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THE MAELSTROM

BY

FRANK FROEST
AUTHOR OF "THE GRELL MYSTERY"

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CHAPTER I

HALLETT blundered into an unlit lamp-post, swore with fervour, and stood for a second peering for some identifiable landmark in the black blanket of fog that muffled the street. Where he stood, a sluggish dense drift had collected; for following the treacherous habit of London fogs, it lay in patches. About him he could hear ghostly noises of traffic muffled and as from afar, but whether the sounds came from before or behind, from right or left, was more than his bewildered senses could fathom.

For the last ten minutes he had been walking in a spectral city among spectres. A by-street had trapped him and no single wayfarer had come within his limited area of sight. He lifted his hat and rubbed his head perplexedly as he came to the conclusion that he was lost. It was as though London had set out to teach the young man from New York a lesson. The fog had him beat.

"Guess I shall fetch somewhere, sometime," he muttered and strode doggedly on.

He had gone perhaps a dozen yards when from ahead a quick burst of angry voices broke out. Then there came a running of feet on the sodden pavement. Hallett came to a stop, listening. The fog seemed to thin a trifle.

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Out of the thickness the outlines of a woman's figure loomed vaguely. She was running swiftly and easily with lithe grace. As she noted the motionless figure of a man, she swerved towards him and he caught the hurried pant of her breath—caused rather, he judged, by emotion than by exertion. She halted impetuously as she came opposite to him and he caught a glimpse of her face—the mobile face of a girl, with parted lips and arresting blue eyes. She was hatless, and though Hallett could not have described her attire, he got an impression of some soft black stuff, clinging to a slim figure. She surveyed him in a quick, appraising glance, and before he could speak had thrust something into his hand.

"Take it—run," she gasped, and tore forward into the fog.

It had all happened in a fraction of time. She had checked rather than halted in her flight. An exclamation burst from Hallett's lips, and he was almost startled into obedience of the hurried command. Then heavier footsteps thudding near brought him to himself. He moved to interrupt the pursuer. As a man came into view, Hallett's hand fell on his shoulder.

"One moment, my friend——"

An oath was spat at him as the man wrenched himself free and was blotted out in gloom. Hallett shrugged his shoulders philosophically, and made no attempt at pursuit.

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"Alarums and excursions," he murmured. "Wonder what it's all about?"

In nine and twenty years of life Jimmie Hallett had acquired something of a philosophy that made him content to accept things as they were, save only when they affected his personal well-being. Then he would sit up and kick with both feet. His lack of curiosity was almost cold-blooded. There was indeed a certain inoffensive arrogance in his attitude towards the ordinary affairs of life. He was the sort of man who would not cross the road to see a dog-fight.

Yet he always had a zest for excitement, providing it had novelty. A man who has scrambled for a dozen years in a hotch-potch of vocations retains little enthusiasm for commonplaces. When Hallett Senior had gone out from the combined effects of a Wall Street cyclone and an attack of heart failure, his son and heir had found himself with a hundred thousand dollars less than nothing. Young Hallett went to his only surviving relative—an elderly uncle with a liver—and with the confidence of youth rejected the offer of a cheap stool in that millionaire's office. He believed he could get a living as an actor—but a five weeks' tour in a fortieth-rate company, which finally stranded in the wilds of Michigan convinced him of the futility of that idea. Thereafter he drifted over a wide area of the United States. Farm-hand, railwayman, cow-puncher, prospector, and one very vivid voyage as a deck-hand

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on a cattle boat. It was inevitable that of course he should eventually drift into that last refuge of the unskilled intellectual classes—journalism. Equally of course it was inevitable that fate, who delights to take a hand at unexpected moments, should interfere when he showed signs of making a mark in his profession. His uncle died intestate and Jimmie leapt at a bound to affluence beyond his wildest dreams.

He had stayed long enough in New York after that to realise how extensive and variegated were the acquaintances who had stood by him in adversity. They took pains that he should not forget it. And forthwith he had taken counsel of Sleath, the youthful-looking city editor of *The Wire*, who breathed words of wisdom in his ear.

"Go to Europe, Jimmie. Travel and improve your mind. Let the sharks forget you."

So Jimmie Hallett stood lost in a fog, somewhere within hail of Piccadilly Circus, with an unopened package in his hand and the memory of a girl's voice in his mind. A less observant man than Hallett could not have failed to perceive that the girl was of a class unlikely to be involved in any street broil. The man flattered himself that he was not impressionable. But he retained an impression of both breeding and looks.

He dangled the package—it was small and light—on his finger, and moved forward till an electric standard gave him an opportunity of examining it more

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closely. It was closely sealed at both ends with red sealing wax, but the wrapping itself had apparently been torn from an ordinary newspaper. He hesitated for a moment and then tore it open. He could scarcely have told what he expected to find. Certainly not the thirty or forty cheques that lay in his hand. One by one he turned them slowly over, as though the inspection would afford some indication of why they had been so unexpectedly thrust upon him. A bare possibility that he had been made an unwitting accomplice in a theft was dismissed as he noticed that the cheques were dead—they all bore the cancelling mark of the bank. Why on earth should the girl have been running away with the useless cheques? And why should she have so impulsively confided them to a stranger to avoid them falling into the hands of her headlong pursuer?

Not that Hallett would have worried overmuch about these problems had the central figure been plain or commonplace. She had interested him, and his interest, once aroused in any person or thing, was always vivid.

Keen-eyed, he scrutinised the cheques, in an endeavour to decipher the signature. They were all made out by the same person, and payable to "self." The name he read as J. E. Greye-Stratton. Whoever J. E. Greye-Stratton was he had drawn within three months, in sums ranging from fifty to three hundred pounds, an amount totalling—Hallett reckoned in United States terms—more than fifteen thousand dollars.

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He stuffed the cheques into his pocket as an idea materialised in his mind. An opportune taxi pushed its nose stealthily through the wall of fog and halted at his hail.

"Think you can fetch a post-office, sonny?" he demanded.

"Get you anywhere, sir," assented the driver cheerfully.

"Find your way by the stars, I suppose," commented Hallett, the tingle of fog still in his eyes.

Nevertheless, the driver justified his boast and his fare was shortly engrossed with the letter "G" in the London directory. There was only one entry of the name he sought, and he swiftly transcribed the address to a telegraph blank.

"Greye-Stratton, James Edward, Thirty-four, Linstone Terrace Gardens, Kensington, W."

Shortly the cab was again crawling through the fog, sounding its syren like a liner in mid-channel. All that the passenger could make out was a hazy world, dotted with faint yellow specks, which now and again transformed themselves into lights as they drew near them. Later the yellow specks grew less as they swerved off the main road, and in a little while the car drew to a halt.

The driver indicated the house opposite which they were standing, with a jerk of his thumb, as Hallett descended.

"That's the place, sir."

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It was little that Hallett could see of the house, save that it was a big old-fashioned building, with heavy bow-windows, and a basement, protected by wrought-iron rails. There was no light in any part of the house, not even the hall. Twice the young man wielded the big brass knocker, arousing nothing apparently but an echo. As he raised it a third time, the door was thrown open with disconcerting suddenness, and he was aware of someone standing within the blackness of the hall. Hallett could distinguish nothing of his features.

"I wish to see Mr. Greye-Stratton," said Hallett, and tendered a card.

The other made no attempt to take it. "He won't see you," he declared with harsh abruptness, and only a sudden movement of Hallett's foot prevented the door being slammed in his face.

His teeth gritted together, and he thrust the door back and himself over the lintel. He was an easy-tempered man, but the deliberate discourtesy had roused him to a cold anger. "That will do, my man," he said, clipping off each word sharply. "I want ordinary civility, and I'm going to see that I get it. My name is Hallett—James Hallett, of New York. Now you go and tell your master that I want to see him about certain property of his that has come into my hands. Quick's the word."

There was a pause. When the man in the hall spoke

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again his tone had changed. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Hallett. It is dark—I mistook you for someone else. I am sure Mr. Greye-Stratton would have been happy to see you, but unfortunately he is ill. If you will leave whatever you have, I will see that it reaches him. By the way, I am not a servant, I am a doctor. Gore is my name."

Hallett thrust his hand in the pocket that contained the cheques. He had no intention of handing them over without some information about the girl in black. And he fancied he detected a note of anxiety in the doctor's voice, as though, while forced in a way to civility, he was anxious for the visitor to go.

"I quite understand, Dr. Gore," he said coldly, "I will call at some other time. I should like to return the property to its owner in person—for a special reason. Good-night."

"Then you will not entrust—whatever you have to me?"

"I would rather see Mr. Greye-Stratton at some future time." He half turned to go.

"One moment." The doctor laid a detaining hand upon his sleeve. "I did not wish to disturb my patient unnecessarily, but if you insist I will arrange you shall see him. Will you come with me? I am afraid it is rather dark. The electric light has gone wrong—frightfully awkward."

Hallett groped his way after his guide, his brain

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busy. It was queer that the light should have given out—queerer still that no apparent attempt had been made at illumination, either with oil or candles. The place was deadly quiet, but that was only natural with a sick man in the house. He wondered why some servant had not answered the door. A man of less hardened temperament would have felt nervous.

The doctor's footsteps falling with ghostly softness on the carpet in front of him ceased.

"Here we are, Mr. Hallett. Keep to your left. This is the room. If you will wait here a second, I will see if I can get a light. Where are you? Give me your hand."

Slim delicate fingers gripped Hallett's hand as he followed the direction. He passed through a doorway and for a moment his back was turned towards the doctor. He heard something whirl in the air and a blow descended with crushing force on his right shoulder. He wheeled with a cry, but there was no question of resistance. A second blow fell, this time better directed, and a million stars danced before his eyes. He dropped like a felled ox.

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CHAPTER II

PUNCTUALLY at half-past six, the little plated alarm clock exploded and Weir Menzies kicked off the blankets. Punctually at seven o'clock he had breakfast. Punctually at half-past seven he delved and weeded in the square patch of ground that was the envy and despair of Magersfontein Road, Upper Tooting. Punctually at twenty-past eight he left his semi-detached house and boarded a car for Westminster Bridge.

There were occasions when the routine was upset, but it will be observed that on the whole Weir Menzies was a creature of habit. He had all that respect for order and method that has made Upper Tooting what it is. From the heavy gold watch-chain that spanned his ample waist, to his rubicund face and heavy black moustache, he wore Tooting respectability all over him. It was a cause of poignant regret to him that circumstance prevented him taking any part in the local government of the borough. Nevertheless, he belonged to the local constitutional club, and was the highly esteemed people's warden at the Church of All Saints. The acute observer, knowing all this, might have judged him a deserving wholesale ironmonger.

And the acute observer would have been wrong.

Punctually at half-past nine, Weir Menzies would pass up a flight of narrow stone stairs at the back of

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New Scotland Yard into the chief inspector's room of the Criminal Investigation Department. From his button-hole he would take the choice blossom—gathered that day at Magersfontein Road, Upper Tooting—place it carefully in a freshly-filled vase, exchange his well-brushed morning coat for a jacket of alpaca, place paper protectors on his cuffs, and settle down on his high stool—he preferred a high stool—to half an hour's correspondence.

Mr. Weir Menzies, churchwarden of Upper Tooting, was in fact Chief Detective Inspector Menzies of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard. Not that he made any secret of it. There was no reason why he should. It is only on rare occasions that a detective needs to conceal his profession.

Although the residents of Magersfontein Road, Upper Tooting, knew that Mr. Weir Menzies was an admirable churchwarden, they had to take his reputation as a detective on trust. And being constant subscribers to circulating libraries, they knew him as an innocent fraud. A man something over forty, with an increasing waist-line and a ruddy face, was obviously against the rules of all the established authorities. It was only understandable because he was at Scotland Yard.

Everyone knows that official detectives are heavy, dull, unimaginative fellows, always out of their depths, and continually receiving the good-natured assistance of amateurs, by whom they are held in tolerant contempt.

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Magersfontein Road, Upper Tooting, would have smiled broadly had anyone remarked that Chief Detective Inspector Menzies held an international reputation—that he was held one of the subtlest brains in the service; that he was a man who had time and again shown reckless courage and audacity in bringing off a coup; that he, in short, had individuality and a perfect knowledge of every resource at his disposal in carrying out any purpose to which he was assigned.

He looked a commonplace business man; he was a commonplace business man with many of the traits of his class. He hated the unexpected and protested that he loathed with a fierce abomination those cases in which he was engaged that meant a departure from the ordinary routine. But yet those cases, when they arose, there was no man more capable of dealing with their baffling intricacies than he. He had a faculty of adjusting himself to an emergency, of ruthlessly discarding the superfluous that in twenty-three years had carried him to within one rung of the top of the ladder.

It was shortly before midnight. He had returned from a remote suburb where with a corps of assistants he had made an entirely successful raid upon certain pickpockets, who had been too well acquainted with the resident detectives to give them any chance. It had been a triumph of organisation and vigilance, and Menzies had gone back to headquarters to arrange that the histories of the birds he had caged should be ready before

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the police court proceedings in the morning. He was struggling into his overcoat when he was summoned to the telephone. He picked up the receiver irritably.

"Hello," he said.

A musical buzz answered him, and Menzies allowed himself an expression that should be foreign to a churchwarden. Then far away and faint he caught a voice. "That Mr. Menzies?"

"Yes," he answered impatiently. "Speak up. Who is it? What do you want?"

A prolonged buzz reached him. He was conscious of someone speaking, but only intermittently could he hear what was said.

"Pretty done up—buz-z—come at once—buz-z—at thirty-four—buzz-z—Gardens, Kensington—buzz-z."

"Number, please?" said a new and distinct voice.

"Blast," said Menzies simply, and put down the telephone. This addiction to forcible language on occasions of annoyance was a constant regret to him in his more reflective moments.

. . . . .

Jimmie Hallett's first impression on awakening had been that someone was swinging a sledge-hammer irregularly on to his temples. He lay still for a little, wondering why it should be. By and by he sat up and tried to piece together the events of the evening. His head ached intolerably, and he found consecutive thought painful.

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It was totally dark, and he could make out nothing of where he was. Then the whole thing flashed across his mind and he staggered rather uncertainly to his feet and, steadying himself against the wall, struck a match.

The feeble flicker showed him a blue papered apartment, furnished as a dining-room. He had been lying just inside the door, which he now tried. It refused to answer to his tug, and he realised how weak he was as he all but toppled backwards. The match went out and he struck another.

Then it was that he noticed an electric switch and pulled it over. A rush of light flooded the room and he tottered to one of the Jacobean armchairs at the head of the table. The sledge-hammer was still swinging at his temples and things swayed dizzily to and fro before his eyes. He made a resolute effort to pull himself together. His eyes roved over the room, and he noticed a pedestal telephone on a small table in the corner furthest from him.

"What was the name of the chap Pinkerton gave me an introduction to," he muttered, and drawing a bundle of papers from his breast pocket, sorted them till the envelope he needed lay at the top.

Chief Detective Inspector Weir Menzies,
New Scotland Yard, S. W.

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Cautiously the man began to move across the hearth-rug towards the telephone. Four shambling steps he took, then something that had been hidden by the table tripped him and he sprawled on all fours. He gave a little gasp of horror, and steadying himself on his knees, held his hands a foot in front of his face, gazing at them stupidly. They were wet—wet with blood, and the thing that had tripped him was the body of a man.

It is one thing to be brought in association at second-hand, so to speak, with a crime, as are doctors, reporters, and detectives, but quite another to be so closely identified with it as to be an actor in the drama. Hallett had seen violence, and even death in his time, but never had cold horror so thrilled him as it did now. In ordinary condition, with nerves previously unshaken, he would have been little more moved than a spectator at a play—perhaps even less so, for real life tragedies are rarely well stage managed.

Circumstances, however, had conspired to bring home to him the last touch of terror. The sudden assault, the locked room, and now the dead man, had played the mischief with his nerves. He could have shrieked aloud.

He wiped his hands on his handkerchief, but the stain still remained. Carefully he stepped over the body and made his way to the telephone. His imagination was beginning to work, and he recalled cases where per-

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fectly innocent men had been the victims of circumstantial evidence that had convicted them of hideous crimes. The story of the cheques thrust upon him in the fog seemed to him ridiculously unconvincing. Had his mind been less overwrought, had he been able to take a calmer survey of the matter, he would probably never have given his own position a thought. He fingered the telephone book clumsily and his mind reverted to the coincidence that he should hold a letter of introduction to one of the senior detectives of Scotland Yard.

"Queer that it should come in so handy," he grinned feebly, and then weakness overcame him.

He gave the number. Hours seemed to elapse before he got Menzies. In a quick rush of words he made himself known to the detective and recited the happenings of the evening. He did not know that barely a dozen disconnected words had reached him. His strength was waning and he wanted Menzies to know everything before he gave way. As he finished the receiver dropped listlessly from his hand, and for the first time in his life Jimmie Hallett fainted.

At the other end of the wire Weir Menzies was left with one of those harassing little problems that he hated. It was an irregular hour—an hour when he had reckoned on being safely on his way home. For all the insistence of the voice at the telephone, it might be quite a trivial affair. Menzies did not like losing

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sleep for trivialities. People in trouble are apt to take distorted views of the importance of their difficulties. That is why private enquiry agencies flourish.

He was impatient with ambiguous messages. He thought of his well-aired bed and sighed. But the fact that he had been appealed to by name ultimately swayed him.

In two minutes he had set in motion the machinery which would reveal the point from which the voice originated. It needed no complex reasoning, no swift flash of inspiration: merely to look up in the Kensington directory a list of thoroughfares ending in "Gardens," and the names of persons who resided at the respective thirty-fours.

"And get a move on," he said to one of his men. "I don't want to hang about all night. Ask Riddle to come up and 'phone 'em through to the local people as you check 'em off. Tell 'em they'll oblige me by sending out as many spare men as they've got to ask at each address if anyone rang me up."

He adjusted his coat with precision, lit a cigar, and sauntered over to the underground station opposite. Barring accidents, the address would be ready for him by the time he reached Kensington.

He was not disappointed. One of the advantages which the Criminal Investigation Department has over the individual amateur detective, beloved by Magersfontein Road, is the co-operation at need of a prac-

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tically unlimited number of trained men. True, the detective staff at Kensington had long since gone home, since there was no extraordinary business to detain them, but in this case a dozen ordinary constables served as well. Nine of them had returned when Menzies walked in. There was only one who interested him. He had reported that he could get no reply from Linstone Terrace Gardens.

"Did you find who lives there?" questioned the chief inspector.

The reply was prompt. "Yes, sir. Old gentleman named Greye-Stratton. He lives alone. Had two servants until last week, when he sacked 'em both because he said they had been bribed to poison him."

"Ah!" Menzies nodded approval. "You've got your wits about you, my lad. Where did you get all this from?"

The constable flushed with pleasure. He was young enough in the force to appreciate a compliment from the veteran detective. "The servant next door, sir," he answered.

"That will do. Thank you." Menzies rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he turned to the uniformed inspector by his side. "It begins to sound like a case," he muttered. All his petulance had gone. When it came to the point, the man was an enthusiast in his profession. "I'll get you to come along with me, inspector. It sounds uncommonly like a case."

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CHAPTER III

THE eminent Tooting churchwarden, perched on the stalwart shoulders of his uniformed colleague, wriggled his way on to the roof of the porch with an agility that was justifiable neither to his years nor his weight. He was taking a certain amount of risk, if there were no serious emergency within the place, for even a chief detective inspector may not break into a house without justification.

He worked for a while with a big clasp knife on the little landing window, with a skill that would have done credit to many of the professional practitioners who had passed through his hands, and at last threw up the sash and squeezed himself inside.

"Wonder if I'm making a damned fool of myself, after all?" he muttered with some misgiving as he struck a match and softly picked his way along the corridor. He was peculiarly sensitive to ridicule, and he knew the chaff that would descend on his head if it leaked out that he had elaborately picked out and broken into an empty house.

There would be no way of keeping the matter dark, for every incident of the night would have to be embodied in reports. Every detective in London keeps an official diary of his work.

He burned only one match to enable him to get his

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bearings. Noiselessly he descended the stairs into the hall, and his quick eye observed a splash of light across the floor. It came from under a doorway. He turned the handle and pushed. The door resisted.

"Locked," he murmured, and knocked thunderously. "Hello in there! Anyone about?"

Only the muffled reverberation of his own voice came back to him. Frowning, he strode to the doorway, slipped back the Yale lock, and admitted the uniformed man.

"If I had nerves, Mr. Hawksley, this place would give me the jumps," he observed. "There's something wrong here and I guess it's in that room. See, there's a light on."

"That's queer," commented the other. "It could only just have been switched on. I didn't notice it outside."

"Shutters," said Menzies. "Shutters and drawn curtains. Come on. I'm going to see what's behind that door."

There was no finesse about forcible entry this time. Half a dozen well-directed kicks shattered the hasp of the lock and sent the door flying open. Menzies and his companion moved inside.

For the moment the blaze of the electric light dazzled them. Menzies shaded his eyes with his hand. Then his glance fell from the overturned telephone down to the prostrate figure of Jimmie Hallett. He was across

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the room in an instant, and made swift examination of the prostrate man.

"Knocked clean out of time," he diagnosed. "Help me get him on the couch. Hello, there's another of 'em." He had observed the body on the hearth-rug.

He bent over the murdered man in close scrutiny but without touching the corpse. His lips pursed into a whistle as he marked the bullet wound that showed among the grey locks at the back of the head. He was startled but scarcely shocked.

He straightened himself up. "This looks a queer business altogether, Hawksley. You'd better get back to the station. Send up the divisional surgeon and 'phone through to the Yard. They'd better let Sir Hilary Thornton and Mr. Foyle know. I shall need Congreve and a couple of men, and you'd better send for Carless and as many of his staff as can be reached quickly. They'll know the district."

The faculty of quick organisation is one of the prime qualities of a chief of detectives, and Menzies was at no loss. The first step in the investigation of most great mysteries is automatic—the determination of the facts. It is a kind of circle from facts to possibilities, from possibilities to probabilities, and from probabilities to facts. But the original facts must be settled first, and for any one person to fix them single-handed is an impossibility.

There are certain aspects that must be settled by

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specialists; there may be a thousand and one enquiries to make in rapid succession. Menzies had no idea of playing a lone hand.

For a couple of hours a steady stream of officials and others descended on the house, and Linstone Terrace Gardens became the centre of such police activity as it had never dreamed would affect its austere respectability.

Men worked from house to house, interviewing servants, masters, mistresses, gleaning such facts as could be obtained of the lonely, eccentric old man, his habits, his visitors, friends, and relations. Inside the house the divisional surgeon had attended to Hallett ("No serious injury. May come round any moment"), and waited till flash-light photographs of the room had been taken from various angles ere examining the dead man. Draughtsmen made plans to scale of the room and every article in it. A finger-print expert peered round searchingly, scattering black or grey powder on things which the murderer might have touched. In the topmost rooms Congreve, Menzies' right-hand man, had begun a hasty search of the house that would become more minute the next day.

Menzies occupied a morning room at the back of the house and was deep in consultation with Sir Hilary Thornton, the grizzled assistant commissioner, and Heldon Foyle, the square-shouldered, well-groomed superintendent of the Criminal Investigation Department.

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There was little likeness between the three men, unless it lay in a certain hint of humour in the eyes and a firmness of the mouth. A detective without a sense of humour is lost.

Now and again Menzies broke off the conversation to issue an order or receive a report. Thornton observed for the first time the characters in which he made a few notes on the back of an envelope.

"I didn't know you knew Greek, Menzies," he remarked.

The chief inspector twiddled his pencil awkwardly. "I use it now and again, Sir Hilary. You see, if I should lose my notes by any chance it's odds against the finder reading them. I used to do them in shorthand, but I gave it up. There are too many people who understand it. Yes, what is it, Johnson?"

The man who had entered held out a paper. "Addresses of the cook and housemaid, sir. One lives at Potters Bar, the other at Walthamstow."

"Have them fetched by taxi," ordered Menzies curtly.

"Couldn't you have statements taken from them?" asked Hilary mildly. "It's rather a drag for women in the middle of the night."

Menzies smoothed his moustache. "We don't know what may develop here, sir. We may want to put some questions quickly."

While thus Menzies was straining every resource

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which a great organisation possessed to gather together into his hands the ends of the case, Jimmie Hallett awoke once more. The throbbing in his head had gone and he lay for a while with closed eyes, listlessly conscious of the mutter of low voices in the room.

He sat up, and at once a dapper little man was by his side. "Ah, you've woke up. Feeling better? That's right. Drink this. We want you to pull yourself together for a little while."

"Thanks., I'm all right," returned Hallett mechanically. He drank something which the other held out to him in a tumbler, and a rush of new life thrilled through him. "Are you Mr. Menzies?"

"No, I'm the police divisional surgeon. Mr. Menzies is in the next room. Think you're up to telling him what has happened? He's anxious to know the meaning of all this."

"So am I," said Hallett grimly, and staggered to his feet. "Just a trifle groggy," he added as he swayed, and the little doctor thrust a supporting shoulder under his arm.

The three in the next room rose as Hallett was ushered in. It was Foyle who sprang to assist Hallett and lifted him bodily on to the settee, which Menzies pushed under the chandelier. The doctor went out.

"Quite comfortable, eh?" asked Foyle. "Let me make that cushion a bit easier for you. Now you're

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better. We won't worry you at present more than we can help, will we, Menzies?"

The three great detectives, for all that their solicitude seemed solely for the comfort of the young man, were studying him keenly and unobtrusively. Already they had talked him over, but any suspicions that they might have held were quite indefinite. At the opening stage of a murder investigation everyone is suspected. In that lies the difference between murder and professional crime. A burglary, a forgery, is usually committed for one fixed motive by a fixed class of criminal, and the search is narrowed from the start. A millionaire does not pick pockets, but he is quite as likely as anyone else to kill an enemy. In a murder case, no detective would say positively that any person is innocent until he is absolutely certain of the guilt of the real murderer.

Hallett, whose brain was beginning to work swiftly, held out his hand to the chief inspector. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Menzies. I've got a letter of introduction to you from Pinkerton. That's how I came to ring you up. My name's Hallett."

Menzies shook hands. "Glad to know you, Mr. Hallett. This is Sir Hilary Thornton—Mr. Heldon Foyle."

"And now," said Jimmie decisively, when the introductions were done. "Do you people think I killed this man, Greye-Stratton?"

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The possibility had been in the minds of everyone in the room, but they were taken aback by the abruptness of the question. Weir Menzies laughed as though the idea were preposterous.

"Not unless you've swallowed the pistol, Mr. Hallett. We've found no weapon of any kind. You were locked in, you know. Now tell us all about it. I couldn't hear a word you said on the telephone."

They all listened thoughtfully until he had finished. Thornton elevated his eyebrows in question at his two companions as the recital closed.

"Where are those cheques?" asked Foyle. "They may help us."

Hallett patted his pockets in rapid succession. "They're gone!" he exclaimed. "They must have been taken off me when I was knocked out."

"H'm," said Foyle reflectively. "Can you make anything of it, Menzies?"

The chief inspector was gnawing his moustache—a sure sign of bewilderment with him. He shrugged his shoulders. "There's little enough to take hold of," he returned. "Could you recognise any of the people you saw again, Mr. Hallett? the girl, the man who was running after her, or the chap in the house."

"I haven't the vaguest idea of what the face of either of the men was like," said Hallett.

"But the woman—the girl?" persisted Menzies.

Hallett hesitated. "I—I think it possible that I

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might," he admitted. Then an impulse took him. "But I'm sure she's not the sort of person to be mixed up in—in——"

The three detectives smiled openly. "In this kind of she-mozzle you were going to say," finished Menzies. "There's only one flaw in your reasoning. She is."

Wrung as dry of information as a squeezed sponge, Hallett was permitted to depart. The courtesy of Sir Hilary Thornton supplied him with a motor-car back to his hotel, the forethought of Menzies provided him with an escort in the shape of a detective sergeant. Hallett would have been less pleased had he known that that same mentioned detective sergeant was to be relieved from all other duties for the specific purpose of keeping an eye upon him. Weir Menzies was always cautious, and though his own impression of the young man had been favourable enough, he was taking no chances.

All through that night Weir Menzies drove his allies hither and thither in the attempt to bring the ends of the ravelled threads of mystery into his hand. No one knew better than he the importance of a first hot burst of pursuit. An hour in the initial stages of an investigation is worth a week later on. The irritation at being kept out of bed had all vanished now that he was on the warpath. He could think without regret of a committee meeting of the Church Restoration Fund the following day, from which he would be forced to absent himself.

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THE MAELSTROM

Scores of messages had been sent over the private telegraph and telephone systems of the Metropolitan Police before, at seven o'clock in the morning, he took a respite. It was to an all-night Turkish bath in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly Circus that he made his way.

At nine o'clock, spruce and ruddy, showing no trace of his all-night work beyond a slight tightening of the brows, he was in Heldon Foyle's office. The superintendent nodded as he came in.

"You look fine, Menzies. Got your man?"

The other made a motion of his hand deprecatory of badinage. "Nope," he said. "But I've got a line on him."

Foyle sat up and adjusted his pince-nez. "The deuce you have. Who is he?"

"His name is Errol," said Menzies. "He's a prodigal stepson of Greye-Stratton, and was pushed out of the country seven years ago."

"Menzies," said Foyle, laying down his pince-nez. "You ought to be in a book."

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CHAPTER IV

Weir Menzies fitted his form to the big armchair that flanked Foyle's desk, and dragged a handful of reports secured by an elastic band from his breast pocket. Foyle snipped the end off a cigar and leaning back puffed out a blue cloud of smoke.

"It's been quick work, though I say it myself," observed Menzies complacently, "especially considering it's a night job. This night work is poisonous—no way of getting about, no certainty of finding the witnesses you want, everyone angry at being dragged out of bed, and all your people knocked out the next day when they ought to be fresh."

Foyle flicked the ash from his cigar, and a mischievous glimmer shone in his blue eyes. "It's tough luck, Menzies. I know you hate this kind of thing. Now there's Forrester—he's got nothing in particular on: if you like——"

Menzies' heavy eyebrows contracted as he scrutinised his chief suspiciously. Untold gold would not have induced him to willingly relax his hold of a case that interested him. "I'm not shifting any job of mine on to anyone else's shoulders, Mr. Foyle," he said acidly.

"That's all right," said Foyle imperturbably. "Go ahead."

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THE MAELSTROM

Menzies tapped his pile of statements. "As far as I can boil down what we've got, this is how it stands. Old Greye-Stratton was a retired West Indian merchant—dropped out of harness eight years ago, and has lived like a hermit by himself in Linstone Terrace Gardens ever since. It seems there was some trouble about his wife—she was a widow named Errol when he married her, and she had one son. Five years before the crash there was a daughter born. Anyway, as I was saying, trouble arose, and he kicked his wife out, sent the baby girl abroad to be educated, and the boy—he would then be about twenty—with his mother. Well, the woman died a few years after. Young Errol came down to Greye-Stratton, kicked up a bit of a shindy, and was given an allowance on condition that he left the country. He went to Canada, and thence on to the States, and must have been a bit of a waster. A year ago he returned to England and turned up in Linstone Terrace Gardens; there was a row and he went away swearing revenge. Old Greye-Stratton stopped supplies, and neither the lawyers nor anyone else have seen anything of Errol since."

Foyle rolled a pencil to and fro across his blotting-pad with the palm of his hand. He interrupted with no question. What Menzies stated as facts he knew the chief inspector would be able to prove by sworn evidence, if necessary. He was merely summarising evidence. The inference he allowed to be drawn, and so

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far it seemed an inference that bade fair to place a noose round young Errol's neck.

"We have got this," went on Menzies, "from people in Linstone Terrace Gardens, from Greye-Stratton's old servants, from the house agents from whom he rented his house, and from Pembroke, of Pembroke and Stephens, who used to be his solicitors. Greye-Stratton was seventy years old, as deaf as a beetle, and as eccentric as a monkey. I don't believe he has kept any servant for more than three months at a stretch—we have traced out a dozen, and there must be scores more. But it is only lately that he has taken to accusing them of being in a plot to murder him. The last cook he had he made taste everything she prepared in his presence.

"He had no friends in the ordinary way and few visitors. Twice within the last year he has been visited by a woman, but who or what she was no one knows. She came evidently by appointment and was let in by him, himself; remained half an hour and went away. Practically all his business affairs had been carried on by correspondence, and he was never known to destroy a letter. Yet we have found few documents in the house that can have any bearing on the case, except possibly this, which was found in the grate of the little bedroom he habitually used."

He extracted from the pile of statements a square of doubled glass, which he passed to Foyle. It con-

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tained several charred fragments of writing paper with a few detached words and letters discernible.

"J. E. Gre. . . . Will see . . . ld you . . . ues . . . mother to her death . . . ous swine . . . let me hea. . . . ."

"Errol's writing?" queried Foyle.

"I haven't got a sample yet, but I've little doubt of it. Now here's another thing. It was Greye-Stratton's custom to lock up the house every night at dusk, himself. He would go round with a revolver and see to every one of the bolts and fastenings, and no one was allowed in or out thereafter. It was one of the grievances of the servants that they were prisoners soon after four o'clock each day in winter. And though he always slept with that revolver under his pillow, we can't find it.

"There's another thing. Greye-Stratton had a little study where he spent most of the day, and there was a safe built in to the wall. It may mean nothing, or anything, but the safe was open and there was not a thing in it. Now we have been able to discover no one who has ever seen that safe open before. It's curious, too, in view of Hallett's story about the cheques, that we have not been able to lay our hands on a single thing that refers to a banking transaction—not so much as a paying-in book or a bunch of counterfoils.

"The doctors say the old man was shot about three hours before we got there. That would be about half-

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past nine. I don't know how Hallett struck you, Mr. Foyle, but according to his own account he must have arrived at Linstone Terrace Gardens at nine."

Foyle rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You mean he may have been there when the shot was fired."

Menzies made an impatient gesture. "I don't know. I own freely I don't quite take in this yarn, and yet the man struck me as genuine. He's got good credentials, and if he's mixed up with the murder, why did he 'phone to me?"

"Search me," said Foyle. "What about the daughter? You said there was a girl."

Menzies stuck his thumbs in the sleeve holes of his waistcoat. "That's another queer point. She was brought up abroad, and scarcely ever saw the old man. Pembroke says she spent her holidays with an old couple down in Sussex, to whom he had instructions to pay three hundred pounds a year. When she left school he had the allowance paid to her direct. She had a taste for painting and was apparently quite capable of looking after herself. For two years she has not called or given any instructions about it. He wrote Greye-Stratton, who retorted it was none of his business—that the allowance would be paid over to his firm, and that if the girl did not choose to ask for it, it could accumulate. He did not seem at all concerned at her disappearance. Take it from me, Mr. Foyle, we shall run across some more damned funny business before we

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get to the bottom of this. There's not even a ghost of a finger-print. If only we can find Errol——"

Foyle was too old a hand to offer conjecture at so early a stage of the case. Nor did Menzies seem to expect any advice. Hard as he had driven the investigation during the night, the ground was not yet cleared. Until he had all the facts in his possession it was useless to absolutely pin himself to any one line of reasoning. There was now one man who, on known facts, might have committed the murder. But plausible as was the supposition that Errol was the man, the detectives knew that at best it was only a suspicion. And suspicion nowadays does not commit a man. It does not always justify an arrest. There must be evidence, and so far there was not a scrap of proof that Errol had been within a thousand miles of Linstone Terrace Gardens on the night of the murder.

Menzies went away with his bundle of documents, to have them typed, indexed, and put in order, so that he could lay his hand on any one needed at a moment's notice. He was in for a busy day.

Two advertisements he drafted in the sanctuary of his own office. One was to check Hallett's own account of the evening before, and to identify, if possible, the street in which the cheques had been forced on him.

"£1 REWARD. The taxi-cab driver who, on the evening of ——————, drove a fare from the

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West End to 34, Linstone Terrace Gardens, Kensington, will receive the above reward on communicating with the Public Carriage Office, New Scotland Yard. S. W."

The other ran differently, and seemed to give him more trouble. Several sheets of note-paper he wasted, and discontentedly surveyed his final effort.

"If James Errol, last heard of at Columbus, Ohio, U. S. A., will communicate——"

He crushed the sheet up, flung it in the waste-paper basket, and lifted a speaking-tube. "Any newspaper men there, Green? Right. Tell 'em I'll see 'em in half an hour. Send me up a typist."

The newspaper press, if deftly handled, may be a potent factor in the detection of crime. Moreover, the ubiquitous reporter is not to be evaded for long by the cleverest detective living. The wisest course is to meet him with fair words—to guide his pen where there is a danger of his writing too much, and put him on his honour on occasion. Many a promising case has been spoilt by tactless treatment of a pressman at a wrong moment.

Menzies dictated an account of the murder, in which he said just as much as he wanted to say and not a word more. The conclusion ran:

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"The stepson of the deceased gentleman, a Mr. James Errol, left England for the United States many years ago, and his present whereabouts are unknown. The police are anxious to get in to touch with him, in order that certain points in connection with his father's career should be cleared up."

The chief detective inspector knew that the simple paragraph would throw into the search for Errol the energies and organisation of every great newspaper—an aid he did not despise. It was not intended as an official statement. The Criminal Investigation Department does not issue bulletins officially. It was an act of courtesy, and incidentally a stroke of policy to maintain the good-will of the Press. The reporters might paraphrase it as they would.

He received the newspaper men pleasantly, parried their chaff and too adroit questions with unruffled good-humour, and told them little anecdotes which had not the slightest bearing on the murder or Greye-Stratton. They read the typewritten sheets he handed them greedily and cross-examined him as mercilessly as ever he had been cross-examined at the Old Bailey. A clerk brought a card to him and he read it without a change of countenance.

"In a minute," he said to the waiting clerk, and put the card in his waistcoat pocket. "Well, gentlemen, you know as much as I do now. If there's anything else

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you want to know, just drop in and see me when you like. Good morning."

They accepted their dismissal, and he took another glance at the card. "Miss Lucy Olney," he read; and underneath, written in pencil: "Peggy Greye-Stratton."

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CHAPTER V

THE early evening papers were on the streets before Jimmie Hallett rose, and the inevitable reporters had established a blockade of his hotel. He cursed them while he shaved. As an old newspaper hand himself, he had little taste to be served up again all hot and spiced for the delectation of a morbidly hungry public.

He surveyed a salver full of cards that had been brought up to him with a scowl. Vivid recollections came to him of the way in which he had himself dealt in "personal sketches," and "personal statements" on big stories, and he began to conceive a certain fellow-feeling for his long-forgotten victims. But his chin grew dogged.

"I'll see 'em in hell before I'll talk. Go away and tell 'em I'm dead."

The liveried functionary who had brought the cards gave as near an approach to a grin as his dignity permitted. "Yes, sir," he said quietly; "they'll not believe it, sir."

Hallett swung his eyes sideways to the man, and his hand slipped to his trousers pocket. It was no use getting angry. "Say, what are you getting out of this, sonnie?" he demanded. "It's all right. You needn't answer." A bank-note crackled between his fingers.

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"If you can clear out the gang below this is yours. It's more than they'll give you."

"Very good, sir. There'll be no harm in telling them you're in a very critical condition, sir, I suppose?"

"Not in the least. If they've any bowels of compassion they won't worry a dying man. It will stave 'em off for a while, perhaps."

As a matter of fact, beyond a mild headache and some stiffness, he felt scarcely a trace of the attentions of his overnight assailant. He was uncertain whether that was a tribute to the skill of the divisional surgeon or to the hardness of his skull. He inwardly congratulated himself that the injury was not a particularly noticeable disfigurement. Indeed a skillful brushing of the hair almost hid it.

He descended to breakfast with an appetite that of itself was proof that his general health remained unaffected, and discovering that there was a back entrance to the hotel, decided to make use of it, lest some pertinacious reporter might still be lingering in the reception hall. He wanted to know something of what the police were doing, and a visit to Scotland Yard seemed the best way of finding out. In the background of his thoughts there was perhaps less concern that a murderer should be brought to justice than curiosity in regard to the lady of the fog.

There is a way, mostly used by tradesmen, at the Palatial Hotel, which leads through a narrow alley for

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fifty yards on to the Embankment. Through this Hallett sauntered. He was halfway through when a tap on the shoulder caused him to wheel. He confronted a slim-built, shallow-faced man, of lank moustache and burning black eyes.

"Pardon," he said. "Your name is Hallett?" He spoke silkily and the extremely correct pronunciation of his words showed that he was neither English nor American.

"Well?" demanded Hallett shortly. He feared that he had been run down by a reporter after all.

"You were at the place where this man was killed yesterday—eh?" The man shook a newspaper under his face.

"Well?" said Hallett again. He had resumed his walk but the other was keeping pace with him.

A hand caught at his arm. The burning black eyes were within three inches of his face. "You know who killed heem, eh?" The English had become a little less correct under stress of some excitement. "You have not told the pol-lice yet. You will not tell them?"

Hallett shook himself free angrily. "Look here, my man," he said. "I don't propose to answer your questions, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it. Now git."

The foreigner's hand dropped to his pocket. He did not remove it, but pressed something hard through the

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cloth against the young man's ribs. "You are hasty, Mr. Hallett," he remonstrated. "You don't know what it is you say—what you're up against. This is a pistol you can feel"—he pressed it close—"and unless you listen quietly I shall keel you dead. Understand?"

"Well?" said Hallett quietly.

"You were at the house. You saw who killed the old man? You would know him again?" The man did not wait for an answer. "You must keep your mouth shut. This is for a warning. If you see him again you not tell—eh? There are many of us. You will be watched. And if you split——" A prod with the pistol finished the sentence.

The theory that his molester was a reporter had long ago been abandoned by Jimmie Hallett. It was evidently thought that he had seen the face of the man at Linstone Terrace Gardens and he was to be terrorised into silence. He had sense enough to reflect that for all the audacity of the hold-up, the threat of surveillance was bluff—perhaps even the concealed pistol was bluff. Not that his actions would have differed much even had he supposed them real.

He took a quick step backwards and sideways and a bullet that tore its way through the cloth of the other man's pocket told that that part of the story was reliable. Then Hallett's knee was in his back and Hallett's arms were woven in a strangle-hold about his throat. The man collapsed, gurgling.

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The whole business had occurred in barely two seconds of time. As they fell there was a third arrival.

"Hold him down a minute, Mr. Hallett. That's all right." The third man possessed himself of the squirming captive's wrists and twisted them behind his back to Hallett. Then he methodically and quickly ran his hands through the prostrate man's clothing, possessing himself of a still smoking Derringer and a formidable sheath-knife.

"Thank you, sir. Now this gentleman might get up. We'll run him along to King Street station and see what Mr. Menzies has to say about it."

Then Hallett noted that the man who had come to his assistance was the liveried functionary who had accepted his five-pound note to put off the press men less than an hour ago. But he no longer wore livery. He was in quiet, unassuming tweeds and his manner was not exactly that which might be expected from a waiter to an hotel guest—even in the circumstances.

He surprised Hallett's look of enquiry and smiled as he locked his arm into that of the prisoner. "Detective Sergeant Royal, sir," he explained. "I'll let you know all about it later. What's your name, my man?" He shook his captive slightly.

"Smeeth—William Smeeth," said the man sullenly, and Royal winked at Hallett.

"That's a good old Anglo-Saxon name," he said. "Come along."

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THE MAELSTROM

It was in the Criminal Investigation office at King Street, while they were awaiting Menzies, that Royal gave his explanation with a certain apologetic tone. "It was this way, Mr. Hallett. You see, Mr. Menzies asked me to keep an eye on you when you were sent home yesterday. Of course he thought you were all right, but it doesn't do to take anyone's say-so in our trade. This is murder, you see, and though it seemed all right, you might have forged or stolen the introduction you had. We couldn't be sure your name was really Hallett."

"And sandbagged myself on the back of the head," interpolated Hallett with irony.

Royal gave a shrug. "Mr. Menzies doesn't take any risks, sir. It couldn't do you any harm. They know me at the hotel and that's how it was I was able to get into livery and walk into your room pretty well as I liked."

A new light broke upon Hallett. "I get you. I thought perhaps I was a bit fogged when I got up and had forgotten where I put things. You've been searching my room."

Royal's face never shifted a muscle. "I don't admit it, sir. That would be illegal without your permission."

"Illegal or not, you did it," retorted Hallett. "I hope you're quite satisfied."

"Oh, there'll be no more trouble about that. Mr.

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Menzies told me on the telephone just now that he'd cabled to the States and they've put your reputation straight. Besides, there's what I learned about you."

"I suppose you read my letters," ventured Hallett.

"No. Don't worry to soothe me down. I'd probably have half killed you if I'd caught you at it, but I'm quite calm now. By the way, there was a fiver——"

A flush mounted to the temples of the detective and he shook his head in vehement denial of the implication contained in the broken sentence. "I had to take it or you might have suspected something. I passed it on to the servants and told 'em what to do. I never saw the press people myself. Some of 'em might have known me. When you went down to breakfast I changed my clothes and slipped a 'phone message through to headquarters. They told me to hang on to you till Mr. Menzies had seen you. You'd never have known a word about it if it hadn't been for our bird down below." He jerked his head in the direction of the cells.

Hallett began to appreciate some of the realities of detective work. Before he could make any comment, Menzies came in. He nodded affably to the young man.

"Morning, Mr. Hallett; not much the worse for last night, I see. I've got a little job for you presently. Meanwhile I want to see your friend down below. Like to come along?"

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He made no apology for the espionage he had set on foot and Hallett did not think it worth while to thrash out the subject again.

"William Smith," it seemed, had already been searched with care and thoroughness. Royal explained to his chief that nothing which would serve as a hint to who he was had been found on him—nothing but the pistol, nine cartridges, and some money.

"Have you looked for the name of the tailor on his clothes—the brace buttons, the inside of the breast pocket, the trousers band?" demanded Menzies.

"Of course, sir," said Royal. He was a trifle offended that it should even be thought that he had neglected so elementary a precaution. "There's nothing—nothing at all."

Preceded by a uniformed inspector they went down to the cells. Smith looked up sullenly from the bench on which he was seated and met Menzies' gaze squarely. The detective chief was no believer in Lombroso's theories of physiognomy, but he studied the face intently. In point of fact he was analysing the features to discover if he had seen the man before. He wanted, too, to get some clue as to the manner he should adopt—authoritative and official, or familiar and persuasive.

"Well, sonny," he said gently. "You've tumbled into a mess. Attempted murder is a serious business in this country."

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Smith glanced at him blackly over his shoulder. Menzies went on: "Of course we don't believe the cock-and-bull story you told Mr. Hallett of there being a gang of you——"

"You don't, eh?" exclaimed the prisoner, wheeling in sudden passion to face his visitors. "Then you are —what shall I say—wooden blockheads." He pointed a long slender forefinger at each of them in turn. "You! and you! and you!—I tell you, you will be marked. I failed—but there are others who will not fail, if you persist."

Royal turned away to hide a snigger. This kind of melodrama failed to impress him.

"No doubt, no doubt," assented Menzies soothingly. He might have been calming down a headstrong questioner at a vestry meeting. "But there are a good many police officers in London. It will take a long time to kill 'em off. Now why don't you be reasonable, Mr. Smith?"

"Pah!" interrupted the prisoner. He spat on the cell floor to indicate his contempt.

"You've shown you know something about this murder," went on Menzies. "The judge is pretty sure to take that into account one way or the other at your trial. I, of course, should tell him if you helped us. It would probably make a difference, you know."

The prisoner showed two rows of yellow teeth in an unmirthful, contemptuous grin. "Go away, wooden-

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head. I shall not go to prison, but you will die. You don't know what you call—what you are up against."

"Perhaps I've got an idea," said Menzies. His voice changed. "I don't know whether you're playing the fool, my man," he said sternly, "or whether you really believe that kind of wild talk. Perhaps your friend Errol will be able to enlighten us."

"Errol?" said Smith blankly. "I know him not."

"I hear you," said Menzies. "You think over what I've said, my lad. Meanwhile, we'll have a doctor to look at you."

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CHAPTER VI

Menzies let an unparliamentary expression slip from his lips as the cell door clanged behind them. It is tantalising to have a piece of evidence drop into one's lap, so to speak, and then refuse to be evidence. He was annoyed because his efforts to unlock the lips of the prisoner had failed. He knew that if only the man could have been induced to talk, days, possibly weeks, of heart-breaking labour would be saved.

This fresh development had him guessing, as Jimmie Hallett might have said. Who was "William Smith"? Why had he threatened Hallett, and even gone so far as to try to carry his threat into execution? The hint of an organised conspiracy to save the murderer of Greye-Stratton would have excited his derision if it had not aroused speculation. The secret societies in England may talk murder at times, but they never seriously plot murder or carry out a murder. A man who perils his neck has invariably some strong, personal motive. And when others actively shield him they also have some motive other than pure altruism.

One person may commit an irresponsible act for no reason; it is even conceivable that two people may act in concert in some insane crime. But here were at least three people concerned and possibly more—the woman who had passed the cheques to Hallet, the murderer of

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Greye-Stratton, and "William Smith." What was the link that bound them all together? That each was acting from some powerful self-interest he felt confident. It might be that there was a community of interest, but he was sceptic enough to think that accidental.

The chief inspector checked his flow of thought with a jerk. Speculation without materials spelt a fixed theory—and to a detective too early a theory may be fatal. He is apt to try to prove his theory rather than the truth.

He laid a hand on Hallett's arm as the gaoler inserted a key in the big steel door that led to the charge room.

"Wait a minute. There are a dozen people the other side of the door waiting for us. I want you to have a good look at them when you go in. If you recognise any of them I want you to go up and touch her."

"*Her*," repeated Hallett. His pulse throbbing unaccountably faster. Menzies eyed him keenly.

"You said last night that you would probably know the woman again who planted the cheques on you. I'm relying on you, Mr. Hallett. You're a man of the world. Don't run away with the idea that a pretty face can't be mixed up in crime."

"So you've run her down. Why didn't you tell me before? Who is she? Does she admit passing the cheques?"

Menzies shook a forefinger blandly at the young man. "I'll answer your questions some other time. Only play

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the game, Mr. Hallett." He was a shrewd judge of men, and all along he had been doubtful whether Jimmie's chivalry would be proof against the test to which he proposed to put it.

And Jimmie himself was doubtful. A week—a day—ago he would have ridiculed the idea that a pair of blue eyes, seen only once, could have swayed him in any degree. He did not put his thoughts into form, but he wondered what the effect to her of an identification might be. Had Menzies any suspicion against her? Jimmie found himself arguing illogically enough that it was impossible. Menzies' words braced him as they were intended to—come what would, he would point her out if she were in the charge room.

And then the door swung back. The charge room, lofty and bare, was tenanted by a little group of women seated in a row, at the lower end. Apart from them, in the centre, by the inspector's tall desk, were a couple of officers. A third was leaning against the dock. The chatter of voices ceased.

"Take a good look at these ladies," said Menzies' suave voice.

Jimmie had not needed more than one glance. There was a sufficient general resemblance among the army of women, but *she* was unmistakable. She was the second from the right. He had taken one pace towards her when her gaze met his. There was nothing in it of appeal. It was indifferent, cold, impassive. Yet Hallett's

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resolution wavered. He walked past her along the row and back again. He felt himself a fool. There was not the faintest reason why he should not identify her. She was a stranger. She was at least indirectly responsible for the unpleasant experiences that had beset him. She was possibly concerned in a deliberate murder. And then out of the tail of his eye he saw her moisten her dry lips. That was the only trace of emotion she gave.

"It's no good, Mr. Menzies," he said quietly. "I don't recognise anyone here." He had played poker in his time and his face and voice were absolutely expressionless.

Menzies tapped a forefinger thoughtfully alongside his nose and smiled ruefully.

"All right," he said, and Jimmie fancied there was an inner shade of meaning to the words. "That will do, ladies, thank you."

The women—wives and daughters of police officials for the most part—separated. Only the girl of the cheques remained behind. As the room emptied she walked towards Menzies.

"That's over, Miss Greye-Stratton," he said cheerfully. "I am ever so much obliged to you. I want you to know Mr. Hallett—the gentleman who first called our attention to the death of your father."

Jimmie concealed the surprise that the name gave him. Although there was a certain touch of melancholy in the oval face, there was none of that grief which might

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have been expected in a girl who had suddenly learned of the murder of her father. For a moment he was repelled. He murmured some conventional phrase of sympathy, but she swept it away as though aware that her manner needed explanation.

"Yes, this is very dreadful, Mr. Hallett, but not so dreadful to me as it might have been. You see I scarcely knew my father. We were almost complete strangers."

"Miss Greye-Stratton called on me at the Yard as soon as she heard of the murder," interposed Menzies. "I thought it as well in the circumstances that there should be no ground for misunderstandings. You see your story of the way the cheques came into your possession is bound to make talk when you give evidence at the inquest. I wanted it to be definitely clear that Miss Greye-Stratton was not the lady and she was good enough to consent to this arrangement."

Hallett wondered how the diplomacy of the detective would have got over the difficulty if the girl had refused. That she had consented showed nerve, for she had not known that he would not identify her. He was curious, too, as to what would have happened if he had picked her out. Would she have been arrested on suspicion?

"If it had been Miss Greye-Stratton she would hardly have sought you out," he remarked.

"No, no, of course not," said Menzies soothingly. "I never thought for a moment that she was the woman.

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One likes to save anything in the nature of scandal, though. I remember a case where two elderly ladies—sisters—living in a country house were attacked by someone with a hammer. One was found dead, the other unconscious—she remained unconscious for weeks. The hammer was found in an outhouse a hundred yards away. Now there was a considerable amount of gossip and the theory was firmly held by dozens of people that the living sister had attacked the dead one. They overlooked the fact that to have done so she must have walked to the place where the hammer was found *after* her own injuries had been inflicted. That's an example of what I mean."

The girl nodded. "I am quite sure you only meant to save me possible future unpleasantness. Is there anything else? You have my address."

"There is no other way at the moment in which you can help. As matters develop I may call on you. It has been very good of you——"

She stretched out her slim gloved hand to Hallett. But he was not inclined to let her escape so easily. She owed him something, if only an explanation. "I am going your way," he said unblushingly. "Perhaps if you don't mind——"

"You are very kind, Mr. Hallett," she said formally.

Menzies stroked his moustache and his eyes roved sideways to his aide-de-camp, Royal, who, after an ab-

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sence of two or three minutes, had now returned. Royal nodded almost imperceptibly, and the inspector said good-bye.

"By the way, you had better be at the police court at two, Mr. Hallett. We shall charge this man Smith today. I don't expect you'll be kept long. It will be purely formal. We shall apply for a remand."

Hallett and the girl went down the steps to the street. He was conscious that though she appeared to be gazing serenely in front of her that she occasionally scrutinised him with curious eyes.

Not till they were a hundred yards away from the police station did either of them speak again. Then Jimmie ventured on the ice.

"Perhaps now you will tell me what it's all about?"

"Oh!" she stopped and turned full on him with the wide-open, innocent blue eyes of a child. "So you knew all the time. I wasn't sure."

"Wasn't sure that I knew you as the girl in the fog?"

"Yes. Shall we walk on? We might attract attention standing here. Why did you do it? Why didn't you denounce me?"

Jimmie twiddled his walking-stick. "Hanged if I know," he confessed. Her self-possession rather daunted him. "I thought—that is—if you wanted to you would have explained the incident yourself."

"That's no reason. You didn't know me. There

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was no earthly motive. All the same I am grateful to you, Mr. Hallett—sincerely grateful." She sighed.

A porter with a parcel under his arm loitered three yards behind them. Ten yards behind him a "nut," scrupulously dressed and seemingly conscious of nothing but the beauty of his attire, swaggered aimlessly. Menzies, as has been said, was not a man who took anything for granted. His arrangements for "covering" Peggy Greye-Stratton in the event of Hallett not recognising her had been completed long before he had confronted them in the charge room.

Hallett might have guessed—if he had thought about it at all. The girl certainly did not. Jimmie caught at her last words.

"You can prove that. Although we have only been formally introduced in the last five minutes, we are not exactly strangers. Come and lunch with me. Then we can talk. There are several things I want to know."

She assented, it seemed to him somewhat indifferently. He hailed a taxi-cab and gave the name of a famous restaurant. As she sank back in the cushions it was as though a mask had dropped from her face. It had suddenly become utterly weary. She gasped once or twice as if for breath. Only for an instant had the mask dropped, but Hallett had seen and understood. The girl was strained to breaking point, supporting her part only by strength of will.

What that part was, and why she was playing it, he

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was fixed in the resolution to learn. He spoke on indifferent subjects till lunch was over and coffee was brought. Then he leaned a little forward across the table.

"I shall be glad if I can be of any help to you, Miss Greye-Stratton," he said.

A smile, palpably forced, appeared on the girl's face. She twisted a ring on her finger absently. "That is a polite way of bringing me to the point, Mr. Hallett. You have a right to ask."

A sigh trembled on her lips, and her eyes became absent. The man said nothing, but waited. Very dainty and desirable did Peggy Greye-Stratton seem to him then. Yet he would not have been human if he had not had misgivings. Her very reluctance to speak aroused a little spark of suspicion which he deliberately trampled under foot. A beautiful face, a high intelligence, and courage—and all these he knew she possessed—are not necessarily guarantees against crime.

She appeared to come to a resolve. "I will tell you what I told Mr. Menzies," she said looking up. "Knowing what you know it will seem incomplete to you, but you"—she looked him full in the face—"are a gentleman. I trust you not to question me too far. There are—other people."

He, too, had come to a resolve. "Tell me," he said levelly, "before you say anything else. Did you have act or part in the murder of your father?"

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THE MAELSTROM

She stared at him whitely and half rose. Her shapely throat was working strangely. "Do you think——" she began. And then tensely: "No! no! no!" Her voice fell to a strained whisper. "Why do you ask me that—if I had known—if I could have prevented——" She was rapidly becoming distraught.

He felt himself a cur, but he pressed home the question relentlessly. "Do you know who it was that murdered your father?"

Her fair head fell to her arms on the table. Had Hallett known, he could not have put his questions at a time more likely to wring an answer from her. All that morning she had borne herself before the keen eyes of Menzies and his assistants, conscious that the slightest falter might betray what she did not wish known. Her nerves were now paying the penalty. She raised a face torn with emotion towards Hallett.

"God help me," she moaned. "I believe I do."

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CHAPTER VII

He had expected the answer, and yet it came to him as a shock. She was regarding him with an expression, half defiant, half appealing. His eyes wandered round the room. He had engaged a table that stood in a recess behind one of the marbled pillars and they were thus separated from the general company in the room. Their voices had been low, but he was afraid they might have attracted attention. But no one seemed to have observed them and he turned once more to her.

Somehow she had repressed her weakness. He signalled to the waiter and ordered a liqueur. As she took it he observed that her hand was perfectly steady. And yet but a moment before she had been on the verge of hysterics.

"Tell me just what you like," he said simply. "Just as much or as little as you like. You can trust me."

"Thank you," she said; "you are very good. Let me think. . . . To begin with, you must know my father was a very strange man. When I was quite a baby he quarrelled with my mother and I was sent down into the country, where I lived with an old gentleman farmer and his wife named Dinward. I always understood that I was their child until a few years ago—they never spoke of either my father or my mother. Once—just

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before I went to school—he came to see me. I, of course, did not know who he was.

"I was sent to a convent school at Bruges, where I was brought up, coming home for the holidays—home, of course, being in Sussex. Occasionally I was brought to London. I won't go into all the detail of my life until I left school—it wouldn't interest you. All this time, remember, I had no knowledge of any relations but the Dinwards. When I left school I learnt for the first time that I was not their daughter. Mr. Pembroke, a solicitor, came over to Bruges and told me very nicely. But—acting on instructions, he said—he could give me no clue to my parents. There would be three hundred a year payable to me quarterly by his firm. I was no longer to look to the Dinwards for support.

"Mr. Pembroke was very nice, but he had his instructions. I asked him what I was expected to do. 'I presume,' he said, 'that your benefactor intends that you shall have enough to support you respectably. Think over your plans to-night, my dear young lady, and we will talk it over in the morning.'

"I did think it over. You may imagine that I slept little that night. I have a certain facility for painting and that seemed to me to offer an outlet to ambition. I told Pembroke next day. He expressed neither approval nor disapproval. A cheque he said, would be waiting for me at the offices of his firm on the first day of every quarter. He offered to give me introductions

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in London, but I answered that the only introduction I needed was to my parents. He shook his head at me a little doubtfully and that ended the conversation.

"I wanted to see the world a little before I settled down in London. I went to see the Dinwards, but no word could I get from them as to who I really was. They would tell me nothing.

"The Dinwards were troubled about me—naturally. Of course I promised to keep in touch with them. I changed my name. I had been called Peggy Dinward. I became Lucy Olney. That, by the way, Mr. Hallett, is the name I still keep.

"The allowance I was to receive seemed a tremendous fortune to me. I went abroad—to study art, I told myself. I went to Paris, to Rome, to Venice, and other places. But the money did not prove so ample as I expected. Perhaps I was extravagant. Anyway, in about eight months I was in London, determined to make my fortune—and I still thought that my art pointed the way.

"You will guess that I had some troubles. Art for art's sake is one thing, but I am afraid I haven't the true temperament. I wanted recognition, and though I could have existed without the money I wanted money as a proof that I was recognised. But no one seemed to appreciate me as a genius. It was difficult enough to get dealers to take my pictures at a price that barely paid for canvas and paint. Then I drifted into

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magazine and book illustration work and in that I found my metier. I earned much more than I really needed—even without my allowance."

She fingered a serviette absently for a moment. There was an abstraction in her eyes. Hallett waited without interruption for her to resume.

"I have not told you that I have a step-brother," she went on. "Indeed I did not know it myself till two years ago. He is my mother's son by her first marriage and is much older than myself. He was sent abroad at the time that I was handed over to the Dinwards. As I say, two years ago he traced me out—I believe he got my assumed name and my address from the Dinwards. It was from him that I first learned who I was, who my father was, who my mother was. He told me the whole terrible story of Mr. Greye-Stratton's—I can't call him my father—break with my mother. He swore that she was innocent—that it was a madman's fit of jealousy that broke up the home. I—I——"

Her throat worked and it was some moments before she took up her account again. "My brother had only recently returned to England, and he told me that his first step had been to find me. He wanted me to go back with him to Canada. 'You're my baby sister,' he said, 'I have a right to look after you. There's only you and I now.'

"I can't express how I felt. My quick anger against my father was less intense than his long-nursed hatred.

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We talked long. I refused his offer to go back to Canada and told him that I would never take another penny from my father. He was against that. He argued that it was the least Mr. Greye-Stratton could do for me. When he saw I was determined he pointed out the possibility that I might be Mr. Greye-Stratton's heiress, and that to refuse the allowance might embitter him against me." She flamed for a moment into passion. "As if I wanted anything—*anything* from that man.

"When he left me I scarcely knew what to do—what action to take. I resolved to do nothing. After all, when I was in a colder mood, I could see nothing that I could do. I could not or would not attempt a reconciliation with my father. I could not attempt the vindication of my mother. I renounced the allowance and things went on as they were before—except that I had my brother.

"He went back to Canada and the United States. Now and again I had letters from him. He had a hard struggle to make ends meet."

Hallett nodded mechanically. Something in her tone made him begin to see the brother in a less sympathetic light. He blurted out the question on the spur of the moment. "He bled—I mean he wrote to you for money?"

She winced. "Yes. He wrote to me for money. A little more than a year ago he was in England again."

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Her words came more slowly. "He has stayed here ever since. He called on Mr. Greye-Stratton and something happened—what I don't know. I suppose there were recriminations, but my brother told me little but that he was now entirely without resources. Mr. Greye-Stratton"—Hallett noted that she persisted in the formal mode of reference—"had cut off all help from him. I don't know if Mr. Menzies has said anything to you about my brother?" She flashed the question at him suddenly.

"Not a word. This is the first I have heard of his existence."

"I ask because he questioned me closely about him. My brother is a hard man, Mr. Hallett, and his outlook on life is different from that of the ordinary person. Circumstances have been against him. He was driven to find a living as he could. I want you to remember that if he was desperate he was driven to it. I helped as far as I could, but he had heavy expenses. He signed my father's name to some cheques."

"He committed forgery?"

"Yes. The cancelled cheques came into the hands of —someone else who knew that Dick Errol was my brother. He threatened to pass them on to Scotland Yard and give evidence against Dick unless I paid. Last night there was an appointment made at my flat. The price he demanded was greater than I could pay. When he went I followed him. I knew he had the cheques

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on him and I hoped that I might find some way to get them from him. Just before I met you I had appealed to him again. He refused. He had the cheques in his hand. I snatched them, and when I ran into you I passed them to you on the impulse of the moment. That is all, Mr. Hallett."

"But there is something more," he said; "something you have not said."

She shook her head, her lips pressed tightly together. "I have said all I can—all I dare. You helped me, Mr. Hallett, and I have told you more even than I have the detectives. It has been a relief"—she sighed—"to tell anyone."

Jimmie was silenced. Yet a score of questions trembled on his lips. Trained to see the weak points in a narration, he could not fail to realise that there were gaps in the story—gaps that needed filling before one could come to full judgment. She had passed no hint of the blackmailer, the man from whom she had the cheques. That he was closely linked with her in some manner he felt confident.

And then speculation was lost in a rush of pity for the girl who had been so unwittingly dragged into a maelstrom from which he could see no way of escape. That the man Errol was a scoundrel was certain on her own showing. He glimpsed through her reticence the fresh tragedy that his advent had meant to her life. Vainly he tried to see for what purpose she was being

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used. Of course Errol had been bleeding her, but there was something more. It came to him suddenly. She knew the murderer—she had said so. Here was a motive for Errol—a motive more powerful than revenge or passion. She would stand to gain a fortune by Greye-Stratton's death and Errol would look to dabbling his fingers in it.

Yet this was the man for whom she was playing with fire. He was not very clear about English legal methods, but he conceived that in trying to shield him she was laying herself open to suspicion. He had judged Menzies acutely. If Greye-Stratton's fortune were to come to her that detective would leave nothing undone to be absolutely sure that she had no hand in the crime. Points would arise, actions be revealed that would look black against her by the very reason that she had carefully concealed them.

"Miss Greye-Stratton," he said gravely, "forgive me for what I am going to say. I believe it is a crime here to be an accessory after the fact. Do you realise that? Don't you think it would be wiser for your sake—for your brother's sake—to be candid with the police? Believe me, all that you have told me is sure to be known sooner or later."

Her face was irresolute. "You think they will find out? That it will be worse because I tried to conceal it?"

"I do. If you will take my advice you will come

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with me to Menzies now. Understand me. I shall not betray a word of our conversation without your permission."

She placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her cupped hands, staring across the room in reverie. Presently she stood up.

"I will think of it," she said. "I will think of it."

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CHAPTER VIII

No effective detective organisation is dependent on one man. Co-operation is the essence of all successful detective work exactly as it is in the carrying on of any great business. Scotland Yard will throw a score, a hundred, ten thousand men into an enterprise, if need be, and everyone of them from the supreme brain downwards will have an understudy ready at any moment to pick up a duty abandoned from any cause. No individual is vital, though some may be valuable. Every fact, every definite conclusion arrived at is on record.

That is why Weir Menzies found time to cover the case against the pickpockets he had captured the preceding evening and to return to headquarters to smoke a quiet pipe and consider things in general. He stuck his feet on a desk, leaned back in his chair, and began serenely to go through the reports that had accumulated from every point where information, however remote, might have been gathered on the Greye-Stratton affair.

He liked to have the salient facts of an investigation clear-cut in his mind. That often saved time in an emergency, as well as being an aid to definite thinking. Presently he began to make his Greek notes with a stubby pencil on the back of an envelope. Some of them would have surprised Hallett had he chanced to see them:

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"Statement of P. Greye-Stratton clearly incomplete. Knows much more than she says. Certain that Errol has been for many months constant visitor at her flat in Palace Avenue. (Goulds report interview with maid at her flat.) Yet she denies that she has spoken to or been in communication with her brother for nearly a year. Lift attendant remembers man calling on her the evening of the murder. Left after short interview and immediately after she went out hatless in a hurry."

He commenced a string of question marks across the paper. "I'll see that lift man myself," he murmured, and continued:

"It was the maid's night out. Lift attendant does not remember having seen man before, but he knows Errol. Description vague. Think possible P. G.-S. alarmed. Must handle cautiously and keep under constant surveillance. If can induce Hallett to cultivate her may learn something."

A sharp tap at the door interrupted him. He snapped an irritable "come in," and, pencil in hand, surveyed frowningly a young man with a badly bruised eye.

"Well, Jakes," he demanded impatiently; "who's been decorating you? What's the trouble?"

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THE MAELSTROM

"I got this from Hallett, sir. He——"

Menzies' feet dropped from the table with a crash. "What the blazes! Some muddle, I'll be bound. Where's Gordon?"

"Down below, sir. We——"

"Then you've lost the girl?" He smacked an angry fist down on the table. "Oh, *damn* your explanations. I beg your pardon—you confounded idiot." He sprang to the door and roared down the green-painted corridor: "Royal! Royal!"

That individual popped out of a door like a rabbit out of a hole. "Come here, Royal. These two cabbages have let Miss Greye-Stratton dodge 'em. Take Smithers and get along to her flat, No. 74 Palace Avenue, and see if you can pick her up. She may have gone straight home, or she may not. I've got to come there myself presently, but I'll hear what this dough-witted jackass has got to say."

Ordinarily Menzies was courteous to his underlings, but when anything like stupidity interfered with his plans he let himself go. "They remembered it and it's better than putting 'em on the M. R.," he explained once to a colleague, which was his way of saying that he preferred a few hot words to putting the culprits on the morning report for judgment and punishment. "Only I sometimes wish that I didn't swear so much at them."

Royal had slipped away to carry out his instructions with the swiftness of the well-trained man. Menzies

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turned with a snarl to the young detective, who was trembling nervously and as ill at ease as any young clerk "carpeted" before his departmental chief for the first time.

"Let's have it," he said shortly.

The young man squared his shoulders. "They lunched at Duke's in Piccadilly, sir. I went in with them but could not get near enough to hear what was said. The lady did most of the talking. When they came out they walked towards Regent Street. I was close behind. Gordon about twenty paces behind me. They turned into Regent Street and then sharp back along Jermyn Street. When they reached St. James Street he said something to her and came back towards me. I would have passed him, but he caught me by the shoulder and asked what I meant by molesting a lady.

"I pulled myself free and told him I was a police officer. She had turned the corner by this time. I would have gone on, but he pulled me back again, and Gordon came up——"

"And stopped to see what the matter was instead of going straight on," commented Menzies bitterly. "I know. Go on."

"He stopped to help me. Mr. Hallett was giving me a fair rough house. It took the two of us to tackle him properly. He kept it up for about three minutes and then gave in."

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"And by that time the girl might have been in Timbuctoo. He put up a plant on you and you both fell into it."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you arrest him?"

"No. We thought it ought to be reported to you before we did anything."

"That's the only gleam of common sense you showed in the whole business. Go away. I'll think it over. And the next time you're shadowing, young man, remember you've got to stick—if the heavens fall you've got to stick."

He whistled softly to himself when the other had gone. "I thought as much. She's put the comether on him—and Hallett is a brainy man."

He revolved the matter steadily in his mind as he walked to Palace Avenue. Hallett, if he could be persuaded, would be a valuable ally in discovering what information Peggy Greye-Stratton had withheld. Menzies used the instruments to his hands; and there was no reason why he should have scruples. If he had troubled at all to formulate the ethics of the question he might have argued that when a crime was committed a person who deliberately withheld or evaded giving information could not fairly object to any means adopted to break her taciturnity. That the rôle he proposed allotting to Hallett was actually that of a

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spy did not concern him. That would be Hallett's own affair if he accepted the commission.

Royal appeared out of nowhere as he neared the corner of Palace Avenue. "Not come back yet," he reported laconically.

"Well, there's plenty of time yet," said Menzies with a resignation that had been conspicuously absent in his talk with the delinquent officer. "She's bound to turn up. You'd better 'phone for Gould to relieve you and get down to the court to charge Smith."

He strolled on to the block of flats, sent his card in to the manager in a sealed envelope, briefly explained as much of his errand as was necessary, and was presently confronted with a weedy, pale-faced youth who nervously twisted his cap in his hands as the detective questioned him. His story varied nothing from the statement Gould had put in.

"Now don't get flustered, old chap," said Menzies with that suave air he knew so well how to assume. "Are you sure you wouldn't know the man again? Try and think for a moment. Was he tall or short, fat or thin?"

"Just an ordinary-looking man," said the attendant. "I didn't pay any notice."

"No, of course not. Do you remember if he had a beard or moustache, or was he clean-shaven?"

The youth wrinkled his brows, and after a moment's

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thought shook his head. "Couldn't say, sir. I rather believe he was clean-shaven."

It was hopeless to try to extract a description from him. Menzies had expected as much. Observation is not often a natural gift; it is a matter of training, and many and laborious are the hours spent in teaching recruits to the C. I. D. staff the art. He switched to another point.

"When the man came out of her flat did he seem in a hurry?"

"No, sir, not particularly. He rang for the lift."

"Didn't say anything?"

"Not to me. At least he had something in his hand. He dropped it and when it rolled down the shaft he swore. I offered to go and get it, but he said it didn't matter—it was only a halfpenny."

"H'm!" Menzies stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and tapped his toe on the floor. "You went and made sure it was only a halfpenny afterwards, of course."

The man's eyes had hitherto not met his. Now they were fixed boldly on his face. "No," he declared. "I didn't think it worth while."

A man may fail to look one in the face and be perfectly honest and truthful. But when such a man does do so it is because he has become conscious that an averted gaze may arouse suspicion. Menzies smiled under his moustache and stretched out a hand. "Where is it?" he added quietly. "Give it to me."

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THE MAELSTROM

The lift attendant flushed and drew back. The directness of the demand had disconcerted him. "I don't know what you mean," he said. "I haven't got anything."

"That so?" said Menzies smilingly. And then, with a swift change of voice: "Now, sonny, don't let's have any monkey business. You can't play with me."

Reluctantly, as though hypnotised, the attendant thrust two fingers into his waistcoat pocket, slowly drew something out, and placed it in the detective's hand.

It was a plain, heavy circlet of gold—a wedding ring!

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CHAPTER IX

JIMMIE HALLETT had run into Weir Menzies in the police court corridor after the magistrate had formally remanded "William Smith." The detective threw up his hands quickly in the attitude of one parrying a blow.

"Don't hit me, Mr. Hallett," he implored. "I've got a weak heart."

Jimmie grinned a little shamefacedly. He had not been quite sure how the detective chief would take the assault on the shadowers of Miss Greye-Stratton. He brazened it out. "Well, what are you going to do about it?" he demanded.

Menzies caught him through the arm and pulled him into a small room set apart for consultations between lawyers and clients. "I suppose you know that men have got six months for less than you did this afternoon. You can't knock police officers about with impunity, you know."

There was an underlying current of seriousness in his jocular tone which Jimmie could not fail to perceive. He ran his hand through his hair. "I'll see you," he said, adopting the language of the poker table. "What are you driving at?"

"This." The detective laid a thick forefinger on the palm of his left hand. "You've got sense, Mr. Hallett,

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and you've had experience. Now I've gone into your credentials and I believe you're straight. But I'm not going to stand for any funny business. I'm investigating a case of murder and anyone that stands in the way is liable to get hurt. Now don't interrupt. Let me finish. I don't know whether you were putting up a grand-stand play after lunch to win the girl's confidence or if she talked you over."

He paused enquiringly. Hallett pressed his lips together firmly. "Go on," he said.

"Right. You were butted into this at the start and I've tried to treat you fairly. Don't you forget murder's a dirty thing, however you look at it. I don't say Miss Greye-Stratton's not straight, but she knows a deuce of a sight more than she ought to—or than she's telling us. She's got something up her sleeve. She's no fool, for all her pretty face. She seems to have taken a fancy to you. Do you know why?"

The other shook his head, although he had a very good idea what Menzies was going to say. His face was impassive.

"For the same reason that the man we've got below tried to get you this morning. You're an important witness. She wants to shut your mouth and to find out how much you really do know."

Jimmie laughed outright. "You're wrong there. She's not asked me a single question. All the talking was on her side."

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Then he realised that he had fallen into a trap. Not that Menzies gave any obvious indication of triumph. He merely stroked his moustache serenely. "Well, I don't know that I'm far wrong. She wouldn't be too quick. So she talked, did she? What did she say?"

The young man was not to be caught off guard a second time. "It will all be stale to you. She repeated what she said she had already told you."

"All the same, there may be something new," persisted the detective. "Let's have it."

"If you like to let me have a look at her statement I'll tell you if there's anything fresh I can add," parried Jimmie.

Menzies raised his eyebrows. "I think I see," he said. "I'd consider this a lot if I were you. Why, man, can't you see she's playing with you. Confidence for confidence is an old trick. She has known you a matter of hours, and here she is pitching a tale to you as though you were an intimate friend. I trust you—you trust me! That's what it comes to. Now why not play our game instead of hers. If she's innocent you won't hurt her, but if she's got her pretty fingers in the tar——"

Hallett became conscious of a smouldering rage at the innuendo of the comfortable, ruddy-faced detective. He did not realise that he was being deliberately provoked

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for a purpose. Menzies wanted to discover without doubt his attitude to the girl.

"Cut it out," he advised curtly. And then more quietly: "I think you entirely misjudge the lady. If I've only known her for a few hours, I guess I'm a better judge of her type than you."

"Bearings a bit hot, eh?" smiled Menzies. "It's no good getting angry with me. I'm clumsy, but I mean well. I hate to see a man stepping into trouble. And you'll find trouble on your hands pretty soon, believe me. If I were you I think I'd carry a life-preserver or advertise that you didn't see the man who killed Greye-Stratton."

Hallett had taken a quick turn or two about the room, his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets. He came to a sudden halt. "What do you mean by that?"

Weir Menzies had a well-worn briar pipe in one hand and a tobacco pouch in the other. He methodically filled the pipe before answering. "Only from what I have gathered the lady's in with a tough mob. I'll know more about 'em by to-morrow, but I don't want you laid out before I've picked up all the ends. I've warned you. You must do as you like. Only don't go believing she's a little blue-eyed saint, that's all."

Jimmie's temper, held in till now, continued to rise. Whether it was the implication that he was being made Miss Greye-Stratton's cats-paw, or the suggestion that the radiant girl was the willing accomplice of a gang

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of criminals, he did not stop to analyse. He was wroth with Menzies because he did not know by intuition what was plain to him—that if she was acting a part it was for the sake of someone else. He regretted now that he was bound not to divulge anything she had told him.

"I guess you're a fool, Menzies," he sneered. "You're barking up the wrong tree."

Menzies took the handle of the door. "You think so, do you? Well, we'll let it go at that." He swung the door open. "I suppose the lady told you she was married?"

He spoke casually as though by an after-thought, but he was quick to observe the change that passed over Jimmie's face. "That's a lie," he blurted out. "You've got something at the back of your head."

The detective swung the door to again and took something from his pocket. "Look at that," he said, and smoothed a sheet of paper before Hallett's eyes.

Jimmie read it over twice, unable at first to completely grasp its significance. It was an attested copy of a marriage certificate between Peggy Greye-Stratton and Stewart Reader Ling.

"She didn't tell you about this," went on the detective levelly. "That may alter your idea that she intends to play straight with you."

Jimmie was struggling with a tangle of thoughts. "Who is Ling?" he demanded.

"A crook of the crookedest. He ran a wholesale fac-

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tory for forged currency notes in the United States ten years ago. That was broken up and he did five years in Sing Sing. He has been at the back of a lottery swindle since he came out and Lord knows what else. We'd lost sight of him till I happened to get hold of this copy. That's the kind of man who's the husband of Miss Greye-Stratton."

"How did you find this out?"

Menzies puffed reflectively. He had no intention of completely exposing his hand. He was certain that Peggy Greye-Stratton was the woman who had given Hallett the cheques and that the latter had deliberately refrained from identifying her. Moreover, he was also convinced that she had told the young man something at lunch, though whether she was, as he affected to believe, using him as a tool he was not in his own mind certain. The more he considered the more he felt that she held the key to the mystery if only she could be induced to speak. With him, with any official of police, she would be on her guard. Hallett, if he could be persuaded, was the one man who might win her confidence without exciting suspicion. So long as his sympathies remained with her he was unlikely to be persuaded. Therefore, if possible, his sympathies had to be alienated.

"Just common sense," growled Menzies, "ordinary common sense. I learned that she had a wedding-ring —though she didn't wear it—sent up to Somerset

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House to inspect the registry of marriages, and got this half an hour ago." He laid a hand gently on the young man's shoulder. "Better do as I advise. Anyway, take care of yourself."

He did not wait for an answer, but moved softly out of the room. He was wise enough to know when to stop. To say more might be to spoil things. Hallett might safely be left to his own reflections.

Hallett was a man whose brain as a rule worked very clearly. But now he was confused, and he strove vainly to reconcile reason with inclination. It seemed ages since the episode of the fog, years since he had looked into the pale oval of Peggy Greye-Stratton's face at lunch. Spite of the convincing proof of the marriage certificate, he could not think of her as a married woman. Anyway, he told himself, if Menzies was right in that it did not follow that all his inferences were right. He had felt the ring of honesty in the story she had told him. And yet the idea of the detective was plausible enough. He could see where things dovetailed. If she were stringing him she had been acute enough to tell him a series of half-truths. If she were a willing accomplice, as Menzies supposed, there was reason enough why she should mislead him. He had met female adventuresses before—pretty, cultivated women, some of them—but he had not been impressed by them as he had been by her. But then the circumstances were different.

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He pondered the matter as he drove back to his hotel. Suppose he did accept Menzies' version—and he admitted to himself that there was a considerable weight of probability in that point of view. He could not see, however, why in that event he should become an unpaid amateur detective. The thought of spying on Peggy Greye-Stratton, adventuress or not, was entirely distasteful to him. He had no interest in the investigation. He had been dragged into the affair entirely by accident. Let the police do their work themselves.

It was in this mood that he arrived at his hotel and repulsed the newspaper men who were still blockading the entrance. He avoided the public rooms. He wanted to be alone. He went up to his private sitting-room.

There it was that a note was brought to him. He tore it open and glanced at it mechanically. But at once his interest was aroused. It had been scribbled in pencil, apparently in haste:

> "I am in trouble. For God's sake come and help me. I don't know to whom else to appeal. Call at 140 Ludford Road, Brixton, as soon as you can, but alone. Ask for me."

There was no signature, but Hallett needed none. He had never seen Peggy Greye-Stratton's writing, but the small, neat characters were beyond doubt to him.

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His resolution to stand aside was already being put to the test. He held the note in his hand while he recalled Menzies' warnings. He was an important witness. Already one attempt had been made to secure his silence. Was this a trap?

Yet, on the other hand, if the girl was being used to secure his silence, she could not know that he had changed his decision to stand by her. She must suppose—the conversation at lunch would have made her believe—that he had allied himself on her side. No, the letter was certainly genuine.

He impressed the address on his memory, and tearing the letter into little bits, dropped them into the waste-paper basket. Then he searched in his kit-bag till he found, at the bottom, a small automatic revolver and a packet of cartridges. He loaded the weapon carefully and dropped it in his jacket pocket.

He had no idea where Brixton was, but a study of a street map gave him its location. He did not want to have to ask questions. He had come to have too much respect for Menzies' methods in following up a trail for that. For the same reason, when he went out into the Strand he turned abruptly in his walk once or twice.

The useful little book of maps issued by the Underground railways helped him on his next course. He went into a tube station and booked for Hampstead. At Leicester Square he changed for Piccadilly Circus.

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There he changed for Kennington Oval. By the time he emerged into the sunlight he was satisfied that if there had been any shadowers on his trail he had thrown them off.

He had selected the Oval Station because the map had shown him that the district lay on the verge of Brixton. He was about to hail a taxi when his eye caught the label on one of the big electric cars swinging by. He jumped aboard.

Ludford Road proved to be a quiet road of small houses buried away at the back of Brixton Town Hall. It was a street that might very well have been inhabited solely by moderate salaried city clerks—retired, unobtrusive, and respectable semi-detached villas with neat squares of gardens behind iron railings. It was no street of mystery.

Hallett walked to the door of No. 140 and pressed the bell. It opened promptly, revealing a plump, pleasant-faced little woman with shrewd eyes and a strong mouth. Jimmie, whose right hand had been gripped round the automatic in his jacket pocket, removed it hurriedly and lifted his hat.

"I wish to see Miss Olney, if I may," he said.

The woman shook her head. "You have made a mistake. There's no one of that name lives here," she said, and Jimmie's last shred of suspicion vanished. If the note had been sent for a trap there was evidently no anxiety for him to walk into it.

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THE MAELSTROM

"Pardon me. Miss Greye-Stratton, I should have said. My name is Hallett."

She smiled and flung the door wide. "Oh, yes. She is expecting you. Will you come in?"

Jimmie passed into the narrow little hall and the door shut.

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CHAPTER X

WITH the satisfied feeling of a man who knew he had earned his salary, Weir Menzies betook himself homewards. As he boarded the Tooting electric car at the corner of Westminster Bridge he automatically shut out from his mind all thought of Greye-Stratton. He had ceased to be Weir Menzies, chief inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department. He was Weir Menzies, Esq., of Magersfontein Road, Upper Tooting, who, like other gentlemen of business, left his business worries behind him at the office.

He ate his dinner, while Mrs. Menzies, a motherly little woman who never asked questions, retailed the latest domestic gossip. He added his own quota. He was afraid that Browns, the new butcher in the High Street, was not doing too well. As he pushed his chair back and lit a cigar, Mrs. Menzies seized the opportunity to tell of a calamity.

"Bruin's been in mischief. He dug a big hole under that Captain Hayward rose today."

This news roused Menzies. He kicked off his slippers and began relacing his boots. "That da—shed dog. I'll bet he's ruined it. We'll have to chain him up. Ring the bell and ask Nellie for a candle, will you, dear?"

Candle in hand, he led the way to the garden, mut-

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tering discontentedly as he cast its glow on the damage. He raised his voice. "Bruin, here, Bruin," and a heavy bobtailed sheep dog came lumbering over the lawn. Weir Menzies regarded him sternly and pointed an accusing finger at the hole. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded. "You wicked, wicked dog." Bruin sprawled with downcast head, his whole attitude one of penitence and shame. "Where's the whip?" asked Menzies. "Go fetch it."

Reluctantly, with slow step like a boy sent by his school-master for a cane, Bruin recrossed the lawn, returning in a few seconds with a dog whip between his teeth. He cowered while Menzies administered a couple of light blows—blows so light that they were rather symbolic of disgrace than actual punishment. His master slipped the whip into his pocket. "Now go and see that the house is safe."

The dog, now that retribution was over, slipped away. Detectives, for all their profession, are no more immune from burglary than ordinary mortals, but Menzies had little fear of his house being looted while Bruin was abroad. To and fro over the house he trotted, pushing open doors or whining till they were opened by the maid, and inspecting windows and fastenings with an intelligence almost uncanny. By the time he had finished his inspection Menzies was in his own room. The dog trotted in, sat on his haunches, and made a low crooning noise in his throat.

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"All correct, eh?" said Menzies. "Good dog. Go to bed."

He himself was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. Yet it seemed to him that he had not been asleep five minutes when the deep boom of the dog's bark and an insistent ringing of the bell aroused him. He looked at his watch as he slipped out of bed. It was four o'clock. He had slept seven hours.

He shivered as he shuffled downstairs in his slippers and opened the door. "Why, it's you, Congreve," he exclaimed. "What the devil is the matter? Come in."

Detective-Sergeant Congreve (graded first-class at headquarters) was too wise a man to say anything at an open door with a taxi-driver within earshot. He followed his chief into the dining-room and Menzies switched on the light. "The lady's come back," he interrogated.

"No, sir. I wouldn't have worried you for that. It's Hallett. He's gone, too."

Menzies muttered a little comminatory service—in a low voice, because Mrs. Menzies was probably awake. "That's awkward," he said at last. "I ought to have him kept under observation, but I guessed I could rely on the hotel people to let us know. I didn't want to have to arrest him for putting any more of our men on the sick list, but I wish I'd taken a chance now. He'd have been safer for us and safer for himself under lock and key. What's the point?"

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THE MAELSTROM

"He came back yesterday afternoon, went to his room, found a note waiting him, and went out without saying anything. He has not come back. The hotel people rang me up an hour ago and I went round there. I found the note." He shook an envelope on to the table and a shower of torn fragments dropped. "I didn't wait to put it together. I came straight on here."

The chief inspector became unpleasantly conscious that his pyjamas were an inadequate protection against the bite of the cold. "I suppose this means that I've got to turn out," he grumbled. "I seem to get all the jobs where there's no rest. It's enough to make a man turn it up and take a cottage in the country. Have a go at that note, Congreve, like a good chap, while I go and get some clothes on."

By the time he was dressed Congreve had the note ready for him.

"It looks as if the girl had got him," he commented as he passed the copy over to the chief inspector. "Anyway, there's an address."

Menzies laid the copy down on the table. "That's something," he agreed cautiously. "But it looks to me as though we're right up against it, old man. Somebody'll have to stand from under when the thud comes. What do you make of it?"

"Empty house, likely," said Congreve laconically. "They've shut Hallett's mouth. If you're right about Errol, Ling & Co., sir, they'll not stand on ceremony.

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They're up to their necks already. We'll find a dead man in Ludford Road. They won't let Hallett do any talking."

He spoke in the matter-of-fact way in which a surgeon might contemplate the result of a dangerous operation—not with the shudder with which the average man would speak of a cold-blooded murder. The case with which they were dealing concerned men who he believed would be desperate now that one life had been sacrificed in their efforts to cover their trail.

"I don't know," said Menzies thoughtfully. "They might go to extremes if they were forced, but they won't make the pace too hot. We've got nothing concrete against 'em yet—nothing even to suggest that one of them was near Linstone Terrace Gardens when the old man was killed. You bet they'll have alibis all right, all right. If we could lay our fingers on 'em this minute they'd brazen it out."

"You see," he went on, "unless we prove these other people accessories there is only one person whose neck is in jeopardy. That's the actual murderer. He probably wouldn't object to save himself by another murder. But the others are not going to that length if they can help it. They intend, I imagine, to try and bottle him up till Smith is discharged and the whole boiling of them make a clean get-away."

"But," objected Congreve, "Royal's evidence alone will convict the man."

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"Maybe they don't understand that," retorted Menzies. "Anyway we won't worry yet. I'm going on to Ludford Road. I shall want you to go back and swear out a search-warrant in case it's wanted. Also have that note properly done up and photographed. You might get a paper merchant to examine a piece of the paper. There's just a chance we might find out when it was bought and who bought it. You can get an all-night tramcar at the end of the road. Leave the taxi for me. I'll have to change again."

An hour later a plump, ruddy-faced man, smoking a clay pipe, and with his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, slouched along Ludford Road. The loosened shoulders, the shambling gait, the unpolished down-at-heels boots (one of them laced with string), all told of the practical vagrant. Yet Weir Menzies had not disguised himself in the sense that disguise would be understood by those whose knowledge of Scotland Yard is derived from books and newspapers.

His face was untouched by grease-paint, he wore no wig nor false beard. He was just Weir Menzies as he might have been if fortune had made him a tramp. Yet he bore little superficial resemblance to the Weir Menzies, Esq., churchwarden of All Saints, Upper Tooting, or the Mr. Weir Menzies, chief inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department. His hair had been rubbed up until it looked as if it had not seen brush or comb for a month, and was surmounted by a battered

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Trilby hat. He had rubbed his hands on a doormat and then on his face to prevent any suspicion of unnatural cleanliness. His neat moustache had been combed out till it hung down ragged and bristly. His clothes were shabby and no two garments matched. They might have been given him at different times by charitable householders.

There was nothing which could go astray and betray that he had assumed a character. Indeed, any accident to clothes or person would but increase the disreputability of his looks.

Twice he shuffled up and down the street, the second time meeting a policeman, who paused and without saying anything watched him out of sight. The two met again a quarter of an hour later and this time the constable was not so forbearing. He turned his bull's-eye full on the tramp and surveyed him up and down. It was at the back of his mind that he might have a charge "loitering with intent to commit a felony."

"What's the game, Isaacstein? What are you hanging around for?" he demanded. And because he had been trained not to take risks, his hand gripped the greasy collar of the nondescript and administered a slight warning shake.

One hundred and eighty pounds of trained policeman took the pavement with a thud. He sat up ruefully and with wrath. One does not expect a rickety, middle-aged tramp to have a working knowledge of ju-jitsu. And

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it astonished him still more that his assailant remained instead of taking advantage of the opportunity and making a dash for freedom.

"All right," he growled and advanced cautiously.

"Don't make a fool of yourself, my man," said the tramp authoritatively. "I'm C. I. Walk on quietly to the corner and I'll show you my warrant card."

The constable hesitated. He was young and this was beyond his experience. But the authority of the voice shook him and he obeyed the order. Within five minutes he learned how near he had been to committing a bad mistake.

"I'm sorry, sir," he apologised. "I didn't know."

"That's all right," said Menzies. "Of course you didn't. I'm not blaming you. Now you hang on to this corner for half an hour. I'll be responsible to your superiors. Just stand here and keep your eyes and ears open in case I should want you."

He had straightened up during the conversation, but now he became again the shambling hobo. A clock somewhere had just chimed six, and he judged that there might be a chance to commence operations. He moved furtively up to the door of number one hundred and forty and rang the bell. Twice he had to repeat the summons before there was any movement within. Then a window was flung up above and a woman's voice demanded the business of the intruder.

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Menzies' answer was to press the bell again. He had no very definite plan in his mind. His was merely a reconnoitring expedition. He wanted the door opened and had no intention of carrying on a conversation with the lady upstairs, whoever she was, at the top of his voice. He was shielded from her sight by the porch and he did not offer to step out.

The window closed with a bang and there were sounds of someone moving. Presently the door opened, and the pleasant-faced woman who had met Hallett confronted the detective.

"'Ave you got a bite you could spare a pore man, lidy," he whined. "I've been walkin' all night an' nothin' 'as passed my lips since yesterday."

The pleasant-faced lady frowned. She had a dogged chin and a wide mouth and was quite obviously not the sort of person to be played with. "I've got nothing for you," she snapped, perhaps with excusable viciousness for one who had been dragged out of bed by a beggar. She flung the door to forcefully. Menzies' foot, however, was a shade the quicker as he thrust it in the opening.

"Why, Gwennie," he said smilingly, in his natural voice; "this is a nice welcome for an old friend. "Don't you remember me? I'm Weir Menzies."

She gave a quick exclamation and pulled the door back. Her face did not for a moment bear any very noticeable expression of delight at the reunion. That,

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however, was only for a second. The next instant she had thrust out her hand with a bright smile.

"Why, so it is. Who'd have thought of seeing you here—and in a rig like that. Come right in, Mr. Menzies. I am glad to see you."

"After you, Gwennie," said Menzies politely but firmly. "Lead the way. Never mind the door. I'll shut it."

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CHAPTER XI

Gwennie Lyne was a lady with a reputation—or without one. It depended on the point of view. As far back as Menzies could remember she had been a notable figure in the little coterie of master criminals who know no nation and to whom the world is a hunting ground. Long, long ago, in the days when bank robbery in the United States had been a profitable pastime, she had organised and even played an executive part in exploits any one of which ought to have made her fortune.

Menzies knew her record almost by heart, for she was one of the very few "Classic" criminals who brought to bear on an undertaking an ingenuity, enterprise, and audacity that had won her through in a score of tight places. At ten years of age she had assisted her mother to pick pockets in Philadelphia. At twenty she had married Jim Lyne, bank burglar and gunman. At twenty-one she had effected a particularly daring escape from Sing Sing. At twenty-five she had held a pistol to a watchman's head at a bank in New Jersey while her companions ransacked the vaults. At thirty she had probably more experience in every grade of professional crime—short of murder, which is not professional crime—than any person of her own age, male or female. Opportunely enough, her husband, always too much of a swashbuckler for his trade, was shot in

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a drunken brawl in Wisconsin at this time. Thereafter she held her way undisputed, always ready to become a partner in any department of the higher walks of crime, from receiving, to organising a bogus bank.

She had of course met with checks. There were few civilised countries where she had not tasted prison for longer or shorter periods. All that was in the day's work.

It is a myth that there is a distinctive criminal physiognomy. Fifty years or more of crime had left Gwennie Lyne untouched by any outward mark. Hers was a face which none could dream of distrusting on sight—she had been a handsome and was still a comely woman. The mouth was perhaps a trifle wide and it curved downwards at the edges. Her hazel eyes were shrewd, but with the apparent shrewdness of years, not the cunning of the outcast. She spoke softly, with a slight drawl, but her voice was the voice of a cultivated woman.

Menzies had recognised her with something of a thrill. Her presence in the combination against him was singularly unwelcome, for he knew her fertility of resource and her daring. On the other hand, the mere fact that he knew she was with the other side was something gained.

His right hand dropped to his trousers pocket as he followed her, to make sure that the little baton he had

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placed there before leaving home was in place. He rarely carried a pistol for fear that he might be tempted to use it before it was absolutely necessary.

She took him into one of the two small front rooms of the house and pulled up the blinds to admit the now growing daylight. He observed "The Stag at Bay" and a "View of Naples" on the vivid yellowish-green wall-paper, and it needed not the faded, worn horsehair Victorian furniture, the pile of books on a table in the window, to tell him that Gwennie had had no hand in furnishing the house. She had the virtue of taste, at any rate, and probably the place had been taken already furnished—and for a purpose. He wondered whether its purpose had been entirely fulfilled or not.

"Sit you down, Mr. Menzies," she said briskly. "It's early hours for a call, but I guess you've got some reason at the back of your head. You'll have some breakfast. I'll go and see about it and make myself tidy."

The detective's broad figure blocked the doorway. He smilingly shook his head and with one hand behind him felt for the key. There was none in the lock. He jerked a chair towards him with his foot, placed it against the door, and sat down.

"No breakfast for me, Gwennie, thank you. And you look very charming as you are. Suppose we talk."

She made a graceful gesture of resignation and sat down, her hands in her lap. "I guess I wouldn't poison you," she said.

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THE MAELSTROM

"Aren't you a deportee, Gwennie?" countered the man. "Surely my memory isn't playing me tricks. Wasn't an order of deportation made against you—let me see—six years ago now? You will remember a diamond tiara in Bond Street."

She faced him placidly. "You've got a good memory. What are you going to do about it?"

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked. "Oh, nothing much. I needn't tell a lady of your experience it would have been wiser to stay where you belong."

"See Section 4, Vagrancy Act, 1824," she laughed. "That's it, isn't it. Oh, I've been there before. You can't alarm me any by talking." And Menzies knew the astute old lady was trying to make him lose his temper.

He lifted his clay pipe from his lips. "I've always admired your talents, Gwennie"—she rose and swept him a mocking curtesy—"and we've been pretty good pals—business apart."

"Lord bless the man," she cried. "Is this a proposal. I do believe he's making love to me." She shook a well-manicured finger at him. "I warn you—I might accept you."

He grinned appreciatively at the thrust but shook his head reprovingly. "I'm out for business, Gwennie. Let's cut out the funny business and get down to hard tacks. If you won't listen I'll have to take you along, that's all."

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"And if I do?" she interpolated quickly.

"I'm making no bargains. Will you sit tight?"

"I'll be as good as gold," she promised, a demure half smile still lurking about her lips.

Menzies was too old a hand to make the mistake of despising such an antagonist. The woman knew every trick in the game as well as he did. An experience that went back to the cradle, and a cunning and brain power by which the organised detective forces of the world had often been defeated, had placed her chief among the very few criminals who can plan and successfully carry out great coups. On his side, however, Menzies had one factor on which he placed hopes. There is no such thing as honour among thieves. Sometimes there is a community of interest which forces them to keep faith one with another, but very rarely will one run a risk to save another. The detective had to stir Gwennie to alarm for her own safety—but whether she would allow herself to be alarmed or not was a doubt in his mind.

"Where is Mr. Hallett?" he asked bluntly.

If a person, ignorant of the elementary principles of arithmetic, was suddenly asked to solve a problem in algebra he might have looked as Gwennie did then. Her air of bewilderment was an education. Had Menzies been less sure of his ground even he might have been deluded. She stared at him blankly. "Mr. Hallett?" she repeated. "I never heard of him."

The man's face set grimly and his eyes grew hard.

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"Or of Reader Ling, or of Errol, or Miss Greye-Stratton, or William Smith?" he demanded.

"I know Ling—some," she said artlessly. "But I haven't seen him for two or three years. Why don't you tell me straight what you're driving at, Mr. Menzies? I'm always willing to help you if I can."

"I aim to take you to pieces and see what makes you tick if you're not careful, Gwennie," he said. "You'd better listen. You know of the murder at Linstone Terrace Gardens." He tapped out the bowl of his pipe against the heel of his boot and menaced her with the stem. "I'm not saying you had anything to do with it—but you know something." She met his eyes steadily. "You're going down, Gwennie, don't make any error about it. But I'd hate to be hard on you. I know you've never liked gun-play and I'm willing to believe that it was an accident, so far as you were concerned—that someone got out of hand. You know we've got this chap—Smith he calls himself. He's likely to get loose-lipped, you know."

The last hint was sheer bluff, and Menzies saw it was of no avail even before she replied. She was not to be bamboozled into an acknowledgment that she knew anything of Smith. "You believe I've had something to do with the Greye-Stratton murder," she answered. "If you've made up your mind I'll not argue. You'll have to find a better fairy-story than that to get me

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down to the Old Bailey." She rose and walked over to a seat nearer to the window.

"I should have thought a lady of your penetration could have put two and two together from seeing me here," he remarked.

She looked through the window. "I want to know," she said indifferently.

"There was a note sent to Mr. Hallett, you know. It asked him to come to this address. We have got the note, which is quite enough for me to act on if I want to charge you on suspicion of being concerned in this murder."

He thought that her cheek went a trifle paler but he could not be certain. Mrs. Lyne was not a lady who was likely to show her emotions by any physical change. She seemed deep in thought. She watched through the window for two or three minutes before replying. Her white fingers played an imaginary piano on her lap. Then she jerked her head abruptly as though she had come to some decision. "Where do I come in?" she asked. "I'm not admitting that I know anything, but *if* I did, would it be worth my while to tell you? What should I stand to gain, anyway? Let's talk plain business. You don't expect something for nothing. As far as I can see all you promise is your best thanks if I'll kindly supply you with evidence to get myself convicted."

There was reason in her point of view. There are

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countries where a certain amount of elasticity is allowed to detectives in the matter of bargaining with guilty persons. But Scotland Yard holds very strict views on that point. The slightest resemblance of partiality in its men is rigorously condemned. Menzies was in a difficulty and knew it.

"There's something in what you say, Gwennie," he argued easily. "Only don't lose sight of this—I've got enough to act on in regard to you." He placed his hands on his knees and leaned forward. "It isn't as if we weren't bound to get the rest of our evidence sooner or later. You would be only saving time. You know if I put in a word for you at a trial——"

She interrupted him. "I'll climb down," she said. "You've got me docketed and I know when I'm beat." Her bright face relapsed into a momentary scowl. "I was foolish to send Hallett that note. I thought he might not take any notice of a verbal message. After all I guess you'll search this house, and you'll be bound to find him."

"He's here?"

She nodded. "He's here. He's had a tiring night if I'm any judge. If you'll stand out of the doorway we'll get along and drag him up. We stowed him in the cellar."

He had too much knowledge of Miss Lyne's resourcefulness to take any chances. She had the reputation of being a bitter fighter when hardest pressed and he

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was alert for any indication that she meant to throw him off his guard. He gripped her wrist as he opened the door. "I'm going to hold tight," he warned.

"Oh, if you like it," she retorted, and they passed side by side into the passage.

In the semi-darkness by the kitchen door she stopped and pushed open a cupboard under the stairs. "It's here," she said. "Have you got a match? There's a trap-door."

"We'll have to do without a match," he remarked. "I like clinging to you, Gwennie."

She made no answer, but he felt her stoop, and himself bent and groped on the floor. The fingers of his right hand came in contact with a heavy bolt, which he withdrew. She in turn flung back the trap-door and both peered down into the square of blackness which marked the opening.

"You there, Mr. Hallett?" he cried.

A muffled, inarticulate sound reached him. The woman raised herself almost upright. "He's tied and gagged. We'll need that match, after all, Mr. Menzies. There's a ladder somewhere."

He felt in his pocket with his free right hand and passed her a box of matches. "You'd better strike it, then. Hurry up."

She fumbled with the matches clumsily enough, which was only natural. There was a quick burst of flame as the whole box flared up, and then Menzies gave a

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cry as she brought round the flaming box with all the force of her left hand full in his face. His grip on her wrist involuntarily relaxed and the moment she had been waiting for arrived. She flung her full weight sideways upon him and he collapsed down the open trap-door.

She flung the door swiftly to, pushed home the bolt, and daintily brushing the dirt from her dressing-gown, withdrew, closing the cupboard door behind her.

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CHAPTER XII

Weir Menzies, bruised in body but more battered in his feelings, was on his feet in a flash. Only the need for instant action kept him from expressing in unchurchwardenly terms his opinion of the trick that had been played him. A ladder which had made itself painfully felt in his descent he now ascended with a rush. He scarcely hoped that the trap was still unsecured, but he was a man who rarely took anything for granted. His fingers pressed against the rough surface of the boards and he gave one futile heave. Then he sat down on the top step to consider matters quietly.

It is an elementary principle continually dinned into the ears of junior members of the service that never in any circumstances must a prisoner upon whom hands have once been laid be permitted to escape. A captain who has lost his ship feels little more agony of mind than a Scotland Yard man who has lost his prisoner. It is always difficult to define the difference between negligence and ill luck.

True Gwennie had not been technically under arrest, but that was small consolation. He had intended to arrest her and she had outwitted him. That was the galling part—a part that could admit of little explanation or extenuation when he came to submit his report

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to headquarters. He—a chief inspector of the C. I. D. —had dropped into this muddle.

He put the personal aspect aside for the moment while he sought to disentangle motives and probabilities. Gwennie could have no hope that his imprisonment would be more than temporary. She was too old a hand for that. Even if he were eliminated altogether, the investigation would still go on. His progress was recorded at Scotland Yard and there were able men ready to take it up where he had left off. Also she could scarcely suppose that he had ventured unsupported into the house. She would realise his colleagues would not be far away.

It needed no great reasoning power to conclude that her little effort against him was meant merely as a diversion to afford her time to make a get-away. And more, it seemed likely that she would succeed.

"I'd like to wring her neck," mused Menzies aloud and stabbed a hand viciously into his pocket to see whether he had a spare box of matches.

Down below in the darkness something stirred. The detective more than ever regretted the absence of matches. He cautiously descended the ladder and groped his way towards the sound. The cellar had seemingly been used as a depository of useless lumber and more than once he stumbled before, laying on a heap of coals, he placed his hands on a warm form. The figure moved under his touch and he felt the cords

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that enwrapped it. He slipped his pocket-knife under the bonds and the man moved stiffly, sat up, extracted a gag from his mouth, and spat.

"That you, Hallett?" said Menzies.

"Yes." The young man broke into a cackling laugh. "They've got you, then, Menzies. If I wasn't so sore this would be funny."

"You've a keen sense of humour," retorted Menzies grimly. "I don't see anything funny about it. Here—hold tight. Don't go falling about yet. I'll give you a rub-down and you'll be all right in a jiffy."

He chafed the numbed limbs until Hallett groaned with the exquisite agony of returning circulation. "Matches are what I want more than anything else at the moment," he went on. "Do you happen to have any?"

"I think there's some—right-hand vest pocket," groaned Hallett. "Easy—you're murdering me."

Menzies extracted a small silver box of vestas and struck a light. "You'll do now," he said. "Better keep quiet for a little while I have a look round. We'll talk when there's more time."

The light showed a low-pitched cellar such as is used for the storage of coals in many suburban houses. Hallett, indeed, had been lying upon a heap of coals and almost immediately above was an iron plate which Menzies supposed opened out on to the pavement. He

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pushed it upwards and a slash of light showed that he was right.

"By James!—I'll do Gwennie yet," he exclaimed. "This hole was not built to fit me, but I guess you'll be able to wriggle through, Mr. Hallett. You're slimmer than I. Feel you'd like to have a walk about now? Here, let me give you a hand?"

Supported by the chief inspector, Hallett took two or three uncertain steps. His strength was rapidly returning to him and by the time they had been twice round the cellar he declared himself fit for the undertaking. Menzies lifted him bodily and he wriggled upwards through the manhole. It was a tight squeeze and he sat gasping and exhausted on the pavement by the time he was through.

"What next?" he asked.

"There should be a constable at the corner to the right. Get him and break into the house if you can't do it any other way. Tell him to come and speak to me if he won't take instructions from you."

The policeman proved amenable, and within ten minutes Menzies had the pleasure of hearing the bolts of his prison withdraw and he heaved a sigh of relief as he emerged into comparatively open air. "That's better," he declared. He turned sharply on the constable. "Have you seen anyone leave the house since I came in?"

"There was a lady and gentleman about twenty min-

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utes or half an hour ago, sir. I could have stopped 'em, but I didn't know whether you might want me to. I had no instructions. The gentleman was carrying a bag and the lady asked me where they were likely to find a taxi-cab."

"Did you direct them?"

"I told them the town hall was the nearest rank."

"Hump yourself down to that rank," said Menzies, "and find out if they took a cab. Get the number and hurry back, bringing a cab with you. Come on, Hallett. We'll make sure that all the birds have flown before we have that talk. And a wash wouldn't be amiss for either of us," he added, surveying the other's coal-blackened face.

"You've burnt yourself," said Jimmie.

"That," commented Menzies. "Oh, that's nothing —only Gwennie's trade-mark. She's a regular little spit-cat, isn't she?"

A room to room search of the house satisfied Menzies that it was empty save for themselves. He postponed a more detailed search until Congreve should arrive and led the way to the room in which Gwennie Lyne had received him. He dropped into a chair and looked Hallett up and down.

"If it hadn't been my duty to get you out of this hole," he said, "I'd have felt inclined to let your friends stew you in your own juice. 'You're a little too inclined to go off at half-cock for my taste."

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Hallett flushed a little. He remembered that but for the detective he would probably have been still in the cellar, and he had passed no word of thanks. He tried to overlook the reproof in Menzies' tone. "I'll own I blundered, if that will satisfy you." He held out his hand. "If it hadn't been for you I'd have still been sweating my soul out down below. I take it all back. You're a good man, Menzies."

"The girl played you up, did she? You're not the first that's been made a fool of by a woman, my lad."

Hallett's teeth gritted together. Menzies seemed to have the faculty of invariably smoothing him up the wrong way. "Can't you leave that end alone," he said coldly. "You may be right or wrong, but you know my opinion. Miss Greye-Stratton isn't a criminal. You're judgment's warped."

Menzies smiled and made a gesture as of one indulging a child's whim. "All right, my son. Have it your own way. I know"—he cocked one leg over the other —"if I'd been lured into this shanty by the lady and bundled down to keep company with the coals, what *I* should think. I'm not blaming you for jumping to help a lady in distress—but if you'd gone to the Yard with that note instead of playing knight-errant, it would have been the sensible thing."

"That note was forged. I'll swear she had no hand in it."

Weir Menzies was whistling a tune softly to himself.

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THE MAELSTROM

He stopped in the middle of a bar. "My dear young friend, for a man who's knocked about the world you're the most verdant sprig I've run across for a long time."

"How'd you know I was here?" demanded Jimmie.

"You left the fragments of the note in your room and we put them together. That's all. Suppose you let me know what happened. We'll want your statement, anyway."

Jimmie Hallett felt his unshaven chin absently. "It's no good explaining to you why I fell into this frame-up. You wouldn't understand and you can call me all the names you like if it relieves you any. You've got to take it that I felt I had to do something when I got back to the hotel and found the note. That was how I came out here. I guess I led any of your men who were shadowing me a little dance. I hopped all over the old village."

"If you went to any trouble to avoid my men," said Menzies drily, "it was waste of time. There was no one following you. If there had been you wouldn't have thrown them off. That doesn't matter, though. Go on."

"Well," said Jimmie, "there isn't much more to it. A nice, gentle old lady—it's she who you call Gwennie, I suppose—opened the door to me. I was on the lookout for tricks, but she pretty well threw me off my guard when she denied that she knew Miss Olney—al-

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though when I mentioned Miss Greye-Stratton's name she was as nice as pie and asked me right in—into this very room.

"She asked me to sit down and went away—as I supposed—to fetch Miss Greye-Stratton. She was back in two or three minutes and she pitched me a little tale—I suppose while things were being got good and ready for me. She told me that she was an old friend of Miss Greye-Stratton——"

"Didn't that strike you as curious, seeing she hadn't recognised the name of Olney?" asked Menzies.

"It didn't occur to me—then," admitted Hallett. "I never gave it a thought. As I was saying, she declared that she was an old friend and that the girl had sought her advice in her difficulties. You can laugh, but I gulped it all down. Then there came a tap at the door. 'Peggy is ready to see you,' said she, and we got up. I held the door open for her and passed through close behind. The passage isn't well lighted, as you may have noticed, and as I half turned to close the door after me someone dropped a bag over my head and shoulders.

"I did my best but I didn't stand a dog's chance. If I'd had my arms free I might have done something, but that smothering bag prevented anything like an effective struggle. I had a gun but I couldn't get at it. There were three of them—Gwennie and two men—and I was dragged back into this room and handled.

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"At last the two men managed to get hold of my wrists and held me while Gwennie drew the sack off. Then I was lashed and gagged as you found me.

"'Sorry to put you to this inconvenience, Mr. Hallett,' said Gwennie, 'but we just had to make sure of you.' I glared at her. Of course I couldn't answer. Laying as I was I couldn't see the faces of the two men—they seemed to be purposely keeping out of my line of sight, but one of them struck in.

"'Think yourself lucky that we haven't put you right out.'

"'All right,' thinks I to myself, 'I know that voice.' It was that of the man who let me in at Linstone Terrace Gardens.

"'You keep quiet,' said Gwennie—she seemed to be boss of the show. 'Now just listen to me, Mr. Hallett. You've been jolted into a business that is no concern of yours, and we're not the sort of people to allow our plans to be interfered with. It's up to us to keep your mouth shut about what you've seen or know, but you won't come to any harm unless our hands are forced. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with some discomfort for some hours, though, until we can make arrangements.'

"They lifted me up and carried me down that cellar—and anything harder than the coal they laid me on I've never known. There was a clock I could hear striking somewhere, so I was able to keep track of time.

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