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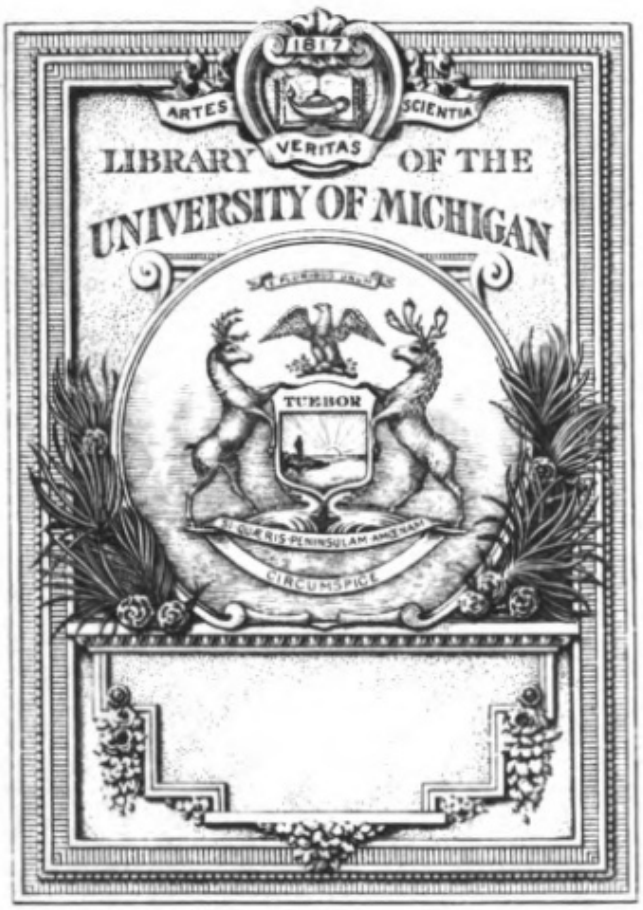

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The

Strange Case of

"WILLIAM"

COOK

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Hosken, Clifford James Wheeler

The Strange Case of "WILLIAM" COOK

By

Richard Keverne

Author of "Carteret's Cure"

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK AND LONDON

1928

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THE STRANGE CASE OF

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The Strange Case of

"WILLIAM" COOK

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

I

To MOST of the summer visitors at the little Belgian plage of St. Gules, old Jean, of the Natation Café, was as familiar as the grey-green sea itself, or the great sand dunes amid which the quaint old place was built.

Jean was a local character, an odd-job man with mysterious occupations, but a regular waiter at the café on the beach during the summer season. The natives mistrusted and disliked him. But that was because he was a foreigner. A Frenchman, some said, others a German or a Scandinavian. And Jean kept himself very much to himself, and returned the local hatred with interest.

He said very little: he never explained his frequent absences, though the whole fishing quarter jeered at him and said he had been in gaol. Only now and again they could rouse him to retort, and then his epithets would rival theirs in savage insult. So they grew a little afraid of Jean, and learned to leave him alone.

Portly, blonde Mme. Levasseur, of the Natation, shared the common hostility, but she was too keen a business woman to express it. Jean was a good workman and cheap. She could beat him down every time, which she could not do when she tried to haggle with her own

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people. And Jean, in his wooden, surly way seemed to understand the English, who were responsible for the fattening of the Levasseur money-bags each season.

Not that Jean spoke their language, but he was resentfully patient with their stupid jokes and their preposterous requests. Madame often thought that Jean was so easy about wages because he made such a good thing out of the fool English. But Madame was always polite to the English. What would you? Without them where would trade be?

That was why, when M. Culver drifted into the Natation one August afternoon and inquired, in his execrable French, what had happened to old Jean, that Mme. Levasseur feigned an intense sympathy. M. Culver was an old customer who came year after year. He paid well, and, for an Englishman, was very "gentil."

"Poor Jean!" Madame exclaimed. "Oh, how I am sorry! He is ill, these few days past. It is the heart, I think. Such a good fellow!"

Richard Culver tried to explain jocularly, in French, that he never believed Jean had a heart. "I always thought he was a mummy," he laboured out. "You know, madame, like Pharaoh."

Madame did not know, but she smiled agreeably, and after his glass of beer, Culver asked for Jean's address.

"I'll go and call on the old pirate," he said. "The Natation without Jean is—is—a different place, madame," he explained.

Madame said, "But, certainly, monsieur," and began to take a more sincere interest in the old fellow's recovery. Jean loomed now as a bigger asset.

Dick Culver lounged off, through the afternoon heat, towards the harbour. For no particular reason he felt sorry about Jean. He was a queer, old thing, and so

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much part and parcel of St. Gules. Culver had known him for five years; he always looked forward to ragging him when he came to the Natation; and it flattered him, too, to realise that he had managed to get nearer to this surly old waiter than most visitors.

Jean would listen to him when he stumbled on in his indifferent French. Sometimes he had asked him questions about England. And Jean had permitted Culver to sketch him.

This was a signal honour. St. Gules was popular with artists, and Jean continually received invitations to pose. He refused them all roughly, contemptuously, and with angry words. Yet last year, when Culver had suggested making a sketch of him, the old man had broken off in the midst of his usual refusal, shrugged his shoulders, and exclaimed, in his rude accent: "If you want to—and will tell no one."

And Culver had made a clever, careful portrait. "The Pirate" he always called it to himself, for there was something about old Jean that suggested a violent past. There was an alert suspicion in the brown eyes, which seemed to veil a life of mystery. The old scar across the right cheek-bone might have come from a cutlass, the stiff leg with which he walked was suggestive; his dark hair and swarthy, weatherbeaten face marked him more as a seaman than a café waiter.

Tall, lithe, wiry, independent, Culver could always imagine Jean, a coloured handkerchief about his head, swarming up the rigging with a knife in his teeth.

Dick Culver came to the open door of a whitewashed cottage by the harbour side, and called out: "Hallo there! Does Jean of the Natation live here?"

A dark-haired virago of a woman disengaged herself

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from a knot of peasants chattering noisily on the neighbouring quay.

"Yes, he does. And what do you want with the lazy good-for-nothing?" she snapped at him. "And how is he going to pay his rent, staying indoors all day saying he is ill? Tell me that? Ill! He's not ill—the lazy one!"

Culver smiled blandly, mainly because he had missed the greater part of the spitfire's outburst.

"I want to see him," he said amicably.

"In the upstairs room," the woman said, with impatience, and turned back to her neighbours.

Culver climbed a steep ladder-like staircase.

"You in here, Monsieur Jean, *le pirate?*" he called out cheerily. "This is Monsieur Culver, you remember him? Come to see what's the matter."

II

That Jean was seriously ill was immediately plain. The old man was lying, fully dressed, on a low truckle bed. His face was mask-like, his skin brown and wrinkled as a shrivelled pear. He spoke with an effort, rudely and hostilely.

"I don't know you. Why do you come here?" he growled.

Culver jollied him.

"Who's to look after me at the café if you stay sulking in your bunk?" he asked. Then, with an odd tenderness: "Look here, Jean, what's up; are you really ill?"

But the man would not respond, merely shifting his deep-set eyes, in gloomy suspicion, to Culver's face, then back again to the damp-stained wall.

"Nothing's the matter," he answered at last. "What do you want with me?"

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Culver made another effort to gain the surly fellow's confidence. But it was no good. He gave up, and, with a cheery "Good-bye" went downstairs to seek the garrulous, acid-tongued woman.

She was waiting for him. Once again she burst into an angry denunciation of that lazy good-for-nothing upstairs. Culver checked her in the way he knew to be the most effective with the Flemish peasant. He spoke of money.

"How much is it that he owes you?" he asked brusquely.

The woman became immediately placatory. Of course, if monsieur were going to pay, it was another matter. But she was a poor, hard-working widow with children to bring up, and she must think of them first.

"Naturally," Culver said, with a shrug; "but how much is it?"

After a rapid calculation, the woman named a pitiably small sum when translated into English currency. Culver marvelled at the hardness of these people, who would blackguard an ill man for a matter of about eighteen shillings.

He gave her three hundred francs, and told her that would clear off the debt and pay the old man's bills for some time to come.

"Now see that you look after him properly," he said sternly.

The woman was cowed, murmuring "Oui, m'sieu; oui, m'sieu," as she fingered the notes greedily.

"And you are to get a doctor in to him," Culver went on. "I shall pay. I'll come again to-morrow and hear what the doctor said." He left with a parting shot: "Look after Jean well and you shall be paid well." And he wandered back to the beach in a curiously sad mood.

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III

Richard Culver was a lonely man himself. He made acquaintances easily enough, but friends seldom. There was something in old Jean's plight that appealed to his sympathy. To lie ill, perhaps dying, amid people who hated you, struck him as being the saddest end to any life.

And Culver, recently, had had a stroke of good fortune; perhaps that helped to sharpen his sympathy for one who appeared to have had none at all.

A gamble on the Stock Exchange, in which he had risked the whole of his small capital, had come off. In a spectacular boom of Kwaga rubber shares he had turned twelve hundred pounds into over nine thousand. Nine thousand pounds meant that he need not worry for a year or two. He could settle down somewhere, in comfort, and write the books he wanted to write, and not be tied to hack journalism for eleven months each year.

For Dick Culver had never followed any settled profession. When he came out of the army he had gone into a stockbroker's office with an old friend of his father's. A year of the City had nearly broken his heart.

He gave up that job and tried painting, for which he had an amateur *flair*. But he soon realised that there was no career for him in art. Then he drifted into journalism, wrote a couple of unsuccessful novels, and found himself past his thirtieth birthday, full of unfulfilled ambitions and tied down to a life of hard, but undistinguished, work from which he could see no escape. But now he was free.

Yet, as he wandered, thoughtfully, along the boarded promenade of St. Gules' Plage, he was feeling a little disappointed. His rather serious grey eyes were wrinkled

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at the corners, and he hurried his pace, as he was apt to do when lost in thought. Life was not panning out as he had dreamed it would.

He had come to St. Gules the day before, on the impulse of a moment, and because he had been there so often. It would be rather jolly, he thought, to spend a luxurious week at the Grande Hotel on the sea front and not have to worry about his bill. Afterwards he would travel until the autumn.

But he found the hotel crowded and not nearly so comfortable as the Trois Poissons in the town where he used to stay, and when he had wandered down to the Natation Café, that seemed changed, too, without old Jean.

Culver flung his six feet of muscular manhood down upon the warm sand and let the hot August sun beat down upon his unruly fair hair while he tried to diagnose his hump.

He was not naturally moody, and a glistening sea soon tempted him to a better occupation than introspection, and sent him, feeling fit and happier, back to the Natation for tea after a joyous swim. And Fate sent to him, on the little *terrasse* by the broad walk, Phil Norman, the landscape painter, who had a cottage in the fishing town overlooking the Mole, whom he had frequently met both here and in town. Life seemed good again.

They dined together that night and joined a merry party at the Casino afterwards. For the time being old Jean passed out of Culver's mind, and when he remembered the old man he did so with a touch of shame.

IV

Culver passed the Natation on his way back from a before-breakfast bathe a couple of mornings later. Mme.

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Levasseur saw him, and came fluttering out from the café, calling him by name.

"Monsieur Culver," she cried in agitation, "Madelaine has been asking for you. Poor Jean, he is very ill; he is dying; he wants to see you at once. You will go? It would be an act of mercy."

Culver nodded, and broke into a run towards the port. He felt terribly guilty for having forgotten the old man; it seemed so mean and selfish.

He found Madelaine and several neighbours in a state of awed excitement, though garrulous as ever. The old man was still alive, he learnt, though they assured him, hopefully, that he could not last much longer.

Culver pushed his way through the gabbling women and climbed the steep stairs. At first glance he thought Jean was already dead. He lay on his bed, looking more like a mummy than ever, motionless, his tanned cheeks turned to a darker, unearthly hue. Culver spoke softly, hardly expecting to get any reply.

"Jean, it's Monsieur Culver. Jean, can you hear me?"

Slowly the old man's eyes opened and he motioned feebly for him to come nearer.

"Shut the door. Lock the door," he whispered with difficulty. "Keep them out, those women."

Culver obeyed and went back to the old man's bedside.

"You wanted to see me, Jean," he said in a low voice. "What is it? Can I do anything for you?"

Jean's speech came so slowly and in such a weak tone that Culver could scarcely understand him. He was patently uneasy, and it was pitiable to watch him groping in a gathering darkness for words that would not come.

The man seemed almost tortured as he tried to form a coherent phrase. He appeared to be appealing to Culver to help him as friend to friend.

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Culver was aware of an intangible change in old Jean; it was as though some barrier between them had been broken down. He no longer thought of him as the rough, surly waiter.

"You want to tell me something?" he asked.

Jean nodded slowly.

"You—will—help ——," he faltered with painful effort.

"Yes, Jean. Anything. Tell me."

"You—will—go—to—try ——" He broke down, unable to sustain the effort, and presently his weak and shaking hand groped towards the grimy pillow.

"All right, old man. I understand," Culver murmured softly. "Don't worry." Tenderly he felt beneath the pillow and brought out a packet of papers loosely tied with twine. "This is what you mean—eh?"

"You—promise—me?"

The words were faint yet so eager. The sibilant French seemed to whisper in the air. Richard Culver was deeply moved. He did not know what he was to promise, though he answered distinctly: "All right. Trust me, Jean," all unconsciously speaking in English.

His words seemed to bring a sudden peace to the dying man. He seemed satisfied. The ghost of a smile flickered in the brown eyes, a smile of gratitude; and for some time he lay staring at the damp-stained ceiling.

And, as he watched, Culver saw that the tired face was softening. The deep lines grew less prominent, the sallow skin took upon it a finer look. Old Jean's mind was no longer in the shabby room; it had gone back to some distant past.

Culver knew he was watching death; death drawing its kindly fingers across Jean's rugged cheeks, and for a long time he sat there in silence, awed and feeling inexpressibly impotent.

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Then, with a sudden, superhuman strength, the old man roused, and raised himself with a jerk, gazing far away into an immense distance, and the dry lips began to move.

The face was no longer that of old Jean of the Natation, but of a younger man, cleaner, less furtive. The brown eyes opened wide in wonder, and from those lips came clear, crisp words in the voice of a cultured, educated Englishman.

"Our Father ——" it began. There was no hesitation, no slurring of syllables. Right to the end, old Jean repeated the Lord's Prayer, as Culver had heard it said hundreds of times in church. Then, just for a moment, he did hesitate, and his head drooped slowly towards his breast, and his last words came in a quieter, subdued voice.

"Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom," he said distinctly. The wondering brown eyes closed slowly, and with a deep sigh old Jean of the Natation died.

V

Richard Culver was neither shocked nor afraid. He found himself feeling glad, glad that old Jean had left, at last, a world that must have held only sorrow for him.

He felt, too, that he had witnessed the fall of the curtain upon a tragedy. Old Jean, the queer old fellow who had gone out with the words of the Penitent Thief upon his lips, was no German or Frenchman, but English, English as Culver himself. And educated, too; there was the accent of the Public Schools in his last speech, a peculiar quality of voice that belonged to no uncultured man.

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He looked at the still figure on the bed, so peaceful and quiet now.

"Good-bye, Jean," he said, covering the softened face reverently. He remembered suddenly the papers he held, still clutched in his hand.

For the moment he was sorry they were there. Sensitive as he was, he felt he did not want to pry further into the secret of this man's past. Yet he had promised something. What, he did not know. But, he realised, quickly, it would be far better for him to deal with Jean's papers than for a soulless officialdom. If this were the end of some great scandal, some family tragedy, then Richard Culver would use his own discretion as to how much or how little he told the world.

He crammed the packet into his pocket and instinctively began to search the room. But the search produced nothing. A tottery chest of drawers held Jean's meagre wardrobe: the battered canvas-covered portmanteau, with its broken lock and frayed corners, held only his shabby dress-suit.

Culver went out of the, now so quiet, room with a new sense of responsibility.

By the door, Madelaine was still chattering excitedly with the other women. As Culver appeared she stretched out a powerful arm scornfully, and pointed to a peasant girl who hovered uncertainly on the outskirts of the crowd.

"There she is; look at her; the young lady who is afraid," she taunted. "A dutiful niece indeed! Why don't you come and thank the English gentleman? Too fond of your money, yes? Afraid you would have to pay your uncle's debts?" She finished with a vile epithet.

Culver stood amazed for the moment, his eyes fixed upon the cowering girl. She gave him only a momentary

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glance, but there was fear as well as anger in the startled eyes. Indeed, she looked innocent enough for all that Madelaine said of her; a scared woman, and undeniably attractive in her peasant garb.

Richard Culver strove to check Madelaine's storm of abuse.

"What is it? What is it?" he asked impatiently.

Madelaine began a torrential explanation, and when Culver glanced up again, the girl had gone.

"Marie Schmidt, the worthless one! Jean's niece, she says she is," the woman sneered. "Jean asked for her; I sent the telegram. But she was afraid to come in, afraid because she heard you were there; afraid because she thinks you would make her pay some of the money Jean owes. Jean's niece—huh!"

"Be quiet, Madelaine! Be quiet!" Culver interrupted, able only to understand a few words of the woman's speech. "It does not matter. Poor Jean is dead."

Madelaine ceased her tirade.

"Poor fellow," she murmured in affected grief. She crossed herself.

Culver went on.

"Madelaine, attend to me." He spoke slowly in his halting French. "You are to see about the funeral, a—a—worthy ——" he could think of no other word—"funeral. I will pay everything, and you for your pains."

Money spoke to Madelaine as it always did. Instantly she was attentive and acquiescent. Everything, she said, should be done; everything.

"And," Culver said as he turned to leave, "if Marie Schmidt comes again, send her round to me, at the Grande Hotel."

He hurried off, anxious to get away from the vituperation and sordidness of the place where poor old Jean

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lay dead. That half-comprehended incident of Marie Schmidt fretted him. Two fish-wives screaming at one another as it seemed to him, though Marie had not uttered a word, struck him as a deplorable anti-climax to the tragedy.

Forgetful of hunger, he wandered on past the hotel, out into the waste of sand dunes beyond the Plage. They looked lonely, and detached, and Dick Culver wanted to be alone just then.

He found a resting place, high up on top of a rush-covered dune, with the grey-green sea of sandhills behind him and the grey-green sea idly lapping in below, and great white-winged gulls riding easily in the sky above his head. And there, in solitude, he went through old Jean's papers.

They told little enough. There were the identification papers and a passport of Jean Jacques Malet, born in Antwerp in 1867, a few francs in Belgian notes. A creased and worn front page of *The Times* of twenty years ago, a railway map of Belgium, and a letter, newly written in a shaky hand, yet so clearly that of the real Jean, the neat, small, well-formed script with its Greek "e's" of the educated Englishman.

The letter was already addressed: "William Cook, Esqre., The Pines, Oldford, Suffolk, Angleterre."

That was the only hint Jean's papers gave of the mystery of his life.

For a long time Dick Culver sat staring out across the gently heaving sea. Seventy or eighty miles over there was Suffolk. And William Cook, whoever he might be. Perhaps an old and broken man, to whom the news of Jean's death might come as a shock—or as a relief.

Away to the left, St. Gules was waking to life under the warm morning sun. Gay parasols dotted the sands,

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and a trim yawl was nosing her way between the harbour piers.

Dick Culver returned by a roundabout route. He had to redeem his unspoken promise to a dead countryman. How he should redeem it he did not quite know, but he was going to Oldford to see William Cook, and what he told when he saw him should depend on—William Cook.

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CHAPTER II

I

THEY buried Jean Jacques Malet in the dreary little cemetery at the back of St. Gules on a blazing hot morning, and only Richard Culver and Madelaine followed him to his grave.

That same evening found Culver at Antwerp; early the next morning at Harwich. He did not hurry. Indeed, now that he was drawing near the end of his journey, he felt a growing distaste for the task he had undertaken.

It was not a pleasant job to look forward to. He would have to be tactful; lie if necessary. Old sores reopened and old scandals revived were apt to hurt all the more because they had been put out of mind for many years. And there must have been one of the most poignant of tragedies behind old Jean's life.

Culver delayed long over breakfast at Harwich, and hired a car to drive him to Oldford. For once the rich beauty of the August landscape made no appeal to him. The yellow harvest fields, all shimmering in the sun, the wide sweep of purple heather on the Suffolk commons; the golden glory of the gorse, he hardly saw, for his mind was back in that squalid attic chamber in the fishing town of St. Gules, and old Jean's last distinct words were ringing in his ears.

And then he came to Oldford, past the crowded golf-links, down the steep hill, with the same, grey-green sea glistening in the distance, to the Palace Hotel with its throng of white-clad, laughing holiday-makers drinking their before-lunch cocktails and chattering of games and pleasures, and life. Richard Culver felt like some aveng-

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ing fate as he elbowed his way to the office to demand a room.

II

Oldford is a queer place. The old town sprawls itself along a mile of shingly coast with the modern town rising sharply from the beach, a haphazard collection of villas and little terraces of lodging-houses, with the flint tower of the ancient church crowning all.

In times past Oldford was a busy port, doing a brisk trade with the Low Countries; but that is all over now, and Oldford thrives on its summer visitors and its famous golf-links.

For nine months of the year the place is as dead as its own, silted-up harbour which shows silent mud flats to the sky for sixteen hours out of each twenty-four. But in the holiday season Oldford wakes to life, like its harbour at high water when it dances and sparkles in the sunshine.

And Oldford seemed very much alive that August afternoon as Richard Culver made his way thoughtfully along its main street, filled with flannel-clad youths and white-frocked girls. The hot sun shone from a cloudless sky, and down each narrow lane which led to the beach there was a vista of yellow shingle backed by a dancing sea, with here and there a sail, or a smudge of smoke on the horizon from some steamer far out.

"The Pines," they had told him, "was down by the river," which he came to understand was the local description of the harbour. "Keep the lane round by the marshes and you can't miss it," the hotel-porter explained.

Culver found it easily enough. It stood alone, a prosperous, peaceful-looking place, just the sort of home to

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which conventional, well-to-do gentlefolk would retire, and utterly unlike anything connected with Jean of the Natation.

Culver stood hesitating just inside the neat, white-painted gate. From beyond a tall hedge of laurels, which skirted the gravelled drive, there came the sound of laughter and the thud of a hard-hit tennis ball. He could see a flicker of white through the gaps in the evergreens, and somebody called in jesting reproof: "Really, Elsa! you might have taken that one."

Culver turned to go. He could not break in upon this pleasant scene with his grim story of family disgrace. He halted, frowning down at the gravel, prodding little holes in it with his stick. Then a girl's voice at his elbow caused him to look up, almost with a guilty start.

"You looking for anybody?" she asked in a lazy drawl.

He found himself staring into a pair of big, questioning hazel eyes which seemed to be appraising him part in interest, part in amusement. And under that steady gaze he grew inexplicably embarrassed.

"I—er—I wanted to see Mr. Cook—Mr. William Cook," he began nervously.

"Yes?" She waited, as if she expected him to say more. "You're a pal of Bill's, I suppose?"

"No. Oh no." He looked at her stupidly. She had appeared so silently and unexpectedly from the gate that he had not yet recovered from his surprise.

She was hatless, and her shingled, brown hair fell carelessly over her forehead in a provocative way. Her clear skin was burnt by the sun, and under one shapely, tanned arm, which made her tennis frock look the whiter, she carried a couple of rackets.

She seemed to sense his embarrassment.

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"Well, come along in," she said, with a slow smile. "Or—or—do you want to see Bill on business?"

"I do rather—that is, perhaps I'd better not interrupt him now. I'll look round later on—when he's not busy."

"Oh, don't do that. Bill's never busy, really. I'll tell him. Who shall I say?"

"Culver. But—but Mr. Cook won't know me. I say—really, I'd better leave it."

"I shouldn't." There was a glint of laughter in the hazel eyes; a suggestion that this graceful, sunburned girl was enjoying some secret joke. It fretted Culver, conscious as he was of the gravity of his mission.

"Thanks; but I think I will," he answered stiffly.

She smiled, frankly now.

"Just as you like," she said, seeming to mock him. "But here is Bill—if you want to see—him."

Culver swung round sharply.

A tall, spare woman, past her first youth, yet undeniably attractive, had just emerged from a path in the shrubbery. She was smoking a cigarette in a long amber holder, and she was looking in question at Culver and the girl by his side.

"Hallo, Bill," the girl called gaily. "Here's a visitor inquiring for you."

Dick Culver felt almost that he was blushing in his confusion.

"It was a Mr. William Cook that I wanted," he said shortly, raising his hat.

The elder woman smiled mechanically as she flicked the ash from her cigarette.

"Yes," she answered in a deep, quiet voice. "I am William Cook—at least, that is my trade name."

"Really? Of course. Oh yes."

Culver found himself floundering idiotically, the more

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so because he was conscious of the hardly hidden smile of amusement at his embarrassment on the red lips of that taunting girl.

The elder woman raised her deftly pencilled eyebrows as though she were at a loss to understand her visitor's behaviour.

"Perhaps I'd better explain," she said. "William Cook is an adaptation of my late husband's name. I am Mrs. Wilfred Coke—we pronounce it Cook, you know." She gave an easy little smile. "And you?"

"Culver—Richard Culver," he answered quickly, feeling a little more at ease now. But he wished the girl would go. He could not explain his call with her standing there laughing at him. Involuntarily his eyes went towards her, and Mrs. Coke seemed to read his meaning.

"Ann, dear, go and tell them that I shan't be long, will you?" she said in the most natural way; then to Culver: "Won't you come into the house? It's rather silly to stand talking here, isn't it?"

III

He was struck by her manner, the competent way in which she controlled a rather foolish situation.

"Thanks, if I may," he answered, enormously relieved to see the girl, addressed as Ann, disappearing in the shrubbery. "I have come on rather a sad mission, I'm afraid. If you'd prefer it, I'll come back later."

She glanced at him sharply through penetrating eyes of a steely blue tint: queer eyes, he thought, they seemed to veil a great secret, and shook her head. It struck him then that already she suspected something of the import of his visit. And it flashed into his mind, too, that her name was familiar. Mrs. Wilfred Coke—he remembered now.

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"Was your husband the etcher?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. Did you know him?" There was a suggestion of apprehension in the sharp way in which she asked the question.

"No. Oh no. Only his work. I know and admire that tremendously."

She sighed. "Yes, it's fine work," she agreed.

Little forgotten details were returning vividly to Culver's mind as he walked the last few paces to the house; odd scraps of stories he had heard from artist friends of Wilfred Coke and his end. A brilliant artist unhappily married, they had said of him. And he had taken to drink, soaked until his hand failed him. Then he had had an accident—at least, that was how a generous coroner had described it—gone overboard from a sailing-boat on a winter afternoon some years ago. But those who knew him did not agree with the coroner's verdict.

No wonder this woman had looked startled when she asked if Culver had known her husband, he thought. She must have had a devil of a life. And this fellow Jean mixed up in it, too!

He looked at her as they went up the steps, a hard-bitten woman with a dry, hard skin skilfully powdered to disguise the effects of age and weather, like that of a hunting woman or a champion golfer. But her hair showed no trace of grey. Severely shingled, it was black and thick as a youth's. Her forehead was puckered, and she was evidently thinking hard. He left her to make the next move.

"You said a sad mission, Mr. Culver?" she queried at last. "What is it?"

She faced him bravely; he could almost see her bracing herself for the shock.

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"It is rather sad," he answered. They turned into a vast room looking out across the river, a studio with canvases littered about, and at one end a motley collection of old furniture. "I've just come back from St. Gules ——" Her eyes lifted quickly. "Did you know old Jean there—Jean of the Natation?"

She hesitated a fraction of a second before she answered:

"Yes. Yes. Everybody knows him. A funny old fellow. So surly—but rather a dear."

"He's dead," Culver blurted out.

"Really! Poor old Jean!"

There was no trace of distress in her voice. She spoke rather as one speaks of a dead terrier. That nettled Culver; unreasonably he knew, but he had been so much obsessed by the tragedy of Jean that this indifferent reception of his news hurt him.

"I was with him when he died," he went on deliberately, "and I have a letter from him—I assume it's from him—for William Cook."

Then she did show some trace of feeling. Again it seemed she braced herself for a shock. She put out her hand. "Poor old Jean," she repeated. "I'm so sorry. Somehow—one never thought of Jean dying."

She laughed a nervous, mirthless laugh, crumpling the letter in her hand and gazing uncertainly at the floor.

"If you're not in a dreadful hurry, Mr. Culver," she said, after a moment, "I wish you would forgive me while I go and settle my party. I'll be back in a few minutes. I want you to tell me all about poor Jean. You were fond of him—I can see that." She gave him a quiet smile of understanding. "You will wait, won't you?"

And without heeding his answer, she hurried away.

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IV

Of course, it was a ruse: the baldest ruse to make an opportunity to read the letter alone. Culver understood that, and appreciated it. But there were many things he could not understand, chief among them what connection there could be between Jean and Mrs. Coke.

She was too old to be his daughter, almost too young to be his sister, and wife was ruled out of the question.

She had been anxious, and she had been dissembling —that, too, was clear—but there was a note in her last words that made him feel that she had some affection for the dead man. He felt curious, anxious now to learn more. If he were satisfied that she had a right to know, he would tell her of the pathetic details of Jean's last moments—it might comfort her as it so clearly had comforted him.

Culver wandered aimlessly about the big studio. There was something very masculine about it. Tobacco-ash was sprinkled about the floor, and on a rickety, old, oak table, by the far wall, was a decanter of whisky with a syphon by its side.

The pictures were mostly seascapes, or vivid little sketches of the purple commons, but there were a few old canvases on the walls, a Dutch still life, and a charming little sea piece that might have been a Van de Velde, though it was in such grimy condition one could hardly see it.

But the jumble of furniture at the far end interested him most; piled up anyhow, was an extraordinary collection of maimed and broken stuff. All of it good. Culver had an eye for old furniture; there was not a fake in the lot so far as he could see. Standing in front of this pathetic medley of ill-used treasures, was an unusually

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don't tell Bill; she hates me messing about in her cupboards."

Promptly the girl began to ransack an oak corner cupboard. Culver saw that it was filled with brushes and bottles and the paraphernalia of a painter. Ann seemed to have forgotten him for the moment.

"Now, where the devil ——" she murmured to herself, groping among a row of tins. Then: "Ah! here they are."

She extracted a handful of cigarettes and turned to him with a shamed little chuckle.

"Better have one," she said frankly. "Be an accessory."

Instinctively he took one. Not that he wanted it, but this girl unsettled him. She was so inconsequent; she made him feel old and staid and stodgy. He was a little afraid of her.

She looked round for a match, and hurriedly he pulled a box from his pocket.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll have to hop back now. You're coming along later, I suppose?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, do. Bill's got a most dreadful bunch here. She may know all about mouldy furniture, but she collects mouldier people. Do come down; you'll be the only bright spot."

Her flattering frankness made him laugh naturally for the first time. She was so entirely devoid of self-consciousness; she treated him as if she had known him all her life.

"I haven't been asked yet," he said.

"But I've asked you." She looked up at him as if she were really surprised.

"And I don't even know your name."

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"Ann."

"Yes, but——"

"Gray. Ann Gray. But I'm Ann to everybody here, just as she's Bill. We don't bother about surnames. Gosh! here she is!" For the moment she was surprised out of her usual lazy drawl. "Don't you give me away now," she whispered as she swung out of the window.

He shook his head and turned to the opening door. Mrs. Coke came in.

"I'm dreadfully sorry to be so long," she said, with a compelling smile. "You're smoking. I'm glad of that, but won't you have a whisky-and-soda? You see, I know what you men like."

It struck him then that there was a bitterness in her voice born of years of experience with the dead Wilfred Coke.

"No, thanks very much," he answered.

"Then sit down. I've arranged my people for a time. Tell me about Jean, now. He wasn't terribly hard up or anything like that—poor old dear?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I ask because of his letter," she went on with a ring of sympathy. "You might as well see it; I need make no secret of it to you, I know. He wrote this."

She put forward a crumpled sheet of paper, thin and almost transparent. Culver glanced at it, and felt himself start in surprise. The letter was not in that neat, educated handwriting of the address, but in sprawling, ill-formed script, and in French, and illiterate French at that. Jean had never written this.

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CHAPTER III

I

THE letter was an obvious fake; that was Dick Culver's immediate impression as he scanned the ill-traced words.

"Poor Jean, he was not a great correspondent, I'm afraid," Mrs. Coke went on with a little shake of the head. "These old Flemish peasants can seldom write even."

"I suppose not," he answered mechanically, his eyes still fixed upon the scrawl.

He found it hard to understand. There was something about a chest, and a servile appeal for money. Suddenly Culver felt sore and angry. To be expected to believe that Jean had written this trivial stuff wounded his pride.

What a fool he had made of himself, dashing across to England with a fanciful idea of breaking tragic news, gently; of helping to soften a blow to some proud family, only to be met by this contemptuous recognition.

"So that was it?" he said, pointlessly, returning the letter.

Mrs. Coke was eyeing him gravely. He met her gaze with hostility. Why should she try to deceive him like this—if she were trying to?

"I must explain the whole thing to you," she began calmly, "because it was awfully—sweet—of you to take so much trouble. Believe me, I do appreciate it."

"It's nothing. I had no means of telling how important it might be."

"Of course not. That's why I want to explain." She gave a queer, nervous laugh. "You see, Mr. Culver, I'm a dealer," she said defiantly. "This I call my hospital." She flung out an arm with a graceful gesture towards the heap of old furniture at the far end.

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"Indeed."

"I found it paid better than painting, after my husband died." Her eyes strayed from his face as if she were recalling unwelcome memories. "I had to do something to live. Unfortunately one will cling to life"—she shrugged her shoulders in a cynical way—"and I learned, when I had to sell most of our own furniture, that there was money in the game, if you have any knowledge at all. And so—well, that's my story."

She was recapturing his interest. He felt sorry for her, despite himself.

"Very clever and plucky of you, Mrs. Coke," he said.

"You really think so? I'm so glad." She had shed her mood of sadness momentarily and was all smiles.

"I began in quite an amateur way, you know—in London, selling to my friends mostly. But I hate London—don't you? Down here it will be different. I'm going in for things on a different scale. The really good things, like that wonderful dower chest."

"I was looking at it," he broke it. "What a fine thing it is!"

"Oh! So you appreciate nice things too?"

"I love old furniture."

"Well, that's one of my real bargains. That cost me ten pounds—delivered to this house, and I'm going to restore it myself—I'm rather clever at that—and then I think I'm pretty certain of a purchaser in America. But why I tell you this, Mr. Culver, is that Jean got that for me."

"Did he?" Culver was genuinely surprised.

"Yes. It was in a stable near St. Gules. They used it for keeping corn in. I saw it when I was over there in June, and I got Jean to buy it for me. We dealers,

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you know, have to be cunning if we are to make our profit," she added apologetically.

"So that's how old Jean comes into the story?" he said, almost thinking aloud. He was still subconsciously trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle. "So my mission wasn't a very sad one, after all."

"Oh, but it was." The strange eyes had clouded. "I really was awfully fond of the old man; I'd known him for years at the café. And he was so quaint, after he bought that chest; it seemed to fire his imagination. He kept finding new treasures for me to buy, most of them utterly useless. But you can see how valuable a man like that was to me."

"Of course. And I expect you were valuable to him."

"He didn't lose by it—as you see from his letter. The dear old thing was just as fond of money as most of us—the Flemings a little bit more, I think, don't you?"

Memories of Madelaine's cupidity came back to him, and he agreed.

"And so you were with him when he died," Mrs. Coke went on. "That was very decent of you. I suppose he was alone; no relations came near him?"

Culver told the story of the niece.

"How like those people! So hard!" the woman commented. "But how was it he came to ask you to bring this letter?" The question seemed to slip out as a mere politeness.

Culver thought for a moment. He was very uncertain. Somehow this story was not altogether convincing, and he still doubted that letter, although his doubts were a little shaken.

She was trying to get at something. But what? Was she really a relative, testing him to make sure that the secret had not been disclosed? He might have done much

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the same thing in the circumstances—given nothing away, even lied to hush up a scandal. Or was her story true?

Anyhow, it seemed to him that Jean's secret were better untold now.

"It was with a few of his papers, and as I was coming back I thought I'd better deliver it," he answered at length. "He evidently wanted me to do something with it, and this was the obvious thing," he went on glibly.

He looked up at her. Her face was like a mask, but it impressed him that she did not believe him.

"How really nice of you!" she said in a low voice, full of appreciation. "But I do feel so guilty, having brought you on such a long journey. You will stay to tea, won't you? Come down to the lawn; you'll find some quite amusing people there. I feel I want to know more of you, Mr. Culver; this is—in a way—such a romantic meeting."

But Culver would not be persuaded. The whole incident somehow fretted him. It had turned from tragedy into pathos. He felt flat and puerile, and anxious to get away, alone, to reason with himself.

"Some other time—if I may," he said with a conventional smile as he rose to leave.

Mrs. Coke did not press her invitation.

"Please do. Any time," she replied, extending a graceful arm. "I shall never forget how nice you were about this."

II

A couple of miles along that lonely shingle beach that runs southward from Oldford towards the mouth of Walm Harbour, Dick Culver scooped himself a seat in the peb-

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bles and tried to persuade himself that Mrs. Coke's story was true.

If Jean Malet had meant anything to her, she could not have behaved as she had done, he told himself. She had been a little ill at ease, of course—the circumstances of his call accounted for that—but her straightforward explanation held water.

And yet —— There was always an "and yet" arising in his mind to oppose every one of his reasons.

The letter! That took a lot of believing. The difference in the handwriting alone condemned it. And yet —— She would have realised that. She need never have showed him the letter at all.

He worried and fretted at the problem until the sun began to sink behind him, and his lengthening shadow told that evening was drawing on. A little breeze blew in from the sea, chill after the heat of the day, and a pale moon came up mysteriously out of the quiet water that lapped in tiny, restless, singing waves against the shingle shore, in defiance, as it seemed, of the declining sun.

Frowning, he stared out across the grey water. Was it any business of his, anyhow? he asked himself. He picked up a stone and threw it viciously at a patch of floating seaweed. If Mrs. Coke had a secret to keep, why shouldn't she keep it?

And then the queer, transfigured face of old Jean came back to him; Jean in his last moments of life. What had he wanted? What was that promise which Culver had given so readily and which had brought the last peace to the dying man? That unsettled him in a way. After all, he couldn't do any more than he had done. Let the dead bury its dead.

"Oh, damn the whole business!" he said, getting, abruptly, to his feet. He was cold, and disappointed.

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That was the truth of the matter, he admitted, frankly. He had looked for some dramatic scene and it had not come off.

He tramped the weary miles back to the hotel in the same disgruntled mood. He would clear off the next morning, he decided; go back to St. Gules, pick up his luggage, and wander south. Get away from the atmosphere of Jean and Mrs. Coke, and romantic surmise. Forget it.

Dinner was over when he reached the Palace. Culver ate a half-cold meal in a corner of the big dining-room and chafed and fretted at the babble of careless talk and laughter which flooded to his ears from the crowded lounge. There was a dance at the hotel that night; already the band had started. And the insistent throbbing rhythm of the music, which on any other night would have set his feet itching to dance, merely served to aggravate his irritable mood.

He was out of conceit with himself—out of conceit with the world. He felt he hated the few late-comers like himself, who were scattered about the room—a faded-looking mother with a couple of noisy, self-conscious flappers who cackled and giggled, a portly, sunburned man in loud tweeds who talked golf to his bored companion, and a round-faced, amiable, elderly parson in dark grey flannels at a neighbouring table, who tried to be friendly, and whom Culver snubbed deliberately and then felt ashamed of his rudeness.

They all irked him. He left his meal half finished, forced an apologetic "Good-evening" to the parson as he went out, and hurried to his room, cursing the throbbing dance tunes that penetrated even there.

Before a window, wide open to the still, moon-lit night, Dick Culver went through old Jean's papers once more.

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He had a foolish idea of putting them all into an envelope and posting them to Mrs. Coke with a brief note of explanation. Then he decided to destroy them.

He scanned them curiously one by one, these tiny fragments of flotsam, all that remained of the tragic wreck of a human life. The passport—with its crude photograph of Jean—that faded and creased sheet of newspaper from a *Times* of twenty years ago. Why had Jean kept that? Culver shrugged his shoulders. If he knew the answer to that question he would probably know much of the hidden tragedy.

His eyes ran down the page mechanically, and riveted to one announcement that seemed now to jump out from the long column of marriage notices.

"Coke—Garland," it read. "On the 15th inst. at St. Chad's Church, Chelsea, Wilfred Hansard Coke, elder son of the late Captain Alban Hansard Coke, R.N., of Cheltenham, to Maude Wilhelmina Garland."

"Wilhelmina Garland. Wilhelmina Coke. Bill." He spoke the words aloud. There could be no doubt about it—this the woman. So she had lied to him!

Here was a definite connection, twenty years old, between Jean of the Natation and the woman who called herself William Cook. And she had pretended, so convincingly, that Jean meant nothing more to her than a Flemish peasant, whom she had employed to buy an old chest.

For a few moments Culver was furiously angry. His instinct was to go straight off, then and there, to The Pines and face Mrs. Coke; let her know, at any rate, that he knew she had been lying. But his anger changed to hard resentment.

If this woman thought she could fool him so easily, she should find out that she was wrong. He had a prom-

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ise to redeem to old Jean and he would redeem it. But first of all he must have a few more facts at his disposal; facts which would refute any further attempt at duplicity on Mrs. Coke's part.

He would go to her, later; when he had found out a little more about her. There was something for him to work on now. Garland—her maiden name. Who were the Garlands? Had Jean's name perchance been Garland?

Then came the memory of that peasant girl, Marie Schmidt, his niece. Perhaps the old man had married a peasant—for who could say what reason?—and gone native, as they put it in the East. Marie Schmidt ought to be traceable. There should be clues to pick up from her. Yes, that is what he would do first, go back to St. Gules as he intended, but not wander south. He would find Marie Schmidt if possible, and see where she led him.

Carefully Culver folded up the worn papers, and locked them away in his bag. His fretful, dark mood of dinner-time had gone. He was grave, but alert. There was a task ahead of him which appealed to his imagination. And two debts to be paid—one to Jean's memory and the other to "Bill" Coke.

The troubling rhythm of the dance music no longer irritated; it sounded rather jolly. Culver went to the door. He would go and watch the dancers for a bit, and have a drink, and think things out downstairs.

III

Making his way through the crowded, noisy lounge, Dick Culver suddenly caught sight of Ann Gray.

She saw him at the same moment, and smiled in recog-

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nition. He would have passed on, but she disengaged herself from a group of laughing companions and called to him.

"Why aren't you dancing?" she asked in her lazy voice.

He stopped. "I don't know. I'm not changed, for one thing," he answered, looking at her curiously. She was really very attractive, so cool and unperturbed in the midst of this noisy, heated crowd, her brown hair just a little ruffled, her tanned cheeks so fresh and healthy. He liked her frock, too, a simple thing of some blue material that looked to his masculine eye, just right. This girl knew how to dress, he told himself.

"Well, go and change," she said frankly. She looked up at him with grave mockery. "Richard Culver's got the hump to-night, hasn't he?" she demanded provocatively.

She made him feel self-conscious. She was laughing at him again. But he tried to answer her in her own light way.

"Not particularly," he said. "Why does Ann make that serious allegation?"

"Just because ——" she answered. She was edging him through the crowd towards the open doors which led to the verandah facing the sea. "Why didn't you come to Bill's party this afternoon?" she went on.

He frowned involuntarily. "I couldn't very well," he said, with a touch of confusion. "I—I had to see Mrs. Coke on—on business, and ——"

"But Bill said she asked you, and you were stuffy about it, and wouldn't come. And I asked you."

He was fretting under this catechism.

"I know you did. But I—I had things to do. I'm only here for a few hours. I have to get away to-morrow."

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"Where are you going?" she asked innocently.

"Back to St. Gules."

"What a rotten spot! I'd much rather be here."

They had wandered out through the garden to the edge of the beach, and he was gazing at the sea, all silvery in the moonlight, wondering why on earth this girl should take so much interest in him. Was there a motive behind it?

"You're an old friend of Mrs. Coke's, I suppose?" he asked with sudden irrelevance.

"Bill? Not very. I met her in Town, and when I found her down here I fell upon her with a shriek. She's enormous fun."

"I thought you were staying with her," he said.

"Oh, Lord, no! I'm staying here. And a very good place, too, Richard Culver."

"I'm beginning to think it is," he laughed. "Still, I've got to go away."

A boisterous crowd of young people burst from the door of the hotel, and somebody called: "Ann, Ann, you out here?"

"All right, I'm coming," the girl called back.

"You're wanted on the telephone."

"Well, go and tell them to hang on," she answered carelessly. Then: "Good-bye, Richard Culver, don't be too dismal," she laughed, and she left him.

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CHAPTER IV

I

DICK CULVER was back in St. Gules the next night. He went up to Town and crossed by the afternoon boat to Ostend. He could not, he felt, hang about Oldford for the whole of the day, with a chance of meeting Mrs. Coke, or Ann Gray, even.

For that odd little interview with Ann had disquieted him. He had come to feel that she was playing a part on Mrs. Coke's behalf; trying to get something out of him to tell her; some hint of his suspicions. Culver rather hated the thought. Ann seemed much too clean and honest a girl to be playing an underhand game.

It was late when he reached the Grande, on the Plage, but the hotel was full of life, so like yet so unlike, he thought, that other hotel eighty odd miles across the sea. The same moon was streaming down on the silvery water, the same rhythmic tunes being played by the dance band. But the people were different, the atmosphere was different. The gaiety of St. Gules was a professional gaiety, not spontaneous and jolly as it had been at Oldford. The dancing women were hard-eyed and daring, the men cynical in their less boisterous laughter. For the first time he agreed with Ann's candid remark—St. Gules did seem a rotten hole.

Culver avoided Phil Norman and his party, who were sitting on the *terrasse* sipping drinks between dances. He did not want to have to answer questions, or to be gay. Norman was a good chap, but not the sort of man to understand why one should go dashing off to England just because a dying waiter asked you to deliver a letter. But he might know something about Wilfred

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Coke's antecedents though. Culver would tackle him, tactfully, to-morrow.

He went along to the harbour soon after breakfast. Madelaine was, as usual, engaged in voluble gossip with her neighbours. She looked surprised to see Culver, and came to meet him, still talking over her shoulder to her companions.

Culver began guilefully. He knew the suspicious type of mind with which he had to deal. He suggested that he had merely come to see that everything was properly settled, and that he had paid all he owed.

Madelaine's greedy eyes narrowed, and she invited him indoors—for fear that their conversation might be overheard by her already curious neighbours. And promptly she invented an outstanding loan of ten francs, which she said she had made to Jean. Culver nodded acquiescence.

"And that telegram you sent for him?" he queried casually.

"But, yes. That is so. I had forgotten that, too," the woman answered quickly.

Culver played with a couple of twenty-five franc notes, and observed with satisfaction the woman's avaricious gaze shifting to them.

"Marie Schmidt never came again, I suppose?" he asked in his laboured French.

"No. No. Not she. The worthless one!" Madelaine became indignant. "She only came to see if there was any money to get. That's all."

Culver abandoned Marie Schmidt for the moment.

"Old Jean, he had lived here a long time with you, Madelaine?" he asked.

"Some months. Perhaps two, perhaps three. He did

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not stay long anywhere. Such a terrible man! Oh!" She shivered with exaggerated horror.

"Why was that? Didn't pay his bills?" Culver asked.

"It was not that. It was the drink. Sometimes for hours he would sit in his room drinking cognac. And he would not be happy, or quarrelsome like the rest when they drink, but just dumb. And if I go in he would stare at me so terribly. As if he would kill me. And never speak. Just glare. Oh, but he must have been a bad man, that Jean. It was the same everywhere he lived, he frightened them. They turned him out. I would have turned him out, but he was ill, and I am a charitable woman."

"Yes, yes. You have a kind heart, Madelaine," Culver said with a smile. "But he is gone now, poor Jean, so we must forget that he was bad."

"Certainly, m'sieur. Poor old man!" She crossed herself mechanically.

He encouraged her to talk more of Jean. She had known him for many years, she said. And he had aged much in that time. "It was his wicked life," she announced fiercely, but details of that wicked life Culver would not extract. It was obviously mere gossip, the gossip of a people who mistrusted and hated the foreigner.

And so Culver led slowly back to Marie Schmidt.

"I think I should like her to know that her uncle was buried properly," he said, "and that you looked after him to the end. I'll write to her, Madelaine, if you'll tell me the address."

The woman looked up suspiciously, then down once more at those crisp notes with which Culver toyed.

"If I can find it," she said evasively.

Culver looked meaningly at the money.

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"You can find it if you try, Madelaine," he said confidently.

She ceased to fence. From a dingy cupboard she extracted a grimy piece of paper, treasured for some furtive purpose of her own. Culver took it from her. Roughly scrawled on a sheet of the cheapest paper were the words: "Marie Schmidt, Rue Jan Hoeck 47, Antwerp."

"Thank you, Madelaine," he said. "You will have no more need for this. Here's fifty francs to pay for everything."

The woman grabbed the money, smiling. Jean Malet had proved an uncommonly good bargain for her.

II

The Rue Jan Hoeck at Antwerp is by the docks; a narrow, squalid street of ramshackle, tenement houses interspersed with gaping spaces where the rottenest of the shabby buildings have either been pulled down or have fallen of their own decay.

In the empty spaces, the teeming child population of the slum plays drearily all day, and drab outcasts of the city find refuge by night.

A gloomy, repulsive street, the Rue Jan Hoeck; and Dick Culver felt its repulsion as he turned into it in the heat of that August afternoon. The place was stifling. Even the lean cats of the street had sought the shade, and hardly a person was moving along the uneven *pavé*.

Under a tattered awning in front of the dingy estaminet at the corner, a few rough-looking sailormen and dock labourers sat over their tepid beer, their shirts flung open at the chest, and the sweat standing in beads on their grimy faces.

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Culver made his way slowly along the steaming, reeking lane. Number 47 was halfway down. He stopped before he reached it, and scanned its uninviting doors with curious interest.

On a rough bench were displayed odds and ends of old metal, and a coil or two of rope. Some hard-worn oilskins hung limply in a spiritless mass from a knob by the door. Number 47 was obviously a marine store dealer's, and a very poor one at that.

Culver knocked on the open door; he was unwilling to enter so dirty a hovel.

For some moments no answer came to his summons and he ventured in. The place gave out the sour, musty smell of rotting rags and decaying rubbish, through which the clean scent of Stockholm tar penetrated like some refreshing breeze. He knocked again, this time on the crazy floor with his stick, and a moment or two later a door opened at the back, and a dour, beady-eyed, black-haired slattern appeared, eyeing the stranger with open mistrust, and gabbling in Flemish.

Culver tried his French, but the woman merely gaped at him before breaking once more into her stream of unintelligible words.

"Marie Schmidt. I wish to speak to Marie Schmidt," Culver said deliberately.

The woman retreated a pace or two, and called out in a sharp voice to somebody in the room beyond. What she said, Culver had not the least idea, but her words brought a sullen-looking man into the shop, a tall, powerful fellow who seemed just to have been awakened from sleep.

His first glance at Culver, under frowning, bushy eyebrows, was furtive and suspicious. Then his face became blank and oafish.

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"Marie Schmidt," Culver repeated. "She lives here. I wish to see her."

The man shook his head.

"I am sure she does," Culver went on, growing annoyed with the stupidity of these people. "I come from her uncle, Jean Malet of St. Gules."

That name brought expression to the wooden faces. Instantly they glanced at one another, then with a look of question back at Culver.

"Jean Malet?" the man queried in an odd tone. "Entrez." He nodded jerkily towards the inner room, then turned to the woman and said something in a low voice, which Culver could not understand. The woman answered in the same unintelligible way, and sat down on a stool by the door, and the man led the way into the back room.

It was sparsely furnished, and cleaner than Culver had expected. An open bottle of wine stood on the table with a couple of glasses by its side. The man closed the door.

"You are English?" he asked suddenly in a villainous accent.

"Yes. I am English."

"Then we talk English, it is better perhaps. You want to see Marie Schmidt, eh? She is not here."

"Well, where is she? I want to find her," Culver asked. "Will she be coming here later?"

"Perhaps." The man shrugged his shoulders. "What do you want to see her about? You have a letter, or something for her?"

"No. I just want to see her—about her uncle, Jean Malet."

"Jean sent you?"

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The man was sitting on the edge of the table, and he looked up keenly as he asked the question.

"No. Jean is dead," Culver said calmly. "I was with him when he died. That's why I want to see Marie; to tell her."

The fellow poured himself out a glass of wine before he answered. He seemed uncertain. Suddenly he looked up with an expressionless face.

"If it is important, it is best to tell me," he said.

"Are you a relation of Marie's?" Culver, said, ignoring the remark.

"No. Oh no. I know her. She comes here sometimes."

"But doesn't she live here?"

"Sometimes."

"Where does she live at other times?"

"I don't know. She comes and goes."

"But hasn't she any relations? Any parents?"

"She never told me."

This was maddening. Culver was sure the man could tell if he would, but with the bovine suspicion of his class, he mistrusted the foreigner and the unknown. These people always saw trouble in anything strange. Culver decided to try the seldom-failing persuasion.

"Look here," he said, after a moment. "I want to get away from Antwerp as soon as I can. If you can find Marie for me I'll pay you for your trouble."

But the fellow did not rise to the bait as eagerly as Culver had hoped. Once more he shrugged his shoulders in an irritating manner.

"All right. I'll try," he said doubtfully. "What is your name?"

"Culver. But she won't know me. Say I'm the Englishman who was with Jean when she came to St. Gules some days ago." The man's eyes lifted slightly. "Tell her,"

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Culver went on, "that she has nothing to be afraid of, and"—a bright thought had come to him—"that among Jean's paper was a little money, about a hundred francs, and as she is the only relation I know of, she ought to have it. You understand?"

"Yes. I understand." He applied himself to the bottle once more, and Culver could see that he was puzzling out something.

"And what's your name?" Culver asked suddenly.

The fellow gulped down his drink. "Peter," he answered. "She will know me."

"Then, Peter, do you think you can get hold of her to-night?"

"I'll try." There came a cunning, sinister expression into his dark eyes. "You come back here about ten. Not before. If I can find Marie, she shall be here."

"Good." Culver felt relieved. "And here's something to go on with," he added, passing the man a note.

He took it without thanks, and crammed it into his pocket.

"All right. You come about ten; not before," he repeated, getting to his feet. "I find her for you. No use coming earlier."

III

Somehow this fellow Peter had not rung true, Culver decided.

He had wandered through the heat, from the noisome atmosphere of the Rue Jan Hoeck, towards the quays, hoping to get some breath of air from the wide river. But though it was cleaner here it was hardly cooler. A brassy haze was spreading over the sky, and there was

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not a breath of wind. Culver found a seat and sat, gasping, as he thought things out.

There was something wrong about Peter. The man's hands, he recalled, were white and soft, not hands to go with his rough costume and the rougher surroundings in which he lived. And it was clear that money did not speak to him as it spoke to most peasants. He was furtive, secretive, and undoubtedly unfriendly to his visitor. And that accent had been feigned, too. Peter spoke a dėal better English at the end of their interview than when it began.

But if he could get hold of Marie, that was all that mattered, though Culver realised that if he were to talk with Marie Schmidt in the presence of Peter there would be little chance of extracting any secret from her. Still, to find her would be a point gained. He must devise some means of seeing her alone.

A distant roll of thunder told the meaning of the cloudy sky. The air was heavy and still, and the flags drooped limply from the neighbouring masts. A great ship nosing her way up-stream looked shimmering and indistinct in the thick air.

Yes, Marie could tell, if only she would. She at least should be able to put him on to the track of discovering Jean's real identity. She would know names perhaps; certainly whom he had married. And if she were reticent, then he must see if money would not open her mouth.

Exhausted by the heat, Culver fell into reverie. It was so queer to think of any connection between that squalid slum he had just left and the clean, green peace of The Pines at Oldford; of any connection between that black-haired slattern who was still sitting sullenly at the door when he had left the shop, and dainty Mrs. Wilfred Coke, with her easy woman of the world manner and her per-

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fectly manicured hands. Yet there was a connection: there could be no doubt of that.

The first heavy drops of rain began to fall. They roused him. He would have to bolt for it if he were going to get back to his hotel before the storm broke. With collar turned up, he started to run, sweating at every pore in the tropic heat. He reached the hotel just in time, and stood with a little group of people in the covered entrance watching the tempest as it swept over the city.

Blue-green stabs of vivid lightning played about the great cathedral steeple, and the rain came streaming down in sheets upon the baked cobbles of the deserted streets until the gulleys filled to overflowing.

But neither storm nor heat showed any sign of abating, and Culver took refuge in the hotel café, and sought consolation in a long iced drink and his own unsettled thoughts.

IV

The storm was still rumbling in the distance at ten o'clock that night. A lurid flash of lightning lit up the deserted Rue Jan Hoeck as Culver turned into it.

Uninviting as the place had been in broad daylight, on a pitch-black night it seemed more repulsive than ever. The rough *pavé* was a mass of murky puddles, and the torrential rain had brought forth a medley of unsavoury smells from the sodden earth.

His shoulders hunched against the downpour, Culver pushed on, worried, rather, lest the storm should have upset his plans. It might have delayed Marie, or, likely as not, that idle fellow Peter would not have ventured out into it.

The street was badly lighted, and Culver found it hard

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in the darkness to pick out the house he was seeking. There was nobody about, he felt he must have overshot No. 47. He stopped and peered at an adjoining doorway, but he could discern no number.

He was passing one of those open spaces where once a house had stood, when a little scuffle in the darkness caused him, instinctively, to halt.

A hoarse voice called something to him in Flemish, and he answered in French that he could not understand. Then, dimly, he made out a figure close by his side, and an electric torch was turned full into his eyes, dazzling him and causing him to step back in quick alarm. And as he stepped back, it was, so far as he could remember, into a pair of powerful arms which flung round him and pinioned him, helpless.

He let out one sharp cry for help, before a clammy hand was clasped roughly over his mouth, and the next moment sinewy fingers were at his throat, and he fell, struggling and gasping for breath, to the muddy earth.

Those cruel fingers pressed tighter and tighter, and Culver felt his head swimming. Though he fought on, he knew that his efforts were futile. His consciousness was going quickly. His ears were singing and his eyes seemed as though they would burst from their sockets. Then a great blackness came over everything.

It seemed an age afterwards that a tiny voice, far, far away, was speaking his name. It seemed that he lay somewhere, in a strange place dreaming. People were bothering him, trying to wake him, and he wished they would leave him alone. He tried to tell them to stop, and the effort of speech brought him back once more to consciousness. But for the moment he could not quite recall things.

He was in the dark, sitting in the mud, his shoulders

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supported by unknown hands, and a strange voice was saying: "That's better. You'll do now. Take it easy, old man."

An excited torrent of French followed, a light was flashed at him again, and he was aware, dully, that there were men in uniform at his side. For a moment or two, groping mentally to remember what had happened, he thought he was back in the trenches.

"It's all right. Quite all right," he said stupidly. "I'm not hurt, it's only ——"

"Take it easy," that calm, emotionless English voice came from behind him. Then it broke into French.

"My friend will be all right in a moment," it went on. "We had better take him back to the hotel."

Dick Culver turned towards the speaker. He was fast recovering his wits and his memory. He could recall the attack now, clearly, but who this Englishman could be, who knew his name, and knew his hotel, he could not imagine.

"I'm all right now," he said, staggering to his feet. "Have I been here long? Some blackguards went for me—out of the dark. I don't remember any more."

The gendarmes, as he discovered the uniformed men to be, pressed about him, talking volubly. In the rays of their lamps, Culver saw the unknown Englishman to be a tall, lean-visaged man, with an expressionless face and a big calabash pipe in his straight mouth. He appeared completely unperturbed by the situation.

"You speak these chaps' lingo?" he asked laconically, removing his pipe and cramming down the ashes with his forefinger.

"A bit," Culver answered, still dazed.

"I wouldn't if I were you. Not till you've thought about it a bit more." The stranger struck a match and

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relit his pipe, puffing at it deliberately. "They make a hell of a fuss over nothing, these foreign bobbies," he went on coolly. "You leave it to me."

"But—but——" Culver protested. "Who are you? Why——" He swayed, and the stranger caught him. He was still feeling horribly sick and faint.

The man's queer, impassive voice came to him dimly from a great distance.

"Franklin Parry," he said. "I'm staying in your hotel. Leave it to me."

Culver was glad enough, then, to leave it to this strange man who had appeared, so fortunately, at his side. His head was swimming again. He was just conscious of being helped through a crowd of gaping, furtive-eyed men and women, who had been drawn like vultures to the scene; of an interminable wait, with the buzzing of voices all about him, and of being lifted into a cab. After that, but for a dreadful pain in his throat, there was no clear memory for some time.

He knew that he answered questions mechanically; there was a vague impression of a doctor, but real consciousness only came to him again the next morning when he woke, in bed at the hotel, to find the stranger, Franklin Parry, at his side, looking down at him with mild amusement in his cynical eyes, and saying cheerfully:

"Well, old man, I hope you're all right now. You gave me a bit of a fright last night; I thought you were really bad."

V

Culver roused himself and blinked sleepily at his visitor.

"What the devil did happen last night?" he asked. "I've only the haziest idea after those swine went for me."

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Parry was fingering his pipe. He gazed thoughtfully at its charred bowl. He was an older man than Culver, but he looked hard as nails, a powerful man without an ounce of superfluous flesh. His lean face was sunburnt to that sallow tint that comes of years in the tropics.

"I don't know what happened before," he said slowly. "I chanced to hear a yell—in good, full-blooded English" —he gave a faint smile—"and I went to see what the trouble was. Your language, old man, indicated that there was some trouble."

Culver grinned.

"I don't remember that," he said.

Parry began to load his pipe.

"It wasn't exactly drawing-room chat," he commented dryly. "Anyhow, there were a couple of blighters on to you. I hit one, it felt a good hit, and they scuttled. Then those chattering bobbies came up, and—well, we got you back here after a bit. Mind smoke?"

"No. Go ahead. But I say, I'm awfully grateful to you ——"

Parry interrupted, with a grim smile.

"No need to be grateful, I've been in too many scraps myself. I wouldn't have butted in but for your fruity language." He puffed solemnly at the huge pipe.

"But—how did you know who I was?" Culver asked, in a bemused voice.

"I'm staying here. I was standing in the porch yesterday when you bolted in out of the rain. I got your name because I knew a Dick Culver out in the Congo once. I saw the name in the book and thought it might be him."

"No. I don't recall any of my crowd out there," Culver said. "Where'd he come from, Hampshire?"

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Parry smiled enigmatically.

"Poor old Dick never talked about his family. I don't think he was a credit to them. But look here, we've got to tell the same lie. Those damned bobbies will be round here soon, and I pitched them any sort of tale last night. To save trouble. You remember anything?"

"Practically nothing. You told me your name and advised me not to talk for a bit."

"Always good advice in a police row. It's so hard to change your mind afterwards."

"But I don't quite understand."

Parry shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know what you were doing in that neighbourhood last night," he said. "It hasn't got altogether a savoury name in Antwerp—that's why the bobbies go in twos. And I don't want to know. That's your business." He looked Culver straight in the face. There was a queer smile in the steady, bleached eyes. "But my experience is that these foreign police are more trouble than they're worth.

"Now take last night's business. You can't do anything. The blighters who went for you are gone. Unless you suspect anybody, the police will never find them. But, by Gad! old man, if they start they'll keep you messing about answering questions, trying to identify things by the score, and filling in forms, and the Lord knows what, till you're sick of it. I remember in Vigo some years ago, a chap came for me with a knife, and those infernal police kept me hanging about in that foul spot for five weeks. I'd drop it if I were you."

Franklin Parry spoke impressively, almost in a monotone, punctuating each sentence with a puff of smoke, like a man recounting some adventure. But the sound, common sense of his advice appealed to Culver. It was no

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good getting entangled with the authorities for no real purpose. If they started investigations heaven alone knew where they might lead to. It might drag the whole story of old Jean into an unwelcome publicity.

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "Perhaps you're right, Parry. I suppose the men were just out to rob me. I don't suspect anybody ——"

He stopped suddenly as the thought flashed into his mind for the first time. Did he suspect anybody? That fellow Peter? He knew he would be coming along at that hour with money on him.

"No. No. I don't suspect anybody," he finished hurriedly.

Parry seemed unaware of his hesitation.

"Then drop it," he said shortly. "Tell them you can't remember anything—and stick to it."

"I will," Culver agreed.

Parry appeared relieved. He sat on talking for some time. He attracted Culver. His hard, cynical manner appeared to cloak a more human nature and a keen sense of humour. And Culver was thoroughly conscious that, but for this man's opportune appearance last night, things might have gone badly for him.

Franklin Parry was a rubber merchant, he said, and was just back from the Belgian Congo on a year's holiday. He had, in fact, only arrived in Antwerp on the previous day, and was hesitating whether to go to Paris or straight on to London.

And the tale he had told the police Culver heard elaborated an hour later when a fussy, little, bearded, plain-clothes man arrived, with a big attaché-case full of papers and an air of great importance.

Culver, still in bed at Parry's suggestion, professed a very slight knowledge of French. Parry acted as inter-

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preter from time to time. Culver, he said, was an hotel acquaintance, and the two had gone out together for a walk after a very good dinner. He stressed the excellence of the hotel dinner and forced a watery smile from the bearded policeman.

M. Culver wanted to see the dock district, and they had wandered that way, and although M. Parry had warned him of the danger of that rough neighbourhood, M. Culver, out of curiosity, had insisted upon venturing down the Rue Jan Hoeck. Parry, trying to dissuade him, had lagged behind until, hearing his companion's call for help, he had rushed forward to his aid. The rest doubtless the efficient and gallant gendarmes had reported.

They satisfied the little policeman that this was their story, and, vastly amused, Culver heartily agreed with the suggestion that really he, or rather the excellent dinner, was entirely to blame. The policeman grinned sympathetically and departed, having made copious notes.

Parry saw him off and returned to Culver's room.

"That's that," he said. "I don't think the little chap was sorry. It would have been a hopeless job. Well, good-bye, old man. Glad it's no worse. I think I shall clear off to Paris at noon."

Culver jumped from the bed.

"No, I'm damned if you do," he said gratefully. "You've got me out of a deuce of a mess, and you don't go till we've had that giddy meal you described so convincingly. You'll lunch with me. Where's the best place in Antwerp?"

Parry's smile was one of real pleasure.

"All right. So long as we don't play the sequel again," he answered.

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CHAPTER V

I

THE lunch was a great success. Franklin Parry improved on acquaintance. He had knocked about all over the world, and he was full of stories of odd experiences in the unswept corners of the earth.

But there was a strange streak of shyness in the man; he was lonely, and, though he welcomed Culver's companionship, he seemed loath to force his company upon him. It was this unsuspected reticence that gave him his brusque, cynical manner, Culver decided.

And Dick Culver was feeling fit again, too. There were some ugly bruises round his throat, which he had noticed when he was shaving, and the throat still felt sore from the grip of those cruel fingers, but otherwise he was as cheery as ever he had been.

Parry spoke of his vague plans. He wanted to get some golf and a bit of fox-hunting later in the year. But he rather funked going home, he said. Things had changed so much, and somehow he didn't seem to fit in with his few relatives and old acquaintances in England.

"They think I'm a barbarian, and I think they're self-satisfied snobs," he said with a touch of bitterness. "It would be all right if we didn't tell one another what we thought, but we do."

Culver laughed. He could sympathise with his companion's feelings. He, too, somehow, had never fitted in, easily, with conventional life; he, too, was a lonely man.

He pondered a problem which had been flitting about his mind ever since the morning. Last night's mishap had badly upset his plans. It might have lost him the

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chance of finding Marie Schmidt. Unless—unless Peter really had had something to do with that attack.

Anyhow, he was going back to the shop to see. And it would be uncommonly useful to have a companion with him this time, and what better companion than Parry? He needn't tell him too much; for that matter, he felt he need tell him nothing. But some explanation was due to him.

Culver leaned across the table with a guilty sort of smile.

"Look here, Parry," he said, "I want to tell you something about last night's affair."

Franklin Parry looked up with mild interest.

"Well?" he said laconically. "I don't want to know unless you want to tell me."

"But I do, I want your help."

Parry sipped his wine, and his queer, light eyes lifted slowly to Culver's face. They seemed to be appraising him.

"That's another story," he said in his expressionless way. "I won't promise till I hear what it is."

Culver weighed his words carefully. He wanted to tell enough but not too much.

"I had an appointment at a house in that street," he said frankly.

"Yes." Parry toyed with his glass, his eyes fixed on the table. "I imagined you weren't there for a walk."

"I was going to see a girl, the niece of an old waiter chap I knew at St. Gules. He died, and, well, sort of left me to settle up his affairs. There was—er—some money, and I wanted to give it to her," Culver explained rather hurriedly.

"Much?" Parry queried with unexpected directness.

Culver floundered.

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"No, no—that is, about a hundred francs," he answered.

"Why didn't you post it? It would have saved you trouble," Parry said in a bored way.

Culver tried to make his story more plausible.

"Well, you see, I wanted to talk to the girl; tell her about her uncle and that sort of thing. Besides I wasn't quite sure of the address."

He felt peculiarly stupid, as if his lie was already discovered, but Franklin Parry showed no sign of doubt—hardly of interest. Culver went on and related the story of his afternoon visit to the shop. Parry grinned as he finished.

"Looks as if your pal Peter thought he might as well have the money for himself," he said.

Culver nodded. "I had the same idea too," he agreed.

"Well, where do I come in?" Parry asked.

"I want to go back to the shop. Part curiosity, but mostly to see if I can find this girl. I must get hold of her if I can."

Parry lit a cigar. "Now think a minute," he said. "If you go back to that shop and find your old friend Peter with a Lord Almighty welt on the jaw—I hit someone mighty hard last night, I tell you—what are you going to do about it? Don't forget we've told one tale to the police. We can't go back on that."

The thought had not occurred to Culver.

"That's true," he said. "I suppose I can do nothing."

"Well, get that into your head. Now, this girl; who'd you say she was?"

Culver told him again, with a little more detail, and Parry listened very attentively.

"All right," he said at last, "I'll come with you. But for the Lord's sake don't go and get into more trouble."

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II

They finished their lunch in a leisurely manner, then strolled off towards the docks. Franklin Parry displayed no further curiosity in the queer story Culver had told him. That was so characteristic of the man—his extraordinary lack of curiosity.

It was a dull day, with a cool breeze after the storm, and the Rue Jan Hoeck looked as forbidding as ever when they turned into it. Some ragged children were playing on the vacant land where Culver had been attacked. They gaped at the strangers as they passed.

Just before they reached No. 47, Parry said:

"Want me to come in with you?"

Culver thought quickly. If Marie was there, perhaps it would be better not.

"No, I'll go alone," he answered. "It might scare them if two of us turned up. I'll sing out if I want you again." He laughed nervously.

Then they came to the shop. The door was shut and padlocked. Through the grimy window Culver saw with amazement that the place had been cleared. All the welter of rubbish had gone, and bare dirty boards showed indistinctly through the dull panes.

"Well, I'm damned! What do you make of this, Parry?" he asked, astounded, and almost doubting his own eyes.

Franklin Parry's face betrayed no feeling. He blew a thick cloud of smoke.

"Saves a lot of trouble, old man," he answered. "I'd forget sweet Marie if I were you. Don't be too sentimental; it doesn't pay."

Just for a moment a ghost of a smile flickered at the corners of the straight mouth, and Franklin Parry looked

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as if he were enjoying a secret joke. Culver noticed it, and it made him feel foolish.

"I give you my word this place was occupied yesterday," he protested.

"I don't doubt it. The only thing that matters is that it isn't now."

Culver stared blankly at the grimy windows. He was savage, not only at having come on a fool's errand, but at the realisation that his last chance of finding Marie Schmidt had gone.

A little group of curious neighbours was beginning to collect. They seeped out of the sordid houses and stood at a little distance, staring suspiciously and gabbling derisively.

A slatternly woman, with flaming red hair, yelled something in Flemish across the street, and Culver replied in his indifferent French with a question as to whether she knew where Peter had gone. But she only laughed at him and broke into a stream of apparent banter.

Culver felt more and more embarrassed. He hated being the centre of this crowd's jeering curiosity. He glanced at his companion. Parry was pulling stolidly at his pipe, as if unaware of the grinning people.

Culver said suddenly: "Let's get out of this."

They had reached the end of the slum and had turned into the main road before Parry commented in the most matter-of-fact voice:

"The lady with the red hair didn't think much of your pals, old man."

"What! Do you understand that infernal jargon?" Culver asked quickly.

"Yes, a bit. Got some of 'em working for me out in the Congo."

"Well, what did she say?"

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Parry gave one of his solemn smiles.

"Put politely," he said, "she described us as qualified policemen who always arrived after the birds had flown. And the birds, meaning your pals, she suggested had beaten us again, and always would. They cleared off about six last night, it seems, and the Rue Jan Hoeck has been enjoying the joke ever since."

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CHAPTER VI

I

CULVER drove up to his rooms in Bloomsbury as St. Pancras Church clock was striking nine the next morning.

Almost to the very moment that the Antwerp boat moored at Parkstone Quay he had been undecided whether to go back to Oldford or whether to go straight to Town. His feelings were for the former, but the broad streak of common sense in his nature told him that he would gain little by seeing Mrs. Coke again until he knew more about her. And he knew nothing more.

But he might pick up something among the artist crowd in London. And he was fully determined to continue with his quest. His complete defeat at Antwerp had only made him stubborn. Mrs. Coke's contemptuous behaviour, as it seemed to him, rankled. He was going to show her that he was not quite such a gullible fool as she thought him, and until he had satisfied himself that there was nothing more he could do to carry out his vague, uncomprehended promise to Jean, he was not going to rest.

Franklin Parry had seen him off, and Culver found that he parted with that strange man with considerable regret. Almost, he wished he had been more candid with him—told him the story of Jean's letter. The man inspired confidence with his cynical, unperturbable manner. And it was always easier to confide in a stranger, particularly a man like Parry, who asked so few questions.

Culver had pondered this a good deal on the journey. The two men had arranged to meet when Parry came to England, as he said he was coming, within a week or ten days. Culver rather wished he had persuaded him to come now. He had a feeling that he could have done

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so, but Parry was so queer, so shy almost, afraid of forcing his company unwanted; and Culver had been considerably rattled by the extraordinary turn events had taken, and he had wanted to get away alone, to recover his sense of values.

He decided to drop a line to Parry at his London bank that day, and urge him to come over. He might even suggest a week's golf somewhere; Oldford, perhaps. That mightn't be a bad scheme.

Culver found his room cheerless and enveloped in dust sheets. The retired butler and his wife, who kept the house, were not expecting him, and were a little upset to be caught unprepared. Culver placated them.

"I shall only be in town for a day or two at the most," he said. "Just fix the bedroom; that's all I want. I'll feed at the club."

But his intimate, little club was closed for its annual cleaning, and he found himself a guest at the Literary Union, a huge caravanserai of a place in which he knew hardly anybody, where strange servants regarded him with seeming indifference. And all the men he had hoped to see, from whom he might extract some gossip about Wilfred Coke's early life—and his wife's—were out of town.

Culver hung about the library of the club till after tea-time.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to get hold of one or two men on the telephone, and as fruitlessly to turn up Wilfred Coke in old reference books. Feeling thoroughly disgruntled, he determined, towards six o'clock, to try the Palmerston, in Chelsea, where he was pretty sure to find some of the shiftless, painting crowd, drinking and gossiping in the bar.

To the uninitiate the Palmerston is as unlike a Bohe-

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mian resort as it well could be. "The Pam" the artists call it, a rather dingy public-house, a gin palace of the nineties, that has not changed its appearance since.

Culver jumped from a bus in the King's Road and made his way back to the Pam's saloon bar. The big room at the back was stuffy and rank with stale smoke. Job Doran, the R.A., was perched on a high stool by the bar, sipping a long gin and soda, and buying drinks for the little court of admirers which clustered about him.

He nodded to Culver as he came in, and went on with a dissertation on wireless. Culver bought himself a drink and took it to one of the tables by the window.

Close by, two or three models sat languidly before glasses of stout, their eyes fixed on the great man. A few tradesmen on the far side were arguing animatedly about Chelsea's football prospects for the coming season, and an airless heat pervaded everything.

Presently Culver became conscious that one of the girls was staring hard at him. He looked up, curiously, and recognised her as Doreen, a model who had been a great beauty in her time, a statuesque creature, with a dead white skin and raven hair. She smiled.

"Haven't seen you for a long time. You come back again, Mr. Culver?" she said hopefully.

Culver shook his head.

"No. Only just to look round; and see if I can find any old pals, beside you, Doreen. Have a drink?"

She left her companions and came to sit beside him.

"Thank you, Mr. Culver. May I have a Quinness?"

He fetched it for her.

"And how are things, Doreen?" he asked cheerily. "Any of the old crowd still alive?"

"Oh, I don't know," she answered. "Let me see. You

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used to work in Mr. Knowles' place. He's dead, you know."

"Yes, poor chap."

Knowles was an elderly man, with whom Culver had shared a studio during his brief adventure into art. And, it occurred to him, Knowles had known Wilfred Coke.

"Yes," he went on. "Poor old Dick Knowles. And you remember Wilfred Coke, I suppose, Doreen?"

"I should think I do," she said, her big eyes opening wide. "There was a nice man, if you like. But what a wife!"

Culver tried to appear unconcerned. In a girl of Doreen's type, any obvious interest would arouse suspicion.

"I don't think I met her. She was nice, too was she?" he commented casually, pulling out a case and idly tapping a cigarette on the table.

"Nice! Oh, my God! Here, you remember what happened to poor Mr. Coke, don't you?"

"He was drowned. It was awfully sad."

"Drowned! And why? She drove him to it. She led him a hell of a life, that woman."

"Come, come, Doreen. You musn't say things like that." Culver was shocked at the venom in the woman's voice.

"All right. I know, that's all." She turned, with mild offence, to her drink.

"What, was she jealous?" Culver asked, with an uneasy laugh.

"Jealous—no. She didn't care what he did so long as she got his money. It was money, money, all the time. God knows what she did with it. She bled him white, Mr. Culver." Doreen leaned forward confidentially. "And to look at her you'd never guess what she was like, kind of quiet, easy-going she seemed. But she was bad,

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real bad. Not the ordinary, but rotten. Look what happened when poor Mr. Coke got ill."

"What happened?"

"Oh, she left him, then. Wasn't any more good to her. Started an antique shop, if you please. And everyone used to say, 'Poor Mrs. Coke, wasn't it brave of her.' " The girl sneered.

"Doreen, who was she?" Culver said, feigning a mild interest.

"I don't know. They'd been married for years. Bill, they used to call her. She was a painter—not bad, landscapes, you know."

"But Mr. Coke must have been a little—well—difficult at times," he said, instinctively driven to defend Mrs. Coke.

"Drink, you mean," Doreen retorted frankly. "That was all her fault. When I first used to sit for him, he was all right. If you ask me, he did it deliberately—to kill himself. And not the first, either."

Culver was really perturbed. He discounted much of what the model said. These women developed sentimental admirations for the painters for whom they sat, and wives were never too popular with them. But there was something behind this outburst of Doreen's, and somehow he felt shabby, gossiping in this way about a dead man and a living woman.

Mrs. Coke, as he remembered her, calm and gracious, fitted ill with this lurid story of avarice and cruelty. And yet, his brain working quickly, he recalled another inconsistency in Mrs. Coke's story. Her suggestion of poverty at her husband's death: of need to sell their furniture. Either that was a lie, or Doreen's statement was. And he thought of the girl's sneer at those who had said

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how brave it was of Mrs. Coke to take to business. He had made much the same remark.

"I suppose Mr. Coke was pretty hard up before the end?" he asked.

"He was, yes. She'd taken it all from him. But not her. Came down here to the funeral in a great big car and furs."

"Oh, well," Culver put in hurriedly. "Let's hope it wasn't as bad as you think." He was disgusted, in a way, with the whole story. He almost wished he had never heard it. In his mind the two men, Jean of the Natation and Wilfred Coke, associated themselves. Two broken men—both connected with the same woman.

He turned the conversation to more trivial matters, and presently left the Palmerston, a fit of deep depression upon him, and a sense of the futility of the self-appointed task in which he had engaged.

II

Culver went down to Oldford the next morning. Through many worrying hours on the previous evening, he had come to a decision. He was not going to fret himself with this business much longer.

It was only making trouble for himself. Better drop it, as Franklin Parry had been so fond of saying. But before he dropped it he was going to make one final, direct appeal to Mrs. Coke. If she were that hard, callous woman that Doreen had depicted, then a frank and unsentimental attack would be more likely to succeed.

As he had schemed it out, he would go to her, quite blandly, and throw the situation at her. He would say: "I have reason to believe that you know a good deal

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more about Jean than you told me. And I know more about him than I told you. If you don't intend to trust me, don't; but I want to know who his relations may be in this country. I have something to tell them when I am satisfied that they are the proper persons to hear it."

That was the sort of thing. Chucked straight at her she might give herself away; or, better still, meet candour with candour. He could do no more. If this failed, well, he had tried to keep faith with Jean, and would have kept faith with himself.

And then he would forget the whole affair; wire Parry, perhaps—he had a hankering for that man's company—and suggest a trip to Scotland to see if they could find some fishing and golf there. The Continent had, for the time being, ceased to attract him; it brought back too many memories of St. Gules and Antwerp.

The Palace Hotel at Oldford could not give him a room and, not altogether unwilling, he sought a humbler place. That disturbing girl, Ann Gray, would be at the Palace, and just then he did not feel equal to facing her. She had something to do with Mrs. Coke's secret he was convinced, and now he was anxious to be done with subterfuge and tortuous ways.

Yet Ann was one of the first people he met that afternoon when he turned into the long, main street from the old-fashioned Blue Boar, where he was staying.

Ann was in a rakish two-seater car, driving skilfully through the crowded street. She crammed on her four-wheel brakes as she caught sight of him, and stopped dead by his side.

"Hallo, Richard Culver," she drawled. "You come back again, or haven't you been away?"

He tried to laugh naturally.

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"Back again for a bit," he said.

"Been to St. Gules already?"

He nodded, then with an effort:

"And found it as you said, a rotten hole," he laughed.

"So you've come back to stay?" she persisted, looking at him with curious interest.

"No. Not for long" He met her big, hazel eyes quite steadily, wondering how much she knew, and suddenly conscious that he wished she were not a friend of Mrs. Coke's.

His even gaze seemed to disturb her. She dropped her eyes in mild confusion.

"You must be fond of travelling," she commented, then looked up with the old mockery in her smile. "And where is restless Richard Culver off to this time?" she demanded.

"Scotland, I think," he said blandly. Her taunting, lazy voice had roused him. He did not want her to think him a complete fool, and if she were asking for a purpose, Scotland was as good as any other place to tell her.

She made no comment on his reply, but asked abruptly:

"You going to see Bill?"

He was not ready with a denial.

"I—er—I was, yes," he faltered.

"Jump in then," she said, throwing open the door. "I'm going up there, I'll take you!"

He could hardly refuse, though instantly he realised his mistake. He wanted to find Mrs. Coke alone, and now it seemed that he was going to be let in for another party.

"If she's got people there again I don't think I'll come after all," he protested lamely. "I want to see her on business, and I'd better wait."

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"Oh, come on," Ann insisted. "There'll be nobody there—not even me. I'm only going to collect Elsa. We're going out to Flackston to tennis at the rectory. Bill won't come, she's got the glooms. She gets like that sometimes, all jumps and headaches and aspirin."

He was in the car now, almost against his will, and Ann had started off nearly as violently as she had stopped.

"Then I certainly don't think she'll want to see me," Culver said.

"Depends what you want to see her about," Ann replied, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "She's always well enough to do her business. She's got to be, poor dear. Bill works hard, you know."

She turned towards him for a moment, as if to emphasise her words.

"I'm sure of it," he said. "Still, my visit can wait if she's really seedy."

"We'll ask Elsa," Ann answered curtly.

They slowed as they came to the gate of The Pines, and Ann honked loudly on the horn.

"I'm not going in," she said, "it's a beastly place to turn. This will fetch Elsa." She hooted again in a deliberate way. "My signal," she laughed.

He had descended, and stood by the car still uncertain whether to go into the house or not. The opportunity seemed a good one, yet if Mrs. Coke were really indisposed she would not be in the best mood to receive his attack. To prevent Ann from returning to that disquieting, personal mood of hers, he was talking mechanically about the car.

Then a woman appeared strolling slowly down the drive, swinging her racket and puffing at a cigarette.

"Oh, Elsa," Ann called. "How's Bill? I collected

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Mr. Culver in the High Street; he wants to see her if she isn't too depressed."

This Elsa, of whom Culver had heard so much, hesitated for a second as she caught sight of him, surprised, obviously, to find Ann with a stranger.

"Oh—er—Bill," she began a little nervously. "She's rather poorish. She's been lying down since lunch."

"Then I won't go in," Culver said definitely.

He found himself staring at Elsa in a curious manner. She was dark and pretty; a woman of about thirty, he judged. There was something opulent about the simplicity of her dress; it looked so particularly smart, from the dainty white shoes, to the daring little hat pulled down over her black hair. And the woman's face was typical, too, but of what he could not quite decide.

Ann broke in: "But you don't know one another, do you? Richard Culver, this is Bill's pal Elsa, Elsa Mayer."

"How do you do?" he said conventionally. "I'm sorry about Mrs. Coke. I won't bother her to-day. She was going to show me her furniture some time, but I'll wait till to-morrow."

Elsa smiled, a little nervously, he thought, and again he searched his memory to recall who it was that she suggested. It was almost as if he had met her before somewhere.

But she answered naturally enough, and he helped her into the car. Ann turned to wave good-bye, and Elsa Mayer looked over her shoulder with a formal little smile, and at that moment it came to him, flashed into his brain with staggering certainty.

He knew now where he had seen this woman before, and, knowing, he felt dazed. It had been in the fishing town at St. Gules on the morning Jean had died. The whole scene rose clearly in his mind, Madelaine, standing

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at her door uttering her acid phrases, and a little way off, angry, startled and fearful, the peasant girl.

The same resentful look of alarm had come over Elsa's face for a second when she had first seen him standing by Ann's car. He was sure of it. Elsa Mayer and Marie Schmidt were one and the same person.

And more than that; Elsa had recognised him.

III

Far up the road, Ann's two-seater was disappearing in a cloud of dust that whitened the bordering hedges. Culver gazed stupidly after it, then turned to the house, which seemed so peacefully asleep in its mantle of shrubs under the summer sun.

It was very quiet in the lane, a lazy quietness, broken only by the humming of insects. Culver walked slowly on in the wake of the now vanished car. He found a gate a hundred yards or so further along and climbed it, wandering across a sun-baked field, where cattle sought the shade of the hedges, until he came to the marsh land by the edge of the river.

Away to the left, the tiled roof of The Pines showed mellow in the strong light. He could see a patch of creeper-covered wall and a wide open window, and that window attracted him as if through it he were able to enter, and wrench from the house some of the secrets that it must hold.

And he meant to wrench from it its secrets now. This meeting with Elsa had given a completely new turn to his ideas—an ugly turn.

Elsa knew him, and was plainly alarmed; probably knew of his journey to Antwerp, possibly of the attack made upon him in the darkness of that miserable slum.

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Probably Mrs. Coke knew about it, too; and the girl Ann. They were all in it—whatever it was—he was sure.

And it must be something pretty desperate, too, some secret of more than a family scandal if what he surmised were correct. But what was to be done? He could hardly go to Mrs. Coke now, and tackle her as he had intended. Nor could he very well accuse Elsa Mayer of being Marie Schmidt and party to a murderous attack made upon him.

For, after all, he had no proof. It was mere conjecture—Franklin Parry's conjecture as well as his own, it was true—but though Elsa be Marie, there was nothing to show that she had been in the Rue Jan Hoeck that night.

Culver felt dazed. He could not force his thoughts into a definite channel. The whole circumstances were outrageously absurd, and yet undeniably true. Who was this Elsa, this dark-eyed, conventional, but rather foreign-looking woman? Could she have been Jean's niece? If so, where did Peter come in? And what was Elsa doing disguised as Marie Schmidt? And Ann Gray?

Culver went over and over again the whole series of events of the past few days, and found himself staring at the ebbing tide baffled and angry.

He wanted another point of view on the problem, someone with whom to discuss it frankly, and at once his thoughts went to Franklin Parry, with his queer, cynical common sense. Parry was undoubtedly the man to advise him. He would wire Parry; go over to France and see him if needs be. If he could only get Parry interested in the problem, there would be a chance to elucidate some of its mysteries.

Culver knocked out his pipe and strolled thoughtfully back to the lane. He would wire to Parry's bank and hope that they would forward the message.

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IV

A country motor omnibus on the point of starting, as he came out of the post-office, decided Culver, on the spur of the moment, to seek counsel in the solitude of one of the vast, heath-clad commons inland from the town.

He craved solitude. Oldford, with its careless crowds and merriment, jarred on his nerves. Half an hour later he descended from the bus at the Bidely cross-roads and found himself in a glorious waste of heather and gorse and bracken, with little else but a wayside cottage and a distant farm-house in a clump of trees in view.

He took a sandy track that led diagonally across the sweet-scented heath and walked on, absorbed in his thoughts for some time. Presently a squat, flint tower of an ancient church appeared in the distance. There were no farms about, only a few trees, through which what was evidently the parsonage showed, and the little church close at hand, in the midst of a sea of purple and green and gold.

Culver made his way towards it. It looked almost unreal, this little, deserted building that seemed to have been dropped by mistake in the middle of a moor. It was to the church, clearly, that the track he had been following led, and it ended at a gate in a lichen-covered, flint wall that enclosed an overgrown churchyard.

There was nobody about; no sound of life even from the adjoining parsonage. The place was as lonely[4] as the graves, half-hidden in the rank grass. Culver tried the south door, but it was locked. From some yellowed notices stuck in the porch he discovered that this was Bidely Church, and he wondered where Bidely village might be.

It was a queer little building, with lancet windows, a

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couple of hundred years older than its upstanding tower. Culver peered through one of the windows. There were repairs of some sort going on inside. But it appeared to be a curiously untouched church, with old, high, box pews and a three-decker pulpit.

Culver loved old churches, and this was a rare example. He tried the sanctuary door without success, then turned towards the parsonage to see if he could get the key there.

The house was, in its way, as interesting a building as the church. It was of red brick, built in late Stuart times, a long, narrow, L-shaped house, but one room deep in the longer wing. The front door stood wide open, showing a white-panelled hall. Culver could see through the glass-paned door, on the other side of the hall, into the garden beyond.

Nobody answered his first knock, and he tried again. After a few moments an elderly parson appeared from the garden. He was panting a little as he came in, and he mopped a moist brow.

I'm sorry to disturb you," Culver began, "but I wondered if I might have the key to your church."

"Why, certainly," the parson answered. "But not my church, sir, unfortunately. I am but a stranger here, not even a locum. I am merely the temporary tenant of the rectory in Mr. Britain's absence."

Culver smiled. The man was so genially pedantic.

"Now let me see," the parson went on, fussing like an agitated old maid, his round face puckered like a child's in thought. "The key, now, the key; where did Ellis put that key? Ah! Here it is." He produced an enormous weapon of iron from a hook by the door. "Now, sir, if you are a student of old churches you shall see a little gem."

Culver followed him down the drive, and as the parson

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came into the full light, he recognised him as the friendly old man whom he had so curtly snubbed at the Palace Hotel a few nights before.

"I am, indeed, very much interested in churches," Culver said, a little embarrassed.

The parson beamed. "Not many pilgrims find their way here," he said. "Have you come far?"

"From Oldford."

"I thought I recognised your face. I think we can say we have met."

"Yes. Yes. I remember you, sir," Culver put in hurriedly.

The key turned easily in the door.

"Now," said the old man, graciously extending a hand that Culver might enter first, "see what St. Nicholas at Bidely can offer you."

And it had many treasures to offer, which the parson explained at length. He was an odd, old fellow, loquacious and an enthusiastic antiquary. He expatiated upon the early font, and went into raptures over the Eastern sepulchre, then drew Culver's attention to two windows on the south side of the nave.

"But these are the gems of the whole church, I am told. Very wonderful, are they not?" His voice dropped reverently.

Culver gazed at the windows, narrow lancets ablaze with colour. The sun threw rich shafts of blue and red light through the tiny mosaic panes.

"That's early glass, isn't it?" he asked.

"Thirteenth century," the old man answered proudly. "In perfect condition, and practically unknown to any but students. Look at them; they might have been made quite recently. Great craftsmen, the Old Masters. No shoddy work there."

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Culver went nearer, fascinated by the depth of colour, and interested to discern the crude design of little panels the rich border enclosed. What the parson had said was true; it seemed impossible to believe this work had been finished seven hundred years ago.

The old man led him to the sanctuary.

"This," he explained, "is more modern. By a couple of centuries." He laughed at his small joke. "But, alas! that dreadful worm has got into the roof. Mr. Britain is having it treated in his absence."

He prosed on for some time, amusing rather than boring Culver, for his mind was diverted from the worries which had filled it that afternoon. And then the old man insisted that he come back and have tea: "Or something a little stronger, if you like," he added, with a smile.

They sat for some time under a great copper beech on the lawn. It was cool and restful there, and though Culver missed much of what his garrulous, kindly host said, the old parson didn't seem to be aware of it.

He was the Reverend Clement Foster, he said, and for years he had been a schoolmaster.

"I am afraid I am a very unworthy priest," he mused sadly. "I have had no cure for many years."

Culver felt awkward.

"But I expect you've had your share of work, sir," he said.

"Yes. Yes," the old man agreed.

In the course of their talk it transpired that Clement Foster had taken the rectory for six weeks. He had been ordered a complete rest. "My heart is not so young as it used to be," he said, tapping his portly chest. He was looked after by a woman from a cottage some half a mile away.

"But Mr. Britain very kindly left his man here. Ellis,

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a nice young fellow. Quite a Crichton. Drives a car, does the garden, and acts as verger. Ellis shall drive you back, Mr. Culver; he has to go into Oldford this evening."

Then the parson pleased Culver by recalling one of his books and commenting on it with a detail that proved he had read it. And altogether Culver spent a very happy couple of hours at Bidely, and he was quite sincere when, as the parson stood by the car bidding him "Good-bye," he accepted his invitation to lunch one day soon.

"I find it very charming, but just a little lonely here," he said. "I seldom have company, except on Sundays when the curate from Flackston is here for duty."

A prosy, but not a bad old bird, Culver summed him up on the drive home. He liked the good things of life, and seemed to have the means to enjoy them.

Ellis brought the car up smartly to the Blue Boar. He was a lout of a fellow, but a good driver, and he grinned like a schoolboy at the half-crown Culver gave him as he thanked him.

"Hope we'll see you at Bidely again, sir," he said cheerfully.

"I hope so," Culver answered, as he went into the hotel.

The girl in the office called to him as he went by. "Telegram for you, Mr. Culver," she said.

Culver tore open the flimsy envelope.

"Good man. Coming down to-night. Parry," he read.

V

Franklin Parry arrived by the last train. Culver was on the platform, and he felt really relieved to see Parry's slow smile as he descended from a first-class compartment.

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He looked sprucer, Culver thought. He was wearing a new overcoat and a new grey felt hat, but the inevitable calabash pipe was between his teeth.

"Hallo, old man," he said. "I was damned glad to get your wire."

"I'm glad you got it," Culver replied heartily. "I thought you were still abroad."

Parry shook his head.

"Came over last night," he said. "One day in Paris was enough for me. I'd hoped to find you still in Town. But this is better. By Jove! this is good air—this is what I want."

Culver turned to the porter who had collected a couple of suitcases and a bag of golf-clubs.

"Shove 'em on a cab," he said. "The Blue Boar. I've booked a room for you there, Parry."

As they drove down the hill to the town, Franklin Parry outlined his wanderings in the past two days, and never once referred to Culver's carefully worded telegram. He spoke as though he had come down merely to play golf and enjoy a holiday, and it was Culver himself who had first to open the subject of the real reason for which he had sent the wire.

That was when they had found a deserted corner in the old-fashioned smoking-room, and Parry had ordered: "Two whisky sodas—big ones."

Culver took a pull at his drink.

"Well, things have developed," he said tersely. Parry nodded.

"So I judged," he answered, with no trace of curiosity. Then, with a queer smile: "Nobody's been going for you again down here, I hope."

"Oh, Lord, no. But you remember the girl I spoke of, Marie Schmidt?"

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"Yes."

"Well, I met her this afternoon, here in Oldford."

For the first time Culver saw Franklin Parry roused from his imperturbable manner. His loose-knit frame seemed to stiffen, and he pulled his pipe from his mouth with a jerky movement.

"You met her here? Where?" he asked sharply.

Culver grinned. "I thought you'd be surprised," he said. "Yes, I met her and was introduced to her ——"

"As Marie Schmidt?"

"No, as Elsa Mayer. A peculiarly well-dressed young woman, who is staying with an artist's widow, a Mrs. Coke, who has a house here."

Parry had reverted to his normal calm, and was puffing steadily at his pipe. But his eyes were keen, beneath the part-closed lids, as he gazed through the smoke.

"Quite sure it wasn't really Elsa Mayer?" he asked quietly. "I wouldn't jump too quickly, if I were you. Think, Culver, think. People can be devilish like one another without being the same."

"I have thought—a good deal," Culver said earnestly. "There is a chance, I grant you, that I'm mistaken. But I don't think I am. No, Parry, I'm sure," he went on, with an emphatic nod. "Not only the eyes, but the expression in them. It was the same. And she recognised me, too. That settled it. She started when she caught sight of me."

But Parry would not be convinced.

"This sounds damned queer," he said, with a half smile. "Did you give her the hundred francs?"

Culver flushed. He had felt that lame story he had told in Antwerp had not carried conviction.

"Look here, Parry," he began. "There's a bit more behind it than I told you ——"

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"Not really!" Parry commented dryly.

"A good deal more," Culver went on. "There's an extraordinary mystery about it all, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. And I want your advice and help, if you'll give it."

Parry prodded at his pipe with a match-stalk. He was growing more serious.

"You do look for trouble, old man," he said. His tone suggested that he wished his companion had not made this request.

"I don't care if it's trouble or not, I'm going to look into this business as far as I can see," Culver retorted, a little heatedly.

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"Listen first of all, and tell me what you make of it," Culver said. "The story starts about ten days ago." And he told that story frankly, save for the details of Jean's last words.

That he still held a sacred trust. It could not affect the present circumstances, so far as he could see. So long as Parry knew that Jean was an Englishman, it would be sufficient.

Franklin Parry listened to every word intently. He had laid aside his pipe and was leaning forward, his sallow face expressionless as a mask, save for the eyes. They hardly moved from Culver's worried face; they seemed to be registering every shade of expression, and questioning all the time.

"That's the position, Parry," Culver said, as he finished. "I'm certain of the girl. But what's behind it? Will you help?"

Parry picked up his glass and gulped the remainder of his drink.

"It's certainly queer. But what's the odds? Is it worth

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while butting in?" he asked, after a moment's pause. "It can't do you any good, and it may lead to a packet of trouble."

He spoke patiently, as though he were reasoning with a headstrong child. And this tone irritated Culver.

"I'm going on with it, anyhow," he said stubbornly. "I give you my word on that—trouble or no. But I've no right to drag you into it, I can see that. Let's forget it, shall we?"

Parry looked hurt.

"No. No, old man," he answered slowly. "I'm not going to quit, if that's how you feel about it. I'll help—as far as I can."

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CHAPTER VII

I

THEY played a round of golf the next morning. That was Parry's suggestion.

"It's no good rushing things," he advised. "If there's anything in what you say, your friend Bill Coke is watching you like a cat. No need to advertise the fact that you're watching her. You and I are down here for golf. She's got to get that into her mind."

They caught a glimpse of Ann Gray towards the end of the round. Ann was just starting out with a fair-haired youth whom Culver recalled as one of her companions at the dance at the Palace. He drew Parry's attention to her.

"Look. That's the other girl I was telling you about," he said.

"What, Marie?"

"No. No. Ann Gray. The cheery one I can't place."

Parry gazed curiously across the course at Ann, who was taking a brassy shot from a difficult lie.

"And you think she's in it, too?" he queried, after a moment.

"I hope not. But it's certainly fishy," Culver answered.

Parry chipped his ball on to the green. "Know anything about her?" he asked laconically.

"Nothing more than I told you."

"Well, we shall see," Parry commented, with indifference.

It was this apparent indifference that rather nettled Dick Culver. It was not that he doubted his sincerity, but he could not help feeling that Parry discredited the whole story. He so seldom referred to it.

When they returned to the Blue Boar for lunch, there

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was a letter waiting for Culver. Mrs. Coke had written a graceful little note, as though to an intimate friend, saying how sorry she was not to have seen him, and begging him to come in to tea that afternoon.

He passed it to Parry.

"She's made the first move," he said.

Parry scanned it superficially.

"You'll go, of course?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to see what she's after."

"Got your lie ready?" Parry asked tersely.

"Lie? What do you mean?"

"To tell her why you're back, and what I'm doing with you. We've been seen, you bet."

"Damn it! I'd forgotten that," Culver admitted ruefully.

Franklin Parry grinned.

"You're a poor sleuth, old man," he said. "That's the first thing she'll want to know." He frowned. "I don't suppose it matters," he added, after a moment's thought. "Put me down as an old pal just back from the Congo. Golf mad. And you brought me down here for a week or two. And if you can insinuate that the lady's charm had something to do with your choice of place, at forty and more, she's apt to swallow it. Flatter her. Middle-aged widows like a bit of attention—at least, that's my experience."

II

It struck Dick Culver at first that Parry's suggestion was rather a feeble one, but he could think of none better. And certainly, if he were to find out anything from Mrs. Coke, he would have to be on friendly terms with her.

Perhaps Parry wasn't such a fool after all. And any-

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thing was better than arousing suspicion or hostility in Bill Coke.

Parry had gone back to the golf-course. Golf mad was not altogether a wrong description of him, Culver thought, for the game appeared to occupy his mind far more than the mystery at The Pines.

Culver arrived at the house just before four. Elsa Mayer came to the door, and she greeted him with the most friendly of smiles. There was not the least trace of yesterday's stiffness or embarrassment in her manner.

"Bill won't be long," she said. "She's got a customer, and she said I was to look after you till she came. We're going to have tea in the garden. Shall we go out now?"

He agreed, feeling that it was he who was ill at ease, and he fought hard to appear natural.

Elsa made it easy for him; she talked in quick, jerky little bursts that often finished in a fascinating laugh. He found it almost impossible to believe that this was the sullen-eyed woman he had seen at St. Gules: yet his conviction was unshaken. She had made such a vivid impression upon him at the time, she, Jean's niece, standing dumb under the vituperative tirade of Madelaine.

They found some chairs under a cedar-tree by the side of the tennis lawn.

"Bill was so glad to hear you were back," Elsa said, settling herself with a cigarette. "Are you going to stay for some time?"

But for Parry's warning, the question which came so naturally, would have seemed the most obvious one, but now Culver felt that there was design behind it.

"A week or two," he said. He began to elaborate. "Frankly, I'm not awfully fond of English seaside places. But I've got an old pal unexpectedly back from Africa,

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and he's mad on golf. So I thought we might as well come here as anywhere."

"Oh yes. Bill was saying you were at St. Gules."

There was an indefinable something about the way she pronounced the word that struck Culver's ear. Was she a foreigner?

"A place I'm very fond of," he said easily.

"And Bill told me how kind you were to that old waiter. I do think that was nice of you." Her deep voice rang with sympathy.

Culver hoped to heaven he was not betraying his surprise.

"Old Jean? Did you know him?" he asked as casually as he could.

Elsa puckered her forehead.

"I think so," she said, flicking some ash on to the grass. "Bill was trying to recall him to me yesterday. He was at that café where you had drinks after bathing, a surly old man ——"

"That's the fellow," Culver broke in. "You know St. Gules well, I suppose?"

He looked up at her innocently, anxious to see if there were any trace of expression on her face that might betray her. But she met his eyes with a smile as innocent.

"I was there with Bill last June for a week. That's the only time. And I hated it. Bill would bathe, and I caught a cold. That makes you hate a place so, don't you think?" Her voice ran off into that queer little laugh.

Culver had to laugh, too. There was something attractive about Elsa Mayer. That beneath this veneer of light inconsequence she was hard and secretive, he knew. But the veneer was very effective, it compelled response.

"I suppose one does. Colds are depressing things."

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"Oh! They make my nose red. They make me look almost ugly."

Again she laughed in that odd way of hers. Ann had that same provocative habit, too, he recalled. But Ann was essentially English; the foreigner in this woman was undoubtedly very close to the surface. Her last remark, for example; it asked for a compliment.

He paid it.

"Until I've seen you with a cold, I won't believe it," he said.

Elsa leaned forward and smiled into his face.

"You nice man. I'll never let you see me with a cold. And Bill said you were serious."

"So I am," he protested gallantly. "Never more serious, Miss ——"

"Oh, Elsa. We're all Christian names here—to people we like."

"So Ann told me."

"She's a harum-scarum child. Bill adores her, but she nearly drives her frantic at times. Bill works, you know. Ann can't understand being forced to work. That's the best of being rich."

Culver's curiosity was aroused. He had wondered a good deal about Ann.

"Does she live here?" he asked.

Elsa looked surprised.

"Don't you know?" she demanded. "Ann's an heiress. Her father is Sir Theo Gray—the shipping people, you know. She's an only child, and he's worth a million. And he's a conscientious Presbyterian and—I'm afraid Ann isn't," she finished with a quick little lift of the eyebrows that suggested an approving disapproval.

Culver was frankly surprised. He knew of Sir Theo

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Gray and his shipping, well. And that made it all the harder to place Ann.

"Then what's she doing here?" he asked blankly.

Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

"Ann's a modern. She can't stand the family. Too many prayer meetings." Elsa's laugh rose to a mocking trill. "She's a real dear, you know, but she must lead her father a devil of a life."

"How?" He was more perplexed than ever.

"She does such silly things. Every time her father smacks her she says she's going to earn her own living. She went as a cook for a month—with some people Bill knew in Town. Bill says she was a good cook, too, but, of course, she got fed up. Then she went as a chauffeur, until she crashed an old dowager's car. But that was funny. She told the old dear she'd buy her a new one just after the smash. Now she wants to go into partnership with Bill."

Culver was intensely interested. Ann was presented in quite a new light.

"What a wild young woman!" he laughed.

He got up to light a match for Elsa, who was just fixing a new cigarette into her holder, and, as he dropped back into his chair, there was an ominous growl behind him.

"What was that?" he asked, turning quickly.

A suspicious-looking Alsatian had appeared as if from the lawn itself. It was standing a few yards away regarding Culver through mysterious, hostile, yellow eyes.

Elsa called out petulantly: "Come, Dirk!" then: "That means Bill's finished with her customer. This is Bill's latest pet. Dirk, speak to the gentleman, he's a friend. Mustn't bite him!"

The big dog lay down at her feet, but showed no sign of friendship.

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"By Jove! He looks a man-eater," Culver said. "Dirk, old man. Come, boy!"

But Dirk seemed to reserve judgment, and at that moment Mrs. Coke come slowly on to the lawn.

"Who's calling my darling a man-eater?" she asked lightly. "Mr. Culver, I thought better of you. Dirk, dear, take charge."

She pulled her tight-fitting hat from her head and threw it wearily on to the grass. The dog rose solemnly, and sat down with the jade-green felt between its paws.

"Now he'll eat you if you try to take it away from him," she laughed, dropping into a chair. "Mr. Culver, I'm sick of you, I've been hearing your praises sung for the last ten minutes. You must have a wonderful way with you."

"My praises? Who's been saying this?" Culver asked, in frank surprise.

"Mr. Foster. The funny old parson who's taken Bidely Rectory. We were in the shop and saw you come in. But, of course, you haven't seen the shop yet, have you?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Well, you shall, after tea. I'm positively exhausted. Elsa, dear, do go and tell Ada to hurry."

Elsa nodded, "All right," and wandered off towards the house. Culver turned to Mrs. Coke and demanded more information about the parson.

"Oh, don't make me say it all over again," she laughed. "He's rather a dear, but gossipy!" She made a weary gesture. "I couldn't stop the man."

"But what did he say?" Culver persisted.

"Oh, that you were most intelligent and charming and sympathetic, and understood old churches and appreciated them. And most young men didn't, and what a pity it was. And then that you were charming again, and did I

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know you—when you were walking out into my own garden with my own friend. Is that enough?" she rattled off quickly. "But how he tired me!"

She put her head back and closed her eyes as if she really meant it.

"What a queer old bird," Culver commented, not quite sure how much of this was jest. "Do you see much of him—I hope not, for your sake."

Bill opened her eyes slowly, with a mischievous smile.

"I don't mind, really," she said. "He looks like being a good customer. This is the second time he's been, and I've sold him something each time. We met him at the Frazers'—the Flackston rector, you know. Mr. Frazer is looking after Bidely while Mr. Britain's away—or rather his curate is."

A growl from the Alsatian told of the coming of tea, and Elsa reappeared escorting an elderly maidservant with a big silver tray.

III

As tea went on, Culver had to admit himself baffled. These two women, Bill and Elsa, chattered away in the easiest manner in the world.

They took him and his presence in Oldford for granted, and they treated him like an old friend. He found it as absurd to think of Mrs. Coke as the hard, pitiless woman Doreen had depicted, as he did to realise that Elsa Mayer had been standing in the fishing town of St. Gules in peasant dress, and that she was an acquaintance of that fellow Peter, whom he was pretty certain had tried to kill him.

The position was crazy, delirious. The women were consummate actresses, or he was entirely wrong. They

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talked of conventional things, knew conventional people; what part could they possibly have in the life of that sordid shop in the Rue Jan Hoeck? And yet, despite it all, he had a sense that they were playing with him, waiting for him to blunder. And he set a guard upon his tongue that made him dull at times, and unresponsive.

They lingered over tea, smoking and talking trivialities until Elsa broke up the party. She glanced at a little, diamond-studded wrist-watch and jumped to her feet.

"Good Lord, Bill! I'd better go and finish packing!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Coke was unperturbed.

"Elsa always takes hours to pack," she said to Culver; "she's been at it on and off since breakfast. Go along, dear; you've only got another two hours."

Elsa made a grimace at Culver, and Mrs. Coke rose lazily.

"Mr. Culver and I will go and look at the shop," she went on. "Don't be afraid, Mr. Culver; I won't make you buy unless you want to."

They drifted back to the house, the disapproving Alsatian at his mistress's heels, and Elsa disappeared upstairs. Mrs. Coke led Culver through a simply furnished dining-room to what had been a more recently built billiard-room, beyond.

"Here's the shop," she said gaily. "What do you think of it? Every mortal thing in it is for sale."

"By Jove, this is fine!" he exclaimed in genuine admiration.

The place was like the most comfortable of halls. There were a few old rugs spread upon the shining parquet floor, a few old pictures hanging from the white walls, a few pieces of rare china and glass in a delightful Queen Anne cabinet, and, dotted tastefully about, tables and

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chairs, and an oak chest or two, and there were fresh flowers everywhere. The room looked lived in, and the subtlety of its arrangement was in the absence of overcrowding.

Culver commented on this, and Mrs. Coke smiled appreciatively.

"You're quite right," she said. "There's lots more in the hospital—you know, the studio—but I set the trap with a note of simplicity. It pays. I get all sorts of funny people here. They like coming to a house. I generally ask them to lunch or tea; they like that, too. I'd have asked the dear old bore this afternoon, but I didn't quite feel equal to more of your praises.

Culver was wandering round the room, lost in admiration.

"And you've all that lovely stuff in the studio too," he said.

"Yes. I'm repairing most of that."

"That ripping chest," he went on enthusiastically. "Where are you going to put that?"

She thought for a moment.

"Oh, the one poor old Jean got for me, you mean. I'm having an awful time with that. It simply won't clean properly. But that won't come here; that goes straight to America, I hope. Poor Jean, I suppose you never heard any more about him?"

Culver looked round sharply. Mrs. Coke was toying with a vase of flowers, arranging them in a different way.

"No," he answered. "I don't suppose I ever shall. I went back to St. Gules, you know, just to settle up his affairs." He eyed her keenly.

She had taken a recalcitrant rose from the vase and was twisting its stem.

"Yes. Ann said you'd gone back." She looked up

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with a sudden smile. "I was afraid I wasn't going to see you again."

He was suspicious, and ready for her this time.

"But you'd invited me to come and see your—your wonderful possessions," he retorted in a lower, more intimate way. "I came back as soon as I could, you see. And I hope you'll let me come again. I'm staying in Oldford for a while."

"Why, of course." Her pencilled eyebrows raised slowly. She was not displeased, he thought. "Nice people are always welcome here; they are as rare as—as old dower chests."

"And come through the same source," he put in quickly.

She seemed a little confused.

"But won't go the same way, I hope," she smiled. "You musn't go to America just yet. Come and look at the chest and tell me how you think I'm getting on with it."

Her mood puzzled him. Until he left she talked almost at random, in a nervous, jerky manner unlike her usual calm. But she walked with him to the gate and left him with a smiling insistence that he must come again soon, to tennis, and bring "the golf man from Africa," for Culver had deliberately explained Franklin Parry.

He looked back at the end in the lane. Mrs. Coke was still leaning idly on her gate, her long cigarette holder in her mouth. She waved to him and turned, and he walked on more intrigued than ever he had been.

But Bill Coke hurried back to the house and up to Elsa Mayer's room.

Elsa snapped out, "Well?" as the door closed. Bill Coke dropped into a chair, frowning. "For God's sake, Bill, what do you make of him?" Elsa continued irritably. "Does he know me or doesn't he?"

Bill Coke's steel-blue eyes narrowed.

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"No. I don't think so," she said after a moment. "I think he's a fool, but a very dangerous fool. The worst kind—the sentimental. What did you get out of him?"

Elsa pushed a half-packed suitcase from the edge of the bed and sat down.

"Very little," she answered. "I don't think he is such a fool. I was afraid to test him. I didn't like the way he introduced Jean. It was too well done. Bill, how much does that man know?"

Mrs. Coke gave a hard, involuntary little sigh.

"I wish I knew," she said with curious emphasis. "And I wish to goodness he'd never come here; he's going to be the most awful nuisance."

"You mean about Carl?"

Mrs. Coke nodded.

"Yes. And the whole business. Elsa, we've got to get rid of him somehow—I don't know how." Her face was lined and intent, and she tapped the carpet nervously with her shoe.

Elsa Mayer, too, looked worried.

"You're quite sure he isn't a fraud?" she asked. She stressed the "quite."

"Oh yes. As far as that goes, I'm quite sure. We've made full inquiries."

"Then why is he hanging about?"

"Oh, don't keep asking that silly question," Mrs. Coke broke out impatiently. "How do I know? I've told you the man's a fool; he'd be easier to deal with if he weren't."

"Well, I don't like it," Elsa returned pettishly. "I believe he knows me. There's something about him. And why did he go to Antwerp ——?"

"It's a pity he ever left it," Bill snapped out, with a vindictive scowl.

Elsa winced.

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"If they hadn't lost their heads there it would have been all right," she said defensively. "I could have dealt with him—then."

"But you weren't there, and he's here, and likely to stick here. He's got some fool of a colonial with him who's golf mad. I must see if Ann can find out what their plans are."

"Yes. Ann might. If she doesn't fall in love with him. She's going to be useful."

"You bet she is," Mrs. Coke said, with a mirthless smile.

"But I don't see how she can help before Carl comes. He may be here at any time now."

"I've tried to stop him. I sent a wire this afternoon—before I came out to the lawn."

Elsa's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Then what about the chest?" she asked.

"You'll have to see to that. That's the infernal nuisance of the whole thing. It means more of this damnable delay."

She rose suddenly and walked across to the window, and there was nothing of the charming, amusing Mrs. Coke about her now. She looked almost wild as she frowned at the garden, biting her lip, her thin, sensitive hands fidgeting with her bag.

"I wish to God people would leave well enough alone!" she exclaimed peevishly. She turned. "We've got work to do," she went on. "Come on. The car won't be here till half-past seven."

Elsa took a gay overall from the wardrobe and fastened it about her, then followed Bill Coke downstairs to the studio.

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CHAPTER VIII

I

A FRIENDLY "Good-afternoon, sir" from Ellis made Culver aware, as he turned into the Blue Boar, that the Rev. Clement Foster's car was waiting outside.

He looked up, surprised out of his thoughts.

"Ah! Afternoon, Ellis," he said. "Mr. Foster here?"

"Yes, sir; he's waiting to see you," the man answered in a pleasant country accent.

Culver hurried on. The parson and Franklin Parry were in the smoking-room, a belated tea-tray before them. The Reverend Clement was talking with animation, punctuating his remarks with a characteristic gesture of the hand, his fingers outspread as though he were trying to grasp the subject of which he spoke.

Parry was slouching back in his chair, listening impassively and puffing, with his usual persistence, at his pipe. He motioned to Culver with a backward nod of the head, and the parson turned, his rubicund face smiling as he blinked at the newcomer.

"An unexpected pleasure," Culver began courteously.

"The pleasure is mine," the parson answered in his smooth voice. "I have met your good friend—Perry, is it?" He glanced at Franklin Parry inquiringly. "Parry. Parry. Yes, yes," he continued at Parry's laconic correction. "And we've been swapping yarns, I think they call it. I know something of the West Coast; I did a short spell of missionary work there, but the climate proved too much."

"Really!" Culver commented, for want of a more intelligent reply.

"I'm afraid I've shocked Mr. Foster with my views on niggers," Parry said, with his slow smile.

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"Not shocked," the old man said in a hurt way; "interested. I can understand how trying the life must be. I found it so myself, I fear. But to pleasanter things. Mr. Culver, I looked in to see if you would redeem your promise to-morrow and take lunch with me. And now, of course, I include Mr.—er—Parry, if he would be so kind." He beamed.

Parry lifted himself up on his elbows.

"I've accepted already," he said.

"Of course," Culver put in quickly. "I should be delighted, Mr. Foster."

"How nice! How very nice!" The parson smiled. "A great treat for a lonely man. Now, when shall I send the car for you?"

He seemed pathetically pleased, and stayed on talking for some little time. He had come into Oldford to do an afternoon's shopping, he said. "Seeking some of the creature comforts, you know," he explained, with a deprecatory smile, "and I met an admirer of yours, Mr. Culver."

"I heard you'd been saying very nice things about me," Culver answered, a little embarrassed.

"So you know," the parson laughed. "What a very charming woman. We're talking of Mrs. Coke, Mr. Parry; I don't know if you've met her. But dangerous," he went on; "a menace to one's pocket, I assure you. What did she make you buy, Mr. Culver?"

Again Culver found himself confused. He didn't quite know how to answer. He hedged, with an inconsequent laugh.

"I escaped this time," he said. "I was taken through the shop—shown the bait, as it were. But she has some very beautiful things."

"Very beautiful," the old man said gravely. "A very

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clever woman Mrs. Coke, though I sometimes wonder if she doesn't over-repair her treasures. They are so perfect."

Again the hands went up, with the outstretched fingers groping in the air.

"You don't mean she fakes?" Culver asked in amazement.

"Oh, dear me, no. Not for a moment. Don't, please don't take that impression. What I mean is that with her great knowledge, her great artistry, she may be tempted at times, unintentionally, to do too much. To gild the lily. I tell her so. And she replies by making me buy something I had no intention of buying." He chuckled softly, like a naughty schoolboy.

But the seed was sown in Culver's ready mind, though he answered with a grin: "A most apt revenge, too, sir."

There was something very unusual about Bill Coke's business. That scrapheap of fine old furniture in the studio, and those very perfect specimens in the shop, as she called it. Furniture faking was a paying job. Had the old man deliberately been giving him a tip?

Parry drawled: "I must meet this fascinating young woman, Mr. Foster—even if I have to buy something."

The old man chuckled again.

"You tell her she's a young woman, and you'll be liked, Mr. Parry. Mrs. Coke is at an age when that would be very welcome hearing. But she has charm, undeniable charm." He drew an old-fashioned gold hunter from his ample waistcoat. "Dear, dear," he said, "but I must be going. Till to-morrow, then. Let us hope St. Nicholas at Bidely will charm your friend as it charmed you, Mr. Culver."

Culver went with him to the car and came back to Parry, who was just ordering a whisky-and-soda.

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"Where'd you pick up that old bird?" he asked with amusement.

Culver told him.

"Gossipy old boy," Parry commented dryly. "Make a hit at an old maid's tea-fight, I should think. Well, old man, you got any startling news?"

II

Culver had never known Franklin Parry in better spirits than he was that evening. He ordered a bottle of champagne at dinner and followed it with a second before they were halfway through. He grew talkative for the first time. He was enthusiastic about East Coast air.

"By Gad! old man, after months of African forest, you don't know what it means to me," he said, as they lingered over their meal. "It's as good as this stuff and better." He filled Culver's glass again.

Mildly amused, Culver noted that "this stuff" was having its effect. Men who lived the life that Parry did were apt to break out now and then, but Parry was holding his liquor well. It mellowed him. He told grim stories of the Congo, interspersed with funny, little, inconsequent recollections of the Rev. Clement Foster's visit.

The parson seemed to have amused him vastly.

"It's going to be a hell of a lunch to-morrow," he said, with his solemn smile. "That's why I said I'd go. A missionary! He talked like it. I've seen 'em. But honest, old man, you'll have to do the talking about architecture; that's not my strong suit."

Culver laughed. He, too, was feeling very tolerant.

"Don't you worry," he said. "Just say everything's wonderful; that'll please the old man."

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Parry went off at random to Culver's story of his visit to The Pines.

"So you drew blank, did you?" he asked. "Where was the other girl—the kid—Ann something. They didn't parade her?"

"No, they hardly mentioned her except to tell me who she was. I told you, you remember."

"Yes. Funny business; that. Sort of young woman who's likely to get into trouble, I should say."

Culver became more serious.

"I can see her being attracted by Mrs. Coke," he said, "but I don't like the idea of her palling up with that woman Elsa—Marie otherwise. She's a bad egg, that woman. Clever as you make 'em, too."

They discussed Elsa and Mrs. Coke for some time, but Parry would never keep to the point for more than a few moments. He was inclined to repeat himself, and ask questions about details he already knew. And though wine did not easily affect Culver, he was feeling his dinner, and not very anxious to be too serious.

He was vaguely hopeful and just as glad when Parry dropped the subject.

They had a cognac with their coffee in the smoking-room, and Parry suggested a walk. But he did not get far. Less than a hundred yards from the hotel he stopped.

"Old man," he said a little thickly, "I'm afraid I've overstepped the mark. What with the air and the dinner, I think I'll be wiser to seek my little cot." He laughed stupidly.

Culver had been expecting this, and he was worried.

"Right you are," he agreed quickly; "you know best. I'll come back with you."

Parry became really truculent.

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"You will not," he said.

"Just to the door," Culver urged.

"Not to the door; not a yard towards the door. I know how to look after myself. Go for your walk. You need it. Get on, my boy. I'm going back."

Dick Culver knew enough not to insist, though unobtrusively he watched his companion until he was safely into the hotel. Then he set out for the sea front. He had dined well, he admitted; a little too well. An hour's hard walk would do him all the good in the world. Funny chap, Parry, he mused. He hoped this wasn't a real failing of his. He must be more careful in future; check him if he could.

But Franklin Parry at about that moment was talking to the night porter at the Blue Boar. There was no trace of his good dinner about him, his speech was clear, and his manner alert.

"There'll be a trunk call coming through for me in a few minutes," he said definitely. "I'll be in that corner. Let me know at once."

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CHAPTER IX

I

OLDFORD is on a branch line. To save the change at Eckenham Junction, Ann drove Elsa the ten miles direct to that station.

She drove at a breakneck speed, cheerily ignoring her companion's many pleas to be more careful.

"My dear, I'm always safest over forty, and I can pull her up in a second—see," she retorted.

She crammed on her brakes and brought the car up with a suddenness that drew a scream of alarm from Elsa Mayer. But the next moment they were rushing on again across the open heath roads, Ann thoroughly enjoying the joke, and Elsa pale, and distinctly nervous.

Ann did not trouble to get out at the station.

"You'll be all right now, won't you?" she announced, rather than demanded. "You've got plenty of time."

Elsa glanced at the clock.

"Quite enough," she said with an odd smile.

"Then I'll crawl off; I want to be back before dark. Good luck, Elsa, I'll hear through Bill how you get on," and almost before the porter had unstrapped the luggage from the carrier Ann was off again.

Elsa was going to Town, then on to Devon, to spend a few weeks with friends, so Oldford had been told. But her luggage was only labelled to Ipswich, and there she left the London train.

She had the best part of an hour to wait before the through train from the North to Harwich arrived. Elsa spent the time restlessly wandering about the far end of the platform, and she gave a sigh of relief when at last she was seated in a compartment near the engine.

Elsa Mayer in travelling costume was not the smart

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Elsa of The Pines; there was something almost dowdy about her loose, drab raincoat, and somehow she managed to accentuate that dowdiness during the journey. When she left the train at Parkeston Quay she looked a typical middle-class Belgian.

There was still some time before the London train was due, and Elsa saw her two suitcases on board the Antwerp boat, then wandered towards the hotel.

The light was baffling under the glaring arcs of the quay, and out of the darkness a man slipped unobtrusively to her side. She started as she saw him, but did not check her pace. He fell in with her step as though they were travelling together, and they strolled a little away from the gangways, and stood by the dockside, looking at the boat.

"When did you get here?" she asked sharply, through the roar of the funnels.

"This morning. I've been hanging about all day waiting to get the stuff cleared."

"Do they know you are here?" Elsa's dark eyes turned on him in anxious inquiry. "They didn't when I left about seven."

"They do now," he laughed, lighting a cigarette. "I was on the telephone to Bill an hour ago. She told me to look out for you. What's up? She was very funny; she wouldn't say much—said you'd explain. What's she fretting about? The stuff's through safe enough."

"It isn't that, Carl, it's that man Culver. He's at Oldford, and they're afraid he'll recognise you. I'm pretty sure he's suspicious of me."

The man whistled softly.

"That's awkward. Who the devil is he, Elsa? He isn't ——"

"No, he's perfectly all right—or Bill says so. She's

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made inquiries. It's only through that letter of Jean's. Of course that fool would die just now—and drag the man into it." Elsa's face darkened.

"But what was it all about, the letter? Was he mad? Did he tell anything?" Carl Mingay looked up quickly. "I don't understand ——"

"Nor do I," Elsa said with a sullen frown. "Bill's a damned sight too secretive. She doesn't tell too much."

A line of trucks creaked slowly along the quay behind them, and stopped with a succession of harsh crashes as each wagon slammed into the buffers of the next. A yard or so away a clattering crane emitted clouds of steam, dazzling white in the fierce electric light, as its chain clanked up and down with luggage for the outgoing boat.

Mingay turned up the collar of his coat; the breeze off the water was cool.

"But what was the letter about?" he persisted.

"Bill said to say that he was ill, and couldn't do any more jobs," Elsa answered with a sceptical sniff. "But I never saw the letter. She made me fake up some silly note in a hurry to show Culver. She was scared, Carl; I've never seen her lose her nerve before. You don't think Jean would have gone back on us?"

"Jean? No. The drunken beast! He'd too much to lose. But it's queer, Elsa, damned queer. You know Culver had an accident in Antwerp, don't you?" Mingay looked up again in that sharp, furtive manner.

Elsa's head swung round, and she stared at him resentfully.

"Bill said something about it. Had you got anything to do with that, Carl?"

He laughed callously.

"I? Good Lord, no. What makes you think that? It

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was some dockside toughs, I suppose, but it might have saved a lot of trouble if——"

Elsa turned on him like a fury.

"Look here, Carl, none of that," she said. Her voice was low, and husky. "If I thought you had anything to do with it, by God! I'd get out tomorrow."

"Well, I didn't, so don't get excited," he said curtly. "Come on, we'd better walk."

They ambled slowly back towards the station, where porters were already lining up in readiness for the London train. And as they paraded slowly up and down the platform, as if waiting for friends, they talked earnestly.

Elsa was insistent that Carl should not go to Oldford.

"Bill will be wild if you do," she said. "She wired you to-day not to."

But he only laughed in a superior self-confident manner.

"That's all very fine," he retorted, "but I want to know a bit more about Culver and the letter. Bill doesn't put me off that way. And besides, I've got something else for her. Bill isn't almighty though she thinks she is. Don't you worry, Elsa, I'm as fond of my own skin as anybody."

The boat train came slowly in, and the platform leapt to life as the passengers streamed out of the carriages. In the bustle, with the slightest of nods to Mingay, Elsa drifted away towards the boat. They parted as they had met. But Carl Mingay strolled slowly to the hotel and made his way to the office.

To the porter on duty he said with a friendly nod:

"I shall have to get away early to-morrow; better call me at six sharp. And I want to make another trunk call to Oldford—my friend hasn't arrived."

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II

Captain Carl Mingay was a good-looking man in a theatrical way. His dark hair was sleek and carefully brushed. When he smiled he showed two rows of very white teeth, and, as if conscious of this, his smile was rather forced. Indeed, his whole manner was one of professional good humour which passed well enough. Few people ever noticed that his dark eyes seldom smiled. They appeared to display a certain sullen watchfulness.

He tipped well, and servants liked him, for he was ever ready to turn any subject into a joke, however trivial that joke might be. And the porter at Oldford Station, who came to open the carriage door for him, sensed his man, and hurried to call a cab, although there was no luggage for him to carry. He knew he would get his tip.

Mingay had chosen the luncheon hour to arrive at Oldford. He drove straight to The Pines, and sent in a card to Mrs. Coke, which read: "Captain Carl Mingay," and at the bottom in Gothic lettering, "Mingay and Burns. Fine Art Dealers. London and Paris."

Bill was sitting over a dish of scrambled eggs in the studio when the card was brought to her. She glanced at it and her lips tightened.

"Take him up to the office," she said to the elderly maid, "I'll be there shortly."

Mrs. Coke's office was on the first floor, a little room designed as a dressing-room. It was a business-like place, with a filing cabinet and a big roll-top desk littered with papers. Mingay was gazing from the window when she entered. He turned with his mechanical smile, and laughed:

"Hallo, Bill, I've come after all, you see."

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Mrs. Coke's greeting was frigid; she shut the door carefully, and sat down with deliberation at her desk.

"Didn't you see Elsa?" she asked briefly.

"Yes. That's why I came."

"Then you're a fool," Bill snapped impatiently. "Carl, do you want to get us all into trouble?"

"Bill, don't get hysterical," he said, still with that fixed smile. "What's the idea? How can we do business if I don't come here?"

Mrs. Coke groped for a cigarette and fixed it into her long holder.

"Haven't you any sense at all?" she asked fretfully. "With this man Culver here—if he sees you ——"

"Oh, get the Culver complex off your mind. He won't see me. And if he did ——" He threw out his hands as if rather proud of his appearance. "Would he recognise me? Don't be silly. What's come over you, Bill? Elsa said you were losing your nerve."

Mrs. Coke winced, and glared sulkily at her desk, fingering a sheaf of papers nervously.

"You see I can't—run away—quite as easily as you and Elsa can," she answered sarcastically. "And your nerves in Antwerp are responsible for all the trouble. God! but what a fool you made of yourself over that. Were you sober?"

It was his turn to grow resentful. The smile stripped from his face, and the furtive, suspicious eyes of Peter of the Rue Jan Hoeck glared sullenly.

"Oh, hell about that," he sneered. "How was I to know who the man was? And who is he, anyhow?"

"A writer. A journalist. He's perfectly all right—of he would be if you kept away. We can deal with him." Bill was petulant.

"That's all very well," Mingay said, and there was

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a sly insincerity in his voice. "But what I want to know is, why did Jean send him?"

Mrs. Coke pushed back her chair an inch or two and drummed on the table, then she broke into a hard laugh.

"The poor imbecile must have been drinking for days, I should think," she answered. "He wrote me a madman's letter—he had delusions. He said people were after him, and he wasn't going to do any more jobs. He said it was all our fault that he was ill. Oh, mad as a hatter!"

She dismissed the subject with a bored gesture, and went on quickly: "Since you are here, what about the stuff?"

He eyed her keenly as if debating whether or not to drop the question of Jean. Then, making his decision, the set smile reappeared on his face.

"That's all right, Bill," he answered. "It's going to Ipswich for the carrier to collect as usual. That's the last of that stunt, isn't it?"

She nodded, and the lines in her face relaxed.

"I suppose you know when you're going to get your money back," he went on with a grin, "but I'd rather stick to the old lines myself. What do you think of this, Bill?"

His hand slid into a hip pocket, and he pulled out a package which he undid casually. Bill was alert and appraising as he removed the paper, and her strange eyes lighted with real admiration as they fell upon a perfect, eighteenth century miniature set in a jewelled frame.

Then she glanced up at him searchingly.

"That's Lowenstein's 'Marquise de Granville.' You can't sell that, Carl; it's reported everywhere," she said.

"That's why I got it cheap," he answered steadily. "Think what the stones are worth, Bill. You can always get rid of them."

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Bill Coke pushed the miniature from her with obvious indifference. Her face was set, unreadable as a poker player's.

"No good, Carl," she said, with a shake of the head. "It would take years to get rid of, and not a very wise thing to keep about the house either." She allowed herself the faintest of laughs.

Mingay's smile seemed glued to his face. It was mirthless; suggestive of some grinning gargoyle.

"Right, Bill," he answered, stretching out his hand. "There are others that aren't so particular. I didn't want to break it up; I thought it was in your line."

"It is, it is," she agreed dispassionately. "But it's too dangerous. Much too dangerous. If I were you I'd get rid of it quick. Lowenstein's employed Pringle's; he's not trusting the official police."

Mingay's smile faded.

"How do you know that?" he asked quickly.

Bill Coke's voice was bored.

"I just know," she said in a matter-of-fact way. For a second her eyes shifted to his face, then swung back to her desk.

He returned the miniature to his pocket and asked for a cigarette.

"Well, I'll take my chance," he said, with a forced laugh. "I'd have let you have it for fifty, but I'll get double that the other side."

"You'll be lucky," she muttered as though she were thinking aloud.

He scowled, then burst out in a blustering way:

"I'll get it all right. Don't you worry. What's the matter with you?"

"Then get it!" she exclaimed impatiently. "And I'll

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be just as glad when you are on the other side, with that thing on you."

"Where's Friend?" he asked with apparent irrelevance.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"New York—the last time I heard."

"He'd buy it—and be glad to get it."

"Maybe. Better go to America and ask him. That's the only place you'd get the price for it." She got up suddenly. "Well, Carl, I've got work to do."

"Half a minute, Bill," Mingay protested. "There's something to come for the fake stuff I brought over."

"When it's delivered," she said without concern.

"But you won't let me wait for that. It's a bit thick."

"Sorry, but you know the terms." Mrs. Coke was hard, almost inhuman, in the utter finality of her refusal.

"I must have a bit to go on with," he persisted. "I'm broke, Bill. Clearing out of Antwerp and all that. After all, it's partly your fault."

Bill's voice rose to a harsh note as she knocked the ash from her cigarette.

"Really, Carl, that's too funny. You made a complete fool of yourself, and now you try to blame me."

"I think there's something behind this letter business," he replied truculently. "So does Elsa. Don't you try any games now, Bill."

Mrs. Coke looked up, her hand still extended over the ash-tray. There was a curious immobility about her face.

"Carl," she said, as if she were announcing the most trivial of facts. "We know exactly where we stand, you and I. We know exactly what would happen if I have you struck off the list." She might have been asking his opinion upon some quite unimportant matter.

His mechanical smile came back hurriedly.

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"No need to get nasty about it," he said in a conciliatory voice. "I've got to look after myself just as much as you have."

"So you come down here in broad daylight, where you're likely to be seen. You've a funny way of looking after yourself, Carl."

He grew uneasy under her accusing gaze.

"I had to," he remonstrated sulkily. "I want some money. Look here, Bill; what will you give?" His hand slid back to his hip pocket.

She shook her head.

"Too risky, too risky altogether," she said. "It's much too well known."

"Oh, come on," he tried to persuade her. "You know you could get three hundred for it. You've got ways. I bet you could get it to Friend inside a month if you wanted to."

"No," she replied apathetically.

"You can have it for forty."

She hesitated.

"I'll give you thirty, and I'm a fool to do it," she said.

He threw it across to her.

"You're a hard nut, Bill. Take it. It's me that's the fool, not you." He gave a soured, disgusted chuckle.

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CHAPTER X

I

DICK CULVER woke late that morning. There was only a slightly gummy mouth to remind him of the indiscretion of the night before, but he was surprised when he looked at his watch. It was long after nine. He had been late in getting to bed. It was nearly midnight when a sleepy porter had let him in, and he must have walked six or seven miles after Parry had left him.

Culver recalled the incident with a shame-faced grin and hurried to his dressing. He wondered what Parry would have to say about it, and whether he would have a fat head. Parry had been really tight, there was no doubt about that.

There was a note from him waiting at the office. Parry had scrawled: "What *did* we do last night? I feel like the devil, and I'm off for a spot of air and exercise. You'll probably find me loafing on the beach. No golf to-day; I couldn't hit a football. And thank God the old parson bird has put us off. He sent his chauffeur round soon after eight to say his heart had gone back on him. We're to go to-morrow if he's better. I'm glad.—F. P."

Culver was glad to; he didn't feel quite up to the strain of that lunch.

"What time did Mr. Parry come down?" he asked the waiter casually.

"Early, sir, early," the man answered, as though Parry had confided his condition in him. "He was down before eight and out soon after. Said he wasn't feeling very well, sir."

Culver nodded and continued to attack his bacon.

He was rather lazy, and he lingered over the papers before he wandered out on to the beach. It was a glorious

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day, and the shingle was crowded, as was the surf, with many bathers. Culver ambled along looking for Parry, but couldn't find him. Then somebody threw a stone at him, and he turned to see Ann Gray.

She was enveloped in a giddy bath-wrap, sun-basking after her swim. As usual, she was surrounded by a group of friends.

Culver went over to her. She looked particularly jolly this morning, he thought, with her unruly short hair drying in the sun, and her clear skin burning to yet a deeper tan.

"Hullo," she drawled. "You look a bit pink-eyed. What have you been up to?"

He assured her that he had been up to nothing.

"Well, you look it," she said frankly. "Come and sit down." She made a place for him and introduced him cursorily to the group.

They talked on for a time, till one by one the others departed. But Ann showed no sign of moving. She lolled back on the warm stones, smoking Culver's cigarettes and chatting of the trivial gossip of the place—the tennis tournament, the coming regatta, and the dances at the Palace. She made only the most fleeting references to Mrs. Coke and Elsa.

But she explained one thing that interested him. He had asked, naturally enough, with whom she was staying at the Palace, and she had laughed lazily:

"Not a soul. I'm all alone. Does that shock you, Richard Culver?" The mocking way in which she always spoke his name both pleased and irritated him. "You look a bit Victorian, like some of the old ducks at the hotel. They don't think I'm quite nice. But I am really."

"But surely ——" he began.

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"Now, don't you start lecturing me," she interrupted. "I get quite enough of that at home. I know the tone of voice." She laughed again. "Ever had measles?"

He looked at her blankly.

"Measles?" he echoed.

"Yes. The spotty things. You know."

"I—I suppose so," he said foolishly.

"I haven't, and I didn't want 'em. That's why I'm here." She leaned upon an elbow and watched his bewildered face with mock seriousness.

Culver was conscious once more of the poor figure he cut with this extraordinary girl. She had a devastating faculty of making him appear a callow youth.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he asked, trying hard to seem unperturbed.

"Measles," she answered solemnly. "Beth's measles. I suppose they were Jimmie's really."

"Ann, don't be an idiot," he broke out, hardly realising what he said.

A smile of real amusement came gradually to her sunburned face.

"That's much better," she drawled. "Richard is becoming almost human. It's quite true, my dear, Beth had measles, and she caught them from Jimmie. Beth's my married cousin. I live with her in London most of the time. And Jimmie's her boy. We were all coming down here till they got measly. So I had to come alone. It's quite true. Beth will be here herself, in about a fortnight, to prove it. She's at home now, getting disinfected. Now is our curiosity satisfied?"

There was something in her teasing manner that broke down his self-consciousness.

"You are a ridiculous child," he retorted. "Do you behave like this with everybody?"

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"Not everybody," she said gravely. "I'm only serious with serious people."

He grew daring. The girl attracted him enormously. For the moment he entirely disassociated her from Mrs. Coke and Elsa and all the mystery that they stood for in his mind.

"Come and have tea somewhere this afternoon?" he asked.

She nodded, without a moment's hesitation. "Let's go to Salthithe. I'll drive you over. It's a simply gorgeous place with an adorable castle full of dungeons and things—all rats and ghosts. It makes me frightened; I love being frightened. It's too thrilling."

"Splendid!" he said. "May I call for you about three?"

"Yes, I'll be ready."

He helped her to her feet, and they walked back to the hotel. And for the first time since he had been in the town Dick Culver felt that Oldford was a really cheery place.

II

Franklin Parry had not returned when lunch started, and Culver went in alone. It was only after he had left Ann that he began to wonder how Parry would receive the news that he was going to spend the afternoon with her.

He felt awkward about it, sensitive in a way. He hoped Parry would not make cynical jokes. After all, Parry had deserted him all the morning; he couldn't be expected to hang about the whole day waiting for him.

Lunch finished, and still there was no sign of Parry. Culver was more relieved than curious about his companion's absence. He had probably gone for a long

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tramp and was lunching at some country inn. He would leave him a note, say he'd be back to dinner, and leave explanations until then.

He wrote a non-committal letter and left the Blue Boar soon after two. But killing time was a dreary occupation, and Culver found himself at the Palace Hotel ten minutes before he was due. He strolled into the lounge from the beach side, determined to hang about there till three o'clock. But Ann was there already.

She was standing on the far side of the room, talking to a tall, dark man in tweeds. She caught sight of Culver, gave a curt "Good-bye" to her companion, and hurried towards him.

"Bright lad," she said in an undertone. "You've saved me from the world's worst bore. Let's go and get the car."

She bustled him out through the door by which he had entered while he asked vague questions about the bore.

Ann explained in her usual exaggerated manner.

"But who is he?" Culver asked in amusement.

They were in the car and starting off. Ann accelerated and the two-seater jumped forward.

"I daren't tell you," she laughed. "I once mistook you for him. It's Elsa's pal, Captain Mingay."

Ann described him unflatteringly as they wound their way through the little town and out into the broad heath country beyond.

"I suppose it's shell-shock, poor dear," she summed him up in the end, with the speedometer needle quivering in the forties. "But that doesn't make it any easier for Elsa."

Mingay, it appeared from Ann's story, was "simply

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