any rate, there is nothing common about her. She speaks like a lady, and is most assuredly dressed like one."

"I should think you are more likely to know that than I," said Rigby. "Whoever that woman is, or whatever gang of scoundrels she is mixed up with, it is quite evident that she knows Miss Helmsley well, and that she is a great friend of hers. You must know surely pretty well the full extent of Claire Helmsley's acquaintances. Can't you recognize the voice? Does not the outline of her figure give you something to go on?"

"I am afraid you have me there," Jack said. "You see, Anstruther is an exceedingly popular man, he goes a great deal into society, and naturally Claire generally accompanies him. She could not have less than a hundred acquaintances she has made in this way."

"Then you can't help me out in this way?" Rigby asked.

Jack was emphatically of the opinion that he could not. He ran his mind over a score or two of Claire's most cherished acquaintances. But not one of them tallied in the least degree with the lady down below. Besides, the darkness rendered an actual recognition almost impossible.

All the friends had to do now was to possess their souls in patience and await the time when their mysterious friend should come to their assistance. That she would come they felt absolutely certain. She might have been the wild, sentimental creature which the man with the cigar had called her; but, at the same time, she had both coolness and courage, or she would not have hit upon the ingenious method of speaking indirectly to them as she had done.

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"Unless I am greatly mistaken," Rigby said thoughtfully, "we are going to make a real useful friend here. What is that I see down below? Surely there is something like a carriage driven into the yard."

Surely enough, it was a vehicle of some kind, painted black, and with not too much glittering varnish about it. So far as could be seen in the gloom, the conveyance in question was a brougham of some kind. It came into the yard with a strange suggestion of ghostliness about it, for the tires were thickly coated with rubber; the horse itself appeared to be similarly shod.

"I fancy we have seen something like that before," Jack suggested drily.

"Right you are," Rigby responded. "Of course, one can't be quite absolutely sure, but that looks very like the vehicle used by those people the other night. You know what I mean—the brougham I saw used by the deaf mute and her companions the night we ran against one another at Carrington's."

"Right beyond the shadow of a doubt," Jack said. "Who is this mystic conveyance for, I wonder—the man or the woman?"

Evidently it was for the woman, for she stood with her long wrap fastened closely about her whilst the man with the cigar opened the door. The horse was turned round, and vanished as it had come, without the slightest noise; indeed, the whole thing might have been a figment of the imagination.

"I hope that does not mean that our last chance has gone," Rigby suggested. "But we must have faith in our fair friend. One thing is pretty certain—if she means to come to our assistance she is not going very far away."

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CHAPTER XIV

NOSTALGO AGAIN

THERE was silence for some time between the friends. They had speculated as far as possible on the chances of the future, and now there was no more to be said. At the same time, the situation was not devoid of elements of interest, seeing that the man with the cigar had not as yet departed. Evidently he was waiting for somebody, for he lighted a fresh cigar from the stump of his old one, and sat down on the edge of the fountain with the air of a man who knows how to possess his soul in patience. He sat thus for some time; then he stood up at length with an air of strained attention and gave a grunt of relief. Out of the shadows there emerged another man, muffled to the eyes and wearing a big slouch hat upon his head.

"So you have come at last," the man with the cigar muttered. "I thought you were going to keep me here all night."

"It is all very well for you," the newcomer said. "You can walk about the world with your head held up; you have no occasion to hide yourself from the light of day. If only this business was done and over, you would never find me in one of Anstruther's schemes again."

There was something exceedingly striking in the voice of the speaker; it was by no means an unmusical voice; the enunciation was clear and defined. But there was a peculiar rasping ring in it, a jarring, metallic discord as if some one had struck two plates of steel together. It was a commanding voice, too, and the man with the cigar seemed to feel it.

"I suppose you know your own business best," he muttered in a tone which was plainly intended to be that of an apology. "Funny thing, isn't it, that you and I should

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be conspiring here, within a pistol shot of Shannon Street police station? Those chaps yonder are still scratching their heads over the disappearance of the man they call Nostalgo."

The other man laughed; his voice rang as an echo rings in a cave. He laughed again a little more gently.

"Yes," he said, "we could throw a very blinding light on that mystery. Have they offered any reward for the discovery of the body?"

"Oh, dear, yes," the other man chuckled. "Two hundred pounds and a free pardon to any accomplice not actually connected with the outrage. Wouldn't it be a fine thing to earn that reward?"

"I'll think it over and see if we can't manage it," said the newcomer. "Fancy hoodwinking the police in that way! All the same, I don't quite like this reward business; it's just the thing to appeal to that scoundrel Redgrave. Anstruther never made a greater mistake than when he took Redgrave into his confidence. That fellow would do anything for a few hundred pounds."

"Well, you will have an opportunity of sounding him presently. He is coming to see you about those West African bonds. As for myself, I have business of greatest importance in the East-End. I only stayed here till you came because Anstruther said that it was absolutely imperative for you to have these papers to-night."

So saying, the speaker took a small packet from his pocket and handed it over to his companion. He turned away, and a moment later had vanished into the night. The sole remaining man appeared to be restless and ill at ease. As he paced up and down the ragged and deserted forecourt, the two friends, cautiously peeping through the up-stairs window, could see that he was lame and that one shoulder was higher than the other. He was muttering to himself, too, in some foreign language that conveyed nothing to the listeners.

He came to a pause presently, and, fumbling in his long coat, produced a cigarette case and a box of matches.

"I wonder if I really dare," he muttered, this time

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speaking in English slightly flavored with a foreign accent. "Surely no one can see me; surely I shall be safe in this well of a place. If only I could manage without matches."

But there has been no way yet invented of lighting tobacco without matches. As the match flared out the stranger's face was picked out clean and clear against the velvet background of the night. As if in full enjoyment of his tobacco, the man threw his head back and filled his lungs with the fragrant smoke. He had not yet dropped the match, so that its rays caught full the upturned face. So clearly did the face stand out that the whole action might have been conceived with the idea of giving the watchers a perfect view of it.

"What do you make of that?" Jack whispered excitedly. "Don't ask me to say, because I know the man as well as I know my own father. The point is, do you know him?"

"I should say that everybody in London does," Rigby responded, "seeing that the face has been glaring down on London for the past two months. Yonder man is Nostalgo and none other."

"No mistake about that," Jack said. "In that strange, weird light, what an awful face it is! And yet there is something about it, too, some half-pathetic suggestion that almost removes one's feelings of repulsion."

"I have noticed that, too," Rigby said. "But why did you not tell me that our mysterious friend was practically a hunchback?"

"But he wasn't," Jack protested. "I am absolutely certain that the man I found apparently dead close to Panton Square three nights ago was as straight and well set up as you or I. Why, I helped to put him in the ambulance; I saw his body laid out in the mortuary at Shannon Street police station. I am prepared to swear that that man was without a physical blemish, and I am quite sure that Inspector Bates will bear me out in this. And yet that man down there smoking his cigarette is as misshapen as Richard III."

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As to this point there was no question. The man below was pacing quietly up and down the forecourt in the full enjoyment of his cigarette, and little heeding the curious watchers overhead. It was easy to see that, so far as physical development was concerned, he had been but ill-favored by fortune. One leg was considerably longer than the other, causing the fellow to shuffle along with a sideways motion not unlike that of a crab.

"Unless that fellow is a bold contortionist, we have evidently two Nostalgos to deal with," Rigby said thoughtfully. "And yet it seems impossible there can be two faces like that in the world. One thing is pretty certain —the supposed dead body you conveyed to Shannon Street police station the other night must have been very much alive. If we could only get away from here to follow him."

"Not much occasion to trouble about that, I am thinking," Jack said. "This man is evidently a tool or accomplice of Anstruther's. I am certain we shall see him in Panton Square sooner or later. As to the man Redgrave they were speaking about just now, I happen to know all about him. He used to be in Anstruther's employ as a kind of secretary—a clever, well-educated fellow, whose weakness was drink. Ha, here comes another one."

Surely enough, another figure crept into the forecutro. Nostalgo, if he it was, paid no heed to the stranger for a moment or two. In a half-timid fashion the man who had just entered the forecourt bowed to his misshapen companion and intimated that he awaited his pleasure. Nostalgo turned upon him with a snarl.

"So they have sent you, after all," he said. His clear, ringing voice vibrated with contempt. "Is this the best thing Anstruther can do at a critical moment like this? I want a man, not a miserable coward like you. Besides, I don't trust you; I never shall trust you again. And, unless I am greatly mistaken, you have been drinking."

"We are in luck again," Jack whispered. "This is the very man I spoke about, Redgrave in the flesh. Are we going to learn anything, I wonder?"

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The newcomer protested whiningly that not one drop of ardent liquor had passed his lips that day.

"You miserable, prevaricating hound!" Nostalgo cried. "Go back to Anstruther, and say that I will have none of you. Tell your master that my time is short, and that an hour from now will make all the difference. He knows that I dare not stay; he knows what hideous disaster even the slightest delay may produce, and yet he sends you of all men to help me in this crisis."

"But Anstruther cannot possibly do anything else," Redgrave whined. "It is absolutely imperative that he should be at Carrington's by midnight. Carrington is not to be trusted; he wants watching as carefully as a cat watches a mouse. You will have to put up with me, sir."

Nostalgo paced up and down the dreary forecourt with the air of a man who is deep in thought. His limp and straggling gait was by no means lost upon the watchers overhead. He came to a halt at length and sat on the edge of the broken fountain, his head upon his hands, deeply immersed in thought. He might have been a graven statue, so rigid and still was his figure.

The effect of this upon the cowering, watching Redgrave was peculiar. There was something of the cat in his own movements as he came inch by inch nearer to Nostalgo. It was as if a child was timidly making overtures to a dog of uncertain temper. Near and nearer Redgrave came, till he was standing directly over the bent figure of his companion. He might have been miles away for all the heed that Nostalgo gave him.

Then quick as thought, and with a snarling, savage cry that echoed strangely between the four walls of the forecourt, Redgrave fell furiously and with headlong impetuosity upon the doubled-up figure of his prey.

"I have got you now, you misshapen devil!" he screamed. "You are going to be worth at least two hundred pounds to me to-night."

Utterly taken by surprise, Nostalgo collapsed under the sudden and furious assault. Something gleamed and flashed in the uncertain light, and the horrified onlookers

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from the window above saw that Redgrave had a knife in his hand.

"You poisonous scoundrel!" Rigby yelled. "Drop it, I say—drop it, or it will be the worse for you."

But Rigby might have been speaking to the wind. He yelled again and again, yet the two men below, locked in a deadly embrace, did not appear to heed; indeed, it was more than probable that they could hear nothing at all. More by great good fortune than anything else, Nostalgo had managed to grip the hand that held the knife and was holding it in a tenacious clutch. Over and over the pair rolled, like two hungry dogs fighting for a bone, their clothes torn and mud-stained, their features grimed almost beyond recognition. It was a grim and gruesome sight to the two eager watchers. A sense of helplessness, a wild desire to do something was upon them; but they might just as well have been fettered prisoners for all the use they were.

"If only we could open this door," Rigby sighed passionately. "If only that mysterious lady could come to our assistance."

It was like a prayer that was answered. There was a click, a sudden wide swinging open of the door, and the lady in evening dress came headlong into the room.

"Quickly, quickly!" she panted. "Oh, it does not matter who I am or where I came from! If you would not have the destruction of a man's soul on your conscience, come with me at once."

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CHAPTER XV

LADY BARMOUTH

QUICK as the whole thing had been, the action on the part of the fair stranger had not taken Rigby by surprise. He had half expected some development of this kind; he was ready for the dramatic moment, and took full advantage of it. Almost before the lady was in the room he had applied a match to the gas burner, and turned it full on. There was a quick, flashing vision of some one magnificently attired, for the white diaphanous drapery and the gleaming diamonds showed from where her wrap had parted at the neck. Perhaps she dimly comprehended the significance of Rigby's manœuvre, for she turned somewhat scornfully from the hissing gas jet.

"Oh, there is no time for that!" she cried. "It can matter little or nothing who I am, at any rate for the present. Did you follow me just now? I hope you understood that I was speaking to you?"

"We gathered that, madam," Rigby said politely; "but really we are wasting time in idle compliments."

The stranger's face fairly beamed with gratitude. She turned and pointed in the direction of the door. There was no need whatever for further words; the friends knew exactly what she wanted.

The gesture was eloquent enough. The lady who had so strangely and unexpectedly come to the assistance of the friends intimated to them as plainly as words could speak that there was no time to be lost, and that the sooner they were off the premises the better. Jack did not wish to delay; he had no desire to be caught like a rat in a trap, nor for a moment did he forget the fact that this woman who spoke in parables had risked much to come to their assistance. On the other hand, Rigby, being cooler

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and more collected than his friend, and, like a journalist, more prone to go into details, was disposed to linger for explanations. His hesitation was by no means lost on the fair stranger. Once more she pointed to the door, this time with an imperious gesture.

"Oh! why do you hesitate?" she murmured. "Why do you stand like a schoolboy staring into a shop window? I know you are here for some desperate purpose; I can more than guess the reason for your visit. You are men of intellect and understanding, therefore you must clearly see the danger of even an instant's delay."

The lady turned away as if she had finished. Jack might have found it in his heart to be a little ashamed of Rigby, but, after all, the temptation to give way to curiosity was absolutely overwhelming. Jack pulled himself together at length, and dragged angrily at Rigby's arm. He felt just a little inclined to flush under the contemptuous gaze of their beautiful rescuer.

"Oh, do come along," he said. "My dear Dick, you are positively guilty of bad taste in this matter."

"Really, I beg your pardon," Rigby said humbly. "But you can quite understand my feelings. Good-night, madam."

Despite the wild hurry-scurry and the excitement of the moment, Jack had not failed to notice the exquisite beauty of the strange woman's face. She was quite young, about twenty-five or thereabouts, and yet her fair face, without a line or wrinkle in it had a suggestion of the Madonna, as of one who had suffered much. She flew down the stairs, heedless of the darkness, and into the forecourt beyond.

"Pray to heaven we are not too late," she said. "It seemed to me just now that I was barely in time, but surely ——"

The woman stopped, and passed her hand across her face just as one does who wakes from an evil dream. And in sooth she had cause enough for her astonishment. Where two bodies had been locked in a death struggle a minute before, only one remained now. The other had

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vanished utterly. And it needed only a cursory glance to see that the form lying there was not the misshapen outline of Nostalgo.

"This is amazing," the fair stranger said, as she bent over the body of the unconscious man. She did not appear to be the least afraid now; all her coolness had come back to her; she suggested a trained nurse on the battlefield. "Surely my eyes did not deceive me, surely I saw two men in a death struggle there as I came into the courtyard?"

"There is not the slightest doubt about that," Jack murmured. "Why, we were actually watching the fight at the very moment you opened the door. Do you know who this fellow is?"

The lady shook her head, but Jack noticed that she did not repudiate all knowledge of the stricken man.

"I can tell you if you want to know," she said, "but we can discuss that point later on. What we want to know now is how far this man has suffered from his injuries."

Heedless of the dust and dirt, heedless of her resplendent attire, the lady had thrown herself on her knees beside the prostrate body. She laid her hand upon his heart, and bent her head down listening intently.

"At all events he is not dead," she said, "neither can I see any sign of a wound. He has evidently been stunned by some tremendous blow. Ah! see, he stirs."

The injured man opened his eyes in a feeble, spasmodic kind of way, and gazed languidly about him. Rigby, fully alive to the possibilities of the situation, grasped Jack by the arm.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, "you say you know that man, and naturally he knows you. Do you think it wise to remain in sight, and thus give him a chance to recognize you?"

Redgrave lay as if lost to all consciousness once more. Despite her dreamy, Madonna-like face, the strange lady was not blind to the danger of the situation.

"I think you are quite right," she whispered hurriedly.

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"It would never do for this man to recognize you. I feel sure that heaven has sent you both to be my friends in the hour of my deepest despair. Who and what I am can be explained presently. But that man is coming to very fast, and it were far better if he did not see you."

Rigby nodded his emphatic approval. Together with Jack he withdrew behind the shelter of a clump of bushes where it was possible to hear everything without being seen. Meanwhile Redgrave had raised himself to a sitting position, and, with his back to the fountain, was stupidly contemplating the fair figure before him.

"I suppose you can understand what is said to you?" the lady asked. "For instance, you can tell me what brings you here to-night?"

"I dare say I could if I liked," Redgrave groaned, "but I am not going to do anything of the kind. This comes of having women mixed up in a business like ours."

"Woman or not, that has nothing to do with your murderous assault on a harmless stranger just now. It is absurd for you to deny any knowledge of me. You have heard of Lady Barmouth before."

Behind the shelter of the bushes Jack nipped Rigby's arm significantly. He had learned something now.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered. "Of course you have heard of Lady Barmouth often enough. I have never met her myself, but I have often heard Claire speak about her. A beautiful South American girl, I believe, married to a sulky brute who never goes outside his house from one year's end to another. I don't know whether he drinks or what it is, but I fear that Lady Barmouth has a very bad time of it."

Jack would have probably volunteered more information on this point, only the cross-examination of Redgrave had begun again, and he did not wish to miss a word that he said.

"It is idle to prevaricate with me," Lady Barmouth was saying. "I will ask you nothing as to your late encounter, because it is evident that you had greatly the worst of it, and that your would-be victim has escaped.

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But what is more to the point, I want to know what has become of my brother?"

"Your brother!" Redgrave stammered, as if utterly taken aback by the suddenness of the question. "I—I don't know in the least what you mean."

"Oh, what is the use of wasting your time and mine like this?" Lady Barmouth cried. "My brother came here by special appointment to meet Mr. Spencer Anstruther, and I came on my own self-initiative to see what my brother was doing."

Here was fresh information for Jack and his companion. It mattered little for the present who Lady Barmouth's brother was, but evidently she had greatly mistrusted him; hence her appearance in the courtyard to-night. It was, therefore, by no means difficult for the friends to guess that the aforesaid brother had been the man who had so lately accused Lady Barmouth of being a sentimental fool. The night's work was being by no means wasted.

"I know nothing whatever about your brother," Redgrave said sulkily, "and I know nothing about Anstruther either. The man who was here just now—the man who made that murderous attack on me, I mean—was a perfect stranger. But this is no place for a lady like you; you had better go home, and keep out of this sort of scrape for the future."

So saying, Redgrave scrambled painfully to his feet, and lurched off in the direction of the doorway leading to the lane beyond. It was only when they were satisfied that he had absolutely departed, that Rigby and Masefield emerged from their hiding place and joined Lady Barmouth. There was a sad, wistful expression on her face.

"You heard all that," she said. "Mind you, I am assuming that you are no parties to the vile conspiracy of which Anstruther is the head. I should like to have your assurance on that point before I proceed any further."

"If there is one man in the world whom we desire to expose and render harmless for the future, it is Spencer

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Anstruther," Jack said vehemently. "But how did you know we were here at all?"

"Because I happened to be in the house when you came," Lady Barmouth explained. "I caught sight of your faces as you moved in front of the light proceeding from that room up-stairs, and I divined by a sort of instinct that you did not belong to Anstruther's gang. Then it came to me that I had seen one of you gentlemen before in the company of Miss Helmsley. I think, sir, I may be pardoned if I assume that Miss Helmsley is something more than a friend of yours."

"To be perfectly candid with you, we are engaged to be married, only it is a profound secret at present," Jack explained. "After telling you so much, I think you might be equally candid with us."

"Indeed I will!" Lady Barmouth exclaimed. "Any one to whom Claire Helmsley has given her heart must be a good and true man. As I told you just now, I saw you on the stairs; I also heard what that strange man said about there being spies in the house; I saw you creep into the room, and I saw Anstruther lock the door upon you. The rest you know for yourselves."

"But that does not explain why you are here," Rigby ventured to suggest.

"Why I am here to-night I cannot even tell you," Lady Barmouth said, in low, nervous tones. "The secret is not mine; it concerns one I love more than anybody else in the world. One thing I can tell you: Claire Helmsley is in great danger so long as she remains where she is living now. You must get her away, Mr. Masefield; you must get her away at any cost."

Jack nodded gravely; he had not been blind to this danger for some time. What he wanted to know now was if Lady Barmouth had any idea of the identity of the man who had successfully got the better of Redgrave. But on that head Lady Barmouth could say nothing; she had returned for the express purpose of relieving Masefield and Rigby from their awkward situation, and in so doing she had come quite unexpectedly upon the combatants. Even

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in the dim light she had seen that a murderous struggle was taking place, and this being so, had hastened headlong up-stairs with a view to securing assistance. More than this she could not possibly say.

"What we want to do," Rigby suggested, "is to go away quietly somewhere, and discuss this matter thoroughly. I need not point out to your ladyship the manifest danger of staying here. Anstruther or any of his tribe may be back at any time, and then we shall be caught like rats in a trap."

"That matter is easily settled," Lady Barmouth replied. "Could you come home with me? It is by no means late yet, and you would not be long in getting rid of those disguises of yours. They are excellent disguises, but they did not prevent me recognizing you, Mr. Masefield."

"There is no deceiving a clever woman," Jack smiled. "I should like nothing better than a chance to discuss this matter at length—but Lord Barmouth? Would he not think it somewhat singular that two strangers like ourselves ——"

"Nothing of the sort!" Lady Barmouth cried eagerly. "My husband never goes outside the house; he is suffering from a trouble so terrible that I try not to think of it if I can. I may, however, tell you that his trouble is intimately connected with the black business that brings us here to-night. It may seem to you that I am a mere frivolous society butterfly. Ah, if you only knew!"

The trio had worked their way into the street by this time. A private hansom stood a little way down the road. Lady Barmouth smiled a little as she contemplated her two companions.

"I am afraid we should be a suspicious-looking party in the eye of a passing policeman," she said. "No, I think it would be just as well if I walked to my hansom alone. Then you can go back to your rooms and attire yourselves as English gentlemen should be attired at this time of the evening. Then you can come to my house; I will tell the servants I am expecting two friends to supper. You know the address."

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Jack intimated that he knew the address perfectly well. The suggestion was by no means a bad one; there could be no possible suspicion aroused by the fact that Lady Barmouth was having two friends to share her late meal. The clocks were striking twelve as Jack and his companion walked up the steps of the big house in Belgrave Square.

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CHAPTER XVI

A RESPLENDENT footman took the names of the callers, and preceded them to the drawing-room. It was no uncommon thing for Lady Barmouth to invite a score or so of friends to supper after a reception or theatre. The footman intimated that his mistress was alone now, and that she was at present in the hands of her maid; therefore the callers had ample time to study the surroundings of so mysterious a person as Lord Barmouth.

That remarkable man, as everybody knew, had only been married a little over two years. Two years ago he himself had been a more or less popular figure in society. In the first place he was exceedingly rich, by no means ill looking, in fact he was a remarkably fine type of an all-round athlete. He was a triple blue at Oxford, a wonderfully keen shot, and a dashing polo player. At his house in the Shires his hunters were noted, as likewise were his coverts. Two years ago any man would have esteemed it a privilege to call himself Lord Barmouth's friend, and be free of his guns and his horses.

But now all this was changed. Barmouth had gone away to South America with a view of something new in the way of sport. Naturally his movements were followed carefully by the society papers. They chronicled all his doings faithfully, and presently Belgravia was officially informed of the fact that Barmouth was in Mexico, where he had become engaged to be married to the daughter of a settler there—an Englishman of good family who had taken unto himself a Mexican wife. Three months later the announcement of Barmouth's marriage was in the *Times*. It was understood that he was not coming home quite yet; indeed, something like two years elapsed before

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the big house in Belgrave Square was set in order for the owner and his bride.

The strange whisperings and muttered scandal began at once. But on one point society was in perfect accord—whatever trouble hung over the household, it could not possibly be a fault of Lady Barmouth's. The woman was a lady to her finger-tips; she took her part naturally and easily in society; she fell into her place like one to the manner born. As everybody expected, there was nothing lacking in the lavish hospitality which had always been a tradition of the Barmouths. Men went down to their country houses in the winter to shoot and hunt, men and women came to Belgrave Square to lunch and dance and dinner—there was no more popular figure in society than Lady Barmouth.

And there it seemed to end. From the day of his arrival in England until the present moment not a soul had looked upon Lord Barmouth with the exception of his wife and his faithful valet. What was the source of the trouble nobody knew, and nobody guessed. It was in vain to try to bribe the servants, for they were just as much in the dark as anybody else. It was perhaps a mistake to say that nobody had ever seen Lord Barmouth, for occasionally he entered the dining or drawing-rooms when some very old friends were there, but previous to his entry the lights were always turned out. Whether this was due to some strange form of disease, or perhaps some phase of madness, was a point never explained. Lady Barmouth, beyond a cold statement that her husband was suffering from a peculiar malady, said nothing, and, indeed, it would have been in very bad taste to have asked. It had only been a nine days' wonder after all, and it mattered little to society in general so long as the hospitality of the house of Barmouth did not suffer.

It was under the roof of a man like this that Rigby and Jack found themselves as a fitting end to a night of amazing adventure. There was nothing to denote a discordant spirit in the house. Here was the magnificent suite of drawing-rooms brilliantly lighted and luxurious to a

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degree, on the walls of which were pictures of price. There was about the house the decorous, smooth, velvety silence which seems to be tradition in all well-ordered establishments. It seemed almost impossible to believe that the sinister wing of tragedy should hang over a home like this. A few minutes later Lady Barmouth came into the room.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting," she said, "but I have been having a little chat with my husband. As I have already intimated to you, his misfortunes are not altogether unconnected with this Anstruther business. My dear husband has suffered cruelly at the hands of certain people; indeed, so cruelly has he suffered that he seems to have lost all life and hope altogether. Ah, if you had only seen him as I saw him for the first time two years ago! There is one thing, however, I will ask you to do—pray do not say a word to him as to the circumstances in which we met to-night."

"Then we are to have the pleasure of seeing Lord Barmouth," Jack exclaimed. "I quite understood that he ——"

"This is an exceptional case altogether. In the strict sense of the word you will not see my husband, but he desires the privilege of a few words with you. Now, let us go into the dining-room and talk this matter over. There will be no servants present—it is the one meal of the day which I prefer to partake of without the presence of one's domestics."

The dining-room was not the usual apartment devoted to state feasts, but a small room on the first floor, cozily and comfortably furnished, and more with an eye to confidences than anything else. The servants were absent as Lady Barmouth had intimated, so that it was possible to discuss the events of the evening without the chance of being overheard.

"Now tell me candidly," Lady Barmouth said at length, "have you any ideas to offer as to that mysterious disappearance from Shannon Street police station? I am asking you this, Mr. Masefield, because it was you who

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actually found the body of the man who most people speak of as Nostalgo. Really, now, was that unfortunate man so very like the wonderful poster of which London has had to say so much of late?"

"The likeness was amazing," Jack explained. "It quite frightened me. Talking about the poster in question, there is another likeness that I have not failed to note. Of course, if you put the man I mean and the poster side by side, nobody could possibly see the resemblance. But in moments of anger, there is a strong likeness between the poster and Spencer Anstruther. Don't laugh at me, Lady Barmouth; I assure you it is absolutely true."

But Lady Barmouth was by no means in the way of laughing at Masefield. Her pale face took on a still more creamy pallor, the pupils of her dark eyes were strangely dilated.

"That is a most strange and wonderful thing," she said, as if speaking to herself. "Mr. Masefield, it is most fortunate that we met to-night. You have just told me something which will prove of the utmost value later on. We will not discuss that now, there is no time. But there is one thing that I am going to ask you to do for me; I want you to influence Claire Helmsley in my favor. I have taken a great fancy to her; indeed, I like her far more than any girl in London. This is all the stranger because I believe I am in a position to do her a great service. I *know* that I am in a position to do her one. But one stipulation I make, and that is—she must be told everything."

Jack hesitated. It would be indeed a dangerous thing to acquaint Claire with all that had happened so long as she was under the same roof as Spencer Anstruther. She was not accustomed to restrain her feelings and emotions, and with his swift, subtle instincts, Anstruther would find out that there was something wrong immediately. Jack pointed this out to Lady Barmouth at some length.

"I don't think so," she said thoughtfully. "Claire is a clever girl, she is in splendid health, and not the least

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likely to fear Anstruther or anybody else. It is, of course, not nice to have to play a part, but think of the information that Claire could glean for us so long as Anstruther regards her as little more than a child and behaves to her accordingly."

"Believe me, I am only too anxious to get at the bottom of this dreadful business," Jack said earnestly, "and there is nobody more anxious than I am to get Claire outside the sphere of Anstruther's influence altogether. Still, I am quite willing to try. I will see Claire to-morrow, and tell her everything."

Lady Barmouth's face beamed with a delight that was almost childish. She looked and acted like one who had had a great weight taken off her mind. That Jack had come to a wise decision she felt certain. She was saying so, speaking very briskly and freely, when the lights of the room were extinguished by some invisible agency, and the apartment left in utter darkness save for the wood-fire which smouldered on the hearth.

"I do hope you have all finished," Lady Barmouth cried. "It is quite evident that my husband thinks so, or the lights would not have been extinguished by turning off the switch outside the door."

Both Jack and Rigby muttered something to the effect that they had finished. Lady Barmouth produced a tiny silver spirit lamp from the sideboard, the blue flame of which was little larger than a pin's point, sufficient to light a cigarette, but insufficient to illuminate a scrap of paper a foot away. In silence the cigarettes were handed round, and the well-trained voice of a servant was heard announcing Lord Barmouth. A closely muffled figure crept into the room, and proceeded to bury itself in a big armchair by the side of the wood-fire.

"These are my friends, Mr. Rigby and Mr. Masefield," Lady Barmouth said cheerfully. "I have told them that you would like to have a few words with them, George. You will find these gentlemen willing to speak quite freely."

"That is indeed good of you." The deep, clear ring-

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ing voice came from the fireplace. "I have been praying for something like this for the last twelve months. Still, it is more with Mr. Masefield than Mr. Rigby that I wish to speak. You have made a great discovery to-night, I understand. You have found out the source of those Nostalgo posters?"

"I think I have done more than that," Jack explained. "I have not only discovered their source, but I know where they are printed, and the process of their manufacture. If you like to put yourself in my hands and accompany me to-morrow night, you shall see the whole scheme for yourself."

Lord Barmouth was of opinion that it was not wise in the circumstances to take any such step. He cross-examined Jack at considerable length, his questions being pointed with marked intelligence. At the same time he said little or nothing about himself. Lady Barmouth sat there smiling behind the cover of the darkness, infinitely glad to see her husband taking an interest in the affairs of life once more.

"Don't you think it is rather late to-night?" she suggested; "besides, we are going too fast. With your intimate knowledge of the situation, and with the help of these gentlemen, surely we can devise some scheme for getting the better of that fiend Anstruther."

"Ay, you are right," Barmouth said, his deep voice ringing through the room. "I see a way now, a way as clear as daylight."

In his passionate emotion he dashed his foot forward so that the point of his shoe came with force against one of the logs in the grate. A blue flame spurted up, and died as suddenly as it had come. Jack and Rigby rose to leave. No sooner were they outside than Jack clutched his companion's arm eagerly.

"Did you see nothing?" Jack whispered. "By heaven, Lord Barmouth and the Nostalgo we saw in the forecourt to-night are one and the same person!"

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CHAPTER XVII

WHICH MAN WAS IT?

RIGBY'S astonishment was frank and undisguised. It was quite evident that he had noticed nothing suspicious about the look or attitude of Lord Barmouth; indeed, he had been on the far side of the table when the master of the house had entered the room. But he was not altogether prepared to accept Jack's statement unless he could verify it by something more than a mere expression of opinion.

"Are you quite sure of that?" he asked. "Mind you, this is an exceedingly important matter, and if what you say is true, we have opened up a quite fresh development of the mystery."

"I am absolutely certain of it," Jack declared. "I had not the least idea of anything of the kind till we were both on our feet ready to go. It was at this point, you will remember, that Lord Barmouth displayed some feeling and accidentally touched the logs of wood on the fire with his foot. In the spurt of flame which followed, I had a perfect view of his face."

"Would you mind describing what you saw?" Rigby asked.

"You have only to look at the nearest poster displaying the features of Nostalgo, and your question is answered. It was only a flash, but the face was impressed upon my mind in the most vivid fashion. There was the same sinister expression of face, the same repulsive twist of the mouth, the same inexpressible gleam of the eyes. You know what I mean: the whole thing was exactly as we see it, on half the hoardings in London. Of course it is the face of a leering Mephistopheles. And yet I don't know; it occurred to me that there was something very pathetic and at the same time kindly about Barmouth's

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aspect. You know what I mean: imagine a kind-hearted, good-natured actor made up as repulsively as possible, and yet with the suggestion of his natural disposition behind him."

"Yes, I fancy I understand what you mean," Rigby replied thoughtfully. "But you don't suggest that the man really was made up, do you?"

Jack replied that he did and he didn't. There was something unreal about Barmouth, and yet it was impossible to believe that that sinister face was anything except just as nature made it. The friends walked along side by side in silence before another idea occurred to Rigby.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we must believe in the existence of two Nostalgos. The one you found near Panton Square was dead; in fact, the police sergeant testified to the fact. How or by what means that man's body was so mysteriously spirited away we are not very likely to find out. At any rate it is quite fair to assume that his friends had some desperate reason for spiriting the body away. Therefore, we may logically infer that Lord Barmouth cannot possibly be the same man you saw in Panton Square."

"That is a very fair assumption," Jack admitted. "But to carry your argument a bit further, we are bound to assume that there are no less than three Nostalgos. The suggestion is almost farcical, but there it is."

"What do you mean by three?" Rigby asked.

"Well, don't forget the man we saw in the forecourt of the house in Montrose Place. No mistake about his being a Nostalgo."

"Quite so," Rigby admitted. "I am with you there. But how do we know for certain that Nostalgo No. 2, so to speak, and Lord Barmouth are not the same man? Did you notice anything strange about the appearance of Barmouth as he came into the room to-night—that he was humpbacked or misshapen in any way?"

Jack was bound to admit that he had not noticed anything of the kind.

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"I don't think we shall ever do much good unless we go direct to the fountain head," Jack said thoughtfully.

"Mexico," Rigby cried. "I see exactly what you mean."

"Mexico it is. We know perfectly well that when Barmouth went off to Mexico two years ago on a sporting expedition he was a normal man like you and me. If he had been so terribly disfigured by birth or accident as he appeared to-night we should have known it. A man in his position with an infirmity like that cannot hide it from the light of day. To carry the thing to a logical conclusion, if Barmouth had been like that when he went away, why should he be so dreadfully troubled about it now?"

Rigby applauded this sound reasoning. He could see that Jack had something on his mind, and urged him to proceed.

"I don't quite know what to make of it," Jack said. "As I observed just now, we seem to be face to face with the fact that there are two or three Nostalgos, and for all we know to the contrary, there may be a score more knocking about London. It has occurred to me more than once that these men must belong to some secret society."

Rigby was inclined to laugh at the idea. On being asked by Jack to explain what he saw that was fatal to the theory, he replied logically enough that such a thing was out of the question.

"My dear fellow, just think what you are saying," he exclaimed. "So far as my reading teaches me, the great object of a secret society is to *be* secret. Besides, you don't suggest for a moment that these men belong to any particular tribe, especially as we know perfectly well that Lord Barmouth, who is an Englishman, belongs to them. Nor would you want me to believe that these men are in the habit of having their faces operated upon by some ingenious doctor, so that they are in the position to recognize one another when they meet."

Jack was bound to admit that Rigby had the facts entirely upon his side. It seemed absolutely childish to believe that sane men would do this kind of thing, especially

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when it was very evident that these various Nostalgos were only two anxious to hide themselves from the light of day. Rigby did not pursue his advantage; he was quite content to judge that his argument had prevailed from the expression of Jack's face.

"But we need not carry that argument any further," he said. "I judge from your expression that you have another theory."

"I was just coming to that," Jack said. "We will assume for the sake of argument that when Barmouth went to Mexico he was without blemish of mind or body. That being so, he must have met with some terrible adventure which has resulted in this terrible disfigurement. Mind you, it is a disfigurement; it certainly is not natural; for instance, no three men could possibly have faces like that as the result of a freak of Nature. What I am trying to think is this: Barmouth got mixed up in some hideous secret society, and that he either carries on his face the badge of the tribe, or he has been purposely disfigured out of revenge for some dereliction of duty. However, this is only speculation after all, and we can do nothing till we have some fresh facts before us."

"I am inclined to think very highly of your theory all the same," Rigby said. "There is no questioning the fact that we have to look towards Mexico for an elucidation of the mystery. By Jove, I have nearly forgotten something. Wouldn't it be a good thing to find out if Anstruther had ever been to Mexico?"

"Of course it would," Jack exclaimed. "I'll see to that. I will go to Anstruther's to-morrow night and learn there. It will be hard indeed if I am unable to answer your question next time we meet."

It was fairly late the following afternoon before Jack found himself in Panton Square again. He had practically promised Lady Barmouth to tell Claire everything, but a natural reflection had shown him that this was not quite prudent. Not that he objected to take Claire into his confidence, but what he greatly feared was the girl's inability to control her feelings in the presence of Anstruther after

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she had learned everything. But, as Jack looked into the face of his betrothed, his doubts gradually vanished. It was a courageous as well as a beautiful face, and it occurred to Jack that Lady Barmouth had not done badly when she had selected Claire to be her confidante in this painful matter. Claire's dark eyes were turned interrogatively upon her lover. Perhaps he was looking a little more serious than usual; at any rate his grave face told her that he came with news of importance.

"My dear boy, what is the matter?" Claire asked. She twined her hands about his arm, and laid her head caressingly on his shoulder. It was impossible to resist that pleading upward glance. "I am sure you have something important to say to me."

"Against my better judgment," Jack laughed. "Yes, I am going to tell you something about your guardian."

Claire listened with the deepest attention as Jack proceeded to speak freely of the adventures of the last two days. He watched the change of her face, the flush and the pallor, and the dawning resolution which gave her mouth strength and firmness.

"I do not think you need be afraid for me," Claire said. "I will be brave and resolute; I will do my best to hide my feelings from Mr. Anstruther. This is a dreadful business altogether; but, dreadful as it is, we cannot draw back now. You have told me some strange things, but some of your facts are not facts at all."

"In what way have I been mistaken?" Jack asked.

"Well, as to Mr. Anstruther, for instance. You say that you saw him at Montrose Place last night for the best part of an hour."

"Well, so I did," Jack declared. "If you want anybody to prove that, ask Rigby. Anstruther was there somewhere about half-past ten, and when he left he had not the slightest intention of going home."

"Most extraordinary," Claire murmured. "Listen to what I have to say, what I should have to swear to if this thing ever went into a court of justice. Shortly after dinner last night Spencer Anstruther went directly to his study;

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he had not been there very long before he was playing his violin, and this he continued to do till one o'clock this morning. Now what do you make of that?"

"It seems almost incredible," Jack said. "Was there a break at all in the performance?"

Claire replied that there was a break of perhaps twenty-five minutes to half-an-hour, so far as she could judge, somewhere about eleven o'clock. Jack smiled with the air of a man who makes a discovery. This was just the period when Padini had turned up in Montrose Place. There was no time to go into theories now, but Jack felt that he would have a surprise for his friends later on.

"Tell me, tell me," he said, "do you think you can recollect the names of all the pieces that Anstruther played last night? I want you to try and repeat them to me exactly in the order that they occurred. This is more important than you would imagine."

It was a somewhat difficult task, but Claire managed it successfully at length. For a long time the girl bent thoughtfully over her writing table, and presently produced a neat list on which were inscribed the names of some ten or fifteen classical compositions.

"I think you will find that practically correct," she said. "I may not have recollected the exact order, but I think that is good enough for your purpose."

Masefield was quite sure of the fact. He folded the list, and carefully placed it in his pocket.

"Now there is one more thing I should like," he said. "Now, as you are perfectly well aware, Padini was giving a recital last night at the small Queen's Hall. You will remember this, more especially as your music agent sent you a programme, a thing he always does when there is anything of importance going on. Now, do you think you could find that programme for me? Not that it very much matters, because I can step 'round to Smithson's and get one for myself; still, if you happen to have it in the house ——"

But Claire was quite certain that she had the programme somewhere. She produced it presently from a mass of papers on the piano.

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"Now we shall get at it," Jack said. "I see by this programme that Padini is down for no less than six items. He had a most enthusiastic audience, as I happen to know, which really means that he played about twelve pieces altogether. Now I will read to you the first four of these compositions. They are respectively Etude 25, Chopin; Wiegenlied, Brahms; Moszkowski's Five Waltzes; Liszt's 'Die Lorelei.' Now, unless I am greatly mistaken, you will find that those pieces were played in the same order by Anstruther in his study last night. Is not that so?"

"Amazing!" Claire cried. "Absolutely it is exactly as you say. What does it mean?"

"We will take the list right through till the end if you like," Jack replied. "The same thing will apply to both lists. Now is it not an extraordinary thing that those two men should have gone through exactly the same programme, item by item, without the slightest variation? And all the time they were some two miles apart?"

"It seems absolutely incapable of explanation," Claire cried.

"Oh! the explanation will be simple enough when the time comes," Jack laughed; "but you will see for yourself that the thing is not quite finished. It is obvious enough that Padini's recital finished at about eleven, whereas you say that Anstruther went on till about one o'clock in the morning. The next business is to find out where Padini was playing so late—possibly at a smoking concert or something of that kind. At any rate I am going to find out, and then I shall discover that the supplementary programme will be exactly the same as your list."

"Is it some new science?" Claire asked, "some wonderful new discovery that Mr. Anstruther is perfecting before he submits it to the world?"

"Not a bit of it," Jack said practically. "There is nothing occult here. And now I must go. I will see you at dinner."

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE EMPTY ROOM

JACK went off, bent upon putting his discovery to the test. There was not the slightest trouble in ascertaining where Padini had passed the hours between eleven and one of the previous evening. As Masefield had anticipated, the artist had been persuaded to lend his services to the Bohemian Arts Club, where he had been the lion of the evening. The fact Jack ascertained at the club itself, a musical member affording him all the information he desired. The previous night's talent had been of a very middle class nature, so that Padini had found himself in great request. He had been exceedingly obliging, so Jack's informant said, and had practically played straight away for a couple of hours. Jack jotted down the names of the various items executed by Padini, and on comparing them with the list given him by Claire, found that they tallied exactly.

"The plot thickens," he murmured, as he walked rapidly away in the direction of the *Planet* office, there to lay his most recent discoveries before Rigby. "What an ingenious rascal we have to deal with, to be sure!"

Rigby was emphatically of the same opinion. He did not see how it was possible to better Jack's suggestion that he should dine at Anstruther's that night and ascertain all he could as to Anstruther's past, and especially as to whether the latter had ever been in Mexico.

"There is one little thing we have quite overlooked," Jack suggested as he rose to depart. "We have got to get inside that study. Anstruther's game is to lock himself in and pretend that his violin soothes his mind and induces a proper train of thought. That's his story, of course. I have ascertained that Padini is doing nothing to-night, but that will not prevent the music going on

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all the same. Now if you could hit upon some scheme whereby ——"

"I know exactly what you mean," Rigby said; "you want to see the inside of the study just at the critical moment. I think our game is to make a diversion outside. I'll just turn over the matter in my mind, and if I can see a really artistic way of doing it, I will send you a telegram just before you go to dinner. The diversion, of course, will come from the outside of the house."

Jack felt sure that the matter was quite safe in the capable hands of Dick Rigby. He was surer still when a little before eight o'clock his landlady handed him a telegram containing just three words from Rigby. Before he slept that night, Jack felt pretty sure that the mystery of Anstruther's violin practice would be a secret from him no longer.

It was hard work to keep his feelings under control, to sit in the drawing-room before dinner was announced and exchange commonplaces with his brilliant host. Anstruther had rarely been in better form; he had the air and mien of a man with whom the world goes very well indeed; success seemed to stand out in big letters upon him. Usually Anstruther was a man of moods; to-night he was merely a society creature with apparently no heed of the morrow.

If Jack had any misgivings on the subject of Claire's behavior towards her guardian, his uneasiness was speedily set at rest. The most critical observer could not have detected the slightest jarring note. It was all the same through dinner: Anstruther monopolized most of the conversation, and Claire followed every word with flattering attention. Dessert was on the table at length before Jack carefully led up the conversation to foreign travel. He had seen much of the world himself, so that there were several places of mutual interest to be discussed with Anstruther.

"There is one part of the world, however," Jack said, as he carelessly peeled a peach, "that I have always been curious to see. I allude to the land of the Aztecs, those

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wonderful ruined cities of Mexico, of which we know so little and profess to know so much. Now, don't you think that those people must have been of an exceedingly high state of civilization?"

The question was so innocently asked, and Jack's artistic deference was so subtly conveyed, that Anstruther fell headlong into the trap.

"I should say there is not the slightest doubt about it," the host responded. "I have been there; indeed, I spent a goodish part of my time in and about Montezuma."

"And about when would that be?" Jack asked.

Anstruther explained, without giving definite dates, that it was about two years before. Jack proceeded to discuss the matter in a casual kind of way. He was anxious to know whether any of the old customs of the Aztecs still prevailed; he had heard that to a great extent the religion of these people had been built up on free-masonry. Did, for instance, Anstruther believe in the legends of terrible revenges which these people used to inflict upon their enemies?

But Anstruther declined to put his head further into the lion's mouth; he seemed to become suddenly a little uneasy and suspicious and changed the conversation to safer grounds. Still, Jack had learned quite as much as he had expected to learn, and Anstruther's very reticence confirmed Jack in the feeling that his host knew everything there was to know about the terrible misfortunes of the man or men called Nostalgo.

It was getting fairly late now, and Jack was beginning to wonder whether the hour had not yet arrived for Rigby's promised diversion. If it came now it would be merely wasted, seeing that nothing could be gained by Rigby's ingenious device until Anstruther was safe in his study. He showed no signs, however, of any disposition to move; his face had grown placid again, and he was talking with all his old charm of manner on various topics of interest.

Jack did not fail to notice the figure of Serena as she flitted noiselessly about the room. It had not escaped

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