THE MYSTERY MAKER

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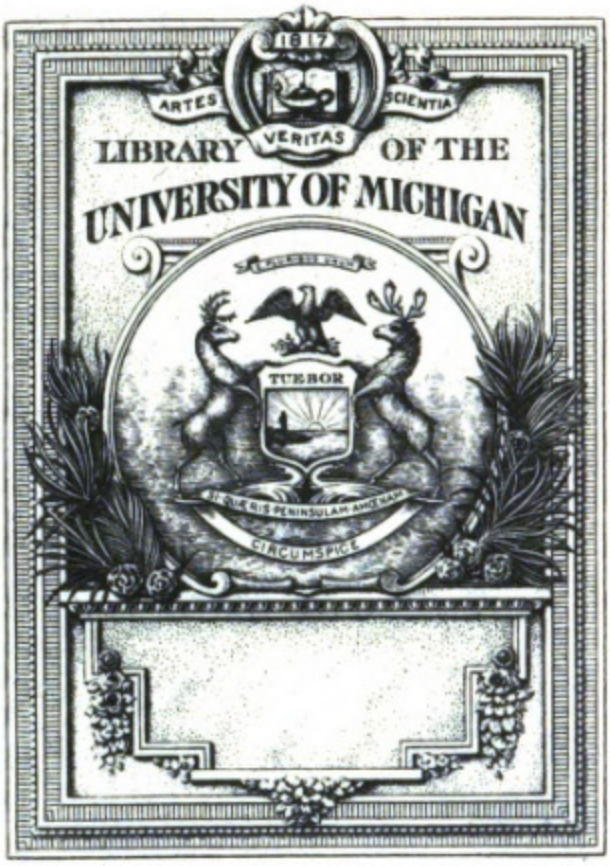

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BY

AUSTIN J. SMALL

LOVE'S ENEMY

MASTER VORST

PEGGY

THE DEATH MAKER

THE MAN THEY COULDN'T ARREST

THE MASTER MYSTERY

THE MYSTERY MAKER

THE NEEDLE'S KISS

THE SILENT SIX

THE WEB OF MURDER

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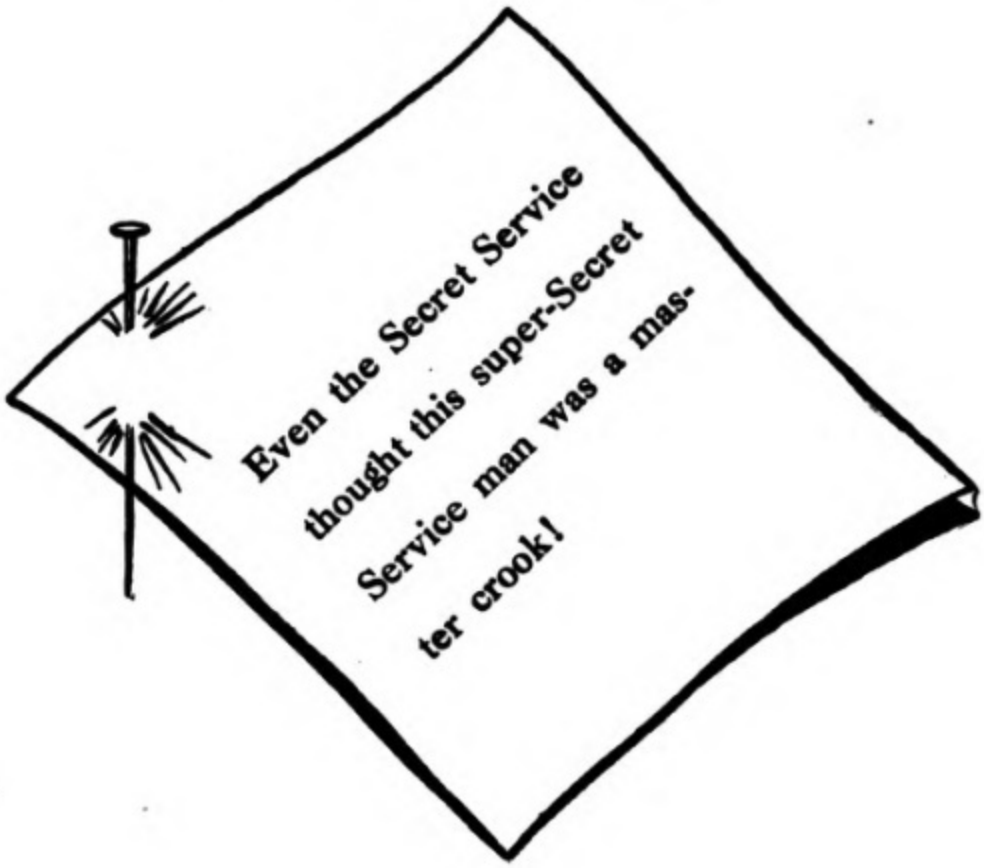

PUBLISHED FOR

THE CRIME CLUB, INC.

BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK, 1930

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O. F. BUTLER
BEQUEST
1/27/40

CHAPTER I

AS AN individual Colonel John Stayne was unique in quite a number of ways. Even the highly coloured records at Scotland Yard admitted him as one of their star artists—and a particularly irritating artist at that. He was one who refused to be snared, no matter how perfectly the trap was laid for him, no matter how many brains took a hand in the perfecting of the trap. He seemed to have been mixed up in something more than half the biggest swindles and criminal jobs of the post-war years, and his name and history were definitely involved in the dossier of every international crook in the Yard archives.

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And yet . . . even the higher authorities at Headquarters had to admit that there was an embarrassingly noticeable "And yet" about the John Stayne situation. He seemed to have an "And yet" complex.

To begin with, he was only thirty-one and yet his rank of colonel was genuine, although he had been out of the army some years. He had gained his colonelcy at twenty-two, and he had never heard a single shot fired in action. He had done remarkable work in the Anti-Espionage Corps, and yet he had resigned without offering a single reason.

Twenty-four hours later the famous Cottrington case broke in seven-column banner lines in the newspapers. Colonel John Stayne's name was mentioned

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by every single witness in that remarkable affair, and yet not a single one of them could recognize him at an identity parade; Lord Cottrington repudiated all knowledge of him when he stepped into the witness-box.

He was so good-looking in a quiet, aristocratic way that pretty well every eligible débutante's mother had taken a shamelessly complete fall in his direction; and yet he was a bachelor still, without a single whisper of scandal against his moral reputation. There was no earthly reason why he should exhibit a criminal tendency, for he was an exceptionally wealthy man in his own right, and yet—there were those ineradicable dossiers in pretty well every important pigeon-hole at Scotland Yard.

He seemed to swim around right out on the verge of things, sometimes heading straight into the very heart of the seething whirlpool, with every other subsidiary revolving madly about him, and then, when the crash came, there were all the majors and minors safely under lock and key—and there was John Stayne, a nebulous, unaccusable being, right out beyond the net again with not a tittle of evidence against him. Indeed, such evidence as there was tended to prove that John Stayne had had nothing whatever to do with the unpleasant affair.

The Yard, being human and as wise as they make 'em, had long since ceased to harbour any resentment against him. He was far too useful. As an unfailing guide-line, pointing always to where big trouble was brewing, he was infallible. Where John Stayne was, there big-time trouble was surely coming to the boil in the stew-pot of the underworld.

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So they gave him his rein, stepped along invisibly four yards astern of his coat-tails, and let him ride. And because of his remarkable propensity for unearthing the big stuff while keeping out of it himself, they dubbed him the "Mystery Maker," raised their mental hats to him, and breathed a little prayer for his continued well-being.

He lived in a large house in Curzon Square, one of those large, fashionable houses in one of those small, fashionable squares that still carry, on their startlingly ugly façades, something of the unutterably quiet and proper atmosphere of the early Victorian era.

John Stayne was a tall, military-looking figure, dark-haired, bronzed with the tan of a good many travels under southern suns, and all over him he carried the indefinable stamp of the soldier. His actions were orderly and precise; as were his utterances. So orderly and precise that they implied an orderly and precise brain. His thoughts were coördinated and definitely formed before he vocalized them into words. Alene Mathers, his secretary, declared emphatically that she had never taken dictation from a more clear-minded, less annoying employer. And that, knowing the general muddleheadedness of a man trying to dictate a letter to a girl with fair hair and speedwell blue eyes, is a knowledgeable commendation.

Val Tembridge, a sharp-tongued young gentleman whom he chose to call his assistant, had thumped the noses of half a dozen individuals who had been incautious enough to scandalize Stayne's general behaviour in his hearing. Scotland Yard had never been

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able to "place" Tembridge to its satsfaction or to discover in exactly what way he assisted. Except that he had a genuine American accent—one which the disconcerting young pup could switch off at will—and a bewildering knack of bobbing up right in that one spot where they had already conclusively proved it was impossible for him to be, they knew very little about him.

One of the first bright suns of early spring was shining sharply through the windows of 8B Curzon Square. In the big main room one of the last wood fires of winter burned cheerily in the open grate. John Stayne reached out from the depths of a great leather armchair and thumbed a bell button under the edge of the table.

It was a huge room. The carved mahogany table, eight foot by twelve, looked small. Eight cut-crystal candelabra swung high from the gilded ceiling, and the wallpaper was of stained, chased leather. Stayne relaxed again and re-read a letter in his lap.

Tembridge came in, a sheaf of papers under his arm and a fat red fountain pen behind his ear.

"Tembridge," said Stayne, "I want some information about the Demorval affair. The probability is that there is a case in it for us. Do you happen to know any inside details about it, offhand?"

"Lady Demorval?"

"Yes, recently widowed. I believe I was in Chicago on that Rutledge business when the case came on."

Tembridge nodded. "Sure," he said. "I haven't all the details, but it's all in the files. Lady Demorval had just left her château in Mentone to come back here for the London season. Before she reached London she

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received news that the château had been broken into. Must have done it the same night she left. Thieves went for the jewels. Said jewels were to have followed her to town a few days later under special guard.

"Stones to the value of over £100,000 were taken. Two ropes of diamonds—the Demorval ropes. Fine tiara of rubies. And the whole collection of emeralds. Emeralds not too good. Some good ones among them, of course, but, on the whole, imperfect. Some pretty fine opals went too, but Lady Demorval ranks opals along with coral, cat's-eyes, and coke. The assessors stuck out a reward right away—£5,000 for their recovery. Increased it later to £20,000. Must have been badly stung on the insurance. Plums of the picking were the ropes. A week later Lady Demorval went to Mentone herself to try to hammer a bit of nous into the heads of the French police. She had put up at an hotel in London for a few days while the town house was being prepared. All her luggage was stored there pending instructions from her.

"One evening there was a sound of banging coming from the room where the luggage was stored. Hotel manager threw a fright and 'phoned the police. They got there in time to arrest Varris in the foyer. He was heading for the street with his hat on his head and the diamonds in his hip pocket—done up in tissue paper. The head bell-hop had watched him come out of the store-room in one peach of a hurry. Varris—Templer Varris—was her private secretary, and was in full charge of her affairs until Lady Demorval's return. Up in the store-room they found half her ladyship's baggage busted open."

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Stayne held up his hand. "Just a moment," he said. "Templer Varris. Have you anything about him?"

"Yes. Unhappy relic of the war. Very good family from one of the shires. A bit county. Joined up as soon as his years let him. Left the army at twenty-two. No more training for a decent job in civilian life than you can derive from four years of loosing off rifles, slinging hand grenades, and jabbing holes in a lot of Jerries with a bayonet. Had two or three years trying to keep up appearances on a couple of pounds a week and then fell fairly lucky. The Demorvals wanted a private secretary and Varris got the job. He'd been with them about three years when it happened. Previous record with them good. No complaint of any sort. Case came up for hearing two weeks ago—just before you got back. Varris got five years."

"Pretty clear case, you think?"

"As it read, Varris had as many legs to stand on as a puff-adder—and about as evenly distributed. He said he was breaking the cases open because he had lost the keys. Lady Demorval had wired for some papers to be sent on to her out of one of the trunks. He proved that piece all right; and then he said that while rummaging through the grips he came across the ropes wrapped up in the tissue just as they were found on him. He couldn't get away from the fact that the bulls collared him for streaking for the broad highway, with the goods as part cargo. He said he was taking them to the assessors for safe custody. He seemed to ignore the fact that there was perfectly safe custody in the hotel strong-room and that the

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clocks were just booming 7. P. M. when they stopped him at the door. The assessors close at five."

Stayne was silent for a while and then said, almost to himself: "A great pity about those times. I suppose Varris was aware of the time City offices close?"

"He said he knew all right, but had forgotten to remember. Said he was so astonished and upset he forgot all about everything. Net result—five years for not remembering not to forget. Those ropes were worth £25,000 each."

"Anything else? Did he try to implicate anyone else or hint at other complications?"

"Not directly. He told the judge that there was considerably more than a mere diamond stealing charge at the back of the business, and asked to be allowed to make a statement to the judge privately in his room. The judge told him that except in cases concerning the Crown, blackmail or obscenity, all statements must be made in open court. Any remarks he had to make would be made from the dock or not at all. Varris thought it over for a bit and decided to stay dumb."

"H'm. Very interesting. Very, *very* interesting. So interesting that, I think, before many hours have passed, we shall re-embark on our criminal career. Quite a lot of laws will be broken before we sort out our particular end of this lively problem."

"Varris is innocent, eh?"

"Of any connection with this diamond business—yes. But the diamond affair is only the rash on the surface. The real disease goes a great deal deeper, I think. There should be some quite bright times ahead.

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I think we have dug our fingers into what you call a real one this time."

A great jade clock began chiming softly on a mantelpiece that was built of solid slabs of alabaster. Stayne had slumped back in his chair again, and was staring hard into the glowing heart of the blazing pine logs. Behind him, on a bracket set in the corner of the room, was a golden idol of incredible ugliness. Gripped in its distorted hands was a tiny silver bell and from its mouth protruded what appeared to be an ivory cornucopia. Suddenly and without any apparent volition the bell tinkled twice on a high musical note. Stayne turned a knob under the arm of his chair, and said, to nobody in particular, "Yes—what is it?"

A minor miracle happened. From the little ivory trumpet in the idol's mouth came a voice of astonishing clarity. It was a male voice, pitched in the natural human key, and its volume was as perfectly modulated as though the speaker was present, there in the corner of the room.

"Front hall speaking," it said; "a visitor to see you, sir."

Without turning round Stayne said, "Thank you. What name, please?"

"Miss Marienne Varris, sir. She says that she wrote you and suggested in her letter that she would like to see you at nine o'clock this morning. If it is inconvenient for you to see her now, would you please make an appointment at as early a moment as possible? She states that her business is of extreme urgency."

"Thank you, Belham; send Miss Varris up to me

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here. I will see her immediately." Stayne pushed the knob back and turned to Tembridge.

"That's Templer Varris's sister," he said. "She's in terrible distress about her brother—to judge from this letter here—and says she will do anything on earth if I will help him. The letter of an educated woman going into hysterics through sheer helplessness and despair."

He rolled the letter into a ball and pitched it into the fire, watching it slowly uncoil and burn away to black ash. With an easy movement he heaved himself out of the deep chair and glanced at the clock.

"At least she is dead on time," he said. "I rather like women who respect the hands of the clock. Get me all the data we have about this Demorval affair, will you, and bring it to me here? I want you to be present when we get down to business, because the first thing I want to know from this young lady is how she came to know my name, my address and the exact manner in which she discovered that there was the possibility of getting assistance from me. I don't like it, Tembridge; I don't like it. Somebody is doing a little private talking behind our backs—and Miss Varris is going to tell us who, or my name is not John Stayne."

There was a hard, bitter look in his eyes as he spoke, a look that Tembridge knew better than any man on earth. And for her own sake he hoped that Marienne Varris would not be too obstinate.

"Will you want the secretary?" he said.

"No. You and I will see this matter through alone."

Tembridge went out through the communicating door to his own room as Miss Varris was ushered in.

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Stayne bowed and motioned her to a seat near the fire. "Won't you please sit down?" he said in his soft, rather deep voice. "The air is quite chilly outside, in spite of the sun. Sit down and warm yourself before you begin talking."

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CHAPTER II

THE girl stayed at the top end of the table, staring a little wildly at Stayne, as though she couldn't quite realize that this suavely-spoken man with the courtly manners and the grace of a knight was the Mystery Maker, the man about whom nothing but hinted stories of unimaginable knavery were whispered. She was staring straight at him, diffidently twisting her gloves about in her fingers as though she had not heard a single word of his invitation.

John Stayne regarded her with a half smile, a smile which could not quite hide a slight reddening of the face—for John Stayne was in process of admitting to his own inner conscience that Marienne Varris was just about the nicest girl he had ever looked at from a distance of less than ten feet. She was one of those gorgeous young creatures one never expects to see in real life. On the covers of the magazines, yes; but never in real life.

Her complexion was much too perfect to be all complexion and nothing added; but on that point the Colonel had a properly open mind, he holding that it was far easier to look at a face that was nicely assisted with a spot of colouring than one that resembled a slab of dough with a set of features let into it.

Her eyes were average as regards size, but the Demorval diamonds themselves were never brighter or fuller of more varying shades.

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Her nose was small and very straight and her mouth was a bewildering series of little curves that somehow melted into lips from her cheeks and chin. What small curls of hair peeped from under her tiny hat were of a shade that was neither black, brown, nor fair—but just that bright, happy tint in between. John Stayne continued to smile—and redden.

"Are you—are you Mr.—Colonel—Stayne?" she managed to stammer out at last.

"I am. And you are Miss Marienne Varris? Won't you *please* sit down? You look so unhappy standing there. I've read your letter, and I am most anxious to talk to you—to help you."

"Are you? Are you—*really?*" There was almost a note of entreaty in her voice, and her gloves were rapidly becoming a shapeless ball of horribly twisted kid.

Stayne went round to her, took her by the arm, and led her to the chair. He sat himself down opposite her where the light fell full on that face that was much too beautiful to be true. There, with the sunlight flooding in full from the high-lighted windows, he saw the tiny worry lines that were crawling, all too wickedly early, into the corners of those bright eyes, saw the slight trembling of the under lip, noted the almost ceaseless twittering of the fingers that indicated a nerve stress of such old standing that it was working up to a breakdown. And he knew then, if he hadn't been definitely certain before, that there was something pretty terrible behind the burgling of the Château Demorval in Mentone and the theft of the Demorval diamonds in London.

The communicating door opened and Miss Varris

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looked up with positive fright in her eyes at the sudden sound.

"It's quite all right, Miss Varris," said Stayne gently. "This is Mr. Valdon Tembridge, my assistant. Impolite folk refer to him as my accomplice. Mr. Tembridge, this is Miss Marienne Varris, who has come to see us about a very private affair."

Tembridge bowed slightly from the hips, and stuck there. He was gazing at Marienne in sheer unbelief, and it seemed age-long minutes before he prised himself upright again.

"I'm delighted to see you, Miss Varris," he said, and mentally informed himself that he had never spoken a more touchingly true sentence in his life.

Stayne took the portfolio from Tembridge's limply extended hand and briefly glanced through the contents. There were printed cuttings of every phase of the story, taken from the various papers, verbatim reports of the magisterial proceedings and the full agency reports of the trial. Here and there were such notices, proclamations and private statements as Tembridge had been able to get possession of by means best known to himself.

Stayne looked up to see Marienne eyeing the accumulation in wild alarm.

"Miss Varris," he said quietly, "I trust that in explaining the reason for your visit to us you will deal with the matter as frankly as possible. You will notice that we have here quite a full résumé of the whole matter in so far as it has yet become public property —and not a few other documents that not even the judge has been privileged to see. You have hinted in your letter at a good many other matters of far

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greater consequence than the theft of a couple of ropes of diamonds and—if I may put it brutally—five years' penal servitude."

The old frightened look, a hunted look, came back into her eyes and she plucked nervously at the torn fingers of a glove. Then, after a little silence, she seemed to screw all her courage up into a single sentence. Looking him straight in the eyes, but with lips that all the courage in the world could not keep from twitching, she asked:

"Mr. Stayne, if I promise to tell you something of what I know—enough for you to discover the net yourself—will you promise to get Templer out of prison, to get him out in such a way that nothing of this terrible business will become public?"

The words came tumbling out of her mouth in an uncontrollable stream—as fast as though it were part of a set speech she had already prepared and rehearsed and was determined to make before she gave away a single line of her own story.

"Will you? Will you?" she rushed on, a light of feverish intensity burning in her eyes. "I know Templer has been indiscreet—has been a perfect fool in some respects—but it has been the foolishness of loyalty. He is absolutely innocent—he no more intended to steal those diamonds than I did—and *I* wouldn't wear the beastly things if I were paid a thousand a week to do just that and nothing else. Those diamonds should never have been in London at all. It was a terrible blunder on Templer's part. Templer didn't want them—he was only getting rid

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of them so that he could save a brace of Demorval skins. Yes! You can look. I said a brace and I mean a brace. If I could tell the full story that lies hidden behind those two footling ropes of diamonds suddenly appearing in London there would be more trouble on the Continent than all the European Chancelleries put together could put right. But I can't! I can't until Templer is out of prison. Templer himself could be free inside an hour if he chose to put what he knows on paper—but he can't do that any more than I can. Oh, what am I to do? What *am* I to do?"

In an access of helplessness she wrung her hands together and her head fell forward in a fit of half-stifled sobbing.

"There's been murder done already over this terrible business," she said in a strangled voice, "and there will be murder done again unless somebody with a cool head gets at the head of things to stop it."

Stayne leaned forward and gently touched her arm.

"Miss Varris," he said, with quiet incisiveness, "you are already saying a great deal more than you intended. You made me a condition just now, a condition which stated that, before you would tell me anything, I would promise to effect the release of Mr. Varris without further publicity compromising him in this business. Before you go any further, I wish to tell you that I, too, have a condition to make."

The girl looked up quickly, her face draining a shade whiter under its nervous pallor and her hands gripped together till the knuckles shone.

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"A—a condition?" she whispered, and looked timidly from Stayne to Tembridge and back again.

Stayne did not give her a chance to think. "Yes, a condition—but a very simple one indeed," he went on smoothly. "I only wish that yours to me had been one-thousandth part as simple. It is this. What is the name of the person who sent you to me?"

Marienne looked down into her lap and covered her eyes with her hands. Stayne noted that those hands were trembling badly.

"No—nobody sent me—I just came," she muttered.

"That is the first lie you've told for many a long day—and you told it badly," said Stayne. The hard glitter was back in his eyes. He had risen and was standing over her.

"Who sent you?" he demanded. "Listen, girl; there is not a soul in England who knows that I am capable of getting a man out of gaol, not a soul in England who knows that Stayne, the Mystery Maker, makes mysteries for others to fall into and get themselves entangled in webs of their own weaving. Only Tembridge there knows the extent to which we have broken laws—knows the extent to which we are able to break them further. You have been to someone. That someone, at his wit's end, has sent you to me. Now, who was it?"

She shook her head helplessly.

"How do I know anyone to go to?" she said.

"Then how did you know to come to me?" He put his hand on her shoulder and pressed her upright. "Miss Varris," he went on, "would it interest you to

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know that I am not unaware of some of the facts behind this case? Until recently my duties took me a good deal to the French Riviera. As a brother member of the Diplomatic Corps, Lord Demorval was known to me. And the Secret Service, my dear, travels along byways that are not even known to Scotland Yard. Would it surprise you to know that I could go straight to France this very day and challenge Monsieur Flocard, the French waiter, his right to his French name—to ask him why he widowed Lady Demorval so recently, to ask Lady Demorval herself why her diamonds were not in the Mentone château, to arrange a prison meeting with Templer Varris and to ask him point blank why——"

But the girl had risen and was clinging to him desperately. "No! No!" she gasped. "Please—*please!* There is no need—Templer is——"

"Yes, yes, I know that too. Now—who sent you to me?"

"Lord Demorval himself." The girl looked at him blankly for a moment and then collapsed over the arm of her chair.

Stayne, with two deeply drawn furrows down the centre of his forehead, sank slowly back in his seat, and his hands were trembling. Tembridge was staring at the girl as though she had suddenly gone mad. Then he caught John Stayne's eyes boring into him. There was a flood of newer—and greater—understanding blazing in them and perhaps just a hint of the fear a man gets when he gazes full face at something that transcends the credible.

"Tembridge," he said, soberly but with deadly con-

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viction in every syllable, "we have got to get Templer Varris out of that cell within forty-eight hours—*and without the permission of the authorities!* We've got to abduct him from under their noses! Quick—some brandy for Miss Varris—she's fainted."

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CHAPTER III

TEMBRIDGE was already on the way to Marienne Varris. In a minute or two she had recovered sufficiently to sit back and try to force a little shamefaced smile. A mountain of relief seemed to have toppled from her shoulders the moment the Mystery Maker decided to take a hand in the fate of Templer Varris.

Stayne slipped out a little notebook, and, while Marienne was dabbing her eyes, he jotted down a few questions, taking meticulous care to verify certain names and dates from the cuttings in the dossier.

"Do you feel like concentrating on a few of the finer points of this unusual story?" he asked at last.

The girl looked up with an emotional surge of relief in her eyes. "Yes, Mr. Stayne, I'm quite ready to do anything you wish," she said.

"And to be perfectly candid in your replies to these questions?" inquired Stayne, tapping his notebook. He was looking directly at her, and she flushed a little. For a few moments her fingers wandered nervously over her forehead, and then she said quietly: "I will answer any question you care to ask me—provided my answers don't implicate my brother any further. You probably realise already that there is one aspect of this matter on which I can shed no light at all."

Stayne nodded grimly. "I understand," he said. "It

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"Yes. It was through me that he got his appointment."

"Are you still in Lady Demorval's employ?"

"No. I resigned some months ago. I couldn't stand the strain of it any longer. I could see something dreadful happening like this—I could see it coming."

"Why? What made you suspect a crash was coming?"

Marienne looked away into the fire. "I—I'd rather not answer that question," she said after a long pause.

Stayne smiled, just a little wisp of a smile that flitted across his mouth for a moment and was gone. "Does it occur to you that you have already answered that question?" he asked.

The girl shot him a quick glance of apprehension. "I don't think I understand," she said hurriedly.

"You, as companion to her ladyship, would know considerably more about her affairs than his," came the quiet rejoinder. "If you resigned it would be in consequence of something you feared on her account. It would seem that all is not well with Lady Demorval's affairs. Still, we will let that matter slide. Now, tell me, when did you last see Lord Demorval?"

"Three days ago, in Paris."

"That was when he recommended you to come and see me?"

"Recommended is a very weak word. He begged me to."

"And where was this?"

"At the Crédit Lyonnais. It is one of the many pseudo-appointments he holds in Paris. I think he was

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acting as a bank clerk at the paying-in grille. At least, that was where I saw him."

"And now about Flocard."

"Emil Flocard? I've never seen him personally. All I know about him is that he, too, is attached to the staff in Paris. He is a waiter."

"Where?"

"At Monsieur Sebillon's café in the Boulevard Pereire. It is a very fashionable restaurant a little way out of the main centre of——"

"I know it. Expensive, too. But the cuisine is perfect. Let me see now. Lord Demorval has been 'dead' now nearly three months, has he not?"

"Nearer four. Lady Demorval was in mourning for over three months at the Mentone château."

"And Lady Demorval actually believes him dead?"

"Yes. So did I. So did we all. He went into a private nursing home and died there. It was as perfectly arranged as only the Secret Service can possibly hope to arrange such things. I went to the funeral. I went over specially for it when I read of his death in the English papers. It happened about a month after I had left the Demorval employ. I remember thinking he had found a happy release from the crash that was coming. The coffin was buried at Chantilly with full official honours."

"Just one more question, Miss Varris." Stayne leaned over and eyed her keenly from under his dark brows. "Where did Lady Demorval go for her little gambling flutters?" He pitched the question directly at her and his eyes never left her face.

She started badly, and the old hunted look leapt

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back into her eyes. Her body tensed and she crouched back into her chair.

"I never said she gambled!" she said breathlessly. "I never mentioned it—never even hinted at it!"

"Probably not," said Stayne dryly. "It isn't necessary to have facts written down in headlines before they become visible." Suddenly his manner changed and he became a hard, masterful figure, dominating her attention by the very menace of his attitude.

"Miss Varris," he said, with the cold bite of steel in his words, "your brother is in prison with five years between him and liberty. He can clear himself only at the expense of uncovering one of the biggest scandals that ever endangered the financial stability of this country. Now listen carefully. A little while ago a man was murdered in one of the private gambling hells in Paris. The whole matter was one for the French police, but somehow it was fiercely hushed up. No one on this side, for instance, ever knew exactly where it happened.

"We do know, however, that there was a terrific fight going on at the time, and that it was only through the mad heroism of an unknown man in the room that a certain Englishwoman of title escaped before the gendarmerie broke in. He held the whole place single-handed till the lady got clear. He did it at the expense of a smashed skull—somebody else's skull.

"When the police forced the doors the lady was gone and her honour was saved. Also there was a dead body on the floor, its head battered in with a champagne bottle—and the valiant unknown was hauling

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himself out through the window with a clear twenty-foot drop to the ground. He made it and got clear.

"That Englishwoman of title was Lady Demorval, and the man who pulled her through was Templer Varris. Varris is now in the sweet position of only being able to clear himself of a five years' sentence by offering his neck to the rope on the murder charge. Now—I want that address, and I want it now! Where did Lady Demorval go for her little gambling flutters?"

Marienne had been listening to Stayne's grim recitative with eyes that slowly filled with fright. The extent of his inside knowledge appalled her. For some time she could not speak.

Stayne pacified her.

"Dear lady," he said, "I assure you that until you came in here I did not know one tenth of what I've just told you. You tell me a little and I infer a lot. I knew there had been a scandal in a roulette club over there. I knew that a man, at the risk of his life, had saved a lady's name. I knew that Lord Demorval was dead; in common with the rest of the world I honestly believed it. Then you tell me that you resigned her ladyship's employ because you could not stand the strain of the anxiety. You tell me that Lord Demorval is not dead—that he quietly withdrew out of life and left nothing but a faked funeral behind him. You tell me that Templer Varris is your brother, and that he is incapable of such an act as stealing valuable diamonds. You tell me that it is impossible for him to clear himself without seriously implicating others. And that the moment he tries to he is letting himself in for worse trouble than before.

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"Dear lady, isn't it rather a simple effort of logic to unite the details and to assume that one is the direct cause of the other? Who else would your brother risk his neck for but the employer who had befriended him when he was down and out? What else would keep his tongue silent when nothing but five years of prison misery stared him in the face?

"No, Miss Varris, you need not be frightened. Your secrets are not quite such public knowledge as you might think. I know, for instance, from your own reluctance to give me such a simple piece of information as the address of that club that you are frightened of having the place investigated. Your agitation precludes any other conclusion. That means that there is something far worse than murder going on there. Consequently I know that Lady Demorval is seriously implicated in that too. One affair is simply the outcome of the other. Now—please!"

Marienne Varris opened her bag hurriedly and with trembling fingers, as though too frightened to listen to more of that cold logic. She took from it a small visiting card and passed it over with a hand that shook. It bore the neatly printed inscription:

CLUB TABARIN,
Rue Pigalle.
Laisser passer.

"Thank you," said Stayne. He glanced at it and handed it back. "I don't know the place, and I didn't know that gambling clubs were beginning to appear in the Montmartre district. Still, we live and learn. Tembridge, are you getting tired of London?"

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"Passports are all O.K.," said Tembridge shortly.

The Mystery Maker nodded. "As soon as we have arranged about Varris we will run over," he said. "There should be some interesting hours in the Rue Pigalle. Show Miss Varris out, will you, please?"

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CHAPTER IV

STAYNE turned to Marienne as she rose with a look of surprise and relief on her face. He was smiling.

"It's quite all right," he said. "You can now get out of the dentist's chair. Not a very pleasant quarter of an hour for you, was it? But most troubles have to get a little worse before they get a little better. Let me see now; to-day is Tuesday. If you come round here on Thursday afternoon Templer will be here to meet you. Mind—not a word of this to a living soul."

"Oh—I—I promise!" she said with tears of emotion starting to her eyes. "Mr. Stayne, I don't know how to thank you. My heart is nearly bursting with gratitude. You'll never know what——"

Stayne took her by the arm and piloted her gently to the door. "Let's not talk about it until it is all over," he said soberly. "Believe me, there is a lot more in this affair than even you dream—and I think you have a pretty shrewd suspicion. There are quite a few hectic hours to be lived before this matter passes out of the danger zone. Don't forget now—Thursday, about tea-time." He squeezed her hand and opened the door.

She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief as she went down the stairs. Belham, most impeccable of butlers, was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

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Stayne watched her go, deep lines of thought creasing over his forehead.

"Miss Varris," he called softly, leaning over the balustrade. "Just one thing more. Did you come here by taxi?"

"Yes," she answered. "From my hotel in the Strand."

Stayne waved his hand. "Keep smiling. Good-bye," he called.

Back in the big room Tembridge was studying a shorthand note he had been taking of the whole conversation. Planked in front of him was a silent typewriter. Stayne glanced at him. "I wouldn't worry about that this time, if I were you," he said. "What we heard we will just keep in our heads. Burn that lot —quickly."

Tembridge looked up. "Bad as that—eh?" he jerked.

Stayne inclined his head once, very deliberately.

"Probably worse," he muttered. "That distracted little fool came round in a taxi. That means the Yard will be nosing around inside five minutes. Still, we shall know what the Yard thinks of it from the size of the man they send. Get that dossier put away." He pulled the knob on the armchair and said: "Has Miss Varris gone yet, Belham?"

"Yes, sir; a moment ago," came the uncanny voice from the golden idol.

"Very good. If a gentleman should call—a gentleman who will prefer not to give his name—warn me and bring him straight up, please."

"I will see to it, sir."

Stayne turned and eyed his assistant critically.

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"Well, Tembridge," he said, "what did you think of her?"

Tembridge stuck his fat red fountain pen back behind his ear and glanced up dreamily at the massive ceiling.

"I'm glad," he said to the furniture in general, "I'm glad to think that you're too old to marry—and that I am just of the right marrying age."

Stayne didn't smile. For a man who had only just turned thirty he looked even younger—except, perhaps, for that deep dominance of will and strength of character which were visibly present even when lying dormant.

"What I mean is," said Tembridge, tucking the dossier under his arm, "colonels never marry. It's against the ethical code. They either marry before they become colonels or they just stay uncles to their own nieces. And very good uncles they make, I hear.

"Marienne—I make no excuse for calling her by her Christian name—is a delightful blend of a duck and a darling and a dear and a delicious little Dresden Shepherdess all dolled up in short skirts, silk stockings —*black* silk stockings, bless her—neat little patent shoes, and bobbed hair. I rather think I like England. You never——"

He stopped short, made one lightning dive for the communicating door, and shot through it like a stone from a catapult. The golden idol had suddenly said: "A gentleman on his way up to see you, sir. He gave his name as Chief Superintendent Hawker, the head of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard."

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Then Stayne smiled. But it was a smile that had not the remotest bearing on the last observations of his assistant. There was a grim line of determination about it that wiped it clean of any trace of humour. It was the gargoyle grin of a man who realises that two lifelong adversaries were coming face to face—the smile of a man who smelt battle ahead and was unafraid of the issue.

Tembridge returned, lighting a cigarette.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, with an unholy glee glittering out of his eyes. "Hawker! The Chief of the whole circus! That's what the Yard thinks about it. Somebody is going to get the cane."

The door opened and the butler announced the detective. Hawker came in. For once, he was a detective who almost looked his part. His eyebrows were greying and shaggy and the eyes that burned beneath them were slaty grey, morose and unfriendly. He had a hard mouth and a disconcerting way of pursing it up as though he didn't like you on sight and wasn't taking any pains to hide it. There was antagonism in his very presence and he stared you hard in the eyes as though he knew you were going to come out with a pack of lies before he spoke a single word. An aura of mistrust hung over him as visible as the great tweed coat he wore—and he hadn't turned his hat over to the butler.

Belham withdrew, a look of high disapproval printed all over his face, his nose drawn up a quarter of an inch as though he had just smelled fish.

"Good-morning, Chief," said Stayne, pushing forward a chair. "Rather early for a call from you, isn't it?"

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Hawker grunted. "Midnight wouldn't be too early for some people," he growled. He stood in the middle of the room and peered round, his cold, metallic eyes boring into every hole and corner. "Well? Where's the gadget?" he demanded.

"The what?"

"The gadget. The doohickey. The tiddy-falah that your butler chatted to you on?"

"Oh, that? The little Cupid up there in the corner." And not even Hawker's probing eyes saw the tiny action of Stayne's right hand under the arm of the chair.

"Belham?" said Stayne, almost to himself. "You might bring up a decanter and some glasses, will you, please?"

"Certainly, sir," belled out from the golden idol. "Coming in one moment, sir."

"Pretty good," said Hawker, staring appreciatively at the tiny ivory trumpet. "Yes, that's pretty good."

"Good in this respect," admitted Stayne, "that Belham might be asked to bring up revolvers for two just as easily as whiskies. It goes one better than the detectaphone, that's all. Same principle. Works both ways."

"Yours?"

"Not this time. Tembridge worked that one out."

"Neat. Neat, I must say. Care to give me the prescription?"

"No reason why we shouldn't. Tembridge will no doubt give you a copy of the blue print. Quite simple. And now, Chief, what's the reason for the visit? Tem-

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bridge hasn't been wangling his income-tax returns, has he?"

"You know perfectly well the reason for this visit, Colonel."

"I regret to say that I haven't the haziest notion."

"You haven't, hey? That's why Belham announced me right away, having only asked me my name. You hadn't whispered down that doodah that I was on the way, hey? That's why you let the girl out of the front door. Unless you'd known that we were already waiting outside and had watched her come in she would have been gently whisked out of that other exit that even we haven't been able to discover yet. That's why that fire there is half-choked with ashes—paper ashes. That's why there's a brandy bottle and a single glass on the table. Say, which of you has suddenly taken to brandy bibbing at nine o'clock in the morning, hey?"

Stayne was laughing quietly. "All right, Chief," he said. "I just wanted to see if you'd lost any of the old flair. That lot wasn't left about by accident. What do we do now?"

Hawker glowered at him. "Still the same old Smarty," he snapped. He eyed his man steadily for some seconds, and his eyes were like twin drills boring Stayne's slightly amused nonchalance. "Well?" he demanded at last, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Candidly, I think I shall have a try at it."

"You do, hey?"

"I certainly do. I told Miss Varris so."

"D'ye think I don't know that? Hey? D'ye think I didn't see her step into that fool taxi with a face that looked as if the weight of the whole earth had sud-

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denly slid off it? D'ye think I didn't see her almost laughing with relief through eyes that were still wet with tears? D'ye think I didn't know how much you had managed to worm out of her in that quarter of an hour she was up here with you?" His eyes strayed to the brandy again. "Enough to make her throw a flop, anyway," he added.

"We thought about going over to Paris on Thursday," said Tembridge, as though anxious to get off a subject that was not untempered with embarrassment for them all.

"You did, did you? Well, you won't. And another thing, my son—when I'm talking to the organ-grinder I don't want the monkey to butt in. When I want you I'll rattle your chain."

Tembridge cocked an owl-like eye on Stayne. "I think it's the cold air," he said solemnly. "The cold air on a naughty liver, too early in the morning. Mr. Hawker, you oughtn't to get up until the streets are properly aired and warmed," he advised, "you oughtn't, really. 'Tisn't fair, Chief, 'tisn't fair to old and valued customers."

Hawker growled far down in his chest like Stromboli working up for a demonstration. He favoured Tembridge with a malevolent glare.

"Finished?" he barked.

Tembridge folded his hands in his lap. "Oh, quite," he said.

Hawker turned back to Stayne. "Listen," he said. "You are not going over to Paris on Thursday. And you are not mixing up in this Varris job any more than you are going to run round the equator or square the

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circle. You are going to back out of it just as fast as you know how. Both you and your tame goat."

"But why?"

"Because there's bigger brains than yours working to straighten out this tangle. Bigger—and more of 'em."

"Bigger—maybe. More—maybe. But certainly not so humane."

"They're on it now, anyway—and they don't want you!"

"Meanwhile, I suppose, they haven't the faintest objection to Templer Varris doing five years for their amusement?"

"That's just his bad luck. Somebody's got to hold the buck. And Varris is a good-plucked 'un. He won't give the show away."

"I'm sure he won't. And I'm equally sure he won't do five years."

"Oh? And who says so?"

"I do. I told Miss Varris so. I promised her."

"What's the new move, Colonel? Turning Good Samaritan, hey?"

"A cross, I think, between that and Sir Galahad."

Hawker suddenly leaned forward across the table and took Stayne by the wrist. His face was deep-set and more serious than Stayne ever remembered seeing it.

"Candidly, Stayne," he said, "you've got to lay off this one. It's not up your street and there won't be any pickings for anyone. You're on a bad egg. There isn't a bob in it—anything you spend on it, you'll be that much out of pocket. And you'll be prevented, by

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force if necessary, from trying to queer the pitch. That's orders from the man up top—and you know who I mean. Now you're no fool. You've been mixed up in some pretty smart shows one way and another, and I'll hand it to you that up to now you've always been able to wriggle clean at the last moment. Sometimes you've been so slick that you've sent me back home gnawing my own gums. But this time you're up against the whole box of works. You won't get away with it. That's *orders*. I'm telling you for your own good."

"Nice of you. I always had a soft spot for you, Hawker. You fight fair—or fair enough—and there's no humbug about you. But this time I think you're out of your depth. Even you don't know just what's been happening over in Paris. Neither does the man up top. He's only feeling his way. And he's being made a tool of, too, by The Man Higher Up Still—just like Varris. Know who I mean? No, I don't suppose you do. Used to work with that crowd myself once. They're smart, believe me—too darned smart for belief sometimes. The chances are that if you interfere with me you will only be putting your own foot in it. That's all. Good-morning. Here comes your whisky. I'll leave you with my tame goat. He's got a little blue print to show you. Don't be surprised if there is a hiatus in Varris's cell before long, will you?"

He pushed out through the door, leaving Hawker staring after him, chewing morosely at his clipped-off bristle of moustache.

The Chief grunted again and reached out for his hat.

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Tembridge peered at him over the top of the decanter as he poured out a couple of stiff pegs. "What's wrong, Chief?—going? So soon?"

Hawker let out a bass rumble. "I don't drink any man's whisky who won't drink with me!" he said, with a dismissing jerk of the hand.

Tembridge frowned. That was a declaration of war. And Hawker had not troubled to be polite about it, either. He shrugged. Well, if it was going to be a war, it would be a good lusty one—and the odds wouldn't all be piled on one side either.

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CHAPTER V

STAYNE went upstairs into his own bedroom. It was a room in keeping with the rest of the house —large, autocratic; a room in which only a man of wealth could have slept in any comfort, for an oppressive air of opulence hung over it like a heavily brocaded pall.

Against a wall was a massive ebony library, its shelves lined with richly gilded leather-covered volumes that are only published by private subscription at so many guineas per copy. They were reminiscences of great soldiers, lawyers, sailors, politicians, and men who held high office in the inner councils of the nation. There was nothing there by Colonel Stayne, though his, with perhaps one exception, would have been the most interesting of them all.

He silently locked the bedroom door and crossed over to the great library. That library could only be manipulated when the bedroom door was locked, and Stayne alone held the queer oddity of a key that snapped over the wards of that lock. He pulled out two books and thrust his arm down a cavity behind where an oiled bolt lay concealed. Then he pushed the books back with a jolt. From somewhere inside the packed shelves there came an audible "click!" and the whole of the great library swung away, revealing a locked door behind it. It was a private telephone cabinet, the existence of which was not known even to Tembridge.

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It controlled one line only, a direct wire to another telephone at the other end, and beside it was a little dial housing a magnetic needle that tick-tacked infallible information the moment a leakage came on that wire. It was as private as the ingenuity of humankind could make it.

Stayne went in and closed the door behind him. He picked up the receiver, and a remarkable conversation began almost as soon as the instrument was to his ear.

"Hallo—is that you, Number One? Number Three here. Were you expecting a call from me—or have I been sitting on a mare's nest?"

"No—no mare's nest, Number Three. I've been waiting at this end for over an hour. Miss V.'s letter to you was intercepted and read. I knew you'd answer in the right way. You have seen her, of course?"

"Yes, I've only just left her. Couldn't get to you before. Hawker called. He was stepping on the back of her taxi, and he nailed me the moment she left."

"Damn!"

"Bit unfortunate, I admit. But I was looking to you to clear him off the scent."

"Can't do it. Our hands are tied. This matter has got to be done—and without even the Yard knowing how or why. It's a case for a lone hand. And you'll have to play it without any official help whatever. If you get caught out you will have to stand your own racket. The Government will repudiate you and wash its hands of all responsibility whatever. You understand that, don't you?"

"H'm. I do now!"

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"It's as serious as that. If it wasn't I'd have the Yard in on your side from the moment you left your house. Number Four has had to die. If everything breaks all right for us he will be found wandering in the Bois de Boulogne woods. A case of loss of memory. The funeral will be a shocking case of bad management on the part of the nursing home—mistaken identity and a change over of the patients concerned, etc. The nursing home is going to close down at the end of the month, anyway. We are reopening it at Auteuil. Address and date will be sent you later. You realised where the call came from, I presume?"

"As soon as I connected the diamonds with Number Four's wife."

"Where is Hawker now?"

"Down with Twenty-two drinking my whisky. He's going to make a fight."

"Can't help it. You'll get no help from us. If anything goes wrong and the thing is discovered it—it—means war, nothing could stop it. You've just got to go your own way—and may the gods go with you."

"The girl?"

"Knows nothing. Suspects a great deal, but it's all away up over her head. She's frightened. Too scared to speak. Got your line of action?"

"Mapped. Varris comes out first thing. With not a soul implicated except Twenty-two. He will be my chauffeur. If the storm breaks he is hidden."

"Good man."

"Number One—there's just one thing you might do for me. Don't cross a rail anywhere. Do it through the prison surgeon. Or the Governor. He's one of us.

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And it will just make the thing possible. Just—and that's all."

"Well?"

"Arrange to have Varris transferred to the outside working party. He's in Scrubs, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, get him moved to the gardening section. See that he is trimming the grass or weeding the beds down by the main gate on Thursday afternoon. That's all I ask. The rest I will arrange myself."

"Varris will this afternoon put in a request to the Governor to be allowed to join an outdoor party on account of his health. There is every possibility that his request will be granted."

"Many thanks. Is there anything more?"

"You have quite enough in your knapsack already."

"Then I'll get to it. I'm going to tour the police courts till I find a drunk and disorderly who hasn't a bob in the world and wants his fine paid."

There was a puzzled silence at the other end for some seconds, and then a gentle exhalation of breath came floating over the wire. "Oh-h-h. I see. Oh, very clever, Number Three." There was a soft chuckle and then "Oh—very good in-dee-ed!"

"You're very bright this morning, sir."

"Et vous, m'sieu. Anything more to report from your end?"

"No—er, yes. I think Number Twenty-two comes off the bachelors' list very soon."

"What—already? That boy's a trifle sudden, isn't he? What a pity. Another good man off the risky-list. But she *is* rather sweet, isn't she?"

"Sweet? Listen, sir. That young hound has got to

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step out quick and lively and leg it all he knows or you will be rubbing another number off the bachelors' list—and Number Twenty-two will only be best man to him."

"Hell!" said a startled voice at the other end, and the receiver went on with a bang.

Stayne left the cabinet, locked it, and went down to the garage for his car. He had several there, from a zooming great limousine that had no engine at all, but just an enormous car-bonnet-shaped steel hive with a single, faintly buzzing bee in it, to a rackety old two-cylindered taxi that proceeded in the midst of a noise like a boatload of old tin cans in a gale.

He selected a trim-looking sports model, one that looked as though it had a heady turn of speed under its bonnet. The garage hand filled her with petrol and oil and in a few minutes Stayne was purring down the road heading for Marlborough Street.

Hopes were dashed there. For though there were two charges of drunk and disorderly on the charge-sheet, neither delinquent was present, both having been admitted to bail earlier on in the morning. That meant that both would be able to pay their fines, or, at the very least, that they would not be committed to gaol out of hand. Stayne went back on the road again.

Bow Street seemed to offer a better chance and a wider selection. Bow Street Police Station caters for a wide district and it is a busy court. Its area of jurisdiction embraces a big slice of the river front and hard drinkers seem, by some natural law, to gravitate to the river.

But even Bow Street sold him. For once in a while

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the sheet was comparatively clear. Even the overflux from Vine Street were all concerned with far more serious charges than over-indulgence in liquid stock. There were only two drunk charges down for hearing —a couple of young 'Varsity boys who had been hitting the high spots in the West End overnight and had celebrated themselves into the arms of a bobby.

Time was getting short, and Stayne risked a lot of trouble for himself by stepping on the gas. It was not till he got to West London that he found what he wanted.

He walked by the officer at the door, who looked at him inquiringly.

"Witness," muttered Stayne untruthfully, and the officer nodded as he wandered through. Along in the charge room he found an unhappy wight who looked as though he had been hung out in a thunderstorm all night. He was bleary-eyed and heavy-lidded, and all the evidences of a hectic steaming-up in alcohol hung about him. He appeared down and out, and his clothes might have done duty on a scarecrow. From the very look of him, his was a hang-over that had been hard earned.

Stayne took a good long look at him. The man was so miserable and so full of last night's aches that he did not even resent the continued scrutiny. He just sat on the wooden side bench with his head in his hands and resigned himself to his own red-eyed misery.

Stayne walked across and spoke to him.

"Feeling bad?" he asked.

The man looked up and swallowed, his Adam's apple going up and down in his throat like a knot in a

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rope. The action revealed the fact that he wore neither collar nor tie. A ragged bit of dirty muffler was tied loosely above the torn neckband of his open shirt. Stayne felt more and more sure of his man every moment he looked at him.

The man gulped again and blinked. There was no show of anger in his eyes, nothing but the sheer animal history of a man who has just emerged from a long bout with devils of alcohol and realises that he is hard up against it.

"Feeling bad?" he growled at last. "Listen, mister. I'm feeling so bad that if I was feeling good I'd be feeling bad. I've had a terrible night, I've had—a terrible night. And now I'm going to get it in the neck—right in the neck."

Stayne pondered the thought.

"Been out on the razzle, eh?" he queried.

"I certainly have," grunted the man. "Drew me pension, see? Drew me pension and got blindo—abserlutely blindo. Socked a copper's helmet over his ears and lorst me barrer. Lorst it. And now I'm going to get it in the neck. An' serve me damn well right, too."

"That's one way of looking at it. Who's your lawyer?"

"Lawyer? Me? Me have a lawyer? That's a good 'un, that is, mister. I couldn't pay for a packet of fags, let alone a lawyer. And, anyway, a lawyer wouldn't do me no good—not this time. The Beak knows me, see? Promised me a turn in the clink next time I showed up. The lawyer don't breathe who could do me any good. The Beak has had it waxed up for me for months."

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"Bad luck, that. You've been here before, then?"

"Reg'lar." The man was positive about it. "Once a month I shows up here—every time I draws me pension. I draws me pension and then I gets blindo. But larst night was the limit. A copper came up to me just as I was showin' folks how Jack Dempsey could have knocked the 'oly 'ell out of Tunney. He got argufyin' with me and I bumped his helmet down past his eyes. And the next thing I knew, I was on me back in a cell with 'arf the 'Ammersmith police force sitting on me chest. And they don't half sit heavy, them coppers."

He broke off mournfully and regarded a set of broken knuckles and tenderly massaged a lump on his head the size of an egg.

"Trouble is," he went on moodily, "I don't know what became of the barrer. That's what's worryin' me—the barrer."

"But surely, haven't the police taken charge of it?"

The man shook his head dumbly. "Not them," he said. "Y'see, I'd lorst the barrer before they came up. Gawd—I must have been drunk," he added reminiscently. "Blind to the world, that's what I must have been, to have lorst the barrer. That does me right in the eye for when I come out. If I'd had the barrer I could have pawned it with a pal and paid the fine. But I ain't got it and I shan't have it when I come out of Scrubs. And that means me living has gone west."

"So you got your living with that barrow, did you?"

"Yes, mister. I'm in fruit, see? Apples and bananas. That's me. On a barrer. And I've lorst me fruit and I've lorst me barrer. And now I'm going to

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get three months in chokee. I'd be better off without that damn pension."

"You've no money at all?"

"Not a bob. Ain't got the price of a cup of tea about you, I s'pose? Strewth, I'd give me soul for a mug of tea—strong and hot."

Stayne signalled to the gaoler and slipped a note into his hand. "Get him a hot one, will you?" he said. "Get one for yourself with the change."

The gaoler, a decent sort of disciplinarian who had seen similar scenes to that a thousand times before, grinned and nodded cheerfully. Stayne watched him walk off down the long stone corridor and quickly fished a flask out of his hip pocket.

"Here," he said, "take a good long swig at this. Neck it all, if you feel like it."

The man grabbed at it avidly, and the raw spirit trickled down his parched throat and almost seemed to sizzle.

"Gosh! That was good," he gasped. "Thank you, mate. You're a right one, you are. What are you in for? Speeding on your motor?"

"That'll do as well as any," smiled Stayne. "But just now I'm more interested in your own plight than in mine. You think the magistrate will commit you to prison right away, do you?"

The man nodded ponderously.

"I'm darn sure of it," he said with blunt decision. "Last time I was up in the dock the Beak says to me, 'Tom Dobey,' he says, 'you're a scamp and a disgrace. You've won a pension for valiant deeds and for doing your duty by your King and country,' he says. 'And

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now look at you. Every time you draw it you get most scandalously drunk and you're a disgrace to the very service for which you draw your pension.' And ding me if it ain't right. Because as soon as I get a couple of quid in me skyrocket I takes one high and mighty dive in off the deep end."

"And is it the same magistrate sitting to-day?"

"Not arf it ain't. Corky hisself. The old scallywag. Got me properly taped, he has. He knows I ain't got a bob, the artful old devil. And he's going to slam me hard and hearty. 'The next time you come up before me,' he says, 'I shall commit you to prison. Once and for all I shall teach you a lesson. You're perfickly able to earn an honest and sober living with your bananas,' he says, 'and I shall see that you do. I'm determined to break you of this continuous drunkenness.' Y'see, what he will do is to fine me again, waxing it up all he knows. Fifty shillings or a week for being drunk and incapable. Fifty shillings or a week for being disord'ly. Five pounds or a month for assault an' battery. And five pounds or a month for bashing the copper's hat. And if he only made it five bob the lot I couldn't pay it. I reckon there was a lot of cheap bananas knockin' round 'Ammersmith larst night."

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CHAPTER VI

STAYNE was smiling inwardly. Tom Dobey's case was made for him: made so perfectly that it fitted into his plans like a foot in a well-built shoe.

"Well, look here, Tom Dobey," he said. "I don't think you need be too despondent. I'm feeling rather tender towards my fellow human beings this morning —and I'd like to do something for you. If it's a case of a fine I'll pay it for you."

Dobey looked up with a start. There was a burst of incredulity in his eyes, and his eyelids shivered as though with a sudden fear.

"D'ye mean that, mate?" he said, huskily. Then he relapsed again into his attitude of bunched-up moodiness. "Very nice of you—and thank you," he muttered. "But you hadn't better do it, mate. It'll mean an awful lot of money—a terrible lot of money —maybe twenty pounds, what with costs and all. And I wouldn't ask anyone to pay that much money just to keep me out of quod. Thank you—and thank you kindly. But I don't reckon you ought to do it."

Stayne laughed cheerfully and held out a cigarette case.

"Have a smoke," he suggested. "You're too good to spend a few useless months stitching mail-bags. Twenty pounds or so won't hurt me—and I'll be more than pleased to be able to help you. More pleased than you think," he added grimly. "What time does the court sit?"

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"Sitting now, sir. My case will be on in about an hour—so the gaoler says."

"Very well; here's my card. If your luck's in and you get the option of a fine, get into touch with me here at this address and I will see that the whole fine is paid immediately."

Dobey gulped and he tried to stammer his thanks through a throat that had suddenly turned fiery.

Stayne waved the thanks aside.

"Wish you luck," he said. "I can't wait to see you through—got an urgent appointment elsewhere—but I only hope you get the option. If you are sent up right away, of course, I can't help you: the law is a trifle strict on such matters. Be nice to old Corky and don't cheek him—and you may get away with it. Here comes your tea. See you later, perhaps."

Stayne hurried out as the gaoler returned with a great steaming mug of tea. A welter of thanks and blessings assailed his ears as he went down the corridor.

So far things were good. Angels couldn't have planned it better for him—or made the running smoother.

Dobey's good luck was tempered with just a spot of bad. For Stayne hadn't the remotest idea of paying that fine out of hand. There was a little ceremony to be enacted first, and it entailed Tom Dobey's temporary presence in Scrubs Prison. Stayne had got his man and got him planted. The rest depended upon what Dobey would describe as old Corky's liver. If the presiding magistrate wasn't feeling up to extending further lenience to the persistent drunk the whole

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scheme would take a disheartening fall earthwards. But there was just the chance that, as Dobey described, he would pass the usual sentence with the option of a fine which he knew the man was financially unable to pay. It would be a lesson to Dobey and a sop to his own conscience at the same time.

Stayne hung around for a while and then kept his urgent appointment. That appointment was at the West London Police Court. He went into the public well of the court and squeezed himself into an out-of-the-way corner where Dobey would not be likely to see him unless he deliberately turned round and searched for him.

Dobey's case came on within the hour, and it was evident that Tom had been a real bad lad overnight. The police evidence was terse and full of corroborated fact. Tom had got himself outside of an inordinate quantity of beer at four different public-houses—from each of which he had been bounced out on his ear. He had walked his barrow up Hammersmith Broadway and entertained himself by flinging bunches of bananas at conductors on the tops of passing buses. The last one he had shied through a fifteen-foot plate-glass window and immediately became engaged in a stand-up fight with the owner of the shop.

That was the first of four separate and distinct fights. The barrow was jettisoned somewhere in the course of fight number two. The helmet incident arrived a few minutes before midnight when Tom was trying to force his way into the Underground Station, uproariously drunk, and demanding to be taken back to Aldershot so that he could join up with the lads again.

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The magistrate glanced at Dobey. Dobey looked sheepish and apologized to the court for having been rough with the constable. The rest of it, apparently, was all in the game. Stayne's heart gave one gentle bump against his side.

The luck held. The magistrate adjusted a pair of pince-nez and focussed a disapproving eye on the delinquent.

"Thomas Dobey," he said, "you have excelled yourself. You've broken even your own wretched record. The last time you were before me I threatened you with prison. Not satisfied with ordinary drunkenness you have added assaults on the police to the tale of your misbehaviour. I had intended sending you to prison without the option of a fine. But in view of your apparently sincere apology to the court and to the officers concerned I am going to offer you one more chance, realising, as I do full well, that you will not, except by exercising a beneficial drain on your financial resources, be able to pay the fines.

"Five pounds or one month for being drunk and disorderly. Five pounds or one month for assault and battery. Twenty pounds or three months for assaulting the police while in the execution of their duty. The cost of the broken window and the price of the constable's helmet will be added to the general costs of the case. A total in all of eighty-five pounds ten shillings. Stand down."

Stayne breathed a sigh of mental relief.

He saw Dobey flinch as though he had been hit. Dobey swayed to the back of the dock, realising that, even though he had found a friend who was prepared to stand for him up to ordinary limits, eight-

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five pounds odd was asking too much of any man, no matter how well-intentioned he might be.

The gaoler called to the prisoner, who meekly stepped down from the dock and vanished through a side door. Stayne waited till he had gone and then slipped out too. He penned a short note:

"Please tell Thomas Dobey that if he gets into touch with me his fine will be paid"—passed it to the charge-sergeant and hurried out before the officer could read the note. Outside he vanished round the corner like a shadow.

He didn't want to be called back to explain himself. The address on the card he had given Dobey was the name of a big hotel in the Strand, and he didn't intend calling there until the next day.

Scrubs Prison, that forbidding great fortress of red and white stone that sits on the edge of the almost countrified road on the edge of London, is one of the most difficult prisons in the world to break out of. Its outer walls are twenty feet high, two feet thick, and are under constant surveillance from two angles at once by sentries in the corner watch-towers.

Escapes there have been from time to time; but they have been very few, precariously undertaken, and never completely successful. The last was when two youths, risking their necks, performed the astonishing feat of balancing a pile of unstable bee-hives one on top of the other, and in some miraculous manner succeeded in climbing them. But they were soon retaken, one with a back injured for life, the result of the inevitable twenty-foot fall on the other side.

Stayne had early come to the conclusion that the

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only safe way to help a man break out of that grim stronghold was to break *into* it first. And before he could break into it there had to be a decoy duck at the other end—a sort of reasonable excuse for being allowed to penetrate that first outer wall. The rest would have to depend on the elements of speed, surprise and accuracy.

He rang up Curzon Square, and Tembridge came on at the other end.

"Number Three here," he said. "Anything happened?"

"Yes—just what you expected. Hawker was on your heels when you went round to the garage."

"Indeed? I looked for him and couldn't seem to single him out."

"He did a bit of fast work, Chief. Must have had one of the Yard cars with him. Did you notice that coster standing on the corner of the street—man hawking ferns?"

"Yes, come to think of it, there was someone standing there—had his arms full of aspidistras."

"That was our little sweetheart. I was about fifty yards behind you. He trailed you down to the garage, hung around there for a while, shed his palms in a refuse bin and called a taxi to follow you when you came out."

"Did you head him off?"

"Yes, but not till after you had called at Marlborough Street. He drew up on the other side of the road to you and I came up in the old sedan. Got my nose in just in front of him and let her drift back till the taxi-driver yelled that my back fenders were kissing his radiator. So I stalled the old bus and cut

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out the ignition. Then you came out and went streaking down the road—heading for Bow Street I guess. Two jumps behind you out came Hawker, yelling for me to get out of his road. I climbed out to start the old tank up on the handle. Hawker swore at me beautifully. So I hopped back at the wheel because he was howling for his man to back away and chase you.

"I got my bus going on the self-starter, edged out in front of him as he turned to clear me, and stalled the old boat again. Language! I think the police force wants a vacuum cleaner over it. By the time the taxi-man had pulled his bus clear again you were well out of sight."

Stayne grunted. "Pity," he muttered. "He knows that car number now. That means there's another perfectly good alias gone west. Still, couldn't be helped. Luckily you were able to head Hawker off. I didn't think he would get his teeth so far in. He's going to be troublesome."

"How's tricks at your end?"

"Fine. The name is Thomas Dobey. Sentence is eighty-five pounds ten shillings or five months for a variety of offences not unconnected with the licensing laws. Make a note of that, will you, and get some cash from the bank to meet it? He is on his way to the Scrubs now."

"Right. Is that all?"

"Yes. There's nothing more to do now till to-morrow morning, first post."

"Good. That lets me out to fix a date. Tea and toast at four o'clock—and perhaps a fox-trot or two. And by the way, Chief—three's a crowd."

"Starting early, aren't you?" said Stayne sourly.

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"Nothing like it when handsome, middle-aged, lady-proof bachelors are knocking about. Better ring off, Chief—at both ends."

"You young pup! For two pins I'd rub your face on the floor," growled Stayne; but as he hung up the receiver he was chuckling with unholy glee. "What with Tembridge and Marienne and Number Three and Varris, Hawker is going to have a panicky time," he chuckled.

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CHAPTER VII

SOON after eight o'clock the next morning Stayne called round at the Strand Hotel. He drove up luxuriously in a vast and shining limousine. Tembridge, neat, smart, and infinitely composed in his dark blue chauffeur's uniform, sat with professional poise at the wheel.

Stayne crossed to the inquiries grille and addressed the clerk with a familiarity that franked a friendship of long standing.

"Any letters for me to-day, Arthur?" he asked. "I'm especially solicitous about one that looks like a family skeleton."

The clerk smiled and dived for the pigeon-hole marked "S."

"Here it is, sir," he said. "Came first post this morning."

Stayne read it, a poor, ill-written scrawl, covered with much ill-spelling and corrections. It was addressed to Mr. J. Sterndale, Strand Hotel, London.

DEAR SIR,—

I am the man you spoke to this morning in West London Police Station about the fine. I got the option, but I never knew I was having it waxed up so hot. They got me for eighty-five pounds ten. Or five months in here where I am. I think you had ought to let me do the five months. The gaoler gave me the

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note you sent round, but after that they couldn't find you. So they sent me round here to start my sentence meanwhile I write to you at the address you sent.

If you can pay the fine, which I shouldn't if I was you, I shouldn't straight, you can get me out as soon as you like. If you bring this letter to the Scrubs and ring the bell the gate gaoler will read it and let you in. Then you can pay him and he will give you a receipt. After that they will give me my clothes back and let me out. And I must say I am very much obliged to you, even if you don't pay the fine. Hoping it finds you as it leaves me at present.

Yours respectably,
THOMAS DOBEY.

It was written on the official prison-letter form, and the envelope bore the black inscription:

H. M. PRISON SERVICE

Stayne caught the clerk's eye as he looked up.

"Birthday greetings from an old friend," he said with a wink, and the clerk laughed outright.

He swung round and headed for the exit, thoroughly pleased with the outlook. That document represented his passport into the prison. Armed with that he could penetrate at least the outer defences and, knowing something of the inside organisation of the prison, he knew that by one swift stroke, deftly carried through, he could get his man out and away in the car before the alarm could be raised.

Stayne climbed in as Tembridge gave him the signal that everything was clear. In order to keep Haw-

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ker off that particular piece of the trail neither of them had slept at Curzon Square that night. They had gone out of town in the car, and criss-crossed about the open country lanes until they shook off the inevitable shadowing car. Then they struck out across country to Maidenhead, where they put up for the night, coming back into town in the early morning by a round-about way.

Less than an hour later they were heading into the great tree-lined courtyard that gives on to the prison entrance.

Tembridge swung the car round and backed it up so that it was no more than a yard or two from the huge prison doors themselves—all ready for a quick getaway, its bonnet pointing for the open highway.

On the way down Stayne had opened out a suit-case. In it was a dark brown lounge suit as near as he could get it to Templer Varris's size; a fifteen and a half collar, a tie, under-clothing, socks, soft felt hat, and a pair of brown shoes, size eight—a complete rig-out according to the plans and specifications supplied by Marienne. The various articles were laid out neatly on the seat, covered by a travelling rug.

Tembridge remained unconcernedly sitting at the driving wheel while Stayne got out, fishing in his pocket for the letter. By that time he was wearing a neat little white moustache and beard, clipped down almost to nothing. Astonishingly enough, even though it was the beard of a man of fifty it seemed to fit that young old face as naturally as though the years had grown it there.

He rang the bell, a great, ponderous bell-pull, as

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old-fashioned as the penal code itself, and stared up at the massive double gates. A brassy clanging echoed to life inside and there came a jangle of keys. A little grille was pushed back and the gate gaoler looked out.

"Well?" he asked.

"I have come in respect of the payment of a fine," said Stayne. "The man concerned arrived yesterday from the West London Police Court."

"Have you a warrant—or a letter?"

"Yes, officer. I have it here." Stayne held it up.

A key rattled in the lock and a small door, so small that Stayne had to stoop to enter, opened like a panel in the main gates. Stayne went in and presented his letter.

"Wait there a moment, please," said the gaoler, and entered a guardroom on the right.

Stayne found himself in an enormous lock, a kind of gigantic tunnel with locked gates at both ends. The right wall of the tunnel was the gaoler's guardroom, the left was the waiting-room for those who had business with the authorities or had called to see prisoners. The entrance doors were of stout oak, painted green, but the gates at the other end were made of two-inch steel bars and extended right to the top of the tunnel. By a flickering gas-jet a notice board hung, on which were pinned notices to warders going on and off duty, new prison regulations, and fresh orders from the higher authorities. That second pair of gates had still to be forced before he could get through to his man.

Beyond the gates lay the gardens, with trim gravel paths running round the perfectly kept flower-beds. The rest of the view was taken up by the fine outlines

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of the prison chapel, with its high curving roof and stained-glass windows: a vast lump of a building that blotted out the rest of the view.

But it was neither the gardens nor the chapel that held John Stayne's critical attention just then. His eyes were focussed on a working party of four men who were busily weeding the great central flower-bed. Twenty yards from the gate they were, their backs bent laboriously over their task, taking no great hurry over the matter and seemingly chatting together quietly while working.

They appeared to be in charge of a "trusty"—a prisoner dressed in a cocoa brown garb with a band on his arm on which were three white chevrons. He, at least, seemed to be directing their operations. And John Stayne's heart gave another little bump when he saw that the man on the extreme right was Templer Varris.

There was no mistaking the trim, smart young lines of him. His obvious awkwardness and newness to his surroundings marked him out. From Marienne's description and from the photographs she had supplied no one could possibly have mistaken him.

Stayne peeped into the waiting-room, his only curiosity being to see if it was empty. It would make a sad mess of his scheming if, when the moment came to bring off the coup, help was forthcoming from that unexpected source. The bare, gloomy-looking room was empty, but he noted with a smile of grim humour the alms-boxes on each side begging for contributions from visitors for altar flowers for the prison chapels.

"Mr. Sterndale, please." He heard the unhurried voice of the gaoler calling from the guard-room and

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went over. The gaoler was a solid, kindly looking fellow, one who had seen so much of the unhappiness of life that he was long since case-hardened to it.

"Is the prisoner a relation of yours, sir?" he asked, slowly reading over Dobey's letter.

"Oh, no—just an acquaintance. He was in a spot of trouble and I offered to help him out. He was at West London and I happened to be there at the same time. Unfortunately it was not convenient for me to pay the fine at the court—so Dobey was brought here pending the arrival of the money, I suppose."

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CHAPTER VIII

THE gaoler nodded cheerlessly as he turned to check off some particulars in a record. This was routine stuff to him. He had gone through the ritual hundreds of times before. Many times in the course of a week an unhappy wife would arrive with the two or three pounds necessary to secure the release of an erring husband who had fallen foul of the law on minor counts.

From outside came the soft purr of an engine being gently accelerated in little bursts—a danger signal from Tembridge not to start work yet. Val had seen some unsuspected danger looming up and he was sending out the delay action warning.

Then a klaxon hooter sounded, discordant and imperious, outside. The gaoler muttered, "Just a minute, sir," and pulled back the grille. Then he opened the great main gates, Stayne watching keenly to see which one of the great bunch of keys hanging by a chain from his belt he used. He photographed it on his mind as the two huge doors swung open.

A long motor Black Maria pulled slowly into the lock and stood panting smoothly there while the gaoler checked the entries. The doors were closed and locked again behind it. Then the second pair of gates were opened and the prison van passed through. Again Stayne fixed his keen eyes on the key used to

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open the second gates, and he knew that when the time came he would make no mistake.

The gaoler came back to his room and entered a note in a book.

"This fine's a bit heavy, you know," he said.

"Yes. Dobey, I'm afraid, misbehaved himself rather thoroughly. But I have all the cash here. Can I pay it now?"

"If you please, sir."

Stayne took the money from his pocket-book in an envelope and counted it out on the desk, nice new notes, easy to check back. While the gaoler was recounting it Stayne stepped quietly aside and laid a white capsule on the desk by his elbow. The gaoler finished counting and said: "That's right, sir, eighty-five pounds ten. And very lucky he is, I'm sure, to find such a friend. Generally, if it's anything over a tenner they stays in. Do you want to take him back with you, sir?"

"Oh, dear no," said Stayne hurriedly. "I don't care two jigs if I never see him again."

"Then if you'll just wait while I 'phone the Governor's office I'll see that he comes out straight after dinner, sir—thank you."

He turned to pick up the letter again and stopped suddenly to stare in a puzzled way at the white capsule on the desk.

" 'Ullo!" he said. "What's this? Is this yours, sir?"

Stayne eyed it curiously as the gaoler held it out between his finger and thumb.

"No, nothing to do with me," he said with an offhand smile. "I don't go walking around with bantams'

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eggs in my pocket. That's what it is, isn't it? A blown bantam's egg."

The gaoler scrutinized it oddly.

"No—'tain't a bantam's egg, sir," he said.

"There's a little ridge running round it—like as if it had been joined together." He rattled it against his ear, trying to divine its contents, if any. But there was no sound from it and it felt astonishingly light in his fingers, no heavier than a ping-pong ball and ever so much more fragile.

"Well, that's a funny thing, sir. Where'd it come from? It wasn't here two minutes ago. I cleared that bit of the desk off this morning and it wasn't there when I put that letter there. H'm. Very odd."

He held it to his nose and sniffed at it hard.

Stayne turned away as though the affair no longer held any interest for him. "Probably one of those puff-ball things one gets in the eye at cabarets and dance places," he said. "Open it and see. Squeeze it."

Stayne said it as though the pettiness of the affair nettled him slightly. After all he had come down to the Scrubs to pay a trifle over eighty-five pounds for the release of a man detained in a cell—not to bother himself with the stupidities of a gaoler's ponderous perplexity over such a childish matter as the discovery of a little white ball.

He took a couple of paces to the doorway and slowly turned. Then, all in a hurry, he leapt. For from behind him there had come the faint sound of the capsule cracking, a tiny crackling like the soft breaking of a brown eggshell. The gaoler, with the capsule still close up under his nose trying to get his nasal organs to discover some recognisable quality in

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the odd little object, had pressed his thumb too firmly upon it. The tightly prisoned gas came out with a malignant hiss, and its amazing volatility did the rest. The gaoler gasped, a sudden indrawn contraction of breath that cut short the moment the vaporised acid struck the lungs.

His face went dead white with the rapidity of a fogged photographic plate, and his eyes shut tight, the muscles of his face flexing up into white, stiff knots of agonising unexpected pain. Stayne, with a wet silk handkerchief pressed up over his nose, leapt forward with an arm outflung to save the gaoler's head, for the officer, crumpling up and toppling backwards, was collapsing like a boxer knocked out in the ring. Consciousness had left him in the same instantaneous second that the gas hit the lung tissues. He did not know, either then or afterwards, that he had taken one deep-drawn sniff of the same deadly gas that a veterinary surgeon uses to put a broken horse out of its pain, the bitingly powerful hydrocyanic gas, which is nothing more or less than prussic acid in vapour form.

Stayne got to him in time. The man was going down like a house of cards, the back of his head a foot away from the massive desk. Stayne reached him with a "hand-off" that sent his skull sheering away from death by a couple of inches.

On the air hung the faint, sickly sweet scent of bitter almonds, the unmistakable, unforgettable sign manual of hydrocyanic and all its compounds. But down there on the floor the atmosphere was clearer, less impregnated with the tincture of sudden annihilation that had knocked the gaoler flat.

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Stayne grabbed the broken capsule and pitched it into the crackling wood fire, where its foundation of dried creamed rice burned up whitely and faded. Thereafter Stayne worked with the speed and precision of a machine in top gear. He cut the gaoler's heavy chain with a pair of powerful steel nippers and seized the huge polished keys.

Running outside he opened the outer door.

"Quick," he said. "He's out—won't last more than two minutes. It was a small dose. Stay here and see that he doesn't raise hell if he comes to."

Tembridge was already by the door. He was through in a second, with the door partly pulled to behind him. Stayne ran to the inner gates, opened them, and in a voice of cold authority called "Varris —Prisoner Templer Varris!"

Automatically Templer Varris straightened his back and looked round. The "trusty" stood up and stared across. The sight of a man in civilian clothes at the gate was nothing new to him; indeed, everybody except the warders wore their own clothes in the prison, and he had not the slightest suspicion of anything wrong. Unauthorised persons don't usually open the inner gate and call a prisoner by his name.

Varris looked round inquiringly at the "trusty," and the senior prisoner nodded. "Go on, you damn fool," he barked. "Want to keep him waiting all day? It's a visitor for you—or your lawyer bloke." The "trusty" did not realise it, but he had absorbed something of the outlook and psychology of a warder himself since he had worn the chevrons.

"Varris, come here. You others carry on." The firm commanding voice sounded a little impatient.

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Templer Varris dropped his trowel and walked stiffly to the gate. Stayne passed him through, relocked it, and passed down the lock.

Tembridge hurried out of the guardroom.

"O. K., chief," he said. "Varris, this way," and hurried through the outer doors. Varris, bewildered and puzzled, hesitated for a moment and received a push in the back of the neck from behind.

"Forward. You are wanted at Bow Street," crackled a voice in his ear. That sounded reasonable enough, and Varris went forward again, out through the doors into freedom.

Tembridge was standing by the open door of the limousine. As soon as Varris was in he dashed to his own seat, Stayne slamming the door as he climbed in beside Varris. In less than six seconds from passing through the outer doors the car was in motion racing down the courtyard. At the bottom it pulled sharply to the right—away from London. For the first time since the lightning interlude began Templer Varris showed genuine surprise.

He looked up quickly with a sharp intuition of foreboding dawning in his eyes.

"This isn't the way——" he began, and then encountered the cold, austere eyes of Stayne turned autocratically upon him. Varris shrivelled. Since his incarceration in that frowning graveyard of personal independence he had learned what it is to become a cipher—a cipher, moreover, ruled by every other human unit in his own immediate ken. He was a thing without will or volition of his own; whatever any other mouth ordered him to do, he did, and he found himself doing it with a celerity that at first surprised

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him and then made him realise his own abnormal helplessness in the general scheme of his own life.

Voices barked at him "Eat," and he ate: "Sleep," and he slept: "Work," and he worked: "Bath," and he bathed. Just now a bureaucratic finger pointed at an entirely new rig-out and the voice of authority barked "Dress!"—and mechanically he found himself reaching down to untie his bootlaces.

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CHAPTER IX

THE car went droning on past the outer limits of the vast open common, careering past the outer confines of the last battlemented outer wall.

Stayne did not speak again or make a single gesture of friendliness. He had seen that Templer Varris was still the same clam-mouthed, dogged individual that had stood in the dock and sullenly refused to break a silence that was inevitably sending him to the prison cell.

Behind him a brazen bell began to sound its clamorous summons to the skies. It welled and swelled to a whanging cacophony of sound, taken up here and there at various points from the watch-towers. A bull-throated howl of surprise and anger.

Stayne glanced down critically at Varris. Bending over, struggling with a recalcitrant boot, he could only see the back of the convict's neck. He had time to hope that the clangour of the bells meant nothing to him. He had not been in there long enough to understand what all the noise was about. No prison-break had occurred during his time within those walls.

Then he saw the back hair prickle and a slow dyeing of crimson creep over the back of his neck. Templer Varris had not only heard, he understood. Stayne stiffened himself for what he realised was coming, and a small shining automatic appeared, as though with the subtlest flick of light, in his left hand.

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Varris came slowly upright, a thick heavy prison boot in his hand. His head turned even more slowly to Stayne and their eyes met in a long-drawn stare; Stayne's as empty of emotion or feeling as those of a basilisk, Varris's burning dully red with an anger that had coursed its way through shock, puzzlement, then utter incredulity. Stayne saw the anger dawn to life. He cocked the glittering automatic up in a dead line with the convict's eyes and reached for the speaking tube.

"Keep off the main roads whatever happens," he ordered. "We're in a bit of a jam. Take to the side streets and keep on twisting. If you hear me shout turn round and shoot. Our man isn't willing. Keep your eye on the inside mirror and see that he doesn't get fractious. I've a couple of capsules left for him, but I might not get a chance to use them. And whatever you do keep out of traffic hold-ups. I've got to make this fool change clothes—and there are no damn blinds in the car."

Tembridge waved a sombre hand in acknowledgment of a message received and understood. He swung the throbbing car left up a narrow lane and opened her out.

Stayne turned back to Varris and looked at him hard. The ultimatum had gone over and it occasioned nothing more than a defiant glitter in the prisoner's eyes. Bony knuckles still clenched the heavy boot menacingly. The pealing din of the alarm bells slowly faded and died as the car threaded its way on a roundabout tour through muffling streets of bricks and mortar.

Stayne realised what had happened back there at

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the Scrubs. An officer had come down to the inner gates on some duty or other, possibly in connection with the release of Thomas Dobey, had called to the gate gaoler, called again and got no reply. The gaoler inside that double lock was the only one who held the key to the inner gate, and for the first time in Scrubs history there was no reply to the summons. Followed a hurried look around, a hailing of the "trusty" in charge of the gardening hands, an excited telling of what had happened—and a quick sounding of the alarm.

The car was now four miles away and safe from any hope of being overtaken from the prison. The telephone was the only thing that could serve them now. He knew that Hawker would have taken the numbers of every car in that garage. Under pressure the garage foreman would readily admit that the big limousine was out, and, furthermore, had been out all night. Inquiry along the Dobey line of approach would rapidly connect the incident of Stayne's visit to Marlborough Street Police Court and the presence of that same sports car outside West London while the Dobey case was on trial. An inquiry at the Strand Hotel would unfailingly provide the rest of the evidence. J. Sterndale of the Strand Hotel was no other than Colonel John Stayne of Curzon Square, the Mystery Maker, now abroad with Templer Varris in a big blue limousine of a certain make and register number that would, within an hour, be circulated to every constable and point policeman in and out of London.

Stayne pointed once more to the clothes.

"Dress!" he said shortly. "And hurry!"

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"I'll see you in Scrubs yourself first," replied Varris quietly.

"You probably will unless you do. And not only me, who does not matter a tinker's cuss either way, but also Lord Demorval, Emil Flocard, yourself, Marienne—everybody, in fact, except our graceful friends Perrigo and Canning. Dress, you damned fool—and jump to it."

The secretary's eyes opened wide in sheer unbelief, an incredulity that anyone living could, in one sharp sentence, betray such a seething knowledge of the inside facts of his distressing affair.

He wavered, and the arm that poised the boot sank away noticeably.

"Bump my head with that ridiculous weapon if you feel inclined," said Stayne in a chilly voice. "Do by all means. You couldn't have made a finer mess of things than you have—and if you break up this attempt to get the thing straightened out you will simply be running true to form."

There was a note of bitter scorn in his voice, a resentfulness that anyone could be such a crass lunatic as not to realise that what was being done was being done at the risk of other people's necks and for the good of those most deeply concerned.

He thrust the gun back into his pocket and said "Bah!" He said it explosively, so that Varris winced.

"I—I just want to know that—that this is all square and above-board," he said defensively. "You come to the Scrubs and shanghai me out—when I've only gone in to save others—and you expect me to accept it all and act as though I understood all about

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it and acquiesced in everything that happens to me. How do I know that this thing is on the level?"

"Of course you don't, you blithering fool! A man with your infantile intelligence couldn't be expected to. You think you were brave, don't you? You think you did a noble and a self-sacrificing thing in going to gaol?" Stayne's eyes almost crackled at him. "Let me tell you, Varris, you were not only a fool, you were a coward. You funked it. You dived into gaol like a rabbit into a hole. You went in because you couldn't face the issues outside. Listen, man. By this time tomorrow night I hope to be in Paris. And not only in Paris but talking to Lord Demorval! Why, man alive, Marienne has got more courage than you. And those clothes, by the way, are from her, not me. The fact that I'm here at all springs from her too. Now climb into those clothes while the road is still open. Tembridge out front there has got all he can do to keep this car on the move without running it under a policeman's eye. For God's sake don't make his job any worse than it is!" He snapped his fingers in growing irritation. "I never knew it was so hard to help a man to help himself," he snorted.

Varris flushed a deep crimson. The boot fell from his hand.

"You might be a little easier on me," he said at last. "Your end of this case is all up in the air to me. What do you think I am—a thought reader?"

"No. Just a loyal fool. Very loyal—and very much of a fool."

"How do I know that you aren't one of the Perrigo crowd?"

"You don't. You don't have to. Except that you

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should know that Perrigo wouldn't shift a finger to save a friend."

"Perrigo would only be saving his own oily skin by getting me out of gaol."

"Would he? Now think in terms of Standard Two. You had already elected to go to prison rather than spill the beans. A good fat sentence, too. Why in the name of beauty should he risk his neck getting you out of a place into which you had voluntarily thrust yourself?"

Varris relaxed. He was half convinced, but resentful still, and as ferociously on guard as a wild animal that has just been captured and is being offered a tempting morsel from a hand that he still suspects.

"How can you prove you are all you say you are?" he demanded.

"I'll take you to Marienne. Marienne can do all my talking for me."

Varris thought that one over for some seconds. He was dressing rapidly, glancing out of the window now and then furtively, as though the window of every suburban house they passed sheltered a watchful enemy eye.

Halfway through the operation of tying his tie he hauled himself round from the mirror and suddenly asked:

"Well—what do you want me for, anyway?"

"I want you to tell me the full story of the Lady Demorval affair—from the Paris end," said Stayne.

Varris stopped dead and his hands went back limply into his lap.

"I'll see you damned first," he said.

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Stayne seemed indifferent. "All right," he said casually. "Finish your dressing. I want to get rid of that prison rig. Perhaps even you can see reason in that." He held out a delicately graved cigarette case. "Have a smoke," he suggested. "You sound as though you could do with it."

Varris took a cigarette and lit it. For a while he smoked, inhaling deeply and luxuriously at a narcotic that had been long denied him. Then in a biting silence he resumed his dressing.

Methodically Stayne picked up the various pieces of clothing as Varris discarded them, folding them neatly and tightly into a roll, using the boots as a core. From the suit-case he produced a large sheet of stiff brown paper already addressed in typewriting, and a long piece of stout string. There were four shilling stamps on the label, more than sufficient to cover the cost of postage back to the prison.

In that move again Stayne had marked the brain that carefully thought out every move ahead. He had long since learned the lesson of the extraordinary difficulties that attended the getting rid of incriminating clothing. Failure in that expedient alone has brought countless criminals to book. Nothing short of a forced draught incinerator really gets rid of them effectively, and it is not every house that is equipped with a private incinerator of its own.

Metal buttons are apt to be left unburned, the coarser hems and double seams somehow manage to retain a few threads of unscorched fabric in their tightly pressed tissues—quite enough for trained sleuths to get their brains to work on and identify.

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Even the disposal of ashes is not the simple thing it appears.

If they are parcelled up and thrown away on some vacant plot they are immediately an object of suspicion. Their mere discovery leads directly to inquiries being made. Throwing the clothes intact into a river is no better. For clothes have a habit of floating—and rivers flow on. It is remarkable, too, to recall how many parcels of clothing, buried away deeply in the thickest woods, have been recovered either by being accidentally stumbled on or by deliberate search. Yet incriminating clothing has to be disposed of somehow.

Stayne took the heady course of mailing it back to the prison whence it came.

"Anyway," he muttered grimly, "we shan't have a charge of stealing Government property added to our list of criminal offences."

He reached for the speaking-tube again. "Stop at the next General Post Office, so long as it isn't under the nose of a point policeman," he said.

He leaned back and regarded Varris from under half-closed eyes.

"You're going to be an interesting problem for the authorities," he said, almost to himself. "You were awaiting appeal, weren't you?"

The other shook his head. "No," he answered abruptly. "I cancelled all that last week."

Stayne frowned. "But surely there was an appeal down for hearing?"

"The lawyers did that. Marienne and—and some

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others brought pressure to bear. They appealed on my behalf. The appeal stood until last week. I've had a lot of time to think things out since I've been in there. Well—I thought things out—and I cancelled my appeal. I was to have been moved to Dartmoor next week." He shivered slightly and with a struggled pose at indifference began combing his crisp hair.

Stayne tapped his teeth with his thumbnail, deep in introspective thought. Then he laughed, a short, staccato laugh. It seemed brittle with high-strung amusement.

"That only makes it a trifle more interesting," he chuckled. "Varris, I think we live up to our reputation as a Mystery-Maker. I've never rescued an unwilling prisoner from gaol before. I find the experience rather exhilarating."

"Nice to know someone enjoys it," retorted Varris coldly.

"The point is, Varris, what are they going to do with you—and me—after we have got this affair all nicely cleaned up and explained to their own supersatisfaction? Eh? What are they going to do about it? Bit of a problem for them, isn't it? How does the law stand in the matter? And if it does, what'll it do?" There was almost a hint of appreciative banter in the quiet voice. He seemed to be gently "kidding" Varris out of his dogged mood.

"I don't see what you are driving at," said Varris, lacing up his new shoes.

"What I mean is this. To get you out of that little nursery I've had to commit a whole sheaf of criminal offences. And all criminal offences are punishable by

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prison. Do you know I've had to half-asphyxiate a head warder in there in order to get you out?"

Varris whipped round sharply. "You—you *what?*" he gasped.

"Well, I didn't do it myself exactly, but I certainly laid the trap for him. I was what one might almost call an accessory before, during and after the fact. I arranged for him to help himself to a sniff of veterinary's Cure-all. One more sniff like it and there would have been a funeral party moving out of the Scrubs in a day or two."

Varris blanched.

"And not only that," went on Stayne blandly, "but I stole his keys. I also broke into the prison. Then I abducted a prisoner. And I broke out of prison again, taking you with me. I took temporary charge of the official keys, having first severely damaged a Government key-chain. To crown these iniquities I left the outer prison door open and unattended. Think it out, Varris. It's rather a serious sheet, isn't it?"

"You did it. I didn't. And, over and above that, I didn't ask you to."

"No. That is quite true, Varris. But the point that tickles me is this. When we have straightened out this mess; when we have proved you not only not guilty, but something of a national hero—what are they going to do to us? After all, I did break into and out of prison, didn't I? And I did abduct you—and I did half-annihilate a warder and leave one of his Majesty's prisons at the mercy of any evil-minded passer-by. And, after all, you *had* cancelled your appeal, hadn't you? As I say, it's all very interesting, Varris.

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Interesting and intricate. Someone is going to achieve a very sore head thinking all this business out."

Varris looked at him again, and there was a slow hint of amusement in his eyes. Stayne noted it and knew that he had won his war.

"Yes, it's surely going to be awkward for someone," muttered Varris.

"Have I done wrong in shanghai-ing you out of a prison into which you should never have been put? A prison, moreover, from which the authorities would be the first to release you as soon as the true facts came to light. Have I done anything criminally wrong in taking the law into my own hands in putting right a grave injustice? I get more enamoured of the myriad ramifications of the problem each moment I think of it. Still, let's not worry ourselves too much about it. Have another cigarette."

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CHAPTER X

VARRIS sat with his hands on his knees for a long time, staring out unwinkingly at the long, drab streets as they flashed by.

"How are you fixed for cash?" asked Stayne suddenly.

Varris seemed to pull himself to with a jerk.

"I—er—I've several hundred pounds in the bank," he said, "but—but——"

"Awkward to draw it out, eh? Of course it would be. And dangerous too. Make me out a cheque for five hundred and I'll pass it through one of my private accounts. Meanwhile, you'll find a wallet in your inside coat pocket. There's money in it. Also visiting cards in the name of Harris, with a quiet little Bayswater boarding house underneath. Tembridge booked the rooms yesterday by 'phone, so there will be no suspicion about that. You could hardly have booked your rooms before you broke out of prison, could you? Also a cigarette case with the name 'H. T. Harris' engraved on it. Also a season ticket made out in that name from Bayswater to Bishopsgate, where you will be in charge of an office I have there. The season ticket is a month old already. It is valid for two months more. It's one of Tembridge's various decoys. He has several others going permanently. You'll have one of those if that one gets dangerous. You'll

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find a couple of letters waiting for you at the Bayswater address. Also a post-card referring to certain conversations you had with the signatory last week. Boarding house landladies have been known to glance through post-cards; and that will help to put her off the scent again."

Varris, throughout the quiet recital, gazed at Stayne with eyes that slowly grew wider and wider with astonishment.

"You're—you're pretty thorough, aren't you?" he said with a long exhalation of breath.

"Also efficient—and speedy. If any of those arrangements break down during our running of this case we shall have others that you can slip into at a moment's notice. You see we have already come to the conclusion that it will be safest for us—and for a great many other people too—if you remain at liberty while this problem is being flattened out. Just a moment, here's the post office."

He stepped out of the car with the tightly tied parcel. Tembridge had gone on past the post office and had turned down the first side street, where he jumped out and covered the radiator with a blanket that reached right down over the front number-plate. He himself stood round at the back, masking out the other number-plate with his own body till John Stayne returned.

Stayne came back and beckoned Varris.

"Come along," he said, "here's where we get out and walk. Tembridge, take the car round somewhere handy and garage it. Say it will be left for a week. Pay a deposit covering that length of time and then leave it. We can recover it when everything is cleared up.

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Get back home as soon as you can—and use the private entrance. I wouldn't use the front door again. Hawker is bound to have a squad there. Come on, Varris."

They walked quietly for something over a mile and then took a series of buses to Bayswater.

"You'll be all right at that address," said Stayne. "Some of your luggage was sent along yesterday. Three hand-grips packed with underclothes and thingummyjigs. The rest you can get yourself. Tell me, what else can you do besides secretarial work?"

Varris paused for a moment and rubbed his chin.

"Well—um—m—I've dabbled at a variety of things and made a pretty fine mess at most," he said ruminatively.

"Motor mechanics?"

"A little—but not too good."

"Wireless?"

Varris brightened. "Hobby of mine," he said.

"Understand it?"

"Know it inside out."

"That'll do, then. I'll put you on rigging up the office with communicating telephone lines. If you understand wireless you can get the hang of telephone wiring inside two jiffs. Pair of dark-blue dungaree overalls, second-hand step ladder. Bag of tools. Cloth cap. Face none too clean. That'll be all you'll need for that. Get the idea?"

"I don't think I do," said Varris. "You move a bit too fast for me."

"Keep that disguise locked in a dráwer at your office. Everything bar the dirty hands and face. You

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see, Hawker is no fool. He's good. And he's out on this job like a stoat on the trail of a rabbit. And he's every bit as persistent. The chances are a hundred to one that he will ferret out my Bishopsgate dead-end. He's like that—the old rat!"

"I see," said Varris, not too happily.

"Sooner or later he will be calling round. Now nobody with any legitimate business with me ever knocks at that door. They all have keys of their own and they come and go at their will. Sometimes there's a knock—but up to now it has been travelling salesmen, filing system experts, loose-leaf ledger representatives and such-like. But one of these days Hawker will be calling. Don't risk the travelling salesmen. As soon as you hear a knock at the outer door slip into that disguise. Don't take any of your clothes off—that will give the game away. You can always have the step ladder leaning against the wall—and leave a few odd wires hanging about. It will look like a job half done. Then all you have to do is to use the grand old army slogan—act green.

"When he comes in, just glance at him and carry on with your job. 'No—you haven't seen the manager. Haven't seen him all the morning. Yes—he was there when you started work. Eh? Oh, yes, he always comes back before tea. There's his hat, look, on the peg. It looks as though he is having a conference with someone else in another office in the building. Why, certainly, wait if you want to. It's none of your business anyway. You're only a telephone linesman come to fit up the offices.'

"See? Kid him along. Lull him. Ring me at home every two hours. Then I'll know everything is O.K.

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If you once go over two hours without calling me I'll know something radically wrong has occurred round at the office. Then I'll come around and rescue you. I think I can handle Mr. Hawker all right. To-night at ten o'clock I'll come along to Bayswater and see you. Together we must piece this thing out and get it all square. As soon as I've got the details fixed I can start for Paris. Not until. It's my way to plan every move out ahead. And no man living can plan in the dark. Here's your place. See you later, Varris. Keep your pecker up, don't play the fool—and good luck!" Varris found himself being ushered out on to the step of the bus in a semi-daze by the most remarkable man he had ever met in his life.

At the Marble Arch Stayne climbed off the bus too. As he stepped on the curb a newsboy went streaking by, yelling "Prison Escape!" at the top of his high-pitched lungs.

News travels fast in London; and never so fast as when Fleet Street gets its nose to it. The Press had risen to it well. Here was a juicy piece of meat right at the beginning of the day, a piece that could be cooked on and on to perfection as the editions went by. A daring prison escape is always a good newspaper story, and one with a peculiar charm for the evening journals.

But here was one that was positively gaudy. It was a spread. An escape plotted and planned with beautiful precision from outside: an attack on the solitary gate gaoler, the suffocating of him, the theft of his keys, the opening of the other gate and the calm ordering of the prisoner away from the working squad. It all seemed too remarkable, too recklessly

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insolent to be true. But true it was. And then the other startling fact emerged, that the escaped prisoner was none other than the extraordinary Templer Varris, the man who had stood in the dock and accepted a stiff five-year sentence rather than tell in open court certain facts that could, quite possibly, have established his innocence. That was the crowning jewel to a wholly extraordinary story.

Later in the day the story was added to. There came the cryptic phrase that inferred quite a lot but gave no real information at all. "An arrest is hourly expected." The inference was that Scotland Yard officers were on the trail of the outside conspirators—were aware of their identity and knew where they could eventually locate them.

Stayne allowed himself a satisfied smile at that. It meant that, without giving away a ha'porth of information to the outside world, Hawker was informing him, through the medium of the public Press, that he was perfectly aware of all that had happened and that the best thing Colonel John Stayne could do was to keep out of it, for he would be arrested on sight.

As an even darker hint, an official notice from Headquarters appeared in print. It was headed "Have you seen this car?" And underneath ran the information: "It is known that two men in a car were concerned in the escape of Templer Varris from Scrubs Prison this morning. Both of them are known to the police, but for reasons of State their names are temporarily withheld. The car is a Silent Six limousine, 1927 model, coloured dark blue, nickel fittings, upholstered inside in dark blue leather. The register number is GG 4012. For some months it has been

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garaged in a mews off Curzon Square. Anyone seeing this car should immediately inform the police."

The next edition informed the world that the car had been found, located in a garage on the western outskirts of London. A chauffeur had taken it in and left a deposit on it for a week's garaging. Stayne was secretly pleased at the construction put on that revelation. The report went on to state that it would appear that the three men were heading out of London. Apparently another car, with a chauffeur, had met them at that prearranged spot—a car that could not be known to the police—and in it they were making their escape from the Metropolis.

Motorists, for the next few hours, complained bitterly of the inconvenience they experienced in trying to get through on the main roads. Traps seemed to exist at every mile, and even those who chose to go by circuitous routes through the by-roads fared little better. At every post they had to undergo a critical scrutiny and questionnaire by the police patrols, and no sooner were they through one cordon than they were into another.

But there was no further news of the supposed flying motorists. Hawker had to admit that the patrol system, for all the miraculous speed with which it was organised and put into operation, had failed.

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CHAPTER XI

JOHN STAYNE entered his house by the secret way. It led in from a cellar in a little house at the back of his own. He owned that house, and the passage-way had been cut, laboriously, yard by yard, by his own hands. The earth had been removed, load by load, in the early hours of the morning, with the aid of a builder's cart. Val Tembridge, the epitomisation of every corduroy-trousered carter that ever lived, poised half asleep on the top, with the limp reins in his hands.

Stayne passed through and let himself into the cellars of his own house. He removed the lid of a whisky keg and lifted a small telephone from its interior. In a little while a voice, suppressed as to be barely audible, came down from upstairs.

"Is that you, sir?" it asked.

"Yes"—Stayne himself was hardly more than whispering—"has anything happened while I've been gone?"

"Yes, sir. That Mr. Hawker came back—half an hour ago. I told him you weren't in and he wouldn't believe me. He said he was coming in to find you: or, if you were out, to wait till you got back."

"Yes, yes—is he there now?"

"I couldn't help myself, sir. I told him I could not possibly let him into the house without your permis-

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sion, but he told me if I didn't mind my own business I would find myself under arrest. I knew he was from Scotland Yard and I didn't know what to do. He demanded admittance and I had to let him in."

"Has he searched?"

"Yes, sir. He went all over the house and finally said he was satisfied you weren't in. But he sat himself down in the dining-room and says he won't budge till you come back—not if you stay away for a month."

"All right, Belham, don't worry yourself; you did quite right."

"But that's not all, sir. Ten minutes ago another detective came in. I believe Mr. Hawker telephoned for him. The two of them are in there together. One keeps answering every telephone call that comes, and the other is sitting by the window watching everyone that calls at the house."

"Well, that won't matter. I'll see them myself presently, but I want to get up into my bedroom first. Is the way clear?"

"Just a moment, sir. I'll see."

There was silence for a little while, and then the butler's voice came on again. "Yes, sir; it's all clear. I've listened at the door. They're still in there, talking. Are you coming up now?"

"Right away."

He slipped off his shoes and noiselessly crept up through the trapdoor into another cellar above, and up the stairs to his room.

In a few minutes he was in through the library panel and talking on the private line.

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"Is that Number One?" he asked.

"Yes, beautiful work, Colonel," came the quietly appreciative voice from the other end. "Have any trouble?"

"Not a piece. Everything went along like ball bearings running in an oil bath. Sorry about the gaoler, but it couldn't be helped. Better than bumping him on the head with a spanner, though."

"I can't see how it could be avoided."

"It couldn't, short of bribery. And they're not that sort. It was only a little whiff, anyhow. He would be as right as rain five minutes afterwards."

"Have you fixed Varris?"

"Yes. That end is all right. But I want your help. Hawker is here. He seems to have anchored himself at the telephone and refuses to budge an inch until he has got his hands on me."

"You rather expected that, didn't you?"

"It was inevitable. That's why I'm in the house without his knowledge. Will you do the necessary? Three should be sufficient. Any more would make it too obvious."

"They will be ready by the time you get down to Hawker. He may not wait, of course. He may choose to take you straight off to Bow Street. In that case you will have to do it from there."

"I'll see to all that, Chief."

"Then they will be numbers Eight, Ten and Seventeen."

"Thanks. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and congratulations."

Stayne relocked the cabin and went down into the dining-room. He pushed the door open carelessly and

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walked through as though he was doing nothing more exciting than going in to dinner.

Hawker sprang up as the door opened and he stared at Stayne in grudging surprise. He had expected him back, but not nearly so soon and not nearly so undramatically.

"Hello, Hawker, how's tricks? Belham told me you were in. Comfortable?"

Stayne took a cigarette from a big silver box on the table and lit it with delicate precision.

"So you made it, did you?" said Hawker, sourly. "I'll find that damned secret dive of yours if I have to tear the house down stone by stone."

"And that wouldn't help either," replied Stayne, cordially. He noted with a slight amusement that the other detective had risen too and had crossed round to the door; he now stood between him and it.

Hawker eyed his man grimly. "Well, are you coming quietly?" he snapped.

Stayne affected a mild surprise. "Coming?" he said vaguely. "Coming where?"

Hawker snorted. "Oh, don't play the fool," he growled. "I've had a cell specially washed and scrubbed for you ever since midday. It's waiting for you now—round at Vine Street."

"May I ask what for?"

"Colonel, that's not funny. I expected a better one than that from you."

Stayne sighed patiently. "Hawker, you might at least extend me the usual privileges of the law of the land," he said. "I am legally entitled to know what the charge is."

"You can have it any way you like," retorted Haw-

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ker hotly. "If you want it all dolled up with the falde-lahs according to Cocker, here it is. John Stayne, I arrest you for complicity in the escape of one Templer Varris from Scrubs Prison to-day, and I hereby warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you."

"Thank you: I just wanted to know what idiotic trick you were up to now." Stayne seemed relieved. "Now, let's stop acting the goat. Candidly, what do you want me for?"

Hawker blinked. "Eh?" he said, and there was a faint shock of surprise in his voice.

Stayne did not seem to notice it.

"Honestly, Hawker, do you really think I had any hand in that fool affair?" he asked.

Hawker staggered. He gaped at the ice-cool man in front of him and swallowed hard. He thrust his head forward to stare at him through a luxurious cloud of pale blue cigarette smoke that was coming idly down Stayne's nostrils. He seemed unable to believe the evidence of his own ears. For some seconds he stared at his man, incredulous. Then he pulled himself together with a tremendous effort, and there was a ring of sheer bad temper in his reply.

"Do you mean to say you dare to put up a denial?" he snorted.

"Dare? Dare?" Stayne turned the word over on his tongue as though to get its full mental quality. "Of course I dare," he added gently. "Why on earth shouldn't I? You know perfectly well that I have nothing to do with such a silly business. When you read out that charge I thought you were joking."

"Joking!" Hawker was nearly inarticulate. "Say,

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Stayne," he managed to strangle out, "are you trying to get my goat?"

"Don't be a fool. Hawker, my son, you're losing your nerve. Arrest me by all means, but I'll promise you that by this time to-morrow you'll be the sorriest man in London. And not only that, but you'll admit that you've made the biggest blunder in your career."

"Is that so?" Hawker had so far recovered himself as to be almost sarcastic.

"I fear it is. I can definitely prove to the satisfaction of any court in this country that I had not the slightest connection with that particular affair, that I neither knew nor saw Templer Varris, and that it was impossible for me to have assisted in his escape from gaol."

"You can do all that, can you? Yes, you can! And then some! Now listen to this little lot. Yesterday you were traced from this house to Marlborough Street Police Station. You were driving a sports model car the number of which is known. An hour later that same car was parked just around the corner from West London Police Court.

"At West London there was a man up on several charges, a man whose name is Thomas Dobey. You saw Thomas Dobey. The gaoler has identified you from several photographs submitted to him. You bought Dobey tea. And you offered to pay his fine. Then, for obvious reasons, you refrained from paying the fine right away. You did that in spite of the fact that you were present in court and heard the sentences passed. You were recognised and identified in that court. That manœuvre insured that Dobey would go to Srubs Prison. On your way out you

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scribbled a note and gave it to the charge sergeant. He, too, will swear to you. And——"

"The note?" asked Stayne levelly.

"The note is in my office now. It is in your handwriting. Also the card you gave to Thomas Dobey. J. Sterndale is the name you gave him, and the address was the Strand Hotel, London. Dobey wrote you from prison. That letter is also in my possession. You left it on the bench in the guardroom when you drugged the gate warder. At the Strand Hotel the inquiries clerk identifies you as the man who called in there this morning and received a letter from Scrubs Prison. Tembridge was driving you, dressed as a chauffeur. Your blue limousine is found, the car is registered to J. Sterndale, of the Strand Hotel. Now disprove that little lot to the satisfaction of any court in the country—and I'll resign."

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CHAPTER XII

STAYNE softly rubbed his chin. "Fast work, Hawker; fast work and good," he admitted. "But on the wrong tack, old man. You've got yourself badly tangled up somewhere."

"Yeh?"

"I'm afraid so. You've got me mixed up with someone else. This Sterndale chap—he's the boy you want to go after. Now, before you make a fool of yourself do you mind if I do a little 'phoning?"

"You're not going to touch that 'phone again for some years," said Hawker flatly. "What you're going to do is to put on your hat and come right round to Vine Street with me—now!"

"You're very trying," said Stayne sadly. "I'm attempting to help you. You've made rather a bad mistake and I'm trying to assist you in avoiding a worse one. Just let me telephone. I promise you that I will only put three calls through. They will be to men whose names are beyond reproach—men who, except in the service of their country, would not stoop to the violation of a single law. You can hear every word I say. It will simply be to ask them to come round here and make a statement to you. If, after what they tell you, you still think you'd like to take me round to Vine Street, believe me I shall be only too willing to accompany you."

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Hawker looked uncertainly from Stayne to his assistant. Then he took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"You're up to your old tricks again, you rascal," he muttered, "but I'm blest if I can see what the game is. Are you going to pull an alibi?"

"Most certainly I am. And when you've heard it you'll realise how nearly you came to making the most perfect *faux pas* you ever made in your life."

Stayne rang the bell and the secretary came in.

"Miss Mathers," he said, "I want you to ring up Mr. Calhoun, Major-General Stonehaugh, and Sir Ardleigh Powers. Tell each of them that I would esteem it a great favour if they would call here at their earliest convenience. Say that I much regret having to trouble them, but that the matter is of such grave import to me that I have no other alternative. If any of them should not happen to be in, please inform me."

The secretary departed, and Stayne turned to Hawker.

"It is better that she should do it," he said evenly. "It leaves me no chance of coding them a message or doing anything utterly impossible like that. When they arrive I will simply ask them to tell you what I've been doing to-day in their company. One could hardly be fairer, could one?"

"You beauty! You're pulling another line of bull on me, hey?"

Stayne shrugged. "Glance at the names," he suggested. "Mr. Calhoun is private secretary to the Prime Minister, General Stonehaugh is the head of the Army Ordnance Department, and Sir Ardleigh

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Powers is Under-Secretary of State for India. You'd hardly question their credentials, would you?"

Hawker was obviously perplexed. He mopped his forehead again, and grunted.

"I'll wait and see 'em," he said at last, and sat down sullenly.

"Of course you will. You would only be making yourself look supremely ridiculous if you didn't." Stayne seemed to dismiss the whole affair with that thought, and he sat down to wait for his callers.

The secretary came in again to say that she had got into touch with each of the gentlemen concerned, and that they were on their way.

Hawker smoked on in a restive silence. He seemed to sense already that Stayne had beaten him again. He saw him wriggling out of the coils he had thrown around him, although for the very life of him he could not define the nature of the particular wriggle employed.

Templer Varris was cheap as the price to be paid for John Stayne. Hawker would willingly have given a year of his life to have put the Mystery Maker safe behind the bars. Stayne had pricked his official pride too long: and now, just when it seemed that he had got his man on the inevitable march up to the dock, there was another convulsive wriggle coming and, equally inevitably, he could see Stayne slipping out of his fingers again.

He jammed his cigarette butt savagely into an ashtray. It was unfair, unjust! Stayne was blatantly as guilty as any man ever was in his life. That chain of evidence had not been built up on surmise; every single

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link of it was definite, a concrete fact that was proven and re-proven. Stayne had actually warned him at that first meeting that he would have Varris out of gaol within forty-eight hours. He had done it, had made good on his boast. Hawker and his men had traced his every movement. It was imbecile to say that Stayne was guiltless.

"How are you going to get clear of the evidence of that car?" he suddenly demanded.

"It was probably stolen from outside my house," said Stayne imperturbably. "That sort of thing is constantly being done in London. I should think it was one of those abnormally frequent cases of borrowing a car. The fact that it was a chauffeur who garaged the car adds credence to that view. The less scrupulous of them borrow a car occasionally and take young ladies of their acquaintance for joy rides. You must have come into contact with many such cases yourself."

Hawker's eyes glittered and he looked as though he was ready, there and then, to get up and have a stand-up fight with Stayne.

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CHAPTER XIII

ONE by one the visitors arrived. Calhoun, tall and thin; Stonehaugh, unmistakably a soldier of the old school; Powers inclined to portliness.

Stayne said nothing whatever until the last of them arrived. He just rose and received them as they were announced, with a formal little bow and muttered greeting.

When they were all in and seated, not without a feeling of embarrassment, Stayne addressed them. He himself was not in the slightest way nervous of the outcome. He knew perfectly well that the Chief would have drilled them into their parts and made them word-perfect. And besides they had played that part before at the sudden quick call of duty.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I want first to introduce you to our friend here. This gentleman is a police officer; you probably all know him quite well by name. He is Mr. Hawker, of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard. Mr. Hawker, this is Sir Ardleigh Powers, the parliamentary head of the India Office; this is Mr. Calhoun, to whose bodyguard you were attached during the General Strike, and this is General Stonehaugh, the present head of the Army Ordnance Department.

"Now, gentlemen, I am not in a position to be able to enlighten you as to the reason for this rather hurried conference. Such an act would, I feel, be a breach

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