

WALLACE EDGAR

THE MAN WHO
KNEW

Edgar Wallace

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	19
CHAPTER V	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

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The Man Who Knew

CHAPTER I

THE MAN IN THE LABORATORY

The room was a small one, and had been chosen for its remoteness from the dwelling rooms. It had formed the billiard room, which the former owner of Weald Lodge had added to his premises, and John Minute, who had neither the time nor the patience for billiards, had readily handed over this damp annex to his scientific secretary.

Along one side ran a plain deal bench which was crowded with glass stills and test tubes. In the middle was as plain a table, with half a dozen books, a microscope under a glass shade, a little wooden case which was opened to display an array of delicate scientific instruments, a Bunsen burner, which was burning bluely under a small glass bowl half filled with a dark and turgid concoction of some kind.

The face of the man sitting at the table watching this unsavory stew was hidden behind a mica and rubber mask, for the fumes which were being given off by the fluid were neither pleasant nor healthy. Save for a shaded light upon the table and the blue glow of the Bunsen lamp, the room was in darkness. Now and again the student would take a glass rod, dip it for an instant into the boiling liquid, and, lifting it, would allow the liquid drop by drop to fall from the rod on to a strip of litmus paper. What he saw was evidently satisfactory, and presently he turned out the Bunsen lamp, walked to the window and opened it, and switched on an electric fan to aid the process of ventilation.

He removed his mask, revealing the face of a good-looking young man, rather pale, with a slight dark mustache and heavy, black, wavy hair. He closed the window, filled his pipe from the well-worn pouch which he took from his pocket, and began to write in a notebook, stopping now and again to consult some authority from the books before him.

In half an hour he had finished this work, had blotted and closed his book, and, pushing back his chair, gave himself up to reverie. They were not pleasant thoughts to judge by his face. He pulled from his inside pocket a leather case and opened it. From this he took a photograph. It was the picture of a girl of sixteen. It was a pretty face, a little sad, but attractive in its very weakness. He looked at it for a long time, shaking his head as at an unpleasant thought.

There came a gentle tap at the door, and quickly he replaced the photograph in his case, folded it, and returned it to his pocket as he rose to unlock the door.

John Minute, who entered, sniffed suspiciously.

"What beastly smells you have in here, Jasper!" he growled. "Why on earth don't they invent chemicals that are more agreeable to the nose?"

Jasper Cole laughed quietly.

"I'm afraid, sir, that nature has ordered it otherwise," he said.

"Have you finished?" asked his employer.

He looked at the still warm bowl of fluid suspiciously.

"It is all right, sir," said Jasper. "It is only noxious when it is boiling. That is why I keep the door locked."

"What is it?" asked John Minute, scowling down at the unoffending liquor.

"It is many things," said the other ruefully. "In point of fact, it is an experiment. The bowl contains one or two elements which will only mix with the others at a certain temperature, and as an experiment it is successful because I have kept the unmixable elements in suspension, though the liquid has gone cold."

"I hope you will enjoy your dinner, even though it has gone cold," grumbled John Minute.

"I didn't hear the bell, sir," said Jasper Cole. "I'm awfully sorry if I've kept you waiting."

They were the only two present in the big, black-looking dining room, and dinner was as usual a fairly silent meal. John Minute read the newspapers, particularly that portion of them which dealt with the latest fluctuations in the stock market.

"Somebody has been buying Gwelo Deeps," he complained loudly.

Jasper looked up.

"Gwelo Deeps?" he said. "But they are the shares—"

"Yes, yes," said the other testily; "I know. They were quoted at a shilling last week; they are up to two shillings and threepence. I've got five hundred thousand of them; to be exact," he corrected himself, "I've got a million of them, though half of them are not my property. I am almost tempted to sell."

"Perhaps they have found gold," suggested Jasper.

John Minute snorted.

"If there is gold in the Gwelo Deeps there are diamonds on the downs," he said scornfully. "By the way, the other five hundred thousand shares belong to May."

Jasper Cole raised his eyebrows as much in interrogation as in surprise.

John Minute leaned back in his chair and manipulated his gold toothpick.

"May Nuttall's father was the best friend I ever had," he said gruffly. "He lured me into the Gwelo Deeps against my better judgment. We sank a bore three thousand feet and found everything except gold."

He gave one of his brief, rumbling chuckles.

"I wish that mine had been a success. Poor old Bill Nuttall! He helped me in some tight places."

"And I think you have done your best for his daughter, sir."

"She's a nice girl," said John Minute, "a dear girl. I'm not taken with girls." He made a wry face. "But May is as honest and as sweet as they make them. She's the sort of girl who looks you in the eye when she talks to you; there's no damned nonsense about May."

Jasper Cole concealed a smile.

"What the devil are you grinning at?" demanded John Minute.

"I also was thinking that there was no nonsense about her," he said.

John Minute swung round.

"Jasper," he said, "May is the kind of girl I would like you to marry; in fact, she *is* the girl I would like you to marry."

"I think Frank would have something to say about that," said the other, stirring his coffee.

"Frank!" snorted John Minute. "What the devil do I care about Frank? Frank has to do as he's told. He's a lucky young man and a bit of a rascal, too, I'm thinking. Frank would marry anybody with a pretty face. Why, if I hadn't interfered—"

Jasper looked up.

"Yes?"

"Never mind," growled John Minute.

As was his practice, he sat a long time over dinner, half awake and half asleep. Jasper had annexed one of the newspapers, and was reading it. This was the routine which marked every evening of his life save on those occasions when he made a visit to London. He was in the midst of an article by a famous scientist on radium emanation, when John Minute continued a conversation which he had broken off an hour ago.

"I'm worried about May sometimes."

Jasper put down his paper.

"Worried! Why?"

"I am worried. Isn't that enough?" growled the other. "I wish you wouldn't ask me a lot of questions, Jasper. You irritate me beyond endurance."

"Well, I'll take it that you're worried," said his confidential secretary patiently, "and that you've good reason."

"I feel responsible for her, and I hate responsibilities of all kinds. The responsibilities of children —"

He winced and changed the subject, nor did he return to it for several days.

Instead he opened up a new line.

"Sergeant Smith was here when I was out, I understand," he said.

"He came this afternoon—yes."

"Did you see him?"

Jasper nodded.

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to see you, as far as I could make out. You were saying the other day that he drinks."

"Drinks!" said the other scornfully. "He doesn't drink; he eats it. What do you think about Sergeant Smith?" he demanded.

"I think he is a very curious person," said the other frankly, "and I can't understand why you go to such trouble to shield him or why you send him money every week."

"One of these days you'll understand," said the other, and his prophecy was to be fulfilled. "For the present, it is enough to say that if there are two ways out of a difficulty, one of which is unpleasant and one of which is less unpleasant, I take the less unpleasant of the two. It is less unpleasant to pay Sergeant Smith a weekly stipend than it is to be annoyed, and I should most certainly be annoyed if I did not pay him."

He rose up slowly from the chair and stretched himself.

"Sergeant Smith," he said again, "is a pretty tough proposition. I know, and I have known him for years. In my business, Jasper, I have had to know some queer people, and I've had to do some queer things. I am not so sure that they would look well in print, though I am not sensitive as to what newspapers say about me or I should have been in my grave years ago; but Sergeant Smith and his knowledge touches me at a raw place. You are always messing about with narcotics and muck of all kinds, and you will understand when I tell you that the money I give Sergeant Smith every week serves a double purpose. It is an opiate and a prophy—"

"Prophylactic," suggested the other.

"That's the word," said John Minute. "I was never a whale at the long uns; when I was twelve I couldn't write my own name, and when I was nineteen I used to spell it with two n's."

He chuckled again.

"Opiate and prophylactic," he repeated, nodding his head. "That's Sergeant Smith. He is a dangerous devil because he is a rascal."

"Constable Wiseman—" began Jasper.

"Constable Wiseman," snapped John Minute, rubbing his hand through his rumpled gray hair, "is a dangerous devil because he's a fool. What has Constable Wiseman been here about?"

"He didn't come here," smiled Jasper. "I met him on the road and had a little talk with him."

"You might have been better employed," said John Minute gruffly. "That silly ass has summoned me three times. One of these days I'll get him thrown out of the force."

"He's not a bad sort of fellow," soothed Jasper Cole. "He's rather stupid, but otherwise he is a decent, well-conducted man with a sense of the law."

"Did he say anything worth repeating?" asked John Minute.

"He was saying that Sergeant Smith is a disciplinarian."

"I know of nobody more of a disciplinarian than Sergeant Smith," said the other sarcastically, "particularly when he is getting over a jag. The keenest sense of duty is that possessed by a man who

has broken the law and has not been found out. I think I will go to bed," he added, looking at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I am going up to town to-morrow. I want to see May."

"Is anything worrying you?" asked Jasper.

"The bank is worrying me," said the old man.

Jasper Cole looked at him steadily.

"What's wrong with the bank?"

"There is nothing wrong with the bank, and the knowledge that my dear nephew, Frank Merrill, esquire, is accountant at one of its branches removes any lingering doubt in my mind as to its stability. And I wish to Heaven you'd get out of the habit of asking me 'why' this happens or 'why' I do that."

Jasper lit a cigar before replying:

"The only way you can find things out in this world is by asking questions."

"Well, ask somebody else," boomed John Minute at the door.

Jasper took up his paper, but was not to be left to the enjoyment its columns offered, for five minutes later John Minute appeared in the doorway, minus his tie and coat, having been surprised in the act of undressing with an idea which called for development.

"Send a cable in the morning to the manager of the Gwelo Deeps and ask him if there is any report. By the way, you are the secretary of the company. I suppose you know that?"

"Am I?" asked the startled Jasper.

"Frank was, and I don't suppose he has been doing the work now. You had better find out or you will be getting me into a lot of trouble with the registrar. We ought to have a board meeting."

"Am I the directors, too?" asked Jasper innocently.

"It is very likely," said John Minute. "I know I am chairman, but there has never been any need to hold a meeting. You had better find out from Frank when the last was held."

He went away, to reappear a quarter of an hour later, this time in his pajamas.

"That mission May is running," he began, "they are probably short of money. You might inquire of their secretary. *They* will have a secretary, I'll be bound! If they want anything send it on to them."

He walked to the sideboard and mixed himself a whisky and soda.

"I've been out the last three or four times Smith has called. If he comes to-morrow tell him I will see him when I return. Bolt the doors and don't leave it to that jackass, Wilkins."

Jasper nodded.

"You think I am a little mad, don't you, Jasper?" asked the older man, standing by the sideboard with the glass in his hand.

"That thought has never occurred to me," said Jasper. "I think you are eccentric sometimes and inclined to exaggerate the dangers which surround you."

The other shook his head.

"I shall die a violent death; I know it. When I was in Zululand an old witch doctor 'tossed the bones.' You have never had that experience?"

"I can't say that I have," said Jasper, with a little smile.

"You can laugh at that sort of thing, but I tell you I've got a great faith in it. Once in the king's kraal and once in Echowe it happened, and both witch doctors told me the same thing—that I'd die by violence. I didn't use to worry about it very much, but I suppose I'm growing old now, and living surrounded by the law, as it were, I am too law-abiding. A law-abiding man is one who is afraid of people who are not law-abiding, and I am getting to that stage. You laugh at me because I'm jumpy whenever I see a stranger hanging around the house, but I have got more enemies to the square yard than most people have to the county. I suppose you think I am subject to delusions and ought to be put under restraint. A rich man hasn't a very happy time," he went on, speaking half to himself and half to the young man. "I've met all sorts of people in this country and been introduced as John Minute, the millionaire, and do you know what they say as soon as my back is turned?"

Jasper offered no suggestion.

"They say this," John Minute went on, "whether they're young or old, good, bad, or indifferent: 'I wish he'd die and leave me some of his money.'"

Jasper laughed softly.

"You haven't a very good opinion of humanity."

"I have no opinion of humanity," corrected his chief, "and I am going to bed."

Jasper heard his heavy feet upon the stairs and the thud of them overhead. He waited for some time; then he heard the bed creak. He closed the windows, personally inspected the fastenings of the doors, and went to his little office study on the first floor.

He shut the door, took out the pocket case, and gave one glance at the portrait, and then took an unopened letter which had come that evening and which, by his deft handling of the mail, he had been able to smuggle into his pocket without John Minute's observance.

He slit open the envelope, extracted the letter, and read:

Dear Sir: Your esteemed favor is to hand. We have to thank you for the check, and we are very pleased that we have given you satisfactory service. The search has been a very long and, I am afraid, a very expensive one to yourself, but now that discovery has been made I trust you will feel rewarded for your energies.

The note bore no heading, and was signed "J. B. Fleming."

Jasper read it carefully, and then, striking a match, lit the paper and watched it burn in the grate.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL WHO CRIED

The northern express had deposited its passengers at King's Cross on time. All the station approaches were crowded with hurrying passengers. Taxicabs and "growlers" were mixed in apparently inextricable confusion. There was a roaring babble of instruction and counter-instruction from police-men, from cab drivers, and from excited porters. Some of the passengers hurried swiftly across the broad asphalt space and disappeared down the stairs toward the underground station. Others waited for unpunctual friends with protesting and frequent examination of their watches.

One alone seemed wholly bewildered by the noise and commotion. She was a young girl not more than eighteen, and she struggled with two or three brown paper parcels, a hat-box, and a bulky hand-bag. She was among those who expected to be met at the station, for she looked helplessly at the clock and wandered from one side of the building to the other till at last she came to a standstill in the center, put down all her parcels carefully, and, taking a letter from a shabby little bag, opened it and read.

Evidently she saw something which she had not noticed before, for she hastily replaced the letter in the bag, scrambled together her parcels, and walked swiftly out of the station. Again she came to a halt and looked round the darkened courtyard.

"Here!" snapped a voice irritably. She saw a door of a taxicab open, and came toward it timidly.

"Come in, come in, for heaven's sake!" said the voice.

She put in her parcels and stepped into the cab. The owner of the voice closed the door with a bang, and the taxi moved on.

"I've been waiting here ten minutes," said the man in the cab.

"I'm so sorry, dear, but I didn't read—"

"Of course you didn't read," interrupted the other brusquely.

It was the voice of a young man not in the best of tempers, and the girl, folding her hands in her lap, prepared for the tirade which she knew was to follow her act of omission.

"You never seem to be able to do anything right," said the man. "I suppose it is your natural stupidity."

"Why couldn't you meet me inside the station?" she asked with some show of spirit.

"I've told you a dozen times that I don't want to be seen with you," said the man brutally. "I've had enough trouble over you already. I wish to Heaven I'd never met you."

The girl could have echoed that wish, but eighteen months of bullying had cowed and all but broken her spirit.

"You are a stone around my neck," said the man bitterly. "I have to hide you, and all the time I'm in a fret as to whether you will give me away or not. I am going to keep you under my eye now," he said. "You know a little too much about me."

"I should never say a word against you," protested the girl.

"I hope, for your sake, you don't," was the grim reply.

The conversation slackened from this moment until the girl plucked up courage to ask where they were going.

"Wait and see," snapped the man, but added later: "You are going to a much nicer home than you have ever had in your life, and you ought to be very thankful."

"Indeed I am, dear," said the girl earnestly.

"Don't call me 'dear,'" snarled her husband.

The cab took them to Camden Town, and they descended in front of a respectable-looking house in a long, dull street. It was too dark for the girl to take stock of her surroundings, and she had scarcely time to gather her parcels together before the man opened the door and pushed her in.

The cab drove off, and a motor cyclist who all the time had been following the taxi, wheeled his machine slowly from the corner of the street where he had waited until he came opposite the house. He let down the supports of his machine, went stealthily up the steps, and flashed a lamp upon the enamel numbers over the fanlight of the door. He jotted down the figures in a notebook, descended the steps again, and, wheeling his machine back a little way, mounted and rode off.

Half an hour later another cab pulled up at the door, and a man descended, telling the driver to wait. He mounted the steps, knocked, and after a short delay was admitted.

"Hello, Crawley!" said the man who had opened the door to him. "How goes it?"

"Rotten," said the newcomer. "What do you want me for?"

His was the voice of an uncultured man, but his tone was that of an equal.

"What do you think I want you for?" asked the other savagely.

He led the way to the sitting room, struck a match, and lit the gas. His bag was on the floor. He picked it up, opened it, and took out a flask of whisky which he handed to the other.

"I thought you might need it," he said sarcastically.

Crawley took the flask, poured out a stiff tot, and drank it at a gulp. He was a man of fifty, dark and dour. His face was lined and tanned as one who had lived for many years in a hot climate. This was true of him, for he had spent ten years of his life in the Matabeleland mounted police.

The young man pulled up a chair to the table.

"I've got an offer to make to you," he said.

"Is there any money in it?"

The other laughed.

"You don't suppose I should make any kind of offer to you that hadn't money in it?" he answered contemptuously.

Crawley, after a moment's hesitation, poured out another drink and gulped it down.

"I haven't had a drink to-day," he said apologetically.

"That is an obvious lie," said the younger man; "but now to get to business. I don't know what your game is in England, but I will tell you what mine is. I want a free hand, and I can only have a free hand if you take your daughter away out of the country."

"You want to get rid of her, eh?" asked the other, looking at him shrewdly.

The young man nodded.

"I tell you, she's a millstone round my neck," he said for the second time that evening, "and I am scared of her. At any moment she may do some fool thing and ruin me."

Crawley grinned.

"For better or for worse," he quoted, and then, seeing the ugly look in the other man's face, he said: "Don't try to frighten me, Mr. Brown or Jones, or whatever you call yourself, because I can't be frightened. I have had to deal with worse men than you and I'm still alive. I'll tell you right now that I'm not going out of England. I've got a big game on. What did you think of offering me?"

"A thousand pounds," said the other.

"I thought it would be something like that," said Crawley coolly. "It is a flea-bite to me. You take my tip and find another way of keeping her quiet. A clever fellow like you, who knows more about dope than any other man I have met, ought to be able to do the trick without any assistance from me. Why, didn't you tell me that you knew a drug that sapped the will power of people and made them do just as you like? That's the knockout drop to give her. Take my tip and try it."

"You won't accept my offer?" asked the other.

Crawley shook his head.

"I've got a fortune in my hand if I work my cards right," he said. "I've managed to get a position right under the old devil's nose. I see him every day, and I have got him scared. What's a thousand pounds to me? I've lost more than a thousand on one race at Lewes. No, my boy, employ the resources of science," he said flippantly. "There's no sense in being a dope merchant if you can't get the right dope for the right case."

"The less you say about my doping, the better," snarled the other man. "I was a fool to take you so much into my confidence."

"Don't lose your temper," said the other, raising his hand in mock alarm. "Lord bless us, Mr. Wright or Robinson, who would have thought that the nice, mild-mannered young man who goes to church in Eastbourne could be such a fierce chap in London? I've often laughed, seeing you walk past me as though butter wouldn't melt in your mouth and everybody saying what a nice young man Mr. So-and-so is, and I have thought, if they only knew that this sleek lad—"

"Shut up!" said the other savagely. "You are getting as much of a danger as this infernal girl."

"You take things too much to heart," said the other. "Now I'll tell you what I'll do. I am not going out of England. I am going to keep my present menial job. You see, it isn't only the question of money, but I have an idea that your old man has got something up his sleeve for me, and the only way to prevent unpleasant happenings is to keep close to him."

"I have told you a dozen times he has nothing against you," said the other emphatically. "I know his business, and I have seen most of his private papers. If he could have caught you with the goods, he would have had you long ago. I told you that the last time you called at the house and I saw you. What! Do you think John Minute would pay blackmail if he could get out of it? You are a fool!"

"Maybe I am," said the other philosophically, "but I am not such a fool as you think me to be."

"You had better see her," said his host suddenly.

Crawley shook his head.

"A parent's feelings," he protested, "have a sense of decency, Reginald or Horace or Hector; I always forget your London name. No," he said, "I won't accept your suggestion, but I have got a proposition to make to you, and it concerns a certain relative of John Minute—a nice, young fellow who will one day secure the old man's swag."

"Will he?" said the other between his teeth.

They sat for two hours discussing the proposition, and then Crawley rose to leave.

"I leave my final jar for the last," he said pleasantly. He had finished the contents of the flask, and was in a very amiable frame of mind.

"You are in some danger, my young friend, and I, your guardian angel, have discovered it. You have a valet at one of your numerous addresses."

"A chauffeur," corrected the other; "a Swede, Jonsen."

Crawley nodded.

"I thought he was a Swede."

"Have you seen him?" asked the other quickly.

"He came down to make some inquiries in Eastbourne," said Crawley, "and I happened to meet him. One of those talkative fellows who opens his heart to a uniform. I stopped him from going to the house, so I saved you a shock—if John Minute had been there, I mean."

The other bit his lips, and his face showed his concern.

"That's bad," he said. "He has been very restless and rather impertinent lately, and has been looking for another job. What did you tell him?"

"I told him to come down next Wednesday," said Crawley. "I thought you'd like to make a few arrangements in the meantime."

He held out his hand, and the young man, who did not mistake the gesture, dived into his pockets with a scowl and handed four five-pound notes into the outstretched palm.

"It will just pay my taxi," said Crawley light-heartedly.

The other went upstairs. He found the girl sitting where he had left her in her bedroom.

"Clear out of here," he said roughly. "I want the room."

Meekly she obeyed. He locked the door behind her, lifted a suitcase on to the bed, and, opening it, took out a small Japanese box. From this he removed a tiny glass pestle and mortar, six little vials, a hypodermic syringe, and a small spirit lamp. Then from his pocket he took a cigarette case and removed two cigarettes which he laid carefully on the dressing table. He was busy for the greater part of the hour.

As for the girl, she spent that time in the cold dining room huddled up in a chair, weeping softly to herself.

CHAPTER III

FOUR IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

The writer pauses here to say that the story of "The Man Who Knew" is an unusual one. It is reconstructed partly from the reports of a certain trial, partly from the confidential matter which has come into the writer's hands from Saul Arthur Mann and his extraordinary bureau, and partly from the private diary which May Nuttall put at the writer's disposal.

Those practiced readers who begin this narrative with the weary conviction that they are merely to see the workings out of a conventional record of crime, of love, and of mystery may be urged to pursue their investigations to the end. Truth is stranger than fiction, and has need to be, since most fiction is founded on truth. There is a strangeness in the story of "The Man Who Knew" which brings it into the category of veracious history. It cannot be said in truth that any story begins at the beginning of the first chapter, since all stories began with the creation of the world, but this present story may be said to begin when we cut into the lives of some of the characters concerned, upon the seventeenth day of July, 19—.

There was a little group of people about the prostrate figure of a man who lay upon the sidewalk in Gray Square, Bloomsbury.

The hour was eight o'clock on a warm summer evening, and that the unusual spectacle attracted only a small crowd may be explained by the fact that Gray Square is a professional quarter given up to the offices of lawyers, surveyors, and corporation offices which at eight o'clock on a summer's day are empty of occupants. The unprofessional classes who inhabit the shabby streets impinging upon the Euston Road do not include Gray Square in their itinerary when they take their evening constitutional abroad, and even the loud children find a less depressing environment for their games.

The gray-faced youth sprawled upon the pavement was decently dressed and was obviously of the superior servant type.

He was as obviously dead.

Death, which beautifies and softens the plainest, had failed entirely to dissipate the impression of meanness in the face of the stricken man. The lips were set in a little sneer, the half-closed eyes were small, the clean-shaven jaw was long and underhung, the ears were large and grotesquely prominent.

A constable stood by the body, waiting for the arrival of the ambulance, answering in monosyllables the questions of the curious. Ten minutes before the ambulance arrived there joined the group a man of middle age.

He wore the pepper-and-salt suit which distinguishes the country excursionist taking the day off in London. He had little side whiskers and a heavy brown mustache. His golf cap was new and set at a somewhat rakish angle on his head. Across his waistcoat was a large and heavy chain hung at intervals with small silver medals. For all his provincial appearance his movements were decisive and suggested authority. He elbowed his way through the little crowd, and met the constable's disapproving stare without faltering.

"Can I be of any help, mate?" he said, and introduced himself as Police Constable Wiseman, of the Sussex constabulary.

The London constable thawed.

"Thanks," he said; "you can help me get him into the ambulance when it comes."

"Fit?" asked the newcomer.

The policeman shook his head.

"He was seen to stagger and fall, and by the time I arrived he'd snuffed out. Heart disease, I suppose."

"Ah!" said Constable Wiseman, regarding the body with a proprietorial and professional eye, and retailed his own experiences of similar tragedies, not without pride, as though he had to some extent the responsibility for their occurrence.

On the far side of the square a young man and a girl were walking slowly. A tall, fair, good-looking youth he was, who might have attracted attention even in a crowd. But more likely would that attention have been focused, had he been accompanied by the girl at his side, for she was by every standard beautiful. They reached the corner of Tabor Street, and it was the fixed and eager stare of a little man who stood on the corner of the street and the intensity of his gaze which first directed their attention to the tragedy on the opposite side of the square.

The little man who watched was dressed in an ill-fitting frock coat, trousers which seemed too long, since they concertinaed over his boots, and a glossy silk hat set at the back of his head.

"What a funny old thing!" said Frank Merrill under his breath, and the girl smiled.

The object of their amusement turned sharply as they came abreast of him. His freckled, clean-shaven face looked strangely old, and the big, gold-rimmed spectacles bridged halfway down his nose added to his ludicrous appearance. He raised his eyebrows and surveyed the two young people.

"There's an accident over there," he said briefly and without any preliminary.

"Indeed," said the young man politely.

"There have been several accidents in Gray Square," said the strange old man meditatively. "There was one in 1875, when the corner house—you can see the end of it from here—collapsed and buried fourteen people, seven of whom were killed, four of whom were injured for life, and three of whom escaped with minor injuries."

He said this calmly and apparently without any sense that he was acting at all unconventionally in volunteering the information, and went on:

"There was another accident in 1881, on the seventeenth of October, a collision between two hansom cabs which resulted in the death of a driver whose name was Samuel Green. He lived at 14 Portington Mews, and had a wife and nine children."

The girl looked at the old man with a little apprehension, and Frank Merrill laughed.

"You have a very good memory for this kind of thing. Do you live here?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" The little man shook his head vigorously.

He was silent for a moment, and then:

"I think we had better go over and see what it is all about," he said with a certain gravity.

His assumption of leadership was a little staggering, and Frank turned to the girl.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

She shook her head, and the three passed over the road to the little group just as the ambulance came jangling into the square. To Merrill's surprise, the policeman greeted the little man respectfully, touching his helmet.

"I'm afraid nothing can be done, sir. He is—gone."

"Oh, yes, he's gone!" said the other quite calmly.

He stooped down, turned back the man's coat, and slipped his hand into the inside pocket, but drew blank; the pocket was empty. With an extraordinary rapidity of movement, he continued his search, and to the astonishment of Frank Merrill the policeman did not deny his right. In the top left-hand pocket of the waistcoat he pulled out a crumpled slip which proved to be a newspaper clipping.

"Ah!" said the little man. "An advertisement for a manservant cut out of this morning's *Daily Telegraph*; I saw it myself. Evidently a manservant who was on his way to interview a new employer. You see: 'Call at eight-thirty at Holborn Viaduct Hotel.' He was taking a short cut when his illness overcame him. I know who is advertising for the valet," he added gratuitously; "he is a Mr. T. Burton, who is a rubber factor from Penang. Mr. T. Burton married the daughter of the Reverend George Smith, of Scarborough, in 1889, and has four children, one of whom is at Winchester. Hum!"

He pursed his lips and looked down again at the body; then suddenly he turned to Frank Merrill.

"Do you know this man?" he demanded.

Frank looked at him in astonishment.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You were looking at him as though you did," said the little man. "That is to say, you were not looking at his face. People who do not look at other people's faces under these circumstances know them."

"Curiously enough," said Frank, with a little smile, "there is some one here I know," and he caught the eye of Constable Wiseman.

That ornament of the Sussex constabulary touched his cap.

"I thought I recognized you, sir. I have often seen you at Weald Lodge," he said.

Further conversation was cut short as they lifted the body on to a stretcher and put it into the interior of the ambulance. The little group watched the white car disappear, and the crowd of idlers began to melt away.

Constable Wiseman took a professional leave of his comrade, and came back to Frank a little shyly.

"You are Mr. Minute's nephew, aren't you, sir?" he asked.

"Quite right," said Frank.

"I used to see you at your uncle's place."

"Uncle's name?"

It was the little man's pert but wholly inoffensive inquiry. He seemed to ask it as a matter of course and as one who had the right to be answered without equivocation.

Frank Merrill laughed.

"My uncle is Mr. John Minute," he said, and added, with a faint touch of sarcasm: "You probably know him."

"Oh, yes," said the other readily. "One of the original Rhodesian pioneers who received a concession from Lo Bengula and amassed a large fortune by the sale of gold-mining properties which proved to be of no especial value. He was tried at Salisbury in 1897 with the murder of two Mashona chiefs, and was acquitted. He amassed another fortune in Johannesburg in the boom of '97, and came to this country in 1901, settling on a small estate between Polegate and Eastbourne. He has one nephew, his heir, Frank Merrill, the son of the late Doctor Henry Merrill, who is an accountant in the London and Western Counties Bank. He—"

Frank looked at him in undisguised amazement.

"You know my uncle?"

"Never met him in my life," said the little man brusquely. He took off his silk hat with a sweep.

"I wish you good afternoon," he said, and strode rapidly away.

The uniformed policeman turned a solemn face upon the group.

"Do you know that gentleman?" asked Frank.

The constable smiled.

"Oh, yes, sir; that is Mr. Mann. At the yard we call him 'The Man Who Knows!'"

"Is he a detective?"

The constable shook his head.

"From what I understand, sir, he does a lot of work for the commissioner and for the government. We have orders never to interfere with him or refuse him any information that we can give."

"The Man Who Knows?" repeated Frank, with a puzzled frown. "What an extraordinary person! What does he know?" he asked suddenly.

"Everything," said the constable comprehensively.

A few minutes later Frank was walking slowly toward Holborn.

"You seem to be rather depressed," smiled the girl.

"Confound that fellow!" said Frank, breaking his silence. "I wonder how he comes to know all about uncle?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, dear, this is not a very cheery evening for you. I did not bring you out to see accidents."

"Frank," the girl said suddenly, "I seem to know that man's face—the man who was on the pavement, I mean—"

She stopped with a shudder.

"It seemed a little familiar to me," said Frank thoughtfully.

"Didn't he pass us about twenty minutes ago?"

"He may have done," said Frank, "but I have no particular recollection of it. My impression of him goes much farther back than this evening. Now where could I have seen him?"

"Let's talk about something else," she said quickly. "I haven't a very long time. What am I to do about your uncle?"

He laughed.

"I hardly know what to suggest," he said. "I am very fond of Uncle John, and I hate to run counter to his wishes, but I am certainly not going to allow him to take my love affairs into his hands. I wish to Heaven you had never met him!"

She gave a little gesture of despair.

"It is no use wishing things like that, Frank. You see, I knew your uncle before I knew you. If it had not been for your uncle I should not have met you."

"Tell me what happened," he asked. He looked at his watch. "You had better come on to Victoria," he said, "or I shall lose my train."

He hailed a taxicab, and on the way to the station she told him of all that had happened.

"He was very nice, as he always is, and he said nothing really which was very horrid about you. He merely said he did not want me to marry you because he did not think you'd make a suitable husband. He said that Jasper had all the qualities and most of the virtues."

Frank frowned.

"Jasper is a sleek brute," he said viciously.

She laid her hand on his arm.

"Please be patient," she said. "Jasper has said nothing whatever to me and has never been anything but most polite and kind."

"I know that variety of kindness," growled the young man. "He is one of those sly, soft-footed sneaks you can never get to the bottom of. He is worming his way into my uncle's confidence to an extraordinary extent. Why, he is more like a son to Uncle John than a beastly secretary."

"He has made himself necessary," said the girl, "and that is halfway to making yourself wealthy."

The little frown vanished from Frank's brow, and he chuckled.

"That is almost an epigram," he said. "What did you tell uncle?"

"I told him that I did not think that his suggestion was possible and that I did not care for Mr. Cole, nor he for me. You see, Frank, I owe your Uncle John so much. I am the daughter of one of his best friends, and since dear daddy died Uncle John has looked after me. He has given me my education—my income—my everything; he has been a second father to me."

Frank nodded

"I recognize all the difficulties," he said, "and here we are at Victoria."

She stood on the platform and watched the train pull out and waved her hand in farewell, and then returned to the pretty flat in which John Minute had installed her. As she said, her life had been made very smooth for her. There was no need for her to worry about money, and she was able to devote her days to the work she loved best. The East End Provident Society, of which she was president, was wholly financed by the Rhodesian millionaire.

May had a natural aptitude for charity work. She was an indefatigable worker, and there was no better known figure in the poor streets adjoining the West Indian Docks than Sister Nuttall. Frank was interested in the work without being enthusiastic. He had all the man's apprehension of infectious disease and of the inadvisability of a beautiful girl slumming without attendance, but the one visit he had made to the East End in her company had convinced him that there was no fear as to her personal safety.

He was wont to grumble that she was more interested in her work than she was in him, which was probably true, because her development had been a slow one, and it could not be said that she was greatly in love with anything in the world save her self-imposed mission.

She ate her frugal dinner, and drove down to the mission headquarters off the Albert Dock Road. Three nights a week were devoted by the mission to visitation work. Many women and girls living in this area spend their days at factories in the neighborhood, and they have only the evenings for the treatment of ailments which, in people better circumstanced, would produce the attendance of specialists. For the night work the nurses were accompanied by a volunteer male escort. May Nuttall's duties carried her that evening to Silvertown and to a network of mean streets to the east of the railway. Her work began at dusk, and was not ended until night had fallen and the stars were quivering in a hot sky.

The heat was stifling, and as she came out of the last foul dwelling she welcomed as a relief even the vitiated air of the hot night. She went back into the passageway of the house, and by the light of a paraffin lamp made her last entry in the little diary she carried.

"That makes eight we have seen, Thompson," she said to her escort. "Is there anybody else on the list?"

"Nobody else to-night, miss," said the young man, concealing a yawn.

"I'm afraid it is not very interesting for you, Thompson," said the girl sympathetically; "you haven't even the excitement of work. It must be awfully dull standing outside waiting for me."

"Bless you, miss," said the man. "I don't mind at all. If it is good enough for you to come into these streets, it is good enough for me to go round with you."

They stood in a little courtyard, a cul-de-sac cut off at one end by a sheer wall, and as the girl put back her diary into her little net bag a man came swiftly down from the street entrance of the court and passed her. As he did so the dim light of the lamp showed for a second his face, and her mouth formed an "O" of astonishment. She watched him until he disappeared into one of the dark doorways at the farther end of the court, and stood staring at the door as though unable to believe her eyes.

There was no mistaking the pale face and the straight figure of Jasper Cole, John Minute's secretary.

CHAPTER IV

THE ACCOUNTANT AT THE BANK

May Nuttall expressed her perplexity in a letter:

Dear Frank: Such a remarkable thing happened last night. I was in Silvers Rents about eleven o'clock, and had just finished seeing the last of my patients, when a man passed me and entered one of the houses—it was, I thought at the time, either the last or the last but one on the left. I now know that it was the last but one. There is no doubt at all in my mind that it was Mr. Cole, for not only did I see his face, but he carried the snakewood cane which he always affects.

I must confess I was curious enough to make inquiries, and I found that he is a frequent visitor here, but nobody quite knows why he comes. The last house is occupied by two families, very uninteresting people, and the last house but one is empty save for a room which is apparently the one Mr. Cole uses. None of the people in the Rents know Mr. Cole or have ever seen him. Apparently the downstairs room in the empty house is kept locked, and a woman who lives opposite told my informant, Thompson, whom you will remember as the man who always goes with me when I am slumming, that the gentleman sometimes comes, uses this room, and that he always sweeps it out for himself. It cannot be very well furnished, and apparently he never stays the night there.

Isn't it very extraordinary? Please tell me what you make of it—

Frank Merrill put down the letter and slowly filled his pipe. He was puzzled, and found no solution either then or on his way to the office.

He was the accountant of the Piccadilly branch of the London and Western Counties Bank, and had very little time to give to outside problems. But the thought of Cole and his curious appearance in a London slum under circumstances which, to say the least, were mysterious came between him and his work more than once.

He was entering up some transactions when he was sent for by the manager. Frank Merrill, though he did not occupy a particularly imposing post in the bank, held nevertheless a very extraordinary position and one which insured for him more consideration than the average official receives at the hands of his superiors. His uncle was financially interested in the bank, and it was generally believed that Frank had been sent as much to watch his relative's interests as to prepare himself for the handling of the great fortune which John Minute would some day leave to his heir.

The manager nodded cheerily as Frank came in and closed the door behind him.

"Good morning, Mr. Merrill," said the chief. "I want to see you about Mr. Holland's account. You told me he was in the other day."

Frank nodded.

"He came in in the lunch hour."

"I wish I had been here," said the manager thoughtfully. "I would like to see this gentleman."

"Is there anything wrong with his account?"

"Oh, no," said the manager with a smile; "he has a very good balance. In fact, too large a balance for a floating account. I wish you would see him and persuade him to put some of this money on deposit. The head office does not like big floating balances which may be withdrawn at any moment and which necessitates the keeping here of a larger quantity of cash than I care to hold."

"Personally," he went on, "I do not like our method of doing business at all. Our head office being in Plymouth, it is necessary, by the peculiar rules of the bank, that the floating balances should be so covered, and I confess that your uncle is as great a sinner as any. Look at this?"

He pushed a check across the table.

"Here's a bearer check for sixty thousand pounds which has just come in. It is to pay the remainder of the purchase price due to Consolidated Mines. Why they cannot accept the ordinary crossed check Heavens knows!"

Frank looked at the sprawling signature and smiled.

"You see, uncle's got a reputation to keep up," he said good-humoredly; "one is not called 'Ready-Money Minute' for nothing."

The manager made a little grimace.

"That sort of thing may be necessary in South Africa," he said, "but here in the very heart of the money world cash payments are a form of lunacy. I do not want you to repeat this to your relative."

"I am hardly likely to do that," said Frank, "though I do think you ought to allow something for uncle's peculiar experiences in the early days of his career."

"Oh, I make every allowance," said the other; "only it is very inconvenient, but it was not to discuss your uncle's shortcomings that I brought you here."

He pulled out a pass book from a heap in front of him.

"Mr. Rex Holland," he read. "He opened his account while I was on my holiday, you remember."

"I remember very well," said Frank, "and he opened it through me."

"What sort of man is he?" asked the manager.

"I am afraid I am no good at descriptions," replied Frank, "but I should describe him as a typical young man about town, not very brainy, very few ideas outside of his own immediate world—which begins at Hyde Park Corner—"

"And ends at the Hippodrome," interrupted the manager.

"Possibly," said Frank. "He seemed a very sound, capable man in spite of a certain languid assumption of ignorance as to financial matters, and he came very well recommended. What would you like me to do?"

The manager pushed himself back in his chair, thrust his hands in his trousers' pockets, and looked at the ceiling for inspiration.

"Suppose you go along and see him this afternoon and ask him as a favor to put some of his money on deposit. We will pay the usual interest and all that sort of thing. You can explain that he can get the money back whenever he wants it by giving us thirty days' notice. Will you do this for me?"

"Surely," said Frank heartily. "I will see him this afternoon. What is his address? I have forgotten."

"Albemarle Chambers, Knightsbridge," replied the manager. "He may be in town."

"And what is his balance?" asked Frank.

"Thirty-seven thousand pounds," said the other, "and as he is not buying Consolidated Mines I do not see what need he has for the money, the more so since we can always give him an overdraft on the security of his deposit. Suggest to him that he puts thirty thousand pounds with us and leaves seven thousand pounds floating. By the way, your uncle is sending his secretary here this afternoon to go into the question of his own account."

Frank looked up.

"Cole," he said quickly, "is he coming here? By Jove!"

He stood by the manager's desk, and a look of amusement came into his eyes.

"I want to ask Cole something," he said slowly. "What time do you expect him?"

"About four o'clock."

"After the bank closes?"

The manager nodded.

"Uncle has a weird way of doing business," said Frank, after a pause. "I suppose that means that I shall have to stay on?"

"It isn't necessary," said Mr. Brandon. "You see Mr. Cole is one of our directors."

Frank checked an exclamation of surprise.

"How long has this been?" he asked.

"Since last Monday. I thought I told you. At any rate, if you have not been told by your uncle, you had better pretend to know nothing about it," said Brandon hastily.

"You may be sure I shall keep my counsel," said Frank, a little amused by the other's anxiety.

"You have been very good to me, Mr. Brandon, and I appreciate your kindness."

"Mr. Cole is a nominee of your uncle, of course," Brandon went on, with a little nod of acknowledgment for the other's thanks. "Your uncle makes a point of never sitting on boards if he can help it, and has never been represented except by his solicitor since he acquired so large an interest in the bank. As a matter of fact, I think Mr. Cole is coming here as much to examine the affairs of the branch as to look after your uncle's account. Cole is a very first-class man of business, isn't he?"

Frank's answer was a grim smile.

"Excellent!" he said dryly. "He has the scientific mind grafted to a singular business capacity."

"You don't like him?"

"I have no particular reason for not liking him," said the other. "Possibly I am being constitutionally uncharitable. He is not the type of man I greatly care for. He possesses all the virtues, according to uncle, spends his days and nights almost slavishly working for his employer. Oh, yes, I know what you are going to say; that is a very fine quality in a young man, and honestly I agree with you, only it doesn't seem natural. I don't suppose anybody works as hard as I or takes as much interest in his work, yet I have no particular anxiety to carry it on after business hours."

The manager rose.

"You are not even an idle apprentice," he said good-humoredly. "You will see Mr. Rex Holland for me?"

"Certainly," said Frank, and went back to his desk deep in thought.

It was four o'clock to the minute when Jasper Cole passed through the one open door of the bank at which the porter stood ready to close. He was well, but neatly, dressed, and had hooked to his wrist a thin snakewood cane attached to a crook handle.

He saw Frank across the counter and smiled, displaying two rows of even, white teeth.

"Hello, Jasper!" said Frank easily, extending his hand. "How is uncle?"

"He is very well indeed," replied the other. "Of course he is very worried about things, but then I think he is always worried about something or other."

"Anything in particular?" asked Frank interestedly.

Jasper shrugged his shoulders.

"You know him much better than I; you were with him longer. He is getting so horribly suspicious of people, and sees a spy or an enemy in every strange face. That is usually a bad sign, but I think he has been a little overwrought lately."

He spoke easily; his voice was low and modulated with the faintest suggestion of a drawl, which was especially irritating to Frank, who secretly despised the Oxford product, though he admitted—since he was a very well-balanced and on the whole good-humored young man—his dislike was unreasonable.

"I hear you have come to audit the accounts," said Frank, leaning on the counter and opening his gold cigarette case.

"Hardly that," drawled Jasper.

He reached out his hand and selected a cigarette.

"I just want to sort out a few things. By the way, your uncle had a letter from a friend of yours."

"Mine?"

"A Rex Holland," said the other.

"He is hardly a friend of mine; in fact, he is rather an infernal nuisance," said Frank. "I went down to Knightsbridge to see him to-day, and he was out. What has Mr. Holland to say?"

"Oh, he is interested in some sort of charity, and he is starting a guinea collection. I forget what the charity was."

"Why do you call him a friend of mine?" asked Frank, eying the other keenly.

Jasper Cole was halfway to the manager's office and turned.

"A little joke," he said. "I had heard you mention the gentleman. I have no other reason for supposing he was a friend of yours."

"Oh, by the way, Cole," said Frank suddenly, "were you in town last night?"

Jasper Cole shot a swift glance at him.

"Why?"

"Were you near Victoria Docks?"

"What a question to ask!" said the other, with his inscrutable smile, and, turning abruptly, walked in to the waiting Mr. Brandon.

Frank finished work at five-thirty that night and left Jasper Cole and a junior clerk to the congenial task of checking the securities. At nine o'clock the clerk went home, leaving Jasper alone in the bank. Mr. Brandon, the manager, was a bachelor and occupied a flat above the bank premises. From time to time he strode in, his big pipe in the corner of his mouth. The last of these occasions was when Jasper Cole had replaced the last ledger in Mr. Minute's private safe.

"Half past eleven," said the manager disapprovingly, "and you have had no dinner."

"I can afford to miss a dinner," laughed the other.

"Lucky man," said the manager.

Jasper Cole passed out into the street and called a passing taxi to the curb.

"Charing Cross Station," he said.

He dismissed the cab in the station courtyard, and after a while walked back to the Strand and hailed another.

"Victoria Dock Road," he said in a low voice.

CHAPTER V

JOHN MINUTE'S LEGACY

La Rochefoucauld has said that prudence and love are inconsistent. May Nuttall, who had never explored the philosophies of La Rochefoucauld, had nevertheless seen that quotation in the birthday book of an acquaintance, and the saying had made a great impression upon her. She was twenty-one years of age, at which age girls are most impressionable and are little influenced by the workings of pure reason. They are prepared to take their philosophies ready-made, and not disinclined to accept from others certain rigid standards by which they measure their own elastic temperaments.

Frank Merrill was at once a comfort and the cause of a certain half-ashamed resentment, since she was of the age which resents dependence. The woman who spends any appreciable time in the discussion with herself as to whether she does or does not love a man can only have her doubts set at rest by the discovery of somebody whom she loves better. She liked Frank, and liked him well enough to accept the little ring which marked the beginning of a new relationship which was not exactly an engagement, yet brought to her friendship a glamour which it had never before possessed.

She liked him well enough to want his love. She loved him little enough to find the prospect of an early marriage alarming. That she did not understand herself was not remarkable. Twenty-one has not the experience by which the complexities of twenty-one may be straightened out and made visible.

She sat at breakfast, puzzling the matter out, and was a little disturbed and even distressed to find, in contrasting the men, that of the two she had a warmer and a deeper feeling for Jasper Cole. Her alarm was due to the recollection of one of Frank's warnings, almost prophetic, it seemed to her now:

"That man has a fascination which I would be the last to deny. I find myself liking him, though my instinct tells me he is the worst enemy I have in the world."

If her attitude toward Frank was difficult to define, more remarkable was her attitude of mind toward Jasper Cole. There was something sinister—no, that was not the word—something "frightening" about him. He had a magnetism, an aura of personal power, which seemed to paralyze the will of any who came into conflict with him.

She remembered how often she had gone to the big library at Weald Lodge with the firm intention of "having it out with Jasper." Sometimes it was a question of domestic economy into which he had obtruded his views—when she was sixteen she was practically housekeeper to her adopted uncle—perhaps it was a matter of carriage arrangement. Once it had been much more serious, for after she had fixed up to go with a merry picnic party to the downs, Jasper, in her uncle's absence and on his authority, had firmly but gently forbidden her attendance. Was it an accident that Frank Merrill was one of the party, and that he was coming down from London for an afternoon's fun?

In this case, as in every other, Jasper had his way. He even convinced her that his view was right and hers was wrong. He had pooh-poohed on this occasion all suggestion that it was the presence of Frank Merrill which had induced him to exercise the veto which his extraordinary position gave to him. According to his version, it had been the inclusion in the party of two ladies whose names were famous in the theatrical world which had raised his delicate gorge.

May thought of this particular incident as she sat at breakfast, and with a feeling of exasperation she realized that whenever Jasper had set his foot down he had never been short of a plausible reason for opposing her.

For one thing, however, she gave him credit. Never once had he spoken depreciatingly of Frank.

She wondered what business brought Jasper to such an unsavory neighborhood as that in which she had seen him. She had all a woman's curiosity without a woman's suspicions, and, strangely enough, she did not associate his presence in this terrible neighborhood or his mysterious comings

and goings with anything discreditable to himself. She thought it was a little eccentric in him, and wondered whether he, too, was running a "little mission" of his own, but dismissed that idea since she had received no confirmation of the theory from the people with whom she came into contact in that neighborhood.

She was halfway through her breakfast when the telephone bell rang, and she rose from the table and crossed to the wall. At the first word from the caller she recognized him.

"Why, uncle!" she said. "Whatever are you doing in town?"

The voice of John Minute bellowed through the receiver:

"I've an important engagement. Will you lunch with me at one-thirty at the Savoy?"

He scarcely waited for her to accept the invitation before he hung up his receiver.

The commissioner of police replaced the book which he had taken from the shelf at the side of his desk, swung round in his chair, and smiled quizzically at the perturbed and irascible visitor.

The man who sat at the other side of the desk might have been fifty-five. He was of middle height, and was dressed in a somewhat violent check suit, the fit of which advertised the skill of the great tailor who had ably fashioned so fine a creation from so unlovely a pattern.

He wore a low collar which would have displayed a massive neck but for the fact that a glaring purple cravat and a diamond as big as a hazelnut directed the observer's attention elsewhere. The face was an unusual one. Strong to a point of coarseness, the bulbous nose, the thick, irregular lips, the massive chin all spoke of the hard life which John Minute had spent. His eyes were blue and cold, his hair a thick and unruly mop of gray. At a distance he conveyed a curious illusion of refinement. Nearer at hand, his pink face repelled one by its crudities. He reminded the commissioner of a piece of scene painting that pleased from the gallery and disappointed from the boxes.

"You see, Mr. Minute," said Sir George suavely, "we are rather limited in our opportunities and in our powers. Personally, I should be most happy to help you, not only because it is my business to help everybody, but because you were so kind to my boy in South Africa; the letters of introduction you gave to him were most helpful."

The commissioner's son had been on a hunting trip through Rhodesia and Barotseland, and a chance meeting at a dinner party with the Rhodesian millionaire had produced these letters.

"But," continued the official, with a little gesture of despair, "Scotland Yard has its limitations. We cannot investigate the cause of intangible fears. If you are threatened we can help you, but the mere fact that you fancy there is some sort of vague danger would not justify our taking any action."

John Minute hitched about in his chair.

"What are the police for?" he asked impatiently. "I have enemies, Sir George. I took a quiet little place in the country, just outside Eastbourne, to get away from London, and all sorts of new people are prying round us. There was a new parson called the other day for a subscription to some boy scouts' movement or other. He has been hanging round my place for a month, and lives at a cottage near Polegate. Why should he have come to Eastbourne?"

"On a holiday trip?" suggested the commissioner.

"Bah!" said John Minute contemptuously. "There's some other reason. I've had him watched. He goes every day to visit a woman at a hotel—a confederate. They're never seen in public together. Then there's a peddler, one of those fellows who sell glass and repair windows; nobody knows anything about him. He doesn't do enough business to keep a fly alive. He's always hanging round Weald Lodge. Then there's a Miss Paines, who says she's a landscape gardener, and wants to lay out the grounds in some newfangled way. I sent her packing about her business, but she hasn't left the neighborhood."

"Have you reported the matter to the local police?" asked the commissioner.

Minute nodded.

"And they know nothing suspicious about them?"

"Nothing!" said Mr. Minute briefly.

"Then," said the other, smiling, "there is probably nothing known against them, and they are quite innocent people trying to get a living. After all, Mr. Minute, a man who is as rich as you are must expect to attract a number of people, each trying to secure some of your wealth in a more or less legitimate way. I suspect nothing more remarkable than this has happened."

He leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped, a sudden frown on his face.

"I hate to suggest that anybody knows any more than we, but as you are so worried I will put you in touch with a man who will probably relieve your anxiety."

Minute looked up.

"A police officer?" he asked.

Sir George shook his head.

"No, this is a private detective. He can do things for you which we cannot. Have you ever heard of Saul Arthur Mann? I see you haven't. Saul Arthur Mann," said the commissioner, "has been a good friend of ours, and possibly in recommending him to you I may be a good friend to both of you. He is 'The Man Who Knows.'"

"'The Man Who Knows,'" repeated Mr. Minute dubiously. "What does he know?"

"I'll show you," said the commissioner. He went to the telephone, gave a number, and while he was waiting for the call to be put through he asked: "What is the name of your boy-scout parson?"

"The Reverend Vincent Lock," replied Mr. Minute.

"I suppose you don't know the name of your glass peddler?"

Minute shook his head.

"They call him 'Waxy' in the village," he said.

"And the lady's name is Miss Paines, I think?" asked the commissioner, jotting down the names as he repeated them. "Well, we shall—Hello! Is that Saul Arthur Mann? This is Sir George Fuller. Connect me with Mr. Mann, will you?"

He waited a second, and then continued:

"Is that you, Mr. Mann? I want to ask you something. Will you note these three names? The Reverend Vincent Lock, a peddling glazier who is known as 'Waxy,' and a Miss Paines. Have you got them? I wish you would let me know something about them."

Mr. Minute rose.

"Perhaps you'll let me know, Sir George—" he began, holding out his hand.

"Don't go yet," replied the commissioner, waving him to his chair again. "You will obtain all the information you want in a few minutes."

"But surely he must make inquiries," said the other, surprised.

Sir George shook his head.

"The curious thing about Saul Arthur Mann is that he never has to make inquiries. That is why he is called 'The Man Who Knows.' He is one of the most remarkable people in the world of criminal investigation," he went on. "We tried to induce him to come to Scotland Yard. I am not so sure that the government would have paid him his price. At any rate, he saved me any embarrassment by refusing point-blank."

The telephone bell rang at that moment, and Sir George lifted the receiver. He took a pencil and wrote rapidly on his pad, and when he had finished he said, "Thank you," and hung up the receiver.

"Here is your information, Mr. Minute," he said. "The Reverend Vincent Lock, curate in a very poor neighborhood near Manchester, interested in the boy scouts' movement. His brother, George Henry Locke, has had some domestic trouble, his wife running away from him. She is now staying at the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne, and is visited every day by her brother-in-law, who is endeavoring to induce her to return to her home. That disposes of the reverend gentleman and his confederate. Miss Paines is a genuine landscape gardener, has been the plaintiff in two breach-of-promise cases, one of which came to the court. There is no doubt," the commissioner went on reading the paper, "that her *modus operandi* is to get elderly gentlemen to propose marriage and then to commence her

action. That disposes of Miss Paines, and you now know why she is worrying you. Our friend 'Waxy' has another name—Thomas Cobbler—and he has been three times convicted of larceny."

The commissioner looked up with a grim little smile.

"I shall have something to say to our own record department for failing to trace 'Waxy,'" he said, and then resumed his reading.

"And that is everything! It disposes of our three," he said. "I will see that 'Waxy' does not annoy you any more."

"But how the dickens—" began Mr. Minute. "How the dickens does this fellow find out in so short a time?"

The commissioner shrugged his shoulders.

"He just knows," he said.

He took leave of his visitor at the door.

"If you are bothered any more," he said, "I should strongly advise you to go to Saul Arthur Mann. I don't know what your real trouble is, and you haven't told me exactly why you should fear an attack of any kind. You won't have to tell Mr. Mann," he said with a little twinkle in his eye.

"Why not?" asked the other suspiciously.

"Because he will know," said the commissioner.

"The devil he will!" growled John Minute, and stumped down the broad stairs on to the Embankment, a greatly mystified man. He would have gone off to seek an interview with this strange individual there and then, for his curiosity was piqued and he had also a little apprehension, one which, in his impatient way, he desired should be allayed, but he remembered that he had asked May to lunch with him, and he was already five minutes late.

He found the girl in the broad vestibule, waiting for him, and greeted her affectionately.

Whatever may be said of John Minute that is not wholly to his credit, it cannot be said that he lacked sincerity.

There are people in Rhodesia who speak of him without love. They describe him as the greatest land thief that ever rode a Zeedersburg coach from Port Charter to Salisbury to register land that he had obtained by trickery. They tell stories of those wonderful coach drives of his with relays of twelve mules waiting every ten miles. They speak of his gambling propensities, of ten-thousand-acre farms that changed hands at the turn of a card, and there are stories that are less printable. When M'Lupi, a little Mashona chief, found gold in '92, and refused to locate the reef, it was John Minute who staked him out and lit a grass fire on his chest until he spoke.

Many of the stories are probably exaggerated, but all Rhodesia agrees that John Minute robbed impartially friend and foe. The confidant of Lo'Ben and the Company alike, he betrayed both, and on that terrible day when it was a toss of a coin whether the concession seekers would be butchered in Lo'Ben's kraal, John Minute escaped with the only available span of mules and left his comrades to their fate.

Yet he had big, generous traits, and could on occasions be a tender and a kindly friend. He had married when a young man, and had taken his wife into the wilds.

There was a story that she had met a handsome young trader and had eloped with him, that John Minute had chased them over three hundred miles of hostile country from Victoria Falls to Charter, from Charter to Marandalas, from Marandalas to Massikassi, and had arrived in Biera so close upon their trail that he had seen the ship which carried them to the Cape steaming down the river.

He had never married again. Report said that the woman had died of malaria. A more popular version of the story was that John Minute had relentlessly followed his erring wife to Pieter Maritzburg and had shot her and had thereupon served seven years on the breakwater for his sin.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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