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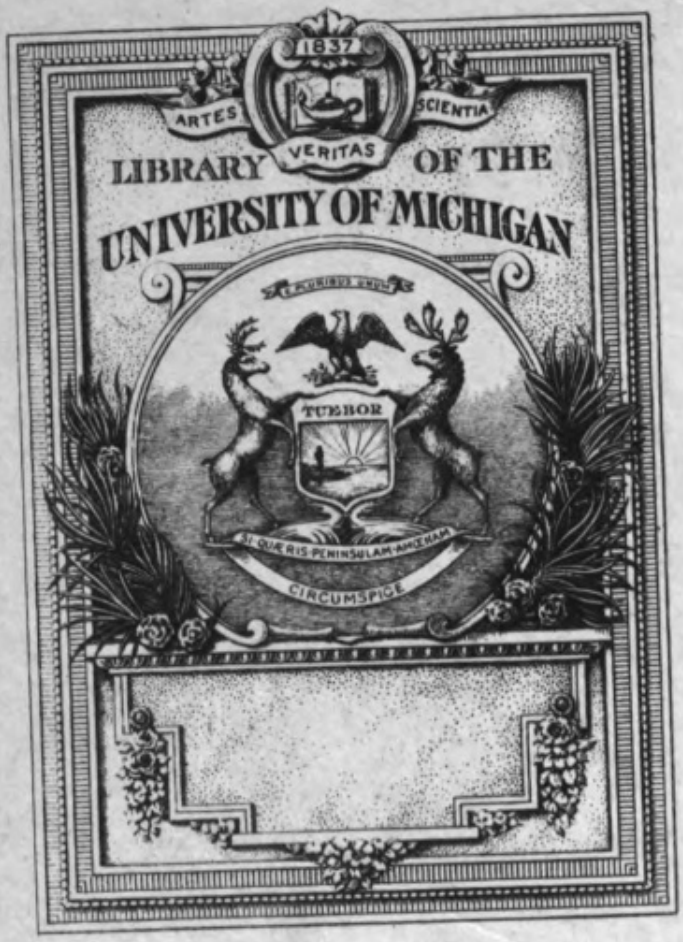

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The Song Book of Quong Lee of Limehouse

The Outer Circle:
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Whispering Windows

Tales of the Waterside

By

Thomas Burke

Author of "Limehouse Nights"

London

Grant Richards Limited

St Martin's Street

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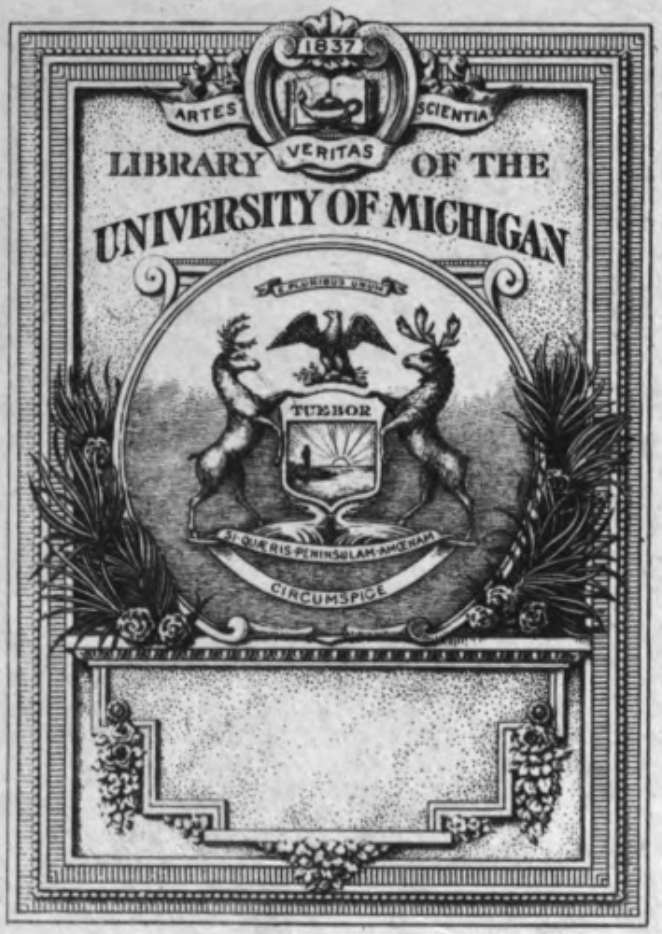

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To

Winifred

I-18-35 Mrs.

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THE shape and soul of Shadwell are reflected in its name. Shadwell! Cold, grey, stony syllables, without lustre or savour; flat to the eye and the palate. It lies derelict between the river and Commercial Road. Its main streets are forlorn and blear of aspect, and are named in cruel mockery—Formosa Terrace, Acacia Grove, Plum-tree Walk, Laburnum Court. Its dominant odours are fried fish and bilge-water. Its colour by day is of cobweb; by night, of the jungle. Its noise is persistent; a brown drone overridden by intermittent crashes. It is sliced at intervals by alleys without light, whose silence is not peace, but silence so tense that one knows it must soon be broken by some sound of dread. On the flood-tide floats from Limehouse the bitter-sweet alluring smell of Asia; and the spring comes slowly up this way.

It is a circus of harsh, unavailing endeavour. Here wealth does not accumulate, though men decay. Its people are casual labourers, out-casts, petty thieves, ineffectual shopkeepers. They are for ever splashily busy, without aim or hope, in this and that puny enterprise; and are perpetually harassed in chasing the cocky and elusive one-and-sixpence. Their evenings

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are as stressful as their days, for they bring to the quest for entertainment the flurried zeal that directs their businesses. In the beetling tenement houses they set their gramophones buzzing. In the mission halls venturesome voices lift the bathos of hymn tunes to tragedy. From dim-lit bars the debilitated music of electric pianos brings ill-tidings of the search for gaiety; and above them all blares the band of the Salvation Army, strenuously wanton.

In a minor street of this district stood once a small shop with dim, reticent windows. Through these dusty windows sniggering boys would peer, and would nudge one another with furtive comment. The stock, dusty as the windows, seemed to have been thrown together by disdainful hands. There were faded photographs of monster-limbed actresses, in tights; a few books in paper covers, with titles matching the maladroit archness of the photographs; some bottles of scent with variegated labels; and little packets of toilet accessories. The ill-informed might have assumed, from the style and condition of the display, that the owner was letting his business run to ruin; while, in fact, he was doing very well. The goods in his window were not

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exposed for sale; they were a nod and a wink to the knowing ones that he had other tricks up his sleeve.

The shop bore no name on the front, but it was known to be the property of one Mr Bronsden. He was a most worthy man. He kept himself *to* himself; and in England there is no more certain way of winning the respect of one's neighbours. He was a large man. His visage was sour; his complexion sanguine. His head was thatched with a mass of beer-coloured hair. His clothes and linen were always soiled, and he kept himself in tune with them, and walked with humility in side streets. Sour as his visage was, he could, on occasion, be jocose, and was so with esteemed customers; but jocosity came heavily from him, and his jokes were as sour and muddy as the lips over which they crawled.

This Bronsden owned, besides a comfortable little business, a wife. Few people had seen her. Few people indeed had even had sight of his private apartments. He was not a man who took pride or joy in his possessions. Though the wife was a recent acquisition, he took less account of her than some of his customers took of their home-made rabbit-hutches. Perhaps he was justified, for he had

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picked her off the streets. This is an action whose merit cannot be denied, for he found her when she had been but a few days in that situation, and, by his intervention, she was snatched from its attendant calamities. Beaten and broken, she was wandering about the streets, when he came across her, and listened perfunctorily to her bitter words that were half appeal and half defiance.

Without any clear motive, he gave her shelter. Then he dismissed the old woman who played at attending him and robbed him of food and money, and installed Hetty in her place, and married her. The contract was plainly set forth; she entered his establishment as indoor servant, with duties, personal cash allowance, household allowance, and reasonable freedom of movement. Her position only differed from that of the ordinary domestic help by her being joined in holy matrimony to her employer: a rite upon which he had insisted so that she should be his fixed property.

Now should she have been proud of the dignity conferred upon her—a wastrel of the alleys; and for a few weeks she was. Then, being a servant in a good home ceased to content her. She wanted to stir delight in

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the muffled heart of Bronsden, and found that it was not in her power to do so. In her company, or without it, he was passive; her fluttering gesture and gamesome eye drew no response or quickening of the blood from him. He accepted her, as he accepted his pipe. Yet beauty rested in her weary face and her flowing figure, and she knew it and longed for its recognition. Because he was oblivious of her charms, she began to hate him; and because, to her honest mind, this neglect afforded no proper reason for hatred, she began to cast about for a reason.

She soon found one. Her distaste for her situation developed rapidly. I think she was not a woman of normal sensibilities. Though he was a strong, silent man, she could not reverence him. Though he was hard and heavy with his tongue, she did not admire the brute. She was foolish enough to want things to which she was not entitled: gentle hands, and respect, and little courtesies. Bronsden looked down to her from stony heights, but she did not look up to him. He had taken her from the streets in his big, abstracted way, on her first journey of misery, and had made her respectable. He had given her money for frocks and chocolates and knick-

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knacks. By Shadwell standards, he was the perfect husband. He was kind, in his aloof way, and occasionally sportive. She was indeed in a position to be envied. But . . . he was her rescuer, her benefactor. By all human ideas he was entitled to her gratitude and her service. In the eyes of the world she was deep in his debt. It was this fact that bit and burned her heart night and day. Herein she found good and sufficient reason for hatred.

In a room at the rear of his shop, looking on to a blank wall, he had fixed a laboratory, and there he toiled by day and increased the wadded brown smell of Shadwell as he compounded his dreadful medicines and surgical goods. To the shop would come often men of horrid aspect and slinking demeanour. They would murmur diffident words to Bronsden and would follow him through the living-room to the laboratory at the back; and there the two would remain in murmurous confabulation, with interjected sniggers. And in the living-room Hetty would sit and feed upon her hate.

Now all men are not so impervious to the graces of woman as this Bronsden. Tom the Toff was an inflammable young man; what is

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known, in certain circles, as a warm member. One glance from bright eyes would set him alight. He was as combustible as powder. And when, one morning, he passed Hetty in St George's, her eyes applied the match. He followed her. He noted where she lived, and hung about each morning to watch for her appearance on the street with market basket. Time was his own; for he was Tom the Toff, a free-lance, who worked West End crowds for purses and handbags. He had an easy conquest. She was as ripe for the bold smile of this debonair philanderer as he for her sidelong glances.

He found early occasion for visiting the morose Bronsden in the way of business. He had a long talk with Bronsden. He told a tale, and listened to Bronsden expatiating on the merits of his remedies. Then he mentioned casually that he had a good deal of business in the West End; it might be worth Bronsden's considering whether he, Tom the Toff, could work an agency for him among West End gentlemen. This proposal Bronsden considered, and it became necessary that Tom the Toff should visit the shop many times for conferences and discussion of terms. Within a week, Tom the Toff's presence in

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the shop was accepted as casually as the presence of a partner.

And Hetty no more sulked and gnawed herself in the living-room. A light step on the threshold of the shop filled her with music and laughter. Youth leapt to youth. And when Bronsden was busy in the laboratory, and could not be disturbed, there were delicious minutes when they stood in each other's presence, and looked and talked—oh, any kind of talk, but a very special kind of look. It was inevitable that she should turn to him. For he had nothing to give her, in the way of material comforts. His West End raids were intermittent, and yielded a precarious income. It was, this time, for her, to give; and she gave him with both hands the gift of her love.

Tom the Toff felt the frigid atmosphere with which Bronsden filled the house, and knew its effect on a limber-hearted girl. At first, in her presence, he was shy and diffident, dropping his easy, nonchalant air, and becoming awkward. By this Hetty knew that their hearts were beating in tune, and by exquisite gesture and significant attitude, sharper messengers than any words, they made mutual discovery. The barriers went down, then;

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and they discoursed freely, as though there were no Bronsden bulking between them.

But Bronsden was still there. Others knew it, if Tom and Hetty forgot it. Tom's father knew it, and said so.

"Wodyeh think yer up to?" he would inquire. "Eh? Going into business as a dealer in trouble—or what? This kind o' thing's going to be a lot o' use to you, ain't it? Messin' yesself up with another chap's wife. And what a wife! Yeh know where 'e found 'er, doncher? Remember I'm yer father. I seen more o' the world'n what you 'ave. Besides, there's 'im. 'E ain't a man what says much, but, begor, I wouldn't like to be on the wrong side of 'im. Them quiet kind, when they breaks out, they breaks out. And Gawd 'elp the one they breaks on."

But Tom paid little heed to dad's garrulous admonitions. He had heard of dreadful things happening to other people, but it had never seemed likely that dreadful things could happen to him.

"I warn yeh!" went on dad. "I warn yeh. If anything comes o' this, yeh can't say I 'aven't warned yeh."

"No, yer right there," replied the respectful son. "I couldn't truthfully say that,

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considering yer at it morning and night. Yeh got a nice pleasant voice, dad, but I wonder yeh don't sometimes get a bit tired of 'earing it. I do."

In the living-room at evenings, Hetty would be notably vivacious and happy-eyed. Spring-tide hung about her and moved with her; but the saturine Bronsden ate his supper and saw nothing. Until, reckoning too boldly on his obtuseness, Tom the Toff presented Hetty with a yellow silk scarf. And Hetty, drunk with glamour, wore it.

At supper on the night of its presentation, Bronsden noticed it. Only deliberately could he have ignored it. It was of brilliant yellow hue, with a long silk fringe. With it about her shoulders Hetty could have been picked up at a mile distant.

"Where d'you get that?"

"Get what?"

"That scarf you got on."

"Oh, that?" airily. "Oh, Tom the Toff give me that."

"Tom the Toff gave you that? Whaffor?"

"Oh, just a sort of present, like. Sort of acknowledgment of what he's made out of placing your stuff up there."

"Give it to me," he said gently.

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"What?"

"Take it off and give it to me."

"Whaffor?"

His eyes snapped. His voice rose. "Never mind what for. Give it to me."

"Of course I shan't. It was given to me."

He stretched a hand, and spoke gently. "Give me that scarf."

"Shan't."

In one movement his great form rose from the table and came to her. With a twitch of the hand he snatched it from her shoulders, crumpled it into a ball, aud thrust it into his pocket.

"Understand, girl, that you're my wife. I don't let my wife have presents from other men. See? Understand that?"

Hetty shrank back. The shock of his action had staggered her. "Wha—wha—wha——"-

Then tears came, and sobs, and she beat herself with her fists, unable to beat him. Then words came.

"You beast! You brute. Gimme back my scarf. I'm not your slave. I ain't going to be crushed like this. You stifle me. You treat me like dirt. Gimme my scarf."

"My wife won't take presents from other men. Understand?"

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"No, I don't. If I am your wife, I'm a human being. I got a right to live, ain't I? Oh, I know. . . . You think 'cos you played the Good Samaritan, you can do what you like with me. But you can't. You can't. I'll show you you can't."

"Now, Hetty, why talk like that? It isn't true. You know it isn't. Have I ever once thrown it up to you—about where I found you? Have I?"

She knew he had not, and the fact angered her more. She went on in a torrent of words:

"You crush me. You never speak a word to me. One wouldn't know you got a tongue. It's like living with the deaf and dumb. You—you—you're fat, y—you're old. You make me sick the way you treat me. 'Cos you're dull yesself, you want to make me as dull. But I won't be dull. There! I'll do what I like. I bin a good wife to you—you can't say I ain't—and I alwis looked after you proper. Why shouldn't I talk to Tom the Toff, if I want to? Where's the harm in that? If you won't talk to me, you can't stop me talking to someone else who's—who's bright, —and—and lively and—and got a bit of go in him."

"Now, Hetty. Now, girl. What's the

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matter with me, exactly? Where am I wrong?" He sought to soothe her with his voice, tolerantly, as one soothes a querulous child. It was the wrong way.

"Oh, shut up! You're *all* wrong. You—your ways and your manners and——" She knew what she wished to say, the fine distinctions of character she wished to draw; but her range of words was restricted. "Anyway, I'll please myself. A wife's supposed to be mistress of her own home, ain't she? I'm like a kitchen-maid here. I ain't hardly able to call me soul me own. But you may as well know that I've asked Tom the Toff to supper to-morrow night."

His manner changed from the soothing to the ruffled. His face began to close up. "Oh, you have, have you? And what have I got to say about it?"

"Don't know and don't care. Gimme my scarf."

"Tom the Toff won't come to supper to-morrow night."

"He will!" she screamed.

"He won't. He won't come into this shop again." He came closer to her. "You can assert your right to please yourself in some other way. Not this way. Understand? I

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don't coop you up or stifle you. I've only tried to protect you against yourself—against your own ignorance. If I hadn't, you'd soon a-been sliding back to where I found you. And, Hetty, don't try any tricks with me. See? Two or three people have found out that it don't pay to play tricks with me."

She glared back at him, and saw something in his face that made her suddenly afraid. "You talk to me as if I was a kid!" she protested sullenly. "Why can't you treat me properly?"

"Have I ever ill-treated you?"

"Not the way you mean. But you done it by taking all the life out o' me. By taking no notice of me—not more'n if I was that table. Gimme my scarf."

"I shall not give you that scarf. I tell you—if you want to assert your right to please yourself, do it some other way."

"I don't want no other way!" She ground the words from her teeth, and then was sorry. Her secret was out. She knew that, from the dull spark that glowed in his eye.

He regarded her intently; then said, quietly, as one dismissing a trifle: "I shall not give you that scarf."

She glowered, finished with words and

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without capacity for action. He returned to his chair, and relapsed into gloom. And for the rest of the evening they sat in frightful silence, while he followed with his eyes her smallest movement.

When she moved to clear the table, he rose, and went into his laboratory. She watched him go with hateful eyes. She saw him no more until midnight, when he came out, looking tired and bent. He moved about the kitchen. She continued to read the serial in *The Sunday Fireside.*

"It's getting late," he said, after a long silence. "You coming to bed?"

"Not yet. I want to finish this."

He hung about for some minutes; then went upstairs. The moment she heard the click of the bedroom door, she dropped *The Sunday Fireside*, and got up.

"The beast! Treats me like a kid, he does. I won't be treated like this. I wonder if he's got it on him, Or whether he's hidden it."

She lit a candle, and went into the laboratory. Here she pottered, nosing around, pulling things about, opening drawers, humming and fretting to herself. At last she found it. He had screwed it tight into a ball and had thrust it into an old tin box. She

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snatched it savagely away, and thrust it inside her corsage.

"Ha! Mr Clever Dick. I'm as smart as you."

Bitter fury, loose and without dignity, possessed her. Her mind was yapping at his, and snarling and grimacing like a whipped child. His suave demeanour under the quarrel had increased her hatred of him. She knew that she had dropped all grace and had become ludicrous in her rage, and she envied him his self-sufficiency. But she thrilled at the fact that she had retrieved the scarf, and this lent her some pride.

She went up to bed swaggering, and no word passed between them that night or next morning. He shut himself in his laboratory till noon. Then he came out for dinner, and over the meal broke the silence.

"Look here, Hetty, we can't go on like this. It's too silly. If you want Tom the Toff to supper, he can come. And anybody else you like to invite. I don't want you to think I crush you. If it's company and society you want, I know I'm not very gay. So if it'll make you happy to have him, have him. Peace and quietness is all I want."

She looked up, surprised at this sudden

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change, and found him regarding her gravely, scrutinising her, passing veiled eyes over her person. She was not ready for this surrender. She did not know how to accept it.

"Well, I do want company and all that," she said lamely.

"I know. I know I'm old and—— You please yourself."

"Oh, well——".

And so the quarrel was healed, and Tom the Toff came to supper. With that supper in the back room her desire for love and gaiety ended. Tom the Toff arrived on time, and found the table laid with cold meat, salad, beer, fruit, cheese. Bronsden was out, and he and Hetty snatched a few rapturous minutes; but before she could tell him of what had passed last night, Bronsden returned, bearing a tin of salmon and a bottle of whisky, as a friendly addition to the table. He seemed downcast, preoccupied; but he greeted Tom the Toff with his usual detached affability, and inquired what he had backed that day.

"Got the tin-opener, Hetty?" he growled.

She brought it, and he set to work on the tin. It was a tough one, and awkward to hold, tipping up when he pressed on its edge.

"Dammit! Just a minute, Tom, will yeh?

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This is as hard as steel. Can't get the point in. Hold it firm, will yeh, while I have another try."

Tom came to the table, and placed both hands on the tin, holding it firm. They stood close together, their heads meeting, and in silence Bronsden pressed on the cutter to drive its point through the tin. Then the silence was broken by a high ripping squeak. The cutter had slipped along the edge of the tin.

With a sharp "Ow!" Tom's hand flashed to his mouth.

"I say, old man!" Bronsden stood, holding the cutter, his attitude one of much concern. "I say, I'm awfully sorry. The cutter slipped. Damn the thing."

"Oh, it's all right," said Tom. "It's nothing." But when he took his hand from his mouth the blood ran around his wrist and down his fingers from an angry, jagged wound. It came pouring out to the tablecloth, and down that to the floor. It was no common wound.

Immediately Hetty swerved from the side-table, where she had been cutting bread.

"Oh, Tom!"

"Bind it up!" snapped Bronsden. "Quick!"

Hetty turned about the room with hands

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out for bandage. Then they flew to her breast, and out came the yellow scarf.

Bronsden had gone to his chair, and sat back, calmly. At this sudden action his big head nodded in two minute movements.

"Where d'you get that?" he said quietly. "I thought I took it away from you."

She made no answer, but twisted the scarf into a bandage.

"Did you steal that from my room?"

"Mind your own business."

"You're not to use it," he said, in even tones.

"I shall do as I please."

"Hetty, I tell you not to use it. Get the towel."

"Oh, shut up. Can't you see Tom's bleeding?"

"Very well."

She fussed over Tom, tender-wise, maternally, and wound the scarf tightly about his wrist. Then she forced him to a chair, and herself sat down. She sat down with a flirt of defiance too strongly marked to carry conviction of self-possession. This accident had given her opportunity for open challenge of this man's bondage. She sat upright, her attitude expressing: "Well, and what now?"

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Bronsden poured two glasses of whisky, and passed one to Tom. "I'm sorry, old man," he growled. "Awfully sorry. Those damn tin-openers. I always said they were dangerous. Keep your arm up. Hetty'll have to cut your meat for you now, and feed you."

Suddenly, Tom emitted a gasp—another gasp—then a scream. He pressed his free hand to the damaged wrist, and bent forward. His teeth were set close, his face twisted in pain.

"What is it?" Hetty cried.

"Oo, it's burning!" he gasped. "Burning like hell. 'Strewth!" Hetty came to him, in agitation, but as she reached him he leapt up, and dashed himself against the wall, and screamed. "Oo, God, I can't stand it!" He tore at the scarf, and unwound it from his wrist. "It's going all over me. Oh, Hetty, what you done to me? What you done to me? I'm going all funny. When you put that scarf on it started. Hetty!"

He sank back to the leather sofa, and Hetty rushed to him. She grabbed the whisky glass, and held some to him. She dithered. And, as she hung over him, uncertain what to do, unable to do one thing by thinking of others, she was suddenly seized by a feeling that

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something dreadful had entered the room. Involuntarily she turned her head, and glanced about her. Then she saw the thing that had entered the room. Bronsden sat immovable in his chair; but on his face was a wry, dark smile.

"What is it? she cried vaguely. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"What you smiling at?"

"Nothing. You know, I *told* you not to use that scarf."

Tom the Toff dropped like a log on the floor. She looked at him and at the yellow scarf and at the door leading to the dreadful laboratory, and back at her husband. She went and stood over him.

"You damn devil—wotter you done?"

Quivering, she struck him in the face. But he only smiled. And, though she struck him again and again, he still smiled.

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A Game of Poker

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AS Archie Plumpton, known to his circle as Plum-plum, stepped from the glare of the Blue Lantern into the melting radiance that it diffused, and from that into the inhospitable darkness of Poplar, three men with flat faces and long eyes crept from their several observation posts and followed him. One walked behind him, one level with him across the street, and one a few paces ahead. From a side street ambled a small hooded van drawn by a pony. This, at a discreet distance, joined the party. Plum-plum walked upright, whistling to himself, one hand in trousers pocket, the other swinging free. The others walked silently, with an air of abstraction and concern with personal affairs.

It was a warm night of summer, and streets and houses were stewing in a viscid heat. Plum-plum strolled airily down East India Dock Road, glad of the slight breeze that wandered from the river and oblivious of the peril that moved busily with him. Certainly he had asked for the trouble that was coming to him; for, if it is injudicious to be funny with a policeman, it is more than folly to meddle with the affairs of a Chinese brotherhood. Plum-plum had done no less than

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thrust hand and foot into the intimate affairs of the Azure Dragon Tong.

Word had come to him, some while ago, of an accumulation of carven vessels, gems and other objects that please the eye of the connoisseur, which lay at a certain house in Poplar High Street, next door to which he had sometimes played at puckapoo. He had seen the stuff through the window of the front room, and had almost cried with professional vexation at seeing such a haul placed within finger-reach, to be obtained without the smallest exercise of technical skill or finesse. It almost seemed beneath his position to take them.

But he did take them. He walked in one afternoon, at the hour of sleep, and took them away in a bag, and passed them to his nearest friend and adorer, Flash Florrie. He thought he had done only what he had done many times before—intervened between police and receiver in the matter of the bunce. He did not know that he had administered a dreadful affront to the most powerful Tong in Limehouse.

He was soon made to know. Cold anger held the Azure Dragon Tong at the discovery of this insolence. It quickly became known about the district that it was Plum-plum's

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work, and the boys, once their envy of his slimness had passed, talked of it with appreciation and delight. They could understand the delicious impudence of it, and admire accordingly; and Plum-plum became a public hero. But the Tong held a council to decide what proceedings should be taken against him. The president asked who accused Plum-plum, and two stepped forward and repeated the street-corner stories. To these two was assigned the duty of entering the house of Plum-plum and making an exact search for the treasure, at whatever cost to their persons or their liberties. This was done, and failure reported. Plum-plum came home one night and found his three rooms ransacked and torn apart; and he smiled. The Tong did not smile. Another meeting was held, and it was decided that Plum-plum himself must be secretly apprehended, and made to discover the whereabouts of their property, and, after suitable punishment, surrender it.

At least (they held among themselves) if we do not by the means we are about to employ recover our property—at least the Englishman will receive a lesson that it is unwise to interfere with our affairs. He shall be an example to others.

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So the three men and the hooded van, now dogging Plum-plum, were engaged in carrying out the decision of the council. And Plum-plum walked carelessly, still bearing about him something of that public glory with which his exploit had endued him. He was a dexterous and versatile lad, and had been desired by more than one gang, as partner. But he preferred to play a lone hand. He was not a crook by education or inclination. He would have liked to be a decent citizen, but found decent citizenship so dull. He had drifted into this game because he liked its soldier-of-fortune atmosphere, and because he was too wayward and impatient of hours, regulations and the petty bonds of legitimate business. He had found, too, on his preliminary flourish, that he had a marked aptitude for it; and every man likes to do the work that he can do really well and without conscious effort. He wore crime as a feather in his cap. He could appear in any society without crying at the top of his voice: "I'm a crook!" He could get away with a police-man's truncheon while being examined on suspicion. He could collect money for the missionaries with one hand and snaffle the donor's watch with the other. These were

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small tricks; he did not preen himself with them. It was the bigger things, calling for strategy, that afforded him delight. But he had never tackled the Chinese before, and he had yet to learn that his tricks with them were as paper swords before steel weapons.

To the end of East India Dock Road he went, and, at the Iron Bridge at Canning Town, he crossed suddenly, and passed into the void of Plaistow Marsh and its meagre lamps and its waist-high mist. He was going towards Beckton, where lodged Flash Florrie. As he entered the Marsh the three followers drew together at a corner and exchanged, tacitly, emotions of satisfaction. A lonely, lugubrious bell announced ten o'clock, and the notes floated miserably about the waste. But Plum-plum was not conscious of his surroundings. His eyes were fixed on the line of lights that made the horizon, and he strode with nonchalant step, his thoughts hovering amiably about the bright person of Flash Florrie and her sturdy, tree-like beauty.

But midway across the Marsh a sudden misstep of one of the Chinks came sharply to his ears. Momentarily suspicion entered his mind, and drove out the bees and butterflies

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that fluttered there. He stood still, and heard no other step, and knew that he was being followed. This was nothing new. He was often shadowed by plain-clothes men, and could always feel their attentions and comport himself circumspectly. But plain-clothes men do not walk about in slippers, and the step he had heard was a slippered step. As he stood there, a deeper sense of imminent personal danger grew within him; and, even as he speculated upon its nature, it arrived.

The struggle was brief. He fought hard for a few moments, and caught a glimpse of close, round faces and long eyebrows. Then something was pressed against his nose and he fell solidly among them. From the distance the pony-cart came to them; and into this, and its litter of greengrocer's baskets and potato sacks, he was bundled. The three companions followed him, and the cart moved forward.

Slowly they crossed the Marsh, while Plum-plum slept stupidly. On the farther side they chose byways. They rumbled through alleys of ebony darkness, whose very noises had the hard quality of ebony; and through streets parallel with the placid river, about which dodged innumerable nimble tugs.

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A Game of Poker

Not a word passed between the company; a profound, uneasy silence held the van.

And so they came to the little lost colony of Cyprus. Cyprus is a frigid, dusty region where the four winds and their branch winds meet, and where the sun comes seldom. Its houses are square brick boxes, at whose doors squat or lounge the docksmen About the stony streets the children gambol day and night; and from slatternly windows peer the women. In this corner, where the lips of the Thames dribble into little purposeless canals, silence cannot live. The Chinks had chosen their location well, for the business they had in hand. From year to year, hammer, crane, siren, hooter and bell perform their rough, unceasing music; iron against iron, steel against steel, with a chorus of nail and rivet; and through the night the shunted trucks make a melancholy fugue. The glum streets and forlorn shops make dreadful efforts to assert the presence of humanity, but Work prevails: one long-drawn hysteria of toil; one everlasting hosanna of noise. Men come and go in worried, clamant haste; and through the stupendous turmoil tramps and destroyers crawl with an air of scornful idleness.

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To a narrow street of warehouses in this ill-named Cyprus came the greengrocer's van. It stopped at a tall door which was immediately opened, revealing a steep flight of stone steps. Up these steps Plum-plum was carried; and thence to a room on the top landing. The room was an unused room, plainly arranged for the occasion. The boards were bare; the plaster of the walls had fallen in a mess of chips; and the windows, which looked into the chilly face of Cyprus, were heavily swathed with matting. Four lighted candles in bottles stood on a deal box. Round the fireplace stood a screen, and in the grate a clear fire was burning.

The three men placed Plum-plum on the floor, and one brought sturdy cord and bound his wrists and feet. Another brought a bucket of water, and the water was thrown about his head and throat. After some seconds he opened his eyes and looked about him. He raised his head, and tried to move, and found he could only roll. He rolled over and looked up, and saw four silent yellow men regarding him. He looked long at them, slowly coming back from his deep sleep. Then he understood, and spoke.

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"Well, Oswald, what's the game? What-um you fella want to do me?"

One, who seemed to be the leader of the party, and was addressed as Ah Kang, spoke without moving. He spoke as one delivering a functional address; in the cool, sleek tones of a chairman of a company meeting.

"I so sorry disturb you, misteh. I lika little talk with you 'bout t'ings you steal from my flen in Poplar. Huh? I ting we talk more flenly lika diss."

"Oh? I don't call *this* friendly." Plum-plum indicated the cord about his arms. "I could talk better if you untied me."

Ah Kang gave a little indrawing of the breath, as one appreciating a jocularity. "Ho yess? We talk 'bout t'ings you steal us."

"No savee, Oswald."

Ah Kang's eyes snapped, but he did not move. "Wantum jewels," he said in peremptory tone. "You no go 'way less we get jewels."

"No can. Ain't gottum jewels."

Ah Kang ignored the denial. "What you do withum jewels?"

"No can tell. Never seen 'em."

"You talk no-truth." Ah Kang stepped forward, and motioned to the others. They

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went to Plum-plum, and dragged him to a sitting posture, and pulled aside the screen.

"You see-um fire?" asked Ah Kang.

Plum-plum looked at it, and saw. "No can."

"You give back jewels. You tellum where they go. And it will be betteh—much betteh. If you no tell—prap fire 'e mek you tell. Huh?"

Plum-plum looked at the unblinking fire and the shaded faces about him, and felt suddenly sick. He thought of Flash Florrie, under whose bed rested the property. They would not release him until the treasure was in their possession, and if he told them, he must remain in their custody while they went to her home. By what method they would recover their property from her, and what penalty they would inflict upon her for her part in the affront, he did not like to think. He jerked his head at them.

"Look 'ere, if you think you can muck about like this with Englishmen, you're dam fella well mistaken—see? If you don't let me go pretty quick, there'll be heap trouble for you—and all the rest of your bunch. So I tell yeh! Stop this foolery plenty dam quick and untie me. See!"

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Ah Kang stood over him. "You tellum where jewels are."

"You go to hell!"

Ah Kang permitted himself to smile, and flicked his fingers at the others. The screen was drawn around the fire, and Plum-plum heard the clatter of metal instruments. Next moment he was flung down, and his coat, shirt and collar were ripped from his shoulders by a sharp knife. He lay quiescent. To struggle was futile. To shout for help he knew was vain. Where he was he did not know; but he knew enough of the Chinks to be sure that, having planned this business, they would have been careful to carry him where cries for help would pass unheeded.

Ah Kang spoke again in suave tones: "You tellum where jewels are?"

Plum-plum spat at him, then shut his teeth and looked away. From time to time the others moved about, nodding among themselves and exchanging smiles that were frightfully discordant with the business in hand. When Ah Kang reproved the smiles they went behind the screen, and Plum-plum heard them murmuring and grunting together. He heard the crackling of the fire, the rattle of coke as they replenished

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it; and he was conscious of the increased warmth which the screen could not effectually enclose.

There are some things before which no man can retain his faith; to which the body must surrender, however steadfast the spirit; and Plum-plum knew that sooner or later he must give way. No creature can endure physical pain beyond a certain point, and that point is determined not by courage but by sensibility. The "strong" man is a creature of blunted nerves and brute skin; yet even he has his breaking-point. Plum-plum knew that his breaking-point was very near. He seemed to see through the screen the glowing fire, white-hot, and the preparations of which it was the centre and he the object. He felt already the touch of hot iron; but, until he could endure no more, he would not speak. He did not suffer fear, but he did suffer a physical nausea that almost drained him of resistance.

He knew he would have to speak before he left that room—in one minute or two minutes or five minutes; yet the spirit that had carried him so aptly through so many delicate engagements closed his lips. He could not speak now, while he was in full control of his

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faculties. He felt that to do so would be to turn himself from man into a mere husk covered with everlasting self-loathing. Afterwards—after *that*—he would not be himself; and neither words nor actions would carry any sting of self-reproach.

"Dissa pokeh prap 'e mek you talk, huh?"

"You go to hell!"

From the streets, the strident but desirable streets, came distantly an organ's titillating music; its exuberant vulgarity overriding the stealthy crackling of the fire and the subdued movements of the hidden Chinks. Then Ah Kang uttered a curt word. Plum-plum was rolled over, and one pressed heavily on his neck. From behind the screen came another with a poker, its point glowing red. Plum-plum heard his slippered step, and, though he could not see, he could follow his steady approach; he could follow the movement of the extended arm; he could feel the glowing thing upon his back; he could see the horrid mark that it would leave. Ah Kang spoke again, and the man with the poker made a slow, drawing movement with it across the shoulders of Plum-plum.

A rending shriek came from the victim, and his whole body heaved in a spasm. Ah Kang

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made a movement, and the man with the poker stood aside.

"You tellum where jewels are now, or——"

Plum-plum made no sound.

"Huh? You no had-um plenty lesson? We try again."

Again the poker was drawn across his shoulders, slowly, lingeringly. But this time it brought no cry, no movement. The four men exchanged glances. Ah Kang moved to Plum-plum and rolled him over. He placed a hand on his breast, and looked up with an expressionless face, while his mind suffered wonder, perplexity, anger. They would not now find the jewels. Plum-plum was dead.

"He dead," said Ah Kang stupidly.

"Dead?" The others echoed him stupidly. They said it again among themselves, and all looked stupidly at the poker. The man who held it was twisting it and snapping it to pieces in his hands—a wooden stick, painted to resemble steel, and, at its point, painted a shrill scarlet.

So they stood, dumb, anxious, impotent, until one of them went again to Plum-plum to touch him and turn him over; and at the same moment he sprang far back from the body with a high scream and a

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trembling arm outstretched to Plum-plum's back.

"Hee-yah!"

Across the shoulders was a long brown mark—the seared trail of a red-hot poker. A tense and throbbing silence enveloped them—a silence of superstitious alarm; and in the close heat of that room they drew together, shivering.

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Katie the Kid

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KATIE THE KID was none of your rapturous, languishing, kiss-me girls. She was a Stunner. She was a Spanker. She was a jazz of a girl. She knew Shadwell, whose dun light was the first she saw, as few people know their native place. She knew it inside out. Many times had she taken it to pieces, that she might find out what made it work; and when she thus tampered with it, she seldom put it back correctly: there was usually a cog missing when she had finished with it. And for perhaps three or six months the proper motions of Shadwell would be retarded, while the cog picked oakum or made sacks under State supervision.

Yes, Katie the Kid was a nark. She was by no means your common nark, who is a poor, spiritless, servile fellow, cringing to his employers and going in bodily fear of his victims. She had the game well taped. She knew all the tricks of the times, and her ample sleeve held others, not yet of the times. In heart and sinew she was concrete. She took money from the gangs, and money from the police, and sold the plans of each to the other. She walked about St George Street and its cowering alleys with the tread of the conqueror. She strode. She moved with the sturdy grace

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of a steel ship, and her long, lusty limbs swayed forward as though making way through advancing seas. A nest of dense, crisp curls was built against her big, bright face, from which glowed defiant eyes of jet. She wore the best feathers and drank the best beer, and put a little bit by.

And then the big fool fell in love.

She fell in love with Freddie Frumkin, who was beginning to be known to vigilant sportsmen as a likely lad. She first saw him at a series of trial contests at a little boxing hall on the south of the river; and the lithe, quivering figure and the shining white skin of him, as he danced about the ring and received blow after blow with game nonchalance, set her too a-dancing and a-quivering, and filled her with an emotion which she hardly understood. It was new to her. In the eighth round he was knocked out; and though, hitherto, she had felt only contempt for the defeated in any kind of contest, this knock-out blow went straight to her heart. It first cracked—this concrete heart of hers—then swiftly melted. That night she took his image to her pillow, and lay awake in blessed brooding, and knew that love had come to her; and being, with all her tricks, fiercely modest in

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physical matters, she was suddenly abashed and humiliated.

Soon, diffidently, by means which every woman can employ, she sought his acquaintance, and won it. By the same means she made him know the state of her feelings; and he—well, he was a big, healthy boy, and when he looked upon this big, healthy girl and heard her words, the thing was done. Thereafter they went about together and agreed in everything. At all his contests Katie the Kid was present, as near the ring as she could get, to exhort him to victory and blight his opponent to ineptitude.

Glibly, as one long skilled in misrepresentation, she told him her story: how she was without parents, and worked in a cigarette factory near the Tower; how she lived alone, and spent her spare time in reading books borrowed from the Free Library, and never went about with boys, or strolled along her local Monkey's Parade, deeming such doings unworthy any self-respecting girl. Whereat Freddie glowed, and wondered that so sweet and gentle a girl should have seen anything in a rough young pug like himself, or should even suffer his company. He told her so, and said that she made him feel ashamed, and

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made him want to do better and bigger things. You know how it is with your first girl.

On this, Katie began to think. She began to think about herself, and her stock of self-esteem dropped sharply. If she inspired Freddie Frumkin with a desire for nobler ways of life, he in turn inspired her with yearnings. He was so clean and cool and simple that she discovered in herself a desire for clean and cool and simple things. She tried suddenly to cut the nark business and the secret commission business. To the loud derision of the Geranium Street police station she started the follow-the-gleam business. As no man is so ardent a teetotaller as your reclaimed dipsomaniac, so with Katie the Kid. She placed herself in the hands of the local Settlement Workers, and set about looking for steady and decent employment. It was even said that she was to attend the open-air mission meetings at the corner of Love Lane on Wednesday evenings; but the police prevented this last indecency. Such backsliding didn't suit them. They made a grand remonstrance.

"Dammit," said the sergeant, "what the hell's she want to turn pious for? With anybody else it'd a-bin all to the good for us.

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But *her*! We can't get on without her. We gotter git her back some'ow."

They did. Remonstrances failed, but economic pressure succeeded. Her savings were soon exhausted; and wherever the local Settlement Workers went among employers, with stories of her industry and moral rectitude, they found that the police had been before them. There was no job for Katie the Kid. So, quietly, she took up again her secret duties. Fortunately, Freddie's home was by Bermondsey Wall, and was severed from hers by the river. Gossip of the North side seldom reaches the South, and they had no common friends. Thus she was able to continue as a nark in Shadwell, while in Bermondsey she was a factory hand with yearnings towards self-culture.

Three evenings a week, when Freddie was not engaged, she would go to him, and they would walk comfortably together in the flare and glitter of Jamaica Road, where the girls parade with frolicsome frocks and gleeful eyes; or down the more modest byways where lights are few. It was just after her return to her old employment that Freddie spoke casually of his need of a punching-ball. He was not yet promising enough to attract gifts of

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equipment from backers, and he had only the gymnasium at the boxing booth in which to train, which was a damn nuisance. A punching-ball, to be fixed in the back-yard of his home, would be the very thing. But they were damn expensive.

Katie pondered the idea at night, and she guessed why he could not purchase the ball. There had been rides on the bus on Sundays, some visits to the local music hall, and a little gilt cross and chain for her sapling neck. From her there had been as yet no gift: her savings were gone, and for the moment crime was short, and there was little coming in from the police. She went home that night to devise means of raising money and to study sporting papers for some hint as to the price of punching-balls.

Next day something came her way. In the street, local gossip made much of the theft of many rolls of cloth from a dry-goods warehouse. Thieves and cloth were well away, and the police were "pursuing inquiries." The sergeant sought Katie, met her in the street, flicked an eye at her and disappeared down an alley. She followed him.

"Ah, Katie—just looking for you. Got a job for you. You heard about this cracking

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of Higginses' place. Well, there's four dozen rolls of cloth gone—good stuff, too. We're stuck on it, for the moment. We're watching all the boys, but haven't got anything so far. Now, it's up to you. Higginses are offering a reward, and if you can put us on to the stuff or the men, you'll do yourself a bit o' good. I dessay there might be a couple o' quid in it for you. See? So put yer back into it."

"Right-o! I'll have a look round."

That day her mind ran on rolls of cloth and punching-balls. A couple o' quid. That ought to be sufficient for the purpose. So she set to work, the punching-ball suspended before her, with gentle thoughts flitting about it, while, in the recesses of her mind, the rolls of cloth covered some crushed but still moving instincts. It was her first job since her reformation; and soon the old fever of the hunt crept into her veins. It ran with her blood, and set a pace; and the thrills that some find in strong drink and some in sex and some in works of art coursed about her shoulders.

Into the dark places of Shadwell she went; into places where discreet men would not go; into places of dirt and crawling beastliness.

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She went, too, into bright places; into well-kept taverns, where men were clean and flashily dressed. She hung about highways and alleys. She gathered a word here, a half-sentence there. She drank heavily with old acquaintance and casual company. It was Dick the Duke who set her on the way, with a shrug and a few words.

"Getting about a bit to-day, ain't you, Katie? What's the game, eh? You ain't going to tell me you're on Higginses' affair? Eh? Good lord! Fancy wasting yer time on that. You're worth better jobs than that. Blasted lot of amateurs. They've hid it, kid. *Hid* it!"

Katie made no clear reply to his perfunctory remarks, but stood him another drink and drank with him; and had another at his shout. Then she strolled idly away. There was but one place in Shadwell where amateurs hid things, and to that place she went. Near the old Basin, she stopped at an open-air coffee caravanserai, labelled "Jumbo's," which stood under an arch, backed against the doors of a disused storage vault. She took a cup of coffee here, and used her eyes. She made goo-goos at Jumbo, and chi-iked him.

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"Got a new suit, eh, Jumbo? My word, we're coming it, ain't we? Nice bit o' cloth, too."

A minute movement at the corner of his lips on the word "cloth," which would have been unperceived by others, or have conveyed nothing if it had been perceived, satisfied Katie. She was watching for it.

She ambled back to Geranium Street.

"I found that bunce of Higginses."

"Good girl. You shall have a nice sweety for that. Where is it?"

"Old Jumbo's got it. In that vault behind 'is place. 'Tanyrate 'e knows all about it."

"Oho. We'll send round and have a little chit-chat with Jumbo."

"Right-o! I'll wait. When do I get the dough?"

"Just as soon as we confirm it, ducky."

The officer called for a plain-clothes man, and assigned him to a friendly cup of coffee with Jumbo. Within half-an-hour he returned.

"I seen Jumbo, and warned him. Same old Jumbo. Injured innocence. First, he didn't know nothing about it. Then minding it for some customers of his. However, I put the wind up him prop'ly. They're calling for

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the stuff to-night—or one or two of 'em are—and I got a list of all the names out of him. It's a gang of six, apparently. I got the names 'ere. I warned Jumbo extra special, and put it across him. Said we'd have him for a stretch if he so much as winked an eye. So if we wait till to-night we can catch 'em removing it, and then round up the others. Jumbo won't move at all—he's too fond of his own skin."

"Right-o! Well, we may as well have an observation man on there, in case. Get Gordon on to it."

"Satisfied?" asked Katie.

"Yes, kid, that's all right. Here you are. Now go and get yesself a good rump-steak, with lashings of onions—you look a bit all-gone."

She took the money, but her first thought was not of food, but of the shop in Cable Street where athletic goods were sold. To it she went, and returned with her purchase. In her one-room home she cooked herself a hotch-potch meal, with tea; and when she had eaten she straightened herself, and set out for Bermondsey.

During the walk her mind gambolled in pleasant pastures. She saw Freddie's strong

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white arms at work upon the punching-ball, and glowed with pride as she anticipated his raptures at the long-desired gift. They met near Cherry Gardens Pier, where it is dark, and at once his arms were about her, and his lips upon hers, while she fingered lovingly the blue scarf about his neck. Then they walked slowly towards Jamaica Road. Under the lamplight he noticed the unwieldy parcel she was carrying.

"What you got there, kid?"

"Aha! Never you mind. You wait and see."

He led her to the "Man in the Moon," kept by a friend of his, who allowed him the use of the back room, where were seats and a fire. He was in high feather. "Now, Katie, order what you like. I bin a bit short o' the ready lately, but I just clicked fer a bit from old Briggles, who's trying to get me a match with Dotty Jewett. I reckin I could settle 'im in three rounds if it comes orf. So 'ave just what yeh like." She chose a port-and-lemonade, and he ordered a dry-ginger for himself. "Now then, let's 'ave a button-hook at yer parcel."

Proudly she tossed it to him. "Open it."

He opened it. "Well, I'm damned! Now, Katie! Now who'd a-thought of you doing

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that? Now, reely! But, I say—— Well, well, well. And you bin an' bought this fer me? No, but—— Well, there! You didn't ought to 'ave, though. Reely, Katie, you didn't. They cost a lot o' money, I know. More'n you can prop'ly afford. You didn't—— Oh, you dear kid! If you ain't a real pal!" He tossed the ball to the ceiling, and caught it, and grinned broadly, and tossed it back again, then became serious.

"No, but, Katie—you shouldn't a-done it. You've 'ad to work dam 'ard fer this, I know. A lot of overtime and saving-up. Fancy you thinking all this of me, though. Just what I wanted, too. And from you! Katie—you think too much of me. I ain't 'alf good enough fer you. I don't deserve that a girl like you should think so much of me. I ain't worth you—your—love. I—— 'Ere—what's the matter? Katie!"

For suddenly Katie spluttered over her port, and burst into a howl of sobs, and big tears ran for the first time down those firm, dry cheeks.

"Why, Katie kid, what's up? There now—you bin overworking—that's what it is. You ain't bin feeding properly. You bin starving yesself to get this ball. 'Ere, I say—oh, Katie!"

"Oh, I can't keep it up no longer, Freddie.

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'Tain't what you think. It's—it's me. It's—it's your—l-love. It's the way you think of me. I ain't worth it. I'm a beast. I'm a liar."

"'Ere, don't be silly, kid." He spoke roughly, awkwardly. "Pull yesself together!"

"I can't. I can't keep it up no longer. It's no good. Not when you talk to me like you bin doing. You're so clean and strong and —and—right. And I'm—— I told you I worked in a cigarette factory, and kep' meself respectable. And it's all lies. I never bin in a factory. And I ain't respectable. Go away. Don't come near me. Lemme go 'ome. I didn't buy that ball by saving up or overtime at the factory. I'm—I'm a c-copper's nark. That's what I am. A dirty, sneaking copper's nark. That's what bought your punch-ball. Narking. It ain't fit for you to use. It's dirty. Chuck it away. And chuck me with it, fer making you love me and l-leading you on w-with l-lies."

She put her head to the table, and Freddie turned about the little room, shamed, apparently, at the sight of woman's distress; but his eyes were bright. He dug his hands deep into his pockets.

"Er—Katie?"

"'M."

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"You ain't telling me anything. I knew."

"You *knew*? Knew what?"

"What you was. I knew it before."

"*Knew?* When? Who told yeh?"

"I known it all along. From the first."

"You known it all along? And bin out wi' me, and kep' up wi' me? You? You let me go about wi' yeh, and said all those things to me, as though you meant 'em?"

"I did mean 'em. I do mean 'em."

"You—so clean and straight, going about wi' me, knowing what I was?"

"'M. I knew you was a nark. But I didn't want you to know I knew in case I should lose yeh. So I let you think I believed about the cigarette factory. 'Cos—Katie—I see something fine about you. About the way you loved me. I see you wanted to be something better, 'cos of me—like I felt about you. I knew you tried to cut it out—over in Shadwell. I 'eard all about it. And I knew then that you was all right. And I loved you more for it. Any feller would. And I says to meself—she's straight, although she's bin a nark, and she loves me, and as soon as I can get a bit together she shall come out of it, and we'll make a fresh start. That 's what I said. And I ain't going to throw you away. It's fer

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you to do the throwing. Listen, Katie. I loved you, knowing what you was. You loved me, thinking I was different from what I was. What d'you think my job is?"

"Boxing, ain't it?"

He made a noise of disgust. "Boxing? No! Boxing's only a side-line with me. I want to be a boxer, but there's no money in it yet. Katie—I'm just a common, dirty, side-door burglar—that's what I am. It was me and a pal what did that business of cloth from Higginses what's all over the newspapers to-night, and—— Hi! George! Quick—brandy—quick! Katie's all gone!"

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The Heart of a Child

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