

**WALLACE
EDGAR**

THE GREEN
RUST

Edgar Wallace

The Green Rust

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CHAPTER I

THE PASSING OF JOHN MILLINBORN

"I don't know whether there's a law that stops my doing this, Jim; but if there is, you've got to get round it. You're a lawyer and you know the game. You're my pal and the best pal I've had, Jim, and you'll do it for me."

The dying man looked up into the old eyes that were watching him with such compassion and read their acquiescence.

No greater difference could be imagined than existed between the man on the bed and the slim neat figure who sat by his side. John Millinborn, broad-shouldered, big-featured, a veritable giant in frame and even in his last days suggesting the enormous strength which had been his in his prime, had been an outdoor man, a man of large voice and large capable hands; James Kitson had been a student from his youth up and had spent his manhood in musty offices, stuffy courts, surrounded by crackling briefs and calf-bound law-books.

Yet, between these two men, the millionaire ship-builder and the successful solicitor, utterly different in their tastes and their modes of life, was a friendship deep and true. Strange that death should take the strong and leave the weak; so thought James Kitson as he watched his friend.

"I'll do what can be done, John. You leave a great responsibility upon the girl—a million and a half of money."

The sick man nodded.

"I get rid of a greater one, Jim. When my father died he left a hundred thousand between us, my sister and I. I've turned my share into a million, but that is by the way. Because she was a fairly rich girl and a wilful girl, Jim, she broke her heart. Because they knew she had the money the worst men were attracted to her—and she chose the worst of the worst!"

He stopped speaking to get his breath.

"She married a plausible villain who ruined her—spent every sou and left her with a mountain of debt and a month-old baby. Poor Grace died and he married again. I tried to get the baby, but he held it as a hostage. I could never trace the child after it was two years old. It was only a month ago I learnt the reason. The man was an international swindler and was wanted by the police. He was arrested in Paris and charged in his true name—the name he had married in was false. When he came out of prison he took his own name—and of course the child's name changed, too."

The lawyer nodded.

"You want me to—?"

"Get the will proved and begin your search for Oliva Prédeaux. There is no such person. The girl's name you know, and I have told you where she is living. You'll find nobody who knows Oliva Prédeaux—her father disappeared when she was six—he's probably dead, and her stepmother brought her up without knowing her relationship to me—then she died and the girl has been working ever since she was fifteen."

"She is not to be found?"

"Until she is married. Watch her, Jim, spend all the money you wish—don't influence her unless you see she is getting the wrong kind of man...."

His voice, which had grown to something of the old strength, suddenly dropped and the great head rolled sideways on the pillow.

Kitson rose and crossed to the door. It opened upon a spacious sitting-room, through the big open windows of which could be seen the broad acres of the Sussex Weald.

A man was sitting in the window-seat, chin in hand, looking across to the chequered fields on the slope of the downs. He was a man of thirty, with a pointed beard, and he rose as the lawyer stepped quickly into the room.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"I think he has fainted—will you go to him, doctor?"

The young man passed swiftly and noiselessly to the bedside and made a brief examination. From a shelf near the head of the bed he took a hypodermic syringe and filled it from a small bottle. Baring the patient's side he slowly injected the drug. He stood for a moment looking down at the unconscious man, then came back to the big hall where James Kitson was waiting.

"Well?"

The doctor shook his head.

"It is difficult to form a judgment," he said quietly, "his heart is all gone to pieces. Has he a family doctor?"

"Not so far as I know—he hated doctors, and has never been ill in his life. I wonder he tolerated you."

Dr. van Heerden smiled.

"He couldn't help himself. He was taken ill in the train on the way to this place and I happened to be a fellow-passenger. He asked me to bring him here and I have been here ever since. It is strange," he added, "that so rich a man as Mr. Millinborn had no servant travelling with him and should live practically alone in this—well, it is little better than a cottage."

Despite his anxiety, James Kitson smiled.

"He is the type of man who hates ostentation. I doubt if he has ever spent a thousand a year on himself all his life—do you think it is wise to leave him?"

The doctor spread out his hands.

"I can do nothing. He refused to allow me to send for a specialist and I think he was right. Nothing can be done for him. Still—"

He walked back to the bedside, and the lawyer came behind him. John Millinborn seemed to be in an uneasy sleep, and after an examination by the doctor the two men walked back to the sitting-room.

"The excitement has been rather much for him. I suppose he has been making his will?"

"Yes," said Kitson shortly.

"I gathered as much when I saw you bring the gardener and the cook in to witness a document," said Dr. van Heerden.

He tapped his teeth with the tip of his fingers—a nervous trick of his.

"I wish I had some strychnine," he said suddenly. "I ought to have some by me—in case."

"Can't you send a servant—or I'll go," said Kitson. "Is it procurable in the village?"

The doctor nodded.

"I don't want you to go," he demurred. "I have sent the car to Eastbourne to get a few things I cannot buy here. It's a stiff walk to the village and yet I doubt whether the chemist would supply the quantity I require to a servant, even with my prescription—you see," he smiled, "I am a stranger here."

"I'll go with pleasure—the walk will do me good," said the lawyer energetically. "If there is anything we can do to prolong my poor friend's life—"

The doctor sat at the table and wrote his prescription and handed it to the other with an apology.

Hill Lodge, John Millinborn's big cottage, stood on the crest of a hill, and the way to the village was steep and long, for Alfronston lay nearly a mile away. Half-way down the slope the path ran through a plantation of young ash. Here John Millinborn had preserved a few pheasants in the early days of his occupancy of the Lodge on the hill. As Kitson entered one side of the plantation he heard

a rustling noise, as though somebody were moving through the undergrowth. It was too heavy a noise for a bolting rabbit or a startled bird to make, and he peered into the thick foliage. He was a little nearsighted, and at first he did not see the cause of the commotion. Then:

"I suppose I'm trespassing," said a husky voice, and a man stepped out toward him.

The stranger carried himself with a certain jauntiness, and he had need of what assistance artifice could lend him, for he was singularly unprepossessing. He was a man who might as well have been sixty as fifty. His clothes soiled, torn and greasy, were of good cut. The shirt was filthy, but it was attached to a frayed collar, and the crumpled cravat was ornamented with a cameo pin.

But it was the face which attracted Kitson's attention. There was something inherently evil in that puffed face, in the dull eyes that blinked under the thick black eyebrows. The lips, full and loose, parted in a smile as the lawyer stepped back to avoid contact with the unsavoury visitor.

"I suppose I'm trespassing—good gad! Me trespassing—funny, very funny!" He indulged in a hoarse wheezy laugh and broke suddenly into a torrent of the foulest language that this hardened lawyer had ever heard.

"Pardon, pardon," he said, stopping as suddenly. "Man of the world, eh? You'll understand that when a gentleman has grievances...." He fumbled in his waistcoat-pocket and found a black-rimmed monocle and inserted it in his eye. There was an obscenity in the appearance of this foul wreck of a man which made the lawyer feel physically sick.

"Trespassing, by gad!" He went back to his first conceit and his voice rasped with malignity. "Gad! If I had my way with people! I'd slit their throats, I would, sir. I'd stick pins in their eyes—red-hot pins. I'd boil them alive—"

Hitherto the lawyer had not spoken, but now his repulsion got the better of his usually equable temper.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sternly. "You're on private property—take your beastliness elsewhere."

The man glared at him and laughed.

"Trespassing!" he sneered. "Trespassing! Very good—your servant, sir!"

He swept his derby hat from his head (the lawyer saw that he was bald), and turning, strutted back through the plantation the way he had come. It was not the way out and Kitson was half-inclined to follow and see the man off the estate. Then he remembered the urgency of his errand and continued his journey to the village. On his way back he looked about, but there was no trace of the unpleasant intruder. Who was he? he wondered. Some broken derelict with nothing but the memory of former vain splendours and the rags of old fineries, nursing a dear hatred for some more fortunate fellow.

Nearly an hour had passed before he again panted up to the levelled shelf on which the cottage stood.

The doctor was sitting at the window as Kitson passed.

"How is he?"

"About the same. He had one paroxysm. Is that the strychnine? I can't tell you how much obliged I am to you."

He took the small packet and placed it on the window-ledge and Mr. Kitson passed into the house.

"Honestly, doctor, what do you think of his chance?" he asked.

Dr. van Heerden shrugged his shoulders.

"Honestly, I do not think he will recover consciousness."

"Heavens!"

The lawyer was shocked. The tragic suddenness of it all stunned him. He had thought vaguely that days, even weeks, might pass before the end came.

"Not recover consciousness?" he repeated in a whisper.

Instinctively he was drawn to the room where his friend lay and the doctor followed him.

John Millinborn lay on his back, his eyes closed, his face a ghastly grey. His big hands were clutching at his throat, his shirt was torn open at the breast. The two windows, one at each end of the room, were wide, and a gentle breeze blew the casement curtains. The lawyer stooped, his eyes moist, and laid his hand upon the burning forehead.

"John, John," he murmured, and turned away, blinded with tears.

He wiped his face with a pocket-handkerchief and walked to the window, staring out at the serene loveliness of the scene. Over the weald a great aeroplane droned to the sea. The green downs were dappled white with grazing flocks, and beneath the windows the ordered beds blazed and flamed with flowers, crimson and gold and white.

As he stood there the man he had met in the plantation came to his mind and he was half-inclined to speak to the doctor of the incident. But he was in no mood for the description and the speculation which would follow. Restlessly he paced into the bedroom. The sick man had not moved and again the lawyer returned. He thought of the girl, that girl whose name and relationship with John Millinborn he alone knew. What use would she make of the millions which, all unknown to her, she would soon inherit? What—

"Jim, Jim!"

He turned swiftly.

It was John Millinborn's voice.

"Quick—come...."

The doctor had leapt into the room and made his way to the bed.

Millinborn was sitting up, and as the lawyer moved swiftly in the doctor's tracks he saw his wide eyes staring.

"Jim, he has...."

His head dropped forward on his breast and the doctor lowered him slowly to the pillow.

"What is it, John? Speak to me, old man...."

"I'm afraid there is nothing to be done," said the doctor as he drew up the bedclothes.

"Is he dead?" whispered the lawyer fearfully.

"No—but—"

He beckoned the other into the big room and, after a glance at the motionless figure, Kitson followed.

"There's something very strange—who is that?"

He pointed through the open window at the clumsy figure of a man who was blundering wildly down the slope which led to the plantation.

Kitson recognized the man immediately. It was the uninvited visitor whom he had met in the plantation. But there was something in the haste of the shabby man, a hint of terror in the wide-thrown arms, that made the lawyer forget his tragic environment.

"Where has he been?" he asked.

"Who is he?"

The doctor's face was white and drawn as though he, too, sensed some horror in that frantic flight.

Kitson walked back to the room where the dying man lay, but was frozen stiff upon the threshold.

"Doctor—doctor!"

The doctor followed the eyes of the other. Something was dripping from the bed to the floor—something red and horrible. Kitson set his teeth and, stepping to the bedside, pulled down the covers.

He stepped back with a cry, for from the side of John Millinborn protruded the ivory handle of a knife.

CHAPTER II

THE DRUNKEN MR. BEALE

Dr. van Heerden's surgery occupied one of the four shops which formed the ground floor of the Krooman Chambers. This edifice had been erected by a wealthy philanthropist to provide small model flats for the professional classes who needed limited accommodation and a good address (they were in the vicinity of Oxford Street) at a moderate rental. Like many philanthropists, the owner had wearied of his hobby and had sold the block to a syndicate, whose management on more occasions than one had been the subject of police inquiry.

They had then fallen into the hands of an intelligent woman, who had turned out the undesirable tenants, furnished the flats plainly, but comfortably, and had let them to tenants who might be described as solvent, but honest. Krooman Chambers had gradually rehabilitated itself in the eyes of the neighbourhood.

Dr. van Heerden had had his surgery in the building for six years. During the war he was temporarily under suspicion for sympathies with the enemy, but no proof was adduced of his enmity and, though he had undoubtedly been born on the wrong side of the Border at Cranenburg, which is the Prussian frontier station on the Rotterdam-Cologne line, his name was undoubtedly van Heerden, which was Dutch. Change the "van" to "von," said the carping critics, and he was a Hun, and undoubtedly Germany was full of von Heerens and von Heerdens.

The doctor lived down criticism, lived down suspicion, and got together a remunerative practice. He had the largest flat in the building, one room of which was fitted up as a laboratory, for he had a passion for research. The mysterious murder of John Millinborn had given him a certain advertisement which had not been without its advantages. The fact that he had been in attendance on the millionaire had brought him a larger fame.

His theories as to how the murder had been committed by some one who had got through the open window whilst the two men were out of the room had been generally accepted, for the police had found footmarks on the flowerbeds, over which the murderer must have passed. They had not, however, traced the seedy-looking personage whom Mr. Kitson had seen. This person had disappeared as mysteriously as he had arrived.

Three months after the murder the doctor stood on the steps of the broad entrance-hall which led to the flats, watching the stream of pedestrians passing. It was six o'clock in the evening and the streets were alive with shop-girls and workers on their way home from business.

He smoked a cigarette and his interest was, perhaps, more apparent than real. He had attended his last surgery case and the door of the "shop," with its sage-green windows, had been locked for the night.

His eyes wandered idly to the Oxford Street end of the thoroughfare, and suddenly he started. A girl was walking toward him. At this hour there was very little wheeled traffic, for Lattice Street is almost a cul-de-sac, and she had taken the middle of the road. She was dressed with that effective neatness which brings the wealthy and the work-girl to a baffling level, in a blue serge costume of severe cut; a plain white linen coat-collar and a small hat, which covered, but did not hide, a mass of hair which, against the slanting sunlight at her back, lent the illusion of a golden nimbus about her head.

The eyes were deep-set and wise with the wisdom which is found alike in those who have suffered and those who have watched suffering. The nose was straight, the lips scarlet and full. You might catalogue every feature of Oliva Cresswell and yet arrive at no satisfactory explanation for her charm.

Not in the clear ivory pallor of complexion did her charm lie. Nor in the trim figure with its promising lines, nor in the poise of head nor pride of carriage, nor in the ready laughter that came to those quiet eyes. In no one particular quality of attraction did she excel. Rather was her charm the charm of the perfect agglomeration of all those characteristics which men find alluring and challenging.

She raised her hand with a free unaffected gesture, and greeted the doctor with a flashing smile.

"Well, Miss Cresswell, I haven't seen you for quite a long time."

"Two days," she said solemnly, "but I suppose doctors who know all the secrets of nature have some very special drug to sustain them in trials like that."

"Don't be unkind to the profession," he laughed, "and don't be sarcastic, to one so young. By the way, I have never asked you did you get your flat changed?"

She shook her head and frowned.

"Miss Millit says she cannot move me."

"Abominable," he said, and was annoyed. "Did you tell her about Beale?"

She nodded vigorously.

"I said to her, says I," she had a trick of mimicry and dropped easily into the southern English accent, "'Miss Millit, are you aware that the gentleman who lives opposite to me has been, to my knowledge, consistently drunk for two months—ever since he came to live at Kroomans?' 'Does he annoy you?' says she. 'Drunken people always annoy me,' says I. 'Mr. Beale arrives home every evening in a condition which I can only describe as deplorable.'"

"What did she say?"

The girl made a little grimace and became serious.

"She said if he did not speak to me or interfere with me or frighten me it was none of my business, or something to that effect." She laughed helplessly. "Really, the flat is so wonderful and so cheap that one cannot afford to get out—you don't know how grateful I am to you, doctor, for having got diggings here at all—Miss Millit isn't keen on single young ladies."

She sniffed and laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked.

"I was thinking how queerly you and I met."

The circumstances of their meeting had indeed been curious. She was employed as a cashier at one of the great West End stores. He had made some sort of purchase and made payment in a five-pound note which had proved to be counterfeit. It was a sad moment for the girl when the forgery was discovered, for she had to make up the loss from her own pocket and that was no small matter.

Then the miracle had happened. The doctor had arrived full of apologies, had presented his card and explained. The note was one which he had been keeping as a curiosity. It has been passed on him and was such an excellent specimen that he intended having it framed but it had got mixed up with his other money.

"You started by being the villain of the piece and ended by being my good fairy," she said. "I should never have known there was a vacancy here but for you. I should not have been admitted by the proper Miss Millit but for the terror of your name."

She dropped her little hand lightly on his shoulder. It was a gesture of good-comradeship.

She half-turned to go when an angry exclamation held her.

"What is it? Oh, I see—No. 4!"

She drew a little closer to the doctor's side and watched with narrowing lids the approaching figure.

"Why does he do it—oh, why does he do it?" she demanded impatiently. "How can a man be so weak, so wretchedly weak? There's nothing justifies that!"

"That" was apparently trying to walk the opposite kerb as though it were a tight-rope. Save for a certain disorder of attire, a protruding necktie and a muddy hat, he was respectable enough. He was

young and, under other conditions, passably good looking. But with his fair hair streaming over his forehead and his hat at the back of his head he lacked fascination. His attempt, aided by a walking-stick used as a balancing-pole, to keep his equilibrium on six inches of kerbing, might have been funny to a less sensitive soul than Oliva's.

He slipped, recovered himself with a little whoop, slipped again, and finally gave up the attempt, crossing the road to his home.

He recognized the doctor with a flourish of his hat.

"Glorious weather, my Escu-escu-lapius," he said, with a little slur in his voice but a merry smile in his eye; "simply wonderful weather for bacteria trypanosomes (got it) an' all the jolly little microbes."

He smiled at the doctor blandly, ignoring the other's significant glance at the girl, who had drawn back so that she might not find herself included in the conversation.

"I'm goin' to leave you, doctor," he went on, "goin' top floor, away from the evil smells of science an' fatal lure of beauty. Top floor jolly stiff climb when a fellow's all lit up like the Hotel Doodledum—per arduis ad astra—through labour to the stars—fine motto. Flying Corps' motto—my motto. Goo' night!"

Off came his hat again and he staggered up the broad stone stairs and disappeared round a turn. Later they heard his door slam.

"Awful—and yet—"

"And yet?" echoed the doctor.

"I thought he was funny. I nearly laughed. But how terrible! He's so young and he has had a decent education."

She shook her head sadly.

Presently she took leave of the doctor and made her way upstairs. Three doors opened from the landing. Numbers 4, 6 and 8.

She glanced a little apprehensively at No. 4 as she passed, but there was no sound or sign of the reveller, and she passed into No. 6 and closed the door.

The accommodation consisted of two rooms, a bed-and a sitting-room, a bath-room and a tiny kitchen. The rent was remarkably low, less than a quarter of her weekly earnings, and she managed to live comfortably.

She lit the gas-stove and put on the kettle and began to lay the table. There was a "tin of something" in the diminutive pantry, a small loaf and a jug of milk, a tomato or two and a bottle of dressing—the high tea to which she sat down (a little flushed of the face and quite happy) was seasoned with content. She thought of the doctor and accounted herself lucky to have so good a friend. He was so sensible, there was no "nonsense" about him. He never tried to hold her hand as the stupid buyers did, nor make clumsy attempts to kiss her as one of the partners had done.

The doctor was different from them all. She could not imagine him sitting by the side of a girl in a bus pressing her foot with his, or accosting her in the street with a "Haven't we met before?"

She ate her meal slowly, reading the evening newspaper and dreaming at intervals. It was dusk when she had finished and she switched on the electric light. There was a shilling-in-the-slot meter in the bath-room that acted eccentrically. Sometimes one shilling would supply light for a week, at other times after two days the lights would flicker spasmodically and expire.

She remembered that it was a perilous long time since she had bribed the meter and searched her purse for a shilling. She found that she had half-crowns, florins and sixpences, but she had no shillings. This, of course, is the chronic condition of all users of the slot-meters, and she accepted the discovery with the calm of the fatalist. She considered. Should she go out and get change from the obliging tobacconist at the corner or should she take a chance?

"If I don't go out you will," she said addressing the light, and it winked ominously.

She opened the door and stepped into the passage, and as she did so the lights behind her went out. There was one small lamp on the landing, a plutocratic affair independent of shilling meters. She closed the door behind her and walked to the head of the stairs. As she passed No. 4, she noted the door was ajar and she stopped. She did not wish to risk meeting the drunkard, and she turned back.

Then she remembered the doctor, he lived in No. 8. Usually when he was at home there was a light in his hall which showed through the fanlight. Now, however, the place was in darkness. She saw a card on the door and walking closer she read it in the dim light.

Back at 12. Wait.

He was out and was evidently expecting a caller. So there was nothing for it but to risk meeting the exuberant Mr. Beale. She flew down the stairs and gained the street with a feeling of relief.

The obliging tobacconist, who was loquacious on the subject of Germans and Germany, detained her until her stock of patience was exhausted; but at last she made her escape. Half-way across the street she saw the figure of a man standing in the dark hallway of the chambers, and her heart sank.

"Matilda, you're a fool," she said to herself.

Her name was not Matilda, but in moments of self-depreciation she was wont to address herself as such.

She walked boldly up to the entrance and passed through. The man she saw out of the corner of her eye but did not recognize. He seemed as little desirous of attracting attention as she. She thought he was rather stout and short, but as to this she was not sure. She raced up the stairs and turned on the landing to her room. The door of No. 4 was still ajar—but what was much more important, so was her door. There was no doubt about it, between the edge of the door and the jamb there was a good two inches of space, and she distinctly remembered not only closing it, but also pushing it to make sure that it was fast. What should she do? To her annoyance she felt a cold little feeling inside her and her hands were trembling.

"If the lights were only on I'd take the risk," she thought; but the lights were not on and it was necessary to pass into the dark interior and into a darker bath-room—a room which is notoriously adaptable for murder—before she could reach the meter.

"Rubbish, Matilda!" she scoffed quaveringly, "go in, you frightened little rabbit—you forgot to shut the door, that's all."

She pushed the door open and with a shiver stepped inside.

Then a sound made her stop dead. It was a shuffle and a creak such as a dog might make if he brushed against the chair.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

There was no reply.

"Who's there?"

She took one step forward and then something reached out at her. A big hand gripped her by the sleeve of her blouse and she heard a deep breathing.

She bit her lips to stop the scream that arose, and with a wrench tore herself free, leaving a portion of a sleeve in the hands of the unknown.

She darted backward, slamming the door behind her. In two flying strides she was at the door of No. 4, hammering with both her fists.

"Drunk or sober he is a man! Drunk or sober he is a man!" she muttered incoherently.

Only twice she beat upon the door when it opened suddenly and Mr. Beale stood in the doorway.

"What is it?"

She hardly noticed his tone.

"A man—a man, in my flat," she gasped, and showed her torn sleeve, "a man...!"

He pushed her aside and made for the door.

"The key?" he said quickly.

With trembling fingers she extracted it from her pocket.

"One moment."

He disappeared into his own flat and presently came out holding an electric torch. He snapped back the lock, put the key in his pocket and then, to her amazement, he slipped a short-barrelled revolver from his hip-pocket.

With his foot he pushed open the door and she watched him vanish into the gloomy interior.

Presently came his voice, sharp and menacing:

"Hands up!"

A voice jabbered something excitedly and then she heard Mr. Beale speak.

"Is your light working?—you can come in, I have him in the dining-room."

She stepped into the bath-room, the shilling dropped through the aperture, the screw grated as she turned it and the lights sprang to life.

In one corner of the room was a man, a white-faced, sickly looking man with a head too big for his body. His hands were above his head, his lower lip trembled in terror.

Mr. Beale was searching him with thoroughness and rapidity.

"No gun, all right, put your hands down. Now turn out your pockets."

The man said something in a language which the girl could not understand, and Mr. Beale replied in the same tongue. He put the contents, first of one pocket then of the other, upon the table, and the girl watched the proceedings with open eyes.

"Hello, what's this?"

Beale picked up a card. Thereon was scribbled a figure which might have been 6 or 4.

"I see," said Beale, "now the other pocket—you understand English, my friend?"

Stupidly the man obeyed. A leather pocket-case came from an inside pocket and this Beale opened.

Therein was a small packet which resembled the familiar wrapper of a seidlitz powder. Beale spoke sharply in a language which the girl realized was German, and the man shook his head. He said something which sounded like "No good," several times.

"I'm going to leave you here alone for awhile," said Beale, "my friend and I are going downstairs together—I shall not be long."

They went out of the flat together, the little man with the big head protesting, and she heard their footsteps descending the stairs. Presently Beale came up alone and walked into the sitting-room. And then the strange unaccountable fact dawned on her—he was perfectly sober.

His eyes were clear, his lips firm, and the fair hair whose tendencies to bedragglements had emphasized his disgrace was brushed back over his head. He looked at her so earnestly that she grew embarrassed.

"Miss Cresswell," he said quietly. "I am going to ask you to do me a great favour."

"If it is one that I can grant, you may be sure that I will," she smiled, and he nodded.

"I shall not ask you to do anything that is impossible in spite of the humorist's view of women," he said. "I merely want you to tell nobody about what has happened to-night."

"Nobody?" she looked at him in astonishment. "But the doctor—"

"Not even the doctor," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I ask you this as a special favour—word of honour?"

She thought a moment.

"I promise," she said. "I'm to tell nobody about that horrid man from whom you so kindly saved me—"

He lifted his head.

"Understand this, Miss Cresswell, please," he said: "I don't want you to be under any misapprehension about that 'horrid man'—he was just as scared as you, and he would not have harmed you. I have been waiting for him all the evening."

"Waiting for him?"

He nodded again.

"Where?"

"In the doctor's flat," he said calmly, "you see, the doctor and I are deadly rivals. We are rival scientists, and I was waiting for the hairy man to steal a march on him."

"But, but—how did you get in."

"I had this key," he said holding up a small key, "remember, word of honour! The man whom I have just left came up and wasn't certain whether he had to go in No. 8, that's the doctor's, or No. 6—and *the one key fits both doors!*"

He inserted the key which was in the lock of her door and it turned easily.

"And this is what I was waiting for—it was the best the poor devil could do."

He lifted the paper package and broke the seals. Unfolding the paper carefully he laid it on the table, revealing a teaspoonful of what looked like fine green sawdust.

"What is it?" she whispered fearfully.

Somehow she knew that she was in the presence of a big elementary danger—something gross and terrible in its primitive force.

"That," said Mr. Beale, choosing his words nicely, "that is a passable imitation of the Green Rust, or, as it is to me, the Green Terror."

"The Green Rust? What is the Green Rust—what can it do?" she asked in bewilderment.

"I hope we shall never know," he said, and in his clear eyes was a hint of terror.

CHAPTER III

PUNSONBY'S DISCHARGE AN EMPLOYEE

Oliva Cresswell rose with the final despairing buzz of her alarm clock and conquered the almost irresistible temptation to close her eyes, just to see what it felt like. Her first impression was that she had had no sleep all night. She remembered going to bed at one and turning from side to side until three. She remembered deciding that the best thing to do was to get up, make some tea and watch the sun rise, and that whilst she was deciding whether such a step was romantic or just silly, she must have gone to sleep.

Still, four hours of slumber is practically no slumber to a healthy girl and she swung her pyjamaed legs over the side of the bed and spent quite five minutes in a fatuous admiration of her little white feet. With an effort she dragged herself to the bath-room and let the tap run. Then she put on the kettle. Half an hour later she was feeling well but unenthusiastic.

When she became fully conscious, which was on her way to business, she realized she was worried. She had been made a party to a secret without her wish—and the drunken Mr. Beale, that youthful profligate, had really forced this confidence upon her. Only, and this she recalled with a start which sent her chin jerking upward (she was in the bus at the time and the conductor, thinking she was signalling him to stop, pulled the bell), only Mr. Beale was surprisingly sober and masterful for one so weak of character.

Ought she to tell the doctor—Dr. van Heerden, who had been so good a friend of hers? It seemed disloyal, it was disloyal, horribly disloyal to him, to hide the fact that Mr. Beale had actually been in the doctor's room at night.

But was it a coincidence that the same key opened her door and the doctor's? If it were so, it was an embarrassing coincidence. She must change the locks without delay.

The bus set her down at the corner of Punsonby's great block. Punsonby's is one of the most successful and at the same time one of the most exclusive dress-houses in London, and Oliva had indeed been fortunate in securing her present position, for employment at Punsonby's was almost equal to Government employment in its permanency, as it was certainly more lucrative in its pay.

As she stepped on to the pavement she glanced up at the big ornate clock. She was in good time, she said to herself, and was pushing open the big glass door through which employees pass to the various departments when a hand touched her gently on the arm.

She turned in surprise to face Mr. Beale, looking particularly smart in a well-fitting grey suit, a grey felt hat and a large bunch of violets in his buttonhole.

"Excuse me, Miss Cresswell," he said pleasantly, "may I have one word with you?"

She looked at him doubtfully.

"I rather wish you had chosen another time and another place, Mr. Beale," she said frankly.

He nodded.

"I realize it is rather embarrassing," he said, "but unfortunately my business cannot wait. I am a business man, you know," he smiled, "in spite of my dissolute habits."

She looked at him closely, for she thought she detected a gentle mockery behind his words, but he was not smiling now.

"I won't keep you more than two minutes," he went on, "but in that two minutes I have a great deal to tell you. I won't bore you with the story of my life."

This time she saw the amusement in his eyes and smiled against her will, because she was not feeling particularly amused.

"I have a business in the city of London," he said, "and again I would ask you to respect my confidence. I am a wheat expert."

"A wheat expert?" she repeated with a puzzled frown.

"It's a queer job, isn't it? but that's what I am. I have a vacancy in my office for a confidential secretary. It is a nice office, the pay is good, the hours are few and the work is light. I want to know whether you will accept the position."

She shook her head, regarding him with a new interest, from which suspicion was not altogether absent.

"It is awfully kind of you, Mr. Beale, and adds another to the debts I owe you," she said, "but I have no desire to leave Punsonby's. It is work I like, and although I am sure you are not interested in my private business"—he could have told her that he was very much interested in her private business, but he refrained—"I do not mind telling you that I am earning a very good salary and I have no intention or desire to change my situation."

His eyes twinkled.

"Ah well, that's my misfortune," he said, "there are only two things I can say. The first is that if you work for me you will neither be distressed nor annoyed by any habits of mine which you may have observed and which may perhaps have prejudiced you against me. In the second place, I want you to promise me that if you ever leave Punsonby's you will give me the first offer of your services."

She laughed.

"I think you are very funny, Mr. Beale, but I feel sure that you mean what you say, and that you would confine your—er—little eccentricities to times outside of business hours. As far as leaving Punsonby's is concerned I promise you that I will give you the first offer of my invaluable services if ever I leave. And now I am afraid I must run away. I am awfully obliged to you for what you did for me last night."

He looked at her steadily in the eye.

"I have no recollection of anything that happened last night," he said, "and I should be glad if your memory would suffer the same lapse."

He shook hands with her, lifted his hat and turned abruptly away, and she looked after him till the boom of the clock recalled her to the fact that the head of the firm of Punsonby was a stickler for punctuality.

She went into the great cloak-room and hung up her coat and hat. As she turned to the mirror to straighten her hair she came face to face with a tall, dark girl who had been eyeing her thoughtfully.

"Good morning," said Oliva, and there was in her tone more of politeness than friendship, for although these two girls had occupied the same office for more than a year, there was between them an incompatibility which no length of acquaintance could remove.

Hilda Glaum was of Swiss extraction, and something of a mystery. She was good looking in a sulky, saturnine way, but her known virtues stopped short at her appearance. She neither invited nor gave confidence, and in this respect suited Oliva, but unlike Oliva, she made no friends, entered into none of the periodical movements amongst the girls, was impervious to the attractions of the river in summer and of the Proms in winter, neither visited nor received.

"Morning," replied the girl shortly; then: "Have you been upstairs?"

"No—why?"

"Oh, nothing."

Oliva mounted to the floor where her little office was. She and Hilda dealt with the registered mail, extracted and checked the money that came from the post-shoppers and sent on the orders to the various departments.

Three sealed bags lay on her desk, and a youth from the postal department waited to receive a receipt for them. This she scribbled, after comparing the numbers attached to the seals with those inscribed on the boy's receipt-book.

For some reason Hilda had not followed her, and she was alone and had tumbled the contents of the first bag on to her desk when the managing director of Punsonby's made a surprising appearance at the glass-panelled door of her office.

He was a large, stout and important-looking man, bald and bearded. He enjoyed an episcopal manner, and had a trick of pulling back his head when he asked questions, as though he desired to evade the full force of the answer.

He stood in the doorway and beckoned her out, and she went without any premonition of what was in store for her.

"Ah, Miss Cresswell," he said. "I—ah—am sorry I did not see you before you had taken off your coat and hat. Will you come to my office?"

"Certainly, Mr. White," said the girl, wondering what had happened.

He led the way with his majestic stride, dangling a pair of pince-nez by their cord, as a fastidious person might carry a mouse by its tail, and ushered her into his rosewood-panelled office.

"Sit down, sit down, Miss Cresswell," he said, and seating himself at his desk he put the tips of his fingers together and looked up to the ceiling for inspiration. "I am afraid, Miss Cresswell," he said, "that I have—ah—an unpleasant task."

"An unpleasant task, Mr. White?" she said, with a sinking feeling inside her.

He nodded.

"I have to tell you that Punsonby's no longer require your services."

She rose to her feet, looking down at him open-mouthed with wonder and consternation.

"Not require my services?" she said slowly. "Do you mean that I am discharged?"

He nodded again.

"In lieu of a month's notice I will give you a cheque for a month's salary, plus the unexpired portion of this week's salary."

"But why am I being discharged? Why? Why?"

Mr. White, who had opened his eyes for a moment to watch the effect of his lightning stroke, closed them again.

"It is not the practice of Punsonby's to give any reason for dispensing with the services of its employees," he said oracularly, "it is sufficient that I should tell you that hitherto you have given every satisfaction, but for reasons which I am not prepared to discuss we must dispense with your services."

Her head was in a whirl. She could not grasp what had happened. For five years she had worked in the happiest circumstances in this great store, where everybody had been kind to her and where her tasks had been congenial. She had never thought of going elsewhere. She regarded herself, as did all the better-class employees, as a fixture.

"Do I understand," she asked, "that I am to leave—at once?"

Mr. White nodded. He pushed the cheque across the table and she took it up and folded it mechanically.

"And you are not going to tell me why?"

Mr. White shook his head.

"Punsonby's do nothing without a good reason," he said solemnly, feeling that whatever happened he must make a good case for Punsonby's, and that whoever was to blame for this unhappy incident it was not an august firm which paid its fourteen per cent. with monotonous regularity. "We lack—ah—definite knowledge to proceed any further in this matter than—in fact, than we have proceeded. Definite knowledge" (the girl was all the more bewildered by his cumbersome diplomacy) "definite knowledge was promised but has not—in fact, has not come to hand. It is all very unpleasant—very unpleasant," and he shook his head.

She bowed and turning, walked quickly from the room, passed to the lobby where her coat was hung, put on her hat and left Punsonby's for ever.

It was when she had reached the street that, with a shock, she remembered Beale's words and she stood stock-still, pinching her lip thoughtfully. Had he known? Why had he come that morning, hours before he was ordinarily visible—if the common gossip of Krooman Mansions be worthy of credence?—and then as though to cap the amazing events of the morning she saw him. He was standing on the corner of the street, leaning on his cane, smoking a long cigarette through a much longer holder, and he seemed wholly absorbed in watching a linesman, perched high above the street, repairing a telegraph wire.

She made a step toward him, but stopped. He was so evidently engrossed in the acrobatics of the honest workman in mid-air that he could not have seen her and she turned swiftly and walked the other way.

She had not reached the end of the block before he was at her side.

"You are going home early, Miss Cresswell," he smiled.

She turned to him.

"Do you know why?" she asked.

"I don't know why—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you have been discharged," he said coolly.

Her brows knit.

"What do you know about my discharge?" she asked.

"Such things are possible," said Mr. Beale.

"Did you know I was going to be discharged?" she asked again.

He nodded.

"I didn't exactly know you would be discharged this morning, but I had an idea you would be discharged at some time or other. That is why I came with my offer."

"Which, of course, I won't accept," she snapped.

"Which, of course, you have accepted," he said quietly. "Believe me, I know nothing more than that Punsonby's have been prevailed upon to discharge you. What reason induced them to take that step, honestly I don't know."

"But why did you think so?"

He was grave of a sudden.

"I just thought so," he said. "I am not going to be mysterious with you and I can only tell you that I had reasons to believe that some such step would be taken."

She shrugged her shoulders wearily.

"It is quite mysterious enough," she said. "Do you seriously want me to work for you?"

He nodded.

"You didn't tell me your city address."

"That is why I came back," he said.

"Then you knew I was coming out?"

"I knew you would come out some time in the day."

She stared at him.

"Do you mean to tell me that you would have waited all day to give me your address?"

He laughed.

"I only mean this," he replied, "that I should have waited all day."

It was a helpless laugh which echoed his.

"My address is 342 Lothbury," he went on, "342. You may begin work this afternoon and—" He hesitated.

"And?" she repeated.

"And I think it would be wise if you didn't tell your friend, the doctor, that I am employing you."

He was examining his finger-nails attentively as he spoke, and he did not meet her eye.

"There are many reasons," he went on. "In the first place, I have blotted my copy-book, as they say, in Krooman Mansions, and it might not rebound to your credit."

"You should have thought of that before you asked me to come to you," she said.

"I thought of it a great deal," he replied calmly.

There was much in what he said, as the girl recognized. She blamed herself for her hasty promise, but somehow the events of the previous night had placed him on a different footing, had given him a certain indefinable position to which the inebriate Mr. Beale had not aspired.

"I am afraid I am rather bewildered by all the mystery of it," she said, "and I don't think I will come to the office to-day. To-morrow morning, at what hour?"

"Ten o'clock," he said, "I will be there to explain your duties. Your salary will be £5 a week. You will be in charge of the office, to which I very seldom go, by the way, and your work will be preparing statistical returns of the wheat-crops in all the wheat-fields of the world for the last fifty years."

"It sounds thrilling," she said, and a quick smile flashed across his face.

"It is much more thrilling than you imagine," were his parting words.

She reached Krooman Mansions just as the doctor was coming out, and he looked at her in surprise.

"You are back early!"

Should she tell him? There was no reason why she shouldn't. He had been a good friend of hers and she felt sure of his sympathy. It occurred to her at that moment that Mr. Beale had been most unsympathetic, and had not expressed one word of regret.

"Yes, I've been discharged," she exclaimed.

"Discharged? Impossible!"

She nodded.

"To prove that it is possible it has happened," she said cheerfully.

"My dear girl, this is monstrous! What excuse did they give?"

"None." This was said with a lightness of tone which did not reflect the indignation she felt at heart.

"Did they give you no reason?"

"They gave me none. They gave me my month's cheque and just told me to go off, and off I came like the well-disciplined wage-earner I am."

"But it is monstrous," he said indignantly. "I will go and see them. I know one of the heads of the firm—at least, he is a patient of mine."

"You will do nothing of the kind," she replied firmly. "It really doesn't matter."

"What are you going to do? By Jove!" he said suddenly, "what a splendid idea! I want a clinical secretary."

The humour of it got the better of her, and she laughed in his face.

"What is the joke?" he asked.

"Oh, I am so sorry, doctor, but you mustn't think I am ungrateful, but I am beginning to regard myself as one of the plums in the labour market."

"Have you another position?" he asked quickly.

"I have just accepted one," she said, and he did not disguise his disappointment, which might even have been interpreted, were Oliva more conceited, into absolute chagrin.

"You are very quick," said he, and his voice had lost some of its enthusiasm. "What position have you taken?"

"I am going into an office in the city," she said.

"That will be dull. If you have settled it in your mind, of course, I cannot alter your decision, but I would be quite willing to give you £5 or £6 a week, and the work would be very light."

She held out her hand, and there was a twinkle in her eye.

"London is simply filled with people who want to give me £5 a week for work which is very light; really I am awfully grateful to you, doctor."

She felt more cheerful as she mounted the stairs than she thought would have been possible had such a position been forecast and had she to speculate upon the attitude of mind with which she would meet such a misfortune.

Punsonby's, for all the humiliation of her dismissal, seemed fairly unimportant. Some day she would discover the circumstances which had decided the high gods who presided over the ready-made clothing business in their action.

She unlocked the door and passed in, not without a comprehensive and an amused glance which took in the sober front doors of her new employer and her would-be employer.

"Sarah, your luck's in," she said, as she banged the door—Sarah was the approving version of Matilda. "If the wheezy man fires you, be sure there'll be a good angel waiting on the doorstep to offer you £20 a week for 'phoning the office once a day."

It occurred to her that it would be wise to place on record her protest against her summary dismissal, and she went to the little bookshelf-writing-table where she kept her writing-material to indite the epistle whilst she thought of it. It was one of those little fumed-oak contraptions where the desk is formed by a hinged flap which serves when not in use to close the desk.

She pulled out the two little supports, inserted the key in the lock, but it refused to turn, for the simple reason that it was unlocked. She had distinctly remembered that morning locking it after putting away the bill which had arrived with the morning post.

She pulled down the flap slowly and stared in amazement at the little which it hid. Every pigeon-hole had been ransacked and the contents were piled up in a confused heap. The two tiny drawers in which she kept stamps and nibs were out and emptied.

CHAPTER IV

THE LETTERS THAT WERE NOT THERE

She made a rapid survey of the documents. They were unimportant, and consisted mainly of letters from the few girl friends she had made during her stay at Punsonby's—old theatre programmes, recipes copied from newspapers and bunches of snapshots taken on her last summer excursion.

She arranged the things in some sort of rough order and made an inspection of her bedroom. Here, too, there was evidence that somebody had been searching the room. The drawers of her dressing-table were open, and though the contents had been little disturbed, it was clear that they had been searched. She made another discovery. The window of the bedroom was open at the bottom. Usually it was open half-way down from the top, and was fastened in that position by a patent catch. This precaution was necessary, because the window looked upon a narrow iron parapet which ran along the building and communicated with the fire-escape. She looked out. Evidently the intruder had both come and gone this way, and as evidently her return had disturbed him in his inspection, for it was hardly likely he would leave her papers and bureau in that state of confusion.

She made a brief inspection of the drawers in the dressing-table, and so far as she could see nothing was missing. She went back to the writing-bureau, mechanically put away the papers, little memorandum-books and letters which had been dragged from their pigeon-holes, then resting her elbow on the desk she sat, chin in hand, her pretty forehead wrinkled in a frown, recalling the events of the morning.

Who had searched her desk? What did they hope to discover? She had no illusions that this was the work of a common thief. There was something behind all this, something sinister and terrifying.

What association had the search with her summary dismissal and what did the pompous Mr. White mean when he talked about definite knowledge? Definite knowledge of what? She gave it up with a shrug. She was not as much alarmed as disturbed. Life was grating a little, and she resented this departure from the smooth course which it had hitherto run. She resented the intrusion of Mr. Beale, who was drunk one moment and sober the next, who had offices in the city which he did not visit and who took such an inordinate interest in her affairs, and she resented him all the more because, in some indefinable way, he had shaken her faith—no, not shaken her faith, that was too strong a term—he had pared the mild romance which Dr. van Heerden's friendship represented.

She got up from the table and paced the room, planning her day. She would go out to lunch and indulge in the dissipation of a matinee. Perhaps she would stay out to dinner and come back—she shivered unconsciously and looked round the room. Somehow she did not look forward to an evening spent alone in her flat.

"Matilda, you're getting maudlin," she said, "you are getting romantic, too. You are reading too many sensational novels and seeing too many sensational films."

She walked briskly into her bedroom, unhooked a suit from the wardrobe and laid it on the bed.

At that moment there came a knock at the door. She put down the clothes-brush which was in her hand, walked out into the hall, opened the door and stepped back. Three men stood in the passage without. Two were strangers with that curious official look which the plain-clothes policeman can never wholly eradicate from his bearing. The third was Mr. White, more pompous and more solemn than ever.

"Miss Cresswell?" asked one of the strangers.

"That is my name."

"May we come inside? I want to see you."

She led the way to her little sitting-room. Mr. White followed in the rear.

"Your name is Oliva Cresswell. You were recently employed by Punsonby's, Limited, as cashier."

"That is true," she said, wondering what was coming next.

"Certain information was laid against you," said the spokesman, "as a result of which you were discharged from the firm this morning?"

She raised her eyebrows in indignant surprise.

"Information laid against me?" she said haughtily. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, that a charge was made against you that you were converting money belonging to the firm to your own use. That was the charge, I believe, sir?" He turned to Mr. White.

Mr. White nodded slowly.

"It is a lie. It is an outrageous lie," cried the girl, turning flaming eyes upon the stout managing director of Punsonby's. "You know it's a lie, Mr. White! Thousands of pounds have passed through my hands and I have never—oh, it's cruel."

"If you will only keep calm for a little while, miss," said the man, who was not unused to such outbreaks, "I will explain that at the moment of your dismissal there was no evidence against you."

"No definite knowledge of your offence," murmured Mr. White.

"And now?" demanded the girl.

"Now we have information, miss, to the effect that three registered letters, containing in all the sum of £63—"

"Fourteen and sevenpence," murmured Mr. White.

"Sixty-three pounds odd," said the detective, "which were abstracted by you yesterday are concealed in this flat."

"In the left-hand bottom drawer of your bureau," murmured Mr. White. "That is the definite knowledge which has come to us—it is a great pity."

The girl stared from one to the other.

"Three registered envelopes," she said incredulously; "in this flat?"

"In the bottom drawer of your bureau," mumbled Mr. White, who stood throughout the interview with his eyes closed, his hands clasped in front of him, a picture of a man performing a most painful act of duty.

"I have a warrant—" began the detective.

"You need no warrant," said the girl quietly, "you are at liberty to search this flat or bring a woman to search me. I have nothing in these rooms which I am ashamed that you should see."

The detective turned to his companion.

"Fred," he said, "just have a look over that writing-bureau. Is it locked, miss?"

She had closed and locked the secretaire and she handed the man the key. The detective who had done the speaking passed into the bedroom, and the girl heard him pulling out the drawers. She did not move from where she stood confronting her late employer, still preserving his attitude of somnolent detachment.

"Mr. White," she asked quietly, "I have a right to know who accused me of stealing from your firm."

He made no reply.

"Even a criminal has a right to that, you know," she said, recovering some of her poise. "I suppose that you have been missing things for quite a long while—people always miss things for quite a long while before the thief is discovered, according to the Sunday papers."

"I do not read newspapers published on the Lord's Day," said Mr. White reproachfully. "I do not know the habits of the criminal classes, but as you say, and I fear I must convey the gist of your speech to the officers of the law, money has been missed from your department for a considerable time. As to your accuser, acting as—ah—as a good citizen and performing the duties which are associated with good-citizenship, I cannot reveal his, her, or their name."

She was eyeing him curiously with a gleam of dormant laughter in her clear eyes. Then she heard a hurried footstep in the little passage and remembered that the door had been left open and she looked round.

The new-comer was Dr. van Heerden.

"What is this I hear?" he demanded fiercely, addressing White. "You dare accuse Miss Cresswell of theft?"

"My dear doctor," began White.

"It is an outrage," said the doctor. "It is disgraceful, Mr. White. I will vouch for Miss Cresswell with my life."

The girl stopped him with a laugh.

"Please don't be dramatic, doctor. It's really a stupid mistake. I didn't know you knew Mr. White."

"It is a disgraceful mistake," said the doctor violently. "I am surprised at you, White."

Mr. White could not close his eyes any tighter than they were closed. He passed the responsibility for the situation upon an invisible Providence with one heaving shrug of his shoulders.

"It is awfully kind of you to take this interest, doctor," said the girl, putting out her hands to him, "it was just like you."

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked earnestly. "You can depend upon me to the last shilling if any trouble arises out of this."

"No trouble will arise out of it," she said. "Mr. White thinks that I have stolen money and that that money is hidden in the flat—by the way, who told you that I had been accused?"

For a moment he was taken aback; then:

"I saw the police officers go into your flat. I recognized them, and as they were accompanied by White, and you had been dismissed this morning, I drew my own conclusions."

It was at this moment that the detective came back from the bedroom.

"There's nothing there," he said.

Mr. White opened his eyes to their fullest extent.

"In the bottom drawer of the bureau?" he asked incredulously.

"Neither in the bottom drawer nor the top drawer," said the detective. "Have you found anything, Fred?"

"Nothing," said the other man.

"Have a look behind those pictures."

They turned up the corners of the carpets, searched her one little bookcase, looked under the tables, an unnecessary and amusing proceeding in the girl's eyes till the detective explained with that display of friendliness which all policemen show to suspected persons whom they do not at heart suspect, it was not an uncommon process for criminals to tack the proceeds of bank-note robberies to the underside of the table.

"Well, miss," said the detective at last, with a smile, "I hope we haven't worried you very much. What do you intend doing, sir?" He addressed White.

"Did you search the bottom drawer of the bureau?" said Mr. White again.

"I searched the bottom drawer of the bureau, the top drawer and the middle drawer," said the detective patiently. "I searched the back of the bureau, the trinket-drawer, the trinket-boxes—"

"And it was not there?" said Mr. White, as though he could not believe his ears.

"It was not there. What I want to know is, do you charge this young lady? If you charge her, of course you take all the responsibility for the act, and if you fail to convict her you will be liable to an action for false arrest."

"I know, I know, I know," said Mr. White, with remarkable asperity in one so placid. "No, I do not charge her. I am sorry you have been inconvenienced"—he turned to the girl in his most majestic manner—"and I trust that you bear no ill-will."

He offered a large and flabby hand, but Oliva ignored it.

"Mind you don't trip over the mat as you go out," she said, "the passage is rather dark."

Mr. White left the room, breathing heavily.

"Excuse me one moment," said the doctor in a low voice. "I have a few words to say to White."

"Please don't make a fuss," said Oliva, "I would rather the matter dropped where it is."

He nodded, and strode out after the managing director of Punsonby's. They made a little group of four.

"Can I see you in my flat for a moment, Mr. White?"

"Certainly," said Mr. White cheerfully.

"You don't want us any more?" asked the detective.

"No," said Mr. White; then: "Are you quite sure you searched the bottom drawer of the bureau?"

"Perfectly sure," said the detective irritably, "you don't suppose I've been at this job for twenty years and should overlook the one place where I expected to find the letters."

Mr. White was saved the labour of framing a suitable retort, for the door of Mr. Beale's flat was flung open and Mr. Beale came forth. His grey hat was on the back of his head and he stood erect with the aid of the door-post, surveying with a bland and inane smile the little knot of men.

"Why," he said jovially, "it's the dear old doctor, and if my eyes don't deceive me, it's the jolly old Archbishop."

Mr. White brindled. That he was known as the Archbishop in the intimate circles of his acquaintances afforded him a certain satisfaction. That a perfect stranger, and a perfectly drunken stranger at that, should employ a nickname which was for the use of a privileged few, distressed him.

"And," said the swaying man by the door, peering through the half-darkness: "Is it not Detective-Sergeant Peterson and Constable Fairbank? Welcome to this home of virtue."

The detective-sergeant smiled but said nothing. The doctor fingered his beard indecisively, but Mr. White essayed to stride past, his chin in the air, ignoring the greeting, but Mr. Beale was too quick for him. He lurched forward, caught the lapels of the other's immaculate frock-coat and held himself erect thereby.

"My dear old Whitey," he said.

"I don't know you, sir," cried Mr. White, "will you please unhand me?"

"Don't know me, Whitey? Why you astonishing old thing!"

He slipped his arm over the other's shoulder in an attitude of affectionate regard. "Don't know old Beale?"

"I never met you before," said Mr. White, struggling to escape.

"Bless my life and soul," said Mr. Beale, stepping back, shocked and hurt, "I call you to witness, Detective-Sergeant Peterson and amiable Constable Fairbank and learned Dr. van Heerden, that he has denied me. And it has come to this," he said bitterly, and leaning his head against the door-post he howled like a dog.

"I say, stop your fooling, Beale," said the doctor angrily, "there's been very serious business here, and I should thank you not to interfere."

Mr. Beale wiped imaginary tears from his eyes, grasped Mr. White's unwilling hand and shook it vigorously, staggered back to his flat and slammed the door behind him.

"Do you know that man?" asked the doctor, turning to the detective.

"I seem to remember his face," said the sergeant. "Come on, Fred. Good morning, gentlemen."

They waited till the officers were downstairs and out of sight, and then the doctor turned to the other and in a different tone from any he had employed, said:

"Come into my room for a moment, White," and Mr. White followed him obediently.

They shut the door and passed into the study, with its rows of heavily bound books, its long table covered with test-tubes and the paraphernalia of medical research.

"Well," said White, dropping into a chair, "what happened?"

"That is what I want to know," said the doctor.

He took a cigarette from a box on the table and lit it and the two men looked at one another without speaking.

"Do you think she had the letters and hid them?"

"Impossible," replied the doctor briefly.

White grunted, took a cigar from a long leather case, bit off the end savagely and reached out his hand for a match.

"The best-laid schemes of mice and men!" he quoted.

"Oh, shut up," said the doctor savagely.

He was pacing the study with long strides. He stopped at one end of the room staring moodily through the window, his hands thrust in his pockets.

"I wonder what happened," he said again. "Well, that can wait. Now just tell me exactly how matters stand in regard to you and Punsonby's."

"I have all the figures here," said Mr. White, as he thrust his hand into the inside pocket of his frock-coat, "I can raise £40,000 by debentures and—hello, what's this?"

He drew from his pocket a white packet, fastened about by a rubber band. This he slipped off and gasped, for in his hands were three registered letters, and they were addressed to Messrs. Punsonby, and each had been slit open.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN WITH THE BIG HEAD

No. 342, Lothbury, is a block of business offices somewhat unpretentious in their approach but of surprising depth and importance when explored. Oliva Cresswell stood for awhile in the great lobby, inspecting the names of the occupants, which were inscribed on porcelain slips in two big frames on each wall of the vestibule.

After a lengthy search she discovered the name of the Beale Agency under the heading "fourth floor" and made her way to the elevator.

Mr. Beale's office was at the end of a seemingly interminable corridor and consisted, as she was to find, of an outer and an inner chamber. The outer was simply furnished with a table, two chairs and a railed fence bisected with a little wooden gateway.

A boy sat at one table, engaged in laborious exercise on a typewriter with one finger of one hand. He jumped up as she came through the door.

"Miss Cresswell?" he asked. "Mr. Beale will see you."

He opened the wicket-gate and led the way to a door marked "Private."

It was Beale who opened the door in response to the knock.

"Come in, Miss Cresswell," he said cheerily, "I didn't expect you for half an hour."

"I thought I'd start well," she smiled.

She had had many misgivings that morning, and had spent a restless night debating the wisdom of engaging herself to an employer whose known weakness had made his name a by-word. But a promise was a promise and, after all, she told herself, her promise was fulfilled when she had given the new work a trial.

"Here is your desk," he said, indicating a large office table in the centre of the room, "and here is my little library. You will note that it mainly consists of agricultural returns and reports—do you read French?" She nodded. "Good, and Spanish—that's rather too much to expect, isn't it?"

"I speak and read Spanish very well," she said. "When I was a little girl I lived around in Paris, Lyons, and Barcelona—my first regular work—the first I was paid for—was in the Anglo-Spanish Cable office in Barcelona."

"That's lucky," he said, apparently relieved, "though I could have taught you the few words that it is necessary you should know to understand the Argentine reports. What I particularly want you to discover—and you will find two or three hundred local guide-books on that shelf at the far end of the room, and these will help you a great deal—is the exact locations of all the big wheat-growing districts, the number of hectares under cultivation in normal times, the method by which the wheat areas are divided—by fences, roads, etc.—the average size of the unbroken blocks of wheatland and, if possible, the width of the roads or paths which divide them."

"Gracious!" she cried in dismay.

"It sounds a monumental business, but I think you will find it simple. The Agricultural Department of the United States Government, for instance, tabulate all those facts. For example, they compel farmers in certain districts to keep a clear space between each lot so that in case of the crops being fired, the fire may be isolated. Canada, the Argentine and Australia have other methods."

She had seated herself at the desk and was jotting down a note of her duties.

"Anything more?" she asked.

"Yes—I want the names of the towns in the centre of the wheat-growing areas, a list of the hotels in those towns. The guide-books you will find up to date, and these will inform you on this subject. Particularly do I want hotels noted where automobiles can be hired, the address of the local

bank and the name of the manager and, where the information is available, the name of the chief constable, sheriff or chef d'gendarmerie in each district."

She looked up at him, her pencil poised.

"Are you serious—of course, I'll do all this, but somehow it reminds me of a story I once read—"

"I know it," said Beale promptly, "it is 'The Case of the Red-Haired Man,' one of Doyle's stories about a man who, to keep him away from his shop, was employed on the useless task of copying the *Encyclopædia Britannica*—no, I am asking you to do serious work, Miss Cresswell—work which I do not want spoken about."

He sat on the edge of the table, looking down at her, and if his eyes were smiling it was because that was their natural expression. She had never seen them when they did not hold the ghost of some joke inwardly enjoyed.

But her instinct told her that he was very much in earnest and that the task he had set her was one which had reason behind it.

"Take the districts first and work up the hotels, et cetera," he suggested, "you will find it more interesting than a novel. Those little books," he pointed to the crowded shelf by the window, "will carry you to stations and ranches and farms all over the world. You shall be wafted through Manitoba, and cross the United States from New England to California. You will know Sydney and Melbourne and the great cornland at the back of beyond. And you'll sit in cool patios and sip iced drinks with Señor Don Perfecto de Cuba who has ridden in from his rancho to inquire the price of May wheat, or maybe you'll just amble through India on an elephant, sleeping in bungalows, listening to the howling of tigers, mosquitoes—"

"Now I know you're laughing at me," she smiled.

"Not altogether," he said quietly; then: "Is there any question you'd like to ask me? By the way, the key of the office is in the right-hand drawer; go to lunch when you like and stay away as long as you like. Your cheque will be paid you every Friday morning."

"But where—?" She looked round the room. "Where do you work?"

"I don't work," he said promptly, "you do the work and I get the honour and glory. When I come in I will sit on the edge of your desk, which is not graceful but it is very comfortable. There is one question I meant to ask you. You said you were in a cable office—do you add to your accomplishments a working knowledge of the Morse Code?"

She nodded.

"I can see you being useful. If you need me"—he jerked his head toward a telephone on a small table—"call 8761 Gerrard."

"And where is that?" she asked.

"If I thought you were anything but a very sane young lady, I should tell you that it is the number of my favourite bar," he said gravely. "I will not, however, practise that harmless deception upon you."

Again she saw the dancing light of mischief in his eyes.

"You're a queer man," she said, "and I will not make myself ridiculous by speaking to you for your good."

She heard his soft laughter as the door closed behind him and, gathering an armful of the guide-books, she settled down for a morning's work which proved even more fascinating than his fanciful pictures had suggested. She found herself wondering to what use all this information she extracted could be put. Was Mr. Beale really a buyer or was he interested in the sale of agricultural machinery? Why should he want to know that Jonas Scobbs was the proprietor of Scobbs' Hotel and General Emporium in the town of Red Horse Valley, Alberta, and what significance attached to the fact that he had an automobile for hire or that he ran a coach every Wednesday to Regina?

Then she fell to speculating upon the identity and appearance of this man who bore this weird name of Scobbs. She pictured him an elderly man with chin whiskers who wore his pants thrust into top-boots. And why was Red Horse Valley so called? These unexpected and, to her, hitherto

unknown names of places and people set in train most interesting processions of thought that slid through the noisy jangle of traffic, and coloured the drab walls of all that was visible of the City of London through the window with the white lights and purple shadows of dream prairies.

When she looked at her watch—being impelled to that act by the indescribable sensation of hunger—she was amazed to discover that it was three o'clock.

She jumped up and went to the outer office in search of the boy who, she faintly remembered, had erupted into her presence hours before with a request which she had granted without properly hearing. He was not in evidence. Evidently his petition had also been associated with the gnawing pangs which assail boyhood at one o'clock in the afternoon.

She was turning back to her office, undecided as to whether she should remain until his return or close the office entirely, when the shuffle of feet brought her round.

The outer office was partitioned from the entrance by a long "fence," the farther end of which was hidden by a screen of wood and frosted glass. It was from behind that screen that the noise came and she remembered that she had noted a chair there—evidently a place where callers waited.

"Who is there?" she asked.

There was a creak as the visitor rose.

"Eggscuse, mattam," said a wheezy voice, "I gall to eng-vire for Mister Peale, isn't it?"

He shuffled forward into view, a small man with a dead white face and a head of monstrous size.

She was bereft of speech and could only look at him, for this was the man she had found in her rooms the night before her dismissal—the man who carried the Green Rust.

Evidently he did not recognize her.

"Mister Peale, he tolt me, I must gall him mit der telephone, but der nomber she vas gone oudt of mine head!"

He blinked at her with his short-sighted eyes and laid a big hairy hand on the gate.

"You must—you mustn't come in," she said breathlessly. "I will call Mr. Beale—sit—sit down again."

"Sch," he said obediently, and shuffled back to his chair, "dell him der Herr Brofessor it was."

The girl took up the telephone receiver with a shaking hand and gave the number. It was Beale's voice that answered her.

"There's a man here," she said hurriedly, "a—a—the man—who was in my room—the Herr Professor."

She heard his exclamation of annoyance.

"I'm sorry," and if she could judge by the inflection of his voice his sorrow was genuine. "I'll be with you in ten minutes—he's quite a harmless old gentleman—"

"Hurry, please."

She heard the "click" of his receiver and replaced her own slowly. She did not attempt to go back to the outer office, but waited by the closed door. She recalled the night, the terror of that unknown presence in her darkened flat, and shuddered. Then Beale, surprisingly sober, had come in and he and the "burglar" had gone away together.

What had these two, Mr. Beale and the "Herr Professor," in common? She heard the snap of the outer door, and Beale's voice speaking quickly. It was probably German—she had never acquired the language and hardly recognized it, though the guttural "Zu befel, Herr Peale" was distinct.

She heard the shuffle of the man's feet and the closing of the outer door and then Beale came in, and his face was troubled.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am that the old man called—I'd forgotten that he was likely to come."

She leant against the table, both hands behind her.

"Mr. Beale," she said, "will you give me straightforward answers to a number of plain questions?"

He nodded.

"If I can," he said.

"Is the Herr Professor a friend of yours?"

"No—I know him and in a way I am sorry for him. He is a German who pretends to be Russian. Immensely poor and unprepossessing to a painful degree, but a very clever scientist. In fact, a truly great analytical chemist who ought to be holding a good position. He told me that he had the best qualifications, and I quite believe him, but that his physical infirmities, his very freakishness had ruined him."

Her eyes softened with pity—the pity of the strong for the weak, of the beautiful for the hideous.

"If that is true—" she began, and his chin went up. "I beg your pardon, I know it is true. It is tragic, but—did you know him before you met him in my room?"

He hesitated.

"I knew him both by repute and by sight," he said. "I knew the work he was engaged on and I guessed why he was engaged. But I had never spoken to him."

"Thank you—now for question number two. You needn't answer unless you wish."

"I shan't," he said.

"That's frank, anyway. Now tell me, Mr. Beale, what is all this mystery about? What is the Green Rust? Why do you pretend to be a—a drunkard when you're not one?" (It needed some boldness to say this, and she flushed with the effort to shape the sentence.) "Why are you always around so providentially when you're needed, and," here she smiled (as he thought) deliciously, "why weren't you round yesterday, when I was nearly arrested for theft?"

He was back on the edge of the table, evidently his favourite resting-place, she thought, and he ticked her questions off on his fingers.

"Question number one cannot be answered. Question number two, why do I pretend to be a—a drunkard?" he mimicked her audaciously. "There are other things which intoxicate a man beside love and beer, Miss Cresswell."

"How gross!" she protested. "What are they?"

"Work, the chase, scientific research and the first spring scent of the hawthorn," he said solemnly. "As to the third question, why was I not around when you were nearly arrested? Well, I was around. I was in your flat when you came in and escaped along the fire parapet."

"Mr. Beale!" she gasped. "Then it was you—you are a detective!"

"I turned your desk and dressing-chest upside down? Yes, it was I," he said without shame, ignoring the latter part of the sentence. "I was looking for something."

"You were looking for something?" she repeated. "What were you looking for?"

"Three registered envelopes which were planted in your flat yesterday morning," he said, "and what's more I found 'em!"

She put her hand to her forehead in bewilderment.

"Then you—"

"Saved you from a cold, cold prison cell. Have you had any lunch? Why, you're starving!"

"But—"

"Bread and butter is what you want," said the practical Mr. Beale, "with a large crisp slice of chicken and stacks of various vegetables."

And he hustled her from the office.

CHAPTER VI

MR. SCOBBS OF RED HORSE VALLEY

Mr. White, managing director of Punsonby's Store, was a man of simple tastes. He had a horror of extravagance and it was his boast that he had never ridden in a taxi-cab save as the guest of some other person who paid. He travelled by tube or omnibus from the Bayswater Road, where he lived what he described as his private life. He lunched in the staff dining-room, punctiliously paying his bill; he dined at home in solitary state, for he had neither chick nor child, heir or wife. Once an elder sister had lived with him and had died (according to the popularly accepted idea) of slow starvation, for he was a frugal man.

It seems the fate of apparently rich and frugal men that they either die and leave their hoardings to the State or else they disappear, leaving behind them monumental debts. The latter have apparently no vices; even the harassed accountant who disentangles their estates cannot discover the channel through which their hundreds of thousands have poured. The money has gone and, if astute detectives bring back the defaulter from the pleasant life which the Southern American cities offer to rich idlers, he is hopelessly vague as to the method by which it went.

Mr. Lassimus White was the managing director and general manager of Punsonby's. He held, or was supposed to hold, a third of the shares in that concern, shares which he had inherited from John Punsonby, his uncle, and the founder of the firm. He drew a princely salary and a substantial dividend, he was listed as a debenture holder and was accounted a rich man.

But Mr. White was not rich. His salary and his dividends were absorbed by a mysterious agency which called itself the Union Jack Investment and Mortgage Corporation, which paid premiums on Mr. White's heavy life insurance and collected the whole or nearly the whole of his income. His secret, well guarded as it was, need be no secret to the reader. Mr. White, who had never touched a playing-card in his life and who grew apoplectic at the sin and shame of playing the races, was an inveterate gambler. His passion was for Sunken Treasure Syndicates, formed to recover golden ingots from ships of the Spanish Armada; for companies that set forth to harness the horse-power of the sea to the services of commerce; for optimistic companies that discovered radium mines in the Ural Mountains—anything which promised a steady three hundred per cent. per annum on an initial investment had an irresistible attraction for Mr. White, who argued that some day something would really fulfil expectations and his losses would be recovered.

In the meantime he was in the hands of Moss Ibramovitch, trading as the Union Jack Investment and Mortgage Corporation, licensed and registered as a moneylender according to law. And being in the hands of this gentleman, was much less satisfactory and infinitely more expensive than being in the hands of the bankruptcy officials.

In the evening of the day Oliva Cresswell had started working for her new employer, Mr. White stalked forth from his gloomy house and his departure was watched by the two tough females who kept house for him, with every pleasure. He strutted eastward swinging his umbrella, his head well back, his eyes half-closed, his massive waistcoat curving regally. His silk hat was pushed back from his forehead and the pince-nez he carried, but so seldom wore, swung from the cord he held before him in that dead-mouse manner which important men affect.

He had often been mistaken for a Fellow of the Royal Society, so learned and detached was his bearing. Yet no speculation upon the origin of species or the function of the nebulae filled his mind.

At a moment of great stress and distraction, Dr. van Heerden had arisen above his horizon, and there was something in Dr. van Heerden's manner which inspired confidence and respect. They had met by accident at a meeting held to liquidate the Shining Strand Alluvial Gold Mining Company—a concern which had started forth in the happiest circumstances to extract the fabulous riches which

had been discovered by an American philanthropist (he is now selling Real Estate by correspondence) on a Southern Pacific island.

Van Heerden was not a shareholder, but he was intensely interested in the kind of people who subscribe for shares in Dreamland Gold mines. Mr. White had attended incognito—his shares were held in the name of his lawyer, who was thinking seriously of building an annex to hold the unprofitable scrip.

Mr. White was gratified to discover a kindred soul who believed in this kind of speculation.

It was to the doctor's apartment that he was now walking. That gentleman met him in the entrance and accompanied him to his room. There was a light in the fanlight of Oliva's flat, for she had brought some of her work home to finish, but Mr. Beale's flat was dark.

This the doctor noted before he closed his own door, and switched on the light.

"Well, White, have you made up your mind?" he demanded without preliminary.

"I—ah—have and I—ah—have not," said the cautious adventurer. "Forty thousand is a lot of money—a fortune, one might say—yes, a fortune."

"Have you raised it?"

Mr. White sniffed his objection to this direct examination.

"My broker has very kindly realized the debentures—I am—ah—somewhat indebted to him, and it was necessary to secure his permission and—yes, I have the money at my bank."

He gazed benignly at the other, as one who conferred a favour by the mere bestowal of his confidences.

"First, doctor—forgive me if I am a little cautious; first I say, it is necessary that I should know a little more about your remarkable scheme, for remarkable I am sure it is."

The doctor poured out a whisky and soda and passed the glass to his visitor, who smilingly waved it aside.

"Wine is a mocker," he said, "nothing stronger than cider has ever passed my lips—pray do not be offended."

"And yet I seem to remember that you held shares in the Northern Saloon Trust," said the doctor, with a little curl of his bearded lips.

"That," said Mr. White hastily, "was a purely commercial—ah—affair. In business one must exploit even the—ah—sins and weaknesses of our fellows."

"As to my scheme," said the doctor, changing the subject, "I'm afraid I must ask you to invest in the dark. I can promise you that you will get your capital back a hundred times over. I realize that you have heard that sort of thing before, and that my suggestion has all the appearance of a confidence trick, except that I do not offer you even the substantial security of a gold brick. I may not use your money—I believe that I shall not. On the other hand, I may. If it is to be of any use to me it must be in my hands very soon—to-morrow."

He wandered restlessly about the room as he spoke, and jerked his sentences out now to Mr. White's face, now over his shoulder.

"I will tell you this," he went on, "my scheme within the narrow interpretation of the law is illegal—don't mistake me, there is no danger to those who invest in ignorance. I will bear the full burden of responsibility. You can come in or you can stay out, but if you come in I shall ask you never to mention the name of the enterprise to a living soul."

"The Green Rust Syndicate?" whispered Mr. White fearfully. "What—ah—is Green Rust?"

"I have offered the scheme to my—to a Government. But they are scared of touching it. Scared, by Jove!" He threw up his arms to the ceiling and his voice trembled with passion. "Germany scared! And there was a time when Europe cringed at the clank of the Prussian sword! When the lightest word of Potsdam set ministries trembling in Petrograd and London. You told me the other day you were a pacifist during the war and that you sympathized with Prussia in her humiliation. I am a Prussian, why should I deny it? I glory in the religion of might—I believe it were better that the old

civilization were stamped into the mud of oblivion than that Prussian Kultur should be swept away by the licentious French, the mercenary English—"

"British," murmured Mr. White.

"And the dollar-hunting Yankees—but I'm making a fool of myself."

With an effort he regained his calm.

"The war's over and done with. As I say, I offered my Government my secret. They thought it good but could not help me. They were afraid that the League would come to learn they were supporting it. They'll help me in other ways—innocent ways. If this scheme goes through they will put the full resources of the State at my disposal."

Mr. White rose, groped for his hat and cleared his throat.

"Dr.—ah—van Heerden, you may be sure that I shall—ah—respect your confidence. With your very natural indignation I am in complete sympathy."

"But let us forget, ah—that you have spoken at all about the scheme in any detail—especially in so far as to its legality or otherwise. Let us forget, sir"—Mr. White thrust his hand into the bosom of his coat, an attitude he associated with the subtle rhetoric of statesmanship. "Let us forget all, save this, that you invite me to subscribe £40,000 to a syndicate for—ah—let us say model dwellings for the working classes, and that I am willing to subscribe, and in proof of my willingness will send you by the night's post a cheque for that amount. Good night, doctor."

He shook hands, pulled his hat down upon his head, opened the door and ran into the arms of a man whose hand was at that moment raised to press the electric bell-push by the side of the door.

Both started back.

"Excuse me," mumbled Mr. White, and hurried down the stairs.

Dr. van Heerden glared at the visitor, white with rage.

"Come in, you fool!" he hissed, and half-dragged the man into his room, "what made you leave Scotland?"

"Scotland I hate!" said the visitor huskily. "Sticking a fellow away in the wilds of the beastly mountains, eh? That's not playing the game, my cheery sportsman."

"When did you arrive?" asked van Heerden quickly.

"Seven p.m. Travelled third class! Me! Is it not the most absurd position for a man of my parts—third class, with foul and common people—I'd like to rip them all up—I would, by heavens!"

The doctor surveyed the coarse, drink-bloated face, the loose, weak mouth, half-smiled at the vanity of the dangling monocle and pointed to the decanter.

"You did wrong to come," he said, "I have arranged your passage to Canada next week."

"I'll not go!" said the man, tossing down a drink and wiping his lips with a not over-clean handkerchief. "Curse me, van Heerden, why should I hide and fly like a—a—"

"Like a man who escaped from Cayenne," suggested the doctor, "or like a man who is wanted by the police of three countries for crimes ranging from arson to wilful murder."

The man shuddered.

"All fair fights, my dear fellow," he said more mildly, "if I hadn't been a boastful, drunken sot, you wouldn't have heard of 'em—you wouldn't, curse you. I was mad! I had you in my hand like that!" He closed a not over-clean fist under van Heerden's nose. "I saw it all, all, I saw you bullying the poor devil, shaking some secret out of him, I saw you knife him—"

"Hush!" hissed van Heerden. "You fool—people can hear through these walls."

"But there are no windows to see through," leered the man, "and I *saw*! He came out of his death-trance to denounce you, by Jove! I heard him shout and I saw you run in and lay him down—lay him down! Lay him out is better! You killed him to shut his mouth, my bonnie doctor!"

Van Heerden's face was as white as a sheet, but the hand he raised to his lips was without a tremor.

"You were lucky to find me that night, dear lad," the man went on. "I was in a mind to split on you."

"You have no cause to regret my finding you, Jackson," said the doctor. "I suppose you still call yourself by that name?"

"Yes, Jackson," said the other promptly. "Jack—son, son of Jack. Fine name, eh—good enough for me and good enough for anybody else. Yes, you found me and done me well. I wish you hadn't. How I wish you hadn't."

"Ungrateful fool!" said van Heerden. "I probably saved your life—hid you in Eastbourne, took you to London, whilst the police were searching for you."

"For me!" snarled the other. "A low trick, by the Everlasting Virtues—!"

"Don't be an idiot—whose word would they have taken, yours or mine? Now let's talk—on Thursday next you sail for Quebec...."

He detailed his instructions at length and the man called Jackson, mellowed by repeated visits to the decanter, listened and even approved.

On the other side of the hallway, behind the closed door, Oliva Cresswell, her dining-table covered with papers and books, was working hard.

She was particularly anxious to show Mr. Beale a sample of her work in the morning and was making a fair copy of what she had described to him that afternoon as her "hotel list."

"They are such queer names," she said; "there is one called Scobbs of Red Horse Valley—Scobbs!"

He had laughed.

"Strangely enough, I know Mr. Scobbs, who is quite a personage in that part of the world. He owns a chain of hotels in Western Canada. You mustn't leave him out."

Even had she wished to, or even had the name been overlooked once, she could not have escaped it. For Jonas Scobbs was the proprietor of Scobbs' Hotel in Falling Star City; of the Bellevue in Snakefence, of the Palace Hotel in Portage.

After awhile it began to lose its novelty and she accepted the discovery of unsuspected properties of Mr. Scobbs as inevitable.

She filled in the last ruled sheet and blotted it, gathered the sheets together and fastened them with a clip.

She yawned as she rose and realized that her previous night's sleep had been fitful.

She wondered as she began to undress if she would dream of Scobbs or—no, she didn't want to dream of big-headed men with white faces, and the thought awoke a doubt in her mind. Had she bolted the door of the flat? She went along the passage in her stockinged feet, shot the bolts smoothly and was aware of voices outside. They came to her clearly through the ventilator above the fanlight.

She heard the doctor say something and then a voice which she had not heard before.

"Don't worry—I've a wonderful memory, by Jove!..."

The murmur of the doctor did not reach her, but—

"Yes, yes ... Scobbs' Hotel, Red Horse Valley ... know the place well ... good night, dear old thing...."

A door banged, an uncertain footstep died away in the well of the stairs below, and she was left to recover from her amazement.

CHAPTER VII

PLAIN WORDS FROM MR. BEALE

Olivia Cresswell did not feel at all sleepy, so she discovered, by the time she was ready for bed. To retire in that condition of wakefulness meant another sleepless night, and she slipped a kimono over her, found a book and settled into the big wicker-chair under the light for the half-hour's reading which would reduce her to the necessary state of drowsiness. The book at any other time would have held her attention, but now she found her thoughts wandering. On the other side of the wall (she regarded it with a new interest) was the young man who had so strangely intruded himself into her life. Or was he out? What would a man like that do with his evenings? He was not the sort of person who could find any pleasure in making a round of music-halls or sitting up half the night in a card-room.

She heard a dull knock, and it came from the wall.

Mr. Beale was at home then, he had pushed a chair against the wall, or he was knocking in nails at this hour of the night.

"Thud—thud—thud"—a pause—"thud, tap, thud, tap."

The dull sound was as if made by a fist, the tap by a finger-tip.

It was repeated.

Suddenly the girl jumped up with a little laugh. He was signalling to her and had sent "O.C."—her initials.

She tapped three times with her finger, struck once with the flat of her hand and tapped again. She had sent the "Understood" message.

Presently he began and she jotted the message on the margin of her book.

"Most urgent: Don't use soap. Bring it to office."

She smiled faintly. She expected something more brilliant in the way of humour even from Mr. Beale. She tapped "acknowledged" and went to bed.

"Matilda, my innocent child," she said to herself, as she snuggled up under the bed-clothes, "exchanging midnight signals with a lodger is neither proper nor lady-like."

She had agreed with herself that in spite of the latitude she was allowed in the matter of office hours, that she would put in an appearance punctually at ten. This meant rising not later than eight, for she had her little household to put in order before she left.

It was the postman's insistent knocking at eight-thirty that woke her from a dreamless sleep, and, half-awake, she dragged herself into her dressing-gown and went to the door.

"Parcel, miss," said the invisible official, and put into the hand that came round the edge of the door a letter and a small package. She brought them to the sitting-room and pulled back the curtains. The letter was type-written and was on the note-paper of a well-known firm of perfumers. It was addressed to "Miss Olivia Cresswell," and ran:

"Dear Madame,—

"We have pleasure in sending you for your use a sample cake of our new
Complexion Soap, which we trust will meet with your approval."

"But how nice," she said, and wondered why she had been singled out for the favour. She opened the package. In a small carton, carefully wrapped in the thinnest of paper, was an oval tablet of lavender-coloured soap that exhaled a delicate fragrance.

"But how nice," she said again, and put the gift in the bath-room.

This was starting the day well—a small enough foundation for happiness, yet one which every woman knows, for happiness is made up of small and acceptable things and, given the psychological moment, a bunch of primroses has a greater value than a rope of pearls.

In her bath she picked up the soap and dropped it back in the tidy again quickly.

"Don't use soap; bring it to office."

She remembered the message in a flash. Beale had known that this parcel was coming then, and his "most urgent" warning was not a joke. She dressed quickly, made a poor breakfast and was at the office ten minutes before the hour.

She found her employer waiting, sitting in his accustomed place on the edge of the table in her office. He gave her a little nod of welcome, and without a word stretched out his hand.

"The soap?" she asked.

He nodded.

She opened her bag.

"Good," he said. "I see you have kept the wrappings, and that, I presume, is the letter which accompanied the—what shall I say—gift? Don't touch it with your bare hand," he said quickly. "Handle it with the paper."

He pulled his gloves from his pocket and slipped them on, then took the cake of soap in his hand and carried it to the light, smelt it and returned it to its paper.

"Now let me see the letter."

She handed it to him, and he read it.

"From Brandan, the perfumers. They wouldn't be in it, but we had better make sure."

He walked to the telephone and gave a number, and the girl heard him speaking in a low tone to somebody at the other end. Presently he put down the receiver and walked back, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"They know nothing about this act of generosity," he said.

By this time she had removed her coat and hat and hung them up, and had taken her place at her desk. She sat with her elbows on the blotting-pad, her chin on her clasped hands, looking up at him.

"I don't think it's fair that things should be kept from me any longer," she said. "Many mysterious things have happened in the past few days, and since they have all directly affected me, I think I am entitled to some sort of explanation."

"I think you are," said Mr. Beale, with a twinkle in his grey eyes, "but I am not prepared to explain everything just yet. Thus much I will tell you, that had you used this soap this morning, by the evening you would have been covered from head to foot in a rather alarming and irritating rash."

She gasped.

"But who dared to send me this?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? But first let me ask you this, Miss Cresswell. Suppose to-night when you had looked at yourself in the glass you had discovered your face was covered with red blotches and, on further examination, you found your arms and, indeed, the whole of your body similarly disfigured, what would you have done?"

She thought for a moment.

"Why, of course, I should have sent for the doctor."

"Which doctor?" he asked carelessly.

"Doctor van Heerden—oh!" She looked at him resentfully. "You don't suggest that Doctor van Heerden sent that hideous thing to me?"

"I don't suggest anything," said Mr. Beale coolly.

"I merely say that you would have sent for a doctor, and that that doctor would have been Doctor van Heerden. I say further, that he would have come to you and been very sympathetic, and would have ordered you to remain in bed for four or five days. I think, too," he said, looking up at the ceiling and speaking slowly, as though he were working out the possible consequence in his mind, "that he would have given you some very palatable medicine."

"What are you insinuating?" she asked quietly.

He did not reply immediately.

"If you will get out of your mind the idea that I have any particular grievance against Doctor van Heerden, that I regard him as a rival, a business rival let us say, or that I have some secret grudge against him, and if in place of that suspicion you would believe that I am serving a much larger interest than is apparent to you, I think we might discuss"—he smiled—"even Doctor van Heerden without such a discussion giving offence to you."

She laughed.

"I am really not offended. I am rather distressed, if anything," she said, knitting her brows. "You see, Doctor van Heerden has always been most kind to me."

Beale nodded.

"He got you your rooms at the flats," he replied quietly; "he was also ready to give you employment the moment you were providentially discharged from Punsonby's. Does it not strike you, Miss Cresswell, that every kind act of Doctor van Heerden's has had a tendency to bring you together, into closer association, I mean? Does it not appear to you that the net result of all the things that might have happened to you in the past few days would have been to make you more and more dependent upon Doctor van Heerden? For example, if you had gone into his employ as he planned that you should?"

"Planned!" she gasped.

His face was grave now and the laughter had gone out of his eyes.

"Planned," he said quietly. "You were discharged from Punsonby's at Doctor van Heerden's instigation."

"I will not believe it!"

"That will not make it any less the fact," said Mr. Beale. "You were nearly arrested—again at Doctor van Heerden's instigation. He was waiting for you when you came back from Punsonby's, ready to offer you his job. When he discovered you had already engaged yourself he telephoned to White, instructing him to have you arrested so that you might be disgraced and might turn to him, your one loyal friend."

She listened speechless. She could only stare at him and could not even interrupt him. For her shrewd woman instinct told her so convincingly that even her sense of loyalty could not eject the doubt which assailed her mind, that if there was not truth in what he was saying there was at least probability.

"I suggest even more," Beale went on. "I suggest that for some purpose, Doctor van Heerden desires to secure a mental, physical and moral ascendancy over you. In other words, he wishes to enslave you to his will."

She looked at him in wonder and burst into a peal of ringing laughter.

"Really, Mr. Beale, you are too absurd," she said.

"Aren't I?" he smiled. "It sounds like something out of a melodrama."

"Why on earth should he want to secure a mental ascendancy over me? Do you suggest—" She flushed.

"I suggest nothing any longer," said Beale, slipping off from the end of the table. "I merely make a statement of fact. I do not think he has any designs on you, within the conventional meaning of that phrase, indeed, I think he wants to marry you—what do you think about that?"

She had recovered something of her poise, and her sense of humour was helping her out of a situation which, without such a gift, might have been an embarrassing one.

"I think you have been seeing too many plays and reading too many exciting books, Mr. Beale," she said, "I confess I have never regarded Doctor van Heerden as a possible suitor, and if I thought he was I should be immensely flattered. But may I suggest to you that there are other ways of winning a girl than by giving her nettle-rash!"

They laughed together.

"All right," he said, swinging up his hat, "proceed with the good work and seek out the various domiciles of Mr. Scobbs."

Then she remembered.

"Do you know—?"

He was at the door when she spoke and he stopped and turned.

"The name of Mr. Scobbs gives me a cold shiver."

"Why?"

"Answer me this," she said: "why should I who have never heard of him before until yesterday hear his name mentioned by a perfect stranger?"

The smile died away from his face.

"Who mentioned him! No, it isn't idle curiosity," he said in face of her derisive finger. "I am really serious. Who mentioned his name?"

"A visitor of Doctor van Heerden's. I heard them talking through the ventilator when I was bolting my door."

"A visitor to Doctor van Heerden, and he mentioned Mr. Scobbs of Red Horse Valley," he said half to himself. "You didn't see the man?"

"No."

"You just heard him. No names were mentioned?"

"None," she said. "Is it a frightfully important matter?"

"It is rather," he replied. "We have got to get busy," and with this cryptic remark he left her.

The day passed as quickly as its predecessor. The tabulation at which she was working grew until by the evening there was a pile of sheets in the left-hand cupboard covered with her fine writing. She might have done more but for the search she had to make for a missing report to verify one of her facts. It was not on the shelf, and she was about to abandon her search and postpone the confirmation till she saw Beale, when she noticed a cupboard beneath the shelves. It was unlocked and she opened it and found, as she had expected, that it was full of books, amongst which was the missing documentation she sought.

With a view to future contingencies, she examined the contents of the cupboard and was arrested by a thin volume which bore no inscription or title on its blank cover. She opened it, and on the title page read: "The Millinborn Murder." The author's name was not given and the contents were made up of very careful analysis of evidence given by the various witnesses at the inquest, and plans and diagrams with little red crosses to show where every actor in that tragedy had been.

She read the first page idly and turned it. She was half-way down the second page when she uttered a little exclamation, for a familiar name was there, the name of Dr. van Heerden.

Fascinated, she read the story to the end, half-expecting that the name of Mr. Beale would occur.

There were many names all unknown to her and one that occurred with the greatest frequency was that of James Kitson. Mr. Beale did not appear to have played any part. She read for an hour, sitting on the floor by the cupboard. She reached the last page, closed the book and slipped it back in the cupboard. She wondered why Beale had preserved this record and whether his antagonism to the doctor was founded on that case. At first she thought she identified him with the mysterious man who had appeared in the plantation before the murder, but a glance back at the description of the stranger dispelled that idea. For all the reputation he had, Mr. Beale did not have "an inflamed, swollen countenance, colourless bloodshot eyes," nor was he bald.

She was annoyed with herself that she had allowed her work to be interrupted, and in penance decided to remain on until six instead of five o'clock as she had intended. Besides, she half expected that Mr. Beale would return, and was surprised to discover that she was disappointed that he had not.

At six o'clock she dismissed the boy, closed and locked the office, and made her way downstairs into the crowded street.

To her surprise she heard her name spoken, and turned to face Dr. van Heerden.

"I have been waiting for you for nearly an hour," he said with good-humoured reproach.

"And your patients are probably dying like flies," she countered.

It was in her mind to make some excuse and go home alone, but curiosity got the better of her and impelled her to wait to discover the object of this unexpected visitation.

"How did you know where I was working?" she asked, as the thought occurred to her.

He laughed.

"It was a very simple matter. I was on my way to a patient and I saw you coming out to lunch," he said, "and as I found myself in the neighbourhood an hour ago I thought I would wait and take you home. You are doing a very foolish thing," he added.

"What do you mean—in stopping to talk to you when I ought to be on my way home to tea?"

"No, in engaging yourself to a man like Beale. You know the reputation he has! My dear girl, I was shocked when I discovered who your employer was."

"I don't think you need distress yourself on my account, doctor," she said quietly. "Really, Mr. Beale is quite pleasant—in his lucid moments," she smiled to herself.

She was not being disloyal to her employer. If he chose to encourage suspicion in his mode of life he must abide by the consequences.

"But a drunkard, faugh!" The exquisite doctor shivered. "I have always tried to be a friend of yours, Miss Cresswell, and I hope you are going to let me continue to be, and my advice to you in that capacity is—give Mr. Beale notice."

"How absurd you are!" she laughed. "There is no reason in the world why I should do anything of the sort. Mr. Beale has treated me with the greatest consideration."

"What is he, by the way?" asked the doctor.

"He's an agent of some sort," said the girl, "but I am sure you don't want me to discuss his business. And now I must go, doctor, if you will excuse me."

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