THE CRIME CLUB

BY

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Logo

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CHAPTER I
THE BLACKMAILER

Hearing the sound of lightly-falling footsteps behind him, Captain Melun ceased his investigations of Sir Paul Westerham's kit-bag and cautiously turned his head.

As he did so, the captain experienced a painful sensation. He felt a little cold ring of steel pressed against his right temple, and from past experience, both objective and subjective, he knew that a Colt cartridge was held, so to speak, in leash within five inches of his head.

It was very still on board the *Gigantic*. The liner rose and fell easily on the long, oily Atlantic swell of the Bay of Biscay. Moreover, there was upon the entire vessel that peace which comes between the post-prandial exercises, such as deck quoits, of Atlantic passengers and the comparative bustle which arrives with tea-time. In short, the hour was half-past three o'clock.

Captain Melun for several infinitely long seconds was offered an opportunity of enjoying the supreme calm of the liner. But he did not entirely revel in the moments so offered to him.

It was, indeed, with some relief that he heard a distinctly pleasant, though slightly mocking, voice break the accentuated silence and say:

“Don't be alarmed, Captain Melun. I mean you no harm. I am simply psychologically interested in your movements. The fact that I am attempting to protect the contents of my kit-bag from your attentions is of comparatively small importance.”

The captain drew a little breath of relief, not the less sincere because he was conscious that the nozzle of the revolver was withdrawn from his temple.

He heard the door of the state-room close softly; then the pleasant voice spoke again, though with a slightly harder ring in its tones.

“Stand up, Captain Melun,” said the voice, “and be seated. I have a good deal to say, and it is not my habit to talk to any man when I find him on his knees.”

Captain Melun rose a little unsteadily and faced about, to find the most disconcerting eyes of Sir Paul Westerham bent full upon him.

Still retaining the revolver in his hand, the baronet seated himself upon the edge of his bunk and then motioned to Captain Melun to sit down upon the only available couch.

For a few minutes the two men gazed at each other with curiosity and interest; and it would have been hard to find a greater contrast in physique and physiognomy.

Captain Melun had an olive face set with dark, almond-shaped eyes beneath a pair of oblique and finely-pencilled brows; his nose was aquiline and assertive, his mouth shrewd and mean and scarcely hidden by a carefully-trained and very faintly-waxed moustache. He was exceedingly tall and astonishingly spare in build. Indeed, his whole aspect suggested a man who brooded over defeated ends. For the rest, his dress was unmistakably associated with that service to which he had never been a credit and which he had left unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.

Sir Paul rivalled the captain in inches. Indeed, he must have overtopped him by half a head. He was spare, too, as Melun was, but his was the leanness of a man who has been worn fine by activity. His hair was undeniably red in tint, and his face had that pronounced ruddiness possessed only by red-haired folk. His nose was inelegantly short and emphasised the length of his upper lip, which was, however, covered, as indeed were both his face and chin, with a short, crisp auburn beard.

Strong though it was, his face, under the covering of its beard, would have lacked both distinction and power but for the amazing eyes. These, beneath brows which were rather beetling for so young a man, were of a shade which can only be described as of duck's-egg green. They gave the man an aspect of superhuman coldness and at times an air of almost superhuman cruelty. They were the eyes of a man who could look unmoved upon a sea of troubles or survey with untouched heart a panorama of undeserved suffering.

Sir Paul was, in fact, no uncommon man. Leaving a wild youth behind him, he had for ten years which followed his landing in the United States pursued the hard and humble and most exacting calling of miner in the West. Life he had always held cheap, not only as it touched others, but as it touched himself. He had learnt a hard lesson in the school of life, and taking it hardly had become a hard man. So inured, indeed, had he become both to suffering and to danger that,

when at length a greedy lawyer had tracked him down, he had at first resented bitterly and blasphemously the fate which made him the richest man on earth.

For his uncle, from whom he inherited the baronetcy, had been a rich man when he died; and for five years his well-invested fortune had lain in the hands of able men, slowly accumulating still greater wealth, which a crowd of secondary relatives had striven to prove did not belong to the vanished and scapegrace nephew.

At first the fact that he was the undisputed owner of quite as many millions as would have justified an American plutocrat in being jealous had annoyed the new baronet more than he could tell.

Week after week the lawyer, mindful of his fees, had pleaded with the new baronet to return to England and enter into possession of his own. Week after week Westerham had hesitated to return, for, in spite of the hardships which he had undergone, there lived with him still sufficient of the old life to tell him that the possession of millions would entail the labour of a social treadmill which he not only dreaded but despised.

There had, however, come to him quite by chance a motive for returning. On thinking it over he had come to the conclusion that it is not, after all, so bad a thing to be able to indulge a whim. And the secret of the whim he meant to follow lay, he knew, within the kit-bag which he had found Captain Melun ransacking.

Utterly cut off from the world as he had been, the names which mean so much in Society in London, Paris, Vienna, and even in New York, had been lost to him. The faces of the great men of those great cities were to him as a closed book. The faces of their womenkind were as dreams which he had long since forgotten. But there was a dream in the kit-bag.

Even Westerham's roystering had not been ill-spent. His knowledge of the world, which, after all, means a certain cognisance of the evil that men do, had taught him that Captain Melun was not a man to perpetrate a common theft.

Long years spent in a land peopled practically by Ishmaelites had taught him deep distrust of the stranger—particularly distrust of the stranger who would be friendly.

So, many hours had not passed on board the *Gigantic* before the shrewd inquiries that followed on his suspicions had laid bare before him, as far as could be unfolded, the history of Captain Melun.

The captain, it seemed, moved in the best society in London and New York; none the less, he was not liked. There was no actual charge against him, but there appeared to have been bound up in his career in America a number of unpleasant episodes. The record of the episodes was vague, but that suspicion of them was justified lay in the fact that whereas Captain Melun had landed in the States poor he was leaving them enriched. And to lend colour to this justification was the captain's exceedingly unfortunate reputation as a card-player.

Now Westerham, if truth must be told, loved play, and high play. In the old days he had not cared for what stakes he played against men so long as they were honest men; but now he resented as an insult to his good sense the suggestion that he should play, despite the resources at his command, for high stakes against a man who, by some subtle means, seldom, if ever, lost.

It was with these things in his mind—a mind active and of great intelligence, a mind moreover sharpened by adversity—that he looked stonily at Captain Melun.

It had almost become second nature for Westerham to draw a gun upon a man whom he had caught apparently intent on theft. Swiftly, however, it came to him that a man in Melun's position was not likely to be engaged in theft. There sprang into his brain the notion that Melun was simply searching through his belongings with the idea of blackmail.

It almost made Westerham laugh to think that any man should attempt to blackmail him. He had nothing to disguise, nothing to hide.

Indeed, as he sat easily on the edge of his bunk looking at the dark, disconcerted face before him, Westerham had half a mind to throw his weapon aside and to tell Melun to go his way in peace. Then there came to him a certain recollection, and the blood crept into his face so that it seemed to burn, and his sinister eyes gleamed beneath his brows, bright and green and dangerous.

His control over himself was, however, perfect, and still in the soft, smooth voice, which long absence in the West had not robbed of its initial and birth-given refinement, he asked:

“What did you find?”

Captain Melun did not even blink his heavy-lidded eyes.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Yet,” rejoined Westerham, almost meditatively, “you must have been here

at least five minutes before I arrived."

"I tell you," said Melun, almost earnestly, "that I found nothing."

"That is to say," said Westerham, "nothing which you could turn to your own good account."

Melun smiled a sour yet demure little smile.

"Precisely," he said evenly.

"Permit me," said the baronet, just as quietly, "to inform you that you are a liar. If you will be good enough to turn over the bundle of socks which you will find in the right-hand corner of the kit-bag as it faces you now, I think you will be able to hand me something that is of interest to us both."

"I was not aware that I could," replied Captain Melun with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

Westerham picked up again the six-shooter which he had laid carelessly at his side.

"Have a look," he said, and his voice was gently persuasive.

Just a flicker of vindictiveness crept into Melun's eyes, and under the suasion of firearms he turned again to the bag.

After a few moments Westerham, now schooled to infinite placidity, inquired for the second time if he had found anything.

"Only a few papers," said Captain Melun, crossly.

"Pardon me," said the baronet, "if I am not mistaken you have found only one paper. Be kind enough to hand it to me."

The captain turned about, and with a carefully-manicured hand offered Westerham a slip of paper which had evidently been torn from some English periodical.

Westerham took it and looked at it casually, though the muscles on his closed jaws stood out in a manner that was not wholly pleasant to look upon. It was, however, with unfathomable eyes that he surveyed the scrap of paper before him. It revealed the portrait of a girl with an astonishingly quiet face. Her cheeks were round and soft, and her chin was round and soft too, but her mouth, a little full and pronounced, was distinctly sad and set. A pair of large dark eyes looked out upon the world unwaveringly and serenely, if a little sorrowfully, beneath a

pair of finely-pencilled, level brows, which formed, as it were, a little bar of inflexible resolve. A mass of dark hair was coiled upon the girl's head after the manner of early Victorian heroines. It was a face at once striking and wistful in its splendour.

The piece of paper had been torn with a jagged edge across the girl's throat, so that the inscription which would have borne her name was lacking.

Westerham looked up from the picture to Melun.

“You,” he said simply, “go everywhere and know everybody. Therefore I feel confident that you will be able to tell me the name of this girl. That is all I ask you—at present.”

Captain Melun laughed and then checked his laughter.

“The lady,” he said, “is Lady Kathleen Carfax, the only child of the Earl of Penshurst, who is, as even you are probably aware”—there was a covert sneer in his tones—“Prime Minister of England.”

“So!” murmured Westerham, and he nodded his head.

“Yes,” said Captain Melun, “and if it is of any interest to you to know it, I propose to marry Lady Kathleen.”

“Indeed,” said Westerham.

He folded the paper and placed it carefully in his breast-pocket.

“You must forgive my being rude,” he added, “but I should not now be on my way to England if I had not every intention of marrying the lady myself.”

CHAPTER II
SIR PAUL WESTERHAM BUYS THE CRIME SYNDICATE

Captain Melun was a man used to being hard hit. He was steeled against cunningly and swiftly-dealt blows, such as he himself administered, but this declaration of Sir Paul Westerham, that he intended to marry the Lady Kathleen, took him quite aback.

“Oh!” he exclaimed softly, and his voice had a certain note of puzzlement and anxiety in it. “Oh!” he repeated, and again he said “Oh!”

The baronet smiled a little grimly in his red beard, but his duck's-egg green eyes were as serene and as cold as ever.

The three gently ejaculated “Ohs” of the captain had told him much. His quick brain realised that he had dealt the captain an exceedingly well-landed blow. Then the baronet's smile died, for, following the train of his suspicious thoughts, he instinctively grasped and held on to the idea that just as Melun had been searching his kit-bag for the purpose of blackmail, so that individual purposed marriage with the Prime Minister's daughter to the same end.

This notion disquieted him greatly.

It disturbed him so much that the hard eyes hardened. Only the baronet's friends knew that they sometimes hardened because of the softness behind their gaze.

Westerham's heart, indeed, rose in revolt against the suggestion that this man, spurned of the Army, suspected of the clubs, distrusted by every honourable man, should for a moment presume to reach out and touch the hand of Kathleen Carfax. Not for such a man as Melun was the girl with the calm yet, at the same time, troubled face, that had looked out from the tattered picture and drawn him back to England.

Westerham's brain worked as swiftly as the brain of a woman, as do the brains of men who, cut off from the electric-lift side of civilisation, day by day face Nature in its true, maternal, and therefore its feminine aspect. It was a long guess, but a shrewd guess, and a true guess, that if Melun had his hopes set on

Lady Kathleen, the girl with the dark hair and steadfast eyes stood in some peril.

The mere thought of it quickened Westerham's blood, and the quickening of his blood livened his brain still more, so that he watched, almost cat-like, the glance of Melun's eyes as they followed the placing of the Lady Kathleen's picture in his pocket.

For a couple of minutes nothing was said. Each man knew instinctively that he must move to the attack, but realised that a mistake at the opening of the game might possibly spell disaster.

It was the baronet who broke the silence—it is always the man who has least to fear that recovers first.

Westerham had pursued a train of thought as bold as it was unerring. It had come home to him that Melun was not merely a blackmailer, but a prince among blackmailers. With infinite speed of thought he followed out his idea, and came to a conclusion which at once suggested and vindicated his next remark.

“I have never realised before, Captain Melun,” he said, “what a pleasure it was to meet a perfectly-unqualified villain.”

Captain Melun raised his black eyebrows a shade more obliquely, and his eyelids flickered. He was, however, equal to the situation.

“Indeed?” he said coolly, though he passed his tongue along his upper lip beneath his carefully-trimmed moustache. “Indeed? I shall be glad if you will explain.”

Westerham took a deep breath and laughed almost gaily. “I shall be charmed,” he said.

He paused a little and then continued: “No man, except one with such a reputation as yours,” he said, “would dream of regarding Lady Kathleen Carfax as a possible wife unless he were so equipped with all the arts of blackmail that he had some reason to hope for his success.”

By this time Captain Melun had got back his composure.

“You seem,” he said casually, “to endow Lord Penshurst with an exceedingly poor character.”

“Not exactly,” said Westerham. “I endow you with an exceedingly dangerous one.”

There was another pause, and the two pairs of eyes sought each other, and

the heavy-lidded, slumberous eyes of Melun flickered and faltered beneath those of the man who had so correctly jumped to a menacing conclusion.

“I am about to present to you an argument,” continued the baronet, “which unswervingly follows my present conception of yourself. Long experience of this wicked world—by which I mean that particular kind of vulture-like humanity which preys upon better men than itself—enables me to assume that you are without question a blackmailer, a bad blackmailer, and a blackmailer of no common type.

“But I have also learnt this, that no blackmailer can stand alone. His offence is the most cowardly offence in the world. A blackmailer is always a coward, and a coward is invariably afraid of isolated action. I am therefore very certain that you do not stand alone in this attempt to blackmail me.”

Captain Melun's eyes left those of Westerham and studied the white-painted panel behind the baronet's head.

Sir Paul went steadily on with his pitiless and logical argument.

“I am persuaded,” he said, “that your only motive in leaving New York was to sail on the same ship as myself, and, if possible, find an opportunity of buying my silence on some point.

“Possibly you think that in the discovery which we have mutually made in the past few minutes you have unearthed a fact which may be much to your advantage. You are wrong.

“On the contrary,” Sir Paul continued, “it is I who have unearthed a fact which may be much to my benefit, and with your permission I will proceed to explain to you why.”

Captain Melun slowly shrugged his shoulders and slightly bowed his head. He realised that it was the baronet's move, and did not propose to hinder him in the making of it, inasmuch as until he could correctly grasp Westerham's intention he could make no counter move himself.

“Following therefore,” continued Westerham, “my original line of thought, I should say that you were the headpiece, the brain-piece, of a well-planned scheme of crime.”

The faint colour in Melun's face became fainter still. Westerham knew he was pursuing the right trail.

“Now with such men as yourself—mind, I am not speaking so much from

knowledge as from an intuition as to what I should do myself were I placed in similar circumstances—it is probable that you have sufficient intelligence, not only to rob your victims, but to rob your friends.

“Another piece of life's philosophy that roughing it has taught me is that the robber is always poor. I come, therefore, to the natural deduction that you are hard up.”

Westerham's whole expression of face changed suddenly. The coldness left it. The sea-green eyes smiled with a smile that invited confidence from the man before him.

“Well?” said Melun. “And what of it?”

Westerham knew that the battle was won.

“Then,” Westerham continued coolly, “such a sum as a hundred thousand pounds would not come amiss to you. Such a sum I am prepared to pay you—under certain conditions.”

He paused suddenly in his speech with the intention of catching the very slightest exclamation on the part of Melun; nor was he disappointed. A quick indrawing of Melun's breath told Westerham that he was hitting him hard.

All the pleasantness in Westerham's face vanished again, and he looked at the captain with narrowed eyes.

“I realise that in offering you such a sum,” he said, “it will, of course, cost you something to earn it. A man who speculates must spend his own money to gain other people's. A criminal—you must forgive the word, but it is necessary—who seeks to make a great coup at the expense of others must put up a certain amount of money to bring it off.

“I think, however, that I am offering you quite enough to enable you to buy either the silence or the inactivity of your fellow criminals. A hundred thousand pounds is a good deal of money, and your gang cannot be so large that you will not be able to afford a sufficient sum to render them your servants.”

“Exactly,” said Captain Melun.

“Ah!” exclaimed Westerham. “Then you acknowledge what I say to be true?”

“Sir Paul,” answered Melun, “you may take my word at what you judge it is worth, but none the less I, for my part, am prepared to take the word of a

gentleman. Do you give me your word of honour that the offer—I take it such is meant—is in all sincerity?”

“It is meant in all sincerity,” said the baronet, “because I am following out my own particular ideas, and I know that you have neither the capacity nor yet the opportunity of saying me nay.”

No man was quicker than Melun to seize an advantage. He saw that Westerham read him through and through, and that acknowledgment of his own baseness would be the surest way of obtaining some small measure of the baronet's confidence.

No man lies to his doctor, and at the moment Melun stood in the presence of a pitiless diagnosis of his soul.

“Yes, Captain Melun,” the baronet proceeded, “I admit that you have had bad luck, but your bad luck places you in my hands. In short, you can be delivered up to the captain of this ship as a common thief, or you can do as I tell you.”

For a moment Melun hesitated, then he laughed.

“I never realised before,” he said steadily, almost with insolence, “that the blackmailer could be blackmailed.”

“Nevertheless,” said Westerham, “such is the case.”

“It is with every confidence,” the baronet continued, “that I make you my present offer. You have divined my secret just as I have divined yours; it would, however, be just as well for both if I explained every motive of my action.”

He paused and looked for a moment almost shyly out of the port-hole, which swung up and down between sea and sky.

“Where I have been,” he said, “women are few and far between. I never cared for any of them—until—until—I saw this picture.”

He tapped his breast lightly.

“Do you think,” he continued, his voice rising louder again, “that I should ever have set out for England if I had not been drawn back by this?”

He tapped his breast again. Then his eyes grew wider and his nostrils distended.

“I suppose,” he cried, with a certain tone of irony in his voice, “that I am a

poet. But I am a poet of the open air. Do you think that I care a glass of barbed-wire whisky for all the scented drawing-rooms in the world? I began life, as they call it, in England, when I was young. What do you think I care for polo, for Hurlingham, for a stuffy reception in some great house in town? Nothing—nothing! Give me the open prairie land, the tall, blue grass, the open sky, the joy of the weary body that has ridden hard after cattle all the day!”

He laughed shortly.

“Do you think,” he continued, extending an almost melodramatically gesticulating hand towards the astonished captain, “that there is any soft, silk-bound pillow in Mayfair that could appeal to me when I could sleep under the stars?”

“Heavens!” He reached out his arms and brought them to his sides again with a strenuous motion, all his muscles contracted. “I have learnt,” he cried, “the lesson that life is not only real and earnest, but that life is hard, that life is a battle—a battle to be won!”

His eyes fell upon his strong, sinewy, brown hands, and he clenched his fists.

“I am not going back to England to make pleasure, but to fight—to win the girl of the picture—from you!”

But now, to Westerham's surprise, Melun had turned to sneering. The baronet was a breed of man the captain did not understand; no man that he had as yet been acquainted with loosed his heart in this wild manner. It seemed to him that Westerham was but a romantic child.

But there was no childhood, no romance, in the bitter gaze he lifted his eyes to meet.

“Listen,” said Westerham, quietly, “for a hundred thousand pounds I expect you to place yourself at my disposal. For a hundred thousand pounds I expect not only your services, but the services of all those whom you employ. And the greatest of these services will be silence.

“I am going back to England as Sir Paul Westerham, Baronet, the richest man in the world. Thanks to the prying of the New York reporters I have had to sail on this ship in my own name. I did not wish it, and I have no intention of ever being discovered in London in the same character as I left New York.”

Westerham laughed a little to himself.

“No reporters at the dock-side for me,” he said. “No triumphal entry into London. No account of what I eat and do, and how many hours a night I sleep. I am going back to London to do precisely as I choose.”

Melun was very quiet. He knew he had met a stronger spirit than his own. For all the bleak chilliness of the eyes of the man who talked to him, he knew that he had to deal with the fierceness of a wild animal which feels the cage opening before him, that Westerham was seeking to evade the bars of a social prison.

“In three days' time,” Westerham went on, “we shall be in Liverpool. I shall leave the ship in such a dress that no man will recognise me. I shall go straight to London and put up at Walter's Hotel in the Strand. It is a little place, where not even journalists will look for a millionaire.”

“You forget,” said Melun, “that if you disappear in that manner there will be an awful outcry over your disappearance.”

“That matters nothing,” said Westerham. “Disappear I shall, to pursue my own ends as I choose to follow them. For once I am going to prove that money has the power to hide a man. Do you agree to my bargain?”

Melun nodded his head.

“I agree,” he said, “because I must. The day after you land in Liverpool I will meet you at Walter's.”

“You tell me,” said Westerham, “that you agree. Yet I doubt your word. There is something which I have not yet fathomed. You are still thinking of Lady Kathleen?

“Lie to me if you dare!” he added with brutal emphasis.

“I am not such a fool as to lie to you,” answered Captain Melun. “I am still thinking of the Lady Kathleen.”

“Then you make a vast mistake,” said the baronet.

He rose and opened the door for Melun to pass out.

CHAPTER III
THE GIRL IN THE PARK

On the same night the oily quality departed from the swell. It came on to blow, and blew hard until the *Gigantic* crossed the Mersey's turgid bar.

It was sufficiently rough to justify a great number of persons remaining in their cabins, but it was hardly sufficiently rough to excuse a two-days' absence of Captain Melun from the poker table.

There were some who were fools enough to grumble at Melun's absence, alleging against him that he sought to rob them of that revenge which they desired to make.

But while the rough weather kept Captain Melun below it brought Sir Paul Westerham on deck. And those maidens whose beauty was weatherproof rejoiced in the fact that the hitherto unattainable baronet now seemed to court friendly advances.

But they, poor little dears, did not know what Captain Melun did—their dreams of endless millions were unspoiled by any knowledge of the little paper which Westerham carried in his breast-pocket.

On the third day, however, there came a complete right-about-face in the conduct of the two men whose personalities had most impressed themselves on the ship's company, for while Melun came on deck looking sullen and morose, the baronet pleaded a slight attack of fever and hid himself in his state-room. Nor indeed, until with all that serenity on the bridge and all that shouting on the quay which goes to the berthing of a great liner, did any of the maidens, clamorous for his presence, look upon Westerham's face again.

The gangway lashed securely to the *Gigantic's* side, the first to step aboard were the reporters, anxious and eager-eyed, keen on finding the miner who was now a baronet and a millionaire. They proposed to wire his life-story up to London for the benefit of readers beyond number. Hard upon the reporters came the fussy relatives and friends of passengers, and amid the general kissings and hand-shakings on deck no one had much thought for any particular individual beyond himself.

So, without arousing any comment, there stepped from the main entrance to the saloon a tall, spare, clean-shaven man dressed in clerical garb. Even the fact that his face was exceedingly ruddy and that his eyes were of a peculiar sea-green shade aroused no comment.

Carrying a little bag in his hand, the apparently athletic curate swept his way to the head of the gangway, where his fresh and smiling face invited confidence from the reporters who hovered there, nervous lest the baronet should escape them.

One of them lifted his hat, and stepping forward, asked the tall, youthful parson if he had seen Sir Paul Westerham.

The parson smiled and said gravely:

“Yes, I saw him two minutes ago in his state-room.”

There was a stampede on the part of the journalists, and, smiling blandly to himself, Westerham settled his clerical hat firmly on his head and sped down the gangway.

In the days he had spent below decks Westerham had mapped out for himself a sufficiently daring and ingenious plan of campaign to satisfy the most exacting of romantic minds. It was, indeed, with almost boyish zest that he entered on the adventure, and with all the enthusiasm of an amateur detective had paved the way for slipping up to London, there to become a lost nonentity.

He knew better than to take the boat-train. Instead, he went up to the Adelphi Hotel, where fewer of his fellow-passengers were likely to congregate than at the North-Western, deposited his bag, and thereafter sauntered out to enjoy a stroll through the crowded streets of Liverpool.

At the Adelphi he slept that night, proceeding up to London on the following day.

He arrived at Euston about one o'clock, and drove straight to Walter's, a small yet comfortable hotel on the north side of the Strand.

Before going there, however, he had taken the precaution to buy some passable, if ready-made, clothes, together with a tweed cap, so that there was left about him no trace of the clerical disguise which he had assumed on arriving at Liverpool.

His presence, indeed, was sufficiently honest and prosperous to warrant not the slightest inquiry as to his *bona fides* at the hotel. In an hour he had

comfortably settled himself in his new and temporary home, taking a small bedroom and a small sitting-room on the second floor.

Immediately on taking the room he had written a note to his friend, Lord Dunton, who was practically the only man in the whole of London whom he considered he could trust.

Dunton called at about five o'clock, and the two men spent a couple of hours in a quiet corner chuckling over the vivid accounts in the various newspapers which told of the mysterious disappearance of the miner baronet from the *Gigantic*.

Every theory which could be advanced was exploited to the full—murder, suicide, lapse of memory, and accidents of every sort and description were set forth to account for Sir Paul Westerham's vanishment. There were interviews with the captain and purser of the *Gigantic*; interviews with a score of passengers, and, much to Westerham's amusement, numerous bearded portraits of himself in a miner's guise.

Then, over a whisky-and-soda, Westerham briefly outlined to Dunton the adventure with Melun in his cabin and of his voluntary disappearance.

“The only thing that troubles me,” Westerham concluded, “is whether you will stand by and see me through. It is practically impossible for me to achieve what I consider necessary unless I have at least one friend who will keep his mouth shut tight.”

“My dear fellow,” said Dunton, earnestly, “I assure you that if this is your whim I see no reason why I should not do my best not only to humour it but to help it. By Jove!” he added, “but it's a ripping good idea!”

For Lord Dunton, who was very light-haired, very blue-eyed, and very vapid, had in his composition a great tendency to what he called “a ripping good lark.”

And so the two men arranged the matter between them.

They dined together very quietly in a little restaurant in Soho, where nobody who knew Dunton was likely to meet them, and where the cooking, if unpretentious, was at least good.

Afterwards Westerham went back to Dunton's rooms in Ryder Street, where they talked far into the night. They sat together, indeed, until past two o'clock, so that even the polite porter at Walter's raised his eyebrows at Westerham with

some disapprobation when he finally returned to his hotel.

Next morning Dunton called early, and together the two men went up to the baronet's solicitors in Lincoln's Inn. There they had a long and not wholly placid interview with Mr. Victor Hantell, a somewhat elderly gentleman with pronounced views on the law and the propriety of abiding strictly by it.

In answer to all his objections, however, the baronet had one extremely awkward reply:

Did or did not the lawyer wish to remain entrusted with the care of his vast estates and fortune?

So after a couple of hours' talk matters were arranged to Westerham's way of thinking.

A hundred thousand pounds were to be paid into Lord Dunton's account in order that Westerham might be able to draw such sums of money as he required without any knowledge in any quarter of the fact that the baronet himself was dealing with the bank.

Mr. Hantell, moreover, was pledged to complete and absolute secrecy, so that with the exception of the lawyer and Dunton no one knew of Westerham's arrival in London.

The only tinge of humour that was introduced into the debate on Westerham's affairs was when, from time to time, a sleek and grave-mannered senior clerk entered quietly and placed on Mr. Hantell's desk a card that bore the name of some great London newspaper; for the newspapers had discovered quickly enough who Sir Paul's lawyers were. But they sought information in vain.

The few matters of moment that required to be settled having been dealt with, Westerham and Dunton went to lunch, and at lunch Westerham unfolded his further schemes to his friend.

They acted upon them without delay, and that afternoon Westerham secured more than luxurious rooms in Bruton Street in the name of James Robinson. It should be mentioned that at Walter's Hotel Westerham was known by the same simple title.

“In fact,” said Westerham to his friend, laughing, as they afterwards sat over a whisky-and-soda at Long's, “I seem to be setting out to lead a double life on a somewhat splendid scale. Where, of course, it will land me, and into what

difficulties it will plunge me, naturally I cannot tell, but it is really comforting to reflect that, no matter what caprice I may indulge in, I have at least sufficient money behind me to provide a complete excuse.

“You see,” he went on a trifle more gravely, “I rely so much upon my intuition that I feel perfectly justified in regarding Melun with the very gravest suspicion. If I do my country no other service, I may at least be able to unmask what I am certain is a gang of international criminals, and, at the worst, I shall have plenty of fun for my money.”

The main reason for his peculiar mode of disappearing Westerham kept to himself. He said nothing to Dunton of the girl with the steadfast eyes.

And there he was wrong, for the difficulties—the very serious and dangerous difficulties—into which he was afterwards plunged would have been far more easily surmounted had he taken his friend into his full confidence.

Melun, in obedience to his instructions, had called at Walter's Hotel on the second day following the arrival of the *Gigantic*, but having no use for him then, and desiring to see a little of London before he proceeded to investigate the mysteries of Melun's life, Westerham told the urbane, if somewhat sinister, captain that he did not require his presence. Westerham, indeed, informed Melun pretty curtly that he would send for him when he needed him.

The next five days were spent by Westerham very quietly. The best of tailors that Dunton could recommend were hard at work building innumerable suits for Mr. James Robinson, whose magnificent motor car was at least a guarantee of the soundness of his banking account.

When he had possessed himself of such clothes as he required in order to live as James Robinson, Esq., of Bruton Street, plain Mr. Robinson, of Walter's Hotel, informed the proprietor there that he was going into the country, and for two days Westerham lived in his new quarters.

Then he made excuses to the correct, soft-footed, and soft-spoken valet with whom Dunton had provided him, and went back to live at Walter's.

As a matter of fact he rather preferred the existence which he was able to follow when he wore cheaper clothes and walked a humbler path of life.

It was not without distinctly good reason that he set himself systematically to explore London—not the London commonly known to the average sight-seer, but the London of the obscure Londoner,—the London of distant suburbs, the London of mean streets, the London of the docks and slums and of wastes of

respectable spaces.

In the course of his peregrinations Westerham found himself one night at about the hour of ten wandering in a particularly ill-lit and remote corner of Hyde Park.

He was walking lightly over the wet grass with almost silent feet. Indeed, as he swung gently forward, his mind was far away on the soft prairie land that he seemed to have left years and years before. So occupied was he with his thoughts that he came near to walking into a couple engaged in a heated controversy beneath a tree.

When, however, he beheld them, he came to a sudden standstill, all his senses alive, his quick intuition telling him he was in the presence of some matter of moment.

He did not like the look of the thick-set greasy man who faced the girl. Westerham could read a man's character as easily from his back as he could from his face, and he had instantly a great distrust of the fat man's aspect.

The girl he could not see, but it was with some unaccountable notion of doing her a service, and not with the remotest idea of eavesdropping, that he stepped softly and silently to the further side of a tree trunk.

Then he heard the girl's voice saying in low, quiet, earnest accents:

“Why will you not let us rest? Why do you pursue us in this way? Surely it is inhuman to adopt these methods. You know what you want, and you have practically the power of obtaining it. Is it fair to drag me to a place like this and insult me in this way?”

The man mumbled something which Westerham could not catch.

Then he heard the girl utter a little cry.

“Look!” she exclaimed eagerly. “Look! I will make you an offer. Free us from this horrible nightmare, give me your word that you will not persecute us further, and I will give you these.”

Westerham heard the rustle of draperies, and was conscious that the girl reached out her hands. The man took something from her. His head was bent over the object, whatever it might be, long and earnestly.

Then he heard a thick voice, with a distinctly Semitic lisp, say, “They are beautiful, very beautiful. But what are they to us? You think they are worth a

hundred thousand pounds, eh? Suppose they are—what of that? Do you think a hundred thousand pounds can close our lips? Do you think a hundred thousand pounds can save your father? Bah!”

The man chuckled thickly.

“But they are very pretty baubles,” he went on, “and seeing you offer them to me, I see no reason why I should not keep them.”

“Ah!” cried the girl. “Then you will be silent?”

“Silent!” exclaimed the man, “Silent, for this much! Not us! Why, it's ridiculous.”

“Then give them back to me,” said the girl, quietly, with a quaver in her voice. “Give them back to me. Would you rob me?”

“I am not robbing you,” answered the man, sullenly. “I am taking what you offered me. I shall not give them back. It is impossible for you to make me. You would cry out, would you? What good would that do? Cry out, call a policeman—do what you like—what will it mean for you except exposure? What will it mean for your father except ruin? Give them back? Not I! I——”

But his speech ended suddenly at this point, for Westerham, always quick to action, took quick action now.

Moving round the trunk of the tree, he caught the man deftly by the collar of his coat, kicked his heels from under him, and brought him with a heavy crash to the ground.

The man lay still.

In a second Westerham was on his knees beside the prostrate figure. With swift fingers he searched the man's clothing and found a mass of jewels in the breast-pocket of the man's outer coat.

In a twinkling he had them out, and, rising to his feet, he held a heavy string of diamonds towards the girl.

“Madam,” he cried, “permit me to befriend you. I do not know who you are, but—”

His voice trailed away into a little gasp. For the frightened face that stared at him with starting eyes was the face of the girl in the picture.

In this strange manner did Westerham meet Lady Kathleen Carfax.

CHAPTER IV
THE RED-HAIRED WOMAN

Westerham stood still gazing stupidly at the girl and holding out the jewels towards her.

When he had recovered from his great surprise he moved a step nearer to her.

“Madam,” he said, “permit me to insist that you shall take these things back.”

Without a word the girl stretched out her hand and took the jewels from him. She hid them quickly in the folds of her cloak, and all the while the expression of amaze and fear on her face did not abate.

At last she pointed to the man lying beneath the tree.

“You have not killed him?” she asked, in a low voice.

For answer, Westerham turned again and knelt at the fat man's side. He inserted his hand skilfully over the unconscious man's heart, and then rose to his feet again.

“No,” he said, almost with a laugh. “Just knocked him out; that is all. He will be all right directly, and I fancy he will be glad to walk away without assistance. I imagine he is not a character who would care for much fuss and attention at this time of the night.”

Again Westerham drew near to the girl and peered gravely and keenly, but at the same time with all deference, into her face.

“I think,” he said quietly, “that it will be better for you to walk away while we are still undisturbed. If you will allow me, I will accompany you to the gates of the park. If I may be permitted to say so, it is hardly fitting that a lady in your position, carrying so much property about with her, should be strolling around here unattended.”

His tones were so kind and so cheering, and suggested such a delicate sense of humour at the whole situation, that Lady Kathleen smiled back at him.

“At least,” she said, and now she almost laughed herself, “you are a very

sturdy escort."

Westerham said not another word except, "This is the way," and then, guiding the girl through the trees, he reached the main path and helped Lady Kathleen to step over the low iron railing; thence he piloted her through a throng of quite incurious people to Hyde Park Corner.

She walked beside him without saying anything at all, apparently satisfied to be in his charge; and she made no demur when, on reaching the street, Westerham hailed a passing taxicab.

The man drew up at the kerb, and opening the door, Westerham assisted the girl to enter.

Then he leant forward into the darkness of the cab and said earnestly:

"I trust you will permit me to see you safely on your road. Apparently one never knows what may happen in London, and, believe me, I have no wish you should suffer a second adventure such as the one through which you have just passed."

"Thank you," said Lady Kathleen in a scarcely audible voice. "If you will see me as far as Trafalgar Square I shall be glad."

Giving the order "Trafalgar Square!" Westerham entered the cab.

They drove in complete silence along Piccadilly, down St. James's Street, and through Pall-Mall, and rapidly approached the Nelson monument. As the lights of the Grand Hotel came into view, Westerham leaned towards the girl and said very gravely:

"Do you think Trafalgar Square is near enough to your home? Had I not better tell the man to put you down at the corner of Downing Street?"

The girl gave a quick gasp, and then a stifled cry.

Westerham could see her eyes shining in the dimly-lit little vehicle.

"What do you know?" she cried.

"If you mean," answered Westerham, "what do I know of the fat man and the jewels and your mission in Hyde Park—nothing. I give you my word I know nothing at all. But I do know you are Lady Kathleen Carfax, and that your father is Prime Minister of England, and that, without any high-flown sentiments, it is at least my duty to see you reach home in safety."

Obedient to Westerham's instructions, the cabman had pulled up at the kerb beneath the monument.

“If you are sure,” said Westerham, “that you would rather alight here, of course I must defer to your wishes. But at least permit me to follow you at a respectful distance down Whitehall. I cannot tell why, but I feel uneasy about the last stages of your journey.”

Turning towards him, the girl held out her hand impulsively.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you. I cannot tell you how much I thank you. You are evidently a gentleman. I ask you as a gentleman not to mention to anyone in the world what you have seen or heard to-night. Believe me,” she added with a catch in her voice, “that to-night's doings concern the honour of the best, and, as I think, the greatest, man in this country. I mean my father.”

Westerham bowed.

“You may trust me absolutely,” he said. “I give you my word of honour that not one single word of this shall pass my lips. But may I say something else? May I be allowed to make an offer of help? I have money, I have many resources at my command. I would willingly pledge myself to serve you in any way. I should be only too proud, too glad, to help.”

“No, no!” cried the girl, sharply, and with a note almost of agony in her voice.

The distress in the girl's tones was so real that Westerham made no further effort to persuade her.

He opened the door of the taxicab and assisted Lady Kathleen to step out.

Then, having paid the cabman, he turned to her side again.

“If you will allow me,” he said, “I will at least see you across the road,” and he made this suggestion with some justification, for the late after-theatre traffic was now streaming westwards.

At the top of Whitehall he turned, and lifting his hat, stood waiting for Lady Kathleen to take leave of him. Once more she stretched out her hand impulsively, and he took it in his own.

“Thank you,” she said, in the same low, earnest voice, “thank you again and again.”

“So far as I am concerned,” said Westerham, “You may rely on my absolute

silence—if only," he added with a little smile, "because there is really no one in London with whom I'm on speaking terms."

Lady Kathleen nodded her head and searched his face with her serious eyes. Then she turned and walked quickly away.

As for Westerham, he ran quickly across to the further side of the roadway that he might watch Lady Kathleen's progress to Downing Street, for he was still fearful that she might meet with further molestation. He saw, however, that she reached the corner of the famous little *cul-de-sac* in safety, and, moreover, that she was saluted by an apparently surprised and startled policeman.

As Westerham walked back to Walter's Hotel he was in a most perplexed state of mind. Was it possible that he had stepped suddenly into the midst of some tragic mystery? Was it possible that it was real and actual sorrow and horror that had made the eyes of the girl in the picture—the eyes of the girl who had drawn him back to England—so wistful and so beckoning?

That a girl in Lady Kathleen Carfax's position might be suffering some profound grief, or might be the centre of some bit of distressing family history, might well be conceived. But what should take the daughter of the Prime Minister of England to Hyde Park after dark, and what extraordinary combination of inappropriate events could possibly cause her to seek the silence of such a man as he had left insensible?

Melun? It was possible that he was connected with the mystery. Westerham now remembered the man's cynical and confident smile when he had so unwisely boasted to him that he proposed to marry Lady Kathleen.

If Melun were really implicated in this business, then the methods of his villainy must be far more complicated than Westerham had anticipated. Only a very extraordinary conspiracy indeed could possibly have taken the Prime Minister's daughter into the park at such an hour.

From Westerham's own personal experience Melun was a very prince of blackmailers. Indeed, he had not troubled to deny the accusation when Westerham had made it. But even the nimble imagination of Westerham had not foreseen the possibility of blackmailing the Prime Minister, at whose back were all the forces of the law, including a discreet and silent and swiftly-acting Scotland Yard.

Westerham sat far into the night, turning all these things over in his mind; and the more he pondered over them the more convinced he became that Melun

must be in some way implicated, if indeed he were not the originator of the whole business.

It was, however, upon what matter Melun could possibly blackmail Lord Penshurst that caused Westerham the most perplexity.

Obviously it was not some minor question of personal honour which involved the necessity of maintaining some sordid and disgraceful secret, or obviously Lord Penshurst's daughter would not be risking her personal safety, and to a great extent her reputation, by making such a visit to the park.

No; evidently the matter involved some great State secret, concerning which the Prime Minister had sought the confidence and assistance of his daughter. Yet Westerham could not altogether understand how this might be, because he could not conceive any matter of State which it would not be better to trust to the Secret Service than to a young girl.

Whatever it might be, the mystery embraced Lady Kathleen; and with the single-hearted desire to assist her, Westerham determined, whether it pleased her or not, that he would range himself on her side.

To do this, however, it would be necessary to discover what the mystery was, and he was still far from the solution when he fell asleep.

On the morrow he rose early, and sat till lunch-time in the reading-room holding a paper before him, but in reality setting up and then demolishing a thousand and one theories to account for Lady Kathleen's plight.

He had sent for Melun, and while he waited for him he debated with himself as to whether or not he should tax the captain with complicity in the matter. Finally he decided against such a course, seeing that an affair of such a magnitude as that in which Lady Kathleen was entangled must of a certainty outweigh in value even the great financial inducements with which he had sought to attach Melun to himself.

Finally Sir Paul resolved to cease his exploration of London and begin his exploration of the devious paths of Captain Melun, with the turnings and twistings of which he was still unacquainted.

It was quite possible that for the better conduct of his campaign against the Prime Minister Melun might require a certain amount of ready money, and in return for that ready money the captain might be led into showing Westerham sufficient of his life to enable the baronet to grasp and understand the mystery of Lady Kathleen.

When at last Captain Melun came up after lunch Westerham greeted him coldly—so coldly that the captain raised his eyebrows.

“It seems,” he said, “that you are not in a very good humour. Is London beginning to bore you?”

Sir Paul looked at him sharply. “No,” he said, thoughtfully, “not in the least, though I confess that I have to some extent exhausted its ordinary attractions. Now I propose to plunge a little deeper into its secrets and its mysteries. In this direction I am, of course, looking to you to help me.”

The captain nodded. “Quite so,” he agreed, “but I hope you realise that up to the present I have had nothing but your promises of favours to come—and times are hard.”

For answer, the baronet took out his pocket-book and counted out ten one-hundred-pound notes upon the table.

“This,” he said, “should be a sufficient guarantee of my good faith for the present. Mark you, I have had some experience of your kind before, and I do not propose to pay down a lump sum for services which you may subsequently find it inconvenient to render.

“Now I will come to the point at once. I don't propose to spend a thousand pounds for nothing—and when I say nothing, I mean for the privilege of knowing you alone. I am desirous of making the acquaintance of your friends and colleagues at once.”

Melun laughed, showing his fine teeth. “I have not the slightest objection,” he said, “and, as a matter of fact, you have chosen a particularly convenient day, for it is on Wednesdays that the heads of my business meet to discuss a few personal matters.

“To-day I will not disguise from you the fact that the discussion will be yourself. I have made known some details of your offer—but not all of them, because my friends are not so gifted with imagination as myself, and I must confess that your proposal is regarded with considerable suspicion.”

The captain moved aside and looked thoughtfully out of the window for a few moments; then he turned round on his heel sharply.

“I will be perfectly frank with you,” he said with an amazingly good attempt at breezy honesty. “All of my friends are not particularly nice people, and if they had any idea that you were likely to play them false, not even the

consideration of tapping your vast wealth would restrain them from putting you out of the way."

"There is such a thing," said Westerham, lightly, "as killing the goose which lays the golden eggs."

"Yes," said the captain, gravely, "but even a supply of golden eggs may be retained at too dear a price.

"However," he went on with an air of gaiety, "this is rather too serious a matter to consider to-day. I simply intended to throw out a kindly hint."

"I'm sure you are very good," said Westerham with a fine sarcasm. "I had not looked for you to be so completely considerate."

"I am sorry," said the captain, "to ask you to a meal which goes ill with your present position, but, truth to tell, as the evening is always a busy time with us, we find it more convenient to discuss our plans over high tea."

He took out his watch and looked at it thoughtfully. "If we start now we shall be at Herne Hill at about five o'clock—that will suit us admirably." "Very well," said the baronet, picking up his hat, "I am ready to go when you are."

At the hall door Sir Paul stopped and looked out into the street, and was in the act of hailing a passing cab when the captain stayed his hand.

“Oh, no,” he said, with a quiet laugh; “we take no cabs to Herne Hill from here. You will find it far more convenient to take a tram when there is a possibility that your movements are being followed with attention.”

Without another word he led the way down the Embankment, and on to Westminster Bridge, where the two men took a car to the Elephant and Castle.

From this point the captain took an omnibus, and twenty minutes later they were in the pretty and innocent and homely suburb of Herne Hill.

Stepping ahead with quick and unhesitating strides, Melun led the way up a long avenue, and turned into the gate of a pleasant garden, in which there stood a substantial red-brick house.

On his ringing the bell the door was opened by a German man-servant, and a moment later they were shown into a prettily-furnished drawing-room of the suburban type.

From a seat by the fire there arose an elderly lady dressed in decorous black silk. This was the hostess, Mrs. Bagley. Her face was broad and flat, and she had a pair of little black eyes that danced and glinted. Her grey hair was neatly parted beneath a black lace cap. Altogether she looked a particularly respectable middle-aged British matron. Her aspect, indeed, was so completely precise and prim, that when he turned from shaking hands with her, Sir Paul was almost taken aback at the utter contrast which the other woman in the room presented to Mrs. Bagley.

The other woman must in her time have been out of the common beautiful. She was beautiful even now, though her eyes were very tired and her face when in repose was hard and set. Her hair would have at once aroused suspicion that it was dyed, for it was lustrous and brilliant as burnished copper. But the suspicion would have been without justification, in the same way as would have been the notion that the very pronounced colour on the woman's cheeks was artificial too.

“Madame Estelle,” said Melun, by way of introduction, and his heavy-lidded eyes glanced quickly from the red-haired woman to Sir Paul. He noted with considerable satisfaction that the baronet was evidently much struck by the beauty of Estelle.

The third occupant of the room was a tall young man of the most unpleasant appearance.

He had very light blue eyes, closely set together, and a large, red, hawk-like

nose. His hands were large and red, with immense knuckles and brutal, short, stubbed nails. Westerham took one of the huge red hands with a little shudder. It was cold and clammy and strong as a vice.

“If ever,” thought the baronet to himself, “I have touched the hand of a murderer, I have touched one now.”

The tall young man sat down by the window and carefully watched the baronet with his narrow, light blue eyes. The quick gaze of the elderly matron glinted and flashed all over Westerham's face. The captain looked at him sidelong. The red-haired woman alone gazed at him openly and frankly with eyes that were almost honestly blue.

There was a little pause while conversation hung fire. There was nothing for this curious collection of human beings to talk about except the baronet himself, and on this subject their tongues had to be silent as long as he remained.

Suddenly the door opened, and a portly man with a sallow, greasy face came quickly in. He stood still, with his hand on the panel of the door, and gave a short, quick gasp which caused the captain to look at him sharply.

And schooled as he was against the betrayal of any feeling, Westerham himself nearly uttered an exclamation, for the man who had entered the room so suddenly was the fat man out of whom he had knocked the sense the night before.

The fat man closed the door behind him gently, and came into the centre of the room.

“Sir Paul,” said Captain Melun, “allow me to present Mr. Bagley. Mr. Bagley is the manager of a branch of a great bank, and acts as our financier.”

Mr. Bagley's sallow and greasy countenance broke into a hideously affable smile. Westerham found himself shaking hands with the man who held Lady Kathleen's secret.

The pause which followed this introduction became so embarrassing that Mrs. Bagley suggested that they should go in to tea; and in a cheerful dining-room Westerham found himself looking curiously at the collection of tea and coffee pots, whisky decanters, bacon and eggs, and muffins and cakes, which were spread promiscuously on the clean white tablecloth.

The conversation turned on many things, but for the most part upon the weather. When the little party had eaten and drunk their fill the captain rapped

sharply on the table.

There was complete silence, in which Melun rose, and having first closed the window he afterwards opened the door to satisfy himself that no one listened without.

He then returned to his seat at the table and spoke quickly and in a low voice.

“I have told you,” he said rapidly, “how I met Sir Paul.”

The baronet could not resist the luxury of a sardonic little smile.

Melun saw it and winced, but went boldly on with his subject.

“It is quite excusable,” he said, “for the richest man on the earth to desire to indulge his whims, and if we can assist Sir Paul to humour his, to his own advantage and ours, then so much the better for us all. The terms which Sir Paul has offered are generous to a degree, while the risks we run are slight. Sir Paul has not pressed us in any way. He desired in return for the money he was about to hand over to us to make the acquaintance—of my friends. He has now met them, and I trust that he is at least satisfied.”

Westerham bowed.

“For the present, therefore,” the captain continued, “there remains nothing to be said and nothing to be done. We, of course, have several things to discuss, and I am sure that Sir Paul will not take it amiss if we ask him to excuse us. It is quite impossible for him to take part in our counsels. There is no immediate hurry, but still we must talk matters over before it is much later.”

Westerham rose to his feet. Truth to tell, he desired to shake off the dust of Herne Hill, not so much to enable Captain Melun's extraordinary friends to discuss their plans, but because he was sufficiently bored to wish to leave them.

To Westerham's surprise, however, Mme. Estelle rose too.

“My carriage is, I think, waiting for me,” she said in an almost gentle voice, “and if Sir Paul will allow me I will drive him back.”

Melun gave both the red-haired woman and the baronet a distinctly ugly look. He was, indeed, about to raise some objection when Mme. Estelle spoke again.

“I will see you to-morrow,” she said, turning quickly towards him.

Melun bit his lips, but said nothing, though he followed her and the baronet out of the room and saw them to the carriage, which was a well-appointed, quiet little brougham drawn by a well-bred bay.

Westerham was somewhat puzzled by all that had taken place, but he had, at any rate, quickly divined that Mme. Estelle stood in no particular fear of Melun, and both for reasons of vanity and policy he determined to show her that he himself could, as a matter of fact, exercise some authority over the evil-looking captain.

Westerham thrust his head out of the carriage as it was driving away and said sharply to Melun, “I shall expect you to-morrow at noon.”

For quite a while they drove north in silence. It was not, indeed, until they were passing through Regent Street that Mme. Estelle turned to Westerham and spoke the first word.

“Forgive my being so blunt,” she said, “but I think you are playing an exceedingly dangerous game.”

“What it is possible for a woman to do is possible for me to do,” said Westerham.

The woman sighed. “Ah, yes, possible,” she said, “and yet with you and with me things are quite different. You have nothing to gain and everything to lose—I have nothing to lose at all.”

They drove on again in silence—a long silence, during which Westerham turned many things over in his mind, and the conclusion he came to was that it would be well to have this woman for his friend.

They were driving past the graveyard of the St. John's Wood Chapel when he turned to her almost sharply and said, “Are you sure that I have nothing to gain?”

Mme. Estelle turned and looked at him quickly, and her eyes were startled; the brilliant colour had left her face.

“What do you mean?” she cried. “You are Sir Paul, aren't you?”

“Madam,” said Westerham, almost gently, “I'm sorry if I startled you. Those who run great risks always imagine that the greatest object of every other person is to accomplish their downfall. I assure you that no such motive prompted me in making the bargain I have made with Melun.”

“Then,” said the woman, “you can have no aim unless it be mere idle curiosity?”

Westerham said nothing for the moment, but five minutes later, as though he were resuming a conversation which had been abruptly broken off, he said, “I am not so sure.”

The carriage had now passed out of the Finchley Road into a quiet *cul-de-sac*, and had drawn up before a high wooden door let into a garden wall.

Westerham assisted Mme. Estelle to alight. She asked him to ring the bell, which he did, and a second later the garden door opened by some unseen agency.

When she had stepped into the garden, Mme. Estelle beckoned to Westerham to follow her, and he stepped into the garden and stood beside her.

She closed the door to, glanced over her shoulder to see that she was not observed, and then caught Westerham by the coat.

“Sir Paul,” she cried in a low voice, “you are a young man. Do not destroy your life for a piece of folly. Cut yourself adrift from this while there is still time.”

Westerham took her hand and looked at her kindly. “Thank you,” he said; “thank you very much. But I am not only moved by folly to go on with this business. Some day I may explain to you. I do not know that I particularly care for going on, but there is no drawing back now.”

CHAPTER V
THE CRIME CLUB

Westerham made his way back to Walter's in a slightly happier frame of mind. He liked to see his difficulties plain before him rather than to be hemmed about with mysteries that he could not understand. And difficulty seemed to be piling itself upon difficulty.

Much, of course, remained to be explained. He was not sure of the different parts which the weirdly associated people whom he had met that afternoon played in Melun's game. He could, however, make a guess, and his shrewd guess was not so wide of the mark.

Bagley, as he had learned from Melun, was the smug manager of a branch of a considerable banking firm. His wife, of course, explained herself. The young man Crow, with the large, cruel, red hands, was probably Melun's principal striking force in times of trouble. The captain himself, he imagined, furnished the brains, while Bagley supplied the finance.

But what of Mme. Estelle? That she had her part allotted to her in the strange drama unfolding itself Westerham could not doubt. But what part?

Some parts that he could conceive were almost too unpleasant to think of. Putting the thing at its best, he could not imagine that Mme. Estelle acted as less than a lure.

But what tie bound her to Melun? What tie kept her within the confines of this strange collection of human beings?

For a moment Westerham's heart grew light within him. It was possible that the tie was connected with Captain Melun. Was she his wife? If he could but establish that, then the captain's boast that he would marry Lady Kathleen was vain indeed.

Westerham decided to inquire.

He was most eager to discover the ways in which Melun and his confederates worked. If he had, indeed, been free to follow his course of curiosity unfettered he would have gone steadily forward until he had discovered the uttermost of their wrong-doing. He was, however, from the outset balked by

the problem presented by Lady Kathleen, and he realised at once that it was upon the solution of this that he must set his whole mind.

Sir Paul was, indeed, confronted by a very Gordian knot of problems. He laughed a little as he made the simile to himself, until he reflected that he was not an Alexander armed with a sword who could disperse the problems at one blow. His, indeed, would be the laborious task of unravelling them one by one; nor could he see any better way than by beginning at the very beginning, which, so far as he was concerned, meant a full knowledge of Melun's intimates and surroundings.

He was quick to see that, with all the possibilities offered by a great organisation of crime, Melun must of necessity have a certain number of hardier spirits than those represented by Bagley, Mme. Estelle, or even Crow to do his rough-and-ready work. Westerham resolved to know these rough-and-readier spirits at once.

That night he did nothing except to wander down to Downing Street and stand for a little while thinking over matters at the corner of Whitehall. He stood there, indeed, for an unwise length of time, so that at last he drew upon himself the attention of the constable stationed on point duty. Perceiving this Westerham turned and walked back to his hotel, where he did his best to amuse himself by aimlessly meandering through the pages of various newspapers.

Knowing, too, that Lady Kathleen stood sufficiently in the world's eye to merit the attention of the Press, Westerham instinctively turned towards those columns which deal with the doings of Society. Nor was his search unrewarded, for before long he came across a paragraph which set forth that the Prime Minister and his daughter, the Lady Kathleen Carfax, would in two days' time give a great reception at Lord Penshurst's official residence in Downing Street.

“Now,” said Westerham to himself, “I shall see to what extent Melun speaks the truth. For, unless he is a liar, I will go to that reception myself.”

Therefore he sat down and wrote a note to Melun requesting him to call after lunch the next day.

In due course Melun came, and Westerham proceeded to speak to him on the lines he had mapped out for himself the day before. Much, indeed, to the captain's discomfort, he advanced his theory that Melun had confederates of an entirely different type from the Bagleys and Mme. Estelle.

“In fact,” said the baronet, fixing his unpleasantly cold sea-green gaze on

Melun's shifting eyes, “it is practically useless for you to dispute my arguments, and if you have any hope of my fulfilling my part of the bargain you had better introduce me to them without delay.”

Melun laughed. It was a habit of his to laugh when embarrassed.

“Really,” he said with a slightly bantering air, “you are almost too swift for me. Believe me, you are dangerously quick. It is most unwise for a man to plunge suddenly into an acquaintance with the various kinds of undesirable people which it is my misfortune to know.

“They are rather touchy about their privacy, and they are apt actively to resent intrusion. I should leave them alone. Personally, I dislike fuss of every description, but especially the kind of fuss which hurts physically.”

Then he caught a slight sneer on Westerham's mouth and reddened a little. He reddened still more when the baronet said shortly, “I thought so.”

Melun's composure, however, returned to him almost instantly. “Come, come,” he said, “it is foolish to be nasty to your friends. We all have our little failings. I have mine. Yours, it seems, is rashness; mine may be timidity. It is purely a question of constitution.”

“Constitution,” said Westerham, grimly, “is largely a question of degrees of force. On this occasion I think that force will win. Please understand me distinctly that, however rash you may think me, however foolish my haste may appear, I am determined to see the rest of your organisation without further delay.”

Melun shrugged his shoulders.

“So be it,” he said; “we shall want a couple of caps, and you will have to turn your collar up. Not even the comparatively humble bowler is particularly acceptable in Limehouse.”

“Limehouse!” exclaimed Westerham. And he smiled a pleased little smile to himself. Events were developing themselves in a sufficiently melodramatic way to be entertaining. “Limehouse,” he said again. “I was there yesterday.”

Melun drew in his breath sharply and bared his teeth in an unpleasant snarl.

“Have you been spying?” he asked coarsely.

“I don't spy,” said Westerham, coldly.

And that was sufficient.

The two men ate a rather gloomy dinner in the small hotel. Conversation lagged, for as yet they had not much in common. Each of them, however, from a different point of view, was soon to have far too much in common with the other.

Towards eight o'clock Melun rose and suggested that they should be going. Westerham provided him with a cap, and having pulled their coat collars about their ears, they climbed on board one of the Blackwall motor omnibuses.

On this they travelled as far as Leman Street, where Melun descended from the omnibus roof. Westerham followed at his heels.

They then took a tram, and for what seemed to Westerham an interminable time they travelled slowly eastward along the Commercial Road. Presently a great white tower threw into greater blackness the surrounding black of the murky sky. Westerham, as the result of his recent experiences in the East End, knew the tower to be that of Limehouse church.

Here they again alighted, and Melun walked quickly down that curious street which is known as Limehouse Cut.

Gas lamps standing at long intervals threw a very feeble and flickering light upon the small, low-built shops which traverse its western side. The light, however, was sufficient to show the curious hieroglyphics which proclaimed the tenants of those shops to be Chinese.

At the bottom of Limehouse Cut Melun turned sharp to the right, and in a little space set back from the road Westerham found himself surveying yet another of the queer little hieroglyphic-ridden shops. But there was a difference, for whereas the others were low built, this was some four storeys high. The door, too, instead of being glass-panelled, was of solid wood, and apparently of great strength.

On this Melun knocked sharply with his knuckles nine times, the first three raps being slow, the second three raps being slow, and the last three raps being quick and decisive.

Almost immediately the door swung noiselessly inwards, while from behind its corner appeared the searching, slumberous eyes of a great nigger.

The nigger was about to let Melun pass when he saw Westerham, and with a mighty arm barred the way.

“All right, all right,” said Melun, quickly. “You don't suppose that I am fool enough to bring a man here whom I cannot trust. Let him in at once.”

The negro shuffled back and allowed Westerham to squeeze himself into the narrow passage.

It was intensely dark, so the negro lifted the lantern, the slide of which had been placed hard against the wall, and held it on a level with Sir Paul's head, looking at him long and narrowly.

Then he gave a little coughing groan and shambled down the passage.

At the end of the passage the huge negro opened a second door, which swung back upon its hinges as easily and as swiftly as the first. Westerham passed into the room, and with a little thump of his heart realised, with a knowledge born of long experience of the Pacific coast, that he was in an opium den of quite unusual dimensions.

The long room ran parallel with the front of the house, but must have been some thirty feet longer than the front of the house itself. On either side and at both ends there were tiers of bunks. From three or four of them came a little red glow where some besotted fool still sucked at his pipe.

No pause, however, was made here. The negro crossed the room and opened a third door, which admitted them into a small passage. At the end of this a fourth door was opened, and Melun and Westerham stepped suddenly into a blaze of light.

Looking quickly about him, Westerham judged himself to be in a working-man's club. Half a dozen men were playing pool at a dilapidated table, while round about were little groups of men playing dominoes or cards. Framed notices set forth various rules, while at one end of the room stretched a bar.

The negro, still with the light in his hand, stood aside watching Melun uneasily. Westerham was quick to observe that he had his hand on his hip-pocket. And his smile was slightly amused and slightly anxious as one of the players looked up and gave a little cry, his cue falling from his hand and his hand going quickly to his hip also.

But Melun was first, and the revolver which he had whipped out covered the man's breast.

The man's cry aroused the instant attention of the others, and for a few moments there was what can only be described as a sort of hushed hubbub.

“All right,” said Melun in a rougher voice than Westerham had yet heard him use. “All right. Don't get scared. Don't worry. It is a new chum!”

Westerham, standing very straight, stood smiling at the astonished men before him.

The negro had set his lantern down, and was passively leaning with his back against the door.

A little man with a bullet-head and a red face got up from his seat at the end of the room and came forward with short, quick, jerky steps.

“Is this going to be a meeting?” he asked.

Melun nodded. “A meeting,” he said, “but not an oath. That I already have administered in part. The new chum is silent.”

“It is most irregular,” grumbled the man with the bullet-head.

“Never you mind,” said Melun in a hectoring voice, “it is my affair, and not yours.”

“It is our business that you bring him here,” mumbled several of the men.

“Don't you bother about things which do not concern you,” rapped out Melun, “until I have had my say. I have said this is to be a meeting, and I am waiting to give my explanation.”

At this several men turned and dragged forward a long trestle table, while others quickly set chairs about it; Melun seated himself at its head, beckoning to Westerham to seat himself at his right hand.

Still smiling, Westerham looked with his oddly disconcerting gaze along the row of faces before him. Melun, he reflected, must have searched London to have found such an exhibition of evil passions.

The men did not look at him; they looked at Melun, warily and anxiously.

“In times past,” said Melun, shortly, “you have found it just as well to trust to me. The shares of any spoils we have won have always been fairly adjusted.”

For the most part the men nodded assent.

“I have told you,” Melun continued, “that at the present time I have on hand a bigger deal than any I have yet attempted. If it comes off it will mean a cool quarter of a million.”

Westerham drew in his breath quietly; he was learning the facts indeed. The magnitude of what Melun must have at stake almost staggered him. He knew well enough that if Melun spoke to these men of a quarter of a million, the sum

at which he was really aiming must be far greater.

"All right. Don't get scared. It is a new chum!"
"All right. Don't get scared. It is a new chum!"

"Now, most of you," Melun went on, "know that to pull off a thing of this sort capital is required. Our capital has run low. I have, however, been fortunate in securing the interest of this gentleman, who is more than able to furnish us with all the money I need to settle the deal.

"I may tell you that he is not new to our kind of work, only hitherto he has gone on his own."

The men round the table nodded approval, and Westerham, while he marvelled at Melun's audacity, flushed a trifle angrily. It was unpleasant to be tarred with the same brush as these fellows. But he saw that he must sit it through.

"Now, the very fact that this gentleman has taken part in this sort of business before," Melun went on boldly, "made him suspicious of our good faith, and he asked for an actual demonstration that we were a working concern, and he would not be satisfied until I had proved it to him. I should, of course, have asked your permission to bring him here first, but the matter is most urgent. The fate of the whole thing may have to be settled to-morrow night."

He paused, and Westerham's blood began to run quickly through his veins.

To-morrow night! To-morrow night the Prime Minister and Lady Kathleen gave their great reception.

To-morrow night! Sir Paul wondered what connection there might be between Downing Street and Limehouse. Melun, however, continued to speak in the same suave tones.

"To-morrow, as I say," he declared, "may settle the whole affair. Before to-morrow night I have to show this gentleman—whose name, I may inform you, is James Robinson—that we are really in earnest.

"Mr. Robinson," he cried, turning towards Westerham, "are you satisfied?"

"I am," said Westerham, in a very quiet voice, allowing himself just enough of American drawl to catch some of the quick ears of his listeners.

“From the States?” asked the man who sat next to him.

Westerham nodded.

Melun gave Westerham's interrogator a look as though he resented any attempt at conversation; and to prevent any further questioning he rose abruptly from the table.

The rest of the men remained seated except the bullet-headed man, who, as Melun vacated his chair, slipped into his place. They were apparently about to discuss other matters, and were following the ordinary course of procedure.

Seeing Melun rise, the negro, who all this time had been leaning against the door, lifted up his lantern again and showed them out.

They passed through the opium den, and so into the little passage, when, as the negro was fumbling at the door, Westerham heard a long, piercing scream.

It came again louder and shriller than before. There was a dreadful note of fear in it. It was the scream of a terrified girl.

CHAPTER VI
DOWNING STREET

Westerham whipped round on his heel towards Melun.

“What is that?” he asked sharply.

Melun shrugged his shoulders.

From Melun Westerham turned to the negro, whose teeth were bared in a wide grin.

“What is that?” Westerham demanded of him.

But the negro took his cue from Melun and merely shrugged his shoulders.

Then there came the scream again, louder and more terror-stricken than before. Westerham did not hesitate.

Before the negro had time to utter any protest he had snatched the lantern from his hand and was racing up the stairs.

Again came the scream, and Westerham blundered up the second flight, the negro and Melun hard upon his heels.

On the second landing there was no longer any doubt as to where the cries came from. Westerham dashed at the door, only to find it locked. In a second he had his shoulder against the crazy panel, and the door went in with a crash, disclosing a frowsy little sitting-room somewhat in disorder. All about was spread signs of a meal. Two girls—Westerham judged them to be young East End Jewesses—were huddled in a corner, while a man, whom Westerham at once recognised as a sailor, stood swaying drunkenly over them.

He had his hand at the man's collar in a moment, and swung him heavily backwards.

The negro, his face quivering with passion, blocked the doorway, knife in hand.

It was Westerham's turn to use firearms now, and he covered the man with as certain and as deadly an aim as that which had extorted the confession of Captain Melun on the *Gigantic*.

The girls ceased to scream, but clung together, crying and looking at Westerham in an appealing way with eyes blurred with tears.

Melun thrust the negro aside and brushed into the room.

“You fool!” he said to Westerham, shortly, “this is enough to bring the whole crowd about your ears.”

Westerham laughed. He had known what in Western parlance is called a “rough house” before, and was prepared for all emergencies. As usual, too, when he found himself in an emergency, he was cool and smiling to the point of insolence.

“You forget,” he said to Melun, “that there is a window in this room, and beyond the window is the street. You forget, too, that one good man is worth all that crowd you seem so much afraid of. I am going to take these girls away.”

The drunken sailor, who had by this time half-recovered his senses, sat on the floor, blinking at Westerham and cursing steadily.

Melun took one quick look at Westerham's unpleasantly bright and steady gaze, and again shrugged his shoulders. But this time the shrug indicated assent.

“Very well,” he said.

Westerham again turned to the negro. “Drop that knife,” he ordered.

“Not me!” said the negro.

“Drop it!” said Westerham again.

And the man dropped it.

He turned to the shivering girls. “Come along,” he said, “let's get out of this while there is time.”

Rising unsteadily to their feet, and still clinging together, the girls moved towards the door.

“Follow me down closely,” said Westerham, and then he thrust the nozzle of his six-shooter against the negro's breast.

“Right about,” he said, “and down the stairs before me.”

Melun he ignored altogether, and the captain brought up the rear. In this wise they went down the stairs.

The hubbub, however, had attracted the attention of the men below, and two

or three of them were now gathered together in the darkness of the passage, swearing angrily.

Westerham, who had taken the lantern from the negro, swung it aloft.

“Permit me to show you a light,” he cried.

They blinked as the lantern dazzled their eyes, but they did not blink so much that they failed to catch the glint of the weapon Westerham carried.

“You dog, Melun!” cried one of them, “is this your friend that is to help us all? If he goes on at this rate he will land us all in gaol.”

Melun, however, by this time saw who was the better man, and felt that at the present pinch he was wise to stand by Westerham.

So he cursed the men roundly and ordered them back, asking them, with pleasant oaths, how long it was since they had ceased to have faith in him.

To this altercation Westerham paid no heed. He contented himself that at his direction the negro opened the door. The girls he told to wait for him outside.

On the threshold he turned about and faced the angry men.

“The sooner you people come to recognise,” he said, “that while I am here I shall do things in my own way so much the better for you. I am not in the habit of being interfered with by scum such as yourselves.”

He purposely gave the negro a push, which sent him rolling back into the passage; then he went out and drew the door after him with a slam.

Once in the street, Melun broke into a torrent of rebuke. Westerham was of no mind to listen to him and cut him short. Turning to the girls, he said:

“Walk whichever way you have to go, and I will follow and see that you are not molested.”

The girls would have hung round him to thank him, but he ordered them to walk on quickly, and then taking Melun's arm in the grip of his hand, he followed them till they had gained the main road.

There he did not even take the trouble to nod the girls good-bye, but bundled Melun into a tram running westward.

They were alone on the top of the car, and Melun endeavoured to speak again, but Westerham told him roughly to be silent.

He said no word, indeed, until they were back in the hotel. The captain was

beyond protesting; he appeared dazed and cowed by the swiftness with which Westerham had wrested his authority from him and practically fought his way out of Limehouse.

In the little sitting-room, Westerham with great precision poured out a couple of whisky-and-sodas and handed Melun a cigar.

“You will not understand me the better by sulking or skulking,” he said. “I would suggest to you that even if you are not one you had better try to be a man.”

Melun winced, and was about to reply angrily, when Westerham again cut him short.

“Listen to me,” he said sharply. “I realise that while I am associated with you for my own ends I shall have to close my eyes to a great many matters not exactly permitted by the law of this country. That contingency, however, I was from the first prepared to face. There are, however, certain things which you had better at once understand I do not permit.”

“You do not permit!” Melun almost yelled.

“That I do not permit,” repeated Westerham, coldly. “And one of them is such a scene as I have witnessed to-night.”

His sea-green eyes were now blazing, and his mouth was shut like a trap.

“I have been introduced as your friend,” he continued, “and therefore I propose to visit Limehouse whensoever I choose.”

“But you cannot,” cried Melun.

“Oh, yes, my dear man, but I can, and, what is more, I mean to. You had better leave that to me. I already see that I am more qualified to deal with those ruffians down yonder than you are. I am not the least alarmed by their blustering, however much you may be.

“And so,” he went on, “I would have you understand clearly and without any mistake that I will have no women fetched into that den of iniquity on any pretext whatsoever. You understand me?”

Melun nodded feebly. He was completely crushed and beaten.

“Henceforward, too,” Westerham continued, “I am going to adopt a different attitude towards you. Once, I confess, I had a few uneasy feelings that, with what you are pleased to call your ‘endless resources,’ you might do me

some injury. A good many people disappear in London, and I fancied for a little while I might become one of the lost ones, but, heavens! it is amazing to think that I should ever have felt the least disquiet. You and your precious friends are cowards, every one of you.

“However, we will leave that subject now and proceed to another which is of more importance and interest to me.”

Draining his whisky-and-soda, Westerham leaned back in his chair and smoked thoughtfully for a few minutes, keeping his gaze on the pale and cowering Melun.

Then he reached out for the newspaper, in which during the afternoon he had read that the Prime Minister was to give a reception on the morrow. Folding it carefully so as to mark the place, Westerham laid the paper down beside Melun and tapped the all-important paragraph with a quick, incisive finger.

“I would recall to your mind,” he said to the captain, “that I explained to you on the *Gigantic* that my sole object in returning to London was to make the acquaintance of the girl in the picture—the girl you informed me was the Lady Kathleen Carfax. Now I find you, even on this short acquaintance, such a braggart that I am inclined to doubt everything you say. So I am going to test your boast that you know Lady Kathleen, and that you have the *entrée* to Lord Penshurst's house. Did you lie to me on that matter or did you not?”

“I did not,” said Melun, with some signs of returning spirit.

In his excitement he would indeed have leapt from his chair, but Westerham gave him a little push in the chest which sat him down again.

“Not so fast,” he said, “you are here to listen to what I have to say.

“You tell me,” he continued, after a slight pause, “that what you said was true. In that case I demand as part of our bargain that you should take me to Lord Penshurst's to-morrow night.”

Melun became livid. “I will never do it,” he cried.

“You will not?” inquired Westerham with a little laugh. “Surely it was part of our agreement that you should introduce me to all your friends. If you fail to keep that agreement, then I shall fail to keep mine; and I fancy that some of the authorities will be extremely interested in what I shall be able to tell them.”

Melun looked helplessly and almost pleadingly at Westerham. “But what you ask now,” he complained, “is quite impossible.”

“Why?”

Melun mumbled, and Westerham's quick mind instinctively found the right reason for the captain's distress. He debated whether he should mention the Hyde Park affair of the night before. Had Bagley told him? He was doubtful. And if Bagley had not told then the revelation might be awkward. He had no wish to drive Melun so hard that he would turn and become obstinately intractable.

Moreover, if he said anything then he would certainly never discover from Melun what hold he had upon Lady Kathleen and her father. It would be better, he reflected, to smooth matters over and let events take their own course. In following his method, he felt assured the opportunity of fathoming the mystery must inevitably come to him.

So when he spoke next to Melun it was a little less curtly. “You will hardly deny,” he said, “that your presence in Lord Penshurst's house must be unwelcome. Do you hesitate to take me there because you think that in so doing I might possibly be tarred with the same brush as yourself?”

“What do you mean?” asked Melun, savagely, and there crept into his eyes an embarrassed, even a hunted look.

“I meant nothing at all except that, in spite of everything, you must make it convenient to have me included among the guests.”

Melun appeared to think deeply for a few moments and then nodded acquiescence. “Very well,” he said grumpily, and closed the matter for that night.

On the following evening Melun arrived at the Walter's Hotel sleek and smiling. His face was as smooth as his shirt-front, and his manner as pleasant as the cut of his coat.

Westerham met him in the hall and nodded to him with an almost friendly smile. Presently they drove down to Downing Street.

When Lady Kathleen had entered into possession of No. 10 as hostess she had turned the rather dowdy old house upside down, and decorators and upholsterers had done all they could to make the old-fashioned building pleasant and graceful.

It was now about half-past ten, and the crush was very great. The Prime Minister, handsome and white-bearded, stood apart with Lady Kathleen to receive the guests.

As Melun pressed forward his gaze darted in all directions as though in the

endeavour to find the eyes of friends or at least acquaintances. And many men nodded to him and many women smiled on him.

Though he had been away from England so long, all Westerham's knowledge of great social events came back to him, and he followed Melun easily and unembarrassed by the scores of eyes which looked at him with questioning and admiration.

For his immense height alone attracted attention, while wherever his strange, bright, sea-green glance fell there was left behind a little recollection which would never be quite effaced.

As he skilfully edged his way nearer to the Prime Minister, Westerham suffered a little pang of remorse. It occurred to him that he was taking Lady Kathleen at a somewhat unfair advantage. He had even half a mind to draw back, fearing lest his unlooked-for appearance might cause her an embarrassment which might become obvious to all beholders, but he reflected that a girl who had displayed such courage and such coolness was more than likely to be equal to the occasion. None the less, he endeavoured, so far as he could, to soften the shock of their meeting, and to this end he looked over the heads and shoulders of the tightly-packed people before him, seeking Lady Kathleen's eyes.

Suddenly her wandering glance met his fixed one, and for a second Westerham's heart softened within him as he saw her pupils momentarily shrink and then dilate as though with terror. But the contraction and dilation of her pupils were so swift that no one but an expectant observer would have noted the change. Her face paled a little and then flushed, and Westerham, from the long-continued habit of studying people's emotions, realised with distress that it was the flush of fear rather than the flush of confusion.

By this time Melun had won his way to the Prime Minister's hand, and Westerham followed him closely. Lord Penshurst lifted his shrewd old eyes to Westerham's face with a long, searching gaze. And over his face there swept a sudden change of expression. As Melun had whispered his name the old man's face had taken a hard and almost dogged look, but instantly it softened, and he looked at Westerham long with something akin to wondering pity in his eyes.

Westerham smiled back frankly, laughing a little to himself at the change in the Prime Minister's expression. He was quick to see that Lord Penshurst had evidently regarded him at first as an enemy, as a man to be avoided, as a man introduced by Melun for some sinister motive. Then suddenly, from the very honesty and openness of Westerham's face, the Premier had changed about to the

opinion that he was Melun's dupe—that he was a new pigeon fit for the captain's plucking. For Westerham by this time had not a shadow of a doubt that Lord Penshurst was only too intimately acquainted with the extent of Melun's evil doings.

With Lady Kathleen, however, things were otherwise. Westerham had noted that to the other man she had merely bowed, but to him she held out her hand, and for a second grasped his warmly.

The all-observant Prime Minister glanced sidewise at his daughter, and his mobile face changed again in its expression to one of astonishment. Westerham saw the dry old lips tighten in the white beard, and was somewhat taken aback. He guessed, and guessed rightly enough, that Lady Kathleen had not told him of her effort to save her father's honour.

So great was the crush that Westerham had no time to say any word to Lady Kathleen—at least not then. But as he moved away he was conscious that the dark, shining eyes followed him with a little look of appeal.

He was so certain of this that he turned his head about and found his instinct true; so he nodded back with a little friendly smile as though he had known her for many years. It was a smile which seemed to say, “Very well, I will see you by-and-by.”

Melun intercepted the smile and scowled, and almost immediately moved back in a further endeavour to gain Lady Kathleen's side.

Westerham wandered aimlessly to a doorway, and there, following the immemorial privilege of bored young men at a dance or a crush, leant against the lintel and surveyed the scene before him with slightly tolerant amusement.

In half an hour or so the people had thinned a little; all the guests had made their bows, and some of them had even taken their departure.

It was then that Westerham noticed Lady Kathleen and the Prime Minister standing a little apart conversing earnestly in whispers, and at the same time doing their best not to attract attention.

From the corner of his eye Westerham saw Lady Kathleen flush once or twice and was conscious that the Prime Minister stabbed him two or three times with his shrewd old eyes.

Then Melun sauntered up to them, and succeeded in detaching Lady Kathleen from her father. They moved away together, and Westerham wondered

what ill-begotten scheme Melun was furthering now. For another ten minutes, therefore, he hung idly in the doorway till he saw Melun come back alone and take the Prime Minister on one side. They were conversing rapidly, and Westerham could plainly see that Lord Penshurst was by no means pleased. There was, indeed, on his face an expression of cold rage such as Westerham had never seen on any man's face before. Melun, too, appeared a trifle disconcerted, and this was a joy to Westerham, for he was right in supposing that Melun had hoped to see fear rather than anger in Lord Penshurst's face.

Westerham was, however, not so interested in this conversation as he was in the finding of Lady Kathleen, so he moved across the room and through the doorway in search of the Premier's daughter.

The room beyond was crowded, and Westerham passed on to a third room in which there were fewer people. Still he could discern no signs of Lady Kathleen.

But just ahead of him he saw the dark entrance to what apparently was a landing. He moved towards this, and found himself suddenly face to face with her. She was sitting almost huddled up in a little chair at the foot of the staircase.

As she saw him approach she lifted up both her hands as though to thrust him away, and her face from deadly white flushed to a bright crimson.

“No, no!” she cried in a low tone, “let matters rest as they are. I shook hands with you just now, but I did not know that you had come—with that man.”

“You think he is my friend?” asked Westerham, gently.

“How can I doubt it?” asked Lady Kathleen.

“Well,” said Westerham, with a quiet little laugh, “I admit that he appears to be, but that is to suit my purpose and to gain my own ends.”

“I thought so,” she murmured.

“Yes, yes,” replied Westerham, quickly, “but don't misunderstand me—my ends may be selfish, but they are not criminal.”

Lady Kathleen started violently.

Westerham glanced about him to see that they were unobserved; he found that they were quite alone.

“I must speak quickly,” he said, “as I know it is impossible for you to stay here long, but please hear me out.

“That night,” he nodded in the direction of the Park, “I knew nothing. I do not know very much now, except that I have discovered a connecting link between Bagley and Melun. Why they persecute you and your father I do not know; I wish I did, for I would then, perhaps, be able to help you. These men are knaves and cowards, and they are also fools. I do not want to boast, but one good man could easily defeat them. Why not tell me what troubles you?”

Lady Kathleen looked at him appealingly and doubtfully, then she rose to her feet.

“I must not. I do not know who you are, or even what your name is, and although you seem to be Melun's friend, I feel that I might trust you; but, oh! if you were persecuted as we are persecuted you would trust no man.”

Westerham was about to persuade her further, but at this moment her father came quickly through the doorway.

“Kathleen!” he cried.

The girl started up and caught her father's arm. The old man turned quickly towards Westerham; his face was ablaze with passion.

“As for you, sir,” he cried in a low voice, “leave my house, leave my house at once.”

Westerham threw out a deprecating hand.

“If you will only hear me, Lord Penshurst.”

“I have told that scoundrel Melun that I will have no further dealing with him or any of his crew.”

“But I—” urged Westerham.

“Be silent,” cried the Prime Minister in a voice of suppressed fury. “Do you think that you have not heaped sufficient dishonour on my head already? But there is a point beyond which you shall not go. I will not have my house and my daughter degraded in this way.”

It took all Westerham's self-control to master himself now. It cut him like a whip to feel himself regarded as of the same breed as Melun. But he saw it would be utterly useless and would only provoke a scene to argue with the bitter old man. So, making a formal little bow to Lady Kathleen, he left them.

CHAPTER VII
LADY KATHLEEN'S DOUBTS

In the outer room he found Melun; he took him by the arm and said very quickly, “Come along, I want to speak to you.”

Melun gave him one almost quizzical look and accompanied him without speaking.

As a matter of fact, he found it rather awkward to say anything at all, and did not attempt to break the silence in which Westerham drove back to the hotel.

Westerham himself was baffled, and yet he had ascertained one thing which was likely to be of infinite use to him. He had discovered that there was, without doubt, a definite connection between the game which Melun was playing and Bagley's attempt to steal Lady Kathleen's diamonds.

That was sufficient for the night.

Still his impatience, or perhaps one had better say his desire, to get at the actual facts prompted him to take Melun into Walter's Hotel and subject him to a close cross-examination.

Melun, however, had recovered from his perturbation of the night before, and, moreover, was apparently intoxicated by the effect of rubbing shoulders with the great ones of the earth at the Prime Minister's reception. Therefore he was in a far less tractable frame of mind than was pleasant to Westerham. The captain, indeed, had got back that self-possession and cool audacity of which he had made such good use on the *Gigantic*. Westerham realised this at once, and at the outset dealt very gently with Melun.

“Don't you think,” he began softly, “that you had better make a clean breast of it?”

“Not at all,” answered Melun. “I have no desire to shock you, and a man who is disturbed by the yelling of a couple of girls is not likely to take what I might tell him in a particularly cool manner.”

Westerham's bright, sea-green eyes hardened.

“I have told you,” he said in a more menacing tone, “that if you want to

indulge in villainy you have got to keep women out of it. Now, whatever your scheme may be, it cannot be of very particular magnitude unless it has to do with the Premier. I fail to see where Lady Kathleen comes into the matter at all."

"Perhaps you do," Melun answered, "but then you are unacquainted with the details, and I don't propose to enlighten you. I agreed to betray the secrets of the prison house, or rather to let you see how my friends work, but I did not agree to tell you of every piece of business in which I was engaged."

"On this occasion, I fancy," said Westerham, "you will find it convenient to unburden your mind."

But Captain Melun only laughed. "Not so," he said.

Westerham was as near to exasperation as he ever allowed himself to get.

"I don't want to coerce you," he remarked grimly.

"You had better not try," Melun answered. "There is one thing which apparently you have not taken into your calculations. You forget that Lord Penshurst—I admit that your suspicions of a tie between us are correct—is quite as much interested in keeping me silent as I am in keeping silent myself."

Westerham had foreseen this point, and was prepared with an answer.

"You forget," he said, "that it might suit my convenience to become Lord Penshurst's friend."

"Have a care," cried Melun, angrily; "you don't know what you say."

"What do you mean?" demanded Westerham.

"I mean," said Melun, softly, "that I can strike back where it will hit you most."

Instinctively Westerham clenched his hands.

"Possibly," he said, "but you cannot blackmail me, and though since I met you first I knew you were a blackmailer, I did not know you aimed so high as to blackmail the Prime Minister."

He paused for a few moments before he spoke again; when he did his voice was even and low; but Melun did not like the ring in it.

"In fact," Westerham resumed, "I have seen enough to convince me that what you are after must be very big game indeed. What it is, of course, I do not know, and it would simply be idle on my part to pretend that I did. But I have the

capacity of being infinitely patient, and sooner or later I shall find out. I will not press you because I think that I should simply land myself into difficulties, which would make matters harder than they are."

He rose and walked over to the door, and held it open. "For the present," he said, "you may go, but if I were you I would not fail to appear when you are sent for."

Melun took up his hat and stick and laughed lightly.

"It suits me very well," he said, "to come when I am bid, but possibly you may not find me quite so pliant in the future. Good-night!"

Going straight up to his room, Westerham slept like a child till about six o'clock. He preferred to do his clear thinking in the early morning. Now he thought long and hard for two hours. He argued the matter out with himself in all its respects, and though he had determined not to take a bold course with Melun on the previous night, he was now convinced that the only way was to take a bold course with Lady Kathleen.

He had not seen Dunton among the guests at the reception, but, of course, there could be no doubt that Lady Kathleen was well acquainted with that entirely charming and honest, if somewhat vacuous, young peer.

It was therefore with the intention of revealing his identity to Lady Kathleen and explaining the whole position to her that about noon he made his way down Whitehall and rang the queer little bell of No. 10 Downing Street.

As he waited on the door-step, however, he was a little disconcerted to observe that the blinds were drawn down, and immediately the door was opened he instinctively knew that the house was, for his purpose at least, empty.

None the less, he asked for Lady Kathleen, only to be met with the grave reply that her ladyship had left that morning by motor car for Trant Hall, in Hertfordshire.

Without any display of discomposure Westerham nodded the man his thanks for the information and retraced his steps to the hotel. The departure of Lady Kathleen to some slight extent unsettled his mind. He reflected that perhaps he had been a little too hasty in his decision to tell her everything.

There was the possibility that she would disbelieve him, and the possibility, moreover, that she would tell her father; and if she told her father there was the further possibility that the Premier would be adamant in his refusal to disclose

his troubles. And in that case he would be absolutely baulked. Westerham was a keen judge of character, and he saw that if her father refused to speak Lady Kathleen would refuse to speak too.

Then indeed he would be in a quandary, for he would be entirely cut off from those whom he wished to befriend, even if he did not excite their active hostility.

Upon these reflections he instantly decided to alter his mind, comforting himself on this score with the dictum that it is only the dead who never change.

But though he decided to withhold his identity, he was resolved to make one last effort to induce Lady Kathleen to confide in him.

With this idea he turned back, not to his hotel, but to his rooms in Bruton Street, from which he had been absent for so long without explanation.

There he was met on the threshold by the entirely immaculate and discreet servant with whom the youthful, but worldly-wise, Lord Dunton had provided him.

The man's eyes revealed nothing. He merely bowed and waited, with that urbane silence which characterises the best kind of English servant.

The man's face, indeed, expressed no surprise even at the rather shabby clothes which Westerham was wearing, though Westerham himself knew well enough that he must have remarked them.

“While I am getting into other things,” he said, “you had better telephone round for my car.”

The man bowed. It was the first time that his extraordinary new master had thought of using the very magnificent motor car which he had casually bought in the course of an afternoon's walk. In about twenty minutes Westerham came out of his room again, looking, if not altogether a different man, at least a better-dressed one.

Westerham was conscious that his servant surveyed him with approval as he offered him lunch. He accepted it, as he was hungry; moreover, he knew that he could reach Trant Hall well within two hours, and he had no desire to arrive too soon. The chauffeur, also supplied by Lord Dunton, was the same manner of man as his valet. Westerham appreciated the fact, but was not as thankful as he became later, when he discovered that a silent and discreet and civil chauffeur was a distinctly uncommon type of human being.

Having made up his mind as to his immediate course of action, Westerham thought no more about the matter. It was not his habit to think what he should say when he met a certain man or a certain woman. He believed in the inspiration of the moment; and his inspiration was seldom wrong.

About four o'clock the chauffeur informed him that they were nearing Trant Hall, and then it occurred to Westerham that it might possibly be unwise to make too bold an entry into the grounds. In consequence he stopped at the lodge and inquired for Lady Kathleen.

Her ladyship, he was told, had not many minutes before called there herself. She was believed to be now on her way to the deer park. Having asked where this lay, Westerham got out of the car and proceeded on foot down the leafy avenue. At the end of the avenue there was a high wall, in which there was a break. A flight of stone steps led up to the break, and these he climbed.

On the top he paused, being struck by the remarkable beauty of the scene. For from the wall the green turf sloped downwards, while before him and on either side stretched a magnificent forest of giant beech trees.

He had taken the precaution to inquire whether it were possible for Lady Kathleen to return from the deer park by any other route, and had received an answer in the negative. Therefore he decided it would be waste of time for him to go in search of her, seeing that she must come back by the same way.

Meanwhile he sat down on the top of the steps, and, lighting a cigarette, gave himself over to patient waiting.

Some thirty minutes passed before he caught a glimpse of a moving figure amid some distant trees. The figure grew in size and in distinctness of outline, and then he saw Lady Kathleen coming slowly towards him.

Her face was bent on the ground, and her whole figure seemed for the moment old and bowed. Her appearance, indeed, gave him a little pang of sorrow.

He realised that when she saw him she must suffer some slight shock. That, however, was inevitable, and so he sat waiting for her to raise her head.

Presently, as she came nearer the wall, she lifted up her eyes, and a little cry escaped her lips as she saw Westerham sitting there. She stopped dead in her walk and stood still, holding her hand against her heart.

Westerham knew that she must have time to recover before he spoke, so he

merely removed his hat and, moving forward, stood bareheaded before her.

A little of her old spirit came back to her as she looked up at him. There was almost a glimmer of amusement in her eyes, but whatever humour she might have felt at his appearance was drowned in her obvious anxiety. She might well have been angry with him, but she kept her sad composure.

“Do you think,” she asked, with an appealing gesture of her hands, “it is quite fair to torment me in this way?”

“You would not ask me that,” said Westerham, “if you did believe me to be an honest man.”

She passed her hand rather wearily across her forehead.

“I hardly know,” she said in a slightly shaky voice, “exactly what to think.”

She lifted her eyes again to his as though to search him through and through.

“At any rate,” asked Westerham, with a smile, “have you a sufficiently good opinion of me to grant me just a few moments to say something?”

“It seems I cannot help myself,” she said, with a pained little laugh.

“Lady Kathleen,” he answered earnestly, “you are very much upset. I assure you that if you will only hear me out you will not regret it—at least you may rest assured that you will be free from any insult or annoyance.

“It will take me some few minutes to explain,” he went on, “and so I think it would be best for you to sit down.”

Without waiting for an answer he took her by the hand and led her gently to the steps. She sank down on them with a heavy sigh.

“The other night,” said Westerham, “I was sufficiently honest to save you from an awkward situation.”

Lady Kathleen was about to speak, but he would not allow it.

“No, no!” he urged, “I did not mention it to be thanked again. I have been more than thanked already. I only did what any ordinary decent man would do. I have no desire to dwell on that. Indeed, I simply mentioned it in order that I might convince you that I wish you well.”

“But you knew that man,” she cried; “you must have known him.”

Westerham stared at Lady Kathleen with some astonishment.

“I give you my word that I did not know him then,” he said, “even if I know him now.”

“Ah!” she darted a look of suspicion at him.

“Yes, I know Bagley, and I know Melun, and I know a man called Crow.”

Lady Kathleen's face blanched.

“And what else?” she asked.

He threw out his arms. “Nothing! I swear to you I know absolutely nothing else, except—and that, of course, is obvious—that you and your father go in deadly fear of all the three. Why, I cannot tell. If you will only enlighten me a little I may do much to help you.”

“No, no!” she cried, “it is simply out of the question. The secret is not mine, but my father's.”

“Then let me go to Lord Penshurst,” urged Westerham.

The girl started and thought for a few minutes before she answered. “No,” she said at last, slowly, “you must not do that. He would not understand.”

“You mean,” said Westerham, “he would merely regard me as one who might be termed ‘one of the gang.’”

The girl nodded.

“But I assure you,” Westerham laughed, “that I am not.”

To his surprise the girl looked him straight in the face. “I wish I felt quite sure,” she said.

Westerham flushed with almost a flush of anger.

“This,” he cried, “is an intolerable situation. If you would only confide in me I would confide in you.

“I am not what I seem. I am no mere man-about-town. I am not one of Melun's dupes. I am not of a certainty one of his friends—even though I may appear to be associated with him.

“I am a very different man indeed from what I fancy you take me for. My resources are practically limitless, and without boasting I may say that I hold Melun in the hollow of my hand.”

Again, to his surprise, Kathleen gave him the same keen look of suspicion.

“I fear no consequence as the result of what I will tell you,” she said quietly, “but Melun declares that you are merely an American confederate.”

“Good Heavens!” cried Westerham, and so great was the sincerity of his tones that Lady Kathleen's face softened.

“But perhaps you are not. I wish I knew.”

She buried her face in her hands and rocked to and fro in her distress.

“If I tell you who I am,” cried Westerham, stung to desperation, “am I not right in thinking that you would tell your father?”

Kathleen nodded her assent.

“And then we should be worse off than ever,” he rejoined gloomily. “Far from being regarded as a friend, I should be regarded as an interloper, possibly a danger, because I knew of your father's difficulty. Yet what the nature of that trouble is I have not the least idea. Why not tell me?”

The girl leapt to her feet and looked at him with wild eyes. “If you do know,” she cried, “you are as great a fiend as Melun to persecute me in this way, and if you do not know—then Heaven forbid that you ever should.

“I cannot tell you because if I did I should be a murderess.”

“A murderess!” Westerham drew a step back in horror.

“A murderess of whom?”

“Don't ask,” cried Kathleen; “I should be a murderess of not one, but many. As it is I can at least be silent, and if needs be make the sacrifice.”

“What sacrifice?”

“What sacrifice? Ah, that I cannot tell you now, though I cannot hide it from you always. I fear that there is no hope. That you will have to know in time unless—unless——”

“Unless what?”

“Unless——” cried the girl, and her voice trailed away.

Westerham took her hands gently and with great deference.

“Unless,” he said softly, “you allow me to help you.”

She tore her hands away from his and almost screamed at him.

“Go! Go!” she cried.

Her whole air was so distraught, she was so obviously on the verge of a complete breakdown, that Westerham realised it would be mere folly to remain. His offers could only exasperate her the more.

So he turned away sorrowfully. It cut him to the heart to see her huddled there upon the steps crying as if her heart would break. But he could do nothing. It was with a blind rage against Melun that he stumbled back along the avenue to his car and curtly ordered the man to return to London.

And at every yard of the way he repeated to himself the words: “Murderess!” “Sacrifice!” “Sacrifice!” “Murderess!”

On a sudden he resolved to call on Mme. Estelle.

Possibly she could help to solve all this sickening mystery.

The words “Murderess!” “Sacrifice!” “Murderess!” “Sacrifice!” fitted with a horrible nicety the throbbing of the engine, and he was still muttering to himself “Murderess!” “Sacrifice!” “Sacrifice!” “Murderess!” when he reached the narrow door in the wall of the house of Mme. Estelle.

CHAPTER VIII
SCOTLAND YARD INTERVENES

Mme. Estelle was at home, and Westerham was immediately shown into a long, low, pretty drawing-room, which gave on to a garden at the back of the house.

Judged, indeed, from Madame's pose, and from the gown she wore, she might have been expecting visitors.

The lights were shaded so that the hard lines on her face were softened, and in the dimness of the pretty room she looked the really beautiful woman she once must have been.

In his generous spirit—though he knew nothing of Madame's past, and practically nothing of her present—his heart was touched by a certain air of loneliness the woman wore, and by the very pleasant smile of greeting which she gave him.

Sir Paul was conscious that Mme. Estelle surveyed him with a certain amount of quiet wonderment. And it came home to him that for the first time for many years he had been shaken out of himself—so badly shaken out of himself that evidently his countenance bore some traces of his unquiet mind.

Madame's words of welcome were, however, quite conventional, and bore no evidence of surprise. “This is a most unexpected pleasure,” she said.

“The pleasure, I assure you,” answered Westerham in the same conventional strain, “is entirely mine. I do not wish in the least to be discourteous, but I have to tell you that I have called on business.”

Madame nodded as if she understood. “Suppose,” she said, in a pleasant voice, “that while we discuss business we drink tea.”

“I shall be more than delighted,” returned Westerham, though he was anxious to get the matter over and go back to the quiet of his room, where he could think without interruption.

So Madame rang the bell, gave her orders, and the tea came in.

It was not till they were alone again and fairly certain of not being

interrupted that Westerham went straight to the point.

“Madame,” he said, and his tone was formal—so formal that he paused for a moment to be amused at himself; he might have been a family solicitor about to talk business with a difficult client.

“Whatever they may have been to you,” he continued, “the last few days have meant much to me. Possibly you are aware of how I made Captain Melun's acquaintance.”

Madame pursed up her mouth and smiled. “I can guess,” she said; “but, of course, versions differ.”

Westerham's heart gave a little bound of triumph. After all, this woman was not wholly sunk in admiration of the gallant captain.

“Never mind about the versions,” he said; “we met. Without attempting to make an *ex-parte* statement, I may say that I practically foisted myself upon Melun. I think I may even go so far as to say that I compelled him to reveal himself to me in his most unpleasant light, and also to introduce to me various of his friends. You will, of course, pardon my including you in that number.”

Making a bow that was half a mock, Madame smiled—not altogether a pleasant smile.

“Les affaires sont les affaires,” said Madame. “Let us be strictly businesslike. Allow me to put the matter as I think you should have put it had you been entirely plain. Do you”—her face grew a little hard again—“blackmail the blackmailer?”

“To be perfectly honest,” said Westerham, “I do.”

Madame nodded her head up and down several times as though she completely understood.

“Now the first of my discoveries,” Westerham continued, “was that Melun had some sort of hold over the Prime Minister, Lord Penshurst.”

Madame started.

“I also discovered that whatever that hold might be, the secret involved his daughter. Then I think by a perfectly reasonable and logical course of argument I came to the conclusion that the secret, however closely it might be guarded, did not reflect one particular kind of dishonour upon Lord Penshurst.”

Madame nodded again. “I presume you mean,” she said—“I am speaking,

of course, as a woman of the world—that whatever Lord Penshurst had to be afraid of, he was at least not terrified of any exposure of his morals."

"Quite so," agreed Westerham. "More than that; both from his reputation and the little I have seen of him I am sure that he is so honourable a man that he is not guarding any secret that might imperil his family's standing. Indeed, I am convinced that whatever he has to keep to himself it does not include any of the ordinary crimes and offences of men."

Again Madame nodded.

"Now, Mme. Estelle," Westerham continued, speaking more sharply than before, "you may or may not be aware that I purchased an insight into Melun's mode of life at the price of a hundred thousand pounds."

Madame's face went first white and then red.

"That's the first I have heard of it," she said, and there was an angry quietude in her voice.

"None the less, it is so," said Westerham. "You know who I am; you know therefore what my resources are. Such a sum is nothing to me.

"Now," and he raised his voice so that it became loud and very clear, "I will double that sum if you will tell me what the secret is."

Lying back on her cushions, Madame stared at him with open mouth; then she sat forward and spoke slowly.

"Will you allow me to speak," she said, "as it were, man to man? Two hundred thousand pounds cannot buy for me that which I desire."

She laughed harshly.

Mme. Estelle, as though she were far away, said dreamily, and a little wistfully. "Still, I will try."

She roused herself from her momentary abstraction and shook her head almost fiercely. "I cannot help you because I do not know what the secret is," she cried.

Westerham looked at her with his cold, bright eyes, and saw that she spoke the truth, and he was amazed.

If she did not know what the secret was, then she could not know the price of it.

Should he tell her the price?

Melun had said nothing to him on that point, but he could clearly see where matters were trending. Money, he understood, would be of little value to Melun compared to a marriage with Kathleen.

He started, and started to such a degree that Madame surveyed him with open suspicion. “Sacrifice,” he said to himself. “Sacrifice.”

“Was that what she meant?”

And then he added to himself: “Oh, Heaven! If that's the sacrifice, then it shall never be.”

Outwardly, however, he only straightened his back and made a formal little bow to the astonished woman on the sofa.

“I believe you, Madame,” he said, “when you declare that you do not know.”

For a few moments he lapsed into silence, debating with himself whether he should drop the bombshell into Madame's camp now, or whether he should keep what, to this woman, would be the coping-stone of Melun's villainy—his intention to marry Kathleen—until such a moment when its dramatic force would turn the scales in his favour.

It required almost superhuman resolution on Westerham's part to hold this second secret to himself. But with an effort he held his lips in silence.

With the silence, too, he suddenly recognised that he had come into possession of a fact that would prove a mighty weapon with which to deal both with Mme. Estelle and with Melun.

Here in truth were wheels within wheels.

He felt strangely softened to this unhappy woman, who was evidently trusting much and being trusted little; and with his pity came a speculation as to what extent Melun was playing fair and square with his other confederates in blackmail.

He realised now that the captain was in a position to play for his own hand, and that neither the financing of Bagley nor the ambitions of Mme. Estelle, nor yet the brutal violence of Crow and his subsidiary hooligans in Limehouse were necessary to his object.

With this conclusion came more complete puzzlement than before.

It was the word “murderess” employed by Kathleen which distressed him most. Facile and swift as his imagination was, he had as yet been unable to build up any theory which could possibly account for the obstinate and desperate manner in which Lord Penshurst and his daughter were guarding their extraordinary secret.

So long, indeed, did Westerham stand in silence, lost in his own thoughts, that it was with a start he realised that Mme. Estelle was gazing at him with wide-open, fearful eyes. He was quick to grasp the necessity of breaking the silence.

And he deliberately chose to bring matters back to a businesslike method by being excessively brutal.

“You will pardon me,” he said, “but I came here expecting to find a liar. I have been agreeably disappointed.”

In the pause which followed the words he coldly watched the woman wince. But the anger which stole across her face convinced him that she had now been speaking the truth.

He held out his hand. Madame rose and took it.

“I am sorry to ask you again,” he said, “but will you once more give me your word of honour as a woman that you do not know what all this mystery is about?”

“I know,” said Mme. Estelle, “that Melun hopes to obtain some advantage from Lord Penshurst; beyond that I know nothing.”

Then suddenly she cast aside her reserve and drew a little closer to him.

“Forgive plain speaking on my part,” she said, “but I am perfectly certain that you are being dragged into some horrible disaster. I will be frank and honest with you. I have been given to understand that the cultivation of your acquaintance will free us—I am speaking now for Captain Melun and myself—from those embarrassments which trouble us so much, but I think—I cannot tell why—that it is unfair you should be drawn into this business.

“You don't know, I am afraid, quite what Melun is capable of. I have seen”—here she shuddered a little and broke off.

“Why will you not listen to me,” she continued presently, “and get clear while there is yet time? There is no reason why your good name should be besmirched; there is no reason”—and she faltered in her speech—“there is no

reason why you should lose——”

“No reason,” said Westerham, in an even voice, “why I should lose my life?”

Mme. Estelle gave a little gasping sigh and drew away from him.

“Oh!” she cried, turning away her face, “you are pitilessly logical.”

They were standing thus, Westerham looking at Mme. Estelle with his searching gaze while her face was turned towards the window, when the door opened behind them.

The prim voice of the trim maid said, “Captain Melun.”

Westerham gathered himself together with a laugh. It was rather like the star situation of a highly-coloured melodrama.

“If Mme. Estelle will pardon the phrase,” he said. “Speak of the devil——” He stopped short, shrugged his shoulders, and made a little bow towards Melun.

For his part, the captain was entirely without embarrassment, having been warned by the maid that Westerham was with Madame.

“Quite so,” he said. His look, however, was so vicious that Westerham had some inclination to stay and see that Mme. Estelle did not suffer physically as the result of his call. He reflected, however, that Mme. Estelle was evidently a brave woman and Melun a cowardly man.

It was, therefore, with an easy mind on this score that he stepped forward and held out his hand to Madame.

“Thank you very much,” he said, “for an exceedingly pleasant, agreeable hour. I hope that you will allow me to have the pleasure of calling again.”

Madame bowed and took his hand. Her own was clammy and wet.

To Melun, Westerham only nodded. The more he dealt with this man the more he regarded him as a lackey to be ordered here and there.

“I trust,” he said, and there was an undertone of command in his voice, “that I shall see you at the hotel to-night.”

When he gained the street, Westerham told his chauffeur to go home; he had been cramped by travelling in the car, and had a wish to walk. He stepped out briskly towards St. John's Wood Road.

At the corner between the Red Lion Hotel and the underground station he

saw a news-boy yelling for dear life and waving about him a fiery-coloured placard. The wind caught it, and blowing it flat against the lad's knees enabled Westerham to read the contents' bill:—

"EXTRAORDINARY GAGGING OUTRAGE IN THE WEST END."

There were times when Westerham suffered from the quick intuition of a woman, and at this moment it came home to him that this contents' bill affected himself.

His second thoughts were that his first impression was nonsense, but his third thoughts were that it was foolish to distrust his intuition; crossing the road, he bought a copy of the paper from the news-boy.

So certain was he that he was in some way connected with the gagging outrage, of which he as yet knew nothing, that he opened the paper perfectly prepared for a shock. It was well that he had braced himself, for in heavy type on the main page he read the following:—

"An extraordinary gagging outrage was discovered at about four o'clock this afternoon at No. 17B Bruton Street, Bond Street. The scene was the flat of a Mr. James Robinson, a gentleman who took a suite of these fashionable chambers less than a week ago.

"Mr. Robinson, who, it is understood, has only been in London a short time, and has since his arrival purchased a magnificent motor car, has not been sleeping regularly at his chambers. As a matter of fact, our representative was given to understand that he has been away visiting friends in the country.

"He returned, however, to London at about one o'clock to-day, and having lunched, told his valet to send round for the car which he had not hitherto used. He was heard to instruct the chauffeur to drive along the Hertfordshire Road, upon which it was concluded that he did not intend to return till late. Up to the time of going to press nothing has been heard of him.

"About four o'clock the doorkeeper, having some message to give to Mr. Robinson's valet, went up to the chambers and knocked at the door. Receiving no reply, the man entered by a pass-key, and was astonished to find the whole place in a state of great disorder. Rushing into the dining-room, he discovered that everything had been turned upside down. He then proceeded to the bedroom, where he found Mr. Robinson's valet securely bound hand and foot and his mouth gagged.

“Before summoning the police, the doorkeeper took the gag out of the mouth of Charles Blyth, the valet, and then released his hands and feet.

“Upon the police being summoned, the man, who was suffering considerably from shock, stated that shortly after Mr. Robinson had left there had come a knock at the door. On opening it, he was confronted by a very tall and powerful-looking man, who, he is quite certain, was a gentleman. He was well dressed in a lounge suit and black bowler hat, but, to the valet's surprise and dismay, wore a mask over his face.

“Continuing, the valet says that in less time than it took him to make the statement, the stranger had rushed into the flat and seized his throat in a vice-like grip.

“His assailant then pushed a gag—which apparently consists of a torn pillowcase—into his mouth, and, throwing him to the floor, partially stunned him.

“After this the stranger bound him hand and foot, subsequently lifting him bodily on to the bed, where he left him while he ransacked the rooms from top to bottom.

“As far as can be judged at present, theft was not the motive of the stranger's extraordinary proceedings, for not a single thing is missing from Mr. Robinson's rooms, though every piece of paper has been turned over and every article of clothing evidently searched.

“Presumably the mysterious assailant was looking for some particular object which he expected to be there. Whether he found it or not is open to question, and no further light can be thrown on the matter until Mr. Robinson returns.”

“Mr. Robinson,” said Westerham to himself, “will return at once,” and, hailing a hansom, he directed the man to drive as fast as he could to Bruton Street.

On the way he was rather troubled over the fact that he had called on Mme. Estelle, as it was quite possible that by this time the police had discovered where he had been during the afternoon, unless his chauffeur had been more discreet than usual.

At Bruton Street Westerham found his rooms in much the same condition as the newspaper had described.

The valet, pale and troubled-looking, was seated on a chair in the dining-room, evidently fending off question after question which was being put to him by a couple of men whom, without much effort of imagination, Westerham instantly recognised as detectives.

As he stood on the threshold, the elder and taller of the two men left the valet and approached him.

“You are Mr. Robinson?” he asked.

Westerham nodded.

“My name, sir,” said the big man, “is Inspector Rookley, from Scotland Yard. We were, of course, called in by the police in Vine Street. This is a most mysterious affair.”

“Apparently,” said Westerham, easily. “I have been reading about it in the evening papers.”

“I think it will be better,” said Mr. Rookley, gravely, “if my colleague takes your valet away while I make a few inquiries.”

“I am not at all sure that I desire any inquiries to be made.”

Mr. Rookley was first astounded and then suspicious.

“But, sir,” he protested, “this is a most peculiar case.”

“I agree with you,” said Westerham, “a most peculiar case, a most puzzling case. But, at the same time, I cannot see, in the least, how it concerns you.”

“I am sure, sir,” said Mr. Rookley, with meaning, “that the sooner I remove your valet the better.”

“Just as you please. As I find you in my flat, and as apparently you want to talk, and as, moreover, I have nothing on earth to do, I suppose I had better talk with you. May I offer you a whisky-and-soda?”

“Not now, sir,” said Mr. Rookley severely, and he beckoned to his colleague to take the astonished valet away.

When they were alone, Mr. Rookley turned sharply on Westerham and demanded in a dictatorial voice: “What does it all mean?”

“Now really,” Westerham laughed, “I should have supposed that that was the question I should have asked you. You, Mr. Rookley, of Scotland Yard, as detective, should be more versed in the wicked ways of this life than I am.

“I have my rooms entered by a stranger, who gags my valet, and who subsequently turns all my effects topsy-turvy. You are summoned by the police to catch the offender. When are you going to catch him?”

Mr. Rookley was used to what he himself called “cool hands,” but, as he said afterwards, this was the coolest hand he had ever met.

However, he was equal to the occasion.

“How do you suppose, sir,” he asked, “we are to make an arrest if you don't provide us with some data to go on?”

“Data!” exclaimed Westerham. “Surely there is plenty of data here, and I can tell you nothing more.”

“Now come, sir,” urged the detective, “you must admit that you yourself are rather a peculiar person, and, mind you, sir, we of the Yard are no respecters of persons. You came here a week ago. You apparently dropped from the skies. No one knows who you are, and yet you have plenty of money. You buy a big motor car, you order a lot of new clothes, and then you disappear.”

Westerham nodded. “Quite true,” he said. “Go on.”

“And then,” continued the detective, “you reappear. You order out the car, and scarcely is your back turned before this business happens.

“Now, my opinion is—and probably you know more about it than I do—that the gentleman who went through your things was looking for some special thing. I say a ‘gentleman’ advisedly, for valets of the description that you have got do not make mistakes on that score.

“Of course,” Mr. Rookley droned on, “gentlemen sometimes do wild things. I have known a few in my time. Maybe there was some quarrel about some lady. Maybe you have taken something belonging to some lady which the other gentleman thought you should not have taken. For the moment we really do not suspect anything more serious, though naturally we are making inquiries.”

“I trust they will prove satisfactory,” said Westerham.

“You may rest assured they will, sir,” snapped Mr. Rookley. “We seldom fail. Of course, it is open to us to put what construction we like upon this matter if you do not choose to explain.

“There is the beginning of many big affairs in such a comparative trifle as this. Why not, for your own sake, and for our sakes, tell us all about it?

“I have to warn you that as things stand your position is very awkward. If you refuse to give an explanation of your movements you must expect to be regarded with suspicion—and I assure you that with us it is not a far cry from suspicion to action. In fact, the consequences may be exceedingly serious for you. There is such a thing, you know,” added the detective, adopting a more bullying tone, “as being arrested on suspicion. Come, tell me, where did you sleep last night?”

“My dear man,” said Westerham, suavely, “I have not the slightest intention of telling you.”

CHAPTER IX
THE HIGHER BURGLARY

Mr. Rookley swung his heavy body to and fro on his heels and toes, and pursed up his official mouth.

“Mr. Robinson,” he said, “I must warn you that you are playing an exceedingly dangerous game.”

“May I suggest,” Westerham remarked, more bluntly than before, “that you are doing precisely the same?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I mean that you are not keeping strictly to your duty. You seem to be taking upon yourself a great many things which it is not your business to do—certainly you are assuming a great many prerogatives that you have no right to.”

“What do you mean, sir?” reiterated the detective.

“Tut, tut, my dear sir,” said Westerham, “sit down and try to compose yourself, while I endeavour to explain the precise situation.

“First,” Westerham continued, emphasising the “first” by touching his left forefinger with his right, “although I am not very much acquainted, thank goodness, with criminal procedure in this country, I am at least aware of this—that the law of England regards every man as innocent until he has been proved guilty. But you, under some misapprehension of your duties, appear to assume that I am guilty until I have proved myself innocent.

“Now, of what am I guilty? Nothing except of absenting myself from my rooms, which it is my innocent privilege and pleasure to do. You inquire of my antecedents. What do they matter to you? They are my business alone.

“However,” he went on, eyeing the now disconcerted Mr. Rookley, “in order that you may not be too harsh in your judgments I will enlighten your ignorance to a certain extent. I came here on the introduction of Lord Dunton, who is a most intimate friend. I paid six months' rent in advance. I furnished these rooms at no small expense, and I purchased one of the best motor cars on the market.

“Now I wish particularly to draw your attention to the fact that I did not offer to pay for any of these things by cheque. I paid for them all out of hand by bank-note. In fact, you will see for yourself that since I took up my abode here I must have spent perhaps a couple of thousand pounds; all of which I have paid out in hard cash.

“Were these bank-notes stolen? Certainly not. Had they been, the fact must inevitably have been discovered. No, strange as it may seem to you, I came by those notes quite honestly.

“It is not your business to do so, but if you care to take the trouble you are at perfect liberty to trace them. However, to save you unnecessary labour, I may as well tell you that those notes were paid over to me by Lord Dunton, in return for a cheque which I gave him. Why I chose to conduct my business on those lines is my own affair.

“More than this I have no intention of revealing. You are, of course, at perfect liberty to make every inquiry you please of Lord Dunton, but I fancy you will obtain very small satisfaction from him.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Rookley, desirous of putting on an appearance which would suggest that he was not entirely baffled—“of course Lord Dunton may refuse to give any information, for the simple reason that such an explanation may be inconvenient to himself.”

“I do not quite follow you,” remarked Westerham.

“What I intended to imply,” said Mr. Rookley, “is that your friendship may not be so welcome to Lord Dunton as Lord Dunton's friendship is to you.”

“I think you are very insolent, Mr. Rookley,” said Westerham.

“Possibly,” answered the man from Scotland Yard; “but I think I have some justification for being rude. Now, although it is true that I cannot ascertain where you slept last night, I am at any rate acquainted with some of your movements.”

Westerham started. This was growing a little more awkward than he had bargained for. It even occurred to him that it might be foolish to withhold too much information from Mr. Rookley. But, on the other hand, if he revealed his identity his troubles would be greatly increased, for it would inevitably lead to a break with Melun and that would double his difficulties in probing the mystery of the Premier's secret.

“Yes,” Mr. Rookley went on, with a return to his old superiority and ease of

manner; “you attended the Premier's reception last night”—he paused that his words might have more dramatic force—“and you went under the auspices of Captain Melun.”

“Indeed,” said Westerham, “you seem to be remarkably well informed.”

“I am,” agreed Mr. Rookley, shutting his mouth with a snap.

“I am,” he continued, “and I know this—that either you must be a very foolish, a very ignorant, or a very bad young man to have had the audacity to attend Lord Penshurst's reception under such a guardianship.”

“It is really very kind of you to make such distinctions,” laughed Westerham. “Only, as it happens, there is another alternative which you have not suggested. It is not my business to point it out to you, but I will give you the opportunity of discovering it for yourself. I know quite enough of Captain Melun to prevent my pleading ignorance or folly in the cultivation of his acquaintance; on the other hand, if you suggest that I am apparently enjoying his friendship because my ideas of life are the same as his, then you are wrong again. Can you think of any other reason for my being with Captain Melun?”

“None,” said the detective, with what was meant to be a most significant air.

“Then,” said Westerham, “suppose we adjourn this conversation *sine die*. It affords me very little pleasure, and apparently gives you uncommonly little satisfaction. Before you go, however, I am afraid I must add to your troubles. I assure you that I have not the faintest notion who broke into my rooms and who gagged my valet, any more than I have the remotest idea what the motive could possibly be. There were a good many things, scarf-pins and the like, lying about all over the place, but nothing has been stolen.”

“Oh,” said the detective with deep meaning, “but suppose they were looking for something else quite other than articles of value—I should say of intrinsic value. Suppose that someone had a notion that he would like to recover something you had no right to be possessed of; or suppose that the person who broke in imagined that he might find something among your papers which would be of use to him?”

“Now, my dear sir,” said Westerham, “I do not wish to insult you, but really you are a very poor judge of human character. Do you suppose I should not know if whatever I had no right to be possessed of had gone? Do you think that if some paper or papers which might give someone else a hold over me had been

taken I should not also by this time be acquainted with the fact? And in either of those cases, should I be so entirely indifferent to the matter as I am now? No, I assure you I think that there has been some mistake."

"Now look here, Mr. Robinson," said the detective, with a more friendly air, "let me ask a straight question. Do you suspect that Captain Melun has had a hand in this?"

"No," replied Westerham, with emphasis, "I do not. I feel certain that he has had nothing to do with it."

"Is there no one else, then, whom you can possibly conceive guilty of such an outrage?"

Westerham gave himself up to a few minutes of genuine hard thinking.

"No," he said at last slowly; "I can think of no one in the world who would have any object in treating my rooms in this way."

"Then surely," cried the detective, "if it is a mystery to you, you would like the matter cleared up?"

"Quite so," said Westerham, with a smile, "cleared up with the assistance of Mr. Rookley. No, thank you very much for your kind offer, but I will clear the matter up for myself. In the meantime, as I see no reason why you should detain me, I will not detain you. Allow me to wish you good-day."

Without another word he walked into his bedroom and shut the door sharply.

When Westerham told Rookley that he had no conception of the identity of his mysterious visitor he spoke the truth; nor, cudgel his brains as he might, could he advance any theory which satisfied him. It seemed that the best thing he could do was to send for Melun. The captain, he reflected, was more acquainted with this sort of dealing than he was, and might possibly throw some light on the matter. So for Melun he sent.

The captain came with a bad grace at about eight o'clock. He had already seen in the evening papers various accounts of the ransacking of Westerham's rooms.

Westerham began by detailing to him the conversation with the detective, to every word of which the captain listened with a great attention, here and there putting in a question which quite convinced Sir Paul that Melun knew nothing of the affair.

However, he was determined to see what Melun would say if he asked him point blank whether he had been playing the burglar.

Upon the question being put to him, Melun laughed quite easily and shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “once bitten, twice shy. My attempt to burgle you on the *Gigantic* was not so successful as to tempt me to repeat the performance. Besides, I am a fairly good judge of my fellow-men, and I have given up all hope of discovering anything in your past or your present which would lead me to the delectable state of being able to dictate to you.”

“Thank you,” said Westerham, “that is at least frank.”

“I am learning,” returned Melun, “that it is scarcely worth while to be anything else with you.”

“Thank you again,” said Westerham. “And now suppose I ask you whether you can throw any light on the subject?”

“Now,” said Melun, “you are asking a really sensible question. I can. What is more, I think I can completely clear up the mystery for you.”

“So you did have a hand in it, after all?” cried Westerham.

“Well, yes, I had a hand in it; but I took no part in the actual burgling.”

Sir Paul stared at him in amazement. “What do you mean?” he demanded.

“First of all,” said Melun, “what was the description of the mysterious stranger given by your valet?”

“Very tall, very thin, with reddish hair and reddish moustache, and, so far as he could see through the mask on his face, grey eyes. His hands, as Blyth had good reason to notice, were very large and sunburnt, with uncommonly well-kept nails.”

Melun nodded his head. “Good,” he said, “the description tallies exactly with the gentleman I suspected of having been here this afternoon.

“You may have noticed,” he continued, “that one of the men most in evidence at Downing Street last night was the Premier's private secretary, the Hon. Claude Hilden.”

“Yes,” said Westerham, eagerly, “what of him?”

“He burgled your rooms,” said Melun, calmly.

“What!” Westerham jumped out of his chair and stood over Melun. “What do you mean? Why, it is impossible. If he did that it must have been by Lord Penshurst's orders, and what, in the name of Heaven, could they have expected to find here?”

“Exactly what Hilden came to find—what he did find, and what he took away with him.”

“In the name of Heaven, what?” asked Westerham, to whom things were becoming a little too complicated for him to follow.

“What Hilden found,” said Melun, slowly and precisely, “were Lady Kathleen's diamonds.”

“Lady Kathleen's diamonds!”

“Yes,” answered Melun, smiling as though with intense relish of an infinitely fine jest, “Lady Kathleen's diamonds.

“They were missed shortly after your departure, and you were at once suspected of being the author of the theft. And therefore Lord Penshurst, knowing that Bagley had made one attempt before, and that I was connected with Bagley, at first suspected me.

“In fact, at about two in the morning, Hilden came around to my rooms with the Premier. They roused me from sleep and taxed me with the theft, Lord Penshurst threatening that if I did not give them up he would certainly not accede to the other terms which I am asking of him.

“I told him quite frankly that I did not take them but that I strongly suspected you.”

“You scoundrel!” cried Westerham.

In his sudden rage he would have seized Melun by the throat; but Melun, whom Westerham had never seen more calm and self-possessed, pushed his hand aside and said, “Softly, softly! you had better hear me out.”

“Go on!”

“I told them,” continued Melun, “that it would be folly to rouse you as they had aroused me. In fact, I told them that you were a strong man armed—that any attack made on you or your rooms in the small hours would inevitably lead to one of them being damaged, which would only result in awkward police-court proceedings and painful revelations.”

“You scoundrel! You scoundrel!” cried Westerham again.

“Wait a minute, my dear fellow; hear me out,” pleaded Melun. “You may consider that you have played the game with me, but that is not my own view of things. It was necessary to teach you a lesson. In your nice, strong, masterful way you were under the impression that you had to deal with a pack of cowards and curs.”

“So I have,” said Westerham, grimly.

“Perhaps; but one of them is not quite so impotent as you judged him, and if you reflect a moment you will see, at any rate, that you are at present in a rather awkward predicament. However, to get on with my tale.

“I had you watched this morning, and as soon as you left your rooms I slipped in here with the diamonds.”

“But you said you had not taken them,” said Westerham.

“So I did, but I took them none the less. I got rid of your man for a minute on some pretext, and just jammed them into the pocket of the coat you had worn the night before. Then I at once communicated with Downing Street. I could not tell them where the diamonds actually were, for that would have given me away, but I knew that Lord Penshurst and Hilden were sufficiently desperate to turn your place upside down to find them. They did find them, for Hilden telephoned the fact to me half an hour before you sent for me.”

“Good Lord!” said Westerham, and held up his hand for silence. He wished to think. Matters were becoming more and more difficult to understand. Lord Penshurst went in dread of Melun—so great a dread that he even had to confide in his nephew and his private secretary when Melun pressed him too hard. It was evident, too, that Melun's grip of the Premier must be of the most remorseless kind, or such a man as Lord Penshurst would never stoop to countenance such deeds on Melun's part.

This was bad enough, but the whole affair assumed a far more sinister aspect when Westerham reflected that Lady Kathleen must of necessity be acquainted with Lord Penshurst's expedition in the small hours, and of her cousin's burglarious exploits in the afternoon.

“No wonder,” groaned Westerham to himself, “she did not trust me. No wonder! No wonder! Oh, the shame of it! This is the hardest part of all—to be suspected, and to be suspected of such a mean and dastardly thing as this.”

“Good Heavens!” he cried aloud, “but for the fact that I should be hung for it, which would unfortunately spoil my chances in certain directions, I think I could shoot you on the spot.”

“Just so,” said Melun, “but I feel safe in the knowledge that you won't.”

“I'll tell you what I will do,” said Westerham, “and I have every justification for doing it—I will go back on my agreement with you here and now. In half an hour I will be in Downing Street and expose the whole thing. Yes, by Heavens! And if Lord Penshurst won't move in the matter himself, then I will see to it that you are prosecuted.”

“No, you won't,” said Melun. “The question really involved is a matter of many men's lives, and one man's life, even yours, will not stand in the way of this secret being kept.”

“Lord Penshurst is no murderer, even though you may be,” cried Westerham, indignantly.

“Perhaps not, my dear sir, perhaps not; but, at the same time, the situation is such that he cannot possible prosecute.”

“What do you mean?” thundered Westerham, again laying his hand roughly on Melun's shoulder.

“Pardon me,” Melun answered, shaking himself free, “but that is my business—and Lord Penshurst's business.”

Poor little Lady Kathleen sobbed till she could sob no more. Then she lifted her head wearily, mopped her swollen eyes, and, gathering herself together, walked slowly back to the Hall.

She went at once to her father's room, to find the Premier in a scarcely less pitiable frame of mind than she was in herself.

The old man was sitting at his desk, his head buried in his hands, though the table was littered with papers requiring urgent attention.

Kathleen walked up behind him, and, placing one of her hands on his head, stroked his hair gently.

“Poor father!” she said.

“Heaven help us, my dear!” said Lord Penshurst, and he stood up and took his daughter in his arms, holding her almost as though he were afraid she might be taken from him.

After a little while he became calmer, and began to speak of the dreadful thing which weighed so upon both their spirits.

But even while he spoke of it he looked cautiously about, as though he were fearful that other ears might be listening.

“So you see, little girl,” he said, “that your very kindly estimate of the red-headed man Robinson was entirely wrong. He didn't look like a scoundrel, but he is one. He is not even a scoundrel of Melun's description. Upon my soul, I think I prefer the blackmailer to the mere thief.”

“Do you think,” asked Kathleen, searching her father's face, “that, after all, this is not some of Melun's work?”

“Why should it be?” returned her father.

“I don't know, I am sure,” said Kathleen, doubtfully, “except that I have a sort of feeling that it is.”

“Why?” asked her father.

Then, for the first time, Lady Kathleen told him of her meeting with Bagley in Hyde Park.

“Oh, my dear! my dear!” cried her father, taking her in his arms again. “How many more sacrifices are you prepared to make for me? If I had not confided in you I do not know what I should have done. I assure you that it is only because I dread the awful consequences that would come if my secret were discovered that has prevented me from taking my life. But, as you know, the shedding of my blood would mean the shedding of blood all over the world. Sometimes I think the dread of it is driving me out of my mind.

“And there does not seem to be any hope of getting the thing back—no hope of it at all. By George! I wish we were back in the good old days. Then I could put that Melun on the rack. I'd get the secret out of him somehow.

“But he is too slippery. I even made arrangements to have him watched, but he beats our men all the time. He is here to-day and gone to-morrow. He appears and he vanishes—Heaven only knows how.

“And now, to add to our perplexities, we have got this red-haired giant, who

seems to be even more unscrupulous than Melun. Certainly he is more bold. To my way of thinking, it was only a bold stroke to win your confidence that he dealt with Bagley as he did."

"Oh, father!" cried Kathleen, "I cannot believe that."

"Nonsense, my dear. Do you suppose that a man who is hand in glove with Melun comes across you and Bagley in the Park by accident? Why, it is one chance against a hundred million."

"But still it is a chance," urged Kathleen.

"My dear little girl," said the Premier, gently, while he patted her cheek, "I am afraid that you are of a very trusting disposition, though that has certainly been to the advantage of your poor old father.

"No, no!" he went on. "Depend on it, he was there by arrangement.

"Besides, how otherwise should he know who you were? And you say he suggested that he should drive you back to Downing Street?

"Gad! it almost makes one admire the man to think of his cool cheek. To drive you back to Downing Street indeed!"

"And yet, father, in spite of it all, I really believe the man's honest. You see, you cut me short. I have something else to tell you yet."

Lord Penshurst eyed Kathleen uneasily.

"What is it now?" he asked, with a sad little laugh.

"Why," said Lady Kathleen, and for a moment she felt unaccountably nervous and shy, "he was here this afternoon."

"What!" roared the Premier; "he was here this afternoon? Why did you not tell me? I would have had the fellow flogged out of the place."

"Gently, father, gently," urged Lady Kathleen, "aren't you speaking rather loud?"

"I suppose I am," said Lord Penshurst, bitterly. "But tell me about it."

In a very few words Lady Kathleen outlined her interview with Westerham in the Deer Park.

"You know, father," she concluded, "I almost believe he was speaking the truth when he said that he was quite different from the man we believed him to be."

“Rubbish, my dear,” snapped the Premier, “he is only a gentlemanly scoundrel—that is all.

“I wonder how long we shall be able to keep Hilden in ignorance of what is really the matter,” he continued. “The dear chap has behaved splendidly—did everything I asked him without a murmur, even to the extent of burglary this afternoon. By the way, he has got your diamonds back. He has just 'phoned me from Downing Street.”

“Oh, let them go! Let them go!” cried Lady Kathleen, with intense weariness. “Their presence seems only to make matters worse.”

Suddenly she threw herself into her father's arms.

“Oh, father, father!” she cried. “Let us do everything we can. Don't let us give up hope. We have still got a fortnight left in which to get that dreadful secret back. Don't let us give up hope. I would rather disguise myself and go out and search for it than have to endure what it means if we fail.”

“Don't cry, my dear. Don't cry. Believe me, I am doing everything I possibly can without giving anything away. But already it seems to me—perhaps I only imagine things—that the servants and people suspect that something is wrong.

“That is why we have got to be brave and look cheerful. I know it will be dreadful for you to have to look after the house party—and the people come to-morrow. Still, it cannot be helped. We have got to go through with it, but after the dance we will go back at once, and then I assure you that if it costs me my life I will make that Melun disgorge.”

Kathleen smiled at her father through her tears.

“You dear old fire-eater,” she said. “I really believe you would.”

“My daughter,” the Premier said, “there has never been a murderer in this family to my knowledge; but I swear to you that if I have to settle the scoundrel myself you shall not marry Melun. Heavens! The price of silence is too big altogether.”

CHAPTER X
SIR PAUL IN PERIL

It was all very well for Melun to tell Westerham that he was a strong man armed. But was he?

Westerham pondered over this problem with a puzzled frown. In spite of the checks he had met with, he still felt himself to be, as Melun had said, a strong man. And when he came to a tight corner he was armed for the struggle, and had less fear of things than had Melun.

At times also it seemed as if his ingenuity was greater than the captain's. But, for all that, did he really hold the upper hand? As he impartially summed the matter up for himself it seemed to him that he did not.

On the *Gigantic* he had laughed that Melun should hope to find in his possession anything to make him an easy prey to blackmail. Yet here he was, a prey to the worst blackmail of all—a species of blackmail of the heart. On every hand, and at every turn, no matter in what direction he might strike out, he was more than met and baffled by the one dominant fact that the faintest breath of publicity would inevitably lose him Lady Kathleen.

So great, however, and so entirely unselfish was his love for the Premier's daughter, that he would have faced even that loss bravely could it have brought any peace to the hunted girl's mind. But he realised that to relinquish his claims would be immediately to throw her into the arms of Melun. Westerham shuddered when he thought of that.

No, crippled and cramped though he was, he must certainly go on—go on in the blind hope that he could find something which would enable him to deal Melun a blow from which he could not recover.

This, however, on further thought, seemed a rather *laissez faire* policy to follow. It was ridiculous to think that, in spite of his handicap, he should be beaten and bested at every turn by such a man as Melun.

For fully an hour, therefore, after the captain had left him, Westerham sat, pencil in hand, mapping out plan after plan of campaign. But all of them, as he pored over their possibilities, seemed to avail him nothing, and at last, when well

nigh in despair, he tore up into minute fragments the various propositions he had formulated.

Then it suddenly dawned on him that if he could only prove, as he strongly suspected, that Melun was by no means dealing honestly with his fellow criminals, he would be able by a little astute management to turn all the organisation which Melun had at his disposal against the captain himself.

Westerham's bright gaze brightened and his smile broadened. With an almost boyish delight he immediately set to work to devise a scheme whereby he could turn the tables on his enemy.

There was very little time to be lost, and to his joy Westerham remembered that the day was Thursday, the day on the evening of which Melun's various friends met at the pseudo working-man's club at Limehouse.

Immediately he resolved that he would go there that very night.

Rough men had no terrors for him; during his life in the West he had dealt with rougher men than Melun had ever been called on to handle. He laughed as he thought of the possibilities of dominating such a collection of scoundrels as he had seen on his first visit to “The Club.”

Then he bethought him of Mr. Rookley, and he reflected that if the mills of Scotland Yard, like the mills of God, ground exceedingly slowly, they ground uncommonly fine.

It may be an easy thing to detect that one is shadowed by a large man with large boots. But, none the less, it is sufficiently disconcerting to find that the large boots follow one's footsteps persistently and doggedly. Scotland Yard wears down a man by sheer weight.

Westerham knew, too, that he had so aroused the interest of the authorities that they would do their best to watch his every movement. Nor was he wrong.

He realised, therefore, that it would be folly for him to proceed straight from Bruton Street to the East End. Never in his life had he feared any man, nor had he ever before been compelled to face the contingency of throwing off pursuers—and those pursuers the representatives of law and order.

However, the prospect of for once being the pursued rather than the pursuer to some extent tickled his fancy; he resolved to try his 'prentice hand at evasion by secretly making his way from Bruton Street to Walter's Hotel.

Walter's, he imagined, would be probably safe from observation for that

night at least. Rookley had practically told Sir Paul that he did not know where he went when he was not in Bruton Street.

First Westerham called in Blyth and questioned him pretty closely; he satisfied himself, however, that whatever the man might think of his master's methods of life he was at least faithful.

Westerham, indeed, resolved to trust him a great deal more than he had done up to then, and told him, without any disguise, that he strongly suspected that Bruton Street was at that moment being watched. Casually, and without the slightest demonstration of surprise, the valet thereupon suggested that it would be just as well for Westerham to change his dress before he left the flat.

This he did, and afterwards sent the porter for a taxicab. Into this he jumped as soon as it arrived, telling the man to drive to Turnham Green.

And long before they reached that distant part of London, Westerham convinced himself that even had he been pursued at all he had certainly outdistanced the pursuers.

From Turnham Green he took the District Railway to Earl's Court. Alighting there, he walked to South Kensington, where he again took the train, on this occasion booking straight through to Whitechapel.

From St. Mary's, Whitechapel, he turned south, and plunging through a maze of little streets came on foot to Limehouse at about nine o'clock.

He had little difficulty in finding the “Cut,” and walking briskly down it, came to the little space where the tall, four-storeyed building was set back from the roadway.

Always quick to observe detail, he had not only noticed but he recollected Melun's peculiar rap. So three times he knocked slowly, and again three times slowly, and then three times in quick succession.

As on the former occasion, the door swung open at once, and the hideous face of the negro he had treated so cavalierly before peered at him from the darkness.

The nigger peered eagerly about as though seeking for Melun, and when he saw that Westerham stood there alone, made as though to slam the door on him.

But Westerham was too quick for him, and thrust his heavy-booted foot into the opening and laughed in the negro's face.

The negro cursed him roundly and demanded what he wanted.

“Let me in,” said Westerham, quietly, “and I will explain.”

Most unwillingly the negro opened the door, and Westerham, entering the passage, looked the black squarely in the eyes.

“I fancy that it is none of your business to inquire what I want?” he said. “I was brought here by Captain Melun and properly introduced, if such is the term you use. And my affairs at the present moment are with the gentlemen of the club. I will thank you to take me there at once.”

The negro gave him an ugly look.

“Did Captain Melun send you?” he asked.

“Mind your own business,” retorted Westerham, sharply. “Lead the way. I shall say what I have to say to my friends.

“Don't play the fool,” he added as the man still looked doubtful. “What do you take me for? A ‘tec’? If I were, do you think I should be ass enough to come here alone and ask to be shown into that crowd?”

The negro grinned as much as to say that he thought him an ass in any case, but he led the way down the passage none the less.

They passed through the opium den as before, and then it seemed that the negro purposely made no disturbance in order that Westerham's entrance might have a proper dramatic effect.

He was right in his estimation of the confusion it would cause.

If one may so term it, the parliament of scoundrels was in full session. The long trestle table was in the centre of the room, and at one end of it sat the bullet-headed man, while at the other was the young ruffian whom Westerham knew by the name of Crow.

It was evidently Crow, too, who was in supreme command.

The bullet-headed man rose up and stared at Westerham with starting eyes. The other men followed his gaze and leapt to their feet with cries and oaths.

Crow, of the vicious eyes and the hawk-like nose and the large, brutal hands, alone seemed undismayed.

The negro, having waited just sufficiently long to watch the sensation caused by Westerham's entrance, had slipped out of the club-room on silent feet.

Crow, in a quick, hard voice, cried, “The door!”

Instantly, as though their stations had by previous arrangements been allotted them—as was indeed the case—two men jumped from their seats and put their backs against the door. As they stood there they drew their knives, and on taking a step forward Westerham found himself cut off from retreat and facing the angry eyes of quite a score of men.

Two of them had pulled out revolvers, but Crow caught their action with quick and angry eyes.

“Don't be fools,” he said; “put those barkers away. We want no noise down here.”

Sullenly the men obeyed.

“Come to the table, Mr. Robinson,” said Crow, in a manner which suggested he had no doubt that his instructions would be followed, “and explain what this intrusion means.”

Westerham laughed and drew away from the men with the knives. He walked easily down to the table to the place which had been vacated by the bullet-headed man, and without so much as a word of apology took that plump and furious person's seat.

He looked easily and almost lazily along the lines of vicious faces until his gaze finally rested on Crow.

“I understood,” he said, in a pleasant voice, “that after my introduction the other night I was at liberty to come here when I pleased.”

“Unfortunately,” said Crow, “you have made a mistake. We had no desire to see you then, much less had we any wish to set eyes on you again.”

“I should think not!” blared the bullet-headed man.

From the rest of the men came murmurs and angry words.

“My visit,” said Westerham, “should be of considerable interest to you all. It is also of considerable interest to myself, as it proves that you act independently of Melun. I understood from him that you held no council unless he was with you.”

“Are you his cursed spy?” cried the man on his right, rising from his seat and bringing his fist down with a bang on the table.

“No,” said Westerham, looking the man straight in the face, “I am not.”

“Sit down, Smith!” shouted Crow.

The man sat down.

“Now, my pretty gentleman,” Crow went on, “we have had enough of you, just as we have had enough of Melun, who has brought you into this business for no good so far as we are concerned, and we do not propose that matters should go any further; in fact, it is rather handy that you thought of coming down East to us, as otherwise we should have come up West to you.”

“Indeed,” said Westerham, who was still smiling at Crow.

“Yes,” Crow went on, “you have saved us a great deal of trouble. You are a cool hand, Mr. Robinson, but we are just as cool. This spot was not chosen for its beauty; it was chosen for its advantages.”

At this some of the men laughed coarsely, while several of them swore.

“Melun's kid-glove business is all very well in its way. It has made a bit of money in its time, but it seems to us—we were just discussing the matter to-night—that we can do pretty well without the captain and his swells up West.

“It is a long time since his nice West End pals brought any grist to our mill, and we don't propose to go on like this for ever.

“What brought matters to a head was your arrival. We can stand a good deal, and we can wait a good deal. We are financed now and again by men whom we never set eyes on, and, according to Melun, we pay them a pretty rate of interest for our share of the work, but that is neither here nor there. What we do object to—and what you will find we object to to the extent of putting an end to it—is the importation of Yankee swankers from the States.”

Westerham raised a protesting hand, but Crow did not heed him.

“Oh, it is no use your objecting,” he said; “we can read you like a book. Things have been worse ever since your arrival. Melun has practically never been near us so that we have been left to our own resources. Well, we don't mind that; but we will see that the resources are such as we like.”

He laughed a jarring laugh.

“Now you may be as bad as the worst of us, and it may be you won't stick at much; and it may be that you have in that clever head a thousand ways of keeping us in funds. I should say by the look of you, you had.

“But I should say, too, that you were one of the mean breed, who keeps things to himself. You are too much class for us. We don't suit your book, and so we can rot while you and Melun spend the dibs up West. Now, that's not good enough.”

Crow looked round the table, the men nodded, and he continued:—

“We are going to end it here and now. Mark you, Mr. High-and-Mighty, we owe you one grudge already. We did not go looking after you to interfere with your pleasures, which probably are a deal worse than ours. In the same way, we do not allow any interference with what we do down here.

“It's a thing which Melun himself never dares to do, and why should you? It's more than we can stand. I am talking about those girls the other night.”

Westerham was still smiling with his eyes hard and bright. “Perhaps,” he said, “you had better let me inform you that if I found the same state of things going on to-night I should interfere again.”

Some of the men stared in astonishment at his audacity. Crow's face went white with passion.

“Would you, my beauty? I don't think you would.”

Then in a flash he had drawn a six-shooter from his pocket and yelled “Hands up!”

Westerham laughed outright. Unless he should so lose control over himself as to act foolishly he knew that Crow would not fire. He had already told two men that they wanted no firing that night.

So, instead of putting his hands up, he folded them placidly on the table.

“Put that thing away,” he said quietly, “until you explain precisely what you intend to do.”

Crow lowered his weapon but kept it on the table. He even laughed a hard, short laugh.

“Well, you are a good plucked 'un at any rate,” he said, “and as your number's up, and dead men tell no tales, I don't see why I shouldn't oblige you.

“You think,” he continued, making an attempt to imitate Westerham's cool, off-hand way of speech, “that this is a working-man's club.

“Well, it is not exactly that. It is a club, sure enough, with pretty fixed rules —rules which, if broken, may result in a man's light being put out.

“The same may be said of anyone who offends us. You have offended us.

“Now, though Melun comes in through ‘The Cut,’ we come in the other way. No one in London except the members of this club know that there are two entrances. We come in by the main door, and that gives on to a path which runs by a handy canal.

“Shooting is noisy, and knives mean messy work. Strangling is just as simple and just as easy, and, with the clothes off you, and with a good lead weight on your feet, there'd not be much chance of your disappearance ever being traced to this place.”

He stared at Westerham with a fixed beast-like glare.

Westerham, however, with his hands still folded placidly on the table, was smiling blandly.

“Allow me,” he said, seeing that Crow had made an end of speaking, “to congratulate you on a very pretty little programme—but a programme which, I fear, is hardly likely to be carried out to-night.”

“Str'wth,” cried a man, craning across the table towards Westerham, “are you a copper's nark? Have you put the police on us?”

Half a dozen men rose from their seats and looked with scared faces at Crow.

Crow, somewhat to Westerham's admiration, kept his head.

“See to the door,” he said.

Two other men rose, and going to Westerham's side of the long room, opened the door leading into a little porch; through this they went out on to the footpath by the canal and peered cautiously up and down.

Presently they came back shaking their heads.

“Have another look,” said Crow. “Search a little further.”

The two men went out again, and in the complete silence which now prevailed their footsteps could be heard through the open door pacing up and down the path.

Returning, they reported that everything was quiet.

“Very well,” said Crow, “but, all the same, you had better get to your posts.”

The two men went out once more and closed the door after them.

“Bluff!” said Crow, insolently, to Westerham, “just bluff. But you cannot come bluff on us, for all your Yankee smartness.”

“No,” said Westerham; and his face was still the face of a man who is immensely amused and interested.

“What are you grinning at?” snarled Crow.

“I was grinning because, whatever you may contrive to do to me, it struck me as being rather funny that one man in a place like this should manage to scare so many.”

Crow's hand gripped the handle of his revolver.

“That will do,” said Westerham, growing suddenly serious, for he realised that while the men were posted at either end of the canal-path there was just a chance that Crow might risk the noise of firearms.

“Now, Mr. Crow,” Westerham continued, “I have allowed you to say a good

deal and insult me very considerably. As a matter of fact, I do not happen to be an American—not that that makes very much difference. Who I am and where I come from is no concern of yours. And I don't propose to tell you.

“I propose to tell you something else, though, and I regret to say that it is a tale of breach of faith—of a breach of faith committed by a member of what you are pleased to call ‘the club.’”

The men looked at each other.

“The name of the offending member,” said Westerham, slowly and deliberately, “is Melun.”

At the mention of this name most of the men broke out into volleys of cursing; but Westerham held up his hand for silence.

“I entered into a certain agreement with Melun on certain terms,” he said. “Is it news to you that the price I offered for his services and for the services of yourselves was a hundred thousand pounds?”

“Good Heavens!” Crow exclaimed, and then sat muttering to himself.

The rest of the men were too astonished to speak.

“You are a liar!” shouted Crow.

“Pardon me,” said Westerham, “I am no liar, as I am quite prepared to prove to you. Now I have every intention, provided that Melun holds good to his promise, of handing him over that sum. I simply tell you this in order that you may see to it that you get your proper shares.”

“You liar!” exclaimed Crow again.

“Pardon me,” said Westerham, “but you really are mistaken.”

He put his hand into his breast and pulled out a pocket-book.

“Here,” he said, “I have the sum of ten thousand pounds in notes.”

Drawing them out, he flung them carelessly on the table.

So utterly were the men lost in amazement that they could do nothing but stare in silence at the notes.

“Now, I may as well be quite frank,” Westerham went on, “and tell you that I have not the slightest intention of handing those notes over to you. Nor, for that matter, do I intend having them stolen.

“You might take them from me, but you would merely have to destroy them, for I have taken the precaution of informing the bank that all these notes have been lost. I can well afford to let such a sum as this lie idle for a time, and the numbers were posted this afternoon.”

“Good Heavens!” said Crow once more.

“Now,” Westerham continued as evenly as ever, “I hope that this, to some extent, proves that what I say is true.”

Some of the men nodded assent.

“Well,” said Westerham, looking about him, “I will take it for granted that you are prepared to believe me. So far so good.”

“I have now to tell you that Captain Melun is at the present moment engaged in a deal of the most stupendous proportions. He has mentioned to me that the sum he hopes to net is over a quarter of a million.”

He paused and looked round at the men again. They continued to stare at him open-mouthed, remaining entirely silent. They were beyond all speech.

Glancing at Crow, Westerham saw with satisfaction that he was evidently much amazed and beginning to look uneasy.

“Well, gentlemen,” Westerham continued, “it is unnecessary for me to mention the names of the people who are assisting Captain Melun in this enterprise. I really believe that they don't even know what the enterprise is. But there is an exception. One of them does know, because the business may involve dirtier work than Melun may care to do with his own hands.”

Westerham paused, and saw that Crow's face was as pale as ashes.

Again his intuition proved to be correct.

“Gentlemen,” he cried, rising, and pointing an accusing finger at Crow, “that is the man who knows!”

“It's a lie!” shrieked Crow; “it's a lie! It is only a matter of ten thousand pounds. Melun swore it to me.”

In the silence that followed Westerham laughed loud and long.

“Gentlemen,” he said at last, “I ask you if ever a man more completely condemned himself out of his own mouth?”

Now the tide of anger turned and swept towards Crow.

There was a great clamour, while the men, with curses, shouted at him for an explanation.

Then above the hubbub there came a loud knocking, and turning in the direction of the sound they saw Melun, smiling and pleasant-looking as ever, pounding on the floor with his stick, while the negro stood behind him, grinning over his shoulder.

Instantly silence fell again.

“Now, then,” called Melun, coolly, “be quiet, all of you. Be quiet at once. We have been betrayed, and the man who has betrayed us is there!”

For some seconds the men looked from Westerham to Melun, and then from Melun to Westerham. But the power of their old allegiance held good, and before he could utter a sound Westerham was seized and borne savagely to the floor.

When he found himself pinned to the ground Westerham made not the slightest attempt to struggle. He had been in similar predicaments before, and knew that a policy of passive resistance was best.

And, just as he had expected, when he made no effort to release himself the men partially relaxed their hold of him. Two of them, indeed, dragged him into a sitting posture.

By this time Melun had taken his place at the head of the long table, and was rapping on the bare boards for order and for silence.

“Two of you are enough there,” he said. “The rest of you get back to your seats.”

The men followed his instructions hastily and almost sheepishly.

When they were all seated again, Melun looked down their ranks sharply and a little furtively.

CHAPTER XI
MURDER MYSTERIOUS

Melun's glance down the ranks of the men satisfied him that he had things well in hand.

The bullet-headed man was shifting about on his seat, and Crow sat with a pasty face, twisting and bending his great, brutal fingers.

“Gentlemen,” said Melun, almost politely, “I expect you feel that some explanation is due from me.”

The majority of the men nodded in a surly way.

“Well,” Melun continued, “the explanation is simplicity itself. I have been duped by that man.”

Again he pointed to Westerham.

“He introduced himself to me,” he went on, “as a colleague in our own particular line of business, and suggested certain schemes to me. Some of them appeared to me to be good, but I may as well tell you that they were at the moment of no use to me, as I had on hand a piece of business which, if I had pulled it off, would have enabled us to rest on our laurels for a considerable period.”

At this point Melun laughed to himself. Westerham was sitting bolt upright on the floor, with every evidence of the closest attention. He was of half a mind to call Melun a liar there and then, but he knew that the greater the lies, and the more the lies, the easier he could refute them. So he let Melun run on without protest.

“Yes,” continued the captain, “it was a very great piece of business indeed, so important a piece of business that it was necessary to keep it from even my most intimate friends and helpers. There was nothing unusual in this, for, as you know, I have often conducted campaigns without letting you into my secrets until success had been assured.

“On this occasion, considering the position of the person I was assailing, the strictest secrecy was necessary. I didn't even inform the kind friend who

finances us what I was about. I didn't even tell Crow of my movements, though I had informed him that something out of the common was in view.

“However, with the appearance of that man whom you now see convicted as a traitor, there was introduced into our affairs a certain element—treachery and suspicion.

“One never knows,” Melun went on with calm mendacity, “of what one may be accused; and I therefore took the precaution to inform at least one of you of what I was about, lest it should be charged against me that I was playing the rest of you false.

“The man to whom I spoke of this matter was Patmore. Patmore, be good enough to stand up.”

Patmore rose and glanced uneasily at his chief.

“Be so kind as to repeat, as accurately as you can, what I told you,” Melun ordered him.

Patmore began to speak rapidly, and with what, to a keen observer, might have seemed a somewhat parrot-like air.

“You told me,” he said, looking at Melun, “that this was a matter of blackmail.”

He spoke quite unblushingly, as though such a business was an every-day affair, which, as a matter of fact, it was.

“You told me,” he continued, “that the person to be blackmailed occupied a high position in the State, and that it was so necessary for him to purchase our silence that he would pay practically any price.

“You mentioned a quarter of a million, of which you yourself proposed to take fifty thousand pounds, dividing the rest of the money among us. You also took the oath of the club before me and declared that whatever might be said to the contrary you were determined to play fair.

“You further said that it was absolutely impossible to reveal any details of the scheme to me, as, should anyone know of the matter besides yourself, discovery would be inevitable.

“In fact, you declared that it was the most difficult, and at the same time the boldest, piece of work that you had ever attempted.”

Patmore stopped abruptly in his recitation.

“And that, gentlemen,” said Melun, nodding towards the men, “is absolutely true.

“It is also true,” he continued, “that to win this vast amount of money it was necessary to lay out a certain amount of capital. I hadn't the money on hand, and it was inadvisable to approach the usual sources.

“I trusted”—and there was an increased bitterness in his voice—“I trusted this man Robinson.

“But, would you believe me, gentlemen, I have just discovered that he is not Robinson at all, nor Smith, nor Jones—nor anyone, indeed, of small importance in this world?

“Now, gentlemen, it would be inadvisable at this moment to tell you precisely who he is, but one thing I may tell you, and that is that he is a gentleman of title, and a man of wealth and position.”

The men turned their wondering gaze on Westerham.

“Now, for what purpose do you suppose that a man of title, of wealth and position is mixing himself up with our affairs?”

Melun paused for a few minutes, and watched with satisfaction intelligence dawn on the stupid, brutal faces before him, which stared first at himself in amazement, and then gloomily and savagely at Westerham.

Westerham, however, to their further astonishment, was laughing quietly, his teeth bared in quite an amused and pleasant smile.

“Now, gentlemen,” Melun continued, “it is one of our unbreakable rules that all traitors must die. Therefore, anyone who is likely to betray us must die also.

“From what I know of this man,” he went on, “he will be too proud to purchase his freedom. In short, not to put too fine a point on it, we cannot bleed him, though his wealth is enormous. I fancy it runs into millions.”

Little cries of wonderment and anger broke from the glowering men round the table.

Westerham laughed aloud.

“In fact,” cried Melun, “though I much regret the necessity of having to take such a step, I am afraid this gentleman's last hour has arrived.

“His death,” he added quietly, “will be carried out by the usual means.”

Crow started eagerly from his chair.

“Is it to be done at once?” he asked.

“At once,” said Melun.

All this time, though he had laughed now and again and never ceased to smile a bold, amused smile, Westerham's quick brain was taking in every word and watching for some means of deliverance. He saw that he was in an extremely tight corner, but he did not doubt his ability to find a way out.

The two men who were acting as his warders suddenly seized his hands, and before he quite realised his position Westerham found himself handcuffed.

Still, however, he made no resistance.

“Gentlemen,” he cried, raising his voice so that it rang through the room and dominated all who were gathered there, “gentlemen, a man is usually permitted to say something when he has been condemned to death. I make no quarrel with your decision. If I were in your place I should probably do the same myself by another man as you are doing by me.

“I don't wish to dispute your decision, much less do I wish to plead for mercy. Melun has denounced me for the simple reason that I have the misfortune to be a gentleman. Well, gentlemen have a habit of dying as such.

“I trust I shall be no exception to the rule, but still, before you carry out your kind intentions, I should like to say something to Melun.”

“Bring him to the table,” said Melun. He looked uneasily at Westerham and avoided the steadiness of his glance. He felt that the moment was an awkward one. It was unwise to allow Westerham to speak; on the other hand, it would have been folly to deny him the privilege.

“Well, what is it?” he demanded sharply as Westerham stepped up to the table and leant his manacled hands on it.

Westerham bent forward over the table as far as he could and looked Melun straight in the face.

“You will not strangle me,” he said in a very quiet voice, “because THEY ARE NOT WHERE THEY WERE.”

Melun turned pale as ashes, and seemed to shrink in his seat.

“Good Heavens, man, what do you mean?” he cried.

Once again the men were glancing stupidly from Westerham to Melun, and back from Melun to Westerham.

“I repeat,” said Westerham, more pointedly than before, “that THEY ARE NOT WHERE THEY WERE.”

There was a long and uncomfortable pause while Melun sat rigid in his chair biting his nails.

Westerham had made a long shot, and had found the mark.

He had argued that Melun's control over the Premier was due to the illegal possession of some of Lord Penshurst's papers, though he did not know whom these papers might concern nor where Melun had placed them.

Certainly the captain had not hidden them in his own rooms, nor in the rooms of any of his confederates; for without a doubt if Lord Penshurst had not scrupled to burgle Westerham's flat, he would not scruple to ransack the houses of Melun or his friends.

Indeed, Westerham guessed that the hiding-place must be a very strange and secret one—so strange and so secret that probably only the subtle mind of Melun could have conceived it.

Thus he had come to the conclusion that it would cause Melun most terrible alarm if that individual even suspected he had an inkling of the whereabouts of the papers. Nor was he mistaken.

Slowly and painfully Melun pulled himself together. The easy confidence which had marked his manner and his talk a few moments before was now utterly gone. He was a broken, almost a cringing, man; and Westerham realised that Lord Penshurst could not be setting any fictitious value on the stolen papers.

These papers could involve no mere matter of sentiment or personal honour or pride. Some colossal undertaking must be at stake.

It was also obvious to Westerham that if the papers fell into strange hands the consequences must be terrible for all concerned. For the anxiety and fear on Melun's face were greater than the anxiety and fear of a man who hazards all in a great stake and thinks he has lost.

Presently Melun got unsteadily out of his chair and came round the table to Westerham.

“Stand away there!” he said to the two men who were guarding the baronet. “Stand away there!”

The men fell back, and Melun, coming close up to Westerham, whispered in his ear: “What do you mean that ‘they are not where they were’? Do you mean the papers?”

Westerham nodded.

“Where are they?” Melun whispered again.

“I decline to say,” said Westerham.

He might well decline, for he had not the least idea.

“I will make you tell me, you dog!” cried Melun.

“You won't,” answered Westerham, suavely.

“By Heaven!” shouted Melun, “but I will. There are more unpleasant things done in this place than you ever dreamt of in your philosophy. The times of the Inquisition are not past for some people.”

“It will take a little more than you to frighten me, you cur,” said Westerham, in a low voice.

Melun's face blazed with passion. He drew back a pace, and then struck Westerham heavily across the mouth.

On his part Westerham did not hesitate for a moment. He lifted both his fettered hands and brought his steel-bound wrists down with a crash on Melun's head; and the captain went sprawling to the floor.

“Look you here,” cried Westerham to the dumbfounded ruffians who stood watching the scene as though they were chained to their chairs. “Look you here; I will deal with men, but not with curs such as this.”

He touched Melun with his boot.

“You cannot deny,” he continued, purposely dropping to a certain extent into their own jargon, “that I was game. I was prepared to die, but I am not prepared to be struck by swine like this.

“Why,” he went on, turning Melun's prostrate body over with his foot, “he is a liar through and through.

“Did I speak the truth just now when I convicted Crow out of his own mouth? I did. I proved it. And surely Melun has now condemned himself in his

turn.

“Do you think that there would be all this fuss over a bundle of papers if there weren't more in the matter than he ever intended to tell you? Not a bit of it.”

The men murmured angry assent, and Westerham felt that he was at last winning through.

“Do you think,” he went on boldly, “that I am the kind of man who deserves to be tortured to reveal the truth? I say no; and so will you.”

Again the men nodded.

“This fellow Melun says that I have betrayed him and you. Let him prove it. I tell him that ‘the papers are not where they were.’ He knows where he placed them; let him go and see. I am content to abide here until he returns.”

It was now the turn of the bullet-headed man to speak.

“Get him to his feet,” he said, pointing to Melun.

Melun was dragged up, dazed and bleeding.

“You will do nothing to this gentleman,” said the bullet-headed man, waving his hand with some deference towards Westerham, “until you have cleared yourself. You will have to see if the papers are gone. But you don't go alone—not much!”

Then Crow spoke up: “Let me go with him,” he pleaded.

The bullet-headed man shook his head. “You have almost as much to answer for as Melun,” he objected.

“No,” he continued. “Ross is the man. We can trust Ross.”

Ross came forward as though the task of watching Melun was not an unwelcome one.

“Yes, boys,” he said, “you can trust me. I will go.”

“Then pull him together a bit,” ordered the bullet-headed man.

Thereupon they roughly plucked Melun's clothes into shape, sponged his face clear of blood, set his hat on his head, and put his stick into his hand.

By this time he had practically recovered himself. He gave one quick look of intense hatred towards Westerham and one quick, vindictive glance in the

direction of the man with the bullet head.

“Very well,” he said, in a rather shaky voice. “If it must be, it must be. You are fools to believe your enemy, but I cannot prevent you. If you must know all, you will probably lose all; well—so much the worse for you.”

He jerked his waistcoat down and assumed a certain air of bravado. In spite of himself, Westerham could not but admire the man. At this point Crow urged again that he should be allowed to accompany Melun. Ross made no objection, and he was given leave to go.

The scoundrels round the table then watched Melun take his departure with Ross and Crow. The room was very quiet, and Westerham could hear the men's retreating footsteps along the path of the canal.

When they had quite ceased to be audible Westerham turned again to the bullet-headed man.

“How long do you suppose,” he asked, “we shall have to wait?”

“Heaven knows,” answered the fat man, with a shrug.

“Then, if you will permit me,” said Westerham, “I will sit down. And,” he added, “I should be obliged to you if you will remove these.”

He stretched out his handcuffed wrists.

One of the men laughed and knocked them off. Westerham thanked him and sat down.

Without more ado he took out his cigarette-case and lit a cigarette. As he smoked he turned things rapidly over in his mind. He was perfectly certain that Melun, in spite of his protestations, would not reveal the whereabouts of the papers. Westerham even doubted whether Melun would take the trouble to lead the man on a bogus chase.

For some reason which he was unable to account for he had a foreboding of coming evil. He tried to shake it off, but in vain.

Time and time again he tried to think matters out and decide what Melun's probable course of action would be. But time and time again he failed to work out any theory which satisfied him.

At last, when half an hour had gone by and the delay was becoming irksome, Westerham spoke up again.

“If you will call for silence,” he said to the bullet-headed man, “there is something else I would like to say.”

The bullet-headed man called at once for order.

“Gentlemen,” said Westerham, addressing the men for the third and last time that night, “will you allow me to range myself on your side? I really think I have proved myself sufficiently a man to warrant my asking this.

“I will not take your oath, but if you will take the word of a gentleman, I will pledge it that, come what may, I will never reveal to anyone what has taken place to-night.”

There was considerable grumbling at this, but the bullet-headed man forcibly expressed his favourable opinion.

“Look here, mates,” he cried, turning to the others, “I know a gentleman when I see one, and I know that this gentleman is to be trusted. If Melun wants to do his own dirty work, let him do it.

“In spite of all his boasting our hands have been pretty clean up to the present. It is quite true that we have always been prepared to put a man out of the way if it had to be done, but we have never done it yet.

“And there is no reason, so far as I can see, that we should begin now. So long as we know where to find this gentleman, that should be good enough for us. I am not much of a hand at an argument, but one thing seems to me pretty plain. If this gent”—he indicated Westerham—“had wanted to give us away he would have given us away long since. No, you may depend upon it that whatever his reasons may be he's got as good cause to keep silence as we have. Don't you think that's right?”

Again there was a good deal of grumbling, but on the other hand there was general assent.

“So I will tell you what we will do,” continued the bullet-headed man, now certain of his ground. “We will let him go on one condition—that he allows me and another man to accompany him home. That seems to be fair. It may be taking a bit of a risk, but it is the only thing to be done unless we want to do murder, and that is not our game. I am not taking any chances of hanging while there's money to be got, and no doubt but that this gentleman will use us fair.”

Westerham caught his meaning, and for the second time took out his pocket-book.

“I said that you would not steal these notes, and I also said that I would not give them away. But I have changed my mind. There they are—and I give you my word that to-morrow I will take the embargo off. It will be easy enough for you to find out whether they are posted as lost or not. I can scarcely do more.”

To this there was greedy assent, and Westerham realised that he was free. He did not even wait for the bullet-headed man's full approval, but reached out for his hat.

There was some dispute as to whom the notes should be given, and finally it was decided that Mackintosh—such was the name of the bullet-headed man—should keep them in his own charge. And then he and a second man by the name of Hicks accompanied Westerham out.

In the main road they took a tram and travelled westward. At Aldgate Westerham hailed a cab, and the three men drove through the half-empty city streets, past St. Paul's, and up Fleet Street, into the Strand.

As they drew near to Walter's, Westerham's quick eye detected a crowd round the hotel. He thrust his hand through the trap-door in the roof and brought the cab to a standstill.

“Look here,” he said quickly to the other men, “that crowd is outside Walter's—and that is where I live.

“You can accompany me to the door if you like and see me go in; but I should not drive up if I were you, as you will only arouse interest, and possibly someone may see and recognise you. That would be awkward both for you and for me.”

Mackintosh gave a grin of agreement, and alighting, the three men walked towards the hotel.

As they approached the crowd, Mackintosh and his companion drew away from Westerham.

“It will do if we see you go in,” said the bullet-headed man, “we will wait here.” And he moved into a little opening on the side of the street opposite the hotel.

Westerham struck across the Strand and pushed his way through the press. The hotel door was closed and guarded on either side by a constable. Through the glass doorway Westerham could see the face of the hall porter peering out, pale and anxious and questioning.

He rapped on the door, and the porter opened it, the policemen making no demur, seeing that the porter obviously recognised the new arrival.

At the further end of the hall were gathered a number of the visitors, talking excitedly, but in low voices.

Two immensely large and solid men were seated on a bench. They rose up as Westerham entered, and he immediately recognised one of them as the inquisitive Mr. Rookley from Scotland Yard.

Rookley, with a stern, set face, walked forward to meet Westerham, and touched him with a forefinger on his chest.

“I have been waiting for you,” he said.

The sense of coming evil against which Westerham had struggled earlier in the evening swept over him again with redoubled force. He made an effort to shake it off, but again failed to do so.

“What is it?” he asked, and his voice sounded strange and harsh even to himself.

Without a word, Rookley grasped his arm and led him up the stairs, nor did he stop till he reached the second floor, on which were situated Westerham's sitting-room and modest bedroom.

Opening the door of the sitting-room, Rookley drew Westerham in and closed the door again.

“Look here, Mr. Robinson,” he said, “you gave us the slip last time, I admit; and I admit also that it was only by a very dreadful miracle that I discovered your whereabouts to-night. For I was summoned here on an awful piece of business. But we've got you now, and I want an explanation.”

Westerham stared at him with a set face.

“Now, one thing is certain—I will give you that much credit”—the detective continued—“that you are not the actual perpetrator of what has happened. Perhaps, too, it would be better to prepare you for a shock, though you look a pretty strong-nerved man. You'd better brace yourself, Mr. Robinson.”

“All right,” said Westerham, quietly.

Without more ado the detective pushed open the door communicating with Westerham's bedroom and led the way in.

The room was in darkness, but Rookley, putting his thumb on the electric button, suddenly switched on the light. And with a cry Westerham stepped back and blundered against the detective.

For on the bed was stretched Ross, the man who had left him in the company of Crow and Melun; and driven hard up to the hilt, straight through the man's heart, was a knife which Westerham instantly recognised as one of his own.

The detective seized him almost roughly and hurried him mercilessly up to the bedside.

“Read that!” he whispered hoarsely.

Westerham stooped and saw attached to the handle of the knife a luggage label which bore the name of Walter's hotel.

And on the luggage label was printed in hand-writing the following inscription:—

“So perish all traitors. Be warned in time. The girl may be the next.”

CHAPTER XII
THE PRIME MINISTER IS COMPROMISED

Horrified though he was, Westerham made no sign. He had stood in the presence of death before, and he had faced it in more dreadful forms, though it is true he had never known it so intimately and so poignantly.

“The girl may be the next,” the words seemed ominous—like a doom. Troubles encompassed him on every side. An hour or so previously he had faced the greatest odds he had ever known till then. The odds were greater now.

Conscious that the keen eyes of Rookley were upon him, he saw that instant action was necessary, and turning on his heel he walked deliberately into the sitting-room.

The detective followed him, and then seating himself at the table, Westerham bade the man take a chair.

For a moment the detective's face lighted up with anticipation. It seemed to him that at last the mysterious Mr. Robinson was about to make some statement. His anticipations were, however, to be disappointed.

“Well,” said Westerham, in a pleasant, even voice, “I am waiting for you to begin.”

“I was hoping,” said Mr. Rookley, “that you were about to make some statement.”

“I never make statements,” said Westerham, “any more than I answer questions which are inconvenient. What have you to say?”

Suddenly the detective leant forward and spoke so quickly that Westerham was almost thrown off his guard.

“Who are you, Mr. Robinson?”

“I can only give you the same answer,” said Westerham, “which I gave you before—that my name is my own business.”

“You are aware, of course,” pursued Rookley, “that the present occasion is more serious than the last. You seem to have an unfortunate habit of coming in on the heels of awkward occurrences.”

“It does seem like it just now,” agreed Westerham.

There was a pause and Westerham was the first to speak again. “As you yourself know full well that I was not here when this business happened, I think that you had better clear the ground by telling me all you know if you wish me to assist you.”

Rookley looked at him sharply, but decided that Westerham was right.

“I will tell you,” he said.

“At about ten o'clock two men called and asked for you. Both of them were dressed rather like sailors, one man being short, the other tall. They were told that you were out.

“The tall man, however, said that he had come to see you in response to a letter, and that, as he knew you had a sitting-room, he would be obliged if they would allow him to wait with his friend.

“As the men were both quiet and respectable in dress and in manner, they were allowed to do so.

“After a little while the taller of the two men went down to the hall and told the porter that he had left his friend upstairs, and that he himself was going out to buy some cigarettes.

“The porter was a little surprised, but said nothing, but when half an hour had gone by he grew uneasy and going upstairs to the sitting-room discovered what you have just seen.

“The body was not touched, and we were immediately summoned by the police at Bow Street. The police-surgeon happened to be absent, and has not yet called. That accounts for the body being still undisturbed. We had, as a matter of fact, only been here a few minutes when you yourself arrived.”

“Is that all?” asked Westerham.

“That's all that I can tell you up to the present,” said the detective.

“What were the men like?” asked Westerham, though he had by this time little doubt as to the identity of the murderer, just as he knew well enough the identity of the victim.

“The murdered man,” said the detective, “you have seen yourself. The murderer—for there is not the slightest doubt that the taller of the two men stabbed the other—is described as being spare in build and black-bearded.”

“Black-bearded?” said Westerham, wonderingly.

Rookley looked at him sharply.

“You have suspicions?” he said.

“Is there a man without them?” asked Westerham.

“Come, come, sir,” urged the detective, “this is not a time for jesting.”

“I am not jesting,” said Westerham, and relapsed into silence.

“Don't you think,” asked the detective after a little while, “it would be better if you were to make a clean breast of everything?”

“I tell you frankly, Mr. Robinson,” he continued, “that I have changed my opinion about yourself. At first I thought you were a dupe of Melun's, but I was soon convinced that a man so astute as yourself could not possibly have been misled even by that clever scoundrel.

“Indeed, it seemed to me improbable that a gentleman of such ingenuity as yourself should have become a victim of any conspiracy. No, sir, it appears to me—mind, I am giving you every credit—that you are in some way bound up with a very extraordinary network of crime.

“What it is, of course, I cannot tell, unless you trust me. I wish you would see the wisdom of giving me your confidence. In the meantime I can only theorise.”

Mr. Rookley paused and looked infinitely wise.

“Go on,” said Westerham.

“In all probability,” Mr. Rookley proceeded, “you have become involved in some peculiar kind of vendetta. I assure you, sir, that when you are as versed in the machinations of mankind as I am you will not find such a supposition as mine at all romantic.

“If, however, such is the case, then Melun plays a part in it. And if Melun plays a part in it,” concluded the detective, with a fine show of pitiless logic, “then he had a hand in this. Now tell me, sir, do you suspect him?”

“I must once again,” said Westerham, “be allowed to point out that what I suspect is no affair of yours at all.

“I don't mind telling you, however, that I am involved in a very remarkable conspiracy. The part which I play is entirely innocent; on the other hand, it is

impossible for me to make the faintest revelation concerning it."

"But this is not the end of it," cried Rookley. "By no means the end of it. Look at the threat on the luggage label. 'The girl may be the next.' Now, what does that mean? Who is the girl?"

Westerham's ruddy face grew a little pale.

"The girl," he said, "is the lady it is my business to shelter and protect. By holding silent I can at least secure her life; if I breathe one word I can well believe that her fate may be the same as that of the man within."

He pointed to the bedroom.

"Then, sir," said the detective, banging his fist on the table, "it is your duty to tell us everything.

"The police can give protection to all who need it," he added after a pause.

"The police did not save the dead," answered Westerham. "And they cannot save the girl."

"Mr. Robinson," said the detective, darkly, "if you persist in silence I must resort to extreme measures. There was no justification in my detaining you yesterday over the gagging of your valet. But this is an entirely different piece of business.

"This is murder, and I should not be doing my duty if I did not turn every stone to bring the murderer to justice, I warn you solemnly that there is such a thing as being charged with complicity, and, if you continue to defy me as you do, then I shall have no other course but to take you in charge."

"My dear man," said Westerham, "don't be a fool. Let me implore you not to be led by a little exercise of your authority into taking a step which you would for ever regret.

"You have been extremely clever in your theories, but you have not been quite clever enough. I don't wish to be unkind, but you have lacked imagination. This is not some comparatively small affair; it is by no means a vendetta; it is by no means a quarrel over a woman.

"It is an affair in which half the participators act in blind ignorance. There are possibly only three people in existence who can throw any light on the matter. And they occupy such a position in this world that it would be extremely unwise for you to take any steps without their sanction."

“I don't know who are concerned in the matter,” said the detective. “It is that of which I complain.”

“And I,” answered Westerham, “am not in a position to enlighten you.”

“One thing, however, I can tell you,” said the detective, “and that is that however he may be indirectly concerned in this murder, Melun himself did not actually commit it. I have already ascertained that he was in his club at the time.”

If he expected Westerham to betray the slightest surprise, Rookley was disappointed. For although, as a matter of fact, he was astounded at this information, Sir Paul continued to stare at his interrogator in stony and unemotional silence.

“Indeed!” was the only remark he made.

Mr. Rookley rose and rang the bell, and when the servant appeared, asked him to request Mr. Moore to step upstairs.

A few minutes later Mr. Moore, the young detective whose acquaintance Westerham had made at his rooms in Bruton Street the day before, came briskly into the room.

“Mr. Moore,” said the detective, solemnly, “we must do our duty.

“It is our task to charge this gentleman with being concerned in this business.”

Westerham turned his hard, stern eyes on Moore, and the man felt uncomfortable.

“Very well, sir,” he said, looking at his chief.

“Stop!” cried Westerham, “before you do so, I want to ask you one or two questions. You, of course, are responsible to the Commissioner?”

Rookley nodded.

“And the Commissioner is responsible to the Home Secretary?”

Rookley nodded again.

“And the Home Secretary is, to a certain extent, responsible to the Prime Minister?”

Once more Rookley nodded.

“That being so,” Westerham continued, “will you allow me to ask you if you have ever known even as bad a business as this hushed up for high political motives?”

Rookley started and stared at him.

“Oh, I see you have,” said Westerham.

“This is not Russia, sir,” remarked Mr. Rookley.

“No,” said Westerham, “but, on the other hand, Russian methods are not wholly unknown in this country.”

It was Mr. Rookley's turn to look uncomfortable now.

“Now,” continued Westerham, “you have warned me. I want to warn you. In dealing with me you are dealing with no ordinary person. I assure you that by my silence I am doing my duty by the State, although I practically know no more what this means than you do. I give you my word on that.

“I know, however, sufficient to appreciate that my arrest must result in a great many inquiries, the effect of which will be disastrous, not only to individuals, but to the State. I repeat again that I cannot see plainly in what way, but I have sufficient knowledge to justify my assuming this conclusion.

“What I ask you therefore is this: Will you allow me to write a note to the Prime Minister in person? I will abide by the answer, which you can easily get from Downing Street within the space of half an hour.”

Mr. Rookley's face suddenly brightened, and there was a certain triumphant air in his manner, as much as to say that he had convicted Westerham of having blundered badly.

“The Prime Minister is away,” he snapped.

“I know that,” said Westerham, “but his private secretary, the Hon. Claude Hilden, is at No. 10. There is, moreover, a private telephone wire to Trant Hall. I know that because I was at the Hall yesterday.”

Mr. Rookley opened his eyes wide. His astonishment was intense and undisguised.

“I will write that note,” said Westerham—“and believe me that the writing of it will save a vast deal of trouble—on one condition. Will you pledge me your word that it shall not be tampered with and shall not be read by anyone until it is placed in the hands of Mr. Hilden himself?”

For a few moments the detective looked worried and doubtful.

“Very well,” he said finally; “but, of course, you must realise that if you are simply putting up a game on us the consequences will be all the worse for yourself.”

“I am perfectly aware,” said Westerham, coldly, “of precisely what I am doing.”

Thereupon he rose, and, going over to the writing-table, hastily wrote the following letter:—

“To the Honourable Claude Hilden, Private Secretary to the Right Honourable the Earl of Penshurst.

“*Personal and private.*

“DEAR SIR,—Kindly inform Lord Penshurst at once by telephone that the writer of this note—Mr. James Robinson, of Bruton Street—whose rooms were burglariously entered by yourself yesterday afternoon—is in an awkward predicament.

“For your own convenience I occupied, besides the flat in Bruton Street, rooms in Walter's Hotel. During my absence to-night an atrocious murder was committed in those rooms. The detectives called in to take charge of the case are convinced that, while I am not the murderer, I am involved in the conspiracy which brought it about. That conspiracy is perfectly well known to Lord Penshurst. There is no justification for my arrest, and the result of police-court proceedings must compel me to make revelations which may prove exceedingly awkward to his lordship.

“I recognise that there must be an inquest, and I am prepared to give evidence there. Nothing I may say there, however, will in any way involve the Prime Minister.

“I venture to write to you and point these things out, and to ask you that you should immediately communicate with Lord Penshurst by telephone, as, although I am practically in ignorance of all that is going on about me, I realise that some very important matter is involved which Lord Penshurst desires to keep to himself.—I am, yours faithfully,

“JAMES ROBINSON.”

Westerham fastened the note down, sealed it, and handed it to Rookley, who

instructed Moore to take it immediately to Downing Street.

There, Moore told Rookley afterwards, he had the unusual experience of seeing Mr. Hilden go pale as death, and of hearing him mutter excitedly to himself.

Then the private telephone was busy for some ten minutes, and presently Mr. Hilden came back still greatly agitated, and told Moore to instruct Rookley that Mr. Robinson was on no account to be detained.

Both the men were, moreover, enjoined to complete silence, and told that not a word of the matter must be breathed to anyone except the Commissioner himself.

When Moore came back with these various messages, Rookley sat for some moments as though entirely overcome.

When at last he spoke his voice was husky.

“I don't know what it's all about, sir,” he said to Westerham, “or who you may be. Apparently it is none of my business to inquire; but I tell you frankly that this beats everything that I have ever known in the course of my long experience.

“You will naturally have to take another room, as the body must not be touched till the police-surgeon has seen it, when it can be removed to the mortuary. You will get your summons for the inquest in the morning.”

He went into the bedroom where the dead man lay and shut the door with a bang.

Westerham, without even troubling to gather together his different effects, rang the bell and ordered another room. But, as may be imagined, he did not sleep much; indeed, he sat and smoked throughout the entire night, trying to account for the real motive which underlay the murder.

Slowly, too, he began to see that he had underrated Melun's resources and fiendish cleverness; for this was evidently Melun's work.

Yet it was difficult to account for Melun's presence in his club at the moment of the perpetration of the crime. Melun must have acted with almost superhuman swiftness and ingenuity.

Piecing the affair together as best he could, Westerham came to the conclusion that after the men had left Limehouse Melun must have purchased

Crow's adherence out and out; and this more than ever puzzled Westerham to understand what the amazing mystery in which he was entangled meant. He could well believe now that the stake was even greater than the quarter of a million the captain himself had mentioned.

Then he also became convinced that not only had he underestimated Melun's mental capacity, but that he had underrated his physical hardihood; for by this murder, unless he had in some subtle way pre-armed himself with a triumphant excuse, the captain had automatically cut himself adrift from the rougher spirits of his gang.

This reflection led to a great anxiety on Westerham's part, for he realised that if Melun could afford to take this step the crisis must be close at hand. And it was an exceedingly uncomfortable and hair-raising thought when he remembered the threat pinned to the dead man's chest.

“The girl may be the next.”

The words haunted him more than Kathleen's own extraordinary statement. He wondered impotently when the problems which beset him would cease to multiply.

The whole situation seemed to have a double edge, for while he rejoiced to think that the crisis must now be close at hand, he was correspondingly terrified by the thought that the crisis might involve, not only the safety, but even the life of Lady Kathleen.

That he could actually blackmail the Prime Minister to the extent of securing his immunity from arrest only increased his alarm, because he was able thereby to appreciate more than ever the reality of the unknown peril in which Lord Penshurst stood.

It was with much apprehension that he sent for the morning papers and read what they might have to say concerning the tragedy.

Fortunately the newspapers—whether by Rookley's instrumentality or not Westerham didn't know—were discreet almost to the verge of being indefinite.

They confined themselves to setting forth those details of the murder which could not be hidden; they advanced no theories whatsoever, contenting themselves by stating that the police had a clue and that important developments might be expected.

They did not mention the fact that the murder had been committed in the

room occupied by a Mr. James Robinson, but Westerham was glad to note that they did not speculate as to who he might be, nor did they attempt to give any account of his present or past circumstances.

He was prepared to face, and if necessary to defeat, a battery of questions when he went to the inquest.

The strange little coroner's court was packed to suffocation, and Westerham was conscious that every eye was turned upon him. But he drew some comfort from the reflection that this was inevitable, seeing that he was the only witness in the case beyond the hall-porter and the detective.

To his surprise he found that the coroner led him quietly through a few formal questions as to the hour at which he arrived at the hotel and what he had seen there. The coroner, indeed, made no attempt to discover Westerham's actual identity, nor even suggested that he should advance any theory of the strange affair.

At the close of Westerham's evidence, however, one of the jurymen became for a few moments a little troublesome.

“I think it should be asked,” said this gentleman, “whether Mr. Robinson's suspicions turn in any particular direction.

“Has anything occurred in his life that would suggest that such a crime might be looked for?”

But the coroner cut him short in such a freezing manner that Westerham rightly guessed that Rookley had been using a tactful influence.

“I consider that question,” said the coroner, “a most improper one. We have been assured by Mr. Rookley that there is not the slightest reason to associate Mr. Robinson with this crime. Interference on your part is out of place, and may even lead to a miscarriage of justice. I am perfectly certain that this matter may be safely left to the police, who should be allowed to take their own course of action.”

The juryman grumbled a little, but subsided, and the sharp eyes of the reporters at the tables looked disappointed.

A verdict of wilful murder by some person unknown concluded the inquest, from which Westerham hurried in order to evade further questionings from curious journalists.

He imagined that his hotel was likely by this time to be beset by reporters,

and so, having first acquainted Inspector Rookley with his intention, he went back to his rooms in Bruton Street.

There even the mask-like face of his valet bore some traces of distrust and curiosity. It was, however, without a word that the man handed him a note.

To his surprise, and with a little leap of his heart, Westerham saw that it was addressed in a woman's hand-writing, and for a moment he thought that the letter might be from Lady Kathleen. But he was very roughly undeceived, for, tearing open the envelope, his eye instantly caught the address—“Laburnum Road, St. John's Wood”—while across half a sheet of newspaper was scrawled:—

“For Lady Kathleen's sake, come to me at once.

“MARIE ESTELLE.”

CHAPTER XIII
THE GAMING-HOUSE

Westerham turned the note about and about in his fingers in the futile attempt to extract some further information from it.

He realised, of course, that the note boded a new move.

Had the crisis really crept so close? Or was the danger in which Lady Kathleen stood merely fictitious?

Possibly it was a trap; but that he had to risk. One thing was certain—he could not ignore the message.

On second thoughts, indeed, he was inclined to regard the summons as a real and urgent one. The murder at the hotel had shown him that Melun was not the man to stick at trifles.

Moreover, he recollected that Madame's concern at his becoming entangled in Melun's toils had without question been genuine. Madame, he almost persuaded himself, had been his friend from the beginning. He trusted that she might be now.

Without any further delay, therefore, he walked out into the quiet little street and turned in the direction of Berkeley Square, where he knew he would be sure to find a cab.

But as he emerged from the door a hansom passed him, and without thinking, he accepted the invitation of the driver to enter it.

Through the trap-door he told the man to drive to the Laburnum Road; and then as the vehicle moved along at a smart pace he gave himself up again to speculating in what way Kathleen might be in peril and from what motive Mme. Estelle had warned him.

He had come to no conclusion on this point when the hansom swung sharply round from the Finchley Road into Laburnum Road, which at that hour of the day was more quiet and deserted than ever.

Then a strange thing happened so suddenly that he had no time to ward off the danger in which he found himself.

Two steel arms, which had been so secreted in the upholstery of the cab as to be invisible, suddenly closed round his arms and body with a snap, and as the hansom was pulled up with a jerk he found himself a prisoner, so tightly squeezed by the encircling steel arms that he was unable to do more than wriggle in his seat.

In a moment the driver was off the dicky and had come round to the front of the cab. With a fascinated gaze Westerham watched him take a little phial from his pocket and saturate a handkerchief.

He divined the man's intention in a moment, and cried out an inquiry as to what he was about to do.

But the man made no answer, except to grin and climb on to the step of the cab.

A moment later he had clapped the handkerchief over Westerham's mouth and nose and held it there tightly for a few seconds.

Westerham was alike unable to struggle or cry out. For a few moments he fought against the overpowering odour of chloroform; then his vision grew dim, his ears began to sing, and he lapsed into complete unconsciousness.

When he awoke it was to find himself fully dressed and stretched upon a sofa. It was apparently morning-time, for the table close beside him was laid out as though for breakfast, and a flood of early sunshine was pouring in through the open French windows.

He was so astonished at his whereabouts that he closed his eyes again and endeavoured with a still half-numbed brain to call to mind the events which had brought him into such strange surroundings.

Slowly, stupidly, he began to remember Mme. Estelle's letter and his disastrous drive in the cab. But so dazed was he that he had for the purpose of fully arousing his faculties actually to repeat his name and address several times before his senses began to assume their normal condition of alertness.

When his brain was clearer he endeavoured to rise, but he immediately became dizzy again and sank back on the couch as though exhausted by a long illness.

So complete was the blank between the time he had been chloroformed and his awaking that he had not the faintest idea whether he had lain on the couch on which he found himself for hours or days, or even weeks.

Yesterday seemed to be a long time behind him.

So, finding exertion out of the question, he leant back with almost contentment among the pillows, and fell to wondering in whose house he might be. From the shape of the room and the aspect of the garden more than anything he came to the conclusion that the roof which sheltered him was that of Mme. Estelle. On this point, however, he could not quite make up his mind until the door opened softly and Mme. Estelle herself came into the room.

She walked over to the couch and stood looking down at him pleasantly and kindly.

Westerham was so astonished at her appearance that he could say nothing at all.

It was Madame who spoke first, but before doing so she drew a chair to his side and sat down. Then she said:

“Sir Paul, I owe you a deep apology.”

Westerham contented himself with a slight inclination of his weary head, and waited for Madame to explain.

“I can speak quite frankly now,” she said, “knowing that there is no one about to overhear, and I must begin by asking you to forgive me.”

Westerham nodded, but still said nothing, though now he saw plainly enough that the letter had merely been a blind.

“Yet,” Madame continued, turning her face away from him, “it was not so great a lie. Lady Kathleen was in peril, and is still in peril, but not in the peril which I really imagined at the time.”

“What do you mean?” asked Westerham.

Madame glanced uneasily about her, and then shrugged her shoulders.

“I cannot tell you, my friend. I wish I could.”

“She was in peril, is still in peril, but not in the peril in which she was,” Westerham repeated to himself. He removed his puzzled gaze from the woman's face and glanced at his feet.

Then he started violently, for the boots which he wore, comfortable though they were, were not his boots.

Struggling into a half-sitting posture, he looked hastily over his clothes.

They were not his clothes.

He endeavoured to rise and Madame helped him to his feet. On one side he supported himself by the table, and on the other by Madame's arm.

Then he took a step forward and deliberately surveyed himself in the glass. And his look of inspection filled him with intense surprise, though he did not allow himself to so much as utter an exclamation.

Mechanically he began to employ those little tricks of gesture which a man indulges in when he is anxious to ascertain if his clothes sit well on him.

To his amazement not one article of attire was his own; yet the blue serge suit in which he was clad was of such a perfect fit that he might have been moulded into it. He moved his toes inside his boot and found that of all the boots he had ever worn these were the most comfortable.

He put his hand to his tie and found that his collar was the exact size. Quickly and methodically he searched through his pockets; his handkerchief was where he always carried it; his keys were in his left trouser pocket; his money and knife in his right. Each in its own correct waistcoat pocket he found his nail clippers, his sovereign purse and tiny card-case. His cards were intact.

Plunging his hand into the inner pocket of his coat he discovered that his notebook was in its place. Almost instinctively he opened it and turned over the contents; nothing whatsoever had been disturbed.

So utterly dumfounded was he that he sat down heavily again upon the couch and stared at Mme. Estelle.

Madame laughed, showing her fine teeth.

“You are a little puzzled,” she suggested.

“Truly,” said Westerham, “I was never so puzzled in my life. Can you tell me what it all means?”

“I would that I were able,” said Madame, earnestly, “but it is quite impossible.”

“These things,” urged Westerham, stretching out his limbs, “what is the meaning of it? I can quite understand,” he added bitterly, “that it might be necessary for Melun to chloroform me for various reasons, but one of those reasons was apparently not theft.

“Indeed,” he added, with a wry smile, “the captain seems to have been

spending money on me.

“Tell me,” he cried, starting up and then falling back weakly, “tell me what all this means. I have had my fill of mystery during the last week.”

“Don't you think,” suggested Madame, quietly, “that it would be best to begin at the beginning? Surely it would be more reasonable for you to ask why you were chloroformed and brought here.”

“Well,” said Westerham, “why was it?”

“It was done,” said Mme. Estelle, “because it was necessary to make you a prisoner for nearly thirty hours—and it was the only way to do it. You see,” she added lightly, “you are a strong man, and I don't blame Melun for declining to risk a struggle with you.”

“But I don't understand any better now,” Westerham complained, passing his hand across his forehead. “Why should I be made a prisoner?”

Mme. Estelle touched his arm and looked earnestly into his face.

“Because,” she said slowly, “it was necessary to ensure that you should see Lady Kathleen to-night.”

“To see Lady Kathleen to-night,” cried Westerham. “When and where? Not here, surely?”

“No,” answered Madame, with a little smile, “not here, indeed.

“Events,” she went on, “have taken a very sudden and curious turn. Yesterday, I tell you frankly, your own life was in considerable danger. You may think it very cold-blooded and horrible of me to say such a thing, but I know that Melun had practically come to the conclusion that you must be put out of the way in order to save trouble.

“But I was averse to that, and, thanks to the plan I suggested, it was found unnecessary to do you any harm.”

“But why,” urged Westerham, “was it found necessary to play all these tricks with my clothes? Why, they must have been made from extremely careful measurements. I should say they had been modelled on one of my own suits. And the boots are the strangest part of all—they fit me like gloves.”

“It was intended they should,” said Mme. Estelle. “And be thankful that they do, for though it is impossible for me to explain, they have actually saved you from death. I assure you that there is no man this afternoon more jealous of

your safety than Melun.”

“And Lady Kathleen?”

“Lady Kathleen,” said Mme. Estelle, gravely, “is still in great danger—but it is a danger of a different kind.”

“You don't mean to tell me,” cried Westerham, “that whereas my life has been spared hers is not safe.”

Mme. Estelle nodded.

“Good Heavens!” cried Westerham. “But this is monstrous—perfectly monstrous! What does all this juggling mean?”

“Please don't excite yourself, Sir Paul!” said Mme. Estelle. “It can do no good. Believe me that I bear Lady Kathleen no ill-will, and that if I can save her I will do so, even at the cost of being a little disloyal to Melun.”

“But why all this trickery and mystery?” demanded Westerham again. “It almost amounts to tomfoolery. One would think that Melun had gone crazy and was indulging in some mad whim.”

“Perhaps it is a whim, but it is a whim with a very serious motive.”

“Come,” she added, “let's try to get some breakfast. I promise you that if you will only endeavour to get strong during the day you shall certainly see Lady Kathleen to-night.”

“Where?”

“Where,” said Mme. Estelle, “I don't know. I can only guess. It was not my business to ask questions on that point. The cab will call for you to-night at nine.”

“The cab!” exclaimed Westerham. “Do you mean the same vehicle which brought me here? For if you mean that then I decline to travel in it.”

“Then I fear,” said Mme. Estelle, sharply, “you will have to forego the satisfaction of seeing Lady Kathleen. The cab will be your only means of reaching her.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” demanded Westerham, who had been so unnerved by the chloroform as to become a little excited, “do you mean that I am a prisoner in this house?”

“Only so far as your feelings keep you captive,” was the answer.

“And I know what your feelings will say. They will decide that you must wait here in patience until the hour comes for you to go to Lady Kathleen.”

Westerham said no more; it was idle to argue with this woman. Circumstances were too strong and strange for him.

After breakfast he revived considerably, and Madame left him on the couch with a pile of magazines to amuse him.

Lunch was served at one, and the afternoon dragged slowly and painfully away. It was with great impatience that Westerham watched the table being leisurely and neatly laid for dinner. His irritation grew with every passing minute.

At dinner he ate but little and drank less, though Madame pleaded that a second glass of champagne would go far to steady his considerably shaken nerves.

Westerham, however, declined. He had become so suspicious of everybody and everything he half imagined that, not content with chloroforming him, his captors might attempt to drug him also.

At the stroke of nine Westerham heard the rumble of wheels in the street, and, rising from the table, Mme. Estelle informed him that the cab had arrived.

As they stood in the hall the woman held out her hand and Westerham put out his half-way to meet it.

“Some day,” he said, “I shall certainly require an explanation of all these strange doings. In the meantime, I don't think you should take my hand unless you are sincere in your determination to reduce Lady Kathleen's danger in every way you can.”

“Believe me,” declared Madame, most earnestly, “that I am quite sincere.”

Westerham shook her by the hand.

It was not until the cab was bowling along Oxford Street that Westerham began to look about him. He had no idea of his destination, and he considered that it would be just as well to take careful note of the journey.

Half-way between Oxford Circus and the Tottenham Court Road the cab turned up to the left. Peering through the glass, Westerham could just make out Newman Street. At the bottom of the street the cab turned to the left, then to the right again, then to the left, and once more to the right. So far as he could tell,

Westerham gathered that he must now be parallel to the top of Tottenham Court Road, and be a good deal nearer to Portman Street than Oxford Street.

Suddenly the cab drew up with a jingle and a clatter, and the driver, lifting the trap-door, informed Westerham that he had reached his destination.

Upon this Westerham stepped out to find himself in a narrow, shabby, and almost deserted thoroughfare of mean and hang-dog appearance.

In spite of this he recognised that the houses must once have been the dwellings of well-to-do people, for the railings about the areas were of finely-wrought iron and the doors were high and massive.

“Knock three single knocks,” said the cab-driver into his ear, and then jumping on to the dicky the man drove away.

Suddenly Westerham remembered that there was one pocket of his new clothes which he had not searched. His hand went towards his hip, and he was surprised to find that his revolver was without question there.

Glancing about to make sure that he was not observed, Westerham drew it out and felt with his thumb along the back barrels. It was still loaded. For a second Westerham wondered whether the bullets had been drawn, but, opening the six-shooter, he satisfied himself that the cartridges had not been tampered with.

This amazed him not a little, although the discovery considerably restored his confidence. At least he had to anticipate no further attack on that night.

And then he remembered the mysterious words of Mme. Estelle: “No man now is more jealous of your safety than Captain Melun.”

He could not help pondering on this point as he gave three taps with the heavy old-fashioned knocker.

The door was opened by a man, apparently a German, dressed in the black coat and white shirt of the traditional English butler.

He said something to him in a foreign tongue which Westerham could not understand. His gesture, however, was clear enough, and he walked straight ahead down a dimly-lighted passage till he came to a baize door. This the man pushed open for him, and he passed on alone, and heard a bolt drawn behind him.

There was not the slightest doubt as to the way he had to go. There was no

other exit from the place except a flight of stone steps, which led downwards. At the bottom of the flight of steps there was a second baize door, and through this Westerham passed along a well-carpeted corridor faintly lit by electric light. The passage had no windows, and it suddenly struck Westerham that he was underground.

At the end of the corridor Westerham encountered another baize door, but as he stepped on the mat which was laid before it he heard an electric bell ring sharply, and the door opened itself.

As it did so Westerham was almost blinded by a flood of white light.

For a moment he stood quite still, blinking and endeavouring to take in the scene. But it was the sound of it rather than the sight of it which instantly told him of the manner of the place in which he stood. He heard the monotonous cry of croupiers and the sharp click of a ricochetting roulette ball.

He was most unquestionably in a gambling-hell.

That in itself did not disturb him in the least, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the light he stepped forward into the room, only to stand still again and remain motionless, as though turned to stone.

For there, at a long table in the centre of the room, with piles of gold and notes before her, sat Lady Kathleen.

A little cry which Westerham could not prevent breaking from his lips drew the eyes of all upon him. Lady Kathleen glanced up, and catching his gaze upon her turned as pale as death.

CHAPTER XIV
LADY KATHLEEN'S MISSION

In spite of Mme. Estelle's declaration that he should see Lady Kathleen that night, and in spite of the conviction that Madame spoke the truth, Westerham, strange to say, had not expected to find her in the gaming-house.

As he entered the room of lights he had for a moment wondered for what reason he had been brought into such a place, but at the same time, by some swift mental process, he had decided that the mysterious gaming-house was but a step towards Lady Kathleen, and not the actual place in which he was to meet her.

For once his intuition had played him false and he was correspondingly taken aback. The deathly pallor, however, which had spread across Kathleen's face served to bring him to a swift realisation of the situation. It was imperative that there should be no scene; matters then would be doubly painful.

Westerham, therefore, instantly turned away and endeavoured to hide himself amid the odd jumble of men who stood round the table watching the play.

The chloroform still hung heavy in Westerham's brain, and at first he was quite unable to get any connected trend of thought. But presently his mental vision became clearer, and he was able to appreciate the extraordinary succession of events which had led up to this climax.

Melun he had not seen since the night of the atrocious murder at Walter's Hotel—and therefore he had been unable to extract from him any information of that villainous and apparently purposeless deed.

For what motive Melun might have in instigating such a crime, except it were to frighten him from his championship of Lady Kathleen, Westerham could not say. Then had followed his extraordinary adventure in the hansom cab and Madame's enigmatic utterances when he recovered his senses in the morning.

And if the motive of the murder were obscure, the motive which induced Melun and his accomplices to change his clothes while drugged was doubly hidden.

What, moreover, could be the motive in bringing him to behold Lady Kathleen in this gaming-house?

This last problem troubled him more than the others, and he gave himself up to considering it as he crouched down seeking to hide himself in the midst of the motley crowd which swayed and jostled round the tables.

Even as he debated this question with himself he took note of the men who hemmed the table in. Every type of face presented itself—the fleshy cheeks of middle-aged Jews, of pale clerks and salesmen, prosperous-looking men who might have been commercial travellers, and here and there a more refined-looking man in evening-dress.

A few were still playing, but the majority were watching the play of Lady Kathleen, and it dawned on Westerham that she was waging a losing fight with the bank.

Her face and figure were in extraordinary contrast to her surroundings. She was, besides, the only woman in the room.

Draped in a long opera cloak from which her bare arms were thrust, she sat forward eagerly in her chair, her lips trembling, her eyes bright as stars.

On either side of her sat a sturdy and rather roughly-dressed man, who took no part in the play. Westerham imagined that they were employees of Melun, stationed there for the purpose of ensuring Lady Kathleen against any molestation or insult.

Such a protection was entirely unnecessary, for every man in the room appeared to feel that he was in the presence of one who not only had the right, but the power, to command respect. In spite of her incongruous surroundings, and in spite of her extraordinary occupation of the moment, the coarse faces by which she was surrounded surveyed her with a certain marked and almost sheepish deference.

As the game went on and the croupier monotonously raked in the winnings of the bank, Westerham suddenly divined the motive which had induced Melun to send him there to watch Lady Kathleen play.

He did not know why she played, nor what the real stake might be, but one thing was obvious—that after he entered the room and she had caught sight of his face her luck suddenly changed. She had been greatly alarmed and distressed; so disconcerted, indeed, that for a few minutes she apparently lost all track of the successful theory which she had been following. And Westerham

knew well enough that if a good player once becomes unnerved, his luck, for some strange reason, will change with his mood, and no efforts, however bold or desperate, will avail him anything.

It amazed Westerham beyond measure that Lady Kathleen could play such a game with so consummate a skill and so much evidence of experience. He judged that her father at some time or other had let her have a little fling at Monte Carlo, and that profiting by such knowledge as she had acquired there she had now been playing an inspired game for some incalculable stake.

Westerham imagined, too, that it had probably been Melun's brutal fancy to drag the girl there on the promise that if she won against the bank he would release her father from his torment; no other theory was possible.

And it made his heart grow cold with rage as he appreciated the fiendish cleverness with which Melun had engineered his entrance at a critical moment. Westerham had been made the innocent instrument of utter disaster to Kathleen.

So convinced did he become of this fact that he shouldered his way through the crowd, and leaning over Lady Kathleen's chair, whispered into her ear: “Don't be alarmed. I see you have been greatly upset. Please allow me to assist you.”

The man at her right hand scowled angrily, but Westerham turned to him with an urbane smile. “As you do not seem to be playing,” he said, “perhaps you will allow me to have your chair?”

Nor had the man any option but to vacate his seat.

Westerham's spirits rose as for the first time in his life he found himself seated by Kathleen's side, playing on her behalf, to win a desperate game.

But the girl's inspiration was gone, and even his skill at this form of gambling availed him nothing. Time after time they lost until practically nothing remained of the great pile of money which had been stacked on the table before Lady Kathleen when he had entered the room.

The girl watched the money dwindle with terrified eyes, her face growing paler and paler until it was ashy white.

Westerham sought to console her. “Don't despair,” he whispered. “I think I have enough with me to see us through.”

When he had at first sat down to assist her she had stared at him with considerable astonishment. Now she appeared utterly confused.

“I don't understand,” she said in a low voice. “You have certainly done your best to help me, but I cannot see why you wish me to win.”

Westerham turned and looked her full in the eyes. “How long will it be?” he asked in a low voice, “before you come to trust me?”

He put his hand into his breast-pocket to take out the notes which he had assured himself had not been removed while he lay insensible at Mme. Estelle's.

The notes were gone.

It was impossible for him to help uttering an exclamation which drew Kathleen's attention to him.

“I have been robbed,” he said.

With a little sob Lady Kathleen rose from the table and steadied herself with her hands on the back of her chair.

At the same moment the door by which Westerham had entered opened again, and there came in two gentlemen in evening-dress. A third man followed close behind them, and a rush of angry blood crept up the back of Westerham's neck as he recognised Melun.

The room was quite hushed. The men about the table had been awed by the vast sum of money which the mysterious lady had staked and lost.

As she moved a step forward as though to go they drew aside to give her free passage, so that now she found herself face to face with the men who had just entered.

Looking over Lady Kathleen's head, Westerham saw the two men glance quickly at each other, their faces a complete study in well-bred astonishment. They bowed to Lady Kathleen, but said nothing. It was Melun who brushed by them and spoke first.

“This is a most unfortunate meeting,” he said to Lady Kathleen, “and as a friend of your father I would suggest that nothing should be discussed here.”

“What do you mean?” stammered Kathleen.

“Nothing, nothing!” said Melun, hastily, “except that this is no fit place for you to remain in. Allow me to show you the way out at once.”

Westerham thrust himself between Kathleen and the two men who had entered with Melun, and spoke to him in a low, fierce voice that could not be

heard by the girl, but was perfectly audible to the others.

“I agree with you, you miserable hypocrite,” he said, “she will leave this place at once.”

Melun waved his hand at him blandly. “Quite so,” he said, “quite so. We will have a little talk outside, but there is no reason why we should distress these gentlemen.”

“On the contrary,” returned Westerham, “there is every reason. Gentlemen,” he said, stepping up to the strangers, “I can see that you are well acquainted with this lady, who unfortunately came here without my knowledge, but whom I now regard as under my protection. The situation is, of course, extraordinary, and requires some explanation. If you will be so good, I shall be glad of your company for a few moments.”

Without more ado he pushed the baize-covered door open and first bowed Lady Kathleen out. Melun followed, nervous and ill at ease. He had not looked for so much determination on the part of Westerham.

The two men in evening-dress glanced at each other again, and then passed out before Westerham as he held the door open for them.

When the little party was grouped in the dimly-lit passage Westerham went over to Kathleen and touched her lightly on the arm.

“Lady Kathleen,” he said, in a formal voice, “you will greatly oblige me by stepping to the other end of the passage. I have something to say to these gentlemen.”

Making a little inclination with her head, Lady Kathleen walked slowly away from them, leaving Westerham to confront Melun. And Westerham by no means minced matters.

“Of you,” he said in a voice full of scorn, “I will demand an explanation by-and-by. Your motive in dragging Lady Kathleen here is sufficiently obvious to me, but is probably not understood by these gentlemen, whom you have carefully brought to witness her humiliation.”

Melun would have protested but Westerham cut him short.

Westerham took out his card-case and offered a card to one of the men in evening-dress.

“My name,” he said, with a rather bitter little smile, “will probably convey

nothing to you. If, however, you wish to know on what authority I speak, kindly communicate with Lord Dunton, whom you doubtless know. He will assure you that I am entirely to be trusted, and that the favour I am about to ask of you is fully justified.

“For purposes of his own, this individual”—he indicated Melun—“has brought Lady Kathleen here for apparently no other reason in the world than that her good name may be connected with a most unpleasant scandal. Believe me or not as you please, I can only assure you that Lady Kathleen was brought here against her will. Unpleasant though these surroundings may be, they are unfortunately connected—intimately connected—with Lord Penshurst's affairs. I ask you on his behalf, and on that of his daughter, to give me your word that what you have seen shall go no further.”

The elder man looked at Westerham shrewdly and made a little bow. He liked the honesty of his face and the complete contempt with which he treated Melun.

“I give you my word of honour,” he said, “and I make myself chargeable for my friend as well, that until we hear from you further on this matter we will make no mention of it at all.”

Having said this, he made a little bow and drew away, as though to end an awkward situation. The younger man bowed and did the same.

Westerham thereupon walked to the end of the passage, where Lady Kathleen waited for him, Melun following hard upon his footsteps.

“Pardon me,” said Westerham, facing about once more, “but your assistance is not required. You will be kind enough to call on me at Walter's to-morrow morning, when I shall ask you for an explanation of many things. Till then I have no further need of you.”

Lady Kathleen listened to this curt speech of Westerham's in an indifferent way, as though all her senses were partially numbed. Still she gave him a quick little look that was not only a glance of gratitude, but a look of inquiry. Plainly she herself was puzzled by the attitude Westerham adopted towards the captain.

However, she said nothing at all, nor did she attempt to break the silence till the cab in which Westerham drove her back to Downing Street was drawing close to Whitehall.

Then, as she appeared to speak with a great effort, turning her face towards Westerham and peering at him as though endeavouring to read his thoughts, she

thanked him for his intervention.

“Mr. Robinson,” she said, “I am profoundly grateful for all that you have done, though I confess I cannot understand it at all. If you speak to Melun in that way you must be his master, and if you are his master it may in reality have been you who dragged me to that place to-night to pit my poor little skill against Melun's bank for the sake of my father's honour.”

“Heaven forbid that I should do such a thing,” cried Westerham, fervently, “and Heaven forbid that you should believe me capable of any such villainy! I suspected that you had been drawn there on some such pretext, but I assure you that I knew nothing of it. It is impossible for me to explain now what has happened since I saw you last. I can only tell you that I have been almost as badly treated as yourself.”

As he spoke Lady Kathleen drew away from him with a slight shudder, as though some recollection had suddenly come back to her.

“The murder,” she asked, “what of that? I am told that it happened in your room?”

“I am innocent of it in every way,” said Westerham, earnestly. “Indeed, I have not yet discovered the motive of such a dastardly act. I can, however, make a guess, and the guess fills me with apprehension just as much for my safety as for yours.

“Why will you not relent,” he cried, “and make a confidant of me? Believe me that it is within my power to help you, and that I will gladly serve you in any way that you choose to dictate.”

Kathleen gave a little sob. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “don't distress me any further. It is not my secret but my father's—besides, I am not sure that you do not know.”

Westerham thrust up the trap and ordered the cabman to stop.

When he had stepped out he turned back and leant towards Kathleen. “You do me a great wrong,” he said. “But believe me, you cannot possibly fight for ever against my determination to serve you. I am told that the crisis is approaching.”

He had no notion what the words meant, but he desired to watch their effect, and again he saw Lady Kathleen's face blanch.

She stretched out both her hands as though to ward off a blow.

“How near is it?” she asked in a faint voice.

“Heaven knows,” answered Westerham, “and it is quite impossible for me to help you unless you will tell me everything. When you need me, send for me at Walter's Hotel.”

Again Kathleen shuddered, and the cab drove on, leaving Westerham standing alone on the pavement lost in sorrowful thought.

At Walter's he was received most ungraciously. He had not been back there since the night of the murder, and his absence had caused great distrust. Though Inspector Rookley had informed the manager that no suspicion attached to his guest, Mr. Robinson, his words hardly coincided with the presence of the younger detective, who, having taken a room there, never left the premises.

Immediately on Westerham's return he communicated with his chief, and in half an hour Rookley came round from Scotland Yard.

He sent his name up to Westerham and Westerham judged it as well to see the man at once. The inspector came up to the little sitting-room looking grave and anxious. He also seemed a trifle nervous at broaching the subject of Westerham's absence.

“Really, you know, Mr. Robinson,” he said, “you are hardly going the way to give us any confidence in you. Of course, I know that you have great influence at your back, but what the Prime Minister may care to do does not altogether affect us. It is quite possible that some of those who occupy high places may be mistaken, and it is as much for Lord Penshurst's protection as for our own that we are compelled to keep you ‘under observation.’

“You have escaped once, but you may not escape so easily a second time, and I must warn you that these disappearances of yours have to be notified to the Commissioner himself. He is very much alarmed at the whole course of events, and is determined to take action in spite of Lord Penshurst's protestations.”

“That seems to me,” said Westerham, “an unwise thing to do.”

The detective grew a trifle alarmed. What he had said was only partially true, and he felt that he had gone too far.

“Don't misunderstand me,” he said. “Of course, within reason, we are bound to respect Lord Penshurst's wishes, but Scotland Yard is not a political association; it is a police force, and if we find crime being introduced into politics it is certainly our business to inquire into the matter.”

“Do I understand you to suggest that Lord Penshurst would dabble in crime?” asked Westerham.

The detective threw up his hands in horror.

“Certainly not!” he said vehemently. “Certainly not! It is you we still suspect, not Lord Penshurst. Good gracious! Certainly not!”

“You suspect me, I presume, to such an extent,” replied Westerham, “that if I left this hotel I am pretty sure to be followed. Well, follow me,” he added with a laugh, “and catch me if you can.”

And taking up his hat he walked out.

He was perfectly right in his suspicions, and as he moved down the Strand and looked into the shop windows he was conscious that a bulky man dogged his footsteps. The pursuit, however, rather sharpened Westerham's wits than otherwise, and raised his spirits rather than depressed them. It served to take his thoughts from the grim business which was beginning to weigh him down.

Westerham's notions of evading capture were somewhat immature, as it was a new experience for him to find the police constantly upon his track. Very little ingenuity, however, sufficed to rid him, at least for a time, of his pursuers.

He strolled along Piccadilly and up the Burlington Arcade.

He entered Truefit's, where he made a small and totally unnecessary purchase.

By this move he knew that he placed the detective who followed him in an awkward position.

He was conscious that the man's face was pressed against the glass in an endeavour to keep him in sight. He did not enter the shop from the very obvious fear of becoming too obtrusive.

Westerham sauntered down the shop, and then, before the detective had any chance of making even an attempt at pursuit, he slipped out into Bond Street and clambered on to a passing omnibus.

As the heavy vehicle lumbered past the clubs in Piccadilly, Westerham took a long breath of relief, and startled the other passengers by laughing aloud. He went on to Victoria, where he made several purchases, including a second-hand kit-bag.

Armed with this, he walked boldly into the Buckingham Palace Hotel and

there booked a room.

Immediately after this he wrote a note to Lord Dunton, asking him to call at once, for he was anxious that he should be warned in time of the visit the two men he had met at the gaming-house the night before would surely pay him.

Little by little Westerham had begun to confide in Dunton. For in spite of that youthful nobleman's apparent flightiness he was, as a matter of fact, discretion itself and a very tomb for secrets.

To his dismay, however, the messenger-boy whom he had dispatched with the note returned with word that Lord Dunton had a couple of days before run over to Paris, and that he was not expected back till the following afternoon.

This landed Westerham in a particularly awkward predicament. It was imperative that he should see Melun as soon as possible, if only for the purpose of threatening to give him into charge for murder. It was only, too, from Melun that he was likely to hear any news of Lady Kathleen until Dunton returned to help him out of his difficulty.

On the other hand, should he send for Melun, Melun was shrewd enough to warn the police at once of Westerham's whereabouts. And this, as his complete freedom of movement might become absolutely necessary, Westerham could not afford to risk.

Twenty-four hours, then, he remained in the hotel, chafing against the delay, and pacing the floor of his room hour by hour in a vain endeavour to unravel the tangled skein of mystery in which he was enmeshed.

On the following day, as Dunton had not arrived by four o'clock, Westerham sent round to his rooms again, only to receive the heart-breaking news that Dunton was still absent. He despatched a further and yet more urgent message to Dunton's rooms, and sat down to wait again.

It was half-past seven when Dunton leisurely descended from a hansom and strolled up the steps of the hotel.

Westerham almost rushed forward to meet him, and grasping him by the arm dragged him into the smoking-room.

There he made as complete a statement as he dared of all that had happened in the past two days; and Lord Dunton opened his innocent-looking blue eyes very wide indeed.

“By Jove,” he said from time to time.

“I should not tell you all this,” Westerham concluded, “unless I were absolutely certain that I could trust you.

“I have no idea who the men were that I saw at the Faro Club, but I don't suppose that it will be long before they call.”

“I fancy that they have called already,” said Dunton. “When I got back this afternoon I found that cards had been left by Lord Cuckfield and a chap by the name of Mendip. My man said that they came together, so I presume they are the Johnnies you mean. And I won't let the grass grow under my feet. I'll look them up to-night and tell them that they have got to keep their mouths shut and to take you on trust.

“By the way,” added Dunton, “this business seems to grow ‘curiouser and curiouser’ as Alice would say. I should have been back before but some unaccountable inclination made me break my journey at Rouen. I was there this afternoon, and who should I see but the heroine of all this mystery.”

“What!” shouted Westerham, utterly shaken out of himself, “not Lady Kathleen?”

“Lady Kathleen herself,” answered Dunton.

“Good God!” cried Westerham. “The crisis must be at hand indeed. She has been lured over there to her death.”

Dunton dropped his eyeglass and stared at his friend in amazement. Westerham was almost beside himself with anxiety and rage.

“Don't sit staring there like a gibbering idiot,” he almost yelled, “but give me some money. Quick! They have taken my notes, and I have practically spent all my loose cash on the things I need here.”

Dunton began to fumble in his pockets. “You cannot expect a fellow to have much about him when he has just come back from Paris,” he grumbled. “Still, I think I can dig up twenty pounds or so.”

Westerham stood over him. “Come along! Come along!” he urged. “Every penny you have got.”

With a queer smile Dunton emptied his pockets and poured the contents into Westerham's palms.

“All right! All right!” he said. “Don't be in such a hurry. It's most disturbing.”

“You fool!” cried Westerham again. “Don't you understand that I have only ten minutes in which to catch the boat-train?”

And without another word he bolted out of the room.

CHAPTER XV
BY ORDER OF THE CZAR

Swift as the cab was, Westerham only caught the boat-train by a minute, and at that without a ticket.

He had then two hours for calm reflection, and to some extent self-reproach. Never in his life before had he been so unnerved, and the expressions of irritation which he had made at the Buckingham Palace Hotel before Dunton did not seem to him good.

He saw that his was not a fit state of mind to be in if he intended to steer safely through the troubled waters ahead of him.

Some things were growing clearer to his mind. More and more he was coming to realise the clever, if circuitous, means by which Melun was seeking to break down Lady Kathleen's resistance and render his own task harder.

But this new move disturbed him more than any which had yet been made. He could find no reason for the scene of the conflict being suddenly transferred from England to France, unless, indeed, Melun had at last come to the conclusion that Westerham was too dangerous a man to play with.

Soon he saw, however, that speculation was utterly useless. All his efforts must be concentrated upon his finding Lady Kathleen, and if necessary compelling her by sheer force to capitulate and take him into her confidence.

He set his heart upon this so strongly that he persuaded himself that there were no difficulties in his way. It would be strange indeed if, when the moment came, he would not be able to induce Lady Kathleen to reveal those things which up to then she had so obstinately and persistently hid.

The night was calm, and the passage to Dieppe a smooth one, but on the quay Westerham received a sharp demonstration that the difficulties which he had mentally brushed aside nevertheless remained to be grappled with in actual fact.

To begin with, he had no luggage. He did not even possess an overcoat, and as it had come on to rain, and for the sake of greater freedom of thought he had remained on deck, his appearance was already travel-worn and bedraggled.

Small wonder, therefore, that as he presented the ticket with which he had been provided at Newhaven the officials of the *douane* regarded him with keen suspicion.

“Monsieur has nothing to declare?” they asked.

He could only shrug his shoulders and say:

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

To avoid further questionings he added: “I have not even an overcoat.”

They looked him up and down, and his appearance inspired a certain amount of respect. None the less, they took counsel together, and with an ever-watchful eye Westerham saw them approach a portly person of an intensely British aspect.

Presently this individual came up to him and asked in most unmistakably English terms what Westerham's destination might be.

Westerham told the man shortly that his destination was Rouen.

“You must excuse me, sir,” said the man, whom Westerham guessed to be a Scotland Yard representative at the port of Dieppe, “but it is rather unusual for gentlemen to travel without luggage and without even so much as an overcoat. It is even more curious,” he added, “when they start on a journey without first taking a ticket.”

Westerham surveyed the man coolly with a faintly insolent air. He was coming to realise that whereas in ordinary times the consciousness of his own good faith enabled him to pass every barrier with the superiority born of an easy conscience, it required some brazenness to face obstructions of this sort when he had a desire for secrecy.

And the fat man was evidently shrewd. He might take life easily on the quay, and watch with thoughtful and even drowsy eyes the coming and going of innumerable English voyagers, but for all that his alertness only slept, and though he had an instinctive trust of Westerham's face and manner, still he could not deny that appearances were against the Englishman who travelled so unprovided for a journey and with such evident haste.

“Of course,” he said apologetically, “you will excuse my being persistent in making inquiries, for, after all, that is only my duty.”

“Quite so,” said Westerham, with a genial smile, “and how can I help you to

do it?”

With some pomposity of manner the English detective produced a fat note-book.

“I'm afraid,” he said, “that I must ask you to give me your name.”

Westerham smiled a little to himself to think how futile was such a precaution on the man's part. He was at liberty to give him what name he chose; he could give him the first name that came into his head.

“I think,” he laughed, “that for safety's sake you had better call me Charles Grey, though how on earth you are to ascertain whether that is my real name or not I confess I cannot see.”

The fat detective sucked in his lips and wrote the name laboriously in his book.

“After all,” he said, with some asperity, “people who give wrong names and addresses seldom come to any good.”

“I suppose not,” said Westerham, and walked a little moodily towards the train. He paid the guard handsomely enough to warrant the man's not forgetting to call him at Rouen. But still Westerham felt that he had so much at stake that he could leave nothing to chance, and so he sat upright, wakeful and watchful, while the train rushed through the apple trees of Normandy to the old cathedral city.

When he arrived there it was raining hard, and he was conscious that he was again an object of suspicion as he stood on the steps of the station looking about him in search of a *fiacre*.

No vehicle was in sight, and Westerham set himself to tramp up the hill to the Hôtel de la Cloche, at which he had stayed long years before, and of which he still entertained a lively recollection of its cleanness and its quaintness.

The hotel slept, and Westerham heard the bell pealing through the silent house as he stood shivering and waiting on the doorstep.

Presently he heard the sound of bolts being withdrawn and a shock-headed night porter thrust his face out into the damp morning air.

The sight of Westerham's tall figure drew his immediate attention.

“What does Monsieur require?” he asked in accents which were at once civil and surprised.

“Let me in,” said Westerham, “and I will do my best to explain.”

The man switched on the electric light, and Westerham, treading warily on the polished parquet floor, made his way to a seat. He was feeling fatigued and not a little miserable.

First he took the precaution of drawing a couple of half-crowns from his pocket and slipping them into the man's hand.

“You need not be alarmed at my appearance,” he said. “I am not a fugitive from justice. I am merely an English gentleman who has lost his friends and who is in search of them.

“Tell me if you have staying in this hotel a very tall young English lady with dark hair and dark eyes? It is possible that she is travelling *incognito,* but if she has given her right name it will be the Lady Kathleen Carfax.”

The man scratched his head and looked worried.

“I would help Monsieur if I could,” he said, “but I can only assure him that there is no English lady staying in this hotel at all. Alas! the season is very bad, and we have few English visitors.”

That Lady Kathleen was not at the Hôtel de la Cloche did not disconcert Westerham very much. He had foreseen that she was hardly likely to stay in the most prominent hotel in the town. He had merely called there because he knew that if one wishes to make one's path smooth in a foreign city it is just as well first to win the confidence of some hotel porter.

“It is many years,” he said to the man, “since I stayed here. In fact, I have practically no recollection of Rouen except of this hotel and the cathedral. I should therefore be very much obliged if you could furnish me with a complete list of all the hotels where English people are likely to be found.”

“Why now,” said the man, “that is an exceedingly simple affair.” And he rattled off a list of hotels.

Westerham repeated them after him, but found he could not remember so many. Therefore he wrote them down.

“And you think,” he asked, “that this is a complete list?”

“Quite complete, I should say,” said the man, “for Monsieur's purpose.”

With a weary air Westerham rose from the cane-backed chair on which he was seated.

“I am sorry to have disturbed you,” he said to the porter, “but I must go in search of this lady at once.”

The man spread out his hands with a deprecating gesture. “It is still very dark,” he said, “and Monsieur will find the hotels closed. Moreover, I do not wish to be rude to Monsieur, all the night porters may not be so accommodating as myself.

“Permit me to help Monsieur,” he went on. “Monsieur will pardon me, but possibly this may be some romance.”

He shrugged his shoulders again, but with such an air of civility and respect that Westerham could not quarrel with him.

“At any rate, it is not my business to inquire. For the time it is merely my end to serve Monsieur well. Be seated for a little while I make coffee and bring rolls and butter. It will fortify Monsieur against the damp air.”

Laughing a little, Westerham sat down again, and suffered the man to bustle about. The fellow was deft indeed, and soon Westerham was glad that he had listened to his counsel.

The dawn came up, and the porter turned the lights out, and Westerham sat in the twilight of the early morning smoking more or less contentedly cigarettes of the Caporal brand.

Shortly after six the man, who had been busy cleaning boots, returned and made a gesture towards the sunlight, which was streaming into the room.

“If Monsieur is in haste,” he said, “I will not seek to detain him. By this time the other hotels will be open. If Monsieur's mission is urgent he should continue his search.”

His air was so friendly and so charming that Westerham resorted to the only expression of appreciation of which he could conceive. He gave the man another five shillings, and pledged him to silence. None the less, he had little faith that the man would keep his tongue still. The Frenchman must talk.

Thereafter Westerham went out into the fresh morning air and began his search. In turn he visited the Hôtel de la Poste, the Grand, the Europe, and the rest of them.

It cost him a pretty sum to purchase the confidence of half-suspicious and still sleepy porters, but by the time he had worked through the list of hotels with which the man at the Hôtel de la Cloche had provided him he had come to the

conclusion that Lady Kathleen was of a certainty not in one of these hostelries.

Was she still in Rouen? The doubt troubled Westerham greatly, but he reflected that she might have elected to put up at a more humble hotel than any of those at which he had called. So with the assistance of a fairly friendly policeman he secured a second and much longer list of minor inns.

The search, too, was successful. In a small and narrow street he discovered a small hotel which went by the name of the République. Here his question put to the plump Madame who opened the door at once kindled interest.

“Yes, there was most decidedly an English lady staying there—a young English lady of most distinguished appearance. She had arrived about noon on the day before, and said she intended to stay there for a couple of days, as she expected friends.”

“Had the friends arrived?”

“No, not as yet. Perhaps Monsieur was the friend for whom she waited?”

Westerham doubted that, and found the situation a trifle awkward to explain.

“No,” he said to the fat Madame, he was not the friend whom Mademoiselle had come to meet. He was, however, an acquaintance, and would call later in the day.

Contenting himself with this, he lifted his hat and strolled down the street, followed by the shrewd eyes of the landlady.

He walked on until he felt sure he was no longer observed; then he walked back again.

On the opposite side of the street to the République, a few doors up, he discovered a *café* of humble aspect, provided with tables beneath an awning at which the thirsty could sit and refresh themselves.

At one of these tables Westerham took a chair, and at the risk of violent indigestion called for more coffee. He sat and sipped the sweet and chicory-flavoured liquid and turned about in his mind the best means of discovering the reason of Lady Kathleen's visit to Rouen.

He debated with himself whether it would not be better to go boldly over to the hotel and make his presence known; but he reflected that such a course might be unwise, more especially as Kathleen might still elect to remain silent on the

mystery which still so much perplexed him. Indeed, his presence might result in her abandoning the business which had called her so suddenly from London.

As time went on he glanced up and down the street, watching everyone's approach with interest. Westerham half expected to see the face of Melun. Instead, however, towards half-past eight his attention was aroused by the appearance of a man whose aspect was out of keeping with the little street.

The stranger was above middle height, and bore himself with a certain air of quiet dignity. He was dressed in black, his clothes being well cut, though of obviously foreign tailoring.

It was the man's face, however, which riveted Westerham's attention. It was very dark, and the nose was somewhat flat. Yet it was a face of great refinement and a distinction accentuated in a strange way by a long, black, and well-trimmed beard.

The man was not a Frenchman, nor, Westerham decided, was he a German; certainly he was not an Italian nor an Austrian. A subtle something about the man's whole appearance, indeed, brought Westerham to the conclusion that he was a Russian.

Yet why he fixed his nationality this way he could not tell, and then that intuition which was Westerham's great aid in times of trouble told him that this dignified and daintily-walking stranger was in some manner connected with Lady Kathleen's presence at the Hôtel de la République.

So certain of this did he become that he took the precaution of drawing further back into the *café*, where he could sit in the shadows and watch the passage of the stranger without arousing any interest himself.

Twice the black-bearded man walked up the street, glancing sharply at the République, and twice he walked back with the same meditative and dilatory air. Then he turned the corner and disappeared.

The patron of the inn busied himself about the *café*, and, seemingly curious about the visitor's long sojourn, Westerham ordered a further supply of the chicory-like coffee.

As the morning wore on so the sunshine became stronger, till the cobbles in the little streets shone hard and bright in the glare.

At ten Westerham's glance was attracted by some bustle about the door of the inn, and he saw the fat landlady bowing and scraping on the white doorstep,

and then out of the shadows into the sunshine came the girl he had come to find.

Dressed all in black and thickly veiled, Lady Kathleen came quickly out of the doorway and walked down the street.

Westerham, who had taken the precaution to previously settle his score, immediately rose and walked after her.

The street was so narrow and there were so many people about that he had to follow Kathleen pretty closely in order to avoid losing her. He noted with some surprise that she walked straight ahead, as though of prearranged purpose, never faltering and never so much as glancing to the right or to the left.

He followed her down the hill, and so into the space about the cathedral, where busy women were setting out their wares—poultry, pottery, vegetables and the like.

More than one head was turned to note the quick, silent passage of Lady Kathleen. Hers, indeed, was a physique which could not have escaped notice, no matter what its surroundings.

On the market-square, having a clearer view before him, Westerham slackened his pace and allowed Lady Kathleen to increase the distance between them.

Still she walked straight ahead, as one who follows an oft-trodden path and knows full well whither that path leads.

She moved up the cathedral steps, and as she did so Westerham saw approaching the sombre figure of the black-bearded man whose presence in the little street by the Hôtel de la République had aroused his interest earlier in the morning.

But though their steps were evidently leading them to the same spot, neither the black-bearded man nor Lady Kathleen made the least sign. The girl passed into the cathedral, the man following closely on her heels.

In fear of losing sight of them Westerham almost ran across the square and darted up the cathedral steps. But for all his speed his feet fell silently, so that neither the girl nor the man, who now walked by her side, heard his quick pursuit.

Once in the cathedral, Westerham paused to accustom his eyes to the dimness of the light.

Far up the nave he could see the man and the girl walking side by side.

Then they turned from the nave into the north aisle and made their way thence into one of the dark recesses of a side chapel.

As he watched them vanish into the shadows Westerham paused.

He felt that he was spying, and the task was an uncongenial one, but he comforted himself with the reflection that, after all, he played the spy out of a desire to serve Lady Kathleen, and he walked on.

He saw that it would be impossible for him to approach the side chapel by the same way as Lady Kathleen had if he wished to remain unobserved. So he turned aside and drew near to the chapel by another way, sheltering himself behind the pillars, which cast black shadows on the floor.

Westerham was following his old stalking habit, which he had acquired when in pursuit of big game among the giant pines of the Rockies. Yet with all his care he almost blundered into his quarry. For, as he moved silently round a pillar, he became conscious that he was so near to Lady Kathleen that he could have stretched out his hand and touched her.

In an instant he drew back and stood still behind a massive column. He could see nothing, but he could hear the voices of the girl and her companion in low and earnest conversation.

At first it was the man who did most of the talking, and from what scraps of his words he could catch Westerham judged him to be speaking in French. He droned on for some minutes, and then his voice died away.

Lady Kathleen now asked several questions in quiet, low tones. The man answered sharply and incisively, and it seemed to Westerham that there was command in his voice.

For a while there was a complete silence, which at last was broken by long, choking sobs. Edging a little nearer round the pillar, Westerham saw Kathleen kneeling upon a *prie-dieu* as though in an abandonment of grief. She was crying as though her heart would break, her face buried in her hands.

The sombre man stood by like some tall shadow, silent and unmoving.

A quick and great desire to go to Kathleen's aid, to gather her into his arms and comfort her, took possession of Westerham. But great as his desire was, he forced it down, recognising that the moment had not come for him to intervene.

Presently the sombre man moved closer to Lady Kathleen's side, and, putting out a gloved hand, touched her lightly, and with the air of one offering silent sympathy, on the shoulder.

Westerham heard him murmuring what must have been words of comfort, and before long Kathleen lifted her face and resolutely wiped away her tears. Then she rose and went forward to the altar, on the steps of which she knelt and prayed.

Finally she came back to the black-bearded man and held out her hand, and Westerham saw with still growing wonder that the man bent over it as though with great respect and brushed Kathleen's fingers with his lips. Without any further word Kathleen walked quickly and quietly away, making for the door through which she had entered the cathedral. The man, with a little sigh, picked up his hat and followed her, Westerham hard upon his heels.

Outside in the sunshine, Westerham watched Kathleen make across the square by the way which she had come. Her companion turned abruptly to the right and walked rapidly away.

Westerham followed Kathleen back till she came to the Hôtel de la République, when she disappeared through the doorway.

Once again Westerham took his seat at a table underneath the awning of the *café* that he might watch developments.

And if on the night before he had been completely unable to understand the reasons which had taken Lady Kathleen to Rouen, he was infinitely more out of his mental depths now. This sombrely-attired, black-bearded man could not possibly be any tool of Melun's. Melun did not employ gentlemen, and that this man was one Westerham did not doubt. For two hours he sat and watched the doorway and the street; but no one either came or went whom Westerham could even distantly connect with Lady Kathleen.

All the while he sat there he suffered great agony of mind. It was torture to him to think that not a score of yards away Kathleen sat alone and in great distress, and that he was powerless to comfort her.

Yet was he powerless? He could at least make one more attempt to help her. With this resolve he crossed the road and asked to see the English lady staying there.

He sent up no name, deeming it wiser not to do so. He recognised that Kathleen was of that type of woman who, if danger threatens, must know the worst at once. She would be curious to discover the identity of the stranger who sought an audience with her, and would ask him to go up.

In this opinion he was justified, for the fat landlady came down and said that the English mademoiselle would be pleased to see him. He went quietly up the stairs, and without so much as knocking at the door walked into the little sitting-room which Kathleen had engaged.

As she beheld him she started back with a quick cry of terror. “Even here!” she exclaimed. “Must you follow me even here?”

Westerham bowed his head. Now that he found himself in her presence explanation became difficult. For a few minutes he could say nothing but stood watching Kathleen, who had sunk down into a chair as if utterly worn out in body and in spirit.

Westerham gathered himself together and came to the conclusion that the time had now come when he at any rate should no longer continue to make mysteries.

“Lady Kathleen,” he said, “I owe you a deep apology for following you here. I learnt of your visit to Rouen quite by accident from my friend, Lord Dunton.”

“Your friend, Lord Dunton!” exclaimed Kathleen with wide-open eyes. “Your friend, Lord Dunton! What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Westerham, simply, “that Lord Dunton is my friend. You know me as James Robinson, a man who, in order to secure acquaintance with yourself, had to indulge in the very questionable privilege of a friendship with Melun.

“It was, believe me, quite by accident I discovered that Melun in some way held your father in his grasp. I was sorry for Lord Penshurst, but infinitely more sorry for you. I offered you my help, but you refused it. It was, perhaps, impertinent on my part, and I cannot blame you for doubting the genuineness of my offer. I was not then in a position to explain either my motives or my identity.

“‘James Robinson’ is not my name. I am, as a matter of fact, the Sir Paul Westerham who was reported to have disappeared from the *Gigantic*.”

Lady Kathleen was staring at him in greater astonishment than before.

“It was my whim—possibly a foolish whim—to vanish as I did. I cannot possibly regret it, because I think it has really placed me in a position to help you out of your difficulties. I want you to treat me with that confidence which, I assure you, I really deserve. I stand in no fear of Melun, nor, indeed, of any man. Melun is simply in my pay. I bought his services for my own ends, and I can equally buy his services for yours.”

He paused and watched Lady Kathleen closely. She appeared utterly unstrung, and clasped her head tightly with both hands.

“I can hardly understand what it all means,” she said at last in a dull voice.

“It simply means this,” urged Westerham, quietly, “that I am an honest man and a gentleman; and if you could only tell me what it is of which you and your father are so much afraid, I feel perfectly certain that with the hold I have over Melun I could free you from your trouble.”

Kathleen searched his face with her eyes eagerly and yet fearfully.

“You must forgive me,” she said, “but I have no reason to believe any man. I am sorry, but it is impossible for me to believe you even now.”

She paused and then cried out again: “No, no! it is quite impossible! Besides, surely if you have been with Melun so much, and seen so much, you must know what this dreadful thing is all about.”

“I give you my word,” said Westerham, “that I do not know.”

Again Kathleen answered: “I am sorry, but I cannot believe you.”

Suddenly her face was flooded with colour. “You followed me here,” she cried, “and saw the man who spoke to me, and yet you still tell me that you do not know! Do not know that while I can save my father I am lost!

“Don't you know,” she cried again hysterically, “that in the cathedral I received my sentence of death? For it means death to me! I cannot face dishonour!”

Wild and uncontrolled as the girl's words were, there was a convincing ring of truth in them, and Westerham for the first time in his life knew what fear meant.

“But who,” he asked with dry lips, “who in this world could possibly have the power to order you such a fate?”

“You know!” cried Kathleen, fiercely, her eyes starting from their sockets in terror, “you must know that it is by order of the Czar!”

CHAPTER XVI
STRANGE HAPPENINGS

“By order of the Czar!”

Westerham repeated the words, and his face was blank in its amazement. Lady Kathleen caught his expression and her own face changed. She saw that Westerham's surprise was entirely genuine. She saw that he did not know!

“By order of the Czar!”

Westerham repeated the words again, groping for some explanation of this extraordinary statement. He could find none. This, indeed, was the greatest mystery of all.

When he had slightly collected himself he drew a chair to the table and sat down heavily, facing Lady Kathleen.

“Don't you think,” he asked, “that we had better be plain with each other?”

Lady Kathleen's face was now a blank, as his own had been two minutes ago.

Almost roughly she brushed away the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand, and set her mouth and squared her shoulders as though about to do battle.

“I cannot understand it,” she said. “I cannot understand it at all. I had to distrust you, and so, though you declared you knew nothing, I did not believe you. But even if you know nothing it does not help us in the least. I am not able to disclose anything at all. It's my father's secret—not mine.”

Gently and persuasively Westerham urged her to tell him how the matter affected herself. But she declined, and remained obdurate to the close of the interview.

Before he ceased his pleading, however, Westerham counselled her to tell her father all that had passed, and begged her to urge Lord Penshurst to send for him the moment she arrived back in London.

This Kathleen consented to do, although she pointed out that her father would in all probability decline to believe in Westerham's *bona fides*.

He countered that argument by asserting that Lord Dunton would of a certainty establish his identity beyond all doubt. But still Lady Kathleen demurred.

“In any case,” she said, “it would be exceedingly difficult to arrange a meeting. Frankly, I don't see how you can help us, and there is only a week left.”

As she said this her eyes again filled with tears, and she clasped her hands with a despairing gesture.

“That there is only a week left,” persisted Westerham, “is all the more reason why I should be made acquainted with the facts at once.”

Kathleen, however, only shook her head and moaned a little to herself.

Westerham did his best to console her, and she then told him that she proposed to return to London by the afternoon's mail. Immediately on arriving in town, however, she would have to set out for Trant Hall, as the Premier was giving a dance there on the following night.

“I trust,” said Westerham, “that you will at least permit me to see you safely home. It is not at all advisable that you should travel without an escort. I have every reason to be fearful on your account.”

Kathleen thanked him, but declined his offer of help.

“There is nothing,” she said, “to prevent your travelling in the same train or the same boat; and if you think it advisable, I shall be grateful to you for doing so. But I must implore you not to speak to me or to make any sign that you know me between here and London.

“Matters have grown doubly bad since this morning. I have not only to fear the spies of Melun, but the agents of the Russian Government. Between the two I am afraid I shall have but little peace.”

Having said this, she rose and held out her hand to bid Westerham good-bye.

“I can no longer refuse to believe in you,” she said, “though I fear I shall have a harder task to convince my father than you had to convince me. Good-bye, and thank you. I really feel that you would be a powerful ally, and if I can possibly persuade him to take you into his confidence I will.”

“That, of course, would be the better way,” said Westerham. “I assure you that I must have a great deal of knowledge of Melun which would be invaluable

to your father. Still, if he declines to tell me anything, remember that I am quite prepared to serve him blindly and in all good faith. I shall be quite content to wait for an explanation."

On this he took his departure, and presently made his way to the station, where he waited for the afternoon mail. Long before the train was due he saw Kathleen enter the railway station carrying a black bag. He gave no sign, and she, for her part, steadily ignored his presence.

At Dieppe he watched her go on board the mail-boat, and then followed her to the saloon deck. There he kept her under surveillance, but made no attempt to communicate with her in any way.

Thus quietly watchful, he guarded her progress to London, where, at Victoria, he saw her enter a hansom and drive rapidly away. His thoughts had been so busy with the things of the immediate present that until he found himself alone at the London terminus he took no thought of what he should next do.

He then decided that he would go to his greatly-neglected rooms in Bruton Street in order to obtain some additions to his all-too-scanty wardrobe, for, with the exception of a few things he had purchased when he left Walter's Hotel, he practically had nothing but the clothes he stood up in; and these were the clothes with which he had been so mysteriously furnished while he lay chloroformed at Mme. Estelle's.

On arriving at Bruton Street the doorkeeper surveyed him with astonishment.

"Why, sir! I was told that you had gone abroad."

"Gone abroad!" exclaimed Westerham. "Gone abroad! Nothing of the kind."

He denied the suggestion flatly, and, indeed, was so taken aback by the man's manner that for the moment he quite forgot he had in reality not only been abroad but had returned again from abroad in the space of twenty-four hours.

The man stared at him steadily, and for all his self-possession, Westerham felt himself colour a little. But he reflected that it was no business of the man's whether he went abroad or not. He requested him to take him up to his rooms in the lift.

The man stared at him in greater astonishment than ever.

"But they are empty, sir," he said.

“Empty!” cried Westerham. “What on earth do you mean?”

“I mean, sir,” said the man, in an excited voice, “that your furniture has been taken away. I understood that it was warehoused. A gentleman called here this afternoon, paid your valet and dismissed him, and this afternoon a pantechnicon came and took away your things. The gentleman gave his card to the manager of the flat and told him that he was a solicitor. It all seemed fair and square, and as we knew—begging your pardon, sir—that you were an eccentric gentleman, we were not surprised to hear that you were not coming back. As a matter of fact, sir,” the man concluded lamely, “we thought that you had been a little put out by the affair here a few days ago.”

“Do you really mean to tell me,” said Westerham, slowly, as though he could not believe his ears, “that everything has been taken away, even my clothes?”

“Even your clothes, sir. Your valet packed them himself.”

“Good gracious!” said Westerham, more to himself than to the man, “and I have nothing but what I stand up in?”

Then it struck him that he must take immediate action in the matter. He suspected Melun was at the bottom of this too, but could not conceive what motive the captain could possibly have for this last extraordinary move.

“Have you any idea,” he asked, “where my valet went?”

The man shook his head.

“Nor where my things have been stored?”

Again the man shook his head.

“It was a big pantechnicon, sir,” he said, “but to the best of my knowledge there was no name on it. I believe it did strike me as being rather funny at the time, but I was busy and didn't take much account of it. It is a most unaccountable thing, sir—most unaccountable. I cannot understand it at all. Have you any idea, sir, who your friend might be?”

Westerham shook his head, though in his own mind he had little doubt.

“Well,” he said briskly, “I must inform the police at once. This is a very serious matter. It is not so much the loss of the things that annoys me, but the inconvenience to which I am put.”

He looked at the man sharply, and endeavoured to ascertain whether he

could trust him. He decided that the man looked honest, and slipped a half-sovereign into his hand.

“In the meantime,” he said to him, “say nothing to anyone. I will deal with this matter in my own way.”

Deciding to take the bull by the horns at once, Westerham hailed a passing hansom and drove to Melun's rooms, only, however, to be informed that the captain was out of town. He tried threats, cajolery and even bribery to extort information as to the captain's whereabouts; but the housekeeper was proof against all his efforts.

It seemed as if she really did not know where the captain was.

As he turned away, wondering in which direction he could next inquire, it suddenly occurred to him that he should ascertain if anything had happened to his motor car. He therefore took a second cab and drove to Rupert Street, in which the garage was situated.

As he entered the yard the manager stepped forward; and the astonishment on his face was even greater than that exhibited by the doorkeeper at Westerham's flat.

“I am afraid, sir,” he said before Westerham had time to speak, “that we have made some terrible blunder. A gentleman called here this afternoon and said that he had been asked to see me on your behalf. He said that he had received a telegram from Holyhead asking him to see that your car was sent up to Chester, as you would be staying there for some days. Your man was to wait for you at the Blossoms Hotel.”

Westerham could scarcely disguise his anger.

“What was this—gentleman like?” he demanded.

“Well, sir,” said the manager of the garage, eyeing him anxiously, “I didn't take much account of him, though he appeared a very pleasant gentleman indeed. He was, I should say, tall and dark.”

“Hook nose and black eyes?” suggested Westerham, helpfully.

“Just so, sir, just so.”

Westerham ground his teeth with rage. “Of course,” he said to the man, “I do not blame you—I cannot—but you've been hoaxed. I sent no orders about my car. I intended it to remain here until I sent for it. I may want it at any moment

now, and the inconvenience and the loss of it may be great. You'd better wire to Chester for the man to return at once.”

The manager of the garage was by this time greatly alarmed. His own suspicions led in the direction of theft, and the prospect of a considerable loss in reputation, if not a considerable loss in pocket, scared him very much.

“Certainly, sir, certainly. And if in the meantime I can place any other car at your service I shall be pleased to do so.”

“I'll let you know,” said Westerham, and he walked abruptly away.

He went rapidly westward and reached the park. There he sat down in the darkness and made a further effort to understand the drastic and impudent measures which Melun was taking.

If he could have come across that person at that particular moment there is little doubt but that he would have shaken the life out of him. Westerham's anger was seldom roused, but when it mastered him it was terrible, and the effects were apt to be disastrous to the object of his wrath.

Now, turn things over in his mind as he might he could see little chance of coming to any conclusion until he could obtain the truth from Melun himself. But where was Melun? It would be ridiculous to make any further inquiries at his house. Crow, too, would certainly know little, and Bagley less.

True, there was Mme. Estelle. He would see her.

Leaping to his feet, he almost ran to the cab-rank at Hyde Park corner, and, hiring a taxicab, ordered the man to make the best speed possible to Laburnum Road.

The man did his best, and in some twenty minutes' time the taxicab entered the little *cul-de-sac*, the features of which Westerham was now beginning to know too well.

He rang the bell impatiently, but the door in the wall failed to open. He rang again and again, but there was no response.

The driver of the taxicab surveyed his fare with some distrust.

“It seems to me, sir,” he said, “that your friends are not at home.”

Westerham's answer sounded very much like an oath.

He gave one final pull to the bell, and finding even that last rough summons

ineffectual, turned to the man.

“Look here,” he said, “this may seem a rather curious business to you, but if you will help me I will pay you well. I am not at all sure that this house is as empty as it seems. Put your cab alongside the wall so that I can climb over the top. I want to go investigating.”

The man grumbled something to the effect that it was not his business, but the sight of the magnificent inducement which Westerham immediately offered him silenced his objections.

Westerham climbed to the top of the cab and dropped over the wall into the garden. He walked round the house and found it shuttered, dark and silent.

He whistled a long whistle to himself. “I wonder,” he thought, “if the birds have flown. I wonder if they have chucked up the sponge. I wonder——”

A second thought, however, which occurred to him, as he proceeded to climb over the garden wall again, was that it was much more likely that the house had been closed that evening in order that he might be cut off from all sources of information.

On further reflection, indeed, he came to the conclusion that this was certainly the case. “But perhaps you imagine,” he thought, mentally addressing Melun, “perhaps you imagine that I shall not come back. We will see.”

It was then nearly eleven o'clock, and Westerham had no course but to return to the Buckingham Palace Hotel, out of which he had rushed without bag or baggage on the night before.

There he was greeted civilly, but by no means with effusion. Lord Dunton's visit on the previous afternoon had set a certain cachet on his respectability, but at the same time his erratic movements did not meet with the managerial approval.

On the following morning he sought out Dunton, who told him that for the moment Lord Cuckfield and Mendip would be silent.

Unfortunately, Westerham's promise to Lady Kathleen prevented his telling Dunton over much. But fortunately Dunton, in spite of his apparent vacuity, had both the good sense and the good manners never to be over curious.

Twice during the afternoon Westerham took a cab to Laburnum Road, and on the second occasion his peal at the bell was answered by the maid he had seen on his previous visit.

In reply to his queries the girl stated that Mme. Estelle, having occasion to go out of town the day before, had closed up the house because she did not like to leave the maids by themselves. Madame however, she told him, was expected back in the course of the evening; she thought about nine o'clock.

The sense of coming action prompted Westerham to dine well. Unlike other men, his senses and capacities were always at their best after dinner.

At nine o'clock he went back to Laburnum Road and was told that Madame was at home. As he entered the pretty drawing-room Mme. Estelle came forward to greet him with outstretched hand. But he kept his own behind him.

“Pardon me,” he said coldly, “but before I meet you on terms of friendship there are certain things which I want to know.”

Madame raised her eyebrows at him and smiled.

“Indeed,” she said, “what are they?”

“In the first place, who stole my furniture and my belongings from my flat?” demanded Westerham.

“Why should you ask me?” answered Madame, evasively.

“Because,” said Westerham, “I have not the slightest doubt in the world that Melun was the man who ordered their removal, and if Melun is responsible then you are probably acquainted with the fact.”

“Very well,” said Madame, quietly, “and I expect that it will do no harm for me to confirm your suspicions. Melun did order your things to be removed.”

“But why?”

Madame smiled again. “It was at my suggestion. It is impossible for me to give the reason; but I must ask you to believe that such a step was necessary for the greater security of your life.”

Westerham stared at her; the matter was entirely beyond his comprehension.

“And the car,” he demanded, “what of that? Was it you also who suggested it should be sent on a bogus mission to Holyhead?”

“It was. That step was also necessary in the interests of your safety.”

Utterly regardless of Madame's presence, Westerham paced angrily up and down the room for some minutes before he spoke again. Finally he turned upon the woman and asked almost roughly where Melun was to be found.

Madame shrugged her shoulders.

“Do you decline to tell me?” asked Westerham.

Madame shrugged her shoulders again.

By this time Westerham had made up his mind as to how he should deal with this woman. There had been ample time since he had left Lady Kathleen to reason out what she meant by the words that, as she preferred death to dishonour, her death-warrant had been sealed. For some strange reason, still to be unearthed, the Czar's emissary had ordered that Kathleen must marry Melun and thereby ensure silence.

How did Mme. Estelle stand in this matter? Westerham determined to ascertain for himself at once.

“Listen,” he said almost gently. “Let us for a few moments try to talk as friends. It is imperative that I should see Melun at once. You are the only person who can tell me where I can find him. And if you will come to a bargain with me it may be to our mutual advantage.

“If I tell you something which I think it is to your interest to know, and if you think the knowledge, when I have given it you, is worth it, will you in return tell me where Melun is?”

“I will see,” answered Mme. Estelle.

“Are you acquainted with the fact,” he asked suddenly, “that in a week's time Melun will have arranged to marry the Lady Kathleen?”

Madame went pale to the lips.

“It's a lie!” she almost screamed. “It's a lie! It's impossible! He has promised himself to me!”

Westerham nodded thoughtfully. It was precisely as he had thought.

“What I tell you,” he said, “I believe to be absolutely true.”

Watching her closely, Westerham saw that Mme. Estelle was greatly agitated.

“To-night,” she murmured, more to herself than to him, “to-night it could be proved, if only I had a witness here whom I could trust.”

“Surely,” suggested Westerham, “though we are on opposite sides in this struggle, you can take my word on a matter of this sort.”

“Yes, yes!” cried Mme. Estelle, eagerly, “you are a gentleman. I can trust you. Oh, how I wish I could trust Melun!”

Her voice trailed away and she lapsed into thought.

Presently she roused herself as though with an effort and looked Westerham in the face.

“I will tell you how you can meet Melun if you will give me your word of honour on two points. First, that you will return and tell me all that passes, and, secondly, that you will not, whatever happens, do any harm to Melun.”

“You have my word,” said Westerham.

Mme. Estelle sighed as though with relief, and after a few seconds spoke again.

“What I am going to tell you now,” she said, “will sound so incredible that you may possibly not believe me. I can scarcely believe it myself, except that there is practically no piece of folly which Melun will not commit when he has one of his mad fits upon him. I sometimes think he is half-crazy.

“To-night Lord Penshurst gives a ball at Trant Hall. The place will be crowded, and the women will be wearing jewels worth a king's ransom.

“More, I think, out of bravado, and with a foolish notion of bringing matters to a head, Melun is taking down half a score of masked men. It will be what I think you call in America ‘a hold-up.’

“Melun says that there is no risk in the business, that he and the others are bound to get away, and even if he is caught he knows the Prime Minister will have to contrive his release. The hour planned for this business is midnight.”

Without a second's hesitation Westerham leapt up from his chair and took out his watch.

“I have just an hour and a half to get there,” he said.

CHAPTER XVII
MELODRAMA AT TRANT HALL

When Lady Kathleen bade good-bye to Westerham she drove first to Downing Street, where she met her father.

Together they travelled down to Trant Hall, and on the way Kathleen gave Lord Penshurst a full account of all that had passed since she had been summoned so suddenly to Rouen.

The Premier sat with bowed head, holding his daughter's hand as he listened to her narrative. For the moment it seemed to crush him utterly, and when Kathleen had finished speaking he lifted up his head and said, in a stricken way:

“So this is the end of it?” He added, after a few moments: “Are you sure that a week is the full limit of time we can obtain?”

“I am only too certain,” answered Kathleen. “If we fail within the next week, then——” she broke off and looked apprehensively about her as though even the cushions of the carriage might have ears. Finally she bent her head and whispered into her father's ear.

At this Lord Penshurst grew paler than before, while great drops of sweat broke out on his forehead.

“That,” he cried, “must never be! Kathleen, great though the sacrifice is, you must make it—make it for our country's sake. Oh! to think that I should have wished to serve her so well and should have served her so evilly.”

For a long time after this Lord Penshurst and his daughter sat in silence as the train ran on through the night. It was not, indeed, until they had reached Trant Hall and had a little supper, for it was now very late, that Kathleen ventured again to broach the subject of Westerham.

She was almost ghastly in her paleness, but was entirely calm and self-possessed.

“Father,” she said, patting the old man's hand as he sat staring before him as though fascinated by some mental vision of pain and horror, “let us try and see

what we can do in this matter on a business-like basis."

The aged Premier nodded his head, but he still gazed steadily before him.

"Don't you think," urged Kathleen, "that you owe it to me to leave no stone unturned to defeat Melun before the week is out? Melun we cannot catch. You tried to do so, and Claude has tried to do so during the last few days, but the man is as elusive as an eel. Why not take this man Westerham to a certain extent on trust? Of course, you will laugh at me, and say that I am merely guided by a feminine habit of jumping to conclusions. Nevertheless, I am perfectly convinced that Mr. James Robinson is Sir Paul Westerham, and that if we were only to take him into our confidence he could do much to help us."

"My child," said the old man, looking at his daughter in a piteous way, "it is, as you know, simply impossible. We have neither of us been released from our oath of silence, and it would be most disgraceful of us to break our word. Indeed, it would be absolutely indefensible, unless by breaking it we were absolutely certain we could save the situation."

"Why not ask Sir Paul Westerham to help us without telling him anything?" suggested Kathleen.

"Do you think any man would be such a fool as to serve us on those terms?" asked the Premier.

"But he has promised to do so," cried Kathleen.

Lord Penshurst, however, remained obstinate.

"No! no! my dear!" he said. "It's quite out of the question. It would arouse considerable comment if we were to postpone this dance to-morrow—there is no legitimate excuse for doing so. Let us get it over and then we will together see what can be done.

"We cannot even take Claude into our confidence, but I can at least give him *carte blanche* to take any steps that he deems necessary. And Claude is not a fellow, thank goodness, to stick at much if we have anything at stake."

He rose from his chair, and coming over to his daughter's side stroked her hair gently.

He did not tell Lady Kathleen so, but on one point the old man had made up his mind. Outwardly he was encouraging Lady Kathleen to brace herself for the sacrifice which appeared inevitable, but he had in reality resolved upon another course, even though it meant for him suicide or the gallows.

All through the following day Kathleen moved through the great house silently superintending the arrangements for the ball.

During the afternoon the majority of the house-party arrived, and at dinner-time both Lord Penshurst and Lady Kathleen had to throw off their gloom as best they could and devote all their minds and energies to the entertainment of their guests.

Two or three great singers had come down from London, and there was music in the grand saloon. It was then that young Hilden sought out Lady Kathleen and drew her apart from the guests.

“Kathleen,” he said to his cousin, “I want to have a very serious talk with you. During the past three weeks your father has asked me to do a great many extraordinary things, and I have not scrupled to carry out any of his instructions, though they have involved a considerable amount of law-breaking.

“I don't know what all this business is about. I assure you I have not the slightest idea, nor have I the least wish to pry into my uncle's secrets; but at the same time, I am growing very uneasy. This mystery, whatever it may be, is weighing on him greatly. He has completely changed in the last month; he is becoming an old and almost broken man. I do not wish to alarm you, but I feel that I ought to open your eyes to this in case it may have escaped you.”

“It is very kind of you,” said Kathleen, wearily, “but I have noticed it myself, and am very much distressed.”

“Then why not be more explicit?” urged Hilden. “Why not tell me what this matter is about? Surely I could take some of the burden off your shoulders. It is a most amazing thing—and I think, with all due respect to your father—a very wrong thing that a trouble of this sort—and I can see it is a great trouble—should be foisted on to the shoulders of a mere girl.”

Kathleen looked at him sadly and wistfully.

“I wish I could tell you, Claude,” she said, “but unfortunately I am pledged to secrecy. I think it is more likely that my father will speak to you about the matter to-morrow, though I fear that he will tell you nothing more than you know at present.

“He may, however, ask you to do several more strange things. You have offered to help us, and so let me implore you to help us by doing everything that you are asked, no matter what it may involve.”

“Kathleen,” cried Hilden, taking her hands and looking into her eyes, “you know very well that there is nothing that I would not do for your sake.”

She thanked him, and drawing away her hands left him, weighed down with a terrible oppression. Her own thoughts frightened her. She was conscious of a dreadful desire for a man's death. She prayed to be delivered from the sin of hoping that she might escape disgrace at the cost of a man's life.

The ball began at about half-past ten, and for an hour before that motor-cars and carriages had been rolling up the long sweep of drive, and the reception-rooms had been filling with the power, the wealth, and the beauty of the country.

By her father's side Kathleen stood at the head of the grand staircase to receive the guests. And one after the other, with misdirected kindness, they murmured their regret to see Kathleen looking so far from well. Her father glanced round impatiently at every such expression, till from the pallor born of the despair which was settling down upon her heart Kathleen's face assumed a vivid flush, due to agitation and annoyance; so that from looking wan and ill her beauty became feverish and radiant.

Hilden, hovering near, felt his heart aching.

By eleven o'clock all the guests had arrived, and the grand staircase and reception saloon were alike deserted, while the ball-room was thronged with dancers and those who watched the dancing.

Lord Penshurst had long been famous as a host, and Lady Kathleen, in spite of her youth, was already numbered among the great hostesses of the country.

The scene, indeed, was full of splendour, and, as Melun's greedy mind had anticipated, the jewels of the women must have been worth upwards of half a million.

The slow, low music of a waltz was stealing down from the gallery, where the musicians were placed, when Lord Penshurst, who had just entered from the grand staircase, was conscious of some disturbance in the hall. For a moment he did not inquire what the cause of the upset might be; and it was, perhaps, just as well for him that he did not.

Up the drive had swept three great motor-cars, which had drawn up in a curious formation before the great entrance. Their concentrated head and side lights faced the door, so that the servants who stood about the hall were almost blinded by the glare.

From the cars descended a score of men in evening dress. But as they came into the more subdued light of the hall the keen eyes of the servants stationed there were quick to see that, in spite of their shirt-fronts and their opera-hats, these men were not gentlemen.

The arrival of so many men at once took the groom of the chambers aback, but he hurried forward to meet the guests, thinking that possibly this might be some surprise party.

His hospitable intention, however, met with a rude check, for he had scarcely taken half a dozen steps forward when he found himself looking down the barrel of a revolver.

A pleasant, easy voice called on him to stop, and the man stood stockstill, staring stupidly straight in front of him, half-fearfully and half-fascinated by the glint of the six-shooter.

The other men poured in quietly and quickly and formed a semi-circle about the door.

Three of their number remained outside, covering with their revolvers the two country constables who had been on special duty for the purpose of controlling the traffic.

All the men were masked, not only their foreheads, but their faces right down to their chins being hidden in black crape.

The man who led them stepped forward and ordered the groom of the chambers back; and the man and his fellow-servants retreated before the advance of the strange intruders.

A couple of armed and masked men sufficed to keep the handful of men-servants penned in the corner. Two others were stationed on the stairs to check any advances in that direction, while two others kept the passages closed against all comers.

At the head of about twelve men the leader walked swiftly towards the door of the ball-room, where he met Lord Penshurst face to face. For the Prime Minister, growing uneasy at the continued movement in the hall, had come out himself to see what might be on foot.

“Get back, Lord Penshurst,” said the leader, still in a pleasant and easy voice; “get back or I will not answer for your life.”

The Prime Minister checked himself, but craned his head forward.

“By heaven!” he said in a low voice, “I believe that is you, Melun.”

“Never mind who I may be, but keep your tongue still. Unless you wish to be quieted, kindly refrain from mentioning names in my presence.

“Now turn about, if you please, and get back to the ball-room.”

At this sudden confrontation by danger the Prime Minister's troubles were for the moment forgotten, and he was again the strong, courageous man that he had once been. He looked straight and steadily at the veiled eyes of the intruder, and declined to turn about. Instead, he retreated backwards step by step.

The music in the ball-room had effectually drowned any noise of the disturbance except to those who stood nearer to the door.

Among these was Hilden. He had followed hard upon the Prime Minister's footsteps, and had, at a glance, taken in the position of affairs.

Nor did he hesitate for a moment. Breaking into a run, he dashed across the hall towards the little alcove in which he knew were placed the telephone and the police call.

As he approached the alcove, however, he was brought to a standstill by a man with a revolver.

Melun noted his progress, and turned about and cried, “Keep that gentleman away. If he moves another yard—shoot!”

Young Hilden threw one contemptuous glance at Melun and walked on. The man hesitated to fire.

“Fire! you fool,” shouted Melun, but the man still held his hand and hesitated so long that Hilden had gripped the barrel of his revolver in his left hand before the fellow quite realised what was happening.

If the man had scruples, Melun had none. His revolver spoke quickly, and Hilden, with a little cough, fell forward on his face.

Turning from his butcher's work, Melun whipped round to meet the terror-stricken eyes of Lady Kathleen.

“Will you take your daughter away, Lord Penshurst?” he said in a low voice. “It is not my fault that she has been compelled to look on this.”

The Prime Minister grasped Kathleen by the arm and drew her into the ball-room. Melun closed in on him and the other men followed.

As they entered the room they spread themselves out fanwise in an obviously prearranged plan.

Coolly and deliberately Melun discharged his revolver at the painted ceiling overhead, bringing down a little cloud of plaster.

The orchestra stopped in the middle of a bar, the dancers came to a halt, and all those guests who had been sitting round the ball-room leapt with cries to their feet.

“Silence!”

Melun's voice rung out clear and hard.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he cried, “I have no desire to create a disturbance. If you will listen to me all will be well.”

Turning for a second to Lord Penshurst, he said, “Get back to the middle of the ball-room.”

The Prime Minister had no other course but to obey.

Melun next proceeded to deal with those guests who were nearest to the door.

“All of you,” he said in a tone of easy command, “all of you get back beyond the chandelier.”

He pointed to the great cut-glass candelabra which hung from the ceiling.

Here and there a woman gave a little scream, but for the most part the people who had been so rudely disturbed were very quiet.

Melun watched the retreat through his mask, and when all the guests had crowded together at the end of the room he gave them further orders.

“All the men step to the front!”

The men looked angrily and defiantly at Melun and his companions, but they had no option in the matter, for a dozen revolvers were pointed in their direction with unwavering nozzles.

Sullenly, angrily, the men came forward, and formed a long chain before the women, who clung together in terror or sat huddled on chairs, holding their faces in their hands. There was a pause, and Lord Penshurst turned towards his guests.

“On the floor at Melun's feet there slowly grew a glittering pile of jewels”

“On the floor at Melun's feet there slowly grew a glittering pile of jewels”

“My friends,” he cried, “I greatly regret this outrage. Any loss which you may suffer at the hands of these thieves I will, of course, make good, but let me implore you to do everything in your power to prevent any bloodshed.”

“Be silent!” thundered Melun. “You were not asked to speak. Lady Kathleen, will you be kind enough to leave your father and join the other ladies?”

Lady Kathleen faced him with flaming eyes. “No!” she cried. “My place is by my father's side.”

She took her father's arm and stood the very picture of defiance, looking scornfully at Melun and his men.

“Very well,” said Melun, quietly; “have your own way.”

“Now we will proceed to business,” he continued, “and I will ask you ladies and gentlemen to be quick; my time is short, and if we are to leave free of interference there is not much time to spare.

“You, gentlemen,” he said, addressing the men, “collect all the jewellery that the ladies hand you, pass it on, and throw it here.” He pointed to the floor at his feet.

The men hesitated, looking one to another; and one boy, more bold than the rest, jumped forward and cried, “Never! you dirty scoundrel!” And he dashed across the floor towards Melun.

Melun let him come on, and it said something for the coolness of the man that he did not even fire, but waited till the lad was upon him. Then he swung round, and catching him on the back of the ear with the butt of his pistol, sent him sprawling senseless to the floor.

After that there was no demonstration of any kind. With almost feverish haste the women began plucking the jewels from their hair and from their bosoms, from their wrists and from their necks. Trembling, they handed them to the men standing in a row before them.

One by one bracelets and necklets and tiaras were tossed on to the floor at

Melun's feet until there slowly grew a glittering pile of jewels.

And then it became obvious that Melun had provided against every contingency and had counted on complete success.

For at a word from him one of the masked men came forward with a rough sack, into which he threw the jewels with as much care as he might have bestowed upon a heap of coals.

When the fellow had gathered them all up Melun made a little bow of mockery.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I have to thank you for your hospitality and for your generosity. With your kind permission I will now withdraw.”

Suddenly a bold, clear, full voice spoke from the little gallery in which the musicians sat cowering.

“Unfortunately,” said the voice, “I fear that you have not my permission.”

All the guests started and turned involuntarily to see whence came the challenge. Melun looked up quickly and stood staring with amazement.

For stepping down the staircase which led from the little gallery came Westerham, smiling serenely.

CHAPTER XVIII
AT THE EMPIRE

The better to show his contempt for the people whom he was robbing, Melun had put away his revolver. This little piece of play-acting cost him dear.

As he saw Westerham coming down the stairs his hand went to his hip-pocket. But Westerham was first, and covered him in an instant.

“Put up your hands!” he ordered.

Melun obediently threw up his hands.

The other masked men now covered Westerham, but Melun cried out sharply: “Stop that! No firing!”

For he knew who was the best shot, and who was likely to be quickest; and he had no desire to risk his own skin.

“Tell the men to lower their hands,” said Westerham, “and you can put your own hands down.”

Melun gave the order in a surly voice.

“Thank you!” said Westerham.

All this had passed in complete silence on the part of Lord Penshurst's guests. Lord Penshurst also was far too astonished to speak.

“You must forgive my intrusion,” Westerham said, now addressing the Prime Minister, “but I must ask you to allow me to have a word with this man.” He pointed to Melun.

Without more ado he came down the staircase from the musicians' gallery and walked over to Melun's side.

“You are an impudent scoundrel, Captain Melun,” he whispered in the captain's ear, “but I will put a stop to this. You will have to call your men off and restore all that property.”

“I shall do nothing of the kind!” snarled Melun.

“You won't, eh?” said Westerham. “Well, we will see.

“You know,” he added, still whispering, “that Lord Penshurst is perfectly acquainted with your identity. The guests are in ignorance, and therein lies your safety. But how many would recognise you if they could see your face?”

Melun shot a vindictive look through his mask at Westerham.

“And so,” continued Westerham, quietly, “I will give you five seconds to make up your mind. You either order all these jewels to be restored to their proper owners or I will tear the mask from your face.”

“For Heaven's sake don't do that,” cried Melun in a low voice. “But it will cost you your life, for I shall not be able to hold the men.”

“I shall not bother you to do so,” said Westerham; “I can manage them quite well myself.”

Still keeping Captain Melun under observation, he turned about, while his revolver covered the man who had collected the jewels. “Come here!” he ordered.

The man came forward.

“Give me your gun!”

The man handed over his six-shooter without a word, and Westerham placed it carefully on the floor.

“Now right-about!” he ordered, “and get the other men's weapons.”

The ruffian in the mask hesitated. “They will shoot me and you, governor,” he said thickly.

“You had better be shot at by them than by me,” said Westerham. “My aim rarely fails. Do as you're told.”

Westerham then turned to the other men. “All of you,” he said, “will have to give up your guns. If necessary, Captain Melun and I will see that you do it. However, I should recommend you to be quick. I warned Scotland Yard before I left London of what was about to happen here, and within a few minutes this place will be swarming with police.”

The men fidgeted uneasily and looked helplessly at Melun.

Melun wisely decided to assist Westerham.

“It's true,” he said, “and you'd better be quick.”

At this there was a good deal of grumbling, and one of the men cried out

that they had been betrayed.

Westerham turned on him sharply. “I am compounding a felony,” he cried; “but still, if you are quick, you will get away. I won't detain you.”

By this time two or three men had come in from the hall to inquire the meaning of the delay. They surveyed the scene uneasily.

“How many of you are there?” demanded Westerham, glancing towards the door. “I suppose it is a case of twenty to one; but never mind. On this occasion it is my move. Bring your guns over here one by one. You on the left there start first.”

Lord Penshurst and Kathleen were staring in amazement at Westerham, as indeed were all the guests. It was a simple exhibition of the domination of one will over many. One by one the men came forward and deposited their weapons at Westerham's feet.

When they had all laid down their arms he turned again to Melun. “You can call your men off now,” he said.

Melun was in no mind to remain. Without a word he walked out of the ball-room, calling on the men to accompany him; they followed him like sheep.

“Just a minute, Lord Penshurst,” said Westerham, easily, “while I see these visitors off the premises.”

He went out into the hall and watched the departure of the three cars.

Melun was shaking with rage. So angry was he, indeed, that his passion overcame his fear, and as he was about to enter his car he stepped back into the hall again and addressed Westerham.

“You shall pay for this, my gentleman,” he said in a shaking voice.

Westerham made no answer except to say, “You're wasting time, and if you take my advice you will not return to town along the same route by which you came.”

Then he turned on his heel and went back into the ball-room. There the men were busy sorting out the jewels on the floor and restoring them to their proper owners.

As Westerham came in there was a simultaneous movement towards him. A half-score of hands were outstretched and a hundred voices clamoured admiration and congratulation.

But Westerham held up his hand for silence.

“Be kind enough not to approach any nearer,” he said; “my business is with Lord Penshurst. If I have been of any service to you I am glad; but please let the matter rest at that.”

Westerham walked over to Lord Penshurst and looked reassuringly into his face.

“Lord Penshurst,” he said, “I shall be grateful if you can spare me a few minutes.”

“Certainly,” said the Prime Minister; “let us go to my own room.”

The Premier led the way across the hall and down a long corridor until he came to the library. He bowed Westerham in before him and afterwards closed the door.

There was open admiration in the Premier's eyes, but at the same time he was distressed and ill at ease. Like the diplomat he was, he waited for Westerham to speak the first word. Westerham spoke it.

“I think,” he said, “that the time has come for mutual explanations.”

“I have to thank you,” answered Lord Penshurst, “for having rid me of these ruffians to-night, but as I imagine that you have only done so to suit your own private ends,” he added coldly, “I think that it is you, rather than myself, who should make the explanations.”

“Practically all the explanations that I can make,” said Westerham, “I have already given to Lady Kathleen.”

“And a very pretty tale, too,” remarked the Premier, drily.

“None the less a true tale. I can furnish ample proof that I am the Sir Paul Westerham who disappeared at Liverpool. I knew Lord Dunton before I left England ten years ago, and he has twice visited me in the States. I should hardly imagine you would doubt his word, and he can certainly establish my identity. If that does not satisfy you, you can apply to my solicitor, Mr. Hantell.”

Still the Premier looked thoroughly unconvinced, but in spite of this Westerham plunged once more into the details of his meeting with Melun and the bargain he had made with him.

“You will see from all that I have told you,” he concluded, “how good a grip I have on that scoundrel. But for the influence that I can bring to bear on

him he would never have surrendered so quietly to-night.

“Of course this escapade of his, mad though it seems, was not without a motive, and I judge that motive to be the further terrorising of Lady Kathleen and yourself. Once more let me appeal to you to tell me frankly and fully what it is that so distresses you.”

The Premier almost laughed. “You must think me a very credulous person indeed,” he said, “if you expect me to believe such a tale as yours. I have several reasons for thinking that you are no better than Melun, I am not sure that you are not worse. If, for some reason, you have served Lady Kathleen and myself, I presume it is merely a question of thieves quarrelling among themselves.”

Westerham flushed hotly. But the Prime Minister, though he noticed Westerham's annoyance, continued to speak quietly and coldly.

“Why should I go in search of Lord Dunton? If you are not a liar, send Lord Dunton to me. Not that it would help matters, for if you were fifty times Sir Paul Westerham you could not assist me, nor, indeed, would I ask your assistance. But as I fully expect that you know as much about my troubles as I do myself, it would in any case be waste of breath to mention them; and certainly I am not going to mention anything that will give you and Melun a stronger hold of me than you have already.”

“But I tell you,” cried Westerham, “that I have nothing to do with Melun's schemes. Nothing at all!”

“That, of course,” said Lord Penshurst, drily, “will presently be proved by your friend Lord Dunton. In the meantime I warn you and your accomplice Melun that you are rapidly driving me to desperation. I admit that. I tell it to you to impress on you the necessity of not going too far. It is rather unfortunate that the Prime Minister of England should have to liken himself to a worm, but nevertheless I may mention that even a worm will turn.”

This was exasperating, and Westerham found it hard to keep cool.

“Very well,” he said with a sigh, “I am sorry you think so badly of me, and I will do my best to open your eyes as to the real truth of matters. As, however, I cannot do that to-night, I will ask you to allow me to withdraw.”

“I have no objection,” said the Premier, “but before you go perhaps I may offer you some hospitality. I do not wish to be so ungrateful and ungracious as to deny that I owe you some thanks for to-night's work.”

“I am much obliged,” answered Westerham, “but I would rather be excused the humiliation of having to accept hospitality from the hands of a man who does me so much injustice. Good-night.”

He passed out of the room, and the Premier let him go without a word.

In the hall the hosts of departing guests eyed him with curiosity and some anxiety.

Lady Kathleen was standing at the foot of the staircase, and, to their surprise, she stepped forward and held out her hand.

Westerham bowed over it but said nothing. He would indeed have choked over any words which he might have sought to utter. He was, perhaps, in as trying a position as he could well be in.

It might have been that Lady Kathleen expected him to say something, for she gazed after his retreating figure a little sadly and wistfully. The guests in their evening wraps drew aside to let this tall man in a blue serge suit pass them.

A few of them held out their hands, and some of them called “Good-night”; but Westerham passed on unheeding.

The taxicab in which he had come down from town was waiting at the door, and stepping into it he ordered the man to return to London. It was nearly three o'clock when he reached his hotel.

There, to his extreme annoyance, he was informed by the porter, who now regarded him with open suspicion, that a gentleman was waiting to see him.

“What is his name?” demanded Westerham, sharply.

“He didn't give any, sir,” said the man, “but he is in the smoking-room.”

Westerham entered that vast and dimly-lighted apartment, to be greeted on the threshold by Inspector Rookley.

“Good heavens! sir,” cried Westerham; “am I never to be rid of this constant persecution?

“Surely,” he continued, “you received fairly explicit instructions through the Commissioner from Lord Penshurst to let me alone?”

“I know, sir,” said the detective, soothingly, “but you have an unfortunate habit of stirring us up afresh. I have called now about this business at Trant Hall.”

“Oh!” said Westerham, starting, “what about it?”

“I understand,” said Rookley, “that you were there?”

“If it's any satisfaction for you to know it,” said Westerham, “I was. But I don't quite remember seeing any members of the police force there, and I should be glad to ascertain how it is that my presence at the Hall was notified to you.”

“It came first of all by telephone from the local police,” said Rookley, “and I then had a message 'phoned through from Lord Penshurst. It seems that he sent word on your behalf, and he was at great pains to tell us of the service you had rendered him. He said he was telephoning because we might imagine that you were in mischief, whereas you happened to be the man who had saved them all from theft and possibly from violence.

“Of course, sir,” the detective continued, “that clears you more or less. I cannot argue with the Prime Minister, or I would have pointed out to him that you must have been in the business yourself or you could never have got wind of the affair and turned up at all. So, as this is a very serious matter indeed, I waited here to ask you what you know about it.”

“Look here,” cried Westerham, annoyed past all endurance, “I don't know half as much about this matter as Lord Penshurst does himself. If you want to know what I had to do with it, go and ask the Prime Minister. Personally, I decline to say anything at all.”

“You do?” Rookley was staring at him uneasily while he scratched his head. He was as certain as he could be in his official mind that he was constantly running up against the most astute of master criminals that he had ever met. It perplexed him, too, beyond measure that, whenever he felt his grip fastening on the man, the Prime Minister should step in to save him.

He would truly have loved to arrest Westerham there and then upon suspicion; but the telephonic message from Trant Hall made that desirable object impossible.

“Well?” he began again.

“Good-night,” said Westerham; and turning on his heel he walked contemptuously away, leaving the baffled detective to make what excuses he could to the night porter, who, ignorant of the detective's identity, was beginning to suspect him of being no more honest than he should be.

Westerham slept badly, and awoke, after a succession of uneasy dreams, at

about nine o'clock in response to a knock at his door.

To his surprise it was neither the boots nor the chambermaid who entered at his bidding; instead there stood before him a tall, cadaverous man, wearing a long black frock-coat, whom he instantly recognised as the manager.

The manager closed the door and walked over to Westerham's bedside. His manner was at once offensive and deferential.

“You will have to excuse me, sir,” he said, “but I thought it better to speak to you in your own room than to rouse any remark by sending a message requesting you to speak to me in mine.

“I am aware that Lord Dunton called to visit you here, and I know sufficient about his lordship to feel no uneasiness about his friends as a rule. But really—you must pardon my saying so—you make things a little awkward in this hotel.”

Westerham sat up in bed and looked at the man quizzically.

“Your appearances and disappearances,” continued the manager, avoiding Westerham's eyes, “have already led to considerable comment. Besides, after inquiry this morning, I discovered that Mr. Rookley from Scotland Yard was here waiting for you till the small hours. Fortunately the night porter did not know who he was, or things would have been still more awkward.”

“On the other hand,” suggested Westerham, “it might have been that Rookley called on me for the purpose of consulting me rather than of holding an investigation as to my movements.”

The manager eyed him coldly.

“That's hardly what I have been given to understand,” he said.

Westerham reddened with anger. It seemed to him that Rookley, being baffled, was seeking to make himself disagreeable. Westerham was beginning to feel indeed something like an outcast, moved on from place to place without time for rest.

“You want me to leave?” he asked shortly.

The manager made a queer sort of bow.

“Very well,” Westerham returned; “for my part I have no objection.”

To himself he reflected that within a few days the man would bitterly regret his mistake.

So Westerham packed his little bag and went out. First he went on foot to Victoria, where he left his bag in charge of the cloak-room.

Then he breakfasted at a restaurant, and after he had consumed a moderate quantity of doubtful ham and still more doubtful eggs he smoked cigarette after cigarette while he thought over the situation.

At last he hit upon a solution—as he thought—to the whole difficulty; a solution which was so extraordinarily daring that he laughed to himself as he conceived it.

The idea tickled his fancy immensely, but he did not embrace it without all his customary caution.

Carefully and methodically he weighed the pros and cons of success, only to be ultimately convinced that the arguments against the scheme were of practically no account.

To secure the success of his enterprise, however, he needed at least one assistant, and his mind turned without hesitation in the direction of Dunton.

But before he saw Dunton it was expedient to ascertain the whereabouts of Melun. Then it occurred to him that he had been more than foolish to allow Melun to escape from Trant without having secured any information as to where he now lay in hiding.

Had he returned to his rooms? That was doubtful; and the doubt was confirmed when Westerham called at Rider Street to ascertain. Captain Melun had not returned to town.

Grateful to Mme. Estelle for the timely news she had given him of Melun's journey to Trant Hall, Westerham was by no means unmindful of his promise to tell her of all that had happened.

He had simply delayed his visit because he had been in hopes that if he could only find Melun he would be able to go to her with some definite proposition.

For it was now entirely obvious that Melun, unable to be true to any man or any woman, had merely been using Mme. Estelle as an agent, and had not the faintest notion of fulfilling his promise to her.

It was inconceivable that unless Melun wished to push his advantage to the utmost—that is to say, to the extreme limit of forcing Lord Penshurst to agree to his marriage with Lady Kathleen—that he could possibly have had the

hardihood, not to say the foolhardiness, of conducting the raid of the night before.

Two days previously Lady Kathleen had declared to Westerham that only a week remained. Two days of that week had already slipped away, so that now only five days were left in which to find Melun and bring his works to naught.

Westerham wondered whether he would find Mme. Estelle tractable. That also was open to doubt. And while he thought on the matter he was tempted to go just a little back on his word and refuse her the information she had asked for until she told him in what way he could lay his hands on the truant captain.

But this, he reflected, in spite of all that was at stake, would be, to say the least of it, dishonourable; and it was with every intention of proving to Madame that the captain was playing her false that Westerham took a cab and drove to St. John's Wood. He found Mme. Estelle alone and anxious.

She gave him no greeting, though she almost ran towards him as he entered the little drawing-room.

“What have you to tell me?” she cried.

“Nothing,” answered Westerham, “that is absolutely definite; but at the same time I am convinced that Melun is not treating you justly and honourably. After last night's affair was over—you may not have heard that I defeated Melun's raid—I spoke for some time with Lord Penshurst. He would tell me nothing; but, none the less, I am convinced that Melun is insisting that his marriage with Lady Kathleen shall take place at once.”

For some minutes Madame sat in complete silence, with her hands tightly clasped together. Then she looked up and said, “Can you prevent that without completely ruining Melun?”

“Yes,” said Westerham, thoughtfully. “I think I can contrive it; but I must first know where I can see the captain.”

Madame rose and looked at him long and earnestly.

“Though I trust your word,” she said, “I can see that it would be very difficult for you to meet him without some dreadful trouble arising. If you can only see him in public it would not matter so much. You are a gentleman and would not create a scene.

“Yes,” she went on, more to herself than to Westerham, “I think that is the better way. To-night—just, I think, to prove that he cares for nobody—Melun

has taken a box at the Empire. I am going there with him. It is possible that you could join us."

Westerham laughed with some bitterness.

"I am obliged to you for your suggestion," he said, "but you do not seem to appreciate that I have been robbed by Melun of all the appurtenances of a decent existence. It is to his efforts—and to some extent yours—that I am at the present moment, in spite of all my millions, homeless. I have not even a dress-suit to my name. If, therefore, my appearance in your box this evening is a little incongruous, you will have to excuse me."

"Quite so; quite so," said Mme. Estelle with a queer smile, the meaning of which was not at the moment obvious to Westerham.

After this he took his departure; nor did he for the moment fulfill his intention of visiting Dunton. It was useless to go to that young man until after he had met Melun. After that meeting his plans might have to be remodelled.

To distract his thoughts he went to a matinee, and afterwards dined alone, lingering over his cigarette till the restaurant clock showed him it was half-past nine.

He then made his way to the Empire and entered the lounge. From there he was able to discern quite easily the box in which Melun was seated. He made his way to it, and without even the formality of knocking turned the handle of the door and went in.

As he did so Melun rose angrily to his feet, and, as though he had never known Westerham in his life before, demanded what he meant by the intrusion.

Westerham bowed to Mme. Estelle, and then turned his attention to the captain.

"Don't be a fool," he said shortly; "I have not the slightest intention of being treated in this way. I think you had better sit down."

For his own part, Westerham drew up a chair and seated himself in front of the box so that his face and figure could be seen by all observers. It was indeed the prospect of this which had so alarmed Melun and had resulted in his taking up so tactless an attitude towards Westerham. Melun was fearful lest some of those present in the theatre should have been numbered among Lord Penshurst's guests of the night before, in which case the freedom which Westerham made of his box might lead to a suspicion that the captain himself was implicated in the

raid.

Westerham smiled at the discomfited Melun as though he hugely enjoyed the joke.

“You may well be alarmed,” he said, “and you had better be civil, or I certainly shall not relieve you of my presence, which is apparently obnoxious, and which I fancy you imagine to be a source of danger to you.”

“Mark you, Melun,” he went on, turning his head away from Mme. Estelle so that the woman could not catch his words. “Mark you, there are a great many things about which I want an explanation. When I made my bargain with you I had no idea that I should come to be regarded as a partner in crime with a murderer. Things have gone too far.

“However, for Mme. Estelle's sake, I will not cross-examine you here. I insist, however, that you shall tell me where and when I can find you.”

“And if I decline to say?”

Westerham had foreseen the possibility of this answer, and had made up his mind as to how he should meet it if it came. He saw that he could not extort a statement from Melun there, and was resolved on a different method.

Without a word—and he knew that his silence would cause Melun the deepest anxiety—he rose and left the box.

He waited patiently till the end of the performance and then succeeded in following Melun into the street.

As he had counted on his doing, Melun took a hansom and drove away with Mme. Estelle. Westerham followed.

The hansom in front of him bowled quickly along Piccadilly, turned up Berkeley Street, and then made at a good pace for Davies Street. Here Melun alighted, and having said “Good-night!” to Mme. Estelle, let himself into a small private hotel with a latch-key.

Westerham, who had passed Melun's cab, stopped his own further up the street and marked the house from the little window at the back of the hansom. He was satisfied.

He immediately ordered the man to turn about and drive to Dunton's room. Dunton was sitting before a fire, enjoying a pipe before he turned in.

Westerham immediately plunged into every detail of his story which he

dared disclose and still keep faith with Lady Kathleen. Dunton heard him out with open-mouthed wonder.

Next Westerham proceeded to explain to Dunton the counter-move against Melun which he intended to put into execution on the morrow.

When he had finished speaking, Dunton rocked on his chair with laughter, as though delighted beyond measure with the proposal.

And certainly Dunton had some justification for his merriment, for what Westerham proposed, gravely and of fixed purpose, was the kidnapping of the Prime Minister.

CHAPTER XIX
THE CAPTURE OF LADY KATHLEEN

It was for very excellent reasons that Melun had not driven up to St. John's Wood to fetch Mme. Estelle to the Empire; and his caution in other matters thus saved him from an unpleasant cross-examination concerning Kathleen.

It is true that when Westerham had left the box Madame made several efforts to broach the subject, but Melun succeeded in steering clear of the matter until after they had left the theatre. As, however, the cab proceeded to Davies Street she made a further attempt to pin him down to the subject. But again Melun evaded it.

Few men knew better than Melun the damage that could be done one by a jealous woman, and as he sat alone that night over his whisky-and-soda, the obvious signs of jealousy which Marie had shown him caused him great disquiet.

From Madame, however, he turned to the more important business of deciding what he should do to bring the Premier to his knees without further delay. And it was a strange coincidence that just as Westerham was explaining to Lord Dunton his scheme for kidnapping the Prime Minister, Melun hit upon the plan of abducting Lady Kathleen as the surest means of inducing Lord Penshurst to surrender.

So each man in different parts of London worked out two similar schemes, which on the morrow were to clash and to produce an extraordinary sequence of events.

Melun sat till late perfecting his plan of abducting Lady Kathleen, but, turn and twist the matter though he might, he saw no means of carrying it through unless he sought Mme. Estelle's assistance.

Therefore he rose early in the morning, and was ringing at the bell of the villa in St. John's Wood before the neighbouring clocks were striking nine. He knew that the most favourable opportunity for his project would come shortly after noon, and even though Mme. Estelle consented to lend her aid there was still much to be done.

He entered the morning-room without ceremony, and, scarcely pausing to say “Good-morning,” drew a chair to the table at which Madame sat at breakfast.

“Marie,” he said, “the crisis in our fortunes has arrived to-day. I want all the help you can give me, and you will want all your nerve.”

Mme. Estelle eyed him calmly.

“Indeed,” she said. “But even though the crisis in our fortunes arrived within the next ten minutes there are certain questions which I must ask you first.”

Melun fidgeted impatiently. He realised that he could no longer baulk the question of Lady Kathleen, and the sooner he got himself out of the difficulty the better for his day's work.

“George,” said Madame, stretching out her right hand and brushing Melun's lightly with her fingers, “George, are you playing me false?”

“Playing you false?” he cried, with a fine show of indignation. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that either you have told me too much or too little. If I am to believe you, the Premier's secret which we hold is worth at least half a million of pounds. You say you are certain of the money, and that the moment it is yours we are to be married and leave this miserable mode of life. If this is so I am content. But now I hear other news. I hear that this is not the only price which you are asking for the return of the Premier's papers. I am told that as part of the bargain you are to be permitted to marry Lady Kathleen.”

Melun jumped out of his chair.

“It's a lie!” he shouted, “and I'll take my oath that that rattle-brained fool Westerham is responsible for your stupid fancies.”

“But are they fancies?” urged Madame.

“Fancies! Of course they are fancies. What good do you think it would do me to be tied to a girl like that? Surely half a million should content any man. I wish to be free to pursue my life with you. The sooner indeed I am free from all this business the better.

“Bagley and the rest of them can say what they please and shout as they please. They know nothing that can possibly betray me, and certainly nothing that can harm me. When he has paid the price you may be sure that Lord

Penshurst will look to that.”

Madame Estelle looked greatly troubled.

“Are you sure, George,” she asked again, “that this is absolutely true? Oh! be sure that I dislike to distress you in this way, but I cannot help it. Up to the present I have found Sir Paul Westerham a most truthful man, and I don't see why he should be telling me falsehoods now.”

“You don't see why?” echoed Melun, with splendidly simulated scorn; “you don't see why? Of course you don't, because you are blind! Blind! You are blind with suspicion and distrust, and he, for his own ends, is simply playing on your fears. He wants to upset you, to put me out of court with you.

“If he can break our friendship, if he can sever the ties which bind us, then his task is the easier. Has it not occurred to you that he has been trying to turn your mind against me simply that he may, for his own ends, call you to his aid? Is it not so?”

For several minutes Mme. Estelle pulled her roll to pieces and made little pellets of the dough with her nervous fingers.

“Yes,” she said at last; “perhaps that is so. I have not looked at it in that light.”

“My dear Marie,” cried Melun, with a greater show of tenderness than he had yet exhibited, “surely I have been true enough and faithful enough all these years for you to believe me now. Indeed, you must believe in me, because if you don't believe in me and give me your support the cup of happiness which is so near our lips may be dashed away from them.

“Listen!” he went on, “and see whether I am speaking the truth or not.

“It is impossible for this business to drag on in this way any longer. I must bring matters to a head at once, and I see only one way to do it—I shall kidnap Lady Kathleen.”

Mme. Estelle started and looked at him, half in terror, half in admiration.

“It is a bold plan,” she said.

“A bold plan,” Melun agreed, “and a plan which must succeed if you will help me. The difficulty is to get the girl away, and I shall have to leave that entirely to you. What is more, there is very little time to be lost. The Cabinet meets at noon, and for a couple of hours after that Lord Penshurst will be busy

with his colleagues. Consequently during that time Lady Kathleen will be alone.

“Fortunately I managed to put young Hilden out of the way, at least for a time, so that we shall be free of his prying and peeping and officiousness when you call to-day.”

“When I call to-day!” repeated Madame in tones of wonderment.

“Yes, yes,” continued Melun; “it is you who will have to call. As things are at present it is naturally impossible for me to show my face near Downing Street. With you, however, the matter is quite different. No one there knows you.

“Now I have left nothing to chance. Westerham, if you please, must go nosing around the garage in Rupert Street to find out where his car is. It had gone, of course, to Holyhead as the result of my instructions. The manager wired to the chauffeur at Chester to return to town at once. But I wired to Birmingham to stop it there. Crow went down and dismissed the chauffeur, saying that he came from Westerham. The car is now in Chelsea, and we shall have the pleasure of using it to-day. It is just the car we want, because for some reason or other Westerham had it fitted with blind shutters.”

Madame nodded her head.

“We will telephone to Westminster and get the car to meet us at Oxford Circus. You can go down to Downing Street, and I will take a taxicab to the Star and Garter, Richmond. When you get to No. 10 simply ask for the Lady Kathleen, but give no name and refuse your business. That will merely arouse her curiosity, and the fact that you come in such a car will certainly obtain you an audience.”

Melun then went on to give Madame various instructions, enjoining her not to talk to Lady Kathleen on the way down to Richmond.

They then took a cab to Oxford Circus together and telephoned from the District Messengers' office to the garage at Chelsea for the car to come on to them at once at Pagani's.

It was shortly after twelve o'clock when Westerham's car reached the famous restaurant in Great Portland Street.

Melun, as he took leave of Mme. Estelle, again enjoined her to silence; and though Madame promised that she would not discuss his affairs with Lady Kathleen, she was, if the truth were told, not quite decided whether she would keep her word.

Her arrival in Downing Street occasioned a little surprise and not a little curiosity on the part of the doorkeeper when she refused to give her name. Without much delay, however, she was shown into the long, old-fashioned drawing-room, and it was not many minutes before Lady Kathleen appeared.

Kathleen came into the room very quietly. The sudden alarms and excursions amid which she had lately lived were accustoming her to strange and unexpected events, and she instinctively guessed that the woman who awaited her in the drawing-room was in some way connected with her father's secret.

As she entered the room Mme. Estelle rose from her seat and bowed. She did not attempt to shake hands, nor, indeed, did Lady Kathleen make any demonstration of friendship.

During the short drive from Oxford Street Madame had rehearsed her little part to herself. Now she played it perfectly.

“Russia needs you,” she said.

Kathleen's face paled, and she drew back a step.

“I don't quite understand,” she said.

Madame smiled in quite a charming way. “Lady Kathleen,” she said, “I cannot explain very much, for I know very little. I was simply requested by the Russian Embassy to inform you that a special emissary from St. Petersburg asks to see you at once. Who he is,” Madame continued, shrugging her shoulders, “I really cannot say. Sometimes, you know, the Russian officials are mysterious, and I have only my work to do. I ask no questions; it is not my business.

“But this gentleman, whoever he may be, is seemingly fearful of being seen in London, and he has asked you to meet me at Richmond in an hour's time.”

“Whereabouts in Richmond?” asked Kathleen.

“At the Star and Garter Hotel. I was asked to assure you that in all probability he would not detain you long.”

Kathleen's heart now beat faster with hope and now slowly with fear. When she had left the Czar's cousin at Rouen that great personage had given no indication that there was anything further to be discussed. He had simply delivered his ultimatum and taken his way back to St. Petersburg.

Kathleen looked at the clock.

“I suppose,” she asked, “you do not know whether this gentleman would be

likely to wait?”

“I am instructed,” replied Mme. Estelle, “that he cannot possibly wait. He is catching the three-o'clock mail back to France.”

It was certainly an exceedingly awkward position for a girl to be in. Hitherto she had undertaken no negotiations with the Czar's agents except on the advice of her father, and it seemed a remarkable thing that she should be sent for in this way in person.

That she could disturb her father was, of course, out of the question, and with some misgivings she decided that it would be best to accompany her mysterious visitor without further delay.

“I will be with you in a few moments,” she said, and passed out of the room to put on her outdoor things.

When she returned she found Madame already on her feet, as though anxious to depart—and anxious to depart she was.

From the beginning Mme. Estelle had cherished no liking for her mission, and the sight of Kathleen's pale and troubled beauty had unnerved her not a little. The place oppressed her.

She admitted to herself that her notions were entirely fanciful, but still the whole atmosphere of the rather sombre and old-fashioned drawing-room seemed charged with tragedy.

Kathleen preceded her visitor down the stairs, and then they entered the car. It was the Premier's official attendant who opened and shut the door of the motor for them. The chauffeur was apparently busy with the machinery, his head inside the bonnet.

Whatever small trouble the man was encountering with the engines was of short duration, for Kathleen had scarcely settled herself in her seat before the car began to move.

As the big motor car swung round into Whitehall a second car entered Downing Street and had to draw up short in order to avoid a collision. Kathleen, thinking that an accident was unavoidable, leant forward and looked out of the window, and, to her astonishment, she discerned the face of Westerham in the other car.

She drew back again with an exclamation, and though she set it down as imagination at the time, she had no doubt afterwards that as a matter of fact

Mme. Estelle had become deathly pale.

The car proceeded at a rapid rate up Whitehall and turning along Pall Mall made its way into Piccadilly.

The run to Richmond was a smooth one, unmarked by any incident, and for the most part, both the women were profoundly silent.

Each, indeed, was occupied with her own thoughts. Mme. Estelle, as she cast furtive and sidelong glances at Lady Kathleen, became more jealous and a little more disinclined to believe Melun's protestations at every mile.

She would have given much to be able to ask Lady Kathleen point-blank whether or not Melun had made a marriage with her one of the conditions which he was seeking to foist on the Prime Minister. But she had the good sense to see that even a tentative question of this sort would instantly arouse Lady Kathleen's suspicions. Even as the pseudo agent of the Russian Government her knowledge of affairs could not be supposed to include a matter such as this.

Kathleen, for her part, had spent the time in trying to account for Westerham's presence in Downing Street. Presumably he was about to make some further effort to persuade her father of his *bona fides*. And she grew more unhappy as she thought what her father's answer would again inevitably be, and could only pray that Westerham might have sufficient forbearance to persevere in spite of the Premier's certain rudeness.

Presently Kathleen, watching from the window, saw the familiar shape of the Star and Garter come into view. Slightly to her surprise the motor-car did not slacken its speed, but went on through the gates of Richmond Park. Then, almost for the first time, she spoke to her companion.

“The man must have made a mistake,” she said; “he has passed the hotel.”

“Has he?” asked Madame, with an air of astonishment. “That is rather strange. He must know the way. Perhaps there is something wrong with the machinery.”

But Lady Kathleen shook her head, for she knew enough of motoring to appreciate the steady purr of an engine which is running well.

Suddenly the brakes were applied with considerable force and the car came to a rapid standstill.

Then the door swung open and a man leaped in.

Almost instantly he pulled up the blind shutters which covered the glass and shut out all the light, so that the interior of the car was in complete darkness.

Kathleen gave a little cry and shrank back against the cushions. For in the darkness she felt the car give a great bound onwards and rush down the hill.

She heard a low laugh, and then the scraping of a hand as it fumbled for the electric button.

The hand groping in the darkness found the switch and flooded the car with light.

Kathleen sat bolt upright and uttered a second cry as she saw grinning at her from the opposite side of the car the evil face of Melun.

CHAPTER XX
THE FARM ON THE HILL

For a while Kathleen was too bewildered to say anything, but soon one ugly fact stood out hard and convincing. She had been betrayed.

Slowly she gathered all her mental resources together and slowly she looked from Melun to Marie Estelle and back to Melun.

During the past few weeks she had learned to expect infamy and even treachery, but she had not looked for any action so villainous as this.

As the car went bounding down the hill at an ever-increasing rate of speed Kathleen saw Melun give an appreciative nod to the woman at her side, and she watched a little smile of triumph flit across the woman's mouth.

Kathleen could only dimly wonder what this new move meant. That she had been kidnapped she could not doubt, but for precisely what purpose she could not understand, though she judged that she had been taken prisoner with the idea of hurrying Lord Penshurst to a decision.

The first shock of Melun's entry over, Kathleen steeled herself against all fear, and calling her pride to her assistance disdained to ask any questions.

The silence in the electric-lighted car became, indeed, so oppressive that Melun, who had been waiting for some passionate outburst on Kathleen's part, could bear it no longer.

“I suppose,” he said, looking at her with an insolent sneer, “that I owe you an apology for being compelled to treat you in this way?”

But Kathleen made no answer; she only looked at him with scorn.

“As a matter of fact, I consider it was well and neatly done,” continued Melun. “Excellently planned and excellently carried out. My congratulation to you,” and again he gave Mme. Estelle a little nod.

Once more there was silence, but it was Kathleen who broke it now. She was determined to carry the war into the enemy's camp. If she could achieve nothing else, she could at least, by showing a mingled boldness and resignation, cause Melun considerable uneasiness.

“I suppose you have put up these things”—and she tapped lightly with her fingers against the blind shutters—“because you were afraid that I might scream or struggle?”

“That is precisely the case,” said Melun.

“You need have no fear of that,” returned Kathleen. “I give you my word that I will neither call out nor attempt to escape. The women of my family are in the habit of acting bravely and openly.”

She intended this as a covert hit at Mme. Estelle, and apparently the shot went home, for she saw the woman redden a little and slightly turn away her head.

Melun gave Kathleen one quick, shrewd glance and then lowered the shutters; and Kathleen, looking almost lazily out of the window, saw that they were now almost clear of the park, and, so far as she could judge by the position of the sun, were running towards the southwest.

The drive continued in complete silence. Mme. Estelle remained red and awkward, Melun was morose and ill at ease. Kathleen alone was self-possessed, though pale. She even forbore to ask whither they were bound, for though sadly tempted to do so, she checked herself with the rather sad reflection that she would know sooner or later.

By-and-by they drew near to a considerable town, and Melun, in spite of Kathleen's promise, drew the blind shutters up once more.

He had, however, the grace to be moderately apologetic.

“It is not because I distrust your word, Lady Kathleen,” he said, “but because I have to take precautions. One does not know who might happen to look into the car.”

It was not long before Melun lowered the shutters again, and Kathleen's heart gave a little thump, for looking out on the country she realised that she was on a familiar road. She recognised the high hedges between which they were running as those which border the long lane running between Croydon and Hayes Common.

The car began to shoot up-hill, and they went over a breezy heath, subsequently running down into the valley, as Kathleen judged, of Farnborough.

For a little while they kept to the main road and then turned off to the left again. Half an hour's run brought them to Westerham—from which place Sir

Paul took his title.

As the car turned to the left once more Kathleen had little doubt that they were bound for Sevenoaks; nor was she wrong.

But the car did not stop here; it swept past the Royal Crown Hotel, past the old Grammar School, past the wooded stretch of Knole Park, down the steep and tortuous River Hill.

At Hildenborough the car turned up to the right and raced through the Weald of Kent. This was all familiar ground to Kathleen, and she realised that to some extent they were doubling on their tracks, making a zigzag course along the valley at the base of Ide and Toys Hill.

Suddenly the car stopped, and Kathleen, looking through the open window, saw the chauffeur get down from the seat and open a gate which apparently led to a more private path.

Through this the car passed and was swallowed up in a wood. But the jolting and rattling over ruts soon ceased, the road widened and became smooth, and they began to climb in curves up the face of a steep hill.

By-and-by they came to a small plateau on the edge of which was an old farmhouse. The ground dropped almost sheer away from it at the southern end, while almost the whole of the front of it was washed by a muddy and apparently deep pool.

As they drew up before the little low doorway Kathleen heard several great dogs baying at different points.

The chauffeur got down from his seat again and drew near to open the door. Then for the first time Kathleen, with a sinking of her heart, recognised the man as Crow.

The short winter's day had now drawn to a close, and as he entered the house Melun ordered the lamps to be lit.

Mme. Estelle led the way into a not ill-furnished dining-room, the window of which projected over the vast cliff.

To reach this room they had traversed a long passage, and Kathleen appreciated the fact that the house was very curiously built. It consisted, indeed, of two portions, which were linked together by a long stone-flagged corridor.

Melun helped himself liberally to neat brandy. Mme. Estelle sent for Crow

and told him to order tea.

Kathleen had been filled with an intense foreboding as she entered the house, a foreboding which increased as she slowly recognised that she and Mme. Estelle were apparently the only women in the place.

For the tea was brought in by a man, not a farmhand or an honest countryman, but a villainous-looking individual with a pock-marked face and little gold earrings in the lobes of his frost-bitten ears. He walked with his feet wide apart, and with a slightly rolling gait. He had an immense bull neck, and the hands with which he grasped the tray were large, grimy and hairy. Kathleen set him down as a sailor; nor was she wrong.

When tea was over Melun lit a cigarette, and drawing Mme. Estelle on one side conversed with her for some time in whispers.

At the end of the whispered conference between Melun and Mme. Estelle the woman left the room without so much as a word to Kathleen or even a glance in her direction.

Melun turned round with a baleful light in his eyes.

“Now, my lady,” he said, “we can have this matter out.”

Kathleen's afflictions had only increased her old habit of command and her natural dignity. Though in reality she was the prisoner, she might have been the captor.

“Before you speak, Captain Melun,” she said, “I also have something to say. How long do you intend to keep me here? I ask this, not for my own sake, but for my father's.”

“That,” said Melun, with a malicious grin, “depends entirely on your father.”

“By this time, of course,” Kathleen continued, “a great hue-and-cry will have been raised after me in London. Do you intend to return there to-night? Again I ask this question for my father's sake. He should be informed of my whereabouts at once; for you must remember that he is an old man and will probably take this very much to heart.”

“He will not be informed of this to-night,” said Melun, shortly. “Because,” he continued, with a villainous leer, “I am only cruel to be kind. I want to have all the details of your ransom and our marriage settled as soon as possible. A night of waiting will soften your dear old father's heart, and he will probably

listen to reason in the morning."

Kathleen shuddered and drew a little further away from Melun. "You coward," she said, and looked at him with infinite contempt.

Again a dangerous light leapt into Melun's eyes.

"Have a care," he shouted, "what names you call me here. I do not wish to be compelled to make you feel your position. But if necessary I shall——"

Kathleen did not take her scornful eyes from his face, and Melun at last looked shiftily away.

As he apparently did not intend to speak again, Kathleen put to him another question:

"Who is the woman," she asked, "you employed to get me here?"

"That is no business of yours," snarled Melun, "though you can, if you wish to speak to or allude to her, call her Mme. Estelle."

"I merely asked," said Kathleen, "because I was curious to know how she came to make use of the name of Russia."

"It was simple, perfectly simple. It was largely a matter of guesswork. It was only natural to suppose that you would be doing what you could to smooth matters over with the Czar."

Kathleen nodded a little to herself. There were apparently few details of her father's secret with which Melun was not acquainted.

"Now," said the captain, changing his tone and attempting to be brisk and businesslike, "let us for a moment consider the essential points of the case. Of the ransom, of course, there can be no question. I shall increase the sum because of the obstinate way in which your father has refused my overtures. That, however, will be all the better for us."

He said this with an insinuating air for which Kathleen loathed him.

"The only remaining obstacle is yourself. But you, perhaps, will no longer refuse the hand which I so considerately offer you in marriage."

"Captain Melun," said Kathleen, coldly, "you are at liberty to discuss the business side of this matter as much as you please. But I decline altogether to allow you to insult me. After all, it is unnecessary, for I have nothing to say on the matter, and must refer you to my father."

“I had hoped,” said Melun, “that I might be able to gladden his heart with the news of your consent.”

Kathleen turned her back on him, and Melun swore at her without disguise. But she paid no heed.

Presently he walked round the room so that he could come face to face with her.

“It is early,” he said, “but early hours will do you good. If you will be so kind as to accompany me I will show you to your room.”

He led the way up three flights of stairs till they came to a small landing. Out of this there opened only one door, and through this Melun passed.

Kathleen now found herself in a large, square room, simply and yet fairly well furnished, partly as a bedroom and partly as a sitting-room.

“It is here,” said Melun, “that I am unfortunately compelled to ask you to await your father's decision. However, I release you unconditionally from your promise neither to scream nor to attempt escape.

“You are at perfect liberty to scream to your heart's content. There is no one here who will mind in the least. You are also at perfect liberty to make what efforts at escape you choose. I fear that you will only find them futile.”

He went out quickly and closed the door after him. Kathleen, listening in the badly-lighted room, could hear a key grate in the lock and bolts shot in both at the top and the bottom of the door.

Quickly and methodically she made an examination of her prison. She looked into the cupboards and into the drawers and the massive bureau. But there was nothing about the room of the remotest interest to her which offered the faintest suggestion, sinister or otherwise.

It was, indeed, only when she looked out of the windows, of which there were three, that she discovered to the full how utterly helpless was her position.

The window on the south side was apparently over the window of the dining-room, and, as she peeped over the sill, looked sheer down the face of the precipice beneath her.

The west window, she found, looked down into a stone courtyard, while the window on the east overhung the pond. Apparently she was imprisoned in a tower.

When Melun had reached the ground floor he sought out Mme. Estelle.

“I have not had much opportunity of saying anything to you,” he remarked as he entered the room in which she was sitting, “but I should like to tell you now how splendidly you have done.”

Madame was restless and ill at ease.

“If I had seen that girl before to-day,” she said, “I should never have brought her here.”

“Then you would have been a fool,” said Melun, rudely.

“Possibly, but still, even at the risk of your displeasure, there are a few things which I do not care to do.”

Melun glanced at her sharply.

“Of course,” she continued, “it is too late now. I have made up my mind, and we will go through with it, but frankly, I don't like this business.”

“Never mind,” said Melun; “it will not last for ever. To-morrow ought to settle it. I shall go back to town the first thing, starting at about five o'clock, as I shall have to make a *détour*. I have changed the number of the car, but still it is hard to say what Westerham may be up to. If he finds that his precious motor has not come back to town he may take to advertising it as stolen—which would be awkward.”

Madame at this point bade Melun good-night, and the captain sent for Crow. To him he gave instructions to have the car ready at five o'clock, but told him that he should drive it back to town himself.

“You can serve a better purpose by remaining here,” he said. “For, mark you, I will have no hanky-panky games in this house in my absence. And, mark you, too, I have no desire to have Mme. Estelle and Lady Kathleen becoming too friendly. You never can rely on women. They are funny creatures, and Madame is far too sympathetic with the girl already. So I shall look to you to stop anything of that sort.

“For the rest, you will know what to do if certain contingencies should arise. I have not brought the dogs here for nothing.” He broke off and shuddered a little himself as at some short distance from the house he could hear the baying of the great hounds.

“They are loose, I suppose?” he asked.

Crow nodded.

“Then Heaven help the stranger,” he rejoined with a cruel laugh, and pulling a rug over himself he lay down to sleep on the sofa.

He was up betimes in the morning, and had, indeed, been gone four hours when Mme. Estelle came lazily down to breakfast.

Melun had left no instructions in regard to Kathleen's food, and as she did not consider it advisable to let the unfortunate girl starve, Madame, after she had herself breakfasted, set a tray with the intention of carrying it up to Kathleen's room.

Before she could do this, however, it was necessary to send for Crow in order to obtain the key.

When she asked for it, Crow shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

“I have very strict orders,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Madame demanded sharply. “What do you mean?”

“Simply that the master said that you and the young lady were not to get talking too much. He said nothing about food, or of waiting on her ladyship, and it didn't occur to me until this morning that it was a bit of a rum job for a chap like myself to wait on her.

“However,” he added, with a smirk, “I don't so much mind.”

But Crow's clumsy utterances had again aroused all Madame's sleeping suspicions. There was, moreover, no reason why she should keep silence now. Her treachery was a different matter altogether. The way was smooth for asking Kathleen the question the answer to which meant so much to her.

She laughed in Crow's face.

“It was hardly necessary for the captain to give you any orders, seeing that he gave certain instructions to me. He said that as there was no other woman in the house it would be my place to take Lady Kathleen anything that she actually needed. I am going to take up her breakfast now. Give me the key.”

Crow hesitated a moment, but finally handed over the key. Madame put it on the breakfast tray and went upstairs.

Kathleen, as she heard the bolts drawn back and the key turned in the lock, suffered fresh apprehension. For she had caught the rustle of Madame's skirts

outside, and she would rather have faced Melun than the woman.

With very little apology Mme. Estelle entered, and, setting the breakfast down, immediately withdrew. Her impatience to ask the question was great, but she schooled herself to waiting.

In half an hour's time she went up for the tray, and then she faced Kathleen boldly and looked her in the eyes.

“Lady Kathleen,” she said, “I am really ashamed to have brought you here in such a treacherous way. I will not ask you to forgive me, for you will not understand. I can only tell you that I am a very loving and jealous woman.”

Mme. Estelle paused, and was conscious that Kathleen looked at her in great surprise.

“I want,” she continued, “to ask you a question which means much to me. Is it, or is it not, one of Captain Melun's conditions that you shall marry him before he returns your father's secret?”

“Yes,” answered Kathleen, very quietly, “it is.”

Madame's rather flushed face grew white, and her eyes blazed with passion. She clenched her fists and beat the air with them.

“Oh, the liar!” she cried, “the liar! Oh! it is hard to be treated like this when I have done so much for him.”

Kathleen drew back, startled and amazed.

“I assure you that you need have no fear so far as I am concerned. Both my father and myself have refused to comply with that condition, and we shall refuse to the end.”

Madame, however, paid but little heed to Kathleen; she was beside herself with rage.

“Ah, ah!” she cried, “wait till he returns! I'll kill him! I'll kill him!”

So distorted with fury was the woman's face that Kathleen became alarmed for her sanity. She drew near to her and endeavoured to catch her hands in her own, imploring her to be calm.

By-and-by Mme. Estelle listened to her, and in a sudden revulsion of feeling fell on her knees, sobbing bitterly.

Kathleen bent over her, doing her best to console her, and presently, as the woman grew calmer, she endeavoured to turn the situation to her own and her father's advantage.

“The best way to defeat Captain Melun's scheme, so far as I am concerned,” she urged, “is to release me.”

But at that Mme. Estelle leaped to her feet again and her face was hideous in its cunning.

“Ah! not that,” she cried, “not that! If I distrust him, I distrust you still more. Your pretty face may look sad and sorrowful, and you may declare to me that you will never consent; but I will wait and see. I'll wait until Melun returns and confront you with him. Then perhaps I shall learn the real truth.”

Kathleen made a little despairing gesture with her hands; argument, she saw, would be useless.

Gathering herself together, Madame blundered, half blind with tears, out of the room, and Kathleen with a sinking heart heard the bolts drawn again.

All through the day Madame sat brooding, sending Kathleen's lunch and tea up to her by Crow.

All the evening she still sat and brooded, until as eleven o'clock drew near and there were still no signs of the captain she had worked herself up into a hysteria of rage.

Twelve o'clock struck, and still the captain was absent. Another half-hour dragged slowly by, and then she heard his car grating its way up the hill-side.

She was at the door to meet him, and would have plunged straightway into the matter which absorbed her but for the sight of his face.

It was haggard and pale as death. His eyes were blazing in their sockets, and his straggling hair lent him altogether a distraught and terrifying aspect.

“Melun!” cried the woman, stretching out her hand, “what is it?”

“I don't know,” he said hoarsely; “I wish I did, but the Premier's gone.”

“Gone! What do you mean?”

“He is lost. Westerham kidnapped him.”

“Impossible!”

“Impossible, you fool!” shouted the captain, irritably. “It's true—perfectly true!”

He walked into the hall and sank exhausted into a chair. “As for me,” he grumbled, “I have had the narrowest escape I ever had.”

“So that's all, is it?” cried Mme. Estelle, remembering her own grievance. “So that's all!

“But what of me? What do you think I have gone through? What do you think I have suffered? What do you think I have found out?”

Melun rose unsteadily from his chair and looked at her in alarm.

“Is it Lady Kathleen?” he asked; “is she safe?”

“Safe! Oh, yes, she is safe,” she cried, with a peal of uncanny laughter. “Safe for your kisses and for your caresses. Oh, you liar! you liar! I have been true to you in all respects, and you have been false to me in everything that mattered. So you will marry the pretty Lady Kathleen, will you? Oh, but you won't! Never! Never!”

She rushed at Melun as though to strike him, but Melun, jaded though he was, was quick and strong.

He caught her brutally, as he might a dog, by the neck, and threw her into the dining-room, the door of which stood open, and, utterly careless as to what harm he might do to her, sent the unhappy woman sprawling on to the floor. In a second he had banged the door to and turned the key in the lock. He sank down on to the bench trembling and exhausted.

He heard Marie pick herself up and hurl herself in blind and impotent fury against the door.

He listened, shaking like a leaf, as shriek after shriek of frenzy reached his ears.

Up in the tower Kathleen heard these shrieks too, and shuddered. A horrible fear took possession of her heart that there was murder being done below.

She sat on the edge of her bed with her hands pressed to her heart, listening in fascinated horror.

The shrieks died away, and there was complete silence in the house for full half an hour.

Then Kathleen heard a sudden shout, a crashing of glass and a scrambling, tearing noise, the hideous bay of the boarhounds in the courtyard, a scream, and a thud.

Stabbing the other noise with sharp precision came the sound of shots.

CHAPTER XXI
THE KIDNAPPING OF THE PRIME MINISTER

“Out of evil cometh good.” Had Westerham caught the eye of Kathleen as the two motor cars passed each other at the corner of Whitehall Kathleen herself would have been spared much suffering and several men would not have gone to their account. But a meeting at that moment would have so changed the whole course of events that far greater trouble would have befallen, and the whole earth might have become involved in a disaster which would have grown, without question, into Armageddon.

It was, however, in happy ignorance of both the greater and the lesser evil that Westerham, in what were really most excellent spirits, drew up the car which he had borrowed from Dunton at No. 10 Downing Street.

With him came Mendip, the younger of the two men whom he had met in such curious circumstances at the gaming club on the night when Kathleen had staked her father's honour against the bank and, for the time, lost.

Mendip was one of those strange, tired men who appear to do nothing and yet accomplish much. He was slow of speech, but quick in action when occasion demanded; silent, serious, and of a character built to bear with resolution any temptation or trial which might arise.

Dunton trusted him implicitly, and, in spite of his short acquaintance with him, Westerham trusted him too.

A third person had been necessary for the enterprise, and had been found in the person of Tom Lowther, a good-natured young giant, who laughed his way through what, to him, was a laughing world.

It was with an immense grin of satisfaction that he had taken on his shoulders the task of driving the car in which Westerham set out on his desperate enterprise.

Dunton had left his chambers early in the morning, so that about eleven o'clock all the men who had been selected to drag the Premier's secret from him had gathered in Dunton's rooms.

There, half humorously, Westerham had explained the project to them,

basing his argument upon a lesson drawn from an abortive raid which certain suffragettes had made upon the official residence not long before.

What woman could attempt, he had argued, man could decidedly accomplish.

So the plan was mapped out; and according to the arrangements which Westerham made, Lowther backed the car round in Downing Street and drew it up alongside the curb, so that its head pointed towards Whitehall, and, as Westerham hoped, the high road of escape.

It was astonishing that, in spite of the suffragettes' attempt on Downing Street, more precautions were not taken. For all he knew, Westerham might have had to encounter worse opposition than he did. But he was prepared for all emergencies, and, moreover, determined not to spare drastic measures if it came to a tight corner.

As he drew up to the door, Westerham hoped that the immaculate Dunton might play his part as well as he intended to play his own. Dunton had gone down to Chichester, and had ordered his yacht to await him in the fair way off Selsey Bill.

It was to Dunton's yacht that Westerham determined to take the Premier.

As the car came to a standstill, Westerham and Mendip alighted quickly, and without hesitation pulled the little brass knob at No. 10. As they expected, the door was pulled open quickly, and the head, followed by the figure, of the Premier's official door-keeper appeared in the entry.

Westerham was first up the steps, with Mendip hard at his heels.

He pushed the man aside, and had slammed the door to in the twinkling of an eye. He thrust the man back into the deep, cane-hooded chair in which he was wont to sit and dream away his official hours, and had him gagged before he had time to cry out. Then, by means of the straps with which he had provided himself, he and Mendip securely lashed the man's feet together, tying his hands behind his back.

This work done, they paused and listened; but, in spite of the scuffle there had been, there was no sound of approaching footsteps, nor, indeed, any sign that they had been overheard.

Without a word, Westerham grasped the man by the shoulders, and Mendip took him by the heels; and so they carried him through the red-baize swing-

doors which formed the entrance to the passage leading to the council chamber.

There, with no ceremony at all, they dropped him on the ground, and ran quickly down the corridor.

At the bottom of this there stood a door, which opened easily as Westerham turned the handle.

They then found themselves in a somewhat ellipse-shaped vestibule, which, as a matter of fact, was the outer lobby of the room where the Cabinet Council was being held.

That the door of the council chamber would be locked Westerham knew full well; but he had come prepared to overcome any difficulty of this kind.

Nevertheless, he turned the handle, only to find, as he had expected, that the key on the inner side had been turned.

When in America, Westerham had found it necessary to force more than one door; and now he pursued the tactics which he had found efficacious on previous occasions.

Swiftly he drew his own revolver from his hip-pocket and held out his other hand for Mendip's. Mendip, with his eyes beaming, passed his own weapon to Westerham without a word.

He then placed the noses of both the six-shooters on the woodwork just above the lock, pointing them downwards so that no damage might be done to the ministers within. He pulled the triggers simultaneously, and the sound of splintered woodwork and riven iron followed instantaneously on the double report.

The door all about the lock was shattered into matchwood, and Westerham, thrusting his foot forward, pushed it open.

Mendip sprang back in fear lest his face should be recognised by any of the startled ministers, while Westerham strode calmly into the room.

The Cabinet Council was in full session about a long oval table.

The Premier, who sat opposite the door, had risen from his seat, and with a white face was staring directly into Westerham's eyes.

The other ministers had thrust back their chairs, and were now upon their feet. There was complete silence.

Westerham had not the slightest fear of any of them being armed, and without a pause walked over to the table and knocked sharply with the butt of his revolver on the polished wood.

“Lord Penshurst,” he said quietly, “I wish to speak to you.”

The Prime Minister's jaw opened and closed spasmodically, so that his white beard wagged upon his breast. He made no answer.

Silently the other ministers drew aside into two groups, leaving Westerham and the Premier facing each other in the centre of the room.

With an effort, Lord Penshurst got the better of his agitated nerves and rapped out a sharp “What do you want?”

“Lord Penshurst,” said Westerham, calmly, “you know who I am. You know on what mission I am here. If you refuse to come round the table to speak to me instantly and speak to me alone I cannot be held responsible for the consequences.”

The Premier, without a word and with trailing steps began to make the circuit of the long table. As he approached, Westerham drew back so that now he was at the entrance to the council chamber. He beckoned Lord Penshurst still nearer.

When the Premier was quite close to him he stooped and whispered into his ear so that none of the other ministers could by any chance catch his words.

“If you want to save Lady Kathleen and yourself, you must come with me at once.”

Lord Penshurst said, “It's impossible!”

“Don't argue,” urged Westerham, almost roughly. “I regret to treat you with so much disrespect, but the crisis for which you have been waiting has now come. If you lose, you know what it will mean. But you need not lose if you will follow me now.”

During this conversation the startled ministers had drawn together, and there was considerable outcry as Lord Penshurst turned to look at them with a white face.

“Be quick,” said Westerham; “you must keep them quiet for about five minutes. Five minutes will do, but we must have that start. Don't fail, everything depends upon it.”

“Gentlemen,” said the Premier, slowly and painfully, as a man speaking in a dream; “gentlemen, I must apologise for this interruption, but I assure you that the fault must not be laid at the door of this gentleman, but at mine. In five minutes I will return. In the meantime I have to discuss more important business than any which could detain me here.”

The ministers looked at each other, utterly aghast. It was fortunate that Westerham's entry had been so swift and so volcanic that they were still partially dazed. Otherwise it might have been necessary for Westerham to take steps entailing consequences which no influence, however great, could possibly have averted.

As it was, they gazed at the Premier and the tall form of Westerham, sullenly and stupidly.

One of them, a younger man than the rest, suddenly remembered and cried out: “By George, it is the man who saved us all at the dance!”

The other ministers looked at their colleague, with inquiry; but it was an inquiry as to the meaning of the stranger's presence, and not as to his exclamation. For the raid on Trant Hall was now a matter of public knowledge and consuming public interest.

Doubtless, but for the unimpeachable reputation of the Premier, some of them would have cried out that this was a traitorous piece of work. But in spite of all the appearances against him, Lord Penshurst's colleagues were silent on this point.

Seeing that the Premier had practically given his consent, Westerham grasped him by the arm and at a rapid rate half dragged him down the corridor.

As they passed the bound and gagged porter, who looked up with wondering and bewildered eyes at his master as he was dragged past him, the Premier could not refrain from uttering a little cry.

“Never mind the man,” said Westerham in his ear, and hurried him on. He left him standing by the red-baize door for a moment as he dashed back to turn the key in the lock of the inner vestibule. But before the Premier had an opportunity of protesting against this, Westerham was back at his side and hastening him across the hall.

In the hall Westerham looked rapidly about him. It struck him that the appearance of the Prime Minister being rushed hatless across the pavement to the motor-car might arouse curiosity on the part of the policeman who was

slouching up and down along the pavement.

He saw Lord Penshurst's hat, snatched it up, jammed it on the Premier's head, and then, again stifling every protest on the part of the old man by curtly ordering him to be silent, ran him down the steps and across the pavement to the car.

By a miracle the policeman's back was, for the moment, turned to No. 10, so that it was without the slightest let or hindrance that Westerham and Mendip bundled the Premier into the car and that Lowther started the motor on its long journey.

So swift and overwhelming had been Westerham's attack that the aged Premier was still too overcome to demand any explanation or to ask any questions. He leant back against the upholstery, looking crushed and frail, so frail that Westerham's heart smote him for the violence that he had been forced to use. But he nerved himself to carry the thing through, comforting himself with the reflection that what he did must prove the salvation of Kathleen.

The car which Lowther drove was a hired one, but he was an expert driver, and made good speed down Victoria Street to the Buckingham Palace Road and over the Albert Bridge. In less than fifteen minutes he had reached Battersea Park.

Here he pulled up in a quiet spot and Westerham, opening the door of the motor-car, turned to Lord Penshurst.

“I'm sorry,” he said, “that I am obliged to ask you to walk, but you see, although it is no more than a quarter of an hour since we left Downing Street, the whole of London and Scotland Yard will by this time be searching for you in all directions. And if there is to be any hope of my being able to help you out of your difficulties, you must not be recognised.”

The Premier mumbled in his beard, but was still too dazed to make any resistance. He followed Westerham out of the car, and suffered Mendip to take his arm.

A fourth man had been idling by the side of the path when the car was brought to a standstill. This was a friend of Lowther's, who had been pledged to secrecy. He had further promised to take the car back to the garage, and, if necessary, to swear that it had been handed over to him by Lowther on the Barnet Road.

Westerham's subtle mind indeed had thought out arrangements which

practically precluded the possibility of their track being picked up and followed with success; though naturally the chances of escape were very strong against him, for, if ever the police had worked, they would of a surety work now.

Westerham led the way through the bushes to another roadway, on which was waiting a second car, driven by a second friend of Lowther's on whom reliance could be placed.

Westerham bundled Mendip and Lord Penshurst into it, while Lowther climbed up beside his friend. They lost no time, but drove boldly and rapidly back along the same route by which they had come until they arrived at Victoria.

There Lowther gave his friend instructions to make for Buckingham Palace. Thence they raced up Constitution Hill into Piccadilly.

Lowther had rooms in Stratton Street, which was immensely in favour of Westerham's hopes, inasmuch as few pedestrians and fewer vehicles frequented that aristocratic *cul-de-sac*.

The street when they drew up was fortunately quite deserted, and Westerham's plans were further aided by the lucky fact that Lowther's apartments were on the ground floor. Lowther had given them free use of his rooms, and as the Premier was hastily conducted into them he nodded to Westerham in intimation that his part of the business was nearly done.

He went out into the street again, and mounting the car drove away. It had been arranged that he should make for Salisbury in case he, too, was followed, and he had immediately agreed to the proposal, tiresome though it was.

Mendip did not enter the house, but walked rapidly into Piccadilly, and turning westward, made for the Automobile Club. There his low-built, yellow-painted racing motor-car was waiting for him, and, as he had often done, he took it over from the charge of his man, and, making a detour by way of Curzon Street and Piccadilly, got back to Stratton Street just as Westerham was ready for him.

In the interval the Premier had somewhat recovered from the dazed state into which he had been thrown, and indignantly demanded of Westerham the meaning of all his manœuvres.

“If you will be good enough to sit down for a few minutes, Lord Penshurst,” Westerham said, “I think I shall be able to make matters a little clearer than they are at present.

“As I told you at Trant, I have no notion what hold Melun has over you. I can only see that it must be a hard and a very heavy one. You declined to believe that I was in reality Sir Paul Westerham. I cannot prove it to you yet until we find Lord Dunton. In the meantime, however, I will ask you if you think that the men who have assisted me to-day would be willing to do my bidding if they for a moment suspected that I was in league with any band of scoundrels.

“With your own eyes you have seen Lowther and Mendip. Both men are known to you, both men are gentlemen, and I think you should take it for granted that if they are so kind as to assist me they are satisfied that I am doing what I should.”

Lord Penshurst wrinkled up his brows. He could not quite understand how it had come about that such men as Lowther and Mendip were apparently working hand-in-glove with Westerham.

“I trust,” he said, “that you have not been so indiscreet as to make mention of my affairs to these gentlemen?”

“None whatever. They have taken the steps they have because they both trust Dunton to the utmost. And however much they may have been influenced by the hope of some fun, they were at least persuaded that there was a good and serious purpose at the back of this seemingly harum-scarum adventure.”

Lord Penshurst could do nothing but gaze about him in a most distressed way, and Westerham sought to give him back his confidence as best he could.

“I assure you, Lord Penshurst,” said Westerham, “that your only hope is to place yourself entirely in my hands. There is only one way out of your troubles; you must tell me the whole of your story, for I alone can save you. I alone know Melun, understand him, and know how to deal with him.”

Again the Premier gazed about him wearily. “But Dunton,” he asked, “where is he? It is all very well for me to see Lowther and Mendip with you, but I must have Dunton's word that you are really the man you say you are.”

“Good,” said Westerham; “I had already arranged, thinking that possibly you would prefer to be out of London, to take you down to Lord Dunton's yacht which is lying off Selsey Bill. However, if you prefer it, I will send for Dunton to come here.”

“Very well,” said the Premier, “I think I would prefer that.”

It was ten o'clock at night when Dunton arrived and was shown into

Lowther's rooms. Dunton's story of Westerham was brief and to the point.

At its conclusion the Premier bowed his head. “I capitulate, Sir Paul,” he said, “and I will tell you my secret.”

Dunton nodded approval and walked out of the room, leaving Westerham and the Prime Minister alone.

CHAPTER XXII
THE PREMIERE'S STORY

I have to confess that quite unintentionally I did my Government and my country a great wrong. In spite of all my very considerable experience, I did not see at the time the danger into which I was drifting, and I had gone too far to draw back when I realised with a shock the awful position in which I had placed myself.

As you know, I was drafted into the Ministry through an rather unusual channel. It is not often that a diplomat forsakes diplomacy to take part in politics. An extraordinary combination of events, however, contrived to place me in a curious position, with the result that great influence was brought to bear on me to give up the Embassy of which I was in charge, and return to England to take up a minor position in the Cabinet.

Probably, in spite of the influence which was exerted, I should never have consented to do this but for the fact that I knew the minor position I was offered was merely a temporary one. I was given to understand clearly that it was but a stepping-stone to the Premiership. So I decided to accept the office.

Now the country from which I returned was Russia. I was, as you may possibly remember, Ambassador at St. Petersburg.

I was there for many years, and enjoyed an unusually close and intimate friendship with the Czar. That was at once the beginning of my ambitions and troubles. It was, indeed, that friendship which, to a great extent, induced me to transfer my labours from St. Petersburg to London.

I do not know what acquaintance you may have of Russian affairs, nor what knowledge you may have of the Emperor himself. I can only assure you that, in spite of all that may be said against him, his Majesty is absolutely sincere and honest in his desire for universal peace. He suffered untold agonies of mind during the struggle with Japan, and since peace was arranged has made use of every diplomatic means to bring about a general disarmament by the Powers.

In this aim he met, of course, with most violent opposition. Some of the Imperial family went so far as to accuse their kinsman and nominal ruler of being a traitor to his country.

However, in spite of all opposition, he persevered; and, as he believed that England was also sincere in her desire for peace, he cultivated my acquaintance to a marked degree.

Unfortunately, in an evil hour, it suddenly dawned upon me that my name might be handed down to posterity, jointly with that of the Czar's, as the man who paved the way to universal peace.

But my ideas were different from those of the Czar. His Majesty wished to work along the line of least resistance, and was quite prepared to spend years of patient effort in bringing about his dream of the millennium.

For my part, I was, I suppose, an old man in a hurry. I could not afford to wait for years to see the triumph of my schemes. I was getting on in life, and it seemed to me that if I did not hasten I might die without my ambition being realised.

I therefore set to work entirely to remodel the Czar's ideas, and as a result ultimately worked out the most daring plan for compelling Europe to lay down its arms that had ever been conceived.

When that plan was fully perfected I was to take it to my own King and ask for his consent to it. I knew his Majesty was as genuinely desirous for peace as the Czar, and I really foresaw no difficulty in being able to persuade him to sanction the scheme which I had drawn up.

It is quite unnecessary to go into its full details here, but perhaps I had better give you a glimpse of the outline. Briefly, England was to make use of the *entente cordiale* to compel France, by means of an ultimatum which would expire at the end of twenty-four hours, to consent to stand in with Great Britain and Russia in a demand that Germany's military force should be whittled down to the limits of the Swiss Militia. It was also to be stipulated that Germany's naval programme should always be one-half of the combined programmes of Great Britain, Russia, and France.

Thanks to the treaty with Great Britain made some years ago with the Scandinavian States, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, and Spain and Italy, Germany would have been speedily isolated. She would have awakened one morning to find herself absolutely friendless, except, perhaps, for Austria. It would have been doubtful, too, whether even Austria would have remained faithful to her pushful friend when she saw the whole of Europe allied against the Fatherland.

It was certainly a daring scheme, but one which, I think, must have met with instantaneous success. Every aspect of it had been considered, and even the contingency provided for by the Czar and myself.

Naturally it was impossible to carry the details of so complicated a piece of business in one's head. I was half-afraid to commit them to writing myself, and so the Czar suggested that he should, with his own hand, draw up the lines of the agreement which we proposed to foist on Europe.

I brought a copy of the document, made by the Czar himself, back to this country, and for three years I waited impatiently for an opportunity to present the scheme to his Majesty, and, if possible, persuade him to put it into operation.

Those were three years of terrible anxiety. I carried the papers with me both day and night. A hundred times a day I would clap my hands to my breast-pocket to see if they were safe, and a score of times I would start up in my bed at night feverishly to ascertain if I still had them in my possession.

But, in spite of all my care, I lost them. I kept the papers in a thin morocco-leather case, which bore the Imperial arms of Russia. One day I was looking through them in my room in Downing Street when I was suddenly informed that I was wanted at the telephone. Unfortunately, at that time I had no extension to my room.

I need not particularise as to from whom the telephone message came. Suffice it to say that it was a summons which I could not disregard. I hastily gathered the papers together and, as I thought, thrust them into the breast-pocket of my coat.

Instead of doing so, however, I must have missed the pocket in my haste, and let the case drop to the floor.

I was detained longer than I expected at the telephone, and on going back to my room some quarter of an hour later, I instinctively felt in my coat to see if the papers were there.

To my horror they were gone!

I did not dare to excite my household too much, lest the affair should come to the ears of my colleagues, and they should begin to wonder what secret I was keeping to myself.

Nor, indeed, was it necessary to make many inquiries. I asked if there had been any visitors, and was told that Captain Melun had called, and had waited

some five minutes in my room, but that he had left before my return, saying that he was pressed for time just then, but would call later in the day.

From that moment I had not the slightest doubt as to where the documents had gone.

I sent for Melun and taxed him with the theft. He did not deny it.

You may think it rather strange that such a man as he should have been allowed to enter my house, but I must explain that I had found his services exceedingly useful in several matters. He was without scruple of any kind, and it is often, I regret to say, convenient for a minister to have some unscrupulous agent at his disposal.

I ordered Melun to give the papers up, and he laughed in my face. He told me that he had mastered their contents, and quite appreciated what they involved.

Indeed, he at once made the most insolent demands. He told me that I could well afford to pay him a quarter of a million sterling to get the papers back. He knew that my wealth was great, and did not hesitate to blackmail me to the fullest extent.

In the course of long and angry negotiations I was compelled to agree to pay over this sum. Indeed I dared not refuse.

He was not, however, content with this rapacious request. He wanted, he said, to rehabilitate himself properly in society, and to that end he had the colossal impudence to demand Lady Kathleen's hand in marriage.

I tell you frankly, Sir Paul, that I was so furious at this that I leaped out of my chair, and, old man though I am, struck Melun across his face.

It was an action which I deeply repented, for, as compensation, he demanded another fifty thousand pounds, and again impudently insisted upon his marriage with my daughter.

This, however, I steadily declined to consider for a moment. It seemed to me impossible for a man of Melun's description to fail to be contented with three hundred thousand pounds. To my dismay, I found I was mistaken. He repeated over and over again that I should ultimately consent to his marrying Lady Kathleen, and threatened me with exposure and ruin if I still held to my refusal.

Now I would have gladly faced exposure and ruin rather than have sacrificed my daughter to such a despicable hound as this. But, unfortunately, it

was not only my ruin which was involved.

Of a certainty it meant the ruin of British diplomacy, if not complete disaster to the British Empire.

Disturbances in Russia alarmed the Czar. I sent Lady Kathleen over to St. Petersburg, and she urged him to make a personal appeal to our King to put the plan which I had prepared into instant action.

At the critical moment the Czar became thoroughly afraid of what the consequences might be, and declined to make any move. Moreover, he wrote me a letter saying that, even at the cost of Kathleen's marriage to Melun, the papers must be recovered and returned to him.

All this, of course, occasioned great delay, and Melun began to press me hard. I made every effort, most of them legitimate, but some, I fear, not quite legal, to get the papers back. I had his rooms searched, and I had the man himself seized and searched in my presence.

I had his friends and himself all searched on the same day and at the same hour. It was all to no purpose. I could not get the faintest clue as to the whereabouts of the papers.

Then Melun became more menacing than ever. He demanded £10,000 down and complete immunity from observation.

And to these requests I had to accede, because he told me frankly that if I were obstinate he would at once open up negotiations with Germany. This, of course, was what I had been dreading.

I knew that if a breath of this business reached the Kaiser's ears it would be the beginning of the end. I knew his Imperial Majesty too well to harbour any hope that he would not strike while Russia and ourselves were still in disagreement as to our course of action.

The situation, indeed, was all the more of a nightmare to me because I had acted without the knowledge or consent of my King or my colleagues, and the whole brunt of the blame would have to be borne by myself.

And what blame it would be! What everlasting shame and disgrace and misery—not only for myself, but for this country!

I am no child in diplomatic matters, and I saw full well that the moment Germany came into possession of the facts, the last great fight among the nations would begin.

That, then, is my story. Four days ago I was given a week's grace by the Czar in which to recover the papers or consent to Melun's conditions. I dare not disobey the Czar's commands, nor is it possible for me any longer to ignore Melun's request. At my earnest prayer the Czar sent a special emissary to me to meet Lady Kathleen at Rouen.

His Majesty knew that in this matter I had been compelled to take my daughter into my confidence. He quite appreciated the necessity for this, and was indeed most kind about the matter, though he remained insistent in his terms.

You may judge how terribly concerned he was when I tell you that the representative he sent was a member of the Imperial family. And even he was not informed of the contents of the papers.

You may realise, too, how desperate my position is, when I say that I have at last accepted your offer of help much as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

CHAPTER XXIII
A GRISLY THREAT

Westerham had listened to Lord Penshurst's long recital with great attention. From time to time he raised his eyebrows, but for the rest he gave no sign of astonishment.

As the Premier concluded Westerham rose and held out his hand.

“We have not much time before us, Lord Penshurst,” he said, “but I think I can promise you that you shall have the papers back before the three days are out.

“Meantime,” he continued, “let us get back to Downing Street at once, and in spite of the sensation that your continued disappearance will cause, I think you had better not let it be known that you are back at your official residence. To do that would be to allow Melun to suppose that I had failed in my purpose, and if he thinks that—then we shall fail indeed.”

The return to Downing Street was made in Lowther's car, and the Premier entered No. 10 by the back door. There they were met by the news of Lady Kathleen's disappearance, and the aged and much-shaken Premier was utterly prostrated with grief.

The situation, of course, was not only painful, but dangerous. The news of the disappearance of the Prime Minister had created a profound sensation, not only in England, but abroad, and the cables all over the world were humming with the news of the astounding event.

Downing Street had at once been cleared of the public, but, seeking to allay alarm as far as possible, those in authority had permitted the representatives of various newspapers to wait about the house for tidings. As it was close on midnight and the newspapers were nearing the approach of the next day's issue, the reporters were clamouring for some word.

Westerham therefore decided to take a bold course, and he issued a short statement to the effect that the Premier and his daughter had merely left town for a few days, and that there was not the slightest cause for public anxiety.

The public, of course, knew better, for practically every detail of the

breaking open of the Cabinet Council Chamber had been passed from mouth to mouth. The episode, indeed, was already the wonder of the age.

Late as was the hour of their return to Downing Street, Westerham decided on immediate action in his search for Lady Kathleen, and summoned help from Scotland Yard. When the inevitable Mr. Rookley presented himself, Westerham, despite the terrible anxiety of the moment, could not restrain a little smile.

Rookley started back as he saw him and his face blanched. Westerham's explanation, though not wholly satisfactory to the detective, was to the point.

“I think it would have been better if you had told me before, Sir Paul,” the detective grumbled.

“Never mind about that,” said Westerham, shortly, “we must get to work.”

And so, though he was intensely weary, Westerham and Rookley, together with Dunton and Mendip, started for Madame Estelle's villa in St. John's Wood. Repeated pulls at the bell produced no response, and so they decided to burst open the garden gate. This they did, only to find the house shuttered and in darkness. There was no time for scruples and, obtaining entrance to the house, they searched the place from ceiling to roof. There was no sign of any life.

“Limehouse!” cried Westerham. “We must try Limehouse!”

“Limehouse?” demanded Rookley. “What do you mean?”

In a few words Westerham gave Rookley the history of the crime club and his connection with it.

“Really, Sir Paul,” grumbled Rookley, “I think we had better engage your services at the Yard; you seem to know a good deal more about London than we do.”

“I am afraid I do,” said Westerham, bitterly.

They started for Limehouse, but on the way Westerham came to the conclusion that they would be too late to serve any purpose. It was three o'clock, and by this time the place would be closed.

Nothing remained, therefore, but to return to Downing Street and seek a few hours' rest. Westerham, fully dressed, flung himself on his bed, but could not sleep.

At nine o'clock he went to visit the Premier in his room, and was shocked to see how aged and white and shaky Lord Penshurst looked.

Westerham cheered him as best he could, and then, summoning Rookley, set out to look for Bagley, the smug banker of Herne Hill.

They brought Bagley a prisoner back to Downing Street, but in spite of every inducement and every threat, he declared that he knew nothing whatsoever of the whereabouts of Melun.

Half maddened with terror as to Kathleen's fate, Westerham next turned his search in the direction of the gaming house. But Melun had covered his tracks well. The house was as silent and devoid of any clue as had been the villa in St. John's Wood. There was nothing to do but wait till night and perfect the arrangements for the raid on Limehouse.

The arrangements which Rookley made were complete, and worked smoothly. So overwhelming was the force of constables that surrounded the house that resistance on the part of the members of the crime club was rendered quite impossible.

In the little room in the front of the house Westerham established a species of impromptu police-court. One by one the members of the club were brought in to him, and one by one they satisfied him that they had no knowledge of Melun's whereabouts.

Still, Westerham had them safely kept under lock and key. It was noon when this curious inquisition was over, and then he immediately returned to Downing Street and sought the Premier's room.

As Westerham entered he looked up with a smile which he fondly imagined was cheerful. His words were gloomy enough, and to Westerham seemed to have a certain amount of reproach in them.

“Do you realise,” he said, “that we have practically only twenty-four hours left in which to find Lady Kathleen and to recover the papers?”

Westerham straightened himself up and looked squarely at the Premier.

“The time is short,” he said quietly, “but I have no fear that we shall not succeed.

“You must remember,” he went on, “that up to the present it is we who have made all the efforts. What is Melun doing? It is very strange that he should have remained quiet so long. It is my opinion that he has put off communication until the last possible moment in order to make his claims all the more effective.”

“Do you really think that is so?” cried Lord Penshurst eagerly. “For my

part, I was beginning to fear that, despairing of being able to move us, he had crossed to Germany in hopes of making terms there."

Westerham shook his head in dissent at this view of the question, though, as a matter of fact, he was growing terribly anxious himself lest Melun should after all have transferred his efforts to Prussia.

"No, no!" he said to the Premier, "I am perfectly certain that he will turn up just in the nick of time. Otherwise, why should he hold Lady Kathleen as hostage for so long? You may, I think, rest assured that he would not still be detaining her if he had abandoned all hope of being able to reduce us to surrender."

The afternoon wore painfully away, and for the first time Westerham learned how time can drag. Up to the point at which he found himself completely foiled in his search for Lady Kathleen he had scarcely counted the hours or even the days. Incident had been crowded on incident, and action upon action.

But now that he found himself faced with the necessity of waiting for the slightest sign that could send him on the trail again, he had to meet and endure the greatest trial that he had ever known.

It was such a helpless and almost hopeless position. Still it was not without some hope, and hope helped considerably to mitigate his sufferings between the hours of noon and three o'clock.

And then, just as he had predicted—just as he had calculated it must come to pass—the expected message came. It came in the shape of a telegram addressed to the Premier, which read as follows:

> "If you accept my terms, wire, not later than four o'clock, to Smith-Brown-Smith, care of Poste Restante, St Martin's-le-Grand. This is final.—M."

The receipt of this wire threw the Premier into a state of great agitation, and he was for answering it at once.

"The offer must be refused finally," he cried. "Don't you see, Sir Paul, that, after all that's been said and done, I cannot possibly accept it? It is not in my power to do so, and there appears to be no way out of the difficulty.

"Surely," he went on in a wailing voice, "no man was ever in worse straits.

It is a question of my daughter or Armageddon!”

Westerham restrained him, pointing out that in such a matter as this an answer could not be made on the spur of the moment. It was a matter, he urged, that required considerable thought.

Quietly and concisely he constructed in his own mind a theory which accounted for the despatch of the telegram, and, as he thought it over, he became convinced that, in spite of its bold statement, the telegram was unreliable. He became certain that the offer which was made them was by no means final.

He said as much to the Prime Minister, and explained his reasons.

“It is ridiculous to suppose,” he argued, “that Melun is such a fool as to think that we shall agree to his terms in this way.

“In the first place, we have no assurance that Lady Kathleen is to be restored to us even for a time, and in the second place, Melun is not the type of man to take anything on trust. Whatever risks he may run in regard to Lady Kathleen he would certainly not leave the handing over of the money to chance.

“No! Let us by all means send a reply to the address he gives, but instead of accepting or not accepting his terms let us word it in this way: ‘Cannot accept any terms by wire. Make appointment at which matters can be discussed. Will guarantee your immunity from disagreeable consequences.’”

The Premier clutched feverishly at this suggestion. “Yes, yes!” he cried. “I see now that it is the better way. Let's send the telegram at once.”

So the telegram was despatched, and Westerham and the Premier sat down to wait again.

Lord Penshurst had suggested that the post-office should be watched in order that Smith-Brown-Smith or his messenger might be watched and followed home.

But Westerham argued against such a course, pointing out that in broad daylight it would be practically impossible for even the most astute of followers to avoid the notice of the pursued.

“Believe me,” he urged, “that such a step would be most unwise, and at the best we should only succeed in arousing Melun's suspicions. And if he thought we intended to try to catch him tripping, it would merely drive him to extremes. Remember that we have to consider not only Lady Kathleen's safety, but the guarding of the secret. We must not push Melun to the point of throwing him

into the arms of Germany.”

Somewhat against his will, the Premier finally gave in to this argument. For the next two hours he sat with Westerham alert, anxious, and watchful.

Towards four o'clock the answer to the wire came, but in a form so unlooked for and so terrible that even Westerham was for a time unnerved.

It came not in the shape of a telegram, but in the form of a small square cardboard box, neatly wrapped in brown paper and addressed to the Prime Minister.

It was brought by a District Messenger boy, who, in response to inquiries whence the package came, could only say that it had been handed in at the Oxford Street office by a gentleman of distinctly foreign appearance.

Though the parcel was addressed to Lord Penshurst, Westerham took it from the attendant and with his own hands laid it carefully and softly down on the Premier's table.

For a moment Westerham looked reflectively at the Prime Minister. “I wonder,” he said slowly, “if this parcel comes from Melun?”

Lord Penshurst was all eagerness. “Let's open it at once and see,” he said.

But Westerham pushed the Prime Minister's hands away from the package.

“Leave it alone,” he said, “we don't know what it may contain.”

Lord Penshurst glanced at him sharply. “Good Heavens!” he cried, “you don't mean to tell me that you think Melun would dare to send me a bomb or something of that sort?”

“One never knows,” said Westerham, thoughtfully. “I think we had better send for Rookley.”

Rookley came and surveyed the mysterious package with a suspicious gaze. He picked it up gently, and then almost smiled as he laid it down again.

“I don't think you need fear its containing anything in the nature of an explosive,” he said; “certainly not an infernal machine. It is much too light.”

Westerham nodded, and without a word drew a knife from his pocket and cut the string. Unfolding the paper, he laid bare a brown cardboard box.

Both the Premier and Rookley were leaning eagerly over Westerham's shoulders as he raised the lid.

Then the three men cried out together and stood rigid as though frozen with horror.

Lord Penshurst gave a second cry, and reeling backwards would have fallen had not Westerham caught him in his arms.

For lying on the top of a little pile of shavings was a human ear. It was the small, round ear of a woman, and against the blood-stained lobe glittered a single diamond.

“Oh, God!” cried the Premier, turning away his ashen face. “It's my daughter's!”

CHAPTER XXIV
WESTERHAM'S WAY OUT

Lord Penshurst was beside himself with grief, and clung to Westerham as a child might, weeping passionately in his arms. Rookley, with a miserable face, had slipped out of the room.

It was a quarter of an hour before Westerham succeeded in bringing Lord Penshurst back to a coherent frame of mind. Then he helped him to his room, and left him dazed and piteous on his bed.

Of the three men who had made the dread discovery Westerham was perhaps the hardest hit, but he walked back to the little box and its horrible contents with set lips and grim face.

It was not, however, without a little shudder that he lifted the lid and looked inside again. He had anticipated that such an awful token would not be sent unaccompanied by a message, and an examination of the box proved his conjecture right.

Tucked into the lid was a crumpled piece of paper. He smoothed it out carefully, and was then able to read the following message:—

> "This should be a sign that we are in earnest. You will be given one more chance. Send to the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral at nine o'clock to-night. Man will meet you there, and things can be discussed. Understand clearly that this man must not be tampered with. His arrest will lead not only to worse befalling Lady Kathleen, but to your secret passing immediately to Germany. The same results will follow if any attempt is made to buy the man's assistance."

Westerham read this message through three times, until at last he could repeat every word of it by heart. He folded it up, and placing it in his waistcoat-pocket, shut the lid of the box and placed it in a drawer of the Premier's writing-table.

Next he went back to Lord Penshurst's room, which he entered without knocking. The broken old man lay on the bed, his face buried in the pillows, so entirely wrapped up in his grief that he scarcely heeded the hand which

Westerham placed on his shoulder.

But presently Westerham persuaded him to look up, and then drawing a chair to the bedside, he sat down.

“I want you to forget, Lord Penshurst,” he said, “what you saw just now. It is unnecessary to remember it. It is a horrible thing, but the man who did such an awful deed shall suffer for it.”

He looked away with a set face, which boded no good for Melun when he found him.

“There is, however, one comfort to be extracted from our distress,” he continued. “At last we have a clue. The opportunity which I was certain must come is in our hands now.

“Before nine o'clock, however, there is much to be done. You are scarcely able to take charge of matters yourself, and you had better leave them to me. I have already taken measures which ought to prove effective, though we shall have to act very carefully and cautiously.”

Lord Penshurst dragged himself up into a sitting posture and turned his blurred and scared old eyes to Westerham's resolute face.

He clenched his fists and beat excitedly on the coverlet.

“Don't let that fiend escape! Oh! if I had the strength I could kill him! I could kill him myself!”

Westerham did his best to soothe him.

“Have no fear,” he said, “that I shall let him slip through my fingers this time. And Heaven judge between us when I do meet him!”

The Premier clutched at his hands in an appealing and childish way.

“Don't spare him! Don't spare him!” he cried.

“There's no fear of that,” said Westerham, and he rose up to go.

When he regained the Prime Minister's study he sent for a map of London, and for some minutes studied it with close attention.

He guessed that a man who was risking so much as the emissary appointed by Melun would take good care to provide himself with sure and certain means of escape. It was doubtful if he would trust to the swiftness of his feet, to the chance of catching a passing omnibus, or to losing himself in the underground.

In all likelihood, though he might walk to the actual place of appointment, he would probably drive to some neighbouring spot in a motor-car.

It was upon this very reasonable assumption that Westerham based his plans. The difficulty was, as he knew full well, that a score of little streets and alleys led into St. Paul's churchyard, and any and all of these would be open to Melun's ambassador.

Westerham did his best to place himself in the position of the man whom Melun was sending to the cathedral steps. And arguing the matter out from this point of view, he came to the conclusion that he would drive to Queen Victoria Street or Newgate Street by car, and then proceed to the meeting-place on foot.

He ruled the junction of Newgate Street and Cheapside out of court, as not offering sufficient opportunities of shelter. That the man would choose the point at which Queen Victoria Street ran into Cannon Street was equally unlikely.

That left only one other route of escape—namely, the open thoroughfare of Ludgate Hill.

This also Westerham set aside as being unnecessary to consider. That any man should attempt to escape down that broad street at a time of night when it would be almost empty was too ridiculous to contemplate.

He decided, therefore, that two motor-cars would be sufficient for his purpose, and having ordered them, he sent for Lowther and Mendip, to whom he explained his plans.

He himself, he said, intended to go to St. Paul's by omnibus, so as to reach the cathedral as nearly as possible on the stroke of nine.

By that time Mendip was to be in waiting in Queen Victoria Street, almost opposite the headquarters of the Salvation Army.

Lowther he instructed to wait at the corner of Angel Lane. For though the man might choose one of the four alleys leading from the churchyard up to Newgate Street, he must reach the main thoroughfare either just to the east, or just to the west, of Angel Lane.

Whether the man would be so bold as to adopt either of the courses which Westerham decided that he himself would choose was an open question. It was a risk, however, which had to be taken, be the consequences what they might.

Westerham saw that whatever line of country the man might take at the close of the interview, the task of following his steps would devolve upon

himself. He could trust no man on that mission, though he saw that he would at the best make but a poor shadower. His bulk was much against him.

Sir Paul, however, had an alternative scheme in mind should it fall out that the man discovered he was followed. But of this he said nothing to the others.

At a quarter past eight he set out eastwards, travelling slowly by horse omnibus along the Strand, down Fleet Street, and up Ludgate Hill.

He arrived at the appointed place a few minutes before time, and, entering the tobacconist's shop at the south-west corner of St. Paul's churchyard, he purchased a cigar. This he lit slowly and carefully, and afterwards made a pretence of choosing a pipe. In this way he spent five minutes.

After five minutes he made his way out of the shop, and, keeping well in the lee of the houses, he edged his way to the corner of Dean's Yard. There he drew back into the shadows, and while the clock struck nine he watched the cathedral steps closely.

Three or four minutes passed before he observed a man cross the road from the direction of Amen Court, and, passing the statue of Queen Anne, slowly mount the steps of St Paul's.

As he stood upon the steps, the man looked first to the south and then to the westward down Ludgate Hill. Finally he turned and closely examined the shadows about the doorways of the drapers' stores to the north.

No sooner was the man's back turned towards him than Westerham shot out from the opening of Dean's Yard, made a slight detour, and walked boldly up towards the steps as if he had just hurried up from Ludgate Hill.

Though he was certain in his own mind that the man waiting on the steps was the messenger whom he was eager to meet, he took the precaution of showing not the slightest sign of curiosity as he strolled towards him.

But as he came abreast of the man he saw that this precaution was wholly unnecessary—for the man who waited was Patmore!

Not by any means the Patmore whom he had seen at the club in Limehouse and had good reason to guess was one of Melun's close confederates. But a different Patmore altogether!

His clothes were no longer rough and his hair no longer tumbled. He was dressed in a frock-coat and top-hat, and his whole appearance was sleek and rather suggested the prosperous commercial traveller.

“Well, Patmore?” said Westerham, quietly.

Patmore started. “You've keen eyes, Sir Paul,” he said.

Westerham nodded. “I find it very necessary,” he returned.

Without another word, Patmore took him by the arm and led him higher up the steps. At the top of them he turned and walked into the shadows thrown by the columns which support the north end of the façade.

Then he took one quick look about him, and having satisfied himself that no one was within earshot, came direct to the point.

“Do you agree?” he asked.

For answer Westerham took out his pocket-book and counted out a pile of notes which Dunton had secured for him.

“Here,” he said in a conversational voice, “are twenty thousand pounds. They are yours if you can tell me where to find Lady Kathleen.”

Patmore laughed scornfully. “I am afraid, Sir Paul,” he said, “that on this occasion you have made a mistake. Fifty times that sum would be a little nearer my figure.”

Westerham stroked his chin thoughtfully and fixed Patmore with his keen eyes.

“Well,” he said slowly, “even that might not be too much.”

The man shot a quick, keen glance at him, and gave another little laugh.

“I daresay,” he said, “but still I don't believe you.”

“That is rather foolish of you,” said Westerham, “considering how little I ask. I don't want to embroil you; I ask for nothing better than to be told where I can find Lady Kathleen.”

For a few moments the man seemed to be considering the proposal. But finally he pushed the notes with an impatient gesture of his hand towards Westerham.

“No,” he said, “it's not worth the risk. The other way the money's certain. You may be a mug, but not such a mug as to pay over a cool million for information of that sort. Besides, it can't be done. The sum is too big, and what is more, as I said just now, I don't trust you.”

Westerham gathered the notes up and replaced them in his pocket. “Very

well," he said, "what do you suggest?"

"If you ask me," replied Patmore, "Melun's making a fool of himself. He is crazy after the girl, and he is crazy after cutting a fine figure in society. He still insists upon having a quarter of a million and a marriage with Lady Kathleen. What's more, it's got to be settled to-night. You hand over the dibs in the morning, and we will tell you where the girl is in the afternoon. But no hank! I tell you frankly again that I consider Melun is a fool. He is prepared to take your word for it that no questions shall be asked and that the business goes no further. The question is whether I am going to get your word?"

Westerham knew well enough what his answer must be, but he stood for some moments with his eyes cast on the ground, as though he were weighing the matter carefully.

At last he said: "It is impossible for me to agree unless I can settle things personally with Melun. You see, as the thing stands, I have no guarantee at all that you have come from him."

Patmore swore angrily. "You ought not to have much doubt after this afternoon," he said coarsely.

With the memory of Lady Kathleen's severed ear fresh upon him, a sudden and passionate desire to kill the man there and then, as he stood lowering at him, arose in Westerham's heart. But he forced his anger down, though his voice trembled with rage as he said: "I think you had better be careful."

Patmore drew back a step; he saw he had gone too far.

There was a pause, and then Westerham said: "Very well. I suppose I have no option but to agree. Where shall I meet you to-morrow?"

"You are hardly likely to kick up a fuss," Patmore answered, eyeing him shrewdly, "so let's say the same place at noon. Mind you, you had better understand clearly that if you try to play me false it will be all the worse for you and Lord Penshurst and Lady Kathleen. We have made up our minds.

"If you give me in charge, you cannot make me open my mouth, and what is more you will finish the whole business. If you play me false you will never see Lady Kathleen again, and your secret goes to Germany."

Westerham made a sudden movement forward and looked into Patmore's face. "What is the secret?" he cried eagerly.

For a moment Patmore looked scared, and then he wagged his head wisely,

and Westerham's heart gave a great throb of relief, for he felt certain that the man did not know. Melun had kept the secret to himself.

Westerham drew away again and made to pass down the steps. “Very well,” he said, “I will be here at noon.”

“With the money?”

“With the money.”

But Patmore was not satisfied, and hurrying after him, plucked at his sleeve. “I have your word?” he asked.

Westerham turned on him fiercely. “No,” he said through his teeth, “certainly not; I would not take the word of a dog like you, and there is no reason why I should give mine. You can take what I say or leave it.”

For a few moments Patmore seemed doubtful. Then he nodded his head.

“All right,” he said sulkily.

Westerham walked briskly away, and made across the street without turning his head. But as he walked he drew from his pocket a little mirror, which he had hidden in his handkerchief, and by straining his eyes considerably he was able to see that Patmore still stood in a hesitating way beneath the monument of Queen Anne.

But as Westerham reached the pavement Patmore moved away, and Westerham ran round the heads of the horses of a waiting omnibus and there stood still, sheltered behind a lamp-post in the centre of the road.

Patmore had reached the pavement opposite the Church House, and had turned up a little court between the two drapers' shops.

He disappeared from view, and Westerham, crossing the street, hid in the doorway of the jeweller's at the corner. Craning his neck, he could see Patmore hurrying towards Amen Court.

Then Westerham took a big risk. He dashed up Paternoster Row and turned up to the left. He ran straight ahead until he reached Cheapside and saw that Lowther's car was in waiting. It was a big car with a limousine body, and Westerham, plunging in, pulled down the window at Lowther's back and spoke rapidly to him. “Go on for twenty yards,” he said, “then turn, and just crawl down the street.”

Westerham had run as he had never run before, and was slightly out of breath; he knew he must have beaten Patmore by a good many yards, and as there was no car in sight he thought he might have to follow him when he marched into Newgate Street.

But just as he had calculated he would, Patmore came hastily into the main thoroughfare and glanced up and down. He gave one quick look at the motor as it moved slowly westward. Lowther, to excuse the slowness of his pace, was seemingly having great trouble with a clutch.

A motor-omnibus rattled past them, and on this Patmore climbed.

This complicated matters considerably. It would have been comparatively a simple matter to follow a motor-car, but to hang behind a motor-omnibus in such a way that they could, without being noticed themselves, see if Patmore left it, was a more difficult piece of work altogether.

Their anxiety was considerably lessened when the motor-car drew up at the further end of Holborn viaduct. They saw Patmore leave it and jump into a waiting taxicab.

The taxicab shot straight ahead up Holborn, and from the fact that Patmore had not troubled to look about him Westerham judged that he was not anticipating pursuit.

The taxicab, which they kept well in view, ran quickly through Oxford

Circus and on to Orchard Street; there it turned north, and they followed it as closely as they dared past Baker Street to St. John's Wood Chapel.

As it shot ahead up the Finchley Road, Westerham wondered whether Patmore was making for Mme. Estelle's. He decided, however, that this could scarcely be, as he had taken the precaution of having the house closely watched throughout the day, and up to the time he left Downing Street there had been no report as to the return of any of its wonted inmates.

Soon, too, it became apparent that Laburnum Road was not the goal. The taxicab rushed past Swiss Cottage and on to Finchley. Here it branched off to the north, and finally turned up a newly laid-out road.

Westerham called to Lowther to pull up at the corner, as he knew their destination must now be in sight.

So certain was Westerham that they were now nearing the goal that he left the car and walked on foot to the corner of the road. Just as he imagined would be the case, the taxicab had drawn up outside a neat, brand-new, red-bricked villa.

He dodged round the corner again, and hastily, lifted the car's bonnet. He called on Lowther to get down, and together the two men began to examine a sparking plug with wholly fictitious energy. The returning taxicab passed them at a good pace, the driver paying no heed either to them or to the car.

Westerham took a deep breath and withdrew his head from the covering bonnet.

“Come along, Lowther,” he said, “I fancy that the last act is about to begin.

“I wonder,” he added more to himself than to his companion, “whether Lady Kathleen is here?”

As he paused at the gate he clapped his hand to Lowther's hip-pocket and nodded with approval.

“Loaded?” he asked.

Lowther nodded.

“All right,” he said; “you may need it, but we will go quietly to start with. I am going in first. If I don't appear in five minutes come in after me, and don't stick at trifles. I may want you before then, and if I do I will give a sharp whistle, so——”

He rehearsed the whistle under his breath.

Lowther signified his understanding, and stepped back into the shade of one of the brick pillars of the gate as Westerham swung into the garden and ran quickly on silent feet up the steps.

He fumbled for a few moments in the darkness till he found the electric bell. This he pushed, purposely giving the same number of rings which he had heard Melun give knocks on the door at Limehouse.

There was a light in the dining-room window, and a few minutes later the door was quietly opened. Westerham put his foot against it and squeezed inside. The hall was dimly lit, but there was sufficient light to see Patmore's face go white as he realised that he had been fooled.

In a moment Westerham had him pinned against the wall.

“Don't cry out,” he whispered, “or it will be the worse for you.”

With his great strength he pinned Patmore's flabby arms to his side and ran him through the door on the right, which stood open.

Still holding Patmore in his grip, he kicked the door to and thrust him down into a chair.

“Tell me where Lady Kathleen is?” he said in a low, fierce whisper.

Patmore remained silent.

“Tell me,” said Westerham again, “and tell me quickly. Tell me at once or you will regret it.”

Patmore gave a sudden wrench and twisted one of his arms free. He reached out and grasped a heavy silver candlestick.

But again Westerham was too quick for him. He dealt him a blow on the muscles of his shoulder which half-paralysed Patmore's arm. The candlestick dropped with a clatter from his hand.

Westerham gave his pent-up passion full play, and it was a miracle that he did not kill his man. He dragged an antimacassar from a chair and used it as a gag. With one powerful hand he dragged Patmore by the neck to the window; with the other he threw up the casement and whistled sharply for Lowther.

Lowther came running up the steps and through the open door.

“We'll bind this cur,” said Westerham through his teeth. And they fastened

his hands and his feet together.

“Now then,” said Westerham to Lowther, “heat that poker in the fire.”

For a second Lowther hesitated to obey.

“Do as I tell you,” whispered Westerham, and his face was the face of a madman.

Lowther thrust the poker between the bars.

Lowther found a syphon of soda-water and brought Patmore to by squirting his face; then Westerham lifted the man up as though he were a child and threw him into the car. Lowther climbed to the steering wheel and headed south for Kent.

Westerham knew where Lady Kathleen was held prisoner.

CHAPTER XXV
THE LAST FIGHT

As the car ran southwards and came to Oxford Street, Westerham thrust Patmore on to the floor and sat holding him between his knees.

Without pity, he again seized the shrinking man's neck in his great hands.

“Understand,” he said in a low voice, “that if you attempt to cry out you will be strangled.”

Patmore made a choking noise to indicate that he understood, and the car went on at a great pace through Regent Street across Piccadilly, and so reached Whitehall.

Westerham had decided that, apart from the necessity of giving Lord Penshurst the good news, it would be better to take the Premier with them to the farm in Kent at which Westerham had learned Kathleen was imprisoned.

It was close on midnight when Lowther brought the car to a standstill in Downing Street. Mendip, who had abandoned his obviously futile watching in Queen Victoria Street, had returned some time before, and now rushed out to meet them.

“He's inside,” said Lowther, jerking his head back, and Mendip thrust his head through the window peering into the gloom in search of Westerham.

“It is all right,” said Westerham, quietly. “Don't rouse anybody, but get Lord Penshurst out here at once. I have got a man in here with me and my hands are full.”

He gave Patmore's back a by no means tender squeeze as a further indication that he had no intention of relinquishing his grip.

Mendip ran inside, and finding the Premier, brought him to the car.

“Well,” he said eagerly, “have you news at last?”

“Yes,” answered Westerham. “I have discovered Lady Kathleen's whereabouts, and I think we shall be just in time. But we must start at once, and you had better come with us. Mendip, get Lord Penshurst a hat.”

They were off again in a few minutes, Mendip riding beside Lowther, and the Premier beside Westerham in the body of the car.

He inquired eagerly as to the man whom Westerham still held between his knees, and Westerham, to Patmore's shame, briefly outlined what had passed since he had kept the appointment at St. Paul's.

There were some things which he did not tell the Premier, and Patmore, wincing under yet another squeeze from Westerham's ruthless fingers, held his peace.

The man had given them fairly accurate directions as to the road which they must take, and Lowther made good speed through New Cross and so to Bromley. They kept on down the main road till they passed Farnborough, where, in accordance with Patmore's instructions, he branched off to the left, and leaving Cudham behind them, he swept down the hill to Westerham, the place from which Sir Paul took his name.

They were now, indeed, travelling along the same route which Melun had taken when he had kidnapped Lady Kathleen in Richmond Park.

As they ran through Sevenoaks Westerham lowered the windows and made Patmore kneel on the front of the seat, so that he could the better point out the way to Lowther.

Lowther knew the district fairly well, and whistled to himself as Patmore directed him to turn up to the right before they reached Hildenborough.

The car was now heading for Edenbridge, and he knew they were racing along the foot of that great range of hills, the southern slopes of which are almost as precipitous and desolate as the moors of Devon.

Before long Patmore directed Lowther to turn to the right again, and he had to put the car on to her second and then on to her third speed as the hill rose up almost sheer before them.

“How much further is it?” he asked over his shoulder as the engines of the motor complained bitterly at the ascent.

“About another half-mile. Then you get on to a sort of plateau. There you must turn to the left.”

“How far will the turning be from the house?” asked Westerham.

“I'm not sure,” replied Patmore, “but I should think about five hundred

yards. You will have to drive through what is practically a bridle-path and take it gently. It is an awkward place on a dark night.”

The man was in considerable pain as the result of the treatment he had met with at Finchley, and now and again he groaned so pitifully that at last Westerham let him slide down from the seat on to the floor of the car again.

Lord Penshurst asked what ailed him. And Patmore would have spoken had not Westerham dug his fingers into his ribs. Patmore knew well enough what that dig in his ribs meant, and wisely kept silent.

As the car groaned and snorted her way up the hill Westerham took counsel with himself. He was doubtful as to the wisdom of running up to the door, lest the noise of the car's approach should give Melun and the other inmates of the farm warning of their approach. He reflected, however, that the warning would be very slight, and that, for all he could tell, every moment might count. So he held on, and as they turned into the bridle-path he urged Lowther to use all the speed he dared.

It was intensely dark beneath the trees, and Westerham sitting in the blackness of the body of the car, could hear light boughs and sometimes heavy branches scrape along the sides.

Suddenly the car stopped and, looking out of the window, Westerham, whose eyes were used to the darkest night, could discern that they were in a little clearing.

He jumped out and, turning round, he took out a spare revolver which he had brought with him and placed it in Lord Penshurst's hand.

“Lord Penshurst,” Westerham said, “it is necessary for someone to keep an eye on this man. I have no idea how many of Melun's gang may be waiting for us. I am told probably not more than two; but one cannot take anything of that sort on trust, and to avoid all unnecessary risks I shall want Mendip and Lowther with me.”

The Premier, whom the drive and the near approach of danger had rendered alert and almost cheerful, nodded at Westerham in the darkness.

“All right,” he said, and his gnarled but still sinewy hand took a firm grip on Patmore's collar.

“You had better sit still,” he said, and Patmore cringed at the Premier's knees. His spirit was entirely broken by the agony he was now enduring.

The ray from one of the lamps outlined the shape of a gate.

“Here we are,” cried Westerham in a low voice, and in a second he had jumped forward and pulled the iron catch back and taken a stride forward. But his eager foot found no foothold. His hand was torn from its grasp of the gate, and he pitched forward, to find himself plunged up to the neck in icy water.

So great was the shock that he cried out a little as he spluttered and blew the water from his mouth. A couple of strokes brought him back to the gate again, and as he clutched it he looked up at the silent house.

Even as he did so he caught a little spit of flame from one of the windows and a bullet splashed into the water beside his head. There was another spit of flame, and he felt his knuckles tingle as though they had been rapped with a red-hot iron.

Then Mendip gripped him by the collar, and with his aid he scrambled up on to the path.

Lowther, who had been quick to see the necessity of instant action, was by this time firing back at the place from which the little spits of flame had come far above them. In the darkness he answered shot for shot.

After the sound of the shots came a complete silence, and Westerham, as he stood stock-still beside the gate, which was now swinging idly over the pond, could hear the patter of the water on the path as it dripped from his clothes.

Mendip, as soon as he had seen that Westerham was safe, had run along the hedge, and now he gave a shout.

“This is the gate we want,” he cried.

But a third spit of flame came from the darkness overhead, and Westerham heard Mendip swearing softly under his breath. Whoever their unknown assailant might be, he was no mean marksman.

Westerham and Lowther ran to Mendip's aid.

“What's up?” asked Westerham.

“Nothing,” answered Mendip, and he got the gate opened. The three men dashed up the path and reached the door of the farmhouse; but it was made of stout oak, and securely fastened within.

They thrust their shoulders against it without avail, and then stood looking at one another, panting, and for the moment baffled.

It was then that Westerham's quick ear caught a woman's voice. He whipped round and looked across the sheet of water. His eyes were now well accustomed to the gloom, and he saw the form of a woman leaning far out of a window and gesticulating wildly.

He held up his hand to the others for silence, and then once more came a voice which he instantly recognised. It was the voice of Mme. Estelle.

“Be quick! Be quick!” she cried. “If you don't wish to be too late, you must swim the pond, the door is barred.”

Westerham cast a quick glance behind him, and his eyes fell on the gate.

“Use that as a battering ram,” he ordered, and then his jaws closed over the butt of his revolver.

Without hesitation he waded in, and a few strong strokes brought him beneath the window out of which Mme. Estelle leant and waved.

He knew instinctively by her accents that she was terrified beyond measure and that he need not expect treachery from her.

With one hand he clutched the sill, with the other he reached up and shifting the safety-cap on with his thumb, let his revolver fall into the room.

Soaked as he was with water, it was not an easy task to hoist himself up and clamber through the window, and when at last he stood within the room he leant against the wall partially exhausted and breathing hard.

Mme. Estelle stood before him wringing her hands.

“Be quick!” she said again. “Be quick! be quick! or you will be too late. That fiend Melun is at his work.”

By the light of the candles which flickered on the mantelpiece Westerham made his way to the door.

Seizing the handle, he turned it, but the lock held fast. He examined it swiftly, and to his joy saw that it opened outwards. He drew back a yard, and then sent the whole of his great weight crashing against the panels. And with good fortune the door of the room, although stoutly built, was partially rotten. It burst wide open before his weight and sent him sprawling on to his face in the passage.

As he lay there half-stunned his pulses throbbed again as the noise which came from the main entrance told him that Lowther and Mendip were making

good use of the gate.

He dragged himself up to his knees, still clutching his revolver, and at the same moment the outer door gave up its resistance, and Lowther and Mendip came headlong into the hall-way.

He heard them give a warning shout as he struggled to his feet, steadying himself by the pillars of the banisters.

Looking up the stairs, he saw the brutal face of Crow on the landing, his strong, yellow teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

Westerham heard the sound of a shot, and at the same time felt the hands of Mme. Estelle give him a push.

Her intention was unselfish, almost heroic; she saved Westerham's life, but lost her own.

She pitched forward with a little gasping sigh and lay still, huddled on the stairs. Westerham heard a second shot rap out from behind his back, and saw Crow stagger on the landing. The man reeled for a couple of paces and then fell heavily.

Westerham had by this time fully got back his senses and his breath; and now he heard coming from somewhere high above him scream after scream of dreadful terror.

He plunged up the staircase, and stepping across the body of Crow as it lay on the landing, raced up the second flight of stairs. For a moment he paused, in order to make doubly sure whence the dreadful screaming came.

Then he had no doubt, and dashed on, up to the third flight, till he came to the topmost landing.

Here he was confronted by a door, and he groaned within himself. He was living in some awful nightmare at which a door faced him at every turn.

He emptied his revolver in the lock and hurled himself in frenzy against this further obstruction; it gave way, and he tottered into the room, the lights of which for a moment dazzled him.

His half-blinded eyes were greeted by the sight which he had dreaded ever since he had come to the farm on the hill.

Kathleen was fighting desperately, and for life, with Melun.

With a great cry Westerham leapt forward, but he was too late to exercise that vengeance which had now full possession of his soul.

Melun flung Kathleen to one side, and for a second turned his pallid face, in which his eyes were burning like a madman's, full on Westerham as he dashed on him.

Then without a sound he leapt aside, and vaulting on to the sill of the open window, jumped out.

Instinctively Westerham knew what was coming, and catching Kathleen to him, held her head against his breast, stopping her ears with his hands. As his palms closed upon them his heart grew sick as he remembered the dreadful thing which had come to Downing Street earlier in the day.

But to his unutterable joy—joy which was almost a shock—his hands told him that Melun's hideous warning had been but a brutal hoax.

Kathleen was never told of it.

Then as he stood there with his eyes bent on her hair, he heard the sickening sound of Melun's body thud on to the stones below.

Releasing Kathleen's ears, he put his hand under her chin and lifted up her face. He marvelled that she had not fainted, but the dreadful horror in her eyes struck into his heart like a blow.

He had to hold her to prevent her falling to the floor, and so he stood for some few seconds with Kathleen limp and shivering in his arms.

Bracing himself for one last effort, Westerham lifted Kathleen up and bore her out of the room. Half-dazed, he stumbled down the stairs with her until he reached the hall.

In the doorway he saw Lord Penshurst, still clinging grimly to Patmore's collar, but at the sight of Kathleen the Premier released his hold and came running forward with outstretched arms.

“Just a minute,” said Westerham, quickly, and he walked into the room, the door of which he had shattered.

In the meantime Mendip and Lowther had picked up Mme. Estelle and carried her into the same room, and now she lay on the couch, her face growing grey with the shadows of death, and her breath coming fast and feebly. Her eyes stared up at the ceiling with an intense and horrible fixity.

Westerham pushed an armchair round with his foot and set Kathleen down on it so that her back was turned to the dying woman.

Lord Penshurst fell on his knees beside the chair, and seizing his daughter's hands, held them against his breast, and for a little while wept quietly.

Westerham crossed over to Mme. Estelle and stood over her. He put his hand against her heart and listened to her breathing.

“I am afraid,” he said in a low voice to Mendip, “that we can do nothing for her. It is a bad business. Heaven forgive her for anything she has done amiss! She did her best to make amends.”

Then he drew Lowther out of the room and told him to fetch a lamp from the car. Patmore was sitting on the stairs with his face hidden in his hands.

“Never mind him,” said Westerham, as Lowther gave the man a glance, “we shall have no more trouble from that quarter.”

When Lowther had fetched the lamp Westerham took it and began rapidly to examine round the ground floor of the rambling building. He was seeking for the courtyard into which Melun had fallen.

At last they found it, and found, too, all that remained of Melun. He was battered and crushed and bruised almost beyond recognition.

Westerham set his face and straightened the twisted and distorted body out. Then began the grim task of searching the dead man's clothes. He turned out every pocket, and with a knife ripped open every lining. But the papers which he sought were not there.

He straightened himself, and picking up the lamp led the way back into the house.

By this time Kathleen, though very pale and still shaken, was quite composed. Indeed, she was now more self-possessed than the Premier. She was doing her utmost to quiet his still painful agitation.

Westerham looked into Kathleen's face, and seeing how strong and resolute it was, felt no hesitation in speaking before her.

“Lord Penshurst,” he said, very quietly, “Melun is dead.”

The Premier glanced at him quickly and then turned to his daughter.

“Thank heaven!” he cried.

“Hush,” said Kathleen, gently, and taking her father by the arm she pointed to Mme. Estelle.

Mendip had done what he could, and the unhappy woman had, to some extent, come back to consciousness.

She was indeed sufficiently alive to catch Westerham's words. She brought her fast fading eyes down from the ceiling and searched Westerham's face.

“Melun!” she muttered to herself: “Melun!”

Westerham drew near and knelt down by the couch. He took one of her hands, which was even then growing cold.

“Melun?” she asked again in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

Westerham put his mouth down to her ear and said slowly, “He is dead.”

The shock of the news acted on the woman in a most extraordinary way. With a convulsive movement she suddenly gathered herself together and sat bolt upright on the couch. She would have fallen back again had not Westerham caught her in his arms.

“The papers!” she gasped.

“Yes?” said Westerham, kindly and soothingly. “Where are they?”

With a faint movement she pointed towards Westerham's feet. “There!” she gasped.

To Westerham it seemed as if she were already beginning to wander in her mind, but he said still kindly and soothingly, “Yes, yes, I know! But where?”

The woman opened her mouth and made two or three efforts before she spoke again, and then she only breathed the word “Boots!”

Westerham's gaze wandered over the sideboard.

“See if you can find any brandy,” he said to Mendip.

Mendip could find no brandy, but brought some almost neat whisky over in a glass.

Westerham took the glass from Mendip's hand and pressed it to Mme. Estelle's lips. She revived a little, and suddenly spoke clearly and in almost her normal voice.

“Sir Paul,” she said, “the papers are in your boots!”

For a moment Westerham stared into the dying woman's face, under the impression that her reason had departed from her. But with a start he remembered how he had awoke in St. John's Wood, after being drugged, to find himself dressed in strange clothes and in new footgear. And for the first time the real significance of the removal of all his apparel from his rooms in Bruton Street struck him with full force. He remembered, too, that from the night he had left Mme. Estelle, Melun, by one swift action after another, had kept him constantly on the move, so that it had been impossible for him so much as to order fresh clothes.

To the astonishment of Lord Penshurst and Kathleen, and to the wonderment of Lowther and Mendip, Westerham propped Mme. Estelle up against the pillows and began rapidly to remove his boots.

Comfortable though they had been, it had always struck him that they were unnaturally deep between the outer and the inner sole. The meaning of that came clearly home to him now.

No sooner had he pulled off his boots than he took a knife and began to rip feverishly at the heels. He succeeded in detaching them, and was then able easily to rip open the soles.

He was now fully prepared for any turn of events, but he could not repress an exclamation, as in tearing away the upper layers of leather, his eyes fell on a dozen neatly-folded sheets of tissue paper.

He drew them out, and with a cry Lord Penshurst snatched them from his hand.

Westerham saw at a glance that the Premier had regained the papers he had lost—the papers which had jeopardised, not only the peace of nations, but his own and his daughter's honour.

Westerham seized the other boot, but Mme. Estelle shook her head. “Look afterwards,” she gasped, “not now.”

Westerham held the whisky to her lips again, and again she rallied slightly.

“The papers,” she said faintly, “were deposited at the poste-restante, St. Martin's-le-Grand, in my name. But Melun really thought you had discovered where they were and took them away. There was not a single place in which we could hope to hide them safely. It was I who thought of your boots.

“I did it,” she said, with a wan little smile at Westerham, “partly to save

you. I knew that so long as you were safe the papers were safe.

“Melun was so certain that he would win,” she went on wearily, “I don't think he really thought of doing you any injury. It struck him that it would be an immense joke after he had got his way to tell Lord Penshurst that the man who was trying to find the papers had them in his possession all the time. I think sometimes he was mad.”

Madame paused, and her eyes contracted as though with pain.

“Forgive!” she gasped. Then her eyes became fixed and staring.

It was Westerham who drew the dead woman's eyelids down.

It was long past dawn when they reached Downing Street, and Lord Penshurst at once sent in cipher a short message to the Czar, informing his Majesty of the recovery of the papers.

Afterwards, in the Premier's own room, Westerham sat for a short while with Kathleen and Lord Penshurst. But little was said, for, just as some sorrows are too deep for tears, so there is some gratitude beyond thanks.

“Westerham,” said the Premier, earnestly, “it is simply impossible that I shall ever be able to repay you the great service you have rendered me. But, believe me, if there is anything in the world it is within my power to give you, you have but to ask to receive it.”

Westerham looked across at Kathleen, but said nothing. The time had not yet come when he could ask Lord Penshurst for that which would a thousand times repay him.

THE END

Transcriber's note:

What appeared to be clear typographical errors were corrected; any other mistakes or inconsistencies were retained.

Paragraphs that were separated by an illustration were rejoined and the image placed before or after the paragraph.

All quotation marks have been retained as they appear in the original publication.

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