

Wallace Edgar

The Duke in the Suburbs



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Содержание

Part I	6
Part II	42
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	59

Edgar Wallace

The Duke in the Suburbs

Dedication

TO

MARION CALDECOTT

WITH THE AUTHOR'S HOMAGE

Author's Apology

The author, who is merely an inventor of stories, may at little cost impress his readers with the scope of his general knowledge. For he may place the scene of his story in Milan at the Court of the Visconti and throw back the action half a thousand years, drawing across his stage splendid figures slimly silked or sombrely satined, and fill their mouths with such awesome oaths

as "By Bacchus!" or "Sapristi!" and the like. He may also, does the fine fancy seize him, take for his villain no less a personage than Monseigneur, for hero a Florentine Count, as bright lady of the piece, a swooning flower of the Renaissance, all pink and white, with a bodice of plum velvet cut square at the breast, and showing the milk-white purity of her strong young throat.

It is indeed a more difficult matter when one is less of an inventor, than a painstaking recorder of facts.

When our characters are conventionally attired in trousers of the latest fashion, and ransacking mythology the oath-makers can accept no god worthier of witness than High Jove.

Greatest of all disabilities consider this fact: that the scene must be laid in Brockley, S.E., a respectable suburb of London, and you realize the apparent hopelessness of the self-imposed task of the writer who would weave romance from such unpromising material.

It would indeed seem well-nigh hopeless to extract the exact proportions of tragedy and farce from Kymott Crescent that go to make your true comedy, were it not for the intervention of the Duke, of Hank, his friend, of Mr. Roderick Nape, of Big Bill Slew of Four Ways, Texas, and last, but by no means least, Miss Alicia Terrill of "The Ferns," 66, Kymott Crescent.

Part I

THE DUKE ARRIVES

I

The local directory is a useful institution to the stranger, but the intimate directory of suburbia, the libellous "Who's Who," has never and will never be printed. Set in parallel columns, it must be clear to the meanest intelligence that, given a free hand, the directory editor could produce a volume which for sparkle and interest, would surpass the finest work that author has produced, or free library put into circulation. Thus: —

AUTHORIZED STATEMENT.
KYMOTT CRESCENT.

PRIVATE AMENDMENT.

44. Mr. A. B. Wilkes.
Merchant.

Wilkes drinks: comes home in cabs which he can ill afford. Young George Wilkes is a most insufferable little beast, uses scent in large quantities. Mrs. W. has not had a new dress for years.

56. Mr. T. B. Coyter.
Accountant.

Coyter has three stories which he *will* insist upon repeating. Mrs. C. smokes and is considered a little fast. No children: two cats, which Mrs. C. calls "her darlings." C. lost a lot of money in a ginger beer enterprise.

66. Mrs. Terrill.

Very close, not sociable, in fact, "stuck up." Daughter rather pretty, but stand-offish—believed to have lived in great style before Mr. T. died, but now scraping along on £200 a year. Never give parties and seldom go out.

74. Mr. Nape

Retired civil servant. Son Roderick supposed to be very clever; never cuts his hair: a great brooder, reads too many trashy detective stories.

And so on *ad infinitum*, or rather until the portentous and grave pronouncement "Here is Kymott Terrace" shuts off the Crescent, its constitution and history. There are hundreds of

Kymott Crescents in London Suburbia, populated by immaculate youths of a certain set and rigid pattern, of girls who affect open-worked blouses and short sleeves, of deliberate old gentlemen who water their gardens and set crude traps for the devastating caterpillar. And the young men play cricket in snowy flannels, and the girls get hot and messy at tennis, and the old gentlemen foregather in the evening at the nearest open space to play bowls with some labour and no little dignity. So it was with the Crescent.

In this pretty thoroughfare with its £100 p.a. houses (detached), its tiny carriage drives, its white muslin curtains hanging stiffly from glittering brass bands, its window boxes of clustering geraniums and its neat lawns, it was a tradition that no one house knew anything about its next-door neighbour—*or wanted to know*. You might imagine, did you find yourself deficient in charity, that such a praiseworthy attitude was in the nature of a polite fiction, but you may judge for yourself.

The news that No. 64, for so long standing empty, and bearing on its blank windows the legend "To Let – apply caretaker," had at length found a tenant was general property on September 6. The information that the new people would move in on the 17th was not so widespread until two days before that date.

Master Willie Outram (of 65, "Fairlawn ") announced his intention of "seeing what they'd got," and was very promptly and properly reproved by his mother.

"You will be good enough to remember that only rude people

stare at other people's furniture when it is being carried into the house," she admonished icily; "be good enough to keep away, and if I see you near 64 when the van comes I shall be very cross."

Which gives the lie to the detractors of Kymott Crescent.

Her next words were not so happily chosen.

"You might tell me what She's like," she added thoughtfully.

To the disgust of Willie, the van did not arrive at 64 until dusk. He had kept the vigil the whole day to no purpose. It was a small van, damnably small, and I do not use the adverb as an expletive, but to indicate how this little pantehnicon, might easily have ineffaceably stamped the penury of the new tenants.

And there was no She.

Two men came after the van had arrived.

They were both tall, both dressed in grey, but one was older than the other.

The younger man was clean-shaven, with a keen brown face and steady grey eyes that had a trick of laughing of themselves. The other might have been ten years older. He too was clean-shaven, and his skin was the hue of mahogany.

A close observer would not have failed to notice, that the hands of both were big, as the hands of men used to manual labour.

They stood on either side of the tiled path that led through the strip of front garden to the door, and watched in silence, the rapid unloading of their modest property.

Willie Outram, frankly a reporter, mentally noted the absence

of piano, whatnot, mirror and all the paraphernalia peculiar to the Kymott Crescent drawing-room. He saw bundles of skins, bundles of spears, tomahawks (imagine his ecstasy!) war drums, guns, shields and trophies of the chase. Bedroom furniture that would disgrace a servant's attic, camp bedsteads, big lounge chairs and divans. Most notable absentee from the furnishings was She – a fact which might have served as food for discussion for weeks, but for the more important discovery he made later.

A man-servant busied himself directing the removers, and the elder of the two tenants, at last said —

"That's finished, Duke."

He spoke with a drawling, lazy, American accent.

The young man nodded, and called the servant.

"We shall be back before ten," he said in a pleasant voice.

"Very good, m'lord," replied the man with the slightest of bows.

The man looked round and saw Willie.

"Hank," he said, "there's the information bureau – find out things."

The elder jerked his head invitingly, and Willie sidled into the garden.

"Bub," said Hank, with a hint of gloom in his voice, "Where's the nearest saloon?"

He did not quite comprehend.

Willie gasped.

"Saloon, sir!"

"Pub," explained the young man, in a soft voice.

"Public-house, sir?" Willie faltered correctly.

Hank nodded, and the young man chuckled softly.

"There is," said the outraged youth, "a good-pull-up-for-carmen, at the far end of Kymott Road, the *far* end," he emphasized carefully.

"At the far end, eh?" Hank looked round at his companion, "Duke, shall we walk or shall we take the pantehnicon?"

"Walk," said his grace promptly.

Willie saw the two walking away. His young brain was in a whirl. Here was an epoch-making happening, a tremendous revolutionary and unprecedented circumstance – nay, it was almost monstrous, that there should come into the ordered life of Kymott Crescent so disturbing a factor.

The agitated youth watched them disappearing, and as the consciousness of his own responsibility came to him, he sprinted after them.

"I say!"

They turned round.

"You – here I say! – you're not a duke, are you – not a real duke?" he floundered.

Hank surveyed him kindly.

"Sonny," he said impressively, "this is the realest duke you've ever seen: canned in the Dukeries an' bearin' the government analyst's certificate."

"But – but," said the bewildered boy, "no larks – I say, are

you truly a duke?"

He looked appealingly at the younger man whose eyes were dancing.

He nodded his head and became instantly grave.

"I'm a truly duke," he said sadly, "keep it dark."

He put his hand in his pocket, and produced with elaborate deliberation a small card case. From this he extracted a piece of paste-board, and handed to Willie who read —

"THE DUC DE MONTVILLIER,"

and in a corner "San Pio Ranch, Tex."

"I'm not," continued the young man modestly, "I'm not an English duke: if anything I'm rather superior to the average English duke: I've got royal blood in my veins, and I shall be very pleased to see you at No. 64."

"From 10 till 4," interposed the grave Hank.

"From 10 till 4," accepted the other, "which are my office hours."

"For duking," explained Hank.

"Exactly – for duking," said his grace.

Willie looked from one to the other.

"I say!" he blurted, "you're pulling my leg, aren't you? I say! you're rotting me."

"I told you so," murmured the Duke resentfully, "Hank, he thinks I'm rotting – he's certain I'm pulling his leg, Hank."

Hank said nothing.

Only he shook his head despairingly, and taking the other's arm, they continued their walk, their bowed shoulders eloquent of their dejection.

Willie watched them for a moment, then turned and sped homeward with the news.

II

The Earl of Windermere wrote to the Rev. Arthur Stayne, M.A., vicar of St. Magnus, Brockley —

"I have just heard that your unfortunate parish is to be inflicted with young de Montvillier. What process of reasoning led him to fix upon Brockley I cannot, dare not, fathom. You may be sure that this freak of his has some devilishly subtle cause — don't let him worry your good parishioners. He was at Eton with my boy Jim. I met him cow punching in Texas a few years ago when I was visiting the States, and he was of some service to me. He belongs to one of the oldest families in France, but his people were chucked out at the time of the Revolution. He is as good as gold, as plucky as they make 'em, and, thanks to his father (the only one of the family to settle anywhere for long), thoroughly Anglicized in sympathies and in language. He is quite 'the compleat philosopher,' flippant, audacious and casual. His pal Hank, who is with him, is George Hankey, the man who discovered silver in Los Madeges. Both of them have made and

lost fortunes, but I believe they have come back to England with something like a competence. Call on them. They will probably be very casual with you, but they are both worth cultivating."

The Rev. Arthur Stayne called and was admitted into the barely-furnished hall by the deferential man-servant.

"His grace will see you in the common-room," he said, and ushered the clergyman into the back parlour.

The Duke rose with a smile, and came toward him with outstretched hand.

Hank got up from his lounge chair, and waved away the cloud of smoke that hovered about his head.

"Glad to see you, sir," said the Duke, with a note of respect in his voice, "this is Mr. Hankey."

The vicar, on his guard against a possibility of brusqueness, returned Hank's friendly grin with relief.

"I've had a letter from Windermere," he explained. The Duke looked puzzled for a moment and he turned to his companion.

"That's the guy that fell off the bronco," Hank said with a calm politeness, totally at variance with his disrespectful language.

The vicar looked at him sharply.

"Oh yes!" said the Duke eagerly, "of course. I picked him up."

There came to the vicar's mind a recollection that this young man had been "of some service to me." He smiled.

This broke the ice, and soon there was a three-cornered conversation in progress, which embraced subjects, as far apart as cattle ranching, and gardening.

"Now look here, you people," said the vicar, growing serious after a while, "I've got something to say to you – why have you come to Brockley?"

The two men exchanged glances.

"Well," said the Duke slowly, "there were several considerations that helped us to decide – first of all the death-rate is very low."

"And the gravel soil," murmured Hank encouragingly.

"*And* the gravel soil," the Duke went on, nodding his head wisely, "and the rates, you know – "

The vicar raised his hand laughingly.

"Three hundred feet above sea level," he smiled, "yes, I know all about the advertised glories of Brockley – but really?"

Again they looked at each other.

"Shall I?" asked the Duke.

"Ye-es," hesitated Hank; "you'd better."

The young man sighed.

"Have you ever been a duke on a ranch," he asked innocently, "a cattle punching duke, rounding in, branding, roping and earmarking cattle – no? I thought not. Have you ever been a duke prospecting silver or searching for diamonds in the bad lands of Brazil?"

"That's got him," said Hank in a stage whisper.

The vicar waited.

"Have you ever been a duke under conditions and in circumstances where you were addressed by your title in much

the same way as you call your gardener 'Jim'?"

The vicar shook his head.

"I knew he hadn't," said Hank triumphantly.

"If you had," said the young man with severity, "if your ears had ached with, 'Here, Duke, get up and light the fire,' or 'Where's that fool Duke,' or 'Say, Dukey, lend me a chaw of tobacco' – if you had had any of these experiences, would you not" – he tapped the chest of the vicar with solemn emphasis – "would you not pine for a life, and a land where dukes were treated as dukes ought to be treated, where any man saying 'Jukey' can be tried for High Treason, and brought to the rack?"

"By Magna Charta," murmured Hank.

"And the Declaration of Rights," added the Duke indignantly.

The vicar rose, his lips twitching.

"You will not complain of a lack of worship here," he said.

He was a little relieved by the conversation, for he saw behind the extravagance a glimmer of truth, "only please don't shock my people too much," he smiled, as he stood at the door.

"I hope," said the Duke with dignity, "that we shall not shock your people at all. After all, we are gentlefolk."

"We buy our beer by the keg," murmured Hank proudly.

* * * * *

There were other callers.

There is, I believe, a game called "Snip, Snap, Snorum," where

if you call "Snap" too soon you are penalised, and if you call "Snap" too late you pay forfeit. Calling on the duke was a sort of game of social snap, for Kymott Crescent vacillated in an agony of apprehension between the bad form of calling too soon, and the terrible disadvantage that might accrue through calling too late and finding some hated social rival installed as confidential adviser and *Fides Achates*.

The Coyters were the first to call, thus endorsing the Crescent's opinion of Mrs. C.

Coyter fired off his three stories: —

(1) What the parrot said to the policeman.

(2) What the County Court judge said to the obdurate creditor who wanted time to pay (can you guess the story?).

(3) What the parson said to the couple who wanted to be married without banns.

Duke and Co. laughed politely.

Mrs. C., who had a reputation for archness to sustain, told them that they mustn't believe all the dreadful stories they heard about her, and even if she *did* smoke, well what of it?

"Ah," murmured the Duke with sympathetic resentment of the world's censure, "what of it?"

"There was a lady in Montana," said Hank courteously, "a charming lady she was too, who smoked morning, noon and night, and nobody thought any worse of her."

The lady basked in the approval. Of course, she only smoked very occasionally, a teeny weeny cigarette.

"That woman," said Hank solemnly, "was never without a pipe or a see-gar. Smoked Old Union plug – do you remember her, Duke?"

"Let me see," pondered the Duke, "the lady with the one eye or –"

"Oh, no," corrected Hank, "she died in delirium tremens – no, don't you remember the woman that ran away with Bill Suggley to Denver, she got tried for poisonin' him in '99."

"Oh, yes!" The Duke's face lit up, but Mrs. C. coughed dubiously.

Mr. Roderick Nape called. He was mysterious and shot quick glances round the room and permitted himself to smile quietly.

They had the conventional opening. The Duke was very glad to see him, and he was delighted to make the acquaintance of the Duke. What extraordinary weather they had been having!

Indeed, agreed the Duke, it was extraordinary.

"You've been to America," said Mr. Roderick Nape suddenly and abruptly.

The Duke looked surprised.

"Yes," he admitted.

"West, of course," said the young Mr. Nape carelessly.

"However did you know?" said the astonished nobleman.

Young Mr. Nape shrugged his shoulders.

"One has the gift of observation and deduction – born with it," he said disparagingly. He indicated with a wave of his hand two Mexican saddles that hung on the wall.

"Where did *they* come from?" he asked, with an indulgent smile.

"I bought 'em at a curiosity shop in Bond Street," said the Duke innocently, "but you're right, we have lived in America."

"I thought so," said the young Mr. Nape, and pushed back his long black hair.

"Of course," he went on, "one models one's system on certain lines, I have already had two or three little cases not without interest. There was the Episode of the Housemaid's brooch, and the Adventure of the Black Dog – "

"What was that?" asked the Duke eagerly.

"A mere trifle," said the amateur detective with an airy wave of his hand. "I'd noticed the dog hanging about our kitchen; as we have no dogs I knew it was a stranger, as it stuck to the kitchen, knew it must be hungry. Looked on its collar, discovered it belonged to a Colonel B – , took it back and restored it to its owner, and told him within a day or so, how long it was, since he had lost it."

Hank shook his head in speechless admiration.

"Any time you happen to be passing," said young Mr. Nape rising to go, "call in and see my little laboratory; I've fixed it up in the greenhouse; if you ever want a blood stain analysed I shall be there."

"Sitting in your dressing gown, I suppose," said the Duke with awe, "playing your violin and smoking shag?"

Young Mr. Nape frowned.

"Somebody has been talking about me," he said severely.

III

"63 has to call, 51 is out of town, and 35 has measles in the house," reported the Duke one morning at breakfast.

Hank helped himself to a fried egg with the flat of his knife.

"What about next door!" he asked.

"Next door won't call," said the Duke sadly. "Next door used to live in Portland Place, where dukes are so thick that you have to fix wire netting to prevent them coming in at the window – no, mark off 66 as a non-starter."

Hank ate his egg in silence.

"She's very pretty," he said at length.

"66?"

Hank nodded.

"I saw her yesterday, straight and slim, with a complexion like snow – "

"Cut it out!" said the Duke brutally.

"And eyes as blue as a winter sky in Texas."

"Haw!" murmured his disgusted grace.

"And a walk – " apostrophized the other dreamily.

The Duke raised his hands.

"I surrender, colonel," he pleaded; "you've been patronizing the free library. I recognize the bit about the sky over little old Texas."

"What happened – ?" Hank jerked his head in the direction of No. 66.

The Duke was serious when he replied.

"Africans, Siberians, Old Nevada Silver and all the rotten stock that a decent, easy-going white man could be lured into buying," he said quietly; "that was the father. When the smash came he obligingly died."

Hank pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"It's fairly tragic," he said, "poor girl."

The Duke was deep in thought again.

"I must meet her," he said briskly.

Hank looked at the ceiling.

"In a way," he said slowly, "fate has brought you together, and before the day is over, I've no doubt you will have much to discuss in common."

The Duke looked at him with suspicion.

"Have you been taking a few private lessons from young Sherlock Nape?" he asked.

Hank shook his head.

"There was a certain tabby cat that patronized our back garden," he said mysteriously.

"True, O seer!"

"She ate our flowers."

"She did," said the Duke complacently. "I caught her at it this very morning."

"And plugged her with an air-gun?"

"*Your* air-gun," expostulated the Duke hastily.

"Your plug," said Hank calmly, "well, that cat – "

"Don't tell me," said the Duke, rising in his agitation – "don't tell me that this poor unoffending feline, which your gun – "

"Your shot," murmured Hank.

"Which your wretched air-gun so ruthlessly destroyed," continued the Duke sternly, "don't tell me it is the faithful dumb friend of 66?"

"It *was*," corrected Hank.

"The devil it was!" said his grace, subsiding into gloom.

IV

The situation was a tragic one. Alicia Terrill trembling with indignation, a faint flush on her pretty face, and her forehead wrinkled in an angry frown, kept her voice steady with an effort, and looked down from the step ladder on which she stood, at the urbane young man on the other side of the wall.

He stood with his hands respectfully clasped behind his back, balancing himself on the edge of his tiny lawn, and regarded her without emotion. The grim evidence of the tragedy was hidden from his view, but he accepted her estimate of his action with disconcerting calmness.

Hank, discreetly hidden in the conservatory, was an interested eavesdropper.

The girl had time to notice that the Duke had a pleasant face,

burnt and tanned by sun and wind, that he was clean-shaven, with a square, determined jaw and clear grey eyes that were steadfastly fixed on hers. In a way he was good looking, though she was too angry to observe the fact, and the loose flannel suit he wore did not hide the athletic construction of the man beneath.

"It is monstrous of you!" she said hotly, "you, a stranger here – "

"I know your cat," he said calmly.

"And very likely it wasn't poor Tibs at all that ate your wretched flowers."

"Then poor Tibs isn't hurt," said the Duke with a sigh of relief, "for the cat I shot at was making a hearty meal of my young chrysanthemums and – "

"How dare you say that!" she demanded wrathfully, "when the poor thing is flying round the house with a – with a wounded tail?"

The young man grinned.

"If I've only shot a bit off her tail," he said cheerfully, "I am relieved. I thought she was down and out."

She was too indignant to make any reply.

"After all," mused the Duke with admirable philosophy, "a tail isn't one thing or another with a cat – now a horse or a cow needs a tail to keep the flies away, a dog needs a tail to wag when he's happy, but a cat's tail – "

She stopped him with a majestic gesture. She was still atop of the ladder, and was too pretty to be ridiculous.

"It is useless arguing with you," she said coldly; "my mother will take steps to secure us freedom from a repetition of this annoyance."

"Send me a lawyer's letter," he suggested, "that is the thing one does in the suburbs, isn't it?"

He did not see her when she answered, for she had made a dignified descent from her shaky perch.

"Our acquaintance with suburban etiquette," said her voice coldly, "is probably more limited than your own."

"Indeed?" with polite incredulity.

"Even in Brockley," said the angry voice, "one expects to meet people – "

She broke off abruptly.

"Yes," he suggested with an air of interest. "People – ?"

He waited a little for her reply. He heard a smothered exclamation of annoyance and beckoned Hank. That splendid lieutenant produce a step ladder and steadied it as the Duke made a rapid ascent.

"You were saying?" he said politely.

She was holding the hem of her dress and examining ruefully the havoc wrought on a flounce by a projecting nail.

"You were about to say – ?"

She looked up at him with an angry frown.

"Even in Brockley it is considered an outrageous piece of bad manners to thrust oneself upon people who do not wish to know one!"

"Keep to the subject, please," he said severely; "we were discussing the cat."

She favoured him with the faintest shrug.

"I'm afraid I cannot discuss any matter with you," she said coldly, "you have taken a most unwarrantable liberty." She turned to walk into the house.

"You forget," he said gently, "I am a duke. I have certain feudal privileges, conferred by a grateful dynasty, one of which, I believe, is to shoot cats."

"I can only regret," she fired back at him, from the door of the little conservatory that led into the house, "that I cannot accept your generous estimate of yourself. The ridiculous court that is being paid to you by the wretched people in this road must have turned your head. I should prefer the evidence of De Gotha before I even accepted your miserable title."

Slam!

She had banged the door behind her.

"Here I say!" called the alarmed Duke, "please come back! Aren't I in De Gotha?"

He looked down on Hank.

"Hank," he said soberly, "did you hear that tremendous charge? She don't believe there is no Mrs. Harris!"

V

Two days later he ascended the step ladder again.

With leather gloves, a gardening apron, and with the aid of a stick she was coaxing some drooping Chinese daisies into the upright life.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly, "what extraordinary weather we are having."

She made the most distant acknowledgment and continued in her attentions to the flowers.

"And how is the cat?" he asked with all the bland benevolence of an Episcopalian bench. She made no reply.

"Poor Tibby," he said with gentle melancholy —

"Poor quiet soul, poor modest lass,
Thine is a tale that shall not pass."

The girl made no response.

"On the subject of De Gotha," he went on with an apologetic hesitation, "I —"

The girl straightened her back and turned a flushed face towards him. A strand of hair had loosened and hung limply over her forehead, and this she brushed back quickly.

"As you insist upon humiliating me," she said, "let me add to my self abasement by apologizing for the injustice I did you. My copy of the Almanac De Gotha is an old one and the page on which your name occurs has been torn out evidently by one of my maids —"

"For curling paper, I'll be bound," he wagged his head wisely.

"Immortal Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away;
The Duke's ancestral records well may share
The curly splendours of the housemaid's hair."

As he improvised she turned impatiently to the flower bed.

"Miss Terrill!" he called, and when she looked up with a resigned air, he said —

"Cannot we be friends?"

Her glance was withering.

"Don't sniff," he entreated earnestly, "don't despise me because I'm a duke. Whatever I am, I am a gentleman."

"You're a most pertinacious and impertinent person," said the exasperated girl.

"Alliteration's artful aid," quoth the Duke admiringly. "Listen —"

He was standing on the top step of the ladder balancing himself rather cleverly, for Hank was away shopping.

"Miss Terrill," he began. There was no mistaking the earnestness of his voice, and the girl listened in spite of herself.

"Miss Terrill, will you marry me?"

The shock of the proposal took away her breath.

"I am young and of good family; fairly good looking and sound in limb. I have a steady income of £1,200 a year and a silver property in Nevada that may very easily bring in ten thousand a year more. Also," he added, "I love you."

No woman can receive a proposal of marriage, even from an

eccentric young man perched on the top of a step ladder, without the tremor of agitation peculiar to the occasion.

Alicia Terrill went hot and cold, flushed and paled with the intensity of her various emotions, but made no reply.

"Very well then!" said the triumphant Duke, "we will take it as settled. I will call – "

"Stop!" She had found her voice. Sifting her emotions indignation had bulked overwhelmingly and she faced him with flaming cheek and the lightning of scorn in her eyes.

"Did you dare think that your impudent proposal had met with any other success than the success it deserved?" she blazed. "Did you imagine because you are so lost to decency, and persecute a girl into listening to your odious offer, that you could bully her into acceptance?"

"Yes," he confessed without shame.

"If you were the last man in the world," she stormed, "I would not accept you. If you were a prince of the blood royal instead of being a wretched little continental duke with a purchased title" – she permitted herself the inaccuracy – "if you were a millionaire twenty times over, I would not marry you!"

"Thank you," said the Duke politely.

"You come here with your egotism and your braggadocio to play triton to our minnows, but I for one do not intend to be bullied into grovelling to your dukeship."

"Thank you," said the Duke again.

"But for the fact that I think you have been led away by your

conceit into making this proposal, and that you did not intend it to be the insult that it is, I would make you pay dearly for your impertinence."

The Duke straightened himself.

"Do I understand that you will not marry me?" he demanded.

"You may most emphatically understand that," she almost snapped.

"Then," said the Duke bitterly, "perhaps if you cannot love me you can be neighbourly enough to recommend me a good laundry."

This was too much for the girl. She collapsed on to the lawn, and, sitting with her face in her hands, she rocked in a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter.

The Duke, after a glance at her, descended the steps in his stateliest manner.

VI

It was the desire of the Tanneur house, that "Hydeholm" should keep alive the traditions of its Georgian squiredom. Sir Harry Tanneur spoke vaguely of "feudal customs" and was wont to stand dejectedly before a suit of fifteenth century armour that stood in the great hall, shaking his head with some despondence at a pernicious modernity which allowed no scope for steel-clad robbery with violence. The quarterings that glowed in the great windows of the hall were eloquent of departed glories. There

was a charge, *on a field vert, goutte de sang, parted per fusil*, with I know not what lions rampant and lions sejant, boars heads, cinquefoils and water budgets, all of which, as Sir Harry would tell you, formed a blazing memento of the deeds of Sir Folk de Tanneur (1142-1197). Putting aside the family portraits, the historical documents, and other misleading data, I speak the truth when I say that the founder of the Tanneur family was Isaac Tanner, a Canterbury curer of hides, who acquired a great fortune at the time of the Crimean war, and having purchased a beautiful estate in Kent, christened the historic mansion where he had taken up his residence "Hyde House," at once a challenge to the fastidious county, and an honest tribute to the source of his wealth. It is a fact that no Tanner – or Tanneur as they style the name – has reached nearer the patents of nobility than Sir Harry himself acquired, when he was knighted in 1897 in connexion with the erection of the Jubilee Alms-Houses.

Sir Harry's son and heir was a heavily built young man, with a big vacant face and a small black moustache. He was military in the militia sense of the word, holding the rank of captain in the 9th battalion of the Royal West Kent Regiment.

"Hal has a devil of a lot more in him than people give him credit for," was his father's favourite appreciation, and indeed it was popularly supposed that in Mr. Harry Tanneur's big frame was revived the ancient courage of Sir Folk, the wisdom of Sir Peter (a contemporary of Falstaff and one of the Judges who sent Prince Henry to prison), the subtlety of Sir George (ambassador

at the Court of Louis of France), and the eminently practical cent. per cent. acumen of his father.

They were seated at breakfast at "Hydeholm," Sir Harry, his son and the faded lady of the house. Sir Harry read a letter and tossed it to his wife.

"Laura's in trouble again," he said testily, "really, my dear, your sister is a trial! First of all her husband loses his money and blames me for putting him into the Siberian Gold Recovery Syndicate, then he dies, and now his wife expects me to interest myself in a petty suburban squabble."

The meek lady read the letter carefully.

"The man seems to have annoyed Alicia," she commented mildly, "and even though he is a duke – and it seems strange for a duke to be living in Brockley –"

"Duke?" frowned Sir Harry, "I didn't see anything about dukes. Let me see the letter again, my love."

"Duke," muttered Sir Harry, "I can't see any word that looks like 'duke' – ah, here it is, I suppose, I thought it was 'dude'; really Laura writes an abominable hand. H'm," he said, "I see she suggests that Hal should spend a week or so with them – how does that strike you, my boy?"

It struck Hal as an unusually brilliant idea. He had views about Alicia, inclinations that were held in check by his father's frequent pronouncements on the subject of mesalliances.

So it came about that Hal went on a visit to his aunt and cousin.

"He's probably one of these insignificant continental

noblemen," said his father at parting, "you must put a stop to his nonsense. I have a young man in my eye who would suit Alicia, a rising young jobber who does business for me. If the duke or whatever he is persists in his attentions, a word from you will bring him to his senses.

"I shall punch the beggar's head," promised Hal, and Sir Harry smiled indulgently.

"If, on the other hand," he said thoughtfully, "you find he is the genuine article the thing might be arranged amicably – you might make friends with him and bring him along to Hydeholm. He is either no good at all or too good for Alicia – it's about time Winnie was off my hands."

Miss Winnie Tanneur was aged about twenty-eight and looked every year of it.

VII

"'66 has a visitor," reported Hank.

The Duke took his feet from the mantel-shelf and reached for his tobacco.

A spell of silence had fallen upon him that morning, that had been broken only by a brief encounter with the butcher on the quality of a leg of mutton, supplied on the day previous.

"Has she?" he said absently.

"I said '66,' which is of neither sex," said Hank. "This fellow

"Oh, it's a man, is it?" said the Duke – brightening up; "what sort of a man, who is he?"

Hank touched a bell and the grave man servant appeared.

"Who is the visitor next door?" demanded the Duke.

"A Captain Tanneur, m'lord; militia; and the son of Sir Harry Tanneur who is related to No. 66."

"You've been gossiping with the servants," accused the Duke.

"Yes, m'lord," said the man without hesitation.

"Quite right," said the duke approvingly. When the servant was gone he asked —

"Do you ever pine for the wilds, Hank, the limitless spread of the prairies, and the twinkling stars at night?"

"Come off, Pegasus," begged Hank.

"The fierce floods of white sunlight and the quivering skyline ahead," mused the Duke dreamily, "the innocent days and the dreamless nights."

"No fierce floods in mine," said Hank decisively; "me for the flesh pots of Egypt, the sinful life."

"Do you ever —"

"Take a walk —*you*," said Hank rudely. "Say your love-sick piece to the shop windows. What are you going to do about Captain Tanneur — the bold militia man?"

"I suppose," said his grace, "he's been sent for to protect the innocent girl from the unwelcome addresses of the wicked duke. I'll have a talk with him."

He strolled into the garden, dragging the step ladder with him.

He planted it against the wall this time, and mounting slowly surveyed the next garden.

His luck was in, for the object of his search sat in a big basket chair reading the *Sporting Life*.

"Hullo," said the Duke.

Hal looked up and scowled. So this was the persecutor.

"Hullo," said the Duke again.

"What the devil do you want?" demanded Hal with studied ferocity.

"What have you got?" asked the Duke obligingly.

"Look here, my friend," said Hal, rising and fixing his eye-glass with a terrible calm, "I'm not in the habit of receiving visitors over the garden wall – "

"Talking about the militia," said the Duke easily, "how is this Territorial scheme going to affect you?"

"My friend – " began Hal.

"He calls me his friend," the young man on the wall meditated aloud, "he is ominously polite: he rises from his chair: he is going to begin – help!"

He raised his voice and kept his eye on the conservatory door of 66.

"What's wrong?" inquired Hank's voice from the house.

"Come quickly!" called the Duke extravagantly nervous, "here's a young gentleman, a stout young gentleman in the military line of business, who is taking off his coat to me."

"Don't talk such utter damn nonsense," said the angry Hal,

"I've done nothing yet."

"Help!" cried the lounging figure at the top of the wall. "He's done nothing *yet*— but — !"

"Will you be quiet, sir," roared Hal desperately red in the face; "you'll alarm the neighbourhood and make yourself a laughing stock — "

The Duke had seen the flutter of a white dress coming through the little glass house, and as the girl with an alarmed face ran into the garden he made his appeal to her.

"Miss Terrill," he said brokenly, "as one human being to another, I beg you to save me from this savage and I fear reckless young man. Call him off! Chain him up! Let him turn from me the basilisk fires of his vengeful eyes."

"I thought — I thought," faltered the girl.

"Not yet," said the Duke cheerfully, "you have arrived in the nick of time to save one who is your ever grateful servant, from a terrible and, I cannot help thinking, untimely end."

She turned with an angry stamp of her foot to her cousin.

"Will you please take me into the house, Hal," she said ignoring the young man on the wall, and his exaggerated expression of relief.

VIII

"On behalf of the organ fund," read Hank and regarded the pink tickets that accompanied the vicar's letter with suspicion.

"It's a curious fact," said the Duke, "that of all people and things in this wide world, there is no class so consistently insolvent as the organ class. There isn't a single organ in England that can pay its way. It's broke to the world from its infancy; its youth is a hand-to-mouth struggle, and it reaches its maturity up to the eyes in debt. It has benefit sermons and Sunday-school matinées, garden parties, bazaars and soirées, but nothing seems to put the poor old dear on his legs; he just goes wheezing on, and ends his miserable existence in the hands of the official receiver. What is this by the way?"

"A soirée," said Hank moodily, "and will we help."

The Duke sprang up.

"Rather!" he said jubilantly "will we help? Why, this is the very opportunity I've been waiting for! I'll sing a sentimental song, and you can say a little piece about a poor child dying in the snow."

"Snow nothing," said Hank, "you can sing if you want, and I'll go outside so that folk's shan't see I'm ashamed of you."

He took a turn or two up and down the apartment, then came to an abrupt stop before the Duke.

"Say," he said quickly, "Bill Slew'er's out."

The Duke raised his eyebrows.

"The amiable William?" he asked with mild astonishment, "not Bad Man Bill?"

Hank nodded gravely.

"I got a letter from Judge Morris. Bill had a pull in the state

and the remainder of his sentence has been remitted by the new governor."

"Well?" asked the Duke with a yawn. Hank was searching his pocket for a letter. He opened one and read —

"... hope you are having a good time ... m – m your Nevada properties are booming ... (oh, here we are). By the way Big Bill Slewler's loose, the man the Duke ran out of Tycker country and jailed for shooting Ed. Carter the foreman.

"Bill says he is going gunning for Jukey – "

"Ugh!" shuddered the Duke.

" – and reckons to leave for Europe soon. Japhet in search of his pa will be a quaker picnic compared with Bill on the sleuth. Tell Jukey – "

The Duke groaned.

"Tell Jukey to watch out for his loving little friend Bill. Bill is going to have a big send off and a bad citizens' committee has presented the hero with a silver plate Colt's revolver and has passed a special resolution deprecating the artificial social barriers of an effete and degenerate aristocracy."

The Duke smiled.

"If Bill turns up in Brockley I'll run the military gentleman loose on him," he announced calmly; "in the meantime let us address ourselves to the soirée."

It was announced from the pulpit on the next Sunday that amongst the kind friends who has promised to help was "our neighbour the Duc de Montvillier" and the next morning Miss

Alicia Terrill sought out the vicar and asked to be relieved of a certain promise she had made.

"But, my dear Miss Terrill, it's quite impossible," protested the amazed cleric; "you were so very keen on the soirée, and your name has been sent to the printer with the rest of the good people who are singing. Here's the proof." He fussed at his desk and produced a sheet of paper.

"Here we are," he said, and she read: —

"No. 5 (song), 'Tell me, where is fancy bred' – Miss A. Terrill.

"No. 6 (song), 'In my quiet garden' – The Duc de Montvillier."

"And here again in Part II," said the vicar. She took the papers with an unsteady hand.

"No. 11 (song), 'I heard a voice' – Miss A. Terrill.

"No. 12 (song), 'Alice, where art thou' – The Duc de Montvillier."

She looked at the vicar helplessly.

"Why – why does the Duke follow me?" she asked weakly.

"It was his special wish," explained the other. "He said his voice would serve to emphasize the sweetness of your singing and coming, as it would, immediately after your song – these are his own words —*his* feeble efforts would bring the audience to a – "

"Oh yes," she interrupted impatiently, "I can well imagine all that he said, and I'm *thoroughly* decided that the programme *must* be rearranged."

In the end she had her way.

For some reason she omitted to convey to her mother the gist

of the conversation. If the truth must be told, she had already regretted having spoken of the matter at all to her family, for her mother's letter to the Tanneurs had brought to her a greater infliction than her impetuous suitor. Whatever opinion might be held of the genius of Hal Tanneur at Hydeholm, in the expressive language of the 9th's mess, he was "no flier." The girl had learnt of his coming with dismay, and the gleam of hope that perhaps after all, he *might* be able to effectively snub the young man of the step ladder, was quickly extinguished as the result of the brief skirmish she had witnessed. And Hal was attentive in his heavy way, and had tricks of elephantine gallantry that caused her more annoyance than alarm.

On the evening of the day she had seen the vicar, Mr. Hal Tanneur decided upon making a diplomatic offer, so set about with reservations and contingencies, that it was somewhat in the nature of a familiar stock exchange transaction. In other words he set himself the task of securing an option on her hand, with the understanding that in the event of his father's refusal to endorse the contract, the option was to be secretly renewed for an indefinite period. He did not put the matter in so few words as I, because he was not such a clever juggler of words as I am, but after he had been talking, with innumerable "d'ye see what I mean Alic's" and "of course you understand's," she got a dim idea of what he was driving at. She let him go on. "Of course the governor's got pots of money, and I don't want to get in his bad books. Just now he's a bit worried over some Nevada property

he's trying to do a chap out of – in quite a business-like way of course. The other chap – the chap who has the property now has got a big flaw in his title and he doesn't know it. See? Well, unless he renews his claim and gets some kind of an order from the court, or something of that sort, the governor and the governor's friends can throw him out, d'ye see what I mean?"

"I really don't see what this is to do with me," said Alicia frankly bored, "you said you wanted to tell me something of the greatest importance, and I really ought to be seeing about mother's supper."

"Wait a bit," he pleaded, "this is where the whole thing comes in: if the governor pulls this deal off, he'll be as pleased as Punch, and I can say out plump and plain how I feel about you."

It was on the tip of her tongue to inform him that "plump and plain" was ludicrously descriptive of himself, but she forbore. Instead she plunged him into a state of embarrassed incoherence by demanding coolly —

"Do I understand, Hal, that you have been proposing to me?"

She cut short his explanations with a smile.

"Please don't wound my vanity by telling me this is only a tentative offer – anyway I'll put your mind at rest. Under no circumstances could I marry you: there are thousands of reasons for that decision, but the main one is, that I do not love you, and I cannot imagine anything short of a miracle that would make me love you."

She left him speechless.

The greater part of the next day he sulked in the garden, but towards the evening he grew cheerful. After all, a woman's No was not necessarily final.

He got most of his ideas from the comic papers.

Only for an instant had he entertained the suspicion that there might be Another Man, but this he dismissed as ridiculous. Alicia's refusal was very natural. She had been piqued by the fact that he had not been able to make her a definite offer. He resolved to bide his time, and come to his father on the crest of that prosperous wave which was to hand the Denver Silver Streak Mine into the lap of his astute progenitor. Then he would speak out boldly, trusting to the generosity of his father. Constructing these pleasant dreams, he found himself discussing the coming concert with Alicia, and the girl pleasantly relieved that her refusal had had so little effect upon his spirits, was a little sorry she had been so severe.

They were talking over the songs Alicia was to sing, when there was the sound of a carriage stopping outside the door, followed by an important rat-tat.

"Whoever can it be?" wondered Alicia.

She had not to wait in suspense for very long. In a few seconds the servant announced —

"Sir Harry Tanneur and Mr. Slewer."

Part II

THE DUKE DEPARTS

I

Years ago I discovered that truth was indeed stranger than fiction – that curious and amazing things happened daily that caused one to say, "If I had read this in a book I should have said that it was impossible." Following upon this discovery, I have observed that all the best chroniclers, exercise unusual caution in dealing with unexpected situations, carefully and laboriously laying solid foundations on which to build their literary coincidences. Fortunately Sir Harry saves me the trouble, for his first words explained his presence.

"Ah, Alicia," he pecked at her, "let me introduce our good friend Slewer – just arrived from the United States of America with a letter of introduction from the gentleman in charge of my affairs in Denver."

Alicia regarded the new arrival with polite interest.

Mr. Bill Slewer, in a ready-made suit of clothing that fitted him badly, in a soft grey shirt and a ready-made tie, shuffled uneasily under the scrutiny.

He was a tall man, with shoulders a trifle bowed and long arms

that hung awkwardly. But it was his face that fascinated the girl. Scarred and seamed and furrowed till it seemed askew, what held her, were his eyes. They were pale blue and large, and in the setting of his mahogany skin he looked for all the world like one sightless. Two white discs that shifted here and there when she spoke, but which never once looked toward her.

"Mr. Slewer," Sir Harry went on, with an air of quiet triumph, "can serve you, Alicia."

"Me?" The girl's eyes opened in astonishment.

Sir Harry nodded and chuckled.

"I don't think you are likely to be annoyed with your neighbour after to-day," he said, "eh, Mr. Slewer?"

Mr. Slewer, seated on the edge of a settee, twisting his hat awkwardly by the brim and staring at a gilt clock on the mantelpiece, shifted something he had in his mouth from one cheek to the other, and said huskily and laconically —

"Naw."

"This gentleman" — Sir Harry waved his hand like a showman indicating his prize exhibit — "has been most disgracefully treated by — er — the Duke."

Alicia regarded Mr. Slewer with renewed interest and an unaccountable feeling of irritation.

"The Duke in fact," the magnate went on impressively, "fled from America to avoid the — er — just retribution that awaited him. Fled in a most cowardly fashion, eh, Mr. Slewer?"

"Yep," said the other, fingering his long yellow moustache.

"Mr. Slewer came to Denver knowing this – er – duke has property or," corrected Sir Harry carefully, "thinks he has property there, and found him gone. As I have large interests in the mining industry in that city, it was only natural that Mr. Slewer should be directed to me as being likely to know the whereabouts of – this chartered libertine."

There was a grain of truth in this story, for the astute lawyer, who was Sir Harry's agent in Denver city, had most excellent reason for wishing to know the Duke's present address. The coming of Big Bill Slewer, ripe for murder and with the hatred he had accumulated during his five years' imprisonment, played splendidly into his hands.

The girl had risen at Sir Harry's last words, and stood with a perplexed frown facing her uncle.

"Chartered libertine?" She was used to Sir Harry's hackneyed figures of speech and usually attached no importance to them.

"What has he done to this man?"

Sir Harry glanced at Mr. Slewer and that worthy gentleman shifted awkwardly. He did not immediately reply, then —

"This Jukey," he said, "went an' run away wid me wife."

She took a step backward.

"Ran away with your wife?" she repeated.

"Sure," said Mr. Slewer.

"You see?" said Sir Harry enjoying the sensation.

The girl nodded slowly.

"I see," she replied simply.

"I'm going to fix up Mr. Slewer for the night," said Sir Harry, "and to-morrow I will confront him with his victim."

Young Mr. Tanneur, an interested and silent listener, had an inspiration, "I say, governor," he blurted, "I've got a ripping idea!"

His father smiled.

"Trust you, Hal," he said admiringly.

"There's a soirée or concert to-morrow night," said the ingenious Hal, "this fellow is going to sing, why not wait till then? I can get you a couple of seats in the first row – it would be awful fun to see his face when he spots Mr. Slewer."

"Oh no!" protested the girl.

"Why not?" demanded Sir Harry? "I think it is an excellent idea."

"But – "

"Please don't interfere, Alicia," said the knight testily, "we are doing all this for your sake: there will be no fuss. As soon as the man sees this poor fellow he will skip and there will be no bother or disturbance – isn't that so, Mr. Slewer?"

"Yep," said the untruthful Bill, who had followed the conversation with interest. Such a finale was in harmony with his tastes. He wanted an audience for the act he contemplated. His ideas about the English law were of the haziest, but he did not doubt his ability to escape the consequence of his vengeance.

One question the girl put to him before his departure.

She found a surprising difficulty in putting it into words.

"Where – where is the wom – your wife now, Mr. Slewer?" she asked in a low voice.

This well-nigh proved the undoing of Mr. Slewer, whose inventive faculty was not the strongest part of his intellectual equipment. He was standing on the doorstep when she put the question, and she saw him wriggle a little in his embarrassment.

"She," he hesitated, "oh, I guess he's got her with him all right, all right." Then he remembered that this could not be so without her knowledge, and he hastened to add, "or else he's put her down and out."

"Killed her?" comprehended the girl with a gasp.

"Yep," said Mr. Slewer nodding his head. "Jukey's a mighty bad man – yes, sir."

Sir Harry was at the gate directing the cabman and young Mr. Tanneur was with him. Bill looked round and then edged closer to the girl.

"Say," he whispered, "dat Jukey feller – do youse wanter do him dirt?"

"I – I don't understand," she faltered.

He nodded his head sagely did this product of Cherry Hill, who had gone West in '93.

"To-morrer," he said, "I'm goin' to put it outer him – proper!"

He left her as a novelist would say, a prey to conflicting emotions.

II

I do not profess to understand anything about the legal procedure of the United States Courts, or for the matter of that of English Courts either. Occasionally there comes to me a document beginning "Edward, by the Grace of God, King of Great Britain." I have noticed idly enough that it used to be subscribed "Halsbury"; and that lately it has borne the name of "Loreburn," so I gather there have been changes made, and that the other man has lost his job.

When Sir Harry's business-like agent in Denver decided to contest the title of the Silver Mine, he acted in a perfectly straightforward manner and issued a writ or its equivalent, calling upon the holder of the title to immediately surrender the same. There was a difficulty in serving this notice on the defendant, and there was also a great danger. For the appearance of the defendant in court would have established beyond any doubt whatever that Sir Harry's friends were no more entitled to the property than the mythical man in the moon. Therefore the clever lawyer in Denver made no attempt to serve it, indeed he was anxious to preserve as a secret the fact that such a writ was contemplated.

It was therefore strange that he decided to take the course he did; which was to advertise, in other words, affect substituted service, in three daily newspapers.

The advertisement came to the *Minnehaha Magnet* in the ordinary way of business, accompanied by a treasury note for fifty dollars. An hour previous to the paper being issued, an alert young man interviewed the editor and proprietor.

He wished to purchase the whole issue of the paper, a simple proposition, but an awkward one for the proprietor of a mining camp newspaper, for there were subscribers to be considered. The young man persisted and offered a price. No one ever saw a copy of that day's issue except the young man who carried away a few copies after superintending the distribution of the whole of the type.

The next day the editor announced that owing to a break down after 2,000 copies of the journal had been printed, many of his subscribers had been disappointed etc. etc. The normal circulation of the *Minnehaha Magnet* is 1,200, but the editorial bluff may be allowed to pass.

There is little doubt that a similar explanation may be offered for the non-appearance, for one day only, of the *Silver Syren*, and the *Paddy Post Herald*. This much is certain: the proprietor of the Silver Streak Mine had, in the eyes of the law, been as successfully "writtred" as though a process server had placed the document in his hands. And there was the advantage that he knew nothing about it.

Sir Harry was informed of the progress made by the capable gentleman of Denver on the morning of the day of the concert.

He had found his letters waiting for him at No. 66 when he

called that morning – he always stayed at an hotel in town – it had been forwarded from Hydeholm.

It may be doubted that he knew the means adopted by his representative; it may safely be assumed that he made no inquiries. He took the newspaper cuttings from the suppressed editions and read them carefully. Then he whistled.

"Oho!" he said, for until now the Silver Streak had had the inanimate existence of a corporation; of the names of its controllers he had been ignorant. He whistled again and folded the cutting.

He was so thoughtful during his short stay, and moreover so absent-minded that Alicia, who had made up her mind to dissuade her uncle from including Mr. Slewer in his party, could get no opportunity of speaking to him. When he had left with Hal, she went into the garden to think.

III

"Good morning," said a cheerful voice.

She looked up to meet the smiling eyes of the Duke.

A recollection of this man's despicable crime gave her a feeling akin to sickness but she kept her eyes fixed on him.

"Getting ready for the concert?" he asked, but she made up her mind quickly and cut his pleasantly short.

"I would advise you to forget about to-night's concert," she said.

He looked a little surprised.

"It's a strange thing you should say that," he replied, "for the fact is I've been trying to forget about it – I'm in an awful funk."

Should she warn him?

"Is that unusual experience for you?" she questioned drily. She marvelled to find herself engaged in a conversation with him.

"Unusual? Rather! I am as brave as a lion," he said frankly. "Hank says I am about three ounces short of a hero."

He met her scornful gaze unwillingly.

"And a gallant also, I hear!" she retorted with a curl of her lip. He made no reply to this charge, and she misread his silence.

"You do not deny *that*, M'sieur le Duc," she went on, "and why should you? You must be aware that the reputation of as great a man as yourself is more or less public property. The greatness that excuses his eccentricities and turns his impertinences into amusing foibles may perhaps leniently gloss over his sordid *affaires*, and give them the value of romance."

All the time she spoke the lines between his eyes were deepening into a frown, but he made no attempt at replying until she had finished.

"May I respectfully demand which of my *affaires* you are referring to at the moment?" he asked.

"Are they so many," she flamed.

"Hundreds," he said sadly, "was it the *affaire* with the Princess de Gallisitru, or the *affaire* of the *premiere denseuse*, or the *affaire* of – who else does one have *affaires* with?"

"You cannot laugh this away," she said, and then before she could stop herself she demanded with an emphasis that was almost brutal —

"What have you done with Mrs. Slewer?"

If she expected her question to create a sensation, she must have been satisfied, for at the name he started back so that he almost lost his balance. Then he recovered himself and for a moment only was silent.

"Mrs. Slewer," he repeated softly, "what have I done with Mrs. Slewer – Mrs. Bill Slewer, of course?" he asked.

She did not speak.

"Of Four Ways, Texas?"

Still she made no response.

"A big bent chap with white eyes" – his voice had recovered its flippancy – "and hands that hang like a 'rang-a-tang?"

She recognized the description.

"So I ran away – do you mind if I consult a friend? You'll admit that this is a crisis in my affairs?"

She affected not to hear him and strolled to the other side of the garden.

"Hank!" She heard his voice and another responding from the house. "Hank," said the muffled voice of the duke. "I ran away with Mrs. Slewer – Big Bill's wife."

"Eh?"

"I ran away with Mrs. Bill, and Bill is naturally annoyed, so Bill is looking me up – in fact Bill – "

She could not catch the rest; she thought she heard Hank make a reference to "hell," but she hoped she was mistaken.

By and by the Duke's head appeared above the wall.

"I suppose," he said, "now that you know the worst, you will tell me this – when is Mr. Slewer going to call?"

She spoke over her shoulder, a convenient chrysanthemum with a pathetic droop claiming her attention.

"I know nothing of Mr. Slewer's plans," said she distantly.

It was such a long time before he spoke again that she thought he must have gone away, and she ventured a swift glance at the wall.

But he was still there with his mocking eyes fixed on hers.

"Perhaps we shall see him at the concert?" he suggested, "sitting in the front row with his tragic and accusing eyes reproaching me?"

"How can you jest?" – she turned on him in a fury – "how can you turn this terrible wrong into a subject for amusement? Surely you are not completely lost to shame."

He rested his elbow on the top of the wall and dropped his chin between his hands. When he spoke, it was less to her than to himself.

"Ran away with his wife, eh? Come, that's not so bad, but Bill couldn't have thought of that himself. He's got a scar along the side of his head – did you notice that Miss Terrill? No? Well, I did that," he said complacently. "Yet Bill didn't mention it, that's his forgiving nature. Did he tell you I jailed him for promiscuous

shooting? Well, I did, and when the governor revised the sentence of death passed upon him, I organized a lynching party to settle with Bill for keeps.

"They smuggled him out of the gaol before my procession arrived. Bill never told you about that episode. H'm! that's his modesty. I suppose he's forgotten all these little acts of unfriendliness on my part. The only thing that worries him now is —*put up your hands – quick!*"

She saw the Duke's face suddenly harden, his eyes narrow, and heard his lazy drawl change in an instant to a sharp metallic command. Most important of all his right hand held a wicked looking revolver. She was standing before the conservatory door as the duke was speaking and apparently the revolver was pointed at her. A voice behind her reassured her.

"Say, Jukey," it drawled, "put down your gun – there's nothin' doin'."

She turned to face Mr. Slewier with his hands raised protestingly above his head, injured innocence in every line of his face, and hanging forward from the inside pocket of his jacket the butt of a Colt's revolver, half drawn.

IV

"Come further into the garden," invited the Duke with his most winning smile, "that's right, Bill. Now just take that gun out of your pocket and drop it into the grass. If the muzzle comes this

way poor Mrs. Slewer will be a widow. Thank you. You heard what I said about Mrs. Slewer?" he asked.

Bill, unabashed, made no reply, but looked up at the smiling face of the man he hated, with passionless calm.

The girl, fascinated by the deadly play, watched.

"How long have you been married?" asked the Duke. "Can these things be arranged in State's prison?"

"Say," said the unperturbed Mr. Slewer, "you're fresh ain't ye, – what's the use of gay talk anyways – I'm layin' for you, Jukey."

"And I ran away, did I?" said the other, ignoring Mr. Slewer's speech, and dropping his voice, "scared of Bill Slewer of Four Ways?"

"Seems like it," said the man coolly.

"Are you the only cattle thief I ever jailed?" asked the Duke; then of a sudden he let go the mask of languor and the words came like the passionless click of machinery.

"Get out of England, you Bill!" he breathed, "because I'm going to kill you else! What! you threaten me? Why, man, I'd have given a thousand dollars to know you were shoot-at-able! Do you think we've forgotten Ed. Carter – "

He stopped short looking at the girl. Her eyes had not left his face. Astonishment, interest and fear were written plainly, and these checked the bitter stream of words that sprang to his lips. For her part she marvelled at the intensity of this insolent young man, who could so suddenly drop the pretence of badinage, into

whose face had come the pallor of wrath and whose laughing eyes had grown of a sudden so stern and remorseless. He recovered himself quickly and laughed.

"Hey, Bill," he said, "it is no use your coming to Brockley, S.E. with any fool bad-man tricks. You're out of the picture here. Just wait till we're both back again in the land of Freedom and Firearms. Is it a bet?"

"Sure," said Bill and stooped leisurely to pick up his revolver.

He stood for a moment toying with it, looking at the Duke with sidelong glances. The Duke's pistol had disappeared into his pocket.

"Jukey," drawled Bill, polishing the slim barrel of his weapon on the sleeve of his coat, "you've has lost your dash."

"Think so?"

"Yes, sir," said the confident Bill, "because why? It stands for sense I didn't come all the way from God's country to do cross talk – don't it?"

The Duke nodded and ostentatiously examined his empty hands.

"Say," said Bill, "them's nice pretty hands of your'n, Jukey, you just keep 'em right there where we – all can admire 'em – see? I've gotten a few words to say to you'se, an' there's plenty of time to say 'em."

Alicia saw the snaky glitter in the man's cruel eyes, and took an involuntary step forward. Slewier did not look at her, but his left hand shot out and arrested her progress.

"You'se ain't in this, Cissy," he said gruffly, "it's me and Jukey." He pushed her backward with such force that she nearly fell. When she looked at the Duke again his face was grey and old-looking, but he made no comment.

"I guess I've not been thinkin' of this particular occasion for some years, no, *sir!*" said Bill carefully, "not been sitting in me stripes, thinkin' out what I'd say to Mr. Jukey when me an' him hit the same lot."

The man on the wall chuckled, but his face was still pale. Bill observed this fact.

"You'se can be the laughin' coon all right," he sneered, "but I guess two inches o' looking glass'd put you wise to yourself."

"Am I pale?" drawled the man on the wall; "it's this fear of you Bill, the fear of you that made me sick. Oh, please don't wag your gun. You don't suppose I'd have trusted you with it, unless I was absolutely sure of you."

Bill scowled suspiciously and thumbed back the hammer of the revolver.

"Sure?" he grated. "By God, Jukey –"

The Duke turned his head never so slightly. Bill followed the direction of his eyes, then he dropped his pistol like a hot coal and threw up his hands. At an upper window of the Duke's house stood the watchful Hank. In the corner of the American's mouth was a cigar, in his hands was a Winchester rifle and its business-like muzzle covered Bill unwaveringly, as it had for the past ten minutes.

V

All this happened in Brockley, S.E. on one bright autumn morning whilst Kymott Crescent (exclusive of numbers 64 and 66) pursued its placid course. Whilst milkmen yelled in the streets and neat butcher's carts stood waiting at servants' entrances, whilst Mrs. Coyter practised most assiduously the pianoforte solo that was against her name in the programme of the evening, and Mr. Roderick Nape paced the concrete floor of his study delivering to an imaginary audience a monologue (specially written by a friend not unconnected with *The Lewisham Borough News*) entitled "The Murder of Fairleigh Grange."

That rehearsal will ever be remembered by Mr. Roderick Nape, because it was whilst he was in the middle of it that there came to him his First Case.

In this monologue, the character, a detective of supernatural perception, is engaged in hounding down a clever and ruthless criminal. Mr. Roderick Nape had got to the part where an "agony" in the *Morning Post* had aroused the suspicion of the detective genius. Perhaps it would be best to give the extract.

"Can it be Hubert Wallingford? No, perish the thought! Yet — come let me read the paper again (*takes newspaper cutting from his pocket and reads*) —

"To whom it may concern: information regarding P.L. is

anxiously awaited by H.W.'

Can it be Hubert! (*sombrely*) – It would seem a voice from the grave that says – "

"The gent from 66 wants to see you, sir."

Mr. Nape stopped short and faced the diminutive maid of all work.

"Is it a case? he asked severely.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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