

The Gambling Girl

(Original version)

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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- III „I cannot tell him the system,” she said.
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Chapter I

Billy and the Briscoes.

TO write the true story of the two extraordinary crimes which placed first Billington Stabbat and then Mary Ferrera in a prison cell, is a comparatively easy matter. To know exactly where to begin is the bigger problem. I could, of course, start with the genealogy of Billington Stabbat—except that I am not quite certain as to his nationality.

He had been all over the world when I met him in France, and he certainly was serving with the American Army at G.H.Q., having been “loaned” by Canadian H.Q.

It was not new work for Billy. He had been a detective in Toronto, the smartest man in that corp, and he had his promotion fixed, when the war broke out, for his capture of the Briscoe gang.

What the Briscoes did not know about the mechanics of lock-making wasn't worth learning. They were patient, far-seeing, diabolically brilliant criminal. It was Billy who trapped the crowd, caught Tom red-handed, and four of the gang. He took George, too, but the case against him fell through. Tom was sent to prison for twenty years, and hanged himself in his cell. I recall this achievement of Billy's because few people in this country ever knew very much about the Briscoe case, even after George stood his trial at the Old Bailey.

I think this story starts when I met Levy Jones on the stairs going up to make a call on Billy. Levy is a little fellow, about five feet two in height, but so immensely

broad across the shoulders that he looks shorter and almost deformed. His face is long, his nose pendulous, his mouth broad and uneven in the sense that when he is amused one corner lifts higher than the other.

His bushy eyebrows rose at the sight of me, and out came a hand of considerable size.

I was surprised and delighted to see him. He had been working with the Mosser Commercial Bureau in pre-War days—as Credit Investigator, I believe—and I had no idea at that moment that he had attached himself to Billy.

“Why, Levy,” said I, “this is a pleasant shock. I thought you were dead.”

“No, sir,” said Levy, with that lop-sided grin of his; “alive—happily. I’m with Mr. Billington Stabbat.”

“The devil you are!” I was a little taken back. “And how is it that one of the original Jones of Johannesburg comes to be in the private detective line of business? By the way, Levy, how did you get that Jones into your name?”

“It is a compromise, Mr. Mont. If I call myself Jivitzki, people think I am a Bolshivicki (sic) You’re not a Jew-hater, are you, Mr. Mont?”

“Not a scrap,” said I, in truth. “Some of the best pals I have ever had have been of your Royal and Ancient Faith.”

“That’s a new one”—Levy was interested—“sounds like football to me—or is it golf? I’m rather sorry you’re not a Jew-hater. I have a new argument for Judaism which I wanted to try on you. I tried it on our Rabbi, but he has no sense of humour. Have you heard the story about the Jew and the flour-bin?”

Levy, like most of his compatriots, had a large repertoire of stories digging slyly at the inherent shrewdness of his race, and this story was a good one.

“But Levy,” said I, “how did you get in touch with Billy—Mr. Stabbat?”

“Call him Billy,” said Levy. “I do, he insists upon it. I met him during the War. He’s just the same now as ever he was. I don’t suppose he has ever altered or ever will. He’d give away his shirt to a friend and go to the gallows to help some woman with a hard-luck story.”

Prophetic words. I remembered them afterwards.

“Kindness to women will be the ruin of Billy.” Levy shook his head. “We lost a fat commission last week because he trailed an erring female, and then when he’d got all the evidence, turned round, worked day and night to prove an alibi! Mind your back, Mr. Mont.”

He drew me on one side to allow a white-overalled workman to pass up the stairs.

“They finish decorating to-day,” he said. “That’s the electrician.”

I glanced idly at the workman in the white smock. He was a pale man with a short red beard.

“Well, so long,” said Levy. “I’m going to Whitechapel to nose around. We’ve got a fire case for one of the insurance companies. By the way, get Billy to tell you about our new client.”

He winked mysteriously, and I went up the stairs to meet his chief.

I saw Billington Stabbat described the other day in a usually well-informed journal as “a remarkably tall man.” That description is absurd. His height is about 5 ft. 10 in. His weight must be something under eleven stone. He was well-built—a type of man that never acquires or carries fat. He is, or was in those days, clean-

shaven, with a wide somewhat bulging forehead, level blue- green eyes, and a rather square jaw.

The first impression I had when I went into his big room was the impression of newness. It had the pungent varnishy-limey smell which new houses have. He was a fastidious man in the matter of comfort, and had chosen the decoration himself. It was, as I say, a big room, very high and light. Three windows overlooked Bond Street, and there was a fairly large sky-light. The floor was covered with a rich, blue carpet, and blue, a rather delicate blue, was employed in the scheme of panelling.

Undoubtedly the feature of the room was an enormous fireplace, a gorgeous affair in marble. I remember particularly that the two supports for the carved mantel-piece were two Assyrian lions, sejeant and regardant, as the heraldry books put it. They were really remarkable pieces of sculpture and though sheerly decorative, were astonishingly real, with their huge mouths agape, their thick lips drawn up in a snarl showing a teeth-rimmed cavity.

Billy looked up as I came in, and sprang to his feet with a broad smile of welcome.

“Why, Mont!” he almost shouted, as he gripped my hand. “Come in and sit on the new carpet—the chairs haven’t arrived yet. What do you think of it?”

He did not wait for me to reply.

I could not but notice that after greeting me he returned immediately, almost hastily, to his desk.

“Would you object, Mont, to sitting on the window-ledge? Where you are standing is exactly in my line of fire.”

“Your what?” I asked, scarcely believing.

“My line of fire,” said Billy, calmly. “It is a phrase employed by machine-gun officers, with or without lurid adjectives.”

I sat myself upon the broad window-ledge, feeling it very carefully, because window-ledges in newly decorated houses seem to be the last part of the decoration to dry. And then I saw the red silk handkerchief on Billy’s desk, and towards that red silk handkerchief his hand presently strayed. There was no need, even if it had been expedient to ask what that square of silk concealed. I knew at once that it was a revolver, and wondered why. As a rule, there is very little that is dramatic, and still less that is melodramatic, in the everyday life of a private detective.

I saw his eyes go from me to the door, and, looking round, I saw the white-coated workman with the little beard. He was standing looking up at the cornice, his hands fidgeting with a foot-rule, and then I heard Billington Stabbat speak.

“George,” he said, softly, and the man turned round. “Come over here, George,” said Billy, “and keep your hands where I can see ‘em, because if they go to your pockets I shall shoot you very dead, and that is a condition in which I am very sure you would find yourself horribly bored.”

The workman came slowly towards the desk, his large brown eyes fixed on Billy.

“Permit me to introduce you to Sergeant Mont, of Scotland Yard,” said Billy, with a little flourish of his hand. “This is Mr. George Briscoe, of Canada; and how is the world treating you, George?”

The workman licked his dry lips, and said nothing.

"I had the honour of putting George's brother into prison for a life term, or was it twenty years?" said Billy, in a conversational tone, as though he were explaining the most commonplace event. "Naturally, George is a little sore with me, and has come over, I guess, to get even. You have not had many opportunities, have you, George?"

Still the workman said nothing.

"How is Tom, by the way?" asked Billington, in all innocence.

Then the man broke his silence.

"Tom is dead—you know that damn well!" he snarled, in a low voice, trembling with hate.

"Dear me, is that so?" said Billy. "Poor old Tom. He was a clever man, George. I'm not so sure that he wasn't a cleverer man than you. Well, we can't live forever, you know."

The man dropped his eyes to the floor and again spoke.

"I'm going straight now, Mr. Stabbat," he said, still in his low voice. "It is only a coincidence that I happened to be engaged in this work. I came from Canada two years ago to make a fresh start."

"You came from Canada six months ago," said Billy, gently, "and you got your job here by tipping the foreman a ten-pound note. In regard to making a fresh start, you were implicated last December in the robbery of Robberts', the Regent Street jewellers, though I doubt whether our excellent friend, Mr. Mont, could bring it home to you."

George rubbed his hand across his beard slowly.

"You are a wonderful fellow, Stabbat," he said. His voice was that of an educated man. "Of course, I'll get you sooner or later."

"We shall see," replied Billy. That phrase, a favourite of his, symbolised his attitude toward life—one of pleasurable curiosity. He was everlastingly eager for tomorrow and all that to-morrow brought, whether it be problem or reward, work or play, fun or danger. "I am not blaming you, George," he went on, "for your very natural and proper desire to put me amongst the obituary notices. Far from it, if I were in your place I should do exactly the same thing. It is an act of fraternal piety, and the name of Tom demands my sacrifice."

"You'd have made a good partner, Stabbat," said George. "I hate doing it on you, but it's got to be done."

Billy nodded knowingly.

"I quite understand," he said, in an almost apologetic tone. "Well, go ahead, old friend."

George Briscoe made as though to speak, and then, changing his mind, walked slowly to the door. He stood a while with the edge of the door in his hand, thinking deeply, and when he spoke there was a glitter in his eyes which I did not like:

"I am finished to-day. You'll be relieved of my society—and your fear!"

Billington Stabbat lay back in his chair and laughed.

"So long!" said George.

"So long," replied Billy, cordially.

And the door closed behind this remarkable criminal, leaving me a little breathless, and Billy with a glint of silent laughter in his eyes.

Chapter II

If Billy Had Rung.

I MIGHT explain about myself, that I was on sick leave as the result of a very bad gruelling I had received when I arrested the Canning Town murderer.

The sick leave—the Commissioner insisted on my taking it, though Inspector Jennings, at that time my chief, was averse to my having any such rest—had been useful in many ways. It had given me leisure to look up old friends and to write my little commentary on Lombroso's Delinquent Woman.

I might say, in passing, that I was at Oxford, and was intended for the diplomatic service, when the death of my father and the necessity for earning a living took me to Scotland Yard, where my father's old friend, Sir John Jordan, offered me his influence to enter the higher services of the Criminal Investigation Department. I never imagined, when I walked out from the Yard with my leave granted, how that leave would be employed, and how it would end.

"What do you think of George?" asked Billy, when we were alone again.

"A dangerous man!" said I. "You were saying that he smashed that jewellers in Regent Street?"

Billy waved the subject out of existence. "Don't let us talk shop," he said. "Besides, everything you hear in this office is confidential. Anyway, you would never convict George. He would prove ten alibis. To get on to a more congenial subject—how is the Honourable Jennings?"

"Jennings!" I said, in surprise. "Do you know him?"

"Do I know him!" scoffed Billy. "I certainly know him. He's not a great friend of yours, is he?"

"Not very," said I.

Jennings was one of those narrow-minded men of the old school, who learn nothing and forget nothing. I have found the people who label themselves "the old school," are consistent only in their prejudices.

"As a matter of fact, he was in this office two days ago. He is a great friend of a client of mine, Mr. Thomson Dawkes."

I nodded. I knew Dawkes by repute, and I knew also that Jennings was rather proud of the acquaintance with this wealthy man. He had been at Dawkes' country house, and had shot his coverts, and he was never tired of dragging into his conversation the names of the illustrious people whom he had met under Dawkes' palatial roof.

Billy took away the handkerchief and put the revolver in the drawer,

"I suppose you are not free for a week or two—you couldn't get leave?" he asked.

"I have leave," I said. "That is why I am here," and then I told him about my holiday.

"That's fine," said Billy. "I think there is no, man I'd rather have with me than you. Mont, do you remember that night when the Germans bombed the ridge and you and I were sitting in a cold, cold dug-out?"

He plunged into a chain of reminiscences. It seemed curious to me that we should laugh and jest about those terrible days and agonising nights, but so it is, I suppose, with human nature.

He changed the subject as abruptly as he had commenced.

“Thomson Dawkes, of course, you know,” he said. “He is a man about town, a gambler, and, I should think, a bit of a blackguard. He came to me on the recommendation of Sir Alfred Cawley, who is by way of being a friend of his, though Cawley is a decent, honest man.”

Billy shifted round in his seat and put his feet up on the desk as he lit a cigar and passed the box to me. Billy has never had manners, and invariably helps himself first.

“The story begins,” he said, “when Dawkes was at Monte Carlo in the early spring of last year. He had been playing at the tables at *trente et quarante*, and, having won about forty thousand francs, had quit for the day. As you know, the rooms have peculiar fascination for students of humanity, as Dawkes claims to be. He idled the rest of the time watching the other players, and his attention was particularly devoted to a girl whom he had noticed playing at the same table.

“According to Dawkes, she was a very pretty girl. In fact, he raves about her. She was simply but very charmingly dressed, and the remarkable thing was that she was playing a heavier game than anybody else at the table. That is to say, she was staking maximums, making double coups on the block and *inverse*, or on the red and *couleur*, as the case may be. Evidently she was following some system because she had a whole sheet of complicated figures before her, which she consulted.

“The girl lost steadily, with a coolness and an absence of all emotion, which excited first the admiration and then the wonder of Mr. Thomson Dawkes, who is no slouch at gambling either. She played steadily from two in the afternoon until five and from seven in the evening until midnight, when the *cercle privée* closed. On the day when she came under the notice of Dawkes, he discovered from people who had been sitting at the table, and from a friendly croupier, that she had lost two million francs, which is a colossal sum.”

I nodded.

“And wants a bit of losing,” I said. “The table must have run very badly against her.”

“I think it did,” said Billy. “As the rooms were emptying Dawkes spoke to her. He commiserated with her upon her losses. Now, as you know, people are not stiff and stand-offish at Monte Carlo. In fact, they are quite the reverse. To Dawkes’ surprise, the girl returned him a cold answer, disengaged herself from his conversation, and went to her hotel, which was the Hotel de Paris, the swagger hotel opposite the Casino.

“Dawkes was piqued. He rather fancied himself as a squire of dames, and he was naturally annoyed. He made inquiries at the hotel, and found that she was a Mademoiselle Hicks, which I am perfectly certain is an assumed name.

“The next afternoon he was very careful to watch for her, intending to pay closer attention to the system she was working, but she did not come. He found that she had left that morning by the mail train for Calais. Who she was, nobody knew.”

"It sounds to me as though the young lady had access to somebody else's money," I said, and Billy nodded.

"That is Dawkes' theory, too, but we shall see! Whose money could it be? How can a girl of the class and character which Dawkes imagines her to be lay her hands upon ready money without exciting suspicion, and do it, not once, but at regular intervals?"

"At regular intervals?" I repeated, in surprise.

"I'll tell you," said Billy. "Dawkes met her again, four months later. But this time she was winning, and winning heavily. His efforts to get acquainted with her ended no more successfully than his previous attempt. I have an idea that she was very rude to him. At any rate, she went away from Monte Carlo with a large parcel of money, leaving a very sick and sore Mr. Thomson Dawkes behind her. And that's the story," he added, as abruptly as usual.

"What is your job, then?" I asked, in surprise, for I had expected some more startling *dénouement*.

"My job is to discover who Miss X. is," he said. "What is her job of work, where she gets her money, etcetera."

"And with this information Mr. Dawkes is going to—" I paused expectantly, but at that moment came an interruption.

The door was flung open, and a big man came in, panting heavily, for he had run up the stairs.

"There she is! There she is!" he cried, breathlessly, and waved his arms towards the window. "Look! Now is your chance, Stabbat! There she is, right opposite your door, my boy!"

Billington ran to the window and threw up the sash.

"Where?" he asked.

"The girl with the blue hat, standing in front of the jeweller's. Do you see her?" Billington shaded his eyes.

It was a warm sunny day, and the office faced south-west.

"I see her," he said, slowly.

"She's going into the shop," said the big man, excitedly. "Now you've got her, Stabbat!"

Billy paused irresolutely, and stretched out his arm to press the bell on the wall. I have often remembered that movement, the lithe figure of Billington Stabbat reaching across the desk, his arm extended, his finger-tips hesitating on the bell-push.

If he had only pressed that bell, this story might not have been written. Thomson Dawkes might have been spared the knife of the surgeon, Billy Stabbat would never have seen the interior of a prison cell, and Sir Philip Frampton would still be attending his quarterly bank conventions.

Billy hesitated.

"I'll go myself," he said.

Yet, if he had rung up Levy Jones!

But he didn't. Instead, he snatched his hat from the desk and raced out of the room, leaving us three by the window.

For a third man had come in behind Thomson Dawkes, and at the sight of his red face and heavy-lidded eyes I had grown uncomfortable.

Apparently he did not see me until we stood by the window, and then he, turned his face slowly in my direction.

“Hello, Mont!” he said, disagreeably. “I thought you were on leave?”

“So I am, sir,” I replied. “But I made a call on an old friend to-day.”

“Is he a friend of yours?” he asked, in so disparaging a tone that I knew that Billy was no friend of Inspector Jennings.

“There she goes,” said Thomson Dawkes, excitedly, “and Stabbat’s gone after her. By Jove, what a bit of luck!”

He turned and beamed upon Jennings, and that sycophant made heroic efforts to reflect his joy.

Thomson Dawkes was a very tall and a very handsome man. Handsome in a florid way, though why he, vain as he was, allowed his face to be disfigured with little black side-whiskers I cannot imagine. He had a heavy silken moustache without a single grey hair, an aquiline nose, and a pair of good-humoured lazy eyes. His lips were big and red, and his chin was a little too rounded for a man; but he was, I must give him credit, as good a looker as I’ve seen for some years.

His language could be coarse and free, and he referred to the girl he was hunting in terms which a gentleman could not have employed. His father had been a mine-owner in Staffordshire, and had left his son a very considerable fortune. Thomson Dawkes was a patron of the prize ring; he owned a stud of horses, a steam yacht, and two country estates. Yet somehow he had never managed to ingratiate himself with the right kind of people.

Jennings did not introduce me. I suppose he thought it was beneath his dignity even to admit that he knew a detective sergeant, and as the two men left the room I caught the words, “One of our men.”

Leaving a note on the desk, I went back to my lodgings in Bloomsbury, and met Levy Jones in exactly the same place where I had parted from him at the foot of the stairs, on my way out.

“You’re not going, Mr. Mont?” he said, in surprise. “I thought Billy wasn’t very busy.”

“Billy’s out,” I explained.

I told Levy just what had happened. He rubbed his long nose.

“I do hope that Billy won’t take an interest in that girl,” he said, soberly. “If she’s living in an attic and supporting an aged and ailing mother, or if she has a brother with consumption in the country, or has got a child she wants to send to Eton, why Billy will be breaking into the Bank of England by to-morrow night, trying to pinch the money that will make right her defalcations. We shall see!” he murmured. “I’ll bet Billy said that when he got the job, and I’ll bet he’s saying it now. Especially if she’s interesting.”

I laughed.

“I don’t think you know Billy, Levy,” said I.

“I do indeed,” said he, grimly. “Well I know him!”

Chapter III

A Shot in the Dark.

HIS experience at Monte Carlo seemed to pique Dawkes into a greater determination that he would run her to earth and expose her. As for Billy, he seemed to be strengthened in his purpose and his faith. Frankly, I thought this merely an exhibition of his notorious perversity, because the balance of probability lay on the side of Miss Ferrera being a very vulgar and commonplace pilferer.

I heard no mere from Billy until I received a letter from Monte Carlo. There were large gaps in this epistle, which the imagination was called up to fill in. He did not tell me, for example, how he had scraped acquaintance with Mary Ferrera (otherwise Hicks), or how he had discovered her real name, or by what sanction he was in Monte Carlo at all. For the most part the letter was filled with glowing tributes to Mary's beauty and Mary's gracious ways, and to Billy's faith in her innocence and his suspicion of Dawkes' honesty. I gathered that Dawkes was in Monte Carlo, too, and that he and Billy had "had a few words," but beyond that nothing until I met him at Victoria Station on his return, looking very tanned and very purposeful. "Mary" had returned a day earlier.

"She's wonderful, Mont!" he said ecstatically, and Levy, standing in the background, groaned.

"Of course, I'm not going to put a girl like that in the power of a man of Dawkes' character. Why shouldn't she have money? Why shouldn't she gamble if she wants? What do you say, Levy?"

Levy shook his head.

"Who am I, Billy, that I should come between man and client?" he asked, bitterly.

I reached the office at ten o'clock on the following morning. Billy had not come in, and when he did it was only to take up the threads of an insurance case he had in hand and issue instructions to Levy Jones.

I left him, but at his invitation returned to take him out to lunch. Billy has a club on the Thames Embankment, and it was when we were walking down Northumberland Avenue that I saw the gifted and mysterious Mary Ferrera for the first time.

I am not a good hand at describing women. I know they are pretty, or even beautiful, without being able to explain to what particular feature or quality they owe their beauty. I think the first thing that struck me was the purity of her complexion, and then, a long way after, when I had sufficiently recovered from the spell into which her appearance cast me, the beautiful humanity of her eyes and the straightness of her little nose.

The meeting was curiously staged, and introduced us to yet another actor in this extraordinary drama. Outside one of the big hotels in Northumberland Avenue was a little knot of elderly, silk-hatted gentlemen who were talking together and walking slowly away from the hotel. I guessed that some sort of meeting had been held, and was wondering what, when I saw a girl walking quickly in our direction.

Billy saw her, too, and stopped.

"Mary!" he gasped.

She could not fail to have seen us, only just before she reached the entrance of the hotel, she turned with a start of surprise, and talked to a thin, tall man, who

lifted his hat half an inch from his white head. She spun round so that her back was toward us in talking to the man, and Billy and I went forward and joined the little throng of ancient gossips who were evidently discussing the business which had called them together that morning.

I heard the girl say:

“No, Sir Philip, I had no idea you were in London,” and the old man grunted.

“Well, well, Miss Ferrera,” he said, testily, “I will see you to-morrow at the bank. Did you have a profitable holiday in Paris?”

“Yes, Sir Philip,” said the girl.

“I hope, so—I hope so,” said Sir Philip, and his voice was clear enough for us to have heard even if we had been at a greater distance. “There is no better way of acquiring the French language than a sojourn amidst people who speak no other tongue. I shall see you in the bank to-morrow morning,” he repeated, and again lifting his hat half an inch, dismissed her.

She did not see us as she passed, and Billy made no attempt to follow her. Instead he walked up the steps of the hotel and nodded to the lordly porter.

An inquiry in this quarter elicited the fact that the old man was Sir Philip Frampton, the principal shareholder of Frampton’s Bank. Billy returned to me with a frown on his forehead.

“I know the bank and I’ve heard of Frampton. Their head office is at Elston, in Somerset.”

I was silent at this new revelation. It looked bad for the girl, and worse when Billy, looking up Sir Philip in a book of reference at the club, discovered that he was the president of the Anti-Gambling Association.

“I’m going to Elston to-morrow,” decided Billy. “There must be some explanation—there *must* be!”

I never saw a man so utterly dejected and broken as Billy looked when he returned from his tour of inquiry the following night. He came up to see me in my chambers in John Street, Adelphi, and he looked a tired, sick man.

“Miss Ferrera is cashier in Frampton’s Bank,” he said, as he dropped into an easy-chair and stretched his long legs. “A cashier! She is Sir Philip’s confidential clerk, and is, moreover, his niece.”

“His niece?” I repeated, and he nodded.

“Her trips to France are explained by the fact that Sir Philip is encouraging her to learn French,” he said, and there was a gloomy silence.

“If Dawkes knows—” I began.

“He knows,” said Billy. “The devil had me watched, believing that I would double-cross him and that I was trying to save the girl. I’m afraid I betrayed my interest in the row I had with him. Anyway, he was at Elston, and has threatened the girl that unless she will consent to an interview he will expose her. I arranged the interview, Mont.”

He sat with his head in his hands, staring miserably into the fire. “Where is the interview to take place?” I asked.

“At my office, to-morrow night,” replied Billy. “He swears that he only wants the gambling system from her—anyway, I persuaded her to come. I can’t face the thought that she’s a—a thief. She took it very calmly.”

Billy had got his information about the girl from a disgruntled accountant of the bank, who thought the girl was being favoured by Sir Philip at the expense of himself.

"It's a rotten business, Mont," said Billy, as he rose to go. "Be at the office with me when this brute calls—at eight o'clock tomorrow night."

"I'll come in the morning," said I.

I did not go straight to Billy's room the next morning. I wanted to see Levy Jones. He was rather more cheerful than I had expected, because he had got together the loose strings of the insurance case.

"Billy's got it bad," he said, shaking his head. "Do you realise that we've been in these darned offices for a fortnight, and that Billy has never sat down once to his desk to do a bit of honest work?"

"What is he doing now?" I asked.

"He's stalking up and down the new carpet taking years of wear out of it," said Levy, sadly. "Why couldn't she have been a plain woman?" he asked, but shook his head. "It wouldn't have made any difference to Billy. So long as she was a good weeper and could turn on the sob music Billy was certain to fall."

"She is a very charming girl," said I, in defence, and he looked at me in cold wonder.

Billington Stabbat was at a loose end. I saw that the moment I went into his office. He was staring gloomily out of the window and taking an interest in little inconsiderable things which only a distracted man could take. For example, there was a small panel in the recess of the window with which he fidgeted. I didn't discover the fact that it was a panel until he fidgeted to such purpose that it swung open on hinges, revealing a tiny dark cavity and the rough edges of the brickwork beyond.

"What's that?" said Billy, eager for distraction.

He peered down what seemed to be an interminable shaft, and then remembered.

"Have you got it, too?" I said, sadly.

"Oh, yes, they had central heating in the building, but it wouldn't work. The pipes came up here from the basement, I think," he said, and closed the panel.

He was staring at it for quite a while, then he pulled it open again—he had to use the paper-knife to get a grip on the edge.

"That would be a fine place to hide anything, wouldn't it?" he said.

"Yes," I replied. "If you wanted to go down into the basement to find it again."

He slammed the panel hard, threw the paper-knife on the table with a crash, and stalked up to the marble fireplace, with its lions *sejeant* and *regardant*. On the grinning head of one of these he leant an elbow and dropped his head on his hands.

"Good lord!" he groaned. "Suppose she is! But it is absurd—"

"Suppose she is what? And what is absurd?" I asked.

"Don't be a fool, Mont!" he snapped. "You know what I'm talking about. Suppose this dear girl has borrowed money from the bank to help some rascally brother—"

"Or lover," I murmured.

"Don't be a brute!" he almost shouted. "And for God's sake be decent, Mont. She has no lover."

“She has no brother either, so far as you know,” said I, lighting one of his cigars.

“Well, suppose all this has happened, and she has borrowed the money from the bank?”

He was silent for a while, then:

“It would be tragic,” he said.

I sat down in the chair and regarded him wonderingly.

“Honestly,” said I, “do you always get like this over a woman case?”

I expected an outburst, but it did not come.

“I am always sorry for women,” he said, quietly, “but I have never loved a woman before.”

And the simplicity of that confession silenced me.

“He has been on the ‘phone to me this morning,” he went on. “He says he wants to see the girl alone.”

“Well,” said I, “that isn’t extraordinary. If he intends demanding something from the girl on the threat of exposing her, he is hardly likely to want a detective sergeant and an ex-detective officer as witnesses.”

“I don’t like it,” said Billy.

“Did you agree to the private interview?” He nodded.

“It doesn’t matter very much. I shall be in Levy’s room, and I shall come in at the first cry from the girl. And I tell you, Mont,”—he smashed his fist on the desk—“if that blackguard insults her I’ll—do you want me, Levy?”

This latter to Levy, standing in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, his head bent on his chest, and looking straight at Billy.

“Who are you killing, Billy?” he asked softly, and Billy smiled.

“Come in, Levy. Don’t stand in the doorway.”

“Who are you killing, Billy?” asked Levy, as he came forward.

“Dawkes,” said Billy.

“Fine!” said the sarcastic Levy. “I’ll send lilies, and Mont can send roses, and we’ll come along and see you the day before you’re hung.”

I tried to get Billy on to some other topic, but only partially succeeded, for every now and again he would come back to the girl and his problem.

“She carries a revolver in her bag,” he said. “You see, she takes so much money about with her hat she can’t afford to run risks. I knew that at Monte Carlo one night I talked with her on the terrace, because, swinging round, the bag struck my hand.”

“She is a very capable young person,” I said, patiently.

I refused his invitation to lunch, and promised to come up at half-past seven that night. As a matter of fact, I did not get there until a quarter to eight, and Miss Ferrera had already arrived.

I could see that even the sceptical and hard-hearted Levy Jones was somewhat under her spell. As for Billy, his face was flushed, and his eyes, which never left her face, were bright and sparkling.

“My client will insist upon the explanation,” Billy was saying as I went in, and, after he had introduced me, she went straight on to where he had left off.

“Then he must insist,” she said, calmly.

“Could you tell him the system?”

She smiled.

“I cannot tell him the system,” she said. “In the first place, it is not my system to give; and, in the second place, it would be impossible to give it off-hand if it were. It is like asking me to explain the differential calculus to somebody who imagines it is a recent addition to the zoo!”

Illustration:

„I cannot tell him the system,” she said.

Billy chuckled.

Further conversation was arrested by the arrival of Mr. Thomson Dawkes. To my surprise, he came alone. I had fully expected to see his shadow—for Inspector Jennings had become little else of late—following him into the room.

“I’m early,” he said, with a genial smile all round; “but I think we might get this business over as we are all here.”

He looked from Mary Ferrera to Billy.

“I wish to speak alone with Miss Ferrera,” he said, and Billy nodded and turned to the girl.

“If you want anything, Miss Ferrera, don’t hesitate to call for me,” he said, pointedly. “Just ring that bell”—he indicated the push by the side of the desk—“and I will be with you before the bell stops ringing.”

She nodded gravely, and we three left the room together.

Did Thomson Dawkes take Billington’s implied threat seriously? I fancy not. He was a man who had a most inordinate faith in the power of money, and in the authority which the possession of great wealth could impose. There was always something of good-natured contempt in his attitude towards Billy, and, indeed, towards the whole of the world.

We waited, a curiously tense party, in Levy’s office, which opened from the bigger room.

“I hope this interview is not going to last long,” said Billy, irritably. “If he dares—” he did not finish his words.

I could find nothing to say, and we sat there in silence and watched the slow minute hand of the clock move from ten minutes to eight to five, and still there came no sound from the room. Another five minutes passed, and then Billy, with a snarl, slipped from the table on which he was sitting, and began: “I’m not going to stand this any longer. I—”

And then the interruption came.

It was the sound of a shot from the next room! Billy leapt at the door and flung it open. The room was in darkness, but there was a switch near the doorway, and his hand found it and turned it down. I shall never forget the sight which met my eyes. Near the door leading into the corridor stood the girl, white-faced and staring like a thing demented. In her hand was a tiny revolver, and as the lights went on she lifted it from her side and looked at it with a kind of fascinated horror. It was Levy who broke the silence.

“We’ve lost a client,” he said, in a shaky voice.

Even in that awful moment his queer sense of humour did not desert him. And lost a client we undoubtedly had—for, sprawling over the desk, lay Thomson

Dawkes, with a hideous wound in his head, and his blood lay in a pool upon the writing table.

Chapter IV

Billy Goes to Prison.

BILLINGTON turned to the girl and gently took the revolver from her hand. Then it was that she woke from her trance, and clung to him, shuddering and moaning.

"He kissed me!" she said. "He tried to hold me—I put the light out to avoid him. I didn't want to scream, and I thought I'd slip out of the door, but it was locked."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Billy, comforting. He patted and soothed her, and then beckoned me with a jerk of his head.

"Get her away," he said. "Take her downstairs and put her in a taxi."

I only hesitated for a second, and then I nodded.

"Don't take her home," he warned me. "Just put her in a taxi-cab and send her to Brixton. Then come back—I want you. Now, you've got to pull yourself together, Mary," he said, and took her face in both his hands. I thought he was going to kiss her, but he did not. Billy's eyes could be wonderfully soft and kind, and so they were now.

"You are not to say what happened. You understand? You were not present at this. You are not to say you were here to-night."

"But, but—" she began.

"You must do as I tell you," he said.

"Is he dead?" she whispered. "I didn't—"

"No, no," said Billy, soothingly, "he is not dead."

He thought he was lying, but he was telling no more than the truth.

I got her downstairs, and waited for a little while on the last landing until she had recovered, and then I hailed a taxi and promised to come and see her in the morning.

When I got back to the room—I had to pass through Levy's room because the door on the corridor was locked from the inside—I found Levy dressing the man's wound with a towel.

"He's not dead, fortunately," said Billy; "but it's a toss-up whether he'll live. I think the bullet must have glanced off his skull. The window is broken."

Together they carried Dawkes to a sofa and laid him down. Levy had already telephoned to a doctor, and an ambulance. After we had put the man as comfortably as we could, Billy went to his desk and took up the revolver we had taken from the girl, looked round, and then, with an exclamation, walked to the window recess where he had discovered the little panel only that day, wrenched open the tiny door and threw the revolver into the cavity, closing the panel securely. Then he went to his desk and took out his own revolver from a drawer.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'll show you," said Billy. He walked quickly to the big fireplace, and, pointing the pistol up the chimney, fired once.

A heap of rubbish fell—bits of bricks and mortar and soot—then he came across to me and handed me the revolver.

“Sergeant Mont,” he said, “as you were coming up the stairs you heard a shot fired, and on reaching this room you found Mr. Dawkes lying across the desk dying. I was standing just about here.” He walked to the door. “You asked me what had happened, and I told you that I had had a quarrel with him, and that I had shot him.”

“I’ll be damned if I do it!” I cried, in protest.

“You’ll be doubly damned if you don’t!” said Billy, between his teeth. “There’s somebody on the stairs now. Are you going to make the arrest, or are you going to wait till that blighter Jennings appears? Mont, for God’s sake, do as I tell you!” he cried. “We’re all in this unless you do. Make the arrest. I’m determined to keep the girl out of it; and you will be doing me the most wonderful of services.”

What was I to do? I had a second to make up my mind, and then, though the words choked me, I said:

“Stabbat, I shall take you into custody on a charge of feloniously shooting Mr. Thomson Dawkes.”

At that moment Jennings came in and took in the situation at a glance.

“Where’s the girl?” he asked, quickly.

“The girl did not come.” It was Billington who replied.

Then Jennings’ eyes fell upon the prostrate figure on the sofa.

“My God—you’ve killed him!” he almost yelled.

“I hope not,” replied Billington. “I shot him, certainly.”

“Are you in this, Mont? Did you see anything of this?” demanded Jennings, his face purple.

“I have just arrested Stabbat,” said I. If it was possible to get any satisfaction out of this miserable business, I had it when I saw his face drop. For by the arrest I had made the case my own, or, if not mine, the officers’ of my particular department; and Jennings, who was an office man, and all his life had craved for a big publicity case like this, positively writhed as he saw his life’s opportunity slip from his grasp.

THE first report I had the following morning was from the hospital. Dawkes had passed an uneasy night, and had not yet recovered consciousness. The injury was a concussion and probably a fracture of the right parietal bone of the skull. Surgeons were making an examination, and if necessary they would operate that morning. I went early to Bond Street, and found Levy Jones collecting his personal belongings under the eye of a uniformed constable, whom I dismissed as soon as I arrived.

“We shall have to seal up the room, and nobody must go in,” said I; “and Levy, old man, you’re going to be a witness.”

“I know all about that,” he wailed. “Poor old Billy! I’ve just been down to Marlborough Street to take him his breakfast.”

“How is he?” I asked.

“Slept like a top,” moaned Levy. “That’s Billy all over. I kidded the screw to let me have a look at him. I said I was his servant—and ain’t I?” he demanded.

“Well, what happened?”

"I asked him how he slept," said Levy, "and he told me he hadn't awakened all the night, and cursed me because I hadn't brought devilled kidneys. *Well, Billy*, I said, *this looks bad. We shall see*, said Billy. That's all, *We shall see*," said Levy, bitterly. Then apparently the suspicious "screw," by which inelegant title Levy had designated the police court gaoler, had turned him out.

"Do you think Dawkes will die?" asked Levy, anxiously.

I shook my head.

"The report from the hospital was not very encouraging."

"Of course, he ought to die by rights," said Levy. "I bet he's a blackguard! When I think of that girl in the power of a man like that—a beautiful, sweet—"

"*Et tu, Brute*," I murmured, reproachfully, and Levy had the grace to blush.

I made a careful examination of the room. I was as anxious to get the real facts of the case as I was to present to the court a story which would have the appearance of truth without betraying Billy or the girl.

The door near the corridor was locked, as it had been the night before; the key I removed and put into my pocket; but not until I had made a search of the new paint on the door for finger-prints. I hoped against hope that some third person had been in the room and had fired the shot which had laid out Dawkes.

And then in a flash I remembered George Briscoe and his threat to be even with Billy. George Briscoe! And then my heart sank. For I had remembered that the girl had not denied the shooting. Had we not taken her with the pistol in her hand? But suppose she, and Briscoe (concealed somewhere in the room) had fired at the same time—it was, of course, a fantastic theory—but I remember reading a story the plot of which was based upon some such happening. Nevertheless, I must trace Mr. Briscoe; and in this search I was favoured by circumstances which I had not counted upon. For Mr. Briscoe was in a police cell at Cannon Row station, and had been there since three o'clock the previous afternoon, on a charge of being concerned in the Regent Street burglary!

I interviewed him in the cell, and there was no doubt whatever that he had the most effective of alibis.

"Who put you away, Briscoe? I had nothing to do with it." I felt it was my duty to exonerate Billy, and he nodded.

"I know all about that, Mr. Mont," he said. "If you want to know the person who has betrayed me, *cherchez les femmes*."

"Why have you come to see me?" he asked, quickly. "Has anything happened?"

"Nothing at all, except that Mr. Thomson Dawkes has been found shot in Stabbat's office—and Stabbat is under arrest for the shooting."

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "Under arrest—Billy Stabbat? Isn't that grand? Did he shoot him?" he asked.

"Unfortunately he did," said I. "I was a witness to the occurrence."

"Is Dawkes dead?" he asked, quickly.

"He's not dead, but he's pretty bad," said I.

"Let's hope he dies," said the cheerful Mr. George Briscoe. "Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to look through the bars and see him going to the death house."

"You're a cheerful little soul, Briscoe," said I, and left it at that.

MY next call was on the girl. I had received from her that morning a postcard with just her address upon it. And the address was a road in Brixton where, I found later, she used to lodge when she was passing through London. She had recovered from the shock of the tragedy, and when I came to the sitting-room into which I was shown, she had the evening paper before her.

The press had only a meagre account of what they termed a "shooting affray," just enough to drive her half wild with anxiety.

"I cannot allow him to make this sacrifice," she said. "It is absurd. I can explain everything."

"That is just why I have come to see you," I said. "You must start explaining to me."

"I've been trying to remember ever since."

She paced the room, and I could see that this imperturbable gambler, who could stake thousands without a flicker of the eyelash, and who could face a man like Thomson Dawkes with equanimity, had been broken, not by the threat to herself, but by the terrible danger overhanging a man for whom she had conceived perhaps something of that love which she had awakened in Billington Stabbat.

"I'm trying to think—I'm trying to think!" she said, wringing her hands. "I've been trying all day to piece together all that happened. When you left me, alone with him, Mr. Dawkes spoke quite kindly, and told me that he had discovered all about me, and he knew that the money with which I had been gambling had been taken from the bank. He talked at the time quite rationally about systems, and then suddenly he came toward me. I had not the slightest idea of his intention until he suddenly seized me in his arms, and said:

"You can pay another price if you like, my dear. You can go to Monte Carlo as often as you take it into your pretty little head to do so.

"I tried to escape, but he was strong—terribly strong. I told him I would scream, and he laughed in my face.

"You will do nothing so ridiculous, he said. I think I know your kind. Now, my dear, what is it to be? Am I to call in those officers of the law—he sneered as he said it—or are you going to be sensible? Then suddenly I stamped on his foot, and with a cry he let go. In the struggle I had moved towards the big door, which I think leads to the passage and the stairs, and immediately his hold released I ran to the door and tried to open it. It was locked. You little devil!" said Dawkes, and was reaching out for me again when by an inspiration I saw the light switch and knocked it up with my hand. I managed to elude him, but I could not get past him to reach the room where Mr. Stabbat was."

"Why didn't you cry out?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Dawkes knew me that much," she said. "I thought I could escape without trouble, or without—causing Mr. Stabbat to make a scene. That was the thing I was afraid of.

"He must have seen me against the window," she went on. "He came toward me with a run, and I had just time to stoop under his arms before he stumbled over the desk. *Stay where you are,* I said. *I can see you against the window. I am armed,* and I pulled back the trigger of the little revolver which I carry in my bag when I am travelling on the continent—oh, if I had not brought it last night!"

"Then what happened?" I asked;

"He fell into a kind of cold fury," said the girl. "I shall always see his silhouette against the window and hear his voice." She shivered. "I never want to recall the vile things that he said to me, I don't know what happened. My head seemed to swim—but just as he was saying *Now I will send for Stabbat and he will put you in prison, you*—I must have gone mad. I don't remember what happened. All I remember was a shot and the thud of his body, and there was I, standing with a pistol in my hand. Then you came in."

"That is all you remember?" I asked.

"I don't know what happened," she said, simply. "I had murder in my heart. I hated him. I wanted to stamp the life out of him. That is all I know. How is he?" she asked.

"He had a very restless night, and the doctors are operating this morning."

"I don't mean Dawkes," she said. "It doesn't matter if he dies or lives. How is Mr. Stabbat? What does he think of it all, and what is going to be done?"

And then I told her, and I thought she was going to collapse.

"You arrested him—you!" she said, her eyes blazing. "You, who are supposed to be his friend?"

"Where are you going?" I said, catching her arm as she was leaving the room.

"I am going to the nearest police station to tell them the truth," she said.

"Incidentally you are going to ruin Billy and break his heart," I said, quietly. "Billy did this deliberately for you, because he had a better chance of getting out of the mess than you had, and he wants to keep your name out of the case."

"Suppose this case goes for trial," she asked, "what will happen to Billy?"

"He may get five or he may get seven years," I replied.

"Five or seven, years!" she gasped. "But they can't touch him. It would be monstrous. It would be a crime!"

Now I must pay this tribute to Mary Ferrera. Any other woman of my acquaintance would have not only "gone in off the deep end" at the news I brought her, but would have persisted in their lunacy. In half an hour she was as calm and as cold as ice and she took even a logical view of the part which I had played.

There and then I told her, not what Billy wanted her to do, because he had not had time to give any instructions or express his wishes. But I had to tell her it was his plan, because she had unbounded faith in him.

"You have a passport?" said I.

She nodded, but looked at me doubtfully.

"I want you to go to the south of France till this business is settled. When it is, you can come back and you can discuss this matter with Levy Jones."

"But how can I go to Monte Carlo?" she asked, and I gaped at her.

"You go whenever you wish, don't you?" I said, bluntly.

"I go when I'm sent," she said; and this was the first hint I had that she was not her own mistress.

"Then get them to send you," said I. "You had better go to your uncle, Sir Philips, and tell him the whole of the story."

"No, no, no!" she said. "I couldn't do that—I dare not do that, I have left the bank—I sent my letter of resignation this morning. I think I can get work in London, and you will find me here if you want me."

I left the matter there, not daring to inquire the circumstances under which she had resigned, and then went to the hospital.

IT was two months before Dawkes stepped up into the witness-box at the Old Bailey with his head still swathed in black bandages, and told all he remembered. Billy had made a statement at the preliminary proceedings at the police court, giving a detailed account of how and why he had shot Dawkes, and this was exactly the story which Dawkes told in the box. I give him credit for being ashamed of the part he had played, and the infamy of his conduct toward the girl, and subsequent events proved that I was right. At any rate, her name was not mentioned in the court, and he even took blame upon himself for the provocation he had offered to Billy.

“You will be kept in penal servitude for the term of seven years,” was the sentence; and Billy, with a little bow to the judge, turned and walked down the steps to the cells.

Chapter V

The Mystery of Billy’s Room.

BY an extraordinary coincidence, George Briscoe was the next prisoner to be tried, and he was sentenced to three years.

I did not see Mary, and heard nothing from Elston. Here I was on tenterhooks, for it was the period of the year when the banks made their half-annual audit.

Apparently nothing had been found at the bank detrimental to the girl. After all, why should it? Supposing she had used the bank money, it must not be forgotten that she was a winner, except on one occasion, and that she would be able to replace the cash she had taken.

Poor Levy Jones was carrying on the business, and carrying it on very efficiently, too, though his heart was not in the job.

Billy had been in prison three months or more when I made a call at the office and had a talk with Levy. I had not heard from Mary Ferrera, and I was not quite sure whether I had been wise in leaving her alone.

I remarked to Levy Jones upon the condition of poor Billy’s room, which was just as he had left it.

“I’d like Billy to come back and find it as he wanted it,” said Levy, miserably. “Oh, yes. I’ve got plenty of work in hand, Mr. Mont, but I should be grateful if you would give me a little help now and again.”

He hadn’t even the heart to tell me a story against his own people.

“There’s a job I’d like you to take on, Levy,” I said just before I went.

“A job for me—a detective job, Mr. Mont?” he answered in surprise, and I nodded.

“It concerns Billy very closely,” said I. “You know the story of Miss Ferrera and her gambling at Monte Carlo?”

He smiled a little sadly.

“I should say I did,” he answered.

“Well,” said I, “I am convinced that Miss Ferrera was merely the agent of some other person, and I am anxious to discover who that person was.”

He pushed back his chair and put his hands into the pockets of his shabby jacket.

“I’ve been to Elston twice,” he said, quietly.

“Have you, by Jove?” I said, startled.

“Yes, I have, by Jove!” said Levy. “When Billy was waiting his trial, you don’t suppose that I was losing any time beating up evidence for him, do you? Billy’s a big thing in my life, Mont,” he said. His voice shook for a moment. “A big thing,” he repeated.

I never suspected Levy Jones of sentiment or of such, deep feeling, but I knew instinctively that he was at that moment very near to tears, and he would never have forgiven me had he broken down in my presence.

“What did you do at Elston, Levy?”

“I found out all I could about the staff of the bank,” he said. “Also, who her friends were. The first thing that struck me as being rum,” said Levy, “was that she hadn’t lived with her uncle—that’s the old banker.”

I nodded.

“Why didn’t she live with him?”

“Because she couldn’t stand him,” was the surprising reply. “They say he is a devil of a man to get on with, and there isn’t a member of his staff that doesn’t hate him.”

This was news to me. The chief of a big staff is not necessarily beloved, but it is very seldom that he is execrated by those who serve under him.

“He’s a narrow, mean kind of man,” said Levy, “the sort of fellow who doesn’t believe in men smoking or women riding astride. The people who knew him were surprised when he carried out the wish of Ferrera—that is, Miss Ferrera’s father—because, though they were relations, relationship means very little to Sir Philip. But he did adopt her and took her out to his house to live. She stuck it for eight months, and then she went into lodgings, but still went to the bank. Now I’ll tell you another curious thing—Miss Ferrera was getting three pounds ten a week in actual cash, and three pounds ten a week was being credited to Sir Philip’s private account.”

I sat down in the chair and stared at Levy.

“Do you mean she was getting seven pounds a week and half of that went to Sir Philip?”

Levy nodded.

“My own theory is that it was toward wiping off some debt which Mr. Ferrera owed when he died.”

“Of course that’s it,” I cried. “What a mean old devil!”

“You’ve said it,” said Levy. “They talk about us Jews. Why, we’re children in the art of usury compared with a certain type of giaour. And I’ll tell you another thing. For the last two weeks Miss Ferrera was working at the bank she was credited with seven pounds, which meant that the debt had been paid, and that was why she resigned.”

“There is one thing I cannot understand about Sir Philip Frampton,” I began, when there was a tap at the door and the lanky youth appeared.

“A gentleman wants to see you,” he said, “on business.”

“Give me that card,” said Levy, and took the pasteboard from the boy’s hand. He looked at it and breathed through his nose heavily.

“Sir Philip Frampton,” he read at last, and we looked at each other.

I had never before caught anything but a fleeting glimpse of him. He had something of a venerable air and appearance, but closer at hand he impressed me less favourably. He overtopped Levy by head and shoulders, and his height alone saved him from the appellation of “mean-looking.” His head was narrow; his face, like his frame, shrivelled; and a pair of restless brown eyes, faded now to something that was neither brown nor grey, glanced from one to the other of us as he rubbed his hands nervously together. Levy pushed a chair forward.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said Sir Philip Frampton, in a harsh, unmusical voice. “Which of you is Mr. Stabbat? I was recommended to Mr. Stabbat a few months ago by a client of his, but I have had no need to invite his services until now.”

“Mr. Stabbat is in the country,” said Levy, calmly, “but I am in control of the business.”

The old man looked at Levy dubiously.

“Can you accept a commission?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” said Levy.

I was rising preparatory to departure, but Levy signalled to me to stay, and the old man evidently thought that it was not unusual that a third person should be present at the interview. He looked at me.

“This is a detective, I presume?” he said. He meant one of Levy’s sleuths.

“Yes, sir, this is a detective,” replied Levy in truth.

“H’m!” said Sir Philip. “He looks an intelligent man.”

I blushed. Levy rocked with silent laughter, but Sir Philip did not seem to notice that his remark had caused any hilarity.

“As he may be called upon in the course of his duty to follow the person I shall speak about, it is perhaps better that he should hear all I have to tell.”

He spoke hesitatingly and with difficulty.

“You probably know that I am a banker—one of the largest bankers in the West of England,” he said. “Some years ago, an old friend of mine, a man who owed me a good deal of money”—Levy shot a quick sidelong glance at me—“died, leaving his—er—orphan child in my care. Though I am not a family man, and in fact am a bachelor, I accepted the undertaking all the more readily because just about then my dear sister died, and I felt extremely lonely. The girl was a difficult person to deal with. She was what is known as a strong-minded woman—I think that is the term, and it describes a type which is extremely obnoxious to me, sir, extremely obnoxious.”

He wagged his head at this, and there was no doubt in anybody’s mind that the strong-minded woman was a type which was extremely obnoxious to Sir Philip Frampton.

“There were one or two disagreeable incidents, and eventually I agreed to her leaving the house and taking lodgings in the town. I might tell you that she was employed in a very responsible position in my bank. A month or so ago she sent in her resignation. She wrote from an address in Brixton, which I will give you.

"I accepted the resignation with the greatest reluctance, and there the matter might have ended, but for a discovery I made last week in going through a safe in my private vault, a safe in which I keep my own personal belongings, that twenty thousand pounds had been taken from the vault without my knowledge."

Levy scribbled the sum mechanically upon a sheet of paper at his elbow.

"Simultaneously," said Sir Philip, with the greatest gravity, "I learn from an anonymous correspondent that my foster daughter, whom I sent frequently to France to acquire a knowledge of the language, instead of being in Paris as I imagined, was gambling very heavily at Monte Carlo, not on one but on many occasions."

We were silent.

Poor Billy! So it was true after all. But there was a third person—somebody behind her, somebody on behalf of whom she was working. Who was the anonymous correspondent who had given the girl away? Immediately my mind went to Mr. Thomson Dawkes; but such an act was not consistent with his attitude in the dock.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Levy.

"Well, that is a difficult question to answer," said the old man, after hesitation. "I think she should be warned not to come to Elston again. I should not like her feelings hurt by the knowledge that I am aware of her duplicity and wickedness."

Levy nodded.

The old man, taking out a pocket-book, produced a sheet of paper with an address written upon it, though he might have saved himself the trouble, for I could have supplied that.

"You might also say," Sir Philip went on, "that I harbour no uncharity in my heart, and although I have destroyed the will in which I left her a very respectable annuity—we afterwards discovered it was one of £75 Per annum!—"I shall, in the will which I shall execute before I return to Elston, specially mention her, and leave her some token to remind her of her benefactor."

Levy showed him out with proper and impressive reverence, and, closing the door behind him, stood with his back to it, looking at me.

"Well, what do you think of that?"

"It is certainly an amazing coincidence," said I. "You will tell her, of course?"

Levy shook his head...

"I don't know what to do," he said. "The truth is that Billy has always made it a rule to respect the confidence of a client. I admit he departed from the straight and narrow way where Miss Ferrera was concerned, but I'm not worrying so much about keeping up to the traditions of the firm as I am about the charge against this young lady. What I can do is to find out if she thinks of going to Elston. And anyway, why couldn't he write and warn her—unless, of course," he added, thoughtfully, "he is not going to admit that he knows anything about the loss of his money?"

I left Levy to go to Brixton whilst I sought out Mr. Thomson Dawkes. He was in, and denied most indignantly that he knew anything of the anonymous letter.

He was rather sad about Billy.

"Every night I go to bed I think of poor old Stabbat, and feel that I should be in his place. Of course, the girl shot me."

“Are you certain of that?” I asked.

“Absolutely. I actually saw the flash of fire, and can remember it distinctly.”

I left Mr. Thomson Dawkes with almost a feeling of friendship for him.

THIS happened on the day that I received the intimation—oh, the irony of it!—that I had been promoted to the rank of sub-inspector for my work in connection with the Stabbat case, and that I would be received on probation with that rank in the special branch.

I dined at my rooms that night, so I was in when a telephone message came through from a call office. It was Mary Ferrera, and her voice was very cheery and bright.

“I’ve just seen the mysterious Levy,” she said. “He came to me with an inquiry as to whether I’m going back to Elston. Of course I am not. Why did he ask that?”

“I don’t know. Levy is a very inquisitive person,” said I, diplomatically.

“He had a reason, hadn’t he?”

“Levy never does anything without reason,” said I, evasively. “He is the most reasonable person I know.”

There was a silence at the other end of the wire, then:

“I saw him last week.”

“I know—you just told me.”

“I don’t mean Levy,” she said. “I saw—Billington.”

“The dickens you did!” said I, in surprise. “Where did you see him?”

“At Wormwood Scrubbs,” said she, and there was just the tiniest break in her voice. “He was going to Dartmoor the next day. I want to see you, Mr. Mont, I’ll call at your office to-morrow afternoon.

“I haven’t an office,” said I, “and Scotland Yard is a dismal hole. Suppose you come to Billy’s office? Levy will give you an excellent cup of tea.”

When I was saying it I realised that I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was making a faux pas, but could not think why. Then it flashed on me that old man Frampton had said he would come in the afternoon.

“No, no—don’t come to-morrow,” I said, hastily.

“I shall be there at four,” she replied. “Don’t try to put me off, Mr. Mont.”

And I heard the click of the receiver.

Anyhow they need not meet, I thought later. There were three rooms to the suite, though she would hardly like going into Billy’s room after all that had occurred.

My work kept me busy at the Yard all the following morning, but I had time to phone Levy and tell him of the appointment which Mary Ferrera had fixed for herself.

“That will be all right,” he said. “She’s been in London for months, and has no idea of going back to Elston, Did she tell you that?”

“Yes.” I recounted our conversation.

“Fancy her going to see Billy,” he said, admiringly. “He must have a pull somewhere to be allowed visitors on odd days.”

At three o’clock that afternoon I went off to keep my appointment with Levy and Miss Ferrera. I met Levy on the steps.

“The old boy isn’t coming to-day,” he said. “He phoned me this morning, and we’re in tons of time for Miss Ferrera.”

Illustration:

Mary Ferrera brushed past us, leaving us staring after her in bewilderment.

We had reached the first landing when we heard the patter of feet on the stairs, and, looking up, to my surprise, I saw Mary Ferrera hurrying down. Her face was white and set, and when I spoke to her she did not reply, but brushed past us, leaving us staring after her in bewilderment.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Levy, and he was silent for a moment. Then:

“We shall see,” he said, prophetically. The door of Billy’s private room, the room in which the shooting occurred, was opposite to the end of the stairway. Further along on the right was Levy’s office, and beyond that the public office, where the lanky youth sat. We went into Levy’s room, and at the sound of our feet the office boy came in.

“Who has been?” asked Levy, sharply.

“The young lady, sir, who was up here before, and the old gentleman.”

“The old gentleman?” repeated Levy, incredulously.

“Yes, sir, they’re both in there.” He jerked his head to the door of Billy’s room.

“But the lady isn’t there—I met her on the stairs.”

“Well, the old gentleman is. He came in about half an hour ago and asked where he could write a letter, and I put him in Mr. Stabbat’s office.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” snarled Levy. “Well, you’d better start looking for another job right away. What happened?”

“The young lady came up,” said the boy, sulkily, “and she went into your room, but I think the door was open and she saw the old gent. Anyway, she went in there and shut the door, and there they are,” he persisted.

So that accounted for Mary’s agitation and obvious anger.

“Good Lord!” groaned Levy. “She thinks we’re double-crossing her! I wonder what the old devil said to her?”

He flung open the door and strode into Billington’s office, then stopped. In the middle of the room Sir Philip Frampton lay at full length on the floor, and there was no reason to ask why, for the bullet-hole above the left eyebrow was eloquent.

Chapter VI

Mary Goes to Prison.

LEVY reeled. I thought he was going to faint.

“Merciful Father Abraham!” he whispered, and, turning round, he gripped the boy who was staring over our shoulders. “Did you hear a shot?”

“No, sir,” whimpered the frightened lad. “I heard something bang, but I thought that he’d shut the door.”

“The door!” said Levy, and ran.

It was unlocked, and was not even closed. We should have noticed that if we had not been so perturbed through meeting Mary on the stairs.

“How long ago did this happen?” asked Levy, eagerly, but here the boy was criminally vague.

It might have been five minutes—it might have been two minutes before we came in—the boy was not very sure.

Levy made a quick search of the room while I sent the boy to get on to the hospital.

“He was writing here,” said Levy. There was a sheet of notepaper upon the pad and an envelope already addressed to a firm of lawyers. The letter was only just begun, and ran:

“Dear Mr. Tranter—I have now decided upon the conditions I will make in my new will, the other having been destroyed by me. I give to...”

Here the writing ceased; the ink was still wet indeed upon the letter. That was an important fact—or would have been—only Sir Philip wrote with a broad-pointed nib and used a heavy stroke, and it was not the kind of day when ink would dry quickly. What we did not notice was that the nib was worn and spluttery. That was the big clue that I missed—that old and useless nib.

Before the arrival of the doctor and the ambulance there was time for one short, tense, nerve-racking conference.

“Now what are we going to do?” asked Levy, desperately.

“What is there to be done?” I demanded in so hopeless a tone that he groaned.

“Don’t talk like that. Billy will break his heart if anything happens to the girl,” he wailed. “Think of something, Mont, for God’s sake! The girl was here—she was in the room with him—she left after he was murdered. Who knows she was here?” he asked, suddenly. I thought for a moment his brain had given under the strain.

“The boy,” said I, quietly. “You’ve got to look things squarely in the face, Levy. There is no sense in deceiving ourselves. We have the alternative of arresting Marv Ferrera or of helping her to escape from the country, But her name will be associated with this killing, and there’s no way out of it.”

He buried his head in his hands, and there he was when the doctor came. Whilst the body was being examined he nodded to me.

“You’d better go and see her, Mont,” he said, shakily, “and do what is best.”

She was not at home when I called at the house in Brixton, and I had to wait in her little sitting-room for half an hour before she came in. At the sight of me her chin went up.

“I didn’t expect this visit,” she said, with a touch of hauteur. “But perhaps you aren’t in Levy’s scheme.”

“I don’t know Levy’s scheme,” I answered, quietly.

She took off her hat and threw it upon the couch.

“I never thought Levy would accept a commission to watch me,” she said, “or that you were in league with Sir Philip Frampton—”

That was my opportunity.

“Speak well of the dead, Miss Ferrera,” I said.

“Dead?” Her face went white—whiter than it had been that afternoon. “Dead, you say?” she repeated, incredulously. “Sir Philip isn’t dead; I saw him this afternoon.”

“We found him shot dead in the room where you shot Thomson Dawkes,” said I, and she sat down heavily into a chair.

“Say that again slowly. I don’t quite take it in,” she said, and I repeated the words.

“You went straight upstairs and you found him—dead?”

I nodded. She looked at me with a hint of wild alarm in her eyes. Suddenly she started up.

“You’ve come to arrest me!” she gasped.

“I have come either to arrest you or to give you assistance to get out of the country,” I said, gruffly. “This means that I shall have to resign from the police. I can’t in decency remain after I have helped you to escape.”

“Do you think I killed Sir Philip?”

I was silent.

“Do you really think I killed Sir Philip?” she said again.

“If you tell me that you did not, I shall believe you,” said I, and I saw the colour come back to her face.

“You’re a dear man, Mr. Mont,” she said, and she dropped her hand on my shoulder. “Thank you for that. No, of course I did not kill him. He made me very, very angry, but I did not kill him.”

“Then you’ve got to get away. We are searching for you now—” I began, and she shook her head.

“I’m not going away. Poor Mr. Mont, you’ve got to arrest me, too,” she smiled, and there was just that pity in her voice which made me choke.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’m going to tell you a strange story.

“When Sir Philip Frampton took me into his house at Elston he did so with some reluctance. And then, I think, the realisation that there was somebody who was bound to him by all manner of ties—by blood relationship and by other obligations (my father owed him six hundred pounds)—gave him the idea, which he afterwards carried out. Sir Philip was a great mathematician, and although he was a very straight-laced person and a man who was respected in the narrowest circles of the small provincial town for his austerity and his impatience of gambling and gamblers, he devoted the greater part of his life to the study of chance and its laws, and was perhaps the greatest authority in the world upon the games of roulette and *trente et quarante*. When I tell you that from seven o’clock every evening till nearly two o’clock in the morning he spent his time working out all manner of possible combinations with the cards, and that he had records extending over years of the ‘runs’ of the colours at Monte Carlo, you will see how deep and earnest a student he was.

“About six years ago he devised a system which he regarded as invincible.

“One night, whilst I was staying in the house with him, he took me into his confidence, swearing me to secrecy, and reminding me, as he invariably did, of his generous treatment. It was then he told me something of his extraordinary hobby. He himself had never been to Monte Carlo, but he was anxious to give the system a practical trial.

“He was a very rich man, and he could well have afforded to snap his fingers at public opinion, because the bank is one of the soundest institutions in the country, as you probably know. But he lived in mortal fear of the censure of little men. At the thought of his fellow-church wardens discovering his weakness he would literally become ill.

“After some time he devised this plan: that I was to go to Monte Carlo, with certain instructions which he elaborated, and there I should play maximum stakes. Every time I left the country I carried with me exactly one million francs, and except on one occasion I returned a winner of one million five hundred thousand francs. Even as it was I should not have lost on that one visit but for an error in Sir Philip’s instructions, a clerical error for which he himself was responsible. When I came back and told him I had lost he was like a madman, and swore that I had not followed the system. I had already given up living in his house because of his ungovernable temper, and now I told him I would not go again. I meant that, but after he had discovered his mistake he was so very humble that I did go to Monte Carlo, as you know.

“I hated the work,” she went on, “and I was determined that when my father’s debts were paid I would make an end of our relationship. As you know, I resigned, and wrote to Sir Philip, telling him that I had no intention of returning to the bank or of acting as his agent in his gambling transactions. I think those two words ‘gambling transactions’ terrified him, for he wrote to me, telling me to keep his secret, and swearing that if I so much as whispered a word that was detrimental to him, he would bring charges against me which would result in my going to prison. He would never have dared!”

“That is where you’re wrong,” I said. “He came to Levy Jones and instructed him to warn you not to go to Elston again. That was the beginning and end of Levy’s instructions.”

“I see. So that was it. Poor Levy! I did you both an injustice.”

She sat with her chin on her hand for a long time.

“I can’t pretend to be sorry that he is dead,” she said, quietly. “He was a hard man, almost inhuman.”

That was the secret, then. A simple story—the story of a hypocritical old man who desired the thrill of gambling without the odium which attached to it.

“I received ten pounds for each visit, in addition to my salary, and this ten pounds was increased to twenty pounds for the last two visits, though the money was never paid to me, but credited to my father’s account.”

She got up briskly.

“Now, tell me, Mr. Mont, you’re an authority on those subjects, what ought I to take with me?”

“Where?”

“To prison,” she said.

An hour later, carrying a little bag with her belongings, I ushered her into the dock at Cannon Row and charged her with the wilful murder of Sir Philip Frampton, though I had no doubt of her innocence.

If I had been the traditional hero of fiction, I should have carried off my friend’s beloved and defied the world to capture her. As it was, I arranged for a comfortable

bed to be put in her cell, and telegraphed to my solicitors asking them to brief the best counsel available for her defence.

I had left two of my own men to make a thorough search of the room to discover the weapon, or any other clues they could find. After putting Mary Ferrera into the cell, I drove straight away to Bond Street, and found Sergeant Merthyr and Constable Doyne eating bread and cheese in Levy's office with the doleful Levy.

Levy looked up anxiously as I came in, but there was no need for secrecy.

"I've arrested Miss Ferrera," I said, and Levy nodded slowly.

"I don't see what else could be done," said he.

"Have you found anything?" I asked Merthyr. But Merthyr had found nothing.

"Was the weapon found? Did you search her lodgings, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "but there was nothing there."

As a matter of fact, I had not taken the trouble to search the lodgings or to subject Mary Ferrera to the indignity of a personal search more than the conventional "smoothing down" which the matron invariably gives a newly arrived prisoner. It was unlikely that Marv would purchase another revolver, or that she had possessed two.

"By gosh!" I said, suddenly. My two men had just gone, and Levy and I were alone.

"What are you goshing about?" asked the weary Levy.

Suddenly I had remembered.

There was a cavity in the window-recess through which Billy had tossed the girl's revolver. Without a word I walked into the room where the tragedy had occurred, and prised open the panel. The hole was seemingly bottomless. I took a penny from my pocket and dropped it into the dark, and after a long time heard a faint "clink." The shaft led to the basement obviously, and in the basement lay the revolver which Mary had fired.

I told Levy, and together we hunted out the janitor, and with a flashlight searched the locked furnace room. There it was! At the foot of a tubular shaft the little revolver lay covered with dust. I picked it up and carried it back to Levy's room.

"This only helps to incriminate Miss Ferrera in the other affair," said Levy, shaking his head as I examined the weapon under the strong light of the desk lamp.

I threw out the revolving chambers and gasped.

Each held a live cartridge—the revolver had never been fired!

I looked again, but there was no doubt about it—each cartridge was intact. When Billington Stabbat took the revolver from the girl's hand and threw it down the shaft, he took away from her the proof of her innocence.

"Well, I'm damned!" breathed Levy. "What do you know about that?"

We sat with that infernal thing between us, neither of us speaking a word, each busy with his own thoughts. The hand that had shot Thomson Dawkes was the hand that had killed Sir Philip Frampton—that was the conclusion I reached—and it was not the hand of Mary Ferrera.

"You'll never get to the bottom of this, Mont," Levy broke his silence. "There's only one man on earth who could disentangle this mystery, and he is in Dartmoor Prison. And he's going to be got out!"

THE preliminary examination of Mary Ferrera differed from any other that I can remember. It differed because, as a rule, only evidence of arrest is offered at the first hearing, but in this case there had also to be evidence of identity, and to establish this we had sent a man to bring the lawyer, a Mr. Tranter, to whom the deceased man had been writing immediately before his death. Then ensued the dramatic examination.

“Did you recognise the body?” asked the counsel for the Crown.

“Yes, sir.”

“Whose is it?”

“The body of Sir Philip Frampton.”

“Was he a wealthy man?”

“An extremely wealthy man—he was worth from four to five hundred thousand pounds.”

“Did he leave a will?”

“No, sir, he did not. We had prepared a will for him, which was duly executed three years ago. There were certain provisions in that will which he desired to alter; and as he had a rooted objection to codicils, he destroyed his testament and was preparing to execute another when he died.”

“Did he die intestate?”

“Yes, sir.”

“As he has died intestate, who inherits his property?”

“Miss Mary Ferrera, his niece,” was the reply.

The girl, sitting in the dock, stood up with wide open eyes and stared at the lawyer.

“I—I did not know that,” she stammered. But her counsel turned with a smile and beckoned her to be seated.

That ended the evidence for the day.

So Mary Ferrera was a rich woman! I had not realised till then that she was the only relative which this loveless old man possessed. But it was a terribly damaging circumstance, for it supplied a motive for the crime.

When I reached Scotland Yard I found a note there from Thomson Dawkes, asking me if he could come and see me.

“I suppose you’re too busy to run over to Regent’s Park, but if you will phone me, giving me an appointment, I would like to call.”

I phoned through, telling him to come at once, and in half an hour he was with me in my office.

“I read of the arrest in the newspapers,” he said. “Of course, the girl didn’t do this. Had Stabbat an enemy?”

“I believe he had several.”

“Do you know what I think?” he said, after considering a while. “I think that the only man who could straighten out this tangle is our unfortunate friend, Billington Stabbat.”

I looked at him and laughed.

“You’re not the only person who believes that,” said I.

"Is there any possible way of getting him out?" he asked.

I laughed again. A most surprising man, this Thomson Dawkes!

"You're rather a sportsman," I said. "Why don't you go along and see Levy Jones? He's Billington Stabbat's assistant."

"I know the man," nodded Dawkes.

What happened at that interview I do not know, but the next day I had to ring up Levy for something, and his office boy told me that he had gone out of town and didn't expect to be back for a fortnight. I was curious enough to ring up Mr. Thomson Dawkes' house.

"Mr. Dawkes is out of town," was the reply. "He left this morning for the South of France."

"We shall see!" said I.

And we did see with a vengeance.

Chapter VII

The Escape.

MARY'S case came on and was adjourned.

On the night of the second adjournment, which was seventeen days after her arrest, I was leaving the office when an urgent telegram was received and immediately minuted to me. It was headed "Princetown," and was handed in at half past three by the Chief Warder of Dartmoor Convict Establishment, and it ran:

Convict Billington Stabbat escaped this morning, it is believed with outside help. Send down two officers who know him and can identify him in civilian clothing. Watch his home address. Very urgent. Very urgent.

I gaped at the wire. Escaped! Then Levy Jones had succeeded.

Jennings and I travelled down together. It was inevitable that he should be the second officer, though I would have preferred going alone.

The story which was told to us by the Assistant Governor was simple and short. Billington Stabbat had been sent out to work on a barn where hay was stacked in the summer. Billington was something of a builder, and could at any rate handle the tools of carpenter or plasterer or bricklayer with equal facility. His behaviour in gaol had been such that they had no hesitation in sending him out of the prison, especially as the usual precautions were taken and an armed guard accompanied the gang of four men who were engaged on the barn.

The place at which they worked was near to the main road across the moor to Tavistock. The field boundaries which extend to the road were formed by a stone wall about four feet high, made of loose stones, laid one on another.

The warder seated himself upon the wall about thirty paces from the shed where the convicts were working, with his rifle across his knees. Whilst he was sitting

there, a grey motor-car drove up containing a man and a stout, large- built woman in a motor-veil. The chauffeur stopped the car near the warder, and, getting down, watched the convicts at work, leaning on the wall within a few feet of the warder.

The warder, as is usual in these circumstances, ordered him to move away, partly because it is considered undesirable that men undergoing sentence should be recognised, and partly because there is always danger of communication or the transfer of tobacco, cigarettes, etc., from well-meaning members of the public to the unfortunates who live in durance.

The chauffeur nodded and turned to go. The warder could not see his face because it was hidden by huge motor-goggles ending in a sort of curtain which concealed everything but the tip of his chin. And then suddenly the chauffeur threw something which was afterwards ascertained to be a sponge filled with liquid ammonia, and it struck the warder in the mouth, and the paralysing odour deprived him of breath so that he rolled on the ground, choking. In that second of time Billington Stabbat raced from the shed, leaped the wall, and by the time the warder could rise to his feet and level his rifle, the limousine was over the hill and disappearing from view. The shot the warder fired did, however, take effect on the back of the car.

A few minutes later the prison gun had boomed, warning the countryside that there had been an escape. All the hamlets, villages, and towns that fringed Dartmoor were warned by telegraph, and reserves of police were immediately called out to watch the roads. And that is where matters stood when I arrived, except that the car had been found with a bullet-hole in the back, abandoned by the side of the road, with a fifty-pound note pinned to the seat and addressed to a firm of motor-car agents at Exeter. It was from this agency that the car was hired in the name of Sir Philip Frampton! That, of course, was Levy Jones' work.

I could understand everything except the stout lady in the tonneau. Who was she, I wondered? Not—not—I could have roared with laughter at the mental vision which was conjured up by my thoughts. Thomson Dawkes minus his black, moustache and side whiskers!

I questioned the warder about this "lady."

"Yes, she had bold features"—a very good description of the aquiline nose and rounded chin of Mr. Thomson Dawkes.

Where had they taken him? Levy Jones would leave nothing to chance. He had been a fortnight preparing, and in that fortnight Levy, with the love of Stabbat to urge him, could work miracles. They had seized Billy's correspondence, and this was now being examined by an expert (specially brought over from Exeter Gaol) who was employed to decode and detect cipher letters written to prisoners.

Amongst Billy's correspondence was a series of letters from one who called herself "Your darling Lee." They were very wordy and very long, and herein the expert unveiled one mystery—the means by which communication had been established between the prisoner and his outside friends. For the last word but one on the first line, and the second word on the third line, and the last but one on the fifth, and so on, read consecutively; and the message in the final letter which had reached Billy in captivity was as follows:

Mary in prison shooting Frampton twelfth. May watch grey motor-car be ready jump will discover working party you are in.

"That's all very well," said Jennings; "but where are they now?"

"Ask me!" said the chief warder, with some asperity.

"Anyway, he won't get past me," said Jennings. Heaven knows what was his private grudge against Billy. "I'd recognise him a mile away, You can't mistake him."

"They will try to get away by train," Jennings went on, caressing his fat chin.

"And there's only one station they'll get from, and it is Tavistock. That is where we must be, Mont."

"Must you?" said I, and then it occurred to me that if we were both together, the full responsibility of Billy getting off would rest with him.

"You needn't come unless you like," said he.

"I know all about that. I'll go with you, Jennings." Thank God I didn't have to call him "sir" any longer!

WE drove over to Tavistock, Jennings and I, and we took up a position on the departure platform, carefully scrutinising every outgoing passenger. Two days, three days passed, and no news of the fugitives. On the fourth day I had a wire recalling me, and Jennings also received a telegram, containing something like a reprimand, I should imagine, for he did not show it to me. The 2.57 was the last train we watched, save the one by which we returned to London.

It was a wet, miserable day, and a wind swept over Dartmoor and howled round the station building. There were only three passengers for London—a lady, who was recognised by the porter; a commercial traveller, who was also known; and a tall, veiled lady.

"She's rather big for a woman," said Jennings.

"That's her misfortune," said I.

These three, and a couple of handcuffed convicts in charge of a grim old warder, were the only passengers on the platform when the train came in.

"I'm going to have a look at that woman," said Jennings. His eyes had been on the veiled lady all the time.

"I don't think I should if I were you," said I, and he looked at me narrowly.

"Why not?"

I shrugged my shoulders,

"Well, she might be quite a respectable person, and you will get yourself in the wrong if you ask her to lift her veil."

"I'm going to do it," said Jennings, fired with a sudden resolve, and he strode along the rain-swept platform and yanked open the door of a first-class carriage which the lady had entered.

I am not going to give an account of the wrangle that followed, or of Jennings' unmannerly behaviour in jerking off the lady's veil, nor of the long correspondence which followed between the Chief Commissioner and the Duchess of Babbacombe—for it was this great lady who was travelling incognito (the Duke's divorce case was heard only a few weeks before, and readers will understand why the Duchess went heavily veiled)—but it left poor old Jennings an absolute pulp.

“Well, we’ve done our best,” he said, cheering up a little as we entered the next train for London. “And if they’ve got away from Dartmoor, it wasn’t through Tavistock.”

I said nothing at all. I had not recognised Billy in his warder kit—the grey beard was most artistically arranged—but, of course, I had known Levy Jones as convict No. 1 and Thomson Dawkes as convict No. 2 the moment I saw them.

Chapter VIII

The Solution.

DEAR Mr. Mont—

“I should be glad if you would favour me with a call at twelve o’clock noon this day and bring with you the Assistant Commissioner and any other responsible police official who is interested in ingenious crime. I will then show how Mr. Dawkes was shot and how Sir Philip Frampton was killed.

“Yours faithfully,

“Billington Stabbat.”

I READ the letter, which had come by hand, and could scarcely credit my senses.

There was nothing to do but to carry it to my chief. He read it without a muscle of his face moving, then rang the bell for Jennings. If ever there was a sportsman it was the Third Commissioner, He handed the letter to Jennings, and I thought the inspector’s eyes would burst out of his head.

“I’ll have him arrested—” he began.

“Be ready to keep the appointment!” snapped the Third Commissioner, and that ended the matter.

Levy received us, Levy who had planned the escape and knew, that the only way for Billy to leave Dartmoor was in the disguise of a warder in charge of convicts. His eye was bright, and there was a ceremonial flourish in his opening of the door.

And there was Billy, neat and smiling, though his hair was cropped and his hands still rough and red.

He smiled at me, bowed to the Commissioner, and had the audacity to wink at Jennings. I saw Jennings’ face go purple, but he said nothing.

“I asked you gentlemen to come,” said Billy, “to explain to you how two people were shot in this room through the agency of a man named George Briscoe, about whom you may have heard, sir.”

“The Canadian criminal?” said the Commissioner.

“Yes, sir, the Canadian criminal, who is one of two brothers. I arrested Tom, but George escaped punishment. He came to this country determined to be even with me for having sent his brother to gaol for a life term. He is, as I think you will know, one of the cleverest mechanics that has ever gone into the crooked game. The opportunity he sought presented itself to him when I took these offices. He bribed the foreman to give him the kind of job he wanted. I recognised him at

once, but let him go on, thinking that he contemplated no more than a quick draw and a plug, and I'm quite willing to take my chance with any gun-play that is going. But that wasn't George's idea at all."

Jennings had seated himself at the desk in the chair that Billy had vacated.

"I hope this story isn't going to last a long time," he said, but the Commissioner silenced him with a look.

"Go on, Stabbat."

"What he did was something so devilishly clever that I don't know whether to hate him or admire him. I've since discovered that he spent two days alone in this room, and that he fixed what was nothing more remarkable than an automatic pistol in such a manner that anybody who pressed that bell, and naturally he expected it would be me"—he pointed to the bell-push by the desk—"would be instantly shot dead."

"Oh, come, come!" said Jennings. "This bell—"

It was over in a flash. Before we quite realised what was happening, I heard Billy's warning cry as he sank flat on the floor, and saw the stodgy thumb of Jennings press the bell...

There was a deafening report. A bullet ripped across the bowed shoulder of Inspector Jennings, slashing his coat as with a knife, and smashed through the window.

"...Yes, that bell," said Billy, rising slowly from the floor. "And if you had been a more intelligent man, Jennings, you'd have been a dead man."

Jennings was as white as a sheet and shaking in every limb, though the bullet did not touch him, because he had pushed his chair back from the table and to reach the bell he had to bend himself forward until his chest was lying on the edge of the desk.

"My God!" said the Commissioner. "Where did that come from?"

"It came from the mouth of the farthest lion. I will show you."

Levy and he tugged at the marble head, which slid out, placing the block on the floor. And there was the pistol, firmly cemented in position, the simple electric control obvious even to those who were ignorant of the electrician's art.

Illustration:

There was the pistol, firmly cemented in position.

"The night a certain person thought he"—he emphasised "he"—"had shot at my friend, Thomson Dawkes, Mr. Dawkes had pressed the bell in order to bring the officers of the law to make an arrest."

"You're very mysterious, Stabbat, but I think I understand," said the Commissioner. "The certain person who heard the pistol did not fire at all. I have learnt that since, though at the time I was under the impression that he had fired. What happened to Sir Philip Frampton is clear. He was writing a letter, and found that the nib he was using had worn out. He looked round and saw the bell-push, and pressed it in order to bring the boy in. He was immediately shot. Like so many men who have been shot in the head, he was able to rise and stagger to the middle of the room before he fell."

The Commissioner was inspecting the pistol.

“Of course, this puts an end to the case against Miss Ferrera,” he said. “I presume she was the *he* in both cases, although”—he looked at me oddly—“I don’t remember that you mentioned her presence, inspector.”

“I did not, sir,” I replied.

“Perhaps you didn’t see her or know anything about it?” asked my discreet superior. He beckoned Jennings.

“You can start a few candles burning before your household shrine this night, inspector. I think you can take your two men from the door. Perhaps Mr. Stabbat will remain here for an hour or two. The Chief Commissioner would like to see this ingenious apparatus.”

I could have wept for joy when I said good-bye to Billy that afternoon.

“I wonder what Mary will say?” I said. Billy said nothing, not even “We shall see!”

