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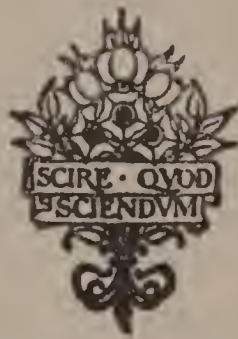
GIRL OR BOY

GIRL OR BOY

A SATIRE AND A DIVERSION

By JOHN NORTH

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TO
G. B.
THIS STORY OF
THE RISE AND FALL OF
DAVID CRUMP

NOTE: The characters in this story are fictitious.

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CHAPTER I

THE BOOT

MR. DAVID CRUMP stood over his suit-case and regarded it meditatively.

“Hair-brushes, comb, tooth-brush, tooth-paste,” he chanted, and paused.

“Ah, my hair oil! Mustn’t forget my hair oil!”

He darted into the bathroom and a moment later emerged with a greasy-looking bottle, which he wrapped up in the folds of a newspaper. He interred the bundle in the suit-case—somewhere within the soft, protective regions of his pyjama suit—and resumed his chant.

“Slippers, collars, socks; shaving-brush, shaving-soap, razor-strop, razor. Ah!”

The razor still lay on the bed, which had lately served as a dumping ground for the contents of his bag. The razor was of the old cut-throat type, and Mr. Crump slowly withdrew it from its black cardboard case and fingered its edge.

“One never knows,” he murmured, addressing his own reflection in the wardrobe mirror; and not for the first time in his life examined his features, as revealed in the glass, with considerable hostility.

“You’ve a rotten sort of face,” he growled. “Only a solution of ferro-concrete would

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master that head of hair: a shaggy-looking brute you are; and your chin's black and your cheeks are blue and your eyes are like pimples; and your teeth, although they do happen to be your own, are nothing to be proud of. A libel on the human species, that's what you are!"

Mr. Crump, having concluded this inventory of his charms, savagely adjusted his black tie, which invariably refused to make a sedate circuit of the white butterfly collar. This operation brought his fingers into some prominence in the mirror, and these too he regarded with undiminished spleen. Mr. Crump, certainly, was only forty-something years of age—he refused to deal in units in this particular computation—but several million cigarettes, consumed through several decades, must have gone to the formation of that deep coppery stain which now covered his fingers. He delivered himself of an oath, went out on to the landing, and leaned over the steep and narrow descent of the staircase. The banisters creaked beneath his weight.

"Mildred!" he shouted; and when no answer was forthcoming, in more suppliant tones—"Millie, my dear!"

"Yes, David?"

The voice that came from the living-room downstairs was dangerously even; it was easy

to deduce from it where resided the controlling spirit of Mr. Crump's suburban dwelling.

"Millie, I want you to get rid of this confounded wardrobe of yours. I won't have the thing in the bedroom any longer. It's the curse——"

Mr. Crump's malediction faded away. The crisp odour of bacon began to sizzle round his nostrils; it acted like a charm. The man almost smiled.

"But why, David? I must have somewhere to put my things, and I must be able to see myself."

"Then I'll lend you my shaving mirror," said Mr. Crump. "This wardrobe affair always gets in the way of my face."

And he laughed, foolishly, recklessly, and returned to the bedroom, confronted the mirror, and shook his fist at his own reflection. From his waistcoat pocket he took out a crumpled piece of paper. "Office Memorandum" was printed on the top of it; underneath appeared the following message, in neat type-script: "Mr. Crump will please report to Mr. Denning at 10.30 to-morrow morning, without fail."

"Good enough," murmured Mr. Crump. "Marching orders!" He rolled the piece of paper into a microscopic ball and shied it through the window at the municipal lamp-

post which nightly illumined his suburban retreat. He snapped down the lid of his suitcase, swept it off the ground, and made for the door. On the threshold he paused. The offending mirror still balefully reflected his features, and his figure also. No vestige of a crease remained in Mr. Crump's short little trousers, and Mrs. Crump had long since relinquished her youthful attempts to revive it.

"God speed!" remarked Mr. Crump, regaining something of his former facetiousness; and descended to the breakfast-table.

"You never told me that you were going away," remarked his wife. She was already seated at the table. Not much of her frock was visible beneath her green apron, which was the epitome of her working existence. The Crump *ménage* did not enjoy the services of a domestic, and Mrs. Crump's life resolved itself into two endless duties: she had to keep the house clean and her husband well fed. Shopping was her only pastime; and at this she was an expert. Every tradesman in the Old Kent Road knew Mrs. Crump; and if he did not know her as a customer he knew of her by repute: the fact that Mrs. Crump did not choose to patronise his shop was in itself a reflection on the conduct of his business. Most mornings of the week Mrs. Crump was to be seen emerging stealthily from her

front door with a capacious string bag concealed about her person, ready for the fray. The true light of battle shone in her eyes when she caught her first glimpse of an L.C.C. tram-car ploughing its way through the swarming humanity along this road of her shopping dreams. Mr. Crump, of course, in the way of city conversation, never mentioned the Old Kent Road. One might have passed an eternity with Mr. Crump and never realised that his excellent physical constitution had been built up on chops and fish and bread and groceries which had been frugally purchased in these noisome precincts. No, in the estimation of the world wherein he moved and had his being, Mr. Crump lived at Blackheath. When at night he returned home he nevertheless took up his residence at Greenwich: though he might reasonably have claimed that he was at least half-way up the hill that led to the polite purlieus of the Heath.

“You never told me that you were going away,” repeated his wife. “Didn’t I hear you packing your bag?”

“You’re quite right,” murmured Mr. Crump, separating with great finesse the rind from his bacon. “I didn’t say anything about it last night because I didn’t want to worry you. Fact of the matter is, I’ve got to go abroad. Paris, my dear!”

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“ Paris!”

The word hardly emerged from his wife's lips; she seemed afraid to let it fall outright because it might break like a bubble in the air. It was the bombshell of her life.

“ You are going to Paris alone? But why, David?”

“ Business,” said Mr. Crump, determinedly munching his bread and bacon. “ I've got to see some newspaper men over there. Firm's got an important new client, you see. I shall be all right. Don't you worry.”

His wife's eyes were looking through the white-curtained window at the grey houses opposite her own; but she was trying to see far beyond them; trying to glimpse some picture-postcard memory of this fantastic city.

“ Are you sure you'll be all right, David?” she asked, with mournful emphasis. After all, her husband and her home were her only hobbies in life, and they were part and parcel of each other. For twenty years she had maintained undisputed control over both of them. Their holidays away from home had been but drops in this ocean of time; and never for a night had she lost sight of her husband, her dear, stodgy, stocky, little man! She trusted him, of course; it never occurred to her not to trust him. So far as she was able she had to realise in him her ideal of

motherhood; for no child of his had ever been born to her. And now this sudden flight. Her scheme of things went awry; a sense of loneliness overcame her.

“But why, David, have they selected *you* of all people?”

Mr. Crump gave an hilarious laugh; one might have thought that this valiant man had suddenly achieved the summit of his earthly fortunes.

“Millie, my dear,” he whispered, “I’ve still another surprise for you. I’ve had a rise. Anything may happen. If this trip of mine comes out trumps I’m for it and you’re for it.”

“For what, David?” She refused to be swept off her feet; these ecstasies were disconcerting.

“We’re for the Heath, my girl! I’ve got my eye on the house already. Stands in its own grounds, you know. And we’ll have a car, and a maid, and a theatre in town every week; and I shan’t care how much stuff you buy for the garden; and I’ll never see you in an apron again!”

Mr. Crump paused; the light went out of his face; he stared at the lamp-post outside the window.

“My God!” he cried, “I’ll do something or die!” And to hide his confusion bent over his wife and whispered in her ear, “Yes,

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Millie, I'll bring it off, or die!" and kissed her, and rushed out of the room. He saw a figure flit past the glass-panelled front door as he picked up his bag and rammed his hat on his head.

"I shall miss it this morning," he shouted, not daring to put his head inside the room again. He knew instinctively that she was leaning over the table with her hands to her eyes. "I'll wire you my address as soon as I get there. Be back in a week. Don't you worry. I shall be—all right."

But Mr. Crump was already on the other side of the iron railings which served to enhance the humble ugliness of his obscure residence. He rushed down the hill leading to the station with his coat-tails flapping in a wind which his own violence created. At the bottom of the hill he halted dead, and then slowly resumed his progress. There was no need for extreme punctuality this particular morning.

At the station bookstall Mr. Crump laid down his penny for his customary morning paper. The boy who handed it to him had no time for the minute examination of his customers; but he could have sworn that a suspicion of a tear lingered in the right eye of the egregious Crump.

CHAPTER II

MR. CRUMP'S DARK HOUR

FOR nearly twenty years past Mr. Crump, in normal circumstances, had never arrived at Cannon Street Station later than 8.40 a.m. At that hour the appearance of the station was as familiar to him as his own face; he knew it like a book. Not less familiar were the faces of his fellow-travellers. A few of the men, usually in times of political crises or particularly bad weather, had ventured to get into conversation with him; but he did not encourage such intercourse. This journey to town occupied precisely eighteen minutes, and they were the most precious moments of his existence; they realised his ideal of earthly peace. For eighteen minutes he could sit with his paper and smoke his pipe in the sure conviction that only a visitation from heaven or an accident on the line could disturb his serenity. The women who travelled on his train were a changeable crowd. Now and again a really pretty girl would put in a regular appearance, and he would almost unconsciously develop a habit of keeping a look-out for her. It is unnecessary to state that Mr. Crump's intentions were of the purest; in fact, he had no intentions whatsoever. Responsive to the daily wisdom of his desk calendar, he regarded all such phenomena as being gleams

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of sunshine across a leaden sky. Nor was sunset ever unduly delayed. These pretty girls, Mr. Crump invariably had occasion to note, never preserved for long the regularity of their morning visits to town; and he not unnaturally assumed that they had succumbed to the temptations of the greatest of all human lotteries. For this definition of marriage Mr. Crump was again indebted to his desk calendar, the proprietors of which, it will be observed, had curious notions of the sort of thing calculated to put a business man in a happy frame of mind in the early morning.

But to-day Mr. Crump hardly recognised Cannon Street for the same station. He arrived an hour later than usual, and when he stepped down on to the platform he walked in a different world. The great flux of woman-kind had ceased; it was a world of staid and prosperous business men, leisurely and elegantly proceeding to their polite avocations; the gaunt commercial spectre seemed suddenly to have disappeared from the face of the earth. No anxious, scurrying multitudes of wage-earners thronged the ticket-barriers, and Mr. Crump was able to present his third-class season with a nonchalance which was in itself an exquisite experience.

“Lord,” murmured Mr. Crump, “I wish I could come up on this train every morning.

MR. CRUMP'S DARK HOUR

Luxury, that's what it is. I could put up with a great deal if——”

He broke off, and seemed to shrivel up, body and soul.

“I was forgetting,” he murmured as he looked up at the great face of the station clock, reluctant to resign the strange fascination of the hour. His black hair was long and untidy at the back of his neck and formed a fringe round the white butterfly collar; the coat he was carrying over his arm trailed on the ground; and with his other hand he uncomfortably grasped his bag, his gloves, and his crumpled morning paper. A pathetic little man, this Mr. Crump, even in a workaday world.

“I was forgetting,” he murmured a second time, still watching the minute-hand of the clock climb jerkily towards the hour. “There'll be no train to catch to-morrow.”

He left the station with a brisk step, after depositing his bag in the cloak-room. A few minutes later he boarded an omnibus bound for Fleet Street. He found a seat on the top, from which eminence he surveyed the hurrying mortals on the pavements beneath him.

“Midgets, all of you,” growled Mr. Crump. “Poor mites on the face of the earth! I was one of you yesterday; but to-day I'm independent! At no one's beck and call!” and hugged himself at the thought of his week's

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freedom, and tried hard to recollect the sum total of his liquid assets. The 'bus skirted St. Paul's, and his eyes roamed its massive lines and contours with the air of the connoisseur; for the first time in his life, perhaps, Mr. Crump really looked at St. Paul's and appreciated something of its magnificence.

“Put that old fool Denning up against *that*,” murmured Mr. Crump to himself, “and what is he? Nothing, nothing at all; less than a worm! Let him give me the sack!”

But the long pause in the traffic block at Ludgate Hill gave Mr. Crump an unwelcome opportunity for much sober reflection. What would the glory of St. Paul's avail him when the rates and the rent fell due? The sight of the noble edifice might be excellent for the soul; but it would neither feed nor clothe him, nor provide his wife's weekly housekeeping money. That monthly cheque had been regularly forthcoming for so many years that he found it difficult to realise that it would forthwith cease; and Mr. Crump's new-born courage withered at the thought. One must have money to live: a fact the significance of which, however obvious, he had never before grasped. By the time he reached the offices of the *Morning Star* his spirits were below zero. He was afraid to look anyone in the face; the commissionaire, always something

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MR. CRUMP'S DARK HOUR

of a personage, now carried a flaming sword in Mr. Crump's febrile imagination. Mr. Crump was an outcast, an intruder.

"Late of the *Morning Star*," thought Mr. Crump as he stepped into the lift and again came face to face with his own reflection. "And a back number," he added with a scowl, which was faithfully recorded in the mirror. "Curse you!" was Mr. Crump's final salutation as he walked out into the corridor on the third floor. From sheer force of habit he turned towards his own room and only halted on its threshold. He had resolved never to enter it again. The night before he had cleared out his personal belongings and left what papers concerned him for filing: if he had to go he preferred to go quickly; he was prepared to state at the coming interview that he was ready to walk out of the building without further ado; the briefer his leave-taking the less painful it would be. And yet he could hardly resist peeping inside the door; he remembered the room so well. It was little more than a cubby hole; nevertheless it had belonged to him for several years past, although he had never really mastered the silent ignition of the antiquated gas fire. Even the unfading ink-stains on the deal table were clearly mapped out in his mind; and, of course, there was his desk calendar. Actually

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it was his own property, but he had not had the heart to bring it away with him. Day after day, year in and year out, he had turned over a leaf at the end of his day's work, entered up the morrow's work, and memorised the quotation printed beneath the date. Last night he had carefully refrained from performing this piece of ritual; for once in a way he had devised his own motto for the day—"No work, no quotation"—but he found it singularly unsatisfying. His consuming curiosity overcame him; he had to look, for the very last time, at that unfailing friend and counsellor. Mr. Crump groaned in spirit, and opened the door.

It was still there, snugly adjacent to his hieroglyphic sheet of red blotting-paper. He pounced on it, saw the diagonal line he had drawn across the previous day's entries—the line he had drawn solemnly, thoughtfully—and turned over the page, and read out aloud:

"Bold knaves thrive, without one grain of sense,
But good men starve for want of impudence."

"That's as true as I'm a good man," commented Mr. Crump, and recited the lines a second time. He did not hear a knock at the door.

"Mr. Denning's waiting for you, sir," announced the messenger-boy, and Mr. Crump straightway turned on his heel,

viciously slammed the door, and followed the boy down the corridor.

“Bold knaves thrive,” he muttered as he went along; “bold knaves thrive. I ought to have known as much. I’ve only to look round this place!”

But it was an entirely subdued Mr. Crump who, a moment later, confronted the resplendent Denning. Mr. Reginald Denning was the advertisement director of the *Morning Star*; his was the directing genius which secured for the *Morning Star* an advertisement revenue which ran into seven figures per annum. He affected a bow which any impecunious tragedian would have thankfully accepted; the wide black ribbon which dangled from his eyeglasses made an elegant plaything for his immaculate hands; his morning coat and vest were of an impeccable distinction; and doubtless as much might have been said for his trousers, which, for the moment, were screened from view by an enormous expanse of plate glass and mahogany. Any visitor would have assumed that the handsome mahogany table had no other purpose in life but to carry this expanse of glass. Not even the monumental inkstand and the luxurious blotting-pad could secure the admiration they merited in this glittering wilderness of space. But it must not be assumed that Mr. Reginald

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Denning was merely a figure-head in the tentacular advertisement-extracting organisation which he controlled. He did not work on paper; he hated the sight of paper; he had no use for the written word; this clumsy means of approach he left to second-rate brethren. Mr. Reginald Denning passed his business life talking and telephoning. He talked over lunch, and conducted conversations over the telephone during the brief passages of time which preceded and followed it. He would have scorned to work seven hours a day: three more than sufficed a man of his calibre. His battery of telephones were put out of action at three-thirty prompt, by which time his cohort of canvassers were in receipt of their instructions for the next day's work, the success of which he had already assured. Such was the potentate who shot an almost affectionate glance at the little man who stood hesitant at the door.

"Come and sit down, Crump," he said melodiously.

For one mad moment Mr. Crump almost believed that he might have misread the signs and portents he had observed throughout the past year: this benevolent personality could never assume the rôle of executioner; but the hope died with the thought, and Denning's next remark buried it.

MR. CRUMP'S DARK HOUR

“ I’m sorry, old man.”

Mr. Crump put his hand to his throat and wrenched at his collar; he wanted air; the blow had laid him low. He knew perfectly well that no man whose banking account did not run into thousands of pounds could ever hope to be addressed as “ old man ” by his opulent chief. He, Crump, had already become a creature of such insignificance in the general scheme of things that Denning had not troubled to observe one of the cardinal rules of his life: one’s terminology is of little consequence in discourse with the dead. Denning removed his eyeglasses and dangled them in front of his nose.

“ Yes, I’m sorry, Crump,” he went on, “ that we shan’t see you about here much longer——”

“ Not after this morning,” interposed Mr. Crump with a grimness of expression which surprised himself. Denning hastily resumed his eyeglasses, and then imperturbably continued his observations.

“ You have to understand that the world is changing every day and that some of us ”— he looked vaguely round the room—“ find it difficult to keep up with the times. For instance, appearance counts for so much in these progressive days; and frankly, Mr. Crump, I think you have been a little lax

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in your observation of this self-evident fact.”

By a severe exercise of his power of self-control Denning contrived to keep his eyes off Mr. Crump's collar and tie. For years past that collar and tie—though Crump never knew it—had haunted the great Denning; it was the one blot on the perfection of his organisation that had baffled him. Those occasions when he had chanced to travel in the lift with Mr. Crump had been moments of exquisite agony. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with the collar, nor the tie; but in conjunction, on Mr. Crump's short thick neck, they were devastatingly sloven and the outward and visible sign of the man's incompetence. Denning heard himself speaking.

“The representatives of a great organ of public opinion, such as we all know the *Morning Star* to be, must of necessity regard themselves as ambassadors of the paper, and carry in themselves something of the prestige and the dignity——”

“I prefer to leave *at once*,” interrupted Mr. Crump, and got up, secretly gratified that he dared to rise to this height of irreverence. Denning rose also, and walked to the other side of the table. There was a pathos in the contrast the two men presented, and neither, perhaps, was altogether unconscious of it. For the first time in their lives they looked at each

other, as man to man. In Mr. Crump's tiny eyes there gleamed a new defiance; he stood his ground until Denning, almost abashed, turned away. To a man who thrived on success this pitiful spectacle of failure was disconcerting; and Denning always hated to be reminded that only a stroke of luck had enabled him to get out of the rut. But he had no compunction concerning Crump. Besides, where was the man's wife? For instance, those absurdly short little trousers. Need they be so baggy at the knees? He looked down at his own, beautifully creased and rolling perfectly over his patent shoes, and sighed.

"Very well," he said. "I am prepared to give way to your wishes in the matter. You will be glad to know that the Directors have already decided to mark their appreciation of your past services in a highly generous fashion. If you care to wait in my secretary's room I can perhaps arrange the matter before you leave the building." He held out his hand. "Good-bye—and good luck to you. I don't expect we shall meet again."

"No, sir. Thank you."

Mr. Crump had spent his last ounce of courage; he had crumpled up with that shaking of hands; when Denning released his grip he felt that he had been left to drown. . . . Somehow or other he managed to get into the

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street again. He walked into the first tea-shop he saw, and ordered a cup of tea. He felt better after it, and took out of his pocket the envelope which had been handed to him by Denning's secretary. It contained a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds.

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT EFFULGENCE

MR. CRUMP spent the rest of the morning tramping the streets of London. It was his first experience of that feeling of independence which, earlier on in the morning, he had contemplated with a considerable amount of self-satisfaction. The people with whom he mingled on the pavements all had jobs to do, errands to perform; his only occupation was that of wasting time, the most difficult of all occupations. He was poignantly reminded of one of the quotations in his desk calendar: something to the effect that time hangs heavy on the sluggard's hands . . . which recollection served to fortify his faith in that diverse compilation. Certainly the cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds which he carried in his breast pocket was something to be grateful for: the firm had come down rather handsomely, and every few hundred yards his hand went up to his pocket-book; but there was in that touch no healing for the misery he bore in his soul. In the tea-shop where he consumed two sausages and mashed potatoes he watched despondently, and enviously, the men and the girls who hurried through their lunches with one eye on the clock. He would thankfully have resigned his cheque for the privilege of being due at the office at two

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o'clock. He wished to heaven he had gone to a first-rate restaurant for lunch, where a change of atmosphere might have helped him to fight against that feeling of depression which was slowly driving him to thoughts of suicide. He was trying to recollect another quotation which had in it something about gilded halls of splendour, when the voice of his waitress interrupted his meditations.

"Did you have any veg.?" she asked, with a lick at her pencil.

"No," groaned Mr. Crump. "I had sausages and mashed potatoes, and a pastry."

"Sausages and mash," interpreted the girl, "and a gahto."

Mr. Crump examined his bill. It totalled one shilling and sixpence ha'penny. He looked up and found his features reflected in what was left of a mirror after a firm of beef-cube manufacturers had finished scrawling over it the name of their product.

"You're a still bigger fool this morning," growled Mr. Crump reflectively. "You've a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds in your pocket, and you put up with this sort of thing. Bah!"

It is impossible to state whether this outburst merely relieved Mr. Crump's feelings or whether indeed it brought enlightenment. Certainly he took up his station in the queue

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at the cash desk with an air of resolution which served to indicate that some new purpose had come into his life. His next half-hour was crowded with incident. He hailed a taxi-cab with less consideration than he had sometimes given in the matter of a penny 'bus ride; he called at his bank, where he paid in his cheque, drew out twenty pounds, and made certain inquiries regarding his War Saving Certificates. He emerged into the street with such a jaunty air that the waiting taxi-driver was emboldened to ask him whether he had had a good day. This piece of familiarity annoyed Mr. Crump; but within the dim seclusion of the cab he tugged at his collar and ran his fingers down a purely imaginary crease in his trousers, and sighed philosophically.

“What else could you expect, in these?” he sniffed. Some minutes later, when he descended the steps of Cannon Street Station with a porter at his heels, he noted with considerable satisfaction the taxi-driver's unconcealed surprise. Not many men would have disdained to carry a suit-case of such small dimensions.

“Take me,” grimly directed Mr. Crump, “take me to the best hotel outside Victoria Station. Quick about it, please.”

Again within the luxurious privacy of the cab Mr. Crump took communion with his soul.

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“ You’re getting on,” he murmured. “ But —*quo vadis?*” And immediately fell to wondering whether or no he had got this quite right. For once in a way he had strayed beyond the self-prescribed limits of his desk calendar.

At the hotel he wisely resigned his body to the care and the direction of the staff; not until he found himself alone in the room allotted to him did he reassume a corporeal existence. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked around him.

“ Wonderful,” he murmured. “ Living is a simple matter for some folk. No mess and no bother. Nothing to do except be done by. Place a penny in the slot and the figure works. I wonder,” he added reflectively, but without visible apprehension, “ how much this will cost me? Twenty-five bob a night, I dare say. ’Tis a mad world, my masters.”

He walked over to the wardrobe and critically examined his face in the mirror.

“ Your face may be an unfortunate mistake on the part of Nature,” he grunted, “ but even at this late hour a wash and brush-up might prove of some assistance.”

He examined a series of bell pushes, variously inscribed, beside the bed.

“*Femme de chambre,*” he remarked, “ ought to do the trick”; and straightway began to

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practise saying, "Some hot water, please," with the requisite degree of hauteur.

The hot water arrived in due course, but remained untouched on the washstand, where it passed into a chilly decline. On the couch by the window lay a little man, fast asleep. His legs were curled up and his chin was buried deep in the abyss of his white butterfly collar; his head, in turn, was buried deep in the cushion to whose ample embrace Mr. Crump's unresting spirit had wearily succumbed and so given the body an hour's repose.

That evening Mr. Crump dined in Soho. For company he had a pile of illustrated papers. He paid little or no attention to the food that was placed in front of him. To all appearance he was dining on the papers; and he would certainly have dined off them but for the watchful ministrations of his waiter. Only the advertisements interested Mr. Crump. He knew them all; he had assisted at the birth of many of them—of those which had already appeared in the *Morning Star*. But this was quite another Mr. Crump. This Mr. Crump had suddenly become a keen student of advertising. In brief, Mr. Crump was in search of an idea, or a commodity, which he could exploit.

At a quarter to eight he emerged from the

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restaurant. He was satisfied with the result of his investigations; he had narrowed down his search considerably; and was proud to realise that he had a keen analytical turn of mind, which had so far languished because he had never previously been called upon to exercise it. "The hour brings out the man." Mr. Crump, in the obscurity of a dark byway leading into the Charing Cross Road, blushed, whatever his satisfaction to record this further vindication of the trust he had hitherto displayed in the wisdom of his desk calendar. And when Mr. Crump halted dead in the middle of the pavement; he was astonished at himself; he found himself regarding that fount of wisdom as something that belonged to a remote past and to a stage in his career from which he had already advanced.

"Curious," he murmured. "I don't know what's coming over me. I'm different somehow. I feel different—sort of——"

Mr. Crump gave it up. As yet he did but dimly perceive that he was to be the uncrowned head of that kingdom in which, for years past, he had played the part of a common soldier.

He turned into Charing Cross Road, and then down into Shaftesbury Avenue. He reviewed in his mind the array of advertisements he had examined that evening. He looked

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up at the scintillating electric signs; they winked at him, gaily, knowingly.

“Whisky’s no good to me,” he growled. “What I want is the women and the mothers and the children and the babies: something a woman can put on herself or inside her baby. O Lord,” he groaned, “where can I find a Commodity? Something that will let me show a mother kissing her baby, holding the pink little dumpling in her pink *peignoir*, or bending over the darling’s little cot, or watching the treasure romp in the garden . . . anything so long as it’s something which can be rammed down her own throat, or the kid’s throat, or father’s throat. No!” Mr. Crump paused. “No, father’s too difficult to put across. Let’s stick to mother and the kids; and let it be a food if you can’t think of something better, you!”

Mr. Crump paused in front of a milliner’s shop window; he had caught sight of himself in the mirror behind the display of hats, and blanched.

“You lean and hungry-looking demon,” he growled. But in this Mr. Crump was unfair to himself. The faces that flitted across the mirror, sometimes extinguishing his own, belonged to the common run of mortals; in his own fiery eye-balls there burned the light of genius, the light of creation. Mr. Crump did

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not know that he was on the verge of the most sublime moment of his life, when the blank in his despairing mind would be filled with a great effulgence which, in a flash, would reveal to him the rising edifice of his earthly fortunes. He turned from the window and drifted through the crowd towards Piccadilly Circus.

“Keep cool and think clearly,” he adjured himself. “O God, must it be a food?” he groaned. “Is there nothing more in the world to advertise? Must stick to women and babies: can’t go wrong if you do.”

He came to a halt on the verge of the pavement at the end of Shaftesbury Avenue. Mr. Crump was a Londoner, but the spectacle presented by Piccadilly Circus at night still had power to dazzle him. During the past decade he had rarely encountered it; every normal evening—and an abnormal evening was something altogether outside Mr. Crump’s experience—he had caught the five fifty-five from Cannon Street Station, with no thought for the gay lights which set up a glow in the western sky. His very occasional trips to town with Millie had invariably occupied his Saturday afternoons; he hardly knew what it was to miss his evening meal at home. He scurried across the Circus and moored himself to the centre island. Still the sky signs winked at

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him gaily, knowingly; their letters of fire consumed him; his soul was sick with envy.

“If only I had something to sell; if only I could get up there. . . .” He broke off and made a gesture of impatience. “Hold fast to women and babies,” he added severely. “One thing at a time. Find your commodity first.”

He brought his eyes to a lower level. He noted with satisfaction that the world seemed to be full of women: many of them lovely; all of them wanting to be lovelier: some of them married; all of them wanting to be married: some with babies; all of them wanting babies. Women fat, women thin; women virtuous, women vile; women, happy and unhappy; women, women, women, all the way. Mr. Crump’s brain throbbed at the sight of them and at the thought of them.

“What,” he asked heaven, “do these creatures want? What can I persuade them to think they want? What can I make them *buy*?” But no answer was forthcoming from the starry spaces; and the circle of lights above and around him began to wink at him maliciously, scornfully.

“There must be something else they want and haven’t got,” he moaned, trying hard to retain that analytical frame of mind on which he had so recently prided himself. He scanned

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the faces of the women who thronged past him, but found in none of them the inspiration he sought. Some of the girls with painted lips paused to return his glance: only paused, he noted, and then passed him by; but he was not offended.

“Scum of the earth,” he growled. “I’m no catch, am I? You wait, hussies!” Suddenly his face went taut; his lips parted; an imbecile stare crept into his eyes.

“God in heaven!” he gasped. “Got it, I’ve got it!”

The idea had come; the vision had been vouchsafed; the world was in flower; and Mr. Crump’s set features relaxed into a child-like smile. Poised on this, the exquisite moment of his life, Mr. Crump, looking neither to the right of him nor to the left of him, stepped into the road clean in front of a motor-car. A wing caught him somewhere in the small of the back and sent him spinning across the road, where he subsided into the gutter.

“Poor little man! I do hope he’s not hurt.”

Mr. Crump, returning to a state of consciousness which had only momentarily deserted him, heard the voice, and thought it the most melodious music that ever fell from mortal lips; he almost swooned a second time.

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“Look, he’s going to open his eyes. Oh, I’m so glad!”

Mr. Crump opened his eyes and looked up into the face that bent over him. Never before had he found himself so near to beauty in women; never before had so intoxicating a fragrance lingered in his nostrils, a fragrance of body, clothes, and perfume; a new world of desire slipped into his ken; and the pain of the revelation was now so keen that he could have cried. She touched his arm.

“I think he will be able to stand,” she said to the man at her side.

But Mr. Crump was already on his feet. Her touch had scorched him; he could not bear it. He was no longer a mere bundle of bones and flesh, but a man, instinct with multitudinous yearnings; he suddenly wanted her to grip his arm with all the desire that was in her woman’s soul. His dazed eyes turned from her; he knew that he looked rather stupid as he stood there in the centre of a gaping crowd. “Poor little man,” she had breathed, almost in his ear. He tugged savagely at his collar. She watched him still with curious eyes, clutching her flaming cloak around her throat.

“I’m very sorry,” said the man at her side; “but when you stepped into the road you couldn’t have been looking where you were going.”

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“ No,” admitted Mr. Crump, in a very weak voice. He paused, and in that pause took on a new lease of life.

“ You see,” he went on brightly, “ I’d just had an idea!”

And fled.

CHAPTER IV

PLACE DE L'OPERA

TWO days later Mr. Crump arrived in Paris. When he stepped down on to the main arrival platform at the Gare du Nord no external change had taken place in his appearance. He was still carrying his suit-case and his overcoat; it had not occurred to him to put on a clean collar since leaving home; and his trousers were, if anything, shorter than ever: possibly the keen sea air had caused them to shrink a little. Nevertheless, Mr. Crump comported himself with an unusual assurance, partly to be explained, no doubt, by the fact that he carried in his pocket-book English notes to the value of five hundred odd pounds and fifty pounds' worth of francs. This sum of money comprised Mr. Crump's total capital resources. His one other valuable possession was a book of railway, sea and hotel tickets, supplied by a tourist agency in London. Mr. Crump had firmly attached himself to this little book, and the little book, with a more than human intelligence, had guided him safely across land and sea, and was finally to secure him safe anchorage in a discreet hotel. Whenever during the journey any person in uniform had so much as looked at him Mr. Crump had instantly proffered his little book, and it had never failed to act like a charm.

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“If this,” murmured Mr. Crump, “is foreign travel, I don’t see why people should make such a fuss about it.” On the other side of the ticket barrier, however, Mr. Crump felt rather less certain of himself. He was assailed on all sides by uniformed hooligans who made desperate efforts to secure his suitcase and his overcoat. When they found that his grip on them was too firm to be shaken they attempted to transport him bodily in the direction of the street; but before they reached the cab-rank Mr. Crump’s manner became so obviously violent that these too-obliging porters released him and sought other prey. Mr. Crump sat down to collect his thoughts. He felt very homesick. The Gare du Nord was a dank and chilly place and the people who thronged it were alien to him; it was like being in babeldom: he could neither understand nor, were he to speak, be understood. It was this last fact which most keenly distressed him; it made him feel unsafe; and Cannon Street Station, seen through the mist that veiled his sight, became a veritable haven of rest, comfort and security. Mr. Crump gave a tiny shudder. This was worse than the Channel crossing; and he simply could not collect his thoughts in this pandemonium.

“I wish,” he murmured plaintively, “I’d been catching my old five fifty-five this evening.”

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At the end of a quarter of an hour he got up and walked towards what appeared to be the station cloak-room. He knew quite well that he ought to have gone boldly into the street and got into a taxi and been driven to his hotel; but he could not screw up his courage to this point: he would explore the city first, on foot, once his suit-case was in safe custody. The little book most unfortunately did not provide the appropriate ticket for its deposition; but he managed to get rid of it by following the example set by other travellers, and turned to face the world of Paris.

The spectacle presented to his astonished gaze outside the station took his breath away, and Mr. Crump had to admit to himself that he felt shaky at the knees. He was afraid to take the plunge into this living maelstrom of traffic. When he did step off the pavement he was back again in the twinkling of an eye, crushed in spirit and very nearly in body by the objurgations cast upon him by an irate taxi-driver whose cab appeared to have sprung out of the bowels of the earth.

“Thank God,” muttered Mr. Crump, “Millie’s not here to see me. She’d have a fit. And to think that I’ve lived in London all my life!”

He lit a cigarette, and found it good.

“How this city smells!” he commented with

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a fine contempt. " Stinking tobacco, stale coffee, and garbage: no wonder I feel ill. Give me the clean smells of old London and a whiff of petrol from one of her red buses!"

This poetical exordium instilled new confidence and hope into Mr. Crump's expanding breast, and he plunged boldly into the main stream of traffic. Consciously he had put on courage and resolution; but he did not know that this moment definitely marked the beginning of his great adventure.

He drifted along the Rue Lafayette towards the Place de l'Opéra; he was content to follow the crowd. Before long he had captured something of its contagion of spirit; he felt that he was one of a happy band of pilgrims, and forgot to feel lonely. There was nothing to worry about for the present, anyway. A man with five hundred and fifty pounds in his pocket was not at the mercy of the world; he could buy food, shelter, services, even in a strange land. So Mr. Crump reflected, and quickened his pace. The Place de l'Opéra disconcerted him; its brilliant disarray bewildered him; and in the middle of it he completely lost his head. He thought wildly:

" Oh, my God, I'm going to be run over again!"

He put one hand to the small of his back, which was still pretty sore, and prayed that

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the earth might open and swallow him up, if only a minute's peace might ensue. It seemed to him that he occupied the central point of a criss-cross system of taxi-cab routes, and that he might have been an empty paper bag for all the notice he attracted from the murderous-looking brigands who drove as if all the devils in hell were clinging to the rear of their cabs. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of the *Café de la Paix* and of the crowd drinking outside it; and every light in the cafe became a lode-star and the pavement itself a shore of refuge, immeasurably distant, poignantly desirable. He had half a mind to sit down on that portion of the road he so precariously occupied and there wait till the mad rampage had spent its fury, whenever that might be. In these tumultuous minutes the most beautiful apparition in the world, for Mr. Crump, would have been a London policeman with uplifted hand, on point duty in the *Place de l'Opéra*.

“Come along, sir.”

His heart leapt. The voice, an Englishman's voice, was the finest music he had ever heard; a grip fastened on his arm, and he felt safe and sound, and hardly conscious that he was being skilfully piloted through the traffic. On the pavement outside the *Café de la Paix* he came to life again. He sighed audibly, and looked at his rescuer.

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“Thank you,” said Mr. Crump, and added, with a shudder: “you see, I only arrived here this evening. I think I should like to sit down. Perhaps——?”

But the man had accepted the invitation almost before Mr. Crump had delivered it, and the waiter was already coming towards them.

“Order something, anything,” murmured Mr. Crump. What he really wanted was a quiet whisky and soda in a little place up a side-turning in Cannon Street.

The man gave an order in French, not a word of which Mr. Crump was able to recognise; he was equally unable to recognise the drink that was placed before him. He gingerly sipped the coloured concoction; it had a warm and bitter taste.

“That stuff wasn’t made to sip.”

“No?” murmured Mr. Crump politely. “Ah, I see. Have another.” And nearly choked in an endeavour to swallow entire the contents of his glass.

Mr. Crump furtively inspected his new-found friend, but hardly knew what to make of him. The man’s face was as lean as his own and his cheeks not less sallow; he wore a grey suit that he had obviously inherited in the days of its decline; his soft collar and shirt, his necktie and his hat, all of French

origin, were rapidly passing into a similar decline, though the man carried them off with a certain bravado. Mr. Crump had more than a suspicion that the whole man was in process of decay, along with his clothes.

“You are English?” inquired Mr. Crump with extreme diffidence.

“What’s left of me.” The man twirled his empty glass between his fingers.

“Go on,” said Mr. Crump; “but not for me, thanks.”

After all, he reflected, the man had probably saved his life. There was a tinkle of glass on the marble table; the man had snapped the slender stem of the glass in two, and at once started to curse the waiter with a surpassing volubility. Mr. Crump sat silent through the storm, but under cover of the table transferred another twenty-franc note from his pocket-book to his waistcoat pocket.

“And how long have you lived in Paris?” he inquired, pretending not to have noticed any break in the conversation.

“Long enough to speak the blasted lingo like a native.”

“So I observe,” murmured Mr. Crump. “Of course, I can only go by the sound, not being a French scholar myself; but——”

“Don’t break your jaw, gov’nor, over a poor blighter like me,” interrupted the man,

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with a gesture of impatience. "What's the little game? What are you doing wandering about Paris?"

"Perhaps it's a little difficult to explain. I just came. That's about all there is to it."

The man grunted. Mr. Crump saw that he did not believe him and realised, with something of a shock, that he had not told the whole truth about his trip to Paris. He had undertaken it, in the first place, to satisfy a whim; but he had since discovered a purpose in this visit, a mission, upon the details of which, even in that moment, his mind was steadily engaged. The idea was germinating fast, and again possessed him. His eyes no longer looked upon the human panorama that passed by his table; and the lights that made them sparkle were those of another city. He was back in Piccadilly Circus, where a riotous multitude of coloured luminous bulbs had winked at him so gaily, so knowingly; where inspiration had come to relieve his agony of mind; where the woman had bent over him and possessed him with her beauty and her fragrance. The man's voice cut across the silence which seemed to have fallen upon the Place de l'Opéra.

"Perhaps you'd like to come along with me to see a little show?" He leered.

Mr. Crump stared at the man. Secretly he

felt flattered that this pariah should have thought it worth while to put up such a suggestion to him; perhaps he was not such a poor little man, after all. . . . He thought rapidly. He remembered to have read in his morning paper a paragraph concerning the male harpies who infested the street corners of the main thoroughfares of Paris; he remembered too that the Paris police had been specially instructed to take vigorous action against them; and too, on this occasion, he had acquired the French for police; he had noticed it particularly because it seemed rather curious, to his way of thinking.

“Is that,” he asked quite casually, with a jerk of the head, “an *agent de police*?”

His pronounciation was all wrong, but his meaning was sufficiently apparent to the man on the other side of the table. He got up, muttered something which might have been a word of vituperation, or thanks, and pushed away his chair. Mr. Crump hugged himself; it was a rare experience for him to be in a position to disturb any man's equanimity, and he was enjoying it; it gave him a foretaste of power.

“Sit down,” motioned Mr. Crump, “and listen to me.” Never in his life had he assumed such a tone of authority; he hardly recognised his own voice; such confidence as he had

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never before known sprang up within his breast; he felt a match for the world.

“What is your name?” demanded Mr. Crump. He pushed his chair away from the table, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette with fastidious care; he intended to be a big business magnate, and he proposed to play the part well.

“My name,” said the man morosely, “is Still.”

“Just that” murmured Mr. Crump, flickering the ash from his cigarette with an elegance and an assurance which he could not help but admire. “Still. Yes, I read a good omen into that name.” He leaned over the table.

“*Now!*”

And on that exclamation the soul of Crump expired, and in that same moment the bold knave was born. Crump’s body goes marching on; but the soul of Crump—of the Mr. Crump we have known, as the *Morning Star* knew him, as the eight-forty up and the five fifty-five down knew him—can only hover disconsolately over the body, awaiting an opportunity to regain possession of that fallen temple.

CHAPTER V

CRUMP RESARTUS

“I AM going to let you into a secret,” said Crump. “I feel that I can trust you. I like your grey eyes.”

Still opened them rather wider. Crump nodded approval.

“I presume,” Crump went on, “you don’t pick up a living in this fashion for love of the thing?”

The man shrugged his shoulders and muttered something in French.

“Quite,” commented Crump, with a perfect understanding. “How would you like to come back to London with me?”

“And what am I going to do when I get there?”

“That’s my business.”

The tone of the employer had already crept into Crump’s manner of speech. He signalled to the waiter to remove their glasses, flicked from his waistcoat pocket the two twenty-franc notes, and imperiously waved the incredulous waiter out of his sight. Crump felt that the gesture was cheap at the price; and it produced the effect he intended on Still.

“I will pay you well,” said Crump. “And there’ll be no need for you to worry about the police. I want you to act as my secretary. On your side that’s about all there is to it.

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You will be in my confidence to a certain extent, and I shall have to feel that I can trust you through everything and anything. Please understand that."

"Naturally," responded Still. "I don't know what you've got in the back of your head; but anyway, I can't be worse off than I am now. What's the figure to be?"

"We'll settle that later on. Meanwhile——"

Crump took out his bulky pocket-book and carelessly selected a ten-pound note from the wad of paper money.

"I don't suppose," he remarked, "you've seen one of those for quite a long time. Regard it as payment in advance for a week's probation. Here in Paris, of course."

"Good enough," said Still.

"Thank you," said Crump. "And now we can really get to business." Having achieved his point he could afford to be magnanimous. "If you like," he added, "regard yourself as my adjutant."

He spoke without any trace of self-consciousness; he was the general, and he felt like a general; and forthwith delivered his immediate plan of campaign.

"By now," he propounded, "you will have formed your own impression of the man you see sitting before you. I don't suppose, Still,

that it is a particularly favourable one. My clothes, for instance, would not lead a stranger to expect to find my pockets well lined. You may suggest that, like many wealthy men, I am somewhat eccentric in my choice of attire, and perfectly careless about my appearance. Well, I may have been."

Crump extracted one leg from beneath the table and examined it. He called up a momentary impression of Denning's trousers, and smiled maliciously; and in that smile there was a suggestion of cunning hitherto alien to the primal innocence and kindness of his soul.

"One's legs," he ruminated, "are what one makes them." He broke off in some doubt: his mind, after this long interval of time, had reverted to his desk calendar, and he knew that his memory had played him false.

"No matter," he said aloud, and dismissed this ghost of his former self. He disliked these visitations.

"This," he continued, "is where I require your assistance, Still. You know of a good tailor in Paris? Not too French. You do? Good. I shan't object to a slight Frenchness in the cut of my clothes—a *nuance*, you know, if that's what you call it. It will do me no harm if it becomes known that I get all my

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clothes made in Paris. . . . Never mind the cost. I want the best of everything."

Still nodded, and inclined his head in the direction of the waiter.

"No," said Crump sternly. "Business first, relaxation afterwards." And cursed this second visitation. . . .

"The best of everything, I said," he continued; "and when I say everything, I mean everything. I propose thoroughly to rehabilitate myself, down to the last button on my shirt—which is probably already missing." He laughed; he was now sufficiently wealthy to laugh at such minor deficiencies in his costume; for he already thought of himself as a rich man; he had only to stretch out his hand. . . . He drew himself up with a jerk; his fingers, he noticed, were creeping over the surface of the table in a most uncanny fashion, under Still's observation. He flicked away an imaginary crumb, and resumed his discourse.

"You must arrange to get me an entirely new outfit, and a complete outfit, down to the last detail. Clothes for all occasions, underwear for all weathers; boots, shoes, hats, socks, suspenders, ties, collars, studs, cuff-links, braces; suit-cases, writing-cases, trunks, bags, portmanteaux; and any other articles for use or adornment that a gentleman of wealth and culture may be expected to require.

A gold watch, for instance, and a walking-stick, of a unique distinction; and so on. Do I make myself perfectly clear, Still?"

Still merely nodded.

"I see," continued Crump, "that you are a person of infinite discretion. You say nothing; you refrain from expressing astonishment at the nature of my commands."

Crump heard his own voice as in a dream; it fascinated him; the words that fell from his lips seemed to him to come from a source external to himself; he began to wonder if the green concoction he had been drinking had a potency and a charm superior to anything he had ever encountered in that little place up a side-turning off Cannon Street. . . . He found himself still talking.

"Briefly, I don't intend to return to England wearing one stitch of the clothing I now stand up in. And you, Still, you will equip yourself in a manner as befits a member of my retinue."

Still nodded.

"Next," continued Crump, "I shall want you to direct me to a hairdresser's establishment which is replete with every modern device for making the best of a man. Manicure, pedicure, face treatment, hair treatment, electric massage——"

"Why not a toupee?" interrupted Still.

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Crump was not sure whether to be offended or not, but decided that the suggestion was good because it would help his disguise.

“Possibly,” replied Crump. “Anyway, I shall let the barber do his damndest daily, for a week; and I shall expect to see a change in my face by the end of it.”

Crump stroked his blue and bristly chin; and his hollow cheeks already luxuriated in the warmth of the steaming towels. . . . He felt his cheek-bones.

“Which brings me to my next point,” he went on. “We’ve both of us got a rather lean and hungry look at present; we must change all that. For the rest of our stay in Paris we are going to live like fighting-cocks: four big meals a day, at least. We shall live, Still, on the fat of the land, and put plenty of flesh on top of our bones. You may have noticed that prosperous people usually look fat?”

Still nodded.

“Otherwise,” continued Crump, “we shall pursue a normal sort of life for the rest of our stay in Paris. I give you a week in which to make these preparations. I shall help, of course; but you will do all the talking. You’d better stay with me at my hotel.”

Still nodded. Crump found the man’s face and his silence alike inscrutable. For one bad

moment he wondered whether he had mistaken his man; but no, he was the sort of creature who knew on which side his bread was buttered. . . .

“Ah,” exclaimed Crump, “there’s one thing more I must tell you. These clothes I’m now wearing—boots, hat, braces, everything—I shall put together in one bag—the one I’ve brought with me, in fact—and you will hold on to this bag like grim death. I shall keep an eye on it too; but I rely upon you to safeguard this as you would your own life. The contents of that bag will mean more to me than I can say.”

He might have added that it would really contain the mortal remains of Mr. Crump.

“Now,” murmured Crump, a little tiredly, “before we go there’s a job I want you to do for me. I want you to get a wire off for me, to London.”

Crump took out a pencil and tore a page from his note-book. He tried hard not to, but he could not help glancing at some of the past entries. Most of them concerned orders for booking advertisement space in the *Morning Star*; they presented a long panorama of inches and columns, and every inch represented an effort and every column an achievement in the life of Mr. Crump. He found it difficult to collect his thoughts, although the

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message he had to send was simple enough. He tore the note-book in two and crammed the fragments into his pocket, thus drastically suppressing its melting influence; and with not too firm a hand wrote out:

“Mrs. Crump, 11 Maze Hill Road, London, S.E., Hotel Como. Business good. Can't say when returning. Don't worry. Much love.—D.”

He handed the piece of paper across the table.

“Better see if you can make it out,” remarked Crump.

Still read it, and nodded.

“Hang it all, man,” ejaculated Crump. “What's happened to your tongue? Have I engaged a mute as my confidential servant?”

“I wonder you didn't.”

The man's smile reassured Crump; but it was another bad moment for him, and he so far unbent himself as to lean across the table and whisper:

“What are you really thinking about?”

“I was thinking,” replied Still, with a reminiscent look in his grey eyes, “that of all the queer coves I've met you're just about the deepest, Mr. Crump.”

“What was that?”

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“Isn't that your name?”

Crump looked away from the lights that flashed their messages from the tall buildings around the Place de l'Opéra and lifted his eyes to the stars. These too now winked at him, how gaily, how knowingly!

“No,” he said. “That is not my name. . . . We'll go now.”

CHAPTER VI

MR. MARCUS FAITHFUL

THE boat train drew up in Victoria station. From a cursory examination of those arriving by it an observer would have inferred that the most distinguished personage on board was the gentleman last to descend from the Pullman Car. Certainly he was of quite medium stature, but the clothes he wore, and wore well, set off to perfection his somewhat portly figure. The clothes themselves were a masterpiece of the tailor's art. The cut of the morning coat was neither English nor French, but a happy combination of the two styles; the elegance and the distinction of this coat represented the ultimate achievement of the genius of two nations and centuries of sartorial practice. The trousers, too, expressed in themselves something of the dignity and the prosperity of the wearer; and the crease in them that converged from the abdomen to the ankles elevated him above the common run of mortals. This hall-mark of perfection was stamped upon every detail of his costume and his person. One exposed hand was no less peerless than the lavender glove upon the other; and it drew forth a gold watch of such beauty and treasure that it would have seemed out of place on any ordinary person. The visitor's face was just

pleasantly rotund: the glow of health in his cheeks gave evidence that he was a man who did not spare himself the rich delights of the table. So much of his hair as was visible beneath the top hat was black and sleek; it looked, in fact, almost too good to be true.

“ You got confirmation of that suite at the Hôtel Grande Riche, Still?”

Still nodded. Crump by now had become used to this nod of the head. It was, in fact, something more than a mere nod: an obeisance, rather, and an act of deferential admiration not unworthy of the presence that evoked it.

“ Good. I propose to get along there. I shall leave you to look after the luggage.”

By this time the contents of the luggage van nearest them had been disgorged on to the platform, and the greater part of the pile belonged to Crump. A porter surveyed the collection and went off in search of a barrow of suitable dimensions.

“ Quick!” rapped out Crump. “ Get those labels changed. I’ll cover you.” He glanced over his shoulder; there was no one in their immediate vicinity. “ Give me a few,” he added. “ And thank God we’ve got through!”

Three minutes later he was walking up the platform with a second porter at his heels. The porter carried a worn suit-case, which was obviously regarded by its owner as being

of particular importance. A padlock attachment—a recent addition—gave it an almost sinister appearance; and indeed the contents were rather sinister: they comprised Crump's old clothes. In the taxi-cab Crump felt that he was travelling with his own corpse; and although this was no more than a momentary weakness on his part he was grateful to find himself at his destination, immune from this ghostly intrusion of his departed spirit. At the Hôtel Grand Riche the reception clerk deferentially glanced at him, lowered his eyes and murmured:

“ Mr. Marcus Faithful?”

“ Yes,” said Crump, and accepted the proffered pen, and inscribed in the book a flowing signature which he had assiduously practised—“ Marcus Faithful, Paris.” His hand may have trembled slightly; but when it was done he looked at the signature approvingly; it gave him courage and confidence; he warmed at the sight of it; and in that moment, in his own mind, Marcus Faithful assumed a corporate entity. He put down the pen, had a sudden feeling that he was being observed from behind, and turned round.

It was Bennett, a reporter on the *Morning Star*: a frivolous young man who had never been made to understand that his salary was

paid out of advertisement revenues which he, Crump, helped to collect; instead, Bennett had regarded him merely as a source of humour; and in that instant, Crump became Mr. Crump, late of the *Morning Star*. . . . He walked towards the lift. Bennett, he knew, had gone straight for the reception clerk. He dimly realised that he was being conducted to the resplendent suite of rooms which had been allotted to Mr. Marcus Faithful; but when he reached them and he was left alone he could still see nothing of them. He flopped down on to a lounge; he felt hot all over; even his clothes terrified him. He looked wildly around for his old suit-case. A knock came at the door, and Still walked into the room.

“Everything’s all right,” he announced, with a glance round the apartment; “and there’s a reporter from the *Morning Star* downstairs wants to know if you will grant him the favour of an interview.”

An interview! The words put new heart into Mr. Crump; Mr. Crump, in fact, forgot his identity once more and became plain Crump or even. . . .

“Mr. Marcus Faithful, sir?”

The voice was Bennett’s, and the name he pronounced fell like an echo on his ears.

“I knocked, sir, and I thought——”

“That’s all right,” interrupted Crump,

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rising from his seat and dismissing Still with a gesture which was a perfect blend of condescension and good regard. He knew that he was safe. This Bennett was not the chaffing persecutor he knew, but a jejune reporter, hungry for news, fired with the expectation that he was on the track of a good story. Crump was flattered: he had, then, created an impression; his disguise had not been penetrated; he was safe, safe. He expanded beneath the warming influence of the word.

“Please sit down.”

The invitation was amiable, but the voice was that of a man accustomed to be obeyed. Bennett sat on the edge of a chair and fumbled with his hands.

“Have a cigarette,” murmured Crump, mercifully. He rose from the lounge and held a match to Bennett’s cigarette; he noticed that the man’s fingers were twitching; the spell was working, although he quite well realised that Bennett would have been less nervous had he been in possession of any information whatsoever concerning the person he had decided to interview purely on the grounds of personal appearance.

“I understand,” ventured Bennett, “that you have just crossed from Paris?”

“That is so.” Crump already affected a

certain weariness which tended to enhance his dignity.

“Where you have been working?” Bennett broke off, hoping that Crump might help him out; but Crump did not more than languidly incline his head.

“On the subject of—er—let me see. . . .”

“I understood,” interrupted Crump, with a fierce severity of tone, “that you are on the staff of the *Morning Star*?”

“I am,” replied the miserable Bennett.

Crump grunted, and that grunt was one of the most contented noises to which Crump had ever given utterance. This young whipper-snapper who in times past had often made his life a misery and a burden had been delivered into his hands. Fortune’s wheel was turning. . . .

“And to what do I owe the pleasure of this interview?”

Crump’s tone was ominous, and Bennett, taking what was left of his courage in both hands, blurted out:

“You must excuse me, sir, but what *have* you been working at? I’m afraid that I’m not very well up in science. You must allow me to say that I can’t associate you with anything in the ordinary way of business.”

“No?” murmured Crump, late advertisement canvasser of the *Morning Star*.

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“Possibly you have brought over with you the news of some important scientific discovery or——”

“Or?” repeated Crump, not very helpfully.

“Hell!” exclaimed Bennett. “I suppose I have made a mistake. I apologise for troubling you. I hope I shall feel better after a drink. Thank you. Good-night.” And made for the door.

Crump was on his feet in a moment, and pushed the bell.

“Sit down,” he commanded. “I hope that I am sufficiently magnanimous to forgive your lack of experience; and I can certainly much more easily forgive the ignorance you display not merely of my identity, but of my life’s work. In this respect you are no worse off than the rest of your countrymen—and mine. I shall be glad to give you an opportunity of communicating something of its nature to the readers of your paper, which, I seem to remember, is an organ of some importance. You see, I’ve been out of the country for the last ten years.”

“Then you must notice several changes?”

“Very many,” murmured Crump; “but I don’t suppose I need detail them to you. If you would like to include some mention of them in your report of this interview you will

know the sort of thing that's wanted: something about the incomparable beauty of the London girl, something about the traffic and the 'buses, something about the climate, and whatever else you leave out don't forget to put in something about the London policeman."

"I have some excellent specimens in that line already prepared," remarked Bennett, now warming up to the work in hand. "I'll see that you get the best of them. Did I understand you to say that you had passed the last ten years in Paris, Mr. Faithful?"

"By no means," replied Crump. "Certainly I've spent a great deal of time in that city, working on the problems presented by my discoveries; but all my practical research work has been done elsewhere."

"In Europe?"

"No, among the mountains of Peru."

"That's excellent," exclaimed Bennett; "sounds most interesting: the land of the Incas, and all that sort of thing. Certain geological discoveries, no doubt?"

"No," murmured Crump, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

"Zoölogical?"

"No." Crump was getting impatient.

"Biological?" Bennett racked his brains in an endeavour to recollect other recognised branches of human knowledge.

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“That’s rather nearer my subject,” said Crump with a lofty condescension.

“Physiological?” groaned Bennett.

“Yes.” Crump pronounced the word as if he were weighed down under the solemnity of the pronouncement. “Yes,” he added, “I have been investigating the vital phenomena of the processes of life. A fascinating study, I assure you, Mr. ——? I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.”

Bennett got up from his seat and stood over the languid Crump with a menace in his eyes.

“You’re playing with me, Mr. Faithful,” he said sternly. “If you’ve anything of importance to communicate to me, and if you want to see it in to-morrow’s *Morning Star*, I must be back at the office within a quarter of an hour.”

“Is that so?” murmured Crump. “If the world has managed to wait all these centuries for my discovery it will probably be able to get through another twenty-four without it.”

“But anything might happen to you within the next twenty-four hours,” protested Bennett. “You might get run down and killed. . . .”

“Yes,” agreed Crump, very seriously and thoughtfully. “That would be decidedly awkward—in more ways than one. I suppose I’d better oblige you now.”

MR. MARCUS FAITHFUL

Bennett sat down and tried to review the situation. Here was a man of obvious distinction in appearance and in his surroundings; the suite he occupied was the most sumptuous in London's most regal hotel: a suite usually occupied only by royalty or princely financiers. Doubtless he had inherited his enormous wealth and pursued his studies in those outlandish parts purely as a hobby. He could not have made his money out of science: this much was certain; for otherwise his name would have been familiar. But Mr. Marcus Faithful was now speaking again, with slow deliberation.

"The subject of my research was a rather delicate one. No opportunity for any such investigation presented itself in England, or anywhere else in Europe, to the best of my knowledge. I had to go abroad. Why I fixed on Peru I don't quite know, apart from the fact that I wanted to pursue my inquiries among a race of people who were in a state of decline rather than in the ascendant."

"So that the conditions of your experiment should be more or less comparable to those obtaining in this country?"

"Partly that," admitted Crump; "but chiefly because of a certain looseness in the moral tone of the community."

"I wish you wouldn't talk in riddles," interjected Bennett.

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“If,” said Crump, with an intimidating glance, “you expect me to satisfy your prurient curiosity by exhibiting an indecent haste in the unfolding of my narrative, and if you expect me to relate in ten seconds the story of a discovery which has absorbed my attention for the last ten years, then I am very much afraid that you will have to disappoint your million odd readers to-morrow morning.”

“I apologise,” replied Bennett, with unfeigned humility. “But the Irish edition goes to press in an hour’s time.”

“Ireland can wait,” announced Crump, with a lordly indifference. “You should understand,” he went on, after a leisurely inspection of the ornate cornice around the lofty walls of the apartment, “that my discovery will certainly revolutionise the marriage relationship, solve many of our present-day industrial problems, ensure a greater degree of human happiness, and, ultimately, and no less infallibly, decide the destiny of nations, which turns solely on the question of man-power. There are, too, other aspects of my discovery, which I don’t propose to enumerate at the moment. Besides, they will probably suggest themselves to you.”

“But I don’t yet know the nature of this wonderful discovery of yours,” groaned Bennett. Never before had he been treated in

this cavalier fashion; it was something unique in his experience; but however much he resented it he did not dare to protest. He looked Crump up and down. There was nothing flashy about the man; he did not give one the impression of being a charlatan; he had not asked to be interviewed. . . .

“Reflect a moment,” murmured Crump, with a kindly and almost paternal air. “What particular act in life is surrounded with not merely the greatest but with absolute uncertainty?”

“Marriage, I suppose you mean,” replied Bennett in a renewed agony of impatience.

“You are a fool,” reproved Crump. “Do you imagine that I should have spent ten years in Peru in order to discover anything quite so obvious? Think again.”

“My God,” ejaculated Bennett, “this is awful!” bidding a mute farewell to the Irish edition. “I thought that I was interviewing *you*.”

Crump gravely consulted his opulent gold watch.

“I’m afraid I must ask you to go,” he said. “Let me therefore inform you very briefly that the next ten months are going to make history in the domestic life of this nation. I happen to have solved the problem of the determination of sex. Now you know.”

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“ You have?”

Crump did not deign to answer.

“ You have proof?”

“ For any who doubt my word,” said Crump with some asperity.

He moved towards the door.

“ And the actual details of your discovery——”

“——will only be communicated to responsible persons,” interjected Crump, with one hand on the door-handle.

“ You propose to make your discovery a gift to humanity?”

“ To individuals only, for a consideration—as a safeguard. My consulting-rooms will shortly be opened.” Crump turned the handle. . . .

At seven o'clock the next morning Crump was sitting up in bed. For the first time in his life he had slept in silk pyjamas. His mind reverted to Millie; he wondered what she would think of them. . . . In the rush of the last few days only occasionally had he remembered her existence, although the problem she presented was always at the back of his mind. More than a week had elapsed, and he would have to face her soon—to-morrow even! The blinds in his bedroom had been drawn up and the curtains pulled aside; it was pleasant to lie

there, in a state of perfect repose, and to look at the sky. The life of the great hotel was already beginning to throb, and he reflected, with considerable gratification, that the whole of its organisation was at his service. The dreary business of life, in most of its mechanical aspects, resolved itself into the simple question of pressing a button for this thing and for that. . . . This was luxury. He glanced at the enchantingly tiny teapot beside the bed and the miraculously thin slices of bread and butter. Under these conditions the ordeal of getting up was robbed of half its terrors. And at that very moment Millie, in a different world, in the dismal world of the suburbs, in Maze Hill, like thousands of other women, was descending to a dark and chilly kitchen to light the fire. . . . Mr. Crump shuddered. He was grateful to hear a knock on the door.

“Your *Morning Star*, sir.”

He flung it open at the main news page. Yes, it was there: a half-column of it! Mr. Marcus Faithful at the Hôtel Grande Riche—the Land of the Incas—ten years of exile in the service of humanity—epoch-making discovery—an instrument for good or ill?—safe in his keeping—its importance to the well-being and the future of the race—the greatest physiological advance since the beginning of time—glad to be back—the London police-

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man still incomparable; no time to be lost in communicating the fruits of his beneficent discovery to the public—obvious at a first glance that Mr. Marcus Faithful is a very remarkable man. . . .

Yes, it was all there, in measure overflowing. Bennett had left nothing out, and put a great deal in.

“Publicity!” murmured the great little man; and stretched his legs, and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER VII

FAME

WHEN, two hours later, Crump opened his eyes he found Still sitting by the window. Still had not managed to put on a great deal of weight during the past week or ten days, but he now looked sleek rather than thin, and the sombre grey of his suit admirably conformed with the faultless deference of his manner. He sat with folded arms, mournfully surveying the pattern in the carpet.

“Why, what’s the matter, Still?” Crump foreboded some disastrous complication, sat up in bed, and glanced round the room. He half expected to find that Still had made all preparations for a sudden flight, but the only change he noticed was that the receiver had been removed from the telephone on the table beside his bed.

“Did you do this?”

Still nodded, and a great light dawned upon Crump; his whole being thrilled, and a smile broke over his face.

“Tell me all about it, Still,” he purred, and hugged his shoulders.

“Well, sir,” said Still, walking up to the bed, “about an hour ago the girl in the exchange here asked me if you were awake. She said that her lines were choked up with

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calls for you, and was she to put them through. I told her no, and took off the receiver as a precautionary measure. Newspaper men," added Still, with a toss of the head.

"Of course," commented Crump. "Go on."

"But they wouldn't be put off and came along here. They're here now, dozens of them; they're outside and they're inside; they've got a watch on every door in the place. I dare say that some of them are prowling about the roof, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised to see one of them come up through the floor-boards."

"I notice that you've shut the windows," remarked Crump.

"Another precautionary measure," replied Still, with a fearful glance over his left shoulder. "I tell you, sir," he went on, "I daren't show my face outside either. They got hold of me half an hour ago." He shuddered. "They'd have given me the earth if I'd unlocked the door of this room. Threatened to do me in, they did."

"Thank you, Still," murmured Crump. "Go on."

"One of them—I think his name's Bennett—has booked a room on this floor: says he means to have a second exclusive, I think: told me you wouldn't refuse because you

owed a great deal to him; and asked me to let you know that he did catch the Irish edition. I wouldn't mind betting," added Still vindictively, "that he's not far off the key-hole at this very minute!"

"I won't listen to such a suggestion," said Crump severely. "But go on."

"Oh, well," said Still, with an offended air, "if you want to be turned inside out by these fellows you've only got to put the tip of your nose outside the door. It's not for me to say whether I think it's a safe thing to do." He looked at Crump darkly.

"You may be right, Still," murmured Crump. "One unguarded word—and we shall both be blown sky-high."

"Excuse me, sir, but how much money have we got left?"

Crump hardly knew whether or no to take offence at this conspiratorial phraseology; he decided that it might be unwise to do so.

"A five-pound note, and some change."

They looked steadily at each other for several seconds on end. Crump then did up the top button of his pyjama jacket, and with that gesture reinstated the relationship of master and man.

"I am going to get up," he said. "Please see to my bath."

But he did not rise immediately; he lay

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back on the pillow, with his hands crossed behind his head, and thought hard.

“Yes,” he murmured to himself, “I’d better get it over at once.” He allowed his attention to wander round the room. After all, he would be returning to it: that was some consolation. Twenty-four hours with Millie! It was a long time to have to play a very difficult part; but he would have to go through with it. His eyes rested on the dismantled telephone; it looked untidy, and he replaced the receiver. The instrument at once sprang to life; the bell kept up a long, continuous din, which sent a shiver down his spine. He shouted for Still.

“Who is it?” he demanded.

Still put his hand over the mouthpiece.

“The Countess of Haslemere.”

“Find out what she wants.” Crump looked up at the ceiling; and through it, and far beyond it, saw the gates of fame opening wide.

“She wants to know, sir, if you will grant her an interview; and she asks me to say that she will be pleased to pay anything for a consultation.”

“Tell her,” said Crump, as one who charily dispensed his favours, “that I am going into the country until the day after to-morrow and that I will see her when I return.”

Still replaced the receiver.

“She wishes me to tell you that she is more than grateful, and that she is sure that you are going to make all the difference to her life.”

“A five-pound note and some small change!” Crump laughed outright. “I don’t think it matters,” he chuckled. “Still, get me out that old suit-case of mine.”

Three-quarters of an hour later there emerged from the dressing-room a strange and yet a very familiar figure. It was Mr. Crump. Mr. Crump of the shaggy hair, the baggy trousers, the semi-unshaven face; Mr. Crump of the rather dingy butterfly collar and the tie which rode so uncomfortably upon it; admittedly a little fuller in the face, but, with this solitary change, the authentic Mr. Crump, late of the *Morning Star*.

“Still!”

His voice had not lost its tone of authority: although his clothes remained the same, his spirit had grown out of them; and Still, who had been prepared for this change in his employer’s external appearance, stiffly awaited his instructions.

“You understand, Still. I have gone into the country for a day or two. I hope to be back to-morrow, though. Beyond this you know nothing. Now see if the corridor’s clear.”

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Still stealthily opened the door and peered outside.

“Now’s your chance!” he whispered. Mr. Crump took it, and within a few seconds had reached the main corridor. He could hear someone approaching from around the corner, but walked straight on. He tried to brush past the oncoming figure. . . .

“Well, I’m damned if it isn’t little Crumpie!”

The voice was Bennett’s, and Mr. Crump’s heart beat fast.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?”

Mr. Crump made no reply; he had always endeavoured to treat Bennett’s sallies with a simulated indifference.

“Got a new job yet?” He thrust his hands in his pocket, set his legs astride, and surveyed Mr. Crump from a very great height.

“Please get out of my way.” It was the authentic voice of Mr. Crump, of a piece with the clothes. . . .

Bennett smiled.

“You don’t mean to tell me,” he scoffed, “that you’ve been trying to persuade the great man to do some advertising? My God, if that isn’t rich! If we can’t get at him, I’m damn sure——”

“I have seen him,” interrupted Mr. Crump, “and he does propose to advertise his service;

he refuses to be dependent on grubbers like yourself for the publicity he desires. And now will you please get out of my way?"

For the moment Mr. Crump had forgotten his part, and Bennett collapsed under the assault. Mr. Crump continued his journey under a salvo of oaths. Before he gained the street he had to agree that Still had not indulged in any exaggeration in his report of the state of siege. Mr. Crump was able to recognise a journalist when he saw one; and journalists that morning had descended on the hotel like a band of locusts. The majority of them maintained a pretence of patronising the establishment, but no stranger in the vicinity escaped their vigilance. Doubtless they saw Mr. Crump put in an appearance, but none of them thought it worth while to take a second look; and he passed through the crowd of them unregarded. Another band, rather less opulent, occupied the main approach to the hotel, and Press photographers were firmly entrenched on the kerb of the hotel courtyard. Even as the door swung round to permit of Mr. Crump's exit their hands went expectantly to their cameras, only to fall again. Mr. Crump gave then an apologetic smile, which passed unnoticed. Indeed, Mr. Crump would have flattered himself had he suspected any sort of danger of discovery.

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At the first post office he came to he stopped, and sent off a wire to Millie: "Back on flying visit. Calling at office, then home." This done, he realised that he had not yet breakfasted, and walked into a tea-shop. The menu was distressingly familiar; it was a long time since he had seen such an array of two-penny, fourpenny and sixpenny dishes. . . . The tiny cloud of depression that had risen before him when he left the hotel and became once more a mere item in the busy world of men, now steadily grew and closed over him. He left untouched the poached egg on toast which a waitress had set before him: even the coffee choked him, reminding him too poignantly of that other coffee he had tasted in France. He then noticed that a customer in the seat opposite was reading the main news page of the *Morning Star*. This was too much to be borne, and he hastily left the restaurant.

"Better get it over," he muttered to himself, and walked in the direction of Charing Cross Station. He felt like a fish out of water; life as he had known it during this past week, was but the dream of a dream, the delight and the excitement of which he dared hardly hope to recapture. He looked up at the train indicator at Charing Cross: 9.47, 10.3, 10.27, 10.42—so they ran, and he had

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to glance at the clock to find his precise whereabouts in the desert of time. Never before had he travelled down the line at this hour of the day; life was indeed a topsy-turvy affair. On the platform the porters set up their raucous, modulated chant—"Greenwich, Maze Hill, Westcombe Park, Charlton, Woolwich, and Plumstead"—a cry which, through the passage of years, had been burned into his soul, but seemed now to come from another world. He bought his usual penny morning paper—not the *Morning Star*—and found himself trying to read it upside down.

"Hanged if I know if I'm on my head or my heels," he growled, and rested his eyes on the dreary expanse of chimneys and roofs that littered the landscape.

The lamp-post outside his house! Ah, he recognised that! Yes, he was home again, home! And there was Millie in her green apron, taking in the milk! The sight of her thrilled him still. Here were rest, peace, security—for twenty-four hours, if not for ever. He knew in his heart that it would not be for ever: the urge for fame and for riches and, in a lesser degree, for his revenge on society, was still upon him, though dormant for the moment. For twenty-four hours he, Mr. Crump, would occupy his allotted station in life, and then——! He snapped his fingers

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at the little world around him and at the greater world beyond.

“ David!”

“ Millie!”

They embraced in full view of the neighbourhood.

The Crumps invariably retired early to rest, and long before ten o'clock this particular evening the connubial couch was calling them. Mr. Crump was winding up the formidable marble clock on the imitation marble mantelshelf when his wife crept to his side and shyly produced a copy of that day's *Morning Star*.

“ You've seen it, haven't you, David?”

“ Of course I have, my dear.” Mr. Crump slammed-to the face of the clock and dropped the key into the customary china ornament with an unusual clatter.

“ And you've seen that interview with——”

“ Yes, yes,” he interjected, not daring to meet her eyes. He resisted with considerable difficulty an acute temptation to run for the door.

“ He says, David, that he can——”

“ I know all about it,” he interrupted a second time.

“ I know, David, that it's different with us. I've never——” Tears came to her eyes and every line in her face expressed the one

abiding sorrow of her life. She nestled into his arms.

“Oh, David,” she whispered, “he might be able to help. Don’t you think I might write to him, or even try to see him?”

Mr. Crump went cold all over and his arms that clasped her were stiff with fright. He felt that he was on the brink of a great enormity. . . .

“Certainly not,” he said loudly, vehemently. “I won’t allow it. The man’s a quack, a fraud, a scoundrel!”

He kissed her dry lips; his own, too, were dry; and gently he led her out of the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WORM TURNS

A HEAVY saloon car smoothly drew up outside the offices of the *Morning Star* and a blue-liveried chauffeur sprang from the wheel to open the door. Crump emerged from the interior. Not even the sheen on the car matched the glossiness of his appearance. In this grubby newspaper world he shone with the beauty and the perfection of some exotic bloom. Even the newsboys paused in their mad career to glance at him; no doubt assuming that he was a newspaper proprietor fresh from the Riviera. . . . Crump, by this time, had long since parted with his small change; he had indeed broken badly into his last five-pound note. He had forgotten about Millie's housekeeping money, and had not been able to offer her less than three pounds to cover her expenses over the next ten days, at the end of which period he had promised to pay her another flying visit. But Crump was not worrying overmuch. He had fixed up an appointment with the Countess of Haslemere for the following afternoon for a ten-guinea fee, and the Countess was only the first in a series of such appointments. When he left the hotel Still was not more than half-way through the morning's post. Crump could afford to smile at his cash balance. He

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walked up to the commissionaire behind the counter on the ground floor.

“Is the advertisement director in?” he asked.

“Mr. Denning, you mean, sir?”

“If that’s his name, yes,” snapped Crump. His impatience was not entirely simulated: he was impatient with himself for allowing his knees to tremble a little on hearing that name again. Denning! In whose great hand he used to lie! Denning! So recently the dispenser of his life and work. Crump’s hand went to his black cravat, and in that touch he found consolation. Not even Denning had aspired to a black cravat. . . . Crump pulled his Parisian morning coat well over the shoulders. The garment gave him a feeling of security; it was to him more than an armour of mail; it was indeed an impregnable wall of defence. If ever clothes made a man they made Crump.

“Will you please fill up this form, sir, for an interview?”

Crump looked at the commissionaire once and looked at him twice.

“Form!” he rapped out. “Form! I never fill up forms! Ring through to Mr. Denning and tell him that Mr. Marcus Faithful would like to have a word with him.”

The commissionaire delivered the message

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over the house telephone and announced that Mr. Denning would see him shortly.

“Tell him,” said Crump, “that I am not accustomed to waiting.” He turned in the direction of the lift. Before he reached it he heard the commissionaire’s voice protesting that the gentleman was already on the way up and that it wasn’t his fault. . . . And Crump smiled: foolishly, no doubt, but never in his life before had he dared to treat himself to the luxury of addressing that commissionaire with such imperial condescension. Crump was collecting the debts of a life-time.

He recognised the lift-boy as well as if he had been his own son. A few weeks earlier, with Mr. Crump as passenger, this boy would have assumed a posture of negligent ease on the way and before the journey was over would probably have whistled the latest music-hall refrain. To-day he stood stiffly to attention. Crump duly noted the change; it was perhaps the most gratifying of all his recent triumphs. But in no way remarkable: he had to admit that the personage whose reflection he scrutinised in the lift mirror would very forcibly have impressed him, in the old days; in fact, it still powerfully affected him, for, truth to tell, Crump had not yet become entirely accustomed to his new face.

The business manager emerged from Den-

ning's ante-room as Crump walked up on the heels of the lift-boy. He had been turned out by Denning to make way for Crump, and Crump, who knew that he had been turned out, reflected that wonders would never cease. He gazed at the business manager so fiercely that that gentleman was considerably abashed; and Crump privately decided that he would never again walk in terror of anyone or anything on this earth.

"Mr. Marcus Faithful, I believe? Good morning," Denning delivered a comprehensive glance at his visitor, motioned him to a seat, and resumed his own. They regarded each other over the familiar expanse of plate-glass.

"I think," said Crump, with a pleasing innocence of manner, "that you look after the advertisements in the *Morning Star*?"

Denning unfolded his hands and grasped the arms of his magisterial chair.

"I am," he replied with some emphasis, "the advertisement director."

"I understand," murmured Crump with unabashed innocence. "It comes to much the same thing, doesn't it? However, Mr. Denning, I mustn't waste my time, or yours," he added, as an afterthought. "You have heard about my work?"

Denning gravely inclined his head.

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“ I propose,” continued Crump, “ to make use of your columns. I refer, of course, to your advertisement columns.”

Denning lifted his eyebrows.

“ I should have thought, Mr. Faithful, that you would have hardly felt it necessary to pay for publicity.”

“ I hope,” said Crump, with a rising note of dignity, “ that I may be spared the obnoxious attentions of irresponsible reporters. You must understand that I have a message to deliver to the public and a duty to fulfil; and that message I propose to deliver, and that duty I propose to fulfil, in my own way.”

“ The doctrine you preach is a sound one, Mr. Faithful.”

“ And,” continued Crump, “ I propose to preach it in your advertisement columns.”

“ You mean,” interposed Denning, shifting uneasily in his seat, “ the general message: not the details, of course; we couldn't allow *that*.” His shoulders perceptibly shivered.

“ Most certainly not.” Crump contemptuously rejected the suggestion. “ The public will pay for the details, as you choose to call them.”

Denning deferentially inclined his head. This interview was something altogether outside his experience; in the light of it he could hardly believe that he was still Mr. Reginald

Denning, the advertisement director of the *Morning Star* and the directing genius which secured for the paper an advertisement revenue that ran into seven figures per annum. . . . But his visitor, in hard, clear tones was continuing his exposition.

“I am given to understand,” said Crump, with a slight forward movement of the head, “that the *Morning Star* is a great organ of public opinion, and that it confers on the advertisements it carries something of its own dignity and prestige.”

For the first time in his career as advertisement director of the *Morning Star* Mr. Reginald Denning not merely felt uncomfortable, but looked it. This man was taking the words out of his own mouth. The *Morning Star* a great organ of public opinion that conferred on the advertisements it carried something of its own dignity and prestige. . . . During the past decade he had given utterance to these same words at every important interview, and all his interviews were important, and every week he had several such interviews. This echo of his own voice was not merely sacrilegious; it was uncanny; and he cast upon Crump a piercing glance which would have gone clean through any ordinary man. A most startling explanation suggested itself to him, and he looked again, and looked hard.

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But no, it was unbelievable, unthinkable, and he rejected the fantastic notion. Why on earth this resplendent personage before him had somehow brought to his mind the unkempt creature he had lately dismissed was more than he could fathom. Crump, meanwhile, consulted his opulent gold watch and assumed a thoughtful expression. Had he been less sure of himself he might have doubted the wisdom of his last remark; but he revelled in this shameless feast of impudence; it salved the wounds of years.

“Well,” he murmured with extreme pleasantness, “how much do you charge for one whole-page advertisement?”

“One thousand guineas,” replied Denning. He placed one finger over the push of an electric bell fitted to the side table on his left hand. Crump knew this ruse of old. It rarely failed to fascinate a visitor: the bell would inevitably ring, and seal the bargain. The familiar words were already on Denning’s lips—“Smith, please see that a page is reserved . . .” But the bell did not sound; the secretary did not appear; and Denning’s finger became cramped in its position of suspense. There was something wrong; the spell refused to work that morning; and Denning admitted defeat by removing his poised finger.

“And other spaces,” murmured Crump,

“pro rata, if that’s the right way of putting it?”

“We reckon other spaces in inches,” said Denning, a little petulantly. “Five and six pounds an inch, according to position.”

“How very interesting!” Crump leaned towards the table; rested the fingers of one hand on the edge of it, and lowering his voice inquired:

“And how much, Mr. Denning, *per line*?”

Denning got up from his chair, savagely exercised his elbow muscles in the telescopic attachment to his telephone, very nearly choked under the sense of his outraged dignity, and announced:

“I think, Mr. Marcus Faithful, you have come to the wrong department. You require the Smalls.” Denning pronounced the last word with a withering contempt for the department in question, for his visitor in particular, and for the world in general.

“I assure you,” snorted Crump, “that I require nothing of the sort. I merely asked the price out of curiosity and for the purpose of comparison. I require a page; several pages, in fact. Of course, if you prefer not to sell them . . .”

Denning lifted his hand in apologetic remonstrance and resumed his seat, and sighed. After all, he reflected, one must be prepared

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to put up with a good deal with several thousand pounds at stake. He looked across at Crump and bowed his thanks.

“And the first insertion is to appear?”

“Immediately.”

“And who will supply the copy—the matter for the advertisement, if you understand me, Mr. Faithful?”

“I think I understand you,” said Crump grimly. “I propose to supply it myself. I have been studying modern advertising,” he went on, “and I have come to the conclusion that its keynote is mother, or baby, or both. Better both. And this is where you can help me, Mr. Denning.”

“This department of the *Morning Star* is at your service, Mr. Faithful.”

“Thank you,” said Crump, grateful for the interruption. He suddenly realised that, in his rising enthusiasm, he had grown rather careless in his manner of speech; but the lapse had passed unnoticed, and he emphasised that professional inflection in his voice which he had acquired with remarkable aptitude.

“What I want,” he continued, “is an illustration; I want a drawing of a beautiful young mother; she must be as young and as beautiful as all women believe themselves to be, or, when the worst has come to the worst, as they

would wish to be. Furthermore, she must be in delightful negligée, and the more so the better. But I need hardly stress this particular essential of modern advertising.”

“You may be right,” murmured Denning. “I can’t say that I ever look at an advertisement myself. I sell space—the land, so to speak: what my clients choose to erect upon it is their concern, not mine.” Denning, it will be observed, was one of those superior people who never read advertisements. “And then?”

“I want the introduction of two babies into this drawing, boy and girl, in the earliest stages of infancy, and little darlings, both of them; and I want the mother’s gaze to be fixed on both of them, and the artist must make it obvious that she is in a sort of quandary. In brief, a human picture, with a heart-throb; and underneath, in bold script, with a vast query at the end of it, the arresting caption—‘*Which will it be?*’ I think you will agree that that conveys my message—at a glance.”

“Perfectly, Mr. Faithful. You exhibit quite a *flair* for advertising, if I may say so.”

“I have always felt interested in the subject.” Crump laughed; he thought of the

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late Mr. Crump, late of the *Morning Star*, and laughed again. Denning hardly knew whether this hilarity was intended to be offensive, and said sharply:

“And what do you propose to put in the body of the advertisement, Mr. Faithful?”

“If you will call in your secretary I will dictate the matter.”

Denning touched his bell-push and his secretary appeared.

“Dictation, Smith,” he mumbled, gave a signal to Crump, and walked to the window. This unorthodox method of procedure had entirely removed his appetite for lunch; he felt that Mr. Reginald Denning had not lived up to his reputation that morning, and resolved that, as soon as the interview was over, he would get into a taxi and be taken to his club, where he knew he would receive the homage that was due to him. He stole a glance at his visitor. Crump was leaning back in his chair; his hands were folded, and his eyes were looking down some infinite vista of thought. His parted lips revealed a perfect set of teeth. They were false, of course, but the best Paris could offer him.

“Right,” he said to Denning’s secretary. “Take this down.” The secretary, notebook in hand, stood like some automaton, waiting to be wound up.

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“ ‘ Deep down,’ ” recited Crump, “ ‘ deep down in the heart of every mother-to-be there reside those feelings of hope, of dread, of expectancy, which may all be summed in that one poignant phrase, *Which will it be?* But, be she queen or beggar-maid, she can only await Nature’s own unfettered, capricious decision.

“ ‘ Truly an amazing position! In the general conduct of our affairs we are able to proceed with deliberation, with knowledge, with certitude; only in this, the supreme effort and purpose of our lives, do we proceed blindly, ignorantly.

“ ‘ But there is no ill in life which has not its remedy, and Mr. Marcus Faithful is proud to announce that to him has fallen the honour of conferring upon humanity the knowledge it craves. If for the future you would relieve your mind of that perplexity and doubt which is both mentally and physically exhausting, consult Mr. Marcus Faithful at the address given below.’ Thank you,” added Crump to the secretary, whose face was as vacant as the remaining pages in his notebook. “ That’s my message,” he went on, turning to Denning, “ and it just about coincides with my idea of a good advertisement: the facts plainly stated. You agree?”

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Denning at last turned away from the window, nervously clutching the lapels of his coat, and Crump, for the first time in his life, felt sorry for the man. Denning's lips were stuttering—in silence; he stroked his quivering chin, stole a glance at Crump, and looked out of the window again.

“You agree?” Crump's voice was insistent, almost intimidatory.

“But have you an address?” stammered Denning, trying to gain time.

“My secretary is now concluding negotiations for a suite of rooms and offices in the West End. I expect to take possession immediately.”

Denning sat down at his table, firmly gripped the arms of his chair, and said, with the desperation of a drowning man:

“I'm sorry, Mr. Faithful. I shall have to refuse the offer of your advertising.” He gulped at the thought of the lost pages, the lost thousands of advertisement revenue; but went on steadily: “Our readers would never stand for it.” He buried his chin in his handsome black bow, thoughtfully stroked his lower lip with the thumb-nail of his left hand, and said once more, with a sigh, “Yes, I'm sorry.”

Crump leapt from his chair.

“Very well, Mr. Denning. If the *Morning Star* refuses to associate itself with this great movement for the betterment and the happiness of humanity I must go elsewhere. Perhaps you will allow me to have a copy of the matter I dictated. The *Morning Sun*——”

Crump broke off in sheer fright. Denning looked as though he were going to have a stroke of the palsy.

“I know, of course,” continued Crump, with an amiable ferocity, “that its circulation is smaller. On the other hand, it is more than likely to go up when I put in an appearance in its pages.”

Denning closed his eyes and put his hand over his brow; only the distant rumbling of street traffic broke the silence of the room. Crump moved over towards Denning.

“Sorry, old man,” he whispered, and patted him on the back. This, perhaps, was Crump’s most considerable achievement to date. Denning slowly returned to life.

“I will, if I may, change my mind, Mr. Faithful.” He paused; in all his life he had never felt so weak and ill; whatever he decided to do he saw no way of escape from endless worry and anxiety. Suddenly his mind sprang to attention; he looked alertly at Crump.

“And about payment, Mr. Faithful?”

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“You will render your account at the end of the month, I presume.”

“In such circumstances as these,” faltered Denning, “it is our custom to render a *pro forma* invoice. A banker’s reference would do as well—whichever you prefer.”

“My dear sir,” ejaculated Crump, “your effrontery amazes me. That I, Marcus Faithful, should be asked to guarantee the paltry sum involved in the taking of one miserable page in your unworthy rag. I hope to find that the *Morning Sun* is at least controlled by gentlemen. Good morning.”

Denning rose wearily from his chair; the crisis of indecision through which he had been passing had left him impervious to Crump’s malicious attack, and now that his mind was made up he announced quietly:

“I cannot afford not to risk anything. You shall have a proof of the advertisement within the next twenty-four hours.”

Crump bowed; he was gratified; he was aglow; he felt that his enterprise was now on a sure foundation. The *Morning Star*, in defiance of reason, did in some mysterious way confer a certain dignity and prestige upon its advertisers; and with this implied backing Crump knew that he was safe—for the next nine or ten months. He had triumphed, and

he could afford to be generous; he held out his hand.

“ Mr. Faithful?”

The voice was still Denning's, but in a flash the man had changed into something more warm, more human. Despite the glamour of his attire and the suavity of his manner he was now just an ordinary human being, reduced to the general common multiple of the human race.

“ Yes?” Crump prepared himself for some confidential disclosure.

“ My wife, you know—though, of course, you don't know—has been a trifle unlucky. Three girls, all in a row, so to speak. She has set her heart on a fine boy, and naturally, as a father——”

“ I understand, perfectly,” interjected Crump. He was genuinely affected; even a little shocked. Denning, so long the lordly occupant of an icy pedestal, was now almost grovelling at his feet. . . . It was more than upsetting: it was positively indecent. Crump had revenged himself too well.

“ Anything I can do, at any time,” he mumbled, and made a hasty exit. The boy in the lift was munching an apple, the unconsumed portion of which, on Crump's approach, he stuffed into his pocket, and nearly choked

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himself in an effort to get rid of the remainder. Crump watched these operations with a sympathetic eye. He was beginning to wonder whether he, too, had not bitten off rather more than he could hope to chew.

CHAPTER IX

ANNETTE FAY

ANNETTE FAY occupied three rooms on the first floor of a house in Great Russell Street, within a stone's throw of the Princes Theatre. It was a curious abode for an ostensibly young unmarried woman. The ground floor of this once-private dwelling-house had been taken over by a carpenter, who had converted it into a workshop for the production of artistic pieces of furniture, and the sickly odour of glue often pervaded the lower regions of the house. On the original drawing-room door, that gave access to his workshop, he had nailed up a piece of board roughly inscribed "*The Artistic Furnishing Company, Inquire Within.*" It did not appear to be a very prosperous concern, for the Company was only able to employ one man, and that the proprietor. At the other end of the bare, unfurnished hall, on the wall beside the foot of the staircase, there appeared a second notice, neatly painted on the faded crimson wallpaper, "*Annette Fay, Please Ring the Bell*": only the bell did not appear to have survived the usage of those who had responded to this invitation: there dangled from a triangular fixture at the top of the wall only a broken length of chain. But one other sign of human habitation remained: a piece of

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frayed red carpet still covered the steep staircase, which turned sharply at the top to give access to the rooms on the first floor. A second staircase led from this landing, but a board had been nailed across the foot of it, effectively barring admission. Whether the second-floor rooms were out of occupation because the roof leaked badly, or whether this ban had been placed upon them because of some horrible drama that had been enacted within these walls, Annette Fay never knew; she was not the sort of person whose curiosity was easily aroused to no useful purpose. All such forms of idle speculation she left to the dairyman next door, to the fruiterer over the way, and the grocer a little further down the rather dingy and dismal street; and she herself gave them ample material upon which they could exercise their inquisitive minds. That she was a spinster they had no cause to doubt; that she was an artist of sorts they inferred; that she knew how to keep house frugally and well they knew from personal experience. If she did not pay her bills with a weekly regularity they were not perturbed; the money always was forthcoming, and where it came from was no concern of theirs. Their suspicions on this point were perfectly well founded. Indeed, Annette Fay had lost her virtue, in various directions, on innumerable

occasions; but no one to look at her would have guessed that this was her manner of life.

Nor was it, considered from any but a superficial point of view. She was unable to read into the sex act any religious or moral significance; to her it was a negligible adventure, and wearisome rather than distasteful. She had to live, somehow or other, and it was in this direction that she had discovered the easiest solution of her difficulties. Her mind, and to a lesser degree her life, was still her own; and this was consolation enough, through all the years of waiting. Her day of deliverance would come, she knew, when she would break away from London and see something of the world and start life afresh in some other country; even settle down, with a man, for good; and she never ceased to look forward to such a unique experience. Men in general she loathed; she only knew them in one aspect; and she hugged the thought of marriage, respectability, tranquillity, and the thought of the enduring happiness that these might bring. How many years had elapsed since she had left her home in the country she did not care to think. She had come to London, with a girl friend, to study art, and had failed to make good. Her friend, who had shared these same rooms with her, had suddenly forsaken her studies and married an overseas Englishman;

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their correspondence had faltered, and then closed for ever. Her parents had died, leaving her little or no money; her friends in the country no longer approved of her; she was alone in the world; and she was not now the sort of person who could make friends. And as for marriage!

But no man had ever wanted to marry her. Men had admired her and loved her, in their own way; but none of them had seemed to want to marry a girl who was, so to speak, suspended *in vacuo*. Had she displayed her charms behind the subtile barriers of a home circle; had the mere existence of parents and brothers and sisters placed obstacles in the way of her more fond adorers; had she been in a position to refuse their advances until she was well and truly married, she would long ago have disappeared from the shabby precincts of Great Russell Street. But no, however much they liked her, she was not the sort of person they could venture to marry; she had no background, no props; she existed in a void; she was destitute of the paraphernalia of the prospective bride—in fine, she was not quite respectable. And what was beauty, and charm of mind, for the purpose of marriage, if men did not quite respect her? Nothing at all, so Annette Fay had long ago decided.

And she still wanted money, badly. Money,

and quantities of it, was her only hope of salvation—in the purely material sense of the word. Her clothes absorbed vast sums; the rent was always a nuisance; and there was always a certain amount of entertaining to be done. . . . Drink was a horribly expensive item in her weekly budget; and she never really got to like the stuff herself! When she was alone at night there was nothing she enjoyed more than a steaming cup of cocoa, made with milk and lusciously sugared. Had any of her men acquaintances come upon her in these moments of contentment and quietude they would have realised, with something of a shock, that Annette Fay, a glittering creature of gay plumage, was, after all, exceedingly domesticated.

To-night—it was in the first week of the great Crump craze—she was alone. She had done a certain amount of clearing up in the tiny kitchen-scellery. Every afternoon a char-woman came in for a couple of hours and generally cleaned and tidied the flat; and one morning a week—whichever happened to be convenient to Annette—she came early and turned the place inside out; this is to say, she scrubbed the floors, washed the paint, shook the cushions, and went for the carpets with a strong bass broom. Mrs. Meek had formed the habit of rejoicing in these good

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works, and she had a heart as large as her body; the singleness of her devotion to her mistress was a constant source of exasperation to her friends the dairyman, the fruiterer, and the grocer, who were for ever pumping her for information concerning her mysterious mistress.

Mrs. Meek never quite knew what to make of the sitting-room. It was something of a study, for there were low shelves of books all around the walls; and something of a studio, for the artists' materials—as Mrs. Meek had learned to call them from a long acquaintance with a shopkeeper opposite—were invariably, from her own point of view, the one untidy feature of the room; and, too, it was something of a music-room: in one dim corner of the room there stood a baby grand, usually well strewn with copies of modern songs. For Annette had a voice, a thrilling soprano voice, which she had come cynically to regard as part of her stock-in-trade; but often when Mrs. Meek, as she herself put it, was having a go at the bedroom, Annette would sing for her own enjoyment, and Mrs. Meek would pause in her strenuous pursuit of London's smoke, dust and dirt fiends and plaintively wonder why her young lady never did get married. . . . Upon the furnishing of her bedroom and the narrow dressing-room that led

out of it Annette had expended more money than she could rightly afford and all the care and artistry of which she was capable. That bedroom was a little dream of rest and elegance, set in the vulgar maelstrom of London life; and never, because of her, and in spite of her, did it seem to lose its chastity. Annette was proud of this room; through everything it remained her own, hers inviolably; it subdued the stranger; none had ever taken from it its quality of refinement; the men who entered it were but shadows on the walls, brief and evanescent—come to-night, gone to-morrow; and Annette too at these times was little more than a shadow of her real self. She went through with her part coolly, deliberately, and then, when the business was over and done with, resumed the garment of her own soul.

But to-night Annette was unusually depressed; she could take no pleasure in her songs or in her books, nor keep up the sorriest of her pretences, and the oldest, that of painting, the rock on which her life had split. She had just finished with her latest liaison: she had sent the man out of her life as swiftly as she had allowed him to enter it: not that he had disgusted her more than the rest, but because she had suddenly realised that she was losing grip on herself; she felt that she was sinking to the level of that class to which

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superficially, she belonged. She rebelled at the thought; she refused to give in. During these past few years she had managed to save—from a secret drawer in her dressing-table she extracted her bank-book—a little more than three hundred and fifty pounds. Not enough to start life anew! And if she broke away, and had no luck abroad, what would she do when she came to the end of these resources? Sell her beauty again: she had nothing else to sell. And even her beauty . . . She went up to the mirror of her wardrobe. Her cheeks had still the flush of youth; and the curve of her chin from the mouth to the throat was still firm and smooth; and there was still a gleam in her hair and a light in her eyes. . . . Oh yes, she was still desirable, still able to set men's hearts aflame; but the day would come. . . . And in the past she had never held herself cheap; the price she set upon herself had kept off the common herd; she had, in her way, been eclectic in her dealings with men; her beauty had enabled her to maintain a standard; but if this went the standard would go with it, and she shuddered at the thought. Yes, she must have money, loads of it. . . . One good haul would see her through.

She picked up a copy of the *Morning Star*; it contained the usual Marcus Faithful advertisement, and she smiled with her lips, half-

contemptuously, half-pityingly. On all questions of sex she had a profound contempt for women, and the way in which they had fallen for Marcus Faithful nauseated her. They had made him the sensation of the hour. All sorts of rumours as to the bonds of secrecy he imposed upon all who consulted him had reached her; and the women revelled in their bonds. The world was full of whispers, but never a word was spoken, in public at least, of all that passed behind the double green-baize doors of Mr. Marcus Faithful's consulting-room. The women believed in him because, she told herself, they wanted to believe in him; he was too good not to be true; he was just about the most glorious thing that had ever happened: more than a nine days' wonder, much more than that. . . . He was something new in the way of sensations; and even the more sceptical had to agree that he presented an impressive front to the world. In appearance he was the most immaculate male in London; at least ten of London's leading tailors had privately claimed the honour of having supplied his clothes. When these reports became public Marcus Faithful contemptuously denied them. His clothes, he stated in an interview, had all of them been made in Paris. Parisians, he claimed, were the finest tailors on earth. This pronouncement was reported in the leading

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journals throughout the kingdom within nine hours; the smaller journals published it a few hours later; the leading articles in these various journals were followed up by similar articles in the weeklies and the Sunday press; and the organ of the tailoring trade published a special supplement that contained expressions of opinion on this topic of the day from the Prime Minister downwards. In fact, whenever Mr. Marcus Faithful could be persuaded to open his mouth to a reporter he invariably gave utterance to a phrase of four or six words which could be counted upon to bring forth a harvest of several million. Newspaper proprietors issued strict instructions that no edition was to go out without some mention of Marcus Faithful's activities, or his sayings, or his movements. The reporters detailed for duty outside the Hôtel Grand Riche had to supply daily a column of matter concerning the great man, or suffer instant and ignominious dismissal. Within a week Marcus Faithful had become not merely the craze but the fetish of the hour.

Annette's eyes continued to dwell on Marcus Faithful's current advertisement. It differed very little from those that had preceded it. There was one phrase in particular with which Annette was perfectly familiar; indeed, it would be true to say that there was not a man

or woman in the country who could not have recited it from memory; it had become as much a part of the literature of the English tongue as the more famous passages in Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible. "Deep down in the heart of every mother-to-be there reside those feelings of hope, of dread, of expectancy, which may all be summed in that one poignant phrase, *Which will it be?* But, be she queen or beggar-maid, she can only await Nature's own unfettered, capricious decision. . . ." After the first few advertisements this phrase appeared in italics in a desert of white space, with the result that it took on the character of an immemorial utterance of some divine authority who, for all time, had revealed the innermost longings of the human heart.

Annette tossed the newspaper to the ground and bent over her gas fire. She was not cold, but she lacked the warmth of companionship. She smiled rather wearily, wistfully. She could not get the thought of this man out of her head, and again took up the paper and glanced at the address given at the foot of the advertisement: "Savoy Mansions, W.1"—that was all. She turned to the picture page of the *Morning Star*. For once in a way it did not contain a photograph of Mr. Marcus Faithful; but she was able to conjure up a perfectly clear recollection of his features:

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certainly not a handsome man, nor a particularly young one; but a magnificent head of hair—the flowing mane with which one associates all great men of the past—a finely masculine moustache, good teeth, a firm chin. . . . In fine, a solid man, and so beautifully groomed, and such lots of money! Annette shrugged her shoulders. This was high game; but she must do something quickly, or go under. It was all to the good that he was not a particularly young man; he would be more easily handled. Her face was hard now, and her beauty cruel. Annette, after all, had not come through her experience of life quite unscathed; and although she knew it not, at such times as these she bore the mark of her profession. As she prepared for bed she critically examined her smooth white limbs, and shrugged her shoulders again.

Seven miles away, at number 11 Maze Hill Road, Greenwich, Mr. Crump, once more at home, on the second of his flying visits from Paris, was winding up the formidable marble clock on the imitation marble mantel-shelf. His wife was kneeling on the hearth-rug gingerly removing to one side of the grate a partially unburned piece of coal. Mr. Crump's head of hair was in its customary state of disorder; the only sign of a moustache was a

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bristly black undergrowth round his upper lip; his baggy trousers looked as if they might fall off at any moment and submerge his enormous and venerable carpet slippers. Mrs. Crump, still on her knees, gravely inspected her husband's trousers at close quarters.

"David," she protested, pulling herself up by his arm, "you *must* let me try and put a crease in those trousers of yours. If only you would take a little more care of your personal appearance you wouldn't know yourself."

"Perhaps I shouldn't," murmured Mr. Crump with a very deep sigh.

CHAPTER X

SAVOY MANSIONS

IN a large sombre room on the first floor of the Savoy Mansions, overlooking the Thames and the Strand, Mr. Marcus Faithful held consultations between the hours of ten and four, with an hour for lunch. Still's choice of a room was admirably suited to Crump's purpose. Three rooms occupied one side of the corridor to which the lift gave access, and at either end of this corridor there was a larger room. The one to the left was the chief apartment, and here, five hours out of every twenty-four, Crump conducted his séances. Still occupied an adjoining room, which served the purpose of an ante-chamber; the two rooms were provided with inter-communicating doors; they were also on the house telephone which Still had thoughtfully installed. Still was a man who believed in systemisation. He had labelled the three rooms alongside the corridor: the first, "*Appointments Only*"; the second, "*Late for Appointment*"; and the third, "*Not by Appointment.*" He was responsible for keeping Crump's diary of engagements, and in the regulation of it he showed neither ceremony nor favour. If one of Crump's visitors were late for an appointment she was forthwith conducted to the appropriate apartment, and there left to cool her head

and her heels until the remissness of a later visitor presented her with a second chance. In the unusual event of this second chamber being quite empty, Still threw open the door of the third, dispassionately consulted the attendance sheet, and called out the name of the earliest arrival. This disciplinary system, by ensuring that not a moment of Crump's time was ever wasted, considerably enhanced the profits of the business. The second large room at the other end of the corridor was only utilised by Still in times of special stress, and the overflow crowd that gathered in it never caused him much concern. When he was compelled to conduct callers into it he summarily informed them that they would do well to abandon all hope for the day, and at four o'clock no less summarily escorted them to the lift. This rather high-handed treatment, as Still did not fail to note, invariably resulted in their arriving dead on time the following morning. And they respected Still because he refused to succumb to their blandishments and cajolements; even the eloquent rustling of bank-notes did not turn his head; he set his face and preserved a cerberean integrity against every suggestion of bribery or corruption, and not a woman was ever allowed to enter the inner chamber of the tabernacle out of her turn. Before a week had elapsed

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Still's reputation in London was second only to his master's.

The actual payment of the consultation fees was a delicate matter which Still had no less delicately adjusted. To all callers, whether by appointment or otherwise, he handed an unaddressed sealed envelope, which contained a straightforward intimation to the effect that, although Mr. Marcus Faithful's first interest in life was to endow humanity at large with the knowledge of his beneficent discovery, he nevertheless found it necessary to proceed with discretion and discrimination. For this reason, and no other, he charged a small fee for each consultation. This fee, however, he was prepared to adjust according to a client's means. . . . But this intimation was merely a precautionary measure. Still had established a system whereby he was enabled to estimate pretty accurately the amount of the fee he could safely demand. At the conclusion of every interview Crump rang through to him on the house telephone. One long buzz meant five guineas—the minimum fee; a short buzz meant one guinea, so that one long buzz and two short meant seven guineas; and so on. The system, of course, was not perfect, because its success depended solely on Crump's ability to gauge the worldly prosperity of his visitors; but as time went on he developed con-

siderably his method of observation. Shoes and stockings he found to be excellent criteria, and, of course, he usually had occasion to ask certain questions regarding a visitor's manner of life, the answers to which gave him some indication as to her pecuniary resources. Still was no less observant, and between them their calculations were never far wrong. "The fee, madam," Still would announce, "is ten guineas," and whatever the amount happened to be it was invariably paid without a murmur. In general, the visitor was too overwrought to take particular note of the number of guineas demanded. The assessment was advanced by at least twenty-five per cent. for all those who produced cheque-books; and Still never ceased to marvel that these same women, who so carelessly paid away their money, would put forth heroic exertions to save themselves a few shillings at sale times.

It was towards the end of the second week of the establishment of the Marcus Faithful cult that Annette Fay paid her first visit to Savoy Mansions. She was demurely but beautifully and expensively dressed; neither Crump nor Still would have had the slightest hesitation in marking her down for the maximum fee. It was about half-past three in the afternoon, and she had deliberately called at this late hour in the expectation that she would

miss the main stream of visitors. In this she was very much mistaken, and Still, with his customary cast-iron resolution, conducted her to the overflow waiting-room, both the "*Not by Appointment*" and "*Late for Appointment*" categories being complete. Annette was appalled. Never before in her life had she seen so many women herded together and in such variety. She recognised the types. A few of the women, banded together in one corner, were present because a consultation with Mr. Marcus Faithful was now the fashion; they were quite willing to pay ten guineas or so for a ten-minute thrill; but the majority looked as if they might be earnest seekers after truth: that gleam of hope and expectation in their eyes could not immediately extinguish the weariness of hope deferred, through years of waiting. . . . Annette, confident in her own physical charm, rather despised these comparatively unattractive creatures in their pitiful quest. She calmly followed Still out of the room. In the corridor they faced each other, and Still, quite unaccustomed to such insubordination, rang for the lift. Annette lightly touched his arm.

"I'm not going yet," she said; "not until I've seen Mr. Marcus Faithful."

"I'm sorry," said Still, "but you've not got the slightest chance this afternoon. Only

three more are likely to get in, and they're all of them by appointment."

"Then I shall speak to him as he goes out."

Still looked at her, and marked her down at twenty guineas or more. Her importunity—not less potent because it was silent—put a bitter strain upon his integrity. Was she to be the first woman he had allowed in out of her turn? Were they to stand to lose twenty-five guineas? But Still remembered in time that he had a reputation to lose and that it might pay him, in the end, to maintain it.

"I am sorry, madam, but——"

And Annette walked straight through the half-opened door of the ante-room. She was the first woman to enter it without Still's permission. He drew himself up to his full height; he looked very neat and fierce in his blue serge suit; he contracted his lips and then stammered:

"This, madam, is unpardonable. I must ask you to leave this room at once." And he flung open wide the door.

Annette sat down, and smiled at him, whimsically. Her charm was devastating, and she knew it. She meditatively examined her stockings, her ankles, her shoes, and flashed another glance in his direction.

"A very nice room you have," she murmured. "Who chose the furniture?"

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“The chair you are about to vacate,” said Still, “belongs to a period when the standard of manners was considerably higher than it is to-day.” The man was floundering; he knew that he had met his match; this woman was of a different breed from the neurotic crowd which had thronged the Marcus Faithful suite in Savoy Mansions.

“Mr.——?”

Into her query she put all the seductiveness of a woman, all the invitation of her beauty, all the fresh appeal of youth. Still groaned inwardly, and did not answer.

“You and I,” she said, describing with her finger a circle in the air, as it were enticing him to enter therein, “you and I are going to meet again. You’d better keep on the right side of me, Mr.——?”

“What do you mean?” he blurted out, again ignoring her query.

“You shall see,” she whispered, with a forward thrust of the head. “Ah!”

There was one long buzz on the house telephone, and a second or two later the door between the two rooms opened and Crump appeared with a woman at his side.

“My secretary,” he began, about to repeat his usual formula, and stopped dead. He recognised the woman in the ante-room; she was the woman who had bent over him when

he lay on his back in the middle of Piccadilly Circus; the woman who had murmured, "Poor little man!" the woman of whose beauty and fragrance, in that moment of waking, his eyes and his soul had drunk deep. He passed his hand across his forehead, as if to free himself of the influence of these hypnotic memories, and looked questioningly at Still; but Still had turned his attention to the previous visitor; he was remarking, without any of his customary finesse, "The fee, madam, is five guineas," and steadily averted his eyes from Crump.

"Please come in, Mrs.—" He emphasised the prefix for Still's benefit, but no assistance was forthcoming from that quarter, and Crump, a little scant of breath, led the way into his consultation chamber. Annette followed him. She directed a swift glance round the room. The heavy curtains at the tall windows were only partly drawn; the thick pile of the carpet, green like the curtains, quenched every sound of movement. The huge polished mahogany table that occupied the centre of this sombre desert of space bore nothing but an immense white blotting-pad, on the unsullied surface of which Crump's horn-rimmed spectacles were reposing, face downwards. In one dim corner of the room there was a handsome glass-fronted bookcase,

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filled with certain heavy nameless tomes; the panelled walls were destitute of any further decoration; and there were only two chairs, and one of these Crump occupied. In the furnishing of this apartment Still had set out to secure the three conditions of privacy, silence, and repose; and he had succeeded. Even Annette, who did not easily lose her sense of self-possession, felt rather subdued when Crump gracefully waved her into the chair on the other side of the table.

“ I need not ask why you have come to see me,” he began. Now that he was working to his ordinary schedule he had regained something of his own self-possession. Resting his elbows on the wide, curving arms of the chair he brought up his hands to the level of his eyes, where the fingers met tip to tip; and behind this barrier, entrenched in his customary professional attitude, a beautiful feeling of security possessed him; and he was amazed at his own good fortune. That this woman, of all women, should have come to consult him! He leaned back and gently balanced the chair on its two back legs. Gazing upon her, he felt that he could blissfully have remained poised in this state of repose for ever. If only he had been a few years younger! He was shocked at his own thoughts. There was Millie to think of. Had he not promised

himself that when the time came, when he had money in plenty, he would take her away and show her all the countries of the world? No more aprons and doorstep interviews with the tradesmen! No more messing about with the fire, when they went to bed, so as to save that last bit of unburnt coal! Her life was to be one long draught of happiness. . . . This woman of Piccadilly Circus had caused him a certain amount of spiritual disturbance in the past, but he had never felt guilty about it: then she was as unattainable as a dream, and no less intangible; she might have dwelt on another planet for all the chance there was of his ever establishing further communication with her. And now, in the sombre silence and the personal privacy of this, his room, she sat before him, breathing the air he breathed, almost a suppliant at his feet! He put his two thumbs between his teeth, and bit them hard, in order to steel himself to the business of the interview. He was a little afraid of those steadfast eyes; he knew that they were searching him; he felt more and more uncomfortable. Here was nothing he could play up to: no emotionalism, no feverish expectancy, no sexual excitement. Under the examination of this woman's clear and unflinching eyes he realised what he had almost forgotten, that he was, after all, nothing but a quack.

“First of all, Mrs.—?” Crump broke off appealingly, but still she kept silence. She was describing with her finger-tip an imaginary circle on the smooth surface of the table, and that finger fascinated him; it seemed to be weaving a coil around him, body and soul, and he could not shake himself free from its sinister bonds.

“First of all,” he went on, trying hard to remember his usual recitation, “I need hardly point out to you that everything that passes between us must be kept absolutely secret. For obvious reasons the information I have to impart to you cannot be, and must not be, a topic for general discussion in the ordinary way of conversation. Furthermore this information is of such a nature that were it to be used by unscrupulous persons great harm to the community might easily result; and again, great harm might result to individuals were there any confusion as to the exact nature of my instructions. This is why I prefer to impart them myself. I have your word of honour, madam?”

“You have,” said Annette. “Please go on.”

Crump picked up his horn-rimmed glasses, wiped them with his delicate silk handkerchief, put them on, stroked his chin, fixed his eyes on the white, unsullied surface of his blotting-pad, and went on—

“As I have so often said, deep down in the heart of every mother-to-be there reside those feelings of hope, of dread, of expectancy, which may all be summed in that one poignant phrase, *Which will it be?*”

“I want a boy,” she said simply, without the slightest trace of emotion or mental excitement. This was all wrong; Crump felt that there was something lacking in this woman; she was too chill, too remote; she did not lean across the table and fix him with a hungry stare. . . .

“I will be as brief as I can,” he said, accepting the implied rebuke. “How many years have you been married?”

“Years.”

Even in this crisis Crump was glad to note a suggestion of weariness in her voice. He was being foolish, he knew, and he could not get Millie out of his mind; but he was a great man now; his name was on every woman’s lips; nothing was beyond his grasp; even this pearl among women. . . .

“Mr. Faithful!”

Another stern rebuke! Crump cursed himself for a fool, and asked, with a retaliatory note of determination in his voice:

“And so far, how many children have you had?”

“None.”

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“All the better,” said Crump, putting up a poor pretence of joviality. “Now I must ask you to give me your very closest attention; and please remember that I address you in the strictest possible confidence. I suppose I may take it that your husband——”

Crump again broke off. At this point in the conversation he could usually count upon a certain pretty confusion, some indication of embarrassment, in the eyes if not in the cheeks of his clients; but here was nothing . . . just a patient watchfulness. He rose from his chair, carefully set free the crease in his trousers, with a firm gesture pulled his coat around his collar, and, still gripping the lapels, thrust his head well forward and began to march up and down the room, resuming his discourse in peripatetic fashion.

Seated alone in the ante-room Still anxiously awaited the outcome of this surprising visitation. In one hand he held the volume of which he had been conspicuously proud, Crump's Diary of Engagements, the contents of which he had now to submit to very heavy revision. He cursed the interloper; she was a regular vixen, butting in like that. . . . It was now some time after four, and he had already cleared out the various congregations of waiting women—worshippers at the shrine of that

old fool on the other side of the door. He had early on decided that Crump would never have got very far without his aid; he, Still, was the controlling genius behind this organisation; Crump was merely the mouthpiece. And Still was angry with himself. The woman had twisted him round her little finger; and he ought to have kicked her out of the room! This was the first time he had failed to maintain order and discipline in the ranks of the disciples. "Never again!" he muttered to himself. "Never again!" It was a quarter past four, and still no ring on the buzzer. This creature was breaking all records: twenty minutes was Crump's absolute limit; this woman had already had more than half an hour. He cocked up his ears. Usually it was possible to distinguish a faint rumble of conversation from the adjoining room; but at the moment he could hear nothing; the room was quiet as death. He went up to the door and put one ear against it: still no sound. Surely the woman had not escaped without paying her fee! The thought roused him to action and he went to the opposite door, opened it, and looked down the corridor. There was no one about, and none of the usual chatter from behind the closed doors; even the electric bulbs looked foolish, shining to no particular purpose; and in their brilliant silence the

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noise from the orchestral Strand seemed miles away. He closed the door, and sat down again.

Another five minutes passed, and Still could stand it no longer. He tapped on the door of Crump's room: no answer; he opened it. Crump sat huddled up in his chair, with his head buried in his hands. The magnificence and the quality of his attire availed him nothing: he was just a poor little man, beaten, cowed. . . . Still rushed up to him.

"Where's that woman?"

"Gone," gasped Crump from the depths of his chest. "Out through the door—straight into the corridor."

"But what happened?" Still was examining his master for any sign of injury.

"She said," replied Crump, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "that I was a rogue and an impostor."

"Oh," murmured Still, throwing out his hands; and then, after a pause: "Once one of them starts, the game's up."

"I know," groaned Crump, with miserable resignation, "but——" And he pushed the huge white blotting-pad towards Still; an address in Great Russell Street had been scrawled across it. "She says that I am to see her, at once."

And Still, who was making a rapid calcula-

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tion as to their available financial resources, whose thoughts were turning to boat trains, tickets, luggage, witnessed with suspicion and amazement the birth of a smile on Crump's reviving countenance.

CHAPTER XI

THE RAPE OF CRUMP

THAT evening Annette dined alone in a small restaurant at the Tottenham Court Road end of Oxford Street. She wanted to be alone for several reasons: she wanted to be free that evening; she wanted to think out her future plan of campaign; and, most of all, she wanted to recover from her afternoon's exploit. Now that it was all over she hardly dared to believe that she had called the renowned and omnipotent Marcus Faithful a rogue and an impostor. She took up her evening paper. The first headlines that caught her eye read, "Fashionable Women Still Throng Savoy Mansions, Mr. Marcus Faithful's National Mission, Sensational Extensions Predicted." Annette smiled wanly: against this immense barrage in the Press she felt very weak and helpless; and yet, she had shot her first bolt, and the heavens had not fallen; she had called the man a rogue and an impostor, and he had denied nothing, but just crumpled up in his chair; she had peremptorily told him to call on her, and she knew that he would come; she expected that he would come that same evening. And she would be in a position to make her own terms! A marvellous turn of events! She glanced down at the paper again. Mr. Marcus Faith-

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ful was to take the chair at the anniversary dinner of the People's League of Health and Hygiene; there was a suggestion that if the Prime Minister wanted to move with the times he would do well to include the name of this servant of humanity in the next Honours List; it was even mooted that one of the older Universities would confer a distinction upon itself by crowning the life's labours of this savant with the offer of an honorary degree. . . . And she had dared to call this phenomenon of the hour a rogue and an impostor! She shuddered, and called for her bill.

Back in Great Russell Street she changed quickly into a blue-and-gold semi-evening gown and threw around her gleaming shoulders a silken wrap an old admirer had sent her from Bellagio, on the shores of Lake Como. She had always treasured this piece of silken loveliness for its exotic charm; it appealed to her because it came from a land where she could live her own life again, once she could make good her escape from London and all that London meant to her. . . . Even the old artistic longings stirred within her whenever she flung the shawl about her shoulders and saw the long fringe trail down her arms. It was a sort of phylactery, and she wore it tonight because she intended to make one bold

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stroke for that freedom which only money could buy. And this man had money, and would have still more money if, on her own terms, she allowed him to go on. Annette walked into the sitting-room, with one backward glance to see that all was straight, took a cigarette from a wooden box on the mantelshelf over the old-fashioned fire-grate, and sat down to wait. She felt cosy, warm, desirable.

She had not long to wait. At half-past eight she heard the screeching brakes of a taxi and the sound of footsteps on the pavement below. She peered between the curtains, and in the light of the street lamp opposite saw that it was indeed the man into whose heart she had struck terror that afternoon. Mr. Marcus Faithful, this splendid creation of the tailor's art, complete with cloak and opera hat! Annette smiled wickedly. This was not the first time she had peered between the curtains, but never before had she beheld a figure quite like this, so perfect in the estimation of the world, so pathetic in her own! Once that afternoon she had rent the veil behind which the real man was hiding, and she would do it again; with her own future at stake she would show no mercy.

He was inside the door now and climbing the ill-lighted stairs. She knew that he would

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be wondering what on earth he was coming to; he had stopped to examine the entrance to the carpenter's shop; and Annette smiled again, more wickedly than ever. He would soon be passing from this region of outer darkness into the warmth and the light and the intimacy of her own room, and the shock would dazzle him; many times in the past it had dazzled less impressionable creatures. . . . There was a knock, a feeble, hesitant knock at the door, and Annette flew to it, opened it, flung it wide with a gesture of invitation.

Crump could not have trembled more had he found himself standing on the brink of hell. The knees inside his perfect trousers quaked; the heart behind the white expanse of his shirt-front almost ceased to beat; his eyes were dazzled by this sudden revelation of warmth and light and intimacy, by the brilliant apparition of this woman in blue and gold. In the past he had dimly apprehended the existence of such a woman in such a setting as this; but here and now was an encounter that he had never thought to experience; and in Annette's smile of welcome every thought, every memory of Millie was extinguished from his mind.

“ Good evening, Mrs.—” Crump's greeting was purely mechanical, and Annette took immediate steps to shake him out of his

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stupor. She grasped his arm and dragged him inside the door.

“Now,” she said, “don’t be a silly man. You must know that I’m not *Mrs.* anything at all. If you must call me something, call me Annette; that’s the only name I have that matters.”

She pulled his cloak off his shoulders and snatched the hat out of his folded hands and pushed him into a chair by the fire. She made a seat for herself on the hearth-rug, and with clasped knees, gravely inspected him.

“Well, Mr. Marcus Faithful,” she said, slowly, ominously. “And what is your real name?”

Crump tried hard to meet her steady gaze, but could not; it not merely abashed him, but made him feel naked to the world; he moistened his dry lips and furtively glanced round the room as if seeking a way of escape; and still her eyes dominated him, obsessed him.

“And what is your real name?” Her voice seduced him; he was utterly at the mercy of her will.

“Crump,” he murmured miserably.

“Crump!” she cried. “Crump! What a lovely name for you!” She touched him lightly on the arm. “It does suit you so well. You’re such a solid, compact little man

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and——” She broke off; she saw that she had hurt him. “Oh, I don’t mean it like that,” she went on hurriedly, “because in a way you do look quite impressive in——”

“Say it,” said Crump bitterly. “In these clothes, you mean. And what are you going to do about it?”

“About what?” she asked innocently.

“About me.” The words *rogue* and *impostor* floated through Crump’s mind. He was less afraid now than he had been; that is, less afraid of exposure; this woman was not dangerous in that direction, but in others. . . . Crump shivered. He felt the foundations of his morality crumble beneath him; he was no longer his own master; and he was rather ashamed of himself because, although he might resolutely have risen to his feet and left the room, he did not even attempt to do so. Her mere presence acted like an opiate upon his mind and body.

“Why,” whispered Annette, “I’m not going to do you any harm. I wouldn’t even if I could—and you know I can’t. A woman in my position!” And she laughed softly. “No, I want to help you.” And again she touched him lightly on the arm.

“How?”

She laughed at the question.

“I’ll tell you soon,” she replied. “First of

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all I'm going to ask for information; there are several things I want to know."

"Go on," said Crump stolidly. He was enormously happy; he now realised that he had found a fellow-conspirator; and under her wing he felt at peace with himself and the world. He looked around the room. After the arid magnificence of the Hôtel Grande Riche it was good to be in such a room and to know once more the warm companionship of a woman. And such a woman! His eyes rested on Annette, lingered on her; wandered from her hair to her lips; followed the course of every brown strand of hair across the firm cheek; his nostrils sensuously exulted. He wondered vaguely what the time was, but he did not really care: years seemed to have elapsed since he entered that room. The noises in the street came from another world. Life was a dream; her voice was a dream.

"How much money have you taken—since you began?"

The nature of the question rather shocked him; but nothing could have destroyed the bliss of that heaven in which he dwelt.

"I don't really know," he replied, hardly conscious of what he was saying. "My secretary—Still, you know—looks after the money. A few hundred pounds, I should think." Money! What did he care about

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money? Money was no longer the coinage of his happiness; he desired nothing but to stay where he was, beneath the spell of her presence.

“And how long do you intend to go on?”

“Eight or nine months, I expect,” replied Crump. “As long as we dare.”

“You mean yourself and Still?”

“I thought *you* were going to help?” Crump smiled like a mischievous child and, greatly daring, rested his hand on her shoulder. She remained quite still, and her mere acquiescence thrilled him. She too was thrilled, for a different reason: she had subjugated this man more easily and more speedily than ever she had anticipated, and his timorous caress showed her that the process was complete.

“Of course I’m going to help, and I’ll explain how—when I’ve made you some coffee.”

She sprang to her feet, gave the top of his head a glancing kiss, and darted from the room. Crump never moved in his chair; he was momentarily stunned; she had almost kissed him! Years and years before Millie might have given him just such a caress, but never quite like that. . . . During the few minutes that he sat before the fire alone a picture of Millie—Millie on the doorstep in her green apron, Millie with her capacious

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string-bag setting sail for the Old Kent Road—clearly presented itself in his mind, and because it was so clear he half-expected the picture to come to life and to hear his wife's voice again; and he trembled at the thought of what she might have to say; but the ethereal presence vanished on Annette's return and the voice of conscience in Crump was stilled. Annette steadied a saucepan over the fire.

“I must apologise for the saucepan,” she said, “but I won't use a percolator because you can't see the coffee simmer in quite the same way.” She smiled at him over her shoulder, and Crump, who, till quite recently, had had his fill of domesticity, thought that this was the most affecting domestic scene he had ever been privileged to witness. He would never have associated Annette with saucepans, but he now saw that she was capable of communicating her charm even to this highly domestic utensil. He felt perfectly happy and at home; she was goddess and wife in one. A new confidence was born in him; perhaps he was not unattractive in her eyes; he might have been a little too modest in his estimate of the qualities of his mind, apart from any question of his personal appearance; and that, he reflected, with a downward glance at his trousers, was by no means contemptible. He accepted the cup she

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held out to him, and as he did so their fingers touched, and there was understanding, there was harmony, in that touch.

“Now listen,” she said with pretty emphasis. “I am going to be frank about it all. I want lots of money. I want it so badly that I don’t much care how I get it. I know that I can trust you, and if——” She broke off and buried her face in her hands. Crump hastily placed his cup on the ground and clumsily tried to console her; his arms had almost closed around her before she recovered her self-possession and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. Crump noticed that there were no tears in evidence, and a doubt seized him. . . . But she was talking again, gaily, enthusiastically.

“This is the point, my dear, dear Crump. If you go on as you are now you’ll never make a great deal of money. Thousands and thousands of pounds, I mean. It’s all a question of time. There are only so many hours in the day, and you can’t talk to more than one person at one and the same time except——”

“Except?” Her enthusiasm was contagious; Crump was gripping the arms of his chair and leaning far forward. He caught the fragrance that hung around her.

“Except through the post!”

“A sort of mail-order business?” inquired

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Crump, lapsing into his old jargon. "And you?"

"I shall attend to that side of the show. Is there anyone else in the wide world you can trust to do it? Is there anyone else in the wide world you'd prefer to do it?" She put her head on one side and looked up at him with an air of mockery. Again a doubt seized him; he did not reply.

"*Is there anyone else?*" she asked slowly, with a hint of menace in her voice.

"There is no one," he murmured weakly; and in his heart he knew that he would have been helpless to refuse even had he desired to do so. She had coiled herself around him; she had imposed a spell upon him; she had laid him low; and although he dimly understood that she had made him the instrument of her own devices he was too far gone to care; he was perilously happy and content in his own infatuation. "It means a new series of advertisements," he muttered, still trying to act the business man.

"Of course," she said, "announcing this new extension of your work. You put yourself at the service of every mother in the kingdom. Oh, it will be easy!" she cried. "A personal letter to every applicant, a plain sealed envelope, and all the rest of it! They'll come in shoals!"

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“Yes, I suppose they would; but this wants a bit of thinking out.” Crump felt that he occupied a precarious position at the top of an acclivity, down which he was likely to find himself descending at any moment with possibly disastrous results; she was going a little too fast for him. “Yes,” he added, “it wants a good bit of thinking out. I’ll have a talk with Still to-morrow.”

“To-morrow!” she cried. “No, you must decide now!” She stole a glance at him. Was he to slip out of her hands at this last moment? She rebelled at the thought. She had only to hold him for a very few months, and she would have money enough; he would refuse her nothing, if he did not escape her now. She thought rapidly; thrust her chin hard against her knees as she sat before the crumbling fire. There was one way, she knew, of making sure of him; and only one! She nerved herself to this final effort.

“Well?” she murmured with a bewitching sweetness. “Do you like my room, and me?”

Crump was abashed; he began to feel that a breath of fresh air would do him good. He heard a taxi swish past in the street below, and rather wished that he had been in it. Even her perfume struck him as being somewhat sickly; and altogether it had been an overpowering experience. A wonderful expe-

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rience, of course; the sort of experience it would be very pleasant—and wonderful—to survey in retrospect. He visualised his cool, tall room at the Hôtel Grande Riche; he saw the white fold of the linen turned back at the head of the bed. With what enormous satisfaction he would insinuate his limbs between the sheets and afterwards pass in procession the events of this amazing day! Occasionally he had dreamed of romantic episodes with beautiful women, but never seriously; and now that he found himself in such a situation as his imagination had sometimes depicted, his one thought was to run away from it. He prepared to rise.

“It’s getting late,” he remarked. “I’d better be going.”

Annette seized his hands.

“It’s not late,” she said, again with a hint of menace in her voice. “Besides, you can’t go yet. You haven’t made your decision. I want you to promise me——”

“I tell you I *will* go!” broke in Crump, rising in spite of her. Appalled by the temptation that beset him, he took refuge in weak anger. “How dare you attempt to dictate to me, young woman!” In his panic he almost shouted.

He flung off her detaining hand; then, seeing that she still obstructed his path, he

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seized her angrily by the arms and thrust her aside. Her arms were white as cream, seductively soft, beautifully rounded. The marvel of them made him tremble.

She shrank from his roughness. Her eyes pleaded piteously with him.

“Please,” she said, with a catch in her voice, “*please* don’t be angry with me!”

The change in her unmanned him, so forlorn she seemed, so utterly at his mercy.

“I’m sure,” he said, still trying to be stern, “I’ve no wish to be angry. But you must be a good girl and not provoke me. . . . No, no, my dear, don’t cry . . .”

Bravely she choked back the sob that threatened her. The performance did her credit.

“There, there!” said Crump; and he kissed her, tentatively, on the brow. He saw that her eyes now shone with gratitude and timid admiration. He kissed her again, this time with more discrimination and decision. After all, she was a helpless little thing. Perhaps he need not hurry off so soon.

Crump opened his eyes, smiled peacefully, and shut them again. He had opened them in his sleep, and doubtless the face that bent over him was all of a part with his dreams. Annette lay still, with her eyes wide open.

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There was only one other man who had opened his eyes just like that. . . . and then she remembered. The accident in Piccadilly Circus! She turned again to the somnolent Crump.

“Poor little man!” she whispered to herself, and a strange wave of tenderness swept through her.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. CRUMP INTERVENES

THE telegraph-boy clanged the iron gate at No. 11, mounted his bicycle, and went free-wheeling down Maze Hill Road. Mrs. Crump remained on the doorstep, lost in contemplation of the telegram she had just received. On an average she received one once a fortnight, and the phraseology was invariably the same: "Over again. Hope to be with you almost as soon as you receive this. Love.—D." Mrs. Crump, in fact, was seriously disturbed in her own mind. She disliked the very short notice he gave her of his intended visits; but when she had protested, and suggested that he should wire her from Paris, he had vaguely excused himself on account of the cost: and this in spite of the fact that his work in Paris was proving highly successful and not unluccrative. When she had further, and a little icily, suggested that he should avail himself of the telegraphic facilities at Folkestone, or Dover, he had even more vaguely excused himself on the score of time. No, most emphatically Mrs. Crump did not like the look of things. And behind all these doubts there was a major mystery: what precisely was her husband's work in Paris? He had never made a practice of talking at great length about his business activities, usu-

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ally because there was so little to tell; but if his Paris appointment did indeed register an advance in his career she felt that she was entitled to hear about it. "Building up a continental connection for the paper" was not good enough; and she had a right to know more, and would know more. It was all very well for him to talk about taking her there and giving her a good time "one day": meanwhile she was condemned to pass a lonely existence in the drab and dusty precincts of the Old Kent Road. She crushed the flimsy telegraph form in her hand, flung it to the ground, and with her heel rammed it into the soft earth in the front garden. And what a garden! About ten feet by eight. She resentfully remembered a flowery description he had given her of the gardens of the Tuileries. Yes, he was seeing the sights of Paris right enough, and something more than gardens, perhaps. But no, she could not countenance this last imputation; deep down in her heart she trusted him; and if she did feel a little overwrought it was not to be wondered at; this continual suspense was enough to wear out any woman. She turned to enter the house, and as she did so glanced down the hill from force of habit, and saw him slowly climbing up the pavement. He was coming home, and this was her man, and her heart was glad; and in

the joy of the moment her resentment vanished, so good it was to set eyes on him again. He had not seen her, and she darted inside the house because there were one or two things she must do. On occasions like this everything had to be just right. . . .

Yes, Crump was coming home. Painfully and slowly and dejectedly he climbed the long hill, with his old bag dragging at his side. He had a thousand troubles to occupy his mind, and this bag was one of them. Mrs. Crump had informed him again and again that it was a disgrace and that he ought to be ashamed to be seen carrying it between London and Paris, and as many times Crump had promised to replace it. But he had never had the heart to do so. That bag, whenever he had occasion to don his old garments, helped him to effect a liaison with his own soul; it was something familiar to grasp; the sheet-anchor of his former manner of existence. No, he could not see himself climbing to No. 11 with a new bag; more than ever he would have felt unlike his real self—whichever that might be. He had become confused in his mind as to his own identity. When he was with Annette he was one man; with Millie he was another; and which of the two was the more real he could not quite decide. He only knew that it irked him now to be with Millie; and if he were not

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entirely happy in the society of Annette, that was not her fault. Business was good; the money was rolling in; the name of Marcus Faithful was a power in the tiniest hamlet in the kingdom; but he was worried, dreadfully worried. He mopped his brow.

There was the lamp-post, still on the pavement outside No. 11. The lamp was alight rather earlier than usual to-night. Thank heaven he had missed tea; but there was a long evening to be got through, somehow. Perhaps he could persuade her to come out to the pictures; that would save him the bother of talking. He couldn't put up with any more cross-examinations; the stores of his invention were just about exhausted. Paris! He never wanted to hear the word again. He groaned, and flung open the gate.

“David!”

“Millie!”

The same old greeting, in the same old way. He kissed her, and she hugged him. He meekly submitted.

“Had a good crossing?”

“Yes, but I need a wash, badly,” he replied, simulating extreme tiredness, and escaped upstairs. He walked into the bedroom and there the first thing he set eyes on was the wardrobe mirror. He scowled at himself. He could detect but little change in his out-

ward appearance; his cheeks, certainly, were rather fuller, and he looked healthier; but in some extraordinary way his limbs seemed to conform to the homely ugliness of his old clothes. He could have sworn that he cut a quite different figure on the first occasion he walked into Annette's room. Annette! Downstairs he could hear the clink and the jingle of crockery and the old, familiar sizzling of the frying-pan over the gas-ring, and an old, familiar odour stole upstairs. Sausages and chipped potatoes, he surmised. Millie had resumed her eternal apron, of course. Millie, his wife through all these years, was cooking his supper, cooking it for the ten thousandth time! And now Annette! Annette and her dresses, and the warmth and the intimacy of that other room in Great Russell Street; Annette and the strong pressure of her arms! His brain went dizzy, and he staggered out of the room.

He washed himself in the tiny bathroom, with a chipped green-enamelled bath no larger than a good-sized tub. Fancy having to live with a thing like that, he reflected bitterly, and fiercely rubbed his face with a piece of harsh towelling. He noticed the nail on which he was accustomed to hang his razor strop. Once that nail had been the friendliest thing in the bathroom; it now seemed a mean and

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beastly little contrivance. It acutely offended Crump; the fatuous inconvenience of the whole place incensed him; he felt that he was reverting to a lower plane of existence. He had grown fastidious since first he had set out on his adventures; he had fallen in love with comfort, elegance, refinement; and these qualities were summed in the dainty person of Annette. His nerves were on edge. There was a shelf just over his head carrying all manner of bottles. The majority of them were empty. He hated the sight of them. An untidy, disreputable crowd! He wanted to sweep the lot of them to the ground and to stamp on them and shatter them.

“David!”

“Yes, my dear?”

“It’s all ready. Don’t let it get cold!”

Crump sighed, and went downstairs. Half-way down he looked over the rail into the kitchen and saw Millie put her hands behind her back and fling her green apron on to the kitchen table in an untidy heap. After a moment’s pause he resumed his descent with heavy, disconsolate steps.

“Sausages and chipped potatoes!” said Mildred brightly. “I thought you’d like to come back to them after all the fine food you’ve been having in Paris.”

Paris again! Crump was thankful that his

mouth was already full; he just nodded his head, kept his eyes on his plate, and tried hard to cultivate an appearance of enthusiasm for the greasy compound.

“What *do* they give you to eat in Paris?”

Crump nearly choked. This inquisition was intolerable! He gulped down a huge portion of sausage and then frantically sought the last remaining chips on his plate. Mildred watched him reproachfully.

“You might tell me.”

“Sausages and chipped potatoes!” gasped Crump. It was the only dish on earth he could think of at the moment, and he had to say something.

“Oh!”

And for the first time their eyes met across the table; her ominous monosyllable struck a new terror into Crump’s heart and brain. Did she suspect anything? Had she—

“David! what’s the matter?” Had a ghost walked into the room he could not have looked more scared.

“All this rushing about,” he murmured weakly, and took refuge behind a glass of water.

That evening they went to the pictures. He rather enjoyed the experience of sitting in the ninepenny seats again. In the midst of that warm humanity which filled them he felt

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curiously at home, and for the moment his mind was at rest. Peace and quietude had been vouchsafed him for a couple of hours; and Millie was well content to sit there with him and to munch the chocolates he had bought her. He had paid one and sixpence for them and she had protested at this unparalleled act of extravagance. One and sixpence! Crump smiled.

They prepared for bed at the usual time and Crump performed the customary ritual with the marble clock over the mantel-shelf. He had come through the evening pretty well, and had it not been for that gnawing doubt in the back of his mind he would have been as happy as he could ever hope to be while the enormous complications of his life continued. But he could not get the recollection of that incident at supper out of his mind, and as the evening had drawn to its close he had grown more and more desperate. The doubt and the anxiety were killing him.

“Millie,” he said suddenly. “I must write a letter before I get to bed. You run along.”

She put up her mouth to be kissed, and there was such girlishness in this gesture of hers that his heart was smitten. He gave her a long kiss: a Judas-kiss, he thought to himself, and hated himself for a scoundrel. But

the feeling of compunction passed with her exit, and before she had reached the top of the stairs he had opened the middle drawer of the bureau that stood in the corner by the window. This particular drawer had always been dedicated to her exclusive use; never in his life had he opened it; nor even dreamed of opening it. But to-night he flung aside every consideration of decency and ravaged her papers. There were seas and seas of tradesmen's bills, old letters of his, crumpled patterns from women's periodicals, rubbishy bits of dress material, a discarded bracelet, a deceased watch, and——

“My God!” cried Crump. “Through the post!”

It was a typed sheet, headed in red: “Mr. Marcus Faithful, in entertaining your application, charges you upon your honour to destroy this document once you have mastered its contents.” Directions followed, in seven paragraphs. His eye glanced down them. “Awful, awful,” he gasped. He knew them all, by heart; they were beautifully phrased; their composition had given him much private enjoyment; he had laughed over them riotously.

“My God!” he cried a second time. “That it should have brought me to this!”

He carefully replaced the document in the

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drawer and guiltily closed it. He dragged a chair to the table, subsided into it, and bent forward with both hands to his forehead. A calendar hung on the wall beside him and he dejectedly consulted it. Yes, his wife evidently intended to carry out Marcus Faithful's instructions to the letter. A succession of wild ideas coursed through his brain. A sudden call to Paris—a false alarm of burglary down the street—setting the house, or a small portion of it, on fire—illness, a chronic seizure, his wife to fetch the doctor. . . . “Oh, anything!” he groaned.

He staggered up to the window and drew the curtains aside. The street lamp was shining with an uncanny steadiness and away over the housetops opposite the stars seemed to wink at him mockingly, because they were so quiet and so free. Escape! His lips formed the word. To float away into that starry void . . .

“David, aren't you coming?”

He clenched his hands.

“Yes, yes!” he shouted, and then murmured, addressing heaven at large:

“No escape, no escape!”

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE DINNER

IT was five o'clock at Savoy Mansions. In the corridor on the first floor a huge woman in a large white apron was raising clouds of dust; all the reception-rooms were deserted and even the telephone bell was quiet; but the day's work was not yet done, and Still remained on to do it; and from Still's point of view the hours between five and seven were the best of the day, because he was relieved of the plague of women and could devote himself to the pleasurable task of reckoning the day's takings. He leaned back in his chair with his feet on the table and a cigarette in his mouth, at peace with the world, and watching the blue smoke from his cigarette sail past his nose. His garb was conventional—striped trousers and morning coat—but it suited his lean and wiry form; he looked neat, alert, efficient. Certainly Crump could take no exception to the appearance of his secretary; and having once made up his mind that he could trust the man, he had trusted: Still had sole charge of the books. He and Annette both received salaries, whereas Crump was content to draw out what sums were needed to cover his current expenses. Early on, however, he had taken the precaution to pay back into his private account the money he had

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withdrawn for his Paris trip. Having achieved this he was considerably relieved in his own mind: if ever his conscience smote him he was able to console himself with the thought that he could at any moment put this new life behind him and resume the old at the point where he had relinquished it. Mr. Crump, so to speak, had not been credited with any of his successor's ill-gotten gains. But as the days and the weeks went by Crump's conscience became less and less active. His waking thoughts were occupied with his work, and with Annette; and life itself, apart from his occasional and enforced visits to Maze Hill Road, was one long dream.

Of all this Still was perfectly cognisant, and it made him very thoughtful. To-night he was particularly thoughtful. On the table before him there was a bundle of treasury notes and a small pile of cheques; they represented one day's returns from the system of postal tuition which Annette had so successfully instituted. "Mr. Marcus Faithful, in his endeavour to extend the knowledge of his system to all deserving classes, has gratefully accepted the voluntary services of a lady of high birth who has devoted her life and her means to the welfare of the people. In view of the fact that her late husband occupied a high position in the diplomatic service she

prefers to remain anonymous. Under Mr. Marcus Faithful's supervision she will, for the future, personally attend to all postal inquiries." So ran Crump's more recent announcements, and as a result Annette was kept busy typing letters and addressing plain sealed envelopes six and seven hours a day.

A second time Still went through the treasury notes and the cheques and verified his first calculation. Annette's total for the day was over sixty pounds, whereas Crump's was not much more than forty, despite the fact that he had not been less busy than usual. Still thoughtfully lit another cigarette. At first he had resented Annette's intrusion; he had not approved this idea of tuition through the post; he had concluded that, with a third party sharing the spoils, his own prospects would suffer. He had now to admit that events had falsified his predictions. The postal idea had caught on; his own remuneration had gone up; and to-day he was confronted with the fact that Annette's contribution to the general funds was greater than Crump's. And this, after all, was not surprising. Annette could type a letter in five minutes, or less; it took Crump at least fifteen minutes to get through a single interview. Still felt somewhat jealous that it had not been himself, but Annette, who had taught Crump how to make money.

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However, he liked her too well to allow this feeling to degenerate into any sort of animosity; and she was always very nice to him; in fact, surprisingly nice. He often wondered why. . . . Annette was certainly something of a mystery. Did she tolerate Crump for the sake of what she got out of him; or did she really like the man? Still could never make up his mind on this point. He sighed, and went on with his work of entering up the books. The whole of the first floor now was quiet as death. The woman in the corridor had finished her work; only one light was burning, and the notices on the doors of the reception-rooms were hardly discernible; the lift, which had come to rest at the first floor, was in darkness.

An hour and a half later Still rose from his chair and crossed the room. Three green-enamelled safes stood against the wall; the largest of the three carried a brass plate inscribed "*Marcus Faithful.*" Still knelt down before the two smaller ones and unlocked them. He then searched in his pockets for another key, found it, and paused before the third. It fascinated him; for weeks past it had fascinated him; his eyes were fixed on the brass plate; he fidgeted with the key. He knew what this safe contained. Inside it there were bank-notes to the value of several thousand pounds. He was not supposed to

know of their existence. When the safe had been installed Crump had casually informed him that he proposed to use it for his private papers, and retained the key. Thereupon Still's curiosity was aroused, and during one of Crump's periodic visits to Maze Hill Road he came upon the key among Crump's belongings and had it copied within twenty-four hours. Ever since, week by week, he had watched those piles of bank-notes grow. Certainly Crump had trusted him, but not completely: Crump had not informed him that, week by week, he had withdrawn from the bank all that Still had paid into it. Every penny of it! What sums Crump had taken for his personal expenses Still had supplied out of his petty cash; and Crump had led him to suppose that the bank had the rest.

As a result of this discovery Still's respect for his master had been considerably enhanced; it even evoked his admiration. Crump, evidently, was no fool. If the worst came to the worst he was in a position to fly at a moment's notice—with the booty. This was a piece of foresight after Still's own heart, and because he so very much appreciated it he did not resent the secrecy with which Crump had undertaken this precautionary measure. Nevertheless that safe presented something of a problem to Still every night of his life. He

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told himself that he was a fool not to help himself and to take his departure; he knew quite well that Crump himself would have to disappear before many more months had passed; Crump had promised nothing for the future; and yet he stayed on, and worked hard and loyally, and took not a penny more out of the business than was due to him. Still surprised himself. Nor could he find any adequate reason for this remarkable forbearance, beyond the fact that he was not naturally corrupt. Certainly he liked Crump: but could he be said to have any obligations towards a scoundrel who had removed him from one line of business and placed him in another not much better? Still gave it up. Had he been perfectly honest with himself he would have admitted that he might have left Savoy Mansions long ago had it not been for the presence of Annette; he could not play the traitor to Crump without at the same time deserting her, and this he would not do.

These were the considerations he turned over in his mind for the thousandth time as he knelt before the huge green-enamelled safe. He still fidgeted with the key; he told himself that there was no harm in just opening the safe; he wanted to feel those wads of notes between his fingers; if he could but look at them he would be content. . . .

He turned the key and the door swung open.

“Well, what’s all this?”

The voice was Annette’s. He sprang to his feet and faced her. She wore no hat and held her evening cloak tightly around her throat; she was not less frightened than Still himself.

“What are you doing, Still?”

“Clearing up, that’s all,” he said, and fetched the rest of the books and papers from the table. She sat down in his chair and watched him. Her cheeks and her hair were bright; her mouth was young and sensuous; she was an apparition of light and colour.

“I’ve called here to meet Marko,” she explained. She had always treated Still as being one of the family, and for some time past Crump had never been anything but Marko in the way of conversation. During office hours, however, he was invariably Mr. Marcus. Still liked her free-and-easy manner and was relieved to find no change in it. Perhaps she had not seen the contents of the third safe.

“Marko,” she went on, “will want some money. He forgot to take it away with him. Have you got any?”

She paused very deliberately over the last few words. Still shot a glance in her direction. Perhaps she had seen, after all.

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“Over a hundred pounds to-day,” he said briefly.

“Oh!” It was only a breath of a word and she pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Tell me, Still, do you think that anyone will ever marry me? Marko, for instance.”

Still walked away from the table out of the close range of her eyes. This was the first really confidential conversation he had ever had with Annette, and he was astounded to find that Crump had kept her in ignorance of his visits to Maze Hill Road. She did not know, then, that there were times when Mr. Marcus Faithful vanished from the face of the earth!

“Do you know anything about his first wife?”

“How should I?” asked Still, grateful for this clue. “I’ve not known him much longer than you have, Annette.”

It was the first time in his life that he had called her Annette to her face, and she looked at him quizzically. Despite the familiarity of her manner, in the past she had always been something of the mistress. However, she contented herself with a look of mock disapproval and asked:

“How did Marko get into touch with you? He has never told me, and I’ve often wondered.”

“We met in Paris,” said Still, again turning away.

Annette watched him narrowly.

“And what were you doing in Paris?”

“Oh,” said Still, shrugging his shoulders, “I was down and out at the time and prepared to fall in with anything that came my way.” He met her eyes. “I used to be quite a decent fellow.” The words came slowly and rather wistfully from his lips.

“I understand the feeling,” murmured Annette, “I understand. In a way we’re companions in distress, aren’t we?”

“I suppose so.” Still thrust his hands in his pockets and uneasily paced the room. This exchange of confidences was rather embarrassing. She had evidently failed to get any information concerning himself from Crump and was now coming for it direct. She got up from the chair and perched herself on the edge of the safe.

“Tell me, Still,” she asked seductively, “would you call me respectable?”

“I suppose so.” He began to feel desperately uncomfortable under her inquisition; and it was not difficult to understand how she had contrived to put Crump under her spell; he was now “her Marko.” He wondered what was coming next.

“I should like to be really respectable,”

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she murmured. "I don't suppose, Still, that *you* would like to marry me?"

Still laughed uneasily. The woman was playing with him, he knew; but he was genuinely frightened; he believed her to be capable of anything.

"Of course," said Annette gaily, "if you'd rather not, say so. It's an offer, though. I believe we should get on quite well together: only you must get me out of this country."

"Don't be ridiculous, Annette." He began to long for some fresh air; the quiet of the room was oppressive; he told himself that she was only fooling; but with her lips and her body she was inviting his acquiescence; she was coming towards him. He felt ill and dizzy.

"I've no money," he said weakly.

"No money!" She echoed the words mockingly, and went up to him and took hold of both his arms. "Open that safe," she commanded, dominating him with her eyes.

He obeyed, and the door swung open.

"Well, are you satisfied?" He turned his face to hers. They were both half-kneeling and their faces were on a level. Her eyes were glistening and he felt her grip on his shoulder tighten.

"All that?" she murmured incredulously. "All that?" She was abashed at the sight

of so much wealth. All her life she had been accustomed to receive pounds, and here were thousands! With one handful of those notes she could buy her freedom! She steadied herself with the hand that grasped Still's shoulder.

“But it's fantastic!” she gasped. “It's fantastic!” She suddenly jumped to her feet and turned on Still. “What were you doing here when I came in?” she cried.

He made no reply, but quietly closed the door, got on his feet, looked at her squarely.

“But it would be stealing—stealing!” she shouted, and sobbed. However great the temptation she would never descend to that—never! Marko! She was fond of him in a way; he had been good to her; he had given her all she had ever asked for; he might yet give her all she desired. Not till now had she realised that he had already acquired a small fortune out of this birth business. A new hope sprung up within her breast. She would wait no longer, but do something quickly, quickly. Her eyes flashed at the thought. She again turned to Still.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I didn't mean anything, you know. I was only——”

But she had gone too far, and Still, in a sudden access of fury and desire, had grasped her in his arms and was seeking her lips.

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Exerting all her strength she pushed him away and held him at arm's length; her eyes challenged him, maddened him.

"Let go!" she cried.

His arms dropped limply to his side, and a little breathless, Annette arranged the folds of her cloak. They neither of them heard the door open.

"Annette!"

The sturdy figure of Crump filled the lower half of the doorway; an enormous expanse of white shirt gleamed behind the folds of the brightly coloured scarf that he wore around his neck; his opera hat was a little awry and pushed back from the forehead, and his eyes looked as if he had just received the greatest shock of his life.

"Annette, what are you doing?" He glanced suspiciously at Still.

"It was nothing, Marko," she said. "I think I must have gone faint. You know, I've had hardly anything to eat to-day. I've been typing away the whole time, haven't I, Still?"

Still nodded, and handed to Crump a slip of paper on which were entered the day's figures.

"Good," commented Crump; and to Annette: "Then come along. The show begins at eight." There was an unusual note of de-

termination in his voice, and Still wondered what was at the back of his mind. At the door Annette flung him a backward glance and put one finger to her lips. Her eyes were merry and her head was thrown back with a rapturous abandon. Obviously she was not worrying about Crump—she could be trusted to remove any suspicions that might have flooded his mind in that moment of discovery; and her eyes were so very merry that Still felt justified in coming to the conclusion that she had not taken offence at his mad attempt to embrace her. He sighed. She was very beautiful. He remembered how she had confronted him; he carried in his mind a vivid picture of that encounter; her anger had but served to set her beauty aflame. He sighed again and sat down in his chair. It was something of a relief to be alone once more, and quiet. He forgot that it was time to be hungry; he had too much to think about.

“And where are you taking me to-night?”

Crump mumbled the name of a theatre, and Annette, seeing that he was not quite pleased with her, gently laid her hand on his knee. The taxi was threading its way through the Strand, and Crump's eyes were fixed in an unseeing stare on the crowded pavements and the glittering windows.

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“And to-morrow you will come home with me, early?” she whispered, with a pressure on his knee.

“Not to-morrow.”

“But why not, Marko?” Her voice was a little insistent. Surely he was not slipping out of her grasp.

“I am going through the books with Still,” he said sulkily. “I want to know how we stand.”

She knew that it was a lie; but she could not imagine for what purpose he lied. She did not know that he was due at Maze Hill Road and that it was not herself, but the prospect of this visit which was responsible for his ill temper.

“Then, Marko, when *are* you coming?” She spoke in a whisper and almost imperceptibly pressed her body to his side. His face slowly, shyly, turned to her own.

“Don’t you worry, Annette,” he said softly. “It’s all right, my dear.” And his trembling hand closed over hers.

The taxi was now grinding its way up the Haymarket, and Crump sat back in his corner utterly content. He was proud and happy to be with Annette in the heart of this glittering city. She belonged to him; she was his woman, and there was none in this world of beautiful women to match her. And she was

almost his creation! The gown that clung to her body, the shoes on her feet, the diamonds in her hair, all had been paid for by him! And her body, had he bought that too? He put the thought aside. It was enough to know that she gave all that she had to give, willingly.

“I’ve got a surprise for you, Annette,” he said, as the taxi turned into Piccadilly Circus.

“What is it, Marko?”

He did not immediately reply. Never since that night when he had first been brought face to face with her beauty had he been able to cross Piccadilly Circus without a tremor in his limbs. Sometimes an almost uncontrollable desire seized him to discover whether she had any recollection of the incident; sometimes he almost collapsed under the burden of this secret; but he managed to keep it. He would have been ashamed to confess his identity with that poor creature who had awakened her sympathy on that night of revelation.

“What is it, Marko?” she asked a second time. She was watching him closely and thinking that there was just that same look in his eyes. . . .

“Lean over this way,” said Crump, putting his arm around her, “and look up there!”

She looked, and saw only the familiar sky-signs flashing round the Circus.

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“Higher, higher!” he shouted in her ear above the noise of the traffic.

She raised her eyes. Across the vault of heaven, in letters of fire, there blazed the message: “CONSULT MARCUS FAITHFUL—THE GREAT BIRTH EXPERT!”

She drew back her head and brushed her cheek past his.

“You’re a wonderful man,” she murmured, “wonderful!”

He did not demur.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. MEEK'S DISCOVERY

MRS. MEEK was very seriously concerned for the welfare of her mistress. During the past few months a great change had come over the establishment at Great Russell Street. Annette's manner of life was quite different. In these days she was up and out of the house by half-past nine in the morning, dressed in a demure city garb which made the local tradesmen rub their eyes. All their efforts to discover what she did and where she went to had so far failed, and, short of shadowing her about her errands, they despaired of finding a solution to the mystery. Mrs. Meek had resolutely refused to discuss her movements with them; on the other hand, she had paid the greatest attention to their speculative comments, the fact of the matter being that Mrs. Meek herself was in ignorance of these new developments. And if Annette left the house at half-past nine in the morning in a demure city garb, she no less regularly returned soon after half-past four in the afternoon. Obviously she had found some work to do, and was doing it with a will. The greengrocer and the dairyman and the rest of their colleagues arrived at this conclusion with considerable reluctance; they even began to doubt the accuracy of their own observa-

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tions. But they had one piece of evidence, as concrete as any man could desire: their bills were now paid with an unfailing regularity; and why they were so paid was sufficiently obvious: Miss Annette Fay now had a regular client.

Nearly every evening, round about seven o'clock, a taxi drew up outside the house and deposited a male passenger. It was always the same man; but he was out of the taxi and inside the doorway before even the dairyman, whose shop was the most conveniently situated for the purpose, could thoroughly examine him. Estimates as to his age varied considerably; but it was generally agreed that he was not less than forty and not more than fifty-two or three; and there was no disputing the fact that, if clothes were anything to go by, this visitor was a very distinguished person indeed. Half an hour later the lady herself would appear, in all the glory of her evening apparel. A very different creature from the demure city worker! It was generally assumed that they returned to Great Russell Street later in the evening; but how the gentleman managed to get out of the house in the morning without being seen was also something of a mystery. However, none of the tradesmen was a very early riser, and none thought it worth while to make a special effort to confirm

his suspicions on a point that hardly stood in need of confirmation. No man would dress up a woman like that for nothing in return; and even if Annette had become a reformed character in the day-time she could never have earned enough money to cover her present rather lavish rate of expenditure. And Great Russell Street, having other things to think about, was content to leave it at that.

But Mrs. Meek was not so easily put off. She did not see a great deal of Annette in these days. Before she arrived in the mornings Annette had left the house; and her work would be finished, even on her long days, soon after her return. Annette had never vouchsafed an explanation as to the strangeness of her garb, and Mrs. Meek had never dared to mention it to her face. She had too great a respect for her mistress to try any tricks of that nature. However, one clue had come her way. One day, not quite by accident, but certainly not altogether by design, she had come across a pile of letters in Annette's bureau. She was not aware of their contents, for the very simple reason that they had none of them been opened; but the addresses on them supplied all the evidence she desired: Marcus Faithful, Esq., Savoy Mansions, London, W.C. 2. That was the address, and quite enough to go on with! Of

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course she knew all about this man Marcus Faithful. What woman did not? The information that had come her way was rather hazy but extremely interesting: she had even thought of writing to him herself. However, she had come to the conclusion that it would be an expensive method of merely satisfying her curiosity, for whatever the details he might impart, they could not be of any vital importance to herself: she was long past that sort of thing. But she was highly gratified to have discovered what she had every reason to believe was the identity of Annette's latest acquisition, though she made it a point of honour to keep the information to herself. There was only one thing more she desired, and that was to see this great man in the flesh; and to-day she thought she saw her opportunity.

This was one of her "long" days; moreover, owing to certain domestic complications in her own home, she had arrived late, and would finish late; and she privately resolved to make her work last out until at least seven o'clock. If she had any luck the great man would put in an appearance that same evening as ever was. . . . She hugged herself at the thought, and set up a mighty flow from the scullery tap. Annette had arrived home soon after half-past four, as usual, and had

straightway disappeared into her bedroom. Mrs. Meek thought that she looked tired and even worried; and she knew that Annette was not the sort of girl whose spirits were easily cast down. She wondered what was the matter. Perhaps there had been a row; perhaps the long idyll had at last reached its natural and inevitable conclusion. She scrubbed the scullery tiles with a passionate vigour. She was now quite sure that it was all the man's fault, and she acutely resented it. As the world went Annette was a good girl; she would have worked herself to death for her sake; and she was indignant that any man should have dared to make her unhappy. Usually Annette did not take these things to heart. Mrs. Meek was sure that there was something behind all this. What it was she meant to find out.

Soon after half-past six Mrs. Meek heard the bedroom door open: Annette was going into the sitting-room; and Mrs. Meek, who had given up hope of seeing her again that evening, wrung out the last of her rags, put on her coat and hat, and just looked inside the door to say good-night.

“ Good-night, Miss!”

Annette did not reply. She was huddled up in a chair before the fire and watching the flames with miserable eyes. She was wearing

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one of her old gowns—the one in blue and gold, which Mrs. Meek had long been expecting to receive as a perquisite and to sell at a profit. She at once decided that there was something very much the matter and went over to her.

“Why, what’s the matter, Miss?”

Still no reply: and Mrs. Meek, who knew that Annette always had recourse to aspirin in any emergency, was about to set out in search of a few tablets when Annette waved to her to desist.

“But,” protested Mrs. Meek, “there is something the matter!”

Annette just nodded her head, smiled, leaned forward, and locked both hands between her knees. It wasn’t illness, Mrs. Meek at once decided, but worry; the girl had something on her mind. She didn’t think it could be a question of money, because to her certain knowledge there were at least twenty pounds in the top right-hand drawer of Annette’s dressing-table; they had been there over a week now. No, it wasn’t a question of money, but that man, surely enough! Then a most startling suspicion flashed across Mrs. Meek’s speculative mind. Had there been a little mistake? Could it be that Annette——

“It’s all right, Mrs. Meek,” said Annette, breaking in upon her thoughts almost as if

she had divined them. "I'm going to have a baby, that's all."

"Miss!"

Mrs. Meek threw up both her hands, and then, for a fraction of a second, allowed them to rest on Annette's shoulders: a motherly gesture, excusable in one who was the mother of eight. She was not shocked: had she not been a person of liberal views she would not have remained loyal to her mistress for the last three years. No, she was perturbed because she at once realised that this development would upset everything: Annette would have to leave Great Russell Street, the flat would be sold up, she herself would be out of a job, and there was the baby to think about and to provide for. Brought face to face with these affrightening problems Mrs. Meek forgot the petty troubles of her own existence, and softly wept. She heard nothing of Annette's whispered words of consolation: all she could think was that she had never had a kinder mistress and would never find another one like her. . . . She dabbed a dirty handkerchief to her eyes, apologised for having given way to her feelings, and gathered herself together in order to take her leave. It was at this precise moment that Crump's taxi came to a grinding halt in the street below. The moment for which Mrs. Meek had been

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waiting had arrived. She forgot her tears; a joyful light shone in her eyes; she was aroused to action, and she looked dangerous; and Annette, who saw that she looked dangerous and meant to have someone's blood, did not choose to issue a word of warning as she left the room. Annette, in fact, seemed rather pleased, and as the door closed sank contentedly back in her chair.

Crump was almost at the top of the stairs when Mrs. Meek appeared on the landing; she used her body as a barricade, and Crump was forced to halt two steps down. For thirty seconds they faced each other in silence, until Crump ventured to utter a mild and almost inarticulate protest. Beneath her fierce scrutiny he maintained a very firm grip of the staircase rail.

“So that's you, is it?”

Mrs. Meek surveyed him with a look of scorn; contemptuously examined him from the shining surface of his hat to the glittering toe-caps of his dress shoes; her lips moved tremulously.

“You and your fine clothes!”

She sniffed, folded her arms with a grim determination, and drew breath for a further onslaught.

“Do you know what you've done for that poor girl?”

MRS. MEEK'S DISCOVERY

The question was purely rhetorical, for she immediately let forth a stream of vulgar abuse that overwhelmed her victim. Crump was only able to stutter a feeble protest. He was quite unaware of Mrs. Meek's identity; he was ignorant of what knowledge she possessed concerning his relations with Annette; and he was frightened. Living as he did under a perpetual threat of discovery and exposure, not merely in his private but in his public activities also, he was lacking in courage to stand up for himself in any emergency; and on this particular occasion he was even too frightened to run away. Besides, Annette's former manner of life was no secret; he had done her no wrong; it could not reasonably be maintained that he had led her astray, or ruined her, or inflicted any new injury upon her; he had, in fact, been extremely generous and considerate in his treatment of her; he felt that he was entitled to be indignant at this plebian assault, and tried hard to translate his feeling into words.

"I will not, my good woman," he shouted, "stand here and be talked to in this fashion. Please allow me to pass."

She snorted at his terminology and succinctly informed him that she was not accustomed to being called "my good woman." "Filthy beast!" she concluded.

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This was too much for Crump. He mounted the two remaining steps, and pushed, with his teeth set. He might as well have tried to remove a mountain. She continued to regard him pityingly.

“What, a little thing like you!”

For another thirty seconds they regarded each other mutely. Mrs. Meek thoughtfully broke the silence.

“It’s a marvel to me,” she muttered, addressing herself rather than Crump, “how on earth you managed to do it.”

“Do what, woman?” shouted Crump in desperation. He felt that he was on the brink of some new disaster.

“Put that girl in the family way,” replied Mrs. Meek, and swept past him down the stairs.

Crump heard the front door slam. He did not move, but still supported himself with one hand on the staircase rail. A sudden feeling of loneliness overcame him. After the recent turmoil the house was eerily silent and deserted; and yet he knew that Annette was not five yards off! A baby! He breathed the word aloud, and it fell like a knell on his ears. He foresaw a horrible and everlasting complication in his life; he realised, as never during these past rapturous months, that he was indeed married to a legitimate wife.

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Millie! She was no longer a woman stowed away in the safe obscurity of south-east London. Although he could not see her, although she did not take on any tangible manifestation, he felt that she was standing beside him and watching him on that ill-lighted staircase in Great Russell Street. . . . And he was afraid to face her, and not less afraid at the thought of having to face Annette. These two women who, in the past, had seemed to him to dwell in worlds apart, were now leagued against him and were both demanding their rights. He owed a divided allegiance as husband and father! He even owed a divided allegiance to himself. . . . He despaired at his own thoughts, and, rather than endure them any longer, stumbled across the landing to the sitting-room door. He opened it and peered inside. She was sitting by the fire, waiting for him in the old familiar attitude; and that blue-and-gold gown, too, was familiar, the first of so many! And the sight of it hurt him; the memories surrounding it were too poignant in a crisis like this.

“Annette!”

She did not stir, though she must have heard his cry. Every detail of the room, her gown, her attitude, scorched his memory. He crept up to her and clumsily put his arms around her.

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“Then you know, Marko?” she whispered.

He shuddered; he wanted to take his arms away; the thought that he was not merely holding her, but the young life within her made him tremble. He had suddenly been brought down to earth, and he was still suffering from the shock. Not a word came from his lips because of the terror that was in his heart. This new burden of responsibility was too much to be borne. He made a pretence of kissing her, and realised for the first time how different were her lips from Millie's! He felt that his wife was very near to him now and that her eyes were upon him; he was afraid of this girl he now held in his arms. What was he to do with her? He wanted to be alone so that he might have a chance to think it all out. She gently removed his arms and took both his hands in her own.

“Marko,” she whispered.

Crump, not daring to look at her, gazed steadily into the fire.

“I'm sorry, Marko,” she added, stifling a sob.

Crump plunged into yet gloomier depths of misery; he felt guiltier than ever. He stole a glance at her. Her body was marvellous, and he could not help but feel that he had done a marvellous thing. . . . If only he had been free!

MRS. MEEK'S DISCOVERY

“Marko, it will be all right, though?” She paused, and then spoke so low that he could hardly catch the words. “We have had a good time together, and everything will be the same when we are really married, won’t it?”

“Yes, my dear,” he gulped. “But you must give me time. I’m just a little bewildered. I thought, you see——”

“Silly boy!” she cried gaily; and taking his head between her hands bent over him and whispered in his ear:

“I wonder? *Which will it be?*”

They dined that evening on cocoa and biscuits, Annette having thoughtfully suggested that Crump might prefer to spend that particular evening quietly at Great Russell Street. At half-past nine she informed him that he looked as if he could do with a good night’s rest, and despatched him to his hotel. When he had gone she drew up her chair to the fire and turned over in her mind the events of the day. Of course, if he did marry her she might have some difficulty in explaining the non-appearance of the baby. Perhaps she had gone a little too far. . . . She thought of Mrs. Meek, and smiled. Mrs. Meek was a good soul. She thought of Crump, and smiled again, but this time with a certain

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melancholy. Crump was a good soul too, and so good to her. . . .

“Oh, it’s rather a shame,” she murmured, reaching for her book.

CHAPTER XV

MRS. CRUMP BREAKS THE NEWS

IT was Saturday morning—a month later—and when Still walked into Crump's bedroom at the Hôtel Grande Riche, although it had gone nine o'clock, the great man was fast asleep. Still did not wake him. Saturday was a day of rest for Crump, and his orders were that he was never on any account to be disturbed on this particular morning of the week. Despite the luxury of his surroundings and the elegance of his present mode of life, Crump would have been the first to admit that the most solid and least unchequered blessing that fate had conferred upon him was this mere ability of his to stay in bed, as long as he chose to, on this one morning of the week. Sundays, of course, did not count in this connection: he had always been able to stay in bed a little late on Sundays. The charm of rising late on these Saturday mornings resided in the fact that he could sleep on in a workaday world. This morning he was sleeping so peacefully that Still regarded with astonishment the child-like expression on his face: not even the ever-encroaching bristle on his chin served to destroy the illusion that Crump was just a big, over-grown boy. His arms were thrown over the eiderdown, and the brilliance of his silk pyjama jacket seemed a little incon-

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gruous with the homeliness of his features. He looked guileless, defenceless, and gave Still the impression that he was a sort of changeling. . . . Seeing how deep was his slumber Still propped up the telegram he had brought in against the reading-lamp on the table beside the bed, and softly left the room.

Half an hour later Crump opened his eyes; he opened them with his customary look of vague surmise; every morning it appeared; he never could feel quite at home in this resplendent apartment. He blinked, and glanced at the tall windows. The bright light of day was piercing the texture of the drawn curtains, and for a moment a horrid doubt crept into his eyes; then a faint smile of contentment crossed his face, and his eyes closed again. It was Saturday. . . . But Crump slept no more; he had too much to think about; indeed, so much to think about that the quiescent repose of his last few Saturday mornings had been seriously disturbed. He was not worrying about his business. The work at Savoy Mansions was proceeding smoothly. With a wearisome monotony he conducted interviews from ten to four; Annette sat over her typewriter and grappled with the unceasing flow of correspondence; and Still attended to finance. There was no excitement, and not much publicity. Mr. Marcus

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Faithful, having become a national institution, had been allowed by the newspapers to pursue his labours in peace. And Crump was content to have it so: it gave him a feeling of security. For days on end he would forget that he was living on the edge of a volcano and that some sort of an eruption must surely come, possibly two, and certainly not later than three months hence. But he was reconciled to this prospect, and he had already made up his mind how he would face it: there were other problems, more pressing, and even more difficult because at the moment he saw no possible solution, that demanded his attention—and kept him awake.

Annette herself was his main problem: the root problem, in fact, of all his problems. What was he to do with her? This was the query that perpetually confronted him. Not another word had she said on the subject of her declaration of a month ago. Obviously she had left the matter in his hands, because she trusted him. Crump squirmed between the sheets. Because she trusted him! He buried his head in the pillow. He would have felt happier about it all had she remonstrated with him, distrusted him, cursed him for a rogue and an unfeeling brute! But no, she preserved a silence that presupposed her assumption that he would do the right thing by her, and marry her. Marry her! He plaintively

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asked himself why ever he had allowed a foolish sense of delicacy to stand in the way of a declaration that he was already well and truly married before this disastrous complication had arisen; it would have made not the slightest difference to either of them. But tell her the truth now he could not. He tried to picture himself saying, "I'm sorry, Annette, but I've been married these last twenty years, and my wife's still alive. I'm sorry, Annette"—and could not. He was afraid of her scorn, and of her beauty. He would have felt like a worm: he wasn't at all sure that he didn't feel like one already. The fine pretence he had put up through all these months would be shattered, and he would be revealed for what he was—little Mr. Crump, late of the *Morning Star*. The thought agonised him; he screwed up his eyes in an effort to shut out the picture from his mind. "Anything but that," he moaned. "Anything but that!"

Since the night of Annette's declaration he had not once been home. Through a friend of Still's in Paris he had transmitted to his wife a variety of excuses for this long delay; but he would not be able to hold out much longer; he would have to face her. He had a great respect for Mildred; long ago he had realised that she was a woman of remarkable intuition; and she was quite capable of putting

him under a cross-examination as to the precise reasons for this delay. He realised too that the longer he stayed away the more difficult the actual encounter would be. Never in his life before had he been unfaithful to Mildred, and he had an uneasy feeling that, although he had found it a simple matter to deceive mankind at large, Mildred would discover the innermost secrets of his heart. The last visit, now that he came to think of it, was not reassuring. On more than one occasion he would not have been surprised had Mildred delivered an ultimatum on the subject of his prolonged stay in Paris without her; and if at the time he had paid but little attention to these danger signals it was only because the thought of Annette and Great Russell Street dominated him to the exclusion of every other consideration. And she still dominated his thoughts, but in a different way. She was going to be the mother of his child, and he didn't know what to do with either of them, with Mildred in the way. He decided, with a certain philosophic detachment, that one woman at a time was as much as he could manage. His one regret was that he had not made the discovery before ever this trouble arose. He sighed, and resolved to get up, in the hope that his outlook on life might be rather more cheerful when he had bathed, and shaved, and dressed.

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He opened his eyes and strained his neck to glance at the watch which hung from the bed-post; he had not been able to break himself of the old habit of hanging it over his pillow; it was, in fact, one of the few links he had maintained with his former manner of existence. Half-past ten! He gasped; he had no idea that his private meditations had consumed so much of the morning. He threw the bed-clothes back, swerved round, and saw the telegram on the table. The sight of it fascinated him. It was not the first orange envelope he had found waiting for him on that table; but he knew in his bones that this particular envelope contained no ordinary message; he scented danger, new troubles, more complications. He tore open the envelope and glanced at the signature on the flimsy. Yes, it was Millie! Her message had been retransmitted from Paris: "You must get away this week-end. Wonderful news. Much love.—Millie."

He did not move, but remained sitting up in bed, naked but for the thin veil of his blue-decorated silk pyjamas, and staring into vacancy with the orange envelope held in one hand and a crushed fragment of flimsy in the other.

An hour later he left the hotel and walked to Savoy Mansions. His morning attire was correct in every detail and the garments them-

selves were perfect; even the slight *embon-point* of the figure seemed appropriate to the man. Casual passengers on the pavement got out of his path; the more observant noted that the great Marcus Faithful was abroad that morning; a Press photographer, who happened to be passing, thought it worth while to snap him. But Crump noticed none of these things. He walked rapidly, with his eyes fixed on the pavement and his wife's message dinning in his ears; but not so rapidly that a keen observer would not have discovered that Mr. Marcus Faithful badly needed a good shave.

He was able to slip into Savoy Mansions unobserved. He did not use the lift, but precipitately climbed the stairs. Within five seconds, still unobserved, he was safely inside his own room, with the door locked. He sat down to regain his breath and started to look up the trains from Charing Cross.

Half an hour later there furtively emerged from the side entrance to Savoy Mansions a figure familiar and yet unfamiliar. Mr. Crump had attained once more a dolorous resurrection. He was complete down to the last detail. His collar was, if anything, grimier than usual; his trousers looked as if they had been rolled up in a bundle—as indeed they had; he looked generally shabby, but gave one the impression

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that this was the result of carelessness rather than of actual impecuniosity; and he was carrying his old leather bag. With this the transformation was complete; it could not have been better had he worn a mask; the black and unhealthy appearance of the skin changed the character of his face. Probably there was not another face in the world to which a good shave made so much difference.

Outside Charing Cross Station he sent off a telegram to Mildred, thoughtfully provided himself with his customary cheap brand of cigarettes, and sat down in the nearest tea-shop in order to waste half an hour. It was strange to be just one of the multitude again, and stranger still to look like them; in their old garments he hardly recognised his own limbs; he felt that his legs and his arms did not altogether belong to him; he missed the white cuff round his wrist, the crease in his trousers, the fine texture of the cloth; he was imprisoned within the confines of his former personality. Mechanically he asked for a poached egg on toast. Months had elapsed since he had last demanded such humble fare: on all his previous visits he had proceeded straight home, and back again, avoiding in this way a depressing interregnum such as that through which he was now passing. His bill came to something over a shilling. The payment en-

abled him to recapture his old sense of values. He had recently come to regard the pound-note as being the smallest coin of the realm worthy of particular consideration: and to-day his lunch had cost him a little over a shilling! And for the first time he realised that he was, judged by his former standard of wealth, an enormously rich man. In that green-enamelled safe at Savoy Mansions there reposed bank-notes to the total value of not less than twelve thousand pounds; there might even be fourteen: but what did a thousand one way or the other matter to him? The girl at the cash desk who handed him change out of one and six-pence wondered why he had such a silly smirk on his face. . . . Crump passed out of the tea-shop in a rather happier frame of mind. After all, with twelve thousand pounds at his back the future could never be quite hopeless.

Twelve thousand pounds! An income getting on for a thousand a year! Why not clear out now? He shook his head. A thousand a year did not seem a great deal when he came to reflect that for the past six or seven months he had been living at the rate of at least ten thousand a year; and he refused to give any countenance to the idea of deserting Annette without leaving her properly provided for. He had no need to trouble himself about Still: a thousand pounds down would see him

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clear of Savoy Mansions. No, Annette was the chief problem. And there was a further complication: she had become so much a part of his life that the idea of living without her hardly seemed feasible; on the other hand, his one purpose during the past month had been to escape from her society. At any moment now she might address to him a specific question regarding his intentions. How was he to reply? He did not know, and it seemed to him that he never would know.

“All tickets, please!”

He was already at Maze Hill Station, and hardly conscious of having undertaken the journey at all. Mechanically he pulled out his old leather pocket-case, which was provided with an inset, now vacant, for his season ticket, and was just about to present it when he suddenly realised where he was and what he was doing. Hoping that this momentary aberration had passed unnoticed he delivered up an ordinary third-class ticket, and walked out of the station. He was now thoroughly miserable. The whole world was full of women; there wasn't another man in sight; he began to wish that he had waited for the great Saturday morning exodus from town. He was once more face to face with the petty and bitter realities of a suburban existence. How frowsy the women looked in this work-

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day world! He had never before seen it at this hour. The whole population appeared to be washing their doorsteps or cleaning their windows or pushing the children into the street; and were all these women able to rejoice in the adoration of their respective males? A milk-cart rattled down the hill; a butcher's boy was pushing his bicycle up it, and Crump toiled at his side. This then was home, and the cultured, leisurely life he had just left seemed less than a dream. He rang the bell, and a second later was astounded to find his neck clasped in his wife's arms: an unprecedented demonstration on her part which struck new terror into his heart.

“Oh, David, I'm so glad you've come!” And she gravely kissed him.

Not a word of explanation! Crump was stunned at the nature of his reception. Kisses where he had expected reproaches! The silence of a deep content instead of a stormy ultimatum! She appeared to be deliriously happy in her quiet way. She did not ask him to talk; he had only to mumble a word here and there while she communicated to him the news of that little world in which she moved. Throughout the meal which she had prepared for him she appeared to be feasting her eyes upon him; she seemed to have gone back twenty years at least, and Crump's condition

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passed from mere bewilderment into one of acute and desperate embarrassment. He had confidently counted upon coming face to face with realities in Maze Hill Road; instead, he had quitted one dream only to enter another. He stoically ate his food, although it nearly choked him, in an effort to appear normal.

That afternoon she took him shopping with her. "Just a few special things that we must have, dear, now that you've come," she had said; and tucking him, as it were, under one arm, and her basket under the other, they had set off for the Old Kent Road. Amazing woman! He saw no reason to doubt her sanity; but he had to admit that her conduct was absolutely inexplicable. She appeared to be under some sort of spell, and assumed, apparently, that he too was under this same spell. But what was it? Crump suggested to himself that it must be the spell of youth. Her manner, lively at one moment, prettily shy at another, revived memories long lost of the early days of their marriage, and even of their courting days; and of a sudden he felt very humble and a hush seemed to fall upon his soul. He had forgotten that his wife had once been that girl, memories of whom now crowded around him.

Afternoon dwindled into evening, and evening into night, and as the hours wore on a

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conviction stole over Crump that she was, all the while, waiting for him to speak. He gave her various openings. In a month or two's time, he informed her, he would be ready for her in Paris; and one day they would be coming back to take over that long-promised house on the Heath. . . . But she did not respond; she appeared to have lost all interest in this, the dearest project of her life! Crump buried his head again in the evening paper and tried to think of something else to say. He recounted various anecdotes of Paris, most of which he had acquired from Still, and gave them the necessary personal touch: she listened, and that was all. But perhaps the most surprising fact of any was that, never once since his arrival, had she commented adversely on his trousers, or his collar, or his bag; she was suddenly and entirely blind to his every fault and failing! It was positively uncanny. He began to feel that if something didn't happen soon he would break out into a frenzy.

At half-past ten she looked significantly at the clock. He nodded, and went out into the kitchen in order to lock up for the night. When he returned to the sitting-room a change had come over her. He knew the signs: she was getting ready to cry.

“Why, Millie, what's the matter?”

For response she turned to him two large

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eyes and looked at him reproachfully. "At last," thought Crump. He extracted the key of the clock from the usual ornament.

"David," she called out insistently, catching hold of his coat, "surely you *know*?"

"Know what?" asked Crump, with a feeble attempt at jocularitv.

"Oh, I thought you would understand!" she cried despairingly, and burst into copious tears: tears of joy and sorrow intermingled. He knelt down by her side and put his arms around her, and clumsily tried to comfort her.

"And I *know* it's going to be a boy," she whimpered, smiling through her tears.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEGINNING OF THE DELUGE

THE task of going through the morning's post at Savoy Mansions was a formidable one, and Still, whose business it was to sort it out, invariably arrived by nine o'clock. This morning he had arrived even earlier than usual. For one thing it was a Monday, and for another, he wanted to get through his work quickly so that he might have time for a private word with Annette before Crump put in an appearance. Quite obviously something was worrying him, and he went through the letters anxiously, one by one. He divided them into several piles: one for postal applications, to be passed on to Annette; this pile was much the largest and appeared to cause him no concern whatever; a second pile, for general inquiries relating to Mr. Marcus Faithful's work; and a third pile, for general requests. These covered a various field. Every organisation in the country which in any way concerned itself with public health or social welfare desired the honour of receiving his interest, his subscription, and the use of his name on the society's notepaper. Those who were thoughtful enough to enclose a stamp for reply, got one, in the negative: Still saw to that. There were various invitations to address meetings and to take the chair at public func-

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tions: to all of which he proposed to reply also in the negative: he had come to the conclusion that the less publicity they received, at the moment, the safer they would be. One or two invitations from editors he put aside for further consideration. When he had time he used to comply with these requests for articles, if the remuneration appeared to be worth while. Indeed, his journalistic achievements had frequently evoked Crump's admiration, and most editors were agreed that Marcus Faithful's contributions to the Press were highly stylistic. The speedier kind of editor took the precaution of sending an article which was not merely ready for signing, but actually in type. These presented no difficulty whatever, and Still was always prepared to make a few alterations, for appearance' sake, and to sign his employer's name with a fair flowing hand. This morning there were no such requests; they had, in fact, been falling off of late, which, in Still's opinion, was all to the good, for reasons not unconnected with a fourth pile of letters.

During the past week this fourth pile had steadily grown each morning. So far he had replied to none of them, and they already filled one of his private drawers. With a sigh Still added one more to the pile and counted them up. Twenty-four this morning! Something would have to be done, and done quickly.

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“ Good morning!”

Annette was at the door, in her business attire. She smiled at him archly from beneath the brim of her hat, glided up to the table, and stretched out both her hands for her letters, in mock supplication. They were pretty hands, and Annette knew that they were pretty. They fascinated Still, and it was only with an effort that he was able to avert his eyes from them. He told himself savagely that she was only playing with him; that she delighted in tormenting him; that it amused her to see him thus slavishly succumb to her adventitious charm of manner and the natural charm of her person; and yet, he was reluctant to believe that this was the true interpretation of her attitude towards himself.

“ You’re a beautiful devil, Annette,” he murmured, with his usual raillery. “ This is your little lot.” He pushed a pile of letters towards her, but did not remove his hand. “ Perhaps you’d better look at these first,” he added, indicating the pile of twenty-four. Annette gave him a quick glance, took up half a dozen of the letters, arranged them fan-wise, and skimmed their contents. Her eyes were very grave when she turned again to Still.

“ And what does this mean?” she asked quietly.

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“It means,” said Still, with a valedictory glance round the room, “the beginning of the end.”

Annette picked up the rest of the letters. They were all written in the same tone; they heralded the approach of the great hysteria. To Marcus Faithful’s famous query, *Which will it be?* they responded with another, *Will it be?* His correspondents—the women who had interviewed him, communed with him, written to him for advice and followed out his instructions to the last letter of his law—now that they were facing the impending crisis, came to him for reassurance and consolation. The phraseology of these letters was remarkably similar: “Are you *quite* sure?”—“I shall die from disappointment”—“Is there nothing more I can do?”—“My husband knows nothing yet, but I mean to tell him afterwards”—“I will let you know what happens”—“The suspense is awful, but if what you say is true I shall be the happiest woman alive. . . .” Annette chose the phrases at random and recited them aloud, and laughed. Still watched her glumly.

“It’s no joke, Annette,” he protested. “Something will have to be done. So far as I can see we’ve got to clear out. The only point is—when?”

“Does Marko know?”

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“Not yet.”

They watched each other steadily, each trying to divine the other's thoughts. After a long and uncomfortable silence Still looked uneasily at his watch.

“He will be here in five minutes,” he said.

“And you propose to show Marko those letters?” It seemed to Still that she was holding her breath for his reply; he tried to evade a direct answer.

“Do you think it wise?”

“Why not?” Annette rapped out the question, and Still felt that he was being cornered.

“Because,” he replied, speaking very slowly, “he might decide to clear out, at once.”

“And why shouldn't he clear out, at once?” Her voice was colourless; it almost deceived Still into the belief that she was just asking for information. . . . He got up from his chair, opened the door, and glanced down the corridor. There was no one about.

“In the old days,” said Still, shutting the door again, “there would have been a queue by this time. We're not quite so fashionable as we used to be. However, your side of the business is doing pretty well.” He affected a laugh. Annette watched him coldly.

“Answer my question,” she said. “Why shouldn't he clear out, at once?”

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Still thrust his hands into his pockets and buried his neck in his collar.

“You needn’t pose for me,” said Annette. “Out with it!”

“Oh, well,” replied Still, in an off-hand manner, “you may as well know. I was thinking that it would be rather a shame if your Marko were to slope off with the cash and leave us stranded high and dry. What would you do, if he does leave us in the lurch?”

“I shall get him to marry me yet,” said Annette, with a wicked grimace.

“Don’t you believe it!” He paused. Should he divulge Crump’s secret? Would it help him to win over Annette to his project? He came to the conclusion that he would do well to wait a little longer. “And if you don’t get him to marry you?” he asked.

“What’s that to do with you?”

“I shouldn’t like to leave you on the rocks, Annette,” said Still, speaking very slowly. “I was thinking, too, that we might——” He broke off and glanced down the empty corridor a second time.

“Go on,” said Annette. She nonchalantly took off her hat and patted her hair.

“Co-operate!” Still blurted out the word.

“How?”

“Go fifty-fifty, and clear out.” He sank back into his chair, looking as if he were

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frightened by his own temerity. Annette did not immediately respond. She slowly advanced to the table and leaned over it.

“So that’s your little game!” Her eyes flashed and she flamed into indignation. “I didn’t know that you were quite so low as all that!” she cried. “You ungrateful little beast!”

Still drew further back in his chair; he began to fear that those same fascinating hands might be at his throat at any moment.

“Where are the keys of Marko’s safe?” she suddenly demanded. “Hand them over!”

He did not move.

“Hand them over!” she shouted a second time. “I’m taking no risks with you!”

They watched each other like two beasts of prey, waiting to spring; and then, before Still realised what was happening, she had darted round to his side of the table and had wrenched from his pocket the chain on which he carried his keys. A link snapped, and she brandished the keys in front of his face.

“Now, which is it?”

“Find out!” Still looked at her vindictively, defiantly.

“Very well, then!” Annette flew to the green-enamelled safe and, slipping down on one knee, began to try each key in turn.

“Ah!” She had found the key that fitted

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the lock, but before she could turn it Still had grasped her shoulders, pulled her to her feet, and sent her staggering across the room.

“You little fool!” he gasped. “Listen!” And the handle of the door turned and Crump stepped into the room. On the threshold he paused; his eyes looked questioningly from the one to the other. Annette was flushed and breathless and had hardly recovered her balance; Still was calmly readjusting his shirt-cuffs, with an air of disdain.

“And what does this mean?” Crump addressed them both, but neither replied. He banged the door and walked up to Still.

“What have you been doing to Annette?” Crump put his knees together and clenched his hands: his indignation had invested him with a certain fierce courage such as he had never before known; he was suddenly consumed with a jealous solicitude for this woman who had so brilliantly come into his life and was now, at any moment, likely to pass out of it. “Answer me!” he shouted with amazing vigour.

“It was nothing at all,” replied Still morosely. “A woman’s row.” He shrugged his shoulders and glanced contemptuously at Annette. “You’d better ask her,” he added, and sat down and drew up his chair to the table.

Crump relaxed his attitude and looked at

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his watch. It was five minutes to ten. He turned again to Still.

“There will be no consultations to-day,” he said rapidly. “You can tell people what you like. Say I’m ill, dead, or anything; and don’t be back late at the hotel. I shall want to see you.”

Annette was putting her hat on and examining her face in a tiny hand mirror.

“Where are you going?” Crump’s voice had in it a note of command which Annette lightly disregarded.

“Back to Great Russell Street—for good, I suppose.”

“What!” Crump walked up to her and grasped both her hands. She made no effort to turn away her face but watched him steadily.

“Aren’t we both dismissed?” she asked innocently.

“Go back to Great Russell Street, and wait there for me,” said Crump sternly, and turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Annette picked up her gloves from the table with perfect composure; Still did not look up from his papers.

“Here are your keys,” she said. “And don’t do anything rash without——” She paused, and their eyes met steadily. “Without consulting me first,” she added with a significant emphasis.

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He nodded weakly. The look of defiance was gone from his eyes, and Annette knew that she still held him under the domination of her beauty.

“Don’t you worry, Annette,” he said quietly. “Whatever happens I shall stick to you.”

“Thank you,” she said, and gave him a smile, and to his profound astonishment lightly touched his cheek with her lips. “You know,” she added, “Marko would never have got along without you; I’ve always realised that; and we’ve all of us got a bad kink somewhere or other.” She pulled on her gloves reflectively. “After all,” she went on addressing herself rather than Still, “we’re both of us hostages to fortune!” And closed the door behind her.

For several minutes Still remained seated, lost in thought. At last an insistent knocking on the door aroused him; it was the first caller on the list.

“Lord,” he murmured, wearily rising from his chair, “this is going to be a day!” He opened the door, and in smooth, deferential tones began:

“Good morning, madam. I regret to say that Mr. Marcus Faithful has been overcome by a sudden indisposition, owing to the enormous strain to which his work has subjected him. If you will be good enough . . .”

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Meantime the subject of this pronouncement was despondently making his way up Charing Cross Road. Crump realised that the crisis in his career was imminent. This in itself was not responsible for his despondency; all along he had perfectly well understood that the life of Marcus Faithful would of necessity be a short one, and as things now stood he was not at all distressed at the thought of having to bury him. Had Crump been entirely candid with himself he would have admitted that the splendour and luxury of his surroundings were beginning to pall; and he was weary of the daylong sessions at Savoy Mansions, and sick of the women. For months past he had conducted his interviews like an automaton; what enjoyment and private satisfaction he had once derived from his own colossal hoax had long ago spent itself; the atmosphere of adulation in which he lived had lost all charm and attraction as the result of a surfeited appetite. In fine, he was beginning to yearn for a resumption of his former state. Plain Mr. Crump again! He smiled at the thought: smiled as he had not smiled for many days! He passed a tailor's shop with a mirror at the doorway, and was almost surprised to find that the mirror reflected, not the plain Mr. Crump of his thoughts, but the still immaculate and slightly pompous

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figure of the famous Marcus Faithful! And he smiled again. The thought of a new happiness to come stole through him and warmed the blood in his veins, and for the first time, for many months, an old friend of the past rose like a cheerful spectre to greet him. His desk calendar! "What is this fame but the breath of fools?" He dug up the words from the depths of memory, and never was ore more precious! "What is this fame but the breath of fools?" Again and again he mumbled to himself the golden words; they were medicine for his soul and healing for his hurt; and it was not until he turned into Great Russell Street that he realised that he was not yet out of the wood. Not all the quotations from all the desk calendars in the world would solve for him the problem of Annette's future.

What was he to do with her? What did he want to do with her? He did not know. To the one question he could return no answer; and as for the other he simply could not make up his own mind. The heinousness of the thought that he would do well to be rid of her shocked him; and he had a dim suspicion that he would never appreciate how much she meant to him, until he had lost her. She was not merely a part of that new life which he was so soon to relinquish: had it not been for

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her he would long ago have turned from it in weariness and disgust; and he recognised, too, to put the matter bluntly, that she had taught him how to make money. In her he had seen fulfilled all his suburban dreams of fair women in a gay and glittering world; in his own clumsy fashion he had cherished and adored her, and lived with her; she had given him all she had to offer in return for the care and the money he had lavished on her; and he had to admit that, so far, she had not betrayed the slightest sign that she proposed to break the implicit bargain.

How much did she care for him? Crump had often asked himself this question, but to this also he could find no answer. All he knew was that never once had she treated him churlishly, ungenerously; she had been decent to him all through. And what more could he demand or expect? Nothing, he decided. Until recently he had never even troubled to ask himself what was the precise nature of her relations with Still. It was sufficiently obvious that Still, all along, had been ready to fall at her feet; but Crump had never seen reason to suppose that Annette had paid particular attention to his secretary's admiration. That is, until recently; and of late Crump had begun to wonder whether there might not be some secret understanding between them. For

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one thing, their work threw them together a great deal; for another, what was the explanation of their quarrel this morning? He trusted Annette, and Still, too, for that matter; but there was something wrong, somewhere. He shook his head. Anyway, he meant to have it out with Annette, and settle the whole business of the child, marriage, everything, one way or the other. The cursed nuisance of that child! When he thought of it his heart hardened against her. If she had taken a little more care he would never have found himself in this appalling predicament. Two at once! He groaned. If Still wanted her, let him take her, if she were willing and had been playing behind his back. . . . The vision of himself as plain Mr. Crump, serenely happy in a world at peace, had suddenly become infinitely remote.

“ You’ll find her in her bedroom, crying her heart out.”

Crump started out of his reverie. The voice was Mrs. Meek’s. With her broom between her feet and both hands grasping the handle Mrs. Meek gave Crump the impression that she was again on the war-path, and with a muttered “ Thank you ” and “ Good morning ” he slipped past her and mounted the stairs. Never before had he seen Great Russell Street at this hour of the morning,

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and in a dreadful flash of revelation he realised that its drabness was not so far removed from that of Maze Hill Road, Greenwich. The knowledge hurt him. He had always thought of Great Russell Street as a most romantic thoroughfare; its shops and houses were not ordinary shops and houses; its doorsteps were not of that variety which required to be everlastingly scrubbed; it was indeed a paradisial avenue leading to the nest of his beloved. . . . Wrong, all wrong! Crump groaned in spirit. He could hear the carpenter in the room on the ground floor grinding away with his saw. Oh, a workaday world! His feet lagged on the staircase, and on the landing he stopped dead. He could hear her sobs from behind the closed bedroom door, and the sound of them infuriated him. What was the use of her crying? How could he argue with her while she was in that condition? What chance was there of his making her listen to reason? Question after question he flung at that unseen prostrate body. If only she would stop crying! He wanted to shake her, choke her.

“Annette!”

He had opened the door and slammed it behind him. She had flung herself full-length on the unmade bed and buried her head in the pillow. Crump caught his breath. In that attitude, in her slight business gown,

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she was just a frail wisp of a girl, utterly different from the grown woman he had known; even the curve of her body seemed strangely youthful. For him it was a new experience, a new revelation. He seemed to be an intruder in that room which, time and again, she had shared with him; and he was abashed at the thought that he had ever possessed that fair young body.

“Annette!” he called a second time, but more softly now. He bent over her and placed his hand on her shoulder, and she lifted her face from the pillow and looked up at him; and at once the illusion of extreme youth was broken and she was the grown woman once more. Crump turned away from the bed and walked to the window. The look in her eyes had frightened him. In her misery and weakness she had appealed to him; and appealed for pity rather than help. For the first time he realised that she was utterly at his mercy, and that he had it within his power either to spare or destroy her. In a way he felt rather pleased with himself, and very much the dominant male. If he let her go she would sink to the old level, and continue to sink, until the end, although he could not conceive what that end might be. . . . Something before death, he vaguely decided in his own mind, trying hard to shake it free of these

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morbid philosophical speculations. How he hated the world that morning! Even the bedroom seemed dull and drab, and not merely because it was untidy. He remembered with a poignant revulsion of feeling how that there had been a time when her dress flung over the back of a chair would have seemed in his eyes the most beautiful sight in the world! But perhaps he was too worried now to respond to the eloquence of its silent appeal. He could hear Mrs. Meek stirring in the next room, and he thought that he could still detect the faint rasping of the saw from the floor beneath. There was no more privacy in the house; the whole place had become vulgarised, and Annette with it. His eyes remained fixed on the street below. He was quite unaware that Annette, who was now sitting on the edge of the bed, had kept him under close observation throughout the period of his meditations.

“Marko!” she called softly, entreatingly.

“Well, what’s the explanation of all this?”

“Of what?” Her eyes affected enormous surprise.

“What were you and Still up to this morning?” he asked brutally, evading the main issue.

“If you want to know,” she replied indignantly, forgetting that she had set out to win his sympathy by a tremendous emotional dis-

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play, "the game's just about up, Marko. If the letters he showed me are anything to go by you'll have a whole army of women at your heels before many days are out."

"I was quite prepared to hear as much," said Crump calmly. "But that's not all."

"No, that's not all, and if you must know, Still tried to kiss me and I——" She fell to weeping again.

"Go on," said Crump, in full realisation that the storm was at last about to burst.

"I told him that he had better be careful what he was doing because you were going to marry me: because you'd *got* to marry me!" She stood up and faced him. "That's true, isn't it?" she cried, with flashing eyes.

"My dear," murmured Crump, taking her hands in an effort to pacify her. "My dear——"

She flung his hands aside.

"Answer me!" she shouted in a fury. "I've waited, and waited, and waited, and you've said not a word about it!"

"Annette, I don't know what I shall do." Crump dashed his hand to his forehead.

"You—don't—know!" Annette drawled out the words with a terrifying emphasis. "Why don't you know?"

"Because," murmured Crump brokenly, "I'm already married."

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Annette shrieked at the top of her voice, and Mrs. Meek, who had never been far from the other side of the door throughout the interview, rushed into the room, flourishing her broom.

“Get out!” she shouted at Crump. “Get out!” And poured from her lips a stream of abuse. “You in your fine clothes” were the last words he heard. He paused outside the front door to regain his breath, quite unconscious of the excitement his precipitate appearance had caused among the local tradesmen.

“Women—oh, my God—women!” he muttered, and strode rapidly down the street. Outside the first Post Office he came to in Shaftesbury Avenue he stopped, and deeply pondered the situation. Yes, he decided, after all this Millie would be a tremendous relief. . . . He would go home for the night, and this time how willingly! He sent off a telegram. In Piccadilly Circus, although it was daylight, his electric sign was palely flashing. “CONSULT MARCUS FAITHFUL—THE GREAT BIRTH EXPERT!” He looked up at it, and smiled; and his smile was as wan as the sign itself. Even so were his own ambitions flickering out. He felt sure that he had once met a quotation in his desk calendar which would admirably hit off his present situation. “Let proud ambition pause . . .” it began; but he could get no further.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT HYSTERIA

BENNETT, of the *Morning Star*, was gloomily walking up Fleet Street, bound for the Hôtel Grande Riche. For the last three days, according to newspaper reports, Mr. Marcus Faithful had been confined to his room as the result of the excessive strain to which he had been subjected during the past nine months. For the moment the papers were content to leave it at that; but Bennett, who was paid for his work according to the amount of space it occupied in column form, was by no means content with this meagre information. He had retained the liveliest recollection of his first interview with the great man on the day of his arrival in England and he had never forgiven him for the ungrateful attitude he had taken up after its publication. Bennett reflectively pursued his journey past the Law Courts into the Strand. He was determined to get another interview out of the man, and to achieve this object he was prepared to throw out any threat or inducement. He flattered himself that he would be the first to break that great hush of expectancy which seemed to have fallen upon so many thousands of women throughout the country. Half-way up the Strand it occurred to him that he might do

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well to call at Savoy Mansions first; there might be an opportunity of picking up some useful information. He turned off to the left.

He had anticipated that the place would be more or less deserted in the great consultant's absence; instead he found it thronged with a crowd of women in a state of extreme voluble excitement. Outside, a line of stationary cars occupied the whole length of the street; inside, it was hardly possible to gain admittance to the main corridor. Bennett forced his way through the press of women. This was not his first visit to Savoy Mansions, and he knew that at the far end of the corridor there was a door marked *Inquiries*. He was determined to get on the other side of it; he realised that he was on the scent of a first-class sensation. The doors of the reception-rooms were all of them thrown open wide, and every room contributed its tributary flow to the main stream of women. Bennett himself was now in a state of suppressed excitement. He had to fight every inch of the ground he covered, and he did not scruple to use his feet and his elbows. None of the women seemed to mind; none of them paid any attention to him; he might have been an obscure insect burrowing its way through the earth. . . . After a protracted struggle

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his endurance triumphed, and he found himself face to face with the end door. It was locked, of course; he had expected to find it locked. One of the women, rather calmer than the rest, took the trouble to inform him that it was hopeless for him to try and persuade the people inside to open it; but Bennett persisted in his efforts. He thumped on the door and lifted his voice high above the general roar of conversation, without success; and in the desperation of the moment he had some difficulty in restraining himself from attempting to kick in the panels. Finally, he bent down and put his mouth to the key-hole.

“Open this door!” he bawled, and within the limited space at his disposal, charged it with his shoulder. In that same moment the door opened and he found himself precipitated on to the floor of the room. He got up and saw Still, who was standing with his back to the closed door, watching him warily. Bennett swore softly and rubbed his elbow.

“You don’t remember me,” he said pleasantly.

“Yes, I do. You’re a reporter from the *Morning Star*.” Still was a little breathless himself and his tone was slightly contemptuous. Bennett’s sudden entry had considerably shaken his equanimity and he was undecided as to what attitude he had better adopt. “If

I'd known it was you," he added, "this door would never have been opened."

"I quite believe that," replied Bennett with sympathetic interest. "And now, may we have a little talk? And do you mind if I sit down?"

"Sit down, and be damned to you," said Still ferociously.

"Thank you." Bennett took a seat and comfortably settled his long limbs. He was thoroughly enjoying himself. He foresaw at least one whole column to himself in the next day's paper; he was already turning over in his mind the luscious titles, sub-titles, and cross-headings. "Sensation at Savoy Mansions—Anxious women besiege the doors—Where is Marcus Faithful?" He earnestly desired that he might find the bird flown by the time he reached the Hôtel Grande Riche.

"And now," said Bennett, "perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what's the meaning of all this. Of course," he added significantly, "you will realise that my position, as a member of the Press, is a little difficult. However, within the limits of my duty to the public—"

"Enough of that," interrupted Still brusquely. "There's nothing the matter except that all these women have got the wind up badly; a sort of general hysteria," he added vaguely. He sat down at his table

and gloomily surveyed a disorderly pile of unopened orange envelopes. He casually picked up one from the heap and threw it across to Bennett.

“Open it,” he said. Bennett tore open the envelope and read out aloud the telegraphic message: “Suspense terrible, but hope not to be disappointed. Any further instructions?”

“They’re all much alike,” commented Still. “And as for answering them . . .” He threw out his hands with a gesture of despair.

“But this is reply paid,” protested Bennett.

“Then give the form to me.” Still took it and scrawled across it: “The Marcus Faithful treatment has never been known to fail.” “I ought to have a rubber stamp for this job,” he added. The telephone receiver was not on its rest and Bennett casually replaced it. Instantly the bell sprang to life and Still visibly blanched.

“Take it off!” he shouted. “The thing has nearly driven me crazy already!”

“I think I’d better be going,” remarked Bennett thoughtfully. “This appears to be no place for me—nor for you,” he added obliquely. “By the way, things appear to be rather quieter outside.” He turned the key and gingerly opened the door. “Well!” he gasped, and stepped back in blank astonishment. There was not a soul in the corridor

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and not a murmur from any of the rooms.

“Where the devil have they all got to?”

“Good-morning, Mr. Bennett.”

It was Crump, in appearance as immaculate as ever, composed in manner, with a formidable look in his eyes.

“But, sir,” stammered Bennett, “how on earth did you do it?”

“That, I think,” said Crump sternly, “is my own business. And might I ask what you are doing here?”

“I only wanted to make a few inquiries, Mr. Faithful.”

“Good-morning, Mr. Bennett,” boomed Crump. “You ought to be aware by now that I never grant interviews. And I think,” he added, as Bennett turned to go, “that you would do well to preserve a discreet silence as to anything you may have noticed on your visit here this morning.” Crump walked into Still’s room and shut the door. “And I think too,” he went on, “that I have managed to restrain that young man’s rather dangerous ardour.” He paused, and then asked sharply: “Where’s Annette?”

“Working in her own room, so far as I know.” He pointed to the pile of telegrams on the table. “Dealing with this sort of thing,” he added, rather lugubriously.

“I understand,” murmured Crump. He

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walked up to Still and put his hand on his shoulder. "Don't you worry, Still," he went on. "You and Annette have been wonderful. I'm making all arrangements for the future."

He walked out into the corridor and tapped on the door of Annette's room. They had not met since their last tempestuous encounter at Great Russell Street, and Annette, when she turned in her chair and saw him, gravely rose and said, with a curl of her perfect lip:

"Good-morning—Mr. Faithful."

"Don't, Annette," he entreated her, "don't!"

"Then what is it, Marko?" She remained standing. He felt that he was an entire stranger to this aloof and unattainable woman. . . . He fumbled with his cuffs and tried to meet her challenging eyes. Was this indeed, he asked himself, the end of his romance?

"Annette," he began awkwardly, "Annette, I'm sorry that I never told you——" He broke off; the words refused to come to his lips. This *was* the end, and the full realisation shattered him. He was going back to Maze Hill Road, and to Millie. Millie of the green apron and the gaunt figure and the dull prosaic garments! This was good-bye to Annette, the dainty and lovely creature who had been his playmate for an hour! He dashed a tear from his eye.

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“ I can't let you go like this, Annette,” he cried appealingly. “ And there are so many things I want to explain to you!”

“ All right, Marko,” she replied, as if she were a little weary of the whole business, “ you can call for me to-night—usual time,” she added, and gave him half a smile.

On his way out Crump put his head inside Still's door. Still was leaning back in his chair with both feet on the table, staring into vacancy. It occurred to Crump that, during the past few days, his secretary's manner had lost its customary deference. However, he was too worried to trouble about these details; and he asked himself what else could he expect? After all, what were they but a couple of conspirators? Now that Annette had broken with him he was beginning to see things in their true light.

“ Still,” he said peremptorily, “ we can hold out another day. To-morrow we'll settle up. If you want me I shall be at the hotel.”

In the corridor two women pounced on him and cried in unison:

“ Oh, Mr. Faithful! Mr. Faithful!”

“ Don't you see I'm ill?” shouted Crump angrily, and wrenching his arms free, told them that his secretary would see them; and, for the last time, in the guise of the great Marcus Faithful, made his exit from Savoy Mansions.

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The rest of the morning and the whole of that afternoon he remained shut up in his sitting-room at the hotel. He had a great deal to think about, but he was beyond the point of worrying. Besides, his plans were now pretty well complete. He calculated that the green-enamelled safe now contained the tidy sum of eighteen thousand pounds, at the minimum. Well, whatever it was, he would divide it into three parts. On this basis he would be able to take his share of the proceeds with a perfectly clear conscience. With six thousand pounds he would be able to give Millie that long-promised holiday abroad, buy her that house on the Heath, give her a motor-car and a couple of house-maids, and generally start life over again. It might be a little difficult to explain to Millie precisely how this windfall had come about. However, she would believe anything of Paris; and a man might credibly perform miracles in that incredible city. . . . There was the further question to be considered: what was he to do with his life when this episode was over? He began to contemplate the possibility of setting up a little business for himself somewhere in the region of Ludgate Circus. One room and a clerk would suffice for his purpose. He closed his eyes and could see quite plainly his name freshly painted on the glass-panelled

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door: "DAVID CRUMP, Agent for Advertisers." Occasionally he would send Denning an order for space in the *Morning Star*, and abuse him thoroughly if the position accorded it were not a good one. . . . The idea of this amused him hugely. He would keep his own books, gravely interview his own clients, give weighty decisions on the choice of media . . . and in the summer evenings Millie would meet him at Blackheath station with the car. The car! His bosom swelled with pride at the thought and the name. A car of his own was one of the few things that Marcus Faithful had not possessed during his tenure of office. Yes, Crump decided, life would be very pleasant in the days to come, and thrilling in a quiet way. He opened his eyes, and the vision faded; there was an insistent knocking at the door.

"Mr. Bennett of the *Morning Star* to see you, sir; and he says that he *must* see you."

Crump rose from his chair. He had come down to earth again, with a bump. What did this further visit portend? Did this man intend to blow him sky-high in the columns of his paper? He didn't see how he could, at the moment; but he would take no risks. Another twelve or fifteen hours must elapse before another issue of the *Morning Star* could burst upon the universe. Crump smiled

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to himself, cunningly, satirically. He turned to the man at the door.

“Give Mr. Bennett my compliments,” he said, “and tell him to go to hell.” And to himself he murmured, as the door closed: “Anyway, that just about settles it.”

He went up to the bureau and wrote a note to Still, warning him to make all preparations for instant departure and to meet Annette at Savoy Mansions first thing the following morning. A sudden gaiety filled Crump's troubled soul. He rejoiced to think that, when he left it that evening, the Hôtel Grande Riche would know him no more. He was amazed to find that he was taking farewell of its scenes of luxury and comfort without a murmur of regret. The quiet, carpeted corridors which at first had thrilled him were now but a desolate splendour; even the epicurean food had begun to pall. In the old days his breakfast bacon had taken the most direct route possible from the frying-pan to his plate and arrived there in a state of sizzling freshness; the bacon he got at the Hôtel Grande Riche was not the same article. Certainly it was bacon, but bacon dressed in its Sunday best; the handsome equipment in which it was served seemed to get in the way of his full enjoyment of the entombed rashers; and he was already looking forward to a nearer

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acquaintance with the frying-pan in the days to come. His eyes wandered round the room. Not a solitary thing in it belonged to him; he was only its occupant. . . . Home! His heart expanded at the thought of home. Home was the place where he could place his hands on the furniture, plant his feet on the hearth-rug, and lift his eyes to the walls, and say, "All these are mine!" And, of course, Millie too was part of the picture; Millie, in fact, would always be a part of the picture. . . . He frowned a little; he had not previously reviewed the situation in quite this light. There would be no Annette in all the years to come; no more visits to the room over the carpenter's shop in Great Russell Street; no more dinners, theatres, suppers, taxi-rides with Annette. Just Millie—and home! But his face relaxed at the thought of the child that was to be born to her. Not till now had he begun to realise all that this child might mean to him; while under the domination of Annette he had never even directly associated it with his own future; indeed, he had never had time to think about the future; he had been afraid to think about the future. The position was different now: his thoughts were turning to the future for consolation and relief. His own child! A smile flickered around his lips, a joyless,

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doubtful smile. . . . He had not forgotten that Annette too was going to have a baby. It was her baby, though; never had he been able to regard it as his own; it had merely represented yet a further complication in his private affairs: an additional responsibility which, rather unfairly, she had thrust upon him. But there, the fact remained that she was going to have a baby, and the further point was that he had not the faintest idea what she proposed to do with it, when it arrived; and he had no suggestions to offer. Gloom once more descended upon Crump's emancipated spirit, whose divided allegiance wrecked his peace of mind. He felt that he was suspended between two existences, not yet being free of the one or in full possession of the other.

"God knows who I am," he groaned, and walked into his bedroom, and peeped into his dressing-room. There was nothing in either of them that he wanted to take away with him; in fact, there was nothing that he could take away with him. The suits, the shirts, the socks and the shoes of the great Marcus Faithful would never be suitable apparel for plain Mr. Crump; Still could take the lot, and Crump decided to tell him so in a post-script to the note he had just written. For the last time his eyes roamed the spacious

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bedroom, the scene of so many pleasant awakenings. Never again in the early morning would he hear the curtains at the tall windows softly drawn by unseen hands; never again would he emerge from a delicious state of drowsy slumber and find waiting on the table beside his bed the familiar dainty teapot, stamped with the proud insignia of the *Hôtel Grande Riche* and containing a reviving aromatic brew, together with a few chaste slices of bread and butter, cut so miraculously thin that they were neither bread nor butter, but a perfect and indissoluble union of the two; never again would he sink back on the voluptuous pillow, lulled to further repose by the murmurous sound of running waters from the adjoining bathroom. Never again! Never again! Solemnly and quietly Crump closed the door. When, five minutes later, he walked up to the lift, he carried with him only his coat and his hat.

Bennett was sitting in the lounge downstairs, and only missed seeing him as the result of a momentary lapse from vigilance. After thus narrowly escaping detection Crump hardly dared to breathe until he was lost in the safe obscurity of the crowded pavements in the Strand. The knowledge that Bennett was still continuing his investigations served to strengthen his resolve not to wait a day longer

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before making his final exodus. If he were not disturbed in his plans he would have vanished from the face of the earth by the following morning. "Yes, it shall be to-night," murmured Crump exultantly, "to-night!" He called a taxi, and before he entered it glanced fearfully at the faces near him. Not a sign of Bennett! He sank back in his seat and expanded with relief. He told himself that he was acting like a fool; that there was no immediate cause for apprehension; that Bennett, as yet, had not a particle of evidence he could use against him in the columns of the *Morning Star*. All to no purpose! He became obsessed with the notion that, at the last moment, he might find his way of escape closed. He was still shuddering at the thought of such a catastrophe when the taxi turned into Great Russell Street.

He found himself at the top of the staircase and outside her door before he had made up his mind what to say to her. He had told her that there were many things he wanted to explain. There was nothing to explain: only a confession to make! Was he to confess to her that he had emerged from the dense obscurity of Greenwich? Was he to confess to her that he was not merely an impostor in his work, but in his person also? Was he to confess to her that this wife of his was a dull,

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respectable, virtuous woman who, like millions of other suburban women, passed the whole of her existence on the approved domestic plan? An appallingly realistic vision of Millie in her green apron confronted him even as he turned the handle of Annette's green-painted door. He determined to offer no explanations and to make no confessions; he would keep up his imposture to the bitter end.

"Hullo Marko!" Her voice was weary, listless, and he realised in a flash that she was no longer interested in him, although she was making an effort to be kind. He noticed that she had not troubled to change her workaday clothes; and he painfully reflected that there had been a time when she had dressed to please him and to minister to his vanity as well as her own. He sat down without a word and miserably surveyed the familiar objects in the room. They were familiar enough to him, but he had an uneasy feeling that he was a stranger in their midst; that he had no right to be there. At last she broke the silence.

"Well, Marko, I suppose that we are just about played out."

"How do you mean?" A foolish question! But anything was better than silence. "You mean——?"

"I mean," she replied, speaking very

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slowly, "you, and I, and Savoy Mansions—everything!"

"I suppose so."

"And is that all you've got to say to me, Marko?" There was just a hint of the old raillery in her tone.

"I suppose so. No, no, Annette," he added hastily, and again broke off. Apparently there was nothing he could say; his brain was dazed and he wanted to rush from the room and dwell for ever in outer darkness; but his limbs were incapable of movement; he could only sit and stare.

"Marko," she said abruptly, as if divining his thoughts, "there's no need to worry about explanations. I don't want to hear them. And now, aren't you going to take me out to dinner?"

Crump just nodded his head; he looked as if he might at any moment break into tears; no spectacle on earth could have been more lugubrious. Annette rose lightly to her feet.

"I thought," she said, "that because this will be the last evening we shall spend together——" She broke off, seeing that the hint was altogether unnecessary; she had only wished to make sure. "Just an ordinary sort of place," she added quickly. "And—I don't want to be late back. I'm very tired. The strain, you know."

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“Of me?” asked Crump, at last finding utterance and striving valiantly for an effect of ferocious good-humour.

“No,” said Annette, but without much conviction. “The work.”

“The women,” corrected Crump, with terrific emphasis, “the women!”

The next two and the last remaining hours of his new life he passed like a man in a dream. They dined together in a quiet restaurant of her own choosing; but he was quite unconscious of his surroundings, unconscious of the food that was set before him, unconscious of the words that fell from his lips. He was just a piece of human mechanism which, somehow or other, managed to keep going more from habit than his own volition. Body and soul were severed; he was a disembodied spirit, perilously suspended between two existences; the woman who faced him on the other side of the table belonged to another world, a world incredibly remote. It was as if he had never known her!

“It’s no good, Annette,” he murmured—and now even her name seemed strange on his lips—“we’d better be going.”

They went; and thus it was that Crump bade farewell to life as he had known it in his short hour of triumph. The feast was finished; the lamp had expired.

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“I should like to walk,” she said, and Crump agreed to walk, and was glad of her choice: a walk would make it easier for them both.

It was early yet, and London was only just settling down to its evening enjoyment. This, he reflected bitterly, was the hour of the day to which he had looked forward, for which he had lived, all these months past. It consoled him nothing to know that Annette still walked by his side; it was like walking with the dead. The whole world had turned to dust and ashes.

At the corner of Great Russell Street she paused; it was her signal to him to say good-bye and it took him by surprise. Surely she intended to ask him what arrangements he proposed to make for her future, and for the future of the child that was to be born to her; or did she expect to see him to-morrow? He smiled grimly: there would be no to-morrow; the man she knew—Marcus Faithful, the great consultant, the sensation of the year—would be dead before morning.

“But,” he stammered, “we’re not going to say good-bye—like this?”

“Won’t it be best?” She watched him with serious eyes from beneath the brim of her hat, and held out her hand.

“But what are you going to do—after-

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wards?" His heart was beating wildly, and the knowledge that the actual moment of parting had arrived numbed every other thought and feeling.

"You will hear, later," she said. He did not reply, and she went on: "Well, Marko, you may never see me again! But we've had a good time together, and I don't grumble, and you mustn't."

He gripped the hand she still held out to him.

"I shall remember you always, Annette," he murmured with trembling lips; and then pulled himself erect and gave sudden and brave expression to the words that stirred in the deeps of his soul.

"It was magnificent," he said, "while it lasted!"

But she had released his hand and was gone. She was lost to him, finally, irrevocably! He watched her slight form with straining eyes until it became but one among the many shadows that crossed the street; and again Crump dashed a tear from his eye.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE EVE

THE caretaker and his wife at Savoy Mansions occupied three or four rooms on the top floor of the building. In two important respects the caretaker had been singularly unfortunate in his choice of a wife: she was an exceedingly light sleeper and much given to the promulgation of false alarms, particularly on chilly nights. The condition of incipient wakefulness in which she slept might have been an advantage had not her hearing been so preternaturally acute that she was able to detect non-existent noises. To-night was one of her bad nights—as her husband was shortly to discover—and towards one o'clock in the morning she raised herself on one elbow and gave her snoring spouse a terrific thump on the shoulder.

“I heard something, John,” she whispered hoarsely. “Get up.”

John got up; at least, he allowed himself to be pushed out of bed; he had long ago discovered that the position was totally untenable whenever his wife had persuaded herself that she had “heard something.” He gave his customary growl of scepticism as he slipped into the woolly garment he kept in readiness for these midnight tours, and shuffled out of the room.

“ John, you’ve got your keys all right?” But her loud whisper did not reach him; or if, indeed, it did, he pretended not to hear it. John, in fact, had not troubled to carry his keys with him on these nocturnal expeditions for years past; it was one of the few minor deceptions which, so far, he had successfully practised upon his wife. She would find it out one day, of course, and there would be the very devil to pay. However—“ Confound the woman!” he growled, peering over the rail on the top landing. Of course there was nothing wrong; there never was anything wrong; once a week regularly, for the past fifteen years, he had been expelled from the warmth of the connubial couch to prosecute these wild-goose chases. He cursed her again, as loud as he dared. Should he proceed downstairs, or should he not? It was an old query, to which he invariably returned the same answer: he always did proceed downstairs, for the very simple reason that, had he not done so, his wife would have sent him back to finish the job. He continued the descent to the floors below. They were none of them in darkness, a certain amount of light from the street lamps penetrating the main windows, so that he never had occasion to make use of an electric torch. Besides, he could have carried out this tour of inspection in his sleep;

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often did, indeed, to all intents and purposes. He made not the slightest effort to walk stealthily; there was, after all, a limit beyond which he was not prepared to go in this matter of humouring his wife's fondness for "hearing something" in the small hours of the morning. He had exhausted his stock of maledictions by the time he reached the bend in the staircase that led on to the first floor landing and was about to call upon the Almighty for further assistance, when he stopped, stopped dead. He could have sworn that there was a line of light beneath one of the doors at the far end of the corridor. There was not a sign of it now; not a glimmer of light beyond the few pale beams that found their way into the building from the lamps in the street below. He crept up to the door and tried the handle, and listened. Not a sound, not a murmur.

"Getting as bad as the old woman herself," he growled, and plodded his way upstairs again.

"Everything all right, John?"

He grunted assent.

"You went down to the bottom?"

"I did." And he pulled over his head as many of the bed-clothes as his wife was prepared to forgo. Three minutes later he was still awake: an unprecedented occurrence. He knew that he was not prone to hallucinations

and he could not get the thought of that supposed light out of his mind. He wished now that he had taken his keys with him. However, he decided that were he to go back he would never hear the last of it, and he therefore composed himself to slumber.

In point of fact John had not been deceived, nor had his wife. There had been a light in the room on the first floor, and the person responsible for putting it on, and off, not long before had stumbled badly at one of the polished corners of the wooden staircase. That person was Crump; and had John been in possession of his bunch of keys he would have found Crump, the great Marcus Faithful himself, cowering behind the door of his own room. He would have been even more astonished had he been in a position to observe his operations.

Crump, on the eve of his flight into obscurity and preparatory to his act of self-extinction, was clearing up. The contents of two of the safes in Still's room lay scattered on the carpet; the contents of Still's drawers were strewn over the table. Crump was clearing up with a vengeance. The cards comprising Still's elaborate card-index system had been heaped together on the capacious chair in front of the table; only an enormous expenditure of ingenuity and patience could have restored these cards to their pristine order.

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Crump, in fact, appeared to have made a dead set at these innocent pieces of pasteboard. In his eyes they were far from innocent; every one of them carried the name of a client, the address of that client, the time of her visit or inquiry, and, more often than not, a few remarks concerning her personal affairs, with particular reference to her financial resources. This record has been in Still's own keeping, and Crump, having at last had occasion to examine it, was appalled by the extent of its information. It was a second *Doomsday Book*, confined, however, to the female sex. Crump had imagined that Still's inquiries regarding the patrons of the establishment were nothing more than the outcome of idle curiosity; but in this assumption he had done Still a grave injustice. It was not curiosity, but supreme devotion to method and systemisation that was responsible for this remarkable compilation. Crump picked up one of the cards at random. The name and address of the person concerned were entered up in block capitals, and Still, in spidery handwriting, had noted the following details: "Age about 32; lower middle class; wants a boy; husband on the weak side apparently; not surprised; wife doesn't look the sort of person to encourage effort. Pretty well off; paid five guineas without a murmur. Worth following up."

There were hundreds of such entries, some of them obscene, most of them cynical, all of them informative. In the aggregate they made distressing reading. Still had noted against a large proportion of the names the two letters M.C. Crump, coming upon a bunch of the earlier entries, found that they were an abbreviation for "morbid curiosity," Still, apparently, having grown weary of writing out the words in full. The M.C. sign appeared most frequently among the better-class entries; another sign, S.S., was devoted almost exclusively to the less wealthy applicants. Crump wondered what it could stand for. "Simple soul" suggested itself; but he was unable to discover conclusive evidence on this point. He also wondered how on earth Still proposed to follow up those people whom he had marked down for this purpose. Had he in mind some subtle form of blackmail? or some new idea to exploit? Crump, although he had never seen cause to be reminded of it, had not forgotten Still's earlier mode of life, and the recollection opened up a dreadful vista of possibilities. . . . Crump sighed; the mystery would have to go unsolved; Still and he were never to meet again.

But on one point Crump was absolutely determined: these records should never fall into the hands of unscrupulous persons: he was

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resolved to do the right thing by his *clientèle*. He began to make preparations for a grand holocaust, piling ledgers—the ledgers over which Still had spent laborious hours—receipts, accounts, pass-books, letters—these in batches of a hundred, alphabetically arranged—and the entire contents of the card-index—all these he piled on an enormous rug in the center of the room. This done he paused to take breath: so much bending down was exhausting work. He next removed his coat, turned back the stiff white cuffs of his shirt, and sat down to take stock of the situation. It would have been a simple matter to have set a match to the pile as the readiest means of destruction; but Crump very quickly gave up the idea as being impracticable. Nor did the gas fire offer much assistance: it would have taken days to have consumed this mountain of documents one at a time. They could, of course, have been safely stowed away in half a dozen cabin trunks; but it so happened that Mr. Marcus Faithful's cabin trunks were stored at the Hôtel Grande Riche—and were likely to remain there until the day should come when, along with other unclaimed luggage, they would be sold to defray expenses. Besides, how could he have disposed of half a dozen cabin trunks full of scandalous, dangerous and incriminating records? With such

variegated evidence of the frailty of human nature and the depths of feminine credulity in his possession he would have been a haunted man for the rest of his days. There was, certainly, a little-used attic at home, but the mere thought of Millie one day unearthing this mass of correspondence so overwhelmed him that he jumped wildly from his chair and embarked on an agitated promenade up and down the room. It was at this moment that he thought he heard the shuffling of feet on the stairs.

Crump kept his presence of mind and acted with lightning rapidity. He leapt to the switch and turned off the light. At the sudden flash of darkness he gasped with relief; he felt safe in the dark; the room had gone back to normal; but he shivered again when the handle of the door turned in its socket. Thank God he had locked the door as a precautionary measure—which appeared to be utterly superfluous at the time—before setting about the business of the night. A wicked little smile of satisfaction played around Crump's trembling lips, though in the darkness there was none to see it. The footsteps retreated, and died away.

For at least ten minutes Crump made no movement; his fingers continued to grasp the base of the switch; his mouth remained half open, ready, it seemed, to drink in the slightest sound. But now the whole building was

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quiet; over the Strand itself a mighty hush had descended; and in the prevailing universal silence Crump began to wonder whether his nerves had not practised some deception upon him. Cautiously he unlocked and opened the door. A soft aura of light from the street hung over the corridor and the landing; the peace that enshrouded it seemed too deep, too secure, ever to have been disturbed; and something of its quality entered Crump's own soul.

He aroused himself with an effort. The night was slipping away, and so far he had done little or nothing. Somehow or other he was determined to destroy every scrap of documentary evidence that related to the Marcus Faithful régime; but for the life of him he could not see how it was to be done. He racked his brain with thinking. Before dawn broke he intended to be some considerable distance from Savoy Mansions; by that time too he had to dispose of the mortal remains of Marcus Faithful: an easy matter this, since it resolved itself into getting rid of a suit of clothes and a few other details of costume. Another quarter of an hour passed, and still he had come to no decision regarding the mess on the floor. Panic seized him, and in his anxiety to get on with the job he started to cram handfuls of the papers into Still's capacious

waste-paper basket. It was soon overflowing, without making any appreciable difference to the size of the pile. Dispiritedly Crump rose from his knees and, with the basket clasped in both arms, drifted out of the room.

It was the sight of the two radiators in the corridor that gave him an idea. He felt them and found them still quite hot; obviously, somewhere in the depths of the building there was a furnace, and, moreover, that furnace was burning. He explored. On the ground floor he found a smaller staircase leading to the basement, and in the basement, which appeared to be given over to storage purposes, he found yet another staircase, provided with a door at the top entrance. This door he opened expectantly and thrust forward his head into the darkness. His nostrils dilated: a most acceptable smell of burning filled the air, which was warm and stale. He felt his way down the stairs and halted again on the floor level. In the far corner he was just able to detect a circle of light thrown out by the red glow of a fire: it was the furnace, and now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness he was able to make out its black and ugly shape quite plainly. Careless of the sound of his footsteps on the stone-tiled floor he walked over to it and examined it. His face lit up: the problem was solved: that fiery

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interior could be relied upon to consume a small library in the twinkling of an eye. He shot the contents of the waste-paper basket through the opening in the top, and a minute later only a few smouldering embers remained. The flickering light from the flames played over Crump's absorbed features, making him look like some dreadful ghoul of the night superintending his demoniac rites.

He climbed to the first floor again, his heart as light as the basket he carried; but this sudden elevation of spirit was succeeded by an equal depression when he once more found himself confronted by the heap of stuff awaiting removal. The basket shrank to pitifully small proportions; he saw himself making one thousand and one journeys up and down those stairs—an impossible state of affairs. He viciously flung the basket into one corner and not for the first time deeply pondered the situation. The rug which now lay submerged under a sea of papers was huge and heavy; it would be a hefty load in itself; on the other hand, it was square and its capacity was sufficient for his purpose. Clumsily he pulled up its four corners, grasping them, with a mighty effort, in both hands. After a moment's pause to take breath he planted his feet firmly on the ground, bent his back, and swung round the burden on to his shoulders.

His knees felt as if they might give way at any moment; but determination of spirit triumphed over the limitations of the body, and blindly, breathlessly, he staggered out of the room. He slid rather than walked down the various flights of stairs; he was only conscious of the fact that, somehow or other, he was going round and down; and he recovered from a waking nightmare to find himself in a heap in front of the furnace. The rug had dropped from his numbed fingers, distributing its contents in all directions over the stone floor. Crump ruefully surveyed the havoc and sympathetically rubbed the bruises on his arms where he had bumped them in the course of his desperate passage.

But he had no time to indulge in self-condolence; the night was wearing on and, whatever happened, he had to be out of Savoy Mansions some time before dawn. He set to work with a will. Using his arms as a kind of shovel he scooped fluttering clouds of white paper into the glowing orifice of the furnace, and continued to cram it with unremitting and unmitigated ferocity until not a scrap of paper remained around the stoke-hole. He paused in his labours and listened to the consuming roar from within as if it were earth's divinest music. When it began to subside his mind once more sprang to attention; his work

was not yet done. He folded up the rug, carefully inspected every corner of the staircases and landings for any fragments that had escaped the main holocaust and, finding none, returned to the room and locked the door. It was with a very solemn face that he searched in his pockets for the key to all his fortune: the key of the green-enamelled safe. He was solemn because he was about to enact the last scene of all in the meteoric career of the renowned Marcus Faithful. He inserted the key in the lock, paused in the hush of expectation, and turned it; and the door swung open.

“ God!”

The word fell from Crump's lips lighter than a breath and a look of complete incredulity crept into and filled his staring eyes. At first sight the safe appeared to be quite empty, and it was not until several seconds had elapsed that Crump realised that on one of the shelves—which, a few days before, to his certain knowledge had been loaded with wealth—a small bundle of bank-notes remained. He mournfully examined them under the light. On the outside note Still had scrawled a message in his thin, small handwriting: “ Approx. £6,000—your share—Annette insisted—best of luck—so long, Marko!”

Crump read through this highly abbreviated announcement time and again. He did not

pause to consider whether or no Still had correctly apportioned his share of the proceeds; he was beyond caring about Still's impertinent usage of Annette's pet name for himself; he did not burn with resentment at this forestalling of his plans—for it was impossible to regard this procedure on the part of Still as being an act of pure treachery: what fascinated him was the cryptic remark—"Annette insisted." What did it mean? What was he to infer? Had Annette flown too—with Still? The thought scorched him, and it was only with an effort that he roused himself to stuff the bundle in his pocket and slam the door of the safe. The door shut with the violence of a pistol shot and the noise of it instantly restored his mental balance. He cursed himself for a careless fool and anxiously awaited developments. Nothing stirred, and he breathed again. He took a final glance round the room. He had made a clean sweep of it; nothing in the shape of documentary evidence remained to connect it up with the occupation of Marcus Faithful. As a last precaution he removed from the table the used sheets of blotting-paper and crushed them into his coat pocket, and passed through the intercommunicating door into his own room.

Here there was nothing to burn, nothing to remove, not a trace of his to obliterate. The

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heavy tomes in the bookcase had remained undisturbed through all these months, and for all he cared might remain undisturbed to the end of time: no evidence as to the true nature of his recent activities could be gleaned from them. Ten thousand investigators might examine every detail of the room for ten thousand years, and be not a whit the wiser; and almost for the first time that night Crump smiled, a cunning, satisfied little smile, born on the verge of the mouth and the eyes, but never extending much further. It had occurred to him to wonder what would happen could walls but speak. . . . But he had now less time than ever for these fanciful considerations, and he resolutely marched across to the bookcase and unlocked the concealed drawer at the foot of it. Tenderly, even timorously, Crump drew forth the only object it contained: the old and battered suit-case, the inseparable companion of his earlier days. He opened it and turned it upside down. A medley of garments flopped on to the table, the earthly apparel of Mr. Crump, complete to the last detail of the stud in the shirt-collar. He disrobed and, divested of his fine clothes and his equally fine linen, stood, for one dreadful moment, naked to the world. A moment later he had definitely crossed the border-line between his two existences, enduing that under-vest

which had passed through the turmoil of Mrs. Crump's wash-tub on innumerable occasions. Five minutes later the transformation was complete: the last remaining vestiges of the great Marcus Faithful resided in a heap of garments that lay tumbling at the feet of this startling and yet not unfamiliar apparition. What was left over from the first pile—a spare shirt and under-vest; a collar or so, all more or less dirty; his old rather Spartan toilet equipment, conspicuous for the cut-throat razor which, one morning, so very long ago, he had so lovingly fingered, and the somewhat leaky bottle of yellow hair-oil—all these he bundled back into the suit-case.

He was now ready for flight, or very nearly ready: he had yet to dispose of the mortal vestments of his predecessor. Having transferred the wad of bank-notes into the inside pocket of his old coat, he gathered up the débris and descended to the stoke-hole. On the way down he spared a glance for the outside windows. The light from the street lamps still cast a sheen over them, but its character, even as he looked, seemed to be changing. Dawn was about to break, if indeed it had not already broken. Panic again seized his limbs and paralysed thought. For the moment he was possessed of only one desire, and that was to be rid of the incriminating

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bundle of clothes he carried. With a fierce joy he fed the hungry furnace, resisting without difficulty the temptation to empty the pockets first. Into the new world which he was about to enter—or to which he was to return—he would carry nothing that did not belong to him by prescriptive right. Not a vestige should Marcus Faithful leave on the track of time! Crump flung a boot into the raging fire. The smell of burning leather nauseated him, but he did not care; so long as it was consumed he would be content. But the other boot? The devil! He must have left it upstairs. . . . Up he went again, three at a time. The boot was lying on the first-floor landing; in his excitement he had failed to hear it drop. He snatched it from the ground and turned back to the staircase, without pausing in his impetuous career; but at the top of the staircase he pulled himself up with a jerk and with a look of terrified surmise sniffed the air. The smell of burning leather was rising in great waves from the depth of the building; he could almost see them, feel them, as they passed; and they were evermore rising, rising. He fled back to his room. Already the fumes had penetrated every nook and cranny of it. He was now incapable of considered action; he assumed that, by now, the fumes must have reached the top of the

building, if not heaven itself. . . . He rammed the odd boot into the suit-case, and without so much as a farewell glance round the room in which he had been born to fame and affluence, completed the evacuation of Savoy Mansions, to all eternity, within the space of five seconds. In the Strand a newspaper van flashed past him. At the rear of it, in the mingled light of dawn and an electric standard, he just had time and light enough to read the contents bill of that day's issue of the *Morning Star*: "SENSATION AT SAVOY MANSIONS." A second van flashed past: "SENSATION AT SAVOY MANSIONS" was the message it held in readiness for a still sleeping universe; and a third and a fourth and a fifth and a sixth, all of them bearing their thousands of copies to enliven the jaded minds of their million readers.

Crump shuddered. He was still shuddering when, on the steps of the Embankment near Westminster Bridge, fearfully but unobserved, he dropped into the grey swirling waters the boot of the illustrious dead.

CHAPTER XIX

RESURRECTION MORNING

MRS. MEEK'S delight was tinged with melancholy. Annette had left Great Russell Street—for good, she had said, and Mrs. Meek believed her; and much as she would have liked to have seen her mistress again, Mrs. Meek tearfully confessed to herself that it was perhaps better not. . . . For Annette had left behind her what was, in Mrs. Meek's estimation, a glorious heritage: to wit, the tenancy and occupation, in her absence, of the rooms in Great Russell Street, for at least three years, not forgetting the use of the furniture. Should she take it into her head to return to the country at any time, anything might happen: certainly the highly attractive prospect now held out before Mrs. Meek's enchanted eyes would be rudely disturbed. Mrs. Meek, in fact, was already envisaging the accumulation of great wealth; she was on this, the very morning after Annette's departure, laboriously but patiently engaged on the production of a notice intended to read: "FURNISHED APARTMENTS FOR A SINGLE GENTLEMAN." She had made use of some of Annette's chinks for the purpose, and used them in the greatest possible variety; a few twirls, impartially distributed throughout the script, put the finishing touches to what was,

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in her opinion, a notice not less attractive than the apartments offered; without the evidence of her own eyes she would never have believed herself capable of such artistic achievement. Proudly she bore it to the window.

The card lodged on the window-ledge to Mrs. Meek's entire satisfaction; her only regret was that she was unable to tell precisely how well it looked from the street level; and although she had courage enough for most things in this world, she did not quite like the idea of going out into the street in her present attire in order to make the desired inspection. It could, of course, be done surreptitiously, but there was always the risk of an unwelcome encounter with the green-grocer, or the dairyman, or some of the other even more impudent tradesmen further down the street. As it was, they would have quite enough to say on the subject of this change-over when the facts came out; and that, as she well knew, wouldn't take long. She decided that she would do well to curb her impatience and wait until she was properly dressed for a perfectly legitimate shopping expedition. And then the miracle happened.

There was the usual sort of traffic passing down the street—the usual mixture of theatre people, itinerant tradesmen, messenger-boys,

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an occasional leisurely member of the police force, and a good sprinkling of business men whose work began at the aristocratic hour of ten in the morning. None of this hurrying throng—and, of course, she was not contemplating a police officer as a tenant for her very desirable apartments—had time to pay any attention to some artistic production at a first-class window; nor was she the sort of person to indulge unreasonable expectations. She was prepared to wait a week or a fortnight before she caught her man. But—a miracle!

A man had not merely halted beneath her windows; he was surveying her notice with an interest and an intensity which surpassed her own. He was positively drinking in the intelligence it conveyed; his eyes never relaxed their profound scrutiny. A lively warmth suffused Mrs. Meek's ample bosom, and it was with considerable reluctance that she resisted the temptation to lean from the window and invite him to come in. She refrained, for two reasons: she had a proper sense of the dignity of a lodging-house keeper, and on reflection she was not at all certain that this was the type of man she was after. It was sufficiently obvious that he was looking for rooms: apart from the interest he displayed in the notice, she found conclusive evidence in the suit-case he held at his side. No, it

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was by no means a handsome piece of luggage: come to that, you couldn't get much luggage at all into a case that size, oh no. Such was Mrs. Meek's unspoken comment. And the man's clothes: they too weren't up to much, oh no: looked, in fact, as if they had recently been put through a mangle. No, Mrs. Meek was not impressed. On the other hand, she was the last person in the world to refuse good money—if she once got sight of it; and, as she well knew, some of these fine gentlemen were rotten bad payers. . . . Mrs. Meek discreetly and prudently decided to withhold judgment. Her motto in this world always had been, "You never know." She left the window and composed herself for the next move. A touch here and there, a brisk rub down of her face with her apron and, with hands clasped over the abdomen, she was ready for all eventualities.

She had not long to wait. A thin voice came from below:

"Is anyone here, please?"

"Come up," she cried, flinging wide the door. He came, and as he climbed the stairs she closely regarded him. The man had a nice homely sort of face; he did not look as if he drank to excess; and if his clothes weren't too good-looking there was nothing the matter with the stuff they were made of. In an

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imaginative flight she saw herself offering, gratis and for nothing, to press the poor dear's trousers. What he needed, of course, was a woman to look after him; and, if he paid her well, she wouldn't object to throwing in a few extras. The transaction was as good as complete. She had let her rooms within the first five minutes! She burst into speech.

"Come to see the rooms, sir, have you? I can thoroughly recommend them. Nicely furnished they are: most suitable for an artistic gentleman like yourself. Everything to hand too——"

"Excuse me," interjected Mr. Crump. "I think perhaps you're making some mistake. I'm not in need of your rooms at the moment. I was intending to ask you if you would be so good as to tell me what has happened to Miss Annette Fay?"

"Well, I never! And what, might I ask, do you know about Miss Annette Fay?"

Her bosom expanded under the expanse of black material that enveloped it; she rose at least three inches in height; she intimidated him with her eyes; and her inquiry was more in the nature of a threat than a mere request for information.

"Oh," said Mr. Crump, his head going to one side, "I just knew her."

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Mrs. Meek was not in a condition to appreciate the extreme pathos in his voice; she was too incensed by the deception this intruder's conduct had created in her mind to be anything but brutal.

"You — knew — her!" She lashed the words singly in his face; and her own underwent the most violent contortions. "*You!*" And she slammed the door in his face. She heard him drag his feet down the stairs, and having made sure that he was well off the premises, rushed to the window; and there, to her full-blooded rage and astonishment, she found this same man's silly face once more staring at the notice in the window. A fury of resentment possessed her, and flinging up the window she shouted:

"Go away! If you want to know, she's gone! Went last night. I'm mistress here now, and I don't want you hanging around. Go away!"

But the man, under a spell, as it were, continued to stare at the house in a bewildered fashion, and Mrs. Meek, with a last despairing shriek of annoyance, pulled down the window and replaced the card on its ledge. She despaired of ever getting to the bottom of this particular mystery. Her eyes happened to fall on a letter propped up on the mantelshelf, addressed in Annette's handwriting to

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Marcus Faithful, Esq. The sight of it provided an outlet for her wrath.

“If that man dares to show his face here this morning,” she began; and then broke off, and wisely turned her attention to the immediate problems of her new station in life.

Meanwhile Mr. Crump, having at last contrived to drag himself away from the window, was making his last mournful exit from Great Russell Street. He wished that he had never ventured near it that morning, although he excused himself with the thought that he had never intended to do more than look at the house. He knew, of course, that no one would recognise him; still, he had to admit that Mrs. Meek’s onslaught had given him a nasty shock; it proved, more than adequately, how far removed he was from any chance of recognition in his new shape and form. On previous occasions she had given him a piece of her mind; but never quite like that. . . . Mr. Crump was wounded; and he felt a little sorry for himself.

“Hell!”

The expletive escaped unconsciously from his lips; it was his way of fortifying himself against the woes that beset him. This backward look into the buried past was doing him no good at all. What concern had he now with Annette’s movements and activities? As

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little as her concern with himself, the dead! And the child? Mr. Crump smiled wearily, wistfully. Probably she had deceived him on that point. He had never quite believed in the possibility of that child. . . .

He entered the first tea-shop he came to and mechanically ordered his customary poached egg on toast. He was now beginning to see daylight. First of all he had to consider the question of paying the six thousand pounds into the bank. It might be safer, he decided, to carry through this rather delicate operation at the Paris branch. Certainly he could not see himself strolling into his own City branch and casually handing over the counter notes to the value of six thousand pounds, payable to his own account. For once in a way those fellows would lose their imperturbability and their general smoothness of manner. They might politely suggest that he should see the manager. . . . No, despite the fact that these notes were making him feel acutely self-conscious of the existence of his breast-pocket, he would have to hold on to them for the time being. And then he had to concoct a feasible story for Millie's exclusive benefit. However, he could think this out in the train on the way home. He had not the slightest doubt in his own mind that the setting in which he placed it would blind Millie to any imperfec-

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tions which were not too obvious. As soon as possible, though, he must send her a wire . . .

Mr. Crump felt a slight choking sensation in his throat. A man had planted himself in the seat opposite his own and distended to his view the main news page of the *Morning Star*. He had bought a copy of the paper and carefully put it away in his suit-case; he had promised himself the pleasure of reading it when he was safely out of the country. Not that it mattered, of course: only he felt disinclined at the moment to suffer Bennett's insolence. That young man had been allowed to take his revenge, and Mr. Crump did not doubt that he had availed himself of the opportunity to the utmost limits of discretion. No, he refused to read the stuff; and he had to admit that he felt a little squeamish at the thought of having to read it. But why should he? He viciously dug his fork into the liquid interior of his poached egg. . . . But it was of no use: he had to look, and slowly and shamefacedly he raised his eyes to the level of the head-lines. Yes, it was there—"SENSATION AT SAVOY MANSIONS"—over three columns; and underneath the ominous query—"WHERE IS MR. MARCUS FAITHFUL?" And last, "THE TRUTH SOON TO BE REVEALED." Mr. Crump scanned the first few

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large-type paragraphs. As he had expected, Bennett had missed nothing; he had strung together a series of facts and prognostications which, though individually harmless, produced in the mass a most damaging impression. Bennett poured out his sympathy for the throngs of distraught women who, having put their faith in his powerful word, now appeared to have been callously left to their own devices. He evinced a pained surprise that any man—much less Mr. Marcus Faithful—should find it possible to resist the pitiful appeal wrung from so many aching hearts. . . . He did not, of course, dare to hint that this great man was nothing but a charlatan; but he as good as said it when he remarked that, although it might be no more than a curious coincidence, it was nevertheless somewhat remarkable that Mr. Marcus Faithful's disappearance from Savoy Mansions should have occurred on the very eve of discovery. . . . The article briefly concluded with a sinister reference to the fact that the gentleman whose honour was so closely concerned in these transactions had brusquely refused to receive at his hotel the accredited representatives of the Press. There was more of it in the middle, but Mr. Crump had already seen enough to satisfy his curiosity, and devoted the whole of his attention to the coagulating poached egg. To his

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surprise he found that he was able to enjoy it. After all, he tried to tell himself, it ought to be possible to derive a considerable amount of private satisfaction from this aftermath of his predecessor's career; it was, in fact, almost as good as reading his own obituary notice.

Five minutes later he found himself in the street again. It was now something after ten o'clock: time to send off that wire to Millie. He composed it without difficulty in the nearest Post Office: "Home for good, but taking you long holiday abroad first, so be ready to start any moment." He pictured with extreme gratification the state of excitement into which this startling pronouncement would fling her. Yes, he would bundle her out of the country at top speed, without giving her time to ask too many questions. That very night as ever was! The nine-twenty from Waterloo! It could be done, and he would do it. He braced himself to the effort.

Insensibly his steps had led him towards Savoy Mansions. The realisation shocked him. He never wanted to see Savoy Mansions again; were he to find himself confronted once more by those luxurious portals he would feel that he was inspecting the precincts of his own grave. . . . Resolutely he turned back into the Strand and made his way to Charing Cross

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Station. He found a seat in the waiting-room. About half-past twelve would be the best time to arrive home; Millie would be ready for him by then. Millie! His thoughts browsed on Millie. She would, he knew, regard this trip abroad as their second honeymoon; but how would he regard it? This was a question to which he could find no answer. Henceforth, so much of his life as he could give to any woman would be devoted to her, and to her alone. . . . His eyes wandered round the bare and dismal waiting-room. A girl was sitting in the far corner; a girl younger than Annette but with just that same flush of youth and beauty. He sighed, and gazed at her through a haze of recollection, reflectively, mournfully. All this was done with; he was now for ever to remain outside that charmed circle of youth and adventure in which, out of his time, he had for a brief span lived and moved. And suddenly the world became a very cold and dreary habitation for the soul of a man bereft of his playmate. The minutes sped by and still he did not move. When he came to life again nothing was left of youth and late romantic love in the breast of Mr. Crump but the kindly echo of farewell.

Half an hour later he found himself, almost without taking thought, outside the door of his own home. There was no need to knock

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or find his key; Millie, he well knew, would not be far away. The door opened, and there she stood, her eyes alight with expectation.

“ Millie!”

“ David!”

She called his name a second time, seeing a strange and troubled look on his face; and then she understood.

“ Yes, David,” she said, highly delighted with herself. “ A present for you!”

Just inside the door, beside the hall-stand, there stood a brand-new leather suit-case; it held him spell-bound.

“ Why,” he murmured, not to his wife but to himself, “ it’s just like beginning life over again!”

“ How do you mean, David?” Her voice was strained and anxious; it seemed to her that a shadow had suddenly crossed their path.

“ Nothing,” he replied, taking her in his arms. “ Nothing at all!”

CHAPTER XX

THE BOOT

IT was not until ten o'clock of the following morning that Bennett managed to secure an interview with the manager of the Hôtel Grande Riche; and he had certainly earned it. During the preceding twenty-four hours he had deprived himself of both food and sleep. From the moment of publication of the rumour concerning Marcus Faithful's disappearance he had set out to obtain definite confirmation of it, and never for an instant had he relaxed his vigilance. That same morning he had paid several visits to Savoy Mansions, without result. Much to his disgust he had been compelled to line up with a crowd of excited women, who were, as it happened, of the least fashionable sort in the Marcus Faithful following. The *Morning Star* had not dared to do more than threaten to prick the bubble of his reputation; but the women who had descended upon Savoy Mansions in angry shoals had lost no time in exploding it. An unobserved intruder in that feminine maelstrom, Bennett, though a hardened student of human nature, shuddered to hear the blasphemous execrations that fell from the lips of these delicate creatures. Every door in the Marcus Faithful suite was locked and double-locked; otherwise the whole place would have been sacked and

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looted. Some of the besiegers were loudly demanding their money back—a feature of the proceedings that caused Bennett a considerable amount of grim amusement. Once the breath of suspicion had touched the great Marcus Faithful, these women, after entrusting him with the innermost secrets of their soul, had turned to rend him. Their conception of justice revolted Bennett, who, as a journalist, was always at pains to verify his facts, and he would gladly have avoided them altogether had he not remembered how, on a previous occasion, the prophet himself had appeared and miraculously stilled the storm. However, on this particular morning he was nowhere to be seen, and Bennett, on his final visit, found the main entrance to Savoy Mansions barred and bolted. He had, too, the mortification of learning from an early edition of an evening paper that the police had been called in to clear the building. Bennett threw the paper into the gutter and hurried back to the hotel.

He was already in possession of certain useful information. The hotel porter had assured him that not a single item of Mr. Marcus Faithful's luggage had been removed from the hotel; the reception clerk had assured him that Mr. Marcus Faithful had not relinquished his suite; a page-boy had informed him that

there was nothing untoward in the appearance of the visitor when, at about his usual hour, he had left the hotel on the previous evening. Bennett therefore came to the conclusion that it would be worth while to wait, and waited; he took the further precaution of securing, by special arrangement, a bedroom which commanded a view of the approach to the Marcus Faithful quarters. For twelve hours Bennett maintained an unceasing vigil, but nothing happened; the silence in that part of the hotel remained undisturbed. Periodically he went out into the corridor and listened for any noises that might have come from within those sumptuous apartments. Not a murmur throughout the watches of the night! If only the secretary-fellow, growled Bennett to himself, had put in an appearance he might have had something to go on. It was not until the early hours of the morning that he gave up all hope, and lay down on his bed, with the door ajar. But sleep would not come; his nerves tingled at every slight mysterious noise that was born in the darkness of the night, and long before it was time to rise he was the most respondent creature breathing. His condition, however, at least served to awaken the sympathetic interest of the hotel manager when at last Bennett gained admission to his private office. He stated the facts, and the

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manager consented to make certain inquiries. Five minutes later he returned to the room.

“Cleared off—both of them—I should say,” he remarked briefly, and handed to Bennett Crump’s last message to Still. “But be careful what you say,” he added, already feeling a little dubious as to the wisdom of his action in saying anything whatsoever to this too eager young man.

“Account unpaid?” asked Bennett hopefully.

“Only a trifling balance—which the value of the luggage will cover a hundred times over.”

A very few seconds later Bennett found himself back in the street, in a not much happier frame of mind. Certainly he had something to go on; but not enough for his liking. It was too early yet to state confidently, without fear of contradiction, that Marcus Faithful had fled the country. After all, he had not stayed away from the hotel for more than two nights, and he might take it into his head to return. If he did there would be hell to pay at the *Morning Star*. . . . Bennett became very thoughtful. The message to Still, of course, appeared to be pretty conclusive; but he could not publish it; it left him no better off. Disconsolately he wandered along to have a final look at Savoy Mansions. The main

entrance was still shut, but he rang the bell, and continued to ring it, until the caretaker's wife reluctantly opened the door. She only showed her face, and that at the moment was not of a very encouraging aspect. Moreover, Bennett was now acutely aware that he was under the careful observation of a police officer on the other side of the road.

"Good morning," said Bennett to the face at the door. "I'm from the *Morning Star*."

The woman looked as if she had never heard of it and sullenly waited for him to continue.

"You may know," he went on ingratiatingly, "that Mr. Marcus Faithful has disappeared—at least, he's not to be found. Perhaps you can help me?"

"There's nothing here," said the woman, already withdrawing her head, "nothing at all. He burned everything he could lay hands on before he left—except the furniture, and that's wanted for the rent." And she slammed the door before Bennett could convey his thanks. The police officer, whom he next approached, proved to be highly uncommunicative; and, not altogether dissatisfied with the result of his researches, Bennett turned his back on the scene of Marcus Faithful's exploits.

It was at this point in the career of this rising young reporter that determined things to destiny held their way: as faithfully as if

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he had been deliberately following a human scent his own footsteps pursued the course taken by Mr. Crump on his resurrection morning, and paused at the very spot where he had leaned over the Embankment railing and looked down into the grey swirling waters. . . . Had an unseen restraining hand been placed on his shoulders Bennett could not have more implicitly obeyed the summons of his fate: the providence of heaven had intervened on his behalf. His wandering footsteps paused, his eyes looked down into the grey swirling waters, at first listlessly, and then with a sudden fiery intensity: lodged in the corner of the river-wall and the lowest step of the stone stairway over which the swell was breaking, was a boot—a boot of such shapeliness and distinction of craftsmanship that only one other boot in all the world could have been comparable to it, and that its fellow. Bennett would have recognised that boot among a million, and the last time he had seen it, it had graced the aristocratic foot of that prince among men, the great Marcus Faithful. Within five seconds he had retrieved it from the perils of the deep. He took out his pocket-handkerchief and lovingly removed from its glistening surface the stains of its unkind immersion: not all the brine in the ocean would have sufficed to dull its pristine glamour; the

boot was unspoiled, inviolate. His heart was brimming over with joy and thankfulness: this find was the most precious ever made since the discovery of Pompeii and the lost tombs of Egypt; never, though he lived to be a hundred, would another such stroke of luck come his way. He examined the boot. It bore the name of a Paris bootmaker. This was almost good enough for Bennett, but not quite. Clutching the boot in one hand with a grip which Samson himself could not have shaken, he rushed for the nearest taxi and directed the driver to take him to St. John's Wood. Here he burst into the studio of the most famous portrait painter of the day, Sir John Clavering, R.A., whose Academy portrait of Marcus Faithful had been sold to America for a record figure. Bennett breathlessly explained the situation to the astounded Academician. Sir John, who had faithfully painted that boot on immortal canvas, did not pause in his judgment: he proclaimed, immediately and emphatically, the authenticity of the boot. . . . A quarter of an hour later Bennett was back in Fleet Street, writing for dear life, with a pen that was inspired by all the devils and archangels in heaven and out of it.

The following day the *Morning Star* produced a twenty-four page paper, thereby consuming, as it was careful to point out, enough

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news-print to wrap the entire earth in a garment. One-third of the space was devoted to a full chronicle of the exploits of the greatest charlatan of modern times. Across six columns ran the heading, in type two inches deep, "HOW MARCUS FAITHFUL DIED," and underneath, a size down, "SUICIDE FROM REMORSE." A moving pen-picture was drawn of the shivering, haunted wretch poised on the Embankment railings, inhaling a last deep breath before flinging himself to a watery doom. . . . Sir John Clavering's speaking likeness of this incomparable criminal was reproduced within the uttermost limits that the margins allowed, and an expert criminologist, whose reputation Scotland Yard itself had never dared to question, discussed the portrait over several columns and by irrefutable argument demonstrated the signs of inherent criminality and debauchery revealed in the face of the deceased. Dark hints were thrown out as to the precise nature of Marcus Faithful's relations with the women who consulted him; but the *Morning Star* maintained an unusual reticence on this point, because, as the Editorial stated, the paper held out its sympathy towards those thousands upon thousands of women who, in all innocence of purpose, had fallen into the monstrous clutches of this master mountebank. A publicist prelate

wrote at length under the title, "What are our women coming to?"—this title being supplied by a sub-editor in preference to the prelate's own choice—"A Distressing Sign of the Times." One whole page was devoted to a brief summary of the characters and exploits of the major master criminals throughout the ages, with an historical introduction contributed by an Oxford Professor. Interviews with a few of the leading women of the day—those few whose curiosity had resisted the blandishments of Marcus Faithful's appeals and to whom Savoy Mansions was merely a name and not an experience—provided some healthy reading for the masses. The greatest dramatist of the day wired to the paper: "I am distressed to witness the trend of modern morals," and at once retired to his study to compose a play on such a promising theme. An enterprising publishing firm announced in the advertisement columns that they proposed to issue, within the next month, a handsome octavo volume giving a full and authentic account of these alluring events, under the title of "The Wizard of Savoy Mansions: The Story of the Greatest Hoax in History." The reverend Head of a famous Public School, on being asked for his comments over the telephone, was reported to have murmured brokenly into the receiver,

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“God help our race.” The Prime Minister, being asked in his pyjamas at one o’clock in the morning whether he proposed to take action, was stated to have sworn volubly that the answer was positively in the negative. True to its character as a national organ of public opinion, the *Morning Star* promised its cultured following further astounding revelations in the next day’s issue.

Mr. David Crump was restlessly pacing up and down the hotel terrace overlooking the lake. The air was pleasantly chill after the heat of the day, but it did not serve to cool Mr. Crump’s troubled brow. That night life was terrible and the world chaos. . . . Mrs. Crump proposed to have her baby here, in Switzerland of all places, at least a fortnight before her time. He ran his fingers through his hair and groaned, in body and in spirit. Finally, he flung himself into a green wicker chair standing beside the ornate lamps that illuminated the terrace. His head fell forward and he clutched it tightly between both hands. If only he could have got her back to England before this blow had fallen! This shattering experience, coming upon him in a strange land, was almost beyond human endurance. Could he have awakened to find it all a dream and himself safely within the drab and dusty

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precincts of Maze Hill Road, Greenwich, he would gladly have consented to remain there for the rest of his days. He stared stupidly, vacantly, at the long chain of mountains of Valais and Savoy and tried to persuade himself that they weren't real, that he was dreaming. . . . Impossible! They were real, and he was their prisoner. He tried to pull himself together and sat upright in his chair. His eyes wandered from the slow-moving light on the gleaming level of the lake to the chain of lamps that lined its shores and on to the stars of heaven; and every point of light was a stab to his soul: he yearned for a great darkness to envelop all. . . . Because he was afraid to face this crisis, seeking vainly a way of escape, a host of memories afflicted his brain. During these past few months only in moments of weakness had his thoughts turned to Annette, but now every little detail of their brief history rose up to haunt him. First memories and last, all of them he lived over again; but the one that hurt most was something less than a memory; it was, rather, a gap in memory: she had gone without a word of farewell. He thought of the morning of his last visit to Great Russell Street. Curious . . . it had not occurred to him to ask whether she had left a note for him. For him? For whom? The man Annette had known, the man to

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whom she would have addressed that word of farewell, was dead! He extracted a certain grim amusement from the thought of what Mrs. Meek would have said had he announced to her, "I am the great Marcus Faithful. Did Miss Annette leave a message for me?" He did not suppose that he would ever see her again; and if they did happen to meet she would not be able to recognise him. . . . And thus it was that, in this belief, heaven was kind to Mr. Crump; for he was never to discover, what that note would have told him, that Annette was the one person in the world who held the secret of his identity.

"Wake up!"

The little man in the green wicker chair felt his shoulders roughly shaken. He was perfectly wide awake, although the attitude of dull dejection into which he had sunk gave every appearance of sleep.

"Good news," said the doctor, an Englishman: Mr. Crump would never have retained his sanity had he been compelled to call in a native practitioner. "Wonderful news!"

Mr. Crump rose unsteadily from his chair and shook his knees free of the crumpled white flannel trousers he had put on that morning and quite forgotten to change.

"Yes?" he asked with trembling lips.

"Two fine bouncing boys!"

His mind went blank. He tried hard to decide what to say, what to do.

“Fancy, after all these years!” he muttered feebly. “Do you think——” He broke off, being suddenly bereft of both speech and thought.

“You’d like to see her?” replied the doctor, who, in these matters, proceeded by routine. “Well, just for half a minute. Come along.”

The doctor took him by the arm and pushed him towards the terrace doors, led him through a maze of corridors, and brought him to a halt outside a tall white door.

“Just half a minute,” he whispered. “I’ll wait for you.”

Mr. Crump found himself in a large white room, saw through a haze the white erect figure of a nurse, a wide white bed, and last, the white and lustreless face of his own wife. Shaking in every limb he stepped towards her, bent over her, and touched her dry lips with his own.

“David!” he heard her gasp with a tiny breath.

“After all these years!” At the moment he was incapable of doing more than repeat himself. On either side of her . . . but now there were tears in his eyes and he could not see. He heard a muffled cry, and shivered:

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whether from fear or delight he did not know.

“David!” He bent down to her again.

“I must tell you now,” she whispered in a voice so low that through her broken words he could hear the plashing of the waters of the lake on the shore beneath the bedroom window. “It was that man. You know who I mean. I didn’t like to tell you before because it might not have been true what he said. I wish I could tell him, now! David, isn’t it too wonderful?”

Tears of joy stood in her eyes, and those in his own as suddenly disappeared. He kissed her again, to hide his confusion, mumbled a few words which made no sort of sense, and crept out of the room with a face as white as anything in it. The doctor was waiting for him on the other side of the door and gave him a cursory glance of examination.

“Lucky man!” he remarked—still proceeding by routine—“but you must pull yourself together. I’ll take you back to the terrace; the air will do you good.”

The doctor, by main force of persuasion, got him back to his seat on the terrace and looked him over with a professional eye. Mr. Crump might have been on the point of death for all the interest he displayed in life.

“Good God,” at last exclaimed the doctor,

“no one to look at you would think that you are—or ought to be—the happiest man alive!”

Mr. Crump looked up at him meekly, appealingly.

“Sorry, doctor,” he murmured, “but these things come rather as a blow, sometimes—the way they come, I mean.”

The doctor, not being in a position to appreciate the pathos behind this simple statement, snorted violently, and prepared to go.

“Oh, very well,” he said, giving up this peculiar sort of father as a bad job. “Collect your thoughts a bit and you’ll soon feel better. Here, have a look at this. I shan’t have time to read it myself. See you to-morrow. Good-night.”

Mr. Crump heard his feet clatter on the stone steps that led to the street below, and then a vast unbroken silence wrapped him round. There were fewer lights now on the slopes that ran down to the shores of the lake, and the lake itself was still and deserted, though there seemed to lurk within the blue deeps of its bosom a monstrous, inhuman, hungry life. . . . Mr. Crump shivered; he no longer liked the lake; its cold inhumanity struck terror to his heart. He looked away, looked up. The stars were shining brighter than ever. They too were placid, but not unkind: it may have been that he was more

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used to them. . . . But he would go in and find somewhere to lay his head. He would feel better in the morning. A father of two boys! Wonderful! But he was too tired now to realise the full significance of this event in his life. He half-rose in his chair—and something rustled in his lap. It was the paper that the doctor had left with him.

Not since he had left England had he so much as glanced at an English newspaper; he wanted to break with that immediate past; he never wanted to see or hear another reference to it; he wanted to settle down happily and comfortably with Millie in their new home on the Heath. He had not been able to kill all thought of that tremendous episode, but he had kept on trying, and he shunned the idea of coming up against the affair once more in cold print. . . . But it would have blown over by now: a thousand scandals must have come to light since his own was last raised. He stole a glance at the paper in his lap. The *Morning Star*! It was like a breath from home; it warmed the blood in his veins; it reminded him of the good days, the early days, perhaps the best days of all when he had first worked on the paper and he and Millie were starting out on life together! Marvellous! He felt better already! He grasped the paper in both hands and opened it at the main news

page. Had the light in the lamp overhead exploded and expired a blanker look could not have crossed his face. In the centre of the page appeared a reproduction of Sir John Clavering's portrait of himself, with a laurel border two inches wide. Multitudes of headlines crossed the page. "ENGLAND'S INGRATITUDE TO ONE OF HER GREATEST SONS. ASTOUNDING REVELATIONS BY THE REGISTRAR-GENERAL'S RETURN OF BIRTHS. TRAGIC JUSTIFICATION OF MARCUS FAITHFUL'S TEACHINGS. NINE TO ONE PREPONDERANCE OF MALE BIRTHS IN U.K. FOR LAST QUARTER. The Editorial was headed, with simple dignity, "The Boot." The final paragraph ran:

"This great man who, after years of exile spent in the unremitting pursuit of his epoch-making discovery, returned to our shores to give ungrudgingly of the fruits of his labours, died unhonoured and unsung. We now know that he chose to die by his own hand because of the intolerable strain and anxiety to which he was subjected during the closing month of his life when, throughout the length and breadth of our land, unnumbered thousands of tender hearts had put their whole faith and trust in him. But in death he stands vindicated. . . . And while this generation lives his memorial will blossom in the hearts of its women and in the prodigality of their sons.

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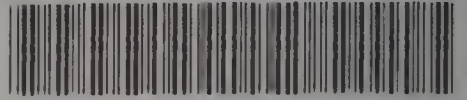
But we believe that we echo a nation-wide desire when we demand that due honour and reverence shall be paid to the one tangible relic that escaped his watery grave. We refer to this great man's Boot. For this great mercy let us be duly thankful. Let the nation, we say, forthwith require that this Boot be interred with all proper solemnity and that a monument be erected over it with the inscription: Here Lies the Boot of One Who . . ."

Mr. Crump lifted his bewildered eyes from the paper. A beatific light flooded his countenance.

"It must have been faith!" he murmured; and all the stars of heaven, between the drifting clouds, winked at him, gaily, knowingly.

THE END

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