THE CRIME DOCTOR

E. W. HORNUNG

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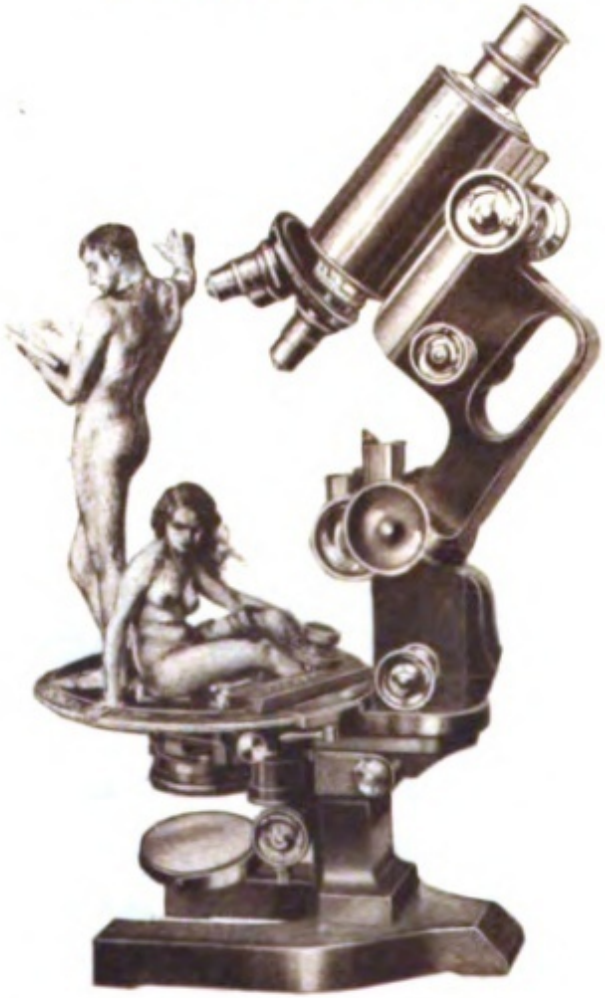

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"It was struck with—this"

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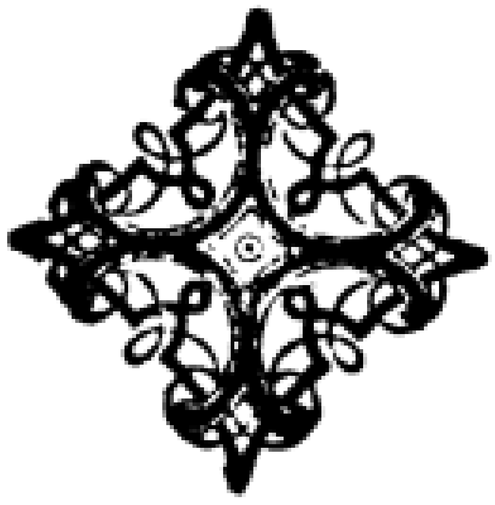
The Crime Doctor

By ERNEST W. HORNUNG

AUTHOR OF

"Raffles," "The Amateur Cracksman,"
"The Thousandth Woman," Etc.



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THE CRIME DOCTOR

I

THE PHYSICIAN WHO HEALED HIMSELF

IN the course of his meteoric career as Secretary of State for the Home Department, the Right Honorable Topham Vinson instituted many reforms and earned the reformer's whack of praise and blame. His methods were not those of the permanent staff; and while his notorious courage endeared him to the young, it was not in so strong a nature to leave friend or foe lukewarm. An assiduous contempt for tradition fanned the flame of either faction, besides leading to several of those personal adventures which were as breath to the Minister's unregenerate nostrils, but which never came out without exposing him to almost universal

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censure. It is matter for thanksgiving that the majority of his indiscretions were unguessed while he and his held office; for he was never so unconventional as in pursuance of those enlightened tactics on which his reputation rests, or in the company of that kindred spirit who had so much to do with their inception.

It was early in an autumn session that this remarkable pair became acquainted. Mr. Vinson had been tempted by the mildness of the night to walk back from Westminster to Portman Square. He had just reached home when he heard his name cried from some little distance behind him. The voice tempered hoarse excitement with the restraint due to midnight in a quiet square; and as Mr. Vinson turned on his door-step, a young man rushed across the road with a gold chain swinging from his outstretched hand.

"Your watch, sir, your watch!" he gasped, and displayed a bulbous hunter with a monogram on one side and the crest of all the Vinsons on the other.

"Heavens!" cried the Home Secretary, feeling in an empty waistcoat pocket before he could be-

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lieve his eyes. "Where on earth did you find that? I had it on me when I left the House."

"It wasn't a case of findings," said the young man, as he fanned himself with his opera hat. "I've just taken it from the fellow who took it from you."

"Who? Where?" demanded the Secretary of State, with unstatesmanlike excitement.

"Some poor brute in North Audley Street, I think it was."

"That's it! That was where he stopped me, just at the corner of Grosvenor Square!" exclaimed Vinson. "And I went and gave the old scoundrel half-a-crown!"

"He probably had your watch while you were looking in your purse."

And the young man dabbed a very good forehead, that glistened in the light from the open door, with a white silk handkerchief just extracted from his sleeve.

"But where were you?" asked Topham Vinson, taking in every inch of him.

"I'd just come into the square myself. You had just gone out of it. The pickpocket was look-

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ing to see what he'd got, even while he hurled his blessings after you."

"And where is he now? Did he slip through your fingers?"

"I'm ashamed to say he did; but your watch didn't!" its owner was reminded with more spirit. "I could guess whose it was by the crest and monogram, and I decided to make sure instead of giving chase."

"You did admirably," declared the Home Secretary, in belated appreciation. "I'm in the papers quite enough without appearing as a mug out of office hours. Come in, please, and let me thank you with all the honors possible at this time of night."

And, taking him by the arm, he ushered the savior of his property into a charming inner hall, where elaborate refreshments stood in readiness on a side-table, and a bright fire looked as acceptable as the saddlebag chairs drawn up beside it. A bottle and a pint of reputable champagne had been left out with the oysters and the caviar; and Mr. Vinson, explaining that he never allowed anybody to sit up for him, opened the bottle with the preci-

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sion of a practised hand, and led the attack on food and drink with schoolboy gusto and high spirits.

In the meantime there had been some mutual note-taking. The Home Secretary, whose emphatic personality lent itself to the discreet pencil of the modern caricaturist, was in appearance exactly as represented in contemporary cartoons; there was nothing unexpected about him, since his boyish vivacity was a quality already over-exploited by the Press. His frankness was something qualified by a gaze of habitual penetration, but still it was there, and his manner could evidently be grand or colloquial at will. The surprise was in his surroundings rather than in the man himself. The perfect union of luxury and taste is none too common in the professed Sybarite who is that and nothing more; in men of action and pugnacious politicians it is yet another sign of sheer capacity. The bits of rich old furniture, the old glass twinkling at every facet, the brasses blazing in the firelight, the few but fine prints on the Morris wallpaper, might have won the approval of an art student, and the creature comforts that of the youngest epicure.

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The young man from the street was easily pleased in all such respects; but indoors he no longer looked quite the young man. He had taken off an overcoat while his host was opening the champagne, and evening clothes accentuated a mature gauntness of body and limb. His hair, which was dark and wiry, was beginning to bleach at the temples; and up above one ear there was a little disk of downright silver, like a new florin. The shaven face was pale, eager, and austere. Dark eyes burnt like beacons under a noble brow, and did not lose in character or intensity by a distinct though slight strabism. So at least it seemed to Topham Vinson, who was a really wonderful judge of faces, yet had seldom seen one harder to sum up.

"I'm sorry you don't smoke," said he, snipping a cigar which he had extolled in vain. "And that champagne, you know! You haven't touched it, and you really should."

The other was on his legs that instant. "I never smoke and seldom drink," he exclaimed; "but I simply can not endure your hospitality, kind as it is, Mr. Vinson, without being a bit more honest with you than I've been so far. I didn't lose that pick-

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pocket by accident or because he was too quick for me. I—I purposely packed him off."

In the depths of his softest chair Mr. Vinson lolled smiling—but not with his upturned eyes. They were the steel eyes of all his tribe, but trebly keen, as became its intellectual head and chief.

"The fellow pitched a pathetic yarn?" he conjectured. He had never seen a more miserable specimen, he was bound to say.

"It wasn't that, Mr. Vinson. I should have let him go in any case—once I'd recovered what he'd taken—as a matter of principle."

"Principle!" cried the Secretary of State. But he did not modify his front-bench attitude; it was only the well-known eyebrows that rose.

"The whole thing is," his guest continued, yet more frankly, "that I happen to hold my own views on crime and its punishment. If I might be permitted to explain them, however briefly, they would at least afford the only excuse I have to offer for my conduct. If you consider it no excuse, and if I have put myself within reach of the law, there, sir, is my card; and here am I, prepared to take the consequences of my act."

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The Home Secretary leaned forward and took the card from a sensitive hand, vibrant as the voice to which he had just been listening, but no more tremulous. Again he looked up, into a pale face grown paler still, and dark eyes smoldering with suppressed enthusiasm. It was by no means his baptism of that sort of fire; but it seemed to Mr. Vinson that here was a new type of eccentric zealot; and it was only by an effort that he resumed his House of Commons attitude and his smile.

"I see, Doctor Dollar, that you are a near neighbor of mine—only just round the corner in Welbeck Street. May I take it that your experience as a consultant is the basis of the views you mention?"

"My experience as an alienist," said Doctor Dollar, "so far as I can lay claims to that euphemism."

"And how far is that, doctor?"

"In the sense that all crime is a form of madness."

"Then you would call yourself——"

The broken sentence ended on a note as tactfully remote from the direct interrogative as practised speech could make it.

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"In default of a recognized term," said Doctor Dollar, "which time will confer as part of a wider recognition, I can only call myself a crime doctor."

"A branch not yet acknowledged by your profession?"

"Neither by my profession nor by the law, Mr. Vinson; but both have got to come to it, just as surely as we all accept the other scientific developments of the day."

"But have you reduced your practise to a science, doctor?"

"I am doing so," said Doctor Dollar, with the restrained confidence which could not but impress one who knew the value of that quality in himself and in others. "I have made a start; if it were not so late I would tell you all about it. You are the Home Secretary of England, the man of all others whom I could wish to convert to my views. But already I have kept you up too long. If you would grant me an appointment——"

"Not at all," interrupted Mr. Vinson, as he settled himself even more comfortably in his chair. "The night is still young—so is my cigar. Pray say all you care to say, and say it as confidentially

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as you please. You interest me, Doctor Dollar; nor can I forget that I am much indebted to you."

"I don't want to trade on that," returned the doctor, hastily. "But it is an old dream of mine to tell you, sir, about my work, and how and why I came to take it up. I was not intended for medicine, you see; my people are army people, were Border outlaws once upon a time, and fighting folk ever since. My father was an ensign in the Crimea —Scots Fusiliers. I joined the Argyll and Sutherlands the year before South Africa—where, by the way, I remember seeing you with your Yeomen."

"I had eighteen months of it without a headache or a scratch."

"I wish I could say the same, Mr. Vinson. I was shot through the head at the Modder, ten days after I landed."

"Through the head, did you say?" asked the Home Secretary, lifting his own some inches.

The doctor touched the silver patch in his dark strong hair. "That's where the bullet came slinking out; any but a Mauser would have carried all before it! As it was, it left me with a bit of a squint, as

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you can see; otherwise, in a very few weeks, I was as fit as ever—physically."

"Wonderful!"

"Physically and even mentally—from a medical point of view—but not morally, Mr. Vinson! Something subtle had happened, some pressure somewhere, some form of local paralysis. And it left me a pretty low-down type, I can tell you! It was a case of absolute automatism—but I won't go into particulars now, if you don't mind."

"On no account, my dear doctor!" exclaimed the Secretary of State, with inadvertent cordiality. "This is all of extraordinary interest. I believe I can see what's coming. But I want to hear every word you care to tell me—and not one that you don't."

"It had destroyed my moral sense on just one curious point; but, thank God, I came to see the cause as well as to suffer unspeakably from the effect. After that it was a case of killing or curing oneself by hook or by crook. I decided to try the curing first. 'And—to cut a long yarn short—I *was* cured."

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"Easily?"

"No. The slander may come home to roost, but I shall never think much of the London specialist! I've dropped my two sovereigns and a florin into too many of their itching palms, beginning with the baronets and knights and ending up with the unknown adventures. But not a man-Jack of them was ashamed to pocket his two guineas (in one case three) for politely telling me I was as mad as a hatter to think of such a thing as really was the matter with me!"

"And in the end?"

"In the end I struck a fellow with an open mind—but not in England—and if I said that he literally opened mine it might be an exaggeration, but that's all. He did go prospecting in my skull—risked his reputation as against my life—but we both came out on top."

"And you've been your own man ever since?"

Topham Vinson asked the question gravely; it would have taken as keen a superficial observer as himself to detect much difference in his manner, in his eyes, in anything about him. Doctor Dollar was not that kind of observer. To see far one must

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look high, and to look high is to miss things under one's nose. It is all a matter of mental trajectory. In the sheer height of his enthusiasm, the soaring visionary was losing touch with the hard-headed groundling in the chair.

"I was cured," he answered with tense simplicity. "It was a miraculous cure, and yet no miracle. Anybody could perform its like, given the nerve and skill. Yet it seemed to me a new thing; its possibilities were almost appalling in their fascination. I must not speak of them, for in a large measure they are only possibilities still. But I resolved to qualify, so that at least I might be in a position to do as I had been done by. I had already left the service; but my fighting days were not over. I was going to fight Crime as it had never been fought before!"

There was a challenge in the pause made here. But the listener did not take it up, and the harangue ended on a humbler note:

"I studied at St. Mary's under men whose names you know as well as they know yours. I was at Berlin under Winterschladen, and with Jens Jennsen in Stockholm. Before I was thirty I had put up

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my plate in Welbeck Street, and there I am still."

"And yet," said the Home Secretary, with a faint and wary smile—"and yet the possibilities are still only possibilities!"

"On the surgical side, yes; there I was misled by my own abnormal case. When another sudden injury makes a monkey of an honest man, I know where to take him; but the average injury is too gradual, too subtle for the knife. Congenital cases are, of course, quite hopeless in that respect. Yet there are ways of curing even what I regard as the very worst type of congenital criminal at the present day."

"I wish I knew of some!" said Mr. Vinson cheerily. "But what, may I ask, do you regard as the very worst type of congenital criminal at the present day?"

"The society type," replied the crime doctor without an instant's hesitation.

His host permitted himself to open his eyes once more.

"Your ideas are rather sensational, aren't they, Doctor Dollar?"

"It's rather a sensational age, isn't it, Mr. Vin-

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son? Your twentieth-century criminal, with his telephone and his motor-car—for professional purposes—his high explosives and his scientific tools, has got to be an educated person, to begin with; and I am afraid there's an increasing number of educated people who have got to be criminals or else paupers all their lives. A vicious circle, I think you must agree?"

"If you can square it with the truth."

"Isn't it almost a truism, Mr. Vinson? When society women making a living out of bridge, traffic in tickets for Royal enclosures, charge a fat fee for a presentation at Court, and a small fortune for launching an unlikely family in their own set, there must be some reason for it apart from their own depravity. They are no more naturally depraved than I am, but their purse is perhaps even smaller, and their wants are certainly ten times as great. Cupidity is not the motive power; it's simple shortage of the needful—from their point of view. Society increases and multiplies in everything but money, and transmits its expensive tastes without the means to indulge them. So we get our good ladies with their tariff of introductions, and our

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members of the best clubs always ready for a deal over a horse or a car or anything else that's going to bring them in a fiver. It's a short step from that sort of thing to a shady trick, and from a shady trick to downright crime. But it's a step often taken by the type I mean—though not necessarily with their eyes open. And that's just where the crime doctor should come in."

"In opening their eyes?"

"In saving 'em from themselves while they're still worth saving; in that prevention which is not only better than cure, but the vital principle of modern therapeutics in every other direction. In keeping good material out of prison at all costs, Mr. Vinson, and even though you turn your prisons into country houses with feather beds and moral entertainments every night in life!"

The Secretary of State smiled again, but this time with some sympathy and much less restraint. He was beginning to see some method in what had seemed at first unmitigated mania, and to take some interest in a point of view at least novel and entertaining. But the prison system was not to be at-

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tacked, even in terms of fantastic levity, without protest from its official champion.

"Prisons, my dear Doctor Dollar, exist for the benefit of those who keep out of them rather than those who will insist on getting in. Of course, the ideal thing would be to benefit both sides; and that's what we're aiming at all the time. It isn't our fault if a man who gets into quod is a marked man ever after; he shouldn't get into quod."

"You've put your finger on your own vulnerable point!" cried the eager doctor. "Why should he be a marked man? Why force a professional status on the mere dabbler in crime, who might never have dabbled again? It isn't as if it undid anything he's done; even hanging your murderer doesn't bring your victim back to life, and the chances are that he would never want to murder anybody else. On the other hand, how many serious crimes might be hushed up without anybody being a bit worse off than they were the very moment after their commission!"

Mr. Vinson had been framing an ironical rebuke in the name of morality and the Mosaic law; but he

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was not sorry to drop the irony and pin his opponent down.

"I hope, Doctor Dollar, it is not to be a function of the new faculty to collaborate in the concealment of crime and criminals?"

"It is impossible," replied the enthusiast, duly drawn, "to define the scope of an embryonic science. When the crime doctor has come to stay—as he will—I can see him playing a Protean part with the full sanction of his profession and of the law. He will be preventive officer, private detective, and father confessor in one, if not even privileged accessory after some awful fact. The humbler pioneer can hope for no such powers; his only chance is to work in the dark on his own lines, to use his own judgment and to take his own risks as I've done to-night. If he really can save a man by screening him, let him do it and blow the odds! If he can stop a thing without giving it away, all the better for everybody, and if he fails to stop it all the worse for him! Let him be a law unto his patient and himself, but let him stand the racket if his law won't work."

"In other words, you would tackle character as

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ordinary doctors and persons devote themselves to the body and the soul?"

"It would come to that, Mr. Vinson. It's a large order, I know, and I don't expect to see the goods delivered in my time. It will take better men than I am, and many of 'em, even to start delivery on the scale I dream about. But that's the idea all right. Punishment has never signified prevention; what we want is to get under the criminal's skin *before* we make it smart, if not before there's an actual criminal in the case at all!"

"A very plausible confession of faith, Doctor Dollar."

The Minister's tone was dry after the other, but that was all. His fixed eyes seemed to be looking through the doctor's into the scheme itself, probing it on its merits in the very spirit in which it had been propounded. It is only the small men who laugh in the face of genuine enthusiasm, however wild and flighty it may seem. Topham Vinson was not a small man; but he, too, had been guilty of some wild flights in his day, and office had not altogether clipped his wings. The sportsman and the charlatan within him were only too ready to see themselves in

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another, to hear their own voices on other lips. But the appeal to temperament does not necessarily compromise the mind. And that citadel still flew a neutral flag.

"What about the practise?" asked Topham Vinson, forcing himself back to facts.

"Rome took less building than a London practise, by an unknown man striking out a new line for himself."

"I really don't wonder. Who would come to consult you about a homicidal tendency, or a trick of tampering with special offertories?"

"In the first instance, most likely, the patient's people; then they might send him to see me on some other pretext."

"And what form would the treatment take?"

"It would depend, of course, upon the case. They don't all know that they're being treated for incipient criminality. The majority think they are in an ordinary nursing home."

"A home!" cried the Secretary of State. The word had brought him to his feet at last, in a frame of mind no longer to be concealed by nods and smiles. "You don't mean to tell me, Doctor Dollar,

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that you actually run a nursing home for unconvicted criminals?"

"Potential criminals, Mr. Vinson. I have at present no patient who is actually wanted by the police."

"And where is this extraordinary establishment?"

"Under my own roof here in Welbeck Street."

"A few hundred yards from where we stand, yet this is the first I hear of it!"

"I can see that. It's not my fault, sir. I have done my best to bring it before your notice."

"How?"

"By writing many times to tell you all about myself and the home, Mr. Vinson."

"Then I never saw the letters. A Home Secretary stands to be shot at by every crank who can hold a pen. I employ more than one young gentleman expressly to divert that sort of fire. You should have got an introduction to me, Doctor Dollar."

The doctor had smiled at an expression that he could not but take to himself. His smile sweetened under the kindlier tone which succeeded that one unmeasured word.

"I am not sorry I waited for the introduction which time has given me, Mr. Vinson."

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"You wanted me to assist the good work, I take it?"

"By your countenance and influence—if you could."

"I must see something of it first. I must inspect this home of yours, Doctor Dollar."

The steel eyes of the Vinsons could seldom have cut deeper at a glance, or been met by a pair more candid and unafraid. And yet there was just that cruel suspicion of a cast, to prejudice both the candor and the courage of the finer face.

"It is open to your inspection day or night," said Doctor Dollar.

"Even at this hour? Even to-night?"

The Home Secretary sounded as keen as he looked; but on the other side there was now just enough hesitation to correspond with that one slight flaw in the finer eyes.

"This minute, by all means," said the doctor, with resolute cordiality. "There's always somebody up, and the patients can be seen without being disturbed."

"Then," said the Home Secretary, "it's a chance at a time when every moment of the day is full.

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Let us strike, doctor, while the iron is as hot as I can assure you that you have made it."

II

That deplorable passion for adventure, which had turned the hope of the last Opposition into a guerrilla warrior in South Africa, but which the Home Secretary of England might have subdued before accepting his portfolio, was by no means a dead volcano as Topham Vinson sallied forth with his extraordinary companion. It was to be noticed that he took with him a thick stick instead of an umbrella, though the deserted streets had become moist with a midnight drizzle. What he expected can only be surmised. But the odds are that it did not include the shriek of a police-whistle in the sedate region of Wigmore Street, and the instantaneous bolting of Doctor Dollar round the first corner to the left!

Now, the Secretary of State was one of those men who keep up their games out of a cold-blooded regard for the figure; he considered himself as fit at forty as any man in England, and he gave chase

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with his usual confidence. But the long-legged doctor would have left him behind with the lamp-posts, but for the fact that he was really tearing toward the sound, not flying from it as his pursuer was so ready to suppose. In a matter of seconds they had both fetched up at a brilliantly lighted house, where a more than usually obese policeman was alternately pounding on the door and splitting the sober welkin with his whistle.

"Stop that infernal row!" cried Doctor Dollar, with incensed authority. "Out of the way with you—this is my house!"

And the Home Secretary arrived on the scene of an imminent assault on his police, just in time to divert the outraged officer's attention by asking what had happened, while the doctor found his key.

"Lord only knows!" said the policeman, kicking some broken glass on one side. "Murder, it sounds like; there's somebody been loosing off——"

And even as he spoke somebody loosed off again! The terrific report was followed by screams within and a fresh shower of glass from the fanlight. But by this time Doctor Dollar had his latch-key in the

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lock. If the door had opened outward, a tangled trio would have fallen into the street; as it was, it hardly would open for the man in white who was struggling with a woman (in red flannel) and a boy (in next to nothing) on the mat.

Dollar exclaimed "Barton!" in blank amazement. But it was not the unlucky Barton who had run amuck. "They won't let me at him! They'll get the lot of us shot dead!" he spluttered, with ungrateful objurgations; and then the newcomers grasped the situation. On the stairs, at the end of the narrow passage, they beheld an enormous revolver, against a background of pink sleeping-suit, with a ferocious eye looking down the barrel.

The crime doctor slipped in front of the Hogarthian group, and stood between everybody and the armed man—shaking his head with an expression that nobody else could see.

"Ozzie, I'm surprised at you!" they heard him say with severity. "I thought you were a better sportsman than to go playing the fool the one night I'm out. If you want to frighten people, do it where you don't damage their property; if you mean mur-

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der, I'm your mark, my lad! Aim at my waistcoat buttons and perhaps you'll get me in the mouth; that's better; now blaze away!"

But the pink-striped miscreant was not lowering his barrel to improve his aim. He lowered it altogether. And his other wild eye was open now, and both were blinking with unlovely woe.

"I—I didn't mean any harm," he faltered. "It was only a rag—and I'll pay for the door."

"It'll be a great rag, won't it, if you fire bang into your own foot? Better give me that thing before you do." Dollar held out the steadiest of hands. "No, t'other way round if you don't mind; 'tisn't manners to pass knives and forks business-end first. Ta! Now make yourself scarce before Barton goes for you by kind permission of his family."

The young man in pink stood wildly staring, then fled up-stairs with a smothered sob.

"After him, Barton, before he does something silly," said the doctor under his breath. "My dear Mrs. Barton, you shall tell me the whole thing from A to Z in the morning; go down to bed like a good soul, and be satisfied that you prevented bloodshed. Bobby, take one of the decanters from the tantalus and give your mother a good night-

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cap." He turned round as the unpresentable pair made off. The street-door was shut; the Home Secretary had sole possession of the mat. "Why, Mr. Vinson, what's happened to the myrmidon?"

"I thought you would like me to get rid of him," said Topham Vinson dryly. "He's waiting outside to explain matters to the reinforcements—as a joke."

"Rather an unconvincing joke!" said the doctor, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I'm glad you admit it, Doctor Dollar. Am I to understand that the whole thing was a practical joke, carefully rehearsed for my benefit?"

The doctor opened his shining eyes.

"Does it look like one? Hark back a little, Mr. Vinson!"

"There's no need. I didn't think of it till you put the word into my mouth. But it's well, rather a coincidence, doctor, coming on top of the one about my watch—and you of all men catching the thief!"

"Yet this is the sort of thing that's always liable to happen when one's back is turned, and always will be until——"

"Yes?" said the Home Secretary, as Dollar paused and looked at him.

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"Until you make it at least as difficult to buy revolvers and ammunition, Mr. Vinson, as a dose of prussic acid! Here's a young man, unsteady, and an epileptic, who has just been placed under my care. I don't run a private asylum, nor is he ripe for one. I must give him his head a little, and this happens in a minute! If it should lead to fresh revolver regulations—but I mustn't forget myself in my excitement. If you would come in here and smoke a cigarette, I shall have to make a round directly to see how things are quieting down, and should be only too glad to take you with me."

The round was made after further conversation in a dining-room as Spartan as the rest of the crime doctor's characteristic abode. An instructed taste in aged but uncomfortable oak gave it the chill severity of a refectory; and the suggestion was strengthened by a glance into the minute consulting-room next door, which struck the visitor, perhaps in the light of one of Dollar's own similitudes, as a sort of monkish cell and confessional in one. The carven table, rugged yet elaborate, pale with age, might once have been an altar; the chair behind it was certainly an ecclesiastical chair. The cum-

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brous pieces were yet the fruit of a fastidious eye, and apparently its only fruit. Everything else throughout the house was ultra-sanitary, refreshingly utilitarian, twentieth century. No shred nor thread made for dust on the linoleum, no picture harbored it on the glazed paper. Walls and floors were of the same uncompromising type up-stairs and down. Yet, when a peep was taken through one of the numbered doors above, hothouse flowers bloomed in glass bowls on glass tables, and the bedroom ware was glass again. The very books were bound in glassy vellum; there was a pile of them beside the bed, in which a very young man, swathed in bandages, lay reading under the green glass shade of an electric lamp.

The doctor expressed his sorrow for the occurrence down-stairs; the patient, scarcely looking up, said that since he could not have moved to save his life, he had gone on reading all the time; and they left him at it, obviously glad to be rid of them.

"That," whispered the doctor on the landing, "is a young fellow who will one day be—well, never mind! Until he came to me he had never of his

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own free will read anything but a bad novel or a newspaper; he is now deep in the immortal work of another weak young man who was swayed by strength, and is himself for the time being under Doctor Johnson's salutary thumb."

"What was his weakness?"

"Pyromania."

"What?"

"A passion for setting places on fire. He started it as quite a small boy; they licked it out of him then. All his boyhood he went in fear of the rod, and it kept him straight. Only the other day he goes up to Oxford, and promptly sets fire to his rooms."

"Some form of atavism, I presume?"

"A very subtle case, if I were free to give you its whole history."

"I should be even more interested in your treatment."

"Well, I needn't tell you that he's bandaged up for burns; but you might not guess that he has come by this lot since I've had him, if not almost at my hands."

"Nonsense, man!"

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"At any rate I'm responsible for what happened, and it's going to cure him. It was a case of undisciplined imagination acting on a bonnet with just one bee in it.' He had never realized what a hell let loose a fire really was; now he *knows* through his own skin."

The statesman's eyebrows were like the backs of two mutually displeased cats.

"But surely that's an old wives' trick pushed beyond all bounds?"

"Pushed further than I intended, Mr. Vinson, I must confess. I only meant him to see a serious fire. So I arranged with the brigade to ring me up when there was a really bad one, and with my man to take the boy out at night for all his walks. There was another good reason for that; and altogether nothing can have seemed more natural than the way they both appeared on the scene of this ghastly riding-school affair."

"I know what's coming!" cried the Home Secretary. "This is the fellow who dashed in to help save the horses, and got away afterward without giving his name!"

"That's it. He says he'll hear those horses till

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his dying hour! He was in the thick of it before Barton or anybody else could stop him—they only succeeded in stopping poor Barton from following. Well, I can take no credit for the very last thing I should have dreamt of allowing; but I fancy the odds are fairly long that the tempting element will never, never again tempt our young friend upstairs!"

They had drifted down again during this recital; and he who had led the way stood staring at the crime doctor, in his monkish cell, with that intent inscrutability which was one of Topham Vinson's most effective masks; but now it was a mask imperfectly adjusted, with the warm light of admiration breaking through, and the shadow of something else interfering with that light. When Doctor Dollar had marched upon the loaded revolver, talking down the barrel as to an infant pointing a popgun—daring another daredevil to shoot him dead—the same admiring look had come over the face behind him, qualified in precisely the same fashion. But then the doctor had not seen it, and now it made him wince a little, as though he dreaded something that was bound to come.

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This was what came:

"Doctor Dollar, I should prefer not to ask you to show me or tell me any more. I know a good man when I see one, and I know good work when I catch him at it. Perhaps that was necessary in the case of such extraordinary work as yours; yet you say it was a sheer coincidence that I caught you at it to-night—or rather that such tough work was waiting for you when we got here?"

"Do you still doubt it? Why, you yourself insisted on coming round to see the place in the middle of this blessed night!"

"Exactly. That establishes your second coincidence; but with all respect, doctor, I don't believe in two of the same sort on the same night to the same two people!"

"What was the other coincidence?" demanded the doctor, huskily.

"Your catching *any* old pickpocket with my watch—and letting him off! Come, doctor, do one more thing for me, and I'll do all in my power for you and your great work. That is, of course, if you still want me to take the interest I certainly should have taken if I had seen your letters."

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"If I" cried the young man from the fulness of his heart. "Your interest is the one thing I do want of you, and you are the one person I want to interest!"

His eyes shone like big brown lamps, straight enough now in their intensity, and dim with the glory of their vision. He could tremble, too, it seemed, where the stake was not dear life, but a life's dearer work. And Topham Vinson was almost moved himself; he really was absorbed and thrilled; but not to the detriment of his penetrative astuteness, his political instinct for a bargain.

"Come, then," said he: "show me the fellow who sneaked my watch."

"Show him to you? What do you mean?"

The doctor had not started. But the injured eye showed its injury once more.

"It was one of your patients who picked my pocket," said the Home Secretary, with as much confidence as though he had known it all the time. "Would you have been in such a hurry to wash your hands of anybody else, and to undo what he'd done?"

Dollar made no answer, no denial; but he glanced

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at a venerable one-handed clock, whose unprotected pendulum shaved the wall with noisy sweeps. It was two o'clock in the morning, but already night must have been turned into dreadful and disturbing day for all the inmates. The doctor abandoned that excuse unmade, and faced his visitor in desperation.

"So you want to see him—now?"

"I do. I have my reasons. But it shall end at that—if I do see him. *That* won't nip my good-will in the bud!" It was obvious what would.

"You shall see him," said the doctor, as though racking his mind once more. "But there are difficulties you perhaps can't quite appreciate. It means giving away a patient—don't you see?"

"Perfectly. It seems to me a very proper punishment, since it's all he'll get. Yet you don't want to lose your hold. Couldn't you send him down here on some pretext, instead of taking me up to him?"

The crime doctor's face lit up as if by electricity. "I can and I will!" he cried. "Wait here, Mr. Vinson. He's another reader; he shall come down for a book!"

The great man waited with the satisfaction of a

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slightly overbearing personality for once very nearly overborne. He was now intensely interested in the crime doctor and his unique establishment. It was an interest that he had no intention of sharing with his closest colleague, until he had gone deeper into a theory and practise that were already a revelation to him. They might both prove unworkable on any large scale, and yet they might light the way to sensational legislation of the very type that Topham Vinson was the very man to introduce. Boundless ambition was one of the forces of a nature that responded to the call of any sufficiently dazzling crusade; but the passion for adventure ran ambition hard; and a crusade calculated to gratify both appetites was dazzling even to eyes of triple steel!

Only, he must show this new ally his power before they struck up their alliance; that was the great reason for insisting on seeing the pickpocket. But there was a little reason besides. An excellent memory had supplied Mr. Vinson with a kind of post-impression of the pickpocket. And within one minute of the doctor's departure, and one second

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of the patient's prompt appearance, a certain small suspicion had been confirmed.

"I think we've met before, my man?" he had begun. His man started stagily—was altogether of the stage—a bearded scarecrow in rags too ragged to be true. Vinson found the switches and made more light. "Not half a bad disguise," he continued, "whoever you may be! I suppose they're supplied on the premises for distinguished patients?"

"How do you know it's a disguise?" croaked the hairy man, with downcast eyes.

"Well, you don't look a distinguished patient, do you?" said the Home Secretary airily. "On the other hand, your kit doesn't convince me at all; looks to me as if it would fall to pieces but for what the ladies call a foundation—eh?"

And he swooped down on the ragged tails as their owner turned a humiliated back. And the "foundation" was a perfectly good overcoat turned inside out; moreover, it was a coat that Topham Vinson seemed to know; it was a coat that he suddenly remembered, as he shot up to his full height and then stood deadly still.

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The pickpocket had not turned round. But his wig and beard lay at his elbow on the mantelpiece; his diminished head had sunk into his hands; and the electric light blazed upon a medallion of silver hair, up above one burning ear.

"Doctor—Dollar!" exclaimed Topham Vinson. And the ingenuous ring of his own startled voice only added to his sense of outrage.

"Yes! I was the man. . . . It was only to get at you—you know that!"

It was a hoarse voice muttering to the wall, in a dire discomfiture that had its effect on the insulted Minister.

"So that was your weakness!" The plain comment was icier than any sneer. "Picking and stealing—and your hand still keeps its cunning!"

"Yes. That was how my wound had taken me." There was less shame in the hoarse voice, thanks to the bracing coldness of the other. "It started in the field hospital—orderlies laughed and encouraged me—nurses at Netley just as bad! Everybody treated it as a joke; the doctor used to ask for his watch or his handkerchief after every visit; and the great score was when he thought I had one, and it

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was really the other—or both—or the keys out of his trousers pocket! It amused the ward and made me popular—made me almost suicidal—because I alone knew that I couldn't help doing it to save my life. . . . And the rest *you* know."

"I do, indeed!"

"This beastly kit, I had it made on purpose so that I could run after you one minute with what I'd taken from you the minute before! It was a last attempt to gain your ear—to get you interested. And now——"

"And now," said Topham Vinson, with a kind hand on the bent shoulders, yet a keen eye on the bent head—"and now I suppose you think you've put the lid on it? So you have, my dear doctor—on any sneaking doubts I had about you! You've struck a job after my own heart, and you've led me into it as I never was led into anything in my life before. Well, you've just got to keep me in it now; and I'm conceited enough to believe I shall be worth my place. Don't you think you might turn round, Doctor Dollar, and let us shake hands on that?"

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II

THE Lady Vera Moyle had made herself notorious in a cause that scored some points through her allegiance. She it was who cajoled the Home Secretary outside Palace Yard, and sent him about his weighty business with the colors of a hated Union pinned to his unconscious back. It is true that some of her excesses had less to redeem them, but all were committed with a pious zest which recalled the saying that the Moyles were a race of Irish rebels who had intermarried with the saints. It was reserved for Lady Vera to combine the truculence of her forefathers with the serene solemnity of their wives, and to enact her devilments, as she took their consequences, with a buxom austerity all her own.

But she was not at her best when she went to see Doctor Dollar on Christmas Eve; for it was just

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two months after the autumn raid, which had caused the retirement of Lady Vera Moyle, and some of her political friends, for precisely that period. Otherwise, the autumn raid had been a triumph for the raiders, thanks to a fog of providential density, which had fought on their side as the stars in their courses fought against Sisera for the earliest militant. Never had private property been destroyed on so generous a scale, with fewer casualties on the side of the destroying angels; and yet there had been one unnecessary blot on the proceedings, which they were the first to repudiate and condemn.

A vile male member of the common criminal classes had not only taken occasion to loot a jeweler's window, broken by some innocent lady, but had coolly murdered a policeman who interfered with him in the perpetration of his selfish crime. Fortunately the wretch had been traced through the stolen trinkets, expeditiously committed and condemned, and was on the point of paying the supreme penalty. No sane person could doubt his guilt, and yet there were those who sought to fix a certain responsibility on the women! The charge of moral complicity had disgraced and stultified both Press

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and platform, and the Home Secretary, pestered for a reprieve, had only sealed the murderer's fate at the eleventh hour. Even the steel nerves of the Vinsons had suffered under a complex strain: it was just as well that he was on the point of departure for the holidays.

A deplorable circumstance was the way the Minister's last hours in town had been embittered by his implacable tormentor, Lady Vera Moyle. That ingrate had celebrated her release by trying to invade the Home Office, and by actually waylaying the Secretary of State in Whitehall. An unobtrusive body-guard had nipped the annoyance in the bud; but it had caused Topham Vinson to require champagne at his club, whither he was proceeding on the arm of his last ally and most secret adviser, Doctor John Dollar of Welbeck Street. And before dark the doctor had been invaded in his turn.

"You must blame the Home Secretary for this intrusion," began Lady Vera, with all the precision of a practised speaker who knew what she had to say. "He refused, as you heard, to listen to what

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I had to say to him this morning; but the detective-in-waiting informed me that you were not only a friend of Mr. Vinson's, but yourself a medical expert in criminology. I have therefore a double reason for coming to you, Doctor Dollar, though it would not have been necessary if Mr. Topham Vinson had treated me with ordinary courtesy."

"I am very glad you have done so, Lady Vera," rejoined the doctor in his most conciliatory manner. "Mr. Vinson, to be frank with you, is not in a fit state for the kind of scene he was afraid you were going to make. He is in a highly nervous condition for a man of his robust temperament. Truth, Lady Vera, compels me to add that you and your friends have had something to do with this, but the immediate cause is a far more unhappy case which he has just settled."

"*Has* he settled it?" cried Lady Vera, turning paler than before between her winter sables and a less seasonable hat.

"This morning," said Dollar, with a very solemn air.

"He isn't going to hang that poor man?"

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No breath came between the opened lips that prison had bleached and parched, but neither did they tremble as the doctor bowed.

"If you mean Alfred Croucher," said he, "convicted of the murder of Sergeant Simpkins during the last suffragist disturbance, I can only say there would be an end of capital punishment if he had been reprieved."

"Doctor Dollar," returned Lady Vera, under great control, "it was about this case, and nothing else, that I wanted to speak to the Home Secretary. I never heard of it until this morning, for I have been out of the way of newspapers, as you may know; and it is difficult to take in a whole trial at one hurried reading. Do you mind telling me why everybody is so sure that this man is the murderer? Did anybody see him do it?"

The crime doctor smiled as he shook his head.

"Very few murders are actually witnessed, Lady Vera; yet this would have been one of the few, but for the fog. Croucher was plainly seen through the jeweler's window, helping himself one moment, then struggling with the unfortunate sergeant."

"Was the struggle seen as plainly as the robbery?"

"Not quite, perhaps, but the evidence was equally

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convincing about both. Then the stolen goods were found, some of them, still in Croucher's possession; and the way he tried to account for that, in the witness-box, was only less suicidal than his fatal attempt at an alibi."

"Poor fool!" exclaimed Lady Vera, with perhaps less pity than impatience. "Of course he was there —I saw him!"

Dollar was not altogether unprepared for this.

"You were there yourself, then, Lady Vera?"

"I should think I was!"

"It—it wasn't you who broke the window for him?"

"Of course it was! Yet nobody tried to find me as a witness! It is only by pure chance that I come out in time to save an innocent man's life, for innocent he is of everything but theft. *I* know—too well!"

Her voice was no longer under inhuman control; and there was something in its passionate pitch that sent a cold thrill of conviction down Dollar's spine. He gazed in horror at the unhappy girl, in her luxurious sables, drawn up to her last inch in the pitiless glare of his electric light; and even as he gazed—and guessed—all horror melted into the most pro-

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found emotion he had ever felt. It was she who first found her voice, and now it was calmer than it had been as yet.

"One thing more about the trial," she said. "What was the weapon he is supposed to have used?"

"His knife."

"Yet it seems to have been a small wound?"

"It had a small blade."

"But was there any blood on it?"

She had to press him for these details; any squeamishness was on his side, and he a doctor!

"There was," he said. "Croucher had an explanation, but it wasn't convincing."

"The truth often isn't," said Lady Vera, bitterly. "You may be surprised to hear that the blow wasn't struck with a knife at all. It was struck with—this!"

Her right hand flew from her glossy muff; in it was no flashing steel, but a short, black, round-knobbed life-preserver, that she handed over without more words.

"But his skull wasn't smashed!" exclaimed John Dollar, and for an instant he looked at his visitor with the eye of the alienist. "It was a puncture

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of the carotid artery, and you couldn't do that with this if you tried."

"Hit the floor with it," said Lady Vera, "but don't hold it quite by the end."

Dollar bent down and did as directed; at the blow, a poniard flew out of the opposite end to the round knob; the point caught in his sleeve.

"That's how it was done," continued Lady Vera. "And I am the person it was done by, Doctor Dollar!"

"It was—an accident?" he said, hoarsely. He could look at her as though the accident had not been fatal; he had less command of his voice.

"I call it one; the law may not," said she resignedly. "Yet I didn't even know that I possessed such a weapon as this; it was sold to me as a life-preserver, and nothing else, out of a pawnbroker's window, where I happened to see it on the very morning of the raid. I thought it would be just the thing for smashing other windows, especially with that thong to go round one's wrist. I thought, too—I don't mind telling you—that, if I were roughly handled, it was a thing I could use in self-defense as I couldn't very well use a hammer."

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And here she showed no more shame than a soldier need feel about his bayonet after battle; and Dollar met her eyes on better terms. He had been making mechanical experiments with the life-preserver. Some spring was broken. That was why it became a dagger at every blow, instead of only when you gave it a jerk.

"And you were roughly handled by Sergeant Simpkins?" he suggested eagerly.

"Very," she said, with a certain reluctance. "But I expect the poor fellow was as excited as I was when I tried to beat him off."

"I suppose you hardly knew what you were doing, Lady Vera?"

"Not only that, Doctor Dollar, but I didn't know what I had done."

"Thank God for that!"

"But did you imagine it for a moment? That's the whole point and explanation of everything that has happened. The worst was over in a few seconds, in the thick of that awful fog, but, of course I never dreamt what I had done. I did think that I had knocked him out. But that was all that ever entered my head until this very morning."

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"Were you close to your broken window at the time?"

"Very close, and yet out of sight in the fog."

"And you had seen nothing of this man Croucher, and his hand in the affair?"

"Not after I'd done my part. I did just before. I'm certain it was the same huge man that they describe. But I heard the whole thing while we were struggling. They were blowing a police-whistle and calling out 'Thieves!' I remember hoping that the policeman would hear them, and let me go. But I suppose his blood was up, as well as mine."

"And after you had—freed yourself?" said the doctor, trying not to set his teeth.

"I ran off, of course! I knew that I had done much more than I ever intended; but that's all I knew, or suspected, even when I found this horrid thing open in my hand. I tried to shut it again, but couldn't. So I hid it in my dress, and ran up Dover Street to my club, where I put it straight into a bag that I had there. Then I made myself decent and—turned out again with a proper hammer."

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The doctor groaned; he could not help it. Yet it was his first audible expression of disapproval; he had restrained himself while all the worst was being told; and the girl's face acknowledged his consideration. Her color had come at last. Thus far, in recounting her intentional misdeeds, as though they were all in the great day's work, she had shown a divine indifference to his opinion of her or her proceedings. There had been nothing aggressive about it—he merely doubted whether the question of his views had ever entered her mind. But now he could see that it did; he had shown her something that she did not want to lose, and her fine candor hid that fact as little as any other.

"I didn't know what I'd done, remember!" she said with sharp solicitude. "I never did know until this morning, when I heard of the case for the first time, and for the first time saw the stains on the dagger—at which you've been trying so hard not to look! Do look at them, Doctor Dollar. Of course, there can be no doubt what they are, but I shall be only too glad for you to prove it to everybody's satisfaction."

"'Only too glad,' Lady Vera?"

They gazed at each other for several seconds.

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Her face was tragic to him now; but emotion, apparently, was the one thing she would condescend to hide. But for her eyes, she might have been incredibly callous and cold-blooded; her blue Irish eyes were great and glassy with a grief not soluble in tears.

"Doctor Dollar," she said, tensely, "nothing can undo this hideous thing, though I hope to live long enough to make such poor amends as a human being can. But in this other direction they must be made at once. It's no use thinking of what can't be undone till we *have* undone what we can—if we are quick! That's why I tried to go straight to the Home Secretary, and why I have come straight to you. Take me to him, Doctor Dollar, and help me to convince him that what I have told you is the whole truth and nothing else! If you think it will make it easier, satisfy yourself about those blood-stains. Then we can take the dagger with us."

The doctor applied a crude test on the spot. He stooped over the fire, heated the stained steel between the bars, cooled it at the open window, picked off a scale and examined it briefly under a microscope. All this was done with tremendous energy tempered by extreme precision and nicety. And

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Lady Vera followed the operation with an impersonal interest that could not but include the operator, so intent upon his task, so obviously thankful to have a task of any sort in hand. But when he rose from his microscope it was with a shrug of the shoulders, an almost angry shake of the head.

"Of course, this is all no good, you know!" he cried, as if it were her test. "It would take hours to make the analysis that's really wanted."

"But as far as you have gone, Doctor Dollar?"

"As far as I have gone—which isn't a legal or medical inch—it certainly does look like blood, Lady Vera."

"Of course it is blood. There's another thing that will help us, too."

"What's that?"

"One of the best points in the defense, so far as I've had time to make out, was about the prisoner's knife. Now, if we take this with us, either to the Home Secretary, or, if he still refuses to see me, to New Scotland Yard——"

"Lady Vera!" the doctor interrupted, aghast at her suicidal zeal. "Is it possible that you realize

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the position you are in? It isn't only a situation that you've got to face; that you have already done, superbly! But have you any conception of the consequences?"

"I think I have," said Lady Vera, smiling. "I don't believe they will hang me; it would be affectation to pretend I did. But, of course, that's their business—mine is to change places with an innocent man."

"That you will never do," replied the doctor warmly. "There's no innocent man in the case; this Croucher is a thief and a perjurer, besides being an old convict who has spent half his life in prison! He would have had five years for the other night's work, without any question of a murder; they'll simply pack him off to Dartmoor or Portland when we've saved his miserable neck. And save it we will, no fear about that; but at what a price—at what a price!"

"I don't see that you need trouble about it," said Lady Vera, concerned at his distress, "beyond putting me in touch with Mr. Vinson. The rest will be up to him, as they say; and, after all, it

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won't be anything so very terrible to me. I am an old prisoner myself, you must remember!"

There was a gleam of her notorious audacity with all this; but it was like the glow of flowers on a grave. The horror of things to happen had never possessed her valiant eyes, and yet it must have been there, for all at once Dollar missed it. He read her look. He had relieved her mind about the man in the cell, only to open it at last to the man in his grave. Grief crippled her as horror had not; prisons could be broken, but not the prison to which her hand had sent a fellow creature. Yet her grief was mastered in its turn, forced out of sight before his eyes, even while her flippant speech rang through him as the bravest utterance he had ever heard.

It blew a bugle in the man's brain, and the call was clear and definite. He knew his own mind only less instantaneously than he had penetrated hers. Never in all his days had he known his mind quite so well as when she thought better of the very words which had enlightened him, and went on to add to them in another key:

"So now, Doctor Dollar, will you crown all

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your great kindness by taking me to see the Home Secretary at once?"

"Lady Vera," he exclaimed, with unreasonable irritation, "what is the good of asking impossibilities? I couldn't take you to Topham Vinson even if I would. He would begin by doubting your sanity; there would be all manner of silly difficulties. Moreover, he's not in town."

She showed displeasure at the statement of fact only.

"Doctor Dollar, are you serious?"

"Perfectly."

"Have you forgot that I saw you together at almost two o'clock?"

"I think not quite so late as that. The Home Secretary left Euston at 2:45."

"Where for?"

She looked panic-stricken.

"I'll tell you, Lady Vera, if you promise not to follow him by the next train."

"When does it go?"

"Not for some time. There's only one more; we debated which he should take. But you mustn't take the other, Lady Vera; you must leave that to

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me. I want you to leave the whole thing to me—from this very moment till you hear from me again."

"When would that be, Doctor Dollar?"

"As soon as I have seen Mr. Vinson."

"You would undertake to tell him everything?"

"Every detail, exactly as you have told me."

"Will it seem credible at second-hand?"

"Quite enough so to justify a respite. That's the first object; and this is the first step to it, believe me! There's plenty of time between this and—Tuesday."

"Oh! I know that," she returned, bluntly disdainful of a well-meant hesitation. "There's still not a moment to lose while that poor man lies facing death."

"I'm not sure that he does, Lady Vera. The decision's only just been made; it won't be out till the day after to-morrow. I don't believe they would break it to Croucher on Christmas Day."

"They can break the good news instead. Where is Mr. Vinson? It's all right, I won't attempt to tackle him till you have. That's a promise—and I don't break them like windows!"

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John Dollar ignored that boast with difficulty. He saw through her tragic levity as through a glass, and his heart cried out with a sympathy hard indeed to keep to himself; but it was obviously the last thing required of him by Lady Vera Moyle. He gave her the required information in a voice only less well managed than her own. And he thought her eyes softened with the faintest recognition of his restraint.

"I thought the Duke had washed his hands of his notorious nephew," she remarked. "Well, we shall have to spoil the family gathering, I'm afraid."

"That's my job, Lady Vera."

"And I never thanked you for taking it on! Nor will I, Doctor Dollar; thanks don't meet a case like this!" Very frankly she took his hand instead: it was hotter and less steady than her own. "And now what about your train?"

"I'm afraid there's not one till seven o'clock. Vinson talked of going down by it at first."

The time-table confirmed his fear; he threw it down, and plunged into the telephone directory instead. Lady Vera watched him narrowly. He had dropped into his old oak chair, and the sheen of

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age on the table betrayed his face as though it were bent over clear brown water. She could see its anxiety as he had not allowed her to see it yet.

"I suppose you wouldn't care to face it in a motor?"

She was faltering for the first time.

"That's exactly what I mean to do," he answered, without looking up from the directory. "I'm just going to telephone for a car."

"Then you needn't!" she cried joyfully. "We have at least two eating their bonnets off in our mews. I'll go home in a taxi, and send one of them straight round with a driver who knows the way, and a coat that you must promise to wear, Doctor Dollar. All my people are away except my mother, and she won't know; she isn't strong enough to use the cars. But I mustn't speak of poor mother, or I shall make a fool of myself yet. It's partly my fault as it is, you see, and of course all this will make her worse. But I'm not so sure of that, either! My mother is the kind of person who has all the modern ailments and no modern ideas—but she could show us all how to play the game at a pinch. She will be the first to back me up in the only conceivable course."

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This speech had not come quite so fluently as might be supposed, though Dollar had only interrupted it to send for a taxicab. It had interrupted itself when Lady Vera Moyle was betrayed into speaking of poor Lady Armagh, whose heartfelt disapproval of her daughter's escapades was public property. Dollar had heard from Topham Vinson—that very day at lunch—that the last one had made her seriously ill; then what indeed of impending resolutions, and the nine days' tragic scandal which was the very least that could come of them unless——

"Unless!"

In the doctor's mind so many broken sentences began with that will-o'-the-wisp among words, that others really spoken fell upon stony ears, and he knew as little what he said in reply. In a dream he saw a small hand wave as the taxicab vanished round the corner to the right; in a dream he sprang upstairs, hiding under his coat the weapon with which that little hand had dealt out death; and awoke in his wintriest clothes, his greatest coat, to find himself called upon to top the lot with another of unkempt fur sent with the car.

That aluminium clipper—a fifteen-horse-power

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Invincible Talboys—was indeed at the door in incredibly quick time. Twin headlights lit long wedges of London mud; two pairs of goblin goggles mounted up behind them—one sent with the coat and a message that was more than law. The dapper chauffeur huddled down behind the wheel; the passenger sat bolt upright at his side; the Barton family, his faithful creatures, carried out an impromptu tableau in the background. Mother and son—those unpresentable features of a former occasion—now appeared as immaculate cook and page at the top of the area steps and on the lighted threshold respectively. Barton himself leaned out of an upper window, still in his white suit—it was the typically muggy Christmas of a degenerate young century—but with all the black cares of the strange establishment quite apparent on his snowy shoulders. The dapper driver gave his horn a spiteful pinch. And then they were off, only to be held up in Oxford Street by the Christmas traffic, but doing better in the Edgware Road, and soon on the way to Edgware itself, and Elstree and St. Albans, and all the lighted towns and pitch-dark roads that lie by night between the capital of England and her smallest county.

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"Least trem-lines this wye," said the dapper one. a mile or two out; and said no more for another fifty. But he drove like a little genius, and the car responded to his cunning hands as a horse that knows its master. She proved to be a sound roadster whose only drawback was a lack of racing speed; the lad had her in prime condition, and the good road ran from under her like silk from a silent loom.

Dollar sat beside him, in the shelter of a wind-screen that glazed and framed a continuous study in nocturnal values. Now the fine shades would be broken by a cluster of lights, soon to scatter and go out like sparks from a pipe; now only by the acetylene lamps that kept the foreground in a blaze between villages. Often a ghostly portent appeared hovering over the road ahead; but this was only the doctor's own anxious face, seen dimly in the screen.

And yet he was not really anxious for those first fifty miles. At the start he was too thankful to be under way, and the road was never empty of exciting and diverting possibilities. But at Bedford they stopped for supper: it was Dollar's sudden idea, the hour being now between eight and nine; but the treasure at the wheel professed his readiness to push on, and it would have been better for Dollar

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to have taken him at his word. The break in the run also broke up the dreamy lull induced by the keen air and the low smooth hum of the car. In the warm hotel, all holly and Christmas cheer, he came back to real life with a thud, and its most immediate problem beset him all the rest of the way.

Hitherto his one anxiety had been to get at the Home Secretary that night; henceforth he was having the interview over and over again, with a different result every time. He knew, indeed, what he meant to say himself; he had known that before he said good-by to Lady Vera Moyle. But what would the Home Secretary say? Was it conceivable that the blood-stained life-preserver would be enough for him? It would be supported by the sworn statement of a man whom he had learned to trust. But was such utterly indirect evidence in the least likely to upset a decision already taken, if not already communicated to the man in the condemned cell?

The very thought of that hapless wretch was fraught with definite and vivid horror. The crime doctor had once seen the inside of a condemned cell; he could see it still. The door was open, the pitiful occupant at exercise in an adjacent yard. He had

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looked in. The cell was not so gloomy as it should have been. Texts on the walls, sunlight through the bars, and on the fixed flap of clean worn wood, a big open book.

Dollar recalled every detail with morbid fidelity. He had gone in to look at the book, and found it a bound volume of *Good Words*, open at a laudable serial by a lady then in vogue with the virtuous. Yet that particular reader had cut a woman's throat over a quarrel about a shilling, and Dollar had seen him striding jauntily up and down the narrow yard, cracking some joke with the attendant warders, a smile on his scrubby lips and in his bold blue eyes. He could see the fellow as he had seen him for ten seconds years ago. Yet his pity for one in the same awful case, for a crime he had not committed, was as nothing to his infinite sorrow and compassion for her who had committed it unawares, comparatively light as the punishment for such a deed was bound to be.

But was it? Not for Lady Vera Moyle, at all events! Either she would go scot-free, or her punishment might well be worse than death. It might easily kill her mother; then the tragedy would be a

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double tragedy after all, and Lady Vera would still be its author. Supposing she had not discovered her own crime! Croucher would have been no loss to the community; life-long criminals like Croucher were best out of the way, murderers or no murderers. The crime doctor was convinced of that. They were the incurables; extermination was the only thing for them.

"I would shut up my penitentiaries, but enlarge my lethal chamber," he sometimes said, and would be quite serious about it. Yet not for a moment could he have carried his ideas to their logical conclusion in the concrete case of Alfred Croucher and Lady Vera Moyle. He could have let a man of that stamp go technically innocent to the gallows—or he thought he could just then. But he could not have allowed the greatest monster to suffer for Lady Vera's sins—and that he felt in his bones. It was the personal equation as supplied by her that made the thing impossible. Such a load on such a soul! Better any punishment than that!

At Kettering a right-hand turn led up-hill and down-dale into little Rutland, and Dollar ceased glaring at his own ghost in the wind-screen; a health-

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ily immediate anxiety kept him peering at his watch instead. But now they were skirting one of the longest and stumpiest stone walls in feudal England, and all of a sudden it parted in twin turrets joined by triple gates. Over the central arch heraldic monsters pawed the stars; underneath an arc lamp hung resplendent; all three gates were open, and the drive beyond was a perspective of guiding lights. It was evidently a case of Christmas festivities on a suitable scale at Stockersham Hall.

Miles up the drive, a semicircle of motor-cars fringed a country edition of the Horseguards Parade, dominated by an escaped hotel; and the car that really was from London had becoming palpitations in the zone of light. Before a comparatively simple portico a superlatively splendid menial looked askance at the doctor's borrowed furs, but was not unimpressed by a curt inquiry for Mr. Topham Vinson, and consented to inquire in his turn.

"Be quick and quiet, and give him this card," said the doctor, slipping half-a-sovereign underneath it. "I want to see Mr. Vinson—no one else—on urgent business from the Home Office."

Yet the next minute merely brought forth an im-

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