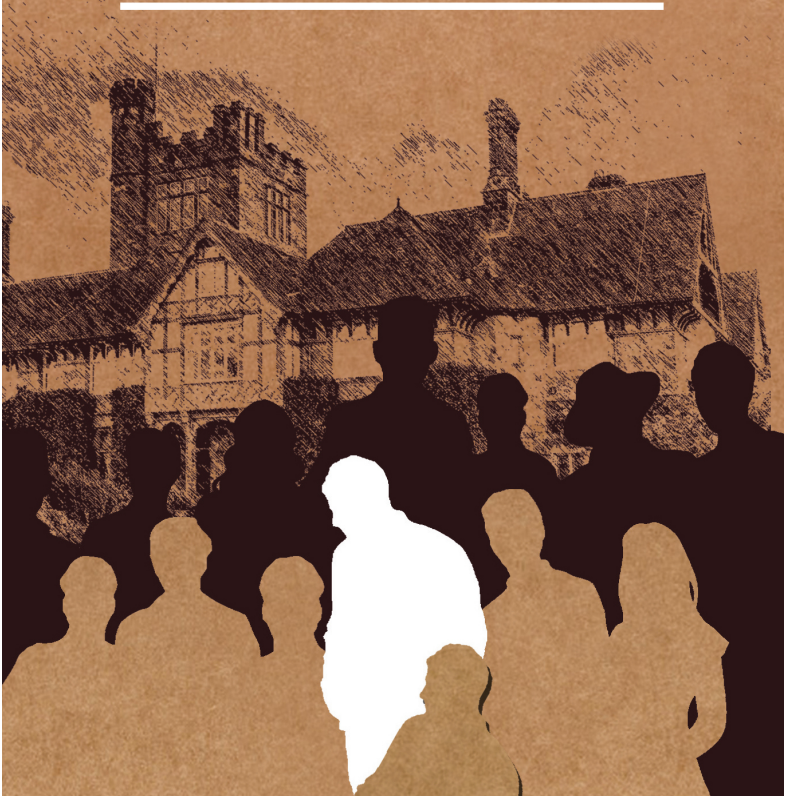
JOSEPH JEFFERSON FARJEON

THIRTEEN GUESTS



■ DETECTIVE STORY ■

Joseph Jefferson Farjeon

Тринадцать гостей / Thirteen Guests

Серия «Чтение в оригинале (Каро)»

Серия «Detective story»

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Аннотация

Возможно, не зря число тринадцать считается несчастливым. Лорд Эйвлинг устроил в своем загородном имении прием, пригласив на него именно такое число гостей. Увы, мероприятие завершилось трагично. В одной из комнат был обнаружен труп незнакомца. Кто этот человек? Почему он был убит? И главный вопрос: кто из присутствующих убийца – модная писательница, скандальный журналист, знаменитый художник, пожилой миллионер? Инспектору Кендаллу предстоит найти ответы на все вопросы…

В книге представлен полный неадаптированный текст произведения на языке оригинала.

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Тринадцать гостей / Thirteen Guests

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Chapter I. Completion of the Number

Every station has its special voice. Some are of grit. Some are of sand. Some are of milk cans. Some are of rock muffled by tunnel smoke. Whatever the voice, it speaks to those who know it, sounding a name without pronouncing it; but those who do not know it drowse on, for to them it brings no message, and is merely a noise unilluminated by personal tradition.

The voice of Flensham station is gravelly. The queer softness of it is accentuated by the tunnel and the curve that precede it. The tunnel throbs blackly and the curve grinds metallically, but Flensham follows with a gravelly whisper that is as arresting as a shout. With eyes still closed the familiar traveller sees the neat little platform gliding closer and closer. He sees the lines of equally neat bushes that assist a wooden partition to separate the platform from the road. A notice, warning passengers not to cross the track when a train is standing in the station. A signal, arm slanting downwards. A station-master, large and depressed, fighting the tragedy of Cosmos with a time-table.

Of the two passengers who alighted at Flensham from the 3.28 one Friday afternoon in autumn, only one had an advance vision of these things. She was a lady of about thirty, and Puritans and Victorians would have called her too attractive. Her hair was tinged with bronze. Her nose delighted your thoughts and defied your theories. Her complexion was too perfect. Her frankly

ridiculous lips annoyed you because by all the rules of sanity they should have disgusted you, yet they did not.

She had been described by her husband, now lying peacefully in his grave, as one of life's most glorious risks, and he had consciously taken the risk when he had married her. "Let her tear me to pieces," he said on his wedding-day. She had done so. She had jolted him from heaven to hell. And he had never reproached her. He had loved her without her make-up, and three hours before he died, during one of her rare moments of repentance—even the worst of us are softened as we watch the sands run out—he had waved her regrets aside. "How can you alter what God made?" he had said. "Some one has to suffer."

The other passenger was a young man. To him the gravelly music of Flensham station told no story, and for this reason he almost ignored it. The lady was already on the platform, interviewing a liveried chauffeur, before the man realised that the train had stopped.

"Hallo—Flensham!" he exclaimed suddenly.

The train began to move on again. The young man jumped to his feet. On the rack above him was a suitcase. He seized it with one hand, while the other groped for the door-handle. A moment later the suitcase shot out on to the platform. The sight amused the lady, to whom every sensation was meat, but it insulted the large and depressed station-master, to whom every sensation was a menace to routine.

Worse followed. The owner of the suitcase shot out after his

belonging, and as he shot out his foot caught in the framework of the door. Now the lady's amusement changed swiftly to anxiety, and the station-master's indignation to alarm.

"Quick! Help him!" cried the lady.

The station-master, the chauffeur, and a porter ran forward. The train chugged on. Its late passenger sat on the ground, holding his foot. He had been pale before; he was considerably paler now.

"Hurt, sir?" asked the station-master.

"Of course I'm hurt!" he retorted unreasonably. "Why the hell don't you show the name of your station in larger letters?" Then he noticed Nadine, and apologised.

"Quite unnecessary," Nadine answered graciously. This young man was immensely good-looking. He had a smooth, boyish face, and his eyes, though drawn with pain at the moment, held possibilities. "Swear as much as is good for you—and that's probably a lot."

He forgot his twinges for a moment. Nadine had the beauty that drugs. Her commanding ease, also, was a consolation, dissolving the oppressions of an unimaginative station-master, a staring porter, and a rather too superior chauffeur.

"Thanks—I'm all right," he said, and fainted.

"Coo, 'e's gorn off!" reported the porter.

"Looks like a case for a doctor," muttered the station-master.

"Definitely," nodded Nadine.

The chauffeur glanced at her, and read his own thought in her

eyes. There was a faint green light in them. It generally came when she was intensely interested. Her husband had called it, anomalously, the red signal.

"Could you get him into the car, Arthur?" she asked.

"Easy," replied the chauffeur.

"Then, if you don't mind, I think we'll stop at a doctor's on the way."

"Dr. Pudrow, madam—the same as attends Mrs. Morris. He's the one." He turned to the porter. "Give us a hand, Bill. And remember he's not a trunk."

The station-master interposed. He himself had been the first to suggest a doctor—he was glad of that—but a certain procedure had to be observed. This was his platform.

"You'd better wait till he comes to," he said.

"Of course," agreed Nadine. "We're not going to abduct him."

In a few seconds the young man opened his eyes. He now fought humiliation as well as pain.

"Did I go off?" he gasped, momentarily red.

"We all do silly ass things when we can't help it," smiled Nadine. "Don't worry. But I think you ought to see a doctor."

"*She* thinks," reflected the station-master. "Taking it all to herself!"

"Believe you're right," murmured the young man. "Something or other seems to have gone wrong with my foot. Could you—send one along?"

"I'm glad you're keeping your sense of humour."

"Eh?"

"Why send one along when I can take you along?"

"That's really frightfully decent of you."

"Say when you're ready."

"Well, if it's not too much trouble—sooner the better."

She made a sign to the chauffeur, then turned back to him.

"Grit on to yourself. It mayn't be nice when they lift you. I know what it's like—I hunt."

He closed his eyes, and kept them closed for two very unpleasant minutes. Then he found himself gliding through a land of gentle undulations and russet October hues. Above him the sky was crisp and clear. The tang of autumn was in his nostrils. The sounds of autumn came to him, too. Dogs bayed in the distance. He recognised the quality, and pictured red coats among them. From an opposite direction cracked the report of a gun. Now he pictured a pheasant flashing downwards from the blue dome, to end its short uneasy life in fulfilment of its destiny. Closer at hand were branches as gold as the pheasant's breast. Closer still was a bronze curl.... His eyes, as they opened, focused on the bronze curl.

But pain intruded. Stags and pheasants were not suffering alone.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad."

"I expect I'd say the same." Nadine's voice was appreciative and sympathetic. "We'll soon be at the doctor's."

It occurred to him that he ought to thank her, but when he began the bronze curl moved a little nearer to him and she placed her hand over his mouth. He rebelled against the pleasure of that momentary contact with her fingers. They were cool, while they warmed. He rebelled because he knew that she was conscious of his pleasure, that she had deliberately produced it. But he did not know that she was conscious, also, of his rebellion. She took her hand away. She had the sporting instinct. She did not fight a man who was down.

"But stags and foxes, eh?" her husband had once taxed her, when she had been forced to point out this virtue to him.

"They're different," she had retorted.

"Of course they are," he agreed. "They don't start fifty-fifty—and they can never get up again and smack you."

The conversation had preceded one of their biggest rows.

The Rolls glided on. A small vine-covered house peeped over one of the brown hedges on their left. The sun, nearing the end of its shortened day, sent a low arrow of light into the vines and picked out a brilliant little plate-inscribed: "Dr. L. G. Pudrow, M.D." The house was less pretentious than the plate, and therefore needed the plate to dignify it. But for the useful illness of a rich old lady and the daily visits this illness imposed, the house might have been even less pretentious. No doctor, however, could visit Bragley Court every morning, and sometimes every afternoon as well, without comfort to his bank-balance, and Dr. Pudrow had found Mrs. Morris a godsend. That

was not why he had devoted so much earnest thought and care to the business of keeping the suffering old lady alive.

When the Rolls stopped outside the house, Dr. Pudrow was actually engaged in that rather unchristian occupation. A maid informed the chauffeur that her master was out.

"He's at your place," she said. "If you hurries you'll catch him."

"Is he coming straight back?" inquired Arthur, with the practical sense of one who has to deal with grit in carburettors.

"No, he's not," answered the maid, and added pertly, "he's got a baby coming at six."

Arthur considered. It was now eleven minutes to four. He pointed out that the baby was not due for over two hours, but the maid retorted that you never knew, and that the doctor was going right on anyway. "This'll be No. 8—it's that Mrs. Trump again," the maid observed, "*I* call it disgusting!" She believed in good looks and Marie Stopes.

The chauffeur returned to the car and reported. Nadine looked at the young man. The green glint in her eyes was dancing once more.

"There's only one way to catch the doctor," she said. "And there's only one doctor to catch. He's attending a patient at Bragley Court—where I happen to be going myself. Shall I take you on there?"

"Why not deposit me here till he returns?" asked the young man. "I mustn't go on being your responsibility like this."

Nadine explained the situation. The doctor might be hours before he got back. Some babies were optimistic, and hurried; others showed less anxiety to enter a troubled world.

"Then—would you take me—?" began the young man, and paused.

"Yes? Where?" inquired Nadine.

Obviously, even a man who fell out of a train had some destination beyond the platform. For the sake of the adventure she had delayed referring to it.

"Not sure," said the young man, and the reply pleased Nadine. The autumn sun was in a very generous mood, and she had no wish to end the adventure. "Isn't there an inn somewhere?"

Nadine turned to the chauffeur, who was still awaiting instructions.

"Bragley Court, Arthur," she said, "and don't worry about speed limits."

There was always something vaguely personal in her use of the word "Arthur." It implied no social unbending on her part, and permitted no familiarity on his, but it recognised his existence; almost, his male existence. Now it added two miles to the speedometer.

"Bragley Court doesn't sound like an inn," commented the young man wearily. He found he couldn't fight.

"It certainly isn't an inn," answered Nadine. "The only two inns within reasonable distance—as far as I know—are the Black Stag and the Cricketers' Arms. The Black Stag is by the station.

No stag has ever been known there, although I think there *is* a rumour that years ago one hid behind the bar, but there's plenty of blackness. It comes from the tunnel. I believe the inn puts up one traveller a year, and never the same traveller. The Cricketers' Arms is *much* more lively. That's why it is even less desirable. All sorts of company. And I'm told the bed, like Venice, is built round seven lumps. I really think, if you went to the Cricketers' Arms, you might die of it."

He did his best to smile. Watching him closely, she assured him the smile was not necessary.

"You're quite understanding," he said suddenly.

"I know you're in pain," she replied. She had to restrain an impish desire to give him a more personal answer. "I was thrown once, and couldn't listen to a funny story for a week. Does my prattle worry you?"

"No, please go on."

"I don't know if there's anything to go on about. Oh, yes—Bragley Court. We are racing there to catch the doctor before he leaves one patient to go on to another, that's all." She laughed. "You are to be sandwiched between old age and youth—an old lady of over seventy, and a baby minus two hours."

It was true her prattling did not worry him. It helped him wonderfully, for there was a vital quality behind its levity that forced some part of his attention, diverting it from his pain. But he did not quite know how to handle it.

"I hope the old lady is not very ill?" he said rather

conventionally.

"She is very ill," returned Nadine. "She does jig-saws, and is a lesson to everybody. That is, if anybody ever *is* a lesson to anybody else, which I doubt. I've only known two people in my life who could make me feel a pig. She's one of them."

"I know what it is," thought the young man. "She's so confoundedly *natural*!" Aloud he asked, "Your mother?"

"It would have been politer to have asked if she were my grandmother! I forgive you. She's neither. She is our—my hostess's mother. Bragley Court is the place of the Avelings, you know. Or don't you know?"

"What! Lord Aveling?" She nodded. "I say—do you think you'd better take me there?"

"Why not? Are you Labour?"

He did not reply at once. He was frowning. In the distance the dogs were barking again. A bird, too fat to emigrate, sent a note of shrill sweetness from a bough. "I have just eaten a worm," sang the bird. It was happy. The snow was a long way off.

"I don't know whether you realise what *I'm* realising," said the young man seriously, "but I may have to stay a bit where you set me down."

"That's exactly why—since you've given me no other address—I'm taking you to Bragley Court. I've already implied that if I took you to either of the local inns here I might be had up for murder."

"But—"

“Do you think, if you tried terribly hard, you could stop worrying? If we catch the doctor, let him decide.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then Lord Aveling can decide. And I know *his* decision in advance, or I wouldn’t risk inviting it.”

“I’m not too sure of that,” said the young man. “You do take risks.”

“Do I?”

“You’ve risked—*me*!”

“So I have!”

“What makes you think Lord Aveling won’t kick against having a stranger lumped upon him, even temporarily?”

“Three things, my dear man. Is that too familiar? One, Lord Aveling. Conservatives with ambition are splendid hosts. Two, myself. I’ve an instinct—and Lord Aveling likes me, and knows I’d never let him down. Three—isn’t that an old school tie?”

This time he laughed.

“Satisfied?” she laughed back.

“Sounds pretty good,” he admitted.

“Thank God for that,” sighed Nadine. “Because here we are, and there’s no turning back now. By the way, what’s your name?”

Chapter II. Inventory

Half an hour later John Foss, bandaged and stretched out on a rose-coloured settee, reviewed his position.

He had been received at Bragley Court with the utmost ease and courtesy. Indeed, when he realised the vastness of the space in which Lord and Lady Aveling moved, he became a little less anxious over the dislocation he would cause. His advent at the Black Stag or the Cricketers' Arms might have created a flutter, but Bragley Court gave no outward sign of vulgar emotion. The indoor and outdoor staff numbered twenty-six, and each member had been trained to meet any situation or emergency with smoothness and efficiency. Emotionally there was no difference between passing a toast-rack and conveying a stranger with a crocked ankle from a car to a couch.

Nevertheless, he was conscious that something more important than efficient service had dealt with his arrival and had sanctioned it. He might have been treated courteously as a necessary evil—his sensitive mind would quickly have fathomed that—but instead Lord Aveling had appeared in person while the doctor did unpleasant things to his leg, and had even half-humorously held the end of a bandage for the doctor, thereby proving (as Nadine pointed out later) that he, also, could be influenced by an old school tie.

Then, when the doctor had concluded his task, and had

impressed on an elderly woman hovering in the background the necessity of frequent applications of surgical spirit, Lord Aveling had insisted that it would be wise for him to remain on the settee a while longer.

"You won't be in the way here," he said. "We can move you to your room later."

"He will have to be moved very carefully," commented the doctor.

"Why move him at all?" suggested Nadine. "Why not move the couch? When I missed my fence two years ago, I was rolled for the night into the ante-room."

"Excellent idea," agreed Lord Aveling. "Some time after tea."

"Yes, when the poor man gets tired of being looked at," smiled Nadine.

Lord Aveling had departed amiably. "The right sort," ran his thoughts. "Good family, obviously. Interesting. Not many youngsters this week-end. Bultin coming down by next train. Make good paragraph. Yes, Bultin will use it. Another example of Aveling hospitality. Followed by list of guests. Wonder if this was the right week-end for Zena Wilding? And the Chaters? Still, of course, I had to have the Chaters.... Pity this young chap makes the thirteenth...."

But welcome alone did not reign in the spacious lounge-hall that glowed in the late afternoon sunshine and flickered in the light of an enormous log-fire. Something brooded as well. The shadows seemed to contain uneasy secrets, and none of the

people John had so far met reflected complete mental ease. Lady Aveling, when she had momentarily deserted a card-table in the drawing-room for a kindly peep at the casualty, had appeared nervously anxious to get back again. Two guests—a thin, angular, cynical man in a black velvet coat and large artist's tie, and a short, stout, grey-haired man of the retired-pork-butcher-and-made-a-damn-lot-out-of-it type (he had made a cool hundred thousand out of it, which alone explained his presence here)—struck a vaguely jarring note when they passed through the hall together. The elderly woman deputed to apply surgical spirit at intervals had been grim. A pretty maid on her way up the carved staircase with a tray had been flushed. A butler had followed her to the stairs, and then turned round and vanished.

"Something's wrong," reflected John. "What is it?"

He wondered whether the two new people who were just entering the hall would continue the impression.

They were a man and a girl in riding kit, and they bore the dust and atmosphere of hard going. The girl's cheeks were tingling from her ride, and she instinctively brushed her hand across her forehead as she entered, as though to sweep away the sudden fuggy warmth of the blazing logs. She was beautiful, in a slim boyish way, and although she looked well in her dark green riding habit, a stranger longed instinctively to see her in more definitely feminine attire. It was odd that a certain hardness around her mouth, a hardness held there by the set of her lips, did not detract from her beauty. Possibly because one could not quite believe it.

The man, large and well-built, reminded you pleasantly of cricket, which in fact he played.

"Half-past four," said the girl, glancing at a clock on her way to the wide staircase.

"Does that mean tea in your room?" inquired the man, pausing to light a cigarette.

"No, I'll be down," she replied. "But the bath comes first. These things are sticking to me."

The settee on which John lay was fitted into a shadowed angle of the wall. The sun was slipping down behind a distant wood, preluding quick gloaming, and a servant entered the lounge-hall and switched on lights. The girl at the foot of the staircase turned her head and saw the patient.

John endured an awkward moment. It occurred to him that perhaps, after all, the routine of Bragley Court had its little flaws. It should have protected him against the necessity of explaining himself. Yet it was unreasonable to expect some one to be in perpetual attendance on him, and even Lord Aveling's generously-planned staff did not run to a Cook's guide. So, after enduring the girl's curious scrutiny for a moment or two, he remarked bluntly:

"I've had an accident, and Lord Aveling's been good enough to give me temporary shelter."

"Bad luck," said the man. "Not riding, was it?"

"No—a prosaic train. I jumped out while it was moving, and it tried to take my foot on to the next station."

The man smiled, and held out his case.

"Have one?" he invited. "We smoke anywhere. Reassure him, Anne."

The girl advanced with a little nod.

"Of course—quite in order," she said. "I am Lord Aveling's daughter. And this is Mr. Harold Taverley."

"Thanks awfully," answered John. The momentary awkwardness created by these two had vanished very quickly. "It does help knowing! Mine's John Foss. And my whole object in life just now is not to be a confounded nuisance. Please don't delay that bath."

Anne laughed. Her mouth lost its hardness. She turned and ran upstairs. But her companion lingered.

"Don't *you* feel sticky?" asked John.

"Oh, I've got a few minutes," replied Taverley. He had a clear, full voice, but rarely raised it. The retired Pork King could only make his carry when he shouted. "I suppose there's nothing I can do?"

"Well—yes, there is," said John impulsively. This was the kind of fellow you could talk to. "I'd like to know something about the people here. One feels such a fool, you know. Rather like a monkey in a zoo."

"I know," smiled Taverley. "That is, if monkeys really do feel like that." He squatted on a stool. "I suppose you'll be staying a bit?"

"There's been some talk of rolling me into an ante-room for

the night. Everybody's frightfully decent."

"The ante-room? That's where—" He paused. "Well, let's run over the inventory. Who've you seen so far?"

"Lord Aveling."

"He's easy. Fifth baron. Hopes to be first marquis or earl. Conservative. I hope politics don't make you feel suicidal?"

"One has to bear them; but I'm not particularly interested."

"Just as well. You'll be able to keep out of arguments. Have you seen Lady Aveling?" John nodded. "She needn't worry you. She follows her husband's lead. The daughter you've just met. The Honourable Anne. Keen on horses. Hunting people here, you know. And golfing. Private course. Anne can drive two hundred."

"I like her," said John.

"She's O.K." Taverley paused for an instant, then added: "She liked you."

"You made up your mind quickly!"

"So did she about that. So did you. Well, let's finish the family. There's only one more."

"The son?"

"No. That's the disappointment. Lady Aveling's mother. Mrs. Morris. You're not the only invalid in the house. But you won't see Mrs. Morris—she sticks to her room!"

At that moment Mrs. Morris was lying two floors above, propped up on pillows, in an ecstasy of joy. She was almost free from grinding pain. The world was very good....

“Fine old lady,” said Taverley. “Example to the lot of us. Right. Now for the guests. Who have you seen of those?”

“A lady brought me here.”

“Rather large and stout? Impressive glasses?”

“My God, no!”

“Would ‘distracting’ be the adjective?”

“I can’t think of a better,” agreed John, fighting an annoying moment of self-consciousness.

“That sounds like Nadine Leveridge. I heard she was coming on the 3.28. Was that your train? The one that tried to pull you to bits?”

“Yes. And Leveridge was the name.”

“Our attractive widow. Susceptible people need to keep out of her way. She can break hearts while she passes.”

“That almost sounds like advice,” said John.

“Well, if it is, it’s good advice,” parried Taverley unrepentantly. “That kind of woman can put a man through hell. Make pulp of his will-power. And—what’s the use?”

“I see you don’t like her.”

“You’re wrong, Foss. I like her immensely. What’s a woman to do with her beauty? Scrap it? One sticks to oneself. I like her, and I liked her husband. He and I played cricket together. He used to tell me that the only moment he could forget Nadine was when he brought off a leg-glide. There’s something about a leg-glide. Then only he got perfect peace. After he’d passed through a particularly difficult time you could always bowl Leveridge l.b.w.

—he *would* try for that leg-glide. Even with the ball on the off-stump."

"Did they quarrel, then?" asked John.

"Like hell," answered Taverley. "And loved like hell. The person who next marries Nadine will know all there is to know. Well, that's Number One of the guests. Seen any more?"

"Yourself."

"Sussex. Batting average, 41.66. We won't talk about the bowling average. Lord Aveling loves a show, and I'm part of it." He laughed, then frowned at himself. "Don't get a wrong impression of our host. He's all right."

"It seems to me you think everybody's all right."

"So they are, if we dig down far enough. But you'll need to hold on to your faith this week-end—you'll bump into some odd people."

"Here come the only others I've bumped into," said John, as the front door opened abruptly and the velvet-coated man and the retired merchant came in. A draught of keen air came in with them.

"Brrh!" exclaimed the retired merchant, rubbing his hands together. "Shut the door, quick!"

"Mistake to admit you're cold in company," commented the velvet-coated man. "It stamps you with a hot water-bottle."

"Well, I love my hot water-bottle, and I don't care a damn who knows it!"

"You'll lose respect. Life, being itself hot, only sympathises

with a poor circulation."

"Oh, does it? Well, blood ain't the only thing that circulates!" The retired merchant tapped his pocket and laughed. "Life respects *that*! Besides, where's your company, anyhow?" Then he became conscious of it. "Ah, Taverley! We've just been across to the studio. It's going to be a masterpiece. How's the patient? How's it go?"

"First rate, thanks," answered John. "I shan't be on your hands long."

"Glad to hear it. I mean, glad you're feeling better. Nasty things, these twisted ankles. I bunged mine up once playing draughts. Ha, ha! Well, come along, Pratt, or we'll have no tea."

He strode to the stairs and disappeared, but Pratt paused for a moment before following.

"Described *us* yet?" he inquired.

"No. You're next on the list," smiled Taverley. "So you'd better hurry!"

Pratt smiled back and left them, with just enough speed to indicate that he could respond to a jest without losing his dignity. John grinned.

"*Leicester* Pratt?" he asked. Taverley nodded. "Rather the rage just now, isn't he?"

"Very much so. That's why he's here. Women flock to him to be painted, and Pratt ruthlessly reveals their poor little souls. Queer, isn't it, how some people will strip themselves for notoriety—and not know they're doing it?"

“I saw one of Pratt’s pictures last May. I thought it was clever, but—well—”

“Horrible?”

“Struck me that way. What’s this latest masterpiece? Is he painting anybody here?”

“The Honourable Anne,” answered Taverley. Both men were silent for a few seconds. Then Taverley continued: “The other was Mr. Rowe. You won’t have heard of him, but you may have breakfasted with him. Pratt—who has a cynical name for everybody—calls him the Man Behind the Sausage. When he paints Mr. Rowe, as he’s bound to do one day—Rowe is rolling in it—he’ll elongate his head just enough to let everybody know but Mr. Rowe. That’s his devilish art. He finds your weakness, and paints round it.”

“I don’t think I’m going to like Mr. Pratt,” mused John.

“Take my advice and try to,” responded Taverley. “Well, that’s four of us. Five—the large lady with impressive glasses. Have you read *Horse-flesh*?” John shook his head. “You’re luckier than about eighty thousand others. Our large lady wrote it. Edyth Fermoy-Jones. Accent, please, on the Fermoy. She’ll die happy if she goes down in history as the female Edgar Wallace. Only with a touch more literary distinction. Quite a nice person if you can smash through her rather pathetic ambition.”

“I’ll do my best,” promised John.

“Six, Mrs. Rowe. Seven, Ruth Rowe—daughter. There isn’t really much to say about them, except that Ruth will be much

happier when—if ever—she escapes from the sausage influence. Let's see—yes, that's the lot of who are here. But Number Eight is coming by car—Sir James Earnshaw, Liberal, wondering whether to turn Right or Left—and there will be four more on the next train. Zena Wilding—"

"The actress?"

"Yes. And Lionel Bultin. Bultin will write us all up in his gossip column. His method in print is rather like Pratt's on canvas. He says what he likes and what others don't. Who are the last two? Oh, the Chaters. Mr. and Mrs. I don't know anything about them. Well—that's the dozen."

"And I make the thirteenth," remarked John as Taverley rose.

"I hope that doesn't worry you?"

"Not superstitious."

"That's fortunate, although, even if you were, you'd be clear. The bad luck would come, wouldn't it, to the thirteenth guest who passes in through that door?… Well, I must be moving. See you later."

Before going up, Taverley waited while the pretty maid with the flushed cheeks—they were still a little flushed—came down. John turned his head to watch the Sussex cricketer depart. A sudden gasp from the maid brought his head round again.

She had vanished, but he was just in time to glimpse a form flashing by the window.

Chapter III. At the Black Stag

The brilliant amber of the day had gone. The sun had changed into a dull red disc and had dropped below the fringe of Greyshot Heath. Already the nip in the air had lost its pleasantness, and the sly old fox at Mile Bottom was opening its eyes in its earthy den to ponder on pheasants and mice and rabbits. One day the sly old fox would itself be hunted, and only for this reason had it escaped sharing the excommunication of the pole-cat. It was too good a runner to waste its agility in the north.

In a little wood half a mile from Bragley Court a cock pheasant fluttered heavily to his roosting place. He had no fear. Death, that odd, incomprehensible thing, came to others; but *he* had survived a dozen shoots, and he knew how to evade its shadow. If a stoat or a cat prowled too close, an old bird could easily raise the alarm and find some other retreat. Like all living things, the cock pheasant was immortal to himself, because he had not yet endured the experience of extinction. When extinction came, he would not know it.

The doctor's brass plate had ceased to glow. It was now merely a cold flatness surrounded by vines. The sentinel dog outside the Cricketers' Arms had risen, shaken itself, and gone inside. A lamp had appeared in the uncurtained window of the Black Stag overlooking Flensham station, and the gravelly railway station itself was a length of grey shadows broken by the occasional

dim lights of platform lamps and of an inadequate waiting-room. Somewhere to the south loomed a large black hole that was a tunnel. You were conscious of the hole, but you could no longer see it, for its blackness had merged into the blackness of the hill through which it bored and of the sky above the hill.

A man sat at the uncurtained window of the Black Stag, staring with moody eyes at the deserted smudge of platform. He had arrived that morning on the 12.10. He had partaken of an unpalatable lunch, and had spent the early afternoon strolling about in a purposeless way, smoking incessantly, and almost as incessantly consulting his watch. He had returned to the inn at three o'clock, and had sat at the window till the 3.28 had drawn in. He had watched the two passengers alight, and had witnessed the accident. It had not interested him particularly, because his interest was centred in one thing, and one thing only; every event outside that one thing, every circumstance that bore no direct relation to it, was as unreal and shadowy as the platform at which he now stared. Had the man who had tumbled been seriously hurt? It did not matter. What was the lady doing? It did not matter. The scene was being enacted within a short distance of him, but for all the effect it produced upon his emotions it might have occurred in Siam. When it was over, and the train had gone, and the platform had become once more deserted, he had taken another purposeless stroll, again smoking incessantly, again incessantly consulting his watch. And now he was back again, and a large, heavily-breathing woman had brought in a

lamp.

"You'll be wanting tea?" asked the woman.

He was a rum one, this one was, but even rum ones took tea.

"The next train's 5.56, isn't it?" replied the man.

She told him that it was. She had told him the same thing three times already. Then she repeated her question about tea.

"Eh? Yes, I'll have some tea," he replied, without interest.

"What would you like with it? Just bread and butter? Or we've got some nice seed cake."

"Anything. Yes. Whatever you've got."

The woman evaporated, and appeared ten minutes later with a tray. She placed the tray on a sideboard, covered a stained table with a scarcely less stained cloth, and moved the tray to the table. The seed cake presided with dejected majesty on a tall, glass-pedestaled dish. Its mission appeared to be to make thick slices of bread and butter look appetising by comparison.

"Excuse me, sir," said the woman, lingering. "But will you be staying the night?"

"What?" replied the man.

"Will you be staying the night?" repeated the woman. "If so, I could have your bag taken up—"

"Don't touch my bag!" cried the man, interested at last. ("You'd have thought some one had trod on his toe," the woman recounted later.) Then the man added: "I'm not sure. Yes, perhaps. I'll let you know presently."

The bag, a black one, was on a chair. When the woman

had gone, the man went to it, opened it, looked inside, closed it, locked it, and moved it, for no reason that he could have explained, to another chair. Then he returned to the table and began his tea.

From the bar across the passage came suddenly the sound of raucous music. Some one had put a penny in a grotesque piece of machinery, and was receiving his money's worth. The man plugged his ears with his fingers and glared at his teacup while the music ground on. After a minute he removed his fingers, then hastily shoved them back again. His forehead throbbed. His head seemed on the point of bursting. A poor man's pleasure was filling his heart with hate.

"God above!" he shouted.

But nobody heard him. The music across the passage was even louder.

When at last the music ended, he found himself laughing. He did not remember beginning to laugh. He stopped abruptly.

"This won't do," he muttered. "This won't do."

He finished his tea quietly and returned to the window.

Chapter IV. Over the Yellow Cups

The teacups at the Black Stag were thick and white. At Bragley Court they were thin and yellow, and they began their clinking in the drawing-room, a long, lofty room of pink and cream, and then followed the guests to their various locations. If you disliked pink and cream and a preponderance of elderly feminine society, you stayed away from the official headquarters, confident that the yellow cups would find out where you were and come to you. Mohammed, at Bragley Court, would not have been put to the trouble of going to his mountain.

John's cup came to him at exactly five o'clock, on a brightly-polished mahogany tray. It was brought and deposited on a small, low table by the pretty maid, and John watched her with interest to discover whether she still bore any traces of her recent agitation. Outwardly, she was now quite calm again, and because of her pleasant friendly quality he hoped that her appearance reflected the truth.

"Is your foot better, sir?" she asked.

"I am sure this interest is unconstitutional," thought John, "but it's nice." So he did not discourage it. He told her that his foot was very much better. The lie did not impress itself on him at the moment.

A cushion had fallen to the ground. The maid picked it up and fixed it behind his head with a bright smile. Then she put another

log on the crackling fire and departed.

It was a small, trivial incident, but later on, among a collection of incidents less trivial, John remembered it.

He was staring at the fire, watching the flames crackle upwards towards the chimney, when a voice said:

"Well, how are you getting along? Do you want some one to pour out your tea?"

He did not have to turn his head. Even if he had not recognised Nadine's voice he would have sensed her personality in the faint silky rustle of her approach and the less faint aroma of expensive perfume. She disturbed the air as she drew near, breaking it up into little emotional ripples.

"Hallo," he answered. "I'm all right. And thank you."

"I could have my tea here with you," she suggested, having already made up her mind not to have it anywhere else. "Shall I?"

"I'd love it," replied John. "Only I feel I'm upsetting things terribly. You ought to be with the other guests, oughtn't you?"

"Why? There are no oughts here. We do as we like. Haven't you noticed it?"

"I've noticed they don't worry you much."

"Of course you have. The house is run on lines of the most highly-organised freedom. You may flirt desperately or read the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Just follow your mood. No one will interfere with you, or display any vulgar curiosity. Even a man with a bad foot isn't pestered with attention. But you can be quite sure the name of Foss has been looked up in Debrett." He

laughed. “Is it to be found there?”

“I’ve an uncle who fills a dozen dry lines.”

“Lord Aveling won’t find the lines dry!” smiled Nadine, sitting on the low stool lately occupied by Harold Taverley. For the first time he took in her rather daring tea-gown, with its provocative glimpses. It was a compliment that she should waste all this wealth of subtle femininity on him. Or was she wasting it? “Debrett and the old school tie will chain you here for the week-end, however your foot progresses! Lord Aveling can’t run a country—though he wishes he could—but he can run a country house, and he lives for these house-parties, you know. The little thrill of them—the little notoriety of them—the little excitement of them—and the little things that happen in them. And, sometimes, quite big things.”

A desire swept through John to ask, “And what do *you* live for?” But he quelled the impulse, and asked instead:

“Are any big things going to happen this week-end?”

She regarded him quizzically for a few moments, then replied, “I shouldn’t wonder.”

She turned and nodded to the pretty maid, who had reappeared with another highly-polished little tray gleaming with yellow china. The second tray was deposited beside the first tray. As the maid departed, Nadine’s eyes followed her.

“Pretty, isn’t she?” said Nadine.

“Very,” answered John.

Two people came down the staircase. Harold Taverley and

Anne. The signs of the road were no longer upon them, and both had changed to indoor clothes, but John noticed that Anne still favoured green. She was wearing a rather severe, close-cut frock that indicated without exploiting her slim boyish figure. Her dark hair was neat and smooth, and slightly waved. John gained an odd impression as she ran forward to greet Nadine that, while conceding to the moment, her real spirit was elsewhere.

"Nice to see you again, Nadine," she exclaimed. "Wasn't the last time Cannes?"

"Yes—drinking coffee at the Galerie Fleuries," answered Nadine. "Did you have a good run?"

"Wonderful! You must try my new mare. She goes over everything."

"I'd love to. But you'll want her to-morrow?"

"Please! You can have Jill, though. We've still got her, and you always liked her, didn't you?" She turned to John. "Do you ride? How's your foot? Or are you sick of being asked? I'd be!"

"It's the penalty of being a pampered invalid," replied John; "and I don't mind it at all. My foot's fine, thank you. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be well enough to join you to-morrow."

"Beastly shame," said Anne. "Never mind, we'll fix you up with jig-saw puzzles. Let me know if I can do anything, won't you? See you later, Nadine. Come along, Harold."

Taverley smiled at John.

"We'd stay, but you're being looked after," he remarked. "Be good to him, Nadine."

When they were alone again, Nadine frowned.

"Beastly man, that Mr. Taverley," she observed. "He's so hatefully nice!"

"I like him, too," replied John. "Is niceness a vice?"

"Yes—like water. You must have something with it."

"I imagine he's got a lot with it."

"Rather. All the virtues, and a perfect off-drive. And he hates *me*!"

"Oh, no, he doesn't!"

"How do you know that?"

John coloured at the quick question, and at his clumsiness. He decided not to retreat.

"We talked of you," he said. "Do you mind?"

She glanced in his cup, noted it was empty, and filled it.

"Of course I don't mind," she answered. "What else do people talk about but other people? But don't tell me what Mr. Taverley said about me. Whatever it was, I am quite sure he forgave me, and so I'd have to forgive him, the beast!"

An interruption occurred. A uniformed nurse—Bragley Court could even materialise that—appeared abruptly and insisted on an application of surgical spirit. Surgical spirit during tea! But the nurse explained apologetically that she had a few minutes now, and might not have later.

"Does she look after Mrs. Morris?" queried John, when the nurse had soaked his foot and gone.

"Yes," answered Nadine. "Poor old lady. She ought to be

dead."

"You mean—the release?"

"Of course! What's the use? You shoot a horse or a dog when it's incurable, but God wants humans to go on suffering!" She shuddered, and for once in her life misinterpreted the expression of a man who was dwelling on the movement of her body. "Oh, don't think I can't face pain," she added almost defiantly. "But I don't care for it. That's why I grasp life while it's here!"

She had spoken impulsively, almost as though thinking aloud. Her hand brushed his. She rose and walked to a window, drawing the long curtain slightly aside to look out into the gloaming. But all she saw was her own reflection and the provocative gown gleaming back at her through the glass.

John watched her, waiting for her to come back. Why was she so long about it? Why was he waiting with such an intense desire for her to turn? A sudden panic seized him.

"Nonsense!" he thought, aghast.

That morning, blind with grief and saturated with its egotism, he had flung some things into a bag and had fled from London. An unexpected letter had toppled his small world over. It had come with the surprising unexpectedness of a poisoned arrow. It had contained poison, too—poison that had polluted the very springs of his faith. And in the first pangs of his agony he had headed for a station—any station—and had taken a ticket to a distant place—any place—so that he might escape the grotesque irony of immediate obligations. Any place would do, so long as it

was an unfamiliar place, a place without associations. Somebody ahead of him in the ticket office had said, “Flensham.” So he had said, “Flensham.”

And this was where the somebody had unconsciously led him —to her own reflection standing out vividly and tormentingly in the darkness of a window!

“Nonsense—nonsense!” he repeated in his thoughts. “I’m just in a mess. This is reaction. It doesn’t mean anything. Reaction, and my foot. Lord, how it’s hurting!”

He concentrated on the pain, trying to trick himself. He rejoiced in its re-discovery, and saddled it with responsibility for his condition. Pain played the deuce with any one. It temporarily distorted values, and gave fictitious significance to unimportant things. That was why patients in hospitals so often fell in love with their nurses....

Nadine came back to him as abruptly as she had left him.

“What are you going to do?” she asked. “Stay here?” He stared at her. Her tone was almost harsh. “I mean—well, you’ve spoken so little about yourself, haven’t you? Aren’t you expected somewhere to-night?”

He shook his head.

“Where were you going when I met you at the station?”

“Didn’t you ask that? Anywhere.”

“That sounds morbid!”

“Don’t judge by the sound. I’m fond of roaming.”

“I see. And you roamed—here.”

"Yes." He had a sense that they were going round and round in a circle, and he tried to smash his way out. "You know, I don't think my foot's half as bad as it seems." Yet a moment ago he had been insisting on the pain of it. "I believe I could get away all right."

"You think the foot could stand it?"

"I think so."

"But the question still remains—where do you want to get away to?"

They were moving back into the circle again. He became exasperated.

"Yes, and that's *my* question," he retorted.

"Sorry," she said.

He was appalled at himself. He had not intended to betray his exasperation. He was not exasperated any longer. He did not understand how he ever had been.

"No, *I'm* sorry," he muttered. "Really, you must forgive me. You've been terribly kind. I don't know what's the matter with me."

Nadine knew. It was her knowledge that had sent her to the window, and that had produced her rather lame effort to readjust the trouble. Something had happened very suddenly. She had sensed the exact moment. It was not the first time the moment had occurred in her experience.

Well—could it be helped? And did it matter? She thought of old Mrs. Morris upstairs. One day *she* might be like that! She

thought of the hunt on the morrow, and of the hunted creature doomed to die, as every one at Bragley Court was doomed to die! But at this moment the hunted creature was not conscious of its fate, nor was any one at Bragley Court, saving Nadine Leveridge herself. She was always conscious of it, and of life's demand for compensation.

"Don't apologise, Mr. Foss, and don't worry," she said. "It will be all the same five hundred years hence. Meanwhile, since it's obvious you can't move, and would have nowhere particular to move to even if you could, remember that we are two very small dots in a very large universe, and finish your tea."

Chapter V. The 5.56

The 3.28 had brought two visitors to Bragley Court. The 5.56 brought four. The man at the window of the Black Stag watched them alight.

The 5.56 shared with the 12.10 the distinction of being a fast express, and was, therefore, favoured by the majority of Lord Aveling's guests. It was pleasant to arrive by the 12.10 in the morning, when the sun was at its highest and the sky was at its brightest; you reached your room at Bragley Court by half-past twelve, and your bag was unpacked and your brushes were out by the time the luncheon-gong sounded at half-past one. The 3.38 had its points, too, despite a tedious change, for there is always rather a jolly feeling when you arrive at a country house at tea-time. Tea is an occasion to look forward to after the dust and grit of travel; you flop into soft things and regain your belief in the harmony of life's rhythm.

But the 5.56 was the train-de-luxe. You could pass a reasonable portion of the day in London before catching it. You spent the minimum of time in it, and although you missed the yellow cups of Bragley Court, a smiling attendant brought you blue ones. And when, at 5.56 to the minute, the gravel sounded in your ears and the train slackened speed, you found Flensham station at its peak—the station-master at his most dignified, the porter at his most obliging, and Old Jim (who never troubled

to meet the 3.28, his horse, like himself, being a veteran and needing afternoon rest) at his most hopeful. Not that Old Jim ever expected to get a fare to Bragley Court. His horseflesh was not of the Bragley breed, and Lord Aveling supplied cars for all his guests who did not bring their own. Still there were other destinations, and sometimes a passenger on the 5.56 was bound for one of them.

Of the four guests deposited on the platform on this particular evening, the last to enter the waiting Rolls was a tall, slightish man mid-way between thirty and forty. His name was Lionel Bultin, and he stood, silent and aloof, and purposely lingering, to watch a little incident.

His three companions were, as he had established in the restaurant car, Zena Wilding, the actress, and a married couple who lived an unenviable existence under the name of Chater. Bultin, a ruthless reader of character, had needed only two minutes to decide that an additional "e" slipped between the second and third letters of their name would have described the Chaters more accurately. When the husband looked straight at you he seemed to be seeing you round a corner. The wife hardly ever looked straight at you. She was a silent creature whose moroseness appeared to form her protection against a perpetual desire to scream.

Zena Wilding, on the other hand, was lively and talkative, and while she worried vivaciously about her luggage, she never missed an opportunity to advertise her dentist. Later on, the

solemn station-master paused in the important business of writing "We could do—" to recollect her dazzling teeth before concluding "—with new fire-buckets." And the porter actually dreamt of the teeth, earnestly filling a freight train with tooth-paste to keep them white. But the dazzling teeth made no impression on Lionel Bultin, saving as possible matter for a theatrical paragraph. He felt no personal emotion about them. He had done with personal emotion ten years ago....

In order to understand Bultin's attitude, and the detachment with which his trained intelligence now absorbed an incident frightful with suppressed emotion, it is necessary to travel back those ten years to the day when, an eager and unsuccessful young journalist, he came to his great decision. In a not-very-attractive bed-sitting-room he had faced his mirror frankly, and had said:

"You're making a hash of things. Why is it?"

Yes, why was it? Why did people pay no attention to him? Why had an editor refused, for the third time, to see him that very day? Did eagerness and tenacity count for nothing? Willingness—obligingness—sensitiveness? Bultin possessed all these qualities, plus an average capacity to string words together. So why was he living in this faded bed-sitting-room? Why could he not go across to the restaurant opposite and order a wing of chicken? Why was he *hungry*?

And then, suddenly, his reflection had changed. The despair and the eagerness had left it. Something quite new had entered and, because he was intelligent as well as hungry, he studied

it. The new thing was a queer, cold callousness. A callousness that, because it had lost its faith in humanity, was independent of humanity. He felt as though, all at once, his sensitive soul had died, giving a new functioning power to what remained.

"This means success or the river," he thought soberly.

He put on his hat and he went out, undecided. The river lay on his right, and the office of the inaccessible editor on his left. He turned to the left. The commissionaire whom he had interviewed thrice saw him coming, and exclaimed, "Can't you take 'No' for an answer?"

Bultin wrote something on a slip of paper. "Give that to your fool of an editor," he said, and left the office. He had written on the paper: "I could have given you a signed article by Bernard Shaw. Now you can sing for it. The above address will find me."

Next day the signed article appeared in a rival paper. The editor, a weak man who spent his life in fear of a dropping circulation, never learned that Bultin had not supplied the rival paper with the article. Two hours before Bultin had scribbled his rude note, a friend of his had sold it elsewhere. The editor sent for Bultin and offered him a commission. Bultin turned it down.

He managed to borrow fifty pounds. He began a life of curious isolation. He was ever present in journalistic and social circles, but he remained aloof in his attitude. His manner indicated personal circumstances that did not exist. You would have thought, if you had met Lionel Bultin during those weeks, that he had suddenly come into a large fortune, although he showed no

generosity in spending it, and that he could now snap his fingers at life. A successful man attracts success.

Whether Bultin would have achieved his purpose without the assistance of a small social column is not certain. This column was the last remnant of his evaporating work at the time of his decision, and it was itself on the verge of evaporation. Now, however, it began to wake up. It ceased to be soft and kindly. Amazing bits about amazing people appeared in it. Startling bits. Rude bits. With still a few complimentary bits, as bait. All signed Bultin.

"What does Bultin say?" people started asking.

An actress in the Savoy grill-room—yes, Bultin now went there—left her table to tell him of a pearl necklace she had lost. Two or three weeks earlier he would have travelled five miles to the actress. Now she had travelled five yards to him. Twice the alleged value of the necklace was given exclusively in his column next day, with an account of how the actress had left her *pâté de fois gras* to tell him of the loss. It had really been tomato soup, and the necklace had never been lost at all; but such minor matters were unimportant. The important matter was that the concluding sentence of Bultin's paragraph was nearly, but not quite, libellous.

Bultin's column grew to two. Then to a full page. In a short while the fifty pounds was repaid. Bultin had killed himself, and never had a moment's financial anxiety afterwards. His carcass grew rich....

And, just as the actress in the Savoy grill-room had angled for his publicity, so Zena Wilding posed for him now on Flensham platform, striving to create a paragraph out of her luggage, her Paris hat, and her teeth.

"Oh, dear! Am I keeping everybody waiting?" she gushed, as Mr. and Mrs. Chater moved towards the car.

"Yes," answered Bultin. (His column should mention later how he had agreed with her.)

Then Zena forgot all about her luggage and her hat and her teeth. She also forgot Bultin. The man who had waited for hours in the Black Stag was standing before her.

She gave a gasp. For an instant she looked almost old. She stared at the man without moving, but Bultin gained an impression that she was arching her back like a cat. Then she turned swiftly, and dived towards the car. Mrs. Chater was just getting in.

"Is anything the matter?" inquired Mrs. Chater, apathetically.

"No, nothing!" cried Zena. "Which corner would you like?"

Mr. Chater turned, and saw the man. He also stared. But his manner was considerably more composed than Zena's. His expression of surprise changed to a smile, and he walked up to the man. The man had an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

"Want a light?" inquired Mr. Chater.

The man looked livid. Mr. Chater struck a match. The man blew it out.

"See you presently," he muttered.

“I wouldn’t,” answered Mr. Chater quietly.

Two seconds later, Mr. Chater was entering the car.

About to follow, Bultin changed his mind and strolled casually up to the man.

“You might as well,” he remarked, taking out his lighter. “You’re supposed to burn one end, you know.”

The man switched round violently. Ten years previously Bultin would have dreamt of the expression in the man’s eyes. Now he merely found it undoubtedly interesting.

“I am Lionel Bultin,” he said. “I am spending the week-end at Bragley Court. I shall be there till Monday morning. I pay for material—provided, of course, that I use it.”

For the second time that evening, the man escaped a brainstorm by the breadth of a hair. The first time it had nearly been caused by a penn’orth of mechanical music.

“Bragley Court,” he repeated, suddenly calm. “You’re going there, too, eh?” He bent forward and accepted the light. As he withdrew his head he added, “You’ll get something to write about.”

Chapter VI. Spottings of a Leopard

The drive to Bragley Court was stiff and uncomfortable. Bultin never did anything to put people at their ease, and Zena Wilding's forced vivacity was as unhelpful as Bultin's silence. The one subject that most vitally interested the majority of the party was studiously avoided.

"Don't you think there's always a sort of a thrill, going to a new country house?" exclaimed Zena, trying nervously to be brilliant. "Something like the curtain going up on a play?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Chater dutifully.

It was not encouraging, but Zena prattled on:

"And then the guests—they're like the characters—and you wonder what's going to happen. Of course, nothing particular ever really does happen. Just as well! Suppose it did—a fire, or a burglary, or a murder! No, thank you, we'll leave that to the dramatists!"

She glanced at Bultin. She was speaking partly for his benefit, though partly also to drive her mind from the disturbing moment just before she had entered the car. If she made her conversation scintillating, Bultin might report it.

But Bultin was gazing out of the window, inventing headlines, although his ear did not miss a word Zena said, and it was Mr. Chater this time who broke the silence with a murmured:

"What? Yes, quite."

Mr. Chater was able to talk fluently on occasions, but this was not one of the occasions. He, also, was recalling the moment just before he had entered the car. Unlike Zena, however, he was not trying to forget it. He was dwelling on it, probing its meaning.

The actress made one more effort.

"I suppose I can't help seeing drama in everything," she said, forgetting that her drama rarely rose above the level of musical comedy. "Even when I was on the Riviera—do you know the Riviera?—it was there I met Lord Aveling—yes, even on my holiday I was always inventing plots about everything and everybody. Your mind just goes on working, you know, without your knowing it." She glanced again at Bultin. He was still staring out of the window. It was very disappointing. Well, she must give him some definite news—perhaps that would wake him up. "Yes, but one wants to get back to work. Of course, I enjoyed my holiday immensely—after my illness—but it was far too long. Do you know, it seems years and years since I put on any make-up." Bultin did make a mental note of that phrase. "But—well, I don't believe it will be very long now. As a matter of fact—in strict confidence—I've got *the* play in my case at this moment!… Only perhaps you'd better not mention it just yet, Mr. Bultin?"

"I promise I won't," he answered.

The man was just a beast! She hoped earnestly that he would break his promise.

After that she gave up, and the journey continued in silence.

They reached their destination as Lord Aveling was greeting

another guest who had just preceded them, and who had made the trip from London by car. “Earnshaw,” Bultin identified. He also noticed that Lord Aveling was welcoming him effusively.

“Delighted you were able to get away, Sir James,” said Aveling. “You’re staying till Monday, of course?”

“Unless I’m called back,” replied the Liberal member, his large rich voice filling the hall. He gazed about him as he spoke, leisurely and unflurriedly. He had all the solid assurance of a well-groomed, well-fed man. “Land question, you know.”

“It’s the eternal question,” smiled Aveling. “I expect we’ll talk about it. State or private ownership. Communism or—common sense, eh? No middle course these days.”

The Liberal member looked at his host sharply. He, too, was doubting the wisdom of the middle course. Moderation was in a disconcerting minority at the moment. But it was not this reflection that had arrested him. It was “Communism or Common Sense.” He revolved the words in his mind. A slogan there, somewhere. Communism or Common Sense. Communism or Common Sensism. House of Commonism....

The Honourable Anne appeared on the stairs. Slogans vanished as he strode forward to meet her. Meanwhile Lord Aveling’s polished voice droned on:

“Ah, Miss Wilding! How are you? I hope the journey was not tiring?” He took the actress’s hand and held it for an instant. “We have something to chat about, have we not? Ah, Bultin—how is the world treating you? Or perhaps we should say, how are you

treating the world? Have you brought your large note-book? Be careful of this man, Miss Wilding! He can make or ruin one in a single paragraph. We all try to keep on the right side of Mr. Bultin."

Bultin smiled faintly. He knew that, behind his polished badinage, Lord Aveling was just a little anxious about him. This week-end was a sort of bribe. The tobacco and beads for the naughty Indian with the scalping-knife.

Then Lord Aveling turned to the last of his guests to enter through the front door. Sir James turned also with a sudden sense of responsibility. He was still leisurely and unflurried, but a little of the rich warmth left his tone as he said:

"How well we have arranged this! I arrive just in time to perform the introductions. Mr. and Mrs. Chater, Lord Aveling."

John Foss had said he was not superstitious, but he had been watching the front door from his couch, and counting. Zena Wilding, ten. Lionel Bultin, eleven. Who would enter first of the last couple?… The man—no, he had paused on the threshold. The woman preceded him. Mrs. Chater, twelve. Mr. Chater, thirteen....

The new guests dissolved to their respective rooms. Dinner was at eight, and bags had to be unpacked and clothes changed. Lionel Bultin followed a servant up the soft stair-carpet to a room on the second floor. The artist, Leicester Pratt, wagged a hand from an easy-chair as he entered.

"Hallo, Lionel," said Pratt. "We're to be stable lads together.

I hope you don't mind? There's no way out, if you do. It was my idea."

Bultin did not mind. His invitation to Bragley Court had also been Pratt's idea. It was Leicester Pratt who had lent Bultin fifty pounds ten years ago, at the critical moment of the journalist's career. Pratt was then an unknown artist, doing infinitely better work than he was doing to-day. Pratt had discovered Bultin, and in return Bultin had discovered Pratt. No two men had helped each other more, or understood each other better.

"Well?" queried Bultin, after five minutes of silence.

Pratt laughed.

"You know, I'm quite a little child at heart, Lionel," he answered. "I love to call you Lionel, and even more I love to make you say, 'Well?' I believe I'm the only person who can do it outside the King and Mussolini. Lionel Bultin, purveyor of world news, world gossip, world washing, authority on Eden's size in collars and Greta Garbo's lip-stick, asking *me* for information! Admit it's a score!"

"I don't ask even little children twice," observed Bultin, removing one of Pratt's coats from a hook so that he could use the hook for one of his own.

"You'd ask *this* child twice, if it were necessary," retorted Pratt. "You see, I have the advantage of not being a sentimentalist. You've grown so fond of life that you will woo it with any weapon. I dislike life so much that I'm without fear. Once life begins bargaining for my heart, I've done with the jade!

Yes, and here's an interesting thing," he added. "You couldn't commit suicide if you tried. If ever I decide to, I won't hesitate. Posthumous opinion can find me out, if it's amused—I shan't be here."

"The little child is objectionably precocious," commented Bultin, quite unmoved. He rather enjoyed being thought a sentimentalist. "Get on with it."

"I understood you never asked twice!" jeered Pratt. "'Get on with it,' is your second 'Well?' camouflaged. All right. Here goes. News from the advance guard, for Bultin's column, 'How the Wind Blows,' preferred by ninety-nine per cent. of the population to Hamlet, the Bible, and Omar Khayyám. Paragraph One. 'Miss Zena Wilding, age thirty-two by the kindness of her friends, forty-two by the unkindness of her enemies, and thirty-eight by the justice of God—'"

"Thirty-seven," interposed Bultin.

"'—is an interesting visitor at Bragley Court this week-end. She has long awaited the really big theatrical chance she so thoroughly does not deserve. My little leopard informs me that, if she is very good, but perhaps not too good, she may receive the promise of the necessary backing by Monday next.'"

"I already knew that," said Bultin.

"Your comment was inevitable," replied Pratt.

"She first met the backing on the Riviera," said Bultin, "where she went to recuperate after a serious illness. Cause and nature of illness not known."

“And possibly not for publication when known,” added Pratt. “Paragraph Two. ‘The celebrated artist, Leicester Pratt, who has the world of portraiture temporarily at his feet, who calls a scarcely less celebrated journalist by his Christian name, and whose bow ties become increasingly flowing, has been at Bragley Court for several days, and is now completing a portrait designed for next year’s Royal Academy of Lord Aveling’s only daughter, the Honourable Anne Aveling.’ Kindly turn *that* paragraph into a column.”

“Does this window look out on the back?” said Bultin.

“It looks out on the studio,” answered Pratt, “where the aforementioned masterpiece is in process. Paragraph Three. I think you’ll like this one better. ‘It is interesting to find Sir James Earnshaw among the guests at Bragley Court. It is well known that he does not hunt stags for the pleasure of it. Is he hunting anything else? My little leopard informs me that, if Sir James is to survive politically, he must turn Labour or Conservative, and he would be given the hand of the Honourable Anne Aveling if he decided to survive as a Conservative. This would not outrage Sir James’s private political convictions, because he hasn’t any, and then Lord Aveling might himself survive as a Marquis instead of a mere Baron, in virtue of the additional vote he brought to the Conservative Party.’”

Bultin condescended to turn away from a wardrobe he had been examining, and fix Pratt with a rather fish-like eye.

“Really?” he said.

“Really,” nodded Pratt. “Thank you for your passionate interest. I charge 3/10 for that one. But you can have the next paragraph for nothing. ‘Miss Edyth Fermoy-Jones is studying Nobility at first-hand. This is a pity, because we shall now lose those delicate flights of fancy that have illuminated so many of her previous volumes on High Life, and which once caused a Countess to bathe regularly in expensive hock. My little leopard tells me that her next novel will open with an accident to a young man at a railway station. A very beautiful widow will convey the young man to an ancestral home, will fall in love with him, and will discover that he is really a necklace thief. When a celebrated artist is murdered for painting a mole on the neck of a débutante, the young man will be arrested for the crime, and only the beautiful widow will know that his heart was too pure to devise anything worse than stealing necklaces.’”

“Will it come out that the real murderer of the artist was a famous journalist?” inquired Bultin.

Leicester Pratt laughed, and ran on:

“But the next paragraph is worth another 3/10. I might even work you up to four bob. ‘If Lord Aveling, already secretly harassed for funds, becomes a Marquis, how will he meet enhanced expenses? Perhaps—my little leopard tells me—Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Rowe, who have made a fortune from pork and who are anxious to emerge from the sausage-skin that has encased them so long, could supply the answer. They and their charming daughter, Ruth, have been staying for some days at

Bragley Court, and if Ruth were launched into Society with a Capital S, it is possible that Lord Aveling would be able to support a marquisate. And, incidentally, to justify the expense of backing a show, while waiting.'"

Bultin refused to register any gratitude.

"Who is the attractive widow?" he asked.

"Nadine Leveridge," sighed Pratt, in mock disappointment. "Well, if I can't interest you above-stairs, let me try below-stairs. Leopards also prowl in basements. Do not be surprised if you are given bamboo-shoots for dinner to-night. We have a Chinese cook. No good? I'll try again. We have something in the domestic line more attractive than a Chinese cook—a very pretty maid. Name, Bessie. Delightful figure. Make a good model. But when this was suggested to her, she was filled with charming confusion." He rose and stretched himself. "I shall waste no more time over you, Lionel. You're not worth it. I shall take a stroll before dressing."

"Do," said Bultin. "Since you can't tell me anything about the most interesting people here."

"Who?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Chater."

"Ah, the Chaters," answered Pratt. "Yes, there I'm beaten. The little leopard knows nothing about the Chaters."

"Nor does Lord Aveling," replied Bultin. "But James Earnshaw does. And, unless I am reaching my dotage, the Chaters know something about James Earnshaw. Which is my

bed?”

“That one over there.”

“Good. I’ll have the other one.”

Pratt laughed and left the room. Outside he paused. Harold Taverley, the one man he had not mentioned, was entering his room opposite, and threw him a smile.

“Why does that man always make me see red?” wondered Pratt.

He went downstairs thoughtfully.

Chapter VII. Whitewash and Paint

A narrow passage led from the back of the lounge-hall into the grounds, and as Leicester Pratt passed out into a sheltered lawn, its dark surface streaked with slits of light from upper windows—one window being that of his bedroom—he noticed a thin coil of smoke spiralling upwards. Then Nadine Leveridge gleamed at him out of a shadow.

She was a creature of dazzling white, softened by the deep green of her dress. Her shoulders were perfectly formed and perfectly revealed. One was tempted to envy the narrow green strips curving with such apparent insecurity over them. A double rope of pearls made a loop in front of the simple green bodice. A silk wrap, also of green, but deeper and more brilliant in hue, partially covered one shoulder.

"Nadine Leveridge is Life's relentless weapon," thought Pratt. "A woman for fools to fear."

Pratt did not fear her. He could even stand and regard her, deliberately studying her subtle challenges with the impertinent privilege of an artist.

"You've dressed early," he said. She nodded. "Not afraid of the cold?"

"Not a bit."

He felt for his cigarette-case, and found he had left it in his room.

“I’m sorry I can’t oblige,” remarked Nadine. “Mr. Taverley gave me this.”

She held up her cigarette. Pratt noticed that it was a State Express 555.

“Don’t move for a moment,” he said. She stood motionless, her eyebrows raised a little. Only the cigarette smoke continued its movement. “The lady with the cigarette. The lady in green. Modern Eve. Woman. Anything you damn like. When do I paint her?”

“She’d have to pawn her pearls to pay your price,” smiled Nadine, puffing the cigarette again.

“That’s terribly material.”

“Goes against the grain?”

Now Pratt smiled.

“You must hate meeting pieces of wood like Bultin and me,” he observed.

“Nonsense—nobody’s wood!” retorted Nadine. “Some people build wooden walls around themselves, that’s all. Bultin does, certainly.”

“Yes, I agree. He’s chained himself inside in case he should get out and collapse. But—me?”

“Something could move you.”

“What?”

“I’ve no idea. But *I* couldn’t. That’s why I don’t think I’ll pawn my pearls, thank you. Any one who paints me must be an out-and-out idealist.”

“An idealist is merely another sort of man who builds a wall round his passions.”

“And whose passions are the most ardent when the wall goes?” replied Nadine. “Yes, I know all about that! But he begins with a kind heart, and I only allow artists with kind hearts to paint me. I’ve seen your Twentieth-Century Madonna!”

“I should never have thought *you* feared the truth, Nadine,” reproved Pratt.

“I don’t. But no artist can paint the whole truth. He just paints his half—and the other half can’t answer back from the canvas. The half I fear is your half—all by its little lonesome!”

“Touché,” murmured Pratt, “although I am not admitting there is any other half.”

“Didn’t you paint the other half when you were twenty? I remember a picture called ‘Song of Youth.’”

“My God, spare me!” he winced. “Must that ghastly song follow me to the grave? And anyway,” he added, “how on earth do *you* remember that ancient atrocity? From your appearance, your memory shouldn’t take you back so far.”

“I’m in shadow.”

“Kindly step out of it.”

She hesitated, then did so.

“I repeat my astonishment,” said Pratt, staring at her. “You look twenty yourself! And now, I suppose, you will charge me with gallantry? No, I couldn’t stand that! Not immediately after the resuscitation of my ‘Song of Youth!’ Excuse me, before I

become utterly whitewashed!"

"I'll excuse you," answered Nadine, throwing her cigarette away, "but I don't think I'm exactly the kind of person to whitewash anybody."

"Thank God!" said Pratt devoutly.

He watched her pass back to the house, then stepped on to the dark lawn. It was thirty strides across. Beyond, a flagged path led between bushes to the studio.

As he reached the building he felt in his pocket for the key. There had been no afternoon sitting that day, for horses had supplanted canvas; and there was not much chance of a sitting on the morrow, either. A stag was to be routed out of Flensham Forest, to perform its entertaining death-run. Well, he could add a few touches to the picture by himself, and finish the thing on Sunday. He'd have to get it out of the way by then, if Ruth Rowe's was to follow.

"Where the devil—?" he murmured.

Then he saw the key in the door, and recalled that he must have left it there after his visit with Mr. Rowe before tea. It was then that the picture of Ruth had been decided on.

He turned the key and entered the large room. Ruth's picture would be dull compared with Anne's. There was little to paint about Ruth. There were fathomless depths to reveal in Anne. He knew them. He could pierce through right down to the bed. Yes, he liked this picture—there was something definitely challenging in it. "No whitewashing, my child—we'll show 'em—a bit of real

collaboration. As a rule, I'm the only one that understands, but you understand, too. That's what makes it!"

And Earnshaw's presence here this week-end added its touch of ironic justification. Anne could sell her soul, like the rest of them—or the mythical thing that was called a soul!

He switched on the light, and turned to the picture of the Honourable Anne Aveling.

It was almost obliterated by a long, broad smudge of paint. The smudge, crimson lake, began at Anne's right ear, and descended diagonally across the dark-green riding habit.

"Something could move you!" Nadine's words screamed through his ears, as though repeated by an invisible loud speaker turned full on. He found himself trembling. He fought against vulnerable emotion.

"Somebody's gone mad here," he thought. "All in a moment."

He recalled the moment when *he* had seen red in the passage outside his bedroom. Yes… it could happen.

He turned away from the canvas, to control himself. He stared round the studio. On another easel was a large painting of a stag, done by Anne herself. It was not good, saving for the terrible, dull fear she had somehow planted in the stag's eyes—a fear she should not have known about, since she hunted. He concentrated on the stag's eyes for a few seconds, then turned his own eyes back to the ruined canvas. The fit of trembling had passed.

"Queer game," he said aloud. "I wonder whether I shall ever have the pleasure of painting the person who did this?"

He glanced at his watch. Five minutes to seven. He left the studio abruptly, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. A spent cigarette-end loomed dully from the ground. He picked it up.

Some one was moving in the path. He dashed forward and grabbed. Sheer instinct had caused the sudden action. A hand banged him in the chest, and he staggered. When he had recovered, he was alone.

As he came to the end of the flagged path a figure met him off the edge of the lawn.

"Good-evening," said the figure.

Pratt regarded the face that rose abruptly before his, and smiled.

"Good-evening, Mr. Chater," he answered.

"That's a good guess," replied Chater. "We've not met."

"No, that's how I guessed," responded Pratt. "Process of elimination. You came on the 5.56, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"You've not been here before?"

"No, my first visit. Rather a nice place, isn't it? I'm just having a stroll round."

"I'm afraid you won't see much in this darkness."

"Enough to get one's bearings. Where does this lead? Is that building over there the stables?"

He was gazing along the flagged path.

"No, that's a studio," answered Pratt.

“Oh, yes, there’s an artist here, isn’t there?”

“Well—he calls himself an artist. Are you interested in art, by any chance?”

“Me? Not particularly. Who’s the fellow?”

“What fellow?”

“The artist?”

“Leicester Pratt.”

“Oh, Leicester Pratt! He’s rather the craze just now, isn’t he?”

“Some people like his work.”

“And some don’t?”

“They all pay big prices for it.”

“Then I don’t suppose *he* worries! Is he painting anybody here?”

Pratt paused for a second before replying.

“I have just been looking at a picture he is painting of somebody here.”

“Good?”

“He thinks so.”

“Who’s it of?”

“Lord Aveling’s daughter.”

“Oh, not his wife.”

The remark was made carelessly, but Pratt realised that his face was being watched, and he took great pains that it should convey nothing as he answered dryly:

“I said his daughter.”

“So you did,” smiled Chater. “Rather an attractive girl, though

I've only seen her for a moment. Isn't she just going to be engaged or something?"

"Do I follow you?"

"Eh?"

"The 'something?'"

Chater's smile augmented to a laugh, and his teeth gleamed in the dusk.

"Don't mean to insinuate anything," he said. "It's Earnshaw, isn't it?" As Pratt did not respond, he added, "Hope I'm not asking too many questions; but when you're a sort of stranger—well, it's helpful to know things. Often saves you from making a *faux pas*. Curiosity's not one of my natural vices."

"That idea would never occur to me, Mr. Chater," observed Pratt ironically.

The irony made no impression.

"I admit I would rather like to see that picture, though," Chater went on. "Is one allowed in the studio?"

"I'm afraid it's locked," replied Pratt.

"Locked? Then how did *you* get in?" inquired Chater.

"I have the key," said Pratt, "and I locked it."

"That sounds as if you're Leicester Pratt."

"I am."

"You might have warned me. Now I shall spend the rest of the evening trying to recall our conversation to see if I've put my foot in it! Or p'r'aps you'll save me the trouble? *Have* I?"

There was something cheap, almost insulting, in Chater's

coolness, which appeared to have been deliberately acquired, whereas the *sangfroid* of Pratt was a natural inheritance. The artist answered:

"You have not even put your foot in my studio. Or—have you?"

"What, put my foot in your studio?" exclaimed Chater. "How could I have, if it's locked?"

"It wasn't locked ten minutes ago."

Chater's expression changed slightly. It was still cool, but a watchful quality entered into it.

"Ten minutes ago I was saying good-evening to a maid," he said.

A clock struck seven as he spoke. It was a clock over the stables.

"I see," murmured Pratt. "Then you have not been out here ten minutes?"

"I'd just come out when I met you."

"Did you meet anybody else?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Pratt, but what's all this about?"

Pratt shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing important," he replied. "See you at dinner."

Chater turned his head as Pratt began to resume his way.

"Do we like each other?" he asked.

"Not a bit," answered Pratt.

That was also Chater's conviction as, after watching the artist disappear into the house, he himself turned back to the flagged

path and walked towards the studio. If Pratt had not locked the studio door, he would not have seen the thirteenth guest at dinner.

Bultin was fixing an over-large white tie round his collar when Pratt rejoined him. Bultin liked large things. His soft felt hat was of Italian dimensions, although it came from a shop in Piccadilly.

"Enjoy your walk?" asked Bultin, without turning his head.

"Immensely," answered Pratt, throwing off his coat, "though not quite as much as Edyth Fermoy-Jones would have enjoyed it in my place. 'Why?' the famous journalist refused to inquire. Because, my dear Lionel, Edyth Fermoy-Jones would have made a most sensational discovery, and would have torn up the first chapter of that novel of hers."

"The one thing I have never learned to do without an effort," said Bultin, "is to tie a white tie."

"And she would have started her story afresh, you vile pretender! Yes, Lionel, I made a mistake when I described her plot to you just now. It will certainly contain the marvellous necklace round the neck of the attractive widow—a double rope of pearls worth—you like to quote figures, don't you?—worth every penny of ten thousand pounds. You can make it twenty, if you like. Edyth Fermoy-Jones will make it fifty. But it won't be stolen! Not, at least, for several chapters—till her editor has put the wind up her by shouting for more drama. No, a picture will be mutilated, instead. Less hackneyed idea, isn't it? With first-rate possibilities for development, and an unimpeachable setting. Studio—model's screen—artist's lay figure—strange pictures on

large easels—somebody hiding behind one of 'em—" He paused, arrested by a thought, then continued: "The mutilated picture in Miss Fermoy-Jones's studio will be of a baron's daughter. Value—no, price—one thousand guineas. Smeared over with paint, my boy. Smeared over with paint."

"I thought that was the fate of all pictures," remarked Bultin.

"The fate is bearable when there is only one artist," answered Pratt. "But here there are two. The first artist's smear has been smeared out by the second. I wonder how Epstein feels when people daub his statues? Scornful? Callous? Cynical? Or just bloody angry? I must ask him."

Bultin's nose for a true scent was as accurate as any hound's. He paused for a moment in his struggle with his tie.

"Like that?" he said quietly.

"I don't suppose, Lionel," replied Pratt, kicking off his shoes, "there's a soul alive without his vulnerable spot. An elephant's got one behind his ear. I've got one behind my paint. Where's yours?"

"You'll have to paint me, as you paint other people, to find out," answered Bultin, almost humanly.

"Perhaps I've found out already, without using my brushes."

"Or perhaps I haven't got one? Or perhaps the only individual who will ever find it out is the unpleasant old man with the scythe."

"Death," mused Pratt. "I'm not thinking of Death. That's miles away...."

He stopped abruptly. Bultin loosened his tie, pulled it off, and began again.

"Are you sure, Leicester?" he inquired. "Are you quite sure—with your mutilated picture only a few *yards* away? There may be murder committed in Miss Fermoy-Jones's novel yet—eh? By an artist?"

"I don't kill," said Pratt. Then he recalled the moment when he had seen red in the passage, and again when he had found himself trembling in the studio. He held up his hand. It was perfectly steady. He smiled. "No; I don't kill. The murder may appear in Miss Fermoy-Jones's shocker, but it won't be reported in Monday's newspaper. I'm afraid I won't be giving you *that* paragraph. Just the same, Lionel," he went on contemplatively, "there's a lot beneath a quiet surface. The person who spoilt my picture may have been a quiet sort of a person. He may have been more surprised than any one at his action. A sudden moment of passion, eh? A sudden dizziness? It can happen." He raised a slender finger. "Listen! Dead quiet, isn't it? Not a sound! But if we could *really* hear, Lionel? Storms brewing in the silence? There's silence in the passage outside this door here—silence in the hall below—silence on the lawn, silence in the studio—silence in a room where an invalid lies. A brooding silence, my boy—that's not going to last!"

Bultin looked at Pratt, whose hand now dropped into a pocket to emerge with two small objects. One was a cigarette-end. State Express 555. The other was the key to the studio.

“Damn this tie,” said Bultin, and chose another.

Chapter VIII. How Things Happen

John looked up quickly as Nadine entered the ante-room, and there was something apprehensive in his eye.

A feeling of peace had come to him when, shortly before dinner, his couch had been rolled in here from the hall and he had escaped temporarily from social responsibilities. Nadine, dressed early, had herself supervised the removal and the arranging of the room, assuming responsibility for his comfort, but she had only lingered for a moment or two afterwards. He gained an impression—it was correct—that she had originally intended to stay longer, and had then abruptly changed her mind.

A perfect dinner had followed. Its character gave no hint that it had been designed and cooked by a Chinaman. He had had one visitor during the meal. Anne had left her table to make sure that everything was all right. “I suppose I really ought to have watched you being shoved in here,” she had said, “but I’m afraid I never do half the things I ought to do, and anyway Mrs. Leveridge was looking after you, wasn’t she? She’s terribly nice, isn’t she? I love her. Be sure to give a view-halloa if you want anything, won’t you?” The idea that any one in Bragley Court should have to shout for service made John smile.

The dark lawn outside the window sheltered by the long ballroom wing—had the ballroom been a lecture-hall and the ante-room less luxuriously furnished, he might have fancied

himself back in college, staring out into the dark quadrangle where studious figures flitted not always with studious thoughts—had contributed to the sense of mental repose.

Then the peace had been broken. Guests, impelled by kindness or curiosity, had paid him short visits, or popped their heads in to give him a word or a smile. Apart from Harold Taverley, the men had fought rather shy of him, but the women had formed an intermittent procession. Mrs. Rowe had introduced her daughter, Ruth, who had been thoroughly unmodern and had blushed rather painfully. Miss Fermoy-Jones, on the other hand, had been quite unblushing, and during ten boring minutes had contrived to mention the titles of six of the sixteen mystery novels she had written. "Of course, they're terrible stuff, really," she had gushed, when she had become mistakenly convinced that she would not be believed, "but if people demand a thing, what are you to do? And just as you can write a bad psychological novel, I suppose you can write a good detective story. Lift your readers up, I say, and it doesn't really matter where you start from—if you understand what I mean, Mr. Foss. But I mustn't make your head ache by talking literature!" Lady Aveling had introduced Zena Wilding. Maybe she had hoped Zena would stay, but this interview had ended rather abruptly when the actress had suddenly noticed Lord Aveling in the doorway, and had whispered confidentially, "I'm so sorry, I've got to go and talk shop, but perhaps I'll see you again later." Anne, too, had paid him a second visit.

But Nadine Leveridge had kept away, and during the intervals of the procession John had visualised her in the ballroom, from which music faintly floated. He visualised her with painful clearness and struggled not to.... And he was struggling not to now, when she appeared, and caught his expression.

If she had been dancing, there was little sign of it.

She looked as neat as when he had last seen her, and the double row of pearls lay against smooth, cool skin.

"Shall I go?" she asked with disarming bluntness.

"Go? Good Lord, no!" he exclaimed. "Why on earth?"

"You look worried." His mind raced for the right answer, but her mind raced his. "I expect your foot's still giving you the devil."

"Just a bit."

"So I will go. You'd rather be alone. I know you've had a string of visitors. Good-night."

"I say—you're not—wait a minute—you're not really going, are you?"

"You're quite sure you don't want me to?"

"I should hate you to!"

"Well, after all, I didn't really come here just to turn round and go back again," she smiled.

She entered the room and walked towards the window. A dog across the dark lawn was barking.

"Haig's a bit restless to-night," she remarked. "Haig is our watch-dog, and Lord Aveling's method of keeping the Great

War green. Though why anybody wants to keep a war green I've never learned." She pulled the long curtains across the window, shutting out the lawn and muffling Haig's war-cry. Then she rolled a large green silk pouffe towards the couch and sat beside him. "What do we talk about, Mr. Foss? Things that matter, or things that don't?"

"I'll leave the choice to you," he hedged. "But perhaps cabbages and kings would be the safest."

"Safest?"

He turned red. What a fool he was! What a blundering ass! Usually he was rather good at conversation, but now he could not even talk of cabbages and kings without putting his foot in it. He did not realise that there are some women with whom it is almost impossible for a man to talk insignificantly. Beneath their trivial words they are telling him all the while that they like him or dislike him, love him or loathe him. The personal equation is all that lives behind their conversation.

"Have a cigarette, and don't worry," said Nadine. She produced a tiny gold case and held it out to him. "Forgive their idiotic size."

She struck a match. As the light flickered on her features, their perfection almost hurt him. Of course, it was beauty-parlour perfection. Therefore, not really perfection at all. He held on to that thought while he advanced his head to the light. She blew the match out as soon as he had used it, then struck another and lit her own cigarette from a greater distance.

They smoked for a few moments in silence. He had an agonising sensation that valuable seconds were slipping away, dropping irreclaimably into the void of time. Suddenly she raised her head.

"Yes,—I remember—one can just hear the music from this room," she exclaimed. "Has it tantalised you, as it tantalised *me* when I was lying on that couch two years ago?"

"I'm not a great dancer," he answered, "but I like it."

"You're cut out for the diplomatic service," she smiled, "you answer questions so tactfully! *I* could hardly lie still! There were better dancers that time than this. Apart from Mr. Taverley—and even he trod on my foot once"—She advanced a shoe and regarded the gold-sandalled toe—"there's not a good dancer here. Well, Lord Aveling's not bad—but the rest! Sir James dances with a sort of pompous caution. Mr. Pratt seems to have the one object of preventing you from knowing what steps he's going to do next. I can usually follow anybody, but he beats me. I'm sure it's on purpose. Of course, his bosom companion, Mr. Bultin, doesn't dance at all. Or, if he does, he won't. He just watches with a kind of insulting boredom. So I escaped him. Also Mr. Rowe. But Mr. Chater—oh, my God! We almost came to blows!"

"How does Mr. Chater dance?" inquired John, feeling that all this conversation was mere prelude. "I can't imagine him dancing attractively."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you're right, anyway. He—how can one describe it?—he seems to press, and yet he doesn't. I think it's because he is pressing with his mind. He was asking questions—quite quietly and casually—all the time we danced." She laughed. "He even asked a question about us."

"What—you and me?"

"You and me. He wanted to know whether we'd known each other a long while."

"Confound the fellow! It wasn't his business!"

"So I implied. Although he did it quite nicely. Shall I tell you what he reminds me of? A fairly intelligent worm—and after talking with fairly intelligent worms, I always feel I want a bath!"

"I suppose it was when you implied that it wasn't his business that you nearly came to blows?" asked John.

"No—we just survived that one. It was when he said, 'Did I hear somebody say your husband's in the army?'"

"I—see," murmured John.

"I believe you do," she answered.

A wave of anger swept through him.

"The man's a cad!" he exclaimed. "What's he doing here?"

"That's what I'm wondering, Mr. Foss," replied Nadine thoughtfully. "Lord Aveling sometimes collects queer folk, but he's rather excelled himself this week-end—I've not come across Mr. Chater's type here before. By the way—do *you* know my husband isn't in the army?"

John nodded, and hoped he was not flushing as he recalled the information Taverley had given him.

"Would it be cricket to ask who told you?"

"But you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. Harold Taverley. He was one of my husband's best friends."

"He still is."

She looked at him quizzically, then smiled.

"You put that rather nicely," she said. "And is Harold Taverley still my friend? No, never mind. I'm asking unfair questions." She paused. She gave a queer little sigh. "Well, we've exhausted the cabbages and kings!"

She checked a movement to rise from the pouffe, and hunched her shoulders instead. The green wrap slipped from her back. As she half-turned to pick it up, a bare shoulder touched his sleeve.

"Your first impulse was right," he said.

"What impulse?" she answered.

"Weren't you going?"

"Yes. And then I decided not to."

"Well—I think you'd better!"

"You're not afraid of Mr. Chater?"

"Hell, no! I beg your pardon."

"I like honest swearing, and hell's a good word. Mr. Leveridge used it constantly. Are you afraid of me?"

"That's possible. But more of myself. So, you see, you'd really better go."

“It wouldn’t do any good.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’d only want me back again.”

He took a breath. He could not decide at that instant whether she were wonderful or hateful.

“Suppose that’s true?” he demanded.

“There’s no need to suppose it,” she replied smoothly. “It is true. I’m sorry I brought you here. That’s one thing I wanted to say. But, as I have, let’s face it and talk it out, shall we? It’s only when you don’t face facts that they become exaggeratedly distorted—or fruitless.”

He decided that she was wonderful. Already the idea of facing facts and of avoiding conventional subterfuges brought some ease to his mind, although he had no notion where the process was going to lead.

“Then let me make an admission,” he said. “It may—explain things a bit. My attitude, I mean. You’ve come upon me at a pretty bad time, Mrs. Leveridge.” He said “Mrs. Leveridge” for the conventional protection of it. “There’s no need to tell you things that just concern myself—that wouldn’t interest you. But please accept them as an explanation of my mood and of any silly blundering. I dare say you were right not to act upon that first impulse of yours to go. Yes, I’m sure you were. Something had to be said—you didn’t know quite what—but now I hope I’ve said it. If I have, you’re released to go back to the ballroom.”

“I haven’t implied any burning desire to go back to the

ballroom," she reminded him.

"Well—anywhere else."

"Anywhere but here? Because, if I don't, my seconds are numbered, and you will leap up, despite your foot, and throw your arms round my neck?"

"Lord! I give it up!" he muttered.

"No, don't give it up—stick to it," replied Nadine soberly, "only try playing it my way. I know a lot more about men than you do about women, which is generally the case, although men can rarely bring themselves to believe it—and I know a lot about *you*. No, don't interrupt. I'll tell you what I know. Not dates and facts and things. I don't know the year you were born in, for instance, or the house you live in. I don't know your particular sport, though I'm sure you've got one and it isn't hunting. You're not fond of killing things, and would only do it happily for England. You look as if you'd got your fair share of *that* particular folly. I don't know—" She paused suddenly. "Want me to go on? Now I'm warning *you*!"

He nodded. She pressed her cigarette-end into an ashtray, and continued:

"I don't know the name of the particular trouble that sent you scurrying out of London to a remote place like Flensham, without even a definite address for the night.... By the way, I'm quite aware that you were behind me at the ticket office in London, and you can try and work *that* out if it has any significance and if it amuses you.... But I *do* know that, whatever

her name is, you didn't treat her shabbily. And you can think, if you want to, that it was because of that knowledge—just instinctive then, of course—just a feeling—that I stuck to you rather more than I might have done after your accident. I don't mean—since we're being frank—that the adventure of it all didn't attract me. But I soon realised that you weren't chasing me."

He stared at her. She laughed.

"It's funny how little men believe in a woman's instinct," she said, "and yet how much they owe to it! Do you really suppose that—well, do you suppose that if a man like Mr. Chater had tumbled out of that train, I'd have troubled to lug *him* along here like this?"

"I'm sure you would have!" he exclaimed impulsively. "You'd never have left him—or anybody else—in a hole!"

"For heaven's sake, don't start idealising me!" she begged, good-naturedly. "I'm not idealising *you*. I'm just suggesting that you're rather straight—as men go. No, I wouldn't have left Mr. Chater in a hole—though I would *now*, and help to pile the earth on top! I'd have taken him to the doctor's, and I'd have parked him there. Or even if I'm underrating the Good Samaritan in my nature—even if I had brought him here—I wouldn't have deserted the ballroom for him, and smoked a cigarette with him, and have thrown the cabbages and kings overboard. Am I mixing my metaphors?" She paused, and the light he had seen in her eyes before, and which he found himself instinctively watching

for, sent a queer sensation through him. “So perhaps I’ve as much necessity to warn you, Mr. Foss, as you have to warn me?”

She looked at him with provocative inquiry. He shoved aside a sudden wonder whether, after all—behind everything—she were laughing at him. He knew the wonder was not worthy, or genuine, and that it was merely another protective device. He decided that the most protective thing to do would be to go on idealising her.

“I believe I’m a little bit out of my depth,” he said.

“Most of us are,” she answered.

“Yes, perhaps. Life’s a puzzle. But what I meant was—I may as well admit it—I haven’t had time yet to become a man of much experience.” Was he talking idiotically? Like a small boy? He had no notion, but he plunged on, “Things still seem rather wonderful to me, you know. Probably I’ll grow out of that, only I don’t want to. I thought I’d grown out of it this morning. Now—I’m not quite sure.” He stopped, arrested by a thought. Instinctively she bent a little closer, following his mind rather than hers. He continued hurriedly, “That was an extraordinary guess of yours just now. About my trouble. I mean. I don’t know which is more extraordinary—your guessing it, or my not minding. I didn’t think I could ever talk about it to anybody. When a fellow’s been turned down—”

“Don’t say more than you mean to—”

“No, it’s all right. Well, he generally keeps it pretty well inside him. Or so I should imagine. Doesn’t want people to be sorry for him. Gets into a sort of—mental loneliness that no one

must disturb. You know, I believe it's a sort of silly, self-pitying exaltation. But, whatever it is—I say, I'm getting a bit tied up! What's happening to me? I'm just talking rot!"

Something almost uncontrollable surged through him, surprising him by its force. He stared at her, keeping very still. His forehead became damp in a moment. Then he found Nadine's lips against his.

Nadine had kissed many men in her life, but she had never kissed any man as she now kissed John Foss. There was not only passion, there was something maternal in her kiss.

"I didn't mean to do that," she said. "I'm sorry, John."

She turned her head suddenly. Mr. Chater stood in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I was looking for Lord Aveling."

He closed the door again, and was gone.

"Well?" asked Nadine. "What do we do to Mr. Chater?"

Chapter IX. Largely Concerning Chater

"That man's dangerous," said Nadine. "Let's be practical. Two points stick out. One, I've been a beast. Two, Mr. Chater knows all about it."

"Do you think I care a damn about Mr. Chater?" replied John, through the whirl of his mind.

"Don't you?"

"Why should I?"

Nadine smiled rather ironically, and he misinterpreted her expression.

"No, I'm the beast," he exclaimed. "I meant I didn't care a damn about Mr. Chater for myself—I forgot about you."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she answered. "You needn't worry about me. I'm case-hardened—"

"Don't!"

"What?"

He looked at her almost angrily.

"I can't bear it when you talk about yourself as though—as though you were—"

"The world's worst woman? No, John, I'm not that. I generally play the game—however dangerous—and I generally choose players who know all about the risks. I'm being quite honest

with you. Virtues and vices alike. But just sit on that impulse to idealise me. Men like you do that much too easily. The reason I said I was a beast was because I've taken you at a disadvantage and got you into a mess."

"I don't admit that!"

"No, you wouldn't. You're even better than your old school tie."

"Are you idealising *me*?"

"Heavens, no! I could tell you something that would make you wince! But I want to get you out of the mess. If I could do it by saying good-night and walking out of the room, I'd leave you this moment."

"That wouldn't help," he agreed.

"What will?" she asked. "Have you any suggestion?"

"Yes."

"Is it a good one?"

"It's the only one—and if you know me as well as you think you do, you'll realise it."

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