Hornung Ernest William

The Thousandth Woman

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I
A SMALL WORLD

Cazalet sat up so suddenly that his head hit the woodwork over the upper berth. His own voice still rang in his startled ears. He wondered how much he had said, and how far it could have carried above the throb of the liner's screws and the mighty pounding of the water against her plates. Then his assembling senses coupled the light in the cabin with his own clear recollection of having switched it off before turning over. And then he remembered how he had been left behind at Naples, and rejoined the *Kaiser Fritz* at Genoa, only to find that he no longer had a cabin to himself.

A sniff assured Cazalet that he was neither alone at the moment nor yet the only one awake; he pulled back the swaying curtain, which he had taken to keeping drawn at night; and there on the settee, with the thinnest of cigarettes between his muscular fingers, sat a man with a strong blue chin and the quizzical

solemnity of an animated sphinx.

It was his cabin companion, an American named Hilton Toye, and Cazalet addressed him with nervous familiarity.

"I say! Have I been talking in my sleep?"

"Why, yes!" replied Hilton Toye, and broke into a smile that made a human being of him.

Cazalet forced a responsive grin, as he reached for his own cigarettes. "What did I say?" he asked, with an amused curiosity at variance with his shaking hand and shining forehead.

Toye took him in from crown to fingertips, with something deep behind his kindly smile. "I judge," said he, "you were dreaming of some drama you've been seeing ashore, Mr. Cazalet."

"Dreaming!" said Cazalet, wiping his face. "It was a nightmare! I must have turned in too soon after dinner. But I should like to know what I said."

"I can tell you word for word. You said, 'Henry Craven – dead!' and then you said, 'Dead – dead – Henry Craven!' as if you'd got to have it both ways to make sure."

"It's true," said Cazalet, shuddering. "I saw him lying dead, in my dream."

Hilton Toye took a gold watch from his waistcoat pocket. "Thirteen minutes to one in the morning," he said, "and now it's September eighteenth. Take a note of that, Mr. Cazalet. It may be another case of second sight for your psychical research society."

"I don't care if it is." Cazalet was smoking furiously.

"Meaning it was no great friend you dreamed was dead?"

"No friend at all, dead or alive!"

"I'm kind of wondering," said Toye, winding his watch up slowly, "if he's by way of being a friend of mine. I know a Henry Craven over in England. Lives along the river, down Kingston way, in a big house."

"Called Uplands?"

"Yes, sir! That's the man. Little world, isn't it?"

The man in the upper berth had to hold on as his curtains swung clear; the man tilted back on the settee, all attention all the time, was more than ever an effective foil to him. Without the kindly smile that went as quickly as it came, Hilton Toye was somber, subtle and demure. Cazalet, on the other hand, was of sanguine complexion and impetuous looks. He was tanned a rich bronze about the middle of the face, but it broke off across his forehead like the coloring of a meerschaum pipe. Both men were in their early prime, and each stood roughly for his race and type: the traveled American who knows the world, and the elemental Britisher who has made some one loose end of it his own.

"I thought of my Henry Craven," continued Toye, "as soon as ever you came out with yours. But it seemed a kind of ordinary name. I might have known it was the same if I'd recollected the name of his firm. Isn't it Craven & Cazalet, the stockbrokers, down in Tokenhouse Yard?"

"That's it," said Cazalet bitterly. "But there have been none of us in it since my father died ten years ago."

"But you're Henry Craven's old partner's son?"

"I'm his only son."

"Then no wonder you dream about Henry Craven," cried Toye, "and no wonder it wouldn't break your heart if your dream came true."

"It wouldn't," said Cazalet through his teeth. "He wasn't a white man to me or mine – whatever you may have found him."

"Oh! I don't claim to like him a lot," said Toye.

"But you seem to know a good deal about him?"

"I had a little place near his one summer. I know only what I heard down there."

"What did you hear?" asked Cazalet. "I've been away ten years, ever since the crash that ruined everybody but the man at the bottom of the whole thing. It would be a kindness to tell me what you heard."

"Well, I guess you've said it yourself right now. That man seems to have beggared everybody all around except himself; that's how I make it out," said Hilton Toye.

"He did worse," said Cazalet through his teeth. "He killed my poor father; he banished me to the wilds of Australia; and he sent a better man than himself to prison for fourteen years!"

Toye opened his dark eyes for once. "Is that so? No. I never heard that," said he.

"You hear it now. He did all that, indirectly, and I don't care who hears me say so. I didn't realize it at the time. I was too young, and the whole thing laid me out too flat; but I know it

now, and I've known it long enough. It was worse than a crash. It was a scandal. That was what finished us off, all but Henry Craven! There'd been a gigantic swindle – special investments recommended by the firm, bogus certificates and all the rest of it. We were all to blame, of course. My poor father ought never to have been a business man at all; he should have been a poet. Even I – I was only a youngster in the office, but I ought to have known what was going on. But Henry Craven *did* know. He was in it up to the neck, though a fellow called Scruton did the actual job. Scruton got fourteen years – and Craven got our old house on the river!"

"And feathered it pretty well!" said Toye, nodding. "Yes, I did hear that. And I can tell you they don't think any better of him, in the neighborhood, for going to live right there. But how did he stop the other man's mouth, and – how do you know?"

"Never mind how I know," said Cazalet. "Scruton was a friend of mine, though an older man; he was good to me, though he was a wrong 'un himself. He paid for it – paid for two – that I *can* say! But he was engaged to Ethel Craven at the time, was going to be taken into partnership on their marriage, and you can put two and two together for yourself."

"Did she wait for him?"

"About as long as you'd expect of the breed! She was her father's daughter. I wonder you didn't come across her and her husband!"

"I didn't see so much of the Craven crowd," replied Hilton

Toye. "I wasn't stuck on them either. Say, Cazalet, I wouldn't be that old man when Scruton comes out, would you?"

But Cazalet showed that he could hold his tongue when he liked, and his grim look was not so legible as some that had come and gone before. This one stuck until Toye produced a big flask from his grip, and the talk shifted to less painful ground. It was the last night in the Bay of Biscay, and Cazalet told how he had been in it a fortnight on his way out by sailing-vessel. He even told it with considerable humor, and hit off sundry passengers of ten years ago as though they had been aboard the German boat that night; for he had gifts of anecdote and verbal portraiture, and in their unpremeditated cups Toye drew him out about the bush until the shadows passed for minutes from the red-brick face with the white-brick forehead.

"I remember thinking I would dig for gold," said Cazalet. "That's all I knew about Australia; that and bushrangers and dust-storms and bush-fires! But you can have adventures of sorts if you go far enough up-country for 'em; it still pays you to know how to use your fists out there. I didn't, but I was picking it up before I'd been out three months, and in six I was as ready as anybody to take off my coat. I remember once at a bush shanty they dished up such fruity chops that I said I'd fight the cook if they'd send *him* up; and I'm blowed if it wasn't a fellow I'd been at school with and worshiped as no end of a swell at games! Potts his name was, old Venus Potts, the best looking chap in the school among other things; and there he was, cooking carrion

at twenty-five bob a week! Instead of fighting we joined forces, got a burr-cutting job on a good station, then a better one over shearing, and after that I wormed my way in as bookkeeper, and my pal became one of the head overseers. Now we're our own bosses with a share in the show, and the owner comes up only once a year to see how things are looking."

"I hope he had a daughter," said Toye, "and that you're going to marry her, if you haven't yet?"

Cazalet laughed, but the shadow had returned. "No. I left that to my pal," he said. "*He* did that all right!"

"Then I advise you to go and do likewise," rejoined his new friend with a geniality impossible to take amiss. "I shouldn't wonder, now, if there's some girl you left behind you."

Cazalet shook his head. "None who would look on herself in that light," he interrupted. It was all he said, but once more Toye was regarding him as shrewdly as when the night was younger, and the littleness of the world had not yet made them confidant and boon companion.

Eight bells actually struck before their great talk ended and Cazalet swore that he missed the "watches aft, sir!" of the sailing-vessel ten years before; and recalled how they had never changed watch without putting the ship about, his last time in the bay.

"Say!" exclaimed Hilton Toye, knitting his brows over some nebulous recollection of his own. "I seem to have heard of you and some of your yarns before. Didn't you spend nights in a log-hut miles and miles from any other human being?"

It was as they were turning in at last, but the question spoiled a yawn for Cazalet.

"Sometimes, at one of our out-stations," said he, looking puzzled.

"I've seen your photograph," said Toye, regarding him with a more critical stare. "But it was with a beard."

"I had it off when I was ashore the other day," said Cazalet. "I always meant to, before the end of the voyage."

"I see. It was a Miss Macnair showed me that photograph – Miss Blanche Macnair lives in a little house down there near your old home. I judge hers is another old home that's been broken up since your day."

"They've all got married," said Cazalet.

"Except Miss Blanche. You write to her some, Mr. Cazalet?"

"Once a year – regularly. It was a promise. We were kids together," he explained, as he climbed back into the upper berth.

"Guess you were a lucky kid," said the voice below. "She's one in a thousand, Miss Blanche Macnair!"

II
SECOND SIGHT

Southampton Water was an ornamental lake dotted with fairy lamps. The stars above seemed only a far-away reflex of those below; but in their turn they shimmered on the sleek silken arm of sleeping sea. It was a midsummer night, lagging a whole season behind its fellows. But already it was so late that the English passengers on the *Kaiser Fritz* had abandoned all thought of catching the last train up to London.

They tramped the deck in their noisy, shiny, shore-going boots; they manned the rail in lazy inarticulate appreciation of the nocturne in blue stippled with green and red and countless yellow lights. Some delivered themselves of the patriotic platitudes which become the homing tourist who has seen no foreign land to touch his own. But one who had seen more than sights and cities, one who had been ten years buried in the bush, one with such yarns to spin behind those outpost lights of England, was not even on deck to hail them back into his ken. Achilles in his tent was no more conspicuous absentee than Cazalet in his cabin as the *Kaiser Fritz* steamed sedately up Southampton Water.

He had finished packing; the stateroom floor was impassable with the baggage that Cazalet had wanted on the five-weeks'

voyage. There was scarcely room to sit down, but in what there was sat Cazalet like a soul in torment. All the vultures of the night before, of his dreadful dream, and of the poignant reminiscences to which his dream had led, might have been gnawing at his vitals as he sat there waiting to set foot once more in the land from which a bitter blow had driven him.

Yet the bitterness might have been allayed by the consciousness that he, at any rate, had turned it to account. It had been, indeed, the making of him; thanks to that stern incentive, even some of the sweets of a deserved success were already his. But there was no hint of complacency in Cazalet's clouded face and heavy attitude. He looked as if he had not slept, after all, since his nightmare; almost as if he could not trust himself to sleep again. His face was pale, even in that torrid zone between the latitudes protected in the bush by beard and wide-awake. And he jumped to his feet as suddenly as the screw stopped for the first time; but that might have been just the curious shock which its cessation always causes after days at sea. Only the same thing happened again and yet again, as often as ever the engines paused before the end. Cazalet would spring up and watch his stateroom door with clenched fists and haunted eyes. But it was some long time before the door flew open, and then slammed behind Hilton Toye.

Toye was in a state of excitement even more abnormal than Cazalet's nervous despondency, which indeed it prevented him from observing. It was instantaneously clear that Toye was

astounded, thrilled, almost triumphant, but as yet just drawing the line at that. A newspaper fluttered in his hand.

"Second sight?" he ejaculated, as though it were the night before and Cazalet still shaken by his dream. "I guess you've got it in full measure, pressed down and running over, Mr. Cazalet!"

It was a sorry sample of his talk. Hilton Toye did not usually mix the ready metaphors that nevertheless had to satisfy an inner censor, of some austerity, before they were allowed to leave those deliberate lips. As a rule there was dignity in that deliberation; it never for a moment, or for any ordinary moment, suggested want of confidence, for example. It could even dignify some outworn modes of transatlantic speech which still preserved a perpetual freshness in the mouth of Hilton Toye. Yet now, in his strange excitement, word and tone alike were on the level of the stage American's. It was not less than extraordinary.

"You don't mean about – " Cazalet seemed to be swallowing.

"I do, sir!" cried Hilton Toye.

" – about Henry Craven?"

"Sure."

"Has – something or other – happened to him?"

"Yep."

"You don't mean to say he's – dead?"

"Last Wednesday night!" Toye looked at his paper. "No, I guess I'm wrong. Seems it happened Wednesday, but he only passed away Sunday morning."

Cazalet still sat staring at him – there was not room for two of

them on their feet – but into his heavy stare there came a gleam of leaden wisdom. "This was Thursday morning," he said, "so I didn't dream of it when it happened, after all."

"You dreamed you saw him lying dead, and so he was," said Toye. "The funeral's been to-day. I don't know, but that seems to me just about the next nearest thing to seeing the crime perpetrated in a vision."

"Crime!" cried Cazalet. "What crime?"

"Murder, sir!" said Hilton Toye. "Wilful, brutal, bloody murder! Here's the paper; better read it for yourself. I'm glad he wasn't a friend of yours, or mine either, but it's a bad end even for your worst enemy."

The paper fluttered in Cazalet's clutch as it had done in Toye's; but that was as natural as his puzzled frown over the cryptic allusions of a journal that had dealt fully with the ascertainable facts in previous issues. Some few emerged between the lines. Henry Craven had received his fatal injuries on the Wednesday of the previous week. The thing had happened in his library, at or about half past seven in the evening; but how a crime, which was apparently a profound mystery, had been timed to within a minute of its commission did not appear among the latest particulars. No arrest had been made. No clue was mentioned, beyond the statement that the police were still searching for a definite instrument with which it was evidently assumed that the deed had been committed. There was in fact a close description of an unusual weapon, a special constable's very

special truncheon. It had hung as a cherished trophy on the library wall, from which it was missing, while the very imprint of a silver shield, mounted on the thick end of the weapon, was stated to have been discovered on the scalp of the fractured skull. But that was a little bit of special reporting, typical of the enterprising sheet that Toye had procured. The inquest, merely opened on the Monday, had been adjourned to the day of issue.

"We must get hold of an evening paper," said Cazalet. "Fancy his own famous truncheon! He had it mounted and inscribed himself, so that it shouldn't be forgotten how he'd fought for law and order at Trafalgar Square! That was the man all over!"

His voice and manner achieved the excessive indifference which the English type holds due from itself after any excess of feeling. Toye also was himself again, his alert mind working keenly yet darkly in his acute eyes.

"I wonder if it was a murder?" he speculated. "I bet it wasn't a deliberate murder."

"What else could it have been?"

"Kind of manslaughter. Deliberate murderers don't trust to chance weapons hanging on their victims' walls."

"You forget," said Cazalet, "that he was robbed as well."

"Do they claim that?" said Hilton Toye. "I guess I skipped some. Where does it say anything about his being robbed?"

"Here!" Cazalet had scanned the paper eagerly; his finger drummed upon the place. "'The police,'" he read out, in some sort of triumph, "'have now been furnished with a full description

of the missing watch and trinkets and the other articles believed to have been taken from the pockets of the deceased.' What's that but robbery?"

"You're dead right," said Toye. "I missed that somehow. Yet who in thunder tracks a man down to rob and murder him in his own home? But when you've brained a man, because you couldn't keep your hands off him, you might deliberately do all the rest to make it seem like the work of thieves."

Hilton Toye looked a judge of deliberation as he measured his irrefutable words. He looked something more. Cazalet could not tear his blue eyes from the penetrating pair that met them with a somber twinkle, an enlightened gusto, quite uncomfortably suggestive at such a moment.

"You aren't a detective, by any chance, are you?" cried Cazalet, with rather clumsy humor.

"No, sir! But I've often thought I wouldn't mind being one," said Toye, chuckling. "I rather figure I might do something at it. If things don't go my way in your old country, and they put up a big enough reward, why, here's a man I knew and a place I know, and I might have a mind to try my hand."

They went ashore together, and to the same hotel at Southampton for the night. Perhaps neither could have said from which side the initiative came; but midnight found the chance pair with their legs under the same heavy Victorian mahogany, devouring cold beef, ham and pickles as phlegmatically as commercial travelers who had never been off the island in

their lives. Yet surely Cazalet was less depressed than he had been before landing; the old English ale in a pewter tankard even elicited a few of those anecdotes and piquant comparisons in which his conversation was at its best. It was at its worst on general questions, or on concrete topics not introduced by himself; and into this category, perhaps not unnaturally, fell such further particulars of the Thames Valley mystery as were to be found in an evening paper at the inn. They included a fragmentary report of the adjourned inquest, and the actual offer of such a reward, by the dead man's firm, for the apprehension of his murderer, as made Toye's eyes glisten in his sagacious head.

But Cazalet, though he had skimmed the many-headed column before sitting down to supper, flatly declined to discuss the tragedy his first night ashore.

III
IN THE TRAIN

Discussion was inevitable on the way up to town next morning.

The silly season was by no means over; a sensational inquest was worth every inch that it could fill in most of the morning papers; and the two strange friends, planted opposite each other in the first-class smoker, traveled inland simultaneously engrossed in a copious report of the previous day's proceedings at the coroner's court.

Of solid and significant fact, they learned comparatively little that they had been unable to gather or deduce the night before. There was the medical evidence, valuable only as tracing the fatal blow to some such weapon as the missing truncheon; there was the butler's evidence, finally timing the commission of the deed to within ten minutes; there was the head gardener's evidence, confirming and supplementing that of the butler; and there was the evidence of a footman who had answered the telephone an hour or two before the tragedy occurred.

The butler had explained that the dinner-hour was seven thirty; that, not five minutes before, he had seen his master come down-stairs and enter the library, where, at seven fifty-five, on going to ask if he had heard the gong, he had obtained no answer but found the door locked on the inside; that he had

then hastened round by the garden, and in through the French window, to discover the deceased gentleman lying in his blood.

The head gardener, who lived in the lodge, had sworn to having seen a bareheaded man rush past his windows and out of the gates about the same hour, as he knew by the sounding of the gong up at the house; they often heard it at the lodge, in warm weather when the windows were open, and the gardener swore that he himself had heard it on this occasion.

The footman appeared to have been less positive as to the time of the telephone call, thought it was between four and five, but remembered the conversation very well. The gentleman had asked whether Mr. Craven was at home, had been told that he was out motoring, asked when he would be back, told he couldn't say, but before dinner some time, and what name should he give, whereupon the gentleman had rung off without answering. The footman thought he was a gentleman, from the way he spoke. But apparently the police had not yet succeeded in tracing the call.

"Is it a difficult thing to do?" asked Cazalet, touching on this last point early in the discussion, which even he showed no wish to avoid this morning. He had dropped his paper, to find that Toye had already dropped his, and was gazing at the flying English fields with thoughtful puckers about his somber eyes.

"If you ask me," he replied, "I should like to know what wasn't difficult connected with the telephone system in this country! Why, you don't have a system, and that's all there is to it. But it's not at that end they'll put the salt on their man."

"Which end will it be, then?"

"The river end. That hat, or cap. Do you see what the gardener says about the man who ran out bareheaded? That gardener deserves to be cashiered for not getting a move on him in time to catch that man, even if he did think he'd only been swiping flowers. But if he went and left his hat or his cap behind him, that should be good enough in the long run. It's the very worst thing you *can* leave. Ever hear of Franz Müller?"

Cazalet had not heard of that immortal notoriety, nor did his ignorance appear to trouble him at all, but it was becoming more and more clear that Hilton Toye took an almost unhealthy interest in the theory and practise of violent crime.

"Franz Müller," he continued, "left his hat behind him, only that and nothing more, but it brought him to the gallows even though he got over to the other side first. He made the mistake of taking a slow steamer, and that's just about the one mistake they never did make at Scotland Yard. Give them a nice, long, plain-sailing stern-chase and they get there by bedtime – wireless or no wireless!"

But Cazalet was in no mind to discuss other crimes, old or new; and he closed the digression by asserting somewhat roundly that neither hat nor cap had been left behind in the only case that interested him.

"Don't be too sure," said Toye. "Even Scotland Yard doesn't show all its hand at once, in the first inquiry that comes along. They don't give out any description of the man that ran away,

but you bet it's being circulated around every police office in the United Kingdom."

Cazalet said they would give it out fast enough if they had it to give. By the way, he was surprised to see that the head gardener was the same who had been at Uplands in his father's time; he must be getting an old man, and no doubt shakier on points of detail than he would be likely to admit. Cazalet instanced the alleged hearing of the gong as in itself an unconvincing statement. It was well over a hundred yards from the gates to the house, and there were no windows to open in the hall where the gong would be rung.

He sighed heavily as in his turn he looked out at the luxuriant little paddocks and the old tiled homesteads after every two or three. But he was not thinking of the weather-board and corrugated iron strewn so sparsely over the yellow wilds that he had left behind him. The old English panorama flew by for granted, as he had taken it before ever he went out to Australia. It was as though he had never been out at all.

"I've dreamed of the old spot so often," he said at length. "I'm not thinking of the night before last – I meant in the bush – and now to think of a thing like this happening, there, in the old governor's den, of all places!"

"Seems like a kind of poetic justice," said Hilton Toye.

"It does. It is!" cried Cazalet, fetching moist yet fiery eyes in from the fields. "I said to you the other night that Henry Craven never was a white man, and I won't unsay it now. Nobody may

ever know what he's done to bring this upon him. But those who really knew the man, and suffered for it, can guess the kind of thing!"

"Exactly," murmured Toye, as though he had just said as much himself. His dark eyes twinkled with deliberation and debate. "How long is it, by the way, that they gave that clerk and friend of yours?"

A keen look pressed the startling question; at least, it startled Cazalet.

"You mean Scruton? What on earth made you think of him?"

"Talking of those who suffered for being the dead man's friends, I guess," said Toye. "Was it fourteen years?"

"That was it."

"But I guess fourteen doesn't mean fourteen, ordinarily, if a prisoner behaves himself?"

"No, I believe not. In fact, it doesn't."

"Do you know how much it would mean?"

"A little more than ten."

"Then Scruton may be out now?"

"Just."

Toye nodded with detestable aplomb. "That gives you something to chew on," said he. "Of course, I don't say he's our man – "

"I should think you didn't!" cried Cazalet, white to the lips with sudden fury.

Toye looked disconcerted and distressed, but at the same time

frankly puzzled. He apologized none the less readily, with almost ingenious courtesy and fulness, but he ended by explaining himself in a single sentence, and that told more than the rest of his straightforward eloquence put together.

"If a man had done you down like that, wouldn't you want to kill him the very moment you came out, Cazalet?"

The creature of impulse was off at a tangent. "I'd forgive him if he did it, too!" he exclaimed. "I'd move heaven and earth to save him, guilty or not guilty. Wouldn't you in my place?"

"I don't know," said Hilton Toye. "It depends on the place you're in, I guess!" And the keen dark eyes came drilling into Cazalet's skull like augers.

"I thought I told you?" he explained impatiently. "We were in the office together; he was good to me, winked at the business hours I was inclined to keep, let me down lighter in every way than I deserved. You may say it was part of his game. But I take people as I find them. And then, as I told you, Scruton was ten thousand times more sinned against than sinning."

"Are you sure? If you knew it at the time – "

"I didn't. I told you so the last night."

"Then it came to you in Australia?" said Toye, with a smile as whimsical as the suggestion.

"It did!" cried Cazalet unexpectedly. "In a letter," he added with hesitation.

"Well, I mustn't ask questions," said Hilton Toye, and began folding up his newspaper with even more than his usual

deliberation.

"Oh, I'll tell you!" cried Cazalet ungraciously. "It's my own fault for telling you so much. It was in a letter from Scruton himself that I heard the whole thing. I'd written to him – toward the end – suggesting things. He managed to get an answer through that would never have passed the prison authorities. And – and that's why I came home just when I did," concluded Cazalet; "that's why I didn't wait till after shearing. He's been through about enough, and I've had more luck than I deserved. I meant to take him back with me, to keep the books on our station, if you want to know!" The brusk voice trembled.

Toye let his newspaper slide to the floor. "But that was fine!" he exclaimed simply. "That's as fine an action as I've heard of in a long time."

"If it comes off," said Cazalet in a gloomy voice.

"Don't you worry. It'll come off. Is he out yet, for sure? I mean, do you know that he is?"

"Scruton? Yes – since you press it – he wrote to tell me that he was coming out even sooner than he expected."

"Then he can stop out for me," said Hilton Toye. "I guess I'm not running for that reward!"

IV
DOWN THE RIVER

At Waterloo the two men parted, with a fair exchange of fitting speeches, none of which rang really false. And yet Cazalet found himself emphatically unable to make any plans at all for the next few days; also, he seemed in two minds now about a Jermyn Street hotel previously mentioned as his immediate destination; and his step was indubitably lighter as he went off first of all to the loop-line, to make sure of some train or other that he might have to take before the day was out.

In the event he did not take that train or any other; for the new miracle of the new traffic, the new smell of the horseless streets, and the newer joys of the newest of new taxicabs, all worked together and so swiftly upon Cazalet's organism that he had a little colloquy with his smart young driver instead of paying him in Jermyn Street. He nearly did pay him off, and with something more than his usual impetuosity, as either a liar or a fool with no sense of time or space.

"But that's as quick as the train, my good fellow!" blustered Cazalet.

"Quicker," said the smart young fellow without dipping his cigarette, "if you were going by the old Southwestern!"

The very man, and especially the manners that made or

marred him, was entirely new to Cazalet as a product of the old country. But he had come from the bush, and he felt as though he might have been back there but for the smell of petrol and the cry of the motor-horn from end to end of those teeming gullies of bricks and mortar.

He had accompanied his baggage just as far as the bureau of the Jermyn Street hotel. Any room they liked, and he would be back some time before midnight; that was his card, they could enter his name for themselves. He departed, pipe in mouth, open knife in one hand, plug tobacco in the other; and remarks were passed in Jermyn Street as the taxi bounced out west in ballast.

But indeed it was too fine a morning to waste another minute indoors, even to change one's clothes, if Cazalet had possessed any better than the ones he wore and did not rather glory in his rude attire. He was not wearing leggings, and he did wear a collar, but he quite saw that even so he might have cut an ignominious figure on the flags of Kensington Gore; no, now it was the crowded High Street, and now it was humble Hammersmith. He had told his smart young man to be sure and go that way. He had been at St. Paul's school as a boy – with old Venus Potts – and he wanted to see as many landmarks as he could. This one towered and was gone as nearly in a flash as a great red mountain could. It seemed to Cazalet, but perhaps he expected it to seem, that the red was a little mellower, the ivy a good deal higher on the great warm walls. He noted the time by the ruthless old clock. It was after one already; he would miss his lunch. What did that matter?

Lunch?

Drunken men do not miss their meals, and Cazalet was simply and comfortably drunk with the delight of being back. He had never dreamed of its getting into his head like this; at the time he did not realize that it had. That was the beauty of his bout. He knew well enough what he was doing and seeing, but inwardly he was literally blind. Yesterday was left behind and forgotten like the Albert Memorial, and to-morrow was still as distant as the sea, if there were such things as to-morrow and the sea.

Meanwhile what vivid miles of dazzling life, what a subtle autumn flavor in the air; how cool in the shadows, how warm in the sun; what a sparkling old river it was, to be sure; and yet, if those weren't the first of the autumn tints on the trees in Castlenau.

There went a funeral, on its way to Mortlake! The taxi overhauled it at a callous speed. Cazalet just had time to tear off his great soft hat. It was actually the first funeral he had seen since his own father's; no wonder his radiance suffered a brief eclipse. But in another moment he was out on Barnes' Common. Then, in the Lower Richmond Road, the smart young man began to change speed and crawl, and at once there was something fresh to think about. The Venture and its team of grays, Oxford and London, was trying to pass a motor-bus just ahead, and a gray leader was behaving as though it also had just landed from the bush. Cazalet thought of a sailing-ship and a dreadnought, and the sailing-ship thrown up into the wind. Then he wondered how

one of Cobb's bush coaches would have behaved, and thought it might have played the barge!

It had been the bicycle age when he went away; now it was the motor age, and the novelty and contrast were endless to a simple mind under the influence of forgotten yet increasingly familiar scenes. But nothing was lost on Cazalet that great morning; even a milk-float entranced him, itself enchanted, with its tall can turned to gold and silver in the sun. But now he was on all but holy ground. It was not so holy with these infernal electric trams; still he knew every inch of it; and now, thank goodness, he was off the lines at last.

"Slower!" he shouted to his smart young man. He could not say that no notice was taken of the command. But a wrought-iron gate on the left, with a covered way leading up to the house, and the garden (that he could not see) leading down to the river, and the stables (that he could) across the road – all that was past and gone in a veritable twinkling. And though he turned round and looked back, it was only to get a sightless stare from sightless windows, to catch on a board "*This Delightful Freehold Residence with Grounds and Stabling*," and to echo the epithet with an appreciative grunt.

Five or six minutes later the smart young man was driving really slowly along a narrow road between patent wealth and blatant semi-gentility; on the left good grounds, shaded by cedar and chestnut, and on the right a row of hideous little houses, as pretentious as any that ever let for forty pounds within forty

minutes of Waterloo.

"This can't be it!" shouted Cazalet. "It can't be here – stop! *Stop!* I tell you!"

A young woman had appeared in one of the overpowering wooden porticoes; two or three swinging strides were bringing her down the silly little path to the wicket-gate with the idiotic name; there was no time to open it before Cazalet blundered up, and shot his hand across to get a grasp as firm and friendly as he gave.

"Blanchie!"

"Sweep!"

They were their two nursery names, hers no improvement on the proper monosyllable, and his a rather dubious token of pristine proclivities. But out both came as if they were children still, and children who had been just long enough apart to start with a good honest mutual stare.

"You aren't a bit altered," declared the man of thirty-three, with a note not entirely tactful in his admiring voice. But his old chum only laughed.

"Fiddle!" she cried. "But you're not altered enough. Sweep, I'm disappointed in you. Where's your beard?"

"I had it off the other day. I always meant to," he explained, "before the end of the voyage. I wasn't going to land like a wild man of the woods, you know!"

"Weren't you! I call it mean."

Her scrutiny became severe, but softened again at the sight of

his clutched wide-awake and curiously characterless, shapeless suit.

"You may well look!" he cried, delighted that she should. "They're awful old duds, I know, but you would think them a wonder if you saw where they came from: a regular roadside shanty in a forsaken township at the back of beyond. Extraordinary cove, the chap who made them; puts in every stitch himself, learns Shakespeare while he's at it, knew Lindsay Gordon and Marcus Clarke – "

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Blanche, laughing, "but there's your taxi ticking up twopence every quarter of an hour, and I can't let it go on without warning you. Where have you come from?"

He told her with a grin, was roundly reprimanded for his extravagance, but brazened it out by giving the smart young man a sovereign before her eyes. After that, she said he had better come in before the neighbors came out and mobbed him for a millionaire. And he followed her indoors and up-stairs, into a little new den crowded with some of the big old things he could remember in a very different setting. But if the room was small it had a balcony that was hardly any smaller, on top of that unduly imposing porch; and out there, overlooking the fine grounds opposite, were basket chairs and a table, hot with the Indian summer sun.

"I hope you are not shocked at my abode," said Blanche. "I'm afraid I can't help it if you are. It's just big enough for Martha

and me; you remember old Martha, don't you? You'll have to come and see her, but she'll be horribly disappointed about your beard!"

Coming through the room, stopping to greet a picture and a bookcase (filling a wall each) as old friends, Cazalet had descried a photograph of himself with that appendage. He had threatened to take the beastly thing away, and Blanche had told him he had better not. But it did not occur to Cazalet that it was the photograph to which Hilton Toye had referred, or that Toye must have been in this very room to see it. In these few hours he had forgotten the man's existence, at least in so far as it associated itself with Blanche Macnair.

"The others all wanted me to live near them," she continued, "but as no two of them are in the same county it would have meant a caravan. Besides, I wasn't going to be transplanted at my age. Here one has everybody one ever knew, except those who escape by emigrating, simply at one's mercy on a bicycle. There's more golf and tennis than I can find time to play; and I still keep the old boat in the old boat-house at Littleford, because it hasn't let or sold yet, I'm sorry to say."

"So I saw as I passed," said Cazalet. "That board hit me hard!"

"The place being empty hits me harder," rejoined the last of the Macnairs. "It's going down in value every day like all the other property about here, except this sort. Mind where you throw that match, Sweep! I don't want you to set fire to my pampas-grass; it's the only tree I've got!"

Cazalet laughed; she was making him laugh quite often. But the pampas-grass, like the rest of the ridiculous little garden in front, was obscured if not overhung by the balcony on which they sat. And the subject seemed one to change.

"It was simply glorious coming down," he said. "I wouldn't swap that three-quarters of an hour for a bale of wool; but, I say, there are some changes! The whole show in the streets is different. I could have spotted it with my eyes and ears shut. They used to smell like a stable, and now they smell like a lamp. And I used to think the old cabbies could drive, but their job was child's play to the taximan's! We were at Hammersmith before I could light my pipe, and almost down here before it went out! But you can't think how every mortal thing on the way appealed to me. The only blot was a funeral at Barnes; it seemed such a sin to be buried on a day like this, and a fellow like me just coming home to enjoy himself!"

He had turned grave, but not graver than at the actual moment coming down. Indeed, he was simply coming down again, for her benefit and his own, without an ulterior trouble until Blanche took him up with a long face of her own.

"We've had a funeral here. I suppose you know?"

"Yes. I know."

Her chair creaked as she leaned forward with an enthusiastic solemnity that would have made her shriek if she had seen herself; but it had no such effect on Cazalet.

"I wonder who can have done it!"

"So do the police, and they don't look much like finding out!"

"It must have been for his watch and money, don't you think? And yet they say he had so many enemies!" Cazalet kept silence; but she thought he winced. "Of course it must have been the man who ran out of the drive," she concluded hastily. "Where were you when it happened, Sweep?"

Somewhat hoarsely he was recalling the Mediterranean movements of the *Kaiser Fritz*, when at the first mention of the vessel's name he was firmly heckled.

"Sweep, you *don't* mean to say you came by a German steamer?"

"I do. It was the first going, and why should I waste a week? Besides, you can generally get a cabin to yourself on the German line."

"So that's why you're here before the end of the month," said Blanche. "Well, I call it most unpatriotic; but the cabin to yourself was certainly some excuse."

"That reminds me!" he exclaimed. "I hadn't it to myself all the way; there was another fellow in with me from Genoa; and the last night on board it came out that he knew you!"

"*Who* can it have been?"

"Toye, his name was. Hilton Toye."

"An American man! Oh, but I know him very well," said Blanche in a tone both strained and cordial. "He's great fun, Mr. Toye, with his delightful Americanisms, and the perfectly delightful way he says them!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.