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MURDER IN WAX

A FEARFUL face, living, yet it has the look of the dead! Only the jaw moves and its movements summon murder! Though it cost life after life the grim countenance must be faced. A piece of paper upon which the destiny of an empire depends must be kept from its baleful eyes. . . . John Richmond, King's messenger, is cut down. His daughter is abducted. A famous banker is done to death. Another man of rank joins the company of corpses. And then a young man, little regarded, with only the love of the abducted woman to lead him on, enters the case. Will the hand of death reach him? . . . . . Here is a gripping mystery story by an author who is a master of thrills. An English sensation, it will thrill American readers with its power and ingenuity.

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MURDER IN WAX

Clyde; Leonard Strauss

=

by **PETER BARON**

Author of THE OPIUM MURDERS

New York, THE MACAULAY COMPANY

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DEDICATED TO

NORMAN D. CLIFF

The author wishes to make it clear that all characters in this novel are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any living person.

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E. R. Punshon
Bencolin
No. 6 — 1928

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THE STORY

I. JOHN RICHMOND, KING'S MESSENGER

JOHN RICHMOND was not a coward, but neither was he a fool. The danger in which he stood at the moment was a very real one. He knew it and was taking no risks. Handling his gray Chrysler deftly, he passed through Deptford and headed along the New Cross Road.

The chase was not over yet. As they had followed him across Europe to the coast and Dover, so they would follow him to London and to his grave to get what they wanted. He smiled grimly and looked down at the ebony walking stick on the seat beside him.

To the winner the spoils.

A brief glance back as he passed New Cross Station showed him many cars in his wake, and John Richmond had more than a suspicion that one of those cars held the Squid and a satellite.

At various points in the journey he had thought to throw them off. A King's Messenger knows many tricks—tricks acquired by long years of practice. He had practiced them all, but the Squid had countered equally cleverly and would doubtless show his face again sooner or later.

Richmond had crossed Europe from Venice in practically a straight line and, despite his stratagems, not once had he thrown the Squid off his track.

In Trento his room at the Grande had been searched one night while he was out. The management had known nothing about it. They would not.

The same thing had happened at Zurich, and at Nancy he had found himself in an awkward corner at a café. Three Englishmen had taken a great deal of interest in him and a word in the proprietor's ear from one of them had emptied the café in no time. The intervention of a party of American tourists had successfully relieved an ugly situation.

John smiled as he reflected on that meeting. The American

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has his critics, but he also has his uses. He has his fists and in a scrap of that kind is a troublesome customer.

Between Nancy and Verdun, almost on the outskirts of the latter, an attempt to ditch his car had failed and the Rolls which tried it had vanished in time to escape the ensuing inquiry of the gendarmes.

At Busigny it had been an ambush—wire across the road and broken glass.

Involuntarily he looked at the cracked windscreen. That had been a bullet, and his engine had got another.

At Lens it had been a shot in the dark as he entered his hotel and at St. Omer the man who had fired that shot had chartered a motor launch to cross in the wake of the private boat that was to take John to England.

He had an hour's start for which he was duly thankful.

From Dover his journey had been uneventful, but John read the signs and they were unfavorable.

Through Queens Street, High Street, Peckham Road and Church Road to Camberwell New Road the gray Chrysler hummed its way and John, unable to rid himself of his suspicion, found time to glance back occasionally. Twilight was closing in and the city was no safer than the country.

He gave his attention to the wheel. A short time now and he would be seeing Leslie. Leslie—*his* daughter and the most wonderful——

The last glance back had made him think hard. Surely he had seen that taxi at New Cross? Or was it merely fancy? After all, taxis were fairly numerous in London. He shrugged and, glancing casually at the Oval in passing, slackened pace slightly as he moved into the Harleyford Road.

Leslie—he had not seen her for a year and had been unable to write to her.

Letters served only to attract attention and to betray their source. But that was all over now. In half an hour at least he would be holding her in his arms. His Leslie, that wondrous little flower . . . if her mother had lived . . . he sighed. Applying his brakes, he slowed obediently in response to the policeman's outstretched hand at the entrance to Vauxhall Bridge.

Curse the traffic jams! He had little enough time to spare. He glanced back and his mouth tightened ominously. That confounded taxi was hanging on.

The policeman stood aside and the Chrysler went on its way again.

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With a thoughtful frown John crossed the bridge and ran his car into the courtyard of Victoria Station.

Leaping out, he gathered up his stick and entered the station. Walking swiftly through the crowds, he took cover at a side exit and watched.

A taxi came to a standstill by the Chrysler and a man descended, a tall big-boned man.

John would know that figure in a thousand.

"Slim." So, he had been right. They *had* showed up again.

There was nothing that he could do. To inform the police would be worse than useless. No charge could be brought against a man for driving about in a taxi. He had no proof. He could do nothing.

How long he waited he did not know. It was some minutes before Slim returned and reëntered the taxi.

As it moved away, John Richmond came out of his place of concealment and made for his car.

Reseating himself, he slipped in the clutch and his car slid away through the big gates and out into the traffic, down into Buckingham Palace Road. The taxi was nowhere in sight. Thank God, he would soon be home. B 29 would be there to take charge of the paper and then—God help B 29!

The respite that the removal of the paper would afford John would be only the start of the troubles that would beset B 29.

But then B 29 of the British Secret Service was no novice in the gentle art of espionage and the counter moves.

He took the corner into Belgrave Street easily.

Well, it would be good to see Marky again. There was only one dependable man in the whole world, reflected John, and that was Sir Marcus Loseley, baronet, or, stripped of his garnishings—Marky.

The Chrysler turned into Eaton Place and came to a standstill half-way down the road.

Descending from his car, John hastily crossed the pavement, still clasping his precious stick, and mounting the short flight of steps, knocked on the door. He smiled as he heard slow footsteps cross the hall. In two seconds Fenton, his honest old face alight with pleasure, would be practically enfolding him in his arms.

He was.

As the door opened the King's Messenger stiffened suddenly and staggered.

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The beatific calm died out of Fenton's eyes as he received a limp figure in his arms.

A figure detached itself from the shadows on the opposite side of the road and, turning, vanished swiftly.

With a gasp of horror, Fenton half pulled, half carried the wounded John into the hall and slammed the door.

For a moment he stood there, holding and mumbling agonizedly: "Mister John—oh! mister John—you're hurt, sir—Mister John—what shall I do?"

"Marky here?" mumbled Richmond thickly, making a feeble effort to stand.

"Yes, sir."

"Call him," directed the King's Messenger weakly, his stick falling from his nerveless hand.

And for the first and last time in his life, Fenton, that model of correct behavior, raised his voice and bawled: "Sir Marcus! Sir Marcus!"

A door at the head of the stately central staircase swung open and a tall spare man appeared.

"What the devil——?" he enquired blankly and, then, abruptly catching sight of John, horror displaced the habitual serenity of his ascetic face.

Bounding down the stairs he reached his friend's side.

"What's happened, John?" he beseeched anxiously.

"In—the—back—Marky—old fellow," stammered John, smiling wanly, "nothing much," and he fainted.

"Get him to my room," snapped Sir Marcus. "Take his legs, I'll take his head. And see that the house knows nothing about it."

Together they carried the unconscious man upstairs and into the room the baronet had just left.

Tenderly they laid him on a divan and Sir Marcus with an anxious expression turned to the butler.

"Get warm water and bandages," he directed crisply, "and see that Miss Leslie is not told of this. Bring a blanket as well."

He turned swiftly and dropped on his knees by his friend's side. Propping him up, he gently removed his coat and waistcoat.

When the butler returned, John was lying face down, naked from the waist up, and beneath the left shoulder blade, marring the whiteness of the flesh, was an ominous red stain.

Together Sir Marcus and Fenton ministered to the injured

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man, the former with set face and tight lips, the latter with eyes glazed with terror and hands that trembled.

Twenty minutes' quick sure work resulted in John's opening his eyes.

A faint smile lit up his face as he saw the result of his friend's efforts.

"Go and get that stick I dropped in the hall," he directed slowly, and Fenton turned hastily.

As the butler left the room John looked at his friend.

"Sent—for a doctor?" he asked, wincing with pain.

"Not yet," answered Sir Marcus, regarding him with concern.

"Well don't—yet," urged the other weakly.

He did not speak again until Fenton had returned with the ebony stick and then, signing to the butler to leave them, he lay back and closed his eyes.

Sir Marcus carefully raised him and wrapped the blanket round his naked shoulders.

"That was a silencer that got me," murmured John at length. "I was congratulating myself on getting so far, when I was hit—they tried it at Lens, but," he made a wry face as a stabbing pain wracked him, "they only got the porch of the hotel," he concluded, smiling painfully.

"Who are they?" asked Sir Marcus, curiously.

"The brains of the concern is the Squid," answered the other and winced again.

"Don't talk, old man," begged the other contritely. "I should have known that you weren't fit."

John waved his hand deprecatingly.

"I'm all right," he answered, speaking through clenched teeth.

"What's the time, Marky?"

The baronet consulted a gold wrist-watch.

"Nine o'clock, old fellow."

John started suddenly.

Nine? B 29 had been due at eight. Had anything happened to prevent his coming? He stared round anxiously.

"Have you had any visitors to-day?" he asked anxiously. "Has anyone asked for me?"

Sir Marcus looked at his friend's flushed face and eager eyes curiously and shook his head.

"No," he answered. "Were you expecting someone, John?"

The King's Messenger looked away.

"Er—no—" he said slowly, and relapsed into silence. B 29 had failed him. The accursed thing was to remain in his possession

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longer, and would until B 29 chose to reveal himself. And every minute of the delay was dangerous. His enemies were on the scent.

Was that it? Had they intercepted the Secret Service man and killed him?

Were they even now plotting their opportunity to gain possession of the paper?

He stared nervously at his stick on the floor.

Sir Marcus watched him intently, and, catching that curious glance, John strove to pull himself together.

"I'm all right, Marky," he said in a thick voice.

"Perhaps you had better not talk, old man," suggested the baronet. "Try and get some sleep."

John shook his head impatiently and forced his voice to its normal composure.

"Had that paste tiara made yet?" he asked.

Sir Marcus started. John was talking irrelevantly. Was he approaching delirium?

"Yes," he answered, "it's being made now, but don't you think you might try and get some rest?"

"I'm all right, I tell you," snapped his friend. "Sorry, Marky, I feel jumpy. I'm glad that tiara is being made. I've always told you it was unsafe to keep it here."

He stared down at his stick for a moment.

Then, "Marky will you ring that doctor?" he asked. "I think perhaps it would be as well to have this wound attended to. It's aching infernally. Only make sure you get someone you know. Those devils would try any trick to get at me."

Sir Marcus nodded and reached out a hand to touch the bell.

"No," interposed his friend hastily, "get him yourself, don't call Fenton. I—I feel I don't know whom to trust, and Marky—if anything should happen——"

Sir Marcus leant over and patted his arm.

"But what can happen, old fellow?" he said soothingly.

"You never know," muttered the King's Messenger. "Promise me that Leslie should think that I died—naturally."

"I promise," said Sir Marcus, in a tone that showed plainly he thought only to humor his friend.

"All right," said John, and sank back. "You can get that sawbones now."

Sir Marcus rose and left the room.

As soon as he was satisfied that the baronet was out of earshot, John Richmond rose unsteadily to his feet and, picking up

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the ebony stick, walked a little uncertainly across the room and came to a stand before the huge oak fireplace. For some moments he ran his fingers over the carven woodwork of the overmantel, and at last, finding the particular knob he sought, twisted it slowly to the right.

A series of twists, first clockwise and then anti-clockwise, and a square section of the paneling moved outward.

In the square recess revealed were piled a number of bank-notes, a pass book, bonds, and papers, a necklace and some rings, the property of the late Lady Loseley, and lastly, the famous Loseley tiara.

He looked at the heirloom intently and nodded to himself.

It was an exquisite piece of workmanship. Mounted in gold, the pyramid-shaped front set with three huge diamonds at each angle, reënforced by smaller diamonds.

Taking hold of his stick, he hastily unscrewed the ferrule and, inserting his little finger, drew out a thin roll of paper. It was of the finest, thinnest paper, almost transparent, but tough as parchment. Unfolding it hastily, he glanced briefly at it and refolded it.

Five minutes later the safe was locked and John, seated at a table, was writing slowly in an awkward trembling hand.

How long he had been writing he did not know, but abruptly he was aware of a slight draught on his thinly-clad back.

He was also aware of another presence in the room.

For a moment he sat perfectly still and the instincts of a lifetime came automatically to his aid. Slowly and silently he crumpled in his hand the sheet on which he had been writing.

Then he faced about suddenly in his chair.

The window behind him was open and, standing with his back to it, was a man clad from head to foot in black—black shoes, suit, shirt, collar, tie and gloves—but the thing that arrested John's attention was the man's head.

A huge head, hairless and immovable, the only living things in it were the cold hard eyes. For a moment they faced each other and in that moment John realized that the head was of wax.

Instinctively he knew that the intruder was the Squid.

"Good evening, Mr. Richmond," said a dull flat voice and John, watching the pistol in the other's hand, made no reply, but covertly shifted the hand farthest from the Squid, a little nearer his hip pocket.

"I think," pursued the other softly, "you have something in which I am particularly interested at the moment. Have the

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goodness to give it—ah!" John's hand flashed into view with a Browning automatic, and two shots rang out simultaneously.

A strangled grunt—and silence.

With swift strides the Squid crossed to John and, stooping picked up the ebony walking-stick.

In the chair, a red stain spreading slowly on the blanket wrapped around him, Richmond lolled back, curiously inert, eyes glazed and staring, a meaningless smile on his lips.

With one glance at the dying man, the Squid turned to the window, and tensed suddenly at a sudden rush of footsteps outside the door. Almost immediately it was flung violently open.

On the threshold stood Sir Marcus, horror in his eyes. Behind was the scared face of Fenton.

"My God, you swine!" gasped the baronet as he caught sight of John, still and silent in the chair, and without warning he leapt straight at the intruder.

A short laugh broke from the Squid and his gun spoke for the second time. Sir Marcus seemed to be wrenched back in the middle of a stride. For a moment he hung suspended in the air and then reeled backwards into the arms of the panic-stricken Fenton.

With a harsh laugh the Squid leapt for the window and vanished over the sill. He dropped softly on to the grass of the short garden dividing house from road, and sped swiftly to the gate, and the waiting taxi.

Wrenching open the door he flung himself inside and was carried away at the instant.

It had all taken place so swiftly that the few spectators had not realized what was happening until the taxi vanished from sight.

Police whistles shrilled frantically, and a constable appeared suddenly, running full tilt towards the house.

At the same moment the door opened and a wild-eyed Fenton appeared in the porch, shouting at the top of his voice.

Dashing down the short path, the butler arrived on the pavement just as a small gray touring car drew up by the curb.

The driver, a young man whose face the butler could not see, leant forward and spoke quickly.

"Did he get him?"

"Get him? Get who? I don't know——" Fenton's terror-stricken face worked convulsively.

"Answer me, damn you!" snarled the other. "What happened

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to John Richmond? Quick, before that cursed policeman gets here!"

"My master and Mister Richmond are both wounded or dead. I don't know which," stammered the butler, wringing his hands. "My God, this is terrible. . . . A man with a huge head—dressed in black—fired the shots——"

But he was addressing thin air. Far up the road a gray roadster sped in pursuit of the taxi and the bewildered butler, turning to stare after it, came face to face with a policeman.

With a gasp of relief Fenton clutched him by the arm.

"This way," he shouted, oblivious of the staring knot of idlers. "Quick—it will be too late—my poor master——"

He dashed back by the way he had come, closely followed by the policeman. Two more blue-coated men appeared, one following his colleague and Fenton, the other holding in check the fast gathering crowd that strove to enter the garden.

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II. THE SQUID AND B 29

THE Squid's taxi vanished into Belgrave Street, taking the corner on two wheels. A policeman on point duty whipped out a note-book and took the number. A little way along Belgrave Street it swung suddenly up a turning on the right and tore into Grosvenor Place and, keeping the same pace, raced for Hyde Park Corner.

The luck was with the Squid. As the taxi reached the open square, the traffic stream from Grosvenor Square received the policeman's signal and turned into Piccadilly, occasioning more than one curious stare as it raced on its way to Piccadilly Circus.

Here the luck was with the Squid again. Swinging into line with a steady stream, the taxi rounded the Circus and shot along Coventry Street, crossed Charing Cross Road and whirled down Long Acre, slowing steadily and turning off sharp into Endell Street.

Half-way down the street it slowed almost to a standstill and the Squid leapt out, crossed the pavement and bounded up the steps of a ramshackle tenement house. As he reached the door, the taxi, gathering speed again, sped off toward New Oxford Street. Half-way down the street it slipped into a side turning, and under cover of the darkness the chauffeur got out and hastily changed a number plate for which half the police force of London were looking.

A brief second's fumbling with a key, and the Squid was inside the house. Closing the door, he crossed a dimly-lighted hall and bounded up the stairs three at a time. Crossing a second landing, he continued on to a third and up the last flight of stairs.

The last landing was a small place, unlighted save by the moon striving to peer through a dirt-grained skylight.

Only two doors led off this landing and the Squid made for the one on the left.

Producing a second key, he went into the dark room beyond, closing and locking the door softly behind him.

For a moment he stood there in the darkness, breathing heavily. Then he stepped forward and groped his way to the rickety table that he knew to be situated in the center of the room.

His slow advance brought him into contact with a chair and with a savage curse he kicked it out of his path.

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Reaching the table, he laid the ebony stick upon it and felt in his pockets for matches.

Lighting one, he crossed to the gas jet by the side of the mantelpiece and in a few seconds a pale sickly light illuminated the room.

A dingy place, uncarpeted, with walls from which what paper was left, a faded yellow atrocity, was peeling, revealing damp patches where the rain's invasion had found vulnerable places in the brickwork.

The room boasted only two chairs, a table and a big plain deal cupboard. The ceiling was damp and discolored and the one window, cracked and grimy, looked out on to a rusty iron fire-escape, from the platform of which an unprepossessing vista was afforded of housetops, chimneys in a bad state of repair, and untidy back yards.

Crossing to this window, the Squid opened it to an accompaniment of protesting creaks and, climbing out on to the fire-escape, surveyed the four flights of iron stairs thoughtfully.

Apparently satisfied, he climbed back into the room and walked to the cupboard. Opening it with another key from his bunch, he took down a brown suit from a hanger and laid it on the table. That done, and still moving with the same effortless ease and swiftness, he removed from his hip pocket an automatic pistol and from his jacket pocket a small torch, the only impedimenta he carried.

Laying these on the table, he swiftly divested himself of his clothes, folding them neatly and quickly.

With a brief glance at the watch on his wrist, he changed into the brown suit.

Gathering up his discarded suit, muffler and overcoat, he replaced them in the cupboard and locked it. The hideous mask he left on his head.

His quick change completed, he walked to the table and, picking up the ebony stick, eyed it thoughtfully, turning it this way and that and running his fingers along its smooth surface in search of anything that might aid in discovering what he knew it concealed.

A slight twist of the knob revealed the fact that it unscrewed, and in a few moments it lay in his hand. A brief examination showed him that the top of the stick was solid and that the knob itself, of solid silver, contained nothing.

Tossing it aside, he turned his attention to the ferrule, and in a moment had it unscrewed.

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A sigh of satisfaction broke from him as he observed the hollowed-out center of the stick.

Feeling in his pocket, he produced a long slender pencil and, inserting it in the hollow, twisted it slowly and then withdrew it while pressing the tip hard against the side.

No crackle of crisp paper answered him and with a sharp curse he tried again. The result was the same. Stepping beneath the light of the gas jet, he held up the stick and strove to look down the hollow, even playing his torch on it to facilitate matters.

There was nothing, and with an uncontrollable oath he hurled the stick from him.

It fell against the door and, rolling along the floor, wedged itself in the corner. For a few seconds the eyes in the huge mask glittered with suppressed passion and then, as though struck by another thought, the Squid crossed the room and picked up the stick.

Holding each end he bent it across his knee and strove to break it.

The stick was strong and the beads of perspiration were standing on his forehead as he strained, before, with a sudden snap that almost unbalanced him, it broke in two. .

Feverishly he examined the pieces. The snap had come at the termination of the hollow and one half at least was solid wood.

Turning, he held up the second half to look the length of the groove, and in that second he observed something else.

Standing with his back to the window, was a tall slim young man in gray, lithe, elegant, wearing a gray felt hat and a silk mask that hid his face, except for the eyes.

"What did you expect to find?" asked the stranger coolly, and with a short gasp the Squid allowed the stick to fall from his fingers.

The eyes in his huge waxen mask glittered evilly, but he said nothing. Five paces divided him from the table on which his pistol lay. On the other side of the table, three feet away from it, the man in gray allowed his eyes to fall on the weapon and an amused smile played across his lips.

It was within easy reach and appeared to afford him a kind of grim pleasure.

For some seconds they surveyed each other, warily noting details, and then the Squid spoke.

"May I ask," he purred softly, "the object of this unwelcome intrusion and also why you prefer the window to the door?"

A short laugh broke from the man in gray.

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"You know why I am here," he answered coldly and, stepping round the table, seated himself on the corner nearest the Squid, a move that the other watched with interest.

"So you got Richmond, you swine?" he continued, in the same level tone.

The Squid leant back against the door.

"You speak in riddles, young man. Riddles bore me—and that is fatal!"

"Don't lie," interposed the other, and his voice took on a mocking note. "Apparently he was a little sharper in the matter of the letter." His eyes rested ironically on the broken stick.

"In half an hour," he continued slowly, "you will be paying for that, but much can happen in half an hour—much."

"Such as?" suggested the Squid, softly.

The man in gray rose.

"I am about to give you the father and mother of a whaling!" he said coolly.

Leisurely unbuttoning his coat, he peeled it off, still watching the Squid warily.

As he tossed his coat aside, something fell from one of the pockets and lay between them on the floor.

A silver cigarette case.

The man in gray stooped swiftly to retrieve it and in that second the Squid launched himself forward.

The other straightened swiftly to meet him. stepped back and planted a blow on his assailant's shoulder.

With a savage snarl the Squid reeled and walked into a smashing blow that hurled him back whence he had come.

As he crashed against the wall, the lithe stranger followed like a panther and smote hard.

The Squid ducked smartly and the gray-gloved fist hit the wall. With a short laugh the Squid sent a right hook that flung his adversary to his knees in the corner, and gathering himself, he dived straight at the fallen man.

A swift writhe and the man avoided the dive, closing with his assailant as the other landed.

For a moment there was a swift scurry of blows and then they hurtled apart and came to their feet, panting and wary, the gray man with his back to the door and the Squid with his back to the window.

He in gray dropped to an ugly crouch and poised himself tensely. Almost within touching distance, the Squid, breathing

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heavily, watched the maneuver with satirical eyes and closed suddenly.

A vicious jabbing right licked out to meet him, and with a grunt he staggered backward, clutching at the table for support.

As he rested there for a second, the hand behind him encountered the automatic.

A malignant glare lit his eyes and warned the other.

The man in gray's right hand flashed down to his pocket as the Squid brought his left hand forward.

A report rang out from the Squid's gun, but no sound accompanied the jet of flame from the gray man's pistol.

The Squid clasped his wrist suddenly and stared across the smoke haze at his opponent.

"Playing for safety?" he jeered thickly, and stared down at the gun held in his bleeding hand.

"I took the liberty of substituting my own gun with one cartridge in it for your full one. You had your chance and," he laughed shortly and reached up to the wall above him, "that's what you did. Kids with pea-shooters at six yards range would be more dangerous!"

The Squid stared somberly at the mark made by his bullet and then down at the round burn in the pocket of the man in gray, still exuding a faint wisp of smoke.

"To prove which," he rejoined coolly, "you removed my chance, mister coward."

He transferred his empty pistol to his right hand and stared thoughtfully at the flesh wound in the left wrist.

"Some day, friend," he murmured, "I shall repay this with interest."

"Not unless there are firearms in hell. In ten minutes you'll be on your way to Bow Street, Squid."

"No," corrected the other. "No, really, I think not."

He weighed the revolver in his hand and abruptly his eyes fixed themselves on the cigarette case that had fallen and given him his chance to open the attack.

It lay on the floor, the light playing on the shining silver, but it had another interest for the Squid.

In the center the plain surface was relieved by a raised circle of silver; this had slipped aside, revealing a white enamel surface, bearing the legend "B 29" in tiny blue enamel characters.

"B 29," said the Squid, reflectively. "I shall not forget, my friend!"

"You will find three weeks' wait before the drop a powerful

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stimulant to memory," nodded the other, stepping forward and producing his automatic.

They faced each other silently.

The gaze of neither shifted and it seemed as if they would stand interminably glaring at each other, when a sudden rush of footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs outside. Almost immediately a heavy hand thudded on the door.

"Open this door!" demanded a harsh voice.

B 29's glance became mocking.

"You see, my friend," he murmured, and stepped back two more paces and felt behind him for the door.

The key was not in the lock.

"Give me that key," he demanded, returning, as a second thunderous knocking was followed by another brusque command.

The Squid reached his wounded hand into his pocket and tendered the key.

Stepping back, the Secret Service man walked to the door and turned slightly to locate the lock.

His gaze shifted only for a second, but it was enough.

The empty gun left the Squid's hand and he ducked swiftly.

The man in gray fired as the heavy pistol struck him on the head.

A laugh answered and the Squid leapt back, bounded to the window and hurled himself through it.

B 29, staggering, fell against the door, one hand raised to his face, while with the other he fumbled at the handle behind.

As he turned the key the door flew open and two policemen blundered forward into the room.

"The window," gasped the man in gray faintly and reeling went down in a heap, an ugly red patch welling on his mask above the eye.

The foremost of the policemen leapt to the window, shouting directions as he moved.

"Downstairs, Bickers!—the fire escape! Hurry!"

The second man pushed his way through the little knot of idlers that had materialized from nowhere and dashed down the crazy stairs.

Out on the platform of the fire-escape the first policeman peered down into the night.

And, staring into the blackness, he was not quite sure if his nerves were playing him tricks, or if he really heard a faintly mocking voice say: "Not this time, my friend!"

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THE SEQUEL

III. JERRY THE LAG

THE Strand looked at its best in the early morning sun. On either side of the road pleasure seekers and workers jostled each other cheerfully: animated conversation and an occasional laugh drifted across the hum of the traffic: newsboys yelled: motors hooted.

Inspector Elveden felt in keeping with the spirit of the morning and had dressed with scrupulous care.

Newly-shaven, he strode through the crowd, clad in a well-fitting suit of dark brown. The down-turned brim of his brown hat shaded his dark handsome face and the light foulard handkerchief flaunting defiantly from his breast pocket matched the perfectly knotted tie against the fawn background of his shirt. Dark-brown suede shoes—lending an almost effeminate touch—completed the picture. More than one person turned to stare after the tall figure of the Scotland Yard man as he strode along apparently oblivious of his surroundings.

Pausing opposite "Romano's," he bought a paper from a raucous-voiced urchin who had just descended—somewhat hurriedly, owing to the advent of the conductor—from a passing omnibus.

With a groan of mock despair he noticed that the *Mail's* "splash" story concerned itself, as usual, with the exploits of the Squid and, continuing his stroll, he read the account of the latest challenge to the law, a bank robbery. It was reported under the heading:

THE SQUID WITHDRAWS HIS BALANCE

The Inspector's lips twisted ironically as he read the appended solution, offered by a well-known writer of mystery stories, printed in thicker type and containing more than a suggestion that the police would be well-advised to adopt the learned author's theory and act accordingly. With ill-concealed amusement he reflected that the various suggestions had already been acted on, but the result had not been quite so pleasing as the

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author had anticipated. Certain obvious flaws in the reasoning stood out painfully and the most obvious procedures had not in all cases occurred to the writer.

Still studying the newspaper account, the Inspector paused suddenly in his stride and glanced back at a slouching figure that had just passed him, going in the opposite direction.

Apparently unconscious of the interest he had aroused, the slouching figure proceeded slowly on his way to Charing Cross.

Several passers-by threw him curious glances as he passed. His boots, unpolished and cracked at the toes, were partially hidden by the long faded green trousers that swept the ground: his coat and waistcoat, battered remnants of other suits, were stained and threadbare, and round his throat he wore a torn and dirty silk choker as a substitute for collar and tie. A battered and dusty bowler hat, with more than one dent to mark the passage of time, was set at a defiant angle on his head.

With a thoughtful expression in his dark somber eyes, the Inspector turned on his heel and, folding up the newspaper, tucked it beneath his arm and strode in pursuit.

Overtaking him outside the Adelphi Theatre, the Inspector touched his quarry lightly on the arm.

The man removed his hands from his pockets defensively and swung round suddenly, glaring suspiciously.

A not over-prepossessing face. Furtive eyes regarded the Inspector from beneath bushy eyebrows, and a dirty hand crept up to caress the long sandy-colored mustache that trailed down on either side of his thin-lipped mouth.

His cheeks, hollow and unwashed, were of a sallow, unhealthy color and his chin was hidden by a day's beard.

"Morning, Jerry," said Elveden pleasantly, falling into step with the other.

Jerry the Lag looked at his companion thoughtfully and continued his walk.

Like many others, he mistrusted that quite unhurried and rather sweet voice. It was apt to mislead, and the hint of friendliness in it had led more than one unfortunate into betraying things best kept unsaid.

"Gawd," he muttered in his peculiar husky voice, "it's you, is it? Seems as I don't 'ave no luck these days."

The sentiment did not seem to arouse any ill-will in the Inspector.

"Oh! come, Jerry," he said, smiling pleasantly, "that's not the way to treat an old friend."

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"Friend?" jeered the Lag. "That's news. Well, wot flea's makin' you itch now?"

"I thought I recognized you, so I turned back to have a chat."

Jerry grunted and shot a sidelong glance at his companion.

"Yus, an' I fort I rekernized you, so I walked on to avoid a chat," he said, morosely. "I knows them chats o' yourn, mister Elv'den. Wot is it this time? I'm runnin' strite, ain't I? You ain't got nuthin' on me, 'ave yer?"

He glared at the Inspector with virtuous indignation.

"Nothing," agreed Elveden smoothly. "You're leading a blameless life and, as far as we know, you haven't started anything —yet."

"Oppertoonity'd be a fine thing," grunted Jerry. "Wot wiv reportin' onct a munf and 'avin' one o' you blokes 'angin' on me 'eels to 'ahnd me dahn. Blimey, I don't git the chanct, even if I 'ad the in-clin-ation."

Elveden laughed cheerfully and linked arms with the Lag, a move that Jerry regarded suspiciously.

"Suppose we come and have a quiet drink together, Jerry?" he suggested, guiding him across the road.

"Supposin' we does," agreed Jerry. " 'Oo's payin'?"

"Drinks on me," answered the Inspector, still retaining his gentle hold on the Lag's arm, "I'm going to give you a few words of advice, Jerry."

"Wot's it goin' ter cost me?" demanded the Lag skeptically.

The Inspector shook his head in kind reproof.

"It's not costing you anything, but it might possibly save you something. I want to see you stick to the straight and narrow, Jerry, and I'm making you a free gift of some golden words of wisdom."

The Lag burst into a harsh guffaw and led the way into the "Coal-hole."

"Ain't it 'evenly ter be loved like that," he sneered over his shoulder. "Sister Sunshine, the guardian o' wanderin' boys. Suits yer dahn ter the grahnd, Mister Elv'den."

He lounged against the bar and his bleary eyes shifted uneasily as he watched his companion.

"Love me so much that yer 'ad ter keep me near yer some time ago, didn't yer?" he mocked huskily. "Remember yer larst free gift?"—he spat contemptuously—"Two years in stir!"

Elveden did not speak until the barman had placed their glasses before them. Then, unfolding his newspaper, he laid it on the counter and indicated the main story.

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"Ever heard of the Squid, Jerry?"

Jerry set down his glass suddenly and his eyes narrowed warily.

"Tryin' ter be funny?" he suggested, "'Ave I 'eard on the Squid? Go on, ast me if I ever done time! 'Ave I 'eard on the —cripes!"

Elveden ignored the scathing note in the hoarse voice. "Well, I'm advising you to steer clear of him," he said distinctly.

Jerry wiped his mustache and laughed derisively.

"Say," he leered, "do you ever read the pipers, Mister Elv'den? Cos if yer do, yer oughter know as 'ow that bloke ain't one to make no one 'is bosom pal—not even members o' the Force."

Elveden knew Jerry and his type well. He waited patiently till the other had finished.

Then: "I may be wrong and I may not," he said slowly, "but I've more than a suspicion that there are some very old friends collected among those who work with friend Squid. The members of that gang are specialists at their game. They're a nice little bunch of international crooks who've found their own country too hot to hold them and also, unless I'm mistaken, there are a few closer friends—old lags and such-like."

He eyed the Lag closely and Jerry, toying with the stem of his glass, affected not to notice that searching scrutiny, although the last words had caused him to shoot a curious glance in the Inspector's direction.

"Take, for instance, our friend 'Slim' of America," pursued Elveden. "They want him pretty badly in the States with reference to a little motor deal that ended in the death of—a client. I think I have recognized 'Slim's' wily hand in a few motor deals lately."

Jerry's expression remained devoid of interest.

"*You* know," he said pointedly, "And what *you* say goes. If *you* say so—it just is."

The Inspector sipped at his drink and continued.

"And the Count, Jerry. Our old friend left the States two months ago when they made it too hot for confidence men. I see that someone has been playing along those lines for some time. I wonder if it is our little French Count?"

"I wonder," agreed Jerry non-committally.

He finished his drink and, wiping his mouth with Nature's napkin, replaced his glass.

"Let's 'ave the rest," he invited. "There's more to it or I'm a Dutchman."

"There is more to it," agreed Elveden with a slight, barely

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perceptible, tightening of the lips. "I'm advising you to spill all you know about the Squid, Jerry."

"You're doin' a helluva lot o' advisin', ain't yer?" sneered Jerry caustically. "You blokes don't give drinks buckshee, do yer? Nao! This 'ere," touching his glass, "is a sprat ter catch a Squid, hey?"

"Not exactly," Elveden answered, "but you'll be doing yourself a bit of good by telling us what you know. The Chief's got a tidy pull, you know."

"Don't I know it?" jeered Jerry. "Last time he done any pullin' I was at the other end o' the rope an' got 'ooked in fer two years. 'Im, wiv that slimy grin on the thing that starts where 'is collar leaves orf!"

He scowled and, producing a cigarette, lit it from a small gas jet on the counter.

"Talkin' o' good, mister Elv'den," he said hoarsely, tapping the other on the chest, "you can bet yer perishin' sawl that the bit o' good squealin' will do me ain't nuthin' to the bit o' good it'll do the Chief, an' all."

"Possibly," agreed the Inspector calmly, "but what about it?"

"Nuthin' to it," retorted Jerry promptly. "I wouldn't peach if I could an' I cawn't."

"Have another drink?" suggested Elveden tactfully.

"Cum inter me parler," jeered Jerry. "O'rl right, Mister Elv'den. Bribery an' corrupshun, but mind—I ain't sayin' a wurd abaht nuthin'. Not a perishin' murmur!"

The Inspector signaled to the barman to replenish their glasses. He had hopes that sufficient drink would mellow the Lag.

"You're tough, Jerry," said Elveden sadly, leaving his own glass untouched.

"Mebbe," grinned Jerry, revealing a row of even but stained teeth, "but I ain't orf me onion. I knows what 'appened to them as *did* try to squeal on the Squid. They died—sudding. A sight *too* sudding!"

"You'd have police protection," Elveden reminded him.

"Yus," meditated Jerry.—It appeared to amuse him. "Yus, I'd have perlice pertection. That's abaht as good as a deff certif'cate, that is. While I keeps me 'ead shut, I'm safe. Onct I blabs—curtains! Perlice pertection never saved me pal, Billy 'Orne, no more'n it could save me. You fellers up at the 'Yard' may be little tin Gawds—at the Yard, but if you thinks you can block a move the Squid makes, yer right orf the map!"

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The Inspector shrugged, and drained his glass.

"Is that your real reason for keeping what you know to yourself?"

Jerry, in the act of emptying his own glass, paused suddenly and looked speculatively at his host. For a moment he seemed to be debating the advisability of answering the question, then he looked covertly round the bar and, bending forward, lowered his voice.

"Look 'ere, Mister Elv'den, I'll tell you suthin'. Gimme yer wurd as it won't git no forrader?"

Elveden, carefully repressing everything but a mild and studied indifference, nodded.

"Well, I'll trust yer," said Jerry. "Born trustin' I was. Won prizes fer it in me time. About the Squid," he looked cautiously at the barman to see if he were listening. "That feller put a good pal o' mine out fer the count——"

"Billy Horne?" hazarded the Inspector casually.

"Never you mind 'oo," retorted Jerry, " 'e did, and that's all there is to it, but I'm biding me time, I am, Mister Elv'den, and some fine day you're goin' ter get me penal or the rope. An' not fer nuthin', neither!"

Elveden was careful not to show any of the curiosity that the Lag's strange admission had aroused in him.

"You've got a grudge against him?" he said in a manner that suggested only polite interest.

" 'Ow does 'e do it?" marveled Jerry. "Yus, I got a grudge an' when I can fix 'im—six foot o' ground, an' crepe!"

"You know where he hangs out?" suggested Elveden keenly, and could have bitten his tongue out.

The Lag closed up like an oyster.

"Do I?" he asked blandly. "Don't you put yer shirt on that. Nobody knows where 'e 'angs up 'is 'at. You ain't gettin' no cheap squeal, Mister Elv'den. A King's ransom wouldn't do it, much less a couple o' pints."

He looked slyly at his glass.

Then: "Aw, chinge the subject afore I gits talkative."

Elveden was interested, a fact that Jerry noted with no little amusement. What was still more amusing was that a little of Elveden's customary caution had deserted him.

"You've had plenty of opportunities of dealing with the Squid in the past," suggested Elveden casually.

"Beer," said Jerry, "is not what it was pre-war." He surveyed his empty glass thoughtfully.

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"And you'll have plenty more," pursued the Inspector, in no way deterred by the other's obvious stratagem.

"Beer?"

"No, opportunities," corrected Elveden.

"Oppertoonities o' gettin' beer?" persisted Jerry.

The Inspector's lips closed in a straight line. He looked at his companion coldly.

"When did you see the Squid last, Jerry?" he said suddenly, and forced the issue.

"An' Government ale never was no cop," said Jerry disparagingly. He was not taking up *that* challenge.

"Drop that," said Elveden, "it won't get you anywhere."

"Except clink," answered Jerry, replacing his glass. "I'm surprised at yer. If yer must break somethin', make it yer conversation. I ain't pertikerly interested."

Elveden bit his lip.

"It will be the worse for you if we get you with the Squid."

Now the buttons were off the foils and his tone was threatening.

"If," murmured Jerry, coolly. "Tell the next bloke what tries to foller me, to make sure as I don't spot 'im first. Yer last man warn't much good. I took 'im fer a nice walk from Kensin'ton 'Igh Street ter Waterloo an' then I lorst 'im. Fair gives me a pain watchin' 'im play 'unt the slipper rahnd a corfee stall 'an me not five yards away from 'im!"

He smiled reminiscently.

Elveden eyed him speculatively and then, with a brief nod, turned on his heel.

"Yer wouldn't like ter try a little more bribery an' corrupshun, would yer?" Jerry flung after his retreating figure.

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IV. INTRODUCTIONS

LYING on the divan in the window alcove of her boudoir, Leslie Richmond raised her shapely head and looked inquiringly at her maid as the telephone bell jangled.

"See who that is, will you, Sadie," she murmured, removing the cigarette from her small pretty mouth, and speaking in a pleasant girlish voice.

The maid picked up the telephone and listened for a few moments.

"Mr. Leicester, Miss Leslie."

"Thanks."

Leslie tossed aside the *Tatler* she had been reading. Crossing the room, she took up the instrument.

"Hallo, Freddie," she said. "Fallen out of your little cot early, haven't you?"

A high-pitched laugh came across the wire and an affected falsetto voice answered cheerfully.

"Flawless Pearl, I have it in mind that one can savor a fairly chewable *consommé* at this hour of the day, what?"

Leslie smiled and drew at her cigarette before answering.

"Am I to take that as an invitation to lunch?" she asked, her gray-green eyes dancing with merriment. "What time, my dear old fathead?"

"Half-past twelve seems to be the general conception of a passable time to lap up extracts from the menu," came the cheerful reply.

Leslie wrinkled her forehead and glanced down at the small wrist watch lying on the table.

"Half-past?" she asked in a pained tone. "Have a heart, Freddie. It's just twelve now and I haven't dressed. Make it one o'clock."

"Slothful woman," reproved the other, "I said half-past twelve."

"Very well," said Leslie decisively, "That's settled. One o'clock. Where?"

A plaintive sigh came across the wire.

"Peerless Creature, the Rivoli. Erb will be there. He got back yesterday. As a matter of fact, the Molar Stropping contest was his idea. You'll be a duchess yet."

"Sweet thought," she laughed back. "I'll meet you in the lobby

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at one and, remember, Freddie—no proposals until after lunch. I couldn't stand it on an empty stomach."

"Heartless Jade, it shall be as you wish," came the drawling answer. "You wouldn't like to alter your time estimate? The old tum-tum is beseeching frantically——"

"I should not," answered Leslie firmly. "One at the Rivoli. Bye."

She replaced the receiver and turned to her maid.

"Oh, Sadie," she said, "get me the beige hat, shoes and dress. I'm lunching out."

The maid vanished, to return in a few moments with the required outfit.

For half-an-hour she busied herself with her mistress's toilet and then stood back to survey the result.

And she was amply rewarded for her efforts. A prettier picture would have been harder to imagine than the slender, fairy-like slip of a girl who stood there attending to little details of the set of her dress with deft white fingers.

Leslie paused at the door to give final instructions.

"Tell Sir Marcus that I am lunching with Mr Leicester and the Duke of Framlingham if he asks, please, Sadie."

"Yes, Miss Leslie."

The maid stooped to collect the silk peignoir and small slippers her mistress had discarded.

. . . . . .

Seated in a comfortable chair in the tasteful red and gold lounge of the Rivoli, His Grace of Framlingham, known to his intimates as Erb, lighted a fresh cigar and surveyed benignly the languid sprawled-out figure of his nephew.

Freddie Leicester, elegantly draped in another chair and apparently unconscious of the ducal regard, idly watched the people talking and loitering in the lobby of the restaurant.

The contrast between uncle and nephew was marked.

His Grace, of medium height, placid of face, clad in correct well-fitting morning clothes; his hair fast graying, his figure not yet portly but giving promise of being so in the near future.

Freddie, tall, slim-waisted, elegant and languid; sleek fair hair and a rather vapid expression, his well-knit figure in a suit of pearl gray that seemed to have been molded to it.

After gazing at the charming profile of a well-known actress for some time and finding that occupation totally unprofitable, Freddie turned his attention to his uncle.

"Pretty scaly foregathering, what?" he suggested in his drawling falsetto.

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"By which," sighed the Duke, in his kind, well-modulated voice, "I take it that your advances have been unsuccessful? Leave the stage alone, Freddie. Actresses have good legs but bad morals."

He puffed reflectively at his cigar and studied an undraped Diana on the opposite wall with passive appreciation.

"Now there," he said contentedly, "we have beauty of body and morals, Freddie."

But Freddie was asleep. Having contributed to the conversation to the utmost of his capability—one remark every ten minutes—he had retired into his former comatose state with a satisfied smile. After all, Leslie had said "One."

It was now twenty past and no woman was ever less than forty-five minutes late—it was a point of honor—so he had approximately half-an-hour in which to rest.

Reasoning thus, he drifted into dreamless slumber. And erred.

Two minutes after sleep claimed him, Leslie walked down the lobby towards them to an accompaniment of polite, disdainful, and envious nods, the tribute that every well-dressed, pretty woman commands.

She came to a stand before the Duke, who had risen to his feet.

"Hallo, Erb," she said, extending her hand cordially and, bending forward, she tapped Freddie gently on the head with her glove.

His Grace offered his arm gallantly.

"Ignore the sleeping beauty, my dear," he remarked. "Lunch awaits us," and with a last glance at Freddie: "I hope his soup is cold when he wakes up."

He led the way into the restaurant and Freddie, with a tired smile, joined them, babbling brightly about the weather to a decidedly inattentive young lady.

The Duke had reserved a corner window seat from which they could see both the teeming crowds in Regent Street and the host of diners in the restaurant.

Leslie noticed a cluster of scarlet roses in the center of the table and recognized her host's hand.

A bowing waiter sidled up to the table, rapidly jotted down a few details as he passed to each of them and then vanished as swiftly as he had come.

Forestalling Freddie's tentative efforts to start a conversation and monopolize her for himself, Leslie turned to her host.

"It's ages since I've seen you, you old ruffian Erb," she said, impudently. "You're as bad as Marky. Where have you been hiding yourself?"

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"I only arrived in England yesterday, my dear, and naturally my first thought was of lunching with you."

She returned his smile engagingly.

"Naturally," she mimicked, "but the lunching part of it ruins the compliment. I believe you're an irreclaimable gourmet, Erb."

"Absolute glutton," said Freddie solemnly, and possessed himself of the finger she was wagging reprovingly at his uncle.

"I believe in enjoying the good things of life, certainly," rejoined His Grace, "among which is your society. The greater includes the lesser—hence my lunch, even though it entails enduring the somnolent society of the resuscitated cod who is striving to dislocate your finger."

"Here, I say," protested the 'resuscitated cod,' sleepily, as Leslie disengaged her finger, "go easy with the fulsome flattery, Erb."

"The younger generation," said the Duke weightily, "has an unpleasing lack of respect which I find most trying."

He fixed his eyes reprovingly on his nephew and, having quelled that gentleman, turned to Leslie.

"By the way, how is Marky?"

"Still as restless as ever," sighed Leslie. "People at Marky's time of life don't change much, Erb."

"I sincerely hope that that blot on the landscape will change before it is too late," said His Grace, ferociously eyeing his nephew. "Don't gape, Freddie."

"No—er—rather not," agreed Freddie cheerfully.

"You were saying, my dear?" continued the Duke, turning to Leslie.

"Simply that dear old Marky wants some interest in life other than his moldy old books. You see more of him than I do, you know. He's hardly been at the house at all during the past two years. I haven't seen him for two days."

"Optician's over the way," murmured Freddie cheerfully.

"Don't babble, Freddie," his uncle reproved gently.

"Certainly," beamed Freddie, "made quite a name for myself at not babbling."

"Marky's out at all hours of the day," Leslie continued, ignoring Freddie's efforts to join in the conversation. "He accepts the various invitations and when whatever it is arrives, he's vanished. He's awfully trying."

"Clever fellow," applauded Freddie, making another determined effort. "Meantersay—something fearfully—er—what you might call—booky about bookshops, what? You know, awfully thrilling——"

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"Don't babble *or* goggle, Freddie," said His Grace coldly.

"No—er—no, after mature consideration—perhaps not," agreed Freddie and relapsed into silence again.

The meal passed in comparative silence, the Duke eyeing the crowded restaurant with interest, Leslie studying Regent Street and Freddie contributing rather less than his usual quota to the conversation.

The Duke did not speak again until the waiter had set coffee before them and retired.

"I chose the Rivoli, my dear," he said, "because I am, as you know, a keen psychologist. I find it interesting to watch the masses feeding."

"To listen to the masses feeding," corrected Freddie, brightly. "There is a man behind you, Leslie——"

"I can hear him, thank you," she shuddered. "A solo on spaghetti. . . ."

"You have no ear for music," sighed the Duke. "Nevertheless this restaurant is very diverting. Quite ten per cent. of the people present to-day are criminals. The remaining ninety per cent. are——"

"Peers of the realm," Freddie interrupted.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said 'congenital idiots,'" answered Freddie.

His Grace frowned coldly on his nephew and decided to ignore him.

"I was about to say," he continued in a dignified tone, "that the remaining ninety per cent. are very commonplace people and consequently interesting."

"How would you classify Freddie or myself?" asked Leslie, accepting a cigarette from Freddie's proffered case.

"You, in a class of your own," responded the Duke gallantly. "Freddie is an accident that I prefer to forget. I consider that my brother showed lamentable taste in turning loose that blight upon the earth. He is flippant, foolish, fat-headed, feckless, fatuous, flatulent——"

"Hitherto unknown virtues in an already beautiful character are revealed," grinned Freddie and, as an afterthought, "Try the G's, Erb."

"Otherwise," continued the Duke, "he is a charming boy and, talking of criminals, I see the Squid has made another coup."

"A bank this time, wasn't it?" asked Leslie interestedly, cupping her chin in her hands.

"Diamond cut diamond," said Freddie drowsily. "Sooner or

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later these batteners on mankind—bankers and other rogues—strangle one another."

"The Squid," corrected the Duke, "is a better educated crook than your average bank manager. He is suspected of being what is, I believe, termed by the initiate, a gentleman crook——"

"The terms are synonymous," drawled Freddie.

"Probably American," continued His Grace with a withering glance at his irrepressible nephew, "and certainly a rogue of the most pronounced type, working amongst the leisured classes——"

"Bears out the jolly old Leicester thesis," interrupted Freddie. "All the leisured classes are rogues."

"A budding Socialist," mocked Leslie.

"A blithering idiot," said the Duke, glowering unutterable things at his nephew. "The Squid at least has brains, and that rules Freddie out!"

"It's a wonder that Marky's tiara hasn't come to his notice before now," Leslie commented thoughtfully, extinguishing her cigarette. "It's worth a fortune."

"So are Erb's diamonds," said Freddie. "The result of more battening on human frailty. It's time that they were roped in by the marine johnny."

"My collection," said His Grace serenely, "is too valuable to be lightly lost. I flatter myself that they are immune from the avidious hands of the Squid. You may rest assured that I have taken adequate measures to protect what has taken me a lifetime to collect——"

"And De Beers a lifetime to trace," grinned Freddie, fidgeting, to his uncle's annoyance, with a wineglass.

"Throw it on the floor," suggested the Duke acidly, "and put my nerves at rest."

Freddie smiled, then stared questioningly at Leslie.

"Erb," said that lady swiftly before he could speak, "I must away. Freddie is going to propose. I can see it in his eye. Freddie, my gloves."

With a woebegone countenance, Freddie reached for the gloves and in so doing knocked the glass on the floor.

"Bent," he murmured sorrowfully, eyeing the ruin on the carpet sadly.

A waiter streaked across the room and dropped crooningly over the broken glass. "Put it," said Freddie magnificently, "on His Grace's bill. He will not make the same mistake again."

The Duke eyed his nephew despairingly and, rising, prepared to escort Leslie to her car.

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V. MAN AND MAID

It was a little after four o'clock when Leslie allowed Sadie to dress her in a becoming afternoon frock of jade green.

"Mr. Craven is with Sir Marcus in the library, Miss Leslie," said Sadie, deftly restoring her mistress's curly head to some semblance of order.

A slightly increased color and a sudden warm glow in her eyes were the only signs Leslie gave, but they were sufficient. Sadie smiled wistfully. The "Please hurry, Sadie," although very self-possessed, did not deceive the maid.

In the library the man whose name had brought the betraying flush to Leslie's cheek lounged easily in a chair opposite his friend.

Jimmy Craven was just twenty-seven, tall, dark, with impudent eyes and a humorous mouth. Bagshaw, of the "Evening Mail," regarded him as one of his most alert and promising young men. Crowland, the superior star reporter, saw only Jimmy's lack of sartorial taste and his inconsequent negligence.

At the moment, as usual, Jimmy's tie had succeeded in writhing its way round to the back of his neck; his trousers were even more baggy at the knees than usual; and his socks hung in deplorable wrinkles.

"No time for fashion plates," was his invariable good-natured defense against the barbed witticisms of his friend Freddie Leicester, and yet, despite his untidy appearance, Jimmy was good to look upon, clean-limbed, healthy, perpetually cheerful and, to quote the immaculate Freddie, "a lovable cuss."

In striking contrast was his host, the spare, upright and soldierly Sir Marcus Loseley.

Quietly dressed in black, a color that made his pale, almost ascetic face even paler, he sat regarding his guest. His hair was streaked plentifully with gray, but his eyes still retained the keenness of youth, although in his expression was the calm repose of maturity.

Sir Marcus pushed the cigarette box toward Jimmy.

The reporter accepted and, lighting a match, held it for the older man.

"Well, Jimmy, is this an unprofessional visit or are you looking for the eternal copy?" asked Sir Marcus in his deep pleasant voice.

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"No, sir," answered the reporter, "I dropped in to see Leslie. As a matter of fact, I had no idea that you were back."

"I got back yesterday, and I expected to see you. Leslie's conversation, even in the first rush of welcome, was very much tinged with the subject of one James Craven."

He eyed the young reporter quizzically and Jimmy flushed.

"You see, sir," he began confusedly, running his fingers through his black hair.

"Exactly," smiled his host, "I do see. I gathered that you two youngsters had been seeing a fair amount of each other; consequently, when you arrived, I had an idea that I was not the principal attraction."

Still smiling, he drew thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"What's the most interesting thing in Fleet Street to-day?" he continued. "I get left behind in Faversham and the news passes me by."

"The Squid, sir," answered Jimmy quickly, glad of the temporary respite from a dangerous topic. "Bagshaw can't get the Squid off his mind and I've got the story to write up. We absolutely talk, think, eat and drink Squid nowadays."

"Not, I should imagine, an over-palatable beverage," murmured Sir Marcus, "Whisky at your elbow."

"It's live copy from a news standpoint," answered Jimmy, availing himself of his host's offer, "but it's dashed hard to get a line on the Squid, sir. No one can definitely swear to having seen him, with the possible exception of Jerry the Lag. Elveden —up at the Yard you know—rather favors the idea that Jerry is one of the Squid's little bunch, and personally I think Jerry's worth watching, although he's so devilish close. Elveden tackled him a few days ago and the blighter refused point blank to say anything about the Squid whatever."

"Wise man," commented the other. "The Squid is not above murder."

"He's already got one murder to his credit," agreed Jimmy. "So far he's got away with it. It remains to be seen whether the invisible tentacles of the Squid will be able to avoid the long arm of the law much longer."

"Not forgetting the inky feelers of the press, eh?" chaffed Sir Marcus.

Jimmy grinned and ran his fingers through his hair again.

"Would it surprise you to know that I once saw the Squid?" asked his host slowly.

The reporter stared blankly at him for fully a minute. If Sir

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Marcus were striving for effect, he had succeeded. A thunderbolt would not have startled Jimmy more.

"By Jove, sir, is that gospel?" he gasped and hurriedly produced a notebook. "I—well, I'd no idea that anyone beside Jerry had ever clapped eyes on him—and, as a matter of fact, I'm not altogether sure that Jerry has. He's a lying old devil at the best."

The Baronet's face clouded over slightly and he regarded the reporter steadily for some moments without speaking.

"I don't know why I am telling you this," he confessed at length. "For four years I've kept it to myself—even Leslie does not suspect—but, well, you can hear what there is to tell. It was hushed up at the time and never got into the papers—for obvious reasons, and it's confidential, Jimmy, sorry—but I can't give you a news haul. You see, Leslie always thought her father died naturally——"

"Well, he did, didn't he?" asked Jimmy interestedly, pocketing his notebook. "I remember reading the notice—heart failure, wasn't it?"

"No! You spoke just now of the Squid being responsible for a murder—he was responsible for two!"

Sir Marcus' face hardened and Jimmy sat forward suddenly.

"Good lord, you don't mean——?"

"One of those two," continued Sir Marcus in the same colorless tone and speaking as though he had not heard the reporter's incredulous remark, "was a man for whom I had a very great affection."

He drew thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"I met the Squid two minutes after he had committed the crime."

"And?"

"He all but committed a second. I carry the scar to this day. The man he killed was John Richmond, my very good friend and Leslie's father."

"But the heart failure—I don't understand——"

"Sop for the public," replied Sir Marcus vacantly, and, looking the reporter straight between the eyes, he sat forward.

"Some day, Jimmy, I shall get the Squid for that crime."

"You mean—kill him?" asked Jimmy, watching the other intently.

Sir Marcus shook his head and a harsh unnatural laugh escaped him.

"Nothing so crude," he answered in an ominously flat voice. "I shall put him behind the bars! What is death after all, but

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transition, in most cases instantaneous? No, my way is far more effective. It strikes at his vanity and further—it will teach him fear. The fear of death. Three long weeks with nothing else to do but sit and think. Think of it—the nerve-wracking trial—the long wait—and at the end of it—the rope!"

Jimmy, puffing hard at his unlighted cigarette, stared wonderingly at the baronet. Sir Marcus, the kindly, the placid—expressing those sentiments!

"But, good Lord, sir—I'd no idea—you mean you're going to——?" he sat back, wide-eyed, unbelieving.

"I don't know how," said Sir Marcus, "but I know that if there is a God it *will* be done, Jimmy, even if it costs me my life."

There was a queer, almost fanatical, light in his eyes and his voice trembled curiously.

"Can you describe the Squid, sir?" asked Jimmy nervously, striving to evade any further reference to Sir Marcus' last statement.

The Baronet rubbed a hand over his eyes and pulled himself together.

"Your enthusiasm smells of the Press," he said warningly. "Remember that this is not for the Evening Mail. I tell you this in confidence, and I expect you to respect my wishes."

The reporter nodded his agreement, a little reluctantly.

"The Squid, as I remember him," said Sir Marcus, "is of stocky build and dressed entirely in black. He is, I should say, of medium height and over his head wears the most ghastly mask I have ever seen. A huge waxen head hinged at the jaw—an exact model of a human head—a bald head. The mask is of a most repellant pallor and, save for the movement of his eyes—cold and intent—and jaw, it remains fixed, a horrible composed fixity. The head joins his shoulders by a neck that is partially hidden by collar and tie. A foul, ghoul-like thing, Jimmy, and one that I am going to tear from his face one day—God's curse on him."

He clenched his hand and brought it down violently on the table.

"The thin lips of the mask open mechanically when he speaks, but for the rest his face might be of carven stone. He speaks in a soft suave voice—obviously camouflaged and underlying its sweetness is the sibilant hiss of the snake." He paused to light another cigarette, and Jimmy noticed that, despite this emotion, his hand was firm.

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"I don't think I'll say any more now. Leslie will be down any minute and—well, I want to spare her the truth. It's all over now and there is no reason why an old wound should be re-opened —festering this time. If she guessed at the real cause of John's death—I—well, you see she loves him rather more than any of us thought possible. It was weeks, months, I was going to say years, before she reconciled herself to the fact that she would never see him again. I suppose really I might have helped her more in that difficult time, but I—well, it hit me hard too, and I went and buried myself in the country amongst my dogs."

He paused to listen for a moment.

"I think that is she," he said, swiftly. "Come over and have dinner with me to-morrow night if you're still interested. Erb and Freddie are coming and I'll give you the full story. Leslie is visiting a girl school friend at Esher."

"Who's Erb, by the way?" asked Jimmy.

Before Sir Marcus could reply a cheerful girlish voice broke in:

"Hallo, Jimmy, you old fraud!"

The reporter jumped to his feet and, turning, found Leslie at his elbow.

Unnoticed by either of them, her guardian rose to his feet and made an unobtrusive exit.

Leslie was at length forced to disengage her hand from Jimmy's cordial—almost too cordial—clasp.

"Collar a pew," she invited lightly, dropping gracefully into the chair her guardian had just vacated. "Marky's the essence of tact, isn't he?" She smiled up at him and Jimmy realized that his host had gone.

"He's my ideal of the perfect guardian," sighed Jimmy fervently, seating himself in a chair and pulling it close to hers. "But I don't want to talk about guardians. I'm more interested in wards just now."

"Thank you, sir, she said," smiled Leslie.

"Where were you at lunch time?" continued Jimmy. "I rang you up, but your maid said you were out."

"Did she say with whom?"

"No, just that you were out."

Leslie eyed him from beneath long lashes.

"Tact seems to be a byword in this house," she mocked.

"You haven't told me whom you lunched with yet," he challenged.

"Perhaps I don't intend to," she said provokingly.

"Please!"

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"What inquisitive beings men are," she sighed. "I lunched with two friends at the Rivoli."

"You said 'friends'?" said Jimmy, morosely.

She nodded.

"Must have been men then," he continued, ruefully. "Who were they, old thing?"

"Friends of yours," she answered banteringly. "At least one was. I wasn't going to sit and die of starvation while you made up your mind whether to take me out to lunch or not."

The butler, wheeling in tea at the moment, interrupted further conversation.

"Is Sir Marcus about, Fenton?" Leslie asked.

"No, Miss Leslie. He went out a few moments ago."

"Just like Marky," she sighed. "He spends half his time down at Faversham and the other half in musty old bookshops. I never knew such a man. I've hardly seen him at all since he got back and now I suppose he's off again on his rambles. Sugar? I don't suppose he'll be in to tea then, Fenton. That will be all."

"Thank heaven!" murmured Jimmy.

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch?" she said sweetly.

"I said you had not yet answered my question," lied Jimmy. "Who were they?"

"If you must know, one was Freddie Leicester."

"I shall have to drop that man," grumbled Jimmy. "A man who collars the girl I want to lunch with is no friend, but a viper who stings the hand that feeds him."

"On the contrary," she teased, "he was very nice. He took compassion on a poor starving girl, agonizedly wondering where her next meal was coming from." Then reading the question in his eyes, she said hastily: "All right. Don't ask. The other was Freddie's uncle, Erb."

"Never knew he had one. Erb? What is he?"

"A very nice old gentleman," she replied. "Toast?"

"Thank you. I don't like old gentlemen."

"He may not like you," Leslie retorted. "You must meet him soon. We'll fix up a date for lunch together. He's the most perfect old dear there is. Marky and he are old friends."

"Marky shows bad taste," grumbled Jimmy.

"Fortunately," she agreed, "or he wouldn't allow me to have anything to do with jealous reporters."

Jimmy grunted morosely.

"How about dinner to-night?"

"Impossible, *mon enfant*," she said definitely. "I am going to

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a highbrow concert, but if you behave as a well-brought-up reporter should, you shall motor me home from Esher to-morrow night. I'm going out there to see Maisie Winterton."

"To-morrow night is as far off as Esher."

"It is," she agreed. "I'll give you a ring to-morrow."

"A most unprecedented procedure," mocked Jimmy, rising to his feet. "Now if I were to give *you* a ring—one of Cartier's, say——"

"Don't be rash," she retorted, pushing him back in his seat. "I never listen to proposals—before, during, or after meals."

Jimmy sat back obediently and thoughtfully appropriated more toast. To motor Leslie home the next night was certainly an attractive proposal, but it was going to clash with his dinner engagement, and for obvious reasons he could not tell her anything about that.

He sat and chewed toast and the cud reflectively.

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VI. THE CIPHER

"DINNER is served, sir," announced Fenton from the doorway.

Sir Marcus consulted his wrist watch and looked at his two guests.

"What do you think, Freddie," he asked, "shall we wait for Erb?"

Freddie Leicester grinned vacantly.

"Better not," he advised, "He had a yelping match with me over the phone and I gathered that he was detained. Let's trickle in and put it across the soup. He's only got himself to blame if Jimmy here naffles it all before he arrives."

The Baronet smiled faintly and, nodding to Jimmy, led the way into the dining room. It was a good dinner. The wine, food and liqueurs were excellent and the cigars left nothing to be desired. In a decidedly mellowed frame of mind the three men sat smoking at its conclusion.

Loseley broke the long silence.

"I am going to tell you a story, Freddie," he said, "that till now I have kept to myself. Jimmy heard the outline of it yesterday and I was hoping that Erb would have been here. I am taking the opportunity that Leslie's absence offers because—she has never heard the story and I don't want her to."

"Mum as an oyster," said Freddie somberly, and Sir Marcus knocked the ash off his cigar and sat back.

"The main details of what I am going to tell you are of course known to the police, although the case was kept out of the papers. To-night I am going to tell you about one little detail which has never come into their hands."

"The undivided Leicester attention is at your disposal," bleated Freddie encouragingly. "Unleash the mystery, dear heart."

"You recollect the newspaper report of the death of my friend, John Richmond, Leslie's father, some years ago?"

"Four to be exact," nodded Freddie. "Heart failure, wasn't it?"

"That was the version circulated by the newspapers," answered Sir Marcus gravely, "but it was not the correct one. John Richmond was murdered!"

Freddie sat up with a startled expression and stared blankly at him.

Jimmy made no comment.

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"Murdered by the Squid," continued Sir Marcus and, noticing Freddie's start, "I see you're familiar with the name."

"Well—yes—rather," mumbled Freddie, "but I say, Marky—er, that is, let's have the rest, old hoss."

"There were not many people who knew just exactly what John was," pursued the baronet, "but I was one of them. He was a King's Messenger—at all times a dangerous position—and his death was the result of the successful carrying out of a mission with which he had been entrusted."

He paused again to remove the white ash from his cigar.

"The Squid was interested in that mission, the precise nature of which I do not know myself, and with a view to possessing himself of something that John knew or was carrying with him, the Squid followed him here to England from Venice. That would be just about the time that he opened the campaign of crime that has since swept England and the Continent."

He paused and looked away into the fire. Neither of his hearers ventured to break the silence and it was some time before he picked up the threads of the story again.

"John was followed from Dover to this house and was congratulating himself on having eluded his pursuers—was in fact standing on the doorstep, when a shot was fired that wounded him in the back. When Fenton opened the door, John fell into his arms almost unconscious."

"Did Fenton see the johnny who fired the shot?" asked Freddie with wide eyes.

"It was dark and poor Fenton was too horrified to notice anything. He closed the door and summoned me at once. Between us we carried John upstairs to my study and I dressed his wound. At his own request I left the room for a few moments to telephone the doctor and it was during my absence that the tragedy occurred."

His tone hardened a trifle and it seemed almost as though he were speaking to himself. He glanced neither to right nor left and his listeners waited silently and intently, Jimmy bending slightly forward, Freddie sitting back with his eyes and mouth wide open.

"I was in the act of coming upstairs," continued Sir Marcus, "when I heard two shots fired in the room in which John lay. I jumped to the conclusion that his enemies were making a second attempt on his life, although God alone knows how they obtained entrance without being seen or heard."

He passed his hand over his face and his eyes looked heavy

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and weary. When he resumed speaking it was still in the same far-away vacant voice.

"I rushed to the door and flung it open. God!—I shall never forget the sight to my dying day! John lay sprawled back in his chair, with a second ugly wound in his chest and a pistol dangling from his limp hand. Not two feet from him stood a man clad entirely in black, his face hidden by a huge hairless, waxen mask, the most repulsive thing I have ever encountered, and devoid of all movement save for the two snake-like eyes that watched me. I remember he was holding John's ebony stick in his hand, but I did not wait to take much notice of the man, I just flung myself at him."

He shuddered, and for a moment it seemed as if he were going to discontinue his story.

"And then?" suggested Jimmy gently.

The baronet pulled himself together with a visible effort. "I remember a flash and a report as the fiend fired at me," he muttered, "and as I fell backwards, Fenton caught me—he had followed me upstairs—and I suppose it was only the instinctive shifting of my head that saved me from having my brains blown out. However, be that as it may, the bullet merely grazed my temple, and I must have regained consciousness a few minutes after."

He fingered the scar on his right temple absent-mindedly and, leaning forward, courteously held a lighted candle to the cigar that Jimmy had allowed to go out. Freddie, regarding his host with rigid and unswerving interest, inadvertently applied the lighted end of his own cigar to his mouth with results which may be imagined, as may also the expletives that followed.

Their host, still fingering his scar, listened unmoved. It was doubtful if he had heard.

"When I came to myself," he continued, "I was lying on the floor and the room was empty. Downstairs I could hear Fenton shouting for help at the top of his voice. The Squid had apparently escaped by the window which was open, and I—I—staggered to my feet and walked dizzily to John's chair. He was dead!"

He paused deliberately and his listeners saw that he was regaining something of his normal composure.

"And now I come to the detail of which the police know nothing," he pursued quietly. "That detail was a piece of paper on which John had evidently been writing before his death. It was crumpled up in his hand and for some reason or other I

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removed it and slipped it into my pocket. I had no reason for so doing, and somehow or other I omitted to hand it to the police. Discovering it later, I was not altogether sorry I had retained it. It was only a collection of jumbled, meaningless words and I have never tried to understand it, although sometimes I have wondered if it had any real importance or was merely the rambling of an unhinged mind."

Freddie took an eyeglass from his pocket, polished it, inserted it in his eye and then, thinking better of it, returned it to his pocket again.

"The arrival of the police naturally was a difficult time. I explained to them that it was probably the stick that he was after and the fact that I had seen it in the Squid's hand and never set eyes on it again seems to support that idea. Though why anyone wanted the stick—a very ordinary ebony one—I am at a loss to understand. Fenton, when he returned, told a rather curious tale. He was accosted by a young man, whose face he could not see, driving a motor. The man asked only one question apparently. It was, 'Did he get Richmond?' Fenton blurted out a few details and the man drove away. I have sometimes wondered who the fellow was. His question seemed to hint at first-hand knowledge of the tragedy and I think the police would have done well to have furthered inquiries about him."

He rose to his feet.

"We may as well go up to my study. The cipher is up there in the safe."

He led the way and, opening the door, stood aside and ushered his guests into the warm cozy room at the head of the stairs.

"This is the only room in the house I really like," said Sir Marcus. "It's something like my room at Faversham and pleasantly doggy."

Freddie, a more frequent visitor than Jimmy and more familiar with the "doggy room," smiled cheerfully. There had been an Alsatian in that room once with whom Freddie had had a difference of opinion. Yes—decidedly doggy!

"Make yourself at home," said the baronet cordially, indicating comfortable hide chairs, deep and inviting.

The other two drew their chairs up and Freddie proffered his cigarette case. Sir Marcus strolled to the mantelshelf and stood with his back to them for a moment. When he turned round they caught a glimpse of a square aperture in the paneling beneath the shelf.

Dropping into a chair he offered a slip of paper to Jimmy.

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"That's the cipher," he said, and the reporter studied it thoughtfully. He read:

PRAY PHEER INST CLOD NICE ELAN LEES DO INNS LOOK
STEP LIES YE TRIBAL READ.

The words were written in block lettering, presumably in the hand of John Richmond. Turning the message this way and that, Jimmy read and re-read it for about five minutes with a blank expression on his face and then stared blankly at his host.

"What the dickens does this gibberish mean, sir?"

"As I say, I have never found out," answered Sir. Marcus.

"Give it to little Fred," suggested that gentleman brightly. "Meantersay I'll probably think of something or other. Used to be dashed smart at cross-words and finding animals in pictures as a kid, you know. Fearful brain. Awfully hot stuff."

Jimmy smiled faintly and passed the slip of paper to his friend with a covert wink at Sir Marcus.

"Go to it, chief inferior defective," he chaffed, and to Sir Marcus: "It certainly looks like bosh, sir, but then, John wasn't given to writing bosh, was he?"

"No," the baronet admitted, "decidedly not. As I say, I have wondered if it was a code intended for someone or other and yet —you see, John was badly wounded and he was talking rather wildly and disjointedly a little while before the tragedy occurred. I don't say his mind was unhinged, but well, really I suppose I had no reason other than a suspicion that he was over-excited for retaining this piece of paper. As a matter of fact I have decided to take it up to the Yard and see if they can make anything out of it."

"Elveden's the man," said Jimmy. "Inspector Elveden. Awfully cute cuss."

Sir Marcus nodded and turned to Freddie, still poring vacantly over the message.

"Deciphered it, Freddie?" he asked.

"Er—no," murmured Freddie, "not exactly, but I have come to a decision. This," he tapped the paper, "is either sheer bilge or else a jolly old code."

Jimmy grinned: "Anything else suggest itself to the Leicester brain?" he gibed.

"Yes," answered Freddie, "the whole beastly business is a bit of a mystery. I meantersay—dashed mysterious, what?"

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"Mysteries, you poor fish," said Jimmy, distinctly, "usually are mysterious."

Freddie, fiddling absent-mindedly with his cigarette case, nodded.

"Er—yes," he agreed cheerfully, "Looking at it in that jolly old light I suppose they are, you know. Funny I never thought of that before. I can see it now—sort of mysterious, what?"

Jimmy gave him a withering glance, but the dauntless Freddie babbled on.

"I shall probably think of something quite clever, if I have enough rope, Marky. Bound to unearth the old solush sooner or later and all that sort of rot."

He returned the paper and devoted himself again to balancing his case on the arm of his chair.

Jimmy checked his derisive laughter to glance at the clock.

"Gosh!" he gasped. "Nine o'clock, I shall have to shift some if I'm going to collect Leslie at Esher."

"Is that the arrangement?" asked Loseley, with an understanding smile. "I thought she was using her car."

"She was," agreed Jimmy, rising, "but I persuaded her that there was a magnificent train service to Esher. Fine things, trains—comfortable—fast—er—warm, you know."

"Yes," nodded the baronet, shrewdly, "and in view of all these advantages you are going to bring her home in your car?"

"His what?" demanded Freddie. "Is the girl insured?"

"You are implying a slur on the capabilities of my car?" suggested Jimmy, frigidly.

"Far be it from me to stoop so low. I was thinking of its driver, old egg."

Jimmy laughed good-naturedly.

"All right, Frederick, I'll take you for a spin one day."

"Thank you, I have no wish to die unshriven," grinned Freddie, and ducked to avoid a cushion hurled at his head.

"Good night, sir," said Jimmy, nodding to Sir Marcus. "Don't trouble to call Fenton. I can find my way out all right."

With a cheery nod he turned and left the room, Freddie watching his retreat with thoughtful eyes.

"You know, there's something behind this devoted attention," he said weightily. "I mean, I believe the poor old cod is going down for the count. Positively I do. Dan Cupid versus Common Sense. They all get the K.O. sooner or later, Marky, and I'm afraid he'll join the Marital League, what?"

Sir Marcus smiled. "Possibly."

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"Anyway he's a damned lucky cuss," ruminated Freddie. Marky, sling the old formula across again. I have the glimmerings of a fearfully fruity idea."

Sir Marcus passed the slip of paper obediently. Secretly he had no very great hopes that Freddie's opinion would be justified.

At that moment Fenton reappeared to announce:

"His Grace the Duke of Framlingham."

"Ah, my duçal relation!" sighed Freddie. "He thinks he was invited to breakfast!" And he nodded cheerfully to His Grace who had followed Fenton into the room.

Sir Marcus rose and the two friends clasped hands warmly. The Duke surveyed his nephew without any visible signs of pleasure.

"So you're here, you social scab?" he grunted, dropping into the seat vacated a few moments previously by Jimmy Craven.

"You have dined, I trust?" asked Sir Marcus.

"Yes, at the club with old Mulberry Beak," the Duke nodded disconsolately. "That's Sir Morberry Peak. Fearful bore. Wanted to transfer his account to my bank, you know, and the manager was conservative enough to want a reference, so Mulberry Beak tacked himself on and I couldn't think of any reasonable excuse for braining him with a bottle of Clicquot."

He turned to Sir Marcus: "Well, are you back for good or is this another flying visit. Never saw such a man. Always here, or there, or somewhere else."

"From you," answered his friend, "that is a curious remark. People in glass houses, you know. How was Paris when you left it?"

"Still there, and very Parisian," sighed His Grace placidly. "There was rather a charming young thing I met——"

Freddie coughed diplomatically.

"Delete the beery liaisons and taproom memoirs," he said, reprovingly. "Try and employ your ducal mind to more advantage. Here, take a nibble at this."

He passed the code message.

His Grace studied it for a moment and then looked at Sir Marcus. "Possibly," he suggested, "one might get *some* idea of what that fool meant if a more responsible person outlined the general plan of campaign."

"Have a drink," replied Loseley, motioning to the decanter, "and listen to a story you might have heard earlier if you had not chosen to arrive with the milk."

His Grace poured himself a drink and listened to the story

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Sir Marcus had already told once that evening, occasionally glancing down at the paper he held.

"Police job," he stated emphatically at the conclusion.

Sir Marcus nodded: "I was telling Freddie here and Jimmy Craven that I intended placing the matter in the hands of the Yard."

"Who is Jimmy Craven?"

"If you will bury yourself abroad at every opportunity," grunted his friend, "you can't expect to be *au fait*. He's a reporter friend of Freddie's."

"Freddie needs a keeper, not a reporter," commented His Grace. "By the way, where is Leslie?"

"Visiting at Esher," Loseley answered. "At the moment she should be——"

"Returning with aspirant in chief," Freddie interpolated blandly.

"Perhaps some day," said His Grace, transfixing his nephew with a cold eye, "that crack-brained numskull will acquire the art of intelligent conversation. Aspirant for what, fool?"

"Not for a fool," said Freddie, sweetly, "for the jolly old Richmond mitt. The fair maiden's hand as it were, my dear old screech."

The Duke snorted.

"Looks as if we are going to lose her, Marky," he said sadly. "Is this Raven serious?"

"Craven," corrected Marcus, "Jimmy Craven. Quite a nice boy."

"H'm," grunted His Grace. "Let me have another look at that cipher, Marky."

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VII. BLACK GLOVE

JERRY the Lag shuffled into the "Shaftesbury" public house in Charing Cross Road and lurched up to the bar. The fat barman momentarily ceased polishing a glass and waddled to where the Lag stood waiting.

"The usual, Jerry?"

The old Lag nodded curtly.

"Anything fer me?" he asked in an undertone.

The barman looked cautiously round the bar and reached down swiftly beneath the counter. His hand came up holding a letter and Jerry deftly palmed the envelope. It was so swiftly done that none but the keenest eyes could have seen the transaction.

The eyes, say, of a reporter.

Seated at a corner table by the wall and partially shielded by the curve of the bar, Jimmy Craven had seen a betraying flutter of white as something, a letter he judged, changed hands.

Jerry pocketed the letter and smiled thoughtfully. His own eyes were fairly keen.

"Black Glove came up in a cab twenty minutes ago," whispered the barman as he handed Jerry his drink. "I saw that there beckonin' black glove o' his and went out and took the thing myself."

Jerry nodded and, picking up his glass, moved away to a table by the window, taking care that no one was sitting behind him.

Covertly he took out the envelope and, slitting it, drew forth the message printed in block capitals:

"TO-NIGHT. OUTSIDE THE COLISEUM. EIGHT-THIRTY."

Leaving the envelope on the table in a prominent position, the Lag carefully tore the message into tiny pieces and dropped them covertly on the floor. He glanced at the clock. It was just eight o'clock; he had half-an-hour to spare.

Eight-thirty outside the Coliseum. What was it this time? With an unpleasant leer he emptied his glass and sat for some moments thinking.

Few of the denizens of the underworld knew Black Glove's identity and fewer still ever entered that taxi of his. But Jerry was one of the few. Jerry caught the barman's eye on him and smiled. During the course of a week, and particularly when there

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was "anything doing" the barman handed many such messages across the bar to one or other of the nine men who made the public house their rendezvous. It was probably worth his while, Jerry reflected, although the barman was no doubt in complete ignorance of what he was doing. Jerry grinned. The fat barman was not of the type who asked questions. More than one banknote had passed into the pockets of his capacious waistcoat.

Taking a stub of pencil from his pocket, Jerry wrote one word on the envelope and then, very ostentatiously, put it in his pocket.

That done, he rose to his feet, shuffled to the bar and ordered another drink. In the act of raising his refilled glass, he paused.

Someone clapped him heartily on the back and a cheerful voice behind him spoke.

"Well, Jerry, old warrior!"

Turning, the Lag scowled up into the pleasant humorous eyes of Jimmy Craven.

"You again?" he growled. "Now what are you diggin' fer? Lumme, some o' you blokes 'as a easy time o' it, don't yer? Fair cushy, I calls it. Nothin' else ter do but waste other people's time."

The reporter smiled affably, no whit put out by the other's surly tone. "Drink up, Jerry, and have one on me," he invited.

The Lag moistened his lips enthusiastically and accepted, draining his own glass at a gulp.

" 'Ere's lookin' at yer," he said calmly. "It's safer!"

Jimmy signaled to the fat barman and motioned to the glasses. "Decant."

"Flush to-night, ain't yer?" asked the Lag quizzically, as their glasses were refilled.

"Drink, brother," said Jimmy cheerfully, "and question not the source."

"And blimey, you got a sauce," grunted the Lag. "I ain't no one-an' t'other o' yourn. Less familiarity, an' all."

He replaced his glass and looked at the clock. It was nearly twenty past eight.

"Got an important engagement wiv a genelman at 'arf past."

"I'll walk down with you," offered Jimmy casually, replacing his own glass.

"Not much you won't," returned Jerry sourly. "I said wiv a genelman. You'd feel kinder outa place, you would."

He wiped a grimy hand across his lips and with a curt nod to the reporter shuffled away out of the bar.

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Jimmy, waiting only to examine an envelope which he had abstracted from the Lag's pocket, followed suit with a grim smile. The envelope was empty, but on the back of it had been scrawled one word: "Sold."

Pocketing it, Jimmy hurried out of the "Shaftesbury" and looked eagerly around. The Lag was nowhere in sight.

For a moment the reporter stood there undecided, looking to right and left. Then, with a muttered imprecation, he set off in the direction of Charing Cross.

Jerry, forsaking the shelter of an adjacent doorway, surveyed the retreating back amusedly for a few moments and then followed leisurely in his wake. He was well aware that several people were interested unduly in his movements, among them Inspector Elveden and Jimmy Craven, and their efforts never failed to amuse. They were both harmless and he humored them up to a point. From a safe distance he watched Jimmy turn round by the Cavell Monument and make for Leicester Square. So much for the newspaper sleuth. Jerry smiled ironically and lit a cigarette.

Taking up his position opposite the theater, he leaned back against the wall and smoked tranquilly, watching the constant coming and going of a little stream of people by the advance booking office.

He had been waiting barely three minutes when a taxi drew up outside the restaurant close to the theater.

As he watched, a black-gloved hand showed for a minute at the window nearest Jerry. The Squid's punctuality was a byword.

Tossing aside his half-finished cigarette, the Lag shuffled across the road and came to a standstill beside the Squid's taxi.

"Get in," said a dull flat voice and Jerry opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind him quickly.

The taxi was in complete darkness and all the blinds were down. As he took his seat, a revolver barrel dug into his ribs.

"Eaton Place," instructed the voice of the man by his side, and the taxi moved forward.

Jerry had been for many such journeys with the Squid and the presence of the pistol against his ribs did not greatly worry him. The Squid took no risks and, in any case, Jerry was not fool enough to try conclusions with him in a taxi. The chauffeur, he knew, was one of the gang.

Jerry sat with his hands before him, careful not to violate any of the Squid's rules. One there had been who had broken two rules in one night. He had come to a meeting with a gun in his

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pocket and he had brought friends with him. That had been Billy Horne.

The Squid had not attended the meeting and Billy had not lived to go to another.

They had found him the next morning in Wapping—dead. Very horribly dead.

The Squid dealt swiftly with "squeakers." Very swiftly, and no one knew how he got his information until he struck. After that, the knowledge was valueless. Without seeing the face of the man beside him, Jerry could guess at its outline—the high hairless dome, broad forehead, cold eyes and menacingly fixed expression: the somber black clothes and the black-gloved hands, too.

Once again the dull voice broke the silence.

"To-morrow night," said the Squid, "you will acquire the Loseley tiara. I have uses for it."

Jerry acquiesced understandingly. He had wondered how long the famous heirloom was destined to remain in the possession of its present owner. Diamonds had a fascination for the Squid, and the tiara was a perfect example of its kind. Apparently it was due to take a trip to Amsterdam. There the stones would be removed and re-cut. After that the tiara and jewels would be returned to the Squid, the former melted into a nugget. As a tiara it would have ceased to exist. And the Squid's collection would have increased—valuably.

Jerry refrained from mentioning what was in his mind.

"Where's this ti-hara kep'?"

"In Sir Marcus Loseley's study," rejoined the Squid. "You will find the safe set in the woodwork underneath the overmantel. The woodwork is decorated with roses of carven wood. Press the fourth from the right. You will leave everything else, but you will disorder the room artistically in order to create the impression that you had a long search. Remember, nothing but the tiara. It would be unfortunate if you made any mistakes, Jerry. Very unfortunate—for you."

Jerry agreed.

"You will receive the usual ten per cent," droned the Squid, as the taxi turned into Victoria Street. "I shall apprise you of the meeting place, date and time as soon as I see a notice in the papers announcing Sir Marcus Loseley's loss."

The taxi slid into Eaton Square and continued on, slowing down, till it reached Eaton Place.

"Get out," ordered the Squid. "You will find a survey of the

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house useful, I think. And remember, Jerry, no bungling."

The Lag denoted that he understood and, opening the door, stepped out on to the pavement.

Almost at once the door slammed and the taxi moved away from the curb, gathering impetus as it moved towards Cliveden Place.

Standing on the pavement, Jerry watched the little red tail-light disappear and then turned his attention to the house outside which he stood.

A big house with double bay windows, divided from the gateway by a short gravel path and a flight of steps that led up to the high ceilinged portico. Farther to the right, a small gateway led to a downward flight of stairs which terminated in a small dark area. Servants' quarters, he reflected.

Lighting a cigarette, he puffed at it thoughtfully and then turned away, walking head down, engrossed in his own thoughts.

He had taken barely three paces when he collided violently with someone walking in the opposite direction. A tall, dark, slender young man who stopped and regarded him interestedly.

"Why in 'ell can't yer look where yer goin'?" exploded Jerry irately, and then stopped.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he growled.

Inspector Elveden smiled engagingly.

"Good evening, Jerry," he said softly. "Thinking of forsaking the straight and narrow so soon?"

He stared pointedly at the Loseley home and equally pointedly at the Lag.

"A little light cat-burglary?" he inquired politely.

Jerry scowled and put his hands in his pockets.

"Some o' you blokes up at the Yard is getting a sight too keen," he said truculently. "Yer gettin' so sharp, yer can see things as 'asn't 'appened yet!"

The Inspector was amused. There was something diverting in Jerry's aggressive innocence.

"We can see things that might happen," he corrected gently and his calm eyes challenged those of the Lag.

"Yus, arter they 'appen," sneered the Lag. "Pertickerly when the Squid's 'andlin' the 'appenin' part o' the deal. 'E's coot, 'e is, Mister Elv'den, an' don't yer fergit it. One o' these days yer goin' ter wake up an' find yerself dead, if yer ain't careful!"

The Inspector listened unmoved and Jerry found his cool smile annoying.

"Remember what I told you," advised Elveden.

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"You ain't never tole me nuthin' worth rememberin' yet," riposted the Lag.

"This is an exception, then," answered the other. "Think over what I said about putting the Chief wise."

"Turnin' King's evidence is a mug's gime," said Jerry, and spat contemptuously. "Not," he hastened to add, "that I could tell anything."

"Of course not," agreed Elveden with sufficient irony to cause the Lag a momentary suspicion, "but if you ever should have anything to tell——" He left the sentence unfinished.

"The blokes what squeal," continued Jerry weightily, "is astin' fer it and they comes up again it pronto, most times. I knows the law and if they can land a bloke, they will. They 'ears what 'es got ter say. Then it's: 'Thank you very much. Two years.' They caught many a poor dam' fool like that."

He produced a half-smoked cigarette from his waistcoat pocket and ignited it from the butt of the one he had been smoking.

"And anuther thin', Mister Elv'den," continued Jerry, tapping the other on the chest with a grimy forefinger, "if the 'split' falls dahn an' 'urts itself—it's flowers an' a burial fer someone. No one tries ter queer the Squid's pitch twice. 'E's got a nasty way o' payin' 'is score, 'e 'as, so I've 'eard."

Elveden listened impassively to the Lag's exposition. When an old timer had any reason for wishing to avoid a subject, he would talk for hours—on some other subject.

"An' anuther thin', Mister Elv'den, if I wuz you—which Gawd ferbid—I'd keep that meddlin' snitch o' yourn outer this business. I'm only goin' on 'earsay, o' course, but the Squid don't take over kindly to Inspectors, good bad or perlice, they tell me!"

He leered unpleasantly up into his listener's face and encountered the same calm eyes and disarming smile.

"Can't say as I blames 'im either," he continued humorously. "Only I ain't fond 'o violence, I ain't. Peaceful is me middle monicker. If I don' like a thing I keeps away from it. If *he* don't like a thing—he outs it, suddingly."

The suspicion that Jerry knew more than he was prepared to divulge grew steadily, but the Inspector made no sign.

"Think it over," he repeated. "Which way are you going, Jerry?"

"The hopposite way ter you," grinned the Lag, and leant back against the wall.

With an amused smile the Inspector strode on his way.

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VIII. CONCERNING THE LOSELEY TIARA

"AHA, the last of the house of Craven imbibing corruption at one and six per glass. A commendable occupation. A fruity time-killer."

The drawling voice at his elbow interrupted Jimmy's meditations and he turned to make room for the new-comer.

Freddie Leicester, smiling vacantly, lounged against the bar of the *Nocturnes*.

"What'll you take?" asked Jimmy morosely.

"What a boon to man is a friend who recognizes on sight the parched symptoms," sighed Freddie ecstatically. "A little of the poison that you are absorbing will meet the case, friend James."

"Water this human blotting pad," directed Jimmy, motioning to the barman and indicating his own glass. "Same again. Drink is his middle name."

"Always vertical till the third bottle, laddie," protested Freddie in an injured tone. "But why the festive habiliments?"

He touched Jimmy's dinner jacket and eyed his friend wonderingly.

"Show," answered Jimmy, laconically.

"Show what?" demanded Freddie vacantly.

"Theater, fool," was the polite answer. "Care to join us?"

"Who is 'us,' old cod?" asked Freddie, sipping his drink with marked appreciation.

"Leslie, Marcus and a blot on the landscape called Erb," Jimmy supplied.

"My uncle," nodded Freddie, calmly, "and incidentally an error in grandparental taste."

"Sorry, Leslie did mention it. Where did he get that name? Smacks rather of Billingsgate."

"It affects you unpleasantly?" inquired Freddie, lounging elegantly. "Me too, I have always regarded it as something in the nature of a stab in the back. Unfortunately circumstances over which I have no control prevent my taking it up with his misguided parents. Where are you collecting the ducal incumbrance?"

"Here. Duke, is he? You've never mentioned this secret sorrow before."

"I try to live it down," sighed Freddie. "I thought he was due to bore Paris for a fruity period, but it was not to be. The

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young have many trials. He trickled back a few days ago and I had to try and look pleased and wag my tail. You will find His Grace——"

"Disgrace?"

"Equally applicable. I was saying, when you rudely butted in, that you will find him in part human, although in the main a gruesome affliction."

They drank in silence. Freddie sighed with satisfaction.

"They ought to be here soon," said Jimmy, glancing at the clock.

"How about another quick one? No? Well, perhaps not," said Freddie. "On what theater are you conferring the honor of the ducal audience?"

"Court Royal, mystery play, I believe."

"Erb will be late then," said Freddie. "That is, more so than his usual two hours. He once said he got all the mystery he wanted out of an omelette. When he's at a show he's never at his ease——"

"Good thing not to be."

"Involved," said Freddie in a tired voice. "Expound, James."

"I say it's a good thing not to be a disease," grinned Jimmy.

"Low, positively low. Hints at a warped intellect. However the hour approaches. I must tear myself away. Matter of import demands my attention."

"It has my sympathy. What is it this time? Women?"

"No, an inseparable clause to same," answered Freddie. "Diamonds. I may drop in to see the last act of the mystery."

"God forbid," murmured Jimmy piously.

"Pardon?"

"I said, 'Please do,'" grinned Jimmy, shaking hands with his friend.

. . . . . .

Freddie Leicester ran lightly up the steps of Sir Marcus Loseley's house and knocked twice, loudly.

Humming cheerfully, he waited until the placid Fenton appeared in the doorway.

"Good evening, Mr. Leicester," said the butler respectfully. "Sir Marcus and Miss Leslie are out. I believe they were going to a theater with Mr. Craven."

"That's all right, laddie," answered Freddie. "I have a notion that I left the old cigarette container here a few nights ago. Mind if I flit up to Marky's study and retrieve the electro plate?"

"Not at all, sir," replied Fenton, standing aside to allow Freddie

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to enter and closing the door behind him. "If you will allow me, sir, I will get it myself."

"Don't trouble, old soul," said Freddie cheerfully. "Too many stairs; bad for the middle aged, you know."

He dug the butler playfully in the ribs.

"No trouble, I assure you, sir," said Fenton politely, but he was addressing thin air.

Freddie, still humming cheerfully, was taking the stairs three at a time.

Fenton gazed after him sorrowfully. Mr. Leicester was at all times a peculiar young gentleman, he reflected. While Sir Marcus was in town, Freddie frequently visited him and was more or less allowed the run of the house. More than once Fenton had found occasion during one of Freddie's visits to doubt the other's sanity.

Fenton walked sedately away towards the domestic quarters and his pantry. It was a cold night and a small tot of whisky—a very small tot. . . .

Upstairs Freddie stood on the threshold of Sir Marcus Loseley's study and stared blankly at the disordered scene that presented itself in the electric light flooding the room.

In every direction chaos met his eye.

Chairs, a bureau and a table were overturned in various parts of the room. The wall hangings had been stripped from the paneling, pictures displaced, drawers pulled out and emptied. Everything was indescribably disordered—and on the floor a conglomeration of sporting weapons, trophies, books and bric-a-brac lay in a confused mass.

Freddie walked mechanically to the overturned chair he had occupied a few nights previously and, stooping down, picked up his cigarette case which had been displaced.

Standing there, he noticed that the Baronet's safe in the paneling above the fireplace was open. Neat stacks of bonds lay there untouched, a few bank-notes and a heap of silver, one or two little trinkets, a pile of documents and yet—the tiara, which he knew was always kept there, was missing.

That explained it. The disordering of the room might be a blind.

Mechanically he selected a cigarette and, lighting it, stood and stared about him.

A slight draught made him turn and, descrying the open lattice window, he crossed the room and closed it. Apparently that was how the thieves had found entrance.

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For a moment he stood looking down at Eaton Place and drawing thoughtfully at his cigarette.

After a further survey of the room, he ran his fingers through his hair and with a perplexed smile turned with the intention of summoning Fenton.

It was unnecessary. Fenton, a little curious as to the reason for Freddie's non-appearance, was already coming up the stairs.

He appeared in the doorway with a look of polite enquiry on his face. The polite enquiry faded suddenly to give place to frozen horror.

He stepped hastily into the room and glanced round on the wreckage with despairing eyes.

"Has there been a robbery, sir?" he wailed, and wrung his hands anxiously.

"Funny you should ask that," murmured Freddie. "The same suspicion was vaguely forming in *my* mind. Er—yes—decidedly, there *has* been a robbery."

"But what are we to do, sir?" wailed the agonized butler, his eyes taking in every detail and growing wider with each new discovery. "What are we to do? What will Sir Marcus say?"

Fenton was almost on the verge of tears and running round himself in bewildered circles, striving to take in the full enormity of the outrage.

"Sir Marcus," said Freddie thoughtfully, "will probably say quite a lot, my dear old butlist, and most of it will be unfit for your cultured ears. Suppose, however, passing lightly over the wrath to come, you glue yourself to the old transmitter for a few æons and rummage about for a few of the lads in blue."

"Sir?" asked Fenton stupidly. Mr. Leicester always spoke in that curious way. He was a little trying—everything was rather difficult—a peculiar young gentleman—what ought he to do?

"Telephone—Police," said Freddie tersely.

Fenton waddled hastily to the instrument and instructed the exchange to send a policeman round. Discovering his error, he at length got in touch with the police station.

Piece by piece the Superintendent managed to extract the story from him, and finally bellowed a demand for the address only just in time to prevent the bemused butler from cutting off without giving it.

Freddie, seated on the arm of a chair, looked round interestedly.

"Anything gone?" he asked cheerfully. "Meantersay—er—well it's not unlikely."

Fenton eyeing the room miserably, and mentally taking an

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inventory, suddenly caught sight of the open safe, and immediately cried out like a stuck pig.

"The tiara!"

"Where?" asked Freddie innocently.

"It's gone! Oh, Mr. Leicester, the tiara—the tiara, Mr. Leicester!"

"Pleased to meet you," said Freddie with a vacuous grin. "Sorry. We err. You mean someone has nicked the doin's? Yes, exactly. Marky used to keep it in the larder, didn't he?"

He pointed to the safe, and Fenton nodded.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" wailed the butler, still wandering round aimlessly.

"Change the record," suggested Freddie and, helpfully, "What about a spot of clear up? Meantersay, things *are* a bit unsettled, what?"

"No, sir," said Fenton almost firmly. "Decidedly not, sir. The police like things untouched. Clews, sir. Fingerprints, sir. Footprints——"

"Sir," supplemented Freddie. "All right. As you were! Don't clear up."

At that moment a loud knocking sounded on the door below. Fenton spun round agitatedly.

"That will be the police, sir?"

"Probably," agreed Freddie, "or the postman. Steady, old jellyfish. Face 'em like a man. Like me to come and hold the old mitts?"

But Fenton had not heard. Galloping downstairs, he tore open the door, and poured out a confused tale to the sergeant standing on the step.

As soon as the sergeant had sorted out the irrelevant from the relevant, and of the former there was much, he turned and instructed an invisible "Mathers" to "come on hup," and followed the butler up the stairs to the study.

Entering the room, the sergeant touched his hat to Freddie respectfully.

"Good evening, Sir Marcus," he said.

"Is it?" asked Freddie absently. "Inclined to rain when I trotted in, and look here, my dear old peeler, I'm not the owner of this jolly little shack."

"Oh," observed the sergeant, and his expression underwent a slight change.

"Who is this gentleman?" he asked, rounding on the startled Fenton abruptly.

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"Mr. Leicester, sir," said Fenton, agitatedly, "a friend of the master's."

"Mm," said the sergeant thoughtfully, and, bestowing a cold glance on the cheerful Freddie, he stalked across the room and began to make notes in a little book.

Behind the butler in the doorway, Constable Mathers eyed his superior interestedly, and Mr. Leicester even more interestedly. Asked for an unbiased opinion, Constable Mathers would have stated that it was "a fair cop."

"What's been taken?" demanded the sergeant, pausing in his examination and turning to Fenton.

"As far as I can see, nothing but the Loseley tiara," answered the butler, rubbing his hands together.

"The Loseley what?" demanded the sergeant suspiciously.

"A famous family heirloom," Fenton hastened to add. "Set with diamonds. Very valuable. Extremely so. Sir Marcus kept it in that safe."

He indicated the safe, and the sergeant rubbed his chin. Not being altogether sure what a tiara was, he could not tell whether it was missing or not. He eyed the little trinkets suspiciously, but decided against expressing an opinion.

"Nothing else has been taken from the safe," Fenton babbled excitedly.

"I have eyes," snapped the sergeant; and, turning with such suddenness that Freddie rolled back with surprise into his chair, he demanded:

"May I ask how long you have been here, sir?"

Freddie gaped sheepishly. The fellow's tone was dashed unfriendly. Dash it all—what the deuce. . . .

"Mr. Leicester called to find his cigarette case," Fenton interpolated helpfully.

"Mr. Leicester has a tongue, hasn't he?" asked the sergeant coldly.

"Er, yes," mumbled Freddie. "I left it here a few nights ago. The case, you know, not the tongue. Ha, ha!"

His humor failed to impress the sergeant.

"You were in the room alone?"

"Certainly," interrupted Fenton eagerly. "Mr. Leicester is a frequent visitor. You surely don't think . . . ?"

The sergeant transfixed him with a steely glance.

"No," he agreed icily. "I'm paid to know."

"How long were you in the room alone, sir?" he continued, turning to Freddie.

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"Oh, 'bout ten and a half minutes," Freddie answered after due consideration. "Possibly ten and three-quarters. I won't quibble."

"Take you ten minutes to find your case, sir?" The tone was ominous.

"No—er—no," bleated Freddie. " 'Bout half a jiffy, only the room was in a bit of a mess—I mean, after all it *is* a bit mucked up, what?—and I stood and looked and—er—looked and stood. You see, one doesn't often get the chance of seeing a room like this, sergeant dear."

He eyed the officer of the law pleadingly.

"Sergeant Clarke," corrected that gentleman with acidity. "Anything touched in this room?"

"No," answered Freddie. "You mustn't mind Fenton. It's excitement. He'll get over it, dear lamb. Everything else is O.K."

He beamed indulgently on the indignant butler.

"H'm. Where's Sir Marcus—what's his name?"

"Loseley," corrected Freddie cheerfully. "He's at a show."

"Punch and Judy?" enquired the sergeant ironically.

"No," answered Freddie, "just a show. You know, a sort of—er—show."

"Mr. Leicester means a theater," Fenton explained.

Sergeant Clarke eyed Mr. Leicester unfavorably.

"Oh, he is, is he? Well, I'm afraid Mr. Leicester will have to step down to the station with me."

He motioned to the constable.

"Mathers," he directed, "see that nothing is touched in this room, and take full particulars from—what did you say your name was?"

"Fenton, sir," answered the butler, cowed to a state of abject humility.

Sergeant Clarke laid a gentle but firm hand on Freddie's arm.

"Now, sir," he said. "*If* you please."

"Here, I say, I'm dashed well staying and all that sort of thing," bleated Freddie. "I mean——"

"You're dashed well not staying, *I* mean," the sergeant said firmly. "Better go quietly, sir."

Freddie went quietly.

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IX. "CHARGE, FIDDLESTICKS"

LESLIE was already in the lounge when Jimmy put in an appearance. He crossed hastily to her side.

"Sorry if I kept you waiting," he said contritely. "Ready, old thing?"

She waved a reproving forefinger at him.

"Ask me if I have been waiting long, you inhuman monster."

"Have you?" he asked obediently.

"Ten minutes, James," she answered with severity. "Never keep a lady waiting, my lad. Hell knows no fury like a woman's corns."

The reporter grinned and took her arm. Together they left the club, and Jimmy chartered a taxi, directing the chauffeur to drive to the "Court Royal" Theatre.

"Where's your friend 'Erb?" Jimmy asked as they sat back in the darkness.

"He's coming on later with Marky. You'll like him, Jimmy."

"I always did," said Jimmy serenely. "Fine fellow Marky."

"Not Marky, stupid, Erb."

"I have no desire to like stupid Erb," he replied.

The taxi drew up outside the "Court Royal" in Shaftesbury Avenue and, descending, Jimmy paid the fare and escorted Leslie into the small but tasteful foyer.

Leslie, a slim figure in an ermine cloak, her fair hair uncovered, drew many an admiring glance as she made her way to her seat.

Once in the stalls, they gazed round the house interestedly, listening to the steady hum of conversation.

"I suppose Marky will go up in the gods with Erb?" Jimmy suggested maliciously.

"Don't be unkind," she reproved. "We shan't see either of them till after the first act. As a matter of fact, I believe Marky was going up to Scotland Yard to get some stupid old code message translated. Probably some dirty scrap of paper that he discovered in one of his moldy old books."

Jimmy nodded absently. He knew better, but kept the information to himself.

The abrupt lowering of the lights and sudden cessation of conversation warned them that the curtain was going up. Taking advantage of the darkness—there were no lights on the stage——Jimmy took possession of Leslie's right hand, and she let him

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hold it during the first act of the mystery play, "Twelve O'clock."

As the curtain fell to the accompaniment of thunderous applause, they rose and sauntered into the foyer.

Almost the first people they encountered were Sir Marcus and His Grace of Framlingham, talking "horses."

The two men bowed as Leslie approached.

"Jimmy, I want to introduce you," said Leslie. "Mr. Craven, the Duke of Framlingham."

They bowed to each other, and Leslie engaged her guardian in conversation.

"Let us gravitate to the bar," said the Duke placidly, "and call me Erb, it's so much more matey."

Jimmy grinned and followed His Grace.

"With what poison can I assist in ruining your complexion?" the Duke asked politely.

Jimmy named a drink at random and, taking the opportunity of studying the other, decided that he was going to like this placid kindly gentleman.

"I gather that this kind of stuff is not much in your line?" said Jimmy.

"Depends on the year," answered the Duke, holding up his glass to the light and studying it with the air of a connoisseur. "Now some——"

"The play, I mean," corrected Jimmy, smiling.

His Grace shrugged.

"Child's-play," he observed. "By the way, Mr. Craven, your name seems very familiar."

"I know your nephew, Freddie Leicester," answered Jimmy. "He has probably mentioned it."

"Possibly. It is a serious handicap."

"Oh, I don't know," answered the reporter, reddening slightly. "There are worse names."

"You misunderstand me," sighed the Duke placidly. "I refer to the handicap of knowing my nephew. You have my sympathy. Have some more?"

"Sympathy?"

"No, gargle. The subject of that blighted boy always creates in me an unquenchable thirst."

Jimmy shook his head and, the gong going at that moment, they made their way back to their respective seats. The Duke and Sir Marcus were three rows behind Leslie and Jimmy.

"Well?" whispered Leslie, as the reporter sank into his seat beside her.

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"Yes, a deep one," agreed Jimmy, "and fortunately less dry than I anticipated. Erb has a commendable thirst."

They did not encounter the Duke and Sir Marcus again until they went out to the foyer at the conclusion of the last act. Both gentlemen were standing waiting for them, perfectly unmoved by the paroxysms of delight into which the audience had been transported.

"Can I drop you at Loseley House?" His Grace suggested courteously. "My car is outside, and it's too early to go to bed."

They accepted his offer and made their way to the gleaming Lanchester waiting by the curb.

A smartly liveried chauffeur closed the door behind them, and the car moved slowly off.

"Has anyone seen my erring nephew to-night?" the Duke asked casually, leaning back against the upholstery with a sigh of satisfaction.

"I helped him soak up a throat tickler at the *Nocturnes* earlier in the evening," Jimmy volunteered.

"He means they had a drink together," Leslie explained patiently.

"That boy—I mean Freddie—will go to a drunkard's grave," sighed His Grace. Then, reverently: "And *what* a grave. Have you any idea what particular dissipation he was contemplating, Mr. Craven?"

"He said something about diamonds," answered the reporter, covertly squeezing Leslie's hand, "and, by the way, call me Jimmy."

"Diamonds?" asked the Duke. "He inherits my own irreproachable taste."

"And mine," said Leslie thoughtlessly, providing the reporter with a much sought opportunity.

Taking advantage of the cover offered by the Baronet's conversation with the Duke, Jimmy leaned forward.

"Talking of diamonds," he whispered, "what about Cartier's——?"

"Not after a mystery play, Jimmy," she said hastily, and engaged her guardian in animated conversation.

The reporter could not see her heightened color owing to the darkness, and for that she was thankful.

The Lanchester drew up in Eaton Place and Jimmy's chance was lost. With a disgruntled expression he descended and helped Leslie to alight.

The little party had barely stepped out when the door of Sir

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Marcus's house flew open and the portly figure of Fenton appeared in the doorway. The butler was visibly perturbed.

With one accord, Leslie and the three men hurried up the steps to meet him.

"Sir Marcus, Sir Marcus," wailed the old man agitatedly. "Oh, Sir Marcus——"

"He means you," said His Grace, touching the baronet on the arm.

"Get on with it, man," snapped Sir Marcus impatiently. Fenton gulped and stared miserably.

"The tiara, Sir Marcus," he said in a despairing tone.

"Exactly! What about it?"

"It's gone, sir," Fenton blurted out.

He wrung his hands agitatedly and seemed to be on the verge of tears. They followed him into the hall.

"What do you mean?" demanded Sir Marcus. "Burglary?"

The butler gulped again and nodded doubtfully, as if he felt personally responsible for the crime.

"You see, sir," he began defensively—but Sir Marcus did not see. He brushed past the old man and, followed by the others, made his way up the stairs to his study.

The policeman stationed inside the door hastily extinguished his cigarette and nodded respectfully.

Ignoring him, the Baronet strode to the safe and made a hasty examination of the documents deposited there. Beyond a cursory glance round, he took little notice of the disordered state of the room.

"Let's hear about it," he said tersely, turning to Fenton.

Fenton looked nervously at the Duke and then launched into his tale.

"Mr. Leicester called here about an hour ago, sir, to get his cigarette case which he left here some few nights ago."

"Freddie?" asked the Duke suddenly. "I knew that boy would come to a sticky end."

He pursed his lips angrily and the butler, after a nervous glance at him, continued diffidently.

"I offered to get it for him, sir; but he went up himself."

Again he glanced apprehensively at His Grace, as though expecting him to take up a vigorous defense of his nephew.

"Mr. Leicester was up here some time, and eventually I came up to see if I could assist him. The room was exactly as you see it now, sir, and Mr. Leicester said there had been a burglary."

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"And that," said Framlingham bitterly, "is just the kind of brainy remark one expects from Freddie!"

"I telephoned the police at once, sir," continued the butler, shifting from one foot to the other, "and the sergeant asked Mr. Leicester to step down to the station."

"What?"

Loseley whirled suddenly on the startled butler and glared angrily for a moment. Recovering himself, he turned to the Duke.

"Damned strange, Erb," he said. "Nothing else seems to have been taken but the tiara, and yet the room——"

He waved his hand significantly. His composure was remarkable.

"They must have had a thorough search, and yet it beats me how they discovered the safe."

He turned to Fenton.

"Clear this place up," he directed, and then looked at the others. "I suppose we may as well go along to the station and get Freddie out of durance vile."

"I always knew that blighted boy had criminal tendencies," murmured His Grace. "If he had to disgrace the family, why the devil couldn't he have done it like a gentleman? Got drunk and assaulted a policeman or something. Freddie never was conventional."

"But it couldn't possibly have been Freddie," protested Leslie, impulsively stepping forward. "He wouldn't have the——"

"You were going to say brains?" interrupted His Grace sorrowfully, refusing to be comforted. "I agree, but all that was needed here was low cunning and he didn't use much of that. And why the fool had to mention his intentions to Jimmy here I don't know."

"He merely said he was interested in diamonds," said Jimmy defensively.

"Very, I should think," said His Grace. "However, I don't suppose for a moment that brainless clown did it. He simply has a genius for appearing at the wrong place at the wrong time and landing himself in a lot of fool scrapes."

He looked wearily at the Baronet.

"Coming to release that perishing idiot?" he asked in a tired voice. "It would serve him right if you charged him with the robbery."

Sir Marcus grinned and, followed by Leslie, turned to the door to look enquiringly at Jimmy.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

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"No, sir," said Jimmy, "I have somewhat to say to Fenton."

The Duke eyed him suspiciously.

"The Press," he said accusingly. "You absolutely reek of printers' ink at the moment, you human bloodsucker. Notice the 'news' gleam in his eyes, Marky?"

The other smiled pleasantly.

"By the way, Jimmy," he paused to add at the door. "If it's any help to you, the tiara they got away with was a worthless imitation made by Levalleurs of Regent Street!"

Freddie Leicester stared vaguely at the Superintendent and then at the Sergeant, engaged in picking his teeth.

"What's all this pother about, laddie?" he enquired gently. "And would you mind asking that sweet soul not to excavate his fangs so heartily?"

"You heard the Sergeant's charge," snapped the Superintendent. "He says he took you into custody in Sir Marcus Loseley's study a quarter of an hour after the robbery had been committed."

The Superintendent took up his pen angrily. He objected to being addressed as "laddie."

"As a matter of fact, he doesn't jolly well know how long after it was," Freddie protested. "He was too busy raking his molars and apart from——"

"Name," demanded the Sergeant inexorably.

"Frederick Herbert Leicester," answered the accused obediently, "but look here, my dear old screech——"

"Occupation?" snapped the Superintendent. "And don't call me 'old screech.'"

Freddie shuddered: "Independent means," he bleated.

"Address?"

"Framlingham House, Upper Berkeley Street," sighed Freddie, as though repeating his alphabet.

"Framlingham House? That's the Duke's place, isn't it? Any relation?"

"Nephew. But look here, I don't want the jolly old newsvendors coming out with a paragraph about Freddie, The First Felonious Framlingham or some such tosh."

"Nephew?" snorted the Superintendent. "Who? You or him?"

"Me," said Freddie resignedly, "and see here, my dear old policeman——"

"What were you doing in Sir Marcus Loseley's study at that time of night?"

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"Collecting the jolly old cigarette container," bleated Freddie. "Can't a fellow call for his cigarette container without being accused of nobbling the family plate? I mean, bit thick, what?"

"What time did you arrive at Loseley House?"

"Round about nineish," answered Freddie.

"Talk English," snapped his interlocutor.

"Nine o'clock," Freddie answered obediently. "Or possibly nine one."

"Where did you spend the earlier part of the evening?"

"At the *Nocturnes*, old lad," answered Freddie lightly. "Asked what the *Nocturnes* is, I should feel justified in saying a pretty fruity night-club."

The Superintendent frowned sourly. "What doing?"

"Necking it with considerable gusto."

The Superintendent grunted and fixed his eyes coldly on Freddie: "Have you any friends you could ring up to verify these statements?" he asked.

"No need," responded Freddie. "They'll all be here directly to gather their fallen child to their bosoms. I'll tell them all the harsh things you've said to little Fred."

His humor left the Sergeant and the Superintendent cold. The latter scowled blackly.

"Detained on suspicion," he snapped, and began to write.

A policeman had already stepped forward when a diversion occurred.

Sir Marcus, followed by the Duke and Leslie, entered the station, and went to the high desk behind which the Superintendent sat.

"What ho, Erb!" Freddie cheered lustily. "Look what they're doing to Fred! *A moi!* Hun'and me, you 'ound!"

This to the policeman, in whose face he shook a threatening fist.

The Superintendent looked at the newcomers suspiciously. "May I ask what you want?"

"I am Sir Marcus Loseley," stated the Baronet, stepping forward. "I understand that Mr. Leicester is being detained here on suspicion of having stolen the Loseley tiara from my room tonight?"

"That is so," answered the Superintendent, unbending a trifle. "Pending your charge, of course."

"Charge, fiddlesticks!" barked Loseley. "I do not intend to bring any charge. Mr. Leicester is a personal friend; the idea is ridiculous!"

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"Bravo, Marky, give it him hot!" said Freddie, encouragingly. "Show him up—the nasty, evil-minded wretch."

The Superintendent, glancing from one to the other perplexedly, encountered Freddie's beaming face and frowned coldly.

"*Honi soit*," said the young gentleman cheerfully.

"Mad," grunted the Superintendent. "Am I to understand that you decline to bring a charge against this person?" he demanded of Sir Marcus.

"Oo—he called me a person," wailed Freddie.

"Certainly," the Baronet snorted. "Have the goodness to release him."

Freddie joined the Duke and Leslie, turning to kiss his hand to the enraged Superintendent and the no less enraged Sergeant.

"Some other time, Rachel," he said brightly.

"Oh, shut your fool head, do," growled the Duke. "I notice that you keep my name well in the public eye with your scrapes. There will be a pretty paragraph in the dailies to-morrow, you hopeless clown."

He grasped his nephew firmly by the arm and dragged him away. Sir Marcus, accompanied by Leslie, followed slowly.

In the station Sergeant Clarke and his superior eyed each other wonderingly.

"Well, I'm damned!" grunted the Sergeant.

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X. "NOT TO-NIGHT, MR. ELVEDEN."

THE barman of the "Shaftesbury" placed Jerry's drink before him and winked covertly.

"Friend of yourn left a message fer you, Jerry," he whispered significantly.

" 'And it over," directed Jerry, and a white envelope changed hands.

Jerry did not read the message at once. He stood at the bar for some time sipping his drink thoughtfully, at the same time covertly studying those present. Apparently he was satisfied by his scrutiny. He had his own reasons for not wishing to see either of the two people most interested in his comings and goings—Inspector Elveden and Jimmy Craven, particularly the former. Since his unfortunate meeting with the Inspector on the eve of the robbery at Loseley House, Jerry had been expecting to encounter the sweet-voiced Elveden at every corner. So far he had eluded him.

He stared down at the envelope which he still held. The day before an announcement of the theft had appeared in the papers and with it a statement to the effect that the stolen tiara was a paste imitation. On the whole, Jerry was not looking forward to the interview with the Squid and he had little doubt that this message was to make an assignation. The words—"It would be unfortunate if you made any mistakes, Jerry. Very unfortunate, for you"—stuck in his memory unpleasantly.

With another covert glance round the bar, he retired to a secluded seat and opened the envelope. As usual, the message was printed in block letters. He read—

"WATERLOO STATION. YORK ROAD ENTRANCE. TO-NIGHT. EIGHT-THIRTY."

Jerry lit a cigarette and applied the match to the message, grinding the ashes to dust beneath his heels as a final precaution.

He had only a quarter of an hour. With a slight tensing of his muscles he rose to his feet, buttoned his shabby coat and slouched out of the public-house. He made his way towards Charing Cross and, turning down Villiers Street, crossed Hunger-

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